

**That's
your
lot.**

Limmy

Limmy Limmy
That's Your Lot

«HarperCollins»

Limmy L.

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This is Limmy's second book. It's a whole load of new, odd, and hilariously grim short stories. Tom is in a soft play with his daughters. He's bored. He's so bored he can move things with his mind. A man fills up a mate's biscuit tin without ever telling him, to see what happens. Maggie's boyfriend Iain bought a curtain. It keeps attacking them. She wants it out the house. A man is sitting in his wheelie bin at two in the morning, and he wants to tell you why. Kenny's mate Scott is suicidal and ridden with guilt. Kenny takes him on holiday to Benidorm. It'll be some laugh. Praise for Daft Wee Stories: 'The comedy book of the year.' - Time Out 'Funny, peculiar and original.' - Guardian 'Didn't realise pieces of paper with no pictures on could be so funny. I mean I was cryin' all day yesterday into this book. Hilarious' - Someone on Amazon

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Copyright



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Pavement

George had a baby. A wee baby boy, called Sam. And he wanted to make his son proud. Proud of his old dad. You couldn't really make a baby feel proud of you, but George was thinking more about the future.

He wanted Sam to look back, when he was older, and think, 'I'm so proud of my dad. He was there for me and cared about me. That man there is my dad.'

George was out one day with Sam, pushing him in his pram, and he was thinking about all that. All that stuff about making his son proud. He was looking at his son's face looking back at him in the pram. Sam would look at George, then the sky and the people walking past. George wondered if Sam would ever remember all this, how much George was there for him.

Probably not. And that was a shame.

'Watch yourself, pal!' said somebody.

George stopped, and he saw a few workies looking at him. George had been walking on the pavement, and just a few feet in front of him was a new bit of pavement. The workies had been laying some fresh concrete, and it was still wet. The workie wanted to stop George before he went over it and left a mark.

'Thanks,' said George.

George had seen what happens when somebody went over wet concrete. You see it all around if you look for it. Walk around and you'll see bits of pavement with footsteps in them, or wheels from prams, or bikes, or some other mark made by people who didn't look where they were going.

Sometimes it was deliberate, though. Sometimes people wrote their name in it. George remembered that somebody had written their nickname outside the chippy where he grew up. It had been there for as long as he could remember. It was probably still there, and probably always would be. How was that for something to tell the grandweans?

Oh, and that got George thinking.

George watched the workies finish their work. He pretended to talk to Sam, as an excuse for hanging about. Eventually, some of them left in their council workie van, and some of them headed into a cafe nearby for their lunch.

George walked over to the edge of the wet concrete, and crouched down, like he was going to fetch something from the wee bag at the bottom of the pram.

Then he reached over to the concrete and began to write 'Sam'.

As he made the letter 'S', he thought about Sam in the future, coming to this very spot, with George. George would tell him that he wrote it there. And Sam would know that his old dad was mad about him, even back then. He'd know that when he was a baby, his dad was there for him and thinking about him. He'd bring his mates and point to the writing and say, 'That there was my dad.'

Just as George was beginning the letter 'A', a workie came out the cafe and asked George just what the hell he thought he was doing.

George said he was doing nothing. It was no use lying, though. He'd been caught red handed.

'I asked you what the fuck you think you're doing, mate,' said the workie.

George tried to turn the tables by making a big deal about the workie's swearing. He stood up and said, 'Here, don't you fucking swear in front of my wean. What's your name, you're getting reported.'

'Fuck yer wean,' said the workie, then he pointed at the writing. 'I'm gonnae have to lay that again.'

George couldn't believe his ears. He charged over to the workie, right over the concrete, and started shouting. 'What did you say? Fuck my wean, aye? Fuck my fucking ...'

The workie chinned him.

George punched him back, and the two of them fell onto the wet concrete.

The workie was much bigger, and held George's face down, then he shouted for his workie mates to phone the police.

The police eventually came, and tried to take George away, but they couldn't. The workie had been holding George's face in the concrete until the police turned up. Now the wet concrete was dry and rock solid, and the left side of George's face was stuck.

The police tried to talk to George, to calm him down, to tell him that they'd get him out, but he booted them away. He was fucking livid about how he was being treated as a criminal.

The police told him to go and fuck himself then, and they left him there. Then they took Sam back to his mum.

The next day, Sam and his mum came to visit George, to give him something to eat and drink, but mostly to tell him that he was a dummy. George didn't want Sam seeing him like that, and he didn't want to be told that he was a dummy, so he told her to fuck off.

So she did.

She came back a few days later. Then a few weeks later. Then she never came back at all.

George watched the years go by from down there on the pavement, as people offered him the leftovers from their kebabs or a drink from their half-finished bottles of beer. Somebody would sometimes put their jacket over him to keep him warm, but by the time he woke up the next morning, it had been stolen.

About ten years later, George saw Sam go by with his schoolmates.

One of his mates pointed at George and said, 'That's your dad!', and Sam laughed.

Sam didn't know it really actually was his dad, and neither did his mate. His mate just said it in the way that a person might point at a tramp and say, 'Oh look, there's your dad.'

Taxi Patter

Vinnie was down in London for a few days. Down from Glasgow. It was lovely weather down in London. It always was. He'd been down before, and even when the weather wasn't that nice, like if it was cloudy or pissing down, it was always better than whatever it was up the road.

Today, though, it was lovely, and all the Londoners were dressed for the occasion, with their T-shirts and shorts and bare legs.

When Vinnie got in a taxi, it was one of the first things the taxi driver mentioned.

'Lovely weather, isn't it?' said the driver.

'Aye,' said Vinnie. 'It's roasting.'

The driver smiled at Vinnie in the mirror. 'You from Scotland, yeah?'

'Aye, just down for the day.'

'Down for a spot of sightseeing?' asked the driver.

'Aye,' said Vinnie.

But that wasn't the truth. He didn't want to talk about it, because he knew he'd come across as stupid. He wasn't down for a spot of sightseeing, he was actually down for a concert. But he'd made an arse of it.

He was supposed to be seeing Art Garfunkel.

There was only one UK date on his world tour, and that was London, tonight. Or so Vinnie had thought. But it turned out it was last night.

Vinnie had found out when he got off the train. The second he got off, he saw an Art Garfunkel poster in the station, advertising the tour. He walked over to it, because he'd never seen the poster before, and because Art Garfunkel was the reason he was down. He saw that the London date was on Thursday, not Friday. And next to it were all these other dates.

He didn't know there were other UK dates. He'd only ever known about a tour from the Art Garfunkel forum. Somebody on the forum mentioned that the only UK date was in London.

But, looking back, they maybe just asked if Art's only UK date was London. They were maybe just asking, rather than saying that it was.

Or it could be that the person just said that they themselves were going to see the concert in London.

So Vinnie had gone ahead and searched for 'Art Garfunkel' and 'London', and up came the London date. Just London. And Vinnie took that as confirmation that Art was only going to be in London. So he booked it. Then he came all the way down from Glasgow to London, got off the train, and saw the poster with the dates.

And there on the poster was a date for Glasgow.

It had already passed, it was last Wednesday. Vinnie could have made it. He dearly would have loved to have made it. But now he wasn't going to see him in either Glasgow or London, and he felt so fucking stupid.

He loved Art Garfunkel.

Really, what a talented singer and songwriter.

Vinnie wasn't sure if it was Art who wrote all the songs in Simon & Garfunkel, but he must have. He was the main singer. Plus the fact that he left the band to go solo and then went on to write 'Bright Eyes', whereas Simon, the short one, disappeared without a trace. That tells you everything you need to know about Art.

Vinnie couldn't wait to see him live. But that just wouldn't be happening, not tonight anyway.

It didn't piss him off, though. He was used to it. He was used to things like this happening. But he couldn't laugh it off either. And he didn't want to go into it all with the driver.

So when the driver asked him if he was down for some sightseeing, he just said 'Aye'.

The driver nodded and started driving, looking out the window to the side. He wasn't looking at other cars, though. He was looking at the people on the pavement. And he'd turn his head all the way around to look at some of them.

