



# Peacock's Tale

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1

Homeopathic whisky- that was the latest brainwave. It had crept up on me earlier in the day, and by late on I didn't see how it could possibly fail.

So there I was, sitting at the kitchen table, working out the profit margin on one part spirit to three million parts water, when the sound of the wife screaming stopped me dead in my tracks.

It was a scream and a half, as well. A right blood-curdler.

Then she starts shouting on me, "Peacock... *Peacock!* ..."

And the brainwave went up the spout for the foreseeable future.

I shot through to the living room, half expecting to find her lying underneath something, or at least sitting with something sticking out of her, but she was as right as rain when I got there. She was sprawled out on the couch with her feet up on the coffee table, watching one of her daft stories on STV and pointing at the screen.

"You're on the telly!" she was shouting. "You're on the telly, Peacock!"

"I thought you'd been murdered," I told her, but she wasn't listening.

"*Look!*"

But I couldn't see anything. I couldn't even work out what the fuck she was watching. It seemed to be some daft Scottish detective thing. I thought she'd maybe gone a wee bit mental.

"What are you talking about, Bev?" I asked her. "How can I be on that, hen?"

“Just *watch*,” she said, “You’ll be back in a minute. You’re in it.”

So I sat there for about twenty minutes, watching this dooley tanking about Edinburgh in the rain, and just when I was getting ready to go back to my wee idea she starts shouting again, “There you are! Look, there you are. It’s you.”

And she turns round to look at me, the wee face beaming.

I was at my wit’s end. I really thought she’d lost it this time. The guy she was pointing at didn’t bear the slightest resemblance to me. He was about twenty years older for a start, all kind of knackered looking, with fucked up hair and scary teeth.

The bastard didn’t even have a moustache.

I was just getting ready to phone the doctor, to see if I could convince him to make a wee house call, when all of a sudden the detective boy fires into this restaurant where the scary-teethed guy is holding court, and the detective throws a glass of red wine all over him, and he says- are you ready for this? he says, “Ladies and Gents, I give you— *The Peacock*.”

And the wife grabs a hold of my arm and she starts just about shaking the life out of me.

I was stunned.

“You’re famous!” she shouted.

And the more I watched of the thing the more it looked possible that this jakey on the telly was supposed to be me. They had him cast as a wee bit of an ideas man, he was something of a sharp dresser, and- into the bargain- he was in at just about everything, a right rogue.

“What is this anyway?” I asked the wife, and she said it was something called Rebus. I’d never heard of it. Mind you, I’ve never heard of half the shite she watches, so that didn’t really mean anything.

“Is it popular?” I asked her and she said it was, then she told me to shut-up in case she lost her place and missed out on something important.

So I shut up. I just kept quiet for a while and watched the story unfolding. And the thing was, the longer it went on, the clearer it became that this Peacock guy was more than just a bit of a rogue. He turned out to be a right evil bastard, in at all kinds of things

I wouldn't have touched in a million years. And by the time it finished I realised I was sitting on a wee idea that made the thing I'd been footering about with earlier in the kitchen seem like chicken feed.

"I'm going to sue them," I told the wife, as she snapped it off. "Defamation of character."

"You certainly didn't come out of it well," she said, and she looked a wee bit shocked. I could see the defamation was already beginning to kick in. Even with her. She was giving me some right funny looks and she seemed to be wondering if I really had pulled some of that shady stuff from the show at some point in the past.

I picked up the paper and had a look at the telly page, to see if there were any clues about who was behind the fiasco, but all it said was:

*Rebus. New episode: 'A Question of Blood.' Ken Stott stars as the hard-drinking Edinburgh-based detective in this gritty drama.*

"Who writes it?" I asked the wife, but she only shrugged.

"I just watch it," she said. "But I'll tell you who would know."

I hoped to Christ that she wasn't going to say Billy Smail, but she was.

"Billy would know," she said, and I groaned.

Billy fucking Smail. The brother-in-law. And the trouble was, I knew she was right. If anybody knew who was behind this thing it would be him. He's all over the writing business, but right at that minute he was the last person in the world I wanted to talk to. In fact, he always is.

"We'll be seeing him tomorrow anyway," the wife said. "You can ask him then."

Talk about a bombshell. It took me a good wee while to find my tongue again after that one, and when I did all I could manage to say was, "What do you mean?"

"He'll be at mum and dad's tomorrow," she said. "Him and Marianne, they're both going to be there as well."

"How do you mean 'as well'?" I asked her. "Who else is going to be there?"

"Us, you idiot."

It was all going just a wee bit too fast for me, and I didn't even think I wanted to keep up.

"When was this arranged?" I asked her, and she laughed.

"Don't tease me Peacock," she said. "I know what you're doing."

I was glad that one of us did.

"How?" I said. "What am I doing?"

And then she hit me with it. And all thoughts about homeopathic whisky, and Rebus, and defamation, and suing some idiot blind, disappeared right out the window.

"You're trying to pretend you've forgotten it's my birthday tomorrow," she said. "But I'm onto you. So stop acting it."

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There's never a good time to hear a sentence like that, not unless you really are just fucking about and you've secretly got the whole thing under control. But the wife could hardly have chosen a worse time to spring this one on me because, at that particular moment, tomorrow was- strictly speaking- only six and a half minutes away. And when it comes to birthdays, she's always been a wee bit of a stickler for doing things by the book.

She came across to where I was sitting and squeezed into the chair beside me, and she started playing with my hair.

"What did you get me?" she asked. Then she told me not to answer. "No don't," she said. "Let me try and guess for myself."

She closed her eyes and bit her bottom lip, and while she couldn't see me I took the opportunity to let my face relax into the expression of horror I'd been straining to keep off it. I watched a wee frown popping up on her brow, and her tongue moving about from side to side, then a smile slowly spread across her face and the eyes flew open again.

"Oh my God!" she shouted. "You did, didn't you? You really did, Peacock."

And there was the scream again. Right in my fucking ear this time.

“Oh, I can’t believe it,” she said. “You’re an absolute star. I should’ve known it.”

And she jumped up out of the chair and hit me with yet another bombshell.

“You got me that kitten,” she said. “Didn’t you?”

And I’ll tell you what, they were fair falling thick and fast now. I didn’t even know what kitten she was talking about, but I could see it was pretty close to putting me in the shit, whatever kitten it was.

“Oh, Peacock,” she said. “Can I get it now. Can I? It’s nearly midnight. It’ll be my birthday in five minutes. Can I get it now, Peacock?”

My brain was whirling like a dynamo but nothing much was happening. There didn’t appear to be any wee ideas coming to the surface, and I just kind of stared at her.

“What’s its name?” she said, pushing in beside me again. “Has it already got a name or can I give it one of my own? How about Snowy? Oh I’m so excited I think I’m going to pee myself.”

She rushed off to the bathroom and I put my head in my hands. I knew I had to think quickly. I knew there must be something in there somewhere, just waiting for me to make contact with it, and it turned out I was right. By the time she came back I’d managed to get something together, and it looked pretty good, considering.

“Okay,” I said. “Listen to me, hen. I’ll tell you what I’ve done here. I left the kitten in with Jinky downstairs, so’s you wouldn’t know about it. He’s been looking after it for the last couple of days for me. So you get yourself a drink, and I’ll nip down and grab it, okay?”

She started giggling.

“Go and get that drink,” I told her, and she headed towards the kitchen.

“Can I call it Snowy?” she asked me.

“You can call it whatever you like, hen,” I told her.

“Snowy. I’m going to call it Snowy.”

“Okay. On you go. I’ll be back up in a minute.”

She disappeared for a few seconds and then she popped her head back round the door.

“Peacock,” she said, and I nodded.

“What is it?” I asked her.

“Tell wee Jinky I was sorry to hear about him and Laura,” she said, and I nodded again.

“I will, hen,” I told her. “I will.” Then she disappeared for the second time, and I headed for the door.

It was a two-parter, the plan. And the second part of it depended on wee Jinky being compos mentis, which was quite a lot to ask considering the state he’d been in for the past few days. His fiancée had pulled the plug on their wedding with just a week to go, and the wee man had taken it pretty hard. He still didn’t look too clever when he came to the door. He had a duvet wrapped round his shoulders and a hankie up at his face, and it was pretty clear he’d been bawling his eyes out a few minutes beforehand. Still, he was all I had, so I had to take my chances.

“I need your help, son,” I told him, as he stood there wiping his nose, and he didn’t say a word. He just held the door open to let me in and led the way through to the kitchen.

“What are you after?” he said when we got there, and I told him he’d been looking after a kitten for me.

“A wee fluffy white thing,” I said “For the wife’s birthday. Like a wee ball of cotton wool.”

He started looking about the kitchen, then he put his duvet down on a chair and rubbed his nose again.

“Have you got it?” I asked him.

“Peacock...” he said.

“Come on, Jinky,” I told him. “It’s not hard, son. You were looking after a kitten. Have you got that much at least?”

“But I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember what?”

“The kitten.”

“There *was* no kitten, son. That’s the point. That’s what I’m trying to tell you here.”

He sat down on top of his duvet and put his head in his hands.

“I don’t think I can handle this,” he said. “It’s too much, Peacock.”

I had the feeling he was about to turn on the waterworks again, so I went to the toilet and gave him a chance to pull himself together. I didn’t want him embarrassing himself in front of me like that, and I took my time in there. When I got back he was boiling the kettle and setting up a couple of mugs.

“Sorry about that,” he said. “I got a bit confused, I think. What is it that’s happening here again?”

I took a deep breath and sat down at the kitchen table.

“The wife thinks I got her a kitten for her birthday,” I said. “That’s all. I don’t know how the idea got into her head, but I had to think pretty quickly up there. She wanted it right away so I told her you were looking after the thing, and now I’m going back up there to tell her you went out this afternoon and left the window open, and when you came back it was gone. Alright?”

“I what?”

“You went out and left the window open.”

“Jesus Christ, Peacock...”

“Are you with me now?”

“So it’s my fault the thing went missing?”

“Aye. Well, up to a point. It’s really my fault for being daft enough to leave it with you in the first place, but that’s the general idea.”

“Thanks a lot,” he said. “You’re a real pal.”

“So if she asks you...”

“Aye, aye. If she asks me I went out and left the window open.”

“That’s it, son,” I said. “You’re a lifesaver.”

“Are you wanting any milk in this?” he asked me.

“In what?”

“In your coffee.”

“I better not,” I told him. “I’d better get back upstairs. She’s up there waiting for the kitten.”

“Just stay for a wee while,” he said, but I shook my head.

“I’m sorry, son. I’ve got to get up there.”

Then a wee idea occurred to me.

“Listen to me, Jinky,” I said. “Have you cancelled the stag night yet?”

He shook his head.

“That’s good,” I told him. “I’ll tell you what, we’ll still go through with that, right? Don’t tell anybody else the wedding’s off, and I’ll get them all there and you’ll have a right good night.”

He stared at me.

“I don’t think I could handle that,” he said.

“Of course you could,” I told him. “No problem. I’m your best man, right?”

He looked at me.

“Am I right?”

He nodded.

“Right. So I know what’s best for you, then. I know what you need. Trust me, son. You’ll have a rare time. And it’s the least I can do for you after this.”

He picked up the duvet and I started making my way to the door.

“Stay for that coffee,” he said, and I told him that I wished I could.

“I really do,” I said, “But I’ve got a crisis on my hands here. I’ve got to get up there and sort it out.”

I stepped out into the close and then something occurred to me. “Hang on a minute,” I said, just as he was closing the door, and he looked at me with a wee bit of hope in his eyes. “Have you ever heard of a guy called Rebus?” I asked him, and he thought about it for a minute.

“Him that knocks about with Tony Dowds?” he said. “The guy that got his mother-in-law pregnant?”

I shook my head.

“Never mind, son,” I told him. “I’ll talk to you about it later. But remember what I said about that stag night.”

And as I headed for the stairs, I asked him to wish me luck.

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The wife just about knocked me over when I got back up there. She came running out of the living room and just missed me, then she started jumping up and down in the hall. She was so excited I almost didn't have the heart to go through with it, but when she saw the look on my face, and realized I was empty handed she started to calm down.

"What's happened?" she asked me.

I put my head down.

"What's happened, Peacock. Tell me. Is everything alright?"

"There's been a wee bit of a mishap, hen."

"To wee Jinky? Is Jinky alright?"

"He's fine, hen. He's fine. Well, he's in a bit of a state. But apart from that he's fine."

"So what's happened? Where's Snowy?"

"Well that's the thing. Don't get too annoyed at the wee man, he's not thinking straight. But he went out for a wee while this afternoon, and he left the window open, and when he got back..."

"Snowy was gone?"

"That's it."

"Do you think she'll come back?"

"I don't know. I don't think..."

"Maybe she will."

"Well... But don't get too angry at Jinky. He's having a hard time, Bev. It's probably my fault. I shouldn't have left it with him, knowing the state he's in."

"It's not your fault, Peacock. It was a wonderful thing to do for me. And I think she'll come back. I know she will. In fact, I'm going to put a saucer of milk out on the

front step for her just now. That'll bring her back. I know it will."

She threw her arms round my neck and gave me a big kiss on the cheek, then she ran to the kitchen and started clattering about in there. By the time I had the jacket off she was rushing past me with her saucer of milk and heading out into the close. I grabbed a beer and went to stand at the window.

You should have seen her down there. She put the saucer on the step and then she sat down beside it. She clapped her hands a few times and then made this wee pout, and I could tell she was making what she thought was a sound that would attract a kitten.

You should have seen her.

It would have broken your fucking heart.

## 2

So we spent a sizeable chunk of the next day over at the mother-in-law's bit, celebrating the wife's birthday. Usually I would have done whatever I could to get out of it, even with the opportunity to pick the brother-in-law's brains about the Rebus thing on offer. But I'd watched the wife going down to check her saucer of milk again in the morning, and bringing it up to the kitchen untouched. Then I'd watched her refilling it with fresh cream and sitting beside it out on the doorstep for about another half hour, while she

pouted and clapped and made her strange wee kitten noises again. After that I didn't have the heart for coming up with any more bright ideas, so I resigned myself to spending an afternoon with her daft family.

And it started just about as soon as we got there. We got there before the sister and her man, and as soon as we were in the door the wee comments started to fly. They started making the wee digs. Bev told the mother I'd gotten her the kitten and it was, "Very nice. Oh, that's lovely. I wonder where he got the money for that, eh, Beverley?" With a wee sideways look at me.

"A wee stray from the pound, eh, Peacock?" the father-in-law said.

Ten minutes in and they were already asking me when I was going to start working properly.

"He's got a few ideas he's trying out with wee Jinky," the wife said, and I watched that one sinking like it had hit an iceberg. She carried on trying her best though. "Did you hear about wee Jinky?" she asked the mother. "Him and Laura? The wedding's off. Jinky's heartbroken."

"We heard from your sister," the mother said. "I can't say I've met the girl, but I'm sure she's better off. I'm sure she's made the right decision."

"Mum! That's terrible. There's nothing wrong with wee Jinky."

"Well, that's all I'm saying. I don't know *him* too well either. But I'm sure the girl could do better for herself."

Then the father stepped in. "So what else did you get for your birthday, Beverley?" he asked.

The wife looked at me.

"That was all, dad. Just the kitten. Oh, but she's lovely. You should see her. Snowy, I've called her. She's all white and fluffy. And she's toaty. Isn't she, Peacock? She's just toaty. And she's got these lovely wee pink eyes."

"That'll be a lot of looking after," the mother said. "That's you got two strays to keep your eye on now, hen."

The father-in-law laughed. Then he gave me a daft wee wink.

To give the father-in-law his due, he's not always as bad as his wife. At one point

I used to think we were going to end up getting on alright, but he's never quite got over the night the two of them were over visiting at our place and I came in a wee bit the worse for wear. I'd probably been out with Jinky again. I don't quite remember. I don't quite remember what happened when I got in either, but the rest of them have never forgotten it. I was steaming, you see, and I was lying on the floor at the foot of Bev's chair. So I was just lying there, and her leg was just sitting there, right in front of me. And apparently I was stroking her leg. And I got a bit carried away, and I kept moving higher up her leg till I was somewhere up in her skirt. That was all. Nothing too heavy or anything. The problem was, it turned out not to be the wife's leg at all, it turns out it was the mother-in-law's. And me and the father-in-law have never quite gotten by that. It's become a wee bit of a barrier to the development of our relationship, as they say.

"Your sister and William said they'd be here about two," the mother-in-law said then. She turned round and looked at the clock. "Did you hear they got that place in Tenerife they were after?"

"No."

"Did she not tell you about it? Oh, Beverley- it's out of this world. She brought the brochure round to show me the other day. I couldn't believe it. It's like a mansion. It's got its own pool. Four bedrooms. Hasn't it, Robert."

"Aye."

"Unbelievable. And she said any of us can have a wee holiday there whenever we fancy it. You should get your name down early, Beverley."

"That sounds great, mum. Doesn't it, Peacock?"

I nodded, but it was just about the last thing I needed to hear.

"That man of hers has got a head on his shoulders," the mother-in-law said. "I've always said that. I always knew he'd go far. You could learn a thing or two from him, my boy."

"I'm doing just fine, Mrs. Cuthbertson," I told her.

"Oh, I know you are," she said. "I bloody well know you are. That's the trouble. You're doing just fine while this daughter of mine has to slave away at the call center, keeping you in your fancy clothes. It's about time you took some of the weight off her

shoulders. You've got her a nervous wreck. She never knows..."

Luckily I was saved by the bell. It isn't often the arrival of the sister-in-law and her husband brighten up my day, but I was thankful for them turning up this time. The mother went to let them in, and the father got up out of his seat.

"A wee drink, Peacock?" he said.

"That would be magic, Mr. Cuthbertson. Not too much though. You never know what might transpire between me and your wife if I have too much."

Nothing. Not even a smile. He just turned his back on me and went to get the drink.

And the wife gave me a wee pat on the arm.

\*

I'll tell you what though, the mother's mood fair changed the minute the brother-in-law came through the door. She was like a different woman. And she seemed to forget that I was there altogether, which was a bit of a boon.

So in came the sister and the brother-in-law, carrying the biggest fucking parcel I'd ever seen. Big green bow on top, wrapped up in paper with pictures of teddy bears on it. The father fought his way round it to give the sister a kiss, then he stood shaking hands with the brother-in-law, congratulating him about the villa in Tenerife, while the sister staggered over to Bev under the weight of the parcel.

Bev was flying high again.

"Is this for me, Marianne? Oh my God. Look at the size of that, Peacock. That's terrible, Marianne. You shouldn't have done that. Tell her, Peacock."

The brother-in-law had managed to escape from the father and he made his way across for his share of the appreciation as well.

"Happy Birthday, Beverley," he said, giving her a wee kiss. Then he came and sat down beside me.

"Can I open it now?" Bev asked, and the father told her to wait till the mother got back from hanging the coats up. He asked the sister and brother-in-law what they

wanted to drink, while Bev squeezed my leg and pointed at the parcel. And by the time he'd sorted them out the mother had arrived back in the room for the ceremony.

"That's a beautiful jacket you're wearing just now, Marianne," she said. "I was having a look at it through there. Where did you get that from?"

"Jenners'," the sister said. "Billy bought it for my birthday."

"You're a lucky girl, Marianne. I hope you know that."

"Okay, Beverley," the father said. "Let's see what you've got there."

He came over into the wee circle, and Bev started ripping in to the wrapping paper. There was a moment when you could hardly see her for dust, and then the thing appeared in front of us. A dirty great cat's basket.

"Oh my God!" Bev shouted, and the mother turned to the sister.

"How did you *know*, Marianne?" she asked.

"Bev told me what Peacock was getting her. I hope you *did* get her it, Peacock."

I nodded, and the sister breathed out loudly.

"That's a relief," she said. "I was a bit worried you might have changed your mind."

Bev pulled away the bit of paper that was still underneath the basket, and then lifted the thing up to have a proper look at it. The whole bloody thing was made of leather.

"This is just beautiful," the wife said. "I can't believe it, Marianne. And Billy. Oh, thank you. Snowy's going to just love this, isn't she, Peacock? She'll be like a wee princess in there."

The mother started gathering up the paper and then she picked up a card that was lying on the table.

"This is for you too, hen," she said. "From me and your dad."

"Thanks, mum," the wife said, and she ripped into the card. There was some kind of joke on the front about getting older and the wife laughed at it. Then when she opened it up a big wad of notes fell out from inside. It looked like about a hundred quid.

"Oh, mum," Bev said quietly.

The mother finished picking up the rest of the paper and then screwed it all up

into a ball.

"That should help take some of the weight off, hen," she said getting up off the floor. "Happy birthday."

She came and gave Bev a kiss, then she took the ball of paper through to the kitchen, and the wife went and gave her old man a kiss as well.

"Thanks, dad," she said. "This is really too much, you know."

But the father-in-law just gave her his trademark wink, then the sister and the brother-in-law started asking the wife all about her kitten again, and the wife went to work on the details.

\*

The day just seemed to go on and on. We had our wee bit of lunch, and the wife blew out some candles on a cake. Then the sister-in-law brought out the brochure for the place in Tenerife, and we had to hear all about that in great detail. I was just about at the end of my rope by the time I got away from the table. I found myself a seat in the corner of the room and kept the head down, deciding I'd trawl about on the internet for that Rebus thing when I got home, rather than risk unleashing another torrent of the brother-in-law's pish by getting into anything with him. It seemed like a fair enough plan. It seemed just about enough to keep me sane, and I'm pretty sure it would have done, if it hadn't been for the fact that, the very minute I decided to go with it, the brother-in-law came charging across the room towards me and threw himself down on the chair beside mine.

"So how's business?" he asked me. "Is life treating you well?"

And I cursed myself blind at that moment for having bothered to come at all; kitten fiasco or otherwise.

Let me tell you what the trouble with the brother-in-law is; the real problem with him is that he's forgotten he's scum, just like me. That's the fact of the matter. He had one wee

bit of luck a long, long time ago, and now he's decided to forget that that's the only difference between us. I'll tell you what though; I could fair tell the mother-in-law some stories about him, if it ever took my fancy. Some fine fucking tales. The trouble is, I know for a fact she wouldn't believe a word of it. He's minted now, and that's that. That's all that matters, apparently.

But the real pisser is that he's only ever had one idea in his entire life. And even that fell right into his lap. I've got ideas coming out of my ears, night and fucking day, but he has this one, and for some jammy reason his one idea pays off. And pays off big time.

I'll tell you what it was he did. He was knocking about like the rest of us, signing on- into a bit of this and a bit of that, going nowhere. And then this mate of his old man's writes a book. The brother-in-law had never read a book in his life, but his old man forced him to read this one, kept banging on at him till he did. And then, all of a sudden like, the brother-in-law decides it's a fucking masterpiece.

Fuck knows what he had to compare it against, besides the cartoons in The Daily Record- and forget that every publisher this guy had sent the book to had told him it was rotten. None of that bothered the brother-in-law. Not a jot. He decided it was a masterpiece, and then he decided he was going to scrape the money together to print it up himself. Print it up and put it out.

That was it; that was his one half-baked, shite-arsed idea. And for some unfathomable reason it worked. He talked some idiot at The Daily Record into writing a wee bit about it, about how he'd rescued this Scottish "genius" from the ignorance of the English publishing world, and he sold every copy he'd printed. Then he printed more, and on it went. The whole thing just snowballed; Frank McAlpine kept writing the books, the brother-in-law kept printing them up, and the upshot of it is that I've had nothing but grief about it ever since.

"So what's the latest Big Idea?" he asked me. "Have you got something on the go at the moment?"

"Ach, you know me..." I told him. "I've got a couple of things. A few things with

wee Jinky, here and there."

He shook his head.

"Poor wee Jinky," he said. "Is it right enough what I hear about him and Frank McAlpine's daughter? The wedding's off?"

"Seems to be," I said. "The wee man's devastated."

"He must be. Mind you, that wedding's been causing me no end of trouble. Every time I've tried to line up some promotion for this new book for Frank it's been, "Wait till the wedding's over, Billy. Wait till I get this wedding out the way." Have you read his new book yet?"

"I can't say I have, Bill."

"It's a corker. The best yet. I'll get a copy to you."

"Cheers."

He sat back in his chair, nodding away to himself, apparently just remembering how brilliant this new book was. Then he had another go at me.

"So how about that thing you were working on over in the States?" he said. "How did that go?"

"Fell flat on its arse. As per usual."

"I'm sorry to hear that," he lied. "But remember, if there's ever anything I can do for you, don't hesitate to ask. Just say the word." And since it looked like I was stuck with him anyway, and the last thing I wanted was for him to get back onto that Frank McAlpine book again, I decided I might as well try and get something out of the day, and I went for it.

"There might be one thing you could do for me," I told him, and he looked as pleased as punch.

"Just name it," he said.

"What do you know about this thing Rebus?" I asked him. "Have you ever heard of that?"

"Rankin?" he said, and I shook my head.

"Rebus," I told him.

He nodded.

“Rankin,” he said again. “The Rebus books.”

I started to get a bit wound up. “This thing I’m talking about is on the telly,” I told him, but he was still nodding away.

“That’s right. Ken Stott. Based on the Rankin books.”

That fair got my attention, I can tell you that.

“What was that name again?” I asked him.

“Rankin. Ian Rankin. He’s McAlpine’s main competition.”

“And he writes the books about this Rebus guy?”

The brother-in-law nodded.

“Have you ever read any of them?” I asked him, and he told me he’d read a couple.

“Just to survey the lie of the land,” he said. “You’ve got to know what you’re up against.”

“How about one called ‘A Question of Blood’?” I asked him. “Have you ever read that?”

He thought about it for a minute, then said he didn’t think he had.

“Should I?” he asked me, and I told him it probably wasn’t worth the effort, but I didn’t go into it any deeper than that. I had what I wanted. I had the wee nugget I came for, so I let it drop. Which, in hindsight, was obviously a mistake, because it left the way wide open for him to get back onto the subject of Frank McAlpine again, and he went for it like a man possessed; into how he’d just known as soon as he read that first McAlpine book that there was something there. Into how he couldn’t have predicted just *how* successful the books would be- who could have?- but how he’d known there was just something. Into how this book was going to surpass all the others. Into sales figures and chart positions and all kinds of shite that just about had me on my knees screaming blue murder, and begging to be dragged away to an asylum with padded walls and silence, and a lock on the inside of the door. And on it went for just about the rest of the afternoon, till the sister-in-law mercifully called a halt to it, and decided it was time for them to go.

\*

Then, on the way home in the taxi, just to finish the day off nicely, I had a wee bit of a set to with the wife. Everything started off alright. We climbed into it with the big kitten basket between us, while the sister and brother-in-law waved to us and drove off in his BMW or Mercedes, or whatever it is. And the wife binged on for a wee while about the basket, and the kitten, and whether it might be there when we got back home, and how nice the lunch had been. I asked her how she'd known I was going to get her the kitten- how she'd been confident enough to tell the sister-in-law about it- and she said it was just obvious.

"I made sure you would get me it," she said. "You'd have to be a moron to miss all the hints I was dropping, wouldn't you?"

"I suppose I would, hen," I admitted.

"I probably over did it. But I just wanted to make sure."

"So how come you never told them the cat escaped?" I asked her.

"Cause they'd have thought it was your fault," she said. "Or mum would have anyway. And then she'd have had something to say about it."

We were quiet for a bit, and then I asked her what the money they'd given her was all about.

"I don't know," she said. "That was weird, wasn't it? I was just really embarrassed."

"But what was it all about?"

"How do you mean?"

"It didn't just come out of nowhere, Bev. What were you telling her?"

"About what?"

"I don't know about what. If I knew about what I wouldn't be asking you, would I? But if there wasn't something, she wouldn't have given it to you."

"I think it's just for my birthday."

"Come on, Bev. Don't be daft. What was all that other crap she was giving it about you being a nervous wreck, and about the money taking a load off you? What have you

been telling her?"

"I haven't been saying anything, Peacock. Honest."

"Aye, right."

"I haven't. Honestly. I don't know where she got it all from, but I haven't been saying anything to her about any of that."

"About any of what?"

"About you not making any money, and us having to get by on my wages from the call centre."

"Is that what you've been telling her?"

