

STEPHEN MORRIS AND RALF LITTLE

THE GOLDEN GENERATION

PART 2

A NOVEL BY STEPHEN MORRIS AND RALF LITTLE

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PART 3 AVAILABLE AUGUST 20

BEST LAID PLANS

22 MAY 2006, 09:44

Mark moved in that same night, the night of the Cup final. The two boys had arrived back to Mark's flat very late, both absolutely mullered.

As Jack began to help Mark move his stuff, Mark got very angry and started to punch the wall. Jack joined in. He was drunk after all. Mark ripped down a poster on the wall that he'd made six months earlier. But this was no ordinary poster. It was a price list. It set out the lengths Mark would go to, so to speak, and the rate for each different sexual act on the menu.

Jack grabbed a bin from next to the bed and put the ripped poster in it then stepped back as Mark then took savage pleasure in setting it alight. The boys danced around the flaming bin. Although Mark had more reason to dance, Jack was still pretty pleased with his own good deed.

Eight days had passed without incident. Mark hadn't sold his services since he had moved in, but he hadn't done much else either. They got on like they'd known each other forever. The problem was that their shared room struggled to accommodate one fully grown human, never mind two naturally messy young lads. Jack knew it was natural to be annoyed with your flatmate - but how many people had a bedsit mate? Even in The Gulag they got their own pad. It was starting to grate.

Still, at least he wasn't living with Sarah. And then, he realised that to his horror, given a choice between going back to the bedsit tonight or to his old flat, he would have run all the way to Sarah's place, only stopping for a cup of tea with her parents on the way.

He had wondered how long that thought would continue to console him. It had ended up being less than two weeks.

On the Monday morning following Mark's move, Jack rolled up to work to find an e-mail from Human Resources informing him that his boss was so happy with his work that he'd decided to put him forward for a senior admin job - provided he impressed at the interview.

Primed, ready and pumped with adrenaline, Jack had strolled purposefully into the office like a man destined for higher things, determined to make an impression and at least ensure that one facet of his life was on the right track.

That had been almost fifteen minutes ago, and it was amazing how much could change in that short period. Jack had been sat in the interview with Paul - gleaned from his name badge, there had been no introductions - for twelve and a half minutes now, answering boring standard question after boring standard question. Paul appeared not to have even one iota of interest in Jack or the interview process. He seemed wearily determined to conduct this affair with as little wasted enthusiasm as possible, and had been through the motions and around the board at least twenty times in the last quarter of an hour. He was just passing Park Lane on his way to Mayfair when he wound up and pitched a curve ball at Jack.

"Define irony for me, Jack."

What had just happened? Jack had no idea how this ambiguous question had followed on from "Where do you see yourself in five years?" But it had, so Jack needed to answer it.

Jack sat back and thought for a second. And then it came to him. “Okay, here’s my definition of irony. The scene is a bar in Spain. The bar is packed full of pissed up Brits.

The swamped barman is coming to the end of his 14-hour shift. The barman is fluent in three languages and he’s only working in the bar to get his degree and to get a job in finance, somewhere in Madrid.

A kid addresses the barman. The kid is wearing a white, short-sleeved shirt open to show off his red, sunburned chest and bulldog tattoo. He’s about 18 and speaks, or rather slurs, with a heavy Yorkshire accent. He asks for four beers, four Aftershocks and four absinthes. The music in the bar is really loud and the barman can’t hear the boy. The barman asks the boy – in perfect English – to repeat himself. The boy does, but this time throws in a couple of “fuckings” and one “deaf twat”. The barman, unfortunately, still can’t hear the boy. The banging speaker behind him and the slurred heavy accent doesn’t help. He keeps his cool and in perfect English politely asks the boy again to repeat his order.

The boy replies, shouting loudly in the face of the barman, “What’s the matter? Are you fucking thick?”

That is my definition of irony.”

There was a pause as long as the Mersey tunnel as Paul fixed him with a politely blank stare. Too late, Jack realised that the story he had recounted, originally observed first hand was not nearly as powerful when re-told. In fact, it was rubbish. He had felt sure that his little tale would show him to be intelligent, understanding, and sensitive, though in fact he felt dull, witless, and boring. It wasn’t even a particularly good example of irony.

Knowing that his chance had been well and truly blown, his head swimming with unwanted ridiculous snippets and phrases, and his armpits perspiring like Pavarotti in a sauna, a sudden and unexpected idea came flying into his mind right from his childhood. Barely even thinking, he opened his mouth again...

“Or... erm... a one handed man hanging of the edge of a cliff with an itchy bum?”

After another split second seventy-year pause, Paul roared with laughter, proclaimed Jack “a funny bastard” and “one of us”, and asked Jack to join him on a tour around the office to show him his new desk.

A couple of hours later, and still dazed from the oddest promotion ever, Jack rounded the corner onto Leadenhall Street. The sun was absolutely blaring and the female of the species was out in force. The City seemed to have been invaded by a hoard of stunningly beautiful women in small vest tops and shorts, with long sumptuous brown legs that disappeared into sling-back stiletto shoes. He was spellbound. He found himself speeding up to get to the end of every street, in a frantic effort to see what women lay around the corner.

It had been the same on the tube that morning. He couldn't wait for the train to pull into the next stop just to get a look at the women getting on the train. This wasn't him. Jack had never been a leerer, and found the way most of his contemporaries slavered at innocent passers by distasteful at best, misogynistic at worst. But today the proliferation of outstandingly attractive women, the sheer weight of numbers, the area of viewable flesh, had turned him into an 80-year-old pervert in a flashing Mac. He didn't like it at all, but he reasoned he could put it down to being cooped up in that flat with another bloke.

Also, it didn't help that his last bit of interaction with a woman had been that girl in the nightclub who had given him her card. He had called her twice but had bottled it both times. He'd even hidden his number by dialling 141 before calling. The first time he had hung up before anyone answered. Mark had goaded him and told him he had tiny bollocks. Jack had retorted that at least his bollocks had never been in a bloke's mouth.

They'd developed a pretty good relationship early on. As Mark had pointed out, if you can laugh at your previous career as a self-loathing rent boy, there aren't too many taboo conversations or insults left.

The second time he had called a guy had answered. Jack had hung up, ripped up the card and that had been that.

Mark could see that Jack was climbing the walls with sexual frustration. He offered to put him in touch with some working girls he knew, but Jack had declined. It was one box he'd decided early on not to tick, having always remembered something his mate Graeme had said, "The day I pay for it is the day I stop doing it." Realising that when a mate offers to hook you up with a prostitute out of desperation it wasn't a good sign, Jack made a mental promise that the next time a girl gave him a bit of a come on, or a bit of a signal – or, frankly, even the time of day - he was going to go bold.

Jack's phone rang as he was about to walk into the office. "Yo dude. What's up Mark?"

"Nothing G," Mark joked, mimicking Jack's street slang. "Can you pick up some milk on your way home?"

Jack bit his lip. "Yes, will do."

"Good stuff. Speak to you later."

What could Jack say? He'd practically begged Mark to move in. He couldn't ask him to go and pick up his old lifestyle over a pint of milk, but when was he going to start pulling his weight? Then just like magic, Jack found the solution he had been looking for.

"Do you know anybody that needs work?" said the Chinese man on the corner, handing out leaflets.

The majority of the moving suits passed him without acknowledging his presence, and either ignored his leaflet altogether, or snatched it out of his hand only to drop it five feet further down the road. Not Jack though. This was almost divine intervention.

One of the two rules that Jack had learned in London was to ignore at all costs anybody trying to accost you on the street with leaflets or clipboards. One of Sarah's friends had never mastered this art and had eventually had to change her bank details as around fifty quid a week was going out to various organisations and charities. It wasn't that she didn't want to help charities; it was just the objectionable feeling that she had been corralled into it. Of course if she'd just had the strength to say no in the first place... but then, he reminded himself, Sarah's mates were all dicks anyway. The other London rule was to slalom around people walking in the opposite direction to avoid smacking straight into them. He had once experimented with walking in a straight line down the street without deviating at any point. He hit somebody in seconds. They huffed and glared at him for it, but the fact that they had made no attempt to move at all never crossed their minds.

"Yes. Yes, I know someone that needs work," Jack said.

The man was completely taken aback by an enthusiasm totally alien to him. Usually nobody even gave him the time of the day, sometimes literally. He'd asked a man for the

time earlier on that morning and the bloke had looked straight through him, without even slowing down. With a great sense of pride and ceremony that he was giving someone a leaflet *at their request*, he passed it over like it was the Holy Sacrament.

“Here you go then,” he said, beaming.

Jack skim-read the leaflet. The phrases, “No qualifications needed”, “start immediately”, “labouring” immediately leapt off the page and were music to Jack’s ears - or was it words to his eyes, he wondered. No matter, it was just what Mark needed, and Mark out of the flat, earning money, was just what Jack needed.

Mark’s phone was ringing out.

“Hello,” he said, sounding like he was half-asleep.

“Take this number down, Marcus. I’ve got you a job.”

**NO ONE IS GOING TO KNOCK ON YOUR DOOR AND HELP YOU OUT,
WELL, UNLESS YOU'RE MARK**

22 MAY 2006, 10:46

Jack was in the kitchen making tea for his team. There were only five people so it wasn't too bad. He didn't mind the break either.

As the kettle boiled, Jack reached into his pocket in search of chewing gum. He pulled out a business card. It was Phil's, the nice Asian bloke he'd met on the train on the way down. Jack had forgotten all about him. He'd promised Phil he would contact him. Since things were looking up - Mark was on the verge of working, and Jack had just got a promotion of sorts - he decided to give Phil a ring. He needed some variety in his life.

Jack and Mark had been cooped up in the flat every night since their inaugural evening together. They were too broke to go out and were just barely surviving on Jack's pitiful wages. It had been fun at times. Mark had introduced him to some good films, *La Haine* and such, but it was about time Jack got out of the flat and met a few people. He decided to ring Phil when he got back to his desk.

"Ahh," Jack screamed as the boiling water scalded him. He had been so caught up in his thoughts he hadn't noticed how closely he was pouring towards his hand. A girl walked into the kitchen and laughed at his haplessness.

"It's not funny."

"It's pretty funny," replied the girl.

Jack didn't know her name, but he knew her face, or rather, he knew her legs. Her legs were the thing he had noticed about her the first time she'd glided past him. He hadn't

had another chance to see them of late since he'd moved teams. Up close, Jack could see she was very pretty. Jack was numbly shocked at himself once again, as his frenzied hormones' best attempts to make him a chauvinist had meant that up until now her legs had been the only thing that had entered his radar scope.

She had cropped brown hair and a very cute young face that endeavoured to portray an air of innocent naivety, an image that was belied both by a knowing smirk and the eyes of a vixen. This was a girl who was, as Mike Skinner once observed, fit – but she knew it. Like males since the dawn of time, Jack observed her, judged her, realised that she was trouble and well worth avoiding – then set about trying everything he could to seduce her.

“I'm glad you can laugh. I've got third-degree burns here.”

“Come here,” she said.

She walked around the table and grabbed hold of Jack's hand. She turned on the tap and held his hand under the cold water. As she did, she stroked his hand. That was unnecessary. Could he be quids in?

“Thanks for that. I'm Jack.”

“Toni. Don't worry about it.”

She hung on for a few seconds. Clearly, Jack was supposed to speak next. Unfortunately, he couldn't grasp for a line.

“See you around, darling,” she said.

As Toni floated out of the kitchen, she looked over her shoulder and smiled at Jack. It was a smouldering smile. Jack's hormones hit boiling point and he had to restrain himself from running after her.

When Jack got back to his desk, he pulled his little writing pad out of the top drawer of his desk. Under the heading *To Do* he wrote two action points. The first was to ring Phil. The second was to e-mail Toni to initiate some flirting.

NUMBER ONE ON THE *TO DO* LIST

22 MAY 2006, 11:02

“Yo, you’re on the dog and bone with Sloan.”

“Sorry?”

“It’s Phil Sloan. Who’s this?”

Surely this was a mistake already? ‘The dog and bone with Sloan’? Only a tosser would say that wouldn’t they? Jack was immediately regretting making this call, but hopefully that was just a blip on the record of someone he remembered as a good guy.

“Er... it’s Jack. We met on the train the other week.”

“Ah, yes. Jack the Scouser. How are you doing, pal? I was hoping you’d ring.”

Maybe he was alright after all, he’d started to speak normally again.

“I’m okay thanks,” Jack replied. “How are things at your end?”

“It’s all good in the hood, Jack.”

Oh no. He’d said ‘good in the hood’! EJECT. EJECT. Jack desperately started to think of ways to end the call as quickly as possible, but Phil was not finished with pseudo-Afro-American quips – the worst was to come. “So, what’s the dealio yo?”

Arrgh. This was torture. Luckily, Phil decided to translate his last effort into English.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Erm, I’m not sure. You told me to give you a buzz if I was interested in a beer and meeting a few people, and you’d sort me out.”

“Of course I did. So you obviously are, and of course, I will. How are you fixed on Thursday night?”

Somehow Phil had piqued Jack's interest. As soon as he had realised that Jack was genuinely intrigued, he had immediately dropped his ridiculous speech pattern and suddenly sounded like the intelligent, articulate guy Jack remembered from the train. If nothing else, the slight mystery of exactly who or what Phil was was enough for Jack to play ball – for now at least.

“Thursday? Er, nothing on, really.”

“Great, half past eight on Thursday. Meet me outside Top Shop on Oxford Street.”

“Okay, will do. Can I bring a mate with me?”

“Yes, of course. The more the merrier. See you Thursday.”

“Yes, take it easy, Phil.”

“Yes bro. Stay gold.”

Jack hung up and crossed Phil off of his list. Mysterious he may be, but if Phil didn't stop talking like an idiot every now and again Jack felt he may need to invest in a shotgun before Thursday night. He smiled at his own joke; Phil was alright really, and Jack was looking forward to Thursday with intrigued anticipation. So that was the easy part of the to do list. On to number two – engage flirt mode.

EMAILED HER AND SHE MAILED 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 hugely successful.

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 so impressed that he didn't stop to reflect that perhaps she'd played this same game several times before. In fact, 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 had been given the upper hand for the moment.

“I want to know” – Ray Charles.

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

A bit cheesy, perhaps, but then they were flirting with song titles after all. If cheesy was her style, then by God let there be Camembert.

“Pale Blue Eyes” – Velvet Underground.

She'd noticed the colour of his eyes. Luckily, he'd noticed hers. After her legs.

“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.

Ouch. 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.

The way he was feeling after his atrocious performance in the previous round, Jack’s instinct was to simply put:

“Hold me, thrill me, kiss me – (for the love of God please fucking) Kill me” – U2.

Incredibly, though Jack had taken some hard hits to the body in the last round, she had spared him with another chance. She was the one who had stepped up the flirting again. Defcon Three.

“The Lady is a Tramp” – Frank Sinatra.

Jack had expected a massive right haymaker and waited a tad nervously to see how his semi-critical comment would be received. He needn’t have worried.

“Don’t be cruel” – Elvis Presley.

Jack quite liked that response. It was cute. He really felt in the driving seat now. Maybe he should 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 and had been expecting something a little coyer. Now he was on the back foot. He went back hard.

“I wanna 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. It was time to play his ace.

“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.

“Save it for later” – English Beat.

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

“Let’s live for today” – Grass Roots.

“These things take time” – The Smiths.

Toni was mock pleading. Even a swordsman with such meagre capabilities as Jack knew that she was ready to go, there and then..

“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. What was it going to be madam?

“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, confident that he was a Casanova of the highest order.

Five minutes later, and no reply. Shit. 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 right now. This second. One and a half minutes later, he did so.

