

BARNACLE BRAT

(a dark comedy for grown-ups)

Adrian Baldwin

Also by Adrian Baldwin

Novels:

BARNACLE BRAT
STANLEY McCLOUD MUST DIE!
THE SNOWMAN AND THE SCARECROW

Shorts:

PIED!
EGOR'S EMPORIUM
BLOWN
ONE SMALL STEP FOR (A) MAN
THE AMAZING XANDRA LEE vs NED SWANN
FREAKSHOW (A SHOW FOR FREAKS)
TREACHERY

Episodic Series:

DEVIL'S ACRE (Episode 1: The Great Stink)

Dark Comedy Fiction

Books: Novels and Short Stories
for Grown-Ups

Welcome to my World

Copyright © Adrian Baldwin 2013

First Edition. Published in 2013

Version BB25062022

All characters and situations in this book are entirely imaginary and any resemblance to actual events or real persons– living or dead – is purely coincidental.

The right of Adrian Baldwin to be identified as the Author of this Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, copied, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written consent of the copyright holder, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Body text set in Georgia.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1983087684

For James Alan Baldwin (1934-2012)

Acknowledgements and a Warning

Firstly, the warning: As it states on the cover, this is a novel aimed at *grown-ups*. The story is *not* for youngsters. Why? Because some of my characters use Adult Language; often foul, blasphemous, or sexually charged – on several occasions, *all three*. I didn't necessarily *want* them to but sometimes they insisted. That's characters for you! Some of them can be a right bunch of f***ers.

Okay, now I've got that out of the way, the acknowledgements:

Kane Baldwin. Despite my regular nit-picky interrogations on all matters key-cutting, shoe-repairs, trophy-engraving and the like, he kept his humour and patience throughout.

I'd also like to gratefully recognise the help of my early-readers; in particular: Sandra Baldwin. Bronwen Brooks. Maggie Fitzpatrick-Reeves. Their feedback and ability to spot typos was invaluable. If *you* should find any errors, glaring or otherwise, that slipped through the net, they are all mine.

And a few final thanks need go to the following:

Film-maker/photographer/artist, Marco Zaffino: his beautiful sketch work was gratefully incorporated into the front cover design.

Christopher Hansen, who gave kind permission to use his wonderful font, *Carnivalee Freakshow*, throughout **BARNACLE BRAT**

And last, but certainly not least, I'd like to sincerely thank all my Left 4 Dead gaming comrades for their online-support and encouragement over the last couple of years; especially: Swampbeetle, FeCKiT, Matt, Boudicca, Rossi, Danbarino, Scooper, Izzy, Shane, Lulu, Midge, Metzi, Ronnie, Zobble, Hazz, Con-Angel, and yes, even Adski – plus all the other (far too many to mention) members of the Twisted Fire-\$tarters Clan.

Here's to our battle cry: *'I've got a Molly and I know how to use it!!'*

Front Cover Art/Design by Adrian Baldwin & Marco Zaffino
Rear Cover, Spine & Frontispiece Art/Design by Adrian Baldwin

Photo of James Alan Baldwin and the author by Ken Baldwin
(by kind permission of Ken's family: Ruth, Lynne, Julie and Christine)

BARNACLE BRAT

(a dark comedy for grown-ups)

‘I don’t know where I’m going from here
but I promise it won’t be boring.’

- David Bowie

PROLOGUE

The bit where nobody knows what's going on

Leon Blank awoke to find himself hanging upside-down, seatbelt cutting into his shoulder like a knife. He coughed and a shudder of pain shot through his chest and lit up his neck. One ear encountered a high-frequency hum. His eyes, dazzled by light, could take nothing in.

Until a few minutes ago, 'Betty', a vintage Volkswagen Beetle, had been Lester and Veronica's pride and joy; now, she was a creaking, overturned, twisted metal shell – a write-off beset by fumes and threads of pallid smoke.

As his vision adjusted, Leon caught sight of a section of face in the rear-view mirror. A familiar blue eye, now smoke-smudged and puffy, blinked back. Wiping the eye, he aligned the reflection, squinted, and recoiled sharply.

This is what he saw:

His parents; in the back, also suspended in seatbelts.

Despite their situation, the tethered sexagenarians appeared as great bats, experiencing nothing more traumatic than a pre-flight nap. A single thought poked its silly head out of the dusty cellar that was Leon's fuddled mind: *Sixty-year-olds look much older upside-down*. He immediately berated himself for thinking so. Then, as if synchronised, their eyes blinked open. They looked akin to startled Victorian chimney-sweeps.

'Oh shit!' blurted Leon.

Veronica gave him a familiar scowl. 'Language, Leon.'

Leon shouted over the hum in his ear: *'What?'*

'Language.'

'Oh, right! Sorry, Ma!'

'And there's no need to yell.'

'What the fuck happened?' asked Lester, checking his hearing-aid was in place as he looked around.

'Lester, please!' yelled Veronica.

What the fuck happened? An appropriate question, and exactly what Leon was thinking. Encumbered by a stiffening, crooked neck, he exploded with puzzled, blurry eyes.

To the front, immediately behind gnarled dashboard and cracked windscreen, Leon identified crumpled bonnet and a snatch of iron railings bridged by stone wall. By his head he discerned a section of pavement wet with rain, and beyond, to his right, colouring the edge of his peripheral vision, a Royal Mail

letterbox, shining like a bale-fire, about as red as red can be, everything illuminated, as it was, by Betty's headlights reflecting off the wall.

Kneading his stony neck, he turned off the lights, slowly worked his head to the side, and saw that it was night. A black sky hung like an inky void under the inverted world outside. Suspended above the nothingness, street lights investigated rain-soaked road, their reflections attempting hopeless gatherings against the muddling downpour. Leon watched, spellbound, as the heavy rain poured 'upward', drenching the surrounding palette of sodium-orange and slug-grey. He had always been fascinated by rain, especially *hard* rain – the look of it, the sounds it made – but this upside-down rain was something else.

As it dawned on Leon that he couldn't feel his legs, and he worried that this might be a bad sign, a coughing fit seized him. The convulsions rattled his lungs, scorched dry by vapours, and sent a whole new wave of suffering through his neck and chest.

When the pain subsided, he noticed the high-pitched whine in his ear had dropped to a low drone. Over the still-running engine he heard a thunderous pitter-patter above his feet: rainstorm pelting the vehicle's underside. The deluge almost hissed as it splashed all around.

Putting the worsening heavy weather to one side for a moment, Leon's mind tried to take stock. He reviewed the topsy-turvy perspective and clear evidence of a road traffic accident but for some reason his brain wouldn't process them into anything that made sense. His *Now* was an *After* with no awareness of a *Before*.

Leon acquiesced to his mental disorientation, accepted it as easily as the physically absurd situation he'd found himself in. Anyone who knew him well would probably not be surprised; he had a well-established, not-so-rare personality trait: he would regularly become sidetracked, often by trivialities – sometimes getting involved to the point of obsession – and this occasionally resulted in disconnects from 'serious matters'.

But why *tell* you when we could just as easily *show* you?

Here's an example:

Once, when walking to school (Leon must have been about twelve) his shoes developed a faint squeak; both of them – at the same time! Leon thought this far too improbable to be mere coincidence and the incident really freaked him out. He spent hours crawling around the kitchen floor, shoes on hands, ears low to the tiles, attempting to place the precise location (somewhere in or around the heel area) of the offending squeaks. Is that

strange behaviour? Yes, okay, a little, but listen to this: on the following day, Leon learned that his chemistry teacher, Mr Fitton, had become the seventh victim of the so-called *Head Honcho*, a serial killer whose 'signature' was to leave his victims' heads in one place, limbed torsos in another; both in plain view but usually many miles apart. An Aberdeenshire lady out dawn-walking her dog discovered the chemistry teacher's severed head on *The Wallace Monument* in a see-through plastic bag suspended from William Wallace's extended hand.

Mr Fitton was still wearing his bifocals.

The limbed torso was found early the same morning by cleaning staff, in a passport photo booth at Watford Gap services on the M1. Someone, presumably the killer, had taken time to pose the body and insert four pounds. A strip of neck-and-shoulders photos remained untouched in the dispensing slot. Cardboard signs bearing various messages had always been left draped around the torsos' stubby necks and this case was no different. Mr Fitton's sign read:

HOW DO I LOOK? I CAN'T SEE A THING WITHOUT MY GLASSES.

A senior police officer insisted they *were* doing everything possible but admitted they remained baffled by the murderer's motives, sick sense of humour, and speed of transit (suggestions of *two* serial killers working in tandem were pooh-pooed). When Leon heard news of the gruesome discoveries, during morning assembly, he never flinched – his mind was on his shoes. He did think about it later. How it was a shame for 'Fitz' and the Fitton family. But he also told himself '*These things happen*' and quickly got back to scabbling about on all fours to further investigate *The Great Shoe-Quacks Mystery* (he didn't actually name it thus, but he could have done).

Leon had been this way for as long as his parents could remember. They had never regarded it as a problem, though. And for Leon, it was just 'normal'. *His* normal: easily deflected from the moment at hand to a moment in his head. Even now, dangling in an upturned car, Leon remained partly detached. An acceptance of the apparent inevitability of dire circumstance, a gentle disconnection from his discomfort, his parents' pendulous restraint, and the preposterous nature of their collective situation – none of these surprised him.

What *did* surprise him was the deep voice from his left:

'Don't worry, Leon, old chap. We'll have you out of here in a jiffy.'

Leon worked his stiff neck far enough to see.

Fettered inelegantly under the passenger seat, detained by tangled seatbelt, hung a ventriloquist's doll: four-foot-tall (give or

take), rosy cheeks, thick eyebrows, kiss-curl of hair pressed flat against polished wooden brow, and a fancy smoking jacket over silk pyjamas.

‘Who the fuck are you?’ Leon asked, calm as you like.

‘*Leon!*’ Leon heard his mother bark.

The dummy’s jaw slid open to reveal a toothy grin. ‘Lord Archibald.’ He made it sound like a formal announcement.

‘*Lord Archibald?*’ Leon echoed.

‘’Tis so. We spoke earlier. Dost thou not remember?’ Lord Archibald’s big eyes clacked as they blinked.

‘What the hell are you talking about?’

‘And do call me Archie, dear boy. All my friends do.’ Lord Archibald projected his voice as if he were a stage-actor delivering Shakespeare; booming and dramatic, the manner massively at odds with his diminutive frame. Leon couldn’t help it; he laughed.

‘What’s he laughing at?’ Lester wafted his liver-spotted hands at a pall of smoke hanging between him and the passenger seat. ‘Leon, who are you talking to?’

Veronica’s handbag had come to rest on the upholstered car roof, directly below her head. Rummaging, she replied: ‘It’ll be his imaginary friend again.’

Leon did his best to address the dummy face on. ‘Don’t listen to mum, she gets confused.’ He threw ‘Twenty-three now, Ma!’ over his shoulder then readdressed Lord Archibald: ‘I haven’t had an imaginary friend since I was six.’

‘*Fifteen,*’ corrected mother, bringing a compact to her face. ‘Oh, look at the state of me,’ she wailed. ‘My make-up’s all over the shop. No, don’t look at me, Lester. Not till I’ve put some lippy on.’ A hand plunged back into the bag.

‘I was ten at most,’ Leon persisted. ‘Thirteen, tops.’

Lord Archibald wasn’t listening. He was foraging the outer pockets of his smoking jacket. Lester wasn’t listening either; he was watching Veronica, aided by her mirror, apply a circle of pink to her lips.

‘His name was Mr Pickles,’ Leon went on.

‘*Who* was?’ Archie boomed.

‘The make-believe friend I had when I was—’ Leon’s eyes met his mother’s in the rear-view mirror and he settled on ‘when I was younger’ before explaining further: ‘He was a three-foot-tall marionette. Bit lanky, awkward, and kind of funny looking. Said he liked girls but found it hard to talk to them. I remember he got depressed on a regular basis.’

‘Fascinating,’ Archie remarked unconvincingly, his attention focused on exploration. Unable to find what he sought in the smoking jacket’s outer pockets, he switched inside.

‘Yeah, I’m not sure he was good for me growing up. Really, I mean, what kid needs a *depressed* imaginary friend? I used to tell him stories to try and cheer him up. Other times, I’d put on music, make him dance . . .’

‘Wait.’ Archie paused his search. ‘You made your depressed imaginary friend . . . do an imaginary dance . . . by moving his imaginary strings?’

‘How else?’ asked Leon. ‘I made him talk, too.’

‘Bit creepy,’ decided Archie, not moving his mouth.

‘*Creepy?* It’s not creepy. Most kids make their imaginary friends talk. Anyway, what about you?’

‘What about me?’

Lord Archibald expanded already-bulbous eyes.

‘Well, it may have escaped your notice, but you are . . . how shall I put this . . . *a dummy.*’

Archie’s hands now shifted to pyjama-trouser pockets, patted them stiffly. ‘I prefer the term “Mannequin” myself.’

‘Whatever. You can’t talk without help.’

Archie shook his head. ‘You silly boy, do you see anyone helping me?’ His eyes flicked side to side then returned to Leon. He waited, wide-eyed, staring. ‘Well, do ya, punk?’

‘No, but— hang on . . . “*Punk?*”’

‘Aha!’ the dummy’s bottom jaw shifted, established a satisfied smile. A Swiss Army knife was presented for inspection. ‘Say hello to my little friend.’

Leon could accept just about anything so long as he wasn’t in obvious and immediate life-threatening danger. Even hanging downside-up in a wrecked car seemed kind of benign – had Betty been stuck on railroad tracks, an express train hurtling towards her, it would have been different – but threats of physical violence, be they real or perceived, always freaked him out. And in a battle between Flight and Fight, with Leon, Flight always won. So, true to form, the sight of a knife, no matter how Swiss or useful or unopened, only a metre from his jugular, sent him into a mild panic that kick-started a continuous click-click-clicking on his seatbelt release-button.

‘Good idea, but you won’t escape that way,’ advised Archie. ‘Not until I’ve unleashed Excalibur.’ He flourished the puny (still unopened) knife as if it were a sword.

Leon thought the dummy's technique less King Arthur more D'Artagnan but this was no time for quibbling. Bottom line: Archie looked mental – menacingly so.

