

# THEY WIN. YOU LOSE.

*Sex, Violence &  
Songs from the Shows*



**Book 1 of The Implosion Saga**

# STAN ARNOLD

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Songs from the Shows*

**Stan Arnold**

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## Novels by Stan Arnold

They Win. You Lose.

Daring Dooz

Sea View Babylon

Vampire Midwives

Botox Boulevard

Papa Ratzy

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By Stan Arnold

## 1

With a supreme effort, Michael Selwyn Barton opened one sensationally bloodshot eye.

In a series of weak, random twitches, it tried to focus on life outside the cornea. But it was staring failure in the face. It wouldn't have minded having a tenner on the fact that it was in a room, but it wouldn't have gone to twenty.

Which was pity, really, because, if you'd been someone with a morbid interest the deterioration of the human spirit, and who enjoyed wallowing in the twin fetid pools of degradation and degeneracy, the room would have cheered you up no end.

However, the sad fact was, the images received on Mick's retina could not be transmitted to what was left of his brain. The power simply wasn't available. His eye, having performed well above the level that could be expected of any reasonable organ, closed again, pulsating rather violently, as the eyelashes met.

And so the room stayed unobserved. But if you'd like to know what Mick's eye missed, I'll tell you.

The high point was a low, rosy glow provided by internally illuminated plastic, full-sized models of film stars, including John Wayne, The robot woman from Metropolis, Hannibal Lecter and Jessica Rabbit.

After that, it went rapidly downhill.

There were futile attempts at video scripts pinned to a cork noticeboard. Their titles said it all.

*Secret Shortcuts to Crematorium Profitability.*

*Pig-rearing in your spare bedroom. Client: Sustainable Euro-Solutions.*

*Sewage treatment-handling : the raw facts at your finger-tips.*

And there was a half-hearted attempt at a feature film script; *Anne of Green Gables : The Revenge.*

Even a man on a galloping something, though that would have been a rare event inside Mick's tiny, pathetic, lino-clad Soho office, could have seen he must have been happier at other times in his life.

His grubby string vest, faded British Film Institute underpants and black socks with holes in the toes were bad enough, but there *must* have been an additional destructive force in play.

There was.

The previous evening, there had been a celebration. Mick had downed three pints in an hour - and this was the apocalyptic result. It was, without doubt, his own fault. He didn't normally drink sherry.

However, despite appearances, he was clinging to life. A few moments after the eyelid adventure, he began dreaming a pleasant dream, featuring beautiful, soft-focus images, probably shot on HDV Progressive, of the Dan Dare mobile which had once hung over his cot.

He snuggled his substantial bulk down into the office hammock, and moved to an even deeper comatose level. This was helped, no doubt, by the warmth generated as he began peeing gently, but steadily, into his unwashed, unloved BFI undies.

Directly below the hammock, was an old oak desk with a beautiful, antique, green leather embossed surface, across which, lay, face up, another body - pale, thin, semi-naked, unshaven and completely rigid. Partly-eaten slices of microwaved pizza were stuck to his bare chest, and the whole ensemble was finished off with brown and cream Y-fronts that were too large and a pair of threadbare tartan slippers. If this body had not passed through death's door, it had certainly been fumbling with the keys trying to find the keyhole.

Two things were immediately obvious. The body - which, on more formal occasions, was known as James Redfern Chartwell - had been poorly. And it had rolled over in the night. The clues were obvious - a multi-coloured selection of plastic-coated, paper clips attached to its face by a thin, encrusted layer of something nasty.

But even a medically untrained person could see he was hanging on. Mainly because a party blower with a pink feather was stuck in his mouth, where it unrolled with a dismal squeak every time he breathed out.

The hammock was obviously not designed to be peed into, and, after about twenty minutes, the cotton-polyester blend was breached. Steady drips of urine, no doubt with a similar composition to an illegal discharge from a secret Albanian nuclear facility, began to fall.

They fell through an atmosphere polluted by the unsavoury odour of regurgitated lamb vindaloo, stale alcohol and uncontrolled gaseous emissions, and began anointing the head of the body on the desk.

Neither of them stirred.

At least, not for another three hours.

It was around midday when, in a voice that came from the bottom of a deep well, Mick turned in his hammock and called out, "Ere Jim."

There was no reply, but Mick was undeterred. There was important information to impart.

"Ere Jim," he repeated. And, with as much dignity as he could muster, announced, 'my scrotum smells of kippers.'

What was left of Jim's intellect must have been stirred, because he responded. His voice sounded as though it came from a mouth stuffed with wet cardboard, give or take the odd squeak from the party blower.

'Is that Manx kippers or Scottish kippers? When you're talking personal hygiene, Michael, it's important to be precise.'

Encouraged by this response, Mick rolled to the edge of the hammock, misjudged his centre of gravity and fell heavily onto his associate below.

Jim gave a short, strangled scream and together they tipped off the desk onto the linoleum in a *melange* of fill-your-own sherry bottles, tinfoil curry containers, paperclips, underpants, plastic spoons, cold chips in newspaper and the copious contents of Mick's bladder.

After a few minutes, Mick raised himself up on his elbow.

'James, my old geranium, I want you to savour this moment. Savour it!'

Mick shook Jim, but there was no response, not that the lack of an audience ever blunted his oratorical skills. Despite his slurred voice and vaguely waving arm, Mick managed to deliver a message of encouragement to his comatose colleague.

'Gentlemen in England now-a-bed strut and fret their hour upon the stage. But we, we happy few, we band of brothers, know that nothing - and I really do mean, y'know, like fuck all - will stop us getting a

Bring-Your-Own bottle and a half of that life, liberty and pursuit of bollocks stuff.'

Message delivered, Mick gave a huge belch and passed out. Jim gave a parting party squeak.

The two of them curled up together and slept peacefully until early evening.

\*

All film and video companies have their ups and downs. And you may well be thinking that the two directors of Implosion Productions were at the bottom of a barrel no-one wanted to scrape.

You may also be thinking that this was, absolutely, the lowest point of their professional careers.

But you would be wrong on both counts.

Things were about to get worse.

A lot worse...

## 2

Fuck *me!*’ spluttered Jim.

His face was contorted with pain, confusion and disbelief. It was the sort of way someone would look, albeit for not much more than a nanosecond, if they’d been a cricket-pitch length away from a nuclear explosion.

‘Thanks, but I’ll have to pass on that generous invitation,’ croaked Mick from the battered old sofa opposite. ‘Since our interface with that crate of Woomera, seven-star, unleaded, dear boy, one’s todger has shrunk to the size, shape and functionality of a pickled walnut.’

Despite his speech starting to return, Mick’s eyes were still pulsating from left to right, as if watching a very fast tennis match take place about four inches in front of his face.

‘Fuck me!’ said Jim, again.

He was clutching a piece of letter headed paper, which, judging from the low-budget logo design, came from a firm of solicitors.

‘She’s divorcing me - and she wants the house, the policies and any cash in the bank.’

‘Which reminds me,’ continued Mick. ‘I once knew a charming courtesan in Taiwan who could do amazing things with a pickled walnut.’

‘She’s divorcing me!’ shrieked Jim.

‘Why so surprised?’ asked Mick, calmly. ‘I mean, who else would she be able to divorce?’

‘Look,’ said Jim, ‘you may be an Emmy award-winning cameraman, you may have been commissioned to video Prince Charles before he went away with the fairies, you may even be a personal friend of Barak O-bollocky-bama’s Auntie Lil, for all I care...’

‘Relax, James, old boy,’ interrupted Mick, tilting his head back and speaking as though on intimate terms with the ether.

‘You know my philosophy. It’s stood me in good stead for over thirty years. Essentially, it’s this, “They Win. You Lose.”’

Jim had heard it all before.

‘They Win. You Lose. is a subtle, eco-friendly, holistic concept, drawing on elements of Hinduism, Buddhism and some fun facts I got off the back of a beer mat.’

Jim managed to snort and groan, at the same time - an impressive display of male multi-tasking, which resulted in two lurid streams of mucus sliding from his nasal cavities. They loitered on his top lip for a split second before shooting back up, triggering a coughing fit and a stream of strangled expletives.

Mick had seen it all before.

‘Erudite counter arguments are all very well, my good chap, but they won’t alter the fact that I speak the truth. Expect the very worst from every situation, so you stay calm and collected when disaster strikes. Then, on those rare occasions when it goes your way, you can really celebrate. Like last night.’

‘What *were* we celebrating last night?’ said Jim, pulling up the bottom of his vest to wipe his nose.

‘No idea,’ said Mick, ‘but hang on a minute me old *compadre*, before we kicked off, I wrote it down on a post-it and stuck on the fireplace. Forward planning pays dividends, young fella-me-lad.’

He leaned over, in the general direction of the fireplace, stretched out a trembling hand and broke wind so violently, the sales charts on the wall rippled, and, for a few seconds, the office lost its internet connection.

With another valiant effort, the post-it was retrieved, and Mick began the complex business of focusing his eyes on the small, yellow piece of paper.

‘Ho, ho!’ he cried. ‘You’ll never guess what! Well, well, well! Who’d have thought it? Lawks-a-lummy, Mr Copperfield!’

‘And?’

‘The old memsahib is suing me for divorce, too! So that’s tandem divorce papers. Banned from the marital homes, credit cards cancelled, bank accounts closed, restraining orders, plus money-off vouchers for the Castration Clinic are in the post! Mind you, I’ve been expecting it for the last five years! I knew it couldn’t last. When we were courting, I took her to see *Jaws*, and afterwards, her only comment was “What shark?” Still, I’m glad we went though all that pain last night for something so worthwhile.’

‘But it’s a disaster,’ said Jim, his voice wobbling in the way songs used to slur when you pressed your finger onto the edge of an LP. ‘She’ll screw you for everything, as well.’

‘There’s nothing there to screw, my little chickadee,’ said Mick slowly. ‘We rented the house from Uncle Jocelyn...’ He paused for breath because ‘Jocelyn’ was quite a hard word to pronounce, ‘...and she’s already stashed the cash in trust funds, or something like that. I was never very good with money.’

‘Christ!’ said Jim, ‘we need a bloody miracle! You any good at turning water into wine?’

Mick winced at the mention of alcohol.

The wince took quite a while to form on his bloated face, and even longer to disappear, during which time, Jim struggled to his feet.

‘We need to have a serious talk, Micky, but first, I got to go to the khazi.’

‘Excellent idea,’ said Mick, ‘and if this is going to be the start of a new corporate dawn for Implosion Productions, I’d try and remove those paperclips from your face. I can distinctly remember from my *Useful Tips for Growing Boys Annual 1957* – something nasty sets like concrete, after about eight hours.’

Jim took his dressing gown from the office hat stand. It had once been pristine white, but was now a multi-washed pale-grey with faded streaks of tomato ketchup. Nevertheless, the logo on the back - *What fucking Oscars?* - was still clearly visible. Having made himself un-prosecutable, he slowly and carefully, headed off to the toilet, desperately trying to keep his head level.

Mick was left alone. He occupied this quality time by sitting back in his chair, and, ignoring the twanging springs, directed an unfocused gaze at the polystyrene tiles on the ceiling. The office was silent, and the silence was golden, apart from the faint gurgling and wheezing noises as his lungs started to get used to oxygen again.

Five minutes later, there was a rattling at the door.

‘Come in,’ shouted Mick.

Eventually, Jim managed to turn the handle the right way, and entered the room. That is, if you call hanging on to the doorframe, entering.

His face was raw and bleeding.

‘Good God!’ cried Mick, ‘you look as though you’ve gone ten rounds with my missus, with one leg tied behind your back, and no referee.’

Jim wasn’t in the mood.

‘Tried to get those bloody paperclips off with some sandpaper I found in the toilet. What the hell was sandpaper doing there in the first place?’

‘Must have been some masochist from down the corridor using it to wipe his bum,’ said Mick, who was beginning, just a little, to enjoy himself. ‘I went through that phase - all part of one’s sexual development.’

‘So that’s how you became a sex god?’

‘That - and my ability to stick my tongue down the hole in a bicycle pump.’



'Look,' said Jim, 'we need to get a plan together – right now!

'Hey!' said Mick, 'rein in the stallions, Cordelia! Even a genius has to occasionally regroup his neurons.'

At that moment, the phone rang.

If you were prone to gross exaggeration, you could say Mick was galvanised into action. As he stood up, his underpants made a crackling sound and bright-blue discharges of static electricity ran across his groin.

The phone continued to ring. Mick bent over and, making a curious series of grunting sounds, managed to retrieve his trousers from the fireplace.

It was a monumental effort, which Jim, no doubt smarting from the 'gone ten rounds with my missus' crack, applauded feebly and muttered, 'Well done that man!' before slumping back into deep oblivion.

But Mick was on a roll. He managed to get one leg into his trousers. Unfortunately, he inserted the wrong leg into the wrong trouser hole, but was so elated by what he perceived as success, he forgot to insert his other leg.

Spurred on by the urgent ringing of the phone, he quickly pulled his braces onto his bare shoulders. His trousers shot upwards, twisting viciously into what Mick, in his more erudite moments, referred to as his blue-veined flute and bongos.

Mick's bongos did not appreciate the impact of a pair of heavy-duty, corduroy trousers travelling at an extremely high velocity. Neither did Mick. His mouth opened in a silent scream, his eyes bulged, and his body kicked into what one could only assume was a primitive survival reflex. So primitive, it was completely useless.

With one incorrectly trousered leg planted firmly on the floor, he began to hop in a circle, each hop more excruciatingly painful than the last.

The phone continued to ring, and it was only after a good half-minute of agonised gyrating and high-pitched whimpering, he managed to get across the room and grab the receiver.

Unfortunately, the receiver had a fairly heavy coating of lamb vindaloo, and it avoided his grasp three times before he managed to get it to his lips. He drew himself up to what anyone witnessing it would agree was a surprisingly imperious demeanour. He took a deep breath, then shouted at full volume into the mouthpiece.

'Thank you for calling Implosion Productions, you annoying bastard! Why don't you fuck off, and fuck all your relatives while you're at it!'

Immediately he'd finished, the vindaloo-coated receiver squirted out of his hand and clattered onto the floor. The caller's response was lost to history.

With this unconventional corporate communication at an end, Mick turned his attention to the intense pain in his groin. He slipped his braces off his shoulders, and, miraculously, things became a lot easier. He replaced the receiver and, supporting himself on various bits of office furniture, retraced his steps back to the safety of the sofa, his trousers dragging sadly behind him.

He fell back on the cushions and, in a slurred voice, addressed himself to the comatose figure in the chair opposite.

'You know, Jim, old fruitcake,' he said, wiping the lamb vindaloo off his hand and onto his underpants, 'I feel a recovery coming on! You know, if the Queen of England, God bless him, came through that door with a full OB unit, I could go straight into a discussion of the finer points of the British Constitution without any effing and blinding, whatsoever. Although, as you saw from that last call, I have to confess my telephone technique leaves a little to be desired, from a customer care point of view. What I need is one of them courses that teaches you how to speak properly on the telephone. Where's the fuckin' *Yellow Pages*?'

Mick looked across to the other side of the room. The *Yellow Pages* directory was about twenty feet away, on top of a filing cabinet. However, distances were still difficult to judge and, as he reached out to pick it up, the efforts of the last five minutes caught up with him. He keeled over onto the sofa, bounced once, and fell into a deep sleep.

During the next hour, the phone rang four more times.

Neither Mick, nor Jim, heard so much as the tiniest tinkle.

This was a terrible, terrible mistake - a mistake, which, not to put too fine a point on it, would have life-shattering consequences.

But, hey, be fair, it had been one *hell* of a celebration...

# 3

Charlie Sumkins leaned back behind his large, mahogany desk, stared up at the slowly revolving Singapore fan, and sighed.

Opposite the desk, a small weasel-like man, wearing a homburg and a crumpled, black, pinstriped suit, sat on a wooden stool and twitched nervously.

Sighing was not good. Sighing was definitely not good.

'Fing is,' said Charlie, 'them two at Implosion whatever-it-bloody-well-is are takin' the piss.'

It didn't pay to interrupt, so the weasel nodded slowly, unsure of where this was going.

'Fing is, I can't not have that, can't I?'

Understandably confused by the treble negative, the weasel performed a half-nod, half-shake of his head. It was a tricky manoeuvre, but one which had saved his bacon on more than one occasion.

'How much are they behind?'

'Six months - six grand,' ventured the weasel, relieved he was now, officially, part of the conversation.

'That's bad.'

'It is, Boss.'

'Done anythin' about it?'

'Phoned 'em five times this morning - first call got a load of abuse, then ansaphone.'

'Leave any messages?'

'No. I just done the silence - made 'em sweat a bit.'

'I like it, Aubrey, I like it.'

The weasel glowed with pleasure, and a considerable amount of relief.

'What we need is a plan,' said Charlie. 'It's Thursday today, so we need to get a result before the weekend.'

Aubrey took out a small Playboy notepad and pencil from his inside pocket.

'This afternoon, I want you to deliver a blackmail note to them nuns at that convent near Hatfield. So it'll have to be tomorrow. Whip round in the morning, give 'em a verbal - ask for the cash - then if it's a non-runner, get Vlad and Vic in.'

Aubrey blanched. 'Boss, I know it's six grand - and that's a lot of money - but *Vlad and Vic*?'

'Questionin' my decision, Aubrey?' said Charlie, giving him his much practiced, ultra-intimidating stare.

'No, no, no, Boss - just thinkin' of what Vlad and Vic - well, you know...'

'I never give Vlad and Vic's activities a second thought,' said Charlie. 'What they do is up to them. The less I know about it, the better. Anyway, they could do with the practice; they spend all their time down the pub, ogglin' Brenda's bazookas and pumpin' my money into that bloody jukebox.'

Charlie stood up.

If you had an interest in old films, you could think he was dressed a bit like an extra from an Ealing comedy. You would be wrong. He was dressed *exactly* like an extra from an Ealing comedy. 1945 demob suit. Black, shiny shoes. Trousers that came up to his nipples, grey braces, a garish, yellow and blue spiv's

tie, a false, but expertly applied Clarke Gable moustache and excessively Brilliantined hair, plastered close to his skull.

Although he was born some time after what he referred to as ‘the golden age,’ his Auntie Violet had sat down with him to watch *Passport to Pimlico* a hundred times. And he loved it. As a young boy, he’d even had sexual fantasies about Peggy Mount - which, as he later admitted, took some doing.

He loved the Ealing comedies. People were real people. There was camaraderie, honesty, loyalty, innocent romance, good-humoured disregard for authority and an underlying determination to build a better society.

These values had inspired the young Charlie, and he always thought they would set the exemplary standards by which he would live his life.

Exactly how Charlie became the leader of an international crime syndicate is a phenomenally complex story. But leader he was. And he knew it.

If Charlie had been head of a business, his corporate strategy would have simply involved having all his competitors quietly, or sometimes noisily, disposed of. Or, as a more humane alternative, damaged beyond repair. A similarly direct approach had been developed for his employees. There were severe punishments for anyone who questioned his decisions. And *unbelievably* severe punishments for anyone who so much as flickered a smile when they saw the way he was dressed.

Charlie knew what he was, and, sometimes, although he couldn’t remember the last time it happened, his criminal activities appalled him. The Ealing comedies were a lifeline. They kept him sane, or, as some people would have it, less insane. A collection of gloriously fuzzy, black and white links to what he might have been.

Putting his thumbs in his braces and pulling them forward away from his chest, Charlie strolled around so he was right behind his diminutive employee. Aubrey was transfixed - staring straight ahead, like a not-very-bright rabbit caught in a car’s reversing lights.

‘Now,’ said Charlie, ‘you may be wonderin’ why your *Supremo* is botherin’ with two toe-rags who can’t cough up their piss-all rent, when he’s got fingers in multi-million pound, illegal mega-pies on five continents.’

Aubrey nodded.

‘Well, it’s like this. You know them TV programmes where the Chief Executive at some rip-off supermarket chain goes on the checkouts for a day. Well, what you’re witnessin’ is sort of the same. I want to remind myself how shitty life is for people like you. Not that you don’t deserve it. But still - I want to know.’

‘So, we gotta plan,’ said Charlie, whipping round and crouching to put his face close to Aubrey’s, ‘and you’re going to kick-start it for me.’

Aubrey stopped breathing - mainly because he caught a good whiff of Charlie’s Brilliantine. Why the hell did blokes stick that crap on their hair in the 40s and 50s? Back then, women must have had permanently blocked noses, otherwise, the human race would’ve died out.

By Aubrey’s standards, these were deep philosophical thoughts. As a young man, open to life’s boundless possibilities, he’d become interested in philosophy. He’d once bought a book about Albert Camus. On the title page, it had one of Albert’s most famous quotes, ‘*There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide...*’ Aubrey read the quote out loud to himself, then thought - Fuck that! - and had never opened the book again.

He *had* heard, somewhere, that philosophy was dangerous. Certainly, *thinking* about philosophy was *very* fuckin’ dangerous, if you were supposed to be listening to instructions from Charlie Sumkins.

‘Whip round there, ask for the cash, and if they wanna stay on the sub’s bench - Vlad and Vic - straight away.’

Charlie moved back to his desk, and sat on the edge, polishing one of his shiny black shoes on the back of his trouser leg.

‘I’ve sent photos to the V-twins, so they know what the two sods look like. I wouldn’t want ‘em to hand out the treatment to some poor bugger who’d nothing to do with this.’

Aubrey winced and nodded. He sometimes wished *he* was a poor bugger who’d nothing to do with this. But it had been a career choice. In many ways, what he did now was more compassionate and caring than his previous job as a tax inspector. So, crouching slightly and wiping his perspiring forehead with an old Burger King serviette, he backed away, glad to be leaving in one piece.

‘Sure thing, Boss,’ he said, closing the door quietly, as he melted into the corridor.

Charlie turned and picked up the video control. A single flick and the large screen TV on the wall opposite burst into life with the opening titles of Charles Crichton’s 1953 *Titfield Thunderbolt*, starring George Relph and Stanley Holloway - in full colour.

This was a film guaranteed to lift his spirits, heighten his emotions and fully gratify his sense of nostalgia, for at least the next hour or so.

His job was to be the boss. It was definitely *not* his job to think about what Vlad and Vic would be doing to those two miserable bleeders at Implosion whatever-it-bloody-well-was.

# 4

Neither Mick nor Jim could work out how it happened, but, by mid-morning on Friday, they were both fully dressed and coffee was on the go. The curry, sherry dregs and the contents of Mick's bladder had miraculously disappeared, and the office was relatively tidy, albeit with a lingering aroma of disinfectant.

That old Mrs Hathaway was a treasure - the last of a breed - they must get round to paying her, some day.

'You know,' said Jim, leaning unsteadily on the coffee machine, 'our Mrs Hathaway is like that flying landlady from that film.'

'What film?'

'I dunno.'

'*Mary Poppins*?'

'Yeah, bloody brilliant! Sorts you out with a flick of the wrist.'

At that point, Jim stopped. Getting into serious *double entendre* territory, with Mick around, was never a smart move.

Jim had been dressed in a tweed sports jacket with leather elbow patches, grey flannel trousers, suede shoes and a pale brown check shirt with a maroon sports club tie. This was the outfit he wore when they pitched video concepts to engineering companies. No point in looking out of place amongst all those pale green walls, fluorescent lights, propelling pencils and pipes full of mixed shag.

His badly sandpapered face was covered in an assortment of plasters and creams. He looked in the mirror.

'God, what a state! Do you think my lips look as cracked as Clint Eastwood's in *The Good, the Bad and The Ugly* - you know, when Eli Wallach makes him walk through the desert?'

'The only way any part of Clint Eastwood is going to resemble any part of you, my dear chap, is if he falls head first into a sodding threshing machine.'

Jim turned with half a smile. 'Was that a blinder, or what?'

Mick lay sprawled back on the sofa. 'I can categorically state, for the Christ-knows-how-many-eth time, I'll never touch a drop again, I don't care how many times my wife divorces me.'

'Any grub?' asked Jim. They hadn't eaten for the two days they'd been in orbit.

'Nary a tepid chipolata, mate! That's what tends to happen when you're skint.'

Mrs Hathaway had dressed him in a hacking jacket with more or less matching plus fours, a floppy collared, cream shirt and a red and green spotted bow-tie - finished off with a pair of brown woollen socks and stout, hill-walking brogues.

This was Mick's favourite outfit. He felt it said, *I'm an international-class video cameraman and I'm so good, I don't have to give a shit about looking trendy for you bastard advertising types*.

'Maybe I should change my image,' said Mick. 'Maybe go for a pair of Aviators, leather bomber jacket, blue jeans and white trainers, with perhaps a ponytail. You know something that says "I'm one of you". We've got to get some work in, somehow.'

Jim didn't mention that Mick would need to lose three stone and have a full head of hair before going for the ponytail look. Instead, he started off on one.

'Christ knows what's happened to the jobs,' he said, darkly. 'I blame the bloody telly, wanking off all day to millions of punters saying a recession is coming - so people think, "Oh, maybe I'll not buy that sofa, or that new car..."'

'Or spend a bundle on that new video,' added Mick.

'And before you know it,' said Jim, 'there's a stonking recession. And those slimy bastard telly pundits say, "See, we were right all along - we experts predicted it." No you didn't - you caused it! I mean, for the last recession, the TV even had a *Downturn* logo - is that marketing a shit-awful idea to millions, or what! Same as those bleedin' radio DJs. They forecast a song is gonna be a hit, then they play it a zillion times a day, and then, when it's a hit, they brag about how they can spot the winners. Why can't anyone see...?'

'Well *we* can see alright, Gladys,' interrupted Mick. 'Our order intake over the last three months can best be described as three-quarters of fuck all, and, possibly, as much as seven-eighths of fuck all.'

'Well, at least, seven-eighths is more than three-quarters,' said Jim.

Their brave attempt at laughter was cut short by a loud banging on the door.

Mick moved carefully across the office and opened it, mug in hand.

In front of him, stood a small man with a face that was thinner than anything he'd ever seen. It looked as though his head had been regularly squeezed in a vice. Given the company Aubrey kept, that observation was, really, not too wide of the mark.

'Hello,' said Mick. 'If it's about that timeshare condo in Slough, I'm afraid we're fully committed.'

'You got the rent? Six months, six grand plus VAT,' said Aubrey in the sinister voice he'd perfected during his days as a tax inspector. He held out his nicotine-stained hand. 'Want it now - right here, in my mit.'

'Aren't you a bit old for a rent boy?' said Mick, leaning rather jauntily against the doorframe. 'I mean, a gnarled old bastard like you wouldn't get much in the way of trade, unless you hung around the emergency entrance at Moorfield's Eye Hospital.'

'I'll take that as a "No",' said Aubrey. 'So now, it's my duty to remind you your landlord is Charlie Sumkins.'

'Absolutely,' said Mick, 'his name's on the rental contract, signed in his own blood, as required by the Vampires' Union.'

'So the next thing is to arrange a visit from Charlie's senior negotiators.' Aubrey paused for effect. 'Vlad and Vic.'

'Ah yes,' smiled Mick, 'the boys! Of course, I've seen their pictures in the papers, from time to time. Are they still doing those bodybuilding courses? I think it's so nice when people have a hobby. Let us know when they're coming and we'll get a pot of tea ready - Earl Grey without milk I believe, if the Old Bailey transcripts are correct?'

Aubrey flicked open his phone and hit a speed dial number. 'How fast can you get round?' A pause. He shut the phone and looked Mick straight in his bloodshot eyes.

'You're in luck. They're available. Ten minutes. Have fun!'

And with that, and a rather creepy smirk, he turned and walked off down the corridor, with a trace of a spring in his step.

'Good oh! Look forward to it,' shouted Mick after him. 'We'll get the kettle on.'

He closed the door slowly, so it shut with just the faintest click.

Once inside the office, the transformation from Mr Cool to Mr Demented could have not been faster, or more dramatic, than if he'd been reading a compendium of 17th-century metaphysical poets and accidentally fallen into a vat of molten, high-carbon steel.

'Fuck!' he shouted at Jim. 'Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!'

Jim remained calm. He'd had enough drama in his life during the last forty-eight hours. 'I presume there's a problem,' he said, quietly sipping his cappuccino.

'A problem?' screamed Mick. 'Fuckin' Vlad and fuckin' Vic will be here in *this* fuckin' office in ten fuckin' minutes!'

It was patently clear the 'stay calm when disaster strikes' element of Mick's 'They Win. You Lose.' philosophy had been temporarily abandoned.

Jim had never subscribed to 'They Win. You Lose.' but he knew all about the V-twins. If he'd been inspecting the sharp end of a rocket-propelled grenade launcher and accidentally pulled the trigger, he couldn't have moved faster. Wide-eyed and mouthing, 'Shit, shit, shit, shit!' he shot across the room, hurdled the sofa and began frantically gathering up pieces of equipment.

Mick shouted instructions, his voice cracking occasionally into an ultra-high falsetto. 'The camera's in its flight case, grab a fuckin' tripod and some fuckin' tapes - yank that fuckin' iMac out of the wall - let's get the fuck out of here!'

Jim suddenly turned. 'What about the picture of Bette Midler in that tight-fitting ruched dress?'

'Fuck Bette Midler!' shouted Mick.

They both paused, and, for three silent seconds, shared similar, rather pleasurable mental images. Then it was back to full-scale panic.

'Get the Final Cut Pro back-up disks - and the ProTools set up as well.'

'Stills camera?'

'Wallets and passports - filing cabinet, top drawer!'

'Right!' said Mick, his eyes swivelling round the room at a speed that, a few hours earlier, would've resulted in a major brain haemorrhage.

'That's the lot! Let's go!'

Given the amount of gear they were carrying, and the degree to which they were hung over, they moved extremely quickly down the corridor. They were just a few paces from the lift, when Jim spoke, one can only suppose, out of habit.

'Mick - I gotta have a quick "nervous".'

'This is not a shoot James,' said Mick, with a powerful mixture of venom and hysteria in his voice. 'This is not, "Oh, I'm a fuckin' professional, I must go back and see if we've missed anything." This is Vlad and Vic round here' - he checked his watch - 'in six fuckin' minutes! While you're pissing around thinking about a "nervous", they're sitting in the back of a fast moving limo, oiling the threads on a specially designed set of bollock screws. Get in the lift!'

This argument seemed to resonate with Jim, and, within seconds, they were in the underground car park. It was dark and dank, but their car was there. Sure, they had had to sell the Porches as times got tough, then the Audi TTs when times got even tougher. But, now, despite its shortcomings, this car, at this given moment, was the most welcome sight in the world.



They loaded up quickly and it started first time. The car park's automatic doors opened and let in a dazzling blaze of light from the leaden London skies.

'The good thing about a Morris Traveller,' said Mick, 'is it won't attract a lot of attention.'

'Except from classic car enthusiasts,' said Jim.

'Gangsters, enforcers and hit men are *not* interested in classic cars, you twonk - at least, I bloody-well hope not.'

The car struggled slightly up the steep, concrete ramp into the grit and daily grime of Greek Street.

'Shit!' said Jim. 'There they are!'

And sure enough, two huge, Crombie-clad men wearing crew cuts and black Wayfarers were on the steps leading up to their building. They were carrying a large tartan suitcase with ominous dark stains. Fortunately, they were busily engaged trying to fathom out how to work the security phone system.

'Get your head down! Right down!'

Mick had never driven a car with his head between his knees, but now seemed a bloody good time to start learning.

They moved slowly out into the street and turned left. After a few seconds, Jim felt brave enough to turn round and look back. He was just in time to see Vlad rip the security phone off the wall, while Vic produced a jemmy from under his Crombie and started on what would, no doubt, be a faultless demonstration of forced entry.

The image of the V-twins rampant receded into the distance as they moved slowly south, down Greek Street. They turned left onto the A401, and, after a few hundred yards, headed south again towards Trafalgar Square. Phase One of the Great Escape was complete.

But it'd been a sudden and shattering experience, particularly on the back of their celebratory excesses. If they'd had the option of a McQueen-type, motorbike jump over a barbed wire fence, while being fired on by German guards, they'd have gone for it like a shot.

They began slowly to recover as heart rates decreased to the more acceptable level of rapid palpitation.

Jim leaned forward, checked his bloodstained plasters and creamed abrasions in the vanity mirror, and took some long, deep breaths.

Mick sat upright in his seat for the first time and peered out through the Traveller's grimy windscreen.

Sheets of drizzle were starting to sweep down from a graphite sky, the roads were packed with cars, taxis and buses switching lanes and honking furiously, traffic wardens were getting into fights, high-moral-ground cyclists were jumping the lights and the odd drunken pedestrian swayed dangerously through the traffic.

But to Mick and Jim, joint directors of Implosion Productions, the Charing Cross Road had never, ever, looked more beautiful.

# 5

Nona Sandringham-Smythe heaved herself over the pristine shag-pile and answered the Trimphone in her beautifully appointed foyer.

'Hello, who's this?' she said, while trying to pick a small piece of liver from between her teeth with an elegantly manicured, false fingernail.

'Sorry! I can't hear you proper?'

'Who?'

'You one of them perverts?'

She paused, and her face became even more annoyed, so much so, that little cracks began to appear in whatever she had layered onto her cheeks.

Suddenly, her mouth fell open. The liver would have to wait.

'Michael! Michael! Is that you Michael? You bastard! Christ! It's been fifteen years! What the hell are *you* ringing for?'

Her expression became more and more shocked as Mick relayed a carefully crafted, highly sanitised version of the day's events.

Even to someone as spectacularly insensitive as Nona, it was obvious she was listening to a voice that was slowly crawling towards the drop at Beachy Head.

'You want to stay for a couple of nights! Bloody hell, Mick! That's a bloody liberty after what you done. No way! It's nine o'clock and there's a programme on the telly, so thank you and goodnight.'

There was a short response, which made her shift the phone rapidly away from her ear. But she was, almost instantly, back on the attack.

'Now don't get sarcaflastic with me, Michael - you ungrateful, bald-headed, old git. After all I done for you - I was a good wife - and you bugged off with that Norwegian - OK, Swedish - bitch. I'm runnin' a nice establishment in a posh part of Portsmouth. My last poor husband, the Commodore - God rest his socks - passed away twelve months ago and left me a bundle. Irregardless of nothin', I've never had it so good. No way do I want you and your Jim toyboy hangin' round here lookin' for a paddle to get you back down the creek...'

She was interrupted, as Mick switched tack. After five years of heavy-duty marital experience with Nona, he'd learned the best way of getting the upper hand was to keep moving. Just as you wouldn't stand still if a pit bull was intent on sinking its teeth into your pride and joys.

'What do you mean,' said Nona, speaking more slowly, 'you'll make it worth my while?' For the first time, there was a hint of interest in her voice.

In the cold, draughty public phone box, outside the Ace of Spades transport caff, Mick's tone became even more engaging, despite the fact that his hands were shaking slightly and sweat was tricking down the back of his neck.

'Go on,' encouraged Nona, the furrows on her brow starting to blend back into her sallow, sagging skin. She listened intently, patted her black beehive, glanced at her huge bulk in the reflection of the glass front door and practiced her pout. It said a lot for the technological skills of the Pilkingtons workforce, that the glass didn't shatter, immediately.

‘Hmm!’ she cooed, ‘now *that’s* a bit of an intimate, personal, delicate-type question, isn’t it, Michael? But, as you’re asking - no, I don’t have a live-in lover or significant other.’

Would she take the bait? It was now, or never. Mick popped the question.

‘What *do* you mean?’ said Nona, looking flushed. Really!... Really!... Oh!... *Really!*’

She made a noise that sounded like a badly lubricated, industrial dynamo winding down very quickly, or it might have been a purr of pleasure.

‘*Well* - perhaps we can talk more about *that* when you arrive? Sweetie-pie-pie.’

Nona had adopted a grotesque, coquettish tone of voice, which, if a man on a galloping something were to have heard as he passed by, not that that happened very often in the foyer of the Weeliveer Guest Establishment, Southsea, he would’ve probably brought up his dinner.

Whatever had *really* prompted the call must be serious, and Nona was smart enough to realise she was in a position to dictate, more or less, *all* the terms.

Fifteen years ago, Mick had run out on her. And now, he was in trouble. He wanted something she had - but she was desperately in need of something *he* had - and which, by good fortune, his gentleman friend had as well. Unless, of course, the gentleman friend had had a nasty, intimate accident with a chisel, chainsaw or bacon slicer.

She became a lot more assertive. ‘It’ll have to be *every* night, though. I got a *lot* of catchin’ up to do.’

There was panic and stuttered excuses on the other end of the phone.

‘Alright then, spoilsport!’ The coquette was back. ‘One night *on*, one night *off*...’

There was a pause while Mick acquiesced, during which, a smiling Nona returned to dealing with the piece of liver.

‘So tell me, what’s your ETA, sweetie-pops?’

Mick pitched the latest time he thought he could get away with. It would be past midnight. Way past midnight.

‘Never you mind, my little cherub. The key’s under the mat, so help yourself. Nona will leave a note showing you how to find your bedrooms. I’ll get the hot water bottles in the beds and see you both in the morning.’

There was one more question from Mick.

Nona listened, thought about it, screwed up her face, then replied, ‘OK! Two hundred - but that’s *it* - understand!’

She recovered in seconds. She’d got what she wanted, and moved quickly to end the conversation on a positive note.

‘See you tomorrow, Micky-Dicky. Kissy, kissy, kissy from Nona. Mwahhh!’

As she blew Mick a big stage kiss, the little piece of liver flew out of her teeth and stuck to the mirror above the occasional table. She didn’t notice.

Nona put the receiver back on the Trimphone and, as usual, it flipped over and fell off onto the shag pile.

She left it where it landed, turned on the heels of her leopard skin patterned mules, pulled her pink nylon housecoat around her massive frame, and, humming one of her favourite tunes from *The King and I*, heaved herself upstairs to find a note pad, a pencil and two of her very finest hot water bottles.

A two hundred quid advance was a bit of a cheek. In fact, it was a *lot* of a cheek, but it couldn't take the edge off the deal. Nona was certain she would have some very, very sweet dreams that night, and, with luck, for a great many nights to come.

# 6

'You did fuckin' *what?*' shouted Jim, at such a volume even the heads of the road-hardened truckers in the Ace of Spades turned with looks which implied his conduct was a trifle inappropriate.

'You did fuckin' *what?*' screamed Jim, even louder.

'Yeah!' shouted a large, heavily tattooed driver at a table near the toilet door, who obviously thought there was some fun to be had. 'You did fuckin' what?' C'mon spill the beans. What the fuck did you do? We're all fuckin' ears.'

Mick turned to the driver and spoke in measured tones. 'Look, old chum, I appreciate you want to make conversation with fellow travellers, kindred spirits of the road and all that, but I'm afraid I have to ask you to refrain. This is a private conversation.'

'Like fuck it is - you cheeky bastard,' snarled the driver. He got to his feet, picked up a chair and, holding it above his head, began running towards them at a surprising speed.

Leaving two unfinished teas on the table, along with a packet of half-eaten pickled onion crisps and several grubby, heavily wrinkled plasters Jim had been re-applying, they shot out of the main door, and disappeared, equally rapidly, into the darkness of the lorry park.

As he hurtled towards the door, their pursuer couldn't break the habit of a lifetime, and skidded to a halt to check the one-armed bandit. It was only a nudge away from the jackpot. He put the chair down, sat on it, made the nudge and collected about fifty quid. Much more satisfying than filling in a couple of snotty-nosed gits out there in the freezing cold.

And so it was, that, once again, 'They Win. You Lose.' had bitten the dust. Mick and Jim ran, crouching low and zigzagging, like they'd seen on documentaries about the SAS, and made it to the relative safety to the Morris Traveller.

To avoid revealing their location to anyone who might pop out of the caff brandishing a chair, they sat in the dark with the interior light turned off. An unnecessary precaution because, if you've ever owned a Traveller, you'll know the difference between the interior light being on and the interior light being off can only be detected with extremely sensitive scientific equipment.

They locked the doors - another unnecessary precaution - because anyone over the age of seven can open a Traveller's doors with a teaspoon.

Still, they felt safer, and the bloke with the chair hadn't appeared. Maybe, he'd decided it wasn't worth the effort, and had hit someone else instead.

As soon as they'd got their breath back, Jim started where he'd left off. 'You did fuckin' *what?*'

Look,' said Mick, getting straight to the point, 'it's time for a quick status check. Total cash, £2.47p. Credit cards kaput. Bank accounts in lock-down, and, as an added bonus, nowhere to stay tonight.

'So you say,' muttered Jim.

'It's as clear as the balls on a bulldog, mate! A 30-ton truck is slowly backing over our groins, and you're hacked off because my ex-wife-but-two, the lovely Nona, who lives just an hour's drive away, has kindly offered to put us up, with three square meals a day *and* a £200 cash advance.

'In return for? Come on; let me hear you say it again. 'Cos I couldn't believe it the first time!'

There was a silence, during which, a large articulated lorry rumbled slowly across the park. For a second or two, its headlights shone directly into their faces.

If the driver had bothered to look, he'd have seen that Jim looked apoplectic and Mick looked like a small boy, who'd just been caught looking at line drawings of ladies' corsetry in a 1950's Littlewoods mail order catalogue.

'You mean bloody *sexual* favours, don't you?' said Jim.

'Keep it down,' hissed Mick, suddenly getting his voice back. He was looking across to the caff door. 'I've got a feeling that gorilla with the chair could make the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* look like a bit of weekend DIY. OK - so she'll do it for a bit of nookie.'

Jim looked disgusted.

'It's no big deal, old chum,' said Mick, trying to put a brave face on a situation which featured a big sign saying, 'Brave faces not accepted, yours faithfully, The Management.'

'Look,' said Mick, 'I know what she's like in bed. On the sex front, she's a damp squib. Think squib at the bottom of the Mariana Trench, with added water. Apparently, her latest old man popped his clogs a year ago, probably died of boredom. Since then, she hasn't had so much as a sniff. So, in plain language, Nona just fancies a bit on the side - or, in our case, two bits.'

'What - you mean a three-up, every night?'

'No, we take it in turns - one night on, one night off. I could draw up a timetable. Colour-coded and everything.'

'No! No! No! Definitely, no!' shouted Jim.

'OK,' said Mick, 'shall I go back into the caff and ask our chair-wielding friend if he can spare a couple of coppers for a cup of tea and another packet of crisps? I repeat. Three meals a day. Nice warm beds. Two hundred smackers. And the V-twins - who can I remind you are top-of-the-range killers who want to add us to this month's body count - will have absolutely no idea where we are.'

The last point was the clincher. When it came to Jim placing his vital organs into the hands of an unknown woman, or into the ingenious, stainless steel clamps for which Vlad and Vic were internationally renowned - there was no contest.

'OK, I'll do it,' he said. 'But no action tonight, I'm absolutely knackered - and my face is stinging like hell.'

'No worries mate,' said Mick, reassuringly. 'Just be positive. Sandpaper flesh wounds hardly ever go gangrenous. Tonight, we'll have cosy little beds to snuggle down in and we're on a promise of a hot water bottle each. It'll be a doddle.'