Toni was 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 – the Gods' Supervisors and Assistant Regional Managers - all working together on a one-off special project. In fact, 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 did what any self-respecting red blooded young male would do. Then he had sex.

DINNER

22 MAY 2006, 20:00

Post-coital, Jack and Toni had decided to arrange a dinner date for that evening before going on to a party - someone that Toni alleged to know. Almost immediately after they had both come, hormones sated and normal consciousness returning, there had been this strange awkwardness between them. In desperation Jack reckoned the only way to alleviate it was to ask her out. He did, and she somewhat grudgingly acquiesced. Jack wasn't sure if she really wanted the date, but he was damn sure he didn't.

Fifteen minutes into dinner, Jack began to wonder if there was a single more irritating person on the planet than Toni.

Jack imagined a laboratory scene like something Wes Craven and Steven King may have concocted in their most lucid, gruesome moments. Five doctors, clad in traditional white coats with their mouths covered with elasticised green mouth guards. On six operating tables lay three males and three females - naked from the waist down. The patients were supported under their waists with their genitals raised in the air.

“Brothers, are we ready to commence our macabre and monstrous experiment?” said Dr. Mingus McSatanspawn, the leader of this dark band of miscreant and maverick scientific minds. They each nodded solemnly, all except for the youngest and most nervous – Dr. Novice McPrentice – who quavered, “B-b-but Mingus. Aren’t we g-g-going too far? Isn’t this against nature? Against Almighty God himself?”

The evil Dr. McSatanspawn simply stared at the young man from under his dark hooded eyelids. When he spoke again, it was in a deathly rasp.

“What we do tonight, *Novice*, we do for the advancement of the human race. For how can man create a perfect soul unless we can create a hideously imperfect one – beautiful in its abhorrence? Here, before us, we have the most annoying and irritating specimens on the planet. We owe it ourselves, to God Himself, to splice these aberrations together and see what we can produce.” He smiled a thin, humourless smile, pleased with his flawless logic. “Now, gentleman,” he barked. “Let us begin”.

In Jack’s mind’s eye the view panned across the hitherto unseen bodies, revealing Christine Hamilton, David Mellor, Paris Hilton, George Bush, Kerry McFadden and Peter Andre.

Jack gave an involuntary shudder at the prospect of any offspring produced by this terrifying experiment, and then realised with horror that it was unlikely such a creation could possibly be more fist-clenchingly irritating than the girl sitting opposite him.

“Sooooooo, ha-ha. This guy at work, total Essex boy, ha! Ha ha. You knooooow the type – new money! Heh heh.”

Toni used two heavily manicured fingers from each hand to demonstrate quotation marks around the words *new money*. It was hard to decide whether this was more or less

annoying than her sneery tone or the way she giggled coquettishly as if to punctuate her dreary dialogue.

Plus, Jack fumed, what she had referred to as ‘new money’ had probably meant this guy’s parents had worked hard to build their own business from scratch – a success story - rather than being handed it all on a plate and an open cheque book - the supposedly more sophisticated old money. As angry as it made him, Jack just couldn’t summon the motivation to express any of his thoughts to her, unwilling to waste even one iota of unnecessary energy on her.

“Tooootal new money.” She did the fingers for quotation marks again. “Ha! Weeeell. He has the *cheek* to say to me, ‘Toni, you are soooo beautiful - but you’re nothing but a pretty face.’ Ha! And I’m like, ‘Oooooooooohhh my God, but yeah, and what else is there?’”

She meant it. There was not even one drop of irony in her tone. This isn’t a person sat in front of me, Jack concluded. It can’t be. It’s a caricature – a cartoon.

He slid further down his seat and took a long slug of wine, wondering if the flow of verbal nothingness would cease any time soon. He was to be disappointed.

“Heeeeeeeeyyy?! Have you been to *MINT*?” she asked.

Jack didn’t really understand the question but he was willing to take a stab at the answer.

“No, I haven’t been to that bar.”

It was a guess, but an educated one. So far, she’d quizzed him on every nightspot within fifteen miles of the Thames.

“Oh, it’s soooooo amazing. Toby got me into the VIP. You know Toby? Ha! I loooove him! He knows Callum and Fran.”

Jack didn’t know Toby. Perhaps he was being a little unfair but he had a strong suspicion he didn’t want to know Toby at all.

What could he do? Was there some way he could escape from the clutches of this vacuous non-entity? He was astounded. The girl’s lack of ambition to strive for anything apart from fucking somebody who had been caught by a camera – just once – brought on an intense bout of gut wrenching sickness and frustration, and it forced Jack to gulp stiffly from his glass of water, and take a deep breath, feeling fine again, back in the room.

Resisting the urge to drive a bread knife hard enough to burst arteries through his wrist just to numb the intrusive pain, he released his white knuckle grip on the knife, and with a smile that was little more than a grimace, said “Can I have the Caesar Salad, please?” to the waiter who had momentarily interrupted the world’s most futile conversation.

Desperate to salvage the conversation and at least try to show willing, he made the mistake of pressing on.

“Fran who?”

“Ha! Oh my Gooooo! You must know. He he!”

“Why must I? Was he in my class at school?”

“You just *must know*.”

“Well, who is it then?”

“Fran Cosgrave. He’s only the most dateable celebrity there is.”

“Really? More dateable than Michael Owen? Nice lad, plenty of money, sensible. More dateable than Prince William? Heir to the throne. More dateable than Orlando Bloom? Hollywood’s hottest property?”

“They’re *not* celebrities, Jack.”

Wow. Suddenly a curve ball had been hurled and Jack wasn’t quite sure how to handle it.

“Really?” Jack played along. “What are they then?”

“They’re like footballers and princes and actors and stuff.”

She was gushing, happy to pass on her infinite wisdom of 2006 socialite living.

“Oh right. So what we’re saying is that the meaning of the word celebrity has changed has it? In some subtle but unquantifiable way? In the past it might mean someone who had reason to be ‘*celebrated*’ for some discernable quality – looks perhaps, talent, wit, charm, even the ever undefinable ‘star quality’. But now it’s... what? Seriously, I’d really like to fucking know. Who exactly are the celebrities now? How does it work? What’s with there being such thing as a celebrity *stylist*, but not a celebrity *accountant*? One does Sharon Osbourne’s hair and the other does her taxes. Why can one qualify for the ubiquitous reality shows but the guy holding his calculator in the air can’t? Educate me. I am fucking fascinated.”

Jack had fired up the heat on the hob so suddenly it was like a blast furnace of fury had appeared beneath the super-noodles of dumbed down society, and it looked like Toni was suddenly feeling the boiling water bite at her bottom. To his amazement, Jack saw her do something he had hitherto thought was only a figure of speech.

Her face went blank.

Not bemused, not thoughtful, not even expressionless so much as... blank. Just totally blank.

Jack was so surprised that he laughed out loud. Perhaps expecting Toni to have even so much as a considered opinion on anything was an unfairly high expectation. He calmed down, waved a conciliatory hand in the air and said through a forced smile of diplomacy, "Oh, don't worry about it."

Her relief was obvious, but she clearly wasn't comfortable with the shift in power, as she sulked for a full two minutes without uttering a word.

Jack was just beginning to enjoy the peace and quiet when suddenly, Toni shrieked. Actually shrieked.

"Aaaaaarrrrggghhh! Jack, stop that. It's embarrassing. Eat properly."

"Stop what?" Jack dropped his bread roll as if it was an envelope and somebody had mentioned the word anthrax.

"Your bread roll, Jack. Eat it properly. Break it up and then butter the bits. Oh, that's so rude," she cried with a level of abject horror normally reserved for predatory paedophiles, thus reserving her place in everlasting hell.

She turned away and wouldn't even look at Jack. What little of her face he could see was twisted into a look of utter disgust. One would have thought Jack had put his penis in between the two pieces of bread and offered it to the restaurant as the evening special. With no ketchup.

Jack could see right through this charade. He knew this was her pitiful attempt at trying to restore the balance of power. He knew the role she expected him to play. She was the girl on the scene, dragging along her trophy provincial boy by the arm, who was expected

to lavish her with adoration. But Jack was bugged if he was going to follow that script. In fact he hadn't read a single line and had so far ad-libbed his way through dinner, winging it all the way.

"Rude?" Jack questioned with the kind of brittle politeness that belies an imminent violent eruption of hatred and resentment.

"Yes rude, Jack. Very rude."

Toni appeared to be under the illusion that Jack had misunderstood the charge against him.

"One is supposed to break the bread and butter the individual parts," she explained.

Notice the use of *one*; Jack thought. He was going to enjoy this.

"And if one does it any other way, one is rude is one? Is one as bad as if one had pushed an old lady out of one's way on the tube without apologising? Or maybe if one had stripped oneself naked at a wedding party, exposing one's throbbing cock to the bride's mother and an eleven year old bridesmaid?"

"Well..."

The questions were rhetorical and Jack wasn't about to be cut short.

"It's equally as rude to cut the roll in half and butter both halves, is it? Really? Who does it harm? Who here is offended? Will the bread police be here forthwith to arrest my filthy butter smearing carcass and hold me without trial for yeast based terrorism? No? Then let me ask you this Toni – what the *fuck* are you talking about?"

Toni huffed and stammered. "Well, I..."

"Let's be clear and tell it like it is shall we? The reason someone somewhere has considered this innocuous and innocent act so rude is because years ago, some bloke

called Mr. Johnny-Fucking-Etiquette decided it was. Even though, in reality, it causes no offence, you're willing to let a fucking straitjacket of ancient rules restrict you. So, apparently, you're *persona non grata* if you put the milk in first, or last, or in the middle, or whatever; when in reality it makes not a bit of difference to the person drinking it. And woe betide you if you fill the wine glass to the top, even if your guest is parched, gagging even. No, Johnny Etiquette will rise from his grave and come in dragging his eternal chains and wreak his wrath at your blatant non-compliance of his ridiculous, ancient, stuck-up and fucked up rules."

Jack had finished, his face was red and he was breathing hard trying to get his heart rate back to something approaching normal. This whole subject was a pet hate of his and he'd once had a similar argument with Sarah about a year ago. This time they had been in a Chinese restaurant and she told him he was uncultured for refusing to use chopsticks. Why? Seriously? The knife, fork and spoon were far superior eating tools – fact. It wasn't a cultural statement, but one based in scientific reality. The chopstick had its day, and now it was time for new and improved implements. Would he, for the sake of culture, smash his plate into a thousand pieces and eat from a trough if one was wheeled out?

On top of his socialist box of soap, Jack saw the esoteric rules of the restaurant as one more way to prevent the proles from advancing. As was typical of working class kids in his experience, politeness and manners were values that had been drilled into him from the day he was born – almost to a fault - yet some upwardly mobile thick as pig shit brain-dead celebrity obsessed *twat* was accusing him of rude behaviour because of the way he buttered a *fucking bread roll!*

Jack knew he was educated, polite, well mannered, even charming, yet sit this boy down in front of 17 different types of cutlery and watch his slick exterior peel away, layer by layer, to reveal a battered kid gazing on in horror at the array of dishes being served without a familiar knife and fork in sight and about to reveal his *true colours*.

“Jack, don’t swear at me.”

“Why not?” Jack asked, quite reasonably.

“You’re irrational. You’re being very irrational.”

Oh, so annoying. And Jack had thought it couldn’t get any worse.

“I’m being irrational? *I... am being irrational?*” Jack asked, bowled over by the sheer inaccuracy of the statement.

He couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Toni stood. She pushed the table away from her. She didn’t need to do that. There was ample space between her and the table, and in any event, she was already stood a good couple of feet from it.

“Hmph. I’m going now, Jack. If you want to come to the party later, you may. I need some time to myself now. Some me time. To chill out. You have made me feel wretched. Downtrodden.”

Jack couldn’t believe the melodrama. It was so laughably false that he had to suppress a laugh.

Toni left the table, then the restaurant. She also left Jack with a bill – for which he had only budgeted half. Now he was stuck paying for the lot. It looked as though his brief liaison with Toni in the stationery cupboard was going to cost a great deal of time and money, leaving Jack to grimly reflect that, even though it was not something he would

ever do, visiting a prostitute would have been cheaper, easier, and a damn sight less irritating.

YOU'RE NOBODY TILL SOMEBODY (FAMOUS) LOVES YOU

22 MAY 2006, 22:27

“So what do you do for a living?” asked the tanned girl, holding the biggest fashion accessory Jack had ever seen.

The girl’s handbag was huge. To call it a handbag, in fact, was misleading. It was a suitcase. If it’d had wheels it could conceivably be called a transit van. For no other reason than fashion, the girl appeared to be carting around a huge green wheel-less transit van with long green tassels hanging from it.

“I like your bag,” Jack lied, trying to change the subject.

“So what do you do for a living?” she asked again.

The *so* at the beginning of the sentence might have implied that her question was just a natural progression of their conversation, the inevitable next step. It wasn’t. In fact, these were the first words that had passed between them. Jack hated it. He considered it a feature unique to London conversations. In every possible social setting - but particularly with girls in bars - it was always the first, or at best, the second question. He had been asked the same opening question four times in the last six minutes.

“I do admin at the bank,” he finally answered.

The disappointment was palpable. Her facial expression gave him the Emperor’s thumbs down. If he’d been interested in girls of this type in the past, Jack had resigned himself to lying, having found it was the only way to keep the conversation going.

His fabricated CV consisted of footballer, golfer, tennis player, futures trader, dolphin trainer – who came up with that as a job that would appeal to women, Jack wondered,

and why do supposed dating gurus always feel the need to impart this secret? The list went on and on. He'd stopped short of astronaut, but only because he couldn't think of a plausible back up story to explain why he was in London.

"Oh," said the girl, killing time while she desperately searched for an escape route. "So you work with Toni then? You should meet Toby. He went to school with Toni."

A guy brushed past Jack and the girl with the oversized handbag, and looked momentarily in their direction. Jack caught the glance and guessed this was the famous Toby.

The girl used this tiny distraction as an excuse to dart off in search of a more appealing walking wage packet.

"Hi, I'm Toby," the guy said politely, although it was obvious he didn't want to get drawn into conversation.

"Don't worry mate. I could see you headed towards that group over there. Go and join your mates. That bird just wanted to get away from me."

"Oh, oh, right."

Toby was pretty flustered. Such frank conversation was not something he came across very often.

"Well, why don't you join us?"

Toby was astonishingly, and against all expectation, a nice guy.

"No, don't worry about it. Thanks for the offer. I've got to make a phone call," Jack lied again. He was finding it impossible to tell the truth these days.

Jack walked to the side of the bar. He put his foot up against the wall and took his mobile phone from his pocket.

“Worst party ever. Like smack without the buzz...” Jack began his text to Mark.

“Hi gorgeous.”

A svelte girl, with legs that made her short skirt look punishable by the death sentence, purred at Jack. Forward. Very forward. He’d never met her before in his life. He’d seen her before though; her legs had entranced him all evening.

“Hiya. You alright?” Jack was smooth as always.

“Yes darling. And what do we do for a living?”

Jack groaned internally. He felt like banging his head against the wall, over and over again. Presumably she didn’t want to know what she did for a living. Or did she? These people were so fake and put on so many different fronts; it was probably quite difficult to keep track of their own lives. Why did they even bother with the opening pleasantries? They should just accost you at the front door and ask you for your last three bank statements and a list of your five most valuable assets.

She was the identikit girl that Kanye West despaired for in *It All Falls Down*. However, instead of the Single Black Female addicted to retail, this girl was a Single White Female addicted to *Heat-Males*.

“I’m a talent scout,” Jack replied casually, feigning disinterest and taking a drag from his beer.

Bingo! Line, Full House, The National, World Championship of Bingo, and bloody entrance to the Bingo Hall Of Fame. It was as if a bell had sounded. Her eyes spun like slot machines and finally settled on dollar signs.

