

No stranger to the P45

Volume One

by

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Introduction

When it comes to rates of alpha decay and spontaneous fission, particularly in relation to the isotropic content of spent nuclear fuel, one finds that about 75% of the total content is due to Plutonium²⁴⁰, a figure we arrive at via a study beginning with a particular alpha decay rate of Uranium²³⁵. Any simpleton knows that rate is 7.94×10^{-4} (dis/sec-g), thus we determine our conclusion from the even more obvious rate for Plutonium²⁴² of 1.44×10^8 .

Oops. Sorry. Wrong book.

I'd very recently started a new job. I was White Van Man: hurtling along the M4 at ninety towards my (soon to be evicted from) flat. My battle of wits with the Mayor of London's army of sour-faced parking attendants (or Bastards, as I prefer to call them) over for another week. My friend Jon phoned to ask how I was, what was I up to, and now, considering my latest vocation, *just how many jobs had I actually ever had?*

It was a question that occupied my mind long after I'd reached home, much of the remainder of the journey having been spent reminiscing about crippling the faintly-famous, being pursued by Oasis-seeking paparazzi in a limousine with Noel Gallagher's wife-to-be, upsetting the Russian Mob, and accidentally causing eleven thousand pounds worth of damage to a restaurant in Blackpool as a result of my ineptitude with an industrial belt sander. For almost the entirety of that return journey I had sat grinning like an idiot, my foot pressed hard against the accelerator pedal as the engine screamed like a bag of lawyers in a vice.

Arriving home, shortly after wading through the piles of unopened bills, threats and court summons I fired up my certifiably-insane laptop, waited impatiently as it whined, whirred, beeped and crunched into life and then for no apparent reason rebooted itself, and twenty minutes later set about listing each and every job, role or vocation throughout my sometimes surreal, frequently chaotic, and quite absurd career. Ninety-nine: the final tally. The mention of which to one friend met with uncontrolled hilarity and to my parents' complete horror, shortly before they disowned me.

Unable to ignore that ridiculous figure I continued to recall those rather odd incidents of leaping from a blazing BMW with a pistol in my hand in a desperate, albeit significantly flawed attempt to impress a girl whom three weeks previously had been entirely oblivious to my existence. My stalker, herself as dumb as a bag of hammers, a flying crocodile, a bizarre time-travelling incident with the actress, Jenny Agutter, and, of course, my attempted assassination at the hand of a tree-hugging hedgemonkey while getting pleasantly drunk with the comedian, Johnny Vegas.

I thought too about each of the business ventures that I'd attempted as time after time I'd embarked upon World domination: my *antipreneurial endeavours*, if you will. And I recalled my attempts to become an internet millionaire, a movie producer and a nightclub impresario, albeit not all at the same time. I had attempted product design too, attempted to sell fortune cookies and holographic lollipops. And I had attempted to make a living from buying and selling anything and everything from cars to coffeemakers to cranes, and from skis to plastic skulls and Betamax video players that didn't even work. It was simply inevitable that early one morning I'd find myself the target of a rather reluctant hitman; financed by someone hell-bent on making my life very unpleasant indeed.

Anyway... It was a couple of days after the phone call from Jon, with my list of career failures increasing by the minute while wandering through Waterstones it struck me that I had something of a tale to tell. I had quite a few, actually. I decided on one final push. I decided to become a writer. I decided to write, *No stranger to the P45*. Sorry about that.

This book is the autobiographical account of my arguably-chaotic career to date: of those sixty-nine jobs, roles and vocations and the thirty-plus misadventures in business that I have enjoyed (a particularly loose and rather inaccurate term) throughout my many years of toiling and troubling and being run out of towns by gangsters and their merry thugs intent on snapping my legs like Twiglets.

I have been mistaken for the actor, Tim Roth, which is odd since I more closely resemble Shrek. And for a police officer and an assassin too. I have co-hosted a radio talk

show, made a movie and a television advertisement and featured on a prime-time documentary on the subject of middle-class crime. I have also been a chauffeur of a high-profile actress and during a VIP tour of The Whitehouse could almost have caused World War 3. I have hung chickens upon a rack and mislabelled boxes of creosote. I have also robbed a shed.

Welcome to Danland.

Welcome to *No stranger to the P45*.

Fluffy bunnies and petrol bombs, some biscuits, a tractor and a hedge

Much to the relief of my snobbish superiority complex, I wasn't born in Frome where I'd go to school, have some rather crappy jobs and in a case of mistaken identity one evening be dragged out of a kebab shop by some pissed-up moronic chav. I was born in Bath on June 26, 1972 at about 9.27am. It was a Monday. It explains a lot.

Many years ago my parents purchased a house in the sleepy (nay, dull) village of Great Elm, about three miles from the market town of Frome at the foot of the Mendip hills. It was quite a large house with about five acres of land for Dad's nursery and landscaping business, and it was here where I (arguably) grew-up learning such vitally important lessons in life such as: pouring petrol on already blazing bonfires is not the smartest of things to do, hanging a sit-on lawnmower from a tree is an altogether pointless exercise, and going to school in Frome was about as advantageous to my career development as trying to play the pavement with my teeth.

All things considered I had a great childhood. Because we actually lived about a mile or so out of the village itself in a sort of sub-micro-hamlet type-of-thing I had a huge playground of wide open spaces with woods and fields, a valley and the odd hill.

Great Elm was almost quite a nice village. There was not really a great deal to it apart from a village hall and a duck pond, but it had a farm in the centre from which Mum would buy fresh bread each morning. Monty Norman, the man responsible for the James Bond theme lived there but that's almost irrelevant. I say 'almost' because Eon Productions, the company responsible for the movie franchise, would one day try to sue the living piss out of me, which would in turn result in my being awoken at 3am one morning by a hitman who moments earlier had jemmied open my front door with a screwdriver... but that's another story. Great Elm had a church and an old disused school too, together with a row of pebble-dashed council houses with Ford Capris and Astras parked on blocks out front. Aside from *that*, like I said, it was almost quite a nice place.

A couple of miles to the west, beyond the ruin of the abandoned iron works lies the village of Mells where I went to school. It was, and still is a very pretty place with dozens of old stone cottages with thatched roofing and a charming little pub known as The Talbot. There were about sixty kids at our school and I do remember it quite well. I remember playing football in the yard (probably the last time I ever did) and kicking the ball over a fence into the caretaker's garden where his huge St Bernard dog named Borg, far more Cujo than Schnorbitz, would pounce upon it and tear it to shreds, thus making me the object and target of ridicule and harassment for the rest of the day (see Book). We were all petrified of that dog. I remember how fortunate I was never to be sent to the Headmaster's office to have my backside thwacked with the cricket bat, and I remember my duffel coat and my mittens. Actually, I really don't remember a great deal else. Err... sorry about that.

Ho-hum...

Anyway. Since Dad ran his landscaping business from home there was a large area for us to explore and my friends and I had many things to play with. As one gawped from the rear of the house one would see a lawn and below that the orchard with its dozens of apple and pear trees. Across from the orchard was a field in which Dad had decided to build an arboretum (of-sorts) and it was filled with shrubs, trees and saplings, many of which would often be attacked by wild rabbits. Below the field was a small copse and his yard in which stood a couple of greenhouses and sheds to house the absurd quantities of clapped-out and dilapidated lawnmowers (12), rotavators (9), vans (3) and tractors (2) that he would use for his business. Over the years I'd make the most of this vast playground and its arsenal of highly dangerous toys, very nearly getting myself torn asunder and incinerated on numerous occasions.

Like many, I am sure that there was some time during which my father had high hopes that I would follow in his footsteps and take-over the business one day. I guess it's kind of like doctors who hope their children will enter the medical profession too, or perhaps military folk hoping that their offspring will become military folk as well. In a way, it's a bit like all those mindless Jeremy Kyle-fodder chavs in tracksuits: many of whose parenting skills lead their spawn

to becoming mindless, Jeremy Kyle-fodder chavs in tracksuits too. But despite growing up surrounded by all the flora and fauna and defunct machinery, even at quite a young age I was unable to muster up any enthusiasm for a lapis lazuli... and, if I'm honest, I still don't know what one is. Despite his efforts, I think that Dad gave up on the idea of me following in his footsteps long ago. Still, it was inevitable that during those first eighteen years of my life I did often attempt to 'assist' my father in his business. I would sometimes accompany him on jobs and dig holes in the ground with a piece of machinery. Sometimes I'd mow lawns, plough-up gardens with rotavators or simply burn stuff. I'd help out in the office occasionally too, but because I didn't have the first clue about designing gardens or providing quotes or anything else remotely relevant to his business I'd mainly file things and get in the way. For me it was all about childhood fun and with a playground so vast and with the fields, meadows and the woods all around, so childhood fun was something that my friends and I had a great deal of indeed. I remember my first petrol bomb like it was yesterday. It wasn't. I was nine.

I must confess that preparing Molotov Cocktails was not actually one of my responsibilities helping my father in his landscaping business, but my friend, Joe and I had both developed a rather unhealthy enthusiasm for all things flammable. At the time it simply seemed like a good bit of fun. It was an enthusiasm that would get us nearly killed on more than one occasion, but the thrill of driving my father's tractor through piles of burning boxes, pouring petrol on already-blazing bonfires and dropping matches into vats of other miscellaneous flammables was simply too good a thing to miss.

As children we were quite partial to biscuits. Nice, chocolate bourbons and digestives were high on the list of favourites and we would often swipe a couple of packets from the kitchen cupboard and hide under the bed. There, after devouring the contents as quickly as possible we would then torch the packets to destroy any evidence of the theft. Naturally, it did not occur that fire and bed linen tend not to go together particularly well since we were somewhere between the ages of five and ten. I guess I should probably thank Lady Luck for the fact that during

those pyromania years not once did we manage to combust ourselves or any of the household furniture... although we did once blow our neighbour's Cindy doll apart...

Action Man had been sent to rescue Cindy from a petrol-filled pit in which she had also been strapped to a large firework that I had smuggled back from a holiday in France. The mission was not a success. Our neighbour really wasn't best pleased with us about that.

Anyway. I met Joe when we were both about two. Our parents were friends and it was inevitable that we would become friends as well. We did. And I still regard him as one of my closest today. He works at the Theatre Royal in Bath. Many years later I would get a job working there with him, but that's another story.

One day Joe and I were helping Dad burn some garden rubbish. He had built a rather healthy mound of 'stuff' over the course of the previous week but heavy rain a day before had sodden much of the wood. Telling us to stand well clear he retrieved a can of petrol from a shed and poured a little onto a plank of wood. He then struck a match and with a WHOOSH the mound of rubbish was engulfed in flames. Dad was soon called back to his office for a phone call and Joe and I were left with the strictest of instructions not to go anywhere near the fire. And so we did. With some time having passed since its original ignition we took note that it had almost burned itself out. In our wisdom, Joe and I took it upon ourselves to save it and decided to add some more wood.

Now, for a nine-year-old the combination of a dying bonfire, trees, petrol and impatience is not a particularly healthy one. It is however, rather exciting.

Joe heaved an old wooden pallet onto the top and I picked up the jerry can. Joe then took out a match as I began to tip the petrol onto the fire. The match was not actually necessary because things then became rather entertaining indeed.

There was an almighty WHOOMP! as the flames leapt twelve feet into the air and onto the spout of the can. I immediately dropped it to the floor as Joe appeared to jump ten feet up and backwards through the air at the same time. This was not a situation of which either of us were entirely familiar, and so we did what any nine year old

would do: I picked up Dad's newspaper (and Joe its Sunday supplement) and we both began to hit the flames on the now-raging can of petrol. It was only a matter of seconds before it exploded and engulfed both Joe and I in a rather uncomfortable outfit of flames and significant aggravation, but repeatedly thwacking the flames as if imitating Animal from the Muppets or teaching an illiterate oik to read, we soon managed to extinguish the fire, Dad's paper soon lying a tattered, blackened mess across the floor. With our hands and faces as black as night Joe and I immediately tried to hide the evidence, washing ourselves at one of the nearby sprinklers and returning to the happily blazing bonfire to stand with our hands in our pockets, look skywards and whistle our innocence just as Dad returned from his office. 'Everything ok?' he asked.

'Err... yup!' I replied.

'Good-oh. Right, you boys go off and play. I'm going to tidy up here and then sit down and read the paper.'

Oops.

Anyway...

Among the many clapped-out vehicles Dad used in his business he had a small Kubota tractor, which Joe and I would often drive around the garden enjoying all sorts of fun. Sometimes we would simply ride it around and at others dig holes in the ground with its semi-permanently-attached bucket for absolutely no reason whatsoever. One winter we decided to build a giant sledge.

Across the road from the house there was a small valley and a steep slope that led down to a river. In the winter (back when we actually had snow) it was the perfect place to slide down on old fertiliser sacks. This year however, bored with the usual plastic sacks we decided to build a proper sledge. We hammered a wooden pallet together with three wooden posts and nailed some rubber hosepipe to them to help it run smoothly down the hill. Unfortunately, we had neglected to consider the combined weight of the pallet with the posts and so despite the rubber hosepipe on its 'runners' it was simply too heavy to move. No matter. We tied it to the back of the tractor and took turns pulling each other around the garden instead.

On that day almost everything was covered in a beautiful white carpet of snow. It was the perfect hunting

environment for a fridge, but that aside it was also ideal conditions for using a tractor to tow a sledge.

Now, for the sake of a pseudo-description, the Kubota tractor in question was about the size of a horse. Not a big horse, mind you, but about the size of a Shetland pony standing on top of a pig. It had six gears and a high and low differential (what with it being a tractor and all) and could probably outrun a reasonably quick dog. A sticker illustrating a turtle and a rabbit indicated the differential selection of high and low, and erring on the side of caution we began to create a sort of track around Dad's arboretum in 'turtle'.

