

*STEPHEN MORRIS AND RALF LITTLE*

# **THE GOLDEN GENERATION**

**A NOVEL BY STEPHEN MORRIS AND RALF LITTLE**

**PART 1**

**“I’d rather be famous than righteous or holy, any day, any day, any day.” The Smiths, *Frankly Mr. Shankly*.**

**“It’s not enough to understand the world, you’ve also got to change it.” Raphael Kaplinsky.**

**“I’m an actress, a brand, a businesswoman. I’m all kinds of stuff.” Paris Hilton (alleged).**

**DEDICATIONS**

**STEPHEN DEDICATES THIS NOVEL TO:**

All of my friends and family that supported me during the time of writing this novel including, without limitation, and in no particular order: Devonshires Solicitors, Billy, Carol, Neil, Caz, Teresa and Richie and family, Eleanor, Jimmy, Andrew Thompson, Scott Pack, Kevin Sampson and Graham Johnson.

But particularly:

My Dad – for being my biggest supporter bar none.

My Mum – for buying me novels at age ten that were bigger than me, and always encouraging me to read and write. And to never give up.

My sister – for being a second mother (in a good way) and always, always being there to say the right things to cheer me up.

Thanks to you all.

**Ste**

**RALF DEDICATES THIS NOVEL TO:**

My Mum - for knowing that if she nagged me enough, eventually I'd get off my arse and write something.

My brother for giving me a reason to be responsible.

My sister for reading enough crap books when she was a teenager that it inspired me to write something myself so that she would have something decent to read.

My friends for being legends and helping to define my life.

**Ralf**

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Stephen Morris was born in Liverpool in 1981. When not penning novels or playing football on the marshes of South and West London, Stephen works as a commercial lawyer in the City of London. *The Golden Generation* is Stephen's second novel.

Ralf Little was born in Bury, near Manchester in 1980. He has starred in numerous hit television shows and productions, including *The Royle Family* and *Two Pints of Lager and a Packet of Crisps*. When not doing all of that, or plying his trade as a semi-pro footballer, Ralf finds time to beat Stephen and friends on Pro Evolution Soccer.

Ralf and Stephen are currently writing the screenplay for *The Golden Generation*, and their second collaborative novel.

**DISCLAIMER**

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**A letter to you from Stephen and Ralf**

Dear Reader

Thanks for showing an interest in *The Golden Generation*. We really hope you enjoy this novel as much as we enjoyed writing it, and you stick with it through all five exciting and page turning parts.

Now that you have come this far you have a couple of options:

1. Print the novel off and read it wherever is best for you – on the train, at home with a bottle of beer or glass of wine, basically anywhere you choose; or
2. Read it online.

If you want to save on paper, print it off two to a page and the text will still be a little bigger than your average novel.

The parts will remain on the website indefinitely so if you miss a section don't worry. The dates for publication are 6 A (part 1), 13 Aug (part 2), 20 Aug (part 3), 27 Aug (part 4) and 3 Sept (the 5<sup>th</sup> and final part). Enter your email address on the home page of the website and you'll get an email reminder.

Message from Ralf - as you will be aware, we have written this novel entirely for charity, and no part of the proceeds will go to us. It all goes to Shelter. The plan is that you will enjoy the first four parts for free and will then be willing to donate just three pounds to a really worthy cause to read the gripping conclusion. You can email us at any time with any questions at Ste's hotmail address: ste\_morris@hotmail.com. We'll answer as many as possible and post some on the blogging page of the website.

Message from Stephen – I always find novels much more interesting when I know a bit about the authors and the back story to the book so please do email us if you have anything that you want answered. But by far the most popular question we've been asked (seventy-two emails at the last count asking the same question) is: is the novel autobiographical? What Jack is going through at the beginning of the novel – trying to get rid of Sarah, bemoaning the attitude of her parents, etc. – is not at all the place that I, for my part, was in when I wrote my half of *The Golden Generation*. I was in a very happy long-term relationship, and the parents are two of the nicest people I've met. The emotions that Jack feels throughout are those that Ralf and I have probably both felt at some time in our lives which is why we felt we could write about them convincingly. We are now currently writing a new novel about getting back into the dating game and a friend helping the main character through it. Ironically, this is partly autobiographical for both of us as that relationship of mine came to an end, and Ralf has been a massive help in getting me back out and about. The novel is going extremely well and we've had some exciting meetings on it of late. Watch this space!

Above all, please enjoy *The Golden Generation* and stick with it for the full five parts, and help us and Shelter out by telling all of your friends and family about it. You won't be disappointed.

All the best and take care

**Stephen and Ralf**

*STEPHEN MORRIS AND RALF LITTLE*

**THIS NOVEL IS BASED ON A TRUE STORY.**

**HOME MOVIES**

**14 AUGUST 2027, 19:45**

“Kids from state schools can never tie real dicky bows,” Jack O’Neill complained, whilst pulling and tugging at the black accessory in front of an oval-shaped, full-length gold mirror.

“Do you ever give up with this class warrior business? The only reason I can do it is because I actually took the time to learn. This is so typical of you. I love it when you get nervous and try to find anything to moan about. It’s hilarious.”

Phil grinned and aimed his hand held camera. Despite looking as immaculate as always, Phil had started to dress a full fifteen minutes after Jack, and yet the viewfinder showed his boss was still short of a pair of trousers, cufflinks, a bow tie and a jacket.

“Get over here. I’ll help you out,” Phil commanded, whilst placing the camera onto the hotel bed. “Look at the state of you. The guest of honour isn’t supposed to be stood in his hotel room in his boxer shorts five minutes before he’s due to receive an award. I swear you get worse with this stuff.”

Phil felt like he’d spent his entire adult life ordering Jack around, hurrying him from here to there, prompting him on this issue and that. And yet, they had never once had a cross word. It was amazing really.

The camera was now fixed on the TV screen, inadvertently filming a news broadcast. A female reporter, wearing a pink trouser suit, fake gold earrings and an even faker smile stood in front of a camera talking into a microphone. She could have been anywhere in the world. After all, it was CNN News. She wasn’t. She was on the opposite side of the

wall. Only yards from Jack O'Neill's salubrious hotel room, and somewhat less salubrious boxer shorts.

"We can't get any closer than this. The security operation is huge around the hotel," the reporter, Mary-Ann Jones, relayed into the CNN camera. She'd caked on layer upon layer of foundation prior to broadcast just in case she had the opportunity to interview the Prime Minister later in the evening little realising that it made her face appear bright orange, and considering it was at least three inches thick, quite possibly bullet proof. "Prime Minister O'Neill is due at any moment. The anticipation is building inside the main conference hall. Jack O'Neill is due to speak for some forty minutes on his achievements, focusing on his resolution of the Middle East conflict, but touching on his recent, highly acclaimed, initiatives on child poverty and Third World debt. It promises to be a magnificent celebration of the career of one of the world's most popular statesmen."

"There, that looks okay now." Phil stepped away from his close friend and surveyed his own handiwork.

"It needs to look better than okay, Phil. My Mum will be watching this. As far as she's concerned, ending hundreds of years of conflict comes a very distant second to looking smart for the BBC. Here, pass me that jacket."

Phil handed Jack his tuxedo jacket and a glass of scotch.

"A quick toast, Jack?"

Phil held his glass to Jack's and the crystal glasses clinked.

"We've come a long way mate," commented Jack.

Phil nodded his agreement.

“Thanks for everything.” Jack still held his drink aloft.

“Don’t start getting all sentimental, O’Neill. Just get that down your neck.”

Jack laughed, and both men drained their glasses.

“Come on then. Let’s go and face the music,” Jack ordered as he switched the light off.

The room fell into darkness and the camera, still switched on, now filmed nothingness.

**WHEN AN *FHM* 100 SEXIEST WOMEN LIST IS THE MOST IMPORTANT  
THING IN THE WORLD**

**4 APRIL 2006, 10:43**

“Okay, number 72, Pamela Anderson.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. She’s lower than Kate Moss. That’s ridiculous.”

“No, she’s higher.”

“What do you mean? I thought you said Kate Moss was 87.”

“I did, 72 is higher than 87. Number one is top of the list. The highest.”

“No, it doesn’t work like that. Have you never listened to the Top 40? They say down two if they’re on the way to number one.”

“No, they don’t. They say down two if they’re going *away* from number one. As in, down two this week at number seven it’s The Pop Idols with *The Public Will Buy Any Dross That a TV Talent Show Produces*, which was last week flying high at number five.”

“So, Kate Moss is higher than Pamela Anderson?”

“No, she’s lower.”

“And that’s better?”

“Fuck. No. Sometimes I swear I wonder if we can possibly be related.”

“Shut it. Are we going the right way?”

“Yes, it’s just up there. Three blocks away.”

The Ferrari F430 Spider slowed and pulled up dead at the red traffic light. Two girls in a green vintage MG sat beside them, smiled and beckoned at the gleaming sports car.

“Look at these two,” said the passenger of the Ferrari.

“Ignore them,” instructed the driver.

Both men wore Valentino suits and white shirts with dark blue ties. They wore shades on top of their heads that held their hair in place like Alice Bands. Brown hair with light blonde highlights complemented their deep bronzed tans and chiseled features. The men looked very similar. Not surprising really. They were brothers. One marginally taller than the other. Stefan, the driver, was an inch taller than Lothar, who was exactly six feet.

“Where do you think for Natalie Portman?”

“Top ten. Have you seen *Closer*? There aren’t many sexier scenes in film than the one where she tells Clive Owen her pussy tastes of heaven.”

“Wrong. 48.”

“48? Ludicrous. The list is totally discredited. Have you got the silencers?”

“Yes, of course. Gwen Stefani or Billie Piper?”

“Gwen Stefani by far. She’s got this Marilyn Monroe thing going. The other woman was taking ginger cock for years. No contest. Tell me it’s Gwen Stefani or the first bullet goes through that list.”

“Sorry, get your piece out. Billie Piper is seventy-two places ahead.”

“It’s an outrage. Please tell me Kournikova is number one. If the quintessential female specimen is not number one, it’s the biggest scandal of all.”

“No, Keira Knightley.”

“Not a chance. I do not agree. At all.” Stefan gave it some more consideration. “I would fuck her though.”

“Yes, but she wouldn’t fuck you though, Stef. You tried to send champagne over to her table that night in *MO\*VIDA*. Remember? And she sent it straight back.”

“Yes, I do remember. Haughty whore. She obviously didn’t know my credentials. If I had access to all one hundred of those women, I am confident I could be hitting 80 per cent from the field.”

“Without doubt. Maybe more. Look - my number one is their number two. Look at the heavenly breasts on that Keeley chick.”

“I’m with you on that one. Where did you get it from? Who’s the arbiter?”

“*FHM*. I bought it in the airport before we left Britain. There, up there. Slow down.”

The Ferrari pulled slowly into the one empty parking spot. The space was roughly a third of the way down the road - an excellent vantage point. Up ahead, a black limousine was parked outside of a grand hotel. Three heavies in suits guarded the route from the hotel entrance to the car. The hotel door opened and two men, a woman and a child darted towards the vehicle’s open door.

Stefan turned to his brother. “How do we look?”

From his superior vantage point Lothar smiled, and didn’t even bother looking round before replying, “Perfect.”

Stefan knew his cue. The Ferrari roared. The orgasmic engine purred, calling all suitors. Stefan tossed his head back luxuriating in the vibrations caused by the sports car’s revolutions. Nothing on the pages of Lothar’s magazine was as sexual as the sound of the Ferrari’s engine being stretched to its limit.

They were now just a few feet away from the limousine. The heavies had turned but they were slow, very slow, to react. Panic hit the family. They split. Lothar leaned out

of the window. His sunglasses now resting on the bridge of his nose were slightly cocked. He eased his finger through the trigger. One, two, three, four, five, six times. A precise shot every time. Clinical.

“Drive on Stefan.” Lothar’s voice was measured - not a hint of nervousness. Not a hint, in fact, that anything untoward had happened. He would not have liked to reveal, particularly to his younger brother, that he had actually felt a rush of adrenaline. That the casual theft of another human life still gave him an exquisite high after all these years. Luckily, his tone gave no indication. In fact, it contrived to suggest that perhaps he fancied something light to occupy himself, a Caesar salad – hold the carb fest of the croutons – and a bottle of chilled mineral water before a gentle stroll around the estate.

The Ferrari hit the corner and turned left. Stefan accelerated through a red light and then another, before flipping the car into a ninety degree turn. The tyres screeched as they flew down a side street and up a ramp into the open back doors of a black lorry. The doors closed.

“What happened? You only let off six shots. You fucked up. There were seven people,” Stefan fretted.

“Have more faith. The mother grabbed the young girl. I shot through the girl. Right between the eyes. It ripped through the mother afterwards. Why waste a bullet?”

Stefan nodded. As arrogant as he knew his brother could appear, he didn’t need any convincing of his prowess nor his professionalism.

“Well shot,” he replied.

“Thank you. Okay, Jennifer Love Hewitt. Top 20. True or false?”

“Hmmm. It’d better be top 20, Lothar. She is incredible playing the role of a seductress in *Heartbreakers*.”

“Though it pains me to say it she’s actually several places lower than Billie Piper.”

“Lower?”

“Yes.”

“So, is that better or worse?”

“Jesus Stefan. Sometimes you truly astound me.”

## SO THIS IS WHAT YOUR WIT’S END LOOKS LIKE

**22 APRIL 2006, 12:00**

“No, I don’t want a coffee. I’ve just told you that,” Jack half-shouted at Sarah, his one-time beloved girlfriend.