"*Listen* to me, Peacock. I haven't been telling her *anything*."

"But you've been thinking it."

"Thinking what?"

"All that stuff."

"Well it's true, isn't it? How would I not have been thinking it if it's true. But I haven't said anything to mum about it. I swear to God."

I shook my head. I shook my head and I looked out the window.

"What?" Bev asked.

I didn't answer.

"What is it now? What have I done?"

"Nothing."

"How come you're being like that then?"

I kept looking out the window for a while.

"Do you want me to be like that tit your sister's married to?" I asked her. "Is that what all this is about?"

"All what, Peacock? Is that what all *what* is about?"

"This. The money in the card. I'm trying to make things work, hen. I've got ideas coming out of my ears. But if you'd rather I was like Smail the golden boy..."

"Peacock, I don't know what any of this is about."

"What the fuck is he anyway, hen? He had fuck all till that one writer came along. And that's all he's got. He's got a bunch of idiots who like Frank McAlpine's books, and

if McAlpine fucked off tomorrow he'd have fuck all. Nothing, Bev. He had one idea, and he got lucky with it, and that's his fucking whack..."

It was her turn to shake her head. She sighed and looked out her own window. And we were quiet from then till the taxi stopped outside the close, and we piled out with the fucking basket.

"It's supposed to be my birthday," she said as we walked down the street.

"I know."

"So?"

"I'm sorry, hen. That guy and your mother just wind me up."

"I know that. But you don't have to take it out on me."

"Fair enough. Fair enough. Do you want me to take you out for a wee bit of dinner later on, for your birthday?"

But she wasn't listening. She was staring.

"Look, Peacock," she said. "Look. There's no milk left in the saucer."

I opened the door and she picked it up.

"It could have been another cat," I told her. "Or wee Jinky. He might have drank it himself. He's not thinking too straight at the minute."

But there was no telling her. As soon as we got in she put the basket in the corner of the kitchen, and went to get some blankets to put in it. She fluffed it all up and then poured some milk into her saucer, and she disappeared out to the front step.

I looked out of the window now and again and she was just sitting there. Sometimes making her cat-attracting noise, sometimes not. She sat out there for a long, long time, but no cats came anywhere near her.

### 3

I had a hell of a time convincing Jinky he still needed to have his stag night. He just wasn't into the idea. He kept telling me that all he wanted to do was forget about it, that he didn't want to see anybody, that it would only be embarrassing for him. But I knew that was exactly why he needed to have it.

"You don't want to let this thing beat you, son," I kept telling him. "You need to get out there and enjoy yourself. Show everybody it's business as usual. "

"But I'm cracking up, Peacock."

"That's not the point. You deserve this. It'll be your night. Am I right?"

He kept telling me I wasn't, but I knew I was, and in the end he saw sense. We kept all the arrangements just exactly as they had been for the past few weeks, and we didn't tell anybody else the wedding was off. I knew he needed to have a big bunch of pals round about him just to see how many people cared about him. And I knew if I could just get him convinced to turn up for it that he'd feel a lot better.

So the arrangement was eight o'clock in The Horse Shoe Bar, and we'd see where things went from there.

The trouble was, I was wee bit late in getting there myself. I'd had a few things to take care of in town first, a few things that came up at the last minute. And I was a bit concerned the wee man might not show up without me to get him there. It was a hell of a night as well. The rain was bucketing, and the taxis were chock-a-block. So it was nearly nine bells when I finally got there. I hadn't had any need to worry about the wee man though. He was there. He hadn't let me down. The only problem was, he was sitting off in a corner, away from everybody else. Head down. Soaking wet.

I went and got myself a pint and then squeezed in beside him.

"What's up, son?" I asked him.

He didn't look at me. Just shrugged.

"What are you sitting over here on your own for?"

He pushed his mobile phone, which was sitting on the table.

"There's only me here," he said. "Nobody else showed up."

"What?" I looked about the place. I'd thought the rest of them were already in there, and the wee man was just away in a huff. But he was right enough. I didn't recognize a single face.

"I've had a few texts," he said. "Malky isn't coming. Andy sent a message as well. McClive. They all heard the wedding was off so they didn't see the point."

"They didn't see the *point*?" I said. "The fucking bastards, son. This is when you need them the most. That's the fucking point. Give me that phone."

I picked up the mobile and stared at it.

"How do I use this thing?" I asked him.

"Press the red button."

I was just looking for the red button when the thing started ringing. I near enough shat myself. I handed it back to wee Jinky.

He pushed a button and then looked at it.

"Anderson," he said. "That's him and MacGowan bailed as well. It looks like it's just you and me, Peacock."

I felt bad for him.

"Is that you heard from everybody?" I asked.

"Pretty much," he said. "Everybody I can think of."

So we spent a miserable wee half hour in there. I tried my best to cheer him up, but there was precious little I could do about it on my own. It was hard to argue against the case that none of his mates gave a shit about him, and that this was about as bad a night as he could have under the circumstances. We were just trying to decide whether to call it a night or to have another drink when his phone rang again.

He picked it up and spoke into it this time.

"Hello..." he said. "Aye... Right... Aye... Aye, it's still on. No, don't worry about it. Nah... Are you?... Oh... Aye,okay... Aye, are you sure?... Right... No, that's fine... No problem... Okay... Okay, aye...Okay, I'll see you in a minute then... Cheers...Aye, cheers."

He stared at me as he put the phone back down, and I started to feel a wee bit

better.

"Who have we got?" I asked him, but he just kept staring at me.

"Henderson?" I said, and he shook his head.

"John Jack?"

He shook the head again. "Come on, Jinky." I said. "The suspense is killing me here. Who the fuck have we got?"

He picked the phone up again and pressed a button, as if he was checking to make sure he hadn't made a mistake. Then he held it up to me and pointed at the screen. I read the name.

"Frank McAlpine?"

He nodded.

"Brilliant, son," I said. "Good on him, Jinky. That's more fucking like it."

Jinky looked at the phone again.

"It's a bit weird though," he said.

"What's weird about it?"

"How do you mean, 'What's weird about it?' He's the father of the fucking bride, Peacock."

"So?"

"So? So the wedding's off. Had you forgotten?"

"What are you on? Of course I hadn't forgotten. And neither's big Frank. Are you with me? It's everybody else that's forgotten, Jinky. That's the point."

He put the phone down on the table.

"I still think it's going to be weird," he said, but I told him it was going to be fine. I told him we'd have a rare old time, now that Frank was coming. I knew he'd start to feel better now that somebody else was turning up. And McAlpine was as good as his word. Five minutes after he'd phoned the door banged open, and we watched him looking about the place until he saw us, then the big bear paw shot up in the air and he folded up his umbrella.

I'd never really met the guy before. I'd seen him across the room at a couple of things the brother-in-law had dragged us along to, but that was it. Sitting across the table from us he looked fucking massive. He started pulling his raincoat off and it was like the sail of a ship.

"How are we for drinks?" he asked us, and we showed him that we were fine. Jinky got up to go and get one for him, but Frank told him to sit back down.

"I just wanted to drop in and see how you were getting on," he said. "I'll make myself scarce before the rest of them get here and the party really gets going. I'm sure you don't want me hanging about for too long."

"Nonsense, Frank," I said. "Besides, pal, this is as jumping as it's going to get. Everybody else has let him down."

McAlpine stared at wee Jinky.

"You're having me on," he said.

Jinky shook his head.

"For Christ sake," McAlpine shouted. "That's out of order. That's not on, Gordon. What kind of arseholes wouldn't turn up on a night like this? This is when you need them the most."

"That's what I've been telling him," I said.

"Right then."

He folded his massive coat up and put it under the table. Then he stood up and took his wallet out.

"Let's make a night of this," he said. "What are you both drinking?"

And despite wee Jinky's protests that he didn't want another drink, McAlpine disappeared to the bar, and I tried my best to get wee Jinky into the spirit of the thing, tried to get him out of his shell and ready to enjoy himself.

I'll tell you one thing about Frank McAlpine though, he could fair put the drink away. And he wasn't shy about buying it either. I don't think he let me or wee Jinky buy another round from then on in. And although he'd started out a wee bit nervous seeming when he first sat down, he was soon the life and soul of the thing. It wasn't long before he was telling wee Jinky that no matter what had happened recently he would still consider Jinky to be his son-in-law anyway.

"I'm serious, Gordon," he said. "I expect to see you round at the house as often as I did in the past. I enjoy your company. Don't be shy about just turning up whenever you feel like it. I mean it. We'll use the swimming pool, play some snooker. Whatever you want."

"You've got a swimming pool?" I said. "You should have told me about this before, Jinks. I could have been round there with you."

"The invitation extends to you too, Peacock," McAlpine said. "Bring him with you whenever you want, Gordon. The more the merrier."

Wee Jinky looked like he might start crying for a minute, but then he got a hold on it.

"I'll tell you what my favorite thing over there is," he said, "I really like the fish, Frank. Just standing out there when..."

He was struggling again, so McAlpine stepped in and took the pressure off him.

"I've got a big pond, Peacock," he said. "Koi Carp. I've got a couple of prize winners in there."

"They're magic," Jinky said. "You should see the pond at night. All lit up. There's a wee bridge goes across. Wee trees. It's like you were in Japan."

"What the hell are Koi Carp?" I said.

"Fish," Jinky answered. "Like in the Botanics. You know the pond there, in the greenhouse?"

I nodded.

"That's them. That's Koi carp."

"And you can win prizes for that?"

McAlpine assured me that you could.

"There's good money in it," he said. "In fact there's one belter of a fish in that pond at the Botanics that I wouldn't mind getting my hands on. Christ knows what they're doing with it, but I could win some prizes with that. It's not all about the prizes though, Peacock. There's a lot of enjoyment just standing out there watching them. It's soothing. Calms me down. Helps when I'm stuck with the writing."

"I loved standing out there with Laura," the wee man said, and then he stopped. He hung his head and some rain dripped off his hair into the pint glass in front of him. McAlpine gave me a wee look.

"What was it that happened between you anyway, Gordon?" he said quietly. "I mean, I thought everything was going great."

Wee Jinky just shrugged and kept the head down.

"She decided she was too good for him," I said in the end, and Jinky gave me a

right dirty wee look.

“Give it a break, Peacock,” he said. “Just give it a rest.”

“What?” I asked him. “What’s the problem, son? That’s what she said, isn’t it?”

“Hardly, Peacock. Hardly.”

“Well what did she say then?”

He gave me the look again, and then he turned to McAlpine.

"She said she didn't think she could realize her full potential if she stayed with me, Frank. Something like that."

"Aww, come on, son," I said. "Come on, Jinky. That only means one thing from where I'm sitting."

McAlpine shook his head.

"That's rotten, Gordon," he whispered. "Rotten. I wish there was something I could do about it, son, I really do. There's no talking to her. She's got herself a place on a course in Bristol and she says she's moving there at the start of the week."

"You're better off anyway, Jinky," I told him, trying to cheer him up. "You'll realize that in the long run. I'm telling you, son, it's nothing but trouble. Look at the mess I've got myself in at the minute with this kitten thing. It's never fucking ending."

That didn't seem to help any though. The wee man started swallowing, then he excused himself and ran off to the toilet.

"Poor wee bugger," McAlpine said when he was gone. "I feel for him. I really do. Mind you, you're probably right enough, Peacock."

“How do you mean, Frank?”

“About him being better off. You’re probably right there.”

“No offence though, Frank. I didn’t mean anything about your daughter.”

“Not at all, Peacock. Not at all. I know exactly what you mean. It just never stops. It’s endless. What’s this thing you were mentioning about a kitten?”

"Ach," I said. I shook my head and told him the whole sorry story about the mess I'd made of Bev's birthday. He seemed to find it quite amusing. These writer's are all the fucking same. They love to hear about you making a tit of things.

"Forgive me asking, Peacock," he said eventually. "How come you didn't just tell her Gordon was out when you went to get the kitten. Then you could have bought one the next morning and told her you'd just picked it up from Gordon's when you got

back."

I looked at him for a wee minute.

"Ah, well you see, Frank," I said, "There was a good reason for that, pal. A very good reason."

"I thought there must be. What was it?"

"That I'm a fucking half-wit. The idea didn't even cross my mind till you mentioned it there."

He had a right good old laugh to himself over that.

"So why don't you just buy her one now?" he asked me. "Carry it in and tell her you found it out there on the step at the saucer of milk. Or leave it down there for her to find herself?"

"Do you know what I think?" I asked him.

"What's that?"

"I think we could be dangerous together, pal."

He laughed again and drained the rest of his pint just as wee Jinky was squeezing back in behind the table.

"Let me get us all another one," McAlpine said. "Same again, Gordon?" He looked at the stack of untouched pints that were building up in front of wee Jinky on the table. "Maybe not, eh? What about you, Peacock? Same again?"

I nodded and he stood up.

"Hold that thought," he said, and while he was gone I tried to figure out how Jinky was bearing up. He seemed to be a wee bit better than when he'd left, but he was hardly getting into the party spirit yet.

"What's with all these untouched pints?" I asked him. "Look at them, Jinks. You need to make a start on one of those."

"I'm not really in the mood, Peacock," he said. "I'm thinking I might head off."

"Don't talk shite," I told him. "Come on, son. We're just getting started here." I picked up one of his glasses and put it in his hand. He just looked at me, so I took a hold of his hand and guided the thing towards his lips. The things I do for that wee guy. Jesus Christ.

"That's more like it," McAlpine said when he got back. "I was starting to worry about you, Gordon."

He put another drink down in front of me, and gave wee Jinky a pat on the back.

"So," he said, when he'd sat down and finished off a good amount of his own drink in the first go. "Tell me a wee bit about what you boys have got on at the minute. What's the latest scheme?"

I looked at the wee man. I wasn't sure how much McAlpine knew about the sort of things we got up to. I'd no idea how honest wee Jinky had been with him.

"We're struggling a bit at the minute, Frank," I told him, hedging my bets. "Struggling to get anything off the ground."

Jinky nodded.

"We'd that thing going with the car for a wee while..." he said. "But since that..."

"What was that all about?" McAlpine asked.

"The thing with the car?"

He nodded. "I've always been in the dark about exactly what it is the two of you do," he said. "Give me a wee idea."

Me and the wee man looked at each other.

"You'll have to keep this to yourself, Frank," I told him.

"Not a problem," he said.

So we told him about it. Basically what we'd been doing for the past wee while was working with a couple of old classic cars we'd bought. They'd been registered in my name. I'd used one of them at a time. Kept it outside the house. Then once in a while wee Jinky would come along and swipe it. And stupidly, I'd have left the log book and that in the glove compartment, so wee Jinks wouldn't have any trouble selling it to some daft collector. Then I'd give the police a wee call, tell them the car had been stolen. A few days or a few weeks later and the car would be found and returned. If the police were dragging their heels I'd maybe give them a wee phone and tell them I thought I'd seen it in this guy or that guy's driveway. And the beauty of it was, when you buy a stolen car the money you've paid for it's your loss. The police just come and take it away and give it back to the owner. It was an absolute peach of an idea. Me and the wee man would just split what he'd sold it for, wait a wee while, and then do it all over again with the other car.

"And the police never got suspicious?" McAlpine asked.

"They were starting to. That's how come we've had to jack it in. And the insurance

was starting to go through the roof. It was eating into the profit margin. I just sold the cars recently and we cut our losses."

"I like it though," McAlpine said. He sat back, staring off into space and he shook his head.

"Don't go telling anybody about it, mind," I said.

"No worries," he said. "Not a chance, Peacock. I've been into a wee bit of this and that in my time as well, you don't need to worry about that."

"What sort of thing?" I asked him.

"Eh?"

"What sort of thing have you been into yourself?"

"Ach, nothing too clever. Just a few wee things before the writing took off. My main trick was I'd go to somebody's door in the afternoon, tell them I was a builder and I was going to be doing a wee bit of work on next door's place. But I was a considerate builder, you see. It was a pretty noisy job I was going to be doing. A lot of cutting bricks and jack-hammering and that. So I was just coming to check what hours they were going to be out of the house, so's I could stick to working then, and not disturb them. Then I'd know exactly when they were going to be out, you see?"

"That's not bad," I told him.

"It's not bad. But it's pretty pale next to yours. I could get a whole novel out of that."

"Aye, well don't," I told him. "I've just about had enough of that."

"Enough of what?"

Wee Jinky sighed. "Don't get him started, Frank." he said. But I could tell McAlpine was interested in what I was saying, and a wee idea had just struck me.

"Hang on a minute here," I said. "Just wait a wee second, Frank. I'll tell you what, now that I come to think about it, you might be the very man who can help me out here."

He looked intrigued.

"How come?" he asked me.

"I'm just thinking about the circles you move in," I told him. "About the company you keep. Do you happen to know the boy that writes the Rebus books?"

"Rankin?"

“That’s the one. Do you know him?”

“I wouldn’t say I know him. But I’ve bumped into him from time to time.”

“Brilliant.”

“Is it?”

“You’re fucking right it is, Frank. You’re fucking right it is.”

“How? What’s your idea?”

“No idea. I just want what he owes me. He put me into one of his books. Main character. Made me look a right tit as well.” And I set about laying the whole thing out for him.

I’d grabbed a hold of the book in question on the day after the wife’s birthday, so I was in full possession of all the facts now. And there was no doubt about it- it was me in there all right. I came clattering in on page ninety, with the immortal line, “And then there were men like Peacock Johnson,” and there was hardly a page that went by after that without me on it. The me in the book even looked like me, unlike the me on the telly. The only thing Rankin had changed was the moustache. He’d given me some wee pencil-thin lip-eyebrow, instead of allowing me the full majesty of the real thing, but the rest of it was spot on.

“So what do you think?” I asked McAlpine, when I’d told him all about it. “Can you help me out? Can you put me in touch with this Rankin bloke?”

“I might well be able to,” he said. “I maybe could, aye.”

Then he stopped and thought for a minute. “I’ll tell you what, though,” he said, after a bit, “How would the two of you feel about doing a wee job for me in return? A wee favour.”

“What are you after, Frank?” I asked him.

“Well you said you’re both struggling to get anything off the ground at the moment, is that right?”

“Pretty much.”

“Well I’d pay good money for that koi from the Botanics we were talking about earlier. Very good money.”

“Really?”

He nodded.

“I don’t know how you’d go about getting something like that out of there,” he

said, "But you've got an imagination on you, Peacock. I can see that. So..."

I turned to wee Jinky.

"We could certainly look into it," I said, and McAlpine nodded.

"That's all I'm asking at the moment," he told us.

"And that would pay well?"

"It certainly would."

"Nice one," I said. "Nice one. I'll tell you what, let me get the drinks this time. Come on, Jinky, get wired into one of them. I'm sick of looking at them all sitting there. Get on with it, son."

And off I went to the bar. Flying high.

## 4

I was in a bit of a state the next day. I'd a right belter of a hangover, and all I was fit for was lying on the couch with the curtains closed, letting out a wee moan every now and again. The wife was none too pleased about that though. Apparently I'd promised earlier in the week that I'd take her through to Edinburgh, as a wee belated birthday treat. But there was no way that was going to happen. If I'm being honest I couldn't even remember it having been discussed, but somehow she'd got it into her daft wee head that that was the plan. So I had to put up with her storming about the place into the bargain.

"Have you checked on wee Jinky yet?" she asked me about lunch time. I'd just been managing to drift off to sleep as well.

She started picking up magazines and newspapers and throwing them into a pile, and I lifted my hand off my eyes for a minute and tried to see her through the blinding sunshine.

"Can you do that later, hen?" I asked her. "I'm dying here."

"I cannot do it later, Peacock" she said. "When else do I get the time? This is my only day off. And I asked you a question. Have you checked on wee Jinky yet?"

I covered my eyes again.

"He'll be fine," I said. "I'll go and see him later."

"Go and see him now. That's terrible what you did to him. I thought you were supposed to be out cheering him up."

"We were, Bev. That was cheering him up. He was in a right misery all night. It's just a wee bit of fun."

She started throwing the magazines again.

"Get yourself down there and see if he's back. Anything could have happened to him."

"He'll be back, Bev. Don't worry about it. I'll go and see him in a wee while. He'll be laughing about it. Believe me."

It had been Frank McAlpine's idea anyway. We were both pretty gutted when it got to last orders, but we'd been getting on well together. Especially now that we were going into business. Jinky was still sitting with that table-full of untouched glasses in front of him, though. He'd hardly perked up all night. So just when we were getting ready to leave I made my way to the toilet, and when I was finishing up McAlpine came in and stood beside me.

"Great night, eh Peacock?" he said.

"Brilliant, Frank."

"Poor wee Gordon though. I think we should do something special for him. Try and make this a night to remember."

"What did you have in mind?"

He gave me a wee nudge in the ribs. "Just follow my lead," he said. "It's supposed to be a stag night after all."

So the three of us headed off down Renfield Street. It had been a bit of a heartbreaker to leave all those untouched pints sitting on the table, but me and McAlpine had had a bit of a go at them, and we couldn't get anywhere near finishing them before they were hustling us to get out of there. There was nothing we could do.

"How are you feeling?" McAlpine asked wee Jinky as we walked, and wee Jinky nodded.

"Not too bad," he said. "Thanks for both coming anyway. I appreciate it. Sorry I've not been great company."

"Not at all," McAlpine said. "Don't worry about it, Gordon. As long as you're feeling a bit better that's fine with us."

Then he grabbed wee Jinky's hands and started dancing with him. Jinky was laughing away. McAlpine did this graceful turn, so that he was behind Jinky but still holding his hands, and he started dancing Jinky backwards. Then he shouted to me.

"Right, Peacock," he said. "Help me out here."

Jinky had started to struggle a bit by then and he was trying to turn round to see what was going on, but McAlpine got me to take Jinky's hands and I held on tight. What had happened was, McAlpine had dragged him back so that Jinky had one arm on either

side of a lamp post, and while I held his wrists McAlpine went into the pockets of his massive raincoat and pulled out a pair of handcuffs.

"Where the hell did you get them?" I asked him.

"Always handy in an emergency," he said.

Wee Jinky was really wriggling by then.

"Come on, Peacock," he was saying. "Let me go. What are you doing?"

But McAlpine got the handcuffs snapped on pretty quickly, and that was that. There was nothing Jinky could do.

"Don't do this," he was saying. "Come on, guys. A joke's a joke."

Big Frank seemed to be loving it. He stood cracking himself up for a few minutes. Then he started dancing again, danced up to Jinky and started pulling Jinky's clothes off him.

"Help me out here, Peacock," McAlpine said. And without his arms there was nothing Jinky could do.

"Don't do this," Jinky kept saying. "Come on. Leave me alone."

"It's your stag night, Gordon," McAlpine kept telling him.

In the end Jinky was just standing there with his head down. Trousers and underpants round his ankles, shirt and jacket bunched up back at his wrists on the handcuffs.

"Don't leave me here, guys," he said. "Don't do this. Come on. Please. I'm not even getting married."

But McAlpine had stopped a taxi further up the street and he bundled me into it. The last thing I heard was wee Jinky shouting,

"Frank. Peacock. Frank. Aww, this is fucking *pish*..."

And then we drove off and left him there.

"Stag night?" the taxi driver asked, and we nodded. "Poor wee bastard..." he said. And then he started banging on about what had been done to him on his own stag night, as if either of us cared.

\*

The hangover was starting to ease off by about dinner time, but it would be hard to say the same thing about the wife. She hadn't let up all day long. She'd been hammering on about this and about that, and eventually she'd got on to the subject of what a useless bastard I was.

Again.

Off we went into how hard she had to work at the call centre, and that really got me going for a while. I was soon back to the money the mother-in-law had given her for her birthday, and how the wife would be happy if I was a bit more like her sister's idiot man. It was quite a wee blow up, I'll tell you that. It went on for a good wee while. But in the end I worked out that I couldn't win it. Not with the mood she was in. So I tried just letting her rant on for a wee bit, in the hope she would burn herself out. That didn't work either.

"It's about time, Peacock," she started saying. And the trouble was I'd drifted off, and I didn't know what it was she thought it was about time for. "Don't you think so?"

"You're probably right, Bev," I told her.

"You're bloody right I'm right, Peacock. So what do you intend to do about it?"

"I don't know, Bev."

"Well you'd better do something, cause I'm not prepared to take much more of this. I'll tell you that. I've just about had it up to here."

She stormed off and slammed the door, and I lay back down again. I knew it didn't look good. I decided I'd better try and find out what it was she couldn't take any more of, otherwise I wouldn't get any peace for the rest of the night. So I was just trying to cook up a wee plan to find out what I'd missed, when I heard the buzzer going on the front door. I couldn't hear the wife making any move to answer it, so I pulled myself out of the chair and dragged myself through.

It was wee Jinky.

"Peacock," he said.

"Come on in, son," I told him. "Come away in. How are you getting on?"

But he didn't make much of a move to come in. He just stepped into the hall enough for me to close the door, and didn't answer my question.

"It's Bev I'm here to see," he said quietly. "Is she in?"

"Aye. Come away through, Jinky. That was some night, eh? I'm just starting to recover myself."

"Can you get her, Peacock?" was all he said. He just stood there like a wee numpty, and I looked at him. He looked back. I shrugged and went to get her.

"Bev..."

She was in the bedroom, folding up towels. She didn't look up.

"What is it?" she asked. She kept on with the towels.

"Somebody to see you," I said.

"Where?"

"What do you mean, "where", Bev? At the fucking door. Where else?"

"Who is it?"

I didn't answer her. As far as I was concerned it wouldn't take her much effort to find out for herself. So she started getting up and I headed back out into the hall. I gave Jinky another wee look and then I disappeared into the kitchen. I stayed near the door so's I could hear what was going on.

"Oh, Jinky..." Bev said. "He never said it was you. How are you?"

Jinky just gave her a wee grunt.

"That was a nasty thing they did to you last night," she said. "They're like a couple of big weans. What on earth were they thinking of?"

No response that I could hear from Jinky again.

"Do you want to come through?" Bev asked him. "I'll put the kettle on if you want. Are you wanting a wee cup of tea?"

"No thanks, Bev. I'd better get back down. I just wanted to tell you that it's not just me."

Bev was quiet for a minute this time.

"How do you mean, Jinky?" she asked him in the end.

"It's not just me he's been making an idiot of, Bev."

"Really? What else has he been up to?"

"There wasn't any kitten, Bev. I just wanted to let you know that. He asked me to kid on I was looking after it for you, but there wasn't any kitten. It wasn't me that lost it."

I put my head in my hands. Neither of them seemed to say anything for a while. I stayed where I was for a few more seconds and then stormed out into the hall.

"Jinky," I shouted. "What the fuck are you playing at, son?"

I made a grab for him, but the slippery wee bastard already had the door open and Bev moved herself in between him and me.

"Let me by," I told her, but she wouldn't shift.

"You leave him alone," she said. I tried to push her out the way, but she was hanging onto the door. "Don't you dare manhandle me, Peacock Johnson," she said.

"You're a bastard, Peacock," Jinky shouted. "I had to stand there for over an hour last night before the police came and cut me free. That's you and me by, pal."

"Jinky," I shouted again, but he was gone. I heard his door closing downstairs. Then the door across the landing opened a crack and the wee busybody that lives in there looked out.

"Enjoying the show?" I asked him. He didn't answer, just kept looking out without properly opening the door. "Get back in there, you nosey wee bastard," I told him. I tried to push past Bev again.

"I'll phone the police," he said, in a quivering wee voice.

"I might as well come across there and give you something to phone them about then," I told him.

"Peacock!" Bev shouted. She pushed me and I stumbled back into the hall, and then she slammed the door shut. "You're a bloody lunatic," she shouted. "Get into that living room."

"Fuck off," I told her.

I tried to get to the door again, to get out to that wee bastard across the landing. This time I got there.

"If you so much as set a foot out there I'll call the police myself," she said. "I'll tell them you assaulted me."

"Assaulted you? I never fucking touched you, Bev."

"I don't care. I've had enough of this. I can't take anymore, Peacock."

"Fine," I said. But I didn't go out. I just hovered about there for a wee while, and then I fucked back off into the living room. What a fucking fiasco.

Wee Jinky. Jesus Christ...

