

I

The Flying Dutchman

Bagpipes . . . bleeding bagpipes.

Every time I turn over in my bed or, God forbid, open my eyes, I can hear bleeding bagpipes.

Jesus Christ, am I suffering this morning. My brain is going like one of those heart monitors you see in the hospital dramas on the telly. Only mine seems to have all its wires crossed and crossed again. Suddenly, there's this one screeching long *bleeeeeeep* and just for a second everything flatlines . . .

Thank fuck for that. It's only my alarm clock exploding into life. I force my eyes open once again and glance at the offending machine. It's now thirty minutes past ten on a cold September Sunday morning. I reach over and turn the bloody thing off. For a second there is silence, blissful, peaceful silence.

Then they come again . . . bagpipes, bleeding bagpipes.

I lie there feeling terrible but there is nothing else for it, I have to get up, have to. I climb out of my bed and immediately feel like I've been run over by an articulated lorry. Which then reversed and rode over me again, just to make sure. I stagger across the landing of my parents' house to the khazi, which isn't easy when the floor is rolling up and down like waves in a choppy sea. I close the door softly behind me and look at myself in the bathroom mirror.

My face is the colour of chicken soup. I groan and look

down into the basin, trying to escape the man in the mirror, but that only makes things worse. The whole room feels like it is revolving around me. I have to go and sit on the bog for a minute to compose myself.

God, if someone shot me now they would be doing me a right favour . . . and I still have the sound of bagpipes ringing in my ears.

Through the wall, I can hear my old man coughing and shuffling around in his bedroom. I'm glad we have made an unspoken vow to avoid each other on mornings such as this. The last thing the pair of us need is to see someone looking as rough as we feel. I close my eyes and have enormous difficulty opening them again. Then I realise – I'm not sleepwalking, I'm *sleepsitting*.

My body is screaming for me to get back into bed, but I can't. I have an appointment at my pub of choice today, and I can't miss it. Within an hour and a half I will be in the company of three generations of men who mean the world to me, who educate me, make me laugh and keep me grounded.

Missing a date with them just isn't done. I have to get there and, by the look of things, the bloody bagpipes will have to come along as well. I step in the shower and let the comforting warm water try to heal me. I go back to my room, and even though the spinning has slowed down, I still feel dog-rough. And the reason for the hangover, I hear you ask? Simple. Please allow me to introduce the one and only Mr Gudger Ginnaw, a man I will be sipping the golden nectar with in about an hour's time. Gudge is a grafter who has worked in the Print for the past forty years, and despite reaching the respectable and pensionable age of sixty-five, he has shown absolutely no desire whatsoever to retire.

'Got a few years left on the clock yet, mate,' he tells

everyone when the subject is raised. I've known Gudge for ever.

He has a kind face, topped with blackish-grey hair that is always swept back, and he wears the thickest-lensed glasses I have ever seen. Sometimes when you look at him it actually looks like he has two jam jars perched on either side of his nose. He once stopped wearing the bins and began wearing contact lenses. He went down the pub with the contacts in but no one recognised him. So back came the glasses and people saying hello to him.

Yesterday, Gudge reached sixty-five. Cue massive celebrations. His friends and family all joined together to throw him a party at The Pembroke Club, which is just round the corner from East Street Market in Walworth, the birthplace of the one and only Charlie Chaplin. Top boy Michael Caine grew up not so far away. All roads lead to south London, as someone once said.

The Pembroke is nothing fancy but a nice little space all the same, all wood panelling and red fag-burnt carpet. In one corner, there's a stage on which sits an upright piano with nicotine-stained keys. Along the back wall there is a brightly lit bar.

The venue was chosen by Gudger's wife Doll, and we, his mates, helped organise the moriarty. It was important to us to give him a major blowout. The man is loved far and wide by all and sundry. From the start of the evening we had a variety of singers, piano players – even a local band – all entertaining the assembled in the hall. Round about ten o'clock we were waiting for the next act to start when suddenly a distinct buzzing sound could be heard that got louder and louder.

Now, Camberwell, my manor, is a cosmopolitan area, with a mixture of people from all four corners of the world.

Walking down my road, you'll hear all kinds of noises from roots reggae and ska to African beat and Celtic fiddles, all blaring out of shop doorways and flat windows. But in all my puff, I have never heard a sound like this one.

Around me people are smiling, but we are all thinking the same thing . . . What the fuck is that? The noise gets louder and louder and louder until, amazingly, out of the back room of The Pembroke come fifty women, all dressed up in kilts, little black jackets and white socks, playing 'Scotland the Brave' on their bagpipes like there is no tomorrow.

Ladies and gentlemen, I give you . . . The Dagenham Girl Pipers! But there's more.

At the head of this parade, with a kilt wrapped around his trousered legs, a little tam-o'-shanter on his head and carrying a massive silver-topped wooden staff, is the birthday boy himself, Gudger. He is actually leading the pipers around the pub. The crowd are in hysterics, laughing and joking as Gudger marches forward. Then it happens.

Gudger raises his big staff and then throws it into the air. Up and up it goes . . .

Immediately, a cry goes up and people start diving for cover. They all know Gudger has remarkably poor eyesight and that there is no way in a million years he is ever gonna catch it. Gudger carefully watches the staff start to come down and then suddenly realises this fact himself. So he makes a run for it.

The staff hurtles down, landing on top of a table which six people are sitting around. Bottles of light ale and glasses throw themselves up in the air and cover their owners in liquid.

The staff bounces off the table and flies to a plug socket on the wall opposite. There is a crackle and spark, a tiny

puff of grey smoke and immediately half the hall falls into darkness as the lights fuse. The people sat nearest the table are left covered in beer and bits of broken glass and all of us are now in the gloom as the Girl Pipers grind to a halt.

But you know what? No one moans, no one groans, because it's Gudger, and Gudger is loved by all. In fact, next thing you know, someone starts laughing and then another and then another until the whole place is laughing like there's no tomorrow, most of us doing so because we are extremely thankful not to have been in the immediate vicinity of the staff.

The Girl Pipers strike up again and Gudger comes over to retrieve the staff.

He says, 'Sorry 'bout that, boys,' and then he wheels around, places himself at the head of the pipers and leads them round the room as if nothing has happened.

The drinking starts up again and then my memory of the evening becomes distant, very distant.

Was I pissed at the end? Most certainly.

