



The
Real
Adventures
of
**Irvine
Welsh**

‘Shit hot stuff man.
Reminded me that
hanging out with Irvine
and Sandy back then was
like one long car crash –
with no seatbelts...’

SKINNY

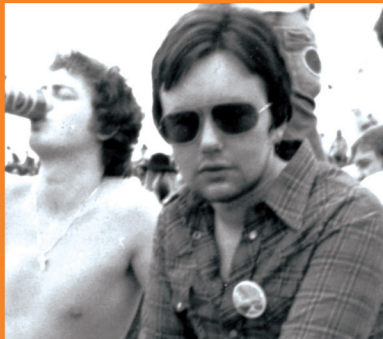
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**SANDY
MACNAIR**

Carspotting



CARSPOTTING



CARSPOTTING

The Real Adventures of Irvine Welsh

Sandy Macnair

BLACK & WHITE PUBLISHING

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Sandy Macnair

HEALTH WARNING

How to use this book safely

Please note the symbols displayed on the opening pages of each chapter. These indicate how many pints you may drink before finishing the book, at the rate of one pint per chapter.

In accordance with Government guidelines, we recommend the following timescale:

Heavy drinkers take 2–4 days

Moderate drinkers take 5–7 days

Light drinkers up to a fortnight

Teetotalers put this book back on the shelf right now!
It ain't for you!

WARNING

It is dangerous to exceed the recommended dose

INTRO...

It was the Best of times, it was the cursed of times. George of that ilk was strutting his stuff at Easter Road but Hibs were still heading for relegation. As the 1970s drew to a close, Irvine Welsh and I were there on the terraces, thinking about quitting our terrible jobs in the Civil Service. We had no discernible ambitions of any sort – apart from an over-riding ambition to escape from the stultifying confines of the General Register Office. Well, that's not *quite* true . . .

When Irvine's boss found him bleary-eyed, unshaven and smelling of drink at his desk one morning, he rounded on him despairingly. "Irvine! Have you *no* ambitions whatsoever?"

"Yes," replied Welsh in all seriousness. "I want to be a messenger."

"*A messenger?*" barked the boss. "What kind of an ambition is that? So you want to end up as a walking vegetable, do you?"

"Well, it beats ending up as a desk-bound vegetable," retorted Irv.

"Oh yes? Really? So you'd rather be on your feet all day? I don't think so!" replied his Executive Officer sarcastically.

Irvine duly stood up and proceeded to spend the rest of the day on his feet, albeit still behind his desk, sulkily going about his paperwork. The boss-man just retreated in abject defeat.

So, Irvine's back might have been killing him but he *had* proved his point. But what *was* the point exactly? There was no point in anything as far as we could see – but so what? At least back in those far-off, pre-Thatcher days, you could simply jack in any job you didn't like because you could always get another one. That happy situation would soon change irrevocably, however.

INTRO...

Finally, we did quit our jobs and went looking for . . . what? Excitement? We weren't gonna find that watching this Hibs team, sadly. The world was our oyster but so too was the West End Oyster Bar. That notwithstanding, the book you are now holding in your hot little hands documents where it all began – if “it” refers to a thirty-year-long insane odyssey involving ugly confrontations with Hearts supporters, jellied eels, motorcycle gangs, deranged Buddhists, smacked-out hookers, oddly coloured sheep, gin-soaked lesbians and police officers. Loads and loadsy polis, likesay.

I hope you find the following story as gruelling to read as I did actually living it. Do enjoy!

Sandy Macnair



BLUE RAM BLUES

Spectral horses, azure sheep

The Filth . . . and the fury

Vertigo terror in York

Strange blobs in the sky



I stumbled along the Portobello foreshore in the savage early morning light, explosions reverberating around my aching skull. The monotonous rumble of traffic sounded more like heavy bombers inside my head. Shuddering and shaking, I picked my way gingerly through Musselburgh, towards the roundabout at the east side of the town where I was due to meet Welsh. I bitterly regretted it now, of course, but it was too late. Sinister jolts of reality from the previous evening's events began to crackle through my brain, as I beheld my compatriot up ahead. Holy Christ! I stopped abruptly, as I suddenly also saw myself, being deposited at my front door by the occupants of a panda car . . . I shut my eyes tightly but the unwelcome images continued to flow. Vomit, shattered bus shelters, police officers . . .

Irvine, for once fairly bright-eyed and bushy-tailed at such an hour, looked at me disapprovingly. It was obvious from my general demeanour that all was not well.

“Well?”

Did he mean as in “not ill” or as in “what the fuck happened to you last night?” I wondered. A bit of both perhaps.

“I . . . I got arrested . . . in Oxfangs . . .” I explained rather uncertainly.

“What?”

I repeated the known facts; namely that an arrest had occurred in

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the Oxbgangs area of the city of Edinburgh sometime between the hours of 12 midnight and 4 a.m., but what exactly for, I could not say. Although by this time I'd actually remembered why they'd driven me home. A police officer had angrily yelled that he wasn't going to dirty his nice clean cells by placing *me* in them, but I decided not to mention this. Irvine shook his head sadly at the irresponsible folly of his old acquaintance. I thought his scandalised reaction was a bit rich but his manner changed noticeably when I, in turn, demanded an explanation. Where, I wanted to know, were we going and why?

"Grantham," he said decisively.

"Where the hell is that?"

"Dunno really. About 300 miles south somewhere . . . I think."

"Why?" was the next obvious question.

