



Mark Staniforth

Smashwords Edition

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Something in the way you love me won't let me me

I don't want to be your prisoner so baby won't you set me free

- Madonna, Borderline

Carnival Queen

Marnie Sleightholme was well chuffed when she got the chance to be carnival queen, and she couldn't give a shit if it was true what folk were saying about her only getting picked because she'd had her right arm ripped off.

Ever since the accident, Deborah Bullock had been using twice as much make-up to disguise her rage. Marnie being picked as carnival queen had only made her pile it on even thicker. Deborah Bullock told anyone who would listen how it was a complete piss-take to give the job to a cripple.

'Imagine getting a wedding cake covered in frosty decorations and shit like that, but it's already got a big chunk bitten out of it. Well, that's exactly how it is.'

Deborah Bullock had dreamed of being carnival queen since more or less the start of primary school. She used to tear their pictures out of the newspaper and dress up to look like them, and tell Marnie she never could because she was too fat and ugly even to pretend.

It was Deborah Bullock's on-off boyfriend who'd been driving the car Marnie had been sitting in when it veered off the road and crashed into a tree halfway down Back South Lane.

It was pointless trying to hide the truth. There was only one reason anybody went down Back South Lane at that time of night, and the flashing blue lights illuminated the exact location for the whole town to see.

When Marnie came round in a hospital bed, the first face she saw was Deborah Bullock's. She felt an ache in her side and blinked her eyes. The room was bare and cold. There was an empty chair in the corner. Deborah Bullock slapped some cheap flowers down on the bed and leaned in. She smelled of talcum powder and nicotine.

'Do you want the good news or the bad news? The good news is you've finally lost some weight. The bad news is, they've chopped your right arm off. So you're still a fat bitch.'

Deborah Bullock's mouth curled into a satisfied smile and she got up. She snatched back the flowers and walked away. Marnie looked down at where her right arm should be. It was so thick with bandages she could hardly tell if it was still there or not.

Marnie had been secretly going with Deborah Bullock's on-off boyfriend for three months up to the accident.

He was a little bit taller than her with short black hair and a gold stud ear-ring. She liked the way he had a good body from working out, and how he didn't go round shouting his mouth off about how easy she was. Most of all, she liked the way he was Deborah Bullock's on-off boyfriend, and how every time she went with him it made her feel better about the shit things Deborah Bullock used to say and do to her when they were kids.

When Marnie came out of hospital, her step-dad glanced up from his dinner plate and said, 'You should be getting yourself a nice bit of compo out of that, love.'

Her mother started treating her like she was some kind of idiot. She spoke loudly and more slowly, and was always checking she'd remembered to go to the toilet or have something to eat.

Marnie got a letter to say she was going to get sixty-three grand for the accident. She read it twice then folded it up as tightly as she could with her one good hand, and stuffed it deep in a ball of tights she never wore. She phoned her job at the animal feeds factory and told them she needed a little more time.

When they asked Marnie to be carnival queen she said yes straight away. She knew nothing would piss Deborah Bullock off more. She even thought if she'd known how pissed off it was going to make her, she might have chopped her arm off herself a long time since.

She looked forward to sitting down on the cane chair on the lead float, wearing the same kind of snow-white dress and sparkly tiara Deborah Bullock used to not even let her pretend to put on.

She imagined seeing Deborah Bullock in the crowd, and how she might shape a single V-sign in her direction. She didn't care if anyone else would see her do it, or if Deborah Bullock might flick two back and say, 'beat that'. None of that would matter. Marnie would know at that moment that everything had worked out fine.

* * * *

Gypos

Uncle Cyrus had had a beef with the gypos ever since he'd come up short at dinging the strongman hammer bell a couple of carnivals past. He'd slapped down the mallet and it had only gone up half-way. Soon as that dinger starting falling, I knew sure as hell there was going to be trouble all right.

Uncle Cyrus was generally half-cut on carnival day even before the floats started their chug round the parade ring, and with a reputation like his to keep up there was no way he was going to stand there and take that kind of shit.

There he was, planting his feet square-on and ranting about how the fucking thing was rigged and the gypos were a bunch of thieving sponging bastards just as he'd always suspected, and how he was going to step right up and take his money back and a whole lot more.

Course, a fair crowd had gathered round at that point and up stepped one of the scrawny-arsed gypo blokes with arms like twigs and a bale of wild grey hair. He looked about as likely to ding that bell as Uncle Cyrus had ever been to turn down a drink.

Yet he stepped right up and one-handed sent that thing whizzing right up the pole and ding-ding-ding-ing right across the fairground. There was silence then, save for a right old splutter from Billy Lunn. Uncle Cyrus went over and decked him with a good enough right hook to ding bells in most other places.

Sticking your nose in someone else's business always took a lot of guts in our house, but the way that wine

bottle filled with petrol was perched on the side I reckoned it was left there to be asked about.

Uncle Cyrus swung down to my level and took hold of my shoulders in such a way that my chin was almost touching the seaweed-green tattoos on the tops of his knuckles. He said: 'People who glue coconuts to their shies so kiddies like you can't never win no prizes? Well, them kind of people deserve every kind of warm welcome they're ever going to fucking well get.'

His eyes searched mine and he said, 'besides, we've got unfinished business with them, don't we?'

I croaked out a yes and I knew right away it sounded like a big fat lie. His eyes kept searching, then all of a sudden they lost interest, like someone flicked off the last weak glow-light inside his messed-up head. He stood up and turned away, mumbling something about real men under his faggy-beer breath.

Uncle Cyrus was right. Those coconuts had used up a heck of a lot of my pocket money at the carnival over the past two years, and I still hadn't got a single one of them to show for it. Not that I ever worked out what I'd do with one if I ever got it. Probably hold it to my chest like a trophy and search out a couple of nice girls to parade it by. Then maybe I'd have lobbed it at the bare wall behind the greengrocers until it broke, and watched sour milk spew out over the potato sacks.

But there was never much chance of that because those coconuts never even wobbled if you hit them flush. They clicked off their sides like ping-pong balls. The gypo who ran the stall dropped your money in his pouch real slow and cackled at you through splintered teeth. We called him Hurricane Billy. We called him that because everyone said it would take a wind that strong to shift his coconuts.

Funny, Uncle Cyrus going on about the gypos being thieving sponging bastards like that, because he'd never done a proper day's work since he moved in with us two years ago, after my real dad finally lost out to the cancer. Truth was my dad's lights went out the day he had the accident up in the forestry and had to go on the disability. Since that day he'd given up on just about everything, including me. Seemed to figure drinking himself to death was as good a course of action as any. He turned yellow as a rape-field and his punches started to carry a lot less hurt. The day he found out he had six months to live he shook my mum and me from our beds to break the news. He got a bottle of cheap cooking brandy out of the cupboard and made us all swig it till we were sick to celebrate.

My mum hadn't even had time to cash the compo cheque when Uncle Cyrus rolled up on the doorstep with a knock-off Head holdall full of his belongings. Said he was carrying out my dad's dying wish to come and lend a hand through the hard times. That was a laugh as my dad had never been able to stand the sight of Uncle Cyrus since Uncle Cyrus let him take sole rap for a poaching charge when they were mid-teens old. Uncle Cyrus stopped sleeping on the couch after less than a week and from the sounds coming from the bedroom it was more than a hand he was lending in there.

Still, it wasn't no worse than having my dad around the place, least not until the gypos came back. My uncle said gypos were like rats and if we didn't do something to get rid of them now the next thing there'd be a whole plague-full of them scuttling around up there. They'd be robbing our shops and raping our women and there wouldn't be two shits we'd be able to do about it by then.

That's when I got some stupid-arsed idea that I'd make him proud. I knew how that strongman hammer bell was still dinging around in his head and I reckoned I'd take it upon myself to tell him how I'd got us even.

I muddled myself up good one day in the car park woods and crashed in on his beer-supping and said, 'them gypos just jumped me. But I fought 'em off.'

Well, it sure served to rile Uncle Cyrus up just the way I wanted. That bell was fair ding-ding-ding-ing all

right in his wide-open eyes.

He rose to his feet. 'Jumped?' he said. 'Where?'

I made up a right good tale about how I'd been traipsing through the car park woods minding my own business when all of a sudden they were on me, biting and scratching and shouting words I didn't understand.

'I threw out my hand,' I said, motioning a feeble right-hook. 'I heard a crack. There was blood. Then they legged it.'

Uncle Cyrus tried to fight a small smile spreading across his thin lips. He crouched down and searched my eyes again and hissed, 'Gypos, huh?' I couldn't work out if he believed me or not.

That was a while ago and I thought things had worked out fine. Sure, the gypo story was all around the village but there didn't seem no-one inclined to head up the lane to search out the truth.

Only when the caravans kept on coming did Uncle Cyrus's mood go back to being a whole lot darker.

'You're not lying to me are you, son?' he'd say, always searching my eyes while he said it. I'd shake my head and look away.

'Show me your best shot again.'

I'd swing another pathetic right hook.

'Bust his nose, did it?'

'Yeah.'

He'd snort: 'Must be - what you call it - hee-mo-philics, them gypos.'

Looking back now, I reckon that wine bottle filled with petrol was Uncle Cyrus's way of saying that he'd figured out it was all total bullshit on my part. Two days later I was down in Mad Harry's woodshed at sunset, holding that bottle's neck and getting ready to get us even whether I liked it or not.

'How's it feel, son?' said Uncle Cyrus, looking down on me all proud like I was all set for heading out on my first push-bike.

'Fine,' I said.

Mad Harry had always scared the shit out of me. He lived up to his name. Anyone round the place who walked with a slight limp or peered out from behind a sliced-up face, it was a fair bet they'd had a run-in with Mad Harry some time.

Mad Harry held the wine bottle. He pointed to the sticking-out rag. 'You set it light here, you lob it there, then.. boom.'

Uncle Cyrus laughed: 'Boom!'

We trudged out the other end of the car park woods for a bit of target practice. Brambles tugged the bottoms of my trousers. I puffed out second-hand fag smoke with the steam from my breath. They both wore big backpacks. Sweat stains spread from under. We climbed a barbed-wire fence and stopped in front of a tall oak

tree.

'See that tree?' said Uncle Cyrus.

'Yeah.'

'That's the caravan belonging to them dirty little gypo friends of yours.'

'Uh-huh.'

'See that woodpecker hole?'

'Yeah.'

'That's the window one of them kids who jumped you's pointing his dirty little head out of right this minute.'

He handed me a bottle, corked and filled. It was almost too cold to touch.

'Well?' he said. 'What are you waiting for?'

'Aren't you gonna light it?' I said.

Mad Harry shook his head. 'And luminate our plans for the whole place to see?'

'Besides,' said Uncle Cyrus, 'it's only a fucking tree.'

I stood up and dug my feet in the grass. I held the bottle tight round its neck and drew it back. I threw it as hard as I could. It somersaulted a few times in the air then fell to the ground with an unbroke thud.

Uncle Cyrus said, 'Jesus wept.'

Two hours later their back packs were empty of practice bottles and their shards shone across the field like a first-thing frost. By the end I was hitting the woodpecker hole roughly one in three. Uncle Cyrus said so long as I got it in the general vicinity it would do its job.

My right arm burned more than I reckoned them gypos ever would. When I'd thrown the last bottle Uncle Cyrus slung his arm round my shoulder and hugged me tighter than just about anyone ever had before. He said, 'this is our secret, kid. You just remember that.' We walked home together, Mad Harry out in front. I don't mind admitting it felt good all right.

I sat up that night with Uncle Cyrus for just about the first time. He ordered my mum to bring us each a whisky. When she complained, he pulled a face. 'Kid's gotta learn,' he said. I laughed. We downed them in one. I had more, enough to make me sick and dizzy. Next thing, it was past one o'clock and Uncle Cyrus was shaking me awake.

I got my boots off the radiator and pulled them on and followed Uncle Cyrus out in the dark. We stood outside the back door and Uncle Cyrus cupped his hands and blew in them then lit a cigarette.

After a couple of puffs that drifted out into the dark he nudged me and held out the cigarette. I took a suck, held it as long as I could before I puffed it out. When Mad Harry came with his backpack we started tramping up the lane. The stars were hid. The hedge-tops hulked. I stumbled over tree-roots. There was no wind. I could hear Mad Harry breathing hard, ruttling a little like he had bits inside him coming loose.

After what seemed like ages Uncle Cyrus touched my arm to tell me to stop and we hunkered down in a clearing. Mad Harry took a hip-flask from his back pack and took a big swig and passed it to Uncle Cyrus and he did the same. Uncle Cyrus jerked me round and filled my face with whisky fumes. 'See there?' he said. I followed his arm and saw a light through the branches. 'That's them.'

Mad Harry scrambled up a small bank ahead. Mud soaked through to my knees. When we got to where we could see the caravans, Mad Harry turned round.

'Don't want to be waking them mutts.'

'What mutts?'

Mad Harry didn't say anything.

'What if they set them on us?'

Mad Harry ignored me. Uncle Cyrus gave me a shove from behind. 'You run faster,' he said.

There were three caravans. Their sides were white under outside lights. The windows were dark. I imagined the gypos sleeping inside. There was a pick-up truck and an old Cortina. A bigger truck was parked to the side. It was almost a lorry. It was half covered in a tarp, but you could just make out a painted sign peeping out of the end. The air smelled of old bonfires. A chain clanked.

Mad Harry jerked his arm to tell us to follow. We kept in the trees and skirted right round the back so the big truck was nearest.

'Here,' said Mad Harry, and sat down and began opening his back pack.

'See where the tarp's highest?' said Uncle Cyrus, moving close again.

'Yeah.'

'I reckon that's more than likely the fucking hammer thing.'

'Okay.'

'What do you reckon you can hit the bullseye?'

I didn't take my eyes off the tarp. I said, 'easy.'

Uncle Cyrus patted my shoulder. He said, 'make sure you hit it good.'

Mad Harry pulled out the wine bottle. 'Once it's lit, you throw it right away,' he said. I nodded. He placed the cold bottle in my hand. 'Then you run like a bastard.'

'Dogs or no dogs,' added Uncle Cyrus.

'Down there.' Mad Harry flung his arm into the blackness and began to stomp off.

'Get through the trees and head up the path,' said Uncle Cyrus. 'They'll more than likely figure we've headed off downwards.'

I held the bottle both at the neck and underneath. Uncle Cyrus struck a match and it went out in the wind. The second time it caught hold of the rag.

'Go!' Uncle Cyrus hissed. I looked at the top of the tarp.

'Go!' he barked again, louder second time.

I pulled my right arm back and threw it forward and let it fly just like I'd learned. I stood and squinted. I lost it in the dark. Then there was a crash and the top of the tarp lit up in orange flames. The dogs started barking. There were shouts from the caravans. I ran the way Mad Harry said. I turned and saw the flames lick up the sky. The shouts got louder. In the dark I heard Uncle Cyrus's footsteps. They slapped through the undergrowth, getting further away each time.

* * * *

Eleutherophobia

Everybody knew Shandor Marley's mother liked to spend more time flirting with serial killers than she did taking care of things at home. So when her son went round with an air rifle popping his neighbours like they were allotment pigeons, they figured all the boy really needed was a bit of attention.

Shandor finally flipped one day after finding out the inbred farm boys who made his life hell most days were in fact his half-brothers. He returned home to confront his mother only to find her pritt-sticking press cuttings of the Mad Killer into a brand new scrapbook and seemingly not in the least bit concerned by her son's unexpected discovery.

Luckily Shandor's shooting spree didn't do too much damage beyond putting one of his so-called new father's eyes out, which could be considered doubly unfortunate given as the so-called new father in question owned the old byre Shandor and his mother called home.

After Shandor had spent enough time shut away in borstal with the kind of kids who would've sent his mother all weak at the knees, he went straight home half-expecting the byre to be boarded up with a blu-tacked note saying she was lugging her stupid arse to Texas to spring her latest psycho boyfriend from his cell on death row.

Shandor was thinking how much that excuse would sit well with her as he scuffed up the stone track to the byre with a black bin-bag of belongings and a sunburned arm across his forehead to shield himself from the glare.

The place looked pretty much the same as he remembered it, only three years worse off. The strip of grass outside the back door was parched yellow and paint peeled around the blown-out windows. He had a hand on the door before he knew for sure it was still lived-in. He flapped thunderbugs off his forearm and creaked open the door. The kitchen stank of stale cigarettes and the dregs of spirit bottles. A black man glowered up at him from a photocopied rap sheet on the kitchen table. Shandor pushed open the living room door and he could hear his mother through the floorboards above. 'Fuck me Hillman,' she was repeating. 'Fuck me Hillman'. With each thump a puff of plaster dislodged from the ceiling and lit up in a triangle of sunbeam as it drifted down.

'My Hillman' - that's what she'd called the guy in the single letter she'd sent him during his time inside. 'My Hillman' - he imagined her cooing out his name like he was some kind of cute rescue-puppy, not a gun-toting psycho who'd bagged himself a cell on death row and a trans-Atlantic pen-pal into the bargain. 'I'm telling you,' she'd wrote, 'he's an innocent man and one of these days we're going to prove it.' She was planning to get

out there and tie the knot before he got fried. Evidently the closest she'd got to Texas so far was a few afternoons of role-play with some equally fucked-up local in the master bedroom, and a trip down to Costcutters for a crate of Southern Comforts.

Shandor's mother had been wetting her knickers over bad boys ever since the Mad Killer and most probably before. Billy Richards, they called him, and he had some beef with the army that ended in him shooting dead his old mother and her new man before heading into the forest and shacking himself up in a tree-house for a week or so and picking off another three coppers while he was at it. In the end they got him surrounded and Billy Richards blew his own brains out rather than turn himself in.

Shandor was eight years old at the time and a bit too young to be scared shitless by a lunatic on the loose but he remembered the way his mother acted all disappointed and stopped watching Look North every night from the moment she found out it was over. Shandor pulled a cigarette from his jeans pocket and placed it between his lips but the moans and thumps of his mother upstairs were pounding into his brain so he tossed the bin-bag into the corner of the room and reckoned he'd go and get the public appearances over with instead.

Shandor headed straight for the car park woods. Most of the kids he grew up with would be lifers at the animal feeds factory by now. But Shandor knew there'd still be Johnny and Chelsea hanging around the benches, too spaced-out to care. On his way down the high street he fixed his eyes on the pavement every time a car came past. A bunch of kids leaned their heads out of a rough-sounding Vauxhall Astra and one yelled over the stereo thumps, 'Marley, you fucking psycho.' They returned five minutes later from the other direction and drove level with him for about half a minute calling names and shouting threats. One threw an open carton of milk which splattered the house wall behind him, catching him with spray.

Johnny and Chelsea both looked thinner than Shandor remembered and Johnny was wet-eyed and white-faced and pretty obviously still on the glue. Chelsea was curled into his side shivering in spite of the heat. Neither noticed Shandor until he was close enough to reach out and touch Chelsea's goose pimped arm.

'All right?'

Johnny turned his head and blinked slow three or four times to focus and said, 'fucking hell, look who's here.' When Chelsea didn't respond he stuck his elbow into her skinny ribs and she started and looked up and a faint smile cracked over her lips.

'Them Thackeray boys is after you.'

Her voice was husky and breathless. She made it sound like having two of the local arseholes on your case was a thing of awe.

Johnny said, 'every time they see their old man's eye patch they think up something new they're going to do to you when you're out.' His forehead creased and he said, 'well, you're out now.' He draped his arm round Chelsea and squinted up. 'Me and Chelsea, we're an item.'

Shandor couldn't much face the idea of spending the rest of his days keeping a look-out for the Thackeray boys. The thought that they could be half-brothers of his almost made him want to spew the last of his borstal breakfasts. More than a few people had been known to say that if there was any justice in the world the Mad Killer Billy Richards would have left them poor coppers alone and taken out the Thackeray boys instead. Then he'd have had a statue built for him on the village green and not bits of his brains splattered all over some tree-house on the edge of the forest.

'Yeah, well. They don't scare me.'

Johnny snorted and hung his head between his knees to gob on the flags. 'They didn't scare Ged Blackstock but that didn't stop him getting skinned like a fucking rabbit.'

The whole village had been witness on show day one time when they tumbled out of the beer tent around sunset and accused Ged Blackstock of being after rutting with some fancy of theirs round the back of the swingboats.

Next thing, they had Ged's ankles twined up and a rope hooked up to the back of their Massey Fergie and Caleb yelled, 'floor it!' and booted Ged in the ribs with his steel toe-caps for good measure. Billy junior flashed this sick grin and hauled him right across the middle of the parade ring and there wasn't nothing anyone had a mind to do to stop him.

One thing that could be said was that they feared their father. Or more than likely they feared what he might do with their shabby old farm once his days were numbered. Far as they were concerned the place could rot but they could see plenty of pound signs worth harvesting out of the acres around it. Their father was known to be upset more than a few times by their antics and he was even said to have forced his sons to cough up some of their own dosh to pay a portion of Ged Blackstock's hospital bill. Everyone half expected Billy Thackeray to wind up poisoned or mysteriously shredded under a combine's spikes one day. They feared that day, because so long as he was still breathing he was the only one who could keep those boys just about in check.

Something in Billy Thackeray had obviously snapped all of a sudden a while back and led to him telling those good-for-nothing boys of his they had another blood relative in the running for his riches. The secret was still warm when the Thackerays plucked Shandor right off the benches and chucked him in the boot of their old green Volvo without a word. Lord knows how many hours later the boot sprung open and the sudden sunlight was shut out by a meaty fist. Shandor was hauled out on the edge of the forest and trussed up tight to one of the trees. The brothers sat and smoked and drank and took turns getting up and aiming kicks and punches at Shandor until sunset.

With each can the kicks got sharper. With each kick they told him he'd better stop planting fancy thoughts in their old man's head and that he'd better get used to the fact he'd be long gone before he saw a penny of Thackeray inheritance.

They took off his shoes before they crunched away. Hawthorns tore at the soles of his feet and he trailed coughed-up blood the whole way home. By the time he made it back the sky was bleeding white. The next day, Shandor still had enough anger swirling in his fuzzy, beat-up head that it didn't take him long to decide to pick up the air rifle and head out a-Thackeray-hunting.

Despite the way it looked, Billy Thackeray hadn't been the one Shandor intended to hit. It was just his misfortune to be clanging past on that Massey Fergie of his when Shandor opened fire. But the way Shandor saw it, if he was going to hit anyone but the boys it may as well have been the man they were beefing over having claimed to be his dad.

Billy Thackeray had never been much of a problem in himself. Shandor could tell that by the way his mother was still shackled up in the byre. Fact is, his mother had a hell of a lot to thank Billy Thackeray for. It was him who got the byre cleaned up and gave her somewhere to stay when she landed up in the dale eighteen years ago with just a scribbled address of some unknown and, as it turned out, freshly-dead old friend and a sob-story of a time when one of them psycho boyfriends of hers had ended up getting a little too real-life for comfort.

In return, Shandor's mother worked her keep with household chores that evidently ended up in the bedroom. Once Shandor himself refused to do any more helping-out in the fields due to the constant taunts and threats

of the Thackeray boys, Billy Thackeray lobbed him an air rifle and told him to head off culling crows and get out from under their feet.

Thinking back, Shandor reckoned he always had an inkling of something amiss because Billy Thackeray could come across as a mean-hearted bastard when he wanted to but to him he was nothing but tolerant. Shandor would stay out long hours stalking the hedgerows with the rifle slung over his shoulder and he never once had the nerve to pull the trigger. He lost count of the number of times he trained his sights on one or other of the Thackeray boys lolling around in the shade on one of them long cigarette breaks of theirs, and wished he had the nerve.

Shandor reckoned Billy Thackeray had it in him to recognise his remorse and not hold too much of a grudge that way. He kept a good look-out on his way back up to the farm and started at every swish of grass or distant drone of engine like it was Billy Junior and Caleb sneaking up to wrap their cold hard hands around his scrawny neck in the nick of time. He was relieved to note the absence of the Volvo in the old yard. He lamped over the last gate and caused a couple of the Thackerays' old mutts to start yapping and clanking at their chains. Even seeing it was Shandor wouldn't shut them up. The yard hadn't changed. The silo hulked over the farmhouse roof. The empty hay barn perched awkward on its stilts. Rusty parts of farm machinery had been reclaimed by the undergrowth. The yard stank of silage and wood-smoke.

'Well, well,' rattled a voice from behind him. Shandor spun round and saw Billy Thackeray leaning against the gate-post. He wore a fraying black eye-patch and the way he screwed his good eye up against the sunlight made it seem to Shandor more like he was judging him.

