

SUNDAY MORNING

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Sunday morning; more like Sunday afternoon. Craig's splitting headache greeted him with a slap in the chops for being so rude. He rolled onto his side and pushed himself slowly upright. The room span wildly and the remnants of last night's curry, rice and chips threatened a hasty and ever-so-messy exit. He swallowed hard and a Guinness-filled belch erupted from his fag-burnt throat.

Not a good day.

But it had been a good night. Besides waking up alone and being faced with clearing up the wreckage without the assistance of his errant flatmate, Craig had had a thoroughly enjoyable time. As he sat on the edge of the bed, gazing out at the Sunday wanderers in nearby Sefton Park, he thought things through.

It had all started, as the best parties do, somewhere in the centre of town. Probably Bar Ça Va, or 'Bar Caver' as it was affectionately known. The cheap tequilas definitely had a lot to do with it, but it never took much for Craig to announce an impromptu shindig back at the flat.

Everyone had kept going 'til about one, touring the various bars and pubs around Slater Street and winding up at the Irish Centre for a bit of a boogie. All of a sudden, Craig had decided the music was getting on his tits and that he'd rather be at home, surrounded by beers and necking a few choice mates to a soundtrack of his favourite tunes. The crowd around him had been only too keen to oblige, and God-knows-how-many of them piled back on the oh-so-convenient night bus to Ullet Road - or 'Bullet Road' as the graffiti had so aptly renamed it.

From then on, things get a bit hazy. In fact quite a lot of the night lay smothered in a spongy haze. The old Morning Glory seeds, purchased the previous afternoon in a bunch of decorated boiling tubes may have had something to do with it. They were a legal high at the time and he'd assumed their legality meant they were crap. Not so...

Now came the inevitable payback. A mouthful of wallpaper paste and nostrils stuffed with black slimy fag residue. Lovely. Need a drink. He licked his teeth and tuned in to his bladder. Full and eager for release. Kitchen, toilet - two birds with one stone, so to speak.

Two birds. Two birds.

As bathrooms go, the flats were reasonably well-equipped. Not too cramped, constant hot water, capable plumbing... The building had once been a school - a pretty small one by all accounts - and it told in the layout. The bathroom and toilet were separated by a wall that didn't entirely reach the ceiling - awkward if you need a dump when you've got an honoured guest relaxing in a nice hot foamy bath next door.

The toilet walls looked inherently cold. The entire 365 pages of the Far Side calendar did little to mask this, though they'd prompted long queues outside on many occasions. Craig was certainly not immune to the pages' hypnotic effect, but his eyes were barely open as he stared vacantly at John Major's face, pasted to the inside of the toilet lid and occasionally splashed from below.

When he was done, he hauled on the chain. He hung there for a moment, swaying to and fro as he gripped the chain for balance. Then, finally, he got his act together and

staggered next door to the bathroom. Smacking his gummy lips together he leant on the door handle, expecting the door to open.

It didn't.

His eyes glazed over and he sighed heavily, slumping against the peeling paintwork. Great.

He tried the door another couple of times before deciding it was locked from within.

Fuck it; go back to bed.

No, sort it out now.

Oh, fa fuck's sake.

He wandered back into the toilet, dropped the seat and the lid and stood on them to peer over the wall. The first thing he noticed was the open window, then the broken mirror, then the blood on the mirror, multiple trickles running down into the once gleaming sink.

And then he saw the girls.

Too dead to be a turn on, one lay serenely naked in a couple of inches of rose-tinted bath water, her hair plastered filthily to the sides of her face; the other lay shattered under the sink, a vision of whore couture, hair and clichéd lace-wear thick with dried blood. Not your average Sunday afternoon pick me up.

Craig was mopping up the last of the beer from the kitchen floor when Adam huffed and puffed his way into the flat.

"Fuckin' 'ell, man. I tell you, Craig, one of these days those stairs are gonna be the death of me."

Craig attempted a laugh but failed dismally. "How was Nottingham?"

"Pretty damn good, bro'. Pretty damned good," Adam answered in his strange Anglo-Aussie twang. "Looks like you had a bit of a party here, too. Did I miss anything?"

"Oh, you know. Same old thing. Went to Bar Caver, Slaters. The usual."

"Dragged a few of the usual crowd back here for more of the same, then, eh? Any nice chicks? D'ya get a root?"

"Oh, there were two pretty fit birds but they were kind of preoccupied so I did the usual Saturday night thing and passed out with very little recollection of the evening's events."

"Blotto, eh? How's the head?"

"Not good," Craig groaned, grinding his fists into his eyes.

"Nah, mine neither, mate. Man, you should've seen the Garvey last night. Fuckin' awesome. Chicks everywhere, some of the best flares I've seen in a long time. Some wicked tunes. Fuckin' great. Man, you shoulda been there."

"I probably should," Craig agreed, tossing the beer-sodden mop back into its corner and collapsing onto one of the shabby kitchen chairs.

Adam pulled open the fridge door, delighted at the sight of leftover beer. He pulled one from the shelf, opened it and handed it to Craig before taking one for himself.

"Cheers," they chorused, feebly going through the motions of a complicated series of bottle-clinks before supping the ice-cold amber.

Adam sighed and kicked his small rucksack. "Better chuck this away, I s'pose."

A light tap and one Cup-winning kick later the bag lay at the end of his bed.

“He shoots; he scores!” he hollered, heading off down the hall with his beer still in hand. “Fuck me!”

Craig sat silent for a moment in anticipation.

“Fuck me!” Adam shouted again.

Craig swallowed and pulled a battered packet of Bensons from his dressing gown. Adam’s head appeared round the kitchen door as Craig leaned over the stove, doing his best to avoid losing his eyebrows as he attempted to light his second last, sorry looking cigarette.

“Craig, what the fuck happened here last night?”

Craig turned his head to face him, singeing his unwashed hair in the process. He swallowed again, harder.

