

## The Polish Experience

Published by Nicholas Westerby at Smashwords

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This book is dedicated to my son Alexander. Let's hope that you cause me more problem than I cause you

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All characters are fictional, if the name or likeness of anyone has been used it is a coincidence. Several real World events are used in this book but not to the detriment of any individual.

### Chapter 1

I have a problem and you can help me solve it.

My name is James Williamson, I was the seventh best salesperson out of two hundred and fifty or so such workers at a company called Minkins & Minkins. I had been working there for less than a year but was suitably impressed with myself. The fuckers above me had been at the company much longer and thus had better contacts to milk.

I was new, I was fresh, I was closing over 300 sales a month!

Some of the top sixers only closed 20 or 30 sales, admittedly huge sales that dwarfed mine but if I could land a big deal I'd be number one in no time. I just needed that one milky tit to suckle off while I kept bringing in three digit sales, then they'd love me, then they'd respect me.

Sales is a strange mixture of being everyone's best friend and surviving as a lone wolf in a harsh, stab your best friend in the back, environment. That is why I never mixed business and pleasure. I worked then I partied.

I lived with Royce and Ranieer. I dated a Polish chick and bragged about her when I was in the office. Royce and Ranieer didn't think much of her but what the fuck did I care? While she was riding me reverse cowgirl, I could squint and imagine it was Jenny Frost from Atomic Kitten. That really was the Frosting on the cake.

I had just dropped of my August results and picked up my massive bonus for the last 3 months. I got paid a basic of £1,200 and my bonus this time levelled out at £3k a month. A lot of money for a kid just out of university with no real burdens upon my wallet, how I wish I'd saved that money. Glad I didn't invest it though.

I was happy. I worked. I drank. I bought shit I didn't need.

I wanted more and pushed my boss Steve to give me a promotion. I thought it must have been going to happen until complications with his wife's pregnancy took him away from work for a few weeks and the promotion that was mine was given to a fat moo from accounting who was going to be right-sized. Well until the cocks in HR thought she'd make a useful sales manager.

What the furry animal toys on your desk were you think bobble head? Accountants are useful people but you need to keep them in their cages, in confinement. Sales' is the purview of the charismatic, the face to facers not the face to calculators.

No!

Wrong choice!

I went over Steve's head and visited Mr. Minkins. I told him that I had worked hard and should be rewarded.

I thought I was going to get fired.

Well I'd walk into another job on better basic, I thought.

No.

As I stood there trying not to be disappointed at the lavender walls and flower bands, Minkins invited me and my Polish girlfriend to his wife's parent's anniversary out in the sticks the following weekend. The varnished brown orange desk impressed me more than the wallpaper and as I stood there and tried to gather my thoughts he reclined in his leather chair bobbing back and forth.

A weekend away he said.

There is a great B&B nearby he said.

Great, I said, sounds like a winner. Which it did.

We arranged the details and that was that, fuck the afternoon sales meets I was moving up in the World.

Celebrations were required.

I met Royce at the Bee Keepers Inn. It was a funny bar. A mixture of musty old timers watching Channel 4 racing, peering into the communal copy of The Racing Post while sipping on their bottles of Skol special. Most of them would choke on their flavoured cigars once or twice an hour.

Then the second group were achingly cool hipsters. They thought so at least. Royce hated the posers but loved the old guys. I liked the cheap beer and an occasional flutter so I didn't mind watching the nags.

Even when I felt minted I didn't like to pay over the odds for beer or worse still fruity cocktails that were served in shot glasses. If I wanted to spend £20 on one shot, I'd do it in the back alley not the bar.

It wasn't an unbreakable rule though. Some birds needed you to flash the cash, some like to take it down and dirty. The dive bars or rustic establishments, if we are feeling kind, were easier for me. I felt more at home there. I would remember my Granddad asking me to help him pick his horses for the day, surrounded by the smoke from his pipe and I was always allowed one sip of his bitter. Only one sip mind.

The upscale joints were more serious, people were serious about having fun. That never played well with me. They were too focused when dancing. They tried too hard to impress you when all you really needed was a little small talk. It was possibly because they all wanted

to prove their worth, to win your love or they were simply narcissistic and wanted to show you how much they loved themselves.

