

# Bully for You – Bully for Me

By **GRT Carizmo**

This novel is a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in the story are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

## **Preface**

My ability to manage a crisis isn't one that came naturally to me. It's something I've had to work hard to perfect and a skill developed over many years, starting at a very young age. You see, for many reasons my childhood was unconventional compared to others my age. For a start, my interests lay in all things related to the military and space. At six years of age I was discussing with my dad, articles in his magazines relating to the most recent developments in armoury, tanks, frigates, destroyers, aircraft carriers and fighter jets. My friends were busy watching Hector's House and The Flower Pot Men in black and white on the telly. I'd contemplate the universe and the purpose of the human race whilst my mates would be happier playing hopscotch.

It's crazy when I look back and think how different various aspects of my life were to others. I can vividly remember my preschool days when I'd ask my dad who my grandparents had been. They'd died when my dad was young so he'd barely known them himself. However, instead of telling me that, he'd strung me along with the story that my granddad had been Adolph Hitler. I believed this right up until I started infant school and still cringe when I recall my first day there. To break the ice a little, the teacher asked each of us to tell the class something grandiose about one of our grandparents. On cue I proudly stood up and told them that mine had been responsible for the atrocities of the Second World War. Of course, at five years of age I didn't appreciate what any of this meant. Just that I believed my granddad to be one of the most infamous people ever to have walked the earth. The teacher predictably laughed at my claim. The children on the other hand just stared back in stunned silence, most likely due to my forthright delivery of the tale. Over the course of that year I had reason to question my dad's statement and was devastated to find out eventually that he'd made it all up. My disappointment wasn't due to me not being related to Hitler- I'm relieved I'm not – but more to do with fact he lied to me.

Things didn't change much for me through junior school either. I'd been into music from a young age, listening to my mum and dad's records and my first album – a Christmas present – was by the Stylistics. I can safely say I never listened to that record past the first track. I was more into stuff by David Bowie and Queen and started to build a limited collection of that type of music. The problem was that everyone else listened to pop and without me knowing it the groups I liked were considered to be gay. I didn't understand what gay meant at the time and unfortunately for me, Kirkby in the seventies was an extremely homophobic place to be.

All was well until I left Primary School. It was at this point I discovered that my differences to those who chose to follow fashion were about to devastate my life. I suffered horrifically in the hands of the school bullies and found myself with two options: kill myself and be rid of the pain, or find a way of standing up to these people. The former being a less attractive proposition, I set about inventing a way through it. I called this my "Life Strategy". At times it has required tweaking or modifying and occasionally has proven to be my Nemesis. On the whole though it has guided me through turbulent times and is still a tool I like to keep well oiled and in good working order. It is this very thing that helps me to cope with the unexpected situations that arise in my everyday life. This philosophy is one I'd strongly advocate to anyone who might find themselves in the same situation.

**Now**

“Liverpool! Capital of Culture 2008?” That’s the headline sprawled across the front page of the newspaper lying on the chair opposite.

At last an opportunity to sit down for a few minutes and enjoy a nice cup of coffee in peace. I glance at the clock noting it has just gone midnight. Leaning back on my chair - cup in hand – I place my feet on the mess room table. It seems to have taken me most of the night to motivate the staff. They reported for duty as usual at seven, but the unseasonably cold weather made them reluctant to get going. The job tonight is pretty routine, bulb changing around the park. Nothing too challenging. I was quite surprised to see the time. I’ve been busy producing my backlog reports which are up to date now and it’s taken me a good two hours to finish them. I couldn’t start properly while the troops were milling about, up and down the corridor shouting at each other. Gary’s in charge of them tonight and for some reason he’d seemed preoccupied earlier on. He kept coming back to my office and asking the same questions over and over again. I have to admit, I lost it in the end. Told him in no uncertain terms to get his backside out there and do some work. It’s difficult to concentrate on the paperwork when you’ve got someone like that wanting you to call all the shots. What’s he think he’s paid for?

I reach forward for the television controller dropping the front legs of my chair back on the red tiled floor and spilling some of my drink in the process. I realise that my recent lack of visit’s to the gym is taking its toll and I feel my stomach muscles pulling as I reach across for the little black box. I’m almost doubled up, reaching forwards as far as I can. I swing myself back on my chair and with a big heave manage to get hold of the controller, balancing the chair on its front legs in order to gain an extra inch. I momentarily gag slightly as my shirt pulls tightly across my neck. Chair eased back into a more comfortable position I depress the red button.

Nothing happens. I look down at the buttons and leaning forwards once again, arm extended in the direction of the portable TV, I press like a demented fool. Still nothing, this is stressful. Having made sure that the controller was within easy reach before sitting down with my hard-earned drink, the last thing I want to do right now is get up for a manual operation. I bash the plastic case on my leg and press again. I have no rational explanation for doing this. I can only suggest it stems back to the days when I would observe my dad repeatedly striking the black and white telly back home. It always worked for him. I experience that sinking feeling as the portable still refuses to respond, resigned now to the fact that I'm going to have to move. I try one more little trick that one of our electricians showed me and remove the batteries from the case. Apparently doing this cleans the battery terminals and makes them work again. I place them back in their holder, checking carefully that I get them in the right direction and try again. Bingo, it works.

The sound of my daughter shouting "hello daddy" - in perfect polyphonic sound - alerts me to an incoming telephone call. I place my coffee cup on the table, this time making sure that I put my feet down first and search my pockets frantically for my mobile. It rings off just as I pull it from my pocket.

My daughter greets me again. The screen indicates one-to-one so I hit green. What happens next makes me run cold.

'Stevie!' It's a breathless Gary. 'Call me Stevie... its Billy, he's fallen and it don't look good.' There's the sound of frantic voices in the background, shouting at Gary, telling him to call an ambulance, and then the phone goes dead.

My hands are clammy now. What did he mean Billy's had a fall? I fumble with the controls of my phone trying to access my phonebook. With the questions running through my head right now, trying to focus on this simple task is difficult, almost impossible. What had Billy been doing when he fell? Was he alright? If so, why did

they need an ambulance? Did he have his safety harness on? Was it attached to something? How far had he fallen? Had he inspected it before he used it? Shit! Was the statutory inspection up to date?

Cancelling my missed call by mistake, I manage to get into my received calls register – Gary Blow. I push green.

The engaged tone makes my head feel like it's going to explode and jumping up I make for the exit. I throw open the first door, then the second and now I'm out in the cold night air. This is ridiculous for June with the temperature not much above ten degrees. I stop momentarily and look across the building tops and on to the park. With a light breeze and gentle glow of the lighting it's hard to believe that something's wrong. I make for my van pressing green again and despair as the busy tone comes back.

Where were they going to be working tonight? Who was the first aider? Shit! Did we have anyone trained on this crew, I couldn't think. My heart feels like it's going to burst out of my chest as I open the van door and sit down. Press green... press green. Fucking hell... answer the phone Gary. 'Engaged. Fuck!'

I reach down to the ignition and my heart skips a beat at the realisation that the key's missing. My head's rushing so fast I find myself gripping the steering wheel in frustration, rocking dementedly backwards and forwards. 'Get a grip Bryson!' I shout repeatedly. The scenarios' going through my head are endless. Did he have all the correct PPE for the job? Who was his next of kin? 'What am I thinking about?' I jump out of the van and head at breakneck speed towards the office to find my keys.

It's at times like these that I question my ability to do the job. I often wondered what would happen to me if I was called up to do a stint in the army. You know, because of some civil unrest or another world war or something. How would I react under extreme pressure, with bullets and bombs raining down on me? I can see it

now. Captain Bryson leading from the front, brains scrambled by the action taking place around him. ‘Don’t worry about a thing lads, it’s all under control.’

‘What’s the plan Captain? The enemy are approaching with heavy infantry. We are taking lots of casualties and the front line is completely hemmed in. Can’t move in any direction without taking serious losses sir.’

‘Just give me a minute to think lads. What did I do with the keys to the APC? Anyone seen the keys to the APC?’

