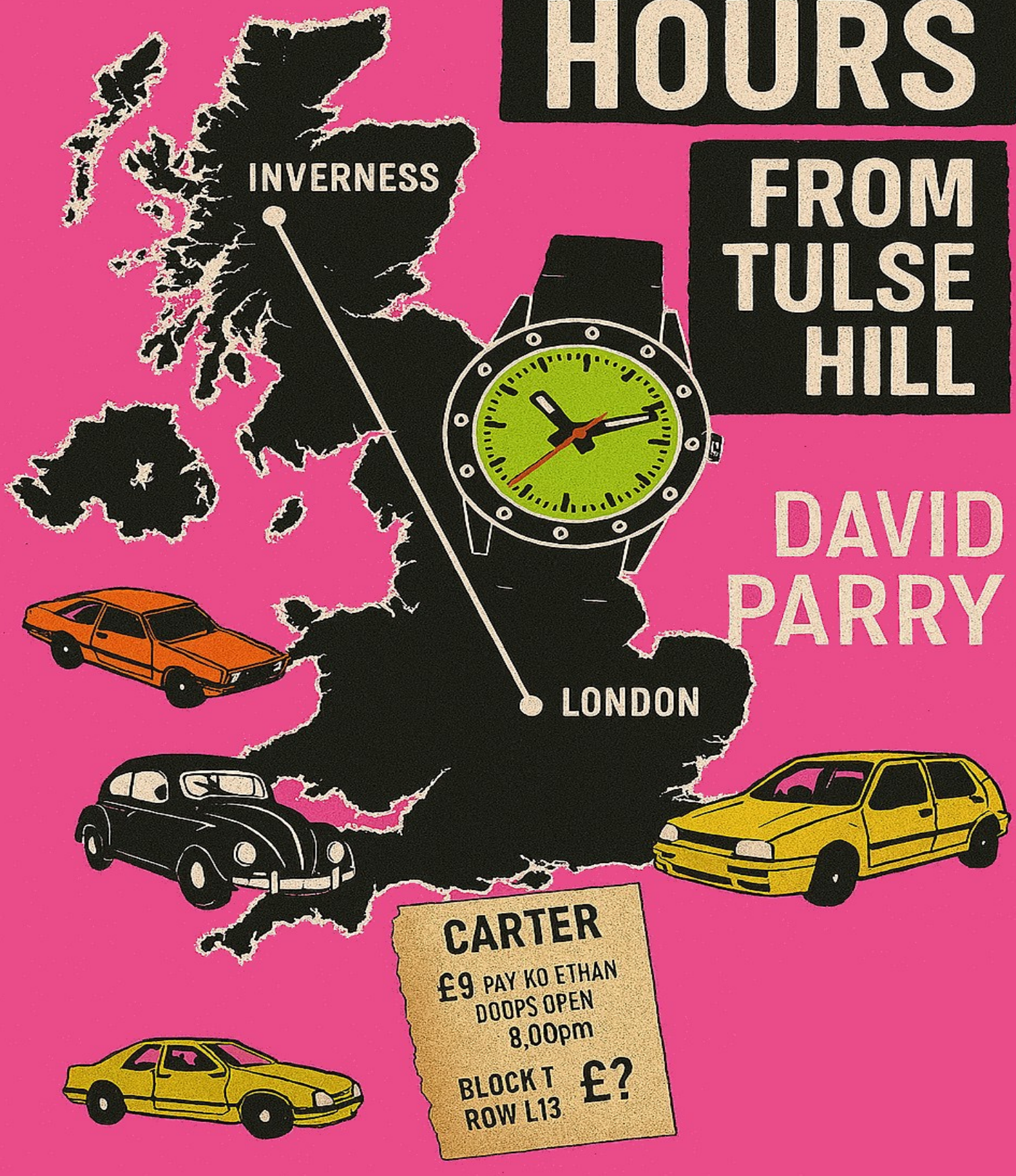
TWENTY FOUR HOURS FROM TULSE HILL



DAVID PARRY

24 Hours from Tulse Hill

A Carter USM Road Novel

David Parry

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Prologue

“Normally at this point in the set, I tell you all to go home and form a band, but maybe you’re like me and not very musical. You don’t have to form a band, at least write a fanzine or an article for a magazine I’d like to read or a book I’d like to read or a sit-com I’d like to watch a film, I’d like to buy a cinema ticket for. I don’t want to sound like a hippy, I don’t, but you can’t complain about it, you can’t complain about it, unless you’re doing something about it. So when I come back here, in a month’s time, and recognise all of your faces, I’m going to grab you by the arm and say ’Where is it? Where is it? Where’s this thing you’re supposed to have made? I saw you complaining, and if you have nothing for me, if you have nothing for me, then I will be very disappointed, I’ll be very disappointed.”

- Eddie Argos

"

Here it is."

- David Parry

24 Hours From Tulse Hill

Chapter 1. The Final Comedown - 22/11/2014 - 8:00pm

Walking out of Brixton Tube, the first thing that hits me is how much has changed in the last twenty-three years - and how much hasn't. The touts still hover by the steps, and the dealers still do their business in the shadows, like part of the scenery nobody ever bothers to repaint.

I head up the street, make a half-hearted joke to myself about Electric Avenue, then remember the seriousness behind the song and let it die on my lips. Past the Ritzy Cinema, I realise I've gone the wrong way again. With the same nonchalance I never quite mastered, I turn back, hoping no one notices.

Brixton Academy looms ahead, the same temple of noise it always was. Just before it, tucked by the corner, is the Canterbury Arms. That's where I'm heading - to meet a friend I haven't seen in twenty-something years. The thought twists in my gut: we were kids then; now we're men with bad knees, dodgy backs, and stories that sound like they happened to someone else.

I pass a shop on the way. Without thinking, I reach out, lift an apple from the display, and slip it into my pocket. Old habits die hard. Some things change; some things don't.

Chapter 2. After the Watershed - 10/09/1991 - 9:00pm

The lorry roared, loud and alive under us, like it wanted to be somewhere faster than its driver did. I cracked open one eye and immediately regretted it. The light was soft, the air thick with diesel and sweat, and my neck was shaped like a question mark. Something stabbed into my back - a seatbelt buckle, maybe. My mouth tasted like lager, chips, and regret.

“Wake up, lads,” a voice said, rich with phlegm and Northern cheer. “This is as far as I go. Gotta drop you before the yard. Not really meant to pick up hitchhikers.”

I squinted. The driver looked like the bastard child of Kris Kristofferson and Terry Funk, with a battered stetson, a beard that had seen war, and a smile that told me nothing good ever came easy.

Jim - me - was barely awake. But I stirred, neck creaking, eyes crusted. “Wher… where are we?” I rasped, not quite sure which version of reality I’d landed in.

“Inverness,” the driver said, like he was telling me I had cancer.

“What?” I blinked. Maybe I misheard.

“Inverness,” he repeated, pointing.

I followed his finger. Big blue sign. Bold white letters.

WELCOME TO INVERNESS

“Fuck,” I muttered.

I elbowed Aaron in the ribs. He made a groaning noise, like a badger being woken from hibernation by a lawnmower.

“Oi. Wake up. We’re in shit.”

“What’s up now?” he moaned, rubbing sleep from his eyes with the same hand he probably used to wipe his arse.

“We’re in Inverness.”

“What?”

I pointed.

He stared at the sign. Blinked once. “Fuck.”

The driver laughed, as if he’d been waiting all night for this reaction.

“Where were you hoping to get to?” he asked.

“Manchester,” I said. “Tonight.”

The driver raised a bushy eyebrow. “Right. So why’d you say, ‘Take us as far north as you’re going’?”

I paused. “Because we didn’t know north could be this far.”

He pulled the lorry into a lay-by with a slow hiss of brakes and a chuckle.

“Well, best of luck to you then. I’ll tell anyone heading south to give you boys a lift, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I said, already pulling on my jacket. “Cheers.”

We got out, boots thudding onto the gravel. I swung my rucksack onto my back. Aaron stood next to me like someone had unplugged

him from reality. The truck pulled away, blasting its air horn as it went.

The sound echoed.

We waved.

And then it was gone.

Silence.

The kind of silence you only get when you're stupidly far from anywhere you meant to be.

We crossed the road - nothing coming, not even ghosts. The other side had a smaller lay-by, dark and empty, with a wooden bench that looked like it had been pissed on by every dog north of Dundee. We stood there, trying to look hitchable. Trying to look like we hadn't completely fucked it.

"Can you hear anything?" Aaron whispered.

I listened.

"No."

"I'm sure I can hear an engine," he said.

"You're the one who wears earplugs to gigs."

He peered into the darkness. Somewhere way down the road, a faint orange glow curved into view. It grew brighter, louder. Then came the unmistakable squeal of old brakes, tyres angry at being stopped.

The car skidded into the lay-by like it had something to prove.

Orange Ford Capri. Fuzzy dice. Bonnet that looked held down by hope and chewing gum. Number plate - I kid you not - had been

scratched into a bit of card with a biro: RUB315H.

The window rolled down. A face emerged. Blonde curls. Sunglasses. At night.

“Where you off to?” he shouted.

“South,” I said. “Anywhere south.”

“London eventually,” added Aaron.

The bloke nodded. “I can take you as far as Glasgow.”

We didn’t think. We just got in. We never did think, not then.

Before Aaron even shut the door, the car roared off like it was trying to hit 88mph and rewrite the last half hour.

Back to the Future.

Or at least to the middle of Scotland.

The Capri’s interior smelled like Red Bull, wet dog, and danger. The passenger door didn’t have a handle, just a frayed bit of string. Aaron sat in the back, hugging his bag like it might explode. I took the front. There was something deeply unwise about the upholstery - it had that stickiness that only comes from questionable history.

The driver - Drew, as we’d later find out - looked like he’d walked off the set of a public information film about amphetamine misuse. Blonde curls stuck out from under a backwards baseball cap. His denim jacket was covered in patches: one said “BRITISH STEEL” in faded Sharpie, another looked suspiciously like a Werther’s Original wrapper stapled on.

“So,” he said, eyes fixed ahead, “what yous doin’ all the way up here, then?”

“We weren’t meant to be,” I said, gripping the dashboard as we veered around a bend at what felt like warp speed.

“Supposed to be in Manchester,” Aaron added. “Ended up here.”

“Ach, brilliant!” Drew barked, like that was the best punchline he’d ever heard. “Only a wee detour, eh?”

“We’re heading to London,” I said, as calmly as I could. “Brixton. Big gig tomorrow night.”

“What, down the Academy?”

“Yeah,” said Aaron. “Carter USM.”

Drew let out a low whistle. “Fuuuuuckin’ love Carter.”

“You do?” Aaron perked up.

“Nope,” Drew said immediately. “But my mate does. He once bit a bouncer ’cause he wouldn’t let him in with a slingshot.”

Aaron and I shared a glance. The Capri took a tight corner like it was being chased by regrets.

“You’re a fast driver,” I said, trying not to white-knuckle the dashboard.

“Nah. Just confident.”

A cassette clicked into place. Loud, metallic bass pounded through the half-working speakers. 808 State, I think. Or some mutated cousin of it.

“You want to see Loch Ness?” Drew shouted, already turning off down a side road.

“Wait, what?”

He didn’t answer.

The car roared down a gravelly path, shaking like it had epilepsy. Foliage blurred past. Headlights flickered in the dark, catching glimpses of water between the trees. It all felt very Blair Witch Goes to Skye.

“Here we are!” he yelled, skidding to a halt near a clearing.

He jumped out.

We looked at each other.

Aaron muttered, “So this is how we die.”

We got out anyway.

Because of course we did.

Drew stood by the edge of the clearing, arms spread wide like he was introducing a stadium crowd. The trees opened onto a narrow stretch of dirt, and beyond it - moonlight flickered across black water.

“Behold!” he bellowed, voice echoing off nothing, “Loch Ness. She’s out there. I seen her. Right here. ’Bout two year ago.”

I folded my arms. “What did you see exactly?”

Drew turned slowly toward me, eyes wide with reverence or caffeine. “Well…” he started, and paused - like he was about to drop a verse from some ancient Highland ballad.

Aaron leaned in, suspicious. “Well?”

He pointed to the water. “So the wee jobbie floated past, right… we were already cracked up laughing… and then out in the middle, you get these waves. Not regular waves - monster waves. Something sticking up. Wobbling. Looked like a traffic cone on a fishing rod.”

He squinted, as if replaying it in his head.

“Might’ve been a bin bag, though.”

Aaron nodded solemnly. “The mystery deepens.”

Drew grinned. “We always said it was Nessie. I mean, you’ve gotta believe in something, right? Can’t just be tax returns and your auntie’s funeral forever.”

He suddenly crouched and slapped the dirt. “Right. Back in the motor.”

We hadn’t really left it, but sure.

Back in the car, Drew slammed the door with his whole body weight and hit play on the cassette again. Music blared: MC Tunes, followed by Utah Saints mashed over a breakbeat that sounded like two shopping trolleys fighting.

“Want a sweet?” he asked, pulling a handful of loose jelly babies from the glove compartment and holding them out.

“They’re warm,” Aaron noted.

“Character,” Drew said. “Anyway, did you know they put cocaine in Irn Bru back in the day? Not even joking. Like - back in the ’20s. Maybe the ’30s. Or maybe I dreamt that. Still. Would explain a lot, eh?”

He jerked the wheel one-handed and the Capri swerved a little too confidently past a rabbit corpse.

“Used to work at a McDonald’s, y’know,” he said.

“Really?” I deadpanned.

“Yep. Fired for eating too many gherkins. They keep track of that shit. Had a fella who nicked all the gherkins and started a black-market pickle racket behind the bins.”

Aaron raised an eyebrow. “Gherkin cartel. Got it.”

“Also, Edinburgh’s not even in Scotland anymore,” Drew added with finality.

“…What?” I said.

He nodded. “It’s a satellite of Denmark now. Didn’t you know?”

We didn’t respond.

The cassette warped into Happy Mondays, then Altern-8. He drove like every corner was a dare and every straight a test of belief. Somewhere along the way, Aaron stopped reacting and just stared at the stars like they were offering some kind of backup plan.

I couldn’t help smiling. Against all odds - and common sense - we were heading south.

Sort of.

Probably.

Drew turned off another road. This one didn’t even pretend to be tarmac. Just gravel, gorse, and hope. Trees rose up around us like silent judges.

“Nearly there,” he muttered.

“To where?” Aaron asked.

“Where I saw her.”

Aaron looked at me. I gave him a shrug that meant: We're already in a stolen moment of our own stupidity. Might as well lean in.

We bounced and rattled down the dirt path until Drew slammed on the brakes and announced, "Here we go."

The car jolted, the cassette warped mid-'Eurythmics' sample, and then… silence.

The air outside was completely still. Not quiet - still. Like the world had hit pause.

Drew hopped out and ran to the edge of a clearing, pointing through a break in the Scots pine trees.

"Over there - 'bout fifty feet out, right near that wee dip - that's where I saw her."

We followed him, cautiously. Beyond the Scots pine, and the bonnie rowan, the loch shimmered under the moonlight. Black water. Uneasy ripples. You couldn't see halfway across it, let alone to the far side. It was like staring into the surface of someone else's dream.

Aaron squinted. "You saw what exactly?"

Drew leaned forward. "Waves first. Weird waves. Real slow, but too strong for ducks. Then something poking up. Could've been a tree. Could've been a tail. Could've been a Tesco trolley. But I tell you - it was moving."

I stood next to him, eyes on the loch.

In the silence, with headlights illuminating nothing but mist and wet rock, I could almost believe it.

"Did it look like… a dinosaur?" Aaron asked, genuinely curious.

Drew laughed. “Nah. Looked like a drunk hippo trying to swim in a jumper. But it had presence, y’know? Something ancient. Like… it knew we were there.”

That hung in the air for a second.

Then Drew ruined it.

“Could’ve been a tyre.”

Aaron nodded. “As long as it wasn’t a floating jobbie again.”

“Those are rarer,” Drew said seriously. “But they haunt you.”

A sudden wind passed through the clearing - just one small gust - and the three of us stood there in total silence, listening to the slap of water against stone, and the distant low hum of a lorry passing miles away.

And for one second, it felt real. All of it.

Then Drew turned, grinned, and said, “Right, no time to fight monsters - let’s get tae fuck.”

Back in the car, Drew had clearly decided subtlety was for cowards. The Capri launched off the dirt track like it was fleeing a crime scene.

We hit the main road again and picked up speed - the kind that starts to press your ribs into your spine. Drew shoved in another cassette with a flourish, and a screech of synths announced the arrival of The Prodigy.

“Tunes bangin’,” he muttered, like a priest reciting a hymn.

The drive blurred into a strobe of music, headlights, and topographical confusion. Drew pointed out lochs, hills, pubs that “used to be something”, a tree shaped like Thatcher, and a boulder

that had “real heavy vibes” because a guy once pissed himself next to it on acid.

We didn’t speak much. We couldn’t. Between the music and the velocity, conversation was pointless. Aaron had pulled his hood up and was doing that thing where you pretend to sleep just to avoid being asked anything.

I watched the world streak past outside. The Scottish Highlands - in fast-forward. Fort William. Loch Lomond. Signs started to get more serious: GLASGOW 20 MILES, then M8, then just a blur of sodium light.

Eventually, Drew slowed.

“This is me, lads. Can’t go much further.”

We pulled into a slip road just north of the city, a place that felt like a holding pen for stolen shopping trolleys and discarded crisp packets.

Drew jumped out and popped the boot. “South’s that way,” he said, pointing toward a roundabout and a shimmering sprawl of city lights beyond it. “If you see a guy called Big Keith, tell him I still owe him for that sausage roll.”

We nodded solemnly. You couldn’t make a promise like that lightly.

Aaron offered his hand. “Thanks, man.”

Drew grinned, shook it, and dropped a cassette into Aaron’s coat pocket. “This one’s got a tune on it that’ll make you shit sideways. Play it in a field.”

And with that, he was gone.

The Capri wheel-spun out of the lay-by, exhaust screaming, taillights fading into myth.

We stood by the roundabout.

City humming in the distance. Sky heavy with clouds. Pavement cold underfoot.

Then - somewhere behind us - a church bell struck ten.

Bong.

Aaron muttered, “Attaboy, Clarence.”

I smiled.

Then we started walking.

Chapter 3. Sealed With a Glasgow Kiss - 10:00pm

The roundabout vanished behind us, swallowed by distance and the gentle hum of Glasgow's sodium glow. We followed the curve of a flyover and then down into streets that looked like they were halfway between a film set and a crime scene.

Sauchiehall Street.

Famous for its nightlife, or at least infamous. But tonight - a Tuesday - it was dead. Not "a few locals hanging around" dead. Proper apocalypse rehearsal dead. Neon signs flickered above shut shops, a row of bins gave off that thick scent of fermenting chip fat and shame, and every pub that wasn't closed had the windows blacked out like a nuclear shelter.

Aaron said nothing. Just stuffed his hands in his pockets and kept pace, boots scraping pavement in rhythmic defiance. I kept checking over my shoulder. Not for anyone in particular. Just habit. The kind of habit that says: you're two southern grebos wandering Glasgow city centre at 10 p.m. dressed like the Cure's roadies, maybe don't get too relaxed.

A voice cut through the silence.

"Oi."

We both froze.

From the mouth of an alley, someone stepped forward - silhouette first. Baggy jeans, denim jacket, floppy fringe, cigarette burning like a miniature flare.

“You two wanna see a band?”

Aaron glanced at me. The unspoken look was: Fuuuuuck…

“We’re not buying drugs,” I said instinctively.

The figure laughed. “Nah, nah, I’m in the band. We’re on in five. Need bodies. Real ones, not the usual bunch of mashed-up art students and goths too sad to clap.”

He stepped fully into the streetlight now. Young. Maybe our age. Grin too wide to be trustworthy, but not unfriendly.

“I’m Fran,” he said. “You in?”

I looked at Aaron. He shrugged. It was the same logic that had got us this far - if we questioned anything too much, the whole reality would collapse like a poorly rolled fag.

“Alright,” I said. “Lead the way.”

Fran turned, gesturing toward a door that looked like it led to a condemned kitchen.

“Place is called Nice & Sleazy.”

“Sounds charming,” Aaron muttered.

“It’s a pub,” Fran said. “And also a bit of a warning.”

We followed him in.

Because what else were we going to do - go to bed?

Inside was warmer than expected - not temperature-wise, just vibe. A neon sign buzzed like it was trying to break free from its wiring. The floor stuck to our boots in that way every music venue floor eventually does - gluey from years of lager, cider, and late-night

regret. The air smelled of sweat, mild paranoia, and those little urinal cakes that never quite do their job.

It was… actually kind of brilliant.

Fran led us through a narrow corridor into the bar, where about nine people stood in little isolated clumps, all clutching pints like they were guarding them from invisible enemies. One girl in a leather jacket and fairy wings was talking to a man dressed like a substitute teacher who'd lost a bet. No one looked like they were here for the band. Or maybe this was the band.

Fran turned to us, grinning.

"Drink?"

Aaron blinked. "Wait - you're buying?"

Fran reached into his coat, pulled out a handful of change, and slammed it on the bar like it owed him money. "Promoter's tab," he said. "And I'm the promoter. So, pint?"

We didn't argue.

Two Tennent's appeared in front of us, cold enough to fog the glass, flat enough to be authentic. I took a long sip. Something about the chemical bitterness of a Glasgow lager on an empty stomach hit different - like being kicked in the palate by a friendly boot.

"So, what's your band called?" I asked, nodding toward the stage area.

Fran smirked. "No One Special."

Aaron snorted. "Modest."

"No, that's the name. Like, literally. No One Special. Our old bassist came up with it before he moved to Aberdeen to become a geography

teacher.”

“What kind of music?”

“Loud.”

A beat.

“Loud what?” I said.

“Loud disappointment. Loud sincerity. Loud regret. All the classics.”

He drained his glass, checked his watch - it was cracked, with a bit of tape holding it together - and said, “Right, we’re on.”

Fran didn’t ask us to come watch.

He just left, ducking into the shadows near the stage.

Aaron leaned in and said, “I kind of like him.”

“Same,” I said. “I just wouldn’t lend him anything.”

We carried our pints to a sticky table near the back, next to a pinball machine permanently stuck on ‘Game Over’.

The lights dipped.

A screech of feedback.

Then Fran’s voice - slightly hoarse, slightly thrilled - crackled out from the mic:

“Good evening, Glas-vegas. We’re No One Special. Try not to hate us too quickly.”

They launched into their first song.

And you know what?

They weren't bad.

They weren't good either.

But they were definitely loud.

The set started with a song that had no name, or maybe too many. It sounded like someone had left a Buzzcocks cassette in the sun, then punched it repeatedly until it developed self-esteem issues.

Fran screamed something about photocopiers and microwave meals. The bassist was shirtless and sweating like he was being slowly boiled. The drummer looked like he hadn't slept since Thatcher got elected. The guitarist had a mullet so precise it could've been used for military mapping.

Aaron leaned over. "Is this… a protest song?"

I sipped my pint. "Think it's about loneliness. Or fried chicken."

Second track had a chorus that went "I DON'T WANNA BE LIKE GARY!" on repeat. The crowd - all eleven of us now - clapped politely between songs, with the same energy people use to thank bus drivers in the rain.

But something about it worked.

It wasn't tight. It wasn't cool. But it was honest. Loud, messy honesty. Like someone shouting at their own reflection and deciding to dance with it instead.

Fran clearly believed in it, even if his vocals were sometimes more aspirational than accurate.

By the fifth song - something called 'She Said, "You Smell Like Wet Wool"' - the crowd had started to nod along. A girl in a cardigan

actually started pogoing near the stage. When Fran shouted “Thank you and fuck you!” at the end, it felt earned.

We clapped. Maybe even cheered a bit.

The lights came back on, and the illusion broke.

Aaron turned to me. “Alright… they’re not completely shit.”

“No,” I said, standing up. “They’re just shit enough.”

The band reappeared near the bar. Fran waved us over. “Oi - travellers of nonsense! You surviving?”

“We are,” I said. “Not sure how.”

Fran grinned. “Wanna help load the gear?”

Aaron blinked. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. You’ve got that roadie energy. Plus you owe me a pint now.”

We shrugged and followed them out to a battered white van parked behind the venue. No windows in the back. Just amps, cables, and the faint smell of spilled cider and carpet glue.

The bassist eyed us suspiciously. “Who’re these?”

“Strays,” Fran said. “They’re alright.”

We didn’t speak much as we lifted amps and cases into the van. It was that shared silence you get with musicians and gig people - the unspoken agreement that we all understand the same chaos, the same bad kebabs and broken strings.

Once everything was loaded, Fran leaned against the door and lit a cigarette.

“So where you boys heading again?”

“Brixton,” Aaron said. “Carter gig tomorrow night.”

Fran raised an eyebrow. “You’re hitching to London?”

I nodded.

He looked back at the van, then at us. “We’re heading south for a couple of days. Got a gig in Leeds. We can get you part of the way.”

Aaron blinked. “You serious?”

Fran smiled. “Aye. Just don’t puke on my delay pedal.”

The back of the van was mostly metal cases, soft black bags, a drum stool with one leg that looked like it had been glued back together by desperation, and a single empty can of Lilt rolling around like it had unfinished business.

Aaron and I wedged ourselves between a bass amp and what I think was either a fog machine or an old hoover. Fran’s voice floated in from the front seats.

“We’ve got sleeping bags, but you’ll have to sit on the gear. You break it, you buy it. If you piss on it, you clean it with your tongue.”

“Reassuring,” Aaron muttered.

I reached for the wall to steady myself as the engine rumbled to life. The van pulled away from the kerb with all the grace of a collapsing bingo hall.

As we bounced along the first few streets, one of the other band members leaned over the back seat - skinny, sharp-nosed, and chain-smoking a roll-up like it was a job.

“So,” he said, “how’d you two end up here?”

I gave the abridged version: woke up in Inverness, supposed to be in Manchester, now heading for Brixton, ideally before tomorrow night, hopefully without dying.

“Sounds like a concept album,” he muttered.

Aaron grinned. “It’s more of a spoken word thing.”

There was a beat of silence. Then laughter from the front seat.

“You’re mental,” Fran said. “I love it.”

I leaned my head back against a cab labelled “FRAGILE AF” and stared at the ceiling of the van, which was decorated with peeling gig stickers: Dunfermline Punk Fest, Support Local Noise, Vote Labour You Dickhead.

The road started to smooth out as we left the city behind. Out the front, the motorway unfolded like a black ribbon pulling us south. No lights out here except the ones we brought with us.

Fran put on a tape. Something ambient and fuzzy - part slowcore, part bad radio tuning. It filled the van like fog.

Aaron whispered, “You reckon they’re axe murderers?”

“If they are,” I said, “at least they’re polite ones.”

He nodded. “Best kind.”