Deal sort of done, and headlights off, they bumped slowly across the potholes in the lorry park. When they turned onto the A3, they fired up all the systems, and headed south towards the doddle, in complete silence.

It was a silence, during which time, Mick did a lot of thinking. For twenty miles or so, his face was illuminated, alternately, by oncoming cars and sodium streetlights. With each illumination, he looked more and more fretful. But it wasn't until the end of the Petersfield bypass, he raised the issue that was really troubling him.

'Ere Jimbo,' he asked, 'you haven't got any of them Taiwanese Viagra tablets have you?'

Mick looked across to the passenger seat, but there was no reply. In the faint, golden glow of the Traveller's dashboard, Jim was sleeping like a baby. Albeit, a baby who seemed to have been playing, unsuccessfully, with a freshly sharpened set of cheese-graters.



# 7

Charlie Sumkins sighed. Otherwise, the room was silent, apart from the creak of the Singapore fan and the sound of his knuckles cracking under the desk.

Today, he was dressed identically to Herbert Lom's character, Louis, in the Ealing comedy, *The Ladykillers* - dark suit, black shirt, thin white tie and trilby, with a touch of brown make-up under the eyes to enhance Mr Lom's carefully crafted psychopathic look. True to character, he was casually tossing an open flick knife from hand to hand.

While he was very proud of his outfit, he wasn't having a good day. He'd spent the morning dealing with some new employees he'd tasked with evicting a dozen orphans from one of his chain of holistic family therapy centres. OK, the blokes had just started on his training programme, but, as he said to them, 'A bit of violence won't come amiss, they're not gonna fight back, and it's sort of preparin' 'em for the rough and tumble of life.'

Eventually, he'd compromised. They would rough the kids up a bit, but collect some cardboard boxes from the local supermarket, so they had beds for the night. Whatever happened to standards?

And now, as if that wasn't enough, he had to give Vlad and Vic a bollocking.

So, he sighed again, and drummed his fingers slowly on the desktop.

Vlad and Vic stood in front of him, shuffling their feet, uneasily.

Eventually, he spoke. The V-twins listened carefully.

'Boys, boys, boys - this weren't a big job. This was two nobodies who simply wouldn't pay for the colander they were fartin' in. And you come back and tell me they done a runner.'

'They gone and escaped from two of the most professional, most sadistic enforcers in the expanded European Union. Boys, you are at the toppermost of the poppermost of the premier league. Scumbag wannabees - from mono-testicled drug dealers to human traffickers savin' up for their first sat-nav - look to you for divine inspiration. You are the role models *par excellence* for a multitude of shit-heads who will never - and I mean *never* - meet your impeccable levels of vindictiveness and extreme violence. So what the fuck, what the fuck, what the *fuck* went wrong?'

With a vicious, lightning-fast movement, he threw the flick knife into a photo of *Bambi* on the opposite wall, where it vibrated at a frequency matched only by that of Vlad and Vic's kneecaps.

There was an awkward silence. Vic coughed slightly, then looked at Charlie with a strained expression that tried to convey his most sincere apologies for the cough.

Eventually, Vlad spoke.

'They must have moved out real fast, Boss. Real fast. We was there ten minutes after Aubrey phoned us.'

'You sure you didn't hang around the Dead Dog gawpin' at Brenda's knockers, or shovin' my cash into that bleedin' jukebox?'

'No Boss, we was off like rockets.'

'So,' said Charlie, 'they was tipped off. And this is your starter for ten - who do you fink tipped 'em off?'

There was another prolonged silence.

'Come on,' said Charlie, 'otherwise I'll have to offer it to Christ Church College, Cambridge.'



Both twins knew the answer, but both thought it was best to leave it to Charlie.

‘Boys - there was only one nicotine-stained, homburg-wearing fuckwit who could’ve spilt the beans.’

Vlad was in like a flash.

‘We’ll deal with him Boss - I mean, we want to make it up to you in any way we can. Give us 12 hours and Aubrey’s castanets will be floating off Southend pier.’

Charlie suddenly smiled, though his eyes remained icy cold. ‘You’re good boys at heart - but no thanks. I’ll deal with this myself. You got that head-clamp in your suitcase?’

‘No,’ said Vlad, ‘this is our below-the-belt kit. I’ll pop in later this afternoon with the right gear – Whitworth threads and nice new vernier adjuster.’

‘Make that *earlier* this afternoon, if you would be so kind.’

Vlad nodded profusely and assured Charlie he definitely *would* be so kind.

‘So, tell me more boys,’ said Charlie, leaning back in his chair. ‘You got there. They’d gone. What next?’

Vlad’s confidence returned a little. ‘Well Boss, we gave the place a real trashing - desks, chairs, filing cabinets, computers, projectors, laptops, photocopiers all got a good sledging. Looked like *World War III - the Sequel* when we’d finished.’

‘Oh great!’ roared Charlie, sitting bolt upright and turning purple at the same time. Disproving in a second, the fallacy that men can’t multi-task.

‘It might interest you to know that that office was let fully fuckin’ furnished. You were sledgin’ my stuff, you cretins!’

Vlad and Vic clutched each other and, for probably for the first time in their lives, realised what uncontrolled terror felt like.

Charlie sat down, his colour turning to a more socially acceptable crimson.

‘I reckon that’s ten thousand quid you owe me. But, I’m a reasonable man. I’ll take bits off your wages - rather than bits off your private parts.’

Vlad and Vic nodded, gratefully.

‘Oh, and one more fing,’ said Charlie. His tone became casual, but the twins could sense there was a big one coming down the track.

‘There was a photograph of Bette Midler in a tight-fittin’, ruched dress - was *that* the subject of your sledgin’ activities too?’

‘Er, er, no Boss,’ stammered Vlad, ‘definitely not Boss. Er - Vic took it home with him.’

‘Yeah, yeah, Boss that’s right,’ said Vic, appalled at how quickly his twin brother had dropped him in it.

‘I was savin’ it for you Boss,’ said Vic. ‘Honest. Savin’ it for you. We’ll bring it round, with the head clamp.’

‘That’s very gratifying,’ said Charlie, eyeing Vic suspiciously. ‘If I thought anyone was usin’ that lovely picture to practice any form of personal, self-gratification of a sexual nature, well, you don’t want to know what would happen, especially if you’ve just had your dinners!’

Charlie’s face then hardened in a way that would have provided years of research at the University of Geneva Department of Psychology, home of world’s leading face muscle analysts.

‘Now,’ he said, both cheeks twitching slightly, ‘about them colander inhabitants - or should I say *ex-fuckin’* colander inhabitants.’

Vlad and Vic began to shuffle again.

'I want 'em found,' snarled Charlie. 'I want 'em found quick. And when you find 'em, I want you to raise your game. I want the best. El ultimo. When the police find the bodies, I want even the Daily fuckin' Star to be too fuckin' nauseated to report it.'

His voice became quieter, which made it even more nerve-wracking.

'If you don't find 'em, well, I might just have to review your employment contracts, and you know what 'appens to people who I ask to leave my employment?'

'Course we do,' said Vic enthusiastically, not seeing where this was leading. 'We work 'em over, slice 'em up and drop 'em over the side of the Dulwich ferry.'

'Well,' said Charlie, 'I'm glad to say that procedure is still a key part of my organisation's employment policy. Of course, dependin' on circumstances, the people who get to do the workin' over, slicin' up and droppin' over may suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, change. Roles may be reversed. If you get my meanin'.'

Vlad and Vic gulped in unison to show how much they got it.

'I don't give a flying fuck with feathers on how you find 'em. Just deal with 'em fast. You got a week. After which, I wouldn't want to be in your Guccis.'

'And take those bleedin' sunglasses off - you look like you've both just failed a Bono lookalike competition.'

They whipped off their Wayfarers, and, unaccustomed to the light, their eyes immediately began to water.

And so it was that Europe's top two gangland enforcers, whose very name could make criminals operating north of the Arctic Circle shit their sealskin trousers in terror, groped their way to the door, and stumbled through into the corridor.

'Ladies and gentlemen!' announced Charlie to the Bambi-embedded flick knife on the opposite wall. 'I'm pleased to tell you, Vlad and Vic have now left the buildin'. Thank fuck!'

A quick dab of the remote control, and the titles of Alexander Mackendrick's 1949 directorial debut, *Whisky Galore!* appeared on the big screen. Charlie settled down with a contented smile. He never tired of seeing Joan Greenwood in anything - and Christ, that voice! He switched off his mobile. He unplugged the phone. He put his feet up on the desk. This demanded complete and absolute concentration.

Although, as the credits rolled, he fleetingly wondered what the fuck a vernier was.

# 8

Jim woke up and thought he was dead.

He wasn't a religious man, but he vaguely remembered hearing about 'purgatory' - the halfway house between heaven and hell.

'This was surely where he was.

The room he was lying in had puce walls, a puce ceiling, puce paintwork, puce furniture and a puce duvet, along with a puce carpet and puce lampshades. This was it - purgatory - the place where souls suffer for a while before getting the thumbs up, or thumbs down, from Mr. Big.

Sure, he was only half-awake, but he started to think of all the bad things he'd done in his life. There weren't too many. Perhaps he'd neglected his wife a bit, spent too much time at the office, or down the pub, and he swore a lot when he was under pressure. Come to think of it, he also swore a lot when he wasn't under pressure. How bad did God think swearing was? Perhaps he was about to find out?

There weren't too many good things, either. He'd always paid his tax. He hadn't had a lot of sex before he got married. He hadn't had a lot of sex after he'd got married, either. He supposed that, when he and Mick played bass and guitar in a local tribute band, their hobby had given a lot of people a lot of pleasure. But what if God wasn't into Slade?

While Jim lay dreamily wrestling with his conscience, Mick was right next door not so dreamily wrestling with Nona's taste for hyper-colour-coordinated rooms. He had woken up in the red room - red walls, red ceiling, red carpet, red bed linen, red furniture, red paintwork, red lampshades. It was a hell of a shock. Then he remembered that Nona's extreme take on interior design was one of the reasons he'd done a runner.

Mick was also wrestling with the fact that yesterday had been bad for his blood pressure. His face, body, arms and legs had turned a dangerous shade of crimson. As he lay on the red duvet and looked down towards his feet, the camouflage effect was perfect. If it hadn't been for his pubic hair, he wouldn't have been able to tell he was there at all.

Next door, Jim was just starting to think it was strange they had duvets in purgatory, when the door opened and in came Nona carrying a silver-plated breakfast tray. Jim immediately revised his original opinion. This was not purgatory - this was not a place where you might have a chat with God about the available options. He'd gone straight to hell. And to prove it, here was the Angel of Death towering over him.

'Hello dreamy dreamboat,' cooed Nona, 'done you a nice boiled egg with toastie soldiers - and a nice pot of tea - help yourself to milk and sugar.'

Following their escape from the Ace of Spades, Jim was starving, but the tray of food barely registered. His immediate thought was - what the hell was this thing wearing a black chiffon tent, with a pink bow and lacy edgings.

Unsure of his whereabouts - and still thinking this could be a version of purgatory none of the world's religious leaders had ever twigged - he changed his last thought to - what the *heck* was this thing wearing a black chiffon tent, with a pink bow and lacy edgings. Some people said God knew what you were thinking - and he was taking no chances.

The Angel of Death placed the tray on his puce bedside table and sat down heavily on the puce duvet. It patted his leg with an action, which, strangely for an angel, included a quick stroke of his upper thighs.

Before things went any further, Jim decided to speak.

‘Where am I? And who are you?’

‘Why, pet, you’re at the Weeliveer Guest Establishment, Southsea - and I’m Nona Sandringham-Smythe. They call me the hostess with more than the mostest.’

Two things were now blatantly obvious to Jim. First, he was not dead, although Christ only knew what this puce room was about. And secondly, when Nona said ‘more than the mostest’, she wasn’t exaggerating.

The black chiffon tent, which he now guessed might be an XXXXL negligee, must be hiding a body so vast and out of control, it might be worth making a quick call to the Guinness Book of Records. Either that, or she was concealing a partially inflated barrage balloon in its voluminous folds.

‘You must have been a tired little bunny when you came in, last night,’ said Nona, and she grinned knowingly. She moved closer, and Jim was treated to an unwanted kaleidoscope - red lips, bright orange foundation, yellow-green teeth and a greyish-blue tongue.

‘I’m not feeling well - look at my face,’ stuttered Jim, hoping the plasters had stayed on during the night.

‘Nona’s got all the medicine we need to make diddums feel better.’

She leaned closer and there was an overpowering smell of Chanel No. 5 and garlic. Jim could feel her gigantic breasts pressing through the duvet against his chest. Although, it could easily have been her gigantic stomach doing the pressing - these two parts of Nona’s anatomy had been inseparable for years.

She leaned forward a little more, salivating slightly as she placed her huge, flabby arms on the duvet on either side of Jim’s neck.

His breath started coming in gulps. His mind was racing. He was being pinned down by a sex maniac who, on a good day must have weighed in at around twenty-five stone. There was no visible escape route. And where was Micky-bastard - the shithole who’d got him into this mess.

Desperately, he turned his head away from her flickering, serpentine tongue, and noticed a tattoo on her right arm. It had a badly drawn image of a football trophy. Above it was the inscription ‘Play up Pompey’ and below, ‘Fuk Barselona.’

‘Oh look,’ Jim squeaked, in one final attempt to manoeuvre the encounter in a more civilised direction, ‘one of your tattoos is spelt wrong.’

He might as well have thrown a peanut on the track in an attempt to stop the Tokyo-Osaka bullet train. This was it. He was a gonner. He screwed his eyes shut and made a mental note to commit suicide, later that afternoon.

‘Good morning playmates,’ cried a cheery voice. ‘Getting to know one another are we?’

Mick walked into the room, wearing only his underpants. The clash between the red of his ample, blood-pressured body and the puce emulsion on the wall was stomach churning, but Mick was unabashed. He gave them a ‘Wow, here’s a brand new day’ smile - the sort you see in those irritatingly happy cornflake commercials.

Despite the pressure of the duvet edge on his throat, Jim forced his head around to look at Mick. It was a look which incorporated terror and fury, but with an overriding inference that, if Mick could get him out of this, he would willingly act as his unpaid butler, maid and scrotum washer, for the rest of time.

Fortunately for Jim, this generous offer did not have to be made public, as Mick’s appearance had an immediate effect on the rampant Nona. She stood up, relinquished her grip on Jim, wiped the saliva from her lips and hastily rearranged her negligee over the partially inflated barrage balloon, if that’s what it was.

Jim responded by leaping out of bed, diving over to Mick and cowering behind his bulky, bright-red form. From this vantage point, he could get a good look at Nona. He began to whimper as he took in the full horror of what had, so nearly, been his early morning alternative to a bowl of Kelloggs.

Mick had said that, when it came to sex, Nona was a damp squib. But from where he was at this moment, she seemed like a cross between the Graf Zeppelin and an Exocet missile.

‘Golly gosh,’ said Mick continuing to smile, ‘it’s nearly nine-thirty. Look, Nona darling, we need to get our clothes washed, dried and ironed - and poor Jim, here, needs some medication for his facial wounds - heroic chappie saved a new-born baby from a Rottweiler attack yesterday - needs more rest. And don’t worry, we’ll share breakfast.’

Nona scowled, and took the hint. But as she turned to go, she left them in no doubt as to what she was expecting.

‘Every evening, gents, in rotaryation, 10 pm on the dotto. We’ll use my yellow bedroom.’ And with a horrendous, slow wink added, ‘it’s so much more soundproved.’

She left the room, then immediately popped her head back in.

‘Oh yes, and I think we’ll commence with you, Michael, just for ancient time’s old sake.’

She closed the puce door with a purposeful thud.

Jim was still in a state of advanced shock. ‘You were married to ... to *that!*’ he stammered.

‘Yes,’ said Mick, calmly. ‘I found her strangely fascinating - in the same way you can be strangely fascinated by Sumo wrestlers, blood-sucking bats and swamp alligators.’

‘We gotta get out of here. Now!’ spluttered Jim.

‘Look, my old shnozzle,’ said Mick, clipping the top off the boiled egg and dipping a toastie soldier into the yolk. ‘Let’s get you fed and watered first, then we’ll have a sensible chat.’

‘But she’s...’

Jim stopped, mid-sentence, as Mick flicked an egg-soaked soldier into his open mouth. It shot so far down Jim’s throat, it triggered a major choking fit. He wheezed, he retched, he spluttered, and with each explosive cough, his body gave a convulsive shudder, and his eyeballs came ever nearer to popping out of their sockets.

‘There, there, you see,’ said Mick patting him gently on his back as it went into a series of deep muscular spasms, ‘you’re a lucky boy. There’s nothing to worry about! Your best friend Micky’s here to look after you - and everything, and I mean absolutely *everything*, is going to be super, fine and dandy.’

# 9

Nona Sandringham-Smythe pulled on her yellow washing-up gloves in a way which, had he witnessed the event, would have caused Jim to rush to the phone and book a six-month course with a sex therapist.

Fortunately, only Mick was in the kitchen. He stood well back as she sprayed the surfaces with a disinfectant, which smelt so strong, you could be forgiven for thinking it'd been purchased direct from an end-of-range car boot sale at Porton Down.

'That's me all over, lovey-kins - clean in the kitchen, filthy in bed!'

Nona was so engrossed in annihilating the bacteria the telly adverts had told her were lurking in every nook and cranny, she missed Mick's involuntary shudder.

Mick pondered on the claim that this stuff killed 99.9 per cent of all known germs. But what about the remaining 0.1 per cent - what the hell did *that* mean? What germs weren't killed? The Black Death?

While he amused himself with these thoughts, Nona finished spraying and turned her massive frame around to face him.

'Even though a woman works all day - there's still more to be done - starting at ten o'clock.'

She pouted in a rather terrifying way, and tickled Mick under his chin with a yellow, rubberised finger.

For one alarming moment, Mick thought she meant ten in the morning. He didn't have to wait to find out, because at that moment, he was saved by the *Sound of Music*.

'Ah!' said Nona, looking slightly peeved, 'that'll be Dave and Royboy - I've given 'em a key, but they *always* ring the bell.'

'Let me do the introduce,' she said. 'They're my painters. This place is like that Fifth Bridge in Scotland - finish painting at one end and it's time to start at the other. They're absolutely inter-disposable.'

Standing in the hallway were two men in white overalls carrying brushes, groundsheets and pots of gloss.

Nona gushed. 'I'm going for a new "white out" look in the foyer - you know, like when you're doing skiing, like the young royals at San Mortice, and it's so white, you can't see nothing much. So today, they're glossing the stairs, bless 'em.'

The elder of the two wiped his hand on his overalls and stretched it out to Mick.

'Hello, I'm Dave - and this,' he said, 'is Royboy - my junior partner and apprentice.'

Royboy was a tall, thin youth, with a moist nose and a deathly white, fairly spotty face. He sniffed by way of introduction, and ran his fingers through his mullet.

'This is Michael,' said Nona, patting Mick's bald head. 'He may be enduring here for quite a while, pending on how things transpire.'

Mick left Dave and Royboy to it, and went through to the breakfast room on the pretext of checking the newspapers to look for work. Nona followed, obviously, glad to have the opportunity to show him around.

He was extremely thankful the breakfast room was not hyper colour co-ordinated. Instead, it was full of gaily decorated, wrought iron, plastic-topped tables and chairs, sort of in the style of an Italian street café.

Nevertheless, it *did* have a theme, which Nona described, enthusiastically, as *España Por Favor*.

There were straw-effect wall holders everywhere, stuffed full of dangling green and black plastic grapes. There were sombreros and a plastic guitar nailed to the wall, along with lacy fans, straw-based Chianti

bottles, and a highly glazed pot in the colours of the Spanish national flag, bearing the legend 'I got bummed in Benidorm.'

There were also luminous drawings of the Eiffel tower, waves on an unknown rocky headland at sunset, a sepia picture of General Franco and a signed photograph of the staff of a Greek beachside pub called 'The Sunburnt Arms.' Over the mantelpiece, was a large, gold framed, full colour photograph of a matador being seriously gored by an enormous black bull.

Pride of place, at the corner of the fireplace, went to Pedro - a quarter-sized, stuffed toy donkey made out of brown felt and wearing a straw hat. As Nona was keen to demonstrate, when she inserted her finger into its bottom, it played a raucous, high speed version of the *Birdy Song* - only stopping when her digit was removed.

Having demonstrated the *pièce de resistance*, Nona pottered off to do whatever it was she did.

Mick tried to take in the rest of the room. One thing you couldn't deny is that Nona had made an effort with *España Por Favor*. The room lights were as bright, if not brighter, than the midday Andalusian sun in August. But, as the bulbs were eco-friendly, they emitted a violent, pulsating, ultra-harsh white light.

If you were an unkind person, rather than thinking the room resembled an Italian street café, you could think of it as a multi-coloured mini-mortuary, designed by a madman.

Mick sat in the bay window enjoying the sunshine and avoiding the light from the bulbs, which, though they were saving the planet, were giving him one hell of a headache. God knows, he thought, how the Australians were coping with it all.

He picked up a magazine called *50 things you must do in Southsea*. He smiled ironically. There were, of course, 51 things that had to be done in Southsea - the extra one starting at ten that evening.

As he mulled over this sobering thought, he started to tune in to Dave and Royboy having a conversation, just outside the door. Obviously, Dave was painting downstairs, and Royboy was painting upstairs. The distance made the conversation loud, but there were pauses, presumably because their minds were on their respective jobs.

Basically, Dave was keen to get some information.

'Royboy?' he shouted, 'you know when your brother got his van, did he buy it, or did he lease it?'

There was a long pause before Royboy replied, 'Yeah.'

A couple of seconds went by while Dave digested this information.

Then the quest continued.

'What does *that* mean - Yeah?' he shouted.

Royboy answered with a touch of irritation in his voice. 'It means yeah, dunnit? Like, not no.'

Another pause.

'I know what it means Ugly,' said Dave. 'What I want to know is - did he lease the sodding van, or did he buy it?'

Royboy was becoming bored. 'I told you - yeah!'

Dave was not amused. 'I don't effin' believe this. Pay attention Royboy,' he shouted. 'I want to know which of the two options your brother chose. He could have chosen to *buy* his van, or he could have chosen to *lease* his van. What I am looking for is an indication of his preferred option. I do not want to hear an irrelevant affirmative. So did he *buy* or did he *lease*?'

Royboy sensed the irritation. 'OK! OK! I get the picture. Keep your hair on...you're right...that's what he did.'

Dave went for it. 'Stone my conkers, Royston. Did your *bleedin'* brother, buy his *bleedin'* van from a *bleedin'* bloke, or did he *bleedin'* lease it from a *bleedin'* contract *bleedin'* hire company?'

He stopped - breathing heavily - but confident he'd got his point across.

It was at least half a minute later before Royboy spoke.

"Ere Dave - you got any more of that gloss?"

At that point, the conversation ended because Mick sensed both contestants were completely physically, mentally and emotionally exhausted.

He settled back in a sherry barrel, which was masquerading as an Iberian armchair. It looked and felt as though it'd been carved by a badly trained orang-utan who wasn't too fussed about agreed tolerance levels.

But that didn't stop him smiling - he began to think he was going to like Dave and Royboy. They were funny, happy in their own skins - and, most importantly, they couldn't give a shit. He really couldn't really imagine them getting stressed about anything.



# 10

‘We’re going to get fuckin’ lynched,’ said Dave, gnawing at his knuckles. ‘You know what that lot down the Police Club are like - no respect for the bleeding law.’

‘If the band don’t show up at the gig, we’ll be marked men - we won’t be able to drive half a mile without being pulled over for a faulty back light, two mph over the speed limit, one tyre across the white line, jumping traffic lights, endangering an officer in the course of his duty. And as for the parking Gestapo and the Wheelie Bin Stasi, they’ll be in on it too. Give it a fortnight and my license will be in the shredder!’

Royboy didn’t respond, as he’d nodded off quite some time ago. His head was leaning against the Destroyer’s jukebox, which was pumping out high volume death metal to an otherwise empty room.

In a gap between tracks, Dave shouted over to the Destroyer’s landlord. ‘Ere, Larry, can’t you switch the brain damage off, we’re discussing how far we’re up the spout.’

Just then, Mick and Jim walked in, with the idea of giving Mick some Saturday night Dutch courage before his ten o’clock rendezvous with the Angel of Death.

Mick walked over, introduced Jim and, having picked up on the last part of Dave’s request, immediately asked what spout they were up, how far up it they were, and whether they could help with any extraction process.

‘No thanks, Michael,’ said Dave, ‘ain’t nothing you can do. See, me and the Sleeping Ugly here are part of a band - ‘Who Shot Nelson’ - good name eh! Nothing spectacular - mainly rock n’ roll standards and some 70s and 80s covers. We’re playing at a Police Social, next Tuesday, and two of the so-called band members have pissed off on a tour of Scotland with some pole dancers.’

‘We could do that,’ said Mick.

‘What, pole dance?’ said Royboy, who’d just woken up.

‘No, help you out. Don’t laugh, but in London, we used to be in a Slade tribute band. You’d be surprised how many poncey media types are closet musos. I play rhythm and Jim plays bass.’

‘Shit! No kidding!’ said Dave. ‘I mean, I’ve already got six points on my licence and, if the cops turned nasty, I’ll be banned by the end of the month.’

‘Ah, the tinsel and glitter of show business,’ said Jim.

Royboy became interested. ‘Dave plays lead and I’m on drums. Dave does lead vocals and I back him up. What sort of stuff do you play?’

‘Well, Slade’s what we used to do, but anything, I suppose, with a bit of practice.’

‘OK, practice here, Monday,’ said Dave, seizing the moment. ‘It’ll be easy - the Destroyer’s the nearest pub to Nona’s place.’

‘It’ll have to start early!’ said Jim.

‘And be over by quarter to ten,’ added Mick, realising that Monday would be his turn on the Nona-go-round.

Dave shrugged. ‘What? Got something better to do?’

Mick said nothing - he just smiled in a resigned sort of way, and went to get a round in.

They began to chat over the details, and it couldn't have been better. The band had spare guitars, mics and back line. And they would get paid - cash. The police gig was on Tuesday night and was worth £400. Also, 'Who Shot Nelson' had a full diary of gigs - with some, like weddings, coming in at up to a thousand.

The only dodgy point came when they asked about Jim's plasters.

'We ain't got much of an image,' said Dave, 'but with *that* lot - I mean, not being rude - but we'd look like the Rocky Horror Show, sponsored by Elastoplast.'

Mick assured them Jim's face would be fully healed and plaster free by Tuesday night, or else.

Otherwise, everything was great, and Mick and Jim began to see a glimmer of hope. A way to get their hands on cash without alerting anyone - particularly, the V-twins. And if they kept their spending tight - they might - they just might - start moving in a positive direction.

Of course, Nona was a big part of keeping costs down, while at the same time presenting them with unimaginable horrors on alternate evenings, the first of which was tonight.

They carried on an animated conversation about the band with Larry acting as drinks waiter - it was quiet for a Saturday night, and he was glad of the trade.

Eventually, after five double brandies, Mick announced he had enough Dutch courage to take on anything.

But when the pub clock struck quarter to ten, he upped that estimate to seven double brandies. Poured another two straight down his throat, and walked unsteadily over to the pub door.

He paused and looked at Jim, Dave and Royboy, who were busy demolishing a plate of pickled eggs.

'Gentlemen,' his voice was slurred, but oddly dignified. 'Gentlemen - I am just going outside, and may be some time.'

And with that, he turned on his heels, banged into the doorframe, then, almost manfully, strode off into the night to meet his fate.

# 11

On Sunday morning, Jim was down early for breakfast, the way some ancient Romans must have whipped down early to the Coliseum to find out how well the Christians got on with the lions the night before.

Mick arrived within minutes, looking calm and relaxed. 'Morning, my old friend, I trust the pickled eggs went down, and came back up, equally well?'

'Come on,' said Jim, his voice trembling with a lot more than anticipation. 'What happened?'

'What happened with *what?*'

'Last night - with Nona?'

'Oh,' said Mick, with a wave of his hand. 'I have absolutely no idea. Or to put it more succinctly, my dear boy, I have absolutely no *recollection.*'

'What!' spluttered Jim.

'Come on, be fair. Seven double brandies, give or take, and you expect me to remember anything? She was bloody lucky I found my way back here, otherwise it could've been some other poor sod of a landlady who copped it.'

Unfortunately for the other guests, who were straining to listen, it was at this most unnecessary turn of phrase that Nona hove into view, and the conversation stopped.

To Jim, it was obvious the night had fully met her expectations.

'Good morning, *caballerios,*' she beamed. Mick beamed back, but Jim felt a cold sweat start to develop on the back of his hands.

Mick might have had no recollection, but he'd obviously done the business. Christ! And tonight, it was his turn!

'Two full English, presume I,' smiled Nona.

She bent down and whispered in Mick's ear.

'And I bet *you'd* like an extra sausage, Michael, you naughty boy. I always say you can't have enough sausages.'

She nudged Mick, and with a dreadful crimson leer, wobbled off to the kitchen.

Shit, thought Jim. Shit! I bet tomorrow morning I get bog-all in the way of extra sausages. Probably, here's a can of baked beans you wimp, open it yourself and eat 'em cold. I can't go through with it. I just can't.

Mick read his thoughts. 'Look, don't panic, *mi viejo hombre.* If the 'Who Shot Nelson' thing comes off, we can be out of here in a couple of weeks, get our own little place, even start touting around for some video work.'

'Yeah! But, after I've done my bit tonight, I might remember some of it - and I'll be scarred for life.'

'Speaking of which, Mr Karloff,' said Mick, 'how's the old sandpaper damage coming on? You ought to take those plasters off now. Looks like you popped down to Accident and Emergency last night and got one of the piss-heads in the queue to patch you up. You need some air on your face. Tell you what, to take your

mind off tonight, let's go for a ride in the Morris. You can relax, get some oxygen to your chivvied mug, and, maybe, we can concoct some sort of plan.'

So, breakfast over, and plasters removed, they became Sunday drivers in the hills to the north of Portsmouth, almost letting the Traveller steer itself. They wound down the windows and wandered through the lanes and smooth, rolling landscape of the chalkstone ridge until, quite by chance, they came across the Bat and Ball Pub at Broadhalfpenny Down, near the tiny village of Hambledon.

It was a beautiful, hot day, and, within minutes, they were sitting outside the pub admiring the view. Jim had a pint of warm beer, while Mick had lemonade with ice and a slice. He would never consider drinking and driving, but he was also acutely aware Charlie Sumkins had informants within police forces across the UK. If he got picked up for anything, he was certain his full details, including his address, telephone number and photographs of his vasectomy scars would be in Charlie's hands within hours.

'This is a fabulous place, isn't it?' enthused Mick leaning back on the wooden bench. 'They call it the Birthplace of Cricket. See that monument over there. Great isn't it? Do you know that, in 1777, Hambledon Cricket Club took on an all-England team and beat them by an innings and 168 runs? Fantastic!'

Mick looked across the velvet, emerald surface of the historic pitch, and then, beyond to the gently sloping valley as it slid away into the heat haze.

There was no doubt about it - he was inspired.

'You know,' he said, breathing deeply, 'I think we're a bit like that old Hambledon Cricket Club. And Charlie Sumkins, the V-twins and Nona are like that England team. We're tiny, and no one expects us to get anywhere. They've got all the cards, all the power, all the muscle, all the money - but there's something about us that's special - we're mates - we trust one another - and we will *never* surrender.'

He warmed to his theme, seeing himself sat in front of a BBC AXBT wearing a siren suit, holding a cigar and rallying the nation in 1940. He didn't attempt to do the accent.

'And that's what's going to pull us through, so *we* end up winning by an innings and 168 runs. We're going to hit sixes. We're going to cover drive for four. We're going to cut it through the slips. We'll keep a straight bat when things are tough, then hook it out of the ground when we get the opportunity, until the great scoreboard in the sky shows Implosion Productions coming out on top. *We can* win, we *deserve* to win, we *will* win.'

'I know,' said Jim, 'but I'm still shitting myself about tonight.'

# 12

They got back to Weeliveer, mid-afternoon. Mick was seriously thinking about an early tea, and Jim was seriously thinking about going back to London and giving himself up to Charlie.

They'd wracked their brains, but still, there was no plan. They were supposed to be the creative ones, the 1980s shoot 'em quick, sell 'em expensive, video entrepreneurs. But they could see no light at the end of the tunnel. In fact, they weren't sure they'd even got as far spotting the tunnel entrance on the map.

'Maybe you should go and see her for a chummy chat, first,' said Mick, as he tucked into his liver and onions.

'That's like letting an alligator bite your arm off, so it can see how good the rest of you will taste.'

'Not really,' said Mick. 'Maybe you'll find out she has some good points.'

Jim snorted with disbelief.

'Or maybe she'll find out how pathetic you are, and go gently on you.'

'Gently?' said Jim, with some apprehension.

'Well, from what I remember, she could get a bit rough when she got going.'

At the words 'rough' and 'got going', Jim began to shudder. The shudder became a shake. The shake became a series of convulsive muscle spasms. And, there, in the full, unforgiving glare of the *España Por Favor* breakfast room's planet-saving eco-lights, he had a low-grade, semi-professional nervous breakdown.

Conscious he was probably going to need all the sustenance he could get, Mick gobbled down the rest of his liver and onions then guided the sobbing Jim out of the room. The only excuse he could think of for the rubbernecking guests at nearby tables was 'His football team lost last night!'

Back upstairs in the puce room, Mick got the gibbering Jim into his pyjamas and tucked him up in his puce bed with his puce face propped up on his puce pillow. Now, it was Jim's turn to be colour co-ordinated with the bed linen. It wasn't a pleasant sight.

Mick suddenly remembered he'd left his glass of wine on the table. How could he have got his priorities so wrong? He shot down to the breakfast room and blinking in the glaring, white light, picked up the glass. As he turned round, Nona appeared, like a great boulder blocking the doorway.

'Oh, Michael!' she cried, 'drinking alone! That won't never do. Good wine I think is liken to a gift from the gods and should be shared over with friends.'

Mick stopped dead in his tracks. Then his brain exploded.

Bingo! Bloody, stonking, bloody bingo, he thought. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! Nona. Shared with friends - that was it! God, if I was a braver man, I could kiss you.

At long last, they had a plan. It wasn't quite knocking a six out of the ground, but it was definitely a powerful pull to the square leg boundary.

'I quite agree, Nona,' he said, trying to dampen down the excitement in his voice. 'In fact, James and I were thinking of having a little liquid refreshment down at the Destroyer tonight and were wondering if you'd care to join us?'

His heart raced as he waited for the answer.

'I'd be considerably delighted,' said Nona, and she fluttered her eyelashes, which was quite a feat considering the weight of mascara involved.

'Great!' said Mick, trying to control a dribble of delight, 'we'll see you in the foyer at eight. Of course, we'll walk you down there.'

Nona gave a girlish giggle - which apart from making Mick feel slightly queasy, also confirmed the plan was shimmying nicely into place.

Nona left an unpleasantly small gap between her bulging stomach and the doorframe for Mick to squeeze through. But squeeze he did - and was off upstairs to the puce room like a demented whippet on amphetamine-laced Winalot.

He burst in. 'Jim, Jim I've got it! I've got it! *We - have - a - plan!*'

'Bollocks to your plan! I've got my own plan. Get me a cut-throat razor!'

'No. No. No!' said Mick, pulling Jim up and shaking him by the shoulders.

'We're going to take Nona out for a drink, tonight!'

'Oh lovely!' said Jim. 'That's just great! We can invite everyone in the pub back here at ten, so they can see her shag me, or whatever she's planning to do.'

'Look,' said Mick, 'there's no need to cry. Don't forget, I was married to Nona for five years. She has a really *big* weakness - you only have to waft a bottle of Gordon's under her hairy old nostrils and she gets squiffy. And *that's* putting it mildly. She can't take her drink. Full stop.'

Jim sat up in bed and dried his eyes on his pyjama sleeve and stopped snivelling. He was becoming interested, but still couldn't see the point.

'It's not a 100 per cent solution, but a few heavyweight G&Ts, will sure as hell, slow her right down.'

Jim thought about it for a few seconds, then flopped back down onto on his pillow. 'Nice try - but no thanks, mate - just get me the razor.'

'Bollocks to the razor,' said Mick - stopping for a moment, as the juxtaposition of the two nouns generated unpleasant images of the one of the many enforcement techniques attributed to the V-twins.

Shudder over, he continued with even greater enthusiasm. 'James, my old soundman *extraordinaire*, this is a corker! At least, it's better than nothing. If you don't go ahead tonight, we'll be sleeping in the Morris on Southsea Common. No more comfy beds, no more breakfasts, no more dinners...'

'And no more Nona,' added Jim.

'Look,' said Mick. 'How long do you think two men in a car with steamed up windows are going to last, before plod comes a-knocking and books us for indecent something or other? We can look forward to a truncheon sandwich and a night in the cells with our belts, braces and shoelaces accidentally lost in the station's eco-recycling bin. And as soon as we're on the charge sheet, Charlie Sumkins will be getting a report in triplicate.'

The Sumkins ploy worked.

\*

Mick had squandered some of Nona's advance on shirts, trousers, and assorted toiletries, so when they arrived in the foyer at eight, they looked relatively smart. Nona arrived on time, too. She was wearing a flowing, all-white outfit, which, thanks to the newly completed 'white-out' colour scheme, made her head seem to float in space.

She planted several unnecessarily wet kisses on Mick and Jim's cheeks. Then, linking arms, in a way more commonly seen in professional wrestling bouts, she eased them onto their tip-toes and said, 'Right boys, let's go!'

The Destroyer pub was just down the road. People could be forgiven for thinking the name was rooted in Royal Navy tradition - perhaps inspired by the magnificent dreadnaughts of yesteryear.

But that was not the case.

Larry, the landlord, was into death metal - a brain-squeezing wall of high volume distorted sound with incomprehensible lyrics screamed by tattooed older blokes with large veins throbbing in their necks, temples and, probably, other places thankfully hidden by compulsory, tight, black leather outfits.

Larry was a fan. He had a blue spider tattooed across his shaved head, he had one long, bright red plait, and enough chromium hardware bolted to his eyebrows, lips, nose, cheeks, tongue and ears to seriously affect the reception quality of the local radio station.

It was hard to believe that a few years earlier, he'd been Honorary Secretary of the South Coast Karen Carpenter Appreciation Society. But, as in all walks of life, people can change.

The name 'Destroyer' was Larry's own idea - because he reckoned the considered aim of death metal was to destroy your eardrums, brain and certain key ligaments. Destroyer - it was a name that made Larry happy.

Although tonight, he wasn't going to be as happy as usual. Because, after three industrial-strength G&Ts, Nona Sandringham-Smythe stood up, somewhat unsteadily, and began to sing.

If there had been a music critic present from one of those elite, country set, subscription-only, glossy magazines, their extended review and analysis of her performance would have only extended to three words. 'Rough as Fuck.'

Larry did his best. He tried putting a few full volume death metal tracks on the jukebox - including *Hammer Smashed Face* by Cannibal Corpse and *Shit Oneself* by Squash Bowels - but gave up when it became clear Nona's rendition of *Getting to Know You* was drowning them out.

A Japanese couple who were in the Destroyer as part of a European Death Metal package holiday tour, were so impressed, they came over and asked for her autograph and whether she had any CDs for sale.

And so, the evening continued with more G&Ts and more singing. But as the gin consumption increased, the frequency and volume of Songs from the Shows diminished.

Eventually, the clock struck quarter to ten, and even Nona, in her advanced state of inebriation, realised the appointed hour was nigh.

She lurched to her feet and grabbed Jim by the arm. He winced. God! She had a hell of a grip.

Nona hung on and whispered into his ear. Unfortunately, she was dribbling a lot, and Jim's ear cavity filled with some of the excess liquid. Consequently, he could just make out something like, 'Tin to glow Lushikins.'

Jim looked desperately at Mick, who, simply and ruthlessly, mouthed 'V-twins.'

Nona tottered unsteadily towards the pub door. She was a truly massive woman, and Jim was worried she might fall at any moment. As Nona lurched past the Japanese couple, they instinctively remembered the earthquake training from their schooldays, and dived under the table with their hands clasped over their heads.

Nona made it through the door, with only minimal damage to the woodwork. Jim turned to Mick, who was happily demolishing a plate of pickled eggs, and made one last attempt at a dignified exit.

'Gentlemen,' he said, his bottom lip trembling, 'I am just going outside, and may be some time.'

At which point, he was yanked through the doorway and into the night to await God knows what.



# 13

On Monday, Mick was down early for breakfast, the way some ancient Romans must have whipped down early to the Coliseum to see if they'd won their bet on how long it took that tiger to finish off the Christian who was buried up to his neck in sand.

Jim arrived within minutes, looking calm and relaxed.

'Morning, my old friend, I trust the pickled eggs went down, and came back up, equally well?'

'Less of that, you cheeky sod,' said Mick. 'What happened?'

'What happened with what?'

'Last night - with Nona?'

'Ah well, I'm glad to say, Micky-boy, the plan worked to perfection. We arrived back. I helped her undress...'

Mick winced at the thought. 'And?'

'She passed out cold. Out cold all night long. Cold as the proverbial penguin's percival.'

Mick had not seen Jim look so happy for a long time.

'I got up early, brought her some tea and toast - and told her she was the hottest thing since sliced bread.' Jim chortled at his little joke.

'You romantic sod!'

'But she never touched the breakfast, she just passed out again. She's still there, as a matter of fact. Goodnight Vienna! Whatever that means.'

'British musical. Jack Buchanan and Anna Neagle, 1932. Ringo Starr's LP title, 1974,' said Mick, casually, in between mouthfuls of tea. 'But your dismal awareness of the world around you, old boy, is not the issue. It's all about putting more runs on the board for Hambledon. I reckon you've just scored a four, run between the wickets.'

'Oh! I don't know. I reckon it was a beautifully timed drive through the covers - certainly no effort involved. Although, maybe you're right, there *was* considerable effort involved. It took me 45 minutes to get her undressed.'

There was silence for a few moments, then Jim said, in a rather peeved way, 'How come, Michael, that, whatever's happening, you're *always* the umpire?'

Thankfully, the girl who worked in the kitchen came over and served breakfast. A full English had never tasted so good, and they both began to feel normal again.

'Practice night, tonight,' said Mick, happily. 'Great to get back into the swing.'

'Early start, six o'clock, and remember,' said Jim, with the smug tones of someone who's just managed to whip down a back alley and give Godzilla the slip, 'it's your turn, tonight.'

From then on, although Mick maintained his enthusiastic chatter about the band practice, his full English breakfast didn't taste quite so good.

They'd just finished eating, when Nona loomed into the doorway, darkly silhouetted against the 'white-out' foyer. She didn't move. She didn't speak. It was more of an impersonal appearance. She looked so

unspeakably dreadful, no one dared ask for her autograph. And, after showing no indication she was able to focus on anything, she sighed and left with a quietly mumbled, 'Bye Jimmy.'

