

Stanley McCloud Must Die!

(more dark comedy for grown-ups)

Adrian Baldwin

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First Edition

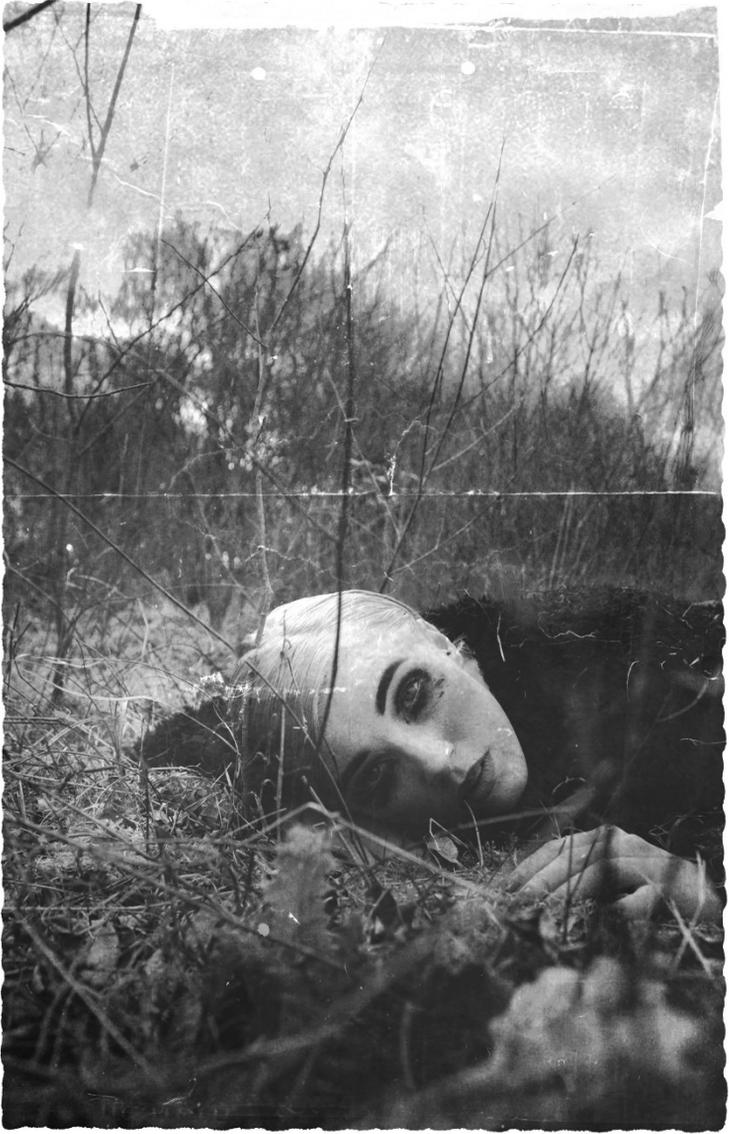
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All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons – living or dead – is purely coincidental.

Body text set in Georgia

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Also by Adrian Baldwin

Barnacle Brat*

(a dark comedy for grown-ups)

*WINNER of INDIE NOVEL OF THE YEAR 2016
(Readers' Choice) at Underground Book Reviews

This one's for Sandy, Kane, and Ma.

Acknowledgements and my usual Warning

Firstly, the warning: As it says on the cover, this is a novel aimed at *grown-ups*. The story is *not* for youngsters. Why? Because many of my characters use Adult Language; often foul, blasphemous, or sexually charged – on several occasions, *all three*. I never ask them to but often they insist. That's characters for you! Some of them can be a right bunch of ****ers.

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

I'd like to gratefully recognise the help of my editor and beta-readers:

Bronwen Burgess (can spot a superfluous comma a mile away), Sandra Baldwin, Kelly Benedetti, Allan Gordon Craggs (not to be confused with the fictional Gordon Craggs in this book), Sharon Green, Jane Lelliott, Zoe Bell-Smith, and last but certainly not least: Maggie Fitzpatrick-Reeves, who went the extra mile with her thoughts and extensive notes.

Their feedback and ability to spot fails in logic was invaluable. If *you* should find any errors, glaring or otherwise, that slipped through the net, they are all mine. By the way, if you found **lots** of typos, and believe words such as grey, travelled, realised, centre and humour should be spelt: gray, traveled, realized, center and humor, you're probably an American - in which case, there's a good chance that what you believe to be typos, are in fact the correct *British English* spelling of words - just saying.

A.B.

Stanley McCloud Must Die!

(more dark comedy for grown-ups)

'You can't blame a writer for what the
characters say.' - *OR DO!*

- Truman Capote (*& ME*)

Author's Introduction

This is a True Story

LISTEN TO ME - DON'T LISTEN TO ME

Despite what you may have heard, this is *not* a true story. It's just made-up - all of it. If you accept the story in that vein and don't take my absurd nonsense too seriously, we should have a laugh - hopefully!

Prologue

Stuff That Happened Ages Ago

TAKE YOUR TIME

Let us journey back, briefly, to the Seventies: a time of Hornsea Pottery, orange sun-loungers, pineapple ice-buckets and plastic Homepride men; Glam Rock, Punk Rock, and IRA car bombers in bell-bottom trousers smoking Player's No. 6 cigarettes; and look: Platform Shoes, the Twister game, Streakers, Pet Rocks, and as much Angel Delight as you can eat!

Okay, yes, there are disgruntled miners, TUC strikes, three-day weeks, Work to Rule, Power Cuts and soaring unemployment. And it might be best not to mention the dodgy BBC Disc Jockeys over there offering Woolworths Pic'n'Mix to kids on Space Hoppers and Chopper Bikes.

(Sadly, we all know how that turns out!)

Let us instead focus for a moment on all the *fun* things: Clackers, Cheese Fondue, Twiglets, Spam Fritters, Green Shield Stamps, Watney's Red Barrel and Ziggy Stardust! Hands up all those who remember the Ford Capri, the Queen's Silver Jubilee, and the VHS video recorder.

So, apart from how annoying lists can be, what does this tell us? As with all things, every decade has its good and bad? That apart from politics and perverts, the Seventies were *innocent*, happy times? We should accentuate the positives and simply forget the seedy side of life? Is this to be a story that rehashes the old adage: Every cloud has a silver lining?

Er, hello, the book is called *Stanley McCloud Must Die! Must die.*

Fine you say but is it possible, despite the title, the main character, this Stanley McCloud fella, makes it in the end?

Hell no! This is *Dark Comedy*. Not Disney!

And so we begin ... in Salford, also known as Little Scotland due the high number of Scots - mostly Glaswegians and Edinburgers - who moved here seeking non-embargoed stock during their homeland's severe post-war whisky rationing. Why they chose Salford in particular, and the reason a large number of their descendants remain to this day, is a mystery. Maybe Salford is much like Scotland - everything as bloody miserable and grey as it's always been.

Miserable? Grey? Have you heard this guy!

Oh, of course the Salfordians will cry all that 'Hey, up yours, mate, we're salt of the earth we are!' baloney, but this is basically a satire, so screw them, right? Besides, Northerners, especially the folk from in and around Manchester, have always had an unwavering ability to laugh at themselves so we'll probably get away with it.

So ... Salford, then ... or more precisely: Langworthy Park in Pendleton. Here, a football match is being played on a rectangular bog edged by four flapping corner flags and two tubular goal frames; both frames so similarly buckled and twisted as to be considered equally matched. This invariably muddy pitch acts as home ground for The Highland Cow's Sunday League football team. As usual, there are more players than spectators.

One of the footballers, an Away player, commits a minor infraction. The referee whistles, produces his little black book, and despite protests, takes the player's name. If you are also the kind of person who likes to make note of names: the referee is the aforementioned *Stanley McCloud*. He's currently early-thirties and in good shape, with a strong, athletic build. Soon you will know him well; better, perhaps, than he knows himself.

(Interesting side note: Some amateur pub footballers smoke whilst playing; hard to believe, but fact. When Stan is referee - which is more often than not - he always makes a show of extinguishing his cigarette *before* blowing for kick off; hoping to set a good example. Bizarrely, though, it is not an offence, according to the official Amateur Football Rule Book for 1973-74, to have a fag *during* the game.)

On the next whistle, a short, ugly lad, mid-twenties, scores from the resultant free-kick. Dougie Hamilton, rickets-riven and bone thin, having netted with a speculative-at-best long-distance shot, is congratulated by team mates. The referee, momentarily forgetting his neutrality, punches the air and celebrates with a walking handstand. Stan and Dougie are pals, you see. Make a note of that, too, if you like.

As one, the visiting players mob the man in black, demonstrate, raise questions concerning impartiality, backhanders, that kind of thing. But Stan, back on his feet, waves them away, blowing his whistle to indicate they should man up and get on with the game.

Chapter One

The Estate

TWENTY-TEN

Take a moment to acclimatise for we have fast-forwarded to 2010; those carefree, crazy days of the '70s have been left behind - things have moved on. We're still in Salford but thankfully the power cuts, strikes, and mountainous piles of rotting rubbish on streets are long gone.

Now, we are bang in the middle of Credit Crunch, Global Financial Meltdown, The Banking Crisis, Double-Dip Recession, and so-called 'Austerity Measures' ...

THE TOWERS

The night is moonless, cold and doleful. A twenty pound note sails aimlessly, high above Pendleton, hostage to gales.

Far below squats a damp, dour, dingy estate, pinned down by a dozen blocks of flats, each thirty storeys high and branded with an uninspiring name. And in the centre of it all, as if crouched, a final block: this one *horizontal* rather than *vertical*. Four stories high, Kersal House is, physically speaking, *two* blocks; each section with a row of shops footing the long outer sides and divided down the middle by a wide alley designed for bins and loading and such. A solitary, shabby public house, The Highland Cow, stands, marking time, a stone's throw from the shops. All around, CCTV cameras fixed atop high stanchions and upon tower blocks keep vigil.

You will become familiar with the whole of this area soon enough, but for now we're interested in the eleventh floor of Broughton House, where a window pulses with the flickering light of a television.

Come, let's take a look ...

The room is an unholy mess: landfill with furniture, wouldn't be far off; worn carpet (what we can see of it) littered with discarded snack packets, remains of microwave dinners and countless crumpled betting slips; cobwebs on the ceiling and around grimy windows; nothing cleaned for months, maybe years; thick layers of dust on the sideboard and its resident ornaments; on photographs, too: pictures of Stan as a referee, back in the day; his wife, Marjorie, large frame and pride of place upon the television set. (Stan reckons that's a playful scowl rather than a forced smile but she never liked having her picture taken did Marjorie.) On the mantelpiece, the couple in various holiday locations: Blackpool, Southport, Rhyl, Llandudno; Stan grinning enough for two.

Centre stage, adrift on a sea of jetsam, a badly worn sofa captained by a dishevelled old man under a snowdrift of fluffy white hair: Stanley McCloud, last of his line, now pushing seventy, exceedingly tubby, smoking a thin roll up. Perched forward, he squints at the overly loud television beaming ghostly images of a greyhound race (the set is one of those old cathode-ray-tube jobs, push-button panel beside a curved screen, and the size of a washing machine).

'Go on, number seven,' barks Stan. 'Give it some welly!'

As the dogs cross the line, he spits a curse, screws up his betting slip and flicks it into oblivion. After irritably extinguishing his tiny stub of a cigarette into the brimming ashtray, Stan slumps back into the sofa, angles a disgruntled mug towards Marjorie and puffs out his cheeks.

'Could have sworn that one was a winner,' he sighs.

Perhaps she calls out to him from ... well, wherever she is now, for his disappointment visibly softens. He smiles sadly at the face he knows so well: her intensely kind eyes; dignified features; the insightful qualities of her spirited demeanour. A handsome woman, Mrs McCloud - and Mr McCloud wouldn't hear otherwise.

'Oh, Marje,' whispers Stan, gently drifting, sliding from the present, perchance, he hopes, towards a replay of a dream he's been having of late: one in which a door swings open and he catches a glimpse of her ... waiting.

Come, let us withdraw quietly now, lest we disturb him. For Stan has already slipped away; see how he stares *beyond* Marjorie's eyes, into a space on the other side?

We'll catch up with him tomorrow.

FRANK'S PLAICE

On the east side of Kersal House, outside the post office cum newsagents, an A-board complains of ANOTHER LOCAL FACTORY CLOSURE, warns of YET MORE JOB LOSSES TO COME, and confirms the awful news:

HEAD HONCHO STRIKES AGAIN!

The 40th victim.

One door along, swearing loudly, pregnant teenager Zoe storms out of the Fish & Chip shop, left hand dragging toddler Ryan, the other pushing a seriously battered buggy containing a seriously ugly infant. Hatless and back in the mid-day sun, the creature wails anew.

Frank, irritated proprietor - tall, skinny bloke with gruff manner and Lego hair - scampers to the window, jabbing an index finger at the NO STAFF REQUIRED! sign.

Zoe shoves the buggy ahead, offers a middle finger, then tromps away along the line of shops, quite a few of which, perhaps surprisingly, steadfastly continue to trade.

Shaking his head, the proprietor returns to the counter, whereupon he balances a large sausage atop a portion of chips and commences wrapping as Stan continues to count through a handful of coins. Outside, despite a shriek of 'For fuck's sake, shurrup, Jade!' the shrill wailing persists until the infant is, presumably, wheeled around the corner.

'Better make it just chips,' coughs Stan, bending to pick up a dropped coin.

The lofty beanpole sighs and rolls his eyes, then wordlessly dumps the sausage back on the drip shelf.

SCORE

In the grounds of Langworthy Park, two joggers breeze past Stan. He's sitting on what was his wife's favourite bench

smoking a rollie, staring blankly across the large boating lake (a boating lake free of boats; all the pedal- and row boats currently locked inside a wooden boat house).

To the joggers, and any other passers-by, the focus of his attention might appear to be the small overgrown island marooned in the middle of the lake but, in truth, the old man's mind is far from here and now.

A solitary one-eyed duck that waddled up five minutes ago gives it another minute then, perhaps assuming Stan has nothing more to offer, waddles away.

Time passes with just a breeze southing through trees.

When the duck and joggers are long gone, Stan abruptly becomes aware of something: a twenty pound note, fluttering down as if from the heavens ...

'Huh,' utters Stan raising an eyebrow, the note settled on the bench beside him.

He looks around and, seeing not as much as a squirrel, pockets the windfall.

WASH AND GO

Spinderella's Washomatic is a small self-service laundrette; a business not out of keeping with other humdrum shops on Ipswich High Street. Opening hours, advises the window: 8.00 A.M. TO 8.00 P.M. SEVEN DAYS A WEEK.

Inside, lining the side walls are two banks of large, coin-operated, front-loading washing machines, each topped with a dryer and separated by a long bench-seat in the middle of a narrow walkway. Three additional stacked washer/dryers across the back wall make it twenty-three in total. The obligatory smells of warm, damp washing, laundry detergent and fabric conditioner fill the air.

Presently, two females are sitting on the bench a few feet apart, one facing left, one facing right, a full wash spinning before each. A handful of other machines in use but only the two currently attended. Nearest the window, the older woman, mid-fifties, glances up from her magazine as a man slips through the door. Having gained a sense of him, early-to-mid-thirties and nothing to write home about (in her

eyes), she returns to the article: a feature on the rising popularity of cougars - that's older women dating younger men, not American Puma. The younger female, early twenties, pays no mind either; lost in a vacuous and inane exchange on her mobile, eyes locked to her spinning smalls.

Ignored by both women, the man steps over the outstretched legs of the phone-talker, tartan blue laundry bag at his chest; drifts to a washing machine at the back, opens the door and transfers the bag's contents - an assortment of bath towels and a head - into the machine. He closes the door, inserts enough coins for a long wash and hits start. Leaving the empty plastic laundry bag in front of the soon foaming machine he departs, unobtrusively, silently; as inconspicuous as he arrived.

The part-time manageress, Candy, observant as a rule, would likely have noticed the six-foot, broad shouldered, poker-faced man; beanie hat over shoulder-length hair, big coat and thick beard. Picture a composed Charles Manson. Borderline disguise but surely real. Who'd wear a fake beard to a launderette? The question is moot, though, as Candy works only the first and last two hours of Spinderella's day. Indeed, the manageress would be able to add absolutely nothing to the big fat zero turned up by subsequent police enquiries. Four people who *do* remember using the launderette on the day in question eventually come forward following TV appeals but none of them will even vaguely recall seeing anything so much as remotely suspicious or out of the ordinary.

Another blank.

And so, for now, the still to be reported missing dog-breeder from York - or rather, her bumped, bruised and bloated sudsy head - waits to be discovered in Washer 22.

COST-CUTS MINI-SUPERMARKET

Stan's spent the whole twenty pounds on items price-slashed because their use-by date is today. But now he's wishing he hadn't bought as much. Perhaps the money would be better spent at Maggy's?

‘Good afternoon and how are we today?’ drones the checkout woman: *Joy*, according to the badge. She’s clearly said this a zillion times and loathes her job with a passion.

‘Actually, I’ll just take these,’ sniffs Stan, advancing a tin of beans, bag of crisps, bottle of Rola Cola and small loaf.

Sighing heavily, Joy reaches over and with an unnecessary grunt, removes the discarded basket and its unwanted contents. ‘Another restock, Les!’ she yells, stowing the basket to one side as Stan unfolds a stack of discount coupons.

Joy huffs; drums long, orange fingernails upon the counter’s metallic edge - noisily, repeatedly ...

No useable coupons, Stan counts out what he hopes will be enough coinage to avoid breaking into the twenty.

Joy sucks her teeth.

The woman next in the queue makes a big thing of folding her arms, the sleeves of her yellow hazmat suit squeaking loudly. Though it’s muffled within the hood - behind the full, plastic facepiece - Stan hears her muttered, impatient curses.

‘Thirty, thirty-five,’ reckons Stan, ‘forty, forty-five ...’

If it wasn’t for the excellent staff discount she gets on groceries and wine - received in exchange for not reporting her manager that time he ‘accidentally’ squeezed her tits together for several heartbeats - Joy would have quit this job years ago.

MAGGY’S INDEPENDENT BETTING SHOP

A sign in the window reads: MAGGY’S LUCKY-DIP SPECIAL PROPOSITION BETS! - ASK INSIDE!

Below the caption sits a drawing of a cobalt-blue envelope embellished with a silver question mark.

Inside, Stan waits patiently, carrier bag in hand, as a young man with MAGGIES’ SPECIALS (one word above the other) freshly tattooed across a red and very sore-looking forehead, rants at the stern-faced woman behind the counter ... Meet Maggy McCulloch: forties; carrot-coloured hair; freckled, milky skin; wild, piercing green

eyes and a demeanour as sharp as her business suits. She's currently swiping Tinder photos on her phone.

The angry customer bangs a blue envelope against the safety-glass, holds it there, jabs an accusatory finger at it.

'No way, and fuck off,' says Maggy calm as you like. 'I've told you: it's Maggy's with a Y ... Not I-E.'

'That disnae matter. A bet's a bet.'

Maggy glances up, re-examines the tattoo. 'Fuck's sake,' she laughs, 'even the apostrophe's in the wrong place.'

'Look ey ma fuckin heid!' retorts the man-child.

'Yer heid, Frazer?' Maggy's Edinburgh accent only comes out when she's angry or annoyed. 'See yer fuckin card?' The branded one obliges. 'Daes it, or daes it no, say: "*Tae win ye must huv MAGGY'S SPECIALS tattooed oan yer forehead.*" And despite appearances ah ken ye kin read. Look there. "*M-A-G-G-Y-apostrophe-S.*" Like it says outside the shoap. Like it says oan yer fuckin card!'

'So, yir no gaunny pay?'

Either would have sufficed but raised eyebrows and twisted lips unite to say *Naw!*

'Ah cannae fuckin believe this!' snorts Frazer, appearing all the younger for his childlike rage. Stan expects to see him tear up the envelope and stamp his feet any second.

'Now, fuck off!' barks Maggy. 'Come back when you've had it changed. Useless twat.'

'So, whit, that's that?' The tattoo is pressed against the glass and wide eyeballs stare down menacingly.

Maggy's countenance sets, as it so often has, to: *Really? Cos you fuck with me at your peril, son.*

A fuming Frazer unnecessarily pushes aside those nearest to him and withdraws under protest, effing and jeffing, taking his misspelled forehead with him. A parting two-finger salute bounces past the window.

'And you slam my fucking door again,' blasts Maggy, 'and I'll fucking slam *you!*'

Stan steps forward and with more than a hint of schizophrenia, Maggy instantly switches to a huge smile:

'Yes, Stan?'

Chapter Two

Here Comes the Night

IF YOU CAN SEE ME

Plated remains of beans on toast at his feet, empty crisps packet shoved down the back of the sofa, Stan glugs Rola Cola from the bottle. Marjorie's eyes appear fixed, beyond the old man, on the darkness blotting the windows. A banal dating program buzzes on the television. Stan pivots his head, aims the better ear at what's being said.

'Oh, I'd probably start with ... *Is it hot in here, pet, or is it you?*' quips a bird-faced Geordie.

