

Chapter One Another Planet

They're no happy these bastards, are they, unless they're giein every one ay us grief? This game's been switched to an early kick-off in a misguided and, I think it's fair to say, unsuccessful attempt to tackle the dreaded alcohol issue. Looks like it's back to the drawing board wi their latest plan. This place is heavin wi Celtic fans, all firing into their Guinness, their alcopops, their expensive watered-down lager; you name it, they're drinking it. I can even make out one or two mid-morning spirits already being tipped doon their throats an aw. It's all because ay the by-laws, strictly speaking you're no supposed to serve the bevvy before a certain hour ay the day here. What's the rule, 1pm...? Noon...? I doubt too many of this crowd knows or even cares, but that's how they've shifted the game. This is the solution the Polis have come up wi, in conjunction with the clubs, in conjunction with the media, in conjunction with the browbeaters at the S.F.A. Get them oot their beds before the fuckin post arrives. That way, they'll no be able to get a drink in them before they get up to the ground. That's the idea anyway, I'd hate to be the one who has to tell them.

The pub's busy, but every face is known to the proprietor and the doors are closed. Bus and social conveners wander vaguely about, shouting out names and distributing tickets. Everywhere people are laughing wildly and chatting anxiously, no able to shut up or stand still for two minutes, which is a pain when you're waiting on your mate to come back fae the bar. Wee Coyler does well though, twisting his way through the odd 'Sorry, son', 'On you go, pal', 'There you are, Martin' and arriving back wi three pints ay the Nigerian lager.

"You don't want to break the law, dae you, but you're no exactly left wi much choice, eh?" I observe, savouring the stout's bitter, creamy taste. God, I love this stuff. It's imbued with mysterious, revitalising properties, one decent-sized glug is all that's required to feel its immediate restorative effects. Just what you need after a Saturday night out on the ran-dan, chasing the Glasgow talent to all hours. At least it was Skelton that was daein most ay the chasing last night, I dimly seem to remember. He was treating aw the lassies to his 'I was a male model' routine which, considering the face Skelton has on him, takes a fair amount ay brass neck. I told him, he had as much chance wi that line as his team had the day, and so far at least I've been proved right because I lost count of the number ay times he was hunted. Later on, I caught up wi him on George Square at Christ knows what time, slumped on the steps, waiting for a night bus. The seagulls and pigeons boldly helping themselves to what was left ay his pie supper. When the bus finally arrived he wasny for moving, so I just had to leave him there. Let's hope his bad luck continues for a few more hours yet.

"You're no breakin nuhin," Coyler informs me. "It's him that's serving you."

"Is that right?"

"Aye. And he's covered an aw, it's a private event. There's nae cash registers open, you put a fiver in the glass for the cause, and that's it."

I'm surprised at Coyler, there's no way a man of his calibre should be taken in by that garbage. Maybe it's just the time ay day and he's no fully into his stride yet, although I'm vaguely aware as well that he could be trying it on wi me.

"What are you saying, Martin? You've no fallen for that old line, have you? The war's over, have you no heard? That donation you gied him is going right into his back pocket, believe me," I assure him.

I'm still searching Coyler's face for any sign of a wind-up, but either way he's no letting on. He's decided he's no speaking to me and is just quietly sipping his pint. I can't say I blame him, I think this boy's in pretty much the same state as me, he'll feel a lot better wi a few cans and a couple ay his loose reefers on the go. Just as well we don't have the McGoldrick boys here to remind us that, regardless of ceasefires

and peace processes, the struggle for a United Ireland is still ongoing, and continues to depend on the generosity of ordinary people. It's no that I don't agree. In fact, I agree completely. The Free State was only ever a stepping-stone in my book. But I can't be bothered with any of that nonsense right now, there'll be plenty of time for that later on. And the truth is, I couldn't have cared less where Coyler's fiver was going. After last night and the head I had on me, he could have given it to David Murray as long as there was a pint of Guinness heading my way. I swear, the bastard that started us on the double vodka red bulls has some serious fuckin' explaining to do, I'm no kiddin'.

I take another big swally from my pint glass, and as I do, I notice, mid-gulp, that I've become locked in eye contact with none other than Jock Stein. The big man and the rest of the Lisbon Lions are smiling broadly down at me; so is Kenny Dalglish, Danny McGrain, Paul McStay, and there's the real King Billy - McNeill - holding up the European Cup. I know we have a tendency to go on about this, I don't know how many times I must have heard it myself, but that's the image which captures the high point of the club's history. Vindication in one photograph of the worthy ideals of the club's inception. Don't believe what the animals say, yes Celtic was unashamedly Irish and Catholic in its origins, and the supporter base across the world today is still drawn extensively from that community, but so what? It's only when that starts to become a problem for people that the bigotry kicks in. Way back in the nineteenth century the decision was taken that Celtic would only employ people on the basis of their ability, a concept the Huns were still coming to terms with as the twenty-first century hurtled towards us. Orange bastards, man. The thing is, they've no excuse either. They can't trot out the old line about standards of the day, that's just the way things were back then, because all the while, right from the off, they had Celtic alongside them, conducting themselves in an appropriate manner. If the club I followed was indulging in those kind of practices, checking up on people's names and backgrounds, rummaging around in their past in order to find out what school they went to, and refusing to sign players on the basis of their religion, then my attitude would have been quite simple - fine, you do that, but I'm no gony support you. And I'm pretty sure a lot of other Celtic supporters, down the decades, would have felt the same way. The fact that Rangers managed to escape any form of serious censure for so long, in the light of such blatant and overt discrimination, only goes to highlight the complicity and indulgence they were afforded by the media, and other institutions and pillars of the establishment. This country didn't exactly blaze a trail for equal opportunities employment. I'm only glad that Celtic never went down the same route, because then the supporters just wouldn't have been interested. The club would never have been special, it would never have grown into what it became, and McNeill wouldn't be up there, holding up the Big Cup.

"There the bus," I nod, as the awkward big vehicle hauls itself into The Gallery car park.

"Hold on just now Kevin. No rush, eh?" Coyler tells me.

"No, I'm just saying. Take your time, enjoy your pint. After you're done with that, it's Tennents Lager and the way," I laugh, holding up my carry-out.

One or two of the Lisbon boys have been in this pub. Willie Wallace is a Kirkie man himself and McNeill, Auld and a few others have all turned up here at one time or another for various functions and anniversary celebrations. Wee Jimmy Johnstone was always at his exuberant, inebriated best. One time he came up to my da and was shaking his hand. I think the old boy was a wee bit star-struck, all he could manage to say to his idol was, "For twenty-odd years I've been wanting to shake your hand Jimmy, and now here you are, shaking mine."

I was never really one for that sort of hero worship masel, but I suppose that's one thing I could always ask wee Jinky, if I ever see him or any of the other members of that team in here again; what's it like having your picture sprayed over every wall in this pub? It's some sight that's on display here, there are a multitude of images everywhere you look, not just of Celtic, but the flags and colours of many of their opponents can be seen as well. The effect is to provide a fairly well-detailed, illustrative history of the club, which only goes to offer a bittersweet reminder, given the team's present circumstances, of the kind

of illustrious company that Celtic used to keep, and hopefully will keep again soon.

Not today though.

Millsy's pleased to see that I'm up and about and have managed to put in an appearance the day.

"You get a ticket Garra, aye?" He shuffles through the ranks with a broad smile on his face. "Well done! I wasny sure you'd make it."

"I wasny sure masel, Darren," I acknowledge. "It was a last minute thing. I was up the house last night and the old man calls me to the phone. He's wantin me to speak to his mate Jamesy Gallacher, you know Jamesy, aye? I'm wondering what this is aw about, then Jamesy goes to us, 'Do you want to go to the game Kevin, right enough? There's a spare sitting here and I've nae takers.' I'm trying to tell him, 'Stay right where you are Jamesy, don't fuckin move or dae anyhin, will you, I'll be right there.' The old boy's just laughing at us, telling me to come round and pick it up if I want it."

"He paid forty pound for his," Millsy points to a rather sheepish looking Danny Igoe. Danny's wearing a Celtic shirt with a big number 32 on the back. Across his shoulders, where conventionally you'd expect to see the player's name, is written the word 'COUNTIES'. I swear, following this club gies you a better understanding of Irish geography and history than you'd get fae any school.

"That's no real. Couldny have been a Celtic fan if he took forty pound aff you," I suggest.

"Fuckin wasny either," Danny confirms gloomily, but deep down I know he'd have probably coughed up twice that amount. I better no mention it, but all I paid was the price ay a few cans of TL that I stopped off and bought on the way round to Jamesy's. He wasny gony take them either, but eventually he accepted a four-pack off us, leaving me to keep a few tins back for the day.

"We're heading out the now, yous coming?" I think Coyler is starting to get itchy feet. He's drained his pint already and now he seems eager for action.

"Aye, we'll be right wi you, Martin," Millsy tells him. "Gie us five minutes."

I finish my drink and big Duffy, who guards the pub's rear entrance, lifts the steel shutters for us and we're among the first on the bus, settling into our seats pretty much right up the back. Coyler's in the row behind and I'm next to Michael McAleer, who we picked up in the pub earlier on. Young Michael was pretty much by himself in there, but there you go, that's what these ballots can do for you. He was pouring what looked like quite a tidy sum ay money into that fruit machine that sits in the corner. The wee twally ended up rooked, so I bought him a drink. I cany say I know Michael all that well, he was a good few years below us at St. Ninian's. Not a bad wee football player though, I seem to remember. I mind his big sister though, that's for sure. Nicola McAleer was a pure darling, and a dead nice lassie as well. Inevitably though, because of her looks and her roving eye, she was the subject of many a scurrilous and unfounded rumour. Big Tooncy was one who was always bragging that he'd went wi her, it's just a shame you cany believe a word big Tooncy says. He has a bit of a track record, does Tooncy, when it comes to boasting about his exploits with Catholic girls, which he's happy to elaborate for you quite openly to your face, usually embellishing his sordid stories with all the lurid details that his twisted imagination can conceive of. And there's never any notion that he might be gieing offence, either to any Tims, or women, or anyone wi half a brain who might be within earshot of one ay his ridiculous rants. This is because for Tooncy, his own prejudices are merely a watered down version of the much more sinister and calculated sectarianism passed on to him down the generations. The boy probably believes he's behaving like an enlightened new man, sharing a bit ay banter wi his Catholic mates, and in comparison to some ay his elders, he could well be right. You don't want to stand in the way ay progress, unlike his old man, at least Tooncy'll no think twice about inviting you into his hoose. With Nicola though, he had overstepped the mark. She angrily confronted him in front ay aw his pals, and he was forced to admit that, no for the first time, he'd been talking a load ay shite, claiming unconvincingly that he'd mixed Nicola up wi some other bird from the opposite end of the attractiveness spectrum, who he

had in fact copped off wi. I'm tempted to ask Michael if they still stay in touch, but I decide it's probably no a good idea. Young guys like that can be quite overprotective ay their big sisters, one false word here and I don't think I'll be his new pal for much longer.

