

Sex & Bowls & Rock and Roll

How I swapped my rock dreams
for village greens



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**Sex & Bowls & Rock and Roll:
How I Swapped My Rock
Dreams for Village Greens**

«HarperCollins»

Marsh A.

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The story of a man who gives up the rock 'n' roll dream... to play bowls. Alex Marsh wanted to be a rock star - but it didn't work out. Instead he toiled away in the big city - only to give up his career, move to rural Norfolk, and become a househusband. Only he isn't a very good one. Whilst his pride won't let him admit it, he struggles with the cooking, the cleaning and the isolation. He hires a cleaner without telling his wife, his repertoire of baked potatoes exhausts quickly. He becomes hooked on daytime television and computer solitaire. He is in danger of becoming weird. So he takes up bowls. In *Sex & Bowls & Rock and Roll* we follow a season in the life of the village bowls team, a group of amateur sportsmen and mild eccentrics. In doing so we see this unfashionable pastime in a whole new light, and very funny it is too. But Alex hasn't quite given up on his dreams of rock stardom. Discovering that some of his mates down the pub are a bit handy with bass and drums he makes one final stab at being in a band, with an eagerly awaited local gig. It is a complete disaster. Join Alex as he comes to terms with life as a domestic disappointment, attempts to learn the fine art of bowls and finally realises that supporting the Sultans Of Ping at the Pink Toothbrush in Rayleigh really was the highpoint of his musical career. *Sex & Bowls & Rock and Roll* is a hilarious account of the life of a genuinely modern man. Everyone will recognise themselves (or their husbands) and you will be hard pressed not to laugh out loud.

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For R, with thanks for putting up with me.

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PREFACE

It was a new day yesterday, but it's an old one now

‘Are you sure that we’re meant to be here?’ I scuffed my feet over the shingle, not willing to let this go. ‘It doesn’t matter that we’re not members?’

‘I’m a member,’ reassured Big Andy, pulling his bag out of the boot. I was already intimidated by its professionally battered look, as if it had been passed down through generations of top-level bowls players. Big Andy had always struck me as somebody who would be good at any sport – he is just one of those people. Personally, I have always suspected people who are good at sport – I certainly never thought that I’d end up being friends with one. Perhaps his likeability was just a ruse, in order to lull me into a false sense of security before he chucked me in the showers and stole my dinner money.

‘Yes, but we’re not,’ I insisted, jerking my head towards Short Tony who had jumped down from the back seat. At least he would be as culpable as me. Big Andy didn’t answer this, clearly not appreciating my genuine concerns.

I did not even have the right shoes.

The green itself was sheltered behind a low wooden fence that shielded from public view a raised concrete path and two weatherbeaten benches. Big Andy placed his gear on one of these; Short Tony followed suit with me lagging behind, surveying the scene with narrow, wary eyes, Clint Eastwood in *A Fistful of Bowls*.

‘What if a man comes and shouts at us?’ I wondered aloud.

I have never been a particularly confident type – at least, not without a guitar in my hand. All the key memories from my early life are scary, nerve-inducing ones: accidentally wandering into a fierce lady’s garden in order to pick acorns from her oak tree. Discovering that the hand that I’d reached up to grip tightly for reassurance wasn’t actually my grandmother’s, but belonged to a random stranger who happened to be getting off the same bus. Getting the phone number wrong on a big press advert for the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and thus ensuring that a Barnet pensioner was telephoned at ten-minute intervals by people seeking tickets for a grand Tchaikovsky gala at the Royal Albert Hall.

There are two types of people in Britain – people with the confidence to take risks with social etiquette, and people who spend their lives concerned that a man will come and shout at them.

‘Who’d shout at us?’ asked Big Andy.

I considered this.

‘The groundsman.’

‘Naaah. He’s fine.’

My nervousness did not abate. I didn’t know any of the other club members and I did not want to start our relationship off on the wrong foot – certainly not as a shoutee.

‘Some other important club official?’

‘Earlier this year, we came up here on our own a lot,’ he insisted. ‘It’s practice. And practice is always encouraged.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘How will you know whether you want to play,’ he demanded, ‘if you don’t know whether you’re any good or not?’