Wincing at more than the inane line and grating canned laughter, Stan rubs his bilious gut, watching in disbelief as bird-face demonstrates what must be some new-fangled sexual technique. With more than enough of that, Stan shifts awkwardly, retrieves his 'remote', a long, thin, slightly bent bamboo stick (used to change channels and save Stan the repeated stress of standing, stepping to, switching, stepping back, and sitting) and leans forward. In what seems like an age but is actually only two minutes of prodding, Stan finds a quiz show he likes then sits back.

'The Mary Celeste, discovered without her crew in 1872, was what kind of merchant sailing ship?' asks the toothy quizmaster. 'And I will need an *exact* answer on this.'

'A brigantine,' gasps Stan, heaving his uncomfortable weight to the edge of the sofa once more. He's sweating now, tummy gurgling and growling.

'No, I'm sorry, that's incorrect,' says the TV. 'It was a brigantine. *A brigantine.*'

Stan's belly bubbles and burbles as if preparing to unload or explode.

'What can't rats do that make them vulnerable to poison?' the grinning quiz host wants to know.

‘They can’t vomit,’ says Stan, gagging on the words.

When the TV confirms this answer to be correct, Stan has already dashed from the room.

PLIP-PLIP-PLIP-PLIP-

Stan grabs Pepto-Bismol from the bathroom cabinet.

Plip-plip-plip-plip-

The top unscrewed, the contents are knocked back.

Plip-plip-plip-plip-

The toilet feels Stan’s weight and waits to see what happens next.

Plip-plip-plip-plip-

His stomach, or whatever it is, hasn’t felt right for a while. Is it his diet ... lack of exercise? The days of being a carefree, athletic young man all seem so far away.

Plip-plip-plip-plip-

And that bloody shower! Once he would have had the strength to swim the channel and back; now he can’t even turn off a stiff tap.

THE POST OFFICE

Stan, thankful his belly has finally fallen quiet, waits patiently at the back of a long queue. *Benefits Day.*

‘Hey, Stan!’ calls a shaky voice at an inappropriately loud volume ... Ahead, next for the counter, in grubby yellow tracksuit, stands Dougie - though his standing is far from steady. And Time has not been kind to the gargoyled-faced bowlegged short-arse. He’s now a well-worn sixty-one with hair the colour of piss-froth and a complexion to match. His four ‘long’ teeth (an optical illusion made possible by receding gums), each crooked, misaligned *and* tartar-stricken, are a little further down the shade-guide: ear-wax amber.

Stan nods, smiles.

Dougie wrestles impaired co-ordination to gesture they should go for a drink. (Although he’s originally from Scotland, Dougie Hamilton is not your clichéd piss-head

from Edinburgh, or even a stereotypical Glaswegian alcoholic - no, Dougie's from Falkirk.)

Stan mimes that he'll catch up outside.

In front of the post office, minutes later, and set to waiting, Dougie kisses his Benefits cash. The joy ends abruptly when he spots a mean son-of-a-bitch he'd prefer to avoid.

Carl, a cold, wiry, rat-faced young man, is currently accosting the grizzled woman who'd been ahead of Dougie in the queue: a frowzy harridan, forties, with matted hair and an unsightly collection of skin-tags around one eye. Carl waits, impatiently wringing fingers, knuckles cracking, until she retrieves a thin batch of notes from her tatty bag.

Snatching up the notes, Carl counts out the amount he deems correct before shoving what's left back into her sinewy claw. The woman scuttles off, muttering to herself as she consults the paltry remainder.

Adjusting his baseball cap, Carl shouts: 'Same time next week, yeah!' Actually, it's more squawk than shout, the ratty one has an unfortunately-high voice.

When Stan exits the post office he's immediately arrested by a low, conspiratorial *Psst*:

'Psst, Stan.'

Turning, Stan discovers one of Dougie's bloodshot eyes peeping from the passageway that separates the post office from Frank's Plaice.

'Ah'll catch up wi ye in The Coo,' whispers Dougie. 'Jist gaunny huv a pish first.' A flash of those lamentable gnashers and the habitually-inebriated head disappears, wobbling up the passageway.

'Okay, Stan, mate?' A squeak from behind. 'How's you?'

Stan swivels to discover Carl's mug up in his own.

'Alright for money?' asks rat-boy.

'Getting by, Carl. Getting by.'

'Right, right.' The face - as lean as it is mean - retreats its dark rodent eyes not an inch. 'Well, you know where to find me if -'

'That I do, Carl. That I do.'

Carl bops his head a moment, shoots an unconvincing made-to-make-you-feel-reassured grin, then disengages; strutting, by way of an over-egged ape-like swagger, back to the post office window, where he places bony hands upon the glass and probes the shop's interior.

IRONBRIDGE

It's the colourful tart cards that initially catch the passing bicyclist's eye. But what's with the little fella in there? He's awfully still.

'Excuse me,' says the dismounted rider opening the door, 'are you—'

He's still vomiting when a squad car arrives from Telford police station, its sirens cutting off; blue flashing lights continuing to strobe the lane's stone walls and surrounding buildings. Two uniformed police constables.

'You the person who called it in?' asks the male copper jumping out and moving swiftly to the telephone box windows.

'What kind of a sick bastard would do that to someone?' groans the cyclist.

'Did you touch anything?' yaps the female copper armed with a roll of blue-and-white cordon tape, scurrying to be involved. Small town cops with a big job to do.

'And who in their right mind,' the cyclist wants to know, 'thinks it's funny to leave a sign like that?'

The officers nod to each other. It's happened. Definitely. On *their* patch. On *their* shift. Who'd have thought it! A decapitated torso. The staging. Familiar cardboard sign with puerile unamusing message ... *Who else could it be?*

'Did you touch anything!?' barks the female over a shoulder epaulette as she wraps tape around a lamppost.

'Can't remember,' splutters the cyclist. 'I might have touched the door.'

'You shouldn't have touched *anything*.'

'I didn't know ... I didn't realise.'

'Everyone knows that,' sneers the male officer.

'I mean, I didn't know it was ... you know.'

‘Let’s hope he hasn’t ruined a vital clue,’ carps the female pointedly.

‘Will I be offered counselling or something?’

‘I’m going to have to ask you to move back, sir, please,’ commands the male copper dramatically.

‘Finding *that*,’ points the cyclist, ‘was *traumatic*. I just—’

The male officer steps in close, cutting off the witness’s blathering. ‘I’ll take a statement from you in a minute, sir. But for the moment, can you -’ He indicates the direction in which the cyclist should retreat, and right away.

Already, his female counterpart has strutted from pillar to post, sectioning off the area around the phone box with crisscrossing ribbons of POLICE LINE - DO NOT CROSS tape. ‘You calling it in, Andy?’ she asks, undeniable excitement in her voice.

‘Just about to, Tina,’ is the reply.

‘Does it look ... you know ... frozen?’

Andy flashes a thumbs-up - and with the cyclist moved beyond the squad car, he keys the two-way radio attached to his shoulder. ‘Delta Tango two-three.’

‘Dispatch,’ replies a crackly filtered voice. ‘Go ahead, car two-three.’

Theatrically, Andy announces: ‘Dispatch, PC Andy Robson on site. Looks like we’ve got a Head Honcho type situation here.’ (Someone’s watched too many American cop shows.) Tina waves furiously, wins Andy’s attention, jabs her breastbone in don’t-forget-*me* style ... He nods begrudgingly, reluctant to share the limelight.

‘Police Constable Griffiths has secured the crime scene,’ he informs Dispatch. ‘Over.’

THE HIGHLAND COW

Above the run-down, uninviting, paint-peeling front of the pub, a loose sign flaps in a cold night wind.

The sign reads: UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT.

Inside, early-fifties bartender Sue - a matronly woman with strong limbs and watchful manner, apple cheeks, creamy complexion, and short, curly fair hair - fiddles with

the locket around her neck. She's staring out, blankly, from behind the bar. It's as dead in here as it is out there. Barfly Dougie is rubbing at the last of a series of scratchcards. Stan's over by the jukebox.

'Fuck it! Fuck it! Fuck it!' seethes Dougie. 'Bunch ay cheatin fuckin swindlers.'

'Still no luck, then?' asks Sue.

'Ach, these fuckin things are fixed fi sure.'

'And yet you carry on buying them.'

'Aye well that's it, ah tell ye. *That's it.*'

Sue nods; she's heard that before - *many* times.

'Nae mair gamblin fi me,' announces Dougie before gulping down the last of his now flat beer.

'Another?' asks Sue.

Dougie hesitates, worries his glass. 'Hoo about ah bet ye a pint ah kin guess which song eh's gaunny pit oan?'

Sue looks to the jukebox: Stan rummaging pockets for coins. 'Oh yeah,' she laughs, 'like it'll be a surprise.'

Dougie pushes forward his empty glass and mumbles something as he slaps money down.

'Come again?' asks Sue.

'Ah said, ah'm gaun fi a pish.'

'Right, thanks for sharing.' Sue picks up the coins. 'Hope the till can take the strain.'

'Fuck the till, why dinnae ye git yir fuckin cloak fixed?'

'Don't bark at me. It's not *my* clock. I've told the management.'

'Hoo are we supposed tae tell when it's nearin last orders fi fuck's sake?'

Dougie slopes off and Sue pulls his beer. As Stan takes the stool next to Dougie's, 'She' by Charles Aznavour comes on the jukebox.

'Usual?' smiles Sue.

Stan nods then says, 'No, better make it a half.'

Sue changes a pint glass for a half-pint glass.

'You okay, Stan?' she asks.

Stan indicates they should listen, not talk.

Chapter Three

The Next Day

MAGGY'S SPECIALS

Dougie staggers out of the betting shop, approaches the nearest litter-bin and imparts a severe kicking: hefty boots and stomps, interspersed with the occasional falling over.

Tearing a betting slip, Stan eyes Maggy's 'Specials' sign.

'Nivir mind, pal,' says Dougie at last, 'we'll turn it roond on the four-thirty.'

'Course we will,' smiles Stan.

'Let's git some cans n heid back,' suggests Dougie tugging Stan away. 'Ah'm parched.'

Stan removes his cap and scratches his head. 'Maybe we *would* have more luck with a Special,' he sighs.

'Naw, Stan, absolutely not. They're evil. D'ye hear me? *Evil.*'

Having stopped briefly at Bargain Booze, they approach Broughton House. Dougie, carrying a six pack, has been doing all the talking - complaining - and hasn't finished yet:

'Ye nivir know whit yir gaunny git. And the odds? Always stacked in *her* fuckin favour.'

'I don't think they're that bad,' says Stan.

'*Maggy's fuckin Specials?* Only people they're special fi is *Maggy*. Her n the other fuckin witch - Morag.'

As the old pals pass between boys playing football, the ball slams into the back of Dougie's head. The force knocks him over, puts him on all fours; his carrier bag splits and cans roll away, one beer fizzing and spinning. The ball bounces back off the tower and Stan catches it.

'Sorry, Dougie,' grins a boy called Tommy running up.

'It *was* an accident,' adds the Connor lad joining them.

The other boys gather round, tittering, trading elbows.

‘That wis nae fuckin accident,’ spits Dougie. ‘That wis fuckin deliberate!’ Reaching out, he seizes the whirling can and sucks frantically at its frothing top.

‘You’re the fucking accident, Dougie,’ says Connor. ‘You drunken prick.’

‘Hey! Watch yer fuckin language, ye wee cunt,’ barks Dougie. He unpockets a Swiss Army knife, pulls out the knife blade and offers it up. ‘Burst their fuckin ball, Stan.’

Stan pauses, deliberates. ‘No, I think I’ll let them off with a warning this time.’ The ball is handed to Tommy. Stan holds up a yellow card. ‘Foul and abusive language,’ he rules, pointing at Connor. The boys run off, laughing.

‘Wee shites, the lot ay em,’ decides Dougie.

The dimly lit interior is as bleak as the exterior. In the ground floor lobby, litter sits as an untidy footnote to angry, garish graffiti and large tags. Despite the tower’s open stairwell, the place smells like tramp socks and wee.

Dougie repeatedly jabs the lift button without success.

‘Stairs again, then,’ sighs Stan.

By the fifth floor of the seemingly never-ending steps, the strain is showing ... ‘Bastard thing,’ gasps Dougie, clutching the handrail. ‘It better no be that fuckin trolley again.’ After three more floors, a dowdy woman with thick legs and a watery eye descends toward them. Stan retreats half a flight, down to the previous landing.

‘Still not crossing on the stairs, Stan?’ smiles Mary.

‘Best not,’ replies Stan.

‘Hubbie still away, Mary?’ pants Dougie setting down his bag of cans. Blanking him, Mary continues down the steps. ‘Shall ah come roond fi a drink later?’ he calls, steadying himself on the rail. He leans over the open central column of the stairwell and shouts: ‘Gie ye a bit ay company, like!’

‘Give it a rest, Dougie,’ says Stan resuming the climb.

‘Dinnae let er fool ye, Stanley. She’s a right slag oan the quiet. Ah see the way she looks at me. Nae fuckin mistake.’ After watching her disappear, Dougie hoists his bagged cans, presses on, and breathing hard, adds: ‘Even *ah’d* huv trouble keepin up wi that one.’

Finally, the panting pair reach their destination ...

They spy the battered shopping trolley, half-in half-out, stopping the lift doors from closing.

‘Ah fuckin knew it! Bastard thing. It’s like a bad fuckin penny. Aw those bastard stairs. Every - fuckin - time.’

‘It’s a mystery right enough,’ muses Stan.

‘Which bastard is it, though?’ asks Dougie. ‘That’s whit ah want tae know.’

Stan sits, takes a breather as Dougie visits his boots upon the trolley: ‘Come oan (kick!) mister fuckin (kick!) shoppin trolley (kick!) spit it oot,’ chants Dougie. ‘Who the fuck (kick!) thinks *this* (kick!) is fuckin funny!’

‘We can’t even be sure it’s somebody from this block,’ suggests Stan peering up the stairwell.

‘Has tae be,’ counters Dougie. ‘*Has tae be!*’ The kicks continue to rain down. ‘The question is—*ah fuck!*’ The shopping trolley gets a break as its assailant falls over.

Stan rises slowly to his feet, rests a hand against the wall and rubs a temple.

‘Whit’s up?’ asks Dougie.

‘Just got up too quick, I think. I’m okay now.’

‘The question is,’ says Dougie returning to the subject of the trolley, ‘which one ay these pricks is it?’

‘I guess,’ Stan races a hand to his back; a twinge as he pulls his friend up, ‘unless we catch them in the act—’

Up, Dougie bustles past and picks up the trolley. Strong when he’s angry.

‘Dae ye hear me?’ he bellows.

Thrown, the cart drops silently down the shaft.

Gnarled knuckles squeeze the outer handrail as Dougie’s next enquiry reverberates up and down the stairwell:

‘*AH SAID WHICH ONE AY YE FUCKIN PRICKS IS IT!*’

NO SURPRISES

‘*Rola-fuckin-Cola?*’ mocks Dougie kneeling behind Stan’s TV. ‘Naw, ah’m fine wi these boys.’ He cracks open one of his beers. ‘But aye, a slice ay Battenberg widnae gae amiss.’

Stan returns from the kitchen with a small toolbox and Dougie rummages loudly, eventually coming up with a slightly-bent screwdriver.

‘And it jist went black ye say?’

‘Yeah, last night; I’d just checked my lottery numbers.’ Stan removes Marjorie’s framed photo from the top of the set. ‘Nearly won a tenner.’

‘Nearly, ma arse,’ says Dougie ripping off the television’s back-panel. ‘*Nearly* is fuck aw.’

‘So, how does it look?’ asks Stan after a full ten minutes of prodding and peering.

‘Jeez, gie us a fuckin chance,’ squints Dougie into the set. ‘These old things are as big as fuckin dug kennels.’

‘There should be a torch in there somewhere.’ Stan nods at the toolbox. ‘Yep, that’s it - just press the end.’

Dougie rolls up his sleeves. ‘Okay, let’s see if ah kin pit aw ma years ay trainin in the Royal Navy tae good use, eh?’

‘*Merchant Navy*.’

‘Same difference. We’re aw trained in the same things.’

Dougie twists what might be a valve, pokes at a possible capacitor, tweaks a resistor or whatever it is, he isn’t exactly sure. Ach, it’s jist a telly, hoo difficult kin it be?

‘You were on cargo ships.’

‘Aye, that ah may huv been, but ah’ve still fixed mair stuff than ye’ve hud—’ Something inside the set *pops* and a lazy plume of smoke drifts out.

‘Oh, well, never mind,’ says Stan. ‘I’ve still got the radio.’

‘*Radios*. Noo ah kid fix *them* in ma sleep. Remember that time ah repaired yours?’ Dougie swigs his beer.

‘Yes, that’s right - what was it you did again?’

‘Fixed the power supply,’ grins Dougie proudly.

‘Or as some people would call it: Put new batteries in; which *I’d* just bought, by the way.’

‘Are ye fetchin that fuckin cake or no?’ gripes Dougie.

‘Merchant seaman,’ laughs Stan disappearing into the kitchen. ‘You spent most of your time in sickbay!’

With shaky hand, Dougie sets to randomly prodding with the screwdriver. ‘Who hus a fuckin black n white in this fuckin day n age?’ he grumbles.

‘Don’t worry if you *can’t* fix it,’ calls Stan. ‘Like I say, there’s always the radio.’

Dougie jabs at fuses and wires with little clue but miracle of miracles, something buzzes; the set’s usual precursor to coming on (after a very long warm up).

‘I could always try Morag’s place,’ suggests Stan. ‘She might have some cheap sets in.’

Dougie checks around the front ... a white dot slowly expanding. This would, he knew, eventually become a picture, of sorts. ‘Oh, ah see the problem,’ he fibs. ‘Ah’ll huv this fixed in a jiffy.’

‘Really? That was fast,’ hails Stan. ‘So, what’s up with it?’

‘Oh, uh,’ Dougie checks Stan isn’t returning, ‘one ay yer *valves*,’ he fudges. ‘It needs adjustin - very intricate work.’

The fuzzy grey embryo of a picture is currently only the size of a postcard, but still growing.

‘There,’ announces Dougie with all the craftiness of a seasoned bullshitter. ‘Ah think that shid dae it.’

‘She’s coming back on?’ asks Stan. ‘Excellent. I’ll cut you an extra piece of cake for that.’

‘And dinnae worry, there’s nay charge - unless ye fancy buyin me a few extra cans.’

‘Race should have just started.’

Dougie checks the screen. The picture’s now almost full-size but wavier than his stomach used to be on even the calmest of seas.

‘If the picture’s a bit wavy,’ calls Stan, ‘try tapping the side; *gently*, mind - that usually works for me.’

Dougie slams a fist down hard on top of the set. And again. Then another. And hey presto is rewarded with a horse race: a ghostly, hazy snowstorm of a race but just about discernible. Shame the running commentary sounds like an alien on helium but he isn’t about to try and fix that.

‘Did I hear a bang?’ asks Stan returned.

Dougie shrugs. ‘Might huv been oan there.’

Stan places a tray on the coffee table: sliced Battenberg cake, two glasses of Rola Cola, and a bag of tobacco. After eating or drinking (or just about anything, really), Stan likes to roll a little cigarette and have a smoke; always has,

always will. And why not, it clearly hasn't done him any harm: bit of a cough, shortness of breath and some morning catarrh, obviously; oh, and extensive browning of the teeth, but other than that, *nothing*; never been sick a day in his life. Unlike Dougie who hasn't been well - or fully sober - for as long as Stan can remember.

Having replaced the TV's rear panel, Dougie teeters around the table and the duo give the sofa their grateful backsides. Stan tucks into cake and Dougie works through a pocketful of slips until the relevant one is found.

'Okay, come oan, Nae Surprises.' He squints at galloping horse-phantoms and their ethereal jockeys. 'Nae Surprises ... *Where is the cunt?* Dinnae tell me eh's fallen awready.'

'That's him, isn't it?' points Stan.

'Whit's eh daein back there? Useless prick. *Forwards!* Ach, whit is eh daein?'

On the TV, horses drift like spectres towards the finish.

'Use the stick!' spits Dougie. 'Beat the useless cunt!'

'... And romping home by a length,' squeaks the commentator, 'forty-to-one outsider, Dagenhem Dave. Followed by Velvet Goldmine, Fugitive Motel, Dolphins Were Monkeys and Prairie Rose. And last to cross the line will be No Surprises. Oh no, would you believe it, he's fallen in the final furlong!'

Dougie growls, tears up his collection of slips and marches onto the balcony where he angrily flings the pieces at the sky and yells to the heavens:

'Jist the once wid be fuckin nice, ye bastard!'

The torn slips flutter down like a ticker-tape parade.

Inside, Stan checks his own slip against the TV results.

'JIST FUCKIN ONCE!' Dougie screams, long and loud.

Stan changes channel, see if there's any news on that serial killer everyone's talking about.

'*Ach, whit the fuck am ah askin ye fir?*' bellows Dougie. '*YE DINNAE EVEN EXIST, YE USELESS FANNY!*'

Stan turns to the outside and his eyes lock abruptly ...

Dougie is easing a leg over the balcony wall.

Chapter Four

Let's do it!

LIKE BUTCH AND SUNDANCE

Having grabbed Dougie, Stan pulls him back and pushes him onto the nearest balcony chair; one of two that attend a small table.

