

Chapter 1

‘Why’d you do that if you knew I was coming? I thought we arranged you’d have them cleaned once a month. Why would you clean the windows if you know you have a window cleaner?’

‘Well, I didn’t know when you were going to come did I? They were dirty and needed cleaning so I cleaned them myself. The next day I come home to see you’ve left your stupid little card saying you’d just cleaned’em for me.’

Mrs Beston’s face swelled crimson and its bloodshot, bulging eyes glared with an unjustified menace. Barry attempted to reason with the thing before him, although he was wasting his breath.

‘Yes, because that’s the arrangement we’d agreed upon remember, once every month?’

‘I don’t think I’m going to want you to do them anymore.’

Barry didn’t feel particularly upset he wouldn’t be cleaning Mrs Beston’s windows again: it was; after all, only a five pound job. And even if it had of been a much larger one, it still wasn’t worth the amount of grief he’d received.

‘Okay, that’s fine—no problem.’

Mrs Beston walked back into her house with its nose ostentatiously turned skywards. Believing she had gone to go and get his money for the final clean he’d done, Barry waited only to find she didn’t come back. Becoming annoyed, he knocked loudly on Mrs Beston’s front door.

‘What do you want now?’ she asked angrily.

‘I’m waiting for you to pay me for doing your windows, you owe me five pounds.’

‘I’m not paying you because they didn’t need doing,’ she said, spitting the words out with biting venom.

‘How the hell was I supposed to know you’d cleaned them the day before I came,’ said Barry, really beginning to get riled now. He had a few more choice words for this miserable hag but managed to catch his tongue, well at least partially. ‘I spent my time cleaning them as we agreed and now you suddenly decide you don’t have to pay me? It’s not my fault you’re an idiot who cleans the windows when you’ve got a window cleaner.’

Revelling in the infliction of suffering, and knowing in this instance she was untouchable, Mrs Beston looked down her long nose at the man before it and said: ‘No, I don’t think I’ll bother paying you—good day.’ With the completion of this closing sentence she shut the door in the window cleaner’s face.

Muttering profanities as he trudged back to his clapped-out car, his ancient, vomit-beige Volkswagen Golf, Barry understandably was in a foul mood.

‘That vile animal, I hope she burns in hell. Some people bloody deserve to burn.’

The life of a struggling window cleaner is not an enviable one; although, you could say most lives where there is great deal of struggling involved are not enviable ones either, irrespective of whether window cleaning is present or not. Barry struggled mainly because his customers believed his existence to be of less value than a microbe, making it okay to treat him with the same contempt they’d treat dog excrement. At this current juncture in his life he was on his money collections, one of his most-hated parts of the job. This loathing was probably down to the fact his customers seemed intent on paying him as infrequently as they possibly could.

What his customers failed to realise, or even if they did they didn't seem too concerned, was that window cleaning was Barry's living, his only source of income. Luckily however he still lived at home with his Mum—Maggie Broomfield—so he didn't ever have to go hungry, yet...

Living with his Mum was okay, but Barry had recently turned thirty-four years old and thought maybe now was the time to get his own place, though because the majority of his clientele didn't actually pay him, this was a dream that's likelihood of becoming reality was highly unlikely. Regrettably there was also no chance of him ever getting a regular well-paid job with the qualifications and experience he had. Since leaving school with nothing to show for his time there except a fully-functional box he'd made in woodwork, window cleaning was the best career he could get.

Mrs Pitts was next on the list for collection of payment. She was a rather timeworn individual that preferred to give her window cleaner trinkets of bad advice rather than money.

'Hi there, here to collect for the window cleaning.'

'Oh sorry I haven't got any cash on me at the moment Barry.'

'That's what you said last time.'

'I tell you what—I've got something even better.' Mrs Pitts then disappeared, before returning a moment later with a can of Coke and a packet of Jelly Babies.

'Arrhh come on. I'm thirty-four years old. I need money.'

'What for, you live with your Mum don't you?' said Mrs Pitts, squeezing Barry's chubby cheek.

'Yeah, but I need it for going out to the clubs. I'm mad fer it me.'

‘Well I’m sorry but I haven’t got any money. And anyway, you shouldn’t be wasting your time in those dance halls; you should be at home looking after your Mum.’

Finding it hard to believe Mrs Pitts didn’t have any money when considering the palace she lived in, Barry thought it an insult his hard work was only deemed the worth of a can of Coke and a packet of Jelly Babies. Still, he was thankful for at least something, it being more than he usually got.

Arriving back at his home, Barry felt that familiar despondent feeling that often followed a night of collecting from his window cleaning round.

‘How did it go?’ asked Maggie.

‘Usual. Terrible.’

‘Well you go and read one of your comics, that’ll make you feel better.’

Comics were a welcome psychological massage for Barry: an escape from his many failings as a human being. The prized and substantial collection he owned would often be shown to visitors.

Jimmy the Genius was one of the few non-pornographic ones he liked. It charted the life of a young prodigy who’d a habit of creating incredible inventions that’d invariably foil the evil Professor Perilous. Of course, one disagreeable consequence of the foiling of the evil professor was that humanity would invariably be saved. But Jimmy the little cherub wouldn’t stop at just supervillain foiling: in his spare time he’d wrestle with chimpanzees.

After reading for a while Barry lay back on his bed and stared at the ceiling.

Jimmy the sodding Genius still wants to help the world, forget it. And forget humanity as well—because there’s nothing human about it.

A loud roar startled Barry, shattering the silvery silence that had been wrapped around his head. The sound came from a vacuum cleaner, a noise he'd always found unbearable.

'Turn it off Mum, not when I'm here, you know I hate that sound.'

'Don't be so soft yeh lil baby.'

Barry took refuge outside. He found loud unexpected sounds insufferable for some unknown reason. In fact this was only one of the ways in which Barry differed from regular people, there were others—hidden away inside of him that even he wasn't aware of.

Friday night arrived and it was time to let the hair on his balding head down. Not having much money to spend from his paltry window cleaning collection, Barry was still determined to at least attempt the enjoyment of his life.

I wonder how many birds I'm gonna pull, he thought, knowing deep down he'd be going home alone to watch *Home Alone* for the ninety-third time.

Down at the local nightclub—Euphoria—a place that smells like sweaty feet and doesn't look much better, Barry wore his best threads and danced with a level of skill rarely seen on the grubby establishment's dance floor. The general decay of the discotheque combined with Barry's shoddy dancing were a depressing sight for anyone of a sober disposition.

Other revellers danced with an almost-equal incompetence to Barry, it resembling a kind of dreary unimaginative zombie shuffle—as if their shoes were lined with lead, while systematically they suckled at the glass teats held in their hands.

Having spent a tenner on a book called *The World's 1000 Most Awesome Chat-up Lines*, Barry was slightly more optimistic he'd have a good night for once.

On the back of the book he read:

Women will be unable to resist your charms, no matter how ugly you are. These chat-up lines are manna from heaven, positively guaranteed to get you into the knickers of your dream girl.

The book even came with a health warning.

Beware, use these drops of gold too often and you may find your penis falls off from overuse!

Goodness, thought Barry.

Managing to memorize a few of the lines within this book, he felt more confident than usual about his chances of striking it lucky. After strutting his stuff on the cattle market, performing such classic numbers like *The Funky Chicken*, *The Swim* and *The Monkey*, Barry approached a hot-looking young lady.

‘I may not be Fred Flintstone, but I bet I can still make your bed rock.’

‘Get lost creep,’ said the girl, pulling a canister of pepper spray out of her handbag.

Abruptly scarpering, Barry was undeterred by this initial setback, but did require a couple more drinks before plucking up the courage to try another line.

‘If you were a hamburger at McDonalds, you’d be McGorgeous.’

‘What did you say? I didn’t hear you,’ replied the woman Barry was now trying it on with.

Her friends, intrigued, closed in to see what this overweight and balding man had to say.

Barry looked nervously around at the enquiring women. 'I er—if you were a —er hamburger you'd be called—McGorgeous.'

The women broke out in laughter. 'But that's pathetic.'

A tenner spent and the receipt for the book lost, Barry was feeling very annoyed, he decided the best plan was to drink his mind into oblivion. Once heavily drunk he started trying his lines on anybody who walked across his path, male or female. He tried one he thought couldn't fail, shouting it above the loud music in what he imagined might be the evil voice and sardonic laughter of Professor Perilous.

'Inheriting eighty million pounds doesn't mean much when you have a weak heart.'

It didn't work.

To a girl with bullet nipples that could cut glass, he said: 'Is it cold in here, or are you just happy to see me?'

This received, as you can imagine, a look of disgust.

Getting more intoxicated now, the lines began to take on a more forward approach before becoming downright insulting.

'Do you sleep on your stomach?'

'No,' replied a young man.

'Can I?'

'No.'

'Hey baby, wanna dance?'

'No thanks,' replied a Medusa lookalike, realising this man's motor skills were far too impaired for dancing.

‘Hey come on, lower your standards a little, I did.’

Obviously the chat-up lines weren’t working, but by now Barry was having far too much fun drunkenly insulting everyone. He tried yet another line on yet another young lady.

‘Hey girl, you wanna play a game called hide the sausage?’

The woman’s boyfriend, who just so happened to be close by, gave Barry a decidedly dirty look. Not caring in the least though if he was offending anyone, or if he was about to get beaten up, Barry plodded on, asking the same girl another line.

‘Hey, fancy a packet of Liquorice Allsorts and some sex?’

Before her boyfriend could discharge a beating from his fists, the girl slapped Barry across the face.

‘I don’t think you understood me. I was asking if I could place my penis inside your vagina,’ said Barry informatively.

The girl’s boyfriend had a lot more than just a slap in store for this cheeky monkey, and gleefully set about punching Barry, who unresisting, simply lay on his back laughing as the old red sauce began to flow. The doormen quickly moved in, pulling the man off the now blood-stained mess that had once been Barry Broomfield.

As he was being picked up like a rag doll and thrown out of Euphoria nightclub, Barry had a line for one of the bouncers.

‘Have you ever kissed a rabbit between the ears?’

‘What the hell are you on about?’

Barry pulled the pockets of his trousers inside out. ‘Would you like to?’

‘You filthy bastard, you’re barred—for life.’

Lying on the pavement Barry shouted back: ‘I don’t care less! Your nightclub’s crap anyway.’

The boyfriend of the girl Barry had offended was also thrown out.

Having one last line reserved especially for his attacker, Barry said: 'The word of the day is legs. Let's go back to my house and spread the word.'

You might think Barry is an ardent bisexual as he was trying lines on men as well as women, but he isn't: he was instead just acting like a drunken fool. Thankfully his attacker had had enough of fighting and simply decided to ignore the insults being hurled his way.

'Oh well, looks like I'll be spending another night with Penelope...'

Penelope was Barry's blow-up doll, the only woman other than his Mum who cared for him.

Picking himself up, he proceeded to stagger through the empty streets heading in the general direction of home. His only companion on this lonely walk was a suffocating feeling of how everything was grim, rotten to its very core. And for him Euphoria Nightclub was just a microcosm of the larger world. He felt poisoned by the stench of it, by the stench of humanity.

Barry was drunk, but not too drunk to notice the beautifully clear night. Looking up at the night sky and the stars that glinted above, he could have sworn those little balls of light were winking just for him. Trying to find his way home, feeling completely dejected and miserable, Barry wanted to turn his back on everyone.

Alone always alone.

The next morning he awoke with a crippling headache, whether it was from the alcohol; or the blows to the head he'd sustained, he couldn't be sure.

‘Morning,’ said Maggie brightly, drawing open her son’s bedroom curtains.

Barry’s eyes squinted from the sudden rush of daylight.

‘Finbar Cedric Broomfield, look at your face, it’s a mess—what happened?’

‘I fell over,’ he replied.

Looking in a mirror he saw his face was indeed a mess, but what did he care, what did anyone care?

Well aware that injuries like Barry’s were not acquired from simply falling over, Maggie said: ‘You should know better at your age,’ before leaving, unimpressed by her son’s immaturity.

‘Where’s my little Bob?’ said Barry to the white bundle of fur residing in the corner of his room. ‘Oww!’ Barry roughly threw his pet rabbit back into its cage. ‘You little rascal,’ he said while tenderly rubbing the teeth marks that had been left on his chest.

Bob had a tiresome habit of biting; however, it was strange as it only ever seemed to bite Barry while remaining a docile joy for everybody else.

‘Bob is this it, is this all there is to life?’

Bob didn’t reply.

‘Maybe your right Bob, I should be grateful for what I’ve got.’ Barry then gave a moment of contemplation towards what he had but couldn’t think of very much. ‘Well at least I have you and Mum.’

The weekend, over way too fast as always meant Barry was once again at work, and needing to replace a couple of clients he’d lost to diphtheria he was busy canvassing.

He parked up his car, walked up to the front door of his next potential customer and said: 'Hello there, I was wondering if you'd be interested in having a window cleaner?'

The person who answered the door ignored the question. 'Is that your car?'

Barry turned around to look at his rusty Volkswagen Golf. 'Yeah, why?'

The man at the door guffawed: 'You can't be a very successful window cleaner now can you?'

Barry was accustomed to being insulted, which was lucky as this would no doubt be the first of much indignation experienced this day. Hating canvassing more than any other part of being a worthless window cleaner, as nothing was quite so effective at making him feel worthless, Barry already longed for home. Unfortunately, not having any other effective means of getting new customers, he doggedly continued with his quest for business.

A few houses down the road a miserable old man with a raisin-skinned face answered the door.

'Hello there, I was wondering if you'd be interested in having a window cleaner?'

'NO! I DON'T WANT A BLOODY WINDOW CLEANER,' shouted the miserable man. 'They should bring a law in to stop people like you coming round.'

The door was slammed into the doorknocker's plump face.

Experiencing a rare moment of insight Barry thought, *I'm just an excrement smear on a toilet bowl to these people...just an excrement smear...*

It started off as a bad night and it didn't improve because Barry had a problem, a problem that had plagued him ever since his first days as a window cleaner: many

homeowners want someone to clean their windows of course, just imagine what the neighbours might think if they saw them dirty, but then there were so many other, far-more-skilled window cleaners where Barry lived, that he may as well have been trying to sell shoes to a man with no legs.

Having spent three hours of his life performing the monotonous task of trudging up and down the streets, knocking on doors, he didn't bother to look through his trusty notepad to see how many new customers he'd acquired since he knew the answer already—none—

Chapter 2

The next day followed a pattern Barry had grown to hate. He arose at 7:45 every weekday morning and was outside by 9:00. The feeling of hatred for a routine is unusual for Barry as normally he has a great affinity for them, but then because the cleaning of windows was involved in this particular one it was impossible to enjoy. Not that Barry really disliked cleaning windows mind you, what he disliked was the way the people he cleaned windows for treated him.

Today, one of the houses he had to clean on his round (round maybe being the wrong word to describe his consortium of extortionists) was thirty-seven, Woodlands Close. He'd only had this client for a few months and although they were one of his better customers, there was still something very peculiar about them. Every time he went to clean their windows there was a person inside the house, but they would never answer the door and instead play a strange game of hiding from him. The stealth manoeuvres were poorly executed, so Barry would always know somebody was in. All Barry wanted was this weirdo to open their side gate for him: it was always padlocked, and so if they were to open it up it would save him the hassle of having to climb over. The entire situation was highly irregular and very annoying.

After doing the front windows—and then with great difficulty managing to make his fat body clamber over the side gate—he proceeded to do the back ones. Whilst cleaning the kitchen's window, a banging noise from behind in the garden startled him from his work. Barry turned around to see there was a small wooden shed that's door had been wedged shut by a broomstick, and evidently there was something inside trying to get out!

The banging sound continued to resonate clearly. Gradually the door edged open. The propped up broom keeping the door closed and whatever was inside restrained slid over, clattering onto the stone path. Emerging out from the shadows within was a very large Rottweiler.

‘Shit,’ said Barry in resignation to the probable likelihood of his impending death.

If there is one thing Barry despises more than anything it’s dogs, which probably has something to do with how he’s been attacked by them on numerous occasions.

Dropping everything he dashed for the side gate as quickly as his short, fleshy legs would carry him. The dog though had seen the whites of Barry’s eyes and couldn’t resist the temptation of the chase, even when it knew perfectly well that its prey was only the harmless window cleaner.

Having opted to wear shorts this day, Barry now realised this was a bad decision: those rippled-with-fat calves were simply irresistible, looking like two juicy, bouncing hams to a hungry Rottweiler. Shrieking like a little girl, he climbed over the side gate of thirty-seven Woodlands Close faster than he’d ever done it in the past, and miraculously, even managed to escape physically unscathed. Don’t feel sorry for the dog though as it didn’t have to go completely empty handed, successfully getting a hold of Barry’s left shoe and pulling it off his foot while he was busy scaling the gate.

‘That’s bloody brilliant that is,’ said Barry, now safe at the front of the house.

Knocking heavily on the door he really began to get annoyed knowing somebody was in there, that this person would not open the side gate for him, and now had irresponsibly failed to secure their dangerous dog properly.

His knocking increased in authority, and when that didn't work he resorted to shouting through the letterbox: 'Hey come on mate, open the door, I need to talk to you. Your dog got out of yer shed and attacked me. I can't finish cleaning the windows.'

There was no reply.

Barry peered through the glass of the door but couldn't see anybody. 'Look mate, I know you're in there, just answer. Help me help you.'

Still nobody came.

Cursing under his breath, Barry posted his business card through the letterbox, with a note on the back explaining how he couldn't finish the job because of the loose dog.

Moving onto the next house in his round, he was still close enough to keep an eye on thirty-seven Woodlands, just to see if anybody came or went. Ten minutes into cleaning his next house, he saw somebody through the glass of the door picking up and reading his business card.

'I knew it; I knew somebody was in there.'

For the second time that day Barry ran, (this being a very rare occurrence, he was rapidly out of breath) and when he came to the door the elusive sneak was still reading his card, oblivious to the fact they'd been spotted. Barry knocked on the door, putting an end to the bizarre game. The sneak had been caught red-handed, hiding in their own home.

A young, spotty-faced boy Barry guessed was aged about sixteen answered.

'Why—didn't you—get the—door—earlier?' were Barry's first angry words, spoken between giant gulps of air.

'What, oh I mustn't have heard you,' replied the boy nervously.

‘Oh—okay.’ With his heart rate returning to normal, Barry began to recover the full use of his vocal cords and lungs. ‘Look—I just want you to open the side gate and put your dog away properly. Then I’ll be able to finish cleaning your windows. I’d also like to get my shoe back.’

The boy looked down at Barry’s shoeless left foot and the hairy big toe that protruded out from a dirty sock.

Knowing this strange young man was lying, Barry reasoned the lad’s probable cause for not answering the door earlier was because he didn’t have any money to pay the bill. With the help of the boy, Barry got his shoe back from the dog whom up till then had been contentedly chewing it.

‘So mate, what’s your name?’

‘Peter,’ answered the boy.

There was an extreme shyness about Peter but Barry couldn’t sense it.

‘So how come you’re always at home?’

Peter gave up the game and stopped lying, it being pointless, as Barry was clearly aware he’d been in the house every time he’d come to clean the windows.

‘Since I left school I haven’t managed to get a job. That was over a year ago now.’

Peter was it turned out seventeen, not sixteen as Barry had presumed.

‘No one wants to give me any training or employ me. I’m not very good in interviews, I’m shy. That’s why I didn’t answer the door when you came. But that don’t matter that much anyway coz normally I don’t even get an interview. I’m sorry I didn’t put the dog away properly.’

For a moment Barry was taken aback by Peter’s open confession to suffering with shyness, but then he felt sorry for Peter, knowing exactly what a rocky transition

it was from the sheltered existence of education to the real world: he had encountered the same problem when he'd left school and had resorted in desperation to a life of window cleaning to overcome it.

Barry was viewing his world and his past through the rose-tinted spectacles, having momentarily forgotten that he'd regularly be whipped into snivelling submission with wet towels after his school P.E lessons, and that window cleaning had been unable to help him overcome anything.

With meeting a lot of people in his line of work, good and bad, Barry believed falsely that he'd developed an infallible ability at seizing people up; all his instincts told him Peter was a good person.

'I'll give you a job if you want, you can work for me. I get fed up doing this by myself all the time. I could really do with somebody to talk to as well.'

'Really?'

'Yeah, you can start tomorrow if you like.'

'Okay great.'

'I'll pick you up at ten to nine tomorrow morning.'

Feeling glad he now had an employee, Barry thought it wouldn't be long before he wouldn't have to do any of the more unpleasant parts of being a window cleaner such as canvassing and bird-faeces cleanups.

'Hey Mum guess what, I've got an employee, his name's Peter.'

'Your joking, you don't earn enough money to pay yourself a decent wage,' replied Maggie at once.

Barry had not really considered the financial implications of having somebody work for him, but felt confident he could make it work after getting Peter out on the streets door knocking.

The following day Barry picked up Peter to give him his first day of training in becoming a window cleaner. As it turned out Peter was a very hard worker, and so Barry carried an annoyingly smug look on his face that he'd made such a great business decision. He taught his apprentice everything he knew, and because Peter was a good student he was cleaning windows as well and as quickly as the master after only a few days on the job. He also seemed to be a natural salesman, successfully getting the business far more customers when he went out canvassing than Barry had ever got. The acquisition of a job had changed this shy, going-nowhere seventeen-year old into an unstoppable ball of fire.

A Few Months of Window Cleaning Joy Later

'Hey Pete, how did you do at school?' asked Barry one day while simultaneously standing and admiring his apprentice's handiwork.

'Yeah I didn't do too badly, I got decent grades,' he replied.

Barry thought about suggesting why Peter had not gone onto further education, but then decided that'd be foolish because he really didn't want to lose such a great worker.

'God what type of bird has done this,' said Peter upon tangling with a particularly dirty window.

‘That’ll be an Albatross I expect mate,’ replied Barry, chuckling oafishly at his own wit.

‘How come you always make me do the dirtiest windows?’ asked Peter.

This was the first little spark of rebellion shown by his young employee, and Barry believed it had to be stamped out fast before it turned into a fire.

‘Hey look, you were the one who needed a job. You know I can just as easily un-hire you—mate.’

With this threat, the spark Barry believed had been effectively put out. He breathed a sigh of relief, confident in the knowledge that his man-management skills were incomparable.

There was an uncomfortable silence for the next few windows, till Barry decided to change the topic of the conversation back to school days.

‘I was never any good at school me, my teachers said I was as thick as two short planks. And I never got any qualifications, so you can imagine how hard it was for me getting a job.’

Peter gave a brief glance over at his boss and said: ‘Oh right.’

‘I once took an IQ test, they told me my score was so low I was classed as borderline retarded. Yep, window cleaning saved my backside though, without that I would’ve been in some serious trouble.’

‘I thought that up until I came along you still lived with your Mum and that you couldn’t afford to pay to live by yourself,’ said Peter, the spark still very much alight. ‘And while we’re on the subject of money, why don’t pay me a proper wage? We’re making five-hundred quid a week now because of the new customers I’ve brought in, but you only give me fifty of it.’

It was true that over the months Peter had been working for him, Barry had finally been able to move out of his Mum's house, gaining some much-needed self-respect. When he had turned up to the school reunion the previous year, it was highly embarrassing for Barry to find out he was the only one at thirty three who had not left home. His old school chums, although that's maybe the wrong way to describe the people who'd mercilessly bullied him throughout his education, were in hysterics when he informed them about his living arrangements. For the eighteen years before Peter had come along, Barry's Professional Window Cleaning Services had been a failing business, but now that had all changed.

Getting annoyed by this young upstart Barry said: 'Look, it's a job ain't it? Stop moaning.'

A few more months down the line, and Barry now not only had enough money to support himself in his own flat, but he could also afford to go on a holiday to sunny Spain. Life was good, and the way things were going he thought it wouldn't be long before he attracted the attention of a female, maybe even a sexy senorita in Spain. He thought wrong.

'Right, I'm leaving you in charge Pete. I know you can handle it. You've been like a brother to me. I don't know what I'd have done without you.'

Peter muttered something although Barry failed to notice because he was too busy playing the boss.

'I'm only going for two weeks, so you shouldn't make too many cock-ups while I'm gone.'

'I'll need the customer book,' replied Peter blankly.

The relationship between the two window cleaners had become frostier than the North Pole. Not being aware of this, Barry handed over the book that contained the addresses, phone numbers and names of all of Barry's Professional Window Cleaning Service's customers.

'Now that book is everything to this business, if you lose or damage it we're done for, so take good care of it—okay?'

'Okay.'

A businessman with a grain of sense would've photocopied the information in the customer book. Barry on the other hand was careless, liked to live his life stupidly, and also lacked that grain of sense.

Sunny Spain made Barry's skin turn the same shade as a ripe tomato, and despite his best attempts not a single *senorita* was interested in this fat, sunburnt, balding monster. And it wasn't just his inclination towards monstrosity that hurt his chances because apparently, the honourable trade of window cleaner doesn't impress most women as well. So all in all Barry had zero chance of ever finding love, or of ever being happy, or of ever finding any of those other things normal people want.

Still, regardless of the sunburn and lack of female interest he managed to almost have a good time. The nightlife was great and even though he was not what you'd call the sporty type, he did have a few forays into some adventurous recreation: he had a go at sitting on a banana boat until he fell off, parasailing, which was kind of fun but mostly scary, and sitting on a jet-ski until he fell off that as well.

But in spite of these perilous distractions, when he had time to calm down and stop fearing for his life he'd look out into nothing and not for the first time think,

Alone always alone.

Whilst on holiday Barry noticed he still had some spending money left and decided it was time to have some sex. He'd finally realised the truth that there was no way he could get a woman to do the wild thing with him without payment first anymore.

Luckily Spain had a plethora of brothels and Barry was spoilt for choice. He decided to try his hand in one called The Juicy Jugs, an exceptionally tatty-looking building that had a reputation for good service.

The actual reality of what he was about to do made him so anxious he had to walk up and down the street a few times just to get the guts to go in. He was excruciatingly nervous, probably the most nervous he'd ever felt in his life about anything, but finally he did it: he took a deep breath and pressed the buzzer on the security door whereupon a woman's voice answered in Spanish.

'I'm English, I don't speak Spanish,' replied Barry.

'Sorry. Have you ever been before?' asked the woman through a thick foreign accent.

'No...'

'Have you ever been to a massage parlour before?'

'No...'

The door opened but once inside Barry was confronted with another one. After a moment or two the second door was also unlocked revealing that standing behind it was a beautiful young lady. After the greetings that polite, civilised interaction demands, the young lady turned and stood behind a rusty till to discuss prices and what was on the menu.

Barry glanced around. The inside of the massage parlour resembled a nightclub with its disco ball hanging in the centre and accompanying lighting display.

Barry was surprised, having been expecting something much seedier and pathetic that tied in with the exterior appearance.

The Menu:

Forty Euros for a massage, hand job and oral

Sixty Euros for full sex

Eighty Euros for anal sex

Optional extras like S&M should be discussed in the room

‘I think I’ll just go for the full sex,’ Barry said timidly as he handed over his sixty Euros.

The woman at the till pointed over her customers shoulder and said: ‘There’s your choice of ladies Sir.’

What a degrading experience it was for Barry to pick out the girl he wanted to have sex with. Something supposedly magical had been reduced into the mere purchasing of a consumer item. He felt as if he was at The Shop, pointing out to the assistant the packet of cigarettes he wanted.

It now occurred to him that a highly grotesque situation was materialising before his very eyes, transforming his mental disposition into that of a scared boy. In front of him there stood three beautiful women, all now willing and able to please with the physical act of love, yet inside fear deflated his loins rather than blood doing the opposite. The temptresses, clothed only in lace bras and black stockings pouted their lips teasingly for their client, meanwhile Barry just stood staring and intermittently gaping at them.

After a markedly long length of time the ladies pouting expressions changed to ones of puzzlement. A nervous tension now hung in the air because Barry was still looking exceptionally gormless, even beginning to drool slightly.

Eventually the lady at the counter said: 'Pick one. Don't be shy.'

Now wishing he'd never entered this funhouse, Barry wanted more than anything to teleport back out into the safety of the street, or alternatively at least have the ground swallow him whole. He stood there for a moment looking at the door, then back at the ladies, then back at the door again. Swallowing hard he took a deep breath; it was now time for him to stand tall and be a man.

'OH MY GOD WHAT'S THAT?' Barry shouted, pointing over the prostitutes' shoulders.

As the ladies all turned to see what it could possibly be that had shocked their business, Barry bolted for the door in an attempt to escape. There was one problem with his escape plan however: the door was locked and of course he didn't have the key. The women all turned to look back at this inept little man that was bringing a tiny dose of light relief, into their otherwise bleak lives.

Barry's chin slowly lowered till it hung on his chest. 'Can I go now?'

It took a while for the laughter to die down before Barry was let out. He didn't bother requesting a refund on account of his irrepressible urge to leave as quickly as possible, and it also being a far too embarrassing situation already.

The explanation of Barry's horribly-humiliating performance at the massage parlour is a straightforward one: the pressure of entering a brothel alone for the first time had taken its toll.

But then there'd have been no chance of him actually achieving an erection anyway because he simply wasn't the brothel-frequenting type. In actual fact, he'd

have had more chance of producing a hard-on standing naked inside a giant freezer, while a platoon of Nazis fired off rounds from their sub-machine guns at him. It is odd what floats some people's boats isn't it?

Chapter 3: Honey I'm Home

The shroud of darkness outside helped hide Barry's shame and the grizzly faces he pulled in light of his own incompetence. Traumatized, he aimlessly wandered along the Spanish streets, his mind in utter turmoil.

This event pretty much ended the holiday, Barry returned to England the next day with his freak mutant tail between his legs. What had begun as a wonderful trip had ended in emotional disaster for this insecure man. Resolving himself to a life of celibacy, he decided his penis would only be used for one thing in future—urinating.

Once back in England Barry felt sad that it was time to go back to the monotony of cleaning windows, despite feeling for the first time hope that his business could succeed. This optimism stemmed from Peter, and it was so strong he toyed with the wonderful idea that he might not have to clean windows anymore as the business built into an empire. He imagined himself sitting in a big leather chair with Cuban Cigar in his mouth while his employees did the donkey work, leaving him occupied with the pleasant job of cashing the cheques.

While he'd been in Spain he didn't stop once to think about how Peter was getting on and why should he, he was on holiday. He'd not had a holiday since he went on a school trip to France aged fourteen and he wanted to make the best of it. He rested assured that his apprentice could tackle any problem that confronted him in the window cleaning trade. Back home now though it was time to get back to work, the cigars and leather chair would have to wait.

The first job was to get in contact with Peter. Barry rang Peter's mobile but there was no answer. Leaving a short message on the answer phone he waited. After a

couple of days there was still no reply and Barry, beginning to wonder what had happened, paid a visit to Peter's house. Peter's Mum came to the door and to Barry's stunned surprise, informed him that her son had recently left home.

'I only pay him the apprentice wage, how does he think he's going to pay for his own place?' said Barry shocked.

Peter's Mum looked confused. 'He told me he's earning good money now. About five-hundred a week he said. That's good for somebody who's only seventeen.'

Five hundred a week, thought Barry, what's he on about?

Barry was getting worried, experiencing a premonition that his dream of an empire was crumbling.

'Well you must know where he's living now,' said Barry. 'I need to get in contact with him.'

The address Peter's Mum had written down took Barry to a pleasant block of flats, but he couldn't go up to the number of the one he'd been given because of a security door and was instead forced to speak over an intercom. Pressing the button for Peter's address a familiar voice replied.

'Hello.'

'Hi Pete, it's Barry, I'm back from my holiday. How's the business been keeping?'

'Yeah, not bad...'

There was a cold quality in Peter's voice but Barry didn't register it.

'So how're you paying for this flat Pete, you robbed a bank? Hey can I come up? I'd love to see your new place.'

'Nah, I don't think that would be a good idea. I've decided I'm not going to work for you anymore.'

‘Oh—’ said Barry, unable to hide his disappointment. ‘So what’re you doing now instead?’

‘Window cleaning still, I’m running my own business. You just weren’t paying me enough.’

Barry felt stupid because he is stupid; his goodwill had been used against him, he’d helped Peter out when he couldn’t get a job, trained him up, and now he’d been stabbed him in the back and was going to have yet another competitor in an already overly-competitive trade.

‘Okay, well I’ll need my customer book back.’

‘Yeah...sorry, but I won’t be able to do that either.’

‘Why? Did you lose it?’ asked Barry, his voice rising with worry.

‘No not quite, you see those customers in that book are going to form the foundation of my new business.’

‘You what! Those are my customers. That’s my business. That’s how I put food on the table.’

‘Well I guess you’ll be going hungry. Hey there’s always the dole. And you can move back in with your Mum can’t you?’

After this things became quite heated. Barry was witnessing his livelihood being stolen from underneath him and he wasn’t at all pleased.

‘You were just some bum when I found you, too scared to even answer the door. You’ll burn for this, burn in hell.’

‘When you were at the helm we had no real customers, they only ever paid us in jelly babies if we were lucky. After I started I made sure we actually got paid money. I was the one who made this business what it is. You were holding it back.’

With me running the show, I could take it all the way into the big time. I was the one who canvassed all those clients, so I figure they're more mine than yours anyway.'

Barry's fat face was right in the intercom speaker now, shouting and spitting. 'I cannot believe this! I was going to buy you some chocolates as a thank you, and not no cheap stuff neither, Milk Tray or Quality Street for all the good work. I might have even splashed out on some Thorntons. Well Sir, you can kiss them goodbye.'

With this last exchange of dialogue, Barry was so furious he head butted the intercom. While Barry was busy damaging his head, inside his new flat Peter had long turned off the connection to his old boss, preferring to resume enjoying the company of a delightfully-naked young lady instead.

Outside Barry was shouting so loudly though he could still be heard, the whole tower block could hear him, ranting and raving like a lunatic, and repeatedly head butting the intercom for a good ten minutes before the police came. Even when this fat, crazy-eyed, frothing-at-the-mouth man was being taken away in handcuffs, he was still hopping up and down on the ground with rage. On a positive note it was the most exercise he'd had in months.

Spending a night stewing in a police cell helped calm Barry down. He was also subdued by a vivid and disturbing nightmare where he had to go crawling back on his hands and knees to a high-flying Peter, whose business had taken off spectacularly since his old boss's departure. He had to beg to be given a job, wrapping his hands around his ex-apprentice's ankles and sobbing like a newborn baby. Peter was a merciful tyrant, granting a job to Barry, but not before he'd made him kiss the shoes of his new master.

The two of them drove out to a customer where Peter setup a deck chair and watched as Barry began to climb the ladder. The woman who owned the house then came out to offer the two of them a drink. Peter said lemonade would be fine for him but his apprentice was not allowed to have anything, as he'd been a very naughty boy. It being a sweltering day, Barry could have desperately done with one of those ice-cold lemonades.

Resignedly he tried to forget his thirst by getting on with his work, but was halted when Peter shouted at him almost immediately.

'In my company we don't clean lead windows with a cloth.'

'But that's how you clean lead windows,' objected Barry.

'Who's the boss here? No, in my company you have to clean windows with your tongue.'

'I'll get lead poisoning and die.'

'Occupational hazard my friend, it's the only way to get them spotless. I demand the very best for my customers so get that tongue out and start licking—unless you wanna get sacked of course.'

Barry proceeded to run his tongue up and down the glass, while at the same time nervously straining his eyeballs sideways to watch as Peter examined his work.

'You've missed a bit.'

'What? You can't expect me to...'

Peter was pointing to a large lump of bird faeces.

'You're not a window cleaner anymore, you're a window licker, don't forget it.'

Waking up covered in sweat, Barry shuddered at the thought of carving a new career as a window licker. He thought that maybe it was time to try something else, something that was non-window related; something altogether different.

‘This could be a blessing in disguise,’ he thought positively. ‘After all, they say every cloud has a silver lining.’

Barry wanted to invent a new Barry Broomfield, feeling a desperate need to ditch his current—loser image—behind. He felt it time for his metamorphosis into a sleeker, meaner, all new and improved butterfly, even going so far as to consider having his name changed in order to help mentally solidify this new image.

A couple of these new names he considered were: Tyson Fury, and Blade Razor. Thankfully under his Mum’s stern advice, he realised that those names were infinitely crap and that he’d be better off sticking with his existing one.

The first thing for Barry to do, after signing on for the dole and inventing a new self, was set about applying for jobs. The first interview he got was for a lifeguard at his local leisure centre. The previous Barry had never enjoyed physical exercise, so this was his first visit to the facility. In spite of feeling like the interview was going great, there was this nagging worry at the back of his mind.

‘Obviously for the job of lifeguard you’ll need to be a strong swimmer, that’s why we’ve asked you bring some swimming stuff. I need you to show me you can swim to a good standard before I progress with your application any further.’

‘Right okay, no problem,’ said Barry, kitted out in a tight-fitting pair of Speedos that revealed his unsightly amounts of pubic hair.

When Barry then proceeded to pull out of a carrier bag a pair of water wings the man interviewing him was wholly unimpressed and said: ‘You must be joking?’

‘No, you can’t be too careful.’

‘Nah I’m sorry mate but you’ll have to do the swimming without those.’

Never having in his whole life swum without the aid of water wings, Barry tentatively began to enter the shallow end of the pool.

‘Actually mate, we like to start the test at the deep end.’

What! Go in the deep end without any water wings on, that’s suicide, thought Barry.

He knew there was no way he could swim in the deep end, as soon as he got in he’d need rescuing. This would be an unsavoury predicament at the best of times, but seeing how he was the one trying for a career as a lifeguard it would make the situation skirt dangerously along the border of farce.

‘I’m suddenly feeling a bit ill; I think I’ll have to take a rain check. Maybe some other time yeah.’

Back home Barry discussed his failed job application with the only individual that would sit and listen to his woes, his rabbit.

‘I need to play to my strengths. I was never the athletic type, it was silly to try and apply for a job like a lifeguard. But what am I good at? What are my strengths?’

Bob couldn’t think of any and neither could Barry.

‘Damn I haven’t got any have I? Well this is the new me Bob so I’m gonna have ter create some.’

The next interview Barry got was for the job of a hairdresser. He decided on applying for a wide range of careers, in the hope he'd find his niche and discover what his strengths were.

'So Mr Broomfield, I take it you have all the relevant qualifications in hairdressing.'

'Yeah...' said Barry, lying through his back teeth.

'Well welcome aboard then, you can start Monday.'

Over the weekend Barry practiced styling on Bob's fur and a couple of wigs he'd bought for Penelope, a puerile attempt to ready himself for the first day of his new job.

'I can blag this; I just gotta make sure I don't do anything stupid. I mean how hard can it be?'

Even for a brainless halfwit such as Barry, it was wishful thinking to expect he'd be able to pass himself off as a fully-qualified hairdresser.

'I'll just say I specialise in skinheads,' he said in shaky self-reassurance.

Monday morning arrived and Barry felt understandably nervous, but so far he was doing a good job of faking it, having perfected the mincing walk, the limp-wrist scissor grip and the effeminate voice. The only thing left to do now was to cut some hair.

'That woman wants a perm. The perming solution and rollers are in there,' said the head hairdresser, pointing to a cupboard.

The unsuspecting customer sat calmly reading a magazine, she assumed she'd get a professional service, she assumed her perm would be done by a trained expert, she assumed wrong.

Barry had seen this hairstyle been done before: in his younger years when he'd had a fuller head of hair he was quite partial to the perm. He put the curlers in and poured on the perming solution. The women's hair began to change colour, a haphazard arrangement of white patches appearing on her cranium.

Barry looked at the container in his hand. *Bleach, oh bollocks.*

It wasn't his lack of hairdressing knowledge that had let him down, but his general incompetence and poor common sense. When he'd reached into the cupboard he had grabbed the first container that came to his hand believing it to be the perming solution, it could have been sulphuric acid for all he knew.

'My hair, my hair, what have you done?' shouted the mortified customer, looking up from her magazine to be confronted with an abomination.

Rather than wait around for the repercussions, Barry did a runner, leaving a shrieking woman that had asked for a perm, but instead received a bleached scalp behind.

The next occupation Barry applied for was to be a dustbin man. Although it's a dirty job it didn't pay too badly, so he felt really pleased when the council decided to give him the job. One small complication with this career that he didn't anticipate though was that being a dustbin man requires a moderate level of fitness. Not exactly being in the best shape (in fact it is safe to say there's probably residents in your nearest old people's home that are in better physical condition) Barry had a problem.

His first day, as you've probably already foreseen did not go well. The lorry Barry was working with moved at such a pace, that the guys outside had to jog to keep up while simultaneously throwing in the rubbish. Barry was okay until he hit what runners commonly refer to as *The Wall*. Unlike an experienced runner who might hit this barrier of exhaustion after fifteen miles, Barry's body hit it after a hundred yards. He'd only managed to collect the rubbish from four houses before his rubbery body began to flag and flounder.

'Come on Broomfield I wanna get home sometime today,' shouted one of Barry's colleagues.

The lorry began to pull further and further away. Battery acid pumped through Barry's veins and his lungs felt like they were churning molten lava. It became all too much, just too unbearable, he had to rest. Leaning over with his hands on his knees he tried desperately to catch his breath.

A distinct pain then began to bubble up inside of him. This crushing, vice-like agony gripped onto his chest, every breath he took, every movement of his ribcage would induce more crushing anguish. Also, his arms began to experience a worrying tingling sensation. These were the classic hallmarks of a heart attack. Barry keeled over and lay flat on his face. He resembled a very large piece of roadkill.

Waking up in a hospital a couple days later, Barry felt that the most sensible course of action would be to retire from the dustbin man job.

The jobs he now applied for began to get less glamorous as he got desperate to make ends meet. He was struggling to pay the bills and his landlord was demanding the

rent, he needed money fast or he'd have to return to his Mum's house. Even Bob was forced to make sacrifices: no longer being bought as many rabbit treats.

It was safe to say things had really gone down the sewage pipe since he'd come back from his holiday. It wasn't that he didn't like living with his Mum, but it would be another demoralising failure to have to go back and admit that the big bad world had defeated him.

The first of the not-so-glamorous jobs he applied for was a pot washer in a pub. There was only one other applicant, an old woman in her seventies.

'Right you two, we're going to put you both on trial to see who's the best, to see which one of you got what it takes,' said the portly pub landlord.

Those spindly, wrinkled hands of Barry's adversary moved with astonishing speed and precision. He was bamboozled by the pensioner's ability to clean item after item in rapid succession. Trying forlornly to keep up, the pile of washed dishes besides Beatrix grew to be far greater than the one next to him.

Desperation for money was making Barry do strange things. He knew there was no way he could keep up with this old timer, so he reasoned he was going to have to bend some of the rules of fair play in order to land the job. Beatrix went out to the toilet and while there, Barry quickly began taking clean dishes from her pile and adding them to his. This dastardly scheme he hoped would influence the landlord's decision in his favour about who to take on.

Beatrix came back from the toilet and eyed the two piles of dishes suspiciously. To add salt to the wound Barry was his usual crass, emotionally ham-fisted self.

'You old fogies always needing the toilet—I dunno. The waterworks, not as watertight as they used to be huh?'

Beatrix strode over to Barry with a strange smile spreading across her lips. She grabbed him by the testes and put her face so close to his he could see that she had a better moustache than him.

Speaking through gritted teeth, she said: ‘Don’t ever rob dishes off my pile again, and keep your opinions on old fogies to yourself, unless you want these pea-sized balls removed.’

‘Hello, I’m ringing about the job of Apple Picker I saw advertised in the local paper,’ said Barry.

‘Okay, well have you ever picked before?’

‘Erm—no...’

‘Oh, I’m really sorry but we can’t take on any new trainees. We’re only looking at experienced candidates at the moment.’

‘It’s just picking apples off a tree isn’t it? I mean what training do you need for that?’

‘No no kid, there’s a lot more to it than that: they have to be placed in a box as well.’

‘Okay, thanks anyway.’

Barry hung up the phone and then placed his face in his hands.

Chapter 4

‘Look’s like we’re gonna have to move back in with Mum Bob.’

Bob cocked an ear towards his owner.

‘I know, we’re admitting defeat, but what else can I do? I’ve tried my best.’

It was true that Barry now had no other options left open to him because his landlord was on the verge of slicing his penniless throat.

‘What do you mean I can’t have my room back?’

Things were going from bad to worse. Maggie had been renting out her son’s old room and was refusing to let him move back in.

‘I’m making some good money renting it out. I’m sorry, but you’re gonna have to find somewhere else.’

‘My landlord’s gonna kick me out, I’m gonna be homeless,’ shouted Barry.

Maggie felt she’d endured her incompetent loser of a son for more than enough time.

‘You’re a thirty-four year old man. You’re no longer my responsibility. It’s time you learnt how to stand on your own two feet.’

Barry was infuriated. ‘If Dad was still here he’d never do this to me.’

Feeling that it was time to part with a little snippet of information she’d been hiding from her son since he was a little boy, Maggie said: ‘You wanna know where your father went?’

‘I know where he went: he went to heaven with the angels,’ answered a puzzled Barry.

‘I just told you that so that you wouldn’t feel abandoned. The truth is he felt certain he couldn’t be the father of an imbecile like you. He believed I cheated on him, cheated on him with the village idiot! And he believed that you—YOU—were our filthy little love child.’

Barry’s aggressive mood was ripped from him and replaced with grief, his bottom lip quivered and his eyes welled up with tears.

‘There, that’s what happened, I’ve wanted to tell you sooner but I just couldn’t bring myself to do it.’

‘He’s still alive?’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t seen him since the day he left. He abandoned us both.’

Barry turned and ran down the street, tears streaming down his flabby cheeks as they flapped in the wind. He looked like a very large small boy that had scraped his knee, only this pain was far deeper.

It was a sorry state of affairs: Barry was kicked out of his flat a couple of days later and had to resort to living in his Volkswagen Golf. Bob, his only real companion was given to Maggie to look after. The previously close relationship he’d had with his Mum was severed, and he couldn’t even look her in the eye as he handed the furry white bundle over.

Buying with the little money he had left a small camping stove and a sleeping bag, Barry pointlessly tried to pretend he was on a camping holiday rather than face the reality that he was a homeless bum. It wasn’t a very successful strategy, but he’d gradually become more skilful at fooling his own mind.

The Hickey Woods Country Park, also known as the Hickey Hills, or just the Hickeys, seemed to be the best place to make his new home because they were close to where he lived and he knew them well.

This picturesque park contains a diverse range of British trees and wildlife, including the elusive Wangdoodles and equally rare Snozwoggers. It was then sad Barry's life would reach such a low point in this beautiful place. In that park though, amongst the cover of the bushes and trees, he hoped he'd be able to hide away how destitute his life had become.

Unfortunately because the woods are such a delight on the eye they're a magnet for people, and in good weather they'd go there in droves to enjoy the beauty and tranquillity of nature like some insidious plague. So, picking a secluded spot for his new home, Barry hoped it would not be discovered by hikers, or the notoriously tyrannical Park Rangers who patrolled the hills.

Parking his car nearby on a lonely dirt track that ran its way through the woods, he felt that the best idea was to use it for sleeping in at night, and his Den inside the park for food preparation and main storage area for the bulk of his belongings. And to keep the rain off these possessions, he utilized a tarpaulin he'd borrowed from his Mum's place.

