



The Prodigals



by Frank Burton

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The Prodigals contains lyrics from to the following songs:

Born Slippy (written by Darren Emerson, Karl Hyde and Rick Smith)

Monkey Gone to Heaven (written by Black Francis)

I'm Free (written by Keith Richards and Mick Jagger)

Step On (written by Christos Demetriou and John Kongos)

Livin' La Vida Loca (written by Desmond Child and Robi Rosa)

PART 1

1999

(According to Travis)

There's nothing quite like that rush. You know what I'm talking about, even though I could be talking about anything. That flash of rage that seemed to spring from nowhere. That orgasm you'd been dreaming of for days. That first shot of whiskey in the morning. All the things you weren't allowed to do when you were a kid.

When you get that rush – whatever your rush happens to be – even if you've felt it a thousand times before, all those other times mean nothing. All that exists is the moment.

I don't really believe that. Sometimes I look back on things that've happened to me, and the feelings are just as intense as first time round.

*

It was fucking freezing when I got off the bus that morning. I sneezed, and wiped my nose on the sleeve of my jacket.

This was November, six weeks before the Millennium and two weeks before Geoff officially went legit. A rumour had sparked up that he was thinking of laying off half his workforce, but no one knew why.

It was coming up to nine, and my hangover hadn't quite kicked in yet. It was due to rear its ugly head about eleven o'clock while I was gasping for my lunch. Working with a hangover was more or less like being asleep.

I was pretty much guaranteed to fall over at some point, usually on one of those sloping driveways. That was a real pain in the arse, especially if you were being chased by some half-starved Rottweiler at the time.

I had a little thermos filled with what I liked to call Irish coffee – a couple of spoons of Nescafe, hot water, long life milk, and a generous dose of cheap supermarket Scotch. I opened the flask, and downed a lidfull before turning the corner. That warm blanket feeling almost fooled me into believing I was drinking it just for the illusion of heat.

Next came the cigarette. A fumble around in my pockets, followed by the flash of the lighter, and that hot nicotine injection. First drag of the day is always the best. It's downhill from there.

I turned round the corner and there stood Ricky, leaning against the railings, tracing the text on the back page of the Sun with his index finger, decked as ever from head to foot in Man U gear. Man U baseball cap, Man U jacket, Man U tracky bottoms.

Ricky supported Man U and Rochdale. It's one of those unwritten rules that you've got to support a local team as well as a Premiership one. People get tattoos, one team on each set of knuckles. Man U and Rochdale; Liverpool and Birkenhead; Leeds United and Goole Town. I heard a bloke on the bus once saying, "I fuckin' smacked him with me Barnsley hand."

One time, we were delivering in Moss Side, which personally I didn't mind because it's all terraced houses – saves you pissing about with garden gates – and Ricky had turned up as usual in Man U gear from head to foot. Someone told him this was a City area and any Man U fans would get their heads kicked in. That's why he ended up delivering leaflets all afternoon in the freezing cold, bare-chested with his nipples sticking out like Zulu spears. He took it well, and that was one of the few genuine laughs this job had given me. I suppose you've got to be grateful for that.

I said, "Alright, Rick."

I'd been reading up on psychology, and one of the things I'd learnt was that it's more assertive if you address a person by their name, rather than saying mate. It's more personal, and also it gives you a stamp of authority. That was what I needed.

Ricky replied, "Alright Travis."

I said, "Not bad, Ricky."

Jack and Midget were the next to arrive.

"Alright, Jack. Alright Midget."

"Alright, mate."

"Alright, mate."

They carried on talking about Playstations.

I never felt the need to join in with those two muppets. We were roughly the same age – late teens, early twenties – but that was the only similarity. Take their favourite topic of conversation. They weren't men, they were little boys. They made me feel like I was a hundred years old.

Bible Brian arrived as the van got there. He jogged the extra few steps, and joined us as we piled into the back.

We exchanged the obligatory "alrights" with Macca as we sat down.

Macca was the driver. He was a mad bastard, that's all I can really say about him. It was best to avoid talking to him while he was driving, because if you asked him a direct question, he'd turn his head round to answer it. It was amazing how few times Macca had been stopped for speeding. We'd be sitting in the back with our boxes of leaflets for seats, and whenever Macca slammed on the brakes we'd be sent flying forward, often onto each other's laps. You had to be careful not to grab hold of someone's bollocks.

I'd become well acquainted with the back of Macca's neck. He had a tattoo of a red dragon poking its head up through his t-shirt collar, threatening to set fire to what was left of his hair.

We set off driving.

Jack and Midget carried on talking about *Tomb Raider* or some such shit. Ricky carried on reading the Sun. Brian pulled out his copy of the Bible and started reading that. His eyes darted back and forth across the page like he was rushing to take it all in.

Ricky was sitting across from me. I could tell there was something going on in that part-furnished brain of his, and for some reason, probably past experience, I just knew he was about to stick his foot right in it. Sure enough, after a couple of minutes searching for something to talk about, out it came:

"Dya see the United game, Sat'dy?"

Macca slammed on the breaks, sending us all flying, and span round at him. "YOU TWAT! YOU KNOW THE BOROUGH LOST ON SAT'DY DON'T YA? EH? EH? EH?"

Ricky said, "I didn't. Sorry, Maccs, I didn't know."

"There's this new fucking invention, Ricky. It's called TACT. You know what tact is?"

Silence followed. We all knew better than to help him out. Even Brian didn't get involved.

Macca said, "Well? T, A C, T. Tact, Rick. Come on."

Ricky said, "I don't know."

"Well, that's fucking obvious, ain't it?"

"I didn't *know*, though."

“DON'T TALK TO ME LIKE THAT!”

“I'm *not* talking to you ... like that ...”

“Well int that *fuck in'* nice?” Macca turned back round and restarted the engine. “Int that fuckin' *nia*, eh? Proper little Des Lynam we got back here, eh?”

Macca carried on muttering obscenities while he turned up the radio. They were playing Underworld's *Born Slippy* – a seminal tune, combining banging beats with mad poetry, like *lager, lager, lager shouting*, but instead of getting caught up in the euphoria, all I could think about was my flask. I wondered if anyone would say anything if I pulled it out and took a swig.

It did your back in after a while, sitting hunched up on those boxes. Macca never let anyone sit beside him in the passenger seat. He used to keep his maps on it and he didn't want any of them getting squashed. Maybe, I thought, I could take over Macca's job some day, just driving people to and fro, sitting up front in the comfortable seat, but as it was, I was stuck sitting on boxes with Ricky, Bible Brian, and the Super Fucking Mario Brothers.

Ricky was OK, he was just *thick*. He was an easy target, that was all. He dug these little holes for himself, because he couldn't string a coherent sentence together. He got confused by little things. Macca had to spend ages giving him directions, and he couldn't read the maps properly, so he was always getting lost.

Brian, on the other hand – Brian wasn't thick. Knew his stuff. Knew his Bible. Sometimes it seems there's only three things you can get into living round here: crime, drugs or religion. At least Brian chose the safe option. You only needed to look at Jack and Midget to see which direction those morons were headed.

Brian dressed like someone twice his age. Black hiking boots, brown woolly jumper, green waxed jacket. He had that halfway-house facial hair that wasn't quite stubble and wasn't quite a beard. There was permanent unease on his face, simultaneously happy and sad, confident and shit-scared. It was like there was a battle going on in his head, and it wasn't clear which side was winning.

Macca's little outburst had wiped out Jack and Midget's Playstation conversation. No one wanted to talk about the threat of us not being there the following week. For the sake of something to do, Jack decided to start taking the piss. I'd been wondering when that would be coming.

He said, "What passage you reading, Brian?"

Brian said, "Sermon on The Mount."

"Semen on the *what?* That's disgusting, Brian."

Jack snatched the book from him and started reading. "*Blessed are you who are persecuted because of me.* Hey, bet you're well chuffed, aren't you, Bri? I could persecute you if you want, like."

He threw the Bible back at him. Midget was loving it. Brian carried on reading.

Jack said, "Hey Brian. Have you seen *Jurassic Park* yet?"

Brian said, "No."

"Why won't you fucking watch it? I keep recommending it."

Brian raised his head and glared. He said, "Look, you either believe it or you don't."

Jack said, "Believe what?"

"You know what."

"What y'on about?"

Brian shut the book. He said, "OK. I believe that there were no such things as "dinosaurs." I believe Satan placed their bones in the earth to test our faith. I believe that God created the world in six days. It's all written down here in black and white. You may choose not to believe it. You may choose to believe Stephen Spielberg or whoever. Personally I prefer the word of God."

Jack was slightly put off. He said, "Still ... fucking good film."

Ricky attempted to chime in. "Yeah, that bit where they're getting chased by that big fuck-off T-Rex, and that other dinosaur jumps on top and starts eating it. Fucking savage."

Jack said, "Yeah, whatever," prompting much laughter from his sidekick.

Jack caught me staring at him, and suddenly the laughter stopped.

I wasn't trying to be aggressive, but I can't help myself sometimes. For the sake of a quiet life, I'd never tried to intervene in these little *Tom and Jerry* stand-offs, but at the same time, you have to assert yourself in some small way. A couple of years ago, I would've happily grabbed Jack by the hair and slammed his head through the side window.

I played the innocent. I said, "What?"

Jack said, "Heavy night last night, was it?"

I nodded. "Too right."

And that was the end of that.

The Brian-baiting continued a little bit longer:

"Hey Bri - whatya do last night?"

"Hey Bri - what's your favourite flavour of crisps?"

"Hey Bri - shagged any birds lately?"

They had this wind-up on the radio, where the DJ phoned some guy at work and told him he'd lost his job and that he was massively in debt and they were gonna send the bailiffs round. The guy bought it, too – kept saying, “You got that wrong man, mate, you got the wrong man!”

We laughed all the way to Eccles.

*

I'd like to say I learnt a lot about people from that job, but it's nothing I didn't pick up at primary school.

What I learnt about was *Manchester*. We visited a different part of the city every day, with our bundles of leaflets advertising burglar alarms, fitted kitchens, and various local kebab houses. I explored every nook and cranny of Manny, from rough Salford council estates, to the swankiest suburban mansions. I climbed to the top of high-rises, full of dingy flats with brilliant views. All those miniature people. It was like some fucked-up version of Lowry.

There was a constant turnover of workers, all thinking this was easy cash-in-hand stuff, but most people quit when they realised you had to walk around all day with a packed rucksack. You'd end up with blisters the size of your toes, and then have to get up the next day and do it all again.

Half the workforce were claiming off the social, but that was only to be expected. I didn't begrudge anyone for doing it. They weren't scroungers, they were real hard-working people.

Some of them were arseholes, but that's a different matter.

*

I was working with Bible Brian that morning. We usually worked in pairs. Macca would drop us at either end of an estate and we'd work our way towards each other. Every now and then, Macca would return to see how we were doing, top our bags up with leaflets and shout playful little orders like, "C'mon, lads, step, step, step!" before driving off for his seventeenth fag break.

Eleven o'clock rolled round, and sure enough, there was that head-spin. My fucking hangovers made clockwork seem slack. I'd already polished off the coffee.

I met up with Brian at quarter past eleven, forty-five minutes before Macca was due to pick us up. We only had a handful of leaflets left between us, and there was time to kill before lunch officially started.

This rarely happened. Usually there'd be leaflets left over and Macca would make some comment about us not having walked quick enough. These remarks didn't bother me particularly, cos I knew Macca was just Geoff's little mouthpiece. All talk and no bollocks, in other words.

I said, "OK Brian. We'd better get ourselves hidden."

"Why's that?"

"Cos if Macca happens to drive past and see us standing here, he'll give us some more work to do."

"Seems a little dishonest."

I said, "Fuck's sake, Brian. It's not a moral issue. I'm being practical. Come on, there's a pub just up the road, looks like they're opening up."

Brian said, "I don't want to drink."

I said, "I'm buying. Come on."

Brian followed me into the pub, and sat down at a table while I ordered. He was looking around at the décor as though this was an alien environment, which maybe it was. Maybe he'd never even had a drink before.

I came back carrying two pints of bitter.

He said, "I said I wanted a Coke."

I said, "I thought I'd splash out. I hate drinking on my own."

He said, "It's not even lunchtime yet."

"So what, Brian? Who says you can't drink in the morning? Jesus was the guy who turned water into wine, wasn't he?"

Brian said, "I fear you're in danger of taking the Lord's name in vain."

"Well, sorry if I offended you, mate. Seriously. I'm not like those pricks in the van, you know. You're alright."

Brian said, "Well, thank you, Travis. You're alright too."

He looked over his shoulder.

I said, "Will you chill the fuck out? If he catches us, you can say that I forced you into it. By the sound of things, we're all getting laid off anyway, so where's the harm in going out in style?"

Brian said, "I don't think Geoff is shutting us down. I think it's likely there'll be voluntary redundancies, and if there are, I'll be the first to put my hand up."

I said, "What, because you hate the job?"

He said, "Because I'm a Christian."

"Well, sorry to take the Lord's name in vain again Brian, but *Jesus Christ*. Sounds more like an inferiority complex to me."

He said, "You wouldn't understand."

I said, "Oh really?"

He said, "I can see that you're a good person, Travis, but you seem to be following the wrong path."

I said, "You're not going to try and convert me, are you?"

He said, "I'm sorry. It's my duty."

"It's your duty as far as your beliefs are concerned. As for me, it's my duty to avoid religion at all costs. Trust me on that one. I've been there."

Brian's eyes widened and his face crinkled in pleasant surprise.
"You were a Christian?"

"Fraid so."

"What denomination?"

"What the fuck does that matter?"

"It matters to me."

I said, "Catholic. Happy now?"

Brian smiled. He said, "Yes. That explains a lot."

"Oh yeah?"

"They say you can spread the word to anyone apart from a lapsed Catholic."

I said, "I never got molested by a priest if that's what you're thinking. I just don't want to be converted, thanks."

He said, "I don't like that word "converted." It reminds me too much of sales speak. I'm not trying to make money."

“Yeah, but under your belief system, you’re set to profit in some way, aren’t you? Don’t you get special treatment in the afterlife?”

He said, “Whatever treatment I receive is nothing compared to the treatment you’ll be missing out on.”

I couldn’t help laughing. “Fucking hell. Pardon my French, Brian, but that is *so fucked up*. Don’t you realise how ridiculous that sounds? *Think* about it, Brian. Eternal damnation, eternal pain, misery and torture, all because I don’t believe in your particular version of God. Where’s the fucking justice in that?”

He said, “This is where you misunderstand me. I don’t believe in hell. *This* is hell, everything that’s happening around us. Don’t you see? All the misery and pain in the world. Satan has to be running the show. There’s no other explanation.”

I studied his face for the slightest trace of irony, but the man was a hundred percent serious. I felt like beating the shit out of him in sheer frustration.

I said, “So, you still believe that there’s whole groups of human beings who are inferior to you? Hindus, Muslims, Jews, what have you?”

He said, “I don’t believe they’re inferior. I think they’re misguided.”

“But they must be inferior, under your system. They’re not allowed into heaven.”

“OK, if that’s really what you want me to say. Other religions are inferior.”

“I guess that makes you a fascist.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“It’s what you are, Brian. If that’s what you believe.”

“That’s not fair. You shouldn’t use that word. That’s not fair. I’m a Christian. I’m not even supposed to be political, anyway. That’s why we don’t fight in wars. It’s just the Devil fighting the Devil.”

His eyes were on the table. I could see that I’d touched a nerve, but I wasn’t going to apologise. Maybe I’d even managed to convert him back.

He picked up his untouched pint, and took a long swig. Half the glass was gone in a couple of seconds. He licked his lips thoughtfully, and finally looked up.

He said, “I’m not happy about it, if that’s what you think. I didn’t make the rules.”

“But you *believe* in them, Brian. People believe in things they like the idea of. That’s the whole point.”

“I can’t explain it. Especially not to someone like you.”

“I understand more than you might imagine, mate. I’ve been there.”

Brian looked at me with a strange smile. “You’ll understand soon enough. Everyone will. You’ll understand in six weeks’ time.”

I said, “Why, what’s happening in six weeks’ time?” Then I realised. “Wait, wait, don’t tell me. You think the world’s going to end in six weeks’ time?”

Brian didn’t blink. I wasn’t sure if he was looking at me or staring straight through my face. “You’ll see,” he said.

*

We headed back outside, bang on time for Macca.

As usual, Macca parked up outside the nearest chippy. Jack and Midget went in and came back with chips and gravy. They still lived with their parents, so they could afford to splash out every lunchtime. I made do with my sandwiches. Dairylea and grated carrot. The cheapskate special.

Macca went off to make a phone call, leaving us all sitting there, munching in silence.

Ricky said, "Do you reckon he's talking to Geoff?"

Jack said, "Yeah, I heard him say earlier you'll be the first one to go, Rick."

"Fuck off."

"It's fucking true. You pissed him off this morning, mentioning the football. You're a marked man."

Ricky shrugged. "Whatever. I don't care. S'not the end of the world if I get the boot."

Jack grinned at him. "You should stick up for yourself, mate. I'm fucking serious. Don't go down without a fight."

"Why not?"

"What, are you a *pussy*?"

Ricky tutted. He said, "I'm not a pussy."

Jack said, "We should *do* something then. Really fuck 'em up."

Jack glanced across at Midget, and gave him a conspiratorial nod. They'd obviously been cooking something up, and Ricky was still oblivious.

Jack said, "Ricky, have you ever heard of a thing called *dirty protest*?"

Ricky said, "No."

Midget joined in. "Yeah, mate. I know what you're talking about. My brother heard about it when he was banged up in Strangeways."

Jack explained for Ricky's benefit. "It's what prisoners do when they're getting mistreated by the screws. Think about it, mate. We're prisoners. We've got no fucking freedom."

Ricky smiled bitterly. "You got that right."

"And the way Macca spoke to you this morning, I wouldn't stand for it. I'm not *gonna* stand for it, actually. I'm with you, man."

Midget said, "Yeah, man, I'm with you too."

Jack said, "I think we should do it."

Ricky said, "Do what?"

"Dirty protest, mate. Desperate times, desperate measures. You get me?"

"Not really, mate."

"You want me to spell it out for you?"

"Um, yeah."

Jack lowered his voice, and explained his scheme to Rick, in what you might call layman's terms.

Ricky laughed, nervously. "Are you *serious*?"

Jack smiled at him. "I'm in. How 'bout you, Midge?"

Midget smirked in unison. "Too right."

Ricky giggled and put his hand over his mouth. He said, "Go on, then."

Jack said, "I'll do it if you do it, mate. We gotta be serious about this. We're fucking comrades now. Are you in, mate?"

Ricky smiled. "I'm in."

Jack giggled, and screwed up his face. "Here we go, lads. Come on, Midge."

Midget said, "I'm trying, hold on."

"How you doing, Ricky?"

Ricky was chuckling quietly beside me. I heard a strange sound, so I looked to the floor, and sure enough, Ricky was pissing his pants. He had a puddle right around the stack of leaflets he was sitting on. They must've been getting soaked. I lifted up my feet as his puddle passed my way, and Brian did the same.

Then came the smell. Raw and potent, like stepping into a sewer.

I could hardly breathe, but I said nothing.

Brian said nothing.

After the smell, Jack and Midget's grins vanished. They looked each other, silently trying to work out what to say or do next. They obviously hadn't planned this far ahead.

I saw the look of exhilaration on Ricky's face, and in a way, I could relate to it. It must've been strangely liberating, breaking all of society's rules, going back to a childlike state, which in Ricky's case, he probably wasn't too far away from anyway.

Macca returned from talking on the phone, and hopped into the driver's seat. It took a moment for him to breathe in.

He span round. He looked down at the state of the floor, and up again at us.

"What the fuck happened?"

Jack pointed his finger. He said, "Rick just shit himself."

"You *what*?"

Jack said, "I know. Dirty fucker, or what?"

Macca was strangely quiet. His voice came out in a harsh whisper. "I do not believe what I'm hearing. Ricky. Tell me it isn't true."

"It's not like that, Macs."

"What?"

"You don't understand."

"OH, I DON'T UNDERSTAND, DO I? WOULD YOU CARE TO FUCKING ELABORATE?"

Ricky's head was bowed. "I can't."

Macca wasn't listening, anyway. He'd climbed out of the van, and was marching round to pull the back doors open.

"Get out."

Obediently, Ricky pulled himself up, and jumped down onto the pavement.

"Go home."

Ricky said, "Are you not going to drive me back?"

"In the state you're in? Fuck off. You can get the bus, you filthy little retard."

*

I watched Ricky hobbling along the pavement as we drove off.

Jack and Midget stayed silent. No doubt they'd be celebrating their little victory later over a game of *Streetfighter*.

I could've happily killed them. But that wasn't the answer. I knew that wasn't the answer.

Brian also remained silent. He just looked at them, examining their faces with that same look he'd given me, his eyes full of belief, and certainty, and superiority, and righteousness, and a certain kind of joy.

2000

(According to no one)

Declan lived across the road from the driving test centre. He kept the curtains closed because he didn't like the idea of people looking in, but every day he'd slide them open a fraction so he could sit and watch the action on the other side of the street.

He saw people in tears being comforted by their instructors, or pouring their hearts out into mobile phones. He saw people jumping for joy, kissing the examiners full on the lips, or performing impromptu dance routines to the amusement of passers by.

He was comforted by the fact that no two celebrations were the same. Every tearful phone call displayed some tiny idiosyncrasy.

Declan lived in an old Victorian house divided into bedsits. His room was about the same size as the bedroom he'd had as a child, but it suited his needs. He imagined in the olden days, this would have been the servant's quarters.

The street was lined with trees, and at first glance, this could've been mistaken for an affluent area. Maybe it was, once.

There were three plants on his windowsill – a yucca, and a pair of cacti. Declan didn't see his plants very often, as they were on the other side of the curtains. He watered them once a week, and sometimes, at six in the morning, he'd open the curtains to take a look. There wasn't usually anyone around at six in the morning, so he was safe for a while.

Declan slept in on this particular morning. He had nothing to do, and took some pleasure in not having to get up early. He'd finished his A-levels a few weeks previously, and had slept in every morning since then.

He pulled himself up and climbed into his dressing gown. He filled the kettle, and washed yesterday's cup. He let the teabag brew while he shaved.

Declan shaved every morning, whether he needed to or not. It gave him something to do while his tea was brewing. He had a shaving mirror hanging over the kitchenette sink, which over time had become flecked with dirt from the washing up water. He preferred not to clean it because the thin film of grime helped to dim his reflection.

He kept one eye on the teabag as he scraped the white foam from his skin. He liked watching the tiny jets of brown polluting the clear water. He wiped his face and hands on a kitchen towel, and poured in the milk. He swished the bag around in the cup, crushing it against the side before tossing it into the bin liner under the sink.

He was just about to make some toast when the doorbell rang.

He gave the tea a final stir and went downstairs.

He paused at the door, slightly dazzled by the postman's luminous orange jacket.

"I need a signature, mate."

"Sure."

Declan shielded the sun from his eyes as he took the biro.

"Cheers, mate."

"Have a good day."

"And yourself."

He took the envelope upstairs to his room.

He knew what it was before he opened it.

It was more than he'd been expecting.

Still, Declan didn't jump for joy. He didn't cry, either. He sat on the bed, staring at the number on the cheque.

There were shouts echoing up from outside. A teenager of about Declan's age had taken exception to an examiner's decision, and was yelling in a deep hoarse bawl, threatening to break the man's legs, while his instructor intervened, trying to calm the boy down.

The young man then turned on the instructor, saying it was all her fault – he wasn't ready, and now he'd run out of money, so he couldn't even take the test again.

The voices softened after a while, until they were just another part of the background buzz.

Declan opened the curtains a fraction and peered out of the window.

The boy was sitting on the kerb, with his head in his hands. His instructor was sitting beside him, stroking his shoulder.

"It's OK," she said. "It'll be OK ... You're a young man with your whole life ahead of you ... It'll be OK ... It'll be OK ... I promise you, it'll be OK."

2001

(According to Brian)

09/10/08

Mood: Cheerful

The 1st thing I'd do if they put me in charge is abolish the monarchy, but I might like to keep the honours system in place, because I think it's important to recognize and reward achievements.

The trouble with the current system is, we don't reward the right things. Exploiters of the poor get knighthoods for "services to business," while all the working man can expect is a medal for killing foreigners, or "bravery" as the establishment prefer to term it.

Don't you think we're looking through the wrong end of the telescope? Instead of rewarding people for doing things, we should be recognising things they HAVEN'T done. That's what Christianity's all about. Check out the Ten Commandments – it's all "don't do this," "don't do that." When was the last time you saw someone commended for NOT killing, NOT stealing, just BEING????

If they put me in charge, I'd find the oldest non-criminal I could find and surprise him with the biggest honour possible. Imagine that – "for being alive for 104 years and doing absolutely fukk all the entire time"!!! ☺

COMMENTS:

NONE.

11/10/08

Mood: Dry

A Jehovah's witness and an evangelical christian walked into a pub.

Pay attention, this is not a joke!!!!!! This happened to me, and I must tell you about it as a matter of some urgency. ☺

For those of you who are new to the blog, my name is Brian Rourke. The story I'm about to tell took place in Manchester, in the United Kingdom, on the Planet Earth - this civilization that is in equal measures extremely ugly and extremely beautiful, extremely clever and extremely stupid, extremely organised and extremely chaotic. A world of extremes that makes me long for moderation.

It was the end of August, a couple of weeks before uni started back.

The pub was on Oxford Road. It was an American-style sports bar with a mock-Tudor exterior. A lot of students went there, and that's where I took Howard that afternoon. Howard wasn't a big drinker - not many of

the theology crowd were. That's how I'd got myself a reputation, I suppose. I'd had nicknames in the past – "Bible Brian," "Holy Brian," what have you. On the university drinking scene, I was referred to affectionately as "Brian Blessed."

I was the Jehovah's witness, but let me assure you, blog fans, that I'm not one anymore!!!! As for why, that comes later. This was 2001, but my first grains of doubt were sewn a couple of years previously – in a pub, funnily enough! ☺ It's strange how all these significant events seem to involve drinking. Nothing wrong with that, of course. Unlike many, I'm a happy drunk. A friend once called me a "people person." I love that expression. I especially love it because it's such a contrast to the way I was as a child, before I was "saved".

Anyway, in spite of any doubts, I was still very much part of the church. I woke people up on Saturday mornings. I boycotted Christmas and Easter. I thought blood transfusions were evil. I had to. It's an all or nothing kind of faith.

Admittedly, I drank alcohol, which wasn't allowed, but as I said to Howard, I was sure I'd be forgiven. ☺

I've always been a conspiracy theorist, which goes some way to explaining why I thought the world was going to end in the year 2000. I'd like to make it clear that it was not the official line taken by the Witnesses. Proclaiming that THE END IS NIGH is a notorious staple of the faith, but after several failed attempts (1874, 1875, 1914, 1975) the church have grown shy of naming a specific date.

Howard was the evangelical, and like me, he was a convert. I'm not going to go into any unnecessary details about the lives Howard and me led prior to signing on the spiritual dotted line, but needless to say, it's all best left forgotten.

Howard's story is far worse than mine – neglect, aboose, moving from foster home to foster home. It just occurred to me that I'm trying to sum up years of a person's life in a sentence, and it feels wrong. But that's the way it has to be. It isn't my story to tell. Maybe Howard could start his own blog (wherever he is nowadays ☺).

Howard looked awkward perched on top of the trendy stool. He was well over six foot, with an impressive build, and he was kind of scary when you first encountered him. He always looked as though he was summing up whether or not to punch you in the face, but all you needed to do was spend 5 minutes with him to see the gentle giant behind his manic exterior. He was always twitching and dancing about. Even when he was sitting down, he jigged his legs about, like he was dying for a piss. Truth is, he was constantly wired on caffeine. That afternoon, he was drinking a latté. I think he was trying to sound all sophisticated while he was ordering, but in his thick Lancashire accent, the word was pronounced "latty."

I had a pint of bitter, which tasted watered down.

The pub was fairlie quiet for that time in the afternoon. It was the end of the summer, and the students hadn't started back yet. The big screen TV

behind the bar was blasting out moosic videos, and there were variuos young peepke playing pool and chucking fifty-pees into quiz macheens. I was only 25, but in many ways I felt a lot older. Howard was a simliar age, and we'd come through a simliar route, so I guess that's why we got on so well.

"I was talking to the Lord the other day," said Howard, "and He reckons I could get some decent graides on these next couple of modooles."

"Talking to the Lord?" I said. "You mean you were praying?"

"I don't really call it praying" he said. "There's 2 things, yeah? There's praying and there's talking to the Lord."

"What's the difERENCE?"

"Well, when I pray, it's just me talking, yeah? When I talk to the Lord, He talks back. Don't you ever do that?"

"So, you actually *have a conersation*?" I said.

"Yeah," he said.

"Bollox."

“Langwage!”

“Sorry. I’m just confoosed as to why you’d call it a convesration, when it’s a bit diferent to what me and you are doing right now.”

“Why’s it diferent?”

“Because you can see my face. You’re hearing me loud and clear. I can undertsand that when you’re praying, you might feel like God’s trying to tell you certain things, or guide you in a certain direcktion, but...”

“Are you saying God’s never spoken to you?” he said.

“Of course he hasn’t. Not in *that* way.”

“In that case, you havn’t got the right *relationship* with Him, yeah? Think about that.”

“Oh yeah,” I said, rolling my eyes at the idea. “You’ve certainly given me somehting too *think* about. Fukk’s sake, you’re Howard Bailey from the sticks. You’re not Moses.”

“You’ve probibly never even spoken in tongues,” he said. “You’re an amature.”

We luffed.

Howard flashed a mischeevus grin. "Seriously, though," he said, "It's all doom and gloom with your lot, isn't it? "Watch out, the world's going to end" and all that. Where's the sence of celebrasion? Where's the JOY?"

"You can't just ignore the negatives," I said. "What do you think Revelasions is about? It's not a picnick."

Howard shrugged. "It's a fulfillment of the book of Daniel," he said. "So what? It rounds the whole thing off nicely at the end."

"It's Ezekiel, actually."

"No, no. Daniel. Anyway ..."

"I was just saying, it's Ezekiel, not Daniel."

"Not that it matters, mate, the book of Revelasions makes constant reference to Daniel."

"Ezekiel!"

"IT'S DANIEL, YOU TWAT!!!!!"

"Don't call me that. It's fukking Ezekiel – any fukker knows that!"

"ANY FUKKER KNOWS IT'S DANIEL, YOU SNIVELING PIECE OF SHIT!"

"Don't talk to me like that," I said.

"Fukk you!"

He was on his feet, bobbing up and down like a boxer.

"Sit the fukk down," I said.

"Don't tell me what to do, yeah?!"

He slammed his half-full cup of coffee against the bar, smashing it in half. Hot brown milk and shattered enamel sprayed against our shoes.

"There's only one person who tells me what to do," he said. "There's only one person, yeah? Only one, yeah? One."

By rights, I should've been terrified. Howard was holding the remaining half of the mug up to my face, but I could tell he was never going to use it. He was blinking to stop the tears running. He'd cut his finger when the mug

smashed, and a trickle of blood crept down the side of his hand. He was like a child who'd fallen over in the playground, trying not to blub.

We seemed to stand there for ages, neither of us knowing what to say or do next. No one had noticed us fighting. Everyone just carried on drinking, and we just stood there, like some bizarre mime act.

I didn't want to be the one to move first.

COMMENTS:

NONE

12/10/08

Mood: Moody

You may have noticed I have a problem with spelling. I make no apology. I've been through the school system, being told by various teachers and experts that I'm not trying hard enough, that I'm a lazy reader, that I'm not academically gifted, that I'm STOOPIID. Dyslexia was never mentioned as a possibility. Wasn't even diagnosed until I was 20.

I was lucky enough to've had the opportunity to do an access course and go to university, which saved me from wallowing in self-pity and state-

sponsored ignorance. I used to talk about having been saved by faith, but really, it was education that rescued me. (More on this subject future posts, folks!!! ☺)

*

Brian's Thought For The Day: why is "dyslexia" such a difficult word to spell?????? ☺ ☺ ☺

COMMENTS:

NONE.

13/10/08

Mood: Disterbed

Same pub, different day. It was September and the students had returned to study, drink and be merry. It was Tuesday afternoon, and the place was packed out. All around was chatter and the inoffensive beat of bad R&B. A swarm of young bodies surrounded us, guzzling pints, crisps and alcopops, but I wasn't watching them. Even the girls weren't of much interest to me that day.

I hadn't seen Howard since he'd flipped out on me a couple of weeks previously. It seemed appropriate to meet in the same place. Howard volunteered for the police a couple of days a week as a community support

officer. He'd just finished a shift, and still had his uniform on underneath his faded denim jacket.

We found ourselves a table in the corner where we could sit and talk. He still couldn't look me in the face.

"You know I'm sorry," he said. "You know that, Brian, yeah? You're a mate."

"You're a mate too," I said. "I just don't want anything like that happen again. OK?"

"OK."

"Is that a promise, Howard?"

"It's an uncertain world," he said. "I try my best, that's the best I can do. I try not to promise anything."

"Bollox," I said.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm only being honest, yeah? I lose my temper sometimes. It's just the way I am. I try to control it as best I can, but I can't promise it won't happen again. I'm not going to lie to you Brian. I don't lie. Neither should you."

"Where does it come from?" I said. "This anger. Why is it there?"

"You wouldn't understand, yeah?" he said.

"OK, OK," I said. "You lose your temper. And maybe I don't understand. But it's not an "uncertain world," Howard. Why would you say something like that? We're CHRISTIANS. We believe in certainty. We believe God has a plan."

"But we're not certain what that plan is," he said. "I've asked Him. He won't tell me. Doesn't want to spoil the surprise."

"But it's WRITTEN DOWN," I said. "We know what's going to happen, Howard. We KNOW the world's going to end. We KNOW that. Everyone in this pub knows that, but most people prefer to pretend otherwise. We just don't know when. That's the only thing we can't be certain of. We can be certain of everything else, but not that."

If I was one of these idiots who believe in fate, or worse, one of these idiots who think every single thing that takes place on the planet earth happens "for a reason," perhaps I might have found what happened next somehow easier to digest.

In retrospect, I'm glad it happened. I'm glad it happened because it solidified my friendship with Howard. I've probably offended half the world by saying

that, but if life has taught me anything, blog fans, it's that you need to get your priorities right. Howard is my priority. Always was, and forever shall be, wherever he is and whatever he's doing now. As Howard himself would say, I'm only being honest. ☺

Behind us, someone had run into the pub, and dashed straight up to the bar, pushing between queuing punters to attract the attention of the nearest member of staff. Even from our table in the corner, we heard his command.

"Put the news on," he said. "Put the news on, now."

The man was forceful enough for the kid at the bar to obey him without question. The kid went out the back to change the channel, and within a few moments, MTV had been switched with News 24.

We got up and joined the crowd round the bar. We stood and watched the images on the screen, bobbing up and down on tiptoes as though drowning in the fear and the anger of the multitude of students, boozers and shoppers from the street who'd come in to find out what was happening. Not being too hot on world geography, I recognised the two buildings, but couldn't name them. We watched the footage as it came in of the plane hitting the tower, and as the buildings hit the ground, I knew, and Howard knew, and maybe everyone else in the room knew too, that nothing would ever be the same. ☹

*

Behind us, a couple of blokes in shorts and sun hats were playing pool. One of them potted the black too early, slamming his cue down in frustration.

His partner chuckled and pumped his fist in the air as he slotted in another pound coin and racked up another frame without looking up from the table.

“That’s typical, that is,” said his friend. “Absolutely bloody typical.”

COMMENTS:

NONE.

2002

(According to no one)

It was a weekday night like any other. Declan went to the union bar, as he usually did.

He often went to the union bar on his own and attached himself to a group of drinkers. He met a lot of people that way.

People would come to Declan with their problems, because he was perceived as being a good listener. Someone said he had an “understanding face,” which Declan didn’t understand, but took as a compliment. A couple of people started calling him “The Guru,” but it didn’t catch on. Declan was glad about this, because he wasn’t sure if they were mocking him.

The bar had a distinctive smell. He could smell it on his clothes at the end of the night. Alongside the usual whiff of beer and cigarettes were a medley of odours – mud, sweat and deodorant from the sports team socials, the overpowering cleaning fluid in the toilets, and the scent of illegal substances wafted into the mix now and then. There were pleasant smells too – perfume, aftershave, and the sweet aroma of hot bodies. The smell was there all the time, even when the place was empty. It was like the atmosphere had been fixed in time, inviting him in every time he passed by.

On this particular night, Declan was sitting with a group of lads who he’d grown to know quite well.

Ed and Trick were sports students. They talked about football a lot, which Declan had never been interested in, but he was engaged by their passion for the game. Sometimes Declan watched football on TV just to

listen to the commentators. He liked listening to passionate people, and sometimes it didn't matter what they were passionate about. He envied Ed and Trick, in a way. He was on an IT course, but he wasn't passionate about IT. It was just something he happened to be good at.

Brian and Howard were interesting for entirely different reasons. When they started university, they were serious and sober, even after a few drinks. They mainly hung around together, and if they did speak to other people it was mainly about God. They were known as the "Two Disciples."

Everything changed in the second year. Brian ditched the woolly jumpers and the ancient waxed jacket in favour of skinny t-shirts and combats. Whereas before he wouldn't shut up about religion, now he was obsessed with conspiracy theories. His favourite subjects:

1. The moon landing ("Why hasn't Armstrong ever given an interview? The guy could've made millions on the chat show circuit.")
2. Roswell ("They call it an *incident*, implying that it's "just one of those things" – as though it's something that only happened *once*.")
3. Despite no longer being a Jehovah's Witness, Brian still refused to believe in dinosaurs. ("How come no one ever unearthed a T Rex bone in the Middle Ages?")

Howard still wore the same checked shirts and ripped jeans, but his look had altered even more than Brian's. There was a permanent smile on his face. His eyes were everywhere at once, like he was seeing the world outside his own head for the first time and he didn't want to miss anything. He'd become a serious social networker, constantly scanning the room for

new people, which could be irritating if you were in the middle of a conversation.

Declan got chatting to Howard as they sat squashed round their crowded table. Howard was bouncing up and down in his seat to the music.

“You look like you’re having a good time,” said Declan.

Howard nodded. “It’s hard to believe sometimes. It’s hard to believe I’m here at all.”