‘Front line has been demolished Sir! Seventy-five metres and closing.  
INCOMING!’

Thank god I never took that route in life. Maybe with the right training I would be more level headed, who knows? Don’t get me wrong though, incidents aren’t new to me, but it never seems to make any difference to how I react. I try the send button again, but I’m still getting the engaged tone.

Keys in hand I jump into the driver’s seat and fumble around as I try to locate the ignition. With a shaky hand I push the key into the barrel with some force, turning it as hard as I can, clockwise, then anti-clockwise. Repeatedly I twist it back and forth until finally it’s home. The engine fires up first time. The starter motor complains as I momentarily hold the key in place too long, my thoughts running away with me again. The grating noise brings me back to my senses and I release, throwing the gear stick into reverse before looking over my shoulder and backing away from the building. My daughter starts shouting “hello daddy” again distracting me from the task in hand. The glow from my mobile’s display, which is lying on the passenger seat beside me indicates that it’s “Pool Phone 1”. I pick it up looking for the green button, forgetting myself for a moment and the van starts to bunny hop. I go for the brake, missing completely and hitting the accelerator. I lurch forwards, and trying to remedy my mistake I realise that my steel toecap boot has become trapped under the brake pedal.

With the throttle wide open, I try to free my foot. Desperately, I depress the clutch and noting I'm on a collision course I turn the steering wheel single-handedly, narrowly avoiding contact with Gary's parked car. The din of the diesel engine is deafening. I feel my head aching with pain as the sound distorts through my ears like audio speakers turned up too loud. It's like they're paying me back for the years of abuse I'd subjected them to in the rock band.

'We've got him now chaps! Get a load of that frequency. Left-ear, the trombone if you will.'

'Right away Sir!'

'Right-ear, set the stormy-sea sound effect to maximum volume!'

'Check.'

'Inner-ear, arm yourself with the "Needle-Array" and prepare for a full assault on the eardrums.'

'Ready Sir!'

'On my count of three, let him have it... THREE!'

I manage to free my foot and hit the brake pedal as hard as I can. The back wheels bounce over the curbstone bordering the pavement around the periphery of the building. My left cheek presses hard against the fabric of the head restraint as the van slows. Then, a small bump and my vehicle comes to rest against the brickwork. With the engine ticking over quietly I can feel the chaos my tinnitus creates within my head. My eardrums feel like they are bleeding internally and this stressful situation magnifies the effect. With the phone once again silent I slump forward, resting my head against the steering wheel and try to collect my thoughts. Not for long though, my daughter's soon greeting me again. This time it's one-to-one again. With a shaking hand I push green and await the worst.

It's Greg this time, and his army training makes him sound very calm as he explains slowly and methodically that Gary is on the phone to ambulance control. They're giving him direction on what to do, which he in turn was relaying to Bob who is busy administering first aid. 'Look spunker,' Greg continues. 'Security are short staffed tonight so the gate's locked. Can you get over there and open it up for the ambulance... said it should be with us in about ten.' In the background I can hear Gary shouting instructions to Bob. It's a little hard to decipher exactly what's being said, but it sounds something like, 'check his airway, is he breathing? Has he got a pulse?' Then the phone goes dead again and I take deep breaths 'cause my heart's still racing and I feel like I need to take charge of the situation. I lift my head from the steering wheel and look out across the dimly lit yard. Greg seems to be managing this quite nicely. I get a surge of adrenalin and feel my veins swell as the blood races through them. Greg's really doing my job and I should be there relieving him and leading the staff through this emergency. Greg was right however, the gate was locked for the night due to our security guard being sick. My head's continuing to spin like mad and showing no signs of slowing. Did I really hear him going through the "ABC" of emergency first aid, or did I imagine it? Why hadn't Greg expanded a little on Billy's condition? I consider calling back, but instead resist the urge. Get the gate open first Bryson, then call. I repeat this to myself over and over again as I jump out of the ever so slightly crumpled vehicle. Leaving the door open I'm running fairly breathlessly towards the gatehouse. It's not that I'm unfit or anything, it's just that this situation is not under my control yet making me extremely anxious. Rounding the bend I see that the palisade gates have been closed in front of the barrier. I should have realised, the barrier isn't secure enough when the gates are left unattended. Approaching them I slow my pace, rooting through my pockets to find my "triple A" key. We have a standard padlock round the park which means we can reduce the

number of keys that we issue to the staff, keeping things simple. I place my left hand on the gate to steady myself and pull the bunch from my pocket. The metal feels rough and cold against my skin and the grey bubbly galvanising paint scratches my fingers as I slide them down towards the padlock. Shit! This is one of the unique padlocks – again I should have known. There are certain locations within the park that, because of the need for extra security - either from a safety point of view or to prevent theft and vandalism - have unique clasps. I inspect the padlock closely to read off the unique number. I was going to have to leg it back to office and find the key before the paramedics' arrived. I pull a piece of paper from my pocket, the way my brain is at the moment there's not a cat-in-hell's chance of me remembering even the three simple digits. Locating a pen I write it down, zero-zero-one. Fucking idiot... even I could remember that. I discard the paper and start my run back towards the main building, taking a cursory glance back at the gate before turning the corner. I stop dead. I'm sure I just saw the flash of a blue light from the main road. I take two slow paces backwards and yes, I'm right. Shit! What am I going to do? Sure enough the ambulance is slowly making its way down the access road toward the gates. I can't just run off, they'll think they've got the wrong road and waste time driving round looking for another one. I sway from side-to-side like some poor caged animal that's been in a zoo for its entire life. I could be at the lock off box in thirty seconds from here, a minute to find the key and I'll be back inside of four. I struggle to make a rational decision and my right foot swings forwards then back. I must repeat this nine or ten times before I finally make up my mind. I can hear a voice shouting at me from within. 'Get the key Bryson... for goodness sake get the fucking key!' I take another look. This time I can make out the headlights of the ambulance slowly approaching, approximately two hundred yards away. Decision made then, I run as fast as I can toward the supervisors' office and the lock off box. Reaching to open the front door I

here the sound of the siren and this stops me dead in my tracks again. Then three short blast on the horn. Oh bollocks, I'll have to go back and explain what I'm doing. I about-turn and run back to the gate to be greeted by the two ambulance crew who are staring back at me through the gate.

'We've had a call, is this the right entrance?' the driver shouts.

Through short gasps of air I respond. 'This is it mate... we're short of staff tonight so I've got to find the key.'

'Is there a quicker access maybe sir?' the other one asks.

'No. This will be the quickest way.' I turn and start my run back to the office. 'Wait there.' I instruct them.

My daughter signals another incoming call, it's Pool Phone 1. 'Yeah?' I gasp as I make it through the first door.

'It's Greg again.'

'What do you want Greg?'

'Just had a call from the ambulance man, says he's at the gate... you going to be long mate only its getting a bit desperate here?'

'Fucking hell Greg, I've got to find the fucking key for the gate.' I had the lock-off box open now and although I knew the keys were all labelled, the urgency of the situation coupled with the phone call was preventing me from reading them.

'There's a set in the lock-off box,' Greg helpfully suggests.

'Zero-zero-one,' I slowly repeat as I finally locate it. 'Greg, look mate... I'll call you back... ok?'

Without waiting for a response I cut him off and make for the gate. The two men are still standing there peering through. I push my hand through one of the gaps and pass my "triple A" to the driver.

‘You unlock that one there.’ I tell him pointing to the padlock that secures the barrier, and I set about unlocking the big gate. Thirty seconds later and between us we’ve succeeded in opening the access.

‘You hop in here and show us the way to the casualty,’ the driver orders.

‘OK,’ I respond. Then I feel my heart sink. In all the confusion I haven’t yet managed to establish where Billy is. I pull the mobile from my pocket, just as it bursts into action again. This time without looking at the screen I push green. ‘Yer haven’t fucking told me where you are!’ I shout sharply down the phone. ‘Where the fuck are yer?’ There’s a stony cold silence as I wait for a response. The paramedic, who’s now crouching behind the two front seats, beckons me into the vehicle. He’s muttering something to the driver who responds by shaking his head. I guess they’re probably slagging me off for my lack of organisation. I return my focus to the mobile. ‘Will yer fucking answer me!’ I shout, feeling myself starting to lose it good and proper.