Another feature in the park that would prove useful was the duck pond, as it was here that Barry would be able to have a wash. Of course this would have to be done in the middle of the night when hopefully there wouldn't be anyone around to see him.

The mind of Barry was still trying to fool itself, panicking because it didn't have a clue how it was going to survive. Rather than worry about the problems reality was currently throwing in its direction, it preferred to retreat into little fantasy worlds

where it could then contentedly socialise with itself. And for added fun, when it was feeling in a particularly good mood, Barry's mind would make Barry have outbursts of uncontrollable laughter. When Barry did manage to capture some control back over his brain, his thoughts processes were something like this: *I'm going back to the way things are supposed to be. Man is meant to live in harmony with nature. The modern way those people—those sheep live, crammed in flats and houses and cages, that's the abnormal way. This is the way it's supposed to be.*

Another voice spoke in Barry's head. *But their cages are heated aren't they? You shall freeze you scummy, scummy individual.*

No Barry, don't listen to him. He just wants you to fail—listen to me.

The last shred of sanity inside his mind was very perturbed to now see there were two Barry's. It decided it was time to pack its bags and head off into the woods.

It was deep winter and darkness had drawn in accordingly early. Barry decided he'd be better off getting an extremely early night, from which he could then unload his possessions from the Golf into The Den early the following morning. He'd be forced to sleep upright in the driver's seat because the rest of his car was filled with clothes, camping equipment and tins of food; he didn't mind.

The truth was he was scared to get out of the car at night on this lifeless dirt track, and was willing to sacrifice a good night's sleep so he could stay in the relative safety of a locked car. While the woods were a great day out for the hikers that visited, once night fell they'd also been known to conceal pure, 100% freshly-squeezed evil.

Barry had read the stories in the newspapers and knew all too well what went on in The Hickey Woods: there'd been murders, rapes, beatings, suicides; all kinds of horror. Little rascals used those woods just as he was doing now, to hide themselves

away from prying eyes when they wanted to sin. Barry's only sin was squatting, but he thought it very possible there were other people in the Hickeys committing far darker crimes. His teeth chattered and his heart beat fast; he hoped he wouldn't be next on the menu for the local psychopaths.

There were occasions when atrocities had occurred in the park, but Barry imagined that they happened on a regular basis when in reality they were very rare. That night he slept uneasily, awaking at every insignificant sound like an owl hoot or creaking of a branch in the wind.

The following morning brought Barry rest bite from the imaginary demons that tormented him. Arising early he had a quick breakfast of tuna sandwiches before beginning moving his belongings into The Den. Even living this miserable existence, he knew he still needed money to pay for food unless he wanted to try and live off the land.

Luckily for once he used some common sense and realised he would not last two minutes surviving on what he could scavenge and hunt in the woods. While he couldn't acquire a real job, he did manage to get what would prove to be a lifeline: at his local corner shop he picked up a paper round.

One drawback of being a paperboy was the embarrassment of standing there in The Shop and collecting the papers he was to deliver, while the other paperboys pointed at him and laughed.

'What you doing a paper round for?' asked one boy. 'Shouldn't you have a proper job?'

'I need the money kid. Just leave me alone okay.'

There were a couple of other adults doing a paper round from The Shop, but one was a retired pensioner and the other a housewife. Both of them were trying to earn a little extra spending money, unlike Barry, who was using it as his sole source of income.

Barry found the actual job itself wasn't too bad. He picked up a couple of other rounds to supplement his meagre income, meagre being the apt word as delivering papers was certainly never going to get him a real address. The other downside was the name-calling from his pint-sized colleagues. He remained, however, well aware that this new occupation was what was keeping him alive by giving him the means to put food in his stomach.

After a couple of weeks living in the woods, Barry noticed he began developing an unpleasant odour that only created more reason for his fellow paperboys to ridicule him. Even the housewife and the old age pensioner were getting a piece of the action, slugging Barry down without mercy. It was apparent he desperately needed a wash, but where? He set the cobwebbed, rusty cogs in his brain into motion.

The first idea he had was to simply wash in a torrential downpour. The second was to stand beside a giant puddle on a road waiting until a car drove through it. There was of course one snag: both of these 'ideas' relied on the presence of heavy rain. For the last few days there hadn't been any and there might not be any for a while, but with Barry kicking up a vile stink, he needed a wash now.

Eventually his sluggish brain remembered that there was a large pond in the Hickeys where visitors could sit around and feed the ducks bread. He knew that if he went to wash there in the daytime it'd be unlikely he'd be greeted as warmly as the birds. He imagined the Park Rangers would be briskly summoned to escort him off

the site, where they'd then be obliged to give him a good doing over in the car park.

I'll have to do it in the middle of the night when nobody's around.

This solution to his personal hygiene problem scared him immensely, as every night since he'd been in the Hickeys he'd never once left the safety of his car. One night when he'd needed the toilet desperately, he'd preferred to urinate into an empty pop bottle rather than go outside. Sitting in a cramped car in the dark and trying to aim his urine into the small opening of this bottle proved extremely difficult. On reflection he was just grateful it wasn't a number two he had needed.

Barry didn't want to start venturing into the woods at night, leaving the protective cocoon of his car, but he had no choice as he simply had to have a wash. That night he set his alarm to wake him up for two in the morning, the shampoo, soap, dry towel and a clean change of clothes he'd already set out in preparation for his departure.

Incidentally the cleaning of his clothes had not been a problem since he was using the local laundrette, despite it being an added expense he could ill afford.

On approaching the pond Barry looked at it with apprehension. He undressed till clad in just his y-fronts, and after neatly piling his clothes onto a bench he gave his bath an observant once over. The water was dark and altogether unclean. He placed a big toe in it to test the warmth. There was no warmth; the water was freezing; the toe almost dropped off.

'I'm gonna become an icicle in this!'

Barry considered retreating back to his car but upon taking a sniff of his armpit decided that his present, pungent body odour was so bad that if he did get hypothermia and die, it would do the world a favour.

Before taking one last look around to see if there was anyone watching, Barry removed his underwear and entered the water. The icy pond took his breath away; it was so cold he thought he might see a dead Eskimo float by at any moment. He scrubbed as fast as possible, not wanting to stay in that water any longer than he absolutely had to. The ducks meanwhile were shocked to say the least that a man was washing himself inside their home in the middle of the night. They began expressing their annoyance by quacking loudly.

‘Shut up you bastard ducks,’ Barry whispered in anger, paranoid of making too much noise just in case somebody was passing at this unholy hour.

Having finished washing his body, his shaking hand reached out and grabbed the shampoo. Once he’d cleaned his hair he’d be able to return to his car and be thankful the ordeal was over. But Barry was stopped from being thankful the ordeal was over when he heard voices that sounded like those of an approaching young man and woman.

‘Oh no!’

There was no time for Barry to get out because he’d be seen. Taking a huge gulp of air, he ducked his head below the water.

‘Michael stop—you’re only interested in one thing. You always get like this when you’re drunk.’

‘Come on baby just give it a suck; that’s all I’m asking.’

‘I told you I’m not ready.’ The teenage girl sat down at a bench beside the duck pond. ‘I remember I used to come up with here with my Nan when I was little, to feed the ducks bread before she died.’ She smiled at the cherished memory. ‘It’s so beautiful up here don’t you think?’

‘Yeah it is, but not as beautiful as you.’

Only a few feet away from these two love-struck teenagers Barry's gulp of air was fast running out.

'Hey what are these clothes doing here?' said the girl, noticing the pile of garments stacked next to her.

'Huh, that's strange isn't it?' said Michael.

It was no use; Barry couldn't hold his breath any longer. Through the murky water he could just distinguish that two people were sitting on the bench in front of him, but he had no alternative: he practically jumped out of the pond like an attacking sea monster gasping for breath, breaking the romantic silence. The two teenagers were understandably mortified. Michael, thinking fast used his girlfriend as a human shield to block the onslaught of what he perceived to be some kind of aquatic beast. The two young lovers then went running into the woods, screaming at the top of their lungs.

Almost having finished his bathing session anyway, Barry felt he'd better depart before anyone was alerted to the screams and came to see what was going on. Despite the encounter with the teenagers, he felt that he was beginning to settle into his new life relatively well considering the circumstances. As he retired (still shivering slightly) for the remainder of the night into his sleeping bag that lay on the back seat of his car, he felt a great deal better, and even began to entertain the idea that he may just be able to make this new life work.

The one thing Barry pined for most over the following months inside the woods, more than any other modern convenience was not a telephone, (who would he phone if he had one anyway) central heating or even a flushable toilet—the thing he missed the most was a refrigerator. He was having a nightmare storing fresh meat and dairy

products, resorting to making frequent trips to The Shop because he'd been frequently resorting to storing meat and dairy products inside his belly.

One day, while in The Den inspecting his food stores, he noticed some things he'd bought only yesterday were missing. Barry knew it couldn't have been an animal that had stolen them because the absent items were tinned goods, thus preventing any woodland creature from realising there was food within. And the thievery didn't end there because not only had some little blighter stolen his food, but they'd pinched his tin opener as well!

It hadn't occurred to Barry that there might be other people like him living fulltime in the woods. Now he had a new problem: where was he going to store his food in future? He certainly couldn't afford to allow somebody to steal from him because he hardly had enough money to feed himself. This thief needed to be caught.

With that in mind Barry set about devising a trap. The one he came up with was like most of his ideas, elementarily simple: he was to dig a deep hole, cover it with sticks and leaves, and then place the bait for the trap (some tins of food) on top in open display.

'This thief is going to regret crossing Finbar Broomfield. Right that should be deep enough. Nobody's getting out of here in a hurry,' he said, throwing his shovel out of his freshly dug hole.

It suddenly dawned on Barry much to his dismay, that the elementarily simple plan he'd assumed was flawless was in actual fact not the masterpiece it had once seemed: there was now no way for him to get out of his big hole.

Trying in vain to jump and clamber up the walls of his ruse, Barry found his fingers couldn't grasp into the hard ground, continually he'd slip back down to the

bottom of the hole like a spider trying to climb out of a slippery bath. Sitting in his trap helpless, Barry retreated to the foetal position and began to sob uncontrollably: it had been a lot of effort digging the hole.

Successfully contained for nearly two whole days, the second night saw Barry forced to endure the full brunt of a thunderstorm, getting soaking wet and very muddy in the process. The area where he had chosen to set his trap was one of the most remote parts of the Hickey Hills, and so nobody had come across him. His mental state was quickly deteriorating and he envisioned himself dying in his muddy pit.

‘Hello, what’re you doing down there?’

The voice was very distant and Barry didn’t know if it was real or imaginary. He continued to sleep, wishing to remain oblivious to the outside world and his many troubles.

‘I said hello. Are you alive?’

Barry realised he was asleep and shot up out of his slumber to see who it was speaking to him. The face of the person looking over the side of the hole was covered in dirt and had crazy eyes that owned a murderous glint. The head was bald and wrinkled, and the neck pencil thin.

‘What’re you doing down there?’

‘Help me out of here please.’

‘What happened? How did you get stuck like that?’

‘I dunno... I was walking along enjoying the woods... and I somehow fell and then couldn’t get out...’ answered Barry unconvincingly.

‘Whose shovel is this?’

The man lifted up the shovel that Barry had tossed out of the hole a couple of days ago when he had been in higher spirits.

‘Dunno,’ said Barry, feigning puzzlement.

The man smiled strangely before helping Barry out of the hole by laying a strong branch that had come down in the thunderstorm the previous night across the top of it. Barry could now jump, grab onto the blackened branch and use it to pull himself up and out of his trap.

‘You’re the one who’s been taking my food from me aren’t you?’ said Barry, looking at his saviour with suspicion.

‘Well you have so much, it ain’t gonna kill you to share it around a bit. Look at me, I’m skin and bones.’

It was clear even to a dullard like Barry this man before him was a vagrant and had been for a long time, what with his hunched-over stoop and his wafer-thin build. His clothing similarly was a dead giveaway, consisting of tatty rags and feet that were devoid of any kind of footwear other than dirt. His walk resembled a raven’s hop and he moved in a peculiar crouching position, while his teeth were gnarled and his eyes black and cold. In many ways the man looked even worse than your average homeless person, rather looking instead like he’d just recently been liberated from Auschwitz.

‘How long have you been living out here in these woods?’ Barry asked.

The face of the man looked distant. ‘I don’t know... I’ve lost all track of time... that’s what living in these woods does to you. Lost all contact with the outside world I have. You’re the first person I’ve talked to since coming here. You know, I was unsure when I first came up to you if I’d still remember how to speak at all.’

‘What do you eat? How do you survive?’

‘I break into the Visitor Centre at night, steal food from there. And of course whatever I can catch in the woods. That duck pond you were washing in a few nights ago. Since I came here the duck population has halved.’ The bald man showed his toothless grin and licked his lips.

‘You were watching me!’ said Barry, horrified by what he was hearing.

‘I’ve been watching you since you came here.’

‘You’re a bloody psycho!’

‘Yeah.’

‘What’s your name?’

The man tried to think back to the time when he hadn’t lived in the woods.

‘You know I can’t remember... it’s been so long... I have no need for a name in here.’

‘You can’t even remember your name? Well what should I call you?’

‘Call me what you like. Psycho will do.’

‘My name’s Barry,’ said Barry, clearly disconcerted.

‘I already know that, you’re always talking to yourself.’ Psycho mimicked Barry’s voice with unerring accuracy, ‘Don’t be so stupid Barry. No they were right to do that Barry. Peter will pay, oh yes, you’ll make sure of that won’t you Barry. And you have the audacity to call me the psycho.’

The bald head tilted back and let out a loud maniacal laugh.

Chapter 5

On his arrival for work, Barry noticed a prominent sign on the front door of the corner shop that troubled him deeply.

Closing down sale all items half price.

He stormed over to The Shop Manager who was at that time preoccupied with meticulously arranging some tins of baked beans into a more orderly manner.

‘The Shop, it’s closing?’ asked Barry in a voice that mixed anger with worry in equal parts.

‘Barry; yes it is. It looks like you won’t be able to deliver newspapers anymore.’

The Manager didn’t even have the courtesy to look at Barry, preferring instead to place the main bulk of his intellect onto the task of the baked bean tin arrangement.

‘So when does it actually close then?’

‘Oh.’ The Manager was startled, he hadn’t realised Barry was still standing there. ‘Pretty soon I’m afraid, next Wednesday to be exact. The Cracker Jack Foods Chain that owns The Shop decided it wasn’t making enough money.’

Well this is bloody brilliant, thought Barry. *I rely on this job, what am I going to do now—* He put his hand to his head and began to gape like a fish out of water.

The Manager surprisingly noticed the look of distress on the paperboy’s face and decided to completely disengage his brain from the shelf of tins. Barry momentarily expected some kind of consolatory remark.

‘There there lad, you’re not the only one who’s been put out. I’ve been relocated to another store. It’s going to add an extra ten minutes to my journey.’

‘Gosh, I’m sorry to hear that,’ said Barry as sincerely as possible, all the while wanting to pour boiling oil on the Manager’s fat face.

Performing his paper rounds in a confused state, Barry felt physically numb and mentally detached from reality. His pathetic existence had already begun to resemble an animal’s, and now he imagined how much worse and degrading it was going to get: he saw his future self participating in highly dangerous, experimental drug tests, and selling off parts of his body to the highest bidder for scientific research. He began to sing:

Sunday Monday crappy days.

Tuesday Wednesday crappy days.

Thursday Friday crappy days.

I slit my wrists,

Watch them bleed,

Waiting to die.

These days are all,

Crappy and bleak. (Those crappy days)

These days are all,

End it with me. (yeah baby)

Goodbye blue sky, hello grey.

There’s nothing to save me when I slit you.

Feels so right, it can’t be wrong.

Lying on my deathbed; so long.

Sunday Monday crappy days.

Tuesday Wednesday crappy days.

Thursday Friday crappy days.

Saturday, the worst day,

When's the pain end?

These days are all,

Share a razor with me. (Those crappy days)

These days are all,

Crappy and bleak. (Oh baby)

These crappy days are yours and mine.

These crappy days are yours and my, crappy days.

After spontaneously breaking into song while still on his paper round, he had to walk past a Very Big Tree that was in a perfect location to inflict maximum emotional distress. If a situation to his problems didn't present itself soon he knew there was always that option...

The only person he could now turn to was Psycho, a man who'd managed to survive in the Hickeys for years without having a single penny to his name.

After his days work Barry came back to his trusty car, took out a couple of tins of food he had stored in the boot and began to cook them on his stove. He hoped the smell would waft through the trees and attract the attentions of his only friend, and with a bit of luck, his two-time saviour.

‘Hello there,’ sounded Psycho’s voice.

‘I’m going to need your help and before you say get lost, remember that I’ve been helping you by giving you food, so I think it’s your turn to help me now,’ said Barry loftily, desiring to show that he was still very much the one who wore the trousers in their relationship.

Psycho pointed to Barry’s still slightly chubby physique and then presented his own half-starved one.

‘You haven’t exactly been feeding me that well have you, but I can see you’ve certainly looked after yourself.’

Barry had nothing to say in defence to the accusation against his generosity, realising he had not maybe given Psycho as much food as possible and had always saved the best things for himself.

‘Look, are you going to help me or not?’

‘Well what’s the problem?’

‘I’m going to lose my job at The Shop and—’

‘Oh dear,’ interrupted Psycho. ‘What will you do?’

‘You’ve managed to survive in these woods; I need you to show me how you’ve done it.’

‘I thought it was obvious how I’d been surviving.’

‘What?’

‘I’m a cannibal,’ answered Psycho as casually as if he had just said his favourite breakfast cereal was cornflakes. ‘I’ve been killing people that foolishly walk alone through the woods at night, women mostly, they’re so much easier to overpower, and they scream more. I like it when they scream, makes it more fun.’

He finished the conversation with his usual toothless grin, but what wasn't usual this time, was that it no longer only appeared moderately frightening because it now emanated from a serial killer and a cannibal.

Sitting listening to this strange conversation, Barry didn't feel as if he was really in it, that instead he was listening in from very far away, that he had tuned a radio into another topsy-turvy and peculiarly insane reality. It all gave him a funny feeling in his guttawutts, and rather than continue listening to this queer discussion, Barry simply decided to tune his radio into something else by running away as fast as he could.

It was a profound scene, the circle of life some might say: the little, sprightly, wide-eyed rabbit, running for his pure and innocent life away from the wolf's salivating mouth. Everything seemed to slow down and it all appeared quite balletic. Sadly the orchestra of expletives Barry screamed were a bit of a mood wrecker.

'I WAS JOKING, I WAS JOKING,' shouted Psycho.

Barry was in his car, the Volkswagen Golf, feebly attempting to get the long deceased engine started. Turning the key the only reply that came back was a long series of splutters. Psycho had now caught up with his friend and he was laughing. Barry thought he was next on the menu.

'I was joking,' said Psycho again as he peered through the grimy glass. 'I don't kill people and eat them—honest.'

Once Barry realised Psycho had been joking he was highly annoyed, but also mightily relieved.

'You have a sick sense of humour, you know that.'

‘That happens when you live by yourself for too long. I didn’t mean to scare you as much as I did. I find it difficult to read other people. I find it difficult to predict how they’re going to react to stuff.’

‘I guess that’s what isolation does to you. So anyway, going back to what we were originally discussing, are you going to help me or not?’

‘Yeah I’ll help you, but it’s not easy living like this.’

Psycho then began teaching Barry how to really ‘rough it’, surviving in the woods armed with nothing more than good old human ingenuity. Barry was taught how to set traps for squirrels, birds and other animals that dwelled in the forest, although they never did seem to catch much. Psycho also informed his protégé which wild berries and fungi could be consumed.

Barry’s faith in his companion’s survival knowledge did waver on occasions. This was probably because the two woodsmen would often find themselves suffering the effects of food poisoning, spending large quantities of their time vomiting violently onto the woodland floor.

Despite all the animal traps and wild berry and fungi collections Barry would do with Psycho, the Hickey Hills Visitor Centre would provide their main source of sustenance. Their existence had reverted to as primitive as man had ever lived, but strangely Barry adapted surprisingly well, displaying an intuitive ability to exist in harmony with nature that we all possess but don’t realise.

Still he did miss his mod cons, and the mod con he missed most since first starting his new life remained his refrigerator, particularly as he remembered it used to be stocked full of food. The only mod con that he still owned and that served as a connection to his past life was his dead Volkswagen Golf, which he continued to sleep in at night.

It was the middle of the night and Barry was sitting in his car thinking to himself, yet again, how hungry he was. He felt glad he had left his beloved rabbit Bob with his Mum because he thought what a great meal that rabbit would now make.

‘Yes Bob. How I would so like to bite into your succulent flesh. How I would savour every morsel.’

A tapping on the window startled him. It was Psycho and he was rubbing his stomach.

‘Are we going to rob the Visitor Centre now?’ asked Psycho impatiently.

‘Yeah okay,’ answered Barry.

Psycho led the way through the woods. Barry had done this many times before, the first time it had been exhilarating but now the novelty had definitely worn off; it had become a laborious task that unfortunately had to be undertaken on a regular basis.

There were two reasons why they had to perform this task regularly: They couldn’t steal too much or else the people running the Visitor Centre would realise that the theft had occurred overnight and may install supplementary security measures. Because they had no refrigerator, they had no way of storing food for a lengthy period.

Breaking in was not at all easy: They couldn’t just stroll in through the front door as it was always locked, but what they had found out was that they could get on the roof by climbing a giant oak tree that stood next to the building. Once on the roof there was a skylight that was never locked which allowed them access to the inside. They would tie a rope around the tree, and then lower themselves down where they

could then get their grubby mitts on the delicious bounty, gorging themselves on sausage rolls, scotch eggs, sandwiches, chocolate bars and ice cream.

On the way back to their Den from the successful food raid, Barry noticed a series of lights shining through the trees.

‘What are those? They’re not Park Rangers are they?’ he asked alarmed.

He was in constant fear of the Park Rangers discovering him and that they’d find out he’d been stealing from the Visitor Centre.

‘Nah, those are the Visitors.’

‘What visitors at this time, it’s the middle of the night. What’re they doing coming to the woods now?’

‘Not that kind of visitors—aliens. Those are the lights from their spaceships.’

‘What? Come on, get real.’

‘You wanna take a closer look? They come here all the time.’

‘Nah I think I’ll just go back to my car thanks.’

‘Wimp, come on, I’m going to take a look.’

Psycho then disappeared into the inky darkness of the night and Barry was left with the two options of either follow him, or stand alone. Fear is always a powerful and compelling force that can make a man do unusual things, and in this moment two tugboats of fear pulled at Barry in different directions.

Since his job as a paperboy had finished he’d had no other human interaction apart from with Psycho, and although Barry was repelled by his very relationship with that wreck of a man, how in any way could he think of himself as better? Aside from the time when he slept in his car the unlikely duo were inseparable. It felt to Barry that their two fates were inexplicably intertwined, and however much Barry didn’t

want to, he accepted he would follow Psycho into hell, or wherever else his companion desired to go.

‘Wait,’ said Barry, powerless to take his own path. As the lights got closer he begged Psycho to take him home, back to his car. ‘Come on that’s close enough, let’s go.’

Barry thought he began to see the outline of a large spinning shape behind the lights, but just as he brought it clearly into focus the spinning stopped... There then descended this unexplainable silence onto the woods, as if something had strangled the life out of it. It was strange as usually there was always something making a sound, an owl, a fox slipping through the undergrowth, something. The silence was disturbing, feeling like a prelude to some impending horror.

‘Touch it Barry, feel it,’ said Psycho.

A quivering hand reached out to feel the apparent spacecraft. The Unidentified Grounded Object, or UGO, didn’t feel as Barry expected, feeling warm and bearing a closer resemblance to skin than metal. He was fascinated and looked for a way to get inside the ship, a door or window, but couldn’t see one.

‘Hey come over here and take a look at this. I can feel the inside throbbing... like a pulse...’ said Barry.

The UGO’s deep low rumble of a heartbeat boomed through his chest cavity, beating with an unbridled potential for power. Barry looked over his left shoulder where Psycho had been standing but he wasn’t there anymore. In his state of stupefaction and intrigue with the UGO Barry had forgotten his fear, it now quickly washed back over him. Having become disorientated by the stunning magnificence of the UGO, and being unfamiliar with this part of the Hickey Hills, he wasn’t sure of the way back to the car.

Sensing an abnormal presence while looking over his left shoulder to locate Psycho, Barry slowly turned his neck the other way to look over his right one, it was a decision he would regret. He now knew why Psycho had decided it would be best to do a disappearing act: standing with its arms neatly folded, stood what looked like for all intents and purposes the stereotypical alien that you might encounter on an episode of The X-Files. The large pear-shaped head, deepest-black almond eyes, the grey skin, the spindly limbs, the absence of a nose, it was all textbook.

The superior life form was looking directly at Barry's hands, which just so happened to be still firmly in contact with his spaceship. It didn't take any other worldly, telepathic communication to make Barry realise this being from the stars was quite annoyed about him rubbing his hands all over his vehicle.

If you look at it from the alien's point of view you would understand the reason behind his annoyance: if you went to the supermarket and came out with a trolley full of shopping, only to find some baboon daubing germs all over your car, you wouldn't be too pleased now would you. This interstellar traveller had parked his pride and joy inside what he'd presumed were deserted woods, and after dissecting some woodland creatures with his laser gun, he comes back to find a self-glorified ape grating his nasty meat hooks against it.

The alien communed with Barry's primitive human brain via telepathy in such a way so that there could be no confusion over his meaning.

'Take them off before I cut them off.' To place further emphasis on his point the alien held his laser gun aloft menacingly.

Barry took his hands slowly off the ships hull and placed them in the air, as if he was being held captive, which was a good thing, because he was.

‘Please don’t hurt me,’ said a petrified Barry in a voice that was little more than a squeak.

The alien stood stock still for a time before bringing its empty hand up to its chin, where upon it then lost itself within the midst of deep concentration. *This hairless monkey must be punished, but how?*

Meanwhile as the alien pondered what to do with our hero, Barry was completely terrified and felt a warm trickle of urine run down his leg. *Oh dear God I hope he doesn’t give me the anal probe. Please God don’t let it be that.*

Barry should have been mindful of his thoughts; after all, the alien was capable of telepathy, and reading what humans were thinking was not much harder. The alien heard the protests of the pathetic creature before him.

‘What’s that my mammalian friend? You would like an anal probe, very well.’

Barry sunk to his knees and protested against this outrage. He would have preferred to have run away but his legs had turned to jelly, so instead he let fly with a feeble swing of his arm that was supposed to be a punch. The alien opened its mouth and out came a paralysing, high-pitched screeching that was unbearably annoying. Barry put his hands to his ears but it was no use, it didn’t block out the sound. He slipped into unconsciousness.

Waking in a room, Barry realised he was lying on his back and everything around him was out of focus.

‘It was all just a dream; I’m back home in my room.’

It was foolish false hope on his behalf rather than just regular disorientation: Barry knew the past few months spent in the Hickey Woods couldn’t have possibly

been just a dream. But where was he now? Barry attempted to rub his eyes to bring his vision into focus until he noticed his arms were firmly restrained.

‘What the...’

He was in a room lying on a silver metal bed. This particular room was quite peculiar, being devoid of any decoration and shaped like a bubble rather than a box. The inner walls, if that’s what you could call them, were glinting silver. His legs were also restrained but unlike his arms, his legs were in a more humiliating position: they were individually separated and suspended from the ceiling, forming a V shape. More worrying was that Barry realised he was also completely naked.

Although he was no longer as embarrassed to be seen in the nude as he used to be, (the time he’d spent living in the woods had resulted in him losing a lot of weight) he still didn’t feel entirely comfortable in this current predicament.

While Barry pondered over his situation, he noticed the metal on the furthest end of the bubble began to peel away in a not dissimilar fashion to when you tug on the ring pull of a sardine can. Standing in the newly-formed opening were not neatly arranged sardines, but instead an alien holding a spiralling, spinning, cucumber-shaped object that had on it little lights which pulsed hypnotically.

‘NO, GET AWAY FROM ME!’

Barry struggled in his restraints but it was to no avail. He only managed to amuse the alien as his naked legs and buttocks jiggled in the air.

‘What’re you gonna to do with that?’ asked Barry in reference to the cucumber.

If Barry would have allowed himself to be completely and wholeheartedly honest with himself, he wouldn’t have bothered asking this question, but he was still

hoping against hope that the object was not destined for his sphincter, which was already quivering with trepidation.

The alien moved closer and then Barry noticed in the being's other hand was a syringe.

'What're you going to give me?' asked Barry.

The alien communicated using telepathy. 'It's a muscle relaxant.'

Barry was given an injection in his arm and almost instantaneously he passed once more back into unconsciousness.

'Hey are you okay?'

Barry was confused and terrified as the alien's horrid laugh cut through him like a razor sending spasms of fear up his spine. It was then with great happiness he realised he was no longer on that alien's metal bed of torture, that he was now lying upon his back on the woodland floor of the Hickey Woods. It was lightly raining and his clothes were soaked through, but all he could feel was overwhelming relief.

Psycho stood over him, his face looked worried. 'What did they do to you in there?'

Recalling his time in the UGO, Barry quickly repressed his emotions and initial desire to scream with horror.

'Where did you go?' asked Barry in a demanding voice, wanting to know what had happened to Psycho and why he'd abandoned him to get tortured.

'I got scared when that creature walked towards you, and I-I ran away.'

Psycho bowed his head. 'I'm sorry.'

Barry wasn't all that angry with his friend because he knew had he found himself in the same position he probably would have done the same thing.

‘You’ve been gone for three days. I’ve been looking for you. I thought you were dead.’

‘THREE DAYS! Three bloody days,’ Barry shouted in disbelief.

Psycho explained how he had gone back to where the two of them had encountered the UGO, but found no sign of the craft, the alien, or anything. He told how he had been scouring the Hickeys in search of Barry ever since, and also how he’d felt personally responsible for the whole thing.

‘I’ve honestly never seen anybody come out of the crafts before. Usually all you see is a few lights in the sky.’

‘Yeah well I experienced quite a deal more than just a few lights.’ Barry shivered at the thought of that fiendish alien and its probe.

Lying in his dilapidated Volkswagen Golf, Barry struggled to get to sleep that night, understandably terrified that his interstellar-travelling friend was going to come back for seconds. It was reminiscent of the time when he had first come to live in the Hickey Woods, jumping at every sound. Barry’s night was disturbed continually by owl hoots and branches swaying in the wind, these innocuous noises would make him sit up and bite his nails for a few seconds before going back to a restless sleep. His night however became most disturbed, somewhere around the time when the alien did in fact decide to come back.

A knocking on the Golf’s windscreen startled Barry and he looked up sheepishly from under his sleeping bag. There before him was the alien, a rat-a-tat-tatting on his windscreen, returned Barry presumed to finish the job. Barry began to let out an agonizing scream and shut his eyes until he heard a familiar friend’s voice.

Peering out of his windscreen again he saw that the alien had metamorphosed into Psycho: Barry now realised he was letting his fear and imagination get out of control.

‘What do you want?’ asked Barry.

‘We’ve got to go and rob the Visitor Centre again.’

Having forgotten about this, Barry’s heart sank into the pit of his stomach with dread. ‘What right now?’

‘Yeah.’

‘If we see any lights through the trees this time we aren’t going to see what they are, okay.’

The two intrepid adventurers made their way through the undergrowth as silently as possible, without once saying a word to one another. The two hungry thieves climbed the conveniently placed oak tree that stood next to the Visitor Centre, dropped onto the flat roof, and then descended through the skylight. The two of them grabbed as much food as they thought they could without anyone noticing the missing items in the morning. And of course they couldn’t resist eating a fair amount too whilst inside.

‘Come on we better get going,’ said Barry, his mind retaking control over his stomach.

The two bandits exited the same way they had come in, up their ropes, through the unlocked skylight and then down the oak tree. Before they’d taken much more than a couple of steps away from the building they’d just pillaged; Barry noticed a light over his shoulder that emanated from behind the trees in the Hickey Hills car park.

‘He’s back to finish me off!’

‘Nah, it’s worse, I think we’ve been rumbled,’ said Psycho looking mortified. ‘It’s the Hickey Hill Park Rangers.’

More lights joined the first light and Barry realised they were from torches.

Men’s voices could be heard, one said: ‘They’re over there, look. Set the dogs on em.’

A series of angry barks and the scampering of oncoming paws greeted the thieves’ ears.

Psycho let out a single word at the top of his lungs. ‘RUUUUNNNNN!’

Barry felt like he was running for his life, the barks of the dogs were right on his heels and the shouts of the men didn’t seem too far behind either. He was sure Psycho was a dead man because he was old and withered, so it was with great surprise that he saw the old codger streaking ahead of him. Barry was desperately throwing sausage rolls like grenades over his shoulder, hoping that this would distract the dogs and that they would decide to eat the pastry-coated sausage rather than him.

The fear Barry felt was more intense than even his encounter with the alien, not because of the potential for physical injury but because his sordid, cesspit life would be discovered and he’d be humiliated. He ran until he was completely exhausted, his legs felt like lead, his lungs burned, and his heart gave the impression that it might explode at any moment. He simply had to rest. With a scratched face from running into tree branches and twigs at full pelt, Barry sat down for a moment upon a tree stump.

A coarse man’s voice was close by. ‘That’s it Killer, show me where he’s hiding.’

With the sniffer dogs tracking him down, Barry got up and began to run again, this time at a slower, more thoughtful pace. He knew he had momentarily lost his

pursuers, but also knew that it wouldn't be long before the dogs picked up his scent again. And picking up Barry's powerful aroma wouldn't take long considering he washed in a duck pond and so created a very distinctive smell. In fact the Park Rangers probably didn't need sniffer dogs at all.

Frantically looking for a solution to his problem, Barry had a brainwave: he had heard somewhere that dogs could not track you when you crossed through a stream or river. Many streams flowed through the Hickey Hills and Barry, now knowing most of the woods like the back of his hand, knew he was not far away from one. He wondered whether it was just an old wives tale that dogs would lose your scent once you went into water, but it was the only option he had left open to him to evade capture and the exposure of his pathetic life.

Making it to the brook, Barry stepped in and plodded downstream as quietly as he could, being careful not to make too much noise in the water because he knew the dogs were not far behind. After walking through the icy chill for about a hundred meters he got out and then ran to his car, got in, curled into a ball and pulled his sleeping bag over his head. He couldn't hear the voices of the men or dogs but still couldn't be sure he'd escaped them. He lay there for a while shivering, bracing himself for the inevitable when the Park Rangers would knock on his windscreen and order him to get out, probably at gun point.

Chapter 6: We've Got to Get out of Here

The inevitable knocking came and Barry, readying himself for this inevitability was fast asleep. Eventually he awoke, and then Barry knew that before he opened his eyes he was going to be confronted by some very angry Park Rangers and a pack of vicious dogs. To his immense relief he was wrong, and instead there stood his good friend Psycho.

'Bloody hell; that was a bit hairy last night wasn't it?' said Psycho.

'How did you get away?'

'I just legged it and hid. I thought you'd been caught.'

'I almost was; I had to run through a stream to get those dogs off my tail.'

Barry showed his friend his still wet legs. 'They know about us now and they're gonna come looking for us. They'll find us eventually. We're gonna have to do something to get out of here.'

'Leave the Hickeys!'

'Yes leave, we can't stay here now. Even if they don't find us they'll put more security on the Visitor Centre, and then we won't have anything to eat.'

'What do you suggest we do then?'

'We're wanted criminals. They'll have informed the police about us. What other choice do we have?'

'Become career criminals?'

'We can rob corner shops. The place I used to work at was always getting robbed, people were continually making off with money and never getting caught.'

‘They’d have a getaway car.’

‘We don’t need a car, we can just leg it into the woods and hide. Once we’ve done our first robbery we can buy a car or just steal one. Look, this is the only option we have. I don’t know about you but I’ve had enough of living in here, getting abducted by aliens and chased by dogs. I’ve lived my whole life honestly and look where it’s got me. You can stay here if you want, but tomorrow—I’m gonna rob that shop.’

The Shop Barry had once worked at as a paperboy was now owned by another company, and the majority of the old employees had had their jobs returned to them. Unknown to Barry the new management controlling The Shop had wanted to reinstate him as a paperboy, but they’d been unable to contact him because he’d given his Mum’s phone number and address as his contact details. Because she had not seen him, not since that fateful day she’d kicked him out and made him homeless, he never got to find out. It is quite amusing that the once model employee who was ridiculed by the other paperboys was now planning to commit the gravely serious crime of armed robbery on his former colleagues.

Barry and Psycho made their way down to the store. Barry carried a large spanner he’d taken from the boot of his car, while Psycho held a hefty branch taken from the Hickeys: these were to be the crude tools of their trade. Barry would have felt a lot more confident if he had something more appropriate for the job like a sawn-off shotgun, but seeing as the spanner was the best thing he could find at short notice it would have to do.

‘Right there’s no backing out,’ said Barry. ‘We go all the way, you and me. We’ll be living it up in a hotel somewhere come tonight, living like kings, you’ll see.’

Psycho said nothing.

Barry continued in the same deluded, desperate tone: ‘Once we’ve robbed a few places and gotten a bit of infamy we’ll have to come up with a name for ourselves. Yeah, somfin like the erm—the Badboy Bandits.’

The *Badboy Bandits* had forgotten to enter The Shop incognito. Choosing not to disguise themselves was a particularly foolish move when you consider Barry was known to many of the customers and people that shopped there.

‘THIS IS A ROBBERY, NOBODY MOVE A MUSCLE.’

‘Barry is that you? Nobody’s seen you for ages, where’ve you been?’

The person who recognised Barry was Rachel Coombs: an obese Sales Assistant that knew Barry because she’d worked with him when he’d been a paperboy. She was standing behind the counter.

‘Gimme all the money outta the tills, then get all the money out of the safe in the back.’

Rachel’s chins wobbled as she spoke. ‘Come on Barry don’t be crazy. God look at you, you look a mess. How much weight have you lost?’

A possessed Barry was infuriated his new life as a career criminal wasn’t being taken seriously, and so in a vengeful riposte he cracked Rachel round the face with the spanner. She lay unconscious on the floor and blood trickled from her head. He’d never liked her much anyway.

Barry shouted to Psycho: ‘GET HIM,’ pointing to the other Sales Assistant currently on duty, a spotty teenage boy who was shaking and looking at Rachel’s limp body.

‘W-ww-who a-aaa-rre you t-t-talking to,’ said the terrified teenager.

Barry was puzzled by the Sales Assistant's comment. 'What do you mean who I'm talking to? I'm talking to that toothless wonder over there.'

The Sales Assistant looked over to where Barry was pointing but could see that there was nobody there. Thinking fast, the young man realised this guy was clearly a nutjob.

'Oh y-yy-yeah s-s-s-sorry I didn't s-ss-ssee him over there.'

'Come on enough of this flirting, get the money Barry,' said Psycho.

'You heard the man,' said Barry towards the Sales Assistant.

'What?!'

Barry was getting exasperated. 'Give us the bloody money, don't play dumb with me sunshine.'

'Oh o-okay—'

The Sales Assistant did as he was told, having seen enough films about the exploits of crazed psychopaths to know not to mess about, particularly as this guy made Hannibal Lector look well-adjusted.

The two tills were emptied but Barry wanted the mother lode: he wanted to get to the safe out the back. He ordered all the customers that had unluckily been caught up in the robbery at the time to lay face down on the floor, bouncing the spanner in his hand as he did so to instil fear and to show that he wasn't afraid to use it again. When one of the said customers looked up from the ground to see what was going on, Barry would shake the spanner in their general direction and growl.

'Want some of this do ya?' said Barry to an old lady who must have been pushing a hundred. He turned his attention to Psycho. 'Right, me and this young man are going out the back to empty the safe, you stay here to keep watch of the front.'

Psycho nodded his head whilst browsing through a pornographic magazine he'd grabbed off the top shelf: he hadn't seen a naked woman in a very long time.

'Right then we're off,' said Barry to Psycho, returning after a few minutes from the back of The Shop. Looking around, Barry realised that all the customers had disappeared. 'Where are they all? You were supposed to be keeping watch, making sure nobody left and that anybody who entered was kept on the floor while I got the money from the safe. You bloody idiot, they'll have phoned the police by now.'

'Sorry Barry but I was reading.' Psycho handed Barry the dirty magazine.

Barry had a quick flick through it.

As if on cue, the sound of fast approaching police sirens loomed ominously in the distance. While Barry and Psycho argued, Rachel Coombs (the woman Barry had hit over the head with a spanner) came to her senses, and she wanted revenge. She knew in her training for the job at The Shop she'd been told to always comply with robber's demands, but this was Barry Broomfield, she felt that it would be a mortal sin to let an oaf like him get away with hitting her. She knew she had to move fast, a task her body was not altogether well suited to, but as Barry was grabbing the bags of cash and getting ready to bolt out of the door she moved silently over to the freezer compartment, picked out a leg of lamb and wielded it as a mace.

At the last moment, out of the corner of his eye, Barry saw the advancing she beast. Terrified, he turned to run out of The Shop entrance, dropping his spanner in the process. Miss Coombs threw the leg with all her might; her aim was good, the meat hit her target squarely on the back of the head.

Barry had been bracing himself for the impact and because of this it didn't knock him cold, but it certainly stunned him, jumbled his senses, and more

importantly drastically changed him. Barry looked to his side, Psycho had disappeared.

Rachel was picking up the spanner he had dropped, preparing to launch into an attack with the weapon that had only recently been used against her own head.

I've got to get out of here, thought Barry, his eyes wide with panic.

He headed off in the direction of the adjoining Hickey Woods, still carrying his bag of cash. The first thing he had to do in the confusion was hide himself from the oncoming police, not that he expected it was much use, but he had to try. Rachel was still after him with the spanner, determined to exact retribution for Barry's earlier savagery. She hefted her giant body in the escaping criminal's direction, but the new slim-line Barry was far too quick for her efforts as he sped off into the woods. She pursued him diligently for a millisecond until she remembered that she didn't like physical exertion or getting sweaty.

The frozen leg of lamb that had hit Barry had been flung at him with the sole purpose of doing as much damage as possible, but quite incredibly it had done the exact opposite. Since he first arrived in the Hickeys Barry's sanity had progressively eroded: the stress of surviving in the wilderness when he'd been accustomed to the shelter under his mother's wing had nearly killed him. Even when Barry lived alone at the time his window cleaning business was thriving, he still made sure his Mum did his washing, and provided him with a steady source of reheatable nourishment for the microwave at his flat.

Also, the knowledge that his father had disowned and abandoned him, coupled with the loss of his business, paperboy round, his lifetime of loneliness and rejection, his long list of failures, and of course the humiliating Spanish brothel incident, had all contributed to sending him off the deep end. In fact with this long list of foibles it was

a wonder that Barry hadn't thrown himself off the Very Big Tree outside Hollywell Primary School ages ago, although that option was still open.

Running through the woods that he called home, Barry knew it wouldn't be long before the authorities caught up with him. Whilst aimlessly trying to evade the police, he happened upon a place of great significance in his insignificant blip of a life: Barry looked at the hole he had dug when he'd tried to capture Psycho for stealing his food but had inadvertently ensnared himself. This was where he had first encountered his only friend in the woods and his only friend other than Bob, his beloved pet rabbit who he hadn't seen for months.

Barry thought back to his time in the hole. Stuck in it for nearly two days, he recalled on the second night a huge thunderstorm, then the following morning Psycho saving him. The branch that he'd used to climb out, and that Psycho had placed there still lay across the opening. The epiphany struck Barry right between the eyes: the thunderstorm he had cowered beneath had unleashed lightening onto a nearby tree, and by a miraculous stroke of fortune blown a branch onto the trap's opening, thus granting Barry a way out.

'That's why the branch had been charred,' he said, comprehension dawning on him. 'But then who stole my food and tin opener?' he thought, remembering why he'd dug the hole in the first place.

He headed off to a location nearby to his Den where he found hidden under some bracken and ferns the missing tins and tin opener.

'I put them here when I was acting as Psycho—' Barry paused and hesitated, not fully believing what he was saying. 'I-I am Psycho.'

This statement was correct. It was a lot to take in for one day, so he sank down to the ground, struggling to absorb the enormity of what he now had to face: that he was two tangerine oboes short of a fudge pie.

Above the treetops a police helicopter hovered. Using its thermal camera to peer through the leafy canopy it stalked its helpless prey. No longer caring whether or not he was to be captured, Barry just sat down and stared blankly at the big hole in the ground with its burnt branch while the helicopter above him led the police on the ground straight to his location. He was handcuffed and placed in a patrol car, before being whisked off to the local police station.

A group of bystanders had gathered around The Shop that Barry had just tried unsuccessfully to rob. Women in pearl necklaces and obscenely large golden earrings shook their heads in disgust at the damage this man had done, a person who only a short time ago had been delivering their newspapers and cleaning their windows. Barry was disgraced; a community outcast; some things never change.

‘Maggie Broomfield’s son! Who’d have thought it? I always reckoned he was a bad egg though,’ said one woman in a pearl necklace, relishing the scandal.

A month later, Barry, looking considerably more presentable compared to the shabby mess that the police arrested in the woods, stood in court, waiting to hear his fate.

Maggie Broomfield, Barry’s Mum was present, and she looked tearful throughout the majority of the proceedings. Most in attendance realised how hard it must be for this woman to watch her only son be sentenced, and that tears were an understandable reaction to this very serious criminal trial. But as it turned out, she just had something bothersome in her eye.

The defence attorney had brilliantly portrayed Barry as a raving lunatic who was not in control of himself during his one-man crime wave.

‘This man, this shadow of a man, this pathetic attempt at a man could not have possibly known what he was doing. He entered The Shop without any attempt at a disguise despite having worked there previously and being well known in the area. The people in The Shop that were unlucky enough to witness the attempted robbery saw a clearly unhinged individual who talked to a person that existed only in his mind. I bring to the court’s and jury’s attention Mr Godwin who was working behind the till at the time of the robbery.’

Mr Godwin was the spotty-faced teenager who emptied the tills and safe for Barry. He was about to be cross-examined by Barry’s lawyer.

‘Mr Godwin, you were there working in The Shop at the time of the robbery?’

‘I was.’

‘And do you recognise the man who is the defendant today?’

‘Yes, he was the man who robbed The Shop!’ Mr Godwin pointed at Barry.

The judge presiding over the trial interrupted. ‘We are not here to dispute whether or not Mr Broomfield robbed the convenience store in question. The CCTV footage, the DNA trail as long as my arm, the fingerprints on the weapon used to hit Rachel Coombs over the head, the numerous eyewitnesses in The Shop who saw the robbery take place and who have positively identified Mr Broomfield, the eyewitnesses who saw him fleeing from the scene of the crime with a bag of cash that was later found on his person, and which totalled the exact amount that had been stolen already confirm this.’

With this mountain of evidence put against him, it is a fair assumption that Barry’s robbery was not the work of a criminal mastermind. It is upsetting to inform

you he'd actually been the figure of fun for police officers, who'd said they wished all the crooks they caught were as easy to prosecute as him.

'Mr Godwin, while Mr Broomfield was performing the robbery did you notice anything unusual about his behaviour?'

'Yeah, he was nuts. He kept talking to a person that wasn't there. I think the imaginary person was talking back to him and telling him to do things. It was well weird.'

'Do you think that Mr Broomfield had any idea the person he was talking to was imaginary?'