“Oh right. And what talent are you looking for?”

The girl’s attempt at casual curiosity was fooling nobody.

“I spot talent for movies.”

Another look away and another drag from his bottle of beer - but this time it was to stop himself smiling.

“Really?”

The girl was practically salivating.

“What are you looking for at the moment?”

“Well, I’m on a mission for a massive Hollywood studio. They are looking for somebody to play the part of an incredibly shallow, self-absorbed money grabber. Do you do any acting? I think you’d be ideal.”

“Honestly?”

The girl was on cloud 999.

“Like LiLo in *Mean Girls*?” She asked.

“Er, yes, I guess so. But shallower,” improvised Jack, stumbling on an albeit tenuous pun.

“Oh my God! Wow!”

The girl hugged Jack.

He couldn’t believe it.

“I’ll be right back,” she said.

The girl bounced away and over to her large group of friends, which included Toni and the girl with the suitcase on her arm. Jack continued to drink his beer. Normally at this point he would be in a state of apprehension at the impending storm of trouble in which he was about to find himself. However, having spent the best part of two hours at this party, Jack had begun to despair of the human race. He couldn’t care less any more.

Suddenly, Hollywood's "next big thing" was back, flanked by Eastwick's original two sorceresses - Toni and the transit van-bag girl.

"You lied to me," she spat at Jack. "You made it all up. All of it. Why?"

Jack thought quickly. Not only was he entirely unconcerned that he'd momentarily dented the girl's confidence, but he was feeling dark, and a little vicious.

"I'm sorry. It was all a wind up. I'm really sorry," Jack said forcing a laugh, playing a role again. He wasn't much of an actor, but as it happened it didn't take much to fool this girl.

"It was a prank. I was asked to set you up for a TV show. You're on camera. You've been Jacked!" he shouted.

"Oh my God."

The girl jumped up and down on the spot laughing, looking around for the cameras.

"I can't believe it," she cried.

Neither could her two friends. As the girl jumped around hysterically tossing her blonde hair in desperate search of exposure, she caught the look from her less gullible compatriots.

"Is he?" she asked them.

They both shook their heads.

"You prick. Get out. Get out of here."

She tried to slap him but missed as Jack had turned on his heel and was already on his way out. As he left the bar, he noticed two muscular guys in sharp suits, laughing, having witnessed his prank. Jack acknowledged them with a smile and a nod, and continued to the glass door. Huge plasma screens surrounded the room and for a second, he got lost in

a strange pink pattern that moved around the screen like one of those sentinels from *The Matrix*. He was starting to worry he'd never find his way out of this ridiculous place when he felt a firm hand clap him on each shoulder.

“That was fucking funny. Let's go and get a beer.”

It was the two snappy dressers.

**KEEP YOUR FRIENDS CLOSE AND THE PEOPLE BUYING YOU BEER EVEN
CLOSER**

23 MAY 2006, 00.01

“Put this money away. Tonight is on us.”

The guys were called Lothar and Stefan. Jack had presumed they were German. They were almost identical and looked and sounded like David Beckham channelling Boris Becker. Or would have done if Boris Becker was dead. And David Beckham could channel him. As it turned out they were Danish.

“So do you two work at the bank?” Jack asked.

“Yes. We are traders.”

“Fuck. You must rake it in.”

Lothar passed them both a bottle of Asahi each.

“We do okay,” said Lothar.

Jack caught a glimpse of a diamond-studded Rolex as he gulped from his bottle.

“That was excellent. What you did to that girl.”

His voice was so measured, so clinical. You could have eaten your dinner off his voice box.

“You totally ruined her. She is abysmal in bed in any event. Stefan fucked her.”

“Twice, I fucked her. That girl from the office, Toni I think, set it up. That girl had never met me, never seen me, but she had seen my car. We agreed over e-mail to fuck. All she had seen was my car. Whore.”

Jack felt slightly uneasy. He had no great love for the airhead in the other room, but his intelligence and his principles didn't sit comfortably with such casual misogyny. He was out of his depth with these guys. He was used to being one of the leaders, the head of the clique. These blokes would think he was a nerd. He didn't even own a car. Suddenly feeling like he was in the playground and needing to impress the bigger boys, principles that had previously been rigorously adhered to found themselves thrown out of the tenth floor window and hurtling groundwards with alarming alacrity. What could he say now? How could he ingratiate himself with these cooler kids? Suddenly he realised he still had a trick in his locker. He dropped the shoulder, rolled the ball with his right foot and stepped over it with his left.

"I fucked that Toni bird at work today," Jack said.

He'd accelerated away from the full back and left him on the floor.

"Awesome."

Jack crossed the ball, straight on the centre forward's head. He turned back and winked arrogantly at the prostrate fullback. As good as a goal. Misogyny one – Decency nil.

"Yes, I fucked her off tonight though." (Two nil.)

They were warming to him. They didn't have to know that the round of drinks on the table cost more than all of the money in his bank account. For the time being, on the women front, he was punching in the same weight category.

"As you should. What do you do, Jack? What is your life plan?"

Jack was in trouble. He'd gone up a weight but had lost all of his advantages. His trademark flight of foot was gone because of the added bulk leaving him suddenly unable

to use any nimble footwork to slip the job. They would see him for what he was and pick him off easily.

“Erm, I’m just in admin at the bank. But I want to be a journalist. That’s erm, that’s the plan.”

The two brothers had the measure of him now. He could see that. They had thought he was their equal but now they knew he was far from it.

“How old are you, Jack?” Lothar said.

“Twenty-four.”

“You’re still a young boy. I didn’t find my calling until I was 27. That gives you three years to fuck tarts in the office before you need worry about your future.”

“But I’m worried now. I’ve got loads of debt, a crap job and no prospects. And worst of all this city rapes me daily like a prison bully. I don’t want to leave London, but I can’t see myself being able to afford it for much longer.”

“Don’t worry about it, Jack. You’re with us now. We’ll fix you up. Excuse me.” Lothar beckoned to the waitress. “There’s my credit card. We’ll have two bottles of your most expensive champagne. And that’s my phone number. Call it.”

Lothar was so sure of himself, his arrogance radiated off him like a blast furnace. And yet, it seemed to warm people - the waitress thanked him, smiled flirtatiously and sashayed away.

“Hot lady. The slut.”

Jack and Stefan agreed. Jack mumbled incoherently, his skin crawling at the brutality of the dismissal.

“What motivates you, Jack?” Stefan asked.

“Erm, I’m not sure. I’ve struggled for motivation the past couple of years, lost my drive a bit. But what really drives me to succeed are my parents, I guess. It’s fairly corny, but making my parents proud was what got me through school and was the reason I went to university.”

“Very admirable, Jack, I like it,” Stefan said. “A strong bond with your family shows loyalty. We’ve got many business interests, and loyalty is a rare commodity – one to be treasured.”

“Yes, our day jobs are simple distractions,” added Lothar. “We are much more interested in property developing, import and export of cars, jewellery, art – this kind of thing.”

“Drugs?” Jack probably shouldn’t have asked that question, but he was half pissed and thus emboldened.

“No,” Lothar said forcefully. “We don’t need to. We make plenty of money anyway, and we do not need attention from the authorities.”

“Do you do drugs?” Jack asked.

“Why do you ask?”

Jack shrugged. He didn’t really know why he’d asked so he tried to think of a plausible reason.

“I don’t know,” he admitted, failing spectacularly.

Lothar smiled knowingly. “No, I look after my body and see no reason to put foreign substances like cocaine into it. We like the finer things in life. We can afford them after all. What is special about cocaine nowadays? Everybody in London is using it every weekend. Look around this place.”

Stefan waved his arm around the bar. Jack's gaze followed the arm.

"I can guarantee 90 per cent of this bar has hovered up a line or two already this evening."

"Hoovered" thought Jack, but said nothing.

"Yes. We like to distinguish ourselves from others, Jack," Stefan added. "We do not follow them. We follow no-one. Do you do drugs, Jack?"

"No. No, I never have. I don't have a massive problem with drugs, but I think if I take a long hard look at my moral and ethical code... I don't know, it's illogical, but... On some level I just don't believe in it. I think they're wrong, somehow."

Jack always felt awkward when this conversation reared its ugly recurring head. Experience had told him that logic very rarely stood up to a clever line of questioning. He knew with a sense of stoic doom that a tricky one was on the way.

"But Jack, you drink. Let us say I am the Devil's advocate. Alcohol is a drug, is it not? What is the difference – merely that it is a legal drug?"

Jack sighed. He had been right. He'd been faced with this one so many times; he knew that there was not really much argument against what was pretty sound logic. He threw his arms up in a gesture of conciliatory defiance.

"I know, I know. It doesn't make any sense, but the fact is it's just the way I feel. I'm not militant or pushy about it, plenty of my mates do it, but it's just not for me. I think it's the thought of the disappointment on my parents' faces."

It was annoying to Jack that he found himself trying to make apologies for taking a moral stance that deep down he genuinely felt was right, but there was something about

these two that created a nervous energy in him, perhaps an over-eagerness to please. He couldn't help worrying, though, that he may have just blown his big chance.

Lothar stared blankly at him for a few seconds, before his lips parted in a wide, shark-like smile. "Good. Then your attitude is correct. You are in."

"I'm in what?"

"You are now an associate of ours. We will look after you."

Jack liked the sound of this.

"Now, do you see those three girls there?"

Jack saw what Lothar was pointing at. The trio were not just girls. They were women. Absolutely stunning, statuesque, obviously-loaded women.

"Go and procure them," Lothar commanded, and for the first time in his life, Jack felt one hundred percent certain that he could.

A LIFE LESS POVERTY STRICKEN

23 MAY 2006, 03:24

Jack stood on the balcony and looked out over the city. The three men were in one of Lothar's flats or did they say it was one of Stefan's? They could have said it was either; he wasn't sure as they seemed to own half of London. They had been drinking *Modelo* for twenty minutes now. They weren't alone.

"This flat is incredible."

It was a female voice. Jack had picked the three women up in the club, as ordered, and brought them back to the table. He had merely had to approach them and point in the

direction of the table at which the brothers were lounging. After round after round of expensive drinks, there had never been any doubt that the six of them would leave together.

“You are impressed by this? Wait until you see the Jacuzzi. Come with me.”

Stefan took the hand of one of the women and led her from the sofa, out of the lounge and down a corridor towards the Jacuzzi, which also overlooked the river. He had only stopped once to straighten an art deco painting. It had looked straight to Jack already, but apparently not. As they reached the end of the corridor, Stefan unzipped the lady’s mid length black dress exposing black French knickers and bra, and the finest arse Jack had ever seen.

These women were incredible. And again Jack observed that the appropriate word was indeed, *women*. Sarah was a girl in comparison. She was very pretty, but she wasn’t a woman. These three spoke, acted and looked like women - film stars in fact.

“Jack buys and sells Ferraris. He has a fleet at his country home. He’ll pick you up in a Modena tomorrow. Won’t you, Jack?”

“Erm, yes.”

Jack sounded unsure, a little hesitant, and Lothar shot him a disapproving look.

Jack stepped up to the role. “Yes, I do import cars, amongst other things. I’ve got one or two big deals at the moment that should clear me a couple of hundred thou’ when they come off.”

Jack’s words were a like a magnet to the bigger chested of the two women. She crawled over to his chair, very feline-like, lifted up his t-shirt and pulled at his jeans.

“Hold it,” Jack said forcefully. “Let’s go in to the bedroom. We’re not animals.”

Lothar smiled at him, and Jack knew he sounded incredibly prudish, but at this point he didn't care – he was thinking with his little head. He took charge and led the woman away.

Spoken like a true prodigy, thought Lothar, but as he turned his attention to the woman in front of him, his actual words were somewhat more direct.

“Now, take off your clothes and suck my cock,” Lothar said.

The brunette removed her expensive high-heeled shoes and knelt down in front of Lothar. Her dress fell from her shoulders to reveal a complete lack of underwear.

She didn't disobey the order.

BED BUT NO BREAKFAST

23 MAY 2006, 05:02

“Nobody stays, Jack. It is not a debate.”

“But Lothar. She just wants to sleep for a couple of hours and then go into work. She only works in Green Park.”

“It is not a discussion, Jack. I am telling you,” said Lothar in a low voice, before turning to Jack's girl. “Brett, it was lovely to meet you beautiful. Your friends are downstairs with the concierge. There will be a cab along shortly.”

Jack kissed her goodbye and saw her to the door. She looked a lot more fragile in the morning with her make up smudged. A couple of hours ago, she could have had Jack eating out of her hand. Now she seemed different, much more vulnerable, broken somehow.

Lothar wasn't vulnerable.

"They never stay the night, Jack. Never. These are the rules. You, however, can stay whenever you want. What is mine is yours, my good friend Jack."

Jack was over the moon. "Cheers mate. This is incredible."

"Ah, but will you feel like that when you're at your desk in three and a half hours?" Lothar joked. "I am working from home which is a.k.a. doing fuck all apart from sleeping and tossing myself off thinking about those sluts from last night." Lothar roared with laughter at the unenviable predicament.

And he was right. Jack certainly wasn't looking forward to a full day of work; especially since he had made an enemy of Toni.

BEING AN ASSOCIATE

24 MAY 2006, 15:35

Word spread like wildfire that Jack was now on the *in* with Lothar and Stefan. Jack discovered the pair were the superstars of the bank, and the industry in general. They came and went as they pleased, and made huge sums of money for the bank no matter where they were.

The girls at the bank treated them like movie stars. Some of the secretaries had even rather nauseatingly saved their intranet photographs as screensavers.

The word around the water cooler was that Jack was *one of them*. His inbox was full of potential dates. Toni tried to apologise for her and her friends' performance, but Jack wasn't having any of it. She truly hated him now, but she was small fry to Jack, an

inconsequential nobody. He had arrived...and as it happened, so had his pay cheque. He opened it. If anything was going to bring him back to earth with a bang on the head from his bank manager; it was his meagre wage.

“How can I live on this?”

Jack hadn't been able to survive on his salary pre-Lothar and Stefan, but now? How could he even afford a drink? They were supposed to be going to *The Groucho Club* that evening.

Jack's mobile phone vibrated in his suit jacket pocket. The text message read, “Do you fancy a beer this evening?”

It was from Mark. Jack did indeed fancy a beer, but in *The Groucho Club* with Stefan and Lothar, and some easily accessible women.

But mates were mates. His head may have been turned by Stefan and Lothar, but he wasn't about to forget about his other friends. Jack was anything but disloyal.

“Yes, mate. I will be home about seven,” Jack texted back.

His work phone rang. “Casanova. How are you feeling?” Lothar said.

“Not great. I got less than an hour's sleep. It's okay for you having the day off.”

“Day off is it, my friend? I made three quarters of a mill for a client just three minutes ago. How much have you cleared in your nine to five shift at the coalface? Not that much, I suspect. Anyway, stop complaining about your lack of sleep. I doubt you would have rather been in bed with a cup of cocoa with that gay prostitute flatmate of yours.

So, we're celebrating tonight. Email me your pick up address and we'll send a car. We're having something to eat at *The Ivy* before we go out.”

Jack wasn't really listening. Hitherto unrecalled memories from the previous evening came flooding back to him. He had totally forgotten about discussing Mark with them. He'd told them all about it. True, the conversation had occurred at the zenith of his drunkenness and at that stage, he would have told them anything, but the fact that he had betrayed the trust of his new friend appalled Jack to the core. Even worse, he remembered their reaction. They had spoken of Mark as if he was a serial killer. They had given Jack a standing order not to bring Mark within a three hundred metre radius of them, and been explicit about the violence that would be meted out to Mark if he did. Jack felt sick with guilt.

"Well, Jack. Are you there?"

"Yes, sorry. I'm here."