Royce said that he knew of an award dinner we could get into. It was the main benefit of Royce being a journalist, the free dinners and parties. Royce claimed to have been a descendant of some Viking King and his family moved to Ireland in fear of their life and to populate it with warriors. I didn't care, I didn't know what to believe but Ranieer was a Finnish documentary maker who had crashed at our flat after a party and never left. In the last two months he had organized a small festival and given a speech at Leeds University. How he wrangled that I'll never know.

He was a bearded God though. If only he had more drive he'd make a killer salesman. I think his charm emanated from his lackadaisical nature and to motivate him would be equivalent to killing his charm.

We all piled into a new glass structure. There were water features that I couldn't describe even with the aid of a gardening magazine, Chinese looking girls thrashing away furiously at violins and dolled up models dressed as air stewardesses (the porn fantasy version not the Ryanair lot) handing out drinks.

"Hat's off to you again Royce." I said taking a glass of free whatever.

"Yeah, sweet bro." Ranieer chipped in.

"Sometimes it's good to be me." He said smiling widely.

"Let's run the circuit." I suggested.

Running the circuit was simple. We each set off in different directions looking for the essentials and making mental notes of where they were so when we were busy schmoozing we didn't look stupid as we needed another bite, the toilet or more likely another round of whatever free booze was knocking about. We also took the opportunity to scope out all the women in the room.

Rule one: Availability.

If they are unavailable they could be the roughest dog or the hottest model you had ever seen but you were just wasting your time. It was a complex art though. Married didn't mean unavailable and vice-versa. Many a bored wife would shimmy off to the toilets while their husbands were lauding it up with their colleagues.

There were really no more rules than that. Obviously you'd aim high but at the end of the day you have to think about your batting average before you think about the trophy cabinet.

"How'd you do?" Royce asked when we finally all met back at the water features.

“Golden.” I replied. “Spotted two bars, the toilets, the meat station and at least three bored wives.”

“Did you see the personal *ass*-istants table?” Royce asked cheekily referring to the table of extremely well groomed tall and thin twenty something women huddled around a table sharing an olive while checking their blackberry’s.

“I did but give them up for dead. They are either fucking their bosses, they want to be or would do for a promotion.”

“You ain’t Kilimanjaro.” Ranieer added.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Royce asked perplexed.

“They are climbers bro and you ain’t a mountain.” Classic Ranieer.

Cathy was coming by tomorrow but I could catch me some strange tonight then McDonald’s her tomorrow on my way to meet Cathy at the station. Cathy wasn’t her real name it was Kasia, like Cash- ah but she preferred to be called Cathy. It annoyed me but not enough to actually raise the issue in anything but a polite, ‘hey you have a name, you don’t need to make one up’ kind of way.

After a little bollocks about how amazing the architecture was I finally hooked me a fine catch for the night and once the boys had theirs we moved onto our private party.

“Wanna go to an exclusive club?” I’d ask.

“Sure. What’s it called?” They’d always ask.

“It doesn’t have a name.” That sounded cool.

“How did you hear about it?” They’d ask.

“I know the bouncer.” I’d reply.

“Oh.” They’d swoon. “No waiting in line then.”

“Nah.” I’d reply putting my arm around her. “I know the DJ too so I can get him to play your favourite song.”

You’re so impressive.

Ok. That would be me thinking that most of the time but when we arrived back at the flat and I opened up youtube some of them laughed, others left. That was disappointing. The ones who didn’t leave got a free breakfast at the McDonalds around the corner from the super club.

Not so much a gentlemanly move but more of a get you the fuck out of my flat thing. Sometimes after a double shift I’d be hungry and quite frankly I thought the egg and sausage McMuffin to be the greatest sandwich ever invented. Everyone was a winner. Well by everyone I mean me.

It worked well though and you shouldn't change a winning formula.

## Chapter 2

So after McDonald's-ing Kara or Clara or whatever her name was I headed to the train station and bought a big bottle of water and paid for my copy of The Times in the honesty box.

I always wondered if it really worked, if people stole out right or maybe dropped in small change when paying for more expensive items. I imagined that I'd do that but every time I paid the right amount. I was never really sure why I did but I did.

She strode through the rolling barriers and her big smile lifted my gloomy hangover. When she smiled it took up all the bottom half of her face and her nose seemed to disappear as only her white teeth and blue eyes remained.

She was carrying flowers. That probably should have been the other way around but I never saw the point on spending money on something that died so quickly.