The van rattled past the last stretch of city light. Industrial estates faded into farmland. Lamp posts became rare. The sky, all bruised purple and orange earlier, had collapsed into that kind of total black you only get in places too small for maps but too big for comfort.

No one talked much. The guitarist was asleep, half-folded over his amp like a dying fern. Fran hummed along with the tape, some lo-fi dirge that may or may not have been slowed-down Pixies.

I rested my chin on my knees, feet pressed up against a flight case labelled “NOISE WEAPON”. Aaron sat beside me, rubbing his hands for warmth. The condensation on the metal was seeping through my jeans.

Out of nowhere, the bassist - who hadn’t spoken since we got in - leaned back over the seat again.

“You lads know they call this stretch the Square Mile of Murder?”

Aaron blinked. “…Sorry?”

He lit another roll-up and spoke through the smoke like he was telling a ghost story to himself.

“Late 1800s. Four murders. All different. All mental. All unsolved. All in the same square mile of Glasgow. Poisonings, stabbings, disappearing bodies. Totally cursed.”

“Right,” I said, nodding slowly.

Aaron glanced at me. “That’s comforting.”

The bassist grinned. “Bit of history for the road.”

Silence again.

The van passed under a railway bridge, and for a second, we were swallowed in complete blackness. Then a light flared again. Road signs. A distant glow on the horizon. We were properly southbound now.

Then - clear through the van walls, faint but unmistakable - a bell rang.

BONG.

Somewhere back in the city, maybe the same church, maybe not. But unmistakably another hour gone.

Aaron turned to me, smirking despite himself.

I exhaled. “Attaboy, Clarence.”

The van trundled forward, wheels humming against the tarmac, and we slipped deeper into the dark.

Chapter 4. 23:59 - End of the World - 11:00pm

The van hissed to a stop somewhere that wasn't quite anywhere. A slip road? A freight park? A dystopian suburb designed by someone who hated warmth?

Fran leaned out the passenger window. "This is where we ditch you. Gotta get back for some other stuff."

I gave him a wave. "Thanks for the lift. And the beer. And the band. And the vaguely haunting urban legends."

He grinned. "Anytime. If you ever get to London, tell Carter USM I said cheers."

Aaron poked his head back in. "Will do. What's your surname?"

Fran blinked. "Nah, that's alright."

The van rattled off into the night, tail lights flickering through the mist like drunk fireflies. And just like that, we were alone again - two weary wanderers in the dead heart of late-night Glasgow, with no idea which direction was forward.

The road was absurdly wide, like it had been built for a much more important city than the one surrounding it. Streetlights buzzed faintly overhead, the kind of light that made everything look sickly, like a world lit by old fluorescent tubes in a chip shop loo.

Aaron stood in the centre of the pavement, eyes scanning the blank skyline.

"You know where we are?"

“Nope.”

“Think we’re near anything?”

“I think we’re near the concept of despair.”

He sniffed. “Bit poetic.”

“Bit knackered.”

We picked a direction based purely on which one had a vending machine flashing faintly in the distance. The silence was thick, broken only by the sound of our boots slapping against wet concrete and the occasional far-off siren, like the city coughing in its sleep.

A takeaway cup rolled across the pavement in front of us. Windless. No obvious source.

We both stopped.

Aaron turned slowly. “Is this still Glasgow?”

I didn’t answer. I wasn’t sure either.

We kept walking. That’s what you do in moments like this - not think, not reflect, just move. One step. Then another. Then another.

That’s when we heard the voice.

“Oi.”

We both froze.

From the shadows just off the main road, a figure leaned against the doorway of a dimly lit pub. Denim jacket. Cigarette. Familiar silhouette.

“You two again?” the figure said. “You following me or just committed to chaos?”

Aaron exhaled. “Fran?”

He grinned. “Come on. Pint’s still on the tab.”

We followed Fran into the pub like moths into a toaster.

Inside, it smelled of warm beer, spilt smoke machine fluid, and history no one had asked for. The carpet was patterned in a way that suggested a haunting, and the bar was manned by a man who looked like he’d been poured into his polo shirt and left to set. Behind him, the optics were lined up like they were in some kind of resignation parade.

The pub’s name wasn’t posted anywhere obvious, but I felt certain it was called something like The Sinking Dog or The Wheezing Badger. Something with a smell.

There were maybe five other people inside. Two were slumped over pints. One was asleep on a fruit machine. One might have been dead.

Fran pointed to the bar. “He’s still got me on tab. You want in?”

I raised a hand. “Only if it comes with an exorcism.”

Aaron leaned against the wall. “What is this place?”

“Pop-up venue,” Fran said. “Sort of. We’re trialling it. If people don’t actively flee or catch tetanus, we might make it monthly.”

I squinted at the back corner where a band was half-assembling gear in front of a sign that said LIVE MUSIC EVERY WEDNESDAY. It was Tuesday.

“Who’s playing?”

Fran smirked. “Some mates. Spinoff project from No One Special. This one’s more experimental.”

“Define experimental.”

“They do a cover of ‘Common People’ using a kazoo and a traffic cone.”

Aaron nodded. “We’ve made worse decisions.”

We got two more pints - flat again, of course, and somehow warmer than the last ones - and claimed a table that hadn’t been wiped since the miners’ strike.

The lights flickered. The band strummed something that might’ve been tuning or might’ve been the song. One of them wore a kilt. The other had no shoes. The third just stood still, staring at a wall with quiet fury, holding a stylophone.

It wasn’t music.

It wasn’t not music either.

It was… noise with ambition.

Aaron leaned in, grinning. “This is the best worst day I’ve had in years.”

I clinked his glass. “It’s only going to get weirder.”

The band made a sound like a robotic goose falling down stairs.

Fran nodded along, eyes closed, lost in it.

And I couldn’t help but wonder: maybe we were following him.

Maybe he was the only person who knew where the hell we were going.

By the third song - or maybe it was still the first, just in different shoes - I felt like I'd dropped through Glasgow's floor and landed in a dream being broadcast from someone's broken telly.

The pub was barely alive. The air was warm, damp. Our pints hadn't improved, but at least the glasses had stopped sticking to the table, as if even gravity was giving up.

The band onstage had no name. At least none they admitted to. One of them shouted something about "liberation through confusion" before launching into a slowed-down cover of 'Common People' that sounded like Pulp being murdered underwater.

Aaron leaned over. "You know, if this was an art piece, I think I'd still hate it."

"It's like they're trying to play it backwards from memory."

At the chorus, the shoeless one climbed into what looked like an old post sack, zipped himself up, and began writhing across the floor while someone blew mournfully into a kazoo.

The kilted guitarist didn't even blink.

The stylophone player was still staring at the wall, like it had personally wronged him.

We sipped our pints in silence.

There was something almost comforting about the madness. Like if the world was going to end, at least it would end with kazoo noise and a man trying to rebirth himself from a nylon sack.

Fran popped up beside us again, holding a pint of something pink and unwelcome.

He sat heavily.

“Still with us?” he asked.

Aaron raised his glass. “Barely.”

Fran nodded toward the stage. “They used to be a punk band. Now they’re this.”

“Evolution,” I said.

He looked at me - properly looked, for the first time all night. “You ever feel like the whole city’s repeating itself?”

Aaron furrowed his brow. “As in…?”

Fran pointed vaguely upward. “You ever walk a road and feel like you’ve already walked it, even though you know you haven’t? Same sound. Same smell. Same weird wee man outside trying to sell you three pens for a fiver.”

I thought about it.

This pub did feel like the last one, just with fewer windows and more ghosts.

“Yeah,” I said. “A bit.”

“Glasgow does that,” Fran muttered. “It loops. Same faces. Same fights. Same bands, different names. It’s comforting and shit in equal measure.”

Onstage, the sack wriggled violently and then lay still.

The audience - what little there was of it - applauded in the way people clap when they’re not sure what just happened, but they respect that it took effort.

The band gave a thumbs-up and stepped offstage as if they’d just saved someone’s life.

Fran stood.

“You’re still heading south, yeah?”

“Soon as we find another mad bastard with a car.”

Fran smirked. “Might be your lucky night.”

Back behind the pub, the band’s van was more a van-shaped rumour than a vehicle. The side door didn’t shut so much as agree to stay closed for now. One of the tail lights was held together with masking tape and someone’s misplaced faith.

“You two again?” asked the stylophone player - now in jeans and a grimy Jesus Jones T-shirt. His face still carried the same intense, haunted look, like he’d just stared directly into a microwave for thirty minutes and liked it.

Aaron gave a small shrug. “We travel light. Move fast. Look confused.”

“We don’t normally pick up strays,” muttered one of the others, this one possibly the man recently reborn from the sack. He was still damp and looked defensive about it.

“They helped us load out earlier,” Fran said, throwing a guitar case into the back. “They’re alright. Think of them as human luggage.”

I raised my hand. “Soft case. Handle on top.”

That got a small snort of laughter from the shoeless guitarist.

Aaron elbowed me. “So where exactly are you lot going?”

“Heading back to Motherwell tonight,” Fran replied. “Then down the M74 toward Carlisle tomorrow.”

“That’s England,” I said. “Close enough.”

“Fine,” the sack man muttered. “Just don’t talk about bloody Carter again. I get it. You’re fans. You like lyrics. So does my gran.”

“We’ll be quiet,” Aaron promised.

We climbed in - me in the back with the gear, Aaron on a folded sleeping bag near the side door that clicked ominously every time the van turned.

The engine turned over like it was clearing its throat after a smoke. Then the van lurched forward with all the grace of a lawnmower full of gravel.

The streets blurred past again - but this time, the city looked different. Deeper shadows. More distance between the streetlights. A colder silence.

The band up front were mostly quiet now. Tired. Spent.

So were we.

The buzz of the van’s exhaust became a kind of lullaby, thrumming through our boots, up our spines, right into the back of our eyes.

Another lift. Another hour.

Closer.

Still not close.

But… closer.

The van dipped under a railway bridge and rumbled out of Glasgow like it owed someone money.

Aaron sat beside me, slumped, his chin resting on his knees. I watched his eyelids flutter like he was having a conversation with sleep but hadn’t yet agreed to leave the party.

Outside the window, the streetlights thinned until there was nothing but black road and blacker sky. Every few seconds, the van would pass a sign - some of them even readable - promising places like Hamilton or Larkhall, names that sounded vaguely like people we once knew but couldn't place.

The stylophone player leaned into the front seat and said something no one heard, and no one answered.

That suited the mood.

Everything had gone quiet. That weird, specific quiet that comes after a night of noise, once your ears stop ringing but your brain keeps doing encores.

Aaron blinked slowly. "You think we're out yet?"

"Out of Glasgow?"

"Out of the loop. Out of whatever weird time vortex we fell into back at Loch Ness."

I shrugged. "If we're not, I hope it loops us through a petrol station soon. I could kill a sausage roll."

He nodded sagely.

The van took a turn, one of those wide, slow arcs that made everything in the back shift half a foot left. My hip met the corner of a bass amp. A cymbal bag slid gently into Aaron's ankle. Neither of us complained.

Then - clear, distant, and unmistakable - a bell rang.

Not close. Not loud. But just sharp enough to cut through everything.

BONG.

Aaron smirked, eyes half-closed.

“Attaboy, Clarence,” he whispered.

I looked out the window again, but there was nothing but dark road ahead.

Still so far to go.

But we were in motion.

And for now, that was enough.

Chapter 5. Midnight on the Murder Mile - 12:00am

The van pulled off at a junction where two motorways tangled together like they'd been built by someone mid-divorce. No buildings. No houses. Just concrete, gravel, and the occasional fox blinking at you like you owed it money.

Fran stuck his head out the window one last time.

"Right - Motherwell's that way. England's that way. You'll figure it out."

"Legend," Aaron called.

"Lunatics," Fran corrected. Then, with a wave and a growl of second-hand diesel, they were gone.

Just like that, the night swallowed them.

We stood in the slip-road lay-by, staring into the kind of darkness that doesn't feel empty - it feels occupied.

"Which direction is England?" Aaron asked, spinning in a slow circle.

I pointed toward the southbound stretch of tarmac, where the road disappeared into black hills and low fog.

"Let's try that one. It looks slightly less like death."

We stood there for five minutes, thumbs out, getting no bites. A couple of lorries passed, their drivers staring ahead like they couldn't afford to register two grebos at midnight standing under a flickering road sign.

Aaron was mid-rollie when the next car came - a rough-sounding green Beetle, its exhaust popping like a firework up a drainpipe. It rattled to a stop with a clank and a wheeze. The driver leaned out of the window before either of us could speak.

“You boys heading south?”

She had a messy ponytail, round glasses, and a nose ring that glinted in the dashboard light. Blonde, pale, probably about our age - or a few years older, but with the kind of night-shift energy that collapses the concept of time.

“To London,” Aaron said.

She raised a brow. “Bit of a walk.”

I nodded. “We’re flexible.”

“I can take you as far as Carlisle,” she said. “If you don’t mind the noise. Or the smell.”

The engine gave a death rattle behind her, as if to demonstrate both.

Aaron was already walking toward the passenger door. “That sounds perfect.”

I gave a small shrug. At this point, our options were:

Get in a weird Beetle with a possibly mad woman.

Sleep in a bush.

“Right,” she said. “Get your arses in.”

We climbed in. The door stuck slightly. The inside of the car smelled like lavender air freshener trying to cover up petrol, fast food, and warm fabric. On the back seat were a medical clipboard, two plastic bags full of cassette tapes, and a plush rat wearing sunglasses.

She jammed it into gear, and we rattled off down the road like the world had just started again - but slightly out of tune.

“So,” she said, swerving around a pothole with the relaxed confidence of someone who drove like this often and survived despite it, “what’s the story, boys?”

Aaron was already chatting like he’d been waiting for this moment all day. Which, to be fair, he sort of had.

“We hitched to Manchester, missed it, woke up in Inverness.”

“Obvious mistake,” she said, nodding.

“Then got picked up by a lunatic called Drew who drove like his Capri was chasing the past, dropped us near Loch Ness, told us about a floating jobbie, took us to Glasgow, we watched a band, then helped them load out and they brought us here.”

She blinked. “Right. Of course.”

“And now we’re heading to London for a Carter gig,” I added, mostly to confirm to myself that we still had a goal and weren’t just characters in a road-trip dream someone else was having.

She grinned. “Carter USM?”

“The one and only,” Aaron said.

She laughed. “My boyfriend’s into them. He said they’re like the Pet Shop Boys if they got locked in a pub toilet with a drum machine and anger issues.”

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s not wrong.”

“I’m Sophie, by the way,” she added. “Nurse. Just finished an evening shift. Now I’m off to Carlisle to see the aforementioned boyfriend. Hopefully still conscious.”

Aaron reached across the seat to shake her hand. “Aaron. That’s Jim.”

“Hi,” I muttered, trying to avoid a metal spring poking up through the seat.

“You two always travel like this?”

“Like what?” Aaron asked.

“Directionless. Jacket full of receipts. One shoe half-laced. Vague air of romantic failure.”

Aaron grinned. “It’s a lifestyle choice.”

Sophie laughed - a genuine one, not a polite ‘you’re mad but I’m stuck in a car with you’ laugh. She flicked on the tape deck. Something ambient kicked in - swirling synth, distant breakbeat.

“Bit of music to keep the brain upright,” she said.

We drove on in silence for a bit, the road thinning, the darkness thickening.

Aaron leaned back and sighed, all performative contentment. “This is oddly comfortable.”

“You’ve got two drumsticks in your back,” I said.

“Still more comfortable than the sack guy.”

Sophie snorted, eyes on the road. “Do I want to know?”

“No,” I said. “No you don’t.”

Somewhere between what might’ve been a dead hedgehog and what definitely was a wheel trim bouncing off a verge, Aaron asked:

“Is it wrong to wank to Lolita?”

Sophie didn’t flinch. Just raised an eyebrow without taking her eyes off the road.

“Book or film?” she asked, calm as anything.

“Either, really.”

“Well, the actress was sixteen in the 1962 one, so technically legal here. But in the book she’s meant to be twelve, so… yeah, bit of a sick fucker if you’re into that.”

Aaron nodded thoughtfully, as if he was filing that away for a pub quiz.

“I haven’t,” he added. “Wanked to it. Just asking.”

“Uh huh,” Sophie said. “You could’ve gone for something safer. Like Clueless. Or that lass from The Wonder Years.”

“I wasn’t allowed to fancy Winnie,” Aaron muttered. “My sister said she looked like our cousin.”

Sophie laughed. “Christ, you two are weird.”

“Thank you,” I said, mostly out of instinct.

She turned the tape over and jammed it back into the deck with a sharp click. Utah Saints kicked in. We all nodded along like people who didn’t know what they were doing but had at least agreed to do it together.

I leaned my head back and stared at the ceiling. The vibrations of the car made the roof wobble in time with the bassline. The speedometer danced. The windscreen wipers moved even though it wasn’t raining. The whole vehicle felt slightly alive.

“You know what gets me?” Sophie said after a long pause. “The fact that we all pretend we’re normal. Like the default setting is anything but weird. And if you admit you’ve thought about shagging a robot or crying at an advert, suddenly you’re the problem.”

Aaron shrugged. “Depends on the robot.”

Sophie grinned. “Exactly.”

Another beat of silence. Then -

“Kelly from Married with Children?” she said.

“Oh absolutely,” Aaron said instantly. “Classic. Grubby and proud.”

“Preferred Peggy, actually,” I muttered. “Don’t judge.”

Sophie looked over at me, eyes squinting. “Yeah, I can see that. You’ve got that secret pervert energy.”

“Thank you?”

“See? That’s what I’m talking about.”

The road curved southward, the car rattling with effort, the darkness settling over us like a duvet you can’t quite pull up all the way.

Aaron cracked the window. A cold wind rushed in. He grinned like it tasted of freedom.

I stared ahead, eyes fixed on the faint lights in the far distance.

This wasn’t just a lift anymore. It was something else - something slipping just outside of normal.

The laughter tapered off into that golden silence that only ever happens in a moving car - engine hum beneath it, wind whistling just

slightly, everyone quietly recalibrating after something too silly, too real, or just too much.

Aaron leaned against the window, tapping his fingers against the glass in time with the tape.

Sophie had shifted into what I could only describe as long-haul mode - posture slack, one hand on the wheel, one elbow hanging lazily out the window like she'd been born to drive into the void.

That's when it came into view: the sign.

White. Boring. Reflective.

WELCOME TO ENGLAND

With a little red rose stuck beside it like someone had decided irony should be nationalised.

We didn't cheer.

We didn't high-five.

We just… saw it.

Registered it.

And something about it landed.

Aaron gave a small nod. "There it is."

Sophie pointed with a cigarette. "Ta-da."

I watched it shrink in the wing mirror, that stupid sign - plain as anything, but now a marker of progress. A checkpoint passed. A glitch survived.

A proof, maybe, that we weren't just looping forever from pub to van to band to whatever came next.

We'd crossed a border.

We were in the right country now.

Still no clue.

But technically… we were winning.

The next twenty minutes blurred in that uniquely nocturnal way where time stops being a ruler and starts behaving like warm chewing gum.

The tape flipped again. The Shamen, then Oceanic, then "Charly" by The Prodigy. The Beetle's dashboard lights dimmed and flickered like they were choosing whether or not to continue existing.

Sophie glanced sideways, lips twitching at the corners. "You two alright back there?"

Aaron gave a blissed-out thumbs-up.

"Still got your tickets?" she added.

I patted my inside pocket. "Safer than my own bollocks."

"Good," she said. "Keep it that way. You're too deep in now to go back."

She pulled off at the top of a long exit slip, tyres protesting slightly, the smell of hot oil dragging behind us like a ghost.

"Carlisle's just east of here," she said. "My boyfriend's flat's about five minutes from here, and I reckon he's either asleep or drunk. Or both."

She cut the engine and turned in her seat. “This is as far as I go. Good luck getting the rest of the way.”

Aaron climbed out and gave a mock salute. “Sophie. You’ve been a legend.”

“I’ve been bored and reckless,” she said. “But I’ll take ‘legend’.”

I nodded. “Hope he’s worth the drive.”

She smirked. “He’s got a gig ticket. I’ve got a night off tomorrow. We’ll see.”

The Beetle rattled to life once more and peeled off into the darkness, one brake light flickering like a dying firefly.

We were alone again.

Roadside verge. Empty road. Distant motorway hum. I lit a fag and handed the lighter to Aaron, who immediately dropped it.

“Shit,” he muttered. “Gone under the verge. Just like that, our entire infrastructure collapses.”

Then - headlights.

A squat yellow Volkswagen screamed around the curve and slid to a halt in front of us, kicking up gravel and uncertainty.

A window rolled down.

“Oi! You trying to get somewhere?” the driver called. Skinny. Greasy. Face like someone drew a rat from memory then added a smirk.

Aaron glanced at me and I shrugged.

“London,” I said.

“Wicked,” said the driver. “Hop in. I’m opening her up tonight. Name’s Steve.”

As we moved toward the car, a soft, electronic tone pierced the silence - a digital watch beeping the hour.

1:00 a.m.

Another hour down.

The lights of Carlisle faded behind us.

Chapter 6. England - 1:00am

The car was already half moving before the door closed. A wheezing, paint-chipped yellow VW Golf that looked like it had been spray-canned in a hurry by someone who'd only read about cars in theory.

The driver, who'd only identified himself as "Steve," was wearing a ripped Ride T-shirt, jeans with one knee missing entirely, and the wide-eyed twitch of a man who hadn't slept properly since Blankety Blank was still airing. His hair, if it could be called that, was a greasy fringe with ambitions of mullethood.

"You boys in a rush?" he said, punching the accelerator like it had insulted his mother.

The little car screeched onto the A-road and barrelled down toward the motorway proper, its suspension protesting every bump like an old man with bad knees.

Me and Aaron were crammed in beside a stack of empty Monster Munch bags, two crushed Lucozade Sport bottles, and something in a Tesco carrier that smelled faintly of regret. Neither of us said a word for the first ten seconds. We were both too busy trying to work out if the car had a floor.

Aaron finally broke the silence. "This thing road legal?"

Steve laughed. "Doubt it. But it's still fast. That's what matters. Wanna hear her sing?"

Without waiting for permission, he downshifted and roared the car onto the M6, the engine emitting a metallic scream that sounded like it was trying to file its own restraining order.

The speedometer bounced between 55 and 120 like it couldn't decide which reality to believe.

"This is mental," I muttered.

"This is progress," Aaron grinned. "Mate, we're in England. We're actually in England."

Steve slapped the dashboard. "See? I'm the wizard of the road. I take stray lambs and turn 'em into guided missiles."

"More like guided meatballs," I muttered, watching the traffic blur past. "If we die, I'm not haunting this car. It doesn't deserve it."

The stereo kicked on of its own accord, spitting out a mangled cassette halfway through Oceanic - *Insanity*.

Steve whooped. "Speedo disco! Let's go!"

The car settled into a kind of rhythmic violence, humming and rattling in a constant low-grade shudder like it might simply choose to implode at any second. But it didn't.

Instead, it flew.

The M6 opened up in front of us - an endless snake of tarmac and sodium glow, two fat lanes empty except for the occasional lorry lumbering along in the distance. The Golf didn't overtake other vehicles so much as sneer past them.

The stereo flickered, warbled, and spat its way through a remix of "Charley Says". Aaron bobbed his head in time with the beats. I kept both hands clutched tight to the edge of my seat.

"Think we're catching up to fate," Aaron grinned, staring out at the road like he could see Brixton glowing in the horizon fog.

“Fate’s probably sitting in a ditch somewhere wondering where the hell we’ve got to,” I muttered. “This car handles like a shopping trolley full of bricks.”

Steve seemed to be talking to the Golf, muttering little affirmations every few seconds - “That’s it girl,” or “You show ’em, darlin’” - while making increasingly unnecessary gear changes.

We passed under another overhead sign. MANCHESTER - 38, it said.

“We’re definitely making time,” Aaron said.

I narrowed my eyes at the flickering dashboard. “Yeah, but at what cost? This thing feels like it’s powered by fear and spite.”

Then came a stretch of absolute silence - no passing cars, no rattles, not even a song on the stereo.

Just the hum of the tyres, the pressure in our ears, the fluttery rush of speed and sleeplessness. For a few weird seconds, I forgot what day it was. What month. I couldn’t remember if we’d eaten since Glasgow. Couldn’t remember the name of the band from the pub.

All that existed was this car, this road, and this completely mad, middle-of-the-night sprint toward something only just out of reach.

Eventually, Aaron spoke. “You ever feel like we’re in a music video no one’s watching?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Directed by David Lynch.”

The yellow Golf roared down the M6 like a bottle rocket with poor alignment, wobbling at high speeds but never quite losing the plot. The overhead signs came thick and fast now.

LANCASTER. PRESTON. MANCHESTER.

To me and Aaron, these weren't towns anymore - just confirmations that we were making progress. A trail of missed exits. Ghost destinations. A game of urban pinball where all we could do was stay in play.

Aaron pointed out one of the signs. "We should have gone to Manchester first, yeah?"

I nodded. "That was the original plan."

"Feels like years ago."

Steve was still muttering to the Golf like it was a lover on the brink of a breakdown.

"Just keep singing, girl," he whispered, patting the steering wheel. "You've got rhythm. Don't listen to their doubts."

Then, louder: "She's got a personality. Can feel it in the gears."

Aaron leaned over the seat. "What's she called, then?"

Steve looked genuinely hurt. "She doesn't need a name. She knows who she is."

We went quiet after that. A kind of reverent silence fell over the car, broken only by the occasional pop from the exhaust or the distant, over-processed reverb of the stereo attempting to push out "What Can You Do For Me" by Utah Saints through a knackered speaker.

The inside of the Golf smelled like hot plastic and takeaway wrappers. The air was thick with condensation, and Aaron had to wipe his window with a sleeve just to see out.

I squinted through the smeared windscreen. "You think she's going to make it?"

"I think we might not," Aaron said.

Then Steve shifted down again - for no reason - and the car jolted like a bucking horse.

“She likes to move,” he said, grinning.

“You’re one fuse away from being a myth,” I muttered.

But I kept smiling.

We were still on the road.

The Golf surged forward again, engine howling like a rusty beast crawling out of its grave. Steve leaned into the wheel like he was trying to coax more horsepower out of pure willpower. The motorway was quiet - so quiet the tyres seemed to hum along with the techno pulsing through the cassette speakers.

I was mid-sentence - something sarcastic about dying in Lancashire - when the first flash lit up behind us.

Not a car flash. Not brake lights. Blue lights.

Aaron saw them in the rearview mirror first and didn’t even need to say it. His posture changed instantly, straightening, shoulders tensing. I caught it too and craned my neck.

Behind us, about four car lengths back, a sleek police Volvo was closing in. Its lights pulsed blue, almost politely at first.

Aaron tapped Steve’s arm. “Mate - pull over.”

Steve blinked, then grinned like a teenager in a stolen Vauxhall Nova.