“Craig, I need some sort of fucking explanation for this, mate.”

“What?” Craig asked quietly, sheepishly.

“‘What?!’ Adam’s jaw dropped. “I ask you to explain the presence of two dead chicks in our bathroom – fit, yes, but dead all the fuckin’ same – and all you can say is ‘what?’ What do you mean ‘what?’? These chicks are dead, Craig. Very fucking dead. Fit, dead and in our fucking bathroom.”

“Yeah, I know.” Craig pulled on the smouldering cigarette for support.

“And I suppose that’s why you’re smoking in the middle of the afternoon?”

Craig nodded.

“Understandable. In fact, if you don’t mind I’ll have one myself.”

Craig pulled out another ropy looking fag, lit it from his own and handed it over. Adam tugged on it desperately. It was his first cigarette in eight months.

“Okay. So what happened?”

“Adam, I have absolutely no idea.”

“‘Absolutely no idea’? Now, what the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“It means I don’t know.”

“Did you kill ‘em?”

“Fucking hell, Adam. Of course I didn’t fucking kill them.”

“Did you fuck ‘em?”

Craig rolled his eyes. “Not ‘til after I found them, no. Christ, Adam, I don’t even know who they are.”

“But they were here last night?”

“Well, I presume so.”

“You ‘presume so’? Fucking hell, Craig. We’re talking about two pretty fuckin’ attractive young girls here. How many people did you invite back last night? ‘Cos I can’t imagine missing these two in any crowd that’d fit in a small flat like this - unless of course you only invited out of this world, top class fuckin’ babes, which although I’m your friend and everything I find pretty fuckin’ unlikely.”

“I just don’t remember,” Craig groaned, ash falling from the his untapped cigarette. “I was wanked. Rupert and Justin were here and the door was pretty much open all night - and we’d done a load of Morning Glory seeds, too.”

“Great, Craig, fucking great. So you’re telling me that total strangers were wandering in and out of our flat and you were too fucked up to know what was going on.”

“Yes, Adam. That’s pretty much what I’m telling you.”

“Fuckin’ marvellous. We could’ve been fuckin’ robbed, Craig. Do you realise that?”

"Gee, Adam. I hadn't even thought about that. I guess I was just a bit too preoccupied with the two dead birds in the bathroom."

"Point," Adam nodded, his own cigarette sailing over the fire escape to the street below. "So when did you find 'em?"

"A few hours ago."

"A few hours ago?" Adam was incredulous.

"I haven't been up long."

"What the fuck is wrong with you, man? Why the fuck haven't you called the fuckin' rozzers?"

"Because, Adam, there are two dead birds in my flat and I'm in no position to explain that fact. Not only do I have the hangover to end all hangovers, the sort of brain-in-a-vice feeling that makes a lobotomy seem like a fucking good idea, but – just in case such a trifling matter had slipped your fanny-infested mind – I am on parole and only six months out of Garth after serving five years for aggravated fuckin' burglary. In that bathroom are two cast iron one-way tickets back to a place I have no intention of revisiting – not in this life, not in any other life. No self-respecting bizzie, if indeed there is such a thing, is going to waste his time trying to work out what actually happened when there's a perfectly viable suspect already on the premises. To sum up, Adam, if I go to the police, I'm fucked. I'd be lucky to taste a freshly pulled pint of Guinness again before I'm forty five."

Adam rubbed his head and sat down. "So what about me?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well now I'm fucked, too. Jesus Christ, Craig. I've never been in any trouble with the cops. I can't handle this. I mean, what are you gonna do?"

"Adam," Craig slapped the younger man on the shoulder. "We are going to find out who did this and see they get what's coming to them."

"So that's your fucking plan?"

"Yeah."

Adam shook his head with a despairing snort. He lifted the bottle of Becks to his lips to find it empty and shook his head once more. "Fuck," he hissed.

"Have you got a better one?"

"No I haven't, but haven't you got a Plan B or something?"

"Christ, Adam. At least I've come up with something..."

"Oh, and I haven't? Well, fuckin' *excuse* me. Only I just got home from a particularly nice weekend away and you've been hanging around the flat with a couple of dead chicks all fuckin' day – who, I hasten to add, died at a party you held in my absence, in our fuckin' flat."

"I was cleaning the place up!"

"Oh, well I'm glad to see you got your fuckin' priorities right. I'd hate to think the police might come crashing through the door looking for corpses and find the place un-fucking-tidy."

"Oh, look; just fuck off, all right. D'you think this hasn't freaked me out? Well, fuck you. I have absolutely no idea what went on here last night. I don't know who these girls are and I haven't the fuckin' foggiest who left them here. Now if you're not up to helping me out, well then that's just fine. I don't need your help. I can sort this shit out on my own."

"Bollocks," Adam told him flatly.

“What?”

“That’s bollocks. You can’t do this on your own. Especially with a plan like that. I’ll help you, but on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You clean up the bathroom.”

Craig and Adam sat with their lunch in the main dining area of the Irish Centre, purposefully as far from the bar as possible. Rupert and Justin were still at the counter, arguing over who should get the last tepid sausage. A young but grizzled Irish girl was waving it in front of them in a set of rusty tongs.

“But what if the girls have already been reported missing?” Adam asked Craig. “If you start asking questions about them, you might attract attention to yourself.”

“Quit your worrying, Adam. As far as Justin and Rupert are concerned, we’re talking about two fit birds who were at my place on Saturday night. It’d be far more suss if I *wasn’t* interested. You just keep quiet, all right? Remember, you’re supposed to have no idea who they are. You’ve never seen them...”

“Christ, Craig. I could hardly forget that I’ve only actually seen these chicks dead, now could I?”

Craig’s eyes flickered and Adam’s concentration focused on his food.

“Bastard!” Justin glared across the table at Rupert as he took his seat.

