

# Almost Dead

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Smashwords Edition

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“If you do that again,” Felix said and picked up a beer mat. “I am honestly going to cut you.”

The two girls seated either side of him started laughing.

“Oh you!” Sally said. She put her arm around him and kissed his cheek. “We love you really.”

Felix smiled. He stretched his arms along the back of their booth and sighed. Cat had a sip of her pint and watched as the barmaid went passed to serve the booth on the opposite side of the pub.

“I could get her,” Felix said and sat up.

“No you couldn’t.”

“I could.” Felix got his phone out of his pocket. “If I switched on the charm, she’d be all mine.”

He threw his phone up in the air and then caught it.

“Go on then.”

“Er, no,” Felix said. He threw and caught his phone again. “I’m just going to play it cool today.”

“You liar.”

“I am.” He threw his phone again. “You can’t-”

With a rattle, the phone clattered down the back of the booth. Felix leapt around and peered over the back.

“Shit,” he said as the girls watched, unmoving. He stuck his arm down the back. “I can’t reach it.”

“It’s just a phone,” Sally said.

“It’s my phone!” Felix said. “I need it! Come on! Show a little enthusiasm!”

Sally sighed and sat up on her knees. She looked down the back of the booth as well.

“This is the most important thing that will happen to us today,” Felix said and leant next to her. “So pay attention. Can either of you reach your little girlish hands down there?”

Sally tried. Cat leaned next to her and tried as well.

“Sally, Sally,” Felix said after a few seconds. “You’re getting in my light.”

“You asked me to try,” Sally said and swept her hair out of her eyes. “Tell Cat to move as well then.”

“Just both of you move!” Felix said and pushed Cat off the seat.

He tried to reach his hand down the small gap between the radiator and the seat. He stuck his tongue out of his mouth.

"I can... just feel...it," he said. "Do we have a pair of pliers?"

"Oh yes," Sally said. "I always keep a pair handy."

She went into her bag. Felix sat up expectantly.

"You twat," Sally said and threw her bag onto the floor. "I was joking."

"Bitch," he said. He put his hand down the back of the booth again and glared at her. "Get me something then! A fork! A spoon!"

"Here," Cat said, holding up a fork.

"What the hell am I meant to do with that?" Felix said. "Get me something useful."

"But you said-"

"Come on." Sally stood up and pulled on Cat's arm. "Let's ask at the bar for tools."

They crossed the pub together. Sally was tall and thin and dark and went around with her nose held up in the air. Cat was short and squat and blonde and went around scratching her head like she had lice.

"Little and large." The barman smiled at them as Sally leant on the bar. He winked.

"What?" Sally said and glared.

"Oh, er, nothing. What can I do for you ladies?"

"Our friend," Sally looked over her shoulder. The back of Felix's jeans was just visible as he tried to squeeze his entire self between the back of the booth and the wall, "has dropped his very expensive phone behind booth number six. Do you have anything that we can get it out with?"

"Oh yeah." The barman leant on the bar and watched Felix's attempts at shrinking himself. "Lots of people do that."

"How do lots of people get their things back?"

The barman shrugged.

"Most don't. A couple do but we don't have a specific tool to help them."

"Wonderful," Sally said. "Can we borrow some sticky tape then? And a pair of kitchen tongs?"

"Sure." The barman said. "What have you got in mind?"

"I'll tell you if it works," Sally said. "Then, next time, you can have the specific tools. Move out of the way," she said when they got back to the table. She knelt on the seats behind Felix and clacked the tongs. "I have a plan."

He wiped his hair out of his eyes. His face was red. He sat on the table.

“She’s clever,” Cat said and sat beside him.

They watched as Sally knelt on the sofa and stuck the tongs down the back of the booth. She straightened up.

“More cellotape,” she said.

Cat stretched a length from the roll and began wrapping it frantically around the end of the tongs.

“Make sure it’s inside out,” Sally said, touching the end with her fingers. “We need it sticky or there’s no point.”

“Oh right.”

Cat tried again. Sally stuck the tongs back down the booth again.

“Mate,” she said, looking up at the ceiling as her arm wavered out of sight. “Can you come and have a look and tell me how close I am?”

Felix jumped up on his chair and leant on the wall. He squinted, he adjusted his position.

“You’re close!” he suddenly shouted. “Really close! Come left, left. No, left. Left!”

“I am going left!”