“Why?” he asked, tone light. “I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“You were doing ninety in a car that’s held together with gaffer tape and bad decisions,” I said sharply. “Pull. Over.”

But Steve didn't. He shifted up instead. The Golf jerked forward, coughing smoke, trembling with effort, and took off again into the night.

"Oh come on!" Aaron shouted.

"They won't catch us," Steve said confidently. "She's got more left in her."

"She's got pieces falling off her," I snapped.

Behind us, the sirens started up properly - the kind that cut through your skull and lodge somewhere in the base of your spine.

The Golf wobbled in and out of the left lane, passing a silent juggernaut and nearly clipping its wing. The windscreen had fogged again, and Steve smeared it with his sleeve without taking his foot off the accelerator.

"Lads, trust me. I know this road. I've done this before."

"That's not reassuring!" Aaron shouted over the wind.

I reached behind my back and felt the two Carter USM tickets still tucked in my wallet. Somehow, they were still there. Still safe. Still real.

Just like death, apparently.

The car died with a clunk, a gasp, and a great plume of white smoke, like it was trying to exit the narrative in a puff of drama. The Golf shuddered once, let out a final choking bang, and coasted onto the hard shoulder with all the grace of a bin fire rolling downhill.

Steve yanked the handbrake and thumped the steering wheel. "Bollocks!"

Me and Aaron sat in stunned silence as the engine sputtered once, coughed, and fell dead. There was a smell - burnt oil, overworked rubber, cooked wires. The kind of scent that told you a car had officially had enough.

Then came the real problem.

The police Volvo glided up behind us. Calm. Professional. Inevitable.

“Do not say a fucking word,” I whispered.

Aaron nodded, wide-eyed, already mentally preparing a list of innocent-sounding phrases and maybe even a fake surname.

The officer who approached wasn’t rushing. He didn’t even look annoyed - just disappointed, like a teacher catching you smoking behind the school canteen.

“Out of the vehicle,” he said firmly. “All of you.”

Steve was already halfway out, arms raised in mock surrender. “She just gave up, officer. Could’ve happened to anyone.”

“Licence,” the officer replied.

Me and Aaron stepped out more cautiously. The second officer moved around to flank us. He was holding a small flashlight, but didn’t use it. He just looked - the sort of look that makes you double-check whether you’re doing something illegal by accident.

“Names?” the taller one asked.

We gave them.

“Where you headed?”

“Brixton,” said Aaron. “Gig tomorrow night.”

I pulled out my wallet slowly - very slowly - and flipped it open to show two creased but intact Carter USM tickets. Proof of purpose. Or innocence.

The officer looked them over, then handed the wallet back with a nod. “You know this lad?”

I shrugged. “He offered us a lift near Carlisle. We were hitching.”

“He’s got prior,” the officer said, mostly to his partner. “But not for anything that warrants a night in the cell unless he kicks off.”

After a brief, muttered exchange by the police car, they returned to us.

“Here’s the deal,” the officer said. “He’s coming with us.”

They cuffed Steve - gently, but with purpose - and opened the back of the squad car. He didn’t struggle. He just looked mildly amused.

As they closed the door behind him, the officer turned to me and Aaron.

“You two don’t look like trouble. But if I see you again tonight, I’ll start reconsidering that assumption.”

Aaron raised a hand in mock-scout salute. “We’re just normal men.”

“We’re just innocent men,” I added.

“Head south. Follow the sign for Wigan. It’s walkable. Eventually.”

The squad car pulled away into the dark, leaving us in silence.

The road glistened faintly in the distant spill of a streetlamp.

Far away, from a nearby village, a church bell struck twice. Ding… ding.

I exhaled, long and slow.

“Attaboy, Clarence,” Aaron muttered.

Chapter 7. Glam Rock Cops - 2:00am

The cop car disappeared over the brow of the hill, taillights shrinking into the grey-black fog of the M6 like the end of a dream I wasn't fully convinced I'd had. For a long moment, the only sound was the tick… tick… tick of the Golf's cooling engine as it released the last of its heat into the night air like a dying sigh.

Aaron was the first to speak.

"Well. That happened."

I nodded. "We're alive. I think."

We looked around. We were standing at the top of a long grassy embankment just off the slip road. Beyond that, a narrow path ran under a rusted sign that read:

WIGAN - 2.5 MILES TOWN CENTRE →

"Two and a half miles," Aaron said. "Could be worse."

"Could've been prison," I agreed.

We started walking.

Our shoes crunched on loose gravel, kicking up little halos of dust in the moonlight. The night air was colder now, with a wetness to it - that pre-dawn damp that clings to your knees and makes you regret ever being born north of Watford Gap.

Aaron zipped up his hoodie. "You ever feel like the universe is just… throwing darts blindfolded?"

“I feel like the universe missed the board and hit someone’s nan,” I muttered.

Aaron pulled a half-squashed Wham Bar out of his pocket and offered me the first bite. We tore it between us like a communion wafer, chewing in silence.

For a while, we just walked, letting the ache in our calves grow and settle.

Then Aaron suddenly said, “Alright. Top five glam bands.”

I grinned. “Easy. Bowie. Mott. Slade. Sweet. Wizzard.”

“Slade’s top? Really?”

I nodded. “Obviously.”

Aaron narrowed his eyes. “Just don’t say ‘Merry Xmas Everybody.’”

I scoffed. “Nah, mate. It’s ‘Mama Weer All Crazee Now.’ That’s the one. Absolute chaos in chord form.”

And before Aaron could protest, I stomped forward like a drunk Noddy Holder and sang:

🎵 “I don’t want to drink my whisky like you doooooo…” 🎵

Aaron gave in - hands in the air, shoulders bouncing to the invisible snare drum.

We were miles from safety. But for a moment, it felt like home.

The footpath ended abruptly in a patch of weedy gravel and chain-link fencing, like the world had just… given up. Ahead lay a silent distribution park, industrial units stacked like bland monoliths under a halo of orange sodium light. The air buzzed with static, and

you could almost hear the hum - like the buildings were asleep, dreaming of forklifts.

Aaron tilted his head. “That a vending machine?”

I was already walking towards it. “Christ, I hope so.”

We found it outside a locked staff entrance, humming softly in the quiet like it was the only living thing for miles. The red scrolling display blinked: INSERT 50P. INSERT 50P.

Aaron reached into his pocket. “I’ve got £2.62 and a Rizla.”

I held out 50p exactly. “Enough for one can of something radioactive.”

We picked a Lilt - partly because it felt tropical, partly because it was the most colourful can in the machine, and partly because it reminded me of school discos and bad decisions. It clunked down with a tragic wheeze.

I popped the tab and took a swig. “God, it tastes like regret and pineapple.”

Aaron sipped and nodded. “And broken promises. Served lukewarm.”

We moved on.

The path led toward a gate, tall and bolted with rusted chains, topped with coiled barbed wire like an angry garnish. A sun-faded sign read:

NO ACCESS AFTER 9PM. VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED.

Behind us: nothing. Ahead: no choice.

I stared at it, frowning. “This is exactly how every horror film starts.”

“Which one?” Aaron asked.

“All of them. Friday the 13th, Halloween, that one we were gonna write - 13th Full Moon.”

Aaron snorted. “Still a better title than The Gate.”

I grunted and grabbed the fence.

Aaron sighed. “We’ll take it slow.”

He didn’t. About halfway up, he slipped.

A loud rip. A hiss. And a muffled, “Shitting fuck!”

A clean split down the seam of his jeans, from knee to belt loop. He hit the ground hard, rolled like a sack of laundry, and sat up groaning. “Well, that’s me dressed for the apocalypse.”

I climbed after him, far more cautiously.

We stood up, breathless, on the other side.

And somewhere in the dark distance ahead - faint but real - we saw a flicker of streetlight.

“Welcome to Wigan,” Aaron said.

The streets of outer Wigan greeted us like an empty film set: long rows of red-brick terraces, every window dark, curtains pulled tight. Not a car in sight. The only light came from ancient lampposts - spaced just wide enough to make you doubt your footing between each one, casting long lonely shadows that stretched behind us like ghosts on leads.

I checked my watch, the glow barely visible. “Two-thirty.”

Aaron exhaled sharply. “We should be asleep. Or dead. Or backstage. Preferably drunk.”

We passed a sign:

WIGAN TOWN CENTRE - 1 MILE

“We’re close,” I muttered.

“Yeah, but so is madness.”

The houses gave way to wider roads. A quiet stadium sat across a railway bridge - skeletal in the low light, with big steel floodlights looming like empty gallows. We stopped to peer in. Rows of silent seats, eerie in their stillness. It might’ve been beautiful if it wasn’t so apocalyptically empty, like the kind of dream where you’re late for something but can’t remember what.

We carried on down a dual carriageway, passing shut pubs, a deserted petrol station, and what looked like an abandoned Kwik Save - the sign still barely holding on by its final bolts. Somewhere, a dog barked. No reply. No movement. Just more of that endless sodium yellow.

Then - CRASH.

The sound of shattering glass ripped through the air.

We froze.

Across the street: a squat cinema building, with posters for *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* and *Terminator 2* still sun-faded in the windows. But around the back, the glow of a torch flickered and shadows moved.

A muffled voice shouted, “Make sure you get *Terminator*! That one’s got Arnie!”

Aaron turned to me. “Do we… do something?”

I was already squinting past the cinema. “Wait - look.”

Across the road, lit by a single flickering security lamp: WIGAN POLICE STATION. Big bold letters. Glass doors. Definitely occupied.

“Oh fuck me,” Aaron muttered.

“Talk about ‘Backstreet Ethics’,” I said. “What would Fruitbat do?”

Aaron didn’t answer.

We stepped toward the cinema, hesitated - then backed off and crossed the road to the station.

A few moments later, we were buzzed in, seated on a vinyl bench, filling out forms with cheap pens and trying to remember what we’d seen. The room smelled of bleach and instant coffee.

A uniformed officer glanced at the clock. “This is officially being logged as… 2:45 a.m.”

I nodded. “Nice of you to keep time.”

The interview room wasn’t an interview room in the TV sense - no two-way mirror, no dangling desk lamp. Just a half-dead ficus in the corner, a wipe-clean table, and the smell of instant coffee soaked into the vinyl chairs.

I leaned back as the constable finished reading his scrawled statement. “Right. That seems fine.”

“Always dreamed of contributing to justice through poor handwriting,” I muttered.

Aaron was still finishing his bit, recounting the broken-glass moment and the shouted demand for *Terminator*. “Yeah, he actually said that

- like it was urgent. Proper cinema heist priority."

The officer blinked. "Right. You didn't intervene?"

"We were gonna," Aaron said, "then we saw your place across the road and figured… why compete?"

We signed our names - awkwardly and with unnecessary flourish - and were ushered out through the front doors with a nod and the kind of smile that says, You're not criminals, but please leave anyway.

Outside, Wigan was draped in that weird, soupy mist you only see between midnight and milk deliveries. The air was cold enough to raise goosebumps through layers. The streetlamps made halos in the damp.

We stood still for a moment. No traffic. No voices. No movement. Just the click of the station doors locking behind us.

Aaron adjusted the strap on his backpack. "So. What now?"

I shrugged. "Walk. Think the canal's south of here."

Aaron looked sideways at me. "You ever think we're just the side characters in someone else's story?"

"Every fucking day."

"I mean like… we're Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Or R2-D2 and C-3PO."

I smirked. "Yeah, but we've got better lines."

A pause.

"Do we though?" Aaron asked.

I thought about it. “Nah. They’ve got a droid with sass. We’ve got a half-drunk Lilt and a hole in your jeans.”

Aaron nodded solemnly. “So we’re the comedy relief.”

“We always were.”

He squinted sideways. “So which of us is the straight man?”

I didn’t miss a beat. “I’m the Morecambe to your Wise.”

Aaron snorted. “Nah - I’m the Barker to your Corbett.”

“Maybe,” I said, “but tonight you’re definitely the Little to my Large.”

“Oh piss off, I’m not being Eddie Large.”

“You are. It’s the jeans.”

Aaron laughed, dragging a hand through his hair. “Fine. Then you’re the Cannon to my Ball.”

I winced. “Now that’s a low blow.”

“Alright, alright - you can be the Hale to my Pace.”

We walked in silence for a moment, grinning at the ridiculousness of it.

Then from somewhere beyond the rooftops: Ding. Ding. Ding.

Three o’clock.

“Attaboy, Clarence,” Aaron muttered again.

And we walked on.

Chapter 8. Crimestoppers A Go Go - 3:00am

“Three a.m.,” Aaron muttered. “The absolute bastard hour.”

We crossed the road in silence. Our footsteps echoed off shuttered takeaways and dark shopfronts, giving the impression that someone was following us, even though we knew better. A takeaway called “New Cantonese Dynasty” had a flickering neon sign that simply read: NEW CAN NASTY. Aaron nodded at it solemnly. “That’s how I feel.”

A woman in a dressing gown and mismatched slippers smoked outside a block of flats, watching us like a CCTV camera with a pulse. She didn’t say anything, just took a long drag, exhaled, and disappeared back inside.

We passed a row of minicabs, all empty, all dead-eyed. One had its engine ticking over, and the radio inside was playing a barely audible tinny version of “The Power” by Snap. I peered in through the condensation-smeared window, half-expecting someone to be asleep in the driver’s seat, but there was nothing. Just a furry dice and an abandoned Greggs bag.

A few streets later, we reached a small square framed by rusted bollards and defunct benches. There was a mural on one wall - some kind of stylised dolphin jumping over a rainbow made of pound coins. Aaron stopped and stared. “Is that a metaphor, or a budget cut?”

I shrugged. “Welcome to the art scene.”

Then - RING RING. RING RING.

A payphone. An actual, working payphone, bolted to the side of a boarded-up newsagent. It rang again, high and shrill, like it was screaming through time from 1983.

We both turned slowly, like we were expecting it to explode.

“Should we…?” Aaron asked.

I was already walking. “This is either going to be hilarious or curse us for eternity.”

I picked up the receiver. “Hello?”

There was a pause. Then the sound of rustling paper. A voice - nasal, unsure - said, “Yeah, is that… Tommo?”

I looked at Aaron, then back at the phone. “Nope.”

“Oh.” Another rustle. “You sure?”

“I’m very sure.”

“…Alright. Sorry, mate.” Click.

I hung up slowly.

Aaron stared at me. “What the actual-?”

“I think we just accidentally ghosted a drug deal,” I said.

Aaron clapped me on the shoulder. “Let’s go before we’re in his contacts list.”

We turned the corner - and there it was.

A battered white Transit van, parked half on the pavement, side door wide open. Light inside. A massive bloke in a leather gilet sat in the

driver's seat, nodding along to what sounded like "Living in a Box" on a cassette.

Painted down the side of the van in wonky white lettering: BIG KEITH'S MOBILE EXCHANGE - SWAPS, SALES, TRANSACTIONS, ENLIGHTENMENT

Aaron stared. "…Are we dead?"

I tilted my head. "If we are, this is Purgatory. And I think it sells shower radios."

Big Keith looked up and grinned, cigarette glowing at the corner of his mouth.

"Alright lads? Fancy a deal?"

Big Keith leaned out of the van's window like a man with no intention of getting out unless gravity did the work for him. He had a roll-up in one hand, a half-drunk can of Panda Cola in the other, and wore a leather waistcoat over a faded Alvin Stardust World Tour T-shirt. His hair - what remained of it - looked like it had been gelled with cooking oil and good intentions.

"You look like two lads in need of… somethin'," he said, dragging out the word like it had layers.

Aaron raised an eyebrow. "You're not Tommo, are you?"

Keith squinted. "Do I look like a Tommo?"

I shrugged. "You answered like one."

"I've been called worse," Keith said cheerfully. "But no. Keith. Big Keith. Only people callin' me Tommo are either confused or owe me twenty quid."

“Fair enough,” Aaron said, taking a cautious step closer to the van. “What’s this, then?”

Keith jerked his thumb toward the open side door. Inside was chaos in catalogue form: a foot spa, a neon fax machine, a stack of Brit Awards VHS compilations, unopened kitchen scales, mystery tins with no labels, an entire shelf of 8-track cartridges, several novelty mugs with slogans like “I Woke Up Sexy” and “Barry’s My Name, Trouble’s My Game.”

I let out a low whistle. “It’s like a car boot sale crashed into a pawn shop and then got buried in a skip.”

Keith grinned. “That’s the dream.”

Aaron tilted his head. “You actually sell this stuff?”

“I deal in exchange,” Keith corrected. “People swap what they don’t need for what they never knew they wanted. Enlightenment through bartering.”

I fished in my pocket and held out the empty Lilt can. “What does this get me?”

Keith took it solemnly, squinting at the label. “Sentimental value… let’s say a joke and a compliment.”

Aaron laughed. “We’re rich.”

“Tell you what,” Keith said, rummaging under the dash. “You seem like good lads. No charge.”

He handed us a cassette in a cracked plastic case. On the handwritten label: “SHANDYLAND - A Compilation of Vibes”

Aaron stared at it. “What’s on this?”

“Magic,” Keith said, already firing the ignition. “Or shite. Life’s full of surprises.”

With a wink, he crunched the van into gear and pulled a rope, which shut the side door.

“Next stop: destiny. Or Skelmersdale.”

And with a jolt and a puff of blue smoke, Big Keith disappeared into the night.

We watched the van until its brake lights blinked out of existence, swallowed by a side street and the kind of fog that only ever seemed to exist after midnight. The night was still again, like someone had hit pause on the world.

I looked down at the tape in my hand. “‘Shandyland.’ This could be a spiritual awakening. Or a hate crime in musical form.”

Aaron nodded. “Only one way to find out. Except we don’t own a tape player.”

“Details,” I said, pocketing it like it was evidence.

We wandered until we reached a glass bus shelter - cracked, half-lit, and inexplicably home to a single shoe, a crisp packet full of rainwater, and a half-finished crossword done in pink highlighter. It was perfect.

We collapsed onto the bench with matching groans. I stretched my legs out like a man twice my age; Aaron leaned forward, elbows on knees, resting his head in his hands.

For a minute, neither of us spoke.

Aaron eventually said, “What kind of guy just gives out a mixtape at 3 a.m. without asking for anything in return?”

I thought for a second. “A ghost. Or a prophet. Or a bloke who’s done one too many car boot sales and gone a bit… cosmic.”

Aaron took the cassette back, turning it over in his hands. The track list on the inlay card looked like it had been written during a sugar crash:

Disco Complaint

Men Behaving Mawkish

Skelmersdale Moonrise

Noel’s House Party (Extended Cut)

Untitled (With Sausage)

Shandyland Theme (Reprise)

Track 7

Don’t Trust Keith

“‘Don’t Trust Keith,’” Aaron read aloud. “Should we be worried?”

I shrugged. “If we die, make sure this ends up in Mojo magazine’s ‘Lost Tapes’ section.”

A gust of wind rattled the shelter’s roof. Somewhere in the distance, a milk float clinked past like it was sleepwalking.

Aaron stood. “Come on. Let’s keep moving before we get put on display in the local museum under ‘Typical 1991 Idiots.’”

We walked on down a narrow path behind a supermarket depot, boots scuffing at loose grit, the sodium lights flickering overhead like they were trying to blink Morse code.

And far behind us, just as we turned the corner, the faint sound of a church bell echoed once through the air.

Ding.

4:00 a.m.

"Attaboy Clarence" I muttered, Aaron just smirked at me

Chapter 9. Only Looney Left in Town - 4:00am

The path spat us out into an alley between two long-defunct pubs, where bins overflowed like they were trying to escape. The dawn was threatening in the east - just the faintest silver hint behind the rooftops - but the rest of the world still felt like midnight. Wigan wasn't dead. It was hibernating.

We turned a corner and found a wall.

Not a metaphorical wall. An actual one.

Six feet of crumbling brick, coated in patchy green graffiti and old band stickers. It wrapped around what looked like a club, shuttered and dark but still humming with the memory of basslines.

And sitting on the wall, beer in hand, boots swinging idly over the edge, was a lad.

Long army coat. Buzzcut. Doc Martens. Wide awake.

He looked up. "Alright?"

Aaron blinked. "I don't know yet."

"Sit down," the lad said, patting the wall beside him. "S'not a checkpoint or anything."

We hesitated, then climbed up and perched beside him. The bricks were cold and uneven. I could feel the vibration of music still echoing through them like the club below had only just powered down.

The lad took a long sip and handed over a can. "Tennents. Bit warm."

I nodded thanks and passed it to Aaron, who took a swig. “Tastes like Glasgow.”

“I’m Chris,” the lad said. “This was our last night. Student night. They called time and threw us out twenty minutes ago.”

“Where’s everyone else?”

“Gone. Fell into taxis. Argued into kebab shops. Vanished into legend.”

“You didn’t fancy joining them?”

Chris shrugged. “Didn’t want to leave. Club’s closing for good next week. Thought I’d sit on the wall till sunrise. Say goodbye properly.”

Aaron looked at the sticker just by his boot. It was for a band he’d seen once in Brighton. Terrible gig. But the sticker had a line beneath it: WE WERE HERE. ONCE.

I raised the can. “To last nights.”

Chris nodded. “To not being the first to leave.”

And just like that, for a moment, the three of us were part of something - a little band of leftover spirits in a town that hadn’t quite caught up with the future yet.

The breeze picked up, and somewhere down the hill, a streetlight fizzed out.

Chris stood up, boots hitting the tarmac with a slap. “Right. I’ve got a long walk home and coursework due in four hours.”

He turned, gave a lazy salute, and vanished into the grey.

I looked at Aaron. “Right then. Let’s find the next ghost.”

We followed the street downhill, veering off instinctively toward the canal. The air had that chilled water smell now - moss and diesel and brickwork left damp too long. Our boots rang out against cobblestones as we crossed a narrow bridge, and just on the far side, we saw a sign:

→ WIGAN PIER

“Wait,” I said, stopping. “This… this is it?”

Aaron squinted through the gloom. “No way. That can’t be it. A bit of wood and railway track, it’s not even big enough for us both to stand on it, not that I’d trust it.”

We followed a curved path down toward the water. What we found resembled a train set abandoned by a child halfway through a tantrum: a twisted bit of iron track, a few rotting timbers, a bench shaped like a broken harp. Somewhere, a plaque tried to explain the historical importance of this place, but the letters had faded like the town had tried to forget its own punchline.

I leaned against the rail. “Wigan Pier. Cultural icon. George bloody Formby and George Orwell and everything.”

Aaron kicked a stone into the water. “Looks like the pier left Wigan, not the other way around.”

We stood there for a minute in silence, watching the oily ripples on the surface. Somewhere in the shadows, a moorhen let out a noise like a startled kazoo.

“Should we… say something?” I asked.

Aaron cleared his throat. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to mourn the passing of hope, glamour, and architectural integrity.”

“Amen.”

The breeze picked up and carried a whiff of chip fat from some 24-hour takeaway we couldn’t see. It reminded us that the world hadn’t stopped - it had just curled up into itself for a nap.

I sighed. “Come on. Let’s get moving before it gets light enough to realise how tired we are.”

We headed back up the slope, Wigan Pier behind us, just as a nearby factory clock began to chime the quarter hour - each bong bouncing off the water like a half-hearted church bell.

The canal path curved along behind a row of terraced houses, their windows dark but their satellite dishes pointed skyward with religious intensity. At the end of the row, just before the towpath turned back to road, someone was sitting on a bench.

Big bloke. Long coat. Leather gloves. A shock of unruly hair that hadn’t seen a brush in years.

Aaron instinctively slowed.

“Morning,” the man said, not looking at us. “Well. Almost.”

I nodded warily. “Been up long?”

“Up? No. I’m from the night shift.” He pointed at a battered old road bike leaned against the railing. “Sorting depot. Finished an hour ago. Thought I’d sit here ’til the milkman beat me home.”

“Big Keith,” he said, offering a hand. “Don’t worry. Not that Big Keith. I don’t sell car parts. I give away wisdom and bootlegs.”

Aaron grinned. “Got any cassettes left?”

He reached into his coat and pulled one from an inside pocket like a magician producing a dove. Handed it over. The label read:

SHANDYLAND - Side B. “Better than Side A,” someone had scrawled in biro.

“Wait,” I said. “We already got one of these. A bloke in a van-”

“That was my cousin,” Big Keith said. “Tommo.”

“Tommo?”

“Yeah, real name’s Alan but nobody calls him that. Thinks he’s God’s gift to the underground scene. He’s not.”

“We liked him.”

“You wouldn’t if you shared a bunk bed with him for eight years. Anyway, he’s out distributing Side A. I’ve got the proper stuff.”

Aaron squinted at the tracklist: “Gritpop Theme (Live in Leigh), Supermarket Dracula, Track 8 (Hidden Until Played Backwards), Dogtanian’s Requiem.”

I whistled. “You’re not aiming for Top of the Pops, are you?”

Big Keith smiled. “You don’t make tapes for charts. You make them because there’s a noise in your head you can’t sleep through.”

He stood, cracked his neck. “Anyway. Time’s up. You’ll want to follow the path under the viaduct - takes you straight out of town. Next stop: somewhere else.”

He swung onto his bike and pedalled away with surprising grace for someone shaped like a fridge with opinions.

Aaron shook his head. “Two tapes. In one night.”

I patted my coat pocket. “We’ll start a museum.”

We turned under the dark mouth of the viaduct, footsteps echoing behind us like applause.

The canal path spat us out near a tangle of brick lanes and back alleys, the kind of roads that wound around themselves like they were trying to forget where they were going. We passed a shuttered chippy, a carpet shop with a wonky sign, and a pub that might've exploded and then been swept up half-heartedly.

The road widened just before a set of traffic lights - and that's where we saw it: a lone petrol station glowing under buzzing strip lights, weirdly pristine against the rest of the street. The sort of place that looked like it came from somewhere else entirely.

"I would murder a bacon bap," Aaron muttered.

I blinked at him. "Bit of warning before the confessions, mate."

We staggered toward the light like moths in denim.

A single red car was parked outside, engine off but stereo still thudding gently like it hadn't noticed the night had ended. A skinny bloke sat cross-legged on the kerb, eating crisps with slow, meditative concentration.

Inside, the shop hummed with refrigerated menace. Rows of sandwiches sat under flickering light. Aaron picked up a triangle pack labelled ALL DAY BREAKFAST - £1.89, its clingfilm fogged with nostalgia and despair.

"Looks… ambitious," I offered.

Aaron shrugged. "So are we."

We paid with a slurry of coins and what might've been a foreign 10p. The night manager - who looked like an Elvis impersonator with an allergy to conversation - waved us through without eye contact.

We sat on the low brick edge near the bins, food in hand, watching the sky pale at the edges like it was being slowly bleached.

The crisp-eating bloke gave us a side glance. “Long night?”

“You could say that,” I muttered.

The bloke pointed with his chin. “There’s a Gregg’s opens at five just down that road.”