Declan wasn’t sure if Howard meant “here” in the sense of here in the world, or here at university, or here in the bar, so he asked him to clarify.

Before Declan could stop him, Howard spouted his entire life story. Howard never knew his parents. He was brought up in children’s homes and foster care. He showed promise at school, and was sent to a Catholic grammar school – “for my sins,” Howard explained.

As a teenager, he’d got into speed, coke and stealing. He found God when he was eighteen. He was on his way to swipe some car stereos, and was suddenly struck by a bright light, which filled him with the spirit of the Lord, like Saint Paul on the road to Damascus. He happened to be passing the *United Church of The Redeemer* at the time, and was welcomed in with open arms – a repentant sinner.

“Did you know,” said Howard, “God loves a repentant sinner more than someone who hasn’t sinned?”

Not being religious, Declan didn’t know that, but the concept seemed ridiculous and deeply wrong to him. Surely it couldn’t possibly be in the Bible, he thought, but didn’t say anything out loud, allowing Howard to continue with his story.

Howard told him how he'd cleaned up his act after his conversion, describing his relationship with God as "more rewarding than anything I could steal – a bigger buzz than any drug."

Declan thought these sounded like someone else's words rather than Howard's. He was suspicious about the whole conversion story, but then, why would Howard lie? Perhaps, like the Biblical version, it was intended as an allegory rather than historical fact. Declan was tempted to say this, but restrained himself, not wanting to be insulting, especially as he was back in his role as "The Guru".

Howard continued, telling him how his life changed again last year when he realised he'd picked the wrong church. Howard had reinvented himself as a "regular Anglican", and Brian had done the same. They went to church on Sundays together before heading down the pub.

"It's the best of both worlds," said Howard. "I've still got the Lord in my life, but I can enjoy myself as well. I don't have these voices in my head whispering, *"What will the church think, what will the church think?"* It doesn't *matter* what the church thinks."

"So, what prompted the change?" said Declan. "I suppose something like September 11th must make you stop and think."

Howard pulled a face. "September the what?"

"I thought at the time, it must be difficult being a fundamentalist after what those extremists did in New York."

Howard nodded thoughtfully, as though the idea had never occurred to him. "*Fundamentalist*, eh?" he said, like it was a foreign word.

"I'm sorry," said Declan. "I just thought ..."

Howard leapt to his feet and ran over to talk to a girl he'd spotted at the bar.

Declan turned his attention to the rest of the group. Ed had a friend from work with him, who bought the table a round of drinks. The lad introduced himself as Jamie. He wore an Iron Maiden t-shirt and a red bandanna over his hair.

“Let’s get this out the way,” said Jamie. “I’m not a student. I’ve got money, fuckers!”

There was an uproar of ironic laughter round the table, and Declan smiled along out of politeness. He understood Jamie was trying to be funny, but he reminded Declan of kids from his old estate who threw stones at him on the way to school and made him scared to leave the house.

Declan disliked people who flashed their cash around for no good reason. He was still living off the payout from his mum’s life insurance, and if he wanted to, he could regularly buy drinks for every person in the bar. He wasn’t being selfish – he just didn’t like drawing attention to himself. It was people like Jamie, happily buying drinks for strangers, who were the real mercenaries.

Declan dwelt on this paradox as the night went on. He tried to formulate an equation or an epigram to illustrate his hypothesis, but he couldn’t come up with anything that didn’t imply all generous people are selfish, or all miserly people are kind.

He waited for Howard to come back to the table and then went to the bar to buy a round of drinks.

He was greeted with a cheer when he came back.

“We should move on after these,” said Brian. “It’s indie night at Choppers.”

The others shrugged in agreement.

“You coming, Dec?”

Declan was surprised by the offer. “Sure,” he said, surprising himself with the reply.

The drinks were soon gone, and Declan followed the boys to the club.

They had a big discussion about music on the way down. Brian and Trick were into indie bands; Ed was more of a dance fan. Howard claimed to be a jazz enthusiast, while Jamie didn’t listen to anything that wasn’t metal. (“You should listen to something *real*, student wankers.”)

Luckily, no one asked Declan about his musical tastes, because he was embarrassed to admit he never listened to music, and didn’t own any CDs. He didn’t dislike music as such – he just found most of it incomprehensible, particularly as far as songs were concerned. Even the meaningful ones were meaningless if you analysed the words. Declan suspected that he was taking it all too seriously, but he wasn’t concerned enough to change his outlook. He liked watching films, because he could understand them better. He made no apology for this, but didn’t often say it out loud because people looked at him funny.

The club was packed. The heat and smoke made Declan thirsty, so he drank quickly. Pint after pint hardly seemed to affect him.

The drinking eased his boredom as he sat watching the boys dance. It was too loud to hear what anyone was saying, so the music was the only real form of entertainment – bad singers mumbling over jangly guitars. He recognised some of the songs from the student bar, and found that he knew a lot of the words without having consciously learned them. It made him think about mind control and the power of propaganda. Whenever a tune by a Manchester band came on, it was greeted with cheers, and appreciative waves to the DJ. It was only a matter of time before the opening drumbeats of *I Am The Resurrection* by the Stone Roses sent people from the sides

rushing to the dancefloor to sing along. Declan noticed Brian and Howard singing loudest of all. Again, he wondered what it all meant.

As the two o'clock finish loomed, people started pairing off. Declan spotted Brian kissing a pretty girl up against a pillar. They disappeared together shortly after that.

Howard was sitting at a nearby table with a girl on his lap. His hands were covering her breasts, and he was nibbling on her ear, whispering whatever it was people were supposed to whisper in those situations. Never having been with a woman in that way, Declan had no idea what you were supposed to say. He tried lipreading without making it too obvious, but the room was too dark.

"Having a good night?" said a voice beside him.

Declan turned to see Jamie smoking a cigarette and sipping on a bottle of water.

"I think I might be drunk," said Declan.

"What's your name again?"

"Declan."

"Can I ask you a question, Declan?"

"Sure."

"What's it all about?"

"What?" said Declan. "Life?"

"Yeah. I suppose that's what I mean. I was brought up on a farm, right? Now I sell stationary for a living. What the fuck's that all about? *Progress?*"

"Why does everyone seem to think I've got all the answers? I'm as confused as everyone else."

“Chill out, mate. You’ve got an understanding face, that’s all.”

“I’m sorry,” said Declan. “I didn’t mean to snap. It just gets a bit much sometimes. People confide things in me – personal stuff, you know? But no one ever listens to what I’ve got to say. And I’ve got things to say, you know? I could talk for days and days if I thought ...”

Jamie wasn’t listening. He was on his feet, heading towards the dancefloor, playing air guitar to the opening riff of The Beastie Boys’ *Fight For Your Right To Party*.

Declan smiled and took a sip from his glass. He wasn’t angry – he thought it was funny. He was amused by Jamie’s elaborate dancing. This was what coming to a place like this was all about.

The track came to an end, and Jamie wandered off somewhere.

The next tune was more downbeat. It was by an American-sounding band who Declan didn’t recognise. It took him a moment to realise he was listening intently to the song. The words seeped into his brain as though they were his own thoughts.

*The creature in the sky
Got sucked in a hole
Now there’s a hole in the sky
And the ground’s not cold
And if the ground’s not cold
Everything is gonna burn
We’ll all take turns
I’ll get mine, too
This monkey’s gone to heaven*

He didn’t know what any of it meant, but he didn’t want to analyse it. There was no need for explanation.

This monkey's gone to heaven

The line repeated over and over. Declan didn't know if it was supposed to be funny or serious. Maybe it was just another stupid song.

He couldn't be bothered to make a judgement on it, so he decided to think about something else.

It was only then that he noticed the jets of saltwater streaming down his cheeks. He couldn't remember the last time he'd cried. It could've been years ago. He didn't know which emotion the tears were attached to. For some reason he found that funny, and he laughed. He wasn't sure if he were laughing at himself or laughing at *This monkey's gone to heaven*. *This monkey's gone to heaven*. *This monkey's gone to heaven*.

*

Declan woke up at nine o'clock to the sound of chatter and car engines across the road at the driving test centre.

He pulled the cover up to his chin, and let out a sigh.

He had nothing to do today. He didn't have any lectures, and he was way ahead on his coursework.

He smiled, and spread out his arms in a victory pose. He'd watch a couple of films this afternoon, and maybe go to the union bar again tonight. No doubt there would be people there he could sit and drink with.

In some small part of his mind he wondered why his life had to revolve around drinking, drinking, drinking. But this was forgotten just as quickly.

He started singing softly to himself. It wasn't a song he knew, he was just making it up as he went along.

2003

(According to no one)

They had a routine on Sundays. The ten thirty service at St Luke's followed by drinks at the Lamb. From that point on, the routine varied. Sometimes they'd have a couple of pints and then head home. Sometimes they'd drink all day and miss work on Monday morning. Drinking was always uncertain, but church was always the same. That was, until one morning, Brian arrived at St Luke's and Howard didn't.

Brian knew where Howard would be. After the service, he found him sitting at their usual table in the Lamb, sipping on his third pint.

The Lamb was also a hotel and restaurant, but no one ever ate at the restaurant, and no one ever stayed at the hotel. The only people who drank in the pub were ancient alcoholics, real hardcore drinkers who could barely stand up but no one would ever think of messing with them. A classy joint.

The landlord's name was Taffy. He had thick, tattooed arms, a mass of untidy grey hair, and a disproportionately large beer-gut, which poked through the lower buttons of his shirt. Brian never discovered Taffy's real name, because that's what everyone called him, including the landlady, who the regulars would refer to as "Taffy's wife." Never having travelled that far south, Brian wondered if everyone in Wales was called Taffy, apart from the women.

He offered Taffy his usual nod and a smile as he sat down. Taffy winked back knowingly from the other side of the bar.

“Where were you?” said Brian as he sat down.

Howard spread his arms, gesturing around the dimly lit room.

“Where else?”

Brian shrugged sarcastically. “Remember that large pointy building with the fancy windows?”

“Not in the mood,” said Howard. “I’m thinking of giving it up.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s crimping my style, yeah? Hanging out with geriatrics. Coffee mornings, harvest festivals, summer fetes. Give me a fucking break.”

Brian nearly dropped his pint. “You’re not coming to the summer fete?”

“Can’t be bothered.”

“What, so you’re too *cool* all of a sudden?”

“Cool doesn’t come into it, yeah? It’s the *complacency* that gets me. This idea that “we could be wrong” Like, “Maybe the Hindus, or the Muslims, or the Jews are right.” What’s the point of believing something you think might be wrong? I *know* that God exists, yeah? He’s *spoken* to me. And I know that He’s the Christian God, because He told me so.”

“Well, if that’s what you believe, you should carry out your weekly obligation.”

“Obligation?” Howard spluttered, spraying flecks of beer back into his glass. “Fuck off. Don’t go all *Christian* on me.”

They laughed.

Taffy passed by their table, gesturing towards the dregs of Howard’s previous pints. “Are these dead?” he said.

Howard nodded, and Taffy took them away.

Brian pondered briefly over the metaphysical implications of a pint of beer having its own life and death.

“Let’s just put this whole thing in perspective, yeah?” said Howard.

“What?”

“We live in a free country. We don’t have absolute freedom, but we have relative freedom. We’re free to come to the pub and drink on a Sunday. It’s a freedom we take for granted. All those mugs who went on that march against military intervention against a known tyrant need to count their blessings. If they’d been opposing government policy in Iraq, they’d’ve been shot dead in the street.”

Brian blinked. “What’s your point?”

“I’m just addressing your question of *obligation*, yeah? Are we actually obliged to do anything?”

““Keep the Sabbath holy” – does that ring any bells?”

“The Ten Commandments don’t actually apply to us, Brian. It’s what the New Testament’s all about. We don’t need to follow the Law, we just need to follow Him. We don’t even need priests. Do you know that? It’s in Matthew 23.”

Howard pulled out his pocket Bible, and started thumbing for the page.

“Mate, I’m not sure this is the time or the place,” said Brian.

Howard located the passage. “*You must not allow yourself to be called Rabbi,*” he said, “*since you have only one Master, and you are all brothers. You must call no one on earth your father, since you have only one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor must you allow yourselves to be called teachers, for you have only one Teacher, the Christ.*”

The greatest among you must be your servant. Anyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and anyone who humbles himself will be exalted."

"Keep your voice down, will you?" Brian whispered. "People are looking."

"What the fuck have we got to be ashamed of, Brian?"

Brian didn't reply.

Howard didn't lower his voice. "I love the Lord," he said. "I fucking *love* Him, and I just want to worship Him in my own way without these clowns interfering..."

Howard stopped talking as Taffy arrived at their table.

"Get out," said Taffy.

"I'm sorry?" said Brian.

"You heard," said Taffy. His eyes were locked on Howard.

"And what the fuck have we done?" said Howard.

"Your language, for a start."

"For a *start*? So, what else?"

"You're upsetting my customers," said Taffy.

"Why?" said Howard.

"I'm not discussing this," said Taffy, marching back over to the bar.

"Look, I think we'd better go," said Brian, softly.

"*Why?* Why should we, Brian?"

"If the man wants us to go, we should go."

"He didn't even say please."

"He's obviously upset."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

Brian almost jumped to his feet as Taffy returned to the table, carrying a hockey stick. He slammed the stick down onto the table, sending the beer inside the glasses rocking. The thud was embarrassingly soft, but it had the desired effect of silencing everyone in the pub.

"Now, get out," he said, calmly.

Brian examined the stick on the table in front of them. It was pretty flimsy, and made of blue plastic. It probably belonged to one of Taffy's kids. It didn't seem quite as effective as a baseball bat would've done, but judging by the look on Taffy's face, he could still do some serious damage.

"OK," said Brian, and got up to leave.

Howard didn't move.

"You going with your friend?" said Taffy.

"You gonna make me?" said Howard.

"Whoa, whoa, easy," said Brian. "Come on, mate, we've gotta go."

Howard looked up at Taffy, and smiled. "I want to finish my drink, yeah?" he said, pointedly raising his glass. The gesture was just subtle enough to show the landlord that he too had a weapon, and was willing to use it.

"You think I'm joking?" said Taffy.

"You think *I'm* joking?" said Howard.

"Come on, mate," said Brian, "stop messing about."

"You should listen to your friend," said Taffy.

"Why are you so afraid?" said Howard.

"You what?"

"I asked why you're so afraid, yeah? I could be a psychopath, or a rapist, and sit here in peace with my pint. But because I'm a Christian, I have to leave. Where's the justice?"

"Shut the fuck up and get the fuck out of my pub."

"Oh, so *you're* allowed to fucking swear?"

"Leave it, Howard," said Brian. "Don't get involved."

"I'm calling the fucking police!"

Taffy stormed back to the bar and picked up the phone.

"Come on, mate," said Brian.

"Stop saying that," said Howard.

"Are you coming?"

"Yeah."

Howard necked the rest of his pint, and got to his feet.

"Sheep shagger," he muttered, and followed Brian out.

*

They walked along the street in silence for a while. The trees lining the road added extra shade to the clouds. The cars flowed, but there weren't many people outside. Here and there, the pavement was dotted with glass, chips and sick from the previous evening.

It wasn't clear exactly where they were heading, so one of them eventually had to speak.

"I understand why you're angry," said Brian.

"Do you really? I don't think you do."

"I do understand."

"Brian, you told me to be *quiet*, yeah? It was like you were *ashamed*."

"I'm not ashamed of you, Howard."

"But worse than that – worse than that – it was like you were ashamed of *yourself*. Ashamed of your own *beliefs*."

"I was just trying to sort things out so it wouldn't kick off."

"Even though we were in the right?"

"It's his pub. He can do whatever he wants."

"So, you're taking his side, yeah?"

"I'm not taking his side. I'm with you. I just don't like violence, Howard."

"I'm not a violent person, yeah?" said Howard. "I'm a Christian."

"So am I," said Brian.

They walked in silence for a while.

"Why don't we just admit what this is really about?" said Howard.

"What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean, Brian. It's not about religion. It's not about principles. It's about *getting involved*."

"Getting involved in what?"

"You know what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the *war*."

"What's the war got to do with it?"

"We've been trying to ignore it," said Howard. "We've been trying to sweep it under the carpet, but there's no getting away from it now. Not after today."

“What are you talking about, Howard? We’re *always* talking about the war. I’m against it, you’re for it. We don’t agree. So what?”

“So, it’s not about *opinions* anymore. It’s about what sort of people we are. Our actions define us, yeah? Our actions reflect our beliefs. Today, you stood up for your beliefs, and I stood up for mine.”

“I was trying to protect you. You’re my friend.”

“I don’t think we can be friends anymore.”

Brian stopped walking. “What?”

Howard stopped walking too. “I’m sorry, Brian, but you let me down today. You let yourself down.”

“Don’t talk to me like that,” said Brian. “You’re talking to me like I’m a child.”

“Maybe sometimes you need telling off. You need to think about what you did today, and what it means. You believe in *not getting involved*, yeah? No matter what the consequences are? So, even when you’re discriminated against for your beliefs – not just your beliefs, but your *religion* – such a fundamental part of who you are – you’re willing just to lie back and accept it, for the sake of a quiet life. You need to think about that, yeah?”

Howard turned and started walking off.

“But they’re not my beliefs anymore,” said Brian.

Howard stopped walking but didn’t turn round. Brian fixed his eyes on the back of his head.

“I was going to tell you,” said Brian. “I was waiting for the right time.”

Howard span round and marched straight up to Brian. Brian became aware of the difference in height between the two of them as Howard loomed over him.

“So let’s get this straight, yeah?” said Howard. “You’re not a believer?”

“Not anymore.”

“So why were you having a pop at me for not going to church?”

“Because I *like* going to church.”

“But you’re not a believer. So, what’s in it for you?”

“It’s a long story.”

Howard looked at his watch. “I’ve got time,” he said.

“I just like ...” said Brian.

“You just like what?”

“I like being part of a community. You know? It’s *nice*. That’s all it is, it’s *nice*, that’s all.”

“Did you *ever* believe? *Ever*?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. It’s difficult to say. When you find God, you feel like you always believed, deep down. When you lose it, you feel like you never really had it. You were just pretending.”

“*Lying* more like. You were *lying*, Brian.”

“I suppose so.”

Howard looked past him up the road. He glanced at his watch again. “Well,” he said, “I’ll be off, then. Have a good whatever.”

“Hold on, hold on. So, we’re not friends anymore?”

“I’m sorry, Brian.”

“But *why?* Because of the *war?*”

“This has got nothing to do with the war, Brian. It’s *you*. You lied to me, you betrayed me, you let me down. *You* did that. Leave Blair and Bush out of it.”

Brian watched as his friend walked away. He stooped over and sat on a wall, as though it were too painful to stand.

He sat there for a long time, replaying his final conversation with Howard in his mind, even though he knew there was no point dwelling on what he should have said. It was too late for that.

He pulled out his mobile phone, and found Howard’s number. His thumb hovered over the delete option, but he didn’t press it. Maybe he’d need the number one day, in an emergency. Some catastrophe big enough for the two of them to forget what had happened today.

What bothered him most as he sat watching the cars go by was that even as the truth came out, he was still lying.

Community. Why did he have to say community?

He said it out loud, as though his friend were still standing there. “I don’t care about any community. I don’t know why I even said that. I just care about *you*. All I care about is you, Howard.”

A crisp packet floated past, and came to rest on Brian’s shoe. He left it there, nestled on top of his foot. Salt and vinegar.

It was lunchtime on Sunday. He’d been to church, he’d been for a drink, now there was nothing to do for the rest of the day.

2004

(According to Brian)

12/11/08

Mood: Retrospective

I'm not going to lie to you. What hapened with Howard afected me a lot, more than I let onto other peeple. I didn't want to see him again. I didn't want our paths to cross, so I gave up my cushie job in the univercity library, and got some tepmorary work in a tomato-packing factory in Oldham. Not the graetest, I know, but I tried to make the best of a bad sitaution. I was the life and soul of the party. I sang along to the tunes on the radio, and was always the first to offer to brew up.

I never metnioned religion while I was packing tomateos. Not even once.

I talked about conspiracy theeories instead. At first, peeple thought I was a headcase, but I had an answer for everything. After a while, even the most ardent scetpics admitted I had a point.

I'll tell you why they listened to me. It wasn't becuase I knew what I was talking about. It was becuase I delivered the mesage with a smile on my face. I never rant, you see. Even as I sit here and type these words, I'm smiling from ear to ear. When you're right, you don't need to feel angry.

The only reason people raise their voices when they're arguing is because of insecurity.

It was because of my ability to put my views across without shouting that I got my work nickname. They called me "Brain". I liked that. ☺

We'd handle green tomatoes all day, sorting them into different sizes and packing them into crates to be shipped off to markets and grocers. The place stank in a strangely unnatural way. Sometimes you'd get a bad one that squished in your hand and squirted juice and seeds down the front of your trousers. I'd come home covered in dried tomatoes, and have to chuck my clothes in the laundry and have a shower to wash the evil smell off.

We'd chuck tomatoes at each other when the supervisor went for a piss. One day this lad called Steeve hit me on the back of the head from the other side of the room. He was so chuffed with himself, I wanted to smash his smug little face in (and I'm not a violent person, blog fans!!!! ☺) I stomped straight over to him with a handful of four or five and pelted them one after the other like he was sitting in the stocks. He flinched and covered his face, but he didn't dogde out the way.

When I was out of ammo, he chased me around the floor, giggling like a skoolgirl. When he caught up with me, he rugby-tackled me to the floor, crushing a tomato in my hair. The cold liquid spread its legs across my scalp like a taransulla.

“Aw, you SKANK!” I shouted, and I felt the audience were on my side, because his attack prompted none of the usual whoops and hollors.

Before he helped me to my feet, Steeve growled in my ear, “Brain, Brain, if that’s your name – you’re never gonna amount to anything. You’ll still be packing tomatoes in 20 years time, you deluded twat.”

I left there shortly after that.

COMMENTS:

NONE.

13/11/08

Mood: Bothersome

I’ll tell you what pisses me off about Holocaust deniers. Why do they bother? If they’re genuine racists, they should have the courage of their convictions and admit that not only the genocide happened, but they actually think it was a good thing. The tossors!!!!!!!!!!!!

*

Brian’s Thought For The Day:

I hate racists because they’re so full of hatred. What a hypocrite!!!! ☺ ☺ ☺

☺

COMMENTS:

NONE.

14/11/08

Mood: Talkative

When the final semester rolled around, I started drinking less. I stayed in most nights polishing off my dissertation and revising for the final exams.

My last exam was a 2-hour slog, and I got an extra half an hour because of my dyslexia. I had everything I wanted to say crammed into my head, and wrote and wrote as fast as I could to get it all down. By the time I reached the end of the paper, my spelling and handwriting were so bad, they probably had to bring an expert in to decipher it all. It wasn't like school, though. They weren't allowed to mark me down because of my disability. (Power to the people!!!!!!)

I heard through the grapevine that Howard wasn't coming to graduation. I don't know why, I'm sure he had his reasons. The police accepted his application to become a fully-fledged officer, and good luck to him, I thought. He'd make a good cop. I mean that.

I was in 2 minds about going myself. They made you wear those stoopid hats and cloaks like you were in Harry Potter.

In the end, I went along in jeans and a t-shirt with the gown draped round the back like a Batman cape.

The t-shirt was that Craydle of Filth one that says "*Jesus is a Crut*". I wasn't trying to be anti-Christian or anything, I just wanted to stick two fingers up at the system. I didn't want to analyze it too much at the time. What matered was the here and now. In a strange way, I think it might have been Howard who taught me that.

Anyway, no one at the cermeony noticed the slogan on the shirt, not even the grinning suit who handed me my certificate. (Probably just as well, folks. ☺)

In the bar afterwards, I caught up with Ed and Trick, who had their little weirdo mate Declan with them. Declan never used to say much. It always felt like he was eavesdropping on the conversation rather than taking part in it. "Mr Personality," I called him. Only in my head, though – I wasn't cruel.

Someone started talking about the war, but I didn't want to get roped in. I was ABSOLOOTELY FED UP of talking about the war. Where did it get you in the end? We were all pissed-up puppies chasing our own tails.

Ed was a sports science student. He was a great guy, and was very smart, but talked in such clear-cut terms like, "The Iraqis think this" and "The Americans think that."

I couldn't help myself. "It's not a football game," I said.

Trick said that's the way we should settle international disputes.

I said that's a stupid idea. The world would end up being run by Brazil, and lest we forget, the gap between rich and poor in that country is staggering.

"It's only a joke, Brian," he said.

"It's not a laughing matter," I said.

That started them off telling jokes. I hate jokes. One liners, I mean. If they're not reinforcing some prejudice or other, then they're just plain shit. I'm not a killjoy, I just think funny things should happen naturally in life.

I laughed along just to be polite.

Then Declan piped up. "Have you heard the one about the dyslexic agnostic?" he said in his stilted whisper. "He spent all night wondering if there was a dog."

"Why would he wonder that?" I said.

"It's a play on the word 'god,'" he said. "It's an anagram."

"Yes, yes, I know what an anagram is, I'm not stupid."

"I didn't say you were stupid."

"Then stop telling stupid jokes," I said. "They're an offence to everything I stand for. My whole belief system."

Declan nodded at my t-shirt. "I can see you like to stick to your beliefs," he said.

He wandered off after that, which probably came as a relief to everyone.

There was supposed to be a graduation ball on campus later on, but I didn't fancy going. I was probably breaking the dress code anyway, plus you had to pay to get in. Imagine that – *paying* to attend a party held in your honour. You might as well join the Mormons!!!!!! ☺

I suggested heading into town. Ed and Trick were up for it, so we went down to Choppers, one of the nearby indie bars, which don't mind people

wearing Craydle of Filth t-shirts. We stood there for a while, nodding our heads to the music and checking out the goth chicks.

"I'm gonna get some chips," I said. I wasn't hungry, I was just restless. I wanted to move around, but I wasn't sure where to go.

"Alright," they said.

"Do you want anything?"

"No thanks, mate."

"Back in 5 minutes," I said.

I stepped into the light of the street. I'd had a few beers by this point, and it wasn't until I got outside that I realised I was dying for a piss.

I wandered down the road a bit and then went into McDonald's.

The place was fairy empty, but there was a guy in there I thought I recognised. I couldn't really tell, because he had a handful of fries over his mouth and a beanie hat almost covering his eyes. He had an untidy beard and dressed in an ancient track suit, which looked like it hadn't been washed for a while. The whiff of cheap cider struck me as I passed him, so I decided against saying hello.

I went into the toilets.

I was standing at the urinal, just about to open my flies, when I realised this guy had followed me in there.

I turned round. He had his foot pressed against the door. It took me another moment to notice the knife he was waving vaguely in my direction. His eyes were on the floor, and I wasn't sure if he was trying to disguise himself, or if he was too scared to look me in the face.

I couldn't look at him either. My heart was pounding. I was gagging. I had to hang onto the wall so I didn't fall over.

"Come on, mate," said the guy. "Wallett. Phone. Whatever else you got."

He spoke as though this were just a formality. The casualness of it shocked me even more.

I couldn't move. I desperately wanted to give him what he wanted, but I was fixed to the spot. Frozen.

I must've looked so ridiculous in my stupid heavy metal t-shirt and mortar board. I had my rolled-up degree certificate in my back pocket, which I'd spent 6 years of my life working towards, and now it was about to be stolen.

At that moment, I was convinsed, CONVINSED I was going to die. I was going to die, and that would be the end of everything. No Jugdemment Day, no rewards, no punihsmnts, just nothing.

For some reason, this thought made me realise exactly who the guy was. I don't know why I didn't work it out sooner.

I turned to face him for the first time.

"Travis?" I said.

"Shit," said Travis. "Sorry, Brian. Fukk. I'm really fukking sorry."

With that, he was off out the door.

I staggered out into the street, and watched as Travis legged it off around the corner.

I wanted to call out after him, but I didn't know what to say. What could I say, anyway? How could I decsribe what was going on in my head?

I perched on the tiny ledge beneath McDonnalds window. I tried to breathe normally, almost as though I was reminding myself how to do it. *In, out, in, out.* I waited for my heart to settle.

Christ, I was dying for a piss.

There was no way I was going back to the crime scene. After an experience like that, there was no way I was visiting a public toilet ever again. I thought about going back to the pub, but the risk was probably even worse.

Do they have CCTV in toilets? I wondered. Surely Big Brother hasn't stretched that far. (Yet!!!!!!)

I hobbled towards the shops, hoping to find a store with a men's room. I tried all the big shops – *Burtons, HMV, Virgin Megastore* – but none of them had any facilities. Eventually I found a big department store with a café up on the second floor. I got stuck behind an elderly couple on the escalator. By the time I got to the top, I was just about ready to burst.

Then I saw the OUT OF ORDER sign.

I staggered into the street again. I tried to find a backstreet to sneak down, but there were too many people around. People, people everywhere. Fukking PEEPLE.

I jumped on the bus at Chorlton Street station. My hands were shaking as I fumbled over my change.

I took one of the disabled seats and sat bent over forwards, as though I were adopting the crash position.

I didn't care about my freinds now, I just needed to get home. The bus usually took 15 minutes, but today there was traffick. If I beleived in a Higher Power, maybe I'd assume the traffick had been sent there to test me, but I knew there was a rational explanasion. It was four o'clock. The school run. The bus was full of kids in uniform. At least I wasn't one of them. At least I wasn't at school anymore. I had my degree in my back pocket. I'd acheived something most people never have a chance to acheive.

I looked up and realised an old lady was staring at me, her eyes tinged with disaproval.

I wondered what I'd done to offend her, but then I remembered the t-shirt.
"Jesus is a Cunt."

Oh God.

I took the fancy hat off, and used it to cover up the message on my chest.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly. "I'm so sorry."

COMMENTS:

NONE.

2005

(According to no one)

"You got a light?" said Barry.

"I don't smoke, yeah?"

"Oh yeah." Barry nodded knowingly. "I forgot."

He fumbled around in the glove box for a lighter.

"So, do you drink?" said Barry.

"What?" said Howard.

"Do you drink?"

"In moderation."

"You never get screaming pissed?"

"I prefer not to participate in binge-drinking culture. I've seen the damage it can cause. I'm sure you've seen the same."

Barry peered at him as he dragged on his fag, teasing smoke out of the window through the corner of his mouth. "You're pretty fucking serious, my friend," my said. "Take a chill pill."

"I assume you mean the legal variety."

Howard meant this as a joke, and Barry laughed as if to say, *OK, I understand your sense of humour. I don't appreciate it, but I understand it.*

The two of them were sitting in a patrol car on a Sunday morning. They were parked in a side street just off Piccadilly Gardens, where a local man had taken to standing and preaching at passers by.

The preacher's presence wasn't illegal as such, but recently events had got a little out of hand. Over time, the man, who went by the name of Simon Solomon, had attracted a small group of supporters. In recent weeks, Solomon had also accumulated an equally small and dedicated group of dissenters.

As yet, no one had arrived, which meant Howard was stuck making smalltalk with Barry.

The Super had warned Howard about Barry when he assigned him as his mentor. "Take him with a pinch of salt," he'd said. *More like a pillar.*

Howard's eyes came to rest on the gun that was nestled discreetly in the holster in Barry's belt.

Why did they need to be armed today? He understood the argument for using firearms against genuine threats, but this was supposed to be a peaceful demonstration. Sure, there'd been a bit of pushing and shoving in recent weeks, but no one was going to get killed.

Catching the look on Howard's face, Barry turned to study his expression. Howard stared pointedly through the windscreen.

"Tell me something, Howard. You're a Christian, right?"

"Right."

"OK, so tell me what religion solves. I'm talking about *social problems*, my friend. Aside from starting wars and fucking up communities, what *god* does it do?"

Howard continued staring through the windscreen. "It's my understanding," he said, "that there's no such thing as a Holy War. Wars get started for political purposes, and religion gets used as a means of manipulation. That's all, yeah?"

"Same difference," said Barry.

Barry paused as a kid in a baseball cap turned the corner into the street. On seeing the car, the kid crossed the road and quickened his pace.

Barry tossed his dog-end out of the window and continued: "Here's what I think. We don't need religion. Once upon a time, granted maybe we did. In ancient times, you could kill, steal, rape, torture, whatever the fuck you wanted. And if you were big and strong enough, you could get away with it too. That's why they came up with all these Commandments, saying "Don't do this, don't do that, or you'll go to Hell." They needed some way of controlling people to stop them misbehaving, and breaking down into anarchy. But over time, things have changed, my friend. You can't just do whatever you want – you'll get arrested. That's where you and me come in. Welcome to the Twenty First Century, Howard. The government is God, and you and me, we're angels."

Barry lit up another cigarette, looking pleased to have solved all of the world's problems on a Sunday morning. "You like that?" he said.

Howard turned to him, and smiled. "Yes, Barry," he said. "I like that."

Barry carried on talking, but Howard wasn't listening. He was thinking about the plans he'd made with some friends to go out to the country next time they had a free weekend. His friend, Jamie, had sorted out some accommodation for a few lads to stay in an old farmhouse.

In his mind, Howard was already there. He'd never been on holiday before. He'd never even left England. It had never been a possibility, financially.

That was one thing he could be grateful for. At least he had a secure income now. That was what he needed. He told himself that constantly. *Security. Security.* He'd be OK as long as he had *security*.

The cold cut through his clothes. As they began their patrol round Piccadilly Gardens, a small crowd began to arrive to hear Solomon speak. They were all young white men, about twenty or thirty of them, dressed in duffel coats and bomber jackets. Several of them held placards with slogans and biblical quotes.

Seeing them, Howard began to feel self-conscious in his uniform, just as he was starting to get used to it. Examining himself in the mirror in the morning, a part of him felt ridiculous. All the drugs he'd ingested, all the shops he'd lifted and car stereos he'd snatched returned to him in his dreams. The only reason the police accepted his application was because he never got caught.

He was a criminal in police clothing. The worst thing was, no one seemed to notice.

A steady flow of bodies streamed in and out of the train station over the road. Sunday shoppers marched into town from the neighbouring car parks.

Fellow uniformed officers wandered casually nearby. There were about twenty of them altogether, dotted around the area in pairs, pretending to mind their own business, admiring the flowers and watching the fountains. This was supposed to be a discreet operation. An opposing police presence could potentially cause a backlash. That was the theory, at least. Going by the theory, Howard wondered if their presence was really necessary at all.

Solomon was in the process of setting up a small speaker with a microphone.

Like his followers, Solomon was a young man in his twenties. He had short spiky hair and a thin, wispy beard. He was dressed in a long black robe, through the bottom of which poked the lower half of his blue jeans and a pair of Nike trainers. He had a tiny pair of ferret-like eyes, surrounded on all sides by lines and wrinkles, with dark grey patches below – “insomnia scars,” as Howard called them. He surveyed the mass of bodies gathered before him with a strange passivity. No excitement, no anxiety.

On closer inspection, Howard spotted the jerky movements of Solomon’s eyes. The man was unable to rest his gaze at any one point for too long. A shepherd who couldn’t look his flock in the face.

*

Three years later, in 2008, Howard downloaded a transcript of the following incident. The transcript was based on an audio recording made by Solomon himself, which was retained by one of his followers following Solomon’s death. According to the website he visited, the original recording had been destroyed in accordance with Solomon’s last will and testament. All that remained were the words. As a mark of respect for Solomon, there was no accompanying commentary to the text. The afternoon’s events had been transcribed to the smallest detail, complete with sound effects.

According to the transcript, Solomon’s speech began like this:

SOLOMON: Brothers and sisters! Today, I want to talk to you, and everyone, and all the people, about what is coming, what is bound to come, and how although we as mortals are unable to do anything about it, we can

prepare for the next world by forging a union with The One. WE MUST FORGE A UNION, BROTHERS AND SISTERS!

I need not remind you of the significance of the number seven in the Book of Revelations. In numerology, the number seven denotes a person “skilled at analysis and research, an intelligent seeker of knowledge, scientific and inventive, studious, meditating, charming personality and demeanour, love of solitude and peace, a perfectionist.” Yet the number also denotes “hidden motives and suspicions,” and speaks of a person “overly reserved, arguments enjoined with silence or sarcasm, isolated, inflexible positions, overly upset by distractions.” As the Reverend Black Francis proclaims on track seven from the album “Doolittle”, *“If man is five, if man is five, then the devil is six, then the devil is six, then God is seven, then God is seven. This monkey/s gone to heaven.”* To HEAVEN, brothers and sisters!

The final line of the film, *The Seven Samurai* is, “The old man was right. Only the farmers won. We lost. We always lose.” What does this mean? How can we always lose? Who is the old man? The old man is you and me!

I am not a prophet. I do not intend to “profit” – ha, ha! What I am here to tell you is the simple truth, that we have less than twelve months until the end of the world, but only the world as we know it, the physical, entirely non-real world of Satan. The non-believer may not see this, as they watch the Devil’s television, or browse the Devil’s information superhighway, or worship at the Devil’s churches – that’s right! They may not see what stares them in the face like a light bulb over each eye, that the world will come to an end next year! The Year of Our Lord Two Thousand and Seven! It is in this year that the total disintegration of our society will be complete. This is

not prophesy, brothers and sisters. It's not heresy, it's not dentistry or science. It's MATHEMATICS!

Solomon continued in this vein, rarely stopping or even pausing for breath. He clearly had a lot to say. Often he'd repeat himself, or break into nonsensical sloganeering, but during his more straightforward moods, his message was clear – the world was on the brink of Armoggedon.

A voice rose up from the crowd, which would also later appear on the transcription, attributed to an unknown dissenter:

“FALSE PROPHET! FALSE PROPHET! DO WE KNOW THIS MAN? DO WE WORSHIP HIM AS AN IDOL? CONSIDER THE COMMANDMENTS, LADS! DON'T LISTEN TO HIM, DON'T LISTEN TO ME, DON'T LISTEN TO RADIO, TV OR ADVERTISEMENT MEN! LISTEN TO THE ALMIGHTY!”

Barry sprang into action, dashing from Howard's side.

Before he knew what was happening, the dissenters' hands were behind his back.

“I'll ask you not to shout, my friend,” said Barry.

The dissenter's screech was more piercing than before.
“HYPOCRITE! ANGEL OF SATAN! THE FALSE IDOL CAN SHOUT, WHILE THE SPEAKER OF THE TRUTH IS SILENCED!”

“You're causing a disturbance,” said Barry. “I've got no issue with you preaching down the street, my friend, but not here.”