Short Tony, who was looking upon the experiment as the start of a potentially interesting new hobby, similarly did not have proper bowls shoes. But they were at least brown, and from a distance they looked like proper bowls shoes. Mine looked like non-proper non-bowls trainers. I studied the terrain carefully. There was some long grass at the far end, where the green ended and met the farmland beyond. If a man came and shouted at us for playing without permission then I would

attempt to quickly step into the long grass, thus camouflaging my footwear and ensuring that he would not be able to follow up his 'Trespasser!' shout with: *'Plus you have not got proper bowls shoes on!'*

I tried to make myself relax. It didn't help that I was probably going to be rubbish at this, and thus make myself look like an idiot. I took a deep breath. There was no man in sight. Instead there was the weak but encouraging-looking sun of an autumnal, early lunchtime casting dewy shadows on an English bowling green.

'Pint, anyone?' offered Short Tony, motioning his head towards the big pub that stood looking over us like a comforting older brother appearing with a towel after the rough beating-up kids have been dispersed.

This seemed like a good idea, but I was cautious.

'Are we allowed?' I asked. 'To take drinks onto the green, I mean.'

Short Tony disappeared off to buy beer.

The grass was soft and earthy, with well-worn patches from a season's play. I padded around guiltily in my clandestine trainers. Big Andy handed me two of his woods; I tossed them down carelessly and they made small indentations in the surface. I drew breath sharply, but no shout came. He then disappeared into the small shed that adjoined the green, re-emerging seconds later with a white ball. Disappearing into a shed! Some people have all the self-confidence. If illegal walking on a bowling green wearing incorrect shoes merited a shout, I was sure that shed-disappearing would warrant at least something cruel and unusual.

The bowls police failed to leap out from behind a hedge and charge us with electric batons.

I picked up a single wood. It was wet from the grass, but felt comfortable in my hand, warm and smooth, not the wood of a guitar body, but a pleasing object nonetheless. I have nice dainty, nimble hands and I suspected that it might be slightly too large a size for them, and perhaps a little heavy for me to be totally sure of control. But I did not say anything for fear of bowls ridicule.

Big Andy, my tutor, lobbed the cott ahead to the other side – it bumped and bobbed on the grass. He then knelt and expertly pitched his wood, which rested intimidatingly close to the target. I watched Short Tony reappear from the pub, ambling up the short hillock and across the gravel car park with a tray of beers the colour of bowls shoes.

And then it was my turn. It is always good to give new things a try. But I couldn't honestly see it being my sort of thing.

ONE

New towels for the old ceremony

‘Excuse me?’

There is a voice. I turn, surprised, from the post box to locate its source.

A man is ambling over from a small four-by-four thing. He is demonstrably from a town somewhere – it is one of those designer jobs that no genuine country-dweller from round here would dream of possessing. The engine chugs over, chug chug chug chug chug. He is clearly the source of the ‘Excuse me.’ I allow my letter to fall from my hand into the post box’s receptive womb, easing my wrist from its slot and giving my new acquaintance my full attention.

Silver-haired, he is wearing immaculate cream pressed slacks, which reveal that he is comfortably off and retired, and probably has a wife named Pat.

‘I don’t suppose you know where these agents are based?’ He gesticulates towards the ‘For Sale’ sign on the bungalow over the road.

A number of houses around mine are for sale – I do not know whether to take this personally or not. This particular one right opposite has been on the market since about Wednesday, 14th March at 11.32 a.m., and I am excited that I might be meeting a potential new neighbour. New people! I study his face closely. I will need to remember, so that I can report the details back to everybody at the village pub.

I give him the information he requires, waving my hand in the general direction of the coast. He asks me what living in the village is like, and I offer him long examples of how we all know what each other is doing and just pop into each other’s houses to say hello at any time of day or night, sometimes when we have been drinking heavily. It is a neighbourly community like that. He looks a bit less enthusiastic after this, and glances over his shoulder several times as he retreats to his car before accelerating off at some speed, doubtless to catch the estate agents before the shops close for the evening.

He did seem like a pleasant chap, and I am determined to stick by my parting words to him: that I would be quite happy to give him a hand with carrying all his stuff from the van when he eventually moves in.

Before he disappears around the corner, I make sure to take the number of his car. He is not from round here, after all, and he could have been looking at houses for sale with a view to committing some crime. I remember it all the way across the road, all up the path and into the kitchen, where I scribble it on the corner of some newspaper, along with ‘Old bloke. Silver hair. McJeep.’