'Might as well,' moans Dougie. 'Ah nivir win a bastard thing. Ye shiddae let me jump.'

'Any more of this nonsense and I'll put you in my book.'

'If ah goat a red card wid that mean ah *kid* jump?'

'Life's short enough as it is, Dougie. You must have heard that before.'

'There's nothin left fi me. Life's a pile ay shite. Ah've hud enough. Fuck it.' Dougie's head slumps into his hands. '*Nae Surprises? Aye, nae fuckin surprises!*'

Stan shakes his head. 'So, what, when things don't work out as we'd like, we should just give up hope, is that it?'

Dougie's vagabond mug resurfaces, eyes red with self-pity. 'Kin ye think ay a single reason, *any* reason, not tae?'

Stan thinks for a second. 'Actually, yeah, you're right. Come on, let's do it; together - now. We'll go out in a blaze of glory. Like Butch and Sundance.'

'We fuckin shid,' says Dougie remaining seated.

'I'll just take this off first.' Stan pulls on the wedding ring pinching his chubby finger but it gives no indication of budging. 'Actually, I'll leave it on.' He slides a chair to the balcony wall. 'Take it with me into the next life,' he puffs stepping up ... Ten toes over the ledge, Stan looks back.

'Come on, what you waiting for? Let's go. Let's jump.'

Dougie's no longer keen. 'Uh, let's huv a drink first, eh?'

'Okay, but then we jump - right?'

'Definitely, definitely.'

'Fine.' Stan climbs down. 'Suppose I can wait a bit.'

Dougie turns his attention to a clump of crinkled beer cans on the table, shaking each in turn. Then, sucking noisily on one at random, he looks to Stan, mug set to:

See whit ah mean? Waste ay fuckin time.

'They're *old* ones,' remarks Stan.

Dougie smacks the can against his forehead, crushes it into a flat, crumpled disc, and lobbs it over the balcony.

'Not sure if my cleaner would be happy with that or not,' quips Stan.

'*Cleaner?* Ye kid fuckin dae wi one. Nae offence, pal, but even *my* place disnae look *this* bad.'

'It's not that bad. I'll get round to it.'

'Course ye will,' laughs Dougie (a red ring appearing on his forehead) and the pair share a much needed lighter moment. As Stan takes a seat, Dougie shoves his ungainly, branded head under the table. 'Where the fuck—'

'By the telly, where you left them.'

'So ah deid,' clicks Dougie. 'Nice one, Stanley boy.'

At the bottom of the tower, the flattened beer can disc that bounced off Tommy's head now lies at his feet. His mates have carried on playing football but Tommy is turning circles, wondering where it came from.

CHOOSE YOUR BATTLES WISELY

Gordon Craggs, bank clerk - soon to be *ex* bank clerk - has been following the tall white van since it clipped and smashed his wing mirror at the lights on Burn Park Road. Gordon, middle-aged, five-foot-six including his head, is currently turning into Sunderland's largest B&Q Superstore. He's also very angry. Life's always short-changing him, it seems. So no, he won't let this go. Never does. His mother's always telling him to walk away, but nope, Gordon must confront injustice wherever he finds it; just has to - especially when it's been perpetrated against him!

He pointedly parks his little smart car alongside the looming Ford Transit at the far edge of the near-empty car park. Mr Craggs had been on his way home from work; the van driver about to shop for hacksaw blades and duct tape.

‘Look what you’ve done,’ points Gordon barrelling up as the man steps out of his van. The driver is tall, broad, with a profound air of detached authority; and sharp in the eyes - grey irises so intense they appear wolf-like. But Gordon refuses be intimidated.

‘You did that, back at the lights,’ he huffs, pointing at the smart car and its smashed wing mirror hanging by a single wire. ‘And don’t tell me it wasn’t you because I saw you.’

‘Get back in your car.’

‘I will *not* get back in my car. And I won’t be bullied by you, either. I’ve made a note of your registration.’ Gordon indicates the van’s license plate number inked on his left palm. ‘So, either we settle this like gentlemen here and now, exchange details, or I call the police.’ He folds his arms, taps a foot. ‘And you can stare at me all you want. I’m not going anywhere until this matter is resolved.’ He prods the spectacles back on his nose, reinstates a fallen wisp of mud-coloured comb-over, then waits, determined, hands now planted stubbornly in pockets.

The man sighs, slides open the side door of his van and stretches out a sheet of crumpled plastic on the floor.

‘Haven’t you got *anything* to say for yourself?’

The claw hammer that strikes the side of Gordon’s head isn’t new but possesses all its original, inherent effectiveness. He lies flailing on the tarmac like a landed tuna - a chubby, mutant man-fish; stubby limbs for fins. The assailant tosses the hammer into the van and studies his catch. Surprisingly precious little blood, but Mr-I-will-*not*-get-back-in-my-car has soiled himself, front and back.

Gordon coughs and gurgles then falls silent.

The six-footer hoists the limp, still twitching body, dumps it inside the van, cocoons it in plastic, closes the door, then walks off towards B&Q - he still needs those hacksaw blades and duct tape. As for the not-quite lifeless, but for all practical purposes dead, ex bank clerk, he forms a final vision in his mind: mother saying, ‘Couldn’t leave it, could you? Had to get involved.’

On the upside, Gordon’s thinning hair and unsightly teeth are no longer the concern they once were.

IT STINKS

Beer cans drained and added to the previous empties on the balcony table, cake eaten, Rola Cola all gone, rollies smoked, Stan and Dougie gaze out to the other blocks. The sun has started to set; evening wrapping around the towers - lights on, here and there.

‘Seriously? Ye cannae smell that?’ Dougie’s talking about the large sewage works at Davyhulme. ‘It stinks.’

Stan rises, steps to the balcony wall and breathes in a noseful. ‘Nope, not a thing. I think it’s all in your head.’

Dougie belches. ‘And ah’ll nivir understand hoo the height disnae boather ye. Christ knows wit it’s like at the top - this floor’s bad enough.’

‘You had your leg over the wall an hour ago.’

‘Aye, n ah wis fair shittin maself.’

‘Still not got anywhere with the move?’

‘Tried till ah’m blue in the face. Ye’ve git tae be a Romanian retard in a fuckin wheelchair before the Housing cunts’ll pit ye anywhere near the ground.’ Dougie checks to see if any of the empties have magically refilled. ‘Unless yir deid, ay course; then ye kin huv as much ground as ye like.’

‘I love being up here. I’d be right at the top if I could. Always a sad day when they knock a tower down. On a clear day, I can see Old Trafford.’

‘A clear day?’

They stare out at the dusky remains of a typically dull day with its smoggy, cloudy view and chuckle.

‘Wouldn’t you like to be a bird - flying over all this?’

‘Fuckin fly away mair like.’

FUCKING FLY

Mid-air, a distance away, an unseen blow-fly spots the men through compound eyes. The balcony grows larger as the bluebottle, on an erratic flight path, heads for the tower.

Stan, soon aware of buzzing around his head, swipes at the air, hands hitting nothing.

‘Has it gone?’ he asks. ‘What was it?’

‘Ah didnae see anythin; jist ye flappin yer arms about.’

All of a sudden, Stan clutches his chest as if in great pain - which makes sense because he is.

‘Stan?’

If you were a fly, looking out from the living-room ceiling, you would now see a myriad of tiny Stans collapse onto multiple balcony tables.

TO A&E

‘But I told you,’ insists Stan. ‘I don’t need to go.’

Dougie repeatedly thumps the eleventh floor lift button, Stan draped over his shoulder in a fireman’s lift.

‘Besides, I hate hospitals. Probably just need a lie down, that’s all; been a long day.’

‘Curse this fuckin lift!’ Dougie almost drops Stan as he plants a kick on the stubbornly sealed doors.

‘I *really* don’t think this is necessary,’ coughs Stan.

‘We shid gae back n call an ambulance,’ suggests Dougie.

‘No, no. I’m sure we don’t need to trouble the ambulance guys. They’re overrun as it is.’

‘Right,’ barks Dougie stubbornly, ‘stairs it is.’ He lurches across the landing and blunders down the first flight of countless concrete steps ... Stan’s head, stuck out over the railing, takes in the frigid air of the mineshaft-like space and what would be a long but fast drop to the ground should Dougie spill him over the side.

‘You sure you’ll be okay?’ asks Stan.

‘Fi ma old pal ah will. Anyhoo, quicker on the way doon.’

‘That’s what I’m worried about,’ mutters Stan.

And, as if on cue, Stan’s transport staggers forward, two-steps-at-a-time, down the remainder of the first flight ...

Stumbling, but miraculously staying upright, the human pack-horse uses the oncoming wall at the corner between Eleven and Ten to arrest his gathering momentum; and adding a surprisingly nimble twist just before impact, utilises Stan’s fleshy backside to minimise damage.

‘Jesus Christ, Dougie!’

‘Sorry, pal - hud tae be done.’

‘What are you trying to do, kill me?’

‘Ach, we’ll be fine noo.’ Knees flexing, Dougie shrugs Stan into a more ‘balanced’ position. ‘The first part ay any journey,’ he wheezes, ‘is always the trickiest.’

‘Yeah, well, I say we journey back.’ Stan attempts to wriggle free. ‘Come on, put me down.’

‘No,’ puffs Dougie tightening his grip and setting off once more. ‘Ye *are* gaunny hospital.’

‘But I’m fine, I tell you, fine,’ insists Stan.

Normally, it probably is quicker going *down* a stairwell rather than *up*, but when you’ve got a stocky, querulous, six-foot-four pensioner on your back, and you are a shrunken, surly and unstable alcoholic, any improvement in rapidity is marginal ... Before Dougie has descended to the dimly-illuminated steps between floors Seven and Six - having thumped every lift button and kicked every lift door - his posture has grown increasingly bent and crab-like, the pace progressively leaden and sluggish.

‘Ohhh,’ groans Stan. ‘This is unbearable.’

‘Tell me about it,’ carps Dougie.

By the time he’s given up on the resolutely unresponsive lift call button down on Four, Dougie’s passenger’s dead weight is bending his back beyond tolerable and he’s hobbling like an undernourished cripple.

‘Why didn’t you call an ambulance? This is ridiculous!’

Dougie desperately wants to argue. Wasn’t it he who suggested exactly that? *Twice!* Once in the flat and again, way back by the lift on Eleven. But no, he won’t argue with a sick friend. That would be selfish. And it has to be said, Stan is the most selfless person—

‘Argh! Move it, Dougie, you bastard. Do you want me to die here on the stairs?’

On Two, progress is no longer slow - it’s stopped. ‘No sure ah kin last much longer,’ coughs Dougie. Unsteady, and even more comically bowlegged than before, he has a suggestion: ‘Whit if ah leave ye here n go n call fi help?’

‘Don’t you dare leave me - don’t you fucking dare!’

‘Right, right,’ gasps Dougie, soldiering on.

* * *

Come on, will you, Dougie. Speed it up for Christ's sake!' cries Stan as Dougie at long last totters down the final steps to the ground floor lobby. 'I need medical treatment - *now!*'

'Daein ma best, Stanley, daein ma best.'

'Think I'm about to pass out.'

'Mibbee it'd be fi the best,' mutters the pack-horse.

'I heard that, you selfish bastard.'

'*Selfish?*' grumbles Dougie.

'If it was the other way round, you can bet your life I'd have *run* there by now. And I wouldn't be griping about it!'

'Ah'm no moanin— *Jesus H Christ!*' Dougie's glance to the lift has discovered the return of the battered shopping-trolley: half-in, half-out, preventing the lift doors from closing. 'That fuckin trolley!'

'Never mind that now. No, wait! I've got an idea.'

As fast as an uncoordinated inebriate can be expected to, Dougie pushes Stan, motionless in the shopping trolley, along the concrete walkway that bypasses The Highland Cow - all the while gazing longingly at the entrance, as if missing an opportunity. But as one door closes ...

'Ah'll be ten seconds,' says Dougie at the corner of Kersal House, 'twenty, tops.'

Stan makes no reply.

Dougie checks for a heartbeat ... Yeah, his pal's fine. Probably for the best that Stan's passed out. And he'll be thirty seconds, a minute at the most - in and out.

Inside the brightly lit off-license, Dougie, six-pack in hand, waits impatiently at the counter behind a bloke dressed as a giant hot-dog; valuable time being used up by an officious manager showing a simple-minded trainee how to ring a sale into the till ... Hot-Dog Man turns his massive bun/sausage combo, garnished with lines of fake ketchup and mustard, sweaty mug squeezed by the costume's tight face-hole, and rolls his eyes at Dougie.

Outside, a ten-year-old in grubby T-shirt and knitted Inca hat is recording on her phone. This'll be great for her YouTube vlog. She's already wondering which of her iTunes songs will be funniest for 'drunk codger' in a shopping cart parked in front of Bargain Booze. Perhaps 'Rehab' by Amy Winehouse. No time to dally, though; should her boozy stepdad decide to check her room at any time, she'll be in *big* trouble. Fat chance but best not push her luck. Besides a trio of youths is approaching and she's streetwise enough to know they'll 'tax' her phone if they catch her.

They might have noticed her, too, if it hadn't been for the old fart in the Cost-Cuts shopping trolley.

'Oh my days, what ave we ere,' laughs Puffa Jacket.

'Someone is sleepin one off, innit,' squawks a second youth, the one in hoodie-over-baseball-cap.

Padded Parka says nothing but keeps watch as Puffa and Hoody ransack the unconscious codger; smoothly relieving him of his only possessions, other than his clothes: a wallet and a watch. Oh they try and wrest the wedding band from Stan's pinched finger, but only succeed in jerking him backwards and forwards; his oblivious head lolling back and forth in what looks like exaggerated encouragement.

Silver-plated, only twenty quid from Argos, but sure, lads, help yourselves. If you can get it off, it's yours. Go on, heave, and again. Wait, what; giving up already?

The wallet, once emptied of ancient betting slips, of no weight beyond its imitation leather, is immediately dumped in the senseless duffer's lap. The watch (worthless apart from its sentimental value; a gift from Dougie on Stan's sixtieth birthday, almost a decade ago; Marjorie said it was cheap, amusement arcade tat, but Stan's worn it ever since) is ditched before the youths have even rounded the corner of Swinton House.

'Waste of fucking time,' is the grunted consensus.

Taxing isn't what is used to be.

Back inside Bargain Booze, Dougie glances outside. Stan seems fine, but seriously, *Hoo much pishin longer!*

'Fuck me. The day wid be good,' puffs Dougie leaning around the red-faced sausage. 'Ma friend is dyin oot there.'

Chapter Five

Bad News

MORNING, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

The room is full of seated press men and women; journalists and reporters itching to ask questions. TV News camera guys and photographers stand tall around the edges. The air is abuzz with separate discussions, rankled mumblings and exasperated concerns. An A-frame bearing a map of Great Britain littered with coloured pins stands beside a desk crammed with microphones. Two police officers, one in high ranking uniform, the other in plain-clothes, take a seat. A uniformed constable, PC Shawcross, all crew cut and square jaw, attends stiffly by the map.

The senior officer, Chief Superintendent Russ Sanders - late-fifties, salt-and-pepper hair, moderately handsome but in *his* mind a silver fox George Clooney type; cocksuredness boosted by rank - is clearly waiting for hush before he'll commence ... After a few seconds the room falls sufficiently silent. The odd cough, but you always get that.

'Good evening, ladies, gentlemen, gathered members of the press. As I'm sure you know, I am Chief Superintendent Russ Sanders of The Really Serious Crime Agency. Next to me is Detective Chief Inspector James Allen.'

The detective nods deferentially to his superior and several cameras flash.

'DCI Allen here is, as you're no doubt aware, now heading up the investigation squad in this case. He replaces Detective Inspector Maguire.' Sanders asides to Allen: '*The useless dick we should have dumped months ago.*' Back to the reporters: 'We all wish him well in his early retirement.'

The superintendent hooks his tight shirt collar with an index finger, stretches his neck. 'Today, we'll be providing details on the last two confirmed Head Honcho murders.'

‘He was averaging around two or three a year!’ gripes a headscarved woman on the front row. ‘Now it seems to be two or three *a month - every* month. What’s going on?’

There follows a barrage of calls: ‘Yeah, how many is that now?’ - ‘Forty-two!’ - ‘That we know about!’ - ‘Soon be one a week at this rate!’ - ‘What are you doing about it?’

‘Believe me, we’re doing everything humanly possible,’ insists the superintendent. ‘It’s only a question of time before the murderer is caught.’

They’ve heard that before. One reporter mocks: ‘Come on, people, don’t be cynical. There’s another new detective in charge. That’s *bound* to make a difference.’

‘Right, this is getting out of hand,’ bellows CS Sanders. ‘We must have order. There’ll be time for questions *at the end*. The next person who shouts out *will* be arrested.’

‘At least that’ll be *one* arrest!’

‘Constable, arrest that man. Take him out, right now.’

Shawcross enthusiastically launches into the gathering and is soon assisting a reporter by the elbow to a side door.

‘Not *her*, constable; *him*.’

The constable releases his mistake and wades back in.

‘Now, does anybody else wish to call out?’ asks the super in an overly authoritative tone. ‘Or are you going to wait till the end like gentlemen?’ His hard stare scans the room. He nods to Kate Hurley (Sky News), who he’s got a thing for. ‘And ladies, of course,’ he adds softly. Hurley smiles obsequiously. ‘Right, where were we? Oh yes, we’ve had *two* murders this month ...’ A long glare, no interruptions. Again, the CS stretches his neck. ‘And now that everybody’s listening *politely*, I’ll hand you over to DCI Allen who will fill you in on the details. Jim.’

‘The Head Honcho,’ announces the detective, loud but flat, ‘has struck again; two more *vicious* murders.’ The plain words return a sense of gravity to proceedings and he quickly has the room. ‘Both deaths fit the serial killer’s Signature and Modus Operandi. Victims taken, apparently at random; heads left in one place, bodies in another; one male and one female victim. I’ll start with the female ...’

‘Ladies first,’ acknowledges the CS, glancing at Hurley.

DCI Allen isn't sure how best to respond to his chief's crassness so he ignores the comment and pushes on:

'Identified as Tess Poulton, thirty-two, a dog-breeder from York; her naked, headless body was found in Victoria Square, Birmingham ... at *The River*.'

PC Shawcross, back at the map, points to Leicester.

'And for those of you unfamiliar with Birmingham,' continues Allen, '*The River* is not an *actual* river - it's a fountain slash statue slash artwork, known locally as *The Floozie in the Jacuzzi*.'

The PC clicks a remote and a slide projects onto the wall, above the seated officers' heads: a monumental bronze statue; a naked female, reclining, legs crossed, on a stone plinth, surrounded by a body of water. Scale is hard to judge from the photo but in reality, the 'Floozie' is nine feet tall, eight feet wide and thirteen feet long.

'Tess Poulton's torso was posed in a kneeling position, at the fountain's edge, arms extended, as if reaching for her missing head; fully frozen - as all victims have been since the turn of the millennium - postmortem examination once again delayed. Although the body is slowly defrosting, the inner organs will take a long time to thaw. Slide, please.'

Click: *The victim's frigid, grey, headless carcass arranged as described*. There is a cardboard sign, but from this angle it can't be read ... a pregnant pause ... it's the part everybody's been waiting for; DCI Allen knows, CS Sanders knows, the whole room knows - even the dim-witted constable ... then again, maybe not.

'As usual, a cardboard sign was left around the neck.'

'The neck *stump*,' clarifies Sanders.

'The neck *stump*,' agrees Allen.

Pens are poised. Laptops readied. Cameras prepped.

Click: *A square of cardboard, photographed in isolation; just a ruler at one side for scale*. The caption reads: **CAN'T TONIGHT ... I'M WASHING MY HAIR**. A barely audible disappointed 'Pfft' gets a heads up from the super.

'*Can't tonight*,' recites Allen in a dull, respectful voice, '*dot, dot, dot, I'm washing my hair*.' He takes a sip of water. 'Next slide, please.'

Click: *A high street with a laundromat centre stage.*

'The head was found two days later, in this launderette, Spinderella's Washomatic on Ipswich High Street, in this washing machine.'

Click: *Washer 22.*

This is one of those moments where the situation is just so damned serious that *any* kind of amusement would be super-inappropriate. One person can't help it, though. He snickers. Only slightly, stifles most of it (hands over mouth, nose pinched) but a few little squeaks slip out.

'This is hardly a laughing matter,' reminds Sanders.

'Why do you think the killer leaves humorous signs?' asks the woman in the headscarf. 'Is it to taunt the police?'

'They're hardly *humorous*,' sighs Sanders. 'Do *you* find the killer's sick sense of humour *amusing*?'

'So, you do admit it could be *killers*?'

'No, I said *killer's* - as in *one*. Now, please, listen to the rest of the brief. There'll be plenty of time for inane questions at the end. And if there's any more snickering, the culprits *will* be escorted out. Constable ...'

Shawcross indicates a readiness to swoop.

'The male now,' rejoins DCI Allen. 'Nathan Bradley, forty-one, five-foot-eight prior to decapitation; a baker from Swaffham, Norwich; his body was found in Ironbridge, Shropshire, in this telephone box ...'