Jack glanced around as self-consciousness crept over him like a prickly rash. He hadn’t meant to raise his voice so aggressively. Not out of respect for his girlfriend, but because they were on a crowded train. He found himself struggling, in that very British way, to express his exasperated rage whilst avoiding at all costs *making a scene*. The result was a sort of loudly whispered shout that tried to convey to Sarah the desire to physically bite her ears off, but yet show the rest of the world that everything was under control and there was really nothing to worry about, honest.

“Alright, Jack. But we had this before at the shop on the station platform? You didn’t want a paper when I went to the shop to buy *Vogue*? But then what happened? We’re just about to get on to the train and you decide that actually?” Sarah put heavy emphasis

on the word *actually*, knowing how it infuriated Jack, before continuing, “You do want a paper? So forgive me for double-checking this time?”

Jack didn’t speak. How could he answer that? Where could he begin when what he wanted to say would have such huge ramifications? Every fibre in his body strained to say something, anything that would relieve the frustration and anger.

He wanted to scream at her, “We’re 24-years-old, our lives are blank canvasses and we want to blot them with *this*?”

Still, he said nothing. He couldn’t begin to understand how things had got so bad. If he’d been asked to pinpoint exactly what it was about Sarah that riled him so much, he would have been hard pressed to think of anything, or at least anything that didn’t make him seem petty, small minded and pathetically intolerant. Anyone that met her described her as a ‘sweet girl’, but all those things about her, those little details that had seemed so charming, so cute, so...sweet had somehow now become sickly.

His mind began to run away with itself. “Yes, that’s it – sickly.” The sudden realisation was astonishing, an epiphany, almost a new freedom. “She. Makes. Me. Sick.” And even thinking it was another small escape. “The way she chews her hair when she’s thinking because she thinks it makes her look cute – it doesn’t. She looks like a fucking three year old. The stupid floaty clothes she wears just because Sienna Miller wears them in *Heat* magazine. Here’s a concept sweetheart: *Heat* magazine does not have to be a blueprint for your life. Grow up. If you need some sort of life manual, perhaps try reading some philosophy, maybe something from Plato or Nietzsche instead of continuing this fucking devotion to anything glossy with a picture of Jade fucking

Goody on the front. Earth to Sarah, you're filling your mind with vacuous, pointless bullshit.

Oh, and that weird little fucking eye thing she does where she blinks twice if she's confused by something. You're a first class honours student in English you ridiculous woman. Stop pretending you don't understand a simple sentence and above all STOP FUCKING BLINKING! It's fooling nobody and you're vastly over estimating its allure. You look like you've got conjunctivitis at best, and at worst you look like a fucking tit.

And worst of all, oh God yes, worst of all is that recent habit she's picked up where she manages – against all the laws of grammar and speech – to raise the sound of her voice on the final word of every sentence making everything she says sound like a question. Every sentence. I mean, how is that possible? It doesn't make you sound intelligent you idiot. It makes you sound permanently bewildered. What time is it, Sarah? Half two? What's two plus two, Sarah? Four? How did I ever find you attractive, Sarah? I don't know?

No, nor do I. You make me fucking sick.”

Jack barely moved in his seat as his girlfriend stood and motioned with her eyes for him to clear the path to the aisle. To any unknowing onlooker the male half of this relationship merely hadn't noticed his love struggling. But Jack had seen her; he had just chosen to ignore her.

“For God's sake, Jack? You're such a kid?” Sarah whined as she clambered over his legs and practically fell into the aisle.

“Just fuck off. Fuck off. Fuck off,” Jack swore softly under his breath as he watched her pass through the electronic doors and out of their carriage.

He continued to swear softly, but the subdued level of his voice was no indicator as to the strength of meaning that went into every syllable.

“Fuck off, fuck off, fuck off,” Jack continued feeling the weight of eighteen months of treble-padlocked anger drifting up and away down the carriage.

In the flat they barely spoke a word to each other anymore. The only conversation that passed between them was a bit of commentary on that night’s episode of *Big Brother*.

Jack often wondered if there was anything more depressing than a young couple basing their lives around a reality TV show. They both rushed home for it, and it was the only event able to stimulate friendliness between them. Communication was only possible through the medium of ten attention-seeking strangers living together in a house on the other side of the city.

Jack thought of it as throwing in the towel in your early twenties and deciding instead to live a proxy life through your next-door neighbours. Aside from the essentials - eating, drinking and sleeping - Jack and Sarah had neglected their own lives, instead focusing on the other people with interesting lives viewable through the side window.

“It’s your turn to eat, Jack? There’s some microwaveable tasteless junk in the fridge? Go to the kitchen and let me have my turn on the chair in front of the window? I wonder what they’re having for dinner? Oh, how exciting – microwaveable? Jack, Jack, quick you’re missing it. Microwaveable?”

Jack’d read an article a few months earlier about tens of thousands of people, mainly in China, that had become so immersed in their online role-play life that it was impossible to decipher which of the two was their *real* life. He’d read incredulously about people having jobs in their online world and laughed at the absurdity of it all. But he wasn’t

laughing a couple of months later when he started to make the worrying link to himself and the time spent watching non-stop live footage of the infamous house in Elstree.

Jack continued to indulge in his x-rated exorcism directing all the pain and rage towards the buffet car. He had almost reached his fifty-fourth consecutive swear word when his mobile phone rang. Out boomed the ring tone, “When you walk through a storm, hold your head...” blasting the entire carriage with the sound of the Spion Kop.

“Excuse me, this is the quiet zone,” a voice called from across the aisle.

Jack wasn’t listening. He checked the name on the screen – an old uni mate. He quickly decided it was not a good time for *that* conversation.

“Excuse me. Excuse me. Young man.”

A middle-aged woman in a blue roll neck jumper stood looking down at Jack. With her erect posture and high neck, Jack mused that she bore a not dissimilar resemblance to Mrs. Peacock in the *Cluedo* game that he’d played with Sarah’s eight-year-old cousin the previous weekend – anything to avoid talking to the rest of her family, who all hated him.

“Would you kindly switch that telephone off?” The pompousness of the woman’s voice immediately removed any friendliness that the use of the word *kindly* may have implied. Jack in his irate state concluded that what she really meant was, “Turn that phone off you inconsiderate young job. You are personally responsible for the miserable decline of this once great nation. How *dare* you?”

Jack rubbed his eyes. The pain of a thousand arguments reverberated around his head, bouncing off his skull. All that he could see was a tiny yellow line in the centre of complete darkness, and a voice, another voice, disagreeing with him bringing only stress demands and annoyance. Somewhere, buried beneath the layer upon layer of pent up

frustration and unspoken anger, a tiny, muffled voice screamed at him desperate to let him know that he was over reacting. But this voice had no chance against the primeval roar of affronted pride.

If he had been in a better mood, if somebody could have chilled Jack out on the spot, injected heroin into his veins at that very moment, for example. Would that have done the trick? Jack didn't know; his drug taking experience had stretched no further than the odd student spliff – although even that would have helped. Then he would have just laughed, thrown his head back and said, “Got a problem? Join the queue, love. There are others with far bigger gripes and problems with me than you.”

But Jack wasn't chilled out – at all. What's the opposite of a drug that calms you down? Some sort of steroid probably. Speed? Jack didn't need it. He'd already passed through irritation, extensively toured anger, and had shot past rage at such a speed that he was now several miles over the incandescence horizon and accelerating. It was no good. It, this, whatever it was, could not go on. He was only twenty-four. His life was not meant to be like this. He shouldn't have a care in the world. Nobody else did. Why him?

“Young man,” the voice called, louder now.

Jack took a deep breath, feeling his lungs expand. “Will. You. Just. Fuck. Off?” Jack screamed at full volume.

His vocal chords stretched to breaking point and he was surprised how those five words came out far louder than he ever thought capable. He felt all his strained body fibres relax, sit back and take a deep slug from a can of lager and a drag of a cigarette, finally content.

At this point, the lady had taken a couple of steps back, rocking on her back foot. The words had fazed her. The force had almost grounded her.

A man's voice now. "Oi! Have some respect. I'm a bobby you know. I'll have you for verbal assault."

The man had turned to face Jack. He'd leaned over to emphasise his point so that Jack found he was practically nose to nose with a rather genial looking man who exuded the kind of casual affable authority more often associated with running into one's old school teacher. In those circumstances, Jack usually found himself fighting the urge to address the person as 'Sir' while staring sheepishly at his shoes and searching for an excuse for how badly his life had turned out. Somehow 'the dog ate it' never did quite cut it.

But this was an unusual day. As Jack looked across the blackhead minefield that ran down the length of the man's nose, the only thing that separated them was the sweat dripping from Jack's forehead. The man's legs and the rest of his body were hidden by the backs of chairs 02 and 03 of carriage E of the Liverpool Lime Street to London Euston train. The face moved closer, forcing Jack to draw his away. All that was now visible was a pair of eyeballs. The blood sloshed around Jack's head. He wanted to hear the man's warning, but he could barely grasp a word over the sounds of the sea of torment that crashed to and fro. Jack needed air. He needed something. But the man had moved. Mistaking Jack's claustrophobic need to be elsewhere for some sort of misplaced display of youthful arrogant defiance, he positioned himself at Jack's side blocking the only available path to the aisle.

"Move," ordered Jack meekly.

He was quieter now.

“Just move.”

His mouth was so dry, he wasn't even sure if the words had come out this time. He tried to lick his lips but there was barely enough lubrication to get his tongue out of his mouth. His lips felt like sandpaper to his parched tongue.

“Just move,” he tried again.

It definitely didn't come out this time. But that was it right there – that was Jack O'Neill's breaking point. The weight of a million petty squabbles proved too much. Jack dropped his head, leaned his forearms on the man's chest and charged. The effect was somewhat less spectacular than he expected and served only to knock the man's upper body backwards. However, it achieved its goal as the shove was sufficient to allow him to clamber to the automatic door that separated the carriages.

“Get him. Arrest him. What do we pay you for?” the woman questioned.

The policeman paused. The woman's dismissive tone had swayed his support momentarily towards the young lad. Not only was he off duty, but he was on the way to visit his sick mother and this woman had chastised him like he had just handed the kid the keys to Fort Knox. Why should he kowtow to this woman's directive? Anyway, he had her pegged already. He wagered that she was the sort of woman that took public issue with the absence of a solitary apostrophe from an advertising billboard. Like it really mattered to her; what did matter was that she had pointed it out. He would have taken exception to being barked at like that even if he had been on duty let alone on his day off. It would have been satisfying to see the woman's reaction if he was to turn up at her door and ask her to leave her *Daily Mail* and cornflakes to go down to the office and do a day's unpaid work.

Granted, a policeman was never off duty - or so the cops in the movies say - but the least that he deserved was a bit of gratitude. On the other hand, the boy had pushed him and showed a lack of respect - and that was enough.

The policeman grabbed Jack around the neck and dragged him through the gap between the carriages. Jack slammed hard against the Perspex of the electric door, and realised – too late – that despite the advancing years, the man had the benefit of two decades' experience and training, and was more than capable of handling aggressive young men. During the brief struggle, the policeman had momentarily weighed up his options and had decided on Jack's sentence.

“You're getting off at the next stop kid,” he told Jack.

There was no way he was going through with any arrest. He was not about to get stuck filling in a load of bloody paperwork on his day off.

## **A TWINKLE IN THE EYE**

**22 APRIL 2006, 12:04**

“Come on girl. You'll have a laugh with us,” hollered one of four boys across the carriage to Sarah.

“What are they like?” Sarah giggled to the buffet cart girl, who looked about six years her junior, and was probably around the same age as the rowdy quartet.

A couple of years ago, Sarah would have ignored them and headed back to her seat, but she found herself enjoying the boys' mock compliments too much to leave.

“You look like Scarlett Johansson,” said the boy who had done all the talking thus far. That, for starters, Sarah had black hair should have been sufficient evidence of the ingenuity of the boy’s flattery. That said, it was working.

“My boyfriend is down there,” Sarah said, laughing. “And I’m far too old for you.”

“If you were my girlfriend, I’d have got your coffee for you. I’d never let you do anything for yourself. Ever. Your wish would be my command, gorgeous.”

And as inane as the conversation was, this boy had captured her imagination. She was there, dreaming of another life. Even though it may have meant sharing a bedroom with this boy, his younger brother, and an Xbox, in his parents’ house; she reckoned life with him could not have been more miserable than her current setup with Jack.

“You’re gorgeous,” the boy said again, forced to repeat himself now that his initial patter was all but exhausted and he had run out of ideas.

Sarah didn’t notice as she let herself ride on the wave of the boy’s compliments and fantasised about their new carefree life together. She couldn’t help but smile.

“Yeah, look at those tits. They’re fucking massive.”

Sarah was broken out of her reverie by the boy’s not-so-charming friend. His crass comment and the reality of her life hit her smack between the eyes. Sarah looked down at her low cut top and crossed her arms to hide her cleavage.

“Shut up, you little prick.”

The Alpha Male punched his friend in the arm causing a full can of Stella Artois to spill all over the table; completely saturating their copy of *FHM*.

Sarah turned and started to walk back down the carriage. They were eighteen again now. Four little boys.

“Aw, don’t go luv,” the flirtatious boy pleaded.

“Sorry. Have a good weekend boys,” Sarah called over the shoulder of her denim jacket before she started back on the path to Jack, a path she had mistakenly chosen three years ago. A path that had led her to *some* happy times, it’s just that she couldn’t quite remember any of them at that moment.

“Ladies and Gentleman, the train is now arriving at Crewe. All those leaving at Crewe, please remember to take your luggage. We hope you have had a pleasant journey with *Virgin Trains*.”

Sarah stumbled as the train pulled into the station and stopped abruptly. While she steadied herself, she caught a glimpse of Jack up ahead. He appeared to be in the grip of a tall, bald man in a green fleece. They looked like they were getting off the train.

“Jack,” Sarah called, beginning to make her way over to him.

She stepped over suitcases and three young boys who were sitting on skateboards next to the doors.