The dissenter's friends were gathered round them, voicing their protests. Barry gestured to Howard to come and back him up.

The huddle backed off as Howard approached.

"Now, I can take you down the station if you like," said Barry.

"Would you like that?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"No. I mean yes."

"Yes what?"

"Yes I'm sure."

"Yes you're sure what?"

"I'm sure I don't want to go down the station."

"I suggest you move on, then."

The man did not reply to Barry's request. He wasn't listening. They were both distracted by a scuffle that had broken out between Solomon's supporters and their rivals. A man had been struck on the head by a placard featuring an excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount, and was lying flat on his back. Solomon's crowd were ready to retaliate.

The remaining officers were straight on the scene, restraining whoever they could grab hold of, and calling for order.

Shouts and hollers were streaming from all directions. Solomon's voice was now barely audible over the PA system, and indeed the transcript described this moment as "an incoherent rabble of voices."

Howard was standing back from the crowd, unsure of what to say or do next. He projected his voice as much as he was able. "*Alright, alright, back off! Back off now!*"

Most of the crowd didn't hear him over their own voices, and a few of them probably didn't even realise he was there.

Seeing a fellow officer trying to fight off three men at once, Howard made a grab for one of them, making noises into his ear that he would be arrested if he and his friends did not disperse immediately.

The man stopped struggling. Howard was pleased with himself for handling the situation so well, until he realised everyone else had stopped what they were doing as well.

One by one, the attention of cops and civilians alike was diverted towards Solomon, who was still ranting into his microphone,

“Brothers and sisters! Are we men and women of violence? Are we like the non-believer with his futile weapons of war? Holy wars? What is this meaning of this conundrum? The right-wing fools preach about it day and night, while those fools on the left, who call themselves “liberal,” “socialist,” “peace lovers,” glorify the terrorists, calling them the “voices of the oppressed”! Brothers and sisters, there are no holy wars! I will not be surprised, before this world comes to an end, to see white, secular, middle class suicide bombers taking to the streets in solidarity with their Arab counterparts! I tell you truly, the War on Terror is not a holy war. It is the Devil fighting the Devil. And the Devil is winning!”

The crowd, however, were no longer interested in Solomon’s words. All eyes were on the preacher’s right hand, which was brandishing a large silver Samurai sword. Solomon waved the sword above his head as he spoke.

Where the weapon had come from was anyone’s guess. Perhaps it had been stuffed in his trousers the whole time.

“*Drop the weapon!*” Barry’s screech emanated from the huddle, as though they all spoke with one voice. “*Put the weapon down, my friend, and raise your hands!*”

Solomon did not stop talking. He continued:

“...but, brothers and sisters, the man in the street may not have heard the word! He may have only seen the American remake, *The Magnificent Seven*, with its covert vindication of US foreign policy, and by extension the subsequent environmental destruction ...”

“I am going to ask you again, my friend! Put the sword down!”

“If a man must take up arms in order to silence the non-believer, the non-listener, the non-eared goat, the lover of ignorance and puerile distraction ... THEN ... HE ... MUST ...!” Each word was accompanied by a swoop of the sword in the air.

A second later, Simon Solomon was dead.

Over the following days and weeks, the moment at which Barry’s bullet entered Solomon’s head would be replayed over and over in Howard’s mind, like a bad tackle, in slow motion and at multiple angles.

Howard released his grip on the man he’d grabbed and ran to where the preacher was lying. He was barely able to look, but it was impossible to look away.

The man was clearly dead. His sword was by his side. On what was left of his face, the mouth hung open, as if desperately trying to finish his sentence.

Howard dropped to his knees and held the man’s hand, oblivious to the wild commotion around him.

He stayed there until the ambulance arrived.

He was pushed out of the way as the body was picked up.

Howard was vaguely aware that people were trying to talk to him. A voice barked through his radio, but he ignored it.

If he was going to talk to anyone, he’d talk to God.

But God, it seemed, wasn't listening today. He spoke but received no answer, no explanation as to what had happened.

Howard staggered along the street, talking aloud, trying to make some sense of it all.

The crowd dispersed as Solomon's body was taken away, and troublemakers were escorted to the station.

Howard stood with his back to them all, watching the fountains, talking to himself. Talking to himself. Talking to himself.

2006

(According to no one)

Mary had a little lamb

Her father shot it dead.

Now it goes to school with her

Between two bits of bread.

Jamie had this rhyme from his school days running round his head all through the train journey. He recited it over and over as the carriage clanked against the track. It brought a smile to his face, and reminded him of happier times.

He wanted the same thing to happen this weekend. He wanted to have a drink and a laugh with the boys, and on Sunday, he wanted to go out shooting rabbits, but mainly he wanted to feel like he was home again, even though the farm wasn't strictly home anymore.

They scrambled off the train at Todmorden, and the boys piled into the first pub that caught their eye. Before Jamie knew what was happening, he was sitting cracking jokes with Ed, Trick, and Howard at a table, while the silent locals offered suspicious glares over their pints of mild.

People in Manchester took the piss out of Jamie for coming from the country, but he gave as good as he got. He used to be embarrassed by where he came from, but now he was laughing along, taking the piss out their surroundings, as though he were from out of town too.

"You's lot not from round 'ere, are ya?" he whispered, in his best old-Yorkshire. *"You're prob'ly not even married to your sisters. Where's me gun?"*

The boys were in stitches. Even Howard laughed, and he'd been a morose motherfucker for a while now. He was still on compassionate leave from the police, since witnessing that shooting last year. *Milking it*, it Jamie's view.

The joke also gave him a chance to unofficially make it up with Ed. They made eye contact for the first time in three weeks.

Recently, Jamie sent a text from Ed's phone while he was in the bogs. He sent the same message to everyone on his contact list: *I want to fuck you.*

Everyone got it. His friends, his mother, his manager at work. But the joke backfired, because as a direct result of Ed's forthright offer, the jammy bastard ended up in bed with this French girl he'd fancied for ages.

A few nights later, after one too many beers, Jamie thought he'd chance his arm with the same girl. If the "direct approach" worked for Ed, maybe it was universal. Maybe that's what French birds were like.

I want to fuck you, he texted.

Fuck off merci, came the reply.

There was probably a kind of moral in there, somewhere.

*

They arrived at the farm in a taxi, with a couple of crates of beer and a small bag of groceries in the boot.

Their ears popped as they drove up the lane. Jamie had missed that feeling.

He'd missed the views. There were hills in every direction you looked – the towering green monsters from his childhood. Sometimes as a kid, he'd stand out in a field and turn in a circle, tracing a line over the jagged horizon with his eyes.

He'd always thought there was something unreal about the scenery. The hills were like paintings – enormous cardboard cutouts strapped to the earth by gigantic strips of Sellotape. Splashes of green, streaks of brown, capped off by the grey-white of the sky.

Jamie smiled as a waft of old air hit him through the window – leaves, grass, mud and manure. He never thought he'd be so excited by the smell of shit.

The farm was now run by Fred O'Farrell, an old friend of his dad's. In the summertime, Fred hired out the farmhouse to tourists, and he'd offered the place to Jamie for a weekend if he wanted. Jamie had assured him that they weren't going to make too much noise or trash the place. He meant it, too.

Fred was outside the farmhouse, and offered them a wave as they arrived.

They paid the driver, and shuffled awkwardly onto the terrace.

Jamie gave Fred a quick introduction to the lads, and ushered them in the direction of the farmhouse door. He stood back and watched as they carried their beers into the house, offering smiles and nods to Fred as they passed.

Jamie shook the farmer by the hand.

He was saddened to see how elderly Fred was looking. His hair was shocking bright white, and his wrinkles were so well defined it was as though they'd been etched on his face with a marker. Jamie recalled the strong, active man he'd looked up to as a child. He found it hard to see a resemblance in the hunched-up figure before him. When Fred smiled, it looked painful.

"They seem like a good bunch of boys," said Fred.

"You got that right," said Jamie. "Absolutely top drawer."

Why was he talking like that? There was no need for him to adopt this mock-formal tone in front of Fred. He should just be himself.

"How's the farm?" he said.

Fred took his time to answer. "I wanted to talk to you about that," he said quietly.

Jamie held his breath, trying not to allow too many thoughts to enter his head. Was business not going well? Was the old man selling up?

"What is it?" he said, careful not to sound too eager. It wasn't as though he had the money to buy the farm anyway. He wouldn't want to either. The past was the past.

"It's Maggie." Fred's eyes were on the ground.

Of course, Jamie knew Maggie. He'd grown up with her. Fred had inherited her along with everything else.

"She's poorly, Jamie. She's very poorly, and she's very old. It upsets me to say this, but I'm afraid it's *time*."

Fred was fighting back the tears just saying the words. Jamie felt like wrapping his arms around the old man.

"I'm really sorry to hear that, Fred. It's heartbreaking."

"I have to say, I've built up a special bond with the old girl," said Fred.

"Who wouldn't?" said Jamie.

"I know you were fond of her too. That's why I've got this favour to ask."

Jamie nearly said, "What favour?" but the look in Fred's eyes told him where this conversation was heading.

They said nothing for a while. Jamie looked around, at the hills, the house, and the stable down the lane where Maggie was kept.

Eventually, he said, "Doesn't the vet take care of things like that?"

Fred shook his head gravely. Jamie saw his look of condescension, as if to say, "That's not how we do things round here, son."

"I mean, I'd be happy to do it," he said quickly. "Well, I wouldn't be *happy*, but ..."

Fred smiled again – that painful, bittersweet beam. He shook him by the hand, and said, "Thank you, Jamie. You're a good boy. You're a good boy, Jamie."

*

Later, Jamie sat in the old armchair by the window as the boys buzzed around him. It seemed like they were all talking at once. Ed's drum and bass CD was playing on the stereo, even though Ed was the only one of them who liked drum and bass.

Jamie wasn't listening. He was thinking about Fred, and his request.

The beers were open, and Jamie looked down to see he was gripping an open can. Someone must've handed it to him.

He smiled. "Cheers!" he said.

The drink flowed as the night wore on, and so did the banter. Jamie didn't feel like taking centre stage for the most part. Every now and then he'd retreat into his secret world, wondering how he could turn this bad situation to his advantage.

Howard was sitting still as a rock at the opposite end of the room, sipping from his can. Once upon a time, Howard would've been life and soul of the party, dancing on the coffee table, or suggesting they go out and pull some women. Now he just sat there, hardly bothering to speak.

Ed was lying on the floor, eating Quavers off his chest. "You're quiet tonight, James," he said.

Jamie usually took an observation like that as an insult, but tonight it didn't bother him. He just made a joke out of it. "What do you want?" he said. "Shadow puppets? Balloon animals?"

"Do you do impressions?" said Trick.

"Do you do impressions?" said Jamie in a stupid voice.

"Kin 'ell, that was spot on!" said Ed. He applauded, spilling crisps on the carpet.

"Howsabout a wind-up?" said Jamie.

"Eh?"

"Pass me that Yellow Pages."

Trick tossed him the phone directory from the newspaper rack.

"Turn that music off a sec."

Jamie had his mobile poised.

“Alright, I need deadly silence for this, alright? I need this place to sound like Howard on an off day.”

“Ha! Ha! Ha!”

“Alright, alright, shhhh, shhhh!”

Jamie dialled a number from the book and clicked on speakerphone.

A woman’s voice replied: *“Seasons Hotel, how can I help?”*

“Hello?” said Jamie, adopting an over-the-top upper class accent.

“How can I help you sir?” said the voice.

“I’m afraid I lost something whilst staying at your hotel. I was wondering if I could have it back.”

“I can check the lost property for you, sir.”

“Thank you. I had it for many years, so I’d be most grateful.”

“Can you describe the item in question, sir?”

“Not really.”

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s more of an abstract concept, you see.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t quite understand what you mean, sir. What exactly did you lose at the hotel?”

“My virginity.”

Ed and Trick broke into a fit of sniggers. Jamie gestured at them to be quiet.

“What uns that, sir?” said the voice.

“Look, this is rather difficult for me to talk about,” said Jamie. “I was in your rather fine hotel bar, minding my own business, when one of

your young porters, who had just finished his shift, offered to buy me a cocktail. Naturally, I was flattered, so I accepted. Long story short, several cocktails later and it was wham-bam-thank-you-mister. Are you getting the picture?"

Ed and Trick crouched over, rocking back and forth in silent laughter.

"Yes, yes, very funny, sir," said the voice.

"It might be fucking funny to *you*," said Jamie. "That man took advantage of me!"

"I'm going to end the call now, sir."

The line went dead.

Ed and Trick's laughter exploded into full-throated roars. Howard smiled politely, and applauded Jamie's performance with a sarcastic tennis clap.

Jamie took an exaggerated bow, and left the room smiling.

*

Outside, he took a gulp of cold air. He wanted to give the boys a few minutes to talk about him.

The hills were still visible at nighttime, looming over him like great black ghosts.

He wandered down to the stable where Fred had taken him earlier. He turned on the light. Two other horses were sniffing the ground – young, powerful-looking beasts that Jamie didn't recognise.

Maggie raised her head as he turned on the light.

He could see she was nearing the end. Her skin was tight against her face, revealing the intricacies of her oval skull. Her hair was worn and thin, despite Fred's attempts at grooming.

She was breathtakingly beautiful. Jamie could have wept then and there, but he was stopped by the thought that Maggie would see him. He wanted her to be happy right until the end.

His eyes wandered over to the cupboard in the corner containing the captive bolt stunner, which Fred had shown him. The device would knock Maggie unconscious, so that she'd feel no pain.

Fred had said his goodbyes before he left.

Jamie had stood back and watched as the old man wished his companion well in the next life.

The old farmer wouldn't be there the next day to see her body being placed in the ground. Too painful, he said. He thanked Jamie again. He was a good boy, he said. A good boy.

*

Jamie walked back to the house, rubbing his hands together in the cold.

When he stepped into the kitchen, he could hear the boys talking in the living room, and hung back for a while, deliberately taking his time to choose a beer from the fridge.

"You've got to *get over it*, mate," Ed was saying.

"Easy for you to say," said Howard. "You weren't there, yeah?"

"I'm not talking about the shooting, you gimp. I'm talking about *Brian*."

“Who?” said Howard.

“What I’m saying is, it’d be nice if you could let your hair down once in a while. Have a *laugh*.”

“I *do* have a laugh.”

“Really? You’ve been sitting there with a face like a slapped arse.”

“If you’re talking about Jamie’s “joke” on the phone, I’ll laugh at him when he says something funny.”

“Look,” said Ed, “I know you’ve got this big morality trip going on, but you’ve got to understand, prank phone calls aren’t cruel. That was probably the highlight of that woman’s day.”

“You reckon?”

“Yeah. I used to work in a call centre.”

“Ed, I’m not questioning the ethics. I’m saying it wasn’t funny, yeah?”

“Fair enough.”

Howard lowered his voice, as though sensing Jamie standing behind him. “Have you noticed,” he said, “how he never laughs? I’ve never even seen Jamie *smile*. Don’t you think it’s a bit weird?”

Jamie slammed the fridge and stormed into the room.

Howard looked up with a guilty smile.

“You’ll never guess what,” said Jamie.

“What?” said Howard, his smile fixed on his face.

“Fred O’Farrell – the wanker who owns this farm – had the fucking nerve to call me on my mobile to check we’re behaving ourselves. What a tosser! I’m supposed to be a friend of the family, not some little kid.”

“He’s probably just suspicious of us lot,” said Trick.

“No, no. Trust me. He was talking to *me*. The patronising, coffin-dodging fuck.”

There was an uncomfortable pause.

“What happened to that music, anyway?” said Jamie.

*

Jamie woke them up early the following morning, banging on the doors and hollering, “Last one up’s a cunt!”

Howard had already been awake for an hour, sitting in the kitchen, staring out of the window, examining the landscape.

Ed and Trick reluctantly dragged themselves up and staggered down the stairs, where Jamie and Howard were waiting with a pot of tea, some toast and a six-pack of lager.

Howard watched, stony-eyed as his friends cracked open their beers.

“Drink, mate?” said Jamie.

“I’m fine, thanks,” said Howard. He nodded toward Jamie’s hand to signify that he wasn’t drinking either, but Jamie pretended not to notice.

“Cheers!”

*

Jamie went out to the shed to get the rifles.

He'd spent the previous weeks convincing the boys of the importance of hunting. He offered the explanations he'd used all his life, to kids at school, workmates, or animal rights campaigners who stopped him in the street. First and foremost, rabbits needed to be killed, otherwise they destroyed crops and interfered with the farmland. If that line didn't work, he'd take a more philosophical approach, arguing that our innate hunter-gatherer instincts need to be put to use in order to stop us all killing each other.

Ed and Trick had been easy enough to convince. Howard was more of a problem.

"Didn't your God give us dominion over the beasts of the earth?" said Jamie.

"He's not "my" God anymore," said Howard. "I'm an atheist, yeah?"

"Are you vegetarian as well?" said Jamie.

"No."

"Well, shut the fuck up, then. You're coming shooting rabbits."

"Suppose so."

The victory was Jamie's. Howard couldn't go back on his word once he'd muttered his "Suppose so." It wasn't his style.

Jamie chuckled to himself as he carried the guns up the hill to the house.

He straightened his face as he reached the door. He couldn't let them see him laughing. He made an exaggerated snarl as he stepped through the door.

"You'll never guess what," he said as he stepped through the door. "The wanker called me again!"

“Tosspot,” said Trick.

“I hope you told him to go fuck himself,” said Ed.

“I will if he calls me again,” said Jamie. “Cheeky fuck.”

*

Jamie carried on complaining about Fred as he took the boys outside. He led them up to one of the top fields where he taught them to load, aim and shoot.

Trick was acting all nervous because he’d never even touched a gun before. Jamie stressed the seriousness of the safety implications, partly just to wind him up.

“You got to be careful where you point these things, right?” he said. “Seriously. You could take someone’s head off. So don’t point them at each other, even as a joke. Right?”

“Right,” chorused Ed and Trick.

Howard didn’t say anything. He was looking at the hills.

Jamie glared at him. “Did you hear what I said?”

“Yeah,” said Howard, not altering the direction of his gaze.

They took their practice shots, aiming at a nearby fence post.

“I’ve got the shakes!” Trick joked as the barrel wobbled in front of him.

“Just focus on the target. Relax, relax. Focus. That’s it.”

Howard’s hand was steady as a rock. He hit the post on his first attempt.

“Not bad for a beginner,” said Jamie.

Howard lowered the weapon, unsmiling. “Any moron can shoot a gun,” he said.

*

When they were ready to go, Jamie led them down the lane towards the stable, muttering all the while about Fred and his incessant nagging.

As they reached the stable, Jamie stopped walking. He put on a Michael Caine voice and said, “*Hold up, lads. I’ve got an idea.*”

He left the boys standing in the lane as he darted into the stable, with his gun slung over his shoulder.

Maggie was standing watching the door, almost as though she knew what was coming.

Jamie marched straight to the cupboard in the corner. He opened the door and examined the strange contraption inside. The stunner was made up of a long black rod, with a metal clip at one end, which was supposed to be the trigger. It was attached to a tube connected to a gas canister that supplied the force for the bolt to enter the animal’s body.

It didn’t look like a gun – that was a problem. It looked more like a telescope. This didn’t fit in with Jamie’s scheme at all. It was all about the look.

Sorry Maggie, he thought, but the humane way ain’t gonna work.

“Fuck it,” he said out loud.

He opened the stable door fully. He took his rifle in one hand and led Maggie outside with the other. She followed him out obediently. He couldn't bear to look her in the face.

The boys were a little way down the lane. He wolf-whistled to attract their attention.

They turned to see Jamie, the gun and the horse. The three of them were worn out already, still trashed from the previous night's drinking. There was a look of mild bewilderment in their glazed eyes, but they couldn't be bothered to ask Jamie what he was doing.

They jumped out of their collective trance as Jamie screamed at the top of his lungs in a cry that echoed throughout the hillside. "SO, THE BASTARD DOESN'T WANT A MESS, DOES HE? I'LL SHOW HIM!"

Jamie grinned maniacally as he placed the gun against Maggie's head and pulled the trigger.

The horse dropped. Her legs gave way as she slowly toppled onto her side. There were no visible signs of blood at first, but when Jamie could finally bring himself to look down, the creature was lying in a pool of red that trickled down the lane between the cracks in the stones. Her legs were crossed over each other like broken twigs. Her body seemed to deflate as her lungs wheezed out her final breath.

Ed and Trick spread out their arms like they were ready to leap into action, but their faces were almost blank, hardly daring to register the sight they'd just witnessed.

Only Howard reacted verbally. He threw his arms in the air and shouted, "YES! YES! FUCK HIM! FUCK THEM ALL! FUCK!"

He raised his face to the sky and let out a primal howl, before breaking into a frantic sprint. He jumped over the dry stone wall and

sprinted across the neighbouring field, his rifle poised. At the far end of the field, he climbed the fence, catching the bottom of his jeans on a spike of barbed wire. He shook it off and jumped down, resuming his sprint. All the while, he was jabbering nonsense to himself, spouting random insults to no one in particular.

Ed and Trick watched, frozen.

“Where’s he going?” said Trick.

In the distance, they saw Howard raise his gun and fire. Moments later, a cow dropped to its knees and toppled over.

Jamie said something, but his voice came out like a whimper. All they heard was the word “joke”.

They turned round to listen. Jamie was down on his knees, stroking the horse’s mane.

“What?” said Ed.

“It was a *joke*,” said Jamie.

“We’ve got to *stop* him,” said Trick, setting off running towards Howard, shouting his name.

Jamie didn’t look up.

“You’re a prick,” said Ed. “You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes,” said Jamie. “I know. I know.”

Ed set off running after Trick, leaving Jamie and Maggie sitting in the lane.

Jamie couldn’t take his eyes off Maggie’s face. Her watery brown eyes were still open, with her hair draped over her pale, smooth cheek.

Somewhere in the background, the boys were wrestling Howard to the ground. He’d already killed four cows.

Jamie didn't care anymore. He knew it was over now. It was all over. He'd never be coming here again. There was something about this place, something that changed him, made him think and feel a different way. It was magical.

He shook his head, over and over.

He couldn't think about Howard right now. All he could think was, *Maggie, Maggie, Maggie, what have I done? What have I done to you, Maggie? Why does it have to be this way? Maggie. Maggie. Maggie.*

2007

(According to Declan)

12th July:

I have the TV on in the background when I'm working. I live in a block of bedsits, and I need something to drown out the noise from the neighbours. I don't pay much attention to the TV, but it's always on. I've got into the habit of working at night, because that's when they show the better programmes.

I work from home, and get paid by the hour. I make my own schedule, so the opportunities for overtime are limitless. I've been known to work twelve or thirteen-hour days, Monday to Sunday, for weeks on the trot. That's a lot of TV.

I used to watch films, but I don't have the time nowadays. In any case, I wouldn't be able to concentrate on just one thing for two whole hours or longer. I'm too used to multitasking. They – whoever "they" are – say multitasking is a female characteristic. I'm a man, and I'm good at my job. That's all I know, and it's all I can say on the subject.

I've always hated those scenes at the end of cheesy films, where the man (it's always the man) chases the woman to the airport to beg her not to move away and leave him. I don't buy these scenes, because their underlying message is supposed to be "love conquers all," but if that's really the case, it shouldn't make a difference that the love of the man's life is moving to another country. If he cares that much, he can follow her out there. If you examine the scene in these terms, you can see that the

character's motivations are more financial than romantic. He just doesn't want to pay for a plane ticket.

There are various exceptions to the rule, of course. *Casablanca*, for example, or *Manhattan*, where Woody Allen chases his after his much-younger girlfriend, who turns around and tells him to stop being so immature. I like these scenes, because this is what I imagine real life to be like.

You could say I've come to this conclusion because I've never loved anyone enough to want to follow them halfway across the world, or even chase them to the airport.

Does that make me a bad person, I wonder?

13th July:

My phone went beep today. Someone's left me a voicemail message. Maybe I'll listen to it tomorrow. I've got too much to do.

14th July:

So, this is a diary. I bet people don't even write diaries anymore. It's all about the blogs. No such thing as a private thought. They all have to be shared with an unseen community, otherwise it's not relevant. Not real.

Still, I'm curious about the question of who it is I'm addressing. I'm writing these words just for me, but it feels as though I'm talking to someone else. Does that make sense?

That's a rhetorical question, obviously. I know that there's no one out there to answer. I'm not crazy.

I can't remember if I've mentioned this already, but I work as an administrator for an Internet company. It's a networking site, where people can get in touch with their friends, or meet new people, or chat, or swap music, or video clips, or exchange exciting chunks of information.

It doesn't appeal to me – let's put it that way – but it's not my place to criticise.

I don't mind the work. It gives me something to do, and a kind of purpose. As long as the money keeps rolling in, I know I'm safe. You can't put a price on security.

I know this job is only a temporary measure. It stands to reason that one of these days I'll be replaced by a machine, or computer program. When that happens, at least I'll have my savings to fall back on.

There's no point in feeling happy or sad about this state of affairs. The world wasn't created just for my benefit.

*

There were two drunken blokes having a fight last night in the driving test centre car park. I tried not to listen; I just let them get on with it.

There were really loud, though. Calling each other every name under the sun.

I could almost hear my mum's voice, complaining.

Fucking louts. Don't they know what fucking time it is?

My mum was never a rowdy drunk. She just used to fall asleep. I think it's the drink that killed her in the end, although officially it was an accident.

Suddenly, I felt very old.

I'm twenty-seven.

15th July:

I don't believe in doing something just because everyone else is doing it. I'd rather do the opposite, just to make a point.

I'm not trying to be different. I *am* different. We *all* are. That's the point.

We're all the same as well. We're all different, and we're all the same, both at the same time.

That's what I believe, anyway.

*

I checked my messages today.

I had three. The first one was from my sister, Vicky.

“Declan, hiya, just calling to remind you it’s Yvette’s party two weeks today. You’ve got to come, it’s been such a long time, bro. *Everyone’s* going to be there.”

*

It’s funny the things you miss about home. I miss the arguments. There’s one episode that keeps coming back to me in my sleep. It’s a Sunday afternoon, and my sisters are clustered together in the kitchen, trying to make lunch for half our relatives. Siobhan’s opened about five tins of tuna and she’s mashed it all up in a big bowl, along with a massive dollop of mayonnaise.

“Need more mayo,” says Vicky.

“I know what I’m doing,” says Siobhan, “I used to work in the sandwich shop. You stick to your dips.”

“She’s right, you know,” says Yvette, sneakily chucking in another spoon of mayo onto Siobhan’s tuna mound.

“Ey, ey, stop it, willya? Jesus Christ, I’m just trying to make us all a *nice lunch*, just to be *nice*. There’s too many cooks in here spoiling the broth. Just go and watch telly with granddad.”

“I’m only trying to help.”

“You’re *not*, you’re just trying to get on my *nerves*. You *know* what you’re doing. This’d all be ready by now if people didn’t keep *getting involved*.”

*

There were two more messages. The first was from my manager.

“Declan, hi, this is Jane. Just calling for a catch-up, if you can give me a call back ASAP.”

That was from five days ago. The next message was from the day before yesterday.

“Declan, hi. Jane. Not sure if you got my message the other day, please give me a call. Very important.”

I called her at the office, and it turned out she wants me to come in for a review meeting tomorrow. She assured me that it’s all good, and she’s very pleased with the work I’m doing. Still, she was making me nervous. Maybe it’s because I haven’t spoken to another human being since I went to the shops a few days ago – and even then it was only to say cheers for the change. I could hardly get the words out, and I had to pretend I had something stuck in my throat.

When we’d finished our brief conversation, I had to sit back down on the bed, the words ringing in my ears.

Sorry, I’ve got something stuck ...

Sorry, I’ve got something stuck ...

Sorry, I’ve got something stuck ...

Did I really sound like that? I tried talking out loud, and found myself launching into an epic ramble, covering anything and everything that popped into my head. Maybe I should’ve written some of it down so that I remembered it all. I’ve got a feeling some of it was quite poetic.

16th July.

My boss's office is in the centre of Manchester. Today was the first time I'd been into town for about three months, and even though I'd been there a million times before, it seemed like a dreamworld now. The crowds, the cars; that blanket of noise.

I stood at the window while the secretary made me a coffee, peering down at Deansgate from several floors above. It occurred to me that none of these people knew or cared that I was watching them. They all had more important things to think about. Comforting, in a way.

I stepped back from the window, and the view disappeared. From that moment, I could almost have been in any other city in the world.

Jane walked in and sat me down in front of her.

"So, how are you?" she said.

The question surprised me, so I didn't answer straight away.

"I don't know," I said, which was the most honest answer I could give.

"Is there anything we can do for you?" she said.

"I don't know," I said.

"Let me answer that question for you," she said. "I've been looking at your stats, Declan. Impressive. Very impressive. Not only do you have an excellent work rate, you're also extremely accurate, and consistent with it. There is one thing that concerns me though. Concerns *us*, should I say, as a team. Declan, you haven't had a holiday for two years. In fact, it's been a number weeks since you even had a day off."

"Has it really?" I said. "I haven't been keeping track."

Jane handed me a printout of my working hours over the last twelve months.

“It’s been twelve weeks,” she said.

I was slightly embarrassed by her tone. This obviously wasn’t normal behaviour.

“It might be worthwhile getting in touch with some of the other administrators,” she said. “They’ve all got profiles on the site. You should sign up yourself.”

“I’d rather not, if it’s all the same,” I said.

“Of course, you’re under no obligation,” said Jane. “I know that some people like their privacy. But it’s a great way to meet people, and when you’re working from home, it’s especially good for keeping in touch with your colleagues.”

“I’m sure they’re all good people,” I said.

Jane nodded, enthusiastically. “Oh, they’re a great bunch. We’ve got a really good team here, Declan. You should set up your own profile. It’s very easy to do.”

This made me angry. I don’t usually get angry, but if there’s one thing that gets me going, it’s people being patronising.

“It’s not because I don’t know *how* to do it,” I said. “*I don’t want to*. I don’t see how I *could*. I don’t see how a list of songs that I like, or films that I like, or books that I like could in any way express who I am. I don’t see why I’d even *want* to try and define myself. What’s so significant about me that people would want to read a page of text about me, or look at my pictures, or whatever else it is that people do on there? I’m *nothing*, Jane. I’m *no one*, and so are you. And what in the world is wrong with that?”

Jane's look was one of complete incomprehension. She obviously took me to be some kind of madman, and thought it best to change the subject as quickly as possible.

"Declan, I'm giving you two weeks holiday. Starting today. You can take it out of your unclaimed entitlement."

I didn't know what to say.

"Are you happy with that?" she said.

"So I won't be able to claim it as extra at the end of the year?" I said.

Jane nodded, as though she understood. "I know we all have financial stresses to deal with. Maybe we'll be able to sort you out a Christmas bonus. I'll see what I can do. You're a very loyal employee, and we're very lucky to have you."

"It's not about the money..." I started to say. "Well. It's not *just* about the money – I mean money's important. I'm trying to save, you see. For the future."

Jane nodded, smiling. "Kids?" she said. "Family?"

"No," I said. "No, it's just me. Just me."

"Well, enjoy it," she said. "You can have some time to yourself now. Some *Dedan* time."

It seemed rude not to try and smile back.

*

Two weeks. Fourteen whole days and nights just to myself. It was difficult to comprehend. I had no idea what I was going to do, or if I even wanted

to do anything. I felt like heading straight home and logging back onto the system, but they'd be able to tell, and I'd get in trouble. Maybe they'd even give me the sack, and where would I be then? I'd have more than a fortnight to worry about. Who else would employ me without a reference? How would I handle the interview?

I'm terrible at talking about myself. If I'm ever in a social situation, I'd much rather listen than talk. You learn things from listening to other people. You don't learn anything from sitting there yakking about yourself. It's boring. I already know all this stuff. I can't understand these people who are happy to churn out the same anecdote time after time without getting tired. It must be like watching repeats on TV, or sitting through the same sequence of adverts, played over in a loop every fifteen minutes.

I found myself wandering around the city centre, trying to get used to the idea of having free time.

I was furious at first. How *dare* she assume that I need a holiday just because I worked hard? How *dare* she spout all that corporate nonsense about work/life balance as though she actually cared?

They didn't want me claiming the extra money. That's what all this was about.

I calmed down after stomping around town for a while, and started to feel a bit excited. I went to a posh department store and started looking around, pretending I was considering buying something. It was like a game, taking on another persona. It brought back memories of being a kid, and actually getting excited by shopping. The joys of a new pair of trainers, or a computer game still wrapped in cellophane. I'd run my fingers over its smooth, crinkly surface on the bus on the way home.

I was there in '96 when the IRA bombed the Arndale, but I was a mile or so away, safe from the blast. I still felt it, shuddering through the ground. Everyone where I was thought it was an earthquake.

I was sixteen at the time, an impressionable age, I guess. I gave up shopping shortly after that. Kids at school started going on about the "fucking Irish," like they knew what they were talking about. Half of them had Irish names, for Christ's sake.

*

My granddad used to refer to himself, with a strange mix of bitterness and pride, as "the last in a long line of Catholics." One Christmas, after one too many whiskies, he launched into a verbal tirade against my mum, calling her a disappointment for rejecting his religion, and a scrounger and a whore for having *all these kids*. Over in Ireland, he said, people were raising large families because of the Pope. She was just doing it because she wanted a bigger house. *And where were all the fathers?*

He apologised on Boxing Day. He was so sorry, he was in tears at breakfast.

When he'd gone, I snuggled up to my mum on the sofa and asked her as tactfully as I could if any of what he said was true.

"I fucking love you all, don't I?" she said. "I love you more than I love myself."

That was certainly true.

My granddad died shortly after that, and I wasn't sad.

*

I found myself drawn to the pub. I hadn't even stepped inside a pub since leaving university, and it had been even longer since I'd had a drink. It's not that I was particularly prudish or health conscious. It was more a case of drinking getting in the way of working. Still, there was something in my upbringing that made me associate freedom and celebration, and perhaps even happiness, with some kind of intoxication.

I chose one of the more upmarket bars, just off Albert Square. It was the middle of the afternoon, and there was a small scattering of people among the forest of tables and barstools. Young executives on their lunch breaks, I imagined, or maybe they were students. In truth, I had no idea who these people were, or what they were doing here, drinking in the middle of a Wednesday. Maybe they were just well dressed alcoholics.

I ordered a pint, and took it over to a table by the window.

I didn't even take a sip, just sat and looked at it for a while. The pint was like another person – an old acquaintance who I couldn't think of anything to say to, and so we sat in silence, trying not to look each other in the eye.

I thought about all the people who'd lost their lives to drink and drugs. Uncle Harry; Uncle Rich. Even my granddad probably qualified, although with him it was more about smoking.

It was just one drink, I told myself.

But what was the point of one drink? One would surely lead to more.

I looked around at the other people in the room, and it wasn't hard to see what was missing from my own table.

I took a sip. It made me feel sick.

I left the pint on the table and walked out, going back to stomping around town.

I needed another plan.

Maybe I could go away somewhere sunny. I've got a passport, but I've never used it. I've got the cash. I just needed to do something to fill up my time. I couldn't just wander the streets for two weeks. I'd end up going crazy. I'm not crazy.

Actually, sunny wasn't important. I wanted to go somewhere interesting, like Rome or Paris. I could picture myself wandering the streets, in and out of museums, or just sitting in a café reading a book.

It must've been two years since I'd opened a book. Now that I was on holiday, I could start reading again.

I was getting excited now. A new opportunity was being opened up to me. A chance to get out of myself, to have a go at being different.

All I needed was a cheap deal.

An hour and a half later, I stepped out of the travel agents having booked myself a week in Italy, leaving tomorrow.

Tomorrow Can you imagine that? I had to keep repeating these significant slices of information, as a way making it real.

A week.

Italy.

Leaving tomorrow

I was nervous. I was worried that now I was on holiday, I'd be too relaxed for my own good, and end up sleeping in tomorrow morning.

To make sure I didn't miss the flight, I went to bed as soon as I got home. It was half past four in the afternoon.

Of course, I couldn't sleep. I'm usually awake most of the night anyway. I started thinking about my plants, and if they'd be OK for a week without water. I thought about my possessions, and whether or not they'd be secure. If someone were to break in and steal my computer, that would be my livelihood gone.

I share a bathroom with a couple of neighbours, who I usually manage to avoid, but there's a guy called Travis who lives across the hallway, and I talk to him sometimes when we pass in the corridor. I like him.

There was one time I was feeling pretty low, and I'd been up working for hours. I ran into Travis outside the bathroom, and ended up unloading all this personal stuff on him. I told him how my mum died, and how my sisters have all married off and gone to live elsewhere, and how Vicky and Siobhan don't even talk to each other now. I told him how I spent last Christmas on my own, working at the computer with the TV in the background. He was very sympathetic, and told me some stuff of his own in return.

I went across the hall and gave him a knock.

"Who is it?" came the gruff, paranoid reply from the other side of the woodwork.

"It's Declan from across the hall," I called back.

"Oh right," he called back. "What can I do for you, mate?"

"I wanted to let you know, I'm going on holiday for a week. If you happen to see anyone suspicious hanging around, maybe you could call the police for me? Or just check to see if they haven't broken in?"

"No worries, mate," he called back. "Hope you have a good trip."

“Thank you,” I called, and went back to lie in bed.

Funny how he never opened the door, I thought. Maybe he was naked.

*

It’s three o’clock in the morning now. What an idiot I am. Why did I have to go and do that?

Travis is a total stranger. I’ve told a total stranger I’m going away for a week. It’s an open invitation.

Stupid, stupid, *stupid*.

I remembered too late a couple of things he’d told me the night when I’d met him out in the hall. He said he used to get in trouble with the police when he was a kid for vandalising and breaking into houses.

July 18th:

Sorry I didn’t write yesterday. Of course, I’m not apologising to *you*, whoever you are, I’m apologising to me. I apologise.

I’ve been in bed two days, drifting in and out of sleep. Most of the time, I’m neither asleep nor awake. Just lying, staring into space.

There’s a packed suitcase and a small item of hand luggage sitting untouched under the bed. So much for my Italian adventure.

I didn't want to bump into Travis in the hallway, so I've started using the kitchenette sink as a toilet. I've been cleaning it afterwards with Fairy liquid and an old scrubbing brush.

I couldn't face going outside, so I've had to live off the food in my fridge. All I had were three tomatoes, sitting on the middle shelf. I ate the first two yesterday.

