

Spritz

Neil J Hart

Chapter 1 : **Fantastically Ordinary**

The Bentleys

Crime is a disease to some, a cure to others. For the Bentleys it's a way of life with the pinnacles and pitfalls all accounted for. They had been to the dizzying heights and the darkest depths of criminal stature, relatively speaking. Right now they were in Swansea.

The Bentleys were Swansea's apology for a Mafia. They had been a moderate threat in London for a while but retired to Swansea for the easy pickings and to avoid certain other families who wanted them dead. It wasn't cowardice or a demonstration of simply running away. They insisted it was an act of respect and honour to the other London families; a tribute to their power and fearful presence. In fact, it was a demonstration of supreme escapology. Wales seemed as reliable a sanctuary, in British terms, as Mexico was to the States.

Dave Bentley Snr had grown up in Hackney with his Uncle Mick after fleeing Leeds with threats of violence from local families there. It had become a common storyline for the Bentleys, which attempted to disguise a subtext of fear, self-loathing and general incompetence. Always leaving, never rooting in any singular place.

Dave Bentley Jnr, known as Davey to friends (none of which were now alive), was a man of stunted intelligence. He was raised on a diet of angry telephone calls, hospital reception rooms and running.

Lots of running.

They had found their niche in Swansea.

They dressed in expensive-looking suits, greased-back hair and excessive gold jewellery, all of which had been stolen from local markets up and down the country. It would appear that '80s mob-styling was somehow alive and well and living in Swansea. Specialising in terror, the Bentleys had really cleaned up and held the city with an iron mitten. People were easily scared and the Bentleys played on their shortcomings.

Dave Bentley Snr and Dave Bentley Jnr had moved to Swansea in the summer of 2001, some five years previous to today's events. In that time they caused a serious

commotion amongst the local businesses, town principals and the neighbourhood watch scheme. They owned proportional shares in nearly all of the thriving businesses in the area – namely the proprietors’ existence; life insurance with a kick. Terrorising simple people was time-consuming work, especially as there were only two pairs of fists on the job. The Bentleys were keen to expand their already thriving business into money laundering and for this they needed capital. Lots of capital.

* * *

It was a little after 2am as rain continued to fall on Swansea. The Bentleys sat outside Time, one of the city’s biggest nightclubs, in a stolen red Ford Mondeo. The back seat was filled with green and white Dunlop sports bags, each one brimming with ten and twenty pound notes. They had discarded their usual attire for brightly coloured velour jumpsuits (not unlike something you would find smothering Sheena Easton in the early eighties), fingerless gloves and Halloween masks in an attempt to portray ‘common thieves’.

They weren’t exactly stealing anything. They were providing a service, but just to be sure that nobody was attempting to turn them in to the police, they always arrived in costume. The bars and clubs around Swansea were always big earners that needed protection from, well, themselves. The Bentleys arrived weekly to collect their share of the takings from each bar, but this week they were demanding a lot more than usual. Not surprisingly, the landlords and managers weren’t best pleased, but they were more worried about waking the next morning with their legs still intact. The Bentleys had already visited Cinderella’s (formerly Rizty’s), Rasputin’s, Quid’s Inn, Spoffers and Vivian’s Wine Bar. Time was the last stop on their collection. The bouncers always made Dave Jnr a little edgy but he guessed that they felt the same about him, if not more so.

‘You ready, Davey?’

‘Not sure, Dad. I’m always a bit worried about Time. ‘Specially now that we’ve put the fee up. How do you think Mr. Griffiths is gonna take it?’

‘We’re the only ones doing the taking, son. Fred Griffiths is a weasel. A two-bit thug.

The man has no class, no sophistication, no forethought. He'll get what's coming to him and then some if he don't pay up. Stay close to me, okay?'

Davey looked concerned.

'Look, son. It's not a matter of what we're capable of but what they believe we're capable of. Remember that, okay? The rest is plain sailing.'

Dave Jnr grunted an affirmation and stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray.

The two men pulled their Halloween masks over their faces, got out of the car and strode down the alleyway beside the nightclub. Dave Snr hammered on the stage door as a cat sprang out from behind some dustbins and scampered away from the scene.

The door swung open uneasily and a man wearing a Panama hat and reeking of whiskey was thrown out into the alleyway. He picked himself up off the floor, shook the rain from his jacket like a stray dog and stared at the Bentleys. 'Whoa, I didn't realise it was Halloween already,' he jibbered. 'Not that anyone tells me what's going on anymore. Christ!'

The Bentleys looked at one another, then back at the drunk who shrugged and shuffled off down the alleyway talking to himself.

'Freddie about?' Dave Snr grunted, at an assortment of skin-tight t-shirt wearing bouncers that had congregated at the door. He turned to look at the man staggering out towards the High Street and thumbed at the drunk, 'Take all of you to sort that little problem out, did it?'

The bouncers, missing the sarcasm, grunted reproachfully and stood aside to let the Bentleys in. Dave Jnr sneered as best he could from behind his Freddie Krueger mask as he shouldered his way through the muscle-bound traffic. They climbed the stairs at the back of the club and strolled across the main dance floor, through some curtains, back around behind the stage and into Fred Griffiths' office.

Fred Griffiths was a small man who possessed an eye for performing talent and a keen interest in physical violence, almost like it was hobby, something for the weekend. He was made for this job. His other eye was lost in the South Mimms annual street brawl of 1981. He smoked a huge cigar and wore glasses that magnified his one remaining pupil so it looked like a giant magic eight ball. The Bentleys were more fearful of him

then any of the other managers and landlords in the area. He seemed to possess an unwavering lack of concern for his own personal safety. So far he had been compliant with the Bentleys' demands off the back of rumours he'd heard about them from, well, he couldn't quite remember where.

He pulled the National Health frames off his head as the costume clad Bentleys approached his desk. Dave Snr pulled up one of the dilapidated leather armchairs whilst Dave Jnr stood behind him cracking his knuckles.

Fred beamed at them and placed a bag of money onto the table. He reminded Dave Snr of a one-eyed Woody Allen.

'It's all there, Dave,' he said with a thick East London drawl.

'Don't use my name!' barked Dave Snr, convicting himself of everything if there had been a tape recorder or some kind of CCTV in operation.

'Chill out, Dave,' Fred continued. 'I don't got no wires or cameras here. You fink I'm stupid of somefink?'

There was a momentary pause for contemplation.

'Let's cut to the chase, shall we?' Dave Snr began, regaining his composure. 'Due to inflation and expansion we're gonna need a little bit more, Fred.'

'More?' he said, putting his glasses onto the end of his nose. 'How much more?'

'Fifty percent in all, Fred.'

The East End Woody Allen blew out his cheeks, 'Well, 'ow am I supposed to run a business if I'm giving you 'alf me takings?'

'That's not my problem, Fred. Come to think of it, I don't believe you'd even have a business if it weren't for us.'

'Yeah, that's cos you'll come round 'ere and destroy all me stock, right?'

'You *were* listening,' Dave Snr hissed. 'I'm sure you can find a way of making more money for yourself, Fred. A resourceful man such as yourself.'

Fred Griffiths came up with a blank. He'd have to put some time into that one.

'Well?' Dave prompted.

Fred Griffiths turned something over in his mind. It was trying to be dark and lurid but was devoid of any substance. Finally, shaking his head, he answered, 'Okay, give me

a minute.’

Fred rose from his desk and wandered over to a signed picture of Danny La Rue that hung on the wall above a dented storage heater. The picture moved aside to reveal a safe encased in the brickwork. Fred fumbled about with the dial and finally opened the door.

‘The full fifty percent, Fred. No skimming. We’re doing the books next week so you’d better be all up to date.’

Fred paused, turning a different something over in his mind and then grabbed at something further down in the safe. ‘I wouldn’t dream of it, Dave,’ he said conversationally. ‘I’m just thankful to ‘ave you boys looking after me. Gawd knows what would ‘appen if I were left to me own devices.’

The Bentleys turned to look at one another but couldn’t decipher any expressions from behind their masks. They refocused their attention back to Fred Griffiths and found him standing before them with a handgun pointed at Dave Snr, the safe locked shut.

Fred beamed again at the pair, as Freddie Krueger and Frankenstein stared back.

‘I’ve just about ‘ad enough of you two idiots,’ he began. His lust for violence was bubbling to the surface but treading water alongside it was an unquantifiable fear of certain death. Pain was helping Humiliation to inflate a Lilo.

Dave Snr interrupted him, ‘What are you going to do with that, Fred?’

Fred looked down at his gun as if to work out its purpose. It was quivering slightly in his sweaty palm. He shook his head wildly and fired a warning shot against the far wall of the office which pierced a Chippendales fly poster. Both the Daves pulled handguns from inside their velour jumpsuits as the sound of the gunshot still echoed around the room.

‘You were saying?’ said Dave Snr, pointing his weapon back at Fred Griffiths.

Fred collapsed to his knees. ‘I’m sorry, Mr. Bentley. I don’t know what came over me. This place is getting to me. Takings aren’t ‘alf what they were a few months back. I just can’t afford it.’

The bouncers appeared at the door after hearing the shot go off. ‘Is everything alright, Mr. Griffiths,’ one said.

‘Yesyesyes. Everything’s just fine,’ he blathered.

The bouncers retreated.

‘Open the safe,’ Dave Snr ordered, not taking his gaze off of the club manager.

Fred pulled himself up off the floor, spun the dial and flicked the door open. Dave Snr moved forward and emptied the contents of the safe into a sports bag. ‘On your knees,’ Dave Snr whispered.

Fred sunk to his knees and began to shake as Dave Snr brought his gun down onto the top of his head.

* * *

Some weeks earlier...

Bob Flint

It was the end of the hardest week, in a long line of hard weeks, that Bob Flint had endured at Mackenzie & Sons Double Glazing Company in Brynfield, a small unassuming suburb of Swansea. He was sacked several hours earlier for reasons he could barely comprehend. The terms ‘lazy, incompetent and argumentative’ were bandied around the meeting room by his former boss Derrick Mackensie. The only other person to apply these statements to Bob was his wife Maggie and he didn’t take a word she said as gospel. Somehow his ex-boss’ words found their way into some realm of understanding.

‘You looked depressed, Bob,’ said Jack Collins, landlord of the Dog and Partridge.

‘Is it any surprise?’ Bob retorted, wiping some beer froth from his chin. His facial hair always seemed to be in that awkward stage between stubble and a full beard. ‘I always looked depressed. That’s my look. At least that’s what everybody keeps telling me.’

‘Ah, now come on, Bob. It can’t be all that bad,’ Jack ventured.

Bob sighed deeply and took another gulp of beer. ‘Sacked is sacked, Jack. It doesn’t get any more depressing than that.’

Jack took this into consideration before adding, ‘Well, at least you’ve got your health. That’s got to count for something.’

Bob stared up at Jack and placed a cigarette placed between his lips. 'You're right there, Jack. Dead right.' Bob sparked a match on a house brick lying on the bar and took a deep, professional drag.

'What gets me is the manner of which I was sacked, you know?' Bob rambled. 'It's not like I robbed them or anything. It's not like I lost them thousands of pounds in business revenue. It's not like I'm ever late.'

Jack looked at Bob with an air of disbelief.

'Seriously, Jack. I'm one of the best guys on the team.' He drained the rest of his pint and dropped the glass gracefully onto the bar. 'Okay, so I like a good drink. Christ! It's hardly a mortal sin, is it?'

Jack looked hesitantly at his wife Flora as she stood in the doorway to the kitchen holding two huge plates of food. She returned a knowing look and, after distributing the plates, came over to save her husband.

'Hiya, Bob. So what's the trouble today?' she mocked.

Bob was oblivious to her sarcasm, 'I'm feeling a little down today, Flora.'

Jack scuttled off to the kitchen.

'Is it Maggie again, Bob? What have you done to her this time?'

'Nothing, nothing! It's not Maggie, for Christ's sake,' he countered slumping backwards against the bar. 'Lost my job today.'

'Ah, you'll find another one, Bob. Chin up!'

Before Bob had time to complain about anything, relevant or otherwise, she had gone. 'Bastards,' he muttered to himself as he wandered over to his favourite table clasping a double whiskey chaser.