“Nice legs,” called one of the boys.

“Fuck off,” Sarah yelled back.

“That’s nice language for a lady. Why’ve you got a skirt around your waist if you don’t want us looking?” the boy asked, laughing with his friend. They were probably sixth-formers, no older.

Sarah carried on, ignoring their question. She finally reached her boyfriend, and considering he was currently being dragged in a headlock, arms flailing pathetically and face reddening with humiliation, quite naturally wondered what the hell was going on.

“What’s happening, Jack?” Sarah asked, perfectly reasonably, looking at Jack and his unlikely captor.

But, Jack did not appear to think this was a reasonable question.

“Forget it, Sar. Go and sit down.”

“Go and sit down? Jack, you’re about to get off the train with this meathead? Er... I mean this.... man?” She rallied magnificently. “We’re supposed to be going back to the flat to start new jobs on Monday?”

“You mean *you’re* starting a new job,” Jack snapped back.

“Jack, you’ve got a temp job and it is not the fucking time for that. Where are you going?”

“I’m throwing him off the train. This lad assaulted a police officer. Or should I say meathead? And you wanna mind your language or you’ll be going with him. I’d sit down if I were you, sweetheart.”

“Yes, go and sit down, Sarah. I’ve had enough of it all. I’ve, I’ve just had enough.”

“You’ve had enough?”

Sarah began to cry but not out of sadness. Her tear ducts released a river of frustrated tears with the abandon that her mouth had resisted for so long.

“Fine Jack. I’m going back to *my* flat. Don’t bother coming back other than to pick up your stuff. I’m not getting off this train.”

The emphasis on *my* was the dig at Jack that she’d avoided ever since they had moved in together. It was a low blow and she knew it, but it was out there now, and if the relationship hadn’t been truly over up to that point, it was the last rusty nail of spite in the cheap coffin of disappointment, irritation and unspoken resentment.

The policeman was having second thoughts. He wasn't an unkind man, and it was clear that what he'd initially assumed was thuggish youthful disrespect was clearly the watershed moment of a complicated back history. He'd had his own passionate moments with the ladies in the past, and he was well aware that high emotional tension in connection with the fairer sex could very easily lead to outbursts like this one. The position he was now in presented a bit of a dilemma. His inbuilt humanity suggested that he just have a quiet word with the kid and be done with it, but painful experience had taught him that police officers were losing respect with every passing generation. It was a shame for the lad but there it was. To back down now would be an unacceptable concession of authority, a nod of deference to every little brat that swore at him in the street, every *hoodie* that spat in his direction, and every smart arse little bugger that threw stones at him from afar knowing that it wasn't worth the paperwork for him to do anything about it. No, he probably wasn't a bad lad, but fair's fair – he had to go.

Jack felt the pressure on his back as the annoyed policeman pushed him from the train and onto the platform. As his feet hit the ground below, his legs buckled under the gravity of the moment. For the first time in months he felt truly relaxed, right here in the middle of the station platform as businessmen skirted around him. Yes, he was exhausted. Yes, he was humiliated. Yes, he was even homeless. But he was free. He was free.

Jack smiled and looked up to the blue sky. It was all over.

**WHEN THE SHACKLES ARE RELEASED**

**22 APRIL 2006, 14:32**

Back in her seat, Sarah watched Jack through the window and realised she felt no longing and no regret. She realised how delighted she was and how right it was they were both headed in different directions. Finally, the metaphors of their lives were in tandem with the physical.

The train back to London now felt like a ticket to a whole new world - a new adventure. No longer did she have a clue where she'd be in the future – the idea of a five-year life plan was now entirely alien to her. She didn't know where she'd be in five months, nor in fact five days. For the first time since she could remember, the thread of her life was flapping loose and she had no idea how to anchor it securely and safely. And to her surprise, it was blissful. The acres of random possibilities and undone deeds rolled before her in her mind's eye. She had finally wrestled back control of her own destiny.

Excited at her newfound freedom, she decided to go back to the buffet cart. Not to get off with the boys – they were only 18 – but because she could.

On the way down she passed four copies of *The Da Vinci Code* and three copies of *Angels and Demons*. Sarah was tempted to stop and tell her fellow passengers that other books had indeed been written in the past two hundred years, and in the same language as that employed by Dan Brown; so they should really give one of them a try some time. But she managed to restrain herself.

Sarah's main problem had been a hackneyed one in fairness, but it hadn't made life any less draining. The relationship had made her feel *old*. She hadn't felt pretty and glam for

over a year. Jack had seen her naked a thousand times and the prospects of further nudity were hardly likely to get him excited any longer. She hadn't worn a matching bra and g-string for yonks, preferring to snatch for any old pair of knickers. In fact, she didn't bother wearing a g-string much in any event. She always found them uncomfortable, and had only ever worn them for Jack's benefit.

But when she had stopped making an effort with her looks and underwear, she had started feeling ugly, frumpy and old. It had been ages since she'd looked in the mirror and thought she looked pretty. She had never been vain in the first place, but she barely gave her reflection a second glance these days. No wonder a solitary and unrealistic compliment from a teenager had bowled her over. Why she'd chosen to share her woe with the girl wo-manning the buffet cart she wasn't sure. But spilling tales of misery and even pointing out the source of her despair – stood on the platform as he was seemingly with questions to answer as the train pulled away – was incredibly therapeutic.

On her way down the train she'd overheard a man on his phone asking, almost with terror in his voice, "So how bad is it? Is he out of the World Cup?"

Sarah knew bits and bobs about football as Jack never had it off the TV, but she wasn't sure who they were talking about. Steven Gerrard? She knew him. If it was him, Jack would be devastated. For some reason, she had a really strong feeling that she didn't want it to be Steven Gerrard. It was strange that although she knew she never wanted to see Jack again - and in many ways hated him - she still didn't want to think of his hurt little boy face if he found out his favourite player had been injured.

With a sigh, she reflected that moving away from an established relationship pattern was exactly like breaking a bad habit - better for you in the the long run, but difficult

nonetheless. Suddenly, her newfound freedom seemed not so much exhilarating as daunting, and the comparative safeness of knowing exactly what comprised her life was a much brighter prospect than it had seemed only moments ago.

No, that was the wrong attitude, the wrong thought process to fall into. She steeled herself, and promised that Jack was a mistake she would not make again under any circumstances. If she never saw Jack again it would be too damn soon.

## **A NATION PREPARES TO MOURN**

**22 APRIL 2006, 15:00**

Jack was still waiting for another train to London. Once he'd sorted out a couple of formalities with the train staff such as explaining in detail why he had been thrown off the train, where he planned to go next, would he be abusive on the next train – that one took all of half of a second to answer; he was free to continue his journey.

News of the football catastrophe had reached the platform and the station buzzed with the search for information. Jack managed to glean from his surrounding travelers that Wayne Rooney had been injured in the United vs. Chelsea game. Incredibly, it seemed that his injury was to his metatarsal. The profligacy of metatarsal injuries had been blamed for every major championship disappointment in the England national team's recent history. Jack fully expected the English public to hold a dodgy metatarsal responsible for the famous collapse of the Queen's horse, Devon Loch, the UK's forced exit from the Exchange Rate Mechanism and the collapse of the British Empire.

Jack wasn't overly concerned. His thoughts had turned to the corpse of his and Sarah's relationship. He wasn't sure where it had gone wrong. He thought it unlikely that people could ever point to any one thing that destroys a relationship, besides the obvious stuff. If he'd been knocking off one of Sarah's friends for example, and she'd found out, then obviously it wouldn't have been difficult to find the turning point of their relationship. But he hadn't. Nor had he gotten drunk and hit her, or gambled away all their money at the races, or even forgotten her birthday. None of the obvious reasons so commonplace in the movies they had become clichés applied. It was just a slow build up of little details, minor infractions, an accumulation of so many innocuous yellow cards over two seasons that the FA had seen fit to suspend play indefinitely.

Having said that, he knew there had been one factor that had really put a strain on their relationship. It may not have been the only cause, but Jack was sure it had contributed significantly.

## **MARRIED TO THE MOB**

### **SOMETIME IN 2005**

Jack and Sarah had both recently moved to London and were struggling. Jack had landed a job as a runner on a newspaper. He was earning peanuts, but he was pursuing his dream of becoming a journalist. Sarah hadn't found anything at all yet.

Their savings had gone and they were two months behind on the rent. All money juggling opportunities had been exhausted; he couldn't get another credit card, the bank

had rejected his request to extend his overdraft and his parents couldn't afford to give him another penny.

That's when the offer came in. Jack knew the psychology. If you want to sucker someone in, you get the person at his lowest point - classic mafia loan shark fare. He'd always known Sarah's Mum and Dad never liked him much. No matter, he didn't like them either. They were - by anybody's assessment - complete snobs and Jack couldn't bear much time in their company. He knew deep down that he had a slight reverse snobbery of his own, in as much as he was staunchly working class and in his younger days had been so left wing as to be almost Marxist, but the fact is he would never pass a judgement on somebody based solely on their background. He wouldn't have minded if Sarah's parents had met him and disapproved of his attitude, his demeanor, his ambition, or any discernable quality that made Jack, Jack. The truth was, they had taken an immediate dislike to him from the moment he said 'hello' in a Scouse accent, making all their judgements the second the first syllable had reached their ears and been processed in their brains. "Good God Milly, a bally *northerner*? In *here*? Fetch my shotgun what what? We'll soon sort the blighter out." (Jack later relayed this story to his Mancunian friend, Craig, a Salford born Man United fan, who listened carefully, nodded sagely, then replied, "He's got a fuckin' point though, your accent could cut fuckin' *glass* man.")

It's not like their disapproval was all in his imagination either. Sarah had all but admitted it to him one night during pillow talk - a time when they were a unit, one person. Sarah had been complaining about them and Jack had been more than happy to join in.

He had never forgotten her saying to him, “You’re not the type of boy they imagined being their son-in-law.”

Of course, when Sarah’s parents offered to buy them a flat, to live in rent-free, Sarah had forgotten she’d divulged her parents’ view of him and told him he was imagining things. Jack didn’t want to accept the offer. On paper, it sounded ideal, but Jack knew it would come with strings attached. Even though there was no financial demand made of them there would nevertheless be a huge price to pay.

If it had been anyone else then he would have been overcome with gratitude at such a generous gesture. But Jack knew Sarah’s parents enough to know that any apparent generosity would only be a way of masking their ulterior motives. They just wanted a hold over them. If he took the offer, he’d be forever in their debt, in their pocket. They would own him.

But he had no other choice and he took the offer. It was a nightmare. They wanted their pound of flesh and Jack hated it. The dynamic of his relationship with her parents was similar to that of the bar owner in *Goodfellas* after he accepts protection from Paulie. It was exactly like that.

Imagine the following as the voiceover of Ray Liotta in his Henry Hill guise:

“So now Jack’s living in the flat that Sarah’s parents have bought her and they’re supporting them both.

Problems with the electricity bills, they can go to Sarah’s parents.

Problems with the council tax, they can go to Sarah’s parents.

The boiler’s broken down; they can go to Sarah’s parents.

But now he's in their debt. Just like Paulie wants his money, they want their pound of flesh.

Oh, you wanted a beer after work with your friends? Fuck you! Go home to your girlfriend.

Oh, there's football on the TV. Fuck you! You're coming over for Sunday dinner.

Oh, you're thinking about going back to uni to study journalism. Fuck you! Get out and earn some money to support our daughter.

And what do you do when you can't borrow another buck from the bank to meet a bill, or deal with one more Sunday afternoon over at their house, or listen to one more career chat? YOU BUST THE JOINT OUT!"

Except that's where Jack's situation deviated from the *Goodfellas* storyline. He didn't burn the place down. He dreamt about it. He would have loved to have seen their sanctimonious faces as that prison went up in flames. But he didn't for any number of reasons. The main one being he had never committed a crime in his life.

Arson would have been a bit of a bold start.

## **HERE COMES THE SUN**

**22 APRIL 2006, 16:45**

Jack was finally aboard a Euston bound train. For the time being, he had no idea where he was going to live, or what he was going to do when he got there. Weighing up his options, he reckoned the best thing to do would be to objectively work out his assets and liabilities. In the liabilities column there was... well, there was everything. It was a stark

realisation to have to admit that the sum total of his life was slightly less than fuck all. Don't dwell on that, Jack scolded himself, move on quickly. In the assets column, at least he had a couple of friends who would no doubt let him stay on their floor and he had a temp job that would keep him going.

It wasn't much, but he could tread water for a few months. *Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans*, the great John Lennon once said. But surely, Jack reasoned, if your life is miserable, it's better to take a year out to take stock rather than going on with *life*, living, but living a miserable life. If the following year, you are just one step closer to where you want to be, and your days are filled with five minutes more happiness then surely that year out was worth it.

Jack drew the comparison of a struggling football team that had experienced a period of success but were now an aging squad unable to compete. Surely it was better to have a transitional year bleeding youngsters for the future before finishing mid-table; rather than bringing in a host of foreigners on over-inflated salaries and finishing in the top six, but still without a major honour in sight. Sir bloody Alex Ferguson had proved that time and time again – often to the detriment of Liverpool F.C. Jack knew he would finish no higher than mid-table this year, but next year, he would be a contender. *He would be a contender.*

Jack sat at a table alone. The train was all but empty. Jack wondered if the passengers had all diverted to Manchester to keep a vigil at Wayne Rooney's bedside. He put his feet up on the empty seats opposite, rested his head against the window and tried to sleep.

**JENNIFER, ALISON, PHILLIPA, SUE**

**22 APRIL 2006, 17:58**

Jack awoke with a start. He had been dreaming about his wedding day. He had been stood at the altar with Lady Isabella Hervey. Why? He had no idea. He was one of the biggest republicans anyone could meet and hated any semblance of aristocracy. Besides which, she was obviously a total arse.