He looked at me awkwardly for a moment, before allowing his gaze to drift off towards the horizon.

"I've got to make a court appearance there," he admitted.

Heartfelt regret at my foolishness in agreeing to accompany him increased rapidly as the morning wore on. But *why* had I agreed to it? Like most things, you could put it down to drink. That warm glow of friendship that permeates your whole being after about the sixth pint of an evening, when your so-called "friend" casually mentions his yearning for a travelling companion on a journey he is due to take. "I'll be there for you, good buddy!" you respond loyally – if you ever knew the reason for the trip in the first place, you've certainly forgotten it after the eighth pint.

After two hours of fruitless thumb flapping, we caught a bus as far as Dunbar to spur us on our way, and the heat on that hellish vehicle only intensified my condition of extreme dehydration and general ill-health. Medicine in the form of two full sized bottles of Irn Bru failed to do the trick. Its manufacturer's boast of it being "Made In Scotland – From Girders". That may well be true but I just felt as if the girders in question were slowly being applied with

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increasing pressure to each side of my broiling brain. Pins and needles ran up and down my body as the sweat lashed down my chalk-white face. Of course, this display of abject misery cheered Irvine up no end. He flung his head back and laughed delightedly at each tremor that galvanised my dilapidated carcass.

At Dunbar we set off on foot again. The omens were not good. There comes a point in every hitchhiker's career when he realises that today is simply not going to be his day. It's as if the entire motoring classes of Western Europe have been to view Rutger Hauer in *The Hitcher* at their local fleapit the night before and think "Oh no – no way!" when men with flapping fingers swim into focus at the roadside.

In any case, a hitcher has to look the part.

"Would I stop for me?" I was forced to ask myself, before answering resoundingly in the negative. Ragged and red-eyed is all very well if you're tramping about in the far north bearing a rucksack the size of Aviemore and exuding an air of "Bona-fide traveller" to the wary motorist. The lack of a rucksack was probably our major mistake. It's always wise to carry one – even if it's empty – to supplement the overall image.

A few piddling little lifts conveyed us through the Borders but after getting stuck outside the bizarre looking *Cat Inn* near Scremerston for ages, we realised that other methods would have to be implemented. We stopped a bus, paid the fare as far as Alnwick, but neglected to get off until it reached Newcastle. A change of driver en route enabled us to get away with it and, briefly buoyed up, we rashly blew some of our meagre funds on a slap-up Chinese meal.

It has to be said that even in my very dodgy state, I knew that this was a high risk strategy. Welsh had a long history of misbehaviour in restaurants (falling asleep in the soup, abusing other diners, rearranging the fixtures and fittings, balancing plates of curry on his head etc.), so I was relieved that for once the meal passed without incident.

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We walked across the Tyne Bridge as twilight descended over Geordieland. Being totally unprepared with no sleeping bags, warm clothing, or tent, we realised that our careless attitude of “so what, it’s summertime after all” had been rather misplaced. It seemed to get cold and dark surprisingly quickly, as we jumped on another bus. Luckily this one was filled with drunks who were dismantling the seats and breaking bottles with a commendable degree of enthusiasm, with the result that the conductress was too scared to come upstairs and collect the fares.

Bored with buses, we opted for some free rail travel for the next stage of the journey. This was very pleasant but we ran into a few complications at the destination where the Doncaster ticket collector, not unreasonably, wanted to know where our tickets were. He eventually summoned the police, by which time I was falling asleep on my feet and couldn’t have cared less. Irvine psyched himself up and then went into bullshit overdrive, spewing out some outraged, long-winded epistle concerning missed connections, stolen luggage (with tickets) and wrong directions being issued by incompetent railway employees into the bargain – indeed British Rail were pretty much to blame for the whole debacle. He hinted at Strong Letters being written and sent to Prominent People in Government. The sergeant was just about falling asleep on his feet too by the conclusion of the tale. By this time it was about 1 a.m. and Irvine persuaded the ticket collector to let us through. Both men clearly wanted to go to their beds and they weren’t the only ones.

However, Doncaster at the dead of night proved to be a stern test of character for two exhausted, hungry, near-penniless wretches with no roof over their heads. It got steadily colder. We had wandered around for ages looking for somewhere to crash out and eventually – being too tired to walk any further – bedded down on a strip of wasteground. The earth was covered in broken glass and dogshit, and was bordered on one side by the road and on

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the other by a huge chemical factory. The ammonia-like stench hung in clouds around us, permeating our clothes and causing our eyes and noses to stream foully. It was impossible to sleep. We lay there determinedly for about two hours growing colder and colder, as the fumes seized up our throats, causing us to cough violently. Unable to endure it any longer, we arose, with teeth chattering, to resume walking The Road To Nowhere.

As we shambled forlornly through a housing estate at 3.30 a.m., an astonishing sight met our eyes. Ambling down the street towards us was a fully grown, beautifully groomed white horse, which then strolled past us quite unconcernedly. It was a magnificent animal, clearly not a dairy horse or common workbeast. At first sight, I became seriously concerned about the welfare of my brain. The creatures were fine adorning whisky bottle labels but less welcome in deserted English housing schemes in the middle of the night. But at least we both saw the same apparition. When Welsh was undergoing alcohol-related aftershocks, he was more inclined to suffer visions of imaginary cougars, so in some ways it was reassuring that he saw the same thing. I kept telling myself that. We *both* saw it. But suppose we were *both* hallucinating, after breathing in some hideous brain-addling fumes from that fucking factory??