'I must be the only one round these parts who reckoned on you having the balls to rear up like this,' said Billy Thackeray. He kept his good eye trained on Shandor. Billy Thackeray's insides squealed up like an old horse cart every time he heaved a breath. Shandor's eyes darted for any sign of his sons. 'If there's one place you're safe enough hiding out from them two buggers,' said Billy Thackeray, noting his alarm, 'it's right here where they make out to belong.'

Billy Thackeray cocked his head towards the old farmhouse and began shuffling towards it. Shandor remembered how in the days before he got shot he'd be tossing hay bales into the back of the trailer like they were sacks of air. He could out-throw Shandor by more or less four to one. Now Shandor reckoned he'd be lucky enough to get a single one of them off the ground.

They stepped into the stone-floored kitchen and even after Shandor's eyes adjusted the room seemed dark. Billy Thackeray lit the stove and filled a pan full of water. It sloshed over the sides as he carried it to the heat. He scraped back his chair and plonked himself down and caught his breath. He looked up at Shandor and said, 'you never were much cop at shooting them damned crows.'

The room was cool. The pan began to bubble on the stove. Billy Thackeray looked away. 'When the missus went and died young on me like she did, I never did reckon on finding me no-one else. Then up steps your mother out of the pasture one morning. Just lands right up here on the doorstep, all wrung out in morning dew.' He looked out of the window as if he was seeing her over again. He placed his palms flat on the ledge and concentrated on drawing up his chest.

'I don't want nothing,' said Shandor. 'Tell 'em that. I don't want nothing.'

Billy Thackeray didn't seem to hear. 'Happen that airgun pellet was the Lord's way of telling me summat.'

Shandor didn't wait for the tea. Instead, he walked right out of the door. Billy Thackeray stayed glued at the window. He tramped the back way through the copse and swung his feet at the wild garlic. The heat stuck heavy despite the shade of the tree-tops. Sunlight speckled the ground. Crows cawed. He'd hunkered down

here when those roaming Thackeray boys were looking for trouble. It was the only place he knew where nothing but a blood-hound would've ever been likely to find him.

When he got through the copse he came out half-way up the valley side and from where he was stood he could look right across the green sweep of the dale to the grey moors up behind. He looked down at the byre where he grew up in and where his mother was finishing rutting with her latest death row role-play. From his high-up angle, he could see over into the scratchy old horse field next door and round the back at the overgrown pill-box. He got a twist in his stomach when he saw the brothers' old Volvo hid in a space alongside.

Not rushing, Shandor swung down through the grass and lamped over a couple of barbed-wire fences until he met the rough track heading up to the house. As he reached its edge he heard the rough cough of the Volvo's old engine and the spit of gravel and he stood over the side-ditch and felt ready for the meeting he'd tried so hard to wish away.

A smirk spread across Billy junior's rat-faced features when he rounded the corner and he slowed to level. His eyes closed to slits. 'Well well,' he said. 'Look who it isn't.' He lost the smirk. Caleb, the younger one, puffed on a thick roll-up in the passenger seat and kept looking straight ahead. He said, 'we've brought you a beauty little welcome home present.'

'Man,' said Billy junior, 'this brother of mine, he's fucked up in the head about as much as you.'

They laughed. 'Not as fucked up as your mother, though,' said Caleb.

'Isn't no-one in this whole dale as fucked up as her.'

Billy Junior said, 'see you around, fuckface,' and gobbled down the middle of Shandor's tee-shirt, a great thick greenie that took its time to fall. He pressed the accelerator, and Shandor turned and watched until the car specked to dust..

He went in the front way. He shouldered the rotting front door and trampled months of free newspapers and unopened post. When he got in the living room he stopped and sat on the couch and ignored the muffles coming from upstairs. He lit a cigarette and this time he smoked it through.

Then he trod up the stairs in the same footprints as the Thackerays' muddy work-boots and heard the muffles getting louder as he did. He pushed open the bedroom door and saw his mother for the first time in two years. Handcuffs stretched her arms back in a shape like a half-diamond. A black bra pulled her mouth back into a sick Joker-smile. She was naked and spread-eagling her charms -clawed-at nipples and her still-glistening cunt. She looked pretty much how he always figured she'd look without clothes. He imagined how much better she might have looked to Billy Thackeray back then. She crossed and uncrossed her legs trying for modesty, then she flipped on one side away from him like a grounded trout. The room smelled of cigarettes and sweet alcohol and ripe farm-boy sweat. The light fitting still dangled bare from the middle of the ceiling and a bin-sack was still taped against the edge of the shut-up window. It was shoved aside enough to make a pool of sun on the mattress. His mother cricked her head over her shoulder and looked at him and tried to speak. Shandor reached across for a half-full bottle of Southern Comfort and he took it then he left the room. He trod down the stairs ignoring the muffles. He went out through the kitchen, past the rap sheet on the table. He couldn't help noticing how Hillman's great big bug-eyes were still staring right out at him, like they were following every move.

* * * *

Ladies Group

The Ladies' Group held a tasting of ten different puddings in the village hall. They were:

treacle sponge

caramel custard

chocolate fondant

chestnut crème vacherin

apple charlotte

summer pudding

clafoutis

crème brulee

syllabub

cherry ginger crunch

Junior Football

Wayne Barnes got caught nobbing Carly Smurthwaite in the disabled bogs of a McDonald's. Pants round his ankles, he laughed out, 'it's tradition.' It turned out Carly Smurthwaite had a history of celebrating with the winning goal scorer. Coach told Carly Smurthwaite her days as chief cheerleader were well and truly over. Carly Smurthwaite said, 'I thought you'd be happy, like.' She pointed out since she started her incentive scheme results had improved by fifty per cent. Siddy Lunn and Dean Marley got caught nicking straws. Siddy Lunn said, 'they're free anyhow.' The McDonald's guy said, 'not the dispenser too, dickhead.' Two miles down the road, Grady Williams chucked up his McChicken Sandwich over the back seat. During the mop-up, Ged Blowes lamped out the fire door and went missing. Conrad Scruton said, 'he just said he was getting out of here.' The cops were called. The bus was three hours late home. They found Ged Blowes next day, sleeping rough at Woolley Edge services.

Aquarist Society

The Aquarist Society held its annual presentation night at the Fox and Rabbit. First prize went to Mr M Smith with an albino guppy. Second prize went to Mr G Williams with a roshai guppy. Third prize went to Mr L Seed with an albino guppy.

Classic Cars

Danny Swales skidded his souped-up Vauxhall Astra round the car park till his tyres went bald. It spat gravel, spewed techno. He hung out an arm and held on the wheel one-handed. Sometimes he missed corners and ramped over flower beds. He sent a rubbish bin spinning. A fag stuck angled from his lips. Sarah Daley sat in the passenger seat, reeking Anais-Anais and exhaust fumes. She stared forward.

Vintage Working Day

A Vintage Working Day was held at Boyes' farm. Entertainment included motorbikes, shire horses, bouncy castle, steam engines, threshing, saw bench, tractor pulling, stalls, auction, bric-a-brac, tombola and plant stall.

Playing Fields Committee

Tammy Marsden and Kayleigh Barker sat up on the swings till after the chip shop shut. When the lights fizzed out they swigged the rest of their Lambrusco and crossed the street to the Kwik Save. Kayleigh Barker said, 'you sure about this?' Tammy Marsden took a spray can from her bag. She sprayed, 'Blake Scruton is a homo' on the front window. Kayleigh Barker took the spray can and sprayed, 'and so is Jake Fearnley' underneath. They were bathed in blue light. A cop said, 'gotcha.' Half-way back to the station Tammy Marsden said, 'are we going to prison?' The cop looked back over at her white thigh. He said, 'I doubt it.' Kayleigh Barker leaned through the seats, said, 'we didn't mean nothing.' The cop studied her in the rear-view mirror. He said, 'I know you.' Then, 'are you Kayleigh Barker?' Kayleigh Barker said, 'who's asking?' The cop said, 'I went to school with your sister.' He smiled through two bends. He pulled over in a lay-by. He said, 'you take after your sister, huh?' Kayleigh Barker scowled back. The cop kept watching. Kayleigh Barker said, 'what the fuck?' The cop clicked the doors, said, 'get out of here.' The girls hiked back. The cop's radio crackled. He shook his head, whistled through his teeth.

Quiz Night

The popular monthly quiz night was held in the village hall. The answers were:

- 1 no
- 2 yes
- 3 gravid lax
- 4 Ku Klux Klan
- 5 woodwind
- 6 cygnets
- 7 Germaine Greer
- 8 smallpox
- 9 Snoop Doggy Dogg
- 10 Upper Volta
- 11 pizzicato
- 12 it cannot fly
- 13 rickshaw
- 14 'just like that'
- 15 wool

16 arachnophobia

17 Fatima Whitbread

18 dogfish

19 Windermere

20 chicken tikka masala

Rainbows

Artie Blowes stacked up his shotgun and headed out in the dark. He could hear the roaring a mile off. He brushed through the snarly grass by the edge of the lake. He aimed his gun in a copse. He said, 'who is it?' The voice said, 'Jesus, help me.' Artie Blowes said, 'I ain't Jesus.' He elbowed branches and swung up his oil lamp. The lamp beamed on the youngest of the Thackeray boys. He clutched his ankle, dug in a wire loop trap. Artie Blowes said, 'I knew it.' His sock bled red. Next to him, rainbows rustled in a Kwik Save bag. Artie Blowes pointed with his gun. He said, 'what you planning on doing with them?' The Thackeray boy said, 'get it off me.' Artie Blowes said, 'huh?' The Thackeray boy said, 'selling them.' Artie Blowes shook his head. He said, 'them brothers of yours.' Then, 'I've lost a fair lake-full.' The Thackeray boy said, 'it's my first time, honest.' His face lost colour. He said, 'my leg.' Artie Blowes said, 'I got bigger traps than them.' He reached and sprung it open. The Thackeray boy winced back, cried. When he tried to stand, he fell. Artie Blowes swung the lamp back to blackness. He said, 'best you go reminding them brothers of yours.'

Gala Dog Show

Categories at the annual Gala Dog Show held at Thorpe's Field on Sunday will be:

Dog with the waggiest tail

Dog looking most like its owner

Dog with the kindest eyes

Dog the judge would most like to take home

Most handsome dog

Most obedient dog

Camera Club

Marcia Wignall tugged off her Kwik Save coat and said, 'is that the time?' She took a boxed chicken bhuna from the freezer and put it in the microwave. She sparked a cigarette. She stubbed it and removed the bhuna before the ping. She forked a few mouthfuls straight from the Styrofoam. Billy Skaife came in the kitchen topless. She kissed him hello, handed him the bhuna. He ate a fork-full and tossed it aside. Marcia Wignall said, 'best get a crack on.' She headed in the bathroom. She stripped naked and dabbed a flannel at her privates. She smeared lipstick in the mirror and puffed her hair. She went in the bedroom and swept specks from the bed sheet. She clipped a frilly black bra and pulled on a panty and suspender set. She sprawled on the bed and shouted, 'all set.' Billy Skaife answered the doorbell. Barry Markham pushed past and said, 'something smells good.' He went in the bedroom, said, 'well hey there, baby.' He tugged off his coat. Billy Skaife followed in with a video camera. He said, 'rolling.' Barry Markham removed his trousers and pants.

Marcia Wignall said, 'someone's all set.' She unclasped her bra and reached for him.

Tuesday Club

Mrs N Willis was the guest speaker and she told the group about her recent trip in a convoy of trucks taking supplies to the Romanian orphans. Mrs K Ellis read a letter from the Cat Protection League, thanking the group for its donation of £128 from the recent bring and buy sale. The competition for prettiest scarf produced joint winners, Mrs V Kaye and Mrs M Fairbanks. Teas were served by Mrs K Ellis.

Ice Cream

Casey Fairbanks told the ice cream kid to give her five minutes then come meet her in the car park woods. She tugged her top button. The ice cream kid counted up slow then scooted right out the serving hatch. Casey Fairbanks sneaked round in the drivers' seat and revved the 1964 Bedford straight up her estate. She handed out free cones and flakes before she heard the cops close in. She emptied the cash box and hitched off into town. She bribed a big kid to buy up fags and booze for the folks back home. She rolled up with a bin bag-full just as they sat down for tea. Casey's mum said, 'you got my Lamberts?' Then, 'that's my girl.'

Ploughing Match

Results of the tractor ploughing tournament held at Thorpe's Field: Class 1 (open): no entries. Class 2 (open): 1 G Scruton; 2 E Lunn; 3 R Ward. Class 3 (open): 1 G Scruton; 2 C Firth. Class 4 (open): no entries. Class 5 (open): no entries. Class 6 (open): no entries. Class 7 (open): 1 L Boyes; 2 A Thackeray; 3 G Boyes; 4 R Lunn. Class 8 (open): 1 P Lunn. Class 9 (open): no entries.

Supper Club

Feargal Manby asked for pizza and chips. Scotch Gordon said the microwave was bugged. Feargal Manby said, 'just go ahead and toss it right in.' Scotch Gordon laughed and said, 'think of the calories.' Feargal Manby said, 'what would a man like me want with calories.' Feargal Manby said, 'how's business?' Scotch Gordon said, 'steady away.' The pizza frothed in the fat. Scotch Gordon said, 'good night?' Feargal Manby said, 'so-so. Dead.' Two kids came in. The taller kid said, 'give us some scraps.' Scotch Gordon said, 'cheeky bastards.' The taller kid said, 'they're free aren't they?' The shorter kid said, 'give us some.' Scotch Gordon said, 'not on their own, they're not.' The taller kid said, 'give us some, you Scotch bastard.' Scotch Gordon shook his head, hooked the pizza onto paper. Feargal Manby said, 'I know your mothers.' The taller kid said, 'who asked you, piss-head?' He reached for the pizza. He frisbee-d it across the shop. It glooped against the price list, slid to the floor. The kids ran off, laughing. Scotch Gordon said, 'cheeky bastards.' Feargal Manby said, 'think of the calories.'

Holistic Therapy

There will be a demonstration by the local branch of the Federation of Holistic Therapists in the Village Hall next Tuesday at 6.30pm when Sue Jacques will present a hopi ear candling demonstration. This is an opportunity to find out about the many conditions hopi ear candling can help with and how the candles form a seal when placed in the ear, which enables wax and other impurities to be drawn out.

Farming News

Ernie Bulmer loaded up his wife's bedtime milk with enough Nurofen to rid her of her supposed migraine headaches for the best part of eternity. He said, 'night, then.' He switched out the lights, couldn't sleep. Next morning, when she didn't stir, he headed out to the pig shed and told his pigs they were in for a right treat. When he got back his wife was sitting at the kitchen table. She said, 'we're fresh out of pills.' She nagged him

so much he took off into town for more. Half-way back, he fell asleep at the wheel. They cut him out. He broke both legs and lost his sight. His wife said, 'I don't know what we'll do about them pigs.'

Wood turners

The latest meeting of the Woodturning Club was attended by 15 members and guests. Club member Geoffrey Halliday was the demonstrator. Geoffrey made a vase from two timbers. One was used to make a narrow neck with a flared rim, the body of the vase had a pattern drilled in the top so that when this was shaped the holes became elliptical. These holes were then filled with a decorative resin and the neck was fitted.

Darts & Doms

Jessie Smurthwaite checked out on a 125 finish. He got slaps on the back and his girlfriend grinned. His opponent bought him a beer and said, 'top darts.' His team captain said, 'you're too good for this league.' Jessie smiled and slurped some more. A new guy stood next to him no-one knew. The new guy said, 'Jessie Smurthwaite, huh?' Jessie turned, nodded. The new guy said, 'whole county's heard of you.' The new guy bought Jessie another drink. He paid with a fifty, flashed a wad. He said, 'ton says you're not as good as you think you are.' Jessie smiled and threw a fifteen dart leg. He checked out on double top. The new guy gave Jessie two fifties, called another drink. Jessie fed the jukebox. The new guy said, 'you got gear?' Jessie smiled, shook his head. The new guy lifted his wallet. He said, 'I'll say it again. You got gear?' In the car park, the new guy asked for grass and pills. He said, 'like I say, whole county's heard of you.' The new guy flashed a blade. He rifled Jessie's pockets for grass and pills and fifties. He took the lot. He said, 'you ought to be more careful.' In the pub, his team-mate let a match-winning double drift.

Weekly Draw

The weekly draw numbers were: 9, 13, 25, 46, 75 and 66. There were no winners.

* * * *

SWEET TOOTH: The Kola Kubes Story

Trisha dreamed of being a Playboy Bunny since the days she still had buck-teeth and fried egg boobs. She blu-tacked page threes above her bed-head and had me snap topless Polaroids till they littered the floor. She told me to imagine she had 36DDs and peroxide blonde hair. I used to wish like hell that she wasn't my cousin.

When she was fifteen Trisha started putting out for the boys in the Kwik-Save car park for a tenner a time. She said she was an entrepreneur, not a prostitute. She started going steady with a kid called Keith. He was a fryer in the fish and chip shop. He had a future and a Ford Cortina. She got a job waitressing and she worked all the hours she could. Keith couldn't handle me and Trisha being as close as we were. Especially the time he caught Trisha bending over me in nothing but a frilly market stall thong while I worked the angles best I could to get a dangle-shot.

Next night he took her in the car park woods and doped her up to the eyeballs. He took out a bottle of India ink and told her he would etch the love-heart she'd always wanted. Instead, he safety-pinned the word 'inbred' into her arse.

Trisha's step-dad tracked the spits of blood and found her sobbing in the bathroom of their long-stay static. It didn't take him long to slap out the truth. He went straight round to Keith's place with a crow-bar and did enough damage to make sure he'd need more than laser treatment to put things right. Keith wasn't rolling in spare change so Trisha's step-dad took the Cortina as payment in lieu of her getting herself fixed up. Trisha

got me to stash the Cortina up the lane at the back of Boyes' farm. Weekend nights, I drove her out to the dual carriageway truck-stop where she found a faster way to make her fortune in the fogged-up cabs.

One night Trisha headed back out of the orange glow and told me she was hitching a ride to London with a trucker called Greg. She leaned in and kissed me on my forehead. She had nothing but a pair of jeans-shorts and a Frankie Says Relax tee-shirt. I drove home alone over the black moors. I still smelled her cheap peach scent. An anchored tanker blinked in the bay. I felt pleased for her.

She stripped for pennies-in-pint-pots in the pubs around King's Cross and said it was a means to an end. She said Greg had a friend of a friend who was going to make things happen. It sounded like bullshit to me but around a year later she sent me a photo. She had a gleaming fluoride smile and her fried-egg boobs had been whipped up into a perfect pair of those 36DDs she dreamed of. Her hair was buffed-up and golden bright. She strained out of a snow-white wedding dress. She asked me to pin the photo up on the fish and chip shop cork-board. 'Fair play,' lisped Keith through splintered teeth. He figured it was good for business.

Next I heard, she'd dumped Greg and filed for divorce. She got a break on page three and started sprawling in soft-core centrefolds. She promoted herself through footballer boyfriends till she hit on one called Carl who had a big enough name to get her in the gossip columns. When that went tits-up she consoled herself with a bigger boob-job. Her 32Gs got her more media than any top footballer ever could. She changed her name, first to Trisha-Marie, then to Kola Kubes. In an interview to launch her own line of adult movies, she said she got her giant boobs from the beef dripping they put in the chip shop batter back home. She said: 'I swear I gained a cup size with every portion. I must've ate a lot of portions.'

She scored three nominations for the AVN Adult Movie Awards. She flew to Las Vegas where she table-danced for a Miami Dolphins line-backer called Larry. She won best newcomer for 'Sweet Tooth II'. Next morning she and Larry celebrated by getting married in the Doo Wop Diner Wedding Chapel. He wore a tore-open dress-shirt and designer jeans. She wore the same cocktail dress she'd had on the night before. Champagne stains stuck in her front. She slurred her lines. On a late-night Las Vegas chat show, she flashed a wedding ring with a diamond the size of a spam fritter. She pointed her arse at the camera, hoiked up her dress and showed off her 'inbred' tattoo. 'I keep it there to remind me where I come from,' she said. Asked about her upbringing, she said: 'It was tough. I got beat up. I ate dog biscuits. I had to get out of there.'

Larry said: 'she's my lover, and my soul-mate.'

Trisha's step-dad moved himself and her mother out of their long-stay static and turned it into a sort-of tourist attraction. He stuck her early glamour shots up on the walls and strung a couple of her early A-cup bras from the curtain rail. There was a stack of pirated videos, each with a knock-off autograph. They sold at twenty pounds a time. Her step-dad told a local TV news programme: 'Too right we're proud of her. It takes guts to do what she did.' He said: 'Sure, we had our differences like any family does. But we're more than willing to put the past behind us.'

Keith sold his story to a tabloid newspaper. His scarred face stared out from behind the chip shop counter over a two-page spread. The headline said: 'Sweet-Talking Kola Left Me For Dead'. Greg sold his story. He said: 'I gave her everything and she left me broke.' Her first footballer said: 'I scored with her six times a night.' Three different men claimed to be her biological father. Her step-dad launched a defamation suit over the beat-up claims. He said: 'I'm sorry it's come to this.' I was offered money for the Polaroids. I was barely scraping by. It was almost a year's wages. As far as I knew, there were no other pictures of Trisha as a plain old buck-toothed, flat-chested kid. But there was no way.

Soon after, Trisha called me. It was the first I had heard from her in almost two years. She giggled her words. She said she was done with porno. She had other projects. She spoke about starting a family. She said, 'if it's a boy, I like Skywalker.'

I said, 'what about Luke?'

She laughed and said, 'Luke? That's what I like about you, Bobby.' Then she said, 'I've got a job for you, anyhow. I'm coming home.'

I met her at Manchester airport. She swirled through the arrivals hall trailing assistants and zoomed-in by a TV crew. She was wrapped in a full-length white fur coat. She threw it open to hug me. People gawped. She burst into tears and said, 'it's been too long, Bobby.' She held me tight to her hard breasts and I said, 'you look great.' She took my hand and led me to a stretch limo. The film crew bundled in alongside. We toasted ourselves with three bottles of champagne. She patted my knee and nuzzled my ear. I was drunk when we reached the city hotel. We had the penthouse suite. She phoned out for pizza and more champagne. She had her assistants knock randomly on the doors of the other guests and invite them up to join the party. She lounged on her bed in just a G-string. I said, 'where's Larry?' She said, 'fuck Larry.' She told me about the house she was having built in Las Vegas with a pool shaped like a breast with a hot-tub for a nipple. She told me she loved me. She said again: 'fuck Larry.' She said I was the only one she could trust. I told her about the Polaroids. She said, 'shit, Bobby, you still got those Polaroids?' Her producer had me sign a stack of waiver forms, ready for morning.

Next day we drove out over the moors. She stared through the tinted glass. She said, 'I see the sea!' The sun shone off the sides of the buildings. The milk bottles were bright white. A paper-boy stopped to watch the limo roll past. Trisha buzzed the tinted window and lifted her top and gave the paper-boy an eyeful of her 34Gs. She giggled. The camera-man said, 'that's the shot!' Her eyes darted for memories.

They took still-shots on the village green, in the Kwik-Save car park. We went in the Kwik Save. She cradled drink in her arms. She said, 'I had my first time here.' She laughed. 'And the second time, and the third time, and the fourth time. Shit, I miss those times.' A thin girl on check-out asked for her autograph. She wrote on a receipt roll: 'To Deborah, follow your dream - Kola.'

We walked right in the fish and chip shop. Keith took one look and said, 'oh, shit.' He was older, fatter. She hooked up the back of her skirt and said, 'remember this?' Keith gurned. She said, 'I forgive you. Now give me some chips.' She said, 'I forgot how good they taste.'

We went to the static she once called home. We rattled the door and her step-dad appeared from the next-door van. He rubbed the dust from his eyes and said, 'fuck, it's you.' He looked at the camera and said, 'what is this?'

Trisha said, 'where's mum?' She went in the van. She said, 'no cameras.' Her step-dad put his hand up at the camera and said, 'we've got to talk money.' The producer looked at me, sighed. He said, 'this bombs. This really does.'

We went to the pub. The producer said, 'you really gotta liven things up a bit.' She tore open her blouse and said, 'well, boys, what do you reckon to these?' She fed the jukebox and danced topless on the pool table. She sloshed her drink and sang out of tune. She stuck her heel in a pocket and fell to the floor. We carried her back to the limo. She fell unconscious. Her ankle swelled. We took her to hospital. I tucked her breasts back in.