There is no more excitement, but it will be good to have something extra-interesting to tell the LTLP when she gets home. Time is getting on – I need a bath and something to eat before I go.

I can’t remember exactly when I gave up.

It was probably on a platform at Harringay Station. Perhaps and probably it was raining. Harringay Station in the rain, fighting with hundreds of others for a modicum of shelter under the narrow footbridge, the loudspeaker broadcasting crackling messages of doom from a British Rail announcer based hundreds of miles away in a secret bunker buried deep beneath the Cairngorm mountains.

‘We apologise for the delay to the seven forty-four service to London Moorgate. This service is running approximately fifty-two minutes late. The first train to arrive will be the eight fourteen service, also to London Moorgate. Due to a short train, this service will consist of half a coach only, which will be of convertible open-top design, have no seats, and will be powered by passenger-manned oars. We apologise for any inconvenience that this might possibly cause you. To cheer you up, here is some music by the Stereophonics.’

When I say ‘a platform’, that implies a multitude of the things. In fact, there are but two platforms at Haringay Station. Standing, boxed in, elbow to arse with frustrated Key Account Executives and Change Implementation Managers and Human Resource Officers. Waiting, worrying if the tingly electricness of the rain is a genuine cause for concern as it drips from the overhead power lines onto your face. Pacing, irresistibly tempted to bolt for that footbridge, to leap aboard one of the frequent empty and invariably on-time trains returning north from the City, and head for the overwhelming excitement and vibrancy of Enfield Chase, New Southgate or, at a pinch, even Potter’s Bar. But of course you don’t. The train arrives and you fight for any form of nook, stuffing yourself frantically up against your fellow passengers like a veal calf undergoing sardine-replacement therapy.

Yes, it must have been then that I gave up. Then.

I’ve never given up on the music, however.

OK, I’m a bit older now. But Debbie Harry was already thirty when Blondie was formed; she was thirty-five when they released ‘Atomic’, which would have made her almost as old as I am. And yet she was famous and successful the world over at this late age, becoming an icon and achieving sales in the millions of millions, with men becoming physically sexually aroused – literally *sexually aroused* – whenever she sang or appeared on *Top of the Pops*. I’ve almost got there once, having supported the Sultans of Ping on one key date of their seminal 1992 UK tour. But Debbie Harry is one hell of an inspiration, and a lesson to anybody who thinks that exciting popular music can only be made by teenagers. Given just one small lucky break, there really is no reason whatsoever why I should not be the next Debbie Harry, but with women.

I call her ‘the LTLP’ for the purposes of the narrative.

I don’t want to upset her by using her real name. The WAGs are generally lower-key than their football equivalents; more down-to-earth and less publicity-hungry. She is my life-partner and has been for a long time; one of the very few people who have been both WAG and rock-chick wife. Every bowls player needs their Yoko Ono figure. She gives me an airy wave as I leave the house.

The canvas bag is weighty, betraying my relative novice status with its clean newness. It contains my four bowls (or ‘woods’, as we bowls people know them), an old beer towel for wiping purposes and some deeply, deeply unfashionable shoes. You have to have four woods, even though you only ever use two, as otherwise the other bowlers will laugh at you and think that you are some sort of idiot amateur without all the proper equipment. I lug it down the drive, across the road, and then sprint to Big Andy’s as fast as an unfit fat bloke carrying a rigid square bag of heavy bowls implements can sprint. He is jangling car keys impatiently; Mrs Big Andy stands hands-on-hips in their doorway, shaking her head and making ‘have a good evening, if this is *really* the way you want to spend your Friday night’ noises. I leap into the passenger seat and we are away in a haze of dust and sporting expectation.

In my pocket: house keys, some small change, a mobile phone. A mobile phone! Why do I bother with a mobile phone these days? I do not have important people to call any more; there is no reason why anybody would need to get hold of me. I get the odd text message from Short Tony that simply reads ‘pub?’, but seeing that he lives in the cottage next door you cannot really count the mobile connection as a vital communications lifeline. My mum and dad have a mobile phone but do not know how to use it; the LTLP knows where I’ll be all day. My friend Unlucky John, the only other person in the world whom I speak to, tends to prefer mobile to landline. But he’s in London, where such status is important.