I'll tell you what though, it fair quietened the house down. Bev had been thumping about and banging stuff, and hammering on about all kinds of shite all day long, and as I sat there in the living room I started to realize just how quiet things had become. I kept expecting her to come storming into the room at any moment, to start going on and on about the kitten, and about what a shitty thing it had been to do. But it just didn't happen. Everything stayed quiet, and I just kept on sitting there listening to it, until the whole thing started to make me feel uneasy. I knew that wherever she was she must be building up to one, and when it came it was going to be a total belter. So in the end I decided to engage in a wee bit of damage limitation. I decided the best thing I could do was to go and find her, and get my apology in first. It seemed pretty much like the only chance I had to try and make things a wee bit easier on myself.

I finally found her in the bedroom, sitting on the bed. Her hands were covering her face and she was crying without really making any noise.

I tiptoed into the room.

"I'm sorry, hen," I told her. "I really am."

No response. So I made my way over to the bed and I sat down beside her.

"Go away," she said.

I put an arm round her, but she pushed it away and moved further along the bed.

"Go away," she said again.

"I'm sorry, hen," I said. "What happened was..."

"I'm not interested, Peacock."

She looked up at me and the wee face was all wet, the wee eyes were red raw.

"I'll get you a kitten, hen," I told her. "We'll go out tomorrow and you can pick it out."

She shook her head. Then she pointed at the chair. There was a bag lying on it.

"I'm going to stay with Marianne and Billy," she said.

"Aww, come on, Bev..."

"I'm going, Peacock. Just as soon as I've got everything in there."

"Don't be daft, hen."

"I'm not *being* daft, Peacock. I've *been* being daft, and now I'm not being daft. So go away and let me get finished."

"Come on, Bev."

But there was no talking to her. After that she just stopped answering- so I buggered off and left her to it.

A wee while later I heard a horn in the street outside, and then I heard her opening the door and going down the steps. I looked out to see if it was the brother-in-law that had come or if it was a taxi, but it was just a taxi. I watched the thing till it disappeared and when it was gone I noticed that the saucer of milk was still lying on the step out there, so after a wee while I went down to get it. On the way back up I knocked on Jinky's door, but the wee bastard wouldn't answer.

## 5

I spent the next few days trying to get Jinky to answer his door to me, but it wasn't happening. Sometimes I knew he was in there, and other times I was pretty certain he was out, but I couldn't fathom how he was getting out without me hearing him in the close or seeing him out the window. Then I worked out that he must have been going in and out through his living room window to avoid me. Desperate measures indeed. The trouble for him was that, the only way he could get back in, would be by leaving the window unlocked while he was out. So I went down there to test my theory and I was right.

He had a right wee surprise waiting for him when he came back that afternoon, I can tell you that. He scrambled in through the window with his shopping bags, dragged them on through to the kitchen thinking he'd made another successful trip without having bumped into me, and there I was sitting in a chair at his kitchen table. The poor wee bastard just about shat himself.

"Jesus Christ..." he said, after a pretty spectacular jump. Then he threw the bags down. "Get out," he said. "Get out, Peacock. I mean it."

"Calm down, son," I told him.

He walked back out into the hall. "I'm phoning the police," he shouted, and I could hear him lifting the phone. So I went out there myself and took it off him.

"For fuck's sake, Jinky," I said. "Give yourself peace, wee man."

"Give me the phone back, Peacock."

I held it up above his head.

"Stop being a dick," he said. "Give me it."

"I should fucking crown you with it," I told him.

"You should crown *me*?"

"The wife left me, son," I said. "Thanks to your wee fucking outburst."

He stopped grabbing for the phone. He dropped his hands and just headed back to the kitchen.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said.

I put the phone back on the table and followed him. I sat down in the chair again while he got on with putting his messages away.

Neither of us spoke for a wee while, then I broke the silence.

"The way I see it," I said, "That's us quits now, Jinky. What do you say?"

"Fair enough."

"I mean, I'm sorry about the stag night. I was burling, and it was McAlpine's idea anyway. But you hardly had to tell the wife about the kitten. That was fucking harsh, wee man. But like I say, I'm willing to call it quits. I fucked it up with the kitten thing in the first place."

"Fair enough."

"So what do you think about this wee job big Frank's set up for us? Do you think we can pull it off?"

He didn't answer; just kept stuffing his messages into the cupboards. Then he shook his head.

"I'm not interested," he said.

"Aww, come on, Jinky. How hard can it be? And he'll pay us a fortune for it."

"I'm giving all that crap up. I've been thinking about all that stuff Laura said. I *am* a fuck up. I've got to get myself sorted out."

He boiled a kettle and knocked us up a cup of tea. Then he came and sat at the table.

"Cheers, son," I said. He seemed pretty domesticated, the wee man. That was something I was going to have to try and get together myself now too. Or maybe I could just knock about down here as much as possible.

"I'll tell you what, Jinky," I said. "I know what you mean about that stuff. But at the same time, it's easy stuff to say when you're Frank McAlpine's daughter. Are you with me? Where's a wee guy like you going to get the money to pay for a place like this while you're sorting yourself out?"

He looked down into his cup.

"Here's the way I see it, Jinky," I said. "If we get McAlpine this daft big fish for his pond we'll be loaded, right? Am I right?"

The wee man nodded.

"Okay," I said. "Of course I am. And then you could sort yourself out. Do you see what I mean? It takes the pressure off. You'll have a nice wee bank balance to keep things ticking over for a couple of months, and then you can look into whatever you want to look into."

He stayed quiet, which I took as a good sign.

"Think about it," I told him. "That's what I'd do. Just think about it for a few days. See what you come up with. Eh?"

He looked over my shoulder.

"What do you say, wee man?"

He stirred his tea again.

"Maybe," he said.

"Maybe? Maybe, Jinky? Maybe?"

"Aye, okay, Peacock. I'll think about it. Will that get you off my back? I'll think about it, okay?"

"Okay," I said. "Okay. That's the attitude, son."

\*

While he was "thinking" about it, I managed to convince him to at least come out with me one day for a look at the Botany, just so's we could see what we were dealing with. I took a wee camera with me, and got a picture of the fish we thought it was, to check with McAlpine first and make sure we weren't going to steal the wrong fucking thing. Apart from that I couldn't see any real problems.

I spoke to the wife on the phone a few times during that week as well. She was a wee bit difficult the first couple of times, but after that things seemed to get better. We even got ourselves into a wee routine.

"Are they driving you daft yet?" I'd ask her, meaning the sister and the brother-in-law.

"A wee bit," she'd say.

"And you're driving them daft I'd imagine."

"I think Billy's getting sick of me being here."

"So are you coming back?"

"Nope."

"Aww, come on, Bev."

"Have you wisened up?" she'd ask me.

"I have, hen. Me and wee Jinky both. His sick of living like an idiot as well."

"Have you been drunk since I left?"

"No."

"Have you been working on any schemes?"

"I can't even think of any, hen. I've dried up. I'm done with that."

"Have you been looking for a job?"

"I certainly have."

"Good," she'd say. "We'll see how long it lasts, Peacock."

"Oh, it'll last," I'd tell her. "If you were back here you'd be able to make sure I was keeping my word."

"I'm willing to take your word," she'd say. "Besides, I want to see you doing this yourself."

And that would be about it. There was no budging her. She'd her mind made up, and that was that. I kept trying to think of ways round her, but I wasn't coming up with anything. I was bone dry.

"It's starting to worry me," I told Jinky while I was having my dinner down there one night. "I've never been stuck for a way round her before now. It's always been a breeze to come up with something in the past."

The wee man kept chewing and loaded up his fork.

"Do you know what I reckon?" I asked him, and he shook his head. "I reckon it's this Rankin thing. I reckon the bastard's stolen my vital ingredient. What do you think?"

"I think you're going mental," he said. "I think the sooner Bev comes back to you the better."

I loaded up my own fork.

"You're probably right," I agreed.

"So?"

"So what?"

"I think we should call off the fish thing," he said. "If she finds out about it you're finished. That'll be it. She'll be gone for good and you'll end up in an asylum."

"But how would she find out? Unless you throw a wee tantrum again, and go telling her?"

"Come on..."

"She's not going to find out, Jinky. Don't be daft. I think we should just get on with the thing. The sooner it's done the sooner we can move on. What do you think? I reckon once I've got a few quid behind me the ideas'll start firing again as well. Are you about done thinking about it?"

He didn't answer.

"You are, aren't you?" I said. "You're ready to do it, wee man. Aren't you? Am I right?"

He shrugged.

"Brilliant, son," I said. "I say the sooner the better. Tomorrow?"

He still didn't answer. He just started picking up the plates and carried them to the sink. Then he turned on the taps and got to washing them.

"You're a beauty, Jinky," I told him. "I knew it, son. I knew you'd come round in the end."

## 6

The way I saw it, it was simple. All we had to do was make sure we were still inside the greenhouse at the Botanic when they locked it up for the night. Then we could take our time about doing what it was we needed to do.

There are plenty of places to keep hidden in there as well, the place is like a fucking jungle. So me and wee Jinks got ourselves there about half four, ready for the place to close up at five bells.

The pond with the fish is near the main door, but when you're properly into the place there's just a circular path that goes round the outside of a big dirty indoor forest. So me and the wee man waited till there was nobody about, and then we sneaked our way in amongst the vegetation. We spread out a bit once we got in there, just to make sure we'd be properly hidden, and then we lay out flat and waited for them to lock the place up.

And it went like a breeze. Come about a quarter to five you could hear them dragging the chairs about in the wee cafe at the front, and not too long after that you could hear a guy telling folk at the door that it was just about to close and they couldn't come in. Then it was just the noise of the few lost souls that were still hanging about in there making their way to the door, followed by the staff leaving the cafe. And the boy that had been telling people they couldn't come in anymore took a quick scout round the place, then he locked it up and fucked off himself.

We lay on for a wee while anyway, just making sure nobody came back for anything, and then I heard wee Jinky moving himself about.

"Alright, son?" I asked him.

"Seems to be," he said.

So I got myself up, and we made our way out of the undergrowth.

I'll tell you what, it was pretty humid in there. I don't know if he'd cranked the heating up a bit before he left, but it was like Brazil or something.

"We should have put the shorts on," I said to Jinky. "Maybe a wee pair of flip-flops and that."

"Right enough," he said, and we made our way back to the pond.

We'd a couple of torches with us, and we shone them into the water. The big fella was there alright, just cruising about. I'd bought some feeding sticks and I threw them in, and he cruised right over and made short work of them.

"Right," I said to Jinky.

"Right what?"

"Grab him."

"Grab him?"

"Aye. I'll keep feeding him, keep him distracted, and then you just lean over and grab him."

"That's the plan, Peacock? I thought you said you'd worked it all out."

"I have. I have, son. We're here, aren't we? We're in. No problems. Now I just feed him, you give his belly a wee tickle, lift him out and we're off."

"Give his belly a wee tickle?"

"Aye. I've been reading up on it. It paralyzes them. You just tickle the belly and they're helpless. On you go, son."

"And then what? What do we put it in?"

I took a good sized bin bag out of my pocket and unfolded it.

"This," I told him. "We just fill this up with some water and then we're away."

He didn't look too convinced, but I knew what I was talking about.

"That's how they do it, son," I said. "I watched a guy buying a fish when I was getting the food. That's all there is to it. They just fill the bag up with water and throw the fish in."

"How big was this fish you saw him buying, Peacock?"

"Not as big as our guy, granted. But this is a much bigger bag than they had."

"Oh well, that should be fine then."

"Are you taking the piss, son?"

"It's you that's taking the piss, Peacock."

"Stop worrying yourself, Jinky," I told him. I threw a few more sticks in. "Right," I said. "Get a hold of him."

He just looked at me.

"I'm not touching it," he said.

"How?"

"Cause it's a shambles. We need a net or something. And a fish tank."

I gave him the fish food. "You're like an old woman, Jinky," I said. I pulled my shoes off and rolled the trousers up. Then I climbed over the wee fence and got myself in there.

"Right," I said. "Throw a few sticks in."

He dropped them over the side and all the fish swam towards him. The big guy was first as usual, which is probably how come he got to be the big guy in the first place.

"Alright," I told Jinky. "Alright. Just give him a wee bit more. Keep him busy."

And while he was filling his face I moved in slowly and brought my hands up underneath him and gave him a wee tickle. It was right enough what I'd heard, he just went kind of still. Then I grabbed him. I'll tell you what though, he fair woke up at that. I had him up out of the water holding him against my chest, but he felt like a bloody crocodile. I didn't know if I could keep a hold of him after that, so I didn't take any chances. I just launched him out over the fence and shouted at Jinky to catch him. He missed him right enough. Or he didn't so much miss him as dive out of the way. The fish landed with a slap on the path and started flapping about there.

"Fill the bag up," I shouted at Jinky, and he grabbed it and lowered it into the pond. I got myself out of the water and went to get the fish. It was still pretty hard to keep a hold of him. He had some kick on him. But I held him against me and started walking towards the wee man.

The wee man wasn't looking too clever though. He was soaking wet, and he had a pretty sorry expression on his face.

"What's up?" I asked him. Then I saw that the water was pouring out of the bottom of the bag.

"Holes," he said.

"Aww, for fuck's sake..."

I tried to get him to take the fish, but he still wouldn't touch it.

"Throw it back in, Peacock," he said. "It'll die."

But there was no way I was doing that. I knew I'd never get it out again if I did. The wee man just wouldn't take it off me, though.

"You go and see what you can find to put it in then," I told him. "There's bound to be something in here. They must take them out of the pond themselves sometime."

There was a door across from the cafe that went into another big greenhouse full of more jungle plants, so Jinky went off through that and I started talking to the fish.

"Just hold your breath," I told it. "The wee man'll be back in a minute. Just hold on, big man."

And I was right. Jinky was back in a flash. The only thing was that it was a wheelbarrow he'd brought back with him.

"What the fuck's that?" I asked him.

"It'll do till we find something else," he said. "At least it'll hold water."

He dropped the bag into the pond, and filled the wheelbarrow with the water that was pouring out of it.

"Right," he said when there were about three inches of water in the bottom of the thing. "Put it in."

I looked at him.

"Hurry up, Peacock. It's dying."

So I put the thing in there. It just lay on its side. The water hardly even made it wet.

"It's had it," I told him.

"It fine," he said. And he grabbed the bag again and poured more water into the barrow. I got over there and started cupping water out of the pond with my hands, and pouring that in as well. It still wasn't as deep as the fish when it was full, but it was pretty close. And the fish had moved off his side and he was sitting in there the right way up. He still didn't look too healthy, and his back was sticking out, but the old gills were moving a bit, and he was still alive.

"Christ almighty," I said. I was knackered. Jinky sat down on the path, and I took a look at us both. We were drookit. Jinky looked as wet as he'd been when I'd turned up

at the stag night, and I was covered in slime and scales into the bargain. "Some mess," I said, and he nodded.

"Let's just catch our breath and then we'll see what else there is to put it in," he said.

But it turned out there was nothing. We looked all over the place, and then we broke into the cafe as well. Nothing doing. There were some pots in there, but nothing big enough. So we had to settle for a table cloth to drape over the wheel barrow, in case anybody would see what was in there. And we tied it on at the bottom to stop the big boy from jumping out. Apart from that we just had to hope for the best. Some water spilled out the front when we lifted it up to start wheeling it, so we had to keep it pretty close to the ground.

"I don't think it'll survive," Jinky said. Ever the optimist.

"We'll just have to wait and see," I told him, and we wheeled the barrow out into the porch bit. There was a door on either side of us, and we looked out the windows to make sure nobody was hanging about.

"I didn't think of that," Jinky said then, when we'd made sure the coast was clear.

"You hadn't thought of what?" I asked him. I picked up the wheel barrow again, trying not to spill too much of the water, and got ready to go.

"We're locked in," he said.

As it turned out, the wee man had been panicking about nothing. As per usual. Both the doors were locked, but only one of them had been locked up from the outside. On the other one the bolts were all on the inside, and after a wee bit of footering we were out, pushing our wheelbarrow down Byres Road.

It was a hell of a way home though. Took us nearly three hours. There was no way we could get the barrow into a bus or a taxi, or onto the underground, without spilling too much of the water, so we had to walk. All the fucking way. Taking turns each of pushing the barrow.

The original plan had been to go straight to McAlpine's with the fish, just as soon as we got it- but that was before we knew how we were going to have to carry it. It would have taken us about a week to walk out to his place with it. So we took it back to Jinky's for the night, and put it in the bath there. Then we got big Frank to come round the next day with the car and a proper tank to put it in.

You should have seen his face when he came into the bathroom. He couldn't believe his eyes. The old fish was looking pretty sprightly by then; swimming lengths up and down the bath. Turning smoothly whenever it reached the top or the bottom and then heading off the other way again. I'll tell you what, it hadn't looked like that when we'd put it in there the night before. I'd thought it had no chance. Jinky thought it was already dead. But it had made a fine recovery, and McAlpine was over the moon.

"I can't believe it," he said. "How did you manage it?"

"Trade secret, Frank," I told him.

"No hiccups?"

"None at all."

There had been a wee bit in the paper about the cafe at the Botanic having been broken into the night before, but it said nothing had been taken. No-one had even noticed yet that the fish was gone.

"It's gorgeous," McAlpine said. "Look at it. My god, it's a beauty."

He knelt down beside the bath and put his hand in the water. The fish came up to him and he ran his hand along its side. He certainly seemed to have a way with it.

Ten minutes later it was in a tank on the back seat of his car, and he'd given us fifteen hundred sheets between us.

"You're some pair," he said. "Oh, by the way, Gordon- apologies for the other night. We got a wee bit carried away."

"Forget it," Jinky told him, and I gave him a look. Two faced wee bastard.

"What about that other thing we were talking about?" I asked McAlpine. "How's that coming along?"

"The Rankin thing? I've made some in-roads. It's looking good."

"Really?"

"I'll give you a bell in a couple of days. I think I'll have something for you by then."

"You're a gem," I told him. "I mean it."

He shook our hands and got into the car. Me and Jinky stood looking at the fish on the back seat. The damn thing had never looked so content.

"He's like Doctor Doolittle," I said to Jinky.

"I'm sad to see it go," Jinky said. And he waved to it as McAlpine drove away. "I wish I'd taken one of those wee fish for myself as well now."

"How would you have managed that?" I asked him. "You wouldn't go anywhere near the bloody things."

"All the same."

"We're not going back for one," I warned him. "You can forget about that right now. Besides," I took the wad of cash that McAlpine had given us out my pocket. "You can buy one for yourself now. We're loaded."

"Right enough," Jinky said. "I might just do that."

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Meanwhile, I was still speaking to the wife on the phone. I kept trying to get her to meet up, without any success, but apart from that we were getting on well. I told her I'd had a wee job, working for Frank McAlpine, and that seemed to impress her.

"What were you doing?" she asked me.

"Just a wee bit of work on his pond," I said.

"Are you still doing that?"

"Nah, it was just a one off. Good pay though. I'm looking for something else now."

"Well I'll tell you what, Peacock," she said. "I know you might not like the sound of this, but there really is something for you at Billy's place, if you want it."

I didn't answer.

"You know," she said. "If you had that, I think I could come back. I really do. I'd know that job was going to last."

"Really?" I said.

"Really."

It was her turn to stay quiet this time.

"I might think about that then, hen," I said.

"You will? Oh, Peacock. I was scared to mention it. I really was. I thought you might go off the head. I'll be glad to get home. I don't know which one of them two's the biggest bampot. You should hear them sometimes. All they talk about is what they need for the house in Tenerife next, or what they need to do to the house here next. Even when it's just me and Marianne that's all she's ever rattling on about. Going through catalogues and asking me what I think of this, that and the next thing. She's obsessed. And their pals- oh, *Peacock*. You should have heard the other night. There was this couple visiting; Anne and Davie. There was this conversation that went on for over an hour, I swear- about somebody I didn't know. It was mental. I think it started with Billy asking them if they remembered this person- Irene McNab or something. Nobody else could remember her. So he said she was somebody else's cousin, and Anne asks- "Is that the one that's married to such-and-such?" And then Marianne jumped in saying something about such-and-such being somebody else's brother. And I swear to God, Peacock it went on for over an hour. "Is that this one's sister?", "Didn't that one work for so-and-so?", "Isn't that one engaged to this one?" About a hundred people I didn't know

from Adam. And then, do you know what? It finally came back to the one Billy had started out asking about, and all he had to say about her was that she was somebody else's sister and he hadn't known that before. I thought I was going to end myself, Peacock. I really did. I'd never heard anything like it in my life."

"So you're coming home?" I asked her.

"I will if you get that thing with Billy," she said. "Even if it's just to save my own sanity."

"Come on home, then," I told her. "I'll get that thing."

"I'll come home when you do," she said, and she gave me the number for the brother-in-law's work. She still wouldn't budge beyond that. So I wrote the number down, and before she hung up I told her I'd think about it. She had me over a barrel right enough. But I still couldn't see how I could possibly go to work for that moron. It was some situation.

How about this though: Big Frank came through for me. I couldn't really believe it at first. I think I'd pretty much been thinking the whole thing was just talk to get me to do the business with the fish. But the man was as good as his word. He phoned me a couple of days after he'd picked up the koi, and he had an address and a phone number for Rankin.

"This is gold dust," I told him, while I was writing it down. "You're some man."

"No problem," he said. "I'm just curious to see what happens next."

"Hoping I might do away with some of the competition?" I asked him and he laughed. "Listen, Frank," I said, "While I'm here..."

"Aye?"

"What do you make of that place of my brother-in-law's?"

"How do you mean?"

"The wife's trying to get me to take a wee job in there. I'm just curious what it's like."

"It's a shit-hole," he said.

"Really?"

"Nah, I don't suppose so. It's probably no worse than anywhere else like it. But the whole business is a cesspool, Peacock."

"Fair enough. So you wouldn't recommend it?"

"It depends what you're after."

"You don't fancy me working on your stuff?"

"Ach, I doubt very much if you'd be working with me," he said. "I try and avoid the place as much as I possibly can these days. To be honest I think it would drive you up the wall."

"That's what I thought," I told him. "Cheers anyway. I suppose I'll have to think of something else."

Wee Jinky wasn't much help on that front either. All he said was that if taking a job at Smail's place was all he had to do to get Laura back, he'd jump at it.

"Fair enough to get her back," I told him. "But then you'd have to stay there, Jinky. Can you imagine that? Day after day, sitting in some office working to make money for some other bastard? Think about it. He's getting richer on your back, and you're getting older and bringing back the same wee bit of money every week for years."

"Look at what *we've* got though," he said. "I was thinking when we were lying in amongst those bushes in the Botanic gardens the other night, and pushing that daft wheelbarrow home, I was thinking- I know what Laura was talking about. Who would want to be married to somebody that carried on like that? Who would want to be married to the kind of fanny that still has a stag night when the wedding's been cancelled, and then ends up chained naked to a lamp post, sober- after only two folk have turned up."

"Come on, Jinky," I told him. "You're being too hard on yourself, son. She's a wee snob, that's all. You're a great wee guy."

"A great wee guy that carries on like a tool."

And so it went on. I don't know how any of it was supposed to help me work out what to do about working at Smail's place. Or how it was supposed to help me come up with a plan to get round working there. But the truth of it was that the wee man had made me my dinner again, so I put up with it. And I did my best to try and make him feel a wee bit better about himself. I'll tell you what, regardless of whatever else, he's quite the wee cook. And I told him that as well.

The best I could come up with was phoning the brother-in-law's place to make an appointment to go in, and that was enough to get Bev to agree to meet up with me for a

wee bite to eat during her lunch hour. Believe it or not I was feeling a wee bit nervous on my way in to see her. I'd scrubbed myself up and I had the good trousers on. A nice wee 50's bowling shirt and a splash of the aftershave. I was looking pretty good. I'd trimmed the mustache. I'd even got wee Jinks to run the iron over the outfit for me before I left. I was spick and span. But I was still feeling a wee bit nervous.

It was quite funny to tell you the truth, as if I was on my way out on a wee date. Off for a dinner in Lascala or something, when the truth of it was going to be a roll and sausage in The Baker's Oven. Still, I was enjoying it. I was looking forward to seeing the wee daftie. I was pretty sure that, once I had her face to face, I could convince her to move back in before I made the mistake of taking the job with the brother-in-law. I had a few things in mind. I was going to tell her about how we'd just be conspiring to make him even better off, while we stayed stuck on a hopeless wage. And then her mother and father would be more and more impressed by them and less and less impressed by us. I wasn't sure how far that would get me. I thought it might do something, but I had the Rankin thing up my sleeve as well. If nothing much came of the first argument I was going to tell her that McAlpine had put me in touch with Rankin, and tell her that things were working out there. I'd tell her there was going to be quite a bit of money in that for us. I had it all worked out. I was firing on all cylinders. I knew I was going to be able to convince her to come back without having to take the job with Smail once I had her sitting down there in front of me. Once I had her face to face.

The only problem was, she didn't appear.

I sat like a prick in The Baker's Oven for about forty five minutes, all scrubbed up and ironed with my aftershave on, and she never fucking showed. I was absolutely raging, I'll tell you that. For the first wee while I thought she was just late. I'd already been through one roll and sausage, and a pot of tea, but I know what she's like, and I thought she was just being her usual dizzy self. So I ordered another roll, with a fried egg on it, and I took my time with that. It was rotten as well, all rubbery. And I was starting to get a bit worked up by then. When I finished it I noticed some of the yolk had run down the front of my shirt, and that put me in a right stinker.

"That was fucking rotten," I told the girl at the counter while I was paying for it, then I stormed out. I'd decided to head for the wife's work, to try and find out what the hell she was playing at. I was going to give her a right bollocking for forgetting about it,

but when I buzzed at the door of the place they wouldn't let me in. I told them who I was, but it just wasn't happening.

"It's an emergency," I told them. "Somebody's been hurt."

It went quiet for a wee minute and I buzzed again. It was the wife's voice that answered me this time.

"What the hell's going on?" I asked her.

"I don't want to talk to you," she said.

"What do you mean? What happened to the lunch, Bev? What are you playing at, hen?"

"I'm working," she said.

"I thought we were meeting up, though."

"I don't want to talk to you," she said again.

"Open the fucking door, Bev," I told her. "This is beyond a joke. What's going on?"

"Go away," she said.

"But I don't get it."

"I'll phone you at home later. I don't even want to talk to you just now."

"But you'll phone me at home?"

"I might."

It went dead after that. I banged on the door for a bit, and I had a wee go at pressing the buzzer and holding for ten seconds, on and off for a good ten minutes. Nothing doing. The whole office had been briefed apparently. So in the end there was nothing I could do but head home, with the egg yolk all over the front of my good shirt.

"Grab your coat," I said. I was standing outside wee Jinky's door, later the same night, and I was totally fucking livid. "Get it," I told him. He looked completely bemused. He looked like he might have been asleep just before I started banging on the door, in fact. Or sitting having a wee greet to himself over Laura again.

"I was going to stay in, Peacock," he said, but before he could finish I roared at him. Poor wee bastard.

"Move," I shouted, and he just about jumped out of his skin. He disappeared into the hall and came back holding a jacket, and he pulled it on in a panic while he was locking up the door.

"Where are we going?" he asked me when we got outside, and I led him into the pub that's joined on the end of the building. The Taverna, or whatever it was called that particular week. Usually I wouldn't be seen dead in there, and wee Jinky knew that. Strictly for the I.T. Brigade. But I needed a drink quickly, so I pushed him inside. I pushed my way to the front of the bar while Jinky found us a table. There was a wee bit of tutting and muttering up there from idiots who thought they should be getting served before me, but I soon put an end to that. Then I made my way over to the wee man's table.

"What's the problem?" Jinky asked me.

I picked up my drink and had a good go at it.

"Are you ready for this?" I asked him. "You're not going to believe this, Jinky."

"What is it?" he said.

"Frank fucking McAlpine," I said, and I took another good wallop of my pint.

"Right..."

"The total fucking bastard, Jinky."

The wee man was just sitting there, looking at me. He picked up his own drink and then he put it down again.

"What about him?" he said.

"He's a total wanker."

"So you said."

"Are you disagreeing with me, Jinky?"