Driving around the yard and then through the trees in an almost figure-of-eight with a chicane in the middle, the tractor and our sledge quickly compacted the snow beneath. We then slowly increased the speed as we completed each lap. After a while, requiring some additional element of excitement we piled some cardboard and wood at a particular point towards the end of our circuit. This we then set ablaze. It was my turn to drive and I climbed into the seat and selected 'rabbit'. Joe hopped onto the sledge and took hold of the makeshift straps fashioned from a length of rope and I thrust the accelerator forward (it was a secondary control to the side of the steering column, the first being a foot pedal). Moments later we raced away through the snow.

The first part of our circuit featured fairly wide turns around a variety of obstacles including the family car. This was no problem, and we were soon through the yard and into Dad's arboretum to complete the 'figure-of-eight' and the chicane part of the course.

By now we were travelling at maximum 'rabbit', slightly faster than half a whippet. We entered Dad's arboretum and followed the 'figure-of-eight' and shortly before entering the chicane I gave a quick glance over my shoulder to see if Joe was having as much fun as I. Only, I'd glanced a little too late. I saw Joe's expression transform from childish fun to absolute terror, and turned forwards again to see us a fraction of a second away from hitting a medium-sized tree. I steered the tractor away from its current path towards my own certain aggravation, immediately glancing back again hoping that the sledge had turned too. It hadn't.

From the outset neither Joe nor I had considered either the dynamics of momentum and trajectory or the responsiveness of a sledge towed behind a tractor travelling beyond the speed of that half-whippet. The sledge had therefore, simply remained on its course towards the tree. I turned back just in time to see Joe leap off the sledge a fraction before it slammed into one of Dad's favourite shrubs, and slammed on the brakes to come to an abrupt halt. I climbed off to check on Joe who was now laughing hysterically inside a snowdrift next to a hedge. Relieved that he wasn't dead, I then went to check on the sledge.

The smash had torn away one of its runners and had snapped the tree in two. We decided then to hide the evidence by extinguishing the fire and hurling the remains together with the now-defunct sledge onto a pile of garden rubbish. We then parked the tractor and hid for the rest of the day.

My father failed to notice the destruction of his tree for some time to come. He discovered it long after the snow had melted when he and I were wandering around the garden and he was looking for fluffy bunnies to blow off the face of the Earth with his air rifle. He responded with raised eyebrows and considerable suspicion when he demanded to know, 'What the bloody hell happened to my tree?' and I replied,

'I don't know, Dad. It must have been the rabbits.'

A silly poem about a rabbit

'Twas midsummer's morn and in a field, a little rabbit
sat, thinking of his life, and other things like that.

He thought of the clouds and of the fish in the sea,
and he thought of the fields and of the fridge in the tree.

'A fridge? In a tree?' said he, 'Well what a funny sight!'
But with a CRACK it fell on him, and killed him dead -
outright.

A supermodel and a sink. A copper pot, some sorbets and a horse

When Jenson Button won the Formula One World Championship in 2009 I couldn't help but raise a smile and feel a sense of pride. It was not because Mr Button was born and bred and went to the same school as I in Frome, mind you, nor was it simply because he too is British and I am wholeheartedly patriotic. It was actually because he and I shared a rather different and somewhat more tenuous connection: Jenson's ex-girlfriend once worked in *The Masons Arms* pub on the outskirts of Frome. And so did I, albeit not at the same time. Somewhat disappointingly, the connection extends no further... although I continue to strive to achieve my dreams of also having a multi-million pound fortune, respect and admiration for the heights reached in my career to date and, perhaps more importantly, a supermodel girlfriend and a home in Monaco. Still, tomorrow's a new day...

Anyway...

I would have been no older than eight when my father stuffed the cupboards under the kitchen sink with Amway cleaning products. He'd been hoodwinked by some family friends and was soon to try selling these products and sign other people up too. Shortly before setting out on this project however, the friends had a dinner party at the beginning of which they requested that those around the table hold hands and thank Amway for the food they were about to eat. My father decided to stick with landscaping.

I mention Amway because if memory serves me correctly (although it probably doesn't) the company had a large office in a building on an industrial or trading estate on the outskirts of Frome. It was near to the bypass of a small village named Nunney and to the ruins of its fourteenth century castle. At the beginning of this bypass was *The Masons Arms* pub.

The Masons Arms was, and probably still is a traditional country pub not quite in the country. It dates back to the seventeenth century and at the time I was employed there its walls featured a great deal of copper and brass, some of which would have once been used to cook things in and some thrown around the neck of a horse. I think I

remember an iron plough hanging on the wall too, but I may be entirely incorrect about that. I was employed as a waiter.

Again, if memory serves me correctly (although it probably doesn't) *The Masons Arms* was my first ever official job. I was about fourteen at the time and because it was such a long time ago I remember very few things about it.

Of these few things, the first I remember with any clarity is an elderly gentleman who chose to live in a couple of cars in a lay-by opposite the pub. I don't recall his name but he was a thoroughly pleasant chap and enjoyed his home of a couple of battered Vauxhalls and a tarpaulin gazebo. The council did not share his appreciation of his home however, and subsequently issued him with dozens of enforcement orders, all of which he ignored. After a couple of years of not getting anywhere the council changed tack and offered to give him a house. He accepted the offer and immediately sold the house to buy another, albeit considerably nicer car in which to live. The council gave up entirely after that.

I recall that it was around this time that the government introduced the all-day drinking laws and *The Masons Arms* soon became an after-work refuge for cider-drinking builders at three in the afternoon. And I recall a wedding reception in the dining area. Despite being about fourteen I was lead waiter for the surprisingly delightful couple and I had a thoroughly pleasant time indeed. In fact, I enjoyed myself so much that I accepted their invitation to sit down with them for some champagne and three glasses later staggered back to the kitchen, dropped a tray of sorbets and was rudely threatened with the sack.

Perhaps the final thing I remember is being invited to a 'knees-up' by the managers. I made the immediate assumption that it would require me to spend the majority of the evening with my thumbs in my jacket lapels as I tried to run on the spot through an imaginary assault course of tyres, eat jellied eels and listen to endless tracks by Chas and Dave. The idea so appalled me that I simply had to quit. And so I did.

Egg-cabbage socks, some wellies and a tree

For me, a nursery is not the most enjoyable of places to spend my time since not only do I not know one type of plant from another I also hate kids. It was simply because I had nothing better to do on this particular day that I agreed to travel with my father to one such establishment purveying plants and a variety of other pieces of vegetation. He wanted to buy some leaves and things from the auction being held there because it was closing down. I had no idea that at this auction I would seize on a money-making opportunity and become convinced that I had all the makings of a super-successful businessman. I also had no idea that I would not remain convinced of this for very long.

Ho-hum...

Many years ago I had a friend whose father had a farm on the outskirts of a village. It was a small village named Standerwick similar in size to another one named something else, and it was a little farther than a violent sneeze away from the desperately dreary town of Frome.

My friend's farm was typical of many found throughout Somerset and Wiltshire and perhaps beyond. It included a number of buildings fashioned from olde worlde stone and there was also a large barn built of corrugated tin. Machinery often defying description and of purpose unknown to me lay apparently neglected and rusting to pieces in a corner of the yard. In another corner sat an old stone trough, and in another still: a shed. One of the olde stone buildings was used for milking the cattle while the barn housed their winter feed of hay. It would have been home to many rodents too had my friend's family not owned a couple of cats that slept in the laundry in a room next to the farmhouse kitchen door. In this room the family also kept their jackets and boots. My friend told me once that one of the cats had given birth to some kittens. This had failed to surprise me as much as it would have had I been told that the same cat had given birth to a wheelbarrow full of penguins, but my friend then told me that at less than a week old one of the kittens had found its way inside the wellington boot of her father who had been rather surprised early one morning when he felt his foot

squelching against something in that boot and something else oozing into his sock. I really shouldn't have found this funny, even though I did. Anyhoo... Not long after this my friend's father sold much of the farm to allow for the construction of the A36, a junction of which accessed the new location of Frome's Farmers' Market recently transferred from the town centre car park. It was at the time the market was still located in Frome that I first visited an auction simply to see what one was like. I had a sneezing fit halfway through and very nearly bought a goat. Other than that I remember little else apart from listening to the auctioneer's rapid and garbled shout, his speech so fast that all his words seemed to blend into one. I remember being unable to understand a bit of it, for it was as if he spoke in another tongue. 'That was a long time ago' I thought as I climbed into my father's truck to visit the nursery and my first auction since. 'At least the worst thing I could end up with at this one is a tree.' As it happened, I was actually rather wrong about that.

It didn't take me long to get thoroughly bored at the nursery auction. As I've already mentioned I had little interest in plants. All the same I wandered around looking at shrubs and sticks in small plastic boxes, and as I did so I have no doubt that I occasionally puffed out my cheeks, thrust my hands into my pockets and scuffed the dirt a couple of times in misplaced petulance. We had arrived at about ten in the morning and by eleven I would have found it more interesting watching cement set. I decided to focus my thoughts on the auctioneer and try to figure out what was being said.

The rapid monotone was that of a somewhat melodic machine gun. It was similar to stones rattling down through a drainpipe, or to the chant of an Aborigine with the backing of a didgeridoo. Slowly though, with my boredom behaving like treacle poured over and through the cogs of time I began to get an inkling of comprehension of the auctioneer's speech. It didn't make anything greatly more fascinating however, but I did begin to notice a few things. I began to pay more attention to his performance, noting that during the bidding each incremental rise in the price of a particular lot was accompanied by a nod of his head and a

point of his finger at one of the green-fingered mob surrounding him. It was almost as if he were crooning on stage to an audience of grandmothers. I found this funny, albeit not for long, and soon thought of him as a rather bad rap artist instead, hoping that he might soon begin to gesticulate a pair of scissors with his fingers and mention about pimpin' bitches and bustin' caps an' that, innit. Sadly he didn't, and so I became bored again and decided to wander around a bit more.

As I wandered I soon discovered a garden mower in a shed. I guess the excitement was merely that of a boy of about thirteen: one whose father had collected many of the things over the years and had left them scattered about the numerous corners and bushes of his yard. I toyed with the idea of encouraging my father to place a bid upon it and left the shed to see how the mass of green fingers, Barbour jackets and wellies was progressing. It was still some way away from the lots within the shed but I immediately noticed that in the midst of the throng was my father. I watched as the mass moved slowly from one lot to the next, and as my father raised his hand in the air to buy a hedge.

The garden mower was one of those sit-on things that doubled as a pathetic-looking tractor. It had a trailer attached to the back and I decided that my friends and I could have a great deal of fun with it should I be able to convince Dad to actually buy it. I went back in to the shed to look it over again and not long after returned outside to try and talk him into the purchase. By then I was rather hungry, but this wasn't particularly important.

At this point Dad was nowhere to be seen and for reasons unknown the number of Barbour jackets and wellies had swiftly dwindled to about thirty. It had reached a pile of paving slabs and a few rocks and, covered by various pieces of vegetation, a stack of flower pots. There was a pallet of plastic ones of different sizes, all of which were coloured black, and behind them an even greater stack of orange and green terracotta pots. They were green with moss and ivy and dozens of other leaves, the names of which would still be completely irrelevant even if I did have the faintest clue. For a moment I pondered nothing in particular. I simply stood next to the pots and decided that I quite fancied a cheese sandwich. The mass of Barbour jackets, wellies and

a clipboard (attached to the auctioneer) came ever closer and soon enough I found myself in its midst. It was then that I heard the auctioneer burble something about the terracotta pots.

I don't precisely recall what had caught my attention; whether it was the number 'twenty-five thousand' referring to the approximate quantity of the pots, or whether it was simply the fact that it was met with an uncomfortable wall of silence. It could well have been either of those things. I looked around me at the faces of the Barbour jackets and the wellies and at the auctioneer standing a good head-height above everyone else because he was on top of a box. He began to call for the bidding against the lot, his gaze falling expectantly upon each of the Barbour jackets and the wellies in turn. 'Shall we begin the bidding at fifty pounds?' he fired, a little more slowly than I had actually anticipated.

The suggestion was again met with the same uncomfortable silence, but undeterred he continued on. 'Twenty-five, then?' Nothing. 'Ten?' I waited for someone to step in with a bid. I didn't think for a second that particular 'someone' would be me.

'A pound?' I said nervously, expecting to be ignored. There was a rustling of Barbour jackets, a scrape of wellies and a nondescript murmur. I'm pretty sure I also heard something of a horsey-snort.

'Okay' said the auctioneer with an almost imperceptible tone of resignation. 'We'll begin the bidding at a pound. Will anyone offer me two?' Again there was silence, and like the egg-cabbage odour of last Friday's socks it seemed to hang in the air for an age. 'One pound, then. Going once. Going twice. Sold... to the young man in the middle (not wearing wellies)!'

Oops.

There was more rustling, a little more of a murmur. Someone definitely laughed. I realised that I'd just bought twenty-five thousand terracotta flower pots for a quid. I immediately forgot about the cheese sandwich and tried to work out how I was going to break the news to my father whom, I had just noticed, was across the yard poking his head into a tree. I went over to the tree with my father's head in. 'Uh, Dad? Do you need any pots?'

His expression was at first confused. Certainly there was disbelief, bemusement and a hint of horror. But there was a definite look of 'for God's sake' present in his face too. It was something that immediately told me of his reluctance to 'bugger about' helping me to load twenty-five thousand flower pots into the pickup truck to take home. But he did. Halfway through the four trips it took us however, a man walked up to me and offered me a fiver for a thousand. Brilliant! I thought, thoroughly pleased with myself. It was my first ever business deal!