"Seven o' clock at Covent Garden. By the way, I e-mailed that Toni slut earlier. I've agreed to meet her in the glass walled boardroom on the top floor in an hour. I told her to be ready for me on the boardroom table and be naked apart from her stiletto shoes."

"Pretty horny," replied Jack, not quite managing to conceal the envy in his voice.

"Yes, not that I will be there to see it. Michael will be just about bumping off Fredo on my TV as Ms. Toni Hasse is escorted naked and humiliated from the building. She will never again work in this industry. This is what happens when anybody crosses my friend, Jack. Seven o'clock. See you later."

"Er, yeah, see you later, Lothar."

What should he do? Toni had been a bit of an idiot the other night, and in many ways he truly held her in contempt. But this? Surely the punishment must be in proportion to the crime. This was like sending someone to Guantanamo for a five-year stretch for

stealing a Mars Bar from the school tuck shop. Jack couldn't intervene though. He knew Lothar was doing it to prove his point about loyalty. But was this the sort of loyalty Jack was looking for? He reckoned his actions from last night were certainly not what Mark was looking for. Jack was disgusted with himself.

Nevertheless, he decided to text Mark, "Sorry mate, can't do it. I've got to work late".

He felt bad... but, well... it was only one night.

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN AND INTO THE FIRE

24 MAY 2006, 21:04

"Number one woman in the world, Jack?" Stefan queried.

"I don't know. Er, Kirsten Dunst. She's incredible."

"Yes, I've seen her out a few times. She's even better in real life."

"What about you?" asked Jack.

"The perfect female form. Blonde and blue, Anna Kournikova. She's out of this world."

"Yes, I guess so."

Jack was fairly bored by this conversation. It was the sort of thing he had discussed when he was fifteen.

"So, Toni got fired." Jack's words showed no emotion. Nor did he want them to.

"Yes. She'll know better next time." Lothar's smile immediately twisted into disgust as he glanced over Jack's shoulder. "Look at him."

Lothar pointed at a large man across the restaurant - a tourist, by the look of him.

“And he’s going to eat in front of us. Disgusting.”

“Yes, slovenly disgrace,” agreed Stefan.

“Alright, fellas.”

Jack put his arms out in an attempt to quieten the brothers. The man and his family weren’t that far away from their table.

“No Jack, not alright. It is disgusting. If you went round to a person’s house and there were two-month-old pizza boxes everywhere and beer all over the walls, and the bathroom hadn’t been cleaned in two years, what would you think? Absolutely disgusting. And you would be correct.

The human being has a duty to look after his habitat, it is what makes us more than animals; and when people do not, you call them tramps, or chavs, or any other derogatory name. Well, it is exactly the same for the human body - more so, in fact. The duty is stronger. We were given a body – a biomechanical miracle, the legacy of millions of years of evolution - and it is our duty to look after it, feed it correctly, exercise it and treat it like the gift it is. Put me anywhere in the world Jack, strip me of all my wealth and power, and I will still have this chiselled body. It is the greatest gift. And if a person does not treat it as such, well, we should call them similarly derogatory names. Watch.”

Lothar nodded to Stefan, who shouted over to the table, “Yes. That’s right. Slovenly disgrace. You fat fucking pig.”

The family all looked up. The father looked shocked and embarrassed. The younger of the two children, a young girl, no older than six, began to cry.

Jack thought he had never been more appalled.

“Okay lads. Shall we get the bill and move on?”

He was desperate to leave now. The older of the two children, a young boy of about ten was staring at Jack, and the hurt look in his eyes made Jack feel like the disgusting individual his father had been so unnecessarily accused of being.

Lothar turned to Jack and regarded him with a casual superiority.

“Okay then Jack. If you want to go, just get the bill now. You get it and you pay for it.”

Jack said nothing, sheepishly playing with a breadstick.

“If not. And if we are paying for it, then you will let us finish our wine in our own good time, and then we will go.”

Two men walked past the table. Jack recognised them from the TV, although they were predominantly on the radio.

“Chris, Dave. Alright boys?”

Stefan seemed to know them. The two men had stopped next to the table. However, their body language suggested they were eager to get away.

“See you later on. I’ll buy you both a beer. Great show today.”

Stefan really did sound like a sycophant. Jack watched very carefully and it was clear that Chris either didn’t know Stefan’s name, or if he did, was reluctant to show such familiarity. Jack could see that Chris and Dave were desperately looking for a way to escape as quickly yet politely as possible. He recognised all the signs, he’d seen the exact same body language in almost every girl he had attempted to chat up. Chris looked so uncomfortable he would have been prepared to light the Bat Signal in the hopes of a rescue.

“Er, yes. Listen we’ve got to er... So...yeah. See you around, maybe,” Chris replied, before the two of them left with as much haste that they could get away with.

“Top blokes,” Stefan assured Lothar.

Over Jack’s shoulder, and just out of earshot of Stefan and Lothar, Jack overheard the DJs’ conversation.

“Who was he?” asked Dave.

“Oh, you don’t want to know. The biggest wanker you should never hope to get collared by in a bar. Wouldn’t leave me alone last week.”

Jack smiled. Yes, it had been a derogatory comment about his two new acquaintances, but somewhere inside him was a small and weakening voice, that - despite floundering in a sea of expensive drinks, fancy restaurants, flash cars, unsurpassed arrogance, stunningly beautiful and equally easy women – still had just enough strength to remind him that this was a small victory and an evening of the score for the large gentleman across the restaurant, who now was finding it impossible to enjoy his family meal.

A TEST OF CHARACTER

24 MAY 2006, 23:52

“Who will you be supporting in the World Cup?” Jack shouted into Lothar’s ear.

They were sat in a booth right next to a speaker. This was the third different bar they’d been to since leaving the restaurant, and Jack had collected four phone numbers. Stefan was at the bar buying champagne.

“Germany.”

“Aren’t you Danish?”

“Yes”

“Oh right.”

No explanation.

“Well, hopefully England will avoid them. As long as one doesn’t top their group with the other second, we should do. Why haven’t you gone out there?”

“Stef and I were invited by a number of clients, but we have work to do here,” Lothar said much more seriously than usual. “Besides, the three of us have women to fuck.”

Jack was drunk again and laughed inanely at Lothar’s comment.

“Yes, we do!!!” Jack said grinning whilst hearing the multiple exclamation marks neatly slipping into place, and thus giving Lothar a verbal high five. He had stopped recognising moments such as this as sickeningly brown nosing. Luckily he managed to stop himself from exclaiming, “You da man!” at the top of his voice, but it was touch and go.

“Hiya mate. How long have you been down here?”

A man was talking to Jack, who had to take a moment to focus. He really was wasted.

“Jonny?”

The man grinned broadly,

“Hiya mate.”

Jack stood up, stumbled and embraced him.

“Jonny McSween. Good to see you. I haven’t seen you since uni. How are you?”

“I’m good thanks, Jack. How’s Sarah?”

“I don’t fucking know. Ha! Fuck her anyway. I’m been banging loads of sluts now anyway. We split up a few months ago.”

“Oh. Well, sorry about that bruv. Anyway, all the best.”

The two boys hugged again. Jonny hadn’t got much sensible conversation from Jack and seemed eager to get away.

“Do not be bringing people like that over to me, Jack.”

Lothar was deadly serious - his eyes fixed directly on Jack’s.

“People I used to go to uni with?” asked Jack, confused.

“No. Spooks.”

Jack was stunned into silence. After a couple of seconds, he realised his mouth had dropped open in an astounded gape that would have been comical had it not been for such an earth shatteringly appalling reason.

Lothar finished his drink, stood up and excused himself to get some cigars. Everything about his demeanour suggested he had merely made a comment about the weather.

Jack didn't know what to say. What was there do say? Where did you *begin*? He didn't approve. Of course he didn't approve - he was horrified, mortified... outraged. But he was also realistic.

Jack knew casual racism was prevalent in Britain, and that some people used racist phrases and jokes quite indifferently, without malice, but without thinking. It was just the way it was. Others would use the same phrases, but mean them, partially at least, especially behind closed doors. Jack, felt very strongly about how deeply damaging this 'harmless' flippant prejudice was. Just because something was light-hearted, not backed by genuine hatred, or even just simply ingrained by tradition, did not make it acceptable, and people with a strong sense of fairness, decency, and morality should make a stand against it – people like himself. He'd always believed that in many aspects of humanity, the people who turned a blind eye to atrocity and wrongdoing were as guilty as the perpetrators.

But Lothar's words hadn't been a casual inappropriate joke, or quiet comment. This had been an open racist statement, a slur on one of his old friends. Jack realised that the saddest thing was, a realist would have to admit that in many parts of the country there was still a large degree of openly racist feeling of exactly this kind. Perhaps it came from ignorance? From people that had never seen a face that looked so markedly different to their own. Or perhaps it was just human nature to define yourself by the dislike of someone different; someone fatter, skinnier, with a bigger nose, smaller ears, different colour skin... whatever. Perhaps there was no answer, and these were ridiculously oversimplified ideas, but if there was an answer, it was beyond Jack's intellect. It had always amazed him how reluctant the media was to acknowledge that this openly racist

abuse was still a nationwide issue, especially when coupled with violence and anger. He'd heard the force with which people spat out the word "nigger" and "paki". It was horrendously offensive. The fact was, racism in 2006 was far, far from a thing of the past.

Now he had a choice. What did he do? Every fibre of Jack's being, every shred of intelligence, every scrap of ethical meaning in his soul screamed at him to walk away, walk away now.

If Jack's life were a teen show that always ended with a moral - California Dreams style - he would have made his feelings clear to Lothar on the spot and talked him round, ending with a suitably catchy message: Increase the Peace, etc.

But life wasn't like that.

When Lothar returned with a fresh glass of champagne and a huge Cuban cigar, he sat down and held his glass aloft.

"To new friends Jack. Cheers."

It was decision time, and Jack made it. He looked back into Lothar's eyes and his face cracked into a broad, friendly grin. Their glasses clinked expensively.

"Cheers."

COMMODITIES, COMMODITIES, COMMODITIES

25 MAY 2006, 04:23

The sounds of Jay Z boomed out over the balcony and drifted into the warm night sky.

“You belong to the city, you belong to the night. In the city of darkness, he’s the man of the night,” the rapper sang.

“Listen to it, Jack. Listen to it.”

Jack and Lothar were out on the balcony of another flat of Lothar’s, a different one. This flat was somewhere on Chelsea harbour. It was the penthouse. The balcony was huge - five times bigger than Jack’s entire flat. It was an incredible setting. The two girls they had brought back with them certainly thought so. They’d left the balcony seconds earlier to go and do a few lines of coke in the bathroom. Jack had been vaguely surprised that Lothar had allowed this, being normally so intolerant of what he described as ‘sloppiness of character’.

“Hear the words Jack. It is about us. The city is mine, Jack. It’s yours too. It’s all ours. We own this place. The city is mine,” Lothar screamed over the balcony.

He was pissed.

Jack smiled. As he looked across the river with the soft lighting of the penthouse lounge behind him, he certainly felt like he was on the way up. Lothar pointed the remote control at the stereo and the music pumped out louder and louder. There would be no trouble from the neighbours. The boys owned the block. They had developed it just 18 months ago at a huge profit.

“Can I do something for you, Lothar? Work wise I mean. Is there anything I can get involved in?”

Jack wanted a piece of this. Lothar lived the life that Riley strived for. It was impossible not to be taken in.

Lothar grinned at Jack.

“Of course you can, my friend. Of course you can.”

Lothar raised his bottle to Jack, and motioned for Jack to raise his too.

“To the three of us. The women, the cars, the money - and the three of us.”

The boys clinked bottles and then took huge mouthfuls of beer as they drained the bottles in one go. They touched their empty bottles again and threw them over the balcony. The bottles made a loud crash as they smashed on the ground below.

“The city is mine,” Jack screamed.

As he did so, he felt his jeans lower and soft, long-nailed fingers dipped into his boxer shorts.

“The city is mine,” Jack repeated, softer this time, but with no less meaning.

WHEN THERE IS NO CANDLE LEFT TO BURN

25 MAY 2006, 10:34

“Jack, are you listening to me?”

“Yes, ‘course I am, Paul.”

He wasn’t. Paul was trying to run him through the new procedures and protocols recently introduced by the bank. He’d been sat in this meeting room for twenty minutes listening to Paul and watching the most boring PowerPoint presentation in history. He hadn’t had any sleep at all, of course, but even if he’d had twelve solid hours and a wake up massage, he would still have been fighting a losing battle to focus on a thing Paul was saying.

Only three hours ago he had been in the midst of a threesome at Lothar’s flat - one girl straddling his waist and the other his face. Lothar had passed out so Jack hadn’t wanted to disappoint his date. And besides, he had always hated waste. No surprise then that he was finding it a little difficult to get excited about Paul’s lecture.

“You’re not. You’re not listening to a fucking word I’m saying. Don’t think because you’re hanging round with those two German wankers that you can do what you want round here.”

“They’re Danish actually.”

“Same difference.”

“Really Paul? Well, I doubt eighty million Germans would agree with you, or fifty million Danes. Try rocking up to German passport control with a Danish passport and see if they go along with your theory. And don’t call them wankers.”

“Don’t get cocky Jack. You’ve turned into a right little prick since you’ve started going out with them.”

“Can my line manager really speak to me like that?” Jack asked, deliberately obtuse.

“I can speak to you however I want.”

“I’m not sure that’s true, Paul. There’s such a thing as Employment Laws. We’re not in a workhouse. If you’ve got time this lunch I could run through some of the things you can and can’t say to me – or I could just ask someone higher up to look into it for me? What do you reckon?”

Paul looked astonished, before his expression softened and he leaned towards Jack conspiratorially. “Jack, mate. Listen, I promoted you because I liked you and you had a good attitude. Now I still like you, but you have been a bit out of character recently, and it’s worrying in an employee like yourself. At the end of the day, we’re all here to do a job. You with me mate?”

Although Jack was exhausted, he still felt his adrenaline pumping regardless, and as he fixed Paul with a cool stare, he had never felt so untouchable, so invincible.

“Paul, mate. Listen... you are completely clueless. You are concerning yourself with a pointless job. Nobody who matters in this company knows who you are – but they sure a hell know who I am. So don’t waste your time trying to be all pally with me, because as far as I’m concerned, your existence is futile. You with *me* mate?”

Paul sat expressionless for a few seconds, before sighing with disappointment, although he assumed Jack would read it as defeat.

“Just get out of here, will you Jack? Just go back to your desk. I’m done with this and you obviously don’t want me to help you. But remember this - if you fuck up, it’ll be on your head.”

“It won’t, Paul. It’ll be on yours,” Jack replied, smiling as he left the room.

Paul hit the desk in fury. He knew Jack was right. He’d been handed the responsibility of training the staff on the new regime, and if it went pear-shaped it would be his head on the chopping block.

As Jack walked up the stairs and back to his department, his phone vibrated in his pocket. It was Mark.

“Morning mate. Did you do an all-nighter?”

“Yeah mate. You wouldn’t believe the two birds I fucked last night. They were absolutely incredible. You’ve got to see them. I’ll bring them round the flat.”

Jack knew he wouldn’t. Mark did too.

“Did you go out?”

“Yes, I was out with Lothar and Stefan.”

“I thought you said you were working late.”

Jack bit his fist. Fuck, he’d forgotten his excuse to Mark. He was usually quite good at these things. It was only a little lie after all, but in his tiredness, he was slipping.

“Yes, really sorry matey. I was working and then we went out afterwards. I was going to ring you but I thought it was a bit late.”

Mark knew this was also untrue.

“Anyway, we’ll do something together soon.”

“What about meeting those blokes tonight?” Mark asked.

“What blokes?”