However, to his utter self-disgust, he had found himself quite taken with her when watching a show set on some island. Jack didn't know the name, but much to his annoyance, Sarah had insisted they watch it every night. As is often the case with reality shows, you start off hating them, but if you watch it for long enough you find yourself addicted. That's when you end up hating yourself.

In his dream, Jack and Lady Isabella Hervey were very much in love, and the wedding looked like something from a fairytale. The priest then asked if anybody objected to their union. Jack and Lady Isabella looked at each other and smiled and all of the guests instantly fell in love with the perfect, glowing, young couple. Until the shouts from the back of the church started. Every single girl that Jack had ever been out with all started to scream to the entire congregation about what a bastard he was and how he'd let them down. Even a girl he dated when he was thirteen was there - if a kiss on the local park bench post bottle of Merrydown for Jack and bottle of Mad Dog 20/20 for Tracey could be considered a date. The recollection of that evening with Tracey was still crystal clear. Since, at thirteen, the alcohol had not been able to envelop and warp his youthfully robust memory as it did with such distressing frequency nowadays, he could recall that

evening with Tracey Birmingham like it was yesterday. He often smirked as he recalled the complete absence of romance. It had effectively been a double date at the outset. Jack, and his mate, Tom, and Tracey and her friend Hels. Hels (real name Helen Whellon – her parents must have hated her) was desperate to get Tom on his own, but all four of them were uncomfortable and chatting nonsense whilst dragging their feet, fiddling with cigs and staring at the floor. They needed someone to come up with a killer line to sweep their date off their feet and give the twosomes a chance to couple up. Hels wasn't to be found wanting. Jack almost laughed out loud as those words came flooding back to him: "Jack, look at Tracey she's bursting. Take her for a piss." And he did, and it was how they ended up on the park bench. Beat that Shakespeare, Jack mused. Who needs a moonlight expression of passion in iambic pentameter when you can just take the girl for a piss?

Back in the dream, Lady Isabella threw her bouquet at Jack, and ran out of the church crying. That's when the wedding guests turned on Jack and he woke up.

Jack didn't want to think about what the dream meant, but it couldn't have been good. It was probably a result of his Catholic upbringing and the innate need to flagellate himself for letting another potential wife slip through his fingers. He'd be okay. He just needed a drink to calm down. He headed for the buffet cart.

"Just this bottle of Virgin Cola, please," Jack said to the young girl.

"I know you," she said.

"Sorry?" Jack was confused.

“I do. I know you. You’re Jack. You used to go out with Sarah, but now you’ve split up. She was a bit bothered at first but now she knows it’s for the best, and after chatting to the other group of Scouse lads earlier, she can’t wait to meet some new blokes.”

Jack was physically taken aback. Was he still dreaming? What was this hairspray - fringed clairvoyant saying to him? How did she know all about him and his relationship? And, more importantly, where did Sarah get off thinking about new blokes when they had only split up this morning?

“I’m sorry, but do you mind telling me who the fuck you are? And how you know so fucking much about me and my fucking relationship?”

“Calm down, Jack. Cut the swearing. You’ll get thrown off the train again,” the young girl laughed.

Jack couldn’t believe it. He had no idea how this girl knew so much about him and why she was laughing at him – a little smugly in fact. He changed tack. Charm offensive, first gear.

“Look, I’m sorry for swearing alright? But please tell me how you know so much about me.”

“Easy,” the girl said, lapping it all up. “I worked the earlier train and got chatting to Sarah after you got thrown off. I got on this train further down the track. She seemed a nice girl, Sarah, but I think you’re better off apart.”

“Thanks, Tricia Goddard.” Jack half laughed, relieved he wasn’t going insane.

“No problem. I reckon Sarah must be mad. You’re proper fit and I’d go out with you. I told her too. She said that something with a beautiful exterior often hides an ugly

interior. I thought she meant your willy, but apparently it means you're not a very good person."

"Thanks for that."

Jack had heard enough. This was clearly one of those girls who thought that a lack of tact and decency was the same as being forthright and sexily outspoken. Plus he'd always had an issue with grown women who use childlike terms for genitalia. In his opinion, any girl who said 'willy' when referring to a penis needed to have a serious word with herself, although serious words were seemingly beyond them. He'd met a thirty year-old woman who referred to her vagina as her 'flower'. Her fucking '*flower*'. And she wasn't even joking. At some point in a certain type of woman's development, he reckoned, something had made them decide that to use terminology employed by your average five year old made them sound sweet and innocent, as opposed to, say, weird and under developed. He'd had a similar argument once with Sarah when, during foreplay, she had referred to Jack kissing her 'tuppence'. '*Tuppence*' for fuck's sake. It was like a paedophile's dream. Hearing it actually turned his stomach and a blazing row ensued, although it was rather abruptly settled when Jack pointed out that if she'd been a prostitute, she'd have been a bargain at a tuppence, and in future, maybe refer to it as her 'tenner'.

He turned to leave, hoping to avoid any more conversation with this tactless idiot and her baby language, but being as pig headed and opinionated as he was he could never resist a parting shot.

He called over his shoulder, "Can I go now or are you going to reveal some other life-shattering surprise to me? Was I adopted? Abducted by aliens when I was seven?"

The girl remained undeterred. Perhaps she hadn't understood Jack's irritation or perhaps didn't care.

"See you later, Jack. Come back down to see me in a bit. I got on alright with your ex, chatting and that, but I wouldn't mind getting off with you behind her back."

"Classy. And if I ever need any more relationship advice, I'll know who to come and see."

Jack wasn't sure how he felt about what he'd just heard. It was clearly unfettered, and exactly what Sarah had said earlier. He was sort of glad she was okay about it all he supposed, but...actually, no, that was bollocks. He wasn't glad at all. In fact, he was livid that she seemed to be so blasé about an event that should, by rights, have her weeping uncontrollably into a lacy handkerchief and wailing mournfully at the agony of her loss. And as for the *getting off with other lads* comment – how dare she? How dare she even think that?

Jack sighed. He knew he was being stupid and immature. He was smart enough to realise that his feelings were tainted by the circumstances in which he found himself. Most notably, the fact that Sarah was now out of reach had made her attractive again. Plus, of course, there was the male pride to deal with. The old 'I don't want you, but I don't want anyone else having you either'.

Fortunately, none of these thoughts tempted him to try and re-ignite the flames of their relationship so nothing had changed. He could console himself with that.

**IF TWO MEN CAN'T FIND COMMON GROUND ON ANYTHING ELSE,  
THERE'S ALWAYS FOOTBALL**

**22 APRIL 2006, 18:38**

“Have you heard any news about Rooney, mate?”

The young Asian man opposite Jack seemed concerned. Jack thought he was probably about the same age as him, maybe a couple of years older, but no more.

“I haven't mate sorry. I've overheard a few people saying he looked in a bad way but it may not be too bad as he got onto the team coach rather than going straight to hospital. You a big England fan?”

“Yeah, massive. I can't wait for the World Cup. We haven't got a chance without Rooney though.”

Jack was trying to place the guy's accent. Somewhere around Manchester. Bolton, Rochdale, Bury - that way definitely. Any minute now there would be some clichéd Scouse/Manc banter, which he would nonetheless join in with. It was just the done thing.

“Yes, he'd be a big loss,” Jack replied nonchalantly.

“You don't seem too bothered. Are you not really into football?”

Jack didn't want to go overboard when answering this question. He must have seemed disinterested. In reality, he'd been distracted ticking off one by one all of the identikit towns that surround Manchester. But now the man had quite clearly got the wrong impression of him. Jack didn't want to end up looking like a combination of David Brent and the bloke from the *Fast Show* – ‘I bloody love football me’ and so on.

“Yes, I am,” he said, choosing his words carefully. “I’m just not that bothered about the England team.”

“Oh right.” He seemed unconvinced.

“You’re a Scouser, aren’t you? Red or blue?”

“There’s only two teams in Liverpool mate – Liverpool and Liverpool reserves,” Jack replied.

The guy laughed. “So why aren’t you bothered about England? What about when Gerrard and Carragher are playing?”

“Don’t get me wrong. I do support them and I want them to win. It’s just that I’ve always been much more bothered about club football. If we win the European Cup it has a much more profound effect on my life than if England win the World Cup.”

“Really? No way.” He looked stunned. “I sort of see what you’re saying, but, well, it’s the World Cup man.”

It was Jack’s turn to laugh. “Don’t worry, I’ll be supporting them this summer. Who’s your team anyway?”

“Bolton. That’s where I’m from. The Champions League ain’t something I have to worry about. My name’s Phil by the way.”

“Alright, nice to meet you. Jack. I’m from Kirkdale, near the city centre. So, what are you going to London for?”

“I work in London - management consultant in the City. What about you? Why are you going down?”

Jack resisted the temptation to toss his hands in the air, roll his eyes and give it the big ‘good question’ and treat Phil to his tale of three years of woe.

“I’ve just got a temp job. I’m thinking of trying to get back into journalism though so it’s just for a couple of weeks until I sort myself out,” Jack said instead.

“Nice one. What kind of journalism? Sports?”

“No mate. I’d love to. What a job that would be, eh?”

Phil smiled and nodded in agreement.

“Political journalism. It’ll be a tough field to break into, but you’ve got to have a crack, I reckon.”

“True. Actually, I heard you talking on the phone about the elections to your mate. I’m interested too. Politics and that. Know, what I mean? Here take this.”

Phil placed a business card into Jack’s hand.

“I’ve got something going. It’s right up your street, I reckon. If you fancy meeting up with a few like-minded people once you’ve got yourself settled, give me a shout.”

“Oh, right. Er, cheers mate. I will do. Sounds good.”

Jack knew he wouldn’t, and he thought it sounded awful, some sort of cult maybe. But still, Phil seemed like a nice bloke and pretty personable. Jack would rather take the card and never call than have the bottle to refuse it point blank.

“Where do you...” Jack’s question was interrupted by Phil’s *Three Lions* ring tone.

“Sorry mate. Just bear with me a sec,” Phil apologised, taking his mobile phone out of his pocket. He started to listen to the voice on the other end of the line looking steadily more distressed. “You’re joking?” It was a question rather than a statement. “No, that’s an absolute disaster.”

Phil said his goodbyes and put his phone back into his pocket. He shook his head and flopped back against the headrest with his eyes closed. Jack thought he'd better keep his mouth shut. He didn't know Phil well enough to pry into anything like this.

"He's out."

Jack knew what he meant, but Phil clarified it for him anyway. Probably more for his own benefit.

"Rooney's out of the World Cup."

Jack nodded silently, deciding that it was better to let Phil grieve alone.

## **UNCHARTERED WATERS**

**22 APRIL 2006, 19:37**

Jack grabbed his belongings from the hold and turned to disembark the train.

"It was good meeting you, Phil. All the best."

"Yes, you too Jack. And good luck in the Cup final. Oh..." Phil's face turned serious.

"You've got my card. Give me a call. If you want to meet some people, I'll sort you out."

"Okay I will."

Not for the first time, Jack felt a little uncomfortable at the weight of conviction with which Phil referred to his 'people' but he brushed the thought away, shook Phil's hand and headed in the opposite direction. Jack's arrival in Euston in some respects felt like the five thousandth time in the past few years, but this time it was somehow different - like a completely different destination. He felt he was on a maiden voyage. In his

romantic frame of mind, Jack fancied himself as Columbus, off in search of the new world. Unfortunately, Jack's daydream was rudely interrupted by a collision with a drunken middle-aged man wearing a trench coat and reeking of cigars. As they both fell to the floor, Jack's thoughts of Columbus vanished as he was unceremoniously engulfed by Columbo.

"Oh shorry," the man slurred as he rolled off, the stench of stale beer clinging to him like crude oil on a cormorant's back.

Jack was vaguely disappointed the man didn't proclaim that his wife was a big fan, before bumbling his way to catching a cold-blooded murderer. It appeared that the Columboesque similarities had started and ended with the man's disheveled appearance. The slurred apology marked the last words that passed between them.

A full thirty seconds went by as Jack stood contemplating his fate. It was too late to impose on any of his friends and he couldn't afford to even think about a hotel. To the amusement of a passing girl in dreadlocks and a woolen cardigan, Jack spoke to himself out loud.

"So what now, Jack O'Neill? What now?"

## **PLANS ARE MADE TO BE CHANGED**

**22 APRIL 2006, 22:04**

"So, what was he like?" Suzy asked.

"A nightmare. An absolute nightmare," Phil replied shaking his head ruefully.

"In what way? Is he a complete write-off?"

“Totally. He was a real Billy Liar. And everything I mentioned he’d done it better. You know the type. If I said I’d been to Tenerife, he’d been to Elevenerife. I wouldn’t work with him for a second and neither would you lot.”

“So, a complete waste of a trip then,” Suzy complained.

“Actually, no, not really, Suz. I had a good weekend with my family. But the main reason the weekend wasn’t pointless was that I met a really interesting lad on the train. I didn’t get to find out too much about him, but my instincts tell me he could be one of us. I listened to him on the phone and he definitely sounded like he had potential.”

“Great. Shall we get him to come along this week?”

“It’s not as simple as that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Listen, Suz. He was a good lad, a normal lad, and if I’d pushed too hard for him to come down to the pub with me – someone he’d just met twenty minutes beforehand – he would have thought I was mental. Or grafting to pull him.”

“Of course he wouldn’t.”

“I’m telling you, Suzy, he would. And the reason I know it is if somebody had done it to me, I would think the same thing. I gave him my card and hopefully he’ll give me a buzz. I’ve got a feeling he will too.”

“Right, well, let’s wait and see. In the meantime, I’ll keep trying to get the word out.”

“But remember the key Suz - subtlety and secrecy. Little by little – we don’t want to scare anyone off by being too intense.”