Now, for the sake of a pseudo-description, twenty-five thousand flowerpots is a lot of pots. Stacked together they're about the size of a couple of skips full of pigs. I had no idea what I was going to do with them but over the coming years I sold a few thousand, used a few more thousand for anger management after discovering their particularly therapeutic qualities when hurled against a wall, and I attempted to turn a few more into candles to sell at car boot sales. A few more I shot with Dad's air rifle and I gave a few thousand to a friend to make a sculpture with that he sold for four hundred quid. But as with anything and Me, after a while I lost interest and Dad used the remaining thousands to bury one of the half-dozen vans rotting away at the end of the garden.

Like I said, inspired by my wheeler-dealing and belief in my own entrepreneurial abilities I soon visited another auction convinced that I could spot a deal and make myself a vast fortune. I left with two Betamax video players, an electric drill that didn't work and a pair of rusty skis. It was one of the last auctions I ever went to.

Hugely-significant vocational unpleasantness

Hinton Poultry was a particularly foul place to work, perhaps on a par with having someone push your head into a bucket of maggots. It was a chicken processing plant to which tens of thousands of chickens were delivered each day to be unceremoniously massacred, plucked, and then ripped to pieces. It was a place of hugely significant vocational unpleasantness but, way-back-when, if you wanted to earn as much money as possible to go away to university with or to take travelling or something, the general consensus was that because it paid quite well one would get a job either there or in the yoghurt factory in Frome. The yoghurt factory was, by all accounts, an equally vile establishment. Of course, if you were thick and had few aspirations, if any beyond ten kids, an obsession with Jeremy Kyle and a satellite dish, one could work there too and hope to make shift supervisor by the age of forty. However, my hopes and dreams extended far beyond the egg and chips TV dinner and so, once more skint I took a deep breath, swallowed my pride and my snobbish superiority complex and got a job 'down chickerrr' (that's pikey-speak for 'the chicken factory').

All those years ago, despite it being one of the most revolting places on the planet there was actually a challenge (of sorts) among us non-satellite dish-orientated folk to getting a job there... aside from the avoidance of starvation to death of course, which, in retrospect may have been worthy of further consideration. The challenge was simply to stick it out for a longer time than any of your peers did. Then the record stood at just short of three weeks. I lasted one day.

Waiting for the bus laid on (pardon the pun) by the company, I spent the first few minutes watching people driving by in their smart new Mercedes and BMWs. Each occupant was clearly blissfully unaware, and not in the slightest bit interested that I was about to undergo eight hours of disgusting psychological torment. I remember thinking that I wanted to be them; any of them. But alas, I was Dan W.Griffin and about to be kitted-out in a set of white plastic overalls and a hairnet and hang twelve thousand chickens on a rack.

For my first task I was sent to 'the chillers', presumably so-called because it was not so much chilly as so cold that you'd be far more comfortable standing in a freezer while someone sprayed your hands with liquid nitrogen and then smacked you in the face with a brick. It was here where thousands upon thousands of cold, lifeless, recently-beheaded soggy lumps of grey-fleshed bird poured onto a conveyor for me to grab by the feet and stick on the rack above me. On that day a delivery of twenty-four thousand chickens had come in and for the first four hours on my shift twelve thousand of them passed dead through my numb, almost frostbitten fingers.

That's fifty for every minute I stood there trying to divert my attention away from the tedious unpleasantness of the job. Those four hours felt like a hundred as I thought about my life and just how thoroughly depressing it had become. I tried counting them as they thumped onto the rubber conveyor in front of me but I lost track after about a thousand. And as I contemplated seeing just how big a pile they'd have to make (after coming out of the plucking machine) before they started spilling onto the floor, someone tapped me on the shoulder and told me that it was time for a break.

Without thinking I bought a chicken sandwich to eat and while I struggled to avoid vomiting it over the table in front of me I pondered just what type of machine could possibly pluck the feathers from three thousand chickens in a single hour. I found the concept to be quite amusing, envisaging a giant washing machine stuffed with birds and spinning so fast that all their feathers fell off. I was brought back to reality overhearing a conversation about two of my colleagues, both of whom had recently celebrated their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary.

At first, I felt a sort of congratulatory happiness for them, as one does when one hears of a couple who have actually found genuine love for each other and stayed married for longer than three weeks. However, that feeling of congratulatory happiness soon transformed to horror as I learned that twenty-six years previously they'd actually met at the chicken factory, presumably their eyes meeting across a bag of frozen drumsticks. I then amused myself by

wondering just what on earth their conversations might be like at home:

'How was your day, Dear?'

'I put some chicken giblets in a sack. And you, Dear?'

'Er... me too. What's for dinner?'

'Chicken.'

There was something of an experienced-based hierarchy in the team and its 'leader' was a guy with a head that looked a little like a football trophy crossed with a startled rat. He was about forty with a couple of protruding teeth and ears that stuck too far out from the side of his head. In my mind's eye I can see him now... although, in saying that, the image that I have of him is with his two hands raised to his chest as he nibbles on a piece of cheese. It may, therefore, not be entirely accurate. Anyway. Somewhat tragically he'd been employed at Hinton Poultry since the age of sixteen and he now had some kind of aura about him that commanded a kind of respect. Whenever he spoke the canteen went eerily quiet which, it did when at one point he decided to crack a joke. It was a joke about 'killin'. Because I was unable to converse in chickerr-pikey-speak (as I was), it was a joke that I missed entirely and simply smiled nervously as all around me roared with laughter.

'Killin' (or rather 'killing' if you possess the ability to speak properly) was pretty self-explanatory but a job intended only for the upper echelons of the chicken factory labour force. It was the job of executing the birds straight off the back of the truck. Because I was new, therefore, I could only wonder how twenty-four thousand chickens were slaughtered: Rat-boy and his team of crazed, psychopathic idiots running around with clubs and sticks and battering the poor things to pieces once more being a concept that I found rather amusing.

Break time finished and now fearing for my sanity, having spent the best part of thirty minutes grinning like an idiot and feeling rather sick, I trudged reluctantly back to the factory floor where the shift manager, glancing briefly at his clipboard, directed me to a different conveyor belt in a different section of the factory.

I've no idea of his name but I despised him immediately. Although his job didn't call for it he wore one of the

cheapest suits you could imagine and possessed an incredibly out-of-place and unnecessary superiority complex that would seem to be highly prevalent among smarmy idiots who think that their position of responsibility gives them the absolute privilege to be rude and demeaning to anyone in a lesser role. It made me angry to think that the greatest thrill of his working day was more than likely to be preparing the shift rota and determining which of us dumb peasants would work where. I was ordered to stand for the next four hours at a conveyor belt ensuring that the second twelve of that twenty-four thousand chickens' legs were the right way up. I tried to concentrate as once more thousands after thousands of chicken legs passed under my watchful eye, a sense of excitement welling up inside each time I came upon one that required me to reach and turn it over. I knew I was going nuts.

After about an hour Jobsworth came up to me, his clipboard shining in the ice cold glow of the industrial fluorescent tubing. I was ordered to spend the next hour rinsing out trays and putting chicken giblets in a sack. When done I was to return to the chicken leg turning over section.

I'd been at the factory for about six and a half hours by the time my legs seized up. Through standing so long in the sub-zero temperatures of this godforsaken hole they had obviously decided that they were no longer prepared to function properly and told me so by sending pain impulses up my back and into my head. I decided to rest them a little by leaning on the side of the conveyor. Disappointingly, however, it was less than a minute before Jobsworth shouted at me from across the factory floor; storming over with his eyes filled with a rage as frightening as a slice of toast and hurling various abuses that would have been far less morale destroying had he used the words 'please' and 'thank you' to illustrate his concerns rather than 'fucking' and 'sacked'. And so, as he turned I threw a chicken leg at the back of his head. Unfortunately (although perhaps only in a single sense) with my balance no longer what it was it missed him completely and landed somewhere without he or anyone else noticing. Two hours later and I still had my job.

I spent a while considering whether or not to go back the next day; arguing with myself as to whether the torment could be overcome sufficiently to earn that golden pay-packet at the end of the week. Needs must, I thought. Maybe tomorrow will be a better day. It wasn't.

On the following day, after donning my overalls and hairnet Jobsworth appeared and read out our duties. Once more I was sent to the chillers to hang another twenty-thousand birds on a rack. I wanted to hurt him very badly indeed.

It was about twenty minutes until I thought, 'Fuck this. I'm off.' And as I write this now I wonder how different things would be if, like my sister a couple of years previously I'd opted for the yoghurt experience instead. After all, some years later she gained a first class degree from Oxford. And I... well... look at me now!

Not exactly what it says on the tin

Nineteen eighty-eight was such a long time ago that I don't remember how I got the job working on the production line at the Cuprinol factory in Frome. But since it was a production line and I was packing boxes at the end of it, I can't imagine the application process having been particularly tough. I went to work with a considerable reluctance and a dragging of feet that some may say was not the most suitable of attitudes to go into a new job with. They'd be right: I didn't last out the day.

As you may have gathered by now I'm the type of person to whom boredom comes rather easily... *you too, huh?* (see *Book*). If I'm not finding my given task of the moment sufficiently stimulating I will inevitably try to do something else; something to divert my attention away from the tedious unpleasantness of the particular task. Often, this will involve thinking up alternative mind-occupying entertainments to help pass the time, and an example of this would be the counting of the thousands of cold, lifeless, recently-beheaded soggy lumps of grey-fleshed bird (pouring onto the conveyor) at the chicken factory some time back. The lack of chickens notwithstanding, it was a similar scenario at Cuprinol.

If you don't already know, Cuprinol manufactured a range of wood-stain products and dollopped them into tins. These tins were then packed (by me) into very large cardboard boxes. My role was also to seal said boxes once full and mark one of six spaces on the side to indicate which variety of wood stain or creosote was contained within. I've no idea whether there's any difference between wood stain and creosote but I don't care, either. What's important is that packing boxes of the stuff was about as much fun as sitting in treacle.

By the end of the first of the morning's shifts I'd already exhausted the majority of my time-passing activities; one of which required me to count the number of tins passing through my hands each minute to be dumped into a box for Homebase. I'd counted all of the bolts (in the machines) within my field of vision and I'd tried hypnotising myself with the regularity of their output, but succeeded only in

having one of my legs go numb. I really was getting very bored indeed and I realised that it was time for a new game. After a tea break spent listening to men in overalls guffawing about the size of the 'puppies' of the girl on Page 3, along with a discussion of the previous night's football that I didn't understand, I'd come up with it.

As I've said, packing boxes at the end of a production line was about as much fun as sitting in treacle. Judging by the expressions worn by my co-workers it was clear that I was not the only one who thought so. Radio One was blaring like a foghorn across the factory floor and there was an air of glumness and disappointment about the place too. Bored, I'd figured that an injection of humour was required and I set about this injection beginning with my own work station.

With my marker pen, to accompany the label describing the contents of the box destined for either B&Q or Homebase I began to add a variety of cartoons. I had a brain stuffed with images of pig-rabbits and people with huge teeth and at least a dozen types of chicken. It was these that I would feature on the side of each box and it pleased me to imagine them being appreciated by the staff of B&Q or Homebase as they transferred the tins to the shelf. I then took the idea a little further. I took it too far.

In addition to my cartoon pig-rabbits, people with huge teeth and man and pig-rabbit-chicken combinations I began adding bubbles for thought and speech. In each of them the characters made comments about the weather and wished all the staff at B&Q and Homebase a pleasant day. Soon enough the characters then began to joke about the contents of the boxes and instead of being specific with the labelling, they (I) would simply tick all of the spaces on the side or leave them all blank; adding the words 'Guess which?' to the side instead. It amused me to think of the fun to be had by those members of staff as they played their game of Russian Roulette: Wood-Stain Product Edition. I'd had a lot of fun at a friend's house recently by taking all of the labels off their tins of food. I thought it was going to go down rather well. It didn't. A few minutes later and my line manager stormed across the factory floor. 'What the fuck are you doing?' he yelled, his face as red as ketchup.

'Er... I was just having a bit of fun.'

'What?'

'Um... I thought the customers would appreciate the cartoons and a little joke.'

'You're fired. Fuck-off.'

'I'll get my coat. I suppose a reference is out of the question?'

It was.

Look kid, there aint no Santa

It's gonna be lonely this Christmas...

Really, Elvis? Thanks for reminding me once again. Fuck you very, very much.

I've always been a bit Bah-Humbug when it comes to Christmas. It lasts too long and for most of the time I feel as though I've been catapulted into a holly bush and then forced at gunpoint to gargle a hammer. That it encompasses a sixty-day bombardment of advertising to sell shit that people neither need nor want (and rarely deserve), a building to a nonsensical frenzy of buying even more shit that people neither need nor want (and rarely deserve), two days of being nice to one another, eating too much food, feeling sick, and finally five days or so of wondering what all the fuss was about in the first place, simply adds to its monumental unpleasantness.

Christmas is a true showcase of something thoroughly disturbing with our world.

'But soft!' exclaimst thee, as delusion doth conquer clarity, rationale once more becoming a thing of whimsy. 'What cynicism of soul! Thou art not a man but a Grinch! What say thee... an' that, innit?'

'Eh?'

'Tis Christmas! Is thyne spirit so cold? Hath thee no warmth of sentiment for thy fellow?'

'Eh?'

'Tis Christmas! Tis a time for happiness and joy; a time for sharing, a time for goodwill to all. Tis a time for peace and for love and...'

BULLSHIT. Tis a time for nothing but self-inflicted misery and despair.