“You’re just jealous because you lack my disarming charm,” Rupert chided him.

“No, that’s where you’re wrong, Rupert. The only thing I’m jealous of is that juicy looking sausage you’ve got there...”

“Easy boys. People’ll talk,” Craig interrupted.

“Let ‘em talk,” Rupert cast a condescending glance across the room. “I’m ready for the world to know that Justin longs for a juicy sausage just like mine!”

“You twisted wanker,” Justin snorted.

“Aw, Justin. Now, if you had my looks and my way with words then this sausage, that girl even, could have been yours.”

“Well, I’m gutted,” Justin grinned. “To think, if I too looked like a cross between Paul Daniels and Basil Brush and was full to the brim with cheap *double entendres* and a third rate Viz sense of humour, I might have landed not only a small sack stuffed with the shitty bits of what may or may not have once been pigs, but also the chance to slip behind the Irish Centre for a ride on the village bike. As if it wasn’t bad enough that we’ll be reeking of rancid chip fat and egg for the next few hours, I could’ve had the added pleasure of a collection of specially inbred Irish venereal diseases to play with.”

“I think you’re being a bit harsh there, Justin,” Rupert chastised him, his eyes on the girl at the counter. “These are good quality sausages. Trotters and testicles only.”

Justin laughed and choked, a spray of baked beans covering the table. Craig slapped him on the back and offered him a glass of water.

“So, Adam,” Rupert began, ignoring the scene. “How was sunny Nottingham?”

“Surprisingly sunny, actually.”

“Say it’s not true,” Rupert camped it up. “Sun in the Midlands – and in June, too. So, did you go on any nice picnics?”

“Nah, mate. But Megadog were on at the Marcus Garvey Centre. Spankin’ tunes, man.”

“Spanking tunes?” Rupert repeated with a chuckle. “Now that sounds like my kind of place.”

“Oh, it was wicked. Loads of foxy chicks, Transglobal Underground and Banco de Gaia playin’ live. Drugs a-go-go. Top.”

“Foxy chicks! I like it. Could’ve done with some of that myself.”

“Really? Craig says there were a couple of babes at our place on Saturday night.”

“I’m surprised you noticed, Craig,” Justin laughed. “You were out of your fucking box.”

“Yeah, well, maybe I dreamt it or maybe those Morning Glory seeds actually worked, but I could’ve sworn there were two really stunning birds there.”

“What? Two in particular?” Rupert’s interest was piqued.

“Yeah, one blonde, the other kind of ginger – you know: the fake, kind of auburn colour everyone seems to be after these days.”

“Kate and Louise?”

“You tell me,” Craig shrugged. “As far as I remember I never got to talk to them.”

“Just a few words, Craig,” Rupert grinned. “Kate’d be the blonde one – kind of shoulder length hair – and Louise is the reddish head – real angular jaw length bob. Those the two you’re on about?”

“Yeah, that’d be them.” Craig kept his eyes from Adam’s. “Did... I mean do you know them, then?”

“Only vaguely...”

“Bollocks, Rupert,” Justin interrupted. “You don’t know ‘em at all. Or at least they don’t know you, which is far more important.”

“That’s what I meant,” Rupert glared at him.

“So how did they end up at my place?” Craig pressed him.

“Christ, mate, you don’t remember much at all, do you?”

“Fill me in.”

“They were at Bar Caver. Louise works there and was slipping us the extra slammers – I can’t believe you haven’t noticed her there before. Kate was on our side of the bar, doing body slammers with some of her mates. It was Eddie that introduced us. They’re neighbours or something. I don’t think he knows them too well, either, but you know Eddie: even the most tenuous link to a beautiful woman and he’s in there like a shot...”

“Eddie, man,” Justin chuckled. “Shit, he could bluff a bird into the sack with any old crap. He should be working for the CIA.”

“Yeah, anyway... you, my friend were well into it. In like Flynn – anyone would’ve thought you’d known the two of them for years, especially once you’d dived in and wangled a body slammer with Kate. Wow, what I wouldn’t have given to lick salt off her chest and pluck a slice of lemon from between those blowjob lips.”

“You’re taking the piss, right?”

“Not at all, mate. Not at all. You were on a hell of a roll that night, Craig. I’m surprised you didn’t end up with one of them jumping your bones. Christ, if it hadn’t been for that Morning Glory you might even have woken up with both of them!”

“Yeah, Craig, but it was a wicked party.”

“I’m sure it was, Eddie. I’m just having a little trouble piecing it all together.”

“And you’re after the low-down on Kate and Louise, eh? Bloody hell; if I had an ounce for every time someone’s quizzed me on those two...”

"You know them well, then?"

"Oh, not as well as I'd like, if you catch my drift. They've lived at 68 for six months or so. Just the two of them in a four bedroom house."

"There's nobody else there?"

"Nah. A couple of people have kipped over for a couple of weeks now and then, but most of the time it's just them. Nice place, too – at least from the outside."

"You've never been in?"

"Never made it past the doorstep, Craig. And, Christ, what I wouldn't do for a late night invite. That's the shitter of living virtually next door, of course – even if I was to get inside, hang out with them and get all smoked up, there'd be no way I'd be able to pull the old 'oh it's such a long way home, it'd be so much easier if I could just kip over' scam."

"Downer."

"Indeed, Craig my friend. Indeed," Eddie grinned, sipping his orange juice as Craig swirled the remainder of his Guinness around in its glass. "Still, I s'pose I could just follow my dick and move a bit further away. Maybe Adam'd fancy swapping – what do you reckon?"

"Well, he's always been more into perving than acting, but I think he's pretty comfortable where he is. And besides, I don't think I could handle living with a tee-totaller. It gives me great pleasure to come home from work and find my flatmate relaxing in front of the TV with a nice cold bottle of beer, eager to have me join him."

"You really should give that shit up, Craig. Too much beer rots your brain. Embrace the weed..."