‘Where the fuck are yer?’ The reply knocks me completely off my train of thought.

‘How dare you speak to me in that tone Stevie Bryson!’ comes a female’s scorned response. I recognised the Essex dialect instantly as that of my wife Colette. I immediately feel embarrassed for the way in which I’ve answered the phone, but her tone has riled me. Colette of all people should understand how difficult things can be in a crisis. No time for niceties, I have a man dieing in the park and must find him. My response is brief and to the point.

‘Fuck off love!’

I press the green button cutting her off and quickly search with my shaking hand for Greg’s phone number.

‘You alright sir?’ the paramedic asks sarcastically. I give him one of my disapproving stares, and then realising what I’m doing, look back at the phone and retrieve the number before I manage to upset someone else. After all, my response to

Colette was probably a little over the top. I press the green button again and place the phone to my ear, I'll apologise to Colette later.

**1967 - Little Lord Fauntleroy**

Stevie Bryson

5 Dartmond Road

Northwood

Kirkby

Liverpool

LANCASHIRE

I've just finished an afternoon's hard graft, creating different interpretations of my name and new address, and I do believe it's getting dark outside. It can't be teatime yet though, 'cause Elizabeth normally tells me to go to the loo and wash my hands. I thumb through the pile of paperwork and marvel at my artistic prowess. It's a bit dark and I could really do with switching on the light but I'm afraid of what Elizabeth might say. We've not got that much money apparently, although both Elizabeth and me Dad work. Think it's just their way of telling me they're in charge. Still, when I think of it, whenever the gas or electric runs out they always send me up the road to Auntie Pat's to borrow a couple of bob for the meter. I'll leave the light off for now.

I lay the finished text out across the floor and admire the sight. I have presented the writing in different ways. On some sheets I use large flamboyant flowing letters, filling every square inch of the paper. Others have three or four entries to a page with everything laid out symmetrically, and when I'm feeling experimental, I slant the letters in different directions, sometimes alternating between big and little letters. The one format that I always regimentally adhere to however is the way in which I present my county. This is always done in large block capitals, LANCASHIRE. As I look down at this impressive spectacle, I read my address proudly out loud, pausing for a moment when I get to the last line. Then, in my posh voice I pronounce the word 'Lancashire,' slowly and deliberately. You see, where we came from wasn't really my

idea of where we belonged. This is our future, not some skanky smog coated house off the back of London Road. Don't get me wrong, some people are suited to that kind of existence, but not us. No, we're above all that and Elizabeth and me dad have seen to it that we start living the good life. This is the clean countryside, not the filthy dirty crowded streets of the city. I have my own bedroom for starters and although I find it a little cold most of the time, it's still somewhere I can come to think and play. Before we had to share our space, the three of us living, eating and sleeping in the one room at my Granny's. It was hard to think there, particularly when Elizabeth and dad were getting up each others noses or watching the telly or having their friends round or something.

'Clear your mess up you little scruff!' she would often say.

I tried standing up for myself once. Used the "F" word when I tried to explain why my aeroplane and makeshift runway couldn't be tidied away. As Elizabeth looked on across the room, mouth wide open I added. 'They don't fucking clear Speke Airport up every night when they've finished with it do they.' I paid the price mind, Elizabeth gave me a smack on the arse, and shortly after I reluctantly cleared up.

The slam of the front door jolts me back to the present. This signifies the return of my dad from his lunchtime session down the pub. The muffled exchange of words indicates that he's perhaps got a bit carried away with his mates and returned a little late. I mentally shut this out and set about clearing up my artwork, placing it into a carrier bag for safe keeping. I take a look at my supply of blank paper which is running short. I'll have to have a word with Auntie Pat later when we go round to hers; she works as a cleaner at some offices and can normally lay her hands on some for me. It must be a perk of the job.

It's really quite dark in my room now and I can see the faint glow from the streetlights outside. I walk over to the window and look out over my tranquil garden,

dimly illuminated by the glow of the streetlight that is situated adjacent to my fence. My leafless maple tree casts peculiar shadows over the garden as it sways in the wind. My eyes slowly adjust to the dark and I start to make out what look like little creatures dashing around the trunk of my tree. I can't work out what they are exactly and with the tree a good thirty yards from me they're too far away to be visible to the naked eye. Then a thought occurs to me. Get the binoculars from beside your bed Stevie and you'll be able to view them clearly, establish precisely what they are. I have a secret hiding place between the bed and the wall and store my most valued possessions in a small shoebox there. Slowly, I move away from the window being very careful so as not to disturb them. If they see me they might be spooked and run away, then my scientific analysis of them will have failed. As soon as I'm a foot clear of the window I drop silently to my knees. I've done this before and understand what is required to obtain the best results. From my knees I slowly lower my torso to the floor and crawl on all fours to the end of the bed. At this point I role over onto my side. I wriggle over to the wall whilst simultaneously glancing about the room to ensure that no one's spying on me. I carefully reach between the divan and the wall with my left hand, forcing the bed into the room slightly thus enabling me to reach the box. The room is in complete darkness and I have to rely on my other senses - sound and touch. I'm listening intently, making sure that the enemy aren't approaching. At this moment in time the thought of being caught doesn't worry me, I just don't want to compromise my secret hiding place. I know all the telltale signs; the eighth step creaks at which point I have four seconds warning. This is closely followed by the twelfth indicating two seconds, then the squeak of the door handle announcing imminent violation of my airspace. All is quiet at the moment and I can hear Elizabeth's voice talking non-stop, so I set the state of alert to "code yellow".

With the box retrieved I gently lift out the binoculars and place them to one side. Next, I place my hand back inside the box and immediately feel the cold metal of my revolver against my skin. I toy with the idea of removing it but decide that this might be pushing my luck too far. Once back at the window it will be extremely difficult to listen for the enemy approaching from the rear and I don't want to risk getting caught. I can explain away my use of the binoculars quite easily... but a revolver? I leave it where it is and place the lid back on the box before sliding it carefully back into its hiding place. I cover my tracks by pulling the bed back to its normal position and ruffling up the bedclothes.

On all fours I make my way back to the window I fast as I dare, carefully holding the bins in my right hand and shuffling across the carpet. I can feel the excitement building inside me as I reach the wall below the window. Carefully I get to my knees, then to my feet and look out toward the maple. My eyes are well adjusted to the darkness now and I can clearly see movement at the base. Standing as still as I can I move the binoculars upwards towards my face with my right hand. I can feel myself trembling in anticipation of what I might see and placing the sights in front of my eyes I find it hard to control the juddering. I peer through them and suddenly everything is clear. I hold my breath trying hard to take in the vision before me. My hand is out of control now and I try to move my left for some assistance, but I'm paralysed with fear. Take control of yourself Stevie Bryson I command myself, and holding my gaze I force my left hand into action and take a firm grip of the binoculars. I tighten my grip and the upper part of my body starts to shudder, even my teeth are chattering as I look out at this horrifying picture. I can clearly see the creatures, but what are they? I curse myself for not bringing the revolver. In my world we shoot first – ask questions later. I hear the creak of the eighth stair, bother, four seconds and counting. 'Code red... code red!' Taking the binoculars in my left hand I

draw the right curtain, and then a quick swap and I close the left. I can't see a thing and as I make for the bed I trip falling hands first onto the floor just as the door opens and the light floods in. I'm oblivious to who is in the doorway and look down at my binoculars as a hand switches on the bedroom light. I can see they're broken beyond repair and I'm devastated.

'I've not been slaving over a hot stove most the afternoon for you to ignore me you little sod.' It's Elizabeth. With all the excitement I must have missed her calling me. 'Get your arse in the bathroom now and get your filthy hands clean.'