After grabbing a few hours kip in the bus station, we started hitching again. At this stage, I still hadn't managed to find out exactly what he was up in court for. He had that vague far-away look in his eye when I pressed for an explanation, which meant that he probably wasn't entirely sure himself. But it seemed that after hitchhiking north out of London with Hawk, they'd been lifted in a transport café. The Mancunian loon was sharing a flat with Irvine in the vibrant metropolis of Colchester – the latter had been so desperate to escape from his terrible Civil Service job that he'd inexplicably wound up at Essex University. Adventures with Carlsberg Special and whisky had preceded the trip, and Irvine

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had fallen across the steering wheel of a lorry which was giving them a lift, causing the driver extreme distress as he narrowly avoided plunging off the motorway into a field. After being ejected from the vehicle, they'd stumbled upon the roadside diner, by which time events had spiralled out of control.

"I think we were throwing plates of food around and kicking the tables about the place or something," he informed me, eyes screwed up in concentration as he struggled to recall the scene. "We might have been singing and shouting a bit as well . . . They put us in separate cells at the nick, as we were both making such a racket they couldn't shut us up. Well, at least not until a bastard of a *Scottish* cop was dug up from somewhere. He then proceeded to beat the shit out of me, which I had to kind of admire. In a way I felt proud to be Scottish, as all these wimpy local cops couldn't get us to behave, until this sadistic thug from Glasgow appeared out of the blue. By the time I'd finished counting my bruises I was beginning to actually *like* the man."

Eventually some brave motorist finally deposited us in Grantham – at that time just voted "The Most Boring Town in the British Isles" in a TV poll – and we stumbled up Blue Street, looking with longing at the pubs we really couldn't afford to patronise. The Blue Bull, The Blue Horse, The Blue Man and The Blue Ram. With such a colour scheme, was it any wonder that the blue-rinsed old boot who used to run the country hailed from here?

Having no idea of the whereabouts of the court building, we were forced to pay a visit to the local Constabulary to ask directions. Never a wise idea, in my view. This was confirmed when we entered the police station.

"*You* again!" observed the constable on desk duty in a broad Glaswegian accent. Welsh just dissolved into fits of hysterical laughter.

"Where's yer long-haired mate, then?" continued PC Simpson, referring to Hawk, who was also due to appear. "Well – never

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mind,” he added, “if he doesnae show, this long-haired yin here’ll dae instead!”

This rib-tickling display of Cop Humour had Welsh just about in stitches.

“Take him away now, Dave!” he cackled, pointing at me.

Not for the first time during that tortuous ordeal, I wished I was elsewhere.

After a short local geography lesson from the Weegie disciplinarian, we retired to The Blue Ram to spend what we could. Irvine developed a strange admiration for the pub’s sign – which depicted a gigantic and scarily realistic-looking blue sheep – declaring it “the most aesthetically pleasing hostelry sign I’ve seen yet!” I thought it looked pretty silly myself and rather rudely said so. Perhaps Salvador Dali had passed through years ago after snorting chemical fumes in Doncaster and designed the thing on the spot. It undoubtedly held the attention though. Its eyes bored into us as we walked away backwards at closing time, its inanimate body creaking mournfully as it swung in the breeze.

We spent the night in a local park, where again sleep proved mightily elusive. As we lay freezing on a couple of benches, Welsh started babbling a load of shite about the Lincolnshire Axeman, believed to be responsible for the recent spate of unsolved killings in the area. Apparently, he had the disconcerting habit of falling upon his unsuspecting victims under the cover of darkness in exposed places, prior to horribly mutilating their inert bodies. I was so crazed with exhaustion, hunger and cold I almost believed him. Again, the plunging temperature finally spurred us to our feet and we walked around aimlessly until about 5 a.m., when we passed out on some other benches right in the town centre. The Blue Ram grinned down at us maliciously.

The early morning populace was not exactly overjoyed to find two Scottish dossers cluttering up the high street, and several spoke their minds loud and clear on the controversial topic. Why did the

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police allow this kind of thing? What exactly were they paying their taxes for? What, in a nutshell, was the world coming to? The latter two queries didn't overly concern me but the first one did. I didn't fancy a spot of early morning traditional Glaswegian cop justice. I shook Irvine awake roughly, causing him to roll off the seat, landing at someone's feet.

"'ows it goin' lads?" enquired Hawk solicitously. "Enjoying the Great Outdoors I see?"

Not long after, as I sat there in the court's public gallery, I found myself in danger of repeating Welsh's performance at the police station. Fits of hysterical laughter were not far off. There was something so ridiculous about the so-called justice system when it went to such lengths to drag two drunken idiots halfway across the country to a building in a one horse (not to mention one ram) town, where I was the solitary spectator to a farce involving silly pompous old goats confronting helpless victims of drug and alcohol abuse. I looked on in alarm as Irvine produced a nasty flowery tie from somewhere and clumsily attempted to tie it around his manky neck. His face was equally grubby, punctured with bright red spots and offset with a greasy stubbly beard. His eyes stared out bleakly from his haggard face, completing the picture of wanton despair.

Hawk was marginally more presentable but his ragged arse-less jeans (which Police Constable D. Simpson had stated could have got him done for indecent exposure into the bargain) and long, flowing, unkempt hair also announced his guilt to the world.