"It's a tough choice, Eddie, but I think I'll stick with my drug of choice. I manage to come up with enough excuses to smoke as it is. without developing a hardcore ganja habit."

"It's not a habit, Craig. It's a pleasure."

"That's as may be, Eddie, but it's just not for me," Craig raised his hands defensively. "Besides, I need to keep myself as clean as possible these days."

"Understood. But one of these days it'll be legal. You mark my words."

"Not in this country, Eddie. The British public are far too namby-pamby to go for anything that radical."

"Bollocks, Craig. We're in the first phase of a revolution, believe you me. In a few years' time, the Government'll cotton onto the fact that there's money to be made from a nation of committed potheads. There'll be spliffs in packets in no time at all, mark my words."

"And you'll be the new Marlboro Man, bringing the weed to the masses, I'm sure," Craig chuckled.

"Man, I will be running the factories. Me and my blissed-out minions'll be skinning up doobies by the truck load."

"Whatever you say, mate. Whatever you say... Anyway, enough of this shit; we were talking about birds."

"Yeah, you're right. Sorry, mate. What do you want to know?"

"I dunno," Craig confessed. "What sort of crowd do they hang out with? Anyone I know?"

"Unlikely mate. These chicks are far too cool for the likes of you."

"Thanks, pal."

"Sorry, Craig. Only joshin'."

"Too right. And, besides, by all accounts I was doing rather well with them on Saturday night."

"By whose accounts exactly?"

"Rupert and Justin's."

"Those idiots? Man, you're more gullible than I thought."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, Craig, that they're having you on; stroking your already raging pecker."

"So I wasn't doing body slammers with Kate, then?"

Eddie burst into fits of laughter, reaching for his orange juice to steady himself. Craig was crestfallen.

"Body slammers?" Eddie chuckled, wiping a loose tear from his eye. "You should be so lucky."

"So that was just bullshit, then?"

"Based on a smidgeon or truth, I'll give them that. I suppose this was supposed to have happened at Bar Caver? They may well be referring to your stunningly bawdy attempt to snog Kate while she sucked on a slice of lemon after downing her own shot of the Devil's mouthwash. Rupert had just told you how desperately out of your league she is, how the two of you'd never have anything to talk about... All of a sudden, you push him aside and stride up to her at the bar. I believe your words were 'I don't wanna talk to her; I just wanna fuck her'. Quite poetic, I thought."

Craig's head was in his hands. "And I suppose she heard that?" he mumbled.

"Who knows, mate? I wasn't all that close to you and I heard it."

"And then what did I do?"

"Well, as far as I can remember it, which is pretty well seeing as I wasn't tanked up to the eyeballs with beer and tequila, you grabbed her round the waist and told her you'd be perfectly willing to help her get the bits of lemon out from between her teeth if she was having any problems."

"I said that?"

"No shit, Sherlock."

"And what happened then?"

"I think her words were 'Over my dead body'," Eddie grinned.

Craig's face was ashen and his mouth painfully dry. "I think I need another pint," he stammered, rising from his seat.

"Cheer up, mate. It's not that bad. At least she'll remember you - assuming she didn't get as fucked up as you did later in the evening."

"You didn't see her later on, then?" Craig paused on his way to the bar.

"Well, she came back to your place. They both did - you do remember that don't you?"

"Only vaguely," Craig lied. "Refresh my memory."

"Louise got off early and came to the Irish with us, then the two of them were so overwhelmed by your quick wits and stunning generosity that they joined us on the bus back to yours."

"Anyone else with them?"

"Some geezer from Bar Caver."

"Do you know him?"

“Nah. Friend of Kate’s, I think. Rough looking fucker; loads of tattoos and a bar through the bridge of his nose.”

“Nice.”

“Bit of a nutter, I reckon.”

“Fantastic, and this Hell’s Angel nightmare was wandering around in my flat.”

“Don’t act like it’s my fault, Craig. You invited the bloke.”

“I did?”

“Sure. The two of you were knocking back Hooch at the Irish Centre trying to prove it was a birds’ drink by drinking the bar dry.”

Craig looked down at him in disbelief, then strode off to the bar.

“No shit, Craig. No shit,” Eddie called after him.

“You do realise this is burglary?”

“We’ve got the keys, Adam,” Craig pointed out as he tied the heavy plastic bag around the Hoover nozzle and flicked the switch. “Nobody’s going to give us any hassle.”

“‘Us’? I think not, me old mate. How the fuck do you expect to explain the fact that you’ve let yourself into a house belonging to two dead birds, using a set of keys you found on one of the corpses? I am not keen, mate, not keen.”

“Suit yourself, but I’m telling you there won’t be any trouble. No one else lives there and nobody’s going to notice someone walking straight up to the front door and letting themselves in with a key. People have stayed there for a couple of weeks at a time before. The neighbours’ll just assume it’s business as usual.”

“And you’re speaking from experience, of course,” Adam snorted.

“Low, Adam. Very low,” Craig scowled, easing the plastic from the end of the Hoover, rolling the excess and stapling the bag closed. “It’s nothing to do with experience, it’s simple common sense.”

“And what happens when the rozzers start questioning the neighbours about the chicks’ disappearance? They’re all gonna wonder where this mysterious housemate is.”

“And the descriptions will be useless. Adam, I look like any other Tom, Dick or Harry in this city. No outrageous clothes; no daft hairdo; no distinguishing features.”

“Except for your rapier wit and criminal record.”

“This is Liverpool, Adam,” Craig grinned, heaving the bag and its contents into the cupboard. “People here are born with criminal records.”

“Well, good luck to you, mate. Personally, I think you’re a fuckin’ idiot. I dunno what you expect to find there, anyway. Just call the fucking police.”

“Oh, and they’re going to understand, are they?”