Click: *Exterior of the phone box, the body removed.*

'And the next slide, constable.'

Click: *Mr Bradley's headless torso 'standing' in the phone box - door ajar.*

Murmurings from the press but no-one snickers. And why would they? There's really nothing even remotely funny about the unfortunate victim.

'As you can see,' Allen uses an extended pointer stick, 'the body is leaning back, maintaining its position, rather like a mannequin, unsupported, by virtue of, once again, being frozen solid. I'll come to the sign in a moment - sorry, it's a bit blurred in this shot - but I can confirm the cord matched that found on previous signs. Note the telephone receiver taped to the right hand.'

Click: *The now empty phone box interior.*

'In addition, *these,*' Allen's pointer taps a random tart card, 'blu-tacked around the phone: cards advertising a variety of ... *personal services.*'

'Domination,' advises Sanders. 'Humiliation, Uniforms, Caning, Spanking.' The room is quiet, other than several male journalists dutifully making shorthand notes - readers need details. And the superintendent has more: 'Tie and Tease, Two girl special, Strap-on ... that kind of thing.'

No-one speaks, no-one moves; pens at a standstill - a sea of slack jaws and wide eyes.

Sanders clears his throat. 'Yes, well, you've got the idea. Carry on, detective.'

'These *tart-* or *hooker cards,* as they're sometimes called, are not indigenous to the area,' continues Allen. 'The mobile numbers advertised are based in the London area.'

'We checked every one,' reports the super.

'Let's move on to the sign.' Allen nods at the constable.

Click: *A close-up of the phone box victim's stubby neck and the cardboard sign hanging from it.*

The message reads: **HOW MUCH JUST FOR HEAD?**

Before the nascent snickering can take root, Sanders announces: 'Right, questions.'

'Are you still pooh-poohing the suggestion made by a lot of people - that there are, in fact, *two* killers?'

'Oh, jeez,' sighs the superintendent checking his watch. 'Yes, we're still pooh-poohing that suggestion. Next.'

WHAT'S UP, DOC?

By the time Dougie and Stan had finally reached the hospital, night was well and truly upon them, the pace down to a stuttering crawl; Stan (still out cold), Dougie necking a beer as he pushed the trolley up the long incline towards the Accident & Emergency entrance ... Off to one side, two green-uniformed paramedics loitered around an ambulance, smoking cigarettes, unoccupied other than sharing amusing YouTube clips on their phones.

'Hey!' shouted Dougie. 'Hoo about gieing us a hand!'

Both medics had looked back, over their shoulders, but only the shorter one bothered to reply: ‘Ach, yir awready there!’ he squawked. Yet another Scottish accent.

Now, first light finds ruddy-faced Dougie fast asleep in A&E’s waiting area, a crumpled can under the seat tasked with supporting his awkward, uncomfortable frame. (A night security guard had moved to eject him, until the nurse on reception confirmed he wasn’t a Homeless, just waiting on a friend.) Along the corridor, in Albert Finney Ward, Stan’s in an open-backed hospital gown, sitting up in a bed with a curtain drawn around. Vickram Wazir, a youthful-looking Indian Doctor, stands over him, clipboard in hand, gazing at the yellow card held aloft in Stan’s hand.

‘W-A-Z-I-R,’ spells the doctor, patiently. ‘Doctor Vickram Wazir, Oncologist.’

Stan writes the name in his notebook.

‘Mr McCloud, please, I’m serious - *very* serious.’

‘But I feel fine, doc,’ insists Stan. He shrugs. ‘So, I have to make a few changes.’

The doctor shakes his head forlornly. ‘If only you’d come in sooner - maybe we could have done something.’

‘I can give up drinking ... or smoking.’

‘Yes, well, if I had seen you earlier, I would have urgently suggested you give up smoking *and* drinking, get out more, improve your diet, take some exercise—’

‘*Exercise?* Pah! I might be nearly seventy but I could still outrun you, doc. C’mon, race me down the corridor.’

‘*And the occasional shower wouldn’t hurt,*’ mutters Dr Wazir accidentally.

‘Probably just the pie I had for lunch. You never know what’s in those pies. I say your diagnosis is codswallop.’

‘Please, we’ve done tests,’ implores the doctor, pulling off his spectacles. ‘*Several* tests.’

‘I know, I’ve been here all night.’

‘And I’d like to investigate further. MRI and CAT scans. Additional blood tests ...’

‘I said I feel fine, cloth-ears,’ rasps Stan.

‘You really should let me examine your prostate, too.’

‘Like hell.’

‘Any abdominal pains? Dizziness? Headaches?’

‘Just tension headaches.’

‘Mr McCloud, you have a tumour.’

Stan says nothing for a beat then asks: ‘How big?’

The doctor remounts his specs. ‘About the size of a large grape, give or take.’

‘So, radiation? Chemo? And then I’ll be fine?’

The doctor looks glum, puffs his cheeks. ‘To be honest, any treatment, at your age and in your condition ... and I’m afraid it isn’t just the brain ... your body also has—’

‘Okay, but apart from the brain and the body I’m good to go, right?’ quips Stan.

‘Mr McCloud, are you taking this seriously?’

‘Yes, doc, Christ.’ Stan swings his feet to the floor, gathers his thoughts. ‘Sorry, it’s just my way, you know, of dealing with— it’s a shock.’ He pours a glass of water from the jug on the bedside unit. ‘So, *what* is the treatment?’

‘As I said, *any* treatment ... with your age, and weight, the smoking ...’ Wazir takes in a deep breath, lets it out slowly. ‘We have to face facts.’

‘How long?’ Stan sips water. ‘Couple of years?’

‘I’m sorry, Mr McCloud, but you may not have long left at all. We just have to accept that.’

‘*How long?*’ asks Stan firmly. ‘Days?’

‘No, no, more than days.’

‘Months?’

‘We can never be exactly sure.’

‘Weeks!’

‘Circumstances sometimes—’

‘Circumstances, my arse!’ blasts Stan folding his arms. ‘It’s all guesswork as far as I can see.’

‘Based on these results,’ Wazir taps Stan’s medical notes, ‘and what you’ve told me about your lifestyle -’

‘My lifestyle? There’s nothing wrong with my bloody lifestyle. Bit sedentary perhaps but -’

‘In some ways it’s incredible you’re here at all.’

‘Oh, you lot never know what you’re talking about. I say you’re wrong.’ Stan’s hands push down on the bed and he straightens up slowly, intent on leaving.

‘And if we’re right?’

‘Then what’s the point? It’s not going to make any difference now.’

‘Well, at least take this information sheet.’

‘What is it?’

‘It’s about palliative care.’ Dr Wazir waits for a response but doesn’t get one. ‘Some patients prefer to stay at home. Others, at least, at the end ...’

‘Pah! I’ll probably go another ten or twenty years.’

‘And this,’ The doctor writes a prescription, ‘something to lessen the pain, counteract the—’

‘I don’t need pills,’ huffs Stan, snatching up his wallet from the bedside unit. ‘Look, could a sick man do this?’

Stan plays Keepy-Uppy with the wallet, manages three kicks and a knee then stops, out of breath.

‘There are also some experimental drugs we could -’

‘Fine,’ wheezes Stan, leaning on the bed. ‘Whatever.’

Doctor Wazir scribbles an addition on the prescription. ‘I should warn you, however,’ he explains, ‘there could be side effects, mood swings, that kind of thing.’

Stan reluctantly accepts the prescription; throws the doctor a long, hard stare. ‘You said there was nothing wrong with my wife.’

‘I don’t think it was actually me.’

‘It was a doctor, just like you. Another puppy-faced boy still wet behind the ears.’

‘Well, I think that’s a little—’

‘Told her to go home, said she was imagining things. *Go home and take a couple of Aspirin*, they said. And what happened? She died less than two months later.’

‘Now, we don’t know she died for certain do we, Mr McCloud?’ Again, the doctor removes his spectacles. ‘After all, she was never found.’

THE WALKING DEAD

Dougie, still slumped awkwardly across three hard hospital chairs, makes lewd suggestions to someone in his sleep. As such, he fails to see Stan’s naked backside, framed by light-

blue hospital gown, reversing through the doors of Albert Finney Ward, its owner holding up a *red* card.

Marched halfway to the waiting area, Stan notices an old man on a gurney and stops. Poor guy looks like the walking dead - the walking dead having a lie down; just skin and bone, the colour of ash. The parked zombie, noticing Stan's attention, rolls sunken eyes to greet the stranger.

'Don't listen to anything this lot tell you,' warns Stan.

'You don't look well,' coughs the zombie.

'They never get anything right. It's all bullshit. *Wait, what?* That's a bit rich.'

'Oh this.' The sunken eyes roll back to take in the sunken body. 'Don't let this fool you. I have a nut allergy is all.'

'*Nut* being the operative word,' mutters Stan. He never likes to be mean but clearly the zombie's brain has turned to mush.

'Be as right as rain in a couple of days.'

'I think someone's in denial,' suggests Stan.

'You're probably right,' says the zombie. 'But it's definitely not me. The nurse told me I was going to be fine.'

'Like I said, they know nothing.'

'Listen, they might make the odd mistake but—'

'They told *me* I'm dying; probably *weeks*. They tell *you* you're going to be fine. No offence, but look at you and look at me. They've clearly got our notes mixed up.'

'Fuck you, you stinky motherfucker! I'll get up and kick your arse in a minute.'

'Come, Dougie.' Stan kicks his friend's chair, 'we're leaving.'

'Eh? Whit's gaun on?' Last night's pack-horse sits up, rubs his eyes. 'Shite, ah wis huvin a crackin dream then.' He hacks dryly. 'Mary wis giein me a blowie in the lift ...'

But Stan has already clattered through the exit into the morning.

A nurse appears in the corridor.

'Mr McCloud!' she shouts. 'Your clothes!'

Chapter Six

The Lake

MEDICATION TIME

The estate's local pharmacy resides in Kersal House. Stan's in there now, leaning on the counter, waiting, as Hattie (so states her name badge) dispenses his prescription at the back of the shop. The pharmacist is late forties, with spidery hands, permanent frown, and an imposing stiff-backed deportment; her well-formed figure wrapped securely in crisp white lab coat.

Dougie couldn't resist a leer at Hattie's norks when they were close but with their relocation to the tricky-to-see-into dispensing area he's switched attention to the pharmacy's junior assistant; or, to be more exact, her backside, which she's currently walking to the front door, as far from the counter as she can go without fully abandoning her post.

Having chocked open the door, Charlotte ignores the continuing leers from the lecher in the filthy red tracksuit that reeks of piss and booze, and sucks in the exterior's fresh air. She scans the outside in all directions, praying for no additional customers until the two inside have left; especially any with urgent demands requiring immediate service. No way does she want to have to go back in there.

Look at them: The old man naked apart from a thin hospital gown, wrinkly backside on show. Is he a nutter escaped from a mental asylum? Broken out by his dirtbag wino accomplice? And ew, the perv is still staring at me!

'Weeks, my backside,' grouches Stan. He nudges Dougie in the back but his pal would prefer not to be distracted from how the low sun shines through Charlotte's lab-coat, makes it appear transparent, exposing her silhouetted thighs and the space between. (Yes, chalk up another for the King of Disgusting Pigs.)

Stan tugs the back of his pal's tracksuit top.

'Whit?' bleats Dougie.

'I said *Weeks, my backside.*'

Dougie yields a 'Huh?' and nothing more.

'That doctor - he doesn't know what he's talking about.'

Lack of a relevant response gets another poke from Stan.

'Dae ye think she's daein that on purpose, the silhouette thing? Ah mean, why else wid she move tae the door?'

With his friend hopelessly lost in Gaga-Land, Stan returns to scrutinising Hattie.

'Come on, missus,' he mutters. 'It's freezing in here.'

Hattie senses her customer's impatience but as much as she'd like to clear the shop - *and immediately fumigate the place* - this is a big order and will take a lot of dispensing.

Charlotte could use a smoke but isn't allowed out front, only out back. And no way is she going back in there. Not until the psychos have left. Are they *really* here for meds, or casing the joint? *What if one of them is the Honcho!* Or maybe it is a pair of nutters working in tandem like the news is always suggesting. She decides to keep a close eye on the duo in case they suddenly make a murderous move. Thank goodness she relocated to the door; could be a life-saver. Mind you, if they murdered Hattie it wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing. She might get promoted! Once she's done the necessary training, of course.

'Whit, pal, whit?' grumbles Dougie. With Hattie still dispensing, Stan is back on his case, prodding his shoulder.

'Not even *months.* Said it was incredible I was here at all. *Tests?* Pfft. Tests, my arse.'

'Aye, aye,' offers Dougie. 'Ye'll outlive us aw.'

'Oh, and "I could use a shower!" Can you believe it? He thought I hadn't heard him, but I did. Shows what he knows, cheeky sod. I had a shower last week.'

Dougie swivels his head, sniffs the air.

'*Think* it was last week,' reflects Stan.

'Smell fine tae me.'

'Well, there you go.' All the proof Stan needed.

'Nearly done, Mr McCloud,' calls Hattie. 'Be with you in a minute now.'

A shiver quivers Stan's hospital gown. 'Can you feel a draft?' he asks Dougie.

But his friend's attention has relocked on Charlotte; the sun could go in any moment.

'And worst of all, what he said about my poor Marje.'

Dougie rolls his eyes but says only: 'Eh wis oot ay order, right enough.'

'What did he say? *She was never found. We don't know for certain.* I think we do. It's pretty obvious, is it not?'

'Course it is, Stan,' agrees Dougie without conviction. He seems to know something we do not. 'Course it is.'

ROW, ROW, ROW YOUR BOAT

A row boat glides slowly through foggy morning waters in the past; visibility, mere yards - aboard, a couple in their early-sixties ...

Stan pulls on the oars, grins at Marjorie. She sighs and turns her face away, bites on an apple.

'You okay, dear? You said they told you there was nothing to worry about.'

'I know,' snaps Marjorie. 'I was thinking about something else.'

Course you were, thinks Stan. *So courageous.* He watches her hand, thin but unmistakably elegant, softly breaking the water; courtly fingers swimming back and forth. The boat creaks gently, as if burdened by an enduring aura of romantic melancholy.

Or perhaps that's just Stan projecting.

Eventually, time spent rowing - without a further word spoken - delivers them to an island in the middle of the lake. Marjorie's distracted gnawing has reduced her apple to half an apple. Stan docks the boat and stows the oars.

'Don't mind, do you, dear?' he asks. *Not his fault that these days, when he has to go, he really has to go.*

An oar drips onto Marjorie's shin and ankle. 'Just go,' she sighs, thwacking the oar away with her foot.

'Right, won't be long.' Stan steps ashore. 'Love you, Marje,' he winks.

Marjorie rolls her eyes and waves him away. Sets to rubbing at the water stain on the leg of her tights.

So cute when she's a bit miffed. 'Back before you finish your Granny Smith,' laughs Stan. He pushes into shrubbery and disappears under a large weeping willow.

'Oh, I needed this!' he calls after half a minute or so.

At his age a wee takes what feels like an eternity (again, not his fault) but finally, pretty sure the job is done, he shakes and zips up his fly.

Upon returning, Stan finds what's left of the apple in the boat, but Marjorie gone. Hours later, still holding the browned core, he suffers the attention of head-scratching detectives at the lake's edge ...

Detective Constable Higgs, a young man with a sprouting of patchy facial fluff (a subconscious attempt to portray a professional experience and maturity he's umpteen years from earning), is in charge of the notebook. The battle-axe in trousers, DS Ratchet (the one imbibing coffee from a travel mug) is leading the investigation - starting with a less-than-sympathetic interrogation. Heads and torsos all over the place and twenty-years service but she gets Missing Persons whilst the Chief Superintendent's mates are transferred to the Head Honcho team and what could end up being the biggest serial killer case in British criminal history! Curse all men with their stupid Mates' Code and secret handshakes and silly Masonic Lodges.

'But we *are* looking for her, Mr McCloud,' advises DC Higgs sympathetically. 'And answering our questions isn't only routine ... it might actually help find her.'

'Hey, hey! You make the notes, I'll ask the questions.'

'I was only -'

'I know what you were doing.'

'Sorry, it just looked like you were thinking about something else so I -'

Ratchet steps forward, elbows Higgs aside.

'Now, let's go over it again, shall we, McCloud?' says Ratchet. This joker probably *killed* his wife and disposed of her somewhere; the whole *claiming-she's-missing* an attempt to divert suspicion from his hideous crime. Yes,

look at those shifty eyes - wet with guilt. Ratchet wasn't a detective sergeant by luck; she had a nose for this kind of thing. *Strangler*, if she wasn't very much mistaken. Give it a few more weeks and the Honcho Squad would be *begging* for her assistance!

'Just start at the beginning,' suggests Higgs softly. 'And take your time.'

'Actually, snappier would be better,' urges Ratchet. She knows killers are more likely to trip up or contradict themselves if chivvied along. Higgs throws her a look but Ratchet presses on: 'You said the park was empty when you set out on your early morning row.'

'No, I said there were a few people about - couple of joggers, someone walking a dog ...'

'Oh, that's right, but you claim it was - *a bit misty*.'

'Very misty,' interjects Higgs, moving forward to exhibit his notes. '*Very Misty*.'

Ratchet accidentally-on-purpose slops coffee onto Higgs' shirt cuff. 'Shut up, Higgs, let the man talk.' As her DC rushes to the water's edge to douse his scolded hand, Ratchet surveys the lake and remarks to Stan: 'That's odd, because it's not misty now. Is it?'

'No,' agrees Stan. 'But it was before.'

There follows a volley of questions. Stan's responses are: 'No, I didn't hear a splash. I told you, that *is* the last time I saw her. Yes, in the boat. Yes, *that* boat. I don't know; at first I thought she was hiding on the island - as a joke.'

'Playful woman, is she?' asks Ratchet.

Stan hesitates. 'Yes,' he lies.

Marjorie was never really what you'd call playful but Stan didn't want to paint his wife in a bad light.

The questions continue.

'I dived in and searched for her, of course, I'm all wet. I *did* use the boat - afterwards. I don't know why I didn't use the boat to search first; just jumped in - must have panicked. *Dived, jumped*, what's the difference? Yes, she can swim. Well, I'm pretty sure she can. I never really ... we never actually went swimming now I think about it. No, I've never seen her *afraid* of water. Yes, the boat trip was

my idea. I thought she'd enjoy it! I am not raising my voice. Of course she likes boating. We've done it before. A couple of times. Well, obviously I checked at home first, I'm not stupid. No, there's nowhere she'd have gone, not without telling me. Yes, I've checked. *Yes, everywhere!* I'm not getting defensive, you harpy, I'm just worried about my wife. What?! Of course I didn't kill her! How dare you?! Do I look like a killer? I AM CALM! Okay, I'm not calm but that's only because you—'

'So,' Ratchet interrupts, 'according to your statement, your wife must have either swum ashore - *if she can swim* - or she transferred to another boat.'

Stan shakes his head. 'I didn't say anything about another boat. How could she have transferred to another boat? Someone would have had to -'

'That's assuming we don't find her body in the lake, of course,' sniffs Ratchet, 'or buried on one of these islands - which we will be checking by the way.' The detective falls silent, her eyes on two frogmen exiting the lake.

'Is it dived or dove?' asks Higgs.

'What?' frowns Ratchet.

'He said he *dived* in and searched, but I wasn't sure if -'

'Just write down whatever he said.'

'Fine,' sniffs the junior detective. 'I was only asking.'

The landscape is bright and clear, the lake surface as reflective as a looking-glass. Stan, who's been sitting on his wife's favourite bench since the police circus arrived, rises expectantly. Close by, uniformed officers keep a swelling, nosy gathering at bay.

'Well, boys?' shouts Ratchet, hands upon hips.

Shrugging off air tanks, the divers shake their heads.

Stan slumps back onto the bench, partly relieved, partly mystified.

LIFE IS BUT A DREAM

'And that's how you remember it, is it?' asks Dougie.

'Hard to believe that was - how many years is it now?' Stan frowns, thinking back ... 'Feels like only yesterday.' He

sighs, a finger rubbing the grooves where Dougie, last Christmas, carved MARJORIE'S BENCH into the seat.

(Dougie had never liked Marjorie much, thought she was a selfish, overbearing nag, but he'd whittled her name, for his old pal's sake, as a gesture of amity and accord.)

'How time flies,' laments Stan, gazing out across the boating lake. He takes a bite of his sausage butty - bought from Taffy's Caffy. 'Can't believe they've never found her.'

Dougie wants to say something but doesn't. Instead, he necks a beer, the second of a four-pack smuggled from an old bloke's shopping bag as the lackadaisical fool waited his turn behind Stan in the café. *Never put your shopping down*, that's one of the first things you learn around here!

'You know, I'm sure Marje is still out there.'

Dougie can bite his lip no longer. 'She isnae oot there.'

Stan's not paying attention. He's feeling the cool air through the hospital gown's thin material, the cold bench under his unprotected bottom, and wondering if he should have gone home to eat. *Oh well, too late now*, he thinks.

'And she nivr liked it when ye called er *Marje*, either.'

'Marje loved this park,' moons Stan. 'This lake.'

'- Hated, in fact.'

'Nonsense, and anyway, I only did that as a tease. It was a kind of joke between us.'