'Mum, Dad, try your seatbelts! Try them *now!*'

For a while, Betty's interior reverberated to the sound of much seatbelt release-switch pressing but Lester's efforts on Veronica's switch (she was busy loading a mascara brush) and his own, proved fruitless – as did Leon's.

'Told you,' Archie sniffed. 'The mechanisms are all buckled. Let us have no more of this frivolous time-wasting.'

'Don't listen to him, Dad. Keep trying.'

'I *am* trying, son.' Of Veronica he asked: 'Sorry, who is it I'm not listening to?'

Veronica didn't reply – she was glooping her lashes.

'For 'tis blade time!' announced Lord Archibald dramatically – before anti-climatically setting about systematically prying open the Swiss Army knife attachments in search of the actual *knife* part. No mean feat for wooden fingers. First out: tweezers, then a corkscrew followed by a can opener, bottle opener, flat-head screwdriver, Phillips screwdriver, and magnifying-glass; a nail file, scissors, ballpoint pen, fish-scaler, pliers, a miniature saw, and a cheese fork.

Archie sighed, defeated. 'Damn the Swiss and their love of cheese!' he boomed.

'What's up?' Leon asked. 'Can't find your sword?'

'You may scoff but how am I supposed to cut you free without a blade?' Archie submitted the teeny two-tine utensil. '*With this cheese fork?*'

"*Cut you free.*" Welcome words which would have pacified Leon had he not already been calmed by the plodding procession of diminutive-accessory openings (all sense of imminent blade-peril had subsided with the magnifying-glass, all attempts at escape by way of seatbelt release-button abandoned at the fish-scaler).

'A Swiss army knife without a knife,' questioned Leon. 'Surely, that's an oversight.'

'I remember now!' Archie jerked his hand as if to click fingers. 'It fell out when I used it to remove a splinter.'

'*Fell out?* What kind of cheap— hang on . . . *a splinter?* Are you winding me up?'

'Not to worry, old boy.' Archie folded away all but the miniature saw blade. 'I'm sure this will do the trick.'

Leon looked doubtful.

The dummy shaped to place the serrated saw edge under Leon's seatbelt. 'No, them first,' Leon urged, nodding towards his parents. The nod made him wince.

'Really? Well, okay, but remember our deal.'

'Deal? What deal?'

'One moment, please.' Lord Archibald turned, as best he could upside-down, to face Veronica (who was attempting to do something with her hair despite gravity mocking her efforts by pulling every greying strand away from her head). Reaching out his tiny tool, Archie kicked and wriggled within his loose harness like a trapped spider-monkey. 'Balderdash; short by inches!'

'Mind my dress,' cautioned Veronica. Then she landed in a heap on the car's roof lining (Lester's dogged seatbelt-popping had paid off). Leon thought the colourful expletive she let out understandable given the situation.

Veronica whimpered as bits of smashed rear window cut into her back.

'You okay, Vee?' asked Lester, still clicking his own seatbelt release-button.

'Oh, yes. Never better. Nearly landed on Betty's roof lining but luckily, all these pieces of broken glass were here to break my fall.'

'See, persistence pays, Leon,' grinned Lester. 'Persistence pays.' And, if proof were needed, Lester's own seatbelt now popped. He landed face-down on top of Veronica.

'Bloody hell, Lester, you dozy great twat!'

A little surprising but again excusable, thought Leon.

'Sorry, Vee,' apologised Lester.

Old hands now moved into action: Veronica braced her palms under Lester's broad shoulders as he raised his considerable weight from her slender frame. Fragments of glass cut into Lester's knees and hands but he didn't complain. Leon, one hand on his neck, strained to clock their scrunching and scraping.

'Are you okay?' he asked.

To Leon, Archie prompted, 'Oh do keep still.' He'd slipped the little saw under the shoulder strap of Leon's seatbelt and was working it back and forth. The exertion made his hanging wee body swing to and fro. After just a few strokes, a bunch of damaged wires dropped out of a hole in the dashboard. As one, Leon and Archie emitted an involuntary yelp. Some wires, the broken and bare ones, crackled with current. 'Okay, the trick is to remain calm, old boy. Simply remain calm.' Looking far from calm, Archie went into overdrive. 'Look at me,' he barked, jaw and eyelids clacking as he pumped the saw, 'see how calm I am? I'm very calm!'

‘Yes, you look calm. But then you’re made of varnished wood, two substances renowned for their fire-resistant properties.’

The clacking and sawing stopped simultaneously and suddenly. Leon sought an explanation; Lord Archibald held up what remained of the saw. The blade had snapped.

‘Curse the heavens!’ the dummy boomed.

‘Hey, if we *do* get out of this alive,’ Leon remarked, ‘remind me to buy one of those things. They really are amazing.’

Archie blasted ‘Why have you forsaken me!’ through the passenger door’s missing window, shook a fist at the sky and yelled: ‘*FAAATHERRRRRRR!*’

The yell went on for several seconds.

This guy is *seriously* bonkers, thought Leon.

The dummy’s head rotated, owl-like.

‘Seriously bonkers am I? Then scoff no longer as I remind you that my trusty army knife has scissors, remember.’ The broken saw stub was eased into the knife handle then, after a quick fiddle, another attachment coaxed out and presented to Leon with a ‘Ta-da!’

Leon eyed the attachment. ‘Tweezers?’

‘Sorry, not that one. These things all look alike in the handle.’ After yet more fumbling and a scream of ‘They should be colour-coded!’ Archie plucked out another tool.

‘A bottle opener. Perfect.’ Leon stretched out a hand. ‘Why don’t you let me do it?’

Archie jerked the knife away. ‘No, ’tis mine!’

‘But I have opposable thumbs, look.’

Leon presented both thumbs to Archie’s face; flexed and wiggled them (which is pretty much the same thing) then immediately wished he hadn’t – felt it akin to tap-dancing around a legless wheelchair-user singing: ‘*Hey, Stumpy, look at me!*’

Archie’s glare hardened.

The anatomically-superior thumbs retreated to neutral territory as Leon attempted to segue into connected but immaterial reflection: ‘Is it opposable or appposable? Not sure now. I think it might be both.’

‘Nobody toucheth my army knife, knave.’

‘Are you sure? Might be easier for me; not having hands made of pine.’

‘Oak.’

‘*Whatever*, it must be tricky.’

Leon adopted the demeanour of an automaton: wielding stiffened hands as if they were long wooden spoons, randomly

prodding the environment, at one with Archie's disability. 'Not much better than spades, are they, really?'

The dummy's stare was fierce and unblinking.

Leon, back-peddalling: 'In a way.' (Nothing, not even a flutter.) 'In a *good* way.'

In a good way? What am I saying? And why do I seem hell-bent on offending our best, possibly only, chance of getting out of here. Apologise immediately!

'No offence, Archie —'

Good.

'— But it is a bit like watching a donkey trying to tie a shoelace.'

Oh brilliant. Well saved, Leon.

'You know, because of the whole *hoof* thing.'

What?!

'Not that I'm comparing your hands to hoofs. Is it *hoofs* or *hooves*?'

Not helping. Abort, abort. Fast as possible.

'Forget that; doesn't matter. Hey, look! Your knife's monogrammed: "*L.A.*"'

Good spot; keep it going.

'I hadn't noticed that before. How cool is that? *You* talk now.'

Nice.

Lord Archibald's manner brightened immediately. 'Oh yes, thank you, dear boy; how kind.' A wooden fingertip passed affectionately over the knife's fancy lettering. 'One could be forgiven for thinking the initials signify *Los Angeles* but of course—'

'So how's it going with the scissors?'

'Crikey, the scissors! I'd almost forgotten. I do apologise. But fear not, for if I'm not mistaken, and I don't think I am, it should be,' Archie's fingers ran over the closed attachments, 'this one. Yes, I'm certain.'

'Good. Good. Thing is, I don't know if you can tell, what with you being a dummy—'

'Mannequin.'

'But the air in here is packed with fumes. One little spark and—' Leon was interrupted by the sound of metal piercing wood.

'Why is it,' Archie seethed, jabbing himself in the forehead with the flat-head screwdriver, 'that one can never (stab!) find (stab!) what one (stab!) is looking for!'

Leon reached across to prevent further damage.

'Come on, we'll be fine. Just keep looking.'

'Yes, of course,' Archie softened. 'Forgive me, dear boy.'

After folding the screwdriver away, he scanned the knife back and forth over his eyeballs, scrutinising the handle for a hint of scissor. ‘What was that about a little spark?’

Leon considered the self-inflicted slot-shaped hole now residing in the middle of Lord Archibald’s kiss-curl.

‘Nothing,’ Leon replied. ‘No spark. Move on.’

‘Not worried the wiring might suddenly burst into flames, are we?’

‘*Actually, yes.*’

Archie chortled, heartily.

‘Honestly, you’re such a big girl’s blouse.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Don’t you think if the wires were going to ignite they’d have done so by—’

Before he could say ‘now’, two of the wires kissed, fizzed, sparkled and ignited a small but keen fire in the dashboard.

‘You were saying?’

‘Fire! Fire!’ the dummy screamed, his head wobbling around aimlessly. ‘*Do something, boy! DO SOMETHING!*’

CHAPTER ONE

The bit where things start moving

Manchester's 'Metrolink' light-rail overground tram system services the Metropolis and its suburbs, shuffling people, in, out, and around the city, every day bar Christmas day.

It was aboard one of these trams that Poppy first noticed the young man sitting at the other end of the congested carriage: she looked up from her novel and was immediately drawn to the distant look in his soft, oh-so-blue eyes. Was he, too, looking for true love and wondering if his soul-mate was ever going to show up? Was he dreaming of bumping into her on a far-off sandy shore one hot musky afternoon? Did he picture instant, deep affinity, undeniable adoration, and all-consuming attraction? Could he feel cool, playful waves licking at their sun-kissed limbs? Had Blue Eyes, like her, not had sex for six months? Okay, *ten months, dammit!*

(There was no way Poppy could have known, but it had been a lot longer than that for Blue Eyes – *a lot longer!*)

Poppy Winters: an unconventional-looking girl, early twenties, with an individual clothing style and distinctive asymmetrical white Bob flashed with a bold copper-coloured streak; an arty, quirky young woman, free-spirited and free-wheeling, who, although avant-garde in a fashion-sense – from her vintage 1940s Irish Tweed green-and-olive checked overcoat to her monochromatic four-inch-heel ankle boots – had a long-standing love affair with good old-fashioned Romances. And she was definitely open to the idea of one for herself.

The seats near Blue Eyes were taken and the close-encounter-zone around him stuffed with passengers but Poppy had a plan: once the standing had thinned at St. Peter's Square, she would walk by, casually, as the tram made its turn into Piccadilly Gardens, and with perfect timing *accidentally* fall into his lap (managing to hook an arm around his neck without elbowing his face would be a bonus).

Okay, so it wasn't a sharp bend, and the tram, even if it hit a green light at Mosley Street, wouldn't be going much faster than two lovers strolling through Stamford Park, but Poppy was sure she could make the 'mishap' look reasonably convincing; enough, anyway, for it not to appear overly ridiculous and in no way make her look like a predatory slapper and/or potential bunny boiler.

Besides, Blue Eyes wouldn't mind. His soul-mate landing in his lap; what could be better? She would gaze into his soul, flutter the lashes around her sweet green eyes, say 'Oops' and laugh a little – perhaps coquettishly. Then, after taking her time 'struggling' to her feet (she'd play this bit by ear but it would take as many failed attempts as she felt she could get away with), she would, by way of an apology, insist on buying him a lunch-time cappuccino at the city-centre café of his choice – and no, she wouldn't take 'no' for an answer; it was the least she could do after violating his lap (at least twice, perhaps even three or four times) with her bottom.

Poppy thought her bum her best feature and hoped Blue Eyes would be able to gain an accurate sense of its awesome pertness despite the thickness of her coat. She might have tried to flash a little cleavage, but until men were more honest about preferring small-to-medium-sized boobs rather than all those big ugly knockers she continually spotted bouncing their way around the city (*the tramps!*) and she actually had some cleavage to show, she would continue to rely on her delightful goddess-like derrière.

The plan was good; foolproof. And not long to go. For now, she would just watch from afar. It's romantic, she told herself, beautiful, even – and in no way weird; definitely not. There's a big difference between staring and admiring. And what I'm doing is definitely admiring. Just look at him, still with that faraway look in those sexy blue eyes. Poppy sighed, softly. I think your luck might be about to change, Poppy, dear-heart, she mused. And you know what blue plus green means, don't you? Yes. Our children will have turquoise eyes! Nice.

Poppy smiled without thinking and immediately knew the names of their adorable offspring: Emily, Sebastian, Ruby, and Charlotte; Danté, should there be a second boy.

Leon hadn't noticed Poppy Winters; not because the morning rush-hour tram was teeming with travellers, commuters, and early-start shoppers, but because he was focused on the heavysset clown seated directly in front. The one that had taken – unjustifiably, Leon believed – the wall-mounted 'Priority' seat: a single seat meant primarily for those less-abled.

The clown was sleeping, head tilted slightly forward, feet up on the seat beside Leon. The massively over-sized shoes swayed in keeping with the movement of the carriage; the bulbous toecaps beating a rhythm against Leon's arm. As Leon was sitting by the window, he was effectively corralled. If he wanted to get out, he would have to step over the clown's legs, and he didn't fancy doing that. This clown looked evil, even asleep.

Leon was immediately reminded of Pogo, clown alter ego of serial murderer John Wayne Gacy. (Leon had seen *To Catch a Killer*: a film about Gacy's life and infamous killing spree. He'd found it disturbing, freaky, and fascinating-in-a-bad-way. Pretty much how he felt about clowns in general.) Leon didn't remember elongated shoes but everything else looked correct: chalk-white face ruptured by big blue triangles around the eyes; large red-paint mouth fixed in an inane grin (shaped like a hanging bat stretching its wings); the costume: red and white stripes on one side, solid red on the other, pom-poms for buttons; pointy hat (also with pom-poms); and frilly ruff-collar and cuffs. Yes, it was Pogo; he was sure of it.