Was I an irresponsible man who should know better than to abuse himself like this?

Yes.

Am I now, having somehow got dressed and out of the house, standing outside my local, The Flying Dutchman, on a bright but cold September morning in 1985 with a hangover the size of London, waiting on Eric the landlord to open up and let me do it all over again?

Unfortunately . . . Yes.

As I shiver against a wind blown in from the Arctic itself, I suddenly hear Sade's song 'Smooth Operator' cut across the icy morning air. I look up and note a car standing still by the traffic lights on Camberwell High Street, its window half rolled down, its driver nodding his head to the song's

gentle samba beat. The lyrics float out of the car radio and go straight into my mind. It's the part that the Goddess sings . . .

'No place for beginners or sensitive hearts, when sentiment is left to chance. No place to be ending, but somewhere to start.'

You know what? Those words are gonna sum this day up perfectly.

Now, I love this pub, The Flying Dutchman, but I have to say, it is no place for amateurs. It's a proper local with all kinds of characters up to all kinds of shenanigans. Unbelievable, some of the stuff that goes on in here, and one of the reasons that you get very few passers-by popping in. One look at the usual clientele is normally enough to make them seek refreshment elsewhere. That, and the state of the place.

Without wishing to cause Eric and the bar staff any offence whatsoever, it's fair to say that The Flying Dutchman has seen better times. It's what I would call an 'old school' pub, and it's been my family's local since the mid-fifties. I reckon it's been decorated twice since then.

The interior is basically made up of long fag-stained curtains that hide dirt-smearred windows. On the floor there's a sticky patchwork carpet held together by strips of black tape. There's tables and chairs that would probably disgrace a second-hand shop, and a bar so long that after a few sherbets it seems to stretch out into eternity. Behind the bar there is a sign that reads:

'No One Is Ugly After Ten O'clock.'

I always smile at that – usually round about . . . ten o'clock.

I reckon every third light bulb is blown and the khazis are as cold as an outside bog in Siberia. People have been known to go into the gents as pissed as a pudding, and come out stone-cold sober. Still, after saying all that, I spend

nearly every Sunday in here. It's my local, always has been, always will be, and that'll do for me.

As I wait for opening time I am joined by two other regulars, Sid and Davy. Davy is better known by all as Wavy Davy. I'll explain why later. Both have pale, sickly-looking faces. By that I mean their faces are much more pale and sickly than usual.

I nod to them. 'You all right, boys? Look like you're struggling a touch,' I say.

Davy lets out a small groan and Sid explains that the pair of them only left the pub at five that morning, having drunk their way to oblivion during another of the famous Dutchman lock-ins. Even if they hadn't told me that, I would have sussed it from the unleaded breath that is blowing from their mouths.

'I don't know why we didn't spend the night in the pub khazi, it would have saved us the bus fare back here this morning,' Sid moans.

You'd have frostbite by now if you had, I thought.

Finally, the outline of Eric can be seen through the front glass. There is that beautiful sound of a lock being cracked, and then the doors open.

'Lads,' Eric says in his usual style. Eric stands just under six foot, thin as a rake, with long black hair and a full black beard. He has what can only be described as a 'pub' face. That's a face that very rarely sees daylight, and which therefore develops a kind of grey pallor.

Nice fella, though, and a very adaptable player. I was once in a Dutchman lock-in and at four in the morning Eric ordered himself a Chinese takeaway. Now that's what I call a publican.

I bowl in, walk up to the bar and place my usual order of a vodka and diet, four bottles of warm light ale and two pint

glasses to Brenda, the barmaid. Brenda's a big girl with a face that rarely cracks a smile, although she's pure gold once you get to know her. Mess with her at your peril, though. That woman can give you a verbal slaughtering so mean you'll do well to be out of hospital within a week.

The light ales, I should explain, are for Gudger and my old man. The pair of them always arrive just after I do. Always. In fact, if any of the others in my mob arrive before them I am pretty certain they would actually turn around and leave the boozier so as not to disturb the natural balance of things.

I walk over to our usual table in the corner and place the drinks down. I then take out a la-di-dah, dip one end in my drink, light the other and blow out a plume of grey-blueish smoke into the air. Then I and my hangover settle back and wait.

As usual, the pub fills up faster than a prisoner on the run. Within fifteen minutes I am surrounded by the faces I have known nearly all my life.

On my right the regular card school is already under way. The school consists of two Bills, a Frankie and a Charlie. The men are all in their fifties, are all taxi drivers and all have a few bob between them, that's for sure. They are all dressed in what I call 'taxi-driver chic', which translates as Gabicci sweaters and freshly pressed Farah strides.

Three-card brag is their game. They have a pint pot on the table holding the whip, and they never talk. They are all too busy being hypnotised by the cards they hold before their eyes. I nod to them but they don't see me through the hearts and the clubs, the spades and the diamonds.

To my left, the aforementioned Wavy Davy has already started swaying about on his stool, trying to find some

gravity to cling on to. From a distance it looks like he's waving at you, hence the nickname.

Davy is as thin as a rasher of bacon and always dressed in jeans, a sweatshirt and market trainers. He is forever smoking a succession of prison-thin roll-ups and sits on the high stool by the bar, which has always struck me as reckless, seeing as he is the sort who just can't take his drink.

One pint of lager and within seconds he is wobbling all over the place. Everyone tries to keep an eye on him as he sways around on his stool because we all know that at some point in the day he will crash to the ground like the stock market on a bad day. Another regular face, Ronnie the Builder, now walks past me. He's on his way to the dartboard end of the pub.

'All right, son?' he says.

'Ronnie Boy,' I reply, acknowledging him. Ronnie is a mountain of a fella, got to be twenty-odd stone. The funniest thing is, he claims to be a vegetarian, so his massive bulk is not the result of endless fry-ups and kebabs. No, Ronnie simply loves a cream cake. He's got a ten-a-day habit. He's also the most un-builder-like builder I have ever met.

Normally they are all lairy, forever giving it the big 'un, trying to mug someone off. But things are different with Ronnie. He's got the character of an artist.

'Busy, mate?' I ask.

'Got a bit on, as it happens, but I'm struggling at the minute, son, really suffering, nothing's flowing at the moment, know what I mean? No inspiration at all. Really struggling . . .' He shakes his head sadly. 'I painted this wall yesterday and the first coat went on lovely, I was really happy with the first coat. Loved the colour, and if I say so myself, my brushwork was first class, the paint went on a treat. But the second coat, nah, it just wasn't happening. Got halfway

through and told the punter I couldn't finish it, told her sorry, like, she could have her money back but my nerve had gone . . . I think I've got builder's block, mate.'