Jack was all over the show. He wasn't sure where the lies ended and the truth began, or vice versa.

“That Phil you met on the train. You were supposed to be meeting him and his mates. And I was supposed to be going with you.”

“Oh right. Yeah, no probs. We'll do that tonight.”

Jack hadn't made any plans with the brothers so he thought it wouldn't hurt to put a bit of time in with Mark, although a traitorous part of him pointed out that if Stefan and Lothar called to make arrangements he would drop Mark like a bad habit.

“I'm supposed to be meeting him at half past eight at Top Shop on Oxford Street. Why don't you meet me at Liverpool Street at eight and we'll get the Central Line?”

“Okay. Sounds good. See you at eight,” Mark said, sounding a bit odd. Jack didn't notice.

“Later.” said Jack, and quickly hung up.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

25 MAY 2006, 10:50

Jack sat at his desk and stared blankly at his computer screen. One thing he had always done on a consistent basis was analyse his own actions. He thought it showed strength of character and considered it a positive feature of his make-up.

He'd met loads of people in his life that had surely never given a moment's thought to their actions. They couldn't have, or surely they would have done something about it.

An accusation often levelled at men – as Jack had found out when browsing through Sarah’s womens’ magazines - was that they never thought they were in the wrong and never apologised. Jack always thought he was wrong, and always apologised.

At least once a day during his time with Sarah, he had taken a minute out to think about what he had done and said, and whether it had been fair. If he came to the conclusion he had been wrong then he’d apologise.

In the early days, it had made for a very harmonious relationship; in the latter days, not so much. Although Jack had still taken his moment out, he kept arriving at the conclusion that he was in the right. That’s anger and bottled up bitterness for you, he thought. It doesn’t just cloud your judgement; it engulfs it - like a tornado to your sense of reason. Who has time to come to a balanced conclusion when they’ve got tornados to fight?

Jack was having one of his internal appraisals right now. Was he happy with the way he had acted with Paul earlier? No. In fact he’d actually been a bit of a self-satisfied prick. What was happening to him? He’d never have dreamed of speaking to anyone like that before. He’d deserved every name Paul had called him and then some. He decided to apologise to Paul.

It was a useful little tool, this self-assessment. It meant that you didn’t need some catastrophic event to bring you to your senses. It would have helped Keanu Reeves’ character in *The Devil’s Advocate* no end - saved his wife and the incestuous impregnation of his sister for example. If Keanu could have just stopped for a moment and thought “You know what, I’m being a little self absorbed here”, then perhaps he

could have avoided the final scene's unnecessary confrontation and not felt compelled to shoot himself in the head.

Then again, Jack considered a film whereby the lead character decides over a cup of coffee and a moment's reflection to shun the devil and make do with his life as a small town lawyer is unlikely to end up as a serious contender for an Oscar. If he ever met a screenwriter, he would definitely make that suggestion.

Jack apologised to Paul. In doing so, he felt he had placated Karma's approaching acolytes. Yin and Yang sat happily cuddling on the sofa with a takeaway - at least for the time being.

It was never likely to last though, and indeed, as Jack called Lothar and Stefan to make plans for the weekend, Yin turned the TV over to a World Cup warm up show and took the last spring roll, which precipitated Yang shouting, "Typical, you care more about that stupid game than you do me," before storming out of the room with a slam of the door.

FOCUS, FOCUS, FOCUS

25 MAY 2006, 20:30

“Punctual. There he is there.”

Jack pointed to Phil, who was fighting his way through the Oxford Street crowd.

“Hiya Jack. Good to see you again.”

Phil and Jack shook hands.

“You too mate. This is Mark. Mark this is Phil.”

The two boys also shook hands.

“Yeah yeah bruv. Good to meet you. Phil Sloan... Or the Sloan-Dogg as some people call me.”

Mark chuckled politely, but as Phil turned away, Mark raised questioning eyebrows at Jack, who groaned inwardly. He had forgotten Phil’s awful trait of using affected ‘street’ language when he met someone he was not used to. He nodded at Mark to indicate that Phil was ok, but Phil had already pointed up the street and moved off.

“It’s just down here,” he said over his shoulder.

Phil walked away from Oxford Street and Jack and Mark fell in behind him as they followed him down James Street.

“I am not down with Oxford Street geez, you know? If I ever go to hell - *when* I go to hell, I’m telling you, it will look like Oxford Street when the sun is out. Ya get me? Where do all of these people come from anyway?” Phil asked.

“I know. And they all stop in front of you every two seconds in the middle of the walkway. Full of sinners, not winners,” Jack quipped.

Phil smiled, clocking the reference.

“Anyway bredren, only 15 days to go.”

“Yeh, are you excited? Phil’s a massive England fan,” Jack filled Mark in. It was pretty much all he knew about Phil.

“I can’t wait. We’re going to win it, Jack. I’m telling you, we’re going to win it. Rooney or no Rooney.”

“I think it’s going to be the latter unfortunately. But let’s hope so.”

That was Mark with the pessimism.

“It’s just in here.”

Phil halted the boys outside of a building on Wigmore Street. Phil pressed the buzzer on the intercom.

“It’s just me,” he said.

A buzz sounded and the door clicked open.

“What is this place, Phil? I thought we were going for a beer.”

Jack hadn’t really asked any questions at all about the evening. Now he wished he had.

“We are later. Don’t worry, I thought it might be interesting to do something a bit different first.”

Immediately, Jack feared the worst. He didn’t mind Phil but had always had reservations about his motives. He had an unsettling intensity at times, and Jack couldn’t help noticing that now they were off the street behind closed doors, Phil had suddenly dropped his street speak and spoke normally, even eloquently.

“How do you both fancy making yourself 50 quid each for an hour and a half’s work? Cash in hand.”

Despite their reservations, Jack and Mark's financial plight was such that they couldn't even afford to glance at the gift horse's arse, never mind look in his mouth.

"Definitely. Is it legal?" Mark asked.

Jack was unsure whether the answer to this question would have made a difference to Mark, not least because he couldn't think of any worse way to earn fifty quid than the things Mark used to do, but to Jack any illegality would definitely be an issue.

"Course it is. I'm just taking you upstairs to a focus group. You'll just sit round with eight others and talk for a while."

"Result."

Mark and Jack exchanged smiles and followed Phil up the stairs.

CASH FOR THREADBARE ROPE

25 MAY 2006, 20:40

“Anyone? Coke, beer, Sprite?” Jack reached into the small fridge in the corner of the room and addressed his question at the group.

They were all sat around an oval table. Phil was at the head. On the table were two plates of sandwiches and a bowl of crisps. The chairs were high-backed and comfortable, like lounge chairs, and the table at knee height. It wasn't like a board meeting. It was a very informal set up.

Nobody answered Jack. He got a couple of head-shakes and one incoherent mumble, but essentially no response. He shrugged his shoulders and took two bottles of *Peroni* out for him and Mark. Jack took his seat and passed Mark his beer.

“Okay guys,” Phil started. “You all know why you're here.”

This was a statement, but it should have been a question in Jack and Mark's case. They didn't have a bloody clue.

“We're just going to have a chat. I'm going to sit here and facilitate. I'm just trying to keep the chat going. But what I'm interested in are your opinions. There are no right or wrong answers. I'm interested in every one of your views. If someone hasn't said anything, I may ask them directly, and if somebody has said lots, I may ask them to give the others a chance. Please don't take offence.

Now, you are being filmed. Don't worry, you won't be on TV and you won't appear on any adverts. It's just for me so that I can pay attention to what you're saying and not have to worry about making a load of notes. Is everybody okay with all of that?”

“That’s fine, Phil. But what about that screen?” Jack asked.

There was a long wide mirror behind Phil that was blatantly a one-way screen. You could hear voices behind it, for a start. Jack heard one voice hush the others the moment he asked the question.

“Oh, don’t worry about that. One of my colleagues is sat behind there watching. It just means there is one less person in here to crowd things.”

Jack thought he had heard at least three voices, but he wasn’t concerned enough to push it.

“Now, I want to talk to you about the three main political parties. Who do you all vote for?”

It turned out, that of the ten assembled members of the group, seven didn’t vote, one voted Labour, one voted Liberal Democrat, and one lied about voting Conservative - probably quite an accurate cross-section of the public. Jack knew that the lying Tory was not David Cameron, but Mark, who had felt too embarrassed to also admit he didn’t vote.

“Excellent,” said Phil.

He was convincing nobody.

“So, if I say the words *Labour Party*, tell me the first word that pops into your head. Ash, why don’t you go first?”

Ash was a 21-year-old from Kent. He was trying - and just about failing - to hide his entire face with the peak of his cap. It was a gallant effort. You could only just about see his mouth. Ash didn’t appear too eager to speak.

“What?” Ash grunted.

“Sorry?”

Phil was trying to be polite. He seemed to be unsure where the confusion lay. Ash must have heard him, so surely he must have understood. Obviously not.

“What words come to your mind when I say Labour?” Phil repeated.

“Tony Blair.”

Brilliant, thought Jack. Succinct and incisive. His big moment over, that was Ash done. Spent, he picked up his plate of sandwiches and munched away with the kind of contentment only achieved from A Job Well Done.

“Great,” lied Phil, as though Paxman himself had deconstructed the state of British politics in a ninety minute diatribe. “Anything else?”

Ash shook his head.

“Okay, what about you, Mary?”

Mary was sat next to Ash.

“Red.”

Jack suppressed a giggle.

“Okay, excellent.”

Jack thought Phil’s enthusiasm was admirable. Even more so, since he managed to keep it up through the next five answers: Prime Minister, Downing Street, Gordon Prescott, Fuckers and Maggie Thatcher.

Jack felt for Phil, he really did. It was taking “say what you see” to new lengths. In fact it was often a case of “say what you *don’t* see.” For example, it was clear that Tony – 26 from Bromley - dreamt of some hybrid created by a horrifying liaison betwixt the Deputy Prime Minister and Chancellor.

Anyway, Jack thought the last two answers – *fuckers* and *Maggie Thatcher* - were pretty funny, given that the penultimate answer was pretty accurate and the final answer - clearly a confused mistake from Simone aged 18 from Peckham and more worryingly about to go off to study Maths at Liverpool University – had turned out to be almost spot on.

At this point, Jack and Mark's sympathy was with Phil. He was not only flogging a dead horse, he was pushing it from behind, pulling it with a truck, shouting in its ear, and giving it mouth to mouth. Anything and everything to get a bit of movement. They felt sorry for him and the three of them had exchanged sympathetic smiles at some of the answers.

So far, Phil had managed to keep up the pretence of his earlier maxim of *no wrong answers*, as if this was actually accurate when it came to this bizarre group. However, Phil's next line of questioning momentarily lost him Jack and Mark's support.

“Okay guys. Imagine the Labour Party, the Tories and the Liberal Democrats are at a dinner party together. What do they look like, what are they wearing and what are they drinking?”

Jack couldn't imagine a cheesier line of questioning if it had come from McFlea's estate agent success manuals.

The group brainstormed, although 'mind-drizzled' would probably be a more fitting phrase to be applied to this bunch.

Ash suggested the Liberal Democrats in a football kit. It had seemed a surprisingly original idea until he admitted he had read about something similar in a news story from a few weeks earlier.

Simone proposed the Labour Party in pink briefs and nothing else, as she thought Tony Blair was 'fit'. The group recoiled in horror at the thought of the Prime Minister in this get up – but she continued to smile beatifically in her own world. A grim fantasy anti-utopia in which ravenous flesh eating monsters stalked the land, but even worse, Tony Blair was fit.

All in all, it was a bit of a shambles, but eventually they did come to some sort of consensus once Jack, Mark and Zoe decided to take over and dominate the discussion.

They decided that the Liberal Democrat would be drinking mild, wearing a tweed suit with elbow patches, smoking roll ups and holding a can of lentils in his hand. Mark came up with the *lentils* bit as he said he always thought of the Lib Dems as students.

The Tory – a good 20 years older than his counterparts - would be drinking port, wearing an old Marks & Spencer suit, and sleeping in a chair.

The Labour representative would be wearing a tailored Paul Smith suit, drinking a Bellini, perspiring oil and chatting in the ear of a blonde woman with no face. This was – Zoe's suggestion - seemingly quite the political activist – who said this image had a dual meaning. The symbolism was lost on Ash who thought it was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard, after cucumber sandwiches.

Phil seemed pleased with what he'd heard, but though this line of questioning was already straining against the weight of cheddar cheese that engulfed it, he pursued it still further.

“Okay guys. Excellent. So we've got our three guests at the party. Would you go up and speak to them? Who would you want to chat to?”

The questions were pretty transparent and it was clear to most of the group what Phil was driving at. It was 'happy slapping' in its crude obviousness.

But Ash was lost.

"What the fuck are you on about? What party? That bird's going on about people sweating oil from his pits? I thought I was getting 40 quid to talk about who I voted for. I thought you were on about the *X Factor* final but this party thing sounds like I'm tripping and I've taken fuck all. What's going on here?"

It appeared it was all a bit much for Ash.

Phil's polished approach took over.

"Don't worry about it. Nobody is holding you here."

Phil had no sooner finished the sentence when Ash stood up.

"Right then. I'm fucking off. I've got my money. Fucking weirdos."

The door slammed and Phil continued, "Okay, well, we're a man down, but I'm sure you guys can cope without Ashley's profound thoughts."

Even Phil had dropped the act for a second, and smiled when the rest of the group giggled. Jack thought some of the others were on dodgy ground by casting stones at Ash from their own glasshouses.

In the end, the group agreed they wouldn't want to speak to any of the politicians at the party. Jack said he would go off in search of a CD player, sit in a separate room and listen to some tunes on his own with a few beers. Phil laughed and said Jack's proposition was a tempting one.

MAP OF THE PROBLEMATIQUE

25 MAY 2006, 22:10

“Right, last question. If you had *carte blanche* and could change one thing about the world, or this country, what would it be? Zoe?”

For the last half an hour, Phil had only directed questions at Jack, Mark and Zoe. He had cut all of the others out of the discussion altogether. Either they didn't know, didn't show, or didn't care about Phil's earlier assertions of the importance of everybody's views. In any case, it looked like this declaration had been well and truly shelved, and no-one had questioned the current status quo.

“I'd sort the situation out with the Israelis and Palestinians.”

“How would you do that Zoe?”

Over the course of the evening Jack's admiration of Phil had grown and grown. Now he seemed in his element, an excellent facilitator.

“Well, I've had a plan for a few years. But they've fucked it up now by going into Iraq. My plan was for the UN to go in there. Set a fair balance of land on the basis of the UN Resolutions and that, and then have the area policed by loads, thousands like, of UN forces. That way, the Palestinians will have the land they're entitled to and nothing can be interrupted by the Israelis.”

“What about the Israelis?” Phil asked.

“Hang on. I haven't finished. The big problem for the Israelis is security, yeah? Well, my big UN force would also have a unit, like an anti-terrorist unit, that would be free to go into Palestinian territory and seek out the terrorists and troublemakers. They would be

punished by a court system. Not shot on sight. Then, if, God forbid, anything happened, it would be treated like it would be, or should be, over here. Like the sentencing of the bastards from 7/7 - had they lived. And no demolishing of houses or anything like that. No innocents would be punished.”

“That’s a bold suggestion Zoe.”

“Yeah, but I reckon it could have worked. There’s no right and wrong on either side. The only way to do it is to have someone or something independent sorting it out. There’s too much bad blood on both sides now. Not now though. They’d never accept the Americans in there after Iraq. And it would have needed the Americans.”

Jack thought it was a very good suggestion. Zoe was Jewish and had talked earlier about spending a lot of time out there. He’d never been, so who was he to argue? But Jack still had no idea why Phil was asking these questions.

“Mark?”

“I don’t know mate, to be honest. It’s all fucked up isn’t it?”

