

Not Every Room Has a View

D I Hughes

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Dedicated to all of the people that make life matter.

Ramblings of a Bored Man

Have you ever wondered what happens in between the episodes of your favourite drama or sitcom? Well, I do; I think about it a lot, actually.

I mean, when the curtains close and the ad breaks come on, or the episode ends, what's left for the characters? Do they just pause in some endless darkness - their own personal purgatory - until they're told to continue with the next vital scene, or do they carry out mundane chores like the Hoovering or the big supermarket shop? In all honesty, life can't constantly be filled with fights, fires, adultery and murder, but on the other hand, I can hardly imagine Dr. Who sitting in suspiciously stained joggers with a cup of milky tea in his hand in between exterminating Daleks.

Anyhow, I'm losing you already, but just for the record, these are the kind of pointless thoughts that run through my head daily. To cut through the old crap cake, I'm bored, perpetually so.

They all kept saying to me, *Sam, get a job, any old job*, but I'm a writer and anyway, when my aunt fell ill and too feeble to function, I found my vocation - the state pays for it too. I do love her dearly, aunty Mags, but she has been quite demanding as of late with her medication, feeding and the amount I've had to empty the slop from her bedpan. It gets in the way of my procrastination process.

I conjure up a lot of snappy ideas but I've been suffering from writer's block for a good year or so now and to date, I've binned eleven different novels; the pieces of scrap paper are still sitting on my floor like Zeus' dandruff strewn across the peak of

Mount Olympus (or paper balls sitting on a mucky carpet: I suppose it depends which way you look at it). I leave them there to remind myself that I'm not a quitter, or is it because I'm bone idle? I'm not sure which is true anymore.

So between caring for my aunt, smoking roll-ups, brief bouts of self-gratification and scrutinising the sentences that I scribe for no one, I pace up and down, listen to 90's radio and gaze out of the window until my eyes go out of focus. If I stare long enough, it almost makes the rows upon rows of wartime chimney pots look serene, and it helps me to escape the shackles of Stunston for a few minutes at a time.

Do you know Stunston? From your silence, I take that as a no. Well, it's only a few miles to the west of here and how can I sum it up in a phrase? The word *dump* immediately comes to mind. It's predominantly grey with little vegetation, or life for that matter, as the people in Stunston don't really seem to live for anything, except maybe flat lager and fighting on match days. But it does provide jobs and lots of them on account of its booming industrial estate. The place looks like a high-security Cold War communist camp, but like I said, it does provide employment. Most of the people I know work somewhere on the old industrial estate but I've never really fancied it. I did do that one day of work experience there, but it didn't end well. I don't want to talk about that right now but perhaps I'll tell you about it later.

I could keep on picking holes in Stunston, but at the end of the day it's my home; it's where I'm from and it's part of my identity. Plus, it has all your major outlets and the neighbouring town does boast a pretty little lake to enjoy in the summer.

But enough of the sales pitch, now you know a little more about me I'd actually like to tell you something real. I'd like to tell you about a fairly extraordinary few days

in an otherwise ordinary life. Everybody has them, even the world's biggest, most transparent nobodies: events that alter the course of one's life, even if only slightly. Everything I tell you from the happenings of last week may be a little hazy to the ear, but you'll get the gist of it. So sit back and get comfortable (if that's possible where we are right now), while I take you back. In case you didn't catch it before, the name's Sam, by the way. Samuel Jacks.

So I suppose, the peculiarities all started last...

Sunday

I woke up around half nine, AM, with a crippling headache and the taste of garlic and onions lingering in my mouth - a taste so stale, that until I managed to chomp down some toothpaste, it intermittently tickled my gag reflex, causing me to puke into my mouth and swallow. But that wasn't unusual, waking up regretting the last few fateful shots of Tequila and Apple Sours after a Saturday session in The Cross is quite commonplace.

All in all, I don't really hang out with many people my own age, so propping up the bar of The Crown and listening to the town's veterans - bumbling raconteurs with a tenuous grasp on vocabulary - tell tales of past hardships, woe and how people of our generation have no backbone (or attention span) is quite comforting. And one day, I'm sure it'll provide the spark of inspiration I need for that award-winning novel of mine. I suppose I should be insulted by the slurs of those washed up old codgers but in some strange way, I tend to agree with them.

Anyhow, my aunt bellowed for me in that crackly smoker's tone of hers and just like clockwork, it was time for her meds. Like any other day, I knocked up the usual cocktail of pills to cure her ills and took a little something for myself: just a couple of prescription painkillers to numb my head and make things a little groovy for a while. She didn't talk much when I fed her the pills and water; the old girl was weak and not

having a great day so I shoved her onto her side, tucked her in and knew I wouldn't need to tend to her for at least another few hours.

I negotiated my way down the minefield of creaks and cracks on the stairs and ate a sugary mound of cornflakes while listening to soothing reports of violence and drudgery on STUNT FM's local hourly news bulletin, and it was then that I knew, Sunday was going to be another day to be cast on the scrap heap of a weary mind.

I couldn't be bothered to wash up so I abandoned my bowl, hopped up the stairs, had a deviously long, soapy shower, slung on my lounging slacks and started to window gaze - a bonafide hobby of mine. Due to the effect of the pills, the molten mash of chimney pots and tangerine street lamps had an additional glow, as if the shy and retiring colours lost in the landscape had come out of hiding just to perform for me, and me only. I'll always remember how comforting that felt.

When my eyes came back into focus I saw someone smoking in the garden of the terrace directly opposite me, a girl who looked my age, and then it hit me like a shot of morphine up the arse: it was Daisy Pegg. I wouldn't have believed it but that ashen complexion, auburn hair and *I don't give a shit* stance were simply unmistakable.

Now, she may sound not sound like the canine's gonads to you, but I can assure you that everything about her is alluring - she's the unattainable drug on the black market and ever since I can remember, the girl's had an overwhelming psychological effect on me. I couldn't believe she was standing there in her mum's garden after all those years. I just *could not* believe it: my wet nightmare.

I've known her since time began. Her mum and my aunt used to go to the pub together; we used to play on the swings at nursery and I'd always share my milk with the girl even when she guzzled all of hers. She always took it too. We learned to ride our bikes together, pilfered pick 'n' mix from the local shops, helped each other with our homework and our families even went on holiday together, once. It was all peaches and cream until we hit puberty, mind you. She developed a pair of Milk Puffers (or bosoms, as conservative people call them) and as a teenage lad, I suddenly found myself longing for a piece of that sweet anatomical pie. As you may have guessed, I was too gutless to even try to make a move, and something in me didn't really want to. As a result, I became a spectator to the unrelenting love life of Daisy Pegg.

We still talked occasionally but being a sulky teenager, I distanced myself from her and turned to books and spending school lunchtimes kicking a football around with the unpopular lads. They had the collective social skills of a jellyfish and didn't have one competitive bone in their bodies, so I felt like a king, plus, it was an easy way to kill the time between life's vital scenes without having to make any new friends.

I'd often try and stare into her window in the evenings as hers was directly opposite to mine, but what was once an open portal became a black hole of segregation, with the curtains closed.

In lieu of communication with Daisy, I'd often consult my laminated Jazz pamphlets for hours on end, just to distract myself from the boredom (the teenage mind is a terrible thing; the adult one is worse when I think about it).

Then one day, without warning at the age of sixteen, she just vanished. No goodbye, no letter. Nothing. After a few weeks I worked up the courage to knock on the

front door and query Daisy's disappearance with her mum, but I was shrugged off with an explanation along the lines of *she's been given a great opportunity far, far away so just leave it at that*. Over time I lost interest and just cracked on with life, after all I had things to do, and I actually started to get a bit of female attention, so it didn't matter, really.

Seeing her sauntering around her mum's front lawn after eight long years made me realise that it did matter, it had always mattered and somehow, at that precise moment, it mattered more than ever. I crouched low to the left-hand side of my bedroom window with my nose just resting on the seal and peeped as she pulled out another one of those pencil-like smokes from her purse and puffed away during what looked like a long and in-depth phone conversation. I recall thinking that it must have been her boyfriend, or husband - a huge bloke with a six-figure salary and a top of the range sports car: a real alpha male. She was on the phone for what I thought was ten minutes, but it turned out to be two hours and I secretly watched, statuesque and attentive: a loyal hound.

When she ended the call and glanced up at my window I cowered and dropped to my knees in an instant, skimming the end of my nose on the coarse wallpaper on the way down. I just kneeled there stunned, anyone who walked in at that moment might have thought I was meditating or praying to Mecca, but I wasn't - I was lost in the all-encompassing mantra of Daisy Pegg.

After casting a cautious glance to see if she was still there, I realised that I hadn't checked on my aunt for hours and it was starting to get dark, but she was okay, if not still a little unresponsive. I hand fed her a Sunday feast of uppers, downers, pain

dampeners, minestrone soup and once again, left her to her psychedelic dreams, knowing that in the Realm of Slumber, her life was more interesting, more meaningful.

Much like the start of the day, nothing particularly interesting happened other than the obligatory shitting, eating, breathing, thinking, pacing and general time wasting, but I couldn't get her out of my mind, and it was as exciting as it was scary.

What was I going to do? How long was she going to be in town? Maybe forever? Would she even remember me? If she did, would she actually talk to me? Why did she look up at my window? This cycle of thoughts continued to spiral through my mind and I was certain that a good night's sleep wasn't on the cards, so I took a small overdose of Night Nurse, slumped face down onto my pillow and as my consciousness drifted away from me, I decided that the next day, I was going to have a shave, iron my shirt, put on my best cologne (not that one from the market that smells like boiled cat piss) and go to see her.

Monday

It was a groggy start to the day, and I remember getting frosty feet about going over for my catch-up with Daisy. There was still a burning desire to do so but I've never really been one for grabbing life by the balls and anyway, what was I going to say? If I even tried to play it cool, my words would trip over themselves like an infant trying to tie their shoelaces for the first time. Basically, I just knew I'd make myself look like one giant dick head.

My aunt was graced with a bit more cheek colour when I was tending to my duties late that morn and I could see a breath of life had returned to that wry old cake hole of hers. That piercing smirk she owned was never intended as a look of judgement, she's not the type, but all my life I have been able to see how others have got the wrong end of the stick when she dished out one of those looks. Before her decline she was certainly feisty, but much more mischievous than she ever was judgemental. My aunt Mags is just one of those people you have to get to know and once you do, the rewards are endless. At least I used to think so.

Anyhow, she seemed chipper so I left her propped up straight with the telly on. Just as my hand brushed against the door frame, I heard her say,

“Sam, I'm worried about you, you know?”

“I'm just fine old girl, don't worry about me, you're the one who's bedridden.”

“You need to get outside and meet people Sammy, get a life or the demons will consume you,” she croaked back like a human cigarette.

“Leave off aunt. I didn’t know you were religious, anyway.” It wasn’t much of a retort, I’ll give you that.

Anyhow, I didn’t stick around to hear the rest of the lecture but as I stomped down the hallway I felt ill at ease. She’d often give me stick about my appearance, language, drinking and general bone idleness, but on that occasion it seemed so very random. Maybe it was because since the start of her illness, she had been sedate and submissive, so at that moment, her comment was way out of context. Those words did serve to ruffle my feathers, but I knew it wasn’t anything a bit of bedroom window peeping couldn’t fix.

I shot my eyes over to Daisy’s childhood bedroom but it there was nothing happening at all.

When you’re suspended at a death-defying height, people always tell you not to look down, at which point you do, and it’s terrifying. After glancing into my front garden, that age old phrase definitely applied as to my shock, amazement, dismay, fright and pleasure, Daisy was knocking on my door. My door! My guts became tight and I began pulling my toes across the carpet in fits of adolescent fear. I didn’t want to answer that door under any circumstances but at the same time, there wasn’t a thing in the world that I wanted to do more. My hands were tied. Was I a teenager again? It definitely felt like it.

Before I had a chance to decide what to do she saw me in the window and began gesturing to me to open up the door with one of those cheesy breakfast presenter grins. I

went into a temporary state of shock, so those next few moments were a complete blur (I've remembered more after drinking a bottle of scotch to myself down The Crown), but before I knew it, I found myself standing in front of her.

“H-hello.”

“Hi Sam, it's been awhile, do you remember?”

“Yeah, err?” My words tripped over themselves in little excitable bursts, “r, remember what?”

“Me silly. The school days, the bike sheds; the time I let you see my knickers for a dare...”

She was still as cheeky as ever and talked as if as nothing had changed, as if we'd been living in each other's pockets for all of those lost years and she hadn't just evaporated into thin air. I didn't know whether to be elated or royally fucked off, but as I gazed at her like some sort of hopeless goon, I finally noticed what she was wearing.

Daisy stood there hand-on-hip, waiting for me to say something, donning a figure-hugging nurses outfit - it certainly made my new hanging baskets look a bit lacklustre. In my stupor, I thought for a moment that she might have found a fresh and exciting career as one of those nocturnal naked dancing ladies, but fortunately I came to the realisation that perhaps she was actually a nurse before I said anything stupid.

“Well, are you going to say something? I can't stand here all day, Sam.”

“Come on...are you coming? Do you want to...?” I couldn't believe what I was saying.

“That's a bit forward Sam, seeing as I haven't seen you in ages. You've gone a bit rouge in the cheeks.”

“Sorry, I meant come in if you like? Do you want to come in for some tea or something?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” she said.

“Come on through to the kitchen.”