Bob had been one of several middle-aged men who filled the telesales department at the Swansea office. His crowning moment came when he devised the advertising strap line for the company back in 1995 - 'It Pays To Double Glaze'. He was very proud. He'd been there for nearly six years, after being sacked from the Swansea Tile Centre, where he had spent fourteen years working his way up to Deputy Assistant Manager. The physical actions behind his dismissal were somewhat trivial - stationery theft and tea money fraud - but his employers were obviously desperate to part with his company. His

job at Mackenzie & Sons had been unchallenging but stable, and that was a bonus in Bob's eyes. 'Money For Nothing' he would say to himself when his pay packet arrived, and would pretend to be Mark Knopfler for a couple of minutes, headbanging and playing air guitar.

He flipped a beer mat over in his hands until it fell out of his grasp and onto the floor. He followed it down through his thick black-rimmed spectacles and then reared his heavy balding head up again. His eyes were tired and bleary, his face long and sad, his brown strands slicked back in an attempt to conceal his baldness. Arthritis hadn't been kind and seemed to attack the joints that Bob cared most about. His hunch was not overstated but was evidence of years spent sitting, working, drinking, wasting time. Wasting days. Years.

He wasn't entirely without hope or happiness. Bob had had a very exciting few months in London back in the late seventies. He also found happiness in quiz shows and documentaries on Channel 4 about British people abroad. Somehow they made him feel better about himself than his real life ever could.

Bob would smile about four times a week.

His gaze shifted to the empty glass that once contained the double whiskey chaser, then to his last Marlboro Light and finally up to the face of Maggie Flint as her shadow loomed over him. Her face showed signs of laughter but mainly of sorrow and doubt. Her hair withered and damaged, a mass of grey and gold, was propped up in a huge bundle on the top of her head.

She owned a launderette – In A Spin – the only thing the Flints could rely on. Maggie's washing machine and spin-drying empire had provided a vital stability to their marriage. Maggie seemed to love it there and spent every waking hour she could at the launderette. Bob never understood what it was about laundry that excited his wife so much. In A Spin wasn't labelled as a twenty-four hour launderette, neither was her licence, but somehow it seemed to operate in that fashion. Bob always wondered what type of people washed their smalls at three in the morning. She was a driven woman when it came to her career. It was as if she was working for a high purpose – worshipping the God of Dirty Pants or something.

She stood before his favourite little table in the Dog and Partridge with the all too familiar ‘how did I know where you’d be?’ look on her face. Her mouth was wide, gaping, hurling abuse at the poor man. She looked tired too.

He couldn’t hear her of course. He couldn’t hear anything. He just refused to engage with the world right now. He hated them all. Bastards. They were all on his back. The prepubescent butt-kissing, computer-tolerant nerds coming up through the company, taking his jobs, his commissions, responsibilities whilst talking about iPods, gigabyte hard-drives, PSPs, Lost, poppers, Angelina Jolie and Douglas Coupland.

He was a man of little dreams, small victories, accomplishable goals. His future would always be average because he never dared to imagine anything more fantastic than a wife, kids and a nine-to-five job. This is not to say that these acquisitions were not fantastic enough in their own right but any idiot can get married, become a father and work nine to five. Making a decent fist of them was another matter all together. He had two of these three acquisitions, but his wife Maggie was unable to bear him any children and it had unbalanced the euphoria of services washes.

Bob wanted a son more than anything in the world. A daughter would be just as good. He believed he would pass on the experiences and wisdom that he had acquired throughout his lifetime and hopefully help influence another equally grandiose existence. Sadly, Bob was neither blessed with any offspring nor an interesting and intellectual life. It was just as well he felt alone. He found comfort in that. And in alcohol.

Maggie hadn’t moved. She was still wagging her finger from side to side as her jaw mechanically reproduced the same speech that Bob had endured every time he went drinking. The other inhabitants of the pub were transfixed on Maggie’s ranting as Tom Jones and Cerys Matthews slithered out of the pub jukebox. Jack and Flora looked on with mild and somewhat bemused interest. On the other side of the bar locally celebrated alcoholics Ted, Brad, and Darren listened subconsciously through the hum of their permanent beer-induced migraines. Tom and Cerys weren’t helping.

‘...and to think that I’ve spent the whole afternoon on my knees scrubbing that kitchen floor after you covered it in goodness knows what after all that I find you sitting here spending our money on booze, I don’t ask much Bob, just a little bit of

consideration...?’

Bob stood up clutching his tweed jacket, brushed past Maggie and walked slowly towards the door as she barked in his ear. He still refused to let the sound reach his brain and ruin the perfectly foul mood he was in.

The mid afternoon sun shone brightly into Bob’s eyes as he pulled the Dog and Partridge’s doors back. Stepping out into the street Bob placed his Panama onto his head. A repetitive noise was muffled as doors swung shut in its face. He breathed in deeply and thought about cigarettes and alcohol.

Johnny Davies

Johnny was sitting on a ripped leather stool behind the counter of Jones’ Newsagents ‘Mags’n’Fags’ flicking through a copy of Hustler while the shop was empty. He sighed through sunken cheeks, and a far from perfect complexion, as he chewed on his overgrown blonde fringe. He was only supposed to be working here as a weekend job to earn some money for singing lessons, but so far this week he had been missing school every day in order to cover for Mr. Jones’ extramarital activities. Johnny really didn’t care, both about the job and Mr. Jones’ affairs, as long as the money was coming in. Johnny was happy. And then there was the free porn, cigarettes and chocolate bars.

He had recently decided that the way forward in his life was boy bands and dressed accordingly; baggy blue jeans with some unpronounceable name splattered on the back, ice white trainers and sports T-shirts. It was an expensive business - keeping up with the Timberlakes. Money, money, money. That was all Johnny was interested in. He’d sell his grandmother, his soul, even his signed ‘Take That Greatest Hits’ album (Jason and Howard only) for a piece of the action. There was always room for one more boy band thought Johnny, and Louis Walsh agreed with him. Yeah, he was going to be huge. He just needed his big break.

The door swung open and Bob came stumbling through. He expertly collected himself and narrowly missed the Jacobs Crackers and Heinz Baked Bean displays. He stood for moment starrng at the floor and breathing deeply.

‘Fucking hell, not you again,’ said Johnny, as Bob regrouped and tottered up to the

counter.

‘Hey!’ Bob sang, ‘Mind your language, Sonny Jim. I know the owner of this place and don’t think he’d be best pleased. Not that I care or anything. Fuck. Shit. Bollocks. See, what do I care?’

Johnny gave him a sideways glance. ‘You could get me sacked?’ he laughed. ‘Yeah right, you loser! This place would go under if it wasn’t for me. I fucking run this place while old man Jones is off screwing someone’s wife. Probably yours if there’s any justice in the world!’

‘I wish. I’d do anything to get that bitch off my back!’ replied Bob unconvincingly and then added, ‘It’s our anniversary today, you know.’

‘Tell someone who gives a shit,’ replied Johnny. His customer relation skills left nothing to be desired but he was sick of these filthy people coming in and giving him abuse day in day out. He was above them. ‘So what do you want? Smokes again?’

‘Yeah. Marlboro Lights, how much is that?’

‘Five twenty nine.’

‘What?’

‘Hand it over, this ain’t a charity.’

Johnny looked at the drunk as he inverted his trouser pockets and began rummaging in his coat. His searching intensified until he shrugged, hands flopping to his sides and his head lifted to face Johnny.

‘Hey sonny, do you give credit?’

The door to Jones’ Newsagents crashed open and a rather limp shape flew out into the street landing conveniently on a pile of black bin liners by a telephone box. Bob’s eyes opened slightly and immediately focused on a selection of sex line cards that were displayed in the phone box door. His spirits rose.

‘And stay the fuck out!’

Andrew Morgan

The TV was on the blink again. It fizzed and crackled but refused to play anything that could be considered watchable. That was daytime TV for you. Andrew had been

trying to watch a film that he'd recorded last night on Channel 4. He was always trying to further his movie knowledge, which was already quite impressive, if not slightly worrying.

Andrew thumped the TV again with little response. He tried a light kick and that too was met with equal contempt. He kicked it harder and suddenly one of the legs on the table gave way and sent the TV tumbling to its death. Andrew stood in horror, his hands gripping his thick black hair, staring at the crumpled box. Ominous sounds from upstairs began to bleed back into his head.

He slumped back into the sofa and stared up at the ceiling. Through the plaster he could hear what sounded like his mother having great sex. Whether she faked it or not – he couldn't tell. Her screams and whimpers resounded rhythmically off the walls as Andrew covered his ears with a beige cushion from Texas Homebase. He rushed over to the radio and turned it up full, but his mother's headboard was smacking against the wall and the whole house seemed to shudder with every thrust.

Andrew pushed open the back door and walked out into the yard. His mother's bedroom window was open and the noise was even louder outside. His next door neighbour, Mr. Craddock, peered over the fence and looked long and hard at Andrew, who was dressed in St. Mary's Comprehensive regulation uniform and forcibly asked, 'Can't you do anything about that obscene racket? I can hear that woman over my Flymo! It's not the first time!'

Andrew just shrugged.

'I'm on the council, you understand,' Mr. Craddock went on. 'I know people!'

Andrew kicked the back gate open and walked down the alleyway towards Mags'n'Fags. He turned the corner into Brynfield Highstreet, past Martha's Goth Shop, In A Spin and finally pushed the newsagent's shop door open.

'Hey Johnny, what's up?'

'Just had that fucking piss artist from the double-glazing company in here again. That guy is such a fucking dickhead. He really winds me up,' Johnny sighed. 'What about you?'

'My mum's keeping the neighbours up to date on her adulterous fornications. Mr

Craddock was out in the garden. He could hear everything.'

'That guy's a fucking pervert anyway. He was probably enjoying it. I'll bet he was there with a tape recorder or something.'

'You reckon? He said he was on council or something.'

'Come on Andrew, there's corruption at all levels of society! You of all people should know that. You watch that 24 programme, don't you?'

'Yeah, but...'

'Corruption from top to bottom. Even the god damn hero is corrupt in his own way. What's his name again...?'

'You mean, Keifer Sutherland? Er...Jack Bauer?' Andrew informed him.

'Yeah, that guy is sick. Sooner or later he's going to be the big evil season finale twist. It's written all over his face.'

'But Mr. Craddock is just some guy who likes his gardening. How can you compare him to Jack Bauer...'

Johnny butted in, 'Andrew, that guy is always in here looking up at the top shelf for ten minutes and then reaching down and buying a paper. Why do you think he lives alone? I reckon he's got some weird kinky shit in his front room, ties himself to stuff and watches kiddie porn or something fucked up like that. I'll bet Pampers ads turn him on.'

Andrew was lost, 'You're sick, Johnny. There's something not right with your head. You're totally deluded.' Andrew picking up a Mars bar and unwrapped the top section.

'It's this place,' said Johnny to the shop in general. 'It gets to me. All I have is this chair, these walls and my thoughts to keep me company, oh and a daily visit from that guy of course. I need to get myself in one of them stage schools and...'

'How're gonna do that, Johnny? Don't you need talent or something? Those places are really demanding. The standard is so high. You've see 'Totally Scott Lee', right?'

Ignoring this, Johnny continued. 'What the fuck do you think I've been doing in this place all this time? Sitting on my arse?'

'Erm...'

'I've been writing songs. I can sing. You'll see. One day I'll make it and then you'll be sorry, my friend.'

Andrew smirked, sighed and turned for the door. 'I gotta go, Johnny.'

'Yeah, yeah. You'll see, my friend. You'll see,' Johnny barked across the room.

Andrew walked back towards his house. He hoped that his mother would be finished by the time he got there but as he stepped into the alleyway he could hear her yelps and screams of sexual satisfaction spiralling out of control. He reached the gate, knocked it open and headed for the back door. Mr Craddock's eyes appeared over the fence as he disappeared into the house. Something went 'click'.

Andrew reached the middle of the living room as the walls shook like never before, the screams whistled down the stairs and the headboard cracked out its deep penetrating rhythm. A deep manly voice roared, high-pitched squeals sporadically flared up, as if a million voices cried out in ecstasy and there was suddenly silence.