"I wish to fuck they'd hurry up man," Michael remarks, suddenly sounding a wee bit anxious beside me, as the pub gradually empties out.

"Stay cool, Mikey," I advise him. "I don't think we're gony miss the game or nothin."

"Aye but it's the nerves, man, is it no?" he suggests, plausibly enough. "Aw this sitting about before wan ay these games, it's bad for the fuckin nerves, man, sure it is?"

"It's no easy," I concede. "I'm in a similar state masel. I'll feel a lot better once we're three nuthin up."

"I'd settle for that right now Garra, I'm tellin you. I cany staun aw this waiting about."

"It's Mister 'cool hand' Coyler there," I indicate. "He makes you feel worse because he's that laid back, is that no right Martin?"

Coyler has lit his reefer and is standing up to open a window. "What's keeping them, Willie?" I shout down the front at the old legend, Willie McCreery, as he drags himself, with a groan and a wheeze, onto the bus in stages. There's a famous story of how Willie, when he used to run the bus many years ago, caused a major panic up at Tanadice one time, believing they were a man short. He had everybody waiting about for forty-five minutes, trying to figure out who it was they were missing. Every other bus is long gone, all except the Kirkie Shamrock. They're still sitting there in the Tayside twilight, then some genius goes and points out to him that he's forgotten to count hissel. That's the sort ay thing that legends are made of round here, believe me.

"Christ knows, son," he says to me by way of an answer.

"Fuck's sake," I complain, but I'm only letting off steam. Michael's right, it's no easy, trying to deal with the nervous tension before one of these games, especially the way Celtic have been playing recently, although Coyler's clearly mastered the art. I'm no sure how he manages it, but I take a puff on the man's reefer and pass it over, just as the bus is finally filling up.

A group of about six or seven come out the pub, laughing and stoating about, led by Eddie Orr and a crowd ay his mates. Orrie's leading them in a chorus of 'If you hate the fuckin Rangers...' I'm still waiting on the day some guy goes, I'm no clappin, I've been meaning to tell yous, I quite like them in actual fact.

"One or two of these are no gony make it in the ground," Coyler suggests and he could well be right. There's a few boys already starting to struggle and they've no even cracked open their carry-outs yet. That's what happens though, with these kick-off times, folk just get tanked up aw the earlier. Then after the game, it's a case of having aw afternoon to get as blootered as you like. That's how incidents start to spill out onto the streets, but the Polis are happy because most ay the bother takes place away fae the ground, even if their event has passed off in relative good order. It was the riots after the 1980 Scottish Cup Final, when McCluskey scored in extra time, that provoked the crackdown and they've no let up ever since. Drink was supposedly the main cause ay aw the rioting, although I personally believe the 'Huns no being able to take a defeat' line of inquiry was worthy of further investigation. I'm no sure what scenarios, real or imagined, they'll be anticipating here once more, but we'll be herded about the place like cattle again the day. Of course they claim it's all justified, because there's no the same trouble wi football crowds now that there used to be, but still, the Accident and Emergency departments of the Glasgow Infirmaries will be busy again this weekend. But as long as it doesny happen live on television, in full view of a horrified nation, exploited every inch ay the way by pontificating media cunts, then the operation will be deemed a success.

The irony is, I'd be quite happy to walk through a crowd ay Rangers boys on the way to this game and as long as they left me alone, I'd leave them alone an aw. I know that by and large the feeling on the other side wouldny be too dissimilar, most Rangers fans are just ordinary punters. Fair enough, they can be a

wee bit misguided and confused at times, no two ways about that, and they seem to have a fairly slanted view, a lot ay them, on certain aspects of their own history. But still, it's the full-time bigots I take exception to, no the ordinary guys that just go to follow their team. The authorities clamp down, blame it on football supporters, move the kick-off times, segregate the fans, because that's what authorities do. Without the perception of imminent all out mayhem, their authority begins to wane. But people cany be bothered with fighting at football grounds, it's no the done thing any more. Hooliganism was never my scene in the first place anyway, the idea of young working-class boys, fae different parts ay the country, battering lumps out ay one another at football matches, while their communities and their way of life, and the industries that sustained them, were being systematically dismantled by vindictive politicians, always struck me as a pretty counterproductive way for people to express themsels. A far better idea, it seems to me, is to try and foster solidarity between supporters of different clubs, because we have enough threatened common interests to be concerned about. These Polis cunts should be targeting their resources on the real troublemakers, no ordinary football supporters, who for the most part try to maintain a good-natured approach, despite the way they're treated. But no matter what happens during the game itself, some innocent young boy will take a battering the night, for nothing other than being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and there'll be nae sign ay a copper to offer him assistance.

Millsy's been watching Eddie Orr and Georgie Matheson with interest as well, and has noted our concerns. "You're mair likely to see a dead man wi a stiffy than you are to cut out drinking before wan ay these games," he turns round and tells us, emptying his can ay lager wi a flourish, just to illustrate the point. I cany argue, he's dead right, but he might have warned us. He has me spluttering my beer all over the back of the seat in front.

"But that's rank though, is it no?" Young Michael seems less amused. "Aw the bother you go to, to get yoursel a ticket for wan ay these games, and then some Polisman goes and takes it aff you at the gate." I think the boy can suddenly see himself being turned away from the ground for the sake ay a few cans.

"You'll be fine Michael," I assure him, as Orrie and his merry band stagger aboard. "We're awright, we're no falling about the place like that." I can understand where Michael's coming from though, because I've seen supporters turned away from Celtic Park for no particular reason dozens ay times.

Harmless wee guys, who were probably just a bit the worse for wear. But I find avoiding the harassment is usually pretty straightforward, no that I've no been fairly blitzed before the odd game or two. Aw you need to dae is keep your heid doon and wait in line, as if you're queuing for communion, that way you don't gie the bastards the excuse they need. Michael's only about eighteen or nineteen, so I continue to blether away to the boy, giving him the benefit of my broad experience, playing the role of the guy who's been around a while, done a few things, seen it all. He seems happy enough to listen, and nods carefully at my pearls of wisdom, which is pretty funny because I'm basically just talking a load ay shite to pass the time. Feeling a bit ay a buzz, looking forward to the game, cany shut my mouth. He's a smart cookie though, Michael, I think I mind now he goes to Strathclyde University.

"Aye," he confirms sternly when I ask him. Touched a nerve there, it seems. I don't think he's that keen to advertise his student credentials, although I cany see how no. Still, at least he'll be able to sign us into Strathy Union, there's a few ay us looking for someone with a card now that Armie's wee brother doesny go any more. They clubs up the west end ay Sauchiehall Street are all dead studenty now, but I mind when it used to be ned city up there. We'll arrange something in a couple of weeks, I tell Michael, and we'll fire into some tidy student fanny. Michael seems to like the sound ay this idea, he's hud one or two ay they dolly birds himself, he assures me, and we agree, they're all sex maniacs. Except for one I bagged one time, who was nice enough looking but wasny much cop when I had her in the sack.

"I'd have been better aff trying to shag a fuckin ironing-board, Michael," he's amused to hear me tell him. We're underway at last and the bus is heading up towards the Stepps bypass. Pat Kelly comes round to do a headcount, sharing a joke wi one or two folk, telling us for definite who is and who isny playing the day.

I wonder where he gets his information from, because usually it's about as reliable as yesterday's Daily Record. There's no sweepstakes or any of the usual fun and games on these occasions so he takes his three quid off us and that's it. It's not long though before the singing starts up in patches: *Hail! Hail! The Celts are here. What the hell do we care, what the hell do we care? Hail! Hail! The Celts are here. What the hell do we care now? For it's a grand old team to play for ...* and so on. I really think they should be saving it for Castle Greyskull, they'll need their voices there awright. But no: *Bring on your Hearts your Hibs your Ran-jurs, Bring on your Spaniards by the score, Barcelona, Real Madrid who the fuck you tryin to kid, Cause were out to show the world what we can do.* Somebody's clearly had enough ay this already, because they're waving a cassette about, which seems to catch the mood, and it's passed down the front to the machine.

That combine harvester song comes on, but rather than a bunch of Westcountry yokels singing about swilling cider, instead it's a soft, mocking Ulster voice we hear:

*My friend Clive, he's in the SAS
He said a change was as good as a rest
But then they went and posted him way down to Crossmaglen!
He's praying to God to be in Wormwood Scrubs again*

Oh I've got a brand new shiny helmet and a pair of kinky boots...

That's more like it. Taking the piss out the army, you cany go far wrong. Next, it's 'Sean South of Garryowen':

*It was on a gloomy New Years Eve as the shades of night came down
A lorryload of volunteers approached the border town*

***There were men from Dublin and from Cork,
Fermanagh and Tyrone***

And their leader was a Limerick man, Sean South from Garryowen

An absolute rebel classic. One or two boys are up in their chairs, looking about, singing. Numerous flags and banners and scarves have appeared and are now brazenly on display. We're starting to get into the swing ay things now and I crack open another can of TL and tuck in, just as poor old Sean South is being laid low by the oppressor's guns.

Michael's trying to convince me to swap my ticket with somebody else. The hypo wee bam has found the guy with the seat next to his and he's trying to organise some sort ay exchange. It's all because he has this big tricolour, and he wants me to stand next to him in the Broomloan, hold up the other end, and shout some heinous sectarian abuse at forty thousand Orange bastards. It's a fine idea, I'll admit. A fine idea at the best ay times, but especially the day, because these cunts aren't gony sit quietly and watch the football when they see us appear, that's for fucking sure. It's Frank McGuire who has the ticket Mike wants, and I can see the man's no that keen to part wi' it.