"Peacock," he said, "Calm down a minute. Just calm down. I said nothing. I'm just sitting here waiting for you to tell me what he's done."

"Don't tell me to calm down, Jinky. Don't fucking start, pal."

He put his hands up and breathed out loudly.

"Okay," he said. "Okay, Peacock. I'm here when you're ready to tell me, right? I'll wait. You don't need to calm down. Is that better?"

"That's a bit better."

"Jesus Christ..."

"So listen to this. Are you ready? He fucking told Bev about the *fish*."

"McAlpine did?"

"McAlpine did."

"What a wanker."

"Exactly, son. Exactly. And that's not the worst of it. I was just starting to get things back on track. I was meeting her for lunch this afternoon. Everything was going great guns. Then that dick opens his mouth and it's all off. Finished. She says that's it, I can forget it."

"Jesus..." the wee man said, and he sat back in his chair. "When did you find this out?" he asked me.

"Five minutes ago. I went to meet her at lunch time and she never showed up. So I went to the work and they never let me in. She says through the wee buzzer thing she'd phone me later, and that was the phone call there."

"When did she see Frank?"

"That's the best of it, son. She never. He told the fucking brother-in-law, and then the brother-in-law told the wife. I'll tell you what though, I went pretty mental up there. I told her to get the brother-in-law on the phone, right now, but she wouldn't do it. She

just kept saying, "That's it, Peacock. You've had your last chance. I can see what you're like now." Then she kept telling me to calm down. Fucking calm down; *aye right*."

"So what did you do?"

"I told her to get herself ready. I told her I'd had enough of her shite and I was coming to get her. "Get your bags packed," I told her. "I'm going to sort Frank McAlpine out and then I'm coming to get you. You're coming back here, Bev. I'm going to kill that bastard, and then I'm coming straight there to get you." "

I stretched across the table then and made a grab for wee Jinky's phone. You should have seen him. He thought I was about to have a go at him and he nearly fell off his chair.

"Calm yourself," I told him. "I just need to make a wee phone call here."

I started pushing buttons and scrolling through screens, trying to get the thing to work, but I ended up turning on the radio or something and I threw it back at him.

"How do I get McAlpine on that thing?" I asked him, and he looked at me as if he was going to ask if I thought that was a wise move, but then he thought better of it and handed it back to me with the radio turned off, and McAlpine's name written on the screen. I held it up to my ear. I couldn't hear anything.

"Push the green button," Jinky said, and I did, then I heard it ringing.

I'll tell you what, I didn't waste any time on pleasantries when the big moron picked it up. I didn't even give him time to catch his breath. I was straight in there before he'd even had time to say hello.

"What the fuck is your problem?" I shouted at him. "What the fuck was the big idea, pal?"

I could hear the fat bastard breathing away on the other end and I waited to see what he had to say for himself, but I'd caught him on the hop apparently and he'd nothing. So I fired right back in there.

"You're a fucking belter," I told him. "I mean that. Just when I had the wife right where I wanted her. I had the wee numpty believing I was willing to take that job selling your shite, then you start spouting about the fish and the whole thing's knackered. She says I can forget it. What the fuck possessed you?"

And maybe if the tool had come up with some viable excuse, or even made some sort of effort, that would've been as far as the thing went. But as soon as I'd finished my daft wee rant he made a big mistake, a fucking roaster. The clown hung up on me.

I couldn't fucking believe it.

"That bastard's had it," I told Jinky, as I hurled the phone back across the table. Jinky scurried off to the bar to get me another drink, mainly to get himself out of the danger zone, and I downed the pint that was sitting in front of me. Then I downed the one he brought me as soon as it arrived, and after that I went straight up to the bar and got myself another one.

I was fucking beeling.

I fired myself up on the drink for a good while, trying to work out what to do, and I got pretty hammered pretty quickly. The drink oiled the old thinking machinery nicely though, and I soon came up with something that seemed to me to make sense. I soon had what I considered, in that state, to be a good sound plan.

"Are you about right?" I asked Jinky then, and I got to my feet.

"Are we heading in?" he said hopefully.

I nodded and pushed my chair in.

"Not a chance," I told him.

He didn't look too pleased.

"We've got a wee bit of business to attend to now," I said.

"Aww, come on, Peacock," he moaned. "I'm done-in, here."

I put a bit of effort into finding my land legs and then I was away. I got myself out onto the pavement and I flagged down a taxi. I think it was a taxi somebody else had already flagged down, but I beat them to it and I got myself inside. I sat with the door open waiting for Jinky, and the driver asked me where to.

"Bearsden," I told him.

There was a wee bit of a scene while the folk who thought it was their taxi tried to get me out of it, and while wee Jinky tried to talk me out of it as well. But I soon sorted that out, and I got Jinky inside.

"I don't want any trouble here," the driver said. "If they were here first that's the way it is, Jim."

"If you don't want any trouble, it's better you just start driving." I told him.

"Fair enough," he said, "Fair enough. You're the boss." And off we went.

When Jinky found out where we were heading, he didn't look too happy. He hadn't heard me telling the driver the first time, so he'd asked him himself after we'd been in there for a few minutes, and when the driver told him it was Bearsden he looked pretty exasperated.

"This is madness, Peacock," he said. "What's the idea? What do you think we're going to do when we get out there?"

"You know what house is his, right?"

He didn't answer.

"Right?" I said again, and he gave me a wee reluctant nod.

"Fine," I told him. "Don't worry yourself, son. It's nothing serious. All we're going out there to do is get that fish back. I'm not having it, Jinky. The guy's a tube. So I'm going to take the fish back off him."

"Oh, Jesus Christ," Jinky said. "Are you serious?"

"It'll be a breeze, son."

"How will it be a breeze? It was next to impossible when you were sober. It's a non-starter, Peacock."

I know now that the wee man only really went along with it to keep an eye on me and make sure I didn't get myself into too much bother, which I appreciate. But as far as I was concerned, at that point, we were going to pull it off no problems. Get the fish out of there and take it back to the Botanics. Get it back into its proper pond and be done with it.

I've told you already, I was pretty far gone.

"This is the plan, Jinky," I told him, as we drove. "We get the guy to let us out down the street from McAlpine's house. A good bit away. Then we'll go in through somebody else's garden and over the fence. What's the fence like?"

"There's a wood on one side of his garden," Jinky said. "No neighbours. We could go in that way."

"Brilliant, wee man. Brilliant. You'd better be straight with me about what house is his though, do you hear me? I mean that."

"Come on, Peacock," he said.

"I'm serious, son. Don't fuck about with me."

"I hear you," he said. "Don't worry about it."

He told the taxi guy when we were there. You should have seen the state of the place. Massive houses. I'd never seen anything like it. Big driveways and fucking forests in the garden. Some of them you couldn't even see the house from the road.

"This is living, Jinky," I told him. "Jesus. No wonder you're sick about Laura chucking you. I get it now. You'd have been marrying into this. You'd have been fucking loaded."

"It's not about that."

"Aye, right. It's not about that. Right you are, wee man," I laughed, and he started walking off the other way.

"Where are you going?" I asked him.

"This is the way we go," he said, so I followed him. I was still having a wee bit of difficulty keeping myself steady, but I did my best.

We'd walked off the street by the time Jinky stopped. It was pitch dark after that. I think that was us out in the countryside by then.

"Right, Peacock," Jinky said. "Through here," and he dived in amongst some trees. I couldn't see a fucking thing. All I could feel were the branches slapping my face and stuff ripping at my ankles. It seemed to go on forever as well.

"Are you taking the piss, Jinky?" I shouted after him.

"Keep your voice down," he said. The clown was right beside me. I just about passed out.

"We should have brought a torch," I told him. "We could be anywhere, Jinky. We'll end up in the middle of nowhere."

"Relax," he said. "We're nearly there. I know where we are."

And he did, I'll give him that. The wee tumpshie must have eyes like a cat in the dark. A few more steps and we could see the lights of the house through the trees. Then we got through the rest of the trees and it was like stepping into a wee dream or something. You should have seen it. I half expected to hear some kind of orchestra playing. Jesus Christ. Jinky had been right about the pond. It was lit up like Christmas. Wee bridges and trees. And then a big lawn going up to a what looked like a mansion. It was like something out of a Hollywood romance. I just stood there taking it in.

"Bloody hell, Jinky," I said. "You certainly did balls it up, missing out on this."

I made my way out onto a wee bridge and looked down into the pond. It looked pretty dark in there.

"The wife would shit herself if she could see this place," I told him. "I mean it, wee man. She'd think she'd died and gone to Beverley heaven. I can just see her here; dancing about on these bridges, singing songs from her old black and white films. I mean, look at these lights, Jinky."

But Jinky was looking over my shoulder. He didn't look too interested in what I'd been saying.

"There's one light up there we never noticed before," he said, and I turned round to have a look. The wee bastard was right. There *was* a light, a blue flashing one, sitting on the roof of a car that was parked in the driveway.

"Fuck it," I said. "What's that about?"

"I'll tell you what it's about, Peacock; Bev must have reported the fish to them. It looks like it's not just us that's here to take it back."

"Fuck," I said. He was right enough. If I'd been thinking straight I'd have been able to work it out myself. "The wee cow," I said.

"We'd better get out of here," he whispered, and we did. Quite a bit quicker than we'd come in, I'll you that. And my face suffered for it going through the trees. I left a bit of my trousers on some thorns in there as well. It started to sober me up a wee bit though. I was walking a bit straighter when I got out of there. Or running, to be more accurate. We sprinted along the street, and through a few more streets like it. Jinky seemed to know where he was going, right enough- so I just followed him. It wasn't too long till we were up on the main street and diving into another taxi. I was totally fucking knackered.

It took me a good few minutes to get my breath back, I'll tell you that.

"Do you think he'll tell them about us?" I asked the wee man.

The wee man just shrugged.

"I'll fucking bet he does," I said. "If he can't keep his mouth shut about it to the brother-in-law he's hardly going to be able to keep quiet about it to the filth."

"It's a nightmare," Jinky said.

"I'll tell you what else," I told him. "There's no way we can go back to our own place. If he tells them about us the place'll be crawling. We're fucked, Jinky."

"Where else can we go?"

"We'll have to think of somewhere. I'll tell you this, it's lucky we went out there when we did. Otherwise they'd just have landed on us. Am I right?"

"I suppose so."

"You're fucking right I am. Fucking bitch. What's all that about, Jinky? What the fuck does she have to go and tell them for? Can you believe that?"

"It's brutal, Peacock," he said.

"What about Malky's? Can we go there? Will he be in?"

"We can give it a try."

"Let's try that then. I'm going to fucking kill her. What's the point in it, Jinky? What's to be gained? I'll tell you what, son- big house or not you're fucking lucky to be out of it. You escaped just in time. I don't get it, Jinky. I just don't get it at all."

So we gave the driver Malky's address, and went to work on a wee story to tell him when we got there.

It wasn't particularly late by the time we got to Malky's place, but the clown was already in his bed. We could see him sprawled out through a crack in the curtains, and we had to bang on the door and hammer at the bell for a full ten minutes before we managed to rouse him. When he finally came to the door he was still half asleep and totally naked.

"What are you wanting?" he asked us, and we told him we needed a wee bit of help.

"We're locked out at our bit," I said, and he stood aside to let us in, then he went straight back to his bed, and that was the last we saw of him that night.

So we made ourselves at home. We'd a few wee beers we found in his fridge and then we argued to see who got the couch and who got the floor. I won that in the end, but Jinky was pretty stubborn about it for a while. He'd a good wee argument going about how it was my fault we were there in the first place, so I should be the one to suffer. I had to just lie down on the couch and refuse to move to win that one.

The best of it was, in the morning, Malky couldn't remember having let us in. He just about had a heart attack when he came through to the living room and found us lying there. It only came back to him gradually.

"I must have been sleep walking," he said.

"You certainly never bothered to dress for the occasion," I told him.

"What?"

"You'd nothing on, son."

"Aww, Jesus."

He went and opened the curtains, then he sat at the far end of the couch, right on

top of my feet. He just about broke my fucking ankles.

"You're a right clumsy bastard," I told him. I sat up and he started tucking into a cup of tea he'd made for himself, non-plussed. "How about one of those for me and the wee man?" I asked him, but he didn't seem interested.

"What is it you're doing here anyway?" he said. "Did you tell me that last night?"

"We're in a wee spot of bother," I said. "Is that right, Jinky?"

Jinky nodded.

"I need you to do us a favour, though," I told him.

"What would that be, Peacock?"

"I need you to give the wife a wee phone. Ask her if she knows where we are. Tell her you've been trying to get a hold of us and we're not in any of the usual places."

"Are you trying to avoid her?"

"Sort of. She's staying at the sister-in-law's, but I don't want her to know we're here."

"And what's in it for me?"

"What's in it for you?"

"Aye."

"Apart from helping out a couple of pals?"

"Apart from that, aye."

"What do you want to be in it for you?"

"How about buying me a breakfast?"

"Fair enough."

"A right proper breakfast though, Peacock. None of that roll and fried egg shite."

"Fine," I said "Fine." I gave him the sister-in-law's number.

"And one other thing," he said.

"What else?"

"I want to know the story of what's going on."

"Aye, okay. Just go and phone her, eh? She'll be leaving for work soon."

He went out into the hall and I gave Jinky a wee wink.

"Well thought of," Jinky said, and we settled back and listened to Malky making the call.

He seemed to be handling it okay at first. He got himself to the wife from

whoever answered the phone, and he sounded pretty convincing- asking her if she knew where we were. But then he went quiet for a minute.

"Right, Bev..." he said. "Aye... Fucking hell. Are you sure?... Christ Almighty... I never thought he had it in him, Bev.... I will... Aye, I will... Right... Aye... Cheers, hen."

Then he hung up.

He stayed out there for a while as well. Me and the wee man were just sitting looking at each other. I shrugged, and the wee man got up off the floor and settled himself in a chair. You should have seen the look on Malky's face when he came back into the room though. The guy was stunned. He didn't look too steady on his feet either.

"Christ Almighty!" he said, and he sat down. "You *are* in a wee spot of bother right enough."

"Are we?" Jinky asked him.

Malky's eyes went wide. He looked into the distance and puffed up his cheeks.

"Fucking hell, boys," he said.

"Are you *into* fish?" I asked him.

"Eh?"

"What the fuck's with all the drama, Malky? It's only a fucking fish."

"What is?"

"The *fish* is. What the fuck are you on, Malky? What did the wife *say*?"

"She told me what happened."

"When?"

"Last night."

"Well, how about you tell *us*, Malky. Cause we seem to be a wee bit in the dark here, son."

"You went a bit mental last night, Peacock?"

"Aye."

"You and the wife had a bit of a thing on the phone? Frank McAlpine had told her something about you that sent you off?"

"Aye?"

"So you *killed* him, Peacock? Are you off your fucking rocker? What the fuck are you playing at, coming here? What's the game, Peacock?"

"Wait a minute," I told him. "Just wait a wee minute, Malky. You've got the

wrong end of the stick here. We never killed anybody. Frank McAlpine's fine. We just went to steal one of his fish. But it never worked out. It was a fiasco."

"That's not how the wife tells it, Peacock."

"The wife's hawering, son. What did she say?"

"She says Frank McAlpine's dead. She said he phoned your brother-in-law last night and asked him to come and help. McAlpine told him you were in the house, going totally bastard mental, demanding that he get you and your wife back together there and then. So your brother-in-law took Bev out there right away to try and calm you down, but by the time they got there you were gone, and Frank McAlpine was dead."

I started laughing.

"That's a lot of shite, Malky." I said.

"I don't know if it is or if it's not. But I don't want any part in it. You'll have to go."

"What about the breakfast?"

"Another time."

"You didn't tell the wife you'd seen us, did you?"

"I did not. But I told her I'd let her know if I came across you. I don't like that you brought me into this, Peacock."

"There's nothing to be brought into," I told him. "I'll tell you what, put the telly on. See if there's anything on there about Frank McAlpine. It's just some kind of a wind-up. I don't know what it's all about, but put the telly on."

"You'll have to go after that," he said.

"Fair enough."

He put it on and flicked about a bit. Some guy cooking, some weans talking Gaelic; shite like that. Then he found a news channel. Something about Israel. We sat and watched it for a wee while, then a story came on about that doctor guy that killed himself. And after that a picture of Frank McAlpine appeared behind the news guy.

"Oh fuck," Jinky said.

It was right enough. Somebody had shot the big fat bastard. I couldn't believe it.

"Right," Malky said. "You'll have to go, boys."

"It's some kind of mix-up," I told him.

"It might well be," he said. "Come back when it's sorted."

Me and the wee man got up. Jinky stood and watched the telly. He could hardly pull himself away from it, but I grabbed his arm and we made for the door.

"Do us one wee favour," I said to Malky before we went. "Will you, pal?"

"What's that?"

"Don't tell anybody you've seen us. I've got to try and sort this out."

"I'll see what I can do," he said.

"Cheers, son."

Wee Jinky was shaking as we went down the stairs. When we got outside the close I thought he might be about to pass out. He didn't look too well. I stood on the pavement and looked up and down the street till he got himself back under control. Then I looked up and down the street again.

"Were gubbed," I told him.

"You're not wrong," he said. "What the fuck are we going to do now?"

How about this for a headline:

Frank McAlpine's Last Writes.

Brutal, eh? You've got to wonder who makes these things up sometimes. That peach was on the front page of *The Daily Record*. The main story. But it wasn't the only one. There was a similar headline on the front page of every paper in the shop. "Final Chapter for Big Frank." That was on the *Evening Times*. The *Mirror* had, "Intruder Closes the Book On Scotland's Most Popular Author." The bloody story was everywhere. And it wasn't just in the newspapers either. It was all over the telly as well. I'd had no idea the guy was so popular before.

I don't think he did either.

This is what it said in *The Daily Record*:

In a scene that could have come straight from one of his own books, Frank McAlpine was found murdered at his home in Bearsden yesterday evening. McAlpine, one of Scotland's best selling writers, and the author of such books as *The Hidden Quaich* and *Under the Sun*, was found dead by the police, shortly after 9pm.

McAlpine, 55, had been killed by two bullet wounds—one to the head and one to the chest.

"This is a terrible loss," said William Smail, head of A&H Books, who published the Frank McAlpine novels. "Not just for his friends and his family, but for the world of literature as a whole."

McAlpine leaves behind him a wife, Sadie, 54, and a daughter, Laura, 32, who is engaged to be married at the end of this month.

Police have indicated that the intruder or intruders may have been known to Mr McAlpine, as there was no sign of a struggle or forced entry to the house.

\*

I read that out to wee Jinky in the hotel room we were staying in by then. We hadn't been taking any chances since we left Malky's. We'd been holed up there with our assumed names watching the whole thing unfold, paying for everything with the cash we were still carrying from McAlpine's fish fiasco. I'd shaved the moustache off and scraped the hair forward- and I was going under the name of Jimmy Campbell. Came to me on the spur of the moment. Wee Jinky was Derek White. Christ alone knows where that had come from.

"What do you make of it?" I asked him, when I'd finished reading the bit out. He was just sitting there, staring into space.

"Do you think that's me they meant?" he said.

"What?"

"Do you think that's me they were talking about?"

"Where?"

"Laura. Do you think it's me they meant she was engaged to- or do you think she's already got somebody else?"

"Jesus Christ, Jinky," I said. "That's not exactly what I meant, son. That's hardly our biggest concern here."

"It's my biggest concern, Peacock. Right at this minute it's my biggest concern."

I struggled to believe what I was hearing. I read through the thing again, into myself, and then I put the paper down.

"They mean you, Jinky," I told him. "They mean you, son. They've just got their information mixed up."

He looked up at me and nodded.

"Thanks," he said. "It's just hard thinking about what *should* have been happening just now."

"It must be," I told him. I waited a wee bit and then I asked him what he made of the rest of it.

"Read it to me again," he said. "Read it again, but leave out the bit about Laura this time."

So I read the bloody thing again, and when I was done he asked me what *I* thought about it. I sighed.

"It doesn't mention us," I said. "That's something at least."

"Do you think Laura knows we did it?"

"Christ almighty, Jinky. What are you on, son? We never did it."

"But do you think she knows that everybody thinks we did?"

"It's a possibility. It's a distinct possibility."

"I think we should turn ourselves in," he said. "This is getting too much for me. Let's just turn ourselves in and let them work out that it wasn't us."

"Where did you get that from? 'Turn ourselves in'? You've been watching too much American shite. Anyway, how would they work out it wasn't us? *We* can't even work that out."

"Maybe they'd use fingerprints and stuff."

I laughed.

"To prove we never did it? As long as they've got *somebody* they'll be happy. It's just a few daft bastards muddling away in Pitt Street. It's hardly an episode of Perry Mason."

He didn't say anything.

"Am I right?" I asked him.

Still no response.

"Answer me, Jinky," I said. "Am I right, son?"

He looked up reluctantly.

"I suppose so," he said in the end.

"Eh?"

"I suppose so."

"You're bloody right you suppose so. Jesus fuck, Jinky."

"So what are we going to do?"

"I don't know. I suppose we're going to have to try and work out what *did* happen."

"*Us*? How the hell are we going to do that?"

"We'll just have to ask about. Somebody must know who did it. I'll tell you what we should do. We should go and see John Jack. He'll know. You can hardly nick a tube of toothpaste out of Boots without him knowing about it. What do you think?"

"Fair enough."

"You want to go and see him?"

"We might as well."

So we went to see John Jack.

\*

At one point, a good few years back now, I did quite a bit of work for John Jack. He's always in at something, and most of the time he's in at just about everything. Whenever you're looking for a wee job, or looking for somebody to help you with something you're in at, John Jack is always your first stop. He always knows what's going on, whatever's happening. I don't know how he does it half the time, but he's some man, no two ways about it.

"I keep thinking everybody's looking at me," Jinky said, as we made our way to the wee casino on Sauchiehall Street.

I told him I wasn't surprised. "That's quite a get up you're wearing, son."

"That's not what I mean. I keep thinking everybody knows who we are. People are looking at me funny. I keep expecting one of them to run off and grab the police."

"Take it from me," I told him, "It's the get up they're staring at. If they run off and grab anybody it'll be the fashion police."

To be honest with you, neither of us was looking too hot. This was us as Jimmy Campbell and Derek White. On top of us having messed up the hair, and me having lost the mustache, we'd kitted ourselves out at one of those shops where the students go. We were looking like a right couple of wankers if the truth be told. You should have seen the look we got from big Andy when we reached the casino. He was sitting outside on the steps, smoking a roll-up, and he looked at us as if he wanted to kill us.

"We're closed," he said, and stubbed his fag out on the sole of his shoe.

I just stood there looking at him, waiting for him to recognize me, but it didn't happen.

"I said we're closed," he repeated. "And don't even bother coming back when we're open. This is a respectable place."

"It's us, Andy," I said, and I pushed my hair back. His eyes just about popped out of their sockets.

"Jesus Christ!" he laughed. "It's wee Jinky and The Pigeon. What happed to the plume, Peacock?"

"I'm playing it down, Andy," I told him. "We've come to see J.J. Is he in?"

He stared at us for a wee while longer, then he went to the buzzer and told John we were coming up.

"Expect a surprise from them," he said into the intercom, then he unlocked the door and let us in.

I'll tell you what though, J.J. had a right good laugh at us when we reached his office. I thought he was going to rupture something. He's a big man, and he was laughing a bit too much for a man as big as that. I didn't like the look of the colour he was going. I told him to settle down and he offered us both a seat.

"I'm surprised at you, Peacock," he said, when he'd calmed down a wee bit. "I really am. I mean that. I didn't think you had it in you."

"I haven't," I told him. "It's just the circumstances."

"I'm stunned, to be honest. I can't get used to it. I didn't think that was your sort thing at all. What happened?"

"It's temporary," I told him. "Purely temporary. We're laying low. Eh, Jinky?"

"Aye. We're trying to."

"We're trying to blend in."

"What in the name of Christ are you talking about? How does this help you to blend in?"

"Take a look outside," I told him. "It's a sad state of affairs, John, but we're blending in fine."

He looked at me as if I was talking another language. Then he got up and went to the window. He stood there for a while, and then he turned back to us with a frown on his face.

"Do you think I'm still talking about your clothes?" he said.

"When?"

"*Now.*"

"When you were talking about our clothes?"

"I wasn't talking about your clothes, you daft bastard. You're fucking obsessed, Peacock. I was talking about Frank Fucking McAlpine. *That.* That's what I didn't think you had in you. Fucking *killing* a man. Not wearing a pair of brown corduroy *trousers*. Are you more insulted to think I could imagine you dressed like an art student?"

"Calm down, J.J.," I told him. "Calm down." He'd started going that purple colour again. "Come on. Sit down. We never killed anybody. Did we, Jinky?"

Wee Jinky backed me up.

"Of course you did!" John Jack shouted. "Don't try and pull that with me, Peacock. I've told you it's a shock to me, and I never thought you had it in you. And I know you're here for some kind of help. But don't try and sit there and tell me you didn't do it."

"We didn't do it."

"So what are you here for?"

"To see if you know who did it."

"I do know who did it. *You* did it."

"Fuck off."

"How could you not have?"

That one got us. We didn't have an answer to that. That one fair shut us up.

"And what are the disguises for if you didn't do it?"

"Cause we know everybody thinks we did it," Jinky said.

"You're bloody right they do," J.J. told him. "Me included. Listen to this... You

know Drew Thornton, don't you?"

"Aye."

"Right, well his wife's brother drives a taxi. Right? He drove you out there on Thursday night, ten to nine he dropped you. Are you denying that?"

"No."

"You're not?"

"No."

He looked surprised, but he carried on.

"Fair enough. Fair enough. How about Barry Devlin. Do you remember him?"

"I can't say I do."

"Jinky?"

Jinky shook his head.

"Never mind. His nephew's driving a taxi as well. He picked the two of you up about fifteen minutes later. Out on the main street in Bearsden. He brought you back into town. Took you both till about Maryhill to get your breath back. He says you were running like a couple of olympic athletes when he picked you up. Is that right?"

"It doesn't look good," I said to Jinky. The wee man looked as if he might be about to vomit.

"It certainly doesn't look good," John said. "And there's more as well. Duncan Kenny knows Frank McAlpine dumped you in the shite with your wife, Peacock. Frank Carberry knows what Frank McAlpine did to you on your stag night, Jinky. It's a stick on. Gary MacIntyre's even heard they've got a bit of trouser material left at the scene, Peacock. They don't know who's it is, but Gary described it to me. There's a limited market for material like that, you know what I mean? It's got niche appeal. And all this is on top of Frank McAlpine's phone call. Even Frank fucking McAlpine said you did it, Peacock. So how about telling me what the fuck's going on, if it wasn't the two of you."

Me and the wee man looked at each other. The wee man looked even more like he was about to vomit now, but he managed to struggle out a wee sentence.

"Do you know..." he said. "Have you heard if Laura knows about any of this stuff, Mr Jack? Does she think we killed Frank McAlpine?"

\*

It had taken us forever to convince John that it wasn't us who had done it. Mainly because it had taken us forever to stop him reeling off more and more evidence that he'd heard that proved it *was* us. Somebody else knew I'd told Bev I was going to kill McAlpine, somebody else's sister knew somebody that had heard me banging on about him in the Taverna, and then saw us leaving there with me in a rage. I told you John Jack would be our man, didn't I? Christ alone knows how he does it. He's in at everything. Absolutely fucking everything. It's unbelievable.

Finally, though, we got to give him our version. We got to set him straight about the fiasco with the fish- convinced him that all we'd gone out there to do was steal it back- and that the flashing light was already there when we arrived. He had Malky's side of things as well. He knew it was Malky that had first told us we were in the shit, so I think that helped him to make sense of the thing.

He rubbed his face.

"This is a right wee mystery you've got yourselves here," he said. "I'll tell you what; whoever put this over on you, they're good. You've got to be good to get by me. This is a first, boys. No question. Somebody's put you right in it here. All the way up."

Then he asked us what we were going to do about it.

I looked at the wee man and the wee man looked at me. The wee man had gone a bit green about the gills, and I scratched the old forehead.

"This was the full extent of the plan, John," I told him. "This was as far as the thinking went. Come and see you and hope for the best. See if you could throw a wee bit of light on it for us."