“What is?” asked Phil, genuinely interested.

Jack noted Phil’s interest. It was *real* interest in everything they were saying. He wasn’t going through the motions for some third party. He didn’t act like it was his job at all. He was passionate

“It’s just all fucked up. The lot. The whole fucking world. Our country. The way it’s all run. It’s just unfair.”

These comments could have come from Ash. They were not incisive, thought-out suggestions like Zoe’s. But it was obvious from Mark’s face and his tone of voice that he really meant it. Of course Phil and Zoe were not aware of the hardship that Mark had

suffered in his life. Anybody provided with a short synopsis of his life would certainly have understood the basis of Mark's views.

Phil seemed to as well.

"You're not wrong, Mark," Phil said, shaking his head and momentarily dropping his objectivity.

Just then, Jack heard the chatter from behind the screen. It was on overdrive.

"So what do you think of the Conservatives nowadays then, Mark? They've made some moves since Cameron became leader, haven't they? He has been getting involved with the gangsta rap scene and really connecting with young people hasn't he?" Phil said on his feet acting for the Devil, barely able to stop himself smiling.

"You've got to be kidding. There's already one Cam'ron in hip hop," Mark replied. "I don't think there's any more room for MC Devious Dave. It just shows you that only in Westminster could a 40-year-old, old Etonian be considered a young, fresh, grassroots voice. I think I could teach him a few things about life."

Phil smiled.

"And you, Jack?"

"I could answer that one." Mark laughed, looking knowingly at Jack. "Get rid of the monarchy."

"A republican, eh?" asked Phil.

"How can you not be?"

Jack launched the ball back 60 yards deep into Phil's half of the field. It came down with the proverbial white stuff all over it.

"Well, this isn't really my place to say. I'm just playing devil's advocate," Phil said.

“But they do provide a lot of money through tourism and they raise a lot for charity,”

Phil went on.

“Bollocks.”

Jack felt very strongly about the subject.

“It’s not bollocks Jack, in fairness. You can’t dispute the fact that they raise money for charity, it’s a fact, not an opinion.”

“Ok, so they may bring the money in but it’d come in anyway. The tourist thing? If we disbanded the monarchy today, then you would still get 80 per cent of the tourists coming to see the palaces and everything else tomorrow. We could still keep all of the guards and everything if the money is so important to the economy. When was the last time anybody had their head chopped off on Tower Hill? And the Tower is still packed every day with people willing to pay 12 pounds a throw.”

“Okay, but what about the charities? The Prince’s Trust does a lot of good doesn’t it?”

“The monarchy just acts as a figurehead. You could change the The Prince’s Trust to The David Beckham Trust, or anybody else. If you gave them the same staff and the same publicity, you’d still make a fortune. Think about it for a second. The monarchy: Princes and Princesses, Kings and Queens. It’s 2006. It’s bloody ridiculous. How can it possibly still exist? How can there be people, who by a complete accident of birth and have achieved nothing in their lives, that are kept by an entire country in incredible luxury? How can we justify that when there are people suffering all over the world?”

“Hmmm. I’m getting there Jack. I’m interested... I’m on the forecourt but I’m not looking at a car yet,” Phil said.

“Think about this then. You’ve got a kid called Ben. Ben has no parents and has spent his entire life in care. Through no fault of his own, he was thrown out at 18 without a penny. He lives in a hovel, a horrible dilapidated bedsit surrounded by drug dens. He’s got no education as he was moved about so much. He gets a job on a production line at a factory, six miles from his bedsit. He can barely afford to get there. Sometimes he has to walk. His shift starts at five in the morning.

If this lad has to get up at four o’clock on a freezing cold November morning to stand on a production line all day long, why should one single penny of his wage – money he has grafted, sweated and killed himself for - go to these people who only have absurd titles and wealth because of their heritage? To paraphrase George Orwell, the thought of a man being waited on and fed by an army of servants, while young children beg for food in the street, is utterly revolting.”

“Woah, there!” Phil laughed. “Good to see such passion. I don’t necessarily agree with everything but I’m still sold. I’m driving out of the lot.”

There was a brief exchange of smiles between the remaining participants of the discussion.

“You obviously feel very strongly about it.” Phil prompted. “But surely you mean the monarchy as an institution, not as individuals? To follow your logic, the people who are born into Royalty can no more help their situation any more than the lad Ben who was born into squalor and deprivation. In the same way as Ben deserves society’s compassion, surely the Royal family don’t deserve our contempt. As individuals at least.”

“I suppose so. To a point, yeah, it’s not their fault or anything. I don’t know, it’s just... I could cope with it if the monarchy were profound thinkers, or trying to crack the cure for cancer or something worthwhile like that. But they’ve got nothing about them these people. Half of them apparently need to cheat to get an Art A-Level. And don’t get me started on the periphery members - the ones you never hear about.”

Phil laughed and held up a restraining hand.

“Don’t worry, Jack. I won’t. Not right now anyway. Have a drink, mate.”

Mark passed him his bottle of beer.

“Okay, well on that rant, I think we’ll call it a day.”

All members of the group stood to leave.

“Jack, Zoe and Mark, could you wait behind for a minute? I need to give you your cash.”

“I got mine on the way in,” replied Mark.

Phil winked, Jack kicked his leg, and even Zoe rolled her eyes as Mark finally managed to read between the lines.

THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE SCREEN

25 MAY 2006, 22:25

“Okay everybody, you can come out now,” Phil said, addressing the mirror.

Seconds later the door next to the screen opened and three people walked in.

“Jack, Zoe and Mark meet Will, Sal, and Suzy.”

After the introduction and handshakes, Phil spoke again.

“Okay you lot, shall we go and get a drink?”

“Yes, let’s go,” said one of the newcomers.

Jack couldn’t remember whether his name was Will or Sal or anything else for that matter. He was awful with names.

He mouthed, “What’s his name?” to Mark.

Mark mouthed, “Will” in reply.

“Where are we going to, Phil?” Mark asked.

“We’re going to get a drink, guys. You deserve it after that.”

Jack found himself a bit perplexed and not a little angry. He could have been out with Stef and Lothar and - given the last few nights - a host of hot women. Instead, he was here with a load of people he didn’t know and everybody was talking in mystical riddles. He wanted to know what the fuck was going on.

“Look, no offence, but I’m going nowhere until someone tells me why I’m here. Otherwise I’m offski.”

“We’ll tell you all about it in the bar, Jack, I promise you. It’s just round the corner. Come on son. You know me. I’ll sort you out, no probs.”

Jack had to hand it to Phil, he was a true diplomat.

“Go on then. One drink. But seriously, if you don’t fill me in, I’m getting off.”

“Done.”

JOE'S PLACE

25 MAY 2006, 22:58

“Welcome, boys and girls, to my humble establishment.”

Phil spun around pointing to every corner of the bar.

“This is your place?”

Mark was impressed.

“Yes, it’s mine. I own it.”

“It’s got no sign outside. How does anybody know about it?”

“They don’t.”

“What?”

“We don’t want anyone to.”

“But this place would do a fortune. The location is perfect. Just off Oxford Street. You’d make a bomb. It’s a quality bar as well.”

“I know; that’s why we don’t let anybody in, apart from invited guests from time to time. I own it. It’s here for me and my friends - not to make money.”

Jack realised he now knew something more about Phil. He had money. He had serious money. Jack looked around the bar, in as much as he could look around. It was dark and he could barely see the far wall. The brass bar started a couple of feet ahead of them and stretched almost the whole length of the left-hand side of the joint. Black bar stools stood all the way along it. Opposite the bar were three booths. Each booth had a long table all completely separated from each other. Jack squinted further and could just about make out a dance floor able to accommodate a fair few movers and shape throwers.

It was very dark and the smoke floated softly around the room. Jack loved it. It was a proper bar. *The Good Life* played in the background. This was the kind of bar where men, proper men, came to privately drown their sorrows. If they lost their jobs, their women, their fortunes; they knew they would find the answer at the bottom of a bourbon glass, proffered by a sympathetic bartender.

In fact, even the bartender in this bar was perfect - middle-aged, white dress shirt, black waistcoat and thin black tie. He had one of those instantly forgettable faces - a face you could feel comfortable pouring your soul out to, because afterwards you knew he'd never remember you, and you sure as hell wouldn't remember him. An ideal situation for the broken man. A good referee is at his best when nobody notices him, Jack reckoned, and the same rule equally applies to a good bartender.

This was the kind of bar Jack could have spent his life in. Speak to your friends, listen to old music and get loaded. The same could hardly be said for the hundreds of identikit nightclubs he'd spent countless evenings in - where you had to shout to make yourself heard, and which forced you immediately on the offensive to snare a girl, any girl, for the sake of being able to say you had pulled. Kudos, Nemesis, Acropolis, Eros - basically any mildly Greek sounding name.

This was how Jack would have liked to spend his evenings. This was the kind of bar that Billy Joel's *Piano Man* would have played in, or where Frank would have boozed whilst singing about Ava Gardner in *One for the Road*.

But the real clincher for Jack - the bar's ace in the hole - was the moment he asked the bartender's name.

"It's Joe, sir."

Joe. The perfect, quintessential bartender's name, for the perfect, quintessential bartender, in the perfect, quintessential bar.

Jack loved it.

"So what do you reckon, Jack?"

"Yeah, it's alright, Phil. You know? Not bad."

READ MY MIND

25 MAY 2006, 23:19

“So what’s this all about?” Mark asked the group.

Jack was glad of the change of subject. For the past ten minutes, the group had indulged in a topic of conversation typical of a group of newcomers to London - the rules of London life. Of course, this group knew them. They were insiders. They were city dwellers, they were hip, and they lived in the capital. It was all *Bright Lights, Big City* and they were not about to let anybody forget it.

They all rolled their eyes as one person after the next came up with a new tourist transgression such as, “Not having their ticket ready at the barriers. God, that’s annoying.” “Standing in a huge group in the middle of Oxford Street with a map out. Fuck, I could strangle them.” “And if one more person fails to move to the right when I’m late for work...” etc.

All through their little moans and whinges, Jack just fixed a smile on his face and longed to be elsewhere. When Samuel Johnson had proclaimed, ‘When a man tires of London he tires of life,’ Jack reckoned he hadn’t been forced to listen to this banal chat thrice weekly.

“It’s about...” Sal began.

“Woah. It’s my song, Sal. Come on let’s dance.”

Suzy jumped around as the Snoop and JT song, *Signs*, rang out in the bar.

“Come on, Sal. In Joe’s Place *where the helicopters got cam-eras!*”

Suzy's cleavage was showing and her ample breasts bounced freely as she danced about.

A month ago, Jack would have made an effort not to stare. These days he didn't care that he was noticeably mesmerised.

"Hang on, Suz. I'm talking here."

Suzy made a disappointed face and headed off to the dance floor to grind alone.

"We're like a little group - a like-minded group that get together," continued Sal, "We want to change things."

"What kind of things?" Jack asked.

"Things that are going wrong with the country and the world. Some of the things that you lot discussed before."

Phil joined in.

"Like a resistance movement. Except we're only in our infancy, so we haven't done anything yet. We're not like a terrorist group or anything. But we're going to change things."

"That's unlikely, isn't it?"

Jack was sceptical.

"It's difficult. Of course it is. But look at the three political parties. They're a joke. You said it yourself. And all of those idiots in the focus group said it too. And don't forget they are the type of people that'll be voting. Or at least should be voting. Everything has to start somewhere. We just need a platform to kick off properly. Until then, we just meet up, drink and discuss."

“Sounds like you’ll not be achieving anything for a while mate. Until then, basically you’re a glorified episode of ‘Allo ‘Allo.”

Jack was dismissive and looked to Mark to see if he was smiling. To his surprise, Mark looked distinctly pissed off. .

“At least they’re having a go, Jack,” Mark said. “I think it sounds like a good idea. So are you recruiting people?”

“Thanks Mark. Yes, that’s why we’re holding those market research or focus group sessions. To see what’s out there. We were very impressed with your views. All three of you. They were in sync with our beliefs and you seemed to have real faith in your opinions. Exactly what we’re looking for.”

“Maybe if you changed your ridiculous questions you might attract a few others.”

Jack was being really pessimistic. He knew it himself, but he was pissed off for some reason. He could have been out with Lothar and Stefan and - he didn’t want to be obsessive - but incredible women too.

“Alright Jack. Don’t be such a prick.”

Taken by surprise, Jack realised this had come from Mark. He turned to Mark ready to explode, but was halted by the look in Mark’s eyes. Immediately it dawned on Jack. A few weeks ago, Mark had been perpetuating his own cycle of misery just to pay the rent, and worse, had felt hopeless and lost, like there was no way out and no one gave a shit. Now Phil, a man who could happily live the life of Riley with his wealth, was instead talking with passion about trying to change the lives of others, and was giving Mark the chance to be a part of it. Jack knew he was denying him that opportunity by acting like a

spoilt brat. Not for the first time that week, or even that day, Jack didn't like the way he was acting.

"Sorry Mark. And you too, Phil. I didn't mean to be a dick. I got no sleep last night. I'm fucked to be honest."

"No probs Jack. The questions are embarrassing. You're right. I can barely spit them out myself. But we've been to loads of those sorts of groups and they use exactly the same questions and format. We want everyone that we decide not to recruit to think they were involved in a legitimate focus group."

That made sense to Jack.

"I'll have another JD and Coke," Will shouted to Joe the bartender. "Anyone else?"

"I'll have a vodka and coke, please mate," answered Jack.

Will nodded and left the table to collect the drinks.

"So what are your plans? Do you have any?" Jack asked.

"Yes, we're putting together a list of things we'd change if we could - a wish list if you like."

"What's on it?"

"A couple of the things you mentioned actually."

"Who got top answer?" Zoe laughed at her own *Family Fortunes* reference.

"You both did in a way. Our main international issue is peace in the Middle East. We feel strongly if somebody resolved, or put in place a course to resolve the problems between the Palestinians and Israelis, it would be a massive boost to sorting out so many of the conflicts in the world and to curb the terror threat. Internally, we're all republicans so I guess Jack gets points for that. One of our main aims on our wish list would be a

referendum on the monarchy. If the people had a choice and chose to keep it, then we'd be happy."

"It's a tough call. Considering nobody knows about you, it's almost impossible isn't it?"

Mark had intended his question to be probing rather than negative, but it was difficult. Jack was secretly glad it had come out this way. He admired the sentiment of what they were trying to achieve, but peace in the Middle East? From five nobodies in a bar off Oxford Street? It was a bit far fetched, to say the least. Phil, however, was undeterred.

"Very, very difficult. It's long haul, Mark. If you're in, you have to be prepared for that. We tried to use Will as a platform, a mouthpiece, but it was a bit of a disaster."

"Why what happened to Will?"

IT'S NEVER WISE TO ENTER INTO A CONTRACT WITH THE DEVIL WITHOUT CHECKING THE SMALL PRINT

24 FEBRUARY 2005, 12:04

Will hung up the phone. He was stunned. When he'd applied and then auditioned, it hadn't felt real. He had never really expected to get selected. He had thought he was too normal. But he had. He was going on live television in two weeks.

Will had been selected for a new big budget reality television show called *Yell to get the Hell out of the Cell*. It was the first series and there was a fair bit of hype surrounding it. Of course, he had to sign a confidentiality agreement. Nobody could know he was

going to be on the show until they witnessed it with their own eyes, along with the rest of the nation.

Will never had himself down as one of those people who would go on a reality TV show. He hated them generally. He thought the people were all fame-hungry losers with nothing better going on in their lives.

That was then, when he had been at university and had thought he had a career ahead of him. Now he was working in a call centre in a retail park in the darkest bowels of Hades. The job was hellish. He didn't even get to decide when to call people. The telephone system did it automatically. As soon as he hung up – the words *fuck off* usually signalling the end of the call with the recipient - the phone system kicked in to dial the next caller. No respite.