Today, I found an onion, nestling at the back of the cupboard. It made me so happy. I chopped it up and fried it alongside the remaining tomato. I sat up in bed and ate it straight from the pan. It was like the onion had been placed there by an angel. The food was giving me life again. It gave me an incentive to write down some of my thoughts.

Then I got another message on my machine from Vicky giving me this whole guilt trip about not calling her back, and that Yvette's party was going to be on Saturday, and I'd better be there.

She called back quarter of an hour later and said sorry, she didn't mean to be nasty, she just wanted to speak to me, to see if I was OK, that was all.

Maybe another day.

I'm not going to go to the party, holiday or no holiday. I've got too much to think about.

What's the point of birthdays anyway? It's just an excuse to get drunk. I don't even celebrate mine.

I knew this guy at uni called Brian, who was a Jehovah's Witness. They don't celebrate birthdays either. I thought about getting in touch with Brian again, but then I read his description of me in his blog and decided against it. He called me a "weirdo." No offence, but this is a *Jehovah's Witness* talking.

I wasn't quite ready to write any of this down yet, so I started talking to myself. I found this was a great way of ordering my thoughts, and making some kind of sense out of everything, even though everything seems meaningless to me now.

I thought about this idea of meaninglessness for a long time, and talked out loud to myself about it as well. The only reason I'm writing this now is so I don't forget it. I could write more, so much more. But what's the point?

19th July:

Feeling more positive today. I went down to the shops to get some food, and I also went to the library, and found a book called *Being and Nothingness* by Jean Paul Sartre, which an internet search informed me was the ultimate book about the meaninglessness of existence. The book was as thick as my arm.

I took it home and started to read, but soon found myself unable to concentrate. Anyway, what was the point of reading a book about the meaninglessness of existence? It was so ironic, I burst out laughing, and chucked the book across the room.

Then I cooked myself some fried onions and tomatoes.

20th July:

Something happened today. Something wonderful. Seriously.

First of all, I spoke to Vicky on the phone.

“How are you, love?” she said.

She’s taken to calling me love since mum died.

“I’m OK,” I said. “Just lots of work to do. Sorry I haven’t called. I haven’t even had time to check my messages.”

“Are you coming to the party?” said Vicky.

So, she didn’t really want to know how I was doing. She just wanted me to come and make up the numbers. I knew what would happen if I went. No one would talk to me for longer than a minute. They wouldn’t know what to say, and neither would I.

“I’ll see what I can do,” I said. “I’ve just got loads of work to catch up on.”

“How is work?” she said.

“Same old,” I said.

I bet she could tell I was lying.

I went back to bed after that. I couldn’t think about anything else but this stupid party. I didn’t want to go, and I knew that eventually I’d make the decision not to, but I also knew that I was letting everyone down, letting myself down, lying to everyone, lying to myself. All the time, I had this voice in my head telling me I was just thinking about myself, and that’s all I ever do.

I wrapped the duvet around me and hugged a pillow.

I just knew there'd be all these people there that I didn't know. There'd be drinking and music and dancing. Characters from a former life. Like watching repeats.

Siobhan wouldn't be there, and she was my favourite sister. I felt guilty about thinking that, but it was true, and Vicky would probably be bad-mouthing her again. "*Greedy bitch*," and so on.

I wasn't going to take sides in all this. It was a stupid disagreement anyway. All about money, and who's the head of the family. Who cares?

I started saying all these things out loud, and just like with this diary, I started wondering who I was speaking to.

I thought maybe it was my mum. I never really talk to her anymore. She talks to me sometimes. She still tells me off for keeping my room untidy. She even gives me cooking tips. But, just as in life, I never talk back.

I don't believe in life after death. What I mean when I say she "talks to me" is that I'm imagining what she'd say if she were here. I'm talking to an imaginary person. It's a game, that's all it is. It's just something to make me feel better. And what's wrong with that?

One of the neighbours was playing techno music at a high volume, and having a shouted phone conversation over the top of it. I closed the window, and turned on the TV to drown out the noise.

I carried on lying there until it got dark. I wasn't really listening to the TV, but its constant jabber was comforting in its own way. It reminded me of home.

I fell asleep, and the TV became the soundtrack to my dreams.

I was woken up by a voice, saying my name.

Dedan.

I assumed it must have been a mistake but then the voice said, *Oi, Dedan! Mate.*

I opened my eyes and looked up at the TV. A man's face was smiling at me through the fuzzy screen.

"Hello?" I said.

The man smiled. *Hello*, he said. His soft northern tone sounded like an old friend, but I couldn't quite place it. With each movement of his face, the light from the box flickered in the air between us.

This was all normal, like it was supposed to be happening, like it was real – not in the way dreams sometimes feel real, but the way reality sometimes feels like a dream.

"Who are you?" I said.

Who the fuck do you think I am? he said.

"I don't know," I said.

I'm you, you knob.

He didn't look like me. He looked happy.

I threw the duvet on the floor, and got to my feet.

It's OK, he said. *I can hear you. I've been listening.*

"So, how come I haven't seen you before?" I said.

You never believed in me before, he said. *But it's OK. I'm here now. I'm here.*

I stepped closer. His eyes were drawing me nearer, beckoning me towards him. I wrapped my arms around the TV, feeling its warm embrace, basking in its light.

I fucking love you, he said. I fucking love you.

*

I'm sitting up in bed now with a glass of water. The lights are on, and the TV is showing a repeat from earlier in the day, with signing for the deaf.

Those words are still ringing in my ear.

I fucking love you.

I fucking love you.

I fucking love you.

21st July:

Great night. Really good, man. Just got back. Still got that song stuck in my head – *Outside inside out, livin la vida loca* ... ha, ha, ha.

I need the toilet now.

5th August:

Just seen the previous entry. Don't really remember writing it. How embarrassing.

I know I haven't written for a couple of weeks, but that's because I don't feel the need to make sense of the world anymore. I'm sure you'll be pleased to hear I'm seeing things much more clearly.

I took my book back to the library the other day, and got out a stack of DVDs. All the best releases from the last couple of years that I've been too busy to watch – or a few of them, at least.

I got an old film as well: the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup*. It's the film Woody Allen watches in *Hannah and Her Sisters* when he's going through an existential crisis, and is on the brink of suicide. He goes to see *Duck Soup*, and somehow it makes life worth living again. I thought it might also be appropriate for my situation.

To be honest, it depressed me a little bit. Even though it's a crazy slapstick comedy, it has moments of harsh political satire, which perhaps I wasn't quite ready for.

I cooked the best breakfast ever this morning. Bacon, egg, sausage, beans, mushrooms, fried bread. I'm still full from it now.

I went for a walk in the park. I haven't been there for years. I checked out all the places I used to go when I was a kid. They're all still there.

There's this tree I used to climb. I could get right to the top, perching in the upper branches with my head poking up through the leaves. You could see everything from up there.

I didn't try to climb it today. People might look at me funny. I just stood there, looking up, remembering what it was like being king of the world.

I passed a preacher on the way home. He was a young man about my age, standing outside the park, ranting in a way that sounded angry,

but he was smiling all over his face. I couldn't work out what he was talking about, so I sat on a bench nearby and listened for a while. Luckily he didn't notice me sitting there.

"Flood warnings?" he said. "This is how it starts! The wettest summer since records began? Only the beginning. It's happening, just as Simon Solomon said it would happen! By the end of this year – The Year of Our Lord Two Thousand and Seven – the day of judgement will be upon us! Remember the words of our fallen brother Simon Solomon!"

I don't know who Simon Solomon is, but I like his name. There's something catchy about it. Maybe I'll google him.

*

The party was fun. I ate, drank, talked, laughed. I had a great time. I even had a dance on the living room carpet with a girl I met, a friend of Yvette's. There was nothing sexual there; it was just a bit of fun.

At the end of the night, me and Vicky were sitting on the stairs, and she put her arm around me and told me how happy she was to see me looking so well, and wondered if this meant there was a woman in my life now.

I whispered in her ear. "As it happens, there's a man in my life."

She clasped her hand over her mouth, and gasped. "Oh my God, Dec. Does anyone else know?"

I laughed, heartily. "I'm not gay," I said. "Vicky, I've found myself."

Vicky burst out laughing. "Stop messing about!"

"I'm serious," I said, smiling.

"Oh," she said. "That's great, love. So ... what does "finding yourself" involve?"

"It's like being in love," I said. "You look in the mirror, and you love what you see. I'm not talking about looks, by the way. And it doesn't matter what other people think, because you know whatever judgements they have are wrong. It's about *knowing* yourself, I suppose. I'm strong now. I can handle anything."

There were tears in my eyes, I think.

"I'm just glad that you're happy," she said, and squeezed my hand.

"So am I," I said.

*

I'm back at work now. I've decided to start working a reasonable amount of hours. I need more to see people, and do my own thing. Time to myself, away from work. *Dedan* time. I've started reading again, and going off for walks when I'm feeling thoughtful. Maybe I don't need to write anymore, or maybe I'll start writing even more now.

I built a little shrine to myself. It sits on my bedside, and sometimes I look at it when I can't sleep. It's nothing too elaborate. There's a picture of me, and some coloured pieces of paper with notes about my positive qualities. Sometimes I light candles around it, and sit and talk to myself about whatever's on my mind.

I don't want to criticise the way other people live their lives. I don't want to criticise other people's beliefs, and I don't want other people to criticise mine.

I'm not alone anymore. That's the main thing. I was never alone, really. It's just a state of mind.

6th August:

I met this cute girl online the other day. She left a comment on my profile, saying maybe we should meet up. She's in Manchester, so I wouldn't even have to travel. I took the Likeness Quiz with her, just for fun, and it says we're almost a perfect match. We've even got the same favourite colour. Maybe it was meant to be.

We'll just have to see what happens.

2008

(According to Brian)

03/12/08

Mood: Festive

*Christsmas is coming, the goose is getting fat
Please put a penny in the old man's hat
If you haven't got a penny, a ha'penny will do
If you haven't got a ha'penny then God bless you!*

Ah, what a gloriuos seezon!!!!!! Everyone loves Christsmas, don't they, blog fans? Peece and goodwill to every man, woman, child, and all that.

YOU'RE STILL GONNA KILL THE GOOSE THUUGH, AREN'T YA???? STILL GONNA MURDER ONE OF GOD'S CRAETURES TO CELEBRATE THE BIRTH OF A SAVIOR YOU DON'T EVEN BELEEVE IN?????

Don't get me wrong I'm not a vegetraian. I'll be tukking into a slice of every animal imagianble come the 25th. Turkey, smoked sammon, suasages wrapped in bacon (and just to remind you you're chomping on animal flesh, someone had the bright idea of calling them "pigs in blankets"!!!!!!!!!!!!!!)

I'll be honest with you. I haven't celebrated Christmas for a good few years. When I quit the Witnesses 7 years ago, I didn't tell my parents.

My parents aren't religious, you see. They celebrate Christmas, and being religious, I didn't. The reason I didn't tell them I'd become an atheist was so I didn't have to celebrate Christmas with them.

Yeah, you're right. Family's complicated...☺

COMMENTS:

NONE.

04/12/08

Mood: Contentious

You know who I really hate? Opinionated people.

It seems like the thicker a person is, the more opinions they seem to have. All those people who talk about being beaten up as a child and how it "never did them any harm" need to take a long, hard look in the mirror. I'd love to see one of them realize the irony of their statement, just once. Like, "Getting beaten up as a kid never did me any harm ... hold on, yes it did! I'm a wackner!!!!!!!"

It's the same people who prattle on about prisoners having it easy, claiming it's "like a Butlins holiday camp." Jesus Christ, have any of these people actually BEEN to Butlins??? It's bad enough just going for the weekend. Imagine doing a life sentence – you be stir crazie after a few weeks. "Please God, not the red coats again!!!!" ☺ ☺ ☺

I also hate people who want to bring back the death penalty. I think they should be killed.

COMMENTS:

NONE.

05/12/08

Mood: Contemplative

Losing my faith was a gradual process. It wasn't one thing, it was lots – some big, some little.

9/11 made me see the implications of fanatical belief systems. No one else in the church seemed all that bothered by it. "We're not Muslims," people said. "So what's it got to do with us? How are we responsible?"

They weren't particularly surprised by it, either. 9/11 wasn't shocking to them. It was just another confirmation that they were right. "These are the

end times," they seemed to say. "This is the sort of thing that happens in the end times."

That's why I had to leave. It wasn't because I saw what the terrorists did and thought I might be capable of that myself. It was people's reactions to 9/11 that disillusioned me. So complacent. So dismissive. Life just carried on as normal.

I was over the moon when Howard told me he felt the same way. For a couple of years, it felt like we were the only ones who understood.

Then Howard stopped being my friend, and it was just me. No one understood apart from me.

COMMENTS:

NONE.

06/12/08

Mood: Apologetic

Sorry, I got a bit sidetracked in yesterday's blog. I was supposed to be telling you about losing my faith. As I said yesterday, it was a number of things. A gradual build-up, if you like. The clincher, though, was a piece I read online called "The 10 Commandments: A Textual Analysis." It was

posted by a guy called Abraham Wurlitzer, and come to think of it, I never thanked him. (If you're out there reading this, Mr Wurlitzer, thanks!!!!) If you want to check it out, you can do so via the following link:

www.madblogs.com/ten-commandments356

Let me know what you think of it, peeps! Apparently, the article was written by a couple of teenagers for their skool magazine. It was supposed to be a humoruos piece, but according to the story, they nearly got expeled because they were at a religius school. (I'm not in favour of religius schools, but that's a rant for another time. ☺)

First of all, it begins. What's the deal with honour thy father and mother? Does that mean under any circumstances? What if your parents are unkn rers? More to the point, what if your parents don't live up to the other Christian principles? According to the Ten Commandments, you're fukked.

The article deals with the other Comandments in a similar vein, but to be honest, I was convinced enough by the first one to stop and think. This, for me, was an extremely powerful piece of writing, becuase besides making me laugh, it made intelectual sense too. It made me think of my own parents, and how could I ever honuor them and still obey God's command?

It's not just Christianity that suffers from this bizarre family-worship syndrome. It's politicians. It's soap operas. It's culture. Everyone gets brainwahsed into beleeving family is the most important thing, that you have to put family above everything else, that you have to get married and

have a family, family, FAMILY!!!! No one ever seems to ask the question, the all-important, burning question of our times: What if your parents are wakners?

COMMENTS:

NONE.

07/12/08

Mood: None

I didn't tell my parents I was religius until after I moved out. I built it up so much, it was like telling them I was gay. In a way, they'd probably have preferred that. At least homosexauls don't go around knocking on doors, trying to recriut new members. (Like, "Hello, Madam, is your husband in?"!!!!!! ☺)

That was the killer for my dad. It wasn't so much religion in general he was against. He was just bafled as to why I'd picked that particluar faith. It's the church people tell the most jokes about. He used to tell them himself:

How many Jehovah's Witnesses does it take to change a light bulb? Three. One to change the bulb, and two to knock on the door and ask you if you've seen the light.

"How did this hapen?" he said.

"I can't explain it," I said. "I've found Jesus. What more can I say?"

"So, you were just walking along the street, and what? You ran into Jesus?"

"That's about the size of it."

"And what did Jesus say to you? Go and join the bloody Jehovah's Witnesses? Jesus Christ, son."

"OK. I didn't actually meet Jesus in the street. It's a metaphor, dad."

"So, who told you about him? Did someone come to the door? We've got a bloody sign out there, you know – "No Hawkers, No Circulars.""

"I picked up a leaflet," I said. "I thought it looked interesting, so I went along."

He looked me up and down. "How long has this been going on?" he said.

"A few weeks," I said. (It had actually been about 100 weeks, but how few is a few, eh? ☺)

"I don't believe it."

"I'm not asking you to join the Church," I said. "I just want you to be happy for me."

My dad was even more shocked by me saying that. He couldn't look me in the face. His eyes were darting all over the carpet, trying to work it all out. I was a different person to him now.

We never talked to each other like that, you see. Never said, "I love you." Never said, "I want you to be happy."

My mum was sitting beside him, silent on the couch. She just didn't react at all. She wasn't happy, she wasn't sad.

"Do you want a cup of tea?" she said.

"I'd love one," I said.

"So would I," said my dad, and turned on the telly.

The snooker was on. World Championships. John Higgins was beating Ronnie O'Sullivan in the semi-finals.

"Ronnie can pull it back," said my dad.

"Looks like he's had another crisis of confidence to me," I said.

"That's 'cos he's a genius," said my dad.

"A tortured genius," I said.

"Trouble is, young Higgins, he's such a consistent player. He knows how to win matches. He's calm, methodical, gets the job done. But he hasn't got Ronnie's flair."

"Oh, but no one has, do they? The guy's unstoppable when he's on form."

"See, that's why he has these crises. It's because he's got so much to live up to."

"I think it's to do with his background as well. Troubled family life. His old man doing time for murder and all that. It's bound to affect his game."

"True," said my dad. "That's true, that."

My mum came in with the drinks.

"Thanks, Mum," I said.

“Thanks a lot, love,” said my dad.

*

That was 10 years ago. I haven't laid eyes on them since. We talk on the phone now and again, but I haven't seen them “in the flesh,” as the saying goes.

I've got a visoin in my mind of them being all small and shriveled. It's funny to think of them like that.

It's going to be a strange one this Christsmas. (I know, that sounds like the opening line to a song, doesn't it?!!!! ☺)

COMMENTS:

NONE.

10/12/08

Mood: Irksome

I went Christmas shopping today. No idea what I was supposed to buy. I got the bus up to the Trafford Centre, or “Hell on Earth” as I like to call it. ☺

I tried not to get caught in the rush of the crowd. I tried walking as slow as I could without getting shoved by the passing hoards. After a while, I gave up shopping altogether, and sat with a cup of coffee, just watching, lulled into a strange trance by the annual soundtrack of Slade, Band Aid, and Aled "God-bles-him" Jones.

Christmas was a pagan festival that got hijacked by Christianity. Now it's a Christian festival that's been hijacked by consumerism. I don't believe in any of them. Where's *my* song? That's what I want to know.

I wish it could be Christmas every day???? Thank fuck it's only once a year!!!!

What kind of world are these people living in? I wondered. For some of these rich folk from suburban Lancashire and Cheshire, this must be all they ever see of Manchester. They don't see the housing estates, the churches, the dodgy pubs, the junkies staggering the streets. They step inside this artificial bubble of commerce and spend the whole of Saturday's daylight hours working their way through its labyrinth of air-conditioned rooms, before hopping back into their 4-by-4's. No clue about what goes on in real life.

In the end, I went for the safe option. I got a bottle of whisky for my dad, a cookbook for my mum and a novelty mug for my brother. The mug has a picture of a pretty girl on it. When you pour hot water in, you get to see what's under her clothes.

I had a cup of tea from it this afternoon. I feel slightly ashamed.

COMMENTS:

NONE.

12/12/08

Mood: Confoosed

I phoned my mum the other day and told her I was coming home for Christmas.

“That’ll be nice,” she said.

I’m sure she meant it, but my mum’s getting to sound more and more like a robot. Years of living with my dad has seen to that. He never aboosed her physically, he just insulted her at every available opportunity. Called her a stoopid bich when she forgot to do the washing up, and a slut when she wore too much makeup. They had blazing rows when I was a young kid, shuoting and scraeming, while me and my brother Ady listened from upstairs. We’d lie on the floor of my bedroom, ears presed to the carpet. Every now and then, one of us would sneeze from the dust, but mum and dad were too busy shouting to hear.

Then, one day, the arguments stoped. Mum just gave up fighting back. I used to respect that, becuase I thought she was rising above it, not stooping

to his level. But I realise now it was something diferent. She started beleeving him.

She could've moved out. She could've taken me and Ady with her and moved in with her mum, or her sister. *Anyone*.

Truth is, she didn't want to. She chose not to. She prefered it. It made her more secure.

I hate to say it, but my dad was right. My mum is a stoopid bichth.

COMMENTS:

NONE.

13/12/08

Mood: Jockular

OK, I've got to share this with you. I just found the lyrics to Cliff's Richard's *21st Century Christsmas*:

www.lyricsonline.net/cliff/richard/5660000zz

I haven't laughed so much in ages. The first four lines are the best:

The sattellite's track in' Santa

We text our Christsmas list

And leave our mobile numbers

To help out 'ole Saint Nick.

Don't you just love the internet??????

COMMENTS:

NONE.

15/12/08

Mood: None

Ady's a mechanic. He works in a little garage, a stone's throw away from mum and dad's house, where he's lived all his life. He's worked at the garage since leaving skool, well over 15 years ago, and who knows, maybe he'll carry on fixing cars there till the oil runs out ☺.

I turned up at his work this afternoon to find him standing outside in his overalls, smoking a fag, all blacked-up like a minstrel.

"Alright, Brian," he said casually, as though the decade since we last spoke had passed in a second.

“Alright,” I said. “How’s it going?”

“Same old.”

“I’m coming home for Christmas,” I said.

“Yeah, I know. Mum told me.”

“I just thought I might come and tell you in person.”

He gave me a strange look. “Why?”

I shrugged. “Maybe we could go for a pint or something. When do you knock off?”

“I’m a bit busy to be honest, Brian.”

“OK. Another time, then.”

“Sure.”

I went off and had a pint on my own, thinking about the olive branch I’d just had thrown back in my face. I wasn’t too bothered by it. As Jesus

might say, "If you reject my olive branch, I'll come back at you next time with a tree trunk." ☺

COMMENTS:

NONE.

17/12/08

Mood: Moody

I wonder if Ady has any political beliefs. God knows, he's lived with our dad long enough.

Dad's so full of fear and hatred, there's certain concepts he just can't get his head round, like tolerance, compassion, or the idea that there might be more to life than working and watching TV. He's obsessed with taxes, and how much he's shelling out to subsidize all these scroungers, layabouts and foreigners. It goes without saying that all foreigners are on benefits. "It's the only reason they're bloody *here*." He's always been suspicious of disabled people. Whenever he sees someone in a wheelchair, he'll mutter, "Lazy bastard." He's convinced they can all walk, and they just want the extra money. According to my dad, "extra money" is the only reason people have kids. "You see 'em pushing their enormous trolleys round Asda's with their 15 brats trailing behind 'em. We're paying for every single one of 'em."

For years, I thought this was all normal. I assumed he was right. Then he did his back in, and had to go on disability. Overnight, the welfare state became the nation's greatest achievement – a reason to be proud to be British. The trouble was, all these foreigners, layabouts and scroungers were taking the money that was meant for genuine cases. "That's why I don't get enough."

I feel like the Prodigal Son, returning home after pissing away everything his father gave him. The only difference is, my father never gave me anything. I wonder if he'd've been more generous if he'd paid less tax.

COMMENTS:

NONE.

19/12/08

Mood: Theological

I never really understood the Prodigal Son story. If you haven't read it, check it out – Luke 15:11-32. Let me know what you think!

It's all about a young man who asks his father to give him all the money he's entitled to, and then leaves home to squander it all on a life of debauchery. He returns home after he's spent it all, and instead of turning the ungrateful sod away, his dad welcomes him back with open arms. Meanwhile, his

brother, who never put a foot wrong in his life gets jealous and asks why the bad one is getting all the special treatment. His dad doesn't really give a satisfactory answer, in my opinion.

What I've never understood, and never believed in – REFOOSED to believe in – is this idea that God favours a repentant sinner over one who has never sinned. Why? What possible motivation could there be? It's almost encouraging people to get into drink and drugs, sleep with a few prostitutes, maybe kill a few people for a laugh, and then repent on your deathbed and be welcomed into Paradise. It hardly seems fair.

Maybe the Creator's just a twisted voyeur, favouring the prodigals because their lives are more entertaining.

We're the same. Who wants to hear a story about someone like Ady, who stayed at home and did everything his parents told him? If he wrote an autobiography, I wouldn't read it. And I'm his brother.

COMMENTS:

NONE.

21/12/08

Mood: Apprehensive

OK, so it's 3 days to go. I really need to stop counting the days down. I don't know why it's so important, but I can't think about anything else. I'm supposed to be doing other things, like looking for a job, or at least writing something meaningful in my blog.

Why is Christmas so important? People spend months preparing for it, and when it arrives, all you do is sit around watching TV with your family.

Why is family so important? Some people will have you believe your family are the only people who care about you, but I don't believe that. It doesn't matter how many friends I lose, or how alone I feel. I refuse to believe that no one cares.

It's this whole concept of caring for people you've never met – that's what my old man can't grasp. I care about people I've never met, and I know there are people out there who care about me, even though they don't know me from Adam. That's what I believe. I believe that more than anything.

COMMENTS:

NONE.

22/12/08

Mood: Ambivalent

2 days to go.

26/12/08

Mood: Full

I went round my parents' place on Christmas Eve. I don't think they were expecting me, because my mum got all flustered when she answered the door. She gave me a hug and then darted off into the kitchen to start preparing some food.

My dad didn't get out of his chair.

I sat down on the sofa, trying not to stare at him too hard.

I couldn't get over how GREY they both were. My dad's hair was pure white, like a blank sheet of paper. My mum was the real shock, though. She'd always died her hair jet black. What happened? Did she phase it out, or did she just get out of bed one morning stop bothering?

"You alright, dad?" I said. I thought it was best to try and mimick Ady's casual approach when it came to greetings.

My dad didn't take his eyes off the TV.

"So, you're not a nutter anymore, then?" he said.

“What?”

“I hear you’re back in the land of the living” he said. “You gave up being a nutter.”

For some reason, I found this really funny. Maybe I’d’ve been offended a couple of years ago, but now I could appreciate my dad’s sense of humour. I laughed, and felt some of the tension evaporate.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m not a nutter, don’t worry.”

Ady looked equally surprised when he got back from the pub to find me sitting on the sofa watching *Die Hard* on Sky Movies.

“I thought you were coming tomorrow,” he said.

I don’t know why everyone thought I’d be coming on Christmas Day. When I was a kid, Christmas Eve was all part of the experience. Staying up late waiting for Santa, counting down the hours till morning.

I stayed up later than anyone that night, breathing in the old air. They still had pictures of me on the walls – old ones from school that I hadn’t seen since I was a teenager. In this house, I was thinner, spottier, less sure of myself when I smiled.

The house was the same – EXACTLY the same as it always was. The carpet, the wallpaper, the battered old sofas. The same plastic Christmas tree, with the same stringy tinsel and dented borbles.

My old room was now their spare room. It seemed unreconisable without all my old stuff piled up – just bare walls and a single bed.

I slept well.

My mum poked her head round the door in the morning, and asked if I wanted a cup of tea.

I sudenly felt 14, so I grunted a yes.

Mum disapeared and I heard Ady holering, “MERRY CHRITSMAS!” from downstairs. I came down to find him skiping about like a little kid, and not even in a tong-in-cheek way. *He must do this every year*, I thought. He’s 33!!!!

☺

We sat in the living room and opened our presents. Dad seemed pleased with his whiskey. Mum didn’t give much of a reaction to the book. Ady APSOLUTELY LOVED his mug. He made himself cups of tea all day, gigling with delihgt as the naked woman apeared, as though he wasn’t expeckting it. He never said thank you.

We had roast turkey at dinnertime. Mum laid out crackors, with jokes and party hats. Dad cracked open the whiskey, and Ady grabed some beers from the frigde.

For some reason, Dad chose that partiucular moment to ask me what I was doing for a living nowadays.

"I told you, Dad. I'm between jobs."

"You're *looking*, though, aren't you?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm *looking*. Can't find anything suitalbe."

"Probobly because you're not Polish."

I let that one pass.

A few years back, my dad met a Polish bloke in a pub, who beat him and my uncle at darts. That was probably the only Polish person he ever met, but because of that expereince he was able to wax lyrical about the "sneaky Poles."

"Don't play them at darts," was his advice. "They're excelent darts players. I'll give 'em that, at least."

After dinner, we settled down in front of the TV with more drinks and watched *Muppets Christmas Carol*.

"He's a fine actor is Micheal Caine," said Dad. "It can't be easy working with a bunch of Muppets, but he's pulled it off."

"Tell me about it," said Ady.

We laffed.

"He plays a good Skrooge," I said.

"Oh, he could turn his hand to anything, old Micheal," said Dad.

"I'd like to see him do Shakespear," I said.

"Fukk that," said Ady.

"Langwage!" said Mum.

"Sorry Mum," said Ady.

Dad fell asleep on the sofa for most of the afternoon. He woke up in the evening for another couple of whiskies and half a box of *Quality Street* before pottering off to bed.

Mum went off to see her sister, and ended up staying the night over there. Was she really going to see her sister, I wondered, or did she have another fella? Half of me wished that were the case, while the other half was stuck in some half-arsed loyalty to my old man.

Dad's harmless enough, after all. He's a "character". You know, like people say, "He's a real *character*, that one."

Of course, that's just a polite way of saying "toss-pot." But a *harmless* toss-pot, that's the point.

Me and Ady ended up sitting drinking and watching *It's a Wonderful Life* till 2 in the morning.

"I watch this every year," he said. "Religiously."

"It's a classic," I said.

"Makes you think about stuff too," he said. "You know. About life."

"What does it make you think about?" I said.

"I don't know." Ady looked at me, his eyes looking weary. Suddenly he looked very old. "What's it all about, Brian? I mean, you've been out there and tried a few things. You've been to uni, you had your whole "religiuos" phase. What did you learn from it all?"

"Lots of things," I said. "What sort of thing do you mean?"

"I suppose I'm just looking for answers."

"Aren't we all?"

Ady couldn't beleeve it. My words hit him like a slap. He searhced my face for some sign that I was joking. Tears poked out of his eyes and perched on his lower lashes, thraetening to fall at any moment.

"Hey," I said. "There's nothing I can tell you, but that's a good thing. I'm seriuos. Don't let anyone tell you what to do, or how to live your life. Don't let anyone tell you what their interpretasion of "the answers" are, becuase all the answers you need are *right here*." I tapped him on the side of the head.

He flinched a little when I touchcd him, but then he noded, like he understudd.

"It's good to have you back, Brian."

Somewhere in the background, James Stewart said, *Attaboy Clarence.*

It was one of those perfekt moments.

Fukk it. Looks like I'll be back next year.

COMMENTS:

NONE.

01/01/09

Mood: Regretfull

I heard my first 9/11 joke on Septebmer 12th 2001. Someone told it in the uni canteen:

A hundred window deeners got made redundant in New York yetserday. Likkily for them, there were a hundred new vacancies for street sweepers.

I heard a Sadam Husein joke the day after the dictator's execution:

Sadam's wife was asked what she liked most about her husband. She said, "He was well hung."

It made me wonder who the hell comes up with these jokes. Do they get paid? How do they get distributed so quickly? It's almost as though they knew it was going to happen . . .

I used to be a conspiracy theorist. I'm not anymore. Conspiracy theorists are idiots, and the 9/11 conspiracy theorists are the biggest idiots of the lot. This idea that everything is America's fault, and all these violent extremists are nothing but innocent victims is what I like to call "terrorism denial". It's the liberal equivalent of Holocaust denial. Just as misguided, just as bigoted, just as idiotic.

Funily enough, I think the Jehovah's Witnesses have got the right idea. It's not about right versus wrong, good versus evil. It's the Devil fighting the Devil. Either way, innocent people are going to get killed, and there's nothing I can do about it. I think I'll just let them get on with it, and I'll get on with my life.

I'm going to stop ranting now, peeps. It's January the first, the world is still here, and this is my resolution. Some people giving up smoking, or red meat. I'm giving up blogging. No offense, but it's such a waste of time. Such a waste of energy. I need to find some way to be happy. I can't do that when I'm arguing myself into a corner. Let's face it, it's not like anyone reads this stuff anyway. They're all too busy downloading snuff and porn...

But that's OK, because I'm talking to myself, and talking to yourself is a good thing. It's a beautiful world out there. I'm beautiful, we're all beautiful. Power to the people.

Over and out. ☺

COMMENTS:

7.

On 02/01/09, Howie B wrote:

Brian! Please don't ever think you're alone. I've been doing some thinking too, and like you, I've reached some conclusions.

On 03/01/09 Brian Rourke wrote:

Hello, freind. Who is this? ☺

On 03/01/09 Howie B wrote:

It's HOWARD, you plank. I called myself Howie B cos there's too many other Howard Baileys out there. It took me a while to find you. There's a LOT of Brian Rourkes. Did you know that? Anyway, I need to meet you, mate. There's things we have to discuss. I'm sorry, by the way.

On 03/01/09, Brian Rourke wrote:

No, no, no, no, no. I'M sorry. You've got nothing to be sorry about. I was an idiot. What do you want to talk to me about?

On 03/01/09, Howie B wrote:

I can't tell you online. Web pages have eyes. It relates to something you said in your last post. I've got something I want you to read. It's a transcript. You're not the only one, Brian. You're not alone. Give me a call. I'm on the same number as before.

On 03/01/09, Brian Rourke wrote:

How did you know I'd keep your number?

On 03/01/09, Howie B wrote:

Because I know you, Brian. I know you like the back of my hand. Fuck's sake, mate. You're like family. ☺

PART 2

1979 □ 2009

(According to Travis)

1.

Rupert taught me how to link and connect.

I went to hypnotherapy as a way of making sense of the mess in my head. A friend recommended Rupert because he helped him quit drinking. I didn't want to quit drinking. I just wanted to sort myself out up to a point where I didn't feel the need to booze twenty four seven.

Rupert asked me what I was hoping to achieve.

I didn't know.

He said, "Would you say that you're depressed, Travis?"

I said, "I'd say I'm confused."

I was working in a low paid job at the time, delivering leaflets door to door, and I just about managed to scrape together the twenty quid an hour he charged. Sometimes when I was a bit short, he'd knock the price down to fifteen. He used to joke that he'd never make a living out of it, but he preferred things that way. He was the one person who wasn't trying to rip me off, or force some fucked up ideology on me. Rupert was a fucking saint.

To save me from paying him the money every week, Rupert taught me some self-hypnosis techniques. Anyone can do them. All you need is a quiet room and a place to rest your head. The resting my head part was fine, but the quiet part was difficult in the block I was living in. That's why I wore headphones. I'd usually listen to Aphex Twin's *Selected Ambient*

Works Volume 2, or *Pomme Fritz* by The Orb. Both of these albums have the power to simultaneously chill you out and fuck you up. It's kill or cure.

Once you're in a state of hypnosis, you can step outside yourself and finally be objective. When I was under, Rupert asked me to visualise myself at one of those times when I feel like lashing out at the world, and link and connect to a previous experience. The concept behind it is simple but mind-blowing: there are certain experiences in life that don't just happen once. They happen a thousand times over, and determine the way that we think and feel. If you want to drag yourself out of that process, you have to understand it first.

So, here goes nothing.

Sit back, relax.

Quiet room. Aphex Twin. Glass of JD.

Link. Connect.

2.

Skateboarding with Sammy in the Co-op car park on a Sunday afternoon. I was ten years old. Sammy was only nine, but he was always the bigger kid. He taught me how to steal.

Some kid left their skateboard outside their house, so I grabbed it while we were walking past. Sammy had his own board and was showing off his kickflips.

I was shit. I mean, I was really fucking rubbish, but this was my one and only afternoon of skateboarding and it was only supposed to be a laugh. Sammy sniggered every time I fell off, almost like I was expected to get it right first time.

I wouldn't be able to keep the board anyway. My folks would ask where I got it. Likewise, there was no way I could stash it at Sammy's. He was already in the shit for stealing tenners out of his mum's purse.

Two kids from Sammy's estate turned up, Gazza and Harvey. Both of them had boards, and were speeding towards us like pros. This was all I needed.

Gazza said, "Alright, Sam?"

"Yeah, mate."

"What you up to, mate?"

"Nothing, mate."

Gazza's little sidekick didn't say anything; he was too busy flying around like Michael J Fox in *Back To The Future*.

Man, I loved that film. That first couple of scenes were the best, where he was skating to school, grabbing on the back of people's cars to make him go faster, with Huey Lewis and The News blasting in the

background. I didn't care about travelling back in time or any of that bollocks, I just wanted to be able to skate like that.

Gazza turned to me, and said, "I didn't know you were a skater."

I said, "I'm not, mate. I nicked it."

Gazza scoffed. "Fuck off."

Sammy said, "No, he nicked it, mate. He's a right little tearaway, our Travis."

"Let's see you fucking ride it, then, you beanhead."

"*What-head?*"

Sammy flashed me a warning look. I shrugged and started skating, not wanting to start a scrap. Gazza wasn't any bigger than me; he liked fighting and didn't need much of an excuse.

I hated fighting. It was pointless, and you only ended up getting hurt. That's why I was mates with Sammy. He wasn't a fighter, either. We were into the same things.

Gazza was peering at me, all sceptical. He said, "Show us some of your tricks, then."

"Don't know any."

"What, can't even ride a fucking skateboard? Spacker. Whatya nick it for, then?"

"For a laugh."

Sammy was hopping up and down, looking awkward. He said, "Go on, mate. Just fucking ride around a bit."

I said, "Alright," and pushed myself off carefully. Straight away, I was starting to wobble.

I stamped my foot into the ground and sped up, trusting my luck, hoping to fuck I'd manage to control it somehow.

Fat chance.

I was on the ground again, doing a little Riverdance to stop me landing flat on my arse.

Gazza and Sammy snatched a quick glance at each other before falling about laughing, really emphasising the ha's, like, "HHA, HHA, HHA."

Harvey grabbed a plank of wood from a skip, and built a little ramp up the kerb. He got back on his skateboard and shot up the plank. He flipped his board under his feet and landed gracefully on his wheels.

He said, "Decent ramp." All casual, like.

Sammy said, "Let's have a go."

Sammy wasn't quite as good, but managed to jump a few feet without falling over.

"Nice one." He grinned, like he was one of the boys.

Gazza went next. Like his little mate, he jumped as though the wheels were an extension of his body.

Gazza kicked his board up into his hands, and grinned back at me. "Go on, Trav."

I said, "Fuck off. You know I'm a beginner."

He said, "What, do you need armbands, or something? Fucking lifejacket? It's only up the kerb, you spaz. How high is that? Couple of fucking inches?"

Harvey was twitching, ready to leave.

Gazza said, "Hold on a sec, Harv. I wanna see Travis fall off again." His eyes were fixed on mine. Loving it.

Sammy was kicking stones about, pretending he wasn't interested, but his voice told a different story. He was almost whispering, *pleading* with me. "Come on, mate. S'only a laugh."