'And what a day for it,' said the driver, looking at the people going by. 'D'you know what I mean?'

'Aye,' said Vinnie.

He thought he knew what the driver meant, but then the driver gave him a look in the mirror that made Vinnie think that he didn't know.

Vinnie asked 'For sightseeing?'

'Yeah,' said the driver. 'If you know what I mean.'

Vinnie didn't know what he meant, and it must have shown, because the driver looked at him again and said, 'The women.'

Vinnie got it now.

'Oh, right, right, aye,' said Vinnie. 'The lassies. The women. Aye.'

What the driver meant was the women. What he meant was, because it was a nice day, because it was lovely and warm, women were wearing less clothes. Instead of getting all wrapped up in big coats and pairs of tights, they were stripping down to keep cool. They were out in their bare legs or wearing thin clothes that let you see their bodies.

Vinnie got it. He looked out the window at them, and after a while, he started getting hard.

He was going to cover it up. He reached over for his bag, which was lying next to him on the back seat. He was going to pick it up and cover his bulge. But then he realised that it didn't matter, when he thought about it.

He left his bag where it was. Because when he actually thought about it, it was all right, when he thought about what the driver said.

He'd said it was a good day for sightseeing, a good day to look at women. To look at them and get turned on by them.

He wanted Vinnie to know that he fancied women, and he wanted to know if Vinnie fancied women as well, and the driver would like it if Vinnie did. For some reason.

Vinnie didn't know why the driver wanted any of that, but it didn't matter. Vinnie was fine with it, because he fancied women as well.

'Look,' said Vinnie.

The driver looked out the window to the side, to see what lassie Vinnie was talking about.

'Who?' said the driver, looking at Vinnie in the mirror, then he looked out the side window again.

'No,' said Vinnie. 'Look here.'

The driver looked in the mirror, down to where Vinnie's hands were, and saw that Vinnie had a hard-on. It was bulging underneath his tracksuit bottoms.

Vinnie saw the look on the driver's face, and it was like the driver didn't know what Vinnie was meaning. Vinnie thought that maybe the driver just thought his trackie bottoms were baggy and what he was looking at was just a big baggy bit raised in the air.

So Vinnie pulled the trackie leg tight to show the shape of his hard-on, so that the driver knew what it was and what Vinnie was talking about. But the driver still had that same look.

The driver even turned his head around to see it with his own eyes, in case he couldn't see it properly in the mirror, but he still had that same look. Vinnie smiled at him, but the driver looked away and didn't say anything.

What had happened?

Why did the driver act funny when Vinnie showed him his hard-on?

Was he gay?

Maybe that was it.

Maybe the driver was doing that thing that people do in taxis, the thing where the driver and the passenger say things that they're not really interested in, things like when you ask the driver what time he started and what time he finishes, or when the driver asks you if that's you on your way home now after a night out.

You know, taxi patter.

Vinnie had seen that being talked about on a stand-up comedy thing on the telly. Maybe the driver was just pretending to be into women, because that's just what you do. Vinnie sometimes pretended to be into football if the driver had football on the radio. He'd ask the driver who was playing and what the score was, even though he didn't care.

It's just taxi patter. It's just people pretending, but the driver got caught out. He fucked it up.

Vinnie sympathised, because he himself knew all about fucking things up. Just look at how he fucked up going to the concert, coming all the way down here when he could have went to the concert back in Glasgow.

He looked at the driver, and he could see that the guy looked ashamed. He felt for him, so he decided to change the subject.

He leaned forward and put his hand on the driver's shoulder to let him know it was all right.

'Do you like Art Garfunkel?'

Grammar

Donnie started a new job, at an office. When he got there, he sent a group email to all the staff, introducing himself. It was a short and informal thing, nothing more than a few sentences. Most people replied saying hello back, putting in smileys or saying funny things in return. Some people didn't reply, but then they said hello in person later.

But this one person, called Toby, only replied to correct his grammar.

There was a bit in Donnie's email where he said 'should of' instead of 'should have'.

Toby had replied to it, copying everybody else in, to say: 'should *have*'.

Donnie thought of replying with something a bit cheeky, a bit funny, because he hoped that's how Toby meant it as well. He hoped Toby didn't mean it the way it came across, because the way it came across made Toby look a grumpy cunt that enjoyed embarrassing Donnie on his first day. And Donnie didn't want to work with somebody like that.

In the end, Donnie just replied with 'Oops. Thanks!'

He hoped for a jokey reply, something where Toby would say he was only joking, or maybe having a bad day. But he didn't get a reply.

Donnie wondered who Toby was, and he walked around the office until he heard somebody mentioning Toby's name. Donnie turned around and expected to see some kind of Oscar the Grouch, or some kind of anti-social Mr Bean. But Toby looked all right. He looked about 40, just an average sort of guy in a suit. He didn't look grumpy either. He was chatting to another member of staff, smiling away. And that made Donnie feel a bit better somehow.

A few days later, Donnie had to send another email around, this time something to do with work rather than introducing himself. This email wasn't for everybody in the office, but it was for a good number of them, and one of the people in the list was Toby.

Everybody replied normally, saying things like 'Good idea' or 'I think we should discuss this further.' But Toby replied again, simply to criticise Donnie's grasp of the English language.

Donnie had accidentally typed 'there' instead of 'their'.

The full sentence was 'We could cut the cost of printing their brochures if we print it at the same time as we print there pamphlets.'

And it was an accident.

Donnie knew the difference between 'there' and 'their', it was just a slip-up. He got the first 'their' right, so it was obviously just a slip-up, just a normal mistake that anybody could make. But there was Toby on it again, making Donnie look incompetent for the second time in his first week on the job.

Donnie just replied with 'Thank you, wordsmith.'

By replying with that, he wanted to gently suggest that Toby was being a smart arse, without it looking too sarcastic. It was Donnie's first week, after all. He didn't want to go in hard with the cheek when he'd barely got his feet under the table. But he also didn't want to be picked on. He wanted his reply to be just enough to put Toby off criticising him in the future, knowing that Donnie would fire back.

But as it turned out, Donnie wasn't being picked on. As time went on, Donnie discovered that Toby did it with everybody, all the time. But nobody else seemed to mind. They would either reply to the corrections with 'Thanks, Toby' or say nothing at all.

Nobody even seemed to bitch about him, not in front of Donnie anyway. If anything, they would defend Toby, even if they were the victim of Toby's cuntishness. Like when Toby corrected Alice.

Alice had sent an email where she said the word 'colour's' instead of 'colours'. She was talking about the colours in the colour printer that they had up the back of the office, because it wasn't working properly. She'd said 'And there's something wrong with the colour's on all of the printouts.'

Toby had replied with 'The plural of colour is colours.'

Donnie asked Alice how she felt about that. It was verging on nasty, as far as Donnie was concerned. It was one thing to correct somebody's grammar, but another to type a reply like that.

Alice said that it was okay, because Toby corrects people's mistakes all the time. But Donnie said that there was a difference with this particular reply. It implied that Alice didn't just make a typo due to typing fast or autocorrect or losing concentration; it implied that she didn't know how to make a word plural, like she would make the mistake again because she just didn't know to do it, like she was in nursery school.

That's the impression that Donnie got, and he wanted Alice to be upset about it. But she wasn't. She just shrugged it off and said it was okay, and that it was a silly mistake anyway.

Donnie said that somebody should say something, but Alice said that it really was okay and that Toby was a nice guy. Just leave it.

Donnie tried to leave it, but when you're seeing somebody correcting everybody's grammar on a daily basis, you just want to say something. You just want to tell the guy to give it a rest with the corrections. What does it matter?

It's not as if the mistakes are being printed on the pamphlets and sent out, resulting in embarrassment for the company. It's not as if Toby was some kind of copyeditor or sub-editor, where it was his job to correct everybody's spelling and grammar before it went to print. He worked in accounts. His job was to do with numbers, not words. Just stick to your fucking job, mate.

Donnie tried to leave him alone, he tried to forget about him. He tried to ignore his ways.

