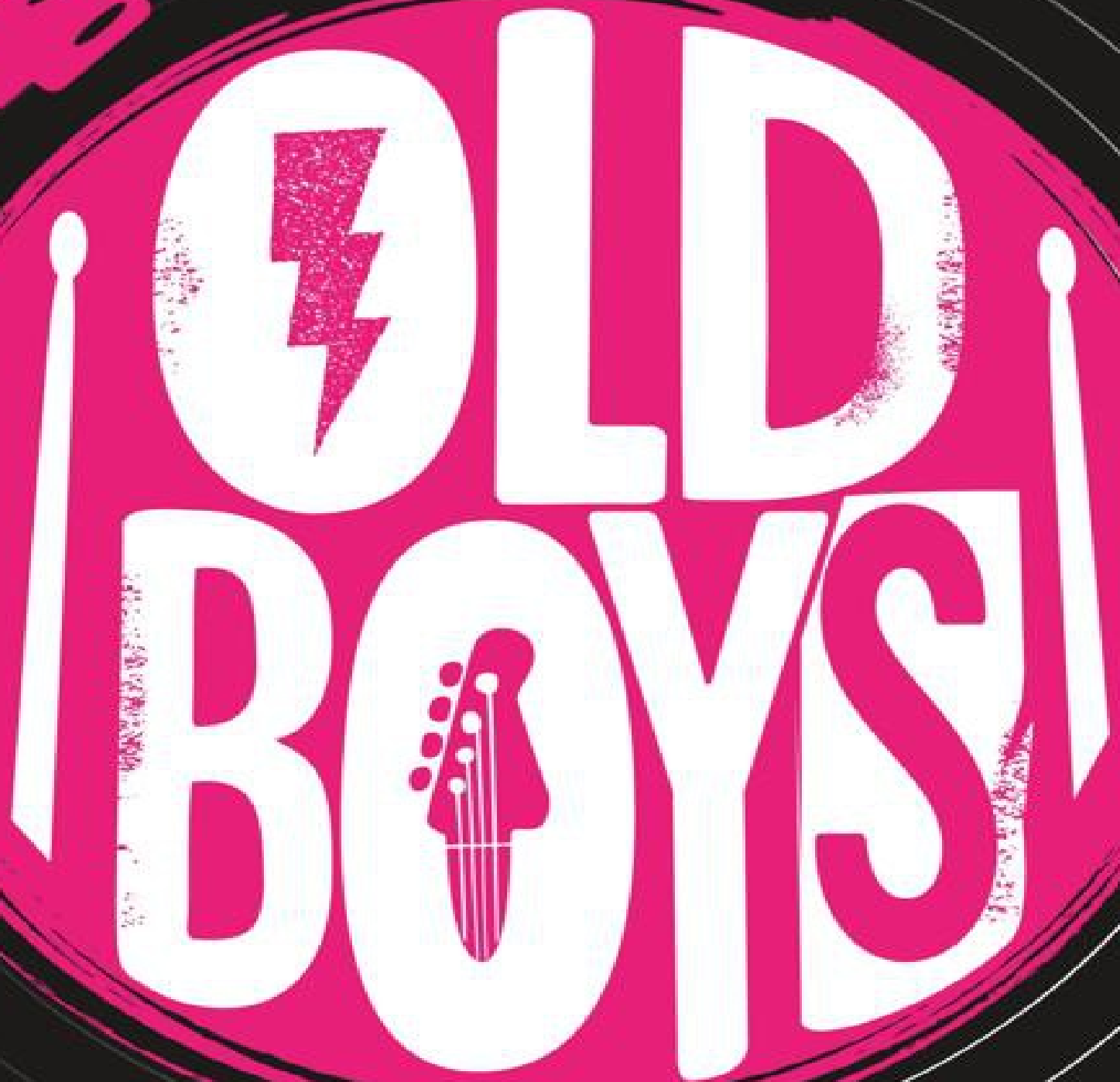


Bestselling author of **DUMPED, ACTUALLY**

NICK SPALDING



BOLD BOYS

The title "BOLD BOYS" is rendered in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. The word "BOLD" is on the top line and "BOYS" is on the bottom line. The letters are set against a vibrant red circular background that has a hand-painted, brushstroke-like texture. Several musical instrument icons are integrated into the design: a red lightning bolt is inside the letter 'O' of "BOLD"; a red guitar is inside the letter 'O' of "BOYS"; two white drumsticks are positioned vertically on either side of the text; and a red USB plug is located in the upper left corner of the red circle. The entire composition is set against a black background with faint, concentric white circles.

**OLD
BOYS**

The image features the text "OLD BOYS" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The word "OLD" is positioned above "BOYS". The letter "O" in "OLD" contains a white lightning bolt symbol. The letter "O" in "BOYS" contains a white silhouette of a guitar headstock. The text has a slightly distressed or textured appearance.

ALSO BY NICK SPALDING

Third Wheel

You Again?

Going Green

Logging Off

Dumped, Actually

Dry Hard

Checking Out

Mad Love

Bricking It

Fat Chance

Buzzing Easter Bunnies

Blue Christmas Balls

Love . . . Series

Love . . . From Both Sides

Love . . . And Sleepless Nights

Love . . . Under Different Skies

Love . . . Among the Stars

Life . . . Series

Life . . . On a High

Life . . . With No Breaks

Cornerstone Series

The Cornerstone

Wordsmith (The Cornerstone Book 2)

OLD BOYS

The title 'OLD BOYS' is rendered in a large, bold, black, distressed font. The letter 'O' in 'OLD' contains a white lightning bolt. The letter 'O' in 'BOYS' contains a white silhouette of a guitar. The text has a grainy, textured appearance.

NICK SPALDING

LAKE UNION
PUBLISHING

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For those about to rock, I salute you

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Fugue

Hmmm.

Chipotle.

Still not entirely sure how you're supposed to say that.

Intellectually, I know it's *chip-ot-lay*, but every fibre of my being wants to say *chip-oh-tel*. I don't know why.

Regardless of how it's pronounced, the real question is whether I should be eating it or not. On the one hand, it is very tasty . . . but on the other, it does nothing for my heartburn – and I read an article the other day which said that as you get older, spicy food may begin to have more of a detrimental effect on your digestive system.

I have a meeting with Heidi from marketing this afternoon, and what if the chipotle affects me so badly that I start farting? It could easily happen. And what would that do to my reputation around the office? Nothing good. Nothing good at all.

But chicken and chipotle does sound *very* tasty, doesn't it?

'Any time today, Will. I've still got the rest of the office to get around yet.'

I look up at Sasha the sandwich girl, and make an apologetic face. 'Sorry. I just can't decide between the ham salad sandwich and the chicken and chipotle wrap.'

'It's pronounced *chip-ot-lay*, Will,' Sasha informs me, her voiced laced with an increasing level of impatience.

I stare at both sandwiches for a few moments more, lost in an agony of indecision – my fingers drumming on the edge of the table as I try to make my mind up.

Sasha sighs and rolls her eyes.

Not wanting to annoy her further, I settle for the ham salad sandwich,

picking it up from her abundantly stacked tray with not a little regret.

‘Thanks, Sasha,’ I tell her, affecting a pleasant smile.

‘No worries,’ she replies and picks up the tray to take it to the other denizens of this enormous office space I call home between the hours of 8.30 a.m. and 5.30 p.m.

I look down at my ham salad sandwich, which has frankly lost a lot of its lustre now it’s parked on my desk, next to the pencil pot. I then look up at the clock to see that it’ll be a good two hours before I can enjoy its questionable merits.

I sigh, and pop it in my desk drawer, wincing a little as I do so. The lumbar support cushion I bought off Amazon last week is not doing as good a job of supporting my lower back as I’d hoped.

I have asked Pete from HR to source me a better office chair, but the chances of actually getting one within the next six months are slim to none. It took nearly that long just to get a flat-screen PC monitor, to give me a bit more room on my desk.

I’m adjusting the lumbar support cushion for what feels like the millionth time already when my phone rings. Before answering, I look around the office to see that no one is paying me any attention. This is largely because Sasha is tempting them all with the chicken and chipotle wrap I was too cowardly to pick, but also because my desk is at the rear of the room, in a corner. This generally suits me fine, and is probably one of the reasons I’ve remained in this job for so many years.

I answer the phone to speak to my wife. ‘Hiya. How did it go?’

‘Hi. It’s the dysplasia,’ Audrey tells me with a slightly heavy voice. ‘Bob the Vet says it’s got a bit worse than the last time we came in to see him.’

‘Oh. Damn it,’ I reply, heart in my mouth. ‘I was hoping it was something we could fix.’

‘Don’t worry too much. It’s a typical complaint for Frenchies like Banjo. Bob said we can keep treating it with the supplements. He’s going to up the dose. And we can also book Banjo in for some physio in the water tank, down at the surgery.’

‘There’s nothing else we can do?’ I ask, knowing the answer already – and dreading what the future is likely to hold if we can’t.

I *can’t* see him in more distress. I just *can’t*. And that’s what’s going to happen, isn’t it? No doubt about it now.

And he'll just get worse and worse, right up until the time he . . .

Audrey sighs. 'He's an old dog, Will. This stuff is bound to happen. All we can do is treat him as best we can, and keep him out of pain.'

I feel tears prick at my eyes, but try to blink them away. Audrey is right. Banjo is just old. There's nothing else wrong with him. Nothing more that can be done. It's just the way of things.

But it was so very, very *hard* to see him limping around the kitchen this morning, the pained expression on his face whenever he looked up at me.

'He's a lot livelier now,' Audrey says, as if reading my mind. 'Been playing with Sophie and that Staffy that came in last week, out in one of the training pens.'

'Oh. That's great,' I say, perking up a little bit. If Banjo is feeling sociable with the other dogs at the rescue centre, he can't be that bad.

For now.

'It is. The pain meds are working wonders. Honestly, Will, try not to worry about him too much. He's still a happy, active dog. He's just got a few problems that have come on with old age. The dysplasia being the worst of them.'

I shift in my uncomfortable office chair again, and feel a tweak of pain in my lower back.

He's not the only one with problems thanks to his age, I think to myself. I nearly say as much to Audrey, but bite the words back. She doesn't need to hear it. Not again.

'Are you going to keep him with you for the day, or take him home?' I ask her instead.

'I'll keep him here. It's better for him when he's had a morning like this, and he's always a great help with socialising the newcomers.'

Ain't that the truth. If there's a more sociable dog on this planet than Banjo Fairweather, I have yet to meet it.

'Okay. That sounds good. What do you fancy for tea tonight?'

Audrey remains silent for a moment, before eventually responding. 'I don't know, Will. It's ten thirty. I haven't really thought about it yet.'

I have. On the drive into work this morning, and when considering what to get for my lunch just now with Sasha. If I have a sandwich at lunchtime, I'd rather avoid too much more wheat for dinner.

'Okay. Well, we can chat about it later,' I tell Audrey, sensing it's not a line of questioning she particularly wants to pursue right now.

‘Yes. Okay. Well, have a good day at work, Will.’

‘Thanks. You too. Hope Banjo stays in a good mood for the rest of the day, and you have a good time too. Love you.’

‘Okay. Thanks. See you later.’

I go to put the phone down, but hear Audrey start to say something else.

‘You alright?’ I ask.

‘Yes . . . I . . . never mind,’ she hesitates. ‘See you tonight, Will. Bye.’

‘Okay . . . bye.’

The line goes dead, and I stare at the phone screen for a moment more. Audrey clearly had more to say, but I guess it can wait until this evening, when we’re face to face. Maybe she wanted to say more about Banjo?

Or maybe there’s something more than that? Something important? Something she doesn’t want to tell me on the phone?

Something bad?

I suppose I’ll just have to find out later.

I pop my phone in the desk drawer, next to what is already looking like a very limp ham salad sandwich, and return my attention to the plethora of emails that have come into my inbox overnight – especially the ones about marketing I have to sort out before Heidi and I talk later. Dealing with them should keep me busy until lunchtime, I’d imagine.

I look up as Sasha leaves the office, noticing that some other brave soul has taken the chicken and chipotle wrap. I hope they enjoy it. I’m not sure I would have done. Not *eventually*, anyway.

No. Limp as it is, the ham salad is the way to go. Much better in the long run. Much healthier. Much safer for me.

And that’s what matters.



Not only is it limp, but the ham salad sandwich is also fairly tasteless. So much so that as soon as it’s gone, I can barely remember eating it.

I don’t fart in the meeting with Heidi, of course. So I guess it was all worth it.

By the time five thirty rolls around, the sandwich has become an abstract and ghostly memory of something that feels like it happened to somebody else.

I bet the chipotle wrap wouldn’t have been like that. Farts or otherwise.

Never mind, though. It's just one sandwich in a line of many.

Perhaps I'll have something with chipotle in tomorrow. I don't have any meetings.

Yeah.

That's what I'll do.

I'll make sure to suggest to Audrey that we have something not too rich tonight, so that tomorrow I can happily have chipotle, without having to worry.

Maybe a baked potato with tuna will be nice this evening.

I'll offer to make it for us. Then I can slip some crunchy bits of the potato skin to Banjo when he sits under the table. He always enjoys that.

The pleasant prospect of feeding my aging French bulldog titbits stays with me as I climb into the car for the drive home. It's likely to be a long one this evening, as they still have the motorway down to two lanes. I could go the back route through the villages, but there was a crash there two days ago. The extra traffic has made it quite tricky to navigate the winding, twisty roads. Best to just stay on the main road, even with the hold-ups.

I can always listen to a podcast.

There's a new one from TheGamingGuru about restoring an old Super Nintendo Entertainment System that I'm pretty keen to listen to. His last one about bringing an original PlayStation One back from the dead was fascinating.

My phone isn't connecting to the Bluetooth in the car again, however, so instead of the radio going straight to the podcast, it chooses to land on the DAB digital radio.

The chorus of 'I Hold the World' fills my car, and I let out an audible cry of disgust.

That bloody song. That *awful* bloody song!

My hand flies to the radio and I bash the off button repeatedly, until the dreadful, turgid din ceases.

Christ. That's the last thing I need to listen to right now. That song. That *voice*.

For some people, that particular track is much loved and listened to repeatedly, but for me it just reminds me of the worst memories from my past.

I really do need to change the station away from something that plays golden oldies all the time – so I never get a nasty surprise like that again.

Hearing just a few seconds of that song puts me in a very bad mood for the rest of the journey home. So much so that I can't even be bothered to connect my phone up to the radio to listen to my podcast. Instead, I spend the forty-minute drive in sullen silence, occasionally flicking my eyes down to the radio with an accusatory stare.

Why would you spring that on me, radio? I was having a half-decent day, all things considered.

I am delighted to park on the driveway behind Audrey's car, and climb quickly out.

I'll have to come out here later to make sure the phone connects properly tomorrow morning, so nothing like that happens again. But that can wait until after I've had my baked potato and fed Banjo the scraps. I might be in a better mood by then.

As I open the front door, I call out Audrey's name. When there is no answer, I have a momentary panic that something has happened to her. She always answers when I call out as I walk in the door. *Always.*

Common sense then takes over, though – which it still does, from time to time – and I surmise that she must be out in the garden.

Sure enough, when I walk down the hallway and into the kitchen, I can see her sat at the patio table just outside, watching Banjo, with her head resting on one hand. Banjo is currently rolling around on the grass, in time-honoured fashion. He certainly looks perkier than he did this morning – which is a godsend.

'Hey, sweetheart,' I say to my wife as I step out on the patio to join her. She looks up at me and smiles. 'Hiya. Good day?'

My face darkens momentarily as I remember the brief two or three chords of 'I Hold the World' that I've just had to suffer through, but I force that negativity away, and return the smile. 'Yes. Not too bad, all things considered. The motorway is still down to two lanes, though.'

'Did you take the B road?'

I shake my head. 'No, no. Too risky, after what happened at the weekend. You know? With those two cars? The pictures in the news were horrible.'

'Ah,' Audrey acknowledges with a sigh, looking back at where Banjo is now lying still and staring up at the sky, having tired himself out after a good, hard wriggle.

I sit down next to her, also looking at our old but still fabulous French

bulldog.

We both continue to sit there in silence, doing this for a minute or two, which cannot be a good sign for the current state of our relationship. We used to talk animatedly with one another about our workday when we got home. Now, there's a lot more silence and dog staring than I'm comfortable with.

I'd better say something.

'Have you decided on what you wanted for tea?' I ask.

She flicks a glance up at me, without removing her head from her hand.

'No, Will. I haven't.'

'Oh. Okay.'

'I'm going inside,' she tells me, and stands up.

Without waiting for my response, Audrey takes herself off indoors, leaving me out here with the recumbent Banjo.

'I bet you know what you want for dinner, don't you?' I say to him – in a voice low enough to ensure my wife doesn't hear.

I should probably get up and go inside to speak to Audrey again. She's clearly not in the best of moods, and I really should find out why.

But I can't seem to get myself off this seat, for some reason.

Now that Banjo has decided to get up and go and investigate the compost heap at the back of the garden, I suppose I'd better stay out here to make sure he doesn't try to eat it.

Yes, indeed, that's the very sensible reason I'm not going inside to talk to my wife.

Absolutely.

A good ten minutes go by, while I avoid doing anything other than drum my fingers against the side of the patio table nervously and watch Banjo eat potato peelings.

Banjo will eat anything. Even though he's an old dog, I'm sure he wouldn't bat an eyelid at a chicken and chipotle wrap.

'Will,' Audrey says from the patio door, making me jump out of my skin. She's holding her phone in her hand and has an animated look on her face.

'What's up?' I ask, taking a few deep breaths to calm my heart rate. I don't like the uncomfortable feeling of my heartbeat in my chest at the best of times. That's why I take the beta-blockers.

'Let's go out.'

'What?'

‘Let’s go out tonight!’

‘Tonight?’

‘Yes!’

‘It’s Wednesday.’

‘So?’

‘People don’t go out on *Wednesdays*.’

‘Well, maybe *we* can!’

I blink a couple of times. I don’t want to go out. I’ve been out all day at work. I want to stay indoors and have a baked potato, and try not to think about how much tastier it would probably be with a bit of chipotle on it.

‘Where do you want to go?’ I ask my wife, still trying to come to terms with this strange turn of events.

‘Barbecue & Boogie!’

‘I’m sorry? What?’

‘Barbecue & Boogie, Will! It’s a new place that’s opened up in the city. I’ve just read about it on that website *Do It Or Don’t*.’ She waggles her phone at me. ‘For a fixed price, you get an all-you-can-eat barbecue buffet, and you also get lessons in the dance of the week!’

‘Dancing? After food? Are you *insane*?’

My bowels are having an anxiety attack just thinking of such a thing.

‘No, I’m not! It’s not insane!’ Audrey cries, coming out to me on the patio. ‘Come on, Will! It’ll be *fun*!’

‘Will it?’

‘Yes!’

‘Why?’

She looks exasperated. ‘Because . . . Because it’ll be better than just spending the evening eating a baked potato and watching the bloody TV!’

‘How did you know I wanted a baked potato?’

‘You *always* want a bloody baked potato, Will!’ Audrey thrusts her phone into her jeans pocket, and her hands fly to her hips. ‘But I want to go out for barbecue and some dance lessons. Tonight!’

‘What dance is it?’

‘No idea. They keep it a secret until you get there.’

Oh my God! She wants me to eat a full meal, and then *dance* . . . and we don’t even know what dance it’ll be?! What if it’s something that makes me fart a lot?

‘I don’t think I want to learn a secret dance, Audrey,’ I tell her.

‘Well, I *do!*’ Audrey leans down and takes both of my hands in hers. ‘Come on, sweetheart. Let’s go out and do something fun and spontaneous. Please? It’ll be good for us. Good for our marriage.’

My heart leaps in my chest. ‘What’s wrong with our marriage?’

‘Nothing! But this will be good for it anyway! Please!’

Audrey looks at me with an expression I’m pretty sure she must have learned from Banjo, when he sits under the dining room table, waiting for crispy potato skin.

Oh God. The last thing I want to do on a Wednesday night is *go out*. But Audrey seems very keen, and I really do hate to let her down.

I’ve been doing a bit too much of that recently, I have to admit. I’d better suck it up and go along with this crazy scheme of hers, as it’s obviously important to her.

If I just eat a little barbecue, and take things easy, I should be fine.

‘Okay, sweetheart. Let’s go out,’ I say to her, earning a cry of delight and a hug.

Banjo, realising that he’s missing out on a public display of affection, comes bounding over from the compost heap to jump around at our feet. It’s good to see him looking so animated and happy.

The same is true for Audrey.

Sigh.

Suck it up, Fairweather.

Time to go dancing . . .



The barbecue is acceptable.

I only have a few bits of beef and a heap of salad, though, so I can’t tell you whether any of the rest of it is any good or not. It certainly smells it. But I know what my forty-five-year-old bowels are like when they get too much food dumped on them before any kind of exercise.

Besides, I’ve read a fair bit about some of the ingredients that go into your average barbecue sauce, and the corrosive effect they can have on your stomach lining. Not to mention the fact that sauces like that have been linked to carcinogens and cancer. And if that’s the case, who knows what other kinds of horrors lurk in the ingredients?

This is why I’m also steering well clear of the small bowl of chipotle

that Audrey keeps dipping her chips in. I feel it's for the best.

'Will?' Audrey says, with a chip halfway to her mouth. 'Why are you looking at that bowl of chipotle like it's about to explode?'

I stare at her. 'No reason,' I reply, knowing exactly what the reason is, but scared of what her reaction would be, if I told her.

My anxiety levels start to notch up even more when there's a commotion over on the large dance floor, which lies just beyond the collection of dining tables all of tonight's participants are sat at.

The tables are only half full, rather indicating that Barbecue & Boogie hasn't quite broken through into the mainstream as yet.

Several young and enthusiastic people have appeared on the dance floor. They are all wearing a variety of loose-fitting, gaudy sportswear, and one of them is carrying a ghetto blaster. I start to draw some conclusions from this. Unhealthy ones.

One of the young people, a handsome guy wearing more Adidas than is probably good for him, steps forward to address us all.

'Hello, everyone, and welcome to Barbecue & Boogie! We are The Urban Crew, and tonight we are going to be teaching you the basics of body popping!'

Another one of the sports-clad youngsters fires up the ghetto blaster, and we immediately hear the dulcet sounds of someone beating a drum machine to death, while someone else strangles a gerbil.

This is what I believe is known as 'dubstep'.

All of the young people, who look like a branch of Sports Direct has thrown up all over them, start to gyrate and twitch in the centre of the dance floor, as if someone has fed them half a tonne of caffeine pills.

I look on aghast.

Audrey laughs and claps her hands.

Everyone else in Barbecue & Boogie does the same.

I am obviously the odd one out, which means I am trapped in a room with a bunch of lunatics. One of whom is my wife.

'That looks like fun!' she says, pointing over at one girl in active wear, who is jiggling about like she's just stepped on the third rail.

This must be a brand-new definition of the word 'fun' that I was previously unaware of.

Don't get me wrong, when I was a kid, I remember attempting a bit of body popping and break dancing at the school disco, when it was at the latter

end of its heyday. I could do the robot quite well, after a fashion.

Even had a go at a back spin once, which didn't result in me getting to kiss Charlotte Bommerly, the object of my affections at the time – but also didn't result in any injury to my person. Regardless of how good I was at it or not, I had a fabulous time, which was the main thing.

I'm now forty-five, and it hurts when I sit cross-legged for more than three minutes.

This will not be an experience I will speak of fondly in the years that remain of my life.

But I'd better keep my mouth shut, and go along with things. Audrey clearly wants this, and I'm in no mood to annoy her. I keep going back to that line she fed me about this being 'good for our marriage', and how disturbing it sounded.

I wait with trepidation, while The Urban Crew set up several mats across the dance floor, and as the wait staff come around to take away our empty plates. I'm still not sure the whole concept of eating dinner and then learning a dance is a good one, but they seem to be quite efficient at setting the whole thing up, which I guess I have to take as a good sign.

Another five minutes goes by, before the Adidas kid (whose name is Troy) tells us all to congregate in front of him, and the Sports Direct evening shift, for our first lesson.

Looking around, I can see that most of the crowd who are about to learn body popping are a wee bit younger than myself. In fact, I definitely think I'm the oldest one here. Most of them look to be around Audrey's age, and some even younger, probably in their twenties.

They should go get me a t-shirt with 'Gramps' written on it, and have me give everyone else advice about the best ways to invest their pocket money.

We are split into three groups of eight people, and the six members of The Urban Crew also split so that two of them join each group.

We get the active-wear girl – and a tall ginger, tattooed lad wearing the baggiest tracksuit I've ever witnessed, and a baseball cap perched so high on his shock of thick, curly ginger hair that it must in some way be breaking the laws of physics. I need to get Brian Cox down here to show him it. It'll destroy his wistful perception of the universe in mere moments.

The girl is Heaven, the ginger lad is Roycie.

Heaven tells us that we are first going to be learning how to do

something called a ‘chest pop’. Roycie then demonstrates this with great aplomb.

He appears to be having a cardiac arrest.

When Heaven doesn’t scream for an ambulance, it seems that Roycie has in fact performed a chest pop – which seems to be the act of twitching your chest muscles inwards, as if someone has just poked you with a stun baton.

Roycie then plays a simple, repetitive beat noise on the ghetto blaster, and bids us follow his direction. The beat rather reminds me of the sound of a drum kit, which unfortunately darkens my mood. It’s probably my least favourite sound in the world.

What you have in front of you, then, is two dozen or so informally dressed diners, mimicking severe cardiac distress, having just consumed their own body weight in barbecued meat.

Audrey’s attempts are far more convincing than mine. She looks like she’s at least trying to do a dance move.

I look like someone’s doing something to me that’s against the Geneva Convention.

‘Try a bit harder, Will,’ she suggests. ‘You can dance when you want to. You were good at the flamenco when we were in Spain, remember?’

I roll my eyes. ‘This isn’t like the flamenco, Auds!’ I protest.

‘It’s just dancing. You used to like it,’ she replies, a little dismayed at my attitude.

‘Yes, well. That was . . . a long time ago.’

Audrey very deliberately doesn’t respond again, and instead turns away from me to keep practising the move on her own. This is very disconcerting.

A few more minutes go by, while we all . . . er . . . *perfect* the chest pop; we all then move on to the ‘arm lock’, which is a similar kind of move, only tensing our arm muscles instead of the ones in our chest.

If anybody has ever used a TENS machine, they’ll have a fair idea of what this looks like. I feel less like I’m learning a dance, and more like I’m being prepared for the physiotherapy I’m inevitably going to need after this evening has come to an end.

I cannot express how fundamentally awkward I feel. It’s one thing to body pop your way around a school gymnasium to impress Charlotte Bommerly. It’s quite another to try it when you’re full of meat, and seriously starting to wonder on an almost daily basis how much state pension you’re

likely to get.

But . . . I soldier on, trying to keep the look of frustration off my face as best as possible. This might be something Audrey has wanted to do to inject a bit of fun into our evenings, but it's my idea of hell. And she should know that. Why put me through it?

She's right about the dancing in the past, though. You did used to enjoy it. That's the reason you both went to Spain that year, isn't it? You did have a lot of fun.

Yes, well. Things have *happened* since then, haven't they?

Including my advancing age.

We spend a bit longer on the arm lock, before Heaven congratulates us all for making it through without straining anything – other than our credulity. Everyone around me is giggling and laughing, which I try to join in with – but only really manage a half-hearted smile. I think that last arm lock may have flared up the pain in my left shoulder that I keep getting from spending too much time on my iPad.

'How are you doing?' Audrey asks me. 'Remind you of your youth?'

'Yes!' I reply with absolute honesty. It reminds me how far in the rear-view mirror of my life it is. 'You're getting the hang of it,' I add, well aware that there's more than a small degree of jealousy in my voice when I do. Those years Audrey has on me really help when it comes to physical activities, I've noticed.

'I don't think so,' she counters. 'You did quite well with the arm thing. Probably one of the best out of the bunch.'

She's just being nice. I know what a berk I looked, trying to spasm my arms about. If everyone else looked idiotic attempting it, then I'm sure I looked twice as bad.

'You can follow the beat really well. Like you did in Spain,' Audrey adds. 'Must be all that time playing the drums when you were a kid. Your timing is great.'

'Hmph,' I snort in response. That might well be the case, but I don't need reminding of all the years I wasted on those silly bloody things.

Audrey catches the look of disgust on my face, which I instantly try to force into one of good-natured gratitude. It's not her fault I hate the drums these days.

It's very much somebody else's . . .

Moving swiftly on, then.

The horror of this evening is not quite over, unfortunately, as now Heaven wants us to try something called ‘waving’.

This is not waving *goodbye*, sadly.

Instead, it’s another body-popping move, which is meant to make your limbs and your body simulate the effect of rolling like a wave.

Again, Roycie demonstrates this move, by first waving his arms about like one of those brightly coloured inflatable dancing men you get outside car dealerships, and then standing still, while he rolls a wave right through his entire body, from toes to tips.

There’s one somewhat disconcerting moment when his crotch sails towards me on the high tide, but it’s back to its starting position in the merest of moments, saving me from having to find something to stave it off with.

Needless to say, Roycie’s motions are fluid and graceful, born of years of practice.

Let’s see how I stack up against them, shall we?

The first part – the arm wave – is quite easy to do a horrifyingly bad version of. You just have to lift your left wrist then lower your left elbow, shrug both shoulders, then lower your right elbow, then raise your right wrist.

You see . . . *waving*, right? That’s the idea of the thing, when you do it right.

Sadly, I just look like I’m having literally the worst massage in human history.

Picture, if you will, a five-hundred-pound gorilla stood right behind me, clumsily mashing its powerful digits into my shoulders, and you’ll be halfway there. Imagine the gorilla’s two mates on either side of me, cranking my arms up and down, like they’re trying to start a car from the early 1900s, and the vision of my ineptitude will be complete.

It’s when we move on to the ‘full-body wave’ that things become exponentially worse, though. This is easily the hardest move of the evening, and I can see why Roycie and Heaven decided to leave it until last.

It’s almost impossible to stand with your feet together and thrust your hips back and forth in a waving motion without falling over. And then you’re supposed to carry that motion on through your back, chest and shoulders, climaxing with your head going forward and then back in a fluid motion.

The strain all of this puts on my already protesting musculature is extreme. This dance move may be called the ‘wave’, but I feel like I’m a storm-tossed ship – caught in a tempest that’s about to snap rigging off

somewhere important.

My lower back is screaming at me by the time I've tried the full-body wave for the fifth time. My neck isn't happy with all this jerking about, either.

Why couldn't we have learned a nice salsa dance?

Or better yet, why couldn't we have just sat at home watching other people do a nice salsa dance on a *Strictly Come Dancing* repeat, while eating a baked potato?

Mercifully, Heaven brings an end to proceedings by clapping her hands enthusiastically, and once again congratulating us all on our efforts.

Even Audrey is looking a little bit tired after all that popping, it has to be said. Waving is a fairly strenuous thing to attempt, and while she's a fair bit younger than me, Audrey doesn't do that much more exercise than I engage in. We like to walk. That's probably about it.

It seems most of the crowd are much the same, as everyone looks like they could do with a sit-down – and possibly a Gaviscon or two, given that all this exercise has come on top of a meat buffet.

I'm about to turn, and gratefully make my way over to a chair, when Heaven tells us that we're now going to put everything we've learned this evening together, and perform a dance of our own. For everybody else here gathered.

Oh my fucking Christ.

Popping and waving while partially hidden among others is one thing, but doing it while those others look upon your efforts is *quite* another.

Why can't we just go and sit down and watch Roycie flopping about the place some more? He looks like he's having a good time . . . let him bloody do it!

But no. Sadly not.

It's going to be *us* that has to put on a show for everyone else, taking it in turns to embarrass ourselves for their entertainment.

'You can either do a turn on your own,' Heaven explains, 'or find a partner for a joint dance!'

Audrey immediately loops her arm in mine, and jumps up and down on the spot a bit in excitement, causing some minor chafing to my elbow.

'We'll let you decide how to incorporate the four moves we've learned this evening into a two-minute routine,' Heaven further elucidates. 'A prize will go to the performer who impresses the most!'

Ah, so I only have to prostrate myself at the feet of the gods of humiliation for two minutes, then – and I'll have my wife alongside me while I do it. That makes things a little more bearable.

All of us Barbecue & Boogie customers then take ourselves off for quarter of an hour's practice, allowing The Urban Crew to go off and smoke weed somewhere.

I initially propose to Audrey that we just keep things simple, stand next to one other, and do each of the four moves separately . . . but she has other ideas.

Bigger ideas.

More *complicated* ideas.

'I want to win the prize, Will!' she tells me, with hectic determination.

'And I want to survive this thing intact,' I argue. 'Can't we just get through it together?'

'No! Come on, Will! Let's push things a bit!'

My eyebrows lower. 'I don't want to *push things*, Audrey. We've had a . . . nice evening, haven't we?'

'Yes! And I'd like to end on a high!' She gives me a pleading look. The one she knows I have no chance of resisting, no matter how hard I try. 'Just like we did in Spain, when you ducked me by the table, and picked up that rose in your teeth. Remember?'

'Yes, I remember, Auds. Okay, then,' I sigh. 'What is it you want to do?'

Audrey then describes her plans for our brief dance routine – and what she wants to do is *kill me*, apparently.

We will begin standing back to back, performing arm locks and chest locks, before moving to stand side by side and holding hands, so we can perform a joint arm wave.

The denouement of the Will & Audrey show will be me doing a full-body wave, before holding my arms out in a circle in front of me, which Audrey will then slide herself into, and perform a full-body wave as well.

Got that?

I'm not sure I have.

But it's a simple enough routine, which I *should* be able to remember easily. We just have to get it done . . . and then we can finally go home.

But not before we sit through several other amateur body-popping routines first.

Some are half decent.

Some are . . . most definitely not.

There's a young couple who could almost be part of The Urban Crew, if they put a few weeks' work in, for instance. They go at it like hammer and tongs, and are generally impressive throughout, damn them.

And then there's a couple of blokes who have probably eaten at one too many barbecue buffets in their time, and shouldn't even be *attempting* something like a full-body wave. Mainly because the inertia created around their ample mid-sections by it might be enough to rip a hole in the space-time continuum.

We've already blown Brian Cox's mind this evening with Roycie's impossible hat. Let's not further destroy his sanity by opening wormholes to other plains of existence via the medium of rapidly oscillating beer gut.

Everybody gets a massive and enthusiastic round of applause from The Urban Crew, though, no matter how good or bad they are at body popping. This probably proves that whatever weed they are smoking is of very high quality.

So, eventually, it comes around to our turn.

Audrey springs forward like a gazelle. I *slope* forward like a much older gazelle, who knows there's a chance a lion is hiding somewhere in the tall grasses.

We take up our position in the centre of the ring of sweaty people, and wait for Roycie to start the beat box music going once more.

He presses the play button, and Audrey immediately comes to stand back to back with me.

We launch into the first of our planned dance moves – and it doesn't go all that badly. Our arm and chest locks are more or less in time to the music, and people are cheering us on, so we can't be that awful.

The joint arm wave is *less* successful, it has to be said. It looks more like we're re-creating a washing line in a hurricane than the waves of the ocean. But again, there's cheering coming our way, so the washing line must look relatively convincing, in its own very special way.

Audrey then leaps aside, to allow me to perform my full-body wave, and I'm afraid to say in the heat of the moment, I put a little too much effort into it – and rather inevitably jar my lower back.

The pain immediately hits, and I know I'll be driving past an all-night chemist on the way home. I'll also be sleeping on my back, driving to work

tomorrow in a sweat, and visiting my chiropractor a good three weeks ahead of time. I just hope he can help me.

But it's not *falling to the floor* painful, which is a saving grace. That's only ever happened to me once – when I was lifting Audrey's extremely heavy suitcase, during a stressful trip home from a holiday in Jamaica.

Still, it's bad enough to make me wince as I complete my deeply awkward and stilted full-body wave, and hold my arms out in a circle in front of me, so Audrey can finish our routine with a flourish.

The pain deepens in my lower back, as I have to lean forward to allow her to slip herself into my personal space.

This manoeuvre leads to a loud cheer from the crowd, indicating that Audrey was on to something with her insistence that we put a bit more effort in than I'd intended.

Maybe we will win the prize tonight – whatever it may be. Hopefully some bath salts.

My wife then proceeds to enact the best, biggest and most pumping full-body wave she can possibly muster. Even from right behind her I can tell it is a thing of beauty, grace and élan. As much of those things you can realistically generate while body popping anyway . . .

The wave begins at her knees, rippling up through her waist and chest, and culminating at her shoulders and her neck with a graceful forward arc that Michelangelo would have had to go and have a lie down over.

It's a masterpiece of an amateur full-body wave, and I'm very proud of her, despite the pain in my back, and the intense feelings of personal embarrassment.

If this evening concludes with Audrey taking the prize for best dance, and a smile on her face, then the discomfort on my part would have been worth it.

This relatively positive frame of mind I now find myself in lasts right through to nearly the completion of Audrey's excellent full-body wave.

Unfortunately, it's such a brilliant execution of the manoeuvre that it doesn't end with the graceful forward motion of her head, but rather with it snapping back again as the wave moves through her entire body. The momentum she's gathered is such that her head snaps back so fast and hard that it connects with something that sadly finds itself very much in the way of a successful body-pop completion: my nose.

'Aaaargh!' I screech, hands immediately flying to the injured area.

I think I heard a crunch.

Did I hear a crunch?

It certainly felt like I heard a crunch.

Aaaargh!

‘Bloody hell!’ I exclaim, stumbling backwards.

Audrey turns in a panic and holds up both her hands. ‘Oh God! Will! Are you okay?’

Roycie kills the music, leaving the plaintive wailing coming from yours truly as the only remaining soundtrack of the evening. I grasp my poor, assaulted face nozzle and moan.

Tears stream from my eyes as I stumble out of the circle of amateur body poppers and barbecue aficionados. Audrey follows me, hands on my back and arm as she tries to console me.

‘Will! Stop! Let me have a look at it!’ she cries.

I do as I’m told, and pull my hands away.

The look on my wife’s face does not inspire confidence.

It’s broken! My bloody nose is broken, and it might never work the same again! What if I can’t smell anything anymore? What if barbecue food I didn’t eat much of is the last thing I get to smell in my bloody *life*?!

Looking into Audrey’s distraught eyes, I should feel some kind of comfort at how much she obviously cares for my welfare. And if I were a better person – one who hadn’t been forced to come and stuff himself with meat, before pretending to have an epileptic fit – I might have felt that way.

Instead, I am *incensed*.

Unfairly, dramatically and horribly incensed.

Why the bloody hell did I let her persuade me to come here?

What in God’s name is wrong with her?

We could have had a nice evening together in front of the television, with Banjo on our laps. Why did she have to insist we did this idiotic thing? For the sake of our marriage? What the hell does that even *mean*?

‘I want to leave,’ I tell her with a hiss. ‘I need to get home and put some ice on this.’

Without waiting for her to respond, I march off towards the exit of the restaurant, leaving Audrey to settle up the bill for tonight’s ‘entertainment’.

Then I have to wait beside the car in the cold drizzle, because she’s the one with the car keys. This just sours my already dark mood even more.

By the time she eventually comes over to me, I’m in possibly the worst

temper I've ever been in.

'Are you okay?' Audrey asks as she fishes the car keys out of her bag.

'Do I look okay?' I reply, with more than a little venom. 'Why did you have to throw your bloody head back like that?'

'I was just trying to finish our dance properly!' she says, her lip quivering. 'I just really wanted to win, Will.' She bows her head.

I watch her do this, and take a very long, deep breath.

I need to calm down a bit here – before I go too far, and say something I'll really regret.

'Well, *okay*. But couldn't you have done it a little less . . . energetically?' I ask her, gently touching my ruined appendage.

The look of misery on her face at my distress is something I should take no pleasure in. This is the woman I love. But I *do* take pleasure in it, damn me. Because none of this *needed* to happen.

'Let's just go home,' I snap, pointing a finger at the car. 'This whole thing was a bloody horrible idea, Auds.'

'No, it *wasn't!*' Audrey snaps back at me, and I'm dismayed to see that there are now tears in her eyes. 'It wasn't a bad idea! I'm sorry I hit you in the nose, but I just wanted to . . . to have some fun!'

'You call this fun?' I bark, pointing at my mashed conk.

'Yes! I mean . . . no! Not that! But coming out tonight . . . I just wanted to do something fun and exciting on a weekday evening for once.'

'Why?' I snap – getting right to the heart of my anger and frustration. 'Why on earth did we have to come out *tonight*? And why the hell did you say it would be good for our bloody *marriage*? What was that supposed to mean?'

Audrey glares at me. 'You really want to know what that means?'

'Yes!'

She grits her teeth and thumps the roof of the car. 'Because we don't do *anything* anymore, Will! We sit around like a couple of fucking pensioners! You never want to go out. You never want to do anything out of the ordinary! You act like an old man!'

'I *am* an old man!'

Audrey screams in frustration and shakes her head. 'No, you're bloody not! You're in your *forties*, Will, not your sodding *eighties!*'

'Yes! I know! And I like to do stuff that's appropriate for my age! Which does not include coming out on a cold weekday night, to a bloody

silly restaurant where a bunch of kids dressed like the Teletubbies nearly put me in *traction* with some idiotic dancing!

‘Oh God almighty! They did not nearly put you in traction! Why do you always have to think up the worst bloody scenario possible?!’

‘I don’t do that!’

‘Yes, you *do*, Will! You *always* do! And I can’t take it anymore! The dancing was perfectly safe! It was just a little bit of *fun*!’

‘Not for me!’ I roar, sending a bolt of pain up through my nose. I draw in a couple of deep breaths, trying to calm myself down a bit. ‘What the hell is going on with you, Audrey?’ I ask my wife, once the throbbing has lessened to a degree.

‘What do you mean?’

‘You’ve been in a foul mood with me for weeks . . . hell, months.’

She looks incredulous. ‘*I’ve* been in a foul mood?’

‘Yes!’

‘Will, you’ve been walking around like a rain cloud for as long as I can bloody remember. You’ve been acting like a miserable old man, ever since —’

Audrey bites down her next few words and looks away from me.

‘Ever since *what*?’ I bark.

My wife now looks more desperate than anything else. ‘Ever since your mum died, Will.’

Oh, come the fuck on! She’s using *that*?

‘Oh . . . oh . . . I’m so *sorry*, Audrey! So sorry that my mother dying has made me a miserable bastard, and it’s inconveniencing you so much!’

‘I don’t mean it like that!’

‘Then what do you mean?!’

‘It *changed* you, Will,’ Audrey sobs. ‘Almost as soon as she was gone, you got obsessed with how old you’re getting, with how many medical problems you have, and you started catastrophising everything . . . And I get it, I really do. I understand. But I’m so *tired*, Will. I just want to have a little fun, like we used to . . . have a little more happiness in my life again . . . and you keep dragging me down.’

‘She was my *mother*! How do you expect me to act when someone that was apparently that healthy just suddenly ups and fucking dies on you?’

‘I know. I know . . . It was brutal. Horrible. And I loved her too, remember? Very much. But it was *four years ago*, Will,’ Audrey says, her

voice cracking a little. ‘Four years. You’ve been going downhill like this for so long now. It just feels like . . . feels like you’ve given up on life. And your mum would never have wanted you to do that.’ She looks at me with a mixture of very clear love, but even clearer resentment. It’s a combination that’s almost impossible to cope with. ‘I don’t want to do that, Will. I haven’t given up on *my* life.’

‘But . . . But . . .’ I splutter, trying to think of the right thing to say.

Audrey is, no matter how much I hate to admit it, bang on the money.

Mum’s death hit me hard – as it would anyone. I loved her dearly, and she pretty much single-handedly brought me up after he . . . disappeared.

But most people by now would have achieved some sort of peace, wouldn’t they? It has been four years.

But for me, the more time that goes by, the more I become worried about my own health, about my own future. How could I not, given the circumstances of Mum’s death? It shook me to my core, and changed the way I look at the world on a fundamental level that I haven’t been able to cope with at all.

‘I don’t . . . I don’t think I’ve given up on life, Audrey,’ I tell her, in a rather half-hearted tone. ‘It’s just that, I *am* getting older, and things aren’t as easy as they once were. And I just think that doing stuff like this’ – I indicate towards the restaurant and then back at my nose – ‘isn’t the best way for us to live. Not these days. I just want things to be . . . *safe*, you know? For the both of us.’ It’s my turn to look at her with a pleading expression on my face. ‘Can’t we just take things easy, and see how it goes?’

Audrey can’t look me in the eye when she responds. ‘I don’t know, Will. I’ve been struggling with this for a long time now. And I’m sorry we came to something you didn’t want to do tonight, and I really am sorry about your nose, and I really, really do love you, but . . .’

‘But what?’

She shakes her head sharply. ‘Let’s not get into anything else tonight, please. We’re standing in a wet car park, your nose needs some ice on it, and I bet Banjo needs to be let out for his evening pee. Let’s go home, yeah?’

Audrey unlocks the car and quickly climbs into the driver’s seat, leaving me standing there for an instant, trying to take in everything that’s just happened.

I’m starting to feel like the potentially broken nose is the least of my worries.

I understand how Audrey feels, I really do. It can't have been easy for her over the past few years, since I lost Mum.

But what can I do about it?

I *am* older than Audrey is. I *am* at a point in my life where I don't feel like I want to do stuff like this anymore. I *do* have to be more careful at my age. The deadening pain in my lower back that I can feel *right now* proves that. Can't she see I'm just trying to live a life that's appropriate to my age?

Can't she see that none of this is anything I *want*? That I know I'm probably not . . . not *enough* for her anymore, but that there's not a damn thing I can do about it?

With some reluctance, I open the passenger door and sit myself down in the car, trying my hardest not to wince as I do so.

'You okay?' Audrey asks, seeing my obvious discomfort. 'Is it your nose?'

I shake my head. 'No, my back. Hurt it doing the wave thing.'

Audrey gives me a flat look, but doesn't choose to respond. Probably for the best.

I close the door and my wife drives us out of the car park, and away from Barbecue & Boogie. As we drive back past the entrance, a few of the other people who attended the event stream out, laughing and joking as they do so. They've all had a good time tonight, that much is evident.

And maybe, once upon a time, I would have had a good time at something like that as well. Like the flamenco dancing in Spain six years ago.

But I'm getting on for *fifty*, for crying out loud. What does my wife really expect of me?

Certainly more than I do.

These days, anyway.

I'm an old dog, just like Banjo.

And just like Banjo, I'm happy doing what I like – and what I know I can get away with.

I hope Audrey can accept that.

Because I really don't know what's going to happen if she can't.

Overture

Three days pass before I am forced into a conversation I most definitely do not want to have. It's not one Audrey wants, either, judging from the look on her face as she sits down at the patio table, across from me.

It's a fine, warm, sunny day. The exact polar opposite of what it should be, considering the discussion I'm about to have with my wife.

Banjo's enjoying it, though.

Nothing pleases my aging dog more than to loll around in the sun, without a care in the world. One of the first things he ever did when I got him from the RSCPA was flop himself down in more or less the exact same spot he occupies now, just beside the lavender plants. These caused him – and still do – to sneeze wildly, but he just won't move to a more acceptable spot. He is an idiot.

I loved him from the moment I saw him.

I think I loved Audrey Tomasi from the moment I saw her too as she wrote down my details after I'd told her I was interested in taking on a rescue dog. The way her brow furrowed a little as she concentrated on getting my postcode down right. The way she kept absent-mindedly tucking long strands of her glorious brown hair behind her ear as she wrote. The warm, excited smile she gave me when I said how keen I was to adopt Banjo.

Two loveable, gorgeous creatures stole my heart that day, eight years ago.

One of them is still happy to have me around (especially when I trim back the lavender).

I'm not so sure about the other one anymore.

'We need to talk,' my wife says, fiddling nervously with a small stick that made its way onto the patio table from the nearby tree during the wind we had last night.

'I guess we do,' I agree. 'After the other night.'

It's something of a surprise it's taken one of us this long to get round to bringing it up again.

We fell into an uncomfortable silence in the car on the way home, and it feels like we've been trying to avoid one another ever since. This wasn't all that hard yesterday, or the day before, because we've been busy with work. But both of us are off on this glorious sunny Saturday afternoon, so there's nothing to distract us from tackling the issue that raised its ugly head at Barbecue & Boogie.

Damn it.

'Yes . . . after the other night,' Audrey repeats and then sighs, continuing to fiddle with the twig in her hands. 'I've just . . . I've just got to a place where I can't carry on like this anymore,' she says quickly, getting it out into the world, with as little pain as possible.

'Carrying on like what?' I ask, although I know damn well what she's talking about. I just want to hear it out loud.

'With you being . . . the way you are, Will,' she says in a firm tone, knowing full well that I'm challenging her to lay it all out for me. 'I love you deeply, but I just don't want to carry on like this.'

'And what way am I, Audrey?'

'Sad, Will. And . . . and *defeated*.' The twig dances around in her fingers at a faster pace. 'You used to be a lot more relaxed. And a lot more carefree.' She holds up a hand. 'And I know what you're going to say . . . that your mum's death happened. And I get that. I miss her a lot too. I know what kind of woman she was. I don't think I'd have been able to get the centre to the place it's at without her help. She was such a strong, capable person, and it was horrible what happened to her . . . But that's not the whole reason for the way you've become.'

'Isn't it?'

'No! Being sad about your mum dying is absolutely understandable. I know how that feels. I lost my dad when I was seventeen, remember?'

'Yes, of course I do,' I reply, my tone softening considerably.

'Well, that kind of grief I can understand. But there's more going on with you, sweetheart. You're just sad all of the time, about *everything*. And you seem *scared* of the world. That's not what grief should be like. Something else is going on with you.' She looks me directly in the eyes. 'Can you tell me what that is? Is it . . . *me*?'

I shake my head rapidly. 'No! Absolutely not! I love you, Auds. You

know that.'

'Then what is it?'

'I . . . I . . . I don't bloody know,' I eventually stammer, frustrated by my own inability to vocalise what's going on in my head. 'I guess . . . maybe the way Mum went . . .' Oh God, this is so painful. 'How fast it was . . . how out of the blue . . .' I can't talk about this. The pain, the hurt. It's all there just below the surface, pushing to force its way out of me, if I'm not very careful.

All I do know is that I'm constantly gripped by a fear that things are going to go *bad*. Which they will, of course. Nobody gets to live their lives without things eventually going bad, in one way or another. It's inevitable.

And to stop things going bad more quickly, I have to be *careful*. It's as simple as that.

I know that this attitude is down to what happened to Mum. I never used to be like it before she died. I was a lot more relaxed, more spontaneous, and more carefree.

. . . and I *miss* that. I really do. Who wouldn't? I *loved* being that person.