I liked cacti.

You could get some pretty ones and if you put them in your garden the cats wouldn't dig them up and dogs wouldn't piss on them. I had read that in the desert they create some kind of drug in their centre, why not in Leeds?

I didn't have any though. Even they were too much responsibility for me.

"Hi." She said as we kissed cheeks.

"Hi." I said taking a swig of water as if that would hide the stench of hung over morning breath. "Can I take that?" I said motioning to her bag.

"Take it where?" She said rehashing an old joke that we shared nearly every week. I had said it to her once and now she liked to repeat it. I thought it was witty at first but now it was tired and I felt it reflected poorly on me.

"Come on." I said swinging my arm around her. "I need another shower."

"You sure do." She screwed up her nose and opened her mouth pretending to gag.

It probably shouldn't have aroused me but it did.

Everything did.

Hell, every time I looked at her big mouth and full lips I felt a funny tingle. It made walking through a packed train station a much more self conscious experience than normal.

We got home and I peeled off my clothes and jumped in the shower. When I got out Cathy had slipped into my bed and was watching the PowerPuff Girls. She loved anything with CGI or animation.

She had told me that she learnt English from watching the Cartoon Network but I don't know if I believed that.

"You should wash sheets." She said kicking out one of her long legs.

"These sheets." I corrected. "Or your sheets."

"Ok." She said.

Did it matter?

Not really.

I dropped my towel and got back to work. Thank God for the renewing powers of the McMuffin and vanilla shake.

We didn't really have any plans for the weekend but we did like to go to the park and watch the dogs and dog owners. We made up back stories for the other people in the park. I liked playing that game and she liked me playing it too. We sat there not getting cold on a mild Saturday.

"Oh." I said remembering I should tell her about our invitation for the following weekend and Minkins probable job offer. "I have booked us a little trip for next weekend, you're free aren't you?"

God damn am smooth.

"Yes." She snapped back. She didn't move. Didn't think about the offer. Didn't even ask about where, why or who was paying for it. She just lay wither her back resting on my chest, legs up, spread out on the bench watching the dogs walk by.

"Actually my boss invited us." Still nothing. What would she say if it was a swinger's party. "I think am going to get a promotion."

Now she spun around to look at me. "Great." She said and as quickly as she had spun around she had eased back into the groove that she'd been working into my chest.

"Yeah, I think so." I really did.

Well it seems innocuous but that was the beginning of the end.

On our way back to the flat we stopped for fish and chips. She couldn't get over the fact that I hated fish, all seafood in fact, except for cod from the chippy. I drowned mine in vinegar and added a little salt, by contrast she hated vinegar and poured the salt on until every chip was thickly covered in white.

We ate and walked not saying anything but I could see the cogs turning behind her blue eyes. Cathy wasn't very talkative about her feelings or thoughts, even though she talked endlessly about crap it rarely was about what she thought or felt.

She didn't like a dress, actress or hairstyle but when she told me about people she worked with I could never decipher if they were her favourite colleague or a nemesis. I joked that she had a work husband because a guy called David Kipling was always lurking about in her anecdotes.

I joked because from what I gleaned from her, she saw him as a helpful asexual lump. I am sure he saw things quite differently. I had my work wives though and a little flirting went along way. It was easier to dine with secretaries than other sales staff as well. I got so bored of sales talk.

I was good at my job but I was not my job.

"I could move with you." She offered.

"Move with me where?" I said surprised.

"Where ever your promotion is."

"What about your job?" I said deflecting.

"I don't need a job."

Not I'll find another job.

I don't need a job. Had she won the lottery?

"We can start our family."

And that was the end of the end, well the end of whatever we were and I knew I had to finish it. Well first we'd have some goodbye sex. Should I have told her that it was goodbye sex? Probably.

I didn't though and selfishly wanting my Sunday to be uncontaminated by a break-up I did it after the sex.

I know.

Am an asshole, or at least I used to be. You can make up your own mind but I don't mind being an asshole, it can be extremely useful.

A few things were thrown, tears were shed and then she left cursing me only to return a few minutes later to ask if I'd accompany her to a wedding later in the month. I refused and she cursed me again and finally left for good.

As I slouched down onto the couch Royce couldn't keep his laughter in anymore and it burst out of him in a loud cackle.

"Good fookin riddens my son." He said.