He managed it for almost a month. He told himself that he wouldn't react or bitch or try to get anybody else bitching. He'd just be like everybody else and take no notice. Almost a month he managed it.

But then it all came out at the office party. They'd all booked a big table at a restaurant, and they all got drunk.

Donnie wasn't sitting near Toby, but he'd look over to Toby now and then, and try to listen in to his conversations. There was nothing interesting to listen to, but then Donnie heard something that he had to jump on.

He heard Toby say 'It depends who you send it to.'

It was a mistake!

'Wait!' shouted Donnie, pointing at Toby.

Toby didn't hear, but Alice did, and she stopped talking to see what Donnie was doing. It didn't look good to her.

'Toby!' shouted Donnie again, and Toby looked around to see Donnie smiling and pointing. When Donnie saw that he had Toby's attention, he asked him, 'What did you just say there?'

'What did I say when?' asked Toby, looking at everybody else.

To Donnie, Toby seemed sober, while he himself felt drunk. He knew he probably wouldn't fare well against somebody so alert, but this might be his only shot. It was too good an opportunity to miss. Even with the rest of the staff looking at him with their straight faces, looking concerned, he knew that they'd appreciate somebody just telling it like it is.

'What did you say when?' asked Donnie, grinning. 'What did you say when? I'll tell you what did you say when. You said, and I quote, "It depends who you send it to."'

Toby gave a confused smile, and searched the faces of everybody around to see if they were equally as confused. 'What on earth are you talking about?'

'Well,' said Donnie, raising his eyebrows. 'I'll tell you what on earth I am talking about. You said "It depends who you send it to." But should it not be something like "Depends to whom you send it"?''

Donnie was half out his seat, and somebody put their hand on his shoulder to gently put him back down. Some people were asking him to just leave it.

Toby wasn't smiling anymore. Donnie reckoned he looked caught out, that's what he reckoned. He looked caught the fuck out.

'I understand what you're saying,' said Toby. 'And you're right. But ...'

'Ahhhh!' laughed Donnie, pointing at Toby, looking at Alice, looking at everybody around, at his audience. 'I'm right. And therefore you are wrong! Ahhhh! Not so perfect after all, is he? Not so fucking perfect after all.'

Somebody said 'Don't, Donnie. Don't.'

But there was no way he was letting this one get away. And he knew that he spoke for everybody. For whatever reason, nobody wanted to say a thing, they were too polite. But Donnie knew it was doing their heads in, bottling it all up. Well, this was it. This was it.

'Seriously, Toby,' said Donnie. 'Seriously, mate. What's it all about?'

'What's what all about?' asked Toby. He looked at Donnie and the others. He tried to smile the confused smile from before, but it was without the same confidence. It was forced, and Donnie could see right through it. He had Toby on the ropes.

'The grammar thing. The spelling and the grammar thing, the fucking emails. Ever since day one. Ever since day fucking ...'

'Just leave it,' said Alice. 'Please.'

'No chance,' said Donnie.

'Look,' said Toby. 'I just think it's important that certain rules are followed, certain consistencies are kept so that ...'

'Depends who you send it to,' said Donnie, repeating Toby's mistake. 'Depends who you send it to. I don't think that's in the rule book. Let me just check ...' Donnie licked his thumb and leafed through an imaginary rule book and said 'Nope'.

'Sure,' said Toby. 'Sure. I take the point. But language evolves and ...'

'Oh!' shouted Donnie, his eyes lighting up. 'Oh! Did you hear that, everybody? Language evolves.'

'B-b-but,' stuttered Toby.

'B-b-but?' said Donnie, taking the utter piss. Alice stood up and walked away.

'But,' said Toby. 'Certain rules should be obeyed, or at least ...'

'But not by you, eh, Toby? By us, but not by you.'

'By all of us,' said Toby. 'S-s-so there's some consistency, so there's, there's, there's ...'

'Why?' said Donnie, banging his hand on the table.

'Because,' said Toby, looking flustered as fuck. 'Because without, without knowing what, what, what ...'

'Why?' said Donnie again, giving the table another bang. He looked at the people around him. They were neither joining in nor trying to stop him. They were looking down at their drinks in silence.

Toby stuttered on. 'Because ... because ... b-b-because ...'

'Why?' asked Donnie, his eyes wide. 'Whyyyyyy?'

Toby stood up sharply, bumping the table with his legs and spilling the drinks around him. Then he shouted at the top of his voice.

'Because it's all I've got!'

The pub, which was previously loud with chatter, fell silent.

Donnie looked at the rest of the staff to see if this was some kind of act. He'd never seen somebody shout like that before, he thought people only snapped like that in soap operas or on a stage. Not in real life.

Donnie looked at them all, waiting for them to laugh. But none of them looked up from their drinks.

Toby spoke again, but this time, with the pub being silent, he only needed to whisper to be heard by everybody in there.

'It's all I've got.'

Toby picked up his coat from the back of his seat and left.

What Donnie didn't know, but what he found out later, was that Toby's wife and kids had died in an accident.

Stookie

Gerry had broken his arm. He fell in his back garden and landed in a bad way on the steps. He didn't think he'd broken anything, his arm felt intact. But the pain just wouldn't go away, even after a week. So he went to the hospital, where he found out that he'd broken the thing. It was a surprise. He didn't think he'd done that much damage, he expected there to be much more pain from a broken arm. But no, he'd broken it, and he'd need to wear a plaster cast.

A plaster cast.

Or a stookie, as they used to call it when he was wee.

He never had a stookie himself when he was wee, but every now and then, somebody would come into school with one on, usually on the arm. It was usually boys that got it, he couldn't remember any lassies wearing one, it was always the boys. That was maybe something to do with all the climbing about that boys did, all the climbing up drainpipes and trees, which lassies never seemed to do. He did sometimes see lassies wearing a kind of stookie, though. The soft ones that went around the neck. The cream-coloured ones made of foam. It made them look so stupid.

The nurse began putting on Gerry's stookie. It was a new experience for him, even just to watch. He didn't know how it was done. He had a memory of being in school and asking somebody how the stookie was put on, but he'd forgotten. He watched the nurse wrap the dry bandages around his arm. Then, when that was done, she began wrapping a wet bandage around. Wet with plaster.

He thought back to the lassies in school that used to wear the soft stookies around the neck, and wondered why they were always soft and never hard like a normal stookie. He wondered if a normal one would have made them look any less stupid.

God, he was such a cheeky cunt in school.

He couldn't remember the names or faces of the lassies he slagged off for wearing the neck thing, but he remembered doing it. He remembered how it made them look like dogs, when dogs have to wear that thing that stops them licking their stitches when they've had an operation. He used to love laughing at the lassies that had to wear one, and he loved the way they couldn't turn their neck for a quick comeback. It was funny saying something cheeky to them, then watching them have to turn their body all the way around to look at you because they couldn't turn their neck.

Guys didn't really get that type of slagging by having a stookie, though.

They were never laughed at, because having a stookie was almost something to be proud of. It was like a war wound. It meant you'd been up to stuff, something dangerous, and people would ask you what happened and how sore it was. Anybody that had their arm in a stookie would get all this respect, and people would cover the stookie in menshies.

There's another word he hadn't heard for years. Menshies. Mentions. People would write stuff on the stookie.

They'd write things like their name, or 'Get well soon', or write something funny. The rule was that you shouldn't write anything dodgy, even for a laugh, because then the person with the stookie would get into the trouble. The teacher would just end up asking who wrote the thing on the stookie, and the person who wrote it would be grassed up.

The nurse finished putting on the stookie, and told Gerry that he'd have to wait a short while in the hospital while the plaster dried.

As he waited, he thought about if he'd get his son to draw some menshies on it when he got home. Alex wasn't able to write yet, but he could draw some squiggles, or maybe get out his paints and paint some flowers. That would be nice. There was the potential for some embarrassment, going around with a stookie covered in daisies, but it would be a nice embarrassment.

Gerry remembered a boy from school.

There was one boy in school who came in with a stookie on. But he didn't get any respect. Nothing like it.

