

Resurrection

by

Rob Lockett

Chapter 1: Awakening

The shift had only just started and already the first of the disaffected drones came in. They looked over at the beer taps and sniffed at the wine menu; not so much gazing at it but keeping up the appearance that they could order wine. They barely made eye contact with me as they selected their option, adding the inevitable ‘No... Wait’ before they started the exhaustive process of mind changes. The shuffling of their hush puppies with the extra soft cushioning did little to discourage my strong sense of loathing and the nervous anxiety which went with absorbing their pretentious and decadent shift of patronage.

“Ah, the agony of choice”, I offered up to the patron. They feigned a weak smile and commenced their selection. They still looked down their nose at me, though their brow was slightly raised. This one clearly wasn’t used to any witticisms at this place. They made their choice of drinks, only to make it more complicated. They stood there soaking up all the beautiful castrated tension of their own nauseous behaviour; as they pushed back manicured hair to go with their metrosexual outfits. This particular customer was standing hunched over in a pastiche of designer labels: Ralph Lauren suit, Tommy Hilfiger glasses. An emo t-shirt peeked from under the gear, with an equally ill-fitting tie of bold purple to punctuate a Calvin Klein perfume that reeked. Its pungent fragrance was reminiscent of an Australian pest removal spray, although I believed this scared off as many women as it did mosquitoes.

The customer started. “Ah Yes, I’d like a Gin and Tonic, with a dash of lime and perhaps some Cranberry. Do you have J20?” They ask. ““I’m sorry Sir, but we don’t. We do have Cranberry Juice though.” I replied.

“Oh never mind.” He balked at the suggestion, as though the sudden change in brands had upset the natural order of the cosmos. He added “Oh and a bitter shandy...” As I reached over to pour lemonade into the pint glass, I began to finalise payment when he offers up “...Oh and

a decaf cappuccino..." There was a slight pause as they offered up one other suggestion. This was the way: they either felt you couldn't handle more than one drink at a time or they fired off a barrage of drink orders. It had been six days of shit and all I wanted to do was break off a shard of glass and jam it into this customer's neck. I fantasised ramming the shard through his jugular and have the blood spatter gush over his Ralph Lauren fashion condom. He gripped at his throat and cried out in agony but I continued with my attack, watching the pinstripes fade under a splash of crimson.

I blinked and took a deep breath as I started to churn the milk froth, letting the steam hit the crucial point just before the milk began to burn; a coffee cup was already half filled with decaffeinated grains as the next group of customers stumbled into the pub; they stood with an air of authority as the waitress calmly asked if they have a booking. They didn't care to check the place was bulging with other yuppies as they merely replied 'no', and assumed that they had a table waiting for them on a busy Friday night. The waitress patiently informed them that we were fully booked and they offered up a constipated look of defiance before they were told they could order the same menu at the bar; they just wouldn't receive table service. The frustrated spouse shot a glance at the husband as they conceded the verdict and took their place in the bar area.

The froth bubbled steadily as I poured it over the coffee, spreading the chocolate powder over the flowing mass of decaf. It was the non alcoholic beer; a snake without the venom. The coffee I had earlier was beginning to kick in; giving me the rush I needed to get through this next round of service. An enthusiastic jumpstart to a shift was now just a refuelling of my adrenaline; as I contemplated the fate of my next customer. This person had decided they'd like to order some food.

“Yes... Hello I was thinking we could grab a Caesar salad...oh but with no anchovies” they asked.

“Okay”, I replied.

“We’d also like the Greek Mezze but with no olives, oh and could I get a side order of Belgian Fries but with no mayonnaise, we’ll also share a rib-eye steak, medium ...oh maybe well- done... “They blurted out.

”Perhaps medium-well?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s correct. That’s what I just said.”

“That’s fine sir. I’ll send the order through.”

The arrogant fucker.

The food had as many exceptions as it did ingredients. I could hear the chefs yelling in the background about this latest order. They were already at full capacity with food orders and quickly running low on staff and patience.

As the Sous chef hollers out ‘Service!’ in the background, customers continued to gnaw at their food. I started to make a vodka sunrise for another trophy wife, who patted her partner’s knee every time he made a financial gesture. I began to pour the raspberry slowly over the orange juice, gazing mindlessly at the collection of spirits laid out in front of me.

In most bars across the world, this remains a uniform display; brand names like Jack Daniels, Smirnoff, Jose Cuervo, Johnnie Walker, Bombay Sapphire, Malibu, Bacardi and Cointreau were universally recognised anywhere and you’d have to live under a rock to not know their names. It seems like it’s never enough though, as the next customer scowled at the suggestion

that the drink they liked wasn't here. This was a far cry from the original ale houses and grog dens where the choice was a house beer or the choice of whiskey and rum as the next alternative. The barman didn't order any taxi; they just pushed you over the hay bale and charged you a farthing to sleep.

The customers continued to pour in. They looked at me with confused looks on their faces; as they haven't been attended to within the space of 5 seconds. I tucked away the beginning of an enraged scowl and pressed out a shit-eating grin.

"Be right with you".

My manager was too busy chatting up waitresses to take any notice of the new guests. The suppressed smile I exhibited outwards was pushed away and I locked eyes with him; my inner rage began to boil over into a crescendo of hate and torment as I paced down the bar. I reached into my bar apron, fingers flicking over a waiter's friend and a few pens before they settled on my prize. I gently massaged the edge of a carefully honed blade. Manager attempted to mirror my glare, narrowing his gaze in my direction. He dished out another order in that dry monotone that most staff members had come to know and hate, likening it to scraping fingernails across an old chalk board while a dentist drill rattled like a jackhammer in the background.