“Well, with each day these two spend wrapped in plastic in the hall cupboard they’re gonna get a lot less fucking understanding. I mean, my hat’s off to you for this Hoover thing. I’d never have thought of vacuum packing the chicks. Anyone would’ve thought you’d done this sort of thing before. Still, the bags are starting to fill up. Sooner or later they’re gonna be mingin’ like nobody’s business.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about that, Adam. Nobody called the bizzies over the stench coming from the Wests’ house and look how many corpses they were sitting on.”

“I’m not talking about Fred fuckin’ West, Craig. I’m talking about us in a third floor flat on Ullet Road. In case you hadn’t noticed, lifting our floorboards puts us in the flat below. And as for sitting on corpses, I have no fucking intention of starting up a crèche for the

dearly departed. We're not talking a few dodgy videos here, Craig, we are talking dead fucking bodies. Corpses. Two dead chicks we know virtually nothing about. At least the Wests had done the deed themselves; we're risking a one-way ticket to Broadmoor for something someone else did."

"Not for long, Adam. Not for long."

It had been a few years since Craig had done a *bona fide* burglary and it showed. His hand was shaking as he slid the key into the Yale lock of Number 68 Kenmare Road. He cursed Adam for making this harder than it needed to be. To Craig, looking around the dead girls' house had been a simple necessity, all part of finding a comfortable solution to their current predicament. With the keys in his hand it hadn't even occurred to him that he shouldn't head up to Wavertree and let himself in. After all, he wasn't going to nick anything, and it wasn't like the girls were going to feel their privacy had been violated. They were already wrapped up naked in a couple of plastic bags back at his flat. As far as he'd seen it, they should be grateful someone like him was going to such extraordinary lengths to see that justice was done.

Now, though, he wasn't so confident. Where a few years ago he wouldn't have needed the slightest excuse to climb in through an insecure kitchen window, whether the place was empty or not, now he was having difficulty turning a key in the front door.

There's nobody here, he reassured himself.

But it didn't do any good. His stomach jittered and he struggled not to lose his nerve. He forced himself not to look up and down the street for nosy neighbours.

Five years in Garth had definitely done the job. As he leaned back on the door and stared at the worn cream-coloured carpet, the sweat forming on his brow, there was no doubt in Craig's mind that doing time had made an unshakeably honest man of him.

He had absolutely no idea what he was after. There was no clever Poirot-type theory behind his exploration of Number 68. He'd simply have to root around and see what he could find. He'd cover his tracks as well as he was able, and get out as soon as he could.

He wandered down the hall, past the bedroom on the left and into the living room. Compared to his and Adam's own shared living space, it was extremely tasteful and tidy. The walls were decorated with movie posters and framed black-and-white photos. The gas fire was topped with an ornate black candelabra covered in beads of white wax that Craig found strangely erotic. Just your average birds' living room, really. And the kitchen was much the same. Washing up obviously left for Sunday afternoon, a collection of highly arousing postcards on and around the fridge – Ru Paul, stereotypically gay looking men in the usual leather and rubber outfits, a few 1950s porn cartoon bondage characters. And those magnetic words everyone but Craig and Adam seemed to have, arranged together into various nonsensical phrases all over the fridge door. All the usual gubbins.

He opened the fridge more out of curiosity than any hope of finding something useful. The original plan had given way to simple nosiness, fascination with the lives of two people he had never known. He felt frozen in time, just as he always used to. It was as if he could take as long as he wanted, as if he could amble around the house for the entire day, looking in cupboards and drawers, imagining the owners or tenants wearing the clothes and jewellery he held up for inspection. The world outside would wait for him, wait until he emerged before rolling on as he walked calmly away.

But what he found brought him back to reality, back to the matter in hand. An entire shelf of the fridge door was devoted to rows of little bottles - medical bottles, instantly recognisable to anyone.

Methadone.

Great. More complications. Adam *would* be pleased.

He picked out a slice of pecan pie and tucked in, the fridge door still open, the methadone still in view. He chewed the situation over thoughtfully, wracking his sugar-starved brain for answers.

An overdose was clearly out of the question. Losing the plot was not. That the birds had slipped up with their dealer was definitely an option.

Had there been a scag dealer at the flat that night? He nearly choked on the pie at the thought. Adam would be severely pissed off if he thought Craig was letting wankers like that into their flat of a Saturday night. Dead birds was one thing. Heavyweight drug dealers was quite another. Adam liked his pot – though he wasn't as devoted as Eddie – and he was far from averse to a spot of mushroom action, or the odd dose of Es and whizz. But coke, heroin and the gun-toting madness that came with them were way out of his league. And they were out of Craig's, too - more than ever, now that he was firmly on the straight and narrow.

He laid the empty plate on the draining board with the rest of the dishes and wiped his gloves on his jeans. Time for a more thorough inspection.

The downstairs bedroom obviously doubled as a chillout room. Bonges, beanbags, UV posters, and Kashmiri carpets and wall hangings all made for a relaxing if oppressive environment. Eddie would have loved it, if he'd ever been lucky enough to score an invite from his drop-dead near-neighbours.

The remnants of the girls' last afternoon lay everywhere. Ashtrays overflowed with unfinished spliffs and torn up Rizla packets - one even sported a failed attempt at some Tulip hybrid. Next to the biggest beanbag stood a large, almost empty bottle of Tequila surrounded by crumpled chocolate wrappers. Chocolate and Gold Tequila, two of Craig's greatest vices. Scag heads or not, he certainly had a few things in common with Kate and Louise. If he hadn't been baby-sitting the girls' shrink-wrapped corpses, the three of them might have been friends.

There was a sound at the door. Someone was coming in. Craig panicked and looked around him. The only viable hiding place was behind a knackered wicker sofa. He stared at it and chewed his bottom lip nervously. Not a good place to be discovered; hard to escape from, hard to attack from and pretty damned hard to explain away. No. He would just stand there and hope for the best. If the worst came to the worst, he'd show them the meaning of 'aggravated burglary', rough them up a bit and bugger off as fast as his unpractised but incredibly eager legs could carry him.