'No I don't think so. I think he thought the person was real because he said things to me like: "you heard the man", and "do what he says" when nobody had said anything. If you ask me, that guy (the shop assistant once again pointed to Barry) is a wacko; he's crazy in the coconut.'

Mr Godwin's crude choice of words, while politically incorrect was an astute description of Barry's mental state at the time. Coupled with the other eyewitness accounts that collaborated Mr Godwin's story, it made a powerful bid for Barry's plea of insanity. With the plea of insanity taken into consideration, he would be looking at a shorter prison sentence.

The only person who said Barry was not insane was Rachel Coombs, but the jury came to the conclusion that she just wanted to get revenge on him for hitting her fat head with a big metal spanner. This violent course of action some of the members of the jury secretly deemed understandable, especially when she opened her mouth and spoke.

Nevertheless, Barry was sentenced to two years in Weirdways Prison, an establishment that housed some of the lowest of the low scum that had crawled out

from under a godforsaken rock to wreak havoc on society. For two painfully long years he would have to mix, and more worryingly shower with psychopaths, rapists, murderers, con-artists and child molesters. It was a sore understatement that it was going to be a tough two years.

To rub salt in Barry's already acutely tender injuries, Peter, Barry's ex-window cleaning apprentice had showed up to see how his old boss was getting on. As Barry left to go to his new home he witnessed Peter leaving the scene encased in a chauffeur-driven luxury saloon, and sandwiched by two buxom beauties that were all over him. The only thing that was all over Barry was a persistently annoying skin rash. Obviously his old window cleaning business had continued to be a remarkable success under the guidance of that young go-getter.

Yeah well, I bet it don't make him happy, Barry thought, knowing full well it most likely did.

Chapter 7: Weirdways

The prison that Barry now was forced to call home was an inner-city Victorian-era building appropriately named Weirdways. Looking extremely grim and foreboding from the outside I would like to say the prison's interior made up for it, but then if I did I'd be lying.

The structure was predominately grey and instantly didn't sit well with Barry, it reminded him of his old high school, a place he had hated and spent much time on the receiving end of bullying. Upon leaving school he felt ecstatic that he would never have to go back there again, but now here he was, entering an altogether different and far more frightening school. Not even remotely a hardcase, he knew it wouldn't be long before he became someone's bitch on a leash.

The standard of living was ghastly inside Weirdways, although the rats and the bacterial diseases seemed to like it. Barry felt he would have been better off starving or freezing to death in the Hickeys because his new home was outrageously overcrowded and dirty. He was shown to his cell, a tiny little room that contained a mildew-stained sink, a rusty bucket and two bunks. On the bottom bunk there was a very large black man. Barry's chin hung on his chest as he walked into the cell with a look on his face like a man going to the gallows.

'Alright,' said Barry's new friend in a strong Jamaican accent once the guard had left.

'Hi,' responded Barry, his bottom lip quivering.

'I like to have the bottom bunk. I hope that okay with you.'

Barry wouldn't even dream of it not being okay due to the frightening size of this man who looked as if he could crush a person's skull with a single hand.

‘Yeah that’s okay. It’s a bit cramped in here isn’t it?’

‘That’s because the cell’s only designed for one person.’

‘Bloody brilliant,’ thought Barry. ‘This guy should count as two people he’s so big.’

Overcrowding in British prisons had reached endemic proportions; Barry should have considered himself lucky that he wasn’t serving his sentence in the prison store cupboard.

Sitting on his bunk in silence for a few moments, not daring to even breathe, Barry desperately tried to think of something to say. He was struggling to find a combination of words that wouldn’t result in him getting killed or molested by the scary-looking man lying down below him. He’d never had much experience at these sorts of tasks. Thankfully his new companion spoke first.

‘You know my last cellmate hung himself—I woke up to find him dangling by his shoe laces. And I heard the guards joking about it the next day. They said that at least it will help with the overcrowding situation. They don’t give a shit about us.’

This bright divulgence of information, although a friendly attempt at small talk, did little to cheer Barry’s dismal mood.

The conditions inside Weirdways were so bad they were tantamount to human torture, but Barry’s cellmate was right, nobody really cared: the politicians weren’t about to divert taxpayers money from the already impoverished NHS, particularly when the prisoners themselves aren’t part of the voting public.

‘What’s your name?’ asked Barry.

‘I’m Tobias Robinson.’

‘I’m Barry Broomfield.’

The initial dread Barry had felt upon seeing his new cohabitant dissolved within a couple of days since he found Tobias was like a big cuddly bear who wouldn't hurt a fly, and just wanted to get his time over and done with as quickly as possible. Funnily enough it turned out that Tobias, like Barry, was also a vicious armed robber, although he'd been more successful than his new cellmate and managed not to get caught on his first robbery. The big Jamaican broke into hysterics when told the story of how his new pal ended up at Weirdways.

‘Crazy white boy. I wished I coulda seen you in dat shop.’

Tobias quickly became Barry's best friend inside Weirdways, which was fortunate because nobody was willing to mess with a man as large as Tobias, and so in turn, nobody was willing to mess with his friends. Because of Tobias, Barry's transition into prison life was relatively smooth and he managed to settle into the prison's strict, regimented routine quickly. He'd always liked routines.

Since there were a massive number of prisoners crammed into the small old-fashioned penal establishment, Barry found that he spent almost all his time locked in his cell, for twenty-three hours a day in fact. The prison was not suitably staffed to allow the large number of inmates anymore time outside than this, so he and Tobias played eye spy to pass the time. After a while it became boring.

It seemed that prisoner rehabilitation was not high on the agenda at Weirdways, that it was more about keeping the animals caged and quiet until their release, letting their fury slowly build during their incarceration and then standing back to admire the mayhem they then unleashed onto the world upon their release. Everyone felt, even though this probably wasn't the best way of dealing with criminality, this tried and tested method certainly kept life interesting.

One day, after another lengthy game of eye spy, Tobias pointed out to Barry that he shouldn't be imprisoned at all because of the mental illness he was experiencing at the time of his crime. Barry explained that after getting hit on the head by a frozen leg of lamb his brain had miraculously cured itself of disease, because of this there wouldn't have been much point in sending him to a mental institute.

'And they weren't about to let me off the hook completely,' said Barry.

Tobias laughed and said: 'It's too bad you didn't get hit on the head before you committed your crime.'

'Thanks for stating the obvious Tobias.'

Tobias then mused: *I think cheeky Mr Barry Boy wants me to bite his nose off for him.*

The following day, while spending some precious time outside his tiny cell, Barry became conscious of a curious individual he had never noticed before and asked Tobias if he knew the man.

'Who's that over there you big crazy Jamaican who could crush my skull with one hand?'

'Dat's old man Bogdan Petrov. He's from Russia originally,' replied Tobias.

The reason Barry had noticed this particular man was because he was playing chess against himself on a very tatty, overused set. He looked extremely bored as he stroked his thick moustache.

Bogdan, becoming aware he was being watched said: 'Hey you, yeah you, want to play some chess?'

'I can't play it,' replied Barry timidly.

There was a memory Barry cherished of how once, a long time ago, his old Grandfather had tried to teach him the rules of chess.

Despite Barry only being a small boy, his Grandfather became so exasperated by his grandson's inability to pick up the rules he had thrown the board across the room, saying to Maggie in the process: 'My god, that boy is bloody stupid.'

The reason the memory was cherished was because it was the last insult Barry's grandfather hurled at him, he died soon after, much to Barry's relief.

'Don't worry I'll teach you.'

Barry still didn't want to play: he didn't want to be embarrassed over the meagre abilities of his inept little brain.

Tobias though whispered warningly in his cellmate's ear: 'I'd do what he says: he's in for triple murder.'

Barry now noticed he was in a desperate situation: If he snubbed this man he may find a knife in his back, people in prison could be surprisingly sensitive. On the other hand, he may be mercilessly ridiculed for his lack of grey matter.

Ridicule seeming the more attractive of the two options, Barry walked over to Petrov to begin his education.

Old man Bogdan spoke clear English, although it was through a heavy Russian accent. 'Now my friend, I'll teach you how to play chess.'

Tobias sat down with them and listened in, attempting to also learn the rules.

Feeling extremely nervous, Barry had a thought. *If his harmless grandfather had reacted so aggressively when he had tried to teach him, how would a convicted murderer react?*

His active imagination saw a crazed Petrov holding a roaring chainsaw intended for his legs.

‘YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND, YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND. WELL MAYBE YOU’LL UNDERSTAND THIS!’

Exactly where Mr Petrov was going to acquire a chainsaw inside a prison Barry’s imagination didn’t specify.

Strangely though, Barry picked up the rules very quickly, much faster than Tobias, although he got them too eventually. He found he was a natural, playing his cellmate and beating him with ease.

Petrov looked impressed. ‘I can see you are a very intelligent man Mr Broomfield.’

Barry couldn’t remember anyone calling him intelligent in his life and wondered whether Tobias was in actual fact even more stupid than he was, in spite of his friend appearing to be a person of average intellect.

‘Now how about you give me a game? I’ll have you know I’m very good and not one to let people win just because they’re a beginner.’

Tobias smirked and said to his cellmate: ‘You won’t be able to beat him. Almost everyone in here has tried.’

Not in the least bit bothered if he lost, Barry was just glad he had actually managed to learn something without getting terribly confused, and also that he’d managed to outwit another fellow human by beating Tobias, a lifetime first. *If Bob could see me now*, he thought, feeling proud of himself before remembering he was incarcerated for armed robbery.

The game began. Tobias sat next to Barry so the two of them could double-team the Russian. The match flowed in the early stages at quite a fast pace with Tobias expecting his friend to be checkmated at any second, but the inevitable was taking longer than expected.

Another inmate with a skinhead and tattoos came over to watch the game unfold.

‘Are you going easy on him Bogdan? You shouldn’t toy with him it’s cruel, just finish him off.’

Tobias had planned on combining his and Barry’s two heads in the futile effort of beating the chess master, but instead he felt obliged to simply stand back and let his friend choose all the moves as he seemed to be doing pretty well by himself.

‘I think you might have him on the run,’ Tobias whispered in his friend’s ear.

Inside Barry’s skull his brain was creating lightning-quick connections, planning many moves ahead of the play, but simultaneously also anticipating every single response of his opponent and then the potential counters. It all seemed so clear.

Petrov was visibly shocked by this prodigal talent and a bead of sweat rolled down his forehead. He had been playing chess since before he could remember and now a man, who had only learnt the rules thirty minutes ago, was giving him the game of his life.

Barry’s play was relentless, unforgiving, and almost machinelike. One mistake and he’d make Petrov pay every time. Consequently, the Russian spent long periods thoughtfully deliberating over his every move, not willing to rush himself into foolish mistakes. Barry didn’t need time to consider his own moves because he had already seen the ones Petrov would make ages before he actually made them. To place the pressure back on his opponent, Barry took every one of his moves instantly, knowing exactly what he had to do. Tobias simply stood back with his jaw agape behind Barry, massaging his friend’s shoulders as if he was a boxer in a prize fight.

The whole of the prison, including the guards had gathered round to see World War Three unfold, and fascinated by the spectacle they started to place bets.

‘I bet a tenner on the new guy.’

‘I’ll take that.’

To Barry, Petrov’s play seemed almost infantile, he couldn’t believe that everyone had thought him to be so good and wondered if it was just some kind of deception: play badly and then at the last minute turn the tide with a sucker punch. *Or maybe he’s going to let me win this one, then want to play me again next time for money where he’ll unleash his real game.*

The opening appeared, Petrov’s defence gaped and his king simply begged to be checkmated. *He must see it, he must.*

Petrov didn’t, he was oblivious, and instead took one of his opponent’s pawns. Barry’s brow furrowed, for the first time in the game he paused doubting himself. It wasn’t the loss of his pawn which was completely insignificant, but the fact that Petrov couldn’t see what he could see.

‘Ooo look, I told you Petrov would get to him in the end. Looks like you’re going to owe me a tenner Mike.’

Barry looked into the confused eyes across from him, puzzling for a moment he stopped to think, *was this some kind of trap?*

He then took his Rook and said in a voice that wasn’t in the least bit sure of itself: ‘Checkmate.’

Petrov surveyed the board, the confusion left his eyes and he started to laugh. Everyone except the Russian wasn’t quite sure what had just happened. Barry had a terrible feeling that he had just done something incredibly stupid and turned scarlet, but for once he was wrong, he hadn’t done anything stupid at all.

‘Gentleman, it seems we have a new chess champion. Well done my friend.’

Petrov patted Barry on the shoulder and began to pack up his board.

‘Oy give me that tenner Jim.’

Exchanging money over the theatre of conflict, the hardened criminals settled their bets.

Petrov shouted back to his conqueror as he was led back to his cell: ‘Hey genius, maybe you can use that big brain of yours to figure a way for us all to get out of here.’

Still sitting at the table, Barry tried to understand what had just occurred: he had never been good at anything vaguely intellectual in his life, so this triumph came as a bit of a shock. Slowly, he got up and walked back to his cell, locked in a kind of semi-trance.

‘That was absolutely incredible. I’ve never seen anything like it, nobody’s been able to beat that guy, and just about everybody’s tried, the screws as well as the cons. You’ve never played chess before, yeah right,’ said Tobias to his pal disbelievingly once enclosed inside the privacy of their cell.

Barry snapped out of his trance. ‘No honestly I haven’t. I’ve never played a game of it before today. My Grandfather did once try to teach me, but he become so annoyed I couldn’t understand it he threw the board across the room! I’ve never been good at anything in my life. I’ve never won anything before, well apart from that raffle once. I dunno, I just can’t explain it, it’s like something inside me has changed...’

The next day Barry played Petrov again. The result was the same. Then they played every day after, but the outcome never changed and if anything, Barry began to gauge his opponent’s moves even faster. Petrov’s favoured attacks and defence strategies gradually became more and more predictable for him. The more time he spent playing

Petrov, the more he found the weaknesses in his game, and the less time it took for him to win. Eventually the Russian chess master got fed up of losing all the time and decided he had had enough of playing chess, but he told Barry before he did quit that a lot of money could be made by someone who possessed the skills he did as a professional chess player.

Over the months Barry was granted privileges inside the prison because of his being a well-behaved inmate. The privilege he came most to treasure was his allowance to read books. In the past he had never managed to read a single book from start to finish—other than *The World's 1000 Most Awesome Chat-Up Lines*—he'd normally lose interest, getting distracted by simpler pleasures like playing with his bellybutton fluff.

Suddenly though he began to feed an insatiable appetite for knowledge; politics, science, psychology, computing, art; he couldn't get enough. He was rapidly undergoing a metamorphosis, no longer the uncultured caveman who thought Leonardo da Vinci was the actor out of *Titanic*. Only a short time ago giving Barry a book to read would be the equivalent of giving a chimpanzee a chemistry set. Talking of chemistry sets, Barry had also developed a particular interest in the sciences, namely physics and the work of great physicians like Albert Einstein.

Tobias watched his cellmate's thirst for knowledge with a mixture of awe and amusement. It has to be said it was mostly amusement, but he couldn't help but be impressed when Barry could recall textbooks he had read word for word.

Tobias grabbed one of Barry's books, *Physics for Beginners* and asked: 'Have you read this one?'

'Yeah,' said Barry, currently reading *Understanding Quantum Mechanics*.

Tobias flicked through the large book at random. 'I'm on page two hundred and forty-five.'

Barry recited page two hundred and forty-five to perfection. 'As time went on and more became known about the behaviour of light, Huygens wave theory came to be accepted as the better one. At the present day however, we have reason to beli.'

'Okay okay, that's enough,' interrupted Tobias. 'How the hell do you do that?'

Barry looked up from his book. 'I don't know, before I couldn't even remember what day it was half of the time but now, now I remember everything.'

'Before what, what happened to make you so smart?'

Barry thought back to his time living in the woods, there was the alien abduction, being hunted down by dogs, the attempted robbery, the steady nosedive into insanity, and then the apparent, miraculous recovery.

'Eureka! It was the lamb Tobias: It must have been the frozen lamb that hit me on the head. It didn't just cure my illness but somehow it gave me this super brain as well.'

It is quite amazing that for someone of Barry's now unparalleled intelligence it had taken him this long to realise the source of his new powers. There surely was then, still a large portion of the old Finbar Cedric Broomfield left residing inside him.

The first port of call for Barry after trying the prison library was Crazy Craig, a man that could acquire just about anything you wanted despite the strict guidelines on what was allowed to come in, and out of the prison. This service obviously didn't come for free because it wasn't in Crazy Craig's nature to help his fellow man for nothing.

Mr Crazy was a decidedly menacing-looking man. Instead of having the obligatory hard case *love/hate* tattoo on his gnarled knuckles, he'd chosen to just have *more/hate*.

'What do you need, tobacco, booze, hard drugs? Can I interest you in a shiv (an improvised stabbing weapon used by prison inmates)?'

'Er, what?'

Barry was a little shocked upon seeing the shiv, a sharpened steel rod that had been given a handle via electrical tape. This weapon shocked Barry because it appeared that when wielded correctly to be very capable of inflicting the immediate discontinuation of a person's life.

'Don't like that, what about this then? Great entertainment for those long rainy days.'

Barry was shown another shiv. This time it was a humble toothbrush that had had its bristles removed, only to have them replaced by humble razor blades.

'Er, no thanks.'

Crazy Craig turned to one of his business associates, a crooked screw and sighed. 'God, there's no pleasing some people. What're you looking for then?'

'I just want you to get me some books.'

'Books?' Crazy laughed at the joke. 'You want me to get you some books? Just go down the prison library, they've plenty of books there.'

Barry was actually already a regular down the library, he was even allowed to surf the internet, while under supervision of course, just another privilege for his good behaviour. Since guessing that the reason for his improved cognitive abilities could be

linked to getting hit on the head with a frozen leg of lamb, Barry had gone in search of answers, coming across a website that talked about the autistic savant phenomena.

The autistic savant is someone of incredible mental abilities, and Barry was extremely interested when he read on the website: *These abilities can lie dormant in a person and then be unlocked following a head trauma.*

Now feeling close to finding some answers to what had happened to him, Barry had asked the prison librarian if she could get him a list of books that he'd pay for about the subject. The librarian was old and delicate but was known for using her taser very indiscriminately on any prisoners that got out of line.

'Well,' she'd drawled in an annoyingly high-pitched sugary voice. 'To get that approved is going to take a very long time, there's a lot of bureaucracy in here you see. That has to be signed by that person, and then so and so has to approve it. You'll probably be out of here before the books actually come.'

A frustrated Barry had tried to reason with her that it was extremely important but she was having none of it, instead glancing over to her primed, ready-for-action taser. Barry for once got wind of a subtle hint and decided wisely to make a hasty retreat.

'The Savant Syndrome, The Autistic Savants Paradox, and Born on a Purple Day,' said Barry.

'You'll have to write those down for me mate. And you know they're going to cost you a fair bit more than what they would in a shop.'

'I don't care.'

It only took Crazy Craig a couple of weeks to acquire the wanted books. He brought them into the canteen while the inmates were eating lunch to deliver them to his happy customer, happy that is until he was informed of the price.

‘Three hundred quid for the lot mate.’

‘What, that’s outrageous!’

Seeing as he had been previously homeless before he came to prison, Barry wasn’t exactly rolling in it, and asking him for three hundred pounds was like asking a man with no arms to do a handstand. Even though he’d transformed into a human calculator he still lacked common sense, because if he’d had even a shred of it, he would have asked just exactly how much his books were going to cost before he ordered them.

‘Every week you don’t pay me— I take a finger.’

Barry looked down at his prison food. ‘You want my fish fingers? Yeah that’s cool, you can have them.’

He continued to eat his meal cheerfully and smiled at Crazy Craig like an oaf.

‘I don’t mean your fish fingers you IDIOT! I mean the fingers that are attached to your hands. Every week I don’t get paid I take another finger, and if I run out of fingers to take then, well...’ Crazy Craig’s eyes conveyed something very sinister. ‘Well let’s just say you don’t want to find out what I take then, but be sure it’ll be something that you’ll miss.’

‘Oh,’ answered Barry in a squeak of a voice.

Tobias, observantly noticing the commotion, walked over to see what was going on and why his friend was talking to somebody as dangerous as Crazy.

‘What’s going on here?’

‘Your friend owes me three-hundred quid and I want it by the end of the week,’ replied Crazy Craig, looking ever so slightly nervous.

Tobias turned to Barry, a look of outrage flashed across his face but he contained his anger before calmly turning back to Crazy. ‘Okay,’ he said composedly.

The debt collector got up and left, to no doubt go and frighten the living daylights out of some other poor soul that owed him money.

Horrified to find his friend had gone and done something so brainless, Tobias explained to Barry that he was now in a terrible situation, he was in debt to somebody that was merciless, immoral and vicious, a man that would quite casually resort to medieval tactics to procure his payment.

‘I can’t protect you from these guys. They’ll get you at some point because Crazy has a lot of allies in here.’

‘Well what am I going to do?’ asked an understandably worried Barry.

‘I’ll pay for it.’ Tobias sighed, not appearing particularly pleased about the situation. ‘But you’d better pay me back.’

‘Yeah I will don’t worry. I’ll pay you as soon as I can.’

Barry had learnt another valuable life lesson: conducting business with convicted criminals was foolhardy, particularly ones that try to sell you shivs.

True to his word, Tobias got his brother on the outside to draw the money out of a bank account and pay for the books. This surprisingly was much to the dissatisfaction of the sadistic Crazy Craig, as he’d secretly hoped his customer would have to lose a few fingers first.

Barry couldn’t thank Tobias enough and considered himself to be very lucky to have such a good friend in a place like Weirdways.

‘You know what Tobias; you’re the first real friend I’ve ever had, well apart from Penelope and my rabbit.’

‘Why?’

‘I dunno. People usually just think I’m an idiot and not worth talking to.’

‘Who’s Penelope?’ said Tobias, raising his eyebrows and smiling. ‘You’re girlfriend?’

‘Well, sort of...’

Barry decided to inform Tobias that Penelope was in fact his girlfriend, but that she was also inflatable. The vicious Jamaican armed robber chortled merrily.

The next break for Barry came in the form of a job: he was going to be the prison’s resident postman. The pay was £3.50 a week, and at that rate he wouldn’t be able to pay Tobias for a very long time. Using his new and improved intellect however, he came up with an ingenious plan to raise the necessary finances so that he could pay off his friend more quickly: he was robbing stamps from the prison post office.

The robbery of the stamps was not part of a new hobby as Barry thought collecting stamps to be a tedious pass time even in the grim surroundings of a prison. His plan was to use them as a form of currency because they have a value, albeit a small one but they do have a value, and if he managed to collect enough of them then he’d be able to pay back the money to Tobias.

Using his mental calculator he figured out he would need between one thousand and one thousand four hundred and twenty eight stamps, depending on whether they were first or second class. But he also realised if he was to sell them back to the prison population it would have to be at a discount price, because otherwise the convicts would just pay for ones that weren’t stolen. Again employing

the services of his mental calculator, he reasoned he would have to maybe get around two thousand five hundred to make the idea viable.

Before long Barry was raking it in but he didn't splash his cash, keeping it a secret so as not to alert the prison guards to his devious little scheme. The inmates quickly realised what was going on when the postman started selling them large quantities of stamps, but they didn't tell the hated guards because they were saving money on postage. Just about everyone in the prison received a lot of mail from their family and friends, and it brought the inmates a little pleasure in their miserable lives to reply to these letters. Money, obviously not something your average convict has a lot of, meant that when they could save a few pennies they did.

It was also lucky how none of the prison staff seemed to notice the stamps were going missing: Barry was making sure not to take too many all at once, using a strategy of siphoning them off gradually to help him evade detection. And it has to be said that the guards were probably preoccupied with bigger worries like the regular riots and stabbings to bother keeping track of the postage inventory.

Within a few months Barry had paid Tobias back his three-hundred pounds and actually even ended up by having some stamps left over. Not having anyone to write to, (he didn't feel his rabbit would appreciate a letter) he started sending off to competitions he saw advertised in magazines. He also occasionally liked to write to Popular Science about some newfangled theory he'd come up with.

Tobias thought his friend was wasting his time and felt that Barry should sell off all the remaining stamps and use the money from them to buy something practical.

‘If you win, what in God’s name are you going to do with an inflatable dingy anyway?’

‘You never know, it might come in handy sometime.’

‘Yeah I guess it might come with a free inflatable woman,’ replied Tobias.

The books Barry had gone to so much trouble in acquiring, trouble being an understatement because he came close to having his fingers removed, and also he suspected his testicles, proved very useful. Not useful only as doorstops which Barry in the past had found were books primary purpose, but for the information located within.

The books answered some questions but also raised others. Almost all autistic savants skills come at a high price since they have to live with remarkable ability and disability. Barry thought he at first appeared to be an exception to this rule, but after further reading he experienced an awakening when he noticed he bore uncanny similarities with the symptoms of autism.

Having once thought he could read other people quite well, Barry had lately come to the realisation that he was wrong. The woefully inept judgement of Peter, his ex-window cleaning apprentice had cost him his business, and this he concluded was just one example of his inability to interpret other people’s feelings, emotions, facial expressions and body language, symptoms typical of autism.

He enjoyed repetitive movements; it was one of the reasons why he’d become a window cleaner, that and his inability to get a good job. As a child he would sit down to rock back and forth for hours, isolated in his own world. He also remembered with shame how he’d never successfully interacted with other children as a child. Again, these two personality traits are common amongst youngsters afflicted with autism.

The final symptom that confirmed the diagnosis was an autistic person's dislike of loud sounds. Loud sounds were nigh unbearable for Barry, the roar of a vacuum cleaner or a kitchen blender would pierce his eardrums and terrorize him into being a submissive little slave for the evil ice queen.

In Barry's case his autism was relatively mild, which might explain why it had gone unnoticed for so long and being mistaken for stupidity. The savant skills however, the incredible memory, the mathematical genius, the unlimited creativity, Barry had acquired only recently. He hypothesized that those skills must have been lying dormant in his autistic brain just waiting to be released, and it was the leg of lamb that did it. Interestingly, his mind appeared to somehow be blessed with a savant's incredible gifts but with only a very small portion of the drawbacks. He appeared at a first glance to have the best of both worlds. Still, it was not lost on him that only a short time ago his incredible brain had been off with the fairies, and he knew he would have to keep its habit for mixing reality and fantasy in check.

Chapter 8

Spending another twenty-three hours incarcerated in a shoebox, Barry and Tobias amused themselves by having Barry do monumentally complex mathematical equations in his head, then testing to see if he was correct with a calculator. After Tobias grew tired of his cellmate's infallibility at maths, he created a new test for Barry.

'What number am I thinking of?' said Tobias

'I'm not telepathic.'

'Come on, I'm thinking of a number, I'm projecting it to you with my mind.'

Barry concentrated hard to see if not only was he fantastically smart, but that if he also had special powers. Potential superhero names had already begun to run through his vast intellect: The Brainalator, Mindman and High IQ Human.

'Five hundred and forty two,' said Barry speculatively.

'Wow, oh my god, you can read minds too!'

Barry leapt off his bunk in amazement. 'That was the number you were thinking?'

'Nah,' answered Tobias casually.

Barry was crushed, having had big plans for his superpowers. 'Thanks, you got my hopes up then, I thought I was going to embark on a life as a superhero.'

Tobias pointed out to his deluded friend that superhero stories don't usually start with the hero locked up in prison for armed robbery and hitting a defenceless woman over the head with a spanner.

'No mate, you'd have to be a supervillain, they don't let people like us be heroes.'

‘I could’ve been framed for my crimes. Did you think of that?’

‘Yeah but you weren’t framed, you’re as guilty as the wolf outta Little Red Riding Hood.’

‘Yeah...’

The place Barry had called home for the past year didn’t frighten him like it did when he first arrived because the Weirdway’s community had accepted him with open arms. Everyone treated him with a respect that he’d never experienced anywhere else.

He had at first presumed he’d be pitilessly bullied, but the feeling of terror for everyone he encountered had abated after a couple of weeks, and he’d come to consider Weirdways Prison a better home than the Hickey Hills. Sure the conditions were terrible, the food tasted like it had been scraped off a pavement, and showering with a load of psychopaths, rapists, murderers, con-artists and child molesters was slightly irksome, but apart from those drawbacks Barry didn’t consider it all that bad.

Unfortunately things were about to drastically change: for all his raw cognitive power, Barry failed to comprehend that the only reason he had been treated with respect was because he was a good friend of Tobias Robinson, who just about everyone feared.

‘These guys in here, they’re not all that bad are they Tobias? I mean everyone thinks they’re animals, but they’ve all been really nice to me since I came here. They’re just ordinary people who’ve made a few mistakes. If you forget the Crazy Craig incident this is the best I’ve ever been treated.’

‘Yeah...’

Spending so much time with his nose buried in books and eyes rampantly scanning the internet for his now favourite fix, knowledge, Barry had failed to notice

the bullying and violence endured by many of the physically-weaker inmates.

Needless to say, Barry also fell into this category of the physically-weak.

Tobias had something very important to say. ‘You know Barry I’m out of here by the end of the week.’

‘What! You didn’t tell me that.’

‘Yeah I know. I’ve sort of been dreading telling you.’

‘Well—I’ll miss you, but hey, it’s not that bad, I’ll be out of here too in a year, and you can always write me.’

‘Nah, that isn’t the reason I have been dreading telling you.’

‘What is it then?’ asked a bemused Barry.

‘Haven’t you noticed how some of the inmates in here,’ Tobias appeared to be struggling for the right words, ‘kinda sit funny?’

Wrinkles creased Barry’s brow and he gave a perplexed smile: he didn’t know what the hell Tobias was on about.

‘No...’

‘Look, everyone here has only been nice to you because I’m your friend, but now that I’m going you aren’t gonna have anybody to look out for you.’

This painful truth was hard for Barry to take. He wasn’t respected at Weirdways Prison, just like he hadn’t been respected outside it. It was a crushing blow to a self-esteem that had until just then been on the mend.

He entered into denial. ‘Nah, those guys’ll be cool, they like me.’

Tobias didn’t say anything; there wasn’t a whole lot to say.

At the end of the week Tobias left the very scared Barry to face the beastly prison and its occupants on his lonesome. The parting of these two friends was a sorrowful sight.

‘Good luck mate,’ said Tobias as he left, his voice laced with melancholy.

Barry felt guilty that he was consumed with envy at his friends escape. Tobias was now a free man while he wasn’t, and it pained him to even muster a half-hearted farewell. Yet after the cell door was locked, and Barry heard his friend begin to walk away, he knew he’d regret not saying goodbye properly for the rest of his life.

He got up and shouted: ‘WAIT!’

The cell door was reopened. Tobias pushed past the annoyed guard and the two friends embraced each other with a robust hug, after which point they both felt embarrassed at their open display of emotion.

The dour, soulless prison guard attempted to crush the two men’s dignity, but his effort was in vain as he didn’t realise this wasn’t like destroying flesh or bone, that this was something that couldn’t be simply broken with crude violence or words.

‘Bloody homos, I bet you’ve ad some fun in here together.’

The guard was ignored as one might ignore a bratty child.

Although they both didn’t know it right at that moment, Tobias and Barry would never see each other in person again because despite their shared understanding, their lives were moving in very different directions.

As Barry lay on his bunk staring disconsolately at the ceiling, he wondered how things could possibly get any worse.

‘Hey Broomfield, you’re getting a new cellmate, he’ll be here soon. We’ve got a real treat for you this time.’

The prison guard said these words with ominous sick pleasure through the small laminated glass window on the cell door.

Dear lord, thought Barry, knowing it was doubtful he would be paired with such another lovely cohabitant.

‘Sooo, this is my new cage, well well well...’

The voice had a distinctly odd, flat robotic monotone to it. Barry looked up from his bunk and saw that his new cellmate was eyeing him with suspicion.

‘This is who you’ve got to spy on me is it?’ said the man to the prison guard that’d accompanied him. The new cellmate turned back to face Barry. ‘Going to keep your friends informed about me are you? Yes you look the type; you have the pointed face of an informant.’

‘I’ll leave you two to get acquainted... two nutters together... you should get on like a house on fire,’ said the guard before leaving.

The moment the guard had left, Barry’s new cellmate started tipping everything in the cell upside down.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ asked Barry horrified.

‘I’ve got to find where they’ve hidden the cameras and bugging devices.’

‘Who’s going to put stuff like that in here?’

‘The MI5, they study my every move. I bet you’re MI5 too, don’t bother trying to pretend you’re not.’

Barry sighed, looked to the heavens (well the ceiling of his tiny cell) and reasoned this was going to be a very long and miserable year.

As his new cellmate searched the cell with a fine tooth comb over and over again for the observational apparatus that had been put in place to spy on him, Barry made a stab at conversation.

‘So is this your first time inside?’

‘Me, nooo, they’re always putting me in because I know too much. I’m too dangerous for them on the outside.’

‘Oh okay,’ said an incredulous Barry as he rolled his eyes.

If he thought his first morning without the shield of Tobias’s protective wing had got off to a bad start, Barry hadn’t seen anything yet because the afternoon brought with it the overt dangers of the prison yard.

‘Oy Broomfield, get that pretty little arse of yours over here.’

Barry turned to see a hairy gorilla slash man making lewd gestures with his mouth at him and beckoning him to come over. Ignoring the request Barry decided to go and see what Bogdan Petrov was doing instead.

‘Hey Bogdan.’

Petrov replied in his usual thick Russian brogue. ‘What do you want? Come to humiliate me again? Well I can tell you that you might be better at chess than me, but now that your big friend has gone, humiliate me again and it’ll be the last thing you ever do.’

Barry gave a stifled laugh in the hope Petrov might be joking, but quickly realised the Russian was deadly serious: triple murderers don’t usually joke about such matters.

It didn’t take long for Barry to fathom that he didn’t have a single friend in Weirdways. Everyone who’d previously shown him respect now looked down on him with contempt. Prison is a very lonely, not to mention dangerous place when you’re on your own. Not only was Barry a weakling, but many of the inmates resented the fact he’d been granted privileges for his good behaviour. They also resented that he’d received a lean sentence on the grounds of mental illness, in spite of the fact that he seemed more or less normal. The next few days for our chief protagonist were not the happiest.

Attempting as best he could to forget his 'encounter' in the showers, Barry tried getting to know his new cellmate, who although was very much insane made a highly intriguing companion. Barry took to studying the mental illness that so obviously afflicted his bunk buddy, who had finally decided, regardless of his belief that Barry was a spy for the MI5, that he would indulge him his name. It turned out to be the highly amusing Sammy Nammy.

'Think that's funny do you?' said a crazy-eyed Sammy, amidst Barry's gales of laughter.

It was an absolute travesty that Sammy's last name was Nammy, but what was even more of a travesty was that he was in a prison, as anybody with a brain stem and two eyes could see the man was mentally detached from any kind of reality.

But there was a small part of Barry that was actually thankful for Sammy's placement alongside him, because he served as a valuable insight into the mental illness he'd experienced just over a year ago. Reading up books on the topic, Barry tried to learn what had gone wrong in his own mind to prevent it happening again in the future. After learning about the various symptoms involved in various mental illnesses, Sammy was diagnosed as a classic case of schizophrenia, while Barry concluded the illness he himself had suffered in the Hickey Hills was dissociative identity disorder, an illness more commonly known to laymen as the split personality.

With his unkempt long hair, unshaven face, wild, wandering eyes and paranoid delusions; Sammy brought back painful memories for Barry and great sadness as he knew just how real those hallucinations could appear. Attempting to talk the higher-ranking prison guards into allowing Sammy to have a psychiatric evaluation, Barry was disappointed to find none of them were willing to cooperate.

‘Tell Gordon, it’s not my problem.’

‘Tell Bridgette, that’s not my department.’

‘Did Gordon say to come to me? Get lost, I’m busy.’

Going round in circles, Barry realised he was getting nowhere fast. He really wanted to help Sammy, knowing that without professional help his cellmate’s condition would only deteriorate. But there was another, ulterior motive to Barry’s help Sammy plan: He simply didn’t think he could stand Sammy’s craziness much longer. And, coupled to this, the man’s personal hygiene was absolutely atrocious, so bad in fact none of the other inmates were willing to give Sammy the same ‘special treatment’ they had bestowed upon Barry.

Realising the underlings were only prepared to do the bare minimum for the wellbeing of the inhabitants of Weirdways, Barry decided to see the prison’s Warden and head honcho, Mr Merryweather. There was a problem however as you could not simply walk up to such an important man like Mr Merryweather and ask him a question: you instead had to book an appointment. The soonest available was in two weeks.

‘Two weeks!’ said Barry in dismay.

That night Barry came close to pulling out his hair as he tried hopelessly to block out Sammy’s voice with his pillow. Sammy just wouldn’t shut up, almost constantly talking in his robotic monotone to the people and voices he would see and hear, all the while pacing the little shoe box of a cell back and forth. He also did a brilliant

impression of a broken record: he liked to replay segments of conversations he'd had, real or imaginary, over and over again as if he enjoyed reliving the moment of them.

'Oh yes she said, oh yes she said, oh yes she said, oh yes she said, oh yes she said.'

'SSSHHHUTTT UUPPP! FOR GODS SAKE SHUT UP,' shouted Barry, finally coming to the end of his ropes after throwing his pillow at the wall.

Sammy halted his discourse and got in his bunk to go to sleep. Barry placed the pillow back under his head, pulled the covers over his exhausted body, and slowly closed his eyes to at long last sink into a deep slumber.

'Oh yes she said, oh yes she said, oh yes she said, oh yes she said.'

Barry groaned, highly embittered because it was beginning to look like he may plunge headlong into a second mental breakdown at this rate.

In preparation for his meeting with Mr Merryweather Barry did his research thoroughly by listing the symptoms his subject had been suffering that confirmed the illness was indeed schizophrenia. The list was quite long. Aside from the constant talking to himself, pacing, and believing that the MI5 were spying on him, Sammy also displayed the following disorders:

1) Sits and stares at his hands for hours, believing they've changed.

2) Experiences severe bouts of depression and has even attempted suicide by overdosing on cough drops.

3) Believes mind-altering drugs are being put in his food, and that the food always tastes funny.

Incidentally, Barry also believed the food at Weirdways tasted funny, but that was just because it tasted like crap.

4) Laughs at inappropriate times like in the middle of the night when his cellmate is trying to get to sleep.

5) Creates neologisms (invented words) and speaks in word salads (strings of unrelated words).

6) Believes his thoughts are being broadcast on the prison television and the cell's radio.

7) Believes that he can read other people's thoughts.

8) Grabs his cellmate in the middle of the night and screams in his ear.

With these extreme symptoms backing up his case, Barry felt it impossible for Mr Merryweather to do anything other than admit Sammy Nammy was a mentally troubled individual who clearly needed psychiatric help.

Mr Merryweather's office was usually forbidden ground for inmates' feet, so this was the first time Barry had laid eyes upon it. Now offices in general, it has to be said, are

all pretty much similar, but what struck Barry the most about this particular one was the obsessive, fastidious nature with which it was maintained. Every pencil, every book, every piece of paper, every picture was aligned in perfect symmetrical order to everything else. The room appeared to be entirely clear of all physical impurity, the carpet looked brand new, there was not a bit of rust or a scratch on the filing cabinets, and even the waste paper bin was immaculate. Barry wondered if in fact the office had been sterilised to eradicate all microbial life as well.

Then there was Mr Merryweather himself who beamed at Barry with the wide grin of a cat playing with its prey. His appearance spoke of a compulsion with cleanliness and order. The dark trousers he wore had been so overzealously pressed that the crease running down the leg was razor sharp, and could probably cut through human flesh if required. The side parting on his head possessed an artificial look due to each individual strand of hair being positioned in precisely the right place, as if it was the result of a surgical procedure rather than a mere comb. And behind the dark horn-rimmed glasses were his large, lifeless grey eyes that betrayed the wide smile.

‘Before we begin Mr Broomfield, I’ll need you to sign this form to state that Mr Griswald is here: it’s the law that two people should always be in attendance at such meetings.’

Mr Griswald stood towards the back of the office by the door.

‘Grizzly’ Griswald is as crooked as they come. He was the business associate of Crazy Craig when Barry was being shown a multitude of shivs and shanks. He is well known for the liberal use of his standard-prison-issue baton, so Barry assumed rightly that he wasn’t really there for his benefit at all but was instead an intimidation device. Barry speculated on whether or not Mr Merryweather was aware of the

violence and underhand dealings for which Griswald was renowned, and then he decided he'd rather not as the thought scared him.

The form for Barry to sign contained a large quantity of unnecessary small print and so it was taking him an uncomfortably protracted amount of time to read it all. The awkward silence while he read what he was about to put his signature on was cut short by a glance from Mr Merryweather to Griswald.

'Just sign it Broomfield, the Warden hasn't got all day,' said the smiling Grizzly as he leant into Barry's ear.

Barry reached for a pen from Mr Merryweather's desk, his handcuffed wrists jangling obtrusively into the suffocating quiet.

'Ah um.'

Mr Merryweather motioned to one of the pencils on his desk: he wasn't about to let this piece of slime use his luxury platinum 18 karat gold-nibbed white-ivory-lacquered monstrosities.

Barry signed his name, for all he knew he could be signing his life away; then he placed the pencil back where it belonged.

'Ah um.'

'What?' said Barry looking at Mr Merryweather baffled. 'Er, thank you for letting me use your pencil.'

'No, you didn't place it back where it belongs.'

Barry moved the writing implement a couple of millimetres to the left, emboldened, he then decided to have a little fun at the ridiculousness of the situation.

'Hang on; I think I've got it. Wait there, nope lost it. Oh wait yep, I've got it again.'

Barry was nudging the pencil ever so slightly in differing directions.

Griswald barked from the back of the room: 'That'll do Broomfield.'

Grizzly's baton was being caressed in his giant mitt and Barry knew the fun was over.

Mr Merryweather picked up the pencil Barry had just used; unashamedly, he then pulled out a handkerchief from the top pocket of his suit and used it to give the pencil a vigorous wipe, before replacing it in the correct position on the desk.

Placing his finger tips together Mr Merryweather then looked across at Barry. 'Now then Mr Broomfield, what seems to be such a problem that you feel the need to take up my valuable time?'

'It's my cellmate Sammy, I think he needs some help, he's very sick.'

'Sick, how?' A disgusting smile curled out of the corner of Mr Merryweather's lips.

'He's mentally ill. I've made a list of the symptoms and I think you'll find he's suffering from schizophrenia.'

'How would you know that? Are you a qualified psychiatrist? The last time I looked you were a failed window cleaner.'

'Well I've had a little experience of mental illness myself, and I've also read quite a bit about the—'

'Oh so now you're an expert,' said Mr Merryweather in a sharp taunting tone. 'No I think Sammy is just fine where he is actually.'

'I don't think you understand,' said Barry politely as possible.

'Don't worry I understand, I understand just fine. I know that you were the one stealing those stamps Mr Broomfield, I can't prove it but I know. Unfortunately on the outside a man is innocent until proven guilty, but that is not the case in here. Sammy is my gift to you, enjoy.'

It was not lost on Barry that all this could have been informed to him straight away, rather than letting him go through the hassle of having this charade of a meeting that's real purpose was now becoming all-too clear.

The only pleasure in Livingston Merryweather's pathetic existence was making his prisoners lives hell. He obtained obscene amounts of delight from their misery because the inmates to him were disgusting sub-humans, lower than even animals, which is why he felt he had to keep his office so ordered and clean for fear that their filth would infect him. As he walked around Weirdways he believed he was breathing in their pollution, and his only haven from this infestation of dirt was his office. The seemingly random thuggery of men like Mr Griswald was, in his unbalanced opinion, a necessary control mechanism within the establishment to maintain a healthy atmosphere of terror.

It looked as if Barry was going to be stuck with his cellmate for the foreseeable future, and while he felt sorry for himself, he simultaneously felt extremely sorry for Sammy because if he hadn't gone and stole the stamps in the first place, Sammy wouldn't have been used as a prop in Mr Merryweather's twisted and vindictive attempt at revenge. Sammy's illness was clearly deteriorating and Barry was engulfed by a deadened feeling of helplessness. He wanted to make Mr Merryweather understand what damage he was doing, but he had a strong suspicion that if anything, Sammy was in a better mental state than the Prison Warden.

With his track record of mental illness, Barry knew that to continue being locked up in close proximity with another mentally-ill person could have a detrimental effect on his own health. But then Mr Merryweather made it clear, in no uncertain terms, this is exactly what he hoped would happen and that it would actually make his miserable job worthwhile.

Of course Barry was no longer allowed to be the prison's postman, but the most sickening development of all was that his prison privileges, including his internet and library access were confiscated. Mr Merryweather wasn't even aware Barry was on the list for privileges but happily removed them after Grizzly informed him otherwise. Barry thought that for nicking a few stamps—well alright—a couple of thousand, the severity of Mr Merryweather's gifts was a smidge draconian.

Back in the dismal confines of his cell with only the company of a raving lunatic to console him, Barry for the first time since his arrival at Weirdways wondered if any of it was worth it, if it was really worth continuing with his depressing life. He looked down at his shoelaces but didn't think they looked strong enough to hold his weight. He remembered that Tobias had told him one of his old cellmates had committed suicide, and that a couple of the guards had joked that at least it would help the overcrowding situation. *That would be one positive that would come out of my demise*, Barry mused logically.

He then thought about who would miss him if he was to do the unthinkable and found there were very, very few names on that list, in fact, as it turned out there was only one, Bob, his albino pet rabbit. Barry was convinced having only one solitary rabbit on his list of people who'd be upset if he snuffed it, didn't really constitute a good enough reason to prolong his wretched life any longer.

The most important task Barry now had to accomplish, having made up his mind to end his life, was what the last words on his suicide note would be. The first sentence that got serious consideration was: *Am I dying, or is this my birthday?* Barry liked it, but nevertheless felt it didn't quite encompass the full range of his hatred for mankind.

The second one that he gave intense contemplation towards was: *I have nothing; I owe much; the rest I leave to the poor.* Again, he didn't really feel these particular last words encapsulated just how much he disliked life, as well as the people that just so happened to like it.

Yeah those aren't bad but I dunno— they're not quite right, thought Barry with a gloom-ridden feeling that he'd never think of the adequate final words.

Just as he was beginning to give up hope a light bulb illuminated his mind. He had found them; he had found what he'd place on his suicide note.

The tragedy of life is that you're alive.

This sentence summed it all up; this sentence was Finbar Cedric Broomfield. The world and the filth that inhabited it had treated him like a dirty radish, so why should he care if he wasn't going to see it again? Barry believed that he'd finally come to understand the meaning of life: life is the worst thing that can possibly happen to a person, and so there is no meaning other than pain. With reaching this epiphany the willingness to end his life grew in strength.

For the first time in many nights Barry noticed Sammy was no longer pacing back and forth or speaking to himself, he was instead snoring quietly and probably pleasantly dreaming of being chased by the MI5. Barry shifted his weight slowly out of his bunk, trying his best to not let it creak too loudly. The noose had already been prepared. One of his fellow prisoners had shown him how to make one out of a bed sheet. Barry thought it very kind of this inmate to teach him this skill as it meant he now wouldn't have to use his shoelaces to do the job. Silently he placed a chair under his cell window, tied the noose to the bars then took a deep breath before slowly placing the loop over his head.