“Actually, I’m here to see Mags”

“What?”

“Your aunt, silly. I’m here to help out here once a week. You know, give her meds, carry out health checks, and the rest. So, my friend, it looks like we’ll be seeing quite a lot of each other from now on. We’ve got a fair bit to catch up on, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Agreed!”

“I’ll go up and say hello to Mags, do my bits and pieces, then I’ll come back downstairs so we can have a proper chat. Put the kettle on and wait for me down here.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“Don’t thank me Sam, thank the NHS.”

Daisy Pegg: back in my life for all of two minutes and she was already calling the shots. Still, I didn’t care, I was buzzing on adrenaline and this was literally the most exciting thing to happen to me since I was interviewed by the Stunston Gazette regarding my opinions on the town’s hardware store being turned into a gentlemen's club. I won’t go into detail, but as you might imagine, my answer didn’t go down well with the local geriatrics and churchgoers.

Not wanting to disobey my orders, I stayed downstairs, placed a few tea bags into Mag’s finest china pot and added boiling water. I was finding it difficult to contain

my excitement and needed a distraction, so I flicked on the radio box and slumped down on the breakfast chair with my elbows resting on the table. STUNT FM's Rob Robust was on, my favourite...

"It's a mid-morning Monday and as if you didn't already know, you are listening to Rob Robust's 'Red Hot Rock 'n' Roll Hour', something to add some spicy seasoning to your 11 o'clock snack, mmm..."

I'm here to offer you a little musical news, words of wisdom and some straight talking rock and roll classics, laced with a few young upstarts that the other radio stations usually cast aside like an old pair of pants. If you're not a real music fan, then it's time to turn over, I don't want you clogging up my 'fair waves', but if you're here for the long haul, hold on to your cereal bar, because we're going for a wild ride to the dark side. To kick things off, here's a brand new song by a young local four-piece for your listening pleasure. Sit back, enjoy and the details will follow..."

I love Rob Robust. His deep, disgustingly sexual, Americanised-cockney-slathered tone is almost laughable, but you find yourself clasping to every word that comes out of his mouth. I thought of him as a musical hypnotist who just happened to play the best records in town, someone close to my heart. He felt like he was an extension of me.

He speaks his mind, which often gets him into trouble, but it's a breath of fresh air from all of those plastic corporate DJ's who are afraid to say anything real in case it jeopardises their ten hours a week, yoga-going lifestyles.

Anyhow, as I sat there and listened to the hard-edged, yet melancholic tones of Rob's first choice of the week, she strolled in.

“Mags is sorted, was lovely to see her, although I do wish she wasn’t so sick. I hope you don’t mind, but she said you hadn’t been out and about in a while. You need to get out there and shake things up a bit or you’ll end up going mental,” she said while arranging the instruments in her work bag in a careless fashion.

“Well, she should keep her nose out, the ungrateful...”

“There’s no need to be like that, she’s been singing your praises you know.”

“Your tea’s getting cold.”

“Oh, Sod the tea Sam, I’ve officially knocked off for the day, let’s go and get a proper drink. Your aunt says she’ll cope for a few hours.”

I couldn’t believe it. “YES. I mean, yeah okay then,” I snatched my coat, pulled on my shoes, threw a bunch of Tic Tacs into my food hole and darted to the front door.

“Where are we going by the way?” I asked.

“The Old Lamb at the back of town.

Bollocks.

The Old Lamb is an absolute shit pit. Ever since I was a young lad, I was ordered to stay away from there at all costs. I was told that if I drank in *that pub* and mixed with *those people*, I’d be forever tainted. I was frightened but I didn’t want her to know that and anyway, I thought perhaps if we got a wee bit tipsy, I might have a shot of rekindling old memories.

The walk there was quiet and with an atmosphere as cold as the autumnal breeze that kept whistling up my nose. She swayed sensually, I followed behind like a mutt on

an invisible leash. But I didn't care; I was still trying to process the situation. Usually, at that time I'd be trying to identify the creaky floorboards in the kitchen while making Mags her pea soup, or pretending to write.

When we arrived, she ushered me to the front door and as I wiped my watery, windstruck peepers there it stood in all of its ramshackle, piss soaked glory: *The Old Lamb*.

The Old Lamb, The Old Lamb. The inn that time forgot. So odd in stature, and the fact that it's nestled underneath one of the town's more reputable hotels makes it even stranger. Essentially, it's one of the filthy cockroaches that attempts to thrive under the cashmere carpet of an affluent family home. And somehow, like all cockroaches do, it has, against all odds.

She gripped my little finger with her right hand; it was icy and soft. Then, without any hesitation, she pulled me through The Lamb's flaky oak doors and took me to the front bar. Blimey, what a sight it was...

Grim. Just grim, nothing else. The lingering odour of stale existence was faintly masked by the haze of roll-up smoke, and the two flickering lamps on the wall were the only things that cushioned my eyes from the horrors of the place. The ceiling had a creeping damp in each corner of the almost perfectly square room, which seemed to stop at the cheap wooden wall panels, and the battered Chesterfields strewn around its perimeter were all wounded, showing their stained, spongy flesh. The carpet was sticky and its geometric shapes seemed to be alive, swimming with filth. But, the most disturbing thing about the floor (apart from the mice) was that it was attached to the locals.

It looked like this small handful of people, mainly malnourished looking middle aged men, hadn't seen the light of day in decades, let alone a hot shower and it didn't look like they gave a shit, either. There were two lank-haired, bony old men hunched at the small bar on the left, spitting all over the place as they slugged their pissy pints and screeched at the horse racing results which were bellowing from an FM radio that was way past its prime. Directly to their right were two horrific looking women whose makeup had migrated from their wrinkled faces to somewhere in between the bottom of their chins and the top of their tits. As I shuffled towards the bar in a sheepish fashion, they cackled and spat the phrase '*do you want some of this, boy?*' in my direction, while the rounder of the two lifted up the hem of her mini skirt, exposing an unkempt pubis and the tops of her cottage cheese thighs. I was nearly sick and very afraid. I just couldn't understand why Daisy had taken me there.

She asked what I wanted to drink, bluntly. *Anything but fermented ammonia* I thought, but not wanting to complain, I gestured towards the lager pump as I was afraid of how long the so-called guest ales had been festering there - for all I knew, they could've been sitting in the pub for longer than the punters.

I recall feeling nervous and sipping my pint in short, sharp intervals between looking at either my trainers or the back of Daisy's head; I really didn't want to get involved in a conversation with the local scumbags, but apart the odd stare from the hog-faced women, all attention was focused on Daisy as she shamelessly flirted with the dirty old men that were both old enough to be her grandad, twice over (I say that to punctuate the point, but I think you get the message that these guys were basically geriatrics). I couldn't get my head around it: had she brought me there to make me feel

uncomfortable? I couldn't figure it out and I remember developing feelings of hatred toward her. Suddenly the words *magical* and *person* were replaced with *stupid* and *bitch*. But of course, that was only temporary.

She got me another pint, then nodded towards the back door with her finger and led me away from the bar to the croaky jeers of the dirty old men. As we went through the door she whispered in my ear:

“I only flirt with those filthy old blokes to distract them from violence.”

I didn't quite get what she meant but those feelings of hatred immediately evaporated into the smoky air, which by that point was getting fainter by the second.

With her hand in mine, she led me through a low lit stock room that looked like some kind of beer barrel graveyard and explained how she was taking me to meet someone who was going to help me. I felt ill at ease, worried, angry and grief-stricken, but all I could muster was a polite nod of acknowledgement - I was at her mercy and at that point and prepared to do anything she told me to do.

“We call him The Honch” she explained.

“Why?” I said.

“Well, because he's the head honcho, silly.”

Christ, she never gave me any straight answers. I still to this day can't decide whether it's a trait that I like or not, but anyhow...

She stopped us in our tracks at a door that was hidden at the back of the barrel graveyard and went on to explain how The Honch, as she called him, was a great and noble man: a charismatic philanthropist with a genuine passion for real ale. He sounded like an anus to me. As soon as she told me he ran The Old Lamb I pulled her up on it.

“How could this bloke possibly be noble and good if he runs this wasteland?”

“The pub is just a front, Samuel; he’s got his fingers in lots of sweet pies. Come in, you’ll understand all of this when you meet him.”

I didn’t like the way she jumped to his defence so quickly, was it her *sweet pie* she was talking about?

We entered the room and it was immaculate. The walls were a brilliant white, the furniture exquisite and a decorative oak bar lined the back wall; it was hard to believe the room had anything to do with The Old Lamb. The second thing I noticed was The Honch in all his mundane glory. He was standing on a beer crate in the centre of the room, talking proudly with his chest puffed out and a half pint handle of golden ale in his right hand. He didn’t look very bloody noble to me, he wore a plain shirt, a pair of chinos, cheap brogues, had bright red stubble and the early manifestations of a beer belly. And he was short. He just looked like your average, unattractive middle-aged bloke, nothing special at all. But that all changed when I actually listened to him and what he had to say, in fact, I regret ever thinking of him as an ordinary man, I really do, sort of.

In mid-speech, he flung us both a welcoming smile and gestured towards the only empty couch in the room: an Oxblood Chesterfield that looked like it had a much more privileged upbringing than its relatives in the front bar. Once I settled into the couch and tuned into his wavelength, I became another happy member of his captive audience.

Right there and then, his voice became a soothing throat lozenge for the ears and as he spoke, he delivered every single syllable with an unmistakable gusto and sincerity.

I can't remember his whole speech word for word, but he talked about the intricacies of the beer brewing process and how, if treated with respect, real ale could actually serve to enrich people's lives in so many ways, and I agreed with his every word. I remember his sign off as clear as day:

“I won't keep you here all afternoon, although I could ramble on, but I can see Marge's eyelids going south over there; however, let me say this, the next time you sip a pint of microbrew, stop and take a moment to think about the raw ingredients and the people who nurtured it to provide you with such a delicious drop. Just by buying the stuff, you've put a penny in their pot, so by enjoying that, I'm sure, well-earned beer, you're actually doing a charitable deed. See you all next week, and don't forget your tote bags.”

I couldn't have put it better myself. I really couldn't. You know, those greedy, grubby handed city boys who trade in other people's dreams wouldn't give one crap about the working man who brewed the beer, nor would they drink the stuff. They might buy a few of his shares if he made a few bob though.

Daisy squeezed my forearm and ushered me over to the beer crate to introduce me to the man. I stood a good four inches taller than him but I felt like a school kid. What was said exactly, I don't remember, all I really can muster is feeling starstruck, you know, like I'd just shaken hands with a Hollywood A-lister, but the conversation did kick off with *Sam, it's good to meet you my son, I've heard interesting things...*

I bumbled through that particular exchange of words very awkwardly, but managed to properly introduce myself and offer a few details about my background, you know, small talk. He said that he'd like me to become a member of his Secret Ale

Society and that my induction would take place by the end of the week. He also offered me some bar work and told me that as I was receiving a carer's package from the state, he couldn't pay me in cash, but provide currency in support, advice, ale, beer brewing lessons and other things that he didn't disclose.

To be honest, at that point, he could've said he'd pay me in arse-wiped potato peel, I was just so elated that I could be a part of something secret and exclusive; it was like I belonged - something I was yearning forever but didn't quite know it.

Then just like that, he mysteriously disappeared from the room (looking back, I suppose it wasn't that mysterious, he just sort of slithered out the back door). There were still a few trusted senior members of the club milling around the room, a couple of them did cast me a nod of approval. I wanted to go over and say hello but Daisy reminded me that until I was officially inducted, not to approach anyone. I understood this as club etiquette so didn't feel the need to question it in any way and before I knew it, we were walking back through the barrel graveyard. As we left the front bar, rather than fearing the down and out locals, I felt pity for them. They were glued to the bottom rung of society's slippery ladder and although they put all of their Job Seeker's into bar, they'd never be privy to the amazing things going on out back. They were just plebs. I understood their plight.

Once again, we faced the cool autumn breeze and by then, I was pretty wobbly from the piss-water, but with my newfound status, I felt the urge to party hard through the evening and into the dawn, but there was a resistance. Daisy told me that she was going home as she had to do her rounds in the morning and afterwards, she'd pick me up and take me to go and see The Honch again. She did suggest that I go home and get

some rest, but something inside me was defiant, I mean, all of a sudden, the thought of going back home to my sick aunt seemed like a prison, and who wants to go to prison, willingly?

So my friend, with a little white lie, I trotted into the town centre for the first time in a long time and hit the first pub I could find, a cheesy sports bar called Denver's with a sticky floor and slippery clientele to match, and let me tell you something, that's all I really remember about Monday night.

There's a hazy tapestry of wayward conversations, shots, falling off bar stools, kebabs, dry roasted peanuts, scrapping, vomiting, shouting in the street about the rising rate of inflation, a possible lap dance and him, The Honch. I don't know if he was following me or out in town on some sort of covert errand, but he was definitely present at one point or another, as the next morning, I woke up on the Chesterfield back at The Old Lamb to two very stony faces.

Tuesday

Two self-righteous souls looked down on me with disgust. Well, at least that's what I thought.

I recall clearing Monday night's debauched film from my eyes and seeing those two shaking their heads at me in tandem as I tried to cobble together the series of events that led to the couch, half-naked and hop-headed. Had I been fiddled with? That was the first thing that came to mind.

"You obviously haven't learned anything, hey - hey?"