'Didnae like *Marje*, didnae like *Dear*, didnae like -'

'I never called her *Dear*.'

'No much ye didnae,' snorts Dougie. Maybe now would be a good time to raise a subject barely mentioned since Marjorie's disappearance ... 'And ye still dinnae think there's any truth tae the rumour?'

'Rumour, what rumour?'

'That she ran off wi Lenny McGuire. That carpet fella fae Salford Market. Ah heard they'd moved tae Costa Rica.'

Stan licks sauce from his fingers.

'Stan?'

Stan swivels a stern-faced frown. 'What?' he asks firmly.

'Nothing,' says Dougie. That's a conversation his friend doesn't need right now. What did it matter if he suspected Marjorie felt Stan was a boring and stubborn old sourpuss

who never sprang for a holiday beyond the shores of the UK; an idler who never had a proper job in his life and gambled away every penny that ever came into their cramped little flat - he would let that sleeping dog lie. Dougie never liked 'miserable Marjorie' anyway. Instead, he squeezes his pal's shoulder. 'She wis ... a lovely lady, right enough,' he says through gritted teeth. He boosts his can and adds: 'Here's tae er, *wherever* she is.'

'To Marje.' Stan raises the last of his barm, catches Dougie's eye, and quickly adds: '-Orie ... to Marje-*orie*.'

As Stan chews on the remains of whatever it is they put in sausages, Dougie drains his beer then tosses the empty can into the bin; not normally one for bins and keeping Britain tidy but respectful of Stan's feelings on the sanctity of his 'missing' wife's bench.

'Anyway,' ventures Dougie, 'Ah'm sure those rumours -'

'Hey, here's an idea,' interrupts Stan, spitting out a small gristly wad. 'Why don't you look what they've given me?'

By the time Dougie had removed all the pills from the paper bag, twelve lots in all - in a wide range of colours - and studied each label (pointlessly, for he knows as much about medication as he does everything else), he was of the opinion: 'Nae offence, Stan, but Jesus, ye mist be *really* ill.'

'Blah, blah, blah - they don't know anything.' Stan retrieves a half-smoked rollie from behind his ear. 'Listen, when your number's up, your number's up, and not before.'

'Dinnae suppose it'd hurt, though, ye know, mibbee dae some ay the things they advise.'

'What? You can't be serious.' Stan lights the rollie and sucks in smoke. 'No,' he says, his voice catching, 'as long as you take their silly little pills, they're happy enough. Oh and, Dougie, not a word of this to anyone. Not a soul.'

Dougie locks his lips and throws away the key. He then jeers a blonde on a bicycle, catcalls a woman walking a dog, wolf-whistles a female jogger and almost gets into a fight with a long-haired backpacker who turns out to be a bloke - all this before Stan's cigarette is fully reduced to ash.

A final two puffs then the old man climbs to his feet.

‘Right, come on, shake a leg.’

‘Where we gaun - pub?’

‘Maggy’s, I’m feeling lucky.’

Dougie stands, dumps his final empty into the bin then studies his pal. ‘Dae ye nae wannae git dressed first?’

Stan checks the back of his loose gown. ‘Maybe Maggy’ll give me better odds if I flash her my sexy arse,’ he quips.

‘That tight bitch?’ laughs Dougie. ‘Listen, ah’ll see ye doon there - jist gaunny pop intae The Coo fi a quickie.’

Stan has long since given up commenting on his friend’s unending and unwavering ability to quaff endless and copious amounts of ale. He and Dougie set off in different directions, Dougie for the pub, Stan for home: to stow the pills and change a hospital gown for something better suited to not looking mental.

They haven’t walked far when an elderly couple on Mobility scooters - holding hands, smiling and swooning; love, perfectly in sync, and without taking their eyes off each other - steer around Dougie.

Dougie yells profanities at them as if he’d almost been killed, even though hands were temporarily released so as not to clonk the pedestrian.

Quickly reconnected and oblivious to all profanities, the pair move on, their love unbroken.

Hearing the commotion, Stan turns and watches the old love birds drive towards and around him as if in slow motion. A stirring moment - and not just because of the breeze that wafts up his hospital gown. He feels emotional, and why? Well, the more compassionate amongst you might be sensing Stan believes that should have been him ... and Marjorie.

Chapter Seven

Dazzled by the New

CHANGES

To make room for all his pills, Stan had to remove everything in the bathroom cabinet: Q-tips (for the waxy build up in his ears); Pepto-Bismol (for the bellyaches); haemorrhoid suppositories (seriously?); dental floss and eye drops (again, easy); nail fungus treatment (oh, come on); cough syrup (the fags); blister packs of Ibuprofen (rheumatism or arthritis, he could never recall which); bottle of TCP (actually, that's seriously out of date and needs throwing out); hydrocortisone ointment (rashes); and an emollient dispenser (dry feet).

Now, he stands before the cabinet brimming with pills and addresses the old man in the mirror:

'Heads, I start immediately. Tails, I wait till I actually feel unwell.'

The coin lands on heads. And though Stan wouldn't admit it, he's secretly pleased. He feels worn out. Actually, *worn out* is an understatement; the poor man feels dead on his feet. No doubt due entirely to an emotional couple of days, he decides, but well, heads is heads. So he pours a glass of water from the sink, sets it to one side, and selects the first of the twelve containers.

'Sure you've given me enough, Doc?' mutters Stan. Then he thanks his lucky stars there aren't *thirteen*.

He takes two green tablets from the first, a pink from the second, and on, taking one or two from each, as instructed by the individual labels. *Three* yellows from container number eight! Fortunately, those pills, unlike some of the others, are tiny, so that's not too bad.

Once all the different tablets (a huge handful of them, even in Stan's massive paw!) have been taken and washed

down, he considers his reflection in the cabinet mirror for a whole thirty seconds, waiting to feel an effect - *any* effect ... nothing ... pfft, just as he'd expected.

Stan did, though, get a fleeting sense that something, or someone, was watching him - and not the man in the looking-glass.

If you were, let's say, a fly, looking down from the bathroom ceiling, you would now see a multitude of tiny Stans, all leaning on the sink, each set to waiting - hundreds of exhausted heads shaking mistrustfully at an equal number of reflected images.

'Not a thing,' sighs Stan.

MOOD SWINGS, MY ARSE!

Sue is dressed for one of her regular jogs: running vest, tight leggings and bouncy trainers. Not strictly necessary for a quick dash around Cost-Cuts, but after a last-minute decision to buy groceries on the way back from a lap of the lake, she couldn't be bothered to go home and change first. That's how she's ended up with Dougie gawking at her sweat-marked chest as she peers into Stan's basket.

'Honestly - cake, chocolate, ice cream.' Playfully, Sue tuts and shakes her head. 'What are you like?'

'Why don't you mind your own fucking business,' snaps Stan. Adopting the face of a mutinous child, he nonchalantly flips another pack of biscuits into his basket.

'The pills,' whispers Dougie. 'Eh kin be a bit up n doon.'

'Pills?' asks Sue.

'Er ... fi a dicky tummy.' A lie told under sufferance of Stan's death-stare.

'Oh, right,' says Sue.

'Eh's been,' Dougie endures further eyeballing and settles on, 'feelin off.'

'I'm not surprised with that diet,' teases Sue. 'You should be looking after yourself, Stan. Fruit and Veg, that's what you need; your five a day.' She indicates her basket of fruit, vegetables, hydro-drinks, smoothies, fat-free yoghurts, energy bars ...

Stan defiantly drops a second cake into his basket.

Dougie stays out of it, instead switching his attention to Sue's front-bottom.

'Naughty,' says Sue to Stan. 'You know, a long walk probably wouldn't hurt either. Come on, what say we put these back and—'

'Oh, piss off!' hisses Stan.

Silence for a beat then up with the jogging watch. 'Yes, well, perhaps I'd better be getting on.' A dignified smile then Sue departs towards the checkouts.

'Bit harsh,' says Dougie squinting at Sue's departing back-bottom. 'Ye know, it mibbee a good idea tae -'

'I'll be fine,' grumbles Stan, 'just so long as people leave me the fuck alone.'

HOT HEAD, COLD FISH

A pair of Ford Transits, one tall, one standard-size, sit in an otherwise empty lay-by beside a quiet dual carriageway. Only the tall van is occupied: two men, one slim, one well built, both broad; same height, same wolfish grey eyes, both eating Kentucky Fried Chicken. The thinner, slightly younger guy has an abundance of facial hair and a wild mane. The other's appearance is the opposite: smooth-faced, hair pulled tightly into a topknot.

'I'm just saying,' complains Liam, the Charles Manson lookalike, 'why do I always have to do the head?'

'The head's the easy bit,' says Joel, he with the topknot.

'Easy?'

'Putting a head in a laundrette machine?'

'Climbing that statue in the dark wasn't easy.'

'Really? You're still going on about that fucking statue?'

The question posed calmly; unemotional and sedate.

'Wet, too,' gripes Liam, 'could've easily slipped.'

'Thought you were happy doing the heads.'

'And now I'm saying I want a go with one of the bodies.'

'So, after seventeen, eighteen years, you want to swap?' checks Joel Galloway, the cold, broody, senior brother.

'Exactly.'

‘The statue - he was the teacher, right?’

‘Oh, please don’t kill me,’ apes Liam. ‘I teach *Geography or History or some other bollocks* - as if that’s important.’

‘Yeah, that’s him; funny how you remember some. But you couldn’t have moved *that* bastard.’

‘Why not?’

‘He weighed a ton.’ Joel slowly wipes his mouth with a paper napkin. ‘And you’re a skinny cunt.’

‘I’m not *skinny* -’

‘Do you think it was easy, setting him up in that photo booth? Hard work, mate. *Hard* fucking work.’

‘- I’m *lean*.’

‘No, you’d get caught. Then, more importantly, *I’d* get caught.’ Joel drops the used napkin in a KFC bag.

‘You’d be skinny, too, if it wasn’t for the steroids.’

‘Steroids?’ Joel flexes an enormous bicep. ‘All of this: hours on the weights.’

‘Stronger than I look.’

‘Seriously, picture *you*, lugging a big, heavy bloke.’

‘I could’ve done one of the women!’ barks Liam. ‘Apart from that Jabba waitress, obviously. Sarcastic bitch.’

‘Fine, next time a *tiny* woman pisses us off, *you* can do the body.’ Joel removes the lid from a Styrofoam cup, blows on the steaming tea. ‘Better brush up on your lock picking skills, though. If there’s a break-in required -’

‘Yeah, yeah, but we’re agreed ... I get to do a body?’

‘The Head Honcho has spoken.’

‘Hey! We’re *both* the Head Honcho.’

‘Lighten up, Liam. This was meant to be a laugh; simple, sadistic pleasure; torture, abuse, no come-backs. Whores, drunks, people who piss us off. It was supposed to be fun.’

‘I know,’ counters Liam. ‘It was my idea to have signs, remember.’

‘Oh yeah ... the *hilarious* cardboard placards.’

‘And by the way: *a laugh*? Seriously? I don’t think I’ve heard you laugh since we were kids.’

‘I laugh on the inside.’

Course you do, thinks Liam. ‘So,’ he says, ‘if I’m taking a turn with a body, you wanna go at writing a sign?’

‘What, and risk them thinking it’s a copycat? No, we need to stay consistent. Still want to catch Shipman, right?’

No reply.

‘Problem?’ asks Joel.

‘I have very distinctive E’s.’

Joel sighs; he’s heard it before. ‘No-one’s going to recognise scrawled caps as *your* handwriting, Liam.’

‘I try not to but -’ Liam describes an E with a finger, writing in the air. ‘And I don’t *scrawl!*’ He punches the dashboard, hard. ‘It’s those marker pens - they’re *scratchy.*’

‘Yeah, noisy, too; I told you to invest in a Sharpie.’ Joel sips his tea ... and after all these years Liam still can’t tell if his brother’s serious or just winding him up ... ‘But what’s this *really* about?’ asks Joel.

‘I’ve run out of ideas, okay,’ barks Liam. ‘I’m stuck!’

‘It’s just writer’s block - you’ll get past it.’

Liam clearly doesn’t think so.

‘Oh come on. This from the man who came up with *Honestly, I’d forget my head if it wasn’t screwed on* and *How do I look? I can’t see a thing without my glasses?*’

‘Maybe if we left the heads and bodies *together* - that’d give me something new to work with.’

Joel shakes his head. ‘Wouldn’t be Honcho. We’ve set a pattern now.’

‘There’s nothing to stop the Honcho *changing* his pattern.’

‘*Should* he, though?’ asks Joel. ‘*Would* he?’

‘So what do we do?’ shrugs Liam. ‘Cos I’ve got nothing.’

‘I’ll put my thinking cap on.’

‘You?’ scoffs Liam.

‘Why not?’

Liam opens the glove-box, takes out a notebook and pen. ‘This, I got to hear.’

DIRTY BOYS

A light shower is underway on Kersal Way, the access road dissecting the two halves of Kersal House. A sleek, black top-of-the-range BMW, at odds with the grimy, graffiti-

covered dumpsters and recycling wheelie bins, slows to a stop. The driver, Maggy, steps out and opens a large, swish umbrella. Her passenger, Bobby, thirties, slight build and subdued posture, clambers out the other side and, after a struggle, manages to erect a tiny, broken broly. His soul shelters but a breath before Maggy clicks her fingers and points at the boot.

As Bobby unloads shopping (gathering up lines of designer-labelled bags: shoes, handbags, clothes), Maggy's phone announces an incoming text.

'Why don't you just leave them in the boot till you get home?' asks Bobby.

Maggy reads her message.

'Worried someone will nick your motor?'

'Who the fuck would be stupid enough to steal *my* motor, you brainless goon.'

'Why not just leave them in the boot, then?'

'Cos I want to admire my purchases. Not that it's anything to do with you. Now, crack on, you useless fanny.'

Across the way, at the rear of Taffy's Caffy, a skinny lad, fifteen or so, rummages through a dumpster. His stocky friend, slightly older, sixteen or seventeen maybe, loiters next to the bin, smoking a spliff; unwilling, it appears, to get his hands dirty. It is this second boy who calls out.

'Hey, Maggy. How about offering *me* one of your Specials?'

'Cheeky little tosser,' she replies. 'Come back when you've got some hair on it!'

Maggy's phone registers a second text has arrived. Without looking, she throws the shop keys in Bobby's general direction. Arms laden with bags, he has no chance and the keys clatter into a puddle.

'Plenty hair on it already, Maggy!' boasts the stocky lad.

'And he's 'ung like an 'orse!' offers the dumpster-rummaging friend with a hint of envy.

'Really?' laughs Maggy tapping a reply into her phone. Hitting the send-button she notices Bobby staring disapprovingly. 'What are *you* looking at?' she barks.

No reply from Bobby, only the sound of rain dripping off his broken umbrella onto Maggy's bags.

'Move it, lard-arse. I don't want my bags getting wet.'

'I'll get your bags wet for ye,' calls Stocky Lad.

'Nice one,' laughs his mate.

After rearranging the shopping about his person whilst juggling the broolly, Bobby retrieves the keys and searches, awkwardly, for the right one.

'Hurry up there, Bobby,' advises the stocky lad. 'Don't you know, you should never keep a woman waiting. *I* definitely wouldn't. Specially a Milf like Maggy.'

Having put her phone away, Maggy now gives the cocky flatterer a quick once over. *Bit short*, she thinks, *but not bad looking*.

'What's your name, son?' she asks.

'Zach.'

A more thorough inspection ensues. *Built more for Distance than the Sprint - so that's good. And hello, what's that!? Well, well, it appears your pal wasn't lying.*

'Tell me, Zach,' asks Maggy, 'do you fancy a go on a dead cert at two-thirty?'

'He's not old enough for gambling,' advises Bobby.

'Who said I was talking about gambling?' sniffs Maggy.

SAFETY FIRST

'Right,' thinks Joel aloud, 'the sign goes with the torso ...'

Liam rolls his eyes. *Well, duh.*

'What if ... we sit a bloke in a barber's chair ... and the caption says: *I only asked for a little off the top.*'

'Too corny,' decides Liam.

'Or ... what about a really obese guy ... *Right, that's it! No more doughnuts for me!*'

Liam winces.

'Okay ... for a woman: *Not now, I've got a headache,* exclamation mark.'

Liam frowns. 'Bit like *Can't tonight, I'm washing my hair*, don't you think?'

'No - they're completely different.'

'I dunno, maybe ...'

'There, three in under a minute. Write them down.'

Liam scribbles the briefest of notes. 'You know, at some point, we *are* gonna run out of ideas.'

'How about we cross that bridge when we come to it.'

'I still say it wouldn't hurt to change things up occasionally.'

'Hope you're not suggesting we cut down on the fun stuff.'

'No, the other stuff - we always do the same thing: drive them home, freeze them, cut their heads off, drive them out again; head one way, body another - *miles apart*.'

'And you want to ...'

'Try something different, something spontaneous, there and then - on the spot improv.'

'Improv?'

'Yeah, if it's safe, and there's time, why not?'

Joel thinks as he finishes the last of his tea ... 'Okay, *if* the opportunity arises, and *if* it's safe, we'll give it a go. But until then, we stick to the Honcho's *usual* routine: me handling the bodies, you taking care of the heads. Yes?'

'Agreed.'

'Good.' Joel slaps his brother's shoulder. 'You know you like the heads.'

Liam's face morphs into a grin. *It's true, he does.*

The pair set to laughing, Liam outwardly, Joel inwardly. When their amusement subsides, Joel hitches a thumb over his shoulder. 'So, any thoughts on what we're going to do with this one?'

Both turn to look in the back of the van.

Kneeling, naked (apart from a black-and-yellow traffic warden hat), ball-gagged, wrists and ankles tied behind his back with cord: a sweaty, terrified, whimpering, drooling forty-something-year-old.

'This *one*? - You mean, these *two*,' quips Liam.

'Oh, very good,' says Joel. 'Because of the head and the -'
'Mumhfh!'

'What's he saying?' asks Liam.

'Some bullshit about *not* writing me a ticket.'

‘Burmphahhhn!’ groans the man, head shaking violently, eyes bulged by fear.

‘No, but you were going to, weren’t you?’ says Joel. ‘That’s the point.’

‘Mumhfhhhh!’

‘Did he now? Little shit.’ Liam flexes his fingers. ‘Mind if I knock him around a bit before we take him back?’

Joel raises an open palm. *Be my guest.*

Liam climbs into the rear, knocks off the traffic warden’s hat, grabs a handful of hair and jerks the guy’s head back, priming a fist ... ‘Hey,’ he says to Joel, ‘do you ever fuck the body *after* it’s been frozen?’

‘God no, it’s solid. Why, do you, with the heads?’

‘Sometimes,’ grins Liam. ‘If they’ve defrosted a bit.’

‘Mumhfhhhh!’

Liam leans in, eye to eye. ‘Oh, don’t worry; we always use a condom. Isn’t that right, Joel?’

‘Safety first,’ agrees Joel.

Various vehicles pass intermittently on the dual carriageway but no-one pays the slightest regard to either Transit van.

Not even the one that’s rocking.

FEELING LUCKY?

Zoe slips the card back into its blue envelope. At her side, Ryan picks his nose; in the battered buggy, Jade hasn’t stopped griping.

‘How come I always get a *year*?’ moans Zoe.

‘I can’t help how they come out,’ beams Maggy banking Zoe’s twenty pound payment. ‘It’s just the luck of the draw.’

‘Yeah, right.’ Zoe folds her envelope and thumps its crease on the counter.

‘So, you know the drill,’ reminds Maggy. ‘Has to be done for the *whole* year, twenty-four-seven, three-six-five. No breaks. No holidays. No time off for good behaviour. I catch you *not* doing it, you lose. No excuses. I even *hear* about you not doing it and you lose.’

‘Yeah, yeah, I know.’

‘And your time starts at six exactly.’ Maggy imposes big eyes, points to the clock. ‘Not half past. Not ten past. *Six.*’

‘Fine,’ grumbles Zoe, shoving the flattened envelope into a pocket.

‘Well, off you pop, then,’ urges Maggy, smile as big as you like. ‘Get yourself over to Morag’s.’

‘I’m going, I’m going,’ sniffs Zoe. And with that she bundles her kids towards the door.

Stan, smiling like a loon, flamboyantly sidesteps the oncoming hazard with a flourish of an invisible cape and aims an ‘Olé’ at Maggy before approaching the counter.

‘What are you smiling about?’ asks Maggy. ‘You’ve not had a winner, have you?’

Realising what she’s said, Maggy laughs.

Stan laughs, too.

‘So where’s your shadow? Finally managed to shake him off, have you? Oh, speak of the devil.’

In staggers Dougie. Without averting his rheumy gaze from Zoe’s escaping backside, he lumbers towards the counter one arm drooped lower than the other - which is pretty much how Dougie always lumbers.

‘Hello, Douglas. How’s my favourite piss-head?’

‘Dinnae take the fuckin pish,’ warns Dougie.

‘And you watch your fucking language in my shop.’

Maggy indicates the NAE FUCKING SWEARING sign on the wall behind her.

‘Sorry, Maggy, ah wisnae thinkin - whit wi Stan’s bad news.’

‘Bad news?’