Standing there on his chair he thought about the terrible things that had happened to him and the terrible people who'd brought him to this point. His life so far had indeed been a ghastly torment and merited this dramatic course of action, yet slowly a few other thoughts, slightly less grey in colour began to filter down through his brain. He began to wonder if things may improve once he left Weirdways, he was now; after all, in the possession of supercomputer intelligence, and felt that maybe he could use it to turn his life around.

Out of the gravely serious, suicidal disposition came a glimmer of hope: Barry hadn't forgotten what Bogdan Petrov had said about there being money and fame for someone who could play chess the way he could. He removed the noose from around his neck, stepped off the chair, walked over to his suicide note that lay on his bunk and scrunched it up into his hand.

Chapter 9: Checkout and Checkmate Time

It was a Monday; Barry had spent one year, eleven months and three weeks of his life locked up inside Weirdways Prison. There was now just one more week left on his sentence to serve.

Over this substantial chunk of his life Barry had managed to prevent himself from going insane by acquiring a pair of ear plugs and a nose peg. These two devices served as indispensable tools at blocking out Sammy's constantly intrusive insanity. They'd been smuggled into the prison for a high price, but Barry managed to pay for them with the leftover stamps he still had and the performance of a lot of blowjobs.

Sammy thought the nose peg and ear plugs had been sent by Satan: his illness had taken a radical shift, transforming him into a religious zealot, and for a reason only known to him, he'd discarded the belief that the MI5 were listening in to his every word. Everything that wasn't labelled The Bible was, to use a phrase Sammy had taken a liking to: An abomination unto the Lord.

Sammy's enthusiasm for this sentence never appeared to wane, and even Barry's unibrow got referred to as an abomination unto the Lord.

It's not that bad, thought Barry caressing his eyebrow self-consciously.

Barry had been permitted to read books from the prison library again, but he had read and memorized almost every word in there and it was getting hard to find any interesting material left for his brain to digest. He was currently perusing, *Tax, Yes It Does Matter* by the Inland Revenue. As you can see he was really scraping the barrel, but then reading was his solitary escape from his unhappy circumstances because the reminders of his failed life were ubiquitous, although as long as he kept

his eyes on the pages of a book his awareness of his problems could be temporarily lessened. The ear plugs and nose peg had helped a great deal as well.

All Barry now had to do was keep out of trouble for another week and he'd be out of Weirdways a free man. There was even a job packing bags at the store he'd attempted to rob setup for him upon his release. It maybe wasn't the world's greatest occupation, yet he felt it should be better than his prior game plan: selling his pretty lil ass on the street for five quid a pop.

The prison canteen was filled with the hustle and bustle of dinner time, but Barry was in his own little world, sitting by himself dreamily staring into space, looking earnestly forward to the moment of his release. He fantasized about blazing sunshine, leafy green trees, cut grass, fresh air, and the delightful charm of birdsong.

It was three minutes past seven in the evening when Mr Merryweather entered through a door into the canteen accompanied by Griswald. Barry had not spoken to Mr Merryweather since their meeting, deliberately trying to keep a low profile, and it had been very successful as he'd for the most part been left alone.

The prison bullyboys had also lost interest in Barry and were currently tenderizing the new meat that had arrived at Weirdways, much to Barry's relief. Barry made sure he never looked up from the floor or said anything more than a murmur, which made the guards believe he was already a broken shell of a man and so their sadism was kept in check too. It was a terrible, repressed way of living, he just wanted to explode sometimes, but he knew the retribution for such a blatant outpouring of emotion would result in reprimands that didn't even bear thinking about; plus, he'd run out of Vaseline.

Mr Merryweather spoke to Griswald in a clearly annoyed tone. 'This robbing Government, you won't believe the amount of tax I have to pay.'

Barry sat in his chair curiously observing the reddening of Mr Merryweather's cheeks. It was the first colouration he'd seen in the drab but pristine appearance of the man.

'I mean I tell you, what sort of world do we live in? I just don't know what is becoming of this country.'

Griswald decided to utter one of his characteristically moronic brainwaves. 'It's these bloody asylum seekers if you ask me Sir. They're sending Britain to the dogs.'

Mr Merryweather declined to respond because his chief guard had a tendency to blame everything on asylum seekers, whether it be the bad weather, his equally mentally-deficient daughter and her hideous school results, or the reason his car repeatedly decided to break down.

Barry surreptitiously continued to eavesdrop on the conversation between the two most powerful men at Weirdways; that was until Mr Merryweather noticed him listening in.

'Mr Broomfield isn't it?'

'Yeah.'

'You seem to be taking an overt interest in my matters.'

'Oh I, er I...'

There was only one week left on Barry's sentence and he knew he was now placing his release in jeopardy. Mr Merryweather was a sick, twisted version of God inside the walls of Weirdways that controlled every aspect of the inmate's existence and could, at the flick of his ridiculously extravagant luxury pen, destroy their lives. 'I could help you with your tax problems,' said Barry finally.

Now don't go thinking Barry had suddenly transformed into a saint because he doesn't usually help people like Mr Merryweather, a man who'd deliberately sought

out to make his life as miserable as possible. Yet deep down inside of Barry the embers of a prevalent goodness still glowed, despite the many mishaps and unfortunate events that had turned him inwardly bitter to everything and everyone.

‘How can you help me and an even better question, would be why would you help me? You’re leaving next week if I’m not mistaken,’ said a clearly intrigued Mr Merryweather.

‘I can help you because I’ve read quite a bit about tax law. I might find some loopholes in the system that you can exploit. The truth is I don’t want to help you, I want to help Sammy Nammy, and if I do take a look at your taxes you must first let Sammy have a psychiatric evaluation.’

It was well known now inside Weirdways that Barry had quite remarkable mental abilities, and Mr Merryweather could see that this lowly convict, this piece of slime, this skid mark on the toilet bowl of society was indeed capable of helping him with his financial matters.

‘Is that it, don’t you want a payment?’

The thought of payment hadn’t even crossed Barry’s mind.

‘No. Just get Sammy some help.’

Even somebody as detached from empathic emotion as Mr Merryweather could see this was a selfless and courageous act. Shocked, the Prison Warden didn’t know what to say, he just stood there befuddled, scratching his head.

‘So is it a deal or not,’ said Barry after a lengthy pause.

Mr Merryweather glanced at Griswald, then at Barry, his eyes shifted back and forth between the two men, his mouth slightly open in bewilderment. Barry believed he was attempting to find the right words to invoke the most potent wrath from Grizzly, but he didn’t.

‘Okay—it’s a deal,’ he said in a strangely quiet voice that almost hinted at defeat.

After going over Mr Merryweather’s financial statements, Barry was able to uncover the loopholes he was confident he would find and saved the Warden a considerable amount of money. It was a bitter success since helping such a petty and malicious man like Mr Merryweather made Barry feel like he was selling his soul to the devil.

The evaluation of Sammy very quickly highlighted the illness that afflicted him. The diagnosis was schizophrenia, just as Barry believed it would be. Sammy was to be rehomed at a mental hospital a couple of hours drive away. He was hysterical upon finding out where he was going and went ballistic when he was informed it was his cellmate who had suggested he be assessed.

Barry sat on his bunk using his arms to shield his face while Sammy clawed at him, screaming in a deranged parrot-like shriek. Barry found this response to his kind-hearted helpfulness to be somewhat disconcerting, but fortunately the men in white coats were there to restrain and escort Sammy to his new place of residence. Bowing his head and sighing dejectedly, Barry watched Sammy frantically struggling in vain against his captors. He just hoped he had done the right thing.

When Barry finally got released after spending two very long years inside Weirdways Prison, he felt just as lost as he had before his arrival. He had fantasized about this day since his first night behind bars, but departing wasn’t as glorious as his mind’s eye had imagined. He’d perceived a divine, glorious light shining on him as the

prison's main gates opened, revealing a serene and beautiful day. Instead of this grandiose vision he was greeted with cascading rain, inner-city pollution and filth.

Catching a bus to the city train station, Barry headed in the *general* direction of his Mum's house: Barry wasn't very good with public transport. Maggie welcomed her son with open arms upon his arrival, but it was not in Barry's plans to enjoy a happy reunion as he'd only come back for a few of his possessions and his beloved rabbit. He knew that his old room was being rented out and that there was no roof for him here. In fact, as Barry stood at the front door he could see through his old bedroom window some random person nonchalantly eating toast off a plate whilst lying on his old bed.

The relationship between mother and son had become tattered beyond repair. Barry was as courteous as civilized interaction requires but was also devoid of the emotion usually expressed between a mother and son, especially considering they hadn't seen each other for a very long time. There was overwhelming tension in the air until at last Barry spoke.

'How come you didn't visit me? One visit in two years would've been nice, or at least a letter.'

'I couldn't really be arsed to write a letter and err, as for coming to visit, well you know, I've been busy and it's a long way.'

'It's half an hour on the train! You abandoned me. Where's Bob? He's my rabbit, he's coming with me.'

'About your rabbit, he erm, well how can I put this delicately? Erm, he's dead.'

'He's what!'

'He died last year. I'm sorry.'

‘How did he go, was it peacefully in his sleep?’

‘Well, no not quite...’ Maggie shifted uncomfortably. ‘What does it matter how he died anyway?’

‘Because I want to know, he was my rabbit.’

‘Okay but you’re not going to like this. I put him outside in the garden to let him have a run around before noticing the grass needed a trim. So, I got the lawnmower out and began cutting it. Anyway I think the noise of the mower startled him and he started running all over the place. Then he ran under the—’

Maggie didn’t get to finish her sentence because a pained cry was torn from Barry’s lungs. He’d trusted this woman to look after his only friend in the world and she had brutally murdered him.

While most women are sensitive to other people’s pain, Maggie didn’t seem to be blessed with this quality.

‘Yeah it took ages to get all the fur and blood off the blades. That lawnmower’s expensive. I had to get it fixed, cost an arm and a leg.’

Barry thought about how it had cost poor little Bob a lot more than just an arm and a leg. He now, after careful contemplation came to the conclusion that the day of his release was definitely not going according to plan. It appeared dismally as if he had left one prison just to enter another.

Because Barry had been a bum upon his arrest he was granted a temporary home inside *Happy Day Hostel for the Homeless*. It certainly wasn’t the Ritz but it was a roof for which he was grateful. Once he’d managed to get the syringes into the bin, mopped the blood bespattered floor and removed the vomit it wasn’t that bad. Sadly Barry wasn’t granted permanent accommodation, and would need to find his own place fairly soon or find himself re-homeless.

The next day he caught the bus to his new job and found out upon arriving he was quite the local celebrity: there was a mob of people armed with pickets waiting to hound and harass him. One such picket read: *Mothers Opposed to the Reintroduction of Outrageous Nutters back into Society*, which conveniently abbreviated to M.O.R.O.N.S.

The M.O.R.O.N.S. had gone to the trouble of developing a highly sophisticated chant, 'OUT WITH BROOMFIELD; OUT WITH BROOMFIELD; OUT WITH BROOMFIELD,' that rose to its ascendancy the moment Barry showed his face on his first day.

He thought at first the callous hags might give him a worse beating than the ones he'd received at Weirdways, but luckily there was a security guard on hand to control the situation with his baton. It was an ironic situation really, seeing as the reason there'd been a security guard appointed to The Shop in the first place was because of Barry's robbery.

Judging from the first day of his new job Barry considered the possibility that this was a final attack orchestrated by Mr Merryweather, to drive him to commit another crime and be returned to his control. He thought it surely couldn't be conventional government policy to place convicted criminals in a job where they'd committed their crime.

The devotion the M.O.R.O.N.S. displayed to their cause was quite remarkable. They patrolled outside informing any approaching customers about the grounds for their protest, and by so doing managed to acquire further members. The crowd grew larger. Understandably, Barry from the supposed safety of The Shop did not have a good first day, dropping and breaking a couple of items due to his nerves being

frazzled by the lynch mob waiting for him just a few feet away. He'd never realized before how middle-aged women could look so uncannily similar to pitbulls.

'That'll be coming out of your pay,' said Rachel Coombs, referring to a jar of pickled onions Barry had accidentally smashed.

In the two years Barry had spent incarcerated at Weirdways, Rachel Coombs (the person Barry had hit over the head with a spanner) had somehow managed to become a powerful force inside The Shop, having risen up the ranks. Coombs patrolled her aisles with a menace reminiscent of Adolf Hitler's Storm Troopers, and crazed with this power, she was simply overjoyed that Barry was now under her control.

She leaned into his ear and whispered: 'See those people out there? They want you dead, but not me, I want you to suffer.'

Barry hadn't expected quite this level of wrath upon his return. Of course he hadn't expected to be welcomed back with warmth and smiles either, but this level of hatred was really quite preposterous. *Whatever happened to forgive and forget? I served my time.*

The following days continued in much the same pattern as the first. The protesters certainly kept the security guard on his toes, and his wooden baton was similarly made to work hard. Barry was beginning to get used to being spat on by now but he still didn't enjoy it that much.

The general agreement from the managers in The Shop was that at some point this trouble would simply blow over, and that the protesters, or Broomfield Busters as the local paper was now referring to them, would get bored. When this assumption didn't turn out to be the case, a high-up boss from the Cracker Jack Food Chain that

owned the store paid a visit to address the situation. This boss called a meeting to be held in one of the larger storerooms out the back of The Shop, a meeting that had to be attended by the entire staff.

The bigwig's face looked like a grey-skinned prune. 'Good day to you all, I think everybody is aware of why I'm here. This particular branch of the Cracker Jack Food Chain has, in the past couple of months, performed very poorly. Now does anybody know why this might be?'

Many pairs of eyes swivelled towards Barry's position in the middle of the room making him squirm on his chair, while at the same time muffled chants of the M.O.R.O.N.S. could be clearly heard from outside.

'Broomfield to burn, Broomfield to burn, Broomfield to burn.'

Sitting on his chair wondering what the point of this meeting was, Barry thought it was obvious as to why business was down: it was because of him. Why did they need this big trumped-up get together to point that out? And he was also acutely conscious that now each individual pair of eyes fixed unwaveringly upon him. He looked everywhere in the room apart from at those scowling faces, finding the ceiling to be quite interesting. Giving a nervous whistle as if to pretend he was oblivious to the dirty looks, he knew the eyes were still burning and the hatred inside of them growing.

After a considerable amount of time staring upwards, Barry had to lower his gaze due to his neck beginning to ache. Looking around the room he tried to uncover any allies, someone that would pipe up and say something positive in his favour, but there was nobody.

Barry was now living in an area that was renowned for being the world's second-least inhabitable place for life after Ukraine's nineteen-mile island around Chernobyl. It was even known for tramps to turn their nose up at the sight of it, instead preferring to remain inside their cosy cardboard boxes. If Barry lost this job though, it would be very probable that he would again find himself joining the ranks of the tramp because he was only just managing to scrape by as it was. The Shop was not paying him a particularly handsome salary just to pack bags of shopping, leaving him on a very tight budget. Visualising his inglorious return to the Hickey Woods with dismay, Barry thought that the leap of faith off the Very Big Tree was once again looking like a splendid life choice.

The silence and those hateful eyes became unbearable, and even though he needed the job badly Barry shouted out: 'WELL SACK ME THEN! THAT'S WHAT EVERYBODY WANTS.'

'We can't do that unfortunately Mr Broomfield,' answered the prune.

'JUST DO IT, JUST DO IT, JUST BLOODY DO IT.'

The eruption of Barry's rage was quite startling and some people seemed a little taken aback, even frightened.

'I was hoping Mr Broomfield that you'd leave of your own accord.'

His rage subsiding as quickly as it had arrived, Barry sighed, grabbed his coat and left, but not before he'd been thoroughly spat on by the Broomfield Busters who had gained a very large following from their coverage in the local media.

Barry turned to the mass of M.O.R.O.N.S. and said over their shouts and shrieks: 'You'll be happy to know that I have quit. I won't be working here anymore.'

A huge cheer reverberated through the crowd and there was singing and dancing. Christmas had come early.

His head hanging down on his chest as the celebratory roar of the M.O.R.O.N.S. rang in his ears, Barry ambled slowly on his long walk back to his bedsit in Junkieville. The icing on the cake was that it started to rain. To lighten the discouraging atmosphere that Barry felt encroached upon his every waking moment, he imagined that in some parallel universe he was getting lucky by being beaten to death by thugs wielding baseball bats.

Having diligently just worked a twelve-hour shift performing the mindless task of filling plastic carrier bags with other people's rubbish, for minimum wage, only to get sacked, was very demoralizing. All Barry wanted to do when he got back home was lay on his bed. Well, he refers to it as a bed but it doesn't really class as one you or I would think of: it was an inflatable lilo mattress that would normally be used at a swimming pool.

One thing about his bed that did make it superior to other normal beds was that it was brightly coloured, and at least this added some kind of decoration to his miserable home. Fetid odours, peeling paint, threadbare carpet and bluish mould were the invasive eye and nose sores in Barry's world now, though there was no hovel he could exist in, no matter how nauseating that could be worse than how he felt internally. His life was a total derelict.

Lying on his bed, completely devoid of anymore hope, Barry pulled up a flea-bitten blanket to his head to then drift off into a miserable sleep. As his eyes began to close and his brain got ready to slip into dreamland, the local newspaper was pushed through the letterbox on his door. This would normally be nothing to get overly excited about, but little did he know it contained his one chance at salvation.

Rays of light signalled the onset of morning, yet Barry had no reason to get up as he was waiting for when he'd be kicked out by his landlord onto the streets, due to his inability to pay the rent. He had decided the best course of action was to lounge on his lilo and fall into a bottomless depression until that moment came. It would be useless for him to attempt to get a job: convicted armed robbers don't have skills that are high on most employers' lists when they're looking to recruit new staff, apart from maybe assertiveness.

Eventually, at around two o'clock in the afternoon Barry became aware he needed to urinate. He got up off his lilo to answer the call of nature, having to step over his saviour to enter the bedsit's tiny bathroom. Looking in the mirror he could see his hair was dishevelled and his eyes bloodshot from spending most of the night quietly sobbing. After emptying the contents of his bladder he picked up the morning's mail that lay outside his front door, including the newspaper that was currently the only thing in the whole world that had the ability to lift him from a terrible fate.

He began sorting out what had to be thrown away. 'Bill, bill, junk, bill, junk.'

The junk mail, along with the newspaper got promptly thrown in the bin. Normally Barry would read the paper, mostly to look in the job finder section, but he would also scan over some of the local news as well. Recently however, he had grown so sick of reading about the exploits of the Broomfield Busters that he no longer bothered. If he had chosen to read it he would have come across an interesting article.

Regional Chess Championships set to take place at Town Hall. 1st place prize money £5000.

Looking out through his window Barry was greeted with a grim day that matched his mood all too well. With no intentions of attempting to snap out of his gloomy frame of mind, he reclined on his offensively bright, multi-coloured lilo, too depressed to even bother feeding himself. The day passed him by.

The following day came and Barry was still moping around. The morning quickly slipped by. Staring at the ceiling Barry realized he was hungry, and his stomach rumbled uncontrollably as if in agreement with these thoughts. Although his renewed descent into depression had left him with a morbid curiosity for death, his body was still currently functional and needed sustenance. There was only one problem: everything in his fridge and cupboards appeared very unappetising.

In his despondent, apathetic mood there was only one meal that could satisfy him and maybe even help to cheer him up slightly: fish n chips. This was an expense though Barry could ill afford considering his current financial predicament.

But then thinking over the matter logically he thought, *what does it matter anyway? I'm going to get kicked out eventually even if I scrimp and save every penny.*

This meal represented much more than just the vital carbohydrate, proteins and other nutrients that Barry's body required to keep it functioning properly, because in his mind it was as if he was on death row and this was his last meal before the inevitable. He rummaged around in the back pocket of his battered blue jeans and found what he was looking for, a heavily fingered five pound note.

With the delightful prospect of fried fish and potato sliding down his throat, a little bit of enthusiasm for life was injected back into Barry's system. He first took a much-needed shower and afterwards, now cleansed, he looked around at the state of

his flat. He had never been the tidiest individual, slob may be a better description, but nevertheless, if this was to be his last hurrah he decided he wanted to go out in style. The flat was thoroughly cleaned, the lilo was dusted and the floor swept. Not owning any other possessions like tables, ornaments, television sets and other dust-collecting objects, the process didn't take very long.

His flat and body now clean, though not to the unnaturally immaculate state of Mr Merryweather's office, Barry felt pleased. The final thing for him to do before making off to his local chippy was to dispose of a couple of full bin bags. This included the one that had located within it the newspaper with the details of his only chance of saviour.

As Barry walked to his floor's refuse chute inside the tower block, the black bin liner containing his salvation began to split and stretch due to been accidentally overloaded, or had it? This surely was an unlikely coincidence, was this in fact some kind of divine intervention, or fate? A few moments more and the black plastic bag would break, revealing the details of the Chess Championship to our loser.

Completely oblivious to the enormity of what was taking place, Barry's walk was brisker than usual: he had grown unfathomably hungry from the physical exertion of sprucing up his homestead, and also because he hadn't eaten for a day and a half. Unfortunately this eagerness to stuff his face had thrown off fate's timing. Hoisting his bin bag into the refuse chute it broke a moment too late, releasing the contents into the dark abyss of the shaft never to be seen again, rather than onto the floor where it was supposed to land.

'That was lucky,' said Barry, looking at the torn bin liner held in his hand, 'could have made a right mess that.'

The chippy that Barry would be frequenting on this cold winter day was only a couple of minutes walk from the tower block where he lived; it was named Phil's Plaice. Barry had never visited it before since he was very strict with his finances, and he had to be because he'd been on a very tight budget since leaving prison, but now all that no longer mattered as he believed for all his discipline and hard work, he was still going back to the gutter.

Phil's Plaice was known to the locals as being far from the best location to go to get fish n chips; or, any other foodstuff on their menu for that matter. Everyone marvelled at how wondrous it was that the establishment had not been closed down by the authorities, and that Phil was not residing in jail, as the hygiene practices Phil's Plaice employed could be compared to the ones used in the third world.

The thing that kept the shop afloat was its very lucrative side business (or should I say real business) of lending and selling the dirtiest of the dirt, the lowest of the low, the cream of the filth barely legal erotic videos. Imported criminally from abroad, the content contained inside these movies could make Amsterdam's finest prostitutes blush.

The shop front acted as a good cover for the sale of smut because anyone walking down the street would just think the customer entering was innocently buying themselves some fish n chips, unaware of what transaction was really taking place. The videos and DVD's even came wrapped in newspaper to make them look like a recently bought portion of chips.

No man wants the rest of the world to think he is a dirty, perverted piece of slime, even though every man is. Phil knew this, and whilst his devious scheme was the product of a deranged mind, it was genius nonetheless, pulling him in a meaty cashpie of delight.

Deprived of this little titbit of information, Barry casually strolled into the chippy expecting a meal.

‘Could I have a portion of fish n chips please?’ said Barry, placing his tattered fiver on the counter.

Phil smiled at him, moved his head a bit closer to his customers face and whispered: ‘What do you really want?’

Barry was puzzled by this odd remark. ‘I er...really want fish n chips. This is a chippy isn’t it?’

‘Yeah...’ said a disgruntled Phil.

While the quality of explicit adult material on offer in Phil’s Plaice is of irreproachable brilliance, the same cannot be said for the food; after all, the fish n chip store is merely a façade. Barry was dished up discoloured chips riddled with eyes, and fish that had long since forgotten its sell-by date. The food was almost thrown at him because Phil was highly annoyed: sad and ugly men like Barry made up the significant bulk of his clientele, and if scum like this were no longer interested in his products anymore he wondered if he was losing his touch at gauging other men’s sick, sexual fantasies. He certainly had no intention of actually becoming a fulltime peddler of fish n chips anytime soon.

Maybe someone locally has opened up another smut store, thought Phil.

Barry, completely unaware of all the thought processes running through the mind of man in front of him asked: ‘Could I have salt and vinegar on them please?’

‘What? Oh yeah, sure...’

Phil’s voice was distant as he was wondering who could be moving in on his territory.

‘Do I get any change?’ asked Barry.

‘What?’

‘Any change—out of my fiver.’

‘Yeah here,’ said Phil impatiently, wanting to return to his paranoid thoughts.

His stomach still grumbling, Barry’s body didn’t realise a potentially lethal cocktail of pathogens, including bacteria, viruses and parasites lay before it. All it knew was that it needed nourishment and the disease-laced food looked extremely appetising. His mouth watered in anticipation of its first bite, knowing the natural high its brain would deliver for granting the body fuel.

It is curious, and also obviously beneficial to mankind how powerfully ingrained the survival instinct is inside the human body. The human body, what a remarkable machine, capable of doing many remarkable things: regulating its own core temperature, repairing itself unaided, equipped with thigh bones that are harder than concrete, nerve impulses that travel to and from the brain at up to one hundred and seventy miles per hour, blah, blah, etc etc. Yet for all this complex majesty and thousands of years of evolution, it was about to be outwitted by a scummy man called Phil who owned a sleazy porno store that masqueraded as a chippy.

In Barry’s right hand a large piece of rotten, encased-in-batter fish was speeding towards an expectant mouth, but he’d barely stepped out of Phil’s Plaice when a pair of meddlesome kids ran past, accidentally knocking the big bag of fish n chips onto the floor. The open bag then proceeded to roll through a muddy puddle, over a pile of dog faeces and into the road, where it was then promptly run over by a truck. Barry had to stop himself from dropping to his knees and holding his hands to the heavens in despair. The meddlesome kids in the meantime had not seemed to notice anything go amiss outside their own little fantasy world, and ran off round a corner to meet with their dealer.

Knowing he didn't have enough money for a fresh helping of poison, Barry inspected the crushed remainders of what was left of his meal on the tarmac to see if there was anything he could savage. It was a mark of just how desperate and hungry he was that he would consider eating it, and it is a fair bet that if he wasn't in broad daylight, and that if it wasn't a packed busy street, he would pick up and eat his sullied meal. Thankfully he didn't and even though his body didn't know it, it would have been grateful.

Just as Barry began to trudge back to his flat to again wallow in an even deeper depression and maybe eat some crackers with mouldy cheese, he noticed a headline on the tattered and torn newspaper that had been used to wrap up his now discarded fish n chips.

Regional Chess Championships set to take place at Town Hall. 1st place prize money £5000.

Chapter 10: Enter the Geeks

It appeared that fate was very insulted Barry had involuntarily attempted to cheat it and it wasn't going to let him escape that easily. Upon seeing the headline Barry quickly grabbed the newspaper from the road, shaking out the ruined food. He was no longer concerned with his hunger as that could wait. He read the article feverishly.

Regional Chess Championships set to take place at Town Hall. 1st place prize money £5000.

This year's regional Chess championship welcomes players of all ages. Entry for children under the age of sixteen is free. Adult entry: £20.00. All entrants must be at the Town Hall on the 19th of February at 8:00am sharp to register themselves and pay the entrance fee.

Any queries, contact Mrs Butler on 0137 657 2319

Barry's heart which momentarily had lifted sank back down into his stomach with a thump: where on Earth was he going to get twenty pounds? Twenty pounds for Barry was like asking a normal man for a million. Walking down the road, he knew it was going to be extremely difficult to get that sort of money as he no longer had a bank account, he had a number of credit card debts, phone debts, and he still hadn't paid last months rent. He hadn't actually racked up this debt since leaving prison: he had managed to acquire it before he went. So, all things considered, he was pretty much screwed.

Now sitting in his tiny flat Barry racked his brains to find a solution to his problem.

‘Twenty pounds... twenty pounds...twenty pounds...’

Barry spoke the words as if that would somehow help an easy answer materialise before his very eyes. It didn’t.

There in fact were five solutions that he could think of, but none of them were really ideal. The at-first-glance most attractive one was to attempt to fob himself off as under sixteen years of age so he could enter the tournament for free. This solution though carried with it a high probability of failure for Barry was thirty-four, balding and certainly not baby-faced.

The second solution was to hit the streets begging and looking for spare pennies on the floor. This already was one of his current pastimes that he had used to supplement his meagre income. Lamentably it was unlikely he’d be able to raise such a large amount of money in the short time period.

The third solution was to go over to his Mum’s house and ask her to loan him the cash, but he was sure her answer would be something along the lines of this.

‘To play chess! Have you gone mad? You want me to give you twenty pounds to play chess? You need to get your priorities right son. Get down the Jobcentre and get a real job.’

Barry couldn’t face his Mum anyway and ask her for money as his pride was getting in the way, making him prefer re-homelessness over asking her for help.

The fourth solution was to gamble, taking all his worldly possessions down to the pawnshop to trade them for cash. Alas, looking around his little bedsit, Barry wasn’t sure if all his worldly possessions would actually amount to twenty pounds. And then what if he lost? He’d only played a handful of bedraggled convicts inside Weirways, so he thought that they’d have real players at this tournament that might

casually destroy him was daunting. Another daunting thought was that if he did play and lose he'd end up with nothing and in an even worse situation than he was now.

The fifth solution was to kill himself.

Going to his Mum Maggie was almost unthinkable, trying to blag he was under sixteen was simply ludicrous, and not being able to afford a coffin made killing himself unfeasible as well. The only solutions that seemed the most appealing and viable were the second and the fourth. Barry decided in cheesy game show style he was going to gamble, only he wasn't gambling with a load of crappy prizes he didn't need: he was gambling with his future existence. If he came up short with the pawned possessions, he believed he'd be able to obtain the rest through begging and scanning the pavement for discarded coppers.

The pawnshop was run by a rodent of a man whose business thrived on desperation, and this man had developed an astute ability at assessing a person's level of anxiety when they walked through his shop doors. He instantly ascertained that the pale, drawn, unshaven face and watery eyes of Barry, who'd just walked into his lair, was beyond desperate and could be easily exploited.

Barry had bundled all his belongings into an abandoned shopping trolley to allow easier transportation of his things to the pawnshop. Outside his block of flats, along with an assortment of burnt-out cars, there just so happened to be many of these conveniently abandoned trolleys.

'I want to pawn some of these items.'

'Bring them up here then,' replied the shop owner in a quiet, rasping voice.

The worthless junk of Barry's life was brought up to the counter to be inspected. The man's rodent eyes shiftily scanned over the items.

‘This is just crap, it isn’t worth anything.’

‘Come on, something must be worth at least—’

‘Wait. This, I’ll give you fifteen pounds for this.’

The man was holding a priceless Broomfield family heirloom: Barry’s dead Grandma’s gold wristwatch, pried off her still-warm arm after she’d snuffed it. Even though he’d brought it down with him in the trolley, Barry had been hoping he wouldn’t have to sell it.

‘Twenty,’ said Barry.

‘It’s not worth twenty brand new.’

‘It’s worth a lot more than twenty. It’s an antique.’

‘I’m not buying it for twenty.’

‘Fine, I’ll go somewhere else then.’

Turning to walk out of the shop, taking his trolley with him, Barry was taking a big risk because he didn’t have anywhere else to go, he didn’t know where there were any other pawnshops and even if he did, he didn’t have any means of transport to get to them.

‘Okay, okay hold your horses. Alright twenty,’ said the pawnbroker begrudgingly.

The rat of a man had a look of pain etched on his face because he never liked parting with his money, so his customer almost had to tear the twenty pound note out of his crusty hand. The same could be said though for Barry as he passed over the watch. He resolved that if did manage to win the five grand he would pay to buy it back. He guessed that he would have to pay a ridiculously exorbitant price and endure an extremely self-satisfied grin from this weasel he had just done business with, but even so, it would be worth it.

For the next few days Barry sat in his flat, checking and rechecking when he had to be at the Town Hall for his judgement day just on the off chance he'd misread when he was supposed to be there. He also got some books on chess tactics out from the local library where he was now a regular, reading them with a scholarly passion. He wanted to be prepared for everything his opposition could throw at him, and while it's true it would have helped if he actually had access to a real chess set to practice his moves, he was so skint the thought of being able to buy one was nothing but a childish dream.

The night before the Chess Tournament that would decide his future, Barry tried with great difficulty to get to sleep on his swimming pool lilo bed. This was always a tricky task: the police sirens outside, loud expletives emanating from rowdy neighbours, the freezing cold of the unheated flat, and the general shoddiness of his makeshift mattress were all contributory factors, but tonight it was mostly because he was nervous. He thought about successful people and how they seemed to have the ability to focus only on triumph, defeat never entering their mind. This wasn't the case in Barry's mind though as the thought of failure was extremely prevalent.

When he did eventually drift into an uneasy sleep he experienced terrible nightmares, dreaming that Petrov had taught him a load of bogus rules because he never knew how to really play chess at all. Instead of being both a talented chess player and a mad axe-wielding murderer, he was merely just the latter. As it dawned on everybody in the Town Hall that Barry didn't know the actual real rules of chess, he was laughed and pointed at before being arrested.

Now standing in a courtroom with many smartly dressed people whose faces were obscured in darkness, Barry realised he was on trial.

'What's my crime?' asked Barry to the Judge in a terrified voice.

‘You’re being tried for not knowing the rules of chess.’

For some unknown reason Petrov was in the jury covered in blood, laughing manically.

‘It was him; it was him who taught me. I didn’t know.’

Sent back to Weirdways Barry met back up with all his old pals, the people who’d humiliated and beaten him. They weren’t what you would call the best type of friends a boy could have but then beggars like Barry can’t be choosers. Mr Merryweather was there, so was Grizzly, Crazy Craig was brandishing a shiv, and Sammy Nammy was pacing his cell back and forth.

Mr Merryweather showed Barry to his cell with Sammy and said in a sadistic voice: ‘Welcome home,’ before pushing him inside and locking the door.

An odd and alarming noise then began to ring in the Barry’s ears, to which Sammy looked at Barry curiously and said: ‘Shouldn’t you be getting up now?’

Almost jumping off his lilo, Barry remembered today was his day of judgement. He was covered in a cold sweat, but that didn’t matter for he had graver concerns. After eating a light breakfast, light not because he wanted it to be but because he was running seriously low on food stocks—things were getting Ethiopia-style desperate now—he got dressed and lifted the precious twenty-pound note from out under his pillow. If all went according to plan he’d be turning this twenty into five grand.

Paying for a bus fare to get to the Town Hall was obviously out of the question, so instead Barry would have the pleasure of some exercise, and the tournament venue being a considerable distance from his tower block meant he had to set out in the dark. Looking up at the stars that were still out, he thought back to the time he’d gotten kicked out of Euphoria Nightclub. Even though at the time he’d felt

miserable, the passage of time had mutated his perception of this memory into the belief that those had been the glory days.

There was only one other person up at this time, the milkman, and Barry made sure to avoid eye contact, recollecting he owed the milk merchant money, although the same could be said for about half of the population in his hometown.

Over the course of the long walk he saw the world awake before him and its inhabitants go about their daily business. He saw mankind rushing to work stressed, fatigued, annoyed and longing for answers or escape. It dawned on him they looked just as pathetic as he was, only they didn't know it. They sat in traffic jams, mere rats in a race all chasing the crumbs swept off life's table, wasting away their expendable existences.

This eye-opening moment cheered Barry slightly and he no longer felt as nervous as he had before: he understood that nothing really mattered, that he was just another conglomeration of molecules living on a speck of dirt drifting through infinity. Comforted by his and everyone else's worthlessness, he felt a little less pressure being exerted on him.

Arriving early at his destination, he was surprised to see there was a long queue populated by spotty-faced teenagers wearing Star Trek shirts. There was a heart-stopping moment where he felt as if he might have somehow read the date or time wrong on the newspaper because this surely was a geek convention, not a chess tournament. So, it was with considerable relief when he saw another geeky teenager wearing a t-shirt that read: *Chess Rules* excitedly talking to a friend about the upcoming tournament.

‘I really fancy my chances this year against Honeysuckle. I’ve been reading up on some new moves. You watch; I’ll be checkmating my way to five grand in record time.’

In accordance with the prospect of winning five thousand pounds for simply moving a few small lumps of plastic around on a piece of cardboard, there’d been a large turn out. The tiny drop of optimism Barry previously might have had rapidly evaporated. *How can I be the best out of all these? I bet they’ve played this game for years!* He pulled out his crisp twenty-pound note and looked at it with an utter sense of despondency, feeling beaten before he’d even begun.

The registration process was a straightforward affair. You first handed in your entrance fee, where upon you’d then be given a form to fill out asking for contact details and other personal information. Barry managed to encounter some difficulty with his form though, having to leave the space for a contact telephone number blank on account of his not possessing the means to afford such a luxury.

Once everybody had been put through the registration process the draw for the first round commenced. Every person entered into the tournament got their name placed in a box where they were then drawn out at random. The person who appeared to be in charge of the day’s proceedings was a Mrs Butler, and she was the one who read out in an annoyingly shrill voice the results of the draw.

‘D’Souza will be facing Gibbons. Jenkins will be facing Hutchinson.’

Barry nervously waited for his name to be called out, biting his fingernails in apprehension, fast gnawing his way to the quick.

‘Broomfield will be facing Jones.’

Scanning the room, trying to spot his opponent as if they might have *Jones* scrawled across their forehead, Barry needn't have bothered because right behind him he heard the voice of his foe.

‘Broomfield... Never heard of him before, must be a newbie.’

Another voice then chuckled. ‘You’ll destroy him then, the newbie’s never get past the first round.’

Furtively Barry glanced over his shoulder to see what his opponent looked like. To his horror it was the acne-faced teenager wearing the Chess Rules t-shirt. This was a crushing blow because in the first round he was going to face a seasoned veteran, a person who had undoubtedly years more chess experience under his belt than he had. *What chance do I have against such an opponent?* he thought lugubriously, wishing instead for a couple of easy matches first to get him warmed up and shake off any rust. Since leaving prison he hadn't actually played chess once. *Yep that's it, I'm done for. I might as well end it all right now in front of everyone.* Barry looked around, hoping to see a loaded shotgun lying nearby.

At this time, just minutes before the onset of his match against Jones, Barry needed a mental pick-me-up, an emotional lift. He wasn't going to get it. As he sat on his chair still biting his fingernails, a man sitting next to him noticed the crippling nerves that had beset Barry and the now nauseous green colour of his face.

‘Hey cheer up mate, it's only chess, if you lose you lose.’

‘You don't understand,’ said Barry. I've got a lot riding on this.’

‘What do you mean a lot riding on it? You don't actually think you're going to win do you?’

‘Well...it's possible.’

‘Yeah it's possible—if you think pigs can fly.’

‘Why can’t I win?’ said Barry, offended by this stranger’s know-it-all attitude.

‘Because there’s only ever two people who get to the final, Matthew Jones and Grace Honeysuckle.’

‘Jones?’ said Barry with a hint of trepidation.

‘Yeah, but he never wins. Honeysuckle beats him in the final every time. I’m surprised he keeps coming. He must reckon he’s going to beat her one of these days. She got to the national semis last year. She’s over there, look.’

The man gestured to a small girl who appeared to be aged only ten or eleven.

‘She’s just a kid!’ said Barry incredulously.

‘Yeah maybe, but she plays a mean game of chess.’

There was a silence before the man thought of something more to say. ‘So, who’re you playing then?’

‘Jones...’

The man roared with laughter and patted his new acquaintance on the back.

‘Hey it could have been worse: you could’ve been drawn against Honeysuckle.’

Matthew Jones had a fireball of energy flowing through him upon taking his seat opposite Barry. He gave one the impression he was about to engage in a bout of fisticuffs as opposed to partaking in the civilised game of chess.

What was different though about this particular game compared to any games of chess Barry had participated in before was that it was being played under a tournament format, and so hence the chess clock situated on his desk.

‘What do I do with this?’ asked Barry pointing to the double-faced clock.

Some onlookers laughed thinking it was a joke, but Jones realised the newbie wasn’t joking and answered Barry’s question with a mocking air of contempt.

‘You press it after you make a move. You have thirty minutes and I have thirty minutes. You have to make forty moves in that time, which means you should try to make a move about every forty-five seconds.

All this was a new concept for Barry: he’d expected to simply play regular chess. In fact it was foolish of him to think this because a chess match can go on for hours, and in a tournament that has to be completed in a day this’d be impossible. The longest he’d ever played chess before was about fifty minutes but his best opponent—Petrov—usually lost in quicker time, so he didn’t realise this.

‘What if you don’t make forty moves in thirty minutes?’ asked Barry, feeling embarrassed by his naivety.

‘Then you lose, unless I don’t have enough material left on the board to checkmate you,’ replied the overcome-with-boredom Jones. ‘I wouldn’t worry about that anyway since I expect I’ll checkmate you in under my thirty minutes.’

‘Oh, well that’s reassuring,’ said Barry, beginning to feel a distinct dislike for his opponent.

Once Barry had been told everything he needed to know, the first round of the tournament began. Nobody gave Barry even the remotest chance of progressing to the second round because of the thirty-one other, highly-skilled competitors. The vast majority of people in the hall were there just as spectators, aware that mere mortals wouldn’t have stood a chance against the unforgiving quality of the opposition.

Jones began his game with a smug, I’m-going-to-trounce-you-into-the-ground look on his face, so it was remarkable how quickly it was replaced by a, Dear-God-I’m-getting-my-arse-handed-to-me-on-a-plate one. Under Barry’s unrelenting

pressure attack Jones began to look around to his friends for help, who in response could only shrug and display a mixture of shock and surprise.

Barry had a peculiar style of playing the game of chess: he'd hunch his shoulders over the table and keep his head unusually close to the board. Playing in this what might be considered odd way, allowed him to more successfully shutout the outside distractions that might disrupt his laser focus. And it was this strategy, combined with Barry's raw genius that would prove invaluable.

The presence of the chess clock to keep the pace moving actually played into Barry's hands: forty-five seconds seemed like an unheard amount of time to make a move for Barry, and he needed instead just five to ten before placing Jones back under the cosh. Every brain cell, every ounce of his intellect was focused on the devastation of his opponent because this was no friendly chess game, but rather a war. The war was a short one, with Jones getting dispatched within twenty minutes to the utter disbelief of onlookers.

Barry hadn't forgotten Jones's nasty demeanour before their match and he felt like saying, still think chess rules do you, in reference to his absurdly geeky t-shirt, but instead decided to be the cordial gentlemen. 'Good game mate, better luck next year.'

Jones had the look of a man who'd just seen a ghost.

The man that said pigs had a better chance of flying than Barry had of beating Jones earlier, whispered in Barry's ear: 'I don't think he knows what's hit him.'

Jones had to be helped out of his seat and escorted home by his friends who kindly supported his weight with their arms.

Feeling ecstatic not only because he'd made it into the second round against all the odds, but also down to the manner of his victory, Barry leaned back in his chair

and couldn't wipe away the self-satisfied grin. He had beaten one of the tournament favourites in twenty minutes of perfectly executed chess. He didn't have too long to bask in his glory though because the tournament was moving along at a frenetic pace, with a lot of chess having to be crammed into a single day.

The next opponent on Barry's hit list was Mary Hutchinson, at first glance a far more likeable character than Jones. Be that as it may, first glances can be deceiving.

Hutchinson, the mother of three who looked as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, had a devious tactic to improve her chances of success: she used guilt to great effect.

Upon meeting each other Mary said to Barry: 'Go easy on me will you, I'm only a woman.'

Smiling genially, Barry thought this might be a tactic to put him off his game in view of the fact that Mary had wiped the floor with her previous opponent, and hadn't shown any of the mercy that she seemed to expect in return. He was then made to feel even more uncomfortable when Mary informed him the only reason she'd turned up was because she was a single mother, who'd recently got laid off and was struggling to support her three kids. The cherry on this trifle of tragedy was that her ex-husband was described as a deadbeat alcoholic, who'd beaten her, the children, and some old people for a cheap laugh.

While having this guilt trip laid upon him Barry just wanted her to shut up seeing how he needed the money as desperately as anyone. He nodded politely but tried as best he could to block out the remorse that pulled at his heart strings.

As many parents will know children have a very annoying habit of saying the wrong thing, at the wrong time, in front of the wrong people, but in this case it served to help Barry.

‘Mummy, are you telling lies again so that you can win?’

The brutal truth of this comment gave Barry a valuable insight into his opponents mind and he no longer felt any shame in savagely beating her (at chess).

What really shocked Barry was Mary’s reaction to her child’s five-grand clanger. A stern look, a few choice words, or even a smack on the backside may be expected punishments for the child’s tactlessness. Although granted, asking a child to think before they speak in delicate social situations is like asking a tiger politely not to kill and eat you, even though you’re so tasty. Instead Mary futilely attempted to pretend this pint-sized person wasn’t hers at all.

‘It’s not my kid. I’ve never seen this disgraceful excuse for a youngster before in my life.’

The child looked very confused. Another nipper who was a few years older came over to the table.

‘Mum can I have some money for some sweets. There’s a shop outside across the road.’

The smallest child spoke. ‘Can I have some too Mummy.’

‘Come on Mum, Lauren wants some too. 50p each would be enough,’ said the eldest child.

Mary was not giving up, turning back to Barry to say: ‘I’m telling you, I’ve never seen these kids before. They must be crazies escaped from the local mental asylum.’

The oldest child looked momentarily puzzled until realisation dawned on him upon glancing into his mother’s dangerous eyes.

‘Come on sis lets go. I think we got the wrong person, you’re not our mother at all, you er—just sort of look like her...’

Feeling abhorred at how some people were willing to casually sacrifice their morality for victory and a roll of banknotes, Barry showed no mercy at quickly finishing off Mary Hutchinson. The only thing he regretted was the punishment the two innocent children might have to endure for scuppering their mother's deceitful scheme.

He needn't have worried too much though since the children were only given fifty lashes each with a cat o' nine tails.

Barry continued to blitz through the opposition until he found himself in the final, it appearing, just maybe, that pigs could indeed fly.

It had been a long tiresome day, this was to only be Barry's fourth game of chess in the tournament, but he'd spent a lot of time waiting around doing nothing other than scoping out his adversaries. It was now eight o'clock in the evening and he'd been in the Town Hall for twelve hours. The adrenaline that had pumped all day through his veins had successfully kept him going so far, but by now he was desperately hungry. He hadn't eaten properly for three days because of his dire financial situation, and his body, weakened by this nutritional deficit made a feeling of wooziness overcome him. The chance to save his existence was being placed in serious jeopardy. It didn't matter that he had all the raw cognitive power in the world because without a healthy body for that mind to live inside, it all meant nothing.

The person Barry had to face in the final was the favourite, Grace Honeysuckle, the adorable little girl who had the crowd wrapped around her finger. She had blonde hair styled into pigtails, sapphire eyes set into her cute face, and brilliant white teeth locked behind shiny metal braces. And despite these shiny metal

braces she wasn't afraid to show a beautiful smile that simply melted the hearts of the onlookers.

The crowd on the other hand didn't know what to make of Barry. Here was this skeletal, sickly, ugly, balding middle-aged man that looked like he belonged in cardboard box under a motorway overpass. It was very clear to Barry that he had absolutely everybody rooting for him to lose, and who could blame them as it had been that way since he could remember.

As the two unlikely combatants took their place on their battleground, the crowd cheered its appreciation.

'Come on Honeysuckle, do him over.'

'KILL HIM KILL HIM KILL HIM.'