With that, he strolls off, nodding his head sadly as I smile a sympathetic smile.

High up on the wall above the fruit machines the telly is on, the Ceefax pages gleefully reminding all the gamblers where their dough from the day before has gone.

I take a sip of my drink and all of a sudden Gudger is sitting beside me, landing in his usual seat like a homing pigeon.

'All right, boy?' he says and throws a tenner into the middle of the table. It joins the one that I had already put there to start the whip off. 'You look a bit under the weather, son. Good night last night, though, weren't it? Mind you, all I can hear right now are fucking bagpipes . . .'

I have to laugh. Here I am, dying from alcohol poisoning, and here he is, fresh as a daisy. He must have the constitution of Keith Richards.

'See those Lions lost again yesterday, polish, that mob, polish,' he continues.

I can't argue. Millwall are my team but they have been so pony lately I have actually stopped going to the games for the time being. I keep that fact to myself. If anyone knew, I'd be banned from the pub.

'Fucking hard work supporting that mob,' I tell Gudge, 'fucking hard work.'

'Ain't that the truth,' he replies gloomily.

I look up and break into a smile as I spot my old man walking over to us. As usual he is immaculately turned out. As am I. As is everyone else . . . well, apart from Wavy Davy. Round my way such things are important. It's the tradition.

You put on your best whistle and scrub up nicely. Sunday Best and all that.

I got to say, though, that my old man always has the steal on everyone in this particular race, and that's because he is an extremely fussy fucker about his appearance. He will spend hours getting ready to go out, making sure that you never ever see him with a hair out of place, a crumple in his clothes, or dirt on his shoes. Whatever the occasion, he will always look immaculate.

'Allo, son ... Gudger,' my old man says, sitting down. 'You alright, Pop?' I ask.

'Can't shake this bleeding cough off,' he replies.

'Sorry to hear that, Thimble. Getting old, my son,' Gudger says.

'And I've got ten verses of "Scotland the Brave" going around my nut,' the old man adds. 'Apart from that, I'm all right.'

A smile breaks across Gudger's lips. 'Good night last night, though, eh?'

'Blinding, Gudge, blinding,' my old man replies. 'Lovely to see all those old faces. Wonder if they've got the electric back on yet?'

Gudger calls my dad Thimble because if there is one thing my old man adores, it is suits, especially handmade, tailored ones.

'You were a bit quiet this morning, son,' my dad says, looking in my direction.

I groan. 'I thought I was dying, Pop.'

'Blouse ...' he says, smiling, 'not too clever myself, as it happens ...'

My old man draws some brown out of his pocket and places a note in the whip. Then he starts to pour the light ale into his pint glass before plunging his lips into the froth.

‘Cheers, boys . . . lovely drop that,’ he says with a little sigh. ‘Lovely.’

He is in his fifties now, works as a messenger for Barclays Bank but has also done some casual work on the Print in his time, thanks to Gudge, who got him in when my old man – as we all do at some point – hit some tough financial waters.

He puts his glass down and says through his foamy white moustache: ‘What about those plums down the Den? What a poxy result that was, fucking Millwall, polish.’

My old man has been going to Millwall since the mid-fifties. Shortly after I was born, he passed his club on to me. I have never forgiven him. In fact, I asked him once why he had done that. After all, there are so many other clubs in London doing things Millwall don’t do, like winning cups or league titles. How the fuck did I end up with this mob? We were in The Dutchman with Gudge when I put this question to him. My old man put down his glass and suddenly turned very serious.

‘Son,’ he said, ‘you know the floodlights you can see from your bedroom window? Well, they belong to the club you will support all your life.’

Gudge took a sip of beer and said, ‘Those Man United fans round here must have fucking good eyesight, then, eh?’

Gudge and the old man have been spars for centuries. In fact, I can’t recall a time when Gudge was not in my life. You’re probably trying to work out why the name Gudge, by now, ain’t you? My advice? Don’t bother. I asked him once where the name came from. This was his response:

‘My old man was nicknamed Hudger McGudger the King of the Pharaohs, weren’t he?’ he casually replied. ‘And it got passed on to me.’ He then carried on drinking as if

what he had just said was the most obvious thing in the world.

Hudger McGudger, King of the Pharoahs . . . Well, that's cleared that up nicely, I thought to myself. One other thing Gudge is known for is his habit of wearing very dodgy shoes. You know the shoes the Africans go for, the grey snakeskin-style ones, with the little brass chain on them? Well, so does Gudge. He loves them.

'What's wrong with these, boy?' he'll shout if he catches you looking quizzically at them. 'andsome, them.'

I blame the glasses.

The supplier of these shoes is the next face in. His name is Fred Harris but he is known to one and all as Fred the Shoe. Fred is in his mid- to late-thirties and very dapper, the result of teenage years spent as an original Mod. Like my old man, Fred loves his schmutter, but above all Fred loves shoes. In fact, he loves them so much he owns a shoe shop, hence the nickname. I say shoe shop, but to be honest it is more like a social club, a place where all the old faces you are about to meet gather to chew the fat, take the piss, have a laugh, have a cuppa and maybe take home some quality shoes, made available to them at very reasonable prices. We all wear shoes from Fred's.

Very rude not to.

It being a Sunday, Fred sports a dark blue suit which looks like it came off the rack at Aquascutum. With it he wears a classic pair of burgundy beef-roll Bass Weejun loafers, a crisp white shirt and matching hanky in the breast pocket of his jacket to finish off the look nicely. Fred is no more than five foot five in his silk socks, but has kept himself fit and the weight off. His barnet is slowly leaving his head but as he always says, 'Grass never grows on a busy street!' He's married to Kay and they have a couple of teenage boys,

Mark and Sam. Fred's got a lovely easygoing nature, and is one hell of a piss-taker, a real funny fella.

Handshakes all round, and a kiss on Gudger's cheek from Fred. He plots up at our table and lobs his tenner entrance fee into the middle of it. Following close behind him is his best mate, Dave Norris. These two have been hanging out for ever, their collective memory stretching right back to war-torn London, you never had it so good, Christine Keeler in her chair, mohair suits, Georgie at The Flamingo, World Cup 1966, man on the moon, glam rock, three-day weeks, Ted Heath and Kevin Keegan.