People wrote stuff on his stookie, but it was nothing nice. It was nothing but fucking horrible stuff, and he had to just take it. They'd hold his arm and then write all this horrible stuff on it. Nobody had any fear of being grassed on, because the boy knew what would happen if he grassed.

The nurse came and tapped on the stookie with her finger. She told Gerry that the plaster seemed to be dry enough now for him to leave, so he was free to go. He left the hospital and headed for the bus stop.

As he waited for the bus, he felt his arm begin to itch. He looked at his stookie, and thought back to that boy from his school.

He could barely remember the boy's name. It was maybe William. William McDonald or William Campbell, one of these Scottish surnames – he wasn't sure. But Gerry remembered what was on the stookie. He looked at his own stookie and he could remember what was on William's stookie like it was right there in front of him. He remembered that there were lots of things written on it, lots of drawings as well, but biggest of all was the word 'TRAMP'.

The bus came and Gerry got on. He realised as he tried to get the change out of his pocket that things were going to be a lot harder with the stookie on. It was his right arm that was in the stookie, leaving his left arm free, but his change was in his right trouser pocket. Getting the change out of his right pocket with his left hand felt like he was using his left hand to shake somebody's hand when they were using their right.

'Hurry up,' he heard somebody saying on the bus. Somebody up the back.

He looked towards the voice, but he couldn't tell who said it. The bus was busy, with most of the people looking at him and the rest looking elsewhere. Nobody looked guilty.

The bus driver, who hadn't yet moved the bus away from the bus stop, stepped on the pedal and moved the bus away sharply. Gerry stumbled, and banged the stookie against one of the metal bars. It went *clink*.

Somebody laughed.

He heard a woman somewhere say something about how Gerry was going to break his arm again, or break the other one. A couple of other people laughed at that and said something else.

By the time the bus was slowing down for the next stop, Gerry still hadn't managed to get his money out. He took a step towards the bus driver and said, 'Sorry, I'll just ...' meaning to say, 'I'll just be a second,' but the driver interrupted him.

'Give me it when you get off,' said the driver, pointing his thumb to the back of the bus. 'You're blocking the aisle. Move.'

'Thanks,' said Gerry, and he walked down the aisle.

He looked for a seat, but there weren't any. There was a guy up the back sitting next to a spare seat, but he had his bag on it. Gerry was sure the guy had seen him but was pretending that he didn't.

The bus got moving again, and Gerry held onto one of the metal bars so he didn't fall over. He glanced at a few people, and saw that some were still looking at him, even from close up. He looked away, and down to his stookie.

He kept his eyes there, on the stookie.

As he looked at it, he thought back to the stookie on William, and what was written. He remembered. He couldn't remember every word, but he could remember their shape, like he was looking at it on his stookie with half-closed eyes. He remembered how the word 'TRAMP' was written. They were in capitals, but the line on the letter p dropped down like a small p. It had looked too much like the letter D, so he drew the line down further to make it more like a p.

He remembered that it was him that wrote 'TRAMP'.

He wrote about half of the other stuff as well. He forgot that. He couldn't remember if he started it, but he wrote at least half of the stuff on that stookie, or told people what to write or what to draw.

He remembered that he drew a picture of William with flies around his head, like Pig Pen from Charlie Brown. He could see it on his own stookie, down near the fingers, down at the bottom right of the word 'TRAMP', near the line that came down.

Gerry looked away.

He looked up from his stookie and saw that he was being watched by a boy on one of the seats. He was maybe about six or seven, a couple of years older than Alex. Gerry looked down so that he wasn't staring back. He saw that one of the boy's socks was white, but the other was light grey.

A thought came to him. He never found out how William broke his arm.

Gerry looked at the boy's face again, and saw that the boy was now looking at the stookie. Gerry turned the stookie away quickly so that the boy couldn't see what was written there, before coming to his senses and remembering that there was nothing there.

The stookie began to make his arm itch again. His skin felt hot and sweaty.

He thought about getting home, and letting Alex draw some menshies on his arm. The idea didn't appeal to him as much as it did back at the hospital, but it was maybe because of being on the bus and how much his arm itched.

He looped his left arm around the bar that he'd been holding onto, his good arm, and poked the fingers under the stookie to give it a scratch, where it was itching. But he couldn't quite reach it.

And oh, it itched like fuck.

Keys

Gary had made a stupid mistake.

Him and Linda had a back garden, and at the back of the garden was their garden fence. It was a high wooden fence with a padlock on it, and behind the fence was a lane, where the bins were kept. The key for the padlock was on a keyring that also held a key for the back door of their house.

Gary had taken a bin bag out to the bins. He'd unlocked the padlock and left the key in the lock while he put the bag in the bin. But while he was there, he saw the bin for bottles and glass, and remembered that they had some bottles in the house that he'd like to bin as well.

He walked back through the gate, into his garden, and he was about to lock the padlock. But he decided not to. He didn't really have to. It was only a ten-second walk from the gate to the house. Did he really need to lock the padlock just for that? Maybe he would have if it wasn't for the padlock being rusty, which made it a pain in the arse to get the key in and out of. It could sometimes take almost a minute to lock and unlock it, and he couldn't be bothered with that.

So instead, he left the key in the padlock. He was sure it was safe. It wasn't as if somebody was going to rush up and grab the keys from the padlock during the ten seconds or so that he was away. But he had a look down the lane, just in case anybody was about to walk by. When he saw that nobody was there, he walked back to his house to get the bottles. If anybody managed to jump out from a hiding place and grab the keys from that rusty padlock in under ten seconds, well, they'd earned them.

He walked through the back door and into his kitchen where the bottles were. There were over a dozen of them, so he opened the cupboard under the kitchen sink, with the intention of getting one of the reusable bags to carry the bottles out to the bin.

But then his dad phoned, wanting some computer advice.

He wanted to know how to move a video off his phone and onto his computer, because his phone was running out of space. So Gary talked him through it.

By the time he came off the phone, Gary had forgotten about the bottles, and he'd forgotten about the keys that he'd left in the padlock. He closed the door of the cupboard under the kitchen sink, without remembering why it was open in the first place.

The next day, Linda asked him to take the bottles out to the bin at the back, and that's when he remembered that he didn't get round to doing it the day before. He felt daft for forgetting to take out the bottles, but then the daft feeling was replaced with dread, when he remembered that he'd left the keys out there overnight.

He was about to tell Linda what had happened, but he hadn't yet checked to see if the keys were still there. There was no point in owning up to making such a stupid mistake if nothing bad had come from it. They had a spare key for the back door, so maybe it wasn't all bad. But it was. She'd know that somebody out there had the other key. Even if they didn't, even if the keys were still there, she'd know he left the back door unlocked overnight.

He'd check first. There was no point in sticking himself in it when he didn't need to.

He picked up the bottles in the house and put them in a bag, then carried them out to the gate. He could see that the gate was open, and he looked behind to see if Linda saw it as well. There would be questions if she saw that. But she wasn't looking.

From a distance, it looked like the keys were no longer in the padlock. That was a sight that he did not want to see, so he looked away until he got closer, hoping that when he got to the padlock, he'd see that the keys were there.

But the keys were gone.

He felt his heart begin to thump.

He was about to search the ground to see if the keys had dropped down, maybe with the wind blowing the padlock during the night, but first he had another look towards the house to see if Linda was looking. And thank fuck she wasn't.

He put down the bag of bottles and looked around in the pebbles that made up the path to the gate. While he was pushing the pebbles around, he was pushing the thought out of his head that somebody had stolen the keys. Somebody had stolen the keys from the padlock, which included the key to the back door. The back door to their fucking house.

He pushed the pebbles around some more, then looked in the same place over and over. He stood up and looked at the padlock. It was a pointless thing to do, and he knew it.

He took in a deep breath. He could feel his pulse in his temples.

This was bad. Seriously bad.

He remembered that he was supposed to be putting bottles in the bin, and he was certain that if Linda didn't hear the sound of bottles crashing on top of bottles, she'd be wondering why. So he picked up the bag and emptied out the bottles. Then he had another look for the keys.