\*

It was a pleasant morning, and Mick and Jim decided to get some air. They strolled past the Destroyer, past the hotels and boarding houses, across the Common, and down to Southsea beach, picking out a weather-beaten bench close to the old castle.

The last few days, apart from the brief interlude at Hambledon, had been so hectic, they needed to pause and take stock.

They stared out across the Solent, breathing in the fresh sea air. Some sort of small yacht race was in progress, the Isle of Wight ferry was wending its way over to Cowes, and, on the beach, some children were trying to skim pebbles across the choppy water.

'Look,' said Mick, pointing into the distance, 'there's the Martello towers. They were built to defend against attacks from Napoleon. You know, I think we're a bit like the defenders in the Martello towers and Charlie, Vic and Vlad...'

'Please, Mick, can we stick to the Hambledon Cricket Club analogy? I'm happy with that.'

'OK,' said Mick, taking the hint. 'So what are we going to do next? What options have we got? Or, if you want to go classical, "Wither Implosion Productions?"'

For once, Jim came up with an answer. 'Taking all the relevant factors into account,' he said, watching impassively as one of the yachts capsized, 'estimating any residual risk, analysing preventative actions and evaluating a whole range of contingencies, I'd say our options amount to fuck all.'

'Well, that's a starting point,' said Mick. 'But, if its not too taxing for you, can we look a little further? We've got about a hundred quid of Nona's advance left. But we start earning with the band on Tuesday night - which will put the pot up to £300-ish.'

'Minus the Nona-strategy drinks bill at the Destroyer,' countered Jim. 'Remember your seven double brandies and the eight heavy G&Ts we needed to put Nona out for the count. And that's going to go on, night after night.'

'But there's some big gigs coming up - weddings at a grand.'

'Yeah,' said Jim, 'but we need some video work.'

'OK,' said Mick, 'we could start phoning around - but you know how long it can take those corporate bastards to make up their minds - we need instant cash, and I think 'Who Shot Nelson' is the best bet.'

They agreed, and spent a pleasant few minutes watching the crew of the capsized yacht being rescued. 'See,' said Mick, 'the crew of that yacht could be us, and...'

'Charlie, the V-twins and Nona could be the Solent,' continued Jim, sarcastically.

'OK,' said Mick, 'point taken.'

It was rare for Mick to acknowledge he'd gone too far, but that's how it'd always been.

They'd known one another since junior school. Mick was a nearly a year older, and that had always dominated the way they operated. That, and the fact that when they were eight, in the school's primitive, concrete-skimmed, open-air urinals, Mick could pee further up the wall. That was the good thing about cheap concrete, it wasn't waterproofed. So exceptional performances remained as a dark stain for around fifteen minutes. So, after an impressive solo effort, your friends could be brought it to marvel at the height achieved. All it then took was to sit on someone's shoulders and mark the record with a scratch from a rusty nail.

When they reached their teens, and peeing up the wall had lost much of its attraction, their lives were dominated by their love of film. Any available cash was spent on visits to the local fleapit.

They weren't all that interested in girls. They'd glorious, semi-platonic relationships with a spectacular array of onscreen stars - Marilyn Monroe, Jane Russell, Ingrid Bergman, Rita Hayworth and Ava Gardner, just for starters.

Then there was the delicious British contingent, Shirley Eaton, Liz Fraser, Diana Dors, Julie Christie and Susannah York. How could the girls who lived down the street begin to compete? Although, the occasional, late night grope in the local park's rhododendron bushes didn't go amiss.

This was also the time they started playing guitars, but there wasn't a lot of support from school. One morning, they arrived to see 'I love Jimi Hendrix' sprayed on the outside wall of the gymnasium. In assembly, the headmaster was furious. 'This is an absolute disgrace,' he said, 'I'm determined to find out who this Hendrix boy is and what school he goes to.' And that, just about summed it up.

But really, for Mick and Jim, it was film, film and more film. They practiced John Wayne's walk, Humphrey Bogart's facial twitch and spent hours saying 'You dirty rat', trying to perfect Cagney's accent. They launched into appallingly bad imitations of Connery's 'Mish Moneypenny', and 'Ratso' Rizzo's nasal drawl from *Midnight Cowboy*. They'd talk late into the night, having rambling discussions, over a shared can of lager, about whether, for example, there were impressionists who did 'voices of the stars' during the silent film era.

As for the classics, they had a good supply from Mr Glead, their English teacher, who had a massive collection of old films on VHS video - *Battleship Potemkin*, Jacques Tati's *Jour de Fete*, Salvador Dali and Luis Brunel's *L'Age d'Or*, *Alexander Nevsky*, *Citizen Kane*, *The Seventh Seal*. He was delighted to encourage them, as the rest of their year dismissed any film in black and white as one-up from the Lascaux cave drawings.

At film school, Mick's exam pieces had always had the edge, and technically, he was brilliant, although some thought he was a little eccentric. When his lecturer asked what would he say if he could ask Alfred Hitchcock one question, he replied, 'In *The Birds*, why didn't you teach Tippi Hedren how to use a car handbrake properly?' And people who watch the film carefully, will see he has a point, although the point is as microscopically small, as it is irrelevant.

Jim was never far behind - but was quietly becoming more interested in sound. He was, according to Mick, 'a determined little sod.' Even though the film school worked them pretty hard, Jim took a night-time job, editing at a local basement-recording studio which rejoiced in the name of Ben's Bunker. Eventually, Ben stopped rejoicing in the name and changed it, after he got fed up of taking telephone calls asking to speak to Ben Spunker.

When Mick and Jim set up Implosion Productions in the early 80s, they put aside their feature film ambitions and caught the start of the corporate video boom.

Everyone wanted video to promote their companies, launch new products and train their workforces. But these productions were not straightforward. They were full of wacky ideas - known, laughingly, in the trade as 'creative concepts.' They wrote scripts which compared organising railway rolling stock in a goods yard to organising a wedding, or recruitment videos, for engineers leaving university, based, frame-for-frame, on *The Graduate* - a film none of the engineers had seen. And anyway, they were more interested in seeing themselves working on dams and power stations with laptops, mobile phones and four-wheel drives, rather than some old tart wafting her leg in front of the camera.

The cost of editing equipment was phenomenal. But so were the fees they could charge. 'A hundred grand for a ten-minute pile of fuzzy-looking, irrelevant shite,' as Mick so accurately put it. So, along came the Porches, five-star hotels, classy women, designer drugs, swanning round the Cannes film festival - overindulgence on a massive scale.

But, in the 90's recession, work slowed dramatically and, as they were running a significant overdraft, they were heartily, and often illegally, clobbered by their bank. They downsized offices and cancelled their accounts at Harrods. The classy women melted away and were replaced with well - nothing, actually - and the designer drugs were replaced by cheap alcohol, with labels that had been nowhere near a designer.

They couldn't remember much about the rest of the 90s. Possibly, that had been the time they got married, but the human brain has a way of erasing unpleasant events.

From the millennium onwards, new digital technology massively reduced the cost of cameras and editing kit. Many organisations started to fancy their chances at producing their own videos. Of course, the results varied from poor to crap, but as it was usually the managing director or his wife who scripted, shot and edited these videos, criticism from within the companies was virtually zero.

They downgraded to Audi TTs as soon as they came on the market, but within a year, even *that* seemed like a wild extravagance. Commissions, profit margins, lifestyles and marital relationships continued to decline rapidly.

Throughout this relentless slide, the bond between Mick and Jim remained as strong as ever. As did the pecking order, established during those early peeing competitions. The question was - would their relationship survive the desperate straits in which they now found themselves - and the many contortions which would, inevitably, lie ahead?

That thought was catapulted to the front of both their minds when, a few hours later, they returned to the Weeliveer, from their pleasant, but fruitless, discussions on the bench.

Nona was standing at the top of the steps leading up to the front door. While it was impossible for Nona ever to look fragile, she *was* looking pretty rough. Her beehive was at a strange angle and she was holding on to the edge of the door for support. At least, she could speak.

'I'm sorry boys,' she said, 'I'm *so* actually sorry. But I'm afraid I've got some really, really, *really* bad news.'

# 14

'I think we ought to do privates,' said Nona, solemnly.

She led them upstairs to her yellow bedroom and sat them down in a couple of yellow chairs, between the yellow wardrobe and the yellow chest of drawers.

The bizarre environment made Mick and Jim look as though they were in the advanced stages of jaundice. The truth was, they felt a lot sicker than that. Could it be time for a 'They Win. You Lose.' moment?

'This is *mucho* very difficult for me,' said Nona, sitting down on the yellow bed and visibly distending its framework.

'I've been thinking. I know we had an understanding all but signed in blood and stuff, but I'm fearful there's going to have to be a, sort of, well - sort of - cancellation.'

Mick's heart sank as he immediately thought of steamy Morris Traveller windows, truncheon sandwiches and Charlie Sumkins cracking his knuckles, as he scanned the triplicate copies.

'I don't know if you're up to *au fait* with the local scene *des artes*, but I'm the producer, by which I mean your actual sole actual funder, of the Marmion Road Theatrical Society's production of *The King and I*. It opens this Wednesday, and, titillating though our ten o'clock rendezvouses have been, I must confess, they've left me a little...'

'Disappointed?' said Mick.

'Dissatisfied?' said Jim.

'No, fucked, actually,' said Nona, with surprising frankness.

'Let me disambiguate everything for you. Now, I'll be playing Anna, the female lead, and well, as I'm sure gents of your sensibleness will understand, I have a lot of paying theatre-going type of people to consider. That means I have to get gallons of beauty sleep in during the oncoming nights. So I'm afraid, my dearest darlings, I'm going to have to put one of them embarjo things on our regular ten o'clock doo-dahs. How can I put this with tact - no more thingy for at least a week.'

The explanation could've been less of a circumnavigation, but the basic message got through. A feeling of unbounded elation permeated every part of Mick's being, not least his reproductive organs.

Jim simply broke down and sobbed with relief.

Mick covered up quickly. 'Oh! Nona, we're heartbroken. I mean, look at Jim here, he's devastated.'

Nona looked moved. 'Well, I can understand your anticipointment. I suppose I could fit in a couple of special night-owl sessions for him, poorly boy.'

Jim shot bolt upright. It was a miraculous recovery.

'No, no, Nona,' he said, trying to look as healthy and not upset as he could. The words flew out like machine-gun bullets. 'I fully understand your commitment to your audience and would never consider asking you to do anything that might compromise it.'

'Not even a backstage knee-trembler?' said Nona, blowing him a kiss.

The machine-gun jammed and Jim slid back into the trench. But Mick lobbed a well-aimed stun grenade.

‘Generous offer, Nona, but I have to agree with Jim. I’m sure you’re going to deliver a *great* performance, and *nothing* must come between you and your public.’

The accidental, mini *double-entendre* was lost on Nona, but she seemed satisfied.

Disaster had been averted. And Jim realised how good John Wayne must have felt every time he took a turn into the hidden canyon while the band of outlaws sped by on the main track.

\*

‘Two very large brandies,’ said Mick.

‘Bit early isn’t it?’ said Larry, leaning casually over the bar and, momentarily, catching his nose ring on the outstretched finger of a plastic model of Betty Boop.

‘Got to get in the mood,’ said Jim, cheerily. ‘Practice night!’

This was, of course, partially true. But the *real* reason for their high spirits was the glorious fact that, every evening, for seven whole days, Nona would be alone in her yellow bed, in her yellow bedroom, surrounded by beauty-sleep fairies scratching their heads and saying, ‘What the fuck have we done to deserve this!’

The brandy had hardly touched their lips, when Dave and Royboy came through the door. Mick and Jim knew the score, and immediately went outside to help unload the gear, and get it up to the function room. It didn’t take long, as the practice amps were small and lightweight. The guitars, on the other hand, were something very, very special. A 1958 325 Capri Rickenbacker, close to the specification used by John Lennon, and a 1951, or thereabouts, Fender Precision bass. If you were going to play Rock n’ Roll, these were the babies!

‘Fantastic!’ said Mick. ‘Where’d you find them?’

‘Well, my uncle Stan has a classic guitar shop, just back from Oxford Street,’ said Dave.

‘We know it,’ chorused Mick and Jim.

‘Bit pricey though.’

‘Yeah!’ agreed Dave, ‘but he tipped us the wink when they came in, and gave us a pretty heavy discount. Funny, he runs a guitar shop, but he’s a big accordion man. Claims he played the solo in the 50’s version of *Hernando’s Hideaway*.’

‘Oh yeah!’ snorted Royboy. ‘Big deal. I must have heard at least ten accordion players saying they done that.’

‘Well they’re beauties,’ said Mick, plugging the Rickenbacker into one of the amps.

Jim plugged in the Fender; they tuned up and, together with Dave, arranged themselves in a semicircle, facing the drums.

‘Right, let’s give it a go! How about a few basic rockers?’

They kicked off with Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee and Little Richard. It was a bit shaky at the start, but it moved in the right direction, and after an hour, they were sounding pretty tight.

Dave was a great lead guitar player, and passable vocalist. Royboy was OK on backing vocals, but even with practice pads on, they could tell he was one hell of a drummer.

After a compulsory beer break, during which, Dave complemented Jim on his plaster-free face, they moved on to the Beatles, the Stones, Slade, of course, and rock standards from the 70s and 80s, including Dave Edmonds’ classic *I hear you knockin’* and Brian Ferry’s version of *Let’s stick together*, with the great, one-note sax solo.

'You know,' said Dave, 'if you can't do an extended, one-note solo and send the audience through the roof, you shouldn't be playing Rock n' Roll.'

There were nods all round.

Larry kept rushing up the stairs, with trays of lager, pickled eggs and packets of Jim's favourite crisps. As it was a practice night, he'd turned off the death metal jukebox, and strangely, the pub had started filling up.

At eleven o'clock, they stopped. It was decision time, and everyone looked at Dave.

'Yes,' he said, pausing for theatrical effect, 'if you're up for the police gig tomorrow, it's a goer!'

Immediately, they called down to Larry for a last round before they started packing the gear away.

Some time later, after the gear was shifted, Mick and Jim found themselves standing at adjacent urinals in the Destroyer's toilets. They'd had about four pints of beer during the practice, and the final pint had turned into three pints, so they were both swaying dangerously.

The toilets were not conducive to verticality. The walls were covered with the most obscene, disorientating and genuinely funny graffiti they'd ever seen.

Not that the walls were originally covered in scrawl. Death metal fans were generally polite and well behaved. But Larry felt graffiti added to the ambience of the place, so every few days, after a Google search, he'd come in and, using different coloured felt tips, would add more examples to the collection.

'Mick,' said Jim, 'you know when we were eight, and we used to have peeing competitions up the wall, and you always won, well I reckon I can take you on - right here, right now!'

'You were a little squirt then, and I bet you're a little squirt *ce soir*,' said Mick.

'Right you're on!' said Jim, and he stopped peeing, so he could build up a bit of back pressure.

'We can't go for height,' said Mick, 'we might damage these lovely murinals.'

'Murals,' corrected Jim.

'OK by me, old sport.'

'So, we'll start peeing, then back away, still hitting the bowl, of course.'

'Wouldn't want anyone to think we were anti-social,' said Mick pronouncing each word very carefully. 'Whosoever can keep hitting the bowl from furthest away gets an Oscar.'

'And a free piddle next week, at the urinal of his choice.'

'Done! Let's go!'

The result was inevitable. A veil, or better still, a large plastic sheet, should be drawn over the competition details, save to say that Jim won the consolation prize - and there was a fair bit of mopping up to do.

\*

When they eventually staggered back through the Weeliveer portal at around one o'clock, there was a pink, scented envelope waiting for them on the occasional table. On the cover it said, *To Mick and Jim xxx*. Inside, were two violently coloured tickets for *The King and I* at The Sea Scout Hut, Southsea. The graphic seemed to be a drawing of Yul Brynner's bald head, superimposed with a map of Siam. A pink, colour-coordinated note simply said, 'See you there. Nona xxx.'

The tickets were for Wednesday - the first night.

'Well, said Mick, storing the envelope down the front of his trousers, 'Nona delivered a whole week's reprieve, so the least we can do is squander one evening down the Sea Scout Hut.'

‘Yeah, and as it’s the first night, if it’s crap, we can always do the “everything will be ironed out by tomorrow - you’ll be fabulous” routine.’

‘You never know,’ said Mick, talking to himself in the mirror, ‘it could be a glorious theatrical extravaganza, a momentous night, a once-in-a-lifetime emotional experience, something you’ll be thrilled to tell your grandchildren about.’

‘Yeah!’ said Jim, raising one eyebrow and sliding slowly down the wall. ‘Where exactly *is* the Sea Scout Hut?’



# 15

It's funny how the offer of £200, cash-in-hand, can make two people put in non-stop, ten-hour shifts, and enjoy every second of it.

Mick and Jim were up very early on Tuesday, and stayed in their bedrooms throughout the day, running through the numbers. It felt right. It was rocking. And by the end of the night, they'd be three times richer than they were now.

Rock n' Roll is a young man's game, so they grabbed a couple of hours' kip at three o'clock, and were bright, breezy, scrubbed and ready to go when Dave and Royboy arrived in the van at 6.30. As a final reminder, they listened, en route, to some of the more complicated stuff on the van's CD player.

When they arrived at the venue, it was getting dark. The club was tucked well out of the way, down a muddy farm track. It was a grubby, whitewashed, single-story building with what was, probably, one of the last corrugated asbestos roofs in the country. Why did the words 'pig pen' come to mind?

Apparently, the police had hired it for the evening, but its regular occupants may not have had such a well-developed sense of right and wrong. The car park was virtually empty, but a bright security light on a pole drew the eye to an old Ford Mondeo. The only thing that made this vehicle worthy of note was that a pitchfork had been smashed through the front windscreen on the driver's side.

'Nice!' said Dave, parking close to the entrance.

'You sure this is the right place?' asked Jim, looking nervously back at the pitchfork.

'Bound to be,' said Royboy. 'Just cops havin' a bit of fun, I suppose.'

They got out and walked to the main door. Over the door was a sign - *Welcome to Salmonella's*.

'More police fun,' said Dave, with a grin. 'I hope!'

Inside, they were met by a tiny, grey-haired lady wearing a pinny that wouldn't have looked out of place during the VE-Day celebrations.

'You the band?'

'That's us.'

'The police just cancelled.'

'What!'

'Yeah, they called about half an hour ago.'

'Why the f-f-flippin' 'eck, have they cancelled?' asked Dave, ever mindful that elderly ladies needed treating with a degree of respect.

'Fucked if I know,' said the old lady, shrugging her shoulders. 'They're always doin' it.'

'Still,' she said, 'they're sendin' someone round with the cash for the hire of the place. That's somethin'.'

'Er - and what about the band fee?'

'Oh yeah, they're bringin' that round too, so you boys'll be OK. Nobody pisses on Ethel Wainwright.'

She shuffled off to the bar area, then stopped.

'You can set up and practice if you want. You can be as loud as you like. There's no neighbours and my deaf aid goes down to minus eleven. And, by the way, I don't know what your contract says about riders,

but we have a rule here. 'The rider is - there are no fuckin' riders. You pay for all your drinks. OK? And I'm not switchin' the heating on.'

And, no doubt, in expectation of falling temperatures, she picked up a t-shirt from a barside stool and pulled it over her head. It featured Keith Flint from the Prodigy at his most expressive.

Mick thought Ethel must have been quite a girl when she was younger. Come to think of it, she was quite a girl now. There was definitely something about her he wouldn't want to cross.

They set up in less than half an hour, and decided to run through the whole set, complete with introductions and Royboy's special effects, dry ice, bubbles and pyrotechnics, that sort of thing.

It went very well.

The most surprising thing was Dave and his introductions. There was no dreary 'This next song is called...'

For example, he opened with, 'Hi everybody, we're 'Who Shot Nelson.' We hope you're going to be a great audience, because last night's audience was terrible. We were halfway through our first number when they all got up and ran out. I've never seen an audience scatter so fast - apart from once, when I was at the circus, and the man on the flying trapeze got an attack of dysentery.'

Bang - straight into the first number.

Or his intro to *Werewolves of London*. 'This next song is dedicated to everyone who's ever come home pissed from the pub, and watched the late night TV horror movie...without switching the set on.'

Or, when introducing the band, his description of Royboy as the only person he'd ever met with an Achilles' head.

He introduced Mick as the new rhythm guitarist and apologised for him looking so nervous. 'The last time I saw a bloke looking so tense was this fella who tried to expose himself coming out of a revolving door and mis-timed it.'

And for Jim - 'Jim is a bit of a sad case. He lives all alone in a tiny cottage in the New Forest. He has no friends.' Dave paused for the inevitable, sympathetic 'awwww' from the audience. 'His only social interaction is on a Friday night when he goes down to Southampton city centre and hits people with an axe.'

All too soon, Ethel called time, charmingly adding that, from next week she was off to live in an old folks home, and was glad she wouldn't have to put up with this sort of shite, night after night. Then, strangely, adding, 'Call yourselves a fuckin' rock band. I've seen more violent country dancin' displays.'

The cash arrived and their share was handed over. They thanked Ethel politely, moved the gear back into the van, and drove across the car park. In the headlights, they could see that, in addition to the pitchfork, the Mondeo now had an old metal wheelbarrow smashed through its windscreen. Despite the lack of light pollution, this was definitely not the place to come with your girlfriend for an evening's stargazing.

On the way back, the mood in the van was good. The practice had been great - and Ethel had seen that they got their cash. Things were fine until, after about fifteen minutes, it started to get misty. And within seconds, the mist turned to fog. This was no ordinary fog, because, as they all soon realised, it was *inside* the van.

'Balls,' said Dave, simultaneously stamping on the brakes, winding down his window, and swerving into a lay-by. 'The dry ice machine's kicked off again - nip out the back, Royston, and sort it.'

Royboy leapt out. Dave opened both doors and apologised, 'It's always happening, we ought to get a lock on it.'

Anyway, Royboy knew how to fix it. They chatted amiably about the gig and congratulated Dave on his intros, which they thought were bound to put an audience in a good mood, as well as using up time, so

they'd less numbers to learn. They'd just started going over some of the funnier introductions, when they realised the dry ice was still billowing from the back of the van, and Royboy had not reappeared.

They stuck their heads out of the door, but immediately, wished they hadn't.

A police car had pulled up and, in its headlights, crouched Royboy. His jeans were round his ankles, and he was half-wearing a white corset.

The police officer got out of the car and approached the pathetic figure. 'I know what I'm seeing,' he said, 'but I have to tell you, son, I don't believe it!'

Everyone else thought it was better to stay inside the van. 'He'll sort this one out on his own,' said Dave.

Mick and Jim agreed, though they were all straining their ears to the point where it was painful.

'I know this looks a bit dodgy, officer,' began Royboy.

'A *bit*?' said the policeman, shining his torch at Royboy's crotch to try and gauge exactly *how* dodgy it was.

Royboy explained they were a band and that the dry ice machine had kicked off, and he'd just got out to fix it.

'But problem is, I got a slipped disc. The doc gave me this steel-reinforced corset to wear. There was no way I was wearing it to a gig, I mean, not even the band know, and if the audience twigged, I'd be dead meat. So, before the gig, I took it off and put it in the back of the van.'

When I jumped out of the van, me back went twang, and I could hardly stand. And these pains started shooting down me legs. So I though I'd get the corset on, secret like, before I sorted the dry ice.'

'I dropped me jeans, and now I can't even get the bleeding corset on proper, *and* it's covered in oil. The back of this van's a disgrace.'

The policeman seemed to understand, and was quite helpful. But, he explained how it was more than his job was worth to help a man with his jeans round his ankles do up a corset in an A3 lay-by. So, he took an official 'incident' photograph, before strolling round to tell Dave that Royboy needed help.

Dave jumped out and began doing up the corset with only the faintest hint of a smile.

'Don't worry,' said the constable, 'there'll be no charges, and of course, we'll keep this all completely confidential.'

Dave pulled up the dropped jeans and, after asking Royboy to do up his own flies, helped him creak back into his seat in the van.

The police drove off, with a cheery goodbye wave and a thumbs-up. Before their speedometer reached 30 mph, they were on the radio, relating the story with enough detail and embellishments to provide some welcome cheer for the other night patrols. They then spent several minutes congratulating themselves on how the lay-by photograph was certain to win first prize in the 'Guess what happens next?' competition at the Police Christmas Party.

Despite assurances that the rest of the band sympathised with his condition and his recent experience, Royboy sat quietly in the back of the van, mumbling things which mostly sounded like, 'Just my bleedin' luck.'

They arrived at the Southsea lock-up and unloaded the gear, without the help of the incapacitated Royboy. Dave then ferried Mick and Jim back to Nona's in his Cortina.

Once safely back in their beds, they began to think about 'bleedin' luck' and how, different theirs was to Royboy's. Thanks to 'bleedin' luck,' they had extra cash in their pockets and a future with a lucrative income stream.

Tomorrow, they had tickets for *The King and I*, starring the raucous, tone-deaf Nona Sandringham-Smythe, and both of them wondered whether their 'bleedin' luck' would be gracious enough to hold out to the end of, what was certain to be, an unforgettable performance.

# 16

The Sea Scout Hut looked like a large 1940's public urinal block with fairy lights. The Sea Scouts hadn't been near it for years, but the name, like the building itself, lingered on.

The door, which was covered in blowlamp burns from an abandoned attempt to repaint it in 1973, was surrounded by a mass of intermittently flashing Christmas tree bulbs. Someone had rigged up a spotlight which sort of shone on a hand-painted sign which announced *The King and I - a musical starring Nona SS*. The sign writer had run out of space and so, on his own initiative, at the last minute, had severely shortened the surname to make it fit.

'Nona SS?' said Jim, as they walked with some trepidation towards the light, 'weren't they one up from the Waffen SS?'

Mick laughed, even though he wasn't really in a laughing mood. Two and a half hours of am dram, with Nona leading the charge, was not his idea of a fun night out.

A pretty girl on the door smiled as they handed in their tickets. 'Sit anywhere,' she said.

'Thank you,' said Mick, returning her smile.

'Make for the back,' hissed Jim.

'Good idea.'

But the back was taken - all twenty-seven rows of it.

The only seats available were on row one and row two.

'Sod it,' said Jim.

'Oh look, booze!' said Mick.

And sure enough, tucked under an alcove, was a table, manned by a short, bald man with a white apron and a large moustache, selling wine by the glass. They ordered two glasses of red. It was surprisingly good.

'Like any more?' said the man behind the table.

'Sorry?' said Mick, who'd just taken his first mouthful.

'Would you like any more?' he repeated. 'People take more than one glass, put it under their chairs, so they can have a little top-up during the performance.'

'Right,' said Jim, 'we'll have six glasses each.'

The man with the moustache was torn between his delight at making another twelve sales and the fact that there might be two drunks to throw out at the interval.

'There *is* an interval,' he ventured.

'Good,' said Jim, 'put us down for another twelve at half time.'

The memory of Mick's divorce celebration and its cataclysmic aftermath in the Soho office had obviously receded from their memories. And anyway, this was their first night out since the police, non-gig, cash windfall.

Row two was virtually empty, so it was easy to choose a couple of seats and slip the trays of drinks underneath.

As they were close to the front, they had a good view of the orchestra. This was a bit of a plus, because if the show bombed, they could occupy themselves checking out the bass and rhythm guitarists' technique.

Mick and Jim were two glasses to the wind, when the conductor strode, imperiously, up onto his podium, which, from where Mick and Jim were sitting, was obviously a beer crate, painted black. This was another plus. If the show was truly gruesome, there was always the chance that, if he was one of those expressive types, he might whirl round and fall off. To make things interesting, they had a side bet of £10. Mick reckoned the conductor would fall off after an hour, while Jim went for one hour, forty-three minutes, with the clock stopping for the interval. Perhaps, thought Mick, the extra cash was going to their heads.

The orchestra wrenched itself into life with the overture. As the first few bars assaulted their ears, they simultaneously reached down for their third glass.

Jim whispered in Mick's ear. 'Just keep drinking 'til it starts to sound good.'

'Shhhh!' hissed a large arty-looking woman in the seat behind. And a man behind her said, 'Keep the noise down!'

A woman in the seat behind him said, 'Remember where you *are!*' in a rather plummy voice.

Probably a string of similar comments went in a relay right to the back of the hall and outside into the street. It was that sort of audience.

Eventually, the overture crash-landed and, rather generously, people clapped. There was a concerted rustling noise as all eight musicians in the orchestra replaced, or turned over, their sheet music. Then silence. The conductor, without so much as a wobble, tapped his baton and they were off.

The red velvet curtains started to open, with a high pitched squeaking sound, which could be clearly heard above the music. The curtains stopped halfway, then started again, then stopped. Eventually, the last three feet was violently yanked out of sight with a terrible ratcheting sound.

The brightly lit scene that greeted Mick, Jim and the other 300 people in the audience was a trifle strange. The stage was, of course, dominated by Nona in a massive, bulk-hiding, purple crinoline. The actors playing Siamese dock workers, a few of whom were trying to stifle laughter caused by the stuttering curtain, had sticking plasters visibly pulling their eyes sideways in a way that would have had government racial discrimination lawyers salivating with anticipation.

But the really strange thing was the sets. In general, the stage looked roughly as it should - a sort of 19th-century quayside in Siam. But some of the images on display seemed to have been left over from last year's production of *My Fair Lady*.

Behind the distant, blue-tinged Siamese mountains, you could clearly see Big Ben, and high on a wall, on one of the flats, was a sign saying *Covent Garden*. Whoever had been charged with painting over stuff, was in for a hell of a bollocking.

Just before Nona spoke her opening lines, some wag at the back, who obviously had excellent eyesight, shouted, 'Buy a flower from a poor gall'

'Shhhh!' 'Quiet!' 'Disgraceful!' 'Keep the noise down!' 'That was uncalled for!'

'Oh good,' whispered Jim - 'audience participation.'

'Shhh,' hissed the arty lady from the row behind.

The opening scene was over in a flash. The sailors stopped giggling. And Nona spoke her lines without incident, apart from when she'd finished, the wag with the eyesight shouted, 'By George, she's got it!' and was promptly thrown out.

The curtains jerked back together, helped by a Siamese dock worker who stepped forward to close the two foot gap, that would, otherwise, have revealed the scene changers working to create the interior of the King of Siam's palace.

Nevertheless, the audience was given a pretty good idea of how frantic the scene changes must have been, because of the noise - banging, bumping, the dragging of heavy somethings and, at one point, a man's voice shouting, 'That's my fuckin' thumb, you cretin!'

At this point, the conductor, fearing further profanities, stood up, and the orchestra began to play the overture again. After a few minutes, a badly bruised hand appeared through the curtain, gave a purple thumbs-up sign, and disappeared.

'It's life Jim,' whispered Mick, 'but not as we know it.'

The orchestra wound down the overture at an alarming rate, apart from a rather ancient oboe player, who continued playing as the second scene was gradually revealed. The lady cellist nudged him in the ribs, and, as the rest of the orchestra moved into the score for Scene II, there was a high-pitched squeak from his instrument and a cry of 'Shit, that hurt!'

The king's palace interior still had Big Ben in the background, but the Covent Garden sign had disappeared and the flats replaced by decorations that looked as though they'd been ripped from the walls of a Chinese take-away during a particularly drunken brawl.

Nona again dominated centre stage. The king was there too. He was a bit podgy and his golden kimono didn't meet round his middle. In the gap, you could clearly see the logo of a Motorhead T-shirt. He had a shaved head, but it looked as though he'd done it himself backstage, in the dark, just before he came on. There were tufts of hair and missed bits all over the place, and a fair amount of congealed blood.

'Meet my children, Miss Anna,' he mumbled with an enthusiasm that indicated he'd rather be down the pub. The music played, and the king's children filed on taking little Siamese steps. These were not stage school kids. Once they had assembled into an untidy, shuffling group facing Nona, they spent their time looking into the audience and waving at their unseen parents, guardians or probation officers. One was violently picking his nose and another was concentrating on unpicking a thread in his robe, which looked like it was made from Ikea tea towels stapled together and sprayed gold.

One of the kids even had the cheek to make a 'wanker' sign behind the king's back.

'Christ, did you see that?' said Jim. 'Can't be more than eight years' old, if she's a day.'

The music faltered up to Nona's big opening number, *Getting to know you*.

Mick and Jim wondered if they'd had enough wine to cushion the impact. But when she opened her mouth, they nearly fell off their seats. They restrained themselves with lightning fast reactions, as an uncontrolled fall might have easily demolished their alcoholic stash.

The stunner - the absolute stunner - was that Nona was *miming* to the original sound track of the film! Some clever bastard had electronically ripped out the vocals and she was opening and closing her mouth almost in time to the words. Gone was the unspeakably high volume, the abrupt changes of key and the wheezing for breath - and gone was the intense vibrato, the frequency of which would have, surely, stripped the twenty-year-old woodchip from the Sea Scout Hut walls.

The shock was so great, glass four was put to bed immediately, and an even warmer glow suffused their bodies. For the first time, they started to enjoy the show, spotting the open fly here, the acne there, the missed cues, groin scratching, fluffed lines and bum notes from the orchestra.

In the interval, they made their way with almost serene confidence to the alcove to collect a further twelve glasses.

As the second half progressed - and it would've taken a brave theatre critic to use that word - Mick and Jim slipped further into a cosy alcoholic haze.

Although, to be fair, towards the end, they began to concentrate when a court official came on. As he strode imperiously towards Nona, one of the King's children stuck out a leg and made him stumble. The courtier announced, 'Miss Anna, the King is dead.' Then, without pausing for breath, turned to the offending kid and hissed, 'and he won't be the only one, you little shit!'

For some reason, Jim cheered.

The courtier pointed over the footlights and added, 'and the same goes for any other fucker who thinks that's funny!'

Otherwise, Mick and Jim slid down an all too familiar slope, 'til, by the final number, they were not sure where the noise was coming from, although Mick suspected it was from the big, bright, oblong area where all the coloured lights were.

Inexplicably, there was an encore. Then, after the orchestra had done a runner to try and catch last orders, the on-stage bows were taken, the bouquets presented and the audience got up and went mumbling off into the night.

Unable to stand properly, Mick and Jim decided to remain in their seats and have a rest. But one minute into the rest, Nona burst out from behind the stage and made straight for them.

'Boys! Boys!' she gushed. 'So glad you could arrive!'

She was wearing a large, flowing dress that looked like one of Isadora Duncan's, understudy's, second-best girlfriend's cast-offs.

'Nice outfit,' said Mick. Two seconds later, he realised what he'd said, and felt quite pleased to have strung the two words together in the right order.

'Yes,' said Nona capriciously, 'the production's couturier, Monsieur Antoine, described the lines as, ephemerally Greek.

'Bit more kebab shop than Aphrodite,' muttered Jim.

But if Nona heard, she didn't let on. This was *her* night.

'Come on! Kissy, kissy!' The boys stood up with considerable difficulty and managed to aim kisses at Nona's cheeks, which were now fluorescent with a mixture of badly applied make-up, adrenalin and gin.

'Ere,' said Jim, coming straight to the point. 'You were miming the songs. That was some other actress singing.'

Nona looked him straight in the eye, and, with a surprising knowledge of the trickery endemic in old film musicals, said, 'if dubbing was good enough for Deborah Kerr, it's good enough for me!'

Mick was impressed by this response and began to applaud. Unfortunately, he was holding his last glass of wine, and the resulting chaos put an immediate end to the conversation.

'Must dash, darlings,' cooed Nona - 'so many people to see, so many things to do.'

'Yeah,' said Jim, as she left, 'like painting out Big fuckin' Ben for a start.'

\*

As Mick and Jim wandered aimlessly into the night, they became vaguely aware of a voice from a dark piece of waste ground singing *On the street where you live*. They peered around the area for a few minutes but failed to find the body.

'You missed a good show tonight,' shouted Jim into the darkness.



You're missing a good show, now,' shouted the virtual performer, and launched into *Ascot Opening Day*.

As they stumbled around, Mick and Jim were aware the voice was getting fainter. Either they were getting further away, or the voice's systems were shutting down.

'Still,' said Mick, 'he had bloody good eyesight.'

In no time at all, they found themselves next to the very bench where, a couple of days ago, they'd looked out to sea and decided their options were zero. They sat down heavily, and the cool, salty breeze blowing in from the southwest started, what would inevitably be, a very long process of sobering up.

They spent some pleasant time, just breathing and taking in the scene. After a few minutes, Jim tried to start a conversation about one of life's great mysteries - why women always laugh when they see men injure themselves? But he really struggled to get the question out, and Mick responded by giving an enormous belch, after which, they both reckoned they'd taken the debate as far as they could.

There was another long silence, then Mick leaned over and said, in a gigantic whisper, 'don't look now Jimbo, but look over there - there's a couple shaggin' on the beach - there, down by the water's edge.'

Jim peered into the gloom as instructed.

'Hm!' he said, totally un-fazed by the distant writhings, 'it must be too crowded under the pier - unusual for a Wednesday night.'

Suddenly, a massive wave crashed over the couple, and when it hissed back into the main body of the sea, there was no one there, just an empty, glistening pebble beach.

'Christ!' said Mick, 'this is serious, we got to get some help.'

He stood up rather too quickly and leaned on a waste paper basket for support. Unfortunately, he leaned on the hole in the centre of the basket and disappeared up to his armpit.

He twisted his head to look out to sea, just in time to see another enormous wave wash the couple back up onto the beach. They were still at it!

'Bloody hell!' said Jim, 'that takes some doing.'

'Not really,' replied Mick. 'I've leaned on waste paper basket holes lots of times - all you have to do is be incredibly pissed.'

'No,' said Jim, 'the couple on the beach - they're...'

He stopped. The pleading look on Mick's face told him if he didn't do something quick, Mick would be stuck in that position for the night.

He helped pull Mick's arm out of the bin, and they worked slowly and carefully together to scrape off a number of sticky Cornetto wrappers, along with the contents of an illegally dumped pooper-scooper bag.

Then, supporting each other as best they could, they tottered off across the dewy grass of the Common, back to the warmth and security of Nona's place - leaving the otherwise-engaged couple to await the impact of the next big breaker.

# 17

Royboy was sure blood was pumping out of his ears.

He shouted down to Dave at the bottom of the ladder, 'What the *bell* is that?'

'Oh!' said Dave, 'it's Nona practicing her scales.'

'Christ!' said Royboy, 'if it goes on much longer, I'm coming down. It's doin' my cerables in.'

As if in answer to his plea, Nona stopped almost immediately, and peaceful drainpipe painting resumed.

Royboy spoke first. 'So, why's she doing scales?'

'She's in a musical,' replied Dave.

'What?'

'S'on all week.'

'What's it called?'

'*The King and I*.'

'The King and I, what?' asked Royboy going carefully round the back of the pipe next to the brickwork.

'What d'you mean?' asked Dave.

'You know,' said Royboy. 'The King and I robbed a bank. The King and I had it three times last night. That sort of thing.'

'No! It's just - *The King and I*.'

'Don't tell you much does it? Wouldn't make me want to go.'

'It's world famous,' said Dave.

'Oh!'

'I'm going.'

'You're *not*!'

'Yeah!'

'Who's running it?'

'The Marmion Road Amateur Musical Society,' said Dave, finishing off the bottom of the pipe with a flourish, and a degree of irritation in his voice.

'Where's it on?'

Clearly exasperated, Dave blew out his cheeks. 'That old Sea Scout Hut, down by the harbour.'

There was a long pause as Royboy finished off the last piece of edging.

'Anyone famous in it?'

Before Dave could explode, Nona came tripping down the steps.

It was a bad trip. A very bad trip. And when she hit the garden path, the shock waves caused Dave's tin of gloss to spill, Royboy's slipped disc to jolt enough to make him shout 'shit' and the layout of the crazy paving to be changed, for ever.

It was obvious Nona was in pain. Dave whipped out his mobile, dialled 999, and within minutes an ambulance arrived.

The paramedics needed Dave and the re-corseted Royboy to help get her on to the stretcher and into the back of the ambulance.

‘Don’t worry,’ said one of the paramedics, ‘we’ll handle it from here. My mate will give her some gas and air, and we’ll be at the hospital in less than five minutes.’

Four minutes and thirty seconds later, Nona was wheeled into A&E. As it was Thursday around midday, rather than Friday or Saturday after the pubs had shut, there was no one with a beer bottle embedded in their skull, there was no one wielding a machete, no nurses were being punched and there was no vomit up the walls. Nona was wheeled straight through to a cubicle where a junior doctor was on his seventeenth straight hour on the job.

‘She fell down some steps,’ said one of the paramedics.

The junior doctor peered down at her.

‘Christ!’ he said, ‘look at the damage to her face. I can’t handle *that* - she’ll need major surgery.’

‘No,’ said the paramedic, a little uneasily, ‘we reckon she’s fractured both arms. She didn’t damage her face - apparently, that’s how she normally looks.’

‘Bloody hell,’ said the doctor quietly, with a degree of sympathy, ‘the poor, ugly, old bitch.’

The doctor and paramedics exchanged glances.

Just then, the massive body on the trolley moved slightly.

‘I heard that,’ murmured Nona. ‘Go saw your dick off, you overeducated fucker.’

\*

An hour or two later, lying on the trolley, waiting for the anaesthetist, Nona had some very serious thoughts.

That bloody junior doctor was right. There was no way she would achieve anything like her goals in life by running a beautiful, tasteful guest house or paying to become the leading light in the Marmion Road Amateur Musical Society.

She’d always known the way she looked was a major impediment. God had dealt her a really shitty set of cards. But, nowadays, it was possible to reshuffle the pack and deal yourself a new, winning hand. All it would take was a call to Switzerland and a raid on the Commodore’s Trust Fund.

The anaesthetist arrived, told her she was in safe hands, then placed a mask over her face. In a few seconds, she was out like a light. But that thought, that momentous, life-changing thought, was still burning brightly as four male nurses struggled to manoeuvre her trolley into the second theatre she’d been in that week.

# 18

It was strange that two people who were being hunted down by the EU's top hit men would be stupid enough to waste time discussing how bored they were getting with their local pub.

But that's exactly what Mick and Jim did. On Friday morning, they went to see Nona in hospital and paid back her loan. There were no complications with her fractures, and she seemed in unusually good spirits.

Duty done, they decided to take a stroll to look for pastures new - not permanent, of course - the Destroyer was in too convenient a location. Whenever life's edges needed blurring, it was a two-minute walk away and a ten-minute stagger back.

They convinced themselves they simply wanted to explore their surroundings - meet local characters, soak up some of the local ambience and broaden their horizons. There hadn't been a peep out of Vlad and Vic. No telephone calls. No letters containing diagrams of the grisly fate that awaited them. Nothing. So, perhaps they'd given up.

The streets felt safe as they headed north, busily chatting about plans, the band and developments to date. They turned left or right as this new adventurous mood took them. Pretty soon, they found themselves completely lost.

It was a darker, more intimidating part of town, lacking the freshness and openness of their usual haunts down by the Common. But they weren't fazed. Their base had been Soho, and now, effectively, they were abroad - so they might as well be innocents.