A month or so after she went back to Vegas, she called again. She sounded drunk or high, or both. She would scream and cry. She swore repeatedly. She said, 'they've axed the show.' She said, 'I'm scared, Bobby. I'm still in plaster, Bobby. I can't get work. Why didn't you come back with me, Bobby? Where were you when I needed you? You're just like all the rest.' Eventually, I hung up on her. I felt bad. She called back twice. She asked me to send her the Polaroids. She said, 'I'm broke.' I pulled the phone from its socket.

Two weeks later, I got another call. It was the middle of the night. A deep, cracked voice said, 'Billy?'

I said, 'Bobby.'

'Uh-huh,' said the voice. 'Bobby, it's Larry.' He paused. 'It's Kola.'

'Trisha,' I said.

'Uh-huh,' said the voice. 'Kola, Trisha, what the fuck, man. It's bad.'

The post-mortem stated that Trisha died from a seizure brought on by an allergic reaction to creams prescribed to ease soreness after tattoo removal. It concluded that she already had an exceptionally high level of drugs in her body. They most likely also contributed to her demise.

They burned her in Vegas in front of Larry and a handful of co-stars from the Sweet Tooth series. They held a wake at the Tropicana resort hotel. They ate fish-sticks and fries. They drank champagne. Larry said: 'it's what she would have wanted.' Then they sent her home. Pink smeared the sky. Her mother propped on two sticks and tossed her ashes in the salt-wind. I bunched up the Polaroids. I burned them too, and threw them up after her.

* * * *

To Boldly Go

Jason Munt said him and Carly Furnish got beamed up by a bunch of aliens just after he'd boldly gone with her in the car park woods. It was the boldly going bit people thought was bullshit. Carly Furnish was a good God-loving girl. Trouble was, she'd gone missing. And Jason Munt had a weird crescent-shaped branding in his back, and was sticking to his story.

Jason got hauled in by the cops and told he was in a whole heap of trouble. He reported blinding lights and a feeling like floating. He described being strapped to a table by little green men. A cop slapped the table and shouted, 'there's a frigging girl out there.' Jason said he knew how it sounded - the little green men, the whole thing - but it's true: they were little and green, just like out of the comic books.

He volunteered tests for drink and drugs. He came back negative on both counts. They left him to stew. He said the last he saw of Carly was her being sucked up in some kind of light ray. He said, 'she seemed asleep - all peaceful, like.' Jason could not explain why he'd been beamed back down to earth, yet they'd seemingly taken Carly all the way off home with them to the Planet Zog. There were plenty of people willing to reckon it proved aliens had mighty good taste, but it wasn't the time nor the place to say it out loud.

The cops released Jason after two days of questions. He stuck to his story throughout. The desk sergeant said, 'mark my words, there's a lot of hate out there.' Jason headed straight home. He lived in one of the straggle of council houses leading up to the tip. Carly Furnish and her folks lived two doors down. Supposedly they were distant relatives, but that's what everyone said about folks on that street. All it took was a couple of kids to get born with stumps for arms a couple of decades back to start the whole inbreeding thing. Others blamed toxic land-fill. The Furnishes made the most of what they got, and what they got mainly came from the state. They had six kids, seven if you include Ged, the oldest one, who swore he'd fell in love with a mermaid and threw himself off the stern of the Sally-Marie six years since with the famous last words, 'I gotta go see her.' When they line-hooked him back in he was smiling like he'd seen something more beautiful than the rest of us could ever dream. Deep chilled, fast-froze dead, but smiling all the same.

Carly was the last. After Carly, they gave up on kids and had a bubble pool built in their back patio. There were some reckoned it must have cost more than the whole rest of their house was worth. Sometimes, Jason would invite us round to take a peep through his curtains, hoping one of Janet or Nicky, Carly's big sisters,

would be out in their bikinis. They got wise to it, started sending their brother Keith round to give us black eyes. Keith had lost his mind like his brother, not that he ever had much of one to begin. Always chuntering on about shutting them skeg-holes of ours for good. No punches ever stopped us looking, but we never got sight of Carly in the bubble pool. There were plenty who reckoned she could be even more of a looker than her big sisters if she got a few square meals inside her and had a frizzing-up of that snow-pale hair of hers, hung round her shoulders limp as fly-paper. The rest of the Furnishes could keep the whole street up into the early hours with their shouting and whooping, but there were few people could ever say they'd heard Carly speak. It was kind of ironic given how good she was at belting out all those church choir hymns all Sabbath long. In fact there were more than a few folk around who didn't give a rat's arse about the religion side of things but would often fill those pews just to hear her sing. They'd come out all misty-eyed spouting 'voice of an angel' crap.

Jason's folks weren't much the types to kick up a fuss and it seemed they'd spewed most of what gobs they'd ever had into their boy. Jason's old man worked the weigh-bridge at the animal feeds and his mother sat at home and figured out ways the wage could get them by. The day Jason headed back they were sat in the front room with suitcases packed. She said, 'I'm all cried out.' His dad said, 'you've gone and done it this time, son.' They headed off to her sister's. Jason said he didn't give a shit what the cops said. He stayed put and went and fixed himself a packet-ham sandwich.

The cops went round more or less every house in the village in turn. Here's the truth, at least as far as most people saw it:

Jason Munt was a smart-arse bastard at the best of times. He could talk his way in and out of just about anything. His teachers had high hopes. Said his sharp mind could get him all the way to university. His folks started putting a little aside. Jason stuck it to the school lot and started slouching around rent-free. Even talked his mother into handing over the set-aside cash. Re-invested it all in a kid from town who'd fixed up his grandma to score him prescription temazepam for a fee. When the kid under-cut him, Jason didn't think twice about heading into town and sorting things out the only other way he knew. Places his gob couldn't get him, his fists weren't far behind. And just about the only other place his gob never got him anywhere close was Carly Furnish's knickers.

Jason sat at the front of those pews every Sunday and when that didn't get her attention he started acting up all born again. Quoted bible lines and set up black-out blinds in his bedroom so as to lead him not into temptation. The way he told it, she said okay pretty much straight away. Jason said he'd take her to the car park woods to watch the stars, maybe catch a few of those angel sisters of hers. We had to hand it to Jason Munt. He didn't have a whole lot going for him in the looks department, but that gob of his could reel them in all right. Trouble was, we didn't reckon there wasn't any amount of smart-arse was going to get him all the way into those clamped-shut God-fearing knickers of hers. And there wasn't a guy or a girl among us who didn't subscribe to the theory that that temper of his had gone and trip-wired big-time when he discovered his gob wasn't enough to get him what he wanted.

The cops kept the woods sealed off. They dredged the pond. All they came up with were a couple of old bike tyres and some empty gas cans. No sign of Carly. Jason sat around in his empty house like nothing had happened. Wouldn't even budge when his living room window was put through, or when Munt = Cunt was daubed on the side of the garage. A cop was posted outside the front door. Jason said, 'I've got nothing to hide.'

Meantime, Carly's face was plastered all over the front of the tabloids. They picked out an old innocent one, her peering out in full choir garb. Jason remained the prime suspect. He was questioned more times, but not re-arrested. They poked at his branding, said it seemed soldered in. Another window went. Folk were getting pretty fed up with what they reckoned he was hiding. Then the Furnishes came out in a TV press conference. They sat in line - mother, father, and some of Carly's brothers and sisters. The mother had red rings round her

eyes. The father hid his face and blabbed. The mother said, 'please - find our angel'. Then she said they were not discounting Jason's story about the little green men.

It turned out the Furnishes were one of ten different households who'd dialled 999 on the night of Carly's disappearance to report strange lights glowing out over the car park woods. Some said they'd seen a round sort of spaceship. Some reported light rays. Almost all the households were from the Furnishes' own street. Their back yards had plain views out over the landfill to the car park woods. Some reckoned it wasn't aliens they'd seen, but a bunch of mutant offspring they'd pitched out with the trash. The cops said they were not discounting anything at this stage. Bobby Lunn came forward and said next day he'd found a pair of his prize milk herd with their inners cut out neat and not a drop of blood in sight. He'd reckoned on it being a bit of a rum do but he'd hauled the carcasses off and burned them up before he'd been of a mind to re-think his findings. 'I ain't got time for believing in no aliens,' Bobby Lunn said. 'I got jobs to do. But still.'

Press and TV poured in over the hill. They parked up their satellite trucks on the village green. Did their own door-stepping. Hauled in UFOlogists and private investigators with them. The cash they flashed wasn't half helping folk open up their gobs a bit.

'I seen the lights,' said Mary Lomax. 'I stood there on the front lawn with the wind whipping up. I had that same kind of paralysed feeling, just like the boy said.'

Jody Morgan said, 'me and Carly, we're best friends. The day before, she said, 'I got a feeling something weird's going to happen.' I thought she meant, like, boys. I'm dead scared now, in case they come back for me.' She posed for pictures with a concerned face and a crop-top.

Cathy Allen, the Furnishes' neighbour, said, 'the whole house shook.'

A huffer named Ged Skaife said he'd seen a girl seeming to fly in the woods that night. 'I never thought nothing of it,' he said. 'I seen lots of things, some true, some not.' No-one paid him for his story, so he sat on the village green and blew out his maybe-truths through a brown paper bag.

A bunch of photos emerged supposedly of the spaceship. One paper said, 'PROOF!' Another got a photo expert to insist they were fakes made with angle-poise lamps and a couple of mirrors.

Jason got an agent and told the same story he'd already told the cops to a tabloid. He lifted his shirt to show his crescent-shaped branding. He said it felt like his insides had been poked around. He said he'd been planning to ask Carly to marry him. He said, 'one minute, I was getting down on one knee. The next minute, whoosh! My Carly was gone.'

Course, Jason quick-clammed up as part of the deal. So the others printed stories about him and Carly Furnish. Got girls to tell how Jason could come over all sicko with that temper of his. Dredged up the kid with the temazepam gran. Got boys to come forward saying never mind aliens, Carly Furnish was away with the fairies all right. One said she'd let him see plenty more than the light with her on a church camping weekend just before she'd got zapped. They dangled lie-detector offers in front of Jason. He told them, 'there's a girl out there.'

The Furnishes got papped heading back from the shops with bags of crisps and beer. The mother said, 'the world don't stop for the rest of us.' Then she said, 'where ever you are, just bring our little girl back.' The father said, 'the truth is out there.' Then, 'I ain't being funny.'

Jason and the Furnishes became sort-of celebrities. They even took to sharing press conference platforms. They said, 'we know Jason wouldn't do our girl no harm.' They said, 'he'll always be like a son-in-law to us.' They rolled up together on breakfast TV. Jason repeated, 'I know how it sounds, but it's true. They were little

and green. If I'd made it up, don't you think I'd have done better?' They did set-up pieces in shiny magazines. They did book deals, appointed ghost-writers. The mother said, 'we've got to keep it in the public eye.' Summer came, and they sat out long nights in the bubble pool. Slowly, eventually, the satellite trucks and the wacko hangers-on shipped out.

The cops pretty much shut the book on it. Said the most likely explanation was that Jason nodded off in some fantasy dream, and Carly simply got up and left. Suggested missing persons bureaux, got a slot on Crimewatch. Jody Morgan played Carly with too-frizzed hair. The Furnishes' agent alleged an MOD cover-up.

Exactly one year after her disappearance, the cops got loads of calls that the bright lights were back. The same people said they were just like before. A few hours later, Keith Furnish found Carly walking dazed in the car park woods. Said he'd just woke up real early and had an inkling. Carly was even thinner and paler-looking. She was still wearing the same black dress she'd worn the night she went. Hair still hanging dead straight. The Furnishes locked themselves away and said they needed time. The satellite trucks rolled back in. That night, the whole village heard the party.

Next day, Carly squinted into the TV lights. Jason clasped her hand and smiled at the cameras. Her mother patted her shoulder. Carly said, 'I got beamed up, I don't know.' The room strained to hear. A tabloid paid for more words. She said, 'they looked after me good. Somehow, it doesn't seem I've been away that long.' They shot Carly in a bikini. They made her up heavy and scrimped up her hair. Finally, she looked as hot as we always knew she could. They had her give Jason a kiss. She strained her lips. The headline said, 'BEAM ME UP, HOTTIE!'

The Furnishes got a bigger bubble pool out of it. It fitted a whole lot better in their bigger house too. In a week, they had the new neighbours call the cops out four times. They stayed up all night drinking, ramped their cars across other people's lawns. They shouted, 'what the hell, we got our girl back!' They sprayed champagne at passers-by.

Jason got a place of his own and said he was going to be a full-time UFOlogist. Carly didn't often venture out in public, and Sunday choir never would never sound so sweet. Their books clogged the top of the best-seller chart for weeks. Judging by the new cars and label-clothes around the place, they weren't the only ones to make a fair wodge.

There were those who said they couldn't begrudge the Furnishes their better lifestyle after all they'd been through, what with having already lost their eldest to the mermaid thing and all. There were others who maintained all along it was a bunch of old bullshit.

The one paper pushed on with the anti-Furnish line, claimed the whole thing was nothing but an elaborate hoax from start to finish. Said Carly had spent the best part of the year holed up in a hidden corner of Bobby Lunn's hay loft. They couldn't ask Bobby Lunn, as he'd blown his brains out with a shotgun soon after foot-and-mouth came and finished off what the aliens had started. Mary Lomax said there never were lights. She said, 'they offered cash. I didn't ask.' The cops stepped up their grilling but the rest of the folk concerned kept mum.

Pretty much the whole village turned out for Jason and Carly's wedding at the church she used to sing. Guests were frisked for cameras. A glossy magazine sent Carly twice up the aisle, making double-sure of its money's worth. It had her repeat her vows a little louder. Carly sparkled in her off-the-shoulder dress. Her hair was frizzed and she'd got a few square meals inside her all right. They exited to the Wedding March. Half-way through, the notes went wavy and turned the tune into the theme from Star Trek. Folk laughed. Outside, the dark drew in and the stars beamed especially bright.

* * * *

Nine Lives

1 Cat Woman

Lorna Feargal kept sixteen cats and slept with schoolboys, one for each cat, give or take. She let them fuck her on a couch thick with fur-balls. One cat, a chocolate-patched stray she called Mr Kipling, she trained to come in half-way through and claw at the schoolboys' bare arses. She liked the thought of them leaving with a reminder of her and her cats. It pleased her more than most of the fucking ever did.

Lorna Feargal reckoned it was bullshit what they said about frequent exercise leading to weight loss. She tipped the scales at twenty-three stone. She was pretty much couch-bound. She got her boys to bring her what she needed. For cat food and cakes, she let them do more or less what the hell they liked.

She told each new boy, 'this ain't no Mills and Boon'. Cig-stunted sons of too-young mums, or inbred hill farm folk. Most either too plain dumb or ugly ever to hope of getting a girl of their own; some screwed-up enough to poke their dicks up half the herd given the chance, least that's how they smelled.

Lorna figured she must lose a few pounds each time, then put it all on again and more by living off boy-brought Bakewell Slices the whole week after. Almost all of them screwed their eyes shut and imagined they were fucking someone else. One kid even crowed the name of some Look-In centrefold every time he climaxed. They didn't even seem to notice when the stray came clawing. Lorna dug off her knickers and popped open her blouse. That's when she said it - 'this ain't no Mills and Boon'. The stench of cat litter seeped from her pores. The TV in the corner murmured daytime talk shows. She lay back and watched light poke through a chink in the curtains. She never much found herself wishing she was anywhere else.

Then one day, she fell in love. Head over heels, if she'd had the frame. With a hunchback kid less than half her age. She cried herself to sleep at night. She sent out for tee-lights. She cleared the fur-balls. Yeah baby, it was love all right.

She knew he was special soon as Mr Kipling wouldn't claw him. He'd said, 'I want to learn how to do it right.'

She'd said, 'this ain't no Mills and Boon.'

He stood shy, stuck-fast in his pants. She shook her head and pulled him in. After, she stroked his skew-iff spine while he breathed warm on her breasts. She said, 'you got a girl?'

He said, 'I'm kind of hoping.'

2 The Hunchback Kid

The girl the hunchback kid kind of hoped for worked the big attraction at the travelling fair. He helped out most summers, oiling the teacups ride or sweeping spent lucky dip wraps. Not out front: he was bad for business. Five year olds stared at his hump and clung tighter to their mothers. The older lot called him names. Terry Sleightholme threw pennies and did a mean Elephant Man. He shouted, 'roll up, roll up for the freak show!' The hunchback kid had got used to seeming like he didn't give a shit. His mother used to say it made him special. Not special enough to stop her dumping him in his cousins' back-yard when he was five years old. A note slung round his neck read, 'I can't cope no more'. He ate nothing but blackberries and slept in the engine shell of a rusted-up combine for two whole days till they came back from market. They found him curled up near dead. They poked him with sticks till he came back round. His Aunt asked the Lord what the hell she'd done bad enough to deserve another.

The fair was due back any time. The hunchback kid kind of hoped he'd be ready for her. He heard about Lorna Feargal. How she lay there and passed no judgement. He figured it could do no harm.

3 Starlight Sister

The girl the hunchback kid kind of hoped for called herself Alabama. The hunchback kid never could get to the bottom of if it was her real name or not. It sounded kind of exotic. He asked her once, 'is that your stage name?' Itching up to her bare ankles in sawdust, she spat back through cock-eyed teeth, 'you see a frigging stage?' Late nights, she'd beckon the hunchback kid round the back of the swingboats and hook up her Mini Mouse crop-top. 'You like what you see, huh?' she'd tease in a voice took straight from TV. He'd stare at her swells and long to reach out and touch them. She'd classic-pose, toss her straw-gold hair. She'd tug her jeans shorts, flash a stripe of knicker. Sometimes, she'd act real nice, make the hunchback kid think they could get a thing going. She'd bum cigarettes, sprawl on the bales to talk. She'd ask him, 'ever thought about getting it fixed?' Others, she'd shriek out if he even came close. One time, her going and hiking up her little dress like that made him damn near snap his arm off in the teacups ride. She stayed stood there giggling while he went white with pain. Alabama was thirteen years old. She was getting in practice too. Only it sure as hell wasn't for the hunchback kid.

4 Blaze, The Amazing Human Fireball

Alabama had her eyes on a boy named Blaze. He fire-ate. He tossed flaming clubs. He lay on nails. He ended up fucking just about every woman he ever laid eyes on. You could say he was kind of incendiary. Often, Blaze had the whole fair tearing up tent pegs and chased out beyond village limits in the dead of night. Left whole places full of splayed-out housewives, husbands hell-bent on revenge. 'Consequences?' Blaze would say. 'If I can't spell it, I can't fear it.'

Alabama helped his show, sometimes three times daily. Squeezed in a light-blue leotard patched with animal-piss stains, she became a Starlight Sister. She stuck out a leg and made shapes with her arms. She stood against the dagger board. Blaze, blindfolded, struck her outline. Sometimes he scraped her skin, pinched an inch. She worked herself up to fling an arm. Thought, if I move, he might notice me. She watched the fire-light flit across his hard chest. He'd slap her arse, but that was all. Night-times, she hung round his caravan, hoped tonight was the night. Dropped off in the dew, her sleep was woke by screams: 'Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me.' One night, he led a middle-aged bitch from town right past. Close enough to smell her heat through her bath-froth. The bitch giggled, tugged Blaze by his arm. Blaze stood on the caravan steps. Told Alabama, 'hey, no peeking.' She peeked all right. Felt her eyes prick up. Decided she couldn't take no more.

5 Bitch

Whatever Sylvie Turpin was after, it wasn't loving. She'd had enough so-called loving to last a life. Grown fat on its false promises. Boys like Blaze, they must have thought she still had a fair bit going for her. But the day she found herself buying size fourteen off the rails at Matalan, she cried. Came to thinking she needed a little excitement back in her life. All sicked out of fat-thigh dinners and drunk-up bedtime fumbles with that smarmy-arsed big-shot she got duped into marrying when things were still good. Not so big now since the shit hit the fan. So she took off to the fair, scoffed a couple of bags of candy floss, and sat front row for the show. First time she set eyes on Blaze, it sure wasn't loving that crossed her mind. She stuck herself in the same seat three times a day for the whole weekend. The last night, her and Blaze rocked the caravan right off its breezeblocks. Voices cut through the night. 'Jesus, Blaze, you split that bitch in half yet? I need my beauty sleep.' Another: 'then you mustn't've slept in years.' A belly-laugh, a curse. She crept out of the caravan as the sun came up. She ran right into Alabama. She was red-eyed, still squeezed in that stupid light-blue leotard of hers. Alabama stepped forward, poured a pan of cooking oil right over Sylvie Turpin. She said, 'you're lucky if it's not scalding. I been out here some time.' It still stuck enough to peel her skin. Her screaming turned on lights.

6 Mr Big-Shot

Mr Big-Shot lost count of the number of times he drove his wife for skin grafts. He got tinted windows put in for the purpose. Still it didn't stop the pointing. The kids could do a mean Sylvie Turpin. An eye pulled one way, the mouth spilled the other. Mr Big-Shot never asked how she came to get a face full of cooking fat. He kind of figured. She used to be the shiniest trophy wife in the whole damn cabinet. He'd plucked her straight off the shop-floor, done more than his fair share for employer relations. Fed her up on fish dinners. Bought her hitched skirts and hang-out tops. Gold from behind locked glass. He fucked her over the boardroom table while the grey-faced accountants furrowed brows outside. Drove her out lunchtimes for al-fresco screws. Wiped grass stains from her knees. Figured her pooling up the excess baggage was bad enough, even before she went and got herself smelted down like candle wax.

Heading back from the skin graft runs, he came to popping in the Kwik Save for a bottle of something to ease the loss. The pain of those grey-faced accountants getting their own back.

7 Miss Fryup

She was a trophy all right: hips like handles, curves pushing out from behind her Kwik Save bib. Calves long and smooth as a sports car bonnet, guaranteed to top-speed her out of Fryup any day soon. Flickered up from her Miss Fryup entry pack, served his whisky without a word. Till the day he flashed a card and said, 'I got connections.'

Her name was Tammy. She took to closing up early, parading up and down the aisles in Sylvie Turpin's old bikinis, worn as new. Felt awkward at first, strutting past the freezer units and the penny chew tray. He fed her twenty pounds each time. He snapped pictures, said 'we gotta get this right.' He swigged the whisky, said again, 'I got connections.' Tammy figured the guy was worth the gamble. Saw his silver sports car parked up outside. A step up from the feeds trucks and souped-up boy racer junkheaps she got offered regular for more short-term rewards. She got an urge for the top-speeding out of there bit. Felt his eyes Started getting careless with her changing-out. One night, he rolled in already drunk, unshaved. He pressed a lime bikini, waved a fifty pound note. He said, 'try topless.' She let him put his hands on her.

8 Our Kid

Terry had never gave much of a shit that Tammy was his first cousin. He'd read up on the ratio of any bairn of theirs being born with two heads or pig-shit for brains, reckoned it was a gamble worth taking if she ever gave the fucking chance. In his head at least, he'd taken her just about every which way he could think. That was even before he'd seen her stripping. First popped down for mini battenbergs, and there she was parading up and down the aisles. He'd got enough kicks to keep him frisky all right, dream up a few new moves. He stood there watching for weeks. The night she first went nude, a different feeling spilled over. He locked up all that nude of hers in his brain for future use. Then he rattled the door, stopped the parading stone-dead. Made out he'd popped by for some after-hours stocking-up.

Tammy said, 'Terry.' She clasped the bib to her front. She said, 'it's not what you think.'

Terry looked at Mr Big-Shot, headed for the shelves. He took almond slices. He waved them, said, 'you got nothing else?' He fished for change. Tammy said, 'take them.' He said, 'you got drink?'

They sat in the car park woods. They swigged stole spirits till the darkness blurred. Terry blew smoke rings, watched Tammy clasp and shiver. Knew he had them how he wanted. Turned to Mr Big-Shot, said, 'you not planning on taking her nowhere, are you?' Said, 'I saw what you did. There'd be folks round here like to know.'

Mr Big-Shot said, 'she's going to be famous.'

He thin-smiled. Terry said, 'you some kind of big shot?'

Tammy repeated, 'it's not what you think.'

Terry said, 'I know what I think.' He reached out and took a fist-full of hair and tugged her towards his crotch. He said, 'how about a little something to remember me by?'

Tammy lost her balance and he took a handful of the top of her blouse and pinged off a couple of buttons. Her knees creased and she struck her head on the corner of the bench arm as she went down. She lay on the slabs with her Kwik Save bib riding up around her thighs. Mr Big-Shot said, 'shit.' He got down and brushed her swelling. He heard Terry say, 'fucking paedo.' Then he saw the sharp glint of glass against moonlight and felt a dull thud, and everything went black.

Just the sight of those panties of hers had been enough for Terry Sleightholme. He locked them away, too. He reckoned if he shut his eyes tight enough he could make that fat bitch be just about anyone, even his fit-as-fuck cousin. He forced the door, unzipped his flies as he headed up the stairs. Slurred, 'here I come, slut.'