Christmas is nothing but an opportunity to delude oneself that all's right with the world. It's an escapism. It's a focal point in one's own mind's eye; a red-dot target of hope that exists in the ether of nothingness alongside gut-wrenching depression and the fear-laden anticipation of the New Years' statement of your credit card. It's a time to quench your narcissistic thirst; to seek attention and recognition for your very existence. As it stands, Christmas is simply one anticlimactic foolishness. If it were in fact outlawed and

that idiot proclaiming himself 'Mr Christmas' (the moron celebrating it every day of the year) was actually stuffed inside one of his own turkeys and flung well-away from the rest of us - like a decathlete would fling a small wooden mallet, perhaps - well, the world would be a far happier place. The whole thing is a thoroughly depressing, over-rated and over-commercialised waste of time, all meaning of which is lost but for its mistaken interpretation into two months of high-intensity greed and delusion. Where once it was simply a festival of light, it has now become an over-hyped marketing juggernaut built on shallowness and hysteria. With this in mind then, just imagine my surprise when I found myself agreeing to deliver Christmas gifts to some kids in Frome dressed as the fat, bearded chap in the red smock. Perhaps it had something to do with that God business of sometime before. Whatever it was, clearly the Bah-Humbug had taken a temporary leave of absence.

Each year the local youth centre (of which I was not a member but - like I said - it probably had something to do with all that 'God' business) operated a scheme for parents to drop-off presents for their kids a couple of days prior the nonsensical frenzy reaching its disappointing crescendo of crazy. These presents would then be delivered by the fat, bearded chap in the red smock on Christmas morning, thus maintaining the delusion of fantasy so that a jolly time could be had by all. I agreed to take part with a friend named Steve and he volunteered to do the first half of the morning's driving so that we could later swap roles as we only had one red smock between us. Thus, early on Christmas morning, with the car crammed-full with gaily wrapped parcels tied with ribbons and string we set-off for our first drop at a rather dilapidated shack.

Both Steve and I were already feeling appropriately jolly as we drew up to a curb somewhere in the middle of a housing estate. We double-checked the address and I grabbed the relevant parcel from the back seat. I climbed out, took something of a deep breath and strolled on up the path to the front door. I caught a glimpse of my reflection in a window and for the briefest of moments felt rather silly before straightening my 'beard' and taking another deep

breath. I knocked on the door and waited, albeit not for long.

I didn't have to wait long because the door soon opened and I immediately felt a blast of warm air against my face. It was accompanied by a gust of welcoming and the smell of fresh toast. 'Ho, ho, ho!' I said, 'Mer-ry Christmas!' It was the first thing that popped into my head. It seemed appropriate, given the circumstances.

In the doorway stood a man about double the size of Me. He too wore a beard, and with it the broadest of smiles and a woollen jumper with a picture of a reindeer on the front. 'Merry Christmas!' he said back. I don't suppose that there was much more he could have said.

Clearly having immediately recognised me as someone legitimately masquerading as the fat, bearded chap in the red smock (whose presence was not too surprising given the day) the man invited me inside and straightaway offered me a drink. Before I'd had even a second to realise that it would be rude to decline such a thing, despite it being eight in the morning and not the most appropriate time for Scotch, he'd gently pushed me through into the living room and disappeared somewhere else. A sweet smell of honey, of chocolate and of pine, together with that of the fresh toast, then wafted up my nose as I stepped forward through the door.

The living room was about the size of another one. There was a tree standing tall in one corner dripping with colours of green and gold and red and blue. Festive cards from long-ago-seen family and friends adorned almost every sill while candles flickered on a table and a cat looked dead.

A couple of grandparents - or so I presumed - rose from armchairs to greet me with mock surprise as Mrs 'Mum' entered from another room and did the same. On the floor, next to the tree a vast pile of multi-coloured shredded paper shifted seemingly of its own accord. A second later and a child of about six emerged clutching a yellow plastic digger. The child made a noise that didn't make any sense (to me), and this was followed by an eyes-n'-teeth exchange between his mother and he. One of the grandparents made an 'oogling' sound. And this didn't make any sense to me, either.

I took control, quickly guessing (correctly) that I was being introduced and I took this as my cue to present the child with his gift. For a moment the child looked at me in astonished bewilderment. He shyly bit his lip before realising that it was then his turn to perform. He immediately hid behind his mother's knees, poking his head around as if playing hide and seek - either that or he was protecting himself just in case I happened to explode. I'm sure that this would have surprised everyone.

To the accompaniment of a little more 'oogling' Child was gently ushered towards me to receive his gift. Taking the parcel in both hands, with a nervous smile he mumbled something sounding a little like 'Thank you' and then dived back into the pile of shredded paper, a second later shrieking with ear-piercing delight.

At this point I was getting the impression that I was actually doing exactly what I was supposed to. This was confirmed when the father returned with the drinks and handed me a tumbler half-filled with whisky. We clinked glasses in a toast to each others' elf, and with some idiotic crack about Rudolph's impatience to bury his nose into a bag of carrots (and having a lot of presents still to deliver before he could do so) I left as a thin mist of nonsense began to cast doubt on my sobriety. With a wave I walked carefully back to the car.

Steve and I arrived at the second house a few minutes later and once again I retrieved the correct gift from the back seat. A little more cautiously I walked to the front door and knocked and within moments of my '*Ho, ho, ho, Mer-ry Christmas*' I was presenting a delighted child with a gift and then toasting the family's good elf with a tumbler half-filled with whisky. Once again, with job done I waved my farewells. This time my walk back to the car was more than a little close to a stumble. My vision was clear, only it took my head a good moment to realise that.

Arriving at the next house I retrieved the gift and again made my way to the front door. As family members performed various indecipherable 'oogling' noises and exchanged expressions all eyes-n'-teeth, we again toasted each other's elf and shortly thereafter I was snaking my way back towards the car, bleary-eyed, and trying not to be sick.

The walk from car to door at house number four took considerably longer than all of the others so far. I knocked with a one-eyed squint and blew a couple of bubbles as I hiccupped my way through my '*Ho, ho, ho, Mer-ry Chrismash!*' As I presented the child with its gift this time the father handed me a glass of sherry. I was still feeling confident that my impersonation of Jolly Old Saint Nick was not altogether atrocious and so, unwilling to let myself down (see Book) I again accepted the family's hospitality and slugged the sherry back, soon bidding my farewells and zigzagging away to the car.

Things continued in this vain for the next couple of houses, the penultimate visit resulting in my final glass of 'whisky' and my drinking a toast to the family's 'shelf'. As I once again zigzagged away down the path I thought it highly amusing that from then on I was going to address Steve as something else. I wished '*Mer-ry Chrismash!*' to a gnome and half-somersaulted over a small pivot hedge. 'Giddy-up, Rudolph!' I said as I reached the car laughing almost-hysterically. 'Carrot?'

Steve looked across at me, his eyebrows raised. 'You okay?' he asked.

All things considered, I probably wasn't (see Book, again).

I'm not proud of it (see Book, once more) but I have to admit that it was probably on Rudolph's advice that the next house was my final visit that Christmas morning. Unfortunately, this advice came a little late: as I performed a Starsky and Hutch-style vault over the bonnet of the car and yelled, 'Go, go, go!' having sobered-up rather quickly. I'd clearly handled the situation very badly indeed (see Book, yet again).

Bleary-eyed and in a bit of a mess I'd knocked on the door and been invited into the house. This time there were no grandparents, no siblings and no mother. The father had offered me a drink and soon after disappearing into another room I heard the phone ring. Child and I were left staring at each other. I had little idea of what next to do.

Child was about seven. He looked at me somewhat suspiciously and after an awkward second or two said, 'You're not Father Christmas!'

'?' I thought.

I hadn't been faced with this challenge before. Here was a kid questioning my professionalism; casting doubt upon my well-meaning masquerade. As it was, the youth centre had given no training at all prior to sending us out and about and I therefore had no idea of an appropriate response. I quickly thought on my feet and determined that I should remain in character. I figured that I should keep up the charade lest I became instrumental in the destruction of the child's festive delusion. 'Yesh, I am [hic.]' I said, thinking that it would do. It didn't.

Child raised his eyebrows far higher than Rudolph had earlier in the car. 'No, you're not!' he said and turned his back. I was beginning to find him rather irritating.

'I am Father Chrishtmash' I responded. 'Look, I've got a beard! And I come with preshensh!'

Child spun around. He looked angry and squawked 'You're not Father Christmas! Go away!' He then kicked me in the shin.

Like I said, I'm not proud of it and I should've known better but Child had annoyed me and booted me in the leg. Of course, in hindsight I could've handled things far more maturely than I actually did but with my irritation apparent I leaned in towards him and in a voice not too far away from a whisper I told him, 'Lishten kid, Shanta's not real. He'sh jusht made-up.'

Child's lip began to tremble and in a second his eyes welled with tears and shock. 'WAAHHH!' he cried. And I immediately fled the house as fast as I could, hoping to be away long before his father returned lest in a fit of rage he battered me into oblivion with a bag of sprouts.

Psychopaths and a butterfly, and a nice cup of tea

It was something of a coincidence when a few years ago I was at a party in Bath and met the daughter of John and Anna Carter, founders of *Carter's Steam Fair* in London where I once worked for a day and where my uncle ran candyfloss stalls laundering cash generated by his narcotics operations. Another coincidence, albeit entirely separate and connected in no way whatsoever to this, is that I have lived in both St Andrews in Bristol and St Andrews in Scotland.

And so, anyway...

Soon after my A-Levels I found myself being rather bored. I was living close enough to Frome for this to be sufficient a reason, and I had a year to kill prior to departing for university to become even more bored than ever before, particularly throughout the two-hour stratigraphy lectures at 9am on Monday mornings. I decided to move to Bristol and pass the year with a job or two, hopefully raising some cash to take to said university and squander on booze and stuff. I took a room in the house my mother shared with her partner, Mark. My sister stayed there too for a bit. I was nineteen years old.

Living in Bristol was my first ever experience of life as a city-dweller. I'd visited the place many a time before, and Bath too, but it was the first time I'd lived in a place so vast and full of concrete and fly posters and dirt. Sure, it wouldn't be the last time I'd ever live in such a place, but it was certainly the first. It was an interesting experience; one that would become rather more memorable as a consequence of attracting the unwelcome attentions of a psychopath. Actually, come to think of it, I'm really not altogether sure whether there ever is a welcoming occasion for that. We lived in North Road in St Andrews (the Bristol one), an area of the city some way 'up' the Gloucester Road and off to the right.

If you don't already know, Gloucester Road is a part of the city that some may describe as 'artisan' while others' as somewhat 'bohemian'. I tend to stick with the simplicity of 'grotty'. It stretches from the centre of Bristol up towards the M5 motorway, but at various stages, for reasons that I

have little interest in going into, it's called something else. A couple of miles or so out of town in an area named Horfield is a prison. I'd rather not ever have a reason to describe that.

Back then, as I imagine is the case even now, Gloucester Road featured an abundance of charity shops. Many regular retailers had long since gone out of business and their graffiti-daubed roller-shutters then served to display day-glow fly posters and to highlight the purposelessness of illiterate chavs. There were a number of cafés along the road and some offered al-fresco slurping of caffeine-related beverages; places for customers to inhale exhaust fumes and grime while relaxing out on the pavement. A few offered fairly reasonable plates of egg and pig-bits and there were any number of old pubs where the music would stop and the regular customers would turn and stare as you entered through the door.

North Road was perhaps a mile or so from the city centre and ran parallel to Gloucester Road... for a bit. It was as interesting as a bowl of spaghetti hoops and as dull and grey as an accountant's socks. We lived on a junction of another road that I can't remember the name of in a four-storey house with a blue door. In addition to this being a rather pointless observation, it is all but irrelevant to anything else. I drove past it not so long back. The door is still blue.

I had not been in Bristol a great length of time before I decided that I needed a job. I had to pay for a replacement window for my car after some revolting little oik hurled a breeze block through it in order to steal a Rachmaninov CD and a half-bag of Werther's. It was a fairly pleasant day and I figured that I'd take a walk into the city to the job shop. I dressed myself in a suit, scraped my face and polished my teeth and set-off feeling oddly cheerful. It wouldn't last. With a further soupçon of irrelevance, the time was about half-nine in the morning.

There's a set of traffic lights at one particular junction near a bridge. On that day, despite it being rather early in the morning the roads and the pavements were fairly quiet. The sun shone and I imagined that birds were singing somewhere. As I neared the lights so a prison van, clearly en route to the magistrates courts in the city centre, pulled

to a halt on account of the lights showing red. This was nothing particularly out of the ordinary as I'd seen such vehicles before. And lights, too, funnily enough. I therefore continued minding my own business. As I drew level with the van however, suddenly a ferocious and repetitive thudding began against one of its blackened windows. It quickly grew more ferocious and was accompanied by what sounded like a kind of scraping or clawing. As I turned my attention toward it, the van then began to rock from side to side.

The thudding and scraping (or clawing) and rocking from side to side fast intensified becoming even more aggressive and violent, and it was then that the muffled, blood-curdling screams began. Immediately my hair stood on-end while I felt the colour drain from my face, my odd cheerfulness vanishing in a split second to be replaced with absolute terror.

In hindsight it was an irrational fear, but my infrequent command of the rational had quickly fled and hidden itself behind a post. Even my cowardice had fast emptied its dignity onto the floor. I looked around. I was alone. Clearly the crazed individual within the confines of the van was directing its attention towards me. I tried to remain calm but couldn't. My irrational fear hit me again like a shovel to the head as I suddenly believed that I was moments from being slain. Images exploded in my mind's eye of my arterial blood spraying across a day-glow fly poster as the escaping loon chewed away at my face. My life flashed before me. Unimpressed, I tried to think of something else.