I slowly get to my feet and I can feel myself being overcome with emotion as I study the damage and feel the tears dripping over my cheeks. Elizabeth must have noticed because she grabs my arms and pulls me to her.

'Look son, it's only a couple of toilet rolls and some selly. You and your dad can fix up some new ones before we go to Auntie Pat's.

I nod glumly, 'but they won't be the same.'

I love Kirkby, Lancashire. The air's so clear up here and I can often smell the cattle in the fields close by. It's a really rural setting with green grass and fresh water everywhere. I love our shiny new house too. In fact, all of the houses and flats round here are brand new. Some people over the road have got a car, I heard Elizabeth telling dad all about it the other day. A pale blue one with chrome bumpers and wheel hubs and it's parked on their own driveway. Imagine that, not only have they got a car but they've got a driveway to park it on too. Dad said he was talking to the man down the pub and apparently they have a stereogram as well. We're going to have a stereogram soon, one that plays seventy-eights, thirty-threes and forty-fives, the lot. Then we'll be able to go to the Townie and buy some records to play on it. I bet within a year we've got at least fifteen or twenty. Not the Beatles though. Everyone

thinks that just 'cause you're from Liverpool you're going to dig the Beatles and stuff. Well, I'm not from Liverpool, I'm from Lancashire now and I don't like the Beatles. Dad took me to see them a couple of years ago, you know, to give them the opportunity to be seen waving to local kids. I didn't mind too much, I mean, they were kids and stuff once. We were living in an old house just round the back of London Road at the time, and the Beatles had just been out to the States for the first time. We watched them on the news, getting off the plane and everything. So some important people in Liverpool decided that it would be a really nice idea if they were given a civic reception when they returned. They flew back into Speke Airport - which was one of Britain's first airports by the way. My dad told me that it originally opened for scheduled flights in 1930. The thing is, when the war came the military took it over. Still, I don't suppose there was much call for scheduled flights during the war. Last year they opened a new runway over there and dad said they're flying twenty-four hours a day now. When we get a car I'm hoping that he'll take me to watch the planes. Anyway, dad took me to London Road and I sat on his shoulders as the Beatles rode past standing in the back of open topped limousines. John Lennon caught a glimpse of me and waved, so I waved back. Don't like the Beatles much but I reckon that John Lennon's ok!

It's half term this week and Elizabeth and me Auntie Pat are taking me to Liverpool. That's why I'm dressed the way I am today. Elizabeth says I've got to get some new shoes. I hate the way I have to dress when I go to town. I dread seeing any of my old mates when we're down there, it can be a little embarrassing when they see you all dressed up in your tweed jacket, matching trousers and bow tie. It's not their fault, their parents' can't afford to dress them like mine can now that we live in Lancashire! Elizabeth takes me to all the finest shops. This particular suit was made for me at a Jewish tailor on London Road in the summer. Elizabeth used to work there and knows

all the people in the shop. It's funny though, we always go in through the back door, never the front. The old man's a bit weird too. Whenever we go to pick the clothes up he nudges me and says "mums the word" as he passes Elizabeth the bag.

I'm kicking my football about while I wait 'cause I'm not sure how long Elizabeth's going to be. I wish my mates were out. I think they're all down at the ponds on the disused factory by Spinney Wood this morning. Elizabeth said I couldn't go because I'd get my clothes mucked up.

I pause for a moment while I marvel at our new house from the road. Being an end terrace, we've got loads of land with the huge front garden extending round the side of the house. A newly planted hedge divides our house from the pavement. The back garden's big too, with a maple tree right in the middle. I like to climb the tree and often sit there for hours looking skywards while I contemplate the universe. I know there has to be other intelligent life out there. I've seen a few flying saucers too! When I tell Elizabeth she tells me I'm being stupid... dad believes what I say though. I've seen what look like aliens as well, that's what I saw through my binoculars the other night, scurrying around the tree under the cover of darkness. I thought I'd best keep it to myself though, don't want scientists crawling all over the garden or taking my tree away for analysis. Elizabeth would kill me. I kick the ball against the curbstone and it bounces back to me. I hear the click of the front door and look up just as I kick the ball again to see Elizabeth standing there.

'Don't you be scuffing those shoes!' she shouts.

'Ok,' how annoying can grownups be? They want you to hang around all day dressed to the nines, then when you decide to entertain yourself for five minutes they want you to stop. 'Are we going soon?' I ask impatiently.

'Don't you answer me back you little sod!' she scorns before disappearing back inside, slamming the door behind her. I can see her through the kitchen window doing

the ironing. She's going to be a while yet so I toss the ball into the front garden and make my round to the back. I open the wooden gate at the side of the house and enter the garden. It's entirely laid to grass, no flowers, just our maple tree in the middle with a brown ring around the bottom of the stump where the grass has died off. I look past it to the three-storey block of flats situated over the boards at the bottom of the garden. That's where the scary people live and I always make sure that wherever possible I avoid crossing the boundary fence. One never knows what undesirables you might bump into over there.

I walk over to the maple and crouch down to inspect the dried earth. There's evidence of some disturbance indicating that something's been here. Perhaps I should take some samples of the soil to keep for future analysis. Dad said that in America the military investigate possible sightings, take them very seriously by all accounts. He said the soil is often contaminated with something called radiation and that the military have ways of testing for this. If I get a sample, dad might know where to send it to get it checked. I look around the garden for something to place it in but draw a blank. Then I remember that Elizabeth had been given some flowers that she'd placed either side of the front door just under the porch. They'd been placed in plastic bags to stop the mud making a mess and I think I saw Elizabeth tuck the bags behind the plant pots. I run round to the front of the house and on close inspection find the bags. Sure enough they're tucked under one of the pots and I have to rock it slightly to free it. I'm a bit too hasty though, and manage to knock the plant over, spilling mud all over the doorstep. I quickly right the plant, stepping to the side of the porch and away from the kitchen window just in case Elizabeth's heard the commotion. I don't want to get a cuff round the ear. I listen, fortunately all is still quiet so I kneel down and set about scooping the mud up with my hands, placing it carefully back in the pot. The mud's dry making it easy to do.

I return to my tree, stopping to empty the contents of the bag at the side of the house on the way. After all, I don't want to contaminate my samples.

'Stand aside please people, my names Captain Stevie Bryson of the US Air Force and I'm here to take some samples following a visitation from outer space. Men, secure the surrounding area immediately and see to it that we erect some screens directly behind this maple tree. We don't want any trouble from those goddam commies over the back there.' I step forwards in my special sterile suit and crouch down to inspect the disturbed earth closely. 'Over here Corporal,' I gesticulate to Corporal Ian Mannering who quickly follows the order and joins me. I take a sample of the dried earth in my gloved hand and allow it to sift through my palm into the glove of my other hand. 'You see this Corporal?' He nods. 'This here soil has been contaminated... you know what this means?' I ask ignoring his nod. 'This means... correction confirms that we have had a visitation from an extraterrestrial being. D'you understand the significance of this?' Again I ignore his enthusiastic nod. 'The significance Corporal is that an alien race, as of yet unknown to us and as of yet unidentifiable to us, has landed directly, or in the close proximity to, where we are now standing.' I straighten myself and outstretch my arm in the Corporal's direction. 'The Geiger counter Corporal if you will... on the double.' He passes me the meter and scanning the floor watch the needle swing over to the red. The Corporal looks genuinely impressed. 'Background radiation Corporal... you know what this means don't yer?

Again the Corporal nods, 'yessir!'

'It means that some alien craft, as of yet unknown to us and as of yet unidentifiable to us, has landed directly, or in close proximity to, where we are now standing. Spilling electromagnetic cosmic rays, that we can deduce is probably from their sustainable fuel system, over the surrounding area. What d'you say to that?'

The Corporal just stands there speechless, in awe of my superior knowledge on such matters. 'Now I must take a soil sample for the lab.' I kneel down and start to fill the plastic bag with the dried earth from the base of the tree.

'What are you doing, you're gonna muck yer bloody trousers up doing that! Get up now will yer.' Elizabeth is leaning out of the lounge window and she doesn't look at all happy. 'And what d'yer think your doing with me plazzy bags. I need them you little sod. Now put them back!'