He barked: "Can you hurry up with that order? The guests are complaining now. Come on man, you're too fucking slow"

I may have been his senior by a few years but there was no way I had taken longer than the required time to push this particular order through. My fingers brandished the blade, caressing the metallic shiv I had taken my time crafting over the last few weeks. It curved

between my fingers like a cat bracing against its master's leg, waiting for that scratch to show it was loved. I continued to stare at Manager, which put him slightly off as he pushed through the swinging doors and out into the kitchen. I decided to abandon my post and follow him out. I walked past the kitchen and cool rooms, dodging past steaming pans about to be thrown at the kitchen porter. I found an exit and knew my quarry lay beyond, taking the time to pollute his lungs with another nicotine fix. Manager appeared surprised at my sudden intrusion.

"What are you doing?" He grunted.

"What does it look like?" I asked.

I reached back for my artwork, pawing at my weapon again. I allowed it to slide into the groove next to my index finger. My supposed superior regarded me for a second before returning to his lighter.

"Who's watching the bar?

"No one."

He flicked at the lighter, trying for more than just a spark. After a few half hearted attempts, I offered a solution.

"Let me help you"

"I didn't realise you smoked"

"I'm sure I've got something in here."

He leant down, preparing for a light, only to offer me another opportunity. The temptation was too much as I stared at his exposed vein, a small ridge of blood-work taunting me. I was entranced by it and time seemed to slow down. I felt like an Anne Rice cliché and imagined a

set of fangs extending through my gums but instead my fingers slid over my prize once again. The result was very quick. I clutched at the end of my shiv and slashed it horizontally at my prey. My slash felt neat but the result wasn't quite as his neck ripped open, blood spattering out at me as I tried to jump out of the way. His eyes were bulging with complete shock as his clothes were sprayed with a Tarantino money shot.

I admired my handiwork as my victim clutched at his neck, keeling over as all the blood rushed away from his brain and began to send him on the big sleep from hell. I wanted to lap at his gushing blood like a thirsty dog; letting pints of blood fill my mouth for sustenance. I had strayed well from the path of the enlightened; I began to sniff at the heels of the cursed like a lapdog of Satan, feeding on the scraps of human rage. My nostrils filled with the smell of blood and the inevitable shit that had finally left this bastards' sphincter for the last time. I savoured the moment, letting the excitement wash over me as I gazed down at this poor excuse for a Pez dispenser, pumping out a last trickle of claret instead of the expected chalk-laden candy.

I began to scrape away at the smears of blood that had captured my uniform but I had another thought. I decided to leave my new coat on and let it guide me back into the restaurant. My former co-worker lay face down in a red blanket of bloody satisfaction, his eyes stared out ahead. They captured a few seconds of chaos as his predator prepared for a rampage.

A kitchen door swung open and a kitchen porter watched with confusion as I go out into a section, carrying a menu with me to hide my blood stains. I watched a newly sat couple haggle over an existing menu. A customer waved me down and I eagerly responded. I noticed a dumpy blonde sitting across from him, leering over the menu. He gazed up at me, ignoring my blood-stained uniform as he enquired, “What can you recommend?”

I politely responded: “Your wife, perhaps filleted over a bed of sweet potato mash.” He gave the justified response “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“You heard me you ignorant cunt”.

“Why this is totally unacceptable.” He blurted.

“You are correct Sir.” I replied. “Why it’s completely unacceptable that you all pollute the very air I like to breathe, you fucking yuppie scum.”

He stared back in astonishment as I revealed my blade again, stabbing it down into the man’s skull, it ground against bone and jarred my wrist. I tried to pry it out which left his spouse a chance to escape but I reached out with my free hand and rammed her head onto the table, giving the pine the appropriate distressed look as she tried to free herself. I finally manage to free the blade and plunge it into the blonde’s back. She squirmed over the table, making the table rattle underneath. I could not suppress my amusement and pushed out a chuckle which only startled the guests even further.

At this point diners should be scrambling but they just sat there with a constipated look on their face as though they had just given a rimjob to a homeless man. I seized the moment to continue my social commentary. “Think of this as theatre restaurant. The specials include a moist bimbo served on a bed of white collar effluence.” I let the malapropism linger in the air as some of the crowd grimaced without realising my deliberate play on words.

A businessman started to squirm under his plate of oysters as I pivoted and in a quick jolt; skewered his temple, feeling the blade vibrate once again, sending tremors up my skin. It gave me another surge of energy as I cut an arc across another trophy wife, cutting a lovely thick slice through her chest, letting the skin flap a little as another crimson geyser lets rip like Ol’ faithful.

“This is not dinner theatre.”

Other customers finally began to flee, recoiling in shock at the scene before them. Most of them ran out into the parking lot, tripping over each other as they fumbled for good cell reception. I caught one of the punters tripping over a picnic table; his legs sprawling across the lawn. I seized the moment and plunged the blade into his back and then reached from behind to slit his throat. The result was too quick as the victim barely put a hand to his neck before the inevitable downpour.

The rest of the guests used the chance to escape as I tried to hoist myself up from the ground. I felt a sharp blow to the back of my skull before I began to black out. The darkness enveloped me and sent me into a big sleep that would make Bogart’s head spin.