I didn't know what he was chatting about, but I felt like a child who'd been caught with their hand in the sweetie jar.

Daisy didn't say a word but stood behind him, almost cowering but trying her best to give off a stern glare, which didn't quite work. I mean, it was laughable, but I wasn't laughing for long.

"Mallet, he's gone too far now, hasn't he?"

Who the fuck is Mallet? I thought to myself.

"Err, yes Samuel, you've let yourself down."

I'm not sure why he called her Mallet, I think it's a pathetic excuse for a nickname, but I wasn't exactly in the position to question it. In fact, the whole situation was like a mallet to the head.

Yet again, it's very hard to tell you precisely what they said to me, but as soon as I let out a chuckle, the verbal onslaught came sharp, swift and with pomp, like an intruder in a family home. It hurt, and I can tell you that for nothing.

The content of my tongue-lashing started with the pair dressing me down about my drunken behaviour and general disobedience, followed by a cross examination of my weaknesses, coupled with an acute fear of living life; my laziness; my scruffiness and my aversion to finishing the things I start. Each word was more poisonous than the last and it bust my emotional stomach wide open with shame.

Insults are hard to take. I don't mean those kinds of insults that slide off the skin like *you're fat* and *you're spotty*, they're childish at best. I'm talking about the ones that dig in deep, wrap themselves around your soft spots and pull them out of every orifice for the whole world to see. Needless to say, after several of those insults, I became a quivering, bawling wreck, which opened me up to more verbal violence. Even Daisy - or Mallet's - (as she obviously liked to be called) soft voice became sandpaper.

Through all of the pleading and the tears they didn't stop; the velocity of their onslaught increased and their words entwined into one rhythmic pattern, like they had been up all morning rehearsing while I was in my drunken slumber, but it stung far too much to be canned.

As the pace slowed from a Latin Hustle to a Hesitation Waltz, the subject turned to my future. The Honch took the lead: he advised me to look at myself in the mirror, study myself beyond the blemishes and wrinkles, and then kill all of the ugliness and bad habits inside me by having the courage to identify them. He told me that I had a real spark - potential - and that if I wanted to be a member of the club, I had to think about

changing my ways immediately or I'd be left behind. He also said that I must cast away the ties, shackles and dead weights in my life as they would only stunt my growth. When he delivered his words in that flocculent tone of his, I couldn't help but eat everything he said. I only really got the gist of what he was talking about, but I was willing to do anything to be part of his club and get wrapped up in his world. I thought, maybe, just maybe, he could even become a mentor to me.

They fed me and told me to clean myself up. I felt emotionally pulped yet cleansed, until I came out of the bathroom. Daisy and The Honch stood firm in the doorway with a red bucket held between them. Before I could query the contents of the mystery bucket, they demanded that I dropped to my knees, and in my delicate state, I obliged without any hesitation - and SPLOSH.

The putrid soup of slop and second-hand brews, which had been sat baking in the sun, slipped down my throat and spread all over my clothes. It tasted and smelt, like a million rotten trench feet that had been dipped in stilton, it was what could only be described as the Devil's own brew. I wept for my sanity and threw myself onto the floor in spasms, just like I had in Toys 'R' Us on my fifth birthday when the Power Rangers dolls went out of stock.

Silence filled the void between me and my two attackers. I was quaking. The room had morphed from a safe haven to a torture chamber in a matter of minutes.

Daisy and The Honch set me the small mission of going home alone, digesting the afternoon's events, getting an early night and waiting for further instructions. Again, I didn't know what they were gassing on about, but I wasn't going to argue, not after that.

When I got home Aunty Mags was out for the count. She looked peaceful and there was even a bit of colour in those scrotum-like cheeks of hers. Despite having upset me, it looked like Daisy did a good job at caring for the old girl, which back then, I was grateful for.

But it was that evening that my tune changed, unmistakably. Like many times in the past couple of years, I stood in the doorway gazing at the woman who looked after me when the whole world turned its back; the person who was partly responsible for moulding me into at the very least, a reasonably decent member of our fair society.

You see, I never knew my parents, only second or third-hand tales that people would recount to me as a so-called treat on my birthday, or at Christmas. You know, the kind of phoney children's tales where all of the ugliness has been cut away from the body like a tumour, leaving only a squeaky-clean account of how incredible this or that person was. It's alright until you're about thirteen as you can comfort yourself with the fact that you were spawned by a pair of superheroes who were chiselled by the gods, but at some point you develop a hunger for the truth, not birthday cake.

My birth mum was Mags' sister and apparently she was a vile, unnecessary, cold and callous piece of excrement that smoked and drank too much. And my old man, well, he was just too out of it to notice. He wasn't much better than her. When aunty Mags actually shovelled up the bullshit and shot me straight, it was the best present I ever received. It hurt but it beat any aftershave, underpants or tangible good I have even been given on my birthday, Easter, Christmas or any other occasion for that matter.

Aunty Mags and uncle Kevin raised me as their own since I was two years old, after mum and dad, known locally as Jill and Mark (and an assortment of other more

colourful names) were written off in a drug-fuelled motorway crash. In some way, I feel the world is probably better off without them. Maybe there is a hole left gaping in my soul, but it's not really something that haunts my day-to-day existence. I don't think so, anyway.

When uncle Kevin died, a piece of my heart was buried with him. A fair and gentle man, Kevin taught me to ride my bike, tie my laces, do my sums, talk to girls and even give someone a punch on the nose if they gave me too much lip - he was a million noblemen in one fleshy package. Now that's my gaping hole right there; cancer took him away almost overnight and neither myself, nor my aunt, ever quite recovered from it. I didn't even get to go to his funeral.

The funny thing is, although I remember most of the things he did for me, I don't remember uncle Kevin himself, in all his nuanced detail, that clearly, just that he was a good man and he took care of us – the rest is a bit blurry now. Perhaps I shut it all out as a way of coping, a means of trucking on. Even so, I know he was a good man and that's all that matters. Yes, that's all that matters.

Anyhow, I've always believed that Kevin's death directly contributed to Mags' ill health and I reckon it did so with immediate effect. Her strength was packed up and couriered to lands unknown and no matter how many bottles of wine she searched in over the years, the poor woman never really found it again. That's when I became her official caregiver: there was no other option; I mean the women raised me for Christ's sake.

On that crimson leaved evening, my sense of duty shifted. Up until that moment, I had always gazed upon Mags with a look of respect, but something had changed. I

couldn't figure out what had rolled me off my axis, but feelings of love were replaced by those of a clawing hatred. I crunched my Tic Tacs with rage and ground them into thin air. I wanted to spit at her for dragging me down those past few years and costing me a great chunk of my youth; I wanted to gob tobacco-laced phlegm on her dependence and throttle her until she cried for making me take care for her every need. I very nearly did, believe me.

Downstairs was the safest place for me to be at the time. I couldn't put my finger on where my resentment had come from and I was genuinely frightened of what I might do if I stayed near her room any longer.

When I calmed down, I tried to rationalise the episode, you know, break it all down in my head. That may have been that last time I truly tried to make heads or tails of anything that ever happened to me.

Head in hands, I sat at the kitchen table and examined every knot on its uneven surface, you could have heard a pin drop if it wasn't for the hum of cheap electrical appliances. It was getting late and still, I had no answers. Why had The Captain and Daisy been so harsh on me? It was only one drunken night out, surely it didn't warrant a punishment like that. You might think it did, I don't know.

My feelings were all over the shop: even though I had been treated like a dog and dressed down to the bone, I never wanted Daisy so bad and I couldn't stand the fact that my actions might have muscled me out of The Honch's secret organisation. Somehow I conjured up a newfound negativity for my sick aunt, and it was impossible to comprehend. Those thoughts flooded my head and washed through my veins, which

made me very anxious - and the silence was driving me mad. In situations like that, the only thing I can do to stay sane is put on the radio.

A little static and there he was, his voiced greeted me like a hot oven on a Sunday afternoon...

“Hello all you cats, cretins and creatures out there, we’re just a stone’s throw away from the hump day, and surely that’s reason enough to party, right?”

Whether you’re in, you’re out, you’re black, white, uptight, alright or searching for the light, I’m here to give you what you need. If you’re feeling down and craving a little perk, put a drop of whiskey in your coffee and get ready to kick those evening blues to the curb. So lean back, relax and listen to this Northern Soul classic from the one and only...”

Rob Robust always knew what to say, and although I’m a huge music fan, to listen to the track he had cued would only have diluted what he said; when he’s on the radio, it’s like he’s literally talking to me - and me only - like some secret code only the two of us can understand.

I felt a bit better after listening to Rob, like I could maybe figure things out, even if at that moment my head was all clogged up with shit and fluff, and nonsense. I did exactly as instructed and started to brew up a coffee while scouring the cupboards for the Famous Grouse, when I heard the letterbox go. There was no way it was the wind and with haste I ran to the front of the house and threw the door open. A silhouette ran down the centre of the street. I chased. I screamed but it didn’t stop and instead, the shape sloped off behind the long snakes of stationary cars that lined the estate. I ran out of breath. I panted like a pup then lit up a fag. On the way back to my front door it

seemed as if all eyes were on me: I was the poorly paid subject of a back alley peep show. Daggers ran down my spine. I was about to head back inside, I spotted a note face up on the pathway.

It simply read, 'Just Checking In.'

Wednesday

Am I losing you? A load of old bollocks, is it? I can tell what you're thinking. Well, at this point in time I suppose you're hoping there's going to be some kind of payoff for lending me your ear for the day, but in the grand scheme of things does it really matter, my friend? You're stuck here just like me and it's not like you're going anywhere anytime soon, hey? We're just a pair of fools trying to pass the time in this soulless purgatory we now call home. So, you just kick back and I'll carry on from where I left off. Don't interrupt me, it's rude.

Now, where were we? Although I'm unsure of what unconscious images my mind had been brewing up while I slept that night, I do remember being haunted by their presence when I woke up. I looked at the clock and I was shocked (well, mildly) when it read just after two in the afternoon - even for a feckless House Urchin like me that was really pushing the envelope. I didn't feel rested at all, just drained of life and agitated. As soon as I started to walk down the hall my mind began to spin cycle, picking up pace until it felt like a rain-cloud forged cloak had set up shop in my brain. I had to find out what was going on. There was no time for Mags and I didn't want to see her anyway, I still felt an angst towards my aunt that was surging beneath my skin and I knew it was a demon best left caged.

Are you getting bored again, hey?

Listen, I need to get this off my chest, I really do. You'll have your turn, just as soon as I've bumbled through my little piece. I tell you what, from now on I'll just to stick what I consider to be the important bits, so for the final time I'll tell you that I had a deviously long, soapy shower, trimmed my pubic hair into a neat little rug, ate a large bowl of canned soup (chicken, cream of) and put my trousers on...well, you get the picture.

Just checking in. I understood what the phrase meant, in fact I used it many a time at school when I was caught pilfering the Space Raiders from the tuck shop. *You know, sorry about that, I was just checking in, as in, just checking in to make sure that you are security conscious at this fine institution.* That didn't end well, but I am familiar with the term, nonetheless.

The words were as plain as the paper on which they were written, and after a few pieces of toast and a lot of pacing, I came to the conclusion that it must have been a test of initiation put in place by Daisy and The Honch, and I that I had passed it with flying colours. I'd stayed at home, I was commended and I was grateful, pathetically so. But, still, I didn't know exactly who the messenger was.

I felt choked inside the house, the walls were a noose and I had to get out, even though the soot-slathered rain was thick. Hood up, I ventured deep into the bowels of the estate using the shimmer of the street lamps as my guide - and even though black and drenched, every object sat firmly in its place.

The postman, that bloody postman, I knew he didn't live a million miles away from the house but he had started to do his bicycle rounds at increasingly weird times and surely a postie doesn't deliver letters after dark? There are no children out at that

time so I knew he wasn't a backdoor Fagin, but I do, or shall I say did, find his behaviour somewhat strange. Anyway, the reason I mention Mr Postman is because on that particular night I felt his pathetic, tubby presence following me as I trudged down Smiths Lane, and just as I was about to try and kick him off his bike and send him crashing into a watery abyss, he sped past and vanished, as if he could read my thoughts. Again, I felt uneasy.

At the time I wasn't really sure where I was going, but home felt more and more of a halfway house with every strike of the clock. I felt like a snail: a spineless, slow-moving and generally undesirable creature that couldn't quite shake his shelter from his back, no matter much he tried. But, I suppose, if you're not a snail, you're a slug, and I think that's much worse.

Left, then right, then right again, a few hundred yards, then left onto the dual carriageway. Come rain or shine, I had taken that route on foot since before I could grow a sort of beard, but on that cold, wet night in the shadows of the murk, I saw things that I had never quite noticed before. Mundane things to most, maybe, you know, things like the trees planted along the pavement every twenty five feet as a token gesture from the council, or the nondescript rows of terraces neatly built in blocks of four; little nuances that are there for everyone to see, but nobody notices because they're too busy doing nothing.

Well. For example, at the end of the road where Smiths Lane meets Park Way, there is a manhole cover and on that manhole cover these words are etched on by a knife, a compass, or something of the like:

Harold of Stunston's plight ends here. Farewell ye merry townsmen.