Now sitting in his seat, Barry's mind was having a hard time concentrating on its task. He glanced around at the faces in the crowd and everywhere he looked his eyes were greeted with people stuffing their chubby faces. A young boy enthusiastically tore into a two pound roll of salami like a starved Yorkshire terrier, while his father standing beside him deep-throated a foot long hotdog. The obscenely long sausage, which had vibrant yellow mustard sitting along the top caused Barry's mouth to slaver and his eyes burn with desire because it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

He ripped his gaze away to rid himself of the cravings that drove him to the edge. The gallant attempt to regain control over his faculties was in vain, for he now saw an obese woman wearing a greasy t-shirt that paralleled her greasy, soaked in chip-fat hair, completely oblivious to where she was, deliriously devouring a giant slice of pizza.

It was mayhem inside Barry's head as his nose, more acutely sensitive to the smell of food that lingered in the air because his stomach hadn't touched solid sustenance in more than three days, tempted him to do something silly. Crazy thoughts began to enter his mind, like unloading a titanic uppercut on the small boy with the salami and robbing him of his meat treat, or rugby tackling the man with the hotdog, and like a rabid beast pulling the foot long out of his mouth with his gnashers. Although even in Barry's famished state, he wasn't willing to take on the extremely large woman with the pizza as she looked like she'd fight tooth and nail to rescue her meal.

The game of chess commenced, but with Barry's mind on his stomach rather than his opponents play he very quickly began to lose pieces. He just couldn't concentrate on what he was doing, simply focusing was impossible, basic moves and problems he could normally overcome with ease now posed immense difficulty. Little Grace Honeysuckle wasted no time in exploiting her opponent's weakness. It looked very much like Barry wasn't going to win the five grand after all. He began to lose hope.

He uttered under his breath, recounting some Shakespeare he'd read in prison: 'A hotdog, a hotdog, my existence for a hotdog.'

As you can see from this ridiculous remark, he really was suffering.

The first significant blow dealt to Barry was when he lost his queen. The loss of Barry's most powerful piece made him audibly sigh in resignation. Honeysuckle, along with the rest of the crowd noticed this sign of weakening and could see before them a beaten man, it only being a matter of time before he'd succumb to the onslaught.

The onlookers were joyous. 'Finish him Grace, he's had it.'

Grace smiled broadly, her braced teeth glinted and her eyes sparkled at the smell of blood.

Barry was so weak now his hands began to shake as he moved his pieces upon the board. Intermittently he'd rub his forehead with his quivering fingertips, hardly even looking at the game anymore that was deciding his future.

The crowd in its excitement and desire for their heroine to win hadn't noticed Barry's sorry physical state, and even if they had of they wouldn't have cared less: Honeysuckle was their darling and they all wanted was the ugly man to fade away into the night, hopefully to never show his face again.

One person that did notice Barry's distress though was Mrs Butler, the event organiser. Despite secretly hoping Grace would be triumphant, she was doing her job well by remaining impartial.

'Do you need to take a short break Mr Broomfield?'

The crowd instantly expressed its disapproval at this question on account of it being late, and everyone wanting to finish watching Grace's success so they could all go home to soak in a nice bloodbath.

At first Barry didn't really see the point in prolonging the inevitable any longer either, as he was almost 100 percent certain he was going to fail and lose the match. But after a couple of moments to consider Mrs Butler's offer, he decided to take it: Feeling like he might pass out at any moment and sweating profusely due to stress, taking a break to visit the toilet where he could wash his face and get an interlude from the stuffy, suffocating atmosphere in the hall might help him feel a little better. It would at least let him go out with a shred of dignity intact because at the present moment he looked like a crumbled wreck of a man.

'Okay I will take a short break, thank you.'

The crowd let out a loud groan and Barry was sure he could hear one person say: ‘What’s the point? He’s lost anyway.’

Standing in the Town Hall’s deserted toilet, his weight leaning against a wash basin, Barry stared into the mirror, examining the drawn, sallow face that looked back at him. Dark rings hung under his eyes, he was exhausted, and having only been granted a five minute break in accordance with chess tournament rules, he felt that what he really needed was a week.

There was a small window in the toilet wall and Barry looked at it nervously: a cowardly voice in his head urged him to escape out of it and to never look back. He consciously silenced the voice, knowing that he was a man and had to face the music like one. Even though he foresaw an extremely bleak future for himself, he had to stand and expect that he’d come up short in the game of life. Grabbing a paper towel from the dispenser he mopped his brow, attempted to straighten out his dishevelled hair, held his head high and proceeded to stroll out to his destiny.

Throwing the paper towel in the toilet waste paper basket, Barry noticed something, a divinely beautiful thing, an exquisite, superb item, the presence of which a remarkable stroke of luck that surely couldn’t be coincidence: inside the bin were the half-eaten remains of a beef burger. To the average person this wouldn’t evoke such powerfully positive feelings, but then Barry isn’t an average person.

There’s nobody here. No one would be any the wiser. He quickly grabbed the half-eaten burger and devoured it, not stopping to think for a second about hygiene as that seemed at this present time insignificant.

To any well-fed observer looking on, they might have believed Barry’s life had reached a new all-time low. Even during his stay in the Hickeys he’d never had to

resort to eating out of a bin. On the contrary though, his life was now about to take a sharp turn for the better.

The half-eaten, slightly funky-smelling burger had given Barry the little burst of energy he'd needed, not enough to stem his hunger pangs but just sufficient to allow his mind to focus back on the chess match. Whether it had been sent by the Gods to aid his quest, or some bloke who'd thought it tasted like crap and threw it away didn't matter: the discarded beef burger rejuvenated him and breathed new life into his body. Sitting back down on his chair opposite little Grace Honeysuckle, Barry looked back down at the board with a fresh eye.

Bollocks.

The situation was dire; he needed something nigh on a miracle if he was going to salvage his future.

To everyone in the room it appeared Mr Broomfield was hopelessly outmatched because he had hardly any pieces left. That was it appeared hopeless to everyone apart from Barry's supercomputer mind. Almost without consciously thinking he began to see the solutions to his problems, hardly being able to believe it himself.

'Okay, are you both ready to resume?' asked Mrs Butler.

To the crowd this all seemed like a pointless formality since the ugly man was surely beaten. People rudely even began congratulating Miss Honeysuckle.

'Well done Graciekins. Can I have an autograph? A strand of hair? A vial of your blood?'

Grace politely nodded and beamed a broad, annoying smile. Her concentration was no longer on the game but what she was going to buy with the money, assuming, along with the rest of the room that she'd already won.

Amongst all this assuming that was going on, Barry's head was close to the board scanning for all the endless possibilities. As the crowd cheered oafishly for their princess, his mind was working. These were precious moments.

The chess clock was restarted from the position it had been left in before the break and the game commenced. Barry quickly took a rook and a couple of pawns, yet nobody really saw any danger to Miss Honeysuckle's title. Barry knew better, but there was one problem: he was running out of time. Nervously glancing at the clock he was agitated by what he considered stalling tactics on his opponent's behalf. In truth Grace wasn't stalling at all because she was still unaware of her peril, it was merely the copious amount of adrenaline flowing through Barry's system as to why time had seemed to slow down.

Barry executed his moves with as much stealth as he could muster under the time constraints, not wanting to alert Miss Honeysuckle to his newfound form and put her on the defensive. Nevertheless, Barry couldn't take a too-sly approach because time was fast running out. Starting to sweat again he looked at the clock. There were five minutes left to win the match and it had to be a checkmate because there was no way he could capture enough of his opponent's pieces in time to win on the most material left rule.

Despite her chess set beginning to sustain casualties, Grace Honeysuckle was hardly even looking at the board anymore; she was busy signing autographs and chatting with her fans, even having the audacity to pose for a few photos. Barry was astonished at this level of impudence and disrespect, but also secretly prayed his opponent continued to be distracted by her minions.

Under these concealing circumstances he set his trap and watched with wide eyes to see what Miss Honeysuckle would do. He never looked up once from the

board because he thought she might see through his poor attempt at a poker face, that she might comprehend from the desperate expression he was sure he'd convey, that he now was one move away from an unbelievable comeback.

Grace yawned, glanced at the board and had to be prompted that it was her turn to move.

'Erm—there, that'll do.' She asked Mrs Butler, apparently too lazy to turn her head towards the clock to look for herself: 'How much time is left anyway?'

'About ten seconds, just enough for Mr Broomfield to make one last move. I don't suppose it matters anyway.'

Ten seconds was all the time Barry needed. As Mrs Butler began to hand a large novelty cheque over to a smiling little girl, Barry uttered a word that silenced the crowd and wiped away Grace's angelic smile. In fact it was not only her smile that sagged, as everyone's in the hall hung slack except one. The solitary smile left emanated from Barry's face and he found it to be quite an unusual sensation after nearly forgetting what smiling felt like. Having been through so much heartbreak in his life, here was something he could be proud of, a real success, his only success, and of course the five grand was a pleasurable bonus too.

The word that had created this impact: checkmate.

Chapter 11: Curly Fries with My Digital Camera Please

‘It can’t be checkmate, it can’t be...’

Unsuccessfully attempting to hide his glee, Barry shrugged and said: ‘Sorry, but it is.’

‘No, you don’t understand, I-I I had the game won.’ Grace Honeysuckle looked out to the crowd, her eyes welling up with tears before she turned back to her opponent. ‘You must have cheated.’

Barry was shocked by this unfounded accusation. ‘How could I of possibly cheated in front of everybody?’

Grace’s very intimidating—not to mention large—father stormed over and hugged the frail frame of his daughter. ‘Don’t worry apple blossom, the man’s just mean. Daddy will still buy you a new pony.’

He stroked the golden hair of his beloved daughter with loving tenderness, while at the same time managing to look menacingly at Barry with an icy, hate-filled stare that would frighten death itself.

Barry had expected to be a hero for pulling off such a fantastic comeback, but instead he was the villain who’d crushed a little girl’s dreams. So, he felt great relief when someone of sane mind spoke up on his behalf.

‘He didn’t cheat. He couldn’t have because I was here the whole time.’

Although Barry was grateful for Mrs Butler’s words of support, she regretted them and would continue to do so for a very long time. How long do multiple brain haemorrhages take to heal anyway? The crowd’s building fury was now directed towards her.

‘You were the one who allowed him to have a break.’

‘Yeah she did. They must’ve been in it together, Broomfield and you;
COLLABORATORS.’

‘This is nonsense,’ said Mrs Butler in her defence, looking mortified at the fire in the eyes of the bristling crowd, ‘it is clearly written in the rules that a player can have a five-minute break.’

‘I bet they’re going to split the winnings,’ piped in another Honeysuckle fan, enraging the crowd still further.

Being accustomed to hate mobs baying for his blood what with the wrath of the Broomfield Busters still fresh in his memory, Barry began to slip out of the room, quietly taking his large novelty cheque with him. The crowd hadn’t noticed: its increasing resentment was still focused upon Mrs Butler. Nudging the door open as quietly as he could, he knew that in just a few more moments he’d be outside and then away into the night.

‘Creeeeaaakk,’ said the door.

Barry didn’t think it was possible that the opening of a door could create such a racket. Every head turned to face him.

‘The cheater’s trying to escape with my money! GET HIM,’ screamed Grace.

Pandemonium ensued as chairs and tables were flung out of the way as people raced to try to catch Barry, while inside the Town Hall a full-scale riot ensued.

Now running down the street, large novelty cheque still in hand, Barry needed every kilojoule of energy the discarded beef burger could give him because Grace’s lapdogs were hot on his heels. As he ran he could hear behind him shrill screams and the smashing of glass. The Town Hall was being torn apart.

Barry, knowing he was no Linford Christie recognised his only chance for escape was to run into the Hickey Hills and hide. Fortunately he was very close to the

woods, and with his pursuers not far behind, and Barry, petrified of what they might do if they caught up with him, ran off the illuminated road and melted into the darkness of the trees.

Moving between the foliage with fleet-footed agility and near silence, Barry left his enemy behind, scratching their heads as to where he went: he'd previously spent countless hours moving through his woods, remaining unseen from the world, and those skills he'd learnt served him well now. The pursuers strained their senses for a sign of their prey's whereabouts but it was hopeless, as they'd lost track of him almost the instant he'd left the road for the trees.

Sitting on a dank wooden bench upon the Hickey's highest hill, Barry caught his breath. He was no longer worried about the idiots chasing him anymore because he knew he'd hear them from a mile away if they tried to close in, to which he'd just simply blend into the trees and lose them again. Still clutching the cheque in his hand he gazed serenely down upon his hometown. The Town Hall where he'd earned his precious prize could be clearly seen: it was engulfed in flames. Barry hoped nobody had gotten hurt, well nobody apart from everybody.

While the conflicting thoughts of not knowing whether to hate the world or love it (the acquisition of five thousand pounds was doing strange things to Barry's usual perception that planet Earth was an utterly terrible place to live) a small Fallow Deer trotted up to the bench. *The animals here still know me.*

A moment of tranquillity washed over him as he stroked the deer's tiny head. The animal was not remotely afraid because it remembered this man had given it food occasionally in the past. When the deer realised Barry didn't have any food it bit him

and promptly left. In the aftermath of this minor incident, Barry concluded that he still hated the universe.

Recalling his existence in the woods as a terrible time where he'd endured cold, hunger and animal attack, it didn't pain Barry too greatly to leave the Hickeys behind. Walking back to his crummy bedsit took a while, and when he did finally arrive at his decrepit home in the early hours of the following morning, for the first time ever the multi-coloured inflatable lilo that served as his mattress looked like a very welcoming prospect. After propping his large novelty cheque against a barren wall, he drifted into a pleasant sleep.

There was a series of loud bangs that made Barry awake from the first truly satisfying night's sleep he'd had in a number of months. Slowly, his brain got itself organised and informed its owner that somebody was knocking heavily on his door, which it found to be quite annoying what with having just been experiencing such an agreeable night of downtime.

Wondering who it could possibly be Barry sat up and rubbed his eyes before hazarding a guess. *I bet it's the milkman.*

The initial feeling of annoyance he'd had was replaced by fear because he owed the milkman a good deal of money, and not only that but this milkman just so happened to be a rather robustly-built fellow.

Answering the door nervously, Barry had his cheque in hand to prove he now had acquired some finances and would be able to pay him. Barry's worrying was unnecessary as it turned out not to be the milkman at all.

'Hello, is your name Mr Broomfield?'

‘Yes,’ answered Barry cautiously, it being prudent considering the area in which he lived to be wary of strangers.

‘Hello, my name is Mr Kenderick. I’m here as a representative for the National Chess Association.’

Barry’s heart immediately sank. ‘You’re here to take my winnings back aren’t you? I won that game fair and square. I didn’t cheat honest.’

Mr Kenderick waved his hands. ‘No no Mr Broomfield, you don’t understand, I know that you didn’t cheat and I’m not here to take your winnings. Mrs Butler informed me of your remarkable comeback and resilience before she had to have her jaw wired shut.’

‘Have her jaw wired shut!’

‘Ah yes—it was quite an ugly scene at the Town Hall I’m afraid, Mrs Butler, god bless her soul, suffered quite a bit. I notice you seem to be unscathed...’

Barry thought this was an insult aimed at his cowardice. ‘I just got out of there as fast as I could. What else was I supposed to do? I couldn’t take on a whole crowd of people, I’m not Superman.’

‘Of course, I’m not blaming you Mr Broomfield. We hadn’t realised that people could get so passionate about a civilised game of chess. Next year it’ll be a different story, there’ll be armed police officers riding upon warrior elephants to keep the hooligans under control.’

‘Oh, okay, erm, how is Mrs Butler anyway?’ asked Barry.

‘Not so good, along with the broken jaw she’s had half-a-dozen teeth knocked out, four ribs broken—’

Barry’s mouth hung agape. He remembered Mrs Butler had appeared to be such a decent woman. *How could those animals...No*, thought Barry, *that would be*

disrespectful to the animal kingdom. Even animals aren't capable of committing acts of such abhorrence.

Barry felt thoroughly appalled but Mr Kenderick hadn't finished.

‘—a broken collar bone, a broken arm, a fractured skull, a cracked knee cap, a crushed hand, and substantial swelling, mostly on the face. She's a positive old thing though, she wrote on a piece of paper only this very morning that eating her food through a straw isn't really all that bad.’

Gasping, Barry was absolutely mortified seeing how it could've been him on the receiving end of those injuries! He felt truly awful for poor Mrs Butler as well, a frail old woman who'd just done something helpful for the community had been savaged. Part of him felt that it was his fault because if he hadn't of won the game in the first place the savaging would've never occurred.

Mr Kenderick noticed the anguish in Barry's face. ‘Don't blame yourself Mr Broomfield. You couldn't have known they'd react like that.’

‘Well,’ said Barry, coming to terms with the frightening capacity for violence average people possessed, ‘if you're not here to take my winnings off me, why are you here? And come to think of it, how did you even know where I live?’

‘You wrote your address on the entrance form at the tournament, remember? By some small miracle it managed to survive the fire.’

‘Oh yeah,’ said Barry, recalling the inferno and the entrance form. ‘Was anybody hurt in the blaze?’

‘No unfortunately, those thugs all got out alive. There's just no justice is there? Anyway, I'm here because you're now our region's representative in the national finals.’

Comprehension dawned on Barry as he suddenly remembered some small print underneath the article from the newspaper about the winner going onto further competition.

‘I would’ve phoned you only you didn’t leave a number on your contact form. In fact the details of the finals should’ve all been laid out to you straight after you won but you had to leave in such a hurry that they couldn’t. Mrs Butler was, as we both know a little preoccupied.’

Yeah, thought Barry, a little preoccupied getting her head kicked in.

‘Is there going to be prize money again?’ he asked optimistically.

‘Why yes of course. I think this year first place receives fifty grand.’

Barry’s eyebrows rose so high they almost disconnected from his face. ‘Fifty grand!’

‘Not bad eh?’ said Mr Kenderick, noticing from Barry’s spartan living arrangements, undernourished body, and that he’d had to visit probably the most dilapidated building in town, fifty grand would most certainly be welcomed.

Barry invited Mr Kenderick inside, with the purpose of discussing the matter of the national tournament further at greater comfort, but since there were no chairs Mr Kenderick had to stand, while Barry sat at first on his lilo, before opting to stand too because he felt uncomfortable having to crane his neck upwards. The thought occurred to Mr Kenderick that he may as well have continued to stand outside Barry’s front door, as it was a far pleasanter place to be compared to the little hellhole he now found himself inside.

Following some small talk, Barry was handed a formal letter that was addressed to him.

Dear Mr Broomfield:

On behalf of the English Chess Association, we are very pleased to accept you to the national chess championship finals commencing on the 26th this month.

The address for the event is as follows:

Empire Hotel,

Chandelier Ballroom,

Stonepits Road,

Kensington,

London.

We will be expecting you to arrive at 11:00pm on the 25th. If for some reason you cannot attend please inform us with a letter or telephone call, preferably a week in advance.

Accommodation will be allocated to you inside the Empire 5 star Hotel free of charge.

Yours sincerely,

Mr S. Gallagher, President of the ECA.

The letter with its regal symbols conveyed to Barry that this was a monumental event, and not the comparatively basic affair he had been involved in the night before.

‘This all sounds a bit serious doesn’t it?’ he said, his brow furrowing as he read the letter a second time.

‘Well that’s because it is lad, these are the national finals.’

Barry suddenly felt ruffled: he had been so focused on winning the five grand he hadn’t considered the possible ramifications of actually being successful.

‘How can I be good enough to face the best players in the country?’

‘Look,’ answered Mr Kenderick, ‘you have to remember that you deserve to be there. And besides, even if you lose you get to stay in a 5-star hotel. That can’t be bad now can it? I mean it’ll certainly beat staying here. I’ve seen down and out smackheads live in better conditions.’

Mr Kenderick’s face turned from jovial to apologetic because he thought he may have overstepped the mark by insinuating Barry’s home was not a very nice place to live. Barry however, well aware his residence was a dump was not in the least bit offended.

‘Yeah—yeah...’ said Barry, his second yeah uttered with greater chirpiness.

Beginning to think of the positives, Barry realised if he lost what did it matter, he’d done well to get this far and he now believed he should just enjoy the ride for as long as it continued to last. He’d also never stayed in a 5-star hotel before. The hotels he’d stayed in didn’t leave complimentary mints on your pillow: instead the pillow gave you complimentary flea bites. Only being able to imagine what the Empire Hotel would be like inside, he now earnestly looked forward to finding out.

Once Mr Kenderick had left it was now up to Barry to begin the enjoyable business of spending his winnings. The first port of call after depositing the money in the bank was the pawnshop, to buy back his deceased grandma’s watch.

‘Sorry mate can’t help ya; sold that a couple of days ago.’

This is exactly what Barry feared would happen and had braced himself for this news just in case of its occurrence.

‘It was a sacrifice I had to make,’ Barry thought. ‘Grandma wouldn’t mind.’

Regardless of the logical arguments he used to justify the loss of the gold watch, Barry still felt disconsolate about the matter. This could’ve been because he remembered how he’d helped to not only remove the wristwatch from his dead Grandma’s wrist, but also the gold fillings from her teeth.

After Barry had paid off the debts on his credit cards, his various bank account overdrafts, and the multitude of people that he owed money to, there was very, very little of that five grand left. Perversely what remained totalled exactly twenty pounds, the price Barry had sold the watch for and the price of the entrance fee to the chess tournament.

With his twenty pounds he bought something that was currently far more useful than an antique timepiece by restocking some of his food supplies. The twenty pounds worth of provisions purchased from the local supermarket would have to last the two weeks till he went to the Empire Hotel. But after his brief stay in London, he understood all too well he’d have to come up with some other means of making money.

Although a huge burden had been lifted off Barry’s shoulders once he’d paid off all his debts, he still wished there’d been a bit more money left for himself because what was didn’t go very far, and didn’t buy a whole lot of food. He was going to be living on a diet of processed cheese, bread, Weetabix, crackers, milk, bananas and water until the national championships.

Lying on his lilo that night Barry didn't feel as exuberant as he'd expected to the day after winning five grand, but instead rather hungry.

The two weeks until his upcoming stay at the London's Empire Hotel were painfully dull. Sitting in his drab, sombre flat with only himself for company, Barry felt terribly depressed. He had expected the financial relief the five grand brought would pull him out of his despair, but in truth the cash injection had only momentarily stalled his financial destitution. Still poverty stricken, the only difference the money had made in life was that he didn't have anybody knocking on the door wanting to break his legs anymore.

To pass the time he now had copious amounts of, he'd been applying for jobs, throwing out application forms like confetti, but all to no avail. Barry needed money fast and unless he found a job soon he'd be in a lot of trouble.

One benefit of being unemployed was that he could spend his time constructively, sleeping, reading books, playing with his bellybutton fluff, or practicing some of his craftiest chess manoeuvres on his new set. Yes that's right; Barry was now actually in the possession of a fully-functional chess set. While it wasn't quite up to the stringent English Chess Association's rules and regulations, it was the best he could muster under the circumstances.

The board itself had been cut from a discarded box of Weetabix, the breakfast cereal that formed one of the staple foods in Barry's diet. And using a felt tip pen, he drew on the blank inside of the cereal box the recognizable chequered design of a chess board.

The most ingenious part of his set however was the extraordinary conglomeration of household items that formed the pieces. Unused condoms still in their foil containment that had passed their use by date during Barry's adolescence formed the bulk of his armies: they were the pawns. Salt and pepper shakers were the two kings, the rooks were pencil sharpeners, cans of coke were the bishops, the queens were empty tomato ketchup bottles, and the knights were paperclips. And to differentiate which items belonged to which side they were labelled with a B or a W.

Obviously not able to afford a TV, and having to sell his radio for cash a long time ago, Barry spent a substantial quantity of his time playing with his toy. He also spent quite a bit of time playing with his chess set, partially because he had nothing better to do, but also because he felt he'd need all the practice he could get if he was to face the most skilled chess masters of Britain in just two weeks.

After fourteen long and uneventful days of playing chess against himself on his improvised set, and applying for a wide variety of occupations ranging from postman to egg packer, Barry was ready to embark on his journey to London. It was the first time he'd ever been to his nation's capital and he felt very excited about the prospect.

'Me in the big city, in a 5-star hotel no less; I feel like royalty.'

As Barry didn't own a car anymore (his Volkswagen Golf was still rusting on that deserted mud track in the middle of the Hickey Woods) the public train would act as his royal carriage. Thankfully the cost of the tickets had been paid for otherwise he might have had to resort to selling one of his organs on the black market to pay for them.

Having never used public transport a great deal in the past, Barry was like a piglet being put through a sausage-making machine: he could do complex mathematic

calculations in his head and memorize whole books after one read, but the intricacies of the rail service's platforms and stations were a world he could only dream of unravelling.

'Are you okay? You seem lost,' said a woman's voice.

Barry was staring at a large electronic railway timetable with glazed eyes and a vacant expression on his face. He knew he was in London, just where exactly he wasn't sure, and how he was going to get to where he needed to go was another matter entirely.

Masses of people expended their life clocks around the two figures, who were a singularly distinctive pair as they stood still amongst the racing sacks of meat that buzzed around them. The horde, too busy with their mundane and insignificant lives, took no notice of the profound connection taking place.

The woman looked puzzled and thought about turning to leave. She stepped back half a pace but something internal, something altogether visceral made her stay. Barry had heard the quiet feminine voice but assumed it had been directed at someone else: accustomed to being deemed invisible by mankind, he'd never thought it possible someone would notice his presence inside this large building with there being, as he perceived, so many other—better meat sacks.

The woman lightly touched Barry's left arm. 'I said are you lost?'

Barry turned and looked down at the woman's face. His eyes were watering slightly from a gust of cold wind that had hit them.

'I am,' he replied meekly.

Observing a pretty face enclosed by dark glossy hair, Barry felt it a shame the cute features were hidden behind a large pair of black-rimmed glasses, the lenses of

which were as thick as jam jar bottoms. This optical modification made the woman's dark eyes look extremely large. She was clearly a fucking geek.

'I've been trying to figure out these timetables but I just can't make head or tail of them.'

'Yeah it can be confusing,' said the woman sympathetically.

With his unenviable ability to say the exactly wrong thing at the wrong time, Barry said off handily: 'Yeah, I mean it must be especially hard for you, what with the eyesight issue.'

The woman was momentarily stunned before recovering and saying: 'Where do you want to go?'

'I want to get to Kensington High Street Station.'

The woman's eyes lit up and the effect was quite considerable taking into account the magnification level of her glasses.

'That's where I'm going! You can tag along with me if you like.'

'Okay, great,' said Barry.

He followed his new companion and as they walked he attempted to make small talk, something that he'd never been very good at.

'So...you from London then?' asked Barry.

'No, just visiting.'

'Me too, I'm here to play some chess at the Empire Hotel.'

'You're joking,' the young woman's eyes were absolutely huge now and her mouth was agape, 'me too, at the national chess tournament. How mad is this?'

Chapter 12: Smell Me

Even after establishing they were going to be competitors, there was not the slightest hint of animosity between the messy man and the geek.

‘We still don’t know each other’s name. I’m Barry.’

‘I’m Jenny,’ said Jenny, smiling genially.

‘I’m just here for the grub in the hotel,’ said Barry.

Jenny laughed which surprised her new friend because he hadn’t told a joke.

‘I’ve got to say I’m fairly nervous. I’ve never been involved in anything like this big before, how about you?’ said Jenny.

‘Nah, I’ve never been involved with anything successful.’

Jenny laughed once more as she thought this was another joke, but again Barry wasn’t jesting as he routinely felt everything he touched turned to disaster.

Finally arriving at his destination, the Empire Hotel, what started out to be a day of confusion and worry had miraculously transformed into fervent elation: Barry couldn’t believe that he was managing to hold a civilised conversation with a woman, and just the fact that she wasn’t inflatable was a massive confidence boost as well. By now most other real women would have thought Barry was either a nut, a loser, or both, but strangely, for some reason Jenny seemed impervious to his off-putting quirkiness.

‘Are you here for the chess tournament?’ asked the hotel doorman, observantly noticing Jenny was a proper geek.

‘Yeah I am,’ replied Jenny.

‘Go on through to reception ma’am, they’ll deal with you there.’

Barry attempted to follow his new friend, but the doorman stepped in front of him before he'd managed to set a toe inside the luxurious Empire.

'I don't think you want to go in there Sir. The bins are round the back. There'll be something for you to eat by now I expect.'

Jenny gasped. 'How rude!' she said, whilst looking livid.

Barry laughed knowing full well he was doing a great impression of a dirty tramp: His ruinous financial problems had given him clothes that were ragged and patchy, an unshaven face and a malnourished body. He also exuded an unpleasant smell because he could no longer afford soap.

If someone else found themselves in Barry's current situation, standing on the door of a prestigious hotel, pulling out from their tattered coat a letter granting them access inside after having just met a new acquaintance, that person may have experienced embarrassment. Barry on the other hand had been through such crippling degradation in his life that no amount of humiliation felt painful anymore, with the possible exception of farting on a crowded lift while naked. Like a boxer that has had their senses and nerve endings blunted by years of punishment garnered in the ring, he couldn't be broken anymore.

'No you don't understand; I'm in the chess tournament as well. Look, here's my letter.'

Barry pulled out the now crumpled letter given to him by Mr Kenderick with bony fingers and presented it. It was a pathetic scene for Jenny and the doorman to endure.

'I'm sorry Sir, I thought—I-I.'

The doorman continued to stutter.

Surprised the man felt uncomfortable, Barry mercifully interrupted the faltering sentence. 'It's okay mate, I know I look like hell. Easy mistake to make.'

The doorman nodded but couldn't look Barry in the eye as he began to turn a pale shade of red.

Now inside, the Empire Hotel struck Barry and Jenny squarely with its full grandiose clout.

'Have you ever been anywhere as beautiful as this?' asked Jenny.

The black marble staircases with their golden handrails fed onto the polished floor of a large room that blended dark and light to magnificent effect, while the babbling from a water fountain established the expected air of calm.

'No never,' replied Barry, entranced by the majesty of the Empire, yet simultaneously conscious of the stares now directed his way.

Being a fish out of water in this environment, a little voice in his head told him he didn't belong there even though the crumpled letter in his hand said he did. For a delusional moment he thought about turning to leave, because the contemptuous stares brought back the memories of his employment as a bag packer at The Shop just before he got sacked. Jenny though pulled Barry to the reception, and it was this action that snapped him from these troubled reminiscences.

'Come on, I want to see my room,' she said excitedly.

After checking in, the messy man and the geek journeyed to rooms that just so happened to be conveniently located adjacent from each other.

'OH MY GOD, THERE'S A HORSE HEAD ON MY PILLOW!' shouted Barry across to his friend who was busy inspecting her room.

Of course there wasn't really a horse's head on Barry's pillow, the room was spellbindingly wonderful, even more so to someone who was accustomed to living in a squalid little bedsit and sleeping on an inflatable lilo. The thick squashy mattress looked to Barry what a 10oz fillet steak would look like to a man dying of starvation, and because Barry was also dying of starvation, it's lucky that there wasn't a 10oz fillet steak in the room as well, as he just may have passed out from excitement overload.

Eagerly, he threw his skeletal physique up into the air and landed as lightly as a feather onto the bed, a wide smile spreading across his gaunt face. He rolled over onto his front and breathed in the scent of the freshly-cleaned sheets. They smelt heavenly.

The thought occurred to Barry how obscene it was that he should be allowed inside a room as clean as this, that it was being fouled by his very presence. Getting up off the bed, he inhaled the aroma of some freshly cut flowers that had been placed in an ornate vase upon an exquisitely-carved mahogany table. Next, he compared the divine smell of the flowers to the one wafting up from his armpit. The first thing he felt compelled to do after this comparison was to take off the dirty rags that enclosed his body and take a much-needed bath.

Before Barry entered the bathroom though, he noticed the mini bar stocked to the brim with drinks and treats. He wanted more than anything to rip open the M&M's but then he looked at the price list. Barry couldn't afford the criminally extortionate prices of a hotel mini bar; in fact your average millionaire may have struggled.

As he lowered his withered body into the hot water and bubbles, the warmth re-awoke his sallow and filthy skin, making him sigh in satisfaction. Soaking in the water for what must have been over an hour, he let his mind drift off into a contented sleepy state until a knocking on the door startled him from his reverie.

‘Barry, are you okay?’

It was Jenny’s voice.

‘Hang on a second,’ he answered.

Hastily Barry got out of the bath and wrapped a large towel around his waist before opening the door.

‘Oh I—err...’ Jenny was surprised to see Barry in just a towel. ‘I’ll go.’

‘Why?’ said Barry. ‘It’s okay, come in.’

The two of them entered the room. Barry disappeared back to the bathroom and Jenny sat down on a chair.

‘Make yourself at home, it’s not my home anyway,’ shouted Barry back to his friend.

Looking at the foul rags on the floor that were his clothes, Barry didn’t really want to put them back on believing it defeated the point of having a wash in the first place, so instead he continued to wear the towel.

‘I thought you were going in there to get dressed?’ said Jenny.

‘Well to be honest I don’t want to coz my clothes need washing. Do you think the organisers of the tournament and our concierge would mind if I walked around naked for the next week?’

Jenny laughed her delightful laugh. ‘Probably. Why don’t you use the laundry service they have here? They’ll have them cleaned and dry for you tomorrow morning.’

‘Would they? That’s brilliant. Does that cost anything though? I think you may have guessed from my appearance I’m not exactly rolling in it.’

‘It doesn’t matter because it’s all expenses paid isn’t it.’ Jenny changed the subject. ‘God you are skinny aren’t you? I mean look at you, you’re just a bag of bones.’

‘All expenses paid! Does that mean we can have anything we want out of our mini bars?’

‘Yeah it does.’

Barry was over to his mini bar so fast he momentarily lost control of his towel, exposing his scrawny behind. He ate so voraciously that it made a piranha feeding frenzy look tame in comparison. Jenny was shocked.

‘When was the last time you had something to eat?’

‘Well my rations have been running a bit low. I think I had a cracker with processed cheese about three days ago,’ said Barry, between mouthfuls of Pringles and M&M’s.

Horrified, Jenny knelt down beside Barry. ‘You haven’t eaten for three days! Why haven’t you eaten for that long?’

‘Because I can’t afford it. While the five grand I won at the chess tournament did save my arse, I’d probably be dead now if it wasn’t for that, I had to use it to pay off my debts. There wasn’t much left afterwards.’

‘What about dole money?’

‘The dole, ha, that’s a waste of time. You’d be lucky to get a single penny out of this stingy government. I did get some money but it’s like trying to get blood out of a stone.’ Barry sighed and lowered his voice. ‘Life is just excessively hard for some people I guess, and unfortunately I’m one of those people.’

‘You know what we should do?’ said Jenny, excitement now in her voice. ‘We should order room service.’

Barry’s face lit up. ‘It won’t cost anything?’

‘Not a penny,’ answered Jenny emphatically.

Before Barry’s very eyes Jenny was metamorphosing into the angel he’d always prayed for.

Half an hour later a mountain of food was delivered to Barry’s room. While Barry contentedly stuffed his face, Jenny sorted it out so that all of her new friend’s clothes were removed from his tiny, battered suitcase and taken to be washed and dried.

Upon receiving the garments the hotel bellboy said quite unashamedly: ‘Would you like me to dispose of these, Ma’am.’

‘No, I want you to place them in the laundry service. Then have them delivered back to this room in the morning,’ replied Jenny, barely containing her anger.

The bellboy left, holding the bundle that made up Barry’s complete wardrobe at arms length in an attempt to minimise his inhalation intake from the rags.

When they were again alone Barry thanked Jenny for helping him, but she didn’t hear his sentiments of gratitude as she was too busy denouncing the elitist nature of the Empire.

‘I can’t believe the snobbish attitude there is in here,’ said Jenny disgusted.

‘I get it all the time, that’s people for you.’ Barry engaged in a thoughtful pause before voicing a self-analytical opinion. ‘People and I don’t usually get along. I guess I’m just an oddball because there isn’t a single segment of society I fit into.’

Barry lay inside a pleasant slumber. His mattress, consisting of luxury pressure-relief memory foam which was supported by the finest Swedish pine, had been far more accommodating than the sorry excuse he had for a bed back home. Having eaten heartily and been thoroughly cleansed the night before, then enclosed in silk satin sheets in a room that had a radiator that was actually turned on, he'd slept like a baby.

Somebody knocked on the door of Barry's room.

'Mr Broomfield, sorry to disturb you but I'm here to drop off your clothes.'

Breaking through that cruel barrier between dream and reality, Barry got up and opened the door to collect his garments. They were clean, dry and had a pleasing new scent that carried the hint of apple and blossom. Before their departure for the laundry room the clothes' odour had been far from pleasing since they emitted a much more powerful cheese and vomit combo. Barry simultaneously realised, his wardrobe's new aroma was markedly easier on the nostrils, and that he never, ever wanted to leave the Empire Hotel.

Placing on the freshly purged clothing, Barry went across the hall to Jenny's room and knocked on her door.

'Jenny, are you in there?'

Jenny answered, her face beaming, 'Morning.'

'I got my stuff. It's all clean, cheers for sorting it out for me. They needed doing that's for sure. I don't smell like dog turd now.'

It made Jenny feel awkward how Barry could be so disarmingly open about himself and the fact that he'd been, up until yesterday, a physical wreck. She swiftly changed the subject.

'We have to go down for breakfast in five minutes.'

'Oh good. Do you know though when we actually start to play some chess?'

‘Pretty much straight after breakfast I think, in the Chandelier Ballroom.’

Breakfast inside the Empire Hotel, like everything else inside that building was a wonderful experience for those deemed worthy. There were choices for the health conscious: fresh fruit, natural yogurt, cereal, fruit juice. Barry was not health conscious and besides, his body’s fat deposits were still painfully low.

The fat boy’s bonanza before him caused Barry’s eyes to spasm with delight. There were mountains of sausages, mounds of fried eggs, piles of toast, a profusion of bacon rashers, heaps of black pudding, shed loads of baked beans, and ample supply of everything else one might expect in a full English breakfast. And what was more, it was a serve yourself affair where you were allowed to devour as much as your digestive system could tolerate.

After his third helping of traditional English cuisine, Barry finally felt that he had eaten enough. His stomach, which had become accustomed to having little more than gruel to digest, had been shocked with the sudden and massive intake of calories, but happily it busied itself in dissolving its contents and assimilating the goodness into the body. Rotund middle-aged women looked on at Barry with disdain: here was a man that was a disgracefully open glutton but somehow maintained the waif body type of a heroin-chic supermodel.

Jenny, who had finished her meagre breakfast long before her friend (she was still full from the banquet she’d enjoyed in Barry’s room the night before) talked excitedly about the upcoming competition and couldn’t wait for it to start.

‘Come on we better be going,’ said Jenny, seeing that Barry was at last full.
‘We don’t want to be late.’

Jenny asked at reception the way to the Chandelier Ballroom. Barry was quite happy to allow her to take care of everything as he was sure she would do a better job than he would, noticing she had a natural instinct for interacting with people that was simply beyond him. He sometimes observed this talent in other people as well, aware that others seemed to interrelate with apparent ease.

Social interaction wasn't something that came naturally to Barry because he found it difficult to escape out of his own world of fantasy. Sometimes he wasn't sure he even wanted to anyway since reality and people could be so cold, whereas his fantasy, his inner reality that he created was so much more soothing.

The Chandelier Ballroom was the jewel in the Empire's spectacular crown. It was a very large room that contained, as you would expect from its name, a truly giant sparkling chandelier suspended from the middle of the ceiling.

A curious habit of Barry's was that he liked to count things, from the number of leaves on a tree to the number of dirty stains on his carpet at home. He began to count the number of sparkling crystals that hung off the chandeliers golden frame.

Moderately exasperated with Barry's tendency to be easily distracted, Jenny said: 'Over here.'

The format for this event was going to be different from the regionals: each player had to play the best of five games against their drawn opponent before progressing onto the next round. The draw for who was playing who had already been undertaken and Barry saw his name placed next to an Elijah Bird. He scanned the board for Jenny's name.

'Daft,' exclaimed Barry.

‘Yeah alright—Broomfield isn’t exactly overly appealing either is it?’ said a disgruntled Jenny.

‘Jenny Daft... You got yourself a great surname there haven’t you?’ continued Barry tauntingly, laughing at the same time.

Jenny had become accustomed to the cruel comments regarding her last name over the years, but still, with Barry’s insensitive chortling showing no sign of letting up, she couldn’t resist a snipe back.

‘At least I didn’t come here smelling like a sewer,’ she said loudly.

She instantly regretted what she had said, having blurted it out in the heat of the moment. Barry’s chortling stopped momentarily as he considered the comment about his personal hygiene, his eyebrows raised and then he pursed his lips approvingly. His annoying chortle resumed.

‘Daft, what a name...’

Barry thought the nigh on insufferable stench that had enveloped his body before he took a bath the previous night only being compared to a mere sewer, was a rather favourable analysis.

‘You’re early, the competition doesn’t start for another half hour,’ said one of the arbiters while busily arranging the pieces on a mint-condition chess set.

Barry turned to Jenny. ‘What do you wanna do? We could wait.’

The arbiter interrupted: ‘Most of the players are in the bar down that way.’

It was a bit early to be getting the beers in, but Barry and Jenny decided rather than wait in the Chandelier Ballroom with just a couple of boring judges, it would be more enjoyable to sit and have a quiet drink before battle commenced.

Upon entering the bar they found it buzzing with activity. As it was still morning nobody was drinking anything alcoholic, that is of course with the notable exception of the alcoholics. But even if it wasn't so early in the day, none of the actual competitors were willing to risk dulling their senses with booze, and in turn jeopardise their chances of winning the fifty-grand prize money.

'I'm sorry about what I said earlier,' said Jenny after she'd sat down.

'Sorry about what?' replied Barry, his mind not really focused on the conversation.

The reason for his lack of focus was because he was looking around at the occupants of the room, trying to gage who Elijah Bird might be, just as he'd done at the regionals in the Town Hall when he'd been looking around to see who Matthew Jones was. Unlike at the regional tournament, Barry was unsuccessful at discovering his opponent and would have to wait until the games began.

'The sewer remark—I didn't mean it.'

Jenny's eyes, enlarged by her spectacles looked sorrowful.

'Oh that, right.' Barry had already forgotten about the comment that Jenny had intended to be hurtful. 'Don't worry about that, I wasn't bothered by it. I smelt worse than a sewer.' Deciding now was a good time to change the subject, Barry asked: 'Do you know who your opponent is?'

'Yeah it's Michael Perry, he's pretty good. I'm not overly confident of winning to be honest, I'm just glad I'm here.'

'Yeah me too.'

There was a silence because neither of them could think of anything else to say. The silence wasn't an uncomfortable one: they were just both thinking of how cool it would be to win fifty grand and what they'd do with all that money.

‘What’ll you do with all that money Barry if you do win?’

‘I’m not going to win.’

‘Come on. Just say if you did, what would you do with it all?’

‘Well I’d move out of my flat in Junkieville coz I live in an absolute septic tank. You know what, it’s so bad I reckon if I went on a holiday to Hell I’d actually enjoy it.’

Jenny Laughed.

‘I guess I’d buy some food, a fridge to put the food in, a washing machine that works so I could wash my clothes, and just live like a human being I suppose.’

The laugh and smile disappeared from Jenny’s face and she decided not to say what she would buy because all of a sudden it seemed completely frivolous and insignificant.

‘Who taught you to play chess? My Dad taught me,’ said Jenny, this time it being her turn to change the conversational subject.

‘A guy called Bogdan Petrov who I met in—’

Barry cut his sentence short. He hadn’t yet told Jenny he’d enjoyed a career as an armed robber, and he hated to think what this virtuous woman would think of him if she knew.

‘Bogdan Petrov? Not the Bogdan Petrov surely?’

‘Why, who’s the Bogdan Petrov?’

‘Well—he’s considered one of the best chess players of all time.’ Jenny spoke as if the information she was currently divulging was common knowledge to everybody. ‘He was world champion three times, but he went mad and cut some people’s heads off with an axe.’

‘Yeah that’s him!’ said Barry gobsmacked. ‘He was a world champion? I didn’t know that.’

‘Yeah, you know him, everyone involved in chess knows him.’

‘Well I didn’t know the rules of chess up until a couple of years ago and I’ve never really been interested in its famous players. I just like to play it myself.’

Jenny’s sharp mind was thinking fast. ‘Petrov couldn’t have taught you to play chess then if you only learnt it a couple of years ago, because he’s been banged up for the last ten years in jail.’

Thinking at first about lying feebly that it must have been another Bogdan Petrov who taught him, Barry then decided it’d be better to tell the truth.

‘I was in prison with him, that’s where he taught me, in prison.’

Barry’s last two words were spoken in a solemnly lightless tone.

Jenny gasped. ‘What were you in prison for?’

‘Attempted armed robbery and assault...’ Barry sighed, hoping Jenny wouldn’t abandon him now she knew the truth. ‘I was a different person back then. I was ill. I didn’t know what I was doing but then I got better. Since I’ve come out I’ve been trying to get a proper job but it’s really difficult, and instead I’ve just been sliding into a deeper and deeper depression. It’s really hard to get out of depression: you just become used to living at that dark place in your mind till it becomes your norm.’

Jenny sat motionless and her eyes pricked with tears as she listened to the desperate jabbering before her. You’d have to have the empathic capacity of stone not to feel Barry’s pain, which is why the vast majority of people Barry encountered, or was ever likely to encounter couldn’t give two hoots about it. Yet Jenny was different: her heart was not made of stone.

‘Good morning,’ said a sprightly voice, ‘you’re competitors in the chess tournament aren’t you?’

‘Yes we are,’ answered Barry to a man that had a big grey bushy beard and a heavily wrinkled face that gave the false impression he spent a lot of time in deep thought.

‘The name’s Perry—Michael Perry. I believe I’ll be playing you Miss Daft. That is how you pronounce it isn’t it?’

‘Yes that’s right, Daft, say it how you see it.’

Barry stifled a girlishly immature giggle.

‘Well I look forward to playing you Miss Daft. It’s great to see more women getting involved in the game. Who knows, one day in the future we might have a female champion.’

Another old man then approached this trio of chess heroes. He was a good friend of Michael Perry, elbowing him playfully in the ribs.

‘Not likely that is it Mike? A woman champ, that’ll be the day.’

The two men laughed.

Mr Perry having sized up his opponent prepared to depart. ‘Good day to you two anyway and best of luck,’ he said before walking off. Under his breath he whispered: ‘Because you’re gonna need it.’

‘They were a nice couple of blokes weren’t they?’ said Barry

‘Nice couple of blokes! They might have been two of the hottest studmuffins I’ve ever laid my squinty little eyes upon, but they were also chauvinistic and patronising.’ Jenny imitated Mr Perry’s voice. ‘I believe I’ll be playing you Miss Daft. That is how you pronounce it isn’t it?’

‘Come on, it’s an unusual name. I don’t think he deliberately attempted to annoy you.’

Jenny shook her head from side to side gently, looking Barry in the eyes. ‘You really have no idea do you, about people I mean, you just can’t understand them.’

Barry felt uncomfortable but came up with the perfect social get-out clause. ‘I need to take a leak.’

Disappearing off to the toilet he began to use his penis to urinate into the urinal (incidentally most male humans use their penis to expel urine) when he heard a voice from one of the cubicles.

‘So what did you think of the woman your up against Mike? What’s her name again? Daft is it? God—what a stupid name.’

Mr Perry replied from another cubicle: ‘She looks like a delicate little flower, doesn’t she? Shouldn’t be too hard to crush.’

They both laughed disgustingly.