'Hello, Dave,' my old man pipes up. 'Meant to say to you last night, mate, did ya see that Sinatra concert on the box in the week?'

'You'll have to speak up, Thimble,' Dave replies, 'I can't hear you over the fifty Dagenham Girl Pipers marching around in my swede ...'

The whole table laughs at the same time.

'Yeah, I saw old blue-eyes, mate ... 'andsome, weren't it, Thimble? Genius, the fella, absolute genius.'

Little Dave loves his music, in particular the old-style ballad singers of whom Francis Albert is the acknowledged guv'nor. Of course, there is also Tony Bennett and Nat King Cole to consider, but Francis Albert is his man. Such is his love for music, Dave will actually go miles out of his way to hear a good pub singer. Again, he is another sharp dresser whose Mod heritage is still in evidence. Today, he's wearing grey trousers with a crease you could slice bread on, a pastel yellow Lacoste polo and cardigan combination, tan tasselled suede loafers (courtesy of his close amico, Frederico of the Shoe) and a neat haircut. Dave lives with Sue and has done for years. Apparently he has never felt the need to get married.

When questioned as to his non-existent marital status, Dave reaches for the songbook dictionary in his mind and turns the page to the letter B. ‘As Tony Bennett sings,’ he states, “*Out of the tree of life, I just picked me a plum*”, and that’ll do me, boys,’ is his take on the subject.

Dave is a black-cab driver, the only one I know in London known to go south if requested. Dave is also small (hence the nickname) in his mid- to late-thirties and has lived in Walworth all his life. I watch him go over to the bar to get the drinks in for Fred and him, which is when I spot the O’sh over by the fruit machine, O’sh being short for O’Shea, as in Mark O’Shea, another one of our table.

‘Oi, O’sh,’ I shout at him.

‘Be with you in a minute,’ he says without looking up, trying to make sense of all the flashing lights dancing in front of him. Bloody fruit machines.

In the old days, when I was a nipper, it was simple. They had a handle on the side. You pulled it. If you got three bells, three cherries, three apples, three whatevers, you won. These days there’s so many lights and permutations going on, it’s like overseeing the invasion of a foreign country by a nudged computer.

O’sh is the baby of our table, a year younger than me at twenty. Sensing that today the machine will be disobeying his commands, he gives it a slight kick, turns and ambles over to us.

‘Here, Gudge, whose bleeding idea was it to get the bagpipes in last night, then?’ the O’sh says as he plots up on one of the little stools by the table.

‘Don’t know, Goldfish,’ Gudge replies, ‘I s’pose it would have been old Dickie Springay. He books all the turns at The Pembroke. Why?’ A little smile plays on Gudge’s lips. ‘Didn’t you like ’em, then? I would have thought you would

have bonded with your Celtic sisters and all that.'

'Slag off out of it, will ya,' the O'sh shoots back, obviously not impressed. 'What a racket, mate. Old Dickie needs looking at if he booked them.'

'Yeah, it was Dickie,' says Fred. 'I asked him afterwards. He told me he was going through his contacts book and under "D" he found "Doonican, Val". So he rung his agent.'

'Val Doonican! Fuck me,' splutters Dave.

'Straight up. He tried to book old Val, but turns out old Val and his rocking chair were already booked for a night down in Bournemouth, so he couldn't make it. So Dickie starts at the top of the page again and next thing you know comes across the Dagenham Girl Pipers, which is how we ended up with them.'

'I read somewhere,' Dave puts in, 'that the definition of a gentleman is someone who can play the bagpipes ... but chooses not to.'

'Could have done with that fella last night ...' says Fred.

'Top-flight contacts he's got, then, old Dickie,' laughs my old man.

'Could have been worse,' O'sh points out. 'We might have ended up with Diddy David Hamilton.'

O'sh is from Irish stock, got the ginger barnet to prove it. Today he is head to toe in a navy Fila tracksuit and his ever-present Nike blue-flash Glorias.

He's taken the same route as me to get to this table. As soon as he could, Tony, his old man, started taking him to the pub. Like his dad, O'sh is a big 'un, as can be seen from the prominent darby he takes everywhere with him.

'All that free school milk I had as a nipper, mate,' he says, justifying his stomach's ever-expanding nature, naturally failing to mention the copious amounts of lager he now consumes on a very regular basis. Fair to say the O'sh has

very much taken to pub culture. Slim Jim he ain't. Gudger calls him My Old Goldfish, on account of him having ginger hair and drinking like a fish. (Mind you, call him a ginger bastard, as we often do, and he will quickly shoot back, 'Oi, not so much of the ginger, mate. More like African Sunset, if it's all the same to you.')

O'sh is a fellow Millwall sufferer and my best mate, the great lummo.

Last but not but least to join us is Alfie Davies, or Alfie Hobnails as he's known to all.

He's in his seventies now but still as sharp as a knife and teak tough. He don't miss much, Alfie, believe me, and he is never seen without his flat cap on, never. Me and the O'sh reckon his missus Lil had it sewn on his head about forty years ago so that he wouldn't leave it somewhere. Under that very cap, he is rumoured to be as bald as a badger. He's got a right bugle on him, which every now and then he blows like a trumpet. How the hanky stays in his hand is a wonder of nature.

His face is very jowly and it wobbles like a ripe jelly when he laughs, which is quite often. Along with all the old blokes I know, he's got great big ears which I can never stop looking at, causing me to wonder if ears carry on growing for all of our lives or whether they actually stop at some point. Must ask the GP next time I go in for a check-up.

As for Alfie's clothes, it's fair to say he dresses more for comfort than speed nowadays. His wardrobe is all beige elastic-waisted trousers and jumpers with suede patches on the sleeves. Marks & Spencer is his outlet of choice.

One of the first things I noticed about him was that although you would often hear fellas of Alf's age telling their war stories, Alf never said anything on the subject. I found this strange. Most of the old 'uns have at least a

story or two to tell about their war exploits, but Alf stayed stum on the subject. After a while it got to me, and I asked him why.