Chapter 2: *The Working Holiday*

I heard the sounds of the *First Great Western Paddington* express shudder past our yard as it passed through the local station. I looked up to see David still stirring in and out of sleep. My room-mate couldn't help but fight against his sleep apnoea on a daily basis. A South African Expat, David was another victim of a Working holiday gone wrong. Lured by the promises of Mother England and the exchange rate, he arrived here only two weeks later than I had but already, he could do little to hide his frustration at the working conditions.

I hoisted myself up from the mattress and drew open the blinds, groaning out a primeval yawn and letting the morning glare pierce my eyes as it cast a harsh light over the bedroom. The view was only too familiar: Two single mattresses on opposite sides of the room separated by a tattered shower curtain and a small picnic table that became our common area. The walls were covered in blue plasticine from where my former Polish room-mate left a collage of pornographic posters; a temporary cover for the dents in the walls. Nothing could explain the mysterious black stain on the carpet though. It was as if a demon filled with bile and shit managed to spill itself in one last final orgy of sloth before seeping into the carpet.

I tried to ignore the stench wafting from the chippy down below as the neighbours followed their weekly ritual of emptying out the fat traps and forcing their tenants to look for other real estate.

I moved over to our gas meter, flicking the button that would warm up our hot water pipes before I attempted the shower. The noise of the ignition starting woke David up. He rubbed his eyes and managed to groan a greeting to me.

“Morning” he said.

“How’d you sleep?” I enquired.

“A lot better than you” he said.

What was he talking about? Could he hear me?

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“You were punching and kicking all night. There was lots of yelling. You need to do something about that man. This job is stressing you out I think.”

Words always flew out like bullets in South African. The guttural alkaline accent pushed every syllable home. English was also a distant second language to him over his native Africance.

“Thanks for the concern. I’m going to hit the shower. What time do you start?”

“Twelve. It’s bullshit. I only have four hours today. How many do you have?”

“Ten.” I reply. “It’s another split-shift.” David was not impressed.

“At least you get the hours. I did not sign up for this part time shit. It’s fucking bullshit. You should consider yourself lucky”

How do I tell him the irony of this whole situation? I was working third world hours while he could hardly get any. This was clearly a human resources SNAFU.

“I really don’t. We need more staff on up front. “

“Yeah I hear you.” He said.

I grabbed my towel and wandered down the corridor to the bathroom. Not exactly a Roman bath-house, the pokey little nook that was our bathroom barely shifted into the shape of the building. Cut into a corner of the flat, you had to lean to the side to stop your head hitting the roof while you showered. This was combined with a toilet that clogged and a basin that only pushed cold water through; the bathroom added to the antiquated sense of disappointment running through the flat. There was a period when the light wouldn't even work, using an old globe which was wired into the circuit and impossible to replace unless you were a half certifiable electrician. We would defecate by candlelight: The most romantic shit a man could take.

I locked the door behind me and began to undress, taking the moment to inspect myself in the mirror. No new wrinkles and no more hair loss; I think I may have just passed my age thirty use-by date in decent fashion. I still cringed at the love handles protruding from my waist. They were slowly shrinking away, but were still a painful reminder of the body fat I still needed to shed just to call myself normal. I had some muscle tone but unfortunately that was overlooked by most. I was the Cadillac of human beings: built for comfort and certainly not speed.

There was still money in the gas meter as the water turned hot and I welcomed one saving grace in an otherwise dismal point in time. I sped through the process, taking few moments to let the hot water soak my head as I expected the heat to run out any moment. I got changed quickly and stumbled down the stair well, pushing out the front door into a Berkshire chill. It was the type of frost which would drown you in its own fragile morbidity, smothering you like an incensed mother at a child beauty pageant.

The weather outside was once again bitterly cold, as I threw my hood over and pushed my IPod ear buds in, letting the sombre tones of Joy division's *Love will Tear us Apart* set the

mood as I marched past a few Emo kids. They stood around pretending to look sad, as though the new depression was a fashion statement; a cultural phase rather than a piece of mind. One of them tried to keep eye contact with me but averted his gaze right at the crucial moment, turning his head downward and feigning more indifference. I had seen people at their most miserable and this was almost a complete reversal, just a plea for attention from another one of society's least interesting specimens; another member of the emotionally impaired.

I stared them down as they eventually moved off, shuffling off awkwardly under their hoodies. My attention was caught as a feral dog ran towards me. Salivating like Cujo, it bounded across the road, narrowly missing an Alfa-Romeo in the process. Teeth bared, it flexed its vocal cords, snarling away at its human opponent. I snapped into a master's pose, yelling at it to sit. Eventually, this confrontation was interrupted by the dog's apparent owner, a mangled old pikey who shouted for its attention. The man would put Brad Pitt to shame, bellowing a mongrel breed of accent half English, half Irish that only the dog could understand. I managed to decode it moments later as something like "get home you bastard" but I don't think he was talking to the dog. The site of the flea-bitten old yellow exiting stage left was a welcome site. I resisted every urge I could to riverdance.

I tried to ignore the previous event and wait for my taxi to pull up. It was not your typical Black English taxi but a private car company grabbing the hitchhiker's pound. The driver reeked of an assortment of sweat, garlic and various body odours and still sported a stain from his last meal; as the last piece of Halal meat formed a lapel on his army disposals jumper. A little bit of friendly banter pushed us through the monotonous green hedge that

stood between me and my work. We eventually passed a sign reading ‘The Rabbit’s Foot’ and I switched into work mode.

Chapter 3: The Rabbit's Foot

From the outset, the place would look nice to the untrained eye. Part of a chain of revamped pubs; the Rabbit's foot was the perfect blend of the aesthetic for the rich and pretentious to salivate over, as they yearned for the mason's equivalent of a mistress they could escape to and feel up the folds of its silken negligee like a fumbling guffawing mid-life virgin.