It is a comfort thing, however. I will have it to hand should there be an emergency at bowls. The LTLP’s employers have given her a BlackBerry, which means that half the emails that pop up in my inbox with a cheerful ‘bing!’, causing such excitement and anticipation, turn out to be mundane and uninteresting things like ‘get the dinner on and don’t burn it this time you idiot’. So I took her old phone when my one finally gave up the ghost. It is a bright lurid pink Motorola, small and dainty, and adorned with girlish graphics.

But who cares? Once, this pink phone would have been a shameful accessory for me, as I wandered amidst the Neanderthal plains of people in chequered suits and wanky black-rimmed spectacles, of braying rah rah me me me idiots, of money-and-status-obsessed bottled-beer-drinking, testosteroned pre-Dibley clowns. That's one of the big advantages of living in a tiny village in Norfolk. Nobody is particularly bothered about the superficial. Just one more stupid unnecessary mental weight that disappears when you leave the world of commuter trains and Strategic HR Initiatives.

It's an easy-going game; none of the other bowlers really mind if you leave your phone on through the evening. Aside from that one time when it escalated a bit, and people ended up shouting 'Well fuck you then! Fuck you!' at each other, across the green. That was an exception.

Personally, I have a system. I keep my mobile phone switched on just in case there *is* an emergency or somebody important does call – but I make sure that I leave it in the pocket of my anorak which hangs in the clubhouse. That way nobody will hear it ringing and be disturbed during a crucial end. It seems a reasonable compromise.

Yes, my name is Alex Marsh and I play bowls.

I am thirty-three years old, and I play bowls. Bowls is what I play. I am not ashamed of it; I do not seek to apologise or be defensive. I play bowls. It is not as if I am Mrs Karen Matthews, or have been exposed having sex with livestock on YouTube, or wrote and produced 'There's No One Quite Like Grandma'. I play my bowls with pride. I would shout it from the rooftops, but I am afraid of heights.

My name is Alex Marsh and I play bowls. And so does Eddie, and Nigel, and Big Andy, and even John Twonil's been persuaded to give it a try. We are the exciting new faces of the sport. It sits oddly with the guitar hero status, I know. But there have been stranger combinations. Rock and roll, bowls; bowls, rock and roll. There's nothing mutually exclusive – it does not need to be an either/or. One does not preclude the other. It is perfectly possible to both jack, and to Fleetwood Mac.

Barry Hearn knows.

Barry Hearn is the legendary sporting Svengali who does the snooker, and boxing, and darts. The man who made Steve Davis. The Don King of Romford. The Billy Graham of the baize. What Barry Hearn doesn't know about marketing sport isn't worth knowing. And he thinks bowls is going to be the next thing – which is why he has put it on Sky TV, during peak morning viewing. So scoff at the beautiful sport at your peril.

I suppose I have mixed feelings about this. It is like when you discover a new band – you want them to be your own special band all to yourself. You do not want them to become popular and mainstream and put on by consensus as background music at dinner parties. And whilst wishing your special band all the goodwill in the world, you would rather that they starved in the gutter than enjoyed any form of commercial success, as this would spoil it for you.

Something a bit like that happened to my own band. However, more of that later.

Will bowls as we know it survive the Sky TV experience? Will it retain its unique nature, or will it sell out to the forces of Evil Marketing? Will the money grow and nurture it, or will it corrupt it? Will it retain the nobility of sport, or will it descend into a new WWF pantomime?

The television camera itself is a great distortion pedal, a two-dimensional screen that loses the subtleties and many of the unsubtleties also. When you watch cricket, it's impossible to judge how fast the bowler's letting the ball go – you have to work it out from where the wicket keeper's standing. Football is robbed of the intense physical aspect, horse racing is sterile without the flying hooves and mud; long pots on the snooker table appear easy and unmissable. I would not want the casual Sky TV viewer to see what I do every week and to dismiss it casually as some gentle meandering pastime. That would be crushing. But I think Barry Hearn and I are on the same wavelength.

Barry Hearn knows that it's the new rock and roll.

'Here you go.'

Nigel strides like a parade sergeant before the row of benches, where we are sitting changing into our deeply, deeply unfashionable shoes. He stops at each player and hands out new kit from a plastic bag – a brand-new, pristine, never-been-used, soft and lovely Stella Artois beer towel.

‘Thanks!’ I say in surprise.

‘I got them from work,’ he explains, moving on to Glen. ‘Given to me.’