Andrew fell into the sofa once again, shut his eyes and enjoyed the quiet for a few moments. The calm after the storm. Sure enough, the silence was broken by footsteps on the creaky floorboards above, then onto the stairs and finally the door opened into the lounge.

'Hiya Andy! How's things?'

'Oh hello, Mr. Jones. I'm fine. Bit of a headache though. Sharp pains right across my hippocampus.'

'Huh? Er...I guess it's all that rock music you kids are into these days I'll bet. Head banging and all that. Axl Rose, isn't it? Can't be good for you.'

'Heavy metal died out years ago, Mr. Jones. Hip hop was the rock of the nineties but there's not much head banging involved.'

'Hip hop, eh? The nineties, eh? So what's the sound of the new millennium?'

'It's hard to say. Boy bands to start with I guess, or post-grunge rock, anyone from Ireland and winners of TV based talent competitions. There's this new thing called Math Rock but I have no idea what that is. Perhaps jangley guitar music for geeks? Johnny thinks he's going to make some big impact on music in this new century,' Andrew stated flatly.

'I didn't know Johnny was Irish? Or a geek?' Mr Jones quizzed himself. Andrew rolled his eyes and reached for a copy of Total Film magazine. 'No, he wants to be in a

boy band,' Andrew corrected. 'Why do you care?'

'Well as long as he can organise it around the hours he works in the shop then I don't have a problem with it. Johnny - a pop star, eh? What will he think of next, eh? Cuppa tea?'

A shiver of nausea rattled through Andrew's bones. 'No, thank you.'

Mr. Jones walked rigidly into the kitchen, fumbling with his crotch and flicked the kettle on. He was wearing Andrew's father's dressing gown and slippers which Andrew thought was in extreme bad taste. He was a slight man with skeletal features and nothing that reflected the sexual monster whose reputation had spread all the way to Cardiff. It amazed Andrew that Mr. Jones' reputation had actually reached that far. Women were calling him from all over the Swansea Bay area for some attention and by the looks of things Mr. Jones wasn't the kind of man to turn his back on a good thing. A gigolo newsagent. What will the world produce next?

'So how long's your father out of town, Andrew, eh?' said Mr. Jones conversationally.

Andrew took a deep, controlling breath, 'Well, he's been gone for nearly a year as it is. He could be back in two weeks. Could be two years. He's out in Africa helping with the famines or something. I forget.'

'It's hard on you and your mother not having him around I suppose, eh? How are you coping?'

'I'm used to it now,' said Andrew, a little agitated. 'He never really seems to be here so I've adapted to that way of life.'

'Well, your mother's taking it really hard you know. It's not easy for a hot-blooded woman like that to be deprived of a little attention. I'm sure your father understands that.'

Andrew wrinkled his nose and tried not to think of his mother as a hot-blooded woman. He exchanged the film magazine for his school bag that was next to the remains of the TV and headed upstairs to begin his homework. Mr. Jones watched him leave and then looked back at the TV lying in pieces next to the legless table. He sipped his tea, took a bite of a Bourbon biscuit and shrugged. 'Casualty of war, I suppose, eh?' he chuckled.

Chapter 2 : New Beginnings

Maggie Flint

Bob fell through the front door of his council flat, just shy of a mile from Brynfield High Street with his face landing on the carpet, his legs out in the alley. His hand clutched a brown paper bag inside his jacket. He sniffed, hacked up some mucus and thought about picking himself up off the floor. He decided against it and began to drag himself along the floor kicking wildly at the door behind him. He managed to slam it and eventually pull himself along to his armchair by the TV set. Lying next to the chair, contemplating the huge feat of actually getting into it, he decided to throw up and promptly pass out on the floor.

He awoke some hours later in a pool of his own vomit, which startled him at first, but possessed an air of something strangely familiar. Weary and disorientated, he rested his head again in the bile. The clock in the hallway chimed eight times. Bob awoke and lifted his head from the mess on the carpet. His legs spasmed, kicking into action and the rest of his body followed shortly. Slowly and very painfully. ‘Christ!’ he bellowed, holding his head.

He pulled the paper bag from his coat pocket, heading for the kitchen in search of a receptacle for the whiskey he’d managed to steal. He slammed the bottle of spirits down on the worktop, turned around with his back to the fridge and hung his head.

‘Christ!’

He unscrewed the bottle, poured a large measure of whiskey out into it and tugged it back. He sighed heavily pouring another, then another.

‘Christ, I needed that,’ he muttered to himself, licking any surplus alcohol from his lips.

He filled the tumbler to the brim and retired to the armchair, stepping in his vomit in the process. He sunk into the chair, sipped at his drink and flicked through the channels on his TV. His mind wandered through the events of that day. The never ending demands of his area manager Derrick Mackensie and all his cronies, that bitch at the bus stop with

the surprisingly nice tits, those school kids with Lost Prophets written on their bags, his boss Derrick Mackensie, his wife Maggie, his boss Derrick Mackensie, that arrogant little bastard in the newsagents, his wife, his boss, his ex-boss, those nice tits...tits...tits...his wife!

‘Christ on a bike! Where’s Maggie?’ he shouted aloud, jumping out of his chair and nearly heading to the floor again. His eyes scanned around the room as he started noticing a distinct lack of ornaments, pictures, cushions and knitting. She’s gone, thought Bob, and on our anniversary. And on the day I got sacked. Gone. Maggie. Twenty-five years today. Gone.

‘Chrrrrrist,’ Bob spat out dejectedly, throwing his glass against the wall smashing it beyond repair. A wave of regret washed over him.

He headed for the kitchen and opened up all the cupboards. There was an absence of cutlery and crockery. He swore and stumbled dangerously into the bedroom to discover all her clothes and shoes missing.

Back in the armchair, Bob wept. He wept hard. He didn’t really know why. He hated her, didn’t he? Twenty-five years of abuse and nagging brought to an end? Or a new beginning? What beginning? No job. No money. Nothing.

It was at this point that he saw the envelope.

An envelope?

An envelope was sitting on the telephone table by the front door with his name on it in thick capitals. What was this?

His comprehension of the envelope’s existence, due to alcohol, was making him ask too many questions of it. The ramifications and immediate signifiers of such a letter, at such a time, did not fill Bob with too much hope and instead made him swear profusely. He reached for the envelope and analyzed the handwriting. Maggie’s, he concluded without doubt. The letter wasn’t sealed and so Bob flipped it open, pulled the paper free and focused hard to read the inscription.

Dear Bob,

I know that this is not what you'd expect from a twenty-fifth anniversary but the simple truth is that I am leaving you. I have tried to put up with you but finally I am unable to take it any more. You are going where I cannot follow and it's been that way ever since I married you. All those promises of financial stability and quality time have never seemed to appear. I'm angry and frustrated, Bob. I want to explode with fury but there's little point anymore. There are also so many things in my life that you could never comprehend but perhaps one day I will tell you all about them. Do something with your life Bob, for your sake, not mine or anyone else's. Bring back the Bob I used to know, so full of life and enthusiasm. All I see now is a man lying in a puddle of his own vomit. I am unable to stay and watch you bury our relationship so I am getting out now while I can still look back with some fondness.

Your wife, Maggie

'She must have come in, taken her stuff and left while I was passed out on the living room floor,' thought Bob. 'What was she talking about? Quality time? She spent her entire life in that stinking launderette surrounded by the scum of humanity. Bloody students!'

He reached the lowest point that he'd felt for a good few months but his attention was easily turned to something that could give him some comfort. In this case it was conversation and, as he fished for the sex line phone cards in his pocket, his imagination kick started itself and a familiar vision filled his booze-addled mind.

He dreamt of beer. Of whiskey, vodka, rum and wine. White wine. White wine spritzers and fruity cocktails. He wanted his own bar. A place where the beer would be free, at least to him, and the girls from the chat lines would be dancing, serving beer topless and singing karaoke. He'd been having this dream for almost twenty-two years. The phone sex girls were a new dynamic however. He raised an eyebrow to this and then sunk back into depression.

What kind of a life did those girls have he thought? Dirty old men phoning up and talking about all sorts of filthy activities with them. What kind of a life was that for a

young lady these days? All that work with little or no appreciation. Nobody got to see who was behind all that hard work and dedication. They need to be brought into the limelight. These foul-mouthed girls ought to have the same chance as any girl. What if one of these girls was his own? He would try his utmost to provide a great future for her, wouldn't he? Bob's mind was never at a socially acceptable level and right now was no exception. Concentrating on the here and now was something he left to sensible people. People with mortgages and expensive suits. Vauxhall Vectras and matching crockery. Personal interior designers, Feng Shui and water features. But Bob's Bar. Oh yes, Bob's Bar. Oh, the possibilities. He pulled the phone sex line cards from his pocket and attempted to focus.

AWOL

'Eat your greens, Andrew,' sighed his mother, 'How many more times do you have to be told?'

'Do you expect me to answer that ridiculous question?'

'Do you expect me to answer that one?'

They sat in silence for several minutes. Andrew looked at his mother in disgust. She sat there eating her food, smoking a fag and drinking neat, Imperial Vodka with her underwear showing through her dressing gown. She was a wreck. Every time his dad went away she turned into this monster that made his life a misery. Andrew couldn't understand it and was well aware that he probably never would.

It was another story when both his parents were there however. They'd go on family trips to the country, take picnics and carry on like the perfect family. His dad, Jerry Morgan, was such a great antidote for his mother's fury. He wished his dad would come home to stay. Forever.

'Mum?'

'Yes, Andrew?'

'Why are you fucking Mr. Jones?'

His mother leapt up from the table grabbing a ladle from the soup bowl, sending the cream of tomato across the floor, and waved it fiercely in Andrew's face.

‘I ought to wash your mouth out with soap, my lad,’ she screeched, ‘I’m not about to put up with that in my house.’

‘But you scream it at the top of your voice most lunchtimes and I was only using it as...’

‘I don’t care how you were using it,’ she interrupted. ‘You just don’t use it in my house. Do you understand me? Do you?’ The ladle shaking in her hand like a weapon.

‘Yeah, yeah! But you still haven’t answered my question,’ replied Andrew, shaking slightly. His mother generally tended to worry him and especially now as she was brandishing a kitchen utensil.

‘It’s not a matter I wish to discuss with you.’

‘Or dad, I suppose?’ he let slip.

‘It’s your father’s fault if it’s anyone’s. If he wasn’t swanning off all over the world then maybe I wouldn’t have been drawn into the arms of another man. Blame your father. That’s what I do. Inconsiderate little man. If only he knew how much his absence has affected you. First the bed wetting, now the swearing. That man’s got a lot to answer for, I can tell you.’

Andrew grew angry, ‘That’s still no excuse and it’s not as though the lifestyle you lead is a good one for bringing up a son, is it? Sometimes I really wonder if you care at all!’

‘How can you say that? I’ve given you everything!’ The ladle struck the table sending the salt and pepper shakers flying.

‘Besides a graphic investigation into your sexual desires and lustings - you’ve given me nothing.’ Andrew was shouting now. ‘Unless you consider a string of middle age adulterers trying to act like a mate to me as a good upbringing! I suppose, waking up each morning to the sound of someone else giving my mother another earth-shattering orgasm is perfectly fine?’ He paused for breath. ‘Why can’t we just be a normal family? We are when Dad’s here.’

Andrew was beginning to cry. His mother sat back in her chair, scowling at him and sipping vodka in the hope that the effects would blur him away. She periodically entertained the idea that he was something she could do without. In a way he was, but she

wasn't without heart.

'Come on, Andy...'

'Andrew, please,' he corrected.

'There's some chocolate ice cream in the freezer if you want some...'

'For God's sake, I am not a child! I am sixteen years old and I do not get won over by temptations such as chocolate ice cream anymore. I'm sick and tired of you not understanding me and it's due to your lack of commitment as a parent. You've ruined my life!' Andrew was providing evidence that he watched too much Trisha.

'Don't be so dramatic, And...rew. So what am I suppose to give you then? Just name it. What do you want from me?' she pleaded.

'Love,' he whispered. 'I just want to be loved.'

Phone Sex

'You've reached 'Swansea Bay All the Way', if you wanna talk dirty to Debbie press one now.... if you wanna chat with Alice and Katie, our lesbian love masters, press two now.... if you wanna listen to Sally playing with a...'