Gazza's grin widened. "Yeah, come on, Travis. I wanna see you get *hurt* this time."

I had nothing to prove to this clown. I hardly even knew the guy – he was just some kid from the rough estate. Why should I care what he thought?

Still, I was struck by the desire to pick up the board and hurl it straight at his smug face.

I tried to control it. I didn't know why, but something inside me had been twisted.

I had to do something. The more I waited, the wider Gazza's grin got. He looked like some gurning muppet. Somehow the more ridiculous his face appeared, the madder I got.

My brain and my arm had their own little Good Friday Agreement, and reached a compromise. Instead of chucking the board directly at him, I just hurled it across the car park in the other direction. In my mind, I could see it smashing into pieces, *Incredible Hulk*-style, but it just slid across the concrete and stopped, leaving nothing but a slug-trail of gravel in its wake.

I stormed off, back towards home.

Sammy didn't say anything. Didn't call after me, just stood with the boys, watching me leave. I didn't blame him.

Gazza was shouting something after me, making noises, trying to get me to turn round, but there was no way I was rising to it. If I turned round, he'd see the tears.

*

Five minutes later, I was round the corner, punching and kicking a lamppost. Even though it stung my toes and cut up my knuckles, it was a strange kind of therapy. I wasn't thinking about Gazza, or Sammy, or the skateboard. My only motivation was to *fuck that lamppost up*.

We make our own choices in life. I'm not going to pretend I'm a victim. If I've messed up, it's my own fault. Not society, not Sammy, not mum and dad.

3.

I suppose I can sympathise with my parents now. No one knows how to bring up kids. All those people who write books on the subject are winging it as much as anyone else.

Whatever you do, you're gonna lose. If you let your kids run riot, they'll end up delinquent, and blame you for it. If you impose rules on them, they'll rebel, or worse than that, they'll obey your orders to the letter, silently nurturing their hatred and resentment.

My hypnotherapist guy Rupert would disagree, but the fact of the matter is, there's only a certain amount of influence a parent can have. You're more likely to listen to your mates, or what the telly tells you.

When I was a kid, my mum tried her best to feed me proper food, but I'd refuse to put anything in my mouth that wasn't TV advertised. Eventually she relented, because even though fish fingers and chips weren't the healthiest option, at least I was eating *something*.

There was a lot of meat in our house. You could smell it wafting down the street. A constant aroma of cooking sausages. Animals used to congregate outside the garden gate, almost as though they were expecting a waiter to come out with a steak in a dog dish.

My dad was a butcher, and any meat he didn't sell came home with him in the evening. Topside. Brisket. Tenderloin. Liver. Kidneys. Tongue. Brains. I'm not kidding. My parents had *brains* for tea.

People knew my dad was a butcher as soon as they found out my surname was McGuiggan. There weren't any other McGuiggans. My dad's shop was slap bang in the centre of town, with the sign, MCGUIGGAN'S BUTCHERS in menacing red letters.

My dad was five foot seven, but I used to think he was a giant.

One time, at nursery school, me and a small army of three year olds were being escorted out on a trip to the park. We were walking through town, with adults walking alongside taking a constant headcount. As we got to the zebra crossing, one of the kids suddenly squealed, and pointed across the street. As is the way with kids, when one of them starts the others follow, and soon we were all screaming.

Just outside the butchers, strutting his way up to the front of the shop was a man in white overalls and bloodstained apron. He had a straw hat on his head, and a dead pig slung casually over his shoulder, like it was a set of fishing rods. He didn't smile. He was too caught up in his work to notice.

It didn't occur to me at that age that I'd look like him one day.

*

That Sunday afternoon, as I was storming off across the Co-op car park, Gazza was making noises, trying to provoke a reaction.

He was sniffing through the back on his throat. *Snorting*. The unmistakable sound of a pig.

4.

I was brought up in a small town in East Lancashire. I don't have much to say about my home town. There's nothing there apart from hills and houses, plus the usual scattering of shops, factories and churches. Half the factories are derelict and half the shops are boarded up. The churches get emptier every year – they'll be the next to go. Some Christians might find that depressing, but trust me, it's a good thing. You know you're living in a shithole when the churches are full.

I don't want to talk about how it's grim up north, because I don't know what that means. It's only grim up north because *life* is grim.

My dad made a decent living from his shop. We lived in a nice two bedroom house with a garden in a quiet street. We were right up in the hills, and I could see the whole town from my bedroom window, framed by green fields. I suppose it was beautiful, but you don't know what beautiful is when you're a kid. No frame of reference. That's what nostalgia's all about – glorifying stuff you didn't appreciate at the time. I've got no time for nostalgia.

My mum didn't have a job, but she was busier than my dad. She was always on her feet, cleaning or reorganising the furniture. She had long wavy brown hair down to her waist. She hadn't cut it for years, and never tied it up. I'm not sure if she ever brushed it either.

My mum didn't watch TV, she just listened to old records. Eighties music passed me by because it was always the sixties in our house. Dylan, The Stones, Velvet Underground and The Kinks greeted me when I got home from school, and I'd dance on the carpet with my mum while she dusted, shaking her flowery skirt and her cascading locks.

When my dad got back from work, the stereo went off, and the TV went on. My mum would cook the dinner and then read one of her books.

My dad never had much to say for himself. He just sat and watched the football. I don't recall ever having a kick-about with him in the back yard. He was too busy watching other people play. As soon as we got Sky Sports, that was it. We lost him to the TV.

He didn't offer any words of wisdom, because he didn't have any. He wasn't religious; he had no political views; he didn't even support a football team. The only thing that really wound him up was vegetarianism. He'd say, "S'not bloody natural," while he was chomping on another genetically modified rump steak.

My mum did all the talking at mealtimes. When she'd read a book she liked, she'd spend a whole half an hour summarising it.

"... The duck-billed platypus's name is misleading in the sense that its bill is different to that of a duck. The platypus uses its bill to hunt, and it provides an extra sense, in addition to sight, sound and smell. This is vital for capturing their prey of crustaceans, insect larvae and small creatures in mud at the bottom of streams, which would be impossible to locate without this extra-sensory perception ..."

My mum never had time for baby talk. Even when I was a small child, she considered me her intellectual equal. She used words I didn't understand, but that didn't matter. I just let her get on with it.

She was passionate about knowledge. Everything was a fact to my mum. When she said, "I love you," she said it like it was the capital of Brazil.

She painted pictures in her spare time. She an amazing talent for replicating famous paintings. We had a Van Gogh in the attic that could've been the real thing.

Education was really important to my mum, so she read to me constantly. We got through the whole of *War and Peace* in the space of a few weeks. We spent hours playing board games – *Monopoly*, *Cluedo*, *Trivial Pursuit*. *Scrabble* was her favourite. She'd usually let me win at the others, but she couldn't bring herself to lose at her favourite game.

My favourite game was *Tuister*. We spread out the mat on the living room carpet, and got my dad to spin the wheel for us. He'd give the directions – "Left hand on red ... right foot on green" – with one eye on the board, and the other on the footy. He'd tell us off for laughing too loud. That was all part of the fun.

I think my mum got a bit jealous when Sammy arrived on the scene. She'd lost her *Scrabble* partner. At the time, I couldn't decide whether it was me or the *Scrabble* she missed.

5.

My mum took me to church every week, and I went to a Catholic school, but at that time, my understanding of religion was pretty minimal. Some Christians happily spend their entire lives in this mindset, accepting the stories they were told as children, long after they've given up believing in Santa, the Tooth Fairy and *Scooby Doo*.

One of the reasons religion wasn't particularly important to me as a kid was that I didn't understand it. I learnt the words, but not the ideas.

Teaching prayers to kids is just another way of teaching them to be obedient. It doesn't matter if they don't know what it means as long as they *say* it. Likewise, it doesn't matter to the kid what the words mean, as long as they get the gist.

Teachers used to tell us stories to scare us into behaving, making sure we never touched broken glass or dog shit in the playground, and we had to run and tell a teacher straight away if we happened to spot a syringe.

There was the *Tale of the Wandering Doctor*.

The Wandering Doctor was the best doctor in the country. He could cure any disease, and perform any operation, without ever getting it wrong. The Wandering Doctor was such a good doctor that the other doctors decided it was unfair just to keep him at one hospital. And so, the Wandering Doctor wandered the length and breadth of the country, curing diseases, fixing broken bones, and even in special cases, bringing people back from the dead.

The Wandering Doctor had one problem, though. He was very clumsy. Sometimes, when he was performing an operation, he needed to have a nurse standing next to him the entire time, in case he suddenly dropped something important. The Wandering Doctor had a habit of

dropping things, you see. We all have these bad habits sometimes, don't we, children?

Sometimes, when the Wandering Doctor was in the local area, he would cut across the school playground, and walk over the top fields, as a short cut to Rochdale Infirmary. And sometimes, when he was doing this, he would drop important pieces of medical equipment. Like syringes. So when we see syringes on the grass, or in the playground, we had to tell a teacher straight away. We weren't allowed to touch them. Touching needles was strictly forbidden. We could get germs on them.

6.

I'm not bragging or anything, but I was an exceptionally bright kid. *Teacher's lapdog*, you might say, except I didn't really want to be. I was embarrassed. I didn't ask to be clever, but I was, and that was that. I wasn't going to write the wrong answers on a maths test just to fit in with all the thick fuckers. That would've been stupid.

Meeting Sammy was like stepping through the mirror into Wonderland. He went to the rough school at the other end of town. His mum and my mum were old friends from school, so one day, Sammy's mum brought him round to our house and introduced us. I took him up to my room to play *Snakes and Ladders*.

He was a few months younger than me, but he dressed like a teenager, in ripped jeans, and a denim jacket covered in badges. He had a thick bowler haircut that stuck out at the sides like an afro. Best of all was the jewellery – a gold hoop spiked through his right ear, and a silver chain round his neck that rattled around when he got overexcited. He looked like a pirate.

Sammy told all these stories about him and his cousins raising hell. Breaking windows, nicking from shops, starting grass fires up on the moors.

He said, "You ever robbed a car badge?"

I said, "What's a car badge?"

Sammy reached into his pocket and pulled out a shiny blue oval, adorned with the silver *Ford* logo.

I said, "How'd you do that?"

He said, "Screwdriver."

"Are they screwed on, then?"

“Nope. Just stuck on with a bit of glue.”

“As if.”

“No, really, mate.”

He showed me the little ring of adhesive on the back.

Sammy reckoned his cousin had a stash in his room of about a hundred and fifty badges. That wasn't including all the number plates he'd nicked.

I was so fucking excited. I went down under the stairs to my dad's toolkit. I shoved a flathead in my anorak pocket, and told my mum we were off playing out.

We wandered the streets for a bit. Soon enough, we came across an old Vauxhall Carlton parked down a backstreet. Sammy kept watch while I snook over to the back of the car. He was whispering, “*Quick, mate, quick. Quick!*”

Seconds later, the badge was in my pocket, and we were legging it, giggling like maniacs. I had such a headrush, I couldn't even see the street ahead of me, but I didn't care, I didn't care about anything, I *didn't give a fuck*.

Sammy said, “I didn't think you had it in you, Travis. You're a *dickhead!*”

I loved being called that. I loved it so much that from that day on, I acted like one just to hear him say it, again and again.

*

We trashed a phonebox once. We didn't plan it. We used to go in there to call directory enquiries and shout stuff at them. My favourite was “*Suck me*”

dick!" Sammy used to crack up at that, especially if it was a woman that answered. We held our heads together so we could both hear her reaction.

This one time, I'd shouted my usual, "*Suck me dick!*" and slammed the receiver down. Because I'd hit it so heavy, a handful of change came splashing out. Nice one.

Sammy tried hitting the side of the phone. It started gushing coins like a fruit machine.

I smacked it. Sammy twatted it.

We carried on until we'd emptied the whole thing. We had about twenty quid in ten and twenty pees.

We went down town and got fish and chips and a burger.

When we got back to his house, Sammy's mum told him off for eating before his tea.

We went up to his room and pissed ourselves laughing. Imagine what she'd say if she knew what we'd done. The extra change was still jangling in our pockets.

Being a dickhead was fun.

*

It's been years since I last saw Sammy. I've no idea what he's doing now, or even if he's still alive. I still think about him, though. I talked to Rupert about him a lot.

Hypnotherapy was the highlight of my week for a while.

Rupert was a young guy just like me. He usually just wore jeans and a t-shirt, and had stubble and long hair like an indie kid. He was a PhD

student, and whenever I went round his house for a session, there were stacks of books and bits of paper everywhere. He had a poster of Sigmund Freud on the wall of his study, alongside a parody of the KFC logo. It said, *Kentucky Freud Chicken: They're Mother-Fucking Good.*

Rupert was a pretty orthodox Freudian. I used to read books about social psychology, just so that I could contradict him. That, for me, is the mark of a good teacher: someone who challenges you to prove them wrong.

After he'd brought me round, we'd have a cup of tea, and chat about psychology.

He said, "You can't choose your parents, but you choose your friends. If you associate with people who've adopted a certain lifestyle, it's because you want to join in. You may decide to play along for a while, and let them talk you into it. Is that what it was like with Sammy, I wonder?"

I said, "I didn't need persuading. I just needed someone to rebel with. It's no fun on your own. I didn't realise that at the time. It's no fun on your own."

He said, "But is that something you've chosen? Have you chosen to be on your own?"

I said, "I don't know."

He said, "Do you *like* being on your own?"

I said, "Sometimes. Most of the time, it's not so great. It's just better than the alternative."

He said, "Other people?"

I said, "Damn right. Other fucking people. Present company excepted."

Rupert yawned and looked at his watch. "Same time next week, then?"

“Sure. Same time next week.”

7.

The worst thing we did was on Christmas Day.

Sammy came round my house in the morning. He'd unwrapped all his presents and now he was bored.

I wasn't particularly bothered about my gifts, either. I'd asked for a skateboard, but my mum bought me a chess set.

We'd been to Midnight Mass, so church duties were out of the way. My dad was watching an old *Morecambe and Wise* special, and my mum was busy preparing a turkey the size of an ostrich, so no one objected when we went out and prowled the streets.

There was no one around. The weather was dull, not a White Christmas, and not too chilly.

Sammy had a little radio-controlled jeep, which he guided along the middle of the road, weaving in and out of the white lines, giving a running commentary as though it was a shit-hot rally car. Truth is, it was pretty flimsy. It went about twenty miles an hour max, and stopped moving altogether if you stood too far away. He got bored with it after a while, and tucked it under his arm.

We wandered into the new estate, peering into people's windows.

Across the road, there were some people leaving their house, dressed all smart for church. We sat on the kerb and watched. Mum, dad, three kids and a granny. It was like an advert for their swanky estate car.

We watched them drive off.

Sammy said, "Do you reckon they've locked the door?"

I said, "Yeah, probably."

“What’d you reckon?”

“What’d you mean?”

He said, “They must have tons of stuff. Three kids – imagine all them presents.”

“So what?”

“So, let’s go for it.”

“Nah. You wouldn’t dare, *dnicken*.”

“*You* wouldn’t, more like.”

“No, *you* wouldn’t. That’s why we can’t do it. Because I can’t do it on my own. And you’re gonna bottle it.”

“Why would I bottle it? I’d only bottle it because you bottled it first.”

“Well, I’m not gonna bottle it.”

“Neither am I.”

“Come on, then.”

That was enough arguing for me.

I followed him up the footpath, leaving the toy jeep at the gate.

Sammy tried the handle, but obviously the door was locked.

We crept down the alley round the side of the house. The back door opened with a push.

The kitchen smelt of bleach and potpourri.

The living room was decked out in lights, with row after row of Christmas cards hanging from the wall from strings, like washing lines.

The tree was fucking huge, with a mass of scrunched up paper and toys underneath it. Dolls house, Cabbage Patch Kids, a Scalextric, a Lego

Technic set, and the ultimate – a Nintendo Game Boy, probably one of the first ones ever sold. Sammy grabbed it and stuck it in his coat pocket.

We didn't say anything. We knew there wasn't anything else we could steal without getting caught. Our mums knew each other, so I couldn't just pinch something and pretend I'd borrowed it off Sammy. So, as if on a pre-arranged count of three, we just started smashing stuff.

Sammy stamped on all the toys. He snapped the Scalextric track in half.

I pushed the tree over. Lights, baubles and pine needles clattered against the carpet. Sammy started pulling the cards off the wall, grabbing random ones as they fell and ripping them in half.

I tried kicking the telly in, but the screen was too thick to smash.

Sammy said, "Go on. Fucking *kick* it!"

He sounded like a psycho. I loved it.

I booted the telly, but all I could manage was a little crack up the middle. I shoved it onto the floor and kicked it some more, like it was an enemy gangster I was doing over.

While I was kicking the telly, I noticed the crib on the mantelpiece – a model barn, with ceramic figures of wise men, shepherds, Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus.

For a moment, I could feel Jesus looking at me.

I started thinking about Hell. I'd never really thought about Hell before. I'd been told about it, but it always sounded like just another story, like detention. Some room, where bad kids have to sit and do lines.

All I knew about Hell was, I didn't want to go there.

We'll work something out, I said silently to the crib. *Honest.*

I said, "We'd better go."

I glanced across at Sammy, who was surveying the carnage we'd created. Suddenly he looked just as shit-scared as I was.

He said, "Yeah. Let's get out of here."

He never admitted it, but I could tell he knew we'd gone too far. We never got caught for what we did that day. We never talked about it either. We just went back to my place, and played *Tetris* on Sammy's Game Boy.

8.

The coolest thing we did was steal a car.

My mum gave us some money to go to the pictures. We went into town and bought a massive bag of fizzy cola bottles. Then we went off to nick some car badges.

We found a Ford Fiesta parked beside a skip round the back of the industrial estate. The skip was stacked full of broken wooden crates, so the car was well hidden. There was no one around, so Sammy decided to pick the lock.

I said, "Betya can't."

He said, "Tenner?"

"I haven't got a tenner."

"No, but you could nick one."

The door swung open and we nearly chickened out. We were ready to run off, but after a few quick jerks of the head, we could see there was no one watching. It was Saturday, and the football was on in The Swan. A rambling chorus of jeers and moans echoed out.

We climbed in. It had that new car smell.

Sammy waggled his screwdriver in the air and said, "You reckon I can start the engine?"

"Go for it."

He stuck the flat silver head in the ignition. His face scrunched up as he twisted.

The engine kicked into life, and he sprang back in the seat, like he wasn't really expecting it to happen.

We let out a whispered cheer, and high-fived about twenty times.

The coolest thing about Sammy was that he knew how to drive. On special occasions, his uncle would take him down to Blackpool in his four-by-four so that he could drive along the beach.

He slid the chair forward, put us in gear and we were off, driving down the road in a flash new Fiesta with furry dice. I took a handful of fizzy cola bottles and shoved them in my gob. That mad sugar rush. I was almost foaming at the mouth.

We turned into the main road, and soon Sammy was doing thirty.

A bunch of kids from my school were playing football by the side of the road. Four of them – Matthew O'Connor, Stephen Mitchell, Daniel Burkett and Ross McNulty.

I said, "I know those lads."

Sammy hammered on the horn, and I stuck my head out the window and waved with both hands.

The kids offered a half-hearted wave back. Then Daniel Burkett realised who was driving. He yelled and pointed, and just as we turned the corner, I saw the four of them standing speechless, like a row of musical statues waiting for the DJ to press play.

9.

I met Sammy's cousins on his birthday. I'd heard so much about them, it was like meeting a pair of celebrities. Troy and Billy. They were fourteen, and easily a foot taller than either of us.

I went round to Sammy's, and they were sitting on the sofa in their baggy jeans, chunky Reeboks, and Inspiral Carpets' *Cool as Fuck* t-shirts. They talked like proper Manks, calling each other "our kid," with their voices freshly broken into an affected nasal drawl.

I wanted to ask them about their secret stash of car badges, but Sammy warned me against it. We weren't supposed to know about that.

Sammy's mum brought the birthday cake in – a chocolate Swiss roll with ten candles in it. We sang Happy Birthday to "our Sammy," then his mum took Troy and Billy into the kitchen. We listened from the living room as she slipped the boys some cash, and told them to take us to *Waves*.

"Aw, do we *have* to?"

"Yes, you bloody do. Now, behave yourselves and there's a fiver in it for you."

"What, fiver each?"

Sammy's mum tutted. "Alright, alright, a bloody fiver each. You boys'll be the death of me."

Waves was a swimming centre in Blackburn. They had everything there – water slides, jacuzzis, and a big fuck-off wave machine that made you feel like you were swimming with sharks off the Californian coast.

We got on the bus, with trunks and towels stuffed in Asda bags. Troy and Billy didn't speak to us the whole way there, and we didn't say anything either, we just listened to them talk about all this teenage stuff –

horror films, like *Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Evil Dead* – and music. There was this tune that was out at the time called *I'm Free* by the Soup Dragons. Troy kept singing snatches from it throughout their conversation:

*I'm free
To do what I want
Any old time ...*

"Tune of the fucking year, man. Gotta be."

"Yeah, s'fucking savage, man. Soup Dragons are savage. They're not from Manchester, but they sound like they're from Manchester."

"Where they from?"

"Fucking *Scotland*. Doesn't matter anyway. And the song's like an old Rolling Stones one, but they've totally made it their own, like the Happy Mondays did with *Step On*. That's an old African tune originally. He just added all that stuff at the beginning – *You're twistin' my melon, man ...*"

"You know ya talk so hip, man, you're twistin' my melon, man."

"Call the cops!"

"Savage."

We caused havoc in the pool. We dive-bombed into the water next to groups of little kids. We sat on the water fountains so it made us look like we were pissing several feet in the air.

The PA system was blasting out Kylie Minogue and Rick Astley and all other kinds of shite. Then, as if from nowhere, our tune came on – *I'm Free*, by the Soup Dragons.

The four of us dived into the water as the machine kicked into life. Me and Sammy had already picked up the words from hearing Troy sing it.

With arms wrapped around each other's shoulders, bobbing up and down in the artificial current, we sang:

Love me

Hold me

Love me

Hold me

'Cos I'm free ...

Kids shouted and screamed all around us as the waves got rockier. Up to our necks, we punched the air as our song reached another chorus. We slammed them back into the water, spraying each other's faces.

The year was 1990. I was ten years old, so was Sammy, and we were the coolest kids in the fucking world.

10.

Of course, it didn't last.

One day, I was walking home from school over the top fields, wondering what my mum was cooking for tea. Maybe fish fingers, or egg and chips. I could almost taste it. Dipping a chip in the runny yolk and polishing it off with a bit of ketchup. Maybe I'd have some beans on the side, or spaghetti hoops. I'd wash it all down with a glass of orangeade, or even better, cherry.

I stepped through the front door to find two people standing on the living room carpet: my mum and a policeman.

There was something slightly ridiculous about the sight of this man in uniform. He was like a character from panto, or a Punch and Judy show.

His face told me otherwise.

My mum had an expression I'd never seen on her before. She had her hair brushed back behind her ears. She seemed older, somehow. I assumed someone must've died.

I was excited for a moment. I'd never known anyone who'd died before. I wondered if there was going to be presents.

I dropped my bag on the floor, and looked up at them, searching for an explanation. My arrival had obviously brought an end to their conversation.

The copper spoke first. "Travis?"

I said, "Yeah?"

"I've come to talk to you about something very serious. It's about a stolen car."

I didn't say anything.

He said, "It seems that you and a friend of yours were spotted on Saturday 13th by a group of your classmates. *Joyriding*, they usually call it, but I prefer to call it *stealing*. At your age, I'd say you were endangering lives too – yourself, your friend, and others."

By the time he'd completed the sentence, I was sobbing like a sprog. I could hardly speak, but I had to get the words out. I had to explain.

I said, "It wasn't me!"

"Do you know any other Travis McGuiggans?"

"It was *Sammy!* He was driving, and he said he'd beat me up if I didn't sit beside him!"

The officer flashed a glance at my mum to see if she wanted to chip in, but she was obviously lost for words.

He said, "He *made* you, did he? I suppose if your friend told you to jump off a cliff, you'd do that as well, would you?"

Between quick, jerky breaths I said, "He said he wouldn't be my friend."

"Well, perhaps you don't need friends like that anyway, Travis."

"Yeah, but he said he'd tell *everyone else* not to be my friend."

My shoulders were shaking as the lies flowed.

The officer gave me a caution. He stressed the seriousness of the situation, and warned me there'd be tougher punishments in store if anything like this were to happen again.

I assured him that it wouldn't, and I wasn't lying. I really meant it. Nothing like this would ever happen again.

My mum gave him Sammy's name and address so he could go round and caution him too.

The man left, and we sat on the sofa in silence.

I couldn't stop crying.

I said, "I'm sorry, mum. It wasn't me. It was Sammy, he stole the car. I don't know how to drive."

"I'll tell you what you did." My mum's voice came out like a growl. "You *lied* to me."

I said, "What do you mean?"

"I gave you *money*, Travis. I gave you money to go to the pictures, not to go out *stealing cars*."

"I didn't steal the car."

"What did you spend it on?"

"What do you mean?"

"The money, Travis. What did you spend the money on?"

I could hardly bring myself to say it. "Fizzy cola bottles."

My mum buried her face in her hands.

My tears were halted in their tracks. To this day, I've never even looked at a fizzy cola bottle. All I'd be able to think about would be the back of my mum's hands.

I said, "I'm not going to play with him anymore."

She pulled her hands away from her face, snapping out of it.

"Good. He's a bad boy."

She put her arm around my shoulder and hugged me from sideways on. She couldn't bring herself to look at me yet.

I said, "I'm sorry."

She said, "I know you are. You just need to be careful from now on, Travis. You need to be careful about who you decide to play with. You're such a clever boy, with such a bright future. All you need to do is be good and work hard at school, and you can achieve anything you want."

She cooked me one of my favourites – Heinz spaghetti bolognese, with some bread on the side to dip in it.

After tea, I went up to my room to think about what I'd done. My mum didn't send me up there, it just seemed like the right thing to do.

I couldn't believe she'd forgiven me. She seemed like the perfect human being that day – an angel.

I hadn't forgiven myself yet. That was going to take a while. It wasn't so much the stealing as the *lying*. The lying was the worst part, because I hadn't done it to a stranger. I'd done it to someone who loved me.

I overheard snatches of my parents' brief conversation when my dad came back from work. Moments later, he stormed up the stairs, still dressed in his bloodstained apron. He flung my bedroom door open, and launched into a verbal tirade about how much of a bloody disappointment I was, how much of a bloody fool I'd been getting mixed up with those sorts of people. He told me he was so bloody embarrassed and ashamed of me. I didn't really care, but I didn't say so.

He never mentioned it again.

My mum never mentioned it either. She stopped talking to Sammy's mum, and I stopped talking to Sammy. We lived in different neighbourhoods and went to different schools, so ignoring him was easy. Sometimes, I passed him in the street and offered the briefest of nods, before moving on.

*

I prayed for the first time in my life that night – not because someone told me to, but because I wanted to. I asked for forgiveness, and thanked God for my mum.

I said the Our Father over and over, until it almost became part of me. The words got fast and jumbled as the prayer grew more intense. I wanted to say it forever.

Our father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven give us this day our daily bread and forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil...

11.

I was a hardcore Christian for the next four years. I became an altar boy. I sang my heart out in school assemblies while my classmates mumbled into their hymnbooks. I approached every situation with the question, "What would Jesus do?"

As it turned out, if Jesus had gone to my school, he wouldn't have been very popular. I didn't give a fuck about popularity, though. I believed in myself, for the first time in my life. And I had God on my side.

Rupert asked me if I got bullied at school.

I said, "It depends on what you mean."

He said, "Well, did people pick on you? Did you ever get beaten up?"

I said, "Yeah, but *everyone* did. It wasn't anything personal. That's not how the system works."

I went to St Bartholomew's, a Catholic grammar school for boys. I didn't really want to go there, but my mum insisted on it, and I couldn't bring myself to fail the entrance exam.

The school was made up of four modern redbrick buildings, surrounding a chapel in the centre. The chapel was modern too, but was built with grey bricks to make it look old, with pictures of the Apostles in stained glass.

It was a funny kind of education. We went to Mass, recited prayers and learnt Latin, but most people there weren't really religious. It was tradition, more than anything. There was lots of talk about preparing boys for Oxford and Cambridge. "Grooming," I think they call it – an

appropriately perverted expression. It's crazy to think I could've been one of them.

I never felt comfortable with all that elitist stuff. It went against my Christian principles, but it was a Christian school, which made me even more confused. I didn't kick up too much of a fuss, though – maybe because I didn't want to end up in the comprehensive with all the plebs.

There was a lot of snobbery about. I managed to avoid it most of the time. You could say I turned my nose up at it. It's all bollocks, after all. Snobbery's a socially acceptable version of bigotry. It's alright to be a racist if you base it on class prejudice rather than colour.

A lot depended on what your dad did for a living. Half the kids had nicknames based on their father's occupation. I was called "Butcher Boy" for a while, which I hated, but I suppose it gave me a few points on the hardness scale.

That was the real hierarchy. It wasn't how smart you were, or how much dosh your parents raked in. It was about who was hardest, coolest, most able to pull the nonexistent girls.

It was all a front, though. They were all swaggering mummy's boys. They'd talk the talk, smoke a ciggie, give someone a slap and then run off and do their maths revision. It's a shame I didn't realise that at the time.

*

In answer to Rupert's question, no I wasn't bullied at school. There's only a handful of incidents in my school life that still piss me off today.

The first was playing football in Year Seven.

I've always hated football. Watching it, playing it, whatever, it just doesn't appeal to me. I tried to participate as little as possible. The PE teacher, Mr Cottrell, called me Cinderella because I "kept running away from the ball" – an old joke, which no one laughed at, and I wasn't fussed about either. It's not that I didn't have the skill, I just didn't see the point.

Rupert asked me once, "Is it because you're not competitive?"

I said, "What's the point of being competitive?"

He said, "It's human nature," but I could tell by his tone he knew that was bollocks.

It was partly to avoid Cottrell's jibes that I occasionally tried a bit of dribbling. On this particular occasion, Cottrell, who was supposed to be refereeing, had gone over to tell some kids off who were standing at the side of the pitch, putting the players off.

The sun was out, but it'd been pissing with rain all morning, turning the grass to mud as soon as you stepped in it, splashing up your legs with each step.

I was jogging along, deliberately slowly so as to make my run with the ball as brief as possible. I was tapping it gently, casually. In a certain light, I could've passed for someone who gave a fuck.

A couple of rival players soon caught up, and a lad called Nathan Parker took the opportunity to boot me straight in the kneecap. He cleared the ball and looked down at me clutching my knee on the sodden grass.

He said, "Y'alright, McGuiggan?"

I said, "Yeah."

He kicked me in the stomach, winding me, and a few more times in the legs for good measure.

He grinned like a maniac. "How 'bout now, you fucking greaser?"

I didn't reply in words. I was too busy coughing my guts up, rolling round in the cold brown sludge.

I knew it wasn't personal. The wanker didn't have a vendetta. He'd never touched me before, and never did again. The fact of the matter was, we weren't just on different footy teams. People like him could lash out at people like me any time they liked.

Mr Cottrell came over a minute later. Parker was long gone.

"Now, what's happened here, Cinders?"

"I tripped."

*

Later, while I was praying, I assured myself I hadn't been lying. Jesus was economical with the truth as much as the next guy. Sometimes the whole truth isn't necessary. Put it another way. God doesn't mind if you keep certain things secret.

*

I stopped doing PE after that. Cottrell said I needed a note from my parents, so I asked my mum to sign one for me.

She said, "It's important to do PE. It's good for your health, and it teaches you how to be a team player."

I said, "Yes, but what kind of team? Sport's about training young people to be obedient soldiers, following arbitrary rules, so we can be used

as fodder in the next war. That's what it says in that Noam Chomsky book I found on the coffee table."

My mum signed the note. She said it was good that I had my own opinions, but I reckoned she'd been stumped by me quoting from one of her books.

For the next five years, I'd sit by the side of the pitch or the gym, reading a book, or doing homework for another subject. It was my job to look after the safety deposit box filled with people's watches and jewellery. The teachers trusted me with it because I was clever.

No one ever asked me why I didn't do PE. They just assumed I was ill. Sometimes having no mates has its advantages.

One Saturday, my mum took me to Whitaker Park in Rawtenstall, where they've got this old museum full of local history. My mum got excited by that sort of thing. There were some Neolithic and Mesolithic arrowheads that'd been unearthed somewhere in the surrounding fields. It was supposed to be an amazing discovery, and she drove me there especially to see them.

I wasn't all that bothered. They were just bits of flint. My mum stood and stared at them for ages, while I went off to check out the taxidermy exhibition.

I didn't know what taxidermy was, but the concept of stuffed animals wasn't too hard to grasp. There were hundreds of them in there, packed in glass cases – a monkey, a kangaroo, an African elephant, a polar bear displaying a full set of teeth towards a nearby baby seal. There was a tiger mocked up to look like it was being strangled by a boa constrictor. *Tasteful*, I thought.

I half-closed my eyes, and they could've almost been real. This could've been a zoo, not a mortuary.

I looked around, taking in the gaze of hundred artificial eyes. Were their spirits still here too? Did animals have souls, or was that just people?

The final exhibit was a shrunken human head, which had once been the property of a Native American tribe. It was the size of a doll. Its skin was the same colour as the elephant.

There was my answer, I supposed. People were animals too. Either everything had a soul or nothing did. There was no middle ground. The world wouldn't make sense otherwise.

I looked behind me, and was surprised to see my mum skipping around from one animal to the next, hurriedly taking it all in.

She skipped over to join me. "Isn't this brilliant, Travis? What period do you think these are from? Victorian? Edwardian?"

I said, "It's barbaric."

My mum stopped skipping. "Really? What makes you say that?"

"You don't think so? Killing living beings just so that people can come and look at their skins?"

She said, "They're very old, you know. They've been here for years and years. It's part of natural history."

"Natural? It's one thing to kill an animal for its meat. Killing them just so that people can gawp at their carcasses just isn't right. It's not right."

She said, "What I'm saying is, Travis, it's already happened. We can't go back in time and change the way these animals were killed."

"But we're *excusing* it. We're excusing it by standing here looking at them."

"You don't understand."

I looked up at the eagle hanging from a piece of string attached to the ceiling. I understood perfectly well.

*

In the car on the way back, I said, "I want to be a vegetarian."

My mum said, "OK."

"It's not right to kill animals when it's not necessary to do so."

“OK.”

“Does that mean you’re going to stop eating meat too?”

“No, Travis, I’m not going to stop eating meat. I don’t think your dad will be happy with you giving it up, either. But you do what you think is right.”

I said, “That’s what I’ll do, then.”

*

My mum didn’t want to tell my dad I’d gone veggie. She was scared of what he might say. I ate different food to them anyway, so she reckoned she could cook something vegetarian for me, and he might not even notice.

I thought that was dishonest, though. I went along with my mum’s scheme for a while, before announcing it one teatime: “I’m a vegetarian now.”

My dad looked up from his triple portion of gammon. He said, “What?”

“I’m a vegetarian.”

“Don’t be bloody silly.”

“I’m not being silly.”

“You’re not becoming a vegetarian, Travis. That’s all there is to it.” He turned to my mum. “Have you heard this?”

She flashed me a disappointed glance. “Yes, I’ve heard.”

“You know how I feel about vegetarians. You’re going against everything I stand for. My *livelihood*, son. Why the bloody hell would you want to do that?”

“Because it’s morally wrong.”

My dad’s hand struck the tablecloth, knocking over the pepper.
“MORALLY BLOODY WHAT? YOU LITTLE...”

He got up and marched out of the room. I caught sight of him through the window, pacing around the garden.

My mum was staring at me. I could tell she was angry with me for telling him, but she could hardly tell me off. I was only being honest.

I carried on eating my egg and chips.

A few minutes later, my dad came and sat down, tucking into his gammon as though nothing had happened.

I said, “Is it OK then, dad?”

He replied, softly, “Let it drop, Travis, alright? Just let it drop.”

*

He couldn’t let it drop, though. A couple of weeks later, for the first time in his life, my dad picked up a copy of the Bible. When I got home from school that evening, he waved it in my face and said, “There you are. I didn’t have to spend too long looking. Genesis chapter one, verse twenty-eight: “Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all living animals on the earth.” So much for your bloody *religion*.”

I said, “It’s a moral choice, not a religious one.”

“Oh.”

My dad had a strange look on his face for the rest of the day.

I heard my mum try to assure him it was just a phase when she thought I wasn’t listening.

He said, "What next, though? That's what worries me. If he's giving up meat now, what's that going to lead to?"

"Anything he wants. He's a bright boy. He can do anything he puts his mind to."

He said, "That's dangerous talk, that is. You'll *ruin* the boy with talk like that, you mark my bloody words. You'll bloody *ruin* him."

I started playing the Smiths' Meat Is Murder in my room at loud volume, but my dad never told me to turn it down. It was as though he was blocking it out, refusing to acknowledge that there may be an alternative to his fucked up worldview.

You probably think I was being rebellious, and I'd like to think that's true. Truth is, though, I was genuinely outraged by man's exploitation of the animal kingdom. I still am. All that killing, all that violence, for what? For nothing. And don't try that "human nature" line on me again, Rupert. It's bollocks, and you know it is.

13.

I thought about Heaven and Hell a lot. My parish priest, Father Patterson, didn't talk about the afterlife much. I tried to get my head around the concept, but it didn't make much sense. I knew Heaven was going to be great – an absolutely amazing place, full of great people and great things to do, like Alton Towers but with Elvis, John Lennon and Jesus.

Heaven became part of my fantasies. I'd started thinking about sex after prayers at nighttime. My head became full of these painfully by-the-book scenarios involving Madonna and Samantha Fox, and anyone else the TV had informed me was fit.

Was there tons of sex in Heaven? It seemed logical to assume there would be. It wasn't long before I was jacking off to images of blonde angels with big tits.

People always assume that because I had a Catholic upbringing I've been warned off things like contraception, sex before marriage and all the rest of it. That wasn't the case at my church. No one ever mentioned sex. My mum had given me the whole "birds and bees" routine at an early age, and assured me there was no shame in doing it, provided you were over sixteen and took "precautions."

My mum was less certain on the subject of life after death, and whenever I broached the subject, she was deliberately vague. I just got the basics: Heaven was where good people go, and Hell was for bad people.

I said, "What about bad people who do good things? Or good people who do bad things?"

She said, "I don't know. It's not really our place to say. We'll all find out when we die."