I'm not sure who Harold is, the cards life dealt him or when he trod Earth's boardwalk, but I can only imagine it ended with him topping himself in a *premeditated moment of madness*. Perhaps, he's still alive but roams the sewers living on toilet paper and human ablutions; maybe he decided to stay strong, only to get hit by 23 bus at the end of the road, or maybe it was all a big joke, and what Harold actually did was go home to his wife for hot pie, mash and lashings of liquor. It's anyone's guess really, but I the fact is, that night, my senses were in overdrive.

The poor pointing work on Mrs Firtree's front wall; the struggling roots fighting their way through the lane's yellow lines; hints of violence from days gone by; a local tramp holding his hand out for scraps of change to use as tokens for numbing substances in strained desperation - all of these things were part of Stunston Estate's rich tapestry, and had been as constant as the sky itself, but usually, they were hiding right under my nose. That night, as I say, that night, they had all come out to play.

Once you turn off the estate you hit a patch of wealth that pompously towers right behind the town. Rather than the rows upon rows of terraces, you are greeted with the stench of affluence and a shoal of fancy structures which accommodate the town's self-professed *elite*: city commuters who seem to value coin over comradeship; mutiny over manners...c-, well, you catch my drift.

Listen up, I'm not saying that Salt of the Earth people making a success of their lives is a bad thing at all, in fact it's poetry personified, it's just the people in those particular dwellings haven't had to work for their fortunes, and that's my issue. I'm not really jealous if that's what you're thinking; I don't think either one of us is in any

position to be worrying about things like that right now be honest. We're just stuck here. We're the bottom of the barrel.

Anyhow, with my newfound senses and curiosity (being a nosey little bastard, if you will), I crouched behind a pine tree and gazed through the rain's mist. I peeped at one of those affluent families tucking into their evening meal. I imagined what it'd be like to be a shit pawed fly on the wall. As I watched them from behind a conifer, I envisioned the kind of conversation that was going on in that room. I reckon it went a little something like this:

Daddy: Son, how was bassoon practice today?

Son: Daddy, it was wonderful, I'm all set for my recital next Monday.

Daddy: Super, there'll be some lovely dessert for you tonight.

Son: Oh wowie, what are we having? What's for dessert?

Mummy: A trio of pud's for you my little superstar.

Son: That's got to be the news of the week!

<The sound of communal laughter soils the room>

Mummy: Cheese on your Bolognese, muffin?

Dad: Oh yes please dear...

Mummy: I wasn't talking to you, darling..

Dad: Self-service for me then, haha!

<They all laugh in unison for over one whole minute. Yes, one whole minute>

Son: Oh, yes please, that would be delightful.

As I peeped at them in the glow of their dining room, smiling and satisfied, I didn't know whether to be sick or knock on the door and ask whether I could join them,

forever. Mind you, although the meal looked tasty, I don't think our conversations would have aligned, I'm far too crass. I felt like crying.

My phone vibrated, it was a text from Daisy:

Come to where the barrels are...x

When I read that message and saw that kiss, a lust-driven determination encompassed my body, and ventured south to my meat hose. There was no time to waste. I just had to hide behind the conifer for a few more minutes to get myself in order.

Of course, it was no riddle: I thought I was being ushered to The Honch's secret society and as I jogged through the rain in pious strides, I couldn't help but wonder what was in store for me. But then it got weird. My lungs felt heavy, a film cased the outside air and then, nothing.

I came around to a charcoal mist; a blackness so dense, that it seemed to cloud up my hearing. There was neither sight, nor sound, just infinite nothingness, kind of like how I'd imagine being buried alive must feel. But, I could move freely around the space.

Running my hands along the floor and then up the bare brick walls, I came to the conclusion that the room had nothing in it at all, not even a slop pan or a rat to talk to; it was barer than the backdoors of Matt Lucas and the cold took up residence in my bones. Someone had taken my phone and my rain jacket. Someone had stripped away everything. Someone wanted to teach me a lesson, but I didn't know what.

So what happens in the gaps between life's vital scenes? You sit idle and let your mind run wild; you panic but you don't scratch and claw; you reach out for a glass

of the stiff stuff but it's not there; you plan things but you go nowhere. That's it, nothing more, nothing less. It's the stuff that madness is made of.

It was frosty in the abyss. I curled up into a protective ball and thought about how I might get out, or even if I was supposed to try and get out. I munched on a few Tic Tacs to calm my nerves and pass the time. I decided that it was another initiation test, one of loyalty and grit. So, I did what I thought was right - I sat in the centre of the room and let my mind wander.

My mind went back into overdrive and images of Daisy's naked flesh; the nobility of The Honch; Stunston's street lamps, aunty Mags; slop buckets; Rob Robust, life; existence; the strength of the English pound and everything else on God's green earth whirled through my head as it began to swell.

I had to focus my thoughts, so for a few moments, so I entered a state of meditation in which I breathed in and out, in and out, in through the nose and out through the mouth, until I was calm: eventually my head became a clear canvas.

Two entities found their way into my blank vision: The Honch and The Postie. They both bashed heads inside my brain until they merged into a blob.

That bloody postman, had he put me in the dark place? I just couldn't put my finger on it; the bloated blue bastard had slowly started to become an unpaid extra in the story of *my* life and in the couple of days leading up to that moment, he had changed from a nosey neighbour to a persistent pest. But why? What was he doing and what did he have to gain? Was he a part of The Honch's organisation. As I sat there with chattering teeth and the foul stench of my own urine wafting up my nose, I knew that I needed to hunt him down and find out what he wanted, if anything.

I even made a little poem up about him to pass the time...

You deliver the post right under my nose;

A portly blue stain in the place I call home.

You're sneaky and fat, you peep with your mail,

Through the small letterbox of a thousand beached whales

You...

Well, that was about as far as I got, because as I was conjuring up the third part of the first stanza, a rod of yellow light pierced my eyes from above.

Thursday

From the piercing light to the bellow of dawn's frost, all of a sudden it was Thursday. I was outside The Honch's room and stacked among the barrels with my phone and jacket resting on my lap. The sun exposed every crack and blemish in the space around me, much like it had on my life on most mornings for years prior to that day.

My head was sore. I remember it feeling like a tiny JCB was excavating the inside of my skull in a bid to reach the outside world (if it was in there and trying to get out, it must have been completely fucking mad); I used my thoughts to let the man in the driver's seat know that they were better off staying away from it all. I suppose it must have worked, as I don't remember it boring a hole in my forehead.

As soon as I'd left my front door the previous evening or so, things hadn't felt right, and lines of information were missing from my memory, just floating around the atmosphere like a school dinner: a smelly old mish mash of waste and processed meat. Rats were roaming around the floor, foraging for their breakfast. It was bright but it wasn't warm, I can tell you that for certain.

I staggered drunkenly, even though I hadn't supped a drop in hours, and made my way through the shadows of the corridors, back through to the stench-ridden front bar in search of any other life forms besides germs, fungus and vermin.

To my surprise, it was completely empty, which really is unusual, even for that time of day. There were patches of damp, grease and snail trails where the urchins usually stood and the only sign of life in that husk of a saloon were the dust mites. The atmosphere was all wrong; it strangled me where I stood.

Not knowing what to do at that moment and feeling weak, I slumped onto the bar and fired up the radio: a little white noise, followed by the faraway voice of a familiar friend, Rob Robust.

“Hey hey hey, all you cool cats and clingers on out there. Welcome to Rob Robust’s Red Hot Morning Medley - coughing candy for your clogged ears...

By now, you may have noticed that things aren’t so groovy outside; there is a real shit storm brewing out there - so boys, girls, gents dames, dogs - or those undecided - it’s simple: BEWARE.

Something’s happening, something big. So, if you’re sitting down, slumped on an empty bar with a sack full of pent up frustration, a sore head and lots of unanswered questions, it’s time to get out there and face the funk. Really, you have no time to waste, time is ticking - I can hear those hands turning louder than ever; like a runaway freight train...CHOO CHOO!

Speaking of locomotives, here’s a little tune by a group called The Yardbirds...

Was he talking to me? As I sat there lingering in my own perspiration and desperation, I came to the conclusion that he must have been. I couldn’t believe it - my hero talking to me via the airwaves - it didn’t make sense, but then again not much had for a while so I thought *screw it*, and with a newfound gusto, I whizzed outside.

It was frozen out there, man. Not frozen like ice-icicles on your testicles, but still, ever so still out on the street. Cloud covered the day's dulcet offerings and the lamps were flickering embers that led the way to nowhere in particular. I'd never seen Stunston that peaceful; I probably won't again until I'm in a box.

I stood there scratching my groin and basking in my town's serene glow, but after a few moments, a creeping sense of dread filled my bones and I wanted to go back indoors. I looked behind me and yeah - the door was closed (predictable, I'm sure). Of course, nothing felt *normal* that day so once again; I just shrugged it off and looked for another means of cover.

In the horizon, I saw a little navy dot. As I moved closer, it morphed into a large ink splodge with milky white spouts shooting from its bottom half. My eyelids were saggier than a pair of thousand-year-old tits, but after a while, my pupils locked into the shape, which all of a sudden became human. It was that fucking postman. That silly little postman who had plagued the pitch black of my mind for days and days.

The next thing I remember is running towards him, fangs out. I was a dog in pursuit of blood-sodden steak and the more the scent punched my nostrils, the faster I ran in his direction. He didn't even have time to run away.

I tried to grab the portly postman by the back of the legs but he clambered up onto a phone box and all I got was a shoe - and a glimpse of an up-short chicken's neck, if you know what I mean? It wasn't pleasant, the sight burned my eyeballs. His agility astounded me - it was incredible for a short, stout peabody, but I suppose as a postman, he must have had plenty of experience with running from dogs and Stunston's rabid out of work can claspers.

“Oi, now you just stop, Sam. Just stop right there.”

“How do you know my name?” I said.

“You ‘have to trust me. I’m one of the good ones and I’m looking out for you, Sam.”

“Stop saying my name like you know me, you piece of shit. What’s your game, postie?”

“I’m not playing games. I’m one of the only ones who aint. That’s all you need to know.” He seemed less jittery and more self-assured. His newfound demeanour poisoned my body with calm and my shoulders dropped.

“I need answers, postie, I need answers. You need to tell me why you’re always lingering around my house. Do you fancy me, or something? Or are you trying to have a piece of Mags before she fades into nothing, hey? You sick f...”

He slammed a fist on the top of the phone box, which made a weird sort of whirring sound, “don’t talk about her that way!”

“Struck a chord have I, pal?”

“No, just chill out. I’m around because I have to deliver mail to your street, that’s a given. But I’m also looking out for your safety, Sam. That’s all you need to know.”

“Well, that’s a bit bloody ambiguous.”

“Nothing is quite as it seems, but keep your head on tight, do a little soul searching and I’ll be there to help. And Sam?”

“Yes?”

“Go home.”

I remember thinking to myself that that little speech must have been the most triumphant thing he had ever said in his whole life.

Such a statement is best garnished with a bold action. The postie's action was to fall backwards off the top of the phone box and into a thorny shrub.

“Ooooh,” he screeched, “my balls.”

#

The next time I saw her she was dead.

Her lips were blue, her fingertips too, but there was still a speck of life in the expression on her face, which made me feel a little better.

She was the wilting rose in the thorn bush. She was so still. It was probably the most glowing she had ever looked.

It's funny isn't it? You know - losing someone you love, or at least someone you think you love. That first moment you're faced with it, you just get saturated in shock; the sorrow doesn't kick in until what seems like a lifetime later. But, I suppose you must know something about that: no one on this Earth is exempt from heartbreak or death.

With sweaty, shaking palms I reached over to touch her, when I realised that the sight before me must have been an act of foul play, I just couldn't figure out how or why. All I knew was, I went to meet her after receiving a text and then she was gone. Struck off the list of the living. It was fucking nuts. Just - fucking - nuts.

I felt cold, colder than she. My bottom lip began to wince and shudder, my Adam's apple became a Brighton beach ball, but there were no tears, only quivering knees.

For hours I simply sat there and cradled her in my arms, her head weighed heavy on my lap while I began to jabber inaudible words into her dead ear. Let me tell you, it was the closest I had ever felt to her, almost, and I didn't want that moment to end, but I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that it had to: I couldn't stay sitting there stationary with her corpse forever, I don't believe it would have made for a very pretty oil painting.

The sun burned holes in the back of my head as it yawned from the trees and there was a halo around us. I was in shock and needed to make sense of the mess around me. I was desperate to find out who did it. My instinct pointed me in the direction of The Honch, so I placed Daisy's lifeless body in the solace of a bush and went wandering.

The whole time I was walking, I kept thinking this and that, this, that and the other until my mind settled on something.

Do you remember me saying about that horrible day of work experience I suffered way back when? If not, you should pay attention more; I bet you didn't listen at school, did you?

At school, work experience was for the no-hopers. You know, the boys and girls in school that the teachers didn't deem to have any potential. They tried to mask it as *those with more practical or vocational minds*, but I knew what they were getting at, even at that age.

You go here for a week, and you go there. If you don't like it, then tough shit - there's always the dole queue when you fail your exams. I'm paraphrasing, but it was probably something like that.

It's great isn't it? Our fair and friendly education system.

So, they packed me off to the grey, smoking maze that is Stuntson Industrial Estate with some big imaginary sign on my forehead that said WORK EXPERIENCE MUG, PLEASE MAKE MY LIFE HELL FOR THE NEXT FIVE DAYS and with chattering teeth, I made my way down to the ham factory. I didn't need a map, the smell of rotting pig's anus and synthesised gloop got me there just fine.

"Are you the work experience boy then, son?" said the fat boss man.