“I know. I know,” Suzy assured Phil. “Subtlety and secrecy.”

**BEING KNOCKED FROM PILLAR TO POSTMAN**

**28 APRIL 2006, 14:35**

Over the next week, Jack went through three temp jobs. A new personal best. On his first day, the agency had sent him to give out leaflets in the street. He had lasted an hour. The second job was a postman's assistant. Jack didn't mind the job, and he had a good laugh with the postman, Tony, but it was only for two days while Tony was struggling with a hip problem. The third job - which Jack had stuck with for now - was working in a factory.

Jack'd had plenty of factory jobs over the years and despite his initial reservations they had been some of his best times. The lads that he'd worked with had been such genuine blokes and some of the sharpest people Jack had ever come across. In one job, he had worn a pair of ripped jeans, a white vest and a bandana to work. Looking back he had no idea why, although he had inexplicably thought he looked good at the time. The lads definitely didn't think he looked good. To the amusement of all of the warehouse staff - and Jack himself who had loved the banter and hadn't minded it being at his expense - that outfit had earned him the nickname 'Handbag' for the rest of his tenure.

It was Friday afternoon and Jack had just completed another day in the warehouse off Commercial Road. This warehouse job was different to any that he'd had previously. He was the only man that worked there. Not that anyone would know that from the appearance and language of some of the staff. He'd never heard anything like it. He didn't mind. He thought it was funny, and the women had taken to him, and named him - admittedly none-too-imaginatively - 'Scouse'.

As Jack filled a small cup of water at the drinks machine, he felt a hand like a pizza shovel on his hip, moving him aside. It was Stella – burly, brash and cockneyer than a Chas and Dave tribute act that had been intravenously injecting liquidized pie’n’mash and jellied eels thrice daily for twelve months. She was the Bea Smith character of the warehouse. Woe betide anybody that wasn’t on Stella’s side. Luckily, Jack was.

“Oi Scars. Out of the fahkin’ way. I need some water quickly. My froat is as dry as a nan’s cant.”

Jack thought he had heard some coarse expressions in his time, but even he recoiled in horror at the phrase.

“What’s that face for, Scars, you dopey bastard?”

“Well, Stella. That’s a bit much, innit?”

“Don’t be such a tart, Scars. If you’re gonna last around here you’d better get fahkin’ used to it sharpish.”

“Well, I’m afraid, he won’t have to,” the foreman interjected, walking over to Jack and Stella.

“What do you mean, boss?” asked Jack.

“Sorry son. I’m laying you off. I can’t afford the temp wages. We’re Brassick Park here.”

“Oh, I see. Well, er, okay then. I suppose I’ll see you all around.”

Jack was gutted. The warehouse was a good laugh and he needed the money desperately. He couldn’t even think of the breadline at the moment. He was still searching for the raw ingredients – the yeast, water and flour line was a more realistic prospect.

“Not so fast, Scars.”

Stella grabbed Jack’s upper arms. She was freakishly strong. He couldn’t move.

“Girls, it’s our Mickey Mars’s last day. And you know what we do to handsome young fahkin’ studs on their last day, don’t you?”

The girls all cheered and whooped and descended on Jack.

On route home, Jack was forced to struggle to the tube, moving like John Wayne as he desperately tried to ease the discomfort of the grease, oil, ketchup, soap and brown sauce the girls had daubed all over his testicles.

**FROM P45 TO P234SDFGT**

**28 APRIL 2006, 16:02**

“Have you got any work? I’m pretty desperate.”

Jack thought he should make the call to the agency before boarding the tube at Mile End. Money coming in was the number one priority and he didn’t want to spend the weekend worrying.

“We’ve got a job giving out leaflets near Charing Cross Hospital.”

“I’m not doing it. I did it before and I quit after an hour.”

Jack’s tone was quite stern.

“Okay, Mr. O’Neill. But if you won’t do perfectly good jobs then you can’t complain.”

“I can complain. It’s not a perfectly good job. It’s not near Charing Cross Hospital. It’s *in* Charing Cross Hospital - in the Accident & Emergency ward. And it’s for an accident claims company. It’s bloody immoral. Some poor kid has got third-degree

burns from slipping in the kitchen during Home Ec. class and I'm supposed to stick a leaflet in his face touting claims. I've heard of ambulance chasers but these blokes don't even bother to chase the ambulance. They slash the ambulance tyres and beat it there."

"Okay, I'll take your high morals into account when I'm searching then," the agent said sarcastically.

"High morals? Richard Nixon would conscientiously object to working for that mob."

"Oh, hang on. I've got something for you. It's an admin job in the City. You've got a degree haven't you, Mr. O'Neill?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Great. This job will be perfect. It's an admin job for a bank. Good money too."

"Excellent. When can I start?"

"They want someone on Monday. Have you got a pen and paper?"

"Yes," lied Jack, taking out his mobile phone.

"Okay. It's on Bishopsgate. Ask for Julia Thomas at reception and quote the job reference: P234SDFGT."

"Great. Thanks for your help."

A wave of relief flooded over Jack, but was quickly replaced by an even bigger wave of burning pain emanating from his scrotum. It seemed that the cocktail of liquids had combined into a lethal poison. He fell to the floor screaming in anguish. As Jack held his nether regions the rush hour commuters stepped over, around, and everywhere; anything to avoid the strange kid that looked like he'd been given a dose of such potency it could only have come from the groin of Rebecca Loos.

**BURNING THE *MIDNIGHT OIL*: HOW CAN WE SPEAK WHEN OUR HEADS  
ARE GURNING?**

**12 MAY 2006, 03:24**

“What’s the matter, Jackie boy?”

“Nothing, Grae. I’m alright.”

“Well, why aren’t you giving it some?”

“I am mate. We’re just not exactly on the same wavelength, are we?”

“I’ve only had four, mate. The night is young, my son.”

Graeme laughed with Jack and placed another pill into his own mouth. He took a large gulp from his bottle of water and grabbed Jack around the shoulder.

“Come on, mate. Let’s go and get hold of a couple of sorts.”

Graeme was a good-looking boy, and from Jack’s experience his line of wide boy patter generally went down well with the women. But in this case, he just couldn’t believe that Graeme could be considered an attractive prospect. His teeth and mouth moved so rapidly in three hundred and sixty degrees revolutions that the lower half of his face looked like a spin drier. During every revolution, Graeme’s teeth bashed into his lips with more relish than Robinson Crusoe munching on a mixed grill that had appeared in place of his cherished coconut tree.

“Here mate.” Jack lifted Graeme’s suit jacket and put it to his lip. “You’re bleeding. Hold that there, and go to the toilets to sort it out.”

Jack was just about done. Graeme would keep knocking the pills back and wouldn’t want to leave for a good three hours. Since Jack had never done any drugs, he found it

very difficult to be enthused by hanging around with a mate who was gurning like a pensioner and shouting ‘whoop-whoop’ every third beat in the bar of one shit repetitive track after another. Jack had been on bottles of beer for the majority of the night, and found it very difficult to maintain any kind of momentum after half past two on most nights out. This night was no different. Especially as all of the good-looking girls had either gone off with other blokes or quite clearly weren’t interested in meeting a man. The only reason he hadn’t left already was that there was one particular girl that had caught Jack’s eye earlier in the evening, but despite a few laps around the club, Jack could not locate her anywhere.

### **THIS CHARMLESS MAN**

**12 MAY 2006, 01:01**

“Oh fuck. Fuck me. There she is again, Grae.”

“Whoop, whoop,” replied Graeme.

She had walked past him three times with her group of undoubtedly beautiful friends - although nothing more special than any girl you would hit if you happened to throw a Balenciaga handbag from the top of an escalator at Bluewater - and he still hadn’t summoned the courage to say a word. At 1:01 a.m. Jack was seriously, possibly, contemplating, perhaps saying something.

“She’s gorgeous, Grae. Look at her.”

“Yes, J. We had this conversation ten minutes ago. Go over and talk to her. Chat her up. Whoop, whoop.”

“Oh aye, yeah. That easy.”

Jack tried to catch the girl’s gaze in an ‘I’m not looking at you, I’m just sipping this bottle with one hand and looking sultry and unbothered’ sort of way. It wasn’t working. Jack didn’t know, but even if she had noticed him, which she hadn’t, she wouldn’t have been able to make out a feature of his face due to the cheap spotlight shining over Jack’s shoulder and straight into her and her friends’ well-preened and brightly decorated eyes.

“It comes down to this. If you don’t have a crack, you definitely won’t be fucking her tonight. If you do, you might.”

Graeme’s summation was pretty unsophisticated, but Jack could see the value of it. Unfortunately, Jack wasn’t that kind of lad. He found the idea of blatant rejection far too embarrassing and humiliating to risk. He sometimes wished he was more like some of his friends from back home. Lads who would systematically go from one girl to the next, shrugging off knock-backs like ill-fitting jackets, and knowing that if they played the numbers game statistics would be on their side, and eventually they would score. If he had been even remotely like that, he would no doubt have been much more successful with women over the years. It was a difficult one to force and Jack didn’t have that level of brashness.

The majority of the women he’d slept with had drifted into his life - and then bed - over a much longer period. There had been a certain amount of ‘getting to know you’ banter and courtship before he had paired off with any girl, whether it was a friend of a friend’s girlfriend, or some other tenuous link. But none of this was helping him now, in London, where he hardly knew a soul, or in this nightclub, where he had seen a gorgeous girl that he was never going to meet.

Jack took a deep breath. "I'm going over," he said.

"Are you fuck."

"I am. Watch."

And he did. The girls were about twenty feet away, and not a single person stood between Jack and his prize. Jack started to make his way over. He was three paces on the way there when all three girls turned and gazed at him. There was no way he could veer off and pretend to be walking towards something else. In any case, there was nothing around that he could have realistically been heading towards. Jack carried on with his measured steps. He was halfway down the *Green Mile*.

Jack caught his goal's eyes with his own and she smiled at him. His step quickened and now there was a bounce to it. He reached them, but the girl was now stood with her back to a post, defended by her two friends who barred Jack's line of attack. He thought about asking them to kindly move aside, but decided it was too bold a step. Instead, he walked to the right of the tall, brown haired friend and inadvertently brushed his hand against her yellow vest top. He leaned in and spoke to the girl he had been watching for over an hour.

"Hiya. You alright?"

That was Jack's chat-up line. It had taken years to develop, and now it had been unleashed on the unsuspecting prey.

"What?" The girl shouted back.

The song *Crazy* pumped out from a speaker above them.

"Hiya. You alright?"

Nothing more imaginative this time either.

“I can’t hear you. What did you say?”

Third time lucky. “I said, are you alright?” Jack almost screamed.

“Yes, thanks.”

That was good to know. At least she was alright.

“Great,” he thought.

“Great,” he said.

The girl looked at Jack for something else. He didn’t blame her. It was going undeniably badly but he couldn’t think of a line that could possibly resuscitate the conversation. The girl’s two friends had clearly decided that she needed rescuing, and were trying to pull her away on the pretense of going to get a drink.

Jack decided to go all in with only a four and a three - different suits.

“Can I have your number?”

“Here’s my card.”

The girl pulled a business card from her handbag and placed it in his hand.

“Thanks. I’ll call you.”

Jack was clearly more articulate when he had nothing to lose.

“Yes, that’s why I gave it to you.”

The girl laughed and walked away with her friends towards the bar leaving Jack to contemplate the extravagant complexities of the human mating ritual while desperately fighting the urge to follow her and ask if she was alright once more, just for good measure.

**AS TOWEL MEETS CANVAS**

**12 MAY 2006, 03:46**

As Graeme headed into the toilet to decide whether he preferred his lips around, or in fact, in, his mouth; Jack decided to head in the opposite direction and out of the nightclub.

As Jack wandered into Leicester Square, he had a feeling of complete and utter loneliness. There is nothing like Leicester Square for making you feel like you don't have a friend in the world - the hundreds of people milling to and fro with no discernable place to go, and the tackiness of the neon fest and surrounding buildings. Jack loved London most of the time, and its many must see sights, but despised Leicester Square with a passion usually reserved for serial killers, and Paris Hilton.

He'd discovered that London could be a lonely and brutal city at times - bashing you backwards and forwards like a tumultuous ocean, never letting you settle for a moment. When you had money, a job, all of society's essentials - the armbands one clings to in order to stay afloat and maintain a grip on sanity - London could be the best and most exciting city in the world. But if you didn't, it could be cruel and vicious.

Jack likened it to being on the *in* with a kid from his school called Jamie. Jamie was - as much as could be quantified - the most popular kid in school. A lot of people didn't like Jamie, but only because he didn't like them, and secretly, they were all desperate for him to approve of them as though this would bestow upon them a mystical stamp of quality.

Jamie had adopted Jack, taken him in and they became very close. The times at Jamie's huge house in Heswall – unsupervised drunken barbecues and pool parties - were some of the best times of Jack's youth. Inevitably, it came to an end and they fell out. Even more inevitably, it was over a girl. Jamie cast Jack aside and all of his hangers-on did too; Jack was desperate, miserable and alone for weeks. It almost broke him. Jamie could do that to a person. So could London.

What was he doing with his life? Jack was still living on Graeme's floor; his temporary job had so far involved nothing more interesting than data entry, and he hadn't heard from Sarah since their break up on the train. Suddenly, he really missed Sarah - really missed the warmth of a relationship, the comfort of holding someone as you drift off to sleep and the knowledge that you are sharing your life with someone that you love, and loves you right back.

He needed to get out of this setting and to bed. Stick on a good break up film, a man's break up film like *Swingers*, or even better, a porno, and think of all of the things that were so much better since the split. He knew his melancholy was only a combination of the alcohol and another night failing to pull - not counting procuring that one phone number. Jack laughed aloud, mocking himself for his lament and his ridiculous rom-com sappy comments - *sharing your life, love and to be loved*. At least he was in the right city for a chick flick. Although he doubted that Richard Curtis would deem Jack's woes good enough for his next script, despite the apt setting.