He burst right in. He tossed the cakes. He saw the cat woman and the hunchback kid tangled up on the couch. Lorna Feargal buttoning up her top. She shifted, saw the distaste in his face. The room was ripe. She said, 'this ain't no Mills and Boon.'

Terry said, 'I'm gonna spew.'

He retched up booze froth on the cat-stuck carpet. He shook his head at the pair of them. The hunchback kid tried to pull his jeans up. Terry stared at his bare hump. He said, 'let me see that.'

The hunchback kid said, 'we don't want no trouble.'

Terry laughed. He said again, 'let me see that, for real.' There was blood on his hands. He stepped forward.

9 Mr Kipling

The chocolate-patched stray saw Terry take a step and it took a dive from in the duvet. Terry felt a searing pain in his arse. It dug its claws in and wouldn't let go. Lorna shrieked, 'that a boy!' Terry shouted, 'get the fucking thing off me!' He swirled and slapped. 'Get the fucking thing off me!' It dug in deeper. Terry swung it against the side of the bedside shelf. It smashed pot-cat trinkets, an old vase. He reached for the box of almond slices, started battering the cardboard on its skull. Lorna Feargal shouted, 'you leave it be!'

Lorna Feargal launched herself off the couch, belly-flopped forward. She goalkeeper-saved Mr Kipling, her fat slow-motion rippling. She beached on the carpet, laid across the vase shards. Mr Kipling took her full weight. She screamed. Twenty-three stones of screaming. 'My cat!' or 'My back!' - it wasn't clear. Either way, Mr Kipling was a goner. And Lorna Feargal was stuck fast. Terry said, 'fucking Jesus.' He swept the table-top for cash, pocketed a furry fiver. He spat down at the hunchback kid, banged back down the stairs. The hunchback kid stayed stooped over Lorna Feargal. He brushed her of blood and cat hairs as best he could. She sobbed, spasm-ed, accepted almond slices. The hunchback kid said, 'I never knew you liked them. You should have said.' She blinked up. For the first time, she saw love shine back. Outside, below, the fair rolled in.

* * * *

Shiny And New

When Debbie first got pregnant we had her going that the bairn would most probably pop out looking like that pervy old codhead off the fishfingers packets. It was our way of taunting her for getting herself knocked up while the fleet was in.

By the time the bump was too far gone to change her mind about it, even Debbie was patting her belly and calling it Captain Birdseye. She was such a slapper Captain Birdseye was as likely the daddy as any. She'd had two up behind the boat sheds on the night in question. A joke went round about the fisherlads catching more crabs on dry land than they ever did at sea. Another one was that Debbie had had so much sea-salt squirted up her inners the bairn was bound to be pretty much inoculated from rickets for life.

Once her mam and dad got used to the idea Debbie was expecting, they let her move out into one of the site statics. They probably thought she couldn't get up to much with Captain Birdseye cramping her style or maybe they just wanted her out of their hair.

What Debbie's folks didn't know was that we'd been calling those skanky statics home for the best part of the summer. If Debbie really wanted to find out who the daddy was the mattresses in those vans must have contained the DNA of at least half the lads of Fryup. Mainly they'd been on top of Tams who'd turned into a right slag ever since she dropped the weight off. Said she was making up for all the times the other bitches had called her a fat tart by sucking off all their boyfriends one by one.

Debbie had us all round on our knees scrubbing to try to detox the place of its sweat smell while typical of her she ponced around stringing some pink fairy lights up around the communal living area as they call it in the trade. We shipped in our supplies of White Lightning and before you knew it Debbie's skanky caravan was party central. You could probably hear the old Kenwood stereo we got off Lizzie's little brother in exchange for Tams giving him a Frenchie blasting out early Madonna all the way down the valley to the sea.

We imagined all the townie skanks festering in their seagull-shit bus shelters listening to the strains of 'Like a Virgin' and wondering where the party was at. It was easy to feel right superior living up on the moor and we laughed at all their jokes about Fryupgrrrlz sucking off horses when we weren't getting enough from the inbreds.

Never mind horses, we sucked on Superkings with the windows open so Captain Birdseye wouldn't pop out with breathing problems, although the way Debbie kept sparking up a sly one suggested our efforts wouldn't count for much.

Debbie was on and off with Jake Birdsall and the night behind the boat sheds must have been an off night. She could easily have passed the kid off as his and he'd never have known. Not until it popped out with a bushy white beard and a pervy wink and stinking of fish any road.

But Debbie got sick of Jake perving over some of the others so she told him about Captain Birdseye before she was even showing. Jake called her a slapper but he didn't seem too upset. The thing that seemed to bother Debbie most about getting pregnant wasn't who its daddy was or how she was going to provide for it. It was whether her stretch-marks would disappear in time to be carnival queen next year.

Next week was Regatta Week and we were all up for piling into town. It was a bunch of old ships and the fire brigade showing you what to do in the event of a chip-pan fire. We'd seen it loads of times, so many times in fact that if we ever had a chip-pan fire we'd all burn to death out of boredom. But more important it meant the fleet was in and the skanks would be out in force. This called for some serious action as there was nothing more sweet than us Fryupgrrrlz stealing their lads from right under their noses. Debbie waddling up the pier with a football stuffed up the front of her shiny new Adidas would be all the proof we needed that we were way out in front in the superiority stakes.

Debbie said the daddy could be one of two and you could tell she was hoping it was the nice-ish lad Cammy, not the jug-lugs ginger one. Debbie said he jumped in so eager soon as Cammy had finished she felt sure she'd been double-teamed for a short while. Lizzie asked if it was possible she could have twins that were from one of each, given as the time-frame was so short. Me and Tams wet our knickers laughing and even more so when Lizzie said she wasn't joking. It was typical Lizzie, she was away with the fairies if she wasn't mortal. She was mortal most nights and there wasn't a lad in Fryup who wouldn't have risked getting banged up with the paedos for a bit of under-age if they got the chance. Me and Tams were looking out for her and making her wait till she found a nice lad to go with for real, or at least till she turned fifteen.

We got Dazaster to take us into town in his ponced-up Lada. We called him Dazaster because he was one waiting to happen. He'd tried to get Lizzie to tug him off once as a favour for picking her up from town one night when she'd missed the last bus. Lizzie was so off her tits she was all for accepting but Dazaster drove her round the back of the statics before he unzipped his flies and lucky Tams happened to poke her head out the door for a post-coital at just the right time. We threatened to get the cunt done for kiddie-fiddling but reckoned a free Fryupgrrrlz taxi service to and from town was a better way to make him pay. Dazaster was all right although you'd never dabble, not even Tams. He was throwing us round the corners going on about getting back at the townie scum who'd done it to Debbie. Us going with their lads or the other way round, to some it meant war. Jake came with us and crammed in the back between me and Lizzie with a bottle of White Lightning. Jake was the type of lad you'd go with. He had a soft face, not like most lads of Fryup with bum-fluff moustaches and ratty eyes and shit trainers that would never walk them far from home.

We couldn't believe Debbie treated him the way she did. Jake said Debbie should sit in the front what with her condition. You could tell by the look on her face she didn't fancy it. She was still hoping Jake would stick by her even while she had a belly-full of fishfinger sandwich. If not then she'd make sure none of us other skanks would get our nails in him. I had half a mind to shove my hand down Jake's pants before we'd even reached village limits. Partly because I wanted to see Debbie's face explode in the rear-view mirror and partly because I was gagging for it. I hadn't done it with a lad since I had a ride on my cousin's cousin after the carnival a couple of months back. We were mortal from being on the Diamond Whites all day. We weren't related close enough for the bairn to have been born with three heads if there'd been an accident, so we reckoned what the hell.

Lizzie had necked enough to get more up close and personal and it was obvious from the way Jake's hand disappeared that she was letting him get up to something in her knick-knacks. From the way Debbie's eyes were glaring it was obvious she'd noticed it too.

It was two quid in The Laurel even though it was the day-time. It was a shitty goth pub with stains on the pool table where the Friday night strippers had been. Pete the landlord didn't give a toss about ID just so long as we ensured we lined up at the bar with our boobies lobbed half out. Even Lizzie could get served no bother even though she looked about twelve. Pete was a total paedo, he even had cameras put in the lavs, for security purposes so he said. Before they got smashed out, me and Tams would sometimes fake him a bit of lezzer action.

After a number of Diamond Whites our jukebox songs came round and when Like a Virgin started up a right mental night looked in store. Lizzie and Tams were on their feet screaming the words and the goths' eyes were bulging out their heads at all the jiggling going on. Only Lizzie went to Debbie about getting up and giving the fishfinger a little boogie and Debbie got a right cob on and shouted back about Lizzie being too much of a dog to ever get laid. It was well out of order and Lizzie stopped dancing for a bit and looked like she was going to start beefing, and only me telling Debbie not everyone fancied getting up the duff by half the fleet saved the day.

With all the tension I couldn't wait to get down the pier for a greasy burger and some tins and find out what the slappers made of Debbie's condition. The top lass saw us coming and folded her arms over her tits like she

was hiding them away to avoid comparison. She had a right pair on her. You would have sworn she'd had a tit job only they'd filled them with jelly by mistake. She said, 'lock up your horses, it's the inbreds.'

Tams said back, 'funny smell of fish round here.'

The slappers were skegging Debbie's belly trying to figure it out and Debbie went right over to Cammy and said she wanted a word.

Well that set up a right dodgy stand-off because there was me and Tams and Lizzie, who was already having trouble standing up from necking all the booze. Jelly-tits was giving us the right evils and the Jug-Lugs lad was there and all, passing out the Bensons like he was some big-time dealer in Class As.

Tams stuck her tits out at Jug-Lugs and gave him the right come-on and went, 'you lads been whaling this week, have you?' To us it was genius, more so as the skanks were all too shit-brained to know what she was getting at.

Lizzie was laughing up sick and the sight of her was putting the tourists right off their fish and chips. Just then there was a right commotion over the arcades. The nut-job Dazaster was piggy-backing on the lad Cammy's back and swinging his right fight into his face while he's clinging on. Say what you want about the fisherlads but they're tough enough bastards being out at sea all that time and a scrawny-arse like Dazaster wasn't ever going to be much of a match for them. Soon enough Cammy bucked Dazaster off him head-first and on his way down Dazaster's head slapped the metal railing. Cammy followed up with a couple of boots in the face and Dazaster was left looking a right mess. Jake was back on the scene checking Dazaster's all right and shouting at him that he's a stupid bastard. Lizzie's still spewing and much to my disgust Tams and Jug-Lugs are frenchying on the lifeboat memorial. Debbie's just stood there sharing another ciggie with Captain Birdseye and staring out to sea and seeming not to give a shit that our taxi home getting fucked up's all her fault.

The scrap seemed to get rid of the tension and we all sat on the memorial while the sun went down. Lizzie was sleeping up against me and Cammy was snogging some other slapper round the other side. Debbie was chaining the Bensons and not speaking. Tams and Jug-Lugs had gone off round the boat-sheds. Jake got Dazaster's car keys before they carted him off to A&E and we lamped in the back dragging Lizzie along the way. Debbie was sat in the front seat telling us to get a move on. Jake was all nervous because the place was swarming with coppers and he didn't have a licence. I was dragging Lizzie on my own and wondering if I should nip down the boatsheds to look for Tams. I pushed Lizzie in the back-seat and Jake was already revving the engine. I flicked a V-sign at the skanks and felt the better for it.

On the way back I kept Lizzie's hair out of her eyes and propped her upright so she wasn't going to do a Jimi Hendrix on me. When we got back we went in the static as a matter of course and I got a couple of blankets out of the cupboard and started making up a bed for Lizzie on the far couch. I pulled her shoes and her jeans off. Her legs were pale and cold and I could see Jake perving at her Minnie Mouse undies. Debbie could too and she came over all bitchy again and said why didn't he have a skeg at her minge as well while he's at it. She put her fingers in and rived the gusset to one side and Lizzie jumped in her sleep when she did it. Debbie tried to grab Jake's head and push it down towards it. Jake said, 'fucking hell', and elbowed Debbie away and she made out like she'd barged Captain Birdseye on the doorframe. She was giving it ooh, ooh, ooh like it was set to pop out but you could tell she was being a drama queen. I pushed Lizzie's pants back and told Debbie she'd been well out of order on all counts. Debbie told me to fuck right off and went in the bedroom and slammed the door so hard the whole place shook.

I gave Jake a blow-job under the pink fairy lights. I thought of all the shit Debbie had done and it made me feel better. It took him ages to get to the gob-full bit and I kept having to stop and swig the dregs of the White Lightning to keep my mouth from drying. I spat and ground his gunk into the carpet with my palm while his

eyes were closed. When we'd finished I got up and started making the coffee. By the time the kettle was boiled there was only me awake.

* * * *

Hannah & Alec

Hannah walked in on Alec while he was taking a shower. Alec shouted, 'what the hell?' He grabbed out for a towel and lost his footing. He splayed nude on the tiles. Hannah tugged down her tights and plonked on the toilet seat. She looked down on him and teased her eyebrows high. She started to pee. She said, 'when a girl's gotta go, a girl's gotta go.'

Next day, Hannah took Alec up the high fields. A warm late-spring sun tickled in on the wind. Hannah said, 'let's explore.' They found run-down sheds and old gypsy camp sites. They poked fly-tips with sticks. They kicked clouds of fire ash. They lay on their fronts on the quarry edge, watching the workers scurry in orange overalls below. They tossed rocks and ran till the shouts faded and their lungs burned. At the lake by the forest they lay back and smoked the cigarettes Hannah had bummed off boys.

Hannah asked Alec: 'you ever kissed?'

The red rose in Alec's cheeks.

He said, 'uh-huh.'

He squinted over the lake. The wind made ripples. Hannah curled a smile. She propped on one elbow. She said, 'generally speaking, uh-huh means no.'

Alec shifted. He said, 'I have too.'

Hannah said, 'You're lying. I know it.'

They sat a while and Hannah said, 'you want to learn?' Then she smiled: 'just kissing won't give us no two-headed babies, or nothing.'

She leaned in and pressed her lips against his. She prized his open with her tongue. She swapped her spearmint gum. He shifted some more. She pulled back and looked deep at him. She said, 'you ever want to practise some more, just say.'

Alec came to finding Hannah's knickers draped from the stair rail, glimpsing her part-nude through her bedroom door-crack. She would curl that smile and tease: 'you spying on me?' She would bustle in on him taking a shower some more, her dressing gown falling away. She would clasp her hand to her mouth and mumble, 'sorry'. She would bring home friends and tell them: 'my brother, here' - Alec would always correct her, say: 'half-brother' - 'he's too cute not to have a girlfriend, huh?' Alec had his own bunch of friends, a couple of girls who said they liked him. He acted not interested.

As Hannah grew more into a woman she took him up the lake some more. There was likely not a teenage boy in the place who did not wish it was them being taken up the lake by her. Hannah had no real boyfriend. She told Alec, 'there's none just right.' She told him: 'none I can get my hands on, any how.'

She got him drunk on beer and asked him if he thought about her. She said, 'I won't tell.' When summer came and the lake shone like glass, they headed up swimming. Hannah stripped down to her bikini. She hooked her thumbs in her straps. She said, 'I will if you will.'

Alec blushed some more. He said, 'will what?'

Hannah said, 'go naked, stupid.'

Alec paddled in the water. He saw the sun shine gold on her skin. He said, 'I dunno.'

She said, 'it isn't nothing you haven't seen before, any how.'

He scanned the banks. He said, 'what if someone sees?'

Hannah squinted back. She said, 'lucky them.' She let her top fall away. Her breasts dropped free. Alec stopped a stare, scanned the banks again. He headed out to deeper water, goose-bumped up with cold. She said, 'hey, a deal's a deal!' She came after him. She caught him and splashed him and whooped. She tugged at his shorts. He kept them up. She slung her arms round his neck and pressed up against him. She snaked her legs round his hips. She curled another of those smiles of hers. Alec watched the bank some more. She said, 'there's nothing we're doing is wrong.' She rolled her gum round her tongue. Her breath wisped his face. She pushed back a hair-strand. She said, 'shit, you're the spit of mum.' Her eyes greyed over. She pushed off and back-stroked away, not looking. Her breasts bobbed the surface. He trod water. He watched her reach the edge. She pulled on her clothes and left. He shouted, 'hey!' She didn't stop.

Some bit later, Hannah's father asked Alec out shooting. Alec looked up from his breakfast. He said, 'shooting?'

Hannah's father looked out the window, past the fields to the hills. He said, 'reckon it's time.' Alec glanced at his mother. She shrugged away.

Alec said, 'just me and you?'

Hannah's father said, 'uh-huh.'

They tramped through the fields. Hannah's father led without a word. He had the rifle slung over his shoulder. They reached the edge of the woods. Rabbits flashed up front. Hannah's father said, 'here.' He set the rifle up on Alec's shoulder. He said, 'it jerks.' First time, the bullet clipped the tree-tops, flung Alec right back. They kept stalking. Hannah's father nodded to try again. He dug it in the soil. Hannah's father took the gun and picked a couple straight off. They fetched them and Hannah's father pulled out his gutting knife. He skinned one down to its red flesh and thumbed out its guts. He handed the knife to Alec and made him do the same. Blood slimed his hands. He gagged. Hannah's father rustled up a small fire and spit. While the rabbits slow-cooked they gazed in the flames.

Hannah's father said, 'you got yourself a girl yet?'

Alec gulped. The red rose more. He said, 'nuh-huh.'

Hannah's father kept his eyes on the fire. He said, 'shit, when I was fourteen..' Then he said, 'you got your eye on one?'

Alec shrugged, shook his head.

Hannah's father said, 'you best not be one of them..'

Alec coughed a laugh.

Hannah's father poked the fire. He turned to Alec. His voice lowered. His eyes slit up. He said, 'don't bullshit me, boy.'

Alec pricked up, coughed another laugh. He said, 'I'm not a homo, if that's what you mean.'

Hannah's father took out his hip-flask and took another swig of morning whisky. He swung in close. He said, 'you know what, boy? You might soon be wishing you were.'

He grabbed Alec tight round his throat. Alec choked up air. He pushed Alec in at the flames. Alec flapped but the grip was tight. He hissed in Alec's ear: 'You think no-one's seen you? You think folks aren't talking? You think we're all that stupid, not to see?'

Alec shook and tried to speak. Hannah's father said, 'say you did it. Say it.' Alec's lips blistered. His hair frizzed. The rabbit flesh charred. The grip eased and he coughed up see-through sick. Hannah's father's face pressed up to his. He said, 'well?'

Alec said, 'no.' He shook fast. 'No.'

Hannah's father grabbed a clump of hair and flung Alec back towards the fire. His nose-end pressed up to the rabbits. He said, 'I'm warning you, boy. You hear me?'

Then Alec's head was in the dirt. He blinked up. Hannah's father was jabbing at the fire. He said, 'I knew I shouldn't have took her back. Her running off on me like that, getting half the fleet up her inners. First I set eyes on you, I knew you were trouble.' He reached in his pocket, began rolling a cigarette. He shook his head. He said, 'but that slut of a mother of yours, she's got her ways of persuading.' They ate the rabbits without speaking. They walked home. Alec's shoulder bruised up black.

Hannah posed in the door in a pink crop-top and a denim mini. She eyed Alec's smoky face. She said, 'what happened to you?'

Hannah's father said, 'get some damn clothes on.' Hannah pulled a face and disappeared.

From that day the teasing stopped dead. Hannah's bedroom door stayed shut. She spoke in muffles behind it. Alec caught whiffs of her on the stairs, snatches of chat at meal-times. She never looked in his eyes. There were no more trips up the fields. She grew even taller, more beautiful. She went out to parties, always made it in by curfew. Hannah's father took Alec shooting some more. He could pick off rabbits. The first time, Hannah's father slapped his back. They barely spoke. They said nothing of what happened.

Alec got a girlfriend. Her name was Chloe. She was sweet with long blonde hair. She liked him lots. She said, 'I thought you'd never ask.' He took her up the fields. They swam in the lake. They drank beer and kissed. They held hands in public. They talked about when their first time might be. Their friends envied them. They were good together.

Hannah ignored them. The first time Chloe came to tea, Hannah excused herself. Hannah's father shouted her back. He said, 'show the guest some respect.' Their mother smiled lots at Chloe. She fed her second-helpings. She offered to run them into town. Hannah glared hate. Her parties got longer. She broke curfews. She took to rolling in drunk. She reeked of cigarettes. Hannah's father slapped her, made her smoke more till she spewed.

Their mother cried. She said, 'why can't you be a bit more like Alec?' They argued downstairs. They shouted till pots smashed. Their mother took a bundle of clothes and headed round her sister's.

Hannah's father shouted after her, 'there won't be no third chances, I'll tell you that for sure.'

Till one day, Alec headed round to Chloe's and rapped the door. He had a bag with a bunch of food for a picnic up the fields. He had his swim shorts. He buried a four-pack deep in. The sun beat down. Chloe's mother answered. She glared at him. She said, 'well?'

Alec frowned.

She said, 'well?'

Alec said, 'is everything all right, Mrs...'

She said, 'don't everything-all-right-Mrs me.'

There was a bustle behind. She flashed back, snapped: 'get back in there.'

Alec tried to peer round. He said, 'Chloe?'

She said, 'she's not here. Not now, not ever.'

She went for the door to slam. She leaned out, hissed: 'you dirty little inbred.' Then she slammed it.

Alec started heading home then he passed the track up the fields and he swung up and got to the lake. He sat and took off his tee-shirt and felt the sun on his shoulders. He swam a little then he got out and laid on the tufty grass and fished the beer from his rucksack. He sat and drank till the sun went in and all four cans were gone.

When Alec got home the house was dark but for the TV flickering an old film in the front room. Hannah's father was sat on the couch asleep with his head back and his mouth open. He clutched a last beer that had tipped down his shirt. An empty whisky bottle sat up in front with a good few inches left in it. Alec leaned over Hannah's father and took the bottle. He trod careful upstairs past his mother's room. Her bed was still empty. Her clothes were still gone.

Alec had pretty much polished off the whisky when the front door clicked and steps came up the stairs. They padded past his room. They paused, then carried on up to the attic. He waited a moment then he followed her up. When he pushed open her door she was stood facing him like she knew he was coming. She did that curl-smile thing and said, 'well, hi.' Alec shook his head and drained the rest of the whisky. He started but tripped over his words. She curl-smiled some more and shrugged off her cardigan. She took the bottom of her crop-top and cross-armed it over her head. She never took her eyes off him. He tripped over his words some more. She said, 'well?'

She toyed the top button of her denim mini and shrugged her hips and let it fall. She peeled off her tights then her lemon-yellow knickers. He saw the slide between her legs. When he looked back up she'd unclipped her bra and was naked. She shrugged out her hair and stepped towards him. When he stepped back she placed a finger to her lips and held out her other arm and kept coming. She took him and lifted off his tee-shirt then she got down and fumbled at his jeans-zip. He shrugged her back on the floor and looked down on her. He said: 'bitch.'

She big-eyed up and that curl-smile flashed back. She got up and flopped on her bed and said, 'isn't this what you want?'

Alec fixed her eyes. He said, 'I want nowt.'

Her smile went and she spat her words: 'you always did get what you wanted.'

Then she fixed eyes and started to scream. It was a real high-pitched scream and there were words in it that would have woke drunks alone. The more Alec tried to hush her, the more high-pitched she went.

It was clear how it looked. When Hannah's father came stumbling up the stairs he blinked his eyes and saw Hannah curled nude on her bed. He saw Alec hung over her half-undressed with his flies down. He reached for Alec. Alec reached back for the whisky bottle and ducked out of the way. He made for the door. Hannah's father caught him and slammed his head in the door frame. They both fell. As they fell Alec swung the hand that held the whisky bottle hard as he could against his skull. There was a crack and the glass broke and the bit he was still holding he dug deep into the darked-out face above him. Then there was a roar from Hannah's father, a gurgle that came from deep inside him. He limped up and slipped over Alec and there was the thud-crash-thud of him falling down the stairs.

Then there was silence and Hannah switched on her bedside light. Alec was caked in blood like the rabbits that time. It poured on the carpet and down the stairs. Alec slumped up on the door-frame. After a bit she came over, still naked, and pulled him into her.

* * * *

Seventeen Days

This is a true story. Names have been changed.

Marjorie Fairbanks:

I turned on the news and I thought, this can't be right. There must be some mistake. These sorts of things just don't happen round here.