The thrashing within continued as the traffic lights descended from red to amber to green. The van continued to rock from side to side as it pulled away, while the blood-curdling screams continued too, seemingly hanging in the air like the unpleasant odour of last Friday's socks. As the loon-mobile disappeared into the distance I leant against a wall. I remembered the day, many years before, when I was appearing in court in Frome accused of committing a minor traffic violation. On that day, before I was called to the dock an axe murderer was brought in manacled to a couple of police officers. Shrugging my shoulders and

rolling my eyes to the sky I thought nervously, 'Psychos, eh?' And quietly awaited my coronary.

Later that day, having successfully gotten myself a job in a nightclub to begin a few days thence, I was walking home. It was a thoroughly pleasant late afternoon and I was feeling quite pleased with myself having recovered from my experience with the psychopath hours earlier. As I crossed the street that would lead me up onto North Road and to home my path was suddenly blocked by a drunken fuckwit. He first looked me up and down and then pondered a moment before slurring, 'Shlook at yoush! (You're) wearingsh a fuckingsh shuit!'

'?'

Now, I hadn't encountered such an observance of the quite-so-obvious for a while. Because my mind was occupied with thoughts of my new job however, my list of snappy comebacks and witty retorts was unfortunately not immediately accessible. 'Yes. That is correct.' I replied instead. To which Drunken Fuckwit quickly stood aside looking thoroughly baffled and bemused and undoubtedly in need of a nice cup of tea.

These incidents were my first introductions to life as a city-dweller in Bristol. I wasn't overly impressed thus far, somewhat obviously, but I hoped that my new job would be fun and exciting and enable me to meet people and dismiss those incidents as if screwing up a piece of paper and hurling it over my shoulder into a bin. The job was in a nightclub in the centre of the city. It had the somewhat-odd and incorrectly-spelt name of 'Papilon' (meaning 'butterfly'). I was thus rather wrong about that.

Papilon (sic) was not the most eventful of jobs that I have ever had. Being nineteen it was my first-ever bar job, yet while I can remember the incidents involving the drunken fuckwit, the psychopath and the revolting oik smashing the window of my car, because it was twenty-odd years ago I can remember very little specifically about my time at the club. I do remember that the assistant manager looked like a cross between Lawrence Llewellyn Bowen and Cher, his hair styled, I guessed, by connecting his ears to a car battery. And I recall that the manager resembled a cast member of the show 'Cats' who often wore leopard-print

Spandex and had the personality of a Triffid. The final thing I remember about working at *Papilon* was being threatened with the sack on my very first night for serving a drink after the bar had closed. I'd done so because the guy I had served had been about a foot taller than I and had threatened to leap over the bar if I didn't and thump out my teeth.

I worked at *Papilon* for a few months (I think), but because it was a club and the shifts were in the evenings I still needed to get myself a daytime job. I think I took a job in telesales, but I'm really not particularly sure about that.

Keystone Cops, a whole bunch of oiks, and some chicken in a basket

One day I decided to join the navy. I'd figured that my life wasn't really going anywhere (see Book) and that somehow military service... for Queen and Country and all that... would be a little more interesting. Besides, I quite liked the idea of blowing things up and travelling the world for free, too. I'd momentarily considered joining the army but I'd recently seen Stanley Kubrick's Full Metal Jacket; so that was out. And some years previously a friend had tried to become a fighter pilot but had been rejected quite early on in the process because he'd admitted to getting stoned once... so that was out, too. I decided on the Royal Navy and with one of the MoD's pressgang offices situated right in the centre of Bristol I made an appointment to see an advisor there.

Being me, I'd obviously approached the idea of a career on the high seas with the same lack of consideration and foresight that I'd tended to approach the majority of my vocational aspirations. However, in those few days before the meeting I took a couple of minutes to give some thought as to just what I would do if they foolishly signed me up. I played it through my head like some kind of internal dialogue. It went something a little like this:

'So... military service then. That'll mean having to get up at 5am and have orders barked at me all day. I'm not going to enjoy that.

'Okay. I'll be an officer.

'But officers get orders barked at them all day, too.

'Aha! Yes. But they also get to bark orders at someone else.

'Good point. So what kind of an officer?

'Well, for a long time I've had an interest in communications. I'll be a Communications Officer.

'On what?

'I don't know. A boat?

'What kind of boat?

'Um... A submarine?

'But there's no room to move and a chance I can be crushed, drowned and blown to pieces... all at the same time.

'Fair point. How about a ship?

'I could get drowned and blown to pieces on one of those, too.

'Okay. So I need to do something that won't involve me getting crushed, drowned, blown to pieces, irradiated, suffocated or shot. And it needs to be something that won't involve my having orders barked at me all day. Aha! I know: I'll be an Admiral.

'Brilliant!'

Okay, so perhaps I wasn't being particularly realistic about a possible career in the Royal Navy: after all, there'd be a fairly long waiting list for the position and everyone on that list would have considerably more experience in this navy lark than I. There was the fact that no matter how I approached it I'd still have plenty of people barking orders at me for great lengths of time to come, plus, I'd also failed to consider that my physical affliction (I have some weird, fucked-up bone thing in my knee) would probably not allow me anywhere near basic training let alone beyond it. I thought about all that, acknowledged that when it came down to it I was a complete and utter coward, and thought, 'Oh well. I'll get myself a job at *The Horn and Trumpet* instead.' So I did.

The Horn and Trumpet was a city-centre pub in the city-centre of Bristol. It was a huge place with a bar stretching all the way back to the rear of the building and to a kitchen serving mostly chicken in a basket, fish in a basket and pretty-much anything else 'in a basket'... with chips. It was a haven for nutters, oiks, yobbos and chavs and on a Friday and Saturday night the police would park in the lay-by outside and wait for the inevitable booze-fuelled moron to be dragged out to them by the doormen. Its management team consisted of two Irishmen. There was Pete, who looked like a psychopath. And Nick, who actually was one.

I remember an evening during which some chav with an alcohol-induced speech impediment tried to order a drink from me at the bar. Both Pete and Nick happened to be standing a couple of feet away and after his various protestations at my refusal to serve him any more booze (those protestations consisting primarily of the word 'fuck', or rather something that sounded a little more like

'sshppffuckleshsh') Pete turned towards Nick and in his charming Irish lilt said simply, 'Get this piece of shit out of here.' With somewhat surprising calm and professionalism (to begin with, at least) Nick asked him to leave. Chav refused.

Now, if there is such a thing as a sensible drunk he or she would, more often than not, comply with a similarly polite request, particularly if it originated from a rather dangerous-looking Irishman missing his two front teeth. Not Chav. Chav wore a Ben Sherman shirt and his face was covered in pits. A barely visible half-caterpillar rested between his nose and top lip, while his 2-carat necklace from Ratner's shone the colour of a blood-orange, reflecting his lobster-pink skin. His hair was closely-cropped and both of his arms and his neck were decorated with tattoos reminding me of the graffitied walls of the pub's toilet. Clutching the bar with both hands in an effort to remain vaguely vertical, his eyes seemed to survey the area but were unlikely to be making any sense of it. I imagined that his lack of comprehension of his surroundings were a particularly familiar feeling to him. I also guessed that his IQ was somewhere in the region of about four.

In addition to Chav's delightful speech impediment and the yobbo's typical interpretation of bar etiquette, hours of pouring alcopops and cheap lager down his throat had eventually rewarded him with significantly-misplaced delusions of adequacy. As a result he had determined that he was sufficiently sober to remain put and decided to communicate this by using his fists to negotiate staying for another drink. Within a second he had raised himself from his position of providing support to the bar to stand-up and look threatening. He pushed-out his chest in an attempt to bulk-out his spindly frame, and then drew back a clenched fist to hurl towards Nick's head. It was then that gravity intervened.

All of a sudden Chav performed a kind of oddly-acrobatic lunge. Unable to maintain stability he then spiralled down towards the floor and let out a muffled yelp as his chin bounced against the bar. A moment later and he came to rest in a crumpled heap on the carpet.

Together with one of the pub's gigantic doorman Nick moved in to gather up the mess but without warning it then

exploded in an angry ball of flailing arms and legs. For a second Chav looked as if he was performing a badly-choreographed tribal war dance, but on closer inspection it appeared more as though he was demonstrating his reaction had he just opened a wildly-shaken box of wasps. With a range of indecipherable obscenities flying in all directions Chav was taken by the arms in a vice-like grip and then dragged through a table into the street. There, he was hurled into the back of a waiting police car.

What happened next I found rather bemusing: not only had the police failed to take the opportunity to handcuff Chav, they had, for some reason, wound down the windows in the back of the car. In a split second Chav had reached out, opened the door and fucked-off down the street. Apparently, he was finally rugby-tackled into a tree and given a few hours uncomfortable respite in a concrete box.

It was not the first time that some pissed-up moronic oik proved troublesome at *The Horn and Trumpet* and there were always plenty of opportunities for Nick and the pub's many doormen to drag some booze-fuelled idiot out onto the pavement and to a waiting police vehicle. Weekends were generally unpleasant shifts to work but as I think about it now, despite all that there was actually something oddly intriguing about the place. It had a strange type of charm that in my mind's eye I liken to the cliché of a saloon of the Wild West. It was a modern day 'spit n' sawdust' kind of pub, only without the sawdust. Where, in a saloon in 1880's Tucson, Arizona, for example, one would push through the wooden swing doors with a self-rolled cigarette between one's teeth and observe unshaven gunslingers chewing tobacco and playing poker, in the 1990's *Horn and Trumpet* one would swagger through the doors and observe freshly-showered oiks smoking Lambert and Butler and playing pool. The vague similarities would continue as a brawl would erupt from nothing and for no apparent reason. Fists and chairs would fly while the modern-day equivalent of the saloon piano: the jukebox, provided an accompanying soundtrack. In the saloon Buckshot Jimmysprinkles would shout 'Yee-Haw!' and break a bottle over someone's head. In *The Horn and Trumpet* Tyrone, Darren and Kurt would do exactly the same. I was rather disappointed though, that not once during my time at *The Horn and Trumpet* was

anyone lifted-up by their collar and britches and slid along the length of the bar, their head crashing through the plaster and into the kitchen at the end. Still, the similarities continued on as I looked around within my mind's eye: where in the saloon working women can-canned on stage and waved the hems of their frilly frocks up high, in *The Horn and Trumpet* overweight, orange-skinned girls with big hair like unkempt pivot hedges shrieked and cackled and made gobbling sounds like turkeys. They took occasional sips of alcopops and coke-flavoured vodka through straws, their outfits nothing but strips of brightly-coloured cloth far too narrow to hide the blubber overflowing their waistlines or the tramp-stamps in the smalls of their backs. Where the odour within the saloon was a pungent mixture of sweat, tobacco and horse dung, in *The Horn and Trumpet* it was of sweat and Lynx deodorant, of hairspray and cigarettes and of cheap perfume and stale beer. 'Twas an almost palpable atmosphere of uncompromising despair. To describe it as 'thoroughly unpleasant' would be both rude and unkind to the putrid stench of all things revolting and repellent.

Anyhoo...

With the exception of a very limited number of individuals the majority of the weekend clientele of *The Horn and Trumpet* guzzled lager as if their lives depended on it. They jeered and honked in a dialect of complete nonsense (see Book), their conversations of fighting and football an obligatory shun of all things civilised (see Book, again). Like I said, these shifts were generally unpleasant to work through but during the week things were occasionally less depressing. Sure, they still attracted idiots in jeans and white trainers trying to outdo one another in their efforts to make the case for mass euthanasia, but the days were (mostly) quite peaceful. And there were actually one or two regulars of the bar to whom I was quite prepared to give the time of day. In particular there was a guy named Miles. Miles was nice. Miles was a mercenary.

Miles was what I refer to as a Wild Goose. It's a term I use in reference to a movie with Richard Burton and Richard Harris, a movie about a group of ex-soldiers undertaking a mission somewhere in Africa. It's a term I use because Miles was, as the name 'Miles the mercenary' suggests,

indeed a professional mercenary. I know this not only because people spoke about it in hushed tones but because he and I spoke at length during the daytimes when the pub was quiet. Sadly, Miles was also an alcoholic.

For somewhat obvious reasons Miles was never boasting or enthusiastically forthcoming with details of his profession but on occasions he'd mention things enabling me to build up a picture of his life in my mind. He was never one for bravado, for that was more Pete and Nick and the other regulars' forte, but we'd often speak about our hopes for the future and of our pasts. Miles' past was, of course, far more varied and shocking than my own.

Miles was in his late forties, early fifties perhaps. He was heavily tanned with deep-set eyes and leathery jowls and he looked, quite simply, like a man who had been in situations in which I'd have been sobbing like a four-year-old girl. He resembled The Joker from the Batman movie because he had a huge scar running from ear to ear: a 'Chelsea smile', as I was to learn later. One day I asked him about it and he told me in the most gentle way that he really didn't want to speak of it. At that I simply nodded and changed the subject. Miles was grateful for that and he and I enjoyed a few more weeks of conversations before one day he arrived, to my surprise ordered a cup of coffee and told me with a keep-it-under-your-hat wink that he'd gotten some work. I never saw him again.