'Hello, hello. I don't want to...erm, I just want to talk to the girls about...oh, am I being charged for this already...hello, hello...why won't anyone talk to me...Christ!' Bob slammed the phone down and picked up another card. He stared at the number trying to make sense of it, sipped some more whiskey from a fresh glass and dialled.

'Hi there. You've just made the greatest decision of your life,' said the voice at the end of the line.

'Hello, yes...I...er...want to talk,' slurred Bob.

'The girls at Welsh, Wet and Willing are ready to fulfill your every desire. Just one press of a button and you can instantly be chatting direct with one of our sex sirens,' the voice continued.

'Yes, hello. I'm sure this is very amusing but I just want to talk to the girls about, well, sex in a sense but...'

Bob tried, as politely as possible.

'Eve has more than a handful waiting for you on line one, Gwyneth is hungry for some special attention on line two, Jenna knows how to handle a man and can

accommodate anything you've got for her on line three, Jimmy and Tom are warming the oils on line four...'

'No. No. Not men! Hello? Christ, why won't you talk to me like any normal human being? I bet this is one of those premium rate lines as well. How much is that these days? 30p a minute? 50p? A pound?'

'Make your choice now and get ready for the ride of your life,' drooled the voice into Bob's earpiece.

Bob looked down at his keypad, focused and pressed. There was a buzzing sound as the line attempted to connect and finally a faint click. 'Hi. Who are you?' came a new voice into Bob's ear.

'Hello. Am I talking to a real person now and not just some damn machine or other? Christ, I hate those things. Why the Devil do all you people insist on having them? What's wrong with just a normal, everyday kinda person picking up the handset and saying hello? For God's sake, all I wanted was to put across an idea of mine to you young ladies and I get treated like some dirty old man. I'm quite offended to think that you regard everyone who calls this line to be a raging pervert with his trousers around his ankles,' Bob rattled down the phone. 'I was a happily married man until my wife walked out on me a few hours ago and I've got no need for the kind of smutty shenanigans that you're advertising. To be honest I'm well past getting remotely turned on by some woman groaning down the phone at me.' He paused. 'Are you still there?'

'Ease up, Grandad. What's your problem?'

'Christ! I'm not a grandad, I'm not even a dad, I don't have a problem and...' Bob regained some semblance of composure, 'so, erm, what's your name then?'

'Anything you want it to be, darling,' came the reply.

'What? I'm not here to play games with you.'

'Well, what's your favourite name?'

'Er, David.'

'A girls name... You can't call me David. If you want a guy I can have you put through.'

'No. No. Girls are good. Right, okay then what about...oh, erm...well, er,' Bob

fumbled. 'Christ, I don't know. What's your real name for crying out loud? This call is probably costing me the earth!'

'I'm Gwyneth and I'm hungry for some special attention,' purred Gwyneth. 'So what do you want me to do for you, eh?'

'No. No, I don't want any of that stuff. I'm just a simple man with a simple idea and I just want a few minutes of your time to discuss it.'

'Ah, so you've got something particular in mind have you? What's your name, sexy?'

'Oh, it's Bob.'

'Hmmm, that's a sexy name. Bob. Hmmm, that's one of my favourite names you know,' Gwyneth continued.

'Oh, what are your other favourite names?'

'What?' said Gwyneth, slightly confused by this response. Her mind reeling she answered, 'Well, er...Steve and er...Fred.'

'Fred's a shit name,' stated Bob. 'I'll give you Steve though. Good solid name that.'

'So what did you have in mind, Bob? Hmmm?'

'Well, I was watching the TV the other day...'

'I can picture it now,' began Gwyneth. 'You're all alone watching an X-rated movie starring your favourite porn Adonis getting some serious attention from a well hung Italian beefcake...'

'No. Chrrrrist! Stop that! Stoppit! Who do you think I am?'

'Ah, I see. You prefer girl on girl action don't you, Bob. I could tell from the moment I first heard your sweet voice.'

'What? Look, you're missing the point entirely.'

'Oh, I'm sure I know exactly what you want, Bill.'

'Look, it's Bob and I'm sure you're a very nice girl but you seem to have misread the reason for my phone call,' he said. 'Is there any chance I can meet you and have a cup of tea or...'

'Oh, Bob. You must know that that sort of thing just doesn't happen. I couldn't possibly meet you. Why don't we talk about what we'd do if we did meet?' Gwyneth went on as professionally as possible.

‘I’m going to have to terminate this phone call as I’m feeling particularly oppressed,’ Bob decided. ‘I’m a nice man, a little bit drunk, but generally a nice man. You’re making me doubt myself.’

Bob replaced the receiver with some venom and swiped the cards across the room with his forearm. They rose into the air and cascaded down across the lounge. Welsh, Wet and Willing’s card ended up next to his prize rubber plant, which by all accounts was dead. He still watered it anyway in some vain hope of a revival. It never came. He watched the cards as they lay strewn about the floor until the image was blurred by tears of frustration.

Anger Management

Ten o’clock arrived at the newsagents thanks to Johnny’s prayers and the inevitable passing of time. He locked up the shop and headed home via Al Pashwa’s Kebab and Video Emporium, which was equidistant between work and home. It was a ritual that Johnny was trying to shake off but with no luck so far. He thought to himself, ‘If you can’t stop yourself from eating grease infested kebabs every night you’ll never make it as a pop star’. Kebabs, Big Mac, Whoppers, KFC and Pepperoni Deep Pan Stuffed Crust Pizzas were all battles he’d yet to win. He appropriated it as his Fat Robbie Williams phase and if it was good enough for Robbie then, well, you get the mentality.

‘Large lamb doner, chilli sauce, chilli’s - no salad right, mate?’ said a beaming moustachioed face, pre-empting Johnny’s order as Living In A Box played on some eighties revival radio station in the background.

‘Yes please, Al,’ said Johnny. ‘No salad! Last time I got an entire allotment. I hate that fucking stuff... And large chips mate. With mayo.’

Al Pashwa’s Kebab and Video Emporium would have seemed out of place anywhere else in the world but somehow nobody batted an eyelid in Brynfield High Street. It was a Jewish family business run by two brothers - Al and Hal, both Greek – and their various children. Nobody knew where their wives had disappeared to or if they had ever had any. The shop was split in two with the food counter on one side and a small selection of videos on the far wall. In between were racks of local postcards, souvenirs, bathroom

products, chocolate bars and other snacks.

‘So ‘ow are you t’day, mate?’ said Al in his best English.

‘Same as yesterday and the day before that, and I’ll probably be the same tomorrow,’ began Johnny. ‘Why the hell do you always have to ask me that?’

‘Just being, how you say, conversationally, mate,’ tried Al.

Johnny grunted and thrust a fiver into Al’s hand as he pushed the meal in Johnny’s direction. Al flicked the buttons on the till, inserted the five pound note and shut the drawer.

‘What, no change from a fiver?’ said Johnny alarmed.

‘It’s gone up innit, mate,’ said Al stepping back from the counter.

‘It’s bullshit is what it is,’ shouted Johnny his eyes wide.

‘Calm down, mate.’

‘Calm down? Fuck you. You’ve just charged me five pounds for a stingy portion of meat, bread and fried potatoes. I’m well within my rights to go fucking berserk. It wasn’t five pounds yesterday and it wasn’t five pounds the day before. So, what I want to know is why it’s five fucking pounds today?’ he barked.

‘You crazy. Get outta my place!’

‘Throwing me out now, are you? Fine. This ain’t the last you’ll hear of me you racist Turkish bastard. I’ll have the authorities down here, you know. I’m sure they’ll find bits of dogs and rats out the back. Filthy Turk scum!’

Al was over the counter wrestling Johnny out of the door as he continued to hurl abuse. Out in the street Johnny started shouting and kicking cardboard boxes into the road. Al watched him for a moment before shouting, ‘...and so you know, I’m Greek. Okay!’

Hal emerged from the back room, draped in a butcher’s apron and gripping a shiny meat cleaver. He looked over at his brother muttering something about the youth of today and then returned to his evenings task of converting his bootlegged DVD of Spider-Man 3 to VHS.

Johnny was in a foul rage. He couldn’t control his temper at all. Everything seemed to offend him. He arrived at his flat, which was located at the far end of Brynfield High

Street, above the betting shop Ample Gamble. He walked around the back, booted over the dustbins and searched around in his pocket for his keys. He pulled out a long collection of metal rings and plastic accessories. Selecting one he pushed it into the lock and heaved the green wooden door open. He climbed the stairs, stormed through the lounge and into his room.

‘Er... Jonathan, is that you?’ said a female voice from the living room.

‘No, I’m a burglar using a key!’

Ignoring him the voice continued, ‘Where’s my tea?’

‘Look, I’ve had another run in with that Turkish, sorry Greek twat in the kebab shop,’ he began. ‘I’ll do you something later, okay?’

‘Later? I’ll be dead later, Jonathan. You can’t leave me on my own for this long with nothing to eat.’

‘You’re not useless are you? Get out of the chair for once and make it yourself.’

‘Jonathan, you know that I can’t make it to the kitchen on my own. Why do you think I’ve got you living here with me?’

‘Because you can’t afford a slave? I don’t know? What do you want to eat anyway?’

‘Anything would be nice.’

‘I’m sick of this. All I get from you is nag, nag, nag. I need a life of my own without having to run around after you,’ he bleated, storming out of his room. ‘Look here, have this kebab and shut your noise!’

The kebab landed joylessly on her lap. ‘But I don’t like kebabs, Jonathan. You know that.’

‘Then fucking starve, Gran!’

Gwyneth Hughes

Gwyneth finally hung up her head set, pulled her white Naf Naf sweater on over her head and set out for the pub to meet the other girls. She was really confused by the last call that she’d received. Not completely fazed but just a little concerned. He didn’t seem to want to get filthy with her and on some strange level he had a caring and fatherly temperament about him. She shook her head and muttered to herself. Working at Welsh,

Wet and Willing hadn't been an ideal job for Gwyneth and, after scraping 3 GCSEs, she felt it a bit beneath her. She dreamt of the stage. Being in the spot light. Adoration raining down on her from crazed fans and actors alike. But money was tight and this was all she could get with E grades in Drama, PE and Sociology. Gwyneth was only twenty-one, with her life ahead of her and a perception of a future far more glamorous than her current state.

Welsh, Wet and Willing was a legitimate business. Based in Roland Piper's terrace house, each of the girls had their own phone station and the walls were covered with thought provoking imagery. Roland was always sitting in the kitchen at the rear of the house, drinking coffee and watching daytime TV. He was rude, obnoxious and stank of kitchen waste.

Gwyneth backed her way into the Dog and Partridge after tripping over some talking bin liners outside and stumbled up to the bar.

'Gin and slim line, please Jack,' she said, stuffing a cigarette eagerly between her over decorated lips.

'Right you are,' came a response from behind Jack's huge beard.

She gazed around the pub. It was the usual half empty crowd sitting around, nonchalantly sipping their drinks. Jenna and Eve were already sitting in the corner puffing away feverishly on their fags. They were wearing Kickers and Fila jumpers, Kappa track suit bottoms with their permed, peroxide hair scraped up into a bun behind them. They were knocking back the cheap double vodka, available at the Dog and Partridge every Thursday night, like it was some kind of antidote for depression and bitterness. Darren, Ted and Brad were midway through pints of some home made looking beverage that forced Gwyneth's stomach to turn. A few girls from their rival company, Swansea Bay All The Way, were poised at the other end of the bar. Road Rage was playing on the jukebox.

'There you go, my love,' said the beard, putting her drink down in front of her.

'Ta, Jack.'

An exchange of monies took place and she moved over to the table where Jenna and Eve were sitting. Both Eve and Jenna were in their mid-twenties but they all looked a

decade older than they were. The three of them sat in silence for a while sucking deeply on their cigarettes, pouring back the liquor and gazing half-heartedly around the pub.

‘Shit in here tonight, innit?’ said Eve, in her thick Welsh drawl.

‘Shit in here every night. Don’t know why we fucking bother coming in,’ replied Jenna.

‘Someone’s got to I s’pose,’ supplied Eve.

‘Yeah and it’s not like there’s anywhere else to go, is there?’