But where had Pogo come from? Leon hadn't seen him board. Big guy, dressed like a clown; how could he have missed that? He ran a suspicious eye over the snoozing bozo, clocking tiny details often missed on a first sweep: the thin strand of drool extending from one corner of his constant grin; the grubby white gloves; the enormous cluster of helium-filled balloons; the I'm Pogo badge—

Leon took a big shoe-knock as the tram snaked through close bends. Jesus, they really are huge, he thought. They must take ages to polish. Imagine having to resole the fuckers!

Just then, Pogo snarled. Spit spluttered from his angry lips as he began muttering aggressively in his sleep – something dark and malevolent; the voice deep and demonic (this wasn't *The Exorcist* exactly but there were a number of 'Mother-Fuckers' and 'Cock-Suckers' in there; and one 'Donkey-Blower' – though Leon might have misheard that one). Leon flinched as a gloved fist shot out. The balloons bounced over the tram's ceiling lights, separated momentarily, then reassembled as the hand, just inches from Leon's startled mug, pointed an accusing finger . . .

'You,' Pogo spat. 'You little shit!'

After Leon had gone cross-eyed trying to focus on the fingertip, the glove withdrew (the balloons bumping back over the lights) and returned to Pogo's lap. Then the vile sputum-heavy sleep-muttering continued.

Now normally, at awkward, potentially upsetting, or possibly hazardous moments like this, Leon would 'detach', treat the situation lightly, make inappropriate jokes, or think about something completely different. But this time he did nothing. He was mentally stuck, and worse, felt like he was about to freak out. Why though? Getting worked up was generally reserved for trivial but frustratingly annoying matters, like shoe-quacks; or for times when he was clearly in *imminent* life-threatening danger, and that didn't seem to be the case here. Not unless Pogo suddenly

awakened, pulled out a carnival strength-test mallet, stepped right up, and hammered Leon's terrified head deep into his chest cavity (*K'TANG!*). So, why wasn't he detaching like he usually did? For some reason the 'ability' escaped him.

So what *should* I do? Leon wondered. With a favourable result in mind (getting to work, on time, in one piece, with minimum, preferably zero, clown engagement) he weighed up the likely odds of success for the three conventional options.

Freeze:

Initially okay so long as Pogo didn't wake. But Leon couldn't remain inactive indefinitely; he'd miss his stop, be late for work and made to endure another of Reg's *How Lateness Lets Our Customers Down* lectures. Besides, Pogo was bound to wake at some point. *Then what?*

Flight:

Was it physically possible? Even if his legs didn't feel like lead – *and they did* – Leon would still (a) have to step over Pogo's baggy-trousers, (b) need to avoid the big, swaying shoes, and (c) have to take care not to get entangled in balloon strings whilst performing (a) and (b). No, it was too perilous. Leon sensed his legs would be *too* leaden, *too* unwieldy. Flight could only end in disaster. One sudden movement from the tram and Leon would be riding the clown, cowgirl-style. Pogo might not like that. Or he could love it, which might be worse. Before Leon knew it, he'd be stripped naked, forced into a wooden barrel and rodgered senseless through the bung hole. No, thank you.

Fight:

Again, the leady legs thing, but putting that to one side: he could get the first punch in, maybe knock out the clown. Yeah, right. BAM! Say goodnight to the circus, Pogo. Who was he kidding? He'd never biffed anyone in his life. Biffing takes timing, technique, nerve, power. For all he knew, his untested punch might prove to have as much strength as an undernourished daddy-longlegs – one of the nerdy, limp-wristed ones. No, he didn't have the physique for fighting. Operating his computer mouse to machinegun virtual zombies into red mist was one thing, using the hand as an actual weapon to wallop an actual clown, quite another. He could picture it now: He would thump Pogo in the hooter, the nose would make a loud *parp* noise, Pogo's eyes would blink open all annoyed, and Leon would be hilariously and embarrassingly beaten to death with a squeaky clown shoe (this would take several minutes). Once the beating, squeaking and resultant high-pitched yelping had died down, a bunch of Pogo's mates would enter the scene. After dwarfs had

poured buckets of cold custard over the bloody corpse, Munchkins, accompanied by a Mariachi band, would sing '*Ding dong the bitch is dead*' as Oompa-Loompas, Smurfs and carnival midgets celebrated by taking a group whizz on the deceased. Leon didn't fancy that scenario one bit: a farcical-looking clown laughing hysterically behind a whole bunch of 'little people' all acting like obnoxious jackasses? All that, yet *he'd* be the one made to look like a fool. He'd never live it down. He would have to move away – forever. What to do? All options appeared equally unappealing and impractical. The voices in his head argued back and forth: one for this option, one for that, one for the other. *Run! No, don't do anything. Punch the fucker!* (Leon had always heard voices inside his head. Didn't everyone? Wasn't that: just *thinking*?) But he couldn't just sit there, he decided. *Action* was necessary. He had to *do* something; simply *had to*. And goddammit, he would – right now – he would ruddy well get out his notebook!

Oh look, we have the same notebook, Poppy observed, her inner voice excited. That has to be a sign. What are the chances of us both having a black A5 spiral-bound notebook? I'm definitely going to write a poem about this later; something about him, about his kind eyes and unusual aura.

The young man at the end of the carriage was a little odd, in a way she couldn't put her finger on, but that was good, she liked 'Different'. A far cry from the dullards who usually crowded the tram, she believed this one had the potential to be heroic. Yes, she definitely liked what she saw. Her instincts were positively glowing. The artist in her soaked up the visual image, the colours, light, composition; the inner-poet took a snapshot of senses, feelings, and emotions. She would call on these later, probably in her coffee break at Razors Edge, the hairdressers where she worked as a stylist. No time now, she might get 'into it' and miss her stop, or more importantly, the turn. Wordsworth's daffodils didn't wilt in the two years it took him to record them for posterity; she could wait a couple of hours.

As she had another 'soak' – appreciated the scene's mood, textures and perspective – she felt the poetic cogs on the creative side of her brain start twitching. There was an automatic rhyme for carriage, which she instantly rejected as far too obvious and way too square, but what rhymed with dullards? Plenty for tram: clam, cram, exam, flimflam, I am, jam, lamb, scam, swam, wham bam, thank you, Ma'am. *Wham bam, thank you, Ma'am?* Oh no, that wouldn't do, that wouldn't do at all. A girl doesn't wait ten

months and then—*Jesus, where are we!* She checked outside. *Pheew!* They were approaching Cornbrook.

‘Cornbrook, Ladies and Gentlemen,’ a female voice announced over the public address system. ‘This station is Cornbrook.’

The woman sitting next to Poppy rose, moved towards the doors. Alarm bells rang in Poppy’s head. What if Blue Eyes gets off here? Her genius plan would be scuppered. She looked down the carriage, stiffening as the tram settled against the platform.

Stay on, stay on, stay on— Oh jeez, I sound like Mrs Doyle.

The doors shooshed open and a few passengers stepped out. Leon was not one of them; so far, so good. Additional passengers boarded. The doors hissed shut.

‘This is the Piccadilly service,’ reiterated the computerised public address system lady. ‘Next stop Deansgate-Castlefield.’

Just two more stops before the turn, our ‘chance’ encounter, and the start of a bright new future together. We will be like swans, my love – but without the hissing and honking – paired for life, like French Angelfish or Turtle Doves. Yes, Poppy was sure this was going to work.

(Some say sensitive ‘artistic’ types have acute inner voices – one pessimistic, one optimistic – and they do constant battle, back and forth, in a far more exaggerated way than experienced by ‘normal’, less creative souls. This may be why so many artists, musicians, writers, and the like, swing between hopefulness and depression. Make of this what you will.)

Anyway, Poppy’s optimistic voice had spoken; now, just moments after leaving Cornbrook, it was time for a little balance: *Turtle Doves?* What am I talking about? He’s going to get off at Deansgate. I just know it. *Loads* of people get off at Deansgate. *He’s bound to.* Yep, I’m certain. *Deansgate*, definitely Deansgate; either Deansgate or St. Peter’s Square; one or the other.

Then, a bit of back and forth thinking: No, he won’t, not if it’s our destiny to be together. *Destiny?* Balls to that; sometimes destiny needs a little assistance. Right, like *I* can change destiny. Why did I even make a plan? I should *never* have made a plan. I’m not a planner. I’m a creature of spontaneity. Courage, girl, courage! Yes, I should go over there right now and say hello. And then what? . . . I don’t know . . . be spontaneous. Okay, I will!

Just then, as Poppy was transferring weight from her awesomely pert bottom to the soles of her killer ankle boots, a sweaty lard-arsed blob clutching a family-size box of assorted Krispy Kreme doughnuts under massive tits, flopped into the empty seat beside her; his beady black eyes bearing down on her as he wedged her in tight. So tight, Poppy almost squealed.

Leon was feeling better for having acted so positively. He had slipped off his *Left 4 Dead* backpack, taking great care not to elbow a clown shoe, eased out his A5 notebook (a thick one he kept short story ideas in), turned to the back and quietly added Pogo's name to his list: a log he kept.

Leon had noticed *unusual* things, things other people might miss, for as long as he could remember, but during the last few days he'd detected a definite increase in the weirdness (and frequency) of the sightings. *Like what*, you ask? Well, I'll tell you: yesterday he experienced a tomato singing 'I will survive' (it managed the bit about *Going now, and walking out the door* before Leon shut the fridge door), witnessed a fully kitted-out Astronaut in the Chinese Takeaway (Two Wongs), and later, retiring for the night, glanced a foot-long fire ant scurry under his bed (it wasn't there when he checked).

This morning: he heard a voice in his pillow (it instructed him to *Wake Up*, even though he felt sure he was already awake); discovered his toothbrush in the toilet (he suspected Richard of foul-play; perhaps a petty retaliation for some perceived slight); and then, as he'd approached the tram station, he discovered Chicken-Man.

Leon didn't like the look of the man/chicken hybrid. The reaction was instant; something about the costume. But mostly, his confrontational manner: up in everybody's faces, deliberately obstructing their progress.

Chicken-Man was about five-foot-six, had a fluffy yellow body with floppy wing-arms, orange legs culminating in splayed-toed chicken-feet, a big yellow head topped with an orange comb, and a florid human face poking out of a hole underneath a brown beak. He was accosting as many people who entered, exited, or passed the station entrance as he could, despite being ignored by all. On occasion, he would attempt to jovially peck the heads of small children, only for parents to pull, carry, or wheel away their kids, double-time. Leon wondered how long it would be before the bothersome creature got his arse kicked. Not that Leon wished violence upon Chicken-Man. But it would be so much easier to slip by if a little pullet-bashing was taking place. Though Leon abhorred confrontations, he thought taking *advantage of one to avoid one* seemed reasonable. They equalled each other out. That was karma.

From a safe distance, Leon had watched a five minute succession of buttonholing and cold-shoulders, then finally managed to slip by when Chicken-Man became distracted by two

large, unaccompanied dogs taking an unhealthy interest in his egg-dispenser.

Jesus H. Christ!

Leon jumped as Pogo suddenly blurted a tirade of foul-mouthed abuse. The gist, as far as Leon could ascertain, seemed to involve the insertion of unknown objects into places where they couldn't possibly be accommodated. Not without assistance, masses of lubricant, and a large supply of morphine. Leon wiped a glob of clown slobber from his cheek as another surge of slaver oozed over Pogo's chin, made grey/white streaks then drooled down into the ruffled collar. Leon loathed everything about clowns but this one was particularly repugnant.

Eyes back on the log, quietly turning pages, Leon came to the conclusion that the previous sightings had been interesting, entertaining, *amusing* even. Not *unnerving*. Okay, Chicken-Man was a little unsettling, but he wasn't full-on scary – and not potentially dangerous as Leon was now starting to think of Pogo. There was something undeniably and exceptionally disturbing about this dozing, dribbling, sleep-blathering clown. He looked likely to snap awake at any moment and in rousing take a stripy baseball bat to whoever was nearest: proximity bludgeoning (Leon hadn't been able to spot any evidence of baseball bat secretion but reliable conclusions are difficult to make as clown trousers are notoriously loose).

As Leon quietly returned the notebook to his backpack, during the stop at Deansgate, the clown's babbling grew louder and more frenzied – still incomprehensible, but clearly vicious. What was he so riled about? Had there been a fancy-dress bash on somewhere last night and Pogo missed it? Is that why he sounded so incensed? Or was he on his way to a children's birthday party and hated kids? Jeez, could this foul-mouthed fermenting ball of anger really be a children's entertainer? One too many tweaks of his nose (despite hushed warnings: *'Do that once more, Princess, and the next time your parents see that freckly little face, it'll be on the side of a milk-carton'*) or an accidental bursting of a balloon-animal, and surely he'd blow a fuse.

Leon pictured the scene: Pogo, bellowing like a mad bull, charges around the patio, scattering ring-leaders and persistent offenders like rag-dolls to all corners of the garden as onlookers wet their party frocks and crap their best trousers. Some children run screaming into the house. At the kitchen breakfast-bar, enjoying a natter and an afternoon white wine, mothers wonder how many more times they'll have to tell their kids to 'Keep it down out there!' And lying in a heap against the back fence, the

main culprit tries to avoid looking into the clown's eyes, looming right above his own.

'Go on, birthday boy, tug my pants again. I fucking dare you. What's that, Timmy? Speak up! Your arm's broken? Oh, dear. And you want Momma? Well, boo hoo, fuck face, and guess what. When she gets here, I'm gonna stick my hand down her dress. Yeah, that's right, you big cry baby, I'm gonna cop a feel of mommie's tits. How about that?'

Oh this party clown, 'children's entertainer', whatever he was, was evil; Leon just knew it. He needed to move, needed to move *now* – and stealthily like a night-time cat-burglar or POW scaling a perimeter fence under the nose of an inattentive guard.

Backpack clutched to his chest, Leon rose silently to his feet, steadied on a hanging grab-handle and, as if stepping over a laser-tripwire, slowly arched one foot over the clown. As the foot landed lightly on the other side, Pogo opened an eye.

Poppy felt like her lungs had collapsed. Doubted she'd ever talk again. Hadn't been this winded since Lynne Horton had punched her in the breadbasket after finding a rude limerick she'd written about Lynne's reputation for dishing out hand-jobs willy-nilly round the back of the school gym to any sixth-former that so much as looked at her.