He didn't really have any better prospects as he'd all but failed his degree. He had got a condoned pass, which basically meant he'd failed, but the university had been so poor, they had refused to fail anybody. It would have spoiled their statistics, and rather than trying to improve the quality of their educating process, it was easier just to re-name 'Fail' with 'Meaningless Qualification' and everybody won.

Will had no girlfriend. This was nothing particularly new. He had never been a lady-killer, nor a heartbreaker, nor a Casanova. His record of killing ladies was blemish-free. Not guilty in that department. Broken hearts? None. Nova's Cassed? Not a one. He'd had the odd rendezvous at uni, but no relationships as such.

His home life was also pretty depressing. After 18 years, the only good thing about Norwich was that he knew - following *Coglan's Law* to the letter - that everywhere and anywhere else had to be better.

After a brief few years at uni, Will found himself right back where he started - living with his parents, three sisters, two dogs, a cat and a budgie, in a three-bedroom house. Will's parents had remodelled the house after he'd flown the nest for uni – supposedly never to return. Thus Will shared a bedroom with the dogs which he found particularly unpleasant; especially when he awoke to find Jimmy spooning him and Hendrix sat on his face.

When he assessed his lot, he couldn't see any reason not to go on the show. Everything else in his life was a joke, so why not go for it? It couldn't get any worse. On the plus side, Will had seen the plight of those that had been on these types of shows in the past few years. Almost to a man or woman they had all made a pretty penny from the show and a lot of them had gone on to other careers. Okay, there was the odd horror story, but when the pros and cons had been weighed up, there was nothing bad enough to put him off.

For Will - with no prospects and a life of humdrum mediocrity - it was a golden ticket, a fast track entry pass to the top. Okay, he'd always said if you had a bit of self-respect, you wouldn't choose that path. You certainly wouldn't go down that route if you cared enough about what your parents might think. After all, most of the discussions on these shows were centred around your cock size, your sex life and well, that was about it. But that was the funny thing, Will did have self-respect and he did care, but he was still willing to do the trade. He'd weighed it up and still decided to apply. If he was to sum up his attitude towards what he was about to do, it would be with the words, "fuck it".

Years ago, he would have been forced to start at the bottom and work his way up. Hard graft as his dad called it. But why do that when you could achieve more in four weeks sitting on your arse than you could in ten years following his dad's advice?

That was the problem with hard graft. It was too much like hard work.

THAT DEVIL'S A MUG

21 APRIL 2005, 14:44

Will moved into his new Islington flat. It was nice. It wasn't huge and he didn't own it, but he was living in London, and there wasn't a dog in sight. Had it been a good decision to go on the show? Will's answer was enthusiastically in the affirmative.

He was also making good money by popping up on all kinds of TV shows and in any and every magazine, and he had women to burn. As soon as he'd yelled "Get me the hell out of this cell", he'd been rushed in to meet his new agent.

His agent was a veteran of the reality TV circuit. He had told Will that his shelf life was limited and they had to strike while he was hot. Will wasn't sure if he *was* hot. He hadn't won it, or even nearly won it. He had finished seventh. Out of ten. Not exactly smoking, but it seemed there was a market for Will. He was no longer Will the person, but Will the product, Will the *brand*.

His agent told him to get himself into a whole new mindset - to think of a role model to base his career on. When the agent asked him what role model he had chosen, Will told him Rio Ferdinand. Wrong. His role model was Jade Goody. She was the queen. She was the Pele of reality television, and Will would have to get himself into her mindset if he wanted to succeed. When Will had enquired as to what mindset that was, his agent had given him a wry look.

"Will, Will, Will. Let me ask you a philosophical question. Do you believe in a soul?"

Will had replied that yes, he supposed so.

"Good. Now, if I were to ask if your soul had a price, what would you say?"

“Well, er... I'd say it's priceless”

“Wrong. Not only does it have a price my friend, but it's pretty fucking low. Welcome to Jade Goody-land.”

So Will went everywhere to get himself in the public eye - and loved every minute of it.

He owed his ingenious agent for his growing celebrity status. The moment he had left *The Cell*, his agent had pulled an unbelievable publicity stunt and told the press that Will's cock had been insured for one million. The rumour had quickly spread to become an oft-quoted fact.

Somehow, on the show Will had managed to bed one of his co-prisoners in a drunken fumble. The nation had immediately proclaimed him a stud. Little did the viewers know that Will had only slept with two girls in his life prior to the show, each a one-night stand. Will was sure that both of them would have raised an eyebrow that each performance with them had been valued at half a million a pop.

On one occasion, Will was invited to play at a televised football tournament on a Premier League pitch. He won the Soccer Six tournament that day, and scored the winner in the final. That evening at the after-party he managed to snare a future starlet from an up and coming girl band.

This was Will. He hadn't changed one iota from the practically suicidal boy who, only months earlier, had been making cold call after cold call. More work in a sick note his dad used to say to him. And it was bloody true. But look where it had got him.

Will was seen at the gala opening of an envelope, a VIP opening of a crisp packet, and a high profile opening of a samosa - as long as there was a camera there to snap him. He started to learn the ropes and got to know the regulars. He realised there was a circuit of

people operating just below the radar of fame, all in the same sinking boat as him. Their position was so precarious they couldn't afford to be out of the public eye for even a moment or they would instantly be forgotten. Once that happened, it would all be over.

So Will and his new mates went everywhere together.

“Oi Will. Are you going to the launch of Frank's Corner Shop?”

“Of course I am. I'll see you in the VIP area.”

“Safe man.”

Then there were the VIP areas. At the height of his fame, Will could get into the VIP area in practically any trendy bar or club in London. Now it was entirely possible that if a Martian happened to walk into one of these bars for a quiet bottle of beer, he might mistake the non-VIP area for the actual VIP area. After all, the non-VIP area was always much bigger and much more comfortable. It housed the dance floor; the music was clearer, the bar much bigger and the drink much cheaper.

On the other hand, the VIP area was tiny and packed full of Will and his 'celebrity' friends. You couldn't order a single short, only a full bottle with an array of mixers at a hugely inflated price

There was no valid reason why Will was considered a VIP. He felt he had stepped into some parallel universe called 2005 – a place where someone whose greatest achievement had been to propagate a lie about the insured worth of their genitalia. All was well, the only snag being, his wallet wasn't exactly of VIP proportions. He was doing okay from his many public appearances and magazine shoots, but was not loaded by any stretch of the imagination.

Occasionally, a couple of footballers would drop into the VIP area and would generally avoid Will and his crowd like the plague, but at least these footballers could afford the drinks. Will had a few friends from the circuit with whom he'd made a pact to share a bottle. Each evening somebody else would buy the solitary bottle and they would all drink from it - topping it up with a contraband bottle secreted in their pockets. At least that way they didn't lose face.

One day, not long after leaving *The Cell*, Will was on the tube travelling to Piccadilly. A girl, about nineteen, recognised him and asked him for his autograph. She called him Will as the nation only knew him by his Christian name. Incredible, considering he had needed to tack on his surname to be recognised in his own house a few months previously. As he scribbled on her *Heat* magazine, she commented how shocked she was to see him on the tube. Will smiled and kissed her on the cheek before taking a seat.

Why was she shocked? He'd been out for three days, within which time he'd probably made fifteen grand in appearances. Yet these people expected him to travel around London like a Saudi prince. Not for the first time in the last three days, Will had questioned the priorities – and sanity - of the public.

But Will loved it in the VIP area. He would see people hanging around just outside the velvet rope - it was always velvet, no attempt to shun cliché - looking for their way in. Generally, they were fantastically pretty girls and Will was more than happy to be their ticket. He'd developed a sixth sense for spotting the type of girl guaranteed to share his bed at a moment's notice.

The women situation was odd certainly. It took time to get used to. He would often be asked: "Are you famous?"

What a bizarre question. He'd always felt that the most obvious response would be to say, "Obviously fucking not." Of course he never did, but on one occasion he had held his tongue when, after a girl had barely contained her excitement whilst procuring his autograph, she had turned around to her friend and audibly said, "Who is he anyway?" It had taken every ounce of self discipline Will possessed to stop himself from reaching over and taking the damn thing back.

If someone didn't recognise him, he'd simply tell them about his time in *The Cell* and they would be all over him. Occasionally, he'd tell them he wasn't famous at all and watch them walk away only to rein them back in again by telling them how famous he really was. Watching them suddenly become interested in him was a strange feeling for Will. He had never before experienced this side of the human psyche.

What was suddenly so attractive about him? He didn't have much money. They knew that. There were blokes in the club - traders and bankers - ten times wealthier than him. Will reckoned the girls did it for the story, for the tiny bit of notoriety they could gain by bedding a celebrity. It was for that extra bit of kudos in work the next day when they exchanged gossip about who they had pulled the previous night. Somehow, celebrity was the new nobility. To some, it was the new *religion*.

Will took full advantage. Very soon after his departure from the show he had been inundated with offers from the tabloids to set up paparazzi photos to promote himself. These had ranged from being seen walking down the street with shopping to being 'caught out' on a luxury yacht in Marbella with a mystery girl. The yacht, the trip, and even the girl would all be provided in return for a usable shot, plus ten grand for his trouble. The funny thing was, Will wasn't stupid, and yet he'd always assumed that

paparazzi shots such as this were, well, genuine. Now, he realised he had just been incredibly naïve.

A girl even sold a story on him. He wasn't shocked. He'd set it up. He had known the girl was a predator. She worked for one of those agencies that acted as brokers for newspapers. Everybody knew. Will was at the very bottom of the celebrity food chain, starving for that matter, but even he knew all about her. But she was gorgeous. Huge tits. So Will bedded her. Before he inserted his far-from-large penis into her, he made her agree she would be very complimentary in her retelling of the liaison. In return, Will would set her up with one of his friends.

It worked out well for Will's friend too – a z-list celebrity who had last appeared on a reality show a couple of months earlier than Will and wasn't far from being cast back out into the wilderness. This liaison/love-affair/business relationship gave Will's pal an extension - another couple of months of the life.

It was all very amicable. One industry fed from another, and they all ate hungrily from the public purse, and its insatiable hunger for anything celebrity.

HOW LONG CAN YOU MAKE FIFTEEN MINUTES LAST FOR?

24 MARCH 2006, 11:28

It was no good. Phil hung the phone up. Will had been drinking in the bar for a few weeks. Suzy had brought him in.

Suzy, a bit of a party girl had met Will one evening at *Funky Buddha*. Her and some of her friends had all been dancing together without really looking at each other. They had

been too busy gazing longingly into the VIP area from their spot inches from the roped barrier.

Will had spotted them immediately. He had a word with the doorman. The doorman had no idea who Will was. If he'd had little pull when he had first left *The Cell*, a year on, he had next to none. But the bar was dead and a few extra people paying VIP area prices would boost the takings, so the doorman let the girls in. They were ecstatic. Will ended up in bed with one of Suzy's flatmates that evening. The following day she imparted every detail to Suzy; disappointed about the size of his penis. Apparently it was half the size they'd read in the papers. Notably, she had still been stupid enough to wonder whether it had only been insured for half the price that was claimed, rather than realise that the whole insurance angle was fabricated.

Later on, Will got up and Suzy made him a cup of tea. They got talking and one thing led to another. Unfortunately for Will, that 'another' had not been a further conquest – instead she took him to Phil's bar that evening.

By now, Will had become very philosophical about the whole fame game. By rights, he should have retired months ago; but it was too addictive to try and stay in the game. There was always a party to go to and he could still, just about make it into a magazine - in the background or something. He wasn't making much of a living though. He needed something new. Going back to Norwich to bed down with the canines was not an option, especially after experiencing the joys of the mid-tier life.

In spite of his fame, Will had managed to keep his feet relatively firmly on the ground. From the beginning he had always known deep down that he was never destined for the big time, so had been able to enjoy the ride it for what it was. Others, friends of his, had

ended up self-destructing because they'd had a taste of higher than mid-tier life - the veritable high-life - and had tried to hang on to it. But they'd forgotten that the key, the real key, to sustaining a grand life-style, is real talent. Plus a not uncertain amount of luck.

Although Will hadn't exactly excelled in university, he was actually pretty intelligent. He had got straight As at GCSE and Bs at A-Level. His grades got steadily worse the more work required. So when he learned of what Phil and the others were putting together he was genuinely interested. When Phil told him that they wanted him to be their figurehead he was even more interested. Phil saw Will as a blend of accessible celebrity and politics. Will's spell in *The Cell* had continued to open doors for him up to a point, and Phil saw his celebrity as a platform to launch the group's ideas.

Phil knew that one guy running for a Tory seat had played a part in *Coronation Street* years ago. That guy had had an equally embarrassing spell locked inside a cage, only apparently his had been glass and he was naked for a music video. If people had still taken him seriously after that, then there was a chance that Will could do something for them.

It didn't work, for two reasons. First of all, and most damningly, none of the newspapers, magazines or television shows were willing to discuss Will. His time was up, and although he still had plenty to give, he had nothing anybody wanted.

Even if Will could recover from that first hurdle - maybe he'd fallen at the first, but had been given another chance, there was a false start or something, perhaps the blokes in traps one and two had gone early - the second problem was that George Galloway's kitten antics - and generally awful spell in the *Big Brother* house - had killed the public's

perception of politicians as celebrities. Maybe in a different time it could have worked, but there was absolutely no appetite for it in 2006 PG - Post Galloway.

So the group shelved the idea but Will still stuck around. He had nowhere else to go. His friends from the circuit had abandoned him. He wasn't surprised. He knew it was coming. He'd done it himself to others. Nobody wanted to be caught socialising with someone the media had outed as a has-been; it was a sure-fire way to be brandished with the same label of death.

Not only that, but Will had nowhere to live. He couldn't pay his rent. Phil put him up in the flat above the bar, rent-free. Will practically lived in the bar itself, as he had no job, no friends, and, truth be told, found that Joe the bartender's discretion gave him a blissful anonymity. It had come to the point for Will where it was better to fade into obscurity than be ridiculed as an ex-somebody.

However, as bad as things were, on the face of it, he still pulled good-looking women on a regular basis. Incredibly, his tenuous link to fame still proved a successful chat up line for a certain kind of young lady, and Will had become an old pro at spotting that kind of prey.

So would he have changed a thing? Given the chance, with all the glorious benefits that hindsight affords us - would Will have rescinded his contract with the Devil?

Not for a gold clock.

BACK IN THE BAR

25 MAY 2006, 01:23

“So, essentially, we haven’t got much of a plan at the moment,” said Phil. “We tried to launch Will not long ago. We hocked him around various newspapers and magazines as a celebrity.” Phil tossed his head round and said the word in an airhead-Valley Girl type way, before continuing, “With a political head on his shoulders and bright ideas. Unfortunately, no one would give him the time of day. So now I’ve got a reality TV squatter using my place as a knocking shop for WAG-abees who are after their own ten seconds of fame. Or are you able to last one minute yet, Will?”

Will threw a handful of peanuts at Phil.

“Oi, I *am* working,” Will protested.

“Oh yeah? And what are you doing this week? He’s chanced his hand at every possible job going in the media these past few months. TV presenter, columnist - you name it he’s had a crack.”

“Shut it. I’m a DJ now.”

Phil rolled his eyes.

“You as well? Bloody hell I’m surprised there are enough clubs in London for you all. God help any aspiring Pete Tongs. They’ve got no chance with the entire cast of *Big Brother* spinning the decks with next to no talent, but a famous face and an eye for the limelight.”

Suzy returned to the table and sat on Jack’s lap. Things were looking up, in every way.