'You know, we ought to get some mobile phones,' said Jim, 'for if we get separated, or land in trouble.'

'We've survived without them so far,' said Mick, 'and you can't be in more trouble than we already are. Anyway, they can hack into anything nowadays. And if *they* can do it, so can Charlie. Best stick to call boxes. And, come on, you don't want to become MPD!'

Jim gave him a look.

'MPD - Mobile Phone Dependent - you've seen 'em - wasting their lives away squinting at a screen no bigger than a packet of fags, sitting in Starbucks talking about apps, then frying their brains every time they make a call.'

Jim had heard all this before. 'It's only because we didn't get that mobile commercial for you-know-who.'

They were bickering because losing work was always a sore point, and because it was one o'clock and they were hungry and thirsty.

There was a pub just across the road - 'The Dockyard Wall.' Mick lightened up.

'Well Brylcreeme my cat, *mon brave!*' This must be the place they talk about when they pose the great philosophical question, "Ever had it up against the dockyard wall?"

'Ho! Ho!' said Jim, sarcastically. 'Let's get in there. I'm gasping for a pint, and a packet of pickled onion crisps would go down a treat.'

The pub looked pleasant enough - dark green and cream glazed tiles, original Victorian signage and etched glass, double doors with brass, art nouveau handles. But as they began to cross the road, a couple of navvies in a hole by the front door opened up with a pneumatic drill.

'Sod that,' said Mick, 'we're not going in there, it's be like being in the Destroyer with the juke box on the go - too bloody noisy.'

Inside the Dockyard Wall, Doreen, the diminutive, intensely coiffured landlady, was not very happy either.

'Bloody hell,' she shouted to no one in particular, 'listen to that bleedin' drill.'

A middle-aged man in a fawn raincoat was standing at the bar agreeing with her, when he made a fatal mistake. He took out some money and said something which, obviously, struck a raw nerve.

In one smooth movement, Doreen vaulted the bar and aimed a double-footed drop kick at his windpipe. It was a move with which she was completely familiar. The man in the raincoat was, however, completely *un*familiar with the move, and staggered backwards clutching his throat. Eventually, he banged the back of his head on a cigarette machine on the opposite wall, and slumped to the floor.

Doreen was on him like a flash. A customer tried to stand in her way. She picked up a wooden bar stool with one hand and shoved it into his face. He went down, too. Other heavy-looking blokes who'd thought about trying to protect the poor sod in the raincoat, returned to their pints with a level of co-ordination that's, normally, only found in synchronised swimming teams.

'Right,' screamed Doreen to the poor guy in the raincoat. 'So what do you want with pickled onion flavoured crisps?'

She ripped a large, red fire extinguisher off its wall bracket and slammed it onto his head. The clang was so loud, the men in the hole outside, stopped work and began checking their pneumatic drill for faults.

As she lifted the extinguisher for another blow, the pub doors opened and a young, smartly dressed, tough-looking man entered. 'Stop it *now!*' he shouted.

'Benny!' Doreen, dropped the extinguisher on the floor, burst into tears and ran over to him.

'Come on, Sis,' said Benny, giving her a hug. He looked as though he'd seen it all before. 'Come on, let's go somewhere quiet, eh!'

Together, they stepped over the body in the raincoat, and the body of the bloke who'd received Doreen's barstool kiss, and walked slowly to a private room behind the bar.

The man in the raincoat lay moaning on the floor. Two elderly ladies sharing a half of stout at a nearby table were obviously concerned. 'There'll be hell to play when Health and Safety come round,' said one, 'that fire extinguisher weren't fixed on the wall proper.'

Benny sat on the private room sofa with his arm around Doreen. 'Look Sis, I told you. Just don't place any more orders for pickled onion flavoured crisps.'

'But they was Fred's favourites. That's what he asked me for that night, just before he was...' She burst into tears, again.

'Look, it's time to give it a rest now,' said Benny, quietly. 'You have to pick up the pieces and move on. I mean, just think of what Uncle Vlad and Uncle Vic would say...'

'I know. I know, love,' sniffled Doreen.

'They'd be upset too, and, believe me, they *know* how get upset. If they got the 'ump with me, even though I'm family, the only place I'd feel safe was down the bottom of a coal mine in Madagascar. But, at the end of the day, even they'd say, "Forget it, Doreen, babes, Fred is *toast*."'

'But those crisps keep coming back - sort of repeatin' on me.'

'Look, if it makes you feel any better, I'll see if me and a few of the lads can find out who killed him, and sort 'em out - permanent like. Or, maybe, we'll find someone who didn't do it, but who looks like the type that *might* have done it and give 'em a good kickin', or a few hours on the electrodes.'

Doreen looked up gratefully through her tears. 'You're a bruv in a million, Benny. A real sweetie.'

‘It shouldn’t be too hard,’ said Benny. ‘I mean, he was just sittin’ at the bar when they done ‘im. There should be someone who saw somethin’.’

‘But people forget when it suits ‘em,’ sniffed Doreen into her hanky.

‘Yeah! Lots of people round here have tiny memories. Still, I know a few ways of giving their memories a nasty jog.’

Doreen looked confused. ‘What’s their tits got to do with it?’

Benny gave her a gentle hug, ‘*Memories*, babes, *memories*!’

‘Oh benny - you’re good to your poor little sister. Fred would’ve been proud of you.’

‘Yeah! Right! Well, he was family - with some people, “was” is “was” and for others “is” is “is” - there’s even them who think “is” is “was”. But in my book its always gonna be that “was” is “is”.’

Sometimes, Doreen wished Benny hadn’t bunked off school so much. Nevertheless, she sought reassurance. ‘That’s good then, is it, darlin’?’

Benny’s lips tightened and his eyes narrowed. ‘Yeah, Sis. That’s as good as it’s ever gonna get round here.’ And he gave her another big hug.

Behind the sofa, on a trestle table, lay Fred’s coffin, topped with a huge floral wreath in the shape of a packet of pickled onion flavoured crisps.

\*

‘God, there’s not a single boozier up here,’ said Jim. ‘Let’s go back to the Dockyard Wall, I could murder some pickled onion crisps, drilling or no drilling.’

Just then, Mick looked down a grubby little cobbled alley to their right, and saw a faded pub sign, hanging from its bracket by a single, rusty hinge.

‘No need to,’ he said, ‘we have quality refreshment to hand, my liege.’

And with a flamboyant bowing gesture and wave of his hand, he led Jim away from one family’s distorted take on life, straight towards another.

# 19

They looked up at the sign above the pub door and could just make out the words - 'The Ragged Cock. Uncharacteristically, they refrained from making any puerile comments or gestures, and stepped inside.

The interior was gloomy. There was dark brown wood boarding up to about four feet, then the walls were bottle green with damp patches and places where the paint was peeling. Some of the floor had small, brown tiles and the rest was untreated planking. The ceiling was dark brown and covered in cobwebs. There were no pictures on the walls, and the bar, which was basically a wide piece of chipboard across a six-foot gap in the wall, just had a couple of unmarked, wooden beer pumps.

Over the bar, hung a single un-shaded, 40-watt, clear, filament light bulb. As it provided no light to the bar at all, one could only suppose it'd been switched on by a malevolent landlord, keen to make a contribution to global warming and sending everyone to an early death.

Round the room, were a number of dingy, black wooden alcoves, with white-painted, badly rusted, cast-iron tables.

The man behind the bar was tall with a pockmarked face and lank greasy hair. He was wearing a white apron with strange stains on it.

'Tell me, good landlord,' said Mick, 'what fine English ales art thou purveying, this pleasant morn?'

'Fucked if I know,' said the man, 'I'm a temp.'

'I presume your spittoon is away for refurbishment?' said Mick, trying to re-pitch the conversation at a more appropriate level.

By way of answer, the barman turned and expertly spat a glob of nicotine-stained saliva into the Belfast sink.

Mick realised this signalled the end of the social niceties, and bought a couple of pints of something brown and a packet of pickled onion crisps. They sat down in one of the alcoves.

After a short discussion, they agreed that anyone who ever did anything worthwhile would never be seen in such a dump. It was definitely a 'nothing happening' place.

But today was going to be different.

In the next alcove, sat the only other punters in the place. They wore long khaki warehouse coats, each with their names carefully interwoven in fuse wire above the breast pocket.

They were talking in loud voices.

Mick had a theory about loud voices. The workers, traditionally, had loud voices because they had to shout above the machines in the cotton mills, or down the mines, or when calling for help while being horsewhipped by the Lord of the Manor. Whereas, the upper class developed loud voices from calling from the East Wing to the West Wing, or shouting across polo fields, or screaming at servants when administering a good horsewhipping. Middle-class people with loud voices, he reckoned, were unhappy with being middle class, so they deliberately spoke in loud voices to make people think they were either upper class or working class, depending on where they put their cross on the ballot paper.

Of course, the two punters in the next alcove might just have been a bit deaf.

Nevertheless, it was one of those conversations you couldn't help overhearing, and the more Mick and Jim overheard, the more startled they became. Plus, they had to admit, there was a certain degree of entertainment value.

It soon became clear the two men were called Alf and Karl. Alf was the dad, and he had all the information. Karl was the son, and he had none.

‘Ere,’ said Alf. ‘Guess who’s back.’

‘Jimmy the Skewer?’ guessed Karl.

‘Nah!’

‘The Bishop?’

‘Nah!’

‘Not the Mad Baron?’

‘Nah!’

‘Who then?’

‘Carletta.’

‘Bloody ‘ell!’

‘The words “snake”, “rattle,” “like,” “goes,” and “a” come to mind,’ said Alf, with an evil chuckle.

Jim had stopped eating his crisps, although his mouth was still opening and closing.

At that point, an elderly Salvation Army lady came into the pub. She walked over to Mick and Jim and shook her plastic collection box. Lunchtime in a pub like this - she must be devoted, thought Jim, as he gave her a couple of pound coins. ‘Thank you, my dear,’ she said.

The Salvation Army lady turned to Alf and Karl. Alf was charging ahead with the story. ‘And don’t forget, she’s been away, care of Her Majesty’s Holloway Hotel - two years, so she’ll be on the prowl. Randy as bleeding hell!’

Alf noticed the collection box, and stopped to add some coins. ‘Ere you are, love, couple of quid alright? Oh, and, sorry about the language, just now.’

‘God bless you,’ said the Salvation Army lady. ‘And don’t worry about the language, I’ve lived round here all my life. It goes in one fuckin’ ear and out the other.’

She went over to the bar, emptied the collection box, ordered a very large brandy, knocked it back in one, and left.

Mick and Jim exchanged glances, as Alf returned to his story.

‘I remember once, after a night on the Guinness, Carletta had me and Billy Zimmerman back to ‘er flat. And you know what Big Billy’s like.’

‘Auntie Dora said about ten inches...though it was a foggy night, and she reckoned it was just an estimate.’

‘She wasn’t far off - Billy’s got one like a couple of Coke cans, end to end.’

‘What, with red and silver logos?’

‘Look - do you wanna hear this, or what?’ said Alf, irritably.

‘OK! OK!’ said Karl, backing down.

‘Right! So all three of us are on the kitchen table,’ said Alf.



'That one with the blue plastic top?'

'Yeah.'

'That could've been dangerous - from what I can remember, it was only a DIY-shed job.'

'Look!' said Alf, pointedly.

'Sorry! Did she like it then?' asked Karl.

'Like it? She went wild, screamin' her head off! Then after a bit, she says 'ere boys there's a cucumber in the fridge.'

'No!'

'Yeah! She made us all slide off the table.'

'Was it a drop-leaf?' asked Karl.

'What?'

'If it was a drop-leaf, you was dead lucky, 'cos there're nowhere near as stable as them with a leaf what pulls out.'

'What is it with you and bleedin' tables?' said Alf, 'I wouldn't like to think a son of mine was growing up to be some sort of pervert.'

'Nah, nah - go on.'

'So we get to the fridge and she gets the cucumber out, but it's past its sell-by date.'

'No!'

'So we're all stark naked on the kitchen floor, and Carletta's trying to work this half-rotten cucumber into the equation.'

'And?'

'That's when the cops broke the door down. Complaints about the noise. Thought someone was being murdered.'

'The fuzz couldn't believe it. We were too pissed to move. She couldn't stop. And they couldn't stop 'er.'

'That's incredible!'

'It was,' said Alf, 'especially when the police dog joined in. All I remember was the handler went hysterical. He kept shoutin', "Time for walkies, Prince!" But I tell you, Princey-boy was not walking anywhere. He was right up for it. There must have been ten cops there, and not one of 'em tried to pull him off.'

'So what did they do?'

'They hid behind the kitchen door, apart from the ones taking photographs. After a bit, they threw a bucket of cold water over us, gave the dog a dose of pepper spray, truncheoned its nuts, and read out the charges.'

'So they did you for what? Sort of lewd acts?'

'Nah - Carletta's too smart for that. She gave them all a blow job, and they swore they hadn't seen a thing.'

'Sounds reasonable to me.'

'I think you can definitely say that was their considered opinion,' said Alf, chortling.

'So, end of story?'

‘Not quite. For weeks after, every time that dog walked past Carletta’s flat, it used to get a bit stalky.’

At that point, Mick stood up, and said, in a brisk, workmanlike fashion, ‘Well, James, I think, given the circumstances, we’ll postpone our discussion of the derivative nature of socio-political sub-texts in Jean Cocteau’s *Orphée* ‘til next week. Oh, and don’t forget your crisps, you’ve hardly touched them.’

\*

They arrived back at Nona’s feeling like children after a long day at the beach - tired but happy, and dying for a pee.

All in all, it’d been a good trip.

They’d seen other parts of the city, possibly made a donation to a worthwhile charity, discovered that family story-telling skills were alive and well in the region, and, thanks to two blokes drilling down a hole, pickled onion crisp *afficionado*, James Redfern Chartwell, had avoided having his brains bashed in with a fire extinguisher.

# 20

'This bullet-proof vest is chafin' my groin,' said Vic, as he limped along the corridor to Charlie's door.

'In a few minutes time,' said Vlad, 'I guarantee that'll be least of your problems. You'll be lucky if you've got a groin at all. He's not just goin' to be mad, he's goin' to be *certifiable!*'

It was rare for the V-twins to be worried about anything.

'We got to stay cool and face it out. That, or stick a round or two between his beady, Ealing-comedy lovin' eyes.'

Vlad took out his Beretta Storm, checked the clip and slotted it back into the belt of his trousers.

This prompted Vic to stop concentrating on his groin and check his own gun. It was a Beretta Storm too. In a way, they were no different from those little twin girls who like wearing identical party dresses.

'Right,' said Vlad, 'any funny business and we let him have it, OK?'

'One last practice.' They stood, legs apart, Crombie's unbuttoned, in the centre of the corridor then, like greased lighting, whipped out their Berettas and made vicious, but quiet, boom fuckin' boom, fuckin' boom, fuckin' boom noises, as they gave the imaginary Charlie what was coming to him.

The practice was so slick, professional and innately violent, that the supreme confidence and limitless aggression, for which they were so rightly feared across Europe, made a sudden, dramatic return.

'Right,' said Vlad, with a poisonous quality to his voice, 'let's do it. Once word out of place and he cops it.'

Vlad knocked on the door, his face was taut, his teeth were gritted, he was ready for action.

In response to the knock, they heard Charlie's voice. 'Come in gentlemen.' It was calm and, really, quite friendly.

Vlad wrenched opened the door, and they strode purposefully into the room. Well, actually, they only managed one purposeful stride each. Their Guccis had hardly touched the Axminster, when they found themselves staring down the barrels of four semi-automatic AK-47s.

'Hands on the wall, dear boys,' said Charlie, pleasantly. They obeyed. And before he could say 'spread 'em, you bastards' one of the gunmen had kicked their legs apart.

The frisk was unnecessarily intrusive, but it produced the two Berettas, two .22 Magnum Black Widows from their ankle holsters, a machete and a selection of evil-looking flick knives and brass knuckle-dusters. The arsenal was placed in a pile on Charlie's desk.

Charlie was wearing a white suit, white shirt and diagonally striped tie, similar Alec Guinness in *The Man in the White Suit* - an Ealing classic about a chemist who invents a fabric that never gets dirty, never wears out, and glows powerfully in the dark.

He was, therefore, in a suitably whimsical mood.

'I'll make a leap of faith boys,' he said, 'and suppose you were plannin' to go Saturday mornin' shoppin' at Waitrose after this meetin', and were carryin' these pieces in case there was any heavy action at the checkout. Assume the position.'

Vlad and Vic were moved to their normal place, facing Charlie's desk.

The four unshaven men stood, two on either side of Charlie, guns at the ready. This was their first big job and they weren't going to blow it. However, it wasn't what they'd planned, when they left Bucharest three months ago.

They'd been professionally trained as milliners and hoped to find honest work in the specialist shops in and around Jermyn Street. But the London millinery scene had been far tougher than they'd expected.

After a fruitless month of searching, they'd ended up working for a pittance, cash-in-hand, showing people to their seats in a small arts cinema in north London. A few days ago, as a 'One-Off Special', the cinema had featured *The Magnet*. Made in 1951, this not-very-classic Ealing comedy starred James Fox as eleven-year-old, Johnny Brent. Charlie, who identified strongly with the little boy, made up an audience of one.

As they guided him to his seat, he instinctively recognised, from the way they flicked their torches, then slunk back into the dark, that these were people who'd been ground down and brutalised by life. Ground down and brutalised people were very useful to Charlie. His whole empire had been built on them.

All it took was a quick chat over some popcorn and a drink on a stick, and they were hired.

They had now moved up to a much better paid form of exploitation, and confidently raised their AK-47s with an increased sense of menace, despite having only had fifteen minutes training.

As the weapons came up, the V-twins looked down, and realised the rest of the office floor was covered in thick polythene sheeting.

Charlie noticed the beads of sweat appear on their foreheads.

'Don't worry about the plastic boys, it's merely a precaution - just in case you try anythin' stupid.'

Vlad couldn't think of anything stupid an unarmed man could do with four AK-47s pointing at him.

'And anyway,' continued Charlie, 'the cost of carpet cleanin' in this part of London is bloody unbelievable.'

The four milliners turned thugs nodded in agreement. They were learning fast. On a trial run, earlier that morning, they'd done well - collecting some overdue protection money from a lifeboat charity. Just a few minor injuries to the WI volunteers in the back office, and it was in the bag. Sweet as a nut.

'Now,' said Charlie to Vlad and Vic, 'one more thing before we start - either you've been at the pies, big time, or you're wearin' Kevlar string vests under your Russel & Hodge's.'

'Off! Now!' He didn't have to add 'please', but he did.

Vlad and Vic gloomily took off their Crombies and removed their mohair jackets, tailor-made shirts and bulletproof vests - then got dressed again. One of the gunmen smiled briefly at their embarrassment. Vlad made a note of his face, and promised himself that, one day, that face would not be smiling as it floated, grey and un-noticed, past the Thames Barrier and out into the North Sea. But for the moment, he had had other things to cope with.

'Right,' said Charlie, 'if they make any moves at all, feel free to splatter the plastic.'

Vlad and Vic stood very still.

'So,' said Charlie, 'you've failed. You couldn't find those two poncey, video-making, non-paying colander bastards. I gave you a whole week, and what do you give me - nothing! And you know what really pisses me right off - apart from the fact I've had to come into work on a Saturday - if it leaks out those Implosion wankers have given me the run-around, my reputation could go down the pan. Although, I have to tell you, as far as I'm concerned, your reputation has *already* gone down the pan, shot through the sewers and is five fuckin' miles off Ramsgate beach.

He was cross.

'I ought to dispose of you arthritic spunk bubbles right now. But I owe one to your dear old mum. I suppose you never knew that Delores and me had an extremely passionate affair, twenty-odd years' ago. It was really beautiful.'

'Ah, Delores!' he sighed, leaning back in his chair. 'I forget what her second name was.' He shot his finger up in the air to stop Vlad and Vic from saying anything. 'No, don't tell me - it'll spoil the magic.'

'Anyway, we were at it like knives. This desktop didn't half see some action. If there was an Oscar for best raunchy screenplay written by an inanimate object, this desktop would win hands down.'

'So now you know, boys - your mum and me were a bit of a hot item. I didn't jot down the exact hump dates in my diary, but you never know - we might even be related. It's a funny old world, isn't it?'

Charlie knew his zero sperm count would've made it an *extremely* funny old world if he'd fathered the V-twins. However, he gave himself an instant testosterone boost by using the one-liner Margaret Thatcher delivered as she was given the bum's rush from No 10. This was because Maggie had gone, and *he* was still here. During her time in office, he'd always feared Mrs Thatcher would leave government and set up a criminal organisation to rival his own - and, if that had happened, he knew there was no way he could compete.

But, for him, the game was still very much on. He'd handed out the red cards, and it was time to blow the final whistle.

'So, in memory of your mum, I'm goin' give you a twelve-hour start.'

'My advice would be to use that time to make yourselves *very* scarce. If you have no other points you wish to raise, I officially declare this meeting closed.'

Vlad and Vic took this to indicate the clock had started ticking. They were soon tearing down the stairs to the foyer, where, in anticipation of this sort of outcome, they'd already packed two suitcases and a small holdall containing hastily purchased Ozzie Osborne wigs and some stick-on Zapata moustaches.

They ran to the taxi rank, carrying their luggage, along with something much, much heavier - the phenomenal weight of their battered egos.

\*

Charlie turned to his new hit men, 'Right, EuroTeam2, you've seen Charlie Sumkins in action. What do you think?'

'You is very most nice boss,' said the only one who could speak English.

'Right,' said Charlie, 'I *is* very most nice boss - but the other 'fing you need to know about me is I'm also a grade-A, lyin' bastard.'

'Give 'em an hour's start. Then off you go - and I want 'em done over good and proper.'

EuroTeam2 left, and made their way to the local Starbucks where, over four lattes, they whiled away the 'hour's start' discussing the relative merits of teardrop crowns, diamond crowns and centre dents in the latest fedora stylings. When the hour was up, they decided to spend the afternoon looking for a gun club to get a bit more practice with their AK-47s.

They made about thirty calls, but everyone refused to give them an appointment. So, they chose instead to pop over to St. James's Street, and check out Lock & Co's glamorous new spring collection of ladies' hats and accessories.

# 21

At the ticket office in Waterloo station, two large, worried-looking men with long hair and lop-sided Zapata moustaches were buying one-way tickets to Bournemouth.

During their taxi ride, Vlad and Vic's battered egos had ceased to be an issue. Unaware of EuroTeam2's preoccupation with lattes, fedoras and spring collections, they'd arrived at the station with a genuine fear for their lives.

'I know we got to get away from them lunatics, *pronto*,' said Vic, 'but why Bournemouth?'

'Because it must be the only place in the country without a reputation for harbourin' hit men. It's the last place they'll look.'

'What about ferries or flights?'

'Charlie has insiders everywhere - he'll have all the exits covered - we're probably on his CCTV network, right now.'

This was, of course, pure paranoia. But, if Charlie had had access to Waterloo's CCTV network, he'd have been quids in. Vlad and Vic were the only people on the concourse who looked like heavy-metal fans with a penchant for dressing up as merchant bankers.

Vlad was trying to keep things positive.

'I already made arrangements. Found a great place to hide once we get there - we can hole up 'til everything cools down.'

They turned up the collars of their Crombies and crossed to where the Bournemouth train was waiting, purposefully avoiding CCTV cameras and anyone who could've been someone.

They got into their seats, looking left and right, and crouching slightly. A whistle blew, a few last-minuters dived onto the moving train, and they were under way.

The grey tombstones of South London soon gave way to the green countryside of Surrey. It did not, however, lift their spirits. They were fugitives. They were on the run. Now, they really knew what it was like - and, as a lifestyle, it didn't appeal to them one little bit.

By the time the train reached Guildford, they were no less worried, but were starting to think differently, very differently. So differently that, if a man on a galloping something, not that there were many on the 2.30 Bournemouth Express, had heard what they were saying, he would've stopped in his tracks and said something like, 'Fuck me, that really *is* a turn-up for the books.'

As the train sped on, the clouds disappeared and the sun burst through. At the same time Vlad and Vic were sat in the buffet car, making plans over a South West Trains' cappuccino and currant slice, Mick and Jim were sitting on their favourite seaside bench, doing nothing in particular.

They were having a lazy Saturday, chatting quite positively about how things were working out, about how the pretty girl on the Sea Scout Hut door had successfully taken over Nona's part in the musical, and about some of the gigs coming up, particularly a couple of posh weddings and a big festival in Southampton.

The sea shimmered, almost in slow motion. Warm breezes arriving from the Isle of Wight seemed to have lost all their energy during the journey. Behind them, the grass on the Common had just been mown, and the smell was delicious. The faint strains of *Walking on Sunshine* floated over from the amusement park's

waltzer. Seagulls flew lazily along the shoreline, looking for discarded bags of chips. They sat back and soaked it all up. They were safe, comfortable and as happy as they could be.

And, for once, they were about to get a lot happier.

A few hours later, when they opened the door of the Weeliveer Guest Establishment, a powerful ray of sunlight illuminated the interior of the 'white out' foyer. It was as if there was a professionally placed HMI floodlight halfway down the garden path. Its golden rays spotlighted Nona's occasional table and, in particular, a neatly addressed, pink envelope.

The envelope smelled of Chanel No. 5 and hospital disinfectant. Mick opened it, and inside was a handwritten note.

*Dear Boys,*

*In a few days, I'll be leaving hospital and flying straight up to a private convalescent home in Switzerland until I am fully recuperated totally from my unfortunate injurious experiences. They tell me I need lots of rest, so I'll be incomunicated for quite a few weeks, maybe even months. My sister Kathleen will be running the place, and I'm sure she'll replace me with courtesy. As to our deal. A deal is a deal. So you have beds and three meals a day, 'til I return. When, I'm sure you will be mouthwatered and keen to rekindle our bi-cyclical relationship!!! Love and kisses to all your naughty bits.*

*Nona xxxxx*

Mick and Jim looked at each another. OK, it was sad that it had taken an injury to Nona to pull them feet first out of the dung barrel. But out they certainly bloody well were.

'I can't believe it, I can't believe it,' cried Jim. Relief flooded through his face, and he looked about ten years' younger.

'Absolutely, my old blancmange,' said Mick. 'And by the time she's back and ready for a rekindle of the bi-cyclical relationship, we'll be out of here and doing - er - well, you know - something.'

'Something bloody amazing!' said Jim.

The air around them crackled with high-voltage expectations.

They were fully aware this was the start of a new, and possibly exhilarating, era of freedom.

What they were fully *un*aware of was, that, sooner, rather than later, their newfound freedom would disappear completely, as they began to play a prominent and dangerous role in the V-twins plans for world domination.



# 23

For the next month, 'Who Shot Nelson' gigged their hearts out, with absolutely no idea they were playing on borrowed time. They did clubs, mainly, but also navy bases, company jollies, outdoor events, weddings and school reunions. Some were great, some not so great, but the list of bookings was getting longer, and fees were on the up.

As a lifestyle, it could be classified as Rock n' Roll Lite. There was even the occasional groupie. One night, Jim was the envy of the band when he headed off to a nearby hotel with a tiny, buxom blonde. She was a real retro rock chick - tight, black leather outfit, studded belt and wrist straps, heavy fringe, purple lips, black eyeliner above and below her eyes. Even Mick, as he sat alone in the Weeliveer that night, watching a selection of Open University programmes on particle physics, felt a twinge of jealousy.

Unfortunately, the romance didn't blossom, as she turned out to be the girlfriend of the leader of the local Hell's Angels chapter. A couple of days later, Jim, out on his own for once, was returning from a pleasant sight-seeing trip to HMS Victory, the Mary Rose and the top of the city's massive Spinnaker Tower, when he saw the rock chick walking on the other side of the street.

'Whoo hoo!' she cried, 'remember me!' and waved happily.

The six heavily tattooed bikers walking alongside her, glared over at him with a dark ferocity that could've kick-started a 500cc Norton.

It was only by feigning a heart-attack, staggering into a nearby chemist, leaping the counter and dashing out of the back door that he managed to give them the slip. For the next few days, he made a lot of excuses to stay in and watch TV.

Not that Jim got all the action.

After one gig, someone left a note for Mick with the organisers. It said, *'Mick - just wanted you to know that you have a huge gay following - and by huge, I mean me!'*

Mick knew that as there was no way he had any sort of followers, with the unfortunate exception of Vlad and Vic. Dave had to be the prime suspect.

Mick left him a little note in his guitar case, *Sorry, old bean, but I'm definitely heterosexual, although, to be absolutely honest, I can't remember that far back.*

These little episodes didn't match the accepted, standard Rock n' Roll excesses, such as throwing televisions out of hotel windows. Although, once, when they stayed overnight on a gig in Exeter. Royboy thought they could get some media coverage by throwing a TV out of a Travelodge window at the M5 Moto Services. But a democratic discussion involving all four band members decided this wouldn't have the same *caché* as lobbing one out of the forty-second storey of New York's Waldorf Towers. So they decided it'd be best not to do it. And anyway, they were on the ground floor.

'Who Shot Nelson' did not trash private jets, inject drugs on stage, or demand blue M&Ms and Chateau Rothschild on the rider, but Mick and Jim were, happy with their lot. Quick calls to solicitors had confirmed their wives were paying for the divorces. When the papers arrived, they just had to sign, and that was that.

They were building a decent stash of cash, and, even though Nona was still recuperating in Switzerland, she was keeping her part of the bargain, and they didn't have to cope with, or avoid, her phenomenal, blood-curdling sex drive, on alternate nights.

It was a wonderful time - positive, exciting and full of hope.



# 24

In the Terminal Rest Home, Bournemouth, Vic could see nothing positive, nothing exciting and nothing that appeared to be the slightest bit hopeful. All he had left was aggression. It wasn't much, but at least, it was something he was good at.

'You can stick that Zimmer frame right up your arse,' he shouted, 'I've had enough!'

'Look,' said Vlad, 'get used to it - we're either under cover, or we're not. It's been four weeks now, and this place is perfect. The dodderin' old sods in here haven't a brain cell between 'em, and spend all their time peecin' into their nappies, or spoonin' gruel into their ear holes. They're never going to crack our disguises.'

'What about the couple who run the place?' said Vic, gloomily.

'They're always pissed, and as long as the fees keep gettin' paid, they don't give a monkey's.'

'You sure?'

'Course I am. Last week, that body was lying in the upstairs corridor for three days before they noticed. There was a hell of a stink.'

'Well, you'd go off if you were up there, not breathin', for three days.'

'No - a stink from the authorities - nearly lost their licence - just that they knew someone on the Public Health committee.'

'How d'you know?'

'They talk about everything in front of everyone, because most of the aluminium pan squad in here wouldn't hear a bleedin' howitzer go off if you used it instead of the dinner gong.'

'And what about the name,' continued Vic. '*Terminal* Rest Home - for Christ's sake - *Terminal*! If you're on the run from four East-Europeans with AK-47s, it don't exactly inspire confidence.'

'Look,' said Vlad. 'It's next to the bleedin' bus terminus - and, whenever this dump was built, the cretin in charge must have got "terminus" and "terminal" mixed up - maybe he was as pissed as the dipsos running it now. Just *relax*!'

But Vic was on a roll.

'And we gotta do somethin' about these wigs. Ever since we tried to make 'em white with that bleach, I've been stinkin' like a toilet attendant in a Domestos factory.'

Vlad had had enough. He was not a very nice person in general, and, now he was about to become not a very nice person in particular.

He grabbed Vic by the lapels, banged him up against the wall, lifted him off the ground and jammed his face up close, so their noses touched.

Vic let go of his Zimmer frame and swivelled his head sideways - not so much in fear, but because it was patently obvious the mashed spaghetti Bolognese Vlad had sucked up for lunch was in repeat mode.

'Vic,' he hissed, 'shut the bloody moanin', or I'll get you a date with that dribblin' old biddy who makes them obscene gestures with that banana at breakfast.'

Vic blanched at the thought. Mainly because he realised making dates with old biddies was way down Vlad's list of available punishments. This threat was merely a frivolous allegory for something Vlad *could* choose to hand out. Something which would see Vic in intensive care for at least a month.

Just then, a white-haired old lady walked by. Over her pinny, she was wearing a t-shirt, featuring Sid Vicious gesturing to the audience while singing *My Way* at the Paris Olympia. Even though Vic was now suspended eighteen inches up the wall, and his collar had been wrenched tightly round his throat, he managed a passable, 'Good afternoon, madam.'

She stopped, ignored Vic, and spoke directly to Vlad. 'Duffin' him up are you?'

Vlad lowered a thankful Vic to the ground, or rather, the sticky, threadbare carpet that passed as the ground throughout the building.

Vic started angling for a way out. 'Perhaps I could escort you down to the lounge, dear lady?' he said, offering his free arm.

She turned up her hearing aid. 'What?'

'Perhaps I could escort you down to the lounge, dear lady?'

'I don't want to go to the soddin' lounge,' she said, taking out her top plate and rubbing it on her sleeve. 'I want to stay here and watch him do you over.'

Vic shot a glance at Vlad. The moment of danger had passed, and he seized the opportunity.

'Sorry,' he said, 'it was just one of them brothers' tiffs. Nothin' really. You carry on givin' your dentures a shine - we're goin' to watch the telly in the lounge.'

And with that, the V-twins waved goodbye, left the bent Zimmer frame where it had fallen, and moved off rapidly down the corridor.

The old lady popped her teeth back in, and shuffled off in the other direction.

'Bloody useless,' she mumbled to herself. 'At least he could've kneed him in the goolies.'

What Vlad and Vic didn't know, and what they would probably never know, was they'd been talking to the Terminal's most recent arrival, Ethel Wainwright, ex-owner of *Salmonella's* night club and widow of Nodder Wainwright, one of the biggest and most unpleasant villains Bournemouth and district had ever produced.

Since her marriage to Nodder in the 1950s, Ethel had been used to, and actually come to enjoy, mindless violence. As a new resident, she was aware there was a degree of mindless violence at the Terminal Rest Home, particularly from the owners. But she regarded it as little more than a light *divertisement*. In Vlad and Vic, she thought she'd instinctively recognised two experienced thugs who were in a totally different league. But, there again, perhaps she was wrong.

\*

When they arrived in the TV lounge, Vlad and Vic moved some of the armchairs, still containing their confused occupants, to remote corners of the room, and made a nice space for themselves in front of the telly.

The residents had been watching one of those shopping channels. Some mouthy, peroxide blonde, who looked as though she'd had a nasty run-in with a budget-priced sun bed, was flogging cheapo Taiwanese jewellery.

Vlad switched it off.

'Ere,' said Vic, 'that bracelet looked really good.'

Then he remembered Vlad's allegorical threat in the upstairs corridor, and settled down quietly into his armchair.

After adjusting the cushions, Vlad fell back into his chair.

'I bet there's sod all on,' he said, grabbing the remote control and punching in a channel, at random.

It would prove to be the most important choice he had ever made in his life.

# 25

The channel Vlad selected at random was the local South Coast News. The V-twins sat staring blankly at the screen, without the slightest glimmer of interest or expectation.

Even after a month, a deep, underlying depression had set in. It seemed like years since they were happily drinking brandy with vodka chasers in the Dead Dog - their home from home.

Of course, the landlord of the Dead Dog didn't quite see it like that. He was fully aware Vlad and Vic's presence was keeping thousands of paying customers away, but he was never going to stroll over to *their* table and ask them politely to find another pub. It would've been the equivalent of sticking his head into an industrial meat-grinder.

For Vlad and Vic, the pub was the Dead Dog's bollocks. All the booze they could drink, a landlord that never charged them, fantastic music on an original Wurlitzer jukebox, and magnificent vistas across Brenda the Barmaid's ample bosom.

The Terminal Rest Home certainly wasn't the Dead Dog, but at least they were below Charlie's radar, and they had a telly to watch.

'Better than nothing,' said Vlad, as a newsreader announced an item on a recent, local pop festival. Actually, it was a quite a bit better than nothing, because popular music was one of Vlad and Vic's few genuinely legal interests.

The announcer appeared over a green-screen set-up which, although she was in the studio, made the concert appear to be taking place in the background. The green screen was incorrectly illuminated, so her hair looked like thick, yellow string which was inconsistently chopped off, and there were grubby black lines between each of her teeth. Alternatively, the green screen set-up could have been perfect, and her appearance could simply have been the result of cuts in the station's recruitment budget.

Vlad and Vic paid attention to the screen, even though they had a poor opinion of local bands.

'Same old crap,' said Vic, for whom the upstairs corridor incident had now become a distant memory. 'I mean, you never hear nothin' that's never going to do nothin' more than bleedin' nothin.'

Vlad understood exactly what he meant. That was just how he felt. The first few acts included a punk band who's lyrics were more bleeped than un-bleeped, a flat-chested Dolly Parton lookalike, and a young girl running around in her knickers, with a load of over-enthusiastic wannabees doing aerobics in the background. Their interest began to fade.

The fourth band had a lead singer telling jokes. Vlad scowled and turned the sound down. They both sighed and thought fondly of the Wurlitzer in the Dead Dog. Then, suddenly, Vlad leapt out of his chair.

'Shit, Vic!' he shouted, his hand shaking wildly as he pointed at the set. 'That bass player - and that guitarist - it's - it's those bastards from Implosion!'

He turned up the sound.

'Can't be,' said Vic. 'Chance in a million!'

'Well look at this!' spluttered Vlad, as he whipped out two photographs from his wallet. He held them up to the screen as the band played on.

'Jesus!' shouted Vic.

'Hallelulya!' came a faint, but enthusiastic, response from an old lady in one of the displaced armchairs.

‘It’s them! It’s bloody well *them!*’

\*

A quick phone call to the local TV station soon identified the band as ‘Who Shot Nelson.’

‘Who shot *n/ho?*’ said Vic.

‘Never mind the name,’ said Vlad, ‘this is the D’s mega-Bs! Remember the plans we made on the train. This is goin’ to help us kill a lot birds with one stone. We’ll get the local *What’s On*, find out where they’re playin’, and go down and have a word or two.’

Vic nodded enthusiastically, although he started wondering what killing birds had got to do with anything. He was going to ask, but then memories of the episode in the upstairs corridor came flooding back, and he decided to keep schtum.

# 26

For Mick and Jim, the round of gigs was working like a dream. Mick was very happy with the situation and Jim was uncharacteristically animated. From time to time, he would bounce around like a little puppy, who's just learned he isn't going to the vet for some socially responsible operation.

'Where're we playing tonight?' said Jim, using his puce bed as a trampoline 'Go on - tell me - tell me - I wanna know, *now*!'

'You *know*, you bozo!' laughed Mick. 'It's that club over on Hayling Island. Only six hundred quid, but Dave reckons it's a good laugh.'

Only six hundred quid! The words had a brilliant ring to them. And there'd be lots more six hundred quid gigs coming up. And still no sign of Nona returning from Switzerland. Perhaps she'd stay there and marry some blind chocolate manufacturer.

'Look,' said Mick, 'we'd better get some rest before Dave and Royboy arrive.' So Jim calmed himself, and they had a lie down on their respective beds.

As they relaxed, they began thinking how great life had become, and how tonight's gig at the club on Hayling Island was going to be absolutely fantastic.

In the Terminal Rest Home, Vlad and Vic also lay back on their beds for a rest, and were thinking exactly the same thing.



The entertainment business is like no other. When an audience is really pissed - you can get away with murder. *And* they ask you to come back next month!

‘All you got to do,’ said Dave, ‘is get them to sign the contract on the night, while they’re still bladdered.’

The most important weapon to help clinch the deal was the band’s final song - and ‘Who Shot Nelson’ had a killer. The audience at the Hayling Island club were nothing more than sitting ducks.

Dave’s intro went something like this. ‘Now you may be thinking “Who Shot Nelson” is a strange name for a band - but there’s a reason. We’ve always wondered who actually fired that fateful shot at our great hero, all those years ago.’

‘We spent all last year researching in the Portsmouth Royal Naval Museum, and even travelled up to the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, and I’m delighted to tell you we’ve discovered exactly what went on.’

‘So we’ve written this song and included the answer, so you’ll never forget. Think of it as a celebration of one of the greatest pieces of historical detective work ever.’

‘Here we go!’

The song was a medium-paced rocker with funny bits about Spanish cannon balls being smaller than British cannon balls and French cannons being shorter and thinner - meat and two veg for late-night drunks.

But it was the audience shout-back, revealing the results of the band’s extensive research, that got everyone going.

Dave sang, ‘Who shot Nelson?’

Then the band delivered the first shoutback, ‘A bloke with a gun!’

Dave was in like Flynn - as the band vamped behind him. ‘OK!’ he shouted, ‘that’s your bit - try it again - forget the tune, concentrate on the volume!’

‘Who shot Nelson?’ The audience response was deafening, ‘A bloke with a gun!’

After that, everything roared relentlessly to a cataclysmic finish resulting in an audience with ‘first-degree brain damage’ - a Rock n’ Roll term meaning ‘very happy.’

\*

Gig over, Royboy and Dave went into the office to get next month’s contract signed. They’d done this hundreds of times, and could even help guide the organiser’s hand while he signed at the bottom.

At the bar, Mick and Jim were also involved in signing things. Not quite like those international rock stars who regularly scrawl their names across the t-shirt fronts of large-breasted groupies, but, being asked to sign a couple of beer mats was a sort of starting point.

They sipped their complimentary pints and basked in the congratulations from happy, inebriated punters. People were asking about the guitars, the lyrics, how long they’d been playing, what were their favourite bands; even the barmaid gave them a wink. It was small time, but big fun.

Then suddenly, just as Jim was about to write his telephone number on a beer mat for the barmaid, a dark shadow fell across the proceedings. Or, to be more precise - two dark shadows.

‘Hello,’ said one of the shadows. ‘We’re Vlad and Vic.’

Mick spun round and his hand shook so violently, he spilled his pint down the front of his trousers. Not that he noticed.

‘V-Vlad and Vic who?’ he stammered.

‘Oh, I ‘fink you know,’ said Vic. ‘We’re Vlad and Vic, your fans.’

‘W-What can we do for you?’ said Mick, who now looked as though he was going to pass out.

‘Well for a start, we could go for a little ride, and have a little talk.’

‘Yes,’ said Jim, ‘but Mick’s trousers are all wet and it could damage your upholstery.’

‘Our upholstery is the *least* of your worries,’ said Vlad. ‘The car’s outside. Shall we go?’

Mick guessed a ride with Vlad and Vic was equivalent to going first in a game of Russian roulette, with a bullet in every chamber. He tried stalling.

‘But we have to pack the gear.’

‘The other two will do it.’

‘And unload it back in Southsea,’ said Jim.

‘Oh, so we’re livin’ in Southsea, are we?’ said Vlad.

‘N-n-no!’ stuttered Mick, ‘it’s not really Southsea, it’s more like Brighton.’

Vlad wasn’t particularly interested in Mick’s attempts to cover up. ‘Our niece, little Doreen runs a pub in Portsmouth - nice place - The Dockyard Wall - ever been in it?’