This is what Poppy wrote: *There is a fifth-former called Lynne, who offers hand-jobs round the back of the gym. She'll jiggle your pole, until you unload then throw you a wink and a grin.*

What Poppy wanted, besides to breathe again, was to do that slight body-shift people make to let adjacent passengers know they require release, but she was locked in so tight it was impossible. No problem; eyes alone should be enough. She put them on her captor hoping to convey the simple message: *Move it, Jabba!* The tiny, sunken eyes that blinked back might have made her jump, or gasp, had either been physically possible.

'Wanna doughnut?' the big blob asked.

Poppy nodded towards the exit.

Pudgy fingers produced a custard-oozing Chocolate doughnut, brought it close to her face. Perhaps nodding was a bad move.

'Thanks but I'm watching my figure,' she groaned. Being crushed made her voice low and throaty.

'Mind if I watch it, too?' Blobby chortled.

What a joke; he'd hardly taken his beady eyes off what remained visible of her size-8 frame since he'd body-slammed it up against the window. 'If you let me out,' she rasped, 'you'll see a lot more of it.' *Okay, that didn't sound right.*

'You're very pretty,' Blobby drooled.

'Pretty squashed,' Poppy quipped.

'You've got a really sexy voice too – sort of husky.'

'Yeah, I get that a lot; especially when I haven't inhaled for a while.'

'My name's Chumlee,' stated the blob. 'What's yours?'

'Poppy.'

'Nice,' nodded Chumlee.

The over-sized face now went on the move, opened up. His itty-bitty teeth were worn and gappy but together they seized like a shark; one attack severed half the doughnut (held before Poppy's face, the doughnut had appeared huge; against the blob's giant knobbly-potato head, it looked miniscule).

Why, Poppy wondered, do the nutters always sit next to me?

Chumlee chomped and chomped and finally swallowed.

'Listen,' he said, 'do you . . . want to come back to my place?'

Poppy laughed acerbically (as best she could with the restrictions to her diaphragm); Chumlee looked about fifteen – though he might have been thirties or forties, it was hard to tell.

'Yeah, good one,' croaked Poppy. She was starting to sound like an asthmatic. 'And now if you wouldn't mind I really do need to get out.'

'No, you don't.'

'Excuse me?'

'You don't get off till Piccadilly Gardens.' Snaffling the last of the gooey Chocolate Custard, Chumlee chewed noisily.

'How the hell do you know where I—?'

'Seen you before; lots of times,' replied Chumlee spraying crumbs. 'You always get off there.'

Stunned silence for a moment then Poppy politely insisted that she needed to stretch her legs, get the blood flowing again.

'If we went halves on a taxi,' Chumlee sucked sugary residue from his fingers in fevered anticipation, 'we could be there by—'

'Are you serious?'

'Normally, I don't like to jump straight in and ask; I like to take my time, woo a girl – make her laugh.'

Spray food in her hair . . . hold her captive.

'To be honest, I prefer it when *they* make a move on *me*.'

Yeah, that must happen a lot.

Chumlee tilted his massive head, put unblinking eyes on her. 'But you know what girls are like.'

Poppy might have shrugged had it been physically possible.

'– A lot of them just want to flirt and lead a guy on but then when it comes to it –'

'I know. What *are* some of us like?'

'You're not like that, are you?'

'Hey, let's be clear, I'm not leading you on.'

'Great, because some girls –' Chumlee scowled and shook his head, left his thought unfinished, then half an Apple Pie doughnut surrendered to his teeny gnashers.

'Yes, we can be a funny bunch.' Poppy smiled, mostly to calm her captor – and it seemed to work:

Chumlee cooled, grinned; he spoke around a loose ball of mush: 'But I thought as you've been giving me positive signals –'

Poppy's expression disputed that.

'– I thought I'd ask you straight out about coming back to the house. We'd be alone. Both my pare—I mean *housemates* are out.'

Chumlee was now perspiring profusely.

'How old are you, Chum?'

'Old enough.' The Apple Pie doughnut's surviving half now joined the half-eaten first half.

'Well, full marks for trying, wheezed Poppy, 'but I think we're done here.'

Regardless, Chumlee chewed on.

'Look, I don't want to be rude but I really do need to breathe soon.'

'I do. I *love* to be rude.' Yet another doughnut – Strawberry Gloss – rose to Chumlee's sugar-frosted lips.

'Oh, God, no . . . if you're about to do what I think you're about to do, please don't.'

Poppy's sense of confinement grew tenfold as Chumlee's dough-studded oxen tongue pushed its way into the shockingly-pink doughnut.

'Okay, that's it. Move it, Lard Arse!'

The chubby tongue flicked lizard-like inside the rosy hole.

'And I didn't mean the tongue.'

'Mmmm,' groaned Chumlee. 'Thecream if you want me to go fathter.'

'*Oh sweet Jesus.*'

The *Mmmmming* grew louder. People were looking. Poppy's mind fizzed: surely this can't be happening. Wedged in by an elephant-arsed horn-dog and oh no, *Blue Eyes is getting off the tram!* Wait; make that *diving* off the tram. Well, that's something you don't see every day.

The doors clunked shut. Poppy tried to free her arms but only succeeded in jiggling one of Chumlee's boobs.

'MMMMMMM . . .'

'*Taxi!*'

CHAPTER TWO

*The bit where it gets quiet
(The Lull before the coming storms)*

Leon was still thinking, two hours later, despite scuffed knees and a grazed elbow, about how impressive his dive from the tram had been. *Moved so fast, I bet the dozy clown never even saw me.* As he re-imagined the incident for the umpteenth time that morning (working in a few improvements: a tidy new tuck-roll-and-up landing, *no* damage to his backpack, *not* winded, plus high scorecards and enthusiastic applause from those awaiting the Bury tram) something cannon-balled into the side of his head.

Eyes made owlish by safety-goggles, he glanced around and found the mischievous culprit, waving.

Seema Khan: thirtyish, healthy size-14 British Asian of Bangladeshi roots with eyes and hair as black as Indian Ink. She ran the dry-cleaning section with time and smiles for everyone; even Reg – unless he was in one of his moods.

A few words about Keys-n-Stuff:

Like every branch of Keys-n-Stuff (a national company with over two-hundred outlets), this shop offered various services: key-cutting; dry-cleaning; engraving; jewellery- watch- and shoe repairs. A see-through counter housed shoe-care products and engravable items: polishes, insoles, laces, pet tags, lighters, hip flasks, that kind of thing. Walls displayed house- business- and memorial signs. A glass-fronted cabinet held enough cups and trophies to make even Manchester United envious. By the key-cutting machine (where Leon had been cutting a cylinder key until he was so rudely interrupted), a large board paraded a cornucopia of shiny key blanks – thousands of them, row upon row of every conceivable size and type.

Having raised goggles, Leon looked down, past his mucky, maroon bib-apron.

At his feet lay the ‘cannonball’ – a rolled-up sock.

His eyes resurfaced to find Seema now grinning from ear to ear; her teeth as white as the whites of her eyes.

‘Now don’t be doing anything silly, Leon. Reg will be back in a moment. It wouldn’t do to—’

Leon rushed over, hands outstretched, ready to tickle.

Squealing, Seema turned about, and dragging Leon in her wake, tried to disappear headfirst into a rack of cleaned clothes. As her upper body, quivering with laughter, attempted to escape

between clear-plastic garment-bags, Leon pulled on her hips. Together they spawned a bizarre tickling/giggling pushmi-pullyu.

'Leon!' yapped a small familiar voice from the doorway.

Late forties, bald (apart from a clump of wiry grey hair over each ear), Reg stood only five-foot-two in elevated heels but always wore his clean, brown, warehouse-style coat with self-important pride. Bustling up to the counter, he whipped off his wire-framed glasses as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

'Honestly,' bristled Reg, 'I leave the shop for five minutes.'

Leon's boss had an extremely soft tone; barely audible, in fact. Even when he got angry and raised his voice, his utterances still retained a feathery, '*female*' quality. For some reason, this contrast – ineffectual indignation – could get Leon laughing, if he wasn't careful.

'Seema, what on Earth are you doing in there?' Reg demanded to know. 'What *are* you two up to?' As usual, his enquiries carried all the gusto of a fairy fart transported by a light summer breeze.

Suppressing a smile and trying to look as blameless as possible, Leon sidled away, back to the key-cutting machine. Reg waited, furiously polishing his glasses with a hankie, as Seema, top half still lost in dry-cleaning, looked for a semi-believable exit-strategy.

A little history: Seema had put in a good word for Leon when he'd been looking for a temporary job after leaving school, whilst he decided what he *really* wanted to do. The post was meant to last a few weeks, couple of months, tops, but he'd been there ever since. From the start, despite Reg's officious nature, or perhaps because of it, the pair indulged, whenever possible, in playful one-upmanship between themselves. Good-natured sparring was the highlight of their working days. And so, Leon had been tempted to say 'Yes, what *are* you doing in there, Seema?' but as he and Seema had always had a real soft-spot for each other, he decided he couldn't just leave her stewing like that.

'Keep looking, Seema,' Leon advised, his intonation more suggestive than encouraging. 'I'm sure you'll find it.'

'*What?* Oh yes, good idea. Thanks.'

Seema's bottom moved, a reaction to some unseen upper body movement, then the other end brayed: '*Aha!*'

She backed out of the garment-bags, straightened up, and turned, holding aloft an empty coat hanger.

'Oh hi, Reg; didn't hear you come in. Hey, remember that hanger I thought I'd lost? You might not; it was last week. Anyway, panic over – here it is.'

'Really?' doubted Reg. 'An errant coat hanger?'

Seema waved the evidence: undeniable proof.

Reg remounted his spectacles, a stiff finger nudging them into place. 'Well, thank goodness you found it, Seema.'

'Leon helped. *Was* helping. *Had been* helping.'

'I see. So what I witnessed was just Leon helping you look for the said coat hanger?'

Seema nodded. 'Thanks, Leon.'

'No problem,' replied Leon, winking to her as he lowered his goggles. The key-cutting machine buzzed noisily as he resumed cutting the cylinder key.

'Okay, so that's that all sorted,' concluded Seema, raising her voice above the machine. 'Now, how about I make us all a nice cup of tea?' She headed for the utility room (kitchen/rest room/storage area) at the back of the shop.

'Listen, I'm not as green as I am cabbage looking.'

Out of view, Seema shouted 'Sorry, what was that, Reg?' over the noise of tap filling kettle.

'I said: *I'm not as green as I am cabbage looking.*'

No response. Just the sound of Leon blowing metal dust off the newly cut key accompanied by the clatter of mugs and spoons and the drone of a noisy kettle.

Reg shook his head. 'She's not even listening.'

'I don't think she can hear you, Reg.'

'Oh she can hear me. She just doesn't *want* to hear me.'

'Pardon?'

'I said, *She*— oh yes, very clever; very droll.'

Rounding the counter like a scolded orangutan, Reg *accidentally* bumped into Leon. Not hard, but enough to underline managerial displeasure.

'It's about time you grew up,' he quipped.

Leon smiled covertly. That's *so* Reg, he thought.

(Reg did lighten up occasionally, but he spent so much time worrying about surprise visits from his Area Manager, that he was always fussing – especially when it came to his 'No larking around' rule and keeping the shop ship-shape and spotless. His overbearingness was constant; relentless to the point of being comical. Add this to his general nature and it's easy to see why Leon and Seema could never take their boss seriously. Reg knew about all their little giggles and elbows, but for the life of him could not figure out what they found so funny all the time. He wasn't an amusing man. Not in the least. So what was their problem? Reg put it down to childishness and an inability to take life – and work – seriously. Silly, silly staff.)

'All this larking around like kids whenever I'm out of the shop.'

‘Sorry, boss.’

‘Well, it’s got to stop.’ Reg grabbed pliers and a Rockport shoe. ‘Honestly, sometimes I feel like I’m just talking to myself. How many more times do I have to tell you both?’

Leon didn’t answer. He was ‘finishing’ the key; working it against the key-cutting machine’s spinning nylon brush.

As Reg ripped away the Rockport’s worn heel, he kept a watchful eye on Leon’s work. The light finishing process removes any residual roughness from the key and should take only seconds, but Leon’s mind had been drifting more than usual of late, and Reg really needed him to stay focused; they had a lot to do today. Why, only last week, he’d witnessed Leon drift away right in front of a customer. The lady had asked for a duplicate mortice key to be cut; a manual but straight-forward process that should take no more than a minute. Leon said he’d do it immediately if she’d like to wait. She would. As she waited at the counter, Leon placed her original key in the key-cutting machine, placed an uncut key alongside, hit the power switch, and began to match-cut. Twenty-one seconds in – Reg was timing – and Leon had ‘gone’. After ten seconds of inactivity, Reg could stand it no longer and *Ahem*-coughed. Leon came back like he’d never been away, picked up seamlessly from where he’d left off, finished the key, and served the customer.

‘What?’ he’d asked, as he spotted Reg’s shaking head.

Blank by name, blank by nature, Reg had been thinking.

‘Okay, Leon – that should be smooth enough now.’

Turning off the machine, Leon held up the new key, side-by-side with the original, and compared.

‘And check it properly. We had *two* returns last week.’

Two? Listen to him. I must have cut over two hundred keys last week: mortice keys, latch keys, safety keys, car keys, caravan keys, padlock keys—

‘Is it okay?’ Reg asked. (Leon nodded.) ‘Good. Engrave Mrs Hadley’s hip flask next, please; she could be here anytime. Then replace the dodgy eyelets on Mr Worrall’s boots; he’s picking them up at four. Oh, and don’t forget the tan Moccasins still need resoling and polishing. And after that, perhaps you could make a start on—’

‘Tea’s up,’ Seema interrupted, placing a tray of mugs on the counter. ‘Except, we’re out of tea, so I made coffee.’

She passed Reg the BECAUSE I’M THE BOSS mug.

‘There you go, Reg. Hot and strong, just like you.’

Reg tutted; shook his head, but inside, he was beaming.

‘And here’s yours, Leon.’ She whispered into Leon’s ear: ‘Wet and frothy, just like you.’

‘Char Wallah,’ Leon whispered back.