Gwyneth sat listening to them bitch about the Dog and Partridge but it really wasn’t all that bad. Sure the carpet was patchy and the upholstery ripped, the beer warm and over priced, but Jack was okay and his wife did a storming roast dinner on Sundays. But that was all you could really say.

‘God, this place sucks,’ stated Gwyneth resigning herself to this apparent fact.

‘Oh, you just noticed? I can’t believe that we make a conscious decision at the end of each night to come all the way down here,’ said Jenna.

‘What do you mean? We only work two minutes away.’ said Eve.

‘But it’s such a trek into town after a long night...’ said Gwyneth.

‘Yeah,’ said Eve.

‘This weekend then?’ Jenna suggested. ‘How about we make the effort and get ourselves all spruced up and make a night of it and really go mad and...what do you think?’

‘Oh, but I’ll have trouble getting a babysitter and on a Friday night as well,’ said Eve.

‘Oh, me too’ said Jenna.

‘Friday’s are a nightmare for babysitters,’ said Gwyneth.

The conversation filled time and nothing more. It was just something to do while they each drank four vodka-based drinks. This was their lives - the bit outside of work - their free time. Making irrelevant conversation in order to justify being in a pub and disguise the fact that they were all heading for alcoholism. They finished their drinks, stubbed out their fags and pulled their puffa jackets on.

‘Night girls, don’t forget your kids,’ barked Jack lifting the bar hatch to allow five toddlers out followed by Flora heaving two pushchairs.

‘Any chance you could have them tomorrow night?’ Jenna tried.

‘Sorry, my love, but it’s Friday. We’re expecting a busy night,’ replied Flora.

‘They wouldn’t know the meaning of busy,’ said Jenna under her breath.

‘Later then, Jack,’ they said in stereo, grabbing their various offspring.

Ted, Brad and Darren lifted their heads off the bar in all this excitement, groaned and belched their own farewell to the girls as they passed through the door. ‘Now them’s some fuckin’ classy birds,’ drooled Brad, holding back the vomit.

Bastard

Bob contemplated heading back down to the Dog and Partridge for last orders but couldn’t seem to get himself out the armchair let alone walk anywhere. He had always thought that life was going to be much more rewarding, and somehow easier, than it currently was. He blamed most of it on his parents. They were as good a scapegoat as any, and the more he thought about it, the more convinced he became that they really were to blame. Bastards! And after all they hadn’t done for him, they now resided in some posh retirement home that he was footing the bill for. Of course, this wasn’t strictly true, although it made him feel better. His brother Marcus was putting up most of the money. Bob just contributed time and very little of it.

He hated that bastard Marcus. Five years younger and ten times the man Bob was. His parents had even wondered where Bob had really come from. ‘Some mix up in the hospital no doubt,’ joked his mother, whenever they approached the tricky subject of their eldest son.

Fuck them, he thought. Fuck them all. I can be as successful as that bastard Marcus. What a bastard. Christ! He even had a beautiful twenty two year old wife. A model for C&A and everything. Bastards the lot of them.

Bastards.

Doner Kebab

‘Look, it’s just lamb, Gran. It won’t fucking kill you,’ sighed Johnny.

‘It may well be sold as lamb but then again it may not actually be lamb,’ she replied.

‘Huh? Okay, so this might be true, but if you’re as hungry as you say you are then...’

‘I’m not that hungry, Jonathan.’

‘Then give me the rest of it, I’m starving.’

‘Oh Jonathan, you used to be such a nice young man.’

‘Well, things change, Gran. We move on. We grow old and we die. And if we don’t eat anything we die a lot quicker than those that do.’

‘But...’

‘Are you hungry?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then eat it or...do I have to spell it out?’

Johnny watched his gran push the chilli sauce smeared meat around her plate and cautiously lift up a green chilli inspecting it for insects. He dragged the remote control over to him with his sock, expertly swiped it up off the floor and switched the TV on. He stared with gormless distraction at the screen for a few moments and then turned to watch his gran’s wrinkled face as she stuffed the large chilli into her mouth. He jumped up in an attempt to stop her but it was too late. The old girl sat in the chair staring directly at Johnny as she chewed on the huge green chilli pepper. Her eyes were wild and piercing. He could sense the pain behind them, the ferocity of the chilli burning her throat sending violent thoughts to her withered brain. He watched as her hands gripped the armrests, her teeth grinding, the floor shaking as she wobbled from side to side. By now she was whining slightly, her eyes rolled back in her head. Johnny dived for the phone, cursing that sweaty Greek bastard Al Pashwa and dialled the emergency services.

‘Ambulance please...what? no, an ambulance...my gran...she’s eaten a chilli and she choking to death...no, it happened last week, of course right now...45b Brynfield High Street...yes, above Ample Gamble...what do you mean twenty minutes, she’s riding the lightning, she’ll be fucking dead in two...sorry...yes, I know there’s no excuse for that sort of...yes, I understand...sorry...she’s still choking, you know...I don’t know, seventy, eighty, she’s pretty old...okay...thanks.’

He slammed the phone down and turned to his gran who sat slumped in the armchair - motionless.

‘Shit! I’ve killed her with a fucking kebab,’ he blurted, jumping over the coffee table to her side. He grabbed her skeletal hand and had a few stabs at feeling her pulse.

Nothing.

‘Fuck!’

Katie Price

Andrew lay in bed staring at pictures of top-heavy-socialite Jordan and wondered what it would be like to actually have sex with someone as beautiful as that. Supposedly, Gareth Gates knew what that was like. Bastard. And Peter Andre. Double bastard.

He turned his attention to some Preacher comics instead, being sure to tell himself that one day he’d finally get laid.

A strange sound began to filter through the wall which Andrew immediately put down to his mother and Mr. Jones. Thinking about it, he realised that the wall backing onto his room was actually that of Mr. Craddock and not his mother at all. There was a slow, mechanical thwumping noise and what sounded like a music box playing a beautiful childish melody. Andrew felt ill.

‘Andrew, turn that light out!’ bellowed his mother from the living room. ‘I can see it shining down the stairs.’

During the process of being dragged back from the dimensions of immoral thought, Andrew replied, ‘It’s not me!’

‘What? Turn that light out!’

Returning to the here and now, he replied: ‘Okay, just give me ten minutes will you!’

He shook himself of the previous thoughts, flicked through the pages of his comic, sipped some water and turned to his alarm clock. Another school day was waiting for him the following morning and without Johnny attending much these days it was becoming unbearable. He really valued Johnny’s friendship, even if Johnny didn’t. Friends are few and far between when your mother is the reason other people’s parents get divorced. Mr. Craddock’s activities subsided.

‘Oh Jordan, Jordan,’ he purred, returning to his posters and snuggling down inside his bed. ‘How sweet it would be if...’

The phone burst into life breaking Andrew's concentration. His mother answered it with the tone of voice that would make most people drop the receiver. However, the caller seemed to ignore her.

'Andrew,' she screeched. 'There's a phone call for you and I want you to remind them that calling at this time of the night is unacceptable. Okay, young man?'

'Okay, hang on.'

He pulled his dressing gown around his waist and tied the cord at the front. On entering the living room he caught the final stages of Mr. Jones buttoning his fly with a big smile on his face.

'Hi Andy,' he grinned moping his brow.

'Hmmm, you're here again?' muttered Andrew, as he headed towards the sideboard near the door and lifted the receiver. 'Hello?'

'What the fuck took you so long? What were you up to? Playing with yourself or something?' said Johnny.

'Err... ' Andrew mumbled.

'You've got to get round here right now!'

'It's the middle of the night, well, eleven o'clock at least...'

'But I've got a serious problem!'

'I'm sure it's nothing that we can't sort out tomorrow, Johnny.'

'It's my gran, Andrew. You've got to help.'

'Oh, okay. What have you done to her this time?'

'Just shut up and get over here. Now!'

Aroused

Bob was still in a filthy rage over his parents, his brother, his wife, C&A. He was drunk. He slapped himself in the face. And again. And again. Then he fell off of his chair and landed on his knees before the TV. Images of national phone sex line girls appeared before him as he flicked between Men and Motors, The Adult Channel, Television X and The Playboy Channel with his favourites button. He began to dribble on the carpet but all too soon the previews were over. He grumbled to himself, flicked the channels one more

time and stopped on a show he hadn't seen before. It was 'Ibiza Uncovered'. He sat, in a heap, on the floor inches away from the screen staring desperately at the semi naked locals and milky white tourists. He watched as the enthusiastic holidaymakers and staff of the CoCo Beach Resort shed their clothing and danced provocatively around the ballroom fondling each other in an erotic fashion. Bob was aroused. He hadn't been this aroused in years. He desperately wanted to get this aroused again. And again. And again. And then he passed out on the floor.

Jessica Hughes

The three girls stood at the bottom of the steps to Jenna's flat, smoking heavily and shouting at five small humans that were running and screaming around the estate. Eve and Jenna attempted to rock their newborns to sleep, which was hard considering the noise the other kids were making.

'Henry!' shouted Eve. 'Stop hitting your sister, for God's sake.' He ignored her and attacked Jenna's other two kids, both girls, Frankie and Charlie.

'Look, what time are you two working tomorrow?' said Jenna.

'I start at two. You're on at twelve aren't you, Eve?' said Gwyneth.

'Yeah, that's right. I could do with a lie in really but I've got to take these brats to see their father again.'

'How long has he got left now?'

'Two years, although it should be four but good behaviour and all that, you know,' said Eve quite matter-of-factly.

'That's good isn't it?' said Jenna. Eve gave her a stern look.

'No, I don't think so. He'll just go and rob some more newsagents. Mug some grannies or whatever. I'm sick of bailing him out. He's pathetic!'

'Well, at least you have someone,' said Gwyneth.

'Yeah,' Jenna agreed.

'Sorry girls. I forget how good I've got it sometimes,' said Eve.

They stood in silence for a while staring at the concrete floor. Henry continued to hit his sister, Suzy, over the head with his fist until she fell on the floor crying. Henry started

laughing manically at his sister's distress.

'You evil little bastard, Henry,' said Eve storming over and smacking Henry around the head with the back of her hand. He started crying too. 'Oh, shut up will you!'

'Right, well we had better get going,' said Gwyneth. 'Come on Jessica.'

The small child appeared at her side, hand outstretched and looking upwards at Gwyneth. Jenna and Eve looked at Jessica with a jealous eye. There was something about Jessica that was apart from all the other kids that they knew. They couldn't quite put their fingers on it. She was different. She was special.

'Night Jenna.'

'Night Eve. Night Gwyneth.'

'Night Jenna.'

Gwyneth and Eve, kids in hand, walked away from Jenna's tower block and headed home.

Gwyneth rented a room in Eve's house and lived there with Jessica and Eve's three kids. It wasn't ideal but neither was her job, her life or getting herself pregnant at fifteen. But Jessica was a joy. A real treasure. Everyone would tell her that she was lucky to have such a great kid.

She looked down at the six year old and wondered who the father was. So many men over such a short period of time. It wasn't as though she needed any encouragement. Her parents had sat her down at eight years of age and explained the whole thing to her. After that she had been so interested in finding out more that at the age of eleven she started experimenting with the boys in her class; all the boys in her class. It was inevitable really that something like Jessica would happen to a girl like Gwyneth. Somehow she regretted it and embraced it in equal measures. She sighed and then smiled.

Flying Lessons

'Come on, Gran. Don't go dying on me now!' exclaimed Johnny, sitting on top of the old lady shaking her wildly. She didn't respond.

'What are you doing?' yelled Andrew, bursting into the living room.

'She's dead, Andrew. I killed her with a kebab. I can't believe she's fucking dead!'

‘Get off her!’

Johnny climbed down from his perch on top of the fragile woman. Andrew moved to her side and grabbed her wrist searching for her pulse. He looked up at his frantic friend.

‘I tried that!’ barked Johnny. ‘Is she dead or what?’

‘She alive, but only just. Her pulse is very weak but she’s hanging on. She must be unconscious. How did this happen?’

A small rippled of relief washed over Johnny. He regrouped and replied, ‘Well she was eating a kebab I gave her and she must have choked on a....’

‘On a what?’

‘A chilli pepper, I guess.’

‘You gave an eighty-something year old woman a chilli pepper to eat?’

‘Not intentionally. It must have slipped in there without me really knowing about it.’