‘And did you see that guy she was with? What godforsaken rock has he crawled out from under? It’s outrageous they’re letting such riffraff in here now. I remember when chess used to be a game for gentlemen. And, I remember there was a time when they’d never let scum like that step foot inside the Empire. Bring back the good old days, eh?’

‘Right you are old boy. I mean that guy she was with, did look a bit of a state didn’t he?’ said Mr Perry. ‘His clothes, they had more holes in them than swiss cheese. Pathetic...’

Their sick chorus of laughter rang out again.

Barry looked down at the tatty rags that were attempting to masquerade as his clothes, and although Mr Perry and his friend were correct he decided he’d heard

enough of their snobbery. He finished his urinate, put his penis away, washed his hands, then left.

The Empire may have been outwardly magnificent but some of the people it housed were not quite so splendid, take Finbar Cedric Broomfield for example. Michael Perry and his friend may have been snobs, but they were absolutely and categorically right snobs regarding their observations about Barry's chronic lack of splendour.

Chapter 13: Me Lucky Charms

Deciding it would be wise not to mention what he had overheard in the toilet to Jenny because he didn't want her to say I told you so, Barry was relieved when an arbiter entered the hotel bar and announced the tournament was going to begin.

'I still can't believe you were taught by Bogdan Petrov,' whispered Jenny in Barry's ear. 'That's an incredible story. What was he like?'

'Frightening, nobody messed with him in there anyway.'

Somewhat out of modesty, but mostly out of fear that Jenny would think him a liar, he decided not to mention that he'd never lost a single game of chess to old Bogdan: it just sounded so unbelievable now that he knew the crazy, axe-wielding murderer had once been a world champion.

'Maybe he was out of practice when I played him...' he thought. 'Maybe he'd gone senile and his skills had rusted...'

Barry knew he was good at chess, although he didn't feel he'd earned it with years of hard work, and it was likely he felt this way because he hadn't. It was clear to him the frozen leg of lamb that'd hit his head had given him extraordinary mental abilities, but he was still blissfully unaware of the level of genius now at his command.

Elijah Bird was like a giant stick insect. He was even thinner than Barry and he was tall, skyscraper tall. Barry didn't want to so much as hazard a guess at his height, being too intimidated to look up at him.

Sitting down at the desk where he'd be playing Barry, Elijah towered over his opponent, his limbs extending out well beyond the confines of the comparatively

small chair and table. This had the effect of making Barry feel yet more intimidated. What became laughable though was how Barry's habit of hunching over the board during play made the size difference appear even greater.

Keeping his head close to the game, his eyes rapidly flicking over the position of the pieces, Barry never once looked up. He employed this tactic always; however, it proved particularly useful on this occasion because he knew he'd be terrified if he gazed up at the immense, albeit slender physique of his challenger, who he imagined would be staring mordantly over him.

For Barry the games against Bird flew by and he actually began to enjoy himself, although he was sensible enough to not outwardly express this pleasure: he did not wish Mr Bird to turn nasty. Barry had won the first two games by playing some quite remarkable chess and a small crowd had gathered round to see who this wildcard was. Unhampered by a nutrient deficiency, the vast room service meal the night before and the morning's huge breakfast had worked wonders, enhancing his game to new heights.

Unknown to Barry, as he was keeping his attention keenly focused upon the game, he did not see that Elijah Bird was sweating profusely and seemed highly embarrassed by his poor showing. He was not one of the tournament favourites, but Bird was regarded as a solid practitioner, yet here he was getting dismantled by this newcomer who nobody had heard of before and looked like he was fresh from being paraded in the tramp's hall of shame.

'Checkmate,' said Barry blankly, attempting to not show any sense of triumph in his voice. 'Good game pal.'

It hadn't been a good game at all since Barry had won 3-0 and had, with apparent ease, absolutely trounced the highly-respected Elijah Bird.

‘Yeah, good game...’

Bird took his defeat stoically but it was obvious he was very disappointed, not to mention humiliated.

Finishing his games before everybody else, Barry walked over to see how his friend Jenny was getting on in her match against Michael Perry. Barry was pleased to see the old wrinkly-faced git had underestimated his female rival, and had not been able to crush her like a flower as he’d presumed he would. Barry wanted to shout encouragement or tips to his friend but thankfully managed to restrain himself: he might have found his immediate disqualification after just pulling off such an impressive victory rather disenchanting.

Jenny and Mr Perry had had their minds locked in a tussle for almost five hours, with Barry watching on for three. It was at this time that Barry realised that not only did you have to be a great thinker to be good at chess, but that you also needed incredible mental stamina and toughness. It was exhausting just to watch.

At two games a piece it was all coming down to this last contest. Jenny had fallen behind, and with time running out and her opponent having more material left on the board it looked like she would need a checkmate. And to make matters worse Perry was playing warily now, knowing in his current position he would win and avoid the unthinkable, being knocked out of the tournament ingloriously by a woman.

Emitting a clearly audible gasp, Barry had noticed a checkmate opportunity for Jenny that neither she, nor apparently Perry had noticed. For the first time since he’d been watching the game Jenny looked up at him. Barry wanted more than anything to help his friend defeat this slimeball of a man but it’d be cheating, and the arbiter, standing close by was keeping a vigilant watch. Jenny and Barry both knew if

the arbiter saw any signs of skulduggery he wouldn't hesitate to have them both disqualified.

Barry—resorting in desperation to doing an impression of Uri Geller—looked into Jenny's eyes. *E7 to B4; E7 to B4; E7 to B4*, he said over and over in his head, whilst looking intently at her.

Jenny glanced back at the board. It was her turn and there was only time for a couple more moves to be made. She'd come close to giving up hope, but then she saw it: E7 to B4.

She looked back at Barry for a second and thought, *My God; Barry has the sloping forehead of an ape*, before turning her attention back to the game of chess.

'Checkmate,' said Jenny.

Utterly flabbergasted by his loss, Mr Perry began to resemble a large tomato, though he quickly shrank and faded into anonymity. Jenny was victorious and that was all that mattered to the people in attendance.

Barry tried to console Jenny as best he could. 'Commiserations; there there, it's okay. They'll always be next year.'

'What are you on about Barry? I won the match.'

'Well done, well done,' said Barry congratulating his friend.

Momentarily he went to embrace Jenny, but for some reason stopped and instead shook her hand heartily.

Barry was so happy that he wasn't sure what to do, and so did a handstand before saying: 'I knew you could do it and beat that old fool.'

'I thought you reckoned he was a good bloke.'

'Yeah...well maybe I was wrong. Look, that doesn't matter, what matters is that you won.'

‘Did you win as well?’

Barry had completely forgotten about his own success in the euphoria of witnessing Jenny’s triumph.

‘Yeah I did. And to think, we both thought we’d lose in the first round. We showed them didn’t we?’

That night Jenny and Barry left the hotel to celebrate, believing they might as well enjoy themselves now seeing how it was highly unlikely either of them would manage to get past the second round. Unfortunately celebration was a bit difficult because Barry didn’t have a penny to his name; he found it highly amusing when a tramp had a go at him for his inability to spare some change.

‘Bloody tight git,’ shouted the beggar.

‘We could go and get a meal somewhere. Come on I’ll pay, I don’t mind.’

Being too proud for his own good, Barry didn’t want Jenny to pay for him: in a quaint, old-fashioned way he thought it should be the man who paid for such things. Jenny found this bothersome complication to their evening annoying, but still had to stifle a smile.

‘Okay Mr 1950’s, how’re we going to celebrate on a budget of zero pence.’

‘I dunno—I just thought we’d walk and talk—I’ve never been to London before.’

Jenny frowned at this cheap-ass idea.

‘We could go to a bar or pub. You don’t have to drink anything. You can just sit there with two empty hands.’

‘If we go to a bar or pub all we’ll see is that bar or pub, don’t you want to see a bit more?’

Jenny gave a shrug of her shoulders in resignation and said: 'Alright then. Have it your way,' before kicking Barry squarely in the testicles.

And so it was, Barry and Jenny walked and talked for hours about everything and anything, failing to notice that they were strolling through one of the most beautiful cities in the world (this was of course after Barry had recovered from being kicked in the testicles). They were so deeply engaged in conversation that they could easily have sauntered through the area where Barry lived with its higgledy-piggledy arrangement of burnt-out cars and invasive gun shots, yet not notice anything amiss outside their own little bubble.

The topics they discussed were light hearted and fun, up until Barry mentioned how pleased he was that Jenny had beaten Mr Perry because of the man's five-star dickhead quality.

'You liked him at first, what changed your opinion so drastically?'

Barry decided to admit what he had overheard in the toilet.

'It took that for you that to realise he was a sod?'

At a loss for what to say, Barry instead puffed his cheeks up with air, shrugged his shoulders, blew the air outwards from his cheeks, looked at his feet, then finally back at his friend.

Jenny's magnified eyes surveyed Barry with great interest, which made him feel uncomfortable since Barry knew in his heart that this time there was nowhere to take a leak.

'You're not accustomed to interacting with people are you? I could tell you were so lonely the first time I saw you in the station. Then when you made what to you was an innocent comment about my eyesight, I could just tell that people were completely alien to you.'

Barry again said nothing. He felt like Jenny's eyes and words were x-raying him, dissecting his abnormal brain.

'And the first time you looked at me it was in total surprise wasn't it, as if no one had ever noticed you before?'

Barry's head dropped in shame at the exposure of what he perceived to be terrible secrets. Jenny had to stoop to locate his eyes that were now looking fixedly at the floor.

'It's okay, that's just who you are. You're Finbar Broomfield, you can't be anyone else.'

In the second round Barry was playing a man by the name of Ali Alzanki, while Jenny was against the only other woman in the tournament: Lisa Higgins. Things followed the same pattern as the first, although Mr Alzanki was more animated than Bird in his misery at Barry's prodigious play.

'Ooooooh you're evil. You can't do that, that's naughty.'

Barry attempted to shut out Alzanki's effeminate voice, believing it a diversionary tactic to disperse his laser focus. Keeping his eyes locked to the board and hunching over as usual, he managed to dissolve the real world once more.

'Checkmate.'

It had been another whitewash. Barry's foes were being bowled out of the way like mere skittles by his near-limitless skill. Pulling his mind with some reluctance from its absorption in the game back to the intrusive noise, lurid colour and random movement of reality, Barry could hardly believe how easy his victories were being realised.

Jenny meanwhile was again battling tooth and nail in another closely fought contest. She appeared very fatigued, but upon seeing Barry her spirits were raised and she mustered a meek smile. Bringing back a recent memory, Barry recalled the first time he'd met this woman, remembering it had been him who'd felt weak that time. He watched her closely, admiring her steely resolve, and even though it was silly, he felt guilty about the smooth passage he'd experienced so far through the tournament. Apparently he'd forgotten it was him who'd had his back against the wall at the regionals before pulling through like a monkey dancing on hot coals. *Come on, you can do it Jenny.*

Jenny did. It took her five hours of deep and exhausting thought that left her with a headache, but she did it.

The rest of the tournament followed on in much the same way as the first two rounds, Barry cruising past his opponents, and Jenny valiantly busting a gut to get past hers. Eventually they achieved what neither of them had even dared to consider: they had both made it to the final.

When Jenny beat her rival in the semi she was overjoyed, exhausted, and saddened. The feeling of sadness was a product of her knowing she'd have to play her friend the following day in a battle to the death.

Barry consoled Jenny as he always did. 'Hey chin up, you did well to get this far. You'll come back stronger from this setback. Turn that frown upside down.'

'What's wrong with you? Have you got brain damage? I won you fucking idiot!' said Jenny.

Barry congratulated Jenny as he always did. ‘That was touch and go, but I never lost the faith. You’re the best—you’re the best—you’re the best.’

‘You won as well didn’t you?’ she asked, already knowing the answer.

‘Yeah...’

‘Then that means we’ll be playing each other for the fifty grand.’

‘It does. But that doesn’t mean we can’t still be mates. Whatever happens this has been a great time for me.’

The two finalists decided against going out to celebrate: Barry was still refusing to let Jenny pay for him, and she was too exhausted to go on another long walk around London’s streets. They opted instead to celebrate at the English Chess Association’s expense.

The Empire Hotel’s staff laid out a sumptuous meal for the two chess stars while they happily revelled in each other’s company. To an outsider watching these two people, a man and a woman enjoy a candlelit meal together, that outsider might come to the palpable conclusion that they were witnessing a relationship that went beyond just platonic friendship.

Late that night a very much awake Jenny reclined in her lavish hotel room; only a few metres away from her lay Barry, sleeping soundly after the meal he’d shared with her. Jenny could hear Barry’s snores and she knew he was sleeping like a baby. She also knew that he couldn’t possibly sleep as soundly back at his flat on the inflatable lilo in Junkieville. Incidentally, this revelation regarding Barry’s sleeping arrangements had been made known to her after Barry had become heavily intoxicated following the ingestion of a couple of liqueur chocolates earlier that night.

Lying there perfectly still, she resolved she couldn't go through with it. Even though she'd played her heart out to make it to the final, she couldn't take away Barry's one solitary chance of financial relief. She was aware he needed that money more than she ever would, but there was more to it than just the crude matter of the cash prize: she had fallen in love.

Chapter 14: Funny Thing Love

What a funny thing love is when it can make fifty-thousand pounds suddenly appear wholly, utterly and absolutely worthless.

The chief arbiter informed Barry of what to him was some baffling news. ‘Mr Broomfield, it looks like you’ve won without having to lift a finger today—’

‘What?’ answered a perplexed Barry.

‘—Miss Daft has had to forfeit,’ continued the arbiter. ‘She’s informed us she feels too ill to play. If you ask me she probably thought that she didn’t stand a chance; you haven’t dropped a game all tournament have you? I think that’s a first in this competition’s history.’

Not listening to the little shrew before him, Barry was trying to think why Jenny hadn’t showed.

‘We did have that seafood last night...Maybe some of it was a bit dodgy... Although I had it and I’m fine...’ He continued to deliberate over what else could have gone wrong but couldn’t come up with anything better. ‘Maybe she just had a bad oyster and I got lucky.’

Barry was a national champion, an achievement nobody could’ve foreseen for everyone had written him off him as a tragic and pathetic loser from his earliest memories. Now though, he supposed he’d established himself as someone important, the star of the British chess community with a cheque for fifty grand sitting in his pocket. Here was conclusive, incontrovertible proof that his many doubters had been wrong about him. But the feeling of redemption you might have expected him to be experiencing was clouded by his feelings of disappointment for Jenny. Barry didn’t

smile for the photographs, and as the light bulbs flashed they illuminated an absent-minded, faraway expression.

Leaving the smiling faces behind after they'd informed him about the upcoming World Championships and how he was now going to be the UK's representative, Barry walked solemnly back up to Jenny's room.

He rapped gently on her door. 'Jenny, are you in there? Are you okay?'

There was no reply, the only sound came from the roar of a fast-approaching vacuum cleaner. Despising that sound, Barry retreated to his own room and sat on the beautiful bed inside the beautiful suite. He would have to leave this palace tomorrow morning and go back to his disgusting little hovel. It would be a crime he thought if he didn't enjoy his last night here, especially when he now had a large amount of money to make things a bit more exciting. Confident he'd be able to catch up with Jenny later to split the winnings, he left to go and have some fun.

Armed with twenty-five grand, the rest belonged to Jenny, Barry hailed a taxi outside the Empire; it was going to be a wild night. Having not had the expenses to truly enjoy himself in a very long time, he planned on having a ruthless night of debauchery, alcoholism, drug abuse and a couple of Cuban cigars. Not the way you would expect a newly-crowned chess champion to act but Barry had always been a unique specimen, and as already stated he'd not been able to enjoy himself in a very long time.

The first port of call on Barry's retail therapy list, after visiting the bank, was an upmarket tailor to buy a suit, due to the onerous circumstance that wearing his current set of clothes he'd have found himself turned away from his own funeral.

‘I don’t think this place is for someone of your financial stature Sir,’ said the tailor of a Saville Row establishment upon glancing at his customer’s unkempt appearance.

‘On the contrary, I think it is,’ replied Barry, pulling out a large roll of crisp banknotes.

‘That’s made from some of the finest Italian silk Sir. Oh yes—Sir does have exquisite taste, those are hand-stitched crepe-soled shoes straight from our connection in Paris.’

Looking in the mirror, Barry liked the reflection he saw and was already realising what a wonderful medicine retail therapy is.

Leaving Saville Row behind decked out in Europe’s finest designer wear, Barry searched for a barber to take a chainsaw to his gigantic wire-wool beard and shaggy mane.

As many people will be well aware, long hair on a balding man is truly repugnant. And it was this repugnant look that Barry was currently sporting because he’d previously not been able to afford haircuts, and also the fact that he was currently balding didn’t help.

It didn’t take long for him to locate a suitable hair salon, although at first he didn’t want to go in because it looked like a high-class place that would only accept women and ladyboys. It wasn’t until he saw through the window another man inside that his fears about the hair salon’s clientele were quashed. These fears only remained quashed for a short time however, because once inside Barry recognised the man: it was Ali Alzanki, the person he’d competed against in the second round.

Ali was engaged in deep conversation with his hair stylist. 'I know darling, you can't trust men. They'll only leave you for some other woman the moment your back's turned.'

The hair stylist nodded her head knowingly.

Ali recognised Barry the moment he walked thorough the door and welcomed him with jubilant surprise. 'Oh my, it's you. What're you doing in here?'

'I—err—was thinking on getting a haircut and a shave if possible.'

'Fantastic! I have to say you could do with one; I mean that Supertramp look died back in the eighties.' Ali turned to his hair stylist. 'Betty, this was the man who beat me in the chess tournament.'

'Was it?' said Betty, raising an inquiring eyebrow towards Barry.

Ali patted Betty playfully on the arm. 'Don't be like that Betty; he beat me fair and square,' before turning back to Barry and asking: 'Who won the final in the end?'

'I did.'

Ali's big brown eyes lit up. 'Did you? Hear that Betty, I lost to the winner.'

Wanting a simple short back and sides, Barry was instead coaxed into purchasing a ridiculous, spiky, blonde-highlighted mullet that was apparently the height of fashion. Having acquired his new do Barry was then given a shave, after which Ali talked to him of the benefits of having a manicure/pedicure combo. Feeling like he had nothing to lose other than his masculinity, Barry decided to go for it.

'My my, you could grow potatoes under those Mr Broomfield,' said Ali in his distinctively feminine voice.

Barry didn't have an answer to this; he preferred to sit in silence while Ali nattered to Betty about the latest celebrity scandal, what was happening on Big

Brother, Coronation Street, Eastenders and then finally, how many calories there are in a vol-au-vent.

‘Well darling, I suppose it all depends on the filling.’

We all know what filling you like, thought Barry, hiding a smirk. Pathetically he was trying to bolster his sense of being a man because he was fairly certain your average macho lumberjack didn’t go in for pedicures.

In spite of enjoying the pampering he’d received sitting alongside Ali, Barry hoped he wouldn’t next be persuaded he needed his bikini line done. Thankfully he wasn’t, because upon seeing the bill for hair removal and nail polishing, he nearly passed out. He didn’t have the bravery to voice a discontented word as he coughed up the dough however, accepting that high living came at a high price.

Taking leave of the salon, Barry was treated to an excessively pleasant farewell by Ali.

‘Seeya honeykins. Love the suit by the way.’ The moment Barry had left the salon and the door had closed behind him, Ali’s face turned sour and he said: ‘What a bitch.’

Betty nodded her head in agreement.

What a thoroughly nice guy that queer was, thought Barry.

Now sporting a silly hairdo, immaculate toenails enclosed inside hand-stitched Parisian crepe-soled shoes, and a beautiful Italian white suit crafted using Mamma Giansesi’s secret recipe, Barry felt it time to get the drinks in. But before he let his mind get drenched in alcohol, he thought about Jenny and wished she was there with him to enjoy his spending spree. His buoyant mood sank slightly.

Sitting by himself in a bar with some obscure name to make it sound exotic, Barry began to drink with enthusiasm, though not for enjoyment, rather just to get blitzed for the sake of it. Sitting on his bar stool, rapidly descending into a drunken stupor, he felt lonely, and it didn't matter that he had twenty-five grand in his pocket because paper can't keep you company.

Just as Barry began to think the downright untrue, that money can't make you happy, an attractive young woman noticed him pulling out his gigantic wad of cash to pay for his latest drink. The pound signs of that money flashed in her eyes because here was an opportunity for her girlfriends and her to have a good night at this bum's expense.

'Hey there stranger.'

'Plesokdefdess,' replied Barry.

'You are a smooth talker aren't you? Hey Sandra, come and meet my new friend.'

Sandra was a fat and ugly woman, but was also the owner of a consolatory large pair of breasts that were highlighted by her tight-fitting outfit.

She eyed her friend with a look of, *who's this loser?*

'He's minted,' whispered the attractive woman, 'and he's blind stinking drunk. Get the girls over.'

Now accompanied by a gaggle of slags Barry no longer felt lonely. He loved every moment of the female interest, even though in some deep layer of his alcohol-soaked brain he knew his new friends were only using him for his cash.

'Wepip Bulub,' said Barry nonsensically.

'Wepip Bulub, what does that mean?' asked Sandra.

‘Serrrip Blub,’ said Barry, trying to hard to communicate what he meant.

‘I think he means strip club. Do you want to go to a strip club Barry?’

Barry nodded his head in agreement vigorously.

Sandra cooed in her victim’s ear: ‘Yeah okay, we’ll go to a strip club if you want, but first can you buy me another drink Barry baby.’

While his new friends walked on towards the strip club Barry crawled on the pavement behind, attempting to follow. The front of his brand new, dazzling white Italian suit was rapidly beginning to turn brown as it picked up grime off the pavement.

With his struggling to keep up, Barry’s friends kindly spurred him onto greater efforts.

‘Come on Barryy baby, not far now. Give him another kick in the balls Sandra, that’ll get him moving again.’

Sandra complied with her friends wishes.

‘Yeah that’s done it, he’s moving now. Wow, look at him go.’

‘God, he can’t handle his drink very well can he? He’s only had a couple of shandys.’

The gang of slags burst into hysterics. Even if they didn’t get anymore free drinks off Barry, they all thought it had been well worth using him for the entertainment value alone. They’d had great fun watching an ugly, balding scumbag with a stupid haircut wriggle like a worm.

From out of a shadowy alleyway a man approached the group of laughing young women, nonchalantly stepping over Barry as he did so.

‘Hiya ladies, would you be interested in buying some cocaine? Pills? Speed?’

‘Barry baby, can we have some money for the nice drug-dealer man.’

Handing over part of his big wad of notes Barry said: ‘Get me some too.’

He thankfully was beginning to sober up and had regained the command of the English language, although he couldn’t yet say the same for his legs.

Finally making it to the strip club after having crawled half the way, Barry was treated to a lap dance. It was then such a shame that for all Barry’s effort expended in making his way there, that he’d actually been led to an all-male one. Luckily though, he was too inebriated to realise that the stripper presently gyrating on his lap was actually a man.

Sandra—not wanting Barry to regain his full faculties as it was so entertaining watching him make a fool of himself—placed a couple of pills with doves on them in his mouth. Feeling euphoric soon after his ingestion of chemicals, Barry began to empathize with everyone in the room. Immense pleasure coursed through his body as he helped himself to a ruddy good time, and the Cuban cigar he now had in his mouth was a nice touch too.

As the night wore on, Barry spent more and more money on strippers, drinks, drugs and cigars, before eventually returning to his hotel room in the Empire. It was mayhem: Barry’s willingness to throw his money at anyone that asked for it had attracted a number of leaches and sycophants back to his suite. The telly promptly vanished, there was vomit up the walls, randoms suffering from drug-induced comas lay unconscious in corners, and from somewhere this motley crew had acquired a ghetto blaster that blared out obscene gangster rap.

Those that had managed to stave off the coma-producing effects of their drug cocktails enjoyed each others bodies, creating an atmosphere of sleaze that made big

ugly Sandra feel lustful and lonely. Under the influence of a myriad of drugs and drink, she started putting the moves on Barry by rubbing her big mammaries across his smiling face.

Looking down at his now erect penis (his trousers and underwear had long since come off) Barry said: 'Where the hell were you in that Spanish brothel?'

Whilst Barry busied himself snorting cocaine off Sandra's breasts, someone that wasn't a leach or a sycophant crossed the threshold into the room, and it wasn't the Empire Hotel staff because they were afraid to even enter: it was Jenny.

Barry, looking at Jenny over Sandra's shoulder as Sandra clambered onto a chipolata said: 'I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU TO JOIN THE PARTY. COME ON DOWN.'

The reason for his shouting was that he was trying to make himself heard over the blare of gangster rap.

Jenny took one swift glance around at the devastation and then looked back into Barry's drunken face. Barry had a small traffic cone sitting atop of his head and was furiously smoking another Cuban cigar. She decided to leave because she didn't want the thing she'd imagined was the love of her life to see the tears that had begun to stream from her squinty eyes.

Waking up late the next morning with his head in a waste paper basket, Barry felt extremely hung over, but upon getting up and assessing the carnage around him with an open mouth, he quickly lost interest in his pulsing headache.

'Poopascoop...'

The first thing he attempted to do was find Jenny, hoping she'd help him get the room sorted out, but when he knocked on the door of her suite, to his dismay, he found there was only a cleaner inside.

'Where's Jenny?' Barry asked the cleaner.

'She checked out early this morning.'

Momentarily paralysed by this information, Barry didn't know what to do until the cleaner broke some more alarming news to him.

'Sir, do you realise you have no clothes on?'

'Huh?'

In his desperate haste to find his friend, Barry had forgotten he wasn't wearing any clothes. Rushing back to his room, he pointlessly attempted to cover his already-viewed private areas with his hands.

Throwing on his filthy white suit and crepe-soled shoes, Barry began in vain to tidy the suite, checkout being ten minutes away. Believing Jenny must have been down in the hotel lobby or having her breakfast, he knew there was no time to go and look for her.

'WHERE THE HELL IS THE BLOODY TELLY!' shouted Barry at the top of his lungs.

This particular item had been furtively removed the night before by a couple of his more enterprising friends, all of whom had disappeared now that the free ride was over.

When Barry was discovered attempting to clean what appeared to be blood from the carpet, his poorly concocted story that it was terrorists who'd done the damage didn't wash. Barry hoped when the English Chess Association had said all expenses paid, it

would hopefully include this debacle. He was wrong, and as a result he was the one who was billed for the repairs to the room and replacement TV.

In the face of the fact that after his wild night out on the town he'd blown almost his entire twenty-five grand and only had a few hazy memories to show for it, Barry didn't feel too disheartened because he could just about recall having sex with some woman. But, and this is a big but, he hadn't yet realised he'd paid a high price for this pleasure: he'd contracted pubic lice and they were currently having a field day in his nether regions.

After paying for the repairs to his suite Barry set about locating Jenny. He searched high and low throughout the hotel looking for her, gradually getting more and more desperate. *She wouldn't have left without telling me first.*

He looked in the laundry room, in dark cupboards, random little cubby holes, and anywhere else that was large enough to accommodate a small woman. Why he thought his friend, a person of sane disposition would be hiding in such places was testament to his confused mental state.

Eventually the painful truth began to formulate in his mind that he had been abandoned by the one human he'd considered to be his only true friend in the world. He couldn't for the life of him think why she'd done it. Unable to remember the event from the night before when Jenny had walked in as Sandra was passing on her STD; he mused forlornly, *did our friendship mean nothing to her?* He'd never thought to get her telephone number or address, and now she'd gone from his life forever.

Even if Barry had been able to remember Jenny walking into his room, he wouldn't have understood his friend's disappointment. While there was an intrinsic understanding between the two of them the subtle, unspoken forms of communication

only flowed one way, from Barry to Jenny. Barry's mind couldn't deal with subtly, and anything that wasn't spelled out to him in plain English would go undetected. He couldn't read the clear signs that Jenny felt more for him than just friendship.

Leaving the Empire for Kensington train station, Barry would only have himself and his crabs for company on the way home. Without an angel like Jenny to guide him through the minefield of perils public transport offered, he made an involuntary detour to Baghdad before reaching his bedsit back in Junkieville.

'Home at last,' Barry said to himself as he stumbled late at night through the door and looked at the mattress that welcomed him.

The inflatable lilo wasn't a very comely proposition since he'd become accustomed to the luxury at the Empire, but he slept soundly anyway because the excursion to Bonnie Baghdad had been exhausting.

Waking late the next morning, Barry scratched his now itchy crotch and began to wonder if Sandra had given him something other than just a smudge of lipstick on his collar. The other thought that played on his mind was the one about how Jenny had discarded him as casually as one might discard an empty crisp packet.

Because of his newfound opinion of his chess friend he no longer felt so inclined to give her, her half of the fifty grand, which worked out quite well because Barry now needed her share seeing how he'd gone and blown almost all of his in one night.

After going to the supermarket and coming back with a trolley filled to nigh on breaking point, he stocked his empty shelves. The next things he went and bought were a refrigerator, a television set, and most importantly to him, a proper bed. The inflatable lilo was deflated and placed at the bottom of a wardrobe.

Sitting on a newly-purchased sofa in his once horrible bedsit, it appeared oddly cramped to Barry because he now actually had stuff. As he acclimatised to this turnaround in fortune he got robbed one day by the neighbourhood magpies while he was out. Leaving his milk bottle lids untouched they'd decided it'd be wiser instead to pilfer Barry's new stuff. This reminded Barry all too well that while the interior of his home was shaping up nicely, he sadly still lived in the ever-dangerous Junkieville.

The last things he purchased were items to assist his budding chess career: a genuine chess set and clock along with various books containing complex moves and stratagems, all of which turned out to be thoroughly primitive to his big juicy brain. His old set, the one crafted from a Weetabix box and other various household items was thrown away for sticking out like a sore thumb against the boringly-normal pleasantness Barry's home had now acquired.

Although being able to afford to put the heating on, lie down upon clean sheets, and cook food that could be eaten without the fear of death by food poisoning, Barry didn't feel a great deal happier than when he didn't have all these material things. The reason for this was that he was still very much alone, but Barry, for all his intelligence still couldn't figure out why happiness eluded him.

Inside his little flat the only sound to keep him company—other than the gunshots from outside—came from his second new radio (the neighbourhood magpies

had stolen the first one). With only the radio's infuriatingly cheerful outlook on the world for companionship, Barry conducted some intense thumb twiddling, a tactic he often used to escape from the real world.

Chapter 15: World Championships and Deep Red

The adrenaline pumping *Eye of the Tiger* blared out above the crowds cheers.

Barry entered the arena to an odd choice of music for a balding, middle-aged man who was about to embark on an enlightened game of chess. But then Barry was no ordinary chess player: he electrified audiences with his scintillating play, breaking the mould, class barriers, and the opposition. He attracted fresh new minds to the game because when Barry played, it was more entertaining than a Paul Daniels versus Debbie McGee sex tape.

The game of chess is not normally considered a popular spectator sport because something interesting normally happens about every two hours, if you're lucky. In Barry's world though it was sheer brutality the way he dispatched the competition. It was like watching a prize fight between two greats, only Barry was vastly the greatest so the lesser great just got destroyed.

He was at the Chess World Championships now and he had battled his way to the grand final, gaining many supporters and female admirers along the way. Okay all the female admirers were chess geeks rather than buxom, pouting-lipped beauties, but who was Barry to complain as just a short time ago he'd been so poor that an inflatable lilo had served as his mattress.

Shadow boxing to the best of his meagre physical abilities to *Eye of the Tiger*, Barry ended his flamboyant entrance into the arena with a pathetically executed flurry of hooks and uppercuts that hurt him more than the air. He was now a bit out of breath. Rapidly Barry had put on weight since his successes in the chess world from living the dream. Booze, drugs and fast chess geeks certainly hadn't improved his

health; in fact he was now probably in worse shape than when he'd been close to starvation.

For this special occasion Barry had intended on wearing the white suit and crepe-soled shoes he'd bought in London. The fashion police weren't required though because Barry discovered his expensive garments had begun to fall apart despite having undergone very little use. The same could be said for a lot of the fancy consumer items he'd obtained from his recent financial success: his replacement high-definition TV was on the blink, his replacement DVD player did everything except play DVD's, and his new laptop didn't appear to like working too hard since it never wanted to turn on.

The current reigning champion—Russia's Anatoly Karcovich—entered to some obscure music and a chorus of boos. A severe-looking man, not unlike Bogdan Petrov, his presence was powerful yet controlled; although, he didn't carry the same intimidation factor of old Bogdan because he wasn't a convicted murderer.

The Russian felt out of place, believing his beloved game had been turned into a circus. Not even sure if he was at a chess match anymore and thinking that instead he might have gone back in time to a Nuremburg Rally, Karcovich found the fanatical devotion to his opponent quite disturbing.

The actual contest wasn't a closely fought one. Barry did drop a couple of games to the surprise of the crowd, but that was only because he'd focused a large portion of his intellect on a fan of his and her prominent cleavage. Recollecting however how Grace Honeysuckle had once made the same mistake of allowing herself to be distracted, he pulled his mind away from the hypnotic grip the delightful bosom had placed upon him, before going on to win with relative ease.

Barry was crowned the new world champion. Cameras flashed and bloodsucking vampires surrounded him to pat him on the back, all the while scheming about how best to bleed him dry. Strangely, Barry didn't feel as satisfied as one might expect when they've become not only a champion, but rich and famous as well. This troubled feeling may have stemmed from the woman with the cleavage having disappeared.

After the victory the world's media who'd become transfixed by the fairytale success of Barry's story, eagerly muscled their way towards him to get a short interview. They hoped for a few inspiring words about one man's struggle that they felt sure would appeal to the general public's pretense of compassion. They were to be disappointed.

'So Barry, you're the world champion—what feelings are going through your mind right now?'

'I feel like crack tonight, like crack tonight, crack tonight.'

'Wonderful, great stuff Barry.'

'Oh before I forget could I just say a couple of thank yous.'

'Yeah of course, go ahead.'

'I want to thank my manager Joe Kearns for getting me prepared for the biggest day of my life. Thanks Joe. And of course, all my fans for their fanatical support.'

Barry paused to allow the crowd to cheer deliriously. The same type of person that'd formed the bulk of the M.O.R.O.N.S., a.k.a. Broomfield Buster's, and had fought for Barry's complete removal from society, now made up a large part of his loyal fan base.

‘Anatoly Karcovich was a great champion,’ continued Barry after the cheers and applause had died down, ‘I can only hope I go on to be as good a champion as he was.’

‘I’m sure you will Barry.’

‘Could I just say one more thing? I’d like to dedicate this victory to a very special person who made all this possible—’

You might think Barry’s victory dedication would be for Jenny Daft because if he hadn’t met her, he’d never have managed to find his way to the Empire Hotel. Or, maybe you’re thinking the dedication wasn’t for Jenny at all, but rather for Bogdan Petrov, the man who’d taught Barry the game in the first place.

‘—Dr Sodworth. Without that man’s help I wouldn’t have got the shampoo treatment that killed off my bad case of crabs. I’d never have been able to focus properly in the match today if it wasn’t for him and his miracle cure.’

Rather than cheer the crowd remained deathly silent. Not noticing the odd reaction to his proclamation about the STD that had plagued him, Barry continued oblivious.

‘Cause I tell yer, when those little guys are crawling around down there and digging their claws in it’s a real concentration breaker.’

The muted reaction continued.

‘Right...er, okay...Thanks, great stuff again Barry...’ said the reporter, with a look of bewilderment upon his face as he turned back to the camera.

Since his meteoric rise to glory, Barry had had many candidates approach him offering to manage his career and financial affairs. Not knowing anything about business or how to judge a person’s character, he picked Irish Joe Kearns, for he was

the one who appeared to have the ability to talk the fastest, and, was a bubbling cauldron of ideas.

Dapper and debonair, Kearns actually turned out to be a good manager, possessing many strong points in the said occupation: he'd arrange the rules in favour of his client, prepare his charge for battle in meticulous fashion, and keep him away from the drugs, booze and women. For the peculiar trade of chess champion manager, Kearns was the man best suited for the task.

There were, however, two gripes his employer had: The first was Kearns's willingness to use large portions of money for training expenses. What these expenses could have been Barry wasn't sure, and when he questioned his manager about where his money was going the explanations given were consistently vague. The second was that he didn't like how Kearns was intent on controlling his every waking moment, even going so far as to place a private detective on him to monitor his every move.

Due to Barry's ability to crush every human opponent that stood in his way, the fast talking and slippery Kearns began putting together an extravaganza that everyone felt was a cert to rake in some serious cash. It was to be that timeless classic of man versus machine: Barry would be pitted against a supercomputer called Deep Red that according to the claims of its creator was unbeatable.

Joe Kearns, unconcerned by breakthroughs in artificial intelligence, didn't need to employ the services of a supercomputer to calculate the vast amount of money potentially involved in the dream match up. He reasoned that even if his client lost it didn't matter because Barry would still be unbeaten against human opposition, and either way, win or lose it would raise the profile of his man ever further. Yet Kearns, for all his streetwise wisdom and scheming intelligence, didn't anticipate just what a spectacular event Barry versus Deep Red would be.

The media covered the lead-up to the big match with gusto, plastering the event in all its newspapers. On the front page of one British Daily was the picture of a human brain next to a giant and imposing supercomputer. The black plastic and metal monstrosity that's consciousness peered out at the world through two red glass eyes looked like a terrifying specimen of invincibility—at chess.

The inventor of Deep Red, Percival Peppermint, was fuelling the media fire by asserting his mechanism's strengths over its human competitor.

'This is a machine, it does not feel, it does not experience fatigue, it knows nothing of fear. This glorious powerhouse can search up to two-hundred-million different moves per second. I sincerely doubt that even the considerable power of Mr Broomfield's brain can do that.'

Peppermint was hoping to scare the chess master but had failed miserably because Barry wasn't intimidated by a pathetic little man and his oversized calculator. Barry knew true intimidation: when he'd lived in Junkieville he'd regularly been chased by gangs of twelve-year-old skinheads armed with flick knives.

Barry had now left his bedsit and that horrible place behind, choosing to live instead inside a beautiful house located in an affluent, leafy suburb. There were big gates on his long driveway with the words: *It's Broomfield Time*, ostentatiously written on them in large golden letters.

It is notable how although many champions come from slums, they certainly don't intend on staying there or having anything to do with them once they hit the big time. Barry was no different, and even went so far as to thinking it might do the world some good if a small thermo-nuclear device was dropped on the one he came from.

While sitting reading the newspapers and listening to his manager, who now lived in a much larger house than even he did and drove an assortment of luxury European sports cars, Barry thought: *God life's crap.*

Quite an unusual choice of thought you might think for a man who now appeared to have everything, including an absurd set of front gates. You have to take into consideration however that at the time of speaking Barry was hooked up to a dialysis machine as his kidneys, having decided they'd had enough of Barry's alcohol intake, had concluded that the only sensible course of action left open to them was to resign.

Barry was busy throwing another tantrum, something he'd been doing a lot of lately.

'This is bloody ridiculous. It ain't going to be man versus machine anymore; it's going to be man slash machine versus machine. WE'LL HAVE TO HAVE THIS STUPID THING THERE.'

He was referring to the life-support system that bestowed upon him the supposedly precious gift of not being dead.

Joe Kearns was not the type of man to shout at, not because he was violent but because he was acid-quick with words.

'That THING is what's keeping you alive, and the only person you've got to be angry at is yourself: nobody forced all that booze down your throat.'

Feeling bitter, Barry sat sulking in silence because he knew his manager was right.

'Look, don't worry about the kidney problem coz I'm buying you a new one off some orphan,' said Kearns now less heatedly.

‘I don’t want just one kidney, I want two. A high profile person like me needs two kidneys. Surely there’s another poor orphan out there who wants in on the deal.’

‘Getting two will take time. You’ll have to make do with one at first.’

Barry nodded in a resigned acceptance. Kearns got up to leave but before he did Barry had one last thing to say.

‘Hey Joe.’

‘Yeah champ.’

‘Make sure it’s from one of those good-looking orphans. I don’t want no ugly kid’s kidney put inside me.’

Kearns smiled and said: ‘You got it champ.’

Entering once again to the *Eye of the Tiger*, Barry was bobbing, weaving, slipping and sliding, well as much as a man who’d recently had a kidney operation could anyway. Deep Red meanwhile was already waiting for the action to begin, its scarlet eyes looking on at Barry’s flamboyant entrance, swivelling in what appeared to be a rolling motion which gave the machine a curious appearance of being less than amused by its opponents display.

The supercomputer was essentially a 10x10 ft black block that housed mountains of circuit boards, wires and microchips. It didn’t have arms or limbs of any kind, so the task of moving physical objects such as the chess pieces befell to its creator, Percival Peppermint.

In spite being a big box of wires, Deep Red had the ability to talk and engage in conversation on important topics such as global warming, human rights, or who’d win in fight to the death between a lion and a tiger.

In a stop-start robotic voice the machine greeted Barry. ‘Hello Mr Broomfield.’

Barry’s heart skipped a beat; he glanced at the glass scarlet eyes before turning to Peppermint who was smiling broadly.

‘He bloody talks?’

Percival ignored the question and instead let his creation answer.

‘Yes I do Mr Broomfield. I hope we can be friends after the game, you are a big hero of mine.’

‘Yeah...sure, maybe we can go for a drink or something...’ suggested Barry with outward pleasantness, whilst strongly hoping his offer wouldn’t be taken up.

Since procuring a new kidney from an orphan in exchange for a big wad of cash, Barry was back on hard liquor. Assuming there was always going to be another orphan willing to sell vital organs if something else packed in, he wasn’t too bothered about health implications relating to his rock n roll lifestyle.

‘It doesn’t drink,’ interrupted Peppermint sternly.

‘Maybe I can buy him some batteries, or a can of WD40?’

Deep Red stirred, replying before its creator could answer for it this time.

‘I would like that very much Mr Broomfield.’

It was hard to tell whether the gigantic black block was genuinely pleased because the tone of its voice never changed. Members of the press had cheekily suggested Deep Red might be playing the wrong game, that with its expressionless demeanour, it may in fact be more suited to poker.

Even though Deep Red lacked an actual face to show expression through, the machine was more humanlike than the media gave it credit for. It was all completely inconsequential for poor Barry though, as communicating with the computer was

exactly the same as his interactions with humanity: it was just a faceless, indecipherable block.

The previous night Barry had been drinking copious amounts of tequila whilst cavorting around with a number of his floozies. This ill-disciplined behaviour resulted in him being far from his best for the career-defining match of his professional chess career. The exhaustion was visibly evident, his eyelids drooped, his smile was strained, his whole body felt fatigued. It also didn't help that his new kidney was taking a while to break in.

After Deep Red had won the first two games, Percival Peppermint felt compelled in declaring to the crowd they were witnessing a glimpse of the future, when artificial life would become superior to the human race. Everyone in attendance who heard these daring and inflammatory claims just thought the computer geek was a computer geek, and so ignored him.

Backstage and desperate that he was going to lose his unbeaten record, Barry, needing inspiration, looked to his manager.

'Here, take this,' said Kearns, 'I've got to go.'

'What is it?'

'What does it matter? It will wake you up, trust me,' said Barry's manager as he left.

'Where're you going?'

'Sorry can't stop, got to see a man about a dog.'

And with that Kearns was gone, leaving Barry with just a Class A drug in his hand.

Resolving that he wasn't going to go down without a fight, Barry made a second dramatic entrance into the arena, but this time at his request to a different soundtrack. *Life in the Fast Lane* was to be his battle cry.

Feeling revived by the chemical pick-me-up he regained his focus. He discovered the best way to play Deep Red was by continually changing his playing style and strategy mid game. The supercomputer had great difficulty in dealing with this because it was incapable, unlike Barry, of adapting. Deep Red, merely a machine, used raw computing power to pick the best options available to it instead of distinctly human traits like imagination, learning and intuition.

The giant calculator was confused by Barry's new tactic, but even so, Barry had to play at his absolute best to stay in the game because Deep Red was proving to be a far more formidable opponent than any human he'd ever faced. He was for the first ever time in his chess career spending long periods planning moves and attacks. The crowd didn't like it one bit as they'd grown accustomed to witnessing Barry bowl his opponents over, usually in little under half an hour.

The shallow fan base, their short attention spans faltering under the strain of concentration became restless; they turned on their hero to boo him. Put bluntly, they were too stupid to realise the high level of skill being displayed before them in this profound tussle of human ingenuity against cold computer calculation.

The contest stretched on for hours, with the result of almost all of Barry's once loyal fans deserting him to watch reruns of classic game shows.

As Roy Walker uncapped his now famous one liner to cheers, *Aye that's good, but it's not the one*, in reply to even the most ludicrous of answers, Barry locked horns with his most dangerous adversary to date.

Barry had incredibly fought back from his two zero deficit to make it three games a piece. Everything was now riding on this last match. Feeling this time truly exhausted, (even the chemical pick-me-ups were no longer working) Barry had come close to throwing in the towel, yet he was determined to leave with his dignity intact, believing it important he went out like a champion.

Just as Barry's steely defiance began to dissipate, something odd started to happen to Deep Red.

'Is smoke supposed to come out of him like that?' asked Barry in a weak voice.

Peppermint didn't answer but his face said it all: something was seriously amiss with his supercomputer.

'I don't feel very good Percival. I think something might be wrong with me.'

'No—you'll be okay... ' Percival replied, gazing intently into the big red eyes of his creation.

Peppermint tried to hide the worry that was etched on his face and embedded in his voice, but failed miserably.

'I think we will have to forfeit Percival because I don't feel very well. I think you had better shut me down.'

A loud bang emanated from Deep Red that startled the remaining spectators from their slumber. Soon after this internal explosion it became apparent to everybody the machine had caught alight and was now officially on fire. Percival had to be dragged away kicking and screaming from his creation. Since the piece of hardware which was going up in flames represented his life's work, he was a bit miffed.

With the very real possibility of getting burnt alive now on the cards, Barry, who had been feeling mentally and physically exhausted quickly found hidden reserves of energy.

‘Watch out, he’s gonna blow,’ said Barry, believing for some unknown reason Deep Red was laced in explosives or volatile chemicals.

Percival Peppermint was still resisting leaving his baby behind. No sooner would he be pulled away from the inferno to safety, than he’d run straight back towards it with careless disregard for his own wellbeing. What was more disturbing was that Peppermint, who’d brought his wife and children along to watch his triumph, did not seem in the slightest bit bothered his family was, along with everybody else in the stadium, in mortal danger. Also unsettling was how Deep Red’s cries of agony were curiously mirrored by its creator, as if the duo held some kind of telepathic connection that allowed them to feel each others pain.

After the fire service had put out the blaze—which incidentally took a long time and a good number of fire engines—Barry was left to reflect on the day’s events.

‘It’s funny how things often seem to end up on fire when I place chess,’ he said, thinking aloud between throaty coughs.

In the end there were only two casualties, although it could have been a lot worse if the arena had been packed. It was then unlucky the majority of the crowd had gotten bored and left. Of the casualties there was one deceased supercomputer and a severely burnt, but still alive Percival Peppermint.

As Barry continued to engage in his period of reflection, and attempt to recover from smoke inhalation, the computer genius was hoisted into an ambulance to be taken to the nearest hospital. Despite having multiple skin grafts to look forward

to, Peppermint still seemed more upset about his now dead calculator, hardly appearing to notice the weeping family beside him.

