

## The Digs

The toasted teacake was stale and the margarine thin, but I managed to swill it down with the brown liquid, thick tea in a thick cup, it tasted like oxtail soup. Today though I didn't care, the tables had been turned, I'd struck a blow for decency and the quiet people. Big Mick was in for a shock tonight; that was assuming of he'd be in a fit state to notice.

The café was old and tired; world cup flags still festooned the walls even though it'd been several months since the sad event. I nodded at the old waitress with the blue rinse who'd served me the grim refreshments and she brought over the bill, shuffling uneasily on varicose legs. In spite of her surroundings and poor constitution she still wore a cheerful smile which went some way towards restoring my faith in the human race, a fragile faith that Mick had so brusquely shattered. It was now mid-morning and I needed to find new digs in a hurry, I'd circled a few in the local rag it was time to check them out. All I wanted was a cheap and clean single room. There'd be no more sharing for me, the experience I'd suffered over the past few days made me realise that the saving of a few pounds wasn't worth the stress.

Actually, my last digs had been fine to start with. I'd ignored the worn carpets and the and ill-fitting ripped lino, the torn and faded wallpaper and ceiling full of brown damp spots and flaky paint. I didn't even mind going down to the next landing to use the loo. It was a price I was willing to pay for privilege of being at the top of the Victorian terraced house. I had a double attic room, with a view of more of the same. The screech of seagulls randomly filled the air, but for the most part I had peace and quiet.

Forty quid, room only, with sheets changed weekly. It would've been seventy for a single room, so I shared with a nice lad called Peter. We played scrabble and had some good conversations, in fact we had some lively debates not least because I'm a bit of a socialist and he was a tory. He'd changed sides years ago when he bought his council house and considered it was the best thing he'd ever done. Peter thought Thatcher was the best leader this country had ever had. He loved his home and home was where he went. "A crisis," he'd said, but not why. He'd had some sort of ultimatum and left the next day.

It bought it all back, my own nightmare. "Stop the drinking," she demanded. "If you don't, I'll leave." I didn't stop, couldn't stop. She left without a goodbye, bugged off with a mate, they must've been at it for months, I thought she'd used the drinking as an excuse to leave, but with hindsight it hadn't helped, I'd been a fool letting the drink dictate my life. I hated the deceit and the fact that they'd been shagging in my bed while I was down the pub. I went onto the hard stuff. It stole my mind, I lost my job, marriage and home in less than an English summer.

"He's had an ultimatum." The landlady told me what I already knew as she came into my room sucking the last bit of life from a roll-up. A small, frail old woman in a thick grey cardigan that she'd knitted herself. She always wore a matching headscarf, it gave extra prominence to her hooked nose and being a bit humpty backed, she put me in mind of a heron.

"There's a new man coming tonight," she said. "His names Mick, he looked ok, so he'll be your new room mate."

Just like that, I wasn't involved and it left me a bit disappointed as I would have liked to have the place to myself for a few days.

"I just hope he's as nice as Peter." I replied just for the conversation.

"Good boy that Peter, always paid his rent right on the nail. Shame he had to leave, still what else could he do when he'd had an ultimatum?"

She pushed the sash window up until it jammed in its usual spot, then leaned out, gave a rasping cough and stubbed her fag out on the sill.

"I'll just change the sheets and be out of your way Mr Pennington."

He arrived around seven with a duffle bag slung over shoulders that would not look out of place on an Olympic shot-putter. He had a shock of curly ginger hair on a pear shaped head and eyes that were pale and small. These were kept apart by a wide crumpled nose and his mouth was a mess, black gaps between teeth like tombstones. Grubby jeans curled at the waist where they'd lost the fight to support the weight of his gut and his stained blue shirt stank of sweat and booze.

"Hello I'm Mick," he declared with a grunt and threw his bag on the bed.

"Fancy coming for a pint?"

"Hi, pleased to meet you, I'm James." I tentatively stuck out a hand, which was either unseen or ignored. "Sorry I'm afraid I don't drink."

"Suit yourself, I'm off for a skin full. Demolition's thirsty work the dust gets right down my throat, I've been spitting cotton wool all day."

He wiped a heavily tattooed forearm across his stubbly mouth, but it still left a white triangle of drying spittle in each corner.

"I'm at the poly, I'm afraid I've given up the ..." I was going to say booze but I was cut short.

"Whatever Jamesy, save it for some other time I'm off to the pub, I'll see you later."