But four years ago, watching what happened to Mum changed me irrevocably.

The *speed* of it. The terrifying descent she suffered.

I saw a lively, engaged woman, in the prime of her senior life, slide downhill so fast it felt like something out of a bad horror movie.

Oh God, please don't make me relive it again.

Now, all I do is worry.

Worry about my health, about Banjo's.

And if Audrey ever displayed any signs of health issues, I'd worry about her too. How could I not? She's still young enough to not be concerned about the same things as me. But it's *coming* for her, isn't it? Down the tracks, one day.

The age monster . . . and all the problems it brings.

That age monster is very definitely on *my* back these days, because I am that much older than Audrey . . . and with it comes a fair degree of doubt about what you can still get away with.

I don't really think I can get away with that much, these days.

I say as much to Audrey, whose brow furrows deeply when I'm done.

'That's no way to live, Will,' she says in a defeated tone.

'Isn't it? Why not? What's wrong with being careful? Keeping life

simple? That's how you live longer.'

'No, it isn't, Will. That's how you *exist* longer. Living is something completely different. And that's not something you've wanted to do for years.' She shifts in her seat. 'Do you remember the list, Will?'

I nod. 'Of course I do.'

The list was a series of things we wanted to do as a couple. It was Audrey's idea, but I was keen to go along with it, at the time. We spent weeks putting it together.

The holiday in Jamaica was on the list, as was flamenco dancing in Spain. There was a lot more stuff as well – like hot air ballooning across the Lake District, go-kart racing at Silverstone, learning how to cook Thai food, and swimming with whale sharks in Australia.

We never got past the first two because . . . what happened with Mum happened.

The hot air ballooning was the closest thing we got to after her death, but we had to go to A&E instead, because I was having trouble catching my breath in the car on the way up to the Lake District aerodrome where the balloons flew from.

'Well . . . that's *living*, Will,' Audrey insists. 'The stuff on that list. Going away. Seeing new places around the world. Doing exciting, adventurous things . . .'

'Yeah, and that sounds *lovely*, Audrey, but unfortunately, in *my* world I'm rapidly approaching middle age, and I don't think I want to take those kinds of risks. It's not like it was a few years ago. I'm just not that person anymore. I just want to . . . want to live a life that I'm comfortable with.'

Audrey moans in frustration. 'You're not *comfortable*, Will! You're tense all the time! It's no wonder you have back problems.'

'Oh God. I have back problems because of my *age*!'

Jesus Christ, is it so hard for her to see that? To understand it? Is this all just about the fact she doesn't understand how much older I am than her?

'You're not *that old*, Will!' Audrey cries, and the twig she's been fiddling with snaps in two.

'Yes, I am!' I argue, because I *know it* to be true.

I know it every morning when I wake up and feel the ache. I know it every evening when I feel myself falling asleep in front of the TV. I know it every time I make love to Audrey, and it gets a little harder to stay hard. I know it whenever I have a bad time on the toilet, because I ate something

with too much chipotle in it.

‘Well, I can’t do anything about that!’ Audrey cries.

‘No! I know you can’t!’ I retort.

Banjo has got up from his position by the lavenders to stiffly come over and see what all the fuss is about. He’d back me up if he could talk, I know he would. He knows what it’s like.

‘And I . . . I can’t go on like this, I really can’t,’ Audrey continues. ‘I need some time . . . away.’

‘From me?’

The anguish in her face is so hard to look at. ‘Yes? I suppose so? The situation, anyway. Maybe we both need just a little time apart temporarily, so we can . . . think about the future. You as much as me, Will, because if you love me, and you want this marriage to continue, things have to change. You have to be . . . better. Happier. More *you* again.’

‘Fucking hell, Audrey, this *is me*. You talk like I’ve changed personalities, but all I’ve done is get older, lose someone I love, and come to understand that everything falls to pieces eventually.’

Audrey’s eyes go wide at this. ‘I don’t even know how to respond to that,’ she says, in disbelief.

‘Then don’t try,’ I reply, exhausted by my own words.

A dreadful silence descends for a few moments, before Audrey speaks again, this time with a finality to her voice that I don’t like one bit.

‘I think we need a separation, Will . . . just for a little while.’

‘Just for a little while? You sure about that?’ I ask. I can hear the defeat in my voice, but I can’t help it. My wife is basically saying she wants our lives to be turned upside down, and God help me, I don’t think I can blame her for feeling that way.

‘Yes. It’s probably just temporary. I need time to think, and you need time to . . . get some help, maybe. I love you with all my heart, but you’re spiralling downwards, and I . . . I don’t want to follow you.’ Her voice is heavy with pain and regret.

And what she says . . . is fair enough, actually.

I’m not going to deny that I have changed from the way I used to be. Or that the change in me has had a detrimental effect on Audrey as well.

There’s no way to reverse that change, because there’s no way to reverse *life*. Audrey just doesn’t understand that. But she will in a few years, I have no doubt of that.

‘And maybe the . . . change in routine will do you good too,’ Audrey adds. ‘Might help you snap out of it a bit. They say a change is as good as a rest, don’t they?’

‘I suppose,’ I reply sullenly. ‘And I get it. It hurts like hell, Auds, but I do get it.’

Her hand flies across the table and takes mine in it. ‘I’m sorry, Will. I don’t want this, but I also don’t know what else to do. For me. Or for you, for that matter. Maybe this will . . . give us both a chance to evaluate. To decide on what we want, and make sure we do everything we can to make things better.’

What she means is that she wants her walking out on me to force me to stop being such a morose, cautious bastard.

But she doesn’t understand. It’s not me making me morose and cautious . . . it’s *time*. And no amount of time apart is going to alter that fundamental truth.

‘Well, if it’s what you want, Auds, then there’s nothing I can do to change your mind,’ I say – rather pompously, it has to be said. ‘If you leaving me and this house is the thing you need to do, then I understand and . . . support you.’

Audrey’s face darkens. ‘I’m not leaving, Will.’

‘You’re not?’ I say, wide-eyed with surprise. Has she changed her mind that quickly?

‘I want *you* to leave,’ she then says. ‘I think that’s only fair, given the circumstances.’

‘Me? You want *me* to leave?’ I ask, incredulous. The thought of me being the one to have to move out of the house was one that never occurred to me.

‘Yes, Will. You’re the one who’s having these long-term issues. I think it’s probably only fair if you’re the one that moves out for a little while, to see if you can resolve them.’

There’s logic to what she’s saying, but I just can’t wrap my head around it.

Me? *Leave*?

Where the hell would I go?

‘Where the hell would I go?’ I say out loud.

‘I’m sure we can sort something out,’ Audrey assures me. ‘I’m not just going to cut you out of my life. I want this to work again between us, and I’m

happy to help in any way that I can.'

'What about Banjo?' I ask her.

I point down at the hairy article, who is now flopped at Audrey's feet, where it's not quite as sunny, but is also far less lavender on his delicate nasal passages. 'What happens with the Banjmeister?' I say, inappropriately using one of our (many) terms of endearment for him.

'He can stay here with me for the time being,' Audrey says. 'I think you need time to work on yourself. Banjo might be a distraction. We'll make sure to arrange lots of visits, though.'

My head is whirling.

My very soul is spinning around like it's on a hot cycle in a nuclear washing machine.

All of this is coming at me way too fast.

'Don't worry, Will,' Audrey tries to reassure me. 'This doesn't have to happen straight away. I want this to be a positive step for us, and that only happens when we're both prepared for it, and fully understand what's going on. I'm not trying to force you out of my life. We can take a little time with it . . . but it does have to happen soon.'

That sounds like a rehearsed speech, doesn't it? All of this is not something that's come out of the blue from her.

'Okay,' I reply, via a mouth that feels like the driest parts of the Sahara. 'I'll . . . I'll start looking at places to rent, I guess?'

And on my wages, that place will be the size of a postage stamp.

Pre-licked, and already used.

I should have gone for that promotion last year. Hell, I should have gone for *all* the promotions I was offered in the last four years. I just didn't because I didn't want the added stress – and didn't think I'd need the wage increase.

Audrey smiles tightly. 'Well, yes, you could start having a look. I'm sure something will come up. And remember, it's only temp—'

'Temporary. Yes, I get it.'

Audrey may have repeatedly told me this is only something for the short term, but there's a finality to the tone of this conversation that feels completely at odds with what she's saying.

I think I'm about to fall off my chair.

I probably would, if I wasn't worried about falling on Banjo.

'Temporary, yes,' Audrey finishes, sitting back as she does so. She's

clearly said everything she wants to for now. Her cards are out on the table.

My marriage is potentially over – and as far as I can tell, there's not really much I can do to salvage it. Audrey wants me to be something I'm not anymore. Unless she's about to whip out a Tardis that'll de-age me by about ten years, the die has well and truly been cast.

It's all so bloody unfair. I can't help getting older. I can't help it that things have happened that have *changed me*.

And I know I'm scared all the time.

I know I'm not the man I used to be – and I am overflowing with regret about all of it . . . but there's *no other choice*. There's nothing I can do. I'm probably going to lose Audrey, and the pain of that eclipses everything else.

Everything except the unlovely truth that I *can't stop getting older*.

I remember worrying a bit when we first met that she was a good ten years younger than me, and how that might affect our relationship moving forward. Nothing reared its ugly head until now, and if I'd known what would happen . . .

'I'll start looking on Rightmove,' I say in a dull voice.

This really is all my fault. All my fault for dropping into this malaise I've been in for years . . . and for marrying Audrey Tomasi in the first place.

What the hell was I thinking? Did I really believe a woman like her would put up with an old fart like me forever?

Stupid.

'Okay, that's good,' Audrey replies, once again leaning across the table to take my hand. 'Everything will be okay, Will. I promise. We'll get through this.'

I nod, not trusting myself to speak.

Banjo breaks the tension by farting, and getting up to jump at Audrey – the universally accepted sign that he wants something to eat.

Thanks, mate. You're always there to get me out of situations I don't want to be in. Even if it does come with the kind of doggy flatulence that only an owner could put up with.

Only I'm not out of this situation at all, of course, I'm forced to reflect as Audrey pops into the kitchen to fill Banjo's dog bowl. It's only just starting, and I have no idea where it's going to end.

A terrified part of me – the same part of me that doesn't want to eat chipotle, or take stressful promotions when they're offered – believes that it probably ends with me alone in a postage-stamp-sized flat somewhere,

whether I like it or not.



Did I say postage stamp?

Hah!

Luxury.

If I want to stay more or less in travelable distance to my work, Rightmove very kindly told me that I basically had one option in my budget – a flat roughly the same size as half a torn postage stamp.

I can't afford anything more because I have to continue to help Audrey pay the mortgage on the house while I'm away, and that limits my options considerably. I also wouldn't want to pay out too much per month, or sign a long contract – just in case we do manage to patch things up. It'd be a massive waste.

I went to have a look at the flat.

I would have described it as the place hope went to die, but hope would have never made it up to the flat, because it would have been murdered by one of the ne'er-do-wells hanging around the entrance.

And that's my best option at this point.

There's no way I'm asking any friends if I can stay with them. I am an intensely private person at the best of times, and I have no desire for anyone to know about my marital problems, or the reasons for them. Audrey tried to argue that asking for help from someone we know was a good idea, but I shut it down quickly. I still have some pride.

And besides, as stated, this is only a *temporary thing*. With any luck, things will get back on track fairly soon, and I don't want my dirty laundry aired in public beforehand.

Sadly, this leaves me with half a postage stamp in Stab Alley. But if that's my only option, then I'll have to suck it up and go for it.

Temporarily.

Needless to say, the search for an appropriate place to call my hopefully very short-term home is so soul-destroying, I have to take a long walk just to get away from it. This is fine by me, as walking is one of my absolute favourite things to do in the world – no matter the circumstances in which I find myself doing it.

I have to confess I'm also taking the long walk to get away from my

wife, because the atmosphere in our house is so thick at the moment, I keep waving my arm absently in front of my face in a vain effort to clear it.

The thickness has come from a further week of having to live together under the cloud that formed above our heads last weekend, during that chat at the patio table.

Oh, things have been relatively cordial, I suppose. We haven't had any arguments, or even harsh words, but then we've avoided each other as much as possible – perhaps unconsciously, perhaps not.

I have taken to sleeping on the sofa bed in the spare room.

And when I say sleeping, I generally mean tossing and turning all night, before walking downstairs bleary-eyed every morning, desperate for some caffeine.

Audrey hasn't been sleeping well, either, even though she's the one in our actual bed, and doesn't have to put up with my snoring for once.

We are both existing in this horrible limbo while I search for somewhere to live, and it's clearly having an adverse effect on both our psyches.

While I'm reluctant to move out at all, I am also desperate to find somewhere to go – even if it is in Stab Alley – just to get out from under this intolerable atmosphere.

So, my search criteria are relatively limited, and only one horrible thing has come up in the past seven days that fits them. Hence the long walk – to get away from both my frustration and the expression on my wife's face every time I look up from the iPad.

Banjo is happy about the walk, though, because Banjo is always happy about going for a walk. Even in the teeth of a howling gale, he'd be happy to go for a walk.

It's one of the things that endeared me most to him when I found him at the shelter. I wanted a dog I could take with me when I go out walking with the guys from the Facebook rambling group I've been a member of for many years – and Banjo fitted that bill magnificently. He used to be able to go for miles upon miles, when he was a younger dog. Now, I have to leave him behind most of the time, if we're doing anything over four or five. He just can't make that kind of distance anymore, bless him.

He'd try. I know he would. And he'd probably make it, but not without a lot of pain and distress. And I won't put him through that – even though I know he'd do it just to hang out with me.

Today, though, it's a much easier, shorter walk, and it's just me and him – ambling through the park at an idle pace. That's something he can still manage with ease.

It's doing me a power of good as well, to be honest. The air is crisp out here. No sign of the thick blanket that's permeating every corner of the house I'm about to be thrown out of.

I shake my head in disbelief as we stroll past the duck pond. I still can't get over the fact that Audrey has asked me to move out. I get her reasons for it, I suppose, and understand why she feels it's necessary – but it's causing both of us pain. Why are we doing it?

Because the pain of living with you is obviously worse. Because it must be lonely and sad and horrible living with a person like the one you've become.

Fucking hell . . .

Fucking hell, to bollocks and back.

I wish Mum was here.

So very, very much.

She'd know what to say. She'd know what advice to give me about Audrey.

They got on so well. Mum would always know how Audrey was feeling . . . what she was thinking. What the right thing for me to say would be. The right thing to do.

Like the time at Christmas when I just couldn't decide what the hell to get my new girlfriend for our first Christmas together, and Mum patiently went around all the shops with me one freezing-cold Saturday afternoon, picking a selection of gifts that ended up being perfect.

It would all be so much easier if Mum was still around.

. . . mainly because I wouldn't be in this bloody mess in the first place.

Christ.

It's best I have a sit-down on the bench over there – because my legs have suddenly become very shaky, and I don't think I can walk much further for the moment.

Banjo initially looks a little disappointed when I plonk myself down on the bench (the ducks looked particularly chaseable this morning) but he's a good-natured, forgiving kind of dog, so promptly jumps up next to me on the bench, and presents his ears for tickling.

You can soothe any bad mood Banjo might be in instantly with a tickle

behind the ears.

If only it was as easy with human beings.

I sit there in silence for a few minutes, scratching my dog's ears, and contemplating my immediate future. One is extremely pleasant, the other the direct opposite.

Slowly, the ear tickling lulls me into a more meditative state of mind, and it manages to clear the brain fog a little for the first time in days – allowing me brief respite from the tumult of emotion and anxiety I've been feeling, ever since Audrey started that godforsaken conversation in the garden.

The trance-like ear-tickling state is, however, rudely and abruptly interrupted by the sound of my phone ringing. It almost makes me jump out of my skin.

I pull the phone out of my pocket, expecting to see Audrey's name on the screen. I don't know how long I've been sat here on this bench, but it could have been over an hour for all I know. She could be worried about me.

Is she still worried about you, though?

Not enough to want you under the same roof with her any longer, evidently.

Banjo, then. If nothing else, I know she'd be concerned for Banjo's welfare, if he was gone for too long.

As it transpires, though, the number on the phone is unknown to me. It's probably a cold call of some description, so I really should just ignore it. But then it could be someone at work. Or maybe even the doctor.

I'd better answer it.

'Hello?' I say, continuing to tickle Banjo's ear as I do so.

'Hello, son,' the voice on the other end says. My tickling hand instantly goes limp.

A few seconds pass. 'Hello? You there, Will?' the voice says, and my stomach flips.

It's a voice I haven't heard in . . . what? Nearly thirty years?

Although . . . what am I talking about? I've heard it much more recently than that. About *two* years ago, in fact, on an episode of *Never Mind the Buzzcocks* – before I managed to grab up the remote control and breathlessly flick the channel.

Then there was the other time, a bit further back – only a few days after Mum's death – when I heard his voice again on that stupid documentary on

the BBC about everybody's favourite Christmas songs. I was sat staring into grief-filled space, with the TV on in the background, and didn't even realise they were featuring 'When Winter Comes' until him – and the rest of the motley crew he called his band mates – started talking about it.

Oh.

And then there was the other day in the car, wasn't there? When 'I Hold the World' came on the radio – the only song in the band's history that he actually sings by himself.

But this?

This is the first time in as long as I can remember that he is directly addressing me – and my heart just can't take it, I don't think.

'Will?' he says again. 'Is this the right number? Have I called Will Fairweather? Only I'm trying to get hold of my son Will, you know? If this isn't the right number, could you just tell me, and I'll try something else?'

It's all still there. In that voice.

The cadence. The gravel. The inherent cockiness – that always comes through, even when it's the most innocuous of statements.

Lester Fairweather.

Red on the Drums.

Holy Moly's wildest and craziest band member.

Icon of the seventies.

Master of the high-hat.

Legend of the bass bins.

Terrible husband.

Worse father.

'What do you want?' I blurt out. Banjo, sensing my instant distress, butts his head against my leg and whines softly.

'Will? Is that you, son?'

'What do you want?' I repeat.

'Um . . . I wanted to talk to you! See how you were! See what's going on with you, kid!'

'How did you get this number?'

'Er . . . well . . . er . . . I found it online, didn't I? Yeah, that's it.'

'I don't want to talk to you.'

And I really don't.

. . . and yet I'm not putting the phone down, for some reason.

'Oh . . . Okay, I get that, son. I really do . . . and I'm sorry I haven't been around, you know?'

He says it so flippantly. *Decades* without him in my life, and he apologises like he just spilt coffee down my shirt.

My hand grips tighter on the phone. 'You're . . . you're *sorry*?'

'Yeah! 'Course I am. I had my reasons, don't get me wrong . . . but I should have been around more, shouldn't I?'

Reasons?

What possible good reason could a man have for not seeing his only child for almost three decades?

'Yes!' I blurt out. 'Yes, you should have been around more!' I can hear the stress and pain in my voice. So can Banjo. He whines harder.

'I know, son, I know.' The apologetic tone is not one I'm used to hearing. Certainly not on *Never Mind the Buzzcocks*, and not even all those years ago, when he was still in my life, and trying to at least have a go at being a father. 'But I'd like to make it up to you.'

'Why now?' I ask, staring out at the duck pond, and trying very hard to blink back tears. 'Because your timing couldn't be worse.'

Which is something of an irony, given that Red Fairweather's exquisite timing on the drums was always so damn perfect.

'Oh . . . well, you know. It just felt like . . . the right time to call.'

He sounds about as convincing now as he did trying to tell the reporters from *Rolling Stone* that he wasn't the one who crashed that golf cart off the stage at Knebworth.

There's no way this phone call is out of the blue, like he claims. I know damn well who put him up to this, and I can hardly believe it.

'Look, this really isn't a good time,' I tell him. 'But you probably already know that.'

'What? I don't know anything, kid. I just want to chat and see how you're doing.'

'Don't call me again,' I snap. 'Ever.'

The thumb that stabs at the phone to end the call shakes as it does so, along with the rest of the hand attached to it.

I have to blink a couple of times and take a few deep breaths, just to try and centre myself a little.

What the hell is this?

What the hell is going on?

My life is coming crashing down around me, and I just happen to hear from the father who abandoned me all those years ago?

No.

I don't believe in coincidences like that.

I have to get home, and find out why the hell my wife would want to put me through something like that, given the current circumstances.

I jump to my feet, anger now my overwhelming emotion. Poor Banjo has to climb down from the bench far quicker than he should, given his dysplasia, and I will be wracked with guilt about that later.

But for now, my anger trumps everything else.

I have to get home to see what Audrey thought she was bloody playing at.

How did she even get hold of him?

I'm not going to get the answer to that stood here looking at the duck pond, any more than I'm going to find a nice place I can afford to live in on Rightmove.



'What the hell were you *thinking*?' are the first words out of my mouth as I storm into the kitchen.

Audrey spins around from where she is filling a glass at the sink.

'What? Will? What are you talking about?'

I thrust out my hand, with my phone gripped in it. '*Him*. Audrey! Why did you get him to call me?' She looks at me with a mixture of shock and guilt. 'In what way does getting my bloody father to call me help me get over the fact you want a separation?'

Audrey puts down the glass of water on the table without drinking a drop. Her breathing seems quite heavy. 'It doesn't, Will. But you need somebody else to talk to.'

'But *him*, Audrey? Why *him*?'

She stares at me hopelessly for a moment. 'I don't know, Will! Because he's your only family? Because there's nobody else I could think of who you'd open up to? Talk to?'

'I'm not going to talk to him! Not after what he did!'

‘But you *used* to, didn’t you?’ The desperation in her voice is palpable. ‘You told me all about how you’d spend time with him when you were young, playing the drums and chatting about the world. I just thought he could be someone you could lean on a little. So it’s not all . . . all coming back onto me.’

‘You genuinely think the best person I could turn to, now you don’t want to know, is my absentee father, who hasn’t given a shit about me for decades?’

Audrey looks downcast. ‘There’s nobody else, Will. Nobody else. You’d never speak to your friends at the walking club about any of this, and there’s certainly nobody at work you’d turn to. I just thought family might be the best place for you to go . . . even if it is . . . *problematic*.’

‘Problematic? I haven’t heard from him in thirty fucking years!’ I have to resist the urge to swipe angrily at the glass of water on the table, sending it flying into the wall.

‘But I have!’ Audrey blurts out, almost instantly regretting it, judging by the look on her face.

‘You have? My father has been in contact with *you*?’

‘He came to the house, when your mum died. I don’t know how he found it.’

My legs go weak. ‘Why . . . Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘He didn’t want me to. He said you wouldn’t want to speak to him. He just wanted to know that you were . . . were *okay*. And he left me his number. That’s how I knew to contact him, when you started to . . . go downhill.’ Audrey can’t look me in the eye as she says all this.

‘When I started to go downhill? You’re saying . . . that you’ve been chatting to my bloody father for months now? *Years*?’

Now she does look me in the eyes. ‘I haven’t been *chatting* to him, Will! He’s not my friend! But yes . . . I have been in contact with someone else who actually *knows you*. What choice did I have?’

‘You could have talked to me!’

‘No! I *couldn’t*! I tried! But you’ve been in this depressive, anxious state for so long now, you didn’t want to hear it. My words just bounced off you. I had no choice but to speak to somebody else!’

I want to scream at her that she’s wrong. That we could have *talked*.

But then I remember back . . .

All the times she’d ask me if I was okay. Or would just hug me and

make a cup of tea. The occasions when she'd try to chivvy me along a little. When she'd make an effort to get us up and doing something, and I'd just shrug it off. Make excuses. Back out.

I wish she hadn't felt the need to speak to my father – a man I haven't been close to for decades – but what does it say about me and my lifestyle that he was the only person she thought she could speak to about me?

I froze her out, and in her rejection she turned to the last person in the world I would have wanted her to talk to. I only have myself to blame here.

I sink into the kitchen chair, and take a sip of Audrey's water, the fingers on my other hand drumming on the table as I do so. 'And what did he have to say?' I ask her, in a low, tired voice.

Audrey leans against the sink and rubs her forehead with tense fingers. 'Not much. Said you were always a . . . sensitive kid, and he wasn't surprised Jane's death hit you that hard. Told me I should just be there for you, and let you work through it all.' Audrey's expression turns to one of confusion. 'Then he started to compare getting over a loved one's death to playing a gig in an empty pub . . . which was a bit odd.'

I let out a sharp, cynical bray of laughter. 'Oh yes. That's Daddy dearest, alright. That's Red Fairweather to a tee. Everything comes back to his sodding music!'

Audrey gives me a reproachful look. 'He meant well, Will.'

'Not well enough to actually bother speaking to me, though, eh?'

She shakes her head. 'I don't think . . . I don't know why he didn't want to speak to you. But I don't think it was because he didn't care.'

I snort derisively. 'And what changed? Why has he suddenly decided on direct communication?'

'I rang him yesterday. Told him about our . . . our separation.'

'Oh.'

'I guess he figured it was the right time to get in touch, knowing that I . . . er . . .'

'Wasn't going to be around anymore?'

Audrey's eyes fill. 'I'm not going anywhere, Will. But I just need . . . some space.'

I nod my head and drink some more water. Gulp it, in fact. I'm suddenly very thirsty. 'Well, that solves that little mystery, then. Not that it matters. I put the phone down on him.'

'You did?' The disappointment is writ large across her face.

Oh God. I can see just how desperate my wife is for me to have someone else to turn to other than her. Even if it means being in contact with *him*.

What have I done to this marriage?

‘Yes. I just couldn’t have a nice little chat. Not after all this time.’ I take a deep breath. ‘I guess I’m just going to have to find somebody else who I can turn to instead of y—’

The phone starts to ring in my pocket.

I know it’s him.

I don’t even need to look at the screen.

His timing is always perfect.

I leave the phone ringing in my pocket, and take another sip of the water, which by now is nearly gone.

‘Are you going to answer that?’ Audrey asks tentatively.

Am I?

Am I going to actively and deliberately have a conversation with the worst father on the planet? A man whose entire life has been dedicated to sex, drugs and rock and roll . . . and rarely ever me?

Yes.

I probably am, aren’t I?

Because I can’t turn to Audrey anymore. And there’s nobody else.

My brain flashes back for an instant to a time *before* . . . a time when things were easier. Better. Simpler. When all I wanted was to learn how to play the drums properly, and snog Charlotte Bommerly.

I’m sat at my drum kit. The black-and-silver Yamaha kit that Red bought for me, and plonked next to his enormous Pearl set-up, in his studio. This is a good seven or eight years after he and Mum actually split up, when I would spend the weekends with him at his idiotically gigantic and ramshackle country house in the New Forest.

And I’m crying.

I’m crying because I got bullied by jealous kids at school last week, because I’m the son of a rock star. One that at least two of my teachers have been big fans of for most of their lives.

It was only a minor thing. A child’s problems. Nothing an adult would understand or sympathise with that much, beyond the usual parental responsibility to comfort their offspring.

That’s how Mum was about it. Sympathetic, but unable to appreciate

just how devastating getting shoved over in the mud is to an eleven-year-old boy – who wants people to like him, and not hate him, just because he’s ‘lucky’ enough to have a rich and famous father.

Mum was a pragmatic sort of person. I doubt she saw my distress as anything more than typical playground rivalry stuff that would dissipate as soon as it arrived. Don’t get me wrong, though, her pragmatism served me extremely well in my childhood for the most part. She brought me up to be the level-headed man I am . . . or rather *was*, before she was taken away from me.

Red isn’t like Mum. Somehow, he *does* understand. He does *get it*. He knows just how serious it is to an eleven-year-old boy. The arm around my shoulder, and the promise to go down to the school and shove a drumstick up Caleb Mitchell’s arse, tells me that.

And then he starts to play a fast rhythm on my drum kit, and sing the ‘Caleb Mitchell Is a Fat Plonker’ song, and I’m not crying anymore. I’m laughing.

And in that moment, I love my dad. Even though he smells of booze and weed more than a little bit. And is unreliable about when he sees me half the time. And swears far too much around me. And takes off to the other side of the planet all the time, leaving me here. And causes me to get bullied at school by jealous kids, who think I have it so great (if only they knew).

Red Fairweather is impossible not to love, when his attention is on you.

But when it’s gone, you really feel it. Deep in your bones.

It’s been permanently gone from my life for three decades.

Do I really want it back?

Do I really have a choice?

I fish the ringing phone out of my pocket, and answer.

‘Hello, Red,’ I say, voice resigned to whatever fate is coming down the line at me.

‘Will! You answered! Cool!’

Hmmm. Not sure I’d use the word ‘cool’ to describe me, Red. I’m sweaty, shaking and feel sick.

‘Audrey’s told me why you called. You don’t have to lie,’ I tell him bluntly.

‘Ah . . . Okay. Sorry ’bout that. Didn’t want to drop her in it.’

‘You didn’t.’ My eyes flick up to my wife, who is looking at me anxiously. This sends my own nerves skyrocketing, so I decide it might be

best to continue this conversation out of her sight. ‘Hang on,’ I tell Red.

I rise from the kitchen table, and make my way out into the garden. I don’t say anything to Audrey as I go. I figure she knows me well enough to know what the lack of communication means. I’m not angry at her. I don’t really have the right to that. But I do – for the first time ever – want to be away from her.

At least the garden is *cool*. Bordering on cold, even.

Hasn’t stopped Banjo from lolling about on the grass, though. He’d probably prefer to be outside, even if we lived in Siberia.

I move closer to him, in an unconscious effort to comfort myself. Banjo’s presence is usually a calming one, especially when I’m giving him a stroke.

Which is what I do, by sitting down next to him on the grass as I contemplate what to say next.

‘How much has Audrey told you?’ I elect to start with. Might as well get to grips with where I stand, right from the get-go.

‘Er . . . well. She’s said you’re not very happy, kid. With life, and other stuff. And I know I might have played a part in that.’

‘Yes, Red, you bloody did.’ I’m trying to stay calm, but it’s proving very difficult, even with my hands running through Banjo’s soft fur.

‘Er . . . yeah. I . . . er . . .’

‘You’re sorry. Yes. I get that.’

‘I am! And I want to make it up to you. That’s why I said to Audrey that I’d call you. To see if I could . . . you know . . . help.’

‘Help? What exactly do you think you can do for me, Red? Write me a song? Dedicate an album to me? Buy me some weed?’

I’m being comprehensively unpleasant here, but do you really blame me?

Red tries to laugh it off, but you can tell by the awkwardness in the laugh that he’s not actually finding any of this funny. ‘Well, weed can always be good when you’re feeling down, son, but no, I wasn’t thinking anything like that.’

‘Then what were you thinking?’

‘Well, Audrey said you were moving out . . . for a little while. And that you were struggling to find somewhere to stay?’

‘Yes, that’s right.’ It’s painful to admit it out loud to another human being. Like giving voice to it makes it real.

‘Well, I might have a solution for you.’

The blood drains from my face. I know what he’s going to suggest before he even has the chance to do it.

Bloody hell.

‘I’ve still got loads of room here at Moly Mansions. You can always crash here with me. For as long as you need to. Hell, your old room hasn’t changed since the last time you were here. This place is so big, I’ve never needed to do anything else with it.’

My old room.

Moly Mansions.

My youth has just crashed into me at breakneck speed, and I feel like something is definitely broken inside somewhere, because of it.

‘You want me to come and stay with you?’ My voice is weak with disbelief.

‘Yeah, why the hell not? It’ll give us a chance to reconnect, you know? Let me make up for not being around enough. We can have some father–son time.’

One eye twitches.

Banjo moves quietly away from me.

Some *father–son time*. At Moly Mansions. Staying in my old bedroom.

. . . as if the past thirty years had never happened.

I’d rather stick a drumstick up my arse.

And I’d rather put the phone down on this bizarre old man, go inside the house, kiss my wife, and forget all about separations, and voices from the past.

But that’s not going to happen, is it?

I do have to move out of my home, because that’s what the most important person in the world wants me to do. And I don’t have anywhere else to go.

‘Alright,’ I hear myself say, from approximately four galaxies away. ‘I guess I could come and stay for a little while.’

‘Hey! That’s excellent!’ Red cries, and in the background, I hear a cymbal crash with excitement.

He’s sat at his drum kit. This entire conversation has taken place with him in the safest and happiest place he knows.

If he could have feasibly started the conversation with a drum roll, he would have. Red Fairweather lives for the music. It permeates everything

about him.

‘I’ll get Borkins to come over and get you tomorrow.’

‘Borkins?’

‘Yeah. My assistant bloke. He’s a bit of a dry bastard, but does a really good job.’

‘Borkins?’ I repeat.

‘Yeah . . . I’m pretty sure that’s his actual name. Might be Parkins? Only I’ve been calling him Borkins for years now, and he never seems to object.’

‘I don’t need picking up, D— Red. I can drive myself down.’

Christ. I nearly called him it, didn’t I?

‘Oh right! You’ve got a car, have you?’

‘Of course I’ve got a car, I’m forty-five years old.’

‘Oh . . . yeah. You didn’t have one last time I saw you.’

No. I hadn’t even passed my bloody driving test back then, Red.

I let out a sudden deep breath that almost amounts to a gasp.

Half an hour ago I was sat in the park looking at the ducks. Now I’m about to get in the car to go and stay with my father, who I haven’t seen for decades, and some poor bugger named Borkins.

Life comes at you fast sometimes.

‘You sure you don’t want a lift?’ Red repeats.

‘Yes,’ I exclaim firmly. For some reason I don’t want to accept anything from this man that I don’t absolutely *have to*. Anything that I’m not being forced into doing, by my circumstances and my wife.

‘Right, well. We’ll see you tomorrow, then, kid!’ Red exclaims happily.

‘I’ll pack some things,’ I tell him with a sigh as my soul leaves my body.

‘Yeah! You do that, kid! Oh . . . this is going to be great, I promise! I’m so glad you picked up the phone again, Will!’

Are you?

Are you *really*, old man?

Because I’m not so sure I am, Red.

Not so sure at all.

Dynamics

The satnav is telling me I'm going in the right direction, and I'll have to trust it, as I don't recognise this stretch of road at all.

It's been many years since I came down this way, after all. And I wasn't driving then. I was in Mum's car – either vibrating with excitement about visiting my father, or sullen with disappointment about leaving again. She put up with both with amazing grace, God bless her.

. . . I miss her so much.

I've been avoiding this part of the world – either consciously, or unconsciously – for a very long time now. This is something of a pity, because it really is very beautiful around here.

I'm on a virtually empty A road that leads down to the small village of Dropley, which sits on the banks of the Solent.

From what I remember, just outside the village is a long, looping road called Brooking Lane, which wends its way down to the shoreline, and then along it for half a mile, before winding back up towards the village again. On this road sit eight houses. Eight *enormous* houses. One of them belongs to Red Fairweather.

Back when I used to visit as a kid, one of the others was owned by a Formula One driver, a third by a Tory politician – and the rest by a series of people who also have no idea how much a pint of milk costs.

I doubt much has changed.

Moly Mansions is not *quite* a mansion, if we're being honest. It's certainly a very large house indeed, but mansions don't tend to have neighbours within walking distance.

Let's call it a very, *very* large house, and leave it at that.

It does have a swimming pool, a drawing room and six bedrooms, though. One of which is apparently still mine.

I guess in any other circumstances, I'd be quite happy to be driving

towards a stay in a six-bedroom luxury house on the banks of the Solent, but in the situation I find myself in, I'd rather be doing anything else.

The hug Audrey gave me after I put my suitcase in the boot of my car was . . . tentative. It spoke of a person who was feeling extremely ambivalent.

Banjo couldn't be ambivalent if you promised to feed him a giant bone every day for the rest of his life, and fussed and whined around our feet as we said our goodbyes. He's a very clever dog, and could tell something was amiss.

'I'll call you tomorrow,' Audrey said to me as she stepped back and folded her arms to ward off the morning chill. There were tears in her eyes. There were in mine too. But they were unshed ones. And remained that way until I had driven away.

Audrey's never held back tears with me before – she's always been a heart-on-her-sleeve kind of person. Probably that Italian blood running through her veins.

But then I've never been the *cause* of those tears before, either.

'Okay,' I replied, not really trusting myself to say more.

'I really hope you guys get on,' she added, with a half-smile.

'Okay,' I repeated, trusting myself even less.

I don't want to even have to think about 'getting on' with my father, Audrey. I'm only doing this because you want me to.

Banjo tried to jump into the car with me, bless him. I had to tell him to go back to Audrey's side, so I could close the door.

I knew I'd see him again in a week anyway.

That's when I'd see them both.

Audrey and I agreed to keep in contact over the phone on a regular basis, and to see each other for Banjo's handover for a walk with me every seven days or so. It feels so piecemeal and *tiny* after what I'm used to, but I have to accept it. Have to deal with it.

I've never felt so low in my entire life.

My mood hasn't changed appreciably in the twenty-five minutes since, despite the glorious surroundings I now find myself in.

Dropley is just on the edge of the New Forest, and the drive down to it is through thick, green woods that look particularly fine on a clear, cool morning like this.

The trees do start to thin a little as I make my way towards where the south of England gives way to the sea, and where Dropley sits perched on its

edge, far away from the crowds and hustle and bustle of city life and suburbia.

Red picked an extremely good place to call home.

I wish he'd picked somewhere a lot further away from me – but you don't get a say in what your absentee father does. The fact he's lived so close to me all these years frankly makes his absenteeism even bloody worse. I could have coped a bit better if he'd moved somewhere a little further away – like to the other side of the moon, for instance. He could have shacked up with Pink Floyd.

And not that he bought the house because of its location, you understand.

Red bought Moly Mansions because the person who built it had installed a secret door in one of the library's bookcases that leads to a wine cellar. All you do is tip one of the books on the shelf forward (*A Moveable Feast* by Ernest Hemingway, because of course) and the whole thing swings backwards on a hinge to allow access to all that booze.

Red Fairweather literally spent a couple of million quid on a house just because it had a secret door in it. The fact it also has a view of the sea most people would kill for, and a comfortable isolation from the rest of society that only someone with millions of pounds can afford, was entirely beside the point.

Dropley is pretty much exactly how I remember it. The fast pace of modern living isn't something that really encroaches on wealthy English villages like this. At least not on the surface. The tiny main street still only consists of about eight shops, and the church still looks as picturesque as it ever did.

I can see that the gas-guzzling Porsches and Bentleys of the 1990s have largely given way to electric Teslas and BMWs of the modern era. But apart from that, Dropley seems firmly stuck in a time warp.

I can almost see my teenage self, wandering into the corner shop to grab Red a packet of Marlboro Lights. Something he had me do quite frequently, despite the fact it was completely illegal. He had an 'understanding' with the shopkeeper, you see. One that comes naturally when you're a millionaire, famous rock star.

Leaving the village behind, I drive onto Brooking Lane and feel my hands go cold on the steering wheel. I'm getting close to my father now. Closer than I've been in so very many years.

Moly Mansions is the fourth house along the part of Brooking Lane that skirts the coast. It's probably the most imposing of all of them, as it tries very hard to resemble something the King might live in, only shrunk on a hot wash.

It was also built in the 1980s, so any airs and graces it might have towards being any kind of historical abode are entirely fake.

It remains impressive to look at, though.

Two gated entrances on either side of a massive wrought iron fence at the front lead to wide gravel lanes that converge on an enormous courtyard, passing several mature trees and large bushes as they do so.

The façade of the house is pleasingly symmetrical, and every one of the eighteen front-facing windows is surrounded in expertly cultivated ivy.

The house itself is flanked by two large garages on either side of the courtyard, housing Red's collection of cars.

The place is every inch the replica of a stately country house.

. . . except for the shagging frogs.

They are still on either side of the white double front doors, I see.

Red saw the shagging frogs while Holy Moly were on tour in Australia, and just had to have them. A couple of enormous grey stone statues, featuring two frogs each – both inexplicably upright, and embracing as if their little amphibian hearts depended on it. One has its legs wrapped around the body of the other.

The two identical statues were placed either side of the front door, while Red looked on and giggled the entire time.

I have to confess I stood there giggling just as hard. It was funny to a twelve-year-old boy.

Not quite the same when you're forty-five, it has to be said. Giggling is not really a thing. But I can't help but let out a more age-appropriate, and completely involuntary, chuckle when I see them as I turn my car down onto the left-hand driveway.

I can feel my heart rate rise as I do this.

I *don't* want to be here.

This is not a place I have good memories of – at least not the latter ones. And bad memories of a place make it feel . . . *unsafe*.

As I park up just in front of the left shagging-frog statue, the front doors open, and I start to feel a bit faint.

Christ. Here he comes. In all his glory . . .

Only it isn't Red that is here to greet me. Instead, it's a smartly dressed man of indeterminate age, regarding me with a mixture of good-natured curiosity and welcoming warmth.

He proceeds down the double steps from the front door and opens my car for me, with a polite smile on his face.

'Good morning, sir, welcome to Moly Mansions.'

Is this the legendary Borkins, who Red was originally going to send to pick me up?

'Morning,' I reply.

'Mr Fairweather has asked me to meet you, as he is currently . . .' – the man tries very hard not to make a face – 'indisposed with an issue regarding one of his drums.'

I roll my eyes.

Of course he is.

'Allow me to get your suitcase for you, sir,' Borkins says. 'Is it in your boot?'

'Um, yeah. Thanks,' I say, not quite sure how to take this level of service.

Borkins disappears for a moment, unlatches my boot, and quickly reappears with my suitcase dragging behind him on the gravel driveway. 'If you'd be so kind as to follow me, sir. I'm sure you remember most of the building, but your father bid me bring you through.'

'Fair enough,' I tell him, and lock my car. Not that it needs it around here.

Borkins leads me into the house, closing the front door quietly behind him as I refresh my memory of the massive, galleried reception hall. The shagging frogs outside haven't gone, and neither have the gigantic recreations of Holy Moly's eight album covers that hang from the walls in here.

You wouldn't think brightly coloured and hectic rock album covers from the seventies and eighties would gel well with white, elegant, mock-Georgian architecture and a crystal-cut chandelier . . . and you'd be absolutely *right*. It's headache-inducing. Holy Moly's nigh on twenty glorious years at the top of the rock game, encompassed in these gaudy, gigantic monstrosities.

Borkins puts my suitcase in front of the left-hand staircase, and indicates I should follow him towards the right side of the house, past the drawing room and study, to where Red had his studio built right after he

moved in.

As I fall in behind Borkins, a question arises in my head that I just have to ask.

‘Excuse me?’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Forgive me if this sounds a bit rude, but is your name actually Borkins?’

Borkins laughs. ‘No sir. It’s Trafford. David Trafford.’

‘Then why does my father call you Borkins, Mr Trafford?’

‘I don’t actually know, sir,’ he replies, a quizzical look on his face. ‘He started doing it about three days after I entered his employ. I tried to gently correct him, but he always went back to calling me Borkins. After a couple of months, I just stopped correcting him. That was seven years ago.’

I nod my head sagely.

Yes.

That very much sounds like Red.

My father is the type of person who sees the world as their backdrop. The fact he ended up in a career that required him to be on stage all the time is no accident.

And he’s the type of person who will warp that backdrop in a way that suits him. Up to and including completely changing somebody’s name.

The horrifying thing is everybody else will indulge him in this.

God knows why.

‘You’re free to call me Borkins as well, sir,’ Trafford tells me, with no trace of resentment. ‘I don’t mind at all.’

‘Oh, okay,’ I reply. Whether I will do this or not remains to be seen. I feel like I’ll be enabling Red’s shenanigans, and I don’t think I want any part of that.

We pass through the drawing room, which actually looks like it’s been decorated since I was last here. The large couches are certainly different, and I see the eight-foot tapestry of Kate Bush has disappeared.

Red met Kate at Knebworth one year and got a little obsessed with her. The tapestry was his way of honouring her bushy magnificence.

He has clearly moved on now, though, as the tapestry has been replaced with a giant blown-up black-and-white photo of Holy Moly on stage at what looks like Donington Monsters of Rock. I think I was actually at that gig. Fourteen years old, and wide-eyed with the amazement of it all.

Borkins and I pass through the drawing room, and into the massive barn-like structure that Red extended the house with, so he could play his music whenever he wanted to. It was also supposed to be the place where Holy Moly launched their big comeback, but that never came to pass. The nineties weren't really the place for prog-rock bands, who had their heyday twenty years previously.

The studio is covered with sound-insulation foam, more massive pictures of Holy Moly's glory days, and several gold and platinum discs that are mainly for the band's album sales, but also include ones for their three hit singles 'Breakneck', 'I Hold the World' and 'Taking No Prisoners'.

There are also a great many musical instruments hung on the walls, microphone stands and speakers scattered about the rubber-coated floor, and at the centre of it all stands Red's massive Pearl drum kit.

Red Fairweather was famous for his enormous drums. They had to send out a team of Sherpas to find animals to kill to change the skins. Stages had to be reinforced. It got to the point where the drum kit was so large it would create its own gravitational field.

I can feel it pulling me towards it right now.

The studio hasn't changed much in the past thirty years. It still looks and smells the same as it ever did. Mainly weed, booze, and polish for the drums.

It contains all the things I remember marvelling at as a child.

What it does not contain, however, is Red Fairweather.

'Ah . . . it would appear Mr Fairweather's drum issue has taken him off elsewhere in the property,' Borkins says, looking around the studio with faint confusion.

'It seems that way. I wonder where he is?'

I almost immediately get an answer to that question when I hear a scream.

Looking over to one end of the studio, a set of double doors leads out into the garden. These are also covered in the black sound-proofing foam material and are closed, so the scream from outside must have been a pretty loud one for us to hear it.

Borkins hurries over to the doors, and I follow, wondering what the hell is going on.

I discover the source of the scream when Borkins flings the doors open.

It is my father.

He is on fire.

Well, of course he is.

Red Fairweather is dancing around the broad patio that extends right across the back of his house, with a very large bass drum upended on its side in front of him.

This is also on fire.

The arm of the bright pink ladies' dressing gown Red is wearing is merrily aflame. He is wearing nothing else upon his person, other than a pair of Iron Maiden boxer shorts.

The wild, unkempt long hair that is his signature look is flying about like Medusa's snakes as Red ineffectually flaps one long, skinny hand at his arm.

The hair is a lot thinner and greyer than I remember.

'Mr Fairweather!' Borkins cries, and rushes to the aid of his employer. He pulls his jacket off and smothers Red's arm with it.

'The drum, mate! Put the drum out! It's a 1974 Pearl!'

Borkins, having extinguished the flame on Red's arm, flings himself at the bass drum, throwing his jacket over the fire that threatens to consume it completely. As he does this, Red continues to dance around him in panic, watching his efforts to save what is obviously a valuable bass drum.

I watch all this with a mixture of bemusement, horror and not a little familiarity.

Yes. This is Red Fairweather, alright. Only older, and apparently even more bloody mental.

'It's out, sir!' Borkins says, standing back from the bass drum, which is still smoking. The skin has a massive, charcoal-lined hole in it now, but the rest appears more or less undamaged.

'Well done, Borks!' Red exclaims, whacking his man on the back happily. He then notices that the arm of his dressing gown is still slightly aflame, and pulls a packet of cigarettes from the pocket of the dressing gown. He takes one out, eyeing the tiny flame closely, and lights the cigarette on it, before slapping it out with his hand.

As he draws deeply on the cigarette, Red looks up and sees me for the first time.

His arms fly out wide. ‘*Aaah! Will! It’s Will! Will’s here! Look, Borks! It’s Will!*’

Red then starts running towards me, pink ladies’ dressing gown wide open, exposing every part of his tattooed body, except the bit mercifully covered by the Iron Maiden boxer shorts. The years have not been massively kind to Red Fairweather’s physique. I feel like I’m about to be attacked by an ambulatory leather handbag with arms.

Run, you fool.

‘Will!’ Red cries again as he reaches where I’m stood, and throws both long, rangy arms around me.

There’s more strength in that bear hug than you’d think, given how skinny he looks, and given how old he is. All those years bashing drums really had an effect.

Red stinks. Partly of the fire that’s just been put out, and partly from whatever weed he has inevitably been smoking recently.

It’s half eleven in the morning, otherwise those smells would probably have been joined by the whiff of Jack Daniel’s.

They say smells are the key to memory, and I am instantly transported back about thirty years to the last time Red hugged me like this – the last day I saw him . . . until now.

I push my father away with an instinctive thrust of one arm. ‘You stink, Red,’ I tell him.

‘What? Oh . . . yeah. Sorry about that!’ He swings an arm around to point at the bass drum. ‘I was trying this curing technique on the drumskin to make the sound a bit purer. You’re meant to gently set fire to it for a moment, to release the surface chemicals.’

‘Gently set fire to it?’

Red smiles broadly. ‘Yeah!’ Then his brow creases. ‘I think I may have used a bit too much lighter fluid, though.’

I look at Borkins disconsolately patting at his now ruined jacket. ‘Yes, I’d say so.’

Red suddenly looks horrified. ‘But I’m sorry I wasn’t there to meet you at the door! I got a bit carried away with the whole drum fire thing. Lost track of time.’ He rests one hand on my shoulder. ‘Are you alright, kid?’

The familiarity with which he says this stuns me. It’s like the past thirty years haven’t happened.

‘Been better, Red,’ I reply, staring at him in disbelief.

How am I here?

How has this happened?

How am I standing with this strange, skinny old man, whose hair is now completely grey, instead of the bright ginger that earned him his nickname in the seventies?

You didn't have a choice.

Didn't I?

No. Not if you didn't want to live in Stab Alley.

'Ah well . . . it's good that you're here, then!' Red says, his arm snaking around my neck. 'This place is lovely. Relaxing. Should fix you right up.'

Can't argue with the first part of that. If you can ignore the gently smoking bass drum and look past it, you'll see a view down a long, sweeping garden to the sea beyond that fair takes the breath away.

Would I really rather be stuck in a grotty little bedsit somewhere? Because that's the only other choice open to me.

But then that wouldn't come with all those bad memories, and this strange, unpredictable man . . .

'The view certainly hasn't changed,' I remark, trying to push those thoughts away. I'm here now. I have to make the best of it, if I can.

'No! It never does. That's why I love it here. The fresh air is wonderful,' Red says, and takes a long drag on his cigarette. 'Borkins has made sure your old room is ready. Why don't you go up and check it out, while I make us some lunch?'

I stare at him for a moment. 'You're making lunch?'

'Yes! I love to cook . . . well, Sophia does. I generally watch and make helpful suggestions.'

Ah. That makes more sense. The only time I've ever heard about Red Fairweather cooking was when he appeared drunk on *Good Morning Britain* back in the mid-eighties, and nearly brained Rustie Lee with a frying pan.

'That's right after I've got this drum back into the studio, silly bloody thing.' Red looks at his butler. 'Borks! Show Will up to his room!'