“Oh no, I meant my left.”

Sally rolled her eyes.

“Your right,” Felix said. He leant closer. “Right, right, right. Stop! It’s about three centimetres beneath you now. Careful, careful. Lower it carefully.”

“I am.”

“There! You should have it. Clench the tongs now.”

Felix peered deep into the gap. Cat tried to look as well but he pushed her out of the way.

“Got it?” Felix asked tentatively.

Sally sat back on the sofa. She pulled her arm out, then the tongs and there, clasped delicately in their sticky taped teeth, was the phone.

“Yes!” Felix said. He took the phone and kissed it. “Yes, my baby! My baby!”

“No worries,” Sally said and unwrapped the stick tape from the tongs.

“Oh yeah, thanks, Sally,” Felix said. He put the phone in his pocket.

Sally shook her head and went back to the bar.

“Did it work?” the barman asked.

“Yes.” Sally handed back the tongs and the sticky tape.

“What did you do?”

“Used the tongs to dangle the cellotape behind the booth and hook it up,” Sally said.

“Really?” The man frowned. “I can’t imagine that working.”

Sally went back to the table.

“I need a slash,” Felix said. He stood up and stretched. “Where’s the toilets?”

“They’re in a separate shed in the beer garden,” Sally said. “I told you this pub was old school.”

“Oh, come with me,” Felix said.

“What?”

“I don’t want to go out there on my own.” Felix put on a mocking whimper. “It’s dark, Sally.”

“You wus,” Sally said and stood up. “Do you want me to hold it for you as well?”

They crossed to the back of the pub. It was richly decorated with dark wood and smelt like a carpet soaked in beer, which wasn’t far wrong. The walls were hung with pictures of cricketers and 1950’s footballers. The lights were small and low hanging, so to see the Elvis quiffs and stripy shirts, you had to put your nose against the frames.

Sally opened the door into the beer garden. Felix peered tentatively outside. It was dark. The back of the garden was hidden in shadows. The toilet block was just a hulking white shape in the darkness.

“Go on,” Sally said and pushed him out. “Man up. The toilets are there.”

Felix trotted across the garden and jumped inside the toilets without a word. The walls were white and bare, with just a naked bulb hanging from the ceiling, lighting the way to the two dirty urinals hanging from the wall and the one cubicle without a door. Felix grimaced. He pulled his flies down and positioned himself in front of the urinal. It was a bit nippy in there. He waited a few moments. He looked up.

Something made a noise behind him. He stopped and looked around.

“Sally?” he said. “Stop messing about.”

He turned back to the wall and urged himself to hurry up. Something made a noise again.

“Shit,” he muttered, shaking himself. “Shit.”

He turned. Someone was standing behind him. Felix gasped. His lungs inflated in one cool whoosh. Then the someone hit him over the head with a spade. Felix fell against the urinals. His arm went into the bowl.

“Shit!” he shouted and tried to clear his vision. “What the fuck man?!”

He was hit on the head with the spade again. He slid down the wall, his hands grasping the lips of the urinal for support. He blinked and his vision faded.

“What the hell are you doing?” Sally said. She came in through the door. “You don’t have to shout whilst you-”

She tailed off. She looked from Felix, bloody and slumped between the two urinals, to the person standing over him, holding a spade.

“Shit,” she said.

“Shit,” the person said.

He hit her with the spade as well.

I go to Plymouth University. I live in an eight bedroomed house on North Road East and I spend most of my days standing at my huge window and staring out into the street outside. That window freaks me out. I’m looking at it now, trying to measure it up, trying to paint this picture for you. It’s about a metre wide and two metres long, situated slap bang in the middle of the wall. If I get naked or put my hands down my pants or watch porn, anyone standing outside, or in the house directly opposite, will be able to see me. There are no obstacles. I feel like I’m in a fucking viewing gallery. Sure it’s good for the light and all that but, come on, I have to shut the curtains if I want to change my trousers. Well, I don’t have to, but school kids walk passed the window and I don’t reckon it’d be appropriate for them to look up and see a half naked twenty year old guy readjusting himself.

I’m telling you all this to try and convey a sense of belief. You know like the guys on T.V. or liars; if they’re brief in their description you know it’s not the truth. The guys who go into detail, who are rich in their descriptions, you’re more inclined to believe. And I guess I want you to believe this. Not so I can get one over you or laugh at you for being gullible but because it really happened to me. You see, for twenty years, my life was boring. Really dull and so, people thought I was boring and dull. Hey, not anymore. Look at me! Look what happened to me.