He looked at the grass in the lane, to see if the keys were there. He knew that he himself didn't drop them there, he definitely left the keys in the padlock, but maybe the person who took them from the padlock then dropped them in the lane accidentally. It was possible.

He got down on all fours, then looked at the lane from down low, hoping to see the shiny keys sticking up from the grass. But he couldn't see them.

He was going to have to tell Linda. He was actually going to have to tell her.

His throat tightened and his heart beat faster. He had to tell Linda that somebody had the key to their back door.

But he didn't want to. He really didn't want to.

It wouldn't just be a case of getting the lock in the door changed, because it wasn't as simple as that. The back door wasn't a normal door like that. They had fancy patio doors that they'd spent a fortune on, and the lock was part of the door. You couldn't just unscrew the lock and then put in a new one. If you replaced the lock then you'd probably have to replace the door as well, and that would cost a fortune. And he just did not want to tell Linda that. So he kept his mouth shut. He knew he was putting the security of their home at risk, but it was a risk worth taking for now, until he worked out what to do.

For now, he would just keep a lookout.

He spent the next few days looking out the window of the room that faced the back garden. The toilet window also faced the back garden, and after every visit to the toilet, he'd look out it, towards the gate and the lane behind.

One day he forgot to lock the toilet door. It was shut, but he had forgotten to lock it. After he washed and dried his hands, he had a look out the window. To do so was always an effort, because the window was high, and in order to look out it he had to step into the bath, and go on his tiptoes.

Linda walked in and saw him peering through the window, and asked him what he was doing.

He nearly fell in the bath. He said he wasn't doing anything, just looking out the window. He couldn't think of what else to say.

She looked through the window, and asked him if he was looking at their neighbour, Teresa.

He told her that Teresa wasn't there, but when he looked out, there she was, lying in her garden, reading a magazine.

When he pictured how it looked through Linda's eyes, it looked bad. He looked like an old-school pervert.

Linda walked away, and Gary was about to call her back to say that it wasn't what she thought. But he knew that if she asked what it was he was looking at, he'd probably have to tell her that he left the keys in the padlock and now they were gone. Maybe he would have owned up if she kept at it, but because she walked away, he just left it.

A week passed, with no break-ins. It surprised Gary, especially considering that they'd left the house unoccupied for a few hours here and there at various times of the day.

There was even a time when they went through to Linda's mum and dad's for the night, and they'd made it quite obvious that they weren't home. Gary tried hard to not make it so obvious, by leaving all the lights on and turning on the radio. Linda asked him why he was doing that, considering he didn't usually. He told her that there was no right or wrong time to start being conscious of burglars. But she said that she doubted that anybody would be able to break in, not with all the locks they had. There were locks on the windows, and there were the special locks on the front and back doors. Multipoint locks. Burglars couldn't kick their way past those.

'But somebody could pick them,' said Gary.

Gary wasn't sure if it was a clever move to continue with the talk of burglars, or a stupid one. It would be a stupid move if the burglars chose that night to break in, on the day that Gary coincidentally became conscious of burglars. She would have asked him if he was psychic, especially because he also seemed to predict that the burglars got into the house by apparently picking the lock. Then she'd maybe wonder if they had a key. Then she'd ask Gary where the keys were, and she'd see that one of them was missing. And she'd see the look on his face. And he'd have to tell her how long he'd known for. And she'd know he let her think that he was perverting on Teresa, rather than just owning up to the truth.

'Och, forget it,' said Gary, switching off the lights. 'You're right.'

He switched off every light in the house. He didn't even close the curtains. He'd rather that the house looked unoccupied and ripe for the picking, than face the music. He'd rather jeopardise their telly, their computers and anything else worth stealing. He'd rather do that and take all the hassle that it would cause, all the phone calls and changing of passwords and proving who he was, than face the music. He could face it eventually, but he wanted some more time to try and work it all out and make things right.

They left the house, and Gary spent the night thinking about what they'd be returning to the next day.

But when they returned, everything was intact.

Gary looked around the house at all the things worth knocking. The telly, the computers, even the food in the fridge. Linda watched him as he looked at it all.

He saw her watching and said, 'Ah, good to be back. It's just good to be back.'

After that night, Gary told himself that if burglars were going to break in, if they truly had their eyes on the house, they would have broken in then. And because they didn't, then maybe there weren't any burglars. Maybe the keys weren't really in the hands of a thief, and they were lying out there in the pebbles after all.

He took a walk to the gate and had another look, making sure again that he wasn't spotted by Linda. He looked in the pebbles and the grass, and in the path behind the gate, but there was nothing. It was puzzling.

Perhaps somebody did snatch the keys, but the type of person that did such a thing would be out their face at the time, and they've since forgotten where the keys came from. Perhaps there was a thief somewhere out there, wondering whose keys were in his pocket.

Gary took off the padlock and threw it in the bin, and told himself to remember to buy a new one, so that Linda didn't ask questions. He also reminded himself to get a copy of the key to the back door, because if they lost the one they had left, Linda would ask what happened to the other one. And she'd see the look on his face. Then she'd find out about how he left the keys in the padlock, and that he left the house unoccupied with all the lights off and the curtains open, putting everything at risk.

Gary went to the shops and replaced the padlock. He got an extra key cut for the back door, and put them on a keyring that looked just the same as the old one. Linda didn't suspect a thing.

Everything was going to be all right. Linda had been a bit funny with him since the perving incident with Teresa, but with regards to the keys, everything was going to be all right.

Then, a few days later, while Gary was looking out the bedroom window upstairs, he saw a guy cycling about outside in the street. There was something about him that Gary didn't like the look of.

The guy wasn't wearing cycling clothes. He was wearing denims and a jacket, and he wasn't wearing a helmet. That would usually be unremarkable, because you don't have to have all the bright clothes and a helmet to ride a bike. But usually, the only people you saw without a helmet were younger guys on a BMX. But this guy was about 30 years old, and he was cycling on a mountain bike that looked dodgy. The bike looked featureless, it was completely black with no logo, like it had been spray-painted black. And why was that? Because it had probably been knocked, and probably by the guy himself.

The guy went up the street, past the house. But when he got a few doors up, he doubled back.

Gary stepped away from the window to look out the side of the curtain, so that he couldn't be seen. He saw the guy look at a few houses, which gave Gary some relief, because it didn't look like the guy had an interest in Gary's house in particular. But as the guy cycled past Gary's front gate, he turned his head quickly to look at the living-room window. And he kept looking at it, even as he passed the houses further down the street.

It was him.

He was the man with the keys.

Gary knew what was coming. It was at that point that Gary thought that he really should tell Linda. He should tell Linda the fucking truth. He should tell Linda that he was sorry, he was so fucking sorry, but he'd left the keys in the padlock around the back, and now there was a guy casing their house. They should go to the police. They were about to get everything stolen.

But it would cost a fortune to get that lock replaced.

And it wasn't just that either. It was the fact that he caused it. And then lied about it. Plus he'd left the house unoccupied, with the lights off and curtain open, knowing that they could have had their computers stolen. Plus there was the thing with Teresa. Him and Linda had been heading for the rocks ever since that happened, and he could have turned it around with a truthful explanation, but instead of that he just let it happen.

A couple of days passed, with no sight of the guy on the bike. But Gary knew the guy was out there, just biding his time. All it would take was one more night away from home.

'We're going through to my mum's and dad's tonight,' said Linda.

But he made every excuse to not go.

He told her he didn't feel well, his head was killing him. But she said he could just take a couple of painkillers and lie in bed when he got there.

He told her that he didn't like her dad, which was partly true. He told her that he didn't like the way her dad patted Gary's belly almost every time he went over, making a comment about Gary 'putting on the beef'. But Linda just told him to get over it, or say something back, or lose weight.

He told her that he didn't like her mum either.

Gary and Linda fell out, and she went through to her mum's and dad's by herself. He felt bad, but there was no alternative, none that he could think of.