“What are we watching?” Ranieer said coming in with a burger. “Where is Cath?”

“She is gone.” I replied.

“For good.” Royce added swiftly.

He wolfed down his burger and grinned at me with mustard staining his teeth. “Are we going out to play then?”

I shook my head and flipped through the channels until I found a Red Dwarf re-run, smegging what I needed to recover my day.

I thought I’d made the right move. Hell I wasn’t ready for kids and I certainly didn’t want a fully grown dependant weighing me down and siphoning my earnings. No, it was the right move.

Well until I talked to Minkins PA on Monday morning.

“I have booked you into the Courtly Lodge.” She said. “I didn’t know your girlfriends name so I just booked you in under Mr and Mrs. Williamson.”

How fucking insane would that shit have been.

“It’ll just be me.” I replied.

“It can’t be.” She reeled back in mock horror. At least I hope it was mock horror. What did she care about my romantic involvements anyway?

“Why?”

“You need to take your Polish girlfriend.” She said very seriously. “It is very important. You will thank me later.” She said handing me an itinerary.

I certainly didn’t see the need.

Maybe it was a swinger’s thing.

I spent the rest of the day musing on how far I’d go for a promotion. Would I do a three way with the Minkins? If there was tequila, probably yeah. Would I do her? Yes. Would I do him? No. Would I let him do my girlfriend? I didn’t have one. Shit. Maybe I should get back with her and let Minkins fuck her, she was planning on fucking me.

I don’t need a job.

Lazy cow.

When I got home I was in a panic and explained my situation to the Fin. “What the fuck am I gonna do?” I asked him.

“Relax bro, just call her.” He answered.

If only it was that simple it would have been done. I needed Royce and his sage advice. Where was that beautiful clown?

I tried to text him again and again but it was no use. I was on my own.

Think. WWRD? What would Royce do?

Easy, have a drink.

“Nag’s Dress?” I asked Ranier knowing full well that he loved swaning down to the queer joint.

“I’d love to.” He replied. I also knew what his next question would be. “You’re buying?”

“My treat.” I said as he was putting on his coat then we were out the door.

When we got back we stumbled into Royce furiously going at it, with himself.

“I gotta sleep on that.” Ranier protested.

Royce ran into the bathroom. Am not sure if it was out of embarrassment or to finish off but he emerged a few moments later fully dressed and didn’t mention a thing. While he was away I took a look at his inspiration and it truly was inspired.

Royce was whacking away to an escort site and while I calculated the price for a weekends work and weighed it against my possible returns with a promotion I searched for a Polish beauty who could convince Minkins that he needed me at the big boy table.

Also, if it was a swinger’s thing I didn’t really need to explain anything away. She’d probably love it.

### Chapter 3

The train up was a dream. She closed her eyes and drifted off into some Polish rock heaven with her earphones on. I don’t know what the bands were so angry about but I have never seen anyone so tranquil with that stuff blasting away at their ears.

I took the chance to look over my stats. Preparing myself to argue my case. Did I need to though? Well my rationale was that the boss wouldn’t have invited me up if he needed me to sell myself. I planned my future, not work wise but with this exquisite creature that sat across from me.

I had to keep reminding myself that she was costing me two grand for the weekend or three units as Portlund Services billed it on my bank account. They thought I should be pleased as it was considered a discount rate for three nights work. I won’t list what I could expect to pay extra for if I had been so inclined but that wasn’t why I’d hired her.

It didn’t stop me thinking and by the time we arrived at the Courtly Lodge it was pushing 9pm. I asked if she was hungry but she said she wasn’t. I couldn’t believe that she wasn’t famished. If she turned sideways you lost her, well all except her breasts. Some people would

screw their face up at that and talk about real women having curves, some do, some don't and some have them added. I don't judge.

I ordered a chicken burger with fries and sat her down to run her through the weekend. We were going to meet Mr. Minkins and his wife for brunch tomorrow at 11 am. I tried to remember if I'd said anything else in the office about Cathy come Kasia or if anyone had met her. The girl I'd hired was calling herself Katarina but I doubted that was her real name and she had no problem calling herself Kasia but said that it was stupid to call her Cathy. I agreed and we laughed. She said that Cathy sounded stupid but got quite upset when I told her about Cathy coming back to ask about the wedding.