Along the line, people take their towels and beam in gratitude, holding them up to look closer. Matching beer towels! The whole thing looks bloody professional, in tune with the new image of bowls, a co-ordinated wave of red that will raise pride and morale in the team, aside from providing more efficient wiping.

That’s us. The village bowls team. Sponsored by Wifebeater Lager.

It’s just a roll-up tonight. No opposition – merely a friendly opportunity to get together and to have a bit of practice before the league starts in earnest. But there is still a buzz of excitement in the air. The dawn of a new season – the first date on my headlining UK tour. The bowling green is my raised stage; the woods are my guitar, and the mat represents my effects pedals. I have not actually ever been on a headlining UK tour, but the parallel is there. The scoreboard is my set list; the beer towel is my guitar lead. Nigel, skipper of our block, is my bass player; Big Andy is my drummer. We don’t have a screaming hysterical audience of teenage girls – our most loyal and regular supporter has been unable to turn out to spectate since he got his foot amputated – although Eileen is here, and she sometimes likes to sit and watch, chucking in the odd heckle, in lieu of playing. But the parallel is definitely there.

I am pleased with my analogy. Songwriting is all about analogies – good songwriting is all about unexpected, hidden ones. ‘There She Goes’ by the La’s is about heroin, not a lady who is going. Really, playing bowls is just like being in a successful rock band. I can’t really see many differences.

Big Andy, Nigel and I do play like a well-drilled trio. We are comfortable in each other’s presence; there is a telepathy between the three of us, like Cream (featuring Eric Clapton). We don’t feel under pressure in front of each other; we barrack and praise each other in equal measure, and we go to the village pub afterwards. That’s the difference between a ‘side’ and a ‘team’, although just to be confusing, in bowls it is called a ‘block’. We are settled together this year – I have high hopes that our near-telepathic understanding will give us a big advantage. There is mutual respect and support there.

There are moments in making music when it all comes together. When you’re rehearsing a new song, the band hits a new chord change, someone drops in a phrase, hits a particular note and it’s just – right. You catch the eye of the bass player, of the drummer, and you know. That’s a magic moment. The tension resolved; the song opens out into perfection.

It’s the same when the skip bowls and you can see the wood coming towards the pack – slowing and arcing for the gap you pointed out, running out its weight perfectly, nudging past the short woods, skipping the bare patch, squeezing through the narrowest of spaces and finally falling to a halt touching the cott itself. It’s magic, it’s perfect. It’s like the big piano chord at the end of ‘A Day in the Life’.

It’s time to start playing again.

TWO

Last night a Strategic HR Initiative saved my life

Past the church gates, past the old Methodist chapel, up through the Tofts and out between the fields of beet. Past the small shed in the woods that acts as the hub of BT's broadband activities in the area; down the hill through the woods to the junction with the main road that will take me into town.

I've lived in three places in Britain: Essex, with my mum and dad; London, in a flat underneath a man with an enormous toilet; and here, in this small and friendly corner of Norfolk. It's here that I truly feel at home, in this place that's impossible not to love, in countryside and a community where I truly belong. Where I have my friendly neighbours (Big Andy, Short Tony, etc.), my close family (the LTLP) and – perhaps for the first time in my life – true and unconditional membership of a youth tribe (bowls). DJ Ken Bruce asks a question on the radio, the answer to which is clearly 'Norman Greenbaum'.

Past the gates of the old airfield, up the gentle hill towards the old service station. The sunshine washes across the fields and hedgerows and the music fills the car. I'd say that it was the sort of morning that made it impossible to have a worry or a care in the world about life, if I weren't so worried and full of cares about life and – specifically – the morning ahead itself.

I park the car and slowly walk up the street towards my appointment. It's a nice day, but let's not get complacent. It's at just these sorts of moments when life has a habit of hitting you in the face with a hammer.

I am hit in the face with a hammer.

I recoil from the shock and surprise. Not being complacent is one thing, but it is fair to say that I was not expecting anything quite so unpleasantly *literal*. The man hits me in the face again. Boff.

It is not a nice feeling, not a nice feeling at all, and improves not one jot when he repeats his assault twice more.

At some point, I tell myself, I should say something. He does seem pretty competent, and I get on with the chap reasonably well (although perhaps less so now, seeing that he is hitting me in the face with a hammer), but truth be told it is an unpleasant experience and I would like him to stop.