‘Eh’s only goat days tae live.’

‘Dougie!’

‘Ach, sorry, pal. It wis boond tae come oot sooner or later, though, eh?’

‘And it’s not *days*,’ counters Stan, ‘it’s *months*.’

Dougie gives Stan a look.

‘Well, *weeks*, at least. And that can be months.’

Maggy isn't buying it. These two are always up to something. 'Yeah, right,' she scoffs, adding sarcastically, 'and I suppose in your will, I get all my money back.'

Stan laughs so heartily at this, that Maggy finds it a little disturbing.

'True, true, I did used to be lucky ... before Marjorie.'

Stan drifts.

'No so lucky since then, eh?' suggests Dougie to Maggy.

'... Never know, though,' smiles Stan snapping back at last. 'I might get lucky again - maybe on the next one.'

'Aye,' quips Maggy, 'you and Dougie both.'

'S'no joke, Maggy.' Dougie leans in, lowers his voice: 'Quack said—'

'I'm sure it's a mistake,' Stan interjects. 'Doctors are always getting things wrong.'

'Perhaps we should have a wager on it,' laughs Maggy.

'We should,' grins Stan enthusiastically.

'Whoa, whoa!' bleats Dougie. 'Ye two cannae be serious!'

'That's if you're *really* ill,' sniffs Maggy. 'You seem a bit ... *happy*.'

'That's aw the pills,' advises Dougie. 'Ye shid see hoo many eh hus tae take. There's mair than ... well, there's a loat, anyway.'

'Give me a chance to,' Stan punches the air as if the doc were standing beside him, 'stick it to that smug quack, too.'

Maggy aims narrowed eyes at Stan. 'Hmm ... I'd have to check it out first, mind.' She presses her nose against the counter's safety glass, studies the old man's baby blues at close quarters. 'But if it's true, I'm sure we could work out some good odds.'

Stan likes the sound of that. He has the appearance of a small child extended a colourful balloon.

Maggy's phone rings. She holds up a finger then turns away to take the call.

'Good odds,' froths Stan.

'Aye, good odds fi *her*,' warns Dougie. 'Fi Christ's sake, pal, dinnae listen. Ye know whit the doctor said.'

'Really?' says Maggy into the phone. 'So remind him a bet's a bet.'

‘But I’m feeling lucky,’ smiles Stan.

‘And remind him properly,’ adds Maggy.

‘*Really* lucky,’ beams Stan.

‘It’s jist the pills,’ cautions Dougie. ‘Mood swings, remember?’

A scream emanating from Maggy’s phone cuts off as she ends the call.

‘She’s evil, Stan,’ whispers Dougie. ‘*Evil*. Dinnae dae it.’

‘Well, while you’re thinking, and in such a good mood.’

Maggy lifts a box onto the counter. The box contains rows of neatly filed, cobalt-blue envelopes.

‘How about one of my Lucky-Dip Proposition Bets?’

Dougie eyes the envelopes as if they’re laced with strychnine. ‘Maggy’s Specials,’ utters his doom-laden voice.

‘They’re pretty,’ coos Stan.

Maggy slides aside the counter window, pushes the box forward ... Dougie’s head shakes adamantly at Stan.

‘Which one catches your eye?’ asks Maggy.

‘No, Stan,’ urges Dougie. ‘Ye know whit those things are like. They’re like poison. It kid be anythin - *literally* - n in yer condition ...’

‘Go on, then,’ decides Stan.

‘Oh, balls,’ sighs Dougie.

‘Excellent,’ sings Maggy patting the envelopes. ‘Now remember, the tougher the challenge, the higher the odds.’

Stan points.

‘This one?’ asks Maggy.

On Stan’s nod, the chosen envelope is quickly handed over, the box pulled back and the window snapped shut.

‘That’ll be twenty pounds,’ declares Maggy.

Stan excitedly rips open the envelope, branded, like all the others, with a large, silver question-mark.

‘Of course, as always, you’re free to bet more once you know the proposition,’ reminds Maggy.

The inserted card - blue, to match the envelope - is removed and read. ‘*The jigsaw challenge*,’ smiles Stan. ‘That doesn’t sound too bad.’

‘Jigsaw challenge?’ parrots Dougie. ‘Whit’s the catch?’

'Jigsaw,' echoes Stan. 'Funny word, isn't it? Jigsaw ... Jiigsaw ... Jiiiig-saw ... Jiiiiiiiiiii—'

Dougie nudges Stan. 'Annoyin, pal - jist sayin.'

'He can pick it up from Morag's,' advises Maggy.

'Haven't done a jigsaw for years,' says Stan.

'Hey, cloth-ears.' Maggy clicks her fingers at Dougie. 'I said he can pick it up from Morag's.' Then, spotting Dougie's reaction, she adds: 'What? You think I have room for everything here?'

'We dinnae even know if it's complete,' mutters Dougie.

'Don't fret,' smiles Maggy. 'It's all there. Bobby counted every piece. *Three times.*'

'All ten-thousand of them,' laments Bobby's voice.

'*Ten-thoosund!*' barks Dougie.

'Yep, ten-thousand,' repeats the voice.

Dougie, on tip-toes, peers over the counter to where Bobby is scrubbing the floor.

'Are you complaining?' snaps Maggy. 'Are you?' But before Bobby can answer, she wants to know: 'Did you clean the car yet?'

'I was just finishing this,' snivels Bobby.

'Well, get a bloody move on,' urges Maggy, offering encouragement with her foot.

Reluctantly, Bobby scrubs away, a little quicker now.

'Hoo's eh supposed tae dae a ten-thoosund piece jigsaw when -' Dougie checks over his shoulder, whispers: 'When eh's no goat long left?'

Maggy shrugs.

Stan is smiling, distant and unconcerned.

'Sae whit's the time frame?' checks Dougie.

'Just finish it within four weeks to win.'

'*FOUR FUCKIN—* I mean ... *four weeks?*'

'Got it in one,' says Maggy.

'And hus anyone ivir finished it?' asks Dougie.

'Actually, no,' answers Maggy.

Stan confidently slaps two twenty-pound notes onto the counter.

'Make it forty,' he beams.

Chapter Eight

A Little Farther Now

ALADDIN'S CAVE

At the end of an old cobbled alley off the high street, a thin crooked path must be weaved through piles of junk and bric-a-brac to gain entrance. A sign over the door declares: WE BUY - SELL - PAWN. It also boasts: WE GOT IT ALL!

And if the exterior supports the impression this might well be true, the interior does nothing to debunk the perception. Morag's Curio Shop is indeed an Aladdin's cave, jam-packed with every conceivable item. On the walls, hanging from the ceiling, on tables, on furniture, or cluttering up the floor: curios, objets d'art, trinkets and baubles; music boxes, snow shakers, ships in bottles, timeworn globes, battered tins, paintings, garden gnomes, ornaments, plastic toys, tin toys, clocks and ancient radios; tall lamps, short lamps, second-hand books, toy robots, ancient dolls, puppets, a ventriloquist dummy, a pair of mannequins, several racks of fancy dress costumes and vintage clothes; a merry-go-round horse, stuffed animals (gorilla, marlin, bear) - with lots more odds and ends crammed between and piled on top.

Knick-knack heaven.

'An extra bloody tenner,' grumbles Zoe, dressed in a clumsy, head-to-foot, bright orange Starfish costume.

'That's right,' says Morag. Morag is Maggy's identical twin. Slightly different hairstyle but indistinguishable attitude and carbon copy face; the staring green eyes not a fraction less powerful, not a fraction less intimidating.

Still complaining, Zoe pushes past Stan and Dougie and shuffles towards the exit with her kids and buggy ... thanks to the costume's width, the narrowness of the walkway and the face-hole's restricted vision, she knocks over a brass

trombone which sets off a wind-up chimp that launches into a furious bashing of his cymbals.

‘Hey, watch out!’ warns Morag.

Stan and Dougie weave nearer the storekeeper and the trio watch the starfish eventually squeeze out, awkwardly, an appendage at a time, through the door.

‘I wouldn’t fancy wearing that for a year,’ laughs Morag.

‘*A year!*’ barks Dougie.

Without preamble, Morag drops a polythene bag sealed with string and heavy with jigsaw pieces into a small free space on what Dougie presumes is the counter.

‘There you go.’ She was clearly expecting them.

‘Nae box, then,’ notes Dougie.

‘No box. No lid.’

‘So nae fuckin picture? Maggy didnae mention that.’

‘No box. No lid. Five pounds.’

‘*Five poonds?* - She didnae mention that, either.’

‘Was there anything else?’ asks Morag.

‘I’ll take one of those,’ points Stan.

‘These?’ Morag titillates a row of death-dealers hanging behind her, each more vicious-looking than the last.

Stan indicates the demon on the end: a black, rubberised and vented rectangular-style brute of a flyswatter - the *Buzz-Kill* - a top-of-the-range bluebottle-batterer if ever there was one.

‘Pound,’ says Morag.

SOME WOMEN PREFER AN OLDER GUY

Sue, jogging through the park, glances over to the play area.

Zoe’s kids are alone. Jade’s bawling in the buggy, Ryan’s motionless in a kiddy swing (the ‘boxy’ type; where junior’s trapped, legs dangling, till someone lifts them out).

Sue questions which is more heartbreaking, the infant’s unbroken wailing or the toddler’s abject despondency. She checks in all directions and finding no sign of mother, heads over, responsibly closing the gate behind her.

‘Oh dear, what’s the matter, sweetheart?’ Wiping the snot-nosed infant’s face, Sue softly addresses the reticent

toddler: 'Where's your mommy?' ... As she attempts to reassure and comfort the children, a grubby-orange starfish extracts itself from nearby shrubbery, a twisty bramble-vine trailing from a 'shoulder'.

'Right, right, I'm here!' exclaims Zoe/Starfish. 'Jesus, I've only been gone a minute.' Then, to Sue, she adds: 'I can manage, thanks.'

'I think they were a bit upset.'

'Well, I'm back now. Honestly, you can't take a piss.'

Sue steps back as the starfish inserts itself bodily. Zoe pulls the swing high and releases then pushes the buggy backwards and forwards. 'I'm pushing you, Jade, I'm pushing you, for fuck's sake.'

'Excuse me but should you be ...'

'What?'

'You know ...' Sue points to the cigarette wedged in Zoe's trap, then lowers the accusing finger to where the starfish's tummy would be if it had one.

'You been spying on me?'

'No, of course not - just seen you around.'

'Yeah, well, for your information, I lost it - okay?'

'Oh, I'm sorry,' flounders Sue. 'I had no idea ... I ...'

'Was there anything else?' The starfish aims its face-hole at Sue, Zoe's mug a glaring frown.

The less than subtle hint doesn't take long.

'Right, I'll leave you to it, then,' smiles Sue stiffly.

Walking away, she chances a gander back. The infant's bawl has subsided somewhat but the toddler's dolefulness, despite swinging back and forth, appears unshakable.

The starfish steals a moment to take a call on her phone and crack open a Red Bull, sucking it down through the costume's port-hole, only resuming buggy-locomotion in an exasperated attempt to quell Jade's resurgent shrieking.

Exiting the play-area, Sue blows her nose and has a word with herself. 'Come on, you silly woman, get a grip, there's jogging to be done.' Then she breaks into a slow run, frequently glancing back as the distance grows.

Necking his fourth beer of the morning, Dougie watches Sue disappear, then turns his eye back to Zoe ... Running

shaky fingers through unwashed hair, he says: 'Who'd ay thought a starfish kid be sexy, eh?'

'Here we go,' sighs Stan.

'And she's clearly no averse tae a wee proposition. Mibbee ah kid pit one ay ma ain tae er.'

'Oh, leave it alone, why don't you?' advises Stan. 'You're old enough to be her grandfather.'

'Some lassies are partial tae an older man.'

'Not *that* old,' mutters Stan.

Dougie stands and rummages his pockets, checking for remaining dole money - then he sets off.

Stan, head shaking, looks on as the wobbly old soak weaves a tottering path towards Zoe, now rotating Ryan on a small wonky roundabout, one loud squeak every half-revolution.

'Piss off,' hisses the starfish.

'Whit?' carps Dougie, barely arrived. 'Ah huvnae said anythin yet.'

'Whatever it is,' Zoe clarifies, 'I'm not interested.'

Over at the bench, Stan turns away from events at the roundabout and gazes out across the boating lake.

'What kind of bet?' asks Zoe, brushing a strand of hair from her eyes.

'Five pounds says ye cannae ...' Dougie leans in to whisper the rest.

The starfish slaps his face, hard.

'Okay, ten,' offers Dougie.

Another hard slap from the offended echinoderm.

'Fifteen's ma final offer,' cautions Dougie.

'Is ma face red?' he asks back at the bench.

'It's always red,' replies Stan.

'The fuckin bitch fuckin bitch-slapped me. *Three times!* Hoo's anyone supposed tae git laid aroond here wi that kind ay attitude?'

'Well, I'm no expert but you could try not leching at their bits. Not propositioning them with cash. Not -'

'Shush.'

'Don't shush me, Dougie. As your friend, I'm telling you.'

'Naw, look - over there - it's that bastard Carl.'

Dougie's day just got worse. It is indeed Carl. He was chatting with three mates: Puffa Jacket, Hoody and Padded Parka. Now he's strutting into the park. Grandstanding like he owns the place.

'Ye comin?' asks Dougie, now ducked behind the bench, using Stan for cover as he edges away.

'No,' says Stan. 'You go. I'll see you later. I've got to pick up a repeat prescription.'

BOOM!

'Was that Dougie?' rasps Carl, swaggering up to the bench, mirrored-shades lifted an inch, rat eyes squinting. 'Scottish bastard. That cunt owes me money.'

'No, that was ... Dewey,' lies Stan, 'a *Welsh* bastard.'

'Right. Don't know him. Alright for cash is he?'

Stan shrugs.

'Right, right.' Carl tends to say 'Right' a lot when he wishes to sound cool or when he's recently taken Speed. 'Well, when you do see that cunt Dougie, tell him he needs to settle up, mate - and fast. Interest is accumulating.'

'Accumulating. I'll tell him.' Stan's tobacco and cigarette papers are fished from a pocket.

'Like that, do ya? *Accumulating*. I know lots of big words me, y'know. Like a walking fucking dictionary, I am; have to be, y'know, cos of the rapping. Need to *know* words, you get me? Like, for *alternatives*. Another good word, yeah? *Alternatives*. Never say the same thing twice. Like, you can't say *Hoes* all the time. Have to say Slags, Bitches, Sluts, Skanks, you get me?'

Stan sprinkles tobacco. 'Skanks, yes, it's impressive.'

'People take me for *Thick*, but they don't know me.' Carl launches a gob of spit over Stan's shoulder. 'Takes smarts to rhyme on the fly.'

Skinny cigarette rolled, Stan licks the Rizla paper and seals. 'So, you're a poet,' he smiles, 'if they did but know it.'

'Exactly. Hey, wanna hear me free-style, old-timer?'

'I'm not really into Hippity-Hoppity music. I'm more a Country and—'

‘Gimme a subject. Anything. Free choice.’

‘Er ... how about ... *Dougie?*’

‘Okay.’ Carl starts a percussive, rhythmic beat-boxing, head nodding to a steady tempo. ‘*Yo, yo, check this out ... Dougie’s avoidance, is an annoyance. Can’t let disrespect be going unchecked. I’ll intimidate, confiscate, discombobulate. And in his future, an accident. Who knows, maybe in, uh, a circus tent. But come Hell-or-high-water, know this: they won’t get me for Manslaughter.*’

Rap done, Carl adds: ‘Which is what I’ll do to Dougie when I catches up with him.’

‘Wouldn’t it be *Murder? Manslaughter’s ...*’

‘Oh, don’t sweat. I’d make it look like a proper -’ Carl searches for an alternative to *Accident* but comes up blank ‘- accident.’

Stan pulls on his cigarette. ‘Can I ask you a question?’

‘Maybe.’ By which Carl means Yes. He loves it when a conversation is about him.

‘Is it true you killed a man, when you lived in, where was it - Timperley or Sale somewhere?’

‘*Timperley!?* Timperley’s for toffs and batty-boys. No, this was - well, I won’t say where exactly. Not till the heat’s died down, you get me. Not that the Filth are actually looking for anyone. See, cos I is sharp.’ Carl looks around. ‘I just made it look like -’

Stan picks a speck of tobacco off the tip of his tongue. ‘An accident?’

‘Like they’d topped each other.’

‘Oh, so it was -’ Stan puts up two fingers, one for each raised eyebrow.

‘Yeah, man, I don’t fuck about,’ brags Carl. ‘And one of them was - well, let’s just say Special Services, you get me.’

‘Special Services?’ echoes Stan. *What a load of—*

‘I shit you not,’ insists Carl reading Stan’s face. He raises his reflective-shades, verminous eyes all the darker for fully-dilated pupils. ‘When I lose it, man, I *really* goes mental.’

Stan scans the bulging black holes staring down, boring into his baby blues, and is suddenly unsure if Carl is a bullshitting fantasist, a bona fide mentalist - or both.

‘So who was the other?’ coughs Stan.

Carl plants a trainer on the bench, leans in, and adopts a conspiratorial tone: ‘A friend.’

‘*Friend?*’

‘Shot his cock off,’ boasts Carl. ‘And he didn’t owe me nothing.’

Stan sucks on his thin smoke. *What a load of bollocks.* Still, might be best not to mention the double negative.

‘So, imagine what I’ll do to Dougie when I catches up with him, yeah? Come down like a ton of bricks on his punk-ass, that’s what. Boom!’

Stan blows a grey cloud. ‘Is that what you do to your debtors?’

‘When they don’t pay, I do; when they take the piss!’

Carl removes his baseball cap as if suddenly unhappy with the fit. He smacks it backwards and forwards across his raised thigh, dusting the old man’s eyes, then sets to listing the punishments he claims to have visited on previous debtors.

On and on and on, but all Stan hears is a constant high-pitched drone. How he wishes Carl would piss off already. He likes to be alone - with Marjorie - when he’s on the bench, quiet and contemplating the world. How did he end up with this idiot? Look, still jabbering! And why so quick? As if he’s on fast forward. Not to mention the whiny, falsetto voice - like a chew-toy. *Squeak. Squeak. Squeak.*

Eventually, though, as all things must, Carl’s monologue ends - and it’s for a question:

‘You good for money today, Stan?’

TRY SOME, BUY SOME

Ted the window cleaner has an aerial view of Naomi. She’s eating crisps in the mouth of the passageway between Frank’s Plaice and the post office.

Naomi is aware of Ted up his ladder but knows he paid for a blowjob yesterday and wouldn't be up for another for at least a week.

'Like what you see?' she asks potential passing trade.

Lumbering on hold, Dougie regards Naomi: mid-twenties; chunky, dough-faced; lacklustre eyes that suggest she's suffered a life at least twice as long; tight leggings and skinny boob tube over landslide tits ...

'Ah'm nae that desperate,' Dougie lies.

'You sure?' grins Naomi, not one to be put off easily.

'Ah'm no intae dumpy birds. Especially ones wi, ye know, a face like yers. Nae offence.'

'No offence? You looked in the mirror recently, love?'

'And ah dinnae mind a wee bit ay extra timber, but there is a fuckin limit.'

Cheeky motherfucker, stews Naomi. But she isn't finished yet. 'I know what you're thinking - smelly fat bird, right? But trust me, it's more cushion for the pushin.'

Ditching the empty crisps packet, she sucks smoky-bacon residue from pudgy fingers and thumb, places all ten painted-fingernails on her generous hips, and thrusts.

'Know what they say,' she winks. 'A *fat fanny* is a *tight fanny*. In't that right, Ted?'

'What you asking me for?' stutters Ted. 'I wouldn't know,' he lies.

'A *fat fanny* is a *tight fanny*,' parrots Dougie. 'Huvnae heard that one before.'

'No matter how many times it's been porked,' adds Naomi.

'Okay, ah'm game,' says Dougie. 'Let's dae it.'

Boom, another sale. 'Twenty quid.'

'Whit!' barks Dougie. 'Ah huvnae goat twenty nicker.'

'Well, I'm not doing anything for less than a tenner.'

'Forget it.'

'A tenner'd buy you a blowjob.' Naomi pushes her chubby tongue into a chubby cheek, makes it bulge.

'Kinda hud ma heart set on a *fat fanny* is a *tight fanny*.'

'Listen, these lips,' she pouts, 'are just as plump and juicy as these, darlin.' The front of her leggings pulled down

to display her wares, she licks her lips (the lips on her face, obviously - she isn't a contortionist).

But Dougie just stands there, swaying slightly, disappointment souring his lustful mug. *Fat fanny is a tight fanny* there for the taking. Why couldn't today be Benefits Day?

'Okay, a fiver but that's my absolute limit,' offers Naomi. 'That'll get you a quick hand-job.'

'Kin ah pay ye Friday?'

'Are you fucking serious?' She flicks back her frizzy, straw-coloured hair. 'You don't get jelly like this on tick.'

Dougie pulls out his empty pockets.

'Are you about to show me your elephant impression?'

'Ah wish!' laughs Dougie.

'Oh come on, you must have a couple of quid,' challenges Naomi. 'Enough for a bag of chips, at least.'