It’s an ego thing. And even if I spent a further twenty years in a dilapidated state of intense boredom, at least I’d have this story to tell people; my one moment, my one period of intense excitement, which blew those first twenty years out of the water.

I guess it all started one Sunday morning. I was down the library, perusing the shelves for relevant books for my essay references. There were a couple of guys there as well, doing the same thing. I reckon every uni student does it. You can spot us a mile away. We’re the ones who walk along the shelves, waiting for a relevant book title to jump out. We take all the information about that book down- title, date, author, you know the drill- and then we put it in our essay bibliography, like we’ve read it. It makes us look well informed. It makes us look like we’ve done our research and not just sat on Wikipedia for six hours.

I pulled out a book and looked through it. It had a good title, it made sense. The guy's second name was Dicker though. Mr. Dicker. Mr. Richard Dicker. I wasn't using that. I put the book back and pulled out another one beside it. This looked promising. I wrote the reference down on my hand and then put the book back.

“scuse me mate.”

“Oh, sorry.”

I stepped aside and let another guy go passed. He was big. Six foot, muscles like a rugby player, smart Jack Wills shirt on, sandals. He patted me on the back in thanks. I nodded my head in an idiotic acknowledgement.

I watch a lot of T.V. I watch anything. Stupid BBC Three things, embarrassing American comedies, cheap U.S. films. The colleges in America (which I figure are equivalent to our unis) are always shown to be so cliquey, you know, like secondary school. All jocks and cheerleaders and ‘oh my God, like totally, check out that girl's hair!’ You see the sports players pushing the geeks into cupboards at frat parties and crushing cans on their heads: ‘Like, uh huh, yeah, totally!’ Stupid guffaws, it's high school all over again.

It's nothing like that at English unis. Take that guy for instance. He was as jock as you could get. And me? Though I'm not cool enough to be a geek, if this were America, he'd have shoulder barged me into the shelves and laughed as the books fell on my head. I guess English guys just don't care. Are we more mature? Or is the whole culture of our universities just different than American colleges? Or do those gay T.V. shows exacerbate the tensions at college to make it worth watching? Like One Tree Hill. I'd move out of that town if all that shit kept happening to me or my mates; definitely not worth it.

After twenty more minutes gathering references for books I'd never read, I went into town. It was my routine. On weekdays, I'd go to town at nine but Drakes Circus toilets didn't open until ten on Sundays. Drakes Circus is the shopping centre in Plymouth and it has the nicest toilets. Flush sensors for urinals and cubicles, mirrors everywhere so you can check the back of your head and the side of your face at the same time and those new Dyson hand dryers, where you post your hand through a letter box gap and your hands gets dried by a reverse Hoover. It's fucking awesome.

They're so good, in fact, I never use the toilet in our house. You, the reader, might have seen a student's house before. The shit piled on the stairs, the old food in the kitchen, the rotting bowls in people's rooms. It's terrible. I don't do anything to prevent such rubbish but I don't add to it, so I can judge.

I don't know, however, if you've ever seen the toilet in a student's house before. I'd like to get those ladies from 'How Clean is Your House' round. I'd reckon they'd faint if they saw it. A mouldy bath (mould, on the bath?), a toilet that's never been cleaned, a yellow sink, a communal bath mat and an inch of dust around the taps, the skirting, the shower head. The toilet seat freaks me out. Someone told me you can catch Chlamydia from toilet seats. I didn't believe it until I watched the progression of dirt around our toilet seat. If that myth turns out to be true, you'd definitely get it from our toilet seat. You'd probably get HIV from our toilet seat, or cancer. I stopped sitting on that in September (it's April now by the way) and started visiting Drakes Circus every morning instead.

There's something great about using public toilets. I never used to like doing it, it felt dirty for some reason, but this year, it's my new favourite thing. They're cleaned every hour for Chrissake. There's always soap, the sinks (in Drakes Circus anyway) are so cool, like Roman troughs with long, silver taps fitted every few feet. There's twenty cubicles to choose from, so guys coming in never know which one you've come out of.