I hold up a hand. 'That's okay. I can find it myself. Help Red with that drum . . . *David.*'

Borkins (look, I've already forgotten his surname, okay? The size and heft of 'Borkins' is so huge that it has completely overwritten my memory of it) gives me a grateful look. Not least because it means he won't need to call an ambulance to take Red to A&E, when the old fool puts his back out trying

to lift that drum on his own.

Also, I need a little time by myself.

Red Fairweather is the type of person that requires you to have some time alone after you meet him. If only to reassure yourself that the universe is still a relatively sensible place, once you're out of his general vicinity.

I walk back through the studio and the drawing room, and up the stairs on the left, carrying my suitcase. I have to marvel at the fact I remember the place so well, despite the intervening years. At the top of the stairs, I turn left again, bringing me towards my old bedroom in the corner of the building.

As I walk along the short corridor that leads to it, I have to let out an audible gasp when I see that the door still has the Nintendo sticker I slapped on it about a thousand years ago.

I suddenly feel a wave of vertigo overcome me, and have to steady myself against the wall. Memories hit me like an out-of-control articulated lorry.

I spend a few moments just stood there, staring at the bedroom door and breathing heavily, before I can will my legs into working again.

When they do, it still takes me far too long to get to the actual door itself, and push it open.

'Jesus Christ,' I whisper to the house.

It's all *the same*.

The enormous super-king bed I loved to both sleep in – and jump on, back when I was young enough to do such things.

The massive hi-fi stereo system, sat in the corner – both testament and monolith to the way we used to consume music, back in the dark ages. There are still a load of vinyl albums in the shelving at the bottom. All of Holy Moly's albums included, of course. I used to listen to them over and over and over again.

On the wall above it are the crossed, battered drumsticks Red gave me when he got back from the tour in Japan. They were used during the gig Holy Moly played on my thirteenth birthday.

Then there's the weird blue gingham wallpaper on the back wall that I never received an adequate explanation for.

The standard lamp in the corner that used to cast interesting and ever-changing shadows on the walls, depending on what paraphernalia I had lying about the place.

The big, black wardrobe that I could still easily fit into, if I had half a

mind. All the Nintendo stickers I stuck on that are still there too.

And that carpet. That thick, grey shagpile carpet.

I can feel it under my toes right now, as if it had only been a few minutes since I last stepped on it.

Unconsciously, I shuffle the slip-on Skechers off my feet, drop my suitcase and walk onto the past.

Yep.

That's how it feels alright. Like every cord in the carpet's fibre is massaging the soles of my feet.

Then I turn to the wardrobe and walk towards it.

When I open the door, will I find what used to live in there?

Yes.

I bet that I will.

And sure enough, as I pull both doors open (holding my breath without realising it as I do so) the giant CRT TV that Red had built into the wardrobe comes into view, along with the Super Nintendo Entertainment System he bought me for my twelfth birthday.

We'd sit on the end of the bed, playing *Super Mario World* on it for hours. It's where my love of gaming came from, something that I still have to this day – though I never really moved past what would now be called 'retro' consoles like this one.

Another wave of that strange vertigo forces me to back up, and sit down heavily on my bed.

Then I decide to flop back onto it completely, because why the hell wouldn't I? It's my bed, after all.

Christ. It's still as comfortable as I remember.

I'm deathly afraid the best night's sleep I'm going to have in a long time will be tonight's.

I always felt like this room was something of a safe haven when I came to stay with Red. You need a safe haven when you're around someone who can be that completely out of control. Shagging-frog statues and burning bass drums are just the tip of the iceberg. And it's an enormous iceberg that you can easily Titanic your way into, if you're not very careful.

Red Fairweather is not an easy or a comfortable person to be around. I felt that back then, even when I was giggling right next to him as they installed the shagging frogs – and I feel it even more keenly now, over thirty years later.

But he's downstairs right now, 'making lunch', and I'm up here in the quiet of this room, marvelling at how comfortable this bed still feels.

Unfortunately, my traitorous brain decides to break the comfortable moment I'm having, by dredging up the last memory I actually have of being in this room. Namely the one where my father told me to pack up my clothes, because he had to send me back home early.

I was fifteen, and full of all the piss and vinegar that comes with being that age. I was also a lot more immature than I could have possibly admitted to anyone, so the tears that rolled down my cheeks as I stuffed my creased clothing into my case were as surprising as they were embarrassing to my teenage ego. I'd hit the iceberg, and didn't know how to deal with it at all.

I'd only been in the house three days when Red told me I had to leave again.

This came as a huge shock, because he'd promised we'd be going to do clay pigeon shooting the next day, before heading to the local pub in the village to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of Holy Moly's first number one album.

But none of that happened, because Red unceremoniously told me I had to pack my things and leave early, because he 'had some stuff he needed to do with the band before the next tour starts'. He promised me he would be back for my sixteenth birthday in three months. A promise that he never fulfilled, *damn him*.

Mum bore the brunt of my misery and rejection when I got home, of course. She always did. Without her, Red's unpredictability would probably have broken me completely over the years. She was his total opposite: the constant figure of reliability in my life. And she knew what Red was like. That unpredictable nature was what attracted her to him in the first place, and what ultimately drove her away. I often think she felt a little guilty that Red Fairweather was my father, which was crazy . . . but also kind of understandable.

What wasn't understandable was my father throwing me out like that. Even less was the fact I never saw him again.

Nothing more from Red Fairweather for three decades – except the healthy (and court-mandated) amount of maintenance money he sent to my mother to help with my upbringing.

When I left the house that day with tears drying on my cheeks, it was the last time I'd be in Red Fairweather's company – until I saw him ten

minutes ago wearing a pink ladies' dressing gown.

My jaw clenches.

What the actual fuck do I think I'm doing here?

This isn't some pleasant jaunt down memory lane. This is something that's been forced on me by (*my wife*) circumstance, and I don't have to be here, if I don't want to be!

. . . feels like some of that piss and vinegar is still in there somewhere.

I'm forty-five. For fuck's sake. I shouldn't be lying on my teenage bed and dreaming about a good night's sleep on it.

I immediately jump off the thing, like it's suddenly burning hot, and march out of the bedroom, resolute in my mind that I *should not be here*.

I do not want to stay in this bloody house! It's not easy. It's not relaxing. It's not comfortable.

It's not *safe*.

I am going to tell my eccentric and awful father this, and be in the car and on my way in no time at all. I will check in to the nearest Premier Inn that I can find, and think about my next move after that.

Yes.

That sounds like a plan.

I tromp back down the stairs, walk across the reception hall, through the dining room, and into the kitchen.

. . . where I find my father throwing waffles at a pot plant.

To be honest, when it comes to what you might find my father doing in a kitchen at any given time, you could take that last sentence, throw any two nouns of your liking together, and there's a good chance he'd be capable of it.

He could be throwing chickens at a statue of Michael Heseltine. Throwing dildos at a coffin. Spoons at a pony.

Virtually anything is possible.

The sight of him merrily lobbing half-cooked waffles at what looks like an extremely healthy ficus, while a dark-haired lady in a pinny stands back with a look of horror on her face, rather knocks me off my stride a bit.

'Red? What the hell are you doing?' I ask.

He turns and looks at me, giggling as he does so. 'I'm chucking waffles at that pot plant,' he tells me.

'Yes. I can see that. Why?'

Red shrugs. 'Why not?'

Oh, for crying out loud.

‘Red, I’m leaving,’ I tell him. ‘I can’t stay here. It’s just . . . *too much.*’

‘What’s too much?’ he replies, looking confused.

The fact he has to ask, given what he’s currently up to, is quite incredible.

‘Being *here*. With *you*. In this house,’ I say, and point upwards. ‘Why is my room still exactly the same like that?’

Red blinks a couple of times. ‘Because it’s *your* room, kid,’ he says, as if this is in any way a decent explanation.

He was probably just too damn lazy to change it.

‘Well, it’s got too many memories, Red. Not good ones.’

‘Really?’ He looks dreadfully disappointed.

‘Yes, really. I’m going to get my suitcase, and get out of here.’ I look over at the pot plant. ‘You’d better get that waffle off that leaf before it breaks it,’ I remark, before turning to leave.

‘Will! Wait!’ Red cries. ‘Sophia! Waffle!’ he exclaims, and throws it over to her. Sadly, she’s not quite as quick on the uptake as she could be, and it lands on her forehead.

This is what working for Red Fairweather gets you. Slapped in the face by breakfast products.

Imagine what being his son feels like.

Aaargh!

I thought I’d moved past all this! I’d gotten over it!

But here it is . . . all over again. All that teen angst and pubescent fury, channelled through the body and mind of a man who should know far better.

I should *never* have come here!

I haven’t fully made it back across the reception hall before Red catches up, grabbing me by one arm. ‘Will! Stop! Please!’

I allow myself to be spun around. ‘Why?! Why should I stop, Red?! What’s the point in all of this? Really? You threw me out of your life nearly thirty years ago. Why the hell do you care so much now?’

‘I always cared, son,’ he tells me, looking deeply hurt.

‘Ha! Could have fooled me!’ I retort, starting on my way back up the stairs to get my suitcase again.

Red doesn’t follow me, thank God.

Instead, he just waits for me in the hall, until I reappear, lugging the suitcase behind me.

I get to the bottom of the staircase before he speaks again.

‘Where are you going to go, kid?’ he asks as I struggle towards the door.

‘I don’t know. I’ll figure something out.’

‘And then what? What will you do? On your own?’

‘That’s none of your concern!’ I roar as I throw the front door open. ‘It never has been!’

‘But it should be!’

‘It’s a bit late for that!’

‘No it *isn’t*, Will!’ Red exclaims, striding over to where I’m trying to lug the suitcase through the door, and slamming the thing hard in my face before I get a chance to go through it.

‘What the hell?!’ I rage, stunned that he’d block my path like that.

‘Stay!’

‘No!’

‘Please!’

‘Why?’

‘Because you’re . . . you’re *sad!*’

‘I’m what?!’

Red takes a step back. ‘*Sad*, kid. Audrey told me all about it. All about *you*. How you’re feeling.’

I drop the suitcase. ‘So what?’ I say in a defeated voice.

‘So what? That’s no way to *live*, kid. It really isn’t. And if you go off on your own now, somewhere without me around, or your wife, you’re just going to get . . . *sadder*. Trust me. I’ve seen it happen to other people. It never ends well. Look, I know I haven’t been around for the past few years —’

‘Few?’

He ignores that. ‘. . . but give me a chance, eh? If you really can’t stand being here after a few days, then I understand. You can go find yourself somewhere else to stay. But just for now, hang out with your old man for a little while, yeah? It’ll be fun!’

Red starts to mock box with me in a playful manner. I watch him do it for a few moments before he stops, having seen the expression on my face.

‘Why are you doing this?’ I ask him in a tired voice. ‘Really?’

‘Why?’

‘Yes. Why? I don’t hear from you for many, *many* years . . . and all of a

sudden, you've decided *now* is the time to come to my aid? Where were you when Mum died? Why didn't you reach out then?'

Red's face crumples. 'It was too hard, kid. Your mum and I . . . didn't part on the best of terms in the end, when our marriage broke down. But I never stopped loving her. So I had to . . . stay away, even when I found out what was happening to her from one of her old contacts. I was too . . . scared, I think. Weak, you know?'

Blimey. The honesty is both painful and shocking.

But then that was never one of Red's problems. For all his faults, being a liar or a dissembler was never one of them. All those promises he made me when I was a kid were genuine – even if he didn't follow up on most of them.

Red Fairweather is disorganised, strange, selfish and unreliable. But he's not a liar, I'll give him that.

'Well, I . . . I needed you then,' I tell him. 'Hell, I needed you for all the years before that. And now look at me . . . I'm in my mid-forties. I'm way too old to have my father sort my life out for me.'

Red throws his arms out to either side. 'But at least you could give me a *chance*, kid!' He's launched into performance mode now. 'And you're never too old to get, or need, help! Let me make some of that lost time up. Let me see if I can help you feel a little happier about the world. Come on . . . what do you say?'

He stands there and looks at me, arms thrown apart like he's just finished a drum solo on stage at the Hammersmith Apollo.

If he's expecting a round of applause, he's not bloody getting one.

He threw you out of his life. Why are you even still standing here?

Because I've really got nowhere else to go?

Because Audrey told me to give it a chance?

. . . and because he said he was scared when Mum died. Weak.

I raise my head and look towards the chandelier hanging from the ceiling, which I now notice has one drumstick stuck in it.

When I look back down again, it's with a mixture of resignation and extreme doubt. 'Alright. I'll stay for a few more days, Red. See how it goes.'

'Great!' my father exclaims excitedly. 'Borkins!' he then shouts across the reception hall. 'Can you take Will's suitcase back up to his room for him?'

'Of course I can, sir,' Borkins responds from over by the right-hand staircase, making us both jump out of our skins. How did he get over there?

‘And I’ll finish making us our waffles,’ Red continues.

‘Actually,’ I begin, ‘I’m not the biggest fan of waffles. Could I just have a—’

‘Waffles for all!’ Red cries, marching off back towards the kitchen.

Borkins and I swap a look that speaks volumes.

‘It will be . . . very nice to have somebody else around the place,’ he says to me gratefully, in what I can already assume is a rather uncharacteristic display of emotion.

‘Yes. I’m sure it will,’ I reply, not convinced in the slightest.

From the kitchen, we hear Sophia scream.

‘I’ll take the suitcase, Borkins. You go and sort out whatever that is.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘Call me Will. Please.’

‘Will do, sir.’

Another scream.

Bloody hell. Can I seriously cope with this?

My father is a human whirlwind. Always has been. It’s what made him a star (along with a preternatural ability to hit drumskins incredibly fast, incredibly hard, and with extremely good timing). Whirlwinds can be scary things, if you’re too damn close to them.

I am *not* a human whirlwind.

I am a gentle gust, blowing through, without anybody else noticing.

My face crumples as I realise I’ve just described myself as a silent fart.

‘If anybody wants me, I’ll be in my room,’ I say to Borkins, and make my way back upstairs.

I wonder if the Nintendo still works?



Of course it does.

My last *Super Mario World* save is even still held in the SNES’s tiny memory banks.

I feel a bit sick, to be honest with you.

And I want to call Audrey. Hell, I *need* to call Audrey.

But I’ve barely been here five minutes. I can’t just go running to her without giving this situation a bit more time to play out.

Having unpacked my clothes, I make my way back downstairs, where I

am greeted with a mound of waffles, and a pot plant with a broken branch.

I eat a couple of the waffles, because while I'm not all that keen on them, I am also pretty damned hungry.

Then Sophia – who, when she's not screaming because of the antics of her employer, is an extremely pleasant and friendly lady of Eastern European extraction – makes me the best coffee I've had in years, using a very large bean-to-cup machine on one of the kitchen counters.

I take this out through the kitchen's patio doors, to sit in the sun for a bit on the massive outdoor couch Red has set up to use when looking at that stunning view.

The sun is high in the sky, and is pleasantly warm on my face.

This might actually not be too bad, if I can just live like this for a while.

If for no other reason than for the quality of the coffee and the scenery.

Ten blissful minutes of peace pass. I only wish Banjo was here, so I could tickle his ears. I wish Audrey was here too, so she could gently stroke mine.

The momentary pang of separation anxiety I feel is the only thing that kind of ruins this experience. Other than that, though, I feel somewhat content for the first time since Borkins invited me in this morning.

'Golf?!' Red exclaims, emerging from the kitchen. He disappeared after his single waffle earlier, telling us all he was going to put some actual clothes on.

The clothes in question would look slightly more appropriate on an eighteen-year-old, given that they are spray-on bleached blue jeans, a Rush t-shirt, and a black leather jacket that swamps my father's skinny frame.

How a seventy-four-year-old man can get into jeans like that is beyond me.

Red is also holding two golf clubs aloft like he's about to go into battle.

'I'm sorry?' I say, realising that my temporary peace has been royally shattered.

'Golf, kid! I had Borkins install a tee for me, so I could fire some balls off. Figured you could join me!'

'But . . . but . . . I'm not very good at golf,' I bluster. 'And I still have some coffee left, so—'

'Nah! Come on! It'll be a laugh. Gypsie and Albo are crap at it. I always manage to hit the ball further than them. I reckon you could give me a run for my money, though!'

Gypsie and Albo, in case you're wondering, are two of the other members of Holy Moly. Gypsie was on lead guitar, Albo on rhythm guitar.

The others in the band are StuTheNu on bass guitar and the honey-voiced Danny Drager on vocals.

I doubt Gypsie and Albo were any more keen on whacking golf balls off a tee than I am. But like them, Red is giving me no choice.

'Come on! Just a few balls, kid. Won't take long!'

Red hands me one of the driving irons, which I take more than a little reluctantly.

He then leads me across the garden, to a flat, extremely well-cultivated patch of grass on an elevated spot on the left-hand side, which provides an excellent view of the garden sloping down ahead of us.

On the grass is a large bucket of golf balls and several tees.

'The best thing to do is to see if you can hit the submarine,' Red tells me as he plants a tee in the ground.

'Hit the what?'

'The submarine.' Red points down the garden to where, some hundred feet distant, by the shoreline and the edge of the house's grounds, is a small, rusty orange submarine.

I give him a perplexed look. 'Why have you got a rusty orange submarine at the bottom of your . . . you know what, never mind. Just get on with it.'

Red laughs, pops a golf ball on the tee and takes an almighty whack at it.

This careens off to the left, over the boundary fence of our property and into next door's equally lengthy garden.

'Whoops!' Red exclaims happily. 'Old Sir John will have a moan about that, I'm sure!'

This is, I have no doubt, not the first golf ball to end up over the extensive garden fence. I would feel bad for the Old Sir John, having to live next door to the maniacal aging rock star, but as I am actually now living *with* the maniacal aging rock star, I'll have to save all that sympathy for myself.

I smack a golf ball about ten feet in a half-hearted strike, and call it good.

'Oh come on!' Red cries. 'You can do better than that!' He starts to wave his arms around like a chicken for some reason. 'You gotta loosen up,

kid!’

‘Loosen up?’

‘Yeah!’

My father then drops his club and grabs me by both shoulders. ‘You’re so bloody tense, Will!’ he says, and starts to give me an extremely painful massage.

‘Ow! Stop that!’ I demand, moving swiftly away.

Red doesn’t seem offended by this. In fact, he just goes back to doing the chicken impression again. ‘You have to *let go* a bit, kid,’ he tells me. ‘Stop worrying about everything so much. Go on . . . have another go!’

I roll my eyes, but pop another golf ball on the tee as I’m told, and step back.

‘Remember! Loooooosen up,’ my father instructs, arms flapping.

I am not going to flap my arms like a chicken, no matter how much it might loosen me up.

I take another swing at the ball, and it flies about three feet further than the first one.

‘Ach! That’s not it!’ Red tells me. ‘Look. This is how you do it.’

He bustles me out of the way, and places another ball on the tee. He then shakes his whole body up and down like a wet dog that’s just come out of the water, looks down the garden at the submarine, sets himself, and swings at the ball with all his strength.

This time, his aim is far more accurate, and the golf ball flies straight and true. When it hits the metallic shell of the submarine it makes a very satisfying *gloing* noise.

Red immediately crows with triumph and starts to dance around the tee. ‘You see! You just need to loosen up, kid! That’s what you need! That’s what’ll fix you!’

I roll my eyes again.

If only it were that easy, old man.

Life does not get better just because you start doing chicken impressions.

My marriage is not going to be fixed if I can hit an orange submarine with a golf ball from a hundred feet away.

It’s more complicated than that.

Much more.

But then ‘complicated’ has never been Red Fairweather’s strong suit,

any more than dressing sensibly. That mentality may come from playing the drums.

There goes an old joke: what's the difference between a drum machine and a drummer? You only need to punch the instructions into the drum machine once.

Drummers are universally simple folk. Not ones prone to deep reflection, or dealing with *complicated* things. My father is the epitome of this.

And I just don't see how somebody like that can offer me much in the way of assistance in how I deal with my life moving forward.

'Go on! Try it again!' Red insists. 'You saw me, you just do the same thing.'

'I can't do that, Red.'

'Why not?'

'Because I'm *not like you!*' I'm suddenly angry. I was quite happy sitting there with my coffee in the sun. I didn't want to come over here and hit golf balls, or get poor advice from a man doing an impression of a farmyard animal. 'I can't just *loosen up* and ignore the way things actually are! The world doesn't work like that.'

Red looks confused. 'Yes it does.'

I let out a cry of frustration. '*Yours*, maybe. But that's not the way it works for the rest of us!'

My father looks deeply disappointed. 'But it *should*.'

Oh my God. Who's the parent here, and who's the child?

'Well, I'm afraid it doesn't,' I tell him as bluntly as possible. I then take a deep breath to think for a moment, before continuing. 'You can't just fix my problems by telling me I need to change the way I worry about things . . . because those things *are not going to change with me*. The world is the way it is, Red. The past is the past. The present is the present. And the future is the future.'

Christ, this has become depressing. That shouldn't be possible this close to chicken impressions, but there we have it.

'You can't go through life thinking that way,' Red tries to admonish.

'Yes, I can. Because I have no choice.' I drop the golf club. 'What else is there to do?'

Red doesn't respond to that. Instead, he looks out over the garden, apparently lost in thought.

Maybe I'm getting through to him. Maybe my words are having some effect. Maybe he'll come to appreciate my position, and that will help him unders—

'A party!' he cries, swinging his head back towards me and grinning.

'What?!'

'That's what you need! A party!'

'A party?'

'Yes! You say the world doesn't change around you . . . well, I disagree. I think you've just been living a bit of a sad, boring life, Will. I intend to change that, before it's too late!'

'You do?'

This isn't right. Red is supposed to be coming around to my way of thinking. Not suggesting bloody *parties*.

'Yeah!' He also drops his golf club and both arms go back out to his sides again. It's something of a signature move when he's excited. 'A big blowout! We'll invite everyone I know . . . and everyone you know too.'

'That won't take long.'

'And it'll be *great!*' he continues, ignoring me. 'A chance for us to have some proper *fun*. Maybe do a little father-son bonding over a beer or two, and I can show you the world can be a better place than you think it is!'

'I don't mean the world around us, Red, I mean the world inside m—'

'Fireworks!' he shouts, head held to the sky. 'And a hog roast! No! *Two* hog roasts!' Red exclaims, and starts to march off back towards the house, shouting for Borkins.

Oh God.

I'm going to have to go to a fucking *party*, aren't I? I won't be able to avoid it. It's literally happening where I'm going to be living.

. . . or I could just beat myself to death right here with a golf club.

I'm not sure at this stage which idea I find less appealing.

Bar

Rock stars can arrange parties in the time it takes the rest of us to arrange a takeaway.

This is not surprising, as rock stars also hold parties about as often as the rest of us sneeze.

That was always my experience with Red when I was a kid, anyway.

I know he's made a big point of saying this party is being held in my honour, but frankly he's never needed much of an excuse to hold one.

I seem to remember one shindig being arranged just because it was the anniversary of Jack Daniel's being invented.

Mum would always come and get me when one of these parties was mooted, something at the time I was dreadfully put out about. Nothing could possibly rouse a teenage boy's interest more than the idea of a party hosted by a rock star. But Mum knew when she had to step in, to protect me from my father's worst excesses. As a kid, I hated it, but as an adult, I completely understand why she did it.

Frankly, I would like nothing more than for her to turn up in her Mini right *now*, and escort me away from the madness that is to come.

He's ordered an inflatable bouncy castle, you see. And I don't think I can handle that. Physically or mentally.

Where are you when I really need you, Mum?

God.

The guest list is as long as my doubts are deep. And by crikey, pretty much everyone that's been invited is attending.

It's Sunday evening. Don't these people have jobs, or other responsibilities?

. . . what a stupid thing to say. Of course they don't. They are aging rock stars and their hangers-on. Not having any responsibilities comes with the territory.

All of Holy Moly will be in attendance, of course. Gypsie is even coming back from his villa in Tuscany for it.

And with Holy Moly comes an *entourage*. One that's only got bigger over the decades as they've accumulated more people, via the mediums of both marriage and procreation.

Holy Moly are all still quite . . . *virile*, and the length of the guest list reflects this.

Not to mention all the hangers-on they still have about their persons, even after being out of the charts for a good thirty years. Red has approximately fifty people coming to the party.

I have two.

And it's only two if you count people with four legs.

But that's fine with me.

In fact, that's *more* than fine with me, and the main reason I can tolerate the bloody party happening in my honour at all.

I haven't seen Audrey and Banjo in *days*, and I am desperate to do so.

Audrey was reluctant to come along, as you'd expect, but Red managed to persuade her it was a good idea.

I was surprised when she said yes, as it's not exactly the way separations are supposed to be handled, but I was also *delighted*.

Maybe a week away from me has thawed her standpoint? Maybe she's missing me so much that this whole thing is starting to sound like a bad idea?

Surely she must be having second thoughts, if she's willing to come to this party and hang out with me?

I was dreading the damn thing, up until Red came into my room to tell me that he'd chatted with my wife and that she'd agreed to attend . . . then my spirits lifted magnificently.

Maybe the mad old bastard is on to something with holding this bash – even if it's not for the reasons he thought.

A party isn't suddenly going to make the world an easier or better place for a cautious man like me, but if it brings me back together with my wife, then mission accomplished, as far as I'm concerned. So, it's with some actual enthusiasm that I help Borkins, Sophia and the staff Red has hired for the party with the extensive preparations.

This mainly consists of me holding the front door open for people carrying a variety of interesting and expensive things. Mostly alcohol, of course. But also a large amount of party snacks.

I also lead the guys with the hog roast (just the one it turns out; Borkins managed to persuade Red we didn't need two) around onto the patio, and the bloke with the fireworks down to the bottom of the garden.

It's quite frightening how I've made myself at home here again.

Red is delighted about it, but I feel weirdly like I'm *betraying* something or someone by doing it. I'm not quite sure what or who, though.

Either way, all the memories of staying in this house as a teenager have come flooding back with remarkable clarity. The extensive knowledge I gained about Holy Moly as a teenager – which I've tried to repress as much as possible, subsequently – has all risen again in my mind, and I truly do feel like I've regressed back to my younger years.

Mentally, anyway. When I try to help the caterers lift the hog up onto the spit, I can feel something pull unpleasantly in my upper back.

Be bloody careful, Fairweather. Just because you're living like a teenager again, it doesn't mean you bloody are one.

Two painkillers take the edge off that, but I make sure I don't get too carried away with the preparations for today's entertainment.

I could also do without the 'Welcome back, Will!' banner that Borkins has spirited up from somewhere, and hung in the reception hall. It's a reminder that I'm supposed to be the centre of attention tonight, and that's the last thing I want.

I can only fail at it miserably, you see. Trying to be the centre of attention around a bunch of people who have raised it to an art form is impossible.

I had toyed with the idea of pretending to Audrey that I'm having a *super-duper* time here at Moly Mansions – in the hopes that she'd take me back after only a week. But the last thing I intend to do is give Red any impression that I'm having that good a time, and Audrey knows me well enough to see through any subterfuge anyway. No. I just want to have a couple of quiet, pleasant and above all *happy* drinks with my wife and my dog, and let Red and his cohorts get up to whatever they so desire for the rest of the evening. As long as I can get off to sleep by about 11 p.m., I will be more or less happy.

In years gone by, there would be no chance of the party ending until six or seven the next morning, but they're old now. Surely they can't have the same stamina they had when they were in their forties or fifties?

The first guests arrive about 3 p.m.

This consists of Albo, his wife, Miriam, two of their kids and their seven grandchildren.

Excellent. With children present, the levels of debauchery will have to be kept to a minimum.

Albo hugs me so hard I feel a couple of ribs crack. ‘So good to see you, mate!’ he exclaims in that broad East London accent of his. Albo has gained a fair amount of weight in the past thirty years, and lost a great deal of hair. Doesn’t stop him wearing round purple spectacles and a fur coat, though.

StuTheNu appears next, about an hour later. He has no wife, but has brought three girls in their mid- to late twenties with him. These are The Queens of Daylight.

That’s their band name, I hasten to add. We haven’t been graced with the presence of royalty, or anything. Stu’s three daughters have been in a semi-popular rock band of their own for the past few years. Huge on YouTube, apparently.

Certainly big enough for them to have a healthy entourage of likely-looking weirdos with them, anyway.

StuTheNu and I have always had something of a stand-offish relationship. I could never really work out why. I know Mum never really liked him that much, though I could never glean the reasons for her dislike.

He gives me a rather perfunctory handshake, before making his way into the kitchen. The daughters and their crew more or less ignore me completely, despite the fact the party is supposed to be in my honour.

I have no problem with this.

I do have a problem with Gypsie slobbering all over me, though. He’s clearly already drunk, having spent most of the flight back to the UK knee-deep in champagne. His wife is Celeste, and Celeste has breasts.

No. I’m sorry. I mean Celeste has BREASTS.

Holy Moly’s top-selling album was *When the Storm Comes* and I think a large chunk of Gypsie’s share of the profits has been attached to this poor young woman’s chest.

Celeste is Gypsie’s fifth wife. I think. Maybe sixth.

. . . possibly seventh, but definitely not eighth.

He is also accompanied by what looks like a biker gang.

Actually, scratch that. They don’t *look like* a biker gang. They *are* a biker gang. You can tell from all the bloody motorbikes. The big Harley-Davidson types that look like they’ve had the leftovers from an abattoir

superglued to them, and then been dipped in liquid chrome.

Gypsie was always the one in the band who enjoyed the most leather, and nothing has changed. He likes wearing it, and others around him should therefore jolly well wear it too.

There's so much of it about all of sudden around the house that I have a desire to turn vegetarian.

It's a good job the driveway is big, because those chrome-covered motorbikes are bloody monstrous.

Last of the band to arrive is Danny Drager, who unlike his cohorts is dressed rather sensibly in a pair of light blue jeans and a Ferrari F1 t-shirt. His hair is cut in a neat short back and sides, and he looks less like an aging rock star than he does a typical grandad out for a Sunday afternoon walk. The only things that really betray his origins are the tattoos sleeved down both arms, the nose ring and the grizzled visage of one who has partaken of far too many drugs over the years.

The reason for this sensible get-up are right behind Danny as he enters the house. Soochi is her name, and controlling Danny Drager's existence is her game.

Danny met and married Soochi about fifteen years ago, from what I've gathered from the conversations I've had with Red about the band recently. They met in Colombia, and he fell head over heels in love with her. Soochi came into Danny's life as a health guru and lifestyle manager, and everything changed once she was installed firmly at his side.

Danny isn't allowed to do much these days if it doesn't involve chickpeas or having his aura cleansed. It's a constant source of disgruntlement to the rest of the band.

Danny shakes hands warmly with me, and Soochi does similar. She's a tiny woman, who favours long, flowing clothing, but I can't help but spot the very expensive-looking jewellery hanging off her, which makes me come to some conclusions that I probably wouldn't air in public.

All of these colourful characters are all well and good, but the person I truly want to see has as yet not arrived.

It gets to six o'clock and I'm starting to look at my watch every few minutes.

'You alright, kid?' Red asks as he struts past me, carrying a large pork roll and an unopened beer. I've sequestered myself out in the kitchen, while most of the party goes on in the drawing room. Nobody's missing my

presence, despite the party ostensibly being for me. I figure as long as people see me when they pass to get more snacks, then at least I can claim to be a part of proceedings.

‘Yes, I’m okay, Red,’ I tell my father.

‘You don’t look it. Here, have a beer!’ he tells me, and thrusts the bottle into my hand.

I have thus far avoided consuming any alcohol, because it’s far too early, it’s a work night, and I want to be completely level-headed when Audrey arrives. I’m not sure I want to drink anything at all, if I’m being honest.

I feel *dreadful* the next day if I only have a couple of drinks, and I have a report I need to finish off for my boss tomorrow. Long gone are the days of me being able to cope with a hangover in the morning on a workday. Especially because they get worse the older I get.

But . . . oh, look . . . Red has flipped the top off the bottle, and is looking at me expectantly.

I take a tiny sip and try to give him a smile. He’s gone to an awful lot of effort with this party, so I suppose I’d better at least try to look like I’m having a good time.

Satisfied that he’s persuaded me to consume alcohol – possibly Red’s main answer to any problem – he struts off in the direction of the drawing room, where all the noise and fun is at.

I sit for another thirty minutes, not drinking the beer, until the doorbell rings and Borkins goes to answer it.

For some reason, I am incredibly nervous as I hurry out of the kitchen. This must be Audrey – and I haven’t been nervous about seeing Audrey for about eight years, since our third or fourth date.

But she’s arrived . . . and that’s the main thing.

Hopefully, she’s here tonight to tell me to come home.

Borkins has the door open as I reach the reception hall, and indeed it is my wife standing at the threshold, with our pudgy little old dog by her side.

It’s only been a week since I saw her last, but it feels like a year.

‘Hi!’ I say enthusiastically, and march up to the door.

Yes! That’s right! Look cheerful. Look happy. Look like you’ve got your shit together.

‘Hey, Will,’ she replies, a somewhat awkward look on her face.

‘It’s the wife!’ Red screeches from behind me, and throws his arms

open.

Oh no. He's going to go in for a hug.

He's only met Audrey once before, as far as I know, but he's about to subject her to a drunken Red Fairweather hug. This cannot go well.

Borkins and I jump out of the way – because you would too if a six-foot, wild-haired, inebriated drummer came at you like that – and I have to cringe as Red goes to wrap his arms around my wife.

I am surprised to see that the hug is quite gentle, all things considered.

That doesn't stop Audrey looking supremely perturbed, though. She's more a polite handshake kind of person with people she doesn't know, much like the rest of us.

Banjo seems to take a liking to Red, though, as he starts to jump up at his leg and wag his tail like mad.

I'm not sure whether I approve of my dog's reaction or not, to be honest.

I sure as hell don't approve of my father hijacking my greeting to my wife, after a week of not seeing her – but when Red's had a few, his airs and graces (what there are of them) go out of the window completely.

'Thanks for coming!' Red says to Audrey, after he's broken the hug. 'A party for Will wouldn't be the same without you!'

'Thanks,' Audrey replies, looking into the house with an expression of extreme doubt on her face. She can hear what's going on in the drawing room.

I feel pretty damn doubtful about the whole thing, and the party is meant to be *for me*. I'm also a lot more used to being around all that rock and roll, thanks to my childhood. It can come as something of a shock to those who have never been around it before.

'Come in!' Red cries exuberantly, beckoning Audrey into the house. She does as she's told, still with that perturbed look on her face.

'Yes! Come through to the kitchen with me, eh?' I tell her, trying to match Red's exuberance, but probably failing, because nobody in the world can be as exuberant as Red Fairweather when he's had a few beers. 'I'll get you a drink, and Banjo some water.'

She gives me a grateful look. I am a rock in a raging sea of Holy Moly.

'Yeah, yeah! Get a drink, and . . . you know . . . make yourself at home!' Red instructs, waving his arms all over the place, and spilling beer as he does so. '*Me carser, sew carser,*' he adds, and chuckles mightily.

‘Come on,’ I say to my wife, ignoring the appalling pronunciation as much as possible. ‘We’ll pop through to meet everyone in a bit, Red,’ I tell my father.

He throws me a massive thumbs up, and twirls around to strut his way back into the drawing room, where it appears that, from the sound of things, Holy Moly’s music has now gone on the stereo. Gypsie and Albo have also broken out the musical instruments, and are accompanying themselves. Everybody is singing Danny’s lyrics – except Danny, because Soochi doesn’t like him to overextend himself these days.

I decide to lead Audrey and Banjo out onto the terrace, after I’ve poured her a lemonade, picked up my full bottle of beer and grabbed a bowl of water. It’s relatively quiet over this side – if you can ignore the horrifying rendition of ‘Riding to Your Love’ going on from the other side of the house, the giant hog roast and the bouncy castle.

‘Sorry, I know it’s a bit much,’ I say to Audrey as we sit down.

‘Yeah. It is a bit. How are you . . . dealing with it? Is being here helping at all?’

‘Oh, yes. I’m fine! Absolutely *fine!*’ I attempt, plastering a hectic smile across my face.

Audrey gives me a look that speaks volumes.

She can read me like a bloody book.

The smile instantly drops off my face, and I pause for a moment, trying to think of the honest thing to say. ‘It’s not easy, Auds,’ I tell her. ‘I feel like I’ve gone back in time . . . and not in a good way. A lot of . . . bad memories keep coming to the surface.’

Audrey looks a little guilty. ‘Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘Thanks,’ I reply, a little weakly. ‘How are things at home?’ I ask, wanting to change the subject. ‘How are you . . . you know . . . getting on with all the changes? How are you feeling about . . . stuff now?’ My heart hammers as I say this. I wish it didn’t.

She nods quickly a couple of times. ‘Oh, you know, I’m fine. Work’s been busy this week, so I haven’t done much else. And Banjo misses you.’

I lean forward in my seat. ‘And do you miss me too?’ I say, affecting what I hope is a cheeky tone, and taking a sip of my beer.

When Audrey doesn’t immediately respond, I feel my heart sink.

‘It’s strange not having you around,’ she eventually says, after considering the question for what feels like an uncomfortably long period of

time.

‘Maybe I should come back, then?’ I say, trying to keep that cheeky tone, but coming across more like I’m desperate and trying to hide it. Which is, of course, the truth.

The expression Audrey returns can only be described as stony-faced. ‘No, Will. It’s only been a week, and that’s not long enough for you to . . . get to grips with the way you’ve been. Get a bit of perspective. Spend time with your dad. For you to . . . stop worrying so much about getting old.’

I respond with a laugh that doesn’t really have much humour in it. ‘I’m drinking beer, and it’s only 7 p.m. I’m living in my teenage bedroom, and there are a load of rock stars over there, getting hammered, and probably snorting cocaine. I’m not exactly living like a pensioner.’

‘That’s not what I meant.’

I sigh. ‘Yeah, I know.’

I put my beer down onto the patio table and run my hands through my hair. This has not gone the way I thought it would. ‘Why did you come, Auds?’ I ask my wife. It obviously wasn’t to ask me to come home.

‘Your father was *very* insistent,’ she says. ‘He told me he thought you needed the moral support, and a familiar face.’ I give her a look of complete disbelief. She rolls her eyes. ‘Okay . . . he actually told me you were being a miserable bugger, that he was fed up with it, and that he’d pay me to come and cheer you up, so you didn’t ruin the party.’

I sigh heavily and shudder. That sounds more like Red.

‘I didn’t take any money, I hasten to add,’ she points out.

‘No, you’d never do something like that,’ I reply. ‘So he thinks I’m being a miserable bugger, does he?’

‘He’s worried about you. The same as me.’

‘Oh yes . . . he’s *definitely* worried about me. You always throw lavish parties for people you’re *worried* about.’

‘Sounds like he’s at least trying.’

I roll my eyes. ‘Yes, he’s *very* trying.’

Silence descends as we both contemplate the contents of the conversation thus far.

The contemplative mood is somewhat marred by the fact that the party is getting louder and louder over on the other side of the house. The drawing room doors have just been thrown open, and people are starting to spill out onto the other side of the terrace, no doubt to get their hands on some of that

roasting pig.

It's difficult to sit in quiet and tense contemplation when 'It's Hard Tonight Without You' is pumping out of the stereo, and a bunch of partygoers are starting to stagger into your field of vision, searching for bacon.

'I should probably go,' Audrey says, noting the party's escalation.

'No! Please don't,' I beg. 'Just stay until you've finished your drink, at least. Banjo looks quite happy.'

This is not much of a persuader. Banjo would look happy lying on a bed of nails, provided we were both with him.

'Okay,' Audrey agrees, with considerable reluctance.

What the hell do I say or do to make this easier?

'I really do miss you, you know,' I tell her.

She gives me a rather wan smile. 'Yes, I know, Will.'

There's a raucous scream of laughter from over at the party. One of StuTheNu's daughters is doing cartwheels on the grass, showing her knickers to everyone, while her sisters and some of the other younger members of the party's guest list are up on the bouncy castle.

'I also quite miss peace and quiet,' I add, wincing as I watch what's happening.

'They look like they're having a good time,' Audrey notes, with a wry smile.

I sigh. 'They always have a good time.'

'Maybe we should go over and join in?' she suggests, a slight catch of excitement in her voice.

I make a face. 'No, thanks. I can't think of anything I'd rather do less than . . . whatever that is.' A second daughter has now also started cartwheeling, while StuTheNu is attempting a headstand. Red and everybody else are cheering and clapping him on. They won't be quite so enthusiastic when he breaks his neck. Stu may be the youngest in the band, but he's still seventy years old. A man that age should not be attempting a headstand.

'I don't know. Looks like it could be fun,' Audrey says, sipping her drink again.

'Well, you can go over there and act like a fool with them if you want, but I'll stay here with Banjo, thanks,' I tell her, chuckling.

Audrey's eyes go flinty. 'Okay, I am leaving,' she says, and rises from her seat quickly.

‘What? Why?’ I ask, also jumping to my feet.

This sudden activity causes Red to look over at us. A look of surprise crosses his face, and he immediately starts to swagger his way over.

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

‘This was . . . a mistake,’ Audrey says, picking up Banjo’s lead.

‘Why?’ I repeat, not understanding what the problem is.

Audrey lets out a gasp of exasperation. ‘If you can’t see it, Will, then I don’t know what to tell you!’

‘Guys! How’s it going?!’ Red bellows as he reaches us. He instantly puts himself between me and my frustrated wife and puts his arms around both our shoulders. ‘You should come over and I can introduce you to everyone, Audrey!’

She shifts herself quickly out from under his arm. ‘Thank you, Red, but your son thinks doing that would make me a fool, so I think I’ll just be leaving.’

I throw my hands up. ‘I didn’t say you were a fool!’

‘Didn’t you?’ she retorts, and points at everyone else. ‘Tell that to all of them!’

‘What’s that even supposed to *mean*?’ I whine.

‘It means you haven’t listened to anything I’ve said, Will! You haven’t . . . started facing up to any of the things that are wrong.’

‘Guys! Chill out! Don’t be angry with one another,’ Red interjects . . . completely unhelpfully.

Audrey looks at him, and for a moment I think she’s about to give him both barrels as well. Good! I’m kind of sick of being her only target.

‘Thank you for inviting me, Red,’ Audrey says in a tight voice – rather disappointingly. ‘Looks like a fun party. Unfortunately’ – she flicks her eyes at me – ‘some people clearly disagree.’

Audrey then strides off back through the doors to the kitchen, and in the direction of the front door.

I watch her go for a moment, trying to process, before looking at my father, who has a deeply apologetic look on his face. ‘Was it something I said?’ he asks me.

‘No. Not this time,’ I tell him, and beetle off in the direction of my angry wife.

. . . who has already left the building, thanks to the efficiency of Borkins, who I find holding the front door open when I reach it.

‘Audrey! Come back!’ I entreat, stumbling down the steps and onto the gravel driveway.

She holds up one hand stiffly as she reaches her car. ‘No, Will! Just . . . leave it alone. I don’t want to talk anymore tonight.’

‘But why?’

‘You know why!’

She wrenches open the car door, and lifts Banjo into the rear passenger seat, before getting in herself, and firing up the engine.

All this time I’m stood there trying to work out what the hell has just happened.

What did I do?

Then, of course, it hits me.

I pooh-poohed the party, didn’t I? I called the other guests fools, and Audrey decided – in her infinite wisdom – that I meant she was one too for wanting to join them.

For crying out loud.

‘We can join the others!’ I tell her, now fully realising my crime, and trying to row back on it hard. ‘We can have some fun!’

Audrey stares at me for a moment behind the car window’s glass, before winding it down. ‘Will . . . I don’t think you could have bloody *fun* if you had a gun to your head!’

‘That’s not true!’

‘Yes, it is! That’s half the problem!’

Audrey then slams the car into reverse, and wheel-spins her way backwards, forcing me to jump out of the way.

‘And what’s the other half?!’ I scream after her, indignant.

Her head pops out of the window. She gestures back behind me. I turn to see Red coming out of the house, now carrying two bottles of beer. Both opened. ‘Ask him!’ Audrey snaps, before spinning the car around and back up the driveway to the opening gate.

‘Ask me what?’ Red says as he joins me, to watch my rapidly disappearing wife.

‘I don’t know, Red. I really don’t know,’ I tell him, trying not to seethe. I don’t know how to have fun??

Of course I do.

Just because my idea of fun might not be the same as hers . . .

Bugger me sideways.

‘Give me that beer,’ I say, and pluck the one from Red’s right hand.
She thinks I don’t know how to have fun? Well, we’ll just see about
that.

I take a huge swig of the beer.

. . . and then everything goes pear-shaped.



Hello there!

How the hell are you?

Good.

Good, I hope.

I definitely hope you are well. Well well well. Wellity wellity wellity.

Heh heh heh.

. . . ignore me. I might be just a little bit drun’.

Just a teensy bit. Just a *soupçon*.

You see, my wife, Audible . . . sorry, Audio . . . nope . . . W. H. Auden
. . . no . . . no . . . *Audrey*. Tha’s it. Audrey. She might think I don’t know
how to have fun, but quite clearly I bloody well do, don’t I?

I mean, look at me, will you?

Jus’ look at my penis.

No. No. Don’t look at my penis. That’s a little weird.

Look at the rhododendrons instead.

Look how pretty they are in the moonlight, would you?

That’s certainly what I’m doing.

Enjoying the midnight rhodododododododendrons.

Now, quite why I’m doing so completely naked, and from the balcony
of my father’s master suite, is beyond me.

Oh no . . .

Hang on.

It’s because I wanted to get a better look at them. That’s why.

And it really is a very large rhododendronical bush, isn’t it?

I really had to get up higher, so I could get a *much* better look at it.

And then there’s the cymbal. The Union Jack cymbal. That’s a thing
too. It’s up here in the rhododendillable bush, and I have to get it back down,

so I can carry on throwing it at Albo's head.

See? All perfectly sensible of me.

Perfectly sensible. Yes, yes, yes.

...

.....

Sorry, what?

The naked thing?

Ah . . . well. That has a *very* interesting story attached to it, I'm sure you'll agree.

You see, Gypsie told me that I wasn't wearing enough leather. Which, in his defence, was absolutely *true*.

I was sat in the drawing room, consuming my fifth or sixth or seventh beer (definitely not eighth, though!) and he passed comment upon my attire, which he found to be 'fucking boring, lad'.

No!

I will not have *boring* in my life!

Audrey thinks I'm boring! This must not stand! I must not be dressed in the boring clothes. They must not be upon my personage. Tell me, Gypsie, you font of all sartorial knowledge, what should I be wearing? What should I be beclothed in?

Leather! And lots of it, my boy! This was his answer, and it was a goood one.

And then he did bid his minions take off their leather clothing, and give them unto me for the wearing of.

And I did go up to my bedroom, and cast off all the clothes of the boring, including my boxer shorts and socks – and then did garb myself in the apparel of the interesting and fun.

Full black leather from head to toe was I dressed in, and it was goood.

For about half an hour, until I suffered some sort of allergic reaction.

But I am getting ahead of myself!

Yes!

You mustn't let me do that, you maniac.

First we must talk of both rhododendron bush and Union Jack cymbal.

The two were, in all fairness, not related to one another to begin with. I don't want you to think there is some kind of symbiotic relationship going on between garden flora and musical instrument. That would just be weird, wouldn't it?

Cymbals do not grow like rhododronendondons. And rhodendronenons cannot be played in front of a crowd of sixty thousand people.

They are completely different things, and I really do need you to remember that, otherwise things will get extremely confusing from this point out.

Got it?

Good.

So . . .

We were outside in the garden.

Yes, that was definitely it.

Outside in the garden doing roly-polies. StuTheNu's daughter taught me how to do it. I don't know which daughter it was, and I can't remember any of their names anyway, so we'll just call her Bernard.

Bernard – who suitably warmed to me once I was dressed head to toe in leather – demonstrated how to do a proper roly-poly to me, while the others looked on. This was fine by me, as Audrey said I was too boring to do roly-polies.

That's exactly what she said before she drove out of my life earlier. She said I was too boring to do a roly-poly. I remember it like it was yesterday.

Which it was.

But here I am, learning how to do a *great* roly-poly from Bernard.

Hah!

That'll show Audrey, won't it!

Yes, indeed.

So, Bernard shows me the roly-poly, and then I do one too, and it's *marvellous*.

Despite all that leather.

Or maybe . . . because of it. Who knows?

Anyway, everybody applauds my roly-poly, because everyone is very drunk, and would probably applaud someone farting.

In fact, they have already done that several times, thanks to Albo's digestive system.

And I *think* that's when my father suggests a game of midnight Frisbee.

I'm pretty sure that's the case, though it could have been just before my roly-poly, or just after it. Or five hours later.

I don't know.

Let's not get bogged down in the details.

Everybody thought the idea for a game of Frisbee was a fantastic one, though, I do remember that.

Until somebody pointed out that we didn't have a Frisbee, which put the dampener on things a little.

But then Red said he had plenty of *cymbals*, and we could use one of them as a Frisbee.

An idea that would sound horrifying to sober people . . . but none of us are sober, *silly!* Haven't you been paying attention?

We are all very, very drun'.

And cymbal Frisbee sounds *fabulous*.

I take it upon myself to stagger into the studio and grab the first cymbal I lay eyes on. The Union Jack cymbal is one Red played during the Queen's Silver Jubilee concert, and would probably fetch a great deal of money on eBay – but it also will make a wonderful Frisbee.

I yank it off the wall, and return to the garden.

Albo says he'll catch it.

I cheer loudly and fling it at his old man's head.

Luckily for Albo, and my spotless criminal record, I am so drunk I barely manage to lob the thing more than ten feet. Albo then picks it up, and chucks it back at me. Luckily for me, and Albo's definitely not spotless criminal record, it sails past me by a good eleven feet.

I run over to fetch it, and spy Albo stumbling geriatrically across the grass in the direction of the bouncy castle, calling for it to come back to him. Everybody is cheering.

It's a wonderful, wholesome family moment.

This time, I set myself a little better, and take a long wind up. Flinging the Frisbee cymbal with all my might, I watch it skim away from me at a frightening rate of knots. We have achieved true decapitation speeds. A small, very scared and sober part of me deep down inside screams loudly.

Luckily (again) the cymbal catches something of an updraught, flies over Albo's head and crashes into . . .

Yes!

You've guessed it, you clever bugger!

The rhododendron bush.

'Oh no!' I cry in dismay. 'The Frisbee has gone into the fucking rhododendron bush!'

Everybody cheers.

It's another wonderful, wholesome family moment.

'I will get it back down again!' I tell them all, setting off more cheering – and not a little vomiting, coming from Bernard, who may have done one roly-poly too many.

So, off I stumble, back into the house, heading for the stairs.

That's when the allergic reaction to the leather kicks into high gear. This is because I'm very, very sweaty, and rushing around indoors, where it's markedly warmer than outside.

The drunken fun on the terrace helped me ignore the itching, but now I'm inside on my own, it is ignorable no more.

I've never been allergic to leather before. It's all very, very strange.