"Yes, that's me. I suppose I am."

"You suppose. Well, you either are or you aint. Make up your mind, squirt."

"Yes, that's me, I'm Sam..."

"Never mind all that, stick on those overalls, then it's down the hall, second to the right: three black coffees and a milky tea with sugar. Then bring 'em back 'ere."

The overall didn't look like it had been washed that decade. On closer inspection, I confirmed that it hadn't.

So there I was in a crusty old overall that gave me the knee joints of a geriatric and the smell of a tramp's boot, making my way to the tea room. Lovely, I thought. Not.

Making tea and coffee is a like meditation, I find. It's a process so ingrained within your being (by the time you're in your teens at least), that you carry out every step with military-like precision while letting your mind drift into a deep void of pure focus. Well, it's like that for me anyway - it's the only time I find any peace and clarity half the time. Still, us two aren't exactly fit for making tea now, are we?

Anyhow, I had made the shitty guvnor his shitting tea and coffees and I was rattling them down the hallway on a rusty tray. All the lights were out which made the

hall seem like a never-ending abyss of despair. When I got to the other end, I wished it had been.

“Here’s your drinks, lads,” I said in my best manly tone.

“Stick ‘em down there saaan.”

“Okay.”

I placed the tray down on a stack of wooden pallets and turned to face the Ham Factory Mob.

I scanned them all: fat, portly, hairy, sallow, greasy, suspect, crusty and fugly (fucking ugly - I mean, really fucking ugly). I didn’t catch their names, but if they appeared as the cast of the Seven Dwarves in the Stunston Christmas panto, that’s what they would have been called.

“Oi, didn’t you get the other lads their drinks? Answer me boy!”

“I - you didn’t ask me to make them.”

“Am I gonna have to mark you down for initiative *zero* on your scorecard?”

It’s funny, when some people get the most miniscule sniff of power (or the illusion of power), they cling onto it like a treacly turd on the toilet bowl. He was only responsible for getting blokes to pack processed ham into plastic packets, it’s not like he produced Exile on Main Street or built the Golden Gate Bridge, or anything even close.

“You should’ve looked around, identified your colleagues and asked them what they wanted. Don’t you know what you are? We’ll I’ll tell you - you’re the factory plebe; the parasite; the scum on the bottom of our collective boots. You’re a lowlife, just like your dad.”

“What do you know about my dad? My dad is dead.”

He began to belly laugh and his jowls started to dance.

I saw claret. The world felt like it was on fire and before I knew it, I found myself lunging at the tubby bastard with a molten cup of coffee in my hand, ready to declare war. I was going to burn his eyeballs, I really was. But then I slipped.

There was a patch of rusty looking water on the left hand side of the factory floor and just like they do in the movies, I slipped back in a comical fashion; before I knew it, I was in mid-air looking up at my steel toe caps with blobs of coffee cascading through the air, ready to scald.

SMACK!

I hit the floor near the top of my spine and the wind escaped my lungs. The coffee came tumbling down onto my lips and neck in the form of a boiling, bitter blanket.

So, there I was, rolling around on the cold factory floor in that pool of rusty water, gasping for air and whimpering while a group of overweight old perverts pointed and laughed at me. I wish that had been the end of it.

When the cup hit the floor beside me, the handle pinged off causing it to roll towards the boss. He was so beside himself with laughter that he raised his left foot to tap his knee and when he went to plant it back onto the floor, the sole of said boot met the side of my cup. The momentum sent him flying forwards and he stumbled towards me like a fat, furry cannonball, which caused his toes to connect with my ribs - the force was so great that he smacked his head on factory floor and shattered the right side of his face.

You could have heard a pin drop. There was no merriment after he hit the deck and, of course, it was all - my - fault.

I was the amateur laugh-smith in The Comedy Store getting jeered and heckled by the Saturday night hyenas and all I could do was lie there with my face down and pretend I was making endless cups of tea and coffee: one extra milky, two with five sugars, one brewed with two tea bags, two black, and so on.

They took fatso away in an NHS ambulance; I had to treat my burns by using what was left of the packing room's 1962 issue first aid box while avoiding eye contact with everyone that walked by me. It was unbelievable, they said they were going to award me with an advanced mark of zero for the whole two weeks, get me banned from working on the estate for life (a silver lining) and said I should count myself lucky that the company weren't going to press any charges. I was mistreated; I was antagonised; he made fun of my father; he hadn't done any physical exercise (other than drinking flat pints of lager and jerking off) in over a decade, yet I was the villain. Things still haven't changed in this world - and they're not likely to.

I clearly recall sitting on a broken fork lift truck in the disused car park by the side of the ham factory, sobbing my eyes out - you know - just weeping it all out. I was having spasms and everything, but no one could see me so I didn't care.

Well, I thought I was alone, and then I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Daisy. She had been working over the road in the office of the local tyre manufacturer, Rough Streak. We all used to call them Ruff Sheath, on account that their rubber seemed so flimsy, it should have been used to make cheap condoms, although if they did, the population of Stunston and its surrounding areas probably would have increased rapidly.

“Hey - hey, Sam. What’s the matter? What’s troubling you?”

It was a little while before I could compose myself and catch a full breath, so she cradled me for a bit and let me soak her shoulder.

“Why is everything so shit, Daisy?”

“Are you on about work experience? We both knew this was going to be a joke, we laughed about it at school, remember?”

“Yeah, I know but it just seems like if you don’t want to accept this is the way things are, there are no other options and you’ll just be floating around like a ghost forever.”

“Better to be a brave ghost than a cowardly lemming, wouldn’t you say?” She gripped my forearm and sat on the wheel arch of the forklift. “Look Sam, we’re kindred spirits, we don’t want this but we’re scared of the alternatives. But you must understand: people like us don’t have any choice. It’s the way we’re wired - we don’t want to stick so we’ll have to twist. We’ll just have to, but that’s all right.”

“I’m not going to stick, or settle or throw my hand away or anything like that, but things just don’t seem right.”

“Things will work out the way they’re supposed to, just stay strong and keep the faith.”

“OH, keep the faith they say, keep the faith. That’s what cults say to keep your brain stored up in a little cube, so they can make you part of their very own cultivated herd of lunatics, smearing shit on the walls and putting poison in the punch...”

“Please Sam, stop being so cynical, we’ll figure it all out together. There’s only two more years of school, then...”

“Then what. THEN WHAT? You go off with your football friends and have orgies and drink champagne in Magaluf while I fester here in my own waste, hey? Kindred spirits? Up yours - you make me sick!”

I thought I was sobbing when she showed up, but it was when her bare knees hit the car park floor, that I knew I’d gone too far. I’d oppressed her just like those fat oafs in the ham factory had oppressed me; she was doubled over like she’d been shot and basically bawling her insides out onto the concrete.

“Daisy, Daisy, I’m so sorry. I really am sorry. I didn’t mean...I’ve just had an awful day. Please don’t cry, please. I love you.” As the words escaped my mouth, I knew I had made a big mistake.

Daisy looked up at me with plum tomato eyes. There was a pause. A long pause. It felt like three lifetimes.

I’d really gone and done it.

She pulled herself up, perched back onto the wheel arch and smiled sarcastically.

“Where did those burns come from? Your mouth looks like a baboon’s arsehole.”

We both laughed in what seemed like the first time in forever and I can safely say, I think it was a blessed relief for the both of us.

“Those chubby pricks in the ham factory made fun of me so I tried to throw hot coffee on the guv'nor, but it ended up on me.”

“Oh my God, are you suspended?”

“Never allowed to work on this estate again.”

“Still, silver linings Sam.”

“Indeed, silver linings,” my face was glowing, “and you should see the state of him.”

“What, the gov’nor?”

“Ha, yeah, he fell over me and smashed half of his face right in. He’ll get free plastic surgery and probably come out looking half like a young Elvis Presley or something, so annoyingly, I think I’ve done him a favour.”

“Haha, only you could look at it that way Sam, only you.”

“And you.”

“And me.”

She squeezed my hand and we both sat there content, filling in the time between life’s vital scenes and let me tell you my friend, it felt good. Everything just felt, so. Right then, we needed nothing more, nothing less.

She moved a little closer and my heart raced. “Samuel, listen. I know I’ve hurt you but all I’ve really been doing is trying to protect you, but I know you won’t understand this right now.

I got sucked into that crowd through being netball captain and as you know, when you spend so much time in other people’s’ pockets, your world tends to orbit around theirs, like it or not. Those little boys, I don’t really care about them. I could have invited you to those sports parties and had you come down to the park to drink cider with them on Friday nights just so you could have joined the gang, but they’re bad people and I don’t want you to have to endure them. You’re better than that.”

“So what about you then, all those filthy football lads going up to your room to *study* at night. You’re pulling my leg if you think I don’t know what you get up to when

the curtains are drawn.” I really wanted to call her a slut, “I live across the bloody road Daisy. If I’m being frank, you’ve actually broken my heart on more than one occasion, there’s hardly anything of it left.”

She looked gutted.

“I was naively helping them to study so they could stay in the team. You know what they’re like with their school work.”

“Obviously, those particular guys are knuckleheads, but you must think I’m really stupid.”

“LISTEN. Just listen up you; I thought you knew me better than that. I thought *you* held me in at least a high enough regard not to accuse me of being a whore, but you disappoint me. Yes, I kissed one of them when I was drunk on Super Scrump and yes, I caved into a bit of peer pressure to make life easier for myself - it’s called being a teenager - but I didn’t do what you think. I didn’t fuck!

If you really want to know, Jim the striker tried it on with me two weeks ago at my place. My mum was out so he saw it as a green light. We were going over long division or something boring and listening to the radio. Everything was going fine, and then he jumped on me like a sex-crazed animal. I told him *no* and he told me to *come on and to stop playing games*. I asked him to slow down and I took him outside for a cigarette to calm things down. He apologised and we shrugged it off. Around ten minutes later he tried it again. The bastard tried to clamp my hands down to the back of my chair and luckily, just luckily, I caught the edge of his balls with the top my foot. He hobbled to the door like he had soiled himself and called me names I can’t even bare to repeat. He could have raped me. Fortunately, he left.

I spent the night sobbing. The next day I knocked on your door to speak to you about it and your aunt said you were out, but your light was on. Just like when I called up the week before to see if you wanted to go to the coast with me and the time before that when I tried to deliver your birthday present. You just *weren't around* but that's bullshit, because you hardly EVER go anywhere anymore. You say I don't care, well you don't either."

She bawled like a hound in a hot car. I had done it again and all of a sudden, I realised I was the awful one; a self-absorbed, juvenile cretin. I remember thinking that I should have joined the bloody football team after all, as I was no better than them.

I wrapped my arms around the poor girl and clamped her tight like I was never going to let go.

"Daisy, please, I'm so, so sorry. I know that doesn't quite cut it but I'll spend the rest of the year making it up to you. You mean the world to me, you really do. It's time for us to twist," her well began to dry a little, "I'll even let you kick me in the bollocks and throw hot coffee in my face." At that point, I realised that all I ever wanted from Daisy was companionship, a bond of friendship on a higher plateau, a purity. Nothing more, nothing less.

"Is that a promise?"

"Of course," I had my fingers crossed, "that's a promise."

"Okay, one day we'll twist right out of this town."

"Deal," I said.

We sat arm in arm on the forklift and watched the ham factory pollute the town together; whenever I see the smog over those old chimney pots, I think of her.

You know, I never quite left that moment. Holding her lifeless body is something I can now turn on and off like a switch, but that evening on the forklift just lingers and lingers, and lingers. Man, it lingers. It's not so much the fact that I felt vaguely happy back then; it's more the haunting realisation that I didn't keep my promise. After all, I'm still holed up in Stunston, a prisoner of my own making.

#

My nose was dripping with claret and pounding like the chest of a beast; it had all erupted out of nowhere. Dormant one second and rife with ash and piss and embers and soot and vinegar the next.

He pulled me up by the scruff of my neck, but left his mouth wide open so I smashed the top of my head as hard as I could on his bottom lip, which split in two without warning. It was satisfying (for a moment); my sybaritic pleasure. His grip yielded as he squealed and stumbled back into the bar. My knees felt like they had been torn to shreds; my head felt like a helium balloon on steroids and my lungs were burning. I'm not sure how The Honch felt, but I did a sterling job at messing his face up.

There was plenty of panting and grasping at objects for a good few minutes before we engaged in anymore dispute. I recall claspng onto the top of a fermentation tank as if it was the only thing keeping me from drowning, while wondering why The Honch and his crew of half-wits hadn't torn me to pieces (don't get me wrong, I was grateful).

“Why won’t you cooperate with me, Honch?” I could barely catch my breath.

“You’re a fucking maniac boy - and stop calling me that.”

“Oh right, I suppose I have to earn it.”

“Earn what - earn WHAT?”

I tapped my finger on the left side of my nose, “don’t worry; I’ll say no more, me old mate.”

“Look, you’re making even less sense than before. Why were you messing around down there by the rec? What business did you have down that end of town?”

“Honch...”

“Stop calling me that, I fucking well told you.”

“Okay, listen. There was no reason, except she told me to meet her down that way in a text.”

“Who asked you, who?”

“You know who, scum. You need to tell me what’s going on and if this is all part of something bigger, all part of your secret society. You need to make me understand that there’s a reason for all of this.”

“You’re telling me that Mallet sorted out a seedy rendezvous with you? That just can’t be.”