"It's awright Frank, never mind," I tell him, but Michael's no letting it go. I've nae idea where I'm gony be sitting the day and to be honest, I'm no really caring. I only landed this ticket at the last minute because Jamesy Gallacher decided at his age, he didn't need aw this nonsense on a Sunday afternoon and offered me up his seat. There's a big discussion being conducted with Millsy and one or two others joining in, and eventually me and Michael have a couple of seats next to one another, although Christ knows how it's all been sorted.

“Gony be magic man, we’ll be right there,” Michael tells me. It’s pretty funny, this boy is under the impression that I’m some sort of big IRA man. I’m no sure where this idea comes from, I certainly don’t propagate the notion, even on a day like this when there’s a lot ay bravado and other high jinks going on. But Michael’s no the first one to have bothered me wi this, the wee apprentice at my work was the same, he was always pestering me for information about Ireland, asking me loads ay questions, treating me as if I was the font ay aw knowledge. It’s not something I’m particularly comfortable with in all honesty, I’m no like my uncle Pat, who was on the civil rights march in Derry on Bloody Sunday, in 1972. He was there, singing ‘We shall overcome,’ on the day when it all kicked off, and there’s no way he could be regarded as any sort ay sympathiser, so I don’t see how I can be either. It’s true, I’ve read Tim Pat Coogan and I know a bit about the history of Ireland, but that’s no quite the same thing as being dragged out your house in the middle ay the night, or being battered by drunken polismen and shot at by soldiers. There’s a fair chance that one or two of the family anecdotes may have sharpened my opinions on one or two subjects, and maybe that’s what leads to the confusion; my auntie Rosemary, only just married, rushing out of their house up on Eastway in the Creggan Estate, leaving the front door wide open behind her, and running down to the Bogside looking for Pat after she heard the shots – the terrifying crack of the live rounds from the Paratroopers’ self-loading rifles making an altogether different sound from the dull thud of the rubber bullets they were used to hearing on an almost daily basis in Derry at that time; then there were the letters which the parents of the victims received from Loyalist paramilitaries, saying that they hoped their sons would all burn in hell, an outrage only slightly mitigated by the fact that malicious lies were being put out by the army, claiming that the young boys they’d just murdered were all active IRA men; how the whole experience brought the community closer together in their fight for justice, and so on. But still, despite my relative proximity to some of these events, I’m of a different generation and living across the water in another country. So I always try to make sure that any opinions I hold are as fair-minded as they can be, and informed by books that are based on intelligence and academic study, no just naked sectarian self-interest, which is what you’re up against half the time. I really should try and set Michael straight but the chances are, that would only provoke further inquiries, and there’s no way I’m about to engage in any sort of big discussion with him right now. If he continues to look curious, I’ll steer him well away from the subject.

But he’s no, he’s settled down now and looking out the window as the bus pulls up outside one of the most notorious Rangers pubs anywhere in the city. There’s one or two of the blue uniform brigade parading about and, as well as the shouting and swearing, you can tell by some of the gestures and ridiculous posturing that’s going on just how pleased they are to see us turning up on their doorstep. We don’t hang about, that’s for sure, we’re straight out our seats, leaning over to the window, blessing them all, like the Pope does when he steps off the plane. Guaranteed to do the trick, that one. It’s all too easy really, one or two ay them are already wound up like fuckin cuckoo clocks. Millsy’s no shy, that’s for sure, he’s right up to the window, and he’s giein them some right abuse, so he is.

Then something goes smash at the back of the bus.

I never seen what happened but there’s a lot of simmering anger coming to the boil now, despite the calls from the older heads at the front to keep the heid and no to lose the rag. The driver swings open the door and steps out to see what’s going on and about half a dozen ay us are down the front and out right behind him, Eddie Orr stomping past everyone, trying to shove his way out and across the street, which isn’t easy, because the lights have changed now and the traffic’s flowing round the side of us.

This big Hun is shouting across at us above the noise of the road but the stones are being flung from another direction. A group of five or six young boys are hanging about not far away, acting smart and looking guilty, but not daring to come any nearer.

“Haud on the now Orrie,” I tell Eddie. The driver’s round the back of the bus, inspecting the damage and I point the young crew out to him. Suddenly we’re after them, but the wee arseholes are sharp out the

blocks, they track suits and trainers they're wearing aren't just a fashion statement, and they've bolted it up side streets and closes, over fences and into buildings. I catch sight of one wee scally lobbing a bottle in our general direction and I tear after him. He's caught out in the open and I take the boy's legs, in the classic manner of the professional foul.

He takes a flying heider into the tarmac but he's straight back up again, staggering away to a big wooden fence, sliding along it, trying to stay on his feet while all the time I'm hovering just beside him. I can't make up my mind what to do, whether to grab the wee dick and frogmarch him back to face the music, or whether to just let him scarper. I take a haud ay him and fling him to the ground until I can decide what to dae wi him. I'm fed up wi these wee chancers trying it on by lobbing bricks, bottles, you fuckin name it, at our buses. It's no as if it's never happened before.

Then I catch sight ay the knife. It confuses me momentarily because it's been in his hand the whole time and if he'd turned round and waved it at me, there's no way I'd have been peggin it after him wi quite so much enthusiasm. My brain's trying to compute everything just a wee bit too fast, and I can't figure out what his original intentions were, but I'm glad he was left isolated because I wouldn't fancy squaring up to a whole crowd ay these bams. Either way, there's no much he's gony be daein wi the thing now, wi ma foot on his heid. I bend down and retrieve the offending weapon from his hand.

Orrie and a few others arrive.

"You got wan, Garra!"

"Wee bastart's cairrying a fuckin lockback, look!" I announce, still genuinely struggling with the full implications.

"Fuck's sake! So he is. Here, gie us it." Orrie takes the knife from my hand and opens the blade, locking it into position.

"Touch me, ma brother'll kill yous," a splutter comes from the pavement. "I knaw whit bus yous are on." The wee toerag's no exactly giein himsel much ay a chance. Even if I wanted to, there's now nothing I can do to prevent him from suffering the consequences of Eddie Orr and Georgie Matheson. I just hope the boy is gony shut his mouth and no try anything funny, because I don't think he knows what he's dealing wi here, and at that age these wee idiots can be too gallus for their ain good. The big man has a haud ay the boy. He picks up his head by the hair and shoves his face into a pile of dog shite that's lying by a nearby lamppost on a slab of broken concrete.

"Up you get pal, did you fall oor? I'm only trying to help you. Aw, you're doon again." Orrie continues to torment the boy, rubbing his face repeatedly in the dog muck. Then, using the blade, he starts scooping the shite into his mouth, face and hair, ignoring the squeals and sputters. "There's some for your big brother an aw," he tells him, the cruel pretence finally at an end.

Sirens wail in the vicinity.

"Go!" Orrie announces and he shies the blade as far as he can over a semi-demolished old factory wall and we jog back to the bus. One or two of the Rangers boys are just where we left them, still looking for all the world like they're dying to come over and start a big rammy, although to be fair to them, I think they just look that way anyway. A Polis car pulls up behind the bus and that seems to disperse them for some reason, the majority disappearing back into their manky wee hovel.

The driver's out the bus again and he wants to go and speak to the cops. This is unnecessary, folk are becoming restless now, because we're sitting here holding up the traffic outside one ay the worst fuckin holes this side ay the river. He's no very popular when he eventually returns.

"Gony get us the fuck oot ay here mate, you shouldny have come by this way anyway."

"That's fuckin three hunner pound damage tae ma bus," the driver complains.

"So whit!? No even your bus anyway, is it? Just you drive the fuckin hing," Orrie shouts at him, which cracks us up.

"Problem solved mate, wee bastarts'll no be tryin that on again," Georgie adds. I don't know if he's heard

them but the driver's no gony argue and we're underway once more, with the recent turn of events being variously described and elaborated on by some of the participants. I'm being dragged into the inquest myself, which is immediately and vociferously underway, but I'm still feeling a wee bit too dazed and confused to be able to offer much insight, after such a close encounter with the big city's knife-wielding subculture. It's little more than I can do just to nod, shrug or smile at the odd reference. I sit back and check my watch - less than an hour until kick off. I empty my can ay TL and crack open another.

Twenty minutes or so later and Ibrox Park looms large on the horizon, or the smelly end ay Shite Street as it's sometimes known. Mordor, the Govan Shityard, Planet fuckin Zonkonion, it doesny matter what you call the place, the trick is to get in and out ay here in one piece, preferably wi your footballing dignity still intact. Victory in this midden is a sweet sensation and one that Celtic have savoured a number ay times recently, the more unexpectedly, the better. Let's face it, the last few years have not exactly represented the greatest period in the club's history, on and off the park, with the turmoil in the boardroom seemingly spilling over and affecting performances on the pitch at times. But once or twice we've turned up here, with the opposition foaming at the mouth wi overconfidence, and dished them out a footballing lesson. The general consensus seems to be that something similar might be on the cards again the day, although I'm no quite so unguarded in my optimism myself. We're conceding the home advantage, and there's one or two dangerous customers in this side that will need to be looked after. Tricky foreign bastards on twenty grand a week, which no doubt goes a long way to helping them assuage any doubts or scruples they might have about the sectarian arseholes they've thrown in their lot wi. But then mercenaries I suppose will fight for anyone, we shouldny be surprised. It doesny half make you laugh though, hearing these players talking on the telly about what a great club they're at, and how they're happy to knock back Serie A just to be here, and aw the rest ay it. As far as I'm concerned, they deserve every penny they get just for managing to keep a straight face during these periodic assaults on our intelligence. They're quite an insecure bunch on the whole, these Huns, they need to be reminded on a semi-regular basis just how important and great they are, or they're no even gony bother turning up. Witness the early eighties for example, when if they managed a five figure crowd for a league game at Ibrox, they were doing well. So now it seems to be Celtic's turn to have a period in the doldrums, and we're certainly exploiting it to the full. I don't think Showaddywaddy were ever this bad for this long. At some point the club is gony have to take it a step further on from the occasional, spectacularly defiant but isolated victory to consolidating some of the recent improvements and eventually winning trophies again. Whether that means compromising the attacking style, I'm no sure, but we certainly need to lose the inferiority complex. The mercenaries, the bigotry, the planet-sized egos - leave aw that shite to this mob, because that's no the Glasgow Celtic way. I think we're starting to appreciate that now, and if everything goes to plan the day, then the team with the better footballing instincts will hopefully win through, in which case there can only be one winner. That's the theory anyway. You'll no catch me running to any bookies though.