Pc Roy Bleasdale:

I even called him Sir. I said, excuse me Sir, out of the car. Nothing. He never even looked at me. I said, I don't tell anybody twice. Out of the car, now. Then I saw the gun. I knew for a fact he was going for my head. He shot me across the nose. The young dog came out then. He shot him twice, which just gave me enough time to start and run.

Dorothy Bostock:

It was the first time I saw Marjorie Fairbanks with tinted highlights. I remember thinking, there's a mad killer on the loose, and she's gone and got tinted highlights.

Pc Ian Jenkins:

We were seconds behind him. The car had hardly started crackling. We followed him with dogs. They took us to the edge of a ravine. The sun was setting. There was no way we were going down there.

Derek Firkin:

They should have smoked the bastard of his hole while they had the chance.

Marjorie Fairbanks:

I said to Dot, that's Mike Neville over there. Him from Look North. He's coming over. Would you mind telling us about the goings-on? Go on then, if you must. Thank you, he says. One take, that's all it took. I've

got it on videotape.

Pc Richard Bazeley:

The bullets matched those used in the shooting of Pc Marley and the elderly couple in Lincolnshire. We had a name: Billy Richards. He became the most wanted man in Britain.

Police description:

White, early 30s, approximately five feet eight inches tall, slim build, sallow complexion, thin face with high cheekbones and prominent eyes, short dark curly hair, clean-shaven.

Sandra West, bakery:

The police vans would park up on the village green. We'd take them out tea and cakes. It was the least we could do. Nothing fancy - scones, flapjacks. Then you got the TV lot. Any chance of a free cuppa, love? Not on your life.

Pc Michael Williams, Lincoln:

The Hardens were such lovely people. I spoke to them on the phone just the week before.

Des Barnes, journalist:

We were following the police messages on the radio. You could in those days. It was a great help. We heard they'd surrounded a barn. They'd found a heat source. We rushed down there. Right on deadline. They found nothing. They said it might have been a fox. Or a badger. Great. Hold the front page.

Det Supt John Rutherford:

A thick mist had been hanging about the place for days. It would have been like looking for a needle in a haystack at the best of times. With the mist, it was nigh on impossible.

Carla Markham:

We lived on a farm on the edge of the forest. They put a guard on our door. They said, stay away from the windows. We got a police escort just to nip down to Costcutters. Out-riders, the works. To fetch bread and milk! Now I know how royalty feels. I thought to myself, I could get used to this.

Des Barnes:

If I'm honest, we were struggling to give the story legs.

Yorkshire Evening Press, June 25:

If the manhunt continues tomorrow, a group of children from the York area, members of the Young Ornithologists' Club, will not be able to go on a planned bird watching expedition to the Bridestones in Dalby Forest.

Paula Jones:

I was sixteen. I was with a lad down the car park woods. I'm saying no names. All of a sudden this copper

shows up. Pull your pants up, love, he says, there's a nutter on the loose. Pull your pants up. That's what he says. The embarrassment. I could have died.

Angela Beaker:

I was driving down the Pickering road, and there he was. Just popped his head out of the bushes, like one of those thingamajigs off the Attenborough programmes. His eyes went right through me. I'll never forget those eyes. They give me nightmares even now. Two days later, that's when he shot that poor man in Malton. It dawned on me how lucky I'd been.

Marjorie Fairbanks:

There were eight hundred police out combing those woods. Helicopters, the works. Vans back half-way up Fryup Bank. And Angela Beaker says she saw him first? The things I could tell you about that woman.

Pc Ian Jenkins:

He went to ground. The trail went cold. He was trained in survival skills. For four days, nothing.

Len Ravis:

A man walked into my shop and bought a loaf, a can of pilchards and other food. He looked like an ordinary, mild-mannered man. He left the shop and a few seconds later I heard a shot. I ran outside and saw Sergeant Ward lying in the road.

Mavis Sleight, teacher:

It wasn't cowboys and indians. It was the mad killer this, the mad killer that. You know how kids are. Guns going off all over the place. Bang bang, you're dead. I shouldn't say that. But, you know.

Chief Constable Kenneth Groves:

Sergeant Ward paid the supreme price. His service to the British police cannot be praised too highly. Our thoughts are with his wife and his one-year old daughter.

Jane Ryton:

My daughter couldn't go out on her pony. No, they said, it's too dangerous. Well, she's out on that pony every day of the week, come hell or high water.

Yorkshire Evening Press, July 3:

The man, who answered Richards' description, was seen by a woman at Railway Cottages. There was also a report that a goat had been milked, not by its owner.

Les Farrow:

He came to the back door. I didn't think anything at first. I thought he was a tramp. Then I saw the gun. I remember thinking, oh well then, here we go then. This is it.

Det Supt John Rutherford:

Initially, until he got to know the Farrows, he kept them bound. They were tied up. But once this trust between them developed, I think they ended up on first-name terms.

Violet Farrow:

I made him sandwiches. He was very interested in watching the news.

Brian Farrow:

As the night went on, we got talking as if we had known each other for years. He was calling me Brian and my father he was calling dad.

Violet Farrow:

He was ever so polite. He said, I'm going to have to tie you up. I'm sorry about this. He said, I won't hurt you. I thought, that's easy for you to say.

Derek Firkin:

They thought they had him. Turns out it was a scarecrow. A bloody scarecrow!

Dave McCabe, survivalist:

I tracked his footprints in the dew. I saw a portion of plastic bag on the ground. It seemed to move. As I put my hand forward, suddenly a foot flew back and hit me on the knee. The plastic bag had been on top of him. I couldn't even see him. I shouted, he's here, and jumped backwards. The policemen hit the ground.

James Bell:

I went out to offer a cup of tea to a policeman. I thought he was manning a checkpoint. He shouted at me to get back inside. Charming. Then I saw the stun grenades being thrown over the wall.

Pc Michael Brown:

We had him surrounded. There was no way out. Then there was a shot. We thought he was shooting at us, so we opened fire. That was the order. To begin with, it wasn't clear whose gun had done what.

Marjorie Fairbanks:

I heard it straight from the horse's mouth. We've got him. It's over. I went straight in the newsagents. We've got him. It's over. Sighs of relief all round. Thank goodness for that. The poor families. The TVs left, just like that. A great long queue of them. They'd ruined the verges.

Yorkshire Evening Press, July 5:

RICHARDS LIVED OFF CAT FOOD

At some point in his final desperate days, Billy Richards was driven to eat cat food. Tins of cat food were stored in an outbuilding of the Farrows' house in East Mount. The tins of cat food were stored in large packs, one of which had been opened.

Derek Firkin:

They had an inquest. Don't ask me why. I don't give a shit who shot him. The bottom line is, we were well rid.

Noelle Curry, Richards relative:

We will see to it that he doesn't have a pauper's grave. No matter what he did, we think as members of the family he deserves better than that. We never met him, but we have been told that before all this he was a pleasant, respectable man.

Dorothy Bostock:

We never saw the tinted highlights again.

Marjorie Fairbanks:

Tinted highlights? No, no. Is that what she said? I'll show you the videotape

* * * *

Odd Kirk

I don't reckon the sun's ever come up quite the same since the day it happened. I've been watching it for years now and to me it still don't look right somehow. Maybe it's just me thinking it, sending myself doolally after what I've done. But I swear every morning it creeps up and it's looking at me, all knowing like. And when you reckon the sun's acting like that over you there isn't a right lot you can do about it, beyond burying yourself away like a mole in the soil.

That's what I've been doing more or less in the score or so years that have gone by since. But however tight I shut them curtains to stop that damn sun lighting me up, it still don't stop the inside of my head from pounding out the truth. No way it's ever going to stop harassing me neither, not unless the deaf and dumb lass was to happen right back on my doorstep and give me the chance to tell her that it wasn't never meant to work out this way.

The deaf and dumb lass went by the name of Mitzi Barker. Her being deaf and dumb, she was the kind of lass you went up the lane with if you didn't want no-one shouting their gob off about it after. Funny but it's the small things I recall best about her, like the way her hair reeked of bonfires and how that little old checkered dress of hers rode right up her thigh with no help from me.

After we'd finished our business we'd head over the trout farm and I'd hunker down and poach us up a couple of rainbows for our tea. That Mitzi Barker, she was thin as an ear of barley and I always figured a good nosh-up was the least I could do for her troubles. Sometimes if I was feeling mean I'd slap the backs of her knees with the wet fish just to hear her squeal, seeing as it was damn near the only sound she ever made. Then we'd head over to the dip and get us a nice burn-up going away from the wind and have a few swigs of beer and a puff of baccy out of my bait box. We'd eat the rainbows with our bare hands, riving the pink meat off the backbone till only its inners stayed put. After, maybe we'd get it going again if we were inclined that way.

Them days no-one never called me odd, least never to my face. Far as I could see they had no reason to and if they did I'd most likely have brayed my big fist down on the tops of their heads for finding it. They said even then one day my temper was going to get me in a whole heap of trouble and I guess if them people knew what had become of me they'd be standing in that pub of theirs swigging down their I-told-you-so's all night long.

The way I see it, things started to go wrong the day I got myself in all sorts of trouble fishing for rainbows on Burgess land. It never crossed my mind them rich folk would give two hoots about nowt but a plaggy bag full

of rainbows but then I never had no cause to be well up with what goes on in rich folks' heads.

Well I don't mind admitting I headed off into the woods and cooked myself up a champion tea that night. I didn't hear nowt of it for a couple of days and tell the truth it weren't nowt to be lingering on my mind any road. Then my old man comes in from work one day too sharp for things to be just so. He plants himself in the middle of the kitchen floor and bawls up a right racket about me being the runt who's just cost him his job at the animal feeds. Turns out old Burgess had skegged me reeling in them rainbows and figured there'd be no better way of putting me straight than by dumping the old man out of the only job he's ever had.

The old man never carried enough of a punch to give me no trouble and he knew it, though he fair packed a weight with his gob when he wanted to. He stands there and tells me he never thought he'd see the day when a lad of his was brought up big and soft as a barm dumpling and clever as a clog nail to match. Far as I'm concerned that deserved a fair welly but what with what's gone on I had to admit I might be in the wrong. So instead of braying him I turned my back and lugged myself right on round to old Roy Barnes's flophouse and the truth is the old man and me never swapped another word, though it didn't stop them taunts of his sticking round long past the day they put him six foot under.

I'm no mind doctor so I can't say for certain if what the old man said to me had anything to do with what happened up the lane that day with Mitzi Barker. The good Lord knows I've had enough dark times to try to figure out why it happened but I still can't say for certain. All I recall is how I'd felt fair gradely when I set out with my rod and my bait box slung over my shoulder and holding that Mitzi Barker's arm. Them people might have been saying I wasn't amounting to nowt but times like that it felt like a mighty fine deal to me. I had my vest off so as to show off the extra brawn I got from turning all them vegetables in old Roy Barnes' allotment and by the way she kept skegging over I reckon it got Mitzi Barker's attention all right. Only I look back now and I see that damn old sun smiling out of the sky like it knew pretty soon it was going to have one less thickhead to have to worry about shining down upon.

We were way up in a wheat field where the land levelled out and Mitzi Barker was riding me slow and purposeful like she was bossing an old Combine up and down not to miss a strip. I was reckoning on telling her we should maybe make a go of things but when I opened my eyes I saw she was flitting a bluebottle away from her face and not looking down on me in a way I would have hoped, specially with all my working at it. There and then it crossed my mind about all other boys she took up here, and how it might be nowt more than a chore for a slap-up dinner of cooked rainbows, and the thought chilled me up real bad despite the heat.

Well, I clawed her back-end real tight till she started to make that sometime squealing noise, and I reckoned pretty much I'd made the moment pass. After we'd finished and hooked the rainbows I slapped them against her knees awhile till the blood-grease trickled down in her ankle socks. Then we headed down toward the dip and I could tell by the way she was coming over about as bothersome as a horse-fly that it was the dinner she was wanting all right and not so much me.

Came over me to think up new ways of getting her to earn her supper. Now I don't want it coming over like I was some kind of odd-job, because I hadn't done half of what other boys my age had got up to with Mitzi Barker or at least told of so. Fact was there wasn't nowt of mine had gone up Mitzi Barker's back-end more than a couple of fingers, nowt in her gob neither but my tongue. If Terrence Thorsby was still around now he'd vouch for how I would no more than skim through his books of dirty drawings on account of some of them peculiar predilections. That sort of stuff was not for me all right and I was no way intending to change that with Mitzi Barker or no-one else who'd have me for that matter any time soon.

So we got to the dip and the sun was still skegging up over the fields and I didn't reckon nowt to it at the time. I was more for fretting about why there was an old Landrover parked up on the ridge. It was way up past where the road had gone to muck and there was no-one bar the trout farm lot had any business in being up this far. Thinking they might have seen me nabbing some of them fish earlier I lobbed that bait box in a patch of

nettles and I had to keep hold of Mitzi Barker's arm hard enough till it welted up just to stop her jumping right in there after it. Times like that I sure was glad she was dumb all right.

Well, there was no-one about and I was all for carrying right on back to that flophouse and making the best of things when curiosity overtook me and I was scrambling up that ridge on my hands and knees for a quick squint.

Mitzi Barker stayed down on the track eyeing up that patch of nettles and it was just as well because what I saw was no sight for a girl of her age, not even one who gave it up as regular as her.

Other side of the ridge there was a lad and a lass giving it up more happy than me and Mitzi Barker had ever done. They were moaning and panting so much it minded me of them nights in lambing season in the Thackerays' barn. It didn't do nowt for me did the sight. I seen enough privates in my time to get by without making room for more. Course, it was still a mighty fine sight on account of its unexpectedness and I lay there in the bracken wondering how to make the most of it. In the end I burrowed back down the ridge and brought Mitzi Barker up to have a skeg and she even fetched a quick smile so I reckoned I must have been doing something right.

There was no signs of letting up down below, in fact all the signs was of things getting more frisky, and just as I was about getting fed up something came into my mind that I wish never had.

I was back up that bank quick as an adder and I made it all the way to the back of the Landrover while they were still full involved in their business. Mitzi Barker was just lain there watching me with them big eyes of hers and I was getting them fanciful notions in my head again of her becoming mine for keeps.

Before I'd proper thought things through I was rutting up against the back of that Landrover so hard it was all for branding my backside. Well there was a fair look on Mitzi Barker's face when I humped that wagon up a good few inches till my arms were burning sharp as the hot metal in my back. Just as I was thinking I had a right to expect her to be well impressed, I saw her gob changed to hanging open like she'd been fish-hooked, and bugger me if that Landrover didn't start rolling slow enough right off that ridge edge.

It wasn't till I popped my head down in the bracken and made to skedaddle that I heard the roaring. I've heard some roaring in my time but nowt like what was rising up out of that dip that day with the sun looking on. I took a sly skeg over at where the Landrover was rested and I saw the lad and the lass fair croodled up in blood underneath. The lad may have been fairly much obvious a goner right away but the lass was whimpering real soft like and surely not conked quite yet. Came to me it might be easier for all concerned if she was. Then I looked up and saw Mitzi Barker standing on the ridge top black-shaped against the sun and gawping down on me played as a lamped-up jack-rabbit. Then she bolted and there didn't seem no chance of a lump like me ever catching her up but I left them lovers under the Landrover, her still whimpering and all, and it came to me to give it my best shot to get right after her.

Funny, but it's not the sight of that lass that bothers me most when I'm sending that day back and forth through my stupid old head. The thing that makes me most frantic is what I might've done if I'd run fast enough to cop hold of Mitzi Barker one more time up the lane that day. Chances are I'd have wrung her neck quick as one of

old Robinson's scrawny-arsed chickens and dumped her under that Landrover with them other two. Don't I just know it and don't I reckon the sun knows it too.

Well, I spent them next days or weeks fair sweating out my fear. Turns out them Landrover pair had no business being up that lane which was as I suspected. They were the talk of the whole damn village and there were a fair few reckoned they just about got what they deserved for larking about like that.

The lass, she got out alive after a good few hours and wouldn't you just know it, it was the lad of Burgess passing by who plucked her out. Still, turns out it was just as well far as I'm concerned as she recounted how the thing reared up like an unbroke colt and came down on them all of its own accord. Fair ended any suspicions there might have been over the cause of things, though it still don't make it no easier when I pass her in the street some days and she's stuck to the seat of that contraption of hers with her bones skew-iff as the teeth of a rusted old thresher.

As for Mitzi Barker, I never did see her again after that night, not to speak to any road. She was always crossing over or looking away and I couldn't make no show of chasing her. And she sure as heck never went up that lane again, not with me nor any of them other boys far as I'm aware.

As time went by I long since stopped bothering myself with wringing her neck. All that nagged me was telling her so long as she promised not to say nowt about what she saw, we could still get along right as rain. Could feed her as many rainbows as she wanted and maybe plan for that future somehow, just me and her in that old flophouse of mine. Course, she wouldn't be inclined to say nowt back. But far as I'm concerned that would do just fine, just so long as that damn sun let up long enough for us to see things through.

* * * *

Revelations

Debbie Bullock's mum was as horny as hell till the day she saw a vision of the Virgin Mary scouting up at her from the bottom of a fish and chip tray. Call it divine intervention, whatever. That was the day the shit really started to hit the fan.

We were sat on the end of the prom. Salt was shaking in off the waves. We were feeding up before we headed back to the Travelodge for more. Under her knee-length coat she wore panties the colour of ketchup. She had stilettos to match. She kept them on the whole time.

The trays were warming our knees. She finished her chips and blinked down. Then she blinked down again. Her lips shone out in an O shape. She said, 'holy...' Then she said, 'Jesus..' I leaned in. The batter crumbs made a perfect outline. She said, 'it's a miracle.' She said, 'you see it, don't you?' I saw it all right. The way it greased out of that tray, I just knew it was going to be trouble.

Me and Debbie had been off and on till the day she went and got herself fish-fingered by a lad from the fleet. We'd known each other since first form. We were the golden couple. She looked hot, with banged-up blonde hair and a strain-out chest before the others wore bras. She stalked round school like she owned the place. We spent nights in the long-stay static with the broken latch. Then I screwed her best friend and things cooled right off. While she was camped up in the same long-stay static with twin sprats swimming round in her belly, I took Marnie Sleightholme down Back South Lane. We spun on mud and went side-on into a tree. They cut Marnie out and took her right arm off with it. It was kind of a hard thing to hide.

News of Debbie's seaside dallies eased the guilt trip a little. Debbie's dad slung his shotgun over his shoulder and headed straight off to town to try to hunt him down. There was more chance of Captain Birdseye washing up with the high tide than there was of him hauling in the lad in question. Debbie's dad came back three days later with bloodshot eyes and a skin rash. Debbie's mum near-drowned herself in gin for a couple of weeks then she buffed her hair bright and headed off down the gym to get her beauty back. When she showed up at my door soon after, she shone health and fitness. She said, 'you must be hurting, babes.' I invited her in. We sat on the couch. She slid her hand on my thigh just like the milf-movies. Next thing I knew, that gym-honed arse of hers was bobbing up and down on me like a pair of tight life-buoys in a swell.

After that time, Debbie's mum fish-hooked me in every chance she got. She'd pick me up straight from school,

hiss in my ear that she was naked underneath. She'd claw at my clothes, rub her nose in my class-dust. Some days she'd phone me in sick, beg me round to her place to spend the whole day in her marital bed. Once time I lamped out the back window in my boxer shorts when Debbie's dad came home unexpected from the animal feeds. She took me shopping for new clothes to make up for it. She spent money she didn't have on tight-fit tee-shirts and Calvin Kleins. She gazed in my eyes and said, 'I need you.' Our record was four times a day. After, she spoon-fed me porridge, crouched nude by the bed-side but for those stilettos. My grab-marks still twisted her tits. She told me, 'it'll keep your strength.' I was seventeen. We made plans. She said she was leaving him just as soon as she got things fixed up. Said she'd get enough cash from the split-up for a place of our own in town. We window-shopped bed-spreads and televisions. I dumped my A-levels, gave up on my chance of a college place. I told my teacher, 'I don't need college where I'm going.' I set my sights on a nine-to-five job on the quay. I reckoned the night-times would more than make up for the boredom.

It was our first night away when she saw the Virgin Mary greased out of chip fat. She'd thrown a bathroom bag and a bottle of gin on the back-seat, tossed in those ketchup stilettos and motored right out. She picked me up out of sight at the truck-stop. She kissed my lips and squeezed my balls. She said, 'I need you.' We booked in the Travelodge as mother and son. We had to squeeze the single beds together. We ordered champagne on room service. She drank it all off me, then she said, 'I'm hungry.' I smiled, 'uh-huh?' She play-slapped my cheek and told me we had all the time in the world. She wrapped her coat back over her undies and we headed out for those chips.

Debbie's mum gripped that tray right back to the hotel like she had her hands on a chest of pirate treasure. When we reached the room she laid it down on the dresser. She sat in front and stared down, fumbling for the gin. She swigged and said, 'I read about this.' I waited on the bed in my boxers. I said, 'uh-huh?' She said, 'tomatoes and shit.' Then she said, 'I haven't set foot in a church since the day I headed up specially just to make double-sure his mother had gone in the ground. Why us, Jake?'

I said, 'maybe He likes a challenge.' When I looked back over her head was hung and her shoulders were shaking. I reached for her. She pulled back and said, 'it's a sign, Jake. I don't know what it's saying, but it's a sign all right.'

She sat and blubbed her way through most of the bottle. She said, 'it's not right. It's not right.' I ordered pizza and ate hers too. I watched sport. Later, I stripped her nude but for her stilettos. She said, 'it's not right.' I licked her right enough. Five minutes in, she stuck a stiletto in the bed-gap and wrenched her ankle ninety degrees. She bawled about telling me about it not being right. She screamed so high she shook the gin bottle on the side. I headed out to the McDonald's opposite and fetched a super-sized ice-cold coke. I stuck it against her ankle and tipped it over. I rubbed in the cubes. Her ankle swelled bigger than her daughter's belly. She said, 'I think it's broken.' Then she said again, 'I said it wasn't right. I said it wasn't.'

I wriggled her on her panties and blouse. Her foot was too swelled to take her jeans. I wrapped her coat around her and hopped her down the hotel lift to a taxi. He dumped us at the door of A&E. They smelled her breath and stuck us at the back of the queue. The X-ray showed up sprained. They strapped her up and gave her pills. I wheelchaired her out. She said, 'the tray!' I flagged a taxi and we headed back to the hotel. She wailed the whole way. The bed was made and the bins were empty. It seemed the Virgin Mary had gone out with the trash.

Well, that was the time the shit really did hit the fan. Debbie's mum levered up and slapped me hard. She spat, 'I told you!' She swung out the door and lurched down the corridor. She palmed the walls. She fell on the first cleaning trolley and started tearing at the bin-bag. She pawed out food leftovers and shit paper on the carpet. A maid popped her head round the corner. She had dark skin and wide eyes. She saw the slew of mess and shouted, 'what the hell?' Debbie's mum was on all fours, tossing stuff high. Her coat was open. Her blouse rode up. Early-nighters peeped out of their rooms. One of the rooms peeped out a whole hen-night of old girlfriends. Tammy, Lizzie, Jodie - I'd been with them all in my off-time from Debbie. Now they all posed

bare-legged and strappy-topped and leered like I wouldn't stand a chance in hell if I tried, not since I left poor Marnie with her arm hanging half off the way I did. They said, 'Jake? Mrs Bullock?' They'd all grown up with Debbie and they'd taken enough of her shit not to give them reason to keep it in their traps. They giggled and glued phones to their ears. Debbie's mum burst out more tears and splayed her ketchup knickers for all to see. They said, 'Mrs Bullock? Are you okay?' Debbie's mum said, 'my Virgin. They've taken my Virgin.' They hooted when security came and carried her off. She got dumped on the hotel steps and sat for half an hour spewing see-through gin-sick. She shivered and told me to stick it. Then she crawled back up the steps on all fours and stuck her fist through the hotel front window. I peeled my shirt and tied it round her wrist. The ambulance splashed blue at the front walls. They loaded her in as the hen night struck out. They clacked past the gin-sick and didn't look back.

By the time I reached home the next day, I reckoned the whole place must be in on the story. I'd spent half the night cricking my back on an A&E chair. Debbie's mum got kept in for some sort of psycho check. I struck out when the sun came up. When I passed village limits it seemed the whole place fell silent. I held a Kwik Save bag with her red stilettos. I'd about got past the static site when I heard Debbie calling. She leaned out of the broken-latch window and said, 'shit, Jake - what happened?' My tee-shirt was caked in her mum's wrist-blood. She flung her door and helped me in. The place stank of stale fags and hung with cold. She flopped back in the couch I used to fuck her on. Cardboard stuck round the windows. She said, 'home sweet home, huh, Jake?' I said, 'you don't have to do this.' She said, 'it's the way I want it.' I crumpled opposite. She laughed, 'look at us pair of fuck-ups.' She struck a fag and threw me one. She nodded at the bag and said, 'I never knew you were that way inclined.' I tried a smile. Her hair was mud-brown and stuck-down limp, and baby-weight clung in folds from her face down. I don't know where it came from, but I started crying. Debbie said, 'shit Jake, it's me who has the hormones.' I wiped the wet from my eyes. I looked in hers and blurted out the whole of everything.