"Right, Terry; now getcher shit together and let's get the fook out of 'ere," came a stereotypical Scouse voice from the hallway. "Dis place gives me the creeps."

Craig watched as the two newcomers headed noisily up the stairs.

"It's just a couple of things, Ba'. I couldn't leave 'em 'ere in case the cops found 'em."

"Cut the chat, Terry. Jus' get d'stuff an' let's go. It's a wonder d'cops 'aven't been 'ere already. Dey've *already* been dead three days."

"Eh, y'don't tink dey're watchin' dee 'ouse do yer?"

"Oh, dat's fuckin' great dat, Terry. *Now y'start wit d'bright ideas. Where was Einstein when we decided t'come an' get dis stuff?*"

"I'm sorry, Ba'. Really I am. I just can't 'ave 'em findin' out I wuz stayin' 'ere, dat's all."

"Look, Terry. Let's give d'fuckin' apologies a miss, eh? An' will you 'urry up wid all dat shit?"

Great, so Eddie was wrong. Someone else *was* living there. Someone who knew full well what had happened on Saturday night, and was as keen as Craig to distance themselves from a couple of once-saucy corpses.

"Right, dat's it," Terry announced. The two Scousers tromped downstairs and Craig flattened himself against the chillout room wall. The front door opened and the men were gone. Craig risked a peek through the curtains at the street outside. The Scousers were getting into a rundown Ford Capri, Barry at the wheel.

You can't lose them, Craig's conscience egged him on.

They're Scousers; they'll kill you, his sense of reality reminded him.

If you lose them, you're fucked, his conscience pointed out. *Two birds dead in your cupboard for three days and no one to point the finger at.*

His sense of reality was beaten.

"You did what?"

"I followed them."

"How?"

"On a mountain bike I took from the girls' place."

"The girls' place'? Fuckin' 'ell, Craig; you sound like those chicks are our mates. Now, while they *have* spent rather a lot of time here, we're still a long fucking way from establishing a great fuckin' relationship with them. You're talking like they gave you permission to go rooting around in their house and take their bike."

"Oh, come on, Adam. You're starting to lose the plot a bit here."

"I'm starting to lose the plot? I'm not the one breaking into people's houses – *dead* people's houses – and I'm not the one following two murdering Scousers through their hometown on a fucking mountain bike. Craig, you're a fucking idiot."

"But I know where they live."

"Where?"

"Just off Lark Lane."

"And you know this Terry bloke killed the chicks?"

"Definitely."

"Any idea why?"

"Nope."

"And I suppose you've got a plan?"

"I have indeed, young Adam. I have indeed."

"Oh, fuckin' 'ell, Craig!"

"Do *you* have a car?"

"No," Adam admitted.

"Right. And we can hardly ask to borrow one, now can we?"

"Why not?"

"Oh, what? Are you volunteering to ask someone if we can borrow their wheels to take two dead birds round to some Scouser's house?"

"No. But I still think stealing one is a fucking stupid idea."

"We'll only need it for a couple of hours," Craig insisted. "The people in Flat A are on holiday. They'll never even know it was gone."

"And you know how to hot-wire a car, of course?"

"No. Do you?"

"Christ, Craig. You're the dodgy geezer here, not me. Didn't they teach you a few basic skills in one of those self-improvement workshops?"

"No, Adam. I was too busy learning how to manufacture chemical weapons to bother about nicking cars, which is why we have to think a bit laterally on this one."

"Meaning what, exactly?"

"Meaning we look at what we've got and try and work with that."

"And what, exactly, have we got?"

"Well, we have my experience in B 'n' E and your love of snowboarding, women and ice cold beer."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you stay here and indulge in at least one of your favourite things while I pop downstairs and find the car keys."

Adam's eyes bulged and his bottom jaw hung loose. "You're gonna break in to our neighbours' flat?"

"Don't worry, Adam," Craig smiled as he opened the fridge and passed his flatmate a beer. "They'll never even know I was there."

Two in one day. Craig was starting to enjoy himself. Sure, the first one had been pretty easy, what with having the key and the occupants of the house being dead and all, but it *had* been over five years since the Manchester Miracle. Even now, it made him chuckle to think about it. The one job he hadn't coughed when they had him for the aggravated burglary, one they'd never have had on their list of T.I.C.s simply because it would never have been reported. It was *that* good. It was also as good a reason as five years inside never to go back to breaking and entering. The Manchester Miracle was the last job he'd done before the rozzers had smacked down his door in the middle of the night and invited him to the station for questioning. No early warning signs; no interviews; not even a mugshot in the local paper: boom!

He hadn't known the place would be such rich pickings when he'd decided to do it over. All he was after was a few CDs, a bit of light audio-visual, maybe a passport or two, some credit cards, chequebook and any petty cash left around. The owners were clearly well-off and a couple of Gold Cards would have set him up for beer for the next week or so. Passports were the in-thing at the time and old Hungry Joe was lapping them up with a passion.

He'd had no idea the owners would be in, either. It was three in the afternoon and the house had been dead for the hour or so he'd casually watched it. It was a weekday and people with that sort of money would've been out earning it. To be honest, he hadn't even given it much thought. All he'd been thinking about was the money and how to get in.

Craig's attention returned to the job in hand. The neighbours' flat had been done before. A simple smash and grab, door kicked in, entry and exit point the same. Brutally effective but definitely not the choice for this particular occasion. No, a bit more subtlety was needed if they were to get away with using the car without being noticed.

The repairs smacked of typical Liverpoolian workmanship. Sloppy. The doorframe was such a mess that Craig was willing to bet that the workmen had intended to come back once the insurance was through and clean the place out properly. As it was, though, they'd done him a favour. The old credit card trick was a doddle and within thirty seconds he was in. There was rarely a need for B in the old B 'n' E.