“Well, Mallet to you, maybe, but I call her Daisy: the name her mother gave to her, the same name that belonged to her, before you took it away, you...”

Droplets of blood laced phlegm rained on the floor as we spoke; it looked like La Tomatina had come to town.

“Sam, stop it, just stop it. Yes, Daisy’s gone, but she went a long time ago, you know that. She isn’t coming back, boy. You need to move on.”

I was so drugged with rage that I nearly fainted and white spots danced across my eyes. I had to sit down; I was too emotionally debilitated to fight.

“Take a breather, Sam,” he said as he knelt down to my level, “we’re in somewhat of a mess here. You were never supposed to find her. *You* weren’t meant to know the ins and outs of things for a while, but somehow you managed to tread on one of my mines out there.

Listen, they say never get high on your own supply, but to her, that particular sentence didn’t exist, not in any way, shape or form. I loved her, I really did - she was not only my muse, but my maker too; I just hovered through the hours aimlessly as a jellyfish until I met her. It just so happened that she was the daughter of my investor, a bad bastard named Sal. He likes me, or at least he will until he finds out about this, which is why we need to work on damage limitation. None of us want to die, nor do we have the desire to spend the rest of our days picking up the soap behind bars.

Samuel, you must believe me, I didn’t do this, at least not directly. She kept pestering me for the odd gram here and there, but she was functioning so I thought it was okay. Recently, she began to sink to the depths of the dregs and her abilities began to dwindle; I was too distracted to notice. Then I found her lying balled up amongst the barrels, a lifeless vessel without a soul. She was green for Christ Sake, she was green.

I couldn’t have her junkie cadaver in my gaff so I panicked and dumped her out by the rec grounds, tucked down by the train tracks and arranged a pick up for her disposal. It’s not something I’ve ever done before Sam, you must believe me; you’d be

amazed at the services you can find in the underbelly of the internet; the unoccupied part of Gumtree is a dark place. Look, if her old man - my supplier, my boss and essentially my father-in-law - thinks she ran off, then at least I can fabricate some sort of tall tale and save our collective bacon; she's the flighty type you see. She has been known to run off and disappear for days on end with her father's plastic.

Mate, I'm sad, really I am, but we need to wash our hands of this for all of our sakes. The moment you saw her body and came to me loaded with that kind of information, you became a part of the fabric of this dirty old mess, so you see, if you go round town telling people what happened and they get the wrong end of the stick, you'll be meeting your maker very bloody soon, believe me.

You look like you've got a pair of bollocks hanging from beneath your eyes; you've been acting like a common oddball recently and you need to get some sleep. I suggest having a hot shower and putting your head down for a few hours.

Just remember, if you talk you are dead. You've always wanted to see things from the other side of the fence, haven't you? You want to be part of the club, don't you? Well, just keep quiet, follow the rules and you'll have your lenses in no time."

I couldn't process all of The Honch's information and my vision *was* smeared, I felt like my body was breaking down from the foundations upwards. I wanted to believed him, but I just couldn't comprehend the shady nature of it all, but then again, most things in life are tarnished, it's just that most things are wrapped up in buttons and bows.

He kept on telling me to calm down and that Mallet wasn't Daisy, or Daisy wasn't Mallet. I sat there and tried to suss out why he was lying to me. I know what I saw out there, alone in the vegetation. Again, I wanted to cry.

“Sam, get some rest mate.”

I was reduced to rubble. I couldn't conjure one single clear thought. I didn't know how to feel or what to think.

So I just sat there in silence, head down and hands in lap as if I was about to be reprimanded by my school headmaster for farting in the staff room. It was deadly silent in there, well, apart from the pack of wolves panting away in harmony, seeing if I would pounce again so they could pull me to pieces. They looked so refined, so demur when I first met them at the back of The Lamb. I glanced up occasionally but quickly looked back down and tried to contain my hysterics.

I heard the shuffle of moccasins and the creak of the door and there he stood - the fucking postman. Always the postman. Usually, his presence made me want to set fire to everything in a fit of defiant rage, but strangely, I was genuinely pleased to see him.

“Hello lads.”

“Aw-l-right,” the pack howled in unison.

The Honch cupped his cheeks in his hand and wafted around the room like a lingering fart. “Hello Mr. Postman, glad you could join us, although, we weren't expecting you so early.”

“Well, a postman must be punctual; otherwise people would be waiting for their post, forever.”

“Got anything for me then postie?” The Honch’s voice turned a little more gravelly than usual.

“Na, just come for what’s mine. And to talk to the boy.”

He really pissed me off saying that. How patronising, all I had been through and I was still regarded as a youngling; an inadequate; a low life dosser. I suppose that is true to some extent, but at the time, it really got under my foreskin.

“You’ll get what’s yours,” said The Honch, “maybe you can talk some sense into young Mr Jacks. He’s gone a little doolally.”

“Come here then Sam, I’ve something to show you.” I followed him into a room and hoped what he had to show me wasn’t meaty and tube-like.

The room was stuffy and perfectly square, much like sitting inside a tea-soaked sugar cube. I wondered what it was all about; not only the situation that had spilled out into a confused, gaping mess, but all of it. The whole darn shootin’ match: from those gory, naked beginnings, right through to becoming some hairy-balled, broken adult without the keys to the meaning of life. You don’t get to unlock the door, you just get a ticket at God’s deli counter and wait for your number to be called, and that’s it. Of course, while you’re waiting you can always fill your time with liquor and girls and heartbreak and organised fun and self-loathing and Lego - and all that other stuff that doesn’t really amount to anything. I mean, what else is there?

The room smelled of a strong charity shop musk and it looked neglected too. I sat down and noticed an old reel-to-reel at my eye level caked in dust.

“Is this your room, postie?”

“It was mine, and his out there. We were in a band together years ago and used to cut demos in here. There’s some other music and radio gear knocking around here too.”

“Are you into radio?”

“Ha, I was a fan, but I didn’t have the face for it,” his grin suggested that he thought he was being funny, “I sometimes pick up airspace on my unit at home.”

“Do you know of Rob Robust?”

“No, lad, who’s he?”

“What, you mean you don’t listen to STUNT FM? That’s an outrage!”

“I do, avidly, but there aint no Rob Robust on there, never has been.”

“Are you pulling my plonker, postie?” Prickles of angst worked their way up and across my forehead. “Well you must be listening to the wrong station then, Rob Robust’s a saint. He’s dedicated his life to educating the people in this town, to let them know that there’s life outside of the Top 40 Charts and puke-coated nightclubs - maybe if you did listen to him you wouldn’t be so blind ignorant.”

I sprang to my feet ready to tear and claw but he wrapped his arms tight around my torso and wouldn’t let go. For a moment I struggled, but strangely, almost instinctively, I surrendered back into my chair during a moment of blissful calm. It was as if I was destined to be in his arms, but not in a romantic way. Let me just say that for the record.

“You need to calm down Sam; you’re going to put decades on yourself behaving like this. I’ve watched you over the past few weeks and you’ve started to lose your hold

on things. I know more about you than you think. Before you say anything I need to make something clear: I can't tell you any more than that, as I've made a vow."

"Who to? The Honch?"

"There you go again. No, not *The Honch*, as you say, but someone closer to home. Sam, go and speak to your aunt. Soak up every drop of her company before it's too late."

My eyes poured. I just didn't get it. Everything felt like it was being swallowed up by a part of my brain I had never used before, a part of which I didn't have an instruction manual for.

"But postie, what about Daisy? The Honch's trying to bullshit me I know it..."

"He's not Sam, it's all true. He's in deep and he's going to take you with him if you whisper a word of this to anyone. I go way back with him and one thing I can safely say is he's bad news. He may be charismatic, but he's cretinous. I've been his brother since I was born, funny enough, and he still calls me by the name, postie. I let you get away with it because you hardly know me, although I'd like to change that. Anyhow, he's a disease for the senses. He thinks I'm here to make sure you play by his rules, but I'm not. I'm here to protect you, that's all you need to know. You must get out of here and never come back."

"I guess you are decent. You're one of the good ones. Are you really brothers?"

"Yes, I don't know what I did in a past life to deserve it, but that's not important right now. I haven't been good, Sam, but I try my best these days. I suppose I'm what you might call a necessary evil. It's nice that you suddenly consider me half decent, at least."

“There’s something in your tone that I can trust. I didn’t notice it before because you put the fright up me. I thought you were a wrong ’en. Tell me, did you leave that note that said *Just checking in?* It was very sinister.”

“I’m sorry about that Sam, yes it was me. It wasn’t meant to be menacing of anything of the sort; it must have fallen out from the front of a care package I left out for your aunty Mags.

He gripped my shoulder, “Sam, go home and ask the right questions to the right people, take time to make sense of everything around you, not everything is as it seems. Cleanse yourself of all this nonsense and I’ll be waiting for you when you do.”

As I opened the door and walked back past The Honch, I saw him hunched over with his minions around him; he seemed distressed and looked like he had been crying. Although I’d been warned, a small part of me still wanted to be one of the gang.

Once again, I found myself roaming Stunston’s grey walkways trying to uncover the answer in my clothes pile mind. Clarity was what I needed, but clarity is something that I’ve always looked at through the shop window: it’s the unattainable toy with the hefty price tag. I had another Tic Tac and kept on walking.

Dusk came around once again and put a cloak on the blemishes of the day. As it set in, I felt uneasy. Once again, I followed the glow of the street lanterns into town and thought about it all - the whole stomach-churning shit show.

I was weighed down with more baggage than I deserved to be carrying around with me. Things had been weird over those past few days. Really weird. But then I realised - my whole life up until that moment had been one big oddity. My parents, spat

on by reputation, lives shrouded in mystery - no one ever gave me any straight answers, only half truths. All of those people who had left me; an aunt who was reduced to the state of a glorified baby, suckling on my teats daily. An elusive love that I was never able to move on from but was just too ignorant to notice; a non-existent writing career packed full of half-baked tales of urban drudgery and masturbation; a town mutated - a town mutated from day one. Everybody took from me, kept me boxed up in a bubble, and they never gave back, not once. Not EVER.

My pace picked up momentum, winding me up with every step. I was so enraged that I feared I was going to explode into a thousand fleshy pieces and coat the window display of Woolworths as I powered down the high street. I knew then that I needed to see Daisy's body once more, for clarification. If I was right, I was going to report the incident, rather than leaving her there for the worms, foxes, and the local rubberneckers. I almost talked myself out of it, as I thought by leaving her in all of that undignified glory, I would somehow win: I would have the power in our game of love. But I could never do that to her.

When I got there she was gone. No police tape, no neon. Daisy had just disappeared. Or perhaps she had just wilted into the ground. Or The Honch had indeed dialled in a disposal. It was hard to say back then.

I still craved answers, but I knew I wasn't going to get them until I cut away the baggage: that spine-bending luggage I'd been pulling around without any wheels. I recall an anger rising, as if a hot steam was going to fire from every orifice in my body. I clenched my fists and thought about beating the shit out of a tree; I thought about

screaming violent obscenities into the atmosphere for the Martians to find. I wanted to kill, I really did. I lost it.

All of a sudden I found myself floating beneath the street lamps and feeling all warm inside as the bulbs softened the town's mushy twilight. For a moment Stunston was beautiful and for that fleeting period, it was exactly where I wanted to be. Everything was perfect - except for sharp pains in my ankles and wrists.

Commotion. Unsavoury tones, like football casuals on match day or the sound of teeth grinding in the revelry of a horrific nightmare. My vision slowly came back into focus and as I snapped back into the room, I realised that I had found myself right back where I started: The Honch's den.

Six glaring faces. A dozen grey cheeks and piercing peepers cutting through me as one. I didn't feel frightened, just on display. *Are they going to ask me to take my trousers off and do a skit*, I thought.

"Why did you go back to the rec, you scumbag? One of my blokes saw you," he had his sweaty hands clasped around my jaw.

"You're lying to me Honch, it was Daisy's body. I held her. Why are you lying to me? And why would your missus come to see my aunt in a nurses outfit, then take me to the pub to see you? It doesn't make sense."

"You're deranged boy, you need help. She didn't even know where you live. I wanted to take you under my wing, but you needed to pay your dues first. Look, you're not cut out for all of this, it's clear to me now. Plus, Mallet didn't take you to see me; it was that trollop from down the road. She's a barfly, a hanger on."

"Don't talk about her like that!"

“Just calm down and think, boy.”

“And pay my dues? How am I going to pay? Please tell me what I have to do to prove myself. I need to understand, none of this makes a blind bit of sense to me.”

“You’re not right Sam - you need help.”

“So help me, I want to be part of this.” I was weak.

“This is not important. I suppose it’s my fault really. I was supposed to help look out for you and be a guide, but I took my eye off the ball.”

“She was gone, Honch, she was gone when I went back to the place that I left her. I left her there because I wanted to see her again. I thought you might have moved her. I got mad though, I must admit. Then I woke up here. That’s all I know. THAT’S all I know.”

“I find it hard to believe you Sam, I really do. You need to sort yourself out. Maybe you’re telling the truth. I’m not sure, this is a real pickle. Hmm, you need to go and see your aunt, she’s not well. You *need* to see her Sam, Dave the postie told me. You’ve lost your sense of duty.”

“Sense of duty,” the steam bubbled up again as I shuffled to my feet, “what do you know about that you pig? I was only a kid, I am still only a kid and I’ve been cooped up wiping her arse, feeding her, bathing her and hopping her up on pills for longer than I even care to remember. And in case your memory is that pulped, just hours ago I was asking you what happened to Daisy - and you continue to play the fool. What’s going on?”