He looked at me longer than usual. 'I wasn't allowed to serve in the army, was I? I was one of Moseley's Black Shirts. Fucking fought in the Cable Street riots of 1936, and all that,' he explained. Then he put down his pint and sighed wistfully. 'Young and silly I was, mate, got taken in by all that bollocks that was going around. Still going on today and I hope you never touch it, son. It's evil stuff. Anyway, because of that they wouldn't let me join up, so I was put into the Fire Service. As you can imagine, that wasn't a bundle of laughs, what with the Blitz and all that. The worst night was Saturday 10 May 1941. Fuck me, that was bad. Over a thousand people died that night, over eleven thousand houses destroyed. Couldn't cope, could we? How I came out of that alive I'll never know, son.'

Alfie picked up his pint and never said anything else on the subject ever again. It was only later on when talking to the others that I discovered he had single-handedly pulled a young mum and her daughter out of a burning building and won himself a bravery medal.

Alf might have had things in his past that would seem dubious to the likes of you and me, but I liked the man and I liked him because not only had he changed, but he told you how it was rather than how you or he wanted it to be.

'You're late, Alfie mate,' Gudger rhymes as Alfie shuffles into view.

'You're lucky I'm here at all, mate,' he replies. 'You nearly killed me with that fucking stick last night!'

'Was you under that, Alf?' says Fred, laughing.

'I was. What a sappy bleeder you are, Gudger. 'Bout time you started acting your age, and not your shoe size. Good

gracious God, I thought I was a goner, mate.’

Alfie then smiles at Gudger and ruffles his head. Gudge smiles back. As I said earlier, no one gets the hump with Gudger for too long. He’s one of those people who you forgive anything.

So there you have the people I drink with. A right mixed mob, three generations of local men, meeting up every Sunday lunchtime to create a tide of good feeling as we mercilessly extract the urine out of each other and drink the golden nectar. In fact, I would say that the art of piss-taking at this particular table has been taken to such a level, it should be taught in universities and schools. I kid you not. I can just see it in the student programme now.

The Art of Extracting the Urine 1900 to 1985. A two-year course.

I suppose after all this spiel, I had better introduce myself.

My name is Mark Baxter, known as Bax. Aged twenty-one, I’m six foot two, weighing in at around twelve and a half stone, and of a big build, just like the old man. My barnet is a sort of dirty-blond colour, cut into a number-three buzz cut by Alberto the Italian barber. Short and neat, just like the birds I like. I’ve got blue eyes, two of ’em, I’m pleased to say, and I’ve recently grown a little bit of fluff just under my bottom lip in homage to the jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, whose recordings with Charlie ‘Bird’ Parker back in the early fifties I am well fond of. Of course, the boys at the table didn’t get the Dizzy reference at all. All I got was, ‘Oi, Bax, you’ve missed a bit there, son.’

Plums . . .

After leaving school as fast as I could, aged sixteen, I ducked and dived for a couple of years, earning a pound by whatever landed in my lap. Never did anything dodgy like selling the tackle, but you could say with some truth

that I have veered in and out of the straight and narrow. At the same time I had my name down to get into the Print. Gudge was my way in, but I had to bide my time. Everyone has to. You don't just walk into the Print. There are rules and regulations, traditions to follow. Whilst I waited I did all sorts, got my fingers into many pies, most of which, unfortunately, stayed cold. I mostly worked on stalls down at Camden Market, where I sold a bit of old bric-a-brac and quite a bit of quality second-hand clobber. I have also been known to do a spot of DJing, playing the old sixties favourites at various parties and a couple of local pubs, anything to make a pound, really. In 1982, aged eighteen, thanks to the man Gudge, I finally got the call to go into the Print, and I have been there these past three years. I love every minute of it.

I'm still living at home, and I am supposed to be saving for a deposit on a flat. Don't get me wrong, my P and M are the salt of the earth and I love them to bits, but even so I do feel the need to spread my wings. Only trouble is, I've got an addiction that needs feeding and it is a bad one. Nah, it's not the tackle I'm hooked on, it is something much worse: CLOTHES!

Always loved clothes, always. From my early days I've been a Mod. Got into it through Paul Weller and The Jam, really, back in 1979, 1980, and haven't looked back since. My pride and joy is the handmade whistle that I got a couple of years back from Georgie Dyer, the tailor all the south London Faces use. It's a thing of true beauty, made of brown mohair, three buttons on the jacket front, a centre vent at the back and trousers that show a bit of sock to match.

Sometimes I get it out of the wardrobe, hang it on the wall and sit and stare at it for hours. If I'm honest, I think I might be in love with my suit. You might see this as a

replacement for the void caused by the lack of a woman in my life right now, and I would say you were talking absolute bollocks whilst agreeing with you wholeheartedly. Anyway, we're all rabbiting away at our table as usual when suddenly this skinny, round-shouldered fella nobody knows walks up to our table and says, 'Hello, chaps, ever thought about owning a racehorse?'

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Oh for the Wings of a Dove

This fella who was stood before us must have been in his mid-fifties, and the first thing I noticed about him was his haircut. It was so bad, I reckon he had cut it himself with a broken bottle. He had a couple of front teeth missing, and that resulted in him having a bit of spittle around his mouth as he spoke. He reminded me of someone who might have been about in Dickens' time, carried a name like Henry Stump or something similar. He materialised at our table at precisely one-fifty p.m. and I know that because just as he stood in front of us, Gudge asked me the time. Before we go any further, I have to tell you that his question has now entered local folklore and is known by everyone in The Dutchman as The Silencer. That's because its effect was to silence every mouth sitting at that table. Never happened before. Never. Always someone in our mob talking, arguing, laughing, shouting and then this man comes along, asks one question and bang, next thing you know, not a sound to be heard. For the longest five seconds I have ever known, there was pure silence. It was Gudge who broke it in two.

'You what, mate?'

'You fellas ever thought of owning a racehorse?' he replied. 'You know, buying into one.'

'A fucking racehorse,' said Fred. 'You pulling my pisser, son?'

‘No . . . no I’m not,’ the man coolly replied. ‘Mind you, I had a feeling you’d say that. But I’m being straight up here. I know someone who has got this horse, and he reckons with a bit of tender loving care and plenty of dough, it will do well in the races.’

Everyone looked at each other and then started laughing at the fella, reckoning him to be either fucking mad, pissed, or on the gear, possibly a combination of all three. That’s everyone except me, because I was too busy scanning the pub looking for the piss-takers who had put this geezer up to it. However, given the faces of the clientele who gather in my boozier, this was a pretty pointless exercise. Could have been any one of them.