Getting in so easily took his mind back to the Manchester Miracle. He'd studied the burglar alarm pretty closely that day, determined not to be put off by its surface sophistication. The dummy box was a joke, a blatant hoax to anyone with the slightest bit of sense. When he'd tackled the real thing, he'd found the intricacy of the wiring to be more a matter of sloppiness than design. It had taken him less than two minutes to disable it.

The job was a watertight case for taking it easy. As it happened the burglar alarm wasn't switched on. As it happened the owners were home. As it happened, had he opted for the old smash and grab he would probably never have wound up at the cop shop only a couple of weeks later. In fact, if the cops had found him at all, they'd have probably have had a hard time identifying him.

Back in Ullet Road, Craig shook his head and chuckled quietly. He could hardly believe his luck. There, in the hallway, hanging on a hook just next to the door, were the car keys. They even had a Toyota key ring attached to them. Idiots. He lifted them down and held them in the palm of his hand for a moment, remembering the BMW key ring on the mirrored coffee table back in Manchester. He felt that rush of adrenaline again as he looked at the keys to the Toyota.

A *fucking BMW*, he'd almost screamed out loud. Then he'd seen the scattered coke and the copious dog ends and the truth had begun to dawn on him. Serious money, serious drugs. It was then that he'd heard someone cough on the landing. Fighting his sense of urgency and instinct to escape, he'd scouted around the living room for quick pickings. He'd heard voices upstairs, at least two men and a woman, a heated conversation Craig couldn't fully understand. He'd been straining to pick up what they were saying when he'd flipped open the DJ's record bag. Why he'd bothered with something so bulky and worthless, he still had no idea. But thank God he had. The bag had been filled to the brim with bright white plastic sacks of coke.

The argument had moved to the second floor and Craig had seized the moment. Throwing the record bag over his shoulder, he'd snatched up the keys and walked swiftly to the front door. Nabbing a jacket and baseball cap from the over-laden hat stand in the hall to cover his tracks, he'd let himself out, barely resisting the urge to call a friendly 'goodbye' to his benefactors.

Five years later, he felt the urge again as he closed the door to Flat A. Piece of piss. Adam *would* be pleased.

Adam had managed to polish off three bottles of beer in the time it had taken Craig to fetch the keys. TV and stereo were fighting for supremacy, classic Led Zep taking on the

usual early evening rubbish from Auntie Beeb while Adam sang the praises of the latest bouncing new arrival to the soap of the moment.

If Quentin Tarantino had been born near the South Coast of England and spent his teens in Australia, *Reservoir Dogs* may have had a scene rather like the one that followed, with Madonna replaced by Minogue. If Irvine Welsh had spotted seagulls and wallabies instead of trains, *Sick Boy* might've been less fascinated with MI6 and devoted many a long hour to the Kylie vs Danni Question.

As it was, Adam was eminently qualified to do their jobs for them. He was a Southern, snowboarding *Sick Boy*, Steve Buscemi in flares and a flowing Led Zep mullet, toting an ice cold bottle of beer in one hand and a lovingly rolled reefer in the other.

Craig was out of his league. He'd weaned himself off soaps after a series of prison dreams involving Barbara Windsor as his mum. Sure, he could voice his opinion of a bird on the box, but he couldn't compete with Adam's stunning wealth of knowledge. Craig simply didn't care if so-and-so's tits were real or if what's-her-name had been out with such-and-such a football star. Yes, he did remember the days when Sally was just a kid, but the fact that her breasts had ballooned so considerably over the past few years just didn't matter to him. It certainly didn't make her any more attractive.

But the stream of soaps and volley of beers certainly helped pass the time. Half a dozen separate uses of dramatic irony, three betrayals, two lesbian clinches and a nasty accident later, it was time to do the deed. It was dark in Ullet Road, and despite their wrapping the girls were starting to stink.

"Oh, man. You'd never've guessed someone so dead could look so gorgeous, would you?"

"Adam, that is the most extreme case of beer goggles I have ever heard of."

"I don't mean I'd fuck her, Craig. Just that she looks so peaceful..."

"You mean, unlike the other one - who'd had her head smashed in?"

"Don't be so fucking heartless, Craig. She may feel like seven and a half stone of dead weight but she *was* a person once."

"Adam, right now she's nothing more than seven and a half stone of deep shit. If we get caught lugging this out into the street, neither of us is likely to be using our beer goggles for a very long time. Now shut up and get that door open."

"Fuckin' 'ell, Craig. Why are you being such a fucking arsehole?"

"Because I'm shitting myself, Adam. All right? Unlike you I haven't been washing down spliffs with Budweiser for the past few hours."

"Look, I'm sorry. If we'd had any Becks left, I'd have stuck with that."

Craig cracked a smile and Adam wrapped his fingers around the door handle.

"I know you're worried, Craig. We both are. I just think we should remember that this troublesome sack of 'deep shit' was once a living breathing person. Chances are, if she'd had any choice in the matter, she'd rather have stayed that way than caused us so much hassle."

"Point taken, Adam, and I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you at Keith's afterwards."

"Keith's? No wine bars for us tonight, my friend, especially not just round the corner from this Terry bloke's place. When this is over, you're taking us for a yard of tequila down at Bar Caver. Go on, say it: it's the least you could do."

"It's the least I could do," Craig sighed. "Now can we shut up and get this, I mean 'her', to the car?"

Adam nodded and they shuffled out into the street.

The house off Lark Lane was dark apart from the obligatory nightlight on the front path. Craig and Adam sat in the car, waiting for the street to go quiet.

"You stay here with the girls; I'll check the place out."

"Don't be long mate; this place gives me the fucking creeps."