Her answer worried me. I needed to be certain. I didn't want to leave anything to chance, especially with all the bad things I'd done up until that point.

I went to Confession one day after mass. I told Father Patterson about everything I did with Sammy – the phonebox, breaking into the house, the car, and all the rest of it.

He absolved me from my sins and gave me three Hail Marys as penance.

I said, "Is that it, Father?"

"Is that what?"

"Are my sins forgiven now?"

"After your penance."

Somehow three Hail Marys didn't seem enough to make up for all the wrong I'd done. I wasn't going to commit any sins again – I knew that much – but I felt like I'd got off lightly.

I needed to make sure I wasn't going to Hell. I waited until that night to say my prayers. Lying in the dark, I said my three Hail Marys. Then I said another three. I carried on, reciting all the prayers I knew, and freestyling in between, telling God how sorry I was for all the bad things I'd done, and how I'd never do anything like that again. It made me physically sick to think that I'd lived that kind of life, all the while knowing He was watching, as though I could just say sorry and that would be that.

I prayed and prayed. I looked at the clock, and it was 5am. I must have been praying for hours. I didn't want to stop while I was on a roll.

When my alarm clock went off, I knew I must've only had about half an hour's sleep. I couldn't miss a day of school, though. My education was too important, and I'd had a hundred percent attendance that term.

I lasted until eleven o'clock, when I passed out in woodwork. I woke up beneath a workbench with a huddle of faces above me. I was still holding the chisel.

I spent the next two days in bed. It was the best sleep I'd had for ages. Sure, I was missing school, but I didn't need to worry anymore, because I knew I'd been forgiven.

Church was more enjoyable after that. It was more like something I wanted to do, rather than an obligation.

My mum always seemed to have one of her migraines on a Sunday, so I ended up going on my own most of the time. I suggested we could start going to the Saturday evening service instead, but she said she was too busy with her artwork on Saturday evenings.

I didn't want to push her too hard. It was her choice not to go, after all. I prayed for her.

14.

Apart from the football incident, I only took two proper beatings while I was at school.

The first time was in the toilets. A bunch of other boys happened to be in there at the same time – Simon Briggs, Dave Egan, Stewart Hibbs, and the icing on the cake, the guy you didn't want to be trapped in the bogs with: Howard Bailey.

They weren't in a gang together or anything. There weren't any gangs at my school. We didn't need them. They were just four lads who happened to be in the bogs at the same time.

Briggs and Egan were in with the football crowd. Hibbs was a druggie – he was hardly ever at school, and when he was there, he was usually off his face and trying to pretend he wasn't.

Howard Bailey was six foot tall at the age of thirteen, with all the early warning signs of a brick shithouse. Why is it always the massive ones who turn out to be psychos?

As everyone knew, it didn't take much to piss Bailey off. In this case, it was overcrowding. There were only four urinals. I had one, and Briggs, Egan and Hibbs had the other three.

I turned round, and Bailey was staring at me.

He said, "Took your time, McGuiggan."

I shrugged. I wasn't going to apologise for taking too long having a piss.

He said, "You gonna move out the fucking way, or what?"

I was out of his way faster than Roadrunner on 'roids.

Bailey scoffed as I darted to the left. What an idiot. I'd pulled the ultimate clanger – I'd shown fear. Now I was a rabbit in his fucking headlights.

His hands were on me. He gripped me by the armpits and hoisted me off the ground, holding me up over his head like a baby. My legs were dangling in the air as he grinned up at me.

Briggs, Egan and Hibbs had finished by now, and had turned round to watch.

Bailey said, "Get his pants!"

Before I knew what was happening, my trousers and boxers were round my ankles. They were like three monkeys giggling round my naked arse. My cock was in Bailey's face, and he was loving it.

It occurred to me that I could've booted him straight in the bollocks if I wanted to. But this situation required a more skilful tactic. If I'd've kicked him, I'd be in for the smacking of a lifetime.

What I did next could've gone horribly fucking wrong, but there wasn't much time to hang around contemplating the ifs and buts.

I leaned forward and kissed the fucker full on the lips. My top lip brushed against his soft stubble while my bottom one slotted straight into his gob. It felt cold and slimy, like munching a lump of frogspawn. He tasted of ketchup and cigarettes.

He dropped me instantly.

I picked myself up and pulled my trousers up, aware that I was surrounded on all sides, but trying to stay defiant.

Bailey was speechless for a few moments. He finally blurted, "Did you see that? What a queer!"

“You’re the queer,” I said, matter-of-factly. “You just kissed me full on the lips.” I turned to the others for confirmation. “You saw him, didn’t you, lads?”

Bailey punched me on the shoulder. I was on the floor again. He kicked me once in the ribs and then pulled back, not wanting to do too much damage. He gave the lads a Mafia-style shrug that said he didn’t need another suspension right now.

The Three Stooges were standing gawping, not quite sure what to make of anything.

I got to my feet. I looked Bailey straight in the eyes.

I said, “Go on.”

He said, “What?”

I said, “Is that the best you got?”

He punched me in the shoulder again. Same place, just as hard. It stung like a bullet.

I got to my feet.

I said, “Well?”

He said, “What?”

I said, “I’m gonna keep getting up. I’m not going to hit you. If you want to hit me again, feel free. I’ll keep getting up, again and again. I won’t retaliate. I’m not a violent person, you see.”

He said, “You gay fuck.”

I said, “I’m gonna keep on saying you kissed me. I’ve got witnesses.”

Bailey looked at the three boys, expecting some form of support that never arrived.

He said, "Why?"

I said, "It's called turning the other cheek."

15.

Word must've got around about what happened, but luckily for me, it took the form of whispers rather than shouts. By all accounts, Bailey preferred to pretend the incident had never happened, and there weren't many people who were willing to correct him.

So, life carried on. I tried my best to stay out of trouble. I spent lunchtimes in the library, reading my Roald Dahl and Enid Blyton. There were teachers in there supervising, so kids left me alone. Sometimes I overheard conversations, identifying me as "the boy who called Howard Bailey a queer," but no one wanted to talk to me to confirm it. Probably just as well.

*

I told Rupert one time, "You've got to understand, I was never a geek. I read books 'cos I liked books."

He said, "Why is it so important that I understand that?"

"Why are you always asking daft questions?"

He smiled. "I understand the problem of being labelled "geek". It's a small-minded word. I've been called one myself, plenty of times."

I nodded vigorously. "This idea of intelligence not being cool – it's a conspiracy. It's a way of keeping people stupid. What I'm saying is, I couldn't help it. I was a child prodigy."

"You mean prodigy?"

"Oh. Maybe. What's the difference?"

“Well, a prodigy is someone gifted, talented, intelligent – like yourself. A prodigal is someone reckless and irresponsible – again, like yourself.”

Rupert stopped mid-word, and put his fingers to his lips.

I chuckled. “It’s alright. It’s true. So what? I’m a prodigal prodigy. A *twisted firestarter*.”

I don’t think Rupert understood the reference. He was into classical music.

*

I disagreed with Rupert on one point. There are genuine geeks in the world – I just wasn’t one of them. I’m not saying it’s a bad thing. I just object to the word being used as an insult.

Greg Whitworth was a geek, pure and simple. The way he looked, with his Hitler hair and jam-jar specs; the way he talked like he was presenting a physics documentary on BBC2. It was in his blood.

He wasn’t a stereotype, though. Greg Whitworth was a fucking maverick.

I was sitting in the library one lunchtime, when I looked up and saw him sitting across from me, staring at the cover of my *Secret Seven*.

He said, “Good book?”

I said, “S’alright. Slightly old fashioned language – “gay,” “queer,” stuff like that.”

“Maybe it’s just a homophobic rant dressed up as a kid’s book.”

I smiled, uneasily. There was something about the way he called it a *kid's book*, like he was ten years older than me.

I said, "So, what are you into?"

"All sorts. Reading is like breathing to me." (I should also mention, Greg conducted most of his conversations from the comfort of his own arse.)

He told me about some of the books he'd read: *A Brief History of Time*; Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*, the novels of Sartre.

Religion, he said, was created as a means of social control. Teachers talked about Jesus as though he were some bloke from Accrington, yet there was no real evidence for his existence as a man, let alone his supposed divinity.

I hit him with a few half-hearted comebacks. "What about the Bible?"

"Fiction."

"The Turin Shroud?"

"A proven fake."

"What about all those people who get cured of diseases at Lourdes?"

"There's a rational explanation for that too. It's called the placebo effect."

It surprised me that an intelligent person would say those things. I knew there were non-believers in the world, but I'd always assumed they were idiots, like my dad.

I nodded along to Greg's lecture, jotting down mental notes so I could talk to God about it later.

*

My prayers didn't have a formal structure. I just talked to God about things that were on my mind while I was lying in bed, in much the same way that I talked to Rupert later in life.

Funny day today, I prayed. I bet you had a right good laugh up there, right? It's funny, isn't it, how a person can be so smart and yet so blind to the truth. Isn't it?

You know

Whatever the truth is.

I mean, there's no real proof you exist at all, or that anything in the Bible actually happened, but ... I don't know. It all seems so obvious to me. It explains things.

And if it's like Greg says, and you don't really exist and I'm just lying here talking to myself -

Well.

That'd be OK.

Nothing wrong with talking to yourself. Believing in yourself.

Don't you agree?

The room remained dark and silent, and I didn't sleep.

*

I was strangely energised the following morning. I bobbed up and down in my seat as I munched on my Coco Pops.

I tried a little experiment as I waited for the bus. I left the house late, with scuffed-up hair and toothpaste round the corners of my mouth. If the bus didn't turn up in the next five minutes, I'd be late for school.

I prayed for the bus to arrive. I gave God thirty seconds to prove Greg wrong. Harsh but fair. If God existed, he knew what was at stake. If the bus didn't arrive in thirty seconds, Greg was right. If the bus turned up, I'd never question my faith again. I'd say my prayers, do my homework, go to Confession for doubting.

30.

29.

28.

27.

26.

25. Not looking good for Christianity.

24.

23.

22.

21. Did I *want* the bus to come? Had I made the test too easy?

20.

19.

18.

17.

16. This is it. No turning back. If you turn back, you're a fool. Once you've made a decision, that's it. You stick to it. Even if you're wrong, at least you're consistent.

- 12.
- 11.
- 10.
9. Travis McGuiggan. You're Travis McGuiggan.
8. Believe in yourself.
7. Nothing wrong in talking
6. To yourself.
- 5.
- 4.
3. Travis.
2. You're Travis –
1. Stop.

I held my breath as a large set of headlamps rolled round the corner. The morning sun glinted off the long, sloping windscreen.

It was a bin van.

I dropped my schoolbag and pumped my fists in the air. "YES!"

The old woman standing next to me clutched onto her handbag.

Some people feel alone when they realise God's not listening. I didn't. There were so many possibilities available to me now. I was free, to do what I wanted, any old time.

I had to celebrate. I had to fucking celebrate, right away.

The next bus to arrive wasn't going to my school. It was going to Burnley – a place I'd never been before, even though it was only a few miles down the road.

I got on. The driver accepted my pass.

I sat at the back, hardly able to sit still. My legs were jiggling. *I was going to Burnley!*

I took off my school tie and blazer and stuck it in my bag. I was pretty sure no one was going to catch me, but it was better to be sure.

What was I going to do all day?

It didn't matter. It really didn't matter.

In the end, I spent most of the day wandering round the shops, looking for things to steal. I hadn't stolen anything since I stopped hanging round with Sammy. I didn't want to steal things just for the buzz anymore. I just wanted the stuff. Books, CDs, clothes. I realised I didn't have any decent clobber. Jesus had stopped me being bothered about fashion. Now he was gone, I wasn't going to get totally into clothes – I knew fashion was just as much a scam as religion. I just needed to start fitting in again.

I didn't nick anything in the end. I was just window-shoplifting. I was already taking a risk by skiving off school, but I wasn't too worried. Without my identifying tie and blazer, people couldn't tell which school I went to. I entertained the idea that in my white shirt and black trousers, I could be mistaken for a sixteen-year-old office junior on his break from work.

I ate my sandwiches at ten o'clock, so I was starving by half past three. My mum always made me carry round five quid emergency money, so I bought myself chips and gravy. I ate it with my fingers on the back seat of the bus on the way home. A few kids from the local school got on, and I listened to their inane chatter as I ate my chips. They could smell them, and kept looking over at me. A couple of the girls were cute, and I reckoned they were interested in more than the chips. I didn't talk to them, though. I played it cool.

I liked this new persona – cool, rebellious, and – yeah, I dared to say it – sexy. I knew it'd all change when I got back to school. I'd be geeky Travis McGuiggan again, the kid who didn't do PE. Something needed to be done about that. Something fucking major.

The girls got off the bus, and I knew I'd probably never see them again, but that didn't matter. Plenty more round the next corner.

*

I almost expected the house to be different when I got home, but it wasn't. It was the same house, with the same people living in it. I was still me.

I went upstairs and lay down in bed.

My eyes started pissing tears. I pulled the duvet over my face, hugged a pillow and wept. It was one of those full-on chest rattlers, and I couldn't work out whether I was laughing or crying, or if it was so funny it was sad or so sad it was funny. It didn't matter, anyway. Nothing mattered.

*

People make assumptions when they find out you were brought up Catholic. That's one thing that really pissed me off about Rupert. When I told him I was brought up Catholic, he nodded and said, "That explains a lot." That was on our first session. *What a tosser*, I thought. I almost didn't go back there a second time.

People outside the church only see what gets portrayed in the media, like that's all there is to it – contraception, abortion, paedophilia, plus of course, the whole "guilt" thing.

I don't feel guilty, OK? I've got nothing to be fucking guilty about.

*

I was still lying in bed at half past five. My mum came up to my room and said, "Tea's ready."

I said, "I'm not hungry."

"I made you egg and chips."

I couldn't lie to her. "I've already eaten."

She said, "What did you eat?"

I said, "I was hungry, so I got some chips from the chippy."

"And where did you get the money for that?"

"I had to dip into the emergency money. I'm sorry."

My mum acted like she was upset, and went downstairs to sort out my dad's steak.

Nothing to do with Catholicism. It was just a regular guilt-trip.

*

I broke the news to my mum the following day at breakfast.

I said, "I'm an atheist now." – all casual, like I was changing barbers.

My mum said, "OK."

I said, "Is that OK with you?"

"If that's what you want. If that's what makes you happy."

"It is."

She chewed on her muesli thoughtfully for a while, and I carried on eating my Coco Pops.

"So, does this mean you're not a vegetarian anymore?"

"Course not. Meat is still murder."

My dad looked on, nonplussed over his Half English.

That's what I called my dad's breakfast: sausage and bacon, no eggs.

I never read the Bible when I was a Christian. I listened to the readings in church, and that was about it. I had faith, so I didn't need to read it.

As soon as I became an atheist, I read the whole thing from cover to cover, highlighting its many inconsistencies with an orange marker, and scribbling sarcastic remarks in the margins. I showed my jottings to Greg in the library one lunchtime, and he got all excited. He started talking about how we should write an article for the school magazine. Greg was putting his own magazine together, and taking submissions from clever kids throughout the school with the help of one of the English teachers.

He said, "This'll really shake things up, Travis. No one will forget this project in a hurry – mark my words."

I started meeting him after school to work on the article. It was called "The Ten Commandments – A Textual Analysis." We wrote it under a joke name, "Abraham Wurlitzer," so that no one would know it was us. To tell the truth, Greg wrote the whole thing – I just contributed ideas. Most of the swearing was my doing. Greg found swearing hilarious. Whenever I said "fuck," he'd burst out laughing – an easy audience to please.

My favourite bit was about coveting your neighbour's ass:

"Don't covet your neighbour's ass? How's that going to work? Our whole social structure is based on coveting your neighbour's ass!

The Commandments also tell us not to covet your neighbour's male or female slave. So, apparently slavery's alright, but *axeting* your neighbour's

slave is out. My, my, what a completely un-fucked-up set of rules! And they're not hypocritical, either.

Or are they? Let's take a look at Commandment number two again:

"You shall have no other gods but me . . . You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments."

So, apparently it's OK for God to be jealous, but not the people he made in his own image. Nice one, pal! Also, what a pleasant touch about punishing people because their great-grandparents chose to worship a different God to you. It's just as well my ancestors didn't follow any of the polytheistic religions, that's all I can say. I'd be fucked!"

Those evenings I spent round Greg's place were some of the best in my life. There was a genuine sense that we were doing something radical – that we were the first people in history with the guts to point these things out. We were gonna be heroes.

It didn't quite work out that way.

In a way, what happened was even better.

A couple of days after the magazine came out, I got called out of science class to go and see the headmaster, Mr Brown, or "Brownie" as everyone called him.

Brownie always wore the same suit – a mass of dull grey fabric, tailor-made to negotiate the bends and ripples of his dome-like body. His brown tie matched his name and his walrus moustache. Always the same

tie. Surely the guy was rich enough to buy more clothes. Maybe he had a row of identical suits in his wardrobe at home, each one a subtly different shade of grey and brown.

When I arrived in his office, Greg was already in there.

We were told that all the copies of the magazine had been confiscated and destroyed. Greg, as the editor of the magazine, had already confessed to our crime, and told Brownie I'd been involved too.

I didn't care about being grassed up. I'd grassed Sammy up four years before. I'd probably have grassed Greg up too, given the chance. In the end, he was only being honest. I said that to Brownie too.

"We were only being honest, sir."

Brownie's 'tashe almost did a somersault. "I beg your pardon?"

"With the article. We were writing about something we feel passionate about, in a frank and honest way. We've even written that in there – it's under Commandment number nine."

"I see." Brownie had a copy of the article on his desk, which he pushed towards me. "Would you care to read it to me, Travis?"

"What, the whole thing?"

"No, please spare me the whole thing, Travis. Just read me your reaction to Commandment number nine."

I took the paper, unsure of where this was going to lead. I could feel Greg's eyes piercing into my head, silently screaming, "DON'T DO IT."

I didn't care. I read it.

"Thou shalt not bear false witness. First of all, let's translate this into English. "Bearing false witness" means lying, right? It just so happens that I agree with this Commandment wholeheartedly. The irony is, a lot of

Christians are going to be offended by this article, when in fact, all I'm doing is adhering to the ninth Commandment. I'm not bearing false witness. I'm telling you what's on my mind. So, frankly, if you're offended by this analysis, you can go ...” I broke off at that point, saying, “And then there's a rude word, sir.”

Brownie raised his bushy eyebrows in mock-surprise. “A rude word? Which particular rude word, Travis? Is it *fuck*?”

I blinked several times. The word sounded appalling coming from this man's mouth. I almost made a pact with myself never to say the f-word again.

I just about managed a mumble. “Yes, sir.”

“Well, now we've highlighted one of the problems. Bad language. Abusive words, which are not to be tolerated in this school. Do you think we should tolerate them, Travis?”

“No, sir.”

“What do you think, Gregory?”

“I don't think they should be tolerated, sir.”

Brownie's forehead crinkled. His eyebrows clashed heads. “Yet, that isn't the worst crime here. Not by a long way. Do you know what blasphemy is, boys?”

We nodded.

“Do you think blasphemy is wrong?”

We looked at the floor.

“Well?”

Greg said, “It depends on the circumstances, sir. One man's blasphemy is another man's reasoned debate.”

Brownie waved the article in his face. "Do you think this is a reasoned debate, Gregory?"

"No, sir."

What a cop out! I wasn't having that. I said, "I think it is, sir. It's just as valid as any other argument."

Brownie paused in mid-wave, in a strangely *kung fu*-like gesture.

He said, "Really?"

I said, "Yes. It's not just a joke. It's got jokes in there, but we're really serious about this."

"Do you know that blasphemy is illegal, Travis?"

"No, I didn't know that, sir."

"Well, it is, only they don't call it blasphemy nowadays. They call it "incitement to religious hatred." Ever heard of that?"

"Not in those words, sir, but I understand the concept."

"Do you think you're clever, Travis?"

"I'm clever for my age, sir."

"Well, I can't deny that, I suppose. Both of you have achieved excellent grades, that is true. It's just a shame..."

Brownie's voice trailed off, interrupted by Greg's whimpers. It'd finally got too much for him. He said, "Please, sir. Please don't involve the authorities. I can't get a criminal record. I just *ain't*, sir!"

"OK, OK, Gregory. Calm down. Just take a deep breath. I didn't say I was going to involve the authorities, did I? What I'm trying to say is, there are certain rules in place – rules that we have to follow whether we like them or not. If we break the law, there's no point in saying it's a stupid law in the first place. It isn't going to change anything."

Brownie passed Greg a tissue from his table. Greg took his jam-jars off and wiped his eyes. He said, "I'm sorry, sir. Really, I'm sorry."

I wasn't sorry at all, but I wasn't going to say so.

Luckily, Brownie didn't seem to expect me to apologise. He had a funny look on his face. He was smiling.

He said, "Can I tell you boys something? It's a secret, so you have to promise not to tell anyone else."

We nodded.

He said, "I'm not a Christian, either. I'm the headmaster of a Catholic school, but I'm not a Christian. I agree with a lot of the things you said in your article. I'm not too impressed with the words you chose to express yourselves with, but you raised some interesting points. Do I think you were right to do it? Of course you weren't. Why weren't you? Because of the *context*. Life, boys, is all about context. It just so happens that you picked completely the wrong time and place to write your article. There are rules, you see. I didn't make the rules, you didn't make the rules, but we all have to respect them. If we don't respect the rules, there will simply be chaos. Trust me, chaos may have its appeal, but it's not pretty."

He was losing me by this point.

He continued, "All that remains is for us to sort out a suitable punishment for the pair of you."

Greg started wailing again. "Please sir, don't suspend me! I can't be suspended!"

"Did I say I was going to suspend you, Gregory?"

"No, sir."

"Well, stop jumping the gun, please."

"OK, sir."

*

Mr Brown was an idiot, but I respected him for it. At least he was able to explain his idiocy in a reasonably intelligent manner. I'd promised to keep his atheism a secret, and that's what I did. Who was I going to tell, anyway? It wasn't really all that shocking. I was more shocked hearing him swear. Still, I chuckled privately to myself every morning, watching him lead the morning prayers. There's something delicious about knowing your headmaster's a fucking liar.

*

We weren't suspended in the end. We didn't get detention, either. What we got was a letter home, accompanied by a copy of the article. The sneaky twat didn't even tell us he was doing it. I found out too late when my mum opened the mail at the breakfast table.

Luckily, my mum saw the funny side. She laughed her head off, in fact.

That was a weight off my mind. I thought she'd be offended by the "honour your mother and father" bit. There was a line in there that said, "What if your parents are wankers?" She must've just skimmed over that part. It wasn't aimed at her, anyway.

She gave me a mild telling off about the swearing, saying, "There's no excuse for it."

I thought she'd be more upset by the attack on her religion, but apparently not. She said it was good for me to express my opinions, but she stressed that there was a time and a place for it.

I said, "Yeah, that's what Mr Brown said."

She carried on reading, and laughed again. "Oh dear, I'd better not show this to your dad."

I assumed she was talking about my vegetarian rant under "Thou shalt not kill," but I can't be sure.

I stopped hanging round with Greg after the magazine incident. I had nothing against him, but he was crimping my style. The guy wore *Star Trek* t-shirts, for fuck's sake.

I also stopped reading books. It didn't seem like they were doing me any good. They certainly weren't gaining me any friends or admirers. I didn't pick up another book for five years, unless I was forced by a teacher – and even then, I was doing it reluctantly.

I didn't need books. I needed respect. No one even knew who the fuck I was. I didn't want to be popular. Everyone hates popular people. I wanted to be *notorious*.

The trouble was, it seemed like the only way to gain notoriety was through fighting or through talking about fighting.

The threat of violence was the key to it all. If you talked the talk, you'd never need to raise a fist. It's the Cold War principle. Very few fights actually took place at my school, and when they did, the hardest lads were never involved. It was always little gimps like me, trying to make their mark and ending up with a suspension and a bust-up face. The hard boys were cleverer than that. They never got into fights with people they knew they might lose to. That's how pricks like Howard Bailey operated. Cowards, the lot of them. Like I say, it was all *talk*.

I refused to go along with it. I wasn't a fighter. I couldn't fight. I didn't want to. I hated violence. It was stupid and pointless.

I refused to talk about fighting too. If I admitted I was a pacifist, I might as well get a bullseye tattooed on my bollocks.

There has to be another way in, I thought. I'd heard comedians talk about how they got through school by making the bullies laugh, but that was no good to me. I wasn't funny. I was rarely in a joking mood. Most of the time I was angry and frustrated. I'd have loved to release some of that anger by pushing people around, but it was against my principles. That made me angry too. Why did I have to have so many fucking principles? Principles were like books. Where did they get you?

I spent a lot of time pondering these questions. I'd taken to wandering round the school grounds on my lunch break, trying to look like I was on my way somewhere. All the while, I was working on my strategy.

I almost had the whole thing worked out when I got beaten up again. *Properly*, this time.

This was that second beating I was talking about. The last beating I ever took from anyone.

I was walking round the side of the art block one lunchtime. I must've been deep in thought, because a ball smacked me on the side of the head and I didn't see it coming. I almost fell over, but had to lean against the wall to keep my balance.

I heard laughter, and looked to the side to see three lads grinning at me. The first was Ross McNulty, a guy I went to primary school with – coincidentally one of the kids who grassed me and Sammy up for stealing the car. The second was Howard Bailey, who always seemed to be around when these things happened. The third was Billy Sweeney, the one who'd thrown the ball. He'd obviously done it deliberately.

Sweeney was a scrawny fucker. He only chucked balls at people when he was hanging round with meatheads like Bailey. McNulty just happened to be there too, like some younger cousin they'd been forced to babysit.

He said, "Wanna play, McGuigan?"

I said, "Play what?"

He said, "Oh yeah, I forgot. You don't play sports, do ya?"

"No. So what?"

"So, why don't you play?"

"Why don't you go fuck yourself?"

I wasn't really thinking. It just came out.

Before I knew what was happening, the ball had smacked me on the head again. I fell on my arse.

The boys hooted with laughter.

I got up.

Something took over. I don't know what it was. Maybe it was everything, combined. Sammy. Religion. The beating in the bogs. The magazine. Kids starving on the streets all over the world, while we all got fat on slaughtered animals.

I was *pissed*. Pissed in every sense of the word – I was angry, and I was drunk on anger. Pissed on power. My head was spinning, but my eyes didn't waver.

I said, "You wanna make it a fair fight? Put the ball down. Let's go, me and you. I don't want your two mates getting involved. One on one, me and you, right here, right now."

Bailey and McNulty backed off a little.

Sweeney still had a grin fixed on his face, but his eyes darted from side to side as he weighed up the odds. Would Bailey step in and help him if he was losing?

I said, "Come on, hard man, what you waiting for? Come on. You take the first punch." I offered him my chin. "Right there. Right fucking there. Make it a fucking good one."

Sweeney's fist cracked into me, and I was knocked back with the impact.

I was still on my feet. It was a puny effort. Half-hearted.

"Is that the best you've fucking got? Give us a real punch, you fucking girl."

He smacked me properly this time, right on the nose.

As I got up, I was vaguely aware that it was bleeding all down my shirt. I could taste it, tricking between my lips, and spat on the ground at Sweeney's feet.

I said, "Come on, then."

The fucker was white as a sheet. He was staring at my face, like he'd never seen blood before. He didn't say anything, but his mind screamed through his eyes, clear as day – he couldn't believe he'd done this to another human being.

I wasn't backing down now. I spread my arms open. "Come one, then!"

"No."

"You what?"

"No, McGuiggan. I'm not fighting you."

"What, you think you've won now, do ya? You think you've fucking won 'cos you bust my face up?"

"No."

“Damn fucking right. Right fucking answer. You’ll never beat me, Sweeney, ‘cos I’ll keep on getting up. Whatever you got, I’ll bounce back. You think your mates are gonna take me?” I turned to McNulty. “I know for a fact that you don’t have the guts, Ross McNulty. I know where you live. 142 Partridge Close – I went to your birthday party when I was seven. Maybe I’ll break in one night when you’re sleeping. You know I’m a crazy fucker – you saw me steal that car. That’s just the tip of the fucking iceberg. And you, Howard Bailey. I know you ain’t gonna touch me again. You know what I can do, and it ain’t fucking pretty. You bunch of fucking pussies.”

Bailey stared back at me blankly, displaying no emotion. The only telltale sign of what was going on in his mind was the slight turn of his head as he moved it gently from side to side.

*

I went to the school nurse, and told her I had a nosebleed. She sorted my face out a little, and gave me a different shirt to wear.

Seeing the state of me, she said, “Are you sure this is a nosebleed?”

I said, “Yeah. It’s a nosebleed. I get nosebleeds.”

“You’re not being bullied, are you Travis? You can tell me if you’re being bullied?”

“I’m not.”

“It’ll go no further if you like. It’s all confidential.”

I said, “I’m not being bullied, don’t worry. Far from it, in fact.”

The look on her face was priceless.

18.

I wasn't exactly Mr Popularity after that, but no one ever looked at me in the wrong way again. I wondered how the story of the fight had got out. Who had told it? How did they tell it?

Whoever it was, it certainly wasn't Billy Sweeney. I never heard a peep out of that muppet again. I've got no idea what happened to him after he left school, either. That guy kept his head down for the rest of his life.

That wasn't enough for me, though. Being respected wasn't just about being hard.

I started smoking. There was nothing else for it – no weighing up of the pros and cons. Credibility was everything. Kids at school were divided into two distinct groups – the ones who smoked and the ones who didn't. Smokers got respect, and didn't care about grades, while non-smokers were nobodies. Not even worth saying hello to. Maybe they'd have the last laugh when we were dying of lung cancer while they were working as airline pilots, but we didn't care. Secretly, we all wished we'd gone to an inner-city comprehensive where everyone carried knives and lost their virginities at twelve. Smoking was part of our front, our pretence that we were like them. We weren't going to Oxford, that was for sure.

I'd started shaving a couple of times a week, but stopped so I could look older. I developed what I thought was a light sheen of stubble, but it was more like a series of uneven tufts of fluff. I looked like I'd been raised by wolves, but I didn't care because it meant I could buy cigarettes.

I skived off school one day and bought my first pack of fags from a corner shop, wearing a sweatshirt over my uniform. I wandered out of town into a forest, to take my first smoke.

I sat cross-legged under a tree, resting back against the bark. The shade of the trees kept my secret safe from the world.

It took me ten minutes to work out how to light the thing. I didn't realise you were supposed to inhale, so I just held it between my lips with the lighter underneath it. I nearly set my fringe on fire.

I got about halfway through the first one before I leapt to my feet, firing my breakfast into the tree-stump – brown, chocolaty lumps of milk and cereal launched out of my throat barely touching the sides.

I couldn't even smell it. My senses were consumed by the stench of burning 'baccy.

The fag was still smoking on the ground. I stamped it to death.

I waited until my stomach was fully empty, and then hobbled on a little further to get away from the vomit.

I sat under a different tree, and lit another ciggie. I was going to start smoking if it killed me.

The first drag was followed by a coughing fit. I was spluttering, gasping for air, my head still spinning.

Was it possible to be allergic to tobacco? Just my fucking luck, that would be.

I recalled conversations I'd heard on the bus – "Don't just blow it all out, *inhale*. Smoke properly, you fucker."

I sucked it right back on the next drag.

I spat at the ground. I wanted to be sick again, but nothing would come out.

I was determined to smoke a whole one. I wouldn't inhale too deeply. It was all about the look, after all. As long as it *looked* right.

I worked out that you didn't need to puff on it continuously. You could hold it in your hand and let some of it burn down naturally.

I practised holding it casually between my middle and index fingers.

I wanted to cheer when I'd finished a whole fag without coughing or throwing up.

I didn't cheer, though. I could hardly breathe.

I walked into town. I didn't have much money, but I needed something to get rid of the smell. I bought a can of Lynx and sprayed it liberally over my clothes. I also bought a packet of Extra Strong Mints, and sucked my way through them over the course of the afternoon. I had nothing else to do, so I went back to the forest and climbed a tree.

I sat at the top watching cars trickle in and out of town. Over the road, a brown factory chimney loomed over everything, too ugly to be appreciated, and too large and inconvenient to be knocked down.

I was so bored, I even considered going to school.

*

The first thing my mum said to me when I stepped through the door was, "You stink. Have you been smoking?"

I said, "It was people on the bus."

She sniffed me up and down. "So why did you try to disguise it with deodorant and," – *sniff, sniff* – "mints?"

I said, "I don't like the smell of smoke."

She didn't check my pockets. To be fair, I don't think she really wanted to know. Over the next couple of years, I'd come home reeking like a chimney, but as long as I carried on denying it, she was happy.

Whatever her motivations, from then on my mum made a point of dropping smoking facts into our conversations:

"There are at least four thousand chemicals in tobacco smoke, forty-three of which have been proven to cause cancer ... Can you pass the salt?"

"Smoking doesn't cause just lung cancer, you know. It contributes to back pain, osteoporosis and male impotence ... Anyway, how was school?"

*

The first time I sparked up in public was on the school bus. I used to ignore everyone on the bus, and they ignored me. I knew this had to change, and I knew smoking would do that. I had it all planned. I'd rehearsed the story in my head until I almost believed it myself.

I sat near the back of the top deck, close by to the hardcore smokers, but not quite amongst them. I had a double seat to myself.

I pulled the packet casually out of my blazer pocket, and lit up with one slick click.

No one noticed for a moment. Then someone looked in my direction and grinned.

"I didn't know you smoked, McGuiggan."

I shrugged, and took another drag. "Yeah, my cousin got me hooked, the bastard."

My audience offered a few nods of recognition.

Someone said, "Give us one, then."

"Fuck off – get your own."

"Come on, mate. I'll sort you out later."

"Alright."

I tossed my new friend a cigarette.

He said, "So, who's your cousin, anyway?"

"Oh, you wouldn't know him. He lives in Manchester."

"Oh, right. What's his name?"

"Sammy."

I've got no idea where that came from. It was the first name that popped into my head.

*

I couldn't take it back once I'd said it. The fake cousin thing was useful, anyway. Every cool thing I'd ever done, I did with "our Sammy". He was the one I smoked with, drank with, skived off school with. Better still, he was from Manchester, so when my accent switched from Lank to Mank overnight, Sammy was my explanation.

I desperately wanted to be from Manchester. I ordered all the CDs I could from the library and taped them onto cassette – *Pills, Thrills and Bellyaches*, *Definitely Maybe*, *The Stone Roses* – anything from Manny was cool. "I got them off Sammy," I'd tell my new friends. I tried to get them into the same stuff, but they were all into cheesy dance music.

There was no way I was turning into a raver just to be cool. All that *bang-bang-bang-bang*, with no tunes. Fuck that. I sounded like my dad – “That’s not music, it’s just *noise*.”

*

I didn’t exactly have a circle of friends. I sat with the smokers on the bus, and spent breaktimes hanging out at the patch of bushes that the teachers had designated as the place they’d turn a blind eye to smoking.

I liked not belonging to one particular group. It allowed me to move from one circle to another. Everyone knew my name, but no one really knew me. It added to my notoriety.

Sometimes people had house parties at weekends when their parents were away. I wasn’t exactly invited to them, but I’d turn up in my best shirt, with a six-pack of cheap lager, and they’d have to let me in.

I didn’t need any trips to the forest to get into booze. I’d already stolen sips of my mum’s wine and my dad’s whiskey to prepare myself for drinking socially.

I still wasn’t shaving, and the hair on my face got thicker. People called me “Monkey Man” for a while, which I quite liked. Because of my facial hair, I was often called upon to do the alcohol runs. This worked out well for me, because my usefulness made me popular, and I usually pocketed the change. Some of these posh kids had shitloads of cash.

It was at one of these parties that I lost my virginity to a girl whose name escapes me now. I was fourteen, a respectable age. I took her into the bathroom, and we started kissing and stripping off. She was so pissed, she could hardly stand up. It didn’t feel right doing it on the floor, or up

against the wall, so I suggested we got in the bath. I pulled down the shower curtain, and we did it underneath, rubbing up against the cold ceramic.

I didn't really know what I was doing. I was self-conscious about shooting off too early, so I didn't shoot off at all. I just kept on banging her until we got bored. I didn't know what to say afterwards, so I didn't say anything. I just jumped into my clothes and left her there, under the shower curtain.

She must've fallen asleep, because she was still there when I went for a piss.

I said, "Y'alright, babe?"

She said, "Yeah."

I'm not sure if she knew who I was.

19.

That was a cool couple of years. I was round someone's house drinking most weekends. Sometimes I'd get lucky, but usually girls wouldn't look at me twice. I suppose the "beard" made me an acquired taste. I'd bring along my indie tapes, and whack them on the stereo whenever I got the chance.

Mainly I'd drink, and listen to people talking. Some of them were cool, some were idiots. Some were interesting, some were boring. If I found myself with boring idiots, I'd move to a different part of the room and listen to someone else. It was like channel-surfing. People were a source of entertainment.

It all stopped around GCSE time. Everyone was too busy revising to party.

There was no way I was revising. I lied to my mum a lot about how much work I was doing. I wasn't doing any. I didn't care about grades, or college. I didn't see the point.

One Saturday evening, I was walking through town when I saw four young lads lurking outside a corner shop. I could tell they were from the council estate by the way they were dressed – Puma trackies and baseball caps. The kids at my school only dressed like that when they were out jogging.

I was tempted to avoid trouble and cross to the other side of the street, but curiosity kept me walking towards them.

As I got closer, the tallest one turned towards me, grinning. For a second, I thought I was in big trouble. He said, "Alright, mate?"

"Alright."

“Any chance you could pop in the shop and get us some beers? We got cash.”

I examined his grin as I considered the offer. The peak of his cap disguised his eyes. His hood was wrapped over the top of his hat, giving him the look of a cartoon duck.

His mates congregated behind him expectantly.

I said, “Alright, as long as I can drink it with you.”

“You chipping in some money?”

“Sure. I got a fiver.”

I bought a box of lager while they peered encouragingly through the window. The guy behind the counter gave me a knowing nod.

I followed my new drinking buddies to the park. They were an alright bunch of people. A bit thick, but that was refreshing after hanging round at the grammar school listening to swots testing each other on their Latin.

They talked about football a lot.

One of them asked, “Who do you support, Travis?”

I hate that fucking question. It’s like saying, “Which God do you worship?”

“Me? I support *myself*.”