Aaron looked at his sandwich. “Too late for us. We’ve committed.”

I chewed and winced. “It tastes like someone’s idea of bacon.”

“And that someone hated pigs,” Aaron added.

But it was food. And it was warm-ish. And it was enough.

We finally walked out of Wigan - slower, wearier, but still moving.

I brushed the crumbs from my jeans and stood up with a noise that might’ve been a sigh or a back complaint. “Right. Before my legs give in and apply for redundancy.”

Aaron drained the last of his Lucozade. “We still heading south?”

“Unless you’ve developed a sudden interest in Blackpool.”

We cut left down a quieter street, where the buildings started to shrink - terraced houses giving way to one-storey shops and peeling hoardings for old estate agents. The air had taken on that weird pre-morning hush, the kind where the world resets itself.

“Feels like we’re the only ones left,” Aaron murmured.

“We are. Everyone else had the good sense to go to bed.”

At the corner of a crossroads, we stopped under a sputtering streetlamp. In the distance, a hill rose gently out of the town, silhouetted against the dulling stars. A bypass curved off to the right, pointing vaguely toward somewhere else.

Aaron stared up at it.

I followed his gaze. “You thinking what I’m thinking?”

“No,” Aaron said. “But I’m willing to lie.”

A fox darted across the road ahead - a real scabby-looking one with a limp and a tail like a failed pipe cleaner. It stopped halfway, looked at us like don’t follow me, and vanished into the brambles.

“That feels symbolic,” I muttered.

We picked a direction - not quite the bypass, not quite the footpath, more a compromise between stupidity and optimism. Our shadows stretched long in front of us now, like we were being gently pulled out of Wigan by the ankles.

At the last set of streetlights before the edge of town, I turned and looked back. All those rooftops, all those windows, all that weird nothingness - the closed clubs, the wall stickers, the beer warm from someone else’s pocket.

I gave a tiny salute. “Cheers, Wigan.”

Aaron didn’t look back. “Let’s get gone before something else happens.”

The wind stirred the hedgerows. A lorry growled on the distant bypass.

And somewhere behind us - maybe a church, maybe just an old habit - a single bell struck five

"Attaboy, Clarence," we both whispered

Chapter 10. Rubbish - 5:00am

It was the sound that gave him away.

A high, rattling growl, like a chainsaw being throttled in a biscuit tin, followed by a screech of tyres that absolutely did not belong to any sane hour of the morning.

Aaron turned first. “No way.”

The orange Ford Capri lurched into view around the corner, its headlights flickering like strobes at a budget rave. It bounced once - hard - over a pothole, scraped something solid underneath, and skidded to a halt ten feet in front of us. The engine sounded like it was trying to chew gravel. And possibly succeeding.

I stared. “He’s back.”

The driver’s side window rolled down with the effort of a man arm-wrestling a stubborn crank handle. Drew’s grinning face popped out, eyes wide, hair wilder than ever.

“Alright, lads! Knew I’d see you again. You’re like the ghost of gigs past!”

Before we could respond, the passenger door creaked open and a figure spilled halfway out - skinny, pale, with a shock of black hair and a long black coat that looked like it had never known laundry. He held a steaming thermos in one hand and a plastic carrier bag in the other.

“This is X,” Drew said proudly. “He’s a goth, a healer, and he knows every bus timetable in Britain. Get in.”

Aaron blinked. “The Holy trinity, Why does that sound like a threat?”

X gave a little wave, then spilled some of his thermos onto the Capri's threadbare floor and hissed, "Ow, shit. That's hotter than cosmic justice."

Me and Aaron exchanged a look. Then Aaron sighed. "Compared with some of our choices, this is cautious."

We climbed in. The seats were damp. Everything smelled of oil and something faintly metallic, like blood and UHU glue. Drew slammed the gearstick into something that might've been second and whooped as we pulled away, fishtailing slightly.

From the dashboard, a plastic hula girl swayed violently with every bump.

"We're heading south," Drew said. "Or possibly east. I've got instincts."

X leaned forward between the seats. "I've got cassettes." He shook the plastic bag like a prize draw.

Aaron whispered to me, "Five quid says we're broken down before breakfast."

"Only five?"

And the Capri rattled into the dawn like a forgotten song on a warped mixtape.

X produced a tape with a cracked spine and shoved it into the cassette deck without asking. It clunked into place, and within moments the car filled with a jagged wall of noise - warped guitars, off-key harmonies, and feedback so persistent it felt like it was tuning you.

"BMX Bandits, live in Kirkcaldy," X said reverently. "'89 bootleg."

Aaron squinted. “Sounds like a washing machine falling down the stairs.”

I nodded with mock solemnity. “Twin tub with guitar.”

Drew laughed so hard he nearly veered off the road. “You two should be on the radio.”

“I think we’re more the pirate station types,” said Aaron, gripping the door like it might detach at any second.

The Capri’s dashboard lights flickered, dimmed, and came back with a weak cough. The heater gave up altogether, replaced by a chill breeze leaking in through the passenger footwell.

Drew flicked ash out the window and shouted over the racket, “This tape’s got depth! Proper sonic textures!”

“I think the texture is rust,” I said.

X passed around the thermos. The tea inside tasted herbal and slightly medicinal, with a suspicious aftertaste like dandelion and bong water. No one said anything. We were all too cold, too tired, and too wired from the night’s madness to question it.

Outside, the roads blurred into hedgerows and roundabouts, anonymous stretches of tarmac glistening under a sky that couldn’t decide whether to dawn or drizzle. A fox darted across our path and vanished.

Inside, the tape switched to Side B with a loud click. The sound changed - still terrible, but now with added kazoo.

Aaron leaned back in his seat. “If we die, I want this bit left out of the obituary.”

X looked affronted. “This is a lost classic.”

The Capri shuddered as it hit another pothole. The engine made a noise like it was trying to remember how to combust.

And still we rolled on, southward-ish, through the fog and fumes.

“Drew,” I finally said, “this thing going to hold out?”

Drew took a drag from his roll-up and grinned into the rearview mirror. “Trust me. She always goes until she doesn’t.”

It happened just past the last sign for Hanley.

The Capri coughed - a guttural sound that came from deep within its soul, if rusted metal could be said to have one. A puff of smoke belched from under the bonnet, thick and grey. Then came the rattle. The unmistakable sound of something important detaching itself from something else.

Drew didn’t even blink. “That’s new.”

The car lurched. A bang, a shudder, then the sensation of everything going loose. Not quite stopping, but freewheeling.

I turned in my seat. “Did we just lose a wheel?”

“No,” Drew said cheerfully, “she’s just liberated from convention.”

Steam began to curl out of the air vents. X leaned toward the dashboard and gave it a gentle pat, as though trying to reassure a dying pet. “Just a phase,” he muttered. “She’s aligning her chakras.”

Aaron rolled down the window to cough. “Your chakras stink of antifreeze.”

We crested a slight hill - momentum alone now - and coasted to a merciful stop on the shoulder near a patch of grass and a battered white sign that read: WELCOME TO STOKE-ON-TRENT CITY CENTRE →

The car sighed, audibly, and a final hiss of smoke rose from the bonnet.

Nobody spoke for a moment.

Then Drew turned the key again. Nothing. Not even a cough.

He leaned back, hands behind his head. “Well,” he said, as though satisfied. “We made it further than last time.”

Me and Aaron slowly climbed out, stretched, and looked at the Capri like we were mourning a fallen animal.

X opened his door and paused dramatically. “And thus,” he intoned, “ends the age of the machine.”

Aaron looked up at the dawn creeping into the sky. “So what now?”

I checked my watch. “It’s just gone quarter to six.”

“We push,” Drew said cheerfully, already at the boot. “Stoke doesn’t come to you.”

We pushed.

The Capri was heavier than it looked - like it was made of guilt and wet sand. The rear bumper flaked orange rust with every shove, and the wheels complained like they’d rather be anywhere else. Drew steered with one hand and waved at passing lorries with the other, none of whom even slowed down.

“Can’t believe we’re pushing a car into Stoke,” I muttered. “Is this progress?”

Aaron grunted. “We were in Inverness yesterday. This is progress.”

X, meanwhile, walked backwards ahead of us, chanting something under his breath and occasionally tossing bits of gravel into the

hedgerow like it meant something. When I asked what he was doing, he replied, “Calibrating the ley lines. Don’t want to end up in Derby.”

We passed a row of garages, half-shuttered, half-graffiti’d. One had “DAVE IS A GRASS” sprayed in foot-high letters. Another just said “NO”.

The eastern sky was starting to lighten for real now, peach smudges softening the rooftops. Birds started to make uncertain throat-clearing noises in the hedges. A new day was booting up, whether anyone liked it or not.

“I think I see a petrol station,” Aaron said, pointing ahead.

“You think everything is a petrol station,” I said. “Last time it was a Chinese takeaway.”

“This time it’s got a Costa sign.”

Drew perked up. “Hot beverages? You wonderful bastards!”

We managed one final shove and rolled the Capri into a quiet forecourt with a defunct air pump and a dim light above the door. The shop inside was still shuttered, but a vending machine glowed like a beacon near the bins.

I slumped against the car. “We can’t stop here long.”

Aaron nodded, wiping sweat off his neck. “But we did stop. Which means the car’s officially given up.”

X stood beside us, very still, then pointed into the distance with all the seriousness of a prophet.

“There,” he said. “That road. That’s your way out.”

I raised an eyebrow. “How do you know?”

X pulled something from his coat pocket - an actual compass. “It’s south-ish,” he said. “Trust me. The ley lines approve.”

Aaron looked at the horizon, then at me.

“Shall we?”

I nodded. “Let’s not give the universe time to change its mind.”

And we walked, leaving the Capri and its cracked cassette deck behind - trudging toward the edge of the city, where the roads narrowed and the light started to feel more like morning.

Maybe a hundred yards from where the Capri gave up, we found a low wall outside a shuttered tile shop and collapsed onto it like it had always been our destination. The street was still quiet - too early even for pigeons - but the sky was starting to grey with the suggestion of morning. Not sunrise, exactly. Just… morning.

Drew and X were arguing by the car, voices drifting but unintelligible. X waved a plastic bag like a flag of surrender, and Drew gestured in big, theatrical arcs toward a side street. Eventually, they wandered off together, muttering something about coffee or petrol or both.

I rested my elbows on my knees and stared at the pavement. “I think my socks are crying.”

Aaron didn’t look up. “My feet gave up back in Wigan. Everything since has been spiritual.”

We sat in silence for a minute. Across the street, a newspaper van stuttered to a stop and a bleary-eyed driver lobbed a bundle of tabloids toward a shop door. The roll bounced, split open mid-air, and exploded across the concrete like a papery grenade.

Aaron watched it scatter. “There’s something beautifully crap about that.”

I pulled the thermos from my bag. It was dented and somehow warm again - residual heat or wishful thinking, who could say. I unscrewed the cap and sniffed it cautiously.

“Still smells like herbal regret.”

Aaron held out a hand. “Share the trauma.”

We passed the cup back and forth, each sip making our expressions worse. But it was something.

“I feel like this whole night’s been a deleted scene from our own lives,” Aaron murmured.

I nodded. “Like if *Withnail & I* had less wine and more shit lifts.”

Behind us, a dog barked. Somewhere far off, a train hummed through the city’s bones.

And then - soft, clear, precise - a single church bell rang.

Once.

Then again.

And again.

Six times it sounded, each chime more solid than the last. Like it was declaring that yes, we’d survived this long. Whether that was good or bad remained to be seen.

Aaron exhaled. “Still rubbish.”

I shrugged. “Still here.”

Aaron laughed, "Still none of these six new Angels to help us!"

We didn’t move.

Chapter 11. Broken Down in Broken Town - 6:00am

A clock radio went off somewhere above us in a flat. Not loud, but clear enough to break the early morning spell. The tinny echo of Steve Wright or someone similar filtered down through a half-open window, instantly dating the moment with a cheesy sting and a regional traffic report.

I rubbed my eyes like I'd just remembered where I was. Aaron stayed folded over, hood drawn up tight, arms clamped against the cold. He looked like he'd spent the last few minutes negotiating a ceasefire with the pavement.

I grimaced. "You alright?"

Aaron gave a dry laugh. "Define 'alright.'"

I stretched, joints cracking audibly. "My back's filed for divorce."

Aaron squinted up at the grey skyline. "My spine's staging a coup."

The world was beginning to move again. A bus hissed to a stop a street away. A kid in a school blazer shuffled past, earbuds in, head down, completely uninterested in the two road-stinking weirdos lounging outside what may or may not have been a carpet warehouse.

X returned first, strolling up with a packet of crisps, a tiny banana, and two vending-machine coffees in polystyrene cups. "Breakfast of champions," he announced, and handed one cup to Aaron.

"Where's Drew?"

“Negotiating.”

“What kind of negotiating?”

X crunched a crisp and shrugged. “Stoke kind.”

Aaron sniffed the coffee. “Tastes like regret and industrial solvent.”

I took the other cup anyway and toasted the moment. “Cheers to rubbish mornings in broken towns.”

We sipped in silence, watching Stoke slowly wake up. Light spread down the buildings like a curtain being drawn open by invisible hands.

Then Drew reappeared, walking fast, looking far too cheerful for someone whose car had recently died in public.

“Boys,” he said, clapping once. “I’ve found us a tow.”

Aaron frowned. “A tow?”

“Better than that. A mechanic. Might even know how to resurrect the beast.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What’s it cost?”

Drew grinned. “Favour owed. Details irrelevant.”

Aaron groaned. “That’s never true.”

But we followed. Because what else was there?

As we headed off, the sound of morning traffic grew louder. Shops unlocked. Bin lorries groaned. A new day was properly beginning.

And we were still in Stoke.

Still broken.

But not finished.

The garage looked like it had been assembled out of spare parts and stubbornness. The sign above the yard gate read MIKE'S MOT & MYSTICAL TUNING in faded red paint. Someone had added "YES, REALLY" in marker beneath it.

Mike looked like he'd been thrown out of every band that mattered. Faded denim waistcoat, silver ponytail, fingers like welding rods. His handshake left a black smear across Aaron's sleeve.

Drew slapped the Capri's bonnet. "She's got a cough."

Mike crouched beside the car and frowned. "You let it overheat?"

"She made a sound like a theremin and then gave up."

Mike grunted and popped the bonnet, peering into the guts of the Capri like a vet with a sense of humour. "Well, she's definitely got character."

I leaned in, hands in my pockets. "She was going fine until about half-six. Then she just… expired."

Mike raised an eyebrow. "She yours?"

Drew jumped in. "Mine. They're just the passengers. Sort of."

Mike grinned. "I won't judge the company a car keeps."

He leaned deeper into the engine bay, muttering. "Crank's not seized. Might've just vapor-locked. Or dropped a belt." He looked up. "You got time for a cuppa while I poke around?"

"Already sorted," X called from the corner, emerging with four chipped mugs, some gaffer tape, and a cheerful lack of hygiene. He

threw the tape to Aaron. “Will fill that hole in your pants, for a bit anyway.”

We stood drinking in the oily quiet. The tea had hints of iron, dust, and possibly rosemary. Nobody asked why.

“If I can patch it up,” Mike said eventually, “she’ll get you another hundred miles, maybe. No promises past that.”

“Good enough for us,” said Aaron.

Mike nodded and turned back to the car. “Right. Let me see if I can breathe some life back into her.”

Mike had both arms buried deep in the Capri’s engine bay. The bonnet was up, and the air smelled of oil, effort, and the kind of garage-born magic that only occurred when desperation met mild technical skill.

The workshop hummed. The radio warbled through a fog of static - part Inspiral Carpets, part local weather.

Drew stood nearby, watching like a worried uncle outside an operating theatre. “How’s she looking?”

Mike didn’t glance up. “Bit of a Frankenstein. She’s got bits in here that should’ve never met each other. But she’s got fight left.”

I muttered, “So basically like us.”

“Exactly,” Mike said, smiling as he adjusted a cable with surgical precision. “Now pass me that optimism again.”

X handed him a freshly soldered wire like it was the last known relic of a forgotten religion.

Aaron and I sat on a crate again, feet tapping nervously.

“He’s a wizard,” Aaron whispered.

“He’s something,” I replied. “Possibly a hallucination.”

Mike made one final adjustment, stepped back, and wiped his hands on an already-filthy rag. “Alright. Drew - key in. Now.”

Drew climbed in, turned the ignition, and held his breath.

The Capri coughed. Once. Then again.

And then - with a banshee shriek and a puff of smoke - the engine roared to life like a demon waking up angry.

A cheer erupted across the workshop. Even Mike whooped and punched the air.

“She’s alive!” Mike declared, grinning like a mad scientist. “Just like in *Frankenstein* - the good one. Not the Kenneth Branagh one.”

I grinned. “We’ve created a monster.”

“She’ll hold long enough to get you moving,” Mike added. “Just don’t ask too much.”

Aaron stood, raised his empty mug in salute. “To miracles, grease, and caffeine.”

Drew revved the engine gently. “Boys. We ride.”

And we did - not toward safety, but forward nonetheless.

The Capri was back.

For now.

The Capri’s engine continued to purr, loud and low and a little uneven - like a hungover lion trying to fake confidence. Drew revved

it again, just to prove a point. Mike stood back, arms folded, beaming like a proud dad at a school nativity play.

“She’s running hot,” he said. “But she’s running. Don’t let her idle too long or she’ll remember she’s meant to be dead.”

I laughed. “We’ve all got that problem.”

Aaron climbed into the back, letting his legs dangle out the open door. “Feels weird being mobile again. Like we’ve cheated the system.”

“You have cheated the system,” Mike said. “That alternator’s being held together by a witchlight socket and sheer bloody-mindedness.”

“What’s a witchlight socket?” Aaron asked.

“Not a thing. I made it up. But it sounded cool, didn’t it?”

Drew clapped Mike on the back. “Mate, I owe you a drink.”

“You owe me a week off and a decent soldering gun,” Mike grinned. “But I’ll settle for a pint next time you’re passing through Stoke.”

I climbed in beside Aaron, cradling a flask Mike had handed me on the sly.

“What is this?”

“Strong tea. Yorkshire Gold, mind - not the floor sweepings.”

I sniffed it. “Smells like resilience.”

Mike leaned through the open window. “One last thing - don’t stall. Not even once. She won’t forgive you.”

Aaron gave a mock salute. “Message received, Garage Gandalf.”

The Capri eased into motion with a lurch, tyres crunching over cracked tarmac as the four of us waved goodbye. Mike stood in the doorway, grease on his fingers and a mug in his hand, watching us vanish into the morning.

The sun broke over the rooftops, catching the orange of the Capri and turning it briefly golden, like it was something blessed.

For the first time in hours, we weren't stuck.

We were moving.

And somewhere behind us, Mike muttered to himself, "Don't explode. Don't explode. Don't explode…"

The Capri rattled through the outskirts of Stoke like it had something to prove. Every corner turned was accompanied by a mechanical complaint, every gear shift a whispered gamble. But we were moving, and that was enough.

Inside, the heater wheezed lukewarm air at our ankles. X leaned forward between the front seats, carefully sipping what was left of Mike's tea like it was an elixir of gods.

"I miss that garage already," he said wistfully.

"You miss the garage?" I asked. "I miss Mike. That man made a car live again with a paperclip and a curse."

Aaron wiped condensation off the window with his sleeve. "That man made tea that tasted like tools and secrets."

We passed an open market just setting up - tarps flapping in the wind, a man unloading crates of bruised apples from a battered Escort. The world was shaking itself awake.

Drew tapped the steering wheel in rhythm to a half-working radio, a cassette turning but no sound playing. “If this tape deck coughs up anything other than Shakin’ Stevens, it’ll be a miracle.”

“Check the glove box,” I said. “Maybe Mike left a surprise.”

X popped it open. A single battered cassette rattled out into his lap.

“No label,” he said.

“Has to be haunted,” Aaron muttered.

Drew ejected the nothing tape and slotted the mystery one in.

Silence.

Then a warped hiss.

Then - unmistakably - the crunchy guitar of The Wonder Stuff came through, distorted but triumphant.

“YES,” I grinned. “It lives!”

We all relaxed a little as the music filled the car, letting the riff carry us out of Stoke like a thread pulling us forward.

Aaron rolled down the window just a crack, letting in a breath of cool air. “We’re not out of the woods yet.”

“Nope,” I said. “But at least we’ve got a soundtrack.”

We sped past a church just as the clock struck seven. One long, clear chime rang out over the rooftops behind us.

A full hour gone.

And Brixton still waiting.

Chapter 12. Nowhere Fast - 7:00am

For exactly six minutes and seven seconds - enough time for “Welcome to the Cheap Seats” and “The Size of a Cow” to finish playing - everything worked.

The engine hummed. The cassette player held strong. The rising sun glanced off shop windows and council flats as we rolled through sleepy streets that looked almost picturesque in the golden hour glow.

Then came the cough.

Followed by the rattle.

Then a worrying smell.

Drew pulled the Capri over outside a row of boarded-up takeaways and sagged in his seat. “She’s sulking.”

Smoke - just a wisp - curled up from under the bonnet like a sigh of regret.

I popped the door open and stepped out. “Please be nothing. Please be nothing. Please be…”

I opened the bonnet.

“…definitely maybe something.”

Steam hissed from somewhere below the battery. Something glistened and dripped. The Capri was bleeding.

Aaron leaned out the window. “That’s not ideal.”

“Nope,” I said. “Looks like we’ve got a split hose. Again.”

Drew groaned and thumped the wheel. “We made it two streets. TWO!”

X, unbothered, cracked open a packet of breakfast biscuits. “At this point, it’s less a road trip and more a rolling art installation.”

Aaron stepped out, shielding his eyes from the sun. “So what do we do?”

“A phone box, a phone box, my kingdom for a phone box,” I muttered.

Aaron pointed to the corner. “There’s a phone box. Go try Mike. Maybe he hasn’t gone back to bed yet.”

As Aaron and I jogged down the street, Drew popped the boot, looking for anything that could be vaguely repurposed as a patch. X leaned on the car, chewing thoughtfully.

Aaron looked up and down the empty road, then muttered, “Going nowhere fast.”

I nodded. “Story of our lives.”

I yanked the phone box door shut behind me and picked up the receiver. The plastic was sticky in that very specific, public-telephone way - like old lollipops and ancient fear.

I dropped a 10p coin into the slot. It rattled down and settled with a clink.

Dialled.

Busy tone.

I hung up and tried again.

Still busy.

I stared at the receiver like it might change its mind.

On the third try, it actually rang. Once. Twice. Then-

Click.

A woman's voice, bored and slightly robotic: "This number is not available at this time. Please try again later."

"Brilliant," I muttered, slamming the receiver down a bit harder than necessary.

I tried 192, hoping Directory Enquiries might conjure up another garage. They offered two: one in Hanley, one in Newcastle-under-Lyme. Neither picked up. One went straight to fax tone, which felt like a personal insult.

I leaned my forehead against the smeared glass of the booth. From here, I could see the Capri, still steaming gently like a cartoon of a tired horse. Aaron had started pacing, Drew was kneeling by the front bumper swearing softly, and X looked like he was meditating against the boot.

I sighed and dialled Mike again.

It rang.

And rang.

Then just as I was about to hang up- "Yeah?" came a voice, breathless and groggy.

"Mike! It's Jim. From earlier. The Capri… she's down again."

A long pause. Then: "…How far'd you get?"

“Two streets.”

“That’s impressive.”

I waited.

Mike exhaled. “Alright. I’ll see what I can do. Might take me a bit. Keep her off the main road and tell Drew to stop over-revving. That engine’s held together with insults and plastic hope.”

“Thanks, Mike.”

Click.

I stepped out into the sun and rejoined the others.

“Well?” Drew asked.

“Maybe,” I said. “If we’re lucky.”

Aaron nodded. “So… business as usual.”

By the time I got back, Drew had dismantled most of the Capri’s modest toolkit across the pavement and was halfway through attempting to wrap a cracked bit of hose with duct tape and a prayer. He looked up with hopeful eyes, but my expression said it all.

“Still Stuck in Stoke?” I asked.

Drew growled something incoherent and returned to wrestling the sticky silver tape around a dripping pipe like it owed him money.

Aaron had claimed a dry patch of pavement and was leaning against a graffiti-tagged shutter, drinking the last of the vending machine coffee. “So what’s the plan?”

“Mike might come,” I said. “He said it like someone agreeing to babysit a haunted child.”

X stretched and cracked his neck. “We wait. Or we walk. Or we give up entirely and open a chip shop.”

“Stoke’s already got too many,” Aaron said, pointing across the street to a boarded-up chippy called BIG FRYER THEORY.

I sat down beside him. “So what’s everyone thinking?”

“Nap,” X said.

“Arson,” Drew said.

“Album title,” Aaron added.

I blinked. “Wait. That’s good.”

“What is?” Drew asked.

“Album titles. Say we’re in a band. What’s our debut album called?”

Aaron rubbed his chin. “Backstreet Ethics.”

X snapped his fingers. “Shandyland.”

“Too mellow,” Aaron said. “What about Rolling Breakdown?”

Drew grinned. “Semtex Surprise.”

We all looked at him.

He shrugged. “Stolen from a Carter song.”

I laughed. “So’s our entire personality.”

We passed the next fifteen minutes trading mock track listings and band names. The Defeatists. Soggy Tuesday. Off Peak Only. Even Drew cracked a smile.

Then a beat-up Citroën BX pulled round the corner and slowed, the suspension bouncing like a drunk nodding off.

“Could be Mike,” I muttered, standing.

The others stood too.

The car stopped.

The driver didn’t move.

Aaron whispered, “If this guy offers us sweets, I’m out.”

The Citroën’s door creaked open. A figure stepped out, slow and deliberate, like a man painfully aware he wasn’t a morning person. Same Mike as before - lanky, bleach-faded jeans, navy boiler suit tied at the waist, and a scowl that seemed stapled to his face.

He didn’t speak until he reached the Capri and peered under the bonnet.

“Split hose again?” he said, deadpan.

“Yup,” I nodded.

Mike turned to Drew. “Y’know, if you ever just want to destroy this car properly, I’ve got a sledgehammer and an alibi.”

Drew raised both hands. “Don’t shoot the romantic.”

Mike sighed and ducked into the Citroën, returning with a toolbox that had clearly seen several wars. “I’ll patch it. But it won’t hold long. You’re asking miracles from a car that probably failed its MOT in 1987.”

“We just need it to limp south,” Aaron said.

Mike didn’t answer. He was already wrench-deep in the engine, grumbling to himself in mechanic shorthand.

X offered him a biscuit. Mike declined with a noise that might have meant thanks or possibly death.

The rest of us loitered awkwardly by the shuttered takeaways, watching Stoke roll past. A dog barked. Someone coughed from a top-floor window. Time passed in yawns and scratched heads.

After about twenty minutes, Mike stood back. “She’ll go for a bit. But I’m not coming back again. Next time she dies, bury her.”