‘No,’ said Mick, honestly.

‘And our sister, Carletta, lives there...’

‘When she’s not in Holloway,’ added Vic.

‘Ever bumped into her?’

‘No,’ said Mick, honestly, again.

But he was concentrating on trying to cover up Jim’s ‘Southsea’ gaffe, rather than discussing Vlad and Vic’s dubious relations.

‘He’s terrible with directions, is Jim. When he goes out on his own, I have to tie an address label to his willy to make sure he gets back safely.’ He tried to laugh, but it sounded as though he’d just swallowed a fly.

It was getting desperate, and all four of them knew it.

‘Shall we go?’ asked Vlad, in a way that implied there was only one answer he wanted to hear.

It was just a few steps to the club door, but for Mick and Jim it seemed like light years. They felt every movement of their leg muscles, and were conscious of each breath being drawn into their lungs and exiting via their mouths. The bright lights of the club and the end-of-night chatter seemed to have faded around them. All they could see was the open door and the darkness beyond.

Oh shit! thought Mick. This is it.

They moved into the chill night air, and walked unsteadily over to Vlad and Vic’s car. It looked dangerously anonymous.

'In you go,' said Vlad. So in they went.

As they moved off, all four sat in silence. They slid smoothly out of the car park and on to the open road. Mick and Jim didn't like this - not one bit.

Fond memories of Nona's absurdly decorated rooms, the bench down by the seashore, the theatrical wag with the eyesight and his anonymous, wasteland sing-song, the Salvation Army lady who whacked down the brandies, Ethel, the 85-year-old punk, that festival in Southampton - all flashed before their unblinking eyes.

Shit! thought Jim. The festival! The TV cameras were there. Bleedin' Sod's Law...?

As if to put him out of his misery, Vlad confirmed his worst fears. 'It was nice to see you on the telly. Gave us quite a pleasant surprise.'

'Oh yeah,' said Jim, weakly.

Their shirts were wet. Their mouths were dry. Their hearts were pounding against their rib cages. They just *knew* something was about to happen. And it did.

Suddenly, without warning, Vic twisted round in his seat, leaned over and shot out his arm. They both flinched and slumped back in their seats. Christ! There was something in his hand.

'Ere,' said Vic, 'fancy a peppermint?'

He held out a crumpled paper bag. Despite a suspicion that the mints could contain strychnine, Mick and Jim took one each.

'Must be hard on the throat doing all that singin',' said Vic, popping one into his mouth.

Reassured that death wasn't going to be imminent, they did the same.

'When we get where we're goin',' said Vlad, 'we'll make it as easy as we can for you.'

Mick and Jim thought the same - peppermints or not, at least the end was going to be quick.

Where they were going was a small motel, in north Portsmouth. They parked up, went into reception and Vlad paid cash. Although the desk clerk was suspicious of four men heading off to a double room, he realised instinctively at least two of the geezers were quite clearly not used to being challenged about anything.

Once in the room, Mick and Jim stood to attention while Vlad and Vic produced a bottle of vodka and four glasses out of the pockets of their Crombies. They sat down - Vlad and Vic in the room's two chairs and Mick and Jim on the bed with their hands on their knees. They were given glasses, and the spirit was poured.

'Right,' said Vlad, nursing his glass, 'let's start at the very beginning.'

'That's a very good place to start,' added Vic.

Mick and Jim nodded. This wasn't turning out to be what they expected.

A few months back, said Vlad, when we came to - er - do, like, an in-depth personal interview with you at your office, you'd scarpered.

'Absented yourself,' added Vic

'Well, whatever the Oxford Fuckin' Dictionary On Legs says, Charlie weren't too pleased...'

And so the whole story - well, at least, the Charlie interview, the East Europeans and the flight on the Bournemouth Express - started to unravel before Mick and Jim's gaping mouths. There was no mention of the Terminal Rest Home - even Vlad and Vic knew where to draw the line when it came to their public image.

When they reached the point where the train passed through Guildford, Vic leaned over, 'Fancy a top up?'

They did.

'We've done some pretty nasty things in our time,' said Vlad.

Mick and Jim were still alive, so they put on their best 'Oh I wouldn't say *that*' faces.

'No, we have,' said Vlad.

'But we realised on the train...'

'Just past Guildford,' added Vic.

'We realised *we* were the ones being chased, *we* were the ones being threatened, *we* were the ones they were out to get. And you know, we didn't like it.'

Mick and Jim nodded. They knew exactly what he meant.

'So, we agreed we were goin' to change.'

'You mean, get less violent?' asked Jim, hopefully.

'No,' said Vic. 'We decided to re-announce...'

'Renounce,' corrected Vlad. 'Renounce violence, altogether.'

'I'll have another top-up,' said Mick.

'Me too,' said Jim.

This was something worth celebrating.

'But what will you do?' asked Mick.

'Ah!' said Vlad, 'that's where you two come in.'

Bollocks, thought Mick, as soon as we get a glimpse of the bright aspirational uplands, we head straight back into the shit tub.

'Here's the "to do" list we wrote on the train.' Vlad pulled out a small piece of paper. 'One day, this might go for a bundle at Sotheby's.'

He began to read.

'Point one: We gotta stop Charlie Sumkins trying to put us six feet under. And that's where you get your chance to stick one on him.'

'Great,' whimpered Mick.

'You phone Charlie and tell him we was chasin' you in a fast car, what crashed through a barrier into the sea, burst into flames, with no bodies found. So *we're* dead, and the Bucharest AK-47 Appreciation Society are called off.'

'Point Two: You two dozy sods...'

Mick and Jim nodded enthusiastically.

'...got behind with your rent, and Charlie will keep going after you until he gets it - or you.'

Vic put his hand in his pocket and took out an envelope.

'Here's six thousand quid plus VAT - which is exactly what you owe him. When you're on the blower to Charlie, tell him you'll send it registered post. Then *you'll* be off the hook too.'

Mick and Jim could not have looked more amazed, than if Bette Midler in her tight-fitting, ruched dress had popped her head round the door, and asked if was there anything they fancied.

Mick pocketed the envelope, and Vlad handed over a piece of paper with Charlie's phone number and address.

'Now, Point Three - and I think you'll like this.' As if they hadn't liked Point Two enough! 'Vic and me want to start a new career.'

'As what?' asked Jim. His mind instantly covered off crocodile wrestlers, anaconda stranglers and those people who bite the heads off sharks. If that last category didn't exist, he was sure Vlad and Vic could start one.

'Now promise you won't laugh,' said Vic.

Mick and Jim were absolutely bloody sure they weren't going to laugh.

'We want to start again as - as - singers.'

Mick and Jim nodded, as if their lives depended on it. For all they knew, Vlad and Vic might have been planning to renounce violence, starting next week.

'Yeah - I think we could do really well,' said Vlad. 'I mean the songs on the Wurlitzer at the Dead Dog was great, but, in between, you know - er - our Charlie assignments - we've been writin' our own stuff, and we'd like to get it out there before we get too old.'

'And where do we fit in?' asked Mick, almost feeling as though they were making some new friends, or, at least, some new not-enemies.

'Well, as part of the deal, you record us singin' a song and make a promo video - that's what you do, ain't it?'

'Oh yes,' said Mick, who had never made a pop video in his life. 'All the time.'

'So,' said Vlad, 'the plan is - call Charlie with the sad news, post the cash, record the song, make the video and then we can all disappear and live happily ever after.'

'When do we start?' asked Jim.

'Quick as possible,' said Vlad. 'How about ten o'clock tomorrow mornin', round your place?'

'Sounds great to me chaps,' said Mick, swilling down his vodka and standing up.

'Any chance of a lift home?'

# 29

The following morning, over boiled eggs with toastie soldiers in the *España Por Favor*, they agreed Mick and Jim would make the Charlie call, that afternoon. But then came the tricky job of deciding the time and date of the car chase, where it started and, most importantly, where it would finish - the site of the fatal crash.

After much discussion and the creative use of salt cellars, pepper pots, egg cups, serviettes and plastic grapes to indicate the local landmarks, they decided the chase would start on the A27 north of the city and go east to the start of the Chichester by-pass.

It would then double back on the A258, and turn left into the upmarket sailing village of Bosham. Lots of harbourside, lots of places to crash. If Charlie asked any questions, they could say the local police put a news blackout on the incident, as they didn't want it to get out that hit men had been tear-arsing around the village. The effect on property prices, particularly the Chief Constable's six-bedroom place with its own private mooring, would have been catastrophic.

\*

Mick and Jim got down to the Destroyer after lunch. The pub was empty and they made the call from the payphone in the public bar. It'd be more difficult to trace, and they certainly didn't want anyone listening in.

First, they phoned Dave and apologised for their sudden disappearance. A couple of mates had dragged them off for a drink and a chat about old times, and it was difficult to say no. Which, apart from stretching the definition of 'mates', was more or less true.

Then Jim drew the short straw, and made the second call. Charlie answered immediately, and was obviously surprised. Jim hit him with the return of the £6,000 + VAT straight away. Charlie seemed very pleased.

Then, reading from pencilled notes on the back of a ripped Kellogg's box, Jim gave Charlie the details of how Vlad and Vic had met their sorry end.

'Oh, that's terrible,' said Charlie. 'You know, even though they were a little bit frisky at times, those boys were like sons to me.'

Christ! thought Jim, this guy is slippery. He was *almost* believable.

Of course, the sincerity in Charlie's voice when he described the deaths as terrible, was because, he wanted to have the personal pleasure of finishing them off himself, in as nasty a way as possible.

Still, there were no more questions. Charlie thanked Jim, again, for the cash, and the conversation ended.

Jim thought it prudent to record the call, for Vlad and Vic's personal review.

He walked over to Mick, who was sat at a table conveniently out of earshot.

'He bought it!' said Jim, 'but bloody hell, I'm sweating like a pig!'

Mick pointed to two huge brandies on the table.

'Antiperspirant, for pigs!'

They both downed the drinks, in one.

\*

Once they were back at the Weeliveer Guest Establishment, and had calmed down, they had to agree things were moving on apace. In a mood of celebration, they swapped colour co-ordinated bedrooms, but within minutes, they found their new environments, just as nauseous and disorientating as the old, and swapped back.

\*

Mick and Jim arrived early at the Destroyer, went up the bare wooden stairs to the function room, fired up ProTools on the iMac, then plugged in a keyboard and a Neumann U87 microphone on a stand.

Jim's idea was to listen to the song, vamp in the basic chords, then record Vlad and Vic singing over the top. Then would come the big job of tarting up the voices and adding the arrangement overnight, without them breathing vodka fumes over his shoulder.

When Vlad and Vic arrived, they were played the tape of the Charlie conversation. It was well received. They were shown the registered post receipt for the cash, which also got the thumbs up. So far, so *very* good.

Then Vlad and Vic took out a cassette tape and an old-fashioned, big buttoned, black plastic tape recorder. They pressed the clunky start key and played their song. They stood, almost to attention, as it played. Their eyes, so often diamond hard and uncaring, now had a watery, pleading look which desperately sought approval.

The song was absolute bollocks. Plus it sounded as though it'd been recorded with Vlad and Vic standing on their heads in an oil drum, at the bottom of a flooded mineshaft.

Christ, thought Mick, every time we think we're getting out of this, something miraculously guides us back down into life's septic tank.

'Tasty vocal sound,' said Mick. 'Yeah,' added Jim, 'nice beat, got a good groove going.'

'We thought the best bits was the words,' said Vlad.

'Absolutely!' said Mick. 'Gershwin would've shit himself, if he'd had you two as competition.'

'Well,' said Vic menacingly, 'This Absolutely Gershwin bloke can shit himself all he likes, as long as he don't try and muscle in on the Birdy-Songers.'

'Sorry?' said Mick.

'Punters on holiday! Costa del Clap an'all that - dancin' round the pool - doin' stupid actions.'

Mick shuddered as images of Nona poking her finger up the toy donkey's bottom came flooding back.

'Right, I see! A targeted song. Clever marketing, very clever marketing.'

'We got the lyrics here,' said Vlad.

This was a real bonus, in terms of Mick and Jim's survival, because the lyrics on the recording were about as easy to follow as a speeded up Tibetan burial chant played backwards.

Mick and Jim read through the lyrics and their evening began to look even bleaker.

The song was called *Stir Your Pudden*, and this is what they planned to sing.

*If you're down and out and your legs feel wooden*

*If you want a tip, then here's a gudden*

*Get a life and get it sudden*

*Grab your spoon and stir your pudden*

*Stir it up. Stir it down.*



*Mucho motion, round and round*

*Stir it when you're feeling cool*

*Stir it by the swimming pool*

~~*Bounce until your dick goes blue*~~

*Bounce until your nose goes blue*

*Stir it. Stir it. Stir it. Whooooo!*

'Right,' said Jim, choking with disbelief, 'give me an hour and I'll vamp the chords into ProTools, then you can pop back and we'll lay the vocals down.'

Vlad and Vic liked that - lay the vocals down - it was proper recording talk. In their previous experience of recording, the bloke working the tape recorder asked them what the fuck did they expect him to do with their shit-awful singing.

In their less deranged moments, the V-twins considered themselves sensitive musical *artistes* and the recordist's comments were hurtful, even heart-breaking.

But it wasn't all bad news.

The next day, his body was found in the Regent's Canal weighed down by a Grundig TK5.

This set up, thought Vlad and Vic, had a much more professional ring to it.

# 30

‘Nice one,’ said Vlad. ‘Yeah, way cool,’ said Vic.

Jim nearly peed himself with relief. He’d been up all night working on the track, doing the arrangement, playing bass on it, waking Mick up to play guitar, correcting what seemed like a billion bum notes in Vlad and Vic’s vocals, adding effects and singing the backing vocals, himself.

After listening to the song a couple of dozen times, Vlad and Vic left – still singing at the tops of their voices.

Mick flopped down next to Jim.

‘Congratulations my old spud! You just turned a tumbrel of shite into the *Hallelujah Chorus*. Mind you, if they turn nasty about the video, I expect you to be right there beside me, or, preferably, in front.’

Jim didn’t reply. He was asleep with his head on the keyboard.

\*

An hour later, Vlad and Vic met with Mick on Southsea sea front, with their Ozzy wigs, now dyed black, and their hopelessly fake Zapata moustaches. In an unexpected twist, they were wearing two bright-pink Mexican bandit outfits they’d bought from the local party shop.

‘Right,’ said Mick, ‘we don’t want anyone clocking it’s Southsea, so low camera angles, ultra-violet filter, blue-sky backdrop. We’re shooting HDV, progressive scan, 25 frames a second, 250th elevated shutter speed, with 48 kilohertz sound sampling.’

Vlad nodded, then turned and whispered to Vic.

‘Hear that? Completely un-fuckin-fathomable! We’re on our way to the top, bruv!

Before they began videoing, there was a bit of a problem as a handgun dropped out of Vic’s shirt and fired as it hit the ground.

‘Shit!’ shouted Mick, as the round ricocheted off in the direction of the amusement park.

‘Sorry about that!’ said Vic, ‘Dodgy safety catch.’

He began looking down the barrel of the gun while fiddling with the errant mechanism.

Vlad was on to the situation, in a flash.

‘Now what have I told you about apologising! The first words you always say when making an apology are “Fuck You!”’

Vic looked suitably admonished. He tucked the gun down the front of his trousers, before clapping his hands together and crying, ‘Right! Let’s do this!’

‘Are you sure?’ asked Mick.

Vic shrugged his shoulders and tucked the gun further into his trousers. ‘Yeah! If it goes off again, I’ll just grit me teeth and keep goin’.’

‘You got it!’ said Mick, and turned his ‘I love Southsea’ baseball cap back to front. He looked and sounded a prat, but he’d do anything to impress a couple of psychopaths, who were trying to kick the habit.

\*

The nearest Vlad and Vic had been to appearing on professionally shot video was on various CCTV cameras in and around London. They didn't mind being on CCTV, as long as the cameras weren't near the actual scene of the crime.

Southsea beach was a good place to shoot. There were few people about and plenty of room. They played the song on a small ghetto blaster and Vlad and Vic mimed away. Later in the day, as the area became busier, people were starting to notice what was going on, with the pink Mexican outfits attracting most attention.

At one point, four loutish-looking teenagers came swaggering up. 'Olé! Olé! Olé! Olé!' they chanted, like a mini-stand full of football hooligans. 'Look,' one of them cried, 'It's Speedy Gonzales and his gay boyfriend. Ooooooh nice!'

This was not a sensible thing to say.

Vlad stopped singing, switched off the ghetto blaster, removed his sombrero and walked over slowly to stand close to the youth who had heckled.

Mick looked around, desperately. The nearest phone booth was 100 yards away, he began to prepared himself mentally for the dash to call an ambulance.

But there was no violence. Vlad merely gave the youth his very special look. This was top drawer stuff - so intimidating, so malevolent, so uncompromisingly threatening, it was guaranteed to cause the recipient's testicles to shoot rapidly back into their abdominal cavity, and stay there, trembling, for at least a week.

Apart from that minor incident, everything went well. And from Vlad, Vic and Mick's perspective, dealing with the heckler *was* just a 'minor incident.' But, this wasn't how it was perceived by the young oaf who received Vlad's venomous 'up close and personal' stare. He was still in therapy, four months later.

\*

The *Stir Your Pudden* pop promo was shot by midday, edited on Mick's laptop during the afternoon and ready for viewing by eight that evening.

The function room was tense, but as Vlad and Vic watched the video, their faces lit up like small children at a birthday party. And Mick and Jim began to breathe again.

Mick knocked off a dozen DVD copies.

Vlad took the discs. 'And now,' he said, 'it's time for us to disappear off the face of the Earth. Thanks a lot boys.'

'Tell me,' said Mick, chancing his arm, 'before you go, we've been working with you, and regard you as fellow professionals, but we don't know your full names - I'm Michael and this is James - I presume you're Vladimir and Victor?'

'Well, not exactly,' said Vlad, adopting a confidential tone for the first time since they'd met. 'It's like, when mum was carryin' us, she had this bad chest, something terrible - so, every night, she spread vapour rub mixed with vodka on her - well, you know - things, and it worked a treat. So, when it came to fillin' in the birth certificates, she felt she ought to commemorate the relief what that mixture gave her. So, like, actually - we're Vladivar and Vicks.'

'Though when we write our names, we don't have to put that registered trade mark circle thing, or nothin',' added Vic.

Mick and Jim tightened their face muscles and nodded solemnly.

A final handshake, a big hug each and the job was done.

As the sound of the V-twins' Guccis faded to nothingness down the function room stairs, Mick and Jim heaved synchronised sighs of relief.

'Thank God,' said Mick, nursing his rapidly bruising rib cage, 'we'll never hear the names, Vlad and Vic, ever again.'

And for once, he was absolutely right. Sort of.

# 31

Less than a week after Vlad and Vic headed off into the sunset, a letter, smelling of Chanel No. 5 and Toblerone, addressed to Mick and Jim, arrived from Switzerland. Mick opened it.

‘Shit! It’s from Nona!’ His eyes opened wide and began to pulsate. He was starting to shake. If he’d had alarm bells instead of testicles, the din from his underpants would have been deafening.

‘She says a bloke called Charlie has been phoning her at that Swiss place where she’s holed up, asking if we were staying here.’

‘Balls!’ said Jim.

‘She says she asked him how he got her number, and he just laughed and said he had ways.’

Mick and Jim looked at each other - they didn’t think this was a laughing matter at all.

‘She told him we’d *been* here, but now we’d gone, and she’d no idea where we were. And that we were absolute arseholes, and she was glad to see the back of us. Apparently, he seemed happy with that. Plus the usual kisses from Nona stuff.’

‘Shit!’ said Jim, ‘that was a close call.’

‘Yeah,’ said Mick, ‘but let’s calm down. Say this letter took four days to get to us. If Charlie thought we were still here, he’d have had his Neanderthals round by now.’

That made sense. Nona had done the decent thing. She’d covered for them. She’d saved them from Charlie’s unimaginably unpleasant clutches. In fact, she’d played a blinder. Just over a month ago, she’d seen they were in trouble, and no matter how inconvenient, or horrifying, the arrangement had been, she had kept them protected and safe.

And now, even though she was recovering from a very nasty fall, she’d dealt with one of the world’s top criminals, and put him well and truly off their track. What a hero!

They looked at each other - and, suddenly, both of them felt rather ashamed of the unkind way they’d behaved towards her, some of the uncalled for things they’d said, and some of the cartoons they’d drawn.

But an hour later, when they were well ensconced in the Destroyer, and had toasted Nona’s health four times with double brandies, those noble, sensitive thoughts, and the uncomfortable guilt that came with them, had evaporated completely.

Maybe, based on that night’s performance, Nona’s ‘absolute arseholes’ assessment hadn’t been too wide of the mark.

The disaster happened on a lovely evening.

The sun cast long shadows over the Common - the golden hour - fabulous! Mick and Jim had just come in from a stroll along the seafront, where, inspired by the warm breeze, they'd had a pleasant time chatting about how cash was up and stress levels down. It felt like the right time for making some serious plans about how to move their lives forward in a more stable, predictable and enjoyable way.

In the glare of Nona's 'white out' foyer, the white Trimphone was particularly difficult to spot. It rang just as they opened the front door and Mick, guessing where the sound was coming from, managed to pick it up, first time.

He very nearly said, 'Good evening, Implosion Productions.' If he'd said that, a casual observer might have felt it was a silly thing to do. But in fact, if he *had* said that, it would have been the equivalent of sticking his head down the barrel of a ten-inch naval gun and shouting 'Pull the trigger, if you think you're hard enough!'

'Can I speak to Mick or Jim?' said a quiet voice on the other end of the phone.

Danger signals rang out. Apart from Dave, Royboy, Vlad and Vick, who knew this was their phone number?

'Sorry,' said Mick, carefully, 'I'm a guest here, I wouldn't know.'

His hand began to shake.

'I wonder if you could give 'em a message - it's their old mate, Charlie.'

'OK,' said Mick. He coughed to disguise the tremor in his voice. 'I'll just get a piece of paper and pencil.'

While he was saying this, he wrote a note on the pad beside the phone, and indicated to Jim to read it.

The note said, 'CHARL...' at which point, he was pressing so hard, the pencil snapped. But Jim got the message. He stood close to Mick, listening to both ends of the conversation while nervously chewing on the Trimphone's coiled handset lead.

'Sorry, can't find a pencil,' lied Mick, trying to sound as helpful and uninvolved as possible.

'OK,' said Charlie, 'I'll talk straight to you, Mick or Jim, whichever one you are.'

'This is the message. Thanks for the six grand plus VAT. It was much appreciated. However, my book-keepin' lady is doing my tax return, and she's just reminded me I forgot to add interest for the time you were owing the rent.'

'Oh,' said Mick, dropping the pretence, 'but it was only a few months.'

'Ah! Yes,' said Charlie, 'but I have *very* high interest rates.'

'Like what?'

'You wouldn't want to know.'

'Well, what does it come to?'

'Eight and a half grand.'

'What!' screamed Mick.

'You 'eard me,' said Charlie, suddenly sounding very unpleasant.

Jim spun round, closed his eyes and slumped back against the gleaming white wall. 'Shit, Mick,' he said quietly, 'this is never going to stop!'

'B-b-but can't we negotiate?'

'Sorry Mick or Jim - my book-keepin' lady's a real dragon, and it's more than my life's worth to try and argue the toss. But I'll tell you what. I have a new team of East European debt collectors. They'll come down to Southsea tomorrow - we know where you live, by the way - so you can hand over the cash, personally. That way, you won't have the inconvenience of parcellin' up the money - *and* you save on postage.'

'OK,' said Mick, realising further discussion was a complete waste of time, 'we'll have the money ready for your boys in the morning.'

'Good,' said Charlie. 'Got to go now. I got this chain of Ballet Schools I use for money launderin', and, well, one or two of the principals are getting a bit too big for their tutus, so it's time to give their Nijinskys a tweak. Busy, busy, busy!'

'Thanks for the call,' said Mick.

'I'm sure it was a pleasure,' said Charlie.

Mick put the Trimphone receiver down. It flipped off the base and bounced up and down in mid-air because Jim was still chewing frantically on the coiled lead.

'Where do we get eight and a half grand from? We got nothing like that!'

'Look,' said Mick, 'we gotta do some quick thinking.'

'Oh, so quick thinking is all we have to do?' cried Jim. 'I'll do some quick thinking - let's get up the stairs *pronto*, and start packing...'

But Mick, despite his bulk, was already halfway up the stairs.

They ran along the top landing and, without thinking, turned left into Nona's sitting room. This wasn't the right thing to do if you wanted to get yourself into a positive state of mind.

The room was Nona's masterpiece - the Midnight Lounge.

The walls were black, the carpet was black, the sofa and chairs were black, the woodwork was black and the ceiling was black with little gold stars. The central lampshade was also black and cast a tube of light vertically downwards onto a black coffee table with a black Trimphone.

In case you think the room was a trifle extreme, the overall look was tempered by an imitation gold, Louise XIV, Sun King-type cuckoo clock on one wall, and a large, ornate, gold-framed mirror on the opposite wall, although all it did was reflect more blackness back into the room.

It was like being engulfed in the mind of a compulsive depressive, only a lot worse.

They sat down and caught their breath. Mick looked up at the clock. All he saw were the seconds ticking away, bringing the time the East Europeans turned up on the doorstep, ever closer.

They didn't speak. They just stared into the blackness - and in the Midnight Lounge, there was a hell of a lot of blackness to stare into.

Then, suddenly, the cuckoo clock kicked off. They both leapt out of their black, fluffy armchairs, not to mention their skins. With a roar, Mick dashed across the room, wrenched the clock off the wall, ran over to the black fireplace and shoved it up the chimney, where the determined little sod continued to call, though at a much reduced volume.

They sat and waited and, just as the cuckoo croaked its last cuck, the Trimphone rang. They both jumped again.

‘Don’t answer it,’ said Jim, ‘it’ll be Charlie putting his interest rates up.’

But Mick felt he had sod all to lose by now. He picked up the receiver.

‘Yes?’ he said, hesitantly. ‘Well, yes - this is *actually* Mick Barton speaking.’

Jim tried to hide behind the sofa, but had difficulty seeing where the sofa, the walls and the carpet began and ended. So he sat down on the floor, with his fingers over his eyes.

Slowly, Mick’s face muscles began to relax and his confidence started to grow. He knelt down on the black carpet and rested his elbows on the black coffee table.

‘Las Vegas?’

‘Yes, of course, we shoot videos - short deadline? Hm! Like when? Oh! Really! Two days!’

‘Well, yes, I suppose we can fit it into our busy schedule.’

He half covered the handset, and spoke to Jim in a louder than usual voice. ‘We can put that interview with the Prime Minister back a week, can’t we? And U2 will just have to wait their turn. And can we cancel the...’

Jim removed his fingers from his eyes, and signalled for him to get on with it.

‘And, the budget...?’

The voice crackled at the other end of the line.

Mick went deathly pale, which was quite a difficult trick to pull off in the Midnight Lounge, as the room effectively sucked all light away into a parallel universe.

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘I’m *sure* we can put together something rather exceptional for that. Mr Green. McCarran International Airport, Las Vegas. You’ll be waiting. Great. And you have all the equipment we’ll need - and you’ve arranged B1 media visas - that’s fantastic! We’ll book some flights now.’

‘All taken care of? Brilliant! Pick up the tickets and paperwork - where? Great! 10 o’clock flight? Yes. Good. Right. So we look forward to meeting Mr Green at McCarran International, at around 8 pm on Wednesday.’

‘Can I ask what the video’s about?’

‘Oh I see - no need for us to worry. Just what we like to hear!’

‘Fine. Fine. And thank you for calling Implosion Productions.’

Mick put the receiver back on the Trimphone. As usual, it flipped over and fell onto the floor. Neither of them felt inclined to pick it up.

Time was short, so Mick spoke quickly. ‘Video job, Las Vegas. Flights tomorrow. All booked and paid for. Equipment provided. Tickets and visas ready for collection at Heathrow. And, wait for this, budget - \$200,000.’

Jim was impressed to the point of being totally stunned. He managed to find the sofa, and couldn’t resist an understandable ‘nervous’ on the flight times.

‘We *will* be leaving before Charlie’s new EU recruits arrive to - you know...’

Mick certainly knew. And was thinking fast.

‘We pack our bags now, leave a note they can pass on to Nona, post a letter to Dave and Royboy - showbiz is tough - shove the gear in self-storage, leave the car, sod the traffic wardens, get the train, book a hotel, zeds, cab to terminal, and off to do the business.’

It sounded like a good plan. So that’s exactly what they did.



\*

They slept at the Heathrow hotel like excited children on Christmas Eve. Their alarm clocks worked, the cab arrived on time, and their first-class tickets, complete with B1 media visas, were ready and waiting. They even had time to draw out all their 'Who Shot Nelson' cash at the airport bank. Everything went as smoothly as possible.

The flight was with British Airways, which was a novelty. Mick and Jim were more used to flying with airlines where the staff had lots of experience counseling next-of-kin.

Soon after take-off, they celebrated by toasting each other with two very, very large brandies.

What a fantastic result! Charlie, with his vile telephone manner and team of thugs were, according to the stewardess, being left behind at around 9.4 miles per minute. Implosion Productions was back on the international scene - which was just where it ought to be - and there were 200,000 greenbacks stacked up and waiting to be collected.

It wasn't until they were halfway across the Atlantic that they began to have some serious doubts.

Mick sat back in his first-class seat in the first-class cabin and started to feel uncomfortable. It wasn't just the onion soup - it was a question which had been nagging at the back of his mind, and had now come full frontal.

Jim, however, was in an unusually good mood, sipping a martini and chattering on about how much he preferred budget airline cabin crews to the up-market, executive lot.

'For a start,' he said, 'their jokes are funnier.'

"Pass along the 'plane please, the seats at the front are just as uncomfortable as the seats at the back." Or, "Any rubbish left on the plane will be posted to your home address." And my personal favourite, "Gloria will be coming down the aisle with the snacks trolley. I'm sure you'll find something you like in her drawers."

He chuckled to himself, then noticed Mick wasn't in chuckle mode.

Mick turned and gave Jim the full frontal. 'How come they knew our phone number? How come they got visas so quickly? We said "OK" yesterday evening, and this morning we're picking everything up at the check-in desk. How come the tickets had the right names? And why did they chose *us* - there must be stacks of video production companies in Las Vegas. And while we're on the subject - who the hell are *they*?'

All Mick and Jim had was a name - Mr Green. And that was it. Once the deal was offered, they'd shot off to Heathrow within hours. Charlie's goons were due to arrive the next morning - and, with that sort of pressure, you don't start asking new clients for photographic driving licences and utility bills as proof of identity.

'You're bloody well right mate. Who's setting this up?'

'Or to put it more precisely,' said Mick, 'who's setting *us* up? I don't want to add to what I'm sure is our perfectly reasonable feelings of paranoia, but have you noticed the tickets are only one-way?'

'It just doesn't ring true,' said Mick. 'I get this nasty feeling we're moving from one crappy situation to another. Like that Mr Green thing. Didn't the mobsters in *Reservoir Dogs* all have names like Mr Pink and Mr Blue? I think somebody is playing with us - and I don't like it. I know we're good, but this works out at \$100,000 a day - it just doesn't make sense. I mean Ackroyd's Pie and Peas Shop in Burnley must have a higher profile in Las Vegas than we do.'

After a few more minutes of this sort of talk, Mick had convinced himself, and Jim, that the call could only have been from some sort of organised crime syndicate, or the Mafia, or both.

'I though it was all too good to be true,' said Jim. 'I mean, when have we ever had a mystery phone call, with such a blinding offer?'

'*Never*, old boy,' said Mick. 'But one thing *is* true - we've got five hours 'til we land in Vegas and, by then, we have to have a plan in place. Somehow, we've just got to avoid being picked up by Mr Green. It's just a question of applying all our brainpower and skills to come up with a winner. And we can do it! Remember Hambledon!'

At that moment, Jim would have been happy to shove the whole of the 1777 Hambledon cricket team headfirst down the aeroplane's toilet, one by bleeding one. But he knew Mick was right, and simply nodded.

'That's the spirit,' said Mick, patting him on the knee. 'I'm off to sleep, now. You take first watch.'

In the five hours since they started to have serious doubts, Mick and Jim still hadn't managed to come up with a plan to avoid whatever was waiting for them, because, quite simply, they'd no idea what was waiting for them.

The plane approached McCarran International at dusk. Mick looked out of the window as they banked to make their final approach.

There was a fantastic view of Las Vegas - the Eiffel Tower, the Pyramid, the Stratosphere Tower and the pulsating lights of the Strip. This was a place where people enjoyed losing everything they had. Mick wondered how much he and Jim were about to lose, and whether they would enjoy any part of it.

He turned to Jim and managed to be both optimistic and pessimistic in the same sentence. 'At least it will be dark by the time the Mafia start looking for us.'

The plane landed smoothly, the air-bridge connection was made and the passengers disembarked. Mick and Jim were the last to leave.

Pulse rates were more or less normal as they stood by the carousel, and they were pleased to see their two very modest bags come clunking around within minutes.

It was when the bags were in their hands that the pressure started to increase. As they moved away from the carousel, neither of them spoke, because neither of them had any idea what to do next.

Then Mick said, 'Just realised, Jimbo, we've got enough cash on us to get a flight back.'

'Great!' said Jim. 'Let's do it now!'

Almost immediately, Mick stopped, and screwed his face up in a pained expression. 'But it's *200 grand!*'

'Yes,' said Jim, 'but it's 200 grand they might slap in our faces, when we're lying in some morgue, just to check we're really dead.'

'Sorry mate, but you haven't pressed the 'Convince Mick' button, yet.'

'What about the *one-way* tickets?'

'Probably think we can pay for our own return tickets with part of the \$200,000.'

'But, if we go back to the UK, we've still got our coffee morning with the East Europeans to look forward to,' said Jim. He sighed and looked down at the polished marble floor. 'I mean, all we ever wanted to do was run a little corporate video outfit...'

'Right,' said Mick, suddenly 'I've decided. You're right.'

'Oh, so you'll get all the credit then,' said Jim, with a touch of bitterness in his voice.

For the first time in the whole affair, they were close to having an argument.

'Look,' said Mick. 'You know me. I know you. Let's stop pissing around. Let's just agree, together, to get a flight back, right now.'

'OK!' said Jim. And they turned around.

Immediately, a security guard moved to block their way.

'I'm sorry, guys,' he said, with the confidence a fully armed person has when giving unpleasant information to two totally unarmed people.

'You can't go back. See that white line there. You've crossed the threshold. You're officially out of the airport. The only way is that way.' And he pointed to the exit in the distance.

'Bollocks!' said Jim.

'Fuck!' said Mick.

The guard was unmoved.

'Having been born and raised in the wondrous state of Kentucky in the heart of the God-fearing bible belt, I don't approve of that sort of un-American language. So why don't you shithead limeys get your motherfuckin' asses out of my airport. And have a nice day.'

'Yes,' said Mick, 'we're going to have a lovely day being sliced up by the Mafia.'

Jim pulled him away.

Metal barriers formed a walkway for arriving passengers. Behind the barriers, a huge crowd of people were craning their necks trying to spot their loved ones. There were waving hands, shouts of welcome and, yes, even tears of joy. Impervious to these emotions, were ranks of po-faced chauffeurs holding up large cards with the names of important persons written on them.

'There's so many punters, I think we're going to be alright,' said Mick. 'Just stay close to the wall and keep your head down. We'll get lost in the crowd.'

It was exactly at this moment, when he was making these confidence-boosting observations, he spotted what must have been Mr Green, holding up a large white card with 'Implosion Productions' written on it.

Mr Green was wearing a *Reservoir Dogs* outfit - only it wasn't fancy dress. Sharp black suit, white shirt, thin black tie and black shades. The only difference between him and the gangsters in the Tarantino romp was his white shirt wasn't soaked in blood - at least, not yet.

'Cover your face,' said Mick, 'they're over there.'

'What do you mean, *they're* over there,' said Jim, as he flashed a quick look at Mr Green and the offending placard. There wasn't *one Reservoir Dogs* lookalike. There were *six*!

'Stay cool,' said Mick, looking down and holding his hand up to cover the side of his face, 'they've missed us.'

Another twenty yards, and he took a quick glance over his shoulder. Mr Green was showing a photograph to the other five, who were all looking very excited. He pointed in their direction, and Mick knew the game was up.

'Run!' he shouted, turning to Jim. But Jim was already five yards ahead, going like the clappers.

It was at times like this, Mick regretted not having stuck to his last diet, but his bag was lighter than Jim's so, within seconds, they were side-by-side, zigzagging through the crowds, desperately looking for the cab rank.

'We've had it!' shouted Jim, as they skidded round a corner. 'There's six of the bastards, and they're not carrying any luggage.'

That was absolutely true. He could've added they were younger, fitter and, apart from a hand-gun each, had very little extra weight to slow them down.

Mr Green's black-suited team moved swiftly. They were confident. They were professionals. Their target was two unarmed, English wimps. This was going to be a walk in the park.

Unfortunately, they reckoned without *The King and I*.

# 35

Leticia Antoinette Talofa was on a high. She had a golden opportunity to promote her new show, and one of the airport's concourses was the perfect place to do it.

She wasn't going to do the whole show, of course - just the highlights. Getting into her husband's casino and watching her version of *The King and I* would cost a hefty \$200 a seat, so Leticia reckoned the airport audience ought to be damn grateful to see a few minutes of her in action, for free.

This was going to be a classy show. Far classier than the shows her grandfather used to organise, which usually featured hooded men and burning crosses. She'd regarded those shows as a complete waste of time. Christ! What a putz! He didn't even charge entrance fees.

Leticia's husband had managed to get permission to put the stage in this prime location, right across the public concourse, after guiding the authorities through a massive number of health and safety laws, fire regulations and the unpleasant things that might happen if they were ever alone in an underground car park, late at night.

It was a big stage, a simple, square platform about three feet high. Leticia dominated the space. She was a large, muscular woman, wearing a purple crinoline, which hid most of her bulk. Around her, sat the King of Siam's children, wearing beautifully tailored, golden robes.

She was just getting ready for her first number, when a man in a black suit, a thin black tie and sunglasses leapt onto the front of the stage, obviously intending to run across to the back, and carry on up the concourse.

He wasn't a very polite man.

'Out of the way, you fat old bitch!' he shouted.

Leticia swung round and stared into his eyes. Mr Green went deathly pale. But only for a split second, because Anna, the new arrival at the court of the King of Siam, delivered a vicious punch square into his face.

He fell backwards off the stage. Blood spurted from his nostrils all over his white shirt. He stood up, unaware that it was, probably, this sort of incident which must have inspired the young Quentin.

He staggered back to Leticia, who was rubbing the knuckles of the hand that delivered the punch. The king's children had scattered and the five other Tarantino lookalikes had sprinted across the stage in hot pursuit of the English wimps.

Mr Green, however, was not in a running mood.

'I'm so sorry, Mrs Tallota. I didn't realise it was you.'

'Course you didn't darlin'. You just called Leticia Antoinette Talofa, wife of Don Talofa, head of the Talofa family, a fat, old bitch. How long you think you got left to live?'

'One hour, twenty minutes?'

'Hm! I like optimistic men.'

Leticia moved in close and spoke in a low voice, full of menace.

'Let's cut the crap! I don't tell anyone about what's just happened, if you buy a hundred tickets for the production. That's \$30,000 in my account by tomorrow. And the seats had better be filled.'

'You got it,' said Mr Green, ignoring her mathematics and wiping the blood from his nose with the back of his hand.

With the negotiations over, Leticia gave Mr Green another enormous blow to the jaw. He went down again, but somehow struggled to his feet.

'Dank yoob derry mush, Mrs Tallota,' he slobbered, and spat out a broken tooth, before hobbling off to catch up with the rest of the Tarantino team.

Leticia turned and burst into *Getting to know you* to a crowd who looked as bemused, as they were impressed, by the recent on-stage action.

A few people who thought this new adaptation of *The King and I* was going to feature lots of explicit violence and bloodstained clothing, immediately began making enquiries about buying tickets for the full show.

\*

Mick and Jim were fighting for breath, and on the edge of synchronised coronaries when they reached the cab rank. They burst into the first available cab.

'The Strip, and fast,' wheezed Mick. He calculated the many attractions of the Strip would give them lots of places to hide. They could lower their profile until they had time to think and make a plan.

'There are strict speeding laws in this state, buddy,' said the cab driver. 'I don't break the law for anyone.'

'Here's \$300, if you get your foot down!' said Mick.

They shot away from the airport like a bullet from a gun. Although that particular analogy wouldn't have gone down well with Mick and Jim, at that specific moment.

The cab driver was surprisingly good at weaving though the traffic at unlawfully high speeds. Tyre-squealing swerves, vicious braking to avoid law-abiding motorists, then foot down, flat out, whenever the road ahead cleared.

Despite the heavy traffic, the cab was soon a mile, or so, down the highway, and they began to relax.

In fact, Mick was elated. 'We did it!' he cried. 'We shook the bastards off! You know, I'm beginning to think "They Win. You Lose." is a crap outlook on life.'

Jim wasn't so sure. He'd just had a quick glance out of the rear window. 'Don't look now, but there's a black, stretch limo with black windows, right behind us.'

Mick checked, but his optimism was undaunted.

'There must be *thousands* of stretch limos here - hey, *buddy*, this is *Las Vegas*! 'And just to show how wrong you are...'

He leaned forward. 'Driver?'

'Call me Maurice.'

'OK! Maurice - could you hang a right at the next junction?'

Maurice hung a right. But the limo followed.

'Now, a left here.' Maurice went left, but the limo stayed on their tail.

'Now, second right,' tried Mick. But every move they made, the limo followed, sometimes a couple of cars behind, but always in sight.

'OK,' said Mick, starting to look uncomfortable, 'one final check.'

Maurice had no problem following instructions, and wherever these crazy guys wanted to go was fine by him. At legal speeds, the meter was running nicely. And they'd paid an amazing bonus for stepping on the gas.

'Just head out of town,' said Mick, 'somewhere you can really put your foot down.'

Maurice felt the initial money he'd received to put his foot down had run out, so, as they started to move towards the edge of town, he eased up.

Mick immediately offered him another \$300 to *really* get his arse into gear. There was a short conversation explaining that 'arse' meant 'ass', after which, the cash was handed over. The response was immediate, and they shot up to around 100 mph, gratifyingly well over the limit. But a quick check showed the limo was still in sight.

After about ten miles, they were coming into an area where, even though it was dark, you could see the spaces between buildings had been reclaimed by the desert.

Another five miles, or so, and Las Vegas was just an insane strip of pulsating light on the horizon. But, still, it was the lights of the black limo that really focused their attention.

'We've got to do something,' said Jim.

And suddenly, that something came into view. In the distance, way over to the right, they could just see a train was heading their way. It was a long train, probably pulling freight, as there were no lights from carriages.

An unmanned crossing warning sign flashed by: Stop, Look, Listen and Live!