Seema laughed at that. ‘Oh by the way, Reg, is it okay if I leave early tonight? I have to pick up my sister’s new sari for the wedding; only ten minutes or so. Thanks. How’s the coffee?’

‘Not tonight, Seema.’ Reg blew on his beverage. ‘I’m calling a staff meeting.’

‘What a shame,’ noted Leon. ‘After you made coffee, too.’

‘Come on, Reg. It’s only twenty minutes.’

Leon chipped in again: ‘Thought you said *ten*.’

‘Quiet, Mowgli, the adults are talking.’ Seema put herself between Leon and Reg, made her eyes doe-like . . .

‘I can do extra tomorrow.’

Reg shook his head, sipped his drink.

‘Oh great,’ sighed Seema. She knew they were in for another of Reg’s *Thirty Years I’ve Worked In This Shop* lectures (they always started that way).

‘Don’t listen to her, boss. She’s just upset because we’ve run out of sugar.’

‘I am not. I told you, I’m on a diet – for the wedding. Oh, Reg, do we really have to have the lecture— I mean “staff meeting”, *tonight*?’

‘Come on, Seema, it’ll be fun,’ Leon teased. ‘Remember the last one on company rules and regulations? Don’t tell me that wasn’t interesting; eighty-four minutes, sure, but it flew by. So, what’s the topic tonight, boss: Head Office guidelines on customer satisfaction; standards of best practise?’

‘Maybe,’ Reg peered over his glasses, ‘we should have a special one just for you, on the potential dangers of sarcasm on the shop floor.’

‘Ha! In your face.’ Seema all but did a little dance.

‘So, it’s not about Seema’s unprofessional giggling?’

‘Hey! I do not. No more than you.’

‘No, it’s not about Seema’s giggling; or yours, Leon – it’s a refresher course on the Health and Safety issues that can arise from larking about in the workplace. And we’ll keep having them until the message gets through.’ Reg eyed them both. ‘Right?’

‘*Right*,’ drawled Leon and Seema in unison.

‘Good. Now I need to phone Head Office, order more stock. Can I leave you two to run the shop for five minutes?’ (The staff nodded.) ‘Good.’ Reg carried his mug to the door of the back room, turned, urged, ‘Well, get your skates on, please, there’s lots to do,’ then disappeared.

Seema made like she was going to hit Leon with the coat hanger and he accidentally let out a squeal which surprised both of them. He would certainly have been ribbed about it had Seema not been preoccupied with disappointment.

‘Can’t believe he won’t let me pick up the sari,’ she seethed. ‘That’s your fault.’

‘My fault? You threw a sock at me.’

‘Oh shut up, Man-Child.’

‘Hey! “Mowgli” was bad enough, but “Man-Child”?’

Seema tromped back to the dry-cleaning section, grumbling under her breath. There, she shifted clothes from one rack to another then shifted them back again, clanging coat hangers with each shove.

Leon knew to leave her alone for a while.

They’d likely laugh about it later.

In the afternoon, Leon, assigned to polishing the contents of the trophy cabinet after being ten minutes late back from lunch (for the second time that week), and labouring under the weight of knowing that Reg would now keep him at work until gone six, did his best to ignore the furious *thump-thump-thump* of Reg’s hammer on a Combat boot. Not only was Reg still miffed about Leon’s lunchtime punctuality (Leon claimed he’d had to jump in and give CPR and mouth-to-mouth to a Chinese woman who collapsed in the sandwich shop), he was still deeply miffed about *this morning’s* tardiness. And he *seriously* doubted *that* defence, too: that Leon had suffered a heavy nosebleed after being bitten by a crazy squirrel, then, later, having returned home to change his shirt, was forced to await the arrival of a replacement tram driver due to the original driver experiencing a severe case of spontaneous combustion that rendered her unable to operate the controls and therefore incapable of continuing – being, as she was, reduced to a pile of ashes.

Leon said Scene of Crime Officers were quick to arrive but vacuuming the remains took a good ten minutes; apparently, she’d left a window open and had blown all over the cab. He also explained how one particularly chatty SOCO told passengers not to be unnerved; although they might not have previously witnessed this definitely natural occurrence, it actually happened all the time – so much so that it probably wouldn’t even be reported by newspapers, radio or TV.

Reg hadn’t believed this far-fetched series of events any more than Leon’s previous outlandish excuses but without making exhaustive phone calls to Metrolink or Greater Manchester Police

there was no quick way to disprove the squirrel/nosebleed/combustion story. So Reg had told Leon to make up that time by taking an *extremely-short* lunch. But no – he'd been *late again!* How many times was that in the last few months?

Reg knew exactly. And now *this*: a neglected customer. The boss had spotted her as soon as the door opened. His hammering slowed as the customer waited at the counter, almost within touching distance of Leon's back. Reg's unblinking piggy eyes peered over their wire-framed lenses. They would peer until he felt Leon had had long enough – and that wasn't long. Then he'd let him have it. Boy, would he let him have it.

Leon was on automatic-pilot: hands busy but the mind elsewhere. Last night, a vicious and bloody catfight between two skin-tight PVC-coated red-devils had spilled out of a stretched limo at the top of Leon's road. The initial pair was followed by several more PVC-coated demons, similarly topped with flashing Satanic horns. Some attempted physical separation; the rest encouraged one or other of the primary devils to '*Lamp the fucking bitch!*' as a singular, uncommonly-tall Princess of Darkness, pitched in with a plastic pitchfork.

(Leon presumed the hellcats had been heading into the city to kick off a pre-fuelled hen-party when one of the primary devils had said something adjudged deeply derogatory by the other.)

The fight had lasted over ten minutes and Leon had the misfortune to observe every unsavoury girl-on-girl second (he'd seen quite a few bitch-brawls over the years but this one was *spectacular*). That was the *real* reason he'd been late this morning: reviewing the incident had made him walk straight past the shop. And questions remained unanswered even now: *What could have been said to start such a fight? Were they all friends again this morning? Wonder if that tall one is single.*

Reg had maintained the slow hammering so as not to tip Leon off; it was for the boy's own good and certainly not because he took a tyrannical pleasure in bringing his junior to heel. Almost there, just a couple more seconds, then the amount of time a customer might reasonably be expected to wait would have *more* than expired.

Seema could sense these moments, and she sensed one now. As Reg focused on Leon, *she* focused on *Reg*. She pictured it thusly: Reg was an orb-spider, hunkering down, patiently eyeballing his prey: Leon; who she saw as an innocent moth. But she, Seema Khan, no lover of spiders, was a hummingbird, and hummingbirds are more than happy to eat insignificant orb-spiders for breakfast. She was a master of timing, and timing was

everything in spider-bashing. She would not fly to the rescue until she'd watched the boss exhibit *every* involuntary reflex reaction (dead giveaways to Seema's experienced eye) listed in what she had come to think of as *The Spider Chronicles*:

Reg's eyes tightened, the brow furrowed. *Check, check.* The jaw set. *Check.* Fingers squeezed whichever tool was in use. The blubbery lips stiffened. *Check. Check.* Wetted by beefy tongue, the lardy lips pulled back – a breath was drawn in. *Check! Check! Check!* This was it! The spider was set to strike.

'Leon, customer!' announced Seema in her sweetest tone. The proclamation carried all the joy of a heartfelt Merry Christmas well-wishing.

Thanking her (he knew an *orb-buster* when he heard one) Leon turned to face the customer. To Poppy he nodded, 'Sorry about that. What can I do for you?'

Poppy handed over a front door key and a smile.

Seema got back to work (pressing a pair of pants), humming quietly, comfortable with the certainty that Reg, having jerked his head round and whipped off his glasses (in one rapid motion), would now be staring, pink-faced and frosty-eyed. He didn't like to have his thunder thwarted did Reg. *Thunder? Ha!* Seema giggled at the thought; giggled again when she heard the boss take out his frustration on the Combat boot with his hammer.

By now Leon had picked an appropriate blank from the wall display, locked *it* and the original in place on the key-cutting machine, and activated the power. Already ringing with the clouts and clobbers of Reg's noisy cobbling, the air positively buzzed. Slipping on goggles, Leon grabbed the cutter handle, looked to Poppy and asked, 'Just one?'

'Yes, please,' she replied, her smile never breaking. 'You never know . . .' (*God, it's loud in here.*) Poppy found her voice rising: 'It could be –'

Leon turned the handle and the machine *shrieked* and *squealed* as it cut into the blank.

'– the key to my heart.'

Unfortunately for Poppy, her words were lost under the cacophonous grinding noises so she settled for just watching Blue Eyes work; that and admiring his bottom every so often. Nothing wrong with that. Looking didn't make her a slut. Her sisters probably only said that because *they* were no longer free to check out guys' butts now all three were '*sooo* happily married'. Heck, if it hadn't been a possible Health and Safety issue she'd have leaned over the counter and given his cute little bum a cheeky

squeeze right there and then, trollop or no trollop. Sometimes nice guys need a slight hint – a helping hand, as it were.

Poppy knew that the young man behind the counter, like so many men, whatever their age, Leon would most likely be hopeless at reading those precious-few hard-to-spot teeny-weeny telltale signs: the abundant smiling, the major eye contact, the excessive laughing, the gesture mirroring, the head tilting, the hair tossing, the hair flicking, the neck stroking, the lip nibbling, the lip licking, the let-me-think pouting, the giggling, the arm-touching, the blushing (the shy ones), the lolly-sucking (the brazen ones), the banana-throating (the *really* brazen ones) – okay, maybe they'd twig the last two but normally each hint, every intimation, all clues, would slip unceremoniously under the radar.

Men hardly ever pick up on the signals girls give out. Not until much later, when they will dismiss them, most likely as wishful thinking. How strange that these indicators of interest should be too subtle for guys when they are so glaringly face-slappingly transparent to other women. Men are stupid in this regard. Poppy knows this. The Asian woman will know this. All women know this. And Poppy knew the challenge she faced – one faced by all *non-scrubbers*, especially those favoured with less-noticeable, cuter, more unobtrusive tits – how to find a way to ask a guy out without appearing obvious or desperate or slutty. Or better still, to get *him* to make the move so they absolutely, definitely, in no way could ever be said to look (to the guy or fellow females) like a complete and utter tart.

Seema eyed the unconventionally pretty woman at the counter entirely certain that her interest lay beyond duplicate keys – and to far more than just Leon's bottom. She'd witnessed these performances before, from time to time. Seema could hear the wheels revolving.

Poppy's 'wheels' were indeed turning; around a choice: would Leon – she'd made a mental note of the name; liked it – be more interested in the Hallé (a Rachmaninov concert was coming up) or a trip to Manchester Art Gallery. Which to suggest? She wasn't sure. Should she propose both? No, that might look needy. As her deliberations went on, she noticed the friendly-looking woman behind the dry-cleaning counter give her a reassuring, sagacious smile. Yeah, *she* gets the picture, thought Poppy. Poppy smiled back. An understanding. *Sisters*.

Seema was thinking: Good for you, girl. You go for it. *Go on*, ask him out. He could use a good date. But break his heart, lady, and I will break your face.

CHAPTER THREE

Homeward Bound

(The bit where we start using proper Chapter Titles)

As another working day – a working day much like any other working day – slipped further behind, Leon’s mind stayed focused on Wayne, the name he’d just written in his notebook; then struck out; then rewrote – only to wonder, now, if he should strike out again.

Wayne.

Odd?

Yes – but odd *enough?*

Wayne, hands in anorak pockets, had been moving up and down the aisle of the half-full tram for the last few minutes, stopping to address anyone who caught his eye; currently, a ponytailed woman talking into a mobile.

‘Hello, what’s *your* name? *My* name’s Wayne,’ Wayne interjected. ‘Who are you talking to? That’s a nice phone. I’ve got a phone but I lost it. It was in my *sweat* pants.’ (He emphasised ‘*sweat*’ as though it were important for some reason.) ‘Somebody stole my *sweat* pants – in the park.’

The woman blinked but carried on talking to whoever was on the other end. ‘You shouldn’t be telling me that when I’m on the tram.’ Lowering her voice and face nearer to her lap, she added: ‘Yes, you *are* a naughty boy, a *very* naughty boy.’ She tried to arrest a giggle. ‘Honestly, what are you like?’ The giggle escaped, became a dirty laugh.

Undeterred, Wayne moved on, checking faces – so many faces; each ignoring his presence.

Leon couldn’t see much of Wayne’s face; the drawstring hood of his puffy orange anorak was tied so tight, the resultant aperture left only a tiny moon of a face; features bunched together jousting for space. The little moon gravitated over to a full-sized face atop a hotdog.

‘Hello, what’s *your* name? *My* name’s Wayne. Is that a hotdog? I like hotdog. I can’t eat mustard though – it makes me sweat. Do you like ketchup? Why haven’t you got ketchup?’ Then, pointing: ‘Is that onions?’

The man, almost cross-eyed with focusing on his frankfurter, never flinched, and after a couple more bites, the moon passed over, sailed away towards a cluster of passengers standing in the relatively open area offered between tram doors.

Leon watched Wayne deftly navigate between a brace of dental-nurses, around a woman burdened with shopping, and back through two overtly gay men who bitched loud and camp about how Mr Foofoo would *not* be going back to Doggy Style pet groomers. *Ever!* (Leon assumed the little guy with the sparkly collar, pink I ♥ MY 2 DADDIES vest and bandaged ear was Mr Foofoo: the Shih Tzu currently sulking quietly within the muscular tattooed arm of the shorter, T-shirted man.) The taller, Versace and Viton (Julia Schang-Viton, not Louis Vuitton) guy intoned, ‘I know. He’s usually *so* the life and soul of the party. Aren’t you, Precious? Yes, you are. And now look at him, poor thing.’

Leon hoped Mr Foofoo would soon be feeling fabulous and strutting around like a rooster in a diamante trouser suit and sailor hat, if that’s how he rolled. And he hoped something else: that Wayne was wearing something under his coat. All Leon could see below the anorak’s knee-length hem was a pair of mottled bare legs – their chunky pink calves and sockless ankles pitching in to push around a pair of well-worn Hi-Tec trainers.

The Hi-Tecs shuffled over to what Leon calculated to be an Auditor or Banker – fancy suit, quiff – studying the Financial Times on an iPad.