“Right guys. Enough of the politics chat. I’ve just got us on the guest list at *Umbaba*,” Suzy said excitedly.

“Wow. Guest list. Totally *rad*,” Phil mocked, using his Valley Girl voice again.

“Shut it Phil. Let’s have some fun.”

“Sounds good to me.” Piped up Jack. This was about as ebullient as he had been all evening.

In the end, everybody else decided they would stay in the bar and chat, so Jack and Suzy went to the club together.

A WAKE UP MOMENT

25 MAY 2006, 03:02

Jack and Suzy had spent the past two hours intermittently dancing together and chatting. Suzy sat on his knee every time they sat down. He was surely in there. Except, he wasn't. Every time he tried to kiss her, she managed to avoid it. A pursed lip here, a turned cheek there. Jack decided she was prick teasing and playing hard to get. He didn't mind. He was happy to play the game, but the problem was she was *bloody hard* to get. Since meeting Lothar and Stefan, Jack was usually confident and cocksure but he was losing confidence in his surety his cock was going to be busy that evening.

The two were sat together in a corner. Jack had his hand on Suzy's thigh, tickling her skin lightly, pushing her dress ever so slightly further up her leg.

"Come on Suzy. Come back to mine."

"No, darling. You've had enough. Let's call it a night. I've got Frankie to order me a cab. I'll take a rain check, sweetie."

"Take a rain check? You've got to be kidding. You're coming back to mine."

The Jack of six weeks ago - pre-Stef and Lothar - would have given up a long time ago. In fact, he wouldn't have even got this far, or into the club, probably. But this new Jack didn't mind himself. More accurately, he was pretty much in love with himself.

"Come on, Suzy. Don't you want to sleep with one of the hottest properties in the City? Any flat in London. I'll take you there. Chelsea Harbour? Covent Garden? Mayfair? I'll take you. I'm one of the *highest* fliers, babe. I'm of the moment."

Suzy listened to the sales pitch. She stood, kissed him on the forehead, laughed and walked away. Waving over her shoulder, she parted with, “See you next week at the bar Rockefeller. Get home safely.”

It was about as crushing a comeback as Jack could have imagined. He felt like a spotty 16-year-old boy who had just had a crack at a supermodel. He was ruined. She had stripped him of all the confidence he’d built recently. He felt like one of those reality TV rejects Will had described earlier – shot down after uttering those six most arrogant words. Well, this had been his *do you know who I am* moment and he felt devastated.

Jack pulled his mobile out. He wasn’t about to throw the towel in just yet.

“Stef. What are you up to lad?”

“Jack. I thought you would come out tonight. No problem. Get round here now.”

“What are you up to?”

“We’ve got four whores round here, and I’ve got neither the time nor the inclination, to service them all. Lothar has passed out.”

“Where did you meet them?” asked Jack.

Jack was sure that if he’d been with his two boys, Suzy wouldn’t have dismissed him. Jack was missing the point somewhat. If he needed the brothers alongside him, to reflect their fame and presence onto him, then he had some issues.

“At the door, my friend.”

“Where’s *The Door*?”

Jack was worried, concerned even. He was still picking up the language, and finding his way around the many must-sees of London nightlife. He’d never even heard this place mentioned, even in passing.

Jack was concerned that he was going to sound foolish. He was still picking up the language, and finding his way around the many must-sees of London nightlife. He'd never even heard this place mentioned, even in passing.

“The door to my flat, spasser. I called them, and they arrived. This is what call girls do. Five hundred quid each, so get here and get my money's worth. Two of them haven't even sucked a cock for this fee, and if there is one thing I hate, it's a lazy employee. Get a cab over here.”

“Done.” When Jack arrived at the flat half an hour later, Stefan was standing naked in the middle of the lounge with two of the girls poring over his naked body. The 50 Cent tune *Candy Shop* reverberated around the room.

“Right, you two.”

Stefan addressed the two obscenely beautiful girls sat on the sofa, clearly bored. They had hatred in their eyes as they gazed back at Stefan. Jack thought fleetingly about the way Mark had described the horror of his previous profession, before brushing the idea aside. Mark was a good lad, and a friend, not like these two bit tarts, expensive though they may be.

“Attend to my friend.”

Jack smiled.

He was back in the game.

ST.CYPRIAN'S, I HATE EVERY INCH OF YOU

29 MAY 2006, 14:25

Jack noticed an envelope in the corner of his screen. Thank goodness for that, he thought. An e-mail. He was bored to tears and the only thing that got him through work was writing and reading the five thousand personal e-mails he sent and received every day.

He opened it. It was a short one, from Sal:

From: Salvatore Montella <salvatoremontella@hotmail.com>

Sent: 29 May 2006 14:25:32

To: Jack O'Neill <jackoneill@verdebank.com>

Subject: Footie Fives

Good to meet you the other night mate. Fancy a game of five a side tonight near Mile End?

Holla back if you're interested.

Increase the peace!

Sal

Jack replied straight away and agreed to go.

Later on in the evening and after a game of football, Jack and Sal agreed to walk home together. It was a massive walk for Jack, but he thought he'd struggle for a while whilst

cooling down, and then get a tube. He was sweating. His shirt was drenched. His boozy late nights had really taken a toll on his fitness. Not Sal though. He hadn't broken a sweat, not least because he had been the best footballer on the pitch by a country mile, and didn't need to move more than five yards from the centre spot to run the game.

Jack had asked Sal where he was from and Sal, for some unfathomable reason, launched feet first into his life story. Jack hadn't really asked for the full tale, but it seemed Sal wanted to give him chapter, verse, chorus, the book of sheet music, and the whole back catalogue of songs.

Sal had gone to an all-boys boarding school in Congleton, Cheshire. St. Cyprian's was the name. He hated it from minute one. He had been a very talented footballer and from the age of ten had represented his County. Most of his friends were part of that football team. He grew up with them, sharing all his experiences and formative firsts – kiss, grope, beer, etc.

Sal's father was an ex-professional footballer and he was popular amongst the lads partly for the status this brought him, but also for the parties he held in his huge house. It had two swimming pools – one outdoor, the other heated indoor - bar and snooker room. It was, as hip hop artists would say, the ideal party crib.

His friends, on the other hand, nearly all lived in council flats in the roughest parts of the County. Any time his parents were away, the entire team took full advantage of Sal's hospitality and ripped it up with huge parties.

Sal lost count of the times he'd been grounded and forbidden from seeing his friends again. The problem was that his parents just didn't care enough about their son's welfare

to actually enforce these punishments; preferring to spend most of their time holidaying abroad.

Perhaps they had trusted Sal to obey their orders. Of course, Sal betrayed that trust. Sal's view was that if his parents weren't that bothered about his lack of education, the drugs he was taking, or girls he was fucking, then he would truant more, take more, and fuck more. They seemed more concerned that their tacky ornaments or tasteless works of so called art would get damaged, or even worse, that their holiday might get cut short on account of a ranting phone call from a neighbour.

Sal and his mother were estranged and he had no relationship with the three stepmothers that had sporadically taken her place. Sure, his dad came to watch him play football, but when it came to actual parenting, he didn't know where to begin. How could he? Sal's father Francesco had been treated like a child himself until not too long ago. He had been smothered and spoiled by a string of foster parents in the form of professional football clubs.

When Francesco had finally been thrust into the real world without as much as an assistant manager to tell him when and what to eat; he had to learn the necessary skills to be an adult himself. Where could he fit in time to learn parenting skills?

His parents threatened - on no less than seventeen occasions - to send him to boarding school. The final straw came when his latest stepmother's handbag collection was decimated by a group of sticky-fingered girls Sal and two of his mates had picked up in a nightclub. After the boys had passed out, the girls had calmly walked out the door with £15,000 worth of designer accessories.

They didn't know it, nor would they care if they did, but they had signed Sal's death warrant with a big, capitalised FUCK YOU.

His parents packed him off to boarding school. Sal didn't like a single person at the place. They didn't even have a football team, only girls' games like lacrosse, hockey, and rugby. His first three years passed by in a virtual misery-filled daze through which he plodded aimlessly, listless and penniless.

His dad was still paying his school fees, but was struggling financially due to a failed investment in sports clothing for female footballers. Francesco and his business partner 'Balls up Bob' (Bob's testicles had failed to drop fully, but the moniker could equally be applied to his business prowess) - with a stunning disregard for anything achieved by females post Emily Wilding Davison - had designed an entire range of sporting apparel for *girls who could steal a man's heart as well as the ball*. It included multi-coloured bangles that wouldn't fall off the wrist when the girl was running, bright pink headbands and sweatbands, tiny vest tops to show every inch of the girl's stomach, and the *piece de resistance* – shorter than short shorts to match the vest top. The goods that hit the shops looked like something only Jordan could have designed as her ideal football kit, and needless to say, it failed miserably. The market research could not have stretched past a cursory glance at Paris Hilton's wardrobe since the product was useless, tasteless, lacking intellectual input, and quite frankly, not that nice to look at. In fact, perhaps they had just glanced at Paris Hilton rather than the wardrobe. In the world of business, Francesco had proved to be as wholly unsuccessful as Craig Johnston, but at least Craig Johnston left behind a legacy of innovation. Francesco merely left behind a warehouse full of unsold stock.

Sal was left struggling. He decided to act. He had moved into the sixth form and realised the younger boys would do anything he asked. Perhaps he could put it to good use. He formed *La Mostly Newstuff* – a Black Hand for the twenty-first century.

He appointed his best friend, Mikey, as his *consigliere*, and then set about recruiting the rest of his “family”. In no time, Sal had gathered a full nexus of underlings, arranged within a rigid chain of command. A pre-requisite for joining was to watch all three parts of *The Godfather*, *Goodfellas*, *A Bronx Tale*, and every episode of *The Sopranos*.

It has started out as a bit of a running joke, a bit of ironic banter at his own expense because of his ancestry, but before long people did owe him favours, money and loyalty. By the end of lower six, Sal ran the school. He had the gambling market cornered and ran weekly casinos. Boys from far and wide came from their own boarding schools to lose their allowances. He procured women and drugs for boys in the house, and pretty much anything else they asked for. He took protection money from a number of the residents of the house and the surrounding schools. Sal specifically selected boys who had to pay for the service. They were the stuck-up pricks that had made his early years at school so miserable. Importantly, he was unbendingly professional. He ran every aspect of the organisation with meticulous detail, at least in the early days, but the organisation descended into more sinister territory when brutal beatings started to be handed out to those that didn't toe the line.

Of course, it couldn't last forever. *La Mostly Newstuff* was brought down by a succession of “rats”. The more “our thing” - as the connected boys called it - had become bigger and bigger, Sal had been forced to recruit more and more foot soldiers. But in doing so, his recruitment process had begun to get less and less rigorous. One day,

a teacher caught a couple of Sal's underlings threatening a boy who wasn't making the payments on his gambling debt. They were threatened with expulsion. Rather than go to Sal for his advice, they 'turned state's'. Sal had drummed into all of his men, time and time again that they had to come to him if they were in any trouble. He had a few school governors on the payroll and could have saved the boys from expulsion. Unfortunately, he'd let things slip and been too busy to get to know many of his new guys.

The school had recently employed a young idealistic 'old boy' as the head teacher. He was the kind of man that would send a seven-year-old home with a week's worth of homework to do over his birthday weekend; rather than risk a state school beating them in the exam league table. Professional and by the book, yes, but lacking in humanity and understanding.

He called the police immediately. When they found out the strength and depth of Sal's organisation, the police even called in the Organised Crime Squad. Sal got three years in jail. As the sentence was being laid down, Sal wasn't concerned. It all seemed so absurd, surreal even, so totally unbelievable. Everything that was happening to him now and at the school seemed so far removed from real life that he thought - *knew*, that it couldn't be real. The whole thing seemed like a big weak joke, it was so unfathomably ludicrous. Yet, only a day later, he was behind bars.

One year, seven months and eleven days on, Sal walked out of jail without a friend in the world. A year earlier, his Dad had hanged himself on account of his complete and total bankruptcy, and Sal would always believe, the shame his son had brought on to the family. It had made the papers and the entire family had read every graphic, violent and sordid detail. Francesco refused to even speak to Sal while he was in jail. Sal's

grandparents were proud, honest Italians, and had come to Britain as immigrants. When their son had represented Italy in the World Cup, Sal's grandfather had said he would have happily died that day. They were proud of their heritage, and proud of their ability to make a good life for their son Francesco, who had gone on to fame and riches.

They were the kind of people who did not revel in *Goodfellas* and similar films that glamorised violent organisations and perpetuated a dangerous stereotype. Now, after years of hard work to distance themselves from that image, to get out, Sal had pulled them back in.

Part of Sal died with his father. His dad wasn't a bad man, just not a capable one. He wasn't a great father or husband, but had never raised his hand in anger his entire life and had tried to do his best for his family. Yet Sal had completely disgraced him and the family name. He had never seen his father hurt. He'd always seemed to enjoy life too much, but the look on his face after the arrest was an expression of pain and grief that he would wear for the rest of his life. Learning of Sal's exploits had seemed to age him 20 years overnight.

Sal knew he would never fully recover from not getting an opportunity to apologise to his father. The night he left prison he sat in a room in a halfway house with the Mike and The Mechanics hit *In The Living Years* on repeat, a bottle of Jack Daniels in one hand and a razor blade in the other. He had no idea what eventually stopped him from opening up his wrists. But whatever it was, he'd changed his mind and instead decided to move to London.

He found a job as a waiter. As a bona fide Italian, he found he was really quite marketable to restaurateurs as every other supposedly Italian waiter in London seemed to

come from Eastern Europe. Rather than Henry Hill Syndrome, Sal found the quiet life away from the action very comforting. He felt like a normal person again - a law-abiding citizen.

It was whilst working in the restaurant that he'd met Phil and Suzy. They used to come into the restaurant every day for lunch and he gradually got to know them. He slowly learned of their ideas and they asked him if he wanted to get involved. An opportunity and shot at redemption? He wanted in, and had been a valuable member ever since.

PHIL, SUZY AND ZOE

Phil was born in Bolton in 1978. He was very political from an early age and graduated from Oxford with a First in Classics. He never revealed the source of his incredible wealth, but if Jack was certain of one thing it was that Phil's money was legitimate and not ill-gotten. Jack supposed Phil's parents were the key, but had never wanted to ask, and Phil had never seemed keen to discuss it.

Suzy, born in 1980, was brought up in Southampton. She was Junior Miss Southampton in 1993 and graduated to Miss Southampton in 2000. But unlike her opponents, the Master of Ceremonies had been quite accurate when he described her as 'not just a pretty face'. She graduated from Southampton University in 2002 with a First in Chemistry.

Zoe also attended Southampton University. She graduated the year before Suzy in 1999. She didn't know Suzy during her three years, and the girls never met. She grew up in North London.

These were what little details Jack had managed to glean during the first few times he spent with the group. He didn't mind. He felt the important thing was that they all seemed to have a chemistry together, and they all really got on well, a feeling that was cemented by the persistent idea of their common goal. The individual details of their pasts were not a relevant as their lives now, here, entwined with the future of the group and what it could achieve.

As they spent more and more time together, they began to formulate ideas, plans, strategies, on how they could change things, and how they could make the world a better place.

Despite himself and the untameably cynical side of his personality, Jack couldn't help but be impressed. He hated to admit it, crazy as it sounded... but some of these ideas might just work.

END OF PART 2

CHECK BACK ON 20 AUGUST FOR THE THIRD OF THE FIVE PARTS OF THE GOLDEN GENERATION.

NEXT TIME IN THE GOLDEN GENERATION: THINGS START TO HEAT UP FOR JACK AS STEF AND LOTHAR FORCE HIM TO START PAYING HIS WAY. AND JACK'S LIFE TAKES A DECIDED TURN FOR THE WORST.