The charges were read out. Apparently the Grantham Two had first broken the law by trying to hitch lifts on the motorway. None were forthcoming. So, in a fit of desperation, Hawk finally stood in the middle of the road to halt an oncoming car, which – luckily you might say – decided to stop. Irvine then climbed on its bonnet to prevent the driver changing his mind and shooting off. It was around then they noticed it had a funny blue light on the roof. So perhaps not so lucky after all.

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The pair exchanged surprised glances. Obviously neither could remember the incident at all. But they wisely decided not to argue and pled guilty. Welsh went into his usual “naïve ex-pat Scotsman unused to strong liquor” routine, which has been trotted out in so many courtrooms up and down the land it’s probably carved in tablets of stone somewhere. Still, it maybe sounded mildly convincing if you hadn’t heard it before. His eloquence had alleviated many a dire situation over the years, but conversely had also led him (and more importantly his friends) into being right up shit creek with no fucking paddles in the first place. This time he escaped with a fine considerably less than Hawk’s, but as the latter was the one found in possession of the Killer Weed, the result was probably much as they’d been expecting.

We adjourned to The Blue Man to discuss the merits of the English legal system.

“I thought you got pulled in a transport café?” I pointed out.

“So did I. You could have knocked me down with the proverbial feather when the old cunt came up with that version. Now that I think about it, I do vaguely remember clambering about on the polis car though.”

After a few pints courtesy of Hawk, we bade him farewell and pondered our next move. Feeling fairly elated at the thought that we could now head for home, we descended on the railway station. After buying two platform tickets, we sneaked onto a northbound train and fell asleep immediately.

“End of the line! End of the line!”

I was jolted out of a dream, where the Blue Ram was pursuing me through the tranquil English countryside, by the repetition of this seemingly meaningless phrase. Where were we anyway?? I swung round to see the ticket collector walking down the train towards us. The situation clarified instantly. I urgently tugged at Welsh’s arm.

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“C’mon! Let’s move!”

“End of the line!” repeated this helpful chappie, who was now only one carriage away and gaining fast. Everyone else had already got off and he was now checking the toilets. We scrambled out of our seats and tumbled out of the door, with Irvine still half asleep.

“End of the line!” he finally crowed in jubilation. “All the way back to Edinburgh for fuck all!”

It was then I saw something that caused me to leap about three feet in the air, before rubbing my eyes furiously and fearfully refocusing my gaze. No – it was still there. “It” was a huge British Rail station sign. And on it, in unmistakably large letters, was printed one fateful four-letter word – “YORK”. Many more four-letter words followed . . .

“YORK??” screamed Welsh in outraged tones. “What the fuck are we doing in York!? Fucking British Rail, screwed us around in Doncaster and now they’re doing it again! York! We should be in fucking Edinburgh! End of the line my arse! I’m going to complain!” An interested crowd of spectators were starting to gather as I firmly vetoed this form of action.

“We don’t have any travel tickets remember?” I whispered.

He paused in his tirade against BR and a thoughtful expression crossed his anguished face. “No, we don’t, do we? C’mon then. Let’s get to fuck out of here.”

This proved easier said than done. There appeared to be no way off the platform, apart from through the barriers. The other passengers had lost interest in us but as we roamed desperately to and fro seeking an escape route, we were feeling more conspicuous by the minute. If we’d been a good deal fitter we might have jumped the gate and made a run for it, but the rigours of the whole ghastly ordeal had knocked the stuffing out of us in no uncertain terms. And even if we had summoned up the necessary resources, the station was really crowded and in our half-crazed paranoid state, it also seemed to be swarming with BR Nazis and

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railway polis stormtroopers. There was no way through. I was on the point of collapsing in despair when Irvine grabbed my wrist and pointed wordlessly to a narrow metallic spiral staircase, which wound its way up onto the station roof.

Expecting at any moment to hear a shout behind us, we fearfully ascended the stair. But no one noticed as we climbed up and out at the top. The scent of freedom was in our nostrils. But not for long. I felt like a Lower East Side hood on the run from the FBI in some dodgy 1930s B-movie set in Manhattan. I could visualise us being pinpointed by the sweeping searchlights before a fat guard in a sweat-stained shirt picked us off through the sights of his telescopic rifle. We were clearly done for now, because there was no way to get *off* the roof. Even a good old-fashioned Scottish “dreep” was out of the question. Irvine beat his fist off his forehead in frustration.

“Where’s the drainpipe?” he demanded. “There’s always a drainpipe in movies like this!”

Well at least we were both in this film noir together. Irv poked his head cautiously over the side, like that of a recalcitrant tortoise emerging from its shell.

“No. We’re fucked,” he announced succinctly.

Miserably we returned to the top of the spiral stairs and started to descend. The only bright spot was the fact that despite being seemingly caught like rats in a trap, no one had apparently seen us or wished to question our behaviour. Not *yet*.

Back at ground level, I leaned back and closed my eyes. It was all too much. I could feel hysteria rising from within again. Then something behind me moved slightly and I struggled to regain my balance. I opened my eyes to see Irv staring behind me in disbelief. I had been leaning against a sliding door, which appeared to be some sort of entrance for Goods vehicles, therefore leading out into the street. Oh no, I thought. We must be imagining this – surely another joint hallucination? But as we tugged surreptitiously at the

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handles, it slid back slowly and we were apparently in the clear. Free! No one came running in pursuit. We cavorted merrily up the street, briefly flooded with relief and happiness.