That's another thing that weirds me out. When you live in an eight bedroomed house with only one bathroom, things can get a bit claustrophobic, a bit stuffy. And it's generally obvious who the last guy in there was. If you leave it in a state (sometimes it can't be helped) you get ribbed for it. And what's even worse than leaving a bathroom smelling like shit is going in there when it smells like shit. Especially if you know which guy's just vacated the area. It started to make me gag, it started to make me question the diet of some of the guys in the house. I wouldn't be surprised if all they ate were cans of tuna and Guinness.

In my experience of the Drakes Circus toilets, you never get this problem. Always smells nice, anonymity and free toilet roll. Win, win, win.

I do get worried, however, that the security guards might start to notice me. I do go there every morning, between nine and ten. I must be all over the CCTV. They might think I'm doing drugs in the toilet, or collecting a stash hidden in the Dyson machine. They might stop me, one of these days, take me into some back office, handcuff my hands behind my back and question me in an interrogation room, with dark walls, no windows, a policeman by the door and a huge mirror to my left. I'd have to explain, probably in some form of written statement, that I only come in so regularly so I can take a shit in their nice bathrooms. Then they'd ban me or call the police because they get pissed off when cheap student kids take all their toilet roll and soap without spending a single penny in any shop.

So I try and avoid the guards when I see them; cover my face, look in the shop windows as I pass, put my hood over my head. I get nervous when one comes near me, in case he's about to put an arm around me and ask me to come with him.

You have to go up these escalators into the food court to get to the toilets. I see the same guy behind the counter at Burger King every morning and I know he clocks me going into the bathrooms and I know he clocks me coming out five minutes later and I know he knows what I'm up to in there. Shitting in public toilets. The biggest crime. The girl behind the juice bar (right next to the toilet door as well by the way- I'm never going to that juice bar) looks at me in disgust every time she sees me. I just keep my head down and slip through the doors. I feel like a dirty criminal.

That Sunday morning, after creeping my way inside again, I was sitting on the toilet, reading a Cineworld brochure and circling which films I was going to see that month, when two guys came in. That early in the morning, on a Sunday especially, guys don't really come into the toilets, so I was a little surprised. They were talking really loudly, laughing together, you know, so I put my magazine down and prepared to wait until they'd gone before resuming my work.

I saw their shadows go passed my cubicle and stop in front of the urinals.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah," the first guy was saying. "Yeah."

"Right," the second guy said.

"Which one?"

"William Hill." I heard the zips go down. "45/1."

"45 to fucking one?" the other man said. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"How'd he get such long odds?"

"Ah, they reckon the trainer ran the horse slow all season. He's probably planning on making a killing as well. Either way, 45/1. Fifty pounds on that is over two grand."

The zips went up. I heard the urinals rinse.

"And you're certain he's going to win?" the first man said.

"Positive. I saw the thing run last season." The taps starting running. "I guarantee it, mate. Best is West, midday, put a fifty on it and you've got yourself two thousand pounds."

Their feet trooped out. I was busily writing down the name and time of the horse on my Cineworld brochure. I had fifty pounds as well. I finished up in the toilets, washed my hands and left, the brochure sticking out of my back pocket. The Burger King guy waved at me. I put my hood up.

I'd never put a bet on before. Well, I'd once bet five pounds that my mate Tubby Brown wouldn't run naked through the halls last day of Year Eleven and he did, so I lost my money there. But I'd never put a bet on in a real bookies before. Russell Howard says it makes you feel like a man. It made me feel like a little kid. Like an actual little boy going in there that day. The street outside was so sunny and clear and fresh. When I pushed the door open, it was like being eaten by darkness. The place stank of man sweat and tears, it was gloomy, barely lit. There were giant, bald headed men leaning on the fruit machines, slamming their knees into the side in their desperation to hit the right numbers. There were skinny little Robert Carlisle impressionists jumping about under the T.V. screen, wearing Argyle shirts and sporting tattoos right up their skinny arms. I pulled my jeans and belt up and put my hands in the front of my hoody. A couple of guys watched me pass. One snorted and wiped his nose. I looked the other way.

"Oh hi," I said to the girl at the desk. Her hair was scraped back like Al Capone and she had thick black make up over both eyes, liked she'd been punched in the face by one of the guys in the shop. I smiled at her. I'd so get her if I could.

"Can I see your I.D. please?" she said.

"Oh, er, yeah, sure," I said and put my hand in my back pocket. "How old do you have to be?"