He slept in the house that night with every light on. He balanced a brush against the patio door in the kitchen so that it would fall over and hit the tiles if the door was opened. He tested it and it made a clatter that he could hear from anywhere in the house.

The night passed with no break-in, and Gary waited for Linda to come home the next day, but she texted him to say that she'd be staying for not one night but two.

Gary saw the guy on the bike again while she was away, this time cycling down the path behind the house. Gary could only see the top of the guy's head, but he saw the head slow down near his gate, before speeding up and cycling off.

He felt like phoning the police, but he didn't. It was just too late now.

He could have just phoned them or gone over to the station and asked them to keep things confidential. It might have been enough for the police to get a description of the guy. They might have known who Gary was talking about and paid the guy a visit, which would have scared the guy off. He'd maybe get the keys back.

But he didn't do any of that. He just wanted it all to go away.

When Linda returned, she said she was going to sleep on the couch, in the living room. She reckoned that was her and him finished.

He could've just told her then. He could have told her that he left the keys in the padlock out in the gate, that he wasn't shagging Teresa next door or looking at her or whatever it was that Linda thought was going on. He could have said he was sorry for leaving the house unoccupied, and hope that she understood why he lied.

He may as well have just told her the truth, if she reckoned that was her and him finished. There was nothing to lose. But he didn't. He still had hope that it would work out somehow.

Then, one night, while he was lying awake upstairs in bed and she was sleeping downstairs in the living room, he heard the brush hit the tiles.

If there was a time to come clean, that was it.

Everything worth stealing was in the living room. The telly, the stereo, and probably the tablet. All the stuff worth knocking was in the living room, and the burglar probably knew that. They probably learned all about that in jail.

All he had to do was run downstairs and chase away the burglar.

But then Linda would ask questions, and she'd see the look on his face.

Trophies

Martin was a cobbler. But like most cobblers, he didn't just mend shoes. He cut keys. He did engravings. He engraved things like trophies and medals and nameplates for doors. People could either come in with the nameplates to be engraved, or they could pick one of the ones he had for sale on the shelves.

He also had trophies and medals for sale, which sat on the shelf above the nameplates and door knockers. It made the wall look like something you'd see in a football club, like a trophy cabinet. Martin used to make a joke about it with customers who were in to get their shoes fixed.

They'd point to their shoes and ask him, 'Are you able to fix this? Is that something you do?'

And he'd say, 'I do that. And you willnae find anybody better. Just look at my trophies!'

But he didn't bother making that joke anymore.

The door beeped, and in walked a customer. Martin gave him a quick look up and down. Right away, he didn't like the look of the guy. A possible thief, thought Martin. The guy looked shifty. It was the way he didn't walk up to the counter to be served, but instead chose to hover around the things nearest the door.

Martin would get cunts like him in now and then. It was a busy street outside. They'd come in and hover about. Martin would turn his back on them for a second, then he'd hear the door beep and the guy would be gone. They'd have grabbed something from the rails, something worthless, like a packet of heel protectors. Martin could sometimes tell what they'd grabbed because they'd have grabbed the item off the rail so quickly that it would cause the remaining packets on the rail to swing.

And that's what this guy was like. Hovering about. He didn't look like he was browsing. If a person was browsing, they'd usually browse around just one type of item. They'd maybe browse around the items for doors, like the door knockers and nameplates, or browse around the trophies and medals – but they'd never drift from the door items to the trophies, like this guy was doing. Nobody ever came into his shop for a nameplate and a trophy, it was either one or the other.

This guy was a thief. He was just waiting for Martin to turn his back, then he'd grab something shiny, and out the door he'd go. He'd be off with the heel protectors, thinking that they were made of solid gold, and he'd go around the pubs trying to sell them.

'Can I help you?' asked Martin.

That was the line that normally caused these cunts to leave. They'd say nothing in reply, like they hadn't heard you, then they'd leave a few seconds later when they realised there was no way you were taking your eyes off them.

The guy looked at Martin and said 'Yeah', in that posh way. He played with his fingers, like an awkward teenager. It could be that he wasn't a thief, but just shy, and he didn't know how to ask for what he wanted. You couldn't be sure, though, not yet.

The door beeped as another man entered the shop. He was wearing denims and a suit jacket, and was pulling a shoebox out of a large paper bag. Martin didn't like two people in the shop at the one time. The guy with the shoebox was less likely to be a thief than the first guy, but he couldn't ask the first guy to leave.

'We're shut,' said Martin.

'Shut?' asked the man, looking at the other guy. 'But ...'

'I said we're shut.'

The man didn't like the attitude. 'Fuck off, then.'

'You fuck off.'

The man opened the door and left. The other guy decided to leave as well, slipping out before the door closed over.

Good. Fuck off. Pair of cunts.

You know, he used to joke about all the trophies on the wall being like a trophy cabinet, like he'd earned them. It was obviously a joke, but these cunts wouldn't even crack a smile. But see seriously? All joking aside? He fucking deserved a trophy, for the cunts he had to put up with in there.

New Life

Alan had gathered all his mates and a few family members at his flat. His girlfriend Lisa was there as well. It was a surprise. There was going to be an announcement, he said. Not even Lisa knew what it was about. It wasn't his birthday or anything.

They came into the flat, smiling and asking questions. They were to be there at 7 p.m. Some of them had asked what they were to wear, but Alan had told them that it didn't matter. Just wear what you want, it was nothing fancy, they weren't going out clubbing. It was just an announcement.

'What do you mean when you say you're going to make an announcement?' asked Lisa throughout the week.

'Just wait, you'll see,' said Alan.

Alan seemed more upbeat lately than he had been for quite some time. Whatever the announcement was, it was good to see him like that. Lisa wondered if it was a new job, but would he really get everybody around just to announce that?

Everybody arrived and chatted for a few minutes while Alan took their coats and got them drinks. Alan's best mate Steven said it was like one of those murder mystery weekends you hear about, but Alan said it was going to be nothing like that, don't get your hopes up.

They were enjoying it, though. Steven said he liked it, whatever it was, and Alan said he did as well. It was exciting and he was glad he came up with the idea.

Alan walked into the middle of the living room where everybody was, and stood on the rug in front of the telly. He cleared his throat in the jokey way that a person does when they want to make a speech.

'Oh,' said Anne, another one of Alan's pals. 'Here it is.'

'The announcement,' said Lisa. 'At last.'

She really didn't know what this could be. It could only be a good thing. All of this was a good thing. Alan rarely came up with an idea by himself, but it wasn't his fault. He'd been struggling for a while, with everything.

'So,' said Alan. 'Here it is.'

He looked nervous. Lisa asked him if he wanted to sit down, but he said that he was fine. He was just trying to think of how to get this across, the thing he had to say.

'So,' he said again. 'As you know, I've had ... no, in fact, first of all, thanks for coming, everybody, let me just say that first.'

'You're welcome, mate,' said Steven.

Alan nodded and got back into it.

'Right,' said Alan. 'So, as you know, I'm prone to getting a bit down.'

The happy atmosphere in the room subsided. The smiles were still there, but their eyes were no longer smiling. They began to realise that the thing that Alan had to say was a bit more serious than they first thought.

He turned the wrist of his right hand around to face everybody. There was a scar on it. 'And you all know about this.'

Lisa looked at everybody in the room, and saw that they were becoming uncomfortable. Chris, one of Alan's cousins, turned his head away to look at the wall to his side, even though there was nothing there of interest.

'Alan,' said Lisa. 'What is this?'

'It's fine,' he said. 'It's fine. It's all right, everybody.'

He smiled at everybody until he got a smile back. Then he continued to talk.

'You all know about it,' he said. 'I've spoken to you all. You know how hard I've tried, you know I've tried everything. Pills, counselling, everything. I've tried everything. And it worked, for a while. But there I was again. On Monday, I think.'

This was the first time that Lisa had heard anything about Monday. 'There you were again what?' she asked. 'What happened on Monday?'

Alan took a deep breath and just came out and said it. 'I was about to kill myself.'

'Jesus,' said Steven.