‘I’ve heard about you lot,’ the fella continued. ‘They call you the Jolly Boys, don’t they? Come here every Sunday, always sit at this table, geezers who know a good thing if it came along, right?’

Actually, the geezer was a little bit off-beam as there was only one actual Jolly Boy at our table, and that was Gudger. The majority of the original Jolly Boys had either scarpered down to the south coast or taken the long road to Heaven.

That said, he had mentioned true local legends. The Jolly Boys started life around 1965 or ’66 (no one is ever sure, as is the case with most local history), in The Globe public house in Darwin Street, SE17, not far from where we were now sitting. A group of fellas started to meet on a Sunday night at the pub, between the hours of seven and nine p.m. This group gradually grew to sixty in number, all fellas from the same side of the street in life. The venue changed from time to time but word of mouth ensured all knew where to land, come opening time. The origin of the name, The Jolly Boys, is lost in the mists of time, though Gudger

remembers a family with the surname Jolly who were involved in the group. He thinks it was on account of them that the name was bestowed but you wouldn't want to put any money on it, if you know what I mean. Within this group, there were at least three quality piano players and a host of great singers. Whatever pub they were in, these artisans of the south would take turns to play and sing.

Soon, every decent pub in the area had a piano installed in one of the bars in case the Jolly Boys arrived. To this day there is still Jolly Boy activity, although not on the scale of yesteryear. Time has not been the gang's best friend. By 1985, a few of the old 'uns had retired to the sands and quieter times, and the rest of us had taken their place. We were friends and sons, Honorary Jolly Boys, if you like. The original survivors still meet up at various pubs and have golf weeks and even trips abroad, Lanzarote being a favourite destination. Some of them still wear their Jolly Boy ties. Gudge still owns a couple. One day, he took me aside and handed one to me.

Got to say it made me really proud to be considered a Jolly Boy. Until I saw the tie, and thought, I'll wear that ... when I'm indoors.

As I said, no one knew who this mush in front of us offering us a racehorse was. Which was kind of strange. In The Dutchman, you get used to certain faces offering all kinds of things, from snide Pierre Cardin shirts to packs of bacon, and we knew most, if not all, of the faces doing the selling. But a racehorse ... that was a new one on all of us. After we had stopped laughing at the fella, the man stood there, not wanting to move. That was when we realised he was serious and not taking the piss.

Glances were exchanged between us and voices discreetly lowered. 'Fucking junkie, ain't he?' O'sh muttered.

‘Definitely on the tackle, got to be,’ Dave said, taking a sip of beer.

‘What the fucking hell are we gonna do with a racehorse, mate?’ Little Dave asked.

‘These slags will nick anything nowadays, won’t they?’ said Alfie.

‘No,’ said the salesman, ‘no, it ain’t nicked. Look, a mate of mine has got stables out in Newmarket. He’s got a couple of horses he runs at flapping tracks, gambles them against the pikey’s horses. Anyway, he’s got this one horse he reckons could do well so he’s looking for someone to invest in it, so he can run it legit. I’ll be straight, this horse has come from a, excuse the pun chaps, an unstable background, so the normal owners won’t touch it, so my mate has asked me to tout it around.’

We all looked at each other. All of us had heard a few tales in our time but this was off the plot. I’ve got to admit I was beginning to think I’d love to know how much the geezer was looking for for it, but that’s me all over. Love a scam, get an idea in my head and I’m off. Even though the idea was ridiculous, I was still thinking, how much and could I get the price of a packet of fags out of it? But from the looks on the other faces, this was a non-starter, in more ways than one.

‘I think we’ll leave it, mate,’ said Fred. ‘Horses cost a bundle to stable, feed and all that. I looked into being in an owner syndicate before and it runs into the thousands. A couple of fellas I know once bunged a few bob into one, along with five hundred and ninety-eight other punters. I asked them once what they got back on their investment. A couple of bags of hot horse shit, they told me!’

‘Fair enough,’ said the seller fella, ‘thought I’d give you a

punt. Any point in leaving my name and number in case you change your mind, or might know someone?’

‘Here y’are, mate,’ I quickly said. ‘Give it to me, I might know a couple of fellas.’ Those around me sighed, all thinking the same thing: Baxter is off again, another fucking stupid idea, so please leave me out of it.

I wrote the fella’s name and number down and stuck it in my back sky rocket. The horse seller, happy to have at least got a bit of interest, ambled off to the bar.

‘Same again all round?’ said Alfie, finishing off his bitter. ‘Up you go Goldfish, save me legs.’

‘What you saving them for, Alf?’ O’sh replied. ‘Fucking medical research?’

‘Bollocks, you lump, get up there, you could do with the exercise. Look at the darby on you.’

‘Funny thing is,’ said my old man to no one in particular. ‘I’ve always wanted to get into horse racing in some way or another. Out of my reach though, of course . . .’

The old man then looked over at me, and straight away sussed what was running through my mind. Which, to be precise, was a racehorse.

‘Look at that sappy prat,’ he said, recognising the signs. ‘He’s only thinking of getting involved, ain’tcha, son? Tut bloody tut . . .’

Despite his comment, I knew the old man well. If he had one weakness it was the gee-gees. He was a serious student of the sport of kings. I reckoned on it not taking much to get him involved.

‘Well, what harm can it do?’ I said. ‘We could have a word with the trainer, see what he wants for it. If it’s silly dough, we walk away, no harm done.’

‘Fucking mad, you are, son. Always been the same, champagne tastes but only lemonade money in your pocket.

You're just like your grandad. He was the same. Head in the clouds, woke up in the dirt. How the fuck you gonna afford a gee-gee? On my life,' he said, shaking his nut and laughing.

'Ain't got a chance on my own, granted,' I said, feeling a slight shot of anger in my gut. 'But Fred's given me an idea. I mean, there is nothing to stop us forming a syndicate and lobbing out for it, is there?' I asked.

Everyone looked at me, uncertain as to whether I was being deadly serious or deadly stupid. Then Fred the Shoe piped up.

'I also said it costs thousands,' he explained. 'None of us has got that kind of spare dough, have we? Well, apart from Gudger, eh Gudge?'

Gudge just carried on drinking his light ale, not making eye contact. It had long been rumoured that Gudge had a few bob tucked away on account of his time on the Print. Made sense. The man had worked his ring off, doing all the hours he could get, never turning a shift down. When you had come from fuck all, like him and my old man, the easy money on offer at the *Telegraph*, the *Mail* or wherever, was too good to turn down. The blinding thing about Gudger was that he didn't keep all the gravy to himself.