John looked kind of crest-fallen. You could tell it hurt him to know something out there had got past him. It was hurting his pride to have fallen short of our expectations.

"I'll tell you what," I said. "Throw us a bit of pencil and a piece of paper and tell us every detail again nice and slowly- without the ranting this time. We'll take it away with us and see if we can find a wee glitch or something. See if we can spot a flaw."

He looked pretty dubious, but he dug out the tools and pushed them across the desk, and I passed them on to Jinky.

“Take some notes, son,” I said, and off J.J. went again, all through the same sorry state of affairs. It just about had me in tears to listen to it.

When he was done, even he looked bamboozled.

“You’re going to need Poirot to help you out of this one, boys,” he said, and I had to agree.

“Have another ask about, John,” I told him. “See what you can dig up. We’ll get back in touch in the morning. See if you can find out if McAlpine was into anything else.”

He looked doubtful.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said. “If there was anything else I’m pretty sure I’d already have heard it, but maybe something’ll turn up. We’ll see. By the way, what have you heard about this thing with Hughie Toole...?”

And that was that.

It wasn't exactly the outcome I'd been expecting. We'd gone in there hoping for a few wee nuggets that would point to us being in the clear, and we came out realising we were much further up to our necks in it than we could ever have imagined. Wee Jinky looked pretty done in. I think he'd been half hoping to find out that it was only me that was being suspected. He'd dropped a few hints about that in the past couple of days because McAlpine's phone call had only said that I was in the house. But John Jack had sure put paid to that, and the wee man was pretty quiet as we walked back through the town. There wasn't a peep out of him. In the end I had to struggle to put a brave face on it and I gave him a wee pat on the back.

"How are you bearing up, son?" I asked him, and he looked startled, as if I'd wakened him up out of a dream.

"We can't go back to the hotel, Peacock," he said. "Not now."

"How come?"

"Because you told John Jack we were staying there."

"He'll keep that to himself," I said. "Trust me."

But Jinky just stared at me as if I'd gone mental. He looked a wee bit like he might be starting to crack up.

"Are you insane, Peacock?" he said.

"It's been a rough day," I told him. "It would have driven anybody daft."

He grabbed my arm then and started dragging me across the street into a pub that I didn't really like the look off.

“We’re fucked if we go back there, Peacock,” he said. “We’re probably fucked anyway. Have you seen how everybody’s looking at us? We’ve pretty much had it. But if we go back to that hotel, that’ll be it, for sure.”

I was starting to get pretty worried about him so I didn’t make any fuss about going into the pub, I just let him push me in there and I sat down at the dark table in the corner that he dragged me towards.

“Keep an eye on the door,” he told me and hurried up to the bar. You should have seen him up there. If he was trying to keep himself discreet he was fair making an arse of it. All his nervous ticks and his constant turning round to look over his shoulder at the door were just about making him the centre of attention.

“What the fuck’s got into you Jinky?” I asked him when he came back to the table, and he looked at me with that same expression that suggested he thought I’d gone totally mental again.

“Hasn’t hit you yet?” he asked me, and I felt pretty thankful that it hadn’t. I didn’t like the look of it. I just shook my head and shrugged.

“What, son?” I asked him.

He leant over the table towards me and started talking in a wee whisper.

“I think I’ve started to see what’s gone on here, Peacock,” he said.

I picked up my drink to buy myself a bit of time. I wasn’t too sure I wanted to hear what he had to say in case it proved my worst fears and confirmed I had a bampot to look after now into the bargain. He sat staring at me as I downed as much of my drink as I could in one go and then I realised it was time to face the music.

“Lay it on me,” I told him. “What’s the big revelation?”

He dragged his chair round the table until he was just about sitting in my lap and then he leant right into my face, speaking so quietly I could hardly hear him.

“Were you even listening to John Jack?” he said.

“I was listening to every word, son,” I told him. “I know it doesn’t look good but we’ve got to try and keep a grip on ourselves, Jinky.”

“Think about all that stuff he told us, though,” the wee man said. “He knows absolutely everything. He’s got eyes and ears everywhere. He could tell us absolutely every move we’d made. He could probably even have told us what we’d had for breakfast that morning, if we’d asked him.”

“That’s John Jack for you,” I told him. “That’s how come we went to see him in the first place.”

“Right,” Jinky said. “So doesn’t that strike you as strange, Peacock?”

“He’s always been like that.”

“I know.”

“So what’s the problem here, then? What’s the whole paranoid android routine about?”

“John Jack always knows everything,” he said, and I nodded.

“So? So what?”

“So how come he doesn’t know anything about this? Not the first thing?”

“Because somebody’s done a number on us,” I told him. “It’s just like John Jack said. Whoever did this knew exactly what they were doing.”

“I’m surprised at you,” the wee man said.

“What?”

“I didn’t think you were that naïve, Peacock.”

“What the fuck are you hammering on about, son?”

“There’s no way John Jack couldn’t know anything about this,” Jinky said. “He knows everything about everything. You heard him. If he’s claiming not to know anything about it, that can only mean one thing. He’s involved in it.”

I started laughing. I couldn’t help myself. But the wee man didn’t look too happy about it so I tried to get myself back under control.

“Come on, Jinky,” I said. “Come on. John Jack?”

He just stared at me. It was pretty clear he was away with the fairies. The poor wee bastard had lost it.

“Think about it, though, Jinky,” I said. “If John Jack did it and he’s done such a good job of making it look as if it was us, how come he didn’t have the filth turn up while we were there? How come they never picked us up as soon as we came out the door?”

Jinky thought for a minute. It seemed like I might be getting through to him and then he shook his head.

“Maybe he wants to make sure we don’t suspect he’s got anything to do with it,” he said.

“But he was convinced we’d done it, Jinky. Think how hard it was to get him to believe we hadn’t. He’s not that good an actor, son. He’d have to be in the Royal Shakespeare Company to have pulled that off. Anyway, what reason would John Jack have to kill McAlpine? What would he get out of that?”

Jinky shrugged. “Maybe it wasn’t McAlpine he was interested in,” he said. “Maybe he did it just to get us done. Just so’s he could frame us for it.”

“Aww, come on, Jinky. He killed a guy just so’s he could put us in the jail for it? Are you listening to yourself, wee man? Besides, what have we ever done to him?”

“You’ve done something to just about everybody at one point or another,” Jinky said.

“You’re not making any sense now,” I told him. “I’m starting to worry about you.”

“I don’t know why he did it,” he said. “There could be a million reasons. Remember what McAlpine told us that night in the Horseshoe? He used to be into all kinds of things himself. Maybe it was something from away back then. I don’t know. That’s not what I’m talking about here. All I’m saying is John Jack always knows everything about everything and it doesn’t make any sense that he doesn’t know anything at all about this.”

“It’s been a rough day,” I told him. “We just need a wee bit of time to settle down. Get yourself wired into that drink, then we’ll head back to the hotel and have a wee sleep. It’ll look clearer after that, I promise you. You’ll have a good laugh about this in a wee while.”

But there was no talking to him. He was adamant about not going back to the hotel and there was no way I could get round him. In the end I had to leave him there and go back to the hotel myself to grab our stuff and check us out, just to stop him from going right over the edge completely. He wasn’t even happy about that. He spent a good while trying to talk me out of going back there, telling me that the filth would be waiting for us, and that they’d bundle me into the van as soon as I got there. I couldn’t really convince him that if we left our hotel bill mounting up day after day, and our old clothes lying in the room, we were putting ourselves in much bigger danger. Pretty soon somebody would get suspicious about that and we’d have left a wee clue on our trail. I had to give up on trying to convince him in the end and just get up and go.

“It’s your funeral, Peacock,” he told me, sitting there in a right wee huff.

“Don’t go anywhere,” I said. “I’ll be back in no time.”

And I was. There was no problem at the hotel. I gathered up our stuff and piled it into a bin bag. We didn’t have much, just the clothes we had on that night we went out to McAlpine’s house and a few bits and pieces we’d picked up since then, and then the big stack of papers we’d been buying to read the stuff about Frank. I grabbed them as well so’s we could continue to comb through them, looking for something we might have missed. Then I went to the desk and paid up what we owed. When I got back to the pub Jinky looked as if he was just about ready for a straight jacket.

“No problem,” I told him. “This is a lot of carry on for nothing. We could have been back there having a sleep by now.”

“I’ll feel a lot happier somewhere else,” he said, so I humoured him.

We ended up in a manky wee hole near the station. Jinky insisted on finding somewhere that didn’t seem like the sort of place I would ever be in, and he did a sterling job on it, I’ll tell you that. I didn’t even want to take a sleep once we got in there. I was pretty certain that if I lay down on the bed I’d catch something that would finish me off before I had the chance to wake up again.

“Happy now?” I asked the wee man.

“Happier,” he said. “A bit. But I wish John Jack didn’t know what we looked like now.”

He went over to the mirror and started checking out his get up. I was amazed that he could even see himself in there, somebody before us had apparently covered it in mud for some reason. He stood looking at himself, pulling his cheeks and rearranging his clothes, then he leant in closer to the mirror and he screwed up his face.

“Do you think I should shave my head, Peacock?” he said.

I didn't much fancy the idea of wee Jinky with a razor in his hand, hacking away at his scalp. Not in the delicate frame of mind he seemed to be in at the minute. As far as I was concerned, the last thing we needed was a trip to the emergency ward, so I put my full effort into convincing him it was a bad idea. It wasn't easy, I'll tell you that. It took me a good couple of hours in all. But eventually he started to see sense, particularly when I hit on the idea of asking him what Laura would think if she saw him looking like that, and he agreed to put it off for the time being.

As hard as that had been, though, it was a walk in the park compared to the next major project. Jinky became convinced that we should go to Pitt Street and let them know that it was John Jack who had killed McAlpine, and we spent the rest of the day and most of the night debating the finer points of that one. There was just no getting through to the wee tumshie. In the end I had to give up completely on trying to convince him that John Jack had nothing to do with it and switch tack to trying to make him see that we had nothing to go to the filth with anyway.

"Think about it, Jinky," I kept telling him. "What would we say? 'We know this guy did it because he doesn't know anything about it?'. Do you think they'd buy that? And meanwhile they're sitting on a big pile of evidence on us, and we've just handed ourselves to them on a plate."

"Well what else have we got?" he would say to me. "What's your Big Idea, Peacock?"

And on it went. On and on. It was a fucking nightmare. Every now and then Jinky would just stand up and announce he was going. He'd start heading for the door and I'd have to grab him and wrestle him back down onto the bed. He was a determined wee

fucker. Then about two o'clock in the morning a wee idea came to me. I started to pretend that he'd talked me round, that I'd seen the light.

"Let's go, then," he said, and he threw the shapeless denim jacket at me that I'd been wearing with the rest of my shite recently.

"We could, son," I told him. "We *could* go just now. But just hear me out. I think we should do this thing properly. I agree you're onto something, fair enough. But let's really nail him. Let's see if we can just find a wee something to throw at him, something to wrap it up nicely so's there's no argument."

"How do you mean?" he asked me.

"A wee motive or something, Jinky," I told him. "We've still got this big pile of papers, right? And there's still plenty of new stuff coming out on the telly every day. Let's go through it all and see if we can find something, something we might have overlooked. See if anything was stolen from McAlpine's house that night, something like that. Just a wee titbit, Jinky."

He didn't seem too certain, but I kept hamming it.

"Look at it this way," I said. "If we can really stick it to him think how Laura will feel when she hears it was you that solved it. That's got to be worth the wee bit extra effort, am I right?"

The eyes lit up a bit at that wee peach, and I knew that I had him then.

"Good man, Jinky," I said, and he gave me a wee smile.

"Do you think that could really happen, Peacock?" he asked me, and I told him that it could. He seemed to start getting a grip on himself again then. We had a few wee beers and watched a wee bit of telly, and there was no more talk of any drastic cosmetic rearrangements, and no more leaping for the door every ten minutes.

"We'll crack this thing between us," I told him later on. "I can feel it."

"Here's hoping," he said.

"You just need to keep your hair on, son," I said, and he had a wee laugh at that one.

So that's how we spent the next couple of days, holed up in that manky wee room, pouring over every paragraph in the papers again and watching every report that we

possibly could on the telly. It was what I'd been wanting to do anyway. When John Jack had given us absolutely nothing to go on I knew we'd have to find some kind of motive ourselves and this was the only way we really had to go about it. I knew if I could find a mention of just anything having been taken from Frank's house I could go back to John Jack with it and maybe that would spark something up for him. I just had to remember to keep in mind, when I was dealing with Jinky, that it was a motive for John Jack we were looking for, as far as he was concerned. And as long as I remembered that everything was sweet. We only ever went out to buy more papers or to nick into the wee internet café to see what else we could find on there. We went at it pretty hard, I'll tell you that, and I made sure Jinky was never out of my sight. There were times when he'd just lose heart and claim that we were never going to find anything and I knew he was liable to make a b-line for Pitt Street in that mood if I didn't keep him on a tight reign.

"We'll get there," I'd tell him. "Just think of Laura's face when she hears it was you that worked it all out."

But to tell the truth there were times when I felt like packing it all in myself as well. It was hard fucking work, and most of the time we were reading the same shite over and over again. They pretty much had nothing, and they'd wander off into talking about how he'd met his wife or how long they'd been married for, or printing bits of old interviews that he'd done in the past.

On the bright side there was still no mention of me or wee Jinky anywhere to be found. Once or twice we came across a mention of McAlpine having phoned his publisher to tell him he was in danger, and to ask for his help but even that almost never popped up, and there wasn't so much as a peep about what he'd said when he phoned him.

Then wee Jinks got it into his head that there might be a clue in one of McAlpine's novels, and he set about reading some of them. He was on his own in that, I can tell you. The things were as thick as house bricks, and I refused to go near them.

"We'd get through these twice as fast if you'd help out," he told me, but I managed to convince him that we needed to keep a man on the papers.

"Something might pass us by while we were both wading through those, son," I said. "You're the man for the job there."

And that seemed to satisfy him. The books kept him fully occupied, which was a good thing most of the time, but every now and again he'd come up with some mental theory about something he'd read in there, and he'd think he'd hit on something.

"Listen to this," he'd say, and he'd start reading out some episode where some guy fires into another guy's wife, or some idiot sells another guy out. "I'll bet this is it," he'd say. "I'll bet this is straight from life. Frank must have pulled this on John Jack at some point."

And then we'd be back to the routine of him wanting to take it to the filth, and me having to talk him out of it.

"Write it down, Jinky," I'd tell him. "Put it all in the notebook, son. You're getting a good wee case going there, but we have to make sure the whole thing's water tight."

And eventually I'd convince him to carry on again.

At the end of the second day, though, I hit the wall. My eyes started to go weird and I thought I was having a stroke or something. I couldn't read the paper any more. The lines and words started to look all bendy and I could hardly tell which way was up. The telly was doing my nut in as well, and I felt as if I might throw it out the window if I had to listen to another word about Frank McAlpine .

"We've got to get out of here," I told Jinky then. "This room is starting to stink, son. Let's get to the pub and forget about all this for a wee while. A few drinks and then I'll be able to go at it fresh again."

But Jinky didn't look too keen. He pretty much shat himself whenever we were out of the room. He'd changed his outfit a bit since we'd been at John Jack's, he was going for something closer to a pensioner's getup now rather than an art student, but he still had it in his head that John Jack had told the filth about my new look, and he didn't feel happy being out there with me.

I had to just about drag him to the pub in the end, and he sat there twitching, buried in his McAlpine novel, while I tried to restore the vision and give my head a wee bit of breathing space.

We downed quite a few, and even the wee man loosened up a bit eventually. I managed to talk him into closing the book and we got to talking about other things for the first time in what seemed a long time.

“You remember that whole kitten fiasco?” I said to him and he nodded. “That seems like fucking years ago, son.”

“A different lifetime,” he said.

“Maybe if I’d been bright enough to buy her that thing in the first place, none of this would have happened to us.”

“You might be right,” he said. “Maybe the worst thing you’d have to be putting up with just now would be wiping its shit up off the kitchen floor.”

“Or listening to the wife talking to it as if it was a wean,” I said.

We ended up having quite a good laugh in there. Wee Jinky even saw the funny side of what McAlpine had done to him on his stag night, and he told me some of the stuff passers-by had been shouting at him after we left him, and some of the stuff the filth had said to him while they were cutting him free, until he started cracking himself up.

I was feeling a lot better by the time we left there, I’ll tell you that. I was raring to go again, and walking back to the hotel Jinky even dropped the red-alert routine. He managed just to look in the direction he was moving in, instead of jerking his head about every which way, like he’d been doing for days.

“Maybe we should just give the detective work a rest for the night,” I said as we climbed up to our room. “Watch a wee film or something.”

“This book’s been doing my head in,” Jinky said, holding it up for a look at the cover. “I could certainly take a rest from this.”

“That’s settled then,” I told him. “Let’s just have a quiet wee night to ourselves.”

And that was exactly what we did. I went down to the bar for a few bottles of beer, while Jinky wrestled with the system for ordering a wee thriller on the telly, and when I got back I decided to put my own clothes on for a change, just so’s I could relax properly, and feel a bit more like my old self. And it worked. We had a rare old time. The film was a lot of shite, some guy stoating about from country to country, trying to stop something happening that you knew it would never happen right from the get-go. But he looked almost exactly like a guy we knew, a guy called Dougie White, and we had a right good laugh at the thing pretending it was Dougie firing into the idiot situations.

We were feeling pretty peachy again by the time it finished, and I told Jinks to dive down to the bar and get us a few more beers. I put my hand in my pocket to pull out a couple of tenners but I forgot I'd put my own trousers on, and my money was all in the pocket of the shapeless corduroys I'd been slouching about in for the past few days. There was something else in the pocket of my own trousers, though, and I pulled it out and had a look at it, and when I saw what it was I knew I'd won a watch. It was like the sun had suddenly come out from behind the clouds.

"Wait till you see this, Jinky," I said, and I got up from my bed and crossed the room towards him. "I think we might be onto something here, son. I think you're going to like this. I've just had a wee idea and I think it's a bit of a belter."

To be honest, it was something John Jack had said that had made the idea click into place for me. He had told us we would need Poirot to help us out of this one, and as far as I was concerned this might be the next best thing. I showed Jinky the piece of paper and he squinted at it, holding it up close to his face and moving his lips a bit as he read.

"What is it?" he asked me. "I don't get it."

"It's an address and a phone number," I told him.

He peered at it again.

"But whose?" he asked.

"The very man who might be able to help us," I said. "The boy Rankin."

He frowned at me.

"Are you back on that again, Peacock?" he said.

"He owes me big time, son. You know that."

"But we've got bigger things to be thinking about just now, Peacock," Jinky said.

"That's just it though, son. That's what I mean. I think he's the guy that can help us. Think about it. This is exactly what he does. He's Rebus. He works out who did things."

"Aye, things he made up himself in the first place."

"But that's the way his brain works," I said. "Maybe we can tell him all our stuff and he'll see a wee chink in it, a wee flaw. And it'll give him a chance to put things straight between him and me, eh?"

The wee man sighed.

“What else have we got?” I asked him, then I had another wee brainwave.

“He’ll be able to point out that wee bit of proof that proves John Jack did it,” I said, and I could see him wavering. “Am I right?” I asked him.

He looked at me without saying anything and handed me the piece of paper back. I looked at it again.

“What do you think, son?” I said. “Are you game?”

He chewed his lip for a wee minute and then he gave up the charade.

“It’s worth a try,” he admitted, and I told him he wasn’t wrong.

“It’s a peach,” I said. “It can’t fail, son.”

And I went to the wardrobe and fished out the corduroys, then I gave the wee man the money that I’d meant to give him in the first place.

Maybe you've read one or two of Rankin's books yourself, I don't know. If you have, you've no doubt built up a wee picture in your head of the sort of place where Rankin lives, based on the place where his Rebus character lives. I know I'd done that. I was expecting the address to lead us to a tenement flat like the one the Rebus boy occupies, but I was sorely mistaken. Way off.

At the end of our journey to Edinburgh we'd found ourselves standing outside a place that was practically a stately home. I had been impressed with McAlpine's place, but this was something else entirely. I think The Daily Record might have been a wee bit off about who was selling the most books. The place was wired to the teeth security-wise, as well. Not that that meant a lot to me and the wee man, it was all pretty standard stuff, it was just the sheer amount of it that impressed me. It took us about twenty minutes just to get close enough to the house to establish that Rankin wasn't in there, exactly the way I wanted it to be. You see, it made perfect sense to me that Rankin owed me, big time, but I was well aware that he might not see it that way himself, and he might need a wee bit of persuading. So I'd decided the best way to go about it would be to put the frighteners up him a bit, just at the outset. Just to make sure I had the upper hand.

"I still don't see the point in this," Jinky said, as we started disabling the technology. "We've got the guy's phone number, Peacock. Why don't we just phone him?"

He'd been giving it the same thing ever since we stepped onto the train at Queen Street. It was starting to drive me a wee bit spare, to tell you the truth.

"This is the way to do it," I told him. "This way we'll get what we want. This way we're in charge. We're not *asking* him to help us, Jinky, we're *telling* him."

"But what if he's away somewhere?" Jinky asked.

"What about it?"

"We could be sitting in there like a couple of lillies waiting for him, while he's away in Spain for a fortnight."

"And you'd complain about that? Two weeks in here instead of the manky hotel at the station? You're a belter, Jinky."

But we checked the answering machine as soon as we got in. The first message was only a couple of hours old. No problem.

And I'll tell you what else. There was no comparison between the state the Rebus guy and the Rankin guy keep their place in. From what I could gather from the book he put me in, the Rebus guy's a bit of a slob. There was nothing like that going on here. The place was immaculate. It looked like he hired a team of cleaners to keep the place in order.

"I don't feel good about this," the wee man said. "It's not right, Peacock."

"How come? What's going on with you, Jinky?"

"Coming into the guy's place."

I just stared at him.

"How many guy's places have we gone into before?" I asked him. "What the fuck are you on about, Jinky? What's the crime here, son? What are we taking? You never went on like this when we *were* taking stuff."

The wee man just shrugged.

"It feels like a liberty," he said.

Liberty my arse.

We got all the alarms and that turned back on, to save Rankin suspecting anything when he got back, and then we sat down to wait. I'd brought my old gear in a bag and I put that on again, just so's he'd know what was what. I'd fixed the hair up properly as well, and I was feeling a bit like the old self. The only thing there was nothing I could do anything about was the mustache. That was gone, and to tell you the truth I was still feeling a wee bit naked without it.

We sat there for a good couple of hours, me and the wee man. Just waiting. It started to get dark, and I was glad about that. It would add a wee bit extra to the element of surprise. We went through the routine a few times, just till I was clear that Jinky had grasped it. And then, just when I was starting to wonder if Jinky had been right about Rankin having gone off on holiday, we heard him coming crunching up the drive.

"Alright..." I whispered to Jinky. "Here we go, son. Just take it easy. It's a doddle."

We heard Rankin coming into the house, and dealing with his elaborate alarm system. Then we heard the coat coming off and being hung up, before he went into the kitchen and the kettle went on.

Jinky had made his way to the door of the room we were in by then, and he was standing up against the wall beside it. I straightened myself up in the chair and we listened to the tea being stirred, and then the footsteps coming back along the hall towards us. The door opened slowly, and as Rankin took his first steps into the room wee Jinky pushed the door shut behind him before Rankin even had a chance to get the light on. I snapped on the wee lamp beside my chair, just so's he could see who it was he was dealing with, and I'll tell you what else; you already know the house of the man and the house of his character have nothing in common, and you know the state they keep them in have nothing in common either. Well, I can let you know- Rebus and Rankin don't have much else in common either. From what I'd read in his books I'd been expecting we might have to deal with a wee bit of a struggle, a wee bit of a do. But Rankin just about pissed in his pants when he saw me sitting there. Wee Jinky had grabbed a heavy-looking statue thing off one of the tables, and he was holding it up behind Rankin in case anything would happen. But it was surplus to requirements. Rankin didn't even seem to realise Jinky was there. In fact, I think Rankin was a wee bit confused about where he was himself at that moment.

"Alright, Rebus," I said. "How are you doing, son?"

No reply. He'd managed to keep a hold of the cup of tea though, which was quite an achievement, considering the state he seemed to be in.

"Come away in," I told him. "Come and have a seat. You might not recognize me without the moustache, but we know we know each other, Ian. You've had dealings with me before."

He came across the room and he sat down, and I told wee Jinky to go and get a cup of tea for the both of us as well.

"I'm sure Ian would have done it himself if he'd known he had guests," I said, and away wee Jinky went.

"What can I do?" Rankin asked, and I told him to calm down.

"Relax, pal." I said. "We'll get to that. We'll get to what you can do. I want make sure you know who I am first."

"I know who you are."

"Who?"

"Peacock."

"That's it, pal. That's the one. And I know who you are, and I know you've taken me for a ride."

"Is this what you do now?"

"Is what what I do?"

"This"

"What?"

"This. First Frank, now me."

I just about shat. I couldn't believe it.

"How the fuck did you hear about that?" I asked him.

"How could I avoid it. There's been nothing else in the news for days."

"Aye. Aye. I know that. But I don't mean that. I mean how did you hear about it having anything to do with me? How did you hear about that?"

"That's what everybody's saying. Everybody knows that."

"Fuck."

I think I was starting to lose my thread a wee bit, but luckily Jinky came back into the room with the tea at the point, and that gave me a chance to get it back together again.

"Alright," I said. "Alright. Be that as it may- cheers, Jinky. Be that as it may. What matters here, Ian, is that you've shafted me, pal. Shafted me big time. How much did you make from that book?"

"How much?"

"A pretty fucking penny, I'd say- looking about at this place. Am I right? And how much did I see of that? Squat? Am I right? I was the main thing in that book, pal. Does that seem right to you, Jinky? This idiot makes a mint out of my name and I don't see a penny. And not only that, he made me look like a right piece of work as well. I could sue for that, Rankin. Defamation of character. You made me out to be a right villian."

"We'll you've certainly changed my mind about that today," he said.

Cheeky bastard. The thing was, I realized I'd got myself in a wee bit of a bind, cause it was helping me out to have him thinking I'd killed McAlpine . It was keeping him nice and scared. But I was going to have to tell him I hadn't done it, if I wanted him to help me out. You see my problem? I was ticking that over the whole time.

"We're only talking, Ian," I told him. "That's all, pal. Nobody's committing any crimes here."

"How about the breaking and entering?"

"We'll write that off against the defamation. What do you say, eh?"

I had a wee go at my tea and I told him to do the same.

"That's a nice cup, Jinky," I told the wee man. "Well done. Just right.."

But I was thinking all the time.

"So what do you think, Ian?" I said. "Do you think we can come to some sort of an arrangement over this, pal?"

He looked at wee Jinky.

"Maybe we can," he said. "I hope so. I'm open. Tell me what it was you had in mind?"

Despite the fact that he'd given me a right shafting over the book, Rankin actually turned out to be a pretty decent guy. He was alright. Apart from the shafting.

Once he'd accepted that me and the wee man weren't going anywhere, and once he'd stopped shaking, things started to go okay. He even cooked up a wee bit of dinner for me and Jinky while we were talking things through. To be honest, I think we'd appealed to his ego a wee bit. I'd told him we needed his help, and I'd bummed up the qualities of his mind to him, and that seemed to sweeten him up. He made a wee play of saying that the detective stuff was just in his books, that the Rebus guy was just a character, but you could tell he'd fallen for it. You could tell he had a wee tip for himself as a bit of a detective in real life, and pretty soon he was banging on about it.

"I'll tell you when I first realized I had a bit of a talent for this stuff," he said, stirring the pot. "I was probably about nine or ten, and my pal's shed got broken into. Somebody had taken his bike; smashed everything else up. I first heard about it from this other guy in our class- Soggy. I was walking home and Soggy came up to me- "Have you heard about Nimmo's shed?" I told him I hadn't. "It got broken into," he said. But then, when I heard about it from Nimmo, it turned out he hadn't told anybody else about it. Neither had his family. So how had Soggy known about it? That's what I was thinking."

He took a few plates out and battered them onto the table.