Eddie seems a wee bit emotional as we step down off the bus. He's waiting by the side ay the road for me, so he can give me a hug or a pat on the back or something. I'm no that keen to let him, he's a friendly big guy, is Orrie, but sometimes he can be a wee bit overfriendly, especially wi a drink in him, and I'd rather gie him the slip.

"Haud on there the now, Garra!" he yells at me. He's obviously fired up for the occasion and so are his pals, they're all here too, so there's no escaping. I'm surrounded and Eddie slaps a chunky arm round my shoulder and grabs me, "That was just as well, Kevin. There's me ready to steam into they Huns, but thank fuck somebody was wise to what was happenin back there. Otherwise we might have ended up battered, or doon the cop shop, or Christ knows where."

He's stinking ay drink and starts bawlin: *Hail! Hail!* One or two join in, including some boys across the street: *The Celts are here, What the hell do we care now! For it's a grand old team to play for...*

There's a wee crowd of us now, young Michael with his Ireland flag wrapped round his shoulders. Coyle has the Celtic scarf round his neck and covering his chin, he's hanging back with Millsy and Danny and Stephen McParland, sharing a sneaky joint. Mad Brian McClure, who walks about like the leaning tower ay Pisa because he suffers from that water-on-the-brain syndrome, and he cany haud his heid up straight, he's along for the ride as well. There's Georgie Matheson, and Davie Dunn, and one or two others fae Orrie's crowd, James Caldwell the student, trying to look the part, with the Wolfe Tones headscarf round his noggin. Then there's Eddie himself, like so many others, sporting the latest version of the famous hooped jersey. He's forty quid worse off than me though. Cross gleaming on my collar, jacket off and tied round my waist, I managed to resist the urge to splash out on the new replica strip. Consequently my chest isn't scrawled with any commercial graffiti, although I don't know why I'm being so precious about it. Naebidy's gony notice another mobile fucking advertising board around here.

Eddie's still going on about the scallies we battered.

"That boy'll need to get a haud ay some industrial strength toothpaste, if he's ever gony nip ony ay the wee birds again. No unless he's wanting to gie them a moothful ay dug shite. Wee arseholes deserved what was coming to them, flinging fuckin stanes at oor buses like that..."

"Outside that Huns pub an aw," I agree. "Staunin back watchin, hoping they were gony spark aff a major fuckin riot. Sneaky wee fuckers, man, they're no as daft as they look."

"Mind big Jackie, Garra?" Eddie asks me. "Boy I used to work wi fae Springburn? I was going back to his bit efitir wan game. See these wee dicks, they fuckin pelted us wi stones, bricks, bottles, rocks, the works. Smashed up aw the windaes. Jackie goes to us, 'That's nuhin Eddie. I've been by there when they've barricaded the road and flung fuckin petrol bombs at the bus!'"

"Jackie fae Springburn? Is that the boy fae Santa Rosa?" I ask.

Orrie's face bursts into a broad smile. "That's right, that's the man, Kevin. Well remembered, by the way!"

"Santa Rosa? What's that aw about?" Orrie responds with mock reluctance to his pals' inquiries. The flash bastard just about has them hanging on his every word, so he does. "Jackie has that internet system in his hoose, right?" Eddie relates. "We're sitting up there wan time on the thirteenth flair, listenin to that idiots' phone-in show on the wireless."

"Christ, I used to like that show," Davie Dunn interrupts. "Fuckin sick ay it now. Fed up wi them nippin ma heid wi their agendas and their petty grievances."

"What are they like, eh? So the presenter guy goes, and you can send us your emails, send us your fuckin opinions on this, that and the other, and aw the rest ay it, right? So big Jackie's on the computer right away and he sends them in this message. Then he signs it aff at the bottom, Jackie Molloy, I'm in Santa Rosa, California, I'm listening to your fuckin shitey show on the internet system, it's a beautiful day and I'm sitting here in the sun, sipping the Sangria, aw the birds are walking by and aw that carry on, right? Five minutes later the guy on the wireless reads the message oot, aw dead pleased wi hissel, 'We have listeners all over the world you know, this one's from Jackie Molloy, an exiled Scot in Santa Rosa, California! The Sunshine State! He's sitting in the sun listening to our show on the internet, what a great time he must be having, is that no the life, eh? What does the panel think ay that yin? Is that no just wonderful?' They've no twigged, the boy's no sitting in the sun in Santa fuckin Rosa, and there's nae Californian Red. He's sitting up a highrise in Springburn, wi a fuckin king-size reefer in his haun."

Every one of us is jam-rolled, including myself, even though I've heard that story before. Orrie plays it cool though, he just takes a big, self-satisfied 'sure ma stories are the funniest' swig from his can of Tennents Lager.

"Watch your can there Orrie."

“What fir?”

“Polis are everywhere man. You know what they’re like, they’ll no let you in the ground.”

It’s a good point Millsy’s making, as a mounted copper trots by on his warhorse. I recheck the two cans that I’ve stored in my jacket pockets. They’re safely hidden away.

“Who was it that lamped the Polis horse in the mooth?” Davie Dunn asks.

“Christ Almighty,” Orrie adds emphasis. And off they go again, bouncing their stories off one another like a comedy act. They can be pretty funny though, that’s the thing. My personal favourite is the boy at the school who heidered a brick. Yes, he heidered a brick. They were all standing about bored clueless one day between lessons, when some guy started throwing a brick up in the air, kidding on he was gony heider it. They’re all joining in the fun, then this twally heiders the thing for real. It was no a bad heider an aw apparently, a real Scottish Cup Final effort. Although the guy needed eight stitches in the back ay his heid, but he was a real hero after that. In fact, if I’m no mistaken, I think he signed for Rangers shortly after that demonstration of his abilities. At least he should have. He’d be mair use than the shite they’ll have up front the day.

“...when the Huns were playing Aberdeen at Hampden,” Georgie’s still elaborating on the previous anecdote. “So Garvie telt us anyway. Says this fuckin horse was staggering aboot after he belted it, no knowing where it wis. Its eyes were away, and its legs were pure gone an aw....” Georgie starts falling about the place in demonstration, giving us his impression of a semi-conscious horse that’s just been tanned in the jaw by a big, hairy-arsed bluenose. “Garvie says he was gony boot it in the baws an aw, just to finish the bastardin thing aff.”

“Or the cunt on its back, he should have wellied it there,” I venture, minding the old joke about the police horse being the only animal whose fanny is half way up its back.

We’re nearing the ground now and one or two cans are emptied and then tossed. The boys in blue have cordoned off the streets behind our end and you can see the Huns on the other side with their Union Jacks and their red hand of Ulster flags, as well as other banners and regalia that you wouldny wipe your arse wi. We ignore them and move up towards the turnstiles. There’s one or two officials in Rangers ties chatting and joking with the Polis, thinking they’re smart, because they’re standing there in front of all these Celtic supporters. They’re treated to *Hail! Hail!* More and more Tims now are joining in the singing: *Hail! Hail! The Celts are here! What the hell do we care now!*

Up the stair, and as you emerge into the upper tier, you’re hit by a wall of sound. The Rangers fans are right in your face, and they’re making some fuckin racket, I’ll gie them that. We’re special guests and we know it because on any other day this place has aw the atmosphere of a lending library. Michael and I move along to our seats and he unwraps his tricolour. I take an end and immediately we’re shouting away like a pair ay maddies: *IRA! All the way! Fuck the Queen and the UDA! IRA! All the way! Fuck the Queen and the UDA!* What can I say, this is no place for a sensible, sit-down discussion on cross-community relations in the North of Ireland. It’s another world we’ve entered here, a cultural black hole, a place where the laws of human society break down and are flung into reverse. And it’s time to revel in the madness and the badness of it all. *IRA! All the way! Fuck the Queen and the UDA!* My eyes pick out two other idiots on the opposite side, waving a Union Jack and giein us dogs’ abuse, and I imagine them shouting the exact same thing, only the other way about: *UDA! All the way! Fuck the Pope and the IRA! UDA! All the way! Fuck the Pope and the IRA!* I admit, it’s no exactly the proudest moment ay my life.

The noise around us is unfuckinbelievable and we’re still shouting and singing at the top ay our voices and pointing, as the players finish their warm-up and jog off. Everywhere people are shouting and bawling. The Huns are piping up with: *Hello hello, we are the Billy Boys.* But coming down from the top of the stand, and all around us, they’re totally drowned out by:

FOR IT’S A GRAND OLD TEAM TO PLAY FOR

*Hello Hello You'll know us by our noise
AND IT'S A GRAND OLD TEAM TO SEE*

*We're up to our knees in Fenian blood
AND IF! YOU KNOW! THE HISTORY!*

*Surrender or you'll die
IT'S ENOUGH TO MAKE YOUR HEART GO-O-O-O!*

So much for the half-hearted attempts to clamp down on the bigoted songs, although as far as I'm concerned, you can sing what you fuckin well like. You're only making a statement about yourself, and what this mob are telling us is that they're aff their fuckin heids. Next up, we're treated to Rule Britannia. I don't know, maybe I'm doing them a disservice, it could be they have a more developed sense of irony than I'm able to appreciate. Bawling out Rule Britannia when the empire's long since been consigned to the dustbin ay history. They think they're winding us up, but they don't have a clue. The only thing Britannia's ruling these days is them! They're the oppressed ones now and here they are, bawling out Rule Britannia at us! But I need to be careful, I'm in danger of turning into a ninety minute bigot myself here. Better to adopt the moral high ground. You wouldny want to be one, that's all I'm saying.

We're belting out 'The Soldier's Song' and I think they're playing that Loyalist number, 'Simply The Best', on the loudspeaker system but you cany hear it. Then when the two sets of players file out onto the pitch again, that's when the lid really comes off the place. The teams just used to come out whenever they were ready before one of these games, but it was pandemonium, so now they line them up and bring them out together.

The men in the hooped jerseys come down our end and they're clapping us. We're singing their names and singing our songs and waving our flags and banners. I'm shouting, 'C'mon the Celts!!' which is no like me, I'm usually one for the comments and the observations rather than the shouting and the singing. But it's easy to find yourself caught up in the atmosphere and pretty soon the game's kicked off, even though one or two folk seem barely to have noticed.