I could tell this was an alien concept from the look on their faces.

“You don’t like football?”

“Nah.”

“What’d you like, then?”

“Other stuff. Music. Films.”

"You seen *Pulp Fiction* yet?"

"No, but my cousin's seen it. He says it's shit hot."

"You gotta see it, man."

"I will," I said, looking beyond them to the carrier bag clinging to a nearby branch, and fixing my gaze on it as I sipped on my can.

*

It became a regular Saturday routine. I'd meet them near the shop and collect their money, then I'd go in and buy a box of beer. We didn't cause any trouble. We didn't hurt anyone. All we did was sit in the park, talk bollocks and have a few beers. All very civilised, really.

One Saturday around exam time, I told my mum I was going round someone's house to do some revision.

I walked into town, heading towards our usual meeting place. It was eight o'clock, and the sun was setting.

There were some kids playing in the street ahead of me. I didn't realise who it was until I got a bit further. As soon as I realised, I stopped in my tracks, and jumped into a nearby phonebox. I pretended to put some money in and dialled a number, watching all the while.

It was Sammy. The real Sammy, not some made up relative. I hadn't seen him for years. He must've been sixteen like me.

What was he doing?

I watched them for a while. The kids he was playing with were tiny. Ten year olds. Was he just babysitting, or were these ankle-biters actually his friends?

Sammy and the three kids were huddled together discussing something.

One of the kids left the group and crossed the road. He walked up the garden path of one of the nearby houses and rang the bell.

A second later, he was back down the path. Sammy and the kids legged it, giggling with Sammy racing ahead of the rest of them, taking massive strides with his long legs.

Knock a Door Run. Jesus.

I stepped out of the phonebox and carried on into town.

My friends, as usual, were waiting for me near the shop.

I said, "Alright, lads?"

"Alright, Travis?"

"Aye, not bad."

One of them said, "I got some bad news for you, mate."

"What's that, mate?"

"We've got a mate whose uncle runs a pub up near the sports centre. He says we can get served tonight."

"Cool. I'm up for that."

"That's the thing, mate."

"What's the thing?"

"Well, you're not coming."

"Eh?"

"Sorry, mate."

The lads started walking off.

I shouted, "Wait up!"

They didn't turn round, they just carried on walking.

I shouted, "What the fuck?"

They quickened their pace.

I shouted louder. "COME ON THEN, FUCKERS! I'LL TAKE YOU ALL ON! I'M NOT FUCKING BOTHERED!"

Still the cowards kept on walking, out of sight.

I wandered around town for a bit. Then I bought myself a four-pack and went off to the park.

It was dark by that stage.

I sat on a bench and drank and smoked. Occasionally a dog-walker would pass, but otherwise there was no one else around.

I did some good thinking while I was there, about the future, and about what kind of life I wanted for myself. I was wasted living in a small town, I realised. I wanted to be in Manny, where life was different. More people. Faster pace of life. You could walk along the street with your swagger and your attitude, and people understood. I'd fit in there. I'd be a regular guy on the street in Manny.

I wasn't too bothered about those pricks going off to the pub without me. It'd probably be a boring night, full of slurred conversations, and zero chance of pulling.

They were pricks, after all. That's all they were. Pricks.

I tossed my final can against a tree, and got up to leave.

I walked back into town. As I headed back to my parents house, I saw Sammy again, playing with those kids. They were sitting on a wall, chucking stones at a lamppost.

I was a bit tipsy, so I didn't care if he saw me this time. I didn't really know what I was doing. I didn't plan what happened next. It just happened.

I waved my hand as I reached them to get his attention.

He recognised me straight away. He was pleased to see me.

"Hiya Travis!"

"Alright Sammy."

He got up to shake my hand.

He came towards me.

I slapped him.

He reeled backwards. "Woah! Trav, what you doing?"

I said, "What the fuck are *you* doing? Fucking *look* at yourself, hanging round with a bunch of fucking sprogs!"

I punched him. He didn't even try to fight back. He dropped to the floor. He was crying, but I didn't care. I was fucking punching him and fucking kicking him, and I was fucking laughing because it felt so fucking good, it was the most beautiful kind of release.

I walked off, leaving his ten-year-old mates to treat his wounds.

I was getting on with my mum really well around GCSE time. We were more like mates than mother and son. She may have been against smoking, but she wasn't against drinking. She was glad that I had a social life. She thought it was healthy.

Sometimes we'd drink together after my dad had gone to bed. She'd have a few glasses of wine, and I'd have a couple of cans of beer. I didn't act silly, like I would at a party. We just had a laugh.

We had great conversations. There was so much knowledge in my mum's brain. She'd read so many books, and was so eager to share it all with me. I learnt more from my mum than I did from school. She made it interesting in a way that teachers didn't.

She had a sense of humour too. I didn't realise this when I was a little kid. She was witty and sharp. I wanted to be like that, but my witty remarks just came out like insults. I needed more practise. Whenever I said something too harsh, she'd correct me.

One night my dad was away visiting his brother in Stockport. My mum suggested a game of Monopoly like we used to in the old days.

I thought this was a great idea and brought through the game with a bottle of wine and some beers.

She said, "I've always felt quite ambivalent about Monopoly."

"What does ambivalent mean?"

"It means having a divided opinion. Seeing both good and bad in something."

I said, "It's a good word. I like it. I feel ambivalent about the world."

She said, "I'm not sure you're using the word correctly."

"I know – it was a joke. Sort of. You know – it's one of those jokes that's serious and funny at the same time."

She nodded, and took a sip of wine. "Sometimes the best jokes are like that."

I cracked another beer open and poured it into my glass.

I said, "Why do you feel ambivalent about Monopoly, anyway?"

"Because it's educational in one sense – it helps you learn mathematics, and teaches you the value of money. But it also teaches you to be ruthless and greedy."

"I never thought of it like that. I just thought it was a bit of fun."

"Perhaps you're right. Sometimes I over-analyse things. It's your go, by the way."

I landed on Community Chest. The card said, "Pay a ten pound fine or take a Chance."

I said, "I'll pay the fine, thanks."

"Really? Boring!"

"There's a reason for it – I always get "Speeding fine, £15." Always. It doesn't matter how much I shuffle the cards. Whenever I get "Pay a ten pound fine or take a Chance," I always get "Speeding fine, £15." Then I'm down by five pounds."

"I'm interested to see what the card would be now."

I smiled. "So am I."

I picked up the Chance card. "Told you."

"Really?" My mum took the card off me. "My word, that is *amazing*. So this happens *every single time*? What an odd phenomenon."

"I know. There really is no explanation for it."

"There must be a scientific explanation. There's a scientific explanation for everything."

"No, there isn't."

"That's what I believe."

"There isn't a scientific explanation for God."

"Well, that's a different matter, isn't it?"

I said, "But you believe in God, don't you?"

My mum shrugged.

I said, "You do, though, don't you? Why else would you have brought me up as a Christian?"

My mum smiled nervously, and hid behind her fringe. "Well, it doesn't matter, does it? You're an atheist now anyway."

"Yeah. That was my choice. What about you? Are you an atheist now too?"

My mum knocked back the rest of her glass in one swift movement, and clasped her hands together. She wore the same uneasy smile.

She said, "It's a funny thing really." Then she stopped talking.

I said, "What? *What's* a funny thing?"

She said, "I might as well tell you now. You see, Travis, I made a decision a few years ago. It was a difficult decision, but it was very important for me to make it. Your dad didn't think it was the right thing to do, but I persuaded him. You can't blame him for it – it's my fault."

"What decision?"

Another pause. She looked at the floor and said, "Saint Bart's is such a good school. The best school around, and you can only go there if you're Catholic."

"So, you're *not* Catholic?"

She shook her head. "No."

"You never have been?"

She shook her head again, unable to speak.

"You've never even been a Christian?"

"No."

"So you lied? You brought me up as a Catholic just to get me into school. Nothing to do with religion or morals or *doing the right thing*."

She didn't respond.

I said, "You lied to me. Didn't you? Answer the question, mum. You lied to me, didn't you?"

Her voice came out in a whisper. "You're such a bright boy, Travis."

"That's not an answer!"

I got to my feet. Her head was bowed, and I was standing over her, looking down.

*

Then what happened? I can hear Rupert's voice even now. Then what happened? What happened next?

I didn't talk about it for a long time. Even in my sessions with Rupert, I didn't mention it at first. I glossed over it, even in a state of hypnosis.

I went round to Rupert's one day after work. I'd been delivering leaflets all day, so I was pretty knackered already. I guessed it'd be easy enough to relax in my present state. I hoped I didn't fall asleep.

I lay down in the reclining chair, and Rupert stuck on his calming music – some generic New Age shit, nothing like the stuff I listened to at home, but it worked in context.

I closed my eyes and listened. I was aware of Rupert's voice, but as I drifted deeper it was more like an extension of my own idle thoughts.

The voice said, Let's start with your toes and your feet. I want you to screw up your toes and drench your feet, and then slowly release. As you do so, I want you to feel all that tension escaping into the air – vaporising, like a cloud.

Moving up to your legs, I want you to tighten all the muscles in your legs and thighs, and slowly, gently, let them fall loose and floppy, and as you do so, I want you to imagine that your legs are like lead weights, slowly, gently sinking into the ground.

Next, your middle and your stomach. I want you to tense up your stomach and your buttocks. Hold it for a moment, now release. Feel that tension escaping. Take a deep breath, now breathe out again slowly. As you breathe out, feel the tension escaping from your middle.

Moving onto your arms and your chest. I want you to drench your fists and tighten your chest. Now take another breath. Now breathe out again, and release all that tension. Your body is feeling very heavy now, like it's being pulled towards the ground like a ton of bricks. It's a good feeling. No more of those worries, no more of that tension.

Moving up to your head now. I want you to screw up all the muscles in your face and neck. Now relax. Relax. Relax ...

Now, in a moment, I'm going to count down from ten. As I do this, I want you to imagine yourself walking down a staircase towards your special place. You remember your special place? We're going there now. Down and down the staircase.

Ten – starting to walk down the staircase.

Nine – going further down.

Eight.

Seven.

Six.

Five – we're halfway down now, you can see your special place approaching.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

We're there.

Now, in a moment, we're going to start visualising some of the problems we've been speaking about before. All the time, remember, we're outsiders looking in. We're like Ebenezer Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Past. We're impartial observers.

What I need you to do is picture yourself at one of your low points – when you're feeling frustrated. You're feeling like you want to have a drink to take the frustration away. Maybe you're at home, or at work, sitting in the car. Can you picture it, Travis?

"Yes." My voice sounded like I was listening to it on a badly tuned radio.

Now, I want you to link and connect, Travis. Just let your mind wander and make its associations. Don't try to influence what your mind is doing now. Just follow the path. Wherever your mind takes you, that's where we'll go. Remember, we're just observing. Just watching.

Now...

Where are you?

"I'm at home."

And where is home, Travis?

"My mum and dad's house."

And what's happening there?

"We're playing Monopoly. My dad's away, and we're just having a drink and a chat. Then my mum tells me ... she's lied to me ... betrayed me ... my whole fucking life ..."

Rupert's voice probed further. How did she betray you?

I said, "It's not important. She just did. And I'm angry. I'm so fucking angry, I can hardly see. I'm out of control. I push over the table with the Monopoly and the drinks on it. I hit it so hard, the whole lot sprays all over the room. A jet of beer and wine, and a shower of green Monopoly houses and multicoloured money. I'm on my feet, and I'm ranting and raving, fucking screaming at her – Sixteen years. All that time I spent duelling on the rights and wrongs of faith, and you didn't even tell me. "All those years" – I sound like an old man, not some sixteen year old runt. But I'm angry, man. I'm smashing up the pictures on the walls. My mum's standing behind me, bawling her eyes out, screaming at me to stop, but that's winding me up even more. I need to get out of the house. Jesus, I'd never raise a finger to my mum, but I'm going to if I don't get out of the fucking house right now."

Rupert's voice interrupted, soothing, "It's OK, Travis. It's OK."

Irritated about being interrupted, I said, "What's OK?"

"It's over. It's in the past, it's all been and gone, and it doesn't matter anymore."

"Of course it matters."

"But it's OK. It's OK to feel bad about what you did. It's OK to feel guilty. It's the mind's way of correcting itself so you don't keep making the same mistakes."

I opened my eyes. "You what?"

I craned my neck, turned my head and glared at him.

Rupert blinked violently, like a magician having his show-stopper foiled by a drunken heckler.

I said, "Well?"

He said, "What?"

I said, "What did you say?"

"I can't remember."

"I don't feel guilty."

Rupert blinked back at me, uncomprehending.

"Did you hear what I said? I ... DONT ... FEEL ... GUILTY!"

"Is that what I said? I stand corrected in that case."

I couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic.

I said, "Don't get all smartarse with me, pal. I don't need your moral fucking judgements."

"Travis, I think you ought to leave."

"Eh?"

"I think you'd better leave, Travis."

"We're only halfway through the session."

"Look, I'm not going to be spoken to like that, so just leave now, please."

"What, so ... do I just owe you for half a session?"

"Don't worry about payment, Travis. Just leave, please."

I didn't say anything else. I eased the door gently shut on my way out, not wanting to make another sound.

I didn't feel guilty. I kept telling myself that, all the way home. I did not feel fucking guilty. And no one in this world was going to make me.

22.

I didn't need hypnotherapy anyway. All I needed to do was close my eyes and I could see it all clearly.

Where was I?

I was standing in the living room, surveying the damage. I couldn't look at my mum, and the noise coming from her mouth made me want to weep, but I wasn't going to cave.

I needed to be practical. I needed some cash.

I stormed through the hallway into the kitchen. My mum's purse was sitting on the sideboard. I snatched it up and stuffed my hand inside.

Jackpot – a hundred quid. It wasn't going to last me long, but it was a start. It meant I could leave and never come back.

I didn't pack any clothes or tapes. I didn't take one last look around the house I'd grown up in. I stuck the money in my back pocket, put on my trainers and jacket, and left.

It was raining outside.

I jogged into town and sheltered in the bus station.

Manchester was just a bus ride away. I had a quarter of an hour to wait. Longest fifteen minutes of my life. Wondering if my mum would come after me. If she'd call the police. What time would my dad be home to see the state of the living room?

When the bus finally arrived, I sat at the back, watching the dark hills disappear as we sped along the bypass. I was clutching my ticket in my hand. My whole body was shaking.

I wasn't sure if it was fear or excitement, but it wasn't anger. I'd got all the anger out in that one brief burst. There was no point dwelling on it. I wasn't going back there, I knew that much.

It occurred to me that I was never going to go to school again either, and that was the biggest fucking weight off my shoulders. I could've sprouted wings and flown.

Manchester! It wasn't just the city over the hill, it was The Land Over The Rainbow. The greatest place on earth, and I was going to live there. I didn't know where exactly I was going to live, or how I'd sustain myself, but I knew I'd survive because that's what people do. It doesn't matter how self-destructive you seem on the outside, you carry on living. Destroying yourself, maybe, but staying alive. It was gonna be great.

I considered the situation rationally. I had a hundred quid in my pocket and no possessions except the clothes I was wearing – jeans, trainers, t-shirt, jacket. One pair of boxers, one pair of socks. It was pissing down with rain and there was no way I was going to sleep on the street. I wasn't going to blow it all on a hotel either. I needed to meet some people. More than that, I needed a drink.

The rain had stopped when I got to the city centre, but it was freezing and I jogged along with my hands in my pockets to keep out the cold.

I peered through the windows of the swanky-looking bars, trying to size up which ones I'd be more likely to get served in. I was still two years underage, and I'd never had a drink in a pub. If I was going to get out of the cold for the night, I needed to go somewhere that opened late.

After wandering around for a while, I found a place that seemed to have younger-looking people in, so I went in for a pint. They were playing some 70's cheese, but the atmosphere was like I'd always imagined a bar in

Manchester to be. Everyone seemed like they were up for having a good time – drinking, dancing, singing, laughing, living.

I got served at the bar, as I'd hoped. I stood by a silver pillar and watched the crowd.

It only took a minute to figure out I was in a gay bar. I grinned like a four year old.

I'd never seen men kissing other men before, or holding hands with other men, or dancing with other men in a sexual way. It was surreal, and totally, totally cool. The idea that anything like this could happen in my home town didn't bear thinking about. These people would get lynched.

I had so much respect for these guys for living their lives the way they wanted to, rather than being dictated to by small-minded wankers. I wished I was gay, in a way, but I wasn't, so that was that.

I finished my drink, and went for another.

I asked the barman if he could recommend any club nights round here, and he handed me a flyer for a place that played drum and bass. There were directions on the back. It was nine o'clock, so I had another couple of beers in the gay bar before moving on. I'd never been to a club before, but I'd checked out the listings enough to know the place wouldn't be open till at least ten.

I got chatted up a couple of times, which I found flattering, and chatted back for a while before dropping some obvious hint that I was straight, like "Yeah, my girlfriend likes my hair this way too."

I hadn't forgotten that I needed a place to stay the night, and no doubt half these guys would've happily taken me home, but I wasn't that desperate yet.

The third guy who chatted me up invited me over to join his group, so I danced with them for a while. I'd only ever danced at school discos before, and even though I was trying to imitate their funky moves as best I could, I was clearly "the straight one." It was fun though – even though I could hardly hear what anyone said to me over the shit music.

I invited my new friends to the club, but they were happy where they were.

The rain had stopped when I got outside. I walked across town, pleasantly drunk and a little excited by the prospect of going raving.

The club was located down some shadowy backstreet, cut off from the bright lights of the city. I had to queue for about ten minutes, standing shivering outside, more from nerves than from the cold.

"Half price ticket, boss?"

I turned to see an enormous bloke in a pinstriped suit and a gold chain. He was right up in my face like he was starting a fight. He had glittering green eyes, like a Martian from some 1960s B-movie.

He said, "We're doing a promotion tonight, boss. Ten quid on the door. Five quid for one of these." He flashed a wad of cards. They were regular playing cards with £5 ENTRY written across them in black marker.

I handed the bloke a fiver and he shot off into the night.

There was a dealer across the road, merrily shouting "*Pills! Whizz! Trips!*" like a market seller. He wore a green Robin Hood-style hat with a red feather sticking out of it. I ignored him.

In the club, I was told that my Five of Hearts wasn't a valid ticket, so I had to pay again. I didn't argue – I was pushing my luck as it was.

I wandered into a wall of noise, pounding drums and throbbing bass, music I'd never understood but in this place it made complete sense.

More bodies streamed in – black, white, Asian, male, female, gay, straight. All labels were irrelevant. Everyone was the same. Everyone was beautiful. We were the beautiful people. I'd never been beautiful before.

I was dancing without realising I was dancing, thrusting my neck back and forth like a chicken to the drumbeats and shuffling my feet to the basslines. This place was like nowhere else on earth. It was like a cross between a warehouse and a carnival. It reminded me of the acid house raves I'd read about and seen on the news, but there was better organisation here. That's what it was all about – organisation – people coming together in mutual love and respect.

I bought a pint and took it onto the dancefloor, dancing one-handed as I drank. Some guy was throwing his arms around like a lunatic, and ended up spilling my beer all down my front.

I forgave him, though. He didn't do it on purpose. He was in love with the music, and just wanted to spread the love around.

Later, I was sitting over near the bar where the music wasn't so loud, wondering where I was going to sleep. A guy I recognised from the dancefloor came over to me and shook my hand. It was like we were mates, even though we hadn't spoken yet.

He introduced himself as Terry. He jabbered in my ear as he sipped on his bottle of water. I didn't feel like talking, so I was happy to listen. Terry's girlfriend had dumped him a couple of weeks ago and he was still trying to figure out if it was a good thing or a bad thing. He said he could see these two alternative futures stretching out in front of him – one with safety, security, a relationship, a job and a house – and the other spent partying, being skint and free. He talked with his hands a lot, doing complex actions for the two pathways, one on his right arm, the other on his left.

Terry's mates came over and he introduced them all to me – Karen, Steve, Eddy and Claire. I introduced myself, and got handshakes and hugs. The hugs took me by surprise. I thought they were attacking me at first, but then I realised that's what everyone else was doing. Someone said my name was like De Niro in *Taxi Driver* and the guy from *Paris, Texas*, which I'd never seen but it seemed cool from the way they were talking.

We went back to the floor and danced in a circle. It was four o'clock in the morning, but there was no time anymore. I guessed from the way they were dancing that Karen and Claire were taken by Steve and Eddy, which was a shame because the girls were fit as fuck, and a shag would've rounded the night off nicely.

The music stopped and the lights came on. We cheered and applauded. People were hijacking the DJ booth, reaching over to shake the guy's hand.

On the way out, I said to Terry, "Man, I need a favour."

"What is it, man?"

"I've got nowhere to stay tonight."

He pretended not to hear me and carried on out the door, weaving in and out of people as he dashed towards the exit.

There was a swarm of people outside. I found Terry and his mates standing in a huddle round the corner.

They smiled at me like I was an old friend they hadn't seen for years. "Hey Travis!"

I said, "Terry, I need a place to stay tonight."

Terry shrugged smugly. "I live with my parents, man. There's no room."

"Can't I sleep on the sofa? Just for one night, I swear."

Their taxi arrived. The group dropped their fag-ends on the ground and stamped them out.

“Sorry, man.”

I opened my arms out to the others. “Anyone?”

None of them had the guts to look me in the eye. They made their apologies and got in the cab.

Terry wrapped his arms around me and said, “Thanks for listening.”

I said, “Get the fuck off me you piece of human shit.”

“Whatever.”

He got in passenger side of the taxi, extending his middle finger through the window as they drove off.

I looked around. Almost everyone who’d been in the club had evacuated the area already. I wandered around trying to find someone else I recognised. No one wanted to make eye contact anymore. It was as though they’d left their preconceptions at the door and picked them up again with their coats.

What a bunch of two-faced, hypocritical scumbags. “Beautiful people” my cock. They were just like every fucker else – selfish, superficial morons.

A voice behind me said, “Hash?”

I turned round and came face to face with the twat in the suit and gold chain from earlier.

I said, “You owe me five fucking quid.”

He laughed, his green eyes twinkling in the streetlight. “Why, boss?”

“You sold me a dud ticket.”

“Not me, boss. I just got here. You must me thinking of my brother. Watch out for my brother – he’s a killer. Hash?”

I focussed on the guy’s face. He was almost a foot taller than me, but that didn’t matter. I wanted to hurt him. I really wanted to fuck his face up – rip his green eyes out and stamp on them. He’d probably kill me given half a chance, but I had surprise on my side.

I smacked him in the nose so hard my fist almost cracked. He reeled back, shocked that this sixteen year old kid was taking him on.

I pushed him in the chest and he fell onto the road. I kicked him in the chest and legs shouting, “Prick! Prick! Prick!” like a fucking maniac. He tried to grab hold of my feet, so I stamped on his hand, grinding it into the ground. I slammed his head into the concrete, knocking him out. His head rocked to the side, his nose gushing blood. I didn’t care if the twat was dead.

I might have carried on, but I felt a soft pair of hands on my shoulders.

“Leave him, babe, he’s not worth it.”

I turned round to look at her. She wore a white top and a tiny skirt showing off a fine pair of legs. She’d obviously been dancing all night because her fringe was stuck to the side of her face with sweat and her makeup was running.

Her hands were still on me. I didn’t say a word – I just brushed her hair to one side and sank my lips into her face.

Without quite knowing how we got there, we were up against the wall. My lips were in her neck and my hand was between her legs. She took her knickers off and undid my pants.

She was fucking sexy. A real woman this time – maybe ten years older than me or more. She knew what the fuck she was doing and so did I. No worries about firing off this time. I came like a fucking fountain, slamming her arse against the cold bricks.

A few feet away, the guy I'd beaten up was groaning quietly to himself.

I fastened my trousers and stood back, watching the sorry sight of the pissed-up clubber stumbling into her heels.

She looked up at me, smiling. "You're amazing. What's your name?"

I said, "Got a thing for violence, have you, love? Does it turn you on?"

Her smile grew uneasy. "What?"

"You disgust me. You're a fucking disgrace. Get the fuck out of my sight before I kill you."

She didn't stick around to argue. She gave up trying to get into her shoes, picking them up and running barefoot round the corner out of sight.

I crept over to the man on the ground and checked his jacket. He had three hundred quid in his pocket, which I snatched, and a big bag of weed, which I left in there. It was no use to me.

I was about to leave him to it when a figure stepped out of the shadows over the road. It was the dealer in the Robin Hood hat. He must've been there the whole time.

I said, "Have you been watching me, you fucking pervert?"

The man threw back his head and laughed like a chimp. "I like your style, man. You got fucking *balls*. You got a *hardcore* pair of bollocks on you."

“What’s your point?”

The guy slipped his hand into his jacket. “I got something I think you’re gonna need, man.”

“Fuck off. I don’t take drugs.”

I stopped talking when I saw the knife in his hand. The blade was thick and silver, with a ridge in the middle like a Shakespearian dagger. It glinted in the moonlight as he waved it from side to side.

I said, “How much?”

“One fifty.”

“One pound fifty?”

The head went back again. “Ha! Ha! You’re funny, man. Seriously. What’s your name, man?”

“Doesn’t matter what my name is. I’ll give you a hundred quid for the knife.”

“One fifty, man. You know how much this thing’s worth? It’s solid silver. I’m doing you a favour. I like you, man. Don’t want to see you get killed.”

I counted out one hundred and fifty quid from the wad I’d just nicked.

I said, “Give me the knife first.”

He said, “You’re a cocky motherfucker, you know that?”

He placed the knife on the pavement and stepped back. I picked it up, looking up at him all the while, watching out for any sudden movements. I handed him the wad and we high-fived on it.

He said, "Pleasure doing business with you. You'd better get out of here, man." He gestured towards the guy on the ground. "I'll make sure he gets home alright."

"Really?"

He nodded.

I said, "That's nice of you."

The guy shrugged. "I got to, I suppose. He's my brother."

I slept in a Vauxhall Astra that night. I forced the lock with the knife and lay down in the back seat. I only got a couple of hours. It was freezing cold and there was nothing to rest my head on.

I woke up with the sun in my eyes. It was nine o'clock in the morning. It was Sunday, so the owner of the car wasn't likely to turn up soon, unless by some bizarre twist of fate they turned out to be a Christian.

I decided to get out early just to be safe. I didn't fancy another confrontation. I wasn't a confrontational person, I told myself. I kept telling myself that. That creature from last night was someone else. It wasn't really me.

I sent my mum a postcard. I told her I was staying with friends, I was comfortable, and she shouldn't try to find me. I put "Love Travis" at the bottom but scrubbed out the word "love" before I sent it.

I spent the next few days wandering round town like a zombie, the knife in the inside pocket of my jacket clanking against my left nipple in time with my steps. I didn't know who I was, never mind what I was supposed to be doing. I had two hundred quid left, which wasn't going to last long, even if I lived off sandwiches and crisps. I went to pubs just so I could be indoors. I could make a pint last an hour if I pretended it wasn't there.

I needed a drink to put me to sleep and keep me warm at night. In the evenings, I'd buy a cheap bottle of wine and sit drinking in one of the public parks.

If any homeless people tried to talk to me, I'd pretend I couldn't speak English and walk off shaking my head. I wasn't being snobbish. I knew I wasn't anything like them. They weren't here by choice like I was. I

didn't want to speak to them because I didn't want them to suss me out. I was an insult to their very existence.

When it was time to sleep, I'd break into someone's car – a different vehicle every time, so I wasn't victimising one particular person. Half the time, I set an alarm off and had to leg it to a different car park.

I usually woke up with the sun, so avoided getting caught, apart from one time in a Honda Civic. The driver didn't realise I was there, and drove all the way to work with me curled up on the back seat.

When we got there, he was about to get out of the car when he realised I was lying there, desperately trying to make myself invisible.

"Oh my goodness. Are you OK?"

I said, "Yes."

"Are you homeless?"

"Yes."

"My goodness. You're so young"

"I'm sorry."

"There are people who can help. Have you been to the council? They can organise accommodation, or a place in a shelter."

"I'm really sorry."

"Really, please, don't worry about it. You poor thing."

The man opened the door for me, and I staggered onto the pavement.

As I continued down the street, the man called after me, but I didn't look back. I couldn't listen to him. I ached too much, and it was too early in the morning. I concentrated all my efforts on walking in a straight line without falling over.

*

I spent the morning in a café drinking cold cups of tea, waiting for the pubs to open. At eleven o'clock, I found a bar where I could sit by the window and drink off my hangover. I was supposed to be pacing myself but I was thirsty and drank three pints in the first hour. I had a bag of crisps and a packet of peanuts for my lunch.

My wallet got lighter as the afternoon went on. Christ, it was expensive being homeless.

By five o'clock, I was pissed out of my head. I was sitting in the corner rambling to myself. Fuck knows what I was saying. I felt like one of those old alcoholics I'd seen staggering through the streets of my home town. I'd always wondered how those men had ended up the way they had. Was it a lifestyle choice, or was it out of their control?

I threw up on the table. A surge of frothy beer and blobs of nut and crisp launched themselves over the polished wooden surface, dribbling over the edges onto the carpet. It stank in the way only vomit can, but it made me feel better enough to jump to my feet and make a hasty exit. I was out of there before anyone noticed.

I ran off down the street towards the park, weaving between shoppers and suited yuppie folk on their way home from work.

When I got to the park, I curled up under a bush, resting my head on my arm, and fell asleep.

It was dark when I woke up, and I had no idea where the fuck I was or how I'd got there. Memories of the sick-stained table swam back as I crawled under a street lamp to look at my watch. It was nine o'clock. I'd

slept uninterrupted for four hours. It was the first time I'd done that since leaving home. I was pleased with myself in a way, but I didn't know what the fuck I was going to do for the rest of the night.

I wandered back into town. People were marching in and out of pubs and takeaways, swinging their arms like soldiers gone AWOL. I was still getting used to how fast people walked in the city. What was the point of walking at that speed? Where were they all going?

I sat down in a shop doorway. I watched people's legs as they passed. The same blue jeans, black combats and tracky bottoms paraded by.

The women were more interesting. There were plenty of sleek, sexy legs on display, either bare or encased in tights or skinny jeans. None of them noticed me looking. I checked out their arses as they walked off. It wasn't exactly a pleasurable sight, because I knew I'd never have a chance with any of them, not in the state I was in. I hardly cared, either. Looking in their direction was just a force of habit. I had no real desire anymore. Sex was something other people did. Maybe it was the thought of never having sex again, the idea that that one desperate fumble against a brick wall in the early hours was my last ever fuck, that spurred me on to open my mouth and ask for money.

That's all you need when you're on the street. You don't need sex, or love or companionship. You just need money. *Money, money, money*, to carry on living. It ain't a rich man's world. It's the penniless who are the real capitalists. When you've got cash, you don't care about it. You just get on with real life.

It came out as a mumble at first – "Mmmm, mmmm change please?"

The first stage is admitting you need help. You have to do this at some point – you actually have to say the words – “Mmmm, mmmm change please?”

No one even looked at me. How many times would I have to say it before people paid attention?

A group of lads approached, out on the razz. Surely one of them would have some spare coins.

I said, “Can you spare any change, please?”

The nearest one smiled and gestured up the road. “Job centre’s that way, mate.”

His mates roared with laughter as they disappeared off round the corner.

I carried on sitting in silence. Suddenly I was stone cold sober. I was shivering, hugging myself tight with my head to the floor.

I was in a kind of trance when a passerby leant down and placed a twenty-p coin in my hand.

I looked up, but the Good Samaritan had already continued on his way.

I called “Thank you!” but the man didn’t turn round.

Talk about mixed fucking emotions. Half of me was overjoyed someone had surrendered their hard earned cash, while the other half wanted to shout, “Twenty-p? Twenty-fucking-p? How far’s that gonna fucking get me?”

It was obvious this wasn’t going to work.

I jumped to my feet and headed out of town to a more isolated spot near a cashpoint. It was late and there was no one around.

I sat on the pavement with my back against a wall.

A kid in his late teens passed. I guessed he was a student judging by his long hair and black eyeliner.

I said, "Can you spare any change, please?" and, as predicted, the kid gestured a vague apology. A few steps later, he was at the machine, sticking his card in.

The kid jolted as I grabbed him from behind, but he didn't attempt to get away. My knife was up against his back. I lifted his denim jacket and t-shirt, and stuck the tip of my blade between his shoulders. I could picture him later trying to treat the cut in that awkward position like an itch he couldn't scratch.

I said, "Do you know what this is?"

"What?"

"Do you know what this is? In your back."

The kid nodded.

"Now I'm gonna ask you again. Can you spare any fucking change, please?"

"Please."

"Yes, *please*, that's what I said. I want five hundred quid."

"I haven't got..."

"Let's see your balance."

"OK, OK. Just let me go, please. Let me go."

As he said this, he was punching in his request for five hundred quid.

I snatched up the wad as soon as it emerged from the slot. The kid fumbled with his card, hastily sticking it in his back pocket.

I said, "Thank you. Seriously – thank you, man. I'm really sorry I had to do this. This isn't really me. This isn't the sort of thing I'd usually do. I'm sorry, OK? Now, don't turn round. Don't turn round. You didn't see me. You didn't see me."

The kid's eyes were fixed on the wall ahead of him.

"Now, I want you to stand here and count to fifty before you turn round. Like Hide and Go Seek, yeah? You didn't see me."

With that, I sprinted down the street. I turned a couple of corners before I stopped, breathless. I gave myself a few seconds recovery, and then started walking, like I was a normal person.

I got myself sorted after that. I stayed in a B and B for the next few nights. There was a job advertised in the *Evening News* for casual cash in hand work, so I called the number and the guy told me I could start the following day. I bought myself another t-shirt and a pair of jeans so I could go down the laundrette and wash the clothes I'd been wearing since I left home.

My hair was getting long, and the whiskers on my face were out of control. I was worried I might look too scruffy when I turned up, but I took one look at the workforce and realised I was right at home. There were nine or ten tired-looking teenagers in crumpled trackies and trainers. Half of them clearly hadn't washed for a while.

A dirty white van arrived at nine o'clock and the driver got out. He had massive tattooed arms poking out of his stained England shirt, but his beergut indicated he hadn't worked out in the gym for a while. He opened the back doors and the lads piled in. He said, "Macca" as I shuffled past him. I said, "Travis." That was the introductions over with.

I steadied myself as Macca sped off out of the car park. There weren't any proper seats in the back, just boxes of leaflets to sit on, and I was sandwiched between two of my soapdodger workmates. About three or four people were smoking, filling the van with fumes. I pulled out my packet of baccy and a Rizla.

Halfway through rolling, Macca slammed on the breaks and my packet got sprayed over three people's feet. There was general sniggering as I scrambled around trying to salvage what I could from the floor.

"Unlucky mate."

I tried to shrug it off. "S'alright, it's only a bit of baccy."

Ahead of us, Macca had climbed out of the van. We were in the middle of a mini roundabout holding up traffic. The front of the van was face to face with the elderly man in a Volvo we'd nearly crashed into. The guy looked about eighty.

Macca was waving his arms in the air, yelling at the side window. "YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO GIVE WAY TO THE RIGHT, Y'OLD CUNT! WHY DON'T YOU FUCKING LOOK WHERE YOU'RE FUCKING GOING? YOU FUCKING BLIND AND DEAF OR SUMMUT? WHY DON'T YOU JUST FUCKING DIE?"

The old man didn't open his window. He stared straight ahead, patiently waiting for Macca to get back in the van.

I whispered, more to myself than anyone else, "It's just a bit of baccy. That's all it is."

*

It wasn't a bad job. I was out in the open air, and got to see the city one street at a time.

I was on the lookout for somewhere to live. I found loads of derelict houses and flats while I was delivering leaflets. I just needed to find a decent one.

One afternoon I was delivering to a street with detached houses not far from the car park where Macca picked us up. There were gardens and garages, and trees lining the street.

One house had masses of weeds and big clumps of grass on the lawn. I peered through the glass in the door as I posted the leaflets through.

My delivery landed on top of a mountain of unopened letters, flyers and newspapers.

I took another look at the house as I stepped back down the path. There was no For Sale sign.

I came back and broke in after work. I smashed a little hole in one of the back windows. I opened it and climbed through. The house had a damp, musty smell. It was getting dark outside, but I could still see the thick coat of dust. I tried the lights but they didn't work.

The back door was locked with a key that wasn't there, but the front door opened from a latch on the inside.

I had a sudden paranoid attack that there was a dead person in there, lying in one of the beds or face down in the bathroom. A rotting corpse with maggots or maybe just a decaying skeleton.

I crept up the stairs. There were a couple of bedrooms. I burst into the first one like a cop on a drug bust.

There was nothing in there. No furniture, just bare walls with peeling yellow paint.

I tried the second bedroom. There was a wardrobe and a double bed – no mattress, just the base. I tried the wardrobe. There was a lady's dressing gown and a raincoat. At the bottom of the wardrobe were a stack of board games – *Connect Four*, *Guess Who*, *Go For Broke*. I slammed the door as soon as I saw them. For the first time, I realised I was trespassing on someone's old life.

I checked the bathroom. No dead bodies in there either. I went for a piss amongst the cobwebs and flies. The place needed a clean, but I could do that at the weekend.

I went downstairs to the living room. There was a battered old couch and a coffee table. I sat down and put my feet up, wondering how far it was to the nearest off licence.

*

I got paid on the Friday, so I went shopping that weekend and bought some more clothes and stuff for the bathroom – toothbrush, toothpaste, shower gel, shampoo, soap, bog roll.

My moustache was linked up with the rest of my facial hair now. It was almost like a proper beard. Only trouble was, some bits of it grew longer than others, so I bought a pair of scissors to keep it consistent.

The costs mounted up. I got a sleeping bag and a couple of pillows, and shitloads of candles for the house.

I cleaned up the place with a duster and a broom, and washed the kitchen and bathroom with bleach. There was no heating or electric, but there was running water, and I could wrap up warm at night. I couldn't cook anything, so I lived off chips and veggie burgers from the local take away. That was my one hot meal a day. The rest of the time I had peanut butter sandwiches. That was the only food I ever had in the house – bread and peanut butter. I felt like a three year old.

At least I didn't have to pay to live there. I'd never really thought about it before, but the idea of having to pay just to eat and drink and stay out of the cold was fucking outrageous. How did all those people with rent and mortgages survive? I had nothing. I was squatting and I was still skint.