A quick brush down at the front door and Elizabeth had sent me on an errand. She was running late with her ironing and wanted me to go to Auntie Pat's to explain that it would be better if she came over to ours before we left for town. 'By the time yer get back I'll have finished,' she said. So I was on my way to get her. I love going to Auntie Pat's, she always makes a fuss of me and always has a good supply of chocolate and sweets. I round the bend at the end of our street and I can see some lads up ahead, near to the entrance of the garages. They're all a lot older than me and must be at least ten in number. From this distance I can't make out who they are. I'm about fifty yards away now and I have to say the way in which they're acting is making me feel a little nervous. They're all huddled in a group and keep looking down the road in my direction, pointing and stuff. It looks like they've got something they're passing around amongst themselves too. I consider turning back, but dismiss this idea immediately, Elizabeth would kill me. Thirty yards away from the lads and the entire group are facing me now, pointing and shouting. I recognise one of them from the flats at the end of my garden, Billy the Bastard my mate Ian calls him. Then two of them run out from the back of the crowd in my direction and I find myself paralysed to the spot as fear takes over. I want to turn and run as fast as I can but there seems to be a major disconnection between my brain and my legs. My eyes grow wider and my

pupils dilate as I realise that the two of them are holding what looks like a milk bottle each. From the top of the bottles I can clearly see a bright flame.

‘Brain to legs, this is an emergency, are you receiving, over... brain to legs, this is not a drill! I repeat this is not a drill! Are you receiving me, over...?’

The projectiles are in the air now and I can clearly identify them as milk bottles... but why are there flames darting from the tops as they hurtle in my general direction.

‘Brain to legs... this is an emergency... I repeat, this is an emergency.’

The first bottle hits the floor no more than ten yards short of where I’m standing and the sound of broken glass is instantly replaced by the whoosh of air as the contents ignite, sending a pool of fire along the road in my direction.

‘Legs here Sir, taking evasive action!’

I jump as hard as I can to my right, clearing a small brick wall in the process and landing on the lawn of someone’s front garden. I hear the glass of the second bottle smash as it hits the ground followed by the sound of the contents bursting into flames before spewing across the ground. I lay bruised but otherwise unhurt on the floor and hear the click of a front door behind me.

‘What do you think you’re doing you little fucker?’ I look up to see an old lady armed with a broom standing in her doorway. ‘You little fuckers’ are always causing trouble round here... now be off with you before I see you off myself.’ She waves the brush at me and I can see that she means business. I glance back toward the road and watch for a moment as the thick acrid smoke rises from just behind the wall. I wonder whether Billy the Bastard and his mates are waiting for me. This isn’t quite the same as playing pooh sticks down at the pond, or running around with my mates at playtime at school or playing “ollies” with my marbles. These lads must be Billy’s mates from Southdean, or maybe from the flats at the end of my garden. In any case I haven’t seen them round here before. They’re not the sort of people that fit in here. I sit up

and rub my sore side. I want to cry and as I look down at my trousers and see that they're covered in mud. I inspect my jacket, that's dirty too. I'll tell my dad later, he'll know what to do with this type of scum. He'll probably have a quiet word with their parents and they'll tell them off for throwing milk bottles loaded with fire. Why did those boys attack me like that? I've never done anything to them. Then the tears start to flow uncontrollably as I sit hurting and feeling sorry for myself, wondering what Elizabeth will say when she sees the state of my suit. I should really explain to her what has happened, but she gets so cross with people when they do naughty things and she might overreact by hitting their mums'. That wouldn't really help much.

'I've not seen you about these parts before have I son?' I'm too caught up in my own misery to be frightened by the old lady now. Hard as I try I can't stop myself sobbing and realise that she's changed the tone of her voice. She sounds genuinely concerned. Gently, she places a shaky hand on my head and I can feel the roughness of her wrinkled fingers touching my forehead. 'There there son, don't cry. Were those boys trying to get you?' She asks quietly and I nod in response, hardly able to take a breath of air let alone string a sentence together. Then she suddenly jolts away shouting, this time making me jump off the ground at her sudden change in character.

'I know who you are you little bastards,' she shouts over the wall and I catch a glimpse of two of the lads. They're looking at me and grinning like Cheshire cats. 'I know who your parents are too!' she continues. 'Now piss off if you know what's good for you, you little fuckers.' She gestures towards them and I hear them laughing as they run away, shouting obscenities at her and suggesting that it'll be she who gets it next. She hobbles back towards me as I try hard to stem the tears.

'Now then little man, that's enough of that. Let's get you inside and yer can have a nice cup of tea and I'll clean you up.'

The old lady was very kind, just like all the other people who live in houses round here. She made me a very nice cup of tea and gave me some cake while she took my clothes into the kitchen and cleaned them. I'd sat there in front of the warm gas fire for about twenty minutes. Stripped down to my shirt, bow tie, underpants and socks whilst she scurried around bringing me a top up and reassuring me that she'd have everything sorted out in no time. She told me it was nice to have such a well mannered young man about the house after so much time and told me how she longed to have the good old days back. Explaining that she'd travelled across to England from Ireland with her son just after the war to live with her sister, whose husband had been killed in action. Her sister had since passed away and she didn't get many visitors these days. She moaned about how quickly the area was deteriorating and believed that before long the louts and hooligans would be running the show just as they had the slums of Liverpool not so long ago. I'd just sat and agreed, but insisted that good would conquer over evil, or something close to that. I told her that Elizabeth and me dad had brought us here for a better life. That within the year I expected we'd be enjoying lots of the good things that this new lifestyle would inevitably bring with it. She looked at me as if to say I was a foolish lad. Clearly she didn't understand how much better living here was compared to the town. She'd handed me my clothes and I'd continued on my way to Auntie Pat's. I glanced over my shoulder and caught sight of her watching out for me as I passed where the boys had been standing earlier. They were gone and peace had been restored.

Auntie Pat and Elizabeth are taking me to town to get some shoes. The bus is crowded today and as we get closer to the shops it's standing room only. The bus smells of damp clothing and old people and the driver has to keep wiping the windscreen with his hand. The demister is losing its battle with the increasing workload. Each time we

stop the driver leans across the steering wheel, placing his weight on his feet to enable him to clear as large an area as possible. Every few stops he reluctantly gets up to clear the nearside part of the screen.

Shoes... what on earth is Elizabeth thinking of? It can't be more than a month since I last got a new pair and I've tried my best not to scuff them. I'm wearing my best patent ones today and Elizabeth polished them before we left the house. I only wear these for our trips out and I'm never allowed them on unless she's with me. Don't get me wrong, I like to dress well, although this suit and stuff gets on my nerves a bit. My two best mates from round the corner dress differently and they have more freedom to express themselves. I complain to Elizabeth all the time about having to go out looking like this and I think I'm starting to get through at last. There have been a couple of occasions just recently where she's not insisted. Auntie Pat breaks my train of thought as she turns round and pulls my cheek, looking at Elizabeth who's sat next to me. She must be reading my mind.

'Oh look at Little Lord Fauntleroy, all dressed to the nines.' Elizabeth is beaming with pride completely missing the inference of the statement as Auntie Pat continues. 'But don't you think he's getting a bit big for tweed suits Elizabeth?' she asks quietly, covering her mouth in an attempt to prevent me hearing. Elizabeth quickly glances about presumably to see if anyone has caught Auntie Pat's cutting remark. I'm quietly pleased that a grown up is standing up for me for a change. Then I notice the hurt expression written all over Elizabeth's face. We sit in awkward silence for a couple of minutes as Elizabeth contemplates Auntie Pat's outspoken comment. I hate to think of Elizabeth being upset and whenever she and dad row I'm always there to console her. Of course, I always wait until dad has got his coat on and slamming the door behind him makes his way to the pub before offering any affection. However, Auntie Pat

fighting my corner could be a major turning point for me and I'm not in a hurry to jump in however much I want to.