The ball's being pinged about the park at breakneck pace with Rangers trying to steamroll their way forward, playing their direct and physical game, relying heavily on Laudrup to play most of their football for them. Celtic are showing plenty of sharpness and aggression in the challenge, refusing to be overawed, and are the more creative of the two sides. Particularly in the midfield, where there's some brilliant individual skill being shown, with Collins and McStay to the fore. But at the same time it's pretty patchy because there are so many stoppages, with every dodgy decision, and let's face it that's most ay them, being greeted by howls of derision from all sides. At one point that wee shite Iain 'Snake Eyes' Ferguson tries to literally pack Paul McStay off to the Royal Infirmary wi a shocker of an over the ball tackle on his standing leg. It's an obvious act of revenge for a few minutes earlier, when McStay nutmegged him and was away, making the ugly wee prick look like a right puddin. The bastard's already been booked but this time the referee just waves play on, as if this cynical attempt to curtail the influence of a dominant player constitutes some sort ay legitimate tactic in his eyes. When the ball finally goes out ay play, that's the cue for one or two of the foreign legion to try and involve themselves. One guy in particular is pushing and shoving in an aggressive manner, arguing provocatively with our defenders, trying to establish his doss bastard credibility wi the heidcases in the main stand. This arsehole will sell the jersey for English gold just as soon as a suitably deluded Premier League outfit waves a large enough chunk ay change under his nose, his transformation into a badge-kissing Rangers man will not last into next season, and yet here he is, trying to throw his weight about and con the referee. Cue more deafening whistles and jeers, and chants of 'Who's the Mason in the black?' from our end, as the trainer is eventually allowed on to administer treatment. But I'm just shaking my head because, although it's a blatant injustice, it's the sort ay thing that's pretty much par for the course in these games.

"You'll need mair than a magic sponge fir that yin Brian," somebody's shouting.

“That was his injured fuckin ankle he went fir,” another voice suggests.

“It was way too high for that!” I hear myself respond. None of us can believe what we’re seeing now as McStay is being told he’ll have to leave the field of play to receive further medical attention. He’s hobbling off the pitch with his weight on the physio and this stern looking, totally unsympathetic wee Hitler cunt of a referee pointing the way and telling him to hurry up. The Celtic fans are all pure raging as it is, when, predictably enough, with the captain still off the park, the bastards break forward and score. Celtic suddenly find themselves a goal as well as a man down, and before there’s any time to regroup, the half-time whistle goes. Where the time went I’m no sure, the players are trooping off, the Huns are going bananas, and there’s one or two folk around me that are daein their nut for quite different reasons. I know how they feel, I’m in a similar state masel, but there’s still the second half and at least we’re playing some brilliant stuff here. I do the only thing I can which is appropriate in the circumstances. I pull myself together and go for a pish.

The Celtic support meanwhile is truly phenomenal. They’re up singing and waving their scarves the entire time, until the players are making their way back out.

*By a lonely prison wall I heard a young girl calling
Michael they have taken you away
For you stole Trevelyan’s corn so the young might see the morn
Now the prison ship lies waiting in the bay*

*Low lie the Fields of Athenry where once I watched a small free bird fly
Our love was on the wing, we had dreams and songs to sing
It’s so lonely round the Fields of Athenry*

We’re sending out our response to the hate-filled drivel that’s being spewed in our direction. ‘The Fields of Athenry’ is Ireland’s answer to punk rock. ‘*Against the famine and the crown, I rebelled, they brought me down*’, is not a million miles away from ‘*I fought the law, and the law won*’. Needless to say, the media want it banned.

The second half resumes along familiar lines; it’s all Celtic. McStay’s patched up and is putting on an absolute master-class in midfield, running the game like the maestro of old. It’s a blast from the past as he fires a shot on goal from all of thirty yards, but he’s struck it maybe too well, and it’s tipped over by the Flying Pig. It’s obviously a boyhood thing, but I still consider Paul McStay to be at the top of my list of favourite players. Just because he’s no as flamboyant or as high profile as some, that doesn’t mean he’s not one of Celtic and Scotland’s all-time greats. A one club man, even the Huns have a grudging respect for him, and they’re no exactly noted for their broad-mindedness. Right now he’s making their man Gascoigne look like an absolute diddy, although Gazza’s daein a pretty good job ay that himself in actual fact, but McStay’s no giein him a kick. The Celtic pressure is utterly relentless, and you feel that if we’re gony take what we deserve from this game, then we’re bound to score at least one. But what you deserve and what you take from these encounters can be two quite different things. Once or twice Rangers look dangerous on the counter-attack and probably would have scored a second, if it wasn’t for their big centre forward controlling the ball further than most people can kick it. With twenty minutes to go, the referee flashes a yellow card at one of our defenders for an innocuous looking challenge. It’s a second yellow so it’s followed by a red, and Celtic find themselves down to ten men. Permanently this time. Despair in the Broomloan but defiance as well, because this is some performance, and we’re totally outplaying this mob in their ain dunghill.

Celtic rally and we’re shouting them on like we’ve no stopped daein the entire piece. But with ten minutes left on the clock, the bastards score a second. It’s nobody’s fault, couldny be helped, we were doing the right thing, all pushing forward, probably overcommitting ourselves in all honesty. It’s no gony be our day

the day, you can sense that now, but that's no gony shut us up:

*O-over and over, we will follow you
Over and o-over we will see you through
We are Celtic supporters, faithful through and through
Over and o-over we will follow you.*

While the Huns haveny changed their tune, they don't seem to know too many songs, they're still up to their knees in people's blood apparently. I don't know, there's a criticism of Catholics that you sometimes hear, that at times we allow ourselves to indulge in a sense of moral and cultural superiority over our Protestant counterparts. It's a criticism I have some sympathy with, nobody likes a superior bastard, but I mean how can you fuckin help it sometimes? Take a fuckin look at what you're up against here.

There's no chance of anybody leaving early, we're here to the bitter end, that's for sure. And just as well because suddenly, out of nowhere, Celtic have a goal back! A real cracker as well, instantly stifling the Hun cacophony, their gruesome anthems immediately cut short and dying in their mouths. Straightaway all hell breaks loose, on the pitch two Celtic players dive into the net to retrieve the ball, and our fans are going wild not just in celebration, but also in urgent anticipation of a late fightback. The game quickly restarts and the Rangers defence, so brutally and ruthlessly efficient throughout the previous eighty-nine minutes, is now beset with panic, and as we head into added time, they're blaming each other as the ball trickles across a gaping goalmouth, and agonisingly wide. This is typical Celtic, too little too late, they know how to put their fans through the grinder, this team, that's for sure. It's a perfect metaphor for the club's recent fortunes, tortuous and exhilarating at the same time, although probably more tortuous to be honest. We've played absolutely brilliantly here and we're gony lose the match. There's time for one last desperate effort, nobody knows what the hell's going on by this stage, only that we're singing 'This land is your land' right up to and beyond the final whistle. The game's been won and lost and in all likelihood the league as well, but if this is the worst period in your club's history, then it doesny feel that bad to me. The players are cheered off the park when they come up to applaud us at the end, and the fans are still singing defiantly.

It's soon time to troop out, the Polis shoving us on our way, and I bless myself as we leave. Christ knows why, but I just do. Michael's saying something to me, I can see the boy's suffering, but I'm no really hearing him. Instead I'm listening to this guy behind me, who's shouting desperately at his mate, "That was fuckin pish by the way. We need players, I'm tellin ye! We need players that'll dae the business. It's no fuckin good enough!"

I suppose people can take defeat in different ways, and everyone's entitled to their opinion, but I cany help thinking, this boy doesny have much ay a clue. A big guy nearby is obviously thinking along the same lines as me, because he's giving the boy a funny look.

"What game were you at pal?" he eventually asks him.

"Whit's it to you big man? Fuckin Art Garfunkel! The same fuckin game as you! That's whit game! Away and sing yir fuckin dafty songs! Fuckin Art Garfunkel!"

The big guy, who does look a bit like Art Garfunkel, it has to be said, is totally nonplussed, but somebody else is intervening on his behalf, and pretty soon there's a shouting match going on. This is the sort of thing that can happen, but it's over before it's even started, with the chief protagonist being shoved out the road and on his way, still ranting and raving. Everybody's wanting to be calm and sensible and make their way back to their pubs as soon as possible, but there's always one. I congratulate the boy who intervened, "That's him away to phone the Egos wi that point."

"Aye that's right. 'What's your point, caller?'" Folk are laughing, which is good, because I for one need cheering up a bit.

“Only Huns fight amongst themselves,” an innocent bystander correctly points out.

Back on the bus, right on cue, the Egos are already on speaker. One of them is describing, as I finish off my can from the ground, how he thinks that the ordering off was ‘technically correct’ by the laws of the game, especially considering the scrutiny that referees are under these days. Referees are just like players, we’re being told. They want to officiate at the top level, so they have to apply the laws stringently nowadays. There are assessors sitting in the stands apparently, and each performance is analysed and graded. You’d still have to be mad to want to be one though... snigger snigger... Jeezo! Nae mention of McStay or the half a dozen or so other incidents. “Listen to this tube,” I complain.

“Technically correct? Technically, Davie, you’re a fucking twally.” I crack open another can, my sixth and last, as the fun continues over the airwaves. A caller, who has been listening to the commentary, is allowed on the air to question one of the Egos (on loan from the chipwrappers), I think his nickname is ‘Charisma’, on his comments about a certain player. It seems like a half decent point the caller’s making, this guy sounds pretty clued up for a pleasant change, no just one ay the usual bawbags and fuckin roasters they regularly drag up from God knows where to put on this phone-in show, and the Ego concerned seems a wee bit flustered. Especially when the caller persists, reminding him of his previous remarks about another player, who performs a similar role at an English Premiership club, and who the Ego in question has nothing but praise for. In the end the poor Ego is reduced to making the ludicrous point that we all live in a democracy, and this entitles him to express his opinion, which, by the way, he fully intends to go on doing, whether anyone else agrees with him or not. The other Egos are all in complete agreement.