'Maurice, can you jump the crossing?' asked Mick.

'What crossing?'

Mick put on the voice he used when telling his young nephews not to stick their fingers in electric sockets.

'The crossing the railroad must have built when they decided to run the track at right angles to the road we're driving along.'

'And?'

'Can you time it so we're the last car across the track, before the train arrives? So we're on the other side, and the black limo stays on this side?'

'What black limo?'

'No more questions. \$300 now and \$300 extra if you pull it off.'

'If I slow down,' said Maurice, 'then make a dash, we could just do it!'

Mick didn't like the words 'could' and 'just,' but this was no time for semantics. He put on a brave face.

'Top hole, Maurice! Go for it!'

Although he had absolutely no idea what a top hole was, Maurice coughed discretely, twice, and Mick handed over the \$300 down payment.

Maurice eyed the approaching train. And using all the skills he'd amassed during several years as a wheelman for a minor mobster in Los Angeles, he eased off the accelerator. The limo eased off too. Then, with about 200 yards to go, he shot away from the limo with a terrifying burst of speed.

The burst of speed, however, didn't even register on the international scale of terrifying events, compared with what happened next.

About 100 yards from the crossing, the cab's engine started to splutter.

'Sorry!' shouted Maurice. 'It sometimes gets a fuel lock. It really sucks.'

Mick and Jim, however, were busy visualising how much it would suck if they hit a moving freight train head-on at 120 mph.

The cab slowed slightly and then began a series of giant leapfrogs, each accompanied by a massive shudder and thunderous backfire. Mick offered a silent prayer asking God to help avoid a head-on collision. As insurance, he offered a side prayer asking that, if the guy who fitted their seatbelts was in any way religious, God wouldn't want to let him down, by allowing his handiwork to fail on impact.

Jim, however, judged this was not the moment for quiet contemplation, and chose instead a complex combination of high-pitched screams and extremely vulgar expletives as they careered towards their fate. In addition to the leapfrogs, the cab was now lurching violently from side to side. This was *not* something to cultivate as a hobby.

Although the train was moving fairly slowly, it was now very close. They could see the dull light in the driver's cab and hear the blaring of its horns. The last few yards to the crossing were covered in a series of heart-stopping lurches. These involved the cab grinding almost to a halt, then shooting forward as if propelled by a colossal catapult.

The final lurch landed them smack bang on the tracks. Mick whipped his head round and, for a horrible split second, could clearly see every detail of the massive engine as it bore down on them. Its lights blasted into the cab, the noise of the warning horns was ear-splitting and, for some strange reason, maybe it was his cinematographer's eye, he noticed a couple of unfortunate pigeons splattered across its front grill.

A final breath-taking catapult took the cab clear of the train by inches. The train thundered by, with its horns still blaring, leaving the limo and its unpleasant contents stranded on the other side.

'Wooooooh!' yelled Mick, more in relief than excitement. 'Let's go!' And he handed Maurice another \$300.

'Top hole!' guessed Maurice, quietly, as he turned to take the cash. Though, by the light of the dash, they could see his face was dripping with sweat.

Jim looked back at the freight train - it was very long. Their death-defying manoeuvre would provide the breathing space they needed.

Five hundred stuttering yards up the highway, Mick leaned forward and said, 'Maurice, stop right here. We're getting out.'

'What?' said Maurice. 'This is the desert. This is not a place to go wandering around in the dark. You never know what's out there.'

Nevertheless, he stopped the cab.

Jim was looking a tad worried, but decided to give Mick his head.

'Right, Maurice, here's another \$300. I want you to drive on to the nearest town. Then turn round and drive back. If the guys in the limo stop you, just tell them the truth. We got out here. Say you just had a call on the radio for a fare in whatever the nearest town is, and the fare never showed.'

Maurice looked uncertain.

'Here's another 300 bucks,' said Mick. Maurice took the money and started to look more certain - this was one hell of a fare!

'Hey,' said Mick, as they were collecting their bags from the boot, 'any chance we could take that bottle of water - the one on the dash?'



‘Come on, guys,’ said Maurice, ‘this is the desert. You know I’ve got engine problems. If the cab breaks down, I’ll need it to survive.’

‘I’ll give you \$200 for the bottle of water.’

‘OK, done!’ said Maurice quickly. As he took the cash and handed over the bottle, he passed a business card to Mick. ‘Say,’ he smiled, ‘if you guys are staying in Vegas, and you need a cab, feel free to give me a call, any time.’

‘Yes, but we’ll wait until we’re ready to ring your bleedin’ neck,’ said Jim, but his words were lost in the rapidly cooling desert air.

‘Have a nice night,’ called Maurice before heading off in a cacophony of backfires and grating gears.

They both aimed an extensive range of swear words and gestures at Maurice’s rapidly disappearing tail lights, then, armed with the world’s most expensive bottle of water and two bags, they left the highway and moved as quickly as they could into the desert.

‘We had to do it,’ explained Mick. ‘If we’d carried on, they’d have caught up, easy. Then it’s thud-thud, and we’re breakfast for the vultures.’

Jim asked him why he had to be so graphic, but, as if in answer, they heard the screech of tyres from the crossing. They flattened themselves to the desert floor, as the limo cleared the tracks and shot past in hot pursuit of the Maurice traveller.

The moon was up. The sky was clear. Mick, Jim and a few Joshua trees and yuccas cast sharp shadows on the desert floor. There was the scent of cactus blossom in the air, and not far away, the moonlight fell on outcrops, sculpted into wild and beautiful shapes by the desert wind. Mountains formed a dark curtain on the horizon.

Not for them the tawdry commercialism and glaring neon of the Strip. Not for them the relentless greed and heartache of the casinos. Not for them the mindless twenty-four-hour dross offered up as entertainment. This was nature at its most natural. This was nature, unsullied by man. They were alone - but alone, for once, in the *real* world.

Jim looked around, inhaled deeply, and took in the landscape.

‘What a shithole!’ he said, and kicked a small rock away into the night.

# 36

'I know,' said Jim, 'let's take our million dollar bottle of water and have a bleedin' barbecue. Do you like your water - well-done, or medium-rare?'

Another totally innocent rock got the boot.

'Look mate,' said Mick, 'stop moaning. They're off our tail, and we can make some more plans.'

'I've had enough of sodding plans,' said Jim, who was beginning to feel the cold.

Without saying anything else, they opened their bags and put on some extra pullovers - and felt a bit better.

They sat down on a boulder and thought.

The first thing they thought about were the noises coming from out of the dark, away to their left.

'Shit! That sounds like wolves.'

They strained their eyes in the direction of the howling.

'Could be coyotes - I don't know if they're as dangerous,' said Jim.

'Well if it *is* coyotes, they won't be like that stupid tosser who keeps swallowing Acme dynamite on the telly. They'll be looking for a late evening snack.'

'Maybe we should light a fire,' said Jim. 'Wild animals don't like fire.'

'Or maybe,' said Mick, 'we find a neon sign saying "We're over here, boys" and start it flashing when we see the limo coming back.'

'OK,' said Jim. 'After providing soddin' Maurice with his pension fund, how much dough have we got left?'

Mick looked in his wallet, the 'Who Shot Nelson' stash was disappearing fast. 'Enough for bed and breakfast, a cab to the airport and flights home. So we'll have to be careful.'

'How much is bed and breakfast on one of these rocks?' asked Jim.

Mick ignored him and looked to the horizon.

He could still make out a line of pulsating light - Las Vegas, home to a thousand creature comforts.

Jim was thinking the same thing. 'Let's get back on the road and hitch a ride into town.'

'No,' said Mick, 'who's going to pick up two tramps on a desert road at this time of night, and, anyway, Mr Green and his pals may get fed up of chasing Maurice and decide to turn back for a cup of camomile tea and an early bed.'

'We'll have to walk it.'

'Oh, *fuck!*' shouted Jim.

'Oh come on,' said Mick, 'it can only be about six or seven miles.'

'No, fuck, I've just impaled my gonads on this cactus.'

While the moon was bright, it obviously wasn't bright enough.

Jim was standing on tip-toe, straddling a cactus, the top of which had managed to impale itself on the crotch of his trousers, and, more disastrously, on the contents of the crotch of his trousers.

‘Jesus!’ he whimpered, ‘lift me off!’

‘Well,’ said Mick calmly, ‘I think Jesus is probably otherwise engaged, there’s a lot of souls need saving just down the road. Will *I* do?’

Jim had just been un-impaled, and was doubled up, nursing his punctures, when they heard the ominous sound of a rattle coming from some nearby boulders. There was no doubt, it was Mother Nature’s most unpleasant early warning system.

They set off immediately, stumbling, shivering and moaning occasionally, their bloodshot eyes not very firmly fixed on the Las Vegas illuminations. Half an hour into the journey, the thin strip of lights on the horizon hadn’t got any thicker. Las Vegas was a lot further away than they thought.

They stopped to let this unpleasant fact sink in. While it was sinking in, Jim, judging the moonlight to be particularly bright, took the opportunity to drop his trousers and check his scrotum for cactus spines.

He had hardly begun this delicate task, when Mick dragged him down onto his knees.

Ignoring Jim’s yelp of pain, he pointed into the middle distance. ‘Look!’

There were lights, car lights, hurtling over the rugged terrain towards them at an incredible speed.

‘If that’s the limo, the Tarantino boys won’t have a single filling left.’

‘Michael,’ winced Jim, with a note of desperation, ‘I’m on a bit of a Royboy here - my trousers are still round my sodding ankles.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Mick, ‘it’ll never get here. The back axle will go any minute.’

But the back axle didn’t go, and the lights got nearer and nearer.

Jim started pulling his trousers up, while kneeling down - never an easy thing to do in the comfort of your own home, let alone in the middle of the desert. Just his sodding luck for it to be a cop car.

The lights were getting closer now, and, strangely, had started to have a life of their own. They could hear the roar of engines. ‘Well, screw the head off my rubber duck,’ said Mick, ‘it’s two motorbikes!’

With a superhuman effort, Jim sorted his trousers out, and they stood up. The oncoming headlights cast gigantic Mick and Jim shadows far into the desert.

A few seconds later, the bikes were braking, right in front of them, sliding sideways in a cloud of dust, small rocks and even smaller desert mammals.

As the dust settled, though there was only moonlight, it was impossible to mistake the raked chromed front wheel assembly, the high handlebars, and the stars and stripes, and flame designs on the petrol tanks. They were the famous ‘chopped’ Harley Davidsons from *Easy Rider*.

Mick and Jim stared in open-mouthed amazement.

‘Hi guys,’ said Peter Fonda.

‘Fancy a lift?’ said Dennis Hopper.

Both Mick and Jim were in ‘Maurice-wary’ mode. But having checked there’d be no charge for the lift, Mick got on behind Peter, while Jim limped over to Dennis and swung his leg carefully over the pillion.

Whoever these guys were, they had the gear off to a tee. Peter Fonda had the ‘Captain America’ leathers complete with stars and stripes on his back, and a stars and stripes helmet, while Dennis Hopper had the famous buckskin outfit and bushman’s hat. Although Mick wasn’t too sure about them wearing shades at this time of night.

Still, America was truly a crazy place. And a quick lift back into town, would fit the bill very nicely.

When the bikes slewed round and accelerated off into the desert, both Mick and Jim realised, immediately, the bill was not going to be nicely fitted at all. But at 50 mph over a broken, boulder-strewn landscape, there wasn’t much opportunity for raising even the most basic issues about their current orientation.

And that wasn’t the only problem.

When they’d jumped on the bikes, they’d both put their bags on their laps. This was a bad move because the extra leverage meant that, every time they hit a rough patch, rock, or fissure, they were fired dangerously high into the air. Though they hadn’t known Peter and Dennis very long, the only answer was to put their arms around their waists and hang on.

Very rapidly, Mick came to the conclusion that Peter Fonda had taken man-boobs to a new and startling extreme. That, or the bike tearing over the desert was being ridden by a rather well-endowed woman.

Over with Dennis, Jim was reaching a similar conclusion.

Being well brought up, they removed their hands from the breasts, and held on to bits of the Harleys’ chromework with their fingernails.

After about half an hour of relentless, bouncing, juddering and uncontrolled sliding, the bikes roared to a halt in yet another cloud of dust.

When everything cleared, they could see a traditional Indian teepee covered with skins and topped by a large, plastic American flag, which shone patriotically in the moonlight.

Mick fell sideways off the bike, still clutching his travel bag.

Considering he was lying on the ground, he managed to sound reasonably assertive. ‘OK! Who the hell are you? Where the hell are we? And what the hell are you playing at?’

The replies were extremely polite.

‘Hi, I’m Petra,’ said Peter.

‘And I’m Denise,’ said Dennis.

‘And I suppose you have *real* names?’

‘Hey, easy man. Hang loose. Like, this is the desert. It’s cold, and we can have coffee on the go in five minutes.’

Mick stood up, dusted himself down and noticed the lights of Las Vegas were still visible, but certainly not much further away than before.

He pointed this out to Petra and wondered how the ride took half an hour.

‘We took the scenic route.’

‘The dumb-ass got lost,’ said Denise.

‘Perhaps it’d be better not to wear sunglasses, next time,’ said Mick.

They ignored him. ‘C’mon, bring your bags, let’s get inside and see what’s cookin’.’

As there was nowhere else to go, and nothing else to do, Mick and Jim simply said, ‘OK.’

Inside the teepee, there was a surprising amount of room. Petra lit a hurricane lamp, and when they took their headgear off, Mick and Jim could see the Easy Riders were attractive women.

Denise had long, brown hair, similar to Mr Hopper’s, although thankfully she didn’t have the moustache. Petra’s hair was blond and cut in a bob, no doubt to get a better fit under the Fonda crash helmet. Given the outfits, it was difficult to tell their ages. But all together, they were very easy on the eye.

God knows, however, what *they* thought about Mick and Jim.

Petra opened the teepee’s smoke flaps, poured some paraffin on a few sticks and started a small fire in the centre of the floor. A black metal coffee pot was soon bubbling away.

The ground was covered in a thick layer of Mexican blankets and large brightly coloured, velvet patchwork cushions, some featuring little mirrors and tassels. There were bamboo wind chimes, along with tie-dyed Indian scarves and batik cloth, looped around the teepee poles. Small ceramic Buddha faces, pottery moons and a large square of black material featuring gold signs of the zodiac were hung on the walls. In addition to the vintage psychedelia, there was an overriding smell of patchouli oil. Make no mistake, this was definitely an *homage* to the sixties.

‘Wow! Man!’ said Mick in a false American accent, ‘this is really rural!’

‘Rural?’ asked Petra.

‘Yeah,’ said Mick, ‘it’s like “cosmic” but not as far out!’

He laughed. They smiled. And Jim thought take it easy, Michael, it’s the teepee, or sod all tonight.

The fire crackled, warm golden shapes flickered around the teepee walls, Denise lit a couple of joss sticks and everyone began to relax.

‘So, what’s *really* going on?’ asked Mick, stretching out on the blankets.

‘Later, man, later. Coffee first.’

The coffee tasted good, and made a small but welcome contribution to alleviating the hyperthermia that had been developing since they left Maurice’s cab.

‘Look, I don’t want to be rude or anything,’ said Mick.

‘Turning over a new leaf, eh?’ said Petra, with a smile.

Mick apologised briefly, then carried on. ‘Do you have anything to eat? We can pay for it.’

‘Sorry,’ said Petra, ‘we’re gonna slide out tomorrow and grab some supplies. All we got is some crappy currant cake. Picked it up at a gas station, yesterday.’

‘That’ll be fine.’

Denise tossed over a paper bag. ‘Help yourself.’

Mick and Jim were starving and started to wolf it down.

‘Nice bikes,’ said Mick, munching away.

‘Yeah! We dig ‘em too.’

'I've always liked bikes - great way to get around London,' said Mick. 'But that was my first time on a Harley.'

Jim, who was recovering from the pounding his cactusly-challenged groin had taken during the ride across the desert, was less enthusiastic, and mumbled something about banning motorbikes. Adding that, after his lucky escape in the Southsea Hell's Angels incident, he was all for banning bikers, too.

Mick ignored him and carried on chatting. Crumbs spilled out of his mouth, but he collected them a cupped hand and popped them back in. The cake was delicious.

'So, why the *Easy Rider* gear?'

'Well,' said Denise with a smile, 'we've always been, like, big film fans, and number one for us was *Easy Rider*. Two guys getting out there and doing their thing. But, you know, all that shit is written for men. If you're a girl, they just want you to dress up pretty, or flash your tits.'

'So we split from home and decided we'd be our *own* easy riders. And that's what we do - we ride easy.'

'Yeah!' said Denise, punching the air with a slow, easy confidence.

'And where is home?' asked Mick. 'I can't quite place your accents - somewhere in the Mid-West?'

'We're from the East.'

'How far east? Washington? New York?'

'No - Dorking.'

He was going to ask which state that was in, before it dawned.

'Yeah, I mean, who lives in *Surrey* for Chrissake,' scoffed Petra.

'We've been getting it together round the US for five years. It's been cool.'

'But what do you do for money?'

'We both have *very* rich parents,' said Petra, bluntly.

'I mean, they're, like, capitalists like you wouldn't believe,' added Denise.

'They send us bank transfers every month. Still trying to buy our affections, I guess.'

'But it's not working,' said Denise, and she pulled out a small, silver handgun with a pink handle. 'Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam!' she mouthed, rather sexily, as she aimed virtual shots at their virtual parents, but not, Mick presumed, at their non-virtual money transferring capabilities.

Mick and Jim had only seen guns in films and at the Queen's Birthday Celebrations on Horse Guards' Parade, and then, that was on TV. They weren't used to the people waving them around in the same way people wave around new mobile phones.

And certainly, if Mick and Jim were getting regular cash transfers from *anybody*, the last thing they'd think about was putting them in front of a firing squad.

'Five years on the road!' said Jim. 'Done anything groovy?' He always felt he'd missed out on the sixties hippy thing, and fancied a bit of retro chat.

'Yeah! For a couple of years, we hitched up with a small urban guerrilla group working out of Malibu - we took a six-bed condo on the beach. It was great cover. Cops never suspected a thing.'

'I *bet* they didn't,' said Mick.

'So, what sort of - you know - like - guerrilla things did you get up to?' asked Jim, a little nervously.

'Well,' said Petra, 'kinda mostly strategic planning stuff. In fact, it was *all* strategic planning. 'Course, we had to do a lot of partying to put the cops off the scent.'

'In my youth,' said Mick, 'I did more or less the same thing on the beach at Grimsby.'

'Isn't that in England?'

Mick nodded, 'East coast.'

'What's it like?'

'Bit like Venice with one unfortunate difference - it isn't sinking!'

Jim decided to steer the conversation away from rattlesnake alley.

'So what did you do then, Denise?'

'We left. There were big problems.'

'Ideological differences?' asked Mick.

'No, the infinity pool pump kept breaking down, and we thought - we don't need this shit, so we bought the bikes and rode out.'

'I'd have done the same,' said Mick, playing for time and still trying to weigh these two up. He knew this was something he'd have to do on his own. Jim was useless with women. When Jim was married, his idea of a Valentine's Day treat was to wash his armpits.

'We ended up hanging out back from the coast at Santa Barbara,' said Petra, 'and we met this guy.'

'Name was Joe, Joe Oppenheimer. He ran this sect, like a cult, or something, you know. Had this old ranch-house in Painted Cave, up in the Santa Ynez Mountains.'

'Wasn't that where your sister, Jane, had a place?' said Mick to Petra.

'Whatever.'

'Essence!' said Jim, feeling Mick was determined to get them ordered out at gunpoint to kip with the rattlesnakes. 'What was Joe's thing?'

'It was pretty cool,' said Denise. 'He was a washing machine repairman from Ohio, and had this vision that Jesus did a similar job, but on UFOs. And that the bible is a coded UFO maintenance manual.'

'I've long suspected that,' said Mick.

Jim imagined a rattlesnake exploring the inside of his trouser leg.

'I guess, looking back, the rules were pretty strict,' said Petra. 'He only allowed women members.'

'There were about thirty of us, you know, like, in the commune.'

'Around 90 per cent of everything we earned we gave to Joe for what he called his Front Loading Fund.'

Explains the ranch house in Painted Cave, thought Mick.

'Plus, everyone had to have sex with him at least twice a month.'

Both Mick and Jim did a double take. What! And they thought *they'd* been smart starting a corporate video company!

'Joe had regular chats with Jesus - we used to call 'em the two Js!' said Denise, with a happy, far-away smile.

'Jesus said he wanted to combine all his UFO preventive maintenance programmes into one intergalactic process. And the more women Joe slept with, the nearer he would get to that celestial goal.'

Mick fleetingly wondered if, after this was all over, it could be worth nipping down to the Las Vegas Employment Office and enrolling on a washing machine maintenance course.

'We had to help by standing around naked, chanting, "The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever."'

'Psalm 19: verse 9,' added Petra helpfully. 'I guess that "clean" bit was his washing machine stuff coming out.'

'But we got pissed off,' said Denise.

'I can imagine,' said Mick, though, of course, there was absolutely no way he could.

'So you split?' said Jim, feeling he was really getting the hang of the lingo.

'Right man, it was too, too heavy. So then, we hit on the *Easy Rider* idea, like with the gear and everything.'

'Why should guys have all the fun?'

Mick nodded, though he was really thinking of that bastard, Joe, and how he'd been getting *far* more than his fair share of the fun.

'We've been on the road ever since - and it's been great,' said Petra.

Jim understood. After seeing *Roman Holiday*, he'd bought a 2-stroke Vespa and drove for miles, imagining Audrey Hepburn was on the pillion with her gorgeous arms around his waist and her spectacular smile next to his ear. But he decided not to mention it.

'Not getting pissed off again, are you?' he asked.

'Yeah well, funny you should say that. We *have* been thinking of doing something with a bit more edge - you know, like, maybe something *dramatic*!'

And so, for half an hour, the joss sticks burned and the conversation drifted around in the way conversations do when people meet for the first time. Mick made up a story about a client not turning up at McCarran International, and a drunken cab driver to explain their wanderings in the desert.

It was all quite enjoyable.

But suddenly, Jim started to feel things were becoming not so enjoyable. He felt hot. Very hot. And he was overtaken by a strange desire to say things he wouldn't normally say to ladies - even if they were dressed like Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper.

'Do you mind if I share something with you guys?' he asked.

'Go ahead, man.'

'Back there, just before you turned up, I caught my scrotum on a cactus. I was, like, cool with that, sort of. But the ride on the back of your bikes gave me really bad vibes. I thought I'd got the spines out, but every bounce was soddin' murder. Just thought I'd let you cats know.'

Petra and Denise didn't bat an eyelid at this frank and sudden change in the direction of the conversation - which is just what you'd expect from urban guerrilla, sex commune, easy-riders from Dorking.

'Ah!' said Petra, 'that could be cactus poison. Bit like a snake bite, you have to suck it out.'

'Right on!' said Jim, in rather a weak sort of way. The teepee was getting a lot hotter. He wasn't sure he liked the look she was giving him - it was motherly, but with a heavy seductive edge. As though she knew what was best for him, and how to make sure he got it.

'Yeah,' she said, 'I could do it for you now if you wanted. Out here in the desert, you'd be surprised how good we get at all sorts of survival skills.'

And with a clear indication of intent, she started to crawl slowly towards him on her hands and knees.



The atmosphere was reaching boiling point. Jim was paralysed by a mixture of fear and anticipation. His mouth went dry and he broke into a sweat. Petra put her lips to his ear and whispered, 'Turn on, tune in, and drop those trousers.'

It was at this point, a three-foot high, lime green Tyrannosaurus Rex popped its head through the teepee flap and gave Jim a cheeky wink.

Jim winked back at the dinosaur. The rest of the teepee was now enveloped in a purple mist, with occasional flashes of pink lightning - but all he could really see was the dinosaur doing his thing. The dinosaur jumped from side to side, he went up and down, he went round and round. What a performance!

'This was one hell of a little guy.

Jim felt parts of him had been touched in a way they hadn't been touched for a long time. He just laid back and enjoyed.

Mick, on the other hand, was having a totally different experience.

For some time, he'd been aware that, swirling round the top of the teepee, was a full colour image of Mrs Hathaway, the cleaning lady from their Soho office. The image was slightly overexposed and needed to come down a stop or two, but hey - this was a teepee in the desert - so who cares? Mrs Hathaway was doing a surprisingly seductive dance of the seven veils - only she was using seven finest-quality Irish linen tea cloths and moving to an old, cracked 78 of *Hernando's Hideaway*.

Things were not at all normal. When Mick looked at Denise's face, it became a sound - a motorcycle engine accelerating at incredible volume, then stopping suddenly, to be replaced by a sort of whistling wind noise.

He knew she was talking to him, but could only hear odd words, which mainly appeared as vibrantly coloured shapes, rather than clearly defined sounds.

The word 'canyon' appeared as a sizzling, bright yellow lightning bolt, which shot into one of his eyeballs, then out of the other.

The words 'high speed' cracked and ripped around the teepee as parallel traces of electric blue light, zigzagging and pulsating uncontrollably.

Some objects, like a map Denise held up, converted into a police siren fused with a tolling church bell, sometimes far away, then suddenly, really loud, as though the sounds were inside his eardrum.

Then he saw the words 'Louise' and 'Thelma' appearing as large splatters of crimson liquid, which interacted horribly with the lightning bolt.

While Mick was going through all this, Jim was having a nice chat with the T-Rex about how much cake he could swallow in one go.

Whoever made the currant cake concoction at the gas station hadn't mixed the LSD tabs in thoroughly enough - there were serious inconsistencies.

The baker's mistake cost Mick dearly. For the next sixteen hours, he experienced all the symptoms of a Lysergic Acid Diethylamide overdose - dilated pupils, high body temperature, increased heart rate and blood pressure, sweating, dry mouth and tremors.

Although later on, he claimed his symptoms were no different to those he experienced during a normal working day at Implosion Productions.

Mick coped as best he could. He was the captain of the Southsea bench as it capsized during a race in the Solent. He was the wicket keeper of the England cricket team as they crushed Hambledon to a humiliating defeat. He was terrified when Jesus' UFOs came out of the gold stars on the ceiling of Nona's Midnight Lounge.

He became an eight-year old ball boy for the crappy virtual tennis match at the end of Antonioni's *Blow-Up*. Throwing back non-existent balls to the pretentious, white-faced mime artists, who had the cheek to complain he hadn't thrown them far enough. A skeletal Aubrey dressed as the grim reaper, complete with homburg and scythe, stood in the fairy-light-decorated, blowlamp-scorched door of the Sea Scout Hut, and beckoned with a bony, nicotine-stained finger. It was a relentless, and often horrific, stream of mind-blowing experiences, one after another.

Whereas, when Jim's sixteen-hour trip had finished, he realised he'd made a new, little, lime-green friend.

Mick was first to come down. He knew enough about drugs to realise where he'd been. He looked at his watch. It was around six o'clock, early evening. He felt absolutely wrecked, as though he'd just gone five hundred rounds with his ex-wife, with his hands tied behind his back, and no rules.

Jim was quietly murmuring, 'Who's a nice little T-Rex then?' when Mick poked him in the ribs.

'Wake up! Wake up! You dozy bastard! We've been drugged.'

'Eh!' said Jim, propping himself up on one elbow and scratching his groin. 'Wa's going on?'

'There was LSD, or at least some cack-handed imitation of LSD, in that cake,' said Mick.

'What cake?'

'Never mind,' said Mick, 'except to say that, from now on, I'm sticking to Mr Fuckin' Kipling's.'

And with that, he decided it was time to bring the explanations to a close.

'Look,' he said, 'it's six in the evening. We've been out of it for the best part of a day. Do you remember Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper?'

'Yeah!' said Jim, drowsily, 'they were in *Easy Rider*.'

As he was about to deliver an extremely rude reply, Mick noticed a note pinned to Jim's blanket.

It read, *Sexy time last night. Phew!!! See you soon. Petra and Denise xxxxx.*

Mick had no recollection of anything physical happening at all. Although, throughout his married lives, excessive alcohol consumption had meant intimacy recollection had never been his strong point.

Still, whatever happened last night, Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper had obviously enjoyed it!

He didn't show the note to Jim, perhaps because he didn't want to spoil his new relationship with the mini T-Rex, or, perhaps, he sensed something wasn't quite right here.

Jim was still obsessed with his cactus problem, and complained it was still hurting like hell, even though his dinosaur friend had tried to fix it.

Eventually, they decided to pop outside the teepee for a quick piddle. Jim made a point of walking some distance away, so he could relieve himself over a large *optunia streptacantha*. Presumably, as a pathetic way of getting his own back.

Mick remembered the easy riders saying they had to go and buy provisions. And sure enough, the bikes were gone.

To start their recovery, they went back inside to get some coffee. Mick found a small cigarette lighter, tipped some paraffin from the lamp onto the wood and, pretty soon, the remains of last night's fire burst back into life.

The coffee, however, wasn't the only thing brewing. As the effects of the gas station cake receded, dark thoughts were emerging from the back of his mind and starting to bubble, ominously.

Jim was coming round, too. 'We're stuck aren't we?' he said.

‘Correct,’ said Mick.

‘We’ll just ask the girls for a lift to the airport, when they get back.’

‘I don’t think it’s that simple, little Jim.’

‘How come?’

‘When I was zonked last night, I distinctly remember hearing three words.’

‘And?’

‘You and your little dinosaur friend may not want to hear this.’

‘OK,’ said Jim. ‘Try us.’

‘The three words were “Thelma”, “Louise” and “canyon”.’

‘Come on!’ snorted Jim, ‘that’s ridiculous! They’re film fans! How often do we get out of our heads, then start sounding off about our favourite stuff?’

‘But how often do we use maps as a visual aid?’ Mick held up the map he’d found while rummaging for the coffee jar, and Jim leaned forward for a closer look.

‘Here’s Las Vegas,’ said Mick, ‘and this large red cross is, probably, where we are now.’

‘So what?’

‘*This*,’ said Mick, jabbing his finger on the map, ‘is the journey they’re planning.’

A red line ran from the cross, over the desert, onto the road, then back into the desert.

The line stopped suddenly, at a point about twenty miles away, clearly labelled ‘Lost Creek Canyon.’

Jim was waking up pretty quickly now. ‘So you think they’re gonna copy Thelma and Louise and drive over the canyon edge?’

‘Bonus point for Jimbo!’ said Mick, ‘if we ever get back to civilisation, remind me to recommend you for membership of my pub quiz team.’

‘They’d never do that,’ said Jim. ‘They’ve just gone out to buy groceries. Why would they buy food if they were planning to top themselves?’

‘Less of the “themselves”,’ said Mick, holding up the map.

Right next to Lost Creek Canyon, was a heart shape drawn in red ballpoint pen. It contained the names ‘Denise and Mick, Petra and Jim’ with lots of kisses.

‘Look here above the heart shape, they’ve scribbled, *Don’t think twice, it’s alright!*’

‘And?’ said Jim.

‘Cancel the pub quiz offer! I think, we’re slotted to play a significant part in their plans for a big finish!’

‘Remember what they said, last night? They’re fed up, and they’re looking to do something dramatic! I thought they might be going to ride down to Tierra del Fuego. But looking at this, best bet is - they’re going to tear-arse off some bloody canyon edge, smiling sweetly and holding hands, while we’re riding pillion, screaming the shit out of ourselves.’

‘Christ!’ said Jim. ‘There’s no way I’m driving over a cliff at high speed!’

‘You’re back on the team.’

‘Or even low speed.’

‘Wanna be team captain?’

‘What are going to do?’

‘There’s not much time, so here a summary. One: They’re nutters. Two: They’ve set their little hearts on this. Three: We’re included.’

‘Four: We’ve got to escape,’ said Jim.

‘Team captaincy confirmed.’

‘We could get out now, and just walk to Vegas.’

‘They’ll be back soon. On Harleys. We’d be lucky if we got two miles.’

‘But they couldn’t actually try and stop us,’ said Jim.

‘Oh no? What about the little pink-handled job old Denise was flashing around last night - Boom! Boom! Goodbye, Mummies and Daddies!’

Jim looked dumbstruck. It was bad enough coping with the fact that his little dinosaur friend wasn’t around, *and* that his scrotum was still infected with cactus poison, without being told you were going to be driven off a cliff edge by two gun-toting lunatics in fancy dress.

As this realisation was sinking in, they heard the distant sound of motorbikes. Jim looked out of the teepee flap and, in the twilight, could see the headlights bouncing across the terrain, about quarter of a mile away.

This was a high-pressure situation. And high-pressure situations can generate some pretty high quality solutions. Although, in Mick and Jim’s case, after a hysterical minute of shouting and wild gesticulation, the plan they devised had two simple stages, and a thousand-to-one chance of coming off.

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As the Harleys braked and skidded to a halt, Mick and Jim were already outside the teepee, waving frantically.

'Rattlesnakes!' shouted Jim. 'Rattlesnakes in the tent! I think there's two of 'em!'

'Shit!' said Petra. She jumped off her bike, groceries in one hand and a flashlight in the other.

As they headed for the teepee, Denise was quick to let Mick and Jim know they were assholes for leaving the flap open.

Behind his back, Mick began lighting a rag soaked in paraffin. As the two girls dived inside, Mick and Jim ran to the bikes.

This marked the end of the first stage of the plan.

It was time for stage two.

Jim got on the pillion of one of the bikes while Mick unscrewed the petrol cap of the other and placed the burning rag over the hole. He then ran, probably faster than he'd ever run in his life, to the other Harley, dived on and kick-started the engine.

They shot away, and after about forty yards, there was a truly spectacular explosion as the other bike's tank went up. The fireball was enormous.

Mick struggled to keep control as the shock wave hit, and Jim was conscious the hair on the back of his head was singed. 'Bloody hell,' shouted Mick, 'that tank must have been full to buggery.'

He'd never ridden a Harley before, and was finding the gears a problem. They covered the first two hundred yards in a screaming first gear, which threatened to dump the engine onto the desert floor.

Jim twisted round. He could just see the girls in the light from the burning motorcycle. Their body language showed they were highly pissed off. But no shots were fired. And even if they were, Jim wasn't worried. At this distance, a small pink-handled gun wasn't going to hit anything.

Mick eventually got into second gear and was able to concentrate on how to put as much desert as possible between themselves and the teepee.

It was getting really dark, so he slowed down a little.

'The last thing we want now,' shouted Mick, 'is to crash and have to walk six miles back to Vegas.'

'Too right mate!' shouted Jim. He was excited that, once again, they'd escaped, and would soon be ensconced in the warmth and safety of a comfortable hotel room - with - oh my God, yes - *room service!* He gripped Mick's ample waist tightly and smiled a contented smile. They were on their way home!

Just then, the bike ran out of petrol.

The dark desert air turned blue with choice expletives selected from Mick and Jim's huge arsenal of obscenities, built up over many years describing clients who'd cancelled jobs at the last minute.

'So,' said Jim, 'we're back where we started; in the soddin' desert at the start of a freezing cold night. But this time, without our bags, our pullovers and our \$200 bottle of water.'

'Look,' said Mick, 'we've still got the money and our passports. And I stuck a toiletries bag in my inside pocket, before we left.'

‘Oh good,’ said Jim, ‘I’m never seen wandering the snake-infested desert at this time of night without a dab of aftershave.’

Mick put his hands on his hips and looked at Jim.

‘James, be sensible!’ he said. ‘They can’t come after us, and only a few minutes ago, you were suggesting we walked to Vegas to get out of the shit. We’ve already knocked two miles off that distance. So let’s keep it positive.’

They looked at each other in unshaven silence, until a rattling sound, close by, reminded them it was time to move on. So move on, they did.

A few minutes after they started the trek, Jim apologised. ‘You’re absolutely right about keeping positive, Michael,’ he said, ‘and I *will* stop whinging, ‘because I know that’s the right thing to do. But, honestly, my balls don’t half hurt.’

\*

Back at the teepee, Petra and Denise couldn’t believe what had happened.

They’d picked up two guys freezing to death in the desert, given them shelter, hot drinks, drugs and a not unreasonable amount of moderately interesting sex. What did they do wrong? I mean, they thought they were getting on really well. One knew a hell of a lot about films and music - although, the other wouldn’t shut up about dinosaurs. But, all in all, they seemed like really pleasant guys. Then when they come back with groceries to cook them a nice meal, they blow up one Harley and steal the other.

‘Maybe they got scared when I messed around with that gun,’ said Petra. ‘I really ought to dump it - I mean, what good is a replica anyway?’

This whole thing had turned out to be a real bummer - yet it was all going so great. And as for the sightseeing trip they’d planned to Lost Creek Canyon - well, that would’ve been such a fun day out.

# 40

As ever, the city lights were further away than Mick and Jim thought. But they kept going. There was no other option.

Mick was stoical, but unfit, and said nothing during the journey, apart from the odd grunt or expletive.

Jim was fitter, but very depressed, so he decided to have a good moan as he plodded Vegaswards. A great many things in life tended to get Jim down, but he normally restricted himself to commenting on the crap swilling around on the surface.

Deep down, there were any number of trivial irritations which festered, interacted and multiplied, providing a fetid undercurrent to his daily life.

These irritations were never voiced - until now. Why now? Well, he'd said all he wanted to say to Mick, and they had five hours to fill. It was also a way of releasing the tension of the last two days, and took his mind off the cactus poison. And anyway, when the time was right, he liked moaning.

Why, for example, were computer USB connectors symmetrical, so you'd no idea which way round to put the sodding things into the slot. Yes, there were little signs on them, but the manufacturers seem to put the slots in whichever way round they felt like. If there were one billion computers in the world, and each person had three fiddly attempts to make a USB connection, a day. And each fiddle took ten seconds - that would mean 317 years of potential working time wasted, worldwide, each day. And the bastards who invented the USB connector are probably swanning it with a load of starlets on Mustique with the proceeds of their piss-awful design, while the world goes down the crapper.

'Really,' said Mick.

'And why is it,' said Jim, 'that the inside pockets in jackets are exactly the same width as a pair of glasses or a ballpoint pen? So when you drop either of them into your pocket, they get jammed, and you have to take your jacket off and turn the pocket lining inside out. Even then, you probably tear the material, so next time you drop anything in the inside pocket, it goes through the lining and then you're really up shit creek.'

'Gosh, that *is* interesting,' said Mick, without having listened to a word.

'And bloody Spanish!' continued Jim. He'd tried learning some basic Spanish for his last holiday with his ex.

'Any language that uses masculine and feminine wants stuffin'. You have to learn double the amount of stuff for every bleedin' noun. Then all the adjectives have to agree. And look at the past tense. For 'to be' in English it's - I was, you were, he was, we were, you were, they were. All you have to learn is 'was' and 'were', job done. In Spanish there's *two* verbs for 'to be' with *two* different past tenses for each - so you have twenty-four sodding things to learn, as opposed to two.'

'And French is no better...'

Mick had heard these sorts of ramblings before, and could expertly shunt his brain into the sidings, while Jim's brain shot up and down the main line at top speed.

'And what about balsamic vinegar pourers, that tip tons of the stuff over your food, and bloody sticky tape you can never find the end of - so you give up and go and buy another roll. How come so many companies make a living out of selling crap? And why do people carry on buying it?'



‘Then there’s those dickhead waiters in pizza restaurants, who spray the tables with disinfectant - so you get a cloud of chemicals floating onto your American Hot and green salad. If that’s what I wanted, I’d bring a packet of Shake n’ Vac to sprinkle over my grub, myself.’

‘And why do women object so much when you leave the toilet seat up? You never hear blokes complaining women always leave the toilet seat down, so you always have to lift it up when you want a pee.’

‘And what about sport!’

‘What about sport?’ said Mick, operating on automatic pilot, automatic air traffic controller, automatic luggage handler and automatic trolley dolly.

‘Egotistical, physically obsessed, overpaid - you wouldn’t catch me going to *any* sporting event, not in a million years!’

This was not true. A few years back, Jim had been persuaded to take his six-year old niece, Amanda, to a Premier Division football match. He had never been before, and even a habitual curser, like Jim, was appalled by the constant stream of foul-mouthed invective shouted from the terraces. So much so, he took little Amanda home at half time.

The following weekend, it was Jim’s grandmother’s birthday party. The whole family was gathered around, and the younger boys switched on the TV to catch the football highlights.

Amanda was playing with her dolls when she spotted the coverage on the screen. She got up, skipped over to the TV and pointed to the referee. ‘Oh look, everybody,’ she cried, ‘there’s a cunt.’

Following the extended repercussions, Jim liked sport even less.

# 41

Five hours after the Harley ran out of juice, and four and half hours after Mick's brain did the same, they staggered up to a building right on the city outskirts - a place where the desert had its first surprise meeting with concrete.

By now, they were bleary eyed, totally exhausted and extremely cold, plus Jim was limping badly and his extended moaning session had resulted in a very sore throat. They approached, cautiously, from the rear.

The building was three storeys high and very quiet. Its whitewashed walls were lit by a few bulbs with green metal shades. The front was flooded with light, so it was obviously open for business of some sort.

There was a big temptation to get back to civilisation; to walk in the main door just like normal human beings. But they hadn't come this far to blow it all by wandering round to the front of the building. Sod's Law would guarantee that, as they stood exposed in a million watts of unspeakably lurid neon, the black limo would cruise by on another mission.

In the middle of the back wall was a peeling, red wooden door, which, unbelievably, was slightly ajar. Above the door was an old weathered sign saying 'Rooms for Rent' and other words, so bleached by the Las Vegas sun, they were unreadable.

But after a ten-hour flight, being chased by a limo full of gangsters, chickening out a freight train, overdosing on LSD, outwitting the Thelma and Louise suicide-a-likes, and walking for five hours over rough terrain in freezing temperatures, not to mention the fact that they hadn't had anything proper to eat since they were on the 'plane, they were, quite simply, too shagged to worry about something as insignificant as illegal entering.

They pushed the door open and stumbled into a deserted kitchen area. They grabbed two mugs, filled them with water - about \$80 worth on the Maurice scale - and drank faster than they'd ever done in the Destroyer.

They wiped their chins on a tea towel and set off to see what else life had in store for them. The kitchen door led into a series of dark red, dimly-lit, David Lynch-type corridors. They followed the signs to reception. Eventually, they opened a door and were hit by an amazing burst of light.

They'd arrived.

The reception *décor* was garish in the extreme, and mind-bogglingly multi-coloured. There was lots of neon, plus a pulsating mini laser show, a waterfall lit from beneath with green lights, an ultra-violet fish tank and some of those rotating, flashing lights they use in discos. But after months encased within Nona's concept of interior design, even in their semi-conscious state, they could handle it.

Set into one of the bright green and gold Regency striped walls was a red and mauve, padded silk, reception desk. It had a frosted glass top, lit from beneath by pink neon tubes. Nobody was around, but there was, a white ceramic button which said 'Push to get someone to come!' Mick poked it with a grubby finger and triggered a tinny version of *I will survive*. Hmm! thought Mick - highly appropriate.

Within seconds, a tall, thin man clattered through the crystal-beaded curtain at the back of the reception desk.