Debbie leaned up and stared deep in me. She sparked another fag when I got to the Virgin Mary. When I reached the end a smile curled her lips. She smoked the rest of her fag and stubbed it on the table in front. She smiled again. She said, 'they're yours, Jake. There never was no boys from the fleet. No-one but you.'

I sat and my head spun. Debbie got up quiet and made coffee. We sat some time. Then Debbie reached in a pile of old clothes and tossed me a tee-shirt. It was stained and smelled stale. Debbie said, 'I need you to do something for me.'

I took her to church. She looped my arm and puffed down the pavement. She made us sit third row. I felt folks' eyes. I eyed up the Virgin and in secret asked her why. We mumbled forgiveness for our sins. I reckoned Debbie must have seen I was weighed down by bad choices. We took the communion. Then we went back to the static. The wind pushed us back. Debbie said nothing. When we got back she motioned to the couch and said, 'get some sleep.' I stretched down and was out in seconds.

When I came to it was back to night and in the thick yellow side-light I saw Debbie sat on the chair opposite, cradling her dad's old shotgun in her arms. I screwed upright. She swung the barrel and said, 'he always said I had a good eye for vermin.' I said, 'shit, Debbie.' She outlined her lips with her tongue. She toyed the gun over me. She said, 'give me one good reason.' I looked around frantic. I gestured at her belly. I said, 'the kids, Debbie..' She dry-laughed and jabbed the rifle at her guts. She said, 'should I?' Then she pulled it away and said, 'just kidding, I reckon. '

Car beams swung past outside. Debbie jerked the rifle back up. The car passed. She smiled. I said, 'why'd you lie, Debbie?' She cackled out, 'it's a bit late to be playing happy families, Jake.' I saw her squeeze the trigger. The world went slo-mo. I swear I saw the bullet coming, digging in. I heard a buzz of silence and felt pain a thousand times worse than I'd ever felt before. I saw the van roof and its pebble-dashed damp. I blinked out the darkness. I heard dogs bark and shouting. I saw strobes of bright light. I saw Debbie doubled up on the couch, wet creeping out between her legs, the gun dropped on the lino floor. I saw blood spewing sideways

from my gut, how it looked the same colour as ketchup.

* * * *

Jimbob

Jimbob Blakey wasn't so much given birth to as clambered right out of his mother himself. He weighed in at almost thirteen pounds, came ready-fitted with a shock of fat black hair and a couple of razor teeth.

Jimbob's folks loved him like most folks love their little ones, maybe more. They'd been trying so hard for a child, suffered more mid-term miscarriages than the ewes they shuttled off to market most Thursdays.

They dressed him in a one-year babygro and took him home to their hill farm. They fought to get up nights and give him his milk. His teeth made breast-feeding impossible. They sat hours gazing down in his cot. They dressed him fine and took him to their church and gave their thanks. Showed him off like the proud parents they were. Others cooed and smiled. But they never asked to hold. They gave thanks the Blakeys were happy, and that the monkey-baby had not been born to them.

Jimbob's folks never gave a second thought that their boy might be different. The first Spring he walked, he stomped the moors in his welly-boots helping herd the pregnant ewes down in-by. He copied his father, kicking and cuffing at the stragglers, when the flock was returned to the hills in May.

As Jimbob grew, his hair became thicker, his arms longer. His head shrunk down on his shoulders. At check-ups, nurses fixed smiles and pronounced him healthy. Doctors said, 'he'll make you a strapping lad.' His mother smiled, her heart swelled. When he was three, she sent him to nursery. She wanted him to mix with other kids. To taste life off the hard hills. She said, 'it'll do him the world of good.' Jimbob hated leaving the farm. He clung to his mother. She drove away, blinking tears. On the third day, she took a phone call. 'It's Jimbob,' they said. 'He's scaring the other kids.' The truth hit Jimbob's mother like a hammer.

From that day, things changed on the hill farm. Jimbob's mother shopped for essentials at sunrise. Stopped going to church. Told the Reverend, 'I see those faces. I see their judgements.' Cooing, smiling, not asking to hold. The Reverend said, 'you have a miracle.' She said, 'Lord strike me down for saying it, but sometimes I don't know what to believe.' She came to shuffling Jimbob off upstairs when visitors came. Scooped him from the paddock when car-clouds rose from the track below. Shushed him in the top room. Told her few old friends he was fine, he was sleeping. Jimbob's father stayed out longer hours, seldom saw his boy. Back home, they sat up late nights, not talking.

The summer Jimbob turned five, they held him down and sheared his thick hair. His mother stitched longer arms into his school uniform. Packed his lunchbox with his favourite things. Jimbob screamed, slapped the back window.

Jimbob liked school. His hair grew back. His arms grew longer. He grew taller, broader. He stood tall as the kids in class six. They teased him for it, and he learned to thump them back. After three weeks, his mother took a call. 'It's Jimbob,' they said.

For years after, Jimbob seldom left the hills. Twice he got ill - first time they wrapped him in blankets and ice packs and banked on their dwindling faith to see it past. Second time, blood-red blotches worried them: they persuaded the visiting vetinary to diagnose nothing worse than a fever. Pleaded for secrecy, but word slowly spread: the Blakeys had had the vetinary out to see their monkey-boy.

Jimbob would shack up upstairs himself, dive for cover in the neck-high bracken from hikers or neighbours. He even sat out visits by the education welfare man, while his mother dragged excuses and flicked textbooks

downstairs.

Only when Jimbob turned teenage and his old man was no longer so strapping did Jimbob venture down to town on market days. The other farm kids would jostle and make fun of him, pull at his arms or jump up to slap the top of his head. The biggest challenged him to fights - Jimbob was no fighter, but he was forced to give in. One right hand laid out the biggest of them round the back of the wagons. Word got round, and the hassling stopped.

When things got bad, shutting Jimbob away became the least of the Blakeys' worries. Subsistence was all, and some beast was ravaging the value that remained. Was leaving red intestine trails all over their land. They took turns sitting through nights with hot flasks and shotguns loaded. With each sunrise came more intestines and paw prints bigger than any cat they knew.

The Bulmers would come from over the valley to compare head-counts, tracking methods. Old Man Bulmer with his gammy hip and sheep-shit-and-snuff stink. Jimbob's mother would seek solace in how when things got bad, they were never as bad as the Bulmers. In the rag-clothes on the Bulmers' washing line, the rusting machinery in their yard, the dirt under their nails. Old Man Bulmer would check his gun, remark, 'I've a mind to turn it on myself.' Jimbob listened through the floorboards. When Old Man Bulmer's feet scuffed out the yard, Jimbob would wrap a fleece round his shoulders, make up a fresh brew and head out on the night-shift.

On his sixteenth birthday, Jimbob dragged a great black panther in the back porch. Jimbob was caked in blood and scratches and his thick black hair was tufting out. His folks looked up from their breakfasts. They dropped their jaws. Jimbob said, 'it was worrying 'em some, so I punched it out.' His father said, 'Holy shitting Jesus.' His mother glanced up, said, 'Lord, forgive us.'

Jimbob's father called over the Bulmers. They stood round and prodded it with sticks and tarnished toe-caps. Jimbob hid upstairs, dabbed his wounds. He heard the young lad, Evan, say, 'you could make summat big of this.' Jimbob's father respond, 'mark my words, we'll be making nowt.'

Jimbob's father buried the carcass in the hills and fended off a couple of phone calls from the local press. 'Nowt but a mad dog,' he said, and replaced the handset. Some came to the door. He watched their smart company cars glint up the dust-track, waited on the front step cupping his shotgun. 'No beasts been up here,' he'd say. Then fix eyes, add: 'wouldn't dare.' Another came, short and fat with gold wrapped round his wrists. 'I got wind of some giant,' the short fat man grinned. 'Talk of the market, so he is.' The short fat man ignored the shotgun. He pressed a card in Jimbob's father's hand. Jimbob's father didn't glance. He said, 'you're full of wind, all right.'

The man said, 'have him call me.'

Jimbob's father tossed the card in the dirt. When the fat man left, he headed straight round the Bulmers. He hair-pulled Evan straight from his table into the yard, barked so help him he'd string him up by his bollocks if any more word got out.

Some day after, there was another knock at the Blakeys' door. His father cursed. Jimbob scraped his chair, headed upstairs. It was a full-shaped, red-haired girl. The lass of the Bulmers. She offered a basket of eggs. 'To say thank you,' she said. She peered past in the kitchen. 'It ain't much, but it's all we got.' Jimbob's mother rose up, thanked her, took the eggs. Shut the door while she stood on the step. She set the eggs in front of her, flicked them of muck. She said, 'we'll not be eating them.'

The red-haired girl called round two or three times more. Final time, she asked straight out for Jimbob. Jimbob's mother snapped, 'Jimbob's not here.' The girl said, 'I seen him out and about only this morning.' A floorboard creaked. They all looked up. Jimbob's mother flushed. 'You've got no business with your spying.'

The girl said, 'if you don't mind me saying, you got no business in locking him away like you do.' Jimbob's mother curled her lips. Reached her hand back in a slap. She said, 'oh, I mind you saying, all right.' Then Jimbob appeared at his mother's shoulder. He wore a wild, grown-up beard, a holey navy jumper with too-short arms. He looked blank at the girl. The girl smiled back. 'I'm Tina,' she said. 'I seen you round.'

Night times, Tina took to trailing Jimbob in the hills. Jimbob mostly ignored her. Had feelings he could not account for. She said, 'lamped right out of my window, I did, damn near broke my neck just to give you a bit of company. Figured you might need it. Least you could do is open your trap.' Jimbob took to shaving mornings, clipped at his hair. Stayed out late enough he started sleeping in, missing his father's morning chores. Still couldn't do no accounting for it. Jimbob's mother said, 'She's a Bulmer, I doubt she's any good for you.' She said, 'don't let her go putting fanciful notions in that thick head of yours.'

Fifth or sixth time, they sat out over the valley while the last white drained from the sky. Tina said, 'it gets kind of lonely up here.' Jimbob said, 'I like it that way.' Tina said, 'you're a hard one, Jimbob Blakey.' Her arm rustled his. Tina leaned over, took his chin, kissed his mouth. Kept it pressed, pushed warm. He reached up, tore at her blouse. Smelled a burst of soap and meadow flowers. She squirmed back, brayed, 'easy, now!' Her hoots echoed round the moors. Once they'd finished, she patched her blouse back on. She said, 'the moor's full of secrets, huh, panther boy.' She kissed his cheek, trod out in the black toward the light squares.

Jimbob started spending more time with Tina. More nights on the hills. His folks disapproved. 'Must be a damn lot of big cats out there, way you're turning all nocturnal,' his father grumbled. His mother repeated, 'you mark my words, she'll bring you nowt but trouble will that one.'

Trouble was brought to them one night on the moors. Tina had shed most of her clothes and made a bed of bracken. She said, 'what was that?' She said, 'there - you hear it?' Jimbob was already half-way to a gorse copse. Moved so silent for such a big man. He flung himself, ignored its spikes. There was a scream, a struggle. Tina clasped her top. A silhouette flickered away against the moon. Evan. He shouted back, 'you think you're so clever. You'll see. You'll see, all right.' Tina pulled her clothes back on, said, 'I gotta go.' Jimbob took her arm. She yanked free, said again, 'I gotta go.' She left a path as she went.

The markets were hard. The mood of Jimbob's father darkened. He took to drinking nights. Heard tell of a farmer up the dale who'd blown his own brains out, such was the forecast. He swung his shotgun at a couple of media types who'd got wind of the panther story. His mother sat in, mostly wept. Jimbob camped day and night in the hills, watched the Bulmer house. Once or twice, when he was sure old Bulmer was down the vale, he'd go round, slewed through mud in the yard. Second time, Evan answered the door. He leered at Jimbob.

'What you want?'

'Tina's what I want.'

'Well, she don't want you.'

'Let me hear it from her.'

'She don't want you.' He shut the door in his face.

Jimbob tried a few times more. Till the day Old Man Bulmer hobbled round waving a gun of his own. He reeked so strong of drink it even out-stunk the sheep shit. He shouted out Jimbob's father: 'where's that damn monkey-boy of yours? I got issues.'

Jimbob's father appeared at the door. He laughed at Old Man Bulmer swaying in his yard. He spat on the ground. He said, 'you got nothing but a piece of shit whore.'

Old Man Bulmer poked the rifle butt towards Jimbob's father's ribs. He said, 'you say that again, I'll blow a hole in you so big.'

Jimbob's father said, 'you heard me.'

They stood off. Old Man Bulmer said, 'he's nowt but a half-beast. He wants caging.'

'That's all the thanks he gets for saving that rag-tag flock of yours?'

Old Man Bulmer slitted up his eyes. 'I don't buy it. Never did. Likely found the thing dead hisself. Cooked up a ruse as a way of impressing.' He cracked a deep breath, cocked his head. 'I know what he's playing at.'

Jimbob loomed in the porch. 'Trouble?' he said.

Old Man Bulmer wheeled the rifle in his direction. He said, 'I know all about your raping, boy. Don't you tell me I don't.'

Jimbob said, 'raping?'

'Her word, boy. You stay away, you heard. You think I'm gonna stand by, let some half-breed mess with my daughter, you got another thing coming.'

Jimbob's father snorted a laugh.

Old Man Bulmer said, 'I ain't joking. How'd you like every shitting newspaper man this side of Fleet Street heading up, poking around in your business?'

He turned away. He half-turned back, said, 'you hear me, boy?' He trudged out the yard.

Jimbob got back to work, re-applied himself. His father seethed - at Old Man Bulmer or Jimbob, sometimes both. Jimbob kept an eye on the Bulmer farm, hoping for a glimpse - a toss of red hair, anything. Nothing till the following summer when he saw her in-by, waiting for her old man and Evan to bring the old ewes down off the hills for clipping. He scooted down, surprised her in the yard. Shocked, her eyes flashed wild. She said, 'you're not supposed to be here.' She was broader, fuller-hipped. Her tee-shirt strained. Her nipples pressed through. He recalled the nights. She said, 'please go.'

Jimbob said, 'I wondered, is all.'

Tina said, 'they'll kill you.'

Jimbob curled a laugh. He said, 'maybe some things is worth the killing.' He reached for her arm. She pulled out, coughed, said, 'what the hell?' It bounced off the farm buildings. The yard creaked with rust. She said, 'what the hell?' again.

Jimbob said, 'I never did nowt.'

She said, 'You did summat.'

He said, 'it were nowt.'

She said, 'call this nowt?'

She hooked her tee-shirt up over her swelling belly, stared in his eyes till she was sure he knew. Tears stained her cheeks. She let Jimbob take her, press in her hair. 'They're after taking it, Jim,' she whimpered. 'After riving it right out. Say the last thing they want's another mouth to feed. And a damn son of a monkey boy's mouth at that.'

Some days later, Jimbob snuck out to the yard in the dark, shushed the dogs. The farm was busy with clipping, the ewes scuffed in-by. Jimbob being out and about in the early hours was no cause for suspicion. He gently keyed the lock on his father's old Volvo and sat in, tossed his rucksack in the back. He got back familiar with the pedals. The moment he turned the engine, the upper light of the house flicked on. He saw his father's shape silhouetted against it. He turned the lights, fired the Volvo out of the yard, across the valley.

They wound down the black lanes till the lights of town loomed before them. Jimbob watched the rear-view mirror for follow-lights. There were none. Tina stared ahead. She rested her hand on his when he lingered on the gear-stick. On her lap was a handbag filled with the cash her old man had been saving for the getting-rid. Enough for a couple of nights at least. Tina directed Jimbob through the outskirts, read the signs past the empty market. 'Furthest I gone,' said Jimbob, clasping tight to the wheel. Tina smiled. 'It's gonna be okay,' she said.

That first night they spent in a lay-by, lolled on the back-seat for the last hours till the sun poked up. Next day they still headed south, sticking to back roads, aiming nowhere much. Evening, they turned back to the by-pass, spent most of their money on service station snacks and a bed for the night. Jimbob lurked behind while Tina booked. The desk assistant looked twice. She said, 'you're big.' Tina snapped, 'you're fat, but we don't cast no aspersions.' The assistant gasped. The pair glared. Jimbob said, 'we're just wanting a bed.'

They stayed awake most of their first night in a bed, about spent up on a pair of great fry-ups they had brought to their room. After, they nuzzled some more. Tina said, 'I can't go back, Jim. Not ever.'

Jimbob fished in the back pocket of his bunched-up jeans and said, 'I got this.' It was the card from the short fat man. He'd pulled it out of the muck once his father stomped off and thought not much of it. Tina shrugged. 'We gotta do summat. For the bairn, if nowt else.'

Jimbob had Tina call the number. 'Up Wether Cote,' she said. She pulled a face at Jimbob. 'Aye, a big lad is right.' She said, 'I don't know owt about no cat.' Then, 'the market is fine.'

She put down the phone and reached for her clothes. She said, 'we got us a meeting-up.'

The short fat man took one look at Jimbob and said, 'aye, he's a big 'un right enough.' He looked at his arms, said, 'fair reach, too.'

He squinted up. 'They tell me you tapped out a panther.'

Jimbob shrugged. Tina said, 'they tell you right.' The short fat man flicked his eyes. They lingered on her front. He said, 'how'd you fancy making a bit of brass?' Tina said, 'he fancies it, all right.' The short fat man leered. 'You too, if you're inclined.' Tina steel-stared back. 'Well, I ain't. And nor's this bairn of mine inside me.'

First hit, Jimbob felt a fuzz in his head and a hot mouth of blood. The second stuck in his ribs and knocked the wind right out of him. He stumbled back and the tall guy attacked, flailing fists in Jimbob's face, knuckles dragging red ribbons over his forehead. Jimbob loped out a wide right hook and the flailing stopped. Blinking back to focus, he saw the tall guy stretched in front, twitching in the dew. The short fat man wore a gold-toothed grin shiny as sheep-dip. Another pair slapped the tall guy back. The short fat man came over, shook Jimbob's sore hand. He said, 'we'll get you fixed up, all right.'

Jimbob and Tina moved in an old caravan round the back of the greyhound track. The short fat man - Lenny - let them have it on tick. It reeked of damp and stale sweat. The linoleum floor stuck to their feet. Woodchip peeled off the inside walls. A stained, sunken mattress was their bed. No electric, no water, no heat. Tina said, 'I ain't going nowhere near.' Lenny pressed a fifty in Tina's hand. 'Just needs a bit of smartening up,' he said. Tina said, 'bit more than smartening.' They bought a new mattress, still slept curled up on the Volvo's back seat while they waited.

On dog days, the mutts whizzed round after the lure and travelling folk queued at the betting booth, hollered on their tickets. Out back, Jimbob took on all-comers, matched the challenger's bet for winner-takes-all. Lenny put up extra, took half the profits, plus extra for early rent and a likely packet on side-bets. They were bare-fist fights - no clinching or holding, twenty seconds to rise from a knockdown. They fought till one was knocked out or gave up. They seldom lasted long. Jimbob's looping right hand accounted for most. The old leather-faced men at the front told Len he had a legend on his hands.

Stakes rose and the opponents came from further. They fought stripped to the waist, smeared in each other's blood. Jimbob broke his nose and his knuckles, cracked a few ribs. He was butted, gouged and wrestled - sometimes the referee overlooked. Once or twice he took a dive. For it, he got a bigger cut of Lenny's betting, tempted bigger stakes next time out.

Tina never watched him fight. She started showing and stayed in the caravan. Jimbob would bring home cash. There was little left after Lenny took his cut and the rent and food was paid. They sold the Volvo and had the caravan fixed up best they could. They painted it from top to bottom and got the roof fixed. That winter, they hooked up a generator and huddled together round a couple of bar heaters. In the new year, Tina gave birth to a boy. Eight pounds only, but with Jimbob's long arms and thick black hair. Zack, they called him - he was a sickly baby, hacked out a cough in the caravan's damp. Tina sat up nights stopping him crying, feeding him up. Jimbob would come home all hours, out from a night with the boys or a fight far away. She'd swaddle his knuckles, dab at his bruises. They'd lie, listen to Zack turning, the wind buffeting the van. Till one night she said, 'oh Jimbob, we gotta get out of here.'

Jimbob said, 'got nowhere.'

He turned. She searched his back.

It went on that way till one early morning, Jimbob rolled up home and no hacking or crying met him when he clicked the door. No-one to swaddle his knuckles. He lay down and slept off the beer. Next morning, he found a note. Too ashamed, he tossed it aside. He fingered the spare cash in his pocket, figured maybe his life just got a whole lot simpler.

Where the boys met trouble in town, they called for Jimbob. He seldom had to go so far as to use his fists. They came to respect him. Jimbob came to telling the panther story, how he wrestled it down, beat it out. He had girls huddle round, pinch his muscles, gaze up at his height. He took to taking them back to his caravan, sometimes two at a time. He fucked how he fought. When he'd finished, they'd fall asleep and he'd sit up drinking home-brew till he about passed out. The boys came to get a little jealous of his womanising. They mocked him for how such a big man could get drunk so quick. The taunts got louder the more he fell towards unconscious and his fists fell helpless.

One night, they shaved all the hair from Jimbob's head and stuck it back on his body, stuck it with paint and strawberry jam. When he woke, Jimbob caught sight and punched holes through the side of his van till his knuckles re-broke. He waded out, still naked, grabbed a plank and took to smashing generators and other van windows. One-night-stands shrieked out the doors, clutching clothes to their chests. Jimbob bellowed. The frightened men bawled, 'the monkey-boy's lost it!' It took four to pin him down. Lenny loomed, took one look at Jimbob's broken hands. 'You're no good to me in this state,' he said. His breath bit of booze. 'You fight once

more to fix up the damage you caused. Then you get the hell out, you hear me?'

Jimbob nursed his swollen hands and laid low in his battered caravan. The heating broke, he slept nights wrapped tight in dirty blankets. He took to drinking more heavy, ate boiled-up rice packets pushed through the door. From outside, he heard blurred talk of the big fight.

Till one Sabbath morning, a crisp light came up and Lenny fisted the door. 'You're on,' he bellowed. 'You got an hour.' Jimbob shook the booze from his brain and reached for jeans-bottoms still bloodied from last time. He winced when he crunched his hands to fists. He glanced in the mirror at his blood-shot eyes and stubble-hair. Felt his bones creak with cold. He peeled back the cardboard he'd stuck over the broken van windows, saw a trail of travelling folk gathering round a makeshift ring, double-bale high. Regular folk from the gypsy camps and market pens, the boys who'd daubed him for the hell of it. Saw Lenny doing deals, wondered who his money was on. Was surprised he'd not been asked to swing nothing - figured either Lenny had lost faith, or else he'd come to assuming what with the state of his hands he was a match for no-one.

Lenny came and pushed Jimbob through the crowd. The crowd mostly jeered and spat insults, depending where their money was at. He pushed aside a bale and clambered in the ring. On the other side, a tall thin man stood struggling to hold back a twisting pit-bull. Lenny studied the surprise in Jimbob's eyes. He clapped his shoulder, hissed, 'you got your chance, panther boy.'

Jimbob circled, crouched, felt his heart thump. The dog foamed on its leash. Lenny bawled, 'fight!' The thin man clicked the leash, jumped backwards on the bales. The dog shot at Jimbob - he swept a kick, missed, instinctively threw out his forearm. The dog clamped it in its jaws. Jimbob felt a scorch of pain, used all his strength to swing and shake, but the dog held firm. Jimbob swung his second arm round, began fisting the dog's soft underbelly. Its weight shifted, sending the pair spinning to the muddy grass. Jimbob side-rolled to protect his face. The dog still savaged his arm, tore his shoulder half from its socket. The crowd bawled. Jimbob had the dog on top of him, felt it crunching in his ribs, squeezing out the wind. He worked his spare arm free and poked his fingers in the soft of an eyeball. Wrenched and twisted till the dog's grip slightly slackened. Jimbob pulled free. The dog recoiled. Jimbob worked the other eye and slammed its nose. Each shot sent shards of pain up his arm and into his chest. Caked in blood, he worked up to his feet, began stamping the dog till it limped up and the thin man pushed past. Jimbob held his elbow, reeled out through the bales. Asked for nothing, nor did he get it. Blanked the crowd's taunts and cheers. Figured on hitching a ride. He reached the road-side, felt a tide of nausea sweep up. He saw the sky spin, and the hills and farms that were in it.