He shook me so hard that I thought my fillings were going to fall out. “You’re not stable Sam. We had to lock you in the basement the other day for shit sake: you

verbally abused Mallet and called her a disgusting bitch, then you went swinging for everyone in sight - you even tried to bite me before doing your utmost to smash my newly refurbished club room to bits. And all the while you were chanting *let me in, let me in* - I didn't even know what you meant. We had to stow you under the floor to calm you down. Is that the behaviour of a rational man?"

I began to laugh - hard - and I couldn't stop. The chuckling started in my toes and much like any infection, it quickly spread to my eyes and mouth and all of a sudden, I was in hysterics.

"Stop it," he cried, "STOP IT." He had really lost his cool, but I just couldn't stop.

The postie slipped into the room and gestured with his hand. Tranquillity suffocated the air and the noise came to a steady halt.

The Honch's head dropped slightly and his arms fell limp by his side, "you can go," he whispered.

"You need to give me answers, you need to tell me what to do," I said.

He gripped my elbow in a limp fashion and then leaned in, the homebrew on his breath warmed my left ear lobe:

"Look, you shouldn't be here. You're not strong enough to be dealing with this. I'm sorry I shouted. But you push my buttons."

"Is she alive?"

He sighed. "You need to go see your aunt, she needs you. Get clear, absorb, and you'll find the answers you need."

"And then I can be in the club?"

He looked deep beyond my pupils and cracked open the door for me, pointing his palm in the direction of the great outdoors. He looked back to see no one was watching and whispered to me:

“Face your demons first. Take them head on and there will be great rewards for you.”

#

Are you shaking your head at me? Yeah, that would be the natural reaction. That mystical fuck certainly is cryptic - but if it was that easy to get into his group, it wouldn't be half as exclusive, would it?

#

So, yet again I found myself walking down that same old urban pathway, but that time, I knew where I was heading.

I became sweaty-palmed and my eyes began to stream. I thought hard about what The postie and The Honch had said to me about facing my demons and getting rid of all that was pulling me down. I couldn't get my head around the way the postie had subdued The Honch, just like that. I suppose he must be the bigger brother.

I delved deep into the core of my brain to pick out the heaviest load in my life and there she was - Mags - the reed on the river bed, the paper weight of my nightmares. She had kept me from thriving or going anywhere, and she barely ever said thank you to me. I felt hot in the face and once more, I went weak with rage. She was the overweight bindle sack crippling my back and she had to be taken care of.

So, I thought I found my vocation as her carer, but all it turned out to be was an unwelcome distraction.

This pissing town, and all of its inhabitants bumbling around within its invisible walls - and me, too ignorant to notice that I was the same - as Pink Floyd said, *just another brick in the wall*.

I tunnelled deep back into the shadows of my thought organ and tried to understand what the hell the last decade of my life had been about. What was the point of it? What had I actually achieved in that time, besides producing unholy amounts of jizz, rolling perfectly formed cigarettes, pining for romantic misadventures gone by, picking up ugly girls for the purposes of rutting like a farmyard hog, and to top it all off, looking after a decaying human being. Then I thought, maybe if I didn't have to look after my sick aunt, I would have done something useful with my time. She was the shackle. A selfish bitch. Was that true?

All the grey, oh the grey and the phantastic greens and blues. The smog and the soot, the violent disintegration and the despair. The people of Stunston walking around with their ears clogged and their eyes welded shut, just clinging onto their hamster wheel of existence for dear life. They made me sick, it all just made me and sick I wanted to bawl, but instead I spat fury into the night's sky.

I powered down the middle of Salmon Street and across Jetsam Green. I wanted to cut off the chimney tops, burn down the boozers - all those squalid pits that enabled locals in their chronic mission of self-destruction - the very thing that had become my hobby, ahhhhhhhhh - I wanted to scream until my vocal chords split in two.

Mags, good old Mags. She had stopped me leaving Stunston behind and although she had taken me on when my parents perished, she was absent half of the time. As I turned the corner and found myself in the thick of my estate, it hit me like the Hindenburg: I was ready to sever the tie, for real. She needed to go and if I wanted to move on, pass the test and become a part of the club, getting rid of her was a must.

At that moment, I had a lament for Mags deeper than I had ever felt before and it knocked the wind out of me, so rather than bashing the door down and making the Hollywood-like entrance that I had envisioned, I slumped on the doorstep of our shared hell and took a moment to contemplate:

*The walls and whispers caving in,
The man whose cloak is draped in sin.
A place in which we dance and drive;
A hole where lust filled fury thrives.
But in this place of smoke and soot;
But in a land where knight takes rook,
Some glimmers live beneath the cracks,
Some might say no to myths like that.
I see the things beneath the floor;
I see through walls and beer-soaked doors.
To claim my place I must not wait,
To show my face, to give away -
And kill those things that drag me down,*

And fight those things that linger round.

My family is my friend, not foe?

That could be true, it's doubtful though.

Let it all go.

Let it all go.

A fire was brewing up inside my belly but externally I felt at peace and an overwhelming sense of calm had monopolised my nerve endings. I suppose I felt like the opposite of a chicken leg that had been badly cooked on a disposable BBQ - you know, cool on the outside and molten in the middle.

In that moment I understood that I no longer needed to question things, just go with my gut. All I had to do was prove to The Honch that I was capable of giving into my inner thoughts and following the orders of my core instincts, yeah, that's what it was all about. Things didn't make any sense, but they didn't have to and anyone who tugged against that logic would have to be cut away - immediately. It was simple: I had to get rid of aunty Mags.

I opened the lock, entered the house and put my foot on the first stair, which squealed like a banshee. For the first time in my life, I felt like a total stranger in that old pile of bricks and mortar, it was as if I was a midnight burglar looking for the jewellery drawer.

You might be wondering what state she was in when I barged into her room, considering she probably hadn't been tended to in days. You may be wondering if she was even still alive at that moment in time - well let me tell you, she was. The room

smelled sour and musty and it was dark as a thousand eclipses. I crept up to her bed and was able to make her skeletal outline; she was gaunt and pale but she looked serene, like a lady who had just made her peace with her reaper.

That pissed me off, big time.

My core collapsed and a certain redness wafted out into space around me.

“Wake up Mags. You’re not going anywhere until we’ve talked. You don’t get to just slip away like that. You just don’t get to leave the room – like *that!*”

Her eyes widened and a little glimmer of something returned to her cheeks - I don’t know whether it was anger or shock - but she was definitely back in the room.

She tried to cough but it sounded like it all got bunched up in her throat. I leaned in and tried to listen to the peaks and troughs in her parched rattling, but I really couldn’t make any heads or tails of it. I began to sweat and my arms went tingly.

The next thing I remember is kicking chunks out of the bedside table as if I was trying to boot it through the wall. I was a madman without a straitjacket, literally.

“S-Sam, please,” she struggled as she propped her back onto the headboard with those bony elbows of hers, “I’ve written you a letter, please...”

“What, a poor excuse for a morbid Post It note. A cop out: a bunch of scribbles? Hey?” I nearly passed out.

“No, it’s what I’ve been waiting to say to you, but I don’t have the energy. I’m on my last legs. Where have you been?”

“Never you mind, bitch,” I couldn’t quite believe the words that were escaping my lips. “I’ve been living my life, facing my demons. Daisy’s gone, you know - she’s gone.”

“Yes, I know that?”

“How do you know, what’s going on?”

She bawled tears of pure air, “you’re delusional Sam. You need help, I should’ve been more proactive.”

Mags flopped onto her front and grabbed bunches of bedsheet to help pull herself closer to me, but she fell into a fit of distraught coughing every time she tried to shift her body. Standing there watching her was both satisfying and sad, like the time I won a goldfish at the Stunston fair, only to feel like I was contributing to its captivity when I looked into its eyes.

“Stop moving, Mags, you just stop that now” I screamed and it echoed around the room.

“Please, just look,” Mags extended her breadstick finger and pointed towards the television table, on top of it stood a neat envelope sporting a tone of brilliant white. My name was crudely scribbled on the front in biro - obviously, it was the letter she had written to me. So I opened it up and I read it (I’ve got it here, I’ll recite it):

My lovely Sam,

I’d like to begin by thanking you for your time, kindness and endless loyalty over the years, without your help and love, I really don’t know where I’d be. You’re my one and only angel and I’m sorry I never took the time to really tell you that.

In recent months, I’ve been able to physically see the burden my situation has put on you, as if all the weight has hunched your back and swollen your eyes, and for that I am truly sorry.

My time in solitary has allowed me to think (at least when I have been conscious for long enough). I thought it would be fair to keep the creeping truths from you and place you in a little bubble, but now I see that it's damaged you more than I ever thought possible. I am unable to open the tap of truth from my mouth, Sam; my body simply won't allow me to generate the energy, so you must know, by giving this to you, I have made a conscious decision to be honest. I laid these words down on paper months ago, as a supplement to my will, meant for your eyes only. I have added to this letter today (it has taken everything left in my engine to do so) as I want to tell you everything I possibly can - no more secrets.

How to begin...

It's not an easy thing to explain so I'm just going to come right out and say it: I'm your mother, not Jill, and Mark's not your dad. They also weren't abusive, drug-addled addicts, I was.

You were conceived as a result of a drunken, hazy night; one nocturnal affair that would have otherwise blended into my many other liquor-soaked escapades. I wasn't ready to have a kid, let alone be an adult, but I couldn't bring myself to terminate you. I decided I would take on the role of your mother, sort myself out and do my best, but when you're an addict, even your greatest efforts pale in comparison to a chronic craving for substance and self-destruction. I know it's not an excuse, but I had a very dark childhood (if you can call it that) and ended up using as a way to numb the pain - it's a cliché, I know. But that's what I did, nonetheless.

When I held you in my arms for the very first time, I knew my life was complete, if only I could get rid of my habits. You see, there were four people in the room that

evening: you, me, your father and the heroin monster - and there was only room for three.

I tried to go cold turkey, I even tried sticking various sedatives where the sun doesn't shine, but my hunger was too powerful. Your dad tried to do the right thing and stick around for you, but when I became too hot to handle, he disappeared off the face of the Earth, for a short while anyway.

So, Jill and Mark are actually your blood auntie and uncle. They took you for the years I was in recovery and assumed the role of your parents. They were kind, honest, gentle, decent people with hearts bigger than the sun, not junkie scum. I moved back in with them when you were four-years-old and in order to fit in, took on the facade of your aunt. You just loved them so much as a toddler, they filled your big blue eyes with so much joy and I just couldn't burst their bubble or yours for that matter, so I played along. I thought at least that way I could still be an influential part of your life.

Sadly, they did pass away. But as you may now have gathered, they didn't die as the result of a smacked up, drunken, drugged-addled car crash. They were driving to the coast in search of a new life for us all, and they were smashed off the road by a pissed up van driver. All I can say is sorry, I'm sorry from the hollows of my heart.

I don't know if it's any consolation at all, but I did get clean and I did it because of you, your existence and the unquestionable respect I have for it. I knew I could never do anything but try and give you the very best. I failed, but please know Sam, I did try.

Just months after your biological dad slung his hook, I found out he was shacked up across the road, literally across the road, but I was too out of my brains to actually fuss or fight so I just let it be. Less than a year after shacking up with Jayne, he fled for

the proverbial hills due to mounting gambling debts - then we didn't see him for almost a decade.

What I'm trying to say to you is, Daisy, well she is or at least was, your sister; you both share the same dad, but you never looked alike. When I got straight I went over to see Jayne, not to pry or fight, but to extend my hand, as we had both been left high and dry with a child to look after all on our own. The pair of us made a pact to keep our tangled web tucked well under the carpet - you know how small-minded the people of this town can be - so we thought we'd make life simple and forge our own little unit. It was us against the world for a while - do you remember all those carefree days we spent down by the seaside? The smell of salt, fish, chips and simplicity.

You and Daisy became as thick as thieves but when you both came of age, as it were, you pair seemed a bit too sweet on one another, and you could see the hormones spiralling through the air like fireflies. To be honest Sam, she told her mum she was going to ask you out and wanted to marry you one day and that's when her mum told her the truth, she swore her to secrecy.

Sam, you had started to become reclusive and unstable, and I found out I was poorly. I didn't tell you at the time, but I have actually been sick for many years, I just didn't want to break it to you until it became visible; I didn't want to break it to you, full stop. Daisy got down very quickly and couldn't shake her feelings so she agreed to cut her ties and go to a boarding school up north. While she was up there she met her father: a fresh-faced, rehabilitated man.

I know you would never listen to anyone when she went missing, even when the search party was on the news. I wish we knew what happened, I wish you could get closure, I wish we all could. I guess you'll let it sink in, but all in good time.

A few of years ago, after exhausting his efforts to find her, he just waltzed back into this estate as if it was paved with red carpet and demanded to be a part of your life. I just couldn't let him intrude like that, not when you were neck deep in a smorgasbord of antidepressants, and other wildly prescribed concoctions (or Tic Tacs as you like to call them), I just didn't think you'd be able to handle it.

He did listen but told me time was ticking and he would reveal himself to you at some point and in some way, before I perished. So, he grabbed himself a flat round the corner and took up a job as a postman so he could somehow be close to you and keep an eye on us. He used to play in a top local band, and when he rebuilt some of the bridges he burned, he was going to show you how to play the guitar. He still might, if you let him.