‘Hello, *my* name’s Wayne. What’s *yours*? Is that a book reader? Doesn’t it hurt your eyes? Why don’t you just buy a book? I like a book. It’s on a shelf at home. I borrowed it from Trevor up the stairs.’

The opportunity for a potentially frivolous question: ‘Did Trevor up the stairs loan *the book* or *the shelf*?’ was overlooked as Quiff gazed beyond the scrap-yard bridged by the tramway, to Victorian warehouses recently converted into highly-prized ultra-modern apartments.

‘What are *you* reading? The one I’m reading is about Jack the Ripper. It’s called *Jack the Ripper*. It’s a bit scary. He had a knife and he *did* use it.’

The suited one brought his eyes back to the e-FT.

‘Ever done a prossy?’ asked the tiny moon face.

Quiff did not react. Not so much as a single glance. Unsurprising; the cold shoulder is a commonplace system for commotion-free commuting in cities.

Now some might consider ‘*Ever done a prossy?*’ a strange question to ask a total stranger but Leon felt sure Wayne meant ‘done’ as in ‘boned’ rather than ‘butchered’. (Didn’t he?) Either way, Leon considered the enquiry ‘odd’ enough to keep Wayne listed.

‘There is a brothel in Urmston,’ Wayne told the indifferent Banker slash Auditor. ‘It’s called a massage parlour and Mandy’s Megastars. Everybody knows about it. Do you know about it?’

Quiff tapped a Markets Data icon. A wealth of equities, currencies, commodities, capital markets and other banking bollocks scrolled this way and that.

‘What are you into? They might do Domination. But probably not Knife Play. Knives make people nervous.’ (Wayne didn’t say *knives*.) ‘Do knives make *you* nervous?’

Leon thought Wayne harmless enough, probably. Not the sort to suddenly turn violent. He looked more likely to be the *victim* of violence – past, present, and future. Leon wondered why Quiff didn’t keep one eye on his inquisitor, though – just in case. Just in case Wayne’s clenched paw suddenly produced a butcher’s knife from one of those well-warmed anorak pockets and ambushed his complacent sun-bronzed neck.

All too easily, Leon pictured the scene: Wayne’s pounce; the first slash, deep sting, and initial feeling of minty cool freshness about the neck; Quiff’s surprise; then attacker and attacked screaming like electrocuted baboons as the blade repeatedly flashes under the ceiling lights; open jugular letting arterial-spray up windows and over ceiling; blood raining down on panicked bystanders – mayhem and cries as the tram hits the M60 tunnel; the once-indifferent slipping and sliding in an attempt to put distance between their whimpering souls and the tooled-up orange anorak.

Carriage carnage.

Wide-eyed, Quiff stares up, clutching wet slice. Mouth agape, he gurgles and gasps as haemoglobin pours down his sleeve, colours his tailored shirt cuff, coats his luxury watch, and streams between his manicured fingernails. A sense of warm liquidity around the lap and inner thighs coincides with a pre-recorded announcement from *Gabrielle* (the name Leon had given to the woman who generously donated her honey-toned voice to the public address system). ‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ she purrs. ‘The next stop will be Stretford – Stretford, the next stop.’

The Banker’s shoes enter the station blood-filled and twitching. (Leon had noticed them earlier: leather Brogues: size 12s, laced, polished brown leather uppers decorated with punches and serrations, classic toe, Goodyear welted leather soles – quality.) Doors sigh open, people spill out. Howling, they run platform and scramble stairs as, fitting over, bleeding done, the now *ex*-Banker slumps motionless inside his suit (Armani: nice; now soaked in two or three of your own bodily fluids: not so nice).

‘Anybody know what station this is?’ Wayne asks.

‘Stretford, cloth ears.’ Even when she’s insulting, Gabrielle sounds sexy – maybe more so.

Stooping over Quiff the stiff, Wayne scouts for station signage. Only Leon spies the cheeky mercenary, a young man with a monkey-like face and ‘Ian Brown’ Adidas trainers, who briefly risks all – he reaches in, between blooded anorak and ex-Banker, angling for free technology. The dead hand does not give up its cargo easily, though, and a spatter of on-screen splatter squeaks against Quiff’s lifeless fingertips as the electronic Financial Times, scrolling under the pressure, is pried out.

Wayne, scanning each side: ‘Doesn’t look like Stretford.’

‘Well, it is,’ insists Gabrielle. ‘Now let’s get this show on the road. Someone on here needs to get home and have a shower. And I don’t mean me. Right, mind the doors.’

The doors whisper to a close behind the liberated iPad and its departing new owner.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, the next stop will be Stretford,’ announced the PA system; Gabrielle’s voice, smoothly serene. ‘Stretford, the next stop.’

Leon gave the exterior his gaze. There it was: Stretford. No doubt about it; Stretford House, a 23-storey tower block, confirmed as much. He had been woolgathering anew.

Looking at the tower always reminded Leon of one of his favourite films: *Billy Liar*. (Because they were made in the same period: the mid-Sixties.) He smiled to himself as he heard Mrs Fisher’s voice ask: *Daydreaming again, Billy?*

Leon watched Quiff, packing his iPad into a leather Messenger bag, step his Brogues to the nearest door. Adidas trainers followed suit. The tram eased to a stop. Leon felt a cold breeze as the doors huffed open. Out went Brogues and Adidas trainers. In came sensible low heels carrying a mousy-haired girl, high pull-on boots, a pair of Hush-Puppies, ratty Moccasins and lace-up green pumps.

‘Hello, what’s your name? My name’s—’

‘Piss off,’ hissed the woman in the high pull-on boots taking a seat.

Wayne’s little moon face, stunned for a second, moved on, seeking better fortune. Leon sympathised. The bare legs and puffy coat shuffled Wayne’s cinched features back to the ponytailed woman: still on the phone, listening.

‘Hello, what’s your name? My name’s Wayne. Is this the way to Bury? I think I might have got a wrong tram. Where do you

live? That's a nice mobile. Who are you talking to? I've got a mobile but I lost it. It was in my *sweat pants*.'

'Dave, you *won't* have to go to A-and-E,' Ponytail insisted. 'Just leave it switched off and for God's sake don't move.'

'Somebody stole my *sweat pants* –'

'Yes, I'm getting off the tram now. I'll be there in five minutes.'

Ponytail stood, breezed past the orange anorak and made for the doors.

Wayne shuffled on, compelled within to engage without.

The owner of the Hush-Puppies: fifty-odd with mad, frizzy hair and a pronounced overbite; had taken the seat next to Leon. Leon watched as the man now removed a large pad from a scuffed leather satchel. He opened the pad (staff paper lined with staves) on his lap and immediately began humming and crooning in a low register, pencilling musical notes and symbols as he did so. He erased a few, quickly added more, then – presumably reading them back – moved his wild mane in slow circles, as if hearing the composed melody play in his head, happily lost inside it, oblivious, it appeared, to his fellow passengers.

Leon felt an envy – the non-begrudging kind – worm into his soul and the PA system crackled. Gabrielle's voice, serenely smooth: 'Ladies and gentlemen, the next stop will be Dane Road – Dane Road, the next stop.'

Wayne leaned in: 'Hello, what's your name? My name's—'

'*Wayne!*' barked a face with a blob of mustard on its nose. 'Yes, I know! Now fuck off, will ya?'

'That was a bit unnecessary.'

Yeah – hotdog man had looked so polite, too.

Leon had got into an exchange with himself walking the canal towpath (he'd taken the longer, scenic route home). Some people can be so ill-mannered, he reflected. Scratch that thin veneer of day-to-day lukewarm toleration for their fellow traveller and underneath they're just ignorant, belligerent twerps. What was it Richard said?

People – who needs 'em?

'No. Something like that, though.'

A narrowboat, puttering alongside at four miles an hour, went unnoticed. (Aboard, a row about where fault lay: the navigator's map-reading skills or the left the helmsman had taken at Chester. 'This is *not* god-damn Birming-ham, Pam,' carped Helmsman. 'I know! I told *you* that over an hour ago, Chuck,' yelled Pam from below deck. Americans.)

People are idiots?

'No, not that one; it was more like . . .'

People are only nice when they want something?

'Hello?' shouted Helmsman.

People are rarely as they seem?

'Hey! Excuse me!' Chuck applied the time-honoured voice-amplification procedure: a hand around the mouth: 'AHOY! You there!'

'Yes, that was it!' *People are rarely as they seem.* 'Richard talking sense for once – a nice change from the *usual* foul-mouthed outbursts.'

'Hey, buddy! Can you tell me which canal we're on?'

Leon now turned away from the towpath – a short walk led to concrete steps. As he climbed, he more-easily recalled one of Richard's scathing declarations regarding the proletariat:

Idiots shovelling shit in government sweat shops for a few grains of chicken feed.

'Did you see that?' Chuck asked. 'He totally blanked me.'

'Don't blame *him*,' muttered Pam.

Spineless gullible rodents. I don't know who's worse –

'Ignorant cocksucker!' shrieked Chuck, unleashing, in decreasing order of mass, a broadside of screwed-up leaflets: Knowing your Narrowboat, How to Operate Canal Locks, then Things to Do and See in Birmingham.

– the ones who remain silent; or the ones who are sycophantically polite.

Leon didn't think any of that held water. Surely it wasn't true. Not in all cases. And wasn't it kind of offensive?

Not speaking up for yourself, that's fucking offensive; offensive . . . and fucking weird.

If you asked Leon, *Richard* was the weird one. And Leon knew exactly what the self-diagnosed agoraphobic would be doing right now.

And so he was . . . Richard was behind a pair of huge, military-style field-glasses, spying at a window – could be any window in the house – binoculars sweeping, waiting for any half-decent-looking female to present herself within the considerable range of his 'Big-Eye' lenses. Innocently walking, close to the house or at the end of the street, minding her own business in a garden or car, going about regular routines at home, Richard would find her; *all of her – all of them.*

Bathrooms and bedrooms were especially favoured – they held tantalising promise. And sometimes they paid off handsomely. Yes, Richard loved bedrooms and bathrooms.

And Kelly Buxton.

Sometimes she went about braless.

Exactly as Leon had pictured him, Richard wore a tired, untied dressing gown over stained Che Guevara T-shirt and grubby pyjama bottoms (Leon suspected even Seema wouldn't be able to remove the splotches and stains from *these* garments). The fatigued ensemble was completed by threadbare slippers that propelled Richard around the house, from window to window, constantly relocating his eagerness to find unsuspecting targets for 'observation'. He wasn't *prying* – not even *peeping*. Of course not; as he had often told Leon, he was 'merely observing'.

Leon couldn't discern the difference.

A few doors from home, Leon bumped into his paternal grandparents at their front gate.

'Hey, look who's in.'

'Actually, we're on our way out. Sorry.'

Although Leon called round often, his grandparents *always* seemed to be out. Leon suspected they hid. He thought Bill and Norma, both in their eighties – but physically well – might be a little bit bonkers.

'Who was that tart you were talking to up there?' asked Bill, nodding up the street as he hitched his trousers over his pot belly.

'Tart? No, that's just Peggy. You remember Peggy. She lives across the road.'

'The one with all the kids?' spat Bill.

'That's the one.'

'She's got enough of them,' complained Norma, patting one of the many rollers in her hair.

'Has to be at least eight of the little bastards,' griped Bill.

'And every one a different shade,' added Norma.

'Must be a *right* tart,' decided Bill.

'Asylum seeker,' advised Norma. 'On benefits, I heard.'

'Yeah, I heard that, too,' sniffed Leon. 'Apparently she did a moonlight flit from Longsight about ten years ago; slipped over the border late at night.'

'Hey, you couldn't lend us a tenner could you, Leon?' asked Norma. 'Things are a bit tight; you understand.'

'Pensions are a disgrace,' hissed Bill.

Leon heard this from his grandparents almost every time he saw them. On auto-pilot he took out his wallet: a folded, black fabric affair – he didn't mind, suspected they didn't have much – pulled apart the Velcro and looked inside.

'I've only got twenties.'

'That'll do.' Grabbing a twenty, Norma planted a lipstick kiss on his cheek. 'Still not changed your – *wallet* – I see.'

Bill winked at Norma; knew what she meant by *wallet*.

'Better make it forty,' he decided, seizing an extra twenty.

'So where are you going?' asked Leon.

'Duh, it's Friday; *Bingo* night.'

Each waved a celebratory twenty.

'Do you know, I've never been; maybe I should—'

'Get real, Leon,' snorted Bill. 'It's not for kids.'

'*Kids?*'

Bill and Norma had already started to walk away.

Half a minute later, Bill called: 'Hey, Leon! Found yourself a nice girl yet?'

Cackling heartily, Norma slapped Bill's shoulder.

The pair wandered away snickering enthusiastically.

Leon closed the front door; hung up his backpack, then, turning, nearly bumped into Richard, who had just raced down the stairs, cigarette locked between his lips, binoculars in hand (Richard always hurried when switching windows lest he miss something). Grunting gruff greetings they paused for a second, face to face – there was a passing resemblance, though Richard looked considerably older – before Richard disappeared into the front room.

After he'd checked the answering machine – no messages – and picked up the morning post, mostly junk mail and circulars, Leon followed.

Richard had already taken up position in the large bay window (a window offering 180 degrees of panoramic view). 'Well I hope you've had a better day than mine,' he grumbled, binoculars sweeping the area, 'I haven't seen a thing.'

Leon brushed aside a bunch of DVDs with dodgy handwritten titles and flopped down on the sofa. He perused the back of Richard's dressing-gown and pyjama legs (Leon had long since given up asking when Richard was going to get dressed. As he never went out, Richard didn't see any point). Nothing had changed, apart from the left slipper: a new cigarette burn by the Biryani stain.

'Not so much as a sniff,' Richard added, breaking wind without breaking sweep.

'Do you have to do that?'

'Don't blame me for having an empty stomach. It's not my fault there's no food in.'

'There's food in.'

‘Call that food? I can’t eat that bollocks you eat.’

‘Salad and fruit is not bollocks.’

‘You’re not becoming a vegetarian, are you?’

‘No. There’s fish in there. And chicken—’

‘*White* meat! That’s no good. I require *red*. Lots of it. Hamburgers and steak and pork pies and— Jesus! Is this prick-teaser ever going to show?’