But then it occurs to me that I am wearing the leather of the Gypsie Minions, and I have no idea where they have been, or what skin conditions they might have.

'Oh dear,' I say to myself as I crest the stairs. 'I'd better get these off, before I catch Ebola.'

I'm not sure it's possible to catch Ebola from a sweaty pair of leather trousers, but let's not take any chances, eh?

By the time I get to Red's master suite in the centre of the landing, I'm butt naked. I should go back to my room to put my boxer shorts back on, but that's a good twenty feet away from me, which is *a bloody long way*, I think you'll agree.

No. Better to just be naked. Nobody can see me up here, after all, and there's absolutely no chance of anyone following me upstairs to see what I'm up to.

The smell of cannabis coming from Red's bedroom is overpowering. There are other smells present too that I do not wish to cogitate upon, even in my inebriated state, so let's just get across the room to the balcony that overlooks the rhododendron bush as swiftly as possible.

And there she is! In all her glory! Right below where I'm standing on Red's master suite balcony – completely naked, at some indeterminate point during the middle of the night.

Below me, the party rages on. Nobody is looking up here, rather indicating that they've forgotten what I'm up to. This may largely be down to the fact Gypsie has now also stripped naked. I don't know if it's for the same reasons I've done it. Maybe there's something in the leather tonight.

Never mind, though. I'm up here to find that bloody cymbal, so I can get back to throwing it at Albo. And also put some clothes on at some point. That would probably be a good idea.

The rhododendron bush sits off to one side of the master suite balcony, between the outside wall of the dining room and the study. It has obviously been carefully cultivated by someone I've not as yet met (let's call them Norkins, shall we?) to climb up the side of the building in an attractive manner.

Norkins obviously takes as good care of the outside of the house as Borkins does the inside.

The top of the bush is at about the same level as the bottom of the balcony I'm stood on, so I can lean over the wrought iron railing and admire its bushy floweriness in the light of the moon. It's really quite beautiful. A cornucopia of beautiful pink flowers and thick green leaves. The whole thing is a thick, bulging column of horticultural loveliness that I really should spend more time close to. It'd probably be good for my mental health.

The other thing I can see glinting in the moonlight is the Union Jack cymbal.

Aha!

Here it is!

The thing I have been looking for!

...

.....

Why was I looking for it again?

Was I going to play something on it? I can't quite remember. It's been a lot of years since I last hit a cymbal, but I guess that could be the reason?

Well, whatever it is, it's clearly important to me, otherwise why would I be stark naked and standing on a balcony?

And the cymbal is just about within reaching distance, isn't it?

Excellent!

All I need to do is just lean over a little bit more . . .

A little bit more . . .

A little bit m—

OHFUCKOHSHTOHAARGGH!

Gravity has decided it's had quite enough of my shenanigans, and flips me over the side of the railing.

Somehow, some sort of unconscious self-preservation kicks in, even

under the blanket of extreme drunkenness, and my left hand grabs at the top of the railing as I go over.

This stops me from falling to what would probably be a very painful, rhododendron-based death.

As it is, though, I do smash my gonads into the side of the balcony as my right hand flails to join the left in its death grip on the railing.

‘Aaaaarghh!’ I scream – as you would expect.

This causes the party below to look up and see what the hell all the fuss is about.

When they see me, everybody cheers.

It’s a wonderful, wholesome family moment.

‘Hey, Red!’ I hear Gypsie exclaim. ‘I can see your kid’s wanger!’

‘Oh yeah!’ Red replies. ‘It’s a lot like mine, to be honest!’

‘Why do you reckon he’s hanging off the balcony like that?’

‘No idea, Gypsie! Maybe it’s like what happened to me in ’83 in Munich?’

‘What? That time you thought the secret police were after you for buying that ex-Soviet missile system, and you jumped over the side of the hotel room balcony to get away from them?’

‘Yeah! That’s the time!’

‘Turned out to be the cleaning lady, though,’ Albo remarks.

‘Yes, it did,’ Red agrees. ‘Bit of an anticlimax, really.’

‘And the missile system was a washing machine with a load of pipes stuck to it.’

‘Yes,’ Red agrees disconsolately. ‘They saw me coming on that one.’

‘HELP ME!’ I scream at him, ignoring this weird tangential conversation.

The sight of a fully grown naked man hanging off the edge of a building should not lead to a happy little chat, reminiscing about the good old days. It should lead to panic and concern.

There’s not enough panic and concern for my liking *at all*.

‘SOMEBODY HELP ME!’ I wail, looking down at my father and his pals for some kind of assistance.

‘Relax!’ Red exclaims. ‘The girls will bring you in.’ He points above my head to where StuTheNu’s daughters have all appeared at the balcony.

All three bend over the railing, grab my arms – and I am then brought unceremoniously back to safety by the combined might of The Queens of

Daylight.

All that daylight must be very good for you, because they're bloody strong.

'Thank you, Bernard!' I screech, collapsing against the safe side of the railing.

'Who?' Bernard asks, with a confused look on her face.

It then occurs to me that three strong and beautiful women in their late twenties can now see my penis.

'I thought I might have Ebola,' I say, by way of explanation.

This neither deserves, nor gets, a response. The Queens of Daylight merely look down upon me in severest judgement for a moment, before turning as one, and collectively leaving me to my fate.

A fate which will involve vomiting very soon, it appears.

All of tonight's activities have culminated in a very unpleasant feeling in my stomach.

I lurch to my feet, shamble across Red's bedroom and back into the hallway.

I just about manage to make it to the bathroom next to my room, and commence my conversation with God on the porcelain telephone.

This marks the end of my presence at the party, which goes on without me until the light of day starts to stain the eastern sky.

I will just be lying here on the bathroom floor for the next few hours, until I eventually crawl my way into my bed, wishing I'd never taken that beer out of Red's hands.

But I only did it to get back at Audrey, didn't I?

As I lie in bed, feeling the room revolve around me – and trying to compose a phone call to my boss to tell him I'm ill and won't be into work – I safely decide that it's my *wife* who is to blame for me nearly falling naked from a balcony into a rhododendron bush.

Yes. That's it.

If she'd been a bit more *reasonable*, then none of this would have happened.

Furthermore, if she hadn't insisted that I come to live here with my maniac of a father in the first place, then none of this would have doubly happened.

Hah!

And there she is, thinking I'm getting old, and don't know how to act

like I'm young anymore!

She should hear what I'm thinking right now.

I sound like an absolute *spoiled child*.

How's that for acting like I'm young again?

A bolt of pain shoots through my head as I hear something crash from somewhere downstairs. This is followed by loud swearing, and another cheer.

It really has been a night of wonderful, wholesome family moments, hasn't it?

What a pity it has to end with me falling asleep in a puddle of my own alcoholic flop sweat.



I can't get out of bed the next morning.

The desperate grasp for the railing that saved my naked life has wrenched my back so badly I can barely walk. I won't be taking just today off work. It'll be the whole damn week.

Sophia brings me coffee, while Borkins supplies me with painkillers.

Red comes in at about three thirty in the afternoon to see how I am, looking as fresh as a daisy.

Before he leaves, he pats me on the head, and hands over the Union Jack cymbal – which he figures will look nice on my wall.

I want to shove the cymbal up his arse, but it hurts too much to move.

Segue

It takes a few days for the back pain to fade back into its usual low-level, old-man discomfort.

But it takes a full *two weeks* for me to get over it, though.

That doesn't sound like it makes much sense, but trust me, it does in my head.

Because it's not just the physical trauma I suffered – it's the *emotional* trauma as well, which is much, much worse, and can't be fixed with Nurofen.

It doesn't help that I've been stuck here in this house, trying to recuperate.

Recovering from an injury at home – the place where I *should* be – would be far easier than doing it here, where I'm surrounded by ghosts and bad memories.

Bad memories that are now both from the *distant* past and the very *recent* past, thanks to what happened at that bloody party.

I will carry a fear of rhododendron bushes and cymbals with me wherever I go, from now on.

I don't hear from Audrey in my recovery period.

Nor do I try to reach out and communicate myself.

The argument I had with her is what pushed me into my night of drunken debauchery – and while I don't blame her for that lapse in my judgement, I am very wary of holding another conversation with her at the moment. Who knows what other self-destructive activities I could indulge in, if the conversation doesn't go my way again?

So . . . now I'm afraid to talk to my wife. This is an extremely *healthy* state of mind, I'm sure you'll agree.

I hate that I feel this way. *Hate it*. Audrey and I were always able to mend fences quickly after an argument in years past. And that was on the rare occasions we ever had one in the first place.

Nothing was ever *serious*, you see. They were silly little arguments about the washing-up, or taking the bins out. Audrey and I were always in agreement on the *big* stuff. Always in lockstep with one another, so there was no real reason for conflict.

God, how I miss being that in sync with her. It's awful knowing there's *big stuff* that comes between us now, and it's even more awful knowing that it all comes from me.

I miss my bloody dog too. He's done nothing wrong. He never has. Other than occasionally chewing a shoe, or pooing on the hallway carpet.

But I think it's probably better if I stay away for a little while longer. For both Audrey's sake and mine.

Probably not Banjo's, though, unfortunately.

My wife and I clearly do need some proper time apart. That much has become apparent from the argument – and its subsequent fallout.

Which leaves me feeling rather lonely here at Moly Mansions – when I'm not at work, that is. Where I also feel pretty damn lonely too, if I'm being honest.

Nobody at work knows what's going on in my personal life, and they certainly don't know who my father is, because I've never mentioned it to any of them, even once. This is entirely deliberate. A lot of people don't react well when they find out you come from success and money – be it kids at school or work colleagues. And why would I even want to tell people I'm Red Fairweather's kid, when Red Fairweather hasn't actually been around for decades? 'I'm the son of a rock star who doesn't give a shit' isn't exactly a good conversation starter.

I have also more or less kept myself to myself in the time I've been at the house, since the party. The back pain saw to that in the first instance, but even after it settled down again, I haven't really felt like doing much, or seeing anyone, thanks to my mental state.

Borkins, Norkins (who I've now met when he came to prune back the roses at the front) and Sophia don't mind, of course. They're quite happy just to get on with their jobs, without any outside interference from me.

Red is different, though.

You can sense his climbing frustration at my reluctance to do anything.

I turn him down when he asks me to come play a little golf with him again. I say no when he asks me to come to the village for an afternoon pint. I make my excuses when he wants to watch movies on the enormous TV in the

sitting room, and I say I'm feeling too tired to go out for a drive with him in his rather mangy Aston Martin.

Every time I send him away, he has more of a dark and frustrated look on his face.

I don't particularly care about this, though, because as previously stated, this is the man who buggered off and left me to it at the age of fifteen. I can take his frustration at me now with remarkable fortitude, thanks very much.

By all accounts, I have achieved a magnificent state of wallowing misery that I have no intention of climbing out of any time soon. Not until my wife deigns to let me back into her life anyway.

And until that day, I will sit here in this comfy chair in my boyhood bedroom, reading my Kindle, flicking my eyes over to my phone every once in a while, and doing my level best to ignore the outside world.

Sadly, the outside world contains Red Fairweather, and ignoring him for any real length of time is a total impossibility. That's not how he operates.

The world sits up and takes notice when the drummer from Holy Moly is about, whether it likes it or not . . . as I'm about to reluctantly find out.

The door to my room flies open.

'Will! Come downstairs!' he cries in a giddy tone, before disappearing again.

I do not follow.

A few moments go by before he reappears. 'Will! Come on, kid! I've got something to show you!' And he's gone again.

I still do not move, and several more moments pass.

For a third time, my erratic father appears in my doorway, this time looking somewhat irritated. 'Are you coming?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because I'm quite happy up here, thank you.'

Red looks around the room. 'Why's that, then?'

I waggle my Kindle in his general direction. 'I have this, and some peace and quiet.'

Red's face crumples in horror. Whether this is at the idea of reading a book or the idea of peace and quiet, I do not know. Either is eminently possible.

'But I've got something to show you,' he insists.

'What is it?'

He pouts. ‘You have to come and see it. I don’t want to ruin the surprise.’

Oh, good grief.

Audrey and I have never wanted children, and yet here I am, forced to deal with a seventy-four-year-old child. The problem with achieving your childhood dream of becoming a rock star is that you never get to actually grow up.

I could insist that I don’t want to move, and send him on his way, but two things prevail against this course of action.

One, there’s every chance he won’t take no for an answer, no matter how much I protest.

And two, I am living in his house rent free, and should probably appreciate that a little more in my dealings with him.

I put the Kindle down onto the arm of the chair with an audible sigh, and I get slowly to my feet.

Red claps his hands together and raises them in triumphant fists. ‘Cool! Come downstairs!’ He disappears again, clearly far too excited to wait for me.

I stand there for another second or two, absently rubbing my lower back where the ache has set in from being sat for too long in one position.

I force myself not to let out another sigh as I leave the room. If I keep doing it too much, I might faint from lack of oxygen.

As I descend the stairs to the entrance hall, there are no immediate signs of what Red is so excited about. The front door, however, is wide open. I swallow hard. Whatever this surprise is, it’s not something small enough to fit into the house. This cannot be good.

It is with more than a little trepidation that I walk out onto the driveway.

There, I see Borkins and Red, next to two large oblong cardboard boxes, standing on end.

Up at the main gate, I can see a delivery truck leaving.

What is in those cardboard boxes?

And why do I feel an impending sense of personal doom?

Red slaps the side of one box in excitement. ‘Wahaay! You just wait until you see what I’ve bought! I’ve wanted to have a go on one of these for years . . . but always wanted someone else to do it with. Now you’re here, I get the chance!’

‘The chance to do what?’

He comes over to me. 'Well, for one thing: apologise.'

'Apologise?' I repeat warily. I could really do without Red getting into the reasons for why he deserted me when I was a kid right now, to be honest with you.

'For what happened at the party,' he continues.

'You want to apologise for the party?' I reply, with some relief.

'Yes! . . . Well, not the actual party. That was a blast. But what happened to you. You know, with the hanging off the balcony and showing everyone your meat and two veg. That.'

I shuffle uncomfortably. 'Oh, er . . . well. Thanks . . . I guess? But to be honest, that wasn't really your fault.'

'It wasn't?' Red looks shocked. This is probably because I've made it clear how much I blame Red for a great many things. Luckily for him, this isn't one of them.

'No. It was mine.' I look a bit shifty. 'And maybe Audrey's.'

'Audrey's?'

My face goes a bit red. 'She was the one who said I didn't know how to have fun. It made me . . . angry, and that's why I did what I did.'

'Got that wasted, you mean?'

'Yes.'

'So, you're not mad at me for throwing the party?'

'No, Red. I'm not. I was actually having a good time . . . until the thing with the cymbal.'

My father looks quite taken aback by this. I have to confess I feel the same way.

Did I actually just say that I had a *good time*?

Me? Will Fairweather? Who avoids drinking as much as possible, due to what it does to his internal workings?

And by Christ, my internal workings did pay for that night, along with my back. The time I didn't spend lying down, I spent on the toilet.

But, when it comes to all of that fallout, was it maybe . . . actually . . . *worth it*?

Because I did *slightly* have a good time, didn't I? Just a little bit? Just a *soupçon*?

Being that drunk came with a tremendous sense of just *letting go*. Even if it was only for the briefest amount of time.

'Oh right, okay, kid,' Red says, nodding his head. 'Well, maybe treat

this as an apology anyway . . . you know . . . for *other things*?’

I look from him to the two large boxes. ‘What are they, Red?’

He looks at his executive assistant. ‘Borkins! Reveal what’s underneath the box!’ Red crows triumphantly, and drops into a dramatic pose, with his arms held out towards the boxes.

Borkins gives us a thumbs up, and then carefully starts to cut down the side of one box with a Stanley knife.

This takes an uncomfortably long period of time, during which Red refuses to move from his *ta-da!* pose. His expression does sour quite considerably, though, as he watches Borkins methodically peel the cardboard away.

‘Hurry up, Borks!’ he insists, but refuses to move.

I hope Borkins can get whatever the hell this thing is out soon, before Red’s hip permanently displaces.

Now the box is cut through down one side, he’s able to peel it away from what lies underneath, and I get my first look at what is contained within.

. . . which is a load of polystyrene chips in the first instance. They’re going to be a pain to clean up – and hideously bad for the environment.

As soon as they’ve fallen away, though, I can see, underneath a transparent plastic sheet, something that makes my blood run cold.

‘That’s . . . That’s a Segway,’ I say in a small voice.

‘Hell yeah!’ Red cries, and runs over to it. He helps Borkins pull off the plastic sheet, so we can see the silly thing in all its glory.

And it’s not just a normal Segway, either. It appears to be some kind of rugged, off-road variant, with enormous thick black treaded wheels. It’s also bright blue, with lightning bolts all over it.

‘Look at it! Isn’t it great!’ Red says, jumping up onto the Segway’s platform and grabbing hold of the handlebars. This is something of a mistake, as it’s switched off at the moment, and provides zero stability, so Red falls back off it again, nearly diving into the gravel. Borkins is there to arrest his fall, though, looking deeply perturbed as he does so.

None of this seems to dampen my father’s rampant enthusiasm.

‘I figured we could go out for a ride together!’ he exhorts, fiddling with the handlebar again, this time from the safety of terra firma.

‘Did you?’

‘Yeah! It’d be great fun!’

I cross my arms and regard the Segway for a couple of seconds. ‘So . . .

let me get this straight, Red. You, wanting to apologise for what happened at the party, and . . . *other things* . . . decided that the best way you could do this was to . . . buy me a Segway.'

Red raises his fists in triumph. 'Hell yeah!'

'Gotcha.'

I probably shouldn't be surprised.

Most people would just say *sorry*, and maybe suggest a nice meal somewhere, or hand over a large bottle of fancy alcohol, or some cash.

Not my father, though.

You have to wonder at the thought processes that go through his brain sometimes. They must have been irrevocably damaged by all that drumming. That's the only rational answer.

Red's never displayed what you would call 'sensible thinking'.

We're talking about a man who once challenged Pink Floyd's head roadie to drink a swimming pool faster than him. His judgement is more than a little *suspect*.

Buying me a Segway to apologise for past indiscretions is actually fairly run of the mill for someone like that, for whom money is no real object. I should be grateful he didn't get me a decommissioned aircraft carrier, or a weekend break in the Mariana Trench.

Borkins cuts away the other box, to reveal a second Segway. This one is coloured an angry shade of red, with yellow flames up the steering column.

'These the normal colours, are they?' I say, pointing at it.

Red looks delighted to receive this question. 'No! I had them custom coloured!'

'Did you?' I say, feigning surprise.

'Yeah! And it took me ages to track 'em down. They don't just sell these things to anyone these days, you know.'

'I can't imagine why.'

'Me neither!'

All that drumming also destroyed Red's ability to sense sarcasm, it would appear.

'Can I ask how much they cost?'

I see Borkins go a few shades whiter.

Aah.

Not cheap, then.

Red flaps a hand. 'Oh, that doesn't matter, kid. What matters is that you

like it!’ He gives the blue, lightning-bolt Segway a friendly slap.

How am I supposed to answer that?

On the one hand, my father has just presented me with a bright blue, lightning-bolt Segway. It’s literally the single worst gift I could possibly think of, for a person like me. He knows I’m a risk-averse kind of chap these days because of—

No.

No.

Not that.

I’m thinking about this Segway.

Nothing else.

So, anyway . . . I could tell Red exactly what I think of my off-road Segway, and probably make him pretty upset. Something which, as we’ve readily established, I am not shy about doing, given the events of the past.

On the other hand, though, I should probably both appreciate, and reward, the *effort*.

It’s got to be a step in the right direction that Red is even trying to say sorry for something – even if it is by way of a rolling, electric death trap.

‘Yes, Red, I like it,’ I lie to him, affecting what I hope is a convincing tone of gratefulness.

This earns me a couple more fist pumps. ‘Excellent! I’ll get Borkins to make sure they’re fully charged, and we’ll go out after lunch.’

‘I’m sorry, *what?*’

‘After lunch! We’ll take ’em off out somewhere.’

‘Where?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. Over that way.’ Red flaps a hand in the general direction of the forest. The New Forest. One of the largest forests in the UK, and a place fraught with danger, if you don’t plan your trip carefully and considerately of all the local flora and fau—

‘We’ll stick flags on them!’ Red shouts enthusiastically.

‘Flags?!’

‘Yep! I’ll have the one we had for the tour of Asia in the early eighties, and you can have the skull and crossbones we used for Monsters of Rock in ’83.’

I give him a horrified look. ‘I’m forty-five. I don’t *want* a skull and crossbones.’

‘Borks! Make sure the flags are strapped to the steering columns, will

you? It'll look great!' Red asks of his valet, ignoring me completely.

'Yes, sir,' Borkins replies, astutely not looking in my direction whatsoever.

What the hell is happening, please?

Am I really about to jump on what can only be described as a two-wheeled death machine, with a skull and crossbones attached to it?

What will people think?

Nothing good.

There's every chance they might think I'm the vanguard of some pirate expeditionary force, come to rob them of their chattels. The police will be called. I'll have to explain myself.

I can just see it now: *'Well, Officer, you see it all started when my wife threw me out for being a moany old bastard . . . and things just escalated from there. I'm very sorry I tried to invade the local Budgens.'*

'We need backpacks!' Red says, pointing one finger to the sky.

'Backpacks?'

'Yeah! Forget having lunch here. We'll take some grub and drink with us instead! We should be able to find somewhere nice to chill out for a while, on our little Segway adventure!'

My eyes narrow. 'I'm sorry, Red . . . are you suggesting that you and I go . . . on a *picnic*?'

He nods enthusiastically. 'Yeah! Sounds great, right? You and me, out and about together.'

'A *father-son* picnic?'

He hurries back over to me, and again puts an arm around my shoulder. 'That's the spirit!' he says, shaking me vigorously. 'I'll go and get changed into something more suitable for the trip, and you . . .' He looks me up and down with a slight grimace. I am dressed in a perfectly reasonable sweater-and-jeans combo today. There is no need for the look of distaste. '. . . you wear whatever you feel most comfortable in,' Red finishes, a bit lamely. 'See you back in what? Half an hour?'

It shouldn't take any man half an hour to go and get changed, but aging rock stars are a different breed.

However, at least the thirty minutes will give me a chance to come to terms with what's happening. And possibly swap these new Adidas for my walking boots. And take out some last-minute life insurance. And pray.

As Red scampers off in the direction of his idiotically large walk-in

wardrobe upstairs, and Borkins goes off to collect the . . . oh God . . . *flags*, I tentatively walk over to my Segway and give it a closer inspection.

Yes, indeed, those wheels certainly are big and chunky. And those lightning bolts certainly are *very* dramatic. What an extremely silly thing it truly is.

But I have seen videos of people on Segways, and it does look like it could be . . . quite good fun?

Super dangerous, though.

Possibly.

Not really something you should be doing at your age.

Red's doing it, and he's much older.

He's insane. And in many important ways, no, he's not much older at all.

Duly noted. But still . . .

Still what?

I survived hanging off that balcony, didn't I?

You showed everyone your penis.

True. But still . . .

This train of thought disturbs me.

I know. But maybe there's nothing wrong with that.

What are you doing now?

I'm just going to jump up on the Segway and have a little play . . .

What? No! Don't do that! It's—

Quite stable, actually. As long as you don't flail about the way Red tends to do whenever he's excited about anything. And the Segway isn't even switched on yet. If I can stay up here when it's off, I should have no issues.

I grip the right handlebar and twist the throttle, imagining myself ploughing across fields and streams, sending plumes of water and grass up behind me.

Cool.

'Having fun, sir?' Borkins asks, having returned with the flags.

I give him a look. 'Maybe, Borks. Just maybe . . .' I say, speculatively.



Red returns forty-five minutes later, dressed like a soldier who's been very much dishonourably discharged – mainly for crimes against fashion.

The black Doc Martens are relatively sensible. But the red commando cargo pants most definitely aren't.

Neither is the Sex Pistols t-shirt, nor the bright blue army helmet.

And the less said about the fishnet waistcoat the better.

Where he bloody gets this stuff from, I'll never know. There's every chance he's got some sort of portal to another dimension up there in that wardrobe, which he can pluck strange and bizarre things from whenever the mood takes him.

'How do I look?' he says, flexing his stringy arms.

'Like someone with dementia stumbled into an army recruitment centre,' I reply, honestly.

Red sniffs. 'Well, I think I look great.'

'That's the main thing, sir,' Borkins points out, in the manner of a dismayed but understanding parent. 'The flags have been attached as requested. And the Segways are both fully charged.'

Borkins indicates the two machines, which are now lined up next to each other on the driveway, with all the packaging removed. The flags, securely fastened with a great many zip ties, snap gaily in the breeze.

'Woo-hoo!' Red cries, arms aloft.

I'm not quite at the point of woo-hooing, but I do have to confess that part of me is actually looking forward to this.

Okay, I could do without the flags, and I'm still not sure about how sensible it is for us to be going off out there with no map or plan . . . but the weather is looking good, the Segways are easy to drive, and how much grief can you really get into in an English forest?

As long as we stick to the designated pathways that criss-cross the forest, I'm sure we'll be fine.

In many ways, this will be kind of like one of the many rambles I like to go on with my friends in the walking group. Certainly the same kind of countryside. It's just that it'll be going by a little . . . *faster*.

Also, Borkins has loaded up my backpack with some delectable treats. Including some of Sophia's excellent coffee in a Thermos flask, and an extremely posh-looking cheeseboard. I'll put up with a lot if there's a tasty Camembert and water biscuit in my near future.

From what I saw, Red's backpack contains several cans of Jack Daniel's whiskey and Coke, and two family-sized bags of Hula Hoops.

The man has truly never grown up.

But then he's never really had cause to.

What about you?

Shut up and get on the Segway.

Borkins hands me my backpack, and I slip it over my shoulders. Red does the same, and we go over to our brightly coloured steeds.

A thrill of nervous energy courses its way through my body, as my natural instinct to remain safe about life battles with this new-found desire to push the boundaries a little.

And wind up showing your penis to people again, probably.

I don't see how that can happen on a Segway, to be honest.

Anything is possible around Red.

That is true.

And besides, you're too bloody old to be gallivanting around on one of these things.

I look at my father, who is already atop his Segway, and rolling around in happy circles, whooping at the top of his voice.

He's not too old.

Yes, he is.

Tell him that.

Ignoring the part of me that just wants to stay indoors and read ebooks, I hop up onto the Segway, set my feet and twist the throttle gently.

The Segway springs into life, and propels me forward. There's a moment I think I'm going to fall off the back of the damn thing, but then the gyro kicks in, and I come back upright again, naturally leaning slightly forward to balance.

For the next few minutes, both Red and I circle around the driveway, crunching gravel under our chunky wheels as we get used to the machines we're going to be spending the day on.

And I almost feel like something of an expert by the time we're done practising.

'Right then! We're off!' Red roars gleefully, pointing an arm in the direction of the main gates to Moly Mansions.

'Do try to be careful, sir,' Borkins says to Red, a look of concern on his face. Bless him, he really does care about my father's welfare, doesn't he?

Red rolls his eyes. 'I will! I will! Don't wait up, Borkins!' he cries with joy, before haring off up the driveway.

I look at Red's valet. 'Please *do* wait up,' I tell him. 'And maybe keep

an eye on where we are on your phone.’ I made the point of allowing Borkins to track my iPhone. I may be willing to entertain a day out on a Segway with my mad father – but not without some form of safety net.

‘Absolutely, sir,’ Borkins replies, looking more than a little relieved that Red won’t be going out on his own. ‘Do have a good time, and do . . . make sure he’s alright.’

I look towards my father, who is already at the gates, circling around on the spot like a madman, while they slowly swing open. ‘I will try my best,’ I tell him, before taking off after Red.

‘Where exactly do you want to go?’ I ask him as we both leave the Moly Mansions compound.

‘Dunno . . . how about along the front for a bit, before turning up when we see a big enough path into the forest? The damn thing is littered with them, so we shouldn’t have any problems!’

‘Um . . . Okay,’ I reply, hesitantly.

I *never* do anything by the seat of my pants. Even when buying pants, I spend time considering all the options, before arriving at the correct choice.

But now, the seat of my pants is definitely in charge.

Or rather the seat of Red’s pants is.

Which is much, *much* more terrifying.

Nevertheless, I follow my father along what is ostensibly a road for cars, but we don’t see a single one on our trip down it. Only the rich denizens of Brooking Lane ever deign to come through here, and there’s only eight or so of them.

Brooking Lane then turns back towards Dropley again, but we turn off to the road on the right, which heads towards the water. Once it reaches it, it starts to skirt its way along the shoreline, which consists of a pebbly beach, divided by groynes, and the occasional boat moored just far enough away to be safe.

Red careens his Segway far too close to where the road drops off to the beach quite precipitously. It’s a good two-metre drop, and neither Segway nor seventy-four-year-old drummer would likely survive unscathed.

He doesn’t appear to care, though. You can tell from the continued whooping.

I briefly move my Segway to within a metre of the edge of the road, before swinging it safely back away again.

I’d like to say my palms aren’t sweaty after the tiny flirtation with

danger, but I'd be lying.

We fly along this road for another three or so miles, before Red spots a small gravel car park on the other side of the road, at the edge of the forest.

'Aha! That's perfect!' he exclaims, and spears off towards it.

I dutifully follow, and we disappear down the wide gravel path that leads away from the empty car park, and into the New Forest itself.

Which is beautiful, it has to be said.

Rich, green conifer trees soar into the sky on either side of us, punctuated by thickets of bramble and bush.

The sound of the Segway's electric motor isn't enough to overpower the birdsong coming from seemingly every tree, nor the rush of wind in the treetops.

Oh my, yes. This really is *very* pleasant.

It's a pity Banjo isn't here. He'd love it. Though getting him to perch on the Segway's platform might have been a bit of an issue.

Even Red has slowed his hectic progress to drink in all the nature that surrounds us. This surprises me no end, as the only thing I'd ever have thought Red had the capability to drink in was either bourbon or a swimming pool.

I am learning a fair amount about my father in this enforced visit into his world, and it's starting to change my rather two-dimensional view of him into something a little more textured.

There might be more to him than just an irresponsible rock star, with no consideration for anyone other than himself. That's certainly part of who he is – I've been the greatest victim of that aspect – but there's clearly more going on than just that.

As drummers go, maybe my father is more than just the cliché of the hard-drinking, dumb-as-a-rock stereotype that accompanies the band wherever they travel.

The way he's looking up at the trees, marvelling at their beauty, tells me that in no uncertain terms.

It takes me a second to fully understand what I'm seeing in his face, but then it hits me – it's the same expression I have on mine right now as well.

Nothing gives me greater joy than spending time in nature. That's why I joined Ramblers United on Facebook.

And that's why I used to insist that Audrey and I go on as many summertime picnics as humanly possible, when the weather was good

enough.

I have *deeply* fond memories of laying out a checked blanket on the side of a random hill in the countryside, sipping wine and eating cheese with Audrey, while Banjo frolicked around in the grass. It's those simple moments I cherish the most with my wife.

It was always so easy to just sit with her, enjoying the view like that, completely comfortable in one another's company.

When was the last time we did that?

Took one of those picnics?

. . . a long time ago.

Far too long.

Hell, it's been far too long since I was out here in the great and wonderful outdoors with anybody.

And look here, would you . . . maybe now I know where I get that love from.

My father.

. . . because it certainly wasn't Mum. She was a city girl, in her heart and in her head. Her fondest place in the world was sat in a coffee shop, writing up an article for whatever magazine was paying her at the time – not gallivanting around in the country, miles from anywhere that could supply her with a good dose of caffeine.

To this day the smell of roasted coffee beans gives me a warm, fuzzy feeling inside. I can't count the number of times I'd sit with Mum in the coffee shop, drinking a milkshake, and listening to the gentle sound of her pencil scratching its way across the page, while I doodled in one of her spare notepads. We'd spend hours like that. Just me and her, lost in our creative endeavours, while the city rushed by around us. That was her place. The city. No doubt about it.

All of which means my love of nature clearly comes from my bloody weird, absentee father.

Who is now sending his Segway off towards the side of the path, a searching look on his face.

I pull up alongside. 'What are you doing?'

'Looking for somewhere we can turn off.'

I look down the long, straight, easy-to-navigate path. 'Why?'

'Because it'll be more fun!'

'I'm quite enjoying it as it is.'

‘Me too, but it could be even *better*.’

And while Red and I obviously share some similarities I was previously not aware of, this is not one of them. I have never been a ‘it could be even better’ kind of person. I am largely happy to level off at *pretty good*, rather than pursuing *incredible*.

And this jaunt through the forest is currently pretty good. I don’t need it to be even better.

Even better can only be a stone’s throw away from an absolute nightmare, if you don’t know what you’re doing.

‘Aha!’ Red cries happily, his Segway slowing to a crawl.

My heart sinks.

We’re about to go off-road, aren’t we?

Hideously, hideously *off-road*.

The path Red has discovered that winds its way away from the left-hand side of the route we’re on is not in any way the gravelled, flat surface we are currently enjoying. It is impacted mud, only about a metre wide, and it undulates across the rippled ground of the forest floor in a way that looks like it could be quite nausea-inducing.

Also, the conifer trees thicken considerably off the beaten track, and block out the warming sunshine almost completely.

‘This is perfect!’ Red says, angling his Segway in.

Perfect for what? An encounter with a psychopathic family of forest-dwelling cannibals?

‘Why do you want to go that way now?’ I ask, stopping my vehicle.

He brings his to a halt too when he sees what I’ve done. ‘Because it’ll be *fun!*’

‘*Why* will it be fun?’

‘I dunno. Just *different*, I guess.’

‘But this track is fine, isn’t it?’

Red looks down it. ‘I suppose. But it’s where everybody goes, isn’t it? We’re not going to discover anything cool just going off down that way.’ He swings his Segway around and pulls up next to me. ‘Come on, kid. Where’s your sense of adventure?’

‘I don’t think I have one, Red.’

He gives me a doubtful look. ‘You won’t know for sure unless you try.’

I consider this for a moment, before sucking in a large breath. ‘Alright, let’s give it a go,’ I tell him, exhaling mightily.

Red laughs and pivots around again. ‘Woo-hoo! Into the unknown ride the Fairweathers!’ he shouts, rumbling his Segway onto the uneven path.

I think he’s being a little over-dramatic myself, but then I do have a skull-and-crossbones flag rippling in the breeze right above my head, so maybe not.

I also turn onto the new path, and immediately have to tense my legs to compensate for the rough terrain. This is going to be a lot more tiring than just sticking to the main route. I hope my legs and my back are up to it.

Turn around, idiot.

No. I’m here now. Let’s see where he leads me.

I carefully accelerate the Segway a little more, in an attempt to keep up with Red, who is already a good twenty feet in front of me, and bumping around like a champion.

If his seventy-four-year-old body can take it, I’m sure mine can too.



And indeed, it can.

While the journey along the darkened forest floor is rough, it’s nothing the Segway can’t handle, and nothing my body can’t handle, either. At least on the surface of things. I may wake up tomorrow with pain all down my legs and back, but right now everything is fine in that department.

What’s not fine is the fact that we appear to be completely lost.

Which is about as predictable as the end of the *Titanic* movie.

And we’ve been lost for a good *two hours*.

The picnic food and drink from our backpacks are long gone. This means I am wired with caffeine and cheese, and Red is half drunk.

We’re also scratched to bloody pieces.

The conifer trees of the New Forest are lovely to look at. Not so nice to drag your skin across as you go by them on a Segway.

‘Where the hell are we?’ I moan, leaning away from a particularly obnoxious branch, which looks like it wants to scratch at least one of my eyes out.

‘No idea! But I’m sure we’ll pop out somewhere soon!’

How does he manage to cling on to such optimism? I know he’s downed three cans of Jack Daniel’s mixer, but even that shouldn’t completely dampen the feelings of panic that should be erupting from within that skinny

little chest of his. We've been lost for *hours*, with no signs of getting out any time soon.

And the battery on my Segway is getting pretty low. The display in the centre of the steering column tells me I've lost several of the little bars that denote how much charge I have left. How many little bars? I don't know. I wasn't paying proper attention . . . but there's definitely only a couple of them left now.

My phone has lost its 4G signal as well, so I can't look on Google Maps to find out where we are, either. We could be right next to a nice wide track, and we'd never know. The trees are so thick and bushy, seeing more than a few feet around us is proving almost impossible.

I'm starting to think we need rescuing from this situation.

'Should we ring David to come and help us?' I ask Red.

'Who?'

'Borkins!'

'Nah! No need. We'll be fine!'

'Will we, though?'

'Yes!'

'But he can just come and find us in the Land Rover, and we can—'

'No Borkins! We're *fine*! I can get us out!' Red insists, an edge to his voice.

This is the first time I think I've heard Red's good-natured tone crack. Interesting that it would be about getting help from someone . . .

We continue along the bumpy track for a few more minutes, in rather uncharacteristic silence. We're only getting more and more lost, but I'm not sure how to broach it with my father.

It's clearly important to him that he negotiates us out of this predicament, but I'm struggling to understand why. He never normally seems reluctant to get Borkins to help him with anything. In fact, he probably leans on the bugger way too much. What's going on here, I wonder?

'You alright?' I eventually ask.

'What? Oh. Yeah. I'm good. Just getting a bit fed up with this bumping.'

And his face has gone a bit white. This is a seventy-four-year-old man we're talking about, after all. My back and legs are starting to feel it after being on this Segway for hours. He must be suffering even more than me.

'Sorry I, you know, shouted at you then,' he continues. 'I just . . . just

wanted this to be something for you and me, you know?’

‘Yeah. I get that, Red. But don’t you think we should just admit we need help and get—’

‘Cow!’

‘What?’

‘I see a cow, kid! We’re saved!’

Oh, fabulous. He’s lost his mind. Whether it’s from the isolation, or the three cans of booze, or a combination of both, Red has clearly gone stark staring mad, because he’s now seeing farmyard animals in the middle of a dense forest. What’s next? A chicken or two? Maybe a pig? Or perhaps his mental break will only get worse, and he’ll start seeing giraffes, kangaroos and giant humpback—

Oh, fucking hell, I can see the cow too.

And I only had coffee and cheese.

It must be the cheese. I really should stay away from the strong stuff during the day.

The cow – a black-and-white one, with a knowing expression on its face – is standing in the forest, looking at us and chewing. It is quite disconcerting.

So much so that we both stop our Segways and ponder what to do next. Is it likely to charge? Can we go past it safely? Should we turn around?

‘Weird,’ Red says, and I have to agree.

The cow then deliberately moves itself around and starts to wander off. It then stops, turns back to us, nods its head once, and continues on its way.

‘I think . . . I think it wants us to *follow it?*’ Red says, in disbelief.

‘Can’t be. Cows aren’t that clever.’

But the cow stops again just as I say this, and turns to give us another impatient look, before moving off once more.

Red shrugs, and twists the throttle of his Segway, taking off after the cow.

Leaving me with no other choice but to do the same.

What an extremely strange development.

We follow the sauntering cow for about two or three minutes, before something miraculous occurs.

‘The trees are thinning!’ Red exclaims, pointing.

And he’s right. The conifers really are starting to thin out.

We continue to follow the cow, until it emerges from under the canopy

of the forest, and we see for the first time that we are very close to fields. Good, honest-to-God, level and easy-to-traverse *fields*. They lie at the bottom of the hill that we appear to be on the crest of.

This is clearly where the boundary of the forest ends. Probably at its western edge.

Blimey. We've got so lost over the past couple of hours that we've made it right to the end of the New Forest. That's a fair old distance from Red's house.

Beyond the downward slope of the hill lie two things that make my heart sing. The first is an A road some distance off – the sound of the cars on it audible, now that we've left the blanketing embrace of the thick forest.

Borkins can come and get us now, I think happily.

The second thing I can see is a farm, nestling at the bottom of the hill, surrounded by fields – and the cow's presence in the forest now becomes more understandable.

Although how it made it all the way up here, out of its pasture field, is beyond me.

I look around . . . and see that the damn thing has disappeared.

'Where's the cow gone?' I ask my father.

He shrugs. 'No idea. Pretty glad it's bugged off, though. Damn thing gave me the willies.' He scratches his nose. 'One of Deep Purple's roadies got crushed by cows when they were touring Belgium.'

'Really?'

'Yep. He dropped acid and tried to ride one to the moon and back, I believe. Didn't get five yards, the poor bugger.'

'Maybe it's good that it's disappeared, then,' I remark, still looking about the place for the cow, but seeing absolutely no sign of it.

'Never mind, at least it helped us out of that damn forest!' Red says. 'Now all we've got to do is get down the hill, and over to that road.'

'Agreed,' I say, with some relief.

Red looks down the hill with a speculative look on his face. 'Race you?'

'Pardon?'

'Down the hill! To the first farm fence. What do you say?'

'Er . . . no?'

'Come on, kid! Let's end this trip with a bang!'

I look down the hill. It suddenly feels a lot steeper than it did a few minutes ago, now Red has brought the concept of racing down it to my

attention.

My legs go a little wobbly. 'I'm not sure it'll be a good idea. We're both pretty knackered, and the Segways might run out of battery anyway . . .' And indeed, my Segway's battery is down to one solitary bar now.

'So what? Doesn't matter, kid! We're done with them, aren't we?'

I regard my father for a moment, wondering at his attitude.

This is someone who sees so much in his life as *throwaway*. Once you're done with something, who cares about it?

Did he think that about me when he walked out?

'Tell you what . . . whoever wins gets to choose what we do for the next . . . two weeks,' he says.

'Really?'

That doesn't sound half bad, actually . . .

If I can just beat this mad old man to that fence, I can stop any more of these crazy days out – at least for a while. And it should be pretty easy to do that. I'm in a lot better physical shape than he is, not least because I'm thirty years younger.

'Alright,' I say, cagily. I don't want him to think I'm too confident, just in case he changes his mind.

'Great! So, down to that fence, then?'

I look down the hill to where a large barn is surrounded by some fairly rickety-looking wooden fencing. What's that? A quarter of a mile at most? Shouldn't be too hard.

My heart starts to pound.

When's the last time I raced anyone for anything? Maybe against Banjo, to a ball, so I could throw it for him again?

Before that . . . what? When I was a kid?

An honest-to-goodness, wet-behind-the-ears kid?

Did I feel as excited and scared as I do now?

Probably not. Racing is something kids do naturally. They don't know the dangers.

I do.

And yet here I am, lining up the Segway on the crest of the hill, and looking down it with more than a little determination on my face.

I feel . . .

. . . *alive?*

'Ready!' shouts Red. 'Steady!' he exclaims. 'Go!' he roars to the

heavens.

And immediately fires off down the hill at maximum speed, leaving me in the dirt.

Fuck!

I can't let him beat me! I can't!

I too throw open the throttle and spear off down the hill, nearly falling backwards off the Segway, before it has the chance to right itself.

But then I'm thundering towards the barn, teeth being rattled out of my head.

I'm making no gains on my father, though, damn it!

He's going to win this stupid race, and I'm going to have to go bungee jumping, or bareback horse riding, or whatever other insane pastime he might have lined up to stave off his own boredom, and my depression.

No! It cannot be!

I try to open the throttle more, but there's nothing left to give.

I'm going to lose!

BANG.

Jesus Christ, what was that?

I think I just went over something! A large rock under the Segway, probably, that struck the underside with extreme force, causing the whole machine to jump a couple of inches into the air.

But it's okay. I'm still going! It didn't knock me off.

Still, I'd better slow up and see if there's any damage done. I've already lost the race, that's plain to see, and—

The brakes don't work.

The fucking brakes *don't work!*

In fact, I think the whole engine has died. I'm careening down this hill on a Segway with no power!

Why aren't the brakes bringing me to a standstill? Why isn't the engine being off stopping me? What the hell did I do to the damn thing on that rock?!

Aaaargghh!

I thought I was going fast before, but now the Segway is freewheeling completely, with zero input from the electric motor or braking system. It's sped up tremendously. I am struggling like mad to even keep my balance now. If I hadn't been on this silly thing for so many hours already, I'd definitely have fallen off.

I should jump. I should abandon ship.
But I'm *gaining* on Red! I'm catching him!
And if I jump off at this speed, I might break something!
So I cling on for dear life, watching as I draw level with my father . . .
and then sail past him!

Woo-hoo!

I won't have to go bareback riding! I won't have to jump off a bridge!
. . . I won't be able to stop myself hitting that wooden fence!
'Oh God, no!' I screech as the Segway piles into the fence, smashing
through it, sending splinters of wood everywhere.

And now I'm heading straight for that barn. That open barn.

What's in there?

Farmyard equipment? Lots of large metal things for me to crash into
and die??

Jump off, you silly bastard!

I can't! I'm too scared!

As I pass from the light of day into the gloom of the barn at roughly
four hundred miles an hour, I briefly look to my right to see the cow from
earlier looking at me from the corner of the barn.

It has an expression on its face that seems to say, *I told you so.*

Then I scream, because it seems extremely appropriate in the
circumstances.

. . . and fly face first into a giant mound of shit, which also,
unfortunately, is very appropriate for the circumstances.

My last thought as my world becomes 99.6 per cent cow faeces is that
the next time my father suggests a father-son day out, I'm going to shove the
skull-and-crossbones flag up his arse, right next to the Union Jack cymbal.

Rhythm

Red gave the farmer his working Segway as compensation for his troubles, along with the promise of a cheque.

I gave the paramedic my everlasting thanks for getting the cow shit out of my eye.

Borkins gave the car valeters a large tip for getting the smell out of the Land Rover's upholstery.

Still.

At least I *won*.

No more crazy days out for the foreseeable future.

Not that Red would probably attempt to suggest anything. Not after . . . that.

He's as mad as a box of frogs, but is still sane enough to know that as he was the one responsible for me needing a good hosing down, it's probably a good idea to just . . . keep quiet for a little while.

Yes, yes.

That's it.

Peace and quiet. Just for a little while.

Just until . . . *stuff* stops coming out of my nose whenever I blow it.

. . . maybe I'll have another bath. It'll only be the third of the day. It'll be fine.

I gather up my towel and walk across the landing from my bedroom to the large main bathroom on the other side of the first floor.

As I do this, Red appears at the top of the stairs. He looks extremely apologetic.

Oh God. Not again.

I can't stand another Red Fairweather apology. The last time he tried it, I ended up in more shit than a hyperactive dung beetle.

'What?' I say, holding my towel up protectively in front of me. I'm

fully prepared to lash out at him with it, if he's about to suggest we go zorbing together.

But then I remember the bet . . . which I *won*.

It's why I still smell farmyard every time I take a deep breath.

'Nothing, nothing,' Red replies, looking sheepish. Luckily, I don't have a problem with sheep. Just the cows. 'I just wondered what you were up to?'

'Taking a bath.'

His eyes go wide. 'Another one? Isn't that, like, seven today, or something?'

'You worried about your water bill?'

'No. More like your brain. That much hot water around it can't be good for you.'

I sniff. 'Well, it makes me feel better.'

And it does. A bath always has. Nothing can be all that wrong in the universe if you are immersed in hot water. I get that from my mother, who took one every day of her life, until—

'Okay,' Red acknowledges. 'Well, when you're done, there's something I'd like to do.'

I hold up a hand. 'No! I won the bet! I don't want to go zorbing, bungee jumping, horse riding or skateboarding!'

Red rolls his eyes. 'Nothing like that.' He scratches his head absently and looks around himself. 'I just thought . . . I just thought it might be nice if we did something like we used to.'

My eyebrow shoots up. 'Such as?'

'Well . . . you know. We used to play the drums together, didn't we? Figured it'd be nice to see where you're at with them, all these years later.'

Oh.

Oh boy.

'Um . . . I don't know, Red. It's been a long time,' I reply awkwardly, not knowing where to put myself.

My head is suddenly full of memories again. For the first time since I got here, really. I think I've been suppressing them as much as possible.

But now, all I can think about is the many happy hours I spent in the studio with Red, while he taught me how to play. If we bonded over anything when I was a child, it was that.

After he left, I didn't touch a drum kit again, and I'm not sure it's something I want to do now.

‘Yeah, yeah. I know,’ he says. ‘I just figured it’d be a nice way to spend the afternoon . . . if you don’t have anything else planned?’

I did have something planned. I was going to scrub myself pink in the bath again, and then spend another couple of hours agonising over whether to give Audrey a call or not.

This is probably my major pastime these days, when I’m not crashing into a mountain of cow shit.

Mind you, I’m not sure a conversation with my estranged wife wouldn’t end in similar circumstances . . . hence why I still haven’t made the call yet.

‘Er . . . no, no. I don’t have much else to do,’ I say, realising that I can’t admit all of that to my father, for some reason.

‘Well? How about it, then? Want to come and bash some skin with your old man? You can show me what you remember?’ Red doesn’t really do the puppy-dog look very often – which is strange, as all that grey hair and the saggy jowls make him a prime candidate for it.

I let out a long, slow breath. ‘Okay. Why not?’

I have my *deep* reservations about this, but even I’m fairly sure no physical harm can come to me sat at a drum kit.

I don’t know. Those stools can be pretty unstable, and the drumsticks are very pointy.

Do be quiet. I’m sure it’ll be fine. And there’s something about Red’s abstract mood that concerns me a little. I’d better go along with what he wants for now.

That’s usually your first mistake . . . and everybody else’s.

‘I’ll have my bath, and join you down there in about half an hour?’ I suggest.

Red nods and smiles, before turning and walking back down the stairs. My eyes narrow. I’m used to him loudly exclaiming something and punching the air when I capitulate to a request. What’s going on here?

I only stay in the bath for a few minutes. My curiosity and my concern are both piqued too much to hang about any longer.

Besides, the smell of cow has well and truly been scrubbed from my personage – if not entirely from my mind. No amount of hot water and soap will help with that.

Once I’m dry and dressed in an old pair of joggers and a Holy Moly t-shirt (of which there are many still lying about the place, brand new and in their cellophane, even though they are many, many years old), I make my

way down to the studio, finger absently poking at one ear to get the remains of the bath water out.

When I walk into the enormous extension, I see that Red has gone to some effort for this.

Next to his gigantic drum kit stands a somewhat smaller, but no less impressive one. It's a black-and-silver Yamaha set, polished to within an inch of its life.

It takes me a moment to realise this is the same drum kit that he taught me to play on over thirty years ago.

My jaw drops open. How does it look so *good*?

'This is the same drum kit, right?' I say to him, pointing at it. Red is sat behind his own set-up, fiddling with the adjuster on one of the high-hats.

He nods. 'Yep. Same kit.'

'How does it look so *new*?'

He sniffs and pulls at his nose. 'Oh . . . you know. I just like to look after my instruments.'

I give him a look.

Red once jumped headfirst into a bass bin at a concert in Adelaide. He spent the night at the hospital. This didn't stop him repeating this trick on at least twenty more occasions, before the doctors told him to give it a rest, if he didn't want to spend his dotage dribbling in a corner somewhere.