* * * *

Good Oil

Johnny got a tattoo of his girlfriend's name inside an arrowed heart on his upper left bicep. He said it was to show Carol how much he loved her. Carol took one look and decided she loved the estate agent a whole lot more. So Johnny changed the tattoo himself, using biro ink and a sewing needle, so it said 'Castrol', as in the oil. Then he added 'GTX'. The 'T' and the 'X' strayed outside the arrowed heart, and even in his own opinion made the thing look messy. Johnny spent a week in hospital with blood poisoning. He said what the hell, it's good oil.

Carol was waiting to meet him at the hospital gates. 'No way are you getting me in there,' she had told Johnny by telephone one day. He had rung to ask her to bring some Kestrel Super Strength.

'I'm fucking desperate,' Johnny had pleaded.

'I was in them places enough times when I were a kid. It's all death and that. It gives me the creeps.'

At the hospital gates, Carol told Johnny she'd finished with the estate agent, but really the estate agent had finished with her.

'No-one's ever done nothing like that for me before,' she said, slipping her arm through Johnny's bad one and making him wince. Johnny nuzzled his five-day stubble up against her cheeks. He smelled of Kestrel Super Strength.

'You got yourself sorted then?'

'I met a couple of lads having a smoke who helped me out.'

Carol smelled of a different brand of perfume. She asked Johnny if everything was going to be all right.

'It's nowt a drink won't fix,' Johnny said.

Carol had got a surprise ready for Johnny to try to make up for her running off like that with the estate agent, and what had happened with Johnny's tattoo.

To get the surprise sorted, she had to get back with the estate agent. She slept with him one more time and as soon as she heard him start snoring she took his set of keys.

She had a new set cut before he woke up.

She went round to the show home the night before Johnny came out of hospital and put some fresh flowers in a vase and a four-pack of Kestrel Super Strength on the kitchen side.

Carol told Johnny all about his surprise on the bus back from the hospital.

'It's fully furnished and everything,' she said.

Johnny said there'd better be an off-licence near by, or it wouldn't be much of a fucking party.

Johnny refused to go to the show home straight away. He said he did not want to spend the best part of the day in an empty house. So Johnny and Carol sat in the corner seats of the Fox and Rabbit, furthest from the door. A triangle of dust hung in the sunlight. Johnny crumbled the corners off his beer mat, and Carol fingered her empty glass.

Two boys were playing pool. They were swigging their pints like they knew where the next one was coming from. They wore tight tee-shirts which showed off their bare arms and flat bellies. They played in almost silence, playing each shot like something big depended on it. They left angles which allowed for the slope in the bottom left-hand corner where cigarette ash had burned away the baize. The taller boy hit the white ball off two cushions and potted a red he didn't intend. The shorter one muttered something under his breath and turned to feed the jukebox. 'You Can't Hurry Love' by Phil Collins jangled across the silence.

Carol lit up another cigarette and watched through the smoke as Johnny got up and wandered across. He slapped a two pence piece on the side cushion, almost losing his footing as he did.

'What the fuck's that?' said the taller boy.

'I'll play the winner,' said Johnny, his palm pressed flat against the side wall.

'With one fucking arm?' laughed the shorter boy.

'With no fucking arms if I want,' said Johnny.

The taller boy won the game and went to the bar.

'Mine's a lager,' said Johnny, reached down to rack up the balls.

'Fuck off,' said the taller boy, but he got Johnny a pint of lager anyway. Johnny noticed the thick roll of notes the boy pulled from his pocket.

'We're having a party tonight,' said Johnny. 'You can come if you bring a bottle, as they say. She knows where it is.' He motioned across the pub at Carol. The shorter boy walked across and sat down on Johnny's old stool, and asked Carol to lend him a fag.

The shorter boy leaned over and said, 'what the fuck's a sexy girl like you doing with a guy like that?'

Carol took another drag on her cigarette. She said, 'Have you ever had anybody love you enough to get a tattoo of your name across their arm?'

The boy said, 'I'll definitely get yours if you tell me what your name is.'

'Margaret'.

'Margaret?'

'Yeah. So?'

The shorter boy reached under the table and put his hand on Carol's thigh. They watched the taller boy pot the black. Johnny asked the taller boy for a twenty pence piece for the jukebox. He put on 'Wind of Change' by Scorpions. After the first verse, the landlord pushed aside his newspaper and reached over to pull the jukebox plug out of the wall.

'I want my money back,' said Johnny.

'Get to fuck,' said the landlord.

Bubbles began to foam at the corners of Johnny's mouth.

'It's lucky I'm disabled, or I'd fucking do you,' he said. He struck a few wobbly kung-fu poses in front of the pool table. The landlord shook his head and picked up his newspaper. The shorter boy slid his hand further up the inside of Carol's dress until it reached the warmth between her legs. Carol sucked on another Lambert and Butler and gazed into space.

Johnny insisted on doing the driving even though he only had one good arm. The shorter boy tried to pull Carol into the back next to him, but she pushed his hand away and got in the front next to Johnny. Her ankles sunk into old cigarette packets and empty cans. Johnny jolted the car out of its parking space. Carol lit up two Lamberts and Butlers at once and reached across to poke one between Johnny's lips.

'What did you do to your arm?' said the shorter boy.

'Knife fight,' said Johnny. 'You should have seen the other guy.'

'Yeah?' said the taller boy. In the darkness it was obvious they were trying not to laugh.

Johnny drove slowly. Carol had to help steer through the S-bend at the top of the high street. Johnny smoked his cigarette down to its filter and dropped it in his lap when it burnt his fingers. He swerved onto the kerb when he saw an off-licence, and gave the boys a shopping list.

Following Carol's directions, Johnny turned into the cul-de-sac without indicating. The show home was easy to find because it was the only one with a flagpole and a lawn. The cul-de-sac was bathed in orange light and no-one was about. The houses snaked around a slight curve with empty driveways. They were little boxes with square black windows and signs saying there were favourable rates for first-time buyers.

The show home smelled of sweat and fresh paint. It was fitted out like it was lived in by the neatest family in the world. The worktops were unmarked and the puffed-up cushions sat at nice angles on the sofa. Carol dragged her fingers along the empty mantelpiece. The taller boy scuffed his feet across the white sheepskin rug. The shorter boy went upstairs. Johnny sunk into the sofa and lit up another Lambert and Butler. He reached for the one of the bottles of vodka the boys had brought, and balanced it between his knees while he unscrewed the cap.

'To a great party,' he said, holding the bottle. 'And new friends.'

He tipped his head back and held the bottle at too steep an angle. The vodka poured down his chin and formed a damp patch at the top of his tee-shirt. The shorter boy shouted down from upstairs that the fucking stupid toilet wouldn't flush. Carol clicked open a can of Kestrel Super Strength and watched Johnny knock back the vodka until his eyes began to close. He fell asleep and the rest of the vodka drained into the folds of the sofa.

From the bedroom window Carol could see how the cul-de-sac curled into blackness. The shorter boy stood behind her and looped his bare arms inside hers to cup her breasts. She turned to him and saw he was already naked except his boxer shorts. She thought of Johnny lying downstairs. She let the shorter boy to push her gently down on the bed. She lifted her arse slightly as his fingers hooked the tops of her tights. The taller boy watched, then bent over and started to remove his jeans.

Johnny woke a few hours later to the sound of birds and the sunlight chinking in through the thin curtains. He felt the cold patch on his tee-shirt. He saw Carol sitting at the kitchen table, watching him.

'We'd better go before they come to open up,' Carol said. She got up, brushed her hands down the sides of her dress and tucked the kitchen stool back under the table.

Carol unclicked the front door. Johnny got to his feet and headed for the stairs.

'The toilet's full,' said Carol. 'It doesn't flush, remember.'

Johnny unzipped his trousers and began to piss on the carpet and the sofa. His piss reeked strong of alcohol. When he'd finished, he took a biro from the top of a pile of information leaflets on the sideboard and scrawled 'piss' and 'fuck' - or maybe 'pissfuck' - on the wall above the fireplace. He pressed the biro hard enough to tear the new paint.

Carol lit up a single Lambert and Butler as Johnny jolted the car through a three-point turn. She noticed how the morning dew sparkled on the show home's lawn. She wondered what it might be like to get up in the morning with a steaming mug of coffee and walk through the wetness barefoot. Johnny looked across at Carol and told her it was the best welcome home party he'd ever had. He told her how much he loved her, and that he was going to get his tattoo changed back to say 'Carol', just as soon as his arm was better.

* * * *

White Power

As forty-something neo-Nazis went, no-one was denying she was hot as shit. She had short-hacked hair that shone white as a Klan hood, and a perma-tan so deep she was in danger of having to start to hate herself.

There was a whole bunch of people willing to subscribe to all things Aryan just to give themselves a better shot at getting into Posie Birtles' Union Jack knickers. Two hundred and thirty one, to be exact - that's the number who voted for her 'Whites Unite' ticket at the latest council elections.

Posie Birtles' policies included boycotting the Kwik Save since it got taken over by the Senguptas, the only non-whites around the place. They were the kind of policies that pleased her old man, who was a bit of a big-shot on the far-right scene. Least, he was till he got caught red-handed trying to kick an asylum seeker right back over the English Channel. Now he funded the campaign from a cell block on the Isle of Wight. Reckoned with his cash and Posie's looks, reclaiming the nation's cultural identity was only a matter of time.

Posie Birtles paraded through the car park woods enough times to tempt a whole generation of teenagers of the benefits of natural selection. Dazaster was first to take a razor to his skull. Before long he was ferrying Posie round her various skinhead meet-ups in his ponced-up Lada. In case anyone questioned his Russian-made junk-heap, he pasted a 'British and Proud' sticker on his back bumper. He read up the 'Whites Unite' manifesto and spent his days loitering round the front of Kwik Save in a pair of second-hand jack-boots, hustling folk for indigenous rights and everyday essentials.

Course, such almost-picketing didn't go down too well with the Senguptas. Their second son Rohit headed out one day and gave Dazaster a black eye and a couple of cracked teeth for his troubles. Dazaster lisped hate through his swollen lips. Rohit laughed and went back to re-stacking. Dazaster headed straight round to tell the Fuhrer that this meant war.

Posie Birtles shook her head at Dazaster crumpled up on her driveway and told him her old man wouldn't stand for one of her boys being beat up by a Paki. She said, 'we're supposed to be the frigging master race.' Still, she forked out the dosh to send Dazaster to the dentist. Then she changed into her leopardskin figure-hugger and clacked right on down to Kwik Save.

'You been beating up one of my boys?' she called to Rohit round the back.

Rohit dumped the tin-trays and got close enough to smell her shower-fresh skin. He set his eyes on her front. He said, 'you after starting a war?'

Posie's eyes darted and she flat-handed Rohit back into the store-room. The air was strawberry-cool.

'Nazi scum,' said Rohit, tearing at her straps.

'Again.'

'Fucking dirty Nazi scum.'

At first, Posie Birtles seemed like just another of those posh-arse neighbours who lived off some long-gone husband's life insurance and generally kept herself to herself. Till the day her carnation beds bloomed the words 'White Power'. She fixed a flag-pole in her front lawn and hoisted the Union Jack. She got iron gates hooked up and a Rottweiler called Rudolph to keep her safe. She called Dazaster and said, 'I got a job for you.'

Dazaster buzzed through the gate with a baseball bat figuring he was going to be sent straight round to Kwik Save to teach those Pakis a lesson. Posie sprawled on a sun-lounger in a tiny bright white two-piece. Rudolph

took one look at the baseball bat and took off. 'Rudi!' shouted Posie, pricking up behind her moon-shades. Then to Dazaster: 'Drop the fucking bat!'

Dazaster had a split-second decision whether to sweep the Nazi-dog straight to third base or risk it leaving his dreams of a late-night putsch with Posie over for good. He fixed his eyes on the tiny white two-piece and chose the latter. Lucky for Dazaster, Rudolph chose his shoulder to take a chunk from.

Later, Posie led Dazaster out to the flower beds and said, 'you've got to make this right.'

She handed Dazaster a digital camera and backed away so she was posing into the sun.

'You got the words?' she said, flapping at the flowers behind her. Dazaster nodded. 'You got the flag?'

Posie whistled sharp. Rudolph bounded round from the back. Dazaster tensed. Rudolph gave him a hungry look and slunk around her knees. She said, 'you got it framed?'

Dazaster nodded. 'Now?'

'Hold up,' said Posie. She reached behind and unclasped her bikini top. Her breasts bounced free. She cupped them, leered.

She said, 'go.'

He pressed. He lingered in the viewfinder. Posie Birtles motioned for the camera. 'Perfect,' she said, flicking back through the pictures. Dazaster smelled fruit scent and sun lotion.

'It's his birthday, see.'

She reached over and kissed Dazaster's cheek. A hard nipple brushed his bare arm. He goose-bumped up. She turned and walked back to the house. He watched her thong-arse all the way till it went indoors. He thought how it felt like his fucking birthday too.

One time, Dazaster used to hope that being the first of his peer group to own a car was his sure-fire ticket to pussy. He dreamed of billing blow-jobs for late-night lifts back from town. Double after midnight. He drilled industrial techno from his Kenwood speakers, and cruised the lanes looking for fares. He fixed a Dukes of Hazzard horn and had his name stuck across the sun-shield. Dazaster was five-foot-four with his hair spiked. Becoming a Nazi had lost him a good inch. He never weighed more than a scrawny-arsed eight stone. Arms like cocktail sticks. His name said it all. The pussy preferred to walk.

Next day, Dazaster headed into town and had a swastika tattooed over his heart. Took him three tries to find someone to do it. A back-street shack round the bus station. He went shirtless the day he ripped the bandage off. He ended his Kwik Save boycott.

'Your mother must be very proud,' said the old Sengupta.

'Too right,' said Dazaster.

Rohit said, 'are you sure you've got it the right way round?'

Dazaster looked down, frowned. They laughed. Dazaster left. He said, 'I'll be back.' And then, 'Paki scum.'

He made to run, but heard Rohit's voice out front.

'Then be sure to take us up on our two-for-one one-coat paint next week - add a little colour to your life!' They laughed again. Them laughing like that, it dug deeper than Rudolph.

Most of the car park woods crowd thought Dazaster's swastika was dumb. Specially as his scrawny white ribcage sort of spoiled the intended effect. But that same night, he got to give Chloe Ravis a lift home. 'I think it rocks,' she said. She bummed a fag and punched him playfully on his shoulder. He winced at the Nazi-dog's work. Dazaster turned the techno up, handbrake-turned out of her road. He presented himself on Posie Birtles' front door. 'Jesus,' she said. 'Someone's signed up for life.' And then: 'Wait here. I gotta get a picture.'

Who knows whether the swastika was the clinching factor, but Dazaster and Chloe seemed to hit it off big-time. Dazaster drove her to school each day and he revved the engine while they French-kissed in the drop-off berth. Scowled at the arseholes laughing at his Lada. Kept his top off when he could.

Posie Birtles didn't seem best pleased when Dazaster rolled up to run her to the next Whites Unite rally with Chloe Ravis in tow. Posie squinted in the back seat. She saw a thin girl in a saggy white top. She said, 'this ain't no Sunday School outing.'

Dazaster said, 'she's one of us.' He nudged Chloe.

Chloe said, 'I hate niggers. You ask anyone.'

Posie shook her head. She clambered in the passenger seat. Dazaster watched the way her short black skirt side-spliced up her thigh. She leaned to turn down the techno. She watched Chloe in the rear-view mirror. She said, 'what do they call you?'

Chloe brushed the blonde from her eyes. She said, 'Chloe.' And then: 'But I'm proper English.'

They stopped at a pub on the moor-top. Razor-skulled men swigged pints in the car park. They parted for Posie. 'Morning, guv'nor,' said one man, bulging tattoos.

Posie pulled a face, shuffled her papers. She accepted a cigarette. Dazaster nodded at the men. They cast their eyes over Chloe. Chloe stuck close to Dazaster. He lit a fag, handed it to Chloe, and took off his tee-shirt.

'Shit, kid,' said one. 'That beats the lot.'

'No half measures,' said another.

They shook his hand and slapped his back till it blazed redder than the cross of St George. Chloe nuzzled closer. She smiled up at Dazaster: 'I'm gonna get one too,' she said. 'Right here,' - she patted her heart - 'where everyone can see.'

Dazaster took Chloe on trips to the seaside. They played the arcades. They slapped the penny-push machines till they were chased away. They shared candyfloss. They ate chips on the end of the pier and gazed out to sea. Dazaster said, 'reckon there's some country out there we can't see where there isn't no niggers.'

'I'd like to live there if there is,' said Chloe.

Dazaster said, 'might have been us if Hitler had won the war. That's what Posie's old man says. Says us winning was the worst thing ever. Meant they could all come in and take our jobs.'

'Like at Kwik Save?'

'Yeah,' said Dazaster. 'Exactly.'

Chloe said, 'I wouldn't work there for shit any how.'

Dazaster said again: 'Exactly'. Then: 'I'm going to smoke them bastards out. I ain't lying.'

She smiled and leaned in to kiss him.

One time, they stopped on the way out of town to slash the tyres of a couple of cars parked outside the Chinese takeaway. Chloe stayed lookout while Dazaster crouched behind and stuck in his pen-knife. Dazaster said it didn't matter if they were Chinkys or not, just giving them money was bad enough. Chloe said, 'it's cat-meat, anyhow. That's what our kid says.'

Heading home, they pulled up on a garage forecourt where an Indian man was manning the pumps. Dazaster tugged his tee-shirt off and got out to confront him. The man said, 'fill up?'

Dazaster looked back at Chloe and grinned. Turned back and said, 'what are you looking at?'

Puzzled, the man repeated, 'fill-up?'

Dazaster said, 'do you speak English?'

The man gawped.

Dazaster said, 'do you speak English, you Paki cunt?'

The man put down the pump and told Dazaster to clear off. Dazaster repeated his taunt and got in his Lada and screeched away. Two miles down the road, the Lada clonked to a halt. They slept on the back seat on the side of the road that night. It was the first time they did it. After, Dazaster lay on his back and held Chloe tight. He said, 'reckon it's saying summat that even the stars are white.'

Posie Birtles peered over her reading glasses and said, 'by inviting just about everyone, from every race and culture, to set up camp within our borders, us, the British, the indigenous population, have become downtrodden, third-class citizens in our own country.'

Rohit said, 'No wonder your little brown-shirts are getting out of control, with stirring messages like that.'

Posie scribbled on the paper. She said, 'the fight must go on.'

Rohit said, 'perfect.'

Posie tossed her sheaf of papers on the floor. Morning sun glared through the curtains. White sheets knotted their limbs. She said, 'I won't miss these frigging rallies.'

Rohit said, 'how's the old man?'

Posie said, 'he's sweet. He liked the flower beds best. And the dumb kid with the swastika. He still thinks we're funding a right-wing revolution. Not Sunday lunch for a bunch of deluded old skinheads.' She said, 'besides, he beat up another Indian kid last week. Put back his parole a good two years.'

She glanced at her clock radio. She fingered Rohit's chest, felt his hand creep back between her legs. She feigned resistance: 'We ain't gonna start a revolution lying down ..' She stayed layed down and smiled.

Next time, Dazaster brought along a couple more new recruits. He pushed forward, showing off, glad-handing skinheads. Chloe smiled. Stewie and Danny hung back. Awkward and pasty faced. Stewie twitched on a cigarette. His eyes darted. Posie said, 'the fight must go on.' They cheered her from the podium. On the way home, Dazaster said, 'you never said.'

Posie said, 'the time's right. It needs new blood.' She regarded Stewie and Danny in the rear-view mirror, raised an eyebrow.

Dazaster said, 'I'm up for it.'

Posie said, 'you're just a kid.'

Dazaster swung the car hard round the next bend so Stewie and Danny fell against the window. He said, 'I'm not a fucking kid.'

Chloe said, 'he's not a kid.'

Posie said, 'far as that lot go, actions speak louder than words.'

Later Posie got Chloe on her own. She said, 'you sure about this?'

Chloe screwed her face in surprise. 'This what?' she said.

'This.. stuff.' Posie swept her arm towards the flower beds.

Chloe squinted in. A smile broke. She said, 'you're testing me.' Posie shook her head.

Chloe said, 'I hate niggers more than ever.'

A few nights later, Dazaster waited for Chloe at the end of her street. The lights pooled orange. Chloe reached up, kissed Dazaster's cheek. She said, 'you ready?'

Dazaster said, 'too right.'

They headed in the car park woods. Dazaster fumbled in the bushes. He said, 'found it.' He lugged out a spray can and a can of petrol. They crouched, watched the Kwik Save. Dazaster said, 'all clear?'

Chloe said, 'all clear.'

Dazaster gave Chloe a long French kiss and swished the cans over the road. He sprayed, careful, 'Pakis Out' on the nearby wall. He held open the Kwik Save letterbox, levered up the can with his other hand. He started tipping, jumped back when the petrol splashed his jeans. Then he took off his shirt, held it against the can nozzle, and stuffed it half in the letterbox. His pale skin shone. He turned to Chloe, grinned, thumped his Swastika twice. Then he stood back, leaned in with a lighter. His shirt puffed brighter orange than the street lights. Flames zipped up the aisle.

They lay in the woods and did it while orange and blue licked the sky. Sirens fought. Smoke tightened in their throats. Dazaster got up. While Chloe cried, he walked back to the lights.

Rohit turned to Posie and placed his hand on her thigh. He worked it upwards. He said, 'my father is pleased. He never liked that fucking shop.'

Posie pushed his hand away and nodded forward.

Rohit laughed. 'I've driven these things before, you know. I can turn my hand to anything. Such is the life of the immigrant.'

Posie said, 'stop it.' She lit a cigarette. She tried not to smile.

Rohit slapped his hand on the steering wheel. 'You're not worrying about those little brown-shirts, I hope?'

Posie said nothing. Rohit said, 'think of the pay-out.' He put his hand back on her thigh. He floored the van in the fast lane.

* * * *

Loonies

Write clearly in blue or black ink only. If you are working in pairs, one of you may submit a photocopy. Remember to write your name/s and class on the work-sheet. The deadline is June 15.

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

Choose your topic. It could be a favourite hobby or activity, or a person or persons you admire. Provide a brief explanation of the reasons for your choice of topic, and what you hope to achieve by investigating it.

Our topic is loonies. We got the idea for our topic from all the loonies who live in our village. Loony means lunatic, which means someone foolish or eccentric. Calum's dad says our village is going down the pan. Calum's dad also says hanging's too good for them. We decided to pick the ten biggest loonies in our village and find out how much of a loony they are.

PART TWO: INVESTIGATION

Using the information you collected, write a report about your topic. Explain how you collected the information, and any problems you encountered in doing so. It is important to remember that this is a written assignment only.

Fat Claire

Fat Claire lives up Back Moor Lane. She lives in a tiny house and she has a tiny dog. This is weird because she is so fat. She is nearly as big as John Brower Minnoch. John Brower Minnoch is the fattest man in the world. He lives in America. He weighs 99 stone. Every time he wants to go for a shit, twelve firemen have to come and lift him. Calum's brother says Fat Claire's dog is so tiny it doesn't live in a kennel, it lives up her bum. Fat Claire talks to herself. Calum's brother says when she is talking to herself she is making spells. She is a white witch. A white witch is like a normal witch, except not with broomsticks or potions. If Fat Claire is a white witch we don't know why she doesn't make a spell to go thin. We have never dared play any tricks on her in case she can turn us into frogs.

Odd Kirk

Odd Kirk lives in a shed and always keeps his curtains shut even when it is sunny. He only goes out at night. This means he is nocturnal. Other examples of nocturnal are badgers, owls and vampire bats. He is called Odd Kirk because he is called Kirk and everyone says he is odd. Calum's mum says you wouldn't have him pop round for no baby-sitting, that's for sure. He is big and has got really long arms. He hangs them down like a

gorilla. At night Odd Kirk goes up the allotments. Calum's brother saw him carry a tree. Calum's brother said it was a bigger tree than they have on World's Strongest Man. The World's Strongest Man is Jon-Pall Sigmarsson. He is from Iceland. To check if Odd Kirk is a loony, we waited till he went out then shone a torch through his letterbox. There was a tap with a cobweb on it, and floor instead of carpet.