He flung his arms wide in a gesture that was supposed to say 'welcome.' But, given Mick and Jim's general state of paranoia, it only made them step back quickly, flinch and duck.

The man had a crinkly, ginger comb-over, luminous tan and a red and orange paisley shirt, which, when illuminated from below by the pink neon, caused a severe strobing effect, of which he was completely unaware.

‘Hi guys,’ he said. His dazzling white teeth seemed to be vibrating sideways off his face.

‘My names Derek, with one “k”, and I’m here to make sure you get everything you want.’ His smile continued to vibrate, though he eyed Jim, who was still clutching his groin, with more than a little suspicion.

‘Is your friend alright?’ he asked, completely misunderstanding the situation. ‘I mean, we can all get the big urge from time to time, but this is a public place.’

‘He walked into a cactus,’ explained Mick. ‘He’ll be alright.’

‘No, I bleedin’ won’t,’ croaked Jim.

Derek decided it was time to move the conversation on. ‘Now, what would you like? It’s up to you. You can have your basic, or your special.’

‘We’ll just have the basic,’ said Mick, ‘we’ve come a long way.’

‘Haven’t we all,’ said Derek, ‘haven’t we all.’

At which point, Derek’s up-selling training kicked in.

‘Mind you, guys, basic is very nice, but a lot of people, a lot of *discerning* people, who are, like, looking for *extra refinement*, go for the Elvis package.’

Mick was too shot to care.

‘OK, how much?’

‘\$500.’

It was a lot of money for a room for the night, but, again, Mick was so wrecked - all he could see was a lovely bed and a chance to close his eyes.

‘Double room?’ asked Jim.

‘What else!’ replied Derek, raising his eyebrows ‘til they almost merged with his comb-over. He looked delighted as Mick handed over the cash.

‘Have you got your papers?’

Mick pulled out his passport.

‘No, no *real* papers. Oh! Never mind,’ he said, waving his hand vaguely. ‘It’ll just be a commitment then, OK?’

Mick couldn’t give a toss - all he wanted to commit to was good night’s kip. So, he nodded.

Derek asked for their names, and they gave them.

‘Fantastic,’ he said, with another strobing smile. ‘That’s settled. I’m so glad we can be of service. Give us five minutes and we’ll be more than ready for you.’

He disappeared back through the beaded curtain.

Mick and Jim wafted over to the purple, velvet-quilted bench opposite the reception desk, sat down and waited. They sat still and stony faced. If it hadn’t been for the intensity of the lights forcing their eyes to blink from time to time, you could be forgiven for thinking they were two rejects from Gunther von Hagens’ laboratory.

After five minutes, Derek returned. He baulked slightly at their appearance, as though he'd forgotten how rough they looked. Then he snapped into action. 'OK,' he said, clapping his hands together. 'Everything's ready. Follow me, *mon braves*.'

They trudged behind him, back down one of the dimly lit, red corridors, occasionally banging into the walls. 'You know,' said Mick, hoping some conversation would keep Jim awake a little longer, 'this is like being in *The Fantastic Voyage*, travelling down someone's veins.'

'With our luck,' replied Jim, 'we'll be travelling down, or up, someone's anal cavity.'

It wasn't much of a conversation, but it helped Mick see Jim still had a few yards left in him. But the effort required to think up and deliver this sentence told Mick that *he* was on the edge as well, and like the discarded Harley, there was, to all intents and purposes, nothing left in the tank.

Eventually, they came to a yellow, silk-quilted door with a ceramic sign saying 'The King.'

Derek opened the door, but it was not what Mick and Jim expected. The room was completely dark, apart from a small trail of lights on the floor, similar to those on either side of aircraft aisles.

'Follow the light track to the end, and face that way,' said Derek, indicating left. 'Then all you have to do is wait.'

Of course, if Mick been his normal, alert, semi-healthy self, and if Jim hadn't been on his last legs and worried about how many cactus spines had penetrated his testicles, they'd have smelt a rat and done a runner.

But tonight, they were too smacked by life to care where they went and where they looked. So they obediently walked inside and waited. It was very dark and very quiet. Their eyelids were heavy and started to close. If they'd had the knack of falling asleep while standing up, they'd have done it, there and then.

Ten seconds into this sedentary state, Mick and Jim took three, simultaneous, mind-shattering hits. They might have just been able to cope with, say, half a hit, shared gently between the two of them, but this was stuff right out of the mega-league.

One: an intense, high-powered spotlight shot down from the ceiling, triggering a laser show.

Two: the opening bars of *All Shook Up* came blasting out of hidden speakers.

Three: an overweight Elvis in a white, studded, high-collared, Las Vegas outfit dropped a full six feet from the ceiling into the spotlight.

Despite the bone-crunching impact, he began miming to the song.

This gyrating image from beyond the grave had exploded just three feet in front of a petrified Mick and Jim. After a five-hour, cactus-fraught stagger through the desert night, this was an extreme onslaught - the multi-media equivalent of hand-to-hand combat.

'Mick,' said Jim, as his eyes shot back about a yard behind his head, 'I think I just peed my pants.'

'Hey! No worries! It's the King!' said Mick, even though he'd done exactly the same thing.

During the song, a battery of intense, coloured spotlights joined the pulsating lasers and shot straight into Mick and Jim's faces, so much so that, for a couple of minutes, they thought the gas station cake had kicked in again.

When the song was over, the room lights began to fade up. They were standing in what looked like a mini, pink and blue, neon version of York Minster. Which, as you can imagine, is not a pleasant place to stand.

Organ music began to play. Mick was *sure* the LSD was having a last 'hurrah', as it sounded like a version of the accordion break from *Hernando's Hideaway* - slowed down, with a quasi-ecclesiastical arrangement.

Elvis spoke. He was sweating profusely and still a little out of breath, following his dramatic descent and subsequent gyrations. 'Dearly beloved brethren, we're gathered here together in the face of God...' At which point, he caught his first real glimpse of Mick and Jim.

'Christ!' he said, 'you guys OK? I mean I can call 911 and get some medics in.'

Elvis leaned forward and overbalanced slightly. There was an overpowering smell of Bourbon.

'No thanks,' said Mick, turning his head away from the fumes, and easing him back on stage, 'we're fine, carry on.'

This was a brave instruction, as he had absolutely no idea what Elvis was planning to carry on with.

'OK,' said Elvis. 'Dearly beloved brethren...'

It was at this point, Mick noticed the King was wearing a vicar-type dog collar. And unthinkable thoughts began to think their way through his pulverised brain.

But, as he was semi-conscious, most of what Elvis said was hazy, to say the least. He heard the word 'commitment' a few times, the occasional 'God', and a few mentions of 'my latest record, on sale now' but, when Mick and Jim were asked to step forward and hold out their hands, he had an idea this was what everything had been leading up to.

Elvis grasped their hands, and looked shocked.

‘Jesus! You guys are frozen! I got my cell phone in my back pocket, they could be here with thermal suits in five minutes.’

He started to fumble around in the back of his flares and the waistband flipped down to reveal an ample belly with a seriously fake tan.

‘No thanks,’ said Mick.

‘OK,’ said the King, ‘But the local emergency guys are ace. When I hit the old Jim Beam White Label too hard, they’re round with the stomach pump, fifteen minutes, tops.’

‘No, really,’ said Mick, ‘we’ll be fine.’

Elvis didn’t believe a word. But he’d tried his best, so he got on with it.

‘All I can say then, Mick and Jim, is - *Finito Benito!* You have now fully reaffirmed your commitment to each other.’

Elvis hitched his flares up, and ran his fingers through his sideburns.

‘I’m now going to mime to *Love Me Tender*, but feel free to go through to reception, any time during the rendition.’

Speaking in a passable impersonation of that famous southern drawl, the calorie-challenged, Bourbon-powered Elvis delivered some sincere-type words over the song’s opening bars.

‘So, guys, all that remains for me to say is thanks for patronising Big Derek’s Twenty-Four Hour, While-You-Wait, Gay Marriage and Commitment Chapel. Fully authorised under Chapter 122 of the Nevada Revised Statutes. Hope to see you again soon. Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you very much.’

He launched into *Love me Tender*, and Mick and Jim, feeling somewhat tender themselves, started their own slow, measured launch towards to door.

They staggered back to reception in a confused state. They also staggered back in their wet trousers. It was a short, but not very comfortable, journey.

Big Derek was waiting for them.

‘All well for you guys?’ he smiled.

Mick and Jim had a very vague idea of what they’d just been through, but decided to keep it positive and neutral.

‘Yes,’ said Mick, ‘quite an experience.’

‘Glad you liked it,’ said Big Derek. ‘Here’s your room key. You can take the elevator to the honeymoon suite. Just press the Elvis knob.’

Mick and Jim got into the lift and were relieved to find the Elvis knob was just a small, plastic button with the word ‘Elvis’ written on it.

Things were just starting to sink in. But now, all they wanted was sleep. Sweet sleep.

When they opened the door to the honeymoon suite, however, their battered senses received yet another shock.

The décor was very loosely based on the Jungle Room at Gracelands, compete with exotic plants, African motifs, a couple of mounted, plastic rhinoceros heads, strange wooden furniture and a bright green carpet. The room was dominated by a huge, heart-shaped bed, covered in red silk. There was also a selection of large, homoerotic photographs on the wall, which only served to make Mick and Jim feel even more physically inadequate.

Other features included a pink-tinged mirror on the ceiling, wall up-lighters with flickering material flame effects, and most disturbing of all, a second bed, up against the wall, where a bare-chested, medallioned, full-size, fibreglass Elvis, supporting himself on one elbow, was gazing at the main bed. His face had been crafted into a dreadful leer, his tongue was sticking out and, to top it off, he was giving whoever was occupying the heart-shaped bed a knowing thumbs-up.

They threw off their clothes in a heap and dragged their aching limbs and damaged body parts into the bed, lying there like two unshaven zombies. Of course, it was a bloody waterbed, but at least the water was warm and it started to ease their advancing hypothermia.

Jim almost began to relax. 'You know,' he croaked, 'those gay guys have got it made. They're polite, friendly and they don't have wives to rip off all their cash. And look at this place. It might not be to our taste, but there's no expense spared - there's something to be said for the lifestyle.'

'Look,' said Mick, 'let's get one thing straight, old chum. If you're choosing tonight to change your sexual orientation, you can have the bloody bed to yourself, I'm spending the night cuddled up with Elvis.'

Jim was halfway through a reassuring sentence when he fell asleep. Within seconds, Mick had gone too.

Maybe they were just good mates, maybe life had just thrown them together, maybe, in a strange sort of way, they loved each other. But whatever the reality, it seemed appropriate that, tonight, after everything they'd been through, they slept in all innocence, in a bed that was heart shaped.

They enjoyed a deep sleep. A long sleep. A sleep they were going to really need, if they were to cope with the momentous events - or, as Mick would later describe them - 'piles of festering shite' - that lay in store for them the following day.

# 43

When Mick awoke next morning, he had, what he unkindly described as ‘a Priscilla moment.’ He opened his eyes to see a half-naked Elvis gazing lustfully at him across the bedroom.

After he’d recovered from the shock, he checked his watch. It was 10.30. He woke Jim. They crawled out of bed and phoned room service for a breakfast of steak and scrambled eggs, followed by cherry pie and black coffee.

Jim stood at the door of the bathroom and gazed at the sanitaryware he’d been dreaming of for the last couple of days. He dropped to his knees and kissed the black and white tiled floor. Then he kissed the hand basin and the taps and the shower curtain and the shower controls and the little free bottles of shampoo and conditioner. Mick managed to pull him back before he got to the bidet and the toilet seat.

‘Isn’t it wonderful,’ he cried. ‘This is just what we need - right here, right now! It’s the most fabulous thing I’ve ever seen in my life!’

Mick raised a slightly cynical eyebrow, but even *he* had to agree that it was. They showered and shaved. Then washed the stains off their trousers and dried them with the bathroom hair dryer. Things were looking good.

Breakfast was delivered along with the morning papers.

They sat back, tucked in, and welcomed the return of a degree of a jeopardy-free existence.

Mick looked up from the paper.

‘We’re news, old boy!’

‘What?’

‘This headline: Harley blows up in desert.’

‘Shit!’

‘No, it’s OK! Listen. The bike’s lady owner told police, she was as mystified, but it was covered by insurance, and she had every intention of buying another.’

‘How does that fit into ‘They Win You Lose?’

‘Maybe I ought to change it to ‘They Win. You Lose. We’re bleedin’ ungrateful bastards!’

They look at each another in an uncomfortable way as they realised how the Easy Riders have kept them out of trouble.

Then, suddenly, Mick bounced back.

‘Blimey! Here on page five, there’s a newsflash about your punctured nuptials! With diagrams!’

‘What!’

‘Only joking! But, as Reuters haven’t picked up the story yet, how *is* the old scrote coming along?’

‘Like two blithe spirits floating in the clouds of Elysium.’

‘James! I didn’t know you had a poetic streak!’

Jim smiled. ‘It’s like the poison’s been all drained away.’



‘Well you know what they say about dinosaurs!’

‘Hey, and while we’re on the subject!’ said Jim, ‘I’ll have you know I was very serious about poetry when I was younger. I remember writing an epic poem about Elizabeth I.

‘Ah yes, I recall!’ said Mick. ‘It started “There was a young girl called Queen Lizzie...”’

Jim ignored the comment and continued to expand on his poetic credentials.

‘Plus, I can recite the whole of *Eskimo Nell*.’

Mick couldn’t resist.

‘So buy me a drink and I’ll tell you a tale...

Neither could Jim.

‘...of a place where spunk is spunk.’

‘Not a trickling stream of lukewarm cream...’

‘...but a solid, frozen chunk!’

They high-fived and, somehow, continued to eat.

‘Researchers,’ said Jim, ‘claim it was written by Noël Coward.’

‘Really!’

‘He recited it in a Paris nightclub in 1919.’

‘Very interesting!’

‘And...’

Mick interrupted. ‘Culture’s all very well, James, but we have an airport to arrive at!’

‘...there’s a good line about frozen sheep.’

Mick held up Maurice’s card and flicked it with his finger.

‘Let’s give Maurice a bell. I seem to remember he has a cab. *And* we can find out how the greedy bastard got on in limoland.’

‘Good idea,’ said Jim, as Eskimo Nell’s dubious exploits began to fade, ‘but remember, he costs about \$150 a mile.’ And for the first time since he’d arrived in Las Vegas, Jim laughed.

Mick phoned Maurice from the call box in reception, and was relieved to hear him answer - at least, he was alive! Mick didn’t say who he was. He just booked the cab. When he announced the pick-up point, he could hear Maurice’s eyebrows raise. But this was urgent, and there was no time to discuss Maurice’s finer sensibilities. Not that Mick, still smarting from the \$200 water bottle negotiation, believed Maurice had *any* finer sensibilities. The little shit.

They checked out, and Maurice arrived on time. He didn’t look too pleased to see them.

‘How’s it going Mozza, me old mate?’ said Mick, as they jumped into the back of the cab. ‘Sorry, but both cheeks of my bum have touched the seat, is that extra?’

Jim cut across the banter. ‘How did it go last night?’

Maurice was scowling. ‘Well, the limo caught up with me about ten miles down the road. They had a word. I said what you told me to say. There was no hassle. They believed the story - and I thought that was that.’

‘But?’

‘They followed me all the way back home. Then, I start work this morning, and they’re on my tail again. And they’re *still* on my tail,’ he said, looking nervously into his rear-view mirror.

‘I think it’s you two they’re after.’ He glanced up at the neon sign above the door. ‘Been upsetting some of your boyfriends, have you?’

‘Look,’ said Mick, ‘airport and fast!’ Maurice knew from his tone that the ‘boyfriends’ discussion was over.

As they pulled out onto the main drag, Big Derek came running out after them waving something in a golden frame above his head. ‘Boys,’ he shouted, ‘here’s your Commitment Certificate - and a complimentary copy of Elvis’s latest single!’

Needless to say, they didn’t go back to collect.

After two minutes, Maurice gave a yelp.

'Look, they're behind us!'

Mick turned - and yes, there was the black limo, two cars back.

The cab was coming onto the Strip. Normally, this would be a time where newcomers stare in open-mouthed amazement at the mind-boggling audacity of the place. But Mick saw nothing. He was firmly focused on the departure lounge at McCarran International.

'Here's \$200 if you put your foot down.'

'No thanks,' said Maurice, 'I've had enough. Those limo guys look like they mean business, and I don't want to be around when the business starts. Just get out of the cab *now*!' He swerved over into the entrance to one of the casinos.

'We are *not* getting out! Take us to the airport!'

'I ain't moving,' said Maurice sullenly, folding his arms.

'OK, then we'll stay here until they come to get us - and whatever happens, I'll make sure it includes *you*.'

'Shit!' said Maurice, fumbling in his inside coat pocket. 'Here's \$500 if you get out, *now*!'

Mick grabbed the cash. It was a Hambleton moment. It was an unexpected case of 'We Win. They Lose', but there was no time to enjoy.

'Done!' he shouted, and, as they dived out of the cab, they saw the limo turning in off the drag.

Dashing through the casino's open doors, Mick and Jim ran across the large, brightly lit foyer. Scores of people were gambling on one-armed bandits and various slot machines - totally unaware that, behind their hunched backs, people were playing for stakes far higher than they could ever imagine.

A large red and gold sign, surrounded by flashing bulbs, advertised the casino's theatre.

'In here!' shouted Mick. They sashayed around a bunny-type girl selling roulette chips, and skidded to a halt at the ticket office.

'Two tickets!' gasped Mick.

The clerk behind the grill was pleasant and relaxed.

'May I ask for what, sir?'

'Anything!'

'May I recommend R&R? They're very popular - and the show's just about to start.'

'That'll do nicely!' said Mick, handing over a wad of notes. 'Keep the change,' he shouted to the delighted clerk, as they ran down the heavily carpeted corridor to a double door marked 'R&R in Concert.'

They handed their tickets to another bunny lady just inside the doors, and began looking for somewhere inconspicuous to sit.

The theatre was huge, with an interior that could only have been tolerated in Las Vegas. To call it tacky and gaudy would have been an extreme understatement. A DJ was in action at the front of the stage. He was supported by a laser show of such unnecessary intensity that, had it been outdoors, it would have downed every aircraft in the skies over Nevada.

Given the mindless thump of hard-core dance, the retina-burning severity of the lasers and the fact that it was just three in the afternoon, they were surprised to see the theatre was packed.

There were just a few empty rows, right at the back. Mick and Jim made straight for them. The location gave a good view of the audience and anyone who came into the theatre. It also put them as far away as possible from whatever muck R&R were serving up as entertainment.

Mercifully, the laser show stopped, and a few seconds later, the opening music started. It was like a mixture of the *Stars and Stripes*, *Here comes the Chief*, *The Old Rugged Cross* and the theme from *Top Gun* - but at least, there was a sort of tune.

The opening few bars had barely finished when the blood in Mick and Jim's veins turned, if not to ice, then definitely to a sort of gritty slush.

Six Tarantino lookalikes came into the theatre. They moved swiftly down the aisles, looking around the audience with quick, jerky movements - apart from one, who had a neck brace and a plaster cast round his jaw.

The lookalikes came back up the aisles. They checked the back rows thoroughly, and soon spotted Mick and Jim lying face down on the floor between the seats. Three Tarantinos moved along their row from one side, and three more, from the other.

Mick and Jim got up from where they'd been lying and sat back in their seats.

'Dropped our programme,' explained Mick to the black-suited thug on his left. But there was no reply. Not even an 'I know. It's terrible when that happens. I'm always doing it.' Don't they teach them any conversational skills at gangster school?

So there they sat - Mick and Jim - in a Tarantino sandwich. All the positive vibes they'd felt as they waited for Maurice's cab had completely evaporated.

The six gangsters just looked straight ahead. Possibly, this was because they were hard-nosed bastards. Or, maybe, it was because the show was about to start, and after twenty-four hours of chasing victims, gangsters, just like ordinary people, crave a little light entertainment.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' enthused the announcer over the sound system. Bit too much treble, thought Jim, automatically.

'Ladies and gentlemen, please put your hands together and welcome the worldwide hit-makers, the worldwide heart-breakers, the worldwide movers and shakers - you're here for them and they're here for you - I want my eardrums shattered by the biggest, most mind-bending, lurve-sending, never-ending Las Vegas welcome ever - give it up for the one, the only, their global uniquenesses - international sex-gods - R&R!'

Whatever the announcer was paid, he was definitely earning his money.

The audience, which Mick suddenly noticed could quite fairly be described as the 'blue-rinse' brigade, leapt to their feet and began screaming. The noise was like having barbed wire shoved down your ears - although that was too pleasant a description. Some of the grannies gave whistles so loud, you could be forgiven for thinking they'd spent most of their lives working on major construction sites.

There was a small delay, just to wind the audience up further, then into the centre stage spotlight stepped two guys in gold tuxedos, with frilly, purple dress shirts and large, pink velvet bow ties. They had large gold medallions, seventies haircuts, flared Crimpelene trousers, tan platform shoes and white Elvis-type, 70's shades - the works!

Every number was equally dreadful. And every number was cheered wildly by the devoted audience of fanatical fans. They showered the stage with a variety of personal items, including sensible underwear, support stockings and a couple of original whalebone corsets.

The hundreds of plastic cherubim and seraphim bolted to the theatre ceiling, even though they were all wearing white-rimmed, Elvis-type shades, must never have seen anything like it.

There was no response from the surrounding Tarantino team, although the one with the neck brace moaned, from time to time.

The show was so mind-numbing, Mick and Jim started to move into what could only be described as a light hypnotic trance - dreadful number - cheering - dreadful number - cheering - dreadful number - cheering... All that was missing was a card with some mini Bridget Riley op art to stare at, and they'd be reliving their lives as debauched artists in 17th-century Paris.

'And now,' said one of the singers, after what seemed like a couple of days, 'as you all know, we've got really big...'

'Knob-enders!' shouted one of the grannies, to huge cheers.

'No,' said the singer, without a pause, '...really big, warm feelings about this, our final number. It's the one we know you've been waiting for. And I'd like to thank you all for being so patient and quiet.'

The audience erupted with yet another round of frenzied, ear-piercing approval.

The R doing the introductions sounded as though he'd just graduated, with not very good marks from the Dolly Parton School of Folksy, Good Ol' Boy-Speak.

'Get out your implements, you lovely ladies, and here - we - go!'

The audience screamed with a ferocity, probably last heard when Stukas were dive-bombing Poland.

The cherubs' internal lights began to pulsate in a blinding, multi-coloured frenzy - and the song started.

The first words and the raising of 2000 wooden spoons, catapulted Mick and Jim out of their mesmerised state.

*If you're down and out and your legs feel wooden*

*If you want a tip, then here's a gudden.*

'Jesus double-hyphenated Christ!' spluttered Mick. 'It's Vlad and Vic!'

The eyes of the Tarantino team turned towards them.

It was important they appeared calm, even though their brains were bouncing around like a couple of personal vibrators in a biscuit tin.

'What the hell are *they* doing here?' whispered Mick.

'God knows! And if he *does* know, I hope to God he doesn't tell me!'

'It *was* them after all, spluttered Mick. 'They got us here. This is just a front.'

He looked across at the Tarantino boys. 'They must be back in business!'

Mick and Jim's state of panic grew as the dreadful song continued. Every line had actions - and the audience knew them all, by heart.

Everyone made stirring motions with their spoons when they sang 'stir your pudden', and performed even more imbecilic gestures at other parts of the song.

The whole performance powered over Mick and Jim like a thirty-foot wave of grade-A, untreated effluent.

*Get a life and get it sudden*

*Grab your spoon and stir your pudden*

*Stir it up. Stir it down.*

*Mucho motion, round and round*

*Stir it when you're feeling cool*

*Stir it by the swimming pool*

*Bounce until your nose goes blue*

*Stir it. Stir it. Stir it. Whooooo!*

When the song finished, the audience response was as phenomenal, as it was unpleasant to the ears - and there were immediate screams for an encore. And, after a few minutes of leaning forward to touch hands with the hundreds of cheering matrons who'd crowded the front of the stage, repeat it they did.

Mick and Jim sat frozen to their seats, until the last chords had slid slowly down the plughole, the bouquets were presented, the band had whipped out for a quick one, and the last of the blue-rinse brigade had returned to barracks, still singing at the tops of their voices.

The train crash was over. The theatre was empty. There was just Mick, Jim, the Tarantino boys and three hundred faintly pulsating, fibreglass cherubs wearing Elvis shades.

The man with the neck brace and jaw plaster, who they now recognised as Mr Green, got up and spoke. 'I thik it tim to grow nd meet someond.'

It didn't need deciphering. Mick and Jim knew it was all over. They'd given it their best shot. They'd frantically avoided capture and God knows what else, since the plane hit the tarmac, but 'They Win. You Lose.' seemed, at last, to have gained the upper hand.

'I think you're probably right, Mr Green,' said Mick quietly. And so, with a sharply-dressed gangster on each elbow, they were escorted out of the silence of the theatre into the blazing lights and chaos of the casino.

The black-suited entourage moved Mick and Jim smoothly across the foyer. They turned right into a quiet, thickly carpeted corridor with subtle lighting and signed, spotlit photographs of previous performers, including Bette Midler, lining the walls. At the end of the corridor, was a large, yellow silk-quilted door with five gold stars and an enormous, sky-blue R&R logo.

As Mick and Jim were eased into the room, the gangsters released their grip and disappeared back into the corridor.

This was obviously the star dressing room, and equally obviously, there were Vlad and Vic, large as life, in fact, as ever, a lot larger than life.

They were sitting on two high-backed, ornate, gold chairs with purple velvet upholstery, set on a raised, red-velvet dais.

If you hadn't got your proper glasses on, you might have thought they were twin kings on twin thrones. Two sensationally beautiful girls in extremely short, silver skirts and matching low-cut tops were pampering them, mopping their foreheads with fluffy white R&R monogrammed towels, and gently massaging their neck muscles.

'Hey! Hey!' said Vlad. He waved a hand full of gold rings, but didn't stand up. 'Glad you could make it.' The folksy Dolly accents were modified by pure South London.

'Great to see you again,' said Mick, while checking for possible escape routes.

'How you finding Vegas?'

'Well,' said Mick, with a nervous smile, 'it's certainly different from Southsea.'

'Sure is,' said Vlad. He gave a broad grin, and there was a flash from an expensive gold filling, so intensely polished, it made Mick blink.

'Hey, and thanks for givin' the boys the run-around,' laughed Vic. 'They could use the exercise!'

'Ah! Yes!' said Mick. 'The black limo ensemble! Who...?'

'Ex-enforcers and hit men,' said Vlad. 'But now we've reformed, we're trainin' 'em to get back on the straight and narrow. Only problem is, we want a clean cut, legal image, but they keep dressin' like that wotsit about big lakes.'

'*Reservoir Dogs*?'

That's the one – bit too violent for me. But everything's cool. Have to give 'em a serious slap if they get a bit frisky, but it's good for them - you know – get some fresh air, an'nat - bit like the Boy Scouts.'

'Yeah! The Boy Scouts Beretta Brigade!' added Vic.

He snorted at his little joke and had what, in polite circles, might be called a nostril malfunction. The beautiful girl at his side produced a tissue and, without flinching, cleared his upper lip of snot.

It became immediately clear to Mick and Jim that, rather than fear for their lives, the first thing they needed to fear was Vlad and Vic's ham-fisted attempts at normal conversation.

Nevertheless, Mick eased into gear.

'So, hey, you guys are looking incredible! But how did all this happen? All this fantastic success,' he added flatteringly.

The two beautiful girls realised a conversation was taking place and moved to stand on either side of the thrones, hands behind their backs and legs apart. It was the same pose adopted by ball girls at Wimbledon, but that was where the similarity ended. Both Mick and Jim were finding it hard to concentrate. But they had to. Their lives could well depend on it.

‘Well, we “disappeared”,’ said Vlad, making quotation marks with his fingers, ‘to Los Angeles. And I don’t mind admittin’ it was hard at first. Like, we walk into a bar. And before we can order a couple of vodka-brandies with rum chasers, everyone scarpers!’

‘No idea we were so big, stateside!’ added Vic.

‘We tried the agencies, all polite like. But there was nothin goin’! No interest! Y’know, like, sod all!’

‘So we went old school,’ said Vic. ‘Took a stroll down memory lane, even memory dark-alley!’

‘Yeah,’ said Vlad. ‘Used a bit of vintage V-twins physical persuasion.’

‘Nothin’ heavy - like, no-one got hospitalised...’

‘...well, not for long!’

‘Then, one day - Bingo! Big time! We dragged this agent geezer from under his desk.’

‘Explained what we were looking for...’

‘...and once the bleedin’ had stopped, he stuck the vid on that YouTube...’

‘...and, in a week, we had over five million hits.’

‘Then he put it on that iTunes thing, and we’re at just over four million sales.’

‘And, on the back of that, he got us this job in the casino. \$50,000 a week, plus 50 per cent of the merchandisin’. *And* a two-year contract.’

‘Not the sort of contract we were used to,’ joked Vlad.

‘And the agent is quids in - even got enough for a bit of the old reconstructive surgery.’

Mick and Jim forced themselves to grin.

Sensing a lull in the conversation, the girls moved round to remove R&R’s wigs, and Mick and Jim shuddered slightly as the old Vlad and Vic were suddenly revealed. They carried on talking while the girls patted their heads dry with more fluffy, white, R&R monogrammed towels.

It was a bit uncomfortable having a chit-chat while standing to attention, but Vlad and Vic seemed happy with the situation, and Mick was not going to argue.

‘And what’s with the name change?’ he asked.

‘Well, we didn’t want to attract the attention of certain international law enforcement agencies, so “Vlad and Vic” were dumped into the buildin’ skip of history.’

‘We used to be good at dumpin’ things in skips,’ added Vic, with a slight snigger, ‘and in freezers, acid baths, bottle banks...’

Vlad gave him a very hard stare.

‘You’re borin’ our guests.’

Vic misinterpreted this admonishment, and simply changed tack, to make the information less boring.

‘Yeah! Well, it wasn’t just dumpin’, we shoved people out of aeroplanes, down lift shafts, under trains, out of portholes...’



Vlad put his hand on Vic's. It didn't look much, but whatever he did made Vic's face go bright red and his eyes start to water, and most importantly, from Vlad's point of view, he shut up.

Still keeping the grip in place, Vlad carried on.

'So, we chose two new names for ourselves. Names that wouldn't be, like, connected with our - like - er - our previous profession.'

'So what's your new names?'

'Ronnie and Reggie,' said Vlad, obviously delighted. He released his grip on Vic's hand, so Vic looked delighted too.

Mick glanced swiftly at Jim with a look which made it absolutely clear this was not the right time to discuss the new names, in any way at all.

'Great idea to shorten it to R&R,' said Mick.

'Yeah, like Rolls-Royce - top of the range, and all that,' added Jim.

'Or Rest and Recuperation - or Randy and Raunchy,' said Mick.

Vlad and Vic seemed amused, thank God.

Mick decided they'd now got enough Brownie points on the board to come up with the big one.

'So, what was all this about an urgent video shoot?'

Vlad and Vic burst out laughing, and continued to laugh until they were nearly crying. Eventually Vlad spluttered, 'There *is* no video shoot!'

Shit, thought Mick and Jim together, but they laughed out loud with the golden-throned ones - determined, at all costs, to keep them onside.

'Great,' smiled Mick, as he mentally sprayed them with exploding bullets from a well-maintained Kalashnikov.

'Fantastic,' said Jim, with all the positivity of a man who's just been told Las Vegas was going to be stuck by a large asteroid in two minutes.

Bloody hell, thought Mick. Everything we've been through - all for nothing. If he got out of this alive, and could find the home address of that bleeding Kentucky security guard at McCarran, he'd make sure he got some very unpleasant things in his mail box.

'But there is somethin',' said Vlad. He stopped smiling, and looked a lot more serious.

Here it comes thought Mick - we're gonna get handed back to the Tarantino boys - as something they can practice their nastier techniques on.

'We told you \$200,000, and we meant it,' said Vlad. 'But you don't have to make a video.' He handed Mick a large, brown envelope. 'Don't check it - it's all there.'

Mick was stunned. He pointed his finger weakly at the envelope. 'You mean there's 200,000...?' His voice trailed away. Jim looked as though he'd been hit moderately hard in the face with a Le Creuset frying pan.

'\$200,000 tax-free, with our compliments,' said Vlad, with a smile. 'See, we started thinkin' and we realised that, without you two guys, *all this* would never have happened.'

He pulled one of the girls towards him. She willingly sat on his lap, wriggled, then purred like a cat that was getting the cream, laced with *Prem Cuvée*.

'It was *your* phone call that put Charlie off the scent,' said Vlad, 'and believe me, I know phonin' Charlie Sumkins, even to wish him "Happy Birthday", takes a lot of guts.'

‘And it was *you* guys who made the video that went viral on the net, also,’ said Vic, experimenting with one of the stranger American sentence constructions.

‘Now, we might have been naughty boys with a global reputation, but, just like we don’t forget grasses...’

Vlad cracked his knuckles in a way which made Mick think he might not have fully reformed.

‘...our sort never, *ever*, forget people who step up to the plate for us, big time.’

‘I know it’s a lot of cash, but we’re generous guys - you might say we do everythin’ to excess.’

‘You were great! You worked flat out for us, even though you thought we might terminate your contract, so to speak, if anythin’ went wrong. And I don’t mind telling you, if there *had* been a hitch, you would’ve been our last “proper” job.’

‘If you’re professionals, you can’t let emotions get in the way,’ explained Vic.

‘Yeah! We was goin’ to bury you up to your necks on Southsea beach, one night when the tide was comin’ in.’

‘We bought top-of-the-range shovels and everythin’.’

‘But, no worries,’ said Vlad. ‘It all turned out great. You’re still alive and kickin’ - so, enjoy!’

It seemed an age since Aubrey’s arrival at their Soho offices, and there’d been many unbelievable, heart-stopping moments, but this topped the lot.

‘Really, it was nothing...’ began Jim.

Mick twisted round suddenly and hugged Jim in a ‘brotherly love’ sort of way, twisting his head sideways and managing to get his hand over the offending mouth.

‘What we’d really like to say,’ said Mick, loudly, ‘is, simply, thanks guys. We really appreciate it. It was a pleasure working with you. And we’re absolutely thrilled it’s all worked out so well.’

Jim realised his gaffe. He stopped struggling, and Mick gently released his grip.

‘And, by the way, the act was great,’ said Mick. ‘Very natty gear - very sexy, if you don’t mind me saying. We loved every minute of it!’

‘That’s a very healthy opinion to have,’ said Vlad, cracking his knuckles again.

‘And what about the audience?’ added Jim, through rapidly bruising lips.

‘Yeah,’ said Vlad, ‘the old dears go crazy. I mean, like, when we first started, we use to get a coronary a week, but now it’s up to three, sometimes four. It’s costin’ us a bomb in medical staff and equipment. Not to mention the mortuary bills.’

‘Yeah,’ added Vic, ‘but that’s the price of success.’

Vlad and Vic beamed. It wasn’t a pleasant sight, but, given the circumstances, it fell into the category of perfectly acceptable.

‘You should get that cash into the casino safe deposit boxes,’ said Vic, ‘there’s a lot of dodgy characters round here.’

‘Present company excepted,’ said Mick, and they all laughed. In fact, Jim laughed so much, he had one of his coughing fits, but even *that* couldn’t take the edge off the occasion.

The audience was over, not that Mick and Jim were unhappy to see the end coming. They shook hands, wished one another all the best and exchanged final hugs. Then Mick and Jim, inside pockets bulging, and ribs only slightly bruised, said ‘thank you’ one more time, took a last look at the beautiful girls, and left quickly before the V-twins could change their minds.



# 46

Casinos are strange places. The atmosphere is an intensely lit mixture of hypnotic enjoyment, bewilderment and indifference. Slot machine winners seem transfixed and simply feed back any winnings, immediately. There are no windows, no clocks and it's hard to see where the exits are - no doubt, to keep the punters playing and losing for as long as possible. Really all quite sad and seedy.

Not that Mick and Jim gave a toss. The cash was in hand and there were no queues at the casino bank. They deposited the \$200,000, less \$10,000 spending money. Did that have a ring to it, or what? Ten thousand spending money! Job, bloody well done! A fantastic result! They were being carried shoulder high round Hambledon cricket ground. The crowds were cheering fit to bust. What a triumph! Their grins reached from ear to ear, and beyond.

Unfortunately, before they could turn away from the bank cashier, a hand fell firmly on Mick's shoulder. It was a heavy hand with a steely grip. It was a hand which would prove that even the happiest moments in life can be very, very short lived.

‘Hello,’ said the owner of the hand, ‘my name’s Charlie Sumkins.’

This time, the blood in their veins by-passed gritty sludge and turned straight to ice. They eased round, slowly.

‘I was just wonderin’ what you two unsavoury bastards were doing wanderin’ round my beautiful casino?’

‘*Your* casino?’

‘One of my many “legal” international investments,’ said Charlie. ‘I don’t just do lino-floored shitholes in Soho. And with just the slightest hint of a facial twitch, he continued, ‘I asked you a question and you were impolite enough not to answer. I have to tell you that’s somethin’ I don’t respond well to. In fact, it can make me quite disagreeable.’

‘We - we - we’re on holiday,’ stuttered Jim, feebly.

‘If you want your interest on the rent,’ said Mick, putting his hand in his inside pocket and getting straight to the point, ‘here’s ten grand, give or take the dollar conversion rate. That should be about right.’

‘Oh!’ said Charlie, ‘*very* nice.’ He took the package with a smile.

‘It’s refreshin’ to meet a couple of honest blokes. There’s a lot of dishonesty round here. It’s somethin’ casinos seem to bring out in people. We had this bloke in earlier this year, and he was cheatin’ at roulette, but he got grabbed by the croupiers and thrown out. Ruined his sex life for the rest of the month!’ Charlie laughed at his joke. Mick and Jim had to smile.

Charlie didn’t look at all like a casino owner. He was wearing a tweed hunting jacket with suede shoulder reinforcements and a loosely-knotted silk cravat, in the style of Dennis Price in the Ealing classic, *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. He’d even had his hair darkened, brushed back and waved to get the look as accurate as possible.

A fabulous diminutive blonde, with a face and figure to die for, came up to stand at Charlie’s side. She gave him a little hug and stood on tiptoe to nibble his neck. She was wearing a red, silk oriental dress with a split almost up to her sun-tanned hipbone. She was so stunning, Mick and Jim, momentarily, forgot the precarious situation they were in. The ice in their veins disappeared. Normal blood temperatures were reached and then exceeded, by a significant amount.

‘Hey,’ said Charlie, ignoring their gawping mouths, ‘what do think of Vlad and Vic’s act?’

‘You *know* it’s Vlad and Vic!’ spluttered Jim.

‘Hey, I wasn’t born yesterday.’

Charlie turned to walk through the foyer. They followed. They’d been running enough, and, anyway, it seemed they were all square on the financial front - so they were out of danger.

‘As soon as their agent showed me the pics, I knew it was the terrible twins. But, hey, look where we are now. The blue-rinsers love ‘em, I’m makin’ \$100,000 a night in ticket sales, payin’ ‘em peanuts *and* we’re booked more or less solid for the next nine months.’

‘But. I thought you were out to get them,’ said Mick, eventually finding his voice.

‘I was, I was,’ admitted Charlie, ‘and I seriously thought about rubbin’ ‘em out when they arrived, but, you know what, if there’s a good enough reason - especially cash - I can forgive anyone.’

Having just cleared their debt, Mick and Jim noted that philosophy with some relief.

Mick was still anxious to get a few things cleared up.

‘But Vlad and Vic said they put out the idea of the big video deal, just to get us over here.’

Charlie laughed. ‘I got ‘em to say that! Do you think those two dumb-asses could organise the visas and flights in twenty-four hours. They just fronted the scam, there *was* no video job, and there’s certainly no \$200,000 on offer.

Both Mick and Jim made a mental note of this last point. Charlie might be Lord of the Universe, but he didn’t know *everything*.

‘So, Vlad and Vic, sorry, Ronnie and Reggie, know this is your place?’

‘Course,’ said Charlie, ‘soon as I decided I wasn’t gonna have ‘em staked out in the desert, I told ‘em I was the owner. And now we’re the best of pals - at least, that’s what *they* think. If audiences drop off, I suppose a good stakeout is still an option. Hey, and while it’s confession time, I suppose I ought to tell you I never sent the East Europeans down to Portsmouth. I knew you’d take the bait. And anyway, have you seen the price of a day-return to Pompey – bleedin’ disgraceful.’

During the conversation, they’d threaded their way through the bustle of the casino, walked up a wide staircase flanked by flashing neon-lit images of playing cards and dollar signs, onto a balcony, overlooking the vast gaming floor. Charlie led them down a long corridor before arriving at a silk-quilted, yellow door with a large letter C on it.

‘Here’s my office,’ he said. ‘There’s a “C” on the door, ‘cos when we had the old sign saying “Charlie”, we used to get queues of druggies thinking it was a some sort of sales office.’

‘Come in, boys, let’s put our feet up and drink to the future.’

He opened the door for the gorgeous blonde. She stepped inside. Mick and Jim followed. They admired her pert, silk-covered bottom and started to feel more relaxed.

‘Hey darlin’,’ said Charlie, ‘here’s 10,000 bucks.’ He handed over the rent interest. ‘Go and see if you can get lucky.’

Before leaving, she smiled a gorgeous smile, with a full, generous mouth, perfect white teeth, and large, cornflower-blue eyes.

God, thought Mick, being an international crime boss certainly had some perks.

The lights in the room were dimmed.

Charlie touched a wall panel, and the lights grew brighter in a slow, expensive sort of way.

It was an impressive room with a large desk in white oak, a beautiful, Italian-designer boardroom set-up, and large, high-quality blow-ups from Ealing films around the walls.

Only three things took the edge off this favourable impression. The room had no windows, the floor was covered in sheets of thick polythene and Charlie Sumkins had just pulled out a massive handgun.

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Charlie spoke in that relaxed, but nasty, tone you can adopt when you're the one holding the gun.

'You two must have hamster shit for brains. Lyin' your arses off about the car crash. Bosham harbour, for Christ's sake. No bodies found - all very convenient, and little Charlie didn't suspect a thing!'

'But Vlad and Vic ...' said Mick.

'Look! Vlad and Vic couldn't organise a gang-bang in a knockin' shop, even if someone printed the tickets! But thanks to them, I've got you exactly where I want you.'

'Which is?' stammered Mick.

'Here in this room - with me armed, you unarmed and a lot of polythene on the floor.'

'But we've paid you everything,' croaked Jim.

'You have. You have,' said Charlie, smiling slightly. 'And that's very kind of you.'

Mick and Jim nodded with a sort of desperate enthusiasm.

'But unfortunately, it ain't about the money,' said Charlie. 'It's about me.'

'You!'