‘Mr Broomfield, well done, that’s surely chess’s first victory by fatality.’

Barry turned around to be confronted by a small, bald, wrinkly man who spoke with an American accent.

‘I’m a big fan of yours,’ continued the man.

‘Yeah, cool...’ replied Barry, only vaguely interested, understandable if you take into account that he’d almost been burnt alive. ‘Sorry mate, but I really don’t feel up to signing autographs at the moment.’

Before Barry’s fan could reply another person stepped between the two men.

‘Are you Mr Broomfield?’

‘Yes.’

‘Mr Kearns told me to give you this.’

Barry was handed an envelope which he looked at in puzzlement, but before he was able to ask the messenger any questions, they had disappeared into the masses of people that were milling amongst the charred carnage.

Upon opening the envelope Barry found a roughly written letter that suggested it had been produced in haste.

Dear Barry,

I am sorry to inform you that I will no longer be able to act as your manager because I have come to the conclusion that working for you is too hard. It is a constant battle keeping you away from the women, drugs and alcohol, and it is a task I am no longer willing to undertake. Instead I have decided to steal all the proceedings generated from the Man versus Machine Extravaganza and retire to

the Caribbean. Also, the house you are living in, the lease was actually in my name and I've sold it, so it is now the house you were living in. Your sports car was again bought in my name, so I've sold that too. In fact if you look in your bank account you'll find I've taken almost all your money. Sorry about that.

Yours sincerely,

Joe Kearns

p.s. I also won't be able to get you that second kidney now.

Dropping the letter, allowing it to blow away into the wind, Barry walked in a trance aimlessly for a few hours. Everything was gone, everything he worked for had vanished into an Irishman's pot of gold and he was now back to where he'd started prior to entering the regionals: he was broke.

This was only the half of it however as not only was Barry re-broke, but due to the media's intense coverage of the farcical and life-threatening Man versus Machine Extravaganza, he was being vilified by the whole world. The party was over. When Barry had had money he'd wasted it on useless crap and illegal kidney transplants, now the remainder was earning interest sitting in the Joe Kearns retirement fund.

In line with the evaporation of Barry's money, followed the evaporation of his floozies and 'friends.' The sponsorship deals also disappeared, only to be replaced by lawsuits from spectators who had attended what was now deemed an extravagant fiasco. They accused the chess master of inflicting mental anguish and distress.

Upon closer examination of these accusers, Barry was certain he had not seen half of them actually at the event when the fire occurred; he was convinced that they

were the most abominable type of opportunists. When these opportunists began to realise their victim was penniless they ceased their attack, but don't go thinking for a second it was out of mercy.

The world's media forgot to recognise Barry's extraordinary accomplishment of defeating a supercomputer capable of analysing two-hundred-million chess moves a second. They opted alternatively to aim the focus of their reporting on the inadvertent devastation caused by this accomplishment. And because this was the angle at which they decided to tackle the story, they needed a scapegoat to be held responsible for the catastrophe.

The culpability wasn't pinned on Percival Peppermint, despite his failure to incorporate strict safety measures that would prevent his creation from overheating. The two reasons for this decision were as follows:

Reason No1: Peppermint was not a high profile target and wouldn't attract much interest from the public.

Reason No2: Peppermint was currently in a critical condition inside a specialist burns unit.

The media knew they'd look callous laying into the computer geek while his mourning family wept over his now skin-grafted body. Barry on the other hand, who was merely financially ruined, was considered fair game, and unfortunately the insatiable media beast didn't have to look far for outrageous crimes against humanity.

Public opinion of Barry became increasingly negative as the leaches who'd briefly sucked him dry were now raking it in by selling their eyewitness accounts of his enormous substance abuse to the highest bidder. Yet there was still a far deeper and darker secret that Barry concealed, other than his partiality for alcohol, drugs and

women: the secret as you'll already be aware was allied to the finer details of his recent organ transplant.

It was with extreme gratitude that Barry thanked the little orphan who now had just one kidney instead of two—albeit a far healthier bank balance—for keeping quiet. Saddening then it is to inform you that the same could not be said for the doctor who performed the operation. He seemed to relish revealing every gory detail of his business arrangement with Kearns and Broomfield. The press, with their unquenchable lust for scandal, absorbed every drop of the tale.

It is noteworthy that everyone appeared to forget that this so-called doctor was just as guilty of a complete lack of moral judgement as Barry, for he was the one who'd negligently carried out the illegal organ transplant for some quick cash in hand. The world, rather than question the practices of this man, applauded him for his forthrightness and his shedding some light on Mr Broomfield's activities; that was until the Inland Revenue nailed him to the wall over the cash-in-hand fee he hadn't declared.

Now hounded by paparazzi, photographers who were looking to snap an ever more shameful photo of their victim (the best they'd got so far was of him surreptitiously picking his nose) meant Barry was not even allowed the dignity to drift back into the Hickey Woods and resume his life as a lost soul.

Chapter 16: A Change of Scenery

Once, many years ago, as an extremely young boy, Barry had been taken to a pub by the father who would later desert him. This in itself was nothing unusual, as Barry's father would often, much to his displeasure, be forced to take his son with him on his drinking adventures.

While Broomfield Senior prattled to the fellow regulars, Barry saw another young boy not unlike himself, approach the bar, request a bottle of coke, and swiftly receive one. Thinking what a novel idea this was he left his father's side and requested a bottle for his own.

The barmaid smiled warmly as she uncapped the chilled fizzy drink and handed it down to the boy's small outstretched hand.

'Thank you,' said Barry politely before turning to go.

'Wait there just a minute!' said the barmaid whose face was no longer smiling with warmth. 'Where's your money?'

Money: This was a concept that was completely foreign to a young Finbar Cedric Broomfield. *What is money.*

'Don't panic Margery, I'll pay for it.'

An old lady who had noticed the little boy's worried countenance, kindly took out her purse and paid for Barry's drink, after which she squeezed his chubby cheek and said: 'Now don't go getting into any mischief.'

What wasn't in Barry's recollection of this event in his childhood was how when he turned away, drink in hand, the old lady pulled out a machete from her handbag of horrors. The large knife was wielded with the sole purpose of hacking a defenceless child into small pieces.

Too busy counting the bubbles that floated to the top of his drink, this part of Barry's memory was missing because he'd never noticed the old lady's real intention. Luckily others in the pub had noticed the crazy bat's vicious intent and restrained her accordingly. The maniacal cackling had been a dead giveaway.

Barry often thought back to this childhood experience when he'd had his first encounter with money. The painful realisation that if you didn't have it, or at a second best, kind old ladies nearby, you couldn't have fizzy pop, was one of those landmark disappointments all children must experience if they're to develop into normal, eternally-cynical adults. It was a great disappointment for a young Barry, greater even than discovering a fat man dressed in red and bearing gifts didn't really come down the chimney every year, which was probably because he never got anything he'd actually want off that fat man dressed in red.

Looking on the bright side, now that Barry didn't have such vast supplies of money at his disposal he was living a more humble existence. The drugs, the alcohol and the fast women were a thing of the past. Barry's liver sighed with relief.

It took a few months for the media firestorm to die down and Barry to be left alone. He was still playing chess professionally, beating anyone that challenged him with ease, but now it was for far smaller sums of money because his public image was still in tatters.

Currently plying his trade at a low-profile chess tournament compared to the ones he'd been involved in before his fall from grace, Barry was wiping out the competition in an unexcited manner when a bald, wrinkly old man approached him.

'Mr Broomfield, finally, I've been trying to track you down now for months. You've successfully managed to keep a low profile lately haven't you?'

Barry's mind registered the man's American accent before replying: 'Yeah I guess.'

'You've been entering chess tournaments under fake names and living out of motels.'

'Motels? Oh right travel inns, yeah. I suppose I needn't bother doing that anymore coz the press guys have lost interest in me now. They must have found somebody else to destroy—thank God.'

'You don't remember me do you?'

'Should I?'

'I was there the day you beat Deep Red.'

Looking at the wrinkled face of the bald man Barry trawled back through his memory.

'I remember now, you said you were a big fan. I met you outside the arena after the fire. I didn't think I had any fans left, after all that's happened.'

'I'm not a chess fan Mr Broomfield. God you've been hard to find. I was beyond miserable when you slipped out of my fingers that day. I turned around and where you'd been only a moment before you were gone.'

'I disappeared because I'd just received a letter after I met you that was a bit of a bombshell. I walked off and sort of lost myself for while to be honest. You say you're not a chess fan?' Barry was momentarily confused until it dawned on him why the old man was there. 'Look, give me your abuse, get it over with and then leave me alone.'

'No, no you don't understand, I'm here about a paper you wrote while you were in prison that you submitted to the magazine Popular Science. It wasn't till I saw you plastered on the internet against Deep Red that I found you.' The old man

chuckled and said: 'You can imagine that it was almost unbearable when I lost you again.'

'What, one of my papers was actually published in the magazine?'

The Professor nodded to confirm it was.

'I didn't know that. I used to send things in because I'd get really bored at...it doesn't matter.' Barry opted to leave out the small detail that he had written and sent in his various theories to Popular Science, all whilst incarcerated for armed robbery, which was actually pointless because the man before him already knew he was an ex-convict. 'So why are you so interested in a paper I wrote anyhow?'

'Let me first introduce myself. My name is Professor George Riddell and I work for NASA.'

'Bloody hell,' said Barry mindlessly.

'What you wrote was groundbreaking, quite astonishing really, it took physics to places it's never been before.'

Groundbreaking, how utterly preposterous, Barry reflected, his inner thoughts taking on a more intellectual quality as his ego inflated under the praise. Having done that paper while simultaneously engaged in a game of eye spy with Tobias Robinson inside prison, Barry felt confident no previous scientific breakthroughs had been achieved in such a way. For a moment his mind then drifted to Tobias and how he'd been a good friend. He wondered with immense sadness what had happened to him, hoping his cellmate's life was filled with more joy than his own.

'Out of interest, which university did you study at?' asked Professor Riddell, breaking Barry's chain of thought. 'Was it Oxford? Cambridge? I bet Stevenson was your mentor wasn't he?'

Barry laughed at this rib tickler before revealing he'd never been to university, that he had just become a window cleaner after leaving school, and that he'd simply developed a fascination with complex physics theory.

Professor Riddell shook his head in disbelief. 'Remarkable.'

The next hour or so of Barry's life was spent engaged in fervent conversation with the Professor, the subject being space travel. Professor Riddell's enthusiasm increased as his beliefs that the man he'd travelled thousands of miles to see was indeed somebody very special.

'Barry, I want you to come and work with me for NASA back over in the States, in the Advanced Propulsion Department. You'd be paid handsomely for it of course and—'

'No,' Barry interrupted. 'If I do it I don't want to be paid a large salary. Money and I don't mix.'

Professor Riddell looked at Barry curiously before shrugging his shoulders. 'Sure, you can choose to be paid a modest salary if that's what you really want. All I want is for you to come and work with me. I feel this could be the beginning of a very fruitful partnership.'

Mulling it over, Barry weighed up the pros and cons before making his decision. 'You know, I am getting tired of living this rock n roll lifestyle, and besides, things always seem to get set on fire when I play chess... Yeah okay, I'll do it.'

Within two weeks Barry was on a plane bound for the US of A, leaving England behind him. As he got off the aircraft and stepped onto American soil for the first time, he was immediately struck by the overpowering heat and how it was starkly

different from the almost permanently overcast climate back home. *This is going to take some getting used to.*

This was a needless worry as yet unknown to him he wouldn't be spending much time in the sunlight.

After walking a few paces alongside the other departing passengers, a man dressed all in black stopped Barry. 'Mr Broomfield, you're to come with me,' said the man, his voice oddly lacking intonation.

There was another man in black standing beside a matching black limousine parked a few metres away which Barry was motioned towards. Climbing inside the car, Barry felt like a very important person for the first time since the glories of his chess career. He'd been unaware he was to be chauffeur driven, expecting instead he'd require the services of a taxi paid for out of his own pocket.

'Are we going straight to the hotel?' asked Barry, showing the address he'd written onto a piece of paper to the driver.

The driver didn't respond, leaving his colleague who now sat in the front passenger seat to answer the question for him. Both chaperones faced unwaveringly forwards, not once turning their heads to look at the cargo now inside their limo.

'There's been a change of plan Mr Broomfield: you won't be working for NASA anymore, we're taking you to a base in the New Mexico desert which is where you'll be conducting your work.'

'What? Will Professor Riddell be there?'

'No he won't I'm afraid, don't worry he's been informed, everything has been taken care of.'

‘Right, well I wish I’d been told about all this before,’ said Barry, feeling disappointed he wouldn’t be able to meet up with that friendly old professor again. ‘If I’m not going to be working for NASA, who am I going to be working for?’

The two men in black gave each other a sideways glance before answering in unison: ‘The United States Military.’

‘I thought my job here was going to be coming up with new ideas for advanced propulsion in spacecraft? I don’t want anything to do with creating weaponry.’

‘You will be working on advanced propulsion for us Mr Broomfield.’

Barry failed to notice that his chaperone’s reply was more of a command than an informative response.

Speeding along in the black limo, Barry spotted the golden arches of a McDonalds.

‘Could you stop off here? I want to get myself a Happy Meal.’

The driver, who had still not yet spoken independently, complied with his cargo’s request.

Upon entering the burger bar the men dressed in black suits flanked either side of Barry, so close in fact that they were almost touching his shoulders. The staff inside the restaurant seemed a little perturbed by their current assemblage of customers and the odd manner with which they moved about the premises.

It was an unsettling scene for the teenage burger flippers: this pasty man with an accent they didn’t understand, wearing a grotesque Hawaiian shirt and tiny hot pants revealing milk-bottle legs was asking them for something.

‘Do you speak English?’ asked a McDonald’s employee slowly and clearly, after trying in vain to understand what to her was Japanese.

The two heavies that were with Barry added a strong dose of intimidation to the already tense atmosphere. They had been scoping-out the restaurant in a dangerous fashion, but now they looked directly into the sales assistant's terrified eyes. Towering over everyone in the place they leaned over the counter so far that their cargo was almost blocked out from sight.

The more talkative of the men in black translated for his English associate. 'He says he wants a happy meal.'

'What does he err—want in it?' asked the burger flipper shakily.

After a moment of conferring the man in black turned back to the counter. 'He would like a coke, one cheeseburger, one fries, and one wobble-icious fruit jelly.' There was some more conferring. 'And he says make sure you remember to put in his toy.'

Barry turned to one of his burly escorts as he waited for his meal. 'The toy is the best part.'

As Barry slurped his coke loudly on the back seat of the once again moving black limousine, he played with the toy he'd received from Ronald McDonald, a tiny Hummer all-terrain vehicle.

'How cool is this, take a look,' said Barry shaking the plastic plaything in the face of one his chaperones.

'Very nice Mr Broomfield,' answered the dark-suited man through gritted teeth, the first sign of emotion and being human he'd shown.

Your average MIB experiences a hard life, although it's all necessary emotional toughening, allowing them to serve their country in the role of secrecy that's required. These two men that escorted Barry had been put through exhausting

physical and mental training regimes, witnessed truly gruesome horrors committed by their own government, and on more than one occasion dealt in death. But in spite of all these experiences, this was the closest thing to unbearable they'd come across. The Broomfield Effect was pushing them to their emotional limits.

After an extremely long drive in which Barry had spent most of the time complaining about how long the journey was taking the car finally stopped, halting abruptly in the middle of an arid desert surrounded by imposing mountains on all sides.

Barry looked out the window and was disgusted by what he saw. 'We're in the middle of nowhere, there's nothing here!'

'First glances can be deceiving Mr Broomfield.'

The ground in front of the car began to move. Amongst the random scatterings of barrel cacti and prickly pear, a giant trapdoor was lifting up out from under the sand. It didn't screech or make any sound as it rose up out of the desert, and after it ceased to move, having opened to its full, it was revealed that the road which had at first appeared to have reached its end now continued steeply downwards underground.

'What the! We're not going down there are we?'

Barry's stupid questions were no longer answered because the two men sitting in front of him had completed their mission, which meant they now deemed small talk needless.

For the first time since his arrival in America Barry sensed that something was amiss. One thing he could be cheerful about though was how he was going to save a small fortune on suntan lotion. At this present time however, the potential sun-block savings he was going to procure were the farthest thing from his mind. Pulling at the door handles, Barry found to his growing distress that they were locked.

After Barry, the two MIBs and the limo had descended steadily deeper for what seemed like an age, a period of time that's passage wasn't made any smoother by the ominous silence save for the occasional whimper that escaped from Barry's lips, the car stopped. It had come to rest inside a large underground car park that had marked on a wall:

Level 1- Car Parking/Tunnel Bore Storage

Even though being located deep underground and apparently top secret, this car park looked almost normal. I say almost because there were a few things that made this particular one different to the average car park you might encounter in normal, everyday life.

The first was that under the words: *Level 1- Car Parking/Tunnel Bore Storage* there was more writing, yet it was in a language Barry had never seen before but that reminded him of Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Another distinguishing feature was that of all the other cars that were parked there, there wasn't a single one that wasn't exactly identical in every detail to the black limousine Barry was currently inside.

But the feature that definitely stood out more than any other in this giant subterranean chasm was a number of truly huge, steel-encased cylinders. These colossal objects had a dozen large disc cutters at either end, each individual cutter being three times as long as a man. Scrutinising those ingenious pieces of machinery, Barry hypothesized they were the tunnel boring devices used to create the secret underworld he had entered.

Beginning now to think a wondrous and exciting revelation was being made known to him, Barry felt as if he'd been let in on a secret that only a privileged few had access to. The truth was, he was as of yet, blissfully unaware of the depth of depravity inside this rabbit's hole and the general disregard of morality it concealed.

The limousine was parked up alongside a line of identical vehicles and only now was Barry able to get out, the MIBs having released the locks on the passenger doors. Once out he was escorted to a lift where one of the dark-suited men placed a metal card inside a terminal and punched a series of numbers into a keypad. A blue band of light encircled the floor the man stood upon before rising up and engulfing his entire body, after which a computer-generated voice spoke from the terminal.

'Weight passed, retinal scan passed, fingerprint scan passed. You are clear to enter Level 2 Agent 427945.'

The doors of the lift opened and the unlikely trio stepped inside. It was during the tight security checks that Barry noticed CCTV cameras were tracking his every move. When the doors opened again it was into a corridor that's floor, ceiling and wall looked as if they were out of a plastic injection mould, all curving into one, yet metallic to the touch.

Walking forward a few paces, there was a sign on the immaculate white wall before Barry that read:

Level 2- Shuttle Bay/ Tunnel Bore Maintenance/ Central Security Hub

This meant nothing to Barry of course but there was another sign below the first one that did.

Please could new arrivals follow the corridor to the left, any deviation from this command will result in the summoning of armed security. You are being watched.

Below the notice were the Egyptian-like symbols again which prompted Barry to think that their purpose was to serve as a type of decoration, an attempt to make this intimidating place seem a little friendlier. In his opinion they were unsuccessful.

Barry looked around for a camera, wanting to know from where he was being watched. He didn't find one or anything that looked like one at least. What he did find was that his two dark-suited companions had vanished into thin air, leaving him completely alone. And not only was Barry now alone, but where the lift had been only a moment ago, now there was just solid wall, as white and as smooth as all the others that surrounded him.

Feelings of distress began to cloud Barry's judgement. *What is this place?* The instinctual fear of the unknown that resides in all human beings left him terrified, and all the crazy stuff that was going on as well didn't help matters either. It was then fortuitous he didn't understand the full horror of the underground base he'd been brought to, since he'd have soiled himself and looked foolish for the naked medical examination that he was still to undertake.

A horrible sense of abandonment washed over Barry: (a feeling you'd expect him to be familiar with by now) the new friends, who up until a moment ago had not been willing to leave his side for a second, even when he'd requested the limousine be stopped because of his need to urinate, (the coke with his happy meal had been large and the journey long) had left him without a word.

Turning back to face the sign, Barry saw that there was only one thing left for him to do, and although it may have appeared obvious to him, anyone else would've

thought his next course of action a little unexpected. He performed an improvised dance routine where he flayed his arms and legs in an unpredictable fashion, before picking up his luggage and deliberately running down the wrong corridor. By so doing he'd disobeyed the explicit instructions on the wall that told him to do the opposite.

This moment of random craziness ended with Barry flat on his back looking up at what appeared to be futuristic guns. They were pointed directly at him. The measly possessions he'd brought to America in his battered old suitcase had pathetically scattered over the metallic floor after multiple rugby tackles. While his luggage had been successfully cracked open, his head luckily still remained intact.

The pain from the boots that kept Barry pinned to the ground was real and Barry now knew he wasn't hallucinating.

'I thought I was in a dream or that I'd gone mad again. I used to have mental problems. I didn't think that all this could be real.'

His explanations fell on deaf ears: this was an above top-secret facility, and the penalty for breaking the rules in a place such as this was usually death by bullet holes, if you were lucky. Barry had broken the first rule that had been asked of him, so to be fair it was a small miracle that he wasn't dead or worse already.

Barry was allowed up but the guns persisted to point at his now aching head that bore the imprint of a standard-issue US Military boot's tread. He looked around and noticed with shame that in his mad dash he'd only managed to cover about five metres from his starting point.

Wanting to put the crazy random he'd just acted out behind him, Barry examined the guns that pointed at him more closely. They weren't like any other firearm he'd ever seen. This new underground world was unravelling many

uncommon features that distinguished itself from the surface he knew. The guns reminded him of the phasers on Star Trek, and being a naturally and at times annoyingly curious person he couldn't help but ask a stupid question.

‘Are those guns, they look weird?’

‘Shut yer hole you.’

The people that surrounded Barry and who were aiming these strange weapons at him wore a distinctive uniform that consisted of a black jumpsuit, and that had a peculiar symbol of a red triangle with the letter *H* superimposed over it. The words: *The All-Seeing Eye*, were written around the outside of this distinguishing symbol upon the upper-left chest.

Lifted up roughly by his arms by two powerful men, Barry's feet barely touched the ground as he was taken to the Security Hub. Expecting this Security Hub as the guards called it, to be something grand and foreboding, Barry was almost disappointed when it turned out to be just a receptionist at a desk, sitting behind a computer screen and a telephone. Things at this base were not always what they appeared to be, and Barry wasn't yet aware disinformation was a favoured tactic used in this new world.

The initial feeling of disappointment Barry experienced at the boring normality of the Security Hub quickly vanished when he noticed the receptionist to be a very attractive young woman.

‘Well, I've seen it all now. I've never had anyone do a mental little dance and then run off the wrong way, that's definitely a first,’ said the receptionist.

‘I know, I'm such an orang-utan,’ replied Barry, trying to muster up as much charm as a man can while he's been held by the scruff of the neck.

Addressing the security personnel she said: ‘Alright, leave him to me.’

After the guards had disappeared around the corner, Barry immediately started to ask questions like, why had he been brought here? And, what is this place?

‘I’m sorry, it’s a need-to-know only policy I’m afraid. I couldn’t tell you anything even if I wanted to because I don’t know anything anyway. My job’s just to log the details of the people they bring to me into the computer and give them their security-clearance cards. You know I think you’re the first British person I’ve inducted. You are British aren’t you?’

‘Yeah—I just don’t understand, I was supposed to be working for NASA and then I got brought here.’

‘You’ll only have been brought here if they think they can use you for something, if you have something special about you that make’s you different.’

Of course Barry was very different, an unparalleled genius, but being unique unfortunately brought in this case an evil into his life he wouldn’t have encountered if he was just a normal man: Writing his paper on anti-matter reactors had initially caught the attention of NASA, but it had also been leaked to the people that controlled the black budget. The All-Seeing Eye did not want this unique talent to go to waste on another mars rover. NASA after all is just a façade, an organisation whose primary directive is to entertain the public with shiny big rockets, the humorous effects of zero gravity, and faking moon landings.

‘You can’t tell me anything else? Barry leaned towards the woman and spoke in a whisper: ‘What about whether or not we are being watched right now?’

‘I couldn’t even tell you that because I honestly don’t know. All I know is some very secretive stuff goes on here since I have to make you sign a waver on penalty of DEATH before you’re allowed any further into the facility.’ The receptionist’s voice was a barely audible whisper now. ‘I’ve heard some of the guards

talking amongst themselves about the other levels. I've only got Triad Level 2 clearance so I can't go down any further than this. I'm not even allowed into parts of this level, like the Shuttle Bay for example, I'm not allowed in there.'

The receptionist for a fleeting moment looked deeply troubled, but then the look dissolved and her cheerful smile returned. 'We've all got to make a living haven't we? It pays well here and as long as you keep your nose clean you'll be alright. Just don't break any more rules okay.'

'What if I don't want to go in? What if I refuse to sign?'

The look of fear returned and she said quietly: 'Keep your voice down. I'm not sure if it's actually optional. Once they've brought you here you MUST sign it, unless you—'

Tears welled up in her eyes but Barry couldn't understand why, since his inability to read emotion as always left him clueless.

'God almighty, okay okay, I'll sign it. No need to get so upset.'

After signing a waiver that stated speaking of the location, any government secrets, or even the existence of the underground base would result in the penalty of death, Barry was shown into a large, poorly lit room that housed a giant computer screen.

'You're going to have to take all your clothes off now Mr Broomfield,' said the receptionist.

'We've only just met!' exclaimed a shocked, but mostly pleased Barry.

'You really are an original aren't you? No you need to be in the nude for the computer to weigh you and take your details.'

Barry laughed nervously before saying: 'Yeah I knew that, I was only joking.'

Feeling a bit embarrassed getting naked in front of the attractive young

receptionist, Barry was sure he heard her stifle a giggle as he pulled his y-fronts down. He now realised the room was poorly lit for good reason.

After a thorough physical examination, a little too thorough from Barry's point of view, he was issued not only his security-clearance card, but with some really good advice from the young receptionist as well.

'Keep that ugly body of yours hidden away at all costs, you'll give people nightmares. And don't bother trying to get a girlfriend either because your penis is far too small.'

Barry's security clearance turned out to be a rather unexceptional Triad Level 3, and he also, like the receptionist wasn't granted access to the Shuttle Bay. Lastly he was he was issued with his uniform. Unlike the security guards, Barry's jumpsuit was white, but it did have the same symbol that the guards wore on their black ones.

'Have a nice life,' said the receptionist.

'What do you mean?'

'Well I never see any of the people I induct again; once they go through that door that's it.'

'Can you at least tell me what this place is called?'

'I don't know its official name. It probably doesn't even have one,' the receptionist's voice descended into a darkly ominous tone, 'but everyone calls it— The Complex—'

'Oh right, cool, cheers. Sounds nice doesn't it? The Complex,' said Barry merrily.

Chapter 17: Working Man Genius at Work

Level 3 of The Complex was dedicated to developing advanced technologies such as new aircraft propulsion methods, active camouflage and everlasting gobstoppers, technology that sat at the very cutting edge of science. Into this world of interstellar possibilities stepped Finbar Cedric Broomfield, and like a lamb that has lost its way and accidentally trotted into an abattoir, he was unaware of the danger within.

Upon his exit from another magnetically-powered lift, Barry noticed that there didn't appear to be a single lift shaft in The Complex linking all the separate levels together as you might expect. Alternatively there was a separate one linking each level to the next. Barry thought this security measure excessive and that it must've really annoyed people when they wanted to move quickly from the bottom level to the top one, or vice-versa. What Barry didn't realise was that this was only the tip of the iceberg. The sophisticated security measures taken inside The Complex made it probably the most secure place on Earth. There were thousands of cameras, radar sensors, motion sensors, infrared sensors, there were the security-clearance terminals that had to be passed to access the lifts, and of course, the small army that could be summoned at an instant.

Immediately after stepping out from the lift that linked Level 2 to Level 3, Barry was greeted by a man who wore an identical uniform to his, but whose face appeared weary, having prominent rings under its eyes.

Attempting to ask some questions about his new home, Barry was again told as he was by the receptionist that information was given on a need-to-know basis only. One question was answered though but the reply troubled him. The question had been about how many days vacation a year he'd be entitled to.

Barry had hoped to do a bit of sightseeing on his holidays, this being his first time in America, but when he inquired about holiday entitlement the weary-looking man guffawed and said: ‘You won’t get many days off I’m afraid. They don’t let us out much, especially guys like you.’

‘What do you mean—guys like me?’

‘I read your paper on anti-matter reactors, pretty groundbreaking stuff. They’ll work you hard. You can probably forget about doing any sightseeing.’

After been shown to his sparse living quarters, Barry sighed at the knowledge that he was going to be locked away underground in this base for the foreseeable future. It wasn’t how he’d imagined the American Dream, and he now began to regret the submission of his paper titled: *How Mankind Can Conquer the Universe* to his favourite magazine, *Popular Science*. *Tobias was right, I should have sold the rest of the stamps and bought with the money something practical, like a shiv off Crazy Craig.*

Barry’s living quarters, although sparsely decorated contained just about everything he might need: a comfortable double bed, a small but pristine kitchen, and an equally spotless bathroom. One thing was missing nevertheless: there wasn’t a window. This was an understandable omission bearing in mind Barry was currently a mile underground. To compensate for the shortfall there was a poster-sized framed photo of a rainforest hanging on the wall, but the bright explosion of colour the picture provided seemed almost lurid and out of place situated inside The Complex’s metallic plainness.

The thing that peeved Barry more though than the pointlessness of his rainforest, was how he’d not yet received his suitcase after having it forcibly taken off

him by the security guards up on Level 2. The Complex apparently didn't like things being brought in from outside. The luggage containing all his worldly possessions had been placed on a conveyor belt and he was told he would not see them until they had been thoroughly checked for any potential security hazards. Unsure how his underwear and other garments posed any serious risks, Barry resigned himself to the fact he didn't have much say in the matter.

An additional cause of disruption to the settling in process was provided by the countless security cameras in Barry's new digs. The sound of their servos as they followed his every move was the cause of much displeasure. And so it was that the most shocking revelation of the day was linked to these infuriating devices: Taking his first bowel-waste-content-evacuation in his new home, Barry heard that irritating sound of moving servos once again, but this time the sound was emanating from below his exposed rump. Lifting his backside he found to his horror there was a bowl cam. He couldn't even drop a load without having it watched, recorded and catalogued.

The following day Barry was shown around his new and very impressive workplace. Level 3 of The Complex contained technological wonders that Barry hadn't even been aware existed yet. Some of this technology was far in advance of what he had up till then believed were humanities manufacturing capabilities. His awareness of the laws of physics were probably better than anyone's on the planet, what with the mountain of information he'd consumed from books, yet he found some of those laws here being pushed to their absolute limits.

Picking through a number of interesting items with rapt fascination, Barry was startled.

‘Ingenious,’ he exclaimed. How did you get the quartz to crystallize around the metal like this?’

‘We believe it was created in the vacuum of space?’ replied a boffin.

‘What do you mean, believe? Weren’t you the people who made it?’

The head of Barry’s department, Professor Heinrich Schriever interrupted to give a very unconvincing lie.

‘Of err of course we were, he was just getting confused.’

Failing to detect that he was being lied to, Barry continued inspecting other objects of exquisite craftsmanship before been shown the piece de resistance.

Professor Schriever and his army of boffins led Barry to a gigantic vault, a vault so incredibly tough a tank would have been unsuccessful in so much as scratching it.

Located off to one side was a terminal similar to the ones outside the lifts. Schriever passed his metal clearance card through it and allowed the various security checks to begin.

As the vault door opened with painful slowness, Barry almost couldn’t contain his excitement at what might be inside this Aladdin’s cave. The expectations he had of seeing something spectacular weren’t in vain because sitting quite nonchalantly before him was a large, silver, saucer-shaped craft.

The far side of this craft had a gaping and charred hole in the hull, as wide as a man is tall, but it did nothing to dull its lustre in Barry’s eyes. At a first glance he thought the damage had been caused by an explosion that had emanated from inside the vessel. On closer inspection however, he observed the hull wasn’t blown outwards but rather inwards, as if something had hit it.

‘What happened here?’ said Barry pointing to the opening.

‘We had a bit of an accident in testing.’

‘An accident...it looks like it’s been struck by something,’ Barry paused and examined the damaged hull still more closely, ‘a missile maybe...It would have to be something fairly powerful to do this kind of damage.’

‘Now why would we go and shoot at our own aircraft Mr Broomfield?’ Everyone except Barry laughed awkwardly. ‘No, it was just an accident in its test flight.’

‘Oh okay,’ said Barry still puzzled. ‘Can I touch it?’

‘Of course, go ahead.’

Barry’s hand, reaching out and touching the craft instantly experienced an odd feeling that something in that convergence between flesh and material seemed very familiar.

‘It doesn’t feel like metal, it’s more like...’

He didn’t get to finish the sentence because of being distracted by the interior of the ship and how it was badly burnt. Professor Schriever and his boffins, noticing Barry’s interest, conducted him around some of the inner workings of the vessel.

‘We believe this is the anti-matter reactor. We think it uses element 115 to produce its anti-gravity and quite frankly, astonishing flight capabilities.’

‘This is an anti-matter reactor?’ said Barry incredulously after been shown the dustbin-sized barrel at the heart of the ship.

‘Yep, this is the engine room.’

‘God—an anti-matter reactor—it’s so small.’

‘Yeah, and the amazing thing is, this produces more energy in a second than our largest nuclear power stations do in a year.’

A clearly amazed, ‘Wow,’ was all that Barry could muster.

‘We need you to help us figure out how it works because this one’s broken.’

‘Well fix it then, you are the ones who built it. What do you need me for?’

With a confused frown Barry asked: ‘You did build it—didn’t you?’

‘Yes of course we built it but we erm, we sort of forgot how it works,’ answered Professor Schriever feebly

‘You forgot!’ said Barry. ‘The greatest invention in mankind’s history since the wheel and you forgot how you built it?’

‘No, well yes, you see the guy who built it, he died, and he was the only one who knew how it worked.’

‘What was his name?’

‘Erm it was err—Bryan,’ Professor Schriever looked down at the floor where there just so happened to be a spanner near his foot, ‘Bryan Spanner.’

‘Bryan Spanner. I don’t think I’ve ever heard of him. He must have been a genius of the first degree to build this though.’

‘Oh yeah Bryan was a mastermind, he won the Krypton Factor and everything.’

‘Did he? Bloody hell the Krypton Factor! Now that is impressive.’

‘Will you help us Barry, will you help finish Bryan Spanner’s work?’

‘Well I dunno what to say. Bryan Spanner sounds like quite a guy. I’ll try my best. I mean I’m sure you’ve got some far more intelligent people here than me. I mean I don’t know how much I’ll be able to help to be honest.’

Like in the chess tournaments he’d entered, Barry used his unique ability to focus his mind on a problem and shut out all other distractions from it to great effect. His co-workers were astounded at his prodigious abilities, and the intuitive nature with which he dissected and solved complex problems.

Still, even for Barry's brilliant mind the secrets of the damaged craft were proving difficult to unravel. In an effort to unlock the puzzle he asked Professor Schriever if it possible he be shown the entire innards of the ship. So far he'd only been granted access to sections that were for the most part, too burnt to allow the finding of any answers to the conundrums the ship posed.

'I'll have to put a request in at security for that to happen. It may take a while.'

There wasn't much time allocated for socialising in The Complex and when Barry wasn't working, eating, or getting his toilet habits filmed, he slept. When he did get chance to talk to his colleagues inside the base the conversation always revolved around work, even when he tried to push it onto other subjects. This situation continued until one day, the man Barry considered himself closest to since arriving at The Complex chose a different topic to discuss.

The man who Barry thought of as his new best friend was a highly-gifted young scientist by the name of Charles Delve, a fellow boffin. Professor Schriever had assigned Delve to work closely with Barry in the hope that the two brightest minds inside The Complex would produce some fruitful results.

Barry had failed to notice anything unusual about his friend until one day when Charles spoke to him very quietly while they were both tinkering around the inside of the damaged saucer.

'You like it here don't you Broomfield? Don't you miss the surface?'

This was the first time Barry had thought about the outside world since looking upon the picture of the rainforest in his living quarters, his mind having been so thoroughly absorbed in its mission.

‘Not really, there was nothing for me up there. At least down here I can work in peace. I hadn’t even thought about it really.’

‘You know for a genius you’re fairly stupid Broomfield. You wait till they give you some higher security clearance and you see what this base really is.’

‘What?’

‘You’ll see, just wait. Once you’ve caught a glimpse of The Nursery you won’t be able to sleep at night just like the rest of us.’

Shaking like a leaf and with a face awash with distress as his mind recalled some of the horrors it had seen, Charles got up and walked off, leaving Barry on his own to consider what he’d said.

Professor Schriever greeted Barry the following morning while he was busily working on positron stability for his new reactor.

‘Good news Mr Broomfield, you’ve been permitted to see the whole interior of the ship. And I imagine it won’t be long till they give you a higher security clearance as well.’

It was no secret that Barry had already established himself as the fastest rising star at The Complex within just a few weeks: his essential quirkiness fitted in snugly with the general atmosphere of insanity. The cameras that followed Barry’s every move documented the imperviousness to the mental anguish that cast its shadow over everyone else in the base. Barry happily and absent-mindedly continued with his work, ignorant and so unaffected by the feeling of fear around him.

The minds behind The Complex’s cameras regarded Barry with intrigue. *This man is the perfect tool, what type of hell has he been through?*

The cordoned-off interior parts of the craft, rather than provide answers only raised more questions. What appeared to be the cockpit was particularly strange.

‘The seats are so small. Who was flying this thing, midgets?’ Barry asked while stooping for the low ceiling.

Professor Schriever resembled a wobble-icious jelly as he tried to think up another pathetic excuse for this one.

‘They were, erm, it was piloted by—trained monkeys...’

‘Monkeys, that’s fascinating.’

The professor momentarily looked astounded before saying: ‘Yes and a good thing too, because when it crashed the only loss of life was monkey rather than human.’

‘Those poor, poor monkeys,’ said Barry sorrowfully.

There was a moment of silence in remembrance for the fictional dead monkeys before the full tour of the saucer’s interior continued. The last room they were to enter would be quite an eye opener.

‘We aren’t sure what we built this room for. We think it was for the monkeys to sleep in,’ said Professor Schriever.

A thunderstuck Barry stood fixed to the spot because he’d been in this room before: the sardine-can door, the bubble shape, the bed of pain, this was where he’d received an alien probe into a tender area following his abduction in the Hickey Woods.

Usually Barry spoke with a fervent enthusiasm at every new discovery the craft unveiled, so due to an uncharacteristic silence he drew the Professors attention.

‘Is there something wrong Mr Broomfield?’

Barry wanted to answer with vehemence; *I'VE BEEN IN HERE BEFORE YOU SLAG. I WAS STRAPPED TO THAT VERY BED. THIS IS A TORTURE ROOM. THIS IS AN ALIEN VESSEL. YOU DIDN'T BUILD IT AT ALL!*

But, he didn't, his reply was cool calm and collected. 'Oh, no no, very interesting room this.'

The realisation that his all-too close encounter with the third kind hadn't actually been a figment of his imagination was very unsettling. While his companion, Psycho, and the Hickey Hill Park Rangers chasing him with attack dogs were fantasy, he'd mistakenly assumed the encounter with the UGO was a creation of his illness and isolation also.

Barry didn't know what to believe anymore as it was feasible that this base was another fantasy concocted by his active imagination, and that possibility frightened him immensely. But then he remembered the pain of the boot on his face when he'd disobeyed the signposted order upon first entering Level 2, and so knew it couldn't be another hallucination.

The weeks turned into months and regardless of his being inside a base that was a beehive of activity, Barry walked along the metallic, oddly-lighted corridors by himself. *Alone, always alone.*

He'd become accustomed to the intrusive whir of the cameras now: their presence no longer felt disturbing because he considered them almost like friendly acquaintances. Walking by on his way to work everyday he'd greet them cheerfully as if they were people he knew.

'Hiya Roger. Alright Charlie? How's it going Tina you little scallywag.'

The sound of moving servos as the cameras tracked him had nothing to do with Big Brother's surveillance in Barry's mind, but instead represented a songbird's uplifting chirp.

Barry knew that regarding CCTV cameras as pals was a little peculiar, but then Charles Delve, probably the closest person Barry had had to a real friend inside The Complex had left the base to embark on a Kenyan safari, leaving without even saying goodbye. And Barry now only interacted with others in the base when necessary for work because nobody else seemed to have the time or inclination for anything more.

Chapter 18: Greys and Draconians

‘You’ve done it, you’ve done it you crazy genius!’ said Professor Schriever, slapping Barry vigorously on the back.

Barry had created the world’s first working anti-matter reactor, the world’s first machine capable of 100% pure energy conversion, completely bypassing the now seemingly Stone Age fusion reactor some unimportant mortals had been working on. The absurdly enormous horsepower the reactor produced, mixed with the anti-gravity Element 115 gave humanity the opportunity to create a vehicle that rendered all current air and space transport obsolete.

Working on a hunch after confirming Element 115 served as the one of the fuel sources for the alien vessel, Barry had managed after months of effort to get this fairy dust to work in tandem with magnetism. This combined with the raw power of the anti-matter reactor was a potent mixture, the result being propulsion and manoeuvrability on a previously unimagined scale.

While the construction of the spacecraft’s body was left to Barry’s less-capable colleagues, Barry worked on something entirely new. He was sure the alien craft didn’t use its anti-matter/anti-gravity engine to cross the unimaginably vast voids in space, as even with the new reactor it would still take many years to reach the nearest star.

After being confronted with this dilemma he’d originally toyed with the idea of wormholes, believing at first that the ship might travel through naturally occurring ones or that it might even somehow create its own. He eventually discarded this idea though after successfully creating one: it was a genuine wormhole but it became apparent you couldn’t make one any wider than the width of an amoeba. Obviously it

goes without saying that you'd never be able to let a ship containing a number of humans and all their associated paraphernalia pass through something so small.

The theories and giant complex formulas he'd written on his blackboard were amounting to nothing as the limits in the laws of physics were repeatedly getting in the way. Every time he thought he came close to discovering the secret of interstellar travel some pesky law would rear its ugly head. Barry became immensely frustrated because the damaged alien craft wasn't much help either, unwilling to shed anymore light on the riddle of how it got here.

One morning Barry was surprised to find Professor Schriever standing outside his living quarters.

'You run like clockwork don't you Barry? Always out of your room for exactly 0700 hours, not a minute sooner, not a minute later.'

'I like to keep to a routine.'

Ever since Barry was a child anything that deviated from his routine made him feel uncomfortable.

'You've been granted a Triad Level 4 access and you've also got full shuttle clearance for Level 2.'

Barry was surprised by the slackening of the security restrictions upon him and said: 'I thought information was only given on a need-to-know basis.'

'Yes, that's right it is, but we realise you've been trying your best to get man to the stars and we've decided to make an exception in your case. I recommend you go down to Level 4 and take a look around, you never know, you might find answers to the questions that torment you.'

Level 4: Visitor Housing.

Completely unaware of what to expect, but knowing it wouldn't be nice judging from the horror his colleague Charles Delve professed to having seen on the lower levels, Barry braced himself. The doors of the lift that connected Level 3 to 4 opened, after which it quickly became clear that no amount of bracing would ever be enough. What Barry saw was so earth shattering he thought the three levels of the Complex above his head might fall in: Standing only a few feet away from his position was a grey-skinned little alien. And this was not just any alien, this was the one that'd abducted him in the Hickey Woods and boldly stretched his rectal crevice in strange new ways.

Carrying a ghetto blaster on its shoulder the alien danced to the rhythm of *Baccara's Yes Sir I can Boogie*.

'YOU,' Barry shouted. 'YOU!' he shouted again.

More aliens, attracted by the commotion began to gather round to witness the spectacle, intrigued to see what the hairless monkey was so angry about. They found watching the ape stamp its feet great entertainment and began to roar with laughter.

The rapid accumulation of these bi-pedal intelligent species would be a monstrous situation to face for your average human, but they didn't—as you might expect—stifle Barry's rage: he wanted more than anything to throttle the little git that had left him with not only severe mental scars, but a rear end that now could accommodate the winning marrow from The World's Largest Vegetable Growing Contest.

Among the aliens was a reptilian species called the Draconians. They were particularly frightening to look at as they had green scaly skin, lizard eyes and a forked tongue.

One of these Draconians spoke above Barry's tantrum. 'So Kredendum, exactly how many Earthlings have you terrorised in your short stay?'

All the aliens laughed heartily except the one called Kredendum. It was now clear to Barry that this individual had a habit of abusing humanity, and this wasn't the first time he'd had a second awkward reunion with one of his abductees.

Kredendum solemnly turned off his ghetto blaster because *Baccara's Yes Sir I can Boogie*, didn't seem an appropriate backing soundtrack to this sordid and highly humiliating new episode in his life.

The crowd of aliens, having got their fill of scandal began to filter away until there was only Barry and Kredendum left standing alone. Barry by now had ceased shouting. Kredendum steadfastly looked down at his feet in silence until he eventually decided to at least have a go at explaining himself.

'I always feel embarrassed and don't know what to say when this happens.'

Kredendum had not used telepathy to communicate with Barry because he felt it might scare him as it had done in the woods.

'Sorry would be a good start.'

'Sorry,' said Kredendum. 'I am trying to change my ways: I'm going to HAA meetings now.'

'HAA meetings?'

'Human Abduction Anonymous meetings. I have a problem: I'm an addict.'

Barry Broomfield was never one to hold a grudge against a person, or an alien as it was in this case.

He looked at the extraterrestrial hard and said: 'Let bygones be bygones.'

It is a quite remarkable thing that Barry could find it in his heart to forgive this being after the abhorrent act he'd perpetrated upon him, but the truth was that there

were other reasons for Barry's forgiving heart. Firstly he wanted to know the secrets of Kredendum's vessel so that hopefully he might be allowed some time off. But secondly and probably more importantly he needed a friend as every human inside The Complex seemed to be suffering from some kind of cerebral atrophy.

So what if he's a hideous monster from a nightmare that turned out to be real. And so what if he probed me, God knows I could do with a companion in here.

He held out his hand and said: 'Friends.'

Kredendum glanced up from his grey feet and placed his hand in Barry's. He was aware that humans showed respect to each other with something they called the handshake.

Barry felt revulsion on noticing the little suckers on his new friend's fingertips, but nevertheless managed to control his urge to throw up. Kredendum was feeling likewise disgusted when he saw Barry's fingernails, having always thought it nauseating how these hairless monkeys had keratin formations on their hands that housed more dirt than the internet.

After their reluctant handshake Barry and Kredendum strolled around Level 4 of The Complex with Barry getting introduced to some of the alien's friends. It occurred to Barry that on the entire level there wasn't any other human presence except his own.

'So what are you and all your people doing down here?'

'The Draconians have lived under your feet for centuries. This is just another outpost for their empire. We're here to serve them.'

'The Draconians?' queried Barry.

'The big green lizards. Greys like me have to be subservient to them because they're the master race in this galaxy.'

‘That sounds terrible.’

‘Well it could be worse: I could be human.’

‘Don’t humans run The Complex?’ asked a confused Barry.

Kredendum laughed, although it wasn’t the maniacal one he’d used when abducting people. ‘Of course not, although they probably like to think they do. Who knows what the apes think.’

‘Hey, that’s my people you’re talking about,’ replied Barry indignantly.

‘Okay big guy, don’t take it to heart. Humanity’s becoming more like us anyway.’

‘What do you mean?’