It felt good to laugh at himself, to give himself a bit of a kick up the arse and just get the hell on with it. For the first time in ages, it really did feel good. It was time to regain control of his life, one step at a time. So what first? Oh, yes...

“I’m finding a flat tomorrow,” Jack announced to himself and a fair proportion of Leicester Square dutifully ignored him.

## **RUTHLESS PEOPLE**

**12 MAY 2006, 11:02**

Ten minutes they’d been together and Jack wondered if killing an estate agent carried the same sentence as murdering a person with at least one scruple. Surely, from a jury of twelve people, you could be sure that nine or ten would have suffered at the hands of at least one of these amphibians in a pin-striped black suit, monochrome brown shirt and tie combo – complete with a knot you could use to batter someone to death - and brown pointy shoes. It had to be worthy mitigation.

“And have you got anything to plead in mitigation, Mr. O’Neill?”

“The deceased was an estate agent, Your Honour.”

“Ah, I see. Well, I’ll just check my sentencing chart. Okay, the maximum sentence for bludgeoning an estate agent to death is twelve months on a Caribbean island. There you will be surrounded by ten scantily clad temptresses who have never before seen a man in their lives. You will live on a staple diet consisting of oysters and a rare form of berry now commonly used to make Viagra. Pity you didn’t knock off a recruitment agent, you could have got two years and an extra five temptresses.”

The member of the species (*estateagentus-slimeballus*) to which Jack had been assigned had slithered from one rented flat to the next and hadn’t made one suggestion that was even mildly useful. Since Jack’s budget was on the wrong side of paltry, he had

been given this kid who looked like he had just been thrown out of an audition for a McFly tribute band. If he was a day over eighteen, Jack would have been shocked. His suit desperately struggled to maintain a grip on his tiny shoulders. McFlea, as Jack had named him on account of his diminutive frame, was now showing him around a horrific bedsit in Kennington.

“You know what it’s like, mate. You’ve had a long day at work, mate, yeah? You’ve got a load of bills to pay, and you know? And you’ve had the bird rabbiting on at you all day. Ha ha. And you just want to kick back with a beer and relax in your own gaff, don’t you? Know what I’m saying. Yeah?”

Of the many annoying personality traits held by McFlea, his attempt to empathise was the worst. Jack had already humoured him by acting amazed that McFlea was also a Liverpool supporter, and thought it was the best city in the world. Would you believe it?

It’s funny - and one of life’s many unexplained mysteries - that estate agents and timeshare salesman always support the same team as you and have family from the exact same city that you're from.

“Basra? You’re pulling my leg aren’t you? My auntie is from Basra. I bloody love it. What I wouldn’t give to up sticks and live in Basra.”

Jack felt like telling McFlea he very much doubted if the jumped up little shitbag *did* know what it was like to have bills to pay, suffer a hard day at work, and listen to your girlfriend going on at you all day. Jack would have put his life on the boy stood in front of him living at home, being very much girlfriendless, and this being his first day at work.

“How long have you been doing this job, Josh?”

Josh was McFlea's alias.

"This is my first day, mate."

Jack smiled. Ordinarily, he would have cut the boy some slack. Jack knew from experience how awful the first day at work is, not knowing anybody and being a bane to everybody on account of your general uselessness. But in McFlea's case, he would make an exception. He acted as though he had been doing this job his entire life; cocksure that Donald Trump would be green with envy at a glance at his property portfolio.

"Listen, how much is it?"

"Hang on, hang on. I haven't shown you around the place yet."

Jack's forthrightness had thrown him off course. Disturbingly, the chat had now deviated from the carefully set course that Josh had laid. Nowhere in his recently downloaded *The Estate Agent's Guide to Knocking the Punter Bandy* had it mentioned how to deal with such straight-shooting questions.

"You haven't shown me around? What are you planning to show me, Josh? Not only can I see every inch of the shit hole, I can touch every wall without moving from this spot. Unless you are going to move a couple of books and that far wall is going to rotate and lead the way to the Batcave, I think I have seen all I'm going to see."

Josh was struggling.

"But mate, right, yeah? Get this, yeah? You've had a long day at the gym, what more do you want than a nice long hot shower?"

He turned on the shower quickly. Brown water dripped down pitifully onto the floor.

"Josh, do us both a favour and give the hard sell a miss. It'll make me less likely to take it. It's a dive, it's a dump, it's a shithole. It doesn't look like anything else, and it

isn't anything else. If I had any other option, I wouldn't live here in a million years.

Unfortunately, I don't. So how much is it a week?"

"One hundred and ten quid."

"Thank you. That's all I wanted to know."

"Would you like it?"

McFlea's bravado had gone. He was very much the meek young boy on his first day at work.

"I'll take it."

"Congratulations," Josh said, addressing himself more than the client. He had let a flat the guys in the office had told him was unlettable. He was the born estate agent that *The Guide* had talked about. Josh had knocked this punter bandy.

Jack just wanted to get rid of McFlea and try to get used to living in a hovel that Begbie and Renton would run a mile from.

"This place is an absolute fucking disgrace," Jack said rhetorically.

McFlea looked at him in sympathy. It was the first truthful gesture he had offered all morning.

"Yeah. All the best, mate, right. Yeah?" Josh said as he left the flat.

It wasn't a throwaway comment. He meant it. He wasn't surprised that squatters hadn't moved in despite the absence of any kind of lock on the door. Squatters would probably consider the place below them.

## **HOUSE OF HORRORS**

**12 MAY 2006, 11:20**

Jack surveyed his new home. He'd always had that working class determination ingrained in him to make the best of everything – perhaps it wasn't that bad after all. There was a single bed in the far left back corner and not much else. In the right-hand corner, alongside and about four feet from the bed, stood a shower and a toilet shielded by a low partition wall. Essentially the wall was pointless because although the sleeping resident couldn't see around the wall, they could see over the top of it.

The bedsit had no kitchen, only a paraffin stove with a tiny fridge next to it which – as if to give the room a bit of symmetry - was in the corner opposite the bed and nearest the door. In the final, unaccounted for corner was a wardrobe. Jack opened it slowly, relieved to find it empty. It would not have surprised him if it had been housing at least one tramp.

Jack dropped on the bed defeated. It was that bad after all.

“Well, at least it isn't owned by Sarah's parents,” he said to himself in consolation.

## **MEET THE NEIGHBOURS**

**12 MAY 2006, 23:03**

Jack lay on his bed with an A4 pad alongside him, a biro moving between the fingers of his right hand.

He had been desperately trying to write something, anything really, that he could pitch to a newspaper to try to get a foot on the road to his journalistic career. All day, he'd read columns and editorials in free newspapers and magazines on the tube, listened to podcasts and bootlegs on his *iPod*, and scanned blogs and chatrooms in the Internet café down the road. He felt like an oppressed consumer. People had been dictating their thoughts and opinions at him, and it made him feel like a modern day Winston Smith. All he wanted to do was fight back, to get his own thoughts down on paper, so that he would, at the very least, know that he had some.

But up to now, it hadn't been so easy. He had only written two paragraphs, and he wasn't altogether happy with either of them. The noise from next door hadn't helped though. There was a seriously randy couple living behind the paper-thin wall that separated the two flats. They had been at it now for nigh-on four hours. The odd thing was that Jack hadn't heard the woman once. The bloke hadn't shut up though. It was grunt after grunt, and all at different pitches and different volumes. He must have been brought to orgasm at least ten times, and every time it was a different crescendo of sound, sometimes completely different, almost from a different person.

Jack picked a tennis ball up from the floor and began to throw it at the ceiling. At least the sound from the ball's bounce blocked out the noise from the thrusts next door. As Jack continued to throw, he found he was throwing in time with the movements of the couple next door.

"Huuhhh," came the grunt in tandem with the thud of the ball as it hit the ceiling.

Jack found it quite difficult and a bit of a challenge since the rhythm of the thrusts was fairly sporadic. After five minutes, he really did become quite good and didn't miss a

beat all the way up to the raucous crescendo when Jack felt the ball had no sooner left his hand than it was back in his grasp and he had to throw again to keep in time. When the man's orgasm came, or rather the man came and the orgasm followed, Jack collapsed into his pillow - actually a towel - absolutely knackered.

The saddest thing for the woman was that Jack had clearly enjoyed himself more than she had. She hadn't made a sound throughout the entire session. Jack tutted to himself – whoever that bloke was, he should read a couple of issues of *Cosmopolitan*. Selfish performances like that are what give the male species a bad name.

**THEY SAID MAGGIE ONLY NEEDED FOUR HOURS KIP A NIGHT TO RUN  
THE COUNTRY**

**13 MAY 2006, 03:44**

Jack reached slowly to his side and picked up his mobile phone. The screen told him it was nearly four in the morning. The last time he had been dragged from a deep sleep by the banging - in more ways than one, well two ways to be precise - from next door, his mobile had shown the time of 03:28.

“Do these people ever let up?”

Jack wasn't happy at the prospect of the next few months spent living next door to a couple that had more appetite for shagging than a group of teachers on a school skiing trip.

Jack threw the bed covers - actually two jackets - off his chest and walked naked to the toilet. Through half-open eyes, he tried to urinate into his toilet, but succeeded only in drenching the coarse carpet underfoot.

“For fuck’s sake,” Jack scolded himself as he tried to wash his foot in the shower.

As he threw himself back into bed and wrapped the towel around his ears to try to block out the noise, the full gravity of Jack’s primitive living situation hit him.

“Still,” he reminded himself, “At least Sarah’s parents don’t own it.”

He wondered how long this fact would continue to console him. Not for very long if things went on like this, he suspected.

**ESTATE AGENTS DON’T ALWAYS TELL THE TRUTH? NEXT YOU’LL BE  
TELLING ME WATER IS WET AND THE SKY IS BLUE**

**13 MAY 2006, 11:02**

If McFlea had been in Jack’s bedsit at that moment, Jack may well have unleashed rage the likes of which Naomi Campbell could not have even contemplated. Unless, of course, someone had brought her the wrong latte.

In order to get hot water out of the shower, McFlea had told him to open a box underneath the bed. In the box was a series of exposed wires - McFlea was certain there was no danger in this - and four rusted switches. The previous tenants obviously disagreed as written in blood red lettering was ‘Death Trap’. McFlea hadn’t been sure which of the four switches turned the water to a halfway comfortable temperature; but

had been certain that one of them did. From his experience with the switches, Jack was certain that none of them did.

The lack of warm water was infuriating enough, but even more blood-boilingly annoying was the amount of time and effort he had spent only to discover that the switches were as useless as they looked. He had the spilled claret and skinless hands to prove it.

Jack was not at that moment in high spirits. He remembered once, when going through a particularly bad time with Sarah, he had seen a TV show about anger management. Jack wasn't usually taken to watching such tosh but the various ITV channels on offer had been showing the usual two-hour dramas; one with Ross Kemp as the lead, and the other starring Tamzin Outhwaite. He had felt his choices were somewhat limited. Similarly formulaic shows containing those two stars - with ever so slightly different plots - had terrorised the television schedules for the past two years.

The anger management show had mentioned that the key to dealing with rage was to go to your Utopian happy place. Jack wondered what they would have advised a person who was about to blow in a hellhole of a bedsit like this one. Jack looked around, unable to imagine a setting more starkly opposite to a Utopian happy place.

McFlea had told Jack all of the flats worked on the same system, each with their own box that triggered the hot water. Jack was sure that McFlea hadn't told the truth in 99.9 per cent of the conversation, but he was desperate enough to speak to his randy neighbours about the situation.

**THE WRONG END OF THE STICK**

**13 MAY 2006, 11:22**

Jack knocked on the door of the flat next door. No reply. He knocked again. Still no reply. If he hadn't been so cross from lack of sleep and desperate for anything approximating a pleasant shower he would have given up by now. Truth be told, however, he held the couple in this flat responsible for half of his bad mood so he carried on.

Jack banged hard twice with his fist and kicked the bottom of the door with his right foot at the same time.

“Alright, alright.”

The bloke was obviously the vocal one when it came to answering the door, as well as during sex. The door opened slowly and a short guy, about Jack's age, popped his cropped head around the door.

“What is it, mate?” he asked rubbing his half-open eyes.

Jack didn't need to ask why he was so tired.

“I can't get any hot water. Do you know how to sort those switches so that the water heats up?”

“Yes, mate. No probs. There's a bit of a knack to it. I'll show you in a couple of hours. Is that alright?”

“Two hours? The FA Cup final's on today. Can't you do it now?”

Jack knew he was being forward, even rude, but it was this bloke's fault he'd got no sleep. As far as he was concerned, this bloke had his fun last night.

“Alright. Give us a second and I’ll come over. Are you in 2A, next door?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“See you in a sec.”

The guy smiled at Jack. It was a warm smile and Jack felt immediately guilty for his curtness.

Minutes later the bloke entered the flat. He was a good four inches shorter than Jack. He had on a worn white t-shirt and a tight, brown leather biker jacket. His jeans hung low allowing Jack to catch a glimpse of the waistband of his white Calvin Klein boxer shorts. He seemed to have no waist. Maybe they were women’s jeans. He certainly looked like he would fit them better than men’s. The guy was the absolute spitting image of Mike Skinner. So much so that Jack had initially double took. The only differences were that this guy looked a little younger and a little cleaner shaven. He was a good-looking bloke and Jack could imagine he was a bit of a lady’s man.

“Hiya, mate. I’m Mark.”

He extended his hand to shake Jack’s and flashed him that warm grin again.

“Good to meet you. I’m Jack. Listen, sorry about that. I didn’t get much sleep. Big night, eh?”