Dougie shakes his head.

'Right, well piss off then and stop wasting my time.'

Dougie suggests a freebie in exchange for spreading the word; more of a trade than a freebie, really.

'Fuck off,' is Naomi's reply. 'Come back when you've got some cash in your pocket.'

Dougie bats away Naomi's inability to spot a good business deal when she hears one and backs away, inadvertently passing under Ted's ladder.

'Hey!' warns Naomi pointing.

Dougie notes the ladder and says, 'Ach, that's a load ay nonsense.' He waits a beat. 'See. Nothin.'

Suddenly, Naomi is drenched. 'What the fuck!' she shrieks. Then Ted's bucket bounces off her head.

'Heads up!' stutters the window cleaner with accidentally-perfect comedy timing.

Naomi parts her dripping hair, then, staring upwards, growls. *Actually* growls.

'Sorry, Naomi,' laments Ted, peering down. 'I slipped.'

'You're having a fucking laugh, aren't you!' yells the sodden Naomi.

Ted hangs on as she kicks his ladder.

Chapter Nine

Why So Serious?

START WITH THE CORNERS

Stan, seated at the living-room table, thin cigarette wedged in his trap, grips the flyswatter, ready to pounce, eyes flicking from walls to ceiling, from windows to doors.

Before him, on the table, a giant heap of tiny jigsaw pieces. He's made a good start; sorting them into separate piles: colour-coordinated, straight-edged ...

Without warning, he's up and away from the table, swishing the flyswatter every which way.

A few days later, Dougie spots Stan walking past Maggy's place with a BHS carrier bag (Brown's Hardware Store).

'Hey, Stanley boy,' hails Dougie in a sing-song voice. 'Whit ye been buyin noo?'

Stan appears twitchy and droop-eyed; as if he hasn't slept for quite a while. 'Just a few things for Figgis.'

'Figgis?'

Stan bats the query away.

'So, hoo are *you* feelin the day?' asks Dougie barely able to keep a self-satisfied grin off his mug.

'Never mind me,' says Stan, 'what are you smiling about? Not had a winner, have you?'

Dougie playfully fans his pal's face with cash.

'Excellent. How much?'

'Forty smackers.'

'Good for you,' says Stan stifling a yawn.

'Aye, guess it is.'

'Problem?' asks Stan.

'Naw, forty poond is forty poond, ah suppose.' Dougie's face has taken a downturn, though. He's distracted, too.

'But?'

‘But see, that’s where the real money is.’

Bobby is washing Maggy’s latest BMW.

‘Washing cars?’ puzzles Stan.

‘*Offerin bets*. Ye know, as opposed tae *placin em*. Ah mean she’s daein awright, is she not? New bimmer every couple ay fuckin years, madam? Aye, thanks very much.’

Bobby, overhearing, laughs. ‘Fancy yourself as a bookie now then, do you, Dougie?’

‘Reckon ah kid. Why not? Mist huv learned somethin in aw the years ah’ve been gamblin away whitever money ah hud. Hey, fancy bein ma first punter, Stan? Aw ma winnings says ye cannae roll the bimmer ontae its roof.’

‘Now, if you’d asked me forty years ago,’ says Stan, ‘I’d have taken your bet, *and* your money.’

‘Oh yeah,’ says Bobby. ‘And have her rip your head off.’

‘We’re no scared ay fuckin Maggy,’ brags Dougie, before quickly indicating everyone should keep mum as Maggy appears in the shop doorway.

‘Admiring the new motor, boys?’ Silence as Maggy lights a smoke. ‘So,’ she asks at last, ‘what are you going to do with all that money, Dougie? Dog? Horse? Footy?’ Maggy thinks like a casino: keep them coming back and eventually you get it all. ‘Hope you’re not going to piss it all away.’

‘Naw, ah’m off tae find me *ma* first mug.’

‘Good for you,’ says Stan. ‘There’s one born every minute.’

Dougie rubs his hands expectantly. ‘There sure is, pal.’ And with that, he distances himself from the betting shop.

‘There sure is,’ echoes Maggy quietly. ‘And he’ll be back.’

DOGGING IN READING

As Liam and Joel both happen to be in Reading on this fine dusky evening, they decide to meet up and drop in on a little-known, highly-secluded dogging spot and strike lucky right away. A couple, upon seeing the brothers approach, pushing through the tall grass, flash them in, as dogging etiquette dictates. (Not that the Galloways would respect such conventions and turn back if the 4x4 had not flashed.)

Joel and Liam discover the pair sharing the passenger seat, both facing forward: she, bare-chested, bouncing on her partner's lap; he, panting heavily, naked other than a leather gimp-hood zipped at the mouth.

A finger of Joel's blue latex glove taps on the half-up window and it scooches all the way down without the lovers losing momentum.

'What's your name, sweetheart?' asks Joel.

'R-Roxy,' groans the woman whose real name is Trudy.

'You should suck us off at the same time,' suggests Liam. He lifts the bottom of his *Why so serious?* Joker T-shirt, sticks a hands down his jeans and rubs his crotch.

'Roxy' appears circa late-fifties face-wise, tits about the same; the one on view, anyway - the other is being squished inside a liver-spotted claw. Gimpy has the body of a thin, waning sixty-year-old: all ribs, blotchy skin and sandy-coloured nipple-hairs. Silver swingers.

'W-w-what?' squeaks Roxy.

'I said you should suck us off at the same time.'

'No thanks. You can touch my tits, though, if you like.'

Joel offers Liam an opinion: 'I believe for Roxy, dogging is about enjoying an audience *without* their participation.'

'You can watch and wank yourselves off,' grunts Roxy, 'but - uh, uh, uh ...'

Gimpy unzips his mouth-hole. 'I don't mind, lads,' he pants. 'Go on, Trudy - I mean, Roxy - give the boys a—'

'Hey, my body, my rules, Jack!' snapped over a shoulder.

'Sorry, lads, I tried.'

'Now, do you wanna touch my tits or not?'

'You *are* going to suck our cocks,' insists Joel.

Liam takes out his thin but erect penis and waggles it at the open window.

'Oh, piss off,' hisses Roxy.

A minute later she is dead. Gimpy, too. Dragged out and strangled beside their Honda. Surprisingly easy, really.

'Hey, wanna do the bodies here?' froths Liam, standing over the corpses. 'We could pose the bodies inside fucking ... and have their heads on the bonnet looking in, watching.'

'Is this you "*changing it up*"?'

‘Be funny, the heads dogging their *own* bodies.’

‘Or ... we just stage the bodies here,’ suggests Joel, ‘and do something else with the heads.’

‘I thought we’d agreed,’ complains Liam.

‘The Honcho’s always left the heads somewhere else - it’s part of his trademark.’

‘*If* the opportunity arises, and *if* it’s safe, we’ll give it a go,’ reminds Liam: Joel’s own words. ‘Improv, remember?’

‘Jesus, Liam, we’re mixing it up: they’re not being removed from the place they died; we’re leaving two bodies together; they haven’t been frozen - isn’t that enough for now? Let’s not change everything at once.’

WIG & GAVEL

‘There,’ says Dougie to the two suckers he just met inside.

‘Hmm,’ wonders the perpendicular guy. ‘What do you think, Mike?’

Mike, the guy in the wheelchair, having negotiated all the pot holes, stones and puddles the alley had to offer, looks up to where Dougie’s finger is aimed ... the top of a ten-foot wall enclosing the pub’s back yard.

TWO HEADS ARE BETTER THAN ONE

By the time he’d decapitated the dogging duo, right there on the dirt track, Jack’s head still in the gimp-hood, Liam had come up with captions he was reasonably happy about.

Now, returning to their vans, the tableau set, Joel remarks: ‘Feels weird, not having a body to lug.’

‘See. Improv has its benefits.’

‘Dunno ... I’ll miss freezing them.’

Liam rolls his eyes.

‘Want me to take one of those?’

‘Think I can manage a couple of heads, Joel, thanks.’

A human head weighs around ten or eleven pounds: with Jack’s in one hand (a finger hooked into each of the hood’s eye-holes) and Trudy’s swinging by her hair in the other, Liam indicates that he’s evenly balanced.

Back at the vans - as Joel cleans the hacksaw and Liam glumly stuffs the heads into a duffle-bag - Joel asks his brother if he's had any ideas on what to do with them.

Liam slings the duffle-bag into his Transit. 'Hey, I've got a delivery in Slough,' he proposes with mock excitement. 'Maybe I could leave them in The White Horse - under that *Mind Your Head* sign.'

'Right, because of those low ceilings and exposed beams,' nods Joel. 'See, now isn't that funnier than just leaving them on the bonnet?'

'Is it?' asks Liam pointedly, removing his latex gloves.

Without further discussion on the matter they depart, Joel heading west, Liam heading east.

In four hours a man who will claim to be out bird-watching and definitely not dogging, will discover a huge pool of blood not yet fully soaked into the track and the Honda parked beside it; topless female torso on the passenger side, naked male torso in the driver's seat - cardboard signs hanging around their stumpy necks.

Trudy's sign reads: **I BLAME YOU FOR THIS!**

Jack's says: **OH SHUT UP, YOU'RE THE ONE WHO WANTED TO GO DOGGING.**

1:54 ... 1:53 ... 1:52 ...

Watching a precariously balanced wheelchair-user atop a high, narrow wall would no doubt be a heart-stopping moment for any neutral observer. Especially when he's balanced on back wheels alone, twitching and tilting in order to maintain equilibrium. But the smiling demeanour of Kenny (the able-bodied man and now lower of the two friends) says only, and this is aimed towards Dougie:

Tough luck, sucker.

With pursed lips Dougie shakes his head in a defiant *I'm-not-worried* gesture.

You sure about that?

Dougie nods an *It's-not-over-yet* at Kenny's phone, where a Stopwatch App counts down: thirty-nine seconds ... thirty-eight ... thirty-seven ...

THE HIGHLAND COW

‘And ah say there wis fuck aw wrong wi um,’ bleats Dougie.

‘Yes,’ sighs Sue cleaning the already spotless bar, ‘you told me already.’

‘Mark ma words, eh’s only in a fuckin wheelchair fi the extra fuckin benefits.’

Dougie had to hand over the bulk of his money when Wheelchair Mike successfully remained balanced on The Wig & Gavel’s perimeter wall for the full two minutes. Oh, Dougie tried to do a runner at four seconds remaining, but Kenny was quick on his toes; he’d have easily caught up even if the reneging rat *hadn’t* barrelled into one of the pub’s dumpsters.

‘Oh, n ah *didnae* stumble - the bastard pooshed me.’

‘What, when you tried to run away?’

‘Ah knew they wis cheatin somehoo. Probably hustlers jist waitin fi an innocent dupe like me tae come along.’

‘Unbelievable,’ sighs Sue.

‘Exactly,’ agrees Dougie. ‘Fuckin cheaters.’

Sue lets it go - faces Mel and Pam, two young women arriving at the bar. ‘Yes, ladies?’

‘Mibbee *ah* shid dae that. Damn sight fuckin easier than walkin. Ma legs are pretty fuckin useless, too, most ay the time. If *he* kin huv one, *ah* shid huv one.’

‘He’s *paraplegic*, Dougie. Not *paralytic* like you. *You* have a choice.’

‘Are these two old enough tae drink?’

‘Yes, we are Grandad, thanks,’ says Mel remaining focused on Pam. ‘So, go on, you were saying.’

‘Well, I told him, if he gets sent down, I’m not promising anything.’

As Sue serves two shots of peach schnapps, two shots of Jägermeister, two pints of cider and a packet of salt and vinegar crisps, Dougie remarks: ‘They dinnae *look* old enough.’

‘Trust me, I’ve seen their ID. They’re old enough.’

‘If ye say so.’ Dougie brightens. ‘Hey, girls, ye up fi a wee proposition bet?’

The women's faces are indifferent, bordering on disdain, but Dougie isn't deterred. 'Sue, quick, pass me an olive.'

'*An olive?*' echoes Sue.

'Aye. Ye mist keep some behind the bar fi yer posh punters.'

'Oh yes, we get a lot of Martini drinkers in of an afternoon. But would you believe it,' Sue checks under the bar, 'no, looks like they've finished them all off again.'

Mel and Pam titter.

'Yir fuckin hilarious, Sue. Anyone ivir told ye that? Ah dinnae come in here jist tae huv the pish -'

'Calm down, Dougie. I'm only pulling your leg.'

'Aye, well.' Dougie drains the last of his pint.

'I've got some silverskins left over from my lunch; one of those do? They're lovely. I eat them on crackers with -'

'Aye, aye, a pickled onion shid work fine. Jist spare me the health shite, wid ye?'

'*Health shite. Nice.*'

Handed over, Dougie places the onion on a beer mat.

'Right,' he says, 'here it is, lassies: Ah bet ah kin move this pickled onion ... fae *this* beer mat ... tae *that* one ... without toochin it ... or the mats.'

'You'll just blow it over,' sniffs Pam.

'Naw, ah willnae.'

'He'll use a straw,' sneers Mel.

'Nae blowin, nae straws. Nor will ah use a cocktail stick or anythin like tae pierce said pickled onion. Whit dae ye say, will ye stand me a pint if ah kin dae it?'

'What like this?' Sue places an empty pint glass over the silverskin. Rotating the glass, makes it spin around inside. Centrifugal force keeps the onion from falling until she relocates the glass to the second mat. And voila, vegetable moved without touching.

'Ta-da!' sings Sue.

The girls whoop and beat the bar.

'Ye *are* takin the pish,' grumbles Dougie.

'Told you before, I've seen them all. *Seen-them-all.*'

'Then why didnae ye jist keep yer soddin pickled onion in yer soddin lunch-box?'

'I didn't know you were going to do *that* trick. It was a long shot but I was hoping it might be a new one.'

Dougie huffs off and heads for the Gents.

'Hey, where do you think you're going?' inquires Mel. 'You owe us a drink.'

'Whit? Ah didnae hear ye take the bet.'

As one, Mel and Pam step closer.

'Okay, okay,' whines Dougie raising his palms. 'Ah'm jist gaun fi a pish.'

'Well, no sneaking out the window, you old tosser.'

'No, or next time we catch up with you, you're in *big* fucking trouble.'

Batting away their concerns, Dougie disappears.

Sue smiles to herself as Mel and Pam transport their ciders to a table well-suited for a stakeout.

The Gents' door reopens and Dougie's head has a proposal: 'Ye kin always come in if ye wintae keep an eye—'

The door quickly shuts as Mel feigns throwing a stool.

Sue flicks the pages of a magazine. 'You're very quiet, Stan. Like me to read your horoscope?'

A sulky-looking Stan shakes his head.

'Oh, go on, it'll be fun.'

'I don't believe in that rubbish. Astrology's a pile of made-up tosh.'

'It is not,' insists Sue. 'And if it was, how is that different from you what believe?'

Stan frowns. 'What do you mean?'

'You, and all your silly superstitions.'

'I'm not that bad.'

Sue scoffs at that.

'What? I can take it or leave it.'

'Take it or leave it, eh?'

'Definitely.'

'Okay, let's see you throw away your rabbit's foot, then. Bet you can't. Go on, the one in your pocket, I know it's there. It's not like it's brought you much luck anyway.'

Stan walks away, leaving his untouched beer on the bar.

'Oh, Stan, don't walk off. I didn't mean ... Come back!'

Chapter Ten

Make a Wish

THIS CHARMING MAN

Sue was right, thinks Stan. *That was hard*. Although he hasn't proved anything until he actually walks away from the bin and the rabbit's foot is *fully* abandoned.

'Hey!'

Jeez, curses Stan inwardly, *can I not sit for five minutes without—*

'You deaf? I said: You good for cash, Stan?'

'Actually, yes, I won a tenner on a scratchcard this morning. Thanks, though.' *Damn, mentioning money to this shyster, of all people!*

Carl's rodent snout sniffs the air, locates an unpleasant whiff. 'Fuck, what *is* you smoking?'

Bad grammar aside, Stan wonders if this is a trick question. 'Er ... a roll-up?'

'Rollie, eh. Just baccy?'

'Yep, just tobacco.'

Carl furtively scans the park, removes his shades; he plants a trainer on the bench and leans in, pushing a pair of pupil-enlarged rat eyes up close. 'Fancy something *wacky* to sprinkle on your *backy*?' he squeaks. 'Something *recreational* - get me?' A nefarious wink followed by 'Christ! What *is* that smell?'

Stan knows all too well and points an accusatory finger at Carl's trainer; the one just inches from the thigh of his corduroy trousers - the one with the large clump of fresh dog shit clinging to its sole and sides. *On Marjorie's bench!*

'Oh man, my new Nikes! Filthy motherfuckers!'

Carl's head swivels, searching for someone to blame - and immediately finds a target.

'Hey, you! Was this *your* fucking dog?!'

The turd-festooned Nike is brandished in the direction of two men walking a little Shih Tzu bedecked in studded collar and black leather vest. The men look aghast.

‘Cos if this *was* your fucking dog!’

‘Fuck you!’ shouts the tall, flamboyantly-dressed guy; Gianni Versace shirt over Julia Schang-Viton trousers.

The shorter, T-shirted man snatches up the dog and croons: ‘Don’t listen to the nasty chav, Mr Foofoo.’

‘Hey!’ barks the taller guy taking a defiant step forward. ‘It’s probably jour own sheet, joo son of a beech!’

From his flamboyant speedy Latino accent, Stan guesses Argentinean or Spanish; maybe Mexican - possibly Cuban. That’s right, Stan doesn’t have a clue. Although he does notice the man speaks even more rapidly than Carl, and that’s saying something! High, too, as if on helium; Stan feels like he’s landed in the middle of a cartoon war.

‘We poop-scoop for your information, mister!’ supports T-shirt: muscular arms, effeminate voice. Rocking the dog, he croons, ‘Don’t we, precious? Yes, we do.’

‘Fucking homos!’ shouts Carl.

‘Joo’d *like* us to fuck you, rat-boy!’ shouts the tall one. ‘Joo’d probably *love it!*’

‘Come, Felipé, come. He’s not worth it.’ The camp muscular one pulls on Felipé’s tangerine sleeve as the Shih Tzu takes to yapping. ‘See, Mr Foofoo agrees. Come, come.’

‘Yeah, that’s right, faggots, jog on!’

Stan thinks this cruel and unnecessary. He rummages for a card but realises he’s left them at home.

‘Hey! And just so joo know, Chilito!’ shouts Felipé, ‘I’m only *not* beating jour ass because I dohwanna upset Rufus and Foofoo! Joo hear me, bastardo?!’

‘Whatever, bitches!’

Rufus leads the way, cradling the yipping dog in one beefy arm, tugging Felipé (still shrieking insults) with the other ... Ignoring them now, Carl uses the edge of the seat to scrape shit from his trainer.

Oh, Marje! Stan could cry. This calls for a straight Red, no doubt about it.

The bulk of stinky brown sludge removed, Carl strides around the back of the bench (his gait even more simian than usual) then slides the afflicted Nike backwards and forwards on the grass, checking and rechecking until he deems it shit-free enough to be considered 'clean'.

'Dirty bastards should be shot.'

'Don't you think Love is a beautiful thing?'

'Not *that kind* of love,' squawks Carl. 'Oh man!' he blurts staring Stan in the face. 'You and Dougie - *you've never ...*'

'No,' snorts Stan. 'Not that there's anything wrong wi—'

'The fuck is this?' Carl's spotted something.

'Dunno,' Stan lies. 'What is it?'

Carl lifts the rabbit's foot from the bin.

No! Not my lucky amulet. Not Rat-Face!

'What, that thing? That's just ... rubbish.'

'One of them lucky rabbit feet, init?'

'Can't be that lucky if it's in the bin,' suggests Stan.

'Hey, maybe if I'd had this, I wouldn't have trod in shit.'

'Unlikely. There's no proof those things actually work.'

'Do no harm to hang on to it, though, right?'

Stan shrugs. 'Hey, you know who *could* use some luck.'

'Who?'

'Me.'

The baseball cap comes off, accommodating a head scratch. 'I thought you'd just won on a scratchcard.'

'What scratchcard? Don't believe everything you hear.'

A frown furrows Carl's rodent features. 'You told me.'

'I'm on medication. I get confused.'

'Confused, eh?' Carl replaces his cap.

Stan nods.

'Okay ... why not.' Carl dangles the foot.

'Aw, thanks,' smiles Stan. 'See, you're not as bad as people make out.' But as he reaches, the ratty one snatches the rabbit's paw away.

'How much?'

'Come again?'

'What is *this* -' the charm is re-dangled, '- worth -' then jiggled, '- to you?'

'You just found it in the bin.'

‘So?’

‘So, it cost you nothing.’

‘And your point is?’

‘... I put it there.’

‘*You*, put this in the bin?’

‘Exactly.’

‘*You* - put *your* lucky charm - in *this* bin?’

Stan nods.

‘Okay, here’s a question for ya - why?’

‘Because it doesn’t work?’ ventures Stan.

‘Bollocks,’ hisses Carl.

‘And to prove I could.’

‘Well, that makes *no* sense; none at all.’

‘Makes sense to me,’ grins Stan.

‘You’re fucking mad, mate - no offence but you are.’

‘Yep, that’s me,’ clowns Stan, ‘mad Stan McCloud.’