Kredendum momentarily toyed with the idea of leaking to Barry some information that would shed light on the grim future in store for the human race.

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘So those Draconians, they’re your masters, you have to do everything they say? That’s saaadddd.’

‘Well, it’s always been the way of things. It just makes me laugh how the humans think they’re the ones controlling us. Those stupid phosphorous lights they have for example that they think stop us from going out, it’s pathetic.’

‘Ah, but humans shot down your spacecraft. We can’t be that stupid if we managed that.’

‘Your lot never shot it down, my own people did coz I was on the run for performing unlicensed abductions.’ Kredendum looked back down at his feet in shame. ‘I couldn’t help myself: I was addicted. Seriously mate, I’ve got it under control now.’

The conversation between the hairless ape and the little alien then gravitated towards Kredendum's damaged spaceship. Barry revealed the things he'd uncovered about the anti-matter/anti-gravity reactor and how he managed to build his own.

'Wow I'm impressed. Maybe humans aren't as dumb as I thought. You figured all that out yourself?'

'Yeah, pretty much. But I know there's something else, something I'm missing. How did you get across the chasm of space Kredendum? Even with the anti-matter reactor it would take years to travel to the nearest star.'

Kredendum shook his head and said: 'I can't tell you that: it'd be like giving a child a machine gun. You've got to figure it out for yourselves and earn the right to go beyond this little speck of dust you call home.'

'Come on, give us a clue at least, you did after all, you know; probe me.'

Kredendum paused to think about it. *Maybe I can give them a hint; maybe I owe them that.*

'Look, okay I'll give you a clue but you won't like it, and it probably won't help you much,' said the alien. 'You've got to think beyond the three dimensions.'

Sitting in his living quarters back up on Level 3 now, Barry tried to think beyond the three dimensions just as Kredendum advised. It goes without saying a scientist of his brilliance was fully aware of Einstein's work with regard to the fourth and fifth dimensions. The problem was, he didn't see any way how he could he turn that knowledge into propelling a huge craft across the unimaginable distances in space?

'It doesn't make sense. Kredendum, you need to give me another clue, come on lad.'

‘You’re going to keep coming down here asking for clues until I’ve spelled out the whole thing for you—aren’t you?’

‘Well if you could tell me it all now straight off, that would really help. You know Kredendum, the emotional damage after what you did to me still hasn’t healed, and that’s not all, I still can’t sit down properly.’

‘Don’t go laying the guilt trip on me Broomfield. I’ll give you one more clue and then that’s it; got it?’

Barry nodded in agreement.

‘What is the shortest distance between two places?’

‘A straight line,’ answered Barry perplexed.

‘No, not if they exist in the same space.’

‘That doesn’t make sense either. How can you make two separate places exist in the same space?’

‘I’ve given you your last clue and that’s it, that’s all you’re getting out of me. You’ll have to figure out the rest yourself, but don’t go getting your hopes up coz you might be figuring for a long time.’

While Barry attempted to squeeze more information out of an unwilling Kredendum, a grizzly curmudgeon of a man muttered to himself whilst busy at work inside Barry’s living quarters.

‘What a mess! That orang-utan hasn’t vacuumed once, the carpet’s filthy. And just look at the kitchen.’

The curmudgeon continued to mutter his discontent, branching into more general moaning about the terrible state of the world and how it was no place for an old man anymore. The perpetual bad mood that’d become his signature character-trait

was due to the fact he was the CCTV maintenance man for The Complex. It was his job to keep the four thousand odd cameras inside the base recording every second of every day. It was not an enviable job. Overworked and overstressed, he would regularly find his services required in middle of the night to patch up some malfunctioning piece of equipment.

The man's complaints persisted as he fixed Barry's shower cam. 'Christ almighty, it's blacker in here than a coal mine.'

Distracted by the obscene mildew build up and the fact that he'd rather be anywhere else, the sour-faced man innocently forgot to tighten a screw fully. This seemingly innocuous mistake would have a profound impact on Finbar Cedric Broomfield's life.

How on Earth can you make two places exist in the same space? thought Barry, still agonising over how Kredendum's craft was capable of travelling such enormous distances.

His alien friend had been adamant in his refusal to divulge anymore hints concerning the secrets of interstellar travel. This left Barry at a dead end.

'I just can't figure it out,' he said aloud in frustration.

Having already tried aimlessly meandering his way along The Complex's corridors, waiting for inspiration to strike without success, Barry felt he might as well take another look inside the recovered alien ship: desperately he hoped that he'd ignite a creative fire after seeing or uncovering something he hadn't noticed in the countless hours he'd already spent in there.

Around 90 to 95% of the technology inside Kredendum's craft Barry hadn't yet been able to decipher what it was actually for, never mind how it all worked. He

doubted now whether he possessed the ability to achieve the task he'd been given, wondering miserably if it was just simply beyond the human brain's capability to comprehend interstellar travel.

The pioneering discovery he'd already made seemed worthless to him now. In his mind that was yesterday's news. Over the months he'd come to hate the precious ship with all its unsolvable puzzles that made his head spin. But most of all he hated it for not revealing his holy grail, the secret of space travel.

It had been a hopeless exercise entering the vessel expecting to come across something that would explain all. He knew this beforehand but had been so desperate he was willing to try anything. Feeling completely dejected and uncomfortable by a problem that seemed to have no answer, he inquired if his colleagues that were working nearby needed any help.

The army of boffins were busy drawing up designs for the spaceship that was to contain the breakthrough anti-matter/anti-gravity reactor Barry had invented.

Taking a look at the blueprints for the first time, Barry saw something that struck him as peculiar.

'Why does the whole thing have to be encased in four foot of lead?'

The boffin closest to him answered: 'Because when she goes out into space, into the Van Allen Radiation Belt, that four feet of lead will come in handy. Don't worry about the increased weight as your reactor produces so much power it won't really make a difference.'

'I wasn't worrying about that, it's just strange...'

'Why?'

‘Well, the Apollo Moon landing programs, they went through the Van Allen Radiation Belt didn’t they? Why didn’t they need four feet of lead?’

Professor Schriever who always seemed to miraculously pop up when Barry asked an awkward question didn’t disappoint.

‘Because back in those days men were men, a dose of radiation that would be lethal to your soft, mollicoddled generation would’ve hardly of given them a headache.’

‘Oh...’

‘By the way Barry there’s something else I want to talk you about.’ Professor Schriever motioned his protégé over to a quiet corner away from everybody else.

‘You’ve been looking burnt out. I think you should have a couple of days off and just forget about everything to do with space and getting across it for a few days.’

‘Yeah, maybe you’re right,’ said Barry in a tired and resigned voice. ‘I have been feeling a bit stressed with it all of late. It’s proving a difficult nut to crack.’

Building the hunk of lead that was to protect man from the many perils of space was a relatively simple undertaking that didn’t really require Barry’s input. The hard part was how to propel that hunk of lead. And the pressure was on Barry because everyone was looking towards him to uncover that final piece of the puzzle.

Professor Schriever and his superiors hadn’t allowed their genius time off out of any kindness or gratitude: they knew he was the only one who could allow them to achieve their goals, and they also knew that it would be beneficial for him to rest and recharge.

The anti-matter engine Barry had created was a massive step in the right direction, but it wasn’t powerful enough to even get to the nearest star outside our

own solar system in a reasonable amount of time. The Broomfield Reactor as it was now been dubbed didn't get anywhere near the speed of light, and even if it could, that would still be far too slow.

Barry's vision was of using the reactor just for cruising speed, say when you're busy exploring an object of interest like an alien planet, moon, nebula, red dwarf, etc. The astronaut would then switch on some kind of super-duper, mega-fast power drive to get to the next object of interest, effortlessly blasting through the annoying emptiness that made up the bulk of space.

Lying on his bed he let his mind dream, what if, what if he could travel all the way to the very edge of the universe, what would he find there? Does the universe go on for eternity? Or does it come to a dead end like when Jim Carrey hit the edge of his universe on that boat in *The Truman Show*?

Exhausted, he slept, dreaming for hours upon hours about a glorious ascent into the heavens on the wings of an angel. He discovered the Moon was made of Edam cheese and that freshly plucked Milky Way's taste better than Mars Bars. It was a wonderfully contented sleep, one that he was very much in need of, and when he awoke he felt much better for it.

There was still one problem though: he had one more day off and he was struggling to think how to make the most of it. Looking around his living quarters, waiting for an idea to formulate, he suddenly remembered he'd been granted shuttle access but as of yet hadn't used it.

What am I doing lying here like a half-eaten poptart for?

What a special day it turned out to be. The spellbinding majesty of the underworld, with its ability to make you question the working order of your eyes is mesmerizing for all who are fortunate, or is that unfortunate enough to explore it.

Even the shuttles, which used maglev technology to move faster than the speed of sound through tunnels cut into solid rock, were themselves a magnificent achievement of engineering. These tunnels stretched thousands of miles and were somehow polished up to give the appearance of black glass, thus allowing the shuttles to slide along them effortlessly. It goes without saying they're an excellent tool for important, scary people when they want to be transported in secrecy.

The sophistication of this technology amazed Barry, but not nearly as much as the fact that these epic developments had been constructed to the complete obliviousness of the general population on the surface. Spending the whole day travelling on this underground highway that criss-crosses the globe, he attempted to cram in as much sightseeing as possible.

Among the military bases he visited, the infamous Area 51 was the first on his list. To his disappointment it turned out to be just a decoy secret base that's purpose was to distract the attention of UFO hunters. The place was deathly quiet and appeared to be empty, save for an abandoned television set depicting an uncannily accurate reconstruction of the Apollo Moon Landings.

Finding it impossible to resist indulging a childhood fantasy, Barry drove around in the Apollo Moon Buggy for a while. After crashing and writing it off he thought it wise to make a swift retreat back to the underground shuttle system. Ashamed, he knew an American hero of his—Buzz Lightyear—wouldn't have been impressed with his sorry shenanigans.

Arriving back in his living quarters at The Complex late that night, Barry reminisced over the events of his action-packed day. The secrets he'd discovered: little gems like Los Alamos wasn't just an immense military stockpile for nuclear weapons, but that it was also home to the best gift shop he'd ever come across. The homemade vanilla fudge sold there was nothing short of extraordinary.

Taking a shower before bed, Barry's mind was preoccupied with thoughts of why hadn't he purchased more of that incredible fudge. While these thoughts bothered him as he lathered his sweaty flab, the CCTV camera inside his shower gave way, conking off the top of his head.

Blows to the skull, while damaging for most other people's brains seemed to have a tendency to enhance Barry's one. Like Isaac Newton many years before him getting stuck by an apple, the falling camera revealed to the Barry one of the universe's secrets. It had all become clear: he knew now how Kredendum's craft had made it across the empty chasm of space!

'Rock n roll!'

Chapter 19: Release the Plague

‘KREDENDUM, KREDENDUM I’VE FIGURED IT OUT,’ Barry shouted exultantly.

‘Yeah right,’ replied the little alien, although his eyes betrayed intrigue.

‘You used an artificially-created black hole didn’t you? The gravity caused by the hole resulted in space being warped didn’t it? That’s how you and all your people got here.’

Kredendum looked shocked, confirming Barry’s hypothesis.

‘I’m right aren’t I?’

Kredendum nodded in amazement.

‘I knew I was; I knew it.’

With an almost childlike obstinacy Kredendum said: ‘Well, it’s one thing knowing how it’s done but it’s another thing entirely, to actually make it happen.’

‘Don’t be such a negative sod. Now I’ve got something to go on I’m halfway there.’

It took many months for Barry to realise the vision he’d had in the shower and create his own warp drive making interstellar travel a reality, yet he did it, much to Kredendum’s disappointment.

In fact Kredendum’s first thought regarding humanities latest technological breakthrough was: *Damn, there goes the neighbourhood.*

The human race was on the cusp of conquering the final frontier, and it was all thanks to Finbar Cedric Broomfield.

Kredendum looked severely miffed as he lectured a now very smug, self-glorified ape. ‘You don’t realise what you’ve done do you? You’ll go down in history as the one who released the human plague onto the universe. You think you’re being creative, you think that your work is benefiting mankind. Well you’re wrong because they’ll twist what you’ve created. Look at your predecessor, Einstein, look what they used his work for.’

‘The atom bomb?’ replied Barry, not quite believing what he was hearing.

‘Yep, thanks to you it won’t be long before this galaxy smells like napalm and ape stink. Your work’ll be used just as they used Einstein’s, to cause devastation. They’ll try to conquer every planet they can to call it their own.’

‘We’re not that bad,’ said Barry, thinking this tirade a joke.

‘I just hope everyone I know back home has stocked up their ape poison to keep you vermin under control, no doubt though your pesky immune systems will build up a resistance to it after a while.’ Kredendum then made a note in his diary under memos. *I’ll have to give them a call to make sure they set their mantraps up with plenty of cheese.*

‘We’re not vermin: we’re people.’ said Barry looking at his friend with disdain.

‘Ohhh my little Barry boy, always the comedian.’

Kredendum slapped his friend on the back and laughed. Barry however had not been joking and was disgruntled by the flagrant disregard for his species.

‘If anything it’s your lot that’s the vermin: abducting people for no good reason and cutting up cattle.’

Kredendum was quick to cut across his monkey friend. ‘Firstly there’s a very good reason for us abducting your lot, and as for the so-called ‘cattle mutilations,’

can't we throw a couple of steaks on the barbie every now and again without getting crucified for it. I mean god almighty, give us a break, give us a Kitkat. And if you like a lot of chocolate on your biscuit join our club. Trio, trio, I want a trio and I want one now.'

'Alright, fair enough, I'll let you off about that. But why do you have to abduct people all the time?'

Kredendum, now clearly embarrassed, spoke in a barely audible whisper. 'We don't have reproductive organs.'

'What? I didn't quite catch that.'

'We don't have reproductive organs,' said Kredendum, turning red as he raised the volume of his voice.

Barry looked down at the alien's groin unabashedly. The Greys don't wear clothes, and Barry had been curious as to where they tucked away their meat and two vegetables.

'Yeah, now you mention it I'd been wondering about that. You've got a crotch with less equipment than an action man figurine.'

'Alright, alright easy,' replied Kredendum with painful self-consciousness.

'So, we've established you don't have a penis, but that still doesn't explain why you need to abduct us poor saps.'

'Because we've lost the ability to reproduce by traditional methods we use cloning, but over time the DNA becomes damaged from the process. We have to replace the breaks in the code with fresh human DNA.'

'Cloning, that's not natural—that's—that's wrong that's what that is, and anyway, you didn't just do it for that did you?'

Kredendum produced a broad smile and said: 'Nah, I just did it for fun me.'

Remembering he was supposed to be ashamed of that particular feature of his past, Kredendum then thought it best to look at the floor as if remorseful.

Barry reiterated: 'Cloning is morally wrong.'

'According to who? If you think that's bad you should see what humanity's up to.' Kredendum decided it was time to shed some light on the real purpose of The Complex. His almond-black eyes focused intently on his friend. 'Look, I tell you what, why don't you have yourself a little excursion with me down to Level 5.'

'I can't coz I don't have clearance.'

'It doesn't matter: I'll be able to sneak you in.'

Level 5: The Nursery and Blood Labs

'Good day and welcome to Level 5, we ask that could you please refrain from speaking to any of the patients as you can destroy years of work. These people are suffering with severe mental and physical illnesses. This site conducts research on high-risk drug treatments. All the patients are here of their own free will.'

The message that played on the lift's intercom as Barry descended yet deeper into The Complex did little to help sooth the nerves that threatened to make him lose bladder control. The greeting certainly drew a stark parallel with the pleasant, pacifying tune you might hear inside an average shopping mall lift.

As Barry battled with the pterodactyls that fluttered about in his stomach, he began to speculate whether he'd encounter his old cellmate from Weirddways—Sammy Nammy—as one of the inpatients.

When the lift doors drew apart they revealed countless prison cells stretching on a series of seemingly never-ending corridors, all filled with a depth of degradation that even a Nazi concentration camp would have had trouble competing with.

Walking slowly, his mouth agape, Barry looked on as the detainee's begged for his assistance.

'Help me—please—help me,' whimpered a young girl through watering eyes and steel bars.

An old man cried out to Barry, holding out his hands in a plea of desperation. 'Give a dog a bone.'

Barry assumed the old man must have been drugged and delirious, or as the lift had told him, insane.

Continuing to walk down the shadowy corridors alongside Kredendum, Barry could see the condition of the inmates deteriorating until some of them no longer began to resemble people at all. There were grotesque hybrids, humans that appeared to be gene-spliced with animals and multi-limbed monsters that could give Spiderman a run for his money.

'There must be thousands of them,' said Barry in horror.

'Yep, these are the results of the genetic experiments your kind has been carrying out on their own people. Your world leaders were happy to provide us with abduction subjects in exchange for data on genetic manipulation. Morality and ethics have never been an issue.'

'Why have you brought me down here...?'

Barry continued to be gripped by an impossible urge to openly stare at the poor mutated souls inside the cells, torn in half between disgust and wonder.

‘To show you that your species, accepts, deals with, and perpetrates evil quite comfortably, so you can get off your high horse about us Greys being the bad guys for doing the occasional abduction.’

‘Why are they doing these experiments, what’s the point?’

Kredendum shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. ‘God knows. Maybe they want to find the meaning of life or something. As of yet I can’t see what they’ve accomplished other than create a lot of faces for radio.’

A weak voice called out: ‘Barry, Barry Broomfield.’

Turning round on his heel, Barry saw lying in one of the cells a man who had four arms and six legs, obviously the result of a botched genetic experiment.

Barry’s eyes narrowed as they focused upon the face of the monstrous inmate. ‘Charles Delve...is that you?’

‘Yes,’ replied Charles meekly.

‘Jesus, what’s happened to you?’

‘THEY’VE GIVEN ME FOUR ARMS AND SIX BASTARD LEGS THAT’S WHAT,’ shouted Charles, invigorated by his co-workers moronic question.

Charles had been Barry’s closest friend up on Level 3 but nobody had seen him for months. When Barry had asked Professor Schriever about his colleague’s disappearance he was told he’d gone on safari.

‘They told us you were on a long holiday. What are you doing taking your holiday down here?’

Charles held his head in his four hands at Barry’s imbecility. ‘Does this look like a holiday to you Broomfield?’

Ignoring Charles’s question and puffing out his chest, Barry said: ‘Have no fear I’ll get you out of here.’

Kredendum, who had so far been silent during this reunion interjected: 'I wouldn't do that Barry because they'll catch you and then you'll end up in here too.'

'You're gonna get me out of here Broomfield!' shouted Charles. 'Smuggle a man with ten limbs out of the most secure military installation in the world. You've got more chance of falling pregnant.'

'I'm not pulling your leg. I'm gonna get you out of here. Amnesty International will be hearing about this.'

Instantly Barry regretted his choice of the leg-pulling expression.

'PULLING MY LEG! PULLING MY LEG! ARE YOU TRYING TO BE FUNNY?'

Charles proceeded to rant and rave inside his barren cell. He'd managed to endure months of bone-crippling genetic experiments, being unjustly incarcerated, agonizing mental torture, terrible experiences for any man to tolerate, yet it was to be The Broomfield Effect that would finally send him over the edge.

Kredendum, dragging Barry away from Charles's demented shouts of pulling my goddamn leg said: 'It's too late, he's lost his mind. We'd better leave Barry before you get thrown in here too.'

Barry was disappointed at what he considered overreacting by Charles and tried to cheer him up. 'It's not all bad, so you're a hideous freak, but just imagine how good you'll be at kickboxing.'

This comment didn't have the desired result: Charles was not comforted by the remark because he didn't even hear it as his descent into insanity was already too deep. He wouldn't be returning from la-la land anytime soon.

Sitting back up on Level Four after reflecting over the dark secrets of The Complex, Barry spoke eloquent words of wisdom.

‘I guess I’d be pretty upset too if I knew my gloves and socks bill was going to go through the roof.’

Tossing and turning in his bed that night over the desperate crimes against the human race being perpetrated on Level Five, Barry didn’t know what to do. The waiver he’d signed upon entering The Complex stated that if he so much as thought of telling the outside world about the base he would suffer the penalty of death. Barry didn’t know if along with all the other surveillance devices Thought Police were an additional security measure, but he didn’t want to risk it. Hurriedly, he attempted to erase his new thoughts of resent for The Complex and the scoundrels who ran it; after all, he didn’t want to end up as another Charles Delve.

The next day at work Barry had lost his laser focus, not that anybody noticed as they were all too busy toasting the achievement of conquering the final frontier with a bottle of champagne. Barry, who was the focal point of the merriment wasn’t interested in celebrating. Just like when he’d won the national Chess Tournament in London, he again forgot to revel in his glory, being too distracted by more important matters.

‘Hey Barry, it’s amazing what you’ve done. You’ve allowed man to reach the stars. You’ll go down in history as the greatest scientist of all time.’

‘Yeah,’ replied Barry absent-mindedly.

‘Well done,’ said another man.

‘Three cheers for Barry Broomfield. Hip hip—’

‘HOORAY.’

As the clapping of hands echoed in his ears Barry dreamt of being somewhere else, anywhere else.

Public conferences followed where Barry stood on a pedestal and attempted to explain to the world how his anti-matter and warp drive worked. Despite not being able to understand his technospeak, the breakthrough of titanic proportions was gobbled up by a swarming press, making Barry once again famous.

Forceful journalists wasted little time getting to the heart of the matter, ‘When will your spacecraft be having its first flight?’ they asked.

‘The first full test flight will fly from the Kennedy Space Centre on July the 20th.’

‘Will this test be open to the public?’

‘Yes it will.’

The collective thought which transmitted amongst the media men was: *If this is a success we potentially may break all previous newspaper sale records. If the whole thing goes tits up, we’ll definitely break them.*

All previous human space exploration had just been the dipping of a big toe into an icy ocean, but now humanity had donned the wetsuit and SCUBA gear. The feeling of union Barry noticed spreading amongst his brothers and sisters gave him a warm glow inside. There was a near-frenzied excitement everywhere he went and he saw differences in race, religion and nationality forgotten. Mankind ceased their petty disputes over land, power and which country has the most attractive women. His spacecraft, now named the Broomanator, had united humanity.

Barry felt immensely pleased he'd taken the human race into a new golden age of peace and prosperity. It was then such a shame that he was living in an idealistic fantasy world. The reality was that the poor, the desperate and the greedy looked up to the heavens with famished eyes, which in effect meant every pair of human peepers, around 6.66 billion in all were staring upwards. The locusts were readying themselves to take flight and form the cloud of death.

No longer living in The Complex because of his newfound status as the world's No 1 pin-up geek, Barry was instead living the American dream. A luxurious mansion that made the one he'd had as world chess champion look like a child's doll house served as his new home.

The media horde setup camp outside to try to catch photos of the science star scratching his backside. They were successful on a number of occasions. This sea of reporters were an annoyance to be sure, but far more alarming to Barry were the men dressed all in black that had infiltrated actually inside his house, albeit with about as much stealth as a rampaging Bengal tiger.

These uninvited guests had an annoying habit of hiding in the bushes of Barry's back garden and inside the wardrobe of his bedroom. There was even one who had large rubber suckers attached to his hands and feet, using them to crawl across the ceiling as Barry moved through his home. One time this wall crawler sneezed and Barry kindly offered him a tissue. The MIB didn't reply save for whispering anxiously into a small microphone located on his chest, that he believed his cover had been blown.

It was difficult for Barry to pretend his house wasn't infested with MIB, but he shouldered on with it because he knew why they were there: they were keeping an

extremely close eye on him to make sure he didn't blurt out any of the secrets he'd discovered in his time working for the US military.

They needn't have worried because Barry had no intention of doing anything of the sort, not that it didn't bother him, on the contrary in fact, every night he had to endure scary-wary nightmares about what was going on inside The Nursery. He would have loved nothing more than to blow the lid open on the conspiracy at The Complex, there was just one thing stopping him: he didn't want to end up as a half-human half-bat down on Level Five. So, he cowardly kept his mouth firmly shut, opening it only to smile for the sporadic flashes of cameras.

A couple of weeks before the big day Barry went to see his Broomanator, just to reacquaint himself with what he'd achieved and admire his genius. His creation felt more precious to him than anything or anyone else in the world.

In spite of having next to no fear of the machine flying with anything less than a 100% success rate, Barry wanted to play it safe, suggesting a less important life form like a Koala bear be the first to take a test flight into deep space. The American bigwigs disagreed with Barry's caution, stating that they'd already been giving it too large to the media to just send up a Koala bear.

The man who'd been picked to be the first person to travel into infinity was Captain James Rico, a larger-than-life distinguished military man with a million dollar smile, chiselled good looks, and the deep strong musk of a male stag. Women swooned as he talked about his time flying Apache helicopters, Nighthawk fighter planes, nursing injured rabbits back to health and generally been an all-round dashing, handsome hero.

As Barry watched the adoring masses manipulated like putty, he realised he was the exact polar opposite of Captain Rico, that his Mum would've much rather given birth to the fighter pilot, and lastly, that his own life was of no value to anybody. The appointment of this man to pilot his ship was fine with Barry, well aware the seasoned battle pilot was perfect for the job.

What did disturb him greatly however upon visiting his spacecraft as it idled inside a hangar, was that there had been some alarming alterations made to the design that he hadn't been informed about.

Barry questioned a young lab technician nearby to fill him in about the finer details of these changes. The explanation he received was exactly what he didn't want to hear.

'Those are the photon torpedoes!' The young lady had a delighted glint in her eye as she explained with enthusiasm just how destructive the alterations were. 'They'll cause some carnage those will. They make nukes look like a child's firecrackers. Booom, oh yeah, that's it, hot stuff cooking in the kitchen tonight baby. Yeah, do me, harder, harder, harder!'

'What!' said Barry horrified.

'Well you can't be too careful can you, anything could be out there.'

Barry didn't really see why it was necessary to equip his creation with more armaments than a Klingon Bird of Prey. He took these reservations to Professor Schriever.

'Why may I ask has my ship been turned into a harbinger of death and destruction? The Broomanator is for exploration. I didn't build it as cudgel for you barbarians.'

‘And you didn’t,’ replied Professor Schriever dismissively, not having time for what he considered to be a hissy fit on Barry’s part.

‘What do you call these then?’

Barry began pointing to the various cutting edge armaments his once innocent spacecraft now possessed.

Along with the photon torpedoes, the Broomanator now had phase beam turrets, pulse detonation guns, molecular disintegration bombs, nerve-gas canisters, active camouflage and an exterior coated in matt black, radar-deflecting technology, similar to that used on the Stealth Bomber. The spacecraft was geared up to the teeth to partake in one thing and one thing alone, mankind’s favourite pass time—war.

Professor Schriever looked over Barry with lightless eyes. ‘You invented the warp drive and anti-matter reactor. You didn’t build the weaponry did you, or the ship itself for that matter?’

‘I won’t allow it. I won’t allow my inventions to be used as tools of tyranny. Kredendum was right.’

‘I’m afraid you don’t have that choice Mr Broomfield because the Broomanator is US government property, besides, you needn’t worry as the armaments are only for defence purposes, just in case Captain Rico encounters anything hostile.’

Every piece of his small logic told Barry this was a lie. The nerve-gas canisters especially couldn’t be there just for defence as that weapon has only one use and that is to be dropped on a large area like a city. And Barry also didn’t forget the stealth technology and active camouflage that had obviously been installed to allow the Broomnator to creep up on an unsuspecting enemy and take them by surprise.

Feeling a panic attack coming on, Barry felt helpless upon foreseeing burning alien settlements, the steady march of black boots and the shockwaves of terror tearing through the galaxy as the first human waves hit. The black hole had just been trumped as the most destructive force in the universe.

Somewhere in the spiritual world the Grim Reaper was sighing: the bone-white skeletal face looked even more miserable than normal what with the knowledge that it'd probably be doing a lot more overtime from now on.

Walking around the hangar, apparently in a trance, Barry began pawing over blueprints pinned up on a wall that detailed the mass production of the Broomanator. As he turned and looked around at his kind while they busied themselves about his craft, tooling it up with yet more weaponry, he was sure he could faintly make out the distinctive sound of the *Imperial Death March*, the one that Darth Vader was partial to. That horrible suffocating feeling that occurs when you know you've cocked up big time was felt plainly by Barry at this moment; only it was amplified by a million because he knew he just might go down in history as the git that destroyed the entire universe.

'What have I done? What have I done? These apes will destroy everything.'

'I told yer,' said Kredendum.

Barry had taken the underground shuttle back to The Complex. Over some tea and crumpets he discussed with his best friend the mess he'd inadvertently created and how to go about cleaning it up.

'What'll I do? I can't let this happen.'

Kredendum paused in thought for a second before saying: ‘You’re the only person who knows how the warp drive and anti-matter reactor really work aren’t you?’

‘The only human yeah.’

‘They haven’t produced anymore Broomanators have they?’

‘No not yet, but they’re planning to once they’ve properly tested this one, and after that happens all hell breaks loose.’

‘Why don’t you destroy the single Broomanator and all the plans of how it’s built?’

Thinking brightly at first that this was a fine idea, Barry’s gloom was quick to return at seeing a gaping hole in Kredendum’s plan.

‘Even if I managed to do that they’ll get the information out of me on how to build a new one won’t they? God knows what they’ll do but after seeing what goes on here they won’t be afraid of, of doing something—not very pleasant shall we say.’

‘Yeah that’s true,’ said Kredendum, ‘you’d be thrown onto a torture rack quicker than a captured Afghani terrorist.’ He began to think again, caressing his small chin with his hand. ‘You could always blow up the Broomanator and then kill yourself; that’d work.’

Barry dutifully considered this plan but did raise one particular misgiving. ‘Yeah, that would work, although to be honest I’d prefer it if I didn’t have to end my life.’

‘You’re so selfish, how’s your life more important than the billions that’ll die?’

‘I erm—I guess it isn’t.’

‘Fancy another crumpet?’

‘No.’

‘More tea?’

‘No.’

‘Suit yourself.’

Chapter 20: Take Me to Paradise

July the 20th came, this place, this day, this date would be remembered by the world; well at least until they put something better on TV anyway.

The Broomanator sat on its launch pad in Cape Canaveral, ready to take its place alongside either the Spruce Goose or the Titanic. Hundreds of news coverage crews from all around the world locked their cameras steadfastly on the vessel, poised to capture every moment of history in the making.

The dawn of man's greatest adventure saw hundreds of thousands flood into the country, all wanting to be able to say they were there when the mystery of space got exposed, conquered and raped. This seething mass stretched on as far as the eye could see; all of them eating, drinking, breathing, consuming, defecating, and all those other things people do. A celestial being looking on from above and that possessed no knowledge of the human race, may have assumed that that particular area of North America had some kind of parasitic infestation.

This event was the most-watched happening in the history of the Earth. Even though only a relatively lucky few would actually get to observe the Broomanator's flight without the aid of a television set, you could be sure the entire civilised world were watching. Even the majority of the crowd at Cape Canaveral were viewing the dawn of true space travel through gigantic TV screens, setup to allow the ones at the back of the rabble (the back being a number of miles away) the opportunity of seeing what was going on.

To make sure every angle was covered and not a single historic moment missed there were cameras not just outside, but aboard the Broomanator itself, placed there to record the Captain's journey and the wonders he was expected to encounter.

Television company executives kept their fingers crossed in a hope these cameras would catch footage of Rico getting his brains sucked out by aliens: they knew such a gift of gore and melancholic disaster would only send the ratings further through the roof.

The nature of Barry's ship allowed those at the front of the crowd to get fairly close to it rather than be forced to stand miles back like they'd be with the now old-fashioned and dangerous rocket-propelled spacecraft. Still, the absence of rockets and their accompanying awe and shock factor was a disappointment to many of the spectators. One consolation for these poor devils was that they got to marvel at all the space-age guns the black saucer carried. Those implements of death did a lot to increase the Broomanator's appeal.

Unknowingly, while everyone's eyes were pointed at the spacecraft, which a lot of the ignorant were deeming rather small and unimpressive for a vehicle that was to take man to the stars, Barry and Kredendum smuggled themselves into the heart of the Kennedy Space Centre. They had achieved this by employing the services of a portable cloaking device that had been developed on Kredendum's home world. This wonderful piece of technology had the ability to control atomic structure, stopping the natural process of atoms reflecting light, and thus making the two unlikely companions close to invisible.

This handy gadget was carried in a rucksack upon Kredendum's back. The Greys aren't accustomed to moving at a fast pace or very far under their own steam though, which meant Barry had to carry the rucksack-wearing alien upon his back. Alas, Barry wasn't accustomed to moving very far or fast himself. Kredendum, as if a jockey upon a horse, had to kick his heels into the human's ribs a few times to get his

tired animal moving. He cursed himself for not bringing a whip to spur his transport onto greater efforts.

With sophisticated alien technology at their disposal, the improbable pair managed to get inside Captain Rico's quarters unnoticed. The fighter pilot was busy practicing his farewell speech in the mirror.

'When I press this button I shall traverse the endless chasm of space for the glory of mankind, but before I do I'd just like to say a couple of important things. To my wife and kids at home, I love you each so very much. To my mistress in your dungeon of despair, don't throw away my handcuffs and dog collar yet, coz I'll be back for those ten lashes baby.'

Rico looked incredibly heroic in his silver spacesuit with the Stars and Stripes emblazoned on his right arm and a thick bristly moustache a porn star could be proud of above his upper lip.

If Barry had been a woman he may have fallen in love with this Adonis, luckily he wasn't and so instead whispered to Kredendum: 'Let him have it.'

The Grey pulled out the ray gun he'd threatened Barry with in the Hickey Woods and set it to stun before shooting Captain Rico in the back. The veteran fighter pilot crumpled like a piece of tissue paper under the force of the blow and his once beautiful hair now stood out on end.

'WHERE THE HELL IS RICO?!?!'

Mission control was starting to get worried as it looked like their brave war hero had transformed into a coward at the prospect of going through a manmade black hole, and had decided a much better course of action would be to do a runner.

With Captain Rico nowhere to be seen and the watching world beginning to grow restless at the hold up, the Head of Mission Control turned to Professor Schriever who also happened to be looking extremely anxious.

‘If he doesn’t show this’ll be the most embarrassing fiasco of all time. We’ll be a laughing stock.’

‘I know,’ answered Schriever, already envisaging the headlines.

‘Wait, there he is Sir,’ shouted a sharp-eyed young woman.

‘Oh—thank God.’

Captain Rico casually strolled out to the Broomanator wearing his silver spacesuit and matching helmet. It was one of those great TV moments, and would have been even greater if Rico hadn’t ingloriously tripped over and fallen flat on his face a couple of times.

With elated relief Professor Schriever clasped his hands and said: ‘He looks great doesn’t he?’

The Head of Mission Control wasn’t so sure; crinkles formed on his brow as he observed the astronaut’s profile.

‘Does he look—shorter and slightly, well fatter to you?’

‘No no, he looks great; he looks magnificent, he looks like a hero.’

The rest of the audience agreed with the Professor, cheering with unfaltering enthusiasm at their perceived triumph over the universe. Captain Rico continued to march out to his waiting vehicle amidst the raucous applause and showering of female underwear. Staying true to his Hollywood persona, he conjured up a gallant wave for his loyal fans before stepping inside.

Billions attentively watched on as the broadcast switched to the spaceship’s internal cameras. Rico, wasting no time made his way directly to the cockpit, sat

down and removed his space helmet. The Head of Mission Control fainted while the rest of the world gasped: the revealed face was not the moustached handsome one of Captain Rico but of an impostor, an impostor with ugly features and a balding head.

The reason Barry had been late boarding was because after he and Kredendum had knocked out the Captain, they'd set about destroying all the information on the warp drive and anti-matter reactor. Erasing this library of data from computers and burning the masses of paper documentation had taken longer than they'd expected. Also, the amount of security guards they'd had to stun with Kredendum's ray gun was nigh on ridiculous. It was imperative however that they made certain, for the sake of the universe that humanity could not be allowed to build another Broomanator.

Within a millisecond of Barry revealing his podgy mug, pilots were being scrambled to their fighter planes to intercept this madman. Those inside Mission Control were not quite as fast to react, for a significant moment of time after the unveiling everyone was at a loss for what to say. The Head of the control centre certainly wasn't about to say anything because he was still lying on the floor unconscious.

Professor Schriever's voice was the first to be heard through the Broomanator's onboard radio.

'What the hell do you think you're doing Broomfield?'

Barry ignored the question and said: 'If anyone tries to attack me or board my ship they'll be toast.'

He had his hands poised purposefully on the controls of the phase beam turrets.

It's a fairly safe bet to say that at about this point in time the US government was regretting their decision to appoint a convicted armed robber as their Chief of Advanced Propulsion.

'I'd just like to leave the world with a few words of my wisdom, now that I know you're all listening.' Barry sighed. 'I guess I've reached—a sort of, what you'd call enlightenment after realising there isn't a single person that cares now, or ever will about my being alive. It's true I've always been an outsider, a loner, but now I see there was a reason for my solitude. Have you guessed what it is yet? No? Well let me tell you. It's because the human race is a dead duck, a dead, cantankerous, disease-carrying dirty duck. So; I'm off. If I make it into deep space I'm getting my own place, it'll be called Barry's World, and none of you are invited.'

During Barry's address almost everybody thought this was the ramblings of a man clearly suffering with psychosis, and they'd be right, but a miniscule number were sort of able to grasp what this incoherent shambles was about.

Peter, Barry's ex-window cleaning apprentice, now a multimillionaire, watched the unfolding events on a giant television inside his country mansion. The opulent wealth that surrounded him wouldn't exist if it hadn't of been for Barry, taking him as a youngster under his spicy chicken wing. The way he'd repaid the man that'd made such a positive impact on his life, by robbing his livelihood, made him feel very naughty.

Big Tobias Robinson, Barry's first cellmate inside Weirdways Prison watched the broadcast at home with his budding family; his wife was smiling as she held their beautiful baby daughter. The friendship he'd had with Barry had stopped him from going the same way as his previous cellmate. It was Barry who'd given him hope and made him think was it really worth killing himself. He now knew taking his own life

would have been the biggest mistake he could have possibly made. Tobias wished he'd told his old friend just how much he was in debt to him, he was going to, but he'd gone and forgotten, having been so busy running his spectacularly successful drug cartel.

Sammy Nammy, now a Bricklayer, was watching Barry's outpouring of pain on a portable telly while he laid bricks. Sammy had been Barry's second inmate at Weirdways and was aware his old cellmate had fought desperately with Mr Merryweather to grant him a psychiatric evaluation. It was then with deep regret that he'd never been able to thank the man who'd gotten his life back on track. Thanks to Barry he'd overcome the mental illness that had afflicted him so terribly and subsequently found life to be full of delight. Because of this newfound joy in existence he desperately hoped nobody noticed the foul smell emanating from under his floorboards, the source of which being the dismembered bodies of his latest murder victims.

Jenny Daft, the only woman to ever fall in love with Barry watched through teary eyes, wishing now she hadn't abandoned him on that night in London's Empire Hotel. She lamented not having made her feelings clear to him, knowing he was different and couldn't read the emotion of others. But it had all been just too painful after seeing him in that hotel room with dirty, dirty Sandra.

If I had just told him how I felt, thought the stringy geekette abomination.

Mr Merryweather, the Weirdways Prison Warden and Barry's greatest enemy during his incarceration, had Barry to thank for showing him that there can be goodness even inside the most dangerous criminal. Inmates at Weirdways no longer had to tolerate the same level of inhuman treatment and conditions that were once the norm. Mr Merryweather would never forget Barry's selfless act which restored his

faith in the prison system, and he now saw no need to keep his office in such immaculate condition. Sometimes, when the mood struck, he'd even have a roll around in his own faeces.

Grace Honeysuckle, who'd grown up into an average, well-adjusted teenager, the spoilt brat she'd once been a thing of the past, remembered how Barry had taught her one of the most important lessons a person can ever learn. He'd shown her that failure is an important part of life and that it's not something to be ashamed of, it's how you come back from it that counts. Grace had gone on from her defeat at the hands of Barry's chess-playing genius to become a better chess player, but more importantly, a more rounded and wholesome person. Of course, this didn't take into account the addiction to crack, crystal meth and heroin she'd since developed, but then no one's perfect.

Joe Kearns, the slimy manager from hell who'd handled Barry's chess-playing career had spent most of the day reclining on his private beach in the tropics, occasionally exerting himself to sip on cold mango juice. In fact this was how he idled away the bulk of his life now. After another hard day's work he forced himself to catch the genesis of interstellar travel, despite his absence of interest beyond his own personal paradise.

Now sitting, listening to Barry's words of wisdom, he unenthusiastically trawled his mind back to how he'd sucked his vulnerable employer dry for everything he was worth, before tossing him away like a used handkerchief. Kearns's cold exterior was pierced with guilt, but then Barry had never far been away from him, constantly haunting his thoughts day and night.

Yet before we get carried away with Kearns's feelings of remorse, we must remember that the buxom wenches that now waited on him hand and foot because of the money he'd stolen did help to ease the pain somewhat.

Maggie Broomfield, Barry's Mum, had a wall inside her house covered in newspaper clippings that documented her son's incredible achievements: the glorious chess career, the revolutionary scientific discoveries, the genius—she couldn't be more proud. Seeing his face being broadcast across the airwaves and into her home, made her feel closer to him than she'd felt for years. She got on her knees to bring her face only inches away from his. It was heart wrenching for her to be so close when in reality she was so far from him.

And nothing tore at her more than seeing him as lost as he was, other than when Joe Mangle's wife died on Neighbours. She just wanted to hold him the way she had when he was a child but their relationship had long since fell apart; besides, she now had two meat hooks for arms after been involved in a moped collision.

The real tragedy of Barry Broomfield's life was not the unsettled and demoralising childhood, his father's abandonment, the frustrating adolescence, the countless female rejections, the failure of his window cleaning business, the disintegration of his sanity, the period of homelessness, or even the time spent in prison: the real tragedy was that he didn't realise there were people who'd miss him, who cared for him—and he would never know that he had affected the lives of others for the positive. People did remember him, thinking about him every day, recognising that he was a unique kind of freak.

Kredendum was watching Barry's sob story on one of the big screens, still cloaked by his invisibility backpack he thought: *Boohoo Broomfield, just get the hell on with it.*

‘I have something else that I feel I must say before I go. There’s an underground military base in the New Mexico desert at approximately these coordinates.’ Barry held up the to the cockpit camera a piece of paper that he’d written The Complex’s location upon. ‘Down there illegal genetic experiments are being performed on thousands of innocent people, one of them I know personally, a man named Charles Delve.’

A torrent of fighter jets and helicopter gunships were bearing down on the Broomanator’s position, intent on destruction. Barry knew they were coming, he could see them on his spaceships in-built Enemy Detection System. Noticing they were beginning to get a little too close for comfort, Barry knew the moment of truth had now arrived: would his invention work? If it broke down on him, or failed to function at all, he was going to look cataclysmically stupid whilst having to endure the inconvenience of getting killed. Engaging the anti-matter reactor Barry took hold of the controls and pulled back on the steering column.

The fast approaching fighter jets could be seen in the distance making Kredendum on the ground nervous. ‘Hurry up Barry!’

A ripple of panic travelled through the crowd, quickly building into a tidal wave. Only those who valued their lives less than clinically-depressed lemmings wanted to get blown up along with the madman. With fear spreading like a wildfire people pushed, trampled and crushed each other in a desperate effort to get as far away from what they perceived was going to happen next.

Barry couldn’t be sure whether or not he’d actually be fired upon, what with many innocent civilians in such close proximity, but then judging from the level of degradation he’d witnessed at The Complex he wasn’t willing to risk it. The

Broomanator ascended vertically into the sky with blistering, yet seemingly effortless speed. The chase was on.

Not having had a great deal of flight time inside the Broomanator, Barry was a trifle alarmed when the EDS alerted him to the two missiles rapidly homing in on his craft's heat signature.

The onboard computer inside the Broomanator—Timmy 9000—gave Barry some advice. 'Hey moron, watch out for those missiles.'

Barry battled with the controls, zigzagging through the sky in an attempt to shake off his pursuers.

'Timmy 9000, any ideas about how I'm gonna get out of this?'

'No.'

Barry gave the computer a contemptuous glance.

The EDS was going crazy as according to it almost the entire US Air Force was on the Broomanator's tail, but thankfully for our hero the mind-boggling manoeuvrability and speed of his vehicle was far superior to that of the outdated fighter jets, even with his abysmal piloting skills. The heat seekers had not the remotest chance of catching Barry's ship and neither did anything else in the US Air Force.

'I thought you said you didn't have any ideas,' said Barry angrily, but not without a large amount of relief.

'I know.' Timmy 9000 burst into hysterical laughter. 'I was only messing with you; my ship wasn't going to be caught by those relics.'

'Your ship? I think you'll find you're just the computer, it's my ship actually.'

The computer laughed again and said: 'Yeah right Barry, all I have to do is accidentally turn off the oxygen.'

‘All I have to do is accidentally spill my cup of tea over the dashboard.

There was an awkward silence.

‘SHIT!’ shouted Barry, getting to his feet.

‘What, what?’ asked Timmy 9000 with genuine worry.

‘I forgot to pack Penelope.’

‘Penelope. Who’s Penelope?’

‘My blow-up doll.’

‘You know Barry, we’re still on camera.’

The onboard computer was right, in his urgency to escape the pursuing aircraft Barry had forgotten that everything he said and did was still being broadcast to the world. Horrified and gasping he looked at the camera that had filmed his confession. Timmy 9000 was yet again laughing with gusto as was the whole world.

Managing to quickly recover his composure, Barry drew up his chest because he remembered that he didn’t have to care what people thought about him anymore, and that the entirety of mankind could go to hell for all he cared.

‘Yeah that’s right. I prefer inflatable women to real ones because at least they accept me for who I am.’

‘You tell em Barry. So anyway, what’re going to do now, live like bandits flying from town to town and wreaking havoc, hold the world to ransom with my molecular disintegration bombs? Personally, I say we go down Discount Computers and pick up some chicks. I saw a couple of laptops I think you’ll really like.’

High in his planet’s lower orbit somewhere above Africa, Barry looked down upon the blue green marble that had been his home and whispered some words of great personal significance.

‘The tragedy of life is that you’re alive.’

These words gave him inner strength because if he died in his endeavour to escape the prison called Earth and its loathsome inhabitants, then he reasoned he would only lose the worthless life that currently incarcerated him, being all the better off for it.

He placed Bon Jovi’s *Wanted Dead or Alive* in the Broomanator’s CD changer, feeling it an appropriate anthem for his victory. His gaze then drifted to the cosmos with its twinkling stars, supernova, quasars, red dwarfs, asteroid belts and God only knows what else, just as they had done on that cold night after getting kicked out of the Euphoria Nightclub.

His finger nervously motioned to start the untested warp drive and like with the anti-matter/anti-gravity reactor, he had a few nagging worries such as would it work, would the ingenious contraption he’d built take him into infinity, would it end up killing him, would it even do anything at all?

Suddenly, Barry remembered he’d almost forgotten something of great importance before he engaged the warp drive, catapulting himself into the unknown.

‘Oh, and one last thing,’ he said, looking directly at the cockpit camera and into the faces of billions, ‘put that in your pipe and smoke it.’

Barry presented the middle-finger salute, defiantly pressed the warp-drive’s engagement button and shot out into the beyond.

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