Gudge came back at us. 'I ain't got cough all, boy. Done most of my spare dough betting on the bloody horses. I wish you joy with it, boy, but I ain't got nothing to give ya.'

'I'll tell ya what,' I piped up, 'I'll bell the fella and get a price and take it from there. Ain't gonna cost us a tanner to find out what he's after, is it?'

'Mate, you're a fucking nut-nut,' said the O'sh, 'a fucking great nut-nut.'

By this stage they were all laughing at me. I looked at them and just grinned, but I didn't reply. I think my best

mate had a point because right then, just as he said it, I felt something inside me change, heard a voice whisper something along the lines of, *your life is about to do a three-point turn, son, better get yourself good and ready*. Unfortunately, I didn't clock the time for that particular occurrence. Glad I didn't, actually. You really would have thought I was a flash bastard then, wouldn't ya?

All of the following week, I was obsessing about that bloody horse. I'm murder, me; get an idea in my head and I have to follow it through. The more I thought about it, the more I wanted it to happen. The problem was, I now had to convince six other non-believers from my 'congregation'. Yet, despite their apparent lack of interest, I did get the vibe that a couple of them might be tempted to get involved. After all, my mob loved a bet and had a genuine interest in the sport. It just needed a couple to admit that to the others and we'd be on. Take my old man, for instance. At tea on the Monday night, he started making all the right noises, kept repeating he would love to get involved *if* he had the dough. That was when I decided to bell the fella at the stables and see what he wanted money-wise. If the price was reasonable, I would go on the offensive, try and talk the others round. I mean, if my old man had it in his mind, then who knows what the others were thinking?

The next day at work, I took the scrap of paper with the number written on it out of my pocket and rang.

'Hello, Dawson House Stables, Sefton speaking,' said the voice at the other end. (Sefton!? What sort of name is that?)

'Yes, hello ... er ... Sefton ... er ... mate,' I said, trying not to laugh, 'I've been given your number by a fella in a pub, reckons you've got a cheap horse for sale ... I might be interested.'

He paused.

‘Well, I’ve got a couple of horses I’m looking for buyers for. You know anything about horses?’ He sounded wary. His voice was what I would call proper Farmer Giles.

‘Only losing money on them,’ I replied, trying to lighten the moment. I didn’t hear a chuckle come back down the line, so I cracked on with my story.

‘Well, as I was saying, this fella in the pub, he reckoned you had a horse that might do okay, and you were looking for backers, so to speak.’

‘That would have been my cousin Allan you met. Asked him if he knew anybody up in the smoke who would fancy owning one. That horse is a three-year-old jumper, big, headstrong bastard, but I’ve always thought he could do well, if he was looked after in the right way. Just a question of getting the money to do it, really.’

I have to say, what I had heard so far hadn’t put me off.

‘All right then, Sefton, well, as I say, I might be interested, wouldn’t mind coming down for a butcher’s . . . a look at it in other words . . . If the price is right, we could talk business, know what I mean?’

The voice at the other end sighed.

‘Look, I’m a businessman, not a Punch and Judy show, and well, they ain’t cheap to look after, y’know. You’ll be looking at stabling it, me training the bloody thing, vet’s fees and entry money to races . . . (Come on, Sefton old son, spit it out, I’m thinking) . . . I reckon, well . . .’ he sounded like he was puffing out his cheeks ‘. . . eight grand will do it . . . how does that sound? What do you think?’

Eight grand! Eight large ones! I’ll tell you what I think to that, Sefton my old son, I think, fuck me, that’s a lot of dough. At least I knew the price now, and I figured with a

bit of haggling I could get it down. The first lesson you learn on the stalls is that the first price mentioned is just the opening gambit. Just as in life, there is always room for manoeuvre. Take Sefton. He must be struggling for dough if he's got family going round dodgy pubs in south London trying to flog a horse.

He continued, 'You never know, you might even get some prize money, might get your dough back, if it wins, never know, but yeah, you're welcome to come and check the horse out.'

Sefton was sounding eager, keen to keep me on the phone. I'm thinking, I must be the first punter to call him about the horse, so he doesn't want to lose me at the first hurdle, all puns intended.

'Yeah, that sounds okay mate,' I said, lying and giving it the big 'un. 'Let me have your address and I'll shoot down at the weekend to see you and the horse.'

Already my mind was trying to figure out how I could sell the idea to the chaps. Sefton asked me my name, and then rattled off his address. It was a gaff called Ashley, up in Newmarket, just as we'd been told in the boozer. I put the phone down and looked up.

A couple of the lads from my office, Roy and Sagey, were looking at me in amazement. They had obviously overheard the conversation.

'Bax, did I hear that right, son, you're buying a horse?'

'You want to get some ointment for that nose of yours, son, don't ya?' I said. 'Listening to other people's phone calls. What you like?'

'Flaming hell, you are, ain't ya?' Roy said.

'Might be, son, might be.'

'Oi, hear that? This mumper is buying a horse,' Sagey

shouted to the assembled blokes dotted around the despatch room where I worked.

There followed a burst of loud laughter. No need to ask what Roy and the boys thought of the idea, then . . .

‘What you buying a horse for, son?’ piped up Frank. ‘You taking up hunting?’

‘Tally-ho!’ shouted a couple of the chaps. I just shook my head at them. Chuckle on brothers, I thought, chuckle on . . . I’ll show ya.

On the bus home from work, as I headed towards the deep south, I began trying to work out a speech to persuade the rest of the honorary Jolly Boys of the potential in buying this horse. Nothing came to mind. It was only when we went past Fred’s shoe shop that I decided then and there to jump off and start my campaign. I wouldn’t try and persuade the boys all at once, I would pick them off one by one, the theory being divide and conquer. If I approached six at once, I’d get slaughtered and verbally nailed to the floor. If I could talk Fred round, and then my old man, the idea might still have legs.

Fred’s shop is located just before Camberwell Green and has been a shoe shop since the 1850s. I reckon some of the dust on the shelves is of that vintage as well. Inside there are mirrors, which were used in the booths so women could try on their shoes in privacy. Apparently, a hundred years ago, showing a bit of ankle constituted hardcore pornography.