Drew placed a hand on his heart. “You’re a saint.”

“I’m a mug,” Mike said.

He packed up his tools, gave a sharp nod, and turned to go.

“Mike,” I called after him, “you ever think about starting a band?”

Mike didn’t even break stride. “Only if I get to name it.”

“What would you call it?”

He didn’t turn around. “Engine Failure.”

He climbed back into the Citroën and vanished around the corner.

I turned to the others. “He’s in.”

Drew turned the key. The engine coughed like an old man at closing time, then sputtered into a wet, rattling idle.

"Christ," Aaron said. "It's like Herbie, if Herbie smoked forty a day and hated us."

I gave him a look. “I swear, one day you’ll have an actual opinion.”

Drew revved the Capri once, gently. She rattled but held.

X gave a little clap. “Our zombie chariot returns.”

I climbed into the back seat with a suspicious squelch. “Is it raining in here, or does this thing just weep oil now?”

“Both,” said Drew, shifting into first.

The Capri juddered forward like a hungover mule, dragging us past the shuttered takeaways and onto the main road again. We passed a man power-washing a shopfront, a school kid kicking a broken Walkman down the pavement, and a woman opening up a Greggs, flipping the sign to HOT FOOD AVAILABLE with a sigh that echoed through the glass.

Inside the car, the silence returned - just the rattle of the engine and the odd wheeze from the cassette player as it rewound.

Aaron stared out the window. “So, what’s the next move?”

I tapped the map folded in my lap. “We follow the A34 till we hit the M6 again. Or until the car explodes. Whichever comes first.”

Drew grinned, already pulling a left. “Buckle up, lads. The Capri’s got one more miracle in her.”

We rounded the corner and picked up speed, sun glinting briefly off the windscreen like the universe giving us a wink.

Then, in the distance, a church bell chimed the hour.

"Dunno who Clarence is helping but it isn't us," Aaron said through gritted teeth.

Eight a.m. Still in Stoke. But moving.

Chapter 13. My Defeatist Attitude - 8:00am

We limped down the A34 in silence, no radio, no chatter. Just the sound of the engine grumbling like a pensioner on bin day. The fields and hedges outside blurred past with none of the romance of early morning countryside. This wasn't dawn. This was a hangover in landscape form.

Up ahead, a big blue motorway sign loomed:

BIRMINGHAM - 27 MILES
M6 - ¼ MILE

The Capri started coughing.

I looked at Drew. Drew looked at the wheel.

The dashboard light blinked.

And then:

CLUNK. CLATTER. BOOM.

A gout of smoke burst from the bonnet. The car shuddered, stammered, and rolled to a slow, wheezing halt on the hard shoulder - like a wounded animal finally giving up the chase.

No one spoke for a second.

Then Drew punched the steering wheel. "She's gone. That's it."

We all climbed out as steam poured from the bonnet like ghost breath. A small pool of something oily and important was already forming beneath the car.

Aaron crouched beside the wheel. “That’s… a lot.”

I ran a hand through my hair and looked up the road toward the slip lane. “We’re spitting distance from the M6.”

X walked around the back of the car, tapped the boot like a disappointed parent, and said, “This might be the most dramatic exit I’ve seen since the time I got kicked out of a Jesus Jones gig.”

Drew paced. “I can’t… I can’t go any further. That’s it. My mate back in Stoke - Kev, not Mike - he’s got a spare part for this engine. I can’t leave her here.”

“You’re staying?” I asked.

“I’ve got to,” Drew said. “She’s my girl. My responsibility.”

X pulled his bag out of the back and slung it over one shoulder. “Romantic. Stupid. But romantic.”

Aaron stared out over the road. “So what do we do now?”

I looked both ways. Nothing but open tarmac and humming heat. “We walk.”

We shook hands with Drew, shared one last knowing look, then set off on foot. No thumbs out this time. Just three lads on a shoulderless stretch of road, dragging bags and dignity in equal measure.

Somewhere behind us, the Capri ticked as it cooled. Like a clock counting down something none of us could name.

The wind picked up.

The sun got hotter.

And the music - faint at first - began to drift over the hedgerows. 808 State. Bizarre Inc. Bassheads. Oceanic.

Ravers.

And the sound was getting closer.

We walked single file along the dusty hard shoulder, bags sagging against our backs, sweat already sticking our clothes to our skin.

No one spoke for a long time.

The music was still faint, somewhere off in the fields or maybe a mile up the road, but it was impossible to ignore now. A thumping, distorted heartbeat. Not quite close. Not quite far. Just… looming.

Aaron shielded his eyes, scanning the horizon. “Didn’t we used to have a car?”

“That was a beautiful lie,” I muttered.

We passed a dead fox, two shredded hubcaps, and a discarded copy of *Auto Trader* that felt like a personal insult.

“Drew’ll be fine,” X said eventually. “He’ll fix her. Or marry her. Or burn her in a field and sing folk songs.”

I didn’t laugh. “We’re going to miss it, aren’t we?”

Aaron didn’t answer.

The heat thickened. The verge was dust and weeds. Cars whizzed past at 80, none of them stopping. None of them caring.

“I don’t want to hitch anymore,” Aaron said suddenly. “Sick of people ignoring us like ghosts.”

I nodded. “We’ll walk to Birmingham if we have to.”

“We’ll die halfway there.”

“We’ll haunt the M6.”

X sighed. “At least ghosts don’t get blisters.”

We stopped beside a road sign. The same blue herald as before, now dirtier, half-smeared with exhaust grime.

BIRMINGHAM - 26 MILES

One mile down. A thousand to go.

Then we heard it properly - the growl of an engine struggling against something not entirely legal. And above it, the music broke through. Louder now. Crisper.

808 State faded. Bizarre Inc rose. A voice shouted something indecipherable over the bassline.

And then the van appeared.

A battered VW camper, covered in UV graffiti and grinning stickers. It swerved gently onto the hard shoulder like it had been summoned.

The side door slid open.

A voice inside yelled, “Oi! You lot look like you need a lift or a lie down!”

The music spilled from the van like heat from a sauna. Sweat, bass, and bad decisions.

Inside: UV paint across every surface, beanbags that looked suspiciously damp, and a smell of incense failing to cover something stronger.

A guy with glitter in his eyebrows leaned out and grinned. “We’re heading to Birmingham. Get in or melt!”

Aaron blinked. “Are you high?”

“Not anymore!” the guy shouted. “Now we’re ascending.”

I snorted. “We’re in.”

But X held back.

“Actually… lads, this is where I bail.”

Aaron looked confused. “What? Why?”

X pointed north. “Got a mate in Congleton I owe a favour. Plus, I don’t really do Birmingham. Too flat. Too Brummie. Too many canals.”

I offered a hand. “Thanks for sticking it out this long.”

X smirked. “Any longer and I’d be legally responsible for your lives.”

Aaron and X hugged, then he waved off the camper and started trudging back the way we’d come.

Inside the van, two women with glowsticks around their wrists were arguing about which Bassheads track was the most spiritually enlightening. A third was painting her nails neon green with her feet up on a crate of Panda Pops.

The door slammed shut. The camper growled back onto the road.

Aaron and I exchanged a glance.

“This is a good idea, right?”

“Nope,” Aaron said. “But it’s an idea with wheels.”

The bass kicked in again.

And Birmingham got a little closer.

Inside the camper, introductions were fast, loose, and probably inaccurate.

The guy with the glittery eyebrows was called Tris. Maybe short for Tristan. Maybe just a vibe. He claimed to be a professional "frequency technician," which turned out to mean an unpaid pub DJ and part-time dealer.

The driver was Shell, short for Michelle, who kept a pair of day-glo sunglasses perched on her head like she'd forgotten they weren't needed inside a moving box of noise. She spoke entirely in shout-whispers and didn't seem to blink.

In the beanbag corner were two girls with matching eyeliner stars. They introduced themselves as Kaz and Bean, then immediately forgot mine and Aaron's names. Kaz was flicking through a dog-eared rave flyer covered in scribbles. Bean was rubbing glitter into her forearms like moisturiser.

Near the back, half-asleep in a hammock strung between two headrests, was a guy everyone just called Greggs - apparently because he used to work at one and once tried to DJ a set entirely with sausage roll wrappers.

"None of this is real," Aaron muttered.

I looked around at the LED lights, the pile of bumbags, the smell of citrus air freshener and something suspiciously herbal. "If it is, I don't think we're qualified to be in it."

"First-timers?" Tris asked, throwing us a Panda Pop and a packet of Space Raiders.

“At this?” I said. “Very.”

“Good,” Tris grinned. “Means you’ll remember it. Or hallucinate a better version.”

The van swerved slightly as Shell yelled at a lorry. The bass thumped. The UV lights pulsed.

The camper bumped and growled its way down the motorway ramp, tyres squealing in protest at every curve. Inside, the van felt like a cross between a squat, a crèche, and a 4 a.m. kitchen party that had never ended.

Aaron sat on a beanbag that was leaking polystyrene pellets, trying to sip flat Panda Pop through a bendy straw. I balanced on a milk crate, one hand braced against the roof, the other shielding my eyes from the dizzying UV strobe strip flickering near the rear window.

“Is it getting louder?” I asked.

“No,” Aaron said. “We’re just getting softer.”

The van’s DJ - a wiry guy named Stickman who claimed to have once lived inside a speaker - was hunched over a tiny set of decks mounted on an ironing board. He twisted a knob, grinned, and shouted, “Incoming curveball!”

And then the opening bells of Metallica’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* rang out across the van.

Everyone went quiet. Not reverent - just confused.

Stickman nodded solemnly to the tolling.

Aaron leaned toward me. “Why does it feel like that’s about us?”

I didn’t answer.

I just checked my watch.

9:00 a.m.

The bell tolled again.

Chapter 14. The Music That Nobody Likes - 9:00am

The bells didn't stop. They kept swinging, heavy and deliberate, like the van had been hijacked by a medieval executioner with a mixing desk.

Stickman hunched over his ironing-board DJ setup, head bobbing in time. "Ultimate rave comedown anthem, this," he shouted over the clang. "Nothing says 'we're alive' like a song about dying."

Nobody argued, but mostly because the toll swallowed our voices.

From the hammock, Greggs stirred. One eye opened, the other refused. "Is this the funeral?" he croaked.

"No," Shell bellowed from the driver's seat, "it's foreplay."

That seemed to wake something in him. He sat up, rubbing his eyes. "Reminds me of the Great Sausage Roll Riot of '89," he said.

Nobody asked, but Greggs ploughed on. "Friday night, chip shop on the High Street. They'd done a two-for-one on jumbo rolls. Ran out by nine. Crowd turned ugly. One bloke tried to pay in washers, another threw a pickled egg at the fryer. There was shouting, shoving… then someone set off a smoke bomb in the queue. Could've been tear gas. No one knows."

He gestured vaguely toward the van ceiling. "By the time the police turned up, three lads were barricaded inside the shop with the last tray of rolls, pelting the crowd with ketchup sachets. Proper siege, it was. Took two mounted officers and a Labrador to break it up."

Aaron glanced at me like is this real? I shrugged - in this van, reality was negotiable.

Bean started waving her glowstick in slow, dramatic arcs to match the tolling, whispering, “One for sorrow, two for joy,” as if it was some personal ritual. Aaron finished off “Three for his old girl, and four for the boys” under his breath. Kaz joined in, mouthing the bell’s rhythm like she was casting a spell.

Shell slapped the steering wheel. “Petrol soon!” she shouted. “Unless… we run it on vibes!”

Tris threw his arms wide. “We’re already running it on vibes!”

I glanced at the sliding door, weighing the drop to the tarmac. Aaron was wedged under Kaz’s glittered legs, one trainer trapped beneath her boot. He gave me a look that said: If you jump, take me with you.

The bells kept tolling.

It took less than a mile for me and Aaron to realise there was no such thing as personal space in the van. Bean had decided Aaron’s shoulder was the ideal surface for applying more glitter, while Kaz leaned over me to yell at Tris about which field party had the better lasers. Greggs, without opening his eyes, kept offering everyone sausage rolls from a mysterious carrier bag that smelled faintly of petrol.

“Where did these even come from?” Aaron asked.

“Legacy stock,” Greggs said. “Best before’s just a suggestion.”

That opened the door to what Greggs proudly called the Great Sausage Roll Riot of ’89. In between bites, he recounted - in graphic detail - the night he tried to sell lukewarm baked goods outside a free party in the Peak District. How a rival snack vendor took offence, how it escalated into a food fight involving thirty people, and how the

police report later described him as “an instigator wielding a tray of hostile pastries.”

Shell hit the brakes suddenly to avoid a caravan, sending everyone swaying. A stack of mixtapes slid off a shelf and landed in my lap. Titles like Deep Acid Sunshine Vol. 3 and Rave ’til the Grave spilled across the floor.

Tris grinned at me. “Pick one. Your fate depends on it.”

Before I could respond, Stickman twisted in his seat from the back, headphones around his neck. “We’re queuing up K-Klass next, then Messiah, then 808 State. If we’re not in Birmingham by the time Oceanic comes on, we’ve failed as human beings.”

Aaron laughed, but it came out more nervous than amused. He caught my eye - both of us knew we had no control over any of this now. We were just along for the ride, clinging to the chaos like it was a lifeboat.

The van lurched forward again, bass rattling the windows, and someone handed Aaron a neon whistle without explanation. He didn’t even question it.

The music in the van wasn’t just loud - it was physical. Bass thumped through the floor like a second heartbeat, making every loose panel and window vibrate in sympathy. Shell drummed on the steering wheel in perfect time, eyes flicking between the road and the cassette deck as if she was racing the beat itself.

Bean was still dusting glitter onto Aaron, now muttering something about “reflective synergy” while waving a small mirror at him. Kaz was up on her knees, pointing out graffiti tags on motorway bridges as if they were part of some secret nationwide treasure hunt. Greggs had somehow produced more sausage rolls from his never-ending bag, one of which had been precariously balanced on the dashboard for so long it was starting to sweat in the heat.

In the back, Tris and Stickman argued over whether Messiah should play before or after Bizarre Inc, their debate only escalating when Shell hit a roundabout faster than gravity could keep up. Aaron braced himself against the window, catching my eye again - a silent exchange of how is this our life right now?

The next track dropped - K-Klass - and the entire van seemed to lean into it, conversations fading, feet tapping, heads nodding. For a moment, the madness almost felt like it had its own strange order, as if we were all part of the same beat.

Then Greggs shouted over the music, “Next service station - I’m getting more ketchup packets.”

Aaron didn’t know if that was a threat or a promise.

The van peeled into the service station like it was entering a pit stop at Le Mans. Shell barely killed the engine before Greggs was out the door, jogging toward the shop with a look in his eye that suggested this wasn’t his first high-speed snack raid.

Inside, the group split instantly. Bean darted toward the sunglasses rack, trying on a pair shaped like flamingos. Kaz and Tris made a beeline for the magazine stand, arguing about whether *Mixmag* or *Smash Hits* had the better interviews. Stickman wandered the aisles like a man who’d never seen fluorescent lighting before, pausing every few seconds to pick something up and frown at it.

Aaron found himself trailing me, and I was staring at a pyramid of pork pies like it was a philosophical question.

“You reckon these are from today?” I asked.

“Does it matter?” Aaron replied.

Meanwhile, Greggs was at the counter, locked in a heated negotiation over a sausage roll deal. By the time he emerged, he had three

multipacks under one arm, a pocket bulging with ketchup sachets, and a family-sized pack of crisps. “Fuel for the road,” he announced, dumping it all into Shell’s lap before climbing back in.

Bean kept the flamingo sunglasses. Kaz somehow convinced the cashier to throw in a promo cassette from behind the till. Stickman returned with a solitary banana and an expression like he’d just witnessed the death of retail.

Minutes later, we were rolling again, service station in the rearview, bass already shaking the windows. Somewhere between the A38 and the outskirts of Birmingham, Shell announced we’d be taking a “scenic detour” - which, judging by the grin on her face, probably meant trouble.

Shell veered off the main drag with the confidence of someone who either knew a genius shortcut or was about to get everyone lost. The hedgerows closed in, sunlight strobing through gaps like the world’s most budget light show.

In the back, Stickman was dismantling a cassette case to “improve the acoustics,” while Kaz force-fed *Mixmag* articles to Tris, who pretended not to care but kept leaning closer. Greggs, legs sprawled, was making short work of a paper bag full of sausage rolls.

“What’s this track?” Aaron shouted over the beat.

“Meat Beat Manifesto,” Shell yelled back. “B-side remix. Nobody likes it but me.”

I winced as the bass did something structural to my ribcage. “There’s a reason nobody likes it!”

The van lurched around another corner, passing a lone horse that looked genuinely alarmed. Fields gave way to warehouses, warehouses to graffiti-splashed walls, the skyline hinting at a city.

Somewhere in the mix - under the breakbeats and distortion - a faint tolling began to bleed through.

Aaron frowned. “Is that-?”

Shell grinned. “Metallica. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Don’t ask.”

We didn’t. The bell kept tolling, loud enough now to rattle windows as Birmingham loomed ahead.

Aaron leaned toward me. “Why does it feel like that’s about us?”

I didn’t answer.

From the hammock, Greggs muttered, “They played bells that night, too.”

Aaron frowned. “What?”

“The Riot,” Greggs said, eyes half-closed. “Local band used to rehearse above the chippy. Tried to drown out the chaos with a cover of AC/DC’s ‘Hells Bells’. Didn’t work. Just made us angrier. And hungrier.”

Bean giggled. “You’ve lived the weirdest life.”

Greggs shrugged. “Only if you count sausage rolls as life.”

I just checked my watch.

10:00 a.m.

The bell tolled again.
Aaron looked at me, and laughed and said, "That's it, too many bells… I'm giving up!"

Chapter 15. Spoilsports Personality of the Year - 10:00am

The bell still echoed faintly in my head, long after the sound had dissolved into bass. The van rattled along a patchwork B-road, every pothole bouncing me against the side wall. Greggs was asleep again, one arm flopped over his face, the other still gripping a packet of Pickled Onion Monster Munch like it was a security blanket.

Bean was trying to teach Stickman a clapping game that clearly predated Stickman's fine motor skills. Kaz had taken control of the tape deck, ignoring shouts for "anything decent" and letting a thirty-minute bleepy techno track ride. Shell drummed the steering wheel with both hands, somehow keeping time with a beat that didn't seem to exist.

I stared out the window at a row of semi-collapsed barns, their roofs folded like broken wings. "Are we still heading south?"

"Technically," Shell said, with the kind of grin that made "technically" sound like a lie.

Up front, Kaz yelled something about seeing a "shortcut" sign, and Shell cranked the wheel hard left without warning. The whole van lurched. Greggs woke mid-snore, yelled "SAUSAGE ROLLS" in blind panic, then blinked blearily at Aaron as if expecting an answer, before slumping back to sleep.

The smell of petrol and warm vinyl filled the van, heavy and sweet, coating the back of my throat. The bass thudded like a second heartbeat, the windows buzzing in time. Somewhere in the rattling mess of sound and smell, a thought settled in: this ride wasn't going to end where we thought it would.

The “shortcut” turned out to be a winding single-lane road hemmed in by hedges so tall they felt like green walls closing in. The van scraped past a tractor at walking pace, Shell waving casually at the driver while the back axle bounced into a pothole big enough to lose a small dog in.

“Where even are we?” Aaron asked, gripping the seat as we lurched again.

“Countryside,” Shell replied. “It’s all the same. Bit of road, bit of sheep, occasional murder house.”

Greggs snorted awake at the phrase “murder house” and squinted out the window. “Saw one of those on *Crimewatch*. Never trust a shed that’s bigger than the main house.”

Bean, who had been leaning against the window, announced, “I just saw a horse blink at me.”

Stickman frowned. “Is that bad?”

“Depends on the horse,” Bean said, then went back to humming.

We passed a lay-by where an old caravan slouched against the verge like it had been abandoned mid-escape. A hand-painted sign read EGGS - HONESTLY FRESH with the word “honestly” underlined three times, which didn’t exactly inspire confidence.

Another bend, another pothole, and Shell’s air freshener - a faded cartoon strawberry - swung violently from the rearview mirror.

“Still reckon this is quicker?” I asked.

Shell tapped the wheel. “Quicker’s a state of mind.”

Every turn felt sharper than the last, the van swaying like it was permanently half a second away from tipping. At one point, we were

overtaken by a jogger who waved cheerily before disappearing into the next hedge tunnel.

Then, as suddenly as it had started, the green corridor broke apart to reveal a proper road again - and, far in the distance, the hazy grey sprawl of a city.

“Birmingham,” Shell said, smug as if she’d just personally invented it. “Told you. Shortcut.”

Aaron wasn’t convinced. The clock on the dashboard said we’d been “short-cutting” for nearly forty minutes.

The van rattled down a long, graffiti-smeared underpass and spat us out into the hum of Birmingham proper. The skyline was a patchwork of concrete, glass, and cranes, half-finished towers glinting in the mid-morning sun.

Shell swung into a side street near a pub called The Barrel Organ and killed the engine. The sudden silence made everyone blink.

Greggs stretched in the hammock, yawned, and pointed at a nearby bakery. “If I lived here, I’d get so fat.”

“Pretty sure you’d manage that anywhere,” Bean said, hopping out.

We spilled onto the pavement in a jumble of bags, bottles, and crumpled crisp packets. Shell leaned against the driver’s door, arms folded. “This is us done, lads. Got a mate to see before we crash. You’re walking it from here.”

I offered a handshake that turned into a lopsided hug. “Cheers for the lift.”

“And the soundtrack,” Aaron added.

“Don’t mention it,” Shell said. “Seriously. Don’t. People judge.”

The ravers piled back in, music already swelling again. Within seconds, the van had turned the corner and was gone, leaving the two of us in a street that smelled faintly of fried onions and petrol fumes.

We started walking. The pavement was cracked, weeds sprouting from the joins. Somewhere, a busker was murdering “Wonderwall.”

“Feels weird without the bass,” Aaron said.

“Feels weird being vertical,” I replied.

We cut through a quieter side street, tower blocks looming above. From a recessed doorway ahead, a figure shifted - hood up, face shadowed. He stepped into our path, hands buried deep in his pockets.

Aaron slowed.

The voice was low, casual. “Alright lads. Got something for me?”

I tried to keep it light. “Depends what you’re after.”

The hood tilted. “Wallets. Cash. Phones. Now.”

My pulse thumped in my ears. My jaw tightened. We handed them over - no heroics. The figure flicked through our wallets, pocketed the only thing I had in there, the tickets and tossed it back.

We stood in silence as the figure drifted away, swallowed by the estate’s shadowy corridors.

Aaron stood there, still holding the empty shell of his wallet like it might suddenly refill itself.

The hoodie was already halfway down the street, moving with that casual, unhurried pace of someone who knows they’re not being chased. Not that either of us had moved an inch.

I broke the silence first. “Well. That was efficient.”

Aaron shook his head slowly. “Wallet, dignity… and our tickets.”

“That’s the bit that hurts,” I said.

“He didn’t even check what they were for,” Aaron muttered. “Could be two tickets for the world’s most boring seminar and he’s just taken them because they were there.”

My eyes narrowed. “Robin Hoodie.”

Aaron frowned. “What?”

“Steals from the poor. Gives to… himself. Probably.”

A bus went past, belching exhaust. The sound rattled off the tower blocks around us. Aaron stuffed the hollow wallet into his pocket, more to hide the sight of it than anything else.

We started walking again, the city suddenly feeling less like a place and more like a maze. Pavement cracked, weeds sprouting through, pigeons scattering in lazy arcs overhead. A shop alarm yelped in the distance, somewhere behind the estate.

Every few steps, Aaron’s hand twitched toward his inside jacket pocket - muscle memory checking for the tickets. Each time, that small electric jolt of loss hit again. Like reaching for a step that isn’t there, over and over.

I glanced at him. “We’ll figure it out.”

He didn’t answer straight away. He was looking at the corner where Robin Hoodie had disappeared, wondering if the bloke would even bother trying to flog the tickets or just chuck them in a bin.

The day already felt heavier. The city noisier. The journey suddenly pointless.

I nudged him, trying to break the mood. “At least we didn’t get stabbed.”

Aaron snorted, a small bitter laugh escaping before he could stop it. “Yet.”

We stumbled into a square that looked like it had given up on being a square years ago - just concrete, bins, and a broken fountain coughing rust. Aaron dropped onto the edge of the fountain, head in hands. I leaned against a lamppost, scanning the street like I half-expected Robin Hoodie to come back for our shoelaces.

“Wallets gone. Cash gone. Tickets gone,” Aaron muttered. “We’re dead men walking.”

“Correction,” I said. “We’re broke men sitting.”

Before he could reply, the shriek of laughter cut across the street. A cluster of women in matching sashes and tiaras wobbled out of a pub doorway, helium balloons bobbing behind them. At the centre was the bride-to-be: veil askew, lipstick smudged, holding a half-inflated inflatable man like a trophy.

“Oi!” she called, pointing at us. “You two look like you’ve been mugged or dumped. Or both.”

“We were mugged,” Aaron said flatly.

Her friends gasped, then immediately closed in around us, a half-circle of perfume, glitter, and cheap prosecco fumes. One of the bridesmaids offered a tissue as if that might solve everything.

“Where you heading?”

I hesitated. “Technically London, but anywhere near.”

The bride-to-be grinned. “Close enough. We’re headed to Milton Keynes - glamorous, I know. It’s on the way, and you look like you could use a rescue.” She jerked a thumb at a waiting minibus idling at the kerb, driver smoking with an expression of pure defeat. “We’ve got room.”

I blinked at Aaron. Aaron blinked at me.

Greggs would’ve said yes in a heartbeat.

“Deal,” I said finally.

The bridesmaids whooped, dragging us toward the bus like captured prizes. The door folded open with a hiss, revealing sticky seats, glitter confetti, and the smell of twenty hours’ worth of WKD.

For the first time all day, Aaron almost smiled.

Chapter 16. Anytime, Anyplace, Anywhere - 11:00am

We barely had time to protest before we were herded into the back of the minibus. It smelled of perfume, prosecco, and glitter hairspray, with an inflatable man slumped lifelessly against the window like the night had finished him off.

Julianne, the bride, stood in the aisle as if it was a stage. Veil skew-whiff, lipstick smudged, grin undimmed. “Right, boys,” she announced, raising a half-empty bottle. “Rules of the bus are: no sulking, no silence, and no saying no.”

Cheers and whoops erupted from the hens. Someone shoved a feather boa round my neck, someone else forced a plastic tiara onto Aaron’s head.

Victoria leaned over the seat in front, eyes lined thick, grin sly. “I’m Victoria. Always the bridesmaid, never the bride. And if you spill my prosecco, I’ll stab you with a breadstick.”

“Charmed,” I muttered, while Aaron tried to fend off Rosie, who was insisting he down a can of Carling in one go.

“Rosie, behave,” Julianne cackled, but didn’t mean it.