This is a lot better, I wasny looking forward to having to listen to these clowns but I’d forgotten how entertaining they can be. It may be unintentional, and for all the wrong reasons, but they seem to have put a smile back on one or two faces already. If only they realised the positive influence they were having on the wider community, cheering up a downcast support after a gruelling defeat, they might no be such cynical bastards. Pretty soon the bus is well and truly livened up and in good spirits again, after no more than five minutes of this pish, even if the caller isn’y, as he’s in turn ridiculed, then patronised, and finally cut off.

We make our way back along the motorway in the mid-afternoon drizzle. The radio recycles some more of its West of Scotland nonsense for a while until the programme goes off the air and is replaced by some empty-headed pop tunes. That gets switched aff right away, thank fuck, and we’re left with a rather quiet and subdued bus for the last mile or two. I’m left trying to gather my thoughts but I’m at a wee bit ay a loss to describe how I feel; there’s a strange emotion chipping away at the edges of my erstwhile magnanimity, defiance and righteous indignation towards everything that I’ve just witnessed and been a part of; a persistent but somehow life-affirming feeling, which in a word can only be described as sadness. I’m grateful for a wee voice coming from down the front which interrupts me in my self-indulgent state of melancholy.

“So whit eh? We git fucked aff the Huns, so who cares eh? We git fucked aff the Huns, so fuckin well whit? We git fucked aff the Huns, so whit eh?” I recognise the voice, and he’s started singing as well now, although no very tunefully right enough: ~ *We don’t care if we win lose or draw, When the League flag flies, And the cheers go up, For we know the Scottish Cup, Is coming home to rest in Paradise.* They Rangers boys that stay over there, they’ll be happy,” the voice observes, aside.

The singing and joking continues as the bus pulls into The Gallery car park, and as folk troop past its source, off the bus and into the pub. It’s Mark Lappin, the boy in the wheelchair with the nasty-looking scar above his mouth, a memento from a night out in happier times for Celtic. He managed to overdo it wi the celebrations and fell out his chair, pished, and banged his lip. “So whit, we git fucked aff the Huns the day, so whit eh? Awright Kevin, how you daein mate?”

“Just you keep singing away there Marky,” I tell him as I climb down.

“Aye I’ll dae that,” he assures me.

Young Michael is trying to convince me to come into the pub for a few consolation scoops, but I'm supposed to be meeting my new girlfriend.

"Never mind the birds, man. She'll no be expecting you, no for a while anyway."

"Aye, she is. I need to go Michael honestly, she made me promise her."

"Mon, I owe you wan fae before, don't I no? Mind?" He has the gift ay the gab this boy, that's for sure, and he's sounding pretty persuasive, but I'm no sure I'm in the mood for a band, and a big sing-song, although I must admit, I'm starting to get a taste for the drink.

"Let him fuck off tae his bird," Coyler brushes past me.

"Beat it you!" I tell him, as Coyler enters the pub and heads straight for the bar.

"Never mind the birds," Michael tells me again. "There's birds in here."

"Where za burdz?" I'm doing the Frank McAvennie impression now, like the 'Only an Excuse' boy, although no nearly as funny. I cany decide what to do for some strange reason, although I'm vaguely aware that if I so much as set foot in this place, it'll be a good while again before I leave, and that consequently, it's probably no a good idea. But like I say, this boy can be pretty persuasive. We're still standing there, me and Michael, the only ones left in an otherwise deserted car park, Mark Lappin being wheeled past us by his big brother, to resume their place at the same table they left some four hours ago.

"Right, on you go then," I tell Michael, and I follow him inside. So much for willpower, but what can you do? Steamin drunk, beat aff the Rangers, up the creek wi another nice lassie... This is all starting to sound a wee bit too familiar for my liking.

Chapter Two KEVIN THE JOINER

My career in professional football was over before it had even started. As a youngster I was on the books wi Airdrie, but I never made it further than their 18s. It's my own fault, I managed to fall out wi the coach, which is something you can never do at that age because these are the people with the power to make or break you. I say coach, but in all honesty by the time that I arrived on the scene, the art of coaching, at all levels, seemed to me to be going out the game in Scotland. Even at a small club like Airdrie, which for years had been a stable and well run institution, their heads were being turned by the lure of money from television, and in the scramble for cash, they had adopted the new magic formula of the day, which was to go for journeymen foreign players, hook them up wi crotchety old veterans and battle hardened cloggers, and then fight for dear life to avoid relegation. There wereny many senior clubs that had the patience or the vision to invest properly in their own futures, and as a result youth football was pretty much dying on its knees. There was no structure or programme in place, and the development and assessment of young players was pretty much left to the discretion and the arbitrary judgments of these semi-autonomous youth team coaches, most of whom in my experience wereny interested in nurturing talent. They were far more likely to be angling for a high profile position, longing once more for a place in the spotlight, which they'd been desperately trying to regain ever since the day their legs gave way. At least I was spared the slow agony of being sat down and told I wasny good enough, and the disingenuous offers of help wi finding another club. It all ended far more rudely and abruptly in my case.

I'd been selected to play in a Scottish Youth Cup Tie up in Inverness in a game against a Highland League team, a match we subsequently went on to lose and in the process, we missed out on the opportunity of a

quarter-final tie against Rangers. Bad idea, this bastard in charge ay us went fuckin ballistic. In those days they used to play the Youth Cup games at the proper stadiums, rather than the amateur and lower division grounds that they used for the League. So as a former Ibrox midfield stalwart himself, I think this boy could already see himself hobnobbing around the marble staircase once more, reliving the days of his misspent youth, and indulging in a spot of dewy-eyed nostalgia with a motley crew of his former colleagues. Unfortunately for the complacent arsehole, he'd forgotten all about the upstart young Teuchters that stood in our way who, it turned out, wereny at all a bad side, and after they cuffed us I was singled out for special treatment in the clapped out old caravan they used as a changing-room. The guy laid right into me, straightaway berating my lack ay talent, telling me I was about as much fuckin use as one man down, a luxury player who couldny get by a lamppost wi a fuckin baw at his feet. I deserved it as well, you knew what to expect when you'd had a bad game, and to be honest I couldny really have had a worse yin that day, so it was no surprise when he started giein me his toys out the pram routine. At first though, I had nothing else on my mind other than just to sit there and accept what was coming. He was shouting and swearing right into my face, trying to cause me maximum embarrassment in front ay my team-mates, hoping that I was gony curl up into a wee ball and die. So I was determined just to sit on my hands and no say a word, to show that I could take it, even though I had a ready-made answer to his ranting and raving which I could have reminded him about.

The Rangers 18s had a boy in their team called Steven Gilmour, who was fae Kirkie, and the two of us had grown up together representing our schools, where we'd been spotted by scouts and invited along to our respective clubs at round about the same time. We were supposed to be pals, but he had raked a gash down my shin wi his studs when we'd come up against each other in the League earlier in the season. I never managed to finish the game and to make matters worse, the cocky wee bastard went on to score the winning goal, so I was right up for a revenge mission this time around, there was nae lack ay motivation on my part. Even just in front ay two men and a dog, Ibrox is still a great place to play football and I was looking forward to a potential rematch wi the Rangers young crew as much as anyone.

But sitting there after the game feeling sorry for masel, there was no way I was about to start pleading my case. I'd seen other boys try their luck on plenty of occasions, pathetically trying to argue the point, and I wasny about to make the same mistake. There were any number ay things I could have moaned about, I wasny happy that I'd been stuck out on the left wing for a start. Fair enough, he was the coach and it was his decision to make, but I was more used to playing as a secondary forward, where you're meant to drop off and look to become more involved in the play, working hard to make yoursel available for a pass and trying to set up goals as well as scoring them, instead ay just hanging about aw day out on the wing. But our regular outside left was unavailable for this game, so Arrigo - as some of the older boys had dubbed the guy, in ironic tribute to Arrigo Sacchi, the famous Italian master tactician - had taken the opportunity to promote a younger boy and play him through the middle, which meant that I was shifted out wide and told to hug the touchline.

The upshot was, I never managed to adapt my game to the unfamiliar position, although in my own defence, I wasny helped on the day by the atrocious conditions. My section ay the pitch was in the shadow of the covered shed area of the old stand and the surface was still brick hard from the winter, which meant I had trouble even staying on my feet, never mind trying to beat my opponent with any sort ay fancy footwork. In the second half it was even worse, the permafrost at the other end had turned to slush and I was left constantly trying to wade through an icy quagmire, usually leaving the ball behind me on the odd occasion that I received it, which wasny very often because by this stage, nae cunt would pass to me. In the end we lost the game, and afterwards I had to sit there and listen to a tirade of abuse, although at least I wasny the only one. The whole team was on the end ay it. Old Baldy Baws wanted us all to line up next to our pegs and bend over, so he could go down the row and boot us up the arse one after the other. At first I thought he had to be joking, but when I realised he was serious, and my team-mates were all about

to manoeuvre themselves into position, knackered and sore and stung by defeat, to present their rear ends for a punishment kicking, that's when I finally lost it, I'm sorry to say. I stood up and told the guy if he came anywhere near me, I'd be the one putting my toe in his arse, no the other way about. The man didn't hesitate, I'll give him that. He made a beeline right for me. BOOM! The whole place went up, it's like somebody's rung a bell, every cunt's diving in, suddenly I'm at the centre in a classic Scottish fitba style all-in dressing-room bust-up. I swear that pokey wee caravan must've not known what hit it, until eventually, somehow, the two of us were pulled apart, with him still screaming and shouting like a fuckin' lunatic. There's me trying to recover my composure, dusting myself down, playing it all cool, calm and collected, although to be honest I was pretty relieved just to be still in one piece. He was a bit of a hard cunt in his day, was this boy, and by the time that I crossed swords with him, he was still a pretty pissed off bastard, ready to take it out at short notice on whatever unfortunate young hopeful he happened to take a shine to. There were a number of reasons why he was pissed off as far as I could tell: he was pissed off that he played in an era before the moneybags arrived in football; he was pissed off that he had a shitey youth coaching job, looking after the likes of us; but most of all he was pissed off that, despite the fact he was an ex-pro, with impeccable Hun credentials, he still couldn't get a job in the media, taking money to talk shite.