Now, I really don't know whether it was all bullshit. Throughout the months of my employment at the pub I'd seen and heard plenty of nonsense about fighting and I had been told stories by the likes of Nick and Pete that were simply too ridiculous to be even remotely true. I'd also discovered how to recognise some of the traits of that bullshit by then as well. Sure, it may have been all conjecture and rumour; some glamorised ideal that had simply built up around Miles alongside just a massive volume of crap, but I don't think so. Miles went away and a few weeks after that I left *The Horn and Trumpet* to work somewhere else. I then went off to university and on my return for my first Christmas break I met up with my friend John (from ATI) for a quiet drink. John wanted to say 'goodbye' as he was going away 'on holiday at Her Majesty's pleasure' for 'aggravated TDA.' Both Pete and Nick had

since left but a guy named Robert with whom I'd worked before was still there. I asked him about Miles and he told me, 'Miles never came back. No one knows what happened to him.' And that was that.

I like to think that it was all indeed conjecture and rumour; that Miles had sobered up, gotten some more legitimate work and moved on with his life. I like to think that but it's probably not true. Whatever happened to Miles I doubt I'll ever know and while the thought that lurks in the back of my mind is sad, and if I'm honest: particularly chilling, I do hope that he's okay. I wish him all the best and you should too. Stay safe, Miles, my friend.

The Cat and Hammer

Finding myself in bed with the wife of the pub's landlord meant the beginning of the end of my employment at the Cat and Hammer. It wasn't the smartest of things to do, particularly considering the fact that the landlord, a revolting Irishman who looked like a bulldog chewing a shovel filled with gravel, saw himself as a bit of a gangster. Fortunately though, that night he'd gone away and so he never found out about his wife and I. Although I guess my writing about it won't help matters particularly.

The Cat and Hammer was a large pub close to Sunderland's city centre, a little up the road from the main university campus and somewhere near the beach. Mostly down to the fact that its clientele consisted primarily of nutters and chavs and had a food menu featuring mainly things with chips in baskets, it was similar to the Horn and Trumpet in Bristol where I'd had a job some time back. It was managed by a guy named Ron, a massively fat pig-slug of a man with an uncanny resemblance to a landfill site. I despised him much in the same way a house-proud obsessive-compulsive despises cleaning cheesecake out of their carpet.

The pub itself was pretty nondescript and not a tremendous amount took place throughout the short time that I was employed there. There are, however, two things that stick in my mind when I think about my work there and the first is Ron himself.

Ron was the kind of guy who would break into a sweat walking up a short flight of stairs. He had a huge head with a stupid-looking moustache similar to that worn by Hitler. Although he thought of himself as something of a gangster, he wasn't. Ron would simply pretend to be very secretive; rarely discussing 'business' openly but preferring to look like some seedy pleb in the corner when someone would turn up to talk to him. He spoke proudly and frequently of fighting; as if it was some fantastic skill and endearing character trait rather than the pathetic boasting of a complete pillock. But there were other reasons why I loathed him and not least because he was crude and foul-mouthed and mannered. He bullied everyone, including his wife. And to his staff he was

particularly demeaning and offensive. Often he'd be scornful and critical for no reason other than he felt that he could and on occasion, without a word he would hand forth his repellent spectacles for one of us to clean. He enjoyed exerting his authority; never once offering a single word of appreciation or gratitude for anything.

He'd guzzle Guinness with the enthusiasm of a dog with a plate of choc-drops and regularly instruct the female staff to reach for things unnecessarily to enable him to make lurid jokes to his equally-vile friends as they stood like heaps of compost at the end of the bar. There are very few people on this earth that I genuinely wish pain upon and Ron isn't one of them... yet I'd quite enjoy watching his turnip-like head explode under the wheels of a truck.

Anyway... The second thing that I recall is the night that Ron was away and his wife and I sat up drinking the pub's stock and getting rather drunk. I got on well with her on account of her sparkling wit and our mutual dislike of Ron.

It was a Sunday evening and I'd spent much of the day working behind the bar. We'd had an after-work drink that had swiftly descended into nonsense and I had a lecture in the morning. Since it was about half-five when I actually remembered it, so 'Mrs Ron' suggested that I get an hour or so's sleep there rather than walking home and then back into town. She led me into a bedroom that I assumed was set aside for guests, but it actually turned out to be hers and Ron's. I learned of this only when she climbed into bed beside me, giving me the shock of my life and very good reason to turn up to a lecture on time for once. I didn't stay working at the Cat and Hammer for much longer because I began to fear for my personal safety. Fortunately though, and like I said, Ron never found out.

I did wonder whether there could ever be any repercussions from writing this, but after a great deal of thought (well, a couple of seconds at least) I decided that if there is to be any fallout it would just go to show that I was absolutely right about the kind of character described. Besides, I'm pretty sure that Ron can't read anyway... so it doesn't really matter.

How hard can it be?

'Three cups of tea and some jobs please!' I asked with feigned enthusiasm, my head thick with the gunk of post alcohol excess. I tried a smile, hoping that it would help. It didn't.

From behind the counter the teenager stared at me, his expression initially blank as he attempted to compute my order. Slowly, at a speed similar to the rising of a winter's sun, something then began to register across his face: bemusement.

A dim light flickered in his eyes and his mouth twisted slightly on one side moments before he turned to scan the menu on the board behind him. Turning back towards my friends and I, he pensively bit his bottom lip. His expression now registered a deep concentration; one battling utter confusion and bewilderment. For a second time he turned to scan the board. I looked at my friends beside me, both of whom turned their heads towards me, shrugged their shoulders and raised their eyebrows, simultaneously opening the palms of their hands at their sides as if welcoming some kind of impending doom. They weren't far off. Moments later the teenager again turned to face us. The expression of confusion remained for just a fraction of a second longer before it disappeared altogether and returned to its default state. With eyes seemingly devoid of hope he asked, 'Would you like fries with that?'

A couple of friends and I had decided to spend our summer holiday away from university and working in Blackpool. It was as good an idea as any other.

We chose Blackpool because we each had other friends there and on the day of our arrival we found ourselves a place to live: a squalid bed-sit next to the football ground. It was a vile place, a bit like living in a skip only considerably less-civilised, and for a moment I thought about changing my name to Grover (from Sesame Street). The moment soon passed and so I didn't.

Understandably, the rent was very cheap but we were students. We were broke and in urgent need of cash. To get some of it we needed jobs. Spectacularly hung-over from a night's free boozing in Blackpool Tower (courtesy of

a friend employed behind one of its bars) we went for an early lunch in McDonalds. We left with three offers of employment and our tea. I had some chicken nuggets, too.

At first, for reasons impossible to recall and irrelevant anyway, we were told that we couldn't begin our jobs for another week. Our financial situations were all particularly dire and so, because I was feeling a little more resourceful than the others I asked whether there was anything else that we could do in the meantime to get some cash. Foolishly, the manager told us that there was. He told us that he had some painting and decorating for us. I was quite apprehensive about that.

It must be recognised at this point that I'm not particularly adept at home improvements, let alone business ones. I've never so much as put a piece of self-assembly furniture together without either discovering at least one leftover bolt on the floor (and said item later collapsing into a heap of disappointment at half-four in the morning), or myself in a state of recovery from a momentary bout of fury-induced amnesia having smashed a shelving unit into a million pieces because I've not read the Pidgin-English instructions. I've barely zero hours of experience painting and decorating and I can't recall ever taking a roller in-hand or, as would soon become rather obvious, operating an industrial belt-sander to ready some fire doors for repainting. That said, we agreed to the jobs immediately and while my two friends were handed some brushes and pointed in the direction of the staff room, I was handed the industrial belt-sander and pointed in the direction of the fire doors.

Now, in experienced hands such a device can make light work of preparing each of the huge, rather expensive fire doors for a re-paint. Since mine weren't in any way experienced however, I'd simply thought: hey, how hard can it be? And carried on regardless. It was, as it turned out, very.

I simply couldn't get used to the sensitivity of the trigger of the device which, despite my caution would launch the machine, with me in-tow, up the entire length of the door, gouging out a rather unsightly chunk of MDF in the process. No matter: eight hours later and I was standing back and admiring five of the restaurant's fire doors, each of varying

thickness, hanging pitifully throughout the corridor while a burgundy-faced manager stood dumbstruck with what appeared to be smoke billowing out of his ears.

Possibly, it was his own stupidity at asking me to do the job in the first place that was the reason I wasn't immediately fired. As for him, it was certainly going to be a while before he would get anywhere near to redeeming himself for the eleven thousand pounds that he'd taken the best part of an hour to explain to me that they were going to cost the company to replace. I was then rota'd on to the counter and to asking 'Would you like fries with that?' Not altogether surprisingly, I didn't last much longer as an employee of McDonalds.

Despite my efforts to be as professional as possible I quickly got the impression that the manager wasn't my greatest fan. This became apparent when he discovered that I'd given away about a hundred free cheeseburgers because I'd failed to check the closing date on the vouchers. It was an oversight that I learned only when he yelled something particularly morale-destroying at me across the restaurant. Realising then that there was no way that I was ever going to get my five stars of professionalism to wear on my silly red shirt I handed in my notice and got myself a job crippling the faintly-famous at Blackpool Pleasure Beach instead.

Driving Miss Crazy - my very own stalker

My driving test to become a Student Union minibus driver required me, quite literally, to know how to start the engine of a Ford Transit. Since the first time I had done this was at the age of three with a screwdriver, it did not represent too great a challenge. After driving less than a hundred yards from the car park without leaving second gear I was thus delighted to learn that I had passed the test and was now a member of an exclusive club of Union Shuttle and Late Night Transport (LNT) drivers. Although the pay was pretty crap, I would soon be spending my evenings driving between the union bars ferrying drunken students about. It made a nice change from actually being one, as I had been far too frequently of late.

Admittedly, being a shuttle driver was not the most challenging of roles that I have ever had, yet I didn't find it all that dull. On occasion I would be required to pop over to Newcastle airport to pick up a visiting lecturer, which was quite fun. Or occasionally a foreign student which, considering the usual language barriers, simply wasn't. But the best job? Now, that was the LNT.

The LNT was the student union's minibus service exclusively for women. It operated each night of the week from about six in the evening into the early hours of the morning and it was great fun mainly because I would get to meet lots of girls. It was far more entertaining than the shuttle because drunken girls tend to be quite funny, whereas drunken blokes generally aren't. In fact, driving drunken blokes across town on a Friday or a Saturday night (or any other night of the week for that matter) was arguably on a par with driving a bus full of sex-starved baboons up to their eyeballs on Red Bull under a ladder during a full moon. It was on the LNT that I met Emma.

I had collected Emma and her friends from the Carlton Bar to take them to the main student union bar named Wearmouth (on account of that being the name of the building in which it was). She sat up front with me and we shared a little idle banter en route. It was the same when I collected them from Wearmouth to take them to Manor Quay, the student union's nightclub. This time, being a

little drunk she was also somewhat more animated. One could even say she was perhaps even a little 'flirty'.

It was probably about half-one when I arrived back at Manor Quay as Emma and her friends were boarding the shuttle. When she saw me she decided to hop onto my bus instead, despite my not being scheduled to leave for twenty minutes, thereby ditching her friends for the journey home. This time she was far more animated (although not that drunk, as I seem to recall) and asked me if I would like to meet her for a drink the next evening. Emma was quite attractive and I found that rather appealing. I agreed to the date with a reaction probably not too dissimilar to that of a dog starved of a choc-drop, and the next evening I set off for the Carlton Bar to meet her. I walked with considerable doubt in my mind that she would actually turn up. It surprised no one more than it did me, when she actually did.

Now, as a man I have little willpower when it comes to women. I can, I guess, at times be quite shallow, too... *although at least I'm deep enough to admit it.* On this occasion however, I had high hopes that the evening would go well: that it would be one of scintillating conversation and laughter; dough-eyed gazings (eyes filled with dough) into each other's eyes as we strolled hand-in-hand along a moonlit path, shared a tender kiss goodnight at her door and then planned to spend the next day picking out curtains. Alas, some hours later and we were in bed.

I discovered a number of things about Emma over the next few hours. None were quite so troubling as the things I discovered after that.

First, I discovered that my ideas of romantic intimacy were not ideas shared by Emma because she immediately set-about demanding that I bite her in places far too disturbing to mention. Second, I learned that she was rather thick. Not long after arriving back at my room in Ashbrooke she looked at me and asked, 'What's your name again?'

Now, if I'm honest I was a little hurt, but I determined to figure out whether or not she was joking and therefore in possession of a sense of humour almost as twisted as my own, or whether she was simply forgetful or actually very

dumb. 'I'll give you a clue' I said, 'It begins with 'D' and ends with 'N'.'

'Err... David?' she asked.

'Uh... no. It begins with 'D' and ends with 'N'. And there's three letters.'

She thought for a moment.

'Err... Darren?'

'No. Three letters: beginning with 'D', ending in 'N'. And there's an 'A' in the middle.' I was becoming a little irritated.

'Damien?'

I gave up and told her my name. The situation then really began to deteriorate.

Emma had already decided that we were now going out with each other, despite the fact that I had determined otherwise. In as polite a way as possible I tried to convince her that I was not the man for her. I hadn't slept with her, literally or otherwise, but things had intensified at a rather uncomfortable rate. In fact, she all but terrified me. I felt it best to end things before they had even begun and decided to do so as gently and as sympathetically as possible. I used the line, 'It's not you, it's me'... even though it was. It just made things worse. She looked very angry indeed as I lied (again) and told her 'I'm sorry, but I have a girlfriend back home'. And that didn't work either. I made a number of further attempts to be subtle about not wanting her there anymore but I shouldn't have bothered; getting rid of her was like trying to get chewing gum out of a carpet.