'Diss crown is priddy impossible to shift,' he explains, in a South African accent. 'I hev tried wiggling it with dee pliers. Now I am hitting it with diss hemmer.' He bashes my tooth with his hammer once more, to emphasise the point. Boff.

Randy Newman wails from my MP3 player. Unfortunately, I have absent-mindedly selected the wrong 'genre' in my haste for musical distraction, and instead of uplifting and rousing cheerful pop music, my head is filled with mournful minor-key reflections on losers and low-life tragedies in the medium of the blues, whilst I am being hit in the face with a hammer.

The anaesthetic seems to have made my face swell up, as if somebody has pushed a marble into my mouth and under my top lip. They may well have done. Or perhaps it is a snooker ball. It certainly feels the *size* of a snooker ball. It could be a penis, for all I know. I have my eyes firmly shut. I do not wish to open them as the hammer is unpleasant enough as it is without watching its descent. I can't believe that it is a snooker ball – what dental purpose would that serve? I also do not think it is a penis, as he would not be hammering it so hard if so.

The only really good thing about a dentist putting his penis in your mouth and starting to hit it wildly with a hammer whilst you are under local anaesthetic and have your eyes firmly shut and are listening to mournful Randy Newman songs is at least you know that you will get offered some mouthwash afterwards.

'It's coming,' he explains, not entirely reassuringly.

The sterilising machine in the corner of the dental surgery starts up with a big ‘whoooooosh’. It makes me jump, but diverts me momentarily from the hammering, and from Randy Newman, who has just finished singing a verse about a girl who stole his car and went on to cause a traffic accident, running over a man named ‘Juan’. Randy Newman sounds particularly extra doleful about this; he has no car, and undoubtedly his insurance will be affected. The ‘whoooooosh’ is presumably steam, but sounds remarkably like an enormous toilet being flushed.

Adam’s enormous toilet was, due to a quirk in the architecture of the London flat conversions, situated directly above my face.

This is what it had sounded like anyway when I lay sleeplessly in bed, my stare fixed on the ornate ceiling, marvelling at the noises that could be made by a simple item of plumbing. Whoosh! It went. Rushhhh! Sloshhh! It is virtually impossible to describe to somebody who has never lived in a converted Victorian house just how loud the noise of a man weeing in the flat upstairs can possibly be. Cities are never quiet, but the background noise will fall to a dead silence when set against the watery rumble of half a pint of urine hitting the base of an enormous toilet bowl over one’s head. The roar of the main stream, the sonically perfect echo of each single salty droplet as it splashed back against the rim.

Sloshhh! Slossssshhhhhh!

I had been on friendly terms with Adam. He was an amiable man who tended to keep himself to himself, but would always be up for a cheery ‘hello!’ as we passed on the stairs. Living on his own, his habit was to go to the pub each evening, returning at around midnight to start weeing.

I would lay in bed listening to the performance, work anxieties surging around my head. Beside me, the LTLP would snore gently in her anxiety-free woman’s world. As the weeing tailed off, the noises of the city would gradually fade back in: some drunks shouting, the clatter of freight on the East Coast line, perhaps somebody trying to steal my car. And then forty minutes or an hour later, the weeing cycle would begin once more.

Sloshhhh! Slossssshhhhhh!

Boff. Boff.

Another couple of bashes with the hammer brings me back to the present day.

The music fills my head to bursting point. Piano, bass, slidey guitar. As each chord hits home, I concentrate hard on trying to envisage myself playing it; the shape of my left hand across the strings, or the sensuous womanly caress of a minor seventh on the ivories. It is not enough to dismiss the hammering stuff, no matter how I want it to. Boff. I blink to myself. Why am I here? Why the bloody hell am I here? The hammer pauses for the gap between songs and then starts up again in earnest.

Why am I here?

Boff boff boff boff.

Why the bloody hell am I here?

Boff the boffy-boff boff boff boff.

Why the...and more to the point, how is this man hacking into my own personal inner monologue in order that he can hammer in perfect time with it? I give him an angry look from behind my protective goggles.

Why am I here?

Boff boff boff boff.

Why *am* I here? Here in Norfolk, pressed rigidly down into a dentist’s chair, being hit in the face with a hammer.

Lots of reasons.

The little picture reason is that I have a toothache; an abominably bad toothache that crept up on the roots of my incisors; a toothache that has lingered like a man in my area who has come round to give me a free consultation and a no-obligation quote.