Craig nodded and slipped across the patchy grass toward the side alley. Given the collection of barbed wire and broken glass across the top of the high walls, he was relieved to find the wooden door unlocked. With a quick look around in spite of himself, he stole inside. The alleyway was hauntingly narrow. Above him to the right, broken glass glinted in the streetlight. And to his left was the great looming edifice of the murderous Scousers. Liverpool: such a dramatic city. Why hadn't he settled for somewhere a little more low key?

In the long-neglected back garden he found exactly what he wanted. Almost smothered by the undergrowth was a battered wooden shed, its windows so dusted and cobwebbed that no one would ever have bothered to look inside, never have noticed if two dead bodies had been stashed within. Perfect; absolutely fucking perfect. He tried the door to be certain there'd be no arsing about when they brought the bodies down the alley. A bit of work and it was open. Plenty of space inside and a few mouldy dustsheets for added effect.

He hurried back to the car. Adam was leaning over from the passenger seat, anxious for a positive sign. Craig nodded at him reassuringly.

It took them far less time to shuttle the bodies to the shed than it had to get them in the car. Sitting in a dark street with two dead birds in the back of his recently stolen car had sobered Adam considerably and even the heavy dose of Abraham Lincoln's favourite 'erb seemed to have worn off.

They laid the bodies under a workbench in the abandoned shed. Then they covered them with dustsheets and a few old newspapers, doing their best to make them look settled. Craig stood back and folded his arms, surveying their handiwork.

"We've done a pretty good job here," he nodded, tapping the side of his mouth absently.

"Yeah, fucking beautiful," Adam shook his head despairingly. "Now, can we go, please?"

"Just one more thing."

"What?"

"The finishing touch," Craig smiled as he led the way back down the alley.

Back in the street he headed for a nearby phone box to make that all-important call. He slipped a small scrap of paper and a ten pence piece from his pocket, then dialled the number. His heart was racing. It was nearly over. The phone rang and rang. Adam was watching him nervously from the car, his head bobbing with impatience.

"Hello, yes," he began in his mentally rehearsed middle-aged voice. "I don't know if it's important but I noticed something rather strange this afternoon and I thought I had better report it. Just in case, of course. I mean, I'd hate to have just let it go and had it come up on the news or something. It's just that there's a funny smell coming from my neighbour's garden and I've seen a couple of the young men who live there doing strange things around the shed. My name? Oh, I'm sorry, but my wife told me not to get involved.

I just wanted you to know, that's all. The address? It's 21a Livingstone Avenue. Now, I really must go. Goodbye."

He hung up and extricated himself from the phone box, raising his fists in the air like a conquering footballer. The adrenaline was pulsing through him as he joined Adam in the car.

"Right then; let's see to those tequilas, shall we?"

"Right on, dude! Right on!"

"Oh, man, I'm not too fucking comfortable with this," Adam moaned as they turned onto Smithdown Road on their way to the Aldi.

"Come on, Adam; I know you're terrified of shopping, but we've got a car. You know what that means? It means we can pick up three weeks worth of baked beans and tinned fruit in one go, and we won't have to break our backs getting it home. Trust me, mate, it'll be over in no time. Then we can head off to Bar Caver and get down to some serious drinking."

"Yeah, but what if we get caught?"

"Get caught doing what?" Craig asked him impatiently.

"Driving a fucking stolen car!" Adam shouted in his ear.

"It's not stolen, Adam," Craig grinned. "Just borrowed. A quick trip to Aldi and we'll put it back where we found it. Nobody's going to know the difference. We already *had* the keys; it's not like we took it just to do our weekly shopping."

"But there could be fucking blood or anything in the back! Hairs, toenails; forensic fucking evidence," Adam insisted.

"Too much TV, Adam; that's your problem," Craig said, shaking his head as they pulled into the car park. He switched off the Toyota's engine and turned to his flatmate with a smile. "Now, shall we get this over and done with?"

He hopped out of the car and strode across the car park to the trolleys. As always, they were chained together. As always Craig held his breath as he fished in his pockets for the necessary pound coin to make one his own.

"I can't believe it's over," Craig grinned at Adam as they sauntered up and down the aisles of cheap and cheerful homebrand products. "A few days ago I was convinced we were shafted."

"Craig; it's not fucking over 'til that car's back where it belongs."

"A mere technicality, mate. Here we are, merrily doing our shopping with nothing more to worry about than the potential after-effects of a big night out on the tequilas. A few days ago we had two dead birds in the flat and no decent explanation. I reckon we've done pretty well."

They stood at the checkout, bagging up their purchases as a surly-looking almost-attractive brunette worked the till. Craig pictured her dolled up to the nines, plastered in garish makeup and wrapped in the tightest and shortest of skirts, her stylish lycra boob-tube doing little to stave off the adverse effects of a cold Friday night. He imagined her stalking the streets with her mates, a pack of underdressed she-wolves prowling the night in search of back-alley liaisons with the drunken Liverpool elite. He could barely hold back a laugh as he lifted the crate of Aldi one pence baked beans from the conveyor belt and slid it under the heavily laden trolley.

"Fuck!" Adam's voice brought him back to reality. Craig looked around at him stupidly.

“That wanker’s nicking our fucking car,” his flatmate explained, pointing out into the car park.

As Adam rushed toward the exit, Craig caught sight of a tracksuit-clad Scouser helping himself to their neighbours’ Toyota. The engine started first time and his face reappeared from under the dashboard, filled with the unmistakable confidence of a man who had done this a thousand times before. Craig smiled as his flatmate heaved open the automatic door, far too late to catch the Toyota as it screeched onto Smithdown Road.

“Let it go, Adam,” he called after him, the face of Scouser Terry at the wheel of the stolen Toyota fixed forever in his mind. His smile spread and turned to laughter as he felt the tension of the past few days drop away.

“Don’t worry about it, Adam,” he shouted to the bemused figure in the car park. “It’s not our problem anymore.”