But only very briefly. After all, not long ago we had stupidly anticipated being back in Edinburgh and here we were, still two hundred miles from home, completely penniless and hopelessly off the beaten track for hitching north. Life was still shite.

Some hours later, we found ourselves plodding mindlessly along a country road, thumbs at forty-five degrees. Another scorching day was slowly evolving into the cool of evening, which would in turn be superseded by the big chill of night. The sun was sinking down over the fields – a perfect scene of rural tranquillity unfolding, which was totally at odds with our mood. That wasn't improved when we finally did get a lift, as the driver was the sort of insufferably boring bastard who most likely spent his days traversing the highways seeking out hitchhikers to torment. His twin specialist subjects were Marti Caine and Scarborough Town Hall.

The latter was apparently about to “be..t..u..r..n..e..d..i..n..t..o.. b..l..u..d..y..S..K..A..T..E..B..O..A..R..D..a..r..e..n..a!” His hackles rose in indignation at such an outrage. “B..l..u..i..d..y..T..o..w..n..C..o..u..n..c..i..l..b..l..u..i..d..y..T..o..w..n..H..a..ll.”

Scarbores's incredibly drawn out mode of speech was roughly akin to listening to sharpened fingernails being drawn slowly down a blackboard – you wanted to clamp your hands over your ears and scream but you knew that the awful sound would continue anyway. “M..a..r..t..i..C..a..i..n..e..u..s..e..d..t..o..a..p..p..e..a..r..t..h..e..r..e..a..l..l..t..h..e..t..i..m..e..h..o..w..c..a..n..s..h..e..b..e..e..x..p..e..c..t..e..d..t..o..p..e..r..f..o..r..m..a..t..a..B..L..U..I..D..Y..S..K..A..T..E..B..O..A..R..D..A..R..E..N..A..?”

How indeed? I wondered idly about the merits of strangling Scarbores on the spot and burying his scrawny body in a ditch somewhere, before fleeing into the surrounding Yorkshire Dales.

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Then again, neither of us could drive. Scarbore droned on interminably, blissfully unaware of his narrow reprieve.

After escaping on the outskirts of Pickering – which was even further off the beaten track than we'd been before being abducted by the Marti Caine Appreciation Society – we glumly bedded down in a graveyard. Irvine actually succeeded in dropping off for a while but inevitably the relentless cold gnawing at his bones soon put paid to that. All these nights of frozen misery were starting to blend into one Long Dark Night of the Soul as far as I was concerned. We had covered countless miles during the wee sma' hours by aimlessly walking, in futile attempts at keeping warm. But this was by far the coldest night yet.

We wandered round and round the utterly deserted village, casting longing glances at curtained windows on cosy little cottages, which probably had crackling log fires burning within. My reveries were interrupted as Irv let out something that was halfway between a muffled scream and a sob.

“I canny stand any more of this! I can't feel my feet any longer. I've developed fucking hypothermia! MARTI CAINE YOU BITCH, IT'S ALL YOUR FUCKING FAULT!!!” He collapsed in a shop doorway, gasping theatrically.

“What are we going to do then?”

His breaths slowed down gradually and the crazed gleam in his eyes abated for the time being. I could see he was considering the possibilities sensibly.

“We could try and get ourselves arrested,” he said after a while.

“*WHAT?!*”

“Well, at least we would be out of this weather.”

He had a point, I conceded. What a fucking choice, though – frostbite or jail.

However, we couldn't find any police station or any other place of authority where we could effectively create a disturbance that might hopefully result in arrest. And were we safely outwith

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PC Simpson's jurisdiction? In any case, kicking up a rumpus in the ghost town of Pickering (which was so silent and bereft of life it was possible the entire village had been murdered in their beds) would have seemed almost sacrilegious somehow, or damned bad manners at the very least.

In the event, we walked five nightmare miles to the next village. A thick swirling mist descended on us round about dawn and we could barely see five yards ahead. Then the foggy shroud would briefly part and huge monstrous shapes seemed to float out of it before disappearing again. As it grew lighter, the strange effect was accentuated, with great sinister blobs hanging in the sky on either side of the road. Overcome with confusion and exhaustion, we lay down on the never-ending highway and moaned and groaned.

Some hours later, when the mist had lifted, we realised that the bad trip visuals were merely trees, rendered spooky and unrecognisable in the queer half-light of dawn. An old Polish guy was deftly conveying us down a series of frightful, precipitous Dales roads and my stomach was churning horribly. Every time another impossible hairpin bend appeared, I shut my eyes and waited resignedly for The End.

The lifts dried up that afternoon, as we shambled up through the awful industrial jungle of Teesside in the boiling sun. Mile after mile of greyness, smoke belching chimneys and machinery screaming – of all the miseries we had so far endured, this stage of the journey was the worst. The heat grew inexorably. My feet were so badly blistered I had to practically walk on tiptoe, mincing along the melting tarmac like a cat on a hot tin roof. Judging by some ribald comments hurled at us from behind a factory fence, I looked like a “tin roof” and all.

I tried to stride more manfully but it was no use. Welsh limped miserably up ahead, about thirty yards in front. When I heard him crying out to the heavens something about wishing Scarbore would tootle along pronto, I knew things were bad. And if anyone

BLUE RAM BLUES

had stopped offering a lift for “one only”, either of us would have gladly stabbed the other in the back for the privilege.