Christina was already at the stereo, hammering buttons until Madonna’s “Vogue” kicked in. Rita squealed and tried to strike a pose, nearly toppling over Brenda, who just swigged directly from a bottle of Lambrini. Sally passed around a packet of cold sausage rolls like communion.

“Where you lot headed?” Julianne asked, half dancing, half balancing in the aisle.

I adjusted the feather boa. “Got a gig in London. Or had, if we don’t sort ourselves out.”

The bride’s eyes lit up. “A gig? Don’t say Take That. My cousin’s obsessed. Or was it Bros?”

Aaron shook his head. “Indie stuff. Proper guitars, not matching waistcoats.”

Julianne raised her bottle like a toast. “Then you’re in luck, lads. You’ve just hitched a ride with the only bus in the Midlands guaranteed to get you closer to London than the M6 ever will.”

Victoria leaned across the aisle, giving me a long look that I missed entirely. Aaron noticed, though. She smirked, took a swig from her can of Diamond White, and joined in the singing with the others.

The bus lurched back onto the dual carriageway, voices rising, bass rattling from a battered cassette player at the front. For the first time since Stoke, it felt like forward motion was actually in our favour - though I wasn’t sure if my ears could survive the bridesmaids’ version of “I Wanna Dance with Somebody.”

The motorway rolled under us in a blur of grey and green, traffic steady but the minibus anything but. It swayed and bounced like it was built from leftover scaffolding poles and stubbornness.

Julianne was still holding court in the aisle, swapping between sloshing prosecco and leading half-remembered choruses of pop hits. Every few minutes she’d point dramatically at one of us, demanding we sing the next line, whether we knew it or not. Aaron’s falsetto attempt at “Like a Prayer” nearly caused Rita to choke on a sausage roll.

Victoria, meanwhile, had swapped seats to end up beside me. She leaned close, voice low enough that only I could hear. “So, London gig. Worth all this grief?”

I shrugged. “Supposed to be. If we ever actually make it.”

Her eyes sparkled. “You will. Girls can keep a secret, but we’re good at getting people places too.” She tapped the side of her nose, then sat back, as if she hadn’t just said something cryptic at all.

Behind us, Christina was DJing with the cassette player, cutting between Madonna, Kylie, and the occasional rogue tape she’d clearly “borrowed” from someone else’s glovebox. Brenda and Rosie were arm-in-arm by the back windows, trying to get lorries to honk at them, while Sally attempted to start a drinking game with rules so convoluted even she forgot them halfway through explaining.

Julianne finally flopped into the seat opposite Aaron, veil half-sliding off her head. “Best hen party ever, right?” she slurred cheerfully.

Aaron raised an eyebrow. “Don’t most hen parties end up in Blackpool or Benidorm?”

“Exactly,” she said, thumping her bottle on the table between the seats. “But this? This is chaos on wheels. It’ll be legend. In Milton Keynes by lunch, stories for life. Anytime, anyplace, anywhere, that’s us.”

The bus roared with laughter and song again, but I caught Aaron glancing out the window. For all the noise and glitter, the road ahead still stretched long and uncertain.

The minibus rattled through the heart of Warwickshire, every bump in the road making the prosecco fizz over or the inflatable man bounce like a drunk mascot.

Victoria leaned back in her seat, watching me argue with Brenda over whether the singer of The Wonder Stuff could actually play guitar or just mime convincingly. She smirked, then pulled a pen from her bag and scrawled a number across the back of a discarded karaoke request slip. With practiced subtlety, she leaned over mid-laugh and

tucked it into the breast pocket of my jacket. I didn't notice - too busy defending Miles Hunt's honour - but Aaron clocked the whole thing.

Victoria winked at him. Aaron mouthed, seriously? She just mouthed back, "Told you, girls can keep a secret," then turned back to the chaos as though nothing had happened.

Julianne, meanwhile, had decided the bus needed a talent show. Rosie belted Bryan Adams' "(Everything I Do) I Do It for You" so loud the driver threatened to pull over - though that might have just been because of the song choice. Rita tried breakdancing in the aisle and nearly dislocated a hip. Christina was next, promising an "avant-garde dance interpretation of Kylie's 'Better the Devil You Know'" before collapsing into giggles.

By the time Sally suggested they crown a "Bus Queen," Brenda was asleep with a sausage roll balanced perfectly on her chest. Julianne swept the boa from my shoulders, draped it across herself, and declared, "Ladies and gentlemen, your reigning monarch of the M1!" The cheer was loud enough to rattle the windows.

For a brief, strange moment, I smiled - properly smiled. Not the weary, let's-get-through-this grin I'd been wearing for days, but the sort of grin that suggested I'd forgotten the tickets, the Capri, even Robin Hoodie.

Aaron caught it. He didn't say a word.

The minibus was a storm in motion. Every few minutes another bottle popped, another song blared, another poor soul got dragged into whatever game Julianne had just invented.

"Truth or dare!" she shouted, wobbling in the aisle with the authority of a general and the grace of a trampoline accident. "Aaron, truth or dare?"

"Truth," Aaron said quickly.

Julianne narrowed her eyes. “Coward. Fine. Have you ever kissed a man?”

Aaron blinked. “Define kissed.”

The bus howled with laughter. Rosie whooped. “He has! He totally has!”

I buried my face in my hands, which only made the hens cackle harder.

Meanwhile, Victoria had commandeered the stereo, shoving in a battered mixtape labelled Party Bangers Vol. 3. Out came a jagged sequence of beats: Snap!, Black Box, and a remix of Ride’s “Leave Them All Behind” that sounded like someone had fed it through a washing machine.

“DANCE OFF!” Rita screamed, dragging Christina into the aisle. The driver groaned, muttering something about losing his deposit on the upholstery.

Feather boas blurred, sausage rolls flew like missiles, and Brenda - somehow awake again - led a conga line that trampled straight over Aaron’s trainers.

For a moment, it didn’t matter about stolen tickets, dead cars, or Robin Hoodie lurking in memory. For a moment, we were just two lads caught in the slipstream of joy, chaos, and relentless Diamond White energy.

And when Julianne raised her prosecco bottle and slurred, “To anytime, anyplace, anywhere!” the entire bus - hens, lads, inflatable man and all - cheered loud enough to drown out the engine.

Julianne had gone full monarch by now. She’d stolen the tiara from Aaron’s head, stacked it on top of her veil, and was parading up and down the aisle like she was holding court.

“Victoria, you’re my handmaiden. Rosie, official choreographer. Brenda-” she glanced at the sausage-roll-still-asleep bridesmaid, “-food tester. Sally, communications secretary.”

“What does that mean?” Sally asked.

Julianne grinned. “Means you have to ring my mum if we crash.”

The bus roared.

Victoria, still smirking from her earlier sleight of hand with my pocket, leaned into Aaron again. “Not bad for a Monday morning, eh?”

Aaron shook his head. “I’ve had quieter Glastonburys.”

At the back, Christina had convinced me into a karaoke duet of Roxette’s “It Must Have Been Love.” I sang one verse with deadpan seriousness before collapsing into laughter, drowned out by twenty women howling the chorus.

The inflatable man was passed overhead like a crowd-surfer at Reading. Someone drew a moustache on him. Rita tried to stick a cigarette in his mouth.

“Speech! Speech!” the hens demanded, and before I could duck, Julianne shoved the prosecco bottle into my hands like it was a microphone.

I froze, then said the first thing that came to me: “This is without doubt the stupidest bus I’ve ever been on. And I’m glad we’re on it.”

The cheer shook the windows. Even the driver, stone-faced and broken by life, allowed himself the ghost of a smirk.

As the bus rattled past signs for Northampton, the chaos hit a fever pitch: glitter, Lambrini, Roxette and raucous laughter swirling

together like the soundtrack to a night we'd never forget - even if I wasn't quite sure how we'd ended up in it.

Two bottles clinked together, ringing out as the hour changed.

11:00 a.m.

Another hour gone.

Chapter 17. Skywest & Crooked - 12:00pm

The bus rolled onto the outskirts of Milton Keynes, and the energy had shifted. The prosecco had run dry, the inflatable man had a puncture, and half the hens were dozing against the windows like glitter-covered casualties.

Julianne was slumped on her throne of coats, tiara skewed, veil caught in the hinge of the emergency exit. She was still humming Madonna under her breath, but it sounded more like a lullaby than an anthem now. A lipstick-smeared plastic champagne flute dangled loosely from her hand, forgotten with every sway of the bus.

Aaron sat wedged between Rosie, snoring softly on his shoulder, and Victoria, who was picking at the label on her bottle of Diamond White with absent-minded precision. She glanced sideways once or twice, almost like she wanted to speak, then just smiled faintly and looked back down.

I had collapsed into the seat opposite, staring out the window at the geometric nightmare of roundabouts and concrete cows rolling past. My reflection in the glass looked older than it should have - the weight of late nights, lost tickets, and too much road already pressing down on me.

For a moment, the bus almost sounded peaceful. Just the low thrum of the engine and the occasional half-hearted cheer whenever someone remembered what time it was. The kind of silence that only comes after chaos burns itself out.

“Feels like the morning after,” Aaron muttered.

“It is the morning after,” I said without looking away from the window.

Up front, the driver flicked ash out the gap in the window and muttered something under his breath about “never again.”

It was clear: the ride was nearly over. The girls’ chaos had carried us ninety miles down the motorway, but the next step - whatever it was - would be on foot again.

The minibus rattled to a stop outside a brutalist block of shops that looked like they’d been designed by someone who hated both buildings and people. The concrete was streaked with rain stains, the signs sun-bleached and half-falling, and the only colour came from a flickering “Off Licence” neon that buzzed like a dying insect.

Julianne roused herself long enough to hug each of us in turn, veil flapping dangerously close to the exhaust fumes. “Boys,” she declared, voice croaky but still full of theatre, “you’ve been the highlight of my hen. And I once saw Rick Astley live, so that’s saying something.”

Rosie and Rita blew kisses out the windows. Christina tried to start another round of “Like a Prayer” but gave up halfway through and fell back asleep. Brenda waved with the sausage roll she’d somehow kept hold of, like a tiny meaty sceptre. Sally just pointed at us and shouted, “Don’t die!” before the driver slammed the doors.

The engine grumbled, the bus lurched, and within seconds the hens were gone, leaving only the faint smell of Lambrini, perfume, and glitter hanging on the pavement like ghost confetti.

Aaron looked around. “Now what?”

Before I could answer, Victoria leaned halfway out the window at the last second, voice carrying across the road. “Elephant and Castle! Ask for a small bloke called Pierre!” She winked. “Tell him Vicky sent you. He owes me.”

And then she was gone too, the bus disappearing round the corner, leaving the three of us with our bags, sore heads, and the strange promise of a mysterious “small bloke” somewhere in Milton Keynes.

I sighed. “Brilliant. We’ve gone from ravers to hens to… what? Circus animals?”

Aaron adjusted his bag on his shoulder. “At least it’s a lead.”

We set off in search of The Elephant and Castle, roundabouts looming ahead like trials set by some bored god.

The Elephant and Castle wasn’t majestic. More a squat, red-brick bunker wedged between a car park and a tyre shop. Its crooked sign showed an elephant that looked more like a washed-out donkey.

Inside, the air smelled of fryer grease and last night’s lager. A fruit machine blinked in the corner, ignored. Two old blokes in flat caps nursed halves and stared at the racing on a tiny TV.

Behind the bar was a man no taller than Aaron’s shoulder. Dark hair slicked back, neat shirt, sleeves rolled. He poured a pint with all the gravity of a surgeon.

I cleared my throat. “You Pierre?”

The man looked up, and the accent answered before he did. “Oui. But - depends. Who is asking?”

Aaron leaned on the bar. “A hen party. Milton Keynes. One of them said to find you. Victoria.”

Pierre’s face shifted into a sly grin. “Ah, Vicky… toujours making promises for me, eh? What is it now? Free drinks? Stolen passports?”

“Closer to London,” I said. “That’s all we need. A lift.”

Pierre set the pint down, straightened up, and gave us a once-over. “You boys look like trouble. Lucky for you, I like trouble.” He tapped the bar with two fingers, decisive. “I finish early. I take you south. Stevenage, maybe further.”

Aaron nearly sagged with relief. “That’s… amazing. Merci.”

Pierre wagged a finger. “Don’t merci me yet. You ride in my van, you follow my rules.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What rules?”

Pierre grinned wider. “Rule one: I pick the music.”

“As long as it doesn’t involve sausage rolls, we’re good,” I replied.

The clock above the optics ticked toward noon. Time slipping away, but at least now we had wheels.

Pierre’s van looked like it had already survived three wars and a cheese festival. A battered Renault Trafic, paint sun-faded to the colour of old toothpaste, sliding door held together with gaffer tape. On the back, someone had stencilled VIVE LE ROCK! in spray paint.

“Chic,” I muttered, climbing in.

Inside smelled faintly of Gauloises, petrol, and onions. The seats were mismatched, some fabric, some plastic, all squeaking whenever the van juddered. A Madonna air freshener swung from the rearview, face smudged with grime.

Pierre hopped into the driver’s seat, slapped the dashboard, and announced, “Mes amis, welcome to Air Pierre. Please keep hands, feet, and existential despair inside the vehicle at all times.”

Aaron blinked. “Did he just say despair?”

“Rule one!” Pierre barked, turning the key. The engine coughed, spluttered, then growled awake like an old bulldog. “I pick the music.”

He shoved a tape into the deck. An accordion wheezed, joined by a frantic violin and a beat that landed somewhere between punk and polka.

I squinted. “What… is this?”

Pierre grinned over his shoulder. “Les Négresses Vertes. Best band in the world. You will learn.”

Aaron buried his face in his hands.

Rule two came quick. Pierre lit a cigarette, cracked the window, and declared, “No complaints. Smoke clears faster than whining.”

By the time we hit the A5, Pierre had listed six more rules - no feet on the seats, no singing unless you knew the words, and under no circumstances were we to mock his fuzzy dice, which he claimed were a “family heirloom.”

The van rattled south, every bump punctuated by accordion squeals and Pierre’s occasional shouts of “Encore! Louder!”

For the first time all day, we weren’t the strangest thing on the road.

By the time the van rattled past Towcester, Pierre had switched tapes twice - first to a scratchy dub of Serge Gainsbourg, then back to more accordion punk that made Aaron’s eye twitch.

I leaned toward him. “You, uh… always drive travellers around?”

Pierre puffed on his cigarette, steering with one hand, utterly casual. “Strangers? Non. Travellers, yes. England, it is full of people with places to be and no way to get there. I enjoy… how you say… the

chaos." He blew smoke out the cracked window. "Besides, I get bored. You three look like boredom antidote."

Aaron muttered, "That's one word for us."

Pierre caught it, laughed, and slapped the steering wheel. "Rule nine! No self-pity. You are alive, you are moving south, and you are not yet in Milton Keynes. Be grateful."

I smirked despite myself. "But Stevenage, it's like getting out of Dante's seventh circle into the sixth."

The conversation drifted - gigs, politics, food. Pierre ranted about how English bread was "like damp cardboard" and how nobody in this country knew how to hold a proper strike. I admitted I'd once fallen asleep on a picket line. Aaron told him about Drew and the Capri. Pierre listened like a priest, nodding, smoking, only interrupting to curse at lorries.

When the tape clicked off, silence filled the van for the first time. The road hummed, hedges flashing by in sun-faded green.

Aaron exhaled. "Feels like we're actually… getting somewhere."

Pierre caught his eye in the mirror. "Toujours, partout, n'importe quand," he said softly. "That is life, mon ami."

The van juddered over a pothole. I steadied myself against the window, looking out at the narrowing road ahead. Welwyn wasn't far. The gig, though - that was starting to feel like another planet.

Then, from Pierre's wrist, a digital beep. Just the hour turning over. A reminder: time was moving, whether we caught up or not.

12:00 p.m.

Another hour gone.

Chapter 18. Road Rage - 1:00pm

The van rattled south, its suspension squeaking like a mouse in distress every time we hit a bump. Pierre sat tall at the wheel, sunglasses perched precariously on his nose, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth in flagrant disregard of the “No Smoking” sticker peeling from the dashboard.

He drove with the air of a man who believed the road would politely bend to his will. One hand rested casually on the wheel, the other occasionally darted out to sketch shapes in the air as though he were conducting an invisible orchestra.

I shifted in the back seat, knees pressed against a box of mysterious French groceries Pierre had collected earlier. “So… how far did you say you were going?”

“Stevenage,” Pierre replied with a flourish. “But for you, mes amis, I extend my generosity. Welwyn Garden City is… how you say… a hop, a skip, a frog’s leap further. I will take you.”

Aaron raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

Pierre shrugged, exhaling smoke toward the cracked sunroof. “Why not? Life is dull if you always stop where you planned. Better to drive further. Meet strangers. Steal adventures.”

Aaron, sprawled across the back seat beside me, trainers on a pile of laundry, muttered, "Sounds like my mum on sherry."

The fields rolled past in late-summer gold. Road signs pointed toward towns that felt half-familiar, half-fictional: Hitchin, Baldock,

Codicote. The sort of names you could mistake for supporting characters in a pantomime.

Aaron leaned forward, arms braced on the back of Pierre's seat. "So, what's in Welwyn?"

Pierre grinned, teeth flashing. "Nothing. And everything. It is like Paris, but with fewer poets, worse wine, and too many roundabouts."

None of us quite knew how to answer that, so we let the van hum on, engine coughing, as the afternoon sun dragged our shadows long across the road.

By the time the van clattered into Stevenage, the air inside was a mix of stale smoke, crisps, and whatever questionable cheese Pierre had stashed beneath the passenger seat. We stared out the window at rows of boxy shopping centres and underpasses that all looked like they'd been designed on a Friday afternoon.

Pierre, however, seemed charmed. "Ah, Stevenage," he declared, sweeping a hand toward a car park as if unveiling the Eiffel Tower. "The jewel of Hertfordshire! So many roundabouts, it is like dancing with geometry."

Aaron squinted. "It just looks like Milton Keynes with less glitter."

"Non," Pierre corrected, taking a long drag on his cigarette. "Milton Keynes is a grid. Stevenage is… improvisation. It is jazz."

I gave Aaron a look that said: he's lost it.

Pierre ignored us, swinging the van down a slip road with the confidence of a man convinced all traffic laws were mere suggestions. A bus honked; Pierre waved cheerfully out the window as if they were old friends, then cut across two lanes in a single manoeuvre.

“You sure you don’t mind going further?” Aaron asked, gripping the door handle.

Pierre grinned, unbothered. “Mon ami, when you have nowhere important to be, every road is the scenic route. Besides-Welwyn is not far. A baguette’s throw! A tiny detour!”

I muttered under my breath, “Feels like a massive detour.”

But Pierre was already pointing excitedly at a sign for Knebworth House, like a tour guide who had been waiting all day to deliver his line. “Voilà! The castle of rock! Led Zeppelin, The Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, Genesis, Deep Purple, even The Beach Boys! All of them, ici, shaking the ground with noise and trousers too tight for comfort. Magnifique!”

We exchanged a look. With Pierre at the wheel, “if we crash” sounded less like a joke and more like a guarantee.

Just beyond Knebworth House, calm turned to chaos. A hatchback screamed out of a side road, clipped the van’s wing with a metallic screech, and shunted us onto the verge. The van groaned, we all lurched forward, and a half-empty pack of Quavers exploded like yellow confetti.

The hatchback skidded to a halt. Out stomped a bloke in a shell suit, face scarlet, fists balled, mirrored shades reflecting pure fury. “What the hell do you think you’re playing at?!” he roared, marching straight for the driver’s door.

Aaron froze. I braced.

Pierre? He lit a cigarette with serene precision, leaned out the window, and beamed as though he’d just seen an old friend. “Ah, monsieur! You arrive so suddenly, like l’amour in a chanson. Please, do not shout. It makes your forehead so red, like a boiled lobster.”

The bloke blinked, rage briefly interrupted. “What?!”

Pierre gestured elegantly at the road, the trees, the sky. “We are but two tiny vehicles in a vast, indifferent universe. You crash, I crash, the birds still sing. Why fight when we could… share a Camembert?”

I clamped a hand over my mouth to stop myself laughing.

The man’s anger stuttered, tripped, tried to get going again. “You-you smashed my motor!”

Pierre shrugged, blowing smoke in perfect rings. “Perhaps. Or perhaps your motor smashed me. Who can say? Life is a circle, no? Round like a wheel. Round like cheese. Always cheese.”

Aaron muttered, “Is he quoting Monty Python?”

The bloke took one look at Pierre’s placid smile, muttered a furious string of half-formed insults, then stomped back to his car, still swearing but no longer sure why. Tyres screeched, and he was gone.

Pierre flicked ash out the window. “Voilà,” he said simply. “Problem solved.”

The van sat steaming at the roadside, one headlight blinking like a dying star. Pierre patted its bonnet with the solemnity of a priest closing a coffin.

“She was a good machine,” he sighed. “Not fast, not beautiful… but loyal. Like a stubborn donkey.”

Aaron kicked at the gravel. “Now what?”

“Now,” Pierre said, striking a match on the bumper to light another cigarette, “we walk. Exercise! Fresh air! Very good for the complexion.”

I slung my bag over my shoulder and glanced at the endless strip of tarmac stretching ahead. “How far to Welwyn?”

Pierre exhaled a plume of smoke. “Eh… twenty minutes. Maybe thirty. Depends on how fast your little legs go.”

“More like two hours,” Aaron muttered.

Traffic roared past, a blur of lorries and hatchbacks, horns blaring as we shuffled single file along the verge. Pierre whistled a jaunty tune, seemingly oblivious to the danger of being clipped by a Ford Sierra doing seventy.

At one point he stopped dead to admire a cow in a nearby field. “Regardez! She looks at me with wisdom. She understands the absurdity of existence.”

“Pretty sure she just wants grass,” I said.

Pierre just shrugged, flicking ash into the wind like a punctuation mark.

Aaron laughed, though it came out thin. Our shoes scuffed the gravel, our bags cut into our shoulders, and the adrenaline from the crash was giving way to the slow ache of fatigue. The air smelled of hot tar and cut grass, every gust of wind carrying both danger and relief.

Still, Pierre marched on at the front, cigarette glowing, unflappable as ever, like this was all part of some grand French holiday package.

The road stretched on like a punishment, every roundabout looking identical to the last. Sweat glued shirts to backs, and the August sun turned the tarmac into a griddle. Our shadows dragged long and slow across the verge, like reluctant companions.

Pierre, however, was thriving. He marched at the front, cigarette clamped between his teeth, one hand occasionally raised as though

conducting an invisible orchestra.

“March with purpose!” he cried suddenly, spinning on his heel to face us. “Left, right, left, right! Not like tourists in Oxford Street, but like soldiers of destiny!”

I rolled my eyes. “We’re soldiers of blisters.”

Aaron grunted, adjusting his bag. “And dehydration.”

Unbothered, Pierre launched into what he called “the three philosophies of walking.” “One: never look at the end, only at the step. Two: whistle, even if you cannot whistle - it confuses despair. And three…” He paused dramatically, blowing smoke into the sky. “Always assume the next pub is just around the corner.”

Me and Aaron exchanged a look.

“Is it?” Aaron asked hopefully.

Pierre shrugged. “Eh, sometimes philosophy lies.”

Traffic hissed past, tyres spraying grit at our ankles. We trudged on, the monotony broken only by Pierre’s occasional outbursts - saluting cows, berating clouds, even shouting “encore!” at a passing tractor as though it had performed for him.

By the time a distant church spire shimmered faintly on the horizon, I wasn’t sure whether to laugh, collapse, or follow Pierre into whatever parallel universe he seemed to occupy.

And then - beep-beep. Pierre’s wristwatch sang again, crisp and unforgiving.

“Deux heures,” he announced. “A whole new adventure begins!”

I groaned. “An hour more of this and I’ll need a stretcher.”

Chapter 19. A Prince In A Pauper's Grave - 2:00pm

The road stretched ahead like a punishment. Sun glaring, heat shimmering off the tarmac, gravel crunching under boots that already felt two sizes too small. Every hedgerow looked the same, every roundabout promised an end that never came.

I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand. "Feels like we've been walking for years."

Aaron kicked a loose stone. "Yeah. Frodo and Sam, only without the ring. Or tickets."

Pierre, striding a few paces ahead with his jacket slung over one shoulder, stopped dead and turned, scandalised. "Pardon? Did you just call me a hobbit?"

Aaron smirked. "If the hairy feet fit."

Pierre gasped theatrically, hand on his chest as if stabbed. "Non! I am Aragorn at the very least. A ranger! A king in exile! Look at this jawline, mon dieu. Does this face say hobbit to you?"

I didn't miss a beat. "More Pippin than Aragorn."

Pierre staggered backwards as though struck, then broke into a grin. "Ha! You think this is funny, but in France, hobbits are very… how you say… chic. They smoke fine cigarettes, they drink good wine, they are irresistible to women. It is only the English who make them ridiculous."

Aaron laughed so hard he nearly tripped on the verge. "Short and sexy hobbits - that's your campaign poster right there."

Pierre raised his chin, mock-heroic. “Better short and sexy than tall and boring.” He spun back around and marched on, humming something suspiciously like the theme tune from *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*.

We fell in behind him, shoulders aching, blisters forming, but the absurdity of it made the road feel just a little shorter. For the first time all day, we laughed more than we complained.

By the time we’d cleared another roundabout - the fifth, or maybe the fifteenth, it was impossible to tell - Aaron’s stomach gave a long, tragic growl.

Pierre heard it and wagged a finger. “Ah, the hobbit hunger! Soon you will demand second breakfast, non?”

Aaron rummaged in his bag and pulled out a half-squashed packet of wine gums. “Second lunch, more like. Behold: the travellers’ feast.” He shook a few into his palm and offered them round like a priest distributing communion.

I accepted a single black one, chewed thoughtfully, and declared, “Definitely lembas bread. One bite fills the stomach of a grown man.”

Pierre raised an eyebrow. “Then you must be very small men, because I could eat twenty of these and still need steak.” He popped two into his mouth at once and chewed noisily.

Aaron laughed. “You’re meant to nibble them slowly, not inhale them.”

Pierre waved him off, mouth still full. “Nonsense. Frenchmen do not nibble. We devour. Even your terrible English sweets.”

The roadside dipped briefly, giving us a view over rolling fields dotted with cows and the distant, jagged line of a church spire. It

should have felt idyllic, but the drone of lorries on the bypass ruined the effect.

“Feels like we’ve been walking for three books already,” Aaron muttered.

I tilted my head back, squinting at the sun. “Yeah, feels like we’re walking into Mordor. Only less volcanoes, more Vauxhalls.”

Pierre snapped his fingers, triumphant. “Exactly! And I am your brave guide. A little Gandalf. A little Samwise. Very fashionable combination.”

Aaron snorted. “More like Gollum with better hair.”