"It's quite a buzz solving a crime when you're a wee guy like that," he said. "Quite a thrill. That was it for me; from then it was either get into the police or write the crime novels."

"You made the right choice," I told him.

"You think so?"

"Going by the way you reacted when you found us in here? I *know* so, Ian. Am I right, Jinky?"

Jinky nodded, but then I backed off it. The guy looked a bit hurt. It seemed to me that the best thing to do was keep flattering him, if we wanted to get what we could out of him. So I backed off it.

"I'm just joking," I told him. "It's the mind that counts, Ian. Any idiot can do the physical stuff. Look at me and him," I nodded towards Jinky. "We're up to our neck in the shit. We've hardly got two bits of brain between us. You know what I mean? We never did this Frank McAlpine thing, but we can't work out what did happen. Even knowing what we know about it. That takes talent, Ian. That's where we need you, pal."

He dished up the food he'd been fucking about with and we all sat down at his table. It was pretty fancy stuff. Even Jinky seemed impressed, domestic goddess that he is. Don't ask me what it was, but it tasted alright.

"So..." Ian said. He'd cracked open a wee bottle of wine as well. "I'll bet I'm the first idiot in history to treat his burglars like this."

"It's certainly never happened to us before," Jinky said. "Eh, Peacock?"

"Not that I can remember, son. Not that I can remember."

"Cheers," Ian said, and then he asked us to lay out everything we could think of that had happened with us on the night Frank McAlpine got killed.

"All we need is for you to find a wee chink, Ian," I told him. "Just a wee glitch. Just to prove we never did it. And a wee idea about who did."

"Fire away," he said.

And so off we went, giving him everything we could think of from the night of wee Jinky's stag night until the minute we'd sat in his own living room listening to him crunching his way up the gravel drive. It took a good hour to get through it all, and we made a right mess of it at points, going back and forward over things we'd left out and things that were coming up, like a nervous best-man trying to tell a joke at a wedding. It was something to do with the fact that he told stories for a living, I think. It seemed to give us a wee bit of the stage fright. But we got there in the end, and when we'd

finished I handed him the piece of paper Jinky had scrawled his notes on in John Jack's office.

He took it without a word and flattened out all the creases, then he put it down on the table in front of him and gave it the once over. I could feel wee Jinky looking at me, trying to get my attention, but I ignored him. I didn't want to make any noise. I wanted to give Rankin the chance to see what he could see, let the mind turn over uninterrupted. I don't know how long I sat there like that for, maybe five minutes, maybe ten. Then, finally, Rankin looked up and wee Jinky was right on him.

"It was John Jack," he said, "Wasn't it? I've been trying to tell him that, Ian."

Rankin looked a bit surprised and he glanced down at the paper again, then he studied wee Jinky.

"What makes you say that?" he asked, and Jinky blushed bright red.

"Well," he said, "It's like we told you; John Jack always knows everything about everything, but he's saying he doesn't have a clue about who did this, if it wasn't us. That's not like him, so he must be hiding something."

Rankin looked quite impressed at that. He nodded slowly.

"That's a sound piece of reasoning, Gordon," he said. "Not bad at all."

He fiddled with the bit of paper and Jinky looked as if he'd just been crowned Miss World. The face was beaming and he turned to me with his head held high.

"There's one thing on here that interests me," Rankin said, and he took out a pen from his pocket and drew a circle round some of Jinky's scribblings. "It says the police know from Frank McAlpine's phone records that he answered a call from Gordon Jenkins at 8.02pm and that he made a call to Billy Smail at 8.51 pm."

I lent forward in my seat, all ears.

"Is that important, Ian?" I asked.

"I don't know," Rankin said. "How did he sound when you spoke to him, Gordon? What did he say?"

"It was me that phoned him," I interrupted. "I used the wee man's mobile. That's the call I told you about, the one I made in the Taverna."

Rankin nodded.

"How did he sound to you?" he asked. "Was he worried? Did he sound agitated?"

"He was worried when he heard it was me," I said. "I can guarantee that."

“And what did he say?” Rankin asked.

I thought back.

“I don’t think he said anything,” I told him. “Didn’t even have the decency to respond.”

That seemed to throw a switch for Rankin and he started tapping the table. He pursed his lips and made wee popping sounds like he was a goldfish blowing bubbles.

“Was it John Jack?” Jinky said, and I glared at him.

“Give it a rest, son,” I said quietly. “Let the man think,” and Rankin turned our piece of paper over and started scribbling a few things down on the back of it. The boy could write, I’ll tell you that. He soon had the sheet just about covered, then he turned it sideways and started scribbling in the spaces he’d left. He looked kind of knackered when he’d finished, sort of red-faced, and he poured himself a fresh glass of wine and got wired into it.

“What have you got?” I asked him, trying to see if I could read any of his words from where I was sitting, but it was a hell of a mess. I couldn’t make any of it out. He had another go at his glass of wine, then he spun the paper the right way up and ran his finger about on it.

“There are only really two possibilities,” he said. “Either somebody killed Frank McAlpine and then phoned your brother-in-law pretending to be Frank, or else they forced Frank to make that phone call first and then shot him. Either way it probably wasn’t Frank who answered the phone to you. But that might have been what gave whoever it was the idea to pin it on you. If they’d already killed Frank at that point they’d have heard how mad you were at him, and why, and that might have given them the idea to phone your brother-in-law. Same thing if they were just with him at that point threatening him or whatever. But in both cases it would probably have to have been somebody who knows you.”

“So you’re saying I put myself in the shit?” I said.

“Partly,” Rankin replied. “Possibly,” and I could hear the wee man muttering “Well done,” underneath his breath.

I let that go.

“So who was it?” I asked Rankin. “What else have you got, son?”

He went back to the crowded piece of paper shaking his head.

“There’s a hell of a lot to take in,” he said. “That’s just the first thing that jumps out at me. I think I’m going to have to give this some proper thought. Maybe even sleep on it. Let it all settle in. How would you feel about leaving me with it and then we can meet up again sometime early tomorrow?”

I didn’t like the sound of that.

“That could be a bit dodgy, Ian,” I told him. “How do we know we can trust you? How do we know that as soon as you’re shot of us that won’t just be the end of it?”

“Come on,” he said.” You saw the state of me when I came in here tonight. You know how much of a shite bag I am now. If I tried to pull that I’d be walking about looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life. I wasn’t made for that kind of thing.”

I had to admire the guy’s honesty.

"Fair enough," I said. "Does that seem reasonable to you, Jinky?"

The wee man nodded.

"Alright," I said. "We'll go for that, Ian. Where are you wanting to meet up?"

We got that sorted, and then me and Jinky got ready to go.

"There's just one thing I wanted to ask you," Rankin said when we were on our way out.

"What's that, Rebus?"

"How the hell did you manage to get through my alarm system? They told me the set up was unbeatable."

"Just a few wee tricks of the trade, Ian," I told him. "Nothing special. Maybe if you manage to sort out this mess for us we'll show you how it should really be set up."

"It's a deal," he said, and off we went.

The plan was to find ourselves a couple of cots in Edinburgh for the night, rather than hike all the way back to Glasgow, just to have to turn tail first thing in the morning to come and see Rankin again.

So we took a wee donner into town and had a scout about for a place.

The thing was, while we were at it, the wee man kept giving me some right funny looks. And he was in a hell of a mood into the bargain. He hardly said two words to me the whole time we were looking, and by the time we'd found ourselves a room it was just about driving me daft.

"What the fuck is with you, Jinky?" I asked him in the end. "What's going on here, son?"

No answer. He just sat staring at the wall.

"Come on," I told him. "Spill it. What's going on?"

"How do you mean?"

"Don't give me that, 'How do you mean?' You know what I mean, Jinky. Stop acting it. What's up with you, son?"

He got up and wandered across to the knackered looking telly that sat perched on the top of the chest of drawers, then he snapped it on and turned back to look at me.

"You lied to me," he said quietly.

"I what?"

"You lied to me, Peacock."

"How come?"

"You know how come. You told me we were going to see Rankin to ask him how John Jack killed McAlpine. You told me I'd convinced you that's what happened, but you never asked him anything of the sort."

I realised I'd made a wee bit of a faux pas there. I'd been thinking Rankin would have been able to tell us what had happened before Jinky had a chance to notice that, but it hadn't quite turned out the way I'd hoped.

"This plan's a bust, Peacock," the wee man said. "Rankin can't even see that it *was* John Jack. It's a no go. He only wanted us out of there so's he could phone the police and tell them what's happening."

"Give it a rest, son," I told him. "You're getting yourself all worked up about nothing. If it was John Jack, Rankin'll work out it was John Jack. If it was somebody else, he'll work out who that somebody is. Trust me, son, we're onto a winner. By the time we meet up with Rankin in the morning he'll have the whole thing in the bag."

Wee Jinky just rolled his eyes.

"I'm telling you, son," I said. "It's a stick on."

And who knows how things would have panned out if everything had just run on as normal from there? Most likely we'd have continued to go through that argument for the rest of the night, then in the morning we'd have gone to see Rankin and Jinky would have got the right end of the stick. But that doesn't bank on the crap we saw on the telly between then and the morning. That threw the whole thing right off the rails.

We'd had a couple of beers by then, nothing much, and I was sitting up in my bed while Jinky flicked about on the channels of the knackered telly. Jinky had just spent the past ten minutes trying to convince me to dump the Rankin plan altogether, and go straight to the police with his John Jack theory there and then, and I was trying to get him to see sense.

"We can do that tomorrow if Rankin comes up short," I told him. "What's the point in burning our bridges at this point in the proceedings? Anyway, by the morning..."

But I was wasting my breath. The wee man wasn't listening to a word I was saying. In fact, he suddenly seemed to have forgotten I was in the room altogether. Instead he was staring at the telly with big wide eyes, hammering at the button on the remote, trying to push the volume up past the maximum. I took a look at the screen myself then and clocked what the problem was, and it was a belter.

The studio was set up the way it always is when some daft England player's broken his toe again, or when some politician's been caught making an arse of himself; a big table in front of a bank of microphones, sitting in a room filled with journalists and photographers. The only thing was, it wasn't a footballer or a politician that was sitting behind the table this time, amongst all the flashbulbs and the questions, it was- are you ready for this?- it was Laura McAlpine, wee Jinky's ex, Frank McAlpine's daughter.

The wee man leapt up off his bed then, and moved across the room until his face was just about pressed up against the screen.

"Turn it up, Peacock," he shouted at me. "Turn it up."

I pointed out that he was holding the remote himself, and that the telly would likely explode if it went any louder, but he only told me to shoosh and tried to get even closer to the thing.

You should have seen the state of him, sitting there with his mouth wide open, listening as if Laura had come on the telly specifically to tell him why she'd fucked off, and what he had to do to get her back.

He looked as if he was about to burst into tears.

All she was gave it, though, was what everybody always gives it in that situation, "If anybody knows anything about this, please come forward", "This is a terrible thing that's happened", "We know somebody watching this must know something." All that kind of guff. The sort of thing that usually makes you think they did it themselves.

When her plea was done, wee Jinks sank back onto the bed and closed his eyes. He put a hand on his brow and I went and grabbed the remote off him, to turn the volume back down from the mental level he'd had it at. I thought about asking him then if he thought Laura had done it, just to try and lighten the mood, but I decided against it in the end, and he let out a wee groan.

"That was me she was talking to, Peacock," he said. "Did you see that? She was looking straight into the camera and she knew I'd be on the other side of it."

I put the remote back down beside him and went and lay on my bed.

"She knows about us," he said. "She's heard all the stuff that's going about. That's why she did that. She knew I'd see it and she wants me to give myself up."

He started flicking about the channels, looking at the other news programmes, and right enough, before too long, he stumbled across it again. He went through the same routine as the first time, hammered the volume right up full, and fired himself across the room until he was pressed up against the screen. By the time it finished this time he was like a limp rag. He snapped the telly off and flopped down onto his bed exhausted.

“She might as well have said my name,” he whispered. “She might as well have said, ‘Listen Gordon, I know it was you, and I still can’t believe it. I knew you were an asshole, but I didn’t think you were capable of killing my dad. So get yourself to the police right now.’ That’s what she was really saying, Peacock. That was the real message behind it.”

I took a deep breath.

“You’re reading too much into it,” I told him. “You’re getting carried away with yourself now. Come on, Jinky. We’re nearly there. Come the morning we’ll know who did it and you’ll be able to prove to Laura that it had nothing to do with you. Am I right?”

No answer. He’d the telly back on and he’d started flicking through the stations again. It was starting to drive me crazy. I grabbed the remote off him and hit the mute.

“Right,” I told him. “Keep that turned down, Jinky. I’m shattered here. It’s been a long day, son, and we’ve got an early start in the morning again. Let’s just try and get some sleep now, eh?”

He nodded and reached out for the remote.

“I’ll keep it quiet,” he said. “I promise.”

I didn’t want to give it back to him at all, but he kept grabbing for it, and I was pretty certain he’d have some kind of breakdown without it.

“Just ten more minutes,” he said. “Then I’ll get some sleep.”

So I gave in. In the end I gave in and I gave it to him. And while he sat there torturing himself, chasing the clip across the channels on a constant loop, I hit the pillow and closed my eyes. And I went out like a light.

Christ knows how much sleep he did get in the end. In fact, I don’t even know if he went to bed at all. All I know for sure is that, when I woke up, the wee bastard was gone. He’d cleared out. At first I thought he was just in the shower or something. Then I

thought he'd maybe gone downstairs for a wee spot of breakfast without bothering to wake me up. But when I clocked the note he'd stuck on the mirror, and noticed that all his crap was gone, I knew exactly what had happened. I knew right away that he'd bailed. And I'll tell you what, I didn't hang about any after that either. I didn't even bother to grab my stuff. I just threw on whatever clothes I could find lying about, stuffed his note into my pocket without reading it, and fucked off out of there as if the building was on fire.

I must have run a good mile and a half before I even stopped to catch my breath, and when I did it was only because I thought I was going into cardiac arrest or something. My chest was as tight as a drum, and the left arm was louping, but I'd wanted to put as much distance as I could between me and that hotel room, as quickly as I possibly could.

I sat down on a wall then and just stared at my feet until the feeling started to come back into my fingers. It took a long time, I'll tell you that, but when it finally happened the first thing I did was pull Jinky's note out to have a swatch at it, and it turned out I'd been right enough. It was exactly what I'd been expecting.

"I've had it, Peacock," it said. "I've gone to the police. I know it was John Jack and I can't hack it anymore. Not after seeing Laura last night."

And that was it. That was all it said. I screwed it up into a ball and threw it away. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe the wee bastard had dumped me in it like that. I just thanked fuck I'd come-to when I did. Another few minutes and I'd probably have woken up to the sound of a swat team banging on the door of the room.

They'd have been carting me away before I even had time to pull on the Y-Fronts.

He was something else altogether, the wee man. No doubt about it. And what really got to me was the thought that there had been a point in time, not too long beforehand, when I'd been willing, out of the goodness of my heart, to be that wee prick's best man.

What a fucking donkey.

So I had to take Rankin by surprise, again.

And he just about pissed in his pants.

Again.

It was some carry on.

I'd been waiting for him a few hundred yards up the road from the pub where we were supposed to meet. I got there about half an hour early, found a suitably dilapidated looking doorway, and buried myself right in in case the filth that were making their way to our original meeting place would pass by there. Then when Rankin came along I stepped out and grabbed him by the arm, and tried to turn him round to start walking him in the opposite direction.

And you should have seen the look in the eyes. He was like one of those gazelles on the telly, when they've just been hit by a big cat. Give him his due, though, he at least attempted to put up a struggle. He pushed me as hard as he could, but somehow that only made things worse. He was already off balance, and the force he pushed me with sent him flying backwards, then he staggered a wee bit, grabbed a handful of fresh air, and smacked down onto the road. Flat out.

"Your pavements are too high in Edinburgh, Rebus," I told him, while he was lying there. "That's your main problem."

It was only then that he seemed to recognize me, and I bent down and gave him a hand up.

"Fucking hell," he said. "What's your game, Peacock? What are you trying to do to me?"

"There's been a change of plan," I told him, and I started walking him back in the direction he'd come from. He kept brushing at his clothes and looking back over his shoulder.

"I thought I was getting mugged," he said. "What are you doing dressed like that?"

"This is the disguise," I told him.

He frowned at me and then looked about.

"Where's your pal?" he said.

"He's bailed."

"Bailed?"

I nodded. "I woke up and he'd fucked off. He's done a runner."

I kept him walking, and I had a wee look over my own shoulder now and again.

"He took that idea about John Jack having killed McAlpine to the police, first thing this morning. As far as I can make out he's cracked up. So we're going somewhere else to talk. The filth are probably sitting in the other place already, waiting to do me."

Rankin had one last look over his shoulder and then he seemed to get it.

"Fair enough," he said.

"So where else can we go?"

"Let me think for a minute..."

I stopped walking him and he brushed himself down again.

"Right," he said. "Just up here."

And away we went.

\*

I liked the place he chose for us. It was dark and empty and we found ourselves a table in a wee alcove with a good view of the door. I sent Rankin up to the bar to get us a couple of pints while I went to the toilet and splashed some water on my face, and when I got back he was already sitting with the wee notebook open, and the mountain of newspaper clippings on the table in front of him. I think I started having a flashback to the hotel room where me and Jinky had tried to puzzle the thing out ourselves when I

saw them, and my eyes started to swim again. I dropped down into my seat and had a good go at my pint, till it levelled itself out, and then I stared across the table at Rankin.

“So what have you got for me,?” I asked him. “Wee Jinky’s stuck me right in it here, Ian, so I need something good now. How are we looking? Is there anything doing?”

And I could hardly believe it, but the bastard nodded.

“You’ve got something?” I said, and he nodded again.

“I’ve got one thing I think you’ll like,” he said. “And another that might not go down too well with you. I think you’re going to like *who* did it, but you might not be too happy about *how*.”

It was a few seconds before I fully registered what he’d just said. I was lifting my pint again, nodding away, and I just about had it up to my lips when it properly hit me. And it hit me hard.

I thumped the glass back down on the table, and I stared at him.

“You know who *did* it?” I shouted, and he nodded again. I couldn’t fucking believe it. I felt like leaning across the table and grabbing the guy by the collar to give him a great big kiss on the cheek. And then I just thought, fuck it- and I did.

That took him aback, I’ll tell you that for nothing.

“For Christ sake, Peacock...” he spluttered, wiping his face with the back of his hand. “Contain yourself, man.”

“Contain myself, nothing,” I told him. “This is huge, Ian. Huge. You’re some boy, Rebus. I knew you could do it. I knew it. I kept telling wee Jinky, Ian’ll sort us out, son. Just take it easy. Ian’s our man. Fucking hell... I’m shaking here. I’m just about ending myself. How the fuck did you manage it? What was the big clue?”

“It was pretty easy once I’d worked out the motive, ”Rankin said, still wiping away at that cheek. You’d have thought I had the lurgy or something, the way he was going at it, and I told him to give it a rest. He gave it one last wipe and then he put his hand back down on the table.

“So who was it?” I asked him, and he smiled.

“See if you can work it out now,” he said. “It’s been staring us right in the face. It’s in this pile of crap right here.”

I started to get a wee bit impatient.

“I don’t mean to be cheeky, Ian,” I said, “But I’m not looking for any suspense here, son. Do you know what I mean? This is hardly one of your books. Are you with me?”

“I know that,” he said. “But humour me, Peacock. Have a wee look and see if you can spot anything.”

I frowned at him, but I picked up two or three of the clippings, one after the other, and I gave them the once over just to keep him happy. The eyes were soon going haywire again. I think I must have done some serious damage to something in my head in that hotel room with Jinky. I could feel the flashback getting stronger and I gave it up.

“Anything?” Rankin asked me, and I shook my head.

He nodded.

“I was the same,” he said. “I was sitting in my living room with the telly on, listening to the radio with all the clippings you gave me spread out on the floor. Just about going up the wall. And then it suddenly hit me. I realized what we’d been doing wrong. We’d been looking at everything too closely, Peacock. That’s the secret. You have to zoom out. It’s not about anything *in* any of these articles; it’s all about the articles *themselves*. All this landfill, all the reports on the news and on the radio. Frank McAlpine, Frank McAlpine, Frank McAlpine. That’s what it’s all for, Peacock.”

He pulled another clipping out of his pocket and handed it to me.

“Take a look at that,” he said, and I studied it. It was a book chart. McAlpine’s books were all over it like a rash.

“Only one of those books was in the charts last week,” Rankin said, “And it was at number 57. I think that’s what this whole thing has been about. Publicity.”

I just about hit the roof. I could hardly contain myself. I had to grab hold of the pint to stop me from keeling over, then I looked Rankin full in the face.

“The brother-in-law?” I whispered, and he nodded.

“That’s what I think,” he said.

I thought I might be about to have a stroke or something. The brain was reeling. Then I remembered Billy telling me how he’d been struggling to get McAlpine to do any interviews for this new book, and McAlpine telling us how he’d been sick of the whole thing. I told all that to Rankin and he started to look like a pig in shit.

“Let me get another round in,” I said. “This calls for a wee celebration, Ian.”

I stood up and fished about in my pocket for some money then something suddenly struck me and I sat back down again.

“What about the phone call?” I said. “According to John Jack the filth know McAlpine phoned the brother-in-law just after ten-to-nine. It showed up in his phone records.”

“And I’m sure he did,” Ian said. “But we’ve only got your brother-in-law’s word for what Frank actually said to him. For all anybody else knows Frank might have phoned him to talk about the weather.”

I had to hand it to the Rebus, he was some boy. He was in at everything. I started looking for my money again and then I had another one of my wee brain waves.

“Wait a minute though, son,” I said. “No matter what McAlpine talked about on the phone, two minutes later the brother-in-law and the wife shot out there in the car, and when they got there they found him dead. How does that work?”

Rankin looked down at the table.

“That’s the bit I told you you might not be too happy about,” he said, and I’ll tell you what, he was right.

And saying I might not be too happy about it was a bit of a fucking understatement. I just about went stark raving mental. I reached across the table and grabbed hold of his collar, dragged the bastard up onto his feet, and I’ll tell you what else, there was no big kiss on the cheek involved this time. I was dead set on killing the bastard. What he’d just told me was that, for his theory to pan out the wife must have been involved. Bev! And I’d gone up like a fucking rocket, no question about that. I had a right good hold of him, telling him he was bang out of order, and he started backpedalling like a bastard.

“Maybe I’ve overlooked something,” he spluttered. “Maybe I’ve made a mistake somewhere.”

“You’re fucking right you’ve made a mistake,” I told him. “A fucking howler. You’re bang out of order here, Rebus.”

But even as I was talking I realised I was making a bit of a howler myself. I was drawing a wee bit too much attention to myself, and I looked over Rankin’s shoulder and noticed that the barman had his hand on the phone, watching to see how far this

thing was going to go. I loosened my grip a wee bit on Rankin's collar and tried to get a hold on myself instead. Rankin struggled to catch his breath, then I gave him a wee push and he dropped back down into his chair.

"Ten minutes, Rebus," I told him, and he looked a wee bit bewildered. "That's how long you've got," I explained. "We're working to a deadline here, Ian, courtesy of my wee pal Jinky. So you've got ten minutes to come up with something halfway decent or the deal about the book is off. Ten minutes and the law-suit is back on."

"Be reasonable," he said, but I didn't let him finish.

"That is me being reasonable," I told him, and I lent towards him again. He held his hands up in the air.

"Okay, okay," he said and he rubbed his cheek. "Maybe we could go and talk to your brother-in-law or something. See if he slips up."

"Whatever," I said. "I'm going out to get some air. Make sure you've got something solid by the time I get back."

I looked over at the barman again. He still had his hand on the phone so I gave him a wee apologetic wave and pointed towards the door.

"Just a wee disagreement," I said, and I grabbed my jacket and headed outside.

I was still pretty livid when I got out there, but I was pleased I'd managed to keep a lid on it to the extent that I had, considering what Rankin had said to me in there.

The wife!

Jesus *Christ*. What a cheeky bastard!

Never mind the fact that the wife had considered it a criminal offence to have left Jinky tied to a lamppost on his stag night. Or that she'd given me the elbow for stealing a bastarding *fish*, for fuck's sake.

That was all by the by, apparently.

The guy was a fucking bampot.

I walked all the way down to the end of the street, and then I turned and started walking back. By then I wasn't really expecting Rankin to come up with anything within ten minutes. In fact, I was starting to feel like a bit of an arsehole for having given him that deadline in the first place. But as I was walking towards the pub, it occurred to me that maybe the wee bit of pressure would do him good. Maybe it would

get his brain fired up enough to create a few wee sparks and he'd come up with something. He certainly needed all the help he could get if he thought the wife was capable of covering up a murder for the sake of the brother-in-law.

Fucking hell.

So before I was all the way back, I turned round again and did another lap. I must have went up and down that street about five or six times, both ways, and by then I had started to cool off nicely. As I walked, it struck me that Rankin had never met the wife, hardly even knew the first thing about her, and I got to thinking that maybe it was a fair enough conclusion he'd come to when that was the case. He should never have said anything about it to my face right enough, that was still bang out of order, but it was a bit more understandable that he'd thought it. Besides, the guy was all I had, so I realized I was going to have to try and get past it.

I'd given him about eight minutes by then, and I decided that when I reached the pub this time I'd just head in and try and make the peace, maybe butter him up a wee bit. See what I could do. The thing was though, it never quite got to that. I never quite made it back to the pub. Instead, there was a wee bit of an incident beforehand, and it forced me into a rather sharpish change of plan. It forced me to rethink the whole thing completely.

I was about halfway back up the street on my final tour of duty, all set to duck in and tell Rankin that I'd probably gone a wee bit over the top at his mention of the wife, when a dirty great police van roared round the corner and pulled up on the pavement, right outside the door of the pub. There was a fair amount of banging and shouting, and then four of the filth's finest spilled out into the daylight, and after some more shouting and a whole lot of confusion they finally managed to work out where it was they were going, and the lot of them dived into the pub. And I'll tell you this, it was clear they weren't just nipping in there for a swift mid-morning pint.

I turned round slowly, trying not to draw any attention to myself, and it was only then that I noticed there seemed to be an uncommon number of filth chariots scattered about the place, parked outside various pubs and cafes in all different directions. Fuck knows how I'd missed them before; too caught up in my philosophizing about Rankin

no doubt, but I saw them now alright. And when I saw there were two boys in uniform coming straight up the street towards me, I decided it was time to make myself scarce.

I nicked off down a side street and weaved in and out of a few wee alleyways at a pretty brisk pace, checking behind me every now and then to make sure no one was following me. Eventually I found myself out on the main thoroughfare, and I dived headlong into the crowd and let them carry me along for a wee while. I don't know if I was just being paranoid, but even out there it seemed like there were a few more officers of the law than there needed to be to deal with the everyday running of the city. So I kept my head down and just kept walking, until I realised I had no idea where the fuck I was going.

The left arm was louping again, and my head was spinning, so I sat down on the edge of a bench and tried to pull myself together. I realised then that the only breakfast I'd had so far was that pint back in the pub with Rankin, and right at the minute it didn't feel like it was sitting too well. Things started to swim a wee bit and I put my head in my hands and rubbed at my face, and it was while I was sitting there like that, just about at the end of my rope, that I started to think I could hear somebody shouting my name. Somebody seemed to be calling out to me over and over, and they were saying something else that I couldn't make head nor tail of. It didn't even sound like English, and I wondered if this was it, if I was finally cracking up, or if I was just having some kind of hallucination brought on by the lack of food and the dodgy pint.

I sat up a bit then and looked about me, trying to work out if there really was somebody shouting, and eventually I noticed a wee blue booth down at the end of the street with a wee guy inside it trying to sell copies of the Evening News, and it appeared to be him. He wasn't looking at me or anything, and Christ alone knows what he was saying, but I edged back into the crowd and drifted towards him, and when I was still a good ten feet away I noticed he'd the day's headline scrawled in big back letters on the front of his booth, and when I read it I just about passed out.