I guess he must have grown out of that particular attitude, given how lovely and clean the drum kit is. 'Bet you had Borkins working his little socks off with the polish.'

Red sniffs again. 'Yeah . . . Borkins. That's right.' He clears his throat. 'You want to sit down at your kit and see where we're at?'

I make a face. Where we're at is *not* going to be a good place.

I do as he asks, however, and park myself down in front of the kit, feeling my heart race as I do so.

This isn't just a son sitting down with his father for a little light drumming . . . This is someone who hasn't played the drums in nearly three decades sitting down with someone who has forgotten more about how to play the drums than most people will ever know.

Red Fairweather may not be considered one of the true greats of rock drumming, like John Bonham or Keith Moon – but he'd be in the top twenty, no doubt.

His seven-minute solo in Long Beach during 'Taking No Prisoners' is

still considered required listening and viewing for anyone with a desire to be a good drummer. That seven minutes in 1978 is probably Red Fairweather's finest hour. He was at the absolute height of his powers.

That's not the case now, of course. But he's still formidable.

And I'm supposed to show him what I remember of what he taught me?

Gulp.

I pick up the two drumsticks Red has set on top of the snare, and hold them in my hands awkwardly. This does not feel natural at all. For a moment, I close my eyes, trying very hard to remember what it was like for them to feel both natural and *right* in my hands . . . but I struggle to do so. So many years . . . and so very, very much between me and the boy I once was.

'Wanna start with something you're familiar with, then?' he asks me. 'Maybe "Welcome to the Jungle"? You always liked that one.'

I hold up a hand. 'More simple than that, please. It's been a very long time!'

I was a massive Guns N' Roses fan when I was a kid, and the drumming on 'Welcome to the Jungle' was something I used to be able to do, given that it was one of the band's best songs, and I practised it like hell. But can I remember how to actually play it these days? Not a bloody hope.

And it has a cowbell in it.

I'm not so sure I want to go anywhere near anything that has a cowbell in it, right now. For multiple reasons.

'Alright. How about "Highway to Hell"? That's a nice simple one?' Red suggests, and bops out the first few notes of it on his own kit effortlessly.

'Um . . . maybe we could start with just some exercises?' I counter, knowing full well that I can't even manage something as simple as AC/DC's famous tune.

Red gives me something of a horrified look. 'You mean, like a four on the floor?'

A four on the floor is one of the most basic drum beats, and sounds like something that comes straight off the disco floor.

I still think it's too hard for me to start with.

I cringe internally.

Not just at my apparent cowardice when it comes to even attempting the drums again, but about the fact I know I'm disappointing Red . . . *which actually makes me feel bad.*

I shouldn't feel bad about disappointing Red Fairweather. Not after he

disappointed me for the rest of my life when he walked out of it.

But here we are. I'm a little boy again, sat at my drum kit, with my talented and off-the-wall father, not wanting to disappoint him.

'Can we . . . Can we just warm up with a few rolls and paradiddles? See if I can manage those?' I plead.

This is rather like suggesting to a Michelin-star chef that the first recipe you should try is buttering a piece of bread.

Red's face betrays his dismay at the level that I have apparently sunk to. 'Okay, kid. We'll take it . . . easy to begin with.'

It certainly is taking it easy. The only thing less difficult than what I'm proposing would be if I dropped the drumsticks altogether and just repeatedly bashed my head against the snare.

I still feel terrified as I hold my drumsticks aloft, though.

And then I play.

I try very hard not to look at my father's face as I awkwardly start with a single stroke roll, before moving on to a double, then a single paradiddle, followed by a double paradiddle. Feeling brave, I try some triples, eighths and sixteenths. I feel like I'm doing them okay, but none of it feels particularly *good*. None of it feels at all *natural*.

After a few minutes I stop, and look around at Red.

He looks back at me in the manner of one who might regard a puppy that has just taken its first successful shit outdoors.

'Very . . . *nice*,' he says, swallowing hard.

I give him a rather pathetic smile.

'Shall we . . . try that four on the floor now?' he asks. 'Or maybe a Motown beat?'

The fact he says this in a doubtful tone is testament to how far he thinks I've fallen with my drumming. I don't think Red believes I can manage either – and I'm not so sure he's wrong.

But I'm here now. I suppose I'd better give it a go.

'Can you lead?' I ask.

This is akin to asking Rembrandt if he can start with a coat of magnolia in the downstairs toilet.

'Okay,' Red agrees, smiling. There's a slight twitch in the corner of one eye, though.

He starts to play the up-tempo four on the floor, and looks over at me, nodding his head to get me to join in.

I do. And fuck it up completely.

I offer him a look of abject apology.

Come on. Stop this. You have no reason to feel that way. He's the one who should constantly be apologising to you, remember!

Well, possibly. But when he does try it, I end up in a mound of cow shit.

Fair point.

'Try it again,' Red encourages. 'Just take a few deep breaths and take your time with it. There's no rush. Try to stop thinking . . . and just *feel it*.'

I think this is the first time Red has sounded properly calm and serious since I got here. It's extremely disconcerting. I'm used to a whirling dervish of insanity, not the collected solidness of a teacher trying to help a failing student.

I swallow, and try the four on the floor again.

This time, it's somewhat better. My muscle memory is starting to come back a little. The long-dormant skills Red taught me when I was young are obviously still in there somewhere. Maybe if I just keep going, they'll start to really dig themselves out of the hole again.

'Yeah . . . that's better!' Red agrees, joining in. His playing is, of course, flawless, but rather than let that worry me, I try to just emulate it as best I can.

'Now let's try the Motown,' he says, and immediately switches it up to the more driving beat on the snare and high-hat. I fumble a bit in the changeover myself, but do manage to drop into the new beat without too much trouble.

'Remember! Don't think! Just feel!' he reminds me.

'Hah!' I exclaim with some satisfaction as I maintain the Motown beat with ease. This is getting a bit better with every note.

'Right, why don't we drop into "Honky Tonk Women"?' Red now suggests.

'Um . . . okay!' I reply. As drum beats go, The Rolling Stones song is an easy one to learn, and the shift from the basic Motown beat should be pretty simple. Let's see if I can manage it . . .

Red counts down from five, and immediately brings in the bass beat to roll into 'Honky Tonk Women' with grace and ease.

And I follow!

Without missing a beat!

Ha ha!

Something deep within me stirs. It's in part driven by memory, but also something more *visceral*. Hitting a rhythm on the drums can be a transcendent experience, if you get it right. Especially when you're playing alongside a master.

Red starts to laugh, and then begins to sing the lyrics to 'Honky Tonk Women', doing his best impression of Mick Jagger. Red was always the second-best vocalist in Holy Moly, and he's more than capable of matching Jagger.

He always provided the back-up vocals to Danny in the band, and even got to sing 'I Hold the World' all by himself. It's easy for him to ape famous rock singers here in his studio with his son.

I actually find myself joining in with the singing as the drum beat becomes easier and easier to maintain. My singing voice is something that would have got me thrown off *X Factor* in the second round.

'Okay! "Highway to Hell"!' Red then says, dropping into the classic rock beat instantly. I follow him with no issues whatsoever.

We spend a couple of minutes on this, with Red singing Bon Scott's famous lyrics.

'You choose one!' Red commands, his head bobbing back and forth in time with his drumming.

My mind races, trying to think of a beat I think I can manage. "'Another One Bites the Dust"?' I venture, knowing it's a pretty easy one as well.

'Good with me!' Red agrees, and transfers into Roger Taylor's thumping beat.

I follow him in again with no issues.

This is really starting to become very enjoyable. I'm starting to remember why I loved doing it so much.

But then Red starts to push me a little more . . .

'Okay, let's have a go at "Smoke on the Water"!'

'What?'

'Come on! Don't think, just feel, remember? You can do it!'

I'm not so bloody sure I can. Deep Purple's seminal hit is a step up from what I've been doing, no doubt about it. It's a far more complex, rolling beat, with harder foot work, and a more difficult snare to manage.

'Can't we just stick with what we've been do—' I begin, but Red interrupts me, by counting down from five in the loudest voice possible.

My hands start to shake as he hits zero, and switches into Ian Paice's work on the 1972 classic. They're shaking not least because I know that Holy Moly have actually supported Deep Purple on tour, and Red has been drunk off his arse more than once with the man responsible for the drum work I'm now being asked to emulate.

And it's hard. Very, very hard. At least for someone like me, who hasn't touched a drum kit in so long.

I try my best to keep up with Red, but I can hear the errors starting to creep back in. The mis-times increase, the rhythm breaks up, the pace goes to hell.

Red doesn't hear any of this. He's fallen into a trance-like mode that every good drummer on the planet hits when they've got into the groove of what they're doing.

I'm sweating bullets and grimacing like mad. He's got his eyes closed and is singing as loudly as possible in that rasping, rock tone of his.

This goes on for a couple more minutes, while I desperately try to cling on to the beat, becoming increasingly more frustrated with every screw-up.

'And now . . . "Welcome to the Jungle"!' Red demands. 'Feel it, kid! Just feel the music!'

Oh God, no.

The cowbell.

The bloody *cowbell*.

'Welcome to the Jungle' isn't the hardest bit of drumming you'll come across, but it's not all that easy, either, especially for someone as rusty as me.

I *adored* playing this song when I was a kid. But now? When I can't even keep up with 'Smoke on the Water'?

Red's not giving me any choice in the matter, though. He's counting down from five again.

Just stop. Just get up. You've done well enough. Don't push it.

No! I want to stick with it!

Why? What are you trying to prove?

Nothing!

Then stop before you embarrass yourself!

No!

Red lurches from 'Smoke on the Water', right into the full roll of 'Welcome to the Jungle'. And for about ten seconds, I can stick with it.

Red screams out Axl Rose's lyrics as he bashes his way through the

verse, and I desperately try to cling on as best I can.

I really am in the bloody jungle.

And here be tigers . . .

Those ten seconds are relatively glorious, but then it all starts to go *horribly* wrong. We've hit the cowbell, you see, and that signals defeat and ignominy.

I'm mistiming all over the place, making it sound dreadfully discordant. Where the errors I was making with 'Smoke on the Water' could be hidden underneath Red's much stronger and forceful drumming, the same cannot be said for 'Welcome to the Jungle'. It's not something you can play quietly. There's nowhere to hide.

I try to keep up, I really do. But my hands suddenly don't want to operate anymore. They become lumps of unwieldy, uncontrollable flesh, grasping onto thin sticks of wood for dear life. I'm no longer drumming . . . I'm a monkey hitting rocks with a bone. It's absolutely fucking *awful*.

And Red has noticed. Not even he can be so caught up in his own playing that he misses the absolute pig's ear I'm making.

'Come on, kid! Just relax and feel the rhythm!' he coaches again, looking over at me.

'I'm trying!' I snap, feverishly attempting to hit the cymbals in time – and failing once more.

Now my arms feel tired and heavy. It's amazing what losing your mojo can do to the perception of what your body is doing. Before this I'd felt pretty good . . . but now everything aches. My back – right between my shoulders – is a white little ball of stinging agony, and my elbows feel like they're going to seize up at any moment.

'Keep going! Don't think, just feel!' Red demands, whacking the crash and ride with pinpoint accuracy.

When I try this, I hit both completely off the beat, and I'm so frustrated by it that when I turn back to the snare, I hit it so hard that the drumstick in my right hand goes flying off over my head.

'Damn it!' I scream, and throw myself back from the drum kit, like it's suddenly become white hot.

Red immediately stops drumming too, and looks at me with dismay as I stand there, back bent, trying to regain my breath.

'What happened, kid?' he asks.

I stare daggers at him. 'What *happened?* What fucking *happened?*

Thirty years is what bloody happened, Red!

‘But you were doing fine!’ he argues.

I stab a finger at the drum kit. ‘Playing stuff a five-year-old could handle!’

‘You were getting there,’ he insists.

‘No! I wasn’t *getting there!* I can’t do this anymore! At least nothing beyond what a child can handle. You keep telling me to stop thinking and just feel it. But all I do is *think*, Red! I can’t stop! I should never have agreed to come in here with you.’

He instantly looks hurt by this, and God damn it, that just makes me feel even worse.

Just leave! He doesn’t deserve your sympathy!

Maybe just for the moment, he does.

This was a nice thing to suggest we do. It really was.

A nice thing for which one of you?

I take a deep, ragged breath to calm myself down, before addressing my father again. ‘I’m sorry, Red. I really am. It’s just been a long time since you taught me this stuff, and I think I’m just too damn old and untalented to keep up.’

‘Bullshit. You were every bit as good as I was when I was young,’ he argues. ‘Every bit.’

I give him a derisory look. ‘I don’t think so. Someone that good just doesn’t forget.’

‘You’d be surprised.’ Red pedals the bass drum a few times thoughtfully. ‘I don’t think there’s anything wrong with your drumming ability, kid. That’s all still there. It’s . . . everything else that’s getting in the way.’

My shoulders sag. ‘Probably.’

‘All you need to do is push all that away. Just feel the music and nothing else.’

I plunk myself back down on the stool in front of the drum kit I will not be trying to play again today, and think for a moment. ‘You keep saying that, but I don’t think I can do it. Not like you,’ I tell him. ‘That’s the difference between you and me, Red. You can forget everything else, I can’t.’

I’m not sure whether I mean this as a compliment . . . or an insult.

Red plays a soft paradiddle while he considers this. ‘Maybe, kid. Maybe we’re not that alike . . . or maybe we are, and you just don’t know it?’

I shake my head slowly. 'I'm like Mum, Red. I always have been.'

The flicker of absolute pain that flashes through my father's eyes nearly takes my breath away.

Red Fairweather is so good at playing Jack the Lad, and being a good time rock and roller, that when genuine negative emotion is allowed out for even the briefest of moments, it stands out like the beam from a lighthouse in a raging storm.

'Your mum always was . . . always was the sensible one. From the day we met, she did her best to keep me on the straight and narrow.' His voice is thick. 'Those three years with her by my side were the . . . calmest? Clearest? The best of my life.'

The hackles on the back of my neck slowly start to rise.

I don't want to talk about Mum. Not now, not with Red. Possibly not *ever* with Red. I'd better change the subject quickly, before this jam session takes a turn for the even worse.

'Why don't you play something? Show me how it's done?' I ask my father, thinking that the best way to steer us away from any uncomfortable discussion over Mum is best achieved by massaging his ego a little.

'Oh . . . yeah. Cool. I could do that. Any suggestions? More Metallica? A bit of Zeppelin?'

I think for a moment. 'Let's have a bit of Holy Moly, eh?'

He nods his head. 'Which one?'

'"Breakneck"?' I suggest.

He wrinkles his nose. 'Bit too easy. Danny wrote that for him, not me. Another one?'

'Okay.'

'How about "I Hold the World"?' he says brightly. 'That one's definitely mine.'

I think back to my hand slamming into my car stereo, to turn off a song I definitely didn't want to listen to at the time.

But maybe the time is right again now?

Or maybe not.

'Yeah. That'd be okay . . . I guess?' I eventually say.

Red's eyes narrow slightly as he picks up on my reluctance. 'Nah. Maybe that's a bit too slow. We should try something more upbeat.'

I heave an inward sigh of relief. Thankfully that's not a song he wants to play today, it seems – and I'm not sure I'd want to listen to it, even if he

did. ‘How about “Taking No Prisoners”? The solo?’ I suggest instead.

I really would like to hear him play that solo again. It’s a hypnotically dark and heavy beat, which rises in a gradual crescendo to what can only be described as a tour de force that grabs you by the stomach muscles and doesn’t let up. I must have played it to myself on my old Walkman a thousand times when I was a kid.

‘Oh. That one. Um. Okay.’ Red looks a lot less enthusiastic about the suggestion than I thought he would.

‘We could go for something else?’ I hazard, me sensing his reluctance this time.

He waves a hand. ‘Nah. It’s all good. Let’s give it a go.’

Red sets himself at the drum kit, and takes a deep breath.

My eyes narrow. This isn’t like him at all. It’s clear he doesn’t want to play ‘Taking No Prisoners’, I just have no idea why. Does it conjure up some unpleasant memories for him? If so, what are they?

Regardless, I should probably just tell him to try something else.

He looks at me. ‘If you want to join in, please feel free to.’

I roll my eyes. ‘Yeah, alright. I’m sure you’d appreciate me murdering your most famous bit of music.’

He laughs, but there’s a tightness to the laugh that is inescapable.

Then Red starts to pedal the bass drum in a slow, rhythmic beat, and his face becomes etched with concentration. I sit back a little to allow him some space. This is obviously a lot harder for him than I thought it would be when I suggested it.

Red brings in the rolling floor tom and the whispering snare that marks the beginning of the drum solo on ‘Taking No Prisoners’. I can feel the beat in my chest in exactly the same way I could on my Walkman all those years ago.

It’s a primal, relentless march that is impossible not to be swept up in. Hearing it live in front of thousands upon thousands of people is an experience all fans of classic rock should have had at some point.

My head starts to bob back and forth in time as Red increases the pace, and the volume.

Then he brings in the cymbals, adding a higher, sharper layer to the increasingly complex beat.

Now the second bass drum comes in, deeper and more booming than the first. Red starts to increase the pace even more, the toms now getting a harder

and harder workout as the song starts to climb towards what you think will be a climax.

But it's only really the beginning.

That inexorable rising pitch will soon be abruptly cut off, and switched into a wild, fast, hammering assault on the senses. I can almost hear Danny Drager's trademark scream in my ears as Red hits the bridge into the new beat.

And then everything explodes, and Red is riding the crest of one of the most complex drum solos in history.

For a few moments, I marvel at the speed with which he plays.

But then . . .

Then I start to hear it.

The *wrongness*.

My skills behind the drums have obviously faded badly over the years, but I'm still able to detect when things are going wrong . . . even in the middle of such a massive, complicated drum solo.

And things are starting to go *very* wrong for Red.

He's missing cymbal hits. He's mistiming the bass drums. The toms are hitting too dull when they should be sharp, and he just completely missed the high-hat.

I blink a couple of times in disbelief.

I've never heard Red play something wrong. Ever.

There's a video of him at a gig in Rio, when I know for a fact he is so blind drunk they had to carry him off stage at the end . . . and he never misses a damn thing the entire time he's playing. It was uncanny. Almost against the laws of physics and biology, to be honest with you.

No.

Red Fairweather never misses.

But today he does.

Today he's missing just about as much as I did trying to get through 'Welcome to the Jungle' – a piece of music that pales into childish insignificance alongside what he's doing now.

Suddenly, I know I have to stop this. I know I have to intervene.

Red's face is . . . well, extremely *red*. His arms are flailing, but not in a free, abandoned way. It looks stiff. And painful. Very, very painful. Way more than a little stinging sensation between the shoulder blades.

The expression on his face, and his bright red complexion, certainly

suggest this is the case.

His knuckles are bright white, though. He must be gripping that drumstick even tighter than I did.

He misses another obvious cymbal, and I wince openly.

‘Red! Stop!’ I yell, having no effect whatsoever. He’s ignoring me.

He’s so caught up in trying to rescue this solo that everything else in the world has disappeared. I know just how that feels. I was there mere minutes ago.

Like father, like—

No. Do not say that.

‘Red! Just stop!’ I try again, with about as much success.

He’s sweating now. I can see rivulets of water running down his face, and—

No.

Wait.

That’s not sweat.

Is Red . . . is Red *crying*?

My blood runs cold.

Seeing Red Fairweather cry is like seeing the sky turn green. An alien, horrifying thing that shakes your understanding of the world around you.

Red Fairweather doesn’t cry. Red Fairweather laughs, swigs from the bottle and jumps off the stage into the crowd.

He can’t cry. It’s impossible.

But I’m seeing it with my own eyes, right now.

And when he misses yet another high-hat pass, the look of sheer distress on his face is enough for me to act.

I leap up from my stool, and put a firm hand on his shoulder. ‘Red! For Christ’s sake, just STOP!’

I have to physically pull him away from the drum kit to do this, nearly causing him to topple from his own seat. I have to grab his other shoulder to steady him.

He lets out a loud cry of surprise as I do this, but doesn’t try to force himself back to the drums in front of him.

Underneath my hands, I can feel his whole body shaking.

When I feel that he’s more stable again, I let go of his shoulders and come back around to his side, the expression on my face full of concern.

‘Red? What’s going on?’ I say in a breathless voice.

The anguish on his face is horrible to behold. ‘I . . . I’m sorry, kid. I wasn’t expecting it to be that bad. I just got lost in . . . trying to stop it.’

‘Trying to stop what?’

He holds up his hands, and for the first time I examine them closely. Usually, they are flailing around so much, it’s hard to get a good look at them, but now I can, it’s clear there is something wrong.

His knuckles appear swollen, and the fingers themselves have a slight warp to them on both hands. The skin is slightly darkened as well.

‘What . . . What is it?’ I ask quietly.

‘Arthritis. Getting worse every day. More painful,’ he tells me, in a small voice. ‘Not bad enough to stop me doing normal stuff, but when it comes to the drums . . . if I try to do anything . . . hard . . .’ He trails off sadly, absently rubbing his right hand with the left.

‘Oh God!’ I say, in shock. ‘I’m so sorry,’ I tell him, a slight tremble in my voice.

He shakes his head. The long grey hair looks more lank and lifeless than it normally does. ‘Not your fault, kid. Nobody’s fault.’ He looks up. ‘Unless you want to blame someone up there – if He even exists.’

‘I should never have pushed you to do “Taking No Prisoners”.’

He winces. ‘I pushed myself, kid. Not on you. That’s the first time I’ve tried it in . . . a long time.’ As he says this, he places the drumsticks carefully back on the floor tom, his hands shaking as he does so. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a sadder sight in my life.

‘Why . . . Why didn’t you say something, Red?’ I ask him.

He looks at me. ‘And say what? That I’m getting old?’ He laughs sharply. ‘That’s pretty obvious, isn’t it?’

My turn to shake my head. ‘Not really, Red, no. You don’t . . . carry your years badly.’

This is something of an understatement. Intellectually, I know Red is in his mid-seventies, but he was on a Segway the other day, for crying out loud. He still drinks like a seventeen-year-old. He’s the youngest pensioner in the world.

Hell, even thinking of him as a ‘pensioner’ feels weird. The mental image of Red standing at a post office counter, getting his pension, is one that just will not form in my mind.

But for all of that, here, in front of me, is the clear evidence that Red is indeed aging . . . and that the process of it is negatively impacting on the

thing he's known for the most, and the thing that has defined his life.

No, no. This can't be happening. Red Fairweather doesn't get *sick*. He doesn't get something like *arthritis*. He's a force of bloody nature, not a normal human being like me or you.

Perception, meet reality. I hope the both of you get on very well together.

'Well, thanks for saying that, kid, but I can't really hide it these days.' He winces again, but this time in pain. 'And frankly, it ain't just the hands, either.'

'What do you mean?'

He stretches awkwardly. 'Some days it feels like my whole body is giving up on me. And the pills aren't really doing the trick.'

'Pills? What the hell are you taking?'

He rolls his eyes. 'Not those kinds of pills, kid. I mean *medication*. From the doctor.'

'What are you taking?' I repeat, only this time a lot more calmly.

He shrugs. 'A whole load of stuff. One for my waterworks. One for the arthritis. And a few other things for stuff I can't remember.'

'Stuff you can't *remember*?'

'Yeah. Not important, though. Don't worry about it.' Red clenches a fist briefly and winces. 'Borkins gets it all for me. Takes good care of me, he does. I rattle when I walk these days. And the weed helps, of course. It's the only reason I still have the stuff around, if I'm honest.'

He's kept all of this so well hidden from me in the past few weeks, I'm stunned by everything I'm hearing.

'My God,' I say, slumping back onto my stool.

'Sorry, kid,' he says. 'This is obviously a bit of a shock.'

'You could say that.'

'Wish I could say the same. Things have been . . . getting worse for a while now.'

I'm incredulous. I truly am. He's hidden it all so very well. Until today. Until I placed him in a situation where he could no longer avoid showing me the truth.

Someone once said that the drums are the truth when it comes to musical instruments.

His name was Red Fairweather, and he was very, *very* drunk at the time.

'I'm sorry,' I tell him again, though quite what I'm apologising for now

I don't know. It's not like I have any control over the aging process.

His or mine.

I might not be troubled by things like arthritis as yet, but I can certainly sympathise about the way the march of time affects your physical abilities. I live in constant fear of it . . . and here's the proof in front of me that I *should* be afraid. The immortal Red Fairweather is as prey to the vagaries of time and illness as the rest of us!

Of course, the difference between my father and me is that I've got no problem complaining about it, while he's kept it all close to his chest. And he's obviously suffering a lot more than I am, now I see it out in the open.

Great.

What a fantastic paradox.

A son who's old before his time, and a father who pretends he's not old at all.

We make a right pair.

'*Ach*. Don't worry about it too much,' he tells me, trying to recapture some of that lackadaisical Red Fairweather charm. 'I'm still fighting fit in most ways. Got years left in me yet, I think.'

I smile, and nod. Although the 'I think' on the end of that statement is telling.

Red looks around himself at all the memorabilia on the studio walls, before returning his gaze to the drum kit again. 'Can I ask you a question, kid?'

'Sure, go for it.'

'Do you . . . Do you think it's all enough?'

My brow furrows. 'What do you mean?'

He indicates around us. 'All of this? Do you think it's enough for me? You know . . . if I don't get to do much else? Have I done enough? Does it all mean something?'

I look at him blankly. How the hell do I answer questions like that? 'Are you worried about your . . . *legacy*?' I think that's what he means, isn't it?

Red nods. 'I know it sounds like a weird thing to ask, but I've been giving it a lot of thought recently.'

'Have you?'

'Yeah. I'm not getting any younger, and when you know you've got less time left than you've had, you start to think about what you'll leave behind.'

Wow.

I mean . . . *wow*.

Reflective Red Fairweather is like an honest politician – something you'd never thought you'd see and can hardly believe exists.

'Not many people get to . . . leave behind what you will, Red,' I tell him truthfully, still partly in disbelief that he's even thinking this way.

Okay, Holy Moly never quite hit the heights of their contemporaries like Pink Floyd, Rush or Genesis, but they were still wildly popular for many years. Red is, without a shadow of a doubt, a minor rock legend – with a fortune commensurate to that description. How is that not enough for him?

'Oh, I know that. I've been very lucky.'

Very, *very* lucky old man.

'But at what cost?' he asks.

'At what *cost*?'

'Yeah. Having all of this is great, but what did I sacrifice to get it? You know what I mean? Were there other things I could have been doing? Other, more important stuff? There were, weren't there? Other . . . things I *should* have been doing. No matter whether anyone wanted me to or not.'

Jesus Christ. I'm not sure if I can handle this. My wayward father sounds like he's having regrets about his life decisions – and as his relationship with me was one of those decisions, I'm not sure I'm all that comfortable carrying on this conversation.

'I don't know, Red . . . *maybe*.' My voice has taken on something of a brittle tone.

Red looks down at his hands. 'I never really say any of this to anyone, kid. So, thank you for listening.'

Oh, for fuck's sake. I want to sit here and be angry at him – hell, I should be bloody angry at him, given that the elephant in the room is the way he abandoned me – but he's making it *very* hard. It's easy to be angry at flailing, wild Red Fairweather. It's not so easy with this new reflective, sad version of him I'm being presented with.

Not least because his apparent concerns about aging and dying key into some of my own neuroses. The very ones that put me in this house with him in the first place.

I very much doubt this is what Audrey had in mind when she suggested I move in with my father. She wanted us to bond to get me out of my stupor, not have Red add to it with his own struggles over getting old.

Audrey.

God, I could do with talking to her right now. And tickling Banjo on the tummy.

Yes. Both of those things would be infinitely preferable to witnessing the image I have of my father collapse in on itself as I realise he might actually be a real human being, after all.

'It's fine, Red. I . . . I understand how you feel.'

He looks up at me. 'You do?'

I sigh. 'Yes. Let's face it, the only reason I'm here is because all I do these days is spend my time worrying about getting old.'

'You ain't old, kid. Trust me.'

'Well, it feels like it most of the time.'

He rubs his hands. 'Try not to think about it. Because sooner or later you really *will* be old, and it ain't much fun, let me tell you that. And time goes by so fast, kid. It doesn't feel like five minutes have passed since you were born, and I first held you in my hands. So live your life while you can, as hard as you can. Because it'll come back on you even harder regardless, sooner or later.'

I shake my head. 'That's not me, Red. We've established that.'

He grits his teeth. 'Well, it could be. You're still my son. You've got a lot of me in there.' He points at my heart. 'It just needs to come out more. That's why I wanted you to stay with me. So I rub off on you.'

'Yes, Red. But when that happens I end up hanging naked off a balcony or covered in cow shit.'

'And I electrocuted myself on a fence in Poland once, but it was totally worth it for the night I had before it.'

My eyes narrow. 'Was it, though? You said yourself that you're worried about what you'll leave behind. What if all that risk taking, and all that throwing caution to the wind . . . what if all that was what stopped you from doing that *more important stuff* you mentioned?'

Christ, why can't either of us just come out and say it?

This is probably an unfair line of questioning, but we're here now, and I want to know where his mind is at.

'No. I don't believe that. I *can't* believe that,' he says, a bit more of the old Red coming out again as he does.

I give him a flat look. 'Then maybe all this reflecting isn't really doing you that much good, is it?'

I don't really know why I am suddenly angry at him, but I am. And I think this little jam session has likely reached its natural conclusion.

Red looks a little hurt at my words, and well he might. I think I've just got to the crux of his problem. If he's going to honestly think about his life decisions, he's going to have to confront the reasons why he's made them. Good and bad.

That's not an easy thing for anyone to do, let alone somebody like him.

'Okay, kid. I get you,' he says in a rather exhausted tone.

I get up from the stool. 'I'm going to go and give Audrey a ring,' I tell him. 'God knows I should have done it days ago.'

He nods slowly. 'Okay, kid,' he repeats. The resignation in his voice is something I try my hardest to ignore.

'Thanks . . . thanks for letting me play the drums again,' I tell him. 'Even if it didn't . . . didn't turn out that well.'

'Maybe it'll be better next time,' he says, and the hope in his voice makes my stomach knot.

'I'll . . . I'll see you later,' I reply, and start to walk away quickly, before he has a chance to say anything else.

There won't be a next time.

Partly because I don't think I want to remind myself of how far I've drifted from the talented young man I used to be, and partly because I don't want to risk another heart-to-heart like this.

It potentially opens up too big a can of worms about the past.

And I don't want to see him that vulnerable again. *Ever*.

Because it makes me very uncomfortable to see him like it . . . and because it just reminds me that I'm eventually going to be just like it too.

And I won't have any kind of legacy to leave behind, will I? Hell, I might not even have a wife to mourn me, the way things are going.

God.

I should *never* have come here.

Bridge

‘Oh my. That must be so hard for Red.’

‘Mmmm.’

‘To have something you love . . . the thing that made you who you are, taken away from you like that must be just *awful*.’

‘Mmmm.’

‘Will? Are you listening to me?’

‘Mmmm.’

‘Will!’

‘Aah!’ Banjo’s lead jerks in my hand as I start. ‘Christ, Audrey, do you want to give me a heart attack?’

‘Are you listening to anything I’m saying?’ my wife repeats as we stroll alongside the canal – a regular walking spot for Banjo over the years, and one we have very much enjoyed coming to in the past.

‘Yeah, yeah. I’m listening,’ I lie.

I haven’t been listening at all.

I’ve been stuck in a cloud of rumination almost the entire time we’ve been walking. This is partly because I’m not sure that there’s much conversation to be had with my wife at the moment that won’t prove painful – and partly because the things Red told me in his studio are revelations I’m having trouble dealing with.

Audrey’s eyes narrow. ‘You don’t seem all that concerned about your father’s failing health.’

I stop in my tracks. ‘I’m concerned about it alright,’ I tell her. ‘I just . . . don’t really know what to say or do about it.’

Audrey looks me square in the eyes. ‘It’s a shock to you, isn’t it?’

‘Of course it’s a *shock*! There’s clearly a real human being underneath all that leather and attitude, and I don’t know how to cope with that.’

Audrey scoffs. ‘You didn’t think of him as a real human being?’

‘No. Not really. When your bloody father is a rock god, it’s hard to think of him as anything other than that. Especially when you’re a kid. I never got to know him as an adult, so the rock god thing stuck in my head.’ I look out over the canal for a moment. ‘It’s like finding out Superman has haemorrhoids.’

Audrey laughs at this, possibly involuntarily. It’s nice to hear, even if the subject matter is a little dark.

She’s the one who suggested we meet up here for this walk with Banjo when I called her. She could tell there was something playing on my mind almost the second she got on the phone.

I leapt at the chance, suffice to say.

Nothing has really changed in the shifted dynamic of our relationship, I’m sad to report. There’s a . . . coldness? A reluctance? A *strangeness* there now, that makes me feel a little sick. Our problems have most definitely not gone away.

But it’s clear she misses me. The same way I miss her.

And I will take some sort of solace in that fact, if nothing else.

Banjo spent five minutes acting like an excited, furry maniac when he saw me get out of the car, and I can’t pretend I was less excited to see him.

‘Well, Red *is* human, Will. Just like the rest of us,’ Audrey says. ‘And maybe one who could do with accepting he has to slow down a little.’

It’s my turn to scoff. ‘Red admit he needs to slow down? Good luck with that. All the time he’s physically and mentally able to do it, he’ll keep up his present lifestyle. It’s who he is.’

She gives me a speculative look. ‘You could help him with it, you know.’

I look baffled. ‘How?’

‘Show him that a man of his age doesn’t have to keep acting like a man of *yours*.’

‘And how am I supposed to do that?’

Audrey shrugs. ‘I don’t know. He’s your father. I’m sure you can think of something.’

I start to walk again, pondering on this.

What could I possibly suggest to Red that would be a thing I’d enjoy doing that he might too?

I amble along a little further in silence, continuing to think.

And then it hits me!

Red needs to find something a little bit more sedate to do with his time. He's only going to get older, and sooner or later he'll have to take his foot off the gas. Slow down a bit. Take more time. Stop and smell the roses, so to speak.

And what better way to do that than the thing I'm doing *right now*?

Walking.

Or, more precisely . . . *rambling*!

I turn to look at Audrey.

'What?' she says, looking at my expression. 'What is it, Will? You look a little *crazy*.'

I shake my head. 'Oh no. It's not crazy, Audrey. It's absolutely *perfect*.'

'What is?'

I throw out an arm at the path ahead of us. 'This!'

And then I actually laugh out loud.

Red Fairweather on a nice, sedate ramble in the countryside.

Is such a thing even *possible*?

I'm going to try my hardest to find out!



'You want me to do *what*?'

Red looks at me like I've just suggested he give his entire fortune away to a charity for retired Segway operators.

'A ramble, Red. With me. And the rambling club I belong to!'

'A r . . . ramble?'

'Yes!'

'You want me,' he says, pointing at his chest, 'to go with you' – he points at me – 'and a bunch of other ramblers' – he mimics an extremely old man – 'on a *ramble*?'

'Yes! It'd be great. Some fresh air, and some sensibleness, will do you the power of good.'

'Have you lost your bloody mind, kid?'

Funnily enough, this was the reaction Audrey had when I suggested the idea too. I don't think she's ever really appreciated my love of a good walk across open countryside. A picnic on a sunny hillside is one thing, but

traipsing up hill and down dale in all weathers is something that she's always left me to do on my own.

Red certainly hasn't ever appreciated that kind of pursuit, either. But it's time he did!

'It'll be *fun*, Red. Trust me!'

Red shakes his head quickly. 'No . . . I . . . I can't do that. It's not . . . not . . .'

'Something a rock star would do?' I say, derisively.

'Exactly!'

I fold my arms. 'Well. Maybe not, Red. But it's something I think you'd enjoy. And it's something *I* want to do.'

'So?'

'Well . . . you invited me to stay with you so we could reconnect, didn't you?'

'Yes.'

'Well, this will help with that.'

'But . . . I meant reconnect doing stuff *I* like.'

My eyes narrow. 'That's not how it works. At least not all the time.'

He grimaces. 'I just don't think I can do something like that, Will.'

If I could fold my arms again, I would do. Instead, my eyes go flinty, which is almost as good. 'You bet me that if I could beat you down the hill on that Segway, I'd win the chance to decide on what activities we get up to, remember?'

Red swallows hard. 'Yes.'

'This is what I want to do with you.'

Red gives me a sullen look, and goes to argue, but sees the look in my eyes and wisely thinks better of it. 'Where do you want to . . . do this *thing*?' he says, looking like I've just suggested we burn down Moly Mansions.

I smile back at him with a warm glow inside my heart. 'Have you ever been to the South Downs, Red?'



It is a bright and sunny morning.

It won't stay that way. This is England we're talking about, after all.

But for now, the weather is set fair, and I am in a perky mood.

This is because I am about to do something I take a great deal of joy in.

Rambling is just one of the *best* things in the world. Such a simple, easy hobby to pick up, but very rewarding once you do.

You just stick on a pair of decent walking shoes, and off you go. If you happen to be doing it with a bunch of like-minded people, it's even *better*.

That's where the Facebook group Rambling Is Marvellous (or RIMs, as it's commonly referred to) comes in. I joined the group a few years ago, and it's only gone from strength to strength in that time.

There are weekly rambling events organised all across the area, and until recent events I have tried to join in with them as often as I possibly can.

All the business with the break-up of my marriage and moving in with Red has stopped me being part of a good ramble for a few weeks now, so I'm delighted to be turning up to this one.

Red Fairweather is *not* delighted.

He looks like someone's about to do a tooth extraction on him.

Blindfold.

He's also dressed entirely incorrectly for rambling.

I did advise him on what to wear, but he seems to have ignored me completely.

I am fixed up in a sensible pair of cargo shorts, an even more sensible gingham shirt, and the single most sensible pair of walking boots in human history. I could walk for a thousand miles in this get-up, providing the weather stays with me.

Red's only real concession to having a ramble is that he's swapped out his usual leather, Cuban-heeled black motorcycle boots for a pair of extremely squishy-looking basketball trainers. They are bright neon green and blue, with enormous tongues and even bigger white soles.

Everything else is unchanged from the usual. He has burgundy leather trousers on, for crying out loud. I'm half worried I'll have to call out the paramedics to deal with the first-degree burns he's going to get from all the chafing.

I'm also worried about how the rest of my rambling friends will react when they see him.

RIMs is largely composed of people who have been around on this planet long enough to know that rambling is the best way you can maintain your health, without putting yourself at any risk whatsoever. Rambling is a pursuit of the wise . . . and the wise tend to be *older*.

I'm not the youngest in the group, but those older than me vastly

outnumber those who are younger. And most of those older folk are supremely, and annoyingly, *healthy*.

I only wish I'd got into rambling at an earlier age. I might be staving off the march of time a little better than I currently am.

Take Brian and Peter Chum, for instance. Brian and Peter Chum are twin brothers who have been rambling since they were very small. And they both look wonderful on it. They're probably about Red's age, but look ten years younger. Maybe twenty.

Then there's Melody and Charles Entwhistle. Melody is in charge of running the Facebook group, and is the kind of formidable woman you don't want to get on the wrong side of. Charles exists to highlight how formidable his wife is, by constantly looking like someone who knows he married an extremely formidable woman, and has been having some doubts about it these past few decades.

Both of them look healthy as horses, though. Formidable ones.

The rest of the RIMs crew can be considered of similar vintage, and they all look like they've just stepped out of a Trespass closing-down sale.

Quite how they are going to react to Red is beyond me.

But it won't be in about thirty seconds, when we round the corner and appear from the other side of the large hedgerow that divides the car park from the start of the walking trail.

To put off that moment of revelation a little while longer, I will tell you that the section of the South Downs Way we are rambling along today sits in a place called the Meon Valley, and wends its way through some truly beautiful English countryside.

We will largely be sticking to the path as laid out in the Ordinance Survey map, but will occasionally go off the beaten track a little, down side paths that are nearly as well marked as the official one.

This is the excitement of rambling.

There's no greater thrill than risking a diversion off the well-trodden path, knowing full well that the risk is actually *minuscule*, because you have maps for everything, and the less well-trodden path is still pretty damn well trodden, when you get right down to it.

Brian and Peter Chum are particularly adept at finding interesting – and entirely safe – pathways for us to go down, which take us to see sights that are only ever viewed by those brave enough to leave the main path, as indicated by the council signposts. A mere several thousand people, at the

absolute most.

But enough procrastination. Let's get this meeting over with, shall we?

'Morning, all!' Red proclaims, throwing his arms aloft, in time-honoured tradition.

While he isn't keen on rambling, Red can't help but play to an audience. Even if it is just an audience of eight people in sturdy rambling gear.

Brian and Peter Chum look like they want to run.

Charles Entwhistle looks like he's just been force fed a lemon.

Four of the other five people present us with similar expressions.

Only Melody Entwhistle seems pleased to see the newcomer.

And when I say pleased, I mean absolutely *ecstatic*.

'Oh my God! Red Fairweather!' she exclaims, hands clasped to her chest.

Melody Entwhistle is usually pretty stony-faced. You don't get to maintain a reputation as formidable if you go around smiling like an idiot all the time.

But Melody is smiling now. So much so that I think the top of her head might drop off.

Oh my God.

She must be . . . *a Holy Moly fan*.

Only that can explain her current, bizarrely out-of-place behaviour.

'Hello, my dear!' Red cries, with what I can only presume is faked excitement, because he's seen all this many times before, and goes straight over to Melody to shake her hand. He does love his fans, of that there is no doubt.

'Hello, everyone,' I say awkwardly as Red envelops Melody in a massive bear hug, and Charles Entwhistle receives a metaphorical lemon up his arse to match the one in his mouth.

'Good morning, Will,' Brian Chum says, side-stepping away from my flailing father.

'I'd . . . I'd like you all to meet my father, Red.'

I indicate towards him as Melody Entwhistle giggles loudly at something he has just said. It's probably very inappropriate. Judging from the red blush now rising on her cheeks.

Peter Chum looks at me in horror. 'That's Red Fairweather? *The* Red Fairweather?'

'Yes, it is.' I pause for a moment. 'I can only apologise.'

I had warned the group on Messenger that I would be bringing my father along today. Perhaps I should have done a better job of fully explaining who and what he is.

Still, at least the shock is over now. They all know what they're dealing with and we can get on with our lovely ramb—

From beyond the high hedgerow that separates the car park from the path comes the sound of a roaring motorcycle engine. And then a second. And then a third.

The bottom falls out of my world.

I slowly turn my head to Red, who is grinning broadly, and now has Melody Entwhistle hanging off him like a twenty-year-old groupie.

'Red,' I say, licking my lips nervously. 'What have you done?'

He shrugs his shoulders. 'Well, you said you wanted me to come on this ramble thing with you. But you didn't tell me I couldn't invite anyone else along.' The motorcycle engines roar one more time before shutting off. 'Figured I'd need a bit of moral support, what with all this fresh air and sensibleness going on. Not something a man can deal with alone.'

The roars of motorcycle engines are now replaced by roars of laughter, and the clinking of bottles, before heavy footsteps start to draw closer.

Something wicked this way comes . . .

'Gypsie, Red? You invited Gypsie?' I say in utter dismay.

'Yep. Was going to get Stu, Danny and Albo along as well, but they were busy. Gypsie said he'd bring his mates with him, though, so I figured that would be fine.'

I shake my head.

No.

No, no, no. This is *wrong*. This is against nature and against God.

Something like Gypsie should never be allowed to taint the joy and splendour of a ramble. Everything a ramble is, Gypsie is most assuredly not. They might as well be from parallel universes.

I don't know what the signs of the apocalypse are, but I'd be willing to bet that a leather-clad motorcycle gang led by the lead guitarist of a prog-rock band coming on a ramble could well be one of them. It sounds about right to me, anyway.

'Fuck a chicken, it's hot today!' Gypsie shouts to the high heavens as he saunters around the bush in all his dubious glory – followed by his entourage of three equally dubious-looking mates, and his nineteenth wife, Celeste.

Definitely not twentieth, though.

The South Downs Way has never witnessed this much denim and leather before.

‘Anyone got a bottle opener?’ Gypsie asks, wagging a bottle of Newcastle Brown Ale at the members of RIMs.

Brian and Peter Chum break into a run.

Charles Entwhistle transmogrifies into a lemon in front of our very eyes.

The rest of RIMs cower away from the harbinger of alcoholic doom that has come among them.

Melody Entwhistle giggles again, and gives Red an adoring look.

I start to wish I’d never been born.



‘You did this on bloody purpose,’ I hiss at Red as we march along a hillside path that gives us tremendous views of the Meon Valley’s fields and hedgerows below.

‘What do you mean?’ he replies innocently.

‘You didn’t want to do this, so you’ve *sabotaged* it.’

‘What are you talking about, kid? I haven’t sabotaged anything.’

Up ahead, Gypsie is swinging off the branch of a tree, while Celeste is staggering along in her high heels between Brian and Peter Chum, using them both for support.

I stab a finger at them. ‘*That!* That, Red! You should have known what would happen if you invited Gypsie along! He’s a one-man disaster zone!’

Red waves a hand in that insufferable way he has of dismissing something. ‘Ah, it’s fine. They’re all getting on like a house on fire.’

I stare at him in horror. ‘Basher and The Sideways Boy tried to get Mrs Blake to smoke a joint, Red. That is not fine.’

‘She didn’t seem to mind that much.’

‘That’s not the point!’

‘Then what is?’

‘You’re . . . You’re *spoiling rambling!*’

Red actually laughs at this. ‘We’re having a nice walk through the countryside. I don’t see how anyone can ruin it.’

‘Tell Brian and Peter Chum that!’

Red looks down the path to where the twins are still maintaining Celeste's upright forward motion, though both of them seem to be struggling with her weight somewhat. It's a good job there are two of them to take one breast each, otherwise she would have toppled over a long time ago. Brian and Peter Chum have combined expressions of fear and loathing on their face that Hunter S. Thompson would have balked at.

Gypsie, Basher, The Sideways Boy and the third malcontent, whose name I don't actually know, are now gibbering and capering at the head of the column of uncomfortable, or flat-out terrified, ramblers.

I have a horrible feeling that, provided they all get out of this experience alive, I may be drummed out of RIMs for the sin of inviting this collection of psychopaths along for the day.

But I only invited Red!

That will be my argument.

Sadly, I doubt it's one that will help me much, because in terms of courting disaster, inviting Red along to anything is all the mistake you need to make. Everything else then tends to fall into place, like the worst domino run of all time.

If I see a bloody cow shed anywhere, I'm running like the hounds of hell are after me.

The ramble . . . Oh God, can I even call it that anymore? The ramble-*ish* continues through some very pretty fields and coppices as it makes its way across the Meon Valley. It's a little hard to pay much attention to them, though, when Gypsie keeps jumping into your field of vision to offer you a swig of his beer.

I invariably hang as far back as I can, because I can best survey the damage being done to my reputation from this vantage point.

Strangely, though, the mood of the ramble has begun to *change*.

Brian and Peter Chum no longer look quite so disquieted at having to help Celeste down the path. In fact, Brian has something of a smile on his face, and Peter looks quite content with his lot.

I'd like to think this is *not* because they have spent the last hour rubbing up against a supermodel with balloon tits wearing a tight dress, but I'd also like to think I'm definitely going to win the lottery one day.

Mrs Blake and the rest of the crew seem to have also warmed to Gypsie and the malcontents. This is extremely disconcerting . . . but also much to be expected, to be honest.

There's a force of will that accompanies your average rock-and-roll star. A charm and an attraction that is honed over many, many years of being in the public eye. You simply do not get to be a rock star unless you are interesting, exciting and different from the norm.

That's a heady thing to be around, and very few are immune to it.

The members of RIMs clearly aren't.

You can tell by the way Mrs Blake is laughing her head off at a joke The Sideways Boy has just told, and the fact that at least two of the other ramblers are enjoying a bottle of Newcastle Brown Ale.

Only Charles Entwhistle remains entirely cold to the addition of several Holy Molies to our rambling team. He has a face like thunder. And lightning. And possibly hurricane and acid rain too.

This may also be down to the fact that his wife, Melody, is *still* hanging off my father.

I'm having to keep a close eye on them both, because there is unfortunately every chance that any minute they could disappear off to have sex behind a bush.

I know what rock stars are like, and I know what their fans are like too – no matter how old they are.

And Melody Entwhistle was clearly a superfan of Holy Moly, judging from the way she's acted ever since Red turned up.

This isn't surprising, either. She looks just about the right age to have been well into the band when she was a young girl.

'Let's turn off here!' Brian Chum shouts, pointing at a smaller pathway that leads away from the main route, and into the picturesque forest. 'This should give us a lovely trip through a patch of wildflowers I've been told about!'

For a moment, my heart freezes. I am terribly reminded of what happened on those bloody Segways. The last time I turned off the main path, I ended up with dung under my fingernails for days.

But this is *different*. Oh so very *different*.

This is not Red Fairweather suggesting we leave the main path, but Brian Chum. Sensible, cagoule-wearing Brian Chum. He wouldn't lead me astray. He would only lead me to wildflower meadows and other lovely rambling sites. I can trust him. I can believe in him.

The rest of the troop grinds to a halt, with the regular ramblers dutifully following Brian, Peter and Celeste onto the side path. Gypsie shrugs his

shoulders and takes off after them with his small entourage. I hang back behind Red and Melody to make sure they go the same way . . . and don't get themselves 'lost'.

Red once got 'lost' with the wife of the record company Holy Moly were signed to. Luckily for all concerned, it was StuTheNu who found them arse naked on a grand piano, and not her husband.

'What?' Red says to me as I glower at him while they pass.

'You know what,' I reply in a stern voice, which makes him laugh . . . and tighten his grip around Melody Entwistle's waist a little more.

Bloody hell.

Brian Chum is as good as his word, and it only takes us ten minutes until we are surrounded by a thick blanket of absolutely gorgeous wildflowers, including foxgloves, honeysuckle, celandines and daisies. I am very pleased to say that Gypsie and co. actually treat this area with respect. There is no trampling going on . . . which is something I would not have put past them, given how much booze they've consumed.

There is, however, still a great deal of raucous laughter, which mars the experience somewhat. Wildflower forests are meant to be things appreciated in relative peace and quiet, not to the sounds of Gypsie singing 'Hard As a Rock' by AC/DC.

In any other circumstance, I'd be feeling pretty relaxed right about now (the scent of wildflowers will do that for you) but today I couldn't be more on edge if you randomly and constantly fired a starter pistol right next to my ear.

As we make our way back out of the patch of beautifully colourful forest, I notice for the first time that thick clouds have begun to build up overhead. They have a look of rain about them. Although, this is Britain in the summer, so they could just as easily part again and leave us completely dry. Who knows.