Fred’s always worked in the rag trade in some capacity or other, but he decided to go it on his own five years back. He’s always got some cracking stock in. Being an old Mod, he knows his shoes, and being south London, he knows how to get them at cheap prices.

Today, his customers fall into two main camps. He still gets a lot of the ‘Faces’ going in there, people he has

known socially from over the years. Like him, a lot of them grew up in the sixties, when being turned out well on a Friday or Saturday evening was the norm. Some, like Fred and Dave, have kept that tradition on; the others have let standards slip. I've often wondered how that happens. Women and children, I suppose.

People get married and the money that would once have gone on a new pair of shoes or a whistle, is needed elsewhere. I'd like to think that won't happen to me, and that I will find a way to buy quality togs for the rest of my days, whatever the circumstances. Fred's other main punters are the local Africans, many of whom love a bit of good British quality gear. He often says he wished he'd kept up the French lessons at school because half of them speak French as a first language.

'Make my life a lot easier, that would, if I knew what the fuck they were on about,' Fred says.

He also says that although they love his stock, they also love a bargain. Most of them have degrees in haggling. Mind you, with Fred's prices, even they are gonna struggle to knock him down. Don't stop 'em trying, though ...

Fred was on the phone when I walked into the shop. While I waited for him to finish, I looked along the shelves, which were lined with classics like Loakes, Grensons, Bass Weejuns and Alfred Sargents – real quality webs. There was also a selection of Gudger's favourites in every conceivable colour, snakeskin, moc croc with bits of suede, brass and silver stuck on them. Right bastards, them ...

Fred spotted me and waved in my direction as he hung up the phone. "Allo son, just finished work?"

"Allo, mate. Yeah, another day at the salt mines out of the way."

'Good lad,' he says. 'Good lad.'

‘Fred,’ I said as nonchalantly as I could, ‘I spoke to that fella with the gee-gee today, got a price.’

‘Fuckin’ ’ell, son, you don’t piss about, do ya?’ he said, chuckling. ‘What’s the fella want for it?’

Straight away I knew I was in. Fred had been thinking about the horse as much as I had. Didn’t surprise me. He’s a lot like me, Fred – if there’s something of interest going on, he wants a slice.

‘He wants eight large,’ I told him.

‘Eight, eh? Not giving it away, is he? What do we get for that, apart from a fucking great big horse?’

I explained that the dosh would take care of it for one year, and that included stabling, vet’s fees, entry to races, as well as the training – the full bifta, in fact.

‘I reckon if I get the others on board, then we can go in with an offer of six large, tell the geezer take it or leave it,’ I stated. ‘Listening to him today, he sounded keen to jog the horse on, and he must need the dough if he’s got a fella going round boozers trying to sell it, eh?’

‘Well,’ Fred said, stroking his chin, ‘been thinking about it a bit, as it happens; reckon I might be in, if the others go for it, of course.’

I knew it, I fucking knew it . . .

‘Having a gamble runs in my family, don’t it?’ he explained. ‘My old man loved a bet. He would bet on two raindrops falling down a pane of glass. Did I ever tell you the best betting story to do with him? When he was at home on leave, during the Second World War? Every night, he was down the Catford dog track, every night. Only there wasn’t enough greyhounds around to make a race, maybe they had ended up on dinner plates, don’t know, but anyway, he comes up with this plan. He gets six doves . . .’

‘Six doves?’ I said, in disbelief.

‘Yeah, six white doves,’ chuckled Fred. ‘Him and his pal, Teddy Herring, talked the owners of the dog track into letting them have the main straight of the track netted off, all down the sides, and then over the top, like cricket nets, you know? Then they got the doves, gave them each a dollop of different colour paint, so as to distinguish between them, and invited the punters to have a gamble on them.’

‘How the fuck did they get them to race in a straight line?’ I said, and then automatically thought, hold up, he’s pulling my piss and I’ve fallen for it . . .

‘You bastard,’ I said. ‘You’re getting me at it, aren’t ya?’

‘Nah, mate, this is kosher,’ said Fred, smiling, his voice going up a notch. ‘The old man reckons what they did was this: they only raced female doves. You get someone to walk the length of the straight waving a male dove in the air, giving off . . . er . . . male dove smells. Female doves can’t resist that smell, so when the male dove gets to the other end they release the female racing doves . . . They paid out on the colour that crossed the line first!’

‘Bollocks! I ain’t having it.’

‘What d’ya mean, bollocks? It’s all true,’ he said laughing, his steely little eyes glinting.

‘Fuck off,’ I said. ‘Fucking racing doves on a dog track . . .’

‘On my mother’s eyesight,’ Fred said, and as soon as he said that I knew the story was true. Fred rarely used that expression and when he did it meant one thing – he was talking straight up.

‘Right,’ he said, ‘the horse. I reckon we have a serious chat on Sunday with the others and decide if we’re in or out for it, yeah?’

‘Can’t say fairer than that, mate,’ I said. ‘And if they don’t go for it, I’ll go halves on six doves with ya!’

We both laughed out loud again, happy with the thought we were on to a scheme, and who knew where that'd lead ya. Life had suddenly got interesting again.

'Ta-ta, son, I'll bell the others, make sure we get a full turnout at The Dutchy,' he said.

Just then, his shop phone started up again. I waved at him and turned to go out. That was when I heard him say, 'Hello, Jean,' and shout 'BAX! For you, mate. It's your mum.'

I came back and took the phone.

'Hello, Mark, it's me, Mum. Thank God I found ya, son, been ringing all over the place. Get here as soon as you can, eh?'

She sounded really upset.

'What's up, Mum?' I asked, worried.

'Just get round here, mate, eh?' she said quietly, and then the phone went dead. I put the receiver down, confusion and worry now surging unexpectedly and terribly through my stomach.

Fred knew something was wrong right away. 'What's up son?'

'Fuck knows, got to shoot lively though, mate, speak Sunday, yeah?' and I went.

I walked and ran as fast as I could towards home, running over the possibles of what could have happened. Had she been mugged or had a fall? I'd told her to keep her wits about her, especially this time of the day when all the freaks came out. Had one of the outlaws died? Was my brother Glen okay? Had something happened to him? All these thoughts and more were going round my nut as I went through the gate, and instead of pulling out my keys I rang the doorbell – quicker that way.

My old man opened up and let me in.

‘Dad?’

He just shook his head. It was then that I saw he’d been crying for what looked like a day and a week, and it was then that I suddenly felt very empty.