Anyway I never hung about long enough to sympathise, that was the last I ever went back there. It's alright looking back having a laugh about it now, but at the time it wasn't particularly funny. The journey back down the road was a total nightmare, they near enough wouldn't let me back on the bus after what happened. They wanted to leave me stranded high and dry in the middle of fuckin' nowhere so they did, so I wasn't just going to turn up for the next training session all smiles. No that I had much choice anyway, when I eventually was allowed to clamber on board, it was made crystal clear to me, I wouldn't be welcome back. I was on a two year professional contract with this club, which I'd signed as soon as I turned sixteen, so they had to call me in a few days later to make it all formal and official, just to cover their own backs. But they needn't have worried, I signed the release form without hesitation. We shook hands and made up and that was the end of it. And to be honest, I couldn't have really cared less at the time, because by this stage I was becoming pretty nonplussed about the prospect of playing football and increasingly disillusioned with the game's harsher realities.

I still had one or two other options at the time though. For a while, my dad had been trying to convince me to sit down and write a letter, to go and use the computers at the school or at the library, and to send off multiple copies to all the clubs in the district, asking for a trial. All you need is one of them to give you a positive response, he told me, and that could be you back doing something you seem to enjoy. I probably should have tried something like that, but for a while a mate of mine, Scott McMurray, had been trying to persuade me to go down to Adamslie Park with him on a Wednesday night to train with his Rob Roy team. He told us that the gaffer there, Charlie Boyd, was always on the lookout for young boys who'd had experience with senior clubs, but whose careers for whatever reason hadn't progressed, and he had a good track record of encouraging them back up to a decent level. I wasn't really that keen initially, because I'd lost the motivation, and after what happened at Airdrie, ugly rumours were flying about that there were folk out to batter me, or worse, if I ever turned up anywhere else, so I had it in my mind just to keep a low profile for a while. But one evening Mr. Boyd phoned up the house and spoke to us. He wheeled out the charm and all his powers of persuasion, claiming he had it on good authority that I was a half-decent player, and he remembered me from my time with the Scotland under 17s apparently, which I was surprised to hear. I didn't think that I'd made too much of an impression during either of my two representative appearances, but he was in the crowd at Firhill when I managed the full eighty minutes of our one each draw against Northern Ireland, although he missed the only other time that I 'played for my cunt-ry', as the pros like to say - a twenty minute run-out in a two nothing defeat against Belgium. The main thing he was trying to impress on me though was not to worry about empty threats and ugly rumours.

It's aw talk, he was urging me, maist ay it fae the mouths ay bitter cunts wi chips on their shoulders the size ay Gibraltar. I think I must have been starting to like what I was hearing by this stage, because I was already coming round to his way of thinking, when eventually he said to me, 'Look, you can either give it another shot, son, or you can chuck it all in and become Kevin the joiner.' Funny to think it was that joinery line that clinched it for me at the time, and I went along the following Wednesday.

I enjoyed myself as well. Junior football has a bit ay a reputation, but most of the boys I played with and against, as far as I could tell, they were all brand new. And there's some pretty decent coaching going on as well at that level, so I'm no sure where the bad reps aw come fae. Fair enough, at times it's no for the faint-hearted, and there was that incident ay the punch-up that started in the tunnel before the match, continued out onto the pitch, and then carried on aw the way through to the end ay the game, but on the whole I would say that the Auchinleck Bampots image of the Juniors seemed to me to be an unfair generalisation. Admittedly that would have to be based on my all too brief experience, because in the end I had my career ruined once and for all playing Junior football. I must have been about eighteen or nineteen; teenage prodigy, broken into the team, showcasing his talents; earning a modest wage for the first time instead ay just an allowance; assurances from the staff that the word was going out, that full-time clubs were looking at me; and this guy catches me as I'm trying to shield the ball, right on the side ay my knee, just as I'm twisting it. It was a total accident, just one ay they things, the top half of my leg was wanting to go in one direction and the bottom half was wanting to go the other, and that's what tore the ligaments. My lateral cruciates were damaged, both the anterior and posterior, which in the days before surgery was the kind ay injury that was guaranteed to finish you off. The only treatment or equipment they had available on the day though, to help rescue my fledgling career, was a Tubigrip. I couldny believe that, there's me lying on the pitch in agony, potential ruined, imminent move to Serie A cancelled, and there's the trainer wi a flimsy bit ay cotton. 'There you go, pit that on it son, you'll be right as rain in nae time.' It was only after a week hobbling about, and there was still swelling and tenderness around the joint, that I decided I needed to go to the clinic, because it wasny the first injury that I'd suffered wi this knee. I'd damaged it a year or so earlier when one of the senior pros had fallen out ay favour wi the Airdrie top brass and been sent down to train wi the Youths. I'm no sure what this guy was supposed to have done, but he tore about the training park like a wounded boar, bouncing off ay people and flying into tackles, making sure everyone knew exactly what he thought of his treatment at the hands ay the head coach. I saw him coming out the corner ay my eye, this fuckin wildebeest charging right at me, but I was too slow. He clattered into me and dislocated my kneecap, keeping me away from training for fifteen weeks.

I gave the nurses at the clinic the full sob story, and they played about with that gel on the side ay my knee, to scan it with the ultrasound, and that's when I knew what I'd done to it. The doctor told me it was a common enough sports injury, not as serious as first feared and it should heal naturally wi rest, but in the light of all the damage, if I carried on playing there was a danger that I could rupture it again and I'd no be able to walk. As well as the Tubigrip, the clinic gied us a set ay crutches, but that was the end once and for all of any ideas I had about playing football.

Still, look on the bright side, if I hadny injured masel, I might never have had the chance to become a joiner, eh? Then again maybe I would, none of the boys I played wi ever went on to make the grade, and there were better players about than me. They're probably aw joiners as well by now, the lucky ones anyway. Somewhere down the line we lost an entire generation of young Scottish footballing talent, and me and my former team-mates are smack bang in the middle of Generation X.

This is where I've landed then, joinery. I'm the man wi the van, on call, workin for the council. I never imagined that I'd end up having my life described to me in the words of a Deacon Blue song, but there you go. How does it go again? *He's been working for the council, Has been twenty years...* OK, maybe no twenty years in my case, six and a half if you include the apprenticeship, but I can still feel suitably

patronised.

Tonight though, I'm no just a joiner, I'm a joiner on call out, which is a bad idea at the best ay times. On nights like this however, if you're no careful, it can bring it all sharply back home to you. I tried to arrange a swap wi one or two ay my colleagues but they're no as daft as they look, they boys, they knew where I was coming from and just patted me on the back. Gied us the thumbs up and a few words ay consolation about the vagaries of the rota system, which I suppose were well-intentioned, but they're no exactly gony help me through this. It's as if a tornado has come howling in and slammed into the West of Scotland over the weekend, then disappeared just as quick, leaving a trail of damage and disruption behind it in its wake.

I really should be relaxing in front ay the telly at this time, or down the pub wi a few pals, or maybe if I'm lucky, out at the pictures with a ladyfriend, instead ay cooped up in a white van wi just Tiger Tim on the wireless for company. Normally I quite enjoy being out on the open road, when times are quiet, but that was never gony be the case the night. Overall though I wouldny knock it, joinery's a good trade to have, if only because you're never likely to be out of work for any lengthy period. There's always gony be enough bampots and fuckin social delinquents about the place, putting in people's windaes, for folk like me to go round and board them up again. It's practically our national pastime and we've all been there at some stage. I seen Craig Hamilton's windaes panned in after he was suspected of involvement in the notorious 1991 stabbing of Toonkey's big brother. But judging on the evidence so far, there are even more traditional reasons why my pager's going off the scale the night.

There goes the thing again, it's started bleeping once more, scrolling out the details of another likely case of juvenile delinquency, the Polis in attendance, awaiting my arrival. I'm on my way to another job and already I have a backlog starting to build up, so I ring Gordy MacDonald on the mobile and ask him if he's interested in taking any ay this work, and the money-grabbing bastard tells me he'll take anything I'm prepared to offer him. I'm tempted to tell him he can take the fuckin lot, so I can go home and watch the Antiques Roadshow, but in the end I pass him a couple of routine 'I've locked masel oot the hoose' diddy jobs. 'Diddy' in this context stands for 'damsel in distress,' just the kind ay thing Gordy likes. They're a wee bit out my way, and I've more than enough jobs to keep me going in the meantime, so he can help himself. He'll probably turn up and the keys will have mysteriously appeared from nowhere, that's what usually happens, or a neighbour will have climbed in a window, removing the need for Gordy to lever the door open, or more likely in his case, kick the bastarding thing in.

The rain's lashing down in sheets as I pull up at the turn-off roundabout and I recheck my map. When the lights change, I crank the van into gear, trying to keep my eyes on the road while searching the map and steering at the same time. I've been out this way dozens ay times before, the locals call this area the Bronx because it's no exactly Millionaires' Row. I have a fair idea where I'm going and it looks like I'm just about there.

Like I say, joinery's a good trade to have, but there's no denying that I'm starting to feel at a bit ay a loose end wi it. Idealistic, romantic notions about the comradeship of trade, class and union have been dead in me for a good while now and it's just turning into a daily grind. It was what I wanted to do when I left school, but I still find myself wondering, wi increasing regularity, whether or not I made the right choices. After the Airdrieonians debacle and my aborted attempts to play football professionally, I was back at St. Ninian's and I went on to pass my Highers in French, German, History and Latin. I was even taking Greek as well at one point, but it was only one class a week so I gave it up, rightly as it turned out, because I've yet to see the use for it in this job.

I remember when I was a wee boy telling my mother, in response to her constant questions, that when I grew up I wanted to be a doctor. That was her pleased as punch, she couldny keep it to herself. All the relatives were round one Christmas and they all had to hear the story, how Kevin was gony grow up to be a doctor, so he could go round people's houses when they wereny well and make them aw better. It

seemed like they couldny have been happier for me. My old gran, and all her sisters, they were chuffed to bits, Kevin the doctor, Aye, we'll aw be needing somebody to look after us by then, son. I'd only said it as well just to keep the old girl happy, because she was fed up hearing my usual answer to that question, that I wanted to play for Celtic.

I probably could have done something like medicine though, with the qualifications that I gained. I inquired about it and was told that it meant taking on an extra year wi the conversion course, so I was looking at the prospect of spending six or seven years as a student, which I didny fancy. Another option I had was Modern Languages. I understood a lot about languages from studying French and Latin, the structure, the syntax, the subordinate clauses et cetera. I used to quite enjoy aw that, so I don't know why I never carried it on. There's also the fact that every Modern Language department at every Uni in the country is full ay women. It's true, that's what the lassies all want to study - French, German, Spanish, Italian, you name it. And part of the course involves spending a year in a foreign country with all the Frauleins and the Senoritas, so I'm sure I could have coped. But I never carried through my initial interest. The main thing I was trying to avoid was what happens to a lot ay young boys who are injured out of football or are turned down for contracts. They end up going off the rails and heading down the slippery slope because they think they've ended up on the scrapheap. That was never gony happen in my case but, I was pretty indifferent about it all to be honest. And in the end, when I went and done my apprenticeship, I was pleased as punch the day I was taken on and put on a basic wage.