The pub was a recently renovated quasi ancient two storey building that sat upon the seasonally old green field that was once used for training horses. The outside areas offered a vast network of oak timber tables that guests regularly used to sit in the sun and slowly get inebriated through a sordid mixture of margaritas and g and t's while contemplating how to waste their money in a dwindling global financial crisis. The irony of this juxtaposition was not wasted on me as I watched them throw down drinks and inhibitions, watching cougars attempt to stalk young male gaolbait in the open wild. Each one was hoping for a midnight cowboy in favour of a salivating Kim Cattrall wannabe.

The elm trees that covered part of the yard provided a perfect shade cover and the ideal spot for men and dogs alike to cock one leg and relieve themselves on a Saturday night.

I threw on a shirt and tie and started setting up the bar. Metal benches over timber shelves; the bar was home to a wide selection of boutique beers; as I started indoctrinating the work gospel that formed part of our spiel. The wine list provided a vast range of slightly pretentious yet highly digestible beverages, boasting a bourgeois' collection of Italian, French and Spanish wines that were bought cheaper in England than the lands they hailed from.

The kitchen staff had already started their prep work, as the IDock pumped out a playlist for the apprentice pill-poppers while routinely chopping up vegetables and prepping industrial

ovens. A new phase of Euro trash and some industrial German techno set an out-of-sync rhythm that swayed them to their monotonous preparation. The Sous chef was the busiest: Setting up roasts, delegating stock rotations to the Kitchen Porter and arguing about the specials with Manager. He still managed time to break away and make fun of me and my mother, letting that harsh northern accent of his conjugate the punch-line, letting his vernacular crawl out over his buck teeth.

“Adam, how err yer, yer reet fooker?”

Was that English?

“I’m good”, I replied hesitantly.

He gets to his point, adding: “Yer ma was good too, worth the pound oy paid her.”

The old: Your ma’s a prostitute joke again. Never gets old.

“Yeah fuckoff and I love you too.”

“Oi, she said that ers well.”

I couldn’t help but remark: “You know Kojak; you should really come with subtitles.”

It was true: Wayne’s accent was even thicker than the Pikey I had encountered earlier. I had the guile to call him Scottish once, only to be reminded that he was a Yorkshireman, not a Scotsman. According to the locals there was a huge difference, and not a mistake I should be making in the near future. Wayne would sit about halfway on the freak-show band-width that represented the staff of the ‘The Rabbit’s Foot.’ His humour delicately masked the receding hairline and the widow’s peak which barely lingered on to his scalp.

At the forefront of this motley crew of ‘hospitality’s finest’ was the Head chef Doug: A man who rose up the ladder from a golf-club bistro boasting a capacity of twenty people per night. Doug was originally from Croydon and moved to Berkshire with his almost divorced family for a change of scene. Anxious ninety-nine per cent of the time, Doug would proceed to have a nervous breakdown every time the restaurant exceeded a modest capacity. Along with Wayne he was another member of the Telly Savalas club for baldies, letting a slick of sweat add extra polish to his shiny dome of anxiety anytime he was a little busy.

The rest of the kitchen crew remained frustrated and a little amused every time his bald head would grow redder as the tickets piled up on the servery window. Doug was the sort of person that would sign up to a cooking show like Hell’s Kitchen for the chance at glory, but only to have his pride and dignity torn to shreds, walking sheepishly out the exit door after a royal reaming from Gordon Ramsay: the King of the culinary underworld.

All of these people would keep me in my suspended state of comfortably numb; enjoying a quiet routine this side of the working class world. Days would begin to bleed into months as the usual regulars stumbled into the door. It was the reverberating monotony of routine working through loud and busy weekends into flat and quiet weekdays, politely bullshitting the most irreverent of guests while serving and wiping glasses. A few new menu changes and the odd rotation of staff would get a small stir of attention from yours truly, however it could be said that these were not the most exciting times; nor saintly times of yore. They were not the best of times: They were almost the worst of times.

One day this changed with a delicate flickering of the daintiest eyes a man could ever see. They belonged to a porcelain doll that would turn David Bowie into a quivering heap. Finally it was someone new. My numbness steadily thawed away as I took in this new spectacle of grace; trying not to stare too awkwardly before returning my attention to a few slack-jawed oglers that fidgeted for pounds and pennies for their next liquid lunch. I made up my mind to introduce myself as soon as I served another round of locals.

She started doing her tour of meets and greets, pretending to remember everyone's name at the front of house and making small talk that would best any politician's. By the time she got to the bar staff, she'd already met the South African. I was hoping she would flick her hair in my direction. It shone like a clichéd shampoo ad, with a colour of amber gold that reminded me of the Erdinger Weisbeir, a taste that could swamp the taste buds and fog the mind. I wasn't going to drink her hair, just merely pointing out the beauty of it.

By the time it was my turn I was hoping to resemble the Daniel Craig charm and aloofness that made his James Bond character so enigmatic. Unfortunately for me, the trademark stammer I produced when I was nervous would begin to rear its ugly head.

I offered up my salutation: "He—Hi there. Whe-wha- What was the name, sorry?"

Christ I was starting to sound like Sling Blade. "French Fried pertatus mmm Hmmm"

As if in tune to my spout of nerves, she reflexively beamed and replied. “Amy and it’s very nice to meet you. You must be the Aussie.”

“Um, Yeah, It- its Adam. I stammered. “I know what you’re thinking: Another bloody Aussie in the bar. We’re a walking cliché.”