"We operate a think 21 policy," the girl said and held out her hand. She had long nails, pink talons. They'd hurt. The very addition of those to her character ruled out half the stuff we could do together.

"What?" I said. "I thought you had to be eighteen to bet. I'm only twenty."

One of the men behind me laughed.

"It's a think 21 policy," the girl said and took my driver's licence. She handed it back to me. "It means we ask everyone who looks under 21 for I.D. It don't mean you have to be 21."

"Oh right."

I put my Licence away and smiled at the girl. She looked back at me, unblinking.

"Yeah?" she said.

"Oh, I want to make a bet," I said.

"Yeah?" she said. "Go on then."

"It's called-

"No, mate," the girl said. She handed me a tiny pen. "You write it down and then give it to me."

“Give it to you?” I said and looked at the tiny pen.

“You never done this before?” she said. She was starting to smile. I banked on it.

“No,” I said, smiling back. “First time.”

“Right.” She sighed and picked up a small form. “I’ll help you. What race?”

“I, er, don’t know,” I said. I laughed. “It’s a race at midday. The horse’s name is Best is West.”

The girl wrote something on the form. She glanced at the T.V. screen.

“45/1,” she said.

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“How much you putting on?”

“Fifty pounds.”

She looked up.

“Fifty pounds?” she said. “Fifty pounds? Why are you betting fifty on a horse at 45/1?”

“It’s my first time.” I smiled.

She raised her eyebrows.

“Fine,” she said and wrote something down. “It doesn’t sound like you’ll be doing it again.” She typed something into her computer and then looked at me. “That’s fifty pounds, please.”

I took the money out of my wallet. I’d just got it out of the ATM outside. If this didn’t pay out, my dad would kill me. If it did, my dad would probably think I was selling drugs. I preferred the second scenario; it would give me a little credibility about the family.

“Thanks,” the girl said and took the money.

She put it through the till and then handed me a receipt.

“What now?” I said.

“Race isn’t for a few hours,” the girl said. “You can’t claim until the race has gone through, so come back when it’s over. It starts at twelve, so come back around then.”

“Cool,” I said. I folded up the receipt. “Thanks.”

I turned around and pulled my trousers up again. I put the receipt in my back pocket. Robert Carlisle and his giant bald mate with golden hoop earrings were watching me from the counter in the middle of the room. They were both chewing gum. I nodded my head at them. They nodded slowly back. I left pretty quickly after that.

I had an hour and a half to waste. I could go home and sit in that shit heap of a house or I could wander round town. I chose to wander round town. I got as far as the Sundial Fountain

in the middle of town before I got bored. I sat on the edge of the Sundial and fiddled with my shoelaces. A group of Goths were hanging about a few feet from me, their dark heads bent, muttering closely together. One of them had a Twilight shirt on. Another one had a piercing through the bridge of their nose. It was pretty scary. Especially seeing them in the sunlight. It was like discovering that vampires were not only real and operative in society but they could stand the daylight.

There was always a group of Goths hanging about the foundation. Everyone knew it- there was a group on Facebook about it and everything. On the other side of the fountain, a group of fourteen year old chavs usually sat around on BMX's, drinking Red Bull. I'd like to see the two groups come together, in a sort of World of Warcraft type fight. Or Tekken: Plymouth.

I got up and went into Superdrug to buy some two pound fifty sunglasses. Apparently you got a free lipsil with it but they were all out so I didn't get mine. I admired my reflection in the cheap, tin foil mirror above the lipstick. I looked cool. I swaggered back outside, into the sunlight. The Goths looked at me. I pulled my collar up and strutted up the hill to Shakeaway. I knew I'd look a lot less cool sucking from a giant blue and yellow cup but I was prepared to risk that. I didn't really have that intrinsic cool factor anyway. I'm one of those guys that can look cool but everyone knows I'm really not. In my experience, cool is a type of presence, not a look. Like you see guys and girls wearing dirty, paint stained jeans with holes in and old jumpers and unbrushed hair and they are cool. Everyone knows it. Cool is how you are, not how you look. I could look as cool as Becks but it'd fool no one.

I got a Malteser shakeaway. It was pale and bland, like my life. I sat on the wall outside and sipped it until my straw got stoppered with chocolate and I choked. The chavs went whizzing passed on their BMX's. One of them threw an empty can of Red Bull at me. It knocked my new sunglasses off and they all laughed. That's something you'd never get in America; little kids, barely into High School, picking on twenty year old guys.