'For God's sake, Alan,' said Cheryl, sympathetically. She gave Lisa's back a rub.

Lisa put her face in her hands and was instantly in tears.

'I was up at the Erskine Bridge,' said Alan. 'I walked all the way up there. Took me over an hour. I walked all the way up there and I was going to throw myself off. And I knew that if I did, that was it.'

He looked at his wrist.

'No going back this time,' he said. 'You step off that bridge, it's over. No ambulance, no rushing to the hospital. You step off there, and it's over. Doesn't matter how much you change your mind on the way down, it's over.'

'Shut up,' said Lisa from behind her hands. 'Just shut up.'

'We better leave,' said Cheryl to everybody else, standing up. 'We should go. Come on.'

'No,' said Alan. He looked at everybody and smiled. 'Because this is what I want to say. I've got something to say. I swear this will be the last time that you'll hear me talk about this. Will you hear me out?'

Cheryl looked at him and everybody else. Lisa looked up from her hands and waited for Alan to speak. Cheryl sat down and started rubbing Lisa's back again.

Alan had been standing on the rug, but now he felt like sitting. He pulled over a small table that was behind him, then he sat down on it and began to speak more quietly. He realised that although he was feeling good, he was potentially causing pain to the others, so he didn't smile, even though he wanted to.

'I don't know why I want to die,' he said. 'I don't really know. But I know that I don't enjoy my life. I've gone too far into a life that I don't like, and I just want it all to end.'

He looked at Lisa.

'But as I was up there on the bridge, it dawned on me that I didn't want to end my life, not completely. I just wanted to end this one, if that makes sense. I think I could enjoy life, if I was somebody else.'

'Then be somebody else,' said Lisa. 'Do whatever you want. Leave if you want to. I'd rather you were somewhere else than here and wanting to jump off the fucking ...'

She broke down again. Cheryl gave her back a rub and kissed her head.

'I thought about that,' he said. 'I thought about it on the bridge. I thought about just running away. Just getting some money and getting on a plane and going to Canada or somewhere and starting again. But that would cost a ton of money. It would cost a serious ton of money, and I'd have to find somewhere to live and get my head around it all and think about all the forms and, oh, I don't know. There's always something. There's always something.'

He rubbed his head.

'I want to stay here, but I just want everything to be different. I want to be home, but with different faces and places, doing different things with different ... I really don't know. I know that it all sounds like it won't change a thing. It doesn't make a lot of sense to me now, but it made sense to me when I was up on the bridge, and I'm not going to go back up there to try and remember. I told myself I was going to do it and that's why I asked you here and I'm going to do it. I have to.'

'Do what?' asked Steven. He looked at Alan's hands to see if he was holding a razor, in case Alan's plan was to cut his wrist or his throat, right in front of them all. But there was no razor.

'Please don't feel bad,' said Alan. 'But I told myself that if I don't then I'd end up killing myself and I'd never see you again anyway. You'd lose me anyway.'

Anne didn't get it. She looked at Lisa and she could see that Lisa didn't get it either. Neither did Cheryl or anybody else. Anne looked to Alan and said, 'Alan, I don't think anybody knows what you mean.'

Alan took another deep breath and tried to remember how much sense it made on the bridge, then he said it.

'After you leave here tonight, you don't know me. After tonight, my name will be Craig.'

There was quiet in the room as they thought about what he could mean. Steven asked, 'What do you mean? You're changing your name?'

'No,' said Alan. 'Well, aye. But not just the name.' He took a breath and tried to keep it simple. 'After tonight, I'll be a guy called Craig.'

Before they left, Alan told them the best way to go about it all. The technicalities. The dos and don'ts. He'd thought it all out.

Lisa was heartbroken, and asked him if he was joking. She wanted him to tell her he was joking. She said it must be a joke and she wouldn't go through with it, but he explained again that it was either this or he was going up to that bridge. If they spoke to him again, he'd be found the following day, floating face down in the Clyde, and that was a promise.

They left, and for the following couple of weeks, they never saw him.

Then, they did.

They started to see him around. They'd get a glimpse of him, then he'd be gone for a month. He'd be passing by as a passenger on a bus, or he'd be seen coming out of a building or getting into a car. Lisa had never seen him herself and wanted every detail about who he was with and what he was doing.

Anne saw him in a park. He was with a group of people, studenty types. One of them had a guitar, and they had a tightrope tied between a couple of trees. They were people like that. They were the type of people that Alan used to laugh at, but Anne said he looked like he was having a good time.

Steven saw him in a club. Steven was with a lassie he'd just met, a lassie he'd got dancing with. She said she wanted to introduce him to her mates, and she led Steven towards a table. One of her mates was Craig. Steven and Craig had said 'Pleased to meet you' to each other, like it was the first time they'd met. Steven stood around for a minute, to pretend that everything was normal, then he told the lassie that he had to go to the toilet. He took a detour to the cloakroom, got his jacket and left. It was too much.

Lisa was worried that she'd never see Craig again after that, that he'd move away or be found face down in the Clyde like he promised.

But then she finally saw him, in Lidl.

There was something different about him. Nothing much, but something. His hair was a bit longer at the top than the last time she saw him. The denims he was wearing were a darker shade of blue than he usually wore, but that was nothing much. He was wearing a jumper, and that was something.

He walked past her, but she didn't look at him, not directly. She watched his reflection on the metal edge at the front of the shelf. He might have turned his head to look at her, but she couldn't be sure. Then he was gone.

She saw him in there again a week after that. And then a few days after that.

The last time she saw him, he walked around the aisles for ten minutes, but then only left with a couple of packets of crisps.

The next time they were in, she would smile at him.

Or she might just go ahead and talk to him. She thought it would be all right, because it wasn't like she'd be talking to Alan. She wouldn't be talking to him as Alan. She'd be talking to Craig. She

liked the guy. And you read things about supermarkets, about how that's where some couples first meet.

Moustache

There was an explosion.

Frank had been walking to the job centre. To get there, Frank would usually leave his house and stay on that side of the street for ten minutes, walking past the tenements, past the community centre and the factory. Then there would be more tenements, and when he reached those, he'd cross over to the job centre.

It was when he reached the factory that the explosion happened.

When it happened, in that first instant, he didn't know that it was an explosion. He didn't know if it was something that had happened inside him, like a heart attack or a stroke, or something that had happened outside his body, out in the open. Whatever it was, the combination of the sound and the force made him fall on his side and bang his head on the ground.

His eyes were shut and his ears were ringing. He couldn't see or hear anything, but he could smell dust. It reminded him of whenever he walked past the flats over in Finnieston, the ones that were being demolished, and the dust that blew onto the street. The smell told him that the thing that had happened hadn't just happened to him, it was no heart attack. He knew that when he opened his eyes, he was going to see something.

He opened them slowly and narrowly, so that the dust he could smell wouldn't go in his eyes.

He looked in front of him. Through the dust he could see that it was like half the factory and the surrounding tenements were lying on the road. There were twisted sheets of corrugated iron, there was broken glass and broken window frames. Strewn across the road were building bricks from the factory, and large blocks of sandstone from the tenements. The scene looked like a sandcastle that had been kicked across a beach.

There had been an explosion at the factory.

Frank checked himself, his arms and legs, and saw they were intact. He looked towards the rubble in front of him, and waited for the dust to clear.

It was quiet. He thought he had been deafened, but he realised he wasn't when he heard the first scream. People had been shocked into silence. But after the first scream, others began to follow.

There was a rumble, then the sound of something crashing to the ground, either a building or part of one. People screamed and shouted again. A mix of women and men.

Frank looked at his arms and legs again and gave them a squeeze, to double check that they were fine. When he was sure that they were, he got to his feet, and began to walk diagonally across the road.

A few people ran past him, some heading the way he was heading, and some heading back the way he came. A guy in his forties, around the same age as Frank, emerged from the dust. He had blood on his head. He stopped to look Frank up and down, then he rubbed his eyes and carried on walking.

Frank walked forward towards the sounds of people shouting, people speaking, or the sound of anything moving, anything that sounded like it was being moved by somebody trying to free themselves from the disaster.