So that was my first meeting with big Mick, scrabble was definitely off the agenda and I dreaded his return.

My worst fears were confirmed, he came back absolutely rat arsed, smashed into the wardrobe while groping for the light switch and knocked the only picture off the wall. The crash of the glass shattering sent a cold shiver right down my spine. Luckily I'd instinctively slid down my bed so that only the top of my head showed above the blankets, but I could see him clear enough through a small opening I'd left for one eye. When the light came on I was confronted by a drunken demon, a beast with which I was well acquainted. I was terrified, beads of sweat were forming on my forehead, memories of school, the bullies, gang violence, ritual punishment dealt out to the small and those boys unfortunate enough to have faces that didn't fit.

"You awake Jamesy?" He slurred.

I kept my eyes shut and breathed deeply and calmly in Oscar winning performance that belied the fact that my teeth were clenched so hard, that my filling were about to crack. Then I heard the unmistakable sound, a metal top was being unscrewed from a glass bottle. He spoke again but louder with impatience.

"Hey Jamesy you awake? I've got a wee drop here, do you good. Wake up and have a snifter with me."

I said nothing, but listened intently as he talked to himself, mumbling in a hardly coherent rant.

"Ah Christ, I forgot to go to the shitter and I'm busting for a piss. I heard him say, "well, I aint bloody well going back down them bloody stairs, not now I aint."

Then I heard him fumbling about under the bed, he was looking for the pot. The landlady had one in every room. "For emergencies only, handy if there's somebody else using the facilities when you're desperate," she always told the new guests.

There was an intermittent tinkle as he did his stuff; most of it seemed to go into the pot but I expected there'd be some new stains on the rug in the morning. Then finally a sigh of relief before he grunted, collapsed backward onto his bed and went to sleep like a baby.

I was left wide-awake in a room stinking of beer fumes and urine; it smelt like the town's public convenience on a hot summer's day, all that was missing was the flies. I put my head under the blankets hoping that they'd act as a filter and block out the stench but it didn't work. Thoughts of a previous trauma came flooding back. My first year at the big school, the chase, the yells and banging on doors, loud voices

echoing off tiled walls. The noise of the chain being pulled and then the rush of water as it filled my ears and nostrils.

I lay there wondering what I could do, one night was bad enough but this had the makings of a regular event. I could wake him up and tell him straight, that I'd prefer him not to use the pot, but I looked at his broken nose and missing teeth and decided it would be better to wait, perhaps I could have a quiet word with him in the morning.

I'd just returned from the bathroom and found the slob beginning to wake. His eyes moved but his body was motionless. Then he rubbed his blubbery face and moaned like a child with mumps.

"Morning Michael, and how are you feeling this morning?" I asked with gusto revelling in the fact that I was no longer a prisoner to drink.

"Bloody crap, feels like somebody's taken the top off my head and shit in it."

"Oh dear, I'm sad to hear that." I lied.

"It was the bloody beer I reckon."

"Yes, I've heard it can have that affect." He was too thick to recognise sarcasm, but all the same I resolved not to complain about him using the pot until he was in a better frame of mind.

"The beer was off. I always get like this when the beers off. I knew it was off when I smelt the first pint."

"How many did you have?"

"Only about six pints, couldn't stand anymore. Shite it was, the pipes needed cleaning. Makes all the difference clean pipes does. Finished up on the hard stuff didn't I, the old laughing juice from kilt country. I'll say this for the haggis bashers, they've saved my bacon many a day when the beer's been as sour as a goat's tit."

"You won't be bothering tonight then."

"Damn right I will Jamesy boy, I go out every night without fail. Hard work demolition, I sweat all day so I've got to replenish my liquids. I'll go a bit further a field tonight. Are you sure you don't want to come with me?" I declined.

I went to bed half an hour earlier that night. If I could get to sleep before he returned perhaps I wouldn't be driven mad reliving the deeds of the big lads. I hated bullies. I wish I'd been bigger or done a martial arts course before getting married and being tied down to mediocrity. By the time my marriage was over and my liver on the way out I wasn't in a state to do any Kung-Foo fighting. Still I was fortunate that the squalor I found myself in jolted me back to reality and I climbed out of the gutter and found a quieter way of life. Now I just do my job, move quietly from town to town, nobody knows me. I keep myself to my self, stay out of pubs and out of trouble.