'And my reputation! See, out on the street, they expect Vlad and Vic to be slippery, difficult and *very* fuckin' dangerous. To your average, piss-ordinary villain, suggesting they have a crack at Vlad and Vic would be like asking 'em to finish off a couple of Spanish fightin' bulls with a toothpick. So, if *I* couldn't nail 'em, well - no other sod would even think about tryin', so my reputation don't take no dents.'

'But you two. Two poncey, limp-wristed, shithead video wimps, without a brass farthin', manage to give me the run-around for ages, *and* in a bleedin' Morris Traveller.'

'Now, there are certain people who have heard about this, and they're thinkin' Charlie's losin' his touch, he's goin' soft, he can't even do a hatchet job on a couple of pansies. He's ripe for take-over, they say. Just a little push and he's history. Well I got to let 'em know they're wrong. I got to push back real hard so they see I got bigger balls than the rest of their balls put together. Now, apart from creatin' an unsavoury mental image, that means I have, personally, to bring you two to a well-publicised conclusion.'

To give Charlie his due, he really did try hard to explain why he was going to shoot them dead in a few minutes.

'I don't like people tryin' to knock me of my perch, for a number of very good reasons - some financial, some humanitarian, some personal. One: financial. It's very expensive to run a turf war. Two: humanitarian. A lot of people get killed. Three: personal. It's a matter of pride. I got to the top by being ruthless, by crushin' people, by seriously double-crossing even my own relatives - God rest mum's soul - and by taking no prisoners, *ever*. How could I live with myself if I didn't personally bring you two to a satisfactory - and please excuse the grammatical analogy - full stop.'

'I could recommend a good therapist in Chelsea who might help you contact your feminine side,' said Mick, half expecting to be shot, merely for making the suggestion.

'I got enough contact with the feminine side,' smirked Charlie. 'You seen my babe?'

They nodded.

'So, I'm afraid, I gotta do the job myself.'

He walked across the room sideways, keeping his eyes and his gun pointing straight at Mick and Jim.

With a dramatic flourish, he used his free hand to whip a black cloth off what turned out to be a video camera on a tripod.

'I'm afraid I'm gonna have to bump you off and tape it, then we can distribute the DVD discreetly to the low life who think they're gonna get a piece of my action. And then, maybe, they'll realise they could be the next in line for a cinematic experience on the polythene.'

'By the way, sorry about the polythene, this is a really nice office but you'd be surprised at how much Las Vegas carpet cleaners charge. Bloody outrageous!'

'Look,' said Mick, 'we could make free videos for you, for the next forty years.'

'Sorry,' said Charlie.

'We could make a feature film for free - *The life and times of Charlie Sumkins*. We'll get Brad Pitt to play *you*.'

'Brad Pitt, armpit, cesspit! They all mean the same to me! Nothin!'

said Charlie, pulling back the hammer.'

He flicked the video camera on, raised his arm and pointed the gun straight at Mick's head.

'What is it you fairies say? Lights, camera, action? Well we got the lights, we got the camera, and now, I'm afraid boys, it's time for the action.'

'But with that camera and the lighting in here, you'll get very poor production values,' said Mick, his voice cracking in desperation. 'And this polythene will play havoc with the acoustics. Perhaps if you give me a couple of days, I could shop around and come up with some really tasty, state-of-the-art kit.'

This was, patently, his last throw of the dice, and Charlie was spectacularly unimpressed.

Suddenly, Jim spoke up.

'You'll never get away with it.'

Even though a horrible death was imminent, the thought flashed through Mick's soon-to-be-despatched brain; fuck me, James, is that the best you can come up with?



# 49

'Look at Louis Mazzini,' continued Jim.

Charlie quickly turned the gun towards him.

'What the fuck do you know about Louis Mazzini?'

'Well I know *he* didn't get away with murder in *Kind Hearts and Coronets*,' said Jim, carefully.

Charlie grunted. It was only the slightest pause, but it presented a drainpipe of opportunity. And Jim shot up it like a ferret on amphetamines.

'That's one of my favourite films,' he said, trying to sound as cool as possible. 'I'm always impressed by the way Dennis Price plays Louis.'

'And what would a tosser like you know about Dennis Price?'

'Well, he was born on the 23rd June 1915 in Twyford, Berkshire. His full name was Dennistoun Franklyn John Rose-Price. His father was Brigadier-General Thomas Rose Caradoc Price and his mother was Dorothy - née Verrey.'

'Who directed?' interrupted Charlie, scowling, but lowering his gun slightly.

'Robert Hamer,' said Jim. 'He collaborated with John Dighton on the script. It's a great plot, don't you think? It was based on novel *Israel Rank, The Autobiography of a Criminal* by Roy Horniman. Have you read it?'

'No I fuckin' haven't. Who else starred?'

'Valerie Hobson, Joan Greenwood and, of course, Sir Alec Guinness. I particularly liked the poster headline, don't you? "He chopped down the family tree..."'

'And the title's interesting too,' continued Jim, 'it comes from Tennyson's poem *Lady Clara Vere de Vere*, written in 1842 - "Kind hearts are more than coronets, and simple faith than Norman blood."'

Mick's mouth was hanging open.

'What's your second favourite film?' snapped Charlie, but this time with a degree of interest.

'Ealing comedy?' asked Jim.

'What else?'

'Oh, I think I'd go for *The Ladykillers*. I think it was directed by Alexander Mackendrick in 1955. Did you know the screenplay was written by an American called William Rose?'

'No,' said Charlie with a touch of amazement in his voice. His gun was now hanging down by his side.

'So, what about this Rose bloke?'

'He was nominated for an Academy Award for Writing Original Screenplay, and won a BAFTA for Best British Screenplay.'

'Really?' said Charlie, with absolutely no malice in his voice.

'He claimed to have dreamt the entire film, and just had to remember the details when he woke up.'

'What about *The Lavender Hill Mob*? That's one of *my* all-time favourites,' said Charlie, sitting down and waving his gun to indicate Jim should do the same.

Mick didn't want to left out, so he took a seat as well. Charlie eyed the move, but was too engrossed to make an issue out of it.

'Well,' said Jim, '*The Lavender Hill Mob* was released in 1951, written by T.E.B. Clarke, directed by Charles Crichton. It starred Alec Guinness and Stanley Holloway, and featured Sid James and Alfie Bass.'

'Anything else?'

'Well, I've got some interesting bits of trivia.'

'Go on,' said Charlie.

'Mr Clarke came up with idea of a clerk robbing his own bank while he was doing research for another film, *The Pool of London*. He had talks with the Bank of England and they set up a special committee to work out the best way to do that sort of robbery.'

'You said *some* trivia,' said Charlie, leaning forward.

'Well, in the car chase scene, near the end, a policeman reports seeing a police car driven by a man in a top hat. Well, the driver was dressed like one of Robert Peel's original 1829 London "bobbies". A sort of in-joke.'

'And?' said Charlie, licking his lips. He was leaning forward with his arms folded, so the gun was now pointing away from Mick and Jim. It wasn't much, but it was a hell of a lot better than having the gun pointed *at* you.

'The scene where Holland and Pendlebury run down the Eiffel Tower steps,' said Jim. 'You know, the one with all the crazy camerawork.'

'I do! I do!' said Charlie.

'Well that's about seven years ahead of similar bits in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*.'

'Like old Alfred copied the Ealing boys?'

'Well, I couldn't say for certain, but it definitely looks like the same idea.'

'This is great. Gimme one last thing.'

Mick didn't like the word 'last', but, at least, Jim had kept them alive for five extra minutes.

'OK,' said Jim, 'and this is some stuff not many people know.'

'Yes, yes, go on!' said Charlie, with genuine excitement.

'Audrey Hepburn played a small role, as Chiquita, near the start.'

'No!' gasped Charlie, 'I'll have to go back and check that.'

'And, it was Robert Shaw's first film appearance. You know, the shark hunter from *Jaws*. He plays the police lab technician, near the end.'

'Where'd you get all this info - it's amazing.'

'Well,' said Jim, 'I'm a big fan. Got all the videos. Read about it all the time.'

'And what about porky?' said Charlie, waving the gun vaguely in Mick's direction.

'Oh, I'm a fan, too,' said Mick, a trifle too loudly.

Charlie sat back in his chair. He was having thoughts.

'This is amazin',' he said. 'But I got a job to do here. It's big decision time. I either bump you off, or I don't bump you off. See, I know people think I'm a twenty-four-carat tosser, being a fan of the Ealing

comedies. ‘Course, they won’t tell me to my face, ‘cos that’s like booking a one-way trip to the crem. And until today, I thought I was, like, on my tod. But now I’ve found you two, it’s been, well, sort of great.’

The use of the word ‘two’ was sweet music to Mick’s ears.

‘But,’ continued Charlie, ‘I’ve spent a great deal of time and money gettin’ you over here, so I could rub you out, in person. On the other hand, it’d be really good if we could’ve regular meet-ups, even on the phone, or that Skype thing and have a chat about the films and that.’

Jim gave a measured response, not so hasty as to appear desperate, but not so delayed as to give Charlie time to make up his mind.

‘I think we could arrange that, no problem. I mean it’d be great for us to talk to someone, like you, who was so keen on the films - there aren’t many of us left.’

‘But, what about my reputation?’ said Charlie. ‘I got to show ‘em I can still cut the mustard. Bang, bang - and I’m king of the heap again.’

‘But, as I said, there aren’t many of us left, and if it’s “bang bang” time, there’ll be two less.’

Just then, the door opened and Charlie’s girlfriend came in. ‘Sorry hun,’ she said, ‘I lost everything.’

‘Never mind,’ said Charlie, ‘I’ll get it back from the cashiers, and you can have another go tomorrow.’

She blew him a kiss. Charlie blew a kiss back.

‘Now darlin’, what do you think I should do with these two?’ he said, waving his gun at Jim and Mick. ‘Rub ‘em out, or let ‘em live? They know stacks of stuff about Ealing comedies and if I don’t whack ‘em, they’ve agreed to have regular chats about the movies.’

‘Does that mean I won’t have to listen to you going on about ‘em any more?’

‘I promise, my sweet,’ said Charlie.

Miss absolutely bleeding gorgeous stood in the doorway, hands on hips, and had a think.

‘Hm!’ she said, after what seemed like three months, ‘I think you should go for the regular chat option.’

She then directed a strange, penetrating stare at Jim and Mick. Her beautiful breasts rose and fell slowly with her breathing. It was a long time before she spoke.

‘I think you’ll find they’re *very good* at chatting.’

Jim and Mick looked each another. That certainly wasn’t a line they were expecting.

But her next sentence made them feel as though they’d just lit up Havana cigars soaked in nitro-glycerine.

‘Down at the Old Sea Scout Hut, they chatted through every one of my beautiful songs - the cheeky sods. But they’re quite sweet, really.’

‘You know these guys?’

‘Nonal’ gasped Jim.

‘Jesus!’ spluttered Mick. ‘But you’ve - you - you’ve - you - you - you’ve, you, you’ve...’

‘...changed a little,’ said Nona, completing the most inarticulate sentence Mick had ever uttered in his life.

‘You’re nothing like...’

Nona silenced him by raising a finger to her gorgeous, pouting lips. Mick was immediately silenced.

‘Yes,’ she said, moving out of Charlie’s line of sight, and giving a “don’t say anything about anything” look - ‘I might have dropped a few pounds, but in all the right places.’

Charlie turned and put his arms around her snakelike hips and hugged her lithe, supple frame against his tweed shooting-jacket.

‘But how - how - did you two...?’

‘Oh! Charlie phoned me when I was recovering in Switzerland. You know, when he was looking for you two. We got chatting and, when I was out of surgery...’

She immediately covered up the mistake.

‘That’s what they call the clinics out there - surgeries - isn’t that funny!’

Jim was quick to back her up. ‘Oh, I’ve heard that too - silly isn’t it?’

‘When I was out of the *clinic*, and was fully sort of recuperated, we arranged a meet-up thing. We got on really well, in fact, we got on *very* well, and now we’re a bit of an international item. Aren’t we hun?’

She put her arms around Charlie’s neck, shimmied in close and gently bit his bottom lip.

Christ! thought Mick, she must have been permanently on the operating table. But what a result! He’d never seen a transformation like it. The surgeons must have been world fuckin’ class. Not to mention having nerves of steel. Where did they get rid of all the blubber? Where was the gargantuan bone structure? Her thighs used to go right down to her ankles. Her voice was now soft and seductive. And her face? Absolutely stunning! Bloody hell - a million quid in fees at least! It also occurred to him, for a second, that, if he’d stayed married, *he* could be the one sliding into bed with that fabulous creature every night - no more ‘where’s the Taiwanese Viagra, darling?’

Charlie, however, was still having doubts. ‘But I should really be seeing ‘em off. In fact, I’ve made up my mind. I gotta do it, sweetheart.’

He cocked the gun and took aim.

Nona looked horrified and helpless.

Jim stepped forward and held up his hands.

‘No, you don’t have to, Charlie. You can have your cake and eat it! Don’t forget, we’re the poncey, limp-wristed, shithead wimps who make videos. We can fake you shooting us on camera. Easy. Tomorrow morning, we can get hold of exploding blood squibs, replica guns that fire blanks like the real thing, and we can treat the video to make it look like real cheapo hostage stuff. We can get all the sound effects you want, shots, screams, everything. And if you want us pleading for mercy, we can do that as well.’

‘Abso-bleeding-lutely,’ added Mick.

‘If we meet back here around noon, we’ll have all the kit, and it’ll be done and dusted by mid-afternoon.’

Charlie stopped and thought. He turned to check with Nona.

Nona nodded.

‘It will look *proper* won’t it?’ said Charlie, ‘otherwise, I’ll have to do it for real.’

‘It’ll look *very* real,’ said Jim, ‘I’ll stake my life on it.’

‘Me too,’ added Mick.

‘Charlie, you’re a real darlin’,’ said Nona, and she wiggled her studded tongue around in his ear.

They spent the next hour with the Las Vegas phone book, ordering everything they needed for what they'd started calling the 'shoot shoot.' That evening, they slept in the casino's penthouse suite with fabulous views over the city.

Next morning, they withdrew the cash from the casino deposit box, commissioned a cab, hired everything, bought a satellite phone, and at midday, met up with Charlie and Nona in the office.

They were so confident in their ability to do a great job, the thought of doing a runner never occurred to them, apart from once or twice.

The shoot went like clockwork. Jim and Mick screamed for mercy, Charlie the Merciless pumped them full of lead with cruel efficiency. There was at least a gallon of fake blood spewed onto the polythene. They even arranged for some to splatter onto the lens. The video ended with a close-up of Charlie's face in a demented grin. The message was clear. This was a man, happy in his work. And you scumbags had better believe it.

He was delighted with the resulting DVD.

'For poncey, limp-wristed, shithead wimps, you done good!'

Nona was almost equally complimentary.

'Very nice film, boys. At least you can do something well!'

'Can you make a photograph from the vid?' asked Charlie. Like with me splattered in blood, with that nasty sneer. It'll brighten the London office up a bit.'

'No problem,' said Jim.

All that remained was to make arrangements for their first Ealing comedy Skype fan-fest in a fortnight's time, and they were ready to go.

As they were no longer on Charlie's death list, Jim felt bold enough to try and clear up one thing that was bothering him.

'When we arrived, the cab driver seemed to pull into your beautiful casino, at random. But was that all pre-arranged?'

'You're learning,' smiled Charlie. 'A few glares from my boys and 300 bucks, and that guy, Maurice, will do anything.'

'We know,' said Jim.

'When the boys caught up with him on that desert road, he reckoned you'd phone him again, and he was right.'

'He's a lucky swine,' said Jim.

Charlie's eyes narrowed. 'Not really,' he said coldly, 'once people take my money, they're in for life.'

Although delighted that Maurice was now officially Charlie's poodle, Mick and Jim felt the conversation was drifting into an area they were anxious to avoid.

They stepped forward, rather too quickly, shook hands with Charlie and kissed Nona goodbye.

'Can I get some of my guys to run you to the airport?' asked Charlie.

Jim looked as though he was extremely grateful for the offer, but after a short pause, during which he thought - like fuck you will - he simply said 'No thanks, Charlie - I'm absolutely sure we can find a cab - hopefully one that doesn't have Maurice driving!'

He knew little jokes could backfire horribly in the present company, but fortunately, everybody, including Charlie, laughed out loud.



On the way to the airport, Jim waited until Mick had finished glancing back out of the cab's rear window to see if they were being followed.

He engaged in some polite chat about where they might fly off to, until he was absolutely sure Mick had calmed down.

'Mick,' he said, 'I've got a confession to make. Do you want it now, or on the plane?'

'You know me, James, instant gratification!'

'OK! You probably noticed my encyclopaedic knowledge of Ealing comedies,' said Jim.

'*Did I?* You were bloody brilliant! Had no idea you were so clued up.'

'Well, the confession is - I'm not! I just saw the pictures on his walls and guessed he was a fan. What I told Charlie was the sum total of everything I know - which is, virtually, sod all. Most of it came from film school where we were forced to do a 10,000-word essay on the Ealing comedies - and those bits just sort of stuck.'

'Well, slip it in gently, Clarrisa,' said Mick, and immediately turned to have another quick 'nervous' out of the rear window. 'But there was still a lot you knew.'

'Yeah, well,' said Jim, 'you always got higher marks than me for live shooting and editing, but I could make up the difference by working flat out on the written work. Just as well really!'

'Shit,' said Mick, starting to perspire slightly. 'I'll say this, old son, you must have a pair the size of a minor planet. There's wasn't the slightest hint of pig ignorance when you were chatting Charlie up and saving us from the chop.'

'And what about Nona!' said Jim, changing the subject. 'Talk about quality nip and tuck! I've never been more gob-smacked in my life. All the time we thought she was convalescing after the arm fractures, she was under the Swiss knife. I mean, know you can use them to get stones out of horses' hooves, but really!'

They burst out laughing. The tension was ebbing away. It was fantastic. But how many times in the last forty-eight hours had they put 'They Win. You Lose.' away, only to have it rear up again like Glen Close in the bath at the end of *Fatal Attraction*.

But this time, they really thought the era of 'They Win. You Lose.' was at an end. From now on, things would be normal. And to prove it, Mick leaned over to Jim and said in a confidential tone, 'Be honest, Jimbo, you know when you kissed Nona goodbye, did you get a tinsey-wincey bit stalky?'

'Oh look, there's the airport,' said Jim.

The cab stopped. They tipped the driver and walked inside.

'You check what stand-bys are available,' said Jim. 'I'm off to the business centre.'

Jim went in, paid the man, sat at a computer, logged on to the internet and felt great. For the first time in his life, the fact he couldn't pee as far up the wall as the eight-year-old Mick didn't matter.

He had moved out from under Mick's shadow, and was now bathed in bright sunlight. He'd saved the day, not to mention their bacon. As he typed his requests into Google, he hummed *Getting to Know You*. And, for once, the song was aimed not at Siamese children, but at himself.

About five minutes later, Mick arrived, looking very pleased. 'There's stacks of choice, my old cupcake. We can go wherever you fancy.'

He looked at Jim's computer screen.

'What's all this? Reprogramming the Space Station?

'Just found loads of books on Ealing comedies. I've shoved about twenty Ealing articles onto my memory stick. And I've found this site where we can download the complete video set, from *Hue and Cry* in '47 to *Davy* in '57.'

*Passport to Pimlico, Whisky Galore! Kind Hearts and Coronets, Lavender Hill Mob, Man in the White Suit, Titfield Thunderbolt.* You name it, we can get it - as soon as we get where we're going!

'And I've downloaded stuff on all the directors - Alexander Mackendrick, Charles Crichton, Robert Hamer, Charles Frend, Anthony Pelissier...'

'Plus biographies on Stanley Holloway, Alec Guinness, Alistair Sim, Peggy Mount, Ronald Shiner...'

'OK, OK,' said Mick, holding up his hands in mock surrender, 'but we'll have to watch all the videos hundreds of times, and read all the verbiage 'til we've got it off pat.'

'That's right,' said Jim. 'And you'll bloody well like it - because I don't want to describe what the alternative is.'

Mick pulled a face.

'I *know* we've got to do the Ealing stuff, but I was planning to write my book on the socio-political sub-texts in Jean Cocteau's *Orphée*.'

Jim put a comforting hand on Mick's shoulder.

'Look, mate, everybody's doing that socio-political sub-texts in Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* thing. Best dump it, eh!'

'But it will tear my creative soul apart!'

'Tell you what! Give it a fortnight, and I'll get a couple of six-packs in, and help you start on something easier, like a biography of Rin Tin Tin.'

Mick gave a resigned grimace.

'I can already feel my creative soul being stapled back together!'

Jim was now certain that impressing Charlie every month with their copious knowledge of Ealing comedies would be shared equally. Who knows? They might even get to like it.

\*

Mick and Jim walked slowly over to the departures board. Jim pointed to a flight. 'I think that would do nicely.'

'Couldn't agree more, me old wine-gum,' said Mick. 'An excellent choice.'

And so, Jim led the way to the stand-by tickets desk.

In fact, it was much more than that. He was leading the way, period. He was leading Mick; he was leading both of them, to a completely new life. Who knew what it would be like? It might be calm and sophisticated, it might be adventurous, it might be truly spectacular. But one thing was certain - it would be something totally different from anything they'd ever known before.



With a supreme effort, James Redfern Chartwell opened one sensationally bloodshot eye.

In a series of weak, random twitches, it tried to focus on life outside the cornea. But it was staring failure in the face. It wouldn't have minded having a tenner on the fact that it was somewhere outside, but it wouldn't have gone to twenty.

However, the sad fact was, the images received on his retina could not be transmitted to what was left of his brain. The power simply wasn't available.

Which was pity, really, because, if you'd been someone with a morbid interest the deterioration of the human spirit, and who enjoyed wallowing in the twin fetid pools of degradation and degeneracy, the scene would have cheered you up no end.

If the electronic pathways *had* been open for business, the eye would have been able to focus on a photocopy of the Hambledon Cricket Club fixture list.

The fixture list was nailed to a beautiful palm tree, which towered over a glorious, white sandy beach and a shallow, turquoise lagoon, which shimmered in the early morning sun.

Also nailed to the palm were two Decrees Absolute, a dozen tickets to the local lap-dancing club - *The Golden Legover*, a copy of Charlie's blood-stained photograph and an R&R publicity shot with the words, '*To Mick and Jim. We've still got the shovels!*'

And finally, a framed photograph of Bette Milder in a tight-fitting, ruched dress. The photograph was signed, '*You Win. They Lose. Love to Jim and Mick from Bette xxx.*' OK, they'd bought it from the *Florida Forgeries* internet site, but the signature *could* have been genuine. Jim and Mick liked to think it was.

Not that they were doing much thinking at the moment. A multi-coloured hammock was strung between the palm tree and the corner post of the thatched beach bar. In the hammock, lay James Redfern Chartwell's eyeball and what was left of the rest of his body, which could be described, if you weren't too fussy, as belonging to soundman *extraordinaire*, ex-bass player with 'Who Shot Nelson' and confidante to the world's most psychopathic, Ealing comedy buff.

He was wearing a garish Hawaiian shirt and a grass hula skirt. On his left foot was an old tartan slipper while his right foot was inserted into a wellington boot. His Hawaiian shirt was soaking wet. This was because, lying across his lower rib cage was a half-empty bottle of Dom Perignon. Every time he breathed in, the bottle tipped and a little more of its contents dribbled out, rolled down his sunburnt body and gathered in a little pool under his back.

The hammock was obviously not designed to cope with substantial amounts of Dom Perignon, and after about twenty minutes, the cotton-polyester blend was breached.

There was nobody around to alert Jim to this fact. The beach bar, temporarily renamed 'The Sunburnt Arms' in honour of Nona and her recent, live-saving decision, was empty. The bar staff, for whom heavy partying was a way of life, had given up, exhausted, two days ago, and left them to it.

The fine champagne, now with just an impertinent hint of sun block, began dripping down from the hammock. It fell through some of the sweetest, freshest air on the planet, onto the comatose form of Michael Selwyn Barton, Emmy-award-winning cameraman, ex-rhythm guitarist with WSN and international evader of hit-men and mad, surgically enhanced landladies.

Mick was unshaven, very sunburnt, and wearing a pair of luminous, red baggies, which looked as though they'd been put on inside out. He was holding a pint glass full of seriously crushed cocktail umbrellas. His

face was covered by a snorkel mask and his left foot was adorned with a wellington boot. If Mick had not passed through death's door, he'd certainly been fumbling with the keys trying to find the keyhole, while, no doubt, shouting, 'Hey come on, you know my mate, how about a bit of service!'

Even a medically untrained person could see he was hanging on. Mainly because, round his middle, was an inflated, yellow-duck life-saver, which squeaked pathetically every time he took a breath.

Neither body stirred. At least, not for another three hours. It was around midday when, in a voice that came from the bottom of a deep well, Jim turned in his hammock and called out, "Ere Mick." There was no reply, but Jim was undeterred. There was important information to impart.

"Ere Mick," he repeated. And, with as much dignity as he could muster, announced, 'My scrotum smells of lobster.'

What was left of Mick's intellect must have been stirred, because he responded. His voice sounded as though it came from a mouth stuffed with wet cardboard, give or take the odd squeak from the duck.

'Is that a clawed lobster or a squat lobster? When you're talking personal hygiene, James, it's important to be precise.'

Encouraged by this response, Jim rolled to the edge of the hammock, misjudged his centre of gravity and fell heavily onto his associate below.

Mick gave a short, strangled scream, then all was silent. They lay there on the silver sand in a *melange* of half-eaten white truffles, empty pots of Beluga caviar, oyster shells, cocktail glasses and quails eggs, all lightly coated in a thin film of very expensive champagne.

After a few minutes, Jim raised himself up on his elbow.

'Michael, my old banana, I want you to savour this moment. Savour it!

Jim shook Mick, but there was no response, not that the lack of an audience was ever going to blunt his newly-found oratorical skills. Despite his slurred voice and vaguely waving arm, Jim managed to deliver a message of encouragement to his comatose colleague.

'Gentlemen throughout the Caribbean now-a-bed strut and fret their hour upon the wotsit. But we, we happy few, we band of real clever buggers know that nothing - and I really do mean y'know like - fuck-fuckety-fuck-fuck all - will stop us getting a Magnum an' a half's worth of that life, liberty and pursuit of somethin' or other bollocks...and more bollocks...and probably even more bollocks!'

Message delivered, Jim gave a huge belch and passed out. They curled up together and slept peacefully. Although Mick's duck continued to squeak, intermittently.

During the next few hours, their satellite phone on the beach bar rang four times. Neither Jim nor Mick heard so much as the tiniest tinkle.

This was a terrible, terrible mistake - a mistake, which, not to put too fine a point on it, would have life-shattering consequences.

But, hey, as they say in this part of the Caribbean - stay cool man - after all, it had been one *hell* of a celebration...

**THE END**

**And finally, thanks for reading They Win. You Lose.**

**If you'd like to write a short review of They Win. You Lose. on amazon, here are the links and instructions.**

For amazon.co.uk it's: <http://amzn.to/2ls3x9H>

For amazon.com it's: <http://amzn.to/2mFvE6s>

Just click on *customer reviews* to the right of the star ratings, then click on *Create your own review* - and off you go - please be kind!

## Synopses and a selection of Amazon reader reviews

### **They Win. You Lose.**

#### *Sex, Violence & Songs from the Shows*

##### **Synopsis**

Mick and Jim are on the run from Vlad and Vic, enforcers for international crime boss and Ealing comedy-lover, Charlie Sumkins. The chase involves frantic attempts to preserve their lives and reproductive organs. They battle inefficiently scheduled sex with Southsea's most colour-blind landlady, violent amateur dramatics and AK-47-weilding milliners.

They end up in Las Vegas, where, with cactus-punctured groins, they're pursued by Reservoir Dogs' lookalikes. Later, they go LSD tripping with the stars of Easy Rider, escape from Thelma and Louise wannabes, and make a commitment before a bourbon-fuelled Elvis impersonator, before the big, life-threatening sort-out in Nevada's most lurid theatrical environment.

##### **Review: Brilliant!**

Clever, fast paced, outrageously funny and never a dull moment. So many laugh out loud scenes, quotable lines and memorable characters. This book is relentlessly entertaining! A great read.

### **Daring Dooz**

#### *Sex, Violence & Useful Household Cleaning Tips*

##### **Synopsis**

Mrs Hathaway, Mick and Jim's 60-year-old office cleaning lady, is a martial arts/extreme sports expert - skills she developed through online and home video courses. Daring Dooz is a highly successful global magazine, full of fictitious adventure stories featuring scantily clad pole dancers.

Mrs Hathaway is, however, the real thing, and accepts a series of global challenges for a £2 million advance. The challenges involve shark attacks, time warps, anacondas, MiG fighters, and the ironmongers/sex boutique at the Hotel du Lack. In a remote Amazon village, they are threatened by sex-mad caimans, exploding missionaries and murderous bandits with Mick and Jim coerced into videoing every terrifying step.

##### **Review: Brilliant, funny book**

Enter Mrs. Hathaway! What a character! A 60 year old, martial arts, street-fighting cleaning lady! Mick and Jim get tied up filming a set of dangerous, international challenges she has to take on for Daring Dooz magazine-including time spent up the far end of the Amazon. I laughed out loud countless times. Again more twists and turns, crazy characters and a totally unexpected final chapter.

## **Sea View Babylon**

*Sex, Violence & Spanish Verb Conjugation*

### **Synopsis**

Mick and Jim are forced into an unexpected holiday in Lanzarote. They book into Sea View, a bizarre re-creation of a 1950's Blackpool boarding house, right next to the beach. On their first afternoon, while enjoying a pedalo ride, they are threatened with assassination by both the CIA and KGB.

Subsequently, they are drawn into a web of lies, deceit and sexual excess involving MI7 - so secret, even MI5 and MI6 don't know about it. After five, bizarre, unexplained deaths they endure a spell in cell 101 with only a bucket for company. Later, they direct a video featuring a clapped out helicopter and two Florida swamp bikers with the goal of saving the Chief of Police's sex life. The climactic, underground, volcanic showdown is orchestrated by Polly, the world's most foul-beaked parrot.

### **Review: Funny and well-written**

Far fetched? Certainly. Funny? Definitely. KGB and CIA operatives interrupt Mick and Jim's holiday pedalo trips with assassination threats - and it takes off from there. Constantly in jeopardy, Mick and Jim stumble around Lanzarote, through unexpected plot twists and turns. Star performer for me was Polly, the parrot who has been taught a wide range of obscene phrases by British holidaymakers. Really unexpected twist at the end - very clever!

## **Vampire Midwives**

*Sex, Violence & Warm Straight-Jackets*

### **Synopsis**

Mick and Jim are lured to deepest Yorkshire to film a bogus 'most haunted' video at a 13th-century castle built by architectural vandal, Gregory the Imbiber. The local villagers are having mass hallucinations about Dracula, Frankenstein and werewolves.

A mysterious death, leads our heroes to places they don't want to be - such as trapped 350 feet underground with a jar of pickled whelks, or facing the wrath of Scotland Yard's nastiest - CI Cragg. Their futile attempts to solve the mystery are complicated by terrifying paranormal activities, mad, frost-bitten neuroscientists, and Hollywood glamour and glitz, featuring Matt Damon and a lunatic film producer intent on making *Bourne and Bred in Yorkshire*. Just another day in the Dales...

### **Review: Brilliant read**

Lots of supernatural fun in this quirky who-done-it set in a down-at-heel castle in the Yorkshire Dales. It features a mad Lord of the Realm, a devious New Scotland Yard detective, and a totally loopy Texan, looking to make the next Jason Bourne film. Mick and Jim are stuck in the middle trying to make a bogus haunted castle film, but end up getting much more than they bargained for. Loved it!

## **Botox Boulevard**

*Sex, Violence & The Art of Geranium Maintenance*

### **Synopsis**

Mick is on a mission to Hollywood intent on saving Jim's soul and any other bits of him that might be useful around the office. Horrible things happen. Like not finding out if Pamela Anderson screen tested for Hannibal Lecter. Fascinating information includes the fact that there are pubs in Ireland, and Bulgarian hit men in Hollywood.

What is the secret of the teak-finished iPhone and how do people cope with power-boating through seven miles of raw sewage? Why is Marlon Brando happy to serve soup, and JK Rowling so keen on setting peoples' feet in concrete? If you like geraniums, Florence Nightingale's spittoon and explosions that shift the San Andreas Fault by six feet. This is the book for you.

### **Review: Book 5 - Just as good as the rest**

This is a really funny novel and follows on from the previous, Vampire Midwives. Mick and Jim end up in Hollywood desperately trying alternative therapies to solve a demonic possession. Think the Omen, with more jokes! They have to deal with sex therapists and violent chat shows, secret service operatives plus a strange set of dubious screen star lookalikes. I loved how just as you think they've succeeded, another threat arrives.

## **Papa Ratzy**

### ***Sex, Violence & Straddled Chainsaws***

#### **Synopsis**

During a devastating night on the town, Mick and Jim befriend a killer wolf, called Twinkle. At the It's Alright He Won't Bite Urban Wolf Sanctuary, they learn how quickly volunteers' groins can disappear, and how best to stir your tea with an artificial insemination pipette. They are conned by the world's worst photographer, into dubious paparazzi assignments. Events quickly become life-threatening and they flee, with Twinkle, to Glencoe to work on a slasher movie for LA's Hemoglobin Productions.

They come up against a Sicilian assassin called Heidi, an Erich Von Stroheim look-a-like, a sex mad, soft porn writer who has trouble with her support stockings, American Civil War cannons, the lure of the Copper Sporrans' tea cakes, and the unbelievable power of Twinkle's bladder. Naturally, all is happily resolved on the desolate tundra around Archangel.

#### **Review: Very funny**

Loved this book. Mick and Jim get themselves a nice little earner, but the whole thing completely unravels leaving them in mortal danger! Avoiding death is made more difficult because they are looking after a killer wolf, called Twinkle. Totally hilarious from start to finish. The first and last chapters are classic.

**Amazon links to novels in the Implosion Saga  
(in chronological order):**

**They Win. You Lose.**

*Sex, Violence & Songs from the Shows*

amazon.co.uk : <http://amzn.to/2ls3x9H>

amazon.com : <http://amzn.to/2mFvE6s>

**Daring Dooz**

*Sex, Violence & Useful Household Cleaning Tips*

amazon.co.uk : <http://amzn.to/2m48nOe>

amazon.com : <http://amzn.to/2mFBJ2P>

**Sea View Babylon**

*Sex, Violence & Spanish Verb Conjugation*

amazon.co.uk : <http://amzn.to/2lPkH3>

amazon.com : <http://amzn.to/2m8RB00>

**Vampire Midwives**

*Sex, Violence & Warm Straight-Jackets*

amazon.co.uk : <http://amzn.to/2lhssMv>

amazon.com : <http://amzn.to/2lrsAji>

**Botox Boulevard**

*Sex, Violence & The Art of Geranium Maintenance*

amazon.co.uk : <http://amzn.to/2m44jxi>

amazon.com : <http://amzn.to/2mdZCku>

**Papa Ratzy**

*Sex, Violence & Straddled Chainsaws*

amazon.co.uk : <http://amzn.to/2lhDSjv>

amazon.com : <http://amzn.to/2lcSCEV>

**Other Stan Arnold links**

Website: <http://www.stanarnoldbooks.com>

Facebook: <http://tinyurl.com/ojy5ubz>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/stanwriter>

Now, here's the first chapter of the next book in the Implosion Saga – Daring Dooz...

# Daring Dooz

*Sex, Violence &*

*Useful Household Cleaning Tips*

## 1

James Redfern Chartwell was asleep in paradise. For someone who'd been chased halfway round the world by an international crime syndicate, and managed to persuade the top man to cancel the contract on his life using his meagre knowledge of Ealing comedies, you might well think he deserved a kip.

But this was no ordinary snooze. Jim's chin was resting on the top of a post at the end of a simple wooden pier, which jutted out into the shallow, turquoise lagoon.

The early morning sun was bright, and reflections were dancing like diamonds. The spectacular white beach was lined with lush, green palm trees, interrupted only by a small beach bar with a palm frond roof. The breezes were balmy, like gentle kisses that had travelled a thousand miles just to make things seem better.

A seagull, floating lazily on the warm air, landed gently on Jim's immobile form and, without so much as a pause, emptied the contents of its bowels over his head. He didn't stir. The uric acid dribbled out from his hair and ran down the side of his unshaven face.

Suitably refreshed, and five or six ounces lighter, the seagull flew off again in pursuit of a rather nice female seagull it had seen on the roof of the beach bar.

A couple of yards away, the chin of Jim's lifelong friend, video cameraman and would-be *bon vivant*, Michael Selwyn Barton, was resting on a nearby post. The squawk made by the seagull, as it unloaded itself onto the hapless Jim, woke Mick up.

Through bloodshot eyes, he managed to see what had happened, and thought how embarrassing it would be for Jim when he eventually woke up. And with that unkind rumination over, he gently smirked himself back into a state of unconsciousness.

If Mick had been able to look down at his reflection in the water below the pier, he'd have seen he had nothing to laugh at. His head, chest, shoulders and back were covered in seagull crap, so that, with his yellow baggies, sunburnt body and green Crocs, he looked like a sixteen-stone, badly-made knickerbocker glory.

The previous night at the beach hut, they'd had more than a few Dom Perignons too many, and ended up tombstoning off the end of the pier, at midnight.

The beach bar staff took pride in their ability to out-drink anyone, but realised they'd entered a different league. The girls from the local lap-dancing club, who thought they'd seen and done everything, learned a few more tricks. And by three in the morning, they'd all given up, and, rather than drag Mick and Jim's lifeless bodies back up the pier for the umpteenth time that month, they'd decided on an innovative, if rather mean-spirited, solution.



They'd simply sat Jim down on the pier decking with his arms and legs on either side of a supporting post. Then it was just a matter of tying his hands together, tying his feet together and placing his chin on the top of the post and, there he was - safe and sound for the night. Providing the same sleeping arrangements for Mick was a no-brainer.

And so, morning came. Neither Jim nor Mick had moved an inch during the night. They sat with closed eyes, staring impassively out to sea. If you can image a couple of Easter Island heads carved by ancient stonemasons after a night out on the piss, you'd be getting close to the mark.

They were still unconscious, when, at around mid-morning, the yacht arrived.

It slid with silky, ocean-going assurance through the lagoon - with a woman of about sixty at the helm. She was deeply tanned and wearing a yellow polka dot bikini - and yes, it was itty-bitsy and yes, it was teeny-weeny. She was lean and toned with long, silver hair and clear, penetrating, light-blue eyes.

The yacht drew alongside the pier. She stepped off confidently and surveyed the scene, which essentially consisted of the dead-drunk, fully harnessed, former directors of Soho corporate video company, Implosion Productions. She looked at them with a strange degree of inevitability. Several empty champagne bottles littered the pier decking. The bikini-clad lady picked up the bottles, went back on board her immaculate vessel and placed them in a Brabantia bin.

On the deck of the yacht was a small tarpaulin. As she walked by, she lifted the canvas and kissed something.

She came back onto the pier with a large Sabatier kitchen knife and cut Jim loose, looking with some distaste at the rapidly forming guano on his head. Then, with remarkable ease, she turned him upside down and, holding his ankles, dunked him several times, headfirst, into the lagoon.

Throughout the cleansing operation, Jim showed no signs of regaining consciousness.

She pulled him out of the water, laid him on the pier, then went back on board, stopping to kiss under the tarpaulin again. When she returned, she was carrying a blue plastic bucket and a roll of duct tape.

After placing the bucket on Jim's head, she secured it by running the duct tape, three or four times round the top of the bucket and under his armpits, then, taking a firm grip on his ankles, began dragging his body, including his well-protected head, along the pier and into the shade of the beach hut.

She returned to deal with Mick, and wisely decided to abandon the idea of dunking him in the lagoon and dragging his bulky form back along the pier. She simply cut him free and pushed him into the water. As Mick began to drown, she dived elegantly into the lagoon, grabbed his body in exactly the way they illustrate in lifeguard training manuals, and began to swim powerfully to the shore. She dragged Mick up the beach and propped his semi-guano-free body next to Jim.

Tutting slightly, she returned to the yacht and removed the tarpaulin to reveal a small man curled up in the foetal position. He had a very thin, green face, sunken eyes and a Hawaiian shirt that was too big. He wore extra large, cerise baggies, and his scrawny arms and legs were deathly white. He looked as though he'd been under the canvas, eating wallpaper paste, for at least a year. There was a small flicker of recognition before he closed his eyes again and abandoned himself to his fate.

She picked him up gently under one arm, holding him round the waist, so his arms and legs hung vertically downwards. She carried him along the pier to the beach bar, where she gave him another little kiss and sat his limp body down on the ground, next to Jim and Mick.

She stared at the three of them, deep in silent thought. The only sound came from two seagulls, which were shagging unnecessarily noisily on the roof of the beach hut.

The silence was broken further by the 'ting ting' of a bicycle bell. A man wearing a khaki shirt and shorts, and whose great-grandparents had obviously made the long journey from Africa two hundred years ago,

was having difficulty making the short journey from his office in the police station to the beach hut. This particular trip was made more difficult than usual, thanks to a serious night on the rum with some of the inhabitants of the cells.

He was a big man and came cycling round the corner much too fast. His eyes popped out of his head, twice. First they popped as he caught a glimpse of the svelte, sun-tanned vision in the bikini. Then they popped again, a split second later, as, distracted by the yellow polka dots, he braked too hard and went straight over the handlebars and head-butted the solid support post of the beach hut.

The captain of the yacht picked him up, humped his unconscious body over her shoulder, carried him behind the bar, poured some beach bar whisky on his head wound and dragged him over to sit next to Jim, Mick and the green-faced man.

She could see from the nametag on his shirt, that the trick cyclist was Roberto Velazquez, the island's Chief of Police. Hm! thought Mrs Hathaway, he might be useful - though obviously not in his current condition.

The sun was arching higher, the palm trees were getting ready for another roasting, the water in the lagoon was already becoming too hot to swim in and there wasn't a single cloud in the sky.

She looked around. These were potentially tough conditions, if you didn't know how to handle them.

But for what she had planned, the conditions would be far more dangerous, far more unpredictable and far more deadly. She would be testing human endurance and resourcefulness to the absolute limits, and beyond. There would be no room for even the slightest error, and any failure would, at best, result in an unpleasant and agonising death.

She stood, hands on bronzed hips, and gazed down at the four unconscious men propped up against the rattan bar. She looked with growing apprehension from face to face - one with alcohol poisoning and wearing a blue bucket on his head, one overweight and still covered in seagull crap, one green with extreme sea-sickness and one blood-stained, concussed and unable to ride a bicycle properly.

Were these men of the right calibre? she mused. Did they have the inherent toughness to cope with extreme physical challenges and excruciating mental pressures? In short, were they the dynamic, self-assured, hyper-energised, Alpha males she needed for her mission.

She walked behind the bar, poured herself half a tumbler of whisky, knocked it back in one go, and began to have some serious thoughts.

**END OF CHAPTER 1**