We walked right through Newcastle in the shimmering heat and out the other side, to a point five miles to the north. Then we flopped down by the roadside like rag dolls and waited for a lift – or death by heat-stroke. A never-ending stream of traffic screamed past us unceasingly. Seven hours later we were still there.

“Well – looks like it’s just not our day!” I remarked in a desperate tone of mock cheerfulness.

Irvine shot me a look of loathing.

“Let’s walk back into town and jump another train,” he suggested.

“No fucking *way*. It’s too far and we’re bound to get huckled this time.”

“I don’t fucking care. Let’s do it.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Look . . .”

I stopped mid-sentence, as my eye caught sight of something most unusual. Irvine saw it too and blinked. Collective mind warp again? No. A car had definitely stopped.

The old bloke – a retired hitchhiker himself – drove us the short distance to Morpeth, which wasn’t really much help. But it’s amazing what even a short lift can do to revive the spirits. We felt a lot better as we resumed thumbing, despite being little better off. Within half an hour, it was growing dark and there had been little or no traffic. We were resigned to another night in the open.

So when the van pulled up out of nowhere and the driver shouted, “I’m going all the way to Aberdeen – any use to you?” I just gaped at it foolishly, opening and closing my mouth like a mentally retarded goldfish. Luckily Irv was quicker off the mark or we might still be there to this day. He gave such a hysteria-tinged yell of delight that our benefactor looked doubtful for a moment.

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But we were in the back seat before he could change his mind.

“So what have you been doing down here, then?” he asked conversationally as we accelerated away. Of course we’d been asked this question numerous times over the piece. And up until that point we’d played it safe. Oh, we’d been at a party, we’d been visiting relations, we’d been looking for work . . . Irvine’s storytelling skills had always convincingly fleshed out whatever tale seemed to suit the situation best and the motorist would be quite satisfied. Yes, I thought warmly of my old friend – get yourself in a dodgy situation and with a bit of luck, when smooth talk and tact is required, Irv will deliver the goods. The next moment, my admittedly exaggerated, rose-spectacled view of Welshy as a Muirhouse version of P.G. Wodehouse’s Jeeves was rudely shattered when the reply came.

“I got arrested a few weeks ago and had to appear in court in Grantham,” he explained.

Well, full marks for honesty, you stupid cunt.

I could see the driver’s expression in the mirror. It was not encouraging. A large thought bubble had also magically appeared above his head. Imprinted upon it were two words, followed by a question mark: “AXE MURDERER?”

I tried to smile reassuringly but even if he’d noticed, I doubt the sight would have been encouraging. After all these days and nights on the road, I looked like a shattered, sunburned version of Charlie Manson on one of his off days. However, whether through fear or some other bizarre emotion, he drove us all the way back to Edinburgh anyway. I slept like a top for around twenty hours and awoke feeling fine, with scarcely a care in the world.

And then I remembered the Oxgangs Incident . . .

2

A LAD INSANE

Thin White Dukes of Hazard in Shellsuit City



The unintentional Jack Kerouac road-trip had mercifully come to an end. For now. We gazed agog at Martin Scorsese's sublime *The Last Waltz* up on the silver screen and nodded knowingly at Robbie Robertson's portentous words – “the Road has taken a lot of the great ones . . .”

Oh yeah. I was truly a battle-scarred veteran of the open highway now. I knew where Robbie was comin' from, man. The road hadn't taken me – but the Oxfangs polis sure as hell might instead.

I decided it was time to seek reassurance from my erstwhile travelling companion. He was a man of firm convictions after all – most of them for vagrancy, breach of the peace and drunk and disorderly. Although both fully paid up Rebels Without a Clue, my hatred of authority figures was more directed towards social security officials and other petty bureaucrats. I was fairly ambivalent about the boys in blue. My sidekick, on the other hand, was resolutely not a fan of the polis and seemed to go out of his way to provoke them at every opportunity.

“They'll throw the fucking book at you,” he said gleefully. “The fact that you have no idea how you ended up covered in spew, cowering like a sick puppy in the shattered shell of a Lothian Regional Transport bus shelter won't look too clever in court,

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believe me. However, I've just the thing to take your mind off it. I'll see you up town at seven . . .”

I stood at the bar in The Grosvenor and looked around tetchily. Where the fuck was Welsh? He had made all this song and dance about going to a so-called “Bowie” night at the schemies’ mecca known as Piper’s and he should have been here ages ago.

“A Bowie night?” I’d said suspiciously. “What’s the script with that then?”

“Just a night of Bowie music . . . and maybe some punters done up like the Thin White Duke,” he’d replied airily.

I scanned the bar again and caught an unsavoury character’s eye one more time. Shit! This simpering faggot was now smiling and waving at me, I realised, in a politically incorrect, homophobic flash of temper. Then a ghastly thought struck me. I looked again, harder. I moved a bit closer. Oh God, there was no doubt about it . . .

“What the fuck are you done up like that for? And what’s with the shades?”

Welsh lowered the glasses daintily.

“Stops the eye-shadow smudging, darling.”

I sprang back in alarm. He was wearing make-up, Spacey Tracey’s scarf, a Miss Selfridge’s jacket and a pair of PVC breeks. Ostentatious bracelets jangled from both wrists. OK, so we were supposedly going to Piper’s. Piper’s was in Lothian Road. Lothian Road at the weekend! Shellsuit Alley. Ned Boulevard. It wasn’t that long since I’d narrowly avoided being stabbed there, having previously been mugged at almost exactly the same location.