I waited until they'd skidded to a stop by the fountain before picking my sunglasses up and putting them back on my face. They knew cool was a presence. They'd never have done that to the kids wearing the paint stained clothes.

Sometimes, I think I'd prefer to be uglier and be cool than average looking and with no social status whatsoever. In my experience, looks is nothing to being cool. Look at John Lennon in 1968. He was cool but was he fit? I'd trade in my looks in an instant for that sense of presence, that aura, like him. The only thing I got going for me at the moment is that my best friend, Martin, is black. I don't mean town black though, like playing basketball or

shooting people, I mean goofy black like that guy from Blazing Saddles. He is quite cool though, in a weird sort of way. A cool that means the girls all love him but if shit started going down, he'd never pull a gun or pop a cap in someone's ass. Still, for people who don't know he likes to go home and drink Cherryade whilst watching King of Queens, it's pretty neat to be seen together. We're like Hey Arnold and that guy with the big hair like Marge Simpson.

His dad is presence cool. He drives around in a silver Mercedes and wears a Giorgio Armani suit. It's awesome. I've seen pictures of him from the seventies. Afro is not the word to describe it. It's like someone grew a man from a ball of hair. I love it when he comes down to visit. He drives us across to Cornwall; air conditioning, heated seats, T.V.s in the back. It's better than our house.

I text Martin then. He text back quickly. Sunday mornings, he goes to play Squash in the gym over by Central Park. I'd go with him but then I'd miss the toilet trip to Drakes. I do go with him Wednesday evenings because I'm paranoid about putting on weight. I've always been the skinny kid, right through school, always. If I suddenly get fat, it'd be so obvious. I'd feel I'd let people down. It's not like I was chubby. If you put weight on when you're already a chubby, no one gives a shit. If I start getting fat after being known as the skinny one, I'd never hear the end of it. People might feel sorry for me. I go running every Saturday and Tuesday as well. Just a couple of miles around Central Park. I don't need much motivation to make me go. I just think of Tubby Brown who, at Primary School, was the skinny little kid we sent behind the P.E. shed to get the footballs back and, by his naked run in Year Eleven, was pushing fifteen stone.

"Hey man."

I looked up. Martin was standing behind me.

"What's up brother," I said and stood up. "How was squash?"

"Better than playing with you."

We started walking the same way.

"Cool Converse," I said and pointed at his shoes. "You play in them?"

"Seventy quid," he said and scratched his arm. "Are you kidding me?"

"I would," I said. "They look pretty cool."

"When you can afford a pair of seventy pound shoes," Martin said. "You can do what you like with them."

"That time may be fast approaching," I said. I got the receipt out of my pocket. "I just put a bet on."

“A bet?” Martin frowned. “On a horse? Why did you do that?”

“I heard some guys talking whilst in Drakes,” I said. “This guy reckoned the horse was a guaranteed win. So I put fifty pounds on.”

“What odds?”

“What?”

“What odds?”

“45/1.”

“45/1!?” Martin looked at me. “You blew fifty quid on 45/1?”

“If it wins, I am rolling,” I said. I put the receipt back in my pocket. “If it wins, you are going to be jealous.”

“If it wins I want a share.”

“Get lost.”

Martin put me in a head lock. We’re about the same height but he’s much stronger than me.

“Ok, ok!” I shouted. “I’ll buy you a McDonalds.”

“A McDonalds?” Martin said and swung me around. “You got to do better than that.”

“Ok, I’ll buy you something better!” I said. “Just tell me what presents black boys want.”

Martin laughed and pushed me away.

“Come on, man,” he said. “What time does that horse run?”

“Midday.”

He checked his watch.

“Let’s go check it,” he said. “We can watch it race.”

Carlisle and his bald mate were still leaning on the counter when we went back into the bookies. With Martin beside me, I walked in slightly stronger than the way I left. I leant on the counter beside them and stuck my elbows out until they nudged Carlisle’s denim jacket. He looked at me. I stood up straight and pretended I needed to go the till.

The girl was there still. She had her back to me. I leant on the desk and prepared my smile, watching her hair swing as she categorised some files or something.

“Hey,” I said as she turned.

“What?”

I backed off. It wasn’t the same girl. This was a woman. Probably about forty five with a heavy bust and John Lennon glasses. She had a moustache.

“Can I see your I.D. please?” she said.