He heard the sound of a female voice, and he began jogging towards it. He found a woman lying underneath one of the sheets of corrugated iron. She was wearing a blue coat, that was either light blue or looked light blue because of the dust. The sheet she was under didn't look like it had either hurt her or pinned her down. She was crawling away from underneath it.

Then he heard a boy's voice, groaning.

Frank looked towards the direction of the voice, then looked at the woman. She looked like she'd be able to sort herself out, but he'd come back after finding the boy.

He ran towards the boy's groaning until he found him. He was with another boy. Both of them looked around 12. They were on the ground at opposite ends from each other, like when two boys of that age share a bed but don't want to be face to face.

One was sitting up, and the other was leaning on an elbow, as both of them pushed away the broken wood that had landed on their legs.

Frank could see that they were both able to move their legs and feet. One was smiling. The other was in pain, but judging by his face, it looked like the pain was nothing much, on a par with grazing a knee or banging a shin.

He was about to head back to the woman when he heard panting.

It was the sound of a man in a lot of pain, breathing through his teeth, quickly. Then it stopped, then started again.

It came from the right, towards the factory. Looking in that direction, Frank could see a flashing yellow light, which he thought was the light from a fire engine or some other emergency service. But then he saw that the yellow light was coming from flames. Through the dust, he could see that the factory was on fire.

Frank walked in that direction slowly. There was more rubble. It became higher, and the dust cloud was thicker.

'Hello?' shouted Frank. But the man didn't shout back, he only panted and coughed.

Frank walked towards the sound, until he saw a hand sticking out from the rubble. Then he saw the guy's legs. They were trapped, but in a far worse way than the boys. The legs were underneath a short but heavy-looking beam of wood, and they looked broken. One of the legs was bent in the wrong direction at the knee.

He followed the legs with his eyes to try and find the guy's face. He heard the panting again. They were short breaths. The breaths of a man trapped under the weight of the rubble, making every breath an effort.

He leaned over and began to lift one of the rocks away from the rubble, but then stopped when he saw that the guy was one of those guys with the funny moustaches. The type of moustache that curled up at the side like Poirot or an old-fashioned boxer.

Frank liked people like that, usually, these cartoony types with their funny moustaches or big beards or bow ties, the ones that treated life like it was one big fancy-dress party.

But now wasn't the time. There had been an explosion, and people needed help.

He put the rock back down and ran back to the woman from before, to make sure she had got out from beneath the corrugated iron.

He found her as she was getting to her feet with the help of another man who was taking her arm. Frank took her other arm.

'Thanks,' she said. 'My God, what happened? What was it?'

'It was that factory,' said Frank, pointing towards the flames. 'There was a factory there.'

The other guy spoke to Frank. 'Is there anybody else?' he asked. 'Back there?'

'Aye,' said Frank. 'There were a couple of boys over this way.'

Frank and the other guy guided the woman to the pavement at the other side of the road, then they rushed back onto the road to help the boys.

One of the boys was already on his feet. His denims were ripped and Frank could see a graze on the legs through the hole, but he looked like he got away with it. He was very lucky, relatively speaking. The other boy looked like he was in more pain, holding his hip.

'How's your leg, son?' asked Frank. 'Is it your hip? Do you think you could get up?'

The boy got up quickly after Frank spoke to him, like he wasn't really in that much pain and all it took was a grown man to snap him out of his childishness.

The boy's pal helped him up, and Frank and the other guy stood by, ready to help if need be. But the boys were fine, and off they went, with the luckier one of the two helping the other one limp away.

The man asked Frank 'Anybody else?' as he looked around. 'Who else?'

Frank looked towards where the boys had headed.

'Boys!' shouted Frank, into the cloud of dust.

'What?' shouted one of them.

'Did you see anybody else?' asked Frank. 'Any of your wee pals missing?'

'No,' came the voice.

'All right,' shouted Frank.

The other man looked around, standing on the spot, swivelling to the left and right, to see or hear anything.

They heard a conversation from somewhere in the cloud of dust.

A lassie said, 'What are you looking for?'

A woman said, 'My phone.'

Frank ran off in that direction, to help this woman find her phone. She'd need it to let her family know she was all right. But he'd have to be fast. It wouldn't be long until the police came and cleared everybody away and taped the area off, and if she didn't find the phone before that happened, it would probably be lost for good. He'd help her find that and anything else that was missing, he'd see if anybody else was missing anything, then he'd come back to check on the guy with the funny moustache, if there was time.

Porridge

Jason sat at the kitchen table, eating his breakfast. It was the same breakfast he'd had every day for the past three months. It was a bowl of porridge, made by his wife Mary.

He didn't like it.

His favourite cereal was Frosties, but he wasn't allowed to have that anymore. He'd been stuffing his face too much recently, not just with Frosties but with everything, and Mary blamed it on what he was having for breakfast.

She told him that what was happening was that he was starting the day with a sugar rush. He was starting the day on a bad foot. Then he'd come crashing down an hour later, and crave more sugar. She said that was why he was snacking throughout the day, eating chocolate and crisps and whatever else he bought at the shops on his way to work. It was why he was fat and always tired.

So it would be porridge now. And he wasn't even allowed salt in it either, because salt was bad for you. It would be porridge oats and hot water, with a splash of milk on top, if he wanted.

Soy milk.

That was how he started every day. Every single day. He'd go to bed, knowing that the next day would start that way. And in the morning, he could barely bring himself to climb out of bed.

He couldn't take it.

He asked her if he could maybe have Frosties as a weekend breakfast treat, as a wee reward for managing to stay off it during the week.

But she said no and told him to stick with it, he'd thank her in the end.

He told her he understood that she was trying to do a good thing, but he asked her to consider if it was any kind of life to deprive yourself of the things you like, just for the sake of being a few pounds lighter or having a bit of extra get up and go.

But she told him he was fat and tired, how was that any kind of life?

He said all right, all right, he'd do it, and he asked her how long it would last. A couple of weeks? A month? Or was it when he got down to a certain weight? He could do it as long as he knew that there was light at the end of the tunnel.

She said that there was no reason for it to end. 'You'll get used to it,' she said. But he never did. And it was driving him out of his mind.

But then, one morning, something happened.

'Look at this,' he said, holding up a spoonful of porridge that he'd just lifted out from his bowl.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Come around here and look.'

'What is it?' she asked again. 'It isn't a fly or something is it? If it is, I don't want to see it.'

'No,' he said. 'Just come here and look. It's funny.'

'Funny?' she asked.

She wondered what could possibly be funny about porridge, so she stood up and walked around to his side of the table. She looked into the bowl of porridge, and then at the spoon. There was nothing funny there.

She asked: 'So what is it?'

Jason raised the spoon and turned it slightly. 'D'you not think that looks a bit like Charlie?'

She began walking away, without looking at the spoon. She couldn't be bothered with this.

'Look!' said Jason, smiling.

She stopped and turned. Curiosity got the better of her. She walked back to Jason's side, knowing that it was a waste of time. But she was curious.

She looked at the spoon, ready to say 'No' and walk away. But you know what?

'It does!' she said.

She leaned closer to it, and tilted her head from side to side to view it from different angles. She laughed. 'It actually does!'

She looked for her phone to take a picture, she was going to send it to Charlie's wife Deborah. But she couldn't find it.

Jason smiled at the porridge on the spoon, then pointed at one bit with his pinky. 'Do you see that bit there? That's his hair. Do you see it? How much does that look like Charlie's hair?'

'I know,' she said. 'It's the spitting image.'

And it was. It was the double. Charlie had thick, wiry fair hair that looked all wavy and bumpy like a cloud. Or like a lump of porridge.

Mary looked at it for a while longer, then she lost interest.

She walked back around to her side of the table and sat down. And it was back to business as usual, as quickly as that. George went back to eating his porridge. They finished their breakfast, left the house, got into their separate cars and went away to work.

A few days later, something else happened.

Mary read about it when she and Jason were having breakfast. Deborah had posted an update on Facebook.

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