In all the time since, I've no spent a day at the Broo Office, so I reckon that makes me one ay the lucky ones, especially when you consider where one or two of my contemporaries find themselves just now. You cany avoid the inevitable comparisons: there's Sully, the top Chinese takeaway delivery man - at least he rounds off every shift wi a free meal. Or there's Goldie, Michael McGoldrick, the biggest Republican sympathiser you could hope to meet. Off he goes one day and joins the British Army, more out ay sheer boredom rather than anything else. Six weeks later he's back from the barracks wi his leg in plaster, claiming unconvincingly that he broke it playing football. Then there's Coyler and Dav, they both work at that out of town hypermarket that opened up no so long ago; Dav's a warehouseman, and his buddy's stacking shelves. They were complaining the other day how they're basically treated like slaves - if you take a biscuit out a burst packet, that's it, you're fired. Still, it's no aw doom and gloom, the company, as decreed by their new American owners, has just introduced this policy of two weeks paid paternity leave for all male employees. I was like that to them, 'There's fuckin six hunner women working up there, aw yous have to dae is get wan ay them up the stick every couple of weeks and you'll never need to go into your work'. Sounds like a riot, I know, but I wouldny want to work there.

Various other guys I know areny exactly climbing the career ladder either, there's that many ay them out of work, with no qualifications, no skills, no prospects, nuthin. No even any mates any more, or at least naebidy you'd describe as such. And as for a bird? Nae chance. My old adversary Steven Gilmour is a case in point. After he was discarded by Rangers, he took the traditional route of rejected ex-footballers and hit the bevvie in spectacular fashion. One afternoon, after a particularly heavy daytime session, he came out the boozie and panelled an old lollipop lady wi her lollipop stick as she was trying to help the weans across the street. When he was up before the beaks, he convinced them that he was off the sauce, so he managed to avoid the clink, thank fuck, but the last I heard, he had suffered a relapse, and I've nae idea where he is now. Secure employment, by contrast, would seem like an easy option. The bosses can be a right pain in the arse when they're on their game and I wouldny exactly say it was challenging me, but what the fuck is a challenge anyway? My Papa worked down the mines aw his days. He died of lung cancer less than a year after his retirement even though he never smoked a pipe or a cigarette in his life. It was the fumes that did it, he'd been breathing in coal dust every day for forty odd years, so I've nae right to complain really, what chance did he have of a fuckin 'challenge'? I don't know whether it's cynicism or realism, maybe a wee bit ay both, but work is work I reckon, and if you're lucky enough to have it, then

you just need to get on wi it. One thing I can't help regretting though, is the total lack of solidarity that seems to exist at present amongst many ay my fellow workers. In my Papa's day they used to talk about Hegel and Marx and the ultimate victory for a socialist society when they were working down the mines, at least they had that collective dream to sustain them. And I mind when I was a wean, my dad and his mates went out on strike because they felt that one of their colleagues had been unfairly dismissed. I don't know what's happened in the intervening years, it wasny that long ago, but I cany see that sort ay thing going on these days, no in our work anyway. A couple ay months ago Nicky Wilson was caught red-handed siphoning off petrol fae the vans and was sacked. The idea of me or Tommy O'Sullivan or big Hammy or Gordy MacDonald or any other idiot going out on strike in order to have Wilson reinstated is just no even funny. Even if we took a notion to try something like that, they'd have us out the door in no time, and you'd be the next one in line, queuing up down the Broo wi big Nicky, with a black mark on your references.

I've located my address and I park the van. I take my tools and a guy ushers me up to his second storey flat where I set about boarding up his window. Clearly he's no appreciating just how many ay these jobs I have lined up after this yin, because he's decided he's found a new pal that he wants to talk to, even though his mates are aw through in the next room. He's telling me all about the guilty parties, how he'll be round their bit the morra, looking for revenge. I ask him if he wouldny mind attaching the number of a private firm to any ay the bricks he's planning on chucking, because we're pretty busy right now. Aye, he says, breaking into a broad smile, that's a great idea, he'll dae that in fact, write the number ay the glazier's on it, nice touch. He's still standing there nattering as I'm trying to take my sizes. I know he's an alright guy, but I find I work ten times faster when I'm left in peace and I can concentrate. It's important because if I fuck this up and this panel blows in, I'll be back here later on the night. Then he'll be even less popular wi his neighbours if I'm round here again, ripping plywood outside his house at two in the morning. I could dae without the hassle ay that, so I ask him to shut the door, ostensibly to block out the draft, but also in the hope that he'll maybe go and stand the other side ay it. That does the trick and he leaves me to it, telling me to shout if I need anything. I work quickly because ideally, I'd like a few hours sleep before I'm back out again in the morning.

The peace and quiet affords me the opportunity to continue to daydream, and I take grateful advantage, allowing my mind to wander once more, indulging myself in idle speculation in an effort to relieve the tedium, if nothing else. True, I might have been a qualified medical doctor by now, called out perhaps, in the post Old Firm fug, to the scene of a stabbing or a hit and run road traffic incident, instead ay just a stoved-in windae. It's no surprise that doctors earn better money than me, their job has a lot more responsibility than mine. Who knows how I would have coped with the very real prospect of holding a person's life in my hands? It might not have worked out for me, for any number ay reasons. The football has shown me, there's no guarantees. I might just as easily be running about Asda wi Coyler and Dav, trying to impregnate a different checkout girl every fortnight. Coyler in fact had a good job no so long ago, working on an assembly line in Cumbernauld. Sticking the backs on tellies, stacking components in all the right places, that sort ay thing. Doesny sound like much, I know, but at least it was a job wi prospects, and it was in manufacturing. So they told him anyway when he started, it wasny quite like that a few months down the line when they paid him aff. Paid aff isny exactly the right way to describe it in fact, he received his week's in reserve and that was it. No explanation, no words of sympathy, nothing. It was just 'Sorry son, you're no needed ony mair, we're gony have to let you go. You can finish this week and then that's you, beat it.' When he asked about redundancy money they just laughed in his face, told him he'd no been there long enough. Of course he'd no been there long enough, they gied him his jotters afore he had the fuckin chance to be there long enough! It was just as well for Coyler that Dav took him along to that supermarket, otherwise I'm pretty sure, he wouldny be working right now. There's only so many knockbacks a guy can take.

That's me finished in the kitchen but I decide to complete the job properly and put another board up on the outside, so I'm back out to the van for the steps, still in cloud cuckoo land as I fire my nails into the wooden panel. If I'd gone to college or university, there's every chance I'd be in the same boat by now as one or two of the former students that I know. Some of them seem happy enough, blazing a trail in the admin departments of various multinational conglomerates, but look at Duncan Campbell. The most intelligent guy I know, up to his eyes in qualifications, a Masters degree from the proper Uni. No Strathy or Glasgow Caley for big Dunc, it had to be Glasgow University for this boy. Byres Road, Queen Margaret Union, up to his neck in debt, the usual story. Dead nice guy as well, Duncan, he stays in one ay they bungalows out towards Bishopbriggs. Doesny know a thing about football, he's more into his golf and his snowboarding, but apart fae that, sound as a pound. He started work at this call centre, selling premiership pay-per-view games to satellite TV subscribers. It obviously never struck anyone there as unusual or ironic that a guy who didn't have a clue, and who couldn't care less, was trying to persuade people to watch more football. Anyway Duncan's clearly a man ay character because he found the training absolute fucking torture. Never mind Coyler's three month in Cumbernauld, poor Dunc never lasted three days in that place, he never even hung about long enough to collect his wages. Mind you, they weren't paying much. For every sale you made, they gied you a Chewit. I couldn't believe that, a fuckin Chewit they gied you. One ay they wee rubbery penny sweetie things. That's no a packet of Chewits I'm talking about, that's a single fuckin solitary Chewit. But then I suppose, they had just paid over a billion pounds for the new, exclusive TV contract to broadcast Premiership football, so maybe that's how they were that fuckin rooked they had to pay their employees in sweeties, the cunts. I remember saying to Duncan, 'What you wasting your time there for, with that soul-destroying numpty work, you could walk into any job you wanted wi your qualifications.' He agreed it was a bad experience, but initially he'd been enthusiastic. He apparently thought this was a growth industry he was becoming involved in, part of the new service sector, which, via a transitional period of mass unemployment, was replacing the old manufacturing base. He seemed to believe that it was a thing ay the future, although what future he saw for himself paying off his student debts in Chewits, I'm not exactly sure. Still, the last I heard, he wasn't too worried about the repayments, because they let you defer them when you're unemployed.

That's me finished at this particular site, so I clear up and load the van. I've no really time for it, but I'm invited into the living room to share a quick draw McGraw wi the guy and his mates. They're watching a recording of yesterday's game, and it seems that at least two of them were there in person, to savour the experience of the first Glasgow derby of the new season. I wasn't, I explain, as I was working, on call, but I seen it on the telly. Quiet as fuck during the game, then gradually, as the day wore on, all hell breaks loose and I'm inundated wi call outs. It's been non-stop ever since. They wind the tape back for me a couple of minutes so I can see Celtic's winner and what a goal it is, what a moment. Although the Rangers boy in the corner, he disagrees, he wants to switch over and watch The Bill. I'm tempted to remind him about the Antiques Roadshow, it's usually on about this time, but I manage to restrain masel. You don't want to take the mince, he's already doing well enough just sitting there next to all these gloating young Tims, without another one pitching in wi his tuppenceworth.

"It's no so bad pal, but this is the fourth time we've seen this the night," he informs me.

"Aye, and there's another five screenings still to come," is his mate's sharp response.

Another quick toke, then it's see you later, thanks for coming round, and I'm off to my next engagement. Checking my pager, checking my map, I'm on the go once more and before too long it's just me and the van again. Me, the van, and the bumpy rain-soaked roads of the North Lanarkshire hinterland.