Mark didn’t laugh and a pang of nervousness hit Jack immediately. Was it too early for the laddish banter?

“Something like that.”

Mark’s answer seemed completely devoid of feeling and his tone sounded weary and hollow.

“Let’s sort your water out. Is it under your bed?”

“Yes. It’s down there.”

Jack showed him to the box underneath the bed. Mark dropped to the floor and began clambering under the bed to resume battle with the errant switches. He could see that Mark had no curves at all.

“So,” Mark grunted, seemingly trying to force the switch. “Are you in a rush to get out? Somewhere to go to?”

“It’s Cup final day mate,” Jack reminded him, unable to conceive that anyone could be unaware of the significance of the day. It was like not knowing it was Christmas Day.

“Oh, yes. Of course. Liverpool against, er, West Ham, isn’t it? Are you Liverpool? You sound like it.”

“Yes. What about you? You don’t have much of an accent.”

“Well, I’m from Newcastle originally, but I’ve been all over the place since. I’ve been in London since I was thirteen.”

“Your mum and dad move about?”

“Not really. I ran away.”

Again, no emotion.

What to say next? Jack had no experience of this type of small talk; where people actually told you something interesting.

“I’m sorry.”

Was he sorry? He didn’t feel like it. Although he still thought it was a good solid phrase.

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t much. Have you got a TV? I actually wouldn’t mind watching the game. Mine’s knackered and only plays DVDs. It’s been a few years since I watched the Cup final.”

“No, I haven’t. I’m going to watch it in the alehouse though if you’re backing it. I was going to be on my own anyway.”

“Yeah, sounds good mate. Give me ten minutes.”

Mark broke off and let out a roar as he managed to force the switch.

“Easy when you’ve got the knack,” he said ironically showing Jack his cut and filthy hands.

Jack laughed.

“See you in ten,” Jack said as he closed the door behind his neighbour.

## **TIME FOR IRRATIONAL BELIEF**

**13 MAY 2006, 16:46**

“I can’t believe you were actually out there. It must have been incredible. I was actually supporting you even if you did rob us in the semis.”

“Rob who in the semis? Chelsea? Oh, don’t tell me you support them as well as every other bastard in the world. You’re from bloody Newcastle.”

“I’m not from anywhere really mate. I don’t support them that much. I wish football was all we had to worry about.”

Mark seemed to really mean that, and once again Jack found that what was usually harmless laddish banter had taken him to a very uncomfortable place. There was more

feeling in that sentence than anything Mark had said so far. A moment of silence followed, which Jack felt compelled to fill. But he had been thrown off balance by the switch in mood and the idea of a coherent sentence was beyond him.

As quickly as Mark had sunk he rose again. It was like watching someone in a hypnotic trance shake their head and immediately be back in the room. It was both impressive and quite unnerving.

“If I support anyone it’s Chelsea. And when you cheated with that supposed goal that never crossed the line, well...”

“Oi, don’t start, Mark. I’ve had this a thousand times. If it hadn’t been a goal, it would have been a pen anyway, and Cech would have been sent off.”

“Maybe matey, maybe. But you’re still going to lose this,” Mark goaded Jack, pointing at the TV.

The pub was packed. They had walked across to Clapham and had settled in a pub on the Northcote Road.

“Come on, West Ham,” screamed an already half-cut middle-aged guy whose West Ham replica shirt was fighting a losing battle with his capacious stomach.

The pub was nearly to a man supporting West Ham. Unfortunately, that man was Jack. When Liverpool scored he jumped up to celebrate, only to receive fearsome looks from all angles. Luckily for Jack, Clapham is more famous for its thirtysomethings and yummy mummies than its hardened football hooligans so he wasn’t in too much danger.

“Yes, it looks like it. I’m gutted for Stevie Gerrard more than anything else. Look at him, he’s killed himself.”

Jack's hero was dragging his feet, barely able to run as Liverpool took a throw-in with seconds to go.

"Come on Reds," Jack shouted at full voice.

"Gerrard! He's done it."

The commentator roared as Gerrard planted the ball into the keeper's right-hand corner from fully thirty-five yards. Jack was on the table in ecstasy and disbelief.

"Fucking get in," Jack screamed to the heavens.

"I don't believe it," the fat bloke said with his head in his hands.

"Lucky bastards," Mark said to Jack laughing.

But Jack hadn't heard. The euphoria of disappointment overturned into elation was too much for him. As he stood alone, celebrating, screaming and wailing on a table in a pub full of opposition fans, there was no Sarah, no bedsit, no shit job, no nothing. Nothing in the world at that moment existed for Jack other than silverware, red shirts, ten men, and one demi-God – Steven Gerrard.

When Jack finally came down from cloud nine and sat down at the table, he was still barely able to talk, and there were tears in his eyes. Later, perhaps, he would be embarrassed, but not now – not now.

"He's something else," Mark said to Jack.

Jack looked back through bleary eyes and tried to speak, choking on the emotion of the words.

"Uh vkn glvv Sneevi Jee," he said, fresh tears forming.

"What?" asked Mark vaguely amused.

Jack valiantly pulled himself together and said again, clearer this time, “I fucking love Stevie G.”

Mark simply smiled, pleased that his new friend could experience such pleasure. However, a couple of days later when Jack thought back to this incident he would feel again the emotion, the euphoria and the joy as fresh as ever. But he would have to admit, at that exact moment, reduced to a blithering wreck, pronouncing his undying love for the talismanic Liverpool captain in front of a man he had met merely two hours earlier...he had probably looked a bit of a tit.

### **THE LORD WORKS IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS**

**13 MAY 2006, 18:10**

“What do you mean? That is ridiculous, Jack.”

“Why is it ridiculous? If people have religious experiences that change their lives, why can’t other things inspire you in a similar way?”

“So you’re telling me that eleven men you have never met scoring three goals in a football match has changed your life?”

“I’ve met Pepe Reina.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Okay, not exactly, but if you are as passionate as all forty thousand supporters were that night, then the outcome of the game really, really means something to you. Everybody in the stadium thought they were down and out. Christ, every football fan in the world thought they were down and out. And then the fans started to sing *You’ll Never*

*Walk Alone* together and forty-five minutes later, the players had turned it around. That emotion and despair into ecstasy surely means something. That song is just so powerful. There's nothing more poignant than listening to it at a funeral."

"Oh, fuck off. Cheesy, you mean," interjected Mark with a grin.

"Well, it's my funeral, as they say," Jack joked, and continued no less passionately, "You say cheesy, Mark. But it's true. Maybe I'm going overboard because Stevie Gerrard has done something so special again but all I'm saying is that match and the narrative structure of it..."

Mark raised his eyebrows at Jack.

"Okay, a bit much. But it's been an inspiration to me, and anytime I think of it, I get goose pimples."

"You must have had an easy life, Jack. If your team losing 3-0 at half-time in a European Cup final is the worst thing that's happened to you; then you want to count your lucky stars."

Mark had moved the conversation into that uncomfortable place again but Jack wasn't so easily caught off guard this time.

"I'm not saying that," he insisted. "Look, maybe in the great scheme of things it was just a game right? But if the human existence contains experiences that have a profound effect on you, such as a great work of art, an incredible book, even a religious awakening – then why not a game of football that moves you every time you think of it?"

"I suppose so. I'd never really thought of it like that. Hey, didn't Man United do a similar thing a few years ago – won the treble in the dying seconds or something?"

Jack bristled. "Well yeah, but that's different. It's not the same at all."

“Why not?”

“Well, it’s Man U innit? Doesn’t count.”

## REVELATIONS

13 MAY 2006, 19:44

“How do you like your new gaff then, Jack?”

“I don’t.”

“That bad is it? What were you expecting?”

“I don’t know. I knew I had fuck all money so I should have expected it. But when I first thought about moving to London, I imagined a flash pad and a flash job. I wanted a place like Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, without the murder and torture obviously. Instead, I’ve ended up with a place like Norman Bates in *Psycho* without the murder and torture obviously.”

Mark laughed. “Yet.”

Jack laughed with him. They had a similar sense of humour and Jack couldn’t help feeling like they were destined to be really good friends. He’d known that happen a few times in his life, sometimes friendships developed slowly with circumstance, and sometimes he would just know, almost immediately, that they were, for want of a better phrase, meant to be. He mentally scolded himself for thinking about friendships with guys with the same ideology as relationships with girls – next he’d be asking Mark to go to Ikea with him and pick out curtains.

“Don’t worry about it. You’ll have it all mate. Just you wait and see,” encouraged Mark.

“I hope so, mate. I hope so. The mighty Stevie Gerrard has inspired me to conquer this city,” Jack said laughing, mocking himself.

“I still can’t believe it. Gerrard should get all eleven medals. He won that on his own.”

“Don’t start that. Just let me enjoy it. Tell you what, I’m up for a big one now. Shall we stay out?”

The two boys had moved along the road to an All Bar One, and were well into their ninth beer of the day. Like all guys everywhere, they had subconsciously waited until they were several leagues under the surface of inebriation before stating the intent to ‘have a big one’, seemingly oblivious to the fact that they were already knee deep in a ‘massive one’ with one welly firmly stuck and the other one threatening to succumb at any moment.

“I can’t, Jack. I need to get back to the flat. I’ve got someone coming round later.”

Mark’s face had changed completely. It had become devoid of all expression, just a dead, featureless mask. It still resembled his face but seemed like it had been draped in a cloak of sorrow. All day, the boys had been laughing and joking together yet every now and again this happened. Jack desperately wanted to lighten the mood.

“Same bird is it?” Jack laughed. “I would have thought she would have been at home with an ice bucket between her legs for at least a week.”

Mark didn’t laugh. He took a long slug of his bottle of beer and looked at Jack. Eyes locked on eyes. Jack thought he saw tears in Mark’s.

“What’s the matter, mate? Did you split up or something?”

Nothing. No reaction. Jack didn't have a clue what was going on but felt compelled to talk. Mark's facial expression was misery personified. Jack couldn't help but try again.

"Mate, I'm sorry. I was only joking."

"It's not like that."

Mark looked away to the door and put his bottle of beer to his mouth.

Jack didn't want to pry. He didn't think his questions were helping. He decided that if Mark wanted to elaborate, Jack would let him do it of his own accord. Meanwhile, Jack continued to sip his beer slowly.

"It's not like that." Mark said again, shaking his head. "It's not like that – at all." Mark laughed the hollownest and most humour free laugh Jack had ever heard. "It's not..."

Mark rubbed his eyes.

Jack thought he was crying but he wasn't sure.

"What's the matter mate? Tell me."

"I don't really want to tell you this, Jack. I've had a good day, and you're a top fella, but if you're going to find out, I'd rather tell you myself."

"Okay pal. Just, you know. Whatever. You can tell me. I mean, if you don't want to..."

The day had taken a massive dip, and Jack had no idea where the conversation was going, or what Mark wanted to tell him. He wasn't even sure he wanted to know now. He wanted to help, but he'd never been much good at the emotional side of conversation and he knew with a sinking feeling that it was heading that way. It wasn't that he didn't care, but he came from a family that just didn't do deep communication. It was the things that weren't said that more often than not conveyed the feelings they had for each

other. He couldn't remember his dad even hugging him let alone sitting him down for a heart to heart. But here it was, the moment of truth. He liked this lad and the least he could do was prepare himself for what awful news Mark was preparing to tell him.

"It wasn't a bird in the flat last night."

"Oh right."

Jack presumed, with some relief, that Mark must be gay. Well, that wasn't so bad was it? Jack was totally comfortable with it and couldn't work out what Mark's problem was – this was the twenty first century for Christ's sake. Jack braced himself to smile at Mark and tell him not to worry, but Mark hadn't finished.

"I'm a rent boy, Jack. My flat is a gay knocking shop. I'm a fucking rent boy. I suck blokes off for cash."

Mark spat out every word with more intensity than anything Jack had heard in his life. It was almost like he was exorcising the ghosts of his day job with every word.

"Fuck."

Jack couldn't think of anything else to say. He was dumbstruck. This was real life. Jack was struck with the thought that his troubled relationship with Sarah had been mere popcorn in comparison to Mark's story. Jack's story was pre-watershed. He'd been sent to bed early by his mum before real life had started. Mark's life was gritty, foreign cinema. It was adult and X-rated, and fucking dark. Jack didn't know what to say. How could he?

"You're disgusted, aren't you? You must be. I don't blame you. I feel sick myself every single day."

Jack didn't say anything, but he imagined his facial expressions were doing all the talking. It didn't matter. Mark was talking to himself.

"Don't you think I hate it? I fucking despise it. Do you know what it feels like to actually be grateful for the smell of cider and woodbines on a dodgy mac, just because it takes away the smell of an unwashed cock?"

Jack grimaced and his stomach churned. The graphic nature of Mark's outburst had literally made him want to vomit. Mark was waiting for a response so Jack did his best.

"I just don't know what to say mate, that's all. I feel awful for you. I mean. I just. Erm."

Jack knew he was being useless, but what was he supposed to say? He decided to play it safe and try diplomacy.

He continued, "If you don't want to do it. I mean if you do, then that's fine. It's your life. It's your body, and everybody has a right to make money however they want."

"Of course it's not what I fucking want. Sucking someone off for under twenty fucking quid. Why would I want that?"

Jack looked at him. He looked ten years older to him now. He still looked like a gaunt Mike Skinner, but for some reason, his revelations had aged him a decade. "A Grand Don't Come For Free", said the real Mike Skinner. For his doppelganger, twenty quid don't even come for free. He had to earn it, and earn it the hardest way possible.

"I'm sorry mate. I'm sorry. Look, I need to get off, Jack. I need a minute."

"Okay mate, whatever you want. Ring me though later. Please. Or knock for me tomorrow."