Pierre clutched his chest in mock agony again, but the corners of his mouth betrayed the grin trying to escape. “You wound me, mon ami. Truly.”

Still, when the wine gums ran out, nobody complained. Our feet hurt, our shoulders burned, but the laughter lingered longer than the hunger.

By the time we reached the edge of Welwyn, the walk had worn thin. Our trainers were heavy with dust, our shoulders raw from straps, and the novelty of hobbit jokes had faded into a trudge of silence.

Pierre, however, marched on at the front, cigarette dangling, humming some chanson like he was strolling through the Left Bank. Every now and then he gestured at hedgerows as though giving a lecture only he could hear.

We cut through a side lane that spilled us out near a squat church and a tangle of gravestones tilting at odd angles. Aaron slowed, squinting at one cracked slab where the inscription had almost faded.

“Look at this,” he said. “‘Here lies Edward, once called a prince among men, now resting in a pauper’s grave.’”

I raised my eyebrows. “Bit dramatic, isn’t it?”

Aaron shrugged. “Kind of fits, though. We’ve gone from would-be kings of the gig to two blokes wandering around like lost pilgrims.”

Pierre chuckled, brushing ash from his sleeve. “Eh, life is like this. One day, you are a prince. The next, you are… how you say? Sharing a sausage roll with drunk bridesmaids.”

Aaron grinned. “You make it sound almost noble.”

I glanced around the leaning stones. “If this is noble, I’d hate to see failure.”

A breeze stirred the grass, carrying the faint toll of a distant bell. We stood there a moment longer, the quiet of the graveyard wrapping around us like a blanket. Then Pierre clapped his hands sharply. “Allez! Enough philosophy. London does not come to us - we must go to London.”

And just like that, we shouldered our bags again, stepping back into the sun-bleached afternoon, the words on the stone lingering in Aaron’s mind.

The road narrowed as we left the graveyard behind, traffic hissing past in sharp gusts of wind. I walked with my hands jammed deep into my pockets; Aaron kept adjusting the strap of his bag like it might strangle him, and Pierre strolled half a step ahead, humming as though leading a parade.

“You know,” Aaron said, breaking the silence, “for a guy who’s… what, five foot nothing? You walk like you own the whole road.”

Pierre bristled, puffing himself up like a cat. “Pah. I am not small. I am… concentrated. Distilled. Small but mighty.”

I smirked. “So basically a hobbit.”

Pierre whirled, nearly dropping his cigarette. “Again with this hobbit! I do not live in a hole in the ground! I am a man of sophistication. I drink Bordeaux, not… second breakfast.”

Aaron laughed. “You’d suit the feet, though.”

Pierre gave us both a wounded look, then turned back with exaggerated dignity. “Mock if you like. But who found you a ride? Who showed you the path to Welwyn? Without me, you are still in Milton Keynes, weeping at roundabouts.”

I admitted with a reluctant nod, “Fair point.”

Pierre allowed a small triumphant smile. “Exactly. Today, maybe I am your hobbit. But remember, in every story, the little one gets you where you must go.”

The words lingered longer than the joke should have. A crow wheeled overhead, its cry cutting through the rush of cars. Aaron caught it first - the way Pierre said *today*. There was weight behind it, a farewell tucked between the lines.

He wasn’t planning to stay with us much longer.

The rooftops of Welwyn finally broke the horizon - rows of red brick terraces and the faint outline of a church spire. After hours of trudging, it looked almost heavenly, though I wasn’t sure if that was the fatigue or the dehydration talking.

Pierre slowed his march, pulling his cigarette stub from his lips and flicking it neatly into the gutter. “Voilà,” he said, with a little flourish

of his hand. “Welwyn. Your next step on this… ridiculous pilgrimage.”

I stared at the town, then back at Pierre. “You’re not coming with us, are you?”

Pierre shook his head, smiling faintly. “Non. My path ends here. I have my van to salvage, my pub to return to… and besides, too many hobbit jokes, they are bad for my soul.”

Aaron grinned despite himself. “You sure? We could use someone unflappable.”

Pierre tapped his nose. “Life, my friend, is not about clinging. It is about… passing the baton. You will walk on without me.”

He extended a hand, and we shook it in turn - Pierre’s grip firm, warm, carrying more weight than I expected.

For once, neither of us had a comeback. We just nodded.

Pierre raised a hand in a mock-scout salute, then turned on his heel and sauntered back the way we’d come, whistling something that might have been “Seasons in the Sun.” His silhouette grew smaller with each step until he seemed to dissolve into the hazy afternoon.

Aaron checked his watch. The digital beep cut through the air.

3:00 p.m.

The hour had turned. Pierre was gone. And for the first time that day, it was just the two of us.

Chapter 20. Senile Delinquent - 3:00pm

St Albans wasn't far, but after the long trudge from Stevenage, even nearby felt like another country. We slumped on a bench outside a post office in Welwyn, not quite ready to start walking again.

That was when the car pulled up - a faded sky-blue Morris Minor with crocheted seat covers and a plastic hula girl nodding on the dashboard. The driver was a woman in her seventies, white hair pinned up under a hat that looked like it had been stolen from a church jumble sale.

She wound down the window and peered at us with startlingly bright eyes. "You boys lost? Or homeless? You look homeless. No shame in it, mind, I was nearly homeless myself once in '72. Bloody strike."

Me and Aaron exchanged a glance. Before we could answer, she waved us towards the car with a gloved hand. "Well, don't just sit there gathering dust. Where you headed?"

"London, but anywhere closer than here really," Aaron said cautiously.

She beamed. "Perfect! I'm going St Albans. Hop in - a couple of strays are no trouble. I once had six dogs and a husband in here at the same time. Dogs were better behaved."

We hesitated only a second before hauling our bags into the back seat. The car smelled faintly of lavender, petrol, and something sharper I couldn't place.

As we buckled in, she set the Morris in gear and chuckled to herself. "Name's Mavis, by the way. I'm seventy-six. And don't mind me if I

swerve a bit. Eyes aren't what they were - but the police never catch me. Too busy chasing real criminals."

She tapped the steering wheel with glee. "Besides, if anyone should be locked up, it's me. Been nicking from supermarkets for years. A girl's got to eat."

Aaron blinked. "Wait, what?"

But Mavis was already humming, eyes fixed on the road, as though petty theft and chauffeuring strangers were perfectly ordinary parts of her afternoon.

The Morris rattled down the road like it was held together with knitting needles and prayer. I gripped the fraying seatbelt across my chest, silently calculating the odds of surviving a crash at forty miles an hour.

Mavis, meanwhile, was in her element. "It's not stealing, you know," she said, eyes flicking between the road and us. "It's redistribution. Tesco doesn't need seventeen tins of soup. I'm seventy-six, I need seventeen tins of soup. That's economics."

Aaron gave a careful nod. "Right. Economics."

She swerved slightly to avoid a pothole, or possibly just to make a point. "Once, I walked out with a frozen turkey under my coat. Christmas dinner, no questions asked. Nearly broke my hip, mind you. But worth it. Delicious with cranberry sauce. Or was it jam?"

I cleared my throat. "Do you… do this often?"

"Oh, love, all the time. Last week I pocketed a lemon squeezer from Sainsbury's. Didn't even need it. But I thought, why not? Keeps the brain sharp." She tapped her temple with a triumphant smile, narrowly missing a cyclist.

Aaron twisted round to look out the back window. “You’re not worried about getting caught?”

Mavis laughed so hard the Morris drifted across the white line. “Caught? I’m seventy-six, dear. What are they going to do, throw me in prison? Three meals a day, heating, a library… sounds better than my bungalow.”

I shot Aaron a look that said: what the hell have we got ourselves into?

The Morris clattered over another roundabout, suspension groaning. Mavis didn’t even slow down. “Anyway,” she chirped, “you boys are lucky. Most drivers wouldn’t give the time of day to two scruffy pilgrims. But me? I collect people. Found a hitchhiker once who swore he was the reincarnation of Napoleon. We had a marvellous weekend.”

Aaron blinked. “Weekend?”

But Mavis was already humming again, as if the story was perfectly normal, the hula girl bobbing in agreement with every bump in the road.

The Morris Minor rattled along the A1 like it had no business still being on the road. Every time Mavis changed gear, it sounded like a small animal was being sacrificed under the bonnet.

“See, boys,” she said, peering through the windscreen as though looking for divine road markings, “they call it shoplifting, I call it survival. First cucumber in ’89, then bread rolls, then them little packets of ham. Manager once tried to stop me. I said, ‘You think you can take food from an eighty-three-year-old woman? You’ll be haunting yourself tonight, lad.’ He backed right off.”

Aaron stifled a laugh. My knuckles whitened on the torn leather seat. “And the police? They never-”

“Police don’t care about cucumbers,” Mavis interrupted, swerving slightly as she lit a cigarette with one hand. “Besides, they know I’m harmless. Too much paperwork. They save their energy for the youngsters nicking Walkmans and spray-painting rude words on roundabouts.”

Me and Aaron exchanged a glance. This wasn’t the sort of lift you politely got out of halfway. This was a ride you survived.

Mavis barrelled on. “Mind you, sometimes I take odd things. Once I pocketed a whisk. Didn’t even need it. I just thought - why not? Keeps me sharp, keeps me in the game.” She grinned, eyes flicking toward Aaron. “Always the element of surprise. That’s how you stay alive at my age. I’m seventy-six, y’know, dear.”

Aaron nodded carefully. “Right. Survival instinct.”

I muttered under my breath, “More like criminal instinct.”

But Mavis heard me. “Aha! That’s where you’re wrong. I don’t take for greed. I take because the world won’t miss it, and I bloody well will.”

She thumped the steering wheel for emphasis. The car swerved. We both grabbed for the dash.

“Relax!” Mavis crowed. “We’re making good time. St Albans in no time at all. Unless, of course, the police finally remember that cucumber.”

Traffic thickened as we neared the outskirts of St Albans, but Mavis seemed immune to the rules of the road. She leaned forward in her seat, eyes narrowed behind bifocals, muttering, “Green means go, red means go quicker.”

She shot through a junction just as the light turned crimson. A delivery van blared its horn. Aaron yelped, I swore, but Mavis only

laughed - a full-bodied cackle that filled the tiny car.

“Don’t fuss! Man like that should thank me, keeping him awake on the job. If you snooze behind the wheel, you deserve a fright.”

Aaron’s heart was still hammering. “You nearly killed us.”

“Nearly doesn’t count,” she said serenely, flicking ash from her cigarette out the crack of the window.

She launched into another story before either of us could protest. “Did I ever tell you about the time I nicked a pineapple from Safeway? Whole bloody fruit, top and all, shoved it under me coat. Looked like I’d grown a crown. Security man thought I was eccentric royalty and saluted me.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “We’re in a death trap with a kleptomaniac Queen Mum.”

Aaron tried not to laugh, failing badly.

Mavis beamed at the sound. “That’s better. Nothing worse than a pair of young lads looking like someone’s nicked their toys. You’ve got to laugh at the danger. Keeps the heart young. I’m seventy-six, and look at me - flying through the roads like Stirling Moss!”

The Morris Minor wheezed around a roundabout, tyres squealing like distressed cats.

“More like Stirling Lost,” I muttered.

But Mavis didn’t hear - she was busy overtaking a startled Ford Escort on the inside lane, humming merrily to herself as though this was all perfectly normal.

We rolled into St Albans in one piece, though Aaron was convinced he’d aged a decade in the last half hour. Mavis finally slowed the

Morris Minor outside a weathered stone arch near the cathedral, brakes squealing like a confession.

“Well then,” she said, clapping her hands together, “end of the line for you two strays.”

We tumbled out, grateful to feel solid ground beneath our trainers. Mavis rummaged in her handbag, muttering to herself, then triumphantly produced two apples, their skins mottled but shining in the sun.

“Here. Vitamins,” she said, pressing one into each of our palms. “Nicked these off the back of Sainsbury’s lorry yesterday. Best fruit tastes better when it’s stolen.”

Aaron blinked at the apple, then at her. “You… actually stole these?”

“Course I did!”

I chuckled despite myself. “You’re unbelievable.”

Mavis grinned, eyes twinkling. “Unbelievable keeps you alive, love. You remember that.” She reached out and patted Aaron’s cheek, then mine. “Now, off you trot. The world won’t wait for the likes of you.”

We nodded, apples in hand, as Mavis revved the Morris Minor back to life. She gave a little wave - half-queenly, half-bandit - before sputtering off down the high street, weaving into the traffic like a mischief spirit that no red light could ever catch.

Aaron bit into his apple, crisp and sharp on his tongue. “Reckon that was the strangest lift we’ve had yet.”

I stared after the fading car. “Mate, I don’t think we’ll top it.”

The cathedral bells tolled the hour.

Four o’clock.

Another hour gone.

Chapter 21. A Perfect Day to Drop the Bomb - 4:00pm

By the time we reached the back streets of St Albans, the adrenaline was gone. The noise, the laughter, even the faint sugar rush from Lambrini and sausage rolls - all of it had drained out, leaving just two knackered lads with sore feet and heavy bags.

We found a quiet alley behind a shuttered bakery, half-hidden from the road. I dropped my rucksack with a groan and slid down the wall until I was sitting on the cobbles. Aaron followed, pulling an apple from his pocket - one of Mavis's ill-gotten stash - and rolling it in his palm without taking a bite.

The alley was warm with trapped sunlight, a still pocket of air that felt strangely separate from the world. A faded poster on the bakery door flapped lazily, advertising a jumble sale that had come and gone weeks ago. Somewhere a pigeon clattered its wings against the tiles, the only sound other than our own breathing.

Our bodies felt heavy, like they'd been filled with sand. Neither of us spoke for a while; the silence wasn't awkward, just the kind that comes when words would take too much energy. The cobbles pressed cool against our legs, grounding us in a way that was almost comforting.

The air smelled faintly of lavender, probably still clinging from Mavis's car. Combined with the stale booze from the hen party and whatever chemical haze was still rattling round our systems from the ravers, it made our eyelids heavy, our heads lolling against the brickwork.

"Just five minutes," Aaron muttered, voice thick.

I nodded, eyes already half-shut. “Yeah. Five minutes.”

The church bells somewhere in the distance struck four o’clock. The sound blurred, stretched, and by the time the last chime faded, we were already drifting - slipping into the kind of sleep that isn’t rest, but a doorway.

The dreams waited.

I blinked and found myself standing under hot white lights, the roar of a crowd surging up like a tide. For a moment, it was glorious - the dream I never admitted out loud, the fantasy that got me through long bus rides and broken guitar strings.

But then I clocked the banner behind me. SUPPORT ACT.

I wasn’t headlining. I wasn’t even mid-card. I was filler.

The audience stretched out into infinity, but it wasn’t fans - it was hens in veils, ravers with glow sticks, and every stray character we’d tripped over on this stupid pilgrimage. Rosie was waving a sausage roll in time to the beat. Christina was trying to do Kylie’s dance moves in the mosh pit. Even Mavis was there, knitting in the front row, her handbag bursting with cucumbers.

I looked down at my guitar… only it wasn’t a guitar. It was the inflatable man from the minibus, arms flapping whenever I tried to strum. The sound that came out wasn’t chords - it was Bryan Adams, loud and tinny, like a broken jukebox stuck on “(Everything I Do) I Do It for You.”

The crowd groaned.

And then a cow walked onstage. Not just any cow - the same one Pierre had saluted by the roadside. She looked me dead in the eye, opened her mouth, and in a ridiculous French accent bellowed:

“Le moo… le boo!”

The whole audience took up the chant, booing me in a chorus that shook the stage. I stumbled backwards, tripping over mic leads that twisted like roundabouts, endless and impossible to escape. I tried to run, but every path just spiralled me back to the same spotlight, the same banner: SUPPORT ACT.

The inflatable man gave a squeak, deflating in my arms. The booing swelled.

I ran, but the roundabouts kept multiplying. Milton Keynes stretching forever.

Aaron’s dream - at least from the way he told it later - began with him playing bass. Or at least, that’s what he thought. The strings buzzed under his fingers, but when he looked down, he wasn’t holding his bass at all. It was a garden hose, coiled and dripping, each note spraying a jet of water over the front row.

The crowd didn’t care. They cheered louder, soaked through, arms raised like it was some glorious baptism. From the side of the stage, Victoria appeared in a bridesmaid’s dress, holding up numbered cards like a gymnastics judge. 7.5… 3… 10… a drawing of a cucumber. She winked and mouthed: Girls can keep a secret.

He tried to shout something back, but his words came out as bubbles, floating into the rafters where they popped like fireworks. Each pop rained glitter. A few glitter-flakes landed on his tongue; they tasted like sherbet lemons, sharp and sour.

Then the stage shifted underfoot - the wood stretched and warped until it became a giant picnic table. I sat at one end, arguing passionately with a cow in a beret. The cow said, in a thick French accent: “Le moo… le boo.” I countered with something about The Wonder Stuff. The cow shook its head in disdain.

Aaron found himself holding an apple instead of the hose. The apple pulsed like a heartbeat, then whispered in Sally's voice: "Don't die." Startled, he bit into it anyway - and it tasted like warm Lambrini. His chin dripped with it, fizzing down his shirt like static.

The crowd applauded. Thousands of bridesmaids leaned over the edge of the stage, chanting: "Encore! Encore!" They began to multiply, reflections of reflections, until the whole front row blurred into a single kaleidoscope of veils and lipstick.

And then, with a sound like a detuned bass string, the whole dream bent sideways - dissolving into the toll of distant bells.

The bells twisted and folded back on themselves, and suddenly both of us were standing in the middle of a village green. Except the grass was made of cassette tape, spooling out beneath our shoes in squeaks and hisses.

I still clutched my guitar - only now it had a cow's head for a body, chewing cud between chords. Aaron carried his pulsing apple, which had grown to the size of a football. The apple sprouted arms, shook itself free of him, and marched off shouting in Mavis's voice: "1989! It started with cucumbers!"

Across the green, a brass band struck up… except it wasn't brass at all. The trombones were baguettes, the trumpets were traffic cones, and Pierre was conducting with a cigarette like a maestro of smoke. Every time he flicked his wrist, a bridesmaid popped up from the ground shouting, "Le moo! Le boo!"

I turned to Aaron. "Is this your dream or mine?"

"Both, apparently."

Before we could say more, the sky cracked open like an egg, and instead of rain, sausage rolls tumbled down, bouncing gently off our heads. Sally appeared, dressed as a vicar, handing out Lambrini

chalices and chanting, “Communion, communion, communion!” The inflatable man from the hen bus drifted past like the Goodyear blimp, waving solemnly.

Just when the absurdity peaked, all the characters - cows, bridesmaids, apples, sausage rolls - turned as one and began chanting: “To London! To London! To London!” Their voices grew distorted, echoing like a broken cassette tape played backwards, overlapping into a wall of sound that rattled our bones. The chant rose higher, faster, until it became unbearable, collapsing into a high-pitched electronic beep-beep-beep-

And we both jolted awake, slumped against the alley wall, the dream collapsing into silence.

The beep wasn’t a crowd chant after all. It was Aaron’s cheap digital watch, announcing the hour in its flat, tinny voice. 17:00.

Aaron groaned and rubbed his eyes. “Tell me you dreamt sausage rolls falling from the sky too.”

I blinked, sitting up against the damp brickwork. “With Pierre conducting a brass band made of baguettes?”

We stared at each other, then both burst into ragged laughter - half from relief, half from exhaustion.

Aaron shook his head. “It’s the lavender in Mavis’s car. Has to be. Knocked us out like a pair of pensioners.”

“Or the Lambrini. Or the rave dust.” I stretched, wincing at the crick in my neck. “Either way, we’ve lost another bloody hour.”

The alley hummed with the late afternoon quiet, bins buzzing with flies, the distant sound of traffic like a reminder the world had kept moving without us. Somewhere a dog barked, and a church bell rang once, as if mocking our sluggish progress.

Aaron hauled his bag onto his shoulder. “Right. No more naps. No more detours. Next stop is London.”

I got to my feet, brushing gravel from my jeans. “Agreed. And if anyone offers us cucumbers, we run the other way.”

Still chuckling, still aching, we stepped out of the alley into the fading light. Our shadows stretched long across the pavement, twin silhouettes stumbling towards the horizon. For all the absurdity of the last day, London suddenly felt just close enough to touch - if we could only stay awake long enough to get there.

The cathedral bells tolled the hour.

Five o’clock exactly.

I smirked at Aaron’s wrist. “Your watch is a bit slow.”

Chapter 22. Lenny & Terence - 5:00pm

By the time we stumbled up the steps to St Albans City station, me and Aaron looked like survivors of a very small, very stupid war. Our bags hung off us like ballast, our eyes were ringed with the purple shadows of no sleep, and our trainers carried the dust of three counties.

The evening rush was already in full swing. Commuters flowed in organised chaos: men in suits tapping at pagers, women in sensible heels power-walking to platforms, kids in uniforms slurping McDonald's milkshakes. Compared to the tide, we looked out of place - two scruffy shapes washed up in the wrong world.

Aaron squinted at the departures board. "London, London, London… it's all London. But which one's ours?"

"None of them," I muttered. "We don't have tickets."

I was about to suggest we try blagging our way through when a voice cut across the concourse, broad and gravelly:

"You lookin' lost, lads? Or just allergic to soap?"

We turned to see a stocky man in a hi-vis vest, head shaved close, face like it had been left too long in hot water. He had a railway badge pinned to his chest and the air of someone who had seen everything a station could throw at him.

I bristled, ready with a comeback, but the man's eyes weren't unkind. They were sharp, assessing, but not unfriendly. He looked at the bags, the scruffy clothes, the dazed expressions, and instead of two fare-dodgers, he seemed to see… strays.

He stuck out a hand. “Name’s Lenny. You two look like you need a train - and maybe a miracle.”

Aaron hesitated before shaking it. “Depends what’s cheaper.”

Lenny grinned, flashing a gold tooth. “Cheaper? Nah. But maybe easier. Stick with me, lads. Tonight, you’re in luck.”

Lenny led us down a side corridor off the main concourse, past a sign that said STAFF ONLY. Me and Aaron exchanged a glance - the sort of glance that said this could either end in free travel or a police report - but followed anyway.

The passageway smelled of old oil and hot metal. Posters from the late eighties curled on the walls, sun-faded slogans warning about ticket fraud and unattended luggage. Lenny walked with the rolling gait of someone who knew every inch of the station, whistling a tune that might once have been “Another Brick in the Wall.”

At the end of the corridor, a door swung open. Out stepped Terence.

If Lenny was stocky, Terence was wiry - all elbows, sharp cheekbones, and restless energy. His cap sat at an angle, and his moustache twitched like it had a life of its own. Where Lenny’s voice was gravel, Terence’s was quicksilver: high, darting, words tripping over each other as though afraid to miss their stop.

“Lenny, you’re late,” Terence barked, though his eyes sparkled. “I thought you’d fallen under a milk float. And who are these ragamuffins?”

“Strays,” Lenny said simply. “Picked ’em up outside. They look like they’ve walked from Scotland.”

“Milton Keynes,” I corrected under my breath.

“Not walked,” Aaron muttered too.

Terence ignored us, already circling like a terrier. “Shoes are shot, eyes bloodshot, bags heavier than sense. Let me guess - band lads? Missed the gig, lost the van, running on fumes?”

Aaron blinked. “That’s… creepily accurate.”

“Experience, my boy,” Terence replied, tapping his temple. “Every platform tells a story. And yours is screaming for a seat to London.”

Lenny folded his arms. “What do you think, Terence? Shall we smuggle them aboard? Or leave them to rot with the pigeons?”

Terence’s moustache twitched into a grin. “Oh, smuggle, definitely. Nothing like a couple of waifs to liven up a dull shift.”

We looked at each other, half-relieved, half-terrified. Whatever these two were plotting, it was better than the pavement.

The train lurched as it pulled out of St Albans, wheels screeching against the rails like an old band tuning up before the encore. Me and Aaron sat hunched on the fold-down seats at the back of the guard’s carriage, surrounded by boxes of spare uniforms, crates of bottled water, and a fire extinguisher that looked older than both of us.

“This isn’t exactly first class,” Aaron muttered, hugging his bag to his chest.

Lenny gave a dry chuckle from the doorway. “What were you expecting, son? Champagne and a lobster platter? Be grateful you’re not in with the parcels.”

Terence dropped onto a crate opposite us, long legs sticking out into the aisle. He tapped a cigarette against his palm but didn’t light it, just let it dangle between his fingers as if it was part of him. “This,” he said, gesturing to the rattling carriage, “is the beating heart of

British transport. Forget your fancy seats and your buffet trolleys. This is where the magic happens."

"Magic?" I raised an eyebrow.

"Absolutely," Terence grinned. "Every trip's a gamble. Will the doors jam? Will the brakes stick? Will Mrs Crump in Carriage D threaten to sue because her tea's too tepid? Pure theatre, my friend. Pure theatre."

Aaron smirked. "And you two are what, the stars of the show?"

"Stars?" Terence scoffed. "We're the glue. We're the tape that keeps the scenery upright when the actors forget their lines." He leaned forward, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "Truth is, the passengers think they run the show. But it's us. Always us."

Lenny rolled his eyes and leaned against the door, arms folded. "Ignore him. He gets poetic when he's got an audience."

I wasn't sure if I was reassured or unnerved, but as the countryside blurred past the small window, I let myself relax for the first time in hours. At least we were moving. At least we were heading south.

The train rattled through the Hertfordshire countryside, fields flashing past in green and gold strips. In the guard's carriage, the rhythm of the wheels made everything rattle: the fire extinguisher, the crates, even the loose fillings in my back teeth. It gave the whole space the feeling of a tin-can confessional.

Terence leaned forward, elbows on his knees, staring at us with a grin that was equal parts curiosity and mischief. "So what's your story then? Two scruffy pilgrims lugging bags like they're carrying the crown jewels. You don't look like commuters."

Aaron shrugged. "We're heading to London. Got a gig to catch tonight."

“And… yeah, we’re in a band ourselves,” I added, almost defensively. “Or at least, we’re trying to be.”

“A gig and a band, eh?” Terence slapped his thigh. “Now that’s a proper mission! Just tell me you’re not another bunch of wannabes mangling ‘Smoke on the Water’ in your mum’s garage…”

I bristled. “We’re better than that.”

“Good man,” Terence said with mock solemnity, like he was a priest giving his blessing. “Because the world doesn’t need another Deep Purple tribute act. Trust me, I’ve seen three of ’em this year alone.”

Lenny, who had been quiet, finally spoke, his voice a slow rumble. “My nephew tried the music lark. Synths, drum machines, the lot. Thought he was the next Depeche Mode. Now he fixes boilers in Hatfield.”

Aaron gave a weak laugh. “That’s encouraging.”

“Don’t mistake me,” Lenny went on, almost fatherly now. “Dreams are fine. Necessary, even. But trains-” he tapped the wall of the carriage “-trains don’t wait for dreams. They run on time, or they break. That’s the world. You’ll either keep up or you won’t.”