My quest to be sound asleep when he came back was futile so for the second night I slid down the bed as I heard him coming up the stairs. He crashed through the door, staggered, slurred, pissed in the pot and slept. For over an hour I listened to his rasping snore. That didn't bother me really I could put up with snoring I'd shared rooms before, what really irritated me was the stinking, putrid stench that was coming from the rotten piss pot under his bed. I also knew that the only way I'd find some sleep would be by getting rid of it. Although I gently eased myself out of bed the springs creaked so loud that it sounded like somebody had thrown a cello down the chimney. I proceeded slowly with caution and on bare tip-toed feet I managed to reach the side of his bed without disturbing him. With trembling hands I picked up the pot and steadily walked to the window. Then carefully, I positioned it under the frame and smoothly pushed the window up to the point where I could discharge its foul contents into the street. Mission accomplished I returned to bed and slept.

While in the bathroom the next morning I wondered what I could do to change the situation this was something I couldn't put up with. If I told the landlady she'd tell the monster that I'd complained and I'd probably get a good hiding, so that was out. There was only one thing for it I'd have to tell him that using the pot was not

on and he'd have to use the toilet like everybody else.

When I returned to the bedroom he was waking and rubbing his face as he had the previous day.

"Good morning Michael, are you feeling any better than yesterday?"

"Slightly."

"Good I could do with having a word," but he stopped me dead.

"I aint very good though, feels like somebody's chopped the top off my head and crapped in it." He gave me a stare. "Now what did you want to say, Jamesy?"

"Nothing really." What was the matter with me, backing down all the time he needed telling so I recalled the smell from the night before and braced myself. "I just wandered, if you were going out again tonight and would you mind using the toilet on your way back up the stairs instead of using the pot."

"My pissing in a pot's a problem for you is it Jamesy?" His glared was somewhere between anger and ignorance

"Well, it smells a bit and not very hygienic."

"Not hygienic, is it? Well if it gives you the gyp Jamesy boy, I'll try my best to use the shitter in future."

"Thanks Michael it's much appreciated."

That night I'd hoped to sleep well but he arrived as usual and burst clumsily into the room bringing with him a different smell. I peeked out from the safety of my covers and found he was less than three feet away. He was sitting on his bed directly opposite me, eating a bag of chips and he also had a bottle of whiskey jammed between his legs. The dirty brute was slathering, his chin was covered in grease and kept wiping his dirty hands on his shirt. He was oblivious to me squinting at him through one eye. I watched as he crumpled up the chip paper roll it into a ball and toss it over his shoulder into the corner of the room.

"Jamesy, you awake?"

I didn't answer.

"Hey Jamesy, you awake? Just want to let you know I've forgotten to go to the bleeding shitter again, so I'm slashing in the pot, any objections."

I certainly didn't answer.

"Good, cause if you did, I'd have to tip it over your scrawny little neck."

I listened again as he did his business. I thought he'd never stop, he must have supped some stuff tonight.

He passed out about thirty seconds later as the rank fumes filled the room. I'd have to do it again tonight, empty the stinking pot out of the window. I tried to pick up the vessel as I had the night before but it was too heavy for my grip. It was full to the top, the only way I could lift it was by putting my thumbs over the rim, this improved the lifting position, but it meant I had to immerse both thumbs into the frothy, still warm, stinking liquid.

Like a soldier with an unexploded bomb I carefully carried the evil brew across the room, listening for any change in his breathing that might signal his waking. If he woke now he would probably drown me in his bodily fluids. Eventually I reached the window and managed to get the bottom of the pot underneath the frame so that I could push it up. Easily it went at first, smooth and silent, but I went too far and it jammed in its usual place sending a cascade of putrid piss over my hands, my feet and down the front of my pyjamas. What a bloody mess. I went to the bathroom and cleaned myself up and decided then that enough was enough.

The next morning I was still in bed when the big bastard rose from his pit and cast an eye over my slumbering form.

"Hey Jamesy, have you no work to go to today?"

"No Michael, I'm having a day off, I've got some business to attend to."

I watched him leave for work unchanged and without a wash. He was a

disgusting creature who may have served the community better if he'd been drowned at birth. It took me twenty minutes to get my belongings together and put them into my bag and I smiled to myself remembering the good times with Peter as I packed the scrabble. Then, before I closed the door for the last time on that dank room, I had one last task to perform. I know I'm a small and timid man but it didn't half feel good when I pulled back Mick's blankets and pissed in his bed.

The End