“Irvine,” I said firmly. “I am *not* walking up Lothian Road with you dressed like that.”

“Why not, sweetheart?” He sounded most miffed.

“And stop talking like that!”

Ten minutes later, we walked up Lothian Road. I took care to

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keep at least ten yards behind him, ready to take evasive action the minute the first person punched him in the mouth. Miraculously, though, we arrived at Piper's with the Thin White Fruit still in one piece. However, my sense of relief was only temporary. We would still have to walk back *down* Lothian Road later on, when it would be even more dangerous.

Irv flounced across the floor to the strains of 'Suffragette City'. How appropriate, I thought, as I determinedly headed to the bar. In all likelihood 'Wham-bam, thank you ma'am' was still up ahead. I bought three pints, one for Irvine and two for myself, as two Ziggy Stardusts of uncertain gender sat down beside us. Irv smiled at me cheerfully, in an overly camp manner.

"Hi, I'm Jean," said one of them.

"I'm Jeanie," confided the other.

I took a huge swallow of over-priced piss water and tried to ignore everything. Trapped here in this alien landscape of plastic disco mirrorball hell. Life on Mars indeed. And what would these androgynous clones make of us? Just a couple of kooks, hung up on romancing . . . ?

3

EVERYBODY KNOWS THIS IS NOWHERE

Future novelist attacked by black magic woman

Banshee screams in the dead of night

A barbed-wire place in the country



Twas the night after Bowie night. Talk about frying pans and fires . . .

“You wanna come up and see me some time? Like, *now* . . .??”

Well, it was hardly vintage Mae West but the offer being put to us by Deep Throat was a mighty tempting one, even allowing for the slightly sinister undertones which accompanied everything that this woman said. We were sitting in a truly dreadful club, whose sole redeeming feature was that it stayed open until 3 a.m. at a time when everywhere else shut around midnight. The annual membership charge was 50p. Naturally the place was full of villains, cut-throats, junkies and whores: the latter two designations being within the remit of Deep Throat, who was now smiling at us in a manner she erroneously believed to be seductive. Then again, as she'd already bought the carry-out, I suppose it was to a degree.

The company that trailed back to her flat in Upper Grove Place consisted of myself, Irvine, the Librarian, and some younger waifs and strays who we didn't really know too well. One of them was a junior member of one of Edinburgh's most notorious “fighting families”, however, so we had reluctantly afforded the little shite some respect.

Although Deep Throat worked as a part-time hooker, she was generally quite free with her favours when off-duty and

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particularly so when zonked out of her tree. At this stage, her smack consumption was still at an embryonic level and she was, in fact, extremely attractive in an ethereal, off-the-wall kind of way, also possessing what one of the sexist young ratbags termed “great jugs”. With previous close-up knowledge of these appendages, I was forced to concur.

As the party progressed to the strains of Pink Floyd’s ‘Shine On You Crazy Diamond’ (a real hot dance number, that one), it looked like I might well end up on the dark side of the moon again. “Is that a can of Export in your pocket, or are you just pleased to see me?” slurred the hostess, dancing like a dervish in front of my prostrate body. God, the dialogue dahling, the dialogue. But there was a vague air of the faded, doomed thirties movie star about her, I thought hazily, removing the offending can and opening it. The next minute she was on top of me, accompanied by Orthanc and Zirak-Zigil.

I should have known better of course. Kooky people with varying degrees of drug dependency were distressingly prone to naming their pets after Tolkienesque figures, in my experience, but they had merely lost the plot. Whereas those who named their cats after *Lord of the Rings* place-names had misplaced the entire fucking cemetery, in my considered opinion. The woman was nuts, I decided. Probably heavily into witchcraft, too, judging by her extensive occult library and unsettling mystic runes painted on the walls. And there was something spooky about the way those felines silently followed her about. Still – great jugs.

However, the approximately sixteen pints that were slopping around inside me like rancid bilge water were starting to take effect. Orthanc shot me a particularly baleful and chillingly *human* look, as I felt the liquid tranquiliser propelling me to the land of shut-eye. In some ways, I was willing it on, realising whatever job Deep Throat might have in mind was well beyond my capabilities. I took the coward’s way out and lapsed into unconsciousness.

EVERYBODY KNOWS THIS IS NOWHERE

Crashing out under such circumstances was always a bad idea. Terrible pranks were known to have been played on unfortunates who had nodded off at such events, ranging from their shoes being filled with soup to surgical eyebrow removal to trouser leg ignition. I snored on uneasily, jerking in and out of consciousness. At some point, I was sure I could hear somebody shrieking as if being subjected to sudden unexpected pain but it could just have been part of a nightmare. The shrieks didn't appear to emanate from myself at least, which was the main thing. In any case, banshee screams in the night were part and parcel of all our lives round about this time and were usually ignored. After all, if some selfish bastard had been fried to a crisp in their sleep, it wasn't going to do any good making a fuss about it at the time. It could wait until morning.

Once daylight broke through the grimy curtains, with a vicious disregard for sensitive heads, all appeared normal. Or as normal as could reasonably have been expected. The Librarian was still sitting there totally immobile, like some Easter Island statue taken root in the armchair. Awake or asleep, who could tell? As usual, he gave off the impression that he'd just been helplessly swept along by the Welshian whirlwind, which unexpectedly tore through his life on occasion. The latter had just emerged from under whatever stone he'd crawled beneath in the wee sma' 'oors. He looked even worse than usual, with huge great red-rimmed eyes staring out of his drooping face, like an ageing bloodhound that had been run over by a truck. Of the hostess and her Praetorian moggy guard there was no sign and the young team had apparently buggered off early doors. Irvine slugged listlessly from an abandoned tin of Export, retching immediately on finding it to contain a mixture of warm flat ale, cigarette butts and ash. It always happened to someone.