The medium picture was the Harringay Station Herd, and the fact that my life seemed to consist of: wake up, fight my way to work, work, come home, listen to man weeing.

But the big picture was all to do with Strategic HR Initiatives.

Strategic HR Initiatives. The foundation stones of modern business. The management engines that are so vitally important to ensure that the companies of UK plc can innovate, thrive and come out clear winners in the global war for talent. There is nothing as pathetic as a moribund stuck-in-the-past company, doomed to hostile takeover, bankruptcy or a slow slide into sales oblivion because of the absence of great – or the implementation of poorly thought-out – Strategic HR Initiatives. That is why we must have them. And just as these initiatives invariably transform the fortunes of the smallest partnership to the most major conglomerate, so they have profound effects on individual employees.

This is what happened to me. Admittedly not *quite* in the way that was intended, but there you go.

I guess you would say that I had been quite successful in business alongside the musical accomplishments. Admittedly I hadn't actually *started* any businesses, or employed any people myself, nor had I spotted an idea that had become really really big and had led to my share capital becoming millions of pounds overnight. However, I had managed to get paid every month without killing anybody or provoking employment tribunals or bringing the company to its knees by confusing 'Press F1 for Help' with 'Press F8 to Delete Exchange Server' on the IT system.

I just wasn't entirely happy.

Modern, bland, large, rectangular. I was in a meeting room dominated by an impressive glass boardroom table – an artefact that had been hand-picked by somebody who knew the vital importance in business of impressive glass boardroom tables. I loitered at the back, nervously crushing and reforming my plastic tea beaker, thinking that perhaps I should be taking a more visible position with the other management types.

Dusty windows watched out across the City of London towards the bowling green at Finsbury Square – this was no glamour view, however, but the rooftops of low-rise rented office accommodation: fire escapes and heat extraction systems. Occasionally during a meeting I would identify the pipework of a particularly interesting heat extraction system and follow it around as far as my eye would go. It was a bit like examining the fantastic exhausts of a spaceship in the year 2508. The air shimmered above it, like on Venus.

Inside, we had no heat extraction system. The space was close and humid; there were too many people present. The lift was broken again – a succession of bodies staggered in, loosening ties with the sweat of a six-floor climb.

A succession of board-level speakers had lined up to intone to the room. This happened every week, as a way of motivating people for the days ahead. Words and phrases lumbered through the thick air towards and past me; some clung exhaustedly to the wall behind, some expired and slumped in defeat to the nylon carpet. It was, to all intents and purposes, a perfectly normal Monday morning.

And then, out of the blue, I had started to catch some of these words. And the interminable speaker of the moment drawing in a monotone as turgid as the very turge itself:

'La la la la la la know that we are all genuinely excited about this new Strategic HR Initiative that we've been working on.'

I gaped at the man. The words churned round my head as I tried to grip hold of them. And as the phrase settled down inside me I looked around the room and, to my horror, saw a sea of nods of interest and concentration and enthusiasm and thoughtful assent. Left, right, left again. Nods – genuine nods. And the fear gripped me, with the icy fingers of a creeping Gantt chart. These people were not pretending; this was no sham for personal corporate advancement, no calculated sucking-up to the powers-that-be.

I was in a room with people who were genuinely excited about a new Strategic HR Initiative that was being worked upon.

It was alarming. My eyes darted round the room looking for exits. I was too far away from the door. They would catch me and wrestle me to the ground and beat me and inject me with the Strategic HR Initiative serum that the others had been given. Catch me! Catch me and inject me! Tape an institutional hub across my eyes and force delivery outcomes into my anus. Brandishing photographs of Haringay Station and massive tubes of Toilet Duck.

That's why I'm here.

Randy moves on a track.

If that's why, what's how?

How did this major change happen? What coup did I pull off, what stroke of daring, what gamble did I take with my life, risking it all on the throw of one die for the sake of a new horizon? Like a frontiersman of the early days of the American nation, what was in my mind as I grimly stowed a rifle and provisions in the wagon, pulled my woman close to me and explained that – for all the dangers, the unknowns, the immense hardships – sometimes a man has to strike out and face these, in order to carve a new life from the dust and rock?

'I'll expect dinner when I get in every night,' said the LTLP. 'A proper one.'