Andrew scratched his head and began pacing up and down the room. Johnny stood staring at his gran wondering how all of this had come about. Where the hell was the ambulance? How long can it take to get here from the hospital?

In the distance sirens could be heard approaching and eventually blue lights flashed into view through the windows. Johnny scooped up his gran and headed for the stairs. In a fit of panic Andrew rushed to help, tripped over the coffee table and took Johnny’s legs away from under him. Johnny lurched forwards and went flying through the doorway. His gran’s trajectory rapidly gained more momentum sending her flying just beyond their reach. Johnny tumbled to the ground as the airborne OAP clattered into the banister and then disappeared over it.

‘Fuck!’ groaned Johnny, as he landed heavily on top of Andrew, who had the wind knocked out of him immediately. They scrambled about for a while before getting to their feet and bolted down the stairs towards the crumpled body at the bottom.

‘Gran. Are you alright?’ yelled Johnny.

‘She’s unconscious you fool. She can’t hear you.’

‘Now *you*’ve killed her!’

‘I didn’t kill her, Johnny. You were holding her. I was trying to help!’

‘I can’t believe that she’d survive a fall like that at her age. Well, she must have

broken a few bones at the very least.’

‘I’d say she’s probably broken most of them, Johnny. If not all!’ said Andrew. ‘You know it’s a scientific fact that persons of seventy years and older have a much lower tolerance of...’

‘Shut up. This is just as much your fucking fault as it is mine!’

By this time two paramedics were also standing over the body of Johnny’s gran. One was on his walkie talkie, ‘Yeah, I think you ought to send the police, this looks like another of those vicious beatings...what?...yeah, the ones on old women. Cruel...I know. It’s a sick, sick world we live in, Pete...yeah, but it pays the bills...yeah...Imogen?...oh, she’s fine...taking her to The Pines this weekend...yeah, she needs a new dress or something...’

Security Breach

On the outskirts of his subconscious Bob could hear something being turned in the lock of his front door. He sprang from his chair and, in the darkness, lost his balance, lurching drunkenly forwards onto the coffee table. Luckily, he bounced off the wooden knee high table instead of falling through it and landed heavily on the floor. He scanned the room at floor level for a weapon. Nothing presented itself so he scraped himself off the carpet and stumbled into the kitchen, grabbing randomly for an empty bottle of liquor out of the bin. On finding one, amongst the many, he swayed back and forth, still under the influence of excessive boozing and positioned himself behind the kitchen door.

The front door clicked shut as Bob tried to conceal his heavy breathing with one hand and clench the bottle with the other. He remained there, quivering behind the kitchen door, as he listened to the intruder’s footsteps probing around the flat. His concentration was interrupted by urges to pass out and soon found himself slapping his own face to gain focus. The intruder seemed to be talking out loud. Bob could decipher that much at least and made an assumption that the uninvited guest was in the living room.

‘Thieving bastard,’ he growled under his breath. ‘I’ll show him who’s boss.’

Bob felt his way through the kitchen, over to the living room door and peered around the crack into the darkness. The burglar was facing the opposite direction, feverishly

looking for something, but only standing a matter of yards away. This was Bob's chance. He grasped the bottle even tighter in his hand and steadied himself ready for his attack. A small bead of sweat ran down Bob's wrinkled forehead, over his eyebrow and into his eye. The salty sweat made him blink and raise a hand to rub it but, unfortunately for Bob, he raised the hand containing a large empty bottle. The glass connected with his head and sent him flying backwards across the kitchen. The intruder spun round to face him, then came tearing through the kitchen door and pounced onto Bob who lay sprawled out on the floor. The bottle remained in Bob's tight grip and he swung it with all earnest towards his assailant. The bottle cut through the air erratically as he tried to fight his way free but he was unable to cause any damage. The intruder fended off Bob's attacks, attempting to prize the bottle from his grasp, a melee of bungled street fighting styles. Finally the bottle ricocheted off the intruder's elbow and caught Bob across the forehead smashing his head back onto the floor. He felt the urges for unconsciousness filling his mind again.

He felt dizzy, drunk and very, very tired. 'I could just lie here and let him steal everything I own, couldn't I? That would be nice. Sleep. Hmmm. No, that bastard is robbing me...I must do something...but I could sleep instead, couldn't I?' Bob hesitated. He just stayed still. Immobile on the floor. The thief put a cool hand on Bob's face, saying something that he couldn't work out and headed towards the living room door again.

An anger rose in Bob, the likes of which he had never felt in his life before, making him more determined not to let this man walk out with all of his treasured belongings. The intruder had got to the door and was reaching for the light switch when Bob finally found his feet. Bob swept up the bottle and raised it high above his head. The thief switched the light on as Bob swung the thick, glass bottle towards the outline of his head. His vision was illuminated with utmost horror as the bottle connected with the intruder's head and shattered on impact.

'Maggie!' Bob screamed, letting go of what was left of the bottle and diving forward to grab her body as it fell.

The glass had already ripped through the flesh on her head making three deep cuts. Her head had been forced backwards jarring her spine and causing the body to go limp.

Bob sunk to his knees smothering her limp body with his arms.

‘Maggie! Christ! No!’

She lifted her head to speak but Bob hushed her with tears streaming down his tormented face. Why was she snooping around her own flat, for Christ’s sake? thought Bob. Why didn’t she just turn the lights on? And then it hit him.

It’s all my fault. thought Bob. She was trying to avoid me by sneaking around in the dark, wasn’t she? She couldn’t even bear to see me for a moment. What a mess I am. She hates me. My wife actually hates me and now I’ve probably gone and killed her.

Snapping out of his wallowing pool of self-pity for a brief second, Bob momentarily lay Maggie on the kitchen floor while he headed for the phone.

‘Hello...Ambulance please...what do you mean it’s busy?...send another one, this is an emergency...well, life or death actually, what did you expect?...yes, Brynfield, the Gruffydd Estate, number 11...please hurry. It’s our twenty-fifth anniversary!’

Chapter 3 : A Different Perspective

PC Thorpe

Johnny and Andrew stood watching the paramedics as they wheeled Johnny's gran into the ambulance. Andrew's arm was loyally stretched around Johnny's shoulders as he hung his head and wept angry tears. The doors were slammed behind his gran and the paramedics turned to Johnny as police sirens, somewhere in the dark, could be heard approaching.

'Don't I get to ride with my gran?' asked Johnny.

'The police want to have a word with you on the way to the hospital, okay son?'

'What have the police got to do with this?' said Johnny, fearing that his evening was about to take a serious turn, if it were possible, for the worse.

The police car screeched to a halt behind the ambulance. The window descended and PC Thorpe poked his head through the opening.

'Johnny Davies, I presume?' he enquired.

'Yes...' began Johnny.

'Get in, son. And your friend,' he ordered, thumbing towards the backseat.

'Me?' said Andrew. 'What's this got to do with me?'

'Just get in the car will you please, sir.'

There wasn't much point in arguing. The ambulance was pulling off and Johnny was anxious to get to the hospital and find out if his gran was going to die or not. They slid onto the backseat of the police car and wrestled with the seat belts for a moment. Inside the car, PC Thorpe was accompanied by WPC Payne. Johnny had run into her a few times before and it was difficult for him to forget the experience of being forcefully restrained by a woman of her enormity. Despite her Jerry Springer-esque appearance, she possessed a vice like grip that would be better suited to American Wrestling than the Swansea Bay Police Department.

Andrew couldn't care less about WPC Payne. He was too concerned with being spotted in the back seat of a police car by his mother. He sighed and fiddled around in his

pockets for some chewing gum. The streets of Brynfield flashed past them as they pursued the ambulance to Singleton Hospital in an almighty hurry.

‘So,’ began PC Thorpe, not turning around to face Johnny, ‘the old lady belongs to you does she, Mr. Davies?’

‘Well, she’s my gran, yes.’

‘I see, and how long have you been taking care of her, son?’

‘A few years now, but it’s not permanent, you know.’

‘I see, and what do you plan to do with her?’

‘Well, I don’t know. I’ll be moving on soon and making a career for myself.’

‘I see, and what will that be then?’

‘I’m going to be famous.’ He paused, ‘Don’t laugh, somebody’s got to do it.’

‘I see, and you thought you could get rid of your gran by throwing her down the stairs, did you?’

‘What? No. I thought...I didn’t think anything...’

‘I see, a mindless, irrational crime, Mr. Davies?’

‘What crime? There’s no crime here. We fell...and she flew...and...’

‘I see, so you’re in cahoots with Mr...’ he turned at this point to look at Andrew and raised his eyebrows.

‘Morgan,’ mumbled Andrew, his mouth filled with Orbit.

‘...with Mr. Morgan here, are we, Mr. Davies?’

‘No. He’s my friend,’ he stuttered, confounded by the allegations, ‘She was choking on a chilli pepper and we were trying to get her to the ambulance as quickly as possible.’

‘I see, a likely story. Have either of you got any experience in health care or support for the elderly?’

‘No, but that’s not the point...’ began Johnny.

‘I think,’ said PC Thorpe pointing a well sharpened pencil into Johnny’s face, ‘that’s exactly the point.’

Johnny and Andrew stared at the pencil. It was blue.

A Bright Future

Eve and Gwyneth, having made their way out of the Gruffydd Estate where Jenna lived, headed towards Brynfield High Street and eventually home. Jessica ran on ahead to play with Henry and Suzy. Henry was still attempting to bash his sister over the head. This time it was with a Frisbee. It had always been that way ever since Suzy had been introduced to Henry three years earlier. Until then he had received all the attention from their mother. Sharing was something Henry, now five, was not able to cope with. The addition of Eve's latest replica, Lorna, currently gargling in the pushchair, had made him even more violent and desperate for her love.

Suzy was screaming, Henry was laughing and Jessica skipped around them, the Frisbee snatched and held aloft, with a carefree look on her perfect complexion. She smiled at her mother and continued to skip mindfully around the bin liners and cardboard boxes that littered the street.

'Do you think I ought to take him for counselling, Gwyn?' Eve said, shaking her head at her son's antics.

'He'll grow out of it, Eve. You just need to give him time to adapt. It's hard for him without a proper father figure.'

'You think so? God, you're so clever. Where do you get this stuff from?'

'The Jeremy Kyle Show.'

Eve continued unfazed. 'It's a shame that this one's father didn't hang around after the birth,' she said, referring to Lorna. 'He could have been there for Henry. Jeremy Kyle? Really?'

'Eve. The guy was a loser,' Gwyneth said, stopping in the street and facing Eve. 'Get a grip will you. You've got to stop going around hooking up with these ex-cons. Look at yourself, for crying out loud. You work on a sex chat line and have three kids that belong to two fathers, one in prison, the other on the run!'

'I guess I love those bastard types, eh, Gwyneth?'

Gwyneth rolled her eyes and turned her attention back to Jessica, thinking of home and the warmth it provided. They walked along in silence for several minutes, thoughts spinning through Gwyneth's head, dreams coming and going, revelations of impossible

hopes of a bright future that were certainly unobtainable, plagued her daily in this way. She had a dream of something better, but just how much better, she had no idea. Then there was Jessica; a little angel with a face of pure joy and innocence. The bitter reality of the world yet to make their eternal mark on her faultless skin and fragile mind. Jessica was the product of some remarkable conception with a man Gwyneth wouldn't be able to pick out in a line up if her life depended on it. Somehow amongst the many rotten apples there was one rich, full and ripe fruit, whose perfect seed had given her this earth bound angel. She blessed her lucky stars for such an amazing fluke of chance between the sheets and not a child such as Henry.

The Frisbee was back in Henry's hands and he ran off down the street kicking boxes and screaming at the top of his voice. In the distance, from Brynfield High Street, police sirens bled into the mix of rain and footsteps on the pavement. They approached at a blinding rate and passed them with some force as the women grasped their children for safety. Only Henry was unprotected and stood, unaware of the danger, on the kerb waving the Frisbee at the speeding vehicles.

Detour

Bob waited hesitantly for the ambulance to arrive, anxious and torn by the sight of Maggie, as she bled onto his shirt. He cradled her head against his chest, weeping and cursing his own stupidity. Minutes had passed that felt like millennia, as he became more and more desperate. He began to shake, sweating from every pore and gibbering on about the terms and conditions of 'Mackenzie and Sons Double Glazing Early Winter Offer'.