Your dad's brother, Colin, well you know him, he owns The Lamb and Flag. He reached out to me recently and asked if he could give you a job to help offer you some structure outside of the house. Your dad must have talked to him - I'm not exactly sure how it came about.

That's why we got Jenny the nurse to take you over there. She's a regular down at The Lamb and Flag and you used to have a thing for a short while during Sixth Form. I thought that if it all seemed organic and you felt like you had made your own choice to head down there, you would give it a try; if I asked you to meet Colin myself,

you wouldn't have gone. I was just trying to protect you, now it occurs to me that I've wrapped you up and manipulated you your whole life, and it has suffocated you.

I would also like to offer my sincerest apologies for the sausage string of men I brought home over the years. Just like the jobs I had, I could never quite hold a man down for long, but I needed someone to share a bed with as I'm just not that good on my own. I always knew once you gave them the nickname Kevin (remember, he was your imaginary friend as a child and we'd all play hide and seek in the fields at the back of the house), you had fallen for them and it must have taken its toll when they finally left. Believe me, I tried to hold them down, but who wants a broken old ex-junkie with stretch marks; it's a bad tonic I suppose. I just hope you understand.

Sam, you'll find my will when the time is right and I have left you everything I own. I know it's not going to make things right, but at least you'll have somewhat of a comfortable life. Perhaps you can sell up the investment furniture and move away, just like you always talked about. But, if you do decide to stay, just know there are people here that love you and want to be a part of your life.

Between the cracks in this town lies life in its purest form: people with bonafide hearts and souls, all you have to do is take a moment to find them.

All I've done in my life has been wrong and regrettably, it's impossible to edit the past or travel through time, but please do remember my love for you is true. I suppose when you cut through all of the nonsense, the problem is that I've always needed you more than you needed me, and that's why I stopped you from growing to your full potential. But there's plenty of time for things to change.

You're so creative Sam, it's unreal. You always have been. Remember those tapes you made as a kid? The ones when you pretended to be a radio presenter, was it Rob something or other? I forget now, but they are a real insight into the beauty of your mind. I kept them all. They're in the loft if you want them.

Not every room has a view, but when you're in the dark, all you need to do is paint one - and I know you have enough of a brilliant imagination to create your own personal utopia where ever you may be.

Enjoy the rest of your life and know that I'll always be with you.

All my love,

Mum

Words failed me. Actions didn't.

It was all too much, the previous few days had all been a mire for the mind and I wanted to be cleansed of it all.

There she was: frail and ugly, holding her breath for my reaction. I felt pale from my head to my toes as the shock set in, which was soon followed by flickers of ember. I was the taunted bull and she was an unwitting matador.

What happened next I'm not exactly sure of, all I really remember is chanting the words *liar. liar, dirty liar* as part of some psychotic mantra. I also remember smashing every piece of furniture I could.

She was right, the woman had broken me and I knew right there and then that I would never forgive her for all the lies and deceit. I could have been someone, but I was

just another warped soul clogging up the pores of Stunston, just an unwanted blemish on the night of a first date. The bitch, I thought, *the bitch*.

She clawed herself up towards the back of the bed and curled her legs into a defensive ball, trembling and terrified. I sort of remember charging at her as fast as I could. I heard a scream and then black. It only seemed like few moments but I must have been out for some while.

As you know, the next thing that's clear to me is waking up in here, sore, bruised and battered, sporting these leg casts, getting fed gloop and having my arse wiped by a middle-aged nurse. I'm living the dream, well, if the dream is a nightmare (mind you, some men are probably into that sort of stuff), but you know what I'm saying. You look like shit, but in all fairness, you haven't come out quite as bad as me. I'll give you that.

Now that's how I remember it, that's my story and I'm sticking to it. It's not a Hollywood blockbuster, nor is it a timeless Shakespearean tragedy, but it's all that I've got to tell. It's the moment everything unravelled and the time when the truth shone at me in all of its scalding glory, now the ball's in my court. I'm finally out of the dark, I think.

Someone left me this local newspaper article. It's only short; I'll read it to you:

Last night local resident Samuel Jacks, 28, was found outside the front of his terraced home in Stunston's Flackbridge Estate after plummeting from a first floor window.

The accident is said to be the result of a family feud between Sam and his auntie, Maggie Jacks, 52, which resulted in a botched assault..

'I heard shouting and scream, a lot of banging, a bit of a struggle and then he just came diving through the window and straight onto the pathway, nearly landed headfirst, ' a local witness said.

Other Stunston residents said they had witnessed Sam drinking and causing a commotion in various parts of the town two days prior to the incident. 'I was just minding my own business, walking my dog, when he came stumbling over and told me if he saw the dog defecate on the pavement, he would rub my face in it. Then he started making growling noises at me like some rabid beast, it was very unnerving, ' explained local gardener, Jeff Wilts.

As someone with a history of anxiety, depression and mental illness, Sam is said to be unstable and is on a cocktail of medication that doesn't agree with the consumption of alcohol.

Mags is said to be distraught and suffering from shock, but in a stable condition. Further investigations will follow.

This must be a couple of days old now because I got word that she died in this morning in the next ward down. I don't know how I feel at the moment, I'm just blank behind eyes, I suppose, seasoned with a bit of relief. Does that make me a bad person?

Anyway, all that stuff about me in the article checks out, I just wanted to share the bit with you about the dog shit: I don't remember saying it whatsoever, but I find it

funny, after all, when you're laid up in a hospital bed, you've got to get your kicks somehow.

It's the article on the front page that caught my eye. I won't read it out as I'm sick of straining my eyes, but what I will tell you is that it's about Daisy's death. The exact time, date, place description, everything, except, the name is wrong, it says it's a girl named Zoe Pritchard, also known as Mallet.

I know what you're thinking: it's not Daisy, you have been told already. She's missing. It just doesn't sit right with me, plus, what do you know, hey?

Of all the strange occurrences and skewed details floating around in my melon, the only one that's truly tangible is the fact that I sat there and held Daisy's lifeless body in my arms. The bond, the face, the feel, is one of the most genuine things I've ever experienced in my farce of a life, and people keep trying to take it away from me.

It was her face the led me to the pub and her smile that gave my life a purpose once again; I really don't know why everyone's trying to tell me otherwise. It all seems like a big old joke to me - only I'm the butt of it. Seeing as I've been lied to all of my life, that wouldn't be so fetched, would it?

I find it hard to believe that Daisy and I are blood-related, but then again, it would explain that Velcro bond we seemed to share. Maybe things have worked out for the best - at least we didn't end up breeding web-footed monsters. No sir.

The nurse said that earlier, when I was out cold, a kind man in blue came to see me and stroked my hair while gripping my hand. She said he talked to me for a while and that he wanted me to stay with him so he could take care of me. The doctor said that it was plain to see that he loved me more than life itself.

I thought by staying in my cocoon, getting off my head at any given opportunity and wallowing in my own shortcomings, I could stay safe and sound.

Well, we both know life doesn't work like that - how can it? There are variables, always variables and it doesn't matter if they come in the form of a missed appointment or springtime flood, they will all catch up with you in the end my friend.

There's something else that really bugs me and I just can't shake it off: where's my personal peace in all of this? I guess I'll just have to say that the truth is individual, the mind is always fleeting and in the end, reality is just a one man show. The postie may well be my sperm donor of a dad and Mags may well have been my mum in disguise, but I'll choose to see things the way I want to, after all, you can't argue with ignorance and apparently, ignorance is bliss.

Anyway, The Honch is called Colin? I think anyone with a name like that that must have a few things to hide. I'll just have to wait, recover, bide my time and eventually I'll crack his code, you just wait and see. Someone once told me there's life between the cracks, and it's the only thing I will ever thank *her* for.

So what do our favourite TV characters do in between those vital scenes? They just shut down and block it all out; it's what we common folk call autopilot. Most of our lives are set to autopilot: the cooking, the cleaning, the chores, work, small talk, text messaging, taking a shower, pretending to have a good time when clearly we'd rather be doing anything else in the world - it's all just fodder.

I mean, do you remember all those times you got up, showered, made some cereal, watched the news, locked your front door and drove to work? I mean really remember each experience individually. Of course not, because it doesn't matter. It's

just a blanket memory - a given - and things like the ironing and the descaling of the kettle, they're not the least bit interesting to most. We only ever actually remember the times when our lives were shook upside down, shot into space or turned sideways, because when it's all said and done, they're the only things worth telling to our friends over the dinner table or down the pub.

We're all just stars in our own low budget soap operas, waiting for the next big scene to come and entertain us - the rest of it is best left in the broom cupboard of our plodding craniums.

Having said all that, if you do choose to open the old broom cupboard once in a while, you might just find something extraordinary that you missed - it all depends if you can be bothered to press the rewind button.

The doc said that another man came to see me about half an hour after the first one, but he wasn't so kind. He was jittery, in a rush and rude to the staff. They explained that he poked his head into my room, stared at me with stone-baked eyes for a minute or two, slipped something onto my bedside table and then told the staff to get out of the way because he was leaving town and there was someone in the car waiting for him.

He left me a letter in a neat white envelope with the words '*read me*' scrawled on the front in biro. Shall we read it and find out what it's all about? We will in good time, but all that talking has left me as dry as a stick, perhaps I'll just take a break.

I suppose at this point, it's all a matter of stick or twist, stay or go, safety or adventure. But I don't have to decide right now, do I?

I'd still like to write that book one day. Maybe I'll scrawl all of this down and send it off to every publisher in the land, but, it seems like too much hard work right now.

Now, as I said before, we're both going to be stuck in here for some time, so you may as well tell me your story. Before you begin, may I request that you start at the most boring part possible and carry on from there? There's no window in here so you'll have to paint me a picture.

I'm all ears.

(Is it ever really) THE END(?)

Farewell Ye Merry Townsman

Harold, from day dot, felt uneasy in his organ sheath. He just didn't know it until he was around four-years-old.

At that tender age, the other lads at Stunston Ward Primary had a thirst for Action Men and knuckles and kicking holes in fences, whereas Harold possessed a lust for crossing his legs and the intricacies of the French plait.

He was trans - but in an unforgiving school in an unforgiving town in an unforgiving time, Harold buried his feelings deep in the dog bone pit of his developing mind.

Harold never knew his father; he buggered off when he was only three weeks old - and the less said about him, the better. But what is worth noting is that the absence of Harold's father had zero bearing on his plight as a transsexual. He was born that way, and that was an unfortunate struggle. And being the grandson of the most macho, and well-renowned, timber merchant in the entire area didn't exactly assist matters.

This human swallowed his gender-based imprisonment and carried on with his life, doing the things that growing lads do.

Not being what you would call the academic type, Harold left school at bittersweet sixteen and went to work at his grandad's timber yard, preparing orders and lugging timbers as gargantuan as mini LZ 129 Hindenburgs heading for disaster.

Harold would occasionally look at herself through a misted internal mirror and smile, slightly, for a fleeting moment, but could not bring herself to cross the lexicon and start her life. Instead, she drank and womanised and fought and pulled splinters from her wood worn fingertips, becoming an aggressive, impossible bore.

She tried starting a mobile window cleaning business with a view to monopolise all of Stunston's commercial office contracts, leaving the family wood-lugging venture and becoming boss of her own, but it all fell flat on its face as a result of the profits being quaffed in public houses. As a result, poor Harold hit a subterranean trough.

Sad and confused and ill-minded, Harold continued her strained existence, her blood boiling in her man's veins, until one day in a late night chicken shop, she beat a tipsy punter, almost to death for touching her can of Pepsi.

Five sterile years, a generous sentence for such an act, then release, in a literal sense, at least; bridges torched to cinders, prospects dead, and only the patience of her sexist old grandad, Larry Jacks, as solace.

Walking through the roaring estate with of all its black market activity, Harold *stopped off* and decided to *hop off*, scribing 'Harold of Stunston's plight ends here. Farewell ye merry townsmen' on a nearby manhole cover, leaving a suicide note popping out of its top like a fishing duck's arse.

Some people mourned, life in an industrial town went on.

Harold was dead; Heather was alive and well.

After facilitating her own suicide, Harold became Heather, and jettisoned her male-like biological shackles, spending over a decade some 30 miles from Stunston,

becoming both physically and mentally, the person she was always born to be. She had arrived, and she wanted a man to share her arrival with.

Internet dating had just begun to pulse through the veins of horny, lonely, promiscuous, curious society and after a few awkward, laughable, filth-sodden flings, Heather met Colin, a pub proprietor and philanthropist from her hometown.

She hadn't known him for long, but they talked on the phone daily, promising hollow nothings into each other's ear holes. They met a few times, they fucked a few times. They had fallen in love, Heather had for sure.

One night, late, Colin called up jittery and distracted, asking if she wanted to run away with him and start the first genuine chapter of their lives together. She packed a holdall immediately.

Before they drove off into the smog that their future promised to bring, Colin stopped off at the local hospital and told her to wait in the car. She didn't ask questions; she didn't care to know about the past, anymore.

While waiting, Heather cracked a smile, a smile in a body and a mind that was hers, thinking whimsically of the journey that lay ahead. She had hearts for eyes.

And before the car rolled off and away from all that had been holding her down, she whispered to herself: *farewell ye merry townsmen, my life starts here.*

Written by D I Hughes

Writer, father, fiction lover and founder of [Catchy Space](#)

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