The crowd of ramblers and rockers comes to a grinding halt at a wooden bridge that crosses over a fast-flowing, three-metre-wide river, just past the edge of the forest. We have to stop, because the bridge is cordoned off with some emergency tape strung across its handrails, and a council sign, stating that it is not safe to cross. I can't see any obvious indications as to what's wrong with the bridge . . . although it does look very old and weathered. I wouldn't say the bridge is exactly *rickety*, but it's clearly seen much better days.

'Oh, that's a pity,' Brian Chum says, in a disappointed tone. 'I had

hoped to use this path, as it's a rather good shortcut up to Steerminster's Hump. We'll have to go back, and take the long way around.'

'Back through the fucking flowers, then, lads?' Gypsie exclaims happily.

Mrs Blake twitches involuntarily at the swearing, but also gives Gypsie a slightly confused look. 'You . . . *like* the wildflowers, Mr Gypsie?' she asks him, somewhat incredulous.

'Of course I fucking do, Bridget! Who doesn't like flowers?'

I had no idea Mrs Blake's first name was Bridget.

'Everyone turn around!' Red commands, still with his arm around Melody Entwhistle.

It appears Holy Moly have now taken charge of my rambling group. Oh, joy unconfined.

Everyone does as they are told, and we walk back into the forest, and through the wildflowers.

We eventually get back onto the main path, and proceed along it again, with Brian and Peter Chum grumbling about the out-of-order bridge. 'It's most perturbatory,' Brian Chum tells me as he studies his South Downs Way booklet. 'That shortcut would have saved us a good half an hour, given how the main path has to cut around the rising edge of the valley, before we reach Steerminster's Hump.'

'That is a pity,' I agree. Anything that would have shortened this little adventure would have been alright with me.

Red, Gypsie and the rest of them are kind of behaving themselves, but I know damn well my position in RIMs will have been negatively impacted by their presence today. Certainly to people like Charles Entwhistle, whose opinion holds a lot of sway.

Damn it all.

We arrive at Steerminster's Hump about thirty minutes later, and by then the clouds overhead have thickened considerably.

So much so that everyone has noticed.

'I fear we may have to curtail the hike a little today,' Peter Chum tells us. 'The weather looks to be closing in.'

'Jesus. How much longer is it *supposed* to be?' says Red, wincing a little as he moves from one foot to the other.

'We're meant to be about a quarter of the way,' I tell him, relishing the horrified look in his eyes, and Gypsie's.

‘Bloody hellfire!’ Gypsie exclaims, looking down at his motorcycle boots.

Peter Chum nods. ‘That’s right, Will, but given the outlook above, it might be advisable for us to wait to see what the weather intends to do before proceeding any further.’

Usually, I’d feel disappointed to hear this, as anything that cuts a ramble short is bad news in my book. I’d be happy to continue, even in the rain.

Today, though, I can’t think of anything that would give me more pleasure than to turn tail and head for home. Sooner or later Red is going to try to shag Charles Entwhistle’s wife, and if I can get this ramble done and dusted before that becomes a reality, I’ll be extremely relieved.

We all mill about on Steerminster’s Hump for another twenty minutes while we wait to see what happens with those clouds.

The hump is not much to write home about, to tell the truth. It barely rises above the treeline. It does provide a lovely view of the valley, though, and a slightly less lovely view of the sky over our heads.

The first thick drop of rain hits me on the top of the head a few minutes later, distracting me from my attempts to follow Red around the hump, making sure he doesn’t go off for one of his own.

Very soon it is joined by more.

The members of RIMs, as one, pull out a variety of plastic raincoats and ponchos.

None of the Holy Moly contingent do, of course.

‘Okay, everyone, I think we should definitely turn back, I’m afraid!’ Brian Chum says despondently.

‘Good idea!’ Gypsie intones. ‘I had this jacket handmade in Turin in ’87. Not sure how it’ll cope with the rain!’

Poorly, Gypsie. Very, very poorly.

‘Right then, back we go!’ Red exclaims loudly, once again taking control of things. What an extremely annoying habit that is of his.

The rain actually holds off for the first quarter of an hour as we trudge back along the main South Downs Way. But as we progress towards the thicker forest, the drops start to multiply rapidly.

‘It’s a shame that bridge is out!’ Peter Chum remarks as we pass by a turn that leads away to our right. ‘If it wasn’t, we could head off down that way. It would make the walk much shorter!’

‘Down there, you say?’ Red replies, pointing.

‘Yes, Mr Fairweather.’

There’s a look in Red’s eyes.

Oh no.

Oh no, no, no.

Not again.

Please not *again*.

I can’t get covered in cow shit again!

‘Let’s go that way!’ Red says, earning an approving nod from Melody.

She’d probably nod approvingly if he told her to stick her head in a ceiling fan, at this point. From what conversational snippets I’ve picked up during the ramble, Melody went to see Holy Moly a grand total of *seventeen times* when she was young.

‘But the bridge is out,’ Brian Chum protests.

Red waves a hand. That bloody dismissive hand of his. ‘Ach, it looked fine to me. Probably just a couple of boards out, if that. We can cross it.’

‘No, we can’t,’ I reply, firmly.

Gypsie drapes an arm around my shoulder. ‘Yeah, we can, mate. Totally worth it to not get wet, eh? Worth the risk in my book.’

But your book is only two pages long, Gypsie, and just says ‘FUCK IT’ in big bold letters on both of them.

‘Come on, folks! We’re taking the shortcut!’ Red yells, and turns off to the right.

He’s immediately followed by Melody, Gypsie, Basher, The Sideways Boy, the other one and Celeste.

With Celeste, of course, come Brian and Peter Chum – whether they like it or not. Her breasts have them completely hypnotised.

This causes Mrs Blake and the other RIMs to follow as well, leaving me at the back, standing on the main path, with only Charles Entwhistle for company.

He glowers at me, before reluctantly following the rest of the group.

Several fat splats of rain hammer onto the top of my thin plastic poncho as I stare up the South Downs Way with a look of absolute defeat on my face.

Holy Moly are completely in charge now. The usurpation has reached its natural conclusion.

I turn right and follow Charles Entwhistle.

Because what else is there to do?

The wind has really got up by the time we get to the bridge. We could well be looking at a storm brewing here.

There is another council sign on this side of the bridge. Gypsie walks over, plucks it up and moves it aside, while The Sideways Boy pulls away the tape that's affixed to the bridge's handrails.

'After you, Gypsie!' Red exclaims with a grin on his face.

Gypsie shoots him a look. 'Is this going to be like that time you made me drink a wasabi and vodka milkshake?' he says suspiciously.

Red waves that bloody hand again. 'Nah. This'll be fine, mate. Off you go.'

Any sensible person would back away and let somebody else go first on the apparently broken bridge, but Gypsie never has had much in the way of a sense of self-preservation. If he had, he probably wouldn't have needed his stomach pumped so many times.

The old rocker shrugs his shoulders, and stomps off across the bridge.

I wince with every footstep he makes.

And I swear underneath that stomping I hear a couple of cracking noises – but Gypsie quickly makes it across the ten feet of the bridge, and raises his hands in victory when he gets to the other side.

Basher, The Sideways Boy and the other one all cheer, and rapidly make their way across to join their leader. I *definitely* hear some cracking this time around.

The wind is blowing even harder now, and the rain is starting to come in sideways. There's more urgency than ever to get back to the car park as fast as possible, but that urgency is putting us all at risk from this unpredictable bridge.

My heart leaps into my throat as Brian and Peter Chum escort Celeste over. If anything's going to break the bridge it's the weight of those boobs.

But they make it safely across too, swiftly followed by Bridget Blake and most of the other RIMs.

Only me, Red, Melody and Charles are left.

This is the moment Charles Entwhistle decides to grow a pair.

He steps forward and thrusts out an elbow. 'Come on, Melody. Cross the bridge with me, please.'

There is a soul-sucking, cringeworthy moment where his wife hesitates, before Red loosens his grip on Melody's waist completely, indicating what he thinks she should do.

I have to frown at the look of mild amusement that plays across his face as he watches Melody reluctantly go back to her husband.

This is all just a game to him, isn't it?

All just a bit of *fun*.

Never mind that Charles Entwhistle probably feels about as worthless as a worm right about now.

But then look how happy Melody has been this entire time . . .

As far as she's concerned, Red is a *wonderful* human being. A charismatic, fun-to-be-with rock star, who's probably made her year by showing her all this attention. Attention that maybe she hasn't quite been getting from good old Charlie.

Who am I to say she shouldn't have that enjoyment?

As someone who knows what it's like to be around Red Fairweather more than most, I can empathise with both of them. The joy and the pain of it all.

Charles leads Melody across the bridge, and halfway there we hear the loudest crack of all, and one of the wooden planks gives way completely.

Luckily for them both it's one they've both just stepped off.

Melody still stumbles backwards, though, and it's only the combined proximity of the handrail and her husband's grasp that stops her falling over.

The grateful look she gives him, and the look of pride he returns, go some way to repairing the damage Red's exploits have done . . . but at what cost?

The bridge is clearly a lot more dangerous than any of us had anticipated, and the council were dead right to cordon it off until someone can come along to fix it.

Red looks at me.

I look back at him.

He waggles his eyebrows, and takes off across the bridge himself, paying no heed to whether any more of the wooden boards are too rotten to hold his weight or not.

'Red! Be bloody careful!' I cry, rushing up to grab the handrails.

He stops in the middle of the bridge and turns back to me. 'Will . . . it's fine! There's nothing to be that scared about. It's just a little bridge.'

'You could fall in!' I say, through gritted teeth.

He looks down at the fast-flowing river below. 'So what?'

'What do you mean, so what? You could hurt yourself! Badly!'

He shrugs. 'Or maybe it'll be absolutely *fine*? Maybe it's worth the small risk involved to get out of this bloody rain a bit quicker?'

There's an edge to his voice. An impatient, frustrated one.

He beckons me on. 'Come on, kid. The sooner we're past this bridge, the sooner we get back to the car park.' He turns to see that the rest of the clan have already moved away. 'We're getting left behind.'

I look back down the path we've come from. 'I'm going . . . I'm going to turn back and walk the other way.'

Red looks around in some disgust. 'What? You're crazy! No need to do that. Just come across the bridge!'

'No!' I reply, hands going white on the old wooden rails. 'It's too risky.'

Red looks to the skies. 'Fuck me, kid. No, it isn't!' He looks down again. 'Why are you like this, Will? What's got into you?'

'Just because I'm exhibiting some common sense, it doesn't mean anything's got into me!' I snap back.

'Everyone else has crossed. Even all your rambling mates.'

'So what?'

'So, don't you think you're going a bit overboard?'

'No!'

'What's the worst that could happen?'

I let out a grunt of frustration. 'That's always the way with you, isn't it?'

'What is?'

'Never considering what could actually happen. How bad things could actually get!'

Red leans against the handrail, which creaks. It's a deliberate move to put me even more on edge, I can tell. 'And how bad could things actually get?' he asks, in a probing voice.

'You could go through the boards. The handrail could break. You could go into the water. You're seventy-four years old, Red. You could die!'

He laughs. 'Die? I'm crossing a little bloody bridge in an English forest, kid. I'm not going to fucking die!' He laughs again, and shakes his head.

'Mum did!' I scream, the rain now battering me. I barely notice it.

Red immediately stops laughing and stands up straight. 'What?' he asks in dismay, starting to walk back towards me.

Oh God. I think I might cry.

At least the rain should hide it.

‘Mum died, Red! And she didn’t think what she was doing was risky, either!’

He looks at me with a mixture of pain and regret. ‘I . . . I don’t really know too much about what happened. I wasn’t . . . wasn’t . . .’ He tails off.

No. He wasn’t.

I’m soaked through, cold, tense and tired. The last thing I want to do is talk about this now. But here we are.

You just don’t get to dictate when the floodgates open, sometimes.

I look at my father and shiver. ‘She . . . She only went in for routine knee surgery, Red. It was supposed to be a couple of days in the hospital, and home. No worries . . . no trouble.’ There’s a lump in my throat now, and a bowling ball in my gut. ‘But she caught . . . She caught some kind of infection. A bad one. They couldn’t stop it from spreading, and . . .’

I can’t say it.

I can’t get it out.

I can’t form the words.

Red has gone ashen-faced. He’s leaning against the handrail again now, but not because he’s trying to prove a point anymore.

‘It was supposed to be routine. No real risks. Easy.’ I choke back an involuntary sob. ‘Eight days later she was dead.’

‘Jesus, kid. I didn’t know. I didn’t realise.’

I look at him. ‘No, Red. I know you didn’t.’ I look down the length of the bridge, which is both very small, and absolutely gigantic, both at the same time. ‘And you don’t understand. You don’t understand how everything can just be . . . *taken away from you.*’ I am at the heart of something now. Standing here in this driving rain – stalled at both a physical and metaphorical bridge I cannot cross. And it’s dark down here. Dark and cold and scary, and I just want to run. I just want to be somewhere *safe*.

Audrey’s face fills my mind, and I feel my legs weaken.

‘It’s too *dangerous*, Red,’ I continue. ‘The world. It’s too dangerous, and too unfair, and I . . . and I . . . I . . .’

Red moves forward and wraps his arms around me.

He stinks of Jack Daniel’s, sweat – and probably marijuana. I don’t quite know how Melody stayed so close to him for so long.

But the hug is fierce. Those ropey drummer’s arms really do have a huge amount of strength in them, even for a man of his age.

‘I’m sorry, kid,’ he says hoarsely into my ear. ‘So sorry . . . for everything. For all of it.’

I pull away from him, a little reluctantly, it has to be said. ‘I know, Red. You don’t have to say it.’

‘Yes, I do. I really, really do.’

I nod, and then wipe rainwater from my forehead. ‘I know I’m not . . . that much fun,’ I tell him, flicking the water off my hand. ‘Mum’s death hit me hard. It *changed* me.’ I sigh deeply. ‘I was a . . . better man before it. And the last few years have been really hard. Too hard for me. And too hard for Audrey.’

‘What do you mean?’

My face crumples in misery. ‘I think I’ve lost her, Red. For good. She wants the old me back . . . but I think he’s gone. I think he went away when Mum did. When I sat by her bedside day after day, and then watched her take her last breath.’ Now my face contorts in a combination of rage and utter despair. ‘All for a stupid fucking routine knee operation!’ I roar, spit flying from my mouth, and mixing with the rainwater that continues to cascade down my face.

‘No, no. That’s not true . . . about Audrey, I mean,’ Red argues. ‘She loves you, kid.’

I roll my eyes. ‘She loves who I *was*, Red. Don’t you see that? She loves a younger, braver version of me. A man who I lost a long time ago.’

Red tries a smile. It’s a little faltering. ‘But that’s why you’re with me, right? That’s why she wanted you to come and spend time with your old man.’ He rests a hand on my shoulder, and gives it a squeeze. ‘You’re still the same man, Will. Whether you think so or not. We just have to . . .’ – he looks behind briefly – ‘. . . get you across that bridge.’

It sounds like such a simple thing.

Such a simple, easy thing to do.

But the boards are rotten, and the handrail creaks, and they told me she’d be home in forty-eight hours.

‘Maybe, Red.’ I swallow hard. ‘But not today.’

My father looks at me gravely for a moment, before he nods slowly and wraps his arms around me again.

Twenty minutes later, as Red and I squelch our way back along the main

South Downs path, the rain mercifully decides to let up.

We don't speak. We're both too cold and wet to do anything other than walk. I'm also exhausted, but I don't think it has anything to do with the ramble we've been on.

Every so often, I sense Red turn to look at me, his mouth open as if to talk . . . but he never actually says anything.

What can he say?

What more is there?

My mother died four years ago, and now my marriage is dying as well.

There's nothing he can do about either thing.

The first he wasn't around for, and the second isn't something the drummer from a prog-rock band is equipped to deal with.

When he eventually does say something, it's a little out of the blue.

'Your mum loved to jump in puddles,' he says in a wistful voice.

'I'm sorry?'

Red points down at the particularly large puddle we're both stepping around. 'Like that one. If she was here right now, that puddle would have been jumped in. I guarantee you.'

I swallow hard.

Can I talk to Red about Mum like this? Even if it's such a benign topic? Have things progressed enough for me to be able to do that?

Let's see, shall we?

'Mum hated the wet and cold,' I reply. 'I can't see her ever doing that.'

Red shrugs. 'She did, though. Back then. When we were an item. I remember one time at Knebworth, she ran headlong at a puddle about twenty feet wide, and soaked everybody in the band when she hit it.' He scratches his chin. 'Never seen her laugh so much in her life. I couldn't stop, either.'

I blink a couple of times, trying to consolidate the rather sensible, stoic woman I grew up with, with the kind of person who'd jump, giggling, into a massive puddle.

But then I never knew Mum when she was that young, did I? I'm sure the vagaries of age and being a single parent must have changed her.

And besides, compared to Red, everybody on the planet seems very sensible, so I've probably got a slightly warped view, anyway.

'She always made me laugh, kid,' Red continues, now apparently lost in a haze of memory.

'Did she?'

‘Oh yeah. Nearly every day. That was one of the things I loved about her. It’s easy for a skinny, weird bloke like me to score good-looking women when you’re in a band, but finding one who’s also funny? And clever? And . . . *strong*? They don’t come along that often. Not at all.’

‘She was very special,’ I respond, my voice thick.

‘I like to think I made her happy too.’ He kicks away a stone with his soggy trainer. ‘For a little while at least.’

I don’t know how to respond to that. Mum didn’t ever really talk about her brief marriage to Red that much. Especially after my sixteenth birthday. Too much pain for both of us in doing so, I’d imagine.

But I can accept they must have been happy for a while back then, otherwise I probably wouldn’t be here, would I?

‘Audrey made me happy,’ I say, in as level a voice as I am able. ‘And I ruined it.’

Red looks at me, and stretches out a hand to squeeze me on the shoulder. ‘Nah. You haven’t ruined anything, kid.’ He lets out a long, slow breath. ‘Trust me on that . . . I’ve ruined plenty of things, so I’m an expert.’

I can’t help but laugh at this, but there’s not much humour to it.

Why would there be?

When we arrive back at the car park, Gypsie roars with approval as he sees us emerge from around the high hedges. But then a look passes between him and Red, and his demeanour completely changes. He leaves the others by the bikes and cars, and comes over to the pair of us, his arm immediately going around my shoulder. ‘Looks like you could use a towel there, Wilbur,’ he says, using a nickname he last used on me about thirty-five years ago.

‘Yeah,’ I say in a tired voice.

Gypsie waves to everyone else as we draw closer. ‘We’re all getting on like a house on fire,’ he tells me. ‘No worries.’

‘No worries,’ I repeat, with a tight grin.

Frankly, I don’t much care about how Holy Moly and RIMs are getting along with one another anymore. Other more important things have asserted their dominance in my head – but it’s nice to see that such a disparate group of people can indeed get along. There’s maybe hope for humanity, after all.

With Red and I returned, the ramble officially comes to a close. Brian and Peter Chum seem to spend an inordinate amount of time saying their

goodbyes to Celeste, while Charles Entwhistle is in his car with the engine idling faster than greased lightning.

‘Don’t worry about him,’ Red says to me as we watch Melody climb in next to him. ‘I’ve given Melody a bit of advice that’ll hopefully perk him up no end by the end of the day.’

I dread to think.

I really do.

‘Thank you for bringing your friends along, Will,’ Mrs Blake says to me before she leaves. ‘It was a very . . . instructional day.’ Her expression turns indecipherable. ‘I’ve learned a lot.’

I also dread to think.

Even more so.

Gypsie leaves with Celeste and his cohort last. As he does, he looks at me in a way I’ve never seen him do before. I think it might be a look of . . . *concern?*

I don’t think Red has had the time to tell Gypsie what happened between us on the bridge, but these are two men who have known each other since the dawn of time (or 1969, as the more prosaic among us might consider it), and who knows how much information they can convey between them in a single look?

I feel weirdly jealous of that level of connection for a moment. That level of kinship.

‘We’ll do it, kid,’ Red says to me as he leans against the side of my car, and notices how thoughtful I am as I watch Gypsie leave.

‘Do what?’

‘Get her back. Audrey.’

I close my eyes. ‘I don’t think so, Red. I really don’t.’

He leans forward. ‘Have some faith in your old man. I know a thing or two.’

I snort and favour him with a wry smile.

If only I could believe that.

But in all honesty, I think I’d trust Red Fairweather to fix that bridge more than my marriage. There’s so much less that can go wrong – up to and including an accidental drowning.

Performance

‘You want to do what?’ I say, looking up from my iPad, and regarding my father carefully from across the breakfast table.

Today he is dressed in white leather trousers, a Holy Moly tank top and a blue, semi-see-through woman’s dressing gown. I don’t know where the pink one has gone.

‘Buy a llama,’ he repeats, as if it’s the most natural thing in the world. He cocks his head. ‘Or maybe at least *sponsor* a llama, if I can’t buy one.’

My eyes narrow. ‘And why, pray tell, is this something that you’ve suddenly decided you want to do?’

Llama ownership is not something my father has ever expressed a desire to partake in. This is an odd turn of events, even for him.

Red looks a little indignant. ‘I’ve always been an animal lover, me.’

‘You did slap that dolphin that one time, though, didn’t you?’ I point out.

Red rolls his eyes. ‘Oh God! The *Sun* blew that completely out of proportion.’

“‘Drummer’s Dolphin Dust Up’ . . . That was the headline, wasn’t it?’

Red looks sour. ‘Yes. Yes, it was.’ He bangs the table. ‘But none of that matters now. I *am* an animal lover, and I want to help out a lovely llama. Give it a home. Or, you know, a nicer bed and some straw to eat, if I can’t do that.’

‘And where exactly would we find this llama?’ I ask, in what can only be described as a long-suffering voice. I’ve only been living here a few months, but a few months in Red Fairweather’s world is like a couple of decades in anybody else’s. You never get that much chance to be bored around here. Surprise and amazement are around virtually every corner. The jury is still out as to whether this has been of any benefit to me or not.

Red tries his best to look innocent, and fails spectacularly. ‘Well, I saw

that there's a local branch of the RSCPA that has a llama on site that needs sponsoring . . .'

'No,' I reply, my eyes going flat.

'What do you mean, no?'

'You're talking about The Heath, aren't you? The centre Audrey runs.'

'Am I?'

Good lord. Red Fairweather is capable of many things. Dissembling in any convincing manner is not one of them.

'Of course you are.' I slap my iPad on the table and sit forward. 'What's really going on here, Red? Why do you want to go to see Audrey?'

Red regards me with some displeasure for a moment. I've seen through his . . . er . . . 'cunningly' devised llama plans, and he doesn't like it. 'Because I like her, damn it,' he tells me. 'And she's my daughter-in-law!'

'Probably not for much longer.'

'You don't know that!'

I cross my arms and lean my elbows on the table. 'Look, we've had this discussion, Red. You remember, don't you? We nearly both caught cold from getting soaking wet.'

'Of course I do. It was only a couple of weeks ago.'

'Good. In that case you know what the situation is. I don't need to repeat myself.'

'I do know . . . But I also know that things are not too late to salvage, even if you think they are. You love her, she loves you. And I think it would be a good idea for the two of you to see each other.' He now folds his arms too, in the manner of a petulant child. 'And I really do want to buy a llama.'

'Well, I don't care. We're not contacting Audrey. About a llama or anything else.'

'You can't stop me,' he sniffs. 'I can do what I like.' He deliberately looks away from me. 'I might have . . . have already called her about it.'

'You did what?!'

He looks back, determination on his face. 'I said, I've already called your wife, and she's more than happy for me to pop down there to meet Chunky Lumps.'

I am about to rage at him for contacting Audrey without telling me, but there really is no way I can let that name pass without comment.

'*Chunky Lumps?*'

'Yes. That's the llama's name. You'd know that if you'd been following

The Heath's Facebook page.'

'I've been avoiding stuff to do with my wife, Red. For what should be painfully obvious reasons. Who called it Chunky Lumps? *Audrey?*'

'No. They had a competition at the local primary school. Chunky Lumps won. It was nearly Llama McLlamabutt, but Chunky Lumps got two more votes from the kids in the end. The whole thing got very tense, I'm led to believe from the comments.'

I blink a couple of times. 'You've been keeping a close eye on my wife, it appears.'

He sighs. 'I've been keeping a close eye on the *both of you*, kid. For longer than you know.'

This brings me up short. I've always felt like up until a very short time ago I was out of Red Fairweather's train of thought completely. The idea that he's actually been taking an interest in me, and my wife, for some time is quite hard to accept.

If that was the case, then why not just get in touch sometime over the years? Why watch me from afar, and not actually be a part of my life?

I'm about to flat out ask him this question when he rises quickly from his seat. Maybe he realises what I'm about to say, and wants to avoid that particular conversation . . . for now at least.

'So! I am going to The Heath, to see Audrey and to meet Chunky Lumps the llama,' he states, in a determined tone of voice. 'You can come with me if you like . . . or not. It's your choice.'

I sit back in my chair again, weighing up my options.

I'm desperate to see Audrey again, of course I am. But I'm also desperate to avoid yet another painful conversation about our marriage.

Maybe if I'm there with my idiotic father, there's less chance of that happening. It might be the best way to see Audrey, without it becoming another trip down misery lane.

'Alright, alright. I'll come,' I tell Red, still sounding pretty reluctant.

He nods his head. 'Great.' Hands go to his hips. 'Now I must go and talk to Borkins about llama management. I'm sure he'll know a thing or two.'

I look in dismay at my father for a moment. He actually thinks poor Borkins would know how to take care of a llama?

Preposterous.



Borkins knows how to take care of a llama.

Or at least, he knows how to care for ungulate farm animals – which is good enough, all things considered. My father's assistant has had what can only be described as a very full and interesting life, prior to coming into Red's service. Apparently at least part of that time was spent on a farm.

I'm deathly afraid that unless I can prevent it, we'll be coming home with a llama today. Borkins looks decidedly grumpy about the whole idea, from what I can tell by the expression on his face as he drives us to The Heath – but he also knows where he gets his wages from, so is wisely staying quiet.

The other thing I'm deathly afraid of is what reaction I'm going to get from Audrey when I see her. Will she be pleased to see me turn up at her work? Or put out by it? It's so hard to tell these days. The mixed signals I get confuse me no end.

As Grumpy Borkins pulls up outside The Heath's main entrance, I feel my legs go a little wobbly. This feels like a confrontation I don't really want to have, even though I miss Audrey so very, very much.

See?

Confusing, isn't it?

I climb out of the car, squinting a little at the thin drizzle that's coming from the sky. The weather has not been good these past two weeks.

But the damp grey weather cannot stop me from crying out in pleasure as Banjo comes scampering across the gravel towards me, having erupted from the entrance doorway as it opens.

'Banjo!' I cry, as if I haven't seen him for years.

In fact, it's only been a week since I last took him for a walk on my own through the park (after another rather stilted conversation with my wife on the doorstep), but a week to a dog is a lifetime to any other creature.

My little old Frenchie proceeds to lick me half to death, and wag his tail so hard I start to get worried he might sprain it. He then spreads himself out for the expected tummy tickle, which I happily oblige him with, because that's what I'm here for.

All of this gives Red time to go and say hello to Audrey, who is still standing at the blue-framed glass entrance to the RSPCA centre she's worked at for ten years, and run for six.

It's odd not to automatically be the first person to greet her.

Hell, it's more than odd. It's deeply, deeply strange and unpleasant.

There's no real reason why I shouldn't just go straight over and say hello . . . but then again, there are all the reasons in the world, aren't there?

Red gives Audrey a hug like he's known her from childhood. She looks a little stunned by it, but doesn't pull away. Thank God he took a shower before we came out.

My legs are still wobbly as I approach her, with Banjo now snuffling his way over to Red for yet another tummy tickle.

'Hiya,' I say to my wife in an awkward voice. It's only been seven days since I saw Audrey, but it feels like it's been far longer. A week in Red Fairweather's orbit really does feel like a month in anybody else's.

Maybe I'm more like Banjo than I thought.

Or maybe I feel this way because this is the first time I've come to see her at work in over a year. The change in location from the familiarity of our front doorstep probably adds a lot to my feelings of distance and disconnection from her. I'm very much on her territory here, and it's not the easiest thing.

'Hey,' she replies, sounding equally awkward.

Red looks at his watch – an ostentatious Rolex that I've never seen him wear before. He must be trying to impress Audrey. 'Shall we go and see Chunky Lumps, then?' he says, obviously keen to get to the llama as quickly as possible.

It could be said, in many ways, that Red Fairweather is always a man who wants to get to the llama as quickly as possible. That's just who he is.

Audrey nods. 'Er . . . yes. Okay, Red. If you want to follow me through.' She looks at me. 'Will? You haven't seen what we've done with the far paddock, have you?' This effort at small talk is a bit forced, but also appreciated.

'Um . . . no. Not yet. It'll be nice . . . to see it.'

God. How can I sound so unnaturally stilted around my own wife?

Red and I follow Audrey and Banjo through the main building that houses the reception desk, cattery, pet shop and meeting rooms. Everything is looking a little tired and shabby. This is testament to the constant struggle my wife has to secure funding for the place from the council, and by private donation. The Heath is pretty much constantly one set of monthly bills away from serious financial trouble.

We emerge back out into the drizzle, crossing a fairly wide, circular concrete courtyard area, which has various paths leading away from it,

towards the variety of other buildings contained within the site of The Heath. As far as rescue centres go, it's a big one, housing everything from the usual dogs and cats to slightly more exotic and rural animals like donkeys, ponies . . . and at least one llama.

From the courtyard, we make our way to the right, and past one of the long, breeze-block dog kennels. From one of these, a gorgeous little black-and-tan dachshund emerges, being led by a nervous-looking staff member who I don't recognise, clad in the dark blue polo shirts they all wear here. Banjo – usually a dog who has no trouble communicating with his fellow doggy kind – gives the dachshund a wide berth. Bless him, he probably doesn't want to scare it.

'Well done, Carole,' Audrey says to the woman as we pass – who must be new to the job, given how scared she looks.

'Thank you, Audrey,' Carole replies. 'One of us had to do it, didn't we?'

I don't have time to find out what Carole has had to do, unfortunately, as Audrey sweeps us past her, and out beyond the kennels, to the fields at the back of The Heath.

They have indeed done a good job of clearing up the far paddock, it has to be said. There's a brand-new stable building and feeding troughs, and the scrubby bushes have been cut back to add a good four or five metres of space.

When Banjo issues forth with an excited little bark, the legend that is Chunky Lumps looks up as we approach.

Chunky Lumps is a llama.

. . . I don't really know what else to say.

It's a white one, if that helps.

Bit fat as well, to be honest. That's probably where the name comes from.

'Chunky Lumps!' Red exclaims happily as we walk up and stand next to the fence that surrounds the llama's paddock. Banjo goes up to it, and looks up at the llama, who gently ambles over to say hello.

'We've received a couple of hundred pounds for him so far,' Audrey says, patting Chunky Lumps on the haunch. 'But any more you can offer us would be fantastic, Red. The costs of keeping a big animal like this are getting higher all the time. '

He flaps a hand. 'Oh, I'll give you ten grand for him,' he says absently

as he tickles Chunky Lumps on top of the head.

Audrey gasps.

I roll my eyes.

Welcome to the wonderful world of Red Fairweather, Audrey. Try to keep your arms inside the cabin at all times.

‘Ten grand?’ she says in shock.

Red looks at her. ‘Is that not enough?’

She shakes her head. ‘No, no. It’s fine. It’s more than enough to sponsor him – probably for the rest of his life.’

Red’s brow furrows. ‘Sponsor him? I want to *buy* him, Audrey.’

‘You what?’

‘I want to *buy* him. Take him home with me. Give him a lovely life at Moly Mansions.’

‘You do?’

‘Yes! Of course!’ Out go the arms, up goes the head, out comes the laugh.

Audrey looks stunned.

Yep.

That’s about right.

‘Well . . . we’ll have to sit down and go through it, Red,’ she stammers.

‘We can’t just hand an animal over. We have to make sure the person adopting them is suitable. We have procedures and conditions and checks and —’

The flappy hand goes again. ‘Yes, yes, that’s all fine. We can do all that.’ He glances at his watch again. Red seems to be in a hurry for some reason. ‘But I can buy him, yes? If everything checks out?’

‘Well, I . . . er . . . I . . .’ Audrey stutters.

‘Let her think about it, Red,’ I interject. ‘It’s a lot to drop on her. But I’m sure the money would help out a great deal around here, so it might be something that can happen, if they feel you are suitable to have Chunky Lumps.’

Audrey gives me a grateful look, which I return with a smile. Probably the first genuine one I’ve used around her in a while. My wife isn’t somebody who usually needs any assistance from me when it comes to her work, so it’s nice to be able to jump in and help out for a change. Also nice to sound a little more sure of myself.

Red nods. ‘Okay, okay, that’s fine. He’s a lovely-looking chap, and I

think he'd love it at my place.' He looks at his watch again. 'Shall we pop back out to the front? We can have a chat with Borkins about what we'd do to accommodate the hairy little bugger.'

What is going on here?

Red seemed so keen to see this llama, but now we're here, he's in one hell of a rush to get away from it. Has he changed his mind, and doesn't know how to say it out of embarrassment?

This would mean Red understanding the meaning of the word 'embarrassment', though, so I doubt that's the issue.

'Okay,' Audrey says uncertainly, head obviously still spinning.

Without waiting for another comment from either of us, Red marches off back towards the entrance to the rescue centre – leaving me, Audrey and our aging dog trailing in his wake.

'Is he alright?' she asks as we hurry to keep up.

'I'm not sure,' I ponder, now feeling deeply uncertain about this entire trip.

Something is very definitely going on here.

'Are *you* alright?' Audrey then asks.

I give her a look. 'Not too bad, I guess,' I say. For a moment, I want to tell her all about what happened on that bridge in the pouring rain, but I really don't have the time to get into it now . . . and what would her reaction be anyway?

Frankly, I think the whole thing sounds a little pathetic, and I don't want to push my wife away any more than I already have.

Poor little mummy's boy couldn't cope with her dying, so now he's a shadow of his former self? Good grief.

Better that goes unsaid, I'm sure you'd agree.

Besides, Audrey has more than enough emotional intelligence to know anyway. I think she's probably understood the depth of what's been wrong with me far longer than I have. That's why she pushed me into moving out. She knew the issue had to be forced – and I can't say she was wrong about that. I think, without her ultimatum, I would have just stumbled along in the same depressive rut, confronting nothing.

I don't know what the future holds with her, but I do know that I'm closer to understanding myself now, and that proves she was right to be strong, and make the tough decisions she did.

And she's not the first woman in my life who knows how to be strong

like that, is she?

We all emerge back onto the gravel driveway out front, to see Red now standing with Borkins, and again looking at his watch.

Borkins still looks extremely grumpy.

Red looks a little hectic around the eyes.

As we cross to them, I notice the cute little dachshund being walked near a rhododendron bush by the nervous member of Audrey's staff. I shudder at the sight of the rhododendron bush. Of course I do. Along with cow sheds, I'll *never* be able to look at one again without feeling a cold shudder.

'Aha! Come and talk to Borkins, Audrey. He can assure you that we have the space and . . . stuff to accommodate good old Lumpy Chunks,' Red says.

'Chunky Lumps,' I correct.

'Whatever,' my father replies absently, looking down at the exit to the car park as he does so. He's very anxious, for some reason.

What the actual hell is going on here?

Audrey then starts to chat with Borkins about the practicalities of Red Fairweather adopting a llama. My father seems far less interested in the conversation than he should be.

This disinterest turns to semi-concealed excitement when a black van turns into the rescue centre car park, and slowly drives towards us. The person driving is a hunched man, wearing both a hooded top and a baseball cap. He looks vaguely familiar, but too much of his face is concealed, and the windscreen is somewhat tinted, so I can't quite identify him.

Alarm bells are ringing in my head now. Something is definitely up here, and I don't know—

A door slides open on the side of the black van with a loud bang as soon as it parks up next to Red's Bentley.

From it jump three men in black balaclavas and black boiler suits. One is holding a handgun. The second carries two flintlock pistols, and the third is wielding what looks like an old World War I trenching spade.

Bloody hell.

'Aaaargh!' Red screams in horror. 'They've come to get me!'

'Tha's right!' the one carrying the handgun roars, in what can only be described as the single worst cockney accent ever devised by man. 'We're 'ere to kidnap you, you fuckin' drummer! Everyone get their bloody 'ands

up!’

He holds up the gun in Red’s face.

Jesus Christ.

The one holding the flintlocks aims them at me, Borkins and Audrey, while the third slaps the spade menacingly in his palm.

We all immediately put our hands up as instructed. Well, Audrey and I do. Borkins does it a lot more slowly, and that grumpy expression on his face does not shift one iota.

Down below, Banjo has naturally gone bloody apeshit.

Sadly, he’s a very old dog now, so going apeshit largely consists of barking hoarsely and wobbling about in an arthritic fashion around Audrey’s legs.

I’m glad he’s defending her, though.

Good dog.

‘Get inna fuckin’ van!’ the thick-set man holding the gun says to Red. ‘We’re takin’ you somewhere ’orrible, and when we ’ave, we’ll tell these twats ’ow much money we want!’

Red, his hands held up, looks about as scared as it’s possible for one man to be. ‘Oh God! Please no! Don’t take me off to somewhere horrible! I don’t want to go!’

‘No?’ the gunman says. ‘Then maybe we’ll take someone else as well, jus’ to get you to come along quiet, you fuckin’ drummer pillock.’

He then turns the gun on Audrey. ‘You! You get inna van with this lanky prick.’

‘No!’ Red screeches. ‘You can’t take the lovely Audrey as well!’ He looks at me. ‘Can’t anyone do anything to stop this?’ His eyebrows waggle up and down enthusiastically as he says this.

Does he mean *me*?

Only, I don’t know if Red has ever noticed this, but I’m a forty-five-year-old man who works at a desk and likes to go rambling.

He seems to have briefly mistaken me for Batman.

I look at Borkins, hoping he might jump to the rescue. He was once a Royal Marine, as I found out during a very interesting conversation with him over coffee. Surely he knows what to do in such dangerous situations?

Borkins, however, just stands there with his hands up, looking mightily annoyed about the whole thing. What he doesn’t look is *scared*. Must be all the military training.

‘I said,’ Red pipes up again, ‘*won’t somebody do something to stop this?*’ He again looks directly at me, motioning towards the gunman frantically with his head as he does so.

Oh my God, my father is going to get me bloody killed.

‘Er . . . are you gonna try to stop us?’ the gunman says, stepping closer to me.

‘No!’ I exclaim, hands still held up very much in surrender.

He looks from me to Red and then back again. ‘Are you *sure?*’

‘Yes!’

‘Completely sure?’

‘Yes!’

He steps a little closer. ‘I mean . . . you don’t wanna go for my gun, then?’ he half whispers.

‘No, I don’t!’

‘You *absolutely* sure? Only, I ain’t fast wiv it. You can probably get it off me, no problem.’

‘You what?’ I reply in a dumbfounded tone.

The gunman looks at Red again. ‘I thought you said he’d be well up for it?’ The cockney accent has dropped off a cliff, and has become a far more recognisable one.

I lean forward and look the gunman in the eyes. ‘Albo, is that you?’

‘MINTY! KILL!’ I hear a tremulous woman’s voice cry from off to our left.

Every head snaps around to see Audrey’s nervous new member of staff over by the rhododendron bush, pointing at the main gunman and letting go of the dachshund’s lead.

Oh, for crying out loud. If my arthritic little French bulldog isn’t going to help out with this kidnap attempt, then what on earth does she think a tiny little sausage dog is going to—

Bloody hell!

The dachshund tears across the car park at a frightening speed. Stones fly into the air behind it as its little legs power it towards us.

It is making a beeline straight for main gunman – who, I am now 99 per cent sure, is actually Jerry ‘Albo’ Albanore – the stocky rhythm guitarist from seventies progressive-rock band Holy Moly.

‘Bloody hell!’ Albo screams in horror as the speedy sausage heads straight for him, barking its little head off.

But what the hell is it going to do once it reaches him? The dachshund is barely eight inches off the ground. What exactly is it going to do?

And then it leaps into the air, and runs straight up the gunman's leg, before clamping his jaws around his crotch.

'Oh, bloody hell!' Albo screams again, the gun flying from his grasp. 'Get it off me! Get it fucking off me!'

'Albo!' Red also screams – this time in *genuine* horror.

'Get him, Minty!' Audrey exclaims savagely at my side.

Banjo is now making hoarse, pig-like noises – the way he always does when he gets over-excited.

Borkins has stepped forward, the grumpy look on his face gone.

The gunman carrying the flintlocks drops both of them, and wrenches his balaclava off. It's bloody StuTheNu. 'Get that sausage off Albo's sausage!' he roars, pointing at Minty, who is wriggling around in absolute fury, her little legs scrabbling about in mid-air.

'He can't play the fucking gig in Hyde Park if his balls are off!' cries the third would-be 'kidnapper' – who is obviously Danny Drager. You can tell from the scream in his voice. That means Gypsie is the man driving the van. I knew I bloody recognised him.

The entire kidnapping was completely staged. By the entirety of Holy Moly's five-man line-up. Including my sodding father.

'Get it off!' Albo once again cries, his hands around the body of the writhing ball of black-and-tan fury.

'Minty!' I exclaim, in what I can only hope is an authoritative tone. 'Release Albo's balls!'

Audrey throws her hands out in terror. 'No, Will! She goes for any man who tells her what to do!'

Minty immediately releases the death grip she has on Albo's crotch, and drops back to earth. She then rounds on me, growling.

'Oh dear,' I say in a tremulous voice.

'Run!' screams Red.

'Run!' cries StuTheNu.

'Run!' opines the pained Albo.

'Run!' shouts Gypsie, who has now appeared from the van.

Well, hell, if the fifth-highest-selling musical act of 1977 say I should run away from the psychopathic sausage dog, then I should probably do that very thing.

I take to my heels, with Minty in hot pursuit.

‘No, Will!’ Audrey cries. ‘She’ll outrun you! She always outruns her prey!’

‘Prey?!’ I scream from over my shoulder as I run towards the exit of the car park and the busy road beyond.

Oh God. I don’t want to go that way, though. I might get Minty run over. I don’t want that on my conscience.

I describe an arc, sending up a spray of stones as I change direction.

Minty expertly changes her trajectory as well, narrowing the gap between us.

‘You’re doing great, sweetheart! Just try to keep going!’ Audrey screams at me. ‘She’ll hopefully tire pretty quickly!’

‘Okay!’ I reply, throwing her a desperate thumbs up.

And thus, I am now running in a circle around an RSPCA rescue centre car park, being pursued by what is apparently a demon from the very depths of the darkest, warped hell, neatly disguised as a miniature sausage dog.

I only came here to help my father buy a llama.

. . . and try to do something to salvage my marriage.

I didn’t have many expectations about how either thing would go, but I certainly didn’t envisage a situation where my testicles were in mortal danger.

This was clearly an error on my part.

When it comes to a life that involves Red Fairweather and the rest of his Holy Moly band mates, having your testicles in mortal danger is probably something you should always prepare for.



Minty got tired enough to be caught by Audrey on my seventh circuit of the car park.

This was just as well, as I was about to collapse from exhaustion – testicles be damned.

I only made it that far thanks to the encouragement coming from Holy Moly – and a bottle of water that Borkins handed to me the fifth time I passed by him.

‘I’ll get her back to her kennel,’ Audrey says as she picks up the clapped-out Minty – who still has enough energy to give me a look of utter

hate from over Audrey's shoulder as she is carried away. Banjo throws me a look of unconditional love to counterbalance this, but follows Audrey back into the rescue centre as well, because he really does know what's good for him.

I go and sit on the bonnet of the Bentley with my head bowed, and try to stop my legs from shaking.

Red comes over in a gingerly fashion, and stands next to me.

'You . . . You alright, kid?' he asks, tentatively. As he does, the other Holy Molies join him.

I hold up a hand with my head still down and give him a 'wait a moment' gesture.

I have to compose myself.

After a few seconds I look up at him.

'What the bloody hell are you playing at?!' I bellow . . . quite understandably.

Red looks awkward as hell.

Albo, still with one hand clamped over his private parts, points an accusatory finger at my father. 'It was all his idea!' he exclaims.

Red rolls his eyes. 'Oh yeah, throw me under the bus, Albo! Thanks very much!'

StuTheNu looks at him. 'But it was your idea, Red. You spent a week convincing us to go along with it.' He waggles his flintlocks. 'I had to go up in the loft to find these.'

Albo holds up the handgun. 'I had to buy this from Irish Les.'

I throw out my hands. 'Fucking hell, Albo!' I wail. 'Put that bloody gun away.'

He looks at me. 'Don't worry, Will, it's just a water pistol.' He then squirts water out of the end of the gun to demonstrate this. 'Irish Les runs a toy shop in the village where I live.'

'This was my grandad's trench spade,' Danny adds to the conversation, obviously thinking it's become a show-and-tell session. 'It's an antique.' His brow furrows. 'I probably should have left it at home. Soochi told me it would be a bad idea to bring it. She says it has bad vibrations.'

'I don't care!' I erupt, still extremely angry about this whole thing, and determined not to have my train of thought derailed by Holy bloody Moly. 'Why did you do this, Red?' I ask my father.

He folds his arms. 'I thought it could help get you and Audrey back

together again.'

I stare at him. 'You thought having your band mates stage a fake kidnapping in public would help me get back together with my wife?!'

'Yes.'

'Why?!'

'Because . . . it would have made you look all brave and cool, if you'd saved me. And her. And possibly Borkins.'

I look at Borkins, who shakes his head vociferously. He clearly thought this entire thing was a very bad idea. Hence the expression on his face this whole time.

'And you know . . . that might have shown her that you're still the guy she married,' Red continues, in a quiet voice.

Great. Now Holy Moly clearly know the ins and outs of my marital problems. Just *excellent*.

I stand up. 'And in this grand plan of yours, you didn't maybe think that it might have possibly been something of a good idea to . . . *let me fucking know about it!*'

Red considers this, sucking air in through his teeth. 'That might have made things go a little smoother, yeah,' he concedes.

'Aaaargh!' I scream in rage and frustration, and stalk away from all five of them.

Just in time to see my wife stalking towards *me*, with a face like absolute thunder.

'Was this your idea?' she snaps, pointing a finger at my face.

'What?'

'This whole stupid thing?' She waves her hand at the van and Holy Moly.

'No! Of course it wasn't!' I snap back, in disbelief that she'd think I'd come up with such a hare-brained scheme.

'Then whose was it?'

'The bloke who once drank a bloody swimming pool!' I spit, and point at my father.

Audrey fixes him with a stare that she's only ever used on me once, when I ruined her favourite set of wine glasses by putting them in the dishwasher, even though she told me explicitly not to.

'Run,' I suggest to my father, who has gone wide-eyed with genuine terror once again.

Audrey proceeds to tell Red Fairweather and the rest of Holy Moly exactly what she thinks of their exploits.

There isn't much that can get my wife's dander up in such a way, but anything that puts the safety of her staff or her animals in question will do it extremely *easily*. And when her dander is up, Audrey Tomasi's Italian heritage comes to the fore, in no uncertain terms. There's a lot of hand waving and gesturing going on.

'Do you know how long we've been trying to retrain Minty?' she asks Red, who has the look of a heavily scolded schoolboy.

'No,' he mumbles.

'A whole *year*, Red! And we were making such good *progress*. She'd stopped attacking everything in sight, and would even let you feed her without having to use the pole.' Audrey's brow creases. 'And now she's back to square one again. Carole has had to go and put on the attack mittens just to get her back into her kennel.'

'Sorry, Audrey,' he mumbles, before looking around at his band mates, eyes flashing. They all look at him for a moment, and then at Audrey.

'Sorry, Audrey,' they all intone together.

These are five people who have gigged in front of millions of people, and met heads of state, movie stars and the greatest musicians who ever walked the planet.

And Audrey Tomasi is dominating all of them.

I feel an immense sense of pride.

Audrey's head whips around. 'And you!'

I step back. 'Me?'

'Yes! You! Why does it take your father coming up with such a stupid scheme for you to actually talk to me these days? Why does it have to be *him* that forces you into it?'

Oh . . . now come on, people. That isn't fair. None of this is my fault!

'But you don't want me around!' I complain.

The anger in her eyes turns instantly to hurt. 'I never said that, Will. You know that.'

She's right. She never has actually *said* that. But I *feel* it. Every time I see her these days, I feel it. But how much of that is coming from her, and how much of it is just in my head?

Holy Moly shuffle extremely uncomfortably from behind her. Gypsie, who up until now has kept more or less out of this whole debacle, mouths

‘Give her a kiss’ at me, and starts to make . . . oh God . . . *motions* with his lips.

I stare at him in horror and dismay. The other Holy Molies slowly turn to look at him as he continues his grotesque pantomime.

My wife swivels back around again, and only when Gypsie catches the look on her face does he stop what he’s doing and bow his head in deserved shame.

‘I need to go back to work now,’ Audrey tells us all, through partially gritted teeth. ‘It would be best if all of you left.’

I step forward to protest, but she glares at me, freezing me to the spot.

Yeah . . . thanks very much, Red. You’ve really helped me get my marriage back on course, haven’t you?

Red steps forward, which is quite brave of him, under the circumstances. ‘Er . . . what about Lumpy Chunks?’ he asks Audrey.

‘Chunky Lumps,’ StuTheNu stage whispers to him from his left-hand side.

‘Whatever.’

Audrey regards him with surprise. ‘Do you still want him? It wasn’t all just a ruse to get this silly bloody performance going?’

Red shakes his head. ‘No. I really do want to give him a home.’ He looks at his band mates. ‘He’s very cute,’ he tells them, earning a series of understanding nods and agreeable expressions.

‘You ain’t gonna punch it like you did that dolphin, though, are you?’ Albo asks.

‘No!’ Red replies, shooting him daggers, before looking back at Audrey and smiling broadly.

Audrey thinks for a moment. ‘Then come back with . . . Borkins tomorrow, and we’ll discuss it.’

Red nods happily, before noticing that Audrey still looks mad as all hell, and immediately stops.

‘Now . . . bugger off, the lot of you,’ Audrey says, and stalks off into the rescue centre. As she goes back through the glass doors, I see Banjo looking out at me through it. He cocks his head to one side, as if to say, ‘Well, you did a bloody good job there, didn’t you?’

I put my head in my hands for a second, before sighing heavily, and trudging back over to the Bentley.

‘Look, kid, I’m sorry it didn’t—’ Red starts to say, before I silence him

with a stiff hand in his face. The last thing I want to do is talk about this right now. I just want to get out of here, before Minty breaks free, and comes back for another go.

As I open the car door, though, something occurs to me.

Something I heard during all that ruckus, while Minty was attacking Albo, and that's only coming back to me now, now all the fun and games have ended.