What the hell was I doing? If I wasn’t Billy Bob Thornton by now I was becoming Woody Allen. I was the poster-child for neurosis and anxiety.

“Cliché’s are only a problem if people are tired of them.” She noted.

“Well hopefully you won’t get tired of me too quickly Amy.”

“Here’s hoping. Is he okay?” she gestured.

I reflexively glanced around only to see one half of the local pair I called Hale and Pace standing at the ready. A plump red-faced man: he was the one I likened more to the comedian Gareth Hale. He often would start his usual dialogue with a quote from their signature ‘Yorkshiremen sketch’. He tapped away at an imaginary bell.

“Oh Oi, now you looky here yer bloody convict.”

More convict jokes again. As if they weren’t piss funny the first time I heard them.

“What can I get you, Mr Hale?

He sniggered.

“Oi that’s the cheek I expect from you Aussie. Now stop givin’ me lip, you lipmeister of Lipsville. Give me a glass of Sangiovese.”

“You realise that completely defeats your whole persona.” I hinted.

The Hale imposter immediately changed his style, opting for a crisper local accent.

“Well it’s either that or the suit and tie I’m boasting.”

Amy couldn’t help but spectate this bemused chit-chat. She beamed a broad smile that would continue to melt hours later.

“Hale and Pace? My dad used to watch that. Of course I was never old enough to watch” She said.

Great now I really did feel like Woody Allen- Minus the weird incestuous multi ethnic, multi generational Freudian family nightmare.

Amy continued to watch and make some more small talk before wandering off. It wasn’t long before my cheerful mood would again be interrupted by the Iron-fisted warlord that had possessed a managers’ body. He would bleat out another command, even though there was clearly little to do at this point. Amy eventually floated away in the background. She caught the wandering gaze of him; The Mcmanager of all that was unholy. Manager spread his leviathan smile and pointed his finger in Amy’s direction.

“You see that Aussie. I will fuck that. You just watch me.” He remarked.

I tried to push any bile down as I remarked. “You’re such a romantic. How can any woman resist that charm, Safa?”

“Whatever. I see it. I fuck it. Tell me you wouldn’t, he replied.

I just shrugged.

“That’s what I thought.”

Manager had tapped into his primitive self and let loose a territorial marking for half the pub to see. Happy to have staked his claim, he left the bar to harass another waitress. Tall and lanky, he had Iggy Pop’s stature with a young face of ridiculously perfect chiselled features. Still, you could only polish a turd so much. I couldn’t help but build up a sense of loathing toward the man, though before I became too buried in my menial tasks; I glanced over at one of the Plasma screens to read another urgent news bulletin.

How convenient? Like a clichéd reveal and plot device; bright fonts were beginning to foreshadow a crucial piece of drama.

In a post 9-11 world, the words ‘terrorism’, ‘Islam’ and ‘Jihad’ were only too frequently used in news bulletins. This particular night was no exception as a jovial round of deal or no deal was abruptly cut short with another overtly public beheading.

As usual we were greeted by another bold print graphic in the style of a CNN headline with the usual: slightly bubbly, yet brooding blonde Journalist poised to beam another serious demeanour as she delivered ill-gotten news. Her jagged, staunch delivery was given in perfect high-definition and by collagen-infused lips as she proclaimed another dramatic turn of events.

“London has been rocked again today by news of yet another horrifying act of terrorism; as a soldier was beheaded in broad daylight by two men of Middle Eastern appearance.

The men were seen hacking away at the soldier before stopping to address passers-by with the all too familiar greeting ‘Praise to Allah’.

Shortly after being arrested by policemen, this vicious act has already triggered off a series of riots led by the English Defence League. Police are concerned that this could incite further rioting and acts of retribution towards the local Muslim community.”

It was fortunate that the bar was almost empty at this point, as I couldn’t help but stare at the screen, transfixed by the messages of terror pouring out at 45 frames per second. I continued watching as a member of the English Defence League vowed vengeance and to keep the streets safe. The news report cut to a shot of masked men smashing down shop fronts in an effort to terrorise their Muslim neighbours.

I continued to wipe down the bar and let my mind wander, piercing the veil of reality and existentialism, as though my thoughts alone could set off the next revolution. The problem with working a quiet shift was that time dragged like a chain gang in charge of the paint dry shift. Your mind begins to wander and you think of anything but the monotonous task at hand.

I needed a break in the routine before I went off the deep end. I was just hoping my dreams weren’t trying to take over my reality. Nothing livened up the day like a nice bar massacre, right?

What was I saying? These were just fantasies, right? Don’t answer your own questions or you’ll fast track yourself to a padded cell Adam.

Chapter 4: Animal House of Wax

Relief can be the great catalyst for pain and the inspiration for the endurance to withstand anything. People could argue that it can also prolong pain as it gives the host an unwarranted sense of hope, like the cancer patient given a relapse week of good health to say goodbye to their loved ones; right before they plunge back into a world of pain and indignity.

I used to argue that anyone could withstand hell with resilience and team work; this would become a work mantra firmly in line with 80s throwbacks such as “you don’t have to be crazy to work here: but it helps”.

A man meets with Lucifer to discuss the option of three rooms to spend eternity.

“I’ll pick this room for eternity.” Offers Gary the lawyer.

“Are you sure? The floor is covered in shit.” enquires Lucifer.

“Yes but you can drink tea.”

“Okay. Your choice. Hop in.”

The man takes his seat just as a demon gives him an order:

“Okay your annual tea break’s over, time to get upside down in the shit again.”