Maggie's blood had seeped through the lounge carpet and was spreading its sticky crimson pool onto the kitchen lino. The remains of the empty liquor bottle, that had caused Maggie's injuries, lay amidst the blood. Bob couldn't bear to look and kicked the lounge door shut to conceal the tormenting image. Still the ambulance didn't come. Still she bled. Still he wept.

‘Where the hell are we going?’ exclaimed Johnny. ‘The scenic route?’

‘We’ve been redirected to another incident in the area,’ replied PC Thorpe.

‘What do you mean redirected? My gran needs to get to a hospital right now...’ he wailed.

‘Look, there are professionals in that ambulance right now taking care of your gran,’ he explained. ‘Somebody else is in trouble and it’d take too long to go via the hospital and back out again, got it, son?’

Johnny was aghast at this revelation and looked to Andrew for sympathy. He received a confused look and turned his attention to WPC Payne.

‘This can’t be a legal procedure? Can it?’ he implored her.

‘Don’t talk to her whilst she’s driving,’ ordered PC Thorpe. ‘We don’t want another fatality on our hands!’

‘Fatality? You’re writing her off before we even get there!’ Johnny was amazed at PC Thorpe’s apparent lack of compassion for his grandmother.

The police car followed the ambulance into the Gruffydd Estate and slammed on the brakes outside number 11. The paramedics descended from the rear of the ambulance and ran into the flat, equipment in hand, the rain outside threatening a downpour.

* * *

‘Where the hell have you been?’ began Bob exasperated, as he let the medics through the front door.

Ignoring him they made their way down the corridor and into the lounge where Maggie’s body lay limp on the carpet. Dropping to their knees, the paramedics bustled around her, digging into their bags and attending to her injuries.

Bob stood at the door, biting down on his nicotine stained fingers as the paramedics performed their magic. His sweating brow refused to subside even as a wave of relief washed over him at the sight he held. He was still anxious as to whether he had inflicted permanent damage upon his wife.

‘Mr. Flint, I presume?’ creaked the voice of PC Thorpe, who had crept up behind Bob

unnoticed in the hysteria.

‘What? Er, yes. Flint, Robert...er, Bob. Yes?’

‘I see, and the victim’s name is...?’

‘Victim? No, Christ, that’s my wife. It was an accident!’

‘I see, is that so, Mr. Flint?’

‘I thought she was an intruder...and I thought that she was going to rob the place...er...’ he tried, attempting a broad smile.

PC Thorpe looked around the practically empty room and stated, ‘What exactly did you think this *intruder* was going to steal?’

‘I...I...er...’ Bob stuttered, amongst his confusion and emotional overload, ‘I don’t know. I guess I just...reacted.’

‘I see. A perpetually violent man are we, Mr. Flint?’

‘Not at all, in fact...’

‘An accidental crime then, Mr. Flint?’

‘Yes. No. It’s not a crime. It’s an accident.’

The constable made his way through to the kitchen, stepping over the spillage on the floor and picked up a piece of paper that lay on the worktop. His eyes speedily scanned their way across the text and a wry grin spread across his taut face.

‘An act of revenge, perhaps Mr. Flint?’ he croaked, entering the lounge once more and waving Maggie’s farewell note under Bob’s nose. Bob lurched forwards to swipe the note, but the officer expertly withdrew it, sliding it into his jacket pocket in the blink of an eye.

‘No. It was an accident!’ said Bob, protesting his innocence.

PC Thorpe produced a blue pencil and moved it hypnotically from side to side in front of Bob’s eyes. ‘I see.’

* * *

Outside in the car, Johnny and Andrew sat in silence. WPC Payne gazed thoughtfully at them in the rear view mirror, Johnny glanced back at her, then away and then back at

her again. He jumped forward in the seat, up to her ear and whispered, 'She's going to fucking die and we're sitting here doing nothing about it!'

'Sit down or I'll have you arrested for assaulting an officer!'

'For Christ's sake!' Johnny was drained, confused and very angry. 'How can you just fucking sit there and do nothing about this? My gran is dying in that ambulance and we're sitting here wasting time.'

'Please, Mr. Davies. You must control yourself or I'll have to carry out that arrest.'

Johnny could sense that his anger made her nervous, especially with PC Thorpe being absent. He didn't push it though, he had his gran to think about. What use would he be to her in a police cell?

'Johnny, calm down. There's no need to get so stressed about this,' said Andrew, trying to console his friend.

'No need to get stressed? It's not your gran that's on her fucking death bed, is it?'

'Well, no.'

'Then shut the fuck up, will you?'

Andrew turned to look out of the window. The permanent drizzle that covered Brynfield had begun to pick up, light at first and within minutes, a downpour. He liked watching the rain from a secluded viewpoint, he loved running in it too. Andrew thought it was romantic, a view that Johnny definitely wouldn't share and would rather mock than embrace. Through the storm he could see figures emerging from the flat and heading towards the vehicles. The paramedics lifted a body into the back of the ambulance and jumped in after. Two other figures stood in the rain, animated and obviously arguing. One was waving a pencil.

Finally they approached the police car, the door next to Andrew opened and a drenched, middle aged man climbed onto the seat. He looked haggard and woeful. His shirt, partially concealed beneath a tweed jacket, was covered with blood and his glasses misted up to the point of virtual blindness. Johnny and Andrew recognised him immediately; by the smell if nothing else.

PC Thorpe slid into the front seat, turned about and looked at the three passengers. He grinned again, that sly, all knowing grin that repelled Johnny and made him angrier than

ever. He nodded to WPC Payne and the engine roared into life.

Frisbee

Gwyneth and Eve had made their way along the rain soaked Brynfield High Street and were standing at the corner next to In A Spin and Martha's Goth Shop. They were indulging in one last cigarette beneath Eve's umbrella before turning into Finch Street and the last stretch home. They bathed in the orange luminescence, which cascaded off Eve's umbrella from one of three street lamps still in working condition, as the children continued to run riot around them. Their energy levels were generally surprising for this time of night. Gwyneth put it down to Jack and Flora, at the Dog and Partridge, feeding them no end of chocolate and colas.

The smoke from their cigarettes billowed up towards the light's origin, the blue and grey tendrils making devilish faces in the air, surrounding them in an ephemeral evil. Jessica watched the smoke rising playfully and shifted her gaze between her mother and the macabre illusions. She looked confused, tilting her head to one side, her immature but open mind trying to decode the secrets the smoke held.

Gwyneth looked at her offspring with interest, the child's fascination with the transcendental apparition was quite precious. Eve too found her gaze rooted on the child. They felt warm, even in this torrential rain, somewhere beneath the skin.

'We best get inside, Eve, before the kids catch their death,' said Gwyneth her eyes transfixed on Jessica.

'Yes, we should,' she replied.

Henry had hold of the Frisbee and was tormenting Suzy with it. The girl looked sad, empty, approaching tiredness and eventual sleep, but her brother's relentless bullying kept her from her dreams. He held it above her head, tempting the infant, as she jumped up in an attempt to take custody of the plastic disc. Jessica's eyes finally moved from the smoke, it's last fibres dwindling into extinction, and refocusing themselves on Suzy's mild tortures.

'Come on. Let's go, Henry,' directed Eve. The small boy looked up at her in disgust,

his fun ending.

‘You too Jessica,’ said Gwyneth.

The child nodded.

At the far end of the High Street, Gwyneth could hear the sirens again. She turned to look and saw a repeat performance of the ambulance and squad car hurtling down the road towards them, spray erupting from beneath the wheels. She turned to Jessica, whose eyes were on Henry as he teased his sister further with the Frisbee. The combination of forceful wind and Henry’s wet grip on the Frisbee, released it into the air. Suzy’s eyes joined Jessica’s, following the Frisbee as it floated up, away from the pavement and across the road. Both girls moved instinctively to retrieve the airborne toy, their tired legs kicking away at the ground as their momentum built.

Eve darted sideways and intercepted Suzy before she crossed the kerb and into harm’s way, swinging her around and scolding the child. Gwyneth leapt in Jessica’s direction but was too late and she landed heavily on the pavement. Jessica headed out after the Frisbee, like a wide receiver in search of the Super Bowl winning touchdown, the cars still coming.

Her vision was fixed on the plastic dish as it span awkwardly, defying gravity for a moment and descending towards the centre of the road. Her mind was bent on the catch. Somehow it blotted out the sirens and lights of the rescue services approaching at a catastrophic rate. Jessica, hands outstretched, stood in the middle of Brynfield High Street, looking up at her prize. It floated down into her grasp. The pink plastic coating, slippery when wet, fumbled in her grip and fell to her chest where she clutched it again. The elation of her accomplishment refocused her mind and terror struck her to the core. Her eyes, now facing ahead of her down the centre of the drenched tarmac, saw the on-coming traffic closing in, their beams blinding and dizzying her, turning her into a white statue. She squealed in desperation and tried to run for safety, slipped and landed face down on the road.

The ambulance was literally upon her, lights flashing, sirens blasting, when the paramedic realised the danger. The driver slammed his foot on the brake pedal, the grip from the road was little to none, the back end of the vehicle stepping out and causing it to

slide sideways down the street.

WPC Payne, shocked by the evasive manoeuvres of the ambulance, buried her foot on the brake also and sent her passengers flying forwards in their seats. Her head connected with the steering wheel, as she attempted to avoid a collision with the ambulance.

Gwyneth, in the few seconds that had covered these recent events, had brought herself to her knees, and watched as Jessica tried to escape the ambulance's deadly gait. She was hit squarely from behind and went down beneath the emergency vehicle, her head connecting with the ground savagely. Gwyneth's unbelieving eyes, wild with shock, froze at the horrific sight that was laid out before her. She shook uncontrollably as the possible outcomes roared across the expanse of her mind.

Eve continued to hold Suzy close as the ambulance finished its spin, slamming sideways into a green Vauxhall Astra and rebounding across the road and onto the pavement towards Ample Gamble. The squad car pulled up just short of a battered pile in the middle of the road. The pile didn't move.

Gwyneth let out a cry of loss; a guttural, woeful exclamation that only a mother could muster, collapsed and then, despite the falling rain, there was silence.

Fate and Destiny

The lights on top of the ambulance continued to flash, beating out their rhythmic warning, the street resembling a near empty nightclub. Eve stood, rooted to the concrete, kids in hand, unable to avert her gaze from the mess that was Jessica, the lights bouncing off her soaked skin; blinking was beyond her. The rain filtered out to a light shower, bedroom lights above the nearby shops flicked on, one by one. The right hand door of the squad car opened carefully and Bob climbed out, holding his chest. He looked in through the front at WPC Payne, she seemed unconscious, blood smeared across her face, PC Thorpe was moving slightly. He crossed the front of the car and stared down at the crumpled child at his feet. Dropping down onto his haunches he inspected the child as best he could without daring to touch her.

'Is she alright?' said Eve, her voice cold and trembling.

He shrugged. What did he know about this? She looked in a bad way. Still. Bloody. Cold. He looked around at her, his eyes fighting back the tears.

‘I...don’t...know,’ Bob stammered, wiping his comb-over off his face. Eve’s feet still didn’t leave their new found home.

Johnny and Andrew erupted from the police car, Johnny stood in the street looking up at the heavens. Andrew went to Bob’s side.

‘Well this is fucking brilliant,’ Johnny started. ‘My gran hasn’t got a hope in Hell.’

‘Shut up, Johnny!’ said Andrew, looking Jessica over.

‘I suppose you think this is funny do you?’ he yelled at the world in general. ‘It wasn’t enough for me to kill her with a chilli pepper, you had to make us detour to the fucking Gruffydd Estate and then have some accident in Brynfield fucking High Street – right outside my fucking house! She never had a fucking chance, did she? Did she?’ His fists punching the air, his hair plastered to his scalp, overcome with rage and anger. He felt cheated, torn of the chance to save his gran. There was no one left to blame but God. To Johnny, fate and destiny were concepts used to explain odd moments of chance in movies, but God was something his gran embraced wholeheartedly. What greater scapegoat was there than a metaphysical ideal that resided beyond the clouds? He cursed, blasphemed, punched the air again and sank to his knees, weeping bitterly.