Sexual equality has come a long way in a very short space of time. For thousands of years there were very clearly defined roles for the genders: the men would do the fighting and hunting and making the decisions etc., whereas the women would do the stuff at home and have babies. Then, from the sixties onwards, society entered a period of hypocrisy. This was when women were ostensibly given the same opportunities as men, but thwarted at every turn with casual sexism. Meanwhile, blokes still would not get involved with domestic chores.

It is impossible to say why the final sea-change occurred: perhaps it was the sudden nineties surge in the average male's confidence about their sexuality, perhaps it was the advent of *The Vicar of Dibley* on BBC1. But we are happily out of the sexist Neanderthal period, and it is not unusual at all now for men to do women's jobs like housework or cooking. Twenty years before, options simply wouldn't have been available to me, and I would have been forced to remain a stressed, insomniac, on-a-downward-spiral putting-a-brave-face-on male provider. But with a flash of fortune, I was the beneficiary of a second sexual revolution.

I became a househusband, and I'm not ashamed.

('Househusband' is not quite the right word, as it is a bit effeminate. But it will do as a short-term description.)

So that was it. I shed the trappings of Neanderthalism and stepped bravely into my own corner of twenty-first-century post-Dibley Britain. The LTLP took her massive and important new job in the east of England, and I took my huge leap of faith. I packed up, I handed in my resignation. We said goodbye to friends, goodbye to Haringay Station, goodbye to meeting rooms and motivational addresses, goodbye to Adam in the flat upstairs with his enormous toilet.

And, gobsmackingly, I said goodbye to the band.

Taking my last few big gulps of choking, Strategic-HR-Initiative-polluted London air, I had felt joyful for the first time in a decade. A stressed businessman, with all the trappings of success but with no time or energy to make the most of them, I was downshifting to the countryside to enjoy a better quality of life. Truly, it was a unique step that I was about to take – a pioneering move that I couldn't believe that anybody else had ever thought of, ever.

'You won't know it...I'll be right behind you...don't try and run away...' There should be an emergency Randy Newman button on MP3 players for just this situation. You would press it and it would immediately leap to something cheerful by S Club Seven or the Proclaimers. 'Little girl... wherever you go...'

The dentist now has my tooth by the pliers, gripping the crown and pulling and wiggling hard. It is like a surreal silent movie. I half expect him to put a boot up against my chest to aid leverage, or to use the pliers to pull my head back and forth exaggeratedly, bashing it alternately against the

mouthwash basin and the headrest. I would laugh, except he is pulling my tooth out with pliers having hit it repeatedly with a hammer.

A few more yanks and my old artificial tooth thing is no more; I have a huge gap in my mouth that is dripping pus and blood along with an unidentified fragment of metal that appears to have been left in there by a previous dentist. We take a two-minute break before he starts to clean out the abscess – but it could be two hours for all I know, such is my state of stunned distress. Randy croons dolefully in my ears.

When I was a small child, I fell off my bike quite spectacularly, via the simple mistake of trying to emulate not just US daredevil Evel Knievel and his stunt bike, but the plastic US daredevil Evel Knievel that you could wind up and send soaring over a dozen Matchbox lorries, as featured on Channel 4's *I Love the 50 Top Toys That You Should Not Try to Emulate*. I required an immense amount of dental surgery as a result, but I cannot remember those particular times being as bad as this. I suspect my teeth have become more sensitive as I've got older. The session finished, I take my jacket with shaking hands and stumble from the surgery in a dull state of shock.

The road outside is noisy; market town traffic passing each way, a brewery lorry unloading. But I hear nothing. I just walk, my eyes fixed on some random point in the far distance, my mind blanker than it has ever been. I take out my mobile phone to ring the LTLP, but a passer-by looks at me very oddly and as I do not feel like talking anyway, I shove it back into my trouser pocket.

I feel utterly alone. With shock I realise that I am already sinking into negative thoughts so early in my brave battle against tooth abscess. I should do something positive. If I write to the *Observer* demonstrating that I can face tooth abscess with wit, good-humour and poignant humanity then they will probably give me a column in their magazine, 'Tooth Abscess and Me'. Being the person who brings the 'TA' word out of the darkness of taboo and into an environment where people are not afraid to talk might be my crowning achievement in life.

'Crowning'!

Even in my lowest hour, I can still laugh at my own very funny jokes. I rejoice in the smile that spreads across my war-torn face as I traverse the mini-roundabouts and head towards the centre of town and the pharmacy.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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