Carl closes one nostril with a finger, snorts out half the contents of his nose then repeats for the other nasal cavity.

‘So, can I have it?’

‘Sure.’

‘Aw, thanks,’ smiles Stan. ‘See, you’re not as bad as people make—’

‘Jesus, you just said that a fucking minute ago!’

‘Pretty sure I’d remember that,’ frowns Stan.

Carl kicks the bin, hard. ‘What the fuck!’ He circles the bench impatiently. ‘Okay, twenty quid.’

‘I’m skint.’ Stan searches a pocket, produces only tobacco paraphernalia and a used tissue as proof.

‘The other one.’

‘What other one?’

‘That fucking one.’ Carl jumps in and rummages Stan’s remaining pocket; comes up with a ten pound note. ‘Tenner on a scratchcard; and don’t say: *What scratchcard?*’

‘That’s got to last me till my next pension.’ Stan squints at his wrist, looks front and back - where did his watch go? ‘What time do *you* make it? ... Have I eaten today?’

Carl’s eyes roll backwards, pissed-off shark style. ‘How the fuck do *I* know if you’ve eaten today?’

‘It’s Tuesday, right?’

‘Jesus Christ!’ Carl holds up the tenner in one claw, hoists the rabbit’s foot in the other. ‘Look, which do you want? Pick one.’

Stan points.

‘Sold to the man in the smelly jumper!’ Carl backs away, waving the banknote. ‘And I gets to keep this.’

‘Hey!’

‘What now?’

‘The rabbit’s foot,’ coughs Stan.

‘Right, sorry. Nearly forgot,’ grins Carl. ‘Here, have it.’

Thrown on a high arc, the lucky talisman rises, falls, then belly-flops (if a foot can be said to *belly-flop*) with a soft slap into the benched shit.

‘Oh, unlucky! Sorry, mate, my bad. Hey, maybe you were right. Maybe it’s not that lucky, after all.’

Gingerly, two fingers wrapped inside used tissue, Stan lifts the charm free.

And there goes Carl, already a distance along the path, laughing uproariously and strutting like Billy Big Bollocks.

READY WHEN YOU ARE, LADY LUCK

In an attempt to prove to himself, once and for all, that he *could* overcome his belief in ‘silly superstitions’, *could* ‘take it or leave it’ as he’d claimed, Stan spent the next morning attempting to break a couple of - as he was now trying to designate them - ‘irrational beliefs’.

He had a go at placing a hat on the bed and a pair of shoes on the table, but no matter how hard he’d tried, both proved impossible. There was also a stab at opening an umbrella. The result was the same: he found he just couldn’t do it. *Not indoors!*

In a fit of frustration Stan made several attempts to ignite the rabbit’s foot with his lighter, but for some reason the flame had refused to get close enough. Then he’d caught sight of himself in the mirror: a run down, foolish old man setting fire to a bunny paw. *What was he thinking?* He didn’t need to *destroy*, he decided, just *not have*. He’d been on the right lines in the park; Carl

panicked him that's all. Yes, if he could only let go, throw the talisman away, that would *definitely* prove he wasn't obsessed with 'silly superstitions'.

And so with renewed effort and a determination like never before Stan marched to the toilet and ditched the foot; almost flushed, too - made a real effort. Then he experienced an epiphany: *No! Someone else should have Luck.* (Not Carl, obviously, but, well, just about anyone else.) He had to *pass on* the possibility of *bonne chance*. Put the charm somewhere for a total stranger to discover. But not in a bin! That way would probably only lead to a landfill site. What a waste! Perhaps that's why he'd been unable to leave the paw in the park. Yes, now everything made perfect sense!

And perhaps the finder would be in *need* of good fortune; could use a lucky break. And even if such talismans don't work, the very act of finding one might bring the next owner a newfound sense of optimism. Yes, this way, he *could* let go! He'd drop the charm blindly from the balcony and serendipity would make sure to place it in the hands of a *deserving* person; someone who would appreciate a slice of good luck.

No sooner had he decided this and Stan was on the balcony, eyes closed, rabbit's foot held at arm's length over the wall, just waiting for Lady Luck to say '*Now!*'

That was around lunchtime. (Four hours ago.)

'Come on, chop-chop, you silly old sod,' says Stan, impatiently repeating a phrase oft used by Marjorie. All he has to do is open forefinger and thumb and providence will take over, but not until the moment feels right, or he receives a definite sign ... he'll know when.

'Only me!' announces Dougie.

Stan nearly jumps off the balcony. 'Jesus, don't you knock? I should take back that key.'

'Baws tae that,' calls Dougie noting a twirling flypaper above his head as he passes through the living-room. 'We've always hud each other's spare.'

'What if I'd been naked?' Stan wants to know. 'Or had a lady friend round?'

‘Lady friend?’ queries Dougie appearing on the balcony.
‘And why are ye naked, ye sly old fox?’

‘That’s not what I meant and you know it.’

‘Naw, but ye should. Aboot time ye hud some fun; me too. Cannae remember the last time ah hud me some fanny.’

‘That’s nice, Dougie - real poetic.’

‘We’re only flesh n blood at the end ay the day, Stanley. We aw huv our needs. Are we not men?’

‘I think the pills have lowered my sex drive,’ sighs Stan.

‘Not that it wis high tae begin wi,’ mutters Dougie.

‘Hey,’ grumbles Stan. ‘I had my moments.’

‘Well, let’s away tae Mandy’s, then; *relive* some ay them moments.’ Dougie widens his eyes, the better to persuade.
‘Ah might need ye tae lend me a few quid, though.’

‘Mandy’s Megastars, is that place still going?’

‘Course it is,’ says Dougie. ‘Well?’

Stan thinks for a moment. ‘No. After I’ve dropped this, I need to crack on with my jigsaw.’

‘Jigsaw! Yir turnin doon tits n fanny fi a fuckin jigsaw.’

‘It won’t do itself, Dougie.’

‘Neither will ma cock.’

‘Again, lovely.’

‘Ach, come on, ye know ah dinnae like gaun on ma own.’

‘You’d rather take a pal? Isn’t that a bit ... odd?’

‘It’s awright if it’s Wendy’s oan reception, but if she’s oaf n they’ve hud tae git cover in -’

‘No, I don’t think Marjorie would approve.’

‘Ach, she’d be the first tae tell ye tae huv some fun.’

‘Not like that.’

‘Disnae huv tae be *full* sex - kid be jist a blowie.’

‘Maybe some other time.’

‘Well, whit about a nice hand-joab?’

‘Now, now, Dougie, I know you’re old friends but if Stan doesn’t want you to give him a hand-job, he doesn’t hav—’

‘Fuck off, Norman!’ barks Dougie.

Norman lives next door; usually to be found in crusty sweat top and pants, reading a book - a portly janitor with a

hankering for snacks and a vocabulary that would surprise many.

‘Gae n find yer own conversation, ye eavesdroppin fuck.’

‘What? You think I *choose* to overhear your immature exchanges?’

‘That’s true,’ upholds Stan. ‘Norman was only saying last week, how every time he hears your grating voice he wishes they’d put -’

Stan looks to Norman.

‘Soundproof dividers.’

‘- Soundproof dividers between balconies when they built the towers.’

‘Actually, I said “discordant and irksome voice” but *grating* will suffice,’ grins Norman.

‘Oh, aye - n when deid ye two start gittin aw pally?’

‘We’ve always been neighbourly, haven’t we, Stan? You should try it sometime.’ Norman’s doorbell chimes. ‘Oh, hold that thought. I must away.’ And he does.

‘*I must away*,’ mocks Dougie. ‘Who talks like that? Ah hate that fucker - arrogant, snooty windbag.’

‘Snooty? He lives in a tower block - in Salford - just like the rest of us. That hardly qualifies him as—’

‘Dunno who’s worse,’ hisses Dougie, ‘him, or the oaf on the other side.’

‘Colin? Aw, he’s okay.’

‘Whit!’ barks Dougie. ‘He’s a cunt. Ye’ve goat a pompous know-it-all oan one side, n a lazy stupid cunt oan the other.’

‘Oh, that’s not fair, Dougie. Colin isn’t *that* bad.’ Stan smiles. ‘For a cunt, I mean.’

Dougie laughs. ‘That’s the spirit, pal.’ He puts an arm around Stan’s shoulder. ‘So, Mandy’s ... ye comin?’

HUMAN POPSICLES

Dingy basement of a house; could be anywhere. There’s a Manchester United calendar - but that hardly narrows it down - weights, tools, walk-in freezer.

‘Nice to be freezing again,’ calls Joel from inside the metallic box.

‘Whatever,’ mutters Liam wobbling his head.

‘Best thing we ever did, buying this.’

The walk-in freezer, an eight foot cube, give or take, has five-inch stainless steel foam-insulated walls, a galvanised steel floor, and wide strips of thick plastic that form a cold barrier across the doorway. Inside: two stainless shelves (one either side), a dim vapour-proof light, and the dead - current population: one.

‘Just something about a frozen body, don’t you think?’

Joel exits the freezer lugging the last of its tenants, the deceased duct-taped to a chair; naked apart from frigid underpants, wisps of once-muddy now-wintery comb-over frosted to a glittery head: Gordon Craggs, ex bank clerk.

‘I’d love to be a fly on the wall when they try and do their postmortems on these fuckers.’

Liam closes the freezer door, cutting off the source of thin cold mist rolling under the plastic strips and across the cellar floor. ‘So Baldy here’s the last.’

Joel sets his burden down. ‘Yep, time to start trawling again. Did you come up with a caption?’

Liam taps the hacksaw against the stiff’s icy neck.

Joel waits. ‘Liam?’

‘Okay, okay.’

‘Your notebook; you put it in your pocket.’

Liam finally snatches out the notebook. He sighs and shakes his head; turns a page, then another.

‘You must have something,’ says Joel.

Liam shrugs and offers: ‘*It’s like a sauna in here.*’ His inflection puts a question mark on the end.

Joel is poker-faced.

‘Crap, isn’t it?’

‘No, no, I like it.’ Joel sets to cutting and removing the frigid duct tape. ‘But is it a little on the nose, maybe? You know: a bit ... *too* obvious.’

‘But he’ll be *in a sauna*,’ explains Liam. ‘That’s the joke.’

‘What about an oven? It’s like an *oven* in here.’

Liam frowns. ‘How does that work?’

Supporting the human Popsicle under the shoulders, Joel leans it forward and nods at the chair. Liam stomps

down on the back legs until the chair snaps away from the body's thighs and bottom with a loud crack. He kicks the chair aside as Joel lays the body on its back, bent legs up in the air, dying-fly style.

'I mean, if he was going *in an oven* -'

'It's fine; we'll use the sauna one.'

'See, for future, if we left the head and torso *together* -'
Liam turns to the back of his notebook. 'No, listen.'

Joel obliges gloomily.

'A cyclist's ridden her bike into railings and the head's ended up in the basket - still with its crash helmet on.'

Joel's face is noncommittal.

'*I name this head, Bob* - vicar christening his own head.'

'... I'm just not -'

'A bowling alley, the guy's posed bowling. His head's at the bottom of the lane. And the sign says: *Strike!*'

'What's funny about that?'

'For fuck's sake, Joel!' Liam throws the hacksaw against the freezer door with a resonating *clang*. 'It just is!'

'Is it Honcho, though?'

'Of course it's Honcho! - Just *different* Honcho. And they'd still be frozen; you know, because of the stagings.'

'Tell you what, if we ever we run out of ideas for—'

'Haven't we already?'

'No, I don't think so. I really like your Oven suggestion.'

'*Sauna.*'

'Sauna, I mean.' Joel indicates the job in hand. 'Now, are you sawing Baldy's head off, or am I doing that as well?'

ACH, COME OAN - IT'S YER BIRTHDAY!

'Hello?' calls Dougie letting himself in. 'Only me!'

'Won't be a minute,' shouts Stan from behind the closed bathroom door.

Dougie enters the living-room and immediately notices not *one* flypaper on the ceiling but a veritable forest canopy of them: a host of dangly brown ribbons, each as clean as the next and all whirling lazily; no doubt disturbed by the opening and closing of the front door.

‘Whit the fuck,’ mutters Dougie. Then he blows, hard as his lungs will allow, which isn’t that impressive, to be honest. Not so much huff as phlegm, though a dozen or so flypapers do set to twisting and turning excitedly - some of the nearest becoming so close, they stick together.

‘Oh shite,’ rasps Dougie. Stan must have spent ages putting all those up. He might not be best pleased to find a bunch forever joined together. Should he grab a chair and try to separate them? No, he’ll probably make it worse ... or get stuck up there.

‘Nearly done,’ announces Stan.

‘Nae boather!’ Dougie distances himself from the conjoined flypapers. ‘Disnae smell sae good in here, Stan. Shall ah open a windae?’

‘No!’ comes the shrieked reply. ‘Keep all windows and doors closed!’

‘Okay, okay,’ Dougie calls back. ‘Jeez, keep yer hair on. *Kin ah at least open the curtains?* Let a bit ay sun in. It’s like the black hole ay Calcutta in here.’

‘They’re already open!’ shouts Stan.

‘Bollocks they are,’ mutters Dougie parting the curtains.

‘Careful of Henry Hoover!’ warns Stan. ‘I’m trying to up his power.’

‘Ah kin huv a gander at um fi ye, if ye like!’ Dougie steps over parts of dismantled vacuum cleaner. ‘But first -’

Stan’s wall calendar: Dougie rips off June and July. Today, Sunday the 1st of August, is circled in red.

The bathroom door opens just enough for Stan to squeeze through, then he quickly recloses it, stirring the air, reactivating the flypapers, making them jostle and sway.

‘Bad one wis it?’ quips Dougie. ‘Or is there someone in there ye dinnae want me tae see?’

‘No,’ grunts Stan, a little defensive. His eyes dart around the room, searching. ‘I’m just trying to keep each room isolated till I’m sure which one he’s in.’

‘Which one *who’s* in?’

‘Figgis.’

‘*Figgis?*’ parrots Dougie. ‘Oh, the fly.’

Eh's giein um a fuckin name!

'Yes, and he must die!' exclaims Stan.

'Why no jist leave the windaes open till eh leaves?'

'What, and risk being overrun by his fly-mates?'

Stan spins stiffly on a heel, as though in pantomime, hoping to catch a baddie encroaching from backstage.

Fly-mates?

Dougie assesses Stan's appearance as his friend creeps up on what Dougie knows to be a raisin (he trod on it coming in), probably fallen from one of Stan's many cakes.

Poor fella, still obsessing on a pishin fly. Even if it wis here, it probably died ages ago.

'Damn, just a raisin!' curses Stan. He pops it in his mouth, chews a little then spits it across the room with a forceful 'Plech!'

To Dougie, Stan appears *highly agitated*, yet, at the same time, somehow *vacuous*. And what's that around his waist? As if he's fashioned some kind of utility belt. Items attached to it with Velcro. Can of insect-killer, rolled-up magazine, the *Buzz-Kill* flyswatter, elastic bands ...

'Who the fuck are ye meant tae be, anyway,' asks Dougie, 'the bug-hunt cowboy?'

'Time for another cloud of death,' announces Stan, whipping free the can of *Die-Pest-Die!* Seconds later, a silver haze clouds the room.

'Christ, Stan,' chokes Dougie. 'That stuff wi kill us aw.'

'Jesus, Dougie,' coughs Stan, 'why do you have to be so negative all the time?'

'Whit? It's nae *me* that's negative.'

'See - *negative*.'

'That's not—'

'Negative.'

'If anyone's negative around here, it's *you*.'

'Hardly,' scoffs Stan.

'Right, we'll soon settle this. Which one ay us gits disturbed when jist *wee* things gae wrong?'

'You, Dougie, you.'

‘Awright, then, here’s an example fi ye.’ Dougie points to the conjoined flypapers above their heads. ‘*That ... disnae boather me.* But ah bet it fuckin boathers -’

‘And there’s no need to—*for fuck’s sake!*’ curses Stan.

‘Ye probably deid that when ye came oot ay there,’ suggests Dougie indicating the bathroom.

‘They took me ages. They’re a nightmare to put up.’

Stan draws Dougie’s attention to a huge clump of sticky ribbons stuck to the top of the TV, a writhing nest of them, all intertwined into a consolidated impenetrable mass.

‘Once they get hold of you,’ cautions Stan, wide-eyed with seriousness, ‘they’re impossible to get off.’

Inside the tacky chaos, hostages to their gummy cage, an upside down photograph of the McClouds holidaying in Blackpool, and one of Marjorie’s ornaments: a plastic Eiffel Tower on a mock-marble base (bought on a shopping trip to Bury Market).

Dougie reaches out a finger.

‘No! Don’t touch them,’ barks Stan. ‘You could be there for days.’

Dougie laughs contemptuously. ‘Ah dinnae think -’

‘Trust me,’ warns Stan with absolute conviction, ‘never take flypaper lightly.’

Dougie sighs. ‘Okay, fine.’

Stan maintains a raised cautionary finger as he reverses to the dining room table.

‘Anyhoo, why are we talkin about that?’ asks Dougie. ‘*When it’s yer birthday!*’

But Stan is oblivious to birthdays, his or anyone else’s. He’s seated now, before thousands of tiny jigsaw pieces neatly sorted into separate colour-coordinated piles, the outline done (with barely a centimetre of table to spare on all sides) and maybe a fifth of the puzzle complete.

‘Now, what was I looking for? Oh yes, a bit of green.’ A pile is rummaged, pieces investigated. ‘With two ins and two outs ...’

‘Stan!’

‘What, Dougie, what?’ Stan flashes red, skittish eyes.

Dougie points to the calendar. ‘Ah said, it’s yer birthday.’

‘Maybe it ended up in here,’ mumbles the birthday boy, fingers dredging the blue pile. ‘Bit of green, bit of green ... *come on, show yourself.*’

‘Christ, look ey the state ay ye,’ sighs Dougie. ‘Huv ye been daein that night n day?’

Jumping on a potential piece, Stan attempts to place it, but the piece won’t fit and suffers a fist-hammering, his jittery mania mutating into angry frustration.

‘We definitely need tae git ye oot fi a wee while,’ says Dougie. ‘Like, right away.’

NEXT YEAR, DEFINITELY!

Installed in a booth in the pub, Stan’s manic demeanour has transformed into sullen glumness; another pill-induced mood-swing? Perhaps, or maybe it’s ‘She’ playing on the jukebox, for the Charles Aznavour classic was *their song* - Stan and Marjorie’s.

From the bar, Dougie and Sue scrutinise.

‘Aye, sae ah git back fae Falkirk,’ says Dougie, ‘n find eh’s been daein that fuckin jigsaw *non-stop.*’

‘Poor thing, he should be enjoying whatever time he’s got left. Not doing silly puzzles. That Maggy’s got a lot to answer for if you ask me.’

‘She’s an evil fuckin bitch, that’s whit she is.’

Eyes fixed on Stan, Sue sighs, understanding etched into her face. ‘Still can’t believe it. When you told me -’

‘Aye well, like ah said, dinnae mention that tae Stan. Eh disnae want everyone tae know.’

Sue nods. ‘Go on, sit with him. I’ll bring them over.’

‘These are on me,’ announces Sue heartily, ‘beers for the boys, a small shandy for myself. Didn’t realise it was today.’ She boosts her shandy. ‘Happy Birthday, Stan.’

‘Aye, Happy Birthday, pal.’ Dougie hoists his beer.

‘If I’d known, we could’ve had a do,’ says Sue. ‘Oh well, next year, eh?’

An awkward silence as she and Dougie quickly realise that's exceedingly unlikely - a proverbial tumbleweed blows through as Stan sips apathetically at his beer.

Dougie, hating to see his old friend so morose, proclaims, 'Aye, next year, definitely. Let's dae that!'

'Yes, you'll prove those doctors wrong, right enough,' encourages Sue. 'Good health!'

The pair raise a reasonably convincing cheer and drink an uncomfortable salute.

'Big mouth,' complains Stan to Dougie.

'Sorry, pal. Jist kindae slipped oot.' Dougie elbows Sue.

'Don't worry, Stan,' confides Sue. 'I can keep a secret.'

'Suppose I've made it this far,' muses Stan, brightening a little.

'Exactly,' agrees Dougie. 'Shame ye didnae take the other bet.'

'Other bet?' asks Sue.

'That eh widnae reach hus birthday.'

'What!'

'But here we fuckin are, eh, pal? Here we fuckin are!'

'Wait - Maggy? -'

'Who else?'

'She offered him odds that he wouldn't -'

'As true as ah'm sittin here,' affirms Dougie.

'No, she didn't!' protests Sue.

Dougie's face is answer enough.

'Oh, what a bitch.'

'A bitch, right enough,' Dougie concurs. 'But eh kiddae won a fuckin stash.'

'Yes, well, I don't suppose he's too worried about that right now.'

'Told ye, ye shidae taken that bet, Stanley lad.'

Sue grips Stan's shoulder, lifts her glass high: 'Anyway,' she hails. 'I say ... Here's to Stan's *next* birthday.'

'Imagine the fuckin odds ye'd git on that, eh, pal?' Dougie boosts his glass. 'Cheers!'

As Dougie and Sue quaff the toast, an idea glints in Stan's eyes.