I start to think about what Mark and Ian will be up to right now. They'll be down at the industrial estate making a camp out of whatever they can find. Ian told me that Mark was going to pinch some matches out of the kitchen drawer back at his house. I bet they've got a campfire and everything going by now - much more exciting than buying a pair of shoes. I close my eyes and imagine the den, made out of long branches from the adjacent Spinney Woods, all arranged to form a frame like a wigwam. We found some tarpaulin the other night in one of the skips and placed it for safe keeping in the wood. Ian buried it at the base of our favourite climbing tree, under some dead branches and gorse. I'd drawn a map with an 'X' marking the spot and Ian took it home and hid it in his bedroom. The idea was for us to use it for our secret den, which we would build at the back of one of the disused units on the estate where no one would find it. As a precaution, we'd also given ourselves secret names. Ian was Big Chief Sitting Bull, Mark was Big Chief Wild Eagle and I was Big Chief Crazy Horse. This way we could write secret messages to each other without raising any suspicion or giving away our true identities. I bet they're sat there now, with the front of the blue teepee tied open and the pair of them sat inside. I can visualise the fire burning in front of the entrance to keep them warm. My heart sinks even lower as I recall Big Chief Sitting Bull suggesting that we club together and buy a tin of beans to cook over the fire. I'd raided my piggy bank without Elizabeth knowing and had given its contents to Sitting Bull. Now I'd to hope that he and Wild Eagle hadn't spent the money without me being there. A sharp pain around the back of my head brings me back to my senses.

'Are yer listening to me?' As I turn my head I note that Elizabeth is glaring at me and flinch mistaking her movement for another incoming shot. She shuffles around in

her seat placing her hand on the bar of the seat in front. Her face immediately softens realising that she's got my attention. 'I said we're not gonna get shoes,' she smiles and I glance at Auntie Pat noting that she too is smiling. 'We're gonna get yer a rabbit.'

I can't contain my excitement and my mouth starts to work without my brain.

'Fucking great!'

'Wash your mouth out you little sod,' Elizabeth hisses back at me in a loud whisper.

I can tell that she's pleased with my reaction though 'cause she's still smiling and doesn't hit me again.

'You happy about that then Stevie?' Auntie Pat asks me.

'Fucking right!' I've chanced my luck once too often and immediately realise this as Elizabeth slaps me hard across the back of the head. I'm not ready for it and it's much harder than the previous blow sending my head diagonally forwards and left, striking the window. Everything goes blurred for a moment and I start to see stars. I rub my left temple and turn to face Elizabeth noting her shocked expression. She probably realises that she's overreacted and hit me too hard. I seize the opportunity standing up and looking at the faces staring at me.

'Did anyone see that? Did anyone see that?'

'Sit down Stevie,' Elizabeth snarls.

'She hit me!' I shout. 'She's always hitting me!' Elizabeth grabs my arm, pulling me toward her and I notice her face redden.

'Call the police someone! She's hurting my arm now! She's kidnapped me and is holding me for ransom.' I lose my balance falling across her lap. I can see up and down the aisle of the bus and note that my outburst has attracted a lot of attention. Some people are smiling and pointing, others are shaking their heads disapprovingly. I'm not sure whether that's at my performance or at Elizabeth's handling of the

situation. In fact, I don't care. I'm on a roll now. I look to the back of the bus as I wriggle my body in an attempt to break free from Elizabeth's firm grip.

'She's only trying to bleeding murder me.'

'Why don't you bleeding well shut up Stevie? You're making a show of me.'

Elizabeth is pinching me hard just under the arms. It hurts like hell so I stop fighting and submit.

'Ok... ok, I give in.'

Auntie Pat comes to the rescue by ignoring my outburst and I get to my knees with the help of Elizabeth. Touching me on the head, Auntie Pat strokes her hand through my hair and past my ears down to my neck. I'm kneeling sideways on the seat facing Elizabeth, and Auntie Pat is smiling sweetly as she caresses me. 'You'll have to think up a name for your new pet Stevie,' she suggests.

'I already have Auntie Pat,' I respond.

There's a silence while I deliberately wait for one of them to ask me what it is.

Elizabeth knows what I'm doing, but she's clearly had enough of my outbursts for one day and focuses somewhat sulkily on the front of the bus. It must be killing her to avoid asking the question. My sense of control over the situation gives me an overwhelming feeling of power. I can feel my brain being stimulated by the release of endorphins and I take slow and deliberate breaths as I gaze out of the window. In this crowded environment Elizabeth is helpless to react with any strength for fear of being branded a child beater. After all, I've already convinced at least half the bus that she's got no control over me. What might come next? I might tell everyone that she makes me work for my keep... sweeping chimneys and stuff.

Auntie Pat's the first to break. 'Oh go on Stevie, tell us what the little fur ball's going to be called.'

I straighten my back making myself as big as I can. I clear my throat and desperately think for a name for my rabbit. There's nothing there and I can't admit defeat now, not after such a show of confidence. The problem is I can't use a normal name. That wouldn't fit with my image. Pat's on my case again.

'Oh come on Stevie, stop teasing us... what you going to call it.'

I think of my friends, what would they suggest... then I've got it. 'Shenandoah!' I exclaim.

Auntie Pat looks confused as Elizabeth slowly shakes her head, keeping her gaze fixed on the front of the bus. 'What sort of a name is that? Auntie Pat asks.

'It's the name of my new rabbit.' I reply proudly.

## Christmas 1987

‘Shenandoah?’ Mick questions looking back at me from across the table like I’m some sort of freak. Who does he think he is to question my choice of pet name?

Young posh know-it-all-know-nothing cunt. Cocky little twat too. Been in the job five minutes and thinks he knows better than everyone else. Still, this is a rare opportunity for me to enjoy a night out with the lads and I’m not going to let this dick-head ruin it for me. The others are laughing at Mick’s little outburst, or is it my choice of name. Either way I don’t want to show weakness by letting on that he’s pissing me off or anything.

‘Go on then Stevie, tell us where you got the name Shenandoah from?’ Kim’s joining in now. She’s a really sweet young thing and has been on double Bacardi and Coke since I arrived. Kim’s our depot clerk. From the smile on her face and the way she’s uncharacteristically snuggling up to my arm, I deduce that she must have had a few too many already.

‘Surely someone here must have heard of Shenandoah, some of yer must be the same age as me.’ I look around the table quizzically at the faces who in turn are transfixed on me as they shake their heads in unison. This time I’m not so sure whether they’re indicating that none of them are the same age as me, or whether they’re denying all knowledge of my once favourite television character. ‘What a bunch of ig-enorm-aramuses!’ I think out loud, much to the approval of the assembled throng, who cheer and clap in approval of my insulting observation and big made-up word.

‘Was it like the fifties version of Bergerac?’ Mick asks. Clever twat, he knows how old I am. The others are laughing.

‘No Mick.’ Gary chips in. ‘It’s a funk band isn’t it?’

I shake my head in despair placing it momentarily into my hands, and then try to explain. This is a serious matter for me, my rabbit was everything and there was a dark secret that I feel compelled to share with my culturally inept colleagues. First however, an explanation of the name.

‘Look, you bunch of idiots. Have yer never heard of A Man Called Shenandoah?’ As I look at each of them in turn I’m met by frowns and the shrugging of shoulders. ‘It was only the best ever western series in the sixties,’ I explain.

‘Didn’t know you Scousers’ got television in the sixties. Thought you were still sharing the bathwater once a week and that sort of thing.’ Mick’s really pushing his luck now. I make my mind up that one more smart comment from this clever twat and I’m going to do him outside. The others are really laughing with him though so now’s not the time to react. I put the Stevie stare on him and he looks away rather sharpish. I’m happy that he’s got the message for now.

‘Have I ever told you lot about my beloved Shenandoah?’ I ask. They all shake their heads and a hush falls around the table as everyone leans forwards in anticipation of one of my stories. I study the faces while I organise the story in my head. I like to get some semblance of order in the way in which I deliver my little tales.