"Police Hunt Killer Peacock," it said, and I edged in closer, trying to get a glance at a paper. I was half hoping I would just see a big picture of a daft bird on the front page, some mad peacock that had caught rabies or something and gone on the rampage out at the zoo. But I was onto plums. It was nothing of the sort. It was a dirty

great picture of yours truly that was staring back at me, a big mug shot from when I still had the moustache and the hair slicked back, slap bang on the middle of the cover.

I quickly dropped a few coins into the boy's hand and grabbed a copy off the top of the pile, then I melted back into the crowd again and had a right good look at the thing while I was walking. It was some read, I'll tell you that; quite the wee fairy tale. But there was one nugget in amongst the crap that fair cheered me up. In fact, it just about had me laughing out loud on the street.

Are you ready for this?

Apparently, my wee pal Jinky had been nicked.

I sat in the back of a black cab, trying to ignore the pish the driver was spouting up the front, and looking down at the loose change and the three tenners I was holding in my hand. It appeared to be all I had left of the money Big Frank had given me, and I couldn't work out where the fuck it had all gone. I'd stolen a rare fish for the guy and all I seemed to have got out of it, less expenses, was thirty pounds and eighty-seven pence, and an impending life sentence. Whichever way you looked at it, that was pretty poor business sense. And once you factored in the fact that I'd lost the wife into the bargain it started to look like a pretty serious instance of bad accounting.

I hunted around in my pockets to see if I was missing anything, but that appeared to be the lot, so I tucked it away carefully and picked up the paper to see if that would get the message across to the driver that I wasn't in any mood to be listening to him. He was hammering on about trams or something, I don't know, and normally I'd just have told him to shut the fuck up. But under the circumstances I didn't want to draw any unnecessary attention to myself, in case he had a right good look at me and thought about where we were headed and put two and two together. So I buried myself in the paper and it seemed to do the trick.

"Am I boring you?" he shouted, and I kept my mouth shut. Then he called me an ignorant so-and-so, and finally he shut up and concentrated on the job at hand.

My original plan, when I'd been floating along in the crowd reading about wee Jinky's predicament, had been to head back out to Rankin's place and wait for him there. But the deeper I read into the thing the less that looked like a good idea. According to the boy who had written the article, the police were saying that now they had 'apprehended' my 'accomplice', Gordon Jenkins, after a long and deliberate effort, I was expected to be arrested and charged within a matter of hours, and they described

me as being currently at large in Edinburgh. So it seemed like a stick on that they'd have a few numpties waiting out at Rankin's place for me, now that they'd grabbed a hold of him in that pub, and I decided the best thing I could do would be to get out of Edinburgh altogether.

I made a b-line for the train station quick smart, but it didn't take me long to work out that that wasn't going to work either. I could see from quite a bit away that there were a couple of uniforms waiting at the first entrance I headed for. Whether they were looking for me or not I don't know, but every other entrance I went to was the same and I didn't really feel like taking any chances, so that's when I'd bailed into this idiot's taxi and told him to put the foot down.

"Where to?" he asked me, and I realised I hadn't even thought about that. The first thought that popped into my head was Glasgow, so I went with it.

"Are you having me on, Jim?" he whinged. "Glasgow?"

"Am I what?"

"It'll cost you sixty quid. What's up with the train?"

"I missed it," I told him. "I've got an appointment."

"Sixty quid," he said.

"I heard you. On you go."

"I'll need it up front," he told me, and I sighed. And that's how I'd ended up down to my last thirty quid and loose change.

So it looked as if it was the end of the line for me and Rankin as a popular duo. I was back on my todd again, and the new plan was to traipse along to see John Jack and let him in on Rankin's wee insight. Whichever way I looked at it, Rankin's idea about the brother-in-law still seemed to be a stroke of genius. Even allowing for the fact that I desperately wanted it to be true for my own twisted reasons, it looked like a winner to me, and I tried to convince myself that maybe that was as far as Rankin would have got with the thing anyway. It was up to me and John Jack now to try and work out how the brother-in-law had done it without involving the wife.

I closed my eyes then, and tried to have a go at coming up with a wee answer myself, but there was nothing doing, and all I really got out of it was the feeling that I might have burst something in my brain. It was a right fucking puzzler. It seemed to me

that if there had been anybody else involved, even just to make that phone call out to the brother-in-law's place, then John Jack would have known all about it. And if the brother-in-law had nicked out there and done it himself, the wife would have shopped him in at the first opportunity.

But then I remembered something. I remembered the trick Rankin had pulled the night before, when he told me and Jinky that he needed to sleep on it, and I thought that maybe that was his secret. Maybe that was how he'd put his finger on the thing in the first place, just sleeping on it. I knew it had worked for me now and again, whenever I was working away on a wee idea. All you do is nod off and let the back bit of the brain keep on buzzing, while you're out like a light. And then you wake up in the morning with the thing cracked.

We were out onto the M8 by then, and the boy up front was still keeping his mouth shut, so I decided there couldn't be any harm in giving it a try. I had a wee paranoid glance about to make sure there weren't any filth chariots following us down the motorway, then I closed my eyes and concentrated on the rocking movement of the car to get myself nice and relaxed, and before I knew what had hit me I was out for the count.

And the beauty of the thing was, it fucking worked. As soon as I came-to it was all there. I had that first wee moment of wondering where the fuck I was, and maybe even *who* the fuck I was, then it all came flooding back to me. And when it did, all the new stuff came flooding in as well.

I had it cracked.

It was only then that I realised what had woken me up though; the driver was twisted round in his seat, shouting over his shoulder, just about turning purple.

"Are you listening to me?" he was saying, and I told him I was. "So how about it?" he asked me. "Where is it in this shite-hole you're wanting dropped?"

I saw then that we were already in the centre of town, heading along Killermont Street, and I gave him a few directions just to keep him happy, then I told him to let me out wherever he could pull in.

By the time he found a place to stop he'd started banging on about how bad the traffic would be on his way back to Edinburgh, and how he should have kicked me out

as soon as he heard where I was going. Then the cheeky bastard had the gall to ask me where his tip was.

“I’ll put it in the post,” I told him, “Keep an eye open for it.”

Then I skipped out.

I was in for a bit of a shock when my feet hit the pavement, mind you. My legs just about went out from under me, and I hardly had the strength to hold myself up. It dawned on me then that I must be coming down with a powerful dose of malnutrition, and it wasn’t until I’d wobbled my way into The Baker’s Oven, and waded into a couple of rolls and sausage and a big mug of tea that I remembered about the wee revelation I’d had when I woke up.

I shat myself for a minute, thinking I might have forgotten it all, but I crept into the memory bank gently and had a wee root about, and I found it was all still there. I was a bit worried at first that it might turn out to be like one of those things that seem like a fantastic idea when you’re half drunk and then seem like total shite when you sober up. But I ran through it a few times and it was as sturdy as they come. It was fucking solid.

So here’s what I’d realised; Rankin had been right after all. He’d been absolutely spot on in thinking the wife had covered up for the brother-in-law. The only mistake he’d made was in thinking the wife knew anything about it, and that was the result of him never having met the wife. Because he’d never met her he was totally unaware of what a wee dafty she can be sometimes. Hand on my heart, the wife hasn’t got a bad bone in her body, but she has got quite a few dizzy ones, most of them up in the brain area. And although Rankin didn’t know anything about that, the brother-in-law certainly does. He’s all too aware of how dizzy the wife can be, and that was the very thing he must have used to his advantage.

When I woke up in the back of the taxi all I’d had in my mind was a single image; the wife and the brother-in-law sitting in the brother-in-law’s fancy car, out on Frank McAlpine’s driveway, and the brother-in-law saying to the wife, “I’ll just run in first, Bev. To make sure it’s safe in there.” To make sure it’s safe. What a fucking hero, eh? Are you with me now? I’ll fucking bet you are.

So all he has to do is run in, plug Big Frank, and then come straight back out and tell the wife they're too late, McAlpine's fucked and I'm already gone. And when the filth get there he makes sure he does most of the talking, tells them about McAlpine's phone call, tells them the same lies he's already told the wife about what McAlpine said on the phone, then tells them that the two of them rushed out there to help but it was too late, as soon as they got there and went in McAlpine was already dead. And the wife would have backed him up, no question. I know exactly what she's like. It wouldn't even have occurred to her that the brother-in-law had put one over on her, and nobody at Pitt Street would have been having any flashes of genius, you can bank on that. As far as Smail was concerned he was in the clear. But now I'd fucking nailed him. Me and Rankin. It was fucking gorgeous.

I looked at my watch. There didn't seem to be any point in going to talk to John Jack now. The only person I really needed to see was the wife, but it was still a good couple of hours until she was due out of work, so I settled back a wee bit and took it easy. The rolls had gone down nicely and the malnutrition was starting to ease off. I was starting to float. There was still a wee gap in the stomach there, though, that could do with some filling, so the next time the waitress went past I shouted her over and I ordered up another roll and a second mug of tea. Then I ended up getting a wee tad carried away with myself. It was probably just the result of all the excitement, and I certainly regretted it almost right away, but by then it was too late. The lassie was already on her way to the kitchen to fire in the order for my roll. And what I'd done was, I'd told her to bung a fried egg on it.

I knew there wasn't a chance in hell of the wife talking to me if she had any choice in the matter, not with the way things stood, so I had to make sure I didn't give her any choice. I had to make sure I took her by surprise and put her right on the spot. The trouble was, I had so much time to kill before she was due out of work that I nearly ended up making a complete arse of the whole enterprise. I spent so long going from bookies to bookies, and from pub to pub, that I stopped paying any attention to the time. It wasn't till I was standing out on Argyle Street, wondering what to try next, that I decided to have a look at the watch and realised I only had five minutes to get all the way from there to her call centre. All I could do then was run like the clappers and hope to fuck she hadn't skived off early. I knew if I missed her, there would be nothing more I could do until the morning, and Christ knows what would have transpired by the morning. But when I came out onto her street I caught sight of her up at the far end, coming along the pavement towards me with a wee pal in tow, and I ducked down into a doorway until they'd gone past, keeping my face hidden behind the newspaper. Then I pulled my hat down low on my head and started following along behind them.

It felt good to see her after all this time, and to hear her wee voice drifting across the top of the crowd as she nattered away to the pal at ten to the dozen. My only worry was that the pal's presence was going to knock my plan completely for a six. I didn't see how I could pull it off with her hanging about. But when they reached the bus stop the pal gave the wife a wee peck on the cheek, stood for a minute while the wife banded on about something else, then the pal fucked off and suddenly things started to look good. It started to look like I might be in business.

I knew the wife wasn't likely to recognise me in the shite clothes and the woolly hat without the usual face furniture, but I hung well back all the same. Even when the bus pulled up at the kerb I still kept my distance, and it wasn't until the driver had opened the doors and the queue started surging towards it that I felt it was safe to make my move. It was a delicate operation, I'll tell you that. Once I got going I started elbowing my way into the crowd to get as close to the wife as I could, but I had to be careful that the crowd's complaints didn't attract the wife's attention, and I had to make sure my threats to the crowd were quiet enough to keep her from hearing them. I got it just about right though. Only one arsehole made a wee bit too much of it, and I got him just in the right spot beneath the ribs to shut him up in time, and then I was on. I was only two folk behind the wife, and I knew I'd cracked it when I saw her heading towards an empty window seat and the other two carried on further up the bus, as nice as you like.

I slipped in quietly beside her while she was looking out the window, and I sat stock still while the rest of the idiots poured onto the bus. Then the doors closed and we were off. I could hardly believe it. I'd fucking done it. I was sitting inches away from my own wife and she didn't even know I was there. It was out of this world. I opened my paper up and buried my face in it again until I'd managed to calm myself down a wee bit, then, just before we got to Cowcaddens, I folded the paper open at a picture of Big Frank and I put it down on my knee. I waited until we were pulling away from another bus stop and then I gave the wife a wee nudge.

"Have you been following this story, hen?" I asked her, and I pointed at the paper. And you should've fucking seen her. You should've seen the look in her eyes when she turned round. Terror, you'd have to call it. There were no two ways about it. And then she screamed. She threw her hand up to her mouth to try and stop it, but by then the thing was already out, and the whole bus had heard it. I thought I was done for, but I did what I could to put a big smile on it. I lifted my hand up to the bus and I dropped my head, then I put the thumbs up.

"Old pals," I said loudly, and I gave them the big smile again. "We haven't seen each other in years."

I could tell the wife was swithering about which way to go, trying to decide whether to drop me in it or back me up. But then she nodded.

“Sorry about that,” she said to them, her face bright red. “I just got a wee bit excited.”

And slowly they all went back to whatever they’d been doing before, and I wiped the brow.

The wife looked as if she couldn’t decide whether she’d done the right thing or not. She was looking like she thought it might have been a good idea to have them on her side. All I could do was thank my lucky stars and go straight back to work.

“It’s been quite the tale,” I said. “Quite the wee mystery. What have you been making of it yourself?”

But she just looked at me she didn’t say a word. Then she stared down the aisle towards the driver.

“Personally I think they’re after the wrong guy,” I whispered, and she didn’t even turn round this time, just kept staring into space, and I could see the bottom lip starting to tremble a wee bit.

I gave it a rest for a minute. I let a few more stops go by and waited till we were past Queens Cross, then I tried again.

“Listen, hen,” I said. “I’m being serious when I say they’re after the wrong guy. I didn’t have the first thing to do with this, Bev, I promise you.”

She turned round to look at me and I could tell she didn’t believe a word I was saying.

“Come on,” I whispered. “I know I’m an arsehole, fair enough. But you know the kind of shite I get involved in. You know I wouldn’t do something like this.”

“I thought I knew you,” she said. “I thought I did.”

“And you were right, Bev,” I told her. “You were spot on, hen. Listen, somebody’s put me right in it here and I think I know who it was. I just need to talk to you for a few minutes, that’s all.”

When she was quiet this time I took it as a good sign. We were getting close to Maryhill by then. Another wee while and we’d reach Bearsden and she’d fuck off to the sister-in-law’s place.

“Will you get off the bus?” I asked her. “Just for a few minutes, Bev. Then I’ll pay for a taxi to take you the rest of the way, I promise.”

She puffed her cheeks out and looked down. “I don’t think that would be wise, Peacock,” she said.

“Ten minutes, Bev,” I said. “Please, hen. We’ll go into a pub where there are plenty of other people. I’m not trying to pull anything here, I swear.”

By Maryhill I’d managed to persuade her. She wasn’t too convinced that it was a good idea I don’t think, but I’d done enough to get her off the bus. I stood up to let her out and then I walked down the aisle behind her. The fanny I’d nudged out in the queue gave me a wee bit of a look as I passed him, and normally I wouldn’t have let that go. Usually I’d have taken issue with that. But I knew I was on rocky enough ground with the wife as it was, and that would just about have put the tin lid on it, so I bent down and had a wee word in his ear.

“I’m sorry about earlier, son,” I said. “I owe you a pint sometime. I got a wee bit worked up out there.”

You should’ve seen the look on his face. Total surprise. It gave me quite a wee buzz, to be honest.

“I really appreciate this,” I said to the wife as we stood out on the pavement watching the bus driving away. “I mean it, thanks a lot.”

And I tucked my paper under my arm and led the way to a wee pub just round the corner.

I made a wee stab at sparking up some small talk once we were settled in. I asked the wife how she was getting on at her work and how things were going at her sister's but she wasn't having any of it. It wasn't on, as far as she was concerned. "Don't even get me started on any of that, Peacock," she said. "I don't want to get into it. It's all been a bloody nightmare, okay? My nerves are shot with it all. So just ask me what you've got to ask me and then let me get out of here."

I nodded and apologised.

"I don't want anybody to see me in here with you," she carried on. "I'm constantly having to avoid idiots from the paper who want to talk to me about Frank McAlpine, and if any of them see me in here with you that'll be the end of it."

"How would they recognise me, though?" I asked her. "You didn't even recognise me yourself."

"I don't care," she said. "You've got no idea what it's been like. Even now there's a guy behind you that keeps staring at us."

I turned round in my seat and had a look.

"He probably just fancies you, hen," I told her. "You're looking good."

She gave me a tight-lipped smile and picked up her drink.

"And you're looking weird," she said. "So what is it you've got to ask me?"

I opened up my Evening News and spread it out on the table.

"Right," I said, and I turned over a few of the pages. "I really don't know how I got into this mess, Bev," I told her before I started. "I really don't."

And obviously I should've just fired right in without the preliminaries, because she seemed to have quite a lot to say about how I'd managed to get myself get into it. Quite a lot that I'd really rather not have bothered having to hear. I think she even tried to stop herself getting into it at first. I saw her looking down and biting her lip, but then it just overtook her, and out it came.

"I'll tell you exactly how you ended up in this mess, Peacock," she said, almost in a whisper with her wee eyes shining. "You ended up in it because you're a bloody madman. It's as simple as that. You're completely out of control, and you're a lying bloody bastard into the bargain."

I was fair taken aback by that, I have to be honest. It took me a couple of seconds just to find my tongue again.

"What are you talking about Bev?" I asked her. "How am I a liar? I'm being straight up with you here, hen. Honest to God."

"I'm not talking about now," she said. "I'm talking about in general. I'm talking about you stringing me along with a lot of bloody rubbish, telling me you were sorting yourself out working at Billy's when all along you were stealing a fish with that wee idiot pal of yours. A *fish*, Peacock. What kind of mug do you take me for? It's your own stupid fault you're in the mess you're in now, and it's just like every other mess you've ever been in. This is exactly what you deserve, Peacock."

"Aww, come on, hen," I said. "Go easy. I don't deserve this."

"Don't you?" she asked me. "You're absolutely sure about that? And the way you flew off the handle at me on the phone was absolutely fine, was it? And those threats you threw at me. You should be able to go about carrying on like that and have nothing come back at you, is that it? Is that how it should work, Peacock?"

She looked down at a spot on the table and kept her eyes fixed on it and I fiddled about with the paper.

"I'm sorry about that, hen," I said eventually. "That was bang out of order, I know that now. But it was just talk, Bev. I was wound up. I went down for wee Jinky and we had a drink and then I calmed down, and that's all that happened. There was nothing else to it, and it was Frank McAlpine I was angry with, not you."

She kept her eyes fixed on the point on the table she was staring at and didn't say a word. I flicked through the paper again and then had a go at my drink, and she just kept staring.

"I'm wasting my breath," she said in the end. "You still don't get it, Peacock, do you?"

"Get what, hen?" I asked her.

"The problem. You still don't understand what I'm talking about. This has got nothing to do with Frank McAlpine. It's got nothing to do with wee Jinky. It's you I'm talking about, but you won't take any responsibility. You had no reason to be angry at Frank. The whole thing was the result of your lying to me about what you'd been doing. That's what I'm complaining about. That's what I was talking about then, and that's what I'm talking about now. You told me you were sorting yourself out and I believed you. I believed you, and all the time you were lying to me. It's got nothing to do with the shouting on the phone. It's about you constantly taking me for a ride, year in and year out."

"But you just said it was because of me shouting at you on the phone, Bev. You're just after saying that."

"You're not listening to me," she complained. "You never listen to me. That's the root of the whole bloody problem."

"All I'm doing is listening," I told her. "All I'm doing is sitting here listening to you right now, Bev."

"So what do you make of it?" she asked me, and I scratched my chin.

"I fucked up, Bev," I told her. "I fucked up big time. I admit it. I told you a pack of lies and I took you for a ride. I'm sorry, hen."

She breathed out loudly. She lifted her eyes from the spot on the table and looked at me. Then she picked up her drink.

"Okay," she said.

"Alright?"

"Alright."

She shook her head. "I'll tell you what though," she said. "That guy across there is really giving me the creeps. I'm going to go to the toilet."

And she took a few sips from her glass and buggered off.

I turned round and had a look at the guy she'd been talking about. His eyes followed her all the way to the toilet door, but when he looked over and saw me staring at him he soon got the message. There was no doubt about it, the guy just fancied her. I moved round to her side of the table so she wouldn't have to look at him when she came back. I pushed her drink over to where I'd been and the guy didn't dare to look at her on her way back. He kept his eyes firmly fixed on his glass.

"Everything okay?" I said as she sat back down.

She gave me a wee smile.

"I'm fine," she said, and she thanked me for having swapped seats.

"So how *have* things been at your sister's?" I said. I'd decided to have one more shot at the small talk, and this time it paid off. She gave me a wee laugh.

"Oh, Peacock," she said, "You don't know the half of it."

And then off she went.

"For a start I've had no idea what you did or what you didn't do, and that's been driving me up the wall. Then there's the reporters. They've been phoning the house at all hours of the day and night, and chasing me up at work, and that's before you even get to Billy and Marianne. They were bad enough before, but they're totally demented now. It's like living in a mental asylum, Peacock. And I'm still totally in shock about Frank. I haven't even started to recover from that yet, but I don't get any chance to. And mum's always at the house, mooching about. She never comes right out and says anything about you, but she's always dropping hints. She might as well be wearing a T-shirt that says 'I told you so' on the front, and 'But I'm not gloating' on the back."

She gave me the wee laugh again.

"So that's how it's been," she said. "Or that's the tip of it anyway."

She sat back, and I had to admit she looked pretty knackered. She looked deadbeat, in fact. She had a wee sip of her drink and started rubbing at her eyes.

"That sounds hellish, hen," I told her, and she let out a big sigh.

"I wish I could believe you, Peacock," she said. "I really do. Are you honestly telling me, hand on heart, that you had nothing to do with what happened to Frank?"

It took me a wee minute to catch up. I'd thought we were still on the subject of how things were at her sister's, but I was soon back on it, and I saw my chance.

“I swear to you, hen,” I said. “And I think I can even prove it to you. I just need you to tell me about what happened that night, when you and the brother-in-law...”

“Oh God,” she said, and she rubbed her wee eyes again. Then she started shaking her head. “Don’t make me talk about that, Peacock,” she said. “It makes me feel sick just to think about it. I started feeling sick when you phoned me that night, and I think I’ve been feeling sick from then until now. I really do.”

She sat quietly for a wee while and so did I. Her face had gone a funny colour, and I gave her a wee minute to calm down again. It looked like it was touch and whether she was going to throw up all over the table or not, but slowly the green colour faded away and then she started to look a bit puzzled.

“So what happened?” she said. “I don’t understand it now. Why would Frank say you were out there and ask us to come and help him if you had nothing to do with it?”

“Did you hear him saying that?” I asked her, and she shook her head.

“Billy heard him saying it. It was Billy he said it to, and Billy told me.”

“That’s just it, hen,” I said. “I think Billy made it up. I don’t think Frank said anything of the sort. I think he was already dead by then.”

She looked even more puzzled.

“But what would Billy do that for?” she asked.

“Because I think it was Billy that killed him,” I told her, and her eyes went wide. She lent across the table towards me and then she sort of jumped back again, all in one move.

“But,” she said, “What would...” and she stared at me. Then she dropped her head and sat frowning at the table for a wee minute. I watched her, and I was nodding away. Eventually she looked up.

“No,” she said. “No, Peacock.”

And I just kept nodding.

“Think about it, hen,” I told her, and I turned through the pages in the paper, showing her how much space the story was still taking up, and telling her how McAlpine’s books were selling like crazy. She just frowned at the newspaper shaking her head.

“I don’t think he did it, Peacock,” she said. “I really don’t.”

“But he must have done, hen. It’s a stick on. You don’t know what these cunts are like when it comes to selling their books.”

“You’re starting to get wound up,” she said, and I dropped the head and let out a sigh.

“What?” she asked me. “You are, Peacock. You know you are. You always get wound up when you start talking about Billy, and he’s not nearly as bad as you think.”

I scrunched up the newspaper.

“You’re starting to sound like your mother now, Bev,” I told her.

“How am I?”

“Because you are. Listen to yourself, banging on about how great the brother-in-law is.”

“Well I know he wouldn’t do that, Peacock,” she said.

“And I would?” I asked her. “Is that what you’re saying? He’s the fucking golden boy and I’m a fucking murderer? I’m telling you, Bev, you’ve been spending way too much time with those idiots. The guy’s a fucking clown, and it turns out he’s an even bigger clown than any of us ever thought he was.”

“Calm down,” she said.

“I am fucking calm.”

“No you’re not.”

“Well how can I be?” I asked her. “You’re sitting there telling me I killed a guy, and meanwhile the brother-in-law’s got you all eating out of his palm, as per fucking usual.”

“You’re shouting, Peacock,” she said.

“Am I fuck.”

“You are, and I’m going if you don’t calm down.”

“Only because you can’t face up to the truth,” I told her. “Your head’s full of shite, and none of this pish would ever have happened if you’d just stayed at home, instead of taking the huff over a wee cat. A fucking *cat*, Bev. What the fuck were you thinking about?”

She stood up and pulled on her jacket and then she grabbed her bag.

“What are you doing?” I asked her.

“I’m going,” she said.

“Are you fuck,” I told her, but I was too late. She was already running across the pub, and then she was out of there.

I jumped up and grabbed my own coat, but then I just sat back down again. I’d fucked it up. I’d fucked it up big time, and I hadn’t even got to ask her my question.

What a fucking tool.

I’ll tell you what though, I was absolutely raging. I couldn’t work out what had been going on in her daft wee head. I grabbed my pint and tried to calm myself down, but it wasn’t easy. I kept getting myself all wound up again just thinking about it. I managed to get through the pint though, and when that was done I decided to take my chances and see if I could still catch up with her outside. I stood up and took a deep breath. The guy who had been giving Bev the eye earlier gave me a wee bit of a look when I walked past him, and I wasn’t in anything like the mood for that, so I thumped my fist down on his table just about as hard as I could. You should have seen the poor bastard jump.

“Keep your eyes to yourself in future, son,” I told him, and then I headed for the door.

I was pretty sure, by the time I got out of there, that the wife would be in a taxi and gone. But I was dead wrong. She hadn't gone anywhere. She was sitting on a wall outside the pub with her face buried in her hankie- crying her eyes out. And it wasn't until I'd ran past her, travelling at a fair old speed, that I realized I didn't need to be running at all, and I turned round and went back.

She hadn't seen me running past her, and she didn't see me coming back. She was still buried in the hankie, and I moved in quietly and sat down on the wall beside her.

It would have broken your heart to sit there listening to her, seriously. I thought about moving in a bit closer and sticking my arm round about her, but I knew if I did that she'd be up and off like a shot. So I just sat there, head down, listening to her slowly getting control of herself again. And as the sniffs started replacing the sobs, and then the sniffs started to get further apart, I kept the head down and listened to her putting the hankie away, and then I heard her turning round and realizing I was there.

And it was just like I'd thought; she was up and off in two ticks. She started marching in the direction I'd been running in, and I just sat on the wall and watched her for a wee while. Then I got up and I started walking after her.

I kept a steady distance for a while, and she didn't look back once. She just kept going. She got across the road without having to stop and wait, and I fell a wee bit behind her, but she didn't speed up and she didn't slow down. And she still didn't look back. Just kept marching on at her steady wee pace.

Once I'd got across the road myself I picked it up a wee bit. I got it up to a wee jog, until I was level with her, and then I started walking along the pavement beside her. I turned to look at her. Nothing. She just stared straight ahead, and kept the pace. I moved a wee bit closer to her and kept looking at her.

"I know I fucked up in there, Bev," I told her." Big time. And I know you're heading back to your sisters now. I'm not even going to try and stop you. I just need to know one thing, Bev. I just need to know exactly what happened when you got out to Frank McAlpine's with Billy."

Nothing. Again. She didn't even blink. And her speed didn't change, not by a notch.

I let myself fall back. I was getting wound up pretty quickly again, I can tell you that.

And still she kept walking. I looked back to see if there were any taxis on the road. I knew if she jumped into one of them that would be the end of it, I'd be totally fucked. But there was nothing coming, and the way she was walking, with her gaze fixed straight in front of her, she'd be lucky to see anything even if it did come. So I let her walk for a wee bit. I let her walk, and then I had another shot at it.

"Listen, hen," I said. "Can you stop walking for a minute? Just till I ask you one question? Then I'll put you in a taxi to your sister's place. I promise."

But apparently she couldn't. Apparently all she could do was keep on walking at that constant speed, with her gaze fixed on that constant spot. And apparently that was just about enough for me. That was just about the right amount to tip me completely over the edge.

I just stopped walking then. I stopped walking and I faced myself out onto the road, and then off I went. Totally bastard mental.