“All right, Irv?”

He just looked at me despairingly.

“Let's go to Glasgow.”

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“When?”

“Now.”

“Why?”

“Why not for Christ’s sake?”

As we sat on the stationary train at Haymarket, I could see that I was in the company of a man under severe stress and mental – maybe even physical – pain. Hence the irrational urge to flee to the west. I could sympathise to some extent, as the Librarian had filled me in on nocturnal happenings before we’d left the flat. As Irvine was doing his usual pregnant-mother-with-morning-sickness routine in the kitchen sink at the time, he was unaware that I was privy to the ghastly facts.

After I’d deliberately passed out, the sexually aroused Deep Throat had instantly checked her surroundings for a replacement victim. Unsure whether or not the Librarian was in the land of the living or not, she pounced like a sex-starved panther on Irvine, who was decidedly not. He was assuredly dead to the world, sprawled face down on the settee. But the hostess wasn’t going to be denied for a second time. As the Librarian watched, she activated a switch, whereupon the sofa promptly shot out legs in all directions, instantly converting into a makeshift bed. She then went to work with a gritty determination, which had been fearful to watch. Removing her own clothes wilfully, she attempted at the same time to do likewise to the still comatose victim. Great jugs though, confirmed the steamed-up bespectacled voyeur. At that point he had also fallen asleep in self-defence. Or so he claimed.

As the train pulled away from Haymarket, Irvine was mumbling some sort of mantra to himself, which, with difficulty, I finally deciphered as combining both the scene of the sexual assault and the demands placed upon him there.

“Upper Grove Place, up her groove please, Upper Grove Place, up her groove PLEEEASE!”

EVERYBODY KNOWS THIS IS NOWHERE

“Did you get down in the groove then or what?” I demanded impatiently, after several minutes of this.

Irv had his eyes screwed up and welded shut in a familiar display of deep inner pain. “It was hellish,” he declared eventually. “I was so out for the count that at first I thought it was just the start of some weird wet dream. Then this sensation of being pulled and pushed around, and the settee or the bed or whatever the fuck it was jerking about the place like something out of *The Exorcist*. When I came to, I had no idea where I was or who the hell was molesting me. But she was so persistent that despite myself I started to get a bit worked up. I mean, she was topless by this time . . .”

“Great jugs,” I interjected unnecessarily.

“. . . Aye . . . Anyway, she had ripped the shirt off my back and I was just starting to get into it when . . .”

He stopped, as the flicker of pain creased his countenance once more.

“When what?” I prompted.

He sighed, and after a moment’s deliberation, leant forward and raised his torn shirt from behind.

“When *this* happened!”

I whistled in admiration at the sight of the raking scratch marks running up, down and across his back.

“Jee-zus. She’s a passionate woman once she gets going right enough.”

He just stared at me with this haggard, hangdog expression again.

“It wasn’t her,” he enunciated through gritted teeth, in the manner of one goaded almost beyond endurance.

“Wasn’t her? Surely the young team didn’t attempt to gangbang you as well?”

“No – IT WAS THAT PAIR OF BASTARDS ORTHANC AND ZIRAK-ZIGIL!” he yelled in agonised recall. “They must

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have thought I was attacking her or something, and both leapt on me at the same time. I just about shat myself. Just when I thought I'd got my act together, I felt this sudden searing pain in my back and all I could hear was this angry hissing in the dark. For all I knew that crazy, devil-worshipping bitch had set a nest of cobras on me! Orthanc and Zirak-Zigil! ORTHANC AND ZIRAK-FUCKIN'-ZIGIL FOR FUCK'S SAKE!" he repeated, slumping down in his seat, his life force apparently extinguished. Well, that explained the screams in the night, I thought, relieved. There was always a rational explanation, once you'd sifted through the evidence.

Just then, I became aware of the spaced out hippy chick who was sitting across the aisle. She looked like an anorexic version of Stevie Nicks and had a glittering-eyed Ancient Mariner aspect about her that made me instantly nervous. She was smiling to herself, as I inadvertently caught her eye. Taking that as a signal that cosmic communication had been established, she slid across into the seats opposite our own. Irvine was still slumped in his feline-induced coma.

"Have you ever thought," said our new acquaintance brightly, "that this is *now* . . . and we are *here*??"

Irvine opened one bloodshot eye cautiously. "Eh . . . well . . ."

"And if you join together 'now' and 'here' . . ."

"Ah . . ."

"Then where are we?"

Well, she had me beaten away. Irvine had come back to life slightly and was staring at her in much the same way that a stricken rabbit on the highway contemplates the approaching car's headlights.

"We are nowhere!" she concluded dramatically, clapping her hands together. Irvine turned slightly, to stare at me instead. But this time his look clearly said, "Let's get off this fucking train at the first possible opportunity."

EVERYBODY KNOWS THIS IS NOWHERE

Alighting at the next stop, two nowhere men making nowhere plans for nobody stared at the ominous sign, and the high barbed-wire beyond. Carstairs. She was right, we *were* nowhere. But physically, now, as well as morally, spiritually and psychologically. This was not a reassuring thought . . .



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