Dawn was soon breaking and the birds outside were beginning their morning chirp. It was the end of May and on my bedroom wall, adjacent to a display of Poll Tax demands (the precursor to the Council Tax) a variety of court summons and other bills in red I had fixed a sheet of A4. On this sheet I had written '3rd June' in huge letters to remind me of my father's upcoming birthday. I had eventually managed to manoeuvre the situation to the point that both Emma and I were now dressed so that I could walk her home, but as I wrapped her coat across her shoulders she paused with her arm half-way into her sleeve. She took a long look at this sheet of paper, thought for a

moment and said slowly, '3... R... D... June. Who's June? Is she your girlfriend?'

I gave a brief explanation that I had forgotten my father's birthday these last two years and did not wish to do so again, before I realised the futility of it, opened the door and walked out. A half-hour later, as I left her at her door and turned the corner at the end of her street I thought that was the end of it and let out a sigh of relief. It wasn't.

As I walked back to Ashbrooke I carried this inexplicable feeling that I was going to see her very soon indeed. I actually had a feeling that I was being followed, but that could have simply been common paranoia. Nevertheless, as I entered the hall I caught my friend Tim returning from his girlfriend's house. I explained my activities of the previous evening and my inexplicable fear that Emma would probably return later that morning. He suggested that we spend the day in Newcastle and we set off in his car. 'That her?' he asked, noticing that I had just discovered something interesting in the glove compartment as we passed a girl striding along the pavement towards Ashbrooke Hall.

'Yup!'

Tim and I had a thoroughly pleasant day in and around Newcastle. We visited the Metro Centre in Gateshead and had lunch somewhere else, returning to Ashbrooke Hall at about four. As we pulled into the driveway another friend named Olie was standing in the door. He looked very angry indeed.

As it turned out, Emma had been in Ashbrooke all day awaiting my return. She had met many of my friends and at various points shared her joy at being my girlfriend and at others her devastation about my supposedly having another back home. Latterly she had expressed her desire to ask her brothers, one of whom had recently been released from prison, to visit me and tear off my face. Learning of this I did what any man in such a position would do: I went to the pub.

I rolled home at about three the following morning to a Post-it note attached to my bedroom door with a telephone number and the message 'CALL ME' followed by a particularly-chilling number of exclamation marks. And so, drunk, I did just that.

I made the call solely to apologise for upsetting her for not telling her sooner about 'June' and, of course, to avoid meeting her brothers and experiencing their propensity for extreme physical violence. I never heard from her again.

I quit driving soon after but not because of Emma. I had had a brainwave and decided that I was going to make my fortune by setting up a nightclub in seven days flat... and giving all the money away to charity.

Bluebells, graffiti and Twiglets. And the questionably-photogenic dead pig

And so I had to leave Sunderland rather swiftly; Phil and his merry band of thugs' fervent desire to snap my legs like Twiglets being somewhat less than appealing. There really wasn't anything left for me anyway, and I was tired of being a student... not that I'd ever been a very good one.

I was fed-up with the area too; tired of the broken, graffitied and industrialised hell that I'd long since generalised as the entirety of the North East of England.

I was bored of the Cash Converters and of the ping of fruit machines in the amusement arcades on every corner, bored of the masses of tracksuit-wearing idiots fighting all over the place. I was done with the tedium of the broken and boarded-up windows on the high streets and of the lager cans and the burnt-out cars strewn all along the beach. I needed to experience civilisation again; to relax in a place where football shirts or alcopops weren't sold in every other shop and where I could see endless fields and lush green meadows without a factory or a power station plonked somewhere along the skyline.

I needed to be free of the grey; free of the stifling smog of despair and lack of hope. I needed to be in a place where the sun occasionally shone and where people could converse without having to mention the Premiership or punch each other in the face. I yearned for cafés with decent coffee and soft, inoffensive music in the background - cafés on the opposite end of the spectrum to those serving tea in chipped mugs accompanied by the melancholic cacophony of eggs spluttering in shallow pans of fat, by the rustle of copies of the Racing Post and the Daily Star, by the distant sirens of police cars pursuing teenage fuckwits joyriding in stolen cars about the city, and by the white noise cum foghorn yell of Radio One.

I needed bars that didn't compete for the paycheques of jeering oiks with 'happy hours' or 'curry and a pint'... weren't crammed to the ceiling with slip-on shoes and white socks and ugly-striped shirts... weren't desperate to attract the shrieks and cackles of full-figured women on hen-nights clicking along the pavements in stilettos, their excessive perfume causing discarded Styrofoam cups to melt into the

floor as a billion sequins reflected the glare of passing traffic, focusing it into a dazzling lightshow capable of downing aircraft or sending a distress call far out into the deepest reaches of space. I guess I just needed out.

I had nowhere to go and nothing to do. I had no plans for the future (see Book), and no ideas of what to do next. Even if I did I had no money to do them with anyway. I was stuck and I was skint and I just thought, *Zoiks!* It was as good a thing to think as any other.

Given the absence of reasoning at any level (see Book again), that very same day I did what any man with a similar lack of foresight and responsibility would do: I hired a car and drove to Scotland. That, too, seemed as good a thing to do as any other.

With my sister having recently begun a PhD studying bees and things at St Andrews University I thought I'd go there for a bit. I hadn't seen her in a while and I arrived planning to spend a couple of days with her drinking tea in charming cafés and sneering my vastly-misplaced sense of superiority and self-importance at Hooray Henrys masquerading as students. I'd then head back down south to Bath to get myself a job. Pootling through Fife however: chugging along the coast in a rented Peugeot the colour of toasted snot, past RAF Leuchars and into the town I thought, 'This is nice, maybe I'll stay.' And so I did. It was a far more agreeable option than having my limbs mistaken for bar snacks.

Anyhoo...

As you may recall (see Book), *Marvellous Malcolm* was my nom de plume - so-to-speak - for the überdrivel that I shoved into my column in the *Student Times*. Since it often awarded me a thin veil of anonymity together with an opportunity to distance myself from the disjointed guff constituting my 'work' I decided to use it again. And so I did that, too. I set out to author a guide to the tiny Scottish town of St Andrews. Sorry about that...

Somewhat unimaginatively titled, *Marvellous Malcolm's A-Z of St Andrews* was my first attempt to write a book since my guide to *Birds of Doubtful Ornithological Plausibility*. It was my first since my diary too, and since another about an alien named Dave. It wasn't a serious attempt, by any stretch of the imagination, but I couldn't play golf and I

enjoyed sitting in cafés. In between shifts at *Bert's Bar* (a job I'd gotten soon after my arrival), and residing for an indeterminate length of time in the golfing capital of the world, just what else was I going to do?

I decided to compile a guide not because there wasn't one, because there was. I simply figured that since I'd caused something of a rumpus with my column for the paper I could perhaps do something similar with a guidebook, too. I considered that I could use my own brand of pseudo-humour to describe the town and its features and attractions, hopefully targeting an altogether different demographic than the ones already in existence, possibly offering an alternative to their generally pleasant, fair and accurate observations. Thus, I'd soon find a publisher dumb enough to pay me oodles of cash, which I could then squander on miscellaneous nonsense. I'd then dupe said publisher into subsidising a trip around the world and bang-out an even greater volume of überdrivel and claptrap. Offers of television shows would soon follow and before I knew it I'd have credibility and purpose and be able to meet girls who might even find me interesting. I'd launch a range of travel merchandise (such as a pac-a-mac trebling as a life-raft and mosquito net) and I'd explore the deepest jungles of Borneo and stay in the most exclusive hotels in Manhattan. I had to begin somewhere though, and that 'somewhere' was Scotland. It was either that or learn to play golf. I did 'that'.

Many, many, many years ago I kept a diary in one of those Red & Black (or is it Black & Red?) books. I kept it for about eighteen months, much of which time I spent besotted with a girl in my class. Each day I'd write a few words about my heart missing a beat the moment I saw her and of how I could never find the courage to speak to her, let alone ask her out. I was a shameful human being back then. It could be argued that I still am.

I composed the most Vogon-like poems for her featuring bluebells and daisies and the like. And I wrote messages of love that were so pathetic that when I re-discovered the book sometime later it sent a shiver down my spine and I had to incinerate it forthwith. After my non-book of *Birds of Doubtful Ornithological Plausibility* it was my second

attempt at writing a book. *A day in the life of Urp* was my third. It was an attempt at writing science-fiction, although it was perhaps as close to that particular genre as a sewage overflow pipe is to Perrier. Like I said earlier, it was a story about an alien named Dave.

Dave was from an alien civilisation that I named the Waiaiblegneepfh. I arrived at the name following a brief reminiscence of the grot-hole otherwise known as Sunderland during which the phrase, 'Waye-aye, Man' popped into my head. Its inexplicable stupidity summed the whole alien-named-Dave thing up for me and so I then punched the keyboard (of my laptop) to add a few more letters. It was as good a way to arrive at a name as any other, I thought.

A typical Waiaiblegneepfh, Dave had a half-dozen arms and eyes on stalks that would change colour according to his mood. He came into existence in a puff of rainbow smoke immediately following the death of his father, who died in a fight over a toaster. Soon exploring his planet and trying to figure out what each of his arms were actually for, he spent the first chapter learning both yogic flying and the words to each of the songs in Johnny Mathis' back catalogue. And then he befriended a rock.

Chapter two featured a psychic dog named Stephen with an uncanny ability to predict the weather some six weeks ahead. After becoming separated from his owner in a French hypermarket and finding himself joining the European space programme, Stephen was accidentally fired into space and would ultimately save the Waiaiblegneepfh from total annihilation by a lizard named Judith. It was all looking rather promising until Dave exploded on page six. There really wasn't anywhere to go with it after that.

Anyway.

It was a shame that my inability to write a guidebook to St Andrews was equalled only by my inability to identify a career ahead of me that would eventually dump me somewhere in the field of a perceived normality. My writing was as awful as it was when I was pouring my heart out onto the pages of my Red & Black diary - an effort replicated by many a puppy relieving himself over a carpet having earlier gobbled down a large bag of prunes. Once more I showcased my mastery of writing good an' that, my

finished sentences as pleasant as a bunion, the overall work as charming as tax.

Despite this acceptance I set out to develop a compilation of descriptive pieces. I failed and instead spewed my thoughts and observations into a computer, hoping that somewhere within a program might actually make some sense out of it that I could then take the credit for. Soon realising that things don't tend to work that way I continued to spend my time off (from working at *Bert's Bar*) in as many of the other bars and cafés that I could find and recording 'things what I found of interest an' that, innit, like.' As it happened, the town didn't have a great many of them.

There were a few museums mostly dedicated to punting little white balls across a field, but at that time the majority of 'things of interest' were the cafés and bars. Sure, there was the university: far more prevalent in popular culture today on account of the graduation of our future King and Queen and the subsequent surge in demand for revoltingly tacky crockery. And there's a ruin of an old thirteenth century castle there, too. And the botanical gardens. And a harbour in which I almost drowned at 3am one morning as a consequence of being rather drunk. There's also a Cold War nuclear bunker that I've only just found out about, and a museum that has something to do with the university.

Not a vast amount actually happens in the minute Scottish coastal town of St Andrews. This was confirmed to me when I conducted a rather poorly-thought-out and executed interview of the town's Chief Inspector (of police). Years previously there had been a 'moider', and a month earlier someone had had a set of golf clubs stolen from the boot of their car. But that was about it. I'm sure it's different now but back then there wasn't even much trouble during The Open golf tournament, or during the other event of significance: the St Andrews' Lammas Fair.

The Lammas Fair is a five-day event taking place in early August. It is said to be one of Scotland's oldest medieval markets, although by whom I'm not quite sure. I was employed at *Bert's Bar* when the fair was held and I remember finishing work late one evening and walking home through the empty streets. Arriving for work the following morning I couldn't help but notice that the place

had suddenly transformed into a theme park, the theme of which not being immediately apparent.

Overnight the main streets - all two of them - had become packed with stalls and rides, many reminding me of Carter's Steam Fair where years before I'd laundered cash from my uncle's narcotics operation. If you'd visited the town on the previous day you'd have seen a simple snapshot of everyday St Andrews' life, and yet within hours it had become a bustling market of music and laughter, of amusement rides, of stalls selling anything from kitchen knives to bags of pig-n-mix, to leather goods and baskets and a great many hotdogs. Today, the image lurking within the porridge-like gloop of my recollection is of the movie, *Transformers: Optimus Prime* and *Megatron* rolling into town overnight and with a clash, clatter and bang morphing into Ferris wheels and a Waltzer... later drooling over teenage girls as they all thumb through thick wads of twenty-pound notes and sounding identical in their yell for riders to 'Scream for speed...' or something like that.

Anyway...

Given my failure to be remotely informative (see Book) you'll probably have already figured out that I've not dared to unearth my final draft of *Marvellous Malcolm's A-Z of St Andrews* (to refer to) lest I spend the remainder of this week rocking back and forth against a wall. However, I do remember with the clarity of curdled milk, *Bert's Bar*, and I remember the existence of a cafe-cum-restaurant-cum-bar-cum-pub, a place with an interior resembling the aftermath of an argument between a couple of skips and a charity shop. I don't recall its name but I do remember walking in through the entrance and being greeted by an old red telephone box. A bicycle hung from the wall as did a boat. There were posters and what seemed a million vehicle licence plates and neon signs and various items of clothing in glass boxes. There was a great deal of awful china and coloured glass and bang in the middle of the place, for reasons that escaped me even then, someone had nailed a chair to the ceiling. It sold a lot of cheeseburgers and things with chips.

There were many other pubs, bars and cafés that I experienced on my travels within the town but few are more than a nano-grain of an image in the sludge-like gloop of

my vaudevillian pursuit. A little like Bath, much of St Andrews' architecture was beautiful and awe-inspiring and provided many opportunities for visitors to capture photographs of friends and loved ones looking awkward as they stood uncomfortably against the backdrop of something quaint. One such place was Murray Mitchell's dead pig shop.