“Yeah, uh, sure,” I said and got my driver’s licence out again. “I’m twenty.”

She looked at it, her lips moving like a bored horse. She handed it back.

“Are you making a bet, sir?”

“Uh no, not now.”

“Then move away from the desk, please.”

I stepped back. Carlisle and his bald mate were watching me carefully, chewing in tandem. I scratched the back of my head and went to join Martin on the fruit machines. He was slapping buttons madly.

“People in here are weird.”

“Yeah, man,” he said and hit a new button. “Jackpot.”

“You’ve won the jackpot?”

“Nah.” Martin bent down to collect his money. “Just fifteen quid.”

“Fifteen quid? I’d love fifteen quid. You can buy me a McDonalds. How did you do that?”

“Luck.” Martin shrugged and put the money in his pocket.

He turned around and leant on the counter. Carlisle looked at him slowly.

“What’s the time?” I asked him, so the men knew we were together.

“Just gone five to,” Martin said. “Hey, man.” He looked at Carlisle. “He’s been I.D’d, he’s over eighteen. Quit looking at him.”

Carlisle shrugged and turned back to the T.V. screens. His bald mate sniffed.

“What?” Martin said as he saw my look of fear strewn incredulity. “You don’t need that.”

“How come they never I.D. you?” I asked and leant beside him.

“Look at me,” he said. He tugged his collar up and bared his teeth. “Now look at you. You got asked for I.D. going into a fifteen last week.”

“He was just doing that to annoy me.”

“Sure.” He slapped my chest. “Best is West, that’s you.”

“Yeah.” I glanced at the T.V. screens lined up along the wall. “Where? Where?”

“Third one along.” He pointed. He whistled. “It is 45/1,” he said. “You might be on the verge of a raping.”

“I trust my sources,” I said and squinted at the T.V. screen.

“Two guys in Drakes?” Martin said. “You were on the toilet, weren’t you?”

“Be quiet.”

We watched the horses shaking their heads in their stalls. I was gripping the edge of the counter. It was quite thrilling. I hadn’t been thrilled like this in ages. I could feel my ears going red. Martin laughed and thumped my back.

“Don’t take off, mate,” he said.

“If it wins, I’ll fucking fly.”

I couldn’t hear the noise of my race above the football on one screen, the dog racing on the other and a grey haired man commentating on the last. Next thing I knew, the stalls had opened and over a dozen horses had come flying out. My stomach leapt and my palms stung.

“Which one is mine?!”

“The green and pink one. Closest to us,” Martin said. He was gripping my shoulder. “Come on.”

My horse was at the back of the pack. I glanced at my ticket and wiped my mouth. My palms were sweating now. The jockey was up in his stirrups, waving the whip energetically. The horse tossed its head and surged forward.

“Fuck me,” Martin said. “Look at it go.”

It careered passed the second from last horse and then pulled out onto the far side. It pulled itself separate from the pack and charged.

“Go on, you little bitch!” I shouted as my horse steamed down the outside lane. It was level with a red and gold horse. “Go, go, go!”

The two horses reached a hedge and jumped in sync. My horse landed a few feet ahead. It leapt forward.

“It’s leading!” Martin called, clinging to my shoulder. “It’s leading! It’s leading!”

“It’s pulling away!” I said. “It’s not just leading! It’s pulling away! Look at that baby go!”

A couple of real men in the corner were watching me, either in amusement or annoyance. I didn’t care. Best is West took the next hedge and started to move into the inside lane. The gap between it and second place was lengthening. Its great muscular legs and shoulders were stretched out as it flew down the track, sods of earth and grass flung up behind it.

“Oh my Christ,” I said and twisted the receipt in my sweaty thumbs. “Jesus, Martin, Jesus. I’m about to win two thousand pounds. You can’t claim that on MP expenses. I’m going to be rich.”

My horse was galloping ahead of the pack now. Its head was down. The jockey waved his whip as it went racing passed the cameras like a whippet. It took the last hedge and landed, strong, majestic, beautifully, powerful. Its head bowed and it charged down the home straight. Martin was shaking me, shouting, and Best is West flew over the finish line in first place. The rest of the horses came tumbling through next but it didn’t matter. I was holding the receipt, staring at the screen.

“Christ!” I shouted and turned to look at Martin. “Did you see that?! I’m doing that again!”

Martin grabbed my head and shook me, then lifted me off the ground.

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