*

I wasn't skint for long, though. I got paid again the following Friday and went out on the town. I didn't bother going to any pubs. I was into clubbing now, big time. I bought a little battery-powered radio and drank a six-pack of lager listening to Pete Tong while I got ready.

I found a new club where they played hard house and trance. The music wasn't really my bag, but the people were amazing. I wandered round introducing myself. I shook hands and exchanged names with about a hundred people. At the end of the night, I ended up dancing with a group of friends who I invited back to mine. They were my friends now. They smoked and crashed out on the carpet surrounded by candles.

Someone said, "This is so fucking chilled, man. It's like a church."

I said, "It's not supposed to be like a church."

"No, I mean it's like a church but without the religion. It's cool, man."

It was an honour. I was officially cool.

It became a regular thing. Every Friday and Saturday night I'd be out all night clubbing followed by a chill out session at my place in the early hours.

Everyone was off their face on some chemical or other, but I stuck to the beers. I wasn't afraid of experimenting. I was suspicious about doing ecstasy because every fucker else was doing it. If everyone's doing something, there's got to be something wrong.

Everything was "large" and "massive" and "wooooooo-wooooooo!" That was how people greeted me – "Hey Travis! Wooooooo-wooooooo!"

I'd say it back too. They all had wacky nicknames like Oil, Brick and Pigeon. I must've sounded ridiculous. "Hey Pigeon! Woouoooo-woouoooo! Hey Brick! Woouoooo-woouoooo!"

I bought a bunch of luminous orange lilos for people to crash on. The clubbers loved it. They always went out dressed in mad coloured shit that lit up under UV. They looked like circus freaks, but that was normal in the clubs we went to. I nearly got turned away a couple of times for wearing trousers and a shirt. I said, "Look, just because I don't dress like a prick doesn't mean I don't know how to party." I was pretty cocky for a kid who was two years underage, but the double bluff paid off.

The house quickly turned into a shag pad. Couples disappeared into the bedrooms as soon as we got back. I got fed up of people locking themselves in the bathroom so I took the lock off. The following weekend, I found a couple shagging on the bathroom floor. I walked past them, dropped my trousers and sat on the bog.

They looked up at me with freak-out faces.

I said, "What? D'ya wanna picture?"

No one ever tried having sex in my bathroom again.

I was chilled out most of the time, but I had to lay down a few ground rules. I didn't want people making too much noise otherwise the neighbours would report us to the council. I didn't want to lose the place after I'd spent all that time cleaning. If anyone shouted "Woouoooo-woouoooo!" too loud, I'd tell them to shut up or get out, which they respected. No one was ever aggressive towards me. They were too loved up.

I left the front door unlocked all the time, and people came and went as they pleased throughout the week. There were three skater kids who pretty much moved in. They hung round in the living room smoking

weed every evening. I didn't mind their company, but I stuck to my tobacco. Inhaling one drug was enough for me. I was smoking about twenty rollies a day by that point. Occasionally I'd splash out on a packet of fags, which I'd smoke slower to savour the luxury.

The skater kids weren't real squatters. They shot off back to their parents for a meal and a change of clothes. I was the only hardcore one there. It was my house. "Hardcore House," I called it. The clubbers loved that. They'd chant, "Hardcore House! Wooooooo-woooooo!" until I told them off for disturbing the neighbours.

It was fun while it lasted. I had a laugh. I got laid a couple of times with women who were clearly out of my league.

I'm a bit hazy on the details now. I made a lot of good friends, and we had great conversations. I can't remember their names or what the conversations were about, but that's cool because we weren't doing it for the memories. We were living for the moment – one day, one hour, one minute at a time. Come to think of it, it's probably best forgotten anyway.

*

One night we got a cab out to Jazzy Kex in Blackburn, a funky little club down a backstreet. I was sitting in the corner with a pint and a rollie watching the dancers, thinking about my house and whether I should get some pictures for the walls. A voice bellowed "TRAVIS!" from the other end of the room. I looked over, expecting one of my friends to be there shouting "Wooooooo-woooooo!" Instead I caught sight of Macca from work, waving his tattoos at me as he weaved his way between clubbers. He was wearing three-quarter-length combats and a string vest. He had a whistle round his neck.

I stood up to shake his hand and he grabbed hold of me and crushed me against him in a bear hug.

“Wow! Wow, man! I can’t believe you’re here! This is my local!”

I sat down with my drink again and Macca came to sit with me. His eyes were popping out of their sockets and his jaw was snapping on a piece of worn-out gum.

He said, “Y’avin’ a good night, man?”

I said, “Yeah.”

“So, what’s your story anyway, Travis? We never just sit down and have conversations at work, y’know what I mean? It’s a shame, that.”

I said, “What do you want to know?”

“Dunno, like ... what’s your surname?”

“McGuiggan.” I hesitated before I said it. I didn’t like people knowing my full name.

“Travis McGuiggan. Guigsy. Mint, mint, mint.” He repeated my name three or four times like it was poetry. “So, what’s your mum and dad do, Travis? What’s your old feller do?”

“What the fuck does it matter?”

Macca slapped me on the back and kept his hand there, stroking me up and down. He said, “You’re fucking right, man. That’s so fucking profound. It’s like me and you – you deliver leaflets for a living and I drive people around. But that’s not you and that’s not me, it’s just a fucking job, man.”

I nodded and smiled at him like he was in nursery school.

“Exactly.”

"Mint, mint, mint. It's good that we can communicate like this, ain't it? We're on the same wavelength. You're a top lad, Trav. I love you."

I swallowed my mouthful of beer and glared at him. "You what?"

Macca's smile vanished. "Nothing."

"Get the fuck off me."

His hand shot away from my back like I was on fire. He said, "I'm not gay."

I got up and glared down at him. I said, "You don't love me, Macca. Why don't you just tell the truth? You're off your tits, so you're in a good mood. Next time you want to "communicate," wait until you haven't got a bunch of chemicals whizzing round your brain telling you everything's hunky dory. And we're not on the same wavelength, by the way. You represent everything I hate about humanity."

He looked up at me, pulling puppy dog eyes with dilated pupils. He said, "I swear to you, I'm not..."

"Oh, shut the fuck up, will you?"

I marched out of the room and out of the club.

I took my own taxi back to the house.

A couple of the skater kids were in the living room, smoking on their lilos.

I said, "Get out."

They didn't move.

"You listening to me? I said get out of my house."

They looked at each other and laughed nervously. "What's up with you, Travis?"

“The party’s over, that’s what’s up with me. The party’s fucking over.”

I locked the door in case anyone else tried to come round. The curtains were always closed, so no one could tell if I was in.

I had an emergency bottle of red wine under the kitchen sink. I drank it in silence watching the candle wax drip, then passed out on the sofa.

I missed work on the Monday while I sorted myself out another place. I had a few hundred quid stashed in a box under my bed, which was enough to put a deposit down on a bedsit. I found a place close to work, across the road from the driving test centre. I had to share a bathroom, but the main room was all mine.

I stuck all my gear in a rucksack and carried it across to the new place. I left the door of the house unlocked in case anyone wanted to go back. Maybe they’d come looking for me, but they couldn’t have found me even if they’d wanted to. Maybe they didn’t even realise I was gone.

I didn’t bear them any grudges. I didn’t really get to know any of them, but I’m sure they were good people. The party wasn’t over for everyone. It was just over for Travis McGuiggan.

25.

Back at work, Macca never mentioned our meeting in the club. I worked there on and off for years and he never looked me in the eye again.

I did whatever cash in hand work I could get. I washed pots in restaurants and hotels. I lugged bricks around on building sites. Whatever I tried, I always seemed to end up delivering leaflets again. I once mentioned to Geoff, the owner, that I'd been to grammar school, which must've given him the impression I was reliable. They'd always have me back, which meant I could walk off the job and turn up three weeks later as though nothing had happened.

There were a lot of Christians working there. Fundamentalist types. Mormon Mike. Bible Brian. There was a Born Again Christian called Bernie. We called him "Saint Bernard." You get the idea.

Brian started working there in 1999. I was nineteen years old, and he must've been a similar age. He used to read the Bible in the van. People ripped the piss out of him, but he didn't stop doing it. I didn't share his beliefs, but I liked his attitude. It's not often you meet someone who genuinely doesn't give a fuck what other people think.

On his first day at work, we were sitting in the back of the van on our lunch break when Brian pulled out his Bible and started reading.

Jack and Midget, a couple of little weasels who worked there at the time, were sitting across from him. Predictably, they started giggling.

Jack said, "So, you're a Christian, mate?"

"Yes."

"What sort?"

"The sort that believes in Jesus."

They giggled some more.

Jack said, "Are you allowed to drink?"

Brian said, "It's not that I'm not *allowed* to drink. I don't drink."

"What about smoking? Do you smoke?"

"No."

"Do you *swear*?"

"No. I don't swear."

"Why don't you try it, mate? Go on. Say fuck."

"No."

"Don't just say "No," mate. Tell me to *fuck off*. Go on, it'll make you feel better."

"I'm not sure it will."

"Oh, come on. Just *say* it. Or say *shit* at least. Can you say shit?"

Brian smiled at him, looking really pleased with himself. "I'm not a parrot, you know."

"What about wank?"

"Oi!" Macca turned down and waved a finger at them. "Leave the new boy alone."

Jack shrugged. "Sorry mate."

Brian said, "It's OK. I forgive you."

Everyone laughed at that, even Macca. Brian laughed along too, like he'd intended it to be a joke.

He left the job after the Millennium. I think he was embarrassed that the world didn't end when he told everyone it was going to. He was so sure the apocalypse was going to happen. I think he was looking forward to

it. It was a shame I didn't see him after New Year. I was going to ask him how he felt after the chimes struck midnight and nothing happened. Was he disappointed about not being dead?

All meat eaters are fucking hypocrites. Any meat eater who claims not to be a hypocrite is a hypocrite and a liar. The only possible exceptions would be people who are willing to be held in captivity and then killed. But even this analogy doesn't quite fit, because animals are held captive against their will, and killed against their will, as far as I know. You can say what you like about me, but I'm not a fucking hypocrite.

That's what I liked about Brian – he stuck to his principles. His principles may have been based on massive misconceptions from the ancient world, but at least they were *principles*. That's more than most people have got.

Call me cynical if you like, but I challenge you to walk up to the next person you meet and ask them what their principles are. If they give you a straight answer, I'll eat my fucking shoes.

I carried on working. I usually made just enough to pay the bills with a bit left over for a few drinks at the weekend. I mainly got drunk on my own. I spent all week surrounded by other people. On my two days off, I wasn't often in the mood for socialising.

I started seeing Rupert once a week. It was supposed to be a positive step towards a better life, even though my life hadn't really changed. I suppose I was trying to change myself, or at least find out who the fuck I was.

I started reading books again. Rupert got me into psychology and science and history. My favourite part of our appointments was the end of the session when we'd just sit there and talk about stuff. I invited him out for a pint a few times, but he always declined. Conflict of interests, he said. I'm not sure what he meant exactly.

Sometimes I'd go completely off the rails and go on a week-long drinking binge. I'd come back to work with a hangover and no money, wondering why I did such pointless things.

Sometimes when I got desperate for money, I'd go out and mug people.

I'm not proud of it, but somehow I always managed to justify my actions. I always chose people who looked like they could handle it – people who could afford to surrender the contents of their wallets without being left out of pocket.

I was always drunk when I did it. Somewhere in my mind that was another excuse. *It uns the drink*. It was the same part of my mind that liked to pretend I was an alcoholic. Truth is, I wasn't addicted. I could stop any time I liked, and I often did when the hangovers got too much.

I'm lucky I never got caught. I was scared of getting caught because I thought the cops might contact my parents. I was scared of bumping into my mum and dad in the street, but I never did. Manchester's a big place. You can lose a lot here.

Every now and then, I'd send my mum another postcard. I'd take a bus to the other end of the city so she couldn't work out where I was.

I made sure no one could trace me. I didn't have a bank account or a passport or a driving license. I didn't even know my national insurance number.

I had to keep working because I couldn't claim off the social. I'd be giving away too much information. For a while I thought about changing my name, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I didn't want to be a different person. I wasn't going to change. I wasn't going to change for anyone. That was the whole point of being on my own.

I was out of work for a couple of weeks when I was twenty-four. I was working as a cleaner, and got laid off. I couldn't face going back to the leaflets, but there didn't seem to be another option. I tried to convince myself that something else would come along – all I had to do was keep looking.

Eventually I was down to my last fiver. I spent two pound fifty on a bottle of cider, which I'd finished by lunchtime.

I didn't really think about what I was going to do next. I was on autopilot. I took my knife from the kitchen drawer and walked into the city centre. I went to McDonalds and bought some chips. As I sat shovelling fries down my throat, I spotted a drunken student who'd taken a detour from his graduation ceremony to come in for a piss. He was wearing a Slipknot t-shirt underneath his cloak. He was the ideal target, I reckoned – some middle class ponce rebelling against mummy and daddy.

I waited a few seconds before following him into the toilets.

I found him standing at the urinal unfastening his jeans.

I pressed my foot against the door and pulled out the knife.

I said, "Come on, mate. Wallet. Phone. Whatever else you got."

The student didn't move. I couldn't tell if he was frozen with fear or ready to take me on. Just my luck to get a marshal arts expert.

I raised my head as I moved towards him. That's when I registered his face. He recognised me at the same time.

He said, "Travis?"

I said, "Shit. Sorry Brian. Fuck. I'm really fucking sorry."

I was off out the door before he could say anything else. I didn't want to see him or hear him, ever again.

*

Back at my place, I lay in bed, punching the mattress with both fists.

I wasn't angry about getting caught. I wasn't concerned about coming away with nothing.

Why did it have to be Brian? It could've been anyone else, and I wouldn't have cared.

I needed a shower. I took off my clothes and threw them in the laundry basket. I put on my dressing gown, took my towel and shower gel and went across the hall to the bathroom, locking the door on the way.

I came out five minutes later, having climbed back into my clothes.

Brian was standing out in the hallway in his cloak and mortarboard. Christ knows how he got there, but there he was. I dropped the towel. I nearly stopped breathing.

My voice came out in a rush. "Oh God, Brian, I don't know what to say. I've messed up, OK? I've messed up my fucking life. I'll be the first to admit that. I really respect you, alright? Oh God, I'm so fucking sorry."

I made a move to put my arms around him and tell him it was OK, but before I got to him, his hands were on me, shaking me by the shoulders.

"Travis. Travis, it's me, Declan."

"Eh?"

"It's Declan. Your neighbour. Remember me?"

"Er ... yeah, I remember you. Sorry, I thought you were someone else. What are you doing here?"

"I live here. I was just letting myself into my flat."

I looked him up and down. "Why are you dressed like that?"

He said, "I graduated today."

"Oh right. Congratulations, mate."

"See you later."

"Yeah. See you later. Sorry again."

"No problem."

That was the last time I mugged anyone. I went back to the leaflets, and sold the knife to a kid at work for a tenner. I made him promise not to kill anyone with it. That put my mind at rest a little. I needed the cash in any case.

28.

I liked my neighbour, Declan. I used to chat to him sometimes, in the hallway. He was just like me. He didn't speak to his family, he just lived in his own world and kept himself to himself.

I never used to hear a peep out of Declan. Then something happened. I had no idea what it was, but overnight, it was like a different person had moved in. His voice got about ten times louder. He had people over all the time – women mainly. A different girl every week, but always the same noisy sex.

He moved out shortly after that.

I didn't see him again for a year or so. I was in some trendy bar in town at three in the afternoon. I was supposed to be at work but I couldn't face it.

Declan walked in with a woman on his arm. He was wearing a suit and tie, and had his hair slicked back like some eighties stereotype. I hardly recognised him without his glasses on.

The woman was wearing a miniskirt and a skinny pink top. Her hair was all over the place, like she'd just got out of bed.

He waved his arms and bellowed at me. "Travis!"

I waved back, vaguely.

Declan sent his girlfriend to the bar and came over to join me. He shook me by the hand, nearly crushing me in his grip. He seemed taller now.

He said, "How's it going?"

"Same old."

He laughed. "Ha, ha. I used to say that a lot."

I said, "It's true. Everything is exactly the same as it used to be, I'm afraid. How are *you* doing, Declan?"

"Very well. Work's going well, life's going well. It's strange to think I used to be like you."

I let go of his hand. "In what way did you used to be like me?"

"Living alone in a cheap bedsit with no self-esteem and nothing to live for. Isn't that how you live your life, Travis?"

I shrugged. "No need to rub it in, mate."

"No, no, I'm not rubbing it in. I'm *sympathising*. I'll tell you what happened to me, and maybe you can learn something from it."

"What makes you think I need your help?"

He said, "Just shut the fuck up and listen. I'm trying to do you a favour."

My eyes widened, shocked by Declan's language. I'd never heard him swear before. It was like hearing Jesus say fuck.

I said, "So, what happened?"

He said, "I found myself."

"That's your entire story?"

"Yes. That's all you need to do, Travis. It's simple, it's easy, it's straightforward. Think about it. When you're on your own, you're living for yourself. But everything you do seems to be for someone else's benefit. You go out to work for other people, and you behave in a way other people expect you to behave. Finding yourself means realising you don't give a fuck about other people. There's no one else in the world but yourself, so the whole point of living is to make yourself happy."

I said, "I'm trying my best. You know, I'm trying to find happiness."

"But you ain't gonna find it if you don't love yourself, Travis. People have an innate capacity for love. Parents love their children, lovers do what lovers do. What these idiots don't realise is, instead of constantly trying to direct your love outwards, we should be directing it inwards. If you love yourself, you don't need anyone else. Believe me, life is so much easier this way. It's a fuck of a lot more fun, too."

Declan's companion came over carrying their drinks.

He said, "Can I get you anything?"

"Wouldn't mind a Guinness."

He turned to the girl. "Go and get a pint of Guinness."

She said, "OK," and went back to the bar.

Declan watched her walking away. He said, "I quite like this one. Not much upstairs, but a cracking arse."

I never saw Declan again, but he gave me his business card in case I wanted to stay in touch. He worked for a vacuum cleaner company.

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Declan couldn't have been more wrong. People don't want to find themselves. Why do you think people drink, or play football, or have relationships? They're doing whatever they can to distract themselves from themselves. At least I'm honest about it. I hate myself and nothing's going to change that. I might be lonely and unhappy, but at least I know the reason.

Another day, another drinking session.

It was Christmas Eve and I was sitting in a pub near my flat at lunchtime watching people eat. I was saving my money for more drink, so I couldn't afford to splash out on lunch.

There was a plastic tree in the corner with dancing fairy lights. I was hypnotised by it for a while.

At the neighbouring table was a guy about my age – late twenties, early thirties. He wasn't eating either. He sipped on a large cup of coffee as he frantically scribbled notes on a collection of papers spread out on the table in front of him. Occasionally he'd mumble something I couldn't catch. Sometimes he'd look up, his eyes darting around the room while he thought of more things to write.

I knew who he was, but I didn't want to speak to him. I couldn't help watching him, though.

Eventually he caught me looking, and raised his head in my direction. He was about to carry on scribbling, then he realised.

He smiled. "Alright, McGuiggan?"

I nodded. "Alright, Bailey."

He gathered his papers together, and came over to sit at my table. The twat wasn't invited, but I didn't fancy a fight so I played along.

He said, "Merry Christmas. Long time no see. Must be about ..."

"Twelve years. It's 2008. We left school in '96."

"You left before me, if I remember right. What happened, McGuiggan?"

“Look, call me Travis, alright?”

“OK.” He smiled. “You can call me Howard. Look, I know I was a bit of a dick when I was at school, but maybe we can put all that behind us, yeah?”

“If you like.”

“So, what’s your story, Travis?”

I glared at him. “Why are you so fucking pleased to see me? For fuck’s sake, we hated each other at school.”

“I didn’t hate you, Travis. I respected you, yeah? You were a big influence on me, actually.”

“Really? How the fuck could I be an influence on you?”

“You had a brain. I didn’t. That’s one of the reasons why I got frustrated and took my anger out on other people. I was good at doing tests and stuff, that’s how I ended up in grammar school. But I knew half the kids in the children’s home were smarter than me. They had what you had – *emotional* intelligence, yeah?”

I pulled a face. “What the fuck’s that?”

“It’s like that time you kissed me in the toilets. That was a clever thing to do. You analysed the situation and acted on your instincts. Your instincts were right because you *understand* people. You understand how people relate to each other.”

“No I don’t.”

“Don’t put yourself down, yeah? I’m paying you a compliment.”

“Sorry. I’m not very good with compliments.”

“What I’m saying is, I spent the whole of my teenage years trying to latch onto other people. I didn’t have a family, so being part of a group was

really important to me. I kept trying to form a gang, but no one wanted to be in a gang with me. I was a liability. So I went into a downward spiral. Drugs, shoplifting, what have you. I didn't even sit my exams."

"Neither did I."

"Then I found religion. You're the reason I became a Christian, Travis."

I nearly spat my beer in his face. "Fuck off."

"I'm serious."

"You're a *Christian*?"

"Well, not anymore. It helped me out of the hole I was in at the time."

"And this is *my* fault?"

"It's not a bad thing, yeah? Like I say, religion really sorted me out. I was crazy before I found God. I went crazy afterwards, but that's a different story. Ended up with a suspended sentence for ... something or other. I got myself sorted again – properly sorted this time. Now I'm out the other side, and I'm ready to face the world."

"But why me, Howard? What the fuck did I do?"

"You were your own person. You had *inner strength*. Like that day Sweeney was chucking the football at you. I saw God in your eyes that day. You had God on your side, so you didn't need other people. That stayed with me for a long time. Then one day, I was walking past the church and I heard the music and singing coming from inside. I thought about the strength you'd shown that day, and I wanted some for myself. I got it, too."

"But you don't believe anymore?"

Howard peered thoughtfully into his coffee cup. "It's not that I don't *want* to believe. I *can't*."

“Join the club.”

He looked me in the eyes. “It’s still in there, you know. That strength of character. You may not have God anymore, but you’ve still got *you*, yeah?”

I gripped my pint glass and slapped it against the table. I said, “Do I look like I’m fucking happy to you? Do I look like I enjoy being on my own?”

“Well, I don’t want to make assumptions, Travis. It’s been fourteen years after all.”

He smiled at me again. He was looking me up and down, admiring my face.

His staring made me uncomfortable, so I thought I’d change the subject. I gestured towards the papers in his hand. “So, what’s all this? You writing a book or something?”

He said, “No. I found this on the internet. Ever heard of Simon Solomon?”

“Can’t say it rings a bell.”

“I’m not surprised. This should’ve been the biggest news story of the decade, but it’s all been covered up. But I was *there*, Travis. I saw it with my own eyes.” He shoved the papers in my hand. “Read it.”

I took the manuscript, but I could hardly make sense of it – some incoherent ramblings about the number seven and the end of the world.

He said, “This is all true, yeah? This *happened*. It’s not a conspiracy theory, it’s *real*.”

I looked up at him. “It says here the world was supposed to end last year.”

"Yeah, *that* bit's not true, obviously. This is what Simon Solomon said before he got shot. Read the last bit."

I turned to the final page. "He just stops in mid-sentence."

"Exactly. He was dead a second later. The police shot him in the head. I was a copper at the time. I watched it happen."

"Yeah, you mentioned."

I glanced down at the page. A particular line jumped out at me – "the Devil fighting the Devil." I'd heard that somewhere before. I said, "What does this bit mean? The Devil fighting the Devil?"

He said, "I think it just means whatever side you're on, you're gonna lose. As soon as you get involved in fighting for something – religion, politics, family, friends, whatever it is, you're doomed to failure because basically we're all screwed. I don't necessarily agree with that. I want to fight for this. I want to fight for Simon Solomon because he can't speak for himself."

"Good luck with that."

I drained the rest of my glass.

Howard said, "Can I get you another one?"

I got to my feet. "No. I think I'm gonna get off."

"No worries. Have a good Chrimbo, Travis. And a happy New Year. Where are you going?"

I said, "Home, I think. I think I'm going to go home."

I didn't go home that day. I chickened out. I spent Christmas and New Year in my bedsit eating mince pies and reading Dostoyevsky.

I've never been one for New Year's resolutions, but I thought about getting in touch with a few people from the old days. I went on the internet in the library. I found Greg Whitworth on My Space. He's a solicitor in London now. I wanted to leave a comment, but it said I had to sign up first. Fuck that.

I tried giving Rupert a call, but he'd changed his number. I turned up at his house, but he wasn't there either. I tried searching online but couldn't find him listed on any of the hypnotherapy directories. I called the Hypnotherapy Society to enquire, and spoke to a snotty young gentleman who told me Rupert wasn't a member. I asked if there was any other way of getting in touch with him, but the man said, "The problem is, any Thomas, Richard or Harold who's read a pop psychology textbook can claim to be a hypnotherapist. If he's not qualified, I'm afraid your friend won't be a member of any official organisation."

I told the man to go fuck himself and hung up the phone.

It wasn't a big deal, I supposed. I only wanted to apologise.

I typed Brian's name into a search engine, and found his blog. I read a few of the entries, and they made me laugh, although his spelling was appalling. It was classic Brian. I was in there too, but it was more of a walk-on part.

I logged on again the following day so I could read some more, but I found the whole thing had been deleted. Brian didn't leave an explanation, or even any contact details.

I'm sure our paths will cross again one day. That's the way it works, I've found. It doesn't matter how hard you try, there's no getting away from other people. I've always said that. Life would be fine if it wasn't for other fucking people.

31.

It was a cold Sunday morning in January. Water filled the air and clung to my clothes as I sat at the bus stop. The mist turned the city as grey as the sky.

I got on the bus, sat down and rubbed my hands on my legs. I could've brought my hat and scarf but I didn't realise how cold it was going to be.

There were a handful of passengers – elderly couples and a few people sitting on their own. I sat at the back watching people's hats and bald patches as we left Manchester.

The hills barged into view as we sped over the bypass. The hills were grey as well, but that's the way I remembered them – like huge solid clouds consuming the sky.

My parents' place was about fifteen minutes from the bus stop. It was raining, so I power-walked the whole way, past the park I used to drink in and the industrial estate me and Sammy stole the car from. It was the same as it ever was, but the dimensions were different. Buildings seemed smaller now. Roads were narrower.

My hair was sopping wet, so I swept my fringe back, letting the liquid drip down my forehead.

I was soaked when I arrived at the door. The doorbell wasn't working, so I knocked with both hands. I just wanted to get out of the rain.

I caught sight of my mum's fuzzy outline through the frosted glass. She must've seen a similar image of me before she opened the door – all distorted and misshapen.

She stood there, staring through the glass. She waited half a minute before yanking the door open and pulling me into her arms on the doormat.

Her hair was longer and frizzier, with extra grey bits. Everything else was the same. Same flowery clothes, same waft of perfume. Our bodies were crushed together.

Neither of us said a word for a while. She wept softly on my shoulder.

I was still half in and half out the door. Rain was dripping down the back of my neck.

I said, "Mum."

She said, "Don't. Please just don't say anything for a moment. I'm not ready."

She stood back and looked me up and down. Tears were still running and she wiped them on her sleeve.

She said, "I'll put the kettle on. Go and sit in the living room. Just give me a minute. I need a minute."

I went inside and sat on the sofa. I could hear her pacing up and down the kitchen floor trying to control her breathing.

I looked around the room. There were no pictures of me on the walls, but my postcards were lined up on the mantelpiece like trophies.

My mum brought two mugs of tea through and sat down in the chair by the window.

I said, "Mum. I just want to say I'm really sorry. OK?"

"Don't."

"Why?"

“Travis, you don’t need to apologise to me. I need to apologise to you. I didn’t mean to lie to you...”

“Mum, you *really* don’t need to apologise for lying. It’s irrelevant. Really.”

“So, why did you run away, Travis? I must’ve done something to you. Something awful.”

“You didn’t, Mum. I’m *stupid*. That’s why I ran away. I was just being really, really ...”

“Don’t say that. You were the cleverest boy in your class. Your teachers always said.”

“Yeah, but Mum, there’s different types of intelligence. I didn’t have *emotional* intelligence back then. I wasn’t unhappy with you. I never hated you for anything. I was unhappy with myself. I thought I was fighting other people, but I was fighting with myself the whole time. And if you fight with yourself, you’re not going to win.”

She looked at me, her eyes weary. “Why did you leave it so long, Travis? It’s been nearly thirteen years. Almost half your lifetime.”

“Stubbornness, I suppose.”

She tutted and waved an arm in the air. “*Stubbornness*? Well, I don’t know who you got that from.”

She jumped as the back door opened.

We sat frozen in our seats as my dad hung up his coat in the hall.

He paused for a moment before coming in. Maybe he could smell something different in the air.

His face poked round the doorframe, thinner and paler than the image in my mind. He was a foot shorter than I remembered him as well.

As soon as he saw me, his teeth nearly leapt out of his face.
“Travis! Son, how the bloody hell are you?”

He grabbed my hand and shook it wildly.

He turned to my mum. “I told you, didn’t I? I bloody told you he’d be back! Well, this calls for a celebration, my lad! Howsabout a beer?”

I said, “I’ll just have a cup of tea, dad.”

“Well, suit yourself. I’m having a beer. The doctor says beer’s alright in moderation.”

He marched off to the kitchen.

My mum said, “I’m sorry to break this to you, Travis, but your dad had a heart attack last summer. He’s recovered now. He’s back at work.”

I said, “He’s looking very well.”

“Yes. He’s given up red meat.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here.”

“It’s all in the past now. Time to move on.”

“OK. No more apologies. That’s a promise. And I don’t want to hear any out of you, either.”

“Sorry.”

My mum put her hand to her lips and we laughed.

She looked beautiful when she laughed. I felt like crying. I felt like punching myself in the face and yelling, asking why we had to end up with all these wasted years. But I couldn’t, because we’d promised to put the past behind us.

My dad came back with his beer, and my mum went off to cook us a meal.

I chatted to my dad for a while. We talked about all sorts. His business, my job, the football. I hadn't seen a game in years, but I picked up enough from workmates to know what he was on about.

The funny thing was, my dad didn't support a team. He watched all the games as a neutral. I asked him if he had a favourite.

He said, "It's not about winning or losing as far as I'm concerned. That's what's so great about the game. It's not bad guys verses good guys. Everyone has an equal right to win, and victory goes to the team who play the best. Of course, the club with the most money usually wins, but that's a different argument. In principle, everyone has an equal chance."

I said, "So, it's just like life. Everyone's equal but some people are more equal than others."

He nodded. "George Orwell."

I smiled. "How'd you know that?"

He smiled back and winked. "Your mother says it sometimes. You see, I listen to her occasionally."

We laughed.

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My mum made roast chicken with potatoes and veg. Me and my dad had the legs, and mum had the breast.

I ate the skin first, sucking back the grease and chewing on it extra long to savour the flavour. I picked up the leg with a napkin to stop the juice running over my hand, and peeled the meat off with my teeth, strip by strip.

My dad said, "This is bloody good chicken, love."

I said, "Yeah. Thanks, Mum."

She watched me polish off the vegetables. I didn't usually like being looked at, but I liked her staring at me like that.

She said, "Thank you for coming home, Travis."

I said, "I thought I might stay here for a while. If that's OK?"

"Of course it's OK. We need to spend some time together. It's been a long time."

I said, "Do you know how old I'm gonna be this year?"

She said, "Yes, Travis, of course I know. You're going to be thirty."

My mum got emotional again, and grabbed hold of the pepper grinder, fiddling with it while she blinked back the tears,

My dad smiled at me across the table, all teeth and eyes. He said, "Do you want any more meat?"

I said, "It's alright. Maybe later. There's plenty of time."

We didn't speak for a while. The silence was gorgeous. No traffic noise, no neighbours shouting, or sudden cracks in the night you'd prefer to pretend weren't gunshots. I could've lost myself in that quiet.

I didn't want to say anything, but I knew there'd be plenty of time to tell them about where I'd been and what I'd been doing. At the same time, I didn't want to reveal anything to them, because I wanted to forget everything, and maybe that was the only way to change. If that meant they didn't really know me, or no one really knew me, not even myself, then that was OK because they could get to know the new Travis McGuigan, whoever that is. We'll have to find out. I'd be interested to meet him as much as anyone else.

I washed up after tea, scraping the grease from the plates under the running tap with a sponge soaked in Fairy Liquid. The sink started filling with brown water, so I pulled something out of the plughole and held it up to the light.

It was a wishbone, dripping with dirty bubbles. It was funny how I hadn't noticed it there. It was like a tiny arm.

I snapped it in half.

EPILOGUE

February 2009. Two men walked into Manchester's Arndale Shopping Centre.

Brian composed his own entry for the history books as he walked. He tried to remain modest, but there was no doubt in his mind that they would make history today. It may end up being a footnote rather than a book or a chapter, but it was history nonetheless. It was important.

Two men.

Two men walked into the Arndale Centre. Perhaps a couple of years ago, you could've called them boys, but they were men now.

Hang on. History books don't talk like this, do they? Stick to the facts, Brian. Details.

The men wore warm padded clothing and rucksacks. They took different entrances so as not to arouse suspicion. Their hearts were pounding and their mouths were dry with the anticipation of what was about to happen.

Do history books really talk like this?

Who cares?

Brian's narrative came to an end as he approached the railings near the escalators where his companion waited for him.

History began at that moment.

"Hello Howard," said Brian.

"Hello Brian," said Howard. "Are you ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

On a pre-arranged signal, they reached up to their rucksacks and clicked open the plastic straps. They took out their thick steel manacles and fastened themselves to the railings.

“This is gonna be great,” said Brian.

Howard nodded vigorously as he surveyed the crowded building. Shoppers streamed past with coloured carrier bags, too caught up in their own thoughts and conversations to question them.

“Bunch of idiots,” Howard muttered.

“Who’s an idiot?” said Brian.

Howard gestured towards the crowd.

“They’re just people,” said Brian. “It’s people we’re doing this for.”

“So why doesn’t anyone care?”

“It’s not that they don’t care,” said Brian. “They don’t know who we are, or why we’re here.”

Howard smiled. “Shall we tell them?”

Brian smiled back. “Of course.”

Howard raised his free arm in the air and hollered, “TRUTH, JUSTICE AND PEACE!”

“TRUTH, JUSTICE AND PEACE!” Brian chimed in, raising his arm and extending two fingers, noting with some amusement that he was offering a peace sign to half the room and a fuck-you to the rest.

Heads turned. A few people stopped to watch. A toddler ran up to Brian and started playing with his chain until her mother pulled her away, flashing them an injured look.

They continued:

“TRUTH, JUSTICE AND PEACE! TRUTH, JUSTICE AND PEACE!”

A security guard broke through their small gathering of onlookers, advising shoppers to move along.

Howard and Brian stopped chanting as the man approached.

The security guard smiled, with that uneasy mix of animosity and customer service training they'd both grown to recognise in various officials.

“Alright, lads?” he said.

“Alright,” they said.

“I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news for you, gents. It’s against the rules to demonstrate anywhere on these premises.”

“All the more reason to do it,” said Howard.

The security guard’s smile wavered slightly. “I’m afraid I’ll have to escort you outside, sir.”

Howard raised his manacled hand in an exaggerated shrug. “You’ll have a job.”

“Have you got a key for those things?”

Howard nodded. “I took the precaution of sticking the keys up my arse. I’d advise against trying to retrieve them unless you want to be sued for sexual assault.”

“You know it wouldn’t be too much trouble for me to cut through those chains, sir.”

Howard smiled. “I think it’s only fair to inform you I have a potentially fatal heart condition. Any physical force used against me could result in instant death. I assume you don’t want to risk a manslaughter charge?”

"Same goes for me," said Brian cheerfully.

The security guard looked from one to the other. "You've *both* got serious heart conditions?"

"Yes."

"That's convenient."

"It is rather, isn't it?"

"Do you have any documentation to prove that?"

"No," said Howard. "We're banking on you being unwilling to take the risk."

"You realise, sir," said the guard, "I have no other option than to call the police."

Howard's face flushed with self-satisfaction. "That's the best idea I've heard all day!"

As the guard departed, they raised their arms again, chanting, "TRUTH, JUSTICE AND PEACE! TRUTH, JUSTICE AND PEACE! TRUTH, JUSTICE AND PEACE!"

Passers by took pictures on their mobiles. A few shoppers asked what they were protesting against, and were politely shocked by their explanation. One man offered to sign their petition, but they didn't actually have a petition.

"My advice," said Brian, "is start your own. We need all the help we can get. I'll be the first to sign it."

The man thanked him and took his phone number.

A group of teenagers in baseball caps and stripy t-shirts paraded past, flashing wanker signs. "*Have a bath!*" one of them roared, while his gathering cracked into laughter.

"Ignore them," said Brian. "They're too young to understand."

"Thanks," said Howard, watching as the teenagers piled into the lift. "Sometimes I need you to remind me people are worth believing in."

Brian nodded. "Sometimes I need you to remind me people are arseholes."

A pair of police officers arrived, swinging their arms in unison as they marched towards them. As they got nearer, one of the officers broke into a grin.

"Howard!" he greeted. "Long time no see!"

"Alright Mike?" said Howard.

"Sorry to ask, mate, but what've you got in the rucksacks?"

"Just food and drink," said Howard. "And a couple of pillows and sleeping bags. We're thinking this might take a while."

The officer checked their bags and handed them back.

"So, what's this all about?" he said.

"Thanks for asking," said Howard. He turned to Brian. "Do you want to tell him, or shall I?"

"Why don't we both tell him?" said Brian.

"Sounds good."

The officer waited patiently for their reply.

"We're not demanding that you change the world," said Howard.

"We're not demanding that you feed the hungry, heal the sick or clothe the naked," said Brian.

"What we demand," said Howard, "is truth, justice and peace."

“And an apology,” Brian added, “for the murder of Simon Solomon.”

The officer’s head jerked. Brian and Howard smiled at him.

“You’re right,” said the officer. “This might take a while. I think I’d better go make a phone call. Pardon me, lads.”

The police departed. Brian and Howard took a seat on the floor.

There was no need to shout anymore.

They sat there in silence. As the afternoon drew to a close, the shoppers went home, and shutters were pulled over the fronts of the stores. A security guard positioned himself a few metres across from them, awaiting further instructions. He didn’t speak to them, or bother them in any way. They hardly knew the man was there.

Occasionally they’d look at each other, and something indefinable passed between them. Neither Brian nor Howard could explain what it was, but they didn’t need to. They were comfortable exactly as they were. They could have stayed chained to the railings for a lifetime. It was like home.

THE END

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