The five minutes of relief in my own upside hell could best be symbolised by a house party; a weeknight ruse to make us feel sociable again. Before we were thrown in the affable effluence of our lives, we’d take a much needed tea break.

House parties were the great priority of my other flatmates. At this stage in the game allow me to introduce Lizzy and Suresh: A pair of fellow Aussies that were instantly likeable, hardworking and also enduring a hellish shit stain of a work-life. They would take great joy in hosting parties, which was there sure-fire way to survive. Both young and good looking, they were very much an old married couple trapped in younger bodies. Suresh started to greet guests by first commenting on the dismal state of affairs that was the Australian Cricket team and by waving a platter of gastronomic delights in their face. Lizzy would fuss over the ladies, engaging in girl talk while also stopping to give Suresh a look of death if he even looked like letting out silent but violent eruptions of gas.

My Hungarian housemate was, on the other hand, the lowest archetype of bottom-feeder. The oxygen thief known as Czaba was one leader in a tribe of scum and villainy as he offered an entourage of douchebags that resembled the Cantina bar in a galaxy not so far away. He was always trying to work angles, borrow money, mooch off everybody and would be mysteriously lurking around other wallets. His miserly ways extended into his overall cleanliness, as he refused to clean anything: including himself. He was equipped with an acerbic Hungarian accent that seemed to resemble a young Bela Lugosi's Impression of Count Dracula; Csaba would spew out a desire for online gambling, Calvin Klein aftershave, *Girls Gone Wild DVDs* and the back catalogue of Abercrombie and Finch.

He had an assortment of post Bohemian gypsy friends: they were the first ones to raid the liquor but the last ones to strike up any conversation with others outside of their caravan of triumph. They failed to make more than a slight impression of annoyance from most; we

were all hoping they would soon get bored and hop on the next train to London to pick more affluent marks.

The only one to stand out in this wolf-pack was Czaba's infamous sidekick: the beloved Lazlo. Lazlo had an overly grotesque physique that had the slightest tinge of crack addict mixed with a gothic sense of Euro trash douchery. He nonetheless displayed a quirky charm, with a speed of eloquent insults that would make Bernard Black seem dim. He could be seen as the smiling assassin, with only the mild stages of gingivitis forming behind his trickster grin. He was quick to brush back a lock of cornrows as he thrust out his hand in a form of greeting I knew only too well. With a quick crush of my hand, followed by a reassuring pat on the shoulder to urge his integrity, he began his sales pitch.

His first comments: "Aussie, Aussie, Oi, Oi, Oi. I heard that all through the last world cup. I fucking love you guys with your balls."

I couldn't help but reply "So you love our balls?"

Lazlo retorted "That's what I'm talking about: That complete and utter disregard for shame. Lucky for you I'm shameless too. I can see by that glint in your eye you would like me to show a hint of sack. Seriously though, Aussie; If you let me, I will look after you."

"Are you coming onto me?"

I was only half-joking at this point. I'm sure if I gave this guy a few shots of absinthe, his pants would have been round his ankles begging for me to be his Daddy. Besides, his amphetamine-infused rant was very amusing, though difficult to comprehend at times.

Laszlo laughed out loud again, though this was a genuine LOL, not some overused internet acronym.

“You would know it if I was big boy... I mean any friend of Czaba’s is a friend of mine. I can get you almost anything: Weed, E’s, meth, real Absinthe, growth hormones, fake passports; you name it.” He proudly boasted.

“Well I wouldn’t consider Czaba a friend but I’d just about do anything to flee this shit hole.” I lamented.

“Anything?” he enquired.

“Don’t get any ideas.” I retorted.

“Honestly if you need it, I can deliver. Forget the wretch over there. I profit when I can and I exploit, but it’s a job that caters to other desperate dicks.”

“A thief among equals? Or just another scumbag who doesn’t rob other scumbags?” I asked.

“Exactly.” He replied.

“Well which one is it?”

“Both and none.” He smirked and then jerked his head in a manner ill-befitting anybody.

“Are you trying to sell me?”

“It’s cool Aussie. Take a shot of this...” He offered me a shot of vodka. I couldn’t help but make a comment.

“How apt. Next we’ll be saluting in some Russian strip joint while you hand over secret files.”

Lazlo couldn’t help but reply: “I think you’ve seen too many movies. You need to get out more.”

“What next Lazlo? Are you going to offer me some pussy too?”

“Not really. Believe it or not I’m shit with women.”

“I’m not surprised. All this talk of balls and sack makes me think you love the man meat.”

Lazlo couldn’t help but comment. “Funny fucker aren’t you?.”

In order to show my respect and acknowledge this blossoming bromance, I decided to chug down the shot of vodka he offered. It didn’t burn the back of my throat like I imagined, but instead decided to half shoot out my nostrils before I started a coughing fit. This produced more hysterics from Laszlo. “This shit is pure gasoline.”

He laughed and said. “Again” We both took another shot each out of some sort of ridiculous bravado. Again I nearly choked and cried at the same time.

Laszlo decided this was a perfect chance to leave my company and start up a conversation with Czaba. I took hardly any notice of this departure as I was busy trying to gather my senses and fight the wave of nausea pushing through my sinuses. This eventually cleared and I felt a surge of adrenalin tremble through my system. A groggy haze kicked in before a slight sense of Euphoria started to shine its lovely head, making me forget about my predicament for a time. It was at this point that Amy decided to make her presence known.