"Here I am," I shouted. "I'm right here. The man of the moment."

And I walked out onto the road and had a go at some of the cars that were passing, banging on the roofs of the ones that slowed down.

"Come and get me," I told them. "I'm ready to go. Open that back door, pal. First stop Pitt Street."

None of them were quite up to stopping, right enough, but I was getting a fair bit of attention for myself. Even cars going the other way were slowing down, and folk in the houses were coming to their windows. And finally it got the wife's attention as well. I watched her stopping and turning, and coming back along the pavement, and the wee face was blazing.

She came out onto the road and grabbed a hold of me.

"Right," she said. "Ask me what you've got to ask me, and then get out of here. I mean it. You're a bloody idiot, Peacock. You really are."

I gave everybody a wee wave then and stepped back onto the pavement. They all started moving on again, apart from a few curtain twitchers, and the wife dragged me back in the direction we'd come in, banging away.

"You're an absolute lunatic," she said. "Come on. Get on with it. What is this thing you need to ask me so badly. Out with it."

The thing was, right at that minute I couldn't really think straight. I was a wee bit dazed from what I'd just been up to, and I needed a wee rest to get myself right again.

"Hurry up, Peacock," she said.

"Eh... Aye. Right..." I said, and I sat down on the kerb. I started rubbing the temples to get the blood flowing. I knew I didn't have too much time.

"I'm getting impatient here," the wife said, and I gave her a wee nod.

"Alright, hen," I said. "Alright. Just let me get myself together here. I'm trying."

I rubbed the forehead and banged on the side of my face, and then I was on it.

"Alright," I said again. "Okay, aye. That night when Billy drove you out to Frank McAlpine's place, am I right in thinking that he ran in first?"

"Who?" the wife said.

"The brother-in-law. I'm right, amen't I? He told you he wanted to check it was safe or something like that, and he left you sitting in the car while he ran in to check."

"What are you talking about, Peacock?" she said and I gave her a great big grin.

"That's how he did it, hen," I said. "That's how he pulled it off. Frank McAlpine was still alive when Billy ran in there. It was Billy that shot him while you waited out in the car."

She looked at me as if I'd gone off my trolley, then the wee bottom lip started going again.

"We went in there together, Peacock," she said, very slowly. "I wish we hadn't. I wish I had waited out in the car. I don't think I'll ever get over what I saw in there, I really don't. It was horrible, and I thought you had done it."

My head fell forward. I had this weird feeling that it might have fallen off if I hadn't caught it in my hands. Then it felt as if the ground was opening up beneath me

and I looked round about me. A few of my admirers from earlier were still standing staring at me, and some of them were talking into mobile phones.

“Fuck,” I said again. The wife sat down on the kerb beside me and stared at the road as if she was in a wee trance.

“Is that all you wanted to ask me?” she said, and I nodded.

“That’s it, hen,” I told her. “Thanks for answering me.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out what money I had left. After my wee visits to the bookies and the pubs earlier, and after the drinks I’d bought us before she ran out on me, I was down to my last fiver.

“Here’s the money for a taxi,” I said, and she took hold of it and turned it over in her fingers. “I’m sorry I said that thing about the kitten earlier,” I told her. “That was out of order.”

She kept her eyes on the bank note.

“Thanks,” she said.

“Take care of yourself, hen,” I said. “You’re a great wee thing. I mean it.”

She nodded, but I wasn’t sure if she was taking any of it in.

“Sometimes I think this is all just a dream,” she said. “Sometimes I think I’m having a nightmare, and I’m going to wake up. I’ve been feeling like that ever since you phoned me that night. I wish I could wake up.”

“You and me both,” I said. “That would be the business wouldn’t it. We wake up and there’s a daft wee kitten running about the flat, and I’ve got that job I was going to take with the brother-in-law. A nice quiet wee life.”

She pretended to laugh.

“As if Peacock,” she said, and I rubbed at my face. “Besides,” she said “I know you weren’t going to take that job.”

“How do you mean?”

She gave me a look.

“I really was, hen,” I told her. “If that’s what it would’ve taken to get you back, I’d have done it.”

She screwed up her face.

“You’re digging yourself a hole here,” she said.

“How?”

“Because you had no intention of taking that job.”

“I did, hen. I swear.”

She made as if she was holding a spade and digging a big hole in the road with it.

“What?” I asked her.

“I *know*, Peacock,” she said.

“How come?”

And then she told me. She told me, and suddenly everything changed. My head started spinning, and I jumped to my feet. I could hardly think fast enough.

“Wait a minute, hen,” I told her. “Wait a minute here.”

I started rubbing the old temples again and I stoated up and down the pavement, struggling to get the brain working, while she tripped along behind me like I’d been doing to her earlier, tottering on her high heels, catching up with me and then falling behind again.

“What is it, Peacock?” she kept shouting, “What’s happened? *Tell* me.”

I stuck my hand up into the air. An empty taxi was coming round the corner, and when the driver saw me he pulled in at the kerb.

“Clamber into that,” I told the wife, and she asked me again what was happening. “Just get in,” I said, “We’ve got him, hen. We’ve fucking got him. I’ll tell you about it on the way. Just get in.”

She stood on the pavement staring at me, still not making a move, so I hauled the door open and bunged her onto the back seat, then I climbed in beside her and gave the driver the sister-in-law’s address.

“We’re in a bit of a hurry,” I said, and the driver nodded.

“No problem,” he told me, but he hardly knew the half of it- another filth chariot had just pulled up outside the pub we’d been in. I watched it out the back window as we drove away. It seemed the boy in there hadn’t just fancied Bev after all.

The closer we got to the sister-in-law's place, the more I wished I hadn't made such a big thing about paying for the wife's taxi. I'd managed to swipe my fiver back off her earlier in the journey, but apart from that all I had was a handful of smash which didn't add up to buttons, and the meter became the sole focus of my attention. By the time the driver dropped anchor it was sitting up at £6.25, and I had to pretend I was surprised to find myself short.

"Have you got a couple of quid on you, Bev?" I said. "I think somebody must have dipped me."

But it wasn't worth the effort. She didn't hear a word I said. She was sitting looking out the window at the sister-in-law's front door, frozen stiff.

"What's going to happen, Peacock?" she whispered, and I reached out towards her handbag.

"Everything's going to be fine," I told her. "Don't worry about it. Everything's going to work out just the way it should."

"You're not going to do anything stupid though," she said, "Are you?"

I shook my head.

"I won't need to," I promised her. "Watch me, I'll be as good as gold."

In the end I had to just about lift her out of the car bodily. I don't think she would ever have made it on her own. That front door had her under a spell of some kind, and even as we walked up the path towards it she couldn't look at anything else.

“I think I’m going to pee myself,” she said when we finally got there, and I pulled my hat off and pushed the hair back, just in case the in-laws would be in any doubt about who they were having over for tea.

“Hit the bell,” I told the wife, and she turned to look at me and swallowed hard.

“Do you think I should?” she asked, and I nodded.

It took her a couple of goes to get it. The first time, she pulled her hand away just at the last minute, as if she’d had an electric shock. Then she straightened herself up, cleared her throat, and went for it again. And this time she got it good and proper.

I’ll tell you what, taking the hat off just about did the trick. You should have seen the look on the sister-in-law’s face when she came to the door and saw who was standing there. She looked as if she’d just been shot.

“Bev,” she said in a wee croak, but her eyes were fixed firmly on me, and they were as wide as they could go.

“Hi, Marianne,” the wife said, in a wee croak of her own.

But then something in her seemed to change. Now that the front door was open it appeared to have lost the power it had over her, and she skipped up the step and dived inside.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” she said as she went. “Is Billy home from work yet?” And he certainly was.

The sister-in-law shouted out for him in a voice that suggested she was being mugged, and she stuck her arm out to stop me following the wife.

“Don’t you dare come in here,” she said to me. “We all know exactly what you’ve done. I’ll phone the police if you as much as set foot in here. I’m warning you.”

So I lent towards her and gave her a wee peck on the cheek.

“It’s good to see you again, hen” I said. “I’m glad things are starting to get back to normal at last. Or that they’re just about to.”

Then I stepped in past her, as bold as brass.

The trouble was, I suddenly wasn’t too sure if I felt as bold as brass. The deeper I got into the hall the more I wondered what the fuck I was playing at. I couldn’t help thinking about how fired up I’d got when I hit on the brainwave that Bev had waited out in the car while Billy ran in and plugged McAlpine, and I started to wonder if this was

just the same thing again, all over the back. With the only difference being that this time I'd pretty much delivered myself to the filth on a plate, and if this one fell as flat on its arse as the last one I'd be fucked.

When I reached the living room door, and the brother-in-law stepped out into the hall to meet me, I realized I didn't even really have a plan. All the way there I'd just been consumed by the idea that we had the bastard, and that seemed to be enough. Now it didn't really look all that clever.

Still, I tried to put a brave face on it. The brother-in-law held out a hand to try and stop me going into the living room, and I pretended to misunderstand him and took a hold of it and gave it a good shake. He was holding a glass of wine in his other hand, and I pointed at it.

"Entertaining?" I asked him, and I gave him a wee smile. Then I edged him out of the way and followed the wife on into the living room. And as soon as I stepped inside I saw that I'd been right, he *was* entertaining. He had a wee guest sitting in there sipping away at wee glass of wine of his own. And you'll never guess who it was:

It was the boy Rankin. As nice as you like.

Allow Rebus, eh?

He gave me a wink and tapped the side of his nose before the brother-in-law traipsed in behind us, and I put a thumb up in front of my chest and gave him a great big grin. I was back on solid ground. I was back in business. It was a good bet that my own brain power wasn't quite up to grasping the full meaning of what Bev had told me, but I knew it wouldn't be a problem for the big man. I knew he'd be able to fathom the thing out. No worries.

"Phone the police, Marianne," the brother-in-law said to his wife, and he looked at me as if it was some kind of challenge. But I wasn't about to try and stop her. I was all for it.

"I think that would be for the best, hen," I said, and she stared at me suspiciously, trying to work out if I was taking the piss or not. Then she picked up the phone and went to work.

"Who's your pal?" I asked the brother-in-law. "You forgot to introduce us."

But he wasn't having any of it.

“If I was you I’d get out of here,” he told me. “You’ve probably got about five minutes before the police arrive.”

I threw myself down into an armchair and started laughing.

“Five minutes?” I said. “If she’s phoning Pitt Street we’ll be lucky to see them before Christmas, Billy. You might as well set up the spare bed for me in the guest room.”

“Lock the doors, Billy,” the sister-in-law said, and she brought the phone across in front of my chair, blocking my path of escape. I sank down further into the cushions and put my feet up on the coffee table. Then I noticed the half empty bottle of wine sitting there and I pointed at it.

“Grab us both a glass of that, Bev,” I said to the wife. “I think our hosts must have forgotten their manners.”

And the wife had a nervous wee giggle to herself, then she went to the drinks cabinet and brought out the crystal.

Amazing as it might seem, Smail's prediction of five minutes wasn't all that far off the mark. For once, the Pitt Street Clown Troupe were there in two shakes of a lamb's tail, bursting with enthusiasm and itching to get the show up and running.

The problem was, I'd been hoping for a chance to swap notes with Rankin before they got there. I didn't want the brother-in-law to get wind of what was going on in case the slimy bastard managed to think up some way out of it, but I'd been hoping me and Rebus might have been able to get together in a corner at some point to have a secret wee chinwag, just so's I could be sure of what I had. As it was, the only opportunity I got to talk to him was when Smail was off locking the doors, and the sister-in-law was giving the wife a bit of a tongue-lashing for bringing me there in the first place. And it wasn't much.

"Anything doing?" I asked him, and he shook his head. He whispered that he'd managed to confirm what he suspected, but only for himself.

"*You* must have something, though," he told me. "You wouldn't be here otherwise. Am I correct?"

I nodded and lent a bit closer to him, and that was as far as we got. That was the full extent of the conference. We heard the sound of screeching breaks outside, and the rattle of the brother-in-law's keys as he unlocked the front door again, and before I could even ask Rankin to wish me luck the brother-in-law was leading the filth into the living room and pointing at me.

There were two of them. Two big guys, strapped up to the neck in body armour. Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee. They looked like a couple of enormous toddlers dressed up to go out and play in the snow.

The sister-in-law turned on me, and started giving it some.

"That's him!" she shouted. "Take him away. Get him out of my house, officer. Please!"

Tweedle Dum started coming at me and then your boy Rankin steps forward.

"Could I have a quick word with you first?" he said, and Tweedle Dum looked at him as if he was a piece of shit on his shoe.

"And who might you be?" he asked.

"My name's Ian," Rankin stammered. "Ian Rankin. I'm a writer."

You should have seen the look on the filth's faces then. The two of them lit up. The *I'm-a-hard-man-and-don't-even-think-about-fucking-with-me* attitude vanished completely, and they started behaving like two old women at a gardening show.

"The Rebus books?" the one who had been coming for me said, and Rankin nodded.

That one turned to the other one.

"Bloody *hell!*" the other one said.

The sister-in-law was starting to look a wee bit agitated by then. She was just desperate to be shot of me, but they weren't paying her any attention now.

"Me and Rab here are big fans," Tweedle Dum said. "Aren't we, Rab?"

Rab nodded.

"It was him that got me started on your books," Rab said. "What a read though. What a read. I've been tearing through them."

"So what was it you were saying?" Tweedle Dum asked Rankin. He seemed to have just remembered he was here on business, and as he said it he tried to get the authority back into his voice, and Rab tried to get the *I'm-as-hard-as-fuck* look back onto his face.

It was comical.

For a wee minute Rankin looked a bit disappointed though. You could tell he would have been quite happy just to stand there and be bummed up about his books a

bit longer. He was fair lapping that up. But give him his due, he soon snapped out of it. He put his wine glass down on the coffee table and then he pointed at me.

"This man here is Peacock Johnson," he said, and I gave them a wee wave.

"That's our man," Rab said. "Right, pal. On your feet."

I stood up. It's always best to keep them thinking your ready to jump whenever they tell you to jump. Otherwise they tend to get a wee bit girny.

"I know he's the one you've been looking for," Rankin said. "But I think I can prove to you that he didn't do it. And I think I can probably tell you who did."

Rab gawped at Rankin. He was back in fan mode again, and so was his big daft pal. The pal had the notebook out and he started scribbling in it frantically.

"Sit down," Rab said quietly to me, and down I went again. I gave the wife a wee wink and I picked up my glass.

"This man here was Frank McAlpine's publisher," Rankin said and he laid a hand on the brother-in-law's shoulder.

"Both big fans of Frank McAlpine as well," Tweedledum said solemnly, and Rab nodded.

"Billy here received the phone call from Frank McAlpine on the night he was killed," Rankin said. "The one where Frank claimed that Peacock was in his house behaving in a threatening manner."

Tweedledum looked up from his notebook and glared at me. It was quite a look. I was glad he didn't have me in the back of a van at that point, with my hands cuffed behind my back. You had to hand it to the brother-in-law though, he was still standing strong. He had a wee smug smile on his face, and if he had any inkling about what was coming he certainly wasn't showing it.

"Now here's what I think," Rankin said. "I think by the time Billy received that phone call, Frank McAlpine was already dead."

Tweedledum just about swallowed his pencil, and Rab couldn't have been more impressed if Rankin had just made the Eiffel Tower disappear. They both seemed to have lost the power of speech. They stared in bewilderment at each other and it was clear that Rankin was in his element. Making up his wee stories was one thing, but you could tell he'd waited his whole life for a moment like this. In his mind, now, he *was*

Rebus, and he looked like a wean who'd suddenly been allowed a shot of driving the car.

Finally Rab found his tongue and he came out with a right corker.

"But how could Frank McAlpine make a phone call if he was dead?" he said, and Rankin pointed at him.

"That's what I'm hoping Peacock can tell us," he replied. "I think Peacock's onto something, but he hasn't had a chance to tell me what it is yet."

And suddenly I was the centre of attention. I wasn't sure whether I should stand up or stay seated. I considered getting up for a minute but then I decided I was just fine where I was.

"Aye," I said, and I lent forward a wee bit in my chair. "That phone call, Ian. That one we told you I made to McAlpine from the Taverna on wee Jinky's phone. Remember you said it might not have been Big Frank I was talking to?"

Ian nodded.

"Well you were right enough," I said, and his eyes lit up.

"You know who it was?" he asked, and I told him that I certainly did. He could hardly contain himself.

"Who were you talking to?" he said, and I milked it with a wee pause, then I gestured with my thumb towards the wife.

"It was her," I said, and Bev took a beamer all the way to the roots of her hair, suddenly finding the spotlight pointing her way.

"Tell Ian what you told me, hen," I said. "Tell him how come you knew I had no intention of taking that job with Billy."

And she chewed at her fingernails for a wee while and then off she went.

It was as simple as this: the brother-in-law had come home that night after Bev phoned him at work and told him she was scared to be in the house by herself, and he'd spent some time calming her down then nicked off for a brisk shower. And while he was in the shower the wife had heard his mobile phone ringing in the pocket of the jacket he'd left hanging on the back of a chair, and she'd pulled it out and answered it, half expecting it to be me.

And she'd been right.

“He was going totally mental,” she said to Rankin. “You should’ve heard him, Ian. It was unbelievable. It was all “I’ll do this to you,” and “I’ll do that to you.” And all because of a fish...”

I froze. If there was one place the conversation didn’t need to go it was anywhere near that fucking fish. Not with the boys in blue around. But she seemed to realize that herself, and she changed lane.

“I assumed he thought he was talking to Billy,” she said, after a pause. “But I was too terrified to say anything, so I just listened to him for a while and then I hung up.”

She stopped then and I studied Rankin’s face. At first he didn’t make any response at all, he just sat looking at her in exactly the same way he’d done while she was talking. I was certain then that I’d fucked it up. I couldn’t quite see how, but I was convinced it was the same thing as when I’d thought the brother-in-law had left the wife out in the car. It was another fucking fiasco. But then, all at once, Rankin leapt to his feet and he slapped his hands together hard enough to do himself an injury. It was like a gun going off. Then he turned to the brother-in-law and looked him straight in the eye.

“We’ve got you,” he said, and the Smail’s face was magnificent. You’d have thought he’d been standing in a glass tank and the whole thing had suddenly just filled up with water, right up to his fucking eyeballs.

I managed to grab a quick look at the sister-in-law as well, and it was the wide eyes again with her. They looked as if the eyelids might have retracted too far to keep the spheres in the sockets for much longer.

It was fucking beautiful.

Rankin turned to me then, suddenly worried apparently.

“You’re certain you didn’t make a mistake with the phone, though?” he asked me. “You’re certain you dialed the right number?”

“Take it easy, son,” I told him. “I didn’t even dial a number. Wee Jinky put McAlpine’s name up on the screen and I just pressed a button.”

That satisfied him, and for a minute he stood there shaking his head.

The two boys in blue didn’t seem to have the slightest idea what was going on though. They were both looking about the room, turning from one face to another. Eventually Rankin noticed them and took the situation in hand.

“This is the man you’re after,” he said, laying a hand on the brother-in-law’s shoulder. Then he sat them down and tried to explain to them that Smail had whacked McAlpine on his way back from work, and then brought McAlpine’s phone home with him.

It all got a wee bit confusing for a while when Rab grabbed the wrong end of the oar and thought Rankin was suggesting that the brother-in-law had killed McAlpine for the sole purpose of stealing his mobile phone. Rab wasn’t buying that idea, no matter how high an esteem he held Rankin in.

“We generally find it’s a much lower class of criminal who’s involved in mobile phone theft,” he said. “This gentleman here seems quite well off to me.”

It was fucking frightening. I couldn’t believe this pair were allowed to take a car out on the road on their own, never mind anything else. But you had to admire Rankin. He stuck with it through thick and thin. He explained patiently that the brother-in-law had only stolen Frank’s phone so’s he could use it to make a call to his own phone later in the evening.

“That way the phone records would show that Frank McAlpine had phoned this house at the time in question,” he said. “And all Billy had to do was put the phone back in Frank’s pocket when he rushed out there with Beverly.”

You got the feeling he might as well have been trying to teach long division to a couple of five-year-olds. He’d probably have had better luck.

I shot a look at the brother-in-law to make sure he wasn’t taking the opportunity to tunnel his way out through the floorboards, but he was still too busy drowning to do anything else. He still looked like he was going to die right there and then in the room.

“If you check the phone records,” Rankin said, “I’m pretty sure you’ll find a call registered from Gordon Jenkin’s phone to Frank McAlpine’s phone around eight o’clock but I’m also willing to bet that you won’t find any call made from Gordon Jenkin’s phone to Billy’s phone. And the fact that Beverly can testify to answering that call in this house proves that Frank McAlpine’s phone was in this house at that time.”

Tweedledum wrote it all down furiously in the notebook, which was at least something, but none of it really seemed to be getting through to them any better. Christ alone knows how they managed to follow the plots in Rankin’s books. Maybe it was just the pictures on the covers that appealed to them. Who knows? In the end Rankin

looked towards me at a bit of a loss, and shrugged his shoulders. I lent forward in my seat again and caught Rab's eye.

"Billy Smail killed Frank McAlpine for the publicity," I said. "Frank didn't want to promote his new book and Billy knew it wouldn't sell otherwise, so Billy bumped him off for the free advertising."

That seemed to click with Rab for some reason, and he was immediately on his feet striding towards the brother-in-law. Tweedledum stopped writing at the same time and took his handcuffs out. It was probably just as well. If he'd kept at it any longer the pencil would have been likely to catch fire. He crossed the room towards Billy and chained him up pretty roughly, and then they both started bundling him across the room towards the exit. The brother-in-law looked as if he'd aged about thirty years in the last ten minutes, but it was the sister-in-law's face I was really interested in. The wide-eyed shock was completely gone, and it was a look of pure hatred that had replaced it, hatred towards the brother-in-law. As they dragged him past her she looked as if she might spit in his face.

"I did it for you, Marianne," he said. "We were about to lose everything."

But she didn't even bother to reply, she just stared at him with that look. I almost felt sorry for the poor bastard.

Then I got over it.

\*

"Can I ask you a question?" I said to Rankin, as he topped up my drink. The wife was through in the kitchen with the sister-in-law, attempting to deal with the hysteria that had quite quickly replaced her white hot anger, and we were waiting about for the patrol cars that Rab had told us would take us down to Pitt Street so's we could make our proper statements.

"Fire away," Rankin said, pouring the rest of the bottle into his own glass.

"I don't mean to be cheeky," I said, "But what the fuck were you doing here when I arrived?"

He seemed a tad taken aback.

"I was trying to sort things out," he said. "That's what you told me to do."

I looked at him suspiciously.

“I’ve got a wee feeling it might have been something else,” I told him. “I don’t know if you’re being quite honest with me, Rankin.”

“What do you mean?”

“It all just seems a wee bit too much of a coincidence,” I said. “I think you might have been here for something else entirely. A wee spot of blackmail, maybe? Trying to get yourself hooked up to the brother-in-law’s company in return for keeping your mouth shut. How about that?”

He shook his head in despair.

“Hear me out though,” I said. “It would’ve worked both ways for you. I’d have been off your back as well. There wouldn’t have been much I could do about that daft book of yours if I was behind bars.”

He looked up at me then.

“Speaking of that,” he said, “Where do we stand on it now? What’s the situation?”

I lifted my glass and clinked it against his. I wasn’t entirely convinced that I was wrong about what he’d been doing at the brother-in-law’s. But after the way it had turned out, I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“We’re all square, son,” I said, and he looked pretty relieved.

Then a wee idea struck me.

“You’re a fairly wealthy man, Ian,” I said. “Am I wrong?”

He didn’t confirm it, but he didn’t deny it either, so I carried on.

“How would you feel about investing in a wee scheme of mine?” I asked him. “Get in right at the off?”

“Tell me more,” he said, and I paused for a minute just to make sure he was hooked, then I hit him with it.

“Homeopathic whisky,” I said. “Three million parts water to one part spirit. Just like the homeopathic remedies.”

It didn’t go down well. He looked at me as if I’d just offered him shares in a white-slave trading company or something.

“I’d need to think about that,” he said, and I let it drop.

As far as I was concerned, it was his loss.

## EPILOGUE

The old face furniture grew back again in no time. A couple of weeks and I was back in business, fully kitted out. Much to the wife's relief.

"You looked a right weirdo without that," she told me, giving it a wee tug one afternoon. "You're starting to look like your old self again."

And I'll tell you what else, I was starting to feel like my old self again as well, although that had less to do with the moustache coming back into my life and more to do with her own wee return to the nest.

After they'd taken our statements down at Pitt Street, and the boy at the desk had offered to dig up a car to take us home, he'd asked us all for the addresses we wanted to be taken to, and my heart had been in my mouth waiting to see what the wife would say. But after a wee bit of swithering, she'd given him our own address, and ever since then I'd been dead set on doing whatever it took to keep her there, no question. She'd been getting the first class treatment night and day – wee dinners out, trips to the pictures, the lot. And on top of all that, I ended up bringing home a nice wee surprise for her one night, as well. A wee something special.

I'd been out drinking with wee Jinky that night, the first time since the debacle. The wife had been a bit nervous about letting me go, knowing how the last night I'd spent out on the tiles with the wee man had panned out, but I'd talked her round.

"He's still suffering over the whole Laura episode," I told her. "He needs some cheering up."

And besides, I needed to show him there were no hard feelings about him having made a right arse of things when he fucked off to the police. So in the end she relented.

“Don’t drink too much, then,” she said. “Promise me.”

And I did promise her, and I kept the promise as well. I was a wee bit merry when I got back but I was upright and, like I said, I had the wee surprise for her into the bargain.

I don’t think she could quite believe it when she first saw me. She was sitting up in her pyjamas, watching her stories on the telly, and I think she’d been expecting me to come in on all fours. But I’m telling you, I’m a changed man. I’m taking this thing seriously.

I told her I’d brought her a wee present and her eyes lit up.

“Really,” she said. “For me?”

“Absolutely,” I told her, and I held it out to her.

“It’s still warm,” I said, “And I had them put a pickled onion in there as well.”

The wee smile faded. She looked back at the telly.

“A fish supper, Peacock?” she said, and I nodded.

“What’s up with that?” I asked her.

“I thought... och, nothing. Nothing. I’ve already brushed my teeth anyway, Peacock.”

I was a wee bit taken aback. I thought she’d have wired right into the thing. Still, I sat down on the arm of the chair and got stuck into it myself. No point in letting it go to waste. Then I told her about the wee surprise I had for her. That got her attention again, but she looked a bit wary at first.

“It’s not a can of juice, is it?” she said, and I shook my head.

“Wait till you hear this,” I told her. “Wee Jinky, he’s given us his honeymoon. Two weeks in the South of France.”

She jumped up.

“He’s what?” she said, and I nodded.

“Take it as an apology, Peacock,” he’d said to me while we were sitting in the Horseshoe. “It’s fuck all use to me now anyway,” and I’d thanked him very much.

The wife ran across the room and grabbed me. She just about knocked me off the arm of the chair.

“Oh, Peacock!” she shouted, and she started firing into the fish supper, clean teeth or not.

“Can we visit Cannes?” she said. “I’d love that. They’ve got the stars in the pavement there, just like in Hollywood, all the film stars’ names, and you can fly in a helicopter to Monaco. Wee Janet told me about that. That’s where Grace Kelly lived when she joined the royal family. Monaco. Princess Grace...”

And on it went, long into the night, the sweet wee voice banging away. About this and about that, and about fuck knows all what, till it was just about morning and the sun was coming up. And I’ll tell you this, it would’ve fair put a smile on your face to hear her, no question about that.

No question at all.





Stuart David has spent most of the past fifteen years touring and recording with *Belle and Sebastian* and *Looper*. During this period he also published two novels; the first, *Nalda Said*, has since been translated into ten languages, and a screenplay for the second, *The Peacock Manifesto*, was written by Graham Linehan (*Father Ted*, *The I.T. Crowd*) while it was in development with Samuelson Productions. He is currently finishing a YA novel, *Jackdaw and the Randoms*, which features a teenage version of his Peacock Johnson character called The Jackdaw. Mute Records will release a *Looper* Best Of, and reissue the complete *Looper* catalogue, later in the year.