I stare at Danny. 'What did you mean about a gig in Hyde Park?'

Discord

It's crazy.

Absolutely bloody insane.

A terrible, terrible idea.

Of course, they all want to do it.

Gods at the Park is an enormous festival happening in Hyde Park in September – and I'm only now learning that Holy Moly have been asked to perform at it.

Not headlining, mind. That honour goes to what's left of Aerosmith.

. . . none of Aerosmith are actually dead, you understand, but bits have been dropping off for the last ten years or so. 'Livin' on the Edge' has taken on a whole new meaning for them these days.

The same is true for Holy Moly – only worse, as they are all even older.

Gods at the Park is a day-long festival that will see six bands in total on stage, in front of an adoring crowd of thousands. Holy Moly are meant to be on second to last, for an hour-long set.

They were only asked if they could do the show a few weeks ago, when Foreigner had to pull out due to illness. The silly bastards have leapt at the chance.

And Red deliberately didn't tell me about it, of course. He knows exactly what my reaction would have been, given what I know about his vulnerabilities.

It's like our parent/child roles have been flipped.

He's behaved like the unruly teenager, who didn't want his sensible and worried father to know he's going to an exciting rock concert he's too young to attend.

Only in this specific case, he's the one *playing* the damn gig.
He *knew* I'd be mad about it.

I guess I have to thank Minty the Mental Sausage Dog. Without her testicular attack, Danny would never have let it slip, and I'd probably have been in the dark about the whole thing until the day of the bloody gig.

This would be the first actual concert that Holy Moly have played in nearly a decade, and is only happening because somebody – and I think we probably all know who that somebody is – has persuaded Danny Drager (or should we say Soochi, his controlling girlfriend) that it's a good idea.

He's always been the one putting the kibosh on any kind of reunion concert, largely because Soochi tells him it won't do his third soul any good. Quite what his first and second soul think about it is anyone's guess.

However, this gig is a one-off, and the pay cheque is large enough to keep Soochi in as many kaftan handbags and incense sticks as she can get her grubby mitts on, so she has signed off on Danny being a part of it.

I wish somebody had consulted a doctor about the whole damn thing, because I'm pretty sure they wouldn't have.

Is it wise for five men, in what should be their dotages, to be playing a gigantic concert like this?

And Holy Moly's songs aren't exactly what you'd call 'sedate', either. Neither are they short. Most have a section that is fast paced, and none of them come in under seven minutes. Do you know how much cardio is involved in bashing about on stage for seven minutes, playing a variety of musical instruments? Far too much.

And that's without even getting into Red's issues with his arthritis. There's no doubt that the crowd will want Holy Moly to play 'Taking No Prisoners' – it's one of their greatest hits. Red proved the other day that he struggles to play that song now. It's surely not wise to try and do it for the first time in years in front of such a huge audience.

No.

The whole thing is a *bad* idea.

Way too much of a risk.

And I need to convince Red of that, before he does something to either embarrass or hurt himself.

My anger at his botched fake kidnapping attempt wants me to stay the hell away from him, but my concern over the revelation about this stupid gig forces me into going to talk to him.

And where do I find him?

In the studio, of course. Practising.

As I make my way through the drawing room, I can already hear him playing.

And there it is . . . that occasional discord in his drum beat that only someone who knows how to play the drums would pick up. And he's not even trying to play anything complex like 'Taking No Prisoners' right now.

I shake my head. This has to be done. This has to be *stopped*.

I walk over to where Red is sat sweating his way through the basic beat of 'Riding to Your Love', and hold up my hands to get him to stop.

He notices me, and does so. There's a sheepish expression on his face.

As well there might be.

I'm sure he didn't tell me about the gig precisely because of the conversation I want to have with him now.

Or maybe it's because he doesn't want me to berate him for the fake kidnapping.

Either is quite possible, but we'll just have to see how it goes.

'Hey, kid,' he says to me, not quite meeting my eye.

'Hi,' I say in a flat voice. 'I need to talk to you.'

He nods. 'Yeah. Figured you might.' He gives me a beckoning gesture. 'Go on, then. Give me both barrels about what happened with your wife.'

I narrow my eyes. 'That's what you want, is it?'

'I think it's probably what *you* want,' he replies, scratching his chin. 'I messed up. I made Audrey angry.'

I nod. 'Yes, you did. But then you gave her a total of *fifteen grand* for Chunky Lumps and the rescue centre, so she's not angry anymore.' I furrow my brow. 'Not at you, anyway.'

The studio doors are open to let in a cool breeze, so I can flick my eyes briefly out to the expansive garden, where I can just about see Borkins supervising the building of a stable for Chunky Lumps. Audrey's disgust at what happened in her car park was greatly mollified by the meeting she had with Red and Borkins the next day, where they hashed out the llama's new living conditions.

I didn't attend. I thought it best not to.

'But I didn't help the two of you out, did I?' Red points out.

'No. But you were never going to. Our marriage isn't your problem to fix, Red. And it isn't something that can be solved with idiotic strategies like

that one.' I sigh. 'Just leave it to me, will you?'

He stares at me. 'But will you *do* anything? Or will you just let her slip away?'

I grit my teeth. This man is a fine one for talking about letting relationships slip away.

Calm down, Will. That's not why you've come in here.

And I think Red knows it. He's trying to derail me.

He's not going to.

'Red. Never mind about me and Audrey for the moment. I want to talk about this bloody gig. You know? The one you didn't tell me about, because you knew it would lead to a conversation like this one?'

He taps the floor tom a couple of times with his drumstick. 'Not sure there's much to be said, kid.'

My hands go to my hips . . . and I'm suddenly *extremely* aware of the positions we've adopted in this conversation. Me stood here stony-faced, him sat there looking guilty.

I really am *Dad* now, aren't I?

Good grief.

'I think there's a lot to talk about,' I say. 'Namely that you really shouldn't be playing a concert like that at your age, and with your . . . problems.'

He lets out a fairly explosive breath. 'It's a *lot* of money, kid.'

'You just bought a fucking *llama*, Red. You don't need any more money.'

He gets up from his stool and puffs out his chest a bit. 'Well, I *want* to play the gig, Will. I've missed being on stage . . . we all have. Even Danny. And none of us are getting any younger. This might be the last chance we have to bring the house down.'

Ugh. He's insufferable. 'And how do you think the house is going to feel if you can't play properly anymore?'

He looks stunned and a bit hurt. Which makes me feel awful.

But I'm right, aren't I?

Red isn't thinking about the risks. He isn't thinking about the dangers of what's being proposed.

He shrugs his shoulders. 'So what if I can't? Does it really matter?'

I throw my hands up. 'Of course it bloody matters!'

Red folds his arms. 'Why? Why does it matter so much if I go up there

and I'm not as good as I used to be? What's the worst that can happen?'

I'm momentarily struck dumb by this question.

What *is* the worst that can happen?

'You could really hurt yourself,' I eventually say, a little pathetically.

He nods his head sharply. 'Yep. That is something that *could* happen. I could cause myself a lot of pain. Throw my back out. Have a . . . heart attack.'

The little falter in his voice as he says that instantly troubles me.

'Hell,' he continues, 'I could *electrocute* myself, the way Keith Richards did that time. It wouldn't be out of the question, the amount of water Gypsie throws around on stage when he gets hot.'

'Water?' I query.

'Alright, beer.'

I gasp in exasperation. 'And none of that bothers you?'

He shakes his head. 'Not really.'

This time the gasp is one of frustration. 'I don't understand you, Red. I really don't!'

'How so?' He sounds more than a little petulant now.

'You just breeze through life, not worrying about any consequences.'

'So?'

I squeeze my hands into fists. 'There are always consequences! For *somebody!*'

'Somebody? What do you mean?'

Oh God. How can he be so *dense*?

'What do I mean?' I spit, now properly angry. I came in here to try to talk my father around, to save him from embarrassment or worse, but now we're swimming in deeper waters again. I frankly should have known this would happen. 'Me and Audrey! Your stupid fake-kidnap plan didn't help us, did it? It probably made things even worse!'

'That wasn't my intention.'

'It's never your bloody *intention*, Red! But it doesn't stop it happening. You blunder through life, recklessly doing whatever you feel like, and you don't appreciate how it affects other people!'

My father then says something that instantly escalates this argument, like when the first power chord hits at the beginning of a particularly heavy song, right after the intro.

'Well, I only tried something because I didn't think you'd ever have the

balls.'

My eyes bulge in rage. 'You fucking what?'

I think Red can tell he might have gone a bit too far by saying that, but he's also clearly angry himself that I'm questioning his decision to play the Gods at the Park gig.

'I only meant . . . meant that I don't think you're able to do much about saving your marriage, right now. Because of . . . the way you are.'

My turn to look hurt. 'Because of the way I am? A *coward*, you mean?'

'No!' he insists, but obviously means just that. 'I just mean that . . . you, you said it yourself. Since your mother died, you've been too . . . too . . .'

'Much of a coward,' I finish icily.

'Not a coward, but . . .' He trails off, seemingly lost for words.

'Well, maybe if my fucking father had been around when my mother died, I would have come out of the whole thing a little *better*.'

Oh, Jesus Christ.

Where did that come from?

The same place it always comes from, idiot.

Red's face flames red – whether out of anger or shame I do not know. He points a shaky finger at me. 'That's . . . That's not fair, Will.'

'Isn't it, Red? Because you weren't around, were you? Not then. And not for *years* before, either. Maybe if you had been, I'd be a different man. Braver, bolder . . . just like *you*.'

I step forward. He steps back, nearly falling over his drum stool.

'But you weren't, were you, Red? You were too damn busy, off living the life of a bloody rock star. The only damn thing you've ever cared about.'

'That's not . . . not true,' he stammers.

'Yes, it is!' I retort, taking another step, forcing him to back away even more.

I had no intention of this all coming out now, but while we're here – in the place where Red is happiest – let's just remind him why *I* haven't been quite so happy for so many years, shall we?

'You didn't care about me,' I continue. 'You didn't care about Mum.'

'I did care!' he insists, tears in his eyes.

'Bullshit! If you cared, you wouldn't have fucked off the way you did! You wouldn't have stayed out of my life for so long! You would have been there to help me. You would have been there to *support* me. Instead of just coming along now, and deciding you want to be part of my bloody life again

– when it’s already fallen apart!’

Rage. Pain. Hate. Love. Shame. Loss.

But most of all . . . *regret.*

He shakes his head swiftly back and forth. ‘That’s not how it was!’

‘Yes, it is! You didn’t care! You didn’t give a shit! Why else would you have stayed away for so long?!’

‘Because your mother told me to!’ Red screams, instantly regretting the words as soon as they are out of his mouth. ‘No . . . Will. Wait. Forget I said that . . . forget I—’

His words make me stumble back. As if they had physical force. ‘What did you say?’ I hiss.

Red holds his hands up. ‘It doesn’t matter. Forget it. I didn’t mean it,’ he says rapidly.

‘Did you say Mum stopped you from seeing me? Because that’s what it sounded like, Red!’

He shakes his head again, desperate. ‘I was angry, Will. I should never have said that. It’s not—’

‘Enough with the bloody lies!’ I cry, on the front foot again. ‘Just, for the love of God, be honest with me!’

For a moment he hesitates, the anguish writ large across his face. Then, his expression slackens and his shoulders slump. ‘Oh Christ,’ he mutters, before slowly moving back to sit on his stool. I’ve never seen him look so old.

This is a seventy-four-year-old man, I’m forced to remember as I look at him collapse into himself, using the bass drum for support.

He looks up, past me a little, like he’s accessing memories. Painful ones.

‘Your mum and I . . . we would never have worked long term,’ he begins. ‘She was a lot more level-headed than me. A lot more grown up. It’s amazing the relationship lasted for the three years it did.’

None of this is news to me. I was well aware how tempestuous Red Fairweather’s relationship was with Jane Ambrose. They met when Mum was a junior reporter working for *On Stage* magazine. She’d been tasked by her bosses with following Holy Moly on their UK tour, for a lengthy write-up, to feature in the October issue. She wasn’t pleased about it. Mum was always more of a jazz fan. She wasn’t really someone who enjoyed overblown progressive rock. But she was good at her job . . . and beautiful. Two things

that very much put her in Red Fairweather's orbit.

The rest is history. Including my conception, birth – and the breakdown of their relationship three years later, largely due to Red never being around, and having what can only be described as a *wandering eye*. And possibly a wandering penis, as well. Though he always denied that.

Mum then became a de facto single parent, given how much Red was away. But whenever he was home, he did have me to come and stay with him. Until I turned sixteen, of course, and never saw him again.

'But we got on okay after that, you know?' Red continues. 'Your mum and me were always pretty good friends. And we had you, of course. That link was always there. Kept us together – even if we were apart.'

For some reason I think of Banjo in this moment. Okay, a little old French bulldog is not quite the same as a child, but I get where Red is coming from. If Audrey and I didn't see each other to walk Banjo, then I doubt we'd have seen much of each other at all in the past few weeks.

'And for a while things were okay,' Red says, with a smile. 'More than okay, actually. I looked forward to you coming over more than I did going on stage.'

That causes a knot to form in my stomach. I never knew that. Never.

Red bows his head. 'But then the nineties came along, and everything went to shit.'

'What do you mean?'

He looks up at me, a haunted look in his eyes. 'Our music stopped selling. Our tours got smaller and smaller. Our popularity went down the toilet. We all took that pretty hard. And I . . . started spiralling downhill. Got into some . . . bad stuff.'

'I never saw that,' I tell him – honestly. To me, Red was just this constant source of entertainment and wonder throughout my years as a child. I never once saw any evidence of the stuff he's talking about.

Red laughs ruefully. 'Of course you didn't. I hid it from you. How could I do anything else?' He studies his hands, which are now in his lap. They are shaking a little. 'But it was there, kid. Oh God, it was there.' He looks up at me again. 'Do you remember your sixteenth birthday?'

I heave a sigh and rub my eyes. 'Yes, Red. Of course I do. You were meant to turn up at my house. You promised to come. I hadn't seen you for months because of the All Roads Lead to Rock tour you were on with Def Leppard, and I was desperate to hang out with you again.' I look at him,

trying very hard not to either cry my eyes out, or punch him in the face. ‘And you never came, did you? Too busy living the life of a rock star,’ I say bitterly. ‘And that was the last time I saw you, until you made me come and live here a few months ago.’

‘I did turn up,’ he states in a flat voice.

‘What?!’

‘I did turn up. Three days late, while you were at school.’ The redness in his face definitely comes from shame now.

‘Why didn’t you stay until I got home?’ I say, in utter, hurt disbelief.

‘Because your mum told me to go away.’

‘What?’

‘And she was right to, kid. She was right to. I was a mess. A complete mess. I was so nervous about turning up as late as I did, I got myself stupid drunk, and so high on coke I could barely walk.’

‘Okay, but still . . . that’s not a good enough reason for her to tell you to stay away from me completely, is it? Especially if you could keep it from me the way you said you did.’

Red shakes his head. ‘That’s not all of it. The reason I didn’t actually turn up on your birthday was because I was in jail.’

‘Jail?’ This is a massive shock to me. I knew Red was a wild rock star in his youth, but I never thought he’d been on the wrong side of the law.

‘Yeah.’ He rolls his eyes. ‘It got covered up, of course. By the record company. We were supposed to be back in the studio for another album that year – not that it happened in the end, anyway. They didn’t want any bad publicity.’

‘Why were you in jail?’

Red swallows hard and looks thoroughly disgusted with himself. ‘Drug possession and assault.’

‘Jesus Christ.’

‘I ain’t proud of it, kid. Not one bit.’

‘What did you do?’

He shrugs. ‘A deal went bad. By that time I needed to be high so much, I was doing the deals myself. Some guy in a back alley, behind a club in London. He tried to stiff me on a wrap of heroin, so I popped him in the face, and ran off. The coppers grabbed me an hour later, from where they found me crashed out on a park bench.’

‘Fuck’s sake,’ I moan.

‘Your mum found out about it the next day. She still had her contacts . . . an old friend from *On Stage*. They told her.’

Mum’s career with the magazine was cut short when she gave birth to me, but she carried on for years in a part-time or freelance capacity, until *On Stage* was shuttered in ’88.

‘And she was mad as hell, kid. Mad as absolute fucking hell,’ Red tells me.

‘I bet she was.’

‘She told me that she didn’t want someone like me to be part of her son’s life anymore. I was too far gone. Too reckless. Too dangerous. Too damaged.’ He clenches his fists. ‘And she was *right*. Every word of it. Me being around you any more would have been a terrible idea. The damage it could have done to you.’

I need to sit down. Now.

I stumble over to the stool at the drum kit Red had set up for me, and sit down hard on it. Taking a few deep breaths, I look back at my father, who can barely meet my gaze.

‘So I left,’ he mumbles. ‘And never came back, all the time I was as messed up as I was. I had to get better. Get off the hard drugs. But that took the better part of fifteen bloody years. Fifteen hard, *horrible* years. And by the time I was back to being myself, I was too . . . too ashamed to come and see you again. You were a man by then. A man who didn’t need a father like me in his life.’

‘Oh my God, Red,’ I reply, in a hushed whisper.

So many things are falling into place for me now. All the questions I had. All the frustrations and anger. I never really knew why my father abandoned me right when I needed him most. But now I do.

And God help me . . . it *was* the right thing to do.

It was right for Mum to tell him to stay away, and it was right for him to do as he was told.

I can’t run from it. I can’t hide from it.

. . . I was better off without my father.

I wasn’t better off without *a* father, though.

But we don’t get to pick who our parents are, do we?

We don’t get to dictate what kind of person they are.

We’d all love to have parents without flaws. Without weaknesses, stupidities and failings. But none of us get that luxury. Some of us get lucky.

Some of us don't.

Some of us get to have fathers who are there to raise us throughout our formative years, and some of us get to have fathers who drink swimming pools and punch dolphins.

Luckily, some of us get to have mothers who know when to force those kinds of fathers to stay away.

Mum.

She did what she thought was right. Even though she knew it would hurt me. As far as she was concerned, she must have known the hurt he could have caused me, if he had been around, would have been far worse.

'I wish . . . I wish one of you had told me,' I say, through the driest of lips.

Red looks at me. 'I know. I'm sorry, kid. I guess your mum didn't want you to know how bad I'd got, and I couldn't break the promise I made to her.'

I stare at him. 'Even when she was dying, Red?'

His eyes are glassy. 'Especially then, Will. I loved your mum with all my heart, even when my head got in the way. Seeing her like that would have . . . broken me, kid.' He draws a deep, ragged breath. 'She called me, you know. From the hospital.'

'Did she?' I say, a little breathless. A revelation like this a few months ago would have shocked me to the core, but now . . . maybe not quite so much.

'Yeah. She . . . She wanted me to know what was happening to her. Wanted me to come and see her . . . mend fences with me, I guess. Before . . .'

He trails off for a moment, lost in an agony even I can't contemplate. 'But I *couldn't*. I just *couldn't*. Because if I did . . . if I saw her like that . . . I might have . . . slipped back into it all again. Into the shit. So, I told her I was just about to leave the country, and hoped she'd get better soon.' His fists clench briefly. 'I was a coward, Will. A complete and utter coward.' He shakes his head. 'I'm so, so sorry.'

But he probably doesn't need to be, if I'm honest. Not on that one.

'I understand, Red,' I tell him, even though it hurts like hell to admit it. This man is more broken inside than I ever imagined, and I think seeing Mum like that probably *would* have killed him, by one method or another. It certainly nearly killed me.

I think for a moment. 'But why now? Why come back now?'

He tries to smile, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. 'Because I'm getting on a bit, kid.' He looks at his hands. 'And things aren't what they used to be.' Now there's a fierce look in his eyes. A determined one. 'And you're my *son*. I've been neglecting you for too long. I don't want things to . . . end without having fixed things with *you*. I was too late to do it with your mum. I was too much of a coward. I don't want to make the same mistake twice, before it's too late for me as well.'

'What do you mean, before it's too late for you as well?'

He stares at me for a second, a pensive expression on his face.

'Let's take a walk,' he eventually says, rising slowly from the stool. 'It's too hot in here, and I need some fresh air after all of that.'

I nod, and get to my feet as well. I'm happy to say they support me fine. I'll spend weeks, months, if not *years*, sorting through all of these revelations – but for now at least, I'm over the initial shock.

Red walks a little stiffly over to the double doors that lead out of the studio, and onto the expansive patio outside.

'Beautiful place, this,' Red says, looking down the enormous garden to the sea wall at the end. 'The view never gets old. Absolutely beautiful.'

'Yeah, it is,' I reply, somewhat taken aback by this reflective mood my father has dropped into.

It would be more beautiful if Borkins wasn't putting the finishing touches to a llama stable with a hammer and some muffled swearing, but you can't have everything, I guess.

Red looks down at his hands again, before clenching them into fists. He winces as he does so.

'The arthritis, it's not the only . . . only thing I've got going on,' he says to me. 'Not the only thing *wrong* with me.'

I come around to face him, blocking his view of the garden. 'What do you mean?'

I'm not sure if I can take any new revelations today, but I'm apparently going to get another one, whether I like it or not. The dam has truly broken on my relationship with my father, and I'm slightly afraid I'm going to drown.

Red sighs. 'When I went to get my hands checked, they did a more complete work-up, and it turns out I have something called . . . er . . . cardiomyopathic mitriosis . . . or mitripathic cardiomyosis.' His brow furrows. 'Or myocardial mitrapathosis. Or something along those lines.' He

waves his long, flappy, dismissive hand, as if he's misremembering an ingredient in a recipe, rather than what sounds like some kind of heart disease.

'Is it . . . Is it *serious*?' I ask.

Red looks at me apologetically for a moment. 'Yeah. Apparently it is. Could kill me off at any moment.'

'What?!'

'Yeah . . .' Red now looks like he's telling me something a bit awkward and unpleasant. Like he's admitting giving Chunky Lumps my bedroom, while I have to go and sleep in the stable. 'Just one of those things, really.'

Good grief.

'One of those *things*?' I say in horror. 'Is there anything they can *do*?'

He nods. 'Oh, I have pills. Lots of pills. Like I told you before. Borkins makes sure I take them. But there's no surgery or anything they can do. Things are too far gone for that, apparently.'

'Too far gone?'

He nods again. 'Yeah. My heart's fucked.'

'Your heart's fucked?'

'My heart's fucked,' he repeats – which, while no doubt an accurate appraisal of the situation, isn't exactly affording it the gravity it probably deserves.

'How long do they say you've got?'

He shrugs. 'They can't be sure, but the . . . atropy? Entropy? Antrophy? Whatever . . . They say that will keep accelerating at an increasing pace. Had the diagnosis about eight months ago. Might well be on borrowed time even now.'

Needless to say, I'm completely lost for words.

Sorry . . . more lost for words than I was five minutes ago, when Red told me the reason he hasn't been in my life for decades was because he was a drug addict criminal that my mother didn't want around me.

Did I say five minutes?

I'm sorry, I mean four hundred years ago.

Red smiles at me a bit awkwardly. 'Sorry, kid. I know this is a lot to take in.'

'Like the contents of a fucking swimming pool,' I half whisper, before I realise I really need to go and sit down once again.

I stumble across the patio to the outdoor lounge set outside the kitchen.

Red follows me like a puppy. I know I should be saying something to him, but right now it's all a bit too much for my brain to cope with.

I slump down onto the couch and regard my father as he walks up to me, still looking awkward.

He's just told me he's going to bloody die. He shouldn't be looking like he's only admitting to putting a dent in my front bumper.

'Of course, once I knew the diagnosis, I wanted to . . . get in touch with you,' he says, coming to sit down next to me. 'But something stopped me. Your reaction, more than anything. I couldn't stand the idea of you . . . you know . . . rejecting me.'

I want to tell him I would have done no such thing, but that would be a complete lie. I would have rejected him. Of course I would.

'But then Audrey called, and told me what was happening with you guys, and I just had to do something . . .'

'Oh God,' I say in a hushed voice.

And to think . . . if Audrey hadn't been the one to insist I move in with Red, I would never have found any of this stuff out.

Christ, I need to see Audrey. I need to see her face, and hear her voice, and feel her arms around me. I need all of that right now, because this is just *awful*.

'And no, before you ask,' Red says.

'No what?'

'No, Audrey didn't know about the heart thing. She still doesn't.'

I nod. 'Okay.'

'Hardly anyone does, to be honest. Borkins, obviously. My doctors. And now you.'

I look over at Borkins, who is still hammering wood and swearing sulphurously. I think about the times I've seen him look deeply concerned for my father's welfare, like when we went off on those bloody Segways. At the time I just thought he was being the cautious type, but now I realise there was much more going on.

'God, Red. I'm so sorry,' I tell my father. Which is a turnabout. It's been him apologising exclusively to me recently – even though he probably didn't need to a majority of the time, as it turns out.

Bloody hell.

I'm having to recalculate everything I thought I knew about my rock-star father – while at the same time digesting the fact that he might not be

around much longer for me to come to terms with that.

‘You’ve got nothing to say sorry for, kid,’ he tells me. ‘It’s just life. The way things go sometimes.’

I look at him in disbelief. ‘How can you be so *calm*?’

He laughs out loud at this, amazingly. ‘Easy, really. When you think about where I’ve come from. I was a snotty little council-estate kid, who nearly died of pneumonia when he was seven, because my mum couldn’t afford to heat the tiny flat we lived in. I went from that to playing live in front of millions of people around the world, and living in a mansion. I’ve had a fucking *great* life, kid.’ He looks at me then with all the regret in the world. ‘For the most part, anyway. I can’t complain if all of that means I get shuffled off this mortal coil a little earlier than I’d like.’

‘Don’t say that,’ I reply in a hot voice. For the first time, the idea of losing Red again fills me with real dread.

‘Well, it might well happen. Any time. I can’t deny that.’ He slides a hand onto my shoulder. ‘And I know that there’s only two things I want from my life now. To maybe play one last gig with my mates . . . and to fix the mistakes I made with my son.’ He squeezes my shoulder and meets my gaze. ‘Can I do those things, Will? *Please*? Can you help me with both of them?’

I try to swallow, but it’s like trying to choke down a rock. ‘I’ll try, Red. I really will.’

‘Promise?’

Oh God. Is that *pleading*? Pleading coming from Red Fairweather?

‘I promise,’ I tell him.

Red smiles again, and looks out across the garden. His lined face is more relaxed than I’ve ever seen it before. ‘Excellent. That’s the way things should be. That’s exactly what I wanted.’

I go to say something else, but I’m afraid at this stage, my brain has overloaded somewhat, and I’m unable to do much of anything, except look at my father for a moment more, before turning and gazing in the same direction that he is.

We both stay like that for a few minutes, half watching Borkins hammer a wooden plank over the entrance to Chunky Lumps’ stable, and half looking towards what is undoubtedly a very uncertain future.



‘Will, what’s wrong?’ Audrey says to me in a concerned voice, the minute she lays eyes on me.

I stand on the threshold of the house I once called home, and try not to cry. ‘It’s Red, Auds. Red is . . . he’s dying.’ I lean down to pat Banjo on his furry little head. ‘My father is dying,’ I repeat, a single teardrop falling onto Banjo’s nose.

I feel her hands on my arms, pulling me back up. She looks in my eyes. ‘Oh my God,’ she says in a breathless voice, and hugs me.

Some fifteen minutes later, I’ve managed to compose myself a little, and am sat outside on my second patio of the day – this one considerably smaller, but in my mind far better.

I had to come around. As soon as I possibly could. Even though it’s not an official Banjo-walking day, I just had to see Audrey as quickly as I could, after learning what was happening with Red.

All the revelations that my father delivered to me this morning were so much that I think my head would have burst if I hadn’t been able to get away from him and see my wife, for at least a little while.

That sounds harsh, but I was in a far worse emotional state at the end of that conversation than Red was. He’s had months to get used to the idea of not being around anymore, and years to live with the reality of why he didn’t spend more time with his only son. It’s all hit me at once, like several tonnes of bricks.

I left Red supervising the last touches on the llama stable with Borkins. He seemed in quite a chipper mood, and I didn’t want to bring him down.

Unfortunately, that means bringing down the only other truly important person in my life.

‘Here,’ Audrey says, handing me a cup of tea. ‘It’s got two sugars in it.’

‘Thanks,’ I reply, with a half-hearted smile.

She sits down and takes a deep breath. ‘What a horrible mess,’ she says, shaking her head.

I nod, in complete agreement.

I’ve detailed to Audrey everything Red told me about his absence from my life, and the reasons for it. She agreed that Mum probably took the right course of action, but you could tell she wasn’t 100 per cent sure.

Neither am I.

I don't know whether I'll ever be.

My head knows she did the right thing, but my *heart*?

'I just wish . . . wish he'd been able to stick around when your mum died,' Audrey says. 'It might have changed things a whole lot.'

'Maybe,' I concede.

Audrey thumps a fist on her knee. 'Damn it all. I should have kept him around that day.'

'What day?'

'The day he came by the house . . . after Jane died. I *should* have made him stay. I should have . . . I don't know . . . shackled him to the wall or something until you got home.'

I put out a hand and cover her clenched fist with it. 'Don't do that. It's not up to you to fix my relationship with my father.' I grunt. 'Besides, I would have just thrown him out the second I got back anyway.'

'But if he'd been around!' she says, in exasperation.

I cock my head. 'Then maybe I wouldn't have fallen into what increasingly feels like it might be a depression?'

She gives me a look that's laced with far more pity than I'd like. 'Yeah. I guess so.'

'Well, maybe, Auds . . . maybe not. We'll never know,' I tell her, removing my hand from hers.

I tickle Banjo under the chin, using my gorgeous little old dog as a momentary distraction.

'Can't do anything about any of that now,' I say, in a rather defeated tone, 'but I can do something about what happens *next*.'

'What do you mean?' Audrey asks. 'About . . . us?'

'No, Audrey. I mean about Red. About this gig he's doing. About my relationship with him.'

'Oh,' she responds, obviously disappointed.

Sigh. I'm not sure what she wants from me. None of this changes things in regards to our marriage.

But I *hate* that disappointed look on her face. I can't bear it. 'Let me get this sorted out, Auds. Then maybe I can think a bit more about . . . other things,' I tell her, hoping that makes her feel a little better.

She nods, perking up a bit.

Thank God for that.

I can't even *begin* to take care of my own problems when my insane

father is planning a massive stage appearance, even though he's riddled with heart disease and chronic arthritis. I have to get him through that. I have to make sure he . . . he comes off stage again at the bloody end, upright.

I'm no happier about the Gods at the Park concert, knowing what I now do.

In fact, I feel ten times worse about it. The danger to Red isn't just about him cocking up a drum solo anymore because of his arthritis. There's a real threat the stupid gig could actually kill him.

But I can't tell him not to do it, can I? Not after I saw that look in his eyes. Not after I promised . . .

'So, what are you going to do?' Audrey says, breaking me out of my reverie.

'Get him through it. Support him.' I throw up my hands. 'I don't know . . . cheer him on?'

'I don't suppose there's much else you can do. He seems determined.'

'Yes, he does.'

It's Audrey's turn to take my hand. 'None of this is your fault, Will. You know that, don't you? You can't do anything about the decisions your parents made or make . . . either of them.'

I let out a shuddering breath. 'No. I know that. That's the whole damn problem. My life's been so dictated to by the actions of other people.' I avoid looking at her. 'Still is.' I consider this point for a moment. 'Mum's death, Red's absence, your . . .' I tail off.

'My what?' Audrey asks, eyes narrowing.

'I don't know. I don't really know what I'm saying.'

Audrey gets up and starts to pace. 'If you mean my decision to ask for a separation, then yes, your life has been affected by that. But it's up to *you* to decide how you react to it. To all of it. Because that's all you can do . . . decide on what *you* want to do, Will. You can't control anybody, other than yourself. You can't manage their lives . . . or their risks.'

I bark a laugh. 'Oh, I know that. Trust me, I know that.'

She stares at me. 'Do you? I'm not so sure, sometimes. Your mother's death and your father's absence had nothing to do with you.'

I'm slightly stung by the harshness in her voice. It feels unfair.

'I don't want to talk about this anymore,' I mutter, feeling like a scolded child.

'Then take your dog for a walk,' Audrey replies flatly. 'He needs it.'

She's not wrong. Banjo tugs at the lead and pants like a maniac as I walk him to the park.

As we reach it, and begin our usual game of fetch the stick, I begin to wish my relationship with human beings could be as easy as my relationship with my little old dog.

Banjo will always do what he's told, if I offer him enough treats.

I very much doubt Red will change his mind about performing in Hyde Park if I wave a bottle of Jack Daniel's under his nose. And Audrey won't take me back if I waggle a bottle of expensive perfume under hers, either.

No. Things are much simpler with a dog, I muse – as Banjo stands close to me, waiting for the stick to be thrown again. Much more controllable. All he really wants is his stick.

But then, when I do throw him the bit of tree branch I found a few feet away, I notice how much slower he is to fetch the stick than he used to be, and how much of an awkward, painful-looking wobble he has in his back legs as he does it.

I can't stop Banjo getting old and ill any more than I can my father, or myself, or anybody else in this world.

What happened to Mum will happen to everyone, and I can't, I just can't—

'Stop!' I actually say out loud, freaking out a couple of teenagers on bikes as they pass by.

Banjo shudders to a halt and turns to look back at me, a perplexed look on his face.

'Not you, Banj. You keep going,' I tell him, pointing at the stick. He barks in happiness at this, and goes straight for it.

That's what I'll have to do with Red, isn't it?

Tell him to keep going, and point him at the stick.

I just hope he can limp back to me okay, the same way Banjo is doing right now.

And where does Audrey fit into this little comparative scenario you've conjured up? Are you going to hope she limps back to you as well?

No. Because she's not the old dog in that scenario, is she?

I am.

And what's your stick, Will? What's the thing that'll make you happier?

I have no bloody idea.

No bloody idea at all.

Crescendo

There is something strangely and fundamentally scary about the crowd.

An almost existential feeling of dread blooms inside you, conjured up by looking at such a heaving mass of humanity. And all of them . . . expectant. Excited.

Hungry.

I could never do what Red and the rest of Holy Moly have done all their lives.

They thrive on the crowd. Are empowered by it. To them, the crowd is energy, and strength, and reinforcement.

To me, it's a heaving mass of humanity that could break through those barriers at any moment, and swamp us all.

I really am not my father's son in so, so many ways.

I take after my mother much more. Always have.

She never loved the big crowds, either. For her, music was about small venues. Intimate occasions. The relationship between performer and audience. Her best writing was always about the little shows she attended. The late-night gigs, in smoked-filled bars and venues that could hold no more than a couple of hundred people. She built a career out of being able to capture the spirit of those places so well you could almost smell and hear them while you read her writing.

The most precious thing I own is the collection of magazines that contain all of her work.

Needless to say, she didn't cover Holy Moly that much, once they went really stratospheric. Stadium tours were never her thing.

So . . . while I don't particularly like the crowd, I do *get it*.

I understand its appeal, to those who like that sort of thing.

The electricity of it is palpable. The *animality* of it, even more so.

That many human beings, all united in one purpose, here for one thing,

is a very powerful entity, indeed.

‘Gosh,’ Audrey remarks as we look out over the vast audience from the back of the stage.

‘Yeah, it’s quite something, isn’t it?’ I say, gazing out over the sixty thousand people gathered for Gods at the Park.

It’s also quite something that my wife is here at all.

This is Red’s doing. He invited her along.

. . . it wasn’t something I was ever going to do, was it?

But this isn’t like the party back at Moly Mansions – where he only invited her to cheer me up, because he didn’t want my sour demeanour bringing the atmosphere of his party down.

No, this time I think his motivations were much purer. Much less self-centred.

He knows this concert is difficult for me, because of my worries over his well-being. He asked Audrey to come along to get me through it. To calm me down.

‘Do you need calming down?’ Audrey asked me over the phone a couple of days ago, when we were discussing the gig, while Red practised in the background.

‘Probably,’ I told her. ‘I’m still worried he’s going to keel over halfway through the show. He’s getting a bit sick of my constant attempts to mother him, and rein in his enthusiasm.’

‘He’s not liking that, then?’

‘No. He’s thrown three drumsticks at me so far. It’s become a bit of a thing, unfortunately.’

‘Okay . . . I’ll come,’ Audrey promised, which made me feel a fair bit better, I’m not going to lie. ‘Sounds like you might need someone there to hold your hand.’

‘Yeah, maybe,’ I admitted, trying to keep the anxiety out of my voice.

While I’ve accepted that Holy Moly are going to play Gods at the Park, it does not mean I will not try my best to ensure my father gets through it *safely*. This includes making sure he stays properly hydrated, takes regular breaks from practice, and eats a healthy diet.

It’s a miracle he hasn’t lobbed more than three drumsticks at me in the last couple of months, to be quite honest. Luckily, I have Borkins and Sophia

on my side, so even when I'm away at work, Red's lifestyle is more carefully managed to ensure he's as fighting fit as he can be for the concert.

The concert that we are now all at.

And when I mean *all*, I think I mean most of the population of the UK, given how large that crowd looks.

Audrey and I have snuck away from the Holy Moly green room for a few moments to pop up on stage between acts, and take a look at the audience.

Audrey's never been on a stage like this before, and the last time I was, it was thirty years ago, so we're both curious – and more than a little excited – to see what's what.

And what's what is an enormous structure of steel, wood and black cloth, upon which are hung multiple banks of speakers, enough lighting to fend off the heat death of the universe, and what looks like thousands of miles of cabling and trunking.

A rock stage is the personification of order from chaos. Everything has a purpose and a place, but it also looks like the whole thing has erupted from a subterranean crypt. A monster of steel and rock that's come to devour the thousands of worshippers stood before it.

Worshippers who are currently chanting for The Black Crowes – the next band on stage, in this celebration of rock greats from the past.

Holy Moly will follow, before the evening concludes with a set from Aerosmith.

There probably aren't many old rock bands who can follow Holy Moly's particular brand of prog-rock excess, but Steve Tyler and the gang are definitely one of them.

'It's huge, isn't it?' Audrey remarks, having to shout to be heard over the crowd. We're peering out from the left-hand side of the stage, at the rear, trying our level best not to get in the way of the multitude of roadies who are setting up for The Black Crowes. Audrey is clinging on to one of the long, black sheets of material, as if to steady herself against the aural onslaught coming from the crowd in front of us.

'Yeah. These gigs always are!'

'Did you go to many when you were a boy?'

'A few!' I shout back. 'You never really get used to it!'

‘I bet!’

‘Shall we go back? The next band’ll be on soon, and we want to be out of the way for that!’

Audrey nods, still not taking her eyes off the crowd in front of her. It is quite transfixing, that many people. And beach balls.

There are always beach balls.

And naked breasts, for that matter. I certainly remember that from when I was fifteen.

I lead my wife away from the stage, and back down the various gantries and steps that lead to it. It’s nice to be able to show her this stuff. I kind of take it for granted, as anyone does when they’ve been exposed to something in the formative years of their life. For Audrey, though, this is all new and bizarre, so I’m glad she seems to be enjoying herself.

As we make our way through the backstage crowd (which is a lot smaller than the one out front, but no less noisy or animated, to be honest) to the green rooms set up for the bands, the knot of anxiety sparked off by the crowd grows larger inside my chest.

The Black Crowes will do forty-five minutes, which means it’s only about an hour and a quarter or so before Red and the boys take to the stage.

I try to swallow down the knot of fear as we reach the security guard standing outside the temporary prefabricated building that acts as Holy Moly’s green room. He waves us past when we brandish our backstage passes, which are hung from lanyards around our necks.

As we reach the door, Audrey grabs my hand, and pulls me back.

‘What’s the matter?’ I ask her.

She looks at me closely. ‘It’s going to be okay, Will,’ she says in a measured tone.

‘I know,’ I reply, nodding quickly.

She cups my cheek in her hand. ‘It’s going to be okay,’ she repeats, even more slowly.

I feel the knot loosen a little.

This time when I nod, it’s slower, and I’m actually looking at her as I do it. ‘Yeah. Yeah, I know.’

Audrey nods, satisfied that she’s got through to me.

Feeling a little calmer, I walk through the doors and down a wide corridor, past a lot of Holy Moly personal assistants, managers, hangers-on and road crew – and enter the green room.

‘I want to do “Lickety Split”!’ Gypsie roars from where he’s perched at the back of the expansive room, on a table laden with snacks, drinks and cigarettes.

‘No!’ Albo insists, rising from the voluminous couch set along one wall. I roll my eyes. This discussion has now been going on for *weeks*.

Holy Moly are on stage in just over an hour, and they still haven’t finalised the set list yet.

This is ridiculous.

Set lists are usually things arranged way ahead of time, so lighting and sound can be programmed in and adjusted appropriately. But Holy Moly are old school, and in this case, old school means making this shit up as they go along.

No wonder the skinny, bearded show director is sat at the back of the room with his head in his hands.

With only an hour-long set, it’s been hard for the band to nail down what songs they want to play. Given Holy Moly are a prog-rock outfit, it only really gives them time for five or six songs at the absolute most.

They have a back catalogue of eight studio albums, so you can imagine how difficult it’s been to narrow things down, especially with the egos on display.

‘I thought we’d agreed not to do “Lickety Split”, Gypsie,’ Danny says, from another massive couch, where Soochi is rubbing his temples and making a low humming noise.

‘But it’s my favourite!’ Gypsie moans. ‘I get to sing a bit!’

‘We’re not going through this again,’ Red says from where he’s leaning against a wall, munching on a sushi roll. ‘It’s “Universal”, into “Riding to Your Love”, then “Not Going to Waste”, “Breakneck”, “I Hold the World” and “Taking No Prisoners”.’ He eyeballs his fellow band members. ‘That’s what we’re playing,’ he tells them, in an authoritative voice.

Gypsie throws his hands up. ‘Oh, so you get to do the song you bloody sing, Red, and I don’t!’

‘Yes,’ Red replies, flatly. ‘It’s important to me that we do “I Hold the World”. You know that.’

‘Bloody hell, Gypsie,’ StuTheNu then says. ‘You wrote “Lickety Split” high on mushrooms.’

‘So what?’

‘So *what*? I’m not having any part of playing a song live again that

features the lyric “the boglins are wobblin’ to the snoglin moglins”. We did it that one time in Scotland and nearly got bottled off stage.’

‘But it’s got a really cool lick!’ Gypsie complains.

‘I don’t care if it manifests itself as a supermodel halfway through and gives me a blowjob. We’re not doing it!’ StuTheNu is emphatic.

The rest of the band readily agree with him.

‘Oh, you lot can be right bastards!’ Gypsie spits, and goes and sulks in the corner.

That little discussion is a microcosm of the ongoing argument that’s been held almost every day in the run-up to this gig. Everyone in, and involved with, Holy Moly has been feeling the pressure. You only get to do a gig like this on very rare occasions, and nobody wants to get it wrong.

This could well be the swan song for Holy Moly.

And, in Red’s defence, the songs he just listed are absolutely the right ones to play. Those six songs are Holy Moly’s best known – culminating in the one that people probably love them for most. I wish it wasn’t, given how hard ‘Taking No Prisoners’ will be for Red, but the crowd – the heaving, hungry crowd – always get what it wants. Even if sacrifices have to be made.

At least he’ll have his own song before it, to take a bit of a drumming breather, before launching into the excesses of Holy Moly’s greatest hit. ‘I Hold the World’ is the closest Holy Moly ever really got to a ballad.

Audrey and I go over to Red, who smiles while munching on his sushi roll. ‘Enjoy being on stage, kids?’ he says.

Audrey nods. ‘Yeah. It’s quite something, isn’t it?’

The memory of three hundred gigs flash in Red’s eyes before he answers. ‘Yeah. It really is.’ He looks between us. ‘How are you two? I mean, how are you both?’

‘We’re fine, Red,’ I tell him, probably a little too quickly.

When Audrey agreed to come to the concert, Red was extremely pleased, thinking it was a sign that we could be on the road to getting back together again.

I don’t have the heart to tell him that’s not the case.

We might be on the road to remaining *friends*, but I fear that is about it.

Red doesn’t need to know any of that today, though. Not as he’s about to play such an important gig.

It still feels strange to put my father’s feelings ahead of my own, and feels even stranger to be happy about doing it. I have felt my resentment

towards him completely dribble away over the last few weeks, in the run-up to this concert. Now I know what really happened between him and my mother, that resentment doesn't feel like it has a place in my heart anymore.

I don't know whether I'm quite at the point of proper forgiveness yet, though.

Let's not forget that Red was still the deeply irresponsible and reckless rock star we all know him to be. He wasn't exactly father of the year, regardless of recent revelations. He was still absent from my life for so many years, and I can't shake the feeling that he didn't really miss me all that much.

These are a child's insecurities that have stayed with me into adulthood.

But . . .

'The past is an ocean that cannot be crossed,' as Holy Moly say in the song 'Seas of Plenty' – which only got cut from today's performance after a three-hour argument in Red's studio, which nearly ended with Albo punching Gypsie in the testicles.

I just need to get Red, myself and everybody else through today, and we'll see what happens next.

I throw a quick glance at Audrey.

. . . with everyone in my life.

The Black Crowes get done with their set about an hour later, having really got the crowd going with 'Too Hot to Handle', before they swagger off stage to go and do whatever The Black Crowes like to do after they've performed for a live audience.

I watch them troop past me from just outside Holy Moly's green room, where I'm standing with a lot of the band's crew as they ready themselves to go on next. We've had the twenty-minute call, and you can sense the tension rising palpably.

I have no idea whether it's the original line-up of The Black Crowes or not, but I kind of doubt it. Holy Moly are something of an outlier when it comes to old rock bands, having stayed together with the starting line-up since their inception.

Not one of them has died, gone off in a huff to start their own band, or gone completely off the rails. Danny's relationship with Soochi has threatened to split them up in the past, but it's never quite come to fruition,

thankfully.

For the longest time, I thought that was just down to pure, dumb luck, but then I think back to the way Red spoke earlier about tonight's set list. The authority in his voice. The finality.

And then I think about how the rest of Holy Moly always seem to do what Red wants, whether it's coming to a party in honour of his son, or helping to stage a fake kidnapping.

He's the leader. He's the one that's kept them together all these years.

I feel a bizarre combination of pride and sadness. For reasons I'm far too nervous to untangle this evening.

'All good, kid?' Red says, coming up to join me as I watch The Black Crowes retinue continue to slide past.

'Yeah. I think so. You?'

'Oh yeah,' Red replies, twiddling a drumstick around in his hand. 'Give it five, and we'll be up on stage prepping.'

I look him up and down. 'You nervous?'

Red continues to rotate the drumstick through his fingers, thinking about what to say. 'Yeah. I guess I am.' He pokes me lightly with the drumstick. 'But you tell any of those other bastards and I'll kill you,' he says with a grin.

I smile as well, but it doesn't stay on my face long. 'You will . . . You will take it as easy as you can, yeah? Pace yourself? And you'll say something if you feel . . . you know . . .'

He fixes me with a stare. 'I'll be *fine*, kid.'

I want to give him a hug. The fiercest hug I can.

But we're standing backstage in Hyde Park at a rock concert with sixty thousand people out front, and several hundred people from the music industry back here. Heartfelt father-son hugs aren't really a thing at events like this.

'Come on, then, you fucking maniacs!' Gypsie roars as he erupts from the green room, with the other members of the band right behind him. 'Let's go and kick the arse out of this thing!'

This earns Gypsie a cry of approval in return from most of the people gathered, including my father. It feels less like a rock band and more like a football team.

Gypsie then leads the troop of Holy Moly types towards the stage, most of whom are now cheering and whooping as well.

‘Oh God, this is all so exciting!’ Audrey says, appearing next to us, holding a glass of champagne.

Red laughs and nods.

I just worry about the champagne going to her head, her falling off the back of the stage, and hurting herself.

For God’s sake, what is wrong with me?

Red puts his arms around both our shoulders. ‘Shall we, kids?’ he says.

Audrey punches the air, spilling a fair amount of the champagne. ‘Yes!’ she roars.

‘Okay,’ I say, trying to sound as enthusiastic.

Red leans into me. ‘Stop thinking, just *feel it*,’ he says into my ear.

I look around at him and nod.

Let’s do this.

And by ‘this’, I mean stand by the side of the stage and watch my father in his element.

. . . and what an element it truly is.

‘Jesus Christ, they’re good!’ Audrey cries at the top of her voice as Holy Moly hit the key change in the middle of ‘Breakneck’.

I nod my head, because trying to shout back over that cacophony is a fool’s game.

The crowd is in raptures.

Largely because there are very few bands in this world who create such a ‘full’ sound as Holy Moly. There are probably bands who write better songs, or play more technical music, or push the boundaries of the art form into new areas . . . but nobody fills the air like Holy Moly. Nobody rattles the cages like Holy Moly.

I once went to the British Grand Prix with Red, when the entire band was given a host of free tickets, thanks to Danny’s passion for Formula One. I remember sitting on the start/finish line and feeling the F1 cars in my chest, before I saw or even heard them.

That’s what a Holy Moly gig is like.

Millions of words have been written about how Holy Moly play – a few thousand of them by my own mother, a very long time ago. And all of those words come to a few conclusions that I can wholeheartedly agree with as I stand here at the side of the stage, with my chest vibrating.

It's Danny's voice. It's StuTheNu's bass. It's Albo and Gypsie's guitars.

But mostly . . .

Above all else . . .

It's those *drums*.

Red Fairweather on the drums.

The beating heart. The pulsing life. The driving force.

Epic.

Huge.

In touch with something primal.

At one with the crowd.

The heaving, hungry crowd.

He feeds them.

He feeds them better than *anyone*.

'Breakneck' slams into its final few chords as Danny Drager screams about speed, power and racing to the line, with the crowd singing along with him, at the tops of their voices.

Danny wrote the lyrics and riff for 'Breakneck', of course. No one could have done it, apart from him. The big racing fan.

A TV station in Australia even used the song as the theme for their F1 programming for a few years in the nineties.

'I will drive and take what's mine!' Danny roars, with Red backing him up on the vocals, as the final chorus of 'Breakneck' hits.

'As I fly across the line!' the crowd screams.

Hell, I scream it too. So does Audrey.

It's almost impossible not to.

The light rigs above and to the sides of Holy Moly spin and turn, throwing flashing beams and splashes of light across the crowd, illuminating what feels like every single one of them.

It is tumultuous. There's no other word for it.

'Breakneck' ends with a long, drawn-out note on the electric guitar from Gypsie, which is drowned out by the crowd as it slowly fades away.

Then Red stands up, so everyone can see him over the drum kit (and those that can't can see him projected onto the twenty-metre-high screens on either side of the stage). He opens his arms out wide and bows his head. This is the signal to show the crowd that the band are about to perform 'I Hold the World'.

Red came up with the gesture years ago on stage, after having carefully studied an image of Atlas holding the globe.