I continue to be at a loss as to why, but Murray Mitchell was far more than just a butcher or a purveyor of meat and game. His shop had become something of an unofficial attraction whose window inexplicably brought tourists from miles around. Many arrived simply to stand in front of it looking rather uncomfortable being photographed against the backdrop of the carcass of a dead pig. Still, he probably sold quite a lot of haggis as a result of that.

Anyway.

As I wound-up my life in St Andrews so too did I cease writing *Marvellous Malcolm's A-Z* of the place. Never-again, I hoped, to set-out on such a project again. But like many things past and like many more to come, I would yet again be quite wrong about that.

Postage stamps and beans. And a handful of cress

If I was to be encouraged to list each of the things that I am actually any good at, it would be necessary to provide me with a postage stamp on which to compose that list. Of course, it wouldn't be a postage stamp known of this world: because it would instead be one used by the Nanomen, the little people of Nanoland whose messages are so microscopically minute that they're only just barely visible to the mystical Gnum-gnum beast, a creature with sight so sharp that were it ever possible to develop a digital camera as good it would have a squillion pixels and be about the size of a headache. With the list dictated (by me) to the cousin of the Gnum-gnum beast, a badger-like being named Whoops, it would then be transported through the ether in the wallet of an invisible bat, and read by the Gnum-gnum beast before crumpets. With a bark the sound of fog he'd read the list aloud for the Nanomen to shrug their shoulders, grumble a harmonious lack of interest, and then melt into the floor. Er... At least, I think it would be something like that.

Anyway.

One of things that would be on that list is that I tend to be quite good at anxiety-related episodes of self-doubt and paranoia. Another would be that I'm particularly proficient in getting drunk and failing to be in the slightest bit appealing to anyone. There wouldn't be even the remotest mention of this mangled sludge of words and stuff (see Book), but I'm pretty competent at wasting time and I'm also rather good at making sandwiches. Actually, I'm really very good at doing that.

Dear Reader, please accept my sincerest apologies for that brief drenching in überpiffle and gobbledegook. It's the smoke and nonsense of a Friday. I'll now try to make some sense...

Today I was, in fact, inspired by a sandwich. It was for sale in a café in Bath, a cafe in which I sat cowering from the rain pounding the pavement outside with all the ferocity of a bag of angry crickets. My almost-tweed jacket doesn't like the rain. It fluffs like a Jackson Five haircut and makes me feel as though I look like a pimp, even though I probably don't. Anyway. I noticed the sandwich not simply

by the fact that it was a sandwich (which it was) but by its name. It was called 'The Bogart' and I leaned in towards it to take a closer look. 'That's got to be one cool sandwich,' I thought, somewhat inappropriately and with flawless idiocy. Only, it wasn't a cool sandwich at all. It was instead a vegan sandwich with beans and organic grass and it got me thinking about the movies. I thought about Dear Old Humph and how mortified he'd be with his name being attached to a sandwich produced primarily for a bunch of pale-faced hedgemonkeys. And then I thought that I was taking this 'being inspired by a sandwich' thing a bit too far and decided to battle the wind and the rain instead. I stood up, shuffled to the door and braced myself. I buried my hands into my pockets and my chin into my neck and I thought: *One, two, three... It's as easy as A, B, C...*

Er... sorry again about that.

Oddly, not only did my discovery of *The Bogart* encourage my brain to flood with thoughts of the movies and a whole bunch of other nonsense (together with thoughts of the Gnum-gnum beast and his cousin named Whoops), somewhere floating on the surface of the frothy gloop of those thoughts was also one about my getting a job in a sandwich factory. It was a job that I'd gotten because I was absolutely broke and up to my eyeballs in debt. It was a job that I took with the conscious thought that I would be able to last it out at least a few weeks. Not surprisingly, I was quite wrong about that.

Of the many employment experiences that I have had the type that I find more unpleasant than any other is that requiring me to work in any kind of factory or production environment. Experience has shown me that factory work is only slightly less unpleasant than having one's tongue nailed to a wall and so, sure enough, signing up to a temping agency in Trowbridge I was immediately offered a job in one. Because things were becoming rather desperate, and the idea of nailing my tongue to anything wasn't a particularly good one, I accepted the job with my usual reluctance. I'd probably have had more fun had I spent a week trying to Blu-tack a frying pan to a horse. Or so I'd imagine.

Anyhoo... In my observations there exist three types of sandwich production facility:

The most obvious is production in one's home where one can place anything one has available between slabs of bread the size of the Gideon's Bible. Next, there are sandwich shops where one's filling of choice is shovelled into a freshly-baked torpedo roll, sometimes to the degree that the second you take a bite the filling falls out the other end and into your lap. The third type of sandwich production facility is one that maximises production efficiency by making sandwiches on a production line. It does this in what is known as a 'sandwich factory'. Sandwich factories are staffed by sandwich-making zombies. A sandwich factory staffed by sandwich-making zombies operates thus:

A team of zombies stand at a conveyor belt and for hours on-end the first pastes a miniscule amount of butter onto slivers of bread. The second along the line will then dollop a pile of egg mayonnaise onto the bread and the next will dump a handful of cress onto it too. Another zombie will then paste another miniscule amount of butter onto another sliver of bread and yet another zombie will place said sliver of bread on top to complete the sandwich. One more zombie will place the sandwich into a packet, one more will attach the label, and finally a whole team of zombies will deliver the packets to Littlewoods. I lasted less than ninety minutes in this job.

Quite simply, I was bored stiff within ten minutes and so being me (as I am) I determined that I had to come up with some way to entertain myself. I was on 'egg-mayonnaise' duty and so every two or three slices of bread that passed me by I 'forgot' to add the egg mayonnaise. Since each of my co-workers were so zombied-out no one noticed my little game. And for that hour and twenty minutes before I could bare it no more and fled I simply entertained myself with the thought that at some time in the next day or so someone would walk into Littlewoods for an egg sandwich, chomp into a handful of cress and be thoroughly disappointed indeed.

Biscuits, bullets, Monster Munch and Yop

Many years ago I had a dream that I was in a war torn, Balkan-like country. I was running along a potholed track and as I began to round a corner I was suddenly aware of thunderous engines and the squeals of caterpillar tracks up ahead. I took this as something to be cautious of and immediately launched myself behind a burnt-out vehicle, hiding from the oncoming convoy by diving into a puddle of mud. As I peered through the rusting frame of what was once the rear window (of said burnt-out vehicle) I noted a convoy of a couple of armoured personnel carriers followed by two or three troop-carrying trucks. I waited a few moments and with the coast clear continued on in the same direction as before.

I remember that to my left was a fairly steep mountainside sparsely covered with tall evergreen trees. Patches of white visible through the scrub may have been snow, but because it was sunny and fairly warm those patches may equally have been outcrops of chalk-based rock. I think it was about lunchtime because I was hungry. It may also have been a Wednesday... but I may have been wrong about that.

Anyway...

It must have precipitated heavily in recent days because I remember that the track consisted of a great deal of gloopy mud. It was a bit like the Glastonbury Festival, but for the lack of Predatoresque drug-pushers and hedgemonkeys waving joss sticks in the air and chanting about organic beans, and there were deep furrows and grooves formed by the wheels and tracks of all the military vehicles en route to blow things up. To my right was a not-so-steep ravine and in its floor a small river winding its way through rocks. Trees and bushes scattered the slope together with some boulders and perhaps the odd shrub. I can't recall whether anything was on the other side of the ravine but there may have been something... although on the other hand, this being a dream there may equally have been nothing there too. No matter. After running for a short time along this muddy track I arrived at a junction in the road at the same time as a second convoy rumbled like thunder into view.

For one reason or another I felt completely at ease with this particular convoy as a soldier manning a gun-turret of a tank asked if I had recently seen any other vehicles. I told him that I had, because I had, at which point he yelled something incomprehensible over his shoulder toward another soldier in an armoured personnel carrier behind, and with a roar of engines, each one coughing a cloud of thick grey smoke from its exhaust into the air, they set off in pursuit. I decided to take the right-hand fork and go and find some lunch. A few minutes later and I arrived at a Tesco Express.

I was pleasantly surprised by this discovery: moments earlier having contemplated pilfering my lunch from a tractor towing a trailer filled with turnips. I thought of this as a good place to purchase a Pepperami and a pasty. I also considered buying a Scotch egg and a bag of Monster Munch too.

Although I hadn't yet figured out what I was doing in a war-torn Balkan-like country in the first place, despite the two convoys of military vehicles and the tractor towing its trailer full of turnips, all these things taking place seemed relatively normal. The appearance of the Orange Tango Man armed with an AK47 assault rifle soon put a stop to that.

Since this was a dream there was not so much little explanation for the arrival of the gun-toting Orange Tango Man as absolutely no explanation whatsoever. There was even less to determine why his expression was that of a man clearly disgruntled with something. For a moment he simply stood in the doorway surveying the scene. I was at the other end of the store behind a promotional display of Cornflakes. Although not of particular interest, I could probably buy a box and get another free.

The Orange Tango Man wore an almost maniacal grin. His lips curled thinly upwards while his eyes were wild and as wide as plates. His demeanour immediately filled me with a sense of dread and I crouched down to the floor a second before he opened fire around the shop. In an instant, loaves of bread, packets of biscuits and jars of pesto were exploding all over the place as the Orange Tango Man let rip. Discounted breakfast cereal rained down upon my head and shoulders as round after round of

aggravatingly-hot lead smashed into Tesco stock. There was no order to the chaos; he simply fired in all directions, emptying the magazine into pomegranates, pasta shells and the odd tin of leek and potato soup.

In one corner of the shop, near to the ceiling a mirror reflected a curious fish-eye image of the scene. I could see that Orange Tango Man was hysterical; both laughing and yelling at the same time as he squeezed the trigger. I thought I heard him shout, 'Tango this, Motherfuckers!' But I may have been wrong about that.

Anyway... As he continued to shoot into the shop his arc of fire rested momentarily upon a fridge. Bullets tore into cartons of milk, bottles of water and the odd tin of 7-Up. For a second I hoped he'd leave me a bottle of strawberry Yop, but no sooner had this thought occurred to me a bullet then ricocheted off a tin of Irn-Bru and fell at my feet. I picked it up between finger and thumb and with a one-eyed squint gave it a cursory examination: it actually wasn't a bullet at all but a wasp in a tiny suit of armour.

Given the circumstances, I was in no position to consider this as something significantly more odd than anything else, but no sooner had I identified this bullet as an armoured wasp the image in the mirror caught my eye once more as a second figure came into view. It was a tall, rugged-looking figure with stubble and a small cigar clenched between his teeth. He too carried a gun. Clint Eastwood then shot the Orange Tango Man in the head.

?

My pillow was sodden with drool when I awoke a fraction of a second later and exclaimed aloud, 'Eh?' It's perhaps the most odd and vivid dream that I have ever had, although not as enjoyable as a recent one in which I went shopping for a Ford Capri with Cheryl Cole. Go figure.

Anyhoo... The reason for recalling this dream is that last night I watched a movie based on the Balkan-era conflict. The recollection of the dream was triggered by this, and this in turn took my mind back to a job I had in a shop. The shop was the Frome branch of Blockbuster, the video sales and rental place. The job lasted about three months.

All things considered, Blockbuster Video was actually one of the more banal of my employments. Aside from being accused by the manager of stealing a forged twenty-pound

note, the existence of which I was unaware, from a locked safe that I didn't have access to anyway, nothing remotely interesting happened. During my somewhat brief employment I watched a lot of movies and six Sony Playstations were stolen by a gang of pikeys, albeit not on my shift. But when, some years later, in the nightclub in Bath known as Cadillacs the aforementioned manager arrived at my bar all eyes and teeth, his smiles and greetings present only because there was a queue and he wanted preferential service, I had him thrown out and barred. I really was quite pleased with myself about that.

About the author

Dan W.Griffin was born in Bath at 9.27 on the morning of June 26, 1972. It was a Monday. And it explains a lot.

Dan was first educated (a somewhat loose and inaccurate term) at Frome Community College and was later accepted by the University of Sunderland to study geology. Failing to study anything whatsoever over the next three years he was urged to leave the city by a gangster whose thugs wanted to snap his legs like Twiglets. He has spent much of the last twenty years trying to figure out what on earth he is actually going to do with the rest of his life.

Over those twenty years, plus a considerable amount of time before, Dan has tried with varying levels of acute failure to pursue careers across a wide range of industries including catering, engineering, entertainment and logistics. He has tried burger-flipping and bar-tending, entrepreneurship and company directing. He has operated rides in amusement parks, sold advertising and failed to be remotely skilled in painting and decorating. Dan has also been a chauffeur, a White Van Man, a movie stand-in and a television extra, and in addition to these roles he has attempted to become a product designer, a photographer, a radio talk show host and a salesman. He was a rubbish postman too, the worst-ever manager of a band very popular in Holland, and an altogether appalling Santa Claus. Dan is currently making an effort to achieve a similar level of success as a writer.

Dan began his inaccurately-termed writing 'career' as a student with his column for the student newspaper, *The Student Times*. With his first-ever piece catching the attention of a number of solicitors and left-wing organisations, a few articles and a couple of unsuccessful lawsuits in, the paper was formally withdrawn from circulation. Dan is indeed no stranger to the P45.

Dan currently lives near Bath and is not married. He has never been married and has no wish to be married in the foreseeable future. His hobbies include: being tactful and sensitive about things, building ironically-platonic friendships with women, and bastardising the English language. A life-long writer of miscellaneous ramblings and

Strongly Worded Letters, *No stranger to the P45* is Dan's first remotely publishable work. It is also probably his last.