As my head steadily glanced the overly familiar setting of scattered second-hand furniture and film posters; with Heath Ledger’s creepy yet genius likeness of the Joker grinning back at me, I noticed another type of grin. This one was less creepy and surprisingly soft, as though it’s very gesture could melt away the cold raw cynicism of my last 3 months in this depressing state of being.

As Amy moved closer, she couldn't help but offer two hands and utter the words: 'Hey you.'

I cast aside my previous anxiety and answered "There you are: I profane with my unworthiest hand."

Amy replied: "Isn't it IF I profane, as I understand?"

I checked and asked: "Who says there's an if in this exchange?"

"Say what, young Romeo, or is it Adam?"

"I know I'm a lowly scoundrel but just being within your presence makes me more virtuous young madam"

"Aren't you the silver-tongued devil? But who says scoundrel anymore? Or Madam?"

At this point I grab her hand. She lets out a surprised laugh.

"Maybe I should read your palm St Amy."

"Oh is that right mister" She smiled.

"This is perfectly legit. I can see your night unfolding before you: there's nothing sinister."

"What else can you tell me?" She enquired.

"You shall meet a handsome but sinful pilgrim: that much I see."

"And is that happening right now, because that's some strong magic."

"Really?"

"No, not really. It's rubbish actually."

We both laugh at this.

“Well worth a try anyway. Though I do predict a yes coming my way soon.”

“And what is the question?”

“Do you want to get a drink?”

“That’s unfair; you know I’m a pisshead.”

I laugh. “That’s true...well what I heard anyway. Maybe I should recant my early hints at you being a saint.”

“I think you should. That’s a yes then.”

I smile again and as if to reassure me, she gave me a quick peck on the cheek.

“At least it might stop Ryan from drooling over me for a bit.” She commented.

“Yeah good luck with that. He can’t leave me alone either.” I joked.

She laughed again and I twirled her around, stumbling a little at the end.

“I think we need to put you in a taxi.” She said.

“I think we need to put you in bed.” I said.

“Easy tiger. You’re way too smashed.” She said.

The next fifteen minutes were filled with some attempt at deep and meaningful discussion, though we were both still holding back, followed by intentions that seemed far too honourable.

This was juxtaposed by the process of tequila shots. Someone had convinced us both to do tequila, lemon and salt, with salt being chucked on my neck before Amy slurped at it like a less than demure Cat woman. When we both came up for air, I heard the honk of a horn.

“Looks like your cab’s here.” She said.

I leant down and kissed her hand. “Such a gentleman” she said. As if on cue, I tripped into the cab, sending my face downwards and a narrow strip of arse-crack gleaming out into the night sky. Suresh couldn’t help but joke “full moon out tonight” I couldn’t tell if Amy was laughing along with him, though I’m sure I could hear the muffled words “Night Sweet prince” in the background as I took off bare-arsed into the cold chill of the night.

Chapter 5: High Fidelity and the Infinite Sadness

The English poet John Donne not only coined the phrase “For whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee” (A Para-phrase Metallica fans have been honouring ever since) but also “No man is an Island”: A mantra that most of society tries to embrace as part of our biological need to belong. City-life and travelling have always made this appear like an optical illusion, as we can’t help but envision a regular person floating in a sea of strangers: They bob up for air occasionally, though the undercurrent of anonymity and cynicism continues to drag them under, into a strangely comforting world of isolation and surface anxiety.

I often felt this lack of a gravitational pull in my cultural quest throughout Europe and parts of Australia. Even on tours with fellow Australians, I had given up my nostalgic attachment to the Australian accent and deliberately separated myself from the rest of the pack, just to get deliberately lost in cities like Berlin. Clad in Vertical Edge cold weather gear, the inevitable aroma of tourist hung thick over my persona. Sounds of Vangelis’ Love theme from Blade Runner would broadcast my loving embrace with loneliness. Each step I took would be a pandering gaze at this wondrously tragic place. Carbonised bullet holes in the Reichstag could only undermine the bold dedication of Dem Deutschen Volke (To the German People). This was all in spite of the renovations. A well preserved Brandenburg gate was overshadowed by the Hotel Adlon, a place notorious for the Michael Jackson media stunt of hanging Blanket over the balcony with hundreds of jaw-gaping journalistic onlookers quietly judging.

In spite of this preconception with being a fringe dweller, I’ve kept a few friends and some direct family attached as my lifeline in times of need, though I still remain a semi-detached dwelling of loneliness. This is especially true of my relationships with women.

You would think that after several interludes with the opposite sex and a few mid-term relationships, I would have become more enlightened with the constitution of women; however, they still continue to remain an anomaly cloaked in a thick shroud of mystery.

It's hard to point out exactly where this originates, though a curious attachment to films where the Damsel in distress needed to be constantly rescued was probably a good start. Culture seemed to have evolved into a need for the reimagining of the ideal guy.

Once we may have projected a Cary Grant-like charm and a need for action that justified our strong silence; we soon evolved into the sensitive new aged guy. This image also went the way of the dodo as women evolved to embrace their sexuality to the point of needing no justification. Of course, I was speaking in gargantuan generalisations which reflected certain types of men and women. However, if that's the only experience you have had, it's difficult not to become jaded, confused and frustrated.

Another failed romance and the immortal words...." But you're such a nice guy" made me emit the sigh that was reminiscent of Jeff Buckley's rendition of Hallelujah. That final note encapsulated the last breath of a dying soul. I made that sigh and the shoulders slumped, allowing an inner voice to cry out:

Why do you keep doing this? Just give up already.