If this had been a movie then Nelly Furtado’s ‘All Good Things (Come To An End)’ would have faded slowly into the speakers.

The door to the ambulance suddenly flew open and one of the paramedics stumbled out onto the pavement behind Eve and her kids. He looked giddy and disorientated but alive. Definitely alive.

Everybody looked to him for help.

His vision was somewhat hazy, but it shifted between each pained face that occupied this small world before him, returning after a moment or two to a lump on the road. His mind raced back over the last three minutes and reality struck him like a cold steak around the face. His brain tried to clear itself of the pain, the cold, running his hand through his hair he concentrated on reviving the young infant.

He returned to the ambulance to retrieve his equipment. Opening the front door again

he looked across to see his colleague, stomach crumpled over the steering wheel, head resting on the bonnet, the windscreen shattered around his shoulders. He climbed in and wrestled his bag free from beneath the corpse, tears of frustration, loss and denial welling up inside him. He jumped down again from the ambulance and headed over to where Jessica was lying.

Eve was lying at Gwyneth's side. She was unconscious.

Johnny approached the rear doors of the ambulance and attempted to get them open and see to his gran. The lock held fast and his frustration deepened.

'What the fuck is up with this?' he screamed, sobbing and throwing himself across the road in desperation. 'Gran, are you okay?' he yelled running up to and thumping the door, it rattled a response. He spun around, his back against the door, sliding down until he sat on the bumper, regaining his breath, shaking all over. 'I'm cold, Gran,' he began at a whisper. 'I'm alone, Gran. I'm sorry for this, for everything. I'm sorry for me, the person I've become, I mean. I don't intend to be like I am but you understand, right?' The tears were streaming down his face by now. Andrew had approached and crouched before him, a hand on Johnny's trembling frame.

'Don't torture yourself, Johnny,' he said, hoping not to insight another violent outburst.

'But it's my fault, Andrew,' he replied. 'I never gave her enough of my time. I was such an arsehole to her, to a sweet old lady, and now she's dead. Look what I've caused.' He pointed towards the paramedic hunched over Jessica. 'That's my fault too!'

'No Johnny, you mustn't think like that.'

'What other way is there to think about this, Andrew?'

Bob stood behind the two boys, as if frozen in time, staring at the beached ambulance. The lines of Maggie's farewell note drifting across his mind.

Andrew was lost. Either his brain was so tired and cold that it refused to offer a practical and logical answer, or there simply wasn't one. He looked back into Johnny's sore, bloodshot eyes.

'It'll be alright.'

PC Thorpe emerged from the car, his uniform strangely in perfect condition, his hair

unaffected by the recent incident – like he'd just stepped out of the make-up trailer. He gazed over at the stricken ambulance and back at WPC Payne.

'Is everybody okay?' he said.

'Yes, Officer, we're all great here, thank you.' Johnny's sarcasm finding PC Thorpe a little embarrassed but not unfazed.

'I'll call for help.'

He returned to the car and checked WPC Payne's pulse. She was alive, just unconscious, a head injury but nothing fatal. He pulled the radio up to his mouth.

'Foxtrot Alpha...receive...over.'

'Go ahead, Foxtrot Alpha. What's your current situation...over?' a tired and agitated voice replied.

'RTA at corner of Brynfield High Street and Finch Street...over.'

'Received...where's that ambulance, Russell?...over.'

'Involved in the accident, Sarge...three casualties now...er make that four, Sarge...over,' he said, looking at WPC Payne again.

'What happened, Russell?...over.'

'Not sure, Sarge...just send some help...over.'

'ETA about ten minutes, Russell...over.'

'Foxtrot Alpha out...'

The radio crackled and he dropped it back onto the floor of the car. He sat back in the seat and took in a deep breath. He looked out into the street, Johnny and Andrew were still sitting by the ambulance, Gwyneth's head was in Eve's lap, the paramedic still dealing with Jessica. He filled his lungs once more and left the vehicle. 'How's she doing?' he asked, standing over Jessica.

'It's unbelievable,' came the reply.

'What is?' he asked more urgently.

'She's alive. Possible broken legs, fractured skull but she's alive,' said the paramedic looking up at the officer. He looked down at Jessica's frail body, it was cruelly bent and bloody, possessing an horrific expression, perhaps fixed at the point of contact with the ambulance. These sights tormented him but the pink Frisbee that she clung onto confused

him profoundly.

‘What about the two in the ambulance?’ he asked.

‘They should be fine, if they survived the crash,’ the paramedic assured him. ‘I’ll check.’

He crossed over to where Johnny and Andrew sat.

‘Excuse me. I’ve got to check on your gran.’

Johnny looked up at him.

‘What’s the use...?’ he droned.

‘Move it, Mr. Davies,’ barked PC Thorpe.

‘She’s an old woman. Leave her be,’ he returned, whilst being dragged aside by Andrew.

The paramedic unlocked the doors and climbed inside. Both the ladies had shifted during the accident. They were now covered in packets, needles and jars of all descriptions. The vital signs were good for Maggie, the cuts had stopped bleeding, she was still out due to the drugs but the medic was happy with her condition. He turned to Johnny’s gran. She’d been thrown sideways during the collision and was laying on her belly, head twisted to one side. She was cold. His brow creased as he fumbled around for a pulse. He looked out at Johnny’s pale face.

‘She’s gone, isn’t she?’ he stated frankly.

Bob squeezed him reassuringly in the shoulder.

The paramedic was about to agree with Johnny when his fingertips felt the slightest of beats beneath the skin. He moved closer to her, turning her arm upward to face him, her skeletal wrist held up in elation. ‘She’s...er...still with us...’ he reported. ‘Where’s that ambulance, Officer?’

Singleton Hospital

The shabby terrace houses of Brynfield soon developed into the semi-detached luxury of Sketty and then the city, its bars and shops still pushing liquor. Thursday night had brought out the usual crowd of alcohol-driven dancers and exhibitionists. Johnny gazed with disgust at the men staggering across the street, hurling kebabs at one another and

sitting on various parked cars whilst they ate what remained. The line between disgust and jealousy became blurred for Johnny in this moment. He hated them for the apparent idiots they were and for the fun they were having. He secretly wished to endorse this same mentality for a slice of real life, real fun, an existence, no matter how shallow, apart from the one he woke up to every morning.

He was back in a squad car, squashed in between Andrew and Bob. PC Thorpe was at the wheel now and clearing the way for the two ambulances that followed them. Lights whirring, sirens blasting, wheels slipping on the wet roads of Swansea.

The news of his gran had kept Johnny's rage from blowing out of control again. He sat with some semblance of inner calm as the emergency vehicles paraded down Oystermouth Road and into Singleton Hospital. From outside the A&E looked calm and peaceful, ready and waiting for Johnny's gran, all hands primed for the special attention she required. The truth that lay within was altogether a different experience.

They pulled up a little way from the main entrance, the two ambulances taking pole position at the A&E department of Singleton Hospital. Johnny's gran, Maggie Flint, WPC Payne and Jessica Hughes were hauled through the plastic swinging doors. Johnny, Andrew and Bob close on the heels of the orderlies as they wheeled their loved ones inside. The A&E was awash with activity. Orderlies pushing and pulling their patients through the milling throng of distressed relatives and friends, doctors, nurses, red cheeked, running like maniacs from one side of reception to the other, calling names, ticking clipboards, helping patients through several doors off the room and into the treatment cubicles.

The woman behind reception, portly, rolled up sleeves under her armpits, her face drawn and momentarily without sympathy, sighed at the recent additions to the mayhem. She looked them over and beckoned the paramedic and Johnny towards her.

'What have we got here then?' she asked.

'The child, get the child in straight away,' the paramedic replied, worried for Jessica's life. 'And the old lady, she's weak.'

'We're stretched as it is,' she said solemnly. 'One of them will have to wait.' She looked at Johnny's tormented face.

‘Wait?’ he said. ‘She’s at death’s door!’

‘There’s nothing I can do,’ she tried to explain. ‘There was an accident involving two rugby team coaches, blocked up half of the City, four fatalities, twenty or so serious injuries, not to mention pedestrians with shock, glass injuries, burns...you want to argue with me, young man?’ Her tolerance leaving her for a moment.

‘Take the girl, take the girl!’ yelled Johnny, his gran’s hand in his. The woman waved her hands, in no particular way it seemed to Johnny, and the orderly headed off with Jessica through one of the doors leading out of reception.

Gwyneth had joined Johnny at the counter, weak and distraught.

‘Where’s my daughter?’ she begged. ‘Where is she? What have you done with her?’

‘She’s being taken care of, okay?’ said Johnny, holding his gran’s hand tighter than ever. He indicated the direction she had gone with the nod. Gwyneth moved off towards her daughter, rambling incessantly, ignoring the people she was knocking into as she passed by.

Johnny looked up at the lady behind the desk. Mrs. T. Sprackman was embossed on her badge, her uniform had been wrestled into, her hair fixed in some wild hurry. The minutes passed by slowly. Johnny anxiously shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

‘It won’t be long now,’ she comforted him.

What wouldn’t? His gran’s death? Her revival? What kind of a sentiment was that? Before he had time to open his mouth and confront her on it she had picked up her phone, a moment’s pause and then she spoke the words he’d been waiting to hear.

‘Owain! Get this lady down to Doctor MacLeod in twenty-three, will you?’

These weren’t the exact words he’d imagined but they would do. Before Johnny had time to contemplate this properly his gran had been whisked away from him and was trundling across the reception area, disappearing through another mysterious door.

The energy in reception buzzed around his ears. He felt relieved, but tight, unable to let go of his guilt just yet, still convinced of her inevitable demise at his hands. He tried moving but the room was filled to bursting with rugby players, stinking of beer and whiskey, gurneys, mourners and drunks, people sleeping, others shouting, arguing, even fighting. And then there was Bob, pushing Maggie through the pandemonium, crying out

for help like the captain of a stricken ship battling a storm.

Bob was lost, both inside and out, staring hopelessly around the room for help and receiving none. Maggie lay still on the gurney, Bob's tears splashing off her face as he tried to get her to safety. A group of agitated rugby players were standing in Bob's way, arguing with an old tramp over a bottle of Scotch that the tramp clutched to his breast. Bob was badly negotiating a way through this potentially violent exchange whilst protecting Maggie's head with his forearm.

A tall, stocky athlete, if such an expression could be applied to such a man, turned to Bob and gave him a quizzical look.

'What the fuck's your problem?' he said, frowning at Bob.

'I'm trying to get my wife some medical attention and you're standing in my way, please move!'

'You what? You telling me what to do, Mister?' It wasn't the type of question Bob had a particularly easy time answering.

'No, I'm...er...asking you, quite politely, if you could move out of my way!' he tried, his anger growing.

'As you can see, Mister, I was here first and I'm taking care of a bit of business with this nice man,' nodding to the tramp and his Scotch. 'So, what have you got to say about that?'

'Christ! Look you'd better move or I'm going to take some kind of drastic measures, okay,' he replied louder than before. 'I've not had the greatest day of my life today, and I don't need the likes of you standing in my way giving me shit, do you understand?'

The man stared in disbelief at Bob and drew back his fist, clenched it hard and swung. Bob's head was still owned by the booze, the fist careering towards his face was large, tattooed and, as Bob shortly found out, painful. He fell backwards; the floor, wet and slippery, soon added Bob to its victims.

His nose felt numb. Actually he couldn't feel his nose at all and somehow the pain was spreading across the rest of his face instead. His eyes were heavy again, a mix of the alcohol and low energy reserves, they attempted to shut but he fought them for a time. The floor in Singleton Hospital's reception area was surprisingly comfortable, right now

he would sleep on a park bench, hot coals, a bed of nails, the cold lino in his kitchen. His kitchen? For some reason he'd been on that floor recently, he couldn't remember why, what the hell had he been doing on the kitchen floor? He was being punched by somebody. On the lino, the intruder, his wife. Maggie? The thought of his wife attempted to raise some response from his otherwise pathetically limp and bedraggled body.

Consciousness was slipping away from Bob, spinning and falling away into the wilderness of his shallow mind, any escape from this world of pain. Deeper and deeper he fell, floated, hurtled, spun. Over and over, never really aware of anything but the endless decaying shades of black.