My thoughts are momentarily distracted as the silence is broken by the arrival of a latecomer. I hate it when this happens and follow the gaze of our little group to be met by the image of Doug standing to my right. His face is ruddy, with a nose that Rudolf would be proud of - minus the thick blue veins - and he’s visibly the worst for wear. An ex-matelot, the craggy contours on his face betray a hard past. As he stands there in front of us, pint held to his chest he sways slowly from side to side. I can smell the strong aroma of burnt wood wafting from his faded Pringle jumper and raising a hand he adjusts his woolly hat. It’s really toasty in here and I’m surprised when he leaves it in place. We continue to look at him in anticipation, but the offer of a drink is not

forthcoming. He grins at us knowingly, enjoying the control that he has over us for a moment and eyes our near empty glasses. I find it impossible not to stare at his tarnished teeth, which today seem to stand out more prominently than usual. They certainly haven't seen the bristles of a toothbrush for a while. Fortunately he doesn't notice my gawping and decides to greet us.

'Merry Christmas to you all,' he shouts out. Sounding, I think, like I imagine an inebriated Santa Claus would.

Kim, realising that Doug is in danger of falling over, leans back on her chair and asks the couple sat behind us whether their vacant chair is spare. I jump up quickly as they nod back and turn it round, sliding it up behind Doug's legs. He collapses backwards into it with a thump, his pint glass crashing onto the table in the process. He gazes around at us, his neck visibly struggling to support his head, and then he closes his eyes.

Sitting back down beside her Kim grabs my arm excitedly. 'Come on Stevie,' she says. Then placing her hand on my knee and gazing into my eyes she continues. 'Please start with your story,' she pleads.

I gently move her hand and looking past her note that the rest of our group have started talking about the fact that Doug has promptly fallen asleep. There are lots of giggles and I can see that Mick is suggesting that they pull a prank on him, now that he's fallen deeper into his slumber. He's a grotesque sight with dribble starting to trickle down his chin.

'Shh!' Kim hisses placing her finger over her lips. 'Stevie's going to tell us his story.' The crowd immediately obey her instruction and silence befalls our table.

I clear my throat finalising the order in my mind. 'Ok, let me think.' I glance at everyone just to make sure I've got their full attention before I start. 'I was about six or seven years old and we'd moved up to Kirkby from Liverpool. Me mum and dad

had decided to buy me a pet rabbit and we'd gone into Liverpool one Saturday to buy it. I thought we were on a shopping trip, so you can imagine how excited I was when me mum tells me I'm getting a pet and not new clothes. My favourite programme on the telly at that time was A Man Called Shenandoah, so Shenandoah seemed the logical choice of names.' I pause for a moment while I check that I've still got everyone's attention and note Mick telling Gary that he remembered that show. He realises I've stopped and turns his attention back to me, apologising in the process. 'So me, me Auntie Pat and Elizabeth get the rabbit and a small wooden hutch on to the bus and head back to ours.'

Mick interrupts with a question. 'I thought you said you were with your mum and dad?'

'Yes Mick.' I respond realising immediately where the confusion has arisen. 'I've always called me mum Elizabeth. Don't ask me why, I just have. And me dad would have been down the pub with his mates 'cause it was Saturday.' Mick responds with a nod so I continue having cleared up that little misunderstanding.

'So between the three of us we manage to get home. Because I'm so small, I carry the bunny in a little cardboard box with some straw in it. Elizabeth and our Auntie Pat had to struggle with the rabbit hutch. Everything was fine for the first couple of days... I think I must have cleaned Shenandoah out every evening. I couldn't sleep the first night mind, and kept looking out the window, making sure that he wasn't getting too cold or anything. Then at school on Monday I did nothing else but think about him, sat there on his own in me back garden. I'd placed him right down at the bottom by the back fence to keep the wind off.'

I pick up my vodka and coke and take a slurp. Kim takes advantage of the moment to clarify another fact.

'What part of Liverpool did you live in Stevie?' she asks.

I place my drink back down and turn slightly to face her. I lived in Kirkby. I resist telling the story of how proud I'd been of this fact and how I used to write my name and address at every opportunity. That would only detract from the main story. I'd save that for another day.

'Anyway,' I start again. 'I think it must have been the following Tuesday. I gets up and opens the curtains like I'd done since we'd got him, just to make sure Shenandoah was ok. Only this time something was wrong.' I feel myself grimace as I recall my panic at the sight before me in the garden. 'You see, the doors to the hutch were wide open. I'd checked the night before after I'd kissed him goodnight.' Some muffled laughter comes from round the table, but in full flow and not wanting to break my momentum I continue with a 'forced' smile. After all, it must sound absurd to them that I'd been capable of kissing a rabbit. 'I was absolutely certain that I'd secured the doors. And in any case, I would have noticed when I'd done my final check before jumping into bed. But there it was. The doors to the cage were wide open. I remember running full pelt down the stairs screaming for Elizabeth and me dad. They were in the kitchen getting their breakfast and I can remember the shock on their faces as I ran into the room. They thought I'd been seriously injured or something. I screamed, 'where's Shenandoah?' repeatedly. I could tell by their bemused expressions that they didn't know what I was talking about.'

'He's in the back garden isn't he son?' me dad had said.

'No dad, no!' I shouted. 'Elizabeth, have you seen me fucking rabbit?' I yelled getting more emotional.

'Don't swear son!' Elizabeth barked as I fumbled with the back door lock.

'But it's me fucking Shenandoah Elizabeth!' I started to cry. Elizabeth touched me on the shoulder and helped me with the key. You had to push the door and turn the key in a certain way. I could never do it properly. We ran into the back garden and I

was way in front of Elizabeth and me dad. I almost climbed into the empty rabbit hutch as I searched through the straw in vain. By the time I'd finished I'd almost emptied the cage of its contents, which were now littered all around me. Elizabeth and me dad searched all over the garden, each side of the fence, everywhere. But Shenandoah was nowhere to be seen. Dejectedly we plodded back to the kitchen, Elizabeth telling me not to worry and that he'd turn up soon. She reassured me that a nice cup of tea would help us think a little straighter. I sat down at the table and sobbed. I kept asking myself how I could've been so careless.

The kettle soon started to boil and me dad had managed to calm me down a bit. I'd stopped crying but was still convulsing uncontrollably as I took in deep involuntary breaths of air. I guess I was almost 'hyper-pet-illiating'. I receive a few chuckles from around the table at my latest feeble addition to the English Dictionary.

Its Gary's turn to butt in. 'Hyper-what-illiating?' he asks.

'You div!' I respond. 'Hyper-pet-illiating. Haven't yer ever heard of that?'

Gary looks around the table as he tries to gauge how stupid his question might be and Mick's straight on his case. 'You've heard of hyperventilating right?' he asks sarcastically. But I'm on a roll and feel it necessary explain.

'Hyper-vent-illiating you mean don't you Mick?' I chip in confidently.

Mick looks puzzled for a moment. Then he continues. 'Yeah... ok... that's it. You've heard of that right?'

Gary nods.

'We'll you know what that means don't you?' he asks Gary once again.

'It's where you get short of breath or something,' Gary responds, looking less than confident with his answer. Everyone starts to nod in agreement placing him immediately at ease and I try hard not to laugh..

‘Well almost.’ Mick replies in a way that makes Gary uncomfortable again. ‘It’s when you lose control of your breathing... a bit like a panic attack. You stop it by breathing into a brown paper bag... right Stevie?’

I can’t help myself now. ‘Almost Mick,’ I start. ‘It’s when a person has a phobia of vents. You know... like those you get in a lift... or with air-conditioning.’ Mick’s nodding, probably not wanting to look too stupid. I continue. ‘Well, people get so worked up they lose control of their breathing as you quite rightly say. Any bag’ll do though Mick, it doesn’t have to be a brown one.’ Mick blushes a little as he tries to explain, but no one’s listening so I get to the point. ‘Hyper-pet-illiating is when you get really worked up over your pet.’