Watching the open dressing-gown flap back and forth in keeping with the to and fro of the binoculars, Leon thought Richard looked like an actor press-ganged from a Noel Coward play to perform the role of a slovenly midshipman, sent aloft, from his sick-bed, to the crow’s nest, to keep vigil until land was spotted (although, he should, if we’re being historically accurate, really be using a telescope).

Discovering an island inhabited by naked caramel-skinned beauties with an insatiable yearning for lanky, pale horn-dogs would have suited Richard perfectly – especially if the island somehow existed *indoors*; perhaps contained within some kind of glass-enclosed bio dome.

‘Richard . . . as a supposed agoraphobic—’

‘What? There’s no *suppose* about it.’

‘Could you live in a glass-enclosed bio dome? Would that be classed as indoors?’

‘Do pipe down, Leon; can’t you see I’m busy?’ Richard’s right hand dropped from the binoculars, dipped into pyjama bottoms. ‘Come on, Kelly. Let’s be seeing you.’ Rearranging his crotch, he added: ‘Come to Daddy.’

Leon pulled a face which would have complemented the word *Urgh*, *Ew*, or *Yuck*, perfectly. How he’d love to have the lazy lecher thrown overboard and keelhauled, then flogged with a cat-o’-nine-tails. *Have this man stretched over a cannon and given two dozen lashes, Mr Christian.*

Richard let out another fart; this one long and instantly foul.

‘Do you have to be down here?’ asked Leon.

‘I was here first. If you don’t like it, fuck off.’

‘Why don’t you try upstairs? Maybe you’ll have more luck there.’

‘I’ve *been* up there, been up there for hours – got nothing. Not a whiff. I’m hoping a change of scenery will change my luck. Besides, I like the personal, up-close feeling this window offers.’

‘*This window?* Those binoculars could see the hairs on a gnat’s chuff from three miles away.’

'I know, so imagine the view I get when Kelly walks past. Especially if it's one of her *unfettered* days – the angle from here is perfect. Christ, I hope today's a Braless.'

Richard's right hand had not returned aloft. Leon hoped the midshipman wasn't rummaging below decks or fiddling with his rudder. First sign of a rising mizzenmast and he was jumping ship. *Maybe that's why he hasn't got a telescope; too unwieldy to use with one hand.*

'Don't you need to keep both hands on binoculars – you know, to keep them steady?'

'The problem is there's no discernible pattern to her comings and goings. Her shifts are constantly changing. Sometimes she works mornings, sometimes afternoons, other times, nights. It's the same with the no-bra days – no pattern. I tell you, Leon, it's a nightmare.'

'Maybe you should keep a log.'

'What and be like you? That *would* be sad. I might be depraved but I'm not pathetic.'

'You kind of are.'

'And what's *your* latest sighting, then?' Richard gurned his face, adopted a high, mocking voice: '*Ooh, I'm not sure. I'll have to check my sad little logbook.*'

'Don't take the piss, Richard. I think I've been losing sleep over these things.'

'You *think* you've been losing sleep? Don't you know?'

'It might just be *time* I've been losing. You know, when I'm thinking about them. I'm not sure. It's confusing.'

Richard made a *Pfft* sound – from his mouth this time.

'It's not just that. A couple of the more recent ones felt . . .'

'What?'

'I don't know – *dangerous.*'

Richard tutted, sighed and scoffed all at the same time.

'And they've been getting progressively more frequent.'

'Really?' asked Richard sounding totally disinterested.

'Yes. So will they *keep* getting more frequent?'

Leon exited the room.

'You know, *more and more and more?*' he called from the hall. 'And what happens then? It can't just carry on. Things reach critical mass. Something has got to give.'

'What a drama queen,' muttered Richard.

'Come again?' asked Leon, returning with his notebook.

'Nothing.'

'Could have sworn I heard something.'

'Oh, I said: Tell me about the last thing seen.'

Leon doubted this but answered: 'A one-armed wrestler. Saw him by the allotments. I had to take a detour.'

'He can't be much of a grappler with one arm.'

'He might be good with his legs.'

'*Good with his legs?* I've told you, they're not *real*.'

'What, all of them?'

'Some might be – *maybe* – but the rest are just in your head.'

'They *seem* real.'

Richard aimed the field-glasses towards the sofa, to where Leon, reseated, was penning an addition to his log.

'Jesus! You should see the size of your head through these fuckers.'

Leon looked up, forced an exaggerated smile then returned to the page.

'*Pogo?*' squawked Richard, spying the entry. 'That's a clown's name.'

'You don't say.'

'Those bastards really freak me out. Hair, make-up, intolerable antics, ridiculous fucking clothes . . .'

'Yeah, yeah, you've told me.'

'Stupid honking noses . . .'

'This isn't about you,' muttered Leon.

'Big squeaky shoes. *Buckets of fucking confetti!* What's that all about?' Richard returned his attention to the street. 'The fuckers should be shot at birth.'

'They're not *born* clowns, Richard.'

Leon glimpsed a momentary image of a pointy-hatted red-nosed baby-clown shot from mother's Tunnel-of-Love as if from a cannon through a cloud of glitter and confetti to splash-land in a barrel of custard accompanied by uproarious laughter and applause from a far-too-easily-amused medical team.

'What?'

'I said: They're not *born* clowns. That *would* be freaky.'

'Come on, they freak you out too, don't deny it.'

'I must admit, this one *was* freaky. *Really* freaky. See.' Leon held out a notebook doodle but Richard's eyes remained fixed to the binoculars.

'*Oooh, the one I saw was reeeally freaky.*' That high mocking voice again. 'They're *all* freaky. *Freaky fuckers.*'

'When do you ever see a clown? You never leave the house.'

'On TV.' Richard tossed his cigarette end out the window. 'And there's never any warning. There should be warnings. "And for those of you who hate freaky-clown fuckers, please be aware that

the next item features at least one freaky-clown fucker, so viewer discretion is advised.”’

‘Think I’ll run a bath,’ mused Leon. ‘Have a long soak.’

‘This is ridiculous. Why aren’t there any women on the move?’ Richard wheeled around, angry and impatient, stared at Leon, as if he might have the answer.

‘Why don’t you try at the back? Maybe Mrs Hobbs is doing some laundry.’

‘Are you trying to be funny? You know she does laundry on a Tuesday.’

As he re-pocketed his notebook, Leon studied the scruffy snooper. ‘You know who you remind me of?’

‘How can I possibly know who I remind you of? Oh, this is hopeless; balls to it.’ Richard left the window, attended a cabinet and rifled drawers. ‘I need a cigarette.’

‘Withnail,’ Leon continued. ‘Richard E. Grant’s character. You know, from Bruce Robinson’s *Withnail & I*?’

‘Bollocks.’

‘Would you like me to tell you why?’

‘No.’

‘You might think it’s because you’re both unwashed, slovenly, failing, and foul-mouthed.’

‘Fuck this for a game of soldiers.’

Richard tipped the contents of the drawers onto the carpet, dropped to his knees. ‘You check down the back of the sofa, I’ll recheck this lot.’

‘But you’d be wrong. It’s because, like you, Withnail is filled with indignation over what he sees as life’s injustices. He rages against the world, blames others for the adverse consequences of his self-centered lifestyle.’

‘Which film magazine did you steal that from?’ asked Richard rummaging through carpeted drawer crap: opened letters, take-away menus, spectacle cases, tissue packs, coins, pens, batteries (worn-out ones, indistinguishable from the new), instruction booklets for the TV and DVD player, keys, paper clips, plastic lighters (both full and empty), scissors, elastic bands, sweet-wrappers, old/spent inhalers, crap, crap, and more crap.

‘I didn’t steal them. They’re *my* words. Some of us do actually have a vocabulary beyond *Bollocks*, *Fuck* and *Balls*.’

‘Utter bollocks.’

Leon looked lost for a moment. ‘Where was I?’

‘*Self-centered lifestyle*.’

‘Oh yes. And like you, he is arrogant, self-serving, self-indulgent, and, it has to be said – a coward.’

‘Are you going to check the sofa or not?’

‘Although to be fair to Withnail, at least *he* left the house on occasion.’

‘Leon, please! I can’t do anything without my smokes.’

‘You don’t do anything anyway.’

‘How dare you!’ Richard blasted wide, offended eyes towards his accuser.

Leon’s only reply was a cursory shrug.

Spotting a pack of Marlboro Reds behind a cushion, Richard dove at the sofa.

Leon knew the pack was empty as soon as it was picked up.

Richard’s frustrated face thawed into a wretched, pitiful grin: ‘You’ll have to go to the shops.’

Leon pursed his lips, shook his head.

‘You *have* to.’

‘What I *have* to do – is get in a hot bath and rest my aching feet.’

‘I’ll run a bath while you’re gone. Have it ready for when you get back. Would Sir prefer oil or bubbles?’

‘Forget it.’

‘Leon, if you don’t get me some smokes, right now, I’ll die, I know I will.’

‘Don’t be so dramatic.’

Richard took on the expression a child might adopt if it was lost and hungry and in desperate need of assistance: woeful, pathetic, miserable – but Leon wasn’t buying it.

‘If you want them, go and get them.’

‘How am I supposed to go? You know I can’t go, you sadistic fucker!’

‘Well, I’m not going,’ advised Leon with a defiant stare.

CHAPTER FOUR

Run, Leon, Run

For thirty minutes, Nobby and Svetlana had witnessed Leon browsing the DVD section of the shop, a modest-sized Spar convenience store, muttering gripes such as: ‘No, *you’ll* have to go’ and ‘You know *I* can’t go, you sadistic fucker’ and ‘Leon, if you don’t get me some smokes, right now, I’ll die, I know I will’ before he’d finally approached, placed an empty DVD case on the counter, and requested a pack of Marlboro Reds.

Nobby the Newsagent, whose paunch strained shirt- and trouser buttons in equal measure, had supplied a pack and a price as Svetlana and her cleavage rummaged below counter for the correct disc.

‘While you’re down there, Svetlana,’ Nobby grinned at Leon. (To picture Nobby, imagine a loathsome progeny spawned from Mrs Toad and Piers Morgan. If what you see is odious, vile, slimy, and nauseatingly repellent; a creature more suited to fly-blown swamp than convenience store, then you have him.)

Performing the very opposite of going down, Nobby’s mail-order bride and her low-cut top had come back up, a DVD grasped between long Soviet-crimson fingernails.

Ah, Svetlana. What to make of her?

Leon thought her beautiful, of course; but *too* beautiful. Intense beauty overpowered him – always had. Beauty possessed the power to render him effectively speechless, or worse, turn him into a blithering blatherer. (Only very recently, having grown accustomed to Svetlana’s acute prettiness, had Leon been able to manage any proper sentences in her company. The Russian turned up two months ago, already wed to Nobby. To this day, no-one knows how the loathsome toad pulled it off.) Why *did* Beauty, Leon wondered, turn him into a blithering blitherer? Unimaginative idiot-men never seemed to be affected in the same way. Was it because *he* was sensitive and creative? Because he more manifestly appreciated the accuracy – the truthfulness – of what existed around him?

Did he see more clearly than they?

Now, refusing to ponder on this any further, he surveyed his surroundings as reflected in the café window:

Parallel rows of shops, seemingly squaring off, shaded and scowling under stilted canopies, challenged each other across an expanse of grey paving slabs. Little contravened the uniformity of

the plain: an occasional bench and its consort, a full waste-bin; a smattering of oblong concrete planters (flowerbeds once, now handy places to store fag ends and crushed beer cans); and, here and there, omitted slabs sprouted metal tree-protectors with incumbent broken tree – thin trunk snapped to a jagged point at roughly the same height as the top ring of its unjustly-named defender. Pissing posts for passing mongrels.

Upholding the tradition, a free-roaming dog moved from one to another, sniffing and splash-peeing. A couple of skateboarders performed ‘grinds’ along one of the planter’s long edges. At either end of the expanse, space existed for two extra shops but the 1970s architect (an obvious supporter of the architectural style known as Brutalism) had wisely omitted these to allow ingress and egress into his solidified vision: an urban block of striking angular geometrics and roughly-hewn concrete. A row of black bollards toothed the gaps, one at each end of the hard rectangle known locally as The Precinct.

In the north passageway, a gang of kids repeatedly kicked a football against a broken NO SKATEBOARDING, NO BICYCLES, NO BALL GAMES sign. In the south, a ring of teens coalesced, compared resources, then clubbed together – to buy fags and/or cheap cider, Leon supposed.

Within this mecca for trouble an unhealthy number of shops no longer traded. Locked up and abandoned long ago. Of those that persisted, early evening brought down many a graffitied shutter: urban canvases to elaborate performances of art – or acts of defacement and vandalism, depending on your point of view; either way, if nothing else, the tags and sprays injected a splash of colour to this otherwise lacklustre landscape. Unshuttered, and exposed to the early evening, besides the Spar: Big Chicken Fast Food; Bargain Booze; Ladbrokes; Kath’s Kaff; and, off in one corner, an L-shaped amusement arcade: Midas Well.

Inside the doorway, endless electronic *bloops* and *bleeps* reverberating hither and thither, a thin white dude and a mixed-race beauty with honey-coloured skin and thick corkscrew hair played pinball, both holding the other and one flipper each. As they played, the dude pulled her in tight; the girl threw back her head, laughed heartily. Leon thought she *looked* wonderful – and doubtless with a warm-hearted nature to match. Why didn’t he have a girl like that? Leon felt a wave of envy – the begrudging type.

You’ll never have a girl like that, you inadequate little ponce. Now stop daydreaming and bring me my nicotine!

No! Not that scumbag again. Leon didn't want to think about *It*. (Just the thought of the reprobate's name made him feel like he needed a bath.) Nonetheless, and in spite of himself, Leon formed a mental picture: visualised the freak rummaging through ashtrays and bins, picking at gaps between patio paving-stones, ferreting for semi-reusable fag-ends, all the while cursing the loss of spying-time due to Leon's overdue return. Well, hard luck, Leon thought. The lazy bastard will have to wait. He had something to do first. Why else would he be staring in at the café window?