So when it was time to ready myself for a date with Amy, the phrase: 'a little anxious' was possibly an understatement. I ventured back into the bathroom of borderline mediocrity and gave myself the usual inspection before throwing on a hint of Aqua De Gio: Not enough to die by asphyxiation or to replace a dose of chloroform but certainly enough to get attention.

Clad in Jeans, a black V-neck and a suede jacket, it was the best I could conjure up for my night of pre-determined anxiety and romantic interview questions.

I decided to meet Amy by the Riverside, a bustling part of the Oracle that was host to a variety of wine bars, cafe's, tapas bars and the odd Nando's just to remind us that it was still a commercial site. In the midst of the crowd of Hipsters, IT programmers, sales reps and retail zombies was Amy, hopefully waiting patiently.

The crowd flocked to this place for the particular ambience that it boasted at night time; the subtle flows of a creek bed, bird life and glowing lights made a suitable backdrop to host a 24 hour night life of cigarettes, hot chocolates and burritos. This could occasionally be violated by a drunk casting all manner of body fluids into the black lagoon after three am.

I walked up to her quickly, almost striding and in my usual half-hearted swagger that women often mistook for a slight limp. I moved in close to attempt a picture perfect embrace only to see her body language was all wrong, as she looked to be almost reeling backwards. I attempted a quick "Throw her in reverse" only to stumble over her toes as I could not slow down.

In between the winces she quickly composed herself, patted me on the arm and then gave me a quick peck on the cheek. She laughed and said: "I'm sorry. That was all me. Yes we definitely left on the right note. I just had a little freak out. "

"Should we call it a mulligan?" I asked.

"What's that?" She replied.

"It means we can start over."

“Oh like a do-over?”

“Yes, a do-over.”

“Sure, why not.”

The second take was much better, with Amy giving me a kiss on the lips. Though it was too thin for me to be completely overwhelmed, it was still nice and allowed my heart-beat to build a faster rhythm, like a bucket drummer on meth.

Re-surfacing from our hug, we decided it was best to walk down by the riverside and find the least crowded place rather than make hasty decisions. It gave us both a chance to ask a few getting to know you questions and exchange compliments. We eventually settled on a place that provided an assortment of Asian cuisines.

Couldn't the business just pick one niche' market to fill?

I kept my social commentary to myself for once and instead found a nice quiet nook for us to dine in peace. I even went all out and pulled her chair out for her.

Who said chivalry was dead? It needed some reviving anyway. I know what you're probably thinking: Don't try so hard, but it felt like a reflex action anyway. Calm it down, Adam....

I always thought that romantic scenes in film and television always looked so contrived, even when they were rewarded for their realism and grittiness. That nagging part of my conscience thought that despite every outcome, from the trivial painful comedy scene to the beautiful love story, the outcome was always predetermined.

You are probably imagining the words SPOILER Alert. And if I'm telling this to someone or the universe or god knows who or what is reading this, okay at some point I'll know what's coming, but at this moment I had no idea. Hence: the nervousness, the fear, the excitement, the hope, the dread and the overall confusion.

The next sequence of events involved the usual candour and the implication of another set of interview style questions. You could cram in delicious food, enlightened ambience and a rousing acoustic soundtrack from the latest pop star to quit cocaine and try their come-back tour, but at the end of the day attraction was established in the first five seconds.

Compatibility was judged by how well you answered the next set of interview questions, all the while your beautiful yet inquisitive interviewer was still paying close attention to tone, variation, pacing and body language. I could practically hear David Bowie and Freddie Mercury harmonising the words: “Pressure: pushing down on me, pushing down on you...” as I tried to come up with the best answers at the spur of the moment.

Like all interviews I just had to swallow hard, push down the anxious thoughts and put my best foot forward. In between rounds of wait staff questions, spring rolls, and steamed rice, checking for her body language and general reactions, I think I was a success. Despite all nervousness, I'd found that eye contact and self-deprecating humour were a handy social companion.

At the end of dessert and coffee, she was already sliding her fingers across the table awaiting my fingers to interlock. A few amusing quips and a few glasses of wine later, she kept enticing me to humour her with a subtle putdown or another embarrassing anecdote.

I decided to let Amy finish the talking, showing off my listening prowess, though often I would catch myself getting lost in mindless thought only to catch her with generic responses that would at least give the pretence that I was hanging on her every word. It wasn't that I was self-centred or stupid, but rather afflicted by a mild case of ADD. As if to show her gratitude, she continued to curl her hair towards me. This was usually a good sign.

With our hands clasped together, Amy offered the immortal words that every guy wants to hear.

"So if you get the bill, how about I get the taxi?"

Trying my best not to grin like an imbecile, I answered. "Sounds good."

Signed, sealed and delivered with a kiss: I made a contract for a love tango that didn't need Paris as a backdrop.

End scene: Show a set of French windows with fluttering white lace curtains and you can cue the soft piano music in the background. The family values version of a lovemaking scene would have us believe the act itself was pure and next to godliness without the sheer mess of it all; or the constant inner monologue of the male psyche building up pressure and anxiety to Himalayan scales before softly imploding into limp performance anxieties. I fortunately had to worry about none of these issues. For this time I had taken the high road but I don't know

if it made any difference. Though not as dignified as I would have liked to believe, I resorted to some long passionate kisses and a quick fumble on the couch before bidding her a sweet adieu before a promise to be less than chivalrous the next time. After our final embrace, she cheekily said “You’d better not be so gentle next time” before giving me a wink. And so it was with another taxi ride home that I parted ways with Amy; half pleased with my romantic side and half angry that I hadn’t just done what I was expected to do and take a less noble but more satisfying option.