Marcie

Marcie lives in the last house up to the tip and wears clothes that make her boobs hang out. She wears bright red lipstick and stilettos even though she's old. Calum's dad says she's mutton dressed as lamb. He also says she's away with the fairies. She gets drunk and dances and sings in the middle of the street. Calum's brother says if you shout show us your tits at her, she does. We went up to her house and waited for her to come out. When she came out we shouted show us your tits at her. Except just when we shouted it Mrs Finch walked past. Mrs Finch said, I do beg your pardon. Mrs Finch is like a teacher but she's not. We ran off. We did not see if Marcie showed us her tits or not.

Limp Man

Limp Man used to work at the old mill till he got his leg stuck in one of the machines. Calum's brother said his dad said it chewed him up like bloody mincemeat the poor man. Limp Man got a job as a security guard at Kwik Save. If you lean over trying to get ice creams out he tries to touch your bum. He is always staring at the rude magazines but pretending not to. Things we have nicked from Kwik Save include a Sara Lee Double Chocolate Gateau, a pack of Mr Kipling's French Fancies, and three tins of Heinz Ravioli. Limp Man has a bright red face. This is because he drinks too much beer. To check if he is a loony, we ran up and knocked on his front door. When he answered it we pulled moonies at him and ran off. When we were running off he shouted, you'll swing for this you little bastards. He also shouted, I know your mothers.

Skinny Annie Ellis

Skinny Annie Ellis lives up the High Street. She is the thinnest person in the whole wide world. If you held a bit of string up in front of her you wouldn't be able to see her. She has suckered-in cheeks and fish-lips. She looks like a ghost. This is because she is anorexic. Anorexic means involving, producing or characterized by a lack of appetite. Calum's brother's dad says what that lass needs is a good square meal. Bobby Sands was an anorexic. He was a Provisional Irish Republican Army volunteer. Skinny Annie Ellis used to be a school dinner lady. It is possible she is anorexic because of seeing school dinners every day. The worst school dinner is curry with currants in it. The second worst school dinner is boiled fish. The third worst school dinner is frogspawn. We sneaked up near Skinny Annie Ellis' house and left a Mr Kipling's French Fancy on her front path. The next day it was still there but squashed.

The Hunchback Kid

The Hunchback Kid works on the fair. He has a lump on his back like he has a pillow stuffed up his tee-shirt. He works on the swingboats. He shouts at you to get off when your five minutes are up. He stands where he can look up the girls' skirts. Once we spied on Calum's brother and Cheryl Johnson snogging round the back of the swingboats. Calum's brother says Cheryl Johnson is a slag. A slag is vitreous refuse left after ore has been smelted. If the Hunchback Kid touches you when he gives you your change, you have to wash your hands or you might grow a hump as well. Once Jonathan Sim slapped him on his hump for a pound bet. Jonathan Sim has not grown a hump yet. We could not do any investigating of him because the fair is not in.

Trolleyman

Trolleyman walks up and down the street pushing a Kwik Save trolley with nothing in it. There is a line of spit going from his mouth to the pushing handle. He talks to himself. We have never got close enough to hear

what he's talking about. Calum's mum says the poor man must've got shell-shock. We decided to find out where he lives. We followed him for ages but he just kept going up and down the street. We started throwing rocks at him to try to make him stop. One even hit him but he carried on. Mr Brown came out after we had walked past his shop six times. His shop sells saws and plant pots. He asked us if we didn't have anything better to do, and told us to leave the poor man alone. Later we went and got some paint and went back and painted NOB on Mr Brown's shop window.

The Knicker Ripper

The Knicker Ripper ripped Sally Jenkinson's knickers off down by the canal. It was on the news. Brian Neville was stood on the village green. Brian Neville is a well-known local regional presenter and self-styled minor celebrity. Sally Jenkinson did not want to get her knickers ripped off. If the Knicker Ripper had tried to rip May Ventress's knickers off she would have let him. Calum's brother says May Ventress will get her bra off if you give her a tenner. So far we have saved up £1.67 in pocket money. The police are still looking for the Knicker Ripper. They fear he could strike again. He is described as five foot nine inches tall with brown hair and a scar on his left cheek. He should not be approached. We could not find the Knicker Ripper so we went round to Sally Jenkinson's house instead. Mr Jenkinson would not let us ask Sally Jenkinson about the Knicker Ripper even though we said it was for a school project. Mr Jenkinson told us to get the hell out of his sight before he wrung our scrawny little necks.

The Gypos

The gypos camp up Back Lane every summer. When they come Calum's mum says, that's all we bloody need, I've got enough bloody clothes pegs to last me a lifetime, thank you very much. Calum's dad says they are nowt more than vermin. This means they are mammals and birds injurious to game, crops etc; eg foxes, rodents and noxious insects. Dean's mum says they are dirty and they are dangerous and you are not to go anywhere near them do you hear me so-help-me-God. Sometimes we go and spy on them. Once we saw a boy one weeing in the beck. Another time we saw a girl one wearing wellies and shorts. We waited to see if she did a wee in the beck but she didn't. Calum's brother says one day he is going to go up and chuck a Molotov Cocktail at them. A Molotov Cocktail is a crude incendiary device consisting of a bottle filled with inflammable liquid. We lobbed a rock instead. It smashed the caravan window and a baby started crying.

Zack

Zack is Kayleigh Barker's brother. We pretend to be friends with him so we can go round and try to see Kayleigh Barker with her top off. Once we hid behind her curtains and she came in with her dressing gown on. She was about to take it off then Calum sneezed. Kayleigh Barker screamed and got her mum. Zack never talks. He drives a pretend car. He goes to a special school. We tied him up in Jippy Jim's junkyard. We said we'd let him go if he said please. We pretended to go away then we saw Kayleigh Barker going swimming so we followed her. It got dark and we got back and Zack's mum was crying. We went back and got Zack. He was white and shivering. We carried him back. There was a crowd in the street. We said we found him up near the gypos. Zack's mum said, what the hell have they done to him. Calum's dad said enough's enough this will be bloody well sorted out once and for all. Zack's mum said how can I ever thank you boys enough.

PART THREE: CONCLUSION

Describe what you have learned about your topic as a result of your investigation. Perhaps you have discovered some interesting facts, or changed your views on the topic.

Our conclusion is that loonies are vermin. Calum's dad says sometimes in this life you've got to take the law into your own hands. He also says a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. Skinny Annie Ellis has died. Well she has either died or she has got so thin she is invisible. The Knicker Ripper has ripped someone else's

knickers off. Calum's brother caught Calum's dad giving Marcie a good seeing-to. Zack has still not talked. We liked doing our topic and have decided we will carry on with it in our own spare time.

* * * *

Cow-tipping

The sight of all those schoolgirls' legs unfolding off the buses at just past four o'clock every afternoon is almost enough to shut anybody up, except for Roscoe Williams when he's got another one of them stupid ideas of his rattling around in his thick old head.

Squinting up at all that bare chicken-flesh parading right past you, it's all you can do just to think straight, let alone talk. But Roscoe Williams, he's so screwed-up with thinking where his next drink's going to come from he could talk his way through a sixth-form orgy just so long as there was a bottle of Super waiting on the other side of it.

Maybe it's because he's so blurry-focused on the booze and his next means of getting it that the sight of all them shiny fawn thighs doesn't seem so much of a big deal to him as it does to me. Me, I reckon I'd happily trade in swigging Super all day long on the bus-stop bench if it meant even the smallest improvement of getting any pair of them educated limbs of theirs lolled around my neck.

This time I'm trying my best to focus on the long curve of Kelly O'Mara's calves, smooth and sleek as a sports car bonnet and guaranteed to top-speed her out of this place just as soon as she's old enough to get behind a wheel. Only Roscoe's blabbing in my left lughole about this weekend being a right ripe time to pull another of his 'famous' cow-tip scams.

Thing is, what gets me most isn't so much Roscoe's blabbing as me knowing how it's going to turn out, no matter how much I try and stop it. Ever since my dinner-time drinking got me fired from the animal feeds, I've been desperate enough that there isn't a whole lot left I wouldn't do for money. Even most of those things would be tempting if you waved a bottle of Super under my nose.

Me and Roscoe go back a long way. We met when his mother threw a party when we were ten years old, snuck under the kitchen table and drank ourselves as good as unconscious on her cooking brandy. Sometimes it seems the screwcap hasn't been back on since. Through it all, I've learned the hard way that Roscoe is exactly the kind of greasy-arsed bastard I oughtn't to be listening to when it comes to the question of making up the next bunch of beer money.

So when he starts up with the famous cow-tip shit, I blink my eyes off all those perfect bodies and dribble a spit on the concrete and say, convincing as I can, 'bullshit, Roscoe.'

'Wayne-oh,' sighs Roscoe. I hate it when he sighs my name that way, like he's some kind of big-shot who can hardly lower himself to shape the words. The sun turns to shadow and there's no need to look up to know it's Patty Jenkins who's blocking it out. She's already replaced her school jumper with a tee-shirt saying 'Frankie Says Relax'. It pegs the end of her balloon boobs then drops straight off, makes her look like some sort of slutty sandwich-board evangelist. She's got tight scraped-back foster-home hair and smells of wet towels and cheese and onion crisps. She sags down between us and pokes a Benson in her cake-hole. She eyes up the bottle of Super and Roscoe hands it over sweet as if he was giving Kelly O'Mara a box of Black Magics on Valentines' Day.

'All right?' I say, but it's Roscoe who's got her attention on account of the free slurp of Super and the always-likely offer of some more fat cash.

'You fixed for tonight?' says Roscoe. Patty shrugs. She slurps and bends forward to itch an inner-thigh. She passes me the Super. I take one look at the fuzzed-up rim and pass it right back. She takes another slurp, passes it to Roscoe who drains the last two inches.

'Have faith in the cow-tip!' he proclaims, standing and tossing the empty bottle of Super towards the village green bin and stomping across the street towards the public lavs.

Later, we're in the Fox and Roscoe's tipping the shorts down Patty Jenkins's neck, wrapping her round his little finger with what's left of his charm and his cash. Strikes me there's no need for Roscoe to be so generous with the doubles, since Patty would good as guarantee herself to anyone for keeps once she's dosed up on Pernod and Blacks.

Patty's swapped her Frankie tee-shirt for her best blow-job clothes, a cheap black bra just about big enough to hold them in under a two-sizes-too-small crop-top that shows off her folds. The way she's rubbing up against Roscoe looking up at him with those big trusting eyes of hers, it almost makes me feel sorry for her. It doesn't take a genius to figure out what's coming but I swallow my morals for the thought of a pocket-full of dough.

The tap-room's full of boys with bare arms swigging pints like they know where the next one's coming from. They're here to give Jackie Bell a quaint old rural send-off. Jackie Bell's hauled them up here supposedly on some outward-bound weekend but truth is he's been after the chance to rub our noses in it ever since he swanned off to that college of his. He's throwing twenties at Old Roy and Old Roy's flapping about after them like a zoo-pond penguin at feeding time. It's just as well we're so practised in making our own pints last all night or we'd be detoxed by the time we managed to catch Old Roy's eye.

Roscoe's got his eye on a couple of likely lads. Reckons he's like a lion picking out the weakest wildebeest from the herd. Calls it his sixth sense and I have to hand it to him, it hasn't done us too far wrong in the past, save the time he didn't account for a scrawny-arsed runt being a champion flyweight. They're well-dressed townie types and it's easy to see who shifts it the most when the pissed-up farm boys barge past on their way to the lavs. Roscoe flicks his head and heads off, pulls up a stool. I follow him. Patty stays back by the jukebox, swivels her clack-shoes so her tits are spilling in their direction.

Roscoe nods at a pair of lads and asks if they can spare him a fag. The fatter one offers up a pack of poncey menthols and I know that at that moment Roscoe's gone and struck gold again. Roscoe leans in for a light. He nods his head at Jackie Bell lording it up at the end of the bar and says, 'known him for years. Couldn't happen to a nicer bloke.'

You can tell the pair's nervous what with the proximity of Roscoe's fucked-up face. Roscoe lifts his dregs and makes them clink glasses. He clocks one of them's wearing a United pin-badge. When it comes to clocking stuff like that, Roscoe never misses a trick. A few minutes later, we've got fresh pints lined up courtesy of the townies, and they're embroiled in a red-faced three-way over who's better down the Old Trafford wing, Jesper Olsen or some other cunt I've never heard of. I'm looking over at Patty waiting for the signal, and I've half a mind to pull Roscoe aside and tell him a night on the beer's enough for me without having to go through with all the famous cow-tip crap.

Roscoe flashes me the wink which says I'll never see the end of it. He nods over at Patty and draws their heads in and says, 'see that bird over there with the tits? Best blow-jobs north of Watford.' He reaches for another menthol, sparks up. 'Fact.'

They're looking over giving her the ogle. She gives them the cutesy wave. 'You're in there.' Roscoe says it so they both know he means them. Truth be told, they're not the types it looks like pussy comes easy for. The fat one looks down, embarrassed. The other meets her stare.

Just then, Jackie Bell flits past and Roscoe pulls him over and steers his pint to the table and says, 'good on you, Jacko!'

'Hey-hey!' says Jackie Bell, slaps Roscoe's back. Roscoe used to be Jackie's pussy-catching mate till too many nights on the glue turned him into an ugly sniff-faced bastard. Used to bore me senseless with stories of double-teaming sluts behind the Kwik Save. Now Jackie just treats him like another piece of shit ought to be stuck down the bottom of a brown paper bag.

Jackie says, 'you've found yourself a right fucking pair here, lads,' and I can't work out who it is he's talking to, us or the stag-do dickheads, but either way knowing we know Jackie seems to put the two stag-do dickheads at ease.

Jackie gone, Roscoe's back to drawling on like a Match Of The Day pundit. Out of the corner of his eye he tips Patty the wink and she wobbles over.

Long past closing time we're out in a field in the middle of nowhere and I hate to admit it but Roscoe's plan has worked like a charm. Getting the pair of them out of the pub didn't present much of a problem once Roscoe started gabbing on about quaint local activities, and Patty piped up about the cow-tipping right on cue.

It's fair to say the fat one was a bit more reluctant to give up his seat in the thick warm pub for a spot of gallivanting round pitch-black fields getting his box-fresh Filas all fucked up with animal shit, but it's nothing a well-placed hand on a thigh from Patty couldn't sort out quick-sharp.

We pile in the back of Roscoe's Cortina Estate. It's had the back down so long now the seats wouldn't sit up if you tried. Roscoe uses it as a mobile bed most nights given as he's pretty much permanent estranged from his folks these days. Colder it gets, the more litres he gets through for insulation. It smells of old fags and stale piss and the bearings squeal like a yard of pigs as Roscoe bathes the pub car park in full beam. 'Jesper fucking Olsen,' he says as he backs out, shakes his head in the best fake awe you've ever seen.

Soon we're bouncing up the pitch-black back-tracks so much it's giving me a stiffy and I'm hating myself for it taking just a few stupid pot-holes to get me horny about Patty Jenkins of all people again. She's squeezed in between the college cunts in the back and if everything's going according to Roscoe's well-laid plans she'll have each of her hands down their respective boxers by now and be twiddling their no-doubt tiny nobs towards the point of splurge.

After more bumping and grinding than you get on the dancefloor of the Pickering Ritzy on your average Friday night, Roscoe pulls up and half-turns and his teathy smirk is lit up by moonlight.

'Cow-tip time!' Roscoe says, and we all lamp out the car and feel our feet sink in pools of warm shit. The fat lad stops to light up another menthol and by the look of his face in the match-glow he's not all that thrilled with where we've took him. The other one's more perving at the gigantic bouncing balls Patty's got stuffed up her tee-shirt and they're looking even bigger in the moonlight glow. Patty's looped an arm round both the boys and she's steering them off to the darkness as planned.

Roscoe hisses open a couple of cans of Special and we clank them together and glug them down. After giving them ten minutes we creak out after catching one or both of them in the act. Sure enough there's the flabby lad silhouetted in the open field with his arms sticking out like a scarecrow and he's mumbling to no-one in particular: 'I knew it. I fucking knew it.'

There's a slurpy sound coming from a block of black on our right which we take correctly to be a hedge, and closer inspection reveals Patty Jenkins down in her most convenient pose gobbling the other lad's sweaty nob with his boxers tangling his knees. Patty's still got her mega-baps well strapped in which I can't help feeling is

a mighty waste on the lad's part, though they do say some are inclined to save a little mystery for their lovemaking.

The routine is for Roscoe to step out out and politely inform the chap that in order to keep such a sorry and perhaps illegal activity under wraps there may have to be a small session of financial transacting. But somehow the sight of Patty summoning up such enthusiasm for the one-thousand-and-forty-third nob she's ever had in her gob seems to rub Roscoe up the wrong way. So while the flabby lad's still stomping around the field moaning about fucking knowing it, Roscoe bellyflops over the top of the hedge and slaps the lad out of his fantasy and calls him a paedo.

Patty slops his nob out of her gob and wipes herself on the hem of her upturned top and gets to her feet and giggles at her mucky whore knees.

The lad's staring big-eyed at Roscoe going, 'I don't want no trouble, like,' but Roscoe slaps him round the chops and sinks him in the mud. He goes, 'she might be a dirty slut but she's only fifteen, like.'

The lad's got his arms in the air and he's starting to panic. He starts to yammer about not knowing, and it would look well funny if it wasn't so serious because he's plain forgot he's still got his boxers round his knees and his danglies dangling. Then while he tries to get up Roscoe slaps him back in the mud and he plants his bare arse in the soil with a slop.

The fat lad comes over with all the commotion and Roscoe calms a little and gives it the, 'your mate's been nobbing my sister and she's only fifteen,' bit, and for good measure, 'what with her mental what-nots, I'm afraid it don't look good.'

The fat lad squints through the gloom at Patty like he's checking if she's dribbling enough to pass for a spacer. Patty leers right back at him and licks her lips.

The fat lad starts cursing under his breath again and he reaches out his wallet and Roscoe's most peturbed when he finds the two lads between them can only summon the paltry sum of thirty-five quid between them and their cash cards are stuffed safe behind Old Roy's bar running up a fine tab.

Faced with the prospect of having a pocket-full of short change once he's deducted travelling expenses and the cost of a couple of four-packs of Special Brew and Patty's considerable pre-event bar bill, it doesn't take Roscoe too long to get his radge back on. First he orders the thin one to kick off his air-bubble Nikes and the Levis from round his ankles and the boxers from his knees, then he's after his dress-shirt and the lad's left clasping himself white and blubbery in the nude. The fat lad's got wind of what's happening and he's legging it away over the field stumbling as he goes, happy to spend the night tramping out on the moors if he means he'll avoid having to get his own pair of floppy norps out in front of a lass. Roscoe gives the thin lad a boot in the ribs and the lad's proper crying now. 'Fucking hell Roscoe,' I say, thinking the lad'll most likely freeze to death just lying like that, and on second thoughts Roscoe chucks him his shirt back, and I might say it's one of the touching things I've seen him do, only he spoils the effect by pulling out his car keys and chucking them and his trainers into the blackness for the spite of it.

Roscoe's fair raging and we sit in the car in silence and neither me nor Patty has the courage to ask Roscoe for our cut. The car stinks of mud-shit and Roscoe's got the Stones Roses on blasting which is totally wrong for the mood we're in.

Roscoe swigs another Special while his lights search the road and I feel Patty sobbing in my armpit and I say, 'you didn't need to call her no dirty slut.'

Roscoe slams on his brakes and almost sends us arrowing through the windscreen. He turns and slurs, 'get the

fuck out of my car.'

Well the mood he's in we don't need no second invite, and I help Patty out and he zooms off with the door still flapping, and Patty sobs more till his red back-lights turn out of sight.

It takes us a fair few hours to make it back and those hours present plenty of time for thinking. Instead of risking waking her old man at her place we head in the site static with the broken window catch that those of us of a certain age been using for extra curricular activities for years. Patty sprawls out over the stinky couch and starts talking her fanciful notions about getting a one-way ticket out of here. They're tempting enough notions all right and what with all that thinking time I find myself swept up with thought that it's not too late to make a go of it somewhere else. Then I look into those eager-to-please blowjob eyes of hers and suddenly I hate myself even more. Truth is I know how tonight's going to end up, just like I know how things'll end up next time Roscoe cools off and comes back round spouting another of them stupid ideas of his.

* * * *

Chat Room

rachelbeardsmore: hi all!!! has it really been ten years?! time flies when your having fun!!! (not!!!) thanks for popping by, there's a few peeps (?) i couldn't track down, anyone know what happened to ged blowes, marnie sleightholme, jake birdsall?!!!

Elvis Perkins: Wot about Tammy Marsedn bet shes still fit

rachelbeardsmore: hi elvis it's me rachel, what are you doing with yourself these days?!! well i never left sad eh?!! still yuong free and single well maybe not the young bit?!! only twentysix tho?!! lifes good... :o)

LIZZIE B: MARNIE WENT TO AMERICA JAKE BUMPED INTO HIM IN YORK A WHILE BACK GED DUNNO

rachelbeardsmore: omg hi lizzie how you keeping haven't seen you in ages?!! you still around fryup?!! hows jake any clues?!!

Denise: hello?

rachelbeardsmore: hi denise how you keeping?!

Elvis Perkins: Wot about tammy marsesn

rachelbeardsmore: anyone got any tales to tell bet you have?>?! saw mr metcalfe in town the other day, I couldn't believe he was still alive!!! he must be like 90!!! anyone else remember when jake hit him wih that board rubber>?>?!!! class!

SOULJA BOY 74: yo peeps

LIZZIE B: DUNNO LOST TOUCH

rachelbeardsmore: er, hiya soul boy 74!!! who are u? :)o

Elvis Perkins: Shame bet shes still fit

SOULJA BOY 74: wouldn't you like to know

Denise: hi Elvis!!!???

Elvis Perkins: use ur real name you tool

rachelbeardsmore: can peeps use their rael names!!?

TAMMY MARSEN: Hi tammy here I've still got big tits for u to suck

Denise: what it's me denise green rememeber (how cud u forget oo-er!!!!??? :@)

Elvis Perkins: lmfao

rachelbeardsmore: ha ha very funny

Denise: ???

[Denise HAS LOGGED OFF]

LIZZIE B: SMOKIN WEED IN THE SPORTS PAV WHEN MR KHAN WALKED IN, CLASS

JAKE BIRDSALL: Hello

rachelbeardsmore: hi jake is that really u!!!

Elvis Perkins: haha

JAKE BIRDSALL: how r u all doing

rachelbeardsmore: great thanks jake how about you, you out and about round york i hear??!

JAKE BIRDSALL: rachel I always fancied u

LIZZIE B: THIS INST THE REAL JAKE NO WAY

*rachelbeardsmore: *** blushing ***!!*

Debbie Bullock: Deborah Bullock here, hello to anyone that knew me, working for haulage firm in Grantham, three kids, Clint 13 now, kyle nine britney 3 another one on way

Elvis Perkins: shit you're keeping busy

rachelbeardsmore: hi debbie you still in touch with marnie

[SOULJA BOY 74 HAS LOGGED OFF]

LIZZIE B: U ALWAYS WAS A SLAG OVER AND OUT

[LIZZIE B HAS LOGGED OFF]

Debbie Bullock: no dead hopefully

Debbie Bullock: Yeh you too skanky bitch dunno why I bothered

[Debbie Bullock HAS LOGGED OFF]

rachelbeardsmore: let's get back to teachers and memories stuff, anyone else remember mini marsh when we hid things high up so she couldn't reach them!! remember when jake hid her glasses!!

JAKE BIRDSALL: forget mini marsh how about meetin up

Elvis Perkins: yeh right

JAKE BIRDSALL: rachel I always wanted to put my massive cock in your minge

[*rachelbeardsmore* HAS LOGGED OFF]

JAKE BIRDSALL: shame

Elvis Perkins: dick

TAMMY MARSEN: well you gonna suck my big tits or what

Elvis Perkins: ok

TAMMY MARSEN: pm me

[Elvis Perkins HAS LOGGED OFF]

[Tammy Marsen HAS LOGGED OFF]

Jake B: Hello?

JAKE BIRDSALL: hello

Jake B: wtf

JAKE BIRDSALL: ha

Jake B: ???

JAKE BIRDSALL: woh, freaky

Jake B: Dick

[Jake B HAS LOGGED OFF]

[JAKE BIRDSALL HAS LOGGED OFF]

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About the author:

Mark Staniforth was born in 1974 and lives in a small village in North Yorkshire. He is working on his first novel. His latest work can be found at:

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Credits:

'Carnival Queen' first appeared in *Southpaw*

'Eleutherophobia' first appeared in *Night Train*

'The Parish News' first appeared in *Succour*

'Sweet Tooth' first appeared in *Eclectica*

'Nine Lives' first appeared in *Underground Voices*

'Cow-tipping' first appeared in *Fried Chicken & Coffee*

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