The crowd cheer when they see it. ‘I Hold the World’ may not be Holy Moly’s most thumping or fast-paced track, but it’s a good chance for everyone to chill out a bit after ‘Breakneck’, and its . . . well, *breakneck* pace.

The crowd cheer even louder when they see Danny pick up an acoustic guitar, and join Gypsie and Albo, who have both swapped their electrics for acoustics too.

The song does not need three acoustic guitars, of course. But Danny doesn’t have much to do otherwise during ‘I Hold the World’, so the band came up with this gimmick for the song to keep him happy.

Red sits back down again, adjusts his microphone a little, and starts to hit a crash cymbal softly and repeatedly.

Gypsie, Albo and Danny all join in with a flowing, rhythmic chord on the guitar that sets the mood nicely.

When StuTheNu also joins in, with his bass a strong foundation behind the guitars, a shiver runs down my back – as I’m sure it does for many others.

‘I Hold the World’ is a pretty ethereal tune, all things considered.

The lighting rig certainly seems to agree, and drops into a cool, blue wash that only just illuminates the stage. Everything else is plunged into darkness.

Red then starts to sing the first verse, and many members of the crowd join him. This choral note only adds to that strange ethereal feeling.

A few lighters and many mobile phones go into the air as the darkened audience suddenly becomes a field of dancing fireflies.

‘Wow,’ Audrey says from beside me.

Wow, indeed.

This isn’t the first time I’ve seen this happen live. But it is the first time as an adult. The gravity of things generally hits harder when you’ve been in orbit for that much longer.

‘I hold the world, in my hands, and I begin to understand . . . that everything ends in time, except the knowledge you are mine,’ Red sings. And even though he’s a man of seventy-four with multiple health problems, there’s still power and cadence in that voice that few could match. He never had Danny’s incredible set of lungs, or his vast range, but there’s an emotive gravel in the way Red sings a tune that perfectly fits this kind of song.

‘I will do what I can, to be a better kind of man . . . I’ll keep you close,

though you're far, knowing you're safer where you are,' Red continues, with his multitude of backing singers in the audience.

'The change in me, it's plain to see, this is how it's meant to be . . . I am here, life has begun, it's the will of the sun.'

'The will of the sun,' the crowd all repeat, almost as if they are in church, as Red drops his own vocals away to let them do it all by themselves.

'The will of the sun,' they sing again, the fireflies dancing.

I'm aware that, by my side, Audrey is crying.

I turn to look at her. 'Audrey? What's the matter? Are you okay?'

She wipes a hand across her eyes. 'Yeah, I'm okay.'

'Why are you crying?'

She looks at me in surprise as, on stage, Gypsie takes up a gentle guitar solo, off the back of Red's methodical pace. 'Because this is a very emotional song, Will! I'm amazed you can hold it together, considering.'

My brow furrows. 'What do you mean?'

She gazes at me in disbelief, the sheen of tears in her eyes reflecting the lighting on stage, which is now slowly rising in brightness as 'I Hold the World' steps up a gear into the second verse. 'Well . . . because it's about you, isn't it?'

'What?'

'This song. I've never really heard it before. Never listened to the lyrics . . . but it's obvious what it's about. Red wrote it about you.'

I look confused.

What's Audrey talking about?

Red's never written a song about *me*. He's never told me anything of the sort.

I turn back to look at my father, who has started singing again.

'I hold the world in my hands, and my universe expands . . . In your eyes, everything is real, my back is filled with strong steel.'

That's not about me, is it?

'I Hold the World' has always sounded like a bog-standard ballad to me. With the kind of rather ephemeral lyrics that all those prog-rock songs from the seventies and eighties had. It's never—

But then, a memory flashes before my eyes. My brain makes a connection it never would have, had Audrey not prompted me into thinking about what 'I Hold the World' actually is.

. . . I'm sat with Red in the studio, just after I found out he had his

issues with arthritis, and we were talking about getting older.

What was it he said?

Time goes by so fast, kid. It doesn't feel like five minutes have passed since you were born, and I first held you in my hands . . .

In. My. Hands.

My jaw goes slack.

I take a small step towards my father, and then immediately stop, as I realise that if I go much further, I will show myself to the audience.

Fear and anxiety immediately hit at that prospect.

I step back again, with my eyes still fixed on my father, whose own are now closed as he continues to sing his way through the verse.

'Time moves on, it never slows, but the feeling always grows . . . Never dulls, never fades, down through all of the decades.'

Oh, Jesus Christ.

'I see your face, I feel your grace, with me through all time and space . . . all is clear, everything unfurled, in you I hold the world.'

'I hold the world,' the crowd sings, and Red lets them have it to themselves again.

That's when he glances over at me.

And from the look in his eyes, I know it's true.

Audrey is *right*.

She is so, so right . . . and I really don't know what to do, say or think.

Red wrote this song about *me*.

I start to replay the lyrics over in my head:

I'll keep you close, though you're far, knowing you're safer where you are.

That's about being away from me on tour, isn't it?

The change in me, it's plain to see, this is how it's meant to be.

Does that mean he changed when I was born?

I will do what I can, to be a better kind of man.

. . . because he became a father.

The will of the sun.

Sun.

. . . son.

All those years. I never knew. I never realised.

One of the greatest rock drummers in history, a man with the world at his feet for so long, wrote a song about his only son . . . and made sure the

whole world could hear it. Even if the son in question couldn't.

Wouldn't.

Gosh.

My father really does love me, doesn't he?

I've been so lost in heavy thought that 'I Hold the World' is now reaching its conclusion.

And I want nothing more than to give Red a hug, and tell him that I understand, and tell him he's forgiven, and tell him I love him, before . . . before it's too late.

But I can't, because he's on stage and the crowd is out there.

The heaving, hungry crowd.

And I'm not my father. I don't love *them*. I don't crave *them*.

They scare me.

Their *hunger* scares me.

Just like so many other things scare me . . .

Dilapidated bridges. Pathways that lead off the beaten track. The dysplasia in my poor little dog's hips. Dancing after I've eaten too much. Chipotle. Getting too drunk. Getting too old. Getting sick. Losing myself. Losing control. Losing my father.

Losing my wife.

But right now, more than anything, the crowd scares me. Because Red belongs to them, doesn't he? He always has. He is *theirs*. Not mine. He's Red Fairweather on the drums, and that's always been more important than Red Fairweather with his son.

And listen to them! Listen to them cheer as 'I Hold the World' ends.

That's *my* song.

Not *yours*.

And you can't have it, you bastards.

It's mine.

And I'm not . . .

I'm not . . .

I'm not.

I'm not *fucking scared of you*.

I stride out onto the stage, in front of sixty thousand people, who have absolutely no idea who I am, and don't care.

But neither do I.

StuTheNu looks at me in amazement as I pass him. Gypsie, Albo and

Danny all go wide-eyed as well as they watch me cross to the centre of the stage, heading right for the drum kit.

I hear the surprise in the crowd. The indrawn breath of thousands of people who don't know what's happening.

But I really don't care, because I do know what's happening.

And I'm not scared.

Red rises from the drum kit as I walk up the couple of risers that lift it above the floor of the stage. As I reach him, I immediately throw both of my arms around his sweaty, skinny body and give him the fiercest hug I possibly can.

Which he returns.

The crowd don't know what's going on, but they cheer anyway. Because what else can they do in sight of such an obvious display of affection?

I hold the hug with my father for a few moments more, before releasing him.

'What was that for?' he asks, delight and surprise in his eyes.

I smile back at him. 'For me, Dad. That was for me,' I say.

'Dad?' he replies, voice cracking.

I nod. 'Yeah. That's who you are.'

He smiles. *Beatifically*.

It's a wonderful thing.

And then, because this is Red Fairweather we're still talking about, he grabs my arm, raises it aloft and screams into his microphone, 'This is my son, Will, everyone!'

I am instantly transfixed with embarrassment.

The crowd don't care, though. Right now, they'd probably cheer me if I dropped my pants and showed them my willy. In fact, they'd probably cheer louder.

And boy . . .

Is that sound *intoxicating*. Once you get over the embarrassment, that is.

The sound of approval coming from thousands of human beings at your mere presence on this earth is something that would go to anybody's head.

I can see why Dad loves it so much.

His son could do without letting it go to his head, though.

I lower my arm and put it around my father's shoulder. 'I'd better get off stage and let you finish this gig,' I tell him.

‘You not gonna warn me to be careful about the next song?’ he says, with a wry smile.

‘No,’ I tell him emphatically. ‘There’s no need to.’

‘Wish me luck, though, eh?’ he asks.

‘Good luck, Dad,’ I say, and look back out at the crowd, feeling the waves of energy coming from them. ‘Not that you need that, either.’

I pat him on the shoulder, and then hurry back across the stage, off to where Audrey waits for me, with a wondering look in her eyes.

‘Are you okay?’ she says as I reach her.

‘Yes, I am,’ I tell her truthfully, feeling somewhat relieved to be back behind the curtain again, where the world can’t see me.

Back on stage, Danny Drager has resumed his usual place at the front, and the crowd go absolutely bloody mental when they hear the sound of clanking chains played over the PA system.

This is the start of ‘Taking No Prisoners’ – the grand denouement of this gig, and so many of Holy Moly’s other concerts down through the years.

I have to confess, unlike the rest of the crowd, I only really half listen to it. I’m still processing the fact I just walked onto a stage in front of sixty thousand people, and hugged a father that a few months ago I never wanted to see again, for as long as I lived.

But everybody else is well into it. Especially Danny, who gets to really stretch his vocal range with this song, in a way few others can compete with. In fact, it’s a complex and difficult song for all of them to carry off. One that lasts over eleven minutes.

Slowly the anxiety creeps back into me as I watch them perform – not just for Dad, but for all of them. Can the energy from the crowd keep those old boys going?

It certainly seems to look like it so far, as we fly headlong into the second chorus. Danny is front and centre, one foot up on a stage monitor speaker. Gypsie and Albo stand together off to the right-hand side, exchanging licks and solo notes. StuTheNu stands alone on the left, his fingers a blur on the bass strings.

And at the back – my father, Red, holding everything together with his superb timing.

That’s who he really is, isn’t it?

Underneath all that leather and stupidity.

For years I’ve pictured Dad as a reckless, foolish little boy, trapped in a

man's body. The kind of person who drinks swimming pools, runs headfirst into bass drums, and punches dolphins. And he is all of those things – but now I realise he's also so much more.

He is the driving force of this band.

He is the one that holds them together. That leads them.

He is probably more responsible for Holy Moly's success than anyone. And you don't get to do that by being a reckless fool the entire time.

Gosh.

What's that feeling?

Is it . . . *pride*?

Yes.

I rather think it is.

So, I don't stand there and watch my father go into his famous 'Taking No Prisoners' drum solo with feelings of fear, or doubt, or dismay – which is maybe what you would have been expecting.

Instead, I feel a swell of pride, and of love for him as the rolling, hammering solo begins.

. . . for the very last time, as it will turn out to be.

This is Red Fairweather in his element. In his pomp.

And no amount of missed beats and notes (of which there are a few, of course) can detract from that.

He is *alive*.

Gloriously, idiotically, painfully *alive*.

As he flies through the solo, his long grey hair whipping around his face, and arms flailing about in ordered chaos, he is triumphant.

A seventy-four-year-old man, magically transformed into the thirty-year-old he once was – just for this brief period of time. Powered on by the energy of the crowd, who love him so much, and who he loves in return.

But not as much as he loves *me*.

He wrote a song about me, you see.

Nobody else ever gets to say that.

And he doesn't care that he's sick.

Doesn't care that his hands betray him.

None of that matters.

None of that is important.

Not right now.

What it must be to be able to live like that! To be the kind of person

who can *do* that.

I wonder what it must feel like . . .

You're his son. You can find out.

Maybe.

We'll see.

The 'Taking No Prisoners' solo is now reaching its crescendo. Red's playing is faster and harder, joined by the guitars, and a scream from Danny that brings down the heavens.

And it's perfect.

Arthritis be damned. Heart disease be damned. *Reality* be damned.

Those things don't get a look in when you're on stage with Holy Moly in front of sixty thousand people.

Red hits the last few enormous beats of the solo, rising immediately to his feet once they are done.

The crowd, now nearly driven insane with excitement, roar their loudest as he does this.

Red's arms are thrown aloft in triumph, drumstick in either hand. The lighting rig above him bursts into an incandescent bright, white flood, bathing him in holy light.

This is how I will always think of him. This is how I will always remember him.

In the crowd somewhere, a photographer is capturing this moment, and I will one day pay a great deal of money to have this picture of my father blown up and hung on the wall in my study.

He really does hold the world in his hands tonight.

He's in charge. In command.

The head of one of the greatest rock bands of all time, with the roar of the crowd ringing in his ears for the rest of time.

And with a very proud son, standing just off stage, loving him for it.

As far as legacies go, that's one hell of a good one.

I hope he'd agree.

Lament

Red died seven weeks later.

I'm sorry, but he did.

At about 3 a.m. In his bed. Asleep.

He would have been thoroughly ashamed of that.

Rock stars are supposed to die *spectacularly*. Preferably in a way that requires a police investigation.

But you don't get to choose.

None of us do.

And the universe decided to send Red Fairweather off to his rest in the most comfortable, prosaic and action-free way possible.

Oh my, yes. He would have *hated* it.

I'd like to say I handled it well, and maybe from the outside I did. I certainly didn't fall apart in front of anyone, or anything like that. Nobody needed to step in to help me with the funeral arrangements. No one was required to prop me up, when people came to pay their respects and offer their condolences.

But I was most definitely broken up.

Inside, I mean. And I don't think I handled it well.

How could I?

I had less than two months to spend with my father, after Gods at the Park. Less than fifty days with a man who I'd only just begun to understand for the first time in my life.

Do I feel cheated?

Yes.

I definitely do.

But do I also feel that those seven weeks were some of the most precious I've ever had on this earth?

Absolutely.

When Mum died, it was all so sudden that I never really got to say goodbye. Not properly. One minute she was fine, and it felt like the next, she was gone. I never had time to prepare. To come to terms. To barricade my heart and my soul against the horror of it.

And while Red's death sort of came out of the blue as well, it also didn't, really. Not with a serious diagnosis like that hanging over his head.

Thankfully, he'd let his friends from Holy Moly in on the secret about his health, right after the gig that would end up being their farewell concert. It took a bit of persuasion from me, though, it has to be said. But they deserved to know.

I'm eternally grateful he did tell them, because it's made these dreadful last couple of weeks after his death a tiny bit less painful for us all.

So, while none of us knew how much time we'd have left with Dad, at least we all knew it might not be that much.

And so we all made the best of it.

I went on walks with him in the country. Sometimes just the two of us, sometimes with the folks from RIMs – who grew to love the mad old bastard as much as I did. He wore them down, you see. Even Charles Entwhistle, who seems delighted with his relationship with Melody now, due to whatever advice it was that Red gave her.

He even came with me on a few walks with Banjo, taking great delight in feeding my dog titbits whenever he thought I wasn't looking. A couple of times Audrey came too, and those will be some of my happiest memories of those last few weeks with Dad. All the most important people in my life together, ambling down tree-lined pathways and across sun-blessed fields.

Red and I also played a bit of Nintendo, because it was there, and I did have that *Super Mario World* save file sat doing nothing.

I did have to stop him attempting to ride Chunky Lumps around the garden, as I didn't think it would be healthy for either of them.

The main thing was, I had a lot of quality time with Red that wasn't laced with an undercurrent of resentment or frustration. It was extremely nice.

The boys from Holy Moly got him drunk, as high as a kite, and persuaded him to get a tattoo of Wile E. Coyote on his arse.

No, I have no idea why.

If you really want to know, you can go ask them yourself. Just follow

the smell of cannabis, leather and liniment oil.

Audrey was there for me. Of course she was.

Just like she had been for Mum.

I could feel the concern for my welfare coming off her in waves when she turned up at the house the morning of Red's death. If Mum dying had sent me into a downward spiral, then what would my father's death do to me? Especially so soon after reconnecting with him, for the first time in decades?

She needn't have worried.

This is . . . *different*.

I am different.

Mum's death was sudden. Unfair. Unexpected. Cold and hard. It taught me that nothing is safe. That the world will end you with no warning whatsoever.

Dad's death, though?

It's taught me a different lesson.

It's taught me that if the world does intend to end you with no warning, it's really important that you *grab hold of it while you're still alive*.

Because that's what Red did. Each and every day.

Yes, he was sometimes reckless. Yes, he was sometimes foolish.

But I don't think he went to bed that night regretting any of it. Up to and including the Wile E. Coyote tattoo on his arse.

This might sound strange, but I almost feel like Dad's death balances Mum's a little.

And you know what?

I think she'd be *delighted* about that.

And I think he would too.

So, I am sad.

Broken.

But I will *mend*.

I will heal.

I will recover.

Because I'm still young. And I have time.



What I do not have time for is Soochi's bullshit.

She's decided that she needs to shape the aura of the church with her own essence – whatever the hell that means. I'm half afraid she's about to go over to one of the walls and cock a leg.

That would cause Donald, the poor vicar of Dropley church, a heart attack, I'm sure. Not one that would be anywhere near as mercifully brief as the one Red suffered the night he died.

Forgive the black humour, please. It's my way of coping.

'Danny, can you get her to just go and take her seat?' I ask Holy Moly's frontman as we stand and watch Soochi wobble around in a circle, in the centre of the aisle. 'I'm nervous enough about this performance as it is, without having to worry about it not starting on time.'

Danny chuckles, and moves towards his wife, an arm outstretched, and a persuasive look on his face. Thank God for that. I really just want to get this over and done with, as quickly as we can.

Now, you may be slightly taken aback at my attitude. This is a solemn occasion, and I shouldn't be trying to get through it as quickly as possible. That is not how one is supposed to approach a funeral service for a close loved one.

But Red Fairweather – the utter bastard – had a very special request written into his wishes for his funeral. A request I would certainly kick him on his Wile E. Coyote-tattooed arse for, if he was still around for me to do it.

At the front of Dropley church, a stage has been erected, by Holy Moly's roadies. Only a very small one, just off to one side of the altar – but big enough to hold two guitarists, a bass player and a small drum kit.

My bloody drum kit.

The one from Red's studio.

Because my father, in his infinite wisdom, decided that he wanted his funeral to include a song by the remaining members of Holy Moly, as an appropriate send-off.

Only there's one big problem with that idea, isn't there?

Red isn't around anymore to play the drums.

Unfortunately, though, *I bloody am.*

The bugger wants me to take his place.

Red wants me to get up on the hastily constructed stage, and perform live in front of an audience, with one of the most popular rock bands of the last generation.

Okay, it's not that *large* an audience . . . Dropley church can only accommodate a couple of hundred people, but that's more than enough to send absolute terror up through my spine every time I think about it. Especially when you consider that of those two hundred people, a lot are from the music industry.

Red had a lot of friends.

Several of whom know how to play the drums *extremely* well.

I wish he was still alive, so I could kill him all over again.

I am *transfixed* by extreme anxiety.

Have been since Borkins informed me of Red's funereal desires, a few days after his death. I nearly fell off my chair when he told me about it. I now understand why Red was so keen to practise the drums with me in the weeks leading up to his death. He knew it was going to happen at some point relatively soon, and wanted me *prepared*.

At the time Borkins told me the news, I wanted to say no to doing it, but how can you go against the last wishes of the father you'd only just buried the bloody hatchet with?

How can I let him down?

I can't, can I?

. . . and he bloody well knew it, when he put that provision in his wishes, the absolute bastard.

Oh, and did I mention that I have absolutely *no idea* what song I'm supposed to be playing, either?

Red stipulated that he wanted it to be a surprise.

Which is fine for the four old geezers who have forgotten more about performing songs on stage than I'll ever know. They can probably pick up and play any bloody tune you stick in front of them.

The same does not hold true for me.

All I can hope is that it's something nice and simple he wants me to play. The funeral march, for instance. Or one of Holy Moly's easier tracks. 'Wise in Water', maybe – which is a weird little tune penned by StuTheNu, after he went on safari and met a hippo.

All Red had to do on that track was a basic quarter-note beat with the ride cymbal, and the odd occasional flourish during the choruses. It bored *him* to tears, but would be fine for *me*.

Only, I don't think Red would particularly want a song played at his funeral about a hippo. I'm not 100 per cent sure on this . . . but I really don't

think so.

No. It's going to be something worse than that, isn't it?

Something challenging. Something more . . . Red-like.

God.

So, here I am, then: first acting as an usher, to make sure everyone is in place for the service – before I sit through that service nervously, while I contemplate getting up onto that stage by the altar, and embarrassing myself in front of the great and good of the rock world.

Thanks, Dad.

Seriously.

I'm amazed he didn't demand I fly down the aisle of the church on the bloody Segway beforehand.

The other guys in Holy Moly have been very supportive, of course, as has Audrey, who is in attendance today as well.

All of them have said I'll be fine, and have reassured me that no one is expecting me to play perfectly – or even well. Which rather indicates how much confidence they actually have in my abilities.

Danny has finally got Soochi to sit down in the pew at the front of the church, on the left, where the rest of Holy Moly are seated. All of them are dressed in black, as befits the occasion. Most of it is leather, though, which is only to be expected.

I take a deep breath, survey the crowd in front of me, decide that everyone is definitely here now, and indicate to the ushers at the doors that they should shut them.

I then walk down the aisle, assiduously not looking at that bloody stage as I do so, and sit down next to Audrey, giving Donald the vicar a nod.

He returns a slight smile, before gesturing over to a very old woman sat at the church organ, whose name is Mrs Potheridge. She nods back at him over her small spectacles, before turning to the organ and starting to play.

And what does she start to play? 'Whole Lotta Love' by Led Zeppelin.

I believe she's been practising it all week.

And enjoying every second of it, by all accounts.

This begins what you would not describe as a *typical* funeral service.

Red Fairweather's sense of humour is on full display throughout. I have no idea when he had time to sit down and plan all this out, but the fact he managed to keep it secret from all of us is quite something.

The minute's silence we are all asked to perform, while dolphin song is

played over the aging speaker system in the church, sends most of the crowd into mild hysterics. This is not in tribute to Red, you understand, but to the dolphin he had that altercation with all those years ago. His last apology to it, so to speak.

Making Gypsie stand up and admit to the entire ensemble that Red's penis is larger than his, is also a . . . er . . . highlight.

As is the eulogy given by Donald the vicar, which was, of course, written by Red himself.

In it, the vicar tells us all that God is watching, but that we shouldn't be worried about that, because God is a pretty 'solid dude' when you get right down to it, and would probably 'be more or less cool' with anything you do, as long as you're not hurting anyone else.

The vicar's face twitches a little every time he has to repeat a decidedly Red Fairweather-like phrase – which all sound completely incongruous against the earnest tone of voice he's using, and the solemn environment those phrases are being spoken into.

The eulogy – which is actually less a eulogy and more an excuse for Red to take centre stage one last time, only by vicarish proxy – concludes with Donald telling us that '*life is always something you wanna grab by the short and curlies, like Red did,*' and that living with too many regrets isn't worth it because '*God never said you were perfect, so stop trying to be, you wally. You don't think He screwed up that much when He made you, do you? He couldn't have, He's God.*'

I don't know if Borkins had to promise to buy more lead for the church roof or something to get Donald to read this out, but it wouldn't surprise me at all if that was the case.

After the sort-of eulogy, Chunky Lumps the Llama – resplendent in a bespoke Holy Moly t-shirt, fitted especially for him – and accompanied by Mrs Potheridge playing 'In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida' by Iron Butterfly – is led down the aisle by Brian and Peter Chum . . . because did I forget to mention that Red also invited the entirety of RIMs along to his funeral?

Because he did.

My father really did form a strange bond with my fellow ramblers in those last few weeks of his life.

Melody is beside herself with grief about Red's death, so it's a good job her husband is on hand to sit next to her and provide the appropriate levels of comfort. Shit, even he looks extremely forlorn. Red's advice must have been

incredibly good.

Upon Chunky Lumps' back is a small saddle, on which sits a twelve-inch doll of Red, holding a sealed envelope.

This doll is part of a very short-lived line of merchandise that Holy Moly commissioned in the early eighties. Red's plastic alter ego looks nothing like him. In fact, it seems like the toy company just repurposed an old doll of Tom Baker, by gluing long fly-away hair to it, and dressing it in a leather jacket and flared jeans. It looks like Doctor Who smoked a bit too much weed in the Tardis one day, and made a huge change to his lifestyle.

As Chunky Lumps and his ridiculous plastic passenger get to where the now deeply perturbed vicar is standing (allowing Chunky Lumps into the church probably paid for the restorations to the nave) my anxiety does its usual trick of skyrocketing in a nanosecond.

In Red's plans for his funeral, the arrival of Chunky Lumps means I have to get up on stage and play very shortly.

Firstly, though, I need to take part in a rather idiotic ceremony that Red has also devised.

I get up from my seat and manoeuvre my way around to stand behind Chunky Lumps, looking out at the mourners as I do so.

As this happens, Mrs Potheridge begins to play 'Fat Bottomed Girls' by Queen on the church organ.

Albo has also stepped forward, and is solemnly plucking the envelope from plastic, hippy Tom Baker.

I say *solemnly*. He's actually trying his level best not to burst out laughing.

He hands me the envelope, before turning and heading up onto the stage, where he is joined by the other three remaining members of Holy Moly.

I hold the envelope up. 'In here is the song my father has asked that we play for you, on this, the occasion of his death,' I tell everyone.

The people in the pews are genuinely trying their hardest to remain serious through this, but it isn't easy with an eighty-two-year-old woman hammering out 'Fat Bottomed Girls' in the background.

God damn you, Red.

'I will now . . .' I swallow hard. 'I will now take my place at the drum kit and open the envelope.'

I do as Red has commanded, and go and sit down on the stool just

behind the Yamaha drum kit that he bought for me about seven thousand years ago. Holy Moly come to stand just behind me for a better view of the envelope opening.

Everyone else looks at me expectantly as I open the silly thing.

'I will now read the contents,' I tell them all.

Because he couldn't just let me keep it to myself, could he? No. I have to read it all *out loud*.

'*Hey, kid,*' I read, my voice breaking a little as I do. This is the last thing Red Fairweather will ever say to me.

I feel Gypsie put a hand on my shoulder and give it a squeeze.

'*Sorry I had to go,*' I continue, trying to stop my voice cracking again.

'*There was so much more I wanted to say to you. Do for you.*'

I hear a loud gasp of grief escape someone's lips in the crowd, but I'm concentrating too much on holding it together myself to look up and see who it is.

'*But I won't get the chance now.*'

The church is now silent. I barely have to lift my voice to be heard.

'*Words are great and all, but sometimes they're not enough,*' Red goes on. '*In my life, it's been the music that makes the most difference . . . That's why you're sat where you are right now.*'

I have to take a deep breath before continuing.

'*It's time for you to let go, kid. In front of all these people. The same way I used to.*'

Oh, God.

'*You just have to stop thinking, and feel the music again.*'

My hands have gone cold.

'*Let it all go. Stop worrying about what's to come, and just live in this moment.*'

There's a murmur from the audience. It might be one of approval.

'*I love you, Will. I always have. I always will.*'

I swallow hard again.

'*Now play the song,*' he tells me.

I look down at the bottom of the page, where the name of the song that Red wants us to play is written.

Oh yeah . . .

It would be that one, wouldn't it?

The other members of Holy Moly see what the requested song is, nod to

themselves approvingly, and take up their positions beside and in front of me.

I close my eyes for a moment, trying to centre myself. Trying to calm the fear. Trying to set the stage.

Which inevitably forces my mind to flash back to that important day in Red's studio, when I sat down with him to play the drums for the first time in a lifetime.

Remember how nervous I was to play again? Remember how I coped alright with the initial songs we tried, like 'Smoke on the Water'?

And what was the song that it all went wrong on?

The *only* song that Red would demand I play today here at his funeral – even though it'll mean nothing to everyone in attendance, but mean everything to me?

I can't do it.

Not then.

And definitely not now.

Gypsie looks at me expectantly, his guitar poised. I stare back at him. He gives me a nod of encouragement. As do Albo, Danny and StuTheNu.

Gulp.

Oh, bloody hell.

I hit the high-hat three times to count them in . . . and Gypsie starts to play the opening chords of 'Welcome to the Jungle' by Guns N' Roses.

The song I couldn't play.

The song I couldn't finish.

Because I'm old, and weird, and scared, and—

I'm playing the snare drum. I'm playing the cymbals.

I'm on a stage with some of the best rock musicians of all time, and I'm drumming alongside them. God help me, and God help us all.

Gypsie hits the striking, echoing chord that gets the song going. There's a lot more controlled feedback than he's used to, but he does it flawlessly. Albo joins him, making the sound they produce echo even more around the vaulted ceiling. StuTheNu is letting what's left of his hair down on the bass, and Danny is taking a swig of water while he prepares to do his best impression of Axl Rose.

Then Danny starts to emulate the rising scream that really starts 'Welcome to the Jungle', and the church is suddenly filled with the kind of music it's probably never heard before.

But that's okay, because when you get right down to it, rock music is its

own form of worship.

I know that from walking out in front of that crowd, and feeling every single one of them.

The song then hits its stride properly, and the people filling the pews start to rock their heads back and forth and tap their feet.

This is probably the smallest and quietest rendition of ‘Welcome to the Jungle’ in history, but it’s more than enough for them.

It’s more than enough for me too.

I can see my father, in my mind’s eye, as we rush through the verse, and headlong into the first chorus – sat there in the place he called home, urging me on.

He’s telling me to feel the music. He’s shouting it at the top of his voice.

Stop thinking and just feel it!

But I couldn’t hear him.

Not then.

Because I was too afraid, and too old, and too resentful.

Can I hear him now, though?

Can I do what he asks?

I close my eyes. I try to stop thinking.

About my marriage. About my mother’s death. About the way my back spasms almost every morning when I get out of bed.

I see Red on the drums at Gods at the Park – *free*. Unencumbered by thought. *Feeling* it. Living it . . .

My eyes snap open.

Oh.

Oh yes.

There it is.

Right in front of me . . . where it’s been all along.

Gypsie, Albo, Danny and StuTheNu all hit the chorus with perfect timing – and I’m right there along with them.

I don’t think.

I just do. I just *feel*.

And it’s amazing.

My arms, down by my sides when the song started, now flail around wildly as I hit cymbal and drumskin as hard as I possibly can. Sweat is flying off me now. I feel one of the arms in the rented suit jacket I’m wearing tear. I

don't care.

A deep, sweet ache has appeared between my shoulder blades, and I don't care.

My wife and I haven't slept in the same bed for over six months, and I don't care.

I never got the chance to say goodbye to my mother, and I don't care.

I only had a few weeks left with my father, and I don't care.

The world is going to end me one day, the same way it ended them, and *I don't care.*

Because I'm Will Fairweather on the drums.

And I always have been.

We roar through the rest of 'Welcome to the Jungle'. Me and the rest of Holy Moly, in as perfect sync as it's possible to be on a small stage in a church, playing a song that isn't one of yours.

Some people are up from their seats now, rocking their way through the song. Including my wife, Audrey. She's dancing with Brian Chum, and the smile on her face is *glorious*.

Mrs Potheridge has actually joined in on the church organ, having picked the tune up enough to follow along. It shouldn't work with the rest of the instruments we're playing, but by the grace of God, it bloody well *does*.

Donald the vicar is nowhere to be seen. He's probably off hiding somewhere, and composing a prayer of apology to the Lord.

Dropley church is rocking.

Dad would very much have approved.

I look up from the drums as the song heads into the guitar solo – which Gypsie plays suspiciously well. Almost as if he, and the other members of Holy Moly, actually had prior warning that they'd be required to play this song today.

Hmmm.

I look up and see my wife again – who is naturally more of an R&B kind of person – dancing around now with both Chums and Celeste, clapping her hands in time to the music, and grinning like the Cheshire Cat.

I smile back and wink, before returning to the drumming, as there's a really complex bit coming up, involving the cowbell.

There will be time enough for me and Audrey.

I think I know what to say to her now. And what to do.

I can see a road ahead that I actually want to travel down, and I hope I

can persuade her to accompany me on it again.

But that can all wait.

Just like everything else can wait, because I'm playing the drums right now, and that's all that matters.

Am I playing them well?

Who knows.

Probably not.

I'm sure I'm missing beats, and scuffing notes – but nobody seems to mind, and I certainly can't tell. I'm having way too much fun.

Which is something you can only really do when you stop thinking . . . have you ever noticed that?

It's also something you can only do when you're not *afraid*. I've been afraid for far too long.

Because the world can be a scary place.

But not all the time.

Not when you're having fun. Not when you just learn to let go. Even if just for a little while.

And that, I think, is what Red was trying to teach me. In his own very special way.

The more fun you can have, the less scary everything is.

That's why he drank a swimming pool and bought a llama.

I just have to be a little more like him in future.

Find my own swimming pool to drink, so to speak.

'Welcome to the Jungle' comes to its hectic conclusion, featuring Gypsy and Albo wildly pinwheeling their arms, StuTheNu holding his bass above his head, and Danny Drager swinging his microphone around in a wide arc.

It also features Red Fairweather's only child rising to his feet and smashing cymbals for all he's worth, in a crescendo of noise so loud I'm likely to get a bill for the cracks in the stained-glass windows at some point.

I end the song with a few last smashes of the cymbal in quick succession, and then, in a conscious and deliberate effort to copy my father, I raise both hands above my head as the mourners (hah!) applaud my efforts.

Oh yes.

I am my father's son.

And for the first time in my life, I am more than comfortable with that.

Coda

Saturday mornings are always the busiest time at The Heath RSCPA centre.

It's the time when most people are off work, and thinking about adopting an animal – if that's their desire.

Audrey has worked pretty much every Saturday morning for as long as I can remember, which means I know exactly where she'll be on this particular Saturday morning.

It's always Meet & Greet day, which gives Audrey and her staff the chance to introduce as many of their animals to prospective owners as possible.

It's also been four days since we buried Dad.

Four days since I played my first and last gig with Holy Moly.

The actual burial was a lot more sedate.

StuTheNu played a sorrowful rendition of Pink Floyd's 'Shine On You Crazy Diamond' on the bagpipes that stunned us all. Nobody knew he could even play them, until they were produced by the graveside. And he was *good*. Like 'making the bagpipes sound nice' good, which is a next to impossible feat.

And while there was only room for two hundred people in the church, there were a lot more in attendance outside, on that crisp early autumn day, to see Dad actually buried. There were even a few reporters from some of the national rags, which surprised me. Holy Moly will always have their place in the pantheon of British rock band greats, but it's been a lot of years since they were in the public conversation. That set at Gods at the Park must have had more of an impact than I'd thought.

It would have pleased Red no end to see that there was still enough interest in him and the band for the press to show up at his funeral.

The amount of fans that came along would have pleased him even more.

Dropley pretty much ground to a halt that day – which is just the way he

would have wanted it. A little mild chaos to commemorate your death is surely the thing that most rockers would wish for.

After the service had concluded, those of us close to Red went for the wake back at Moly Mansions, which was fully catered by the same events company that managed the party Red had held in my honour.

Gypsie was completely naked an hour into the wake – which just goes to show that he’s definitely slowing down in his old age.

Borkins and I had to hire another company to help with the clean-up operation the next morning. It took us until mid-afternoon to get the place back into a habitable state. I should have asked for them to bring along a forklift and dump truck to speed things up.

The house is liveable again, but it’s also very, very quiet.

Something has *gone* from Moly Mansions. Both literally and figuratively. That much is obvious the second you step foot in the front door. It feels like a shell now, rather than a home. The life has been sucked out of it.

I don’t think I shall be staying there much longer. It’s now even more full of memories than it was when I first turned up there earlier this year, and they are all tinged with a fair degree of sorrow.

So, I’ll be moving out soon enough, and leaving the place behind for someone else to enjoy . . . and possibly hang off the side of naked.

The Super Nintendo is coming with me, though.

So is my drum kit.

Having got the business of Red’s funeral out of the way, I turned my attention to the other person in my life who I must sort out my relationship with.

I went back and forth on what to do about Audrey a lot.

Our separation is now at the point where you would have to consider it *long term*, and trying to claw the situation back is not going to be an easy task at all.

We’ve both made new lives without one another, whether we wanted to or not, and there’s an *inertia* to that. A powerful inertia, with a course that I might not be able to alter.

I know I’ve changed a fair bit over the past few months. Audrey was absolutely right when she persuaded me that staying with my father would be a good idea.

But is that enough now? After such a long period of time has passed?

When Audrey has no doubt got used to me not being around all the time?

Before Red's death and the revelations about my relationship with him were borne out, I would never have thought I deserved to have Audrey back in my life.

But with the change in perspective (which I'm hoping will stick with me; you can never be guaranteed anything in this world, as we've readily discovered – but I'm praying this is one of those rare occasions when something will be), I now think that I am in a place where Audrey could come back to me, and things would genuinely be different.

I would be different.

I think I deserve to have my wife back . . . but will she feel the same way?

I thought about the tried-and-tested methods for this kind of thing. Apologies over bunches of flowers, heartfelt promises that things will be different, expressions of love during expensive meals, etc.

But none of that would be right. None of them would do the job.

Words – like my father says – sometimes aren't enough.

It's the music that makes the difference.

. . . and the stage you play it on.

The answer to how I tackle this situation came to me a couple of nights ago. It made me grin from ear to ear – and terrified me at the same time.

This felt like the appropriate reaction.

It hasn't taken that much planning, but it has taken a fair amount of *practice*. Which is fine, because I'm all about the practising of things now. My drumming is coming along very well.

So much so that I'm going to start a band.

Nothing that would ever get beyond playing a few pubs and clubs, you understand. I don't have big ambitions, or anything. I'm rapidly approaching my fifties, after all.

But I have feelers out to find some other musicians to join me, and I've already spoken to a couple of guys who seem keen. Being my father's son helps with that.

And I have a name picked out already.

Red Whirlwind.

Yeah.

That's a name that rocks, isn't it? That's a name the crowd can get behind.

It certainly sounds good to me.

I hope it'll sound good to the people that come to see us, once we get up and running.

The car park outside The Heath is nearly full at 11.30 a.m. I struggle a little to find a parking space, and when I do, it's quite a way from the entrance. This means I have to carry a very heavy, cumbersome object a fair distance – which is made all the harder by the long, heavy black coat I'm wearing.

I start to feel a growing sense of extreme embarrassment as I enter the main building and see many sets of eyes fall upon me.

I do look a little strange, and more than a little suspicious, it has to be said.

But I'm here now . . . and this really is the *right* thing to do.

This is the *Red Fairweather* thing to do.

I offer an awkward smile to everyone who watches me as I hurry past them. Someone at the door leading onto the courtyard outside holds it open for me, which I am very grateful for.

Having got back out, I then scuttle towards the centre of the wide courtyard, which today contains a good twenty or thirty people – mostly comprising parents and small children, along with a few dogs.

I will certainly have an audience for this.

Which is kind of the point. What I'm about to do wouldn't have the impact I'm hoping it's going to if nobody were here to see it.

It's all about the *performance*, you see.

Once I reach the centre of the courtyard, I place the heavy object I've lugged from the car down, clear my throat . . . and wait.

I get a lot of funny looks as I do this.

Not surprising. A man standing on his own in the centre of an animal rescue centre in a long, heavy black coat is bound to draw a lot of funny looks.

Thankfully, and happily for my continued existence as someone without a criminal record, I don't have to wait that long.

Coming towards me from the same kennels that the maniacal Minty lives in, off to the right of the courtyard, is my very harassed-looking wife.

This is an extremely busy day for her, so no wonder she looks like she wants it to be over with.

Many a time she has come home from a Saturday Meet & Greet requiring a foot rub, a cup of strong tea and someone to vent her frustrations on.

In fact, the tense look on her face makes me think that this grand scheme of mine isn't such a great idea, after all. I should have waited for a more appropriate moment. I should stopped and thought more about it before I—

Stop thinking. Just feel it.

I nod to myself.

Okay, Dad. Will do.

Audrey walks into the courtyard, with Banjo on a lead beside her – who is happily trotting along, and just glad to be out and about, around all of these other dogs and all the interesting smells. If the Saturday Meet & Greet is Audrey's least pleasurable day at work, it's probably Banjo's absolute favourite.

Of course, once he lays eyes on me, Banjo immediately starts to get excited and pull on the lead.

Cool your jets, buddy. You might want to run for hills once you see what I'm about to do.

It's Banjo's sudden enthusiasm that draws Audrey's attention away from a conversation she's been having with one of her staff members, and over to me.

'Will? What are you doing here?' my wife asks, incredulous, as she starts to come over to where I'm stood.

I hold out a hand to stop her.

'Stay there. I have something I need to say to you.'

Her brow, already tense, furrows a little more. 'Can't it wait? I'm rather busy.'

'No, it can't.'

I orient myself around so that I am facing her properly.

'I have something I need to do, Audrey. Something that I have to do in front of all these people,' I say in a loud voice, which I manage to keep firm and strong, despite the fact that the butterflies in my stomach are now pinwheeling around like someone's electrocuted them.

Audrey now looks deeply embarrassed. As well she might.

'What the hell are you doing?' she hisses, trying hard not to look at any of the small crowd, which has now turned its full attention towards us.

I think for a moment. ‘Trying to save my marriage, I think,’ I reply.

‘What?’

I hold up a finger.

I then turn that finger downwards, heading for the large black box I’ve lugged all the way over here with me.

The finger moves towards the play button on top of the enormous and very old ghetto blaster I found covered in dust at the back of one of the garages at Moly Mansions.

When I press play, ‘Rockit’ by Herbie Hancock bursts into life across the courtyard. I found this in a pile of old cassette tapes that were in an equally dusty box, behind the ghetto blaster.

It’s like my father knew this moment would one day come for his son in the future, and prepared the way. I can’t imagine that Red ever listened to break dance music during his long life – but given that in the box I also found a dozen classical music tapes, *The Greatest Hits of Dolly Parton*, and a signed copy of ‘The Combine Harvester’ by The Wurzels, I have to conclude he had a very wide and eclectic music taste.

You may have already gathered what I’m about to do.

Feel free to look away, if it’s too much for you to deal with.

‘Will? What the hell is this?’ Audrey repeats, now sporting the expression of one who wants the ground to open up and swallow her.

‘Feeling it, Audrey. I’m feeling the music.’

And with that pronouncement, I unzip the long black coat and throw it to the ground.

Underneath, I am resplendent in a very baggy bright green-and-red nylon tracksuit.

This was not found at the back of Red’s garage.

It was bought from a very unsavoury individual in the depths of Southampton last night, for what I still feel is an exorbitant price.

And then, to the accompaniment of ‘Rockit’ by Herbie Hancock, I proceed to body pop.

Because the last time I tried this, it was the beginning of the downfall of my marriage, wasn’t it?

I am hoping that this little effort will kickstart it again.

‘Oh God in heaven,’ Audrey says in a low, terrified voice as I herk and jerk my body around the courtyard, in a routine that Borkins and I worked on well into the wee small hours of this morning to get just right.

Hah!

She has no idea.

We haven't even got to the good part yet!

I'm about to start rapping.

'Hey, Audrey! It's about time, that you stand right there and listen to my rhyme,' I wail.

'Please stop!' somebody in the crowd immediately shouts, but I do my best to ignore them, keeping my attention solely fixed on my wife.

'I know I've been sad, I know I've down, but I'm better now, and I've lost that frown.'

'Call the police!' the same voice hollers, annoyingly. It appears I have a wit in the audience. I will continue regardless. Nothing will stop me. I will continue to rap and body pop until I am done.

'Being with my dad has taught me true, that I had to change, so I could be with you.'

'Somebody find an exorcist!'

'I'm sick of feeling scared, and feeling old, I want to be better, I want to be more bold.'

'That barely scans!' the heckler points out. I can't really argue, but Borkins and I did the best job we could to come up with a rap at such short notice.

'I'm ready now, to enjoy this ride, but I can only do it, with you at my side.'

'That's a bit better!'

'So I hope all this can prove to you, that I have really changed, and I still deserve to be with you.'

'You can't use the same word twice!'

'My rap is done, I hope it wasn't too tawdry, I love you so much, come back to me, Audrey.'

'There is no God!'

To finish my performance, I re-create as best as I am able the end of the body-popping routine Audrey devised at Barbecue & Boogie – only this time I put a lot more effort into it.

As 'Rockit' comes to a rather badly edited conclusion (you try cutting a piece of music to time on a forty-year-old ghetto blaster), I end my routine with a flourish, doing a full-body wave, before ending on my knees in front of my wife, with my arms held out to the sides and my head tilted skyward.

There follows a deep and meaningful silence, while everybody digests what's just happened to them.

The only sound is from Banjo, who is lying down by Audrey's side, whining, with his paws over his head.

My wife's mouth is agape.

Somebody – possibly my witty heckler; I'm not looking around to find out – starts to clap. A smattering of other people join in.

I briefly consider going around and getting their names, because they clearly need some emergency psychological assistance.

'You've lost your mind,' Audrey eventually says.

But she doesn't say it in horror, or disappointment, or disgust.

There's clear amusement in her voice.

That, as I'm sure you'd agree, is a *good sign*.

'No,' I reply, still at her knees. 'I think I've actually found it for the first time in a long time.'

Audrey looks around us. 'Well, this is certainly not something the old Will would have done.'

'But it is something the old, *old* Will would have, isn't it?'

Audrey thinks about this for a moment. I'm sure she's probably picturing the flamenco. 'Yes. Yes, it is.' She thinks for a second. 'Though you're a lot better on the drums than you are at body popping.'

Can't argue with that.

I climb back to my feet – which takes me a little while, because I'm still in my mid-forties, despite what this performance may suggest. 'So . . . I guess I only have one question for you, after all of that,' I say to her, my heart racing.

'Which is?'

'Can we have another go, Auds?' I say sincerely. 'After everything that's happened? Can we give it another shot? Me and you?'

'*Ruff!*'

'And Banjo.'

Audrey stares at me for a moment, and then looks around at the people all staring at the both of *us*. 'God, Will . . . did you have to do this in front of all these people?'

I look around as well, before nodding. 'Yes, Audrey. Yes, I did.'

This makes her laugh, even though her face is still quite red. 'If I say yes,' she says, 'are you going to body pop any more?'

I think about this for a moment. ‘Probably not. But if you say no, I might.’

She laughs again. By her side, Banjo has now sat up and is looking up at both of us expectantly. He’s sensed the shift in mood, bless him.

‘So, you think things have changed for you?’ Audrey asks me. ‘You think you might be a little more positive again? A little less worried about getting old, getting hurt or making mistakes?’

‘Audrey,’ I say flatly, ‘I’ve just body popped and rapped in front of a small crowd of people, while wearing a bright green-and-red tracksuit. I look like a five-year-old with ADHD. I would say my days of worrying so much about all those things are long behind me.’ I smile. ‘I’m going to try to be a little more Red Fairweather about the way I live my life.’

Audrey makes a face.

‘Not that much!’ I assure her. ‘Just the *good bits*. Because there *were* some good bits about him. Quite a lot of them, actually. That’s the main thing I learned when you forced me to go and live with him. And thank you for doing it. It was hard, and I hated being away from you, but it gave me the chance to get to know him and forgive him, and that makes all of what’s gone on between us in the last few months more than worth it.’ I reach out and take the hand not holding Banjo’s lead. ‘That’s if we can get back together now, that is.’

‘Just take him back, love!’ the heckler says. ‘I’ve got to buy a bloody guinea pig, before my youngest poos herself in a dirty protest.’ I do not look around to berate the heckler for this latest pronouncement. It sounds like he has enough on his plate.

Audrey looks down at our sweet old dog. ‘Banjo . . . what do you think? Should we let Will come back home?’

Banjo, who always knows when to say the right thing, barks happily and jumps up to put his front paws on my leg. As he does this, I see that his hip on one side has fallen a little more, and he’s not as steady as he used to be.

‘*Stop thinking, just feel it,*’ I hear Dad’s voice say in my head.

That’s something I will continue to do for the rest of my life. Hear his voice.

And what I *feel* is a towering love for my little dog, which obliterates all of my worries in this moment.

I give him a pat on the head and look back up at Audrey.

'I think he likes the idea,' I say to her.

'So do I,' she says, and throws her arms around me.

We kiss – because of course we do – and there's another gentle smatter of applause from the crowd. I assume the guy with the child who's going to defecate if she doesn't get her hands on a guinea pig is not one of them.

'Thank you for coming here today to do this,' Audrey says as we end the kiss. 'I didn't know where we were headed. I didn't know what to do.'

I smile. 'I did, though. For the first time in a long time, I did.'

She kisses me again.

It will be, I'm delighted to say, followed by many more in the future.

Audrey will be right there in the crowd the first night that Red Whirlwind plays, cheering me on. And she'll be there when we play our very last gig as well, in about twenty-five years. The final song I'll ever drum will be 'I Hold the World'. Because, of course.

'Also,' I say to her in a light, breezy tone of voice, 'you should probably know that we're rich now.'

'I'm sorry, what?'

'Yep. It's a good job you've taken me back, Audrey, because Red left everything to me. We're rich.'

Her eyes go wide. 'How rich?'

I grin. 'Swimming-pool-drinking, llama-buying, rock-star rich. All that stuff on the list we wrote out all those years ago? We can do all of it. Possibly twice, and wearing more expensive clothing.'

'Oh, bloody hell.'

'That's exactly what I said when Borkins told me,' I tell her. 'Before I had to go and lie down for a few minutes.' Then a thought occurs. 'And now it appears I've got my marriage back on track, it's definitely time to *celebrate*.'

Audrey laughs. 'How?'

I back away from her. 'How else, Audrey? With *music*. We celebrate with *music*.' I hit the play button on the ghetto blaster and Herbie Hancock bursts back into life. Not taking my eyes off my poor wife, I start to body pop again. Even worse than before.

'Will, stop.'

My arms flail, my legs convulse.

'Please, Will, stop!'

My hips thrust, my feet jiggle.

'Everybody is looking!'

My elbows bounce, my head jerks.

'Will! Will! Stop!' Audrey cries, tears of laughter in her eyes.

But I won't.

Not today. And not ever again.

I'll keep dancing badly . . . and go off the path a bit more, and jump in puddles, and throw impromptu parties, and generally be less scared of the consequences, no matter what life throws at me from now on.

Because that's what my father, Red Fairweather, would have done.

And holy moly . . . he was bloody right to do it, wasn't he?

Stop thinking.

Just feel it.

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And for all of you out there, I hope this book rocked for you as much as it did for me.

I'd like to be a little more like Red Fairweather myself, I think. I hope you would too.

Nick x

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Nick Spalding is the bestselling author of seventeen novels, two novellas and two memoirs. Nick worked in media and marketing for most of his life before turning his energy to his genre-spanning humorous writing. He lives in the south of England with his wife.

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