Kath's Kaff: smells of dreariness and deep fat fryers. A place of ruptured sausages, billowing eggs, plastic menu board and laminated tablecloths, rattling coffee machines, industrial-strength tea, timeworn ketchup-squirters and original decor: half-tiled walls, old advertising posters. And skirting the windows: crusty waist-high 'decorative' net-curtain beyond which odious faces twitched in idle chat.

(Leon had wondered if 'Kath' actually existed but concluded it was unlikely; he'd eaten there many times and never heard anyone speak of her.)

Anyway, that didn't matter right now; he wasn't searching for the elusive Kath – he was scouting for Jenny, a new waitress. Not *new* exactly, she'd been working there a while, off and on, but each time Leon saw her, he felt like he had the first time: 'accelerated' – more *awake*. Around her, he invariably experienced curious flutters and fancied she felt the same. If he spotted her now, he would definitely go in (he never went in otherwise). And one of these days, perhaps today, he *would* ask her all about herself.

Did she have a second job? Is that why she worked so infrequently? Which part of Ireland was she from? (Her beautiful lilting accent, fluid and uplifting, could swing from vulnerable to threatening over the course of a sentence. Leon always struggled not to picture a tall Celtic fairy-pixie brandishing a knotty Shillelagh; bewitching but possibly schizophrenic.) Did she attend college? If so, what was she studying?

Really? Interesting choice. What made you choose that? And what do you like to do when you're not working? Oh, cool, me too (unless it's something girly, like shopping or visiting a spa). Do you ever go to the cinema? Favourite films? Most treasured books? And would you please, let me see what you look like with your hair down?

Hang on – activity!

Heaped plates of Double-Egg-and-Chips preceded a waitress from the kitchen.

Nope. Not Jenny.

Disappointment and the sight of grease-glistening food punched Leon in the gut; a double whammy – one taking away his appetite, one making him bilious. His belly rumbled regardless and it occurred to him that he hadn't eaten for over seven hours.

Was Jenny in there? Her presence didn't look promising but she could be busy in the kitchen (there existed a serving hatch but its smallness supplied only a limited view).

He chose to give it five more minutes.

Okay, so if she did show, what would he order? There could be no repetition of the embarrassing beef lasagne incident. Trying to make out you'd ordered this dish thinking it would be the *vegetarian* type (after he'd learned Jenny was a Veggie) is so easily defeated by the simple question: 'Why did you eat it, then?' Leon had gone the colour of the ketchup he'd dolloped all over it. She'd been very nice, said it was fine, she wasn't militant about it. Even so, he would not be making the same mistake. *A mushroom omelette, perhaps*; as good as anything else and it came with extra merit points in the shape of a side salad: three lettuce bits and a quarter of tomato. He would eat slow and appreciate the 'show' (he liked how Jenny sashayed and sauntered, naturally and without affectation, gliding effortlessly between tables, like, he felt, a gazelle on Vaseline) and, afterwards, if feeling sufficiently confident – this required a minimum of two separate smiles and at least one unnecessary glance in his direction – he'd stretch out their 'time together' with a dessert or slice of cake followed by a cup of tea . . . and then, who knows.

He would have to guard against getting stuck with the 'wrong' waitress: Olive; the one that resembled a warthog sucking a lemon; the one currently lurching a plate of thinly-buttered bread towards Mr and Mrs Double-Egg-and-Chips; the one that moved like a troll on uneven stilts. But that ogre-infested bridge (built upon the dual pressures of order-book tapping and a stream of *Come on, you're not Gordon bleedin' Ramsey, what the fuck's it gonna be?* expressions) would be crossed if and when Leon came to it. And *last* time he'd sworn *next* time would be different.

After witnessing several bouts of frustrated, violent egg-prodding (with only one yolk in four being runny and therefore chip-dip-worthy) and using up four minutes of the extra five allotted to observing the café interior, Leon became aware of two buxom middle-aged women on the other side of the glass, at the

table nearest the window. Had the sun been high they'd be sitting in his shadow. His looming presence had suspended their All-Day-Breakfasts.

One, on an operation to administer brown sauce, had stopped mid-squirt; the other, equally inert, held a forked sausage just inches from her gaping mouth. So stationary were they that the scene looked like a photograph. Or rather, a postcard; one of those saucy sea-side affairs normally populated with the bums, boobs and crude innuendo of half-naked minxes, seedy office lechers and horny but incompetent newly-weds. Leon wondered what category he might be looking at – 'unintentionally-lewd housewives', perhaps – and what the caption could be.

How about:

'Check you out, Nora – squeezing in a second sausage.'

'I know, Mavis. And I've just had a big black pudding and a mouthful of juice.'

Urgh, gross! Leon sensed he'd gone too far. Frankly, it was the kind of thing he'd expect Richard to produce. Even the rudest of saucy postcards wouldn't stoop to such blatantly offensive and vulgar smuttiness. And it appeared to Leon that 'Nora' and 'Mavis' were of similar mind. Their stare hadn't wavered. *Quick, think of something else. Can't stand here all day, they'll think I'm bonkers. It only needs to be slightly rude and marginally funny.*

Mavis, big arms, slothful, raised a quizzical eyebrow at her friend. Nora, hypersensitive and thin-necked, blinked behind her sausage.

Something about needing a good fork? No, that's rubbish. Errr . . .

'Ere, Mavis; you seen the way that waitress is walking?'

'Yes, I bet she's had 'er browns hashed.'

No, no! What does that even mean? Think of something else!

Mavis turned now, full face to Leon: a challenge of sorts.

Nora, lowering sausage, inched cautious eyes sideways.

Shit, we're losing them. Abort, abort. They could turn hostile.

Leon had thought creating comical risqué double-entendres would be easy but he'd failed to generate anything Greasy-Spoon-related that was even vaguely amusing – dubious, yes; salacious, yes; humorous, no.

Hang on. What was he worried about? He didn't want to write saucy postcards, anyway. How did he get saddled with that? He realised he'd once again strayed off-course into uncharted irrelevance (Leon was never sure if this was him thinking 'inside' or 'outside' existent events). No matter; no longer self-compelled

to create bawdy, unnecessary postcard captions, and content to be 'back in the room', deliverance brought out a relieved smile.

Nora and Mavis did not reciprocate.

They feared the young man staring in at the window might be bonkers.

'What have we told you about staring?' hollered a voice to the rear. 'People don't like it.'

'Yeah, fuck off, Retard,' squawked a second voice, as shrill as the first was deep – and just as Manc¹.

Leon turned towards the advice. Saw Danny and Carl, two young men about his own age, sitting atop a nearby bench, arses propped on the backrest, Nikes planted on the seat. Below them, a black Staffordshire Bull Terrier, currently secured to the bench by two metres of heavy-duty chain, strained to make Leon's acquaintance.

'Sic 'im, Butch, sic 'im,' teased Danny, as the dog challenged the extent of his restraint, growling in frustration at the stubbornly non-diminishing space.

Leon felt reasonably confident the heavyweight chain would hold, but then envisaged: (a) Butch defeating the bench's inertia and fixings, (b) Butch dragging the seat and its riders across the concrete like a dog-sled on ice and (c) Butch chewing off one of his kneecaps as the clientele of Kath's Kaff looked on, surprised and unnerved, but not wishing to get involved.

Perhaps it's time I was moving, Leon thought.

Danny, the leader, was big – *very* big. Imagine a cross between a Silverback and a bulldozer; kind of slow-moving, but not as dull-witted as you might think. The self-appointed hard-man of this parish had a face like a jellied ham and sported major bling: chains, dog-tags, watch, rings, ear-rings, bracelets, two gold teeth, and 'iced-out grillz' (hip-hop style fake-diamond encrusted braces).

Carl, a cold, sly, sickly-looking sidekick with an eye on the top rung, habitual baseball-cap-wearer, and owner of the unfortunately-high voice, was currently dropping thin fries into his ratty, chewing mouth.

(Together, the nefarious pair supplied whatever pharmaceuticals the area required: tranquillisers, poppers,

¹ Manc: Noun. Short for Mancunian, yes; an inhabitant of Manchester (surely you knew that) but also a *dialect*: often thick, nasally, with over-enunciated vowels. *Proper Manchester* is pronounced as *Propa Manchesta* . . . a much-celebrated accent; except in Liverpool, of course, but who are Scousers to criticise accents?

painkillers, cannabis, cocaine, LSD, heroin, ecstasy, crystal meth, PCP, khat, amphetamines, magic mushrooms, GHB, nitrous oxide . . . or, how about, for that awkward first date: Viagra with a side order of Rohypnol or ketamine?)

From anecdotal accounts (and the exchanges he'd been unable to avoid witnessing first hand), Leon knew the pair well enough to generate a wide berth whenever possible.

According to Moss, Leon's best and possibly *only* true friend, outsiders had tried to muscle in on their turf several times. The intruders had soon disappeared, though – two, quite literally. Danny, thought by some to be indestructible, had once been grenaded, and shot on no less than four separate occasions – once in the head. Yet, here he was, still going strong, and showing no signs of imminent death.

Carl claims *he* was once stabbed (in the arm, stomach, or leg, depending on who you ask; the location and circumstances of the alleged knifing seem to change every time he tells the story) but has never, Leon overheard on the Metro, been able to produce a scar. Leon remembered thinking: I can understand what might drive someone to want to do away with such a despicable creature, but why would they want to get that close? *Now, a sniper rifle . . .*

'Oy! Didn't you hear us, Fuckwit?' enquired Carl through a mouthful of partially-chewed potato.

Leon blinked at them as if he'd just woken up.

Danny chose this moment to raise his Kappa T-shirt and reveal a gun tucked into tracksuit bottoms.

Carl pointed, mimed shooting Leon in the face.

Butch, also no stranger to acts of intimidation, now beefed up his own performance. Front paws bouncing, hind quarters scraping at the concrete, he snarled canine contempt. Leon noted the studded leather collar stretching into the shape of a fat teardrop. This dog was all muscle, teeth, and anger. He would bite poor Mr Foofoo's tear-stained head clean off whilst doing him in the ass then eat his still-warm guts as a post-coital snack. Weird the things you think of when you're unsettled, Leon thought. And now I really should be going. (Leon classed himself as a *dog-person* but that meant *normal, friendly, docile, man's best friend* dogs. Not vicious devil's-spawn hell-hound mutts.)

Giving the dangerous trio a wide berth, Leon walked around the bench as if a tacit exclusion zone were in place, the Bull Terrier following his progress like a jittery Geiger-counter needle. As Leon curved the perimeter, aimed indirectly for the relative safety of beyond, he was struck on his back and neck by a barrage

of fries. Despite his instincts – or perhaps because of them – he stopped.

A heavily-loaded silence reigned briefly then yielded to Carl's voice: 'Hey, Ichabod! What the fuck are you waiting for?' To Danny, Carl added: 'Oh man, we should've took out that posh bastard ages ago, bro.'

Leon noticed a chip had come to rest on his shoulder. Good chip throw, he couldn't help thinking. Why can't *I* throw like that?

Danny grasped the steel-link leash, retreated the Staffy (which fought every inch), freed the looped chain from the bench, and let him back out. Butch, pulling his master's arm straight as he sought to take full advantage of the extra allowance, spoke into the slightly-shortened but from his point of view still disappointingly large divide. The blast sounded like:

'RAAAWAARWRARWARRARARWARARA!'

Carl again, with menace: 'Better keep moving, Fuckwit.'

Again with the 'fuckwit'! Leon flicked the chip from his shoulder. He turned slowly; faced the hard-man, the rat-faced one, and Butch, likely Foofoo defiler.

Danny elbowed his stooge and Carl stood, ready for confrontation, resetting his cap in excited anticipation.

Bouncing on the balls of his feet, arms held in an ape-like position, he addressed the top of Danny's huge head:

'Man, is he for real?' he squeaked. 'Must be trippin', Blood. No way is he frontin' me.' (Carl does so enjoy his street talk.) 'The fuck you staring at, you bent cunt?'

Butch, frenzied now, was reeled in again. Danny held the barking mutt by the collar as if set to unleash him at any second. All three watched as Leon broke the boundary of the separation area he normally imposed on himself.

'Oh, this is going to be fucking hilarious,' Danny decided, feeling no immediate need for actual motion.

As Carl stepped down from the bench, puffing out a less than impressive chest, Leon moved ahead in what seemed like slow-motion: he slipped off his backpack; commenced to run (at funeral pace); reached over his shoulder; pulled out a glinting samurai sword (the backpack hit the ground) and with a lag befitting stretched time, howled: 'Baaaaaanzaaaaaaaaaaaaaai!'

Instantly upon them, Leon decapitated Carl with the first swish – the liberated body fell forward, spilling what remained of his fish supper. Before Danny could say '*What the fuck?*' the second swing cleaved his meaty bonce clean off – razor-sharp katana right through his MADE IN MANCHESTER tattoo. The

head rolled away, splashing through maroon spray issuing from Carl's neck. The whole event was over in a flash.

'How's that for *fucking hilarious*, Danny?' asked Leon, surveying the scene. 'Like it, do you, when someone goes all Kurosawa on your arse?' He took a step back to avoid whoever's blood that was creeping towards his Converse shoes. 'Oh, and it's "We should've *taken* out that posh bastard" not "*took* out", Carl, you imbecile.'

As Leon walked away, the geyser of blood that had been gushing several feet into the air from Danny's neck finally settled down. The scene had been pure Monty Python. Leon wondered if Peckinpah had ever seen the 'Salad Days' sketch and if so— Leon stopped; something behind him was coming his way. He knew immediately what it was: Butch, dragging Danny's massive headless torso in his wake. The Bull Terrier yelped as Leon, spinning on a heel, sliced the gleaming blade clean through the dog's middle.

In one easy move, Leon expertly returned the sword to its sheath, Samurai style, then leisurely strolled back to his pack, picked it up and shrugged it on. 'Yeah, you better keep moving, Fuckwit!' he heard over his shoulder.

As Leon headed for the exit, Danny shouted a postscript: 'Tell your boyfriend we've got that special stuff he likes!'

'Tell him yourself, Meat Head,' Leon muttered.

Having stretched the distance to the edge of the precinct, Leon turned, brushed the chip from his shoulder, and shouted:

'And he's not my boyfriend . . . you halfwit!'