Me and Aaron exchanged a look. For a moment the noise of the train seemed louder, the clatter pressing against our skulls.

Then Terence broke the heaviness with a sharp bark of laughter. “Ignore him. He’s been reading timetables too long. You boys’ll be fine. Just don’t let the bastards make you swap your guitars for spanners.”

The train swayed, and we all laughed with it - tension released into the hum of the rails, three generations briefly levelled by the absurdity of being stuck in a metal box hurtling south.

The train clattered on, pulling us closer to London. The view blurred into hedgerows and rooftops, the carriage rattling with a rhythm that almost sounded like a drumbeat. I tapped along absentmindedly on my knees, while Aaron stared out of the window as if the horizon might cough up an answer.

Lenny stretched, cracking his knuckles like a man settling in for a long story. “This old line, it’s seen everything. Soldiers, football fans, lovesick runaways. Now it’s got you two daft sods chasing a band.”

Aaron smirked. “Better than chasing cucumbers.”

I snorted, trying not to laugh.

Terence pulled a battered hip flask from his coat pocket and offered it across. “Little nip for the nerves? Don’t worry, it’s only sherry. The respectable kind of booze.”

Aaron waved it off, but I took a cautious sip. My face twisted. “Respectable? It tastes like boiled raisins.”

“That’s tradition, son,” Terence said, reclaiming the flask proudly. “Keeps the soul ticking over.”

The train clattered through a tunnel, the windows momentarily turning into mirrors. I caught my own reflection - tired, hollow-eyed, but with a spark that hadn’t been there yesterday. A stupid, stubborn spark that said maybe we’d actually make it.

When the darkness gave way to daylight again, Lenny pointed ahead. “Next stops: Deptford. From there, you’re practically in Brixton’s backyard.”

Aaron leaned his head against the glass, the vibration thrumming through his skull. “Finally feels like we’re getting somewhere.”

“Course you are,” Terence said, topping up his own sip of sherry. “This train only goes forward. Same as life.”

The digital display above the doors blinked: 18:00. The hour turned as the countryside gave way to the creeping sprawl of the city.

Chapter 23. Only Living Boy in New Cross - 6:00pm

The train rattled to a halt at Deptford just after six, brakes squealing like some exhausted beast. The carriage doors hissed open and the cool evening air spilled in, tinged with the smell of chip fat and diesel. Aaron rubbed at his eyes, still fighting off the dregs of sleep from our St Albans alleyway nap, while I hoisted my bag and glanced down the narrow platform.

“End of the line for us, then,” I muttered.

Sure enough, waiting by the barrier were Lenny and Terence. They weren’t meant to be anywhere near Deptford at that hour, but somehow the pair of railway veterans had orchestrated a little sleight of hand to see us off properly. Lenny gave us a quick nod, all business, while Terence grinned and whispered, “This way, keep your heads down.”

It felt like some covert operation. The four of us shuffled past the ticket office in single file, Lenny flashing a battered ID badge at the barrier staff, Terence winking like a magician pulling off a trick. Before me or Aaron had time to blink, we were outside the station, free and clear, the hum of Deptford High Street buzzing around us.

“There you go, boys,” Lenny said, clapping Aaron on the shoulder. “Follow that road up - twenty minutes and you’ll be in New Cross. Keep on from there, and Brixton’s about an hour and a half’s walk. Easy as pie.”

Aaron raised an eyebrow. “Pie’s never that easy.”

Terence chuckled. “True enough. But you’ll manage. Just keep moving. London’s closer now than it’s ever been.”

We parted with a last wave, and suddenly it was just me and Aaron again. The road stretched ahead, the traffic roaring, the skyline smudged with a summer haze. We adjusted our bags and started walking, the weight of the city pulling us forward.

By the time the clock nudged twenty past six, we'd crossed into New Cross. The shift in atmosphere was instant - Deptford's bustling high street gave way to a grittier stretch of pubs, takeaways, and music posters peeling off lampposts. The air smelled of fried chicken and petrol, the pavements sticky with old cider spills.

Aaron tugged at his bag strap. "This place feels… lived in."

"Yeah," I said, eyeing a mural half-faded on a brick wall. "Like every band in the world's passed through here at some point."

We weren't two minutes into New Cross proper before a voice called out: "Oi, lads!"

A wiry bloke in a patched denim jacket jogged up alongside us, guitar case bumping against his leg. His hair stuck up like it had been electrified, his grin wide and unrelenting.

"You're musicians, yeah? I can tell. Got the look." He didn't wait for an answer. "Name's Colin. I'm putting a band together. Big stuff. Proper unique sound. Bit Clash, bit Specials, sprinkle of Talking Heads. You'll love it."

Aaron blinked. "We're actually-"

Colin steamrolled on, waving his hands as if conducting an invisible orchestra. "I've got a drummer who only plays on biscuit tins, a synth guy with a Casio from Argos, and my mate Kev - he does spoken word about pigeons. Pure poetry. All we need now is a rhythm section."

I muttered under my breath, "Or sanity."

But Colin either didn't hear or didn't care. He was buzzing, unstoppable. "So what do you say? Join up, lads. You look like bass-and-drums material to me. We'll storm Brixton by winter. *NME* cover guaranteed."

Aaron glanced at me, half amused, half horrified. We hadn't planned on a recruitment drive this evening, but Colin clearly wasn't planning on letting us slip away quietly.

He fell into step beside us as though it was the most natural thing in the world. Me and Aaron exchanged a look that said do we shake him off, or just let him run out of steam?

Spoiler: he did not run out of steam.

"I've got the name already," Colin said, tapping his temple. "That's the key, right? Branding. We'll be called The Vibrant Anxieties." He spread his arms like a preacher. "Think about it! Captures the spirit of the age. We're all stressed out, but in technicolour."

Aaron coughed into his sleeve, hiding a laugh. "Catchy."

Colin nodded solemnly. "Course it is. Better than half the crap on the radio. And the look? Matching boiler suits. Fluorescent orange. Proper statement. Like we've just escaped from some dystopian factory. And we'll only play gigs in laundrettes. Think about it - the spin cycles, the white noise, the atmosphere. Revolutionary."

"More like washing powder sponsorship," I muttered.

But Colin was already striding ahead, pointing out every cracked shopfront like it was a future venue. "Here, perfect spot for a guerrilla gig. Just drag the amps out, start playing - the people will feel it. Music for the streets, by the streets. That's the dream, innit?"

Aaron adjusted his bag. "We've already got a gig tonight, mate. Well, watching one."

Colin's eyes lit up. "Even better! Networking opportunity. You introduce me to your contacts, I'll get you in on the ground floor of something massive. This time next year? Glastonbury. Latitude. Reading. The Vibrant Anxieties will be top of the poster. You'll see."

By now, the idea of shaking him off seemed pointless. The bloke was basically welded to us - a one-man PR machine, breathless with ambition, dragging us deeper into New Cross with every stride.

The streets narrowed as daylight began to slip, the long shadows stretching into something almost theatrical. Colin was still talking - somehow not even short of breath - spinning yet another story about a friend-of-a-friend who knew a bloke from Blur and how that meant his band was practically destined for stardom.

I trailed half a step behind, muttering to Aaron out the corner of my mouth. "I swear if he says 'visionary' one more time, I'm shoving him in one of those wheelie bins."

Aaron smirked. "Might fit the aesthetic."

We cut through a warren of side streets, shopfront shutters already clattering down, until the road spilled us out under the railway arches. Somewhere beyond, neon signs buzzed to life - pubs, takeaways, off-licences. A group of kids on BMXs weaved lazy circles in the road, the smell of fried chicken drifting thick in the air.

"Welcome to Peckham!" Colin announced grandly, as if he'd personally invented it. He swept an arm at the sprawl of shops and tower blocks. "This is where The Vibrant Anxieties will make their first stand. I can feel it."

I gave Aaron a look that said, Kill me now.

Aaron ignored me, glancing at his watch. "Seven o'clock." The tinny beep confirmed it. We'd been walking, listening, enduring for nearly an hour - and somehow London felt no closer.

Colin, meanwhile, had bounded up onto a low wall, arms wide, preaching like a street prophet. “Remember this moment, lads. The birth of legend. Years from now, they’ll say it started in Peckham!”

Aaron shouldered his bag and sighed. “If we live that long.”

I adjusted mine, staring down Rye Lane’s glow and bustle. “Come on. Brixton’s still ahead.”

Together - two weary travellers and one relentless visionary - we stepped forward, swallowed by the noise and colour of Peckham.

Chapter 24. The Taking of Peckham - 7:00pm

Colin peeled off outside a kebab shop in Peckham, muttering something about rehearsal space and “world domination.” He’d been good company in his odd way, but as he disappeared into the neon glow, I exhaled like I’d just shrugged off a heavy rucksack.

“Bit like Gollum, that one,” I said. “Always muttering about his precious band.”

Aaron laughed. “Yeah, and you just know he’ll be back in the sequel, trying to nick the last sausage roll out of spite.”

We pressed on, the evening sun bleeding gold across the rooftops. The heat hadn’t gone with it - if anything, the air seemed thicker, heavier, clinging to our clothes. London was always hot in my mind, but this… this was different.

Aaron dragged his bag higher on his shoulder and squinted at the road ahead. “So we just keep heading south, yeah? New Cross to Brixton - straight shot.”

I wasn’t so sure. The road signs pointed in about six different directions, and without a map we were essentially walking by faith and pub gossip. “Straight shot, he says. That’s exactly what Frodo thought until the giant spider showed up.”

Aaron grinned at that. “Which makes me Frodo, then? Small, doomed, carrying the weight of the world?”

“More like the weight of your bass,” I shot back. “And that leaves me as Sam, which I don’t mind. He’s the only one with any sense.”

The thought carried us a few blocks further, past shuttered shops and bus stops thick with teenagers smoking. The rhythm of the city shifted here - faster, more restless, as if the streets themselves were hurrying us along toward something.

Aaron pointed to the skyline. “Mount Doom awaits.”

I wiped the sweat from my brow. “Yeah, and it’s bloody hotter than Mordor already.”

The deeper we walked into South London, the more the air pressed down like a damp blanket. The sun had dipped behind the buildings, but the heat clung stubbornly to the tarmac, rising back up in waves that made the street shimmer. Every step dragged, every strap cut into our shoulders, every sigh felt louder than it should.

“This,” I puffed, “is exactly how I imagined Mordor. Endless walking, no maps, sweat pouring off me like I’m being slow-roasted.”

Aaron chuckled, though weakly. “At least Mordor had orcs. All we’ve got are blokes outside off-licences giving us the side-eye.”

I gave him a look. “Give it time. Those offies close and they’ll be chasing us like Ringwraiths for the last tinny.”

The joke landed, but the silence that followed wasn’t quite as light. The city around us seemed bigger than ever - not just physically, but in its attitude. London didn’t care about our quest, didn’t even notice it. To everyone else, we were just two sweaty lads with tatty rucksacks and no clue where we were going.

“Feels like we’ll never get there,” Aaron muttered, almost to himself.

“We will,” I said, glancing sideways. “Sam and Frodo made it, didn’t they?”

“Yeah, but they had eagles at the end,” Aaron said. “We’ve just got blisters and a dodgy apple core from Mavis.”

I grinned despite the ache in my legs. “Then we’ll just have to crawl if we need to. No way we’ve come this far to bottle it now.”

We trudged on, following roads that curved more than they should, every turn making the journey feel longer. Neither of us realised it yet, but the straight shot to Brixton was already behind us.

By the time the clock edged towards seven, the heat had stopped being just weather - it had become a living thing. The pavements radiated it upwards, the air bent with it, and even the shadows seemed to sweat.

Aaron squinted down the road. For a moment he swore he saw Brixton Academy looming at the end of the street, its great curved front glowing like the gates of Mount Doom. He blinked, and it was gone - replaced by a launderette and a chippy.

“Hallucinating now, are we?” I asked, dragging the back of my hand across my brow. “What next - orcs on mopeds?”

Aaron gave a weary laugh. “Wouldn’t surprise me. Though at least mopeds are faster than our legs.”

A bus rumbled past, kicking up a blast of diesel that left us coughing. In its wake, the reflections in a row of shopfronts shimmered strangely - and for a second, Aaron thought he saw Colin pacing behind us, hunched and muttering, like Gollum slinking in the shadows.

“Mate,” Aaron whispered, “don’t look now, but I think Colin’s following us.”

I glanced casually over my shoulder. Of course, there was no one there. “Heatstroke. Classic symptom. Next you’ll be claiming we’ve

got Gandalf with us."

But I wasn't entirely convincing myself. The trick of light, the endless turnings, the feeling of being watched - it all fed into the illusion. We plodded forward, more stubborn than strong, letting jokes and scraps of banter distract us from the creeping thought that maybe we weren't headed the right way at all.

Somewhere, faint and muffled, the sound of music carried on the air. Not Brixton's roar, but something else. A sign that our road wasn't quite the road we thought it was.

The music grew louder as we trudged, but it wasn't the pounding heartbeat of Brixton Academy. Instead, it was tinny speakers blasting reggae from the open window of a tower block, mixed with the bark of a dog and the rattle of a shopping trolley.

"This doesn't feel like Mordor," I muttered. "Feels more like… the bit in *Lord of the Rings* where they wander into the Dead Marshes and everyone's just miserable."

Aaron grinned weakly. "Yeah, except instead of ghosts in the water, it's empty KFC boxes and a trolley full of rusty Fanta cans."

We stopped at a crossroads, both looking at the faded street sign that bore absolutely no resemblance to anything we'd planned. For a long moment, neither of us said a word.

Then I shouldered my bag like it weighed a hundred pounds. "Well, Mr Frodo, looks like we've taken the scenic route."

Aaron puffed out his cheeks. "Scenic? It's Peckham. Scenic is pushing it."

Still, the comparison stuck. With every wrong turn, every overheated step, it felt more and more like we were crawling across some epic

landscape. London wasn't just a city anymore; it was a trial, a gauntlet, a land of shadows and corner shops.

Aaron gave a sly glance at the alleys behind us. "And Colin's probably still back there, muttering about 'my precious' Lambrini."

That cracked us both up, a burst of rough laughter that eased the weight for a moment. Even lost, even half-dead on our feet, the joke of it - two would-be rock pilgrims treating South London like Middle-earth - was just enough to keep us moving.

Ahead, the street narrowed, leading us into darker lanes. Somewhere up there, Brixton still burned in our minds like Mount Doom. We just had to reach it.

The battered clock above a chicken shop flicked to 8:00.

Another hour down - and still not there.

Chapter 25. 24 Minutes from Tulse Hill - 8:00pm

The streets around Tulse Hill looked ordinary enough - corner shops, greasy cafés, kids kicking a ball half-heartedly against a wall. But to me and Aaron it might as well have been the Shire on the edge of Mordor. We'd walked through suburbs and fields, ridden in stolen lifts, been sung to by hen parties and knocked out cold by lavender. And still, somehow, the Academy wasn't behind us. It was ahead. Always ahead.

Aaron wiped his forehead with the back of his sleeve. "How did we even end up here? We should've hit Brixton an hour ago."

I squinted at a sun-bleached street sign. "Must've taken a wrong turn somewhere."

Aaron groaned. "So basically, we're Frodo and Sam, lost in South London."

"More like Frodo and Sam with no map and no Gollum to guide us."

We both looked back down the road, half-expecting Colin to appear, trotting along behind us muttering about his band. He didn't. Just the quiet shuffle of a few shoppers and the distant rumble of buses.

"Guess we shook off Gollum," I said.

Aaron hefted his bag higher on his shoulder. "Good. He was starting to freak me out anyway."

The heat radiated off the pavement as we set off again, following a line of bus stops that pointed vaguely towards Brixton. Every step made the city feel hotter, louder, more oppressive.

“Mordor,” I muttered. “Definitely Mordor.”

But for all the complaining, for all the wrong turns and missed chances, the Academy had taken on a kind of mythic weight in both our minds. It wasn’t just a venue anymore. It was Mount Doom itself - the place where the whole mad pilgrimage had to end.

Aaron narrowed his eyes towards the horizon. “Right then. Let’s finish this.”

By the time we cleared Tulse Hill proper, the pavements shimmered. The air felt baked, heavy, the kind of heat that clung to skin and wouldn’t let go. Even the buses lumbering past seemed exhausted, groaning under the weight of August.

Aaron tugged at the collar of his shirt. “Feels like walking into a bloody oven.”

I gave a dry laugh. “Mount Doom, mate. Told you. Only difference is Frodo got an eagle at the end. We’ll get blisters.”

The comparison stuck. Every lamppost became a looming tower, every double-decker a rolling red Balrog. We weren’t just two lads trudging through South London anymore - we were tiny figures on an epic quest, weighed down by rucksacks instead of rings.

Aaron muttered, half delirious: “At least Sam carried Frodo. Don’t expect me to carry you.”

“Good,” I shot back, “’cause I’d drop you in a kebab shop and leave you there.”

That earned a weary laugh, though Aaron’s face stayed tight with fatigue. His stomach growled, loud enough for me to hear over the bus engines. We had nothing left - no money, no food, not even Pierre’s half-crushed cigarettes. Just the stolen apples from Mavis, and even those had mostly gone.

We passed a pub, its doors open, golden light spilling out along with the smell of fried chips. We both slowed instinctively, then shook our heads and carried on. No point stopping if you couldn't buy anything.

Aaron tilted his face up, eyes closed against the sun. "Feels like the city's testing us. Like it wants to burn us off before we get there."

I didn't answer straight away. I just adjusted my bag, jaw clenched. "Then we keep walking. If Brixton's Mordor, we're nearly there."

And on we went, stumbling but unbroken, shadows stretching long across the road to Brixton.

By the time the road signs started mentioning Brixton, the air had turned thick with people. Pavements narrowed under the press of bodies, shopfronts spilled music onto the street, and every corner smelled of jerk chicken, petrol fumes, and sweat.

Aaron nudged me with his elbow. "Feels like we've stepped into another world."

I nodded, scanning the street as if the Academy itself might leap out from behind a minicab office. "More like the gates of Mordor. All we're missing is orcs and a river of fire."

We pressed on, weaving through the throng. A man with a stack of bootleg cassette tapes shouted "Top tunes, two quid!" A woman in a sequinned jacket tried to flog roses from a plastic bucket. Every shout and call added to the rising hum, and somewhere in the distance, a bassline thumped - faint, but steady, like a beacon.

"That's it," Aaron said, suddenly alert. "Hear it? That's got to be the soundcheck."

The thought made us quicken our pace, even as our legs screamed at us to stop. The crowd grew denser the closer we got, pockets of

punters already drifting towards the same destination. Some wore T-shirts of the band, others carried cans, already singing half-forgotten choruses.

Aaron felt a surge of electricity. After everything - the hitchhikes, the bridesmaids, Mavis and her apples, the lavender-induced nap, even bloody Colin - it was real now. We were here.

I caught his look and smirked. “Careful, mate. Don’t start crying on me.”

“Shut up,” he muttered, though his grin betrayed him.

We rounded a corner, and for the first time, the Academy loomed into view. Massive. Black-bricked. Like a fortress rising out of South London.

“There she is,” I breathed.

And suddenly, the whole mad pilgrimage felt worth it.

The closer we came, the more the Academy seemed to swell, swallowing the skyline. Its wide steps were already a gathering place, fans spilling across the pavement, smoking, laughing, clutching tickets like holy relics. The big doors were propped open, warm light and the throb of soundcheck bass pulsing into the night air.

Aaron slowed, suddenly self-conscious, as though the grime on our trainers and the stink of a hundred miles would mark us out as impostors. But I pushed forward, chest out, eyes locked on the prize.

“Black brick and neon, exactly like I’d always pictured it,” I murmured, reverent as a pilgrim at a shrine.

We mounted the steps, shouldering through the crush until the entrance swallowed us too. And then came the word - sharp, clipped, inescapable.

“Tickets.”

The doorman, broad as a fridge and twice as unyielding, held out a flat palm. No smile. No explanation. Just that single syllable.

I froze. My hand went instinctively to my back pocket, then stopped halfway. The empty ache of memory struck - my wallet, gone since Birmingham. I looked at Aaron, then back at the doorman, panic flickering in my eyes.

“I… uh…” I dug into my rucksack, rummaging desperately, as though salvation might lurk in the lint. Finally, I pulled out the only thing I had left: one of Mavis’s apples, its skin dulled from the journey. I held it out with both hands, almost solemn.

“An offering,” I said, forcing a grin.

The doorman stared at the apple. Then at me. Then back at the apple. His verdict was cold, immovable.

“Sorry, lads. No ticket, no entry.”

The words landed like a door slamming shut.

Aaron exhaled. “And just like that…”

“Yeah,” I muttered, pocketing the apple again. “Just like that.”

We turned away together, the swell of music from inside mocking us with every step. Laughter and shouts from the queue spilled across the pavement, all those ticket-holders streaming inside to the world we’d fought so hard to reach.

The steps back down felt heavier than the miles we’d walked. By the time we reached the street, neither of us could look at the other.

Aaron broke first. “No tickets.”

“No money,” I added, letting out a hollow laugh.

We cut right, into the shadow of the side alley, narrow and quiet except for the distant hum of bass bleeding through the Academy walls. Our trainers scuffed over gravel, past bins lined up like silent sentries. Halfway down, Aaron dropped his bag with a thud, leaning against the wall. I joined him, sliding down until I was sitting on the cold ground.

“Think we can find a nice tout?” Aaron asked, voice flat, more hope than conviction.

I tilted my head back against the brick, eyes half-shut. “Yeah. Maybe one who takes apples.”

We both laughed, but it came out thin and tired, the kind of laughter that hurt.

For a long moment, we just sat there, the city around us alive and indifferent. The dream of Brixton Academy only a few bricks away - and yet impossibly far.

Then a dull thud, like a muted bell, rang out somewhere deeper in the alley.

Chapter 26. And God Created Brixton - 9:00pm

We slumped against the wall, heads tilted back, ready to fade into another hopeless evening - when a door creaked open beside us. A head poked out, framed in the haze of backstage light.

“Guys, any ideas where I can get an apple from at this time?”

I fished into my pocket and pulled out my last one. I didn’t even look, just lobbed it towards the voice. “Here. Shove it up your arse for all I care.”

“Cheers. I’ll remember that. What you two doing sitting out here anyway? They’re about to go on.”

“Short version? Got robbed. No ticket.”

“Long version?” Aaron sighed. “Marooned in Inverness, hitchhiked and walked all the way here, got robbed in Birmingham, so no tickets.”

“Shit. Fuckin’ Brummies. Sure it wasn’t the Poppies?” he said.

Me and Aaron laughed, a dry, exhausted laugh.

Only then did we look up properly. Red-blonde hair brushing his cheeks, huge eighties glasses, a soft double chin made sharper because he was looking down at us.

“Come on then,” the man grinned. “Come with me.”

We followed him through the side door. He flashed a pass - “they’re with me” - and pointed us down a corridor.

“Go on through there. Enjoy yourselves.”

We wandered forward until we reached a doorway spilling sound. We peered inside.

The crowd roared as a man in shorts stepped into the spotlight. Across his chest, scrawled in black marker: NO TALENT AT ALL. His belly jutted proudly over the waistband. The chant rose immediately:

YOU FAT BASTARD! YOU FAT BASTARD!

“Good evening, Brixton. I thought you’d be a bit fucking louder than this. You fat what?!”

YOU FAT BASTARD! YOU FAT BASTARD!

“It’s so lovely to have so many friends here tonight. Is there anybody here from Wales? Well, fuck off! I think it’s time to sex it up a little bit. Please put your hands together for the best kick-arse fucking rock and roll band in the whole goddamn world - Carter The Unstoppable Sex Machine!”

The chant shook the rafters as Jimbob and Fruitbat walked on stage.

A pause. Then another voice - part stand-up, part sermon:

“When you’re younger, you can eat what you like, drink what you like, and still climb into your 26-inch waist trousers and zip them closed. Then you reach that age, 24-25, your muscles give up, they wave a little white flag, and without any warning at all, suddenly you’re a fat bastard.”

The crowd howled.

KERRANG!

And then it began:

Surfin' USM
Re-Educating Rita
Midnight On The Murder Mile
My Second To Last Will And Testament
Rubbish
Say It With Flowers
A Prince In A Pauper's Grave
Bloodsport For All
Billy's Smart Circus
A Perfect Day To Drop The Bomb
This Is How It Feels
Rent
G.I. Blues
Sheriff Fatman

For me and Aaron, the long road, the apples, the lavender, the ravers, the fatigue, the sheer madness of the last twenty-four hours - all of it fell away. There was only noise, sweat, and the sheer impossible relief of finally being inside.

Chapter 27. Down in the Tube Station at Midnight - → Late

The gig still rang in our ears as we spilled out of the Academy, the crowd dispersing like smoke into Brixton's night. Our voices were hoarse from shouting, our bodies aching but somehow light, lifted by the sheer force of the music.

"What a night," I breathed, grinning despite the sweat still clinging to my shirt.

Aaron gave a slow nod, his ears ringing. "Mate… that was unreal."

We staggered towards the Tube, swept along with the rest of the mob. The entrance yawned before us, tiled and fluorescent, smelling faintly of warm electricity and last week's chips. Down the escalator, still joking and half-singing scraps of "Sheriff Fatman," we found ourselves on the platform, leaning against a pillar like two soldiers who'd somehow survived the battle.

"So," Aaron said, "where we going now?"

I shrugged, fishing for a plan that didn't exist. "Home, ideally."

Aaron gave a weary laugh. "And how the fuck do we get home?"

The rumble of an approaching train filled the tunnel. Neither of us had an answer.

Chapter 28. The 90s Revival - 22/11/2014 - 6:00am

Staggering out of the after party, blinking into the pale light of morning, it felt impossible that the night was already over. Me, Aaron, and a few others we'd picked up along the way - faces from solo gigs, side projects, half-remembered bands - all spilled into the street together, still buzzing with half-shouted choruses and ringing ears.

None of us wanted to go straight home. Instead we drifted as a pack into a well-known fast food joint around the corner, settling into the bright plastic seats, trading stories over greasy breakfasts while waiting for the first tubes to start running.

There was only one shadow over it all. Jon "Fat" Beast had died. I'd been secretly hoping he might be around - that I might get the chance, after all these years, to thank him for what he did that night back in '91. The apple. The pass. The door opened when every other door had slammed shut. Instead, I just sat there, a little hollow, raising my cup like a quiet toast.

"Right," someone finally said, breaking the silence. "How you getting home?"

I grinned through tiredness. "Vicky's picking us up at Victoria Station."

Aaron blinked. "Wait… what? Do we need a *Silmarillion* now to fill in the gaps?"

And just like that, twenty-something years on, it felt like nothing had changed at all.

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24 Hours from Tulse Hill
A Carter USM Road Novel
© David Parry

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