"I will do. I promise."

Mark walked away with his eyes fixed firmly on the floor.

## THE HARDEST THING IN THE WORLD

13 MAY 2006, 23:05

“A bottle of *Peroni*, please.” Jack had continued drinking on his own. He was quite drunk – meaning *quite* in the posh sense of the world, rather than ‘a little’.

“When you walk through a storm...,” Jack’s phone sang. He looked at the screen. It revealed nothing. When Jack drank, the first things to go were his eyes. A name had flashed up on the screen, but he couldn’t focus on the letters.

“Hello.”

The music in the bar was loud. The Stone Roses were telling a tale of a girl called *Sally Cinnamon* who was apparently their world. Jack didn’t think anybody would ever be his world - too selfish probably. He realised his mind was rambling.

“Hello,” he shouted into his phone.

Still nothing.

“Hello,” he said even louder.

“Jack, it’s Mark. Where are you?”

“Hang on a minute. I’ll go outside.”

Jack pushed his way through the crowd until he found a quieter place. He told Mark where he was drinking, and agreed to wait there for him. He would have waited as long as necessary, but as it turned out, it was no hardship at all as Mark was around the corner, and Jack had three-quarters of a bottle left.

Fifteen minutes later, the two boys were sitting in the corner of the bar at a table with four bottles - two on each side - separating them. Jack was waiting for an answer to his question.

“I went back to the flat. A bloke came up. He wanted something, but I couldn’t do it. A blowjob. He wanted a fucking blowjob. But I just couldn’t.”

This was totally unsolicited information as far as Jack was concerned. Jack had merely asked him whether he thought Rooney would make the World Cup. Obviously, his attempt at a light-hearted comment had got lost in the loud music, only to be replaced by a question with much more gravitas.

“No?”

Jack had worked out that the best way to deal with Mark’s bean spilling was to let him do all the talking. In a selfish moment, Jack had wondered why Mark had even felt the need to expose himself. They’d only met that day. He wondered if he’d really have preferred if Mark had been a bit coyer and stuck rigidly to society’s code on first meetings. But he immediately scolded himself for these thoughts, and decided that in some respects it was a compliment and a testimony to the bond that had formed so quickly between them.

“I just couldn’t. I felt like a normal bloke today. Two blokes on the piss, watching the football, and having a laugh. A million miles away from turning tricks in that awful flat.”

“I never would have guessed. It doesn’t change anything, Mark. We can still get on the piss together.”

“Do you reckon?” Mark said with a raised eyebrow.

“I’m telling you. It makes no difference to me. You could be an estate agent. And I’m telling you, after the week I’ve had, if you were, I’d have a beer with Charles Manson before I had one with you.”

“Well, go on then. Prove it. Ask me something about it?”

Mark was half-smiling for the first time since this whole subject had reared its ugly head, but Jack could see no amusement in his expression. If he had to be totally honest with himself, he would have to admit that, yes, this news had changed things, and changed them massively – but Mark was a good guy and if there was any possible way for Jack to get his head around all this then he was damn well going to try.

“Go on,” Mark prompted. “What do you want to ask me about it?”

“Nothing.”

This was a lie. Jack had hundreds, thousands of questions that he wanted answered.

“Yes, you do. It’s written all over your face. Go on. Anything. If we’re gonna be mates, you may as well know.”

“Okay then. Are you gay?”

This seemed the most obvious question but Jack wasn’t sure. He had plenty of gay friends and associates. They were all different, but none of them were like Mark.

“Of course not. Why would you think that?”

“Because you suck cock.”

It had been on the tip of Jack’s tongue – and Jack had an unwanted image of a tip on Mark’s - but he hadn’t meant to blurt it out. When it’s so close to your mouth and has traveled so far from the voice box, it’s quite hard to reel it back in.

Mark laughed, partly at the bluntness of the comment and partly at Jack's obvious embarrassment.

"Don't be stupid, Jack. I thought you were more intelligent than that. That's not how it works. It doesn't matter whether I'm *hetero* or *homo* or none of the above, I don't enjoy it. I hate it. Do you think it's any different for a female brass when she's getting shafted by some punter for forty quid?"

As far as Jack was concerned there was a hell of a difference. But he knew already that there would be a great deal of this whole subject that he would not understand, so it seemed easiest, cop out though it was, to let Mark keep talking.

"I guess not."

"Of course it doesn't. She doesn't enjoy it either. You just close your eyes and pretend you're somewhere else. I am as straight as they come. The problem is there's not much calling for male prostitutes to service women but there are hundreds of seedy blokes after a quick bunk up. It's the only way I can survive."

"How did you get into it then? Was it drugs?"

"Bloody hell, Jack. You don't mid going straight for a cliché do you?"

Jack wasn't buying into the sudden lighthearted banter. As far as he was concerned there was nothing frivolous about any part of this.

"Clichés are clichés for a reason, Mark."

Mark's face fell and Jack felt terrible. His instincts told him that being firm with Mark and not letting him get away with pretending everything was fine was the way to genuinely help, but the look of defeat on Mark's face made Jack feel as though he had just kicked a puppy.

“I’m sorry Mark, but it’s true.”

Mark looked up and for the first time seemed to have a resigned determination about him.

“I know mate. You’re right. But the only way you can avoid fucking topping yourself is to bury your head in the sand and not think about it. Otherwise you just can’t keep going.” He sighed. “And yes, clichés are clichés for a reason, and yes, it was partly, well, mainly, due to drugs. I’m an ex junkie mate. Smack, crack, the works – but I beat that at least. I beat that. Small mercies eh?”

Not for the first time in life, Jack was astounded that someone who had done things that he would never do – things that were completely alien to him, so far were they from his world and psyche – appeared so normal, so... ordinary. This guy had been a fucking smack addict, and even now was trapped in a world so dark and hellish that Jack couldn’t even comprehend it. But Mark was a good guy. And surely he could help himself – with a little encouragement.

“Mark, look, surely there’s something else. Haven’t you ever worked? I could get you a job. You’re a bright lad.”

“It’s not that simple. My Mum did a bit on the game too and I never really went to school. I’ve not got a single qualification. I don’t know my National Insurance Number or even if I’ve got one. I’ve got no passport either. How do you like that for a CV? Still reckon you can get me a job?”

“You didn’t go to school? But you’re bright. You’re much brighter than me.”

“Well, I read loads and I watch about twenty films a week. That’s where my education comes from - a film and a book a day. It’s the escape I like - forgetting about my life. I lie on the floor, stick a film on the DVD player and I’m somewhere else for two hours.”

“Lie on the floor?”

Jack wasn’t sure why he’d picked up on this. It was hardly the point of the conversation. But as it happened, going off-piste was about to lead to more startling revelations.

“Yeah, I sleep on the floor. I can’t bear to go near that bed. How can I escape from it when I’m immersed in it?”

“But you didn’t do it tonight?”

“No, I couldn’t.”

“For fuck’s sake, jack it in, Mark. Please, give it up.”

“How can I? I can’t sign on. How am I going to eat and live?”

“Come on, we’ll sort something. If you’re going to sleep on the floor anyway, sleep on my floor. My wage will sort a bit of food out. We might be able to get you a job. Who knows? Anything to stop you doing that. Are you genuinely off the gear? Because I can’t afford that. Don’t get me wrong, I mean, your life is your life, but I can barely afford a box of Tetley’s.”

“No, I stopped ages ago. I needed it for a while but I’m over it now. Physically anyway. Mentally, sometimes, it’s tempting to lose yourself to oblivion, but no. Not anymore.”

“Come on, Mark. Stop.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“It is that fucking easy mate.”

“Well, I’d love to, but are you sure? We only met today.”

“Of course I’m sure. I’ve done ten thousand bad things in my life. Not proper bad things, just hurt and upset people and that. I will feel like I’ve righted some of those wrongs by giving you this chance. You’ll be doing me a favour.”

Mark looked like he had hope for the first time since they’d met, and it made Jack feel optimistic enough about their chances that he felt ready to risk a joke, even if it was quite high stakes banter.

“Besides, I wasn’t getting any kip while you were at work.”

To Jack’s relief Mark laughed. The tension flowed from the conversation like water from a burst dam.

“Plus, I won’t feel guilty for upsetting Sarah so often if you do this for me.”

“Who’s Sarah?” asked Mark.

“Ah, well, that’s another story....”

## **END OF PART 1**

**NEXT TIME IN THE GOLDEN GENERATION (check back 13 AUGUST): Jack meets Stefan and Lothar and his journey begins in earnest, and amongst everything else that is going on his life, Jack has his first post-Sarah sexual experience (see below for a sneak preview).**

**EMAILED HER AND SHEMAILED RIGHT BACK**

**22 MAY 2006, 11:31**

Jack sat staring at his computer screen. He was trying to think of something smooth, but couldn't think of anything other than, "Hi, you alright?" It wasn't strictly accurate to say this line had stood the test of time. It had, in so much that he was still using it after all these years, and it was the only chat up line he had ever proffered. On the other hand, it hadn't always been successful - far, far from it.

Then, out of nowhere, an envelope popped up in the corner of his screen. It was Toni.

From: Toni Haase <tonihaase@verdebank.com>  
Sent: 22 May 2006 11:31:11  
To: Jack O'Neill <jackoneill@verdebank.com>  
Subject: Re: The Kitchen

**"Hey, good looking" – Hank Williams.**

Jack knew the song. He didn't know the singer. It made him laugh. It was an unusual way to flirt, but it showed imagination. He liked imagination. But how would he reply? Luckily, Jack's musical knowledge was extensive.

**"Hey baby" – Bruce Channel.**

Quick as a flash, the ball came hurtling back over the net. It appeared that Toni also knew her music. He was impressed. Little did he know that she'd played this same game seven times before. The last time had only been two weeks ago, with a guy from I.T.

**“What’s new pussycat?” – Tom Jones.**

**“I don’t like Mondays” – The Boomtown Rats.**

**“Why did you go and leave me?” – Marvin Rainwater.**

This was an odd one. She'd left the kitchen first, yet he supposed he had been the one to end the conversation. Jack didn't want to let on that his banter had gone AWOL. He wasn't sure how to respond, so he told her so.

**“I don’t know” – Celine Dion.**

**“Don’t you want me?” – Human League.**

Very bold. Toni had stepped it up. The flirting was at least at Defcon Two now.

**“Do you want to know a secret?” – The Beatles.**

Jack thought a little teasing was in order. He knew he had the upper hand for the moment.

**“I want to know” – Ray Charles.**

**“I only have eyes for you” – Art Garfunkel.**

A bit cheesy, but it was that kind of flirting. It doesn't get much cornier than using song titles as chat up lines.

**“Pale Blue Eyes” – Velvet Underground.**

She'd noticed the colour of his eyes. Luckily, he'd noticed hers. She had gorgeous eyes.

**“Pretty Green Eyes” – Ultrabeat.**

**“Are you the one I've been waiting for?” – Nick Cave.**

**“You're the one that I want” – John Travolta/Olivia Newton John.**

Jack reckoned that was his worst round yet. The judges would have all scored Toni as the winner of that one. Even more damningly, it had taken him four full minutes to reply.

He had desperately been scouring Google for an appropriate song title, but that was all he had been able to come up with.

**“Hold me, thrill me, kiss me” – Mel Carter.**

Incredibly, though Jack had taken some hard hits to the body in the last round, he still had the beating of her. She was the one who had stepped up the flirting again. Defcon Three.

**“The Lady is a Tramp” – Frank Sinatra.**

Jack ducked her hard right haymaker and countered by teasing her further.

**“Don’t be cruel” – Elvis Presley.**

Jack quite liked that response. It was cute. He decided to reward her.

**“You are so beautiful” Joe Cocker.**

**“A Small Victory” – Faith No More.**

Jack thought he would up it a bit. Keep her on her toes.

**“Kiss me” – Sixpence None the Richer.**

Not a huge advance. Defcon Three and a half at the most.

**“Tell me what you want” – Zebra.**

A great response. Jack hadn't seen that coming. He was on the back foot. He went back hard.

**“I want to sex you up” – Color Me Badd.**

Defcon Four.

**“Break it to me gently” – Brenda Lee.**

Jack knew she was playing with him now. This was a crucial point in the bout. He needed to pull something special out of the bag here.

**“I'll make love to you, like you want me to” – Boyz II Men.**

Cometh the hour, cometh the Boyz II Men.

**“That's the way I like it” – KC and The Sunshine Band.**

Got her.

**“Girl, you’ll be a woman soon” – Neil Diamond.**

Defcon Five. The horse had bolted now.

**“Save it for later” – English Beat.**

Toni was playing hard to get. It was too late to try and shut the stable door now though.

**“Let’s live for today” – Grass Roots.**

**“These things take time” – The Smiths.**

Toni was mock pleading. She clearly wanted Jack.

**“It’s now or never” – Elvis Presley.**

He meant it. He couldn’t remember being so consumed by his hormones - watching women parading in next to nothing on the tube, and now this.

**“Take Me in Your Arms” – Mitchell Parish, Fred Markush & Fritz Rotter.**

Done.

**“Light My Fire” – The Doors.**

Jack decided to cut the foreplay. Before Toni had an opportunity to reply, Jack e-mailed her again and told her to meet him in the stationary cupboard in four minutes.

He got no reply. Had he blown it? He considered e-mailing her an apology but that would ruin all of the good work. He decided to go to the store cupboard in six minutes. He did so.

Toni was there sitting cross-legged on the photocopier wearing only a red thong and red high-heeled shoes. If Jack had thought her legs had been sculpted by the Gods before; he now decided they must have been the result of the Gods of the Gods, all working together on a one-off special project. Only the U.S. Basketball Dream Team of Gods could have produced two such heavenly pins.

Jack composed himself and took charge of the situation. He walked towards Toni and took her right there on the photocopier.