Mick laughs out loud and Kim comes to my support. ‘No, it’s true Mick.’ Gary’s nodding too, enjoying the fact that he’s getting one over on him. ‘I read an article on it in one of my magazines.’

‘Now where was I?’ I ask Kim. I know the answer but I want to engage my audience again.

‘Your mum... err, Elizabeth... was just making the tea.’ Kim responds hesitantly.

I continue...

Elizabeth placed a teabag in the pot and opened the fridge. ‘I’ll just get the ‘sterry’ in from the front,’ she announced softly as she walked past me and dad, attempting a smile in the process. The familiar noise of the door opening was followed by the chink of the glass as she picked up the two milk bottles. Then I heard her mumble something. I couldn’t make out what she was saying, but the clang of the bottles indicated that she’d placed them back down on the step in rather a hurry. I looked at dad. He just shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, leaning across me to get a better view down the hallway. Then Elizabeth’s pace started to quicken and we could clearly hear what she was saying. My heart sank.

'I've got the fucking rabbit's head!' she shouted entering the kitchen and the sight before me made me feel sick to the bottom of my stomach. She stood in the doorway, arm outstretched grimacing. And in her hand, supported by its ears was a rabbits head. Then she started towards the back door. 'It's a fucking rabbits head!' she kept repeating before dropping it into the bin. She opened the backdoor and went outside, muttering under her breath.

'Is it Shenandoah?' I asked my dad. His face was thunder.

'What son?' he asked involuntarily. Then, before I could ask again he confirmed the worst. 'Yeah son,' he said placing me down on the kitchen floor. He walked over to the backdoor shaking his head in disbelief. 'It's Shenandoah.'

I stood on my own holding the kitchen table for support. This was devastating news. I had been forgetful, leaving the hutch doors open and poor Shenandoah had been ferociously attacked by an animal that had ripped his head off.

I pause again, and look at the faces staring back at me dumbstruck. All that is, but Gary's, whose morose sense of humour this story clearly appealed to. I must look a little sad 'cause Kim places her hand back on my knee and offers some comforting words.

'Was it a fox?' Gary asks, eager to know more.

'Well that's just it,' I respond looking down at my glass sadly. 'You see, it wasn't an animal at all...'

I went for weeks, maybe months not really knowing what had happened to my rabbit. I spent restless nights tossing and turning repeatedly going through the sequence of events for that fateful night. Just after tea, I'd gone down to the end of the garden and cuddled Shenandoah, before placing him back in his cage and filling his bowl with food. Then, I'd removed the water bottle and took it back into the house where Elizabeth filled it for me. I immediately walked back down the garden and

replaced it, gave Shenandoah a kiss and returned to the house. I remember that it was bath night, so I was a little later going to bed. Before lying down I'd taken one last look out of my window to ensure all was well and then proceeded to get my head down. All must have been in order; else I'd have sorted it out.

Then a rumour started going round at school. I'd had this mate called Eddie who lived over the boards in the flats behind our house. Although that side of the border fence was generally off limits, I made an exception for Eddie. I didn't see him all the time, in fact not at all since the rabbit had died and I hadn't put two and two together. We'd liked to play soldiers. He had a collection of plastic figures to match mine, so we'd spend hours in each others company, digging trenches in the mud and re-enacting major battles of the Second World War. I remember his parents having a picture of this soldier on their wall. I loved it. In fact so much so that I asked Elizabeth and me dad if I could have one like it for Christmas. They got me to explain what it was like and I remember the disbelief on their faces as it dawned on them what it was. Hasten to add, I never got one. And from that day forward, I never really saw Eddie that much either. Not that I was bothered. Me real mates Mark and Ian liked to play soldiers too. They hadn't got as many as Eddie, but they were better at it.

It was Ian who came up to me at school one day and said I ought to know what people were saying. He told me that apparently Eddie had been bragging that it was he who'd decapitated Shenandoah. His mum and dad had sent him to the shops on an errand to get some dog meat. He'd left it too late for the shops so had opted to go to George's "Moby". The "Moby" was this mobile shop parked on the corner of the olla, just off the main road in a "turn round" at the end of a no through road. It was a converted lorry with some steps up to a counter at the back. George owned it and stocked everything from groceries to cigarettes. It was great 'cause he sold the ciggies individually, we called them loosies. George was always open when the shops

weren't, until about nine at night. We'd collect used pop bottles too 'cause George would give us two pence for each one we took back. We'd put all the money together and buy a new bottle of pop. You were never sure what it was you were getting in the bottle though. It was just fizzy water with lots of sugar and artificial additives so we'd ask for it by colour. A bottle of green would be something loosely resembling limeade.

Anyway, by the time Eddie got there, George had pulled down the shutters for the night. He used to leave it there all the time. You see there were hardly any cars in Kirkby in those days so it didn't do any harm. Knowing that he was in for a bit of a kicking if he went home empty handed, Eddie remembered seeing that our side gate had been left wide open. He didn't give a fuck, so he'd just walked through and helped himself to my rabbit. Chopped its head off and fed it raw to his dog. He thought it'd be funny to leave the head on our wall at the front of the house, so that's what he did.

I found out some years later that my parents had heard the rumour long before I'd got wind of it. They'd been round to see Eddie and his parents but they'd just point blank deny it. In fact, every time I challenged Eddie, he'd just deny it and quite convincingly. So I let it go, even though there was this nagging doubt in the back of my mind.

When I was sixteen I happened to meet one of Eddie's mate's down at the shops in the Townie. I asked how Eddie was and his mate told me he was leaving Kirkby to join the Royal Marines. I spent the next three days walking the area. Hanging out in all of the places I expected to run across him. Then it happened. I was walking along the road next to the "Olla" when I spotted him crossing the road ahead, kitbag thrown over his shoulder. He walked into the park, disappearing from my line of sight so I ran

as hard as I could. I eventually caught up, tapping him on the shoulder. He turned, throwing his kitbag down on the path.

‘Hi-ya Eddie,’ I greeted him. ‘Hear you’re off to join the army.’

Eddie looked at me slightly sideways. And I could see him uneasily questioning my motivation for running after him. ‘Yeah,’ he replies simply, looking back and taking a step back.

‘Remember my rabbit Eddie?’ I ask through gritted teeth.

‘Yeah,’ he replies hesitantly. Then his expression turns to one of aggression and he tenses the muscles in his arms. ‘Fucking ripped his head off his shoulders and fed it to my dog didn’t I!’ He’s smiling now, mocking me. It’s exactly the response I’m looking for as I adjust my large sovereign ring and then I let him have it. With years of pent-up hurt inside me I release a big right, my ring striking him square on the nose. My fist continues forwards, following the arc of Eddie’s body as he falls backwards to the ground. I stumble toward him and have to fight to keep my balance. Looking down at Eddie I take a step back. Blood is pouring from the nostrils of his bent nose and I’m satisfied that justice has been done.

‘Fucking hell Stevie, that’s terrible.’ Mick looks truly shocked.

‘Terrible?’ Gary questions. ‘Cunt had it coming to him if you ask me.’

‘No,’ Mick replies. ‘It’s terrible that he ripped the head off Stevie’s rabbit. How could you hurt an innocent animal like that?’

Before Gary could seize his opportunity to rise to this one, I thought I’d share another quick anecdote with them. ‘Look, it’s Christmas so we don’t really want to get too deep with this do we.’ I’m quite impressed with my assertiveness. ‘I’ve just remembered another little story related to the shop where I met Eddie’s mate. When we first moved to Kirkby, Elizabeth used to send me down to the Quarry Green shops over the road to get her paper. I think I was about six at the time. Anyway, I goes into

the shop and asks the lady behind the counter if she'd got a copy of the Liverpool Echo. I get quite a response, and given the fact that the shop was full of customers, I got very embarrassed.

'Well!' she hollers, 'what other fucking echo would there be?'

There's a mild chuckle from round the table. Then Doug reminds us of his presence as he starts to snore loudly and I can sense that Mick and Gary are up to something. Feeling quite giddy, I make out I'm off to the toilet and quietly leave for the taxi rank. I'm not one for goodbyes.