"You should have gone with her." She said sternly.

"Why?" I asked with a chuckle.

We were interrupted by the arrival of my burger. I offered her some but she said she wanted to take a bath. So she did. I ate and flipped through the channels until I caught a documentary about the rivalry in F1 that year.

"I love this." She said emerging from the bathroom in the skimpiest towel possible. I think it was meant for drying your face.

"You like F1?" I almost choked on my beer.

"I love it." She said stealing my beer and nestling her back against my chest as she slid between my legs. "Kubica is great isn't he?"

I should have known. There was a Polish driver.

"He is ok I guess. If he raced for a proper team he would have a chance at winning." I commandeered my beer.

"I'll wrestle you for it." She said playfully.

I nodded and put the beer on the bedside drawer. She pounced on me as I did it and as we rolled around laughing she lost her wash cloth and I was even happier than I had been before.

She wasn't as ghostly white as Cathy, obviously living in England this was a sun bed job but I didn't mind. She was darker on her joints but in the main she had toffee-esque hue to her slim, toned physic. She had tiny nipples that perched on her breasts. She was tall, taller than me and her legs that seemed endless merged into a torso that just went on. All of her features were long. Her hands were thin and fingers long. Cathy had a stubbornness to her digits that was very disconcerting. Almost builderish hands. My new Kasia was fragile in comparison.

The thing I loved the most though was the long black hair. I preferred women with long hair and it was a wonderful indication of their character as well. You could see who was

stylish and not because they had bought the shoes or pants the star was wearing in Hello. You could see if she was healthy, just like checking a dog's coat.

As I stopped and wondered at her she didn't flinch, she didn't stop and wonder at me. She caught me flush in the balls with a finishing manoeuvre The Undertaker would have been proud of.

As I crumpled, she finished off the beer.

"Do you need me to kiss them better?" She asked as I lay stricken on the floor.

"I'll just air them off in the shower." I said barely audibly.

"I love kissing the eggs. Let me take care of them."

She led me into the bathroom, helped me undress and proceeded to nurse my boys back to health.

"Did you call them eggs?" I asked.

"I love the jaja." She muffled.

"Ok." I replied.

The water streamed down me and I tried to freshen my upper half a bit while she was enjoying herself down below. I guess some of the soap ran off onto her. She looked as if it had gotten in her eyes so I tried to bend down to comfort her but being in a shower, as I crouched down there wasn't the room and my arse bounced off the wall sending us both sprawling onto the floor.

I lay on top of her for the first time naked, happy and she was squinting away the soap in her eye. I realised that I was probably squashing the life out of the poor thing and thrust myself up. I turned off the shower and helped her up.

We dried off in the bedroom and she kept initiating things. For the first time in my life I was overwhelmed with how beautiful she was and normally in these situations I was drunk. I never thought about my performance but here I was with a hired lady desperate to get it on and I was worrying about how I'd do.

It was probably the last position I should have worried about her satisfaction, I wasn't normally. I'd try to do a good job but only if she might spread my fame to her friends or others. This was always worth the effort. Sometimes me and the boys might 'share' a lady, not all the same night or anything but in that situation you were motivated to do better. In the normal domain of the one night stand though there was no motivation to go above and beyond unless you were having a good time.

A bag a tricks needs dusting off occasionally for posterity's sake.

The next morning I was up at 6 am as usual and went for a walk around the gardens. They were nice and peaceful, only the staff hurrying around to organize breakfast for all the guests when they woke up. I found a paper and returned to my room to read it. Kasia remained in bed until 10 am but I guess she never needed to be up early in her line of work. I had read the paper by then, had breakfast and returned in time to see her get up and head for another shower.

I had told her before I booked her that she needed a demure dress for meeting my boss and a party dress for a possible evening engagement, if it was required. She looked even better dressed up than she had done naked, if it was possible. A simple yet elegant floral dress and open toed red shoes with a purse or mini-handbag to match. I later learnt that such an item is called a clutch. I always thought a clutch was in a car. Maybe this misunderstanding was why women are such hopeless drivers and men so hopeless at buying women gifts.

We shimmied off to our meeting with the Minkins practically dancing down the hall. I was beginning to be less nervous about meeting my boss to discuss the rest of my life and more nervous about having fun with this happy and charming woman.

Mrs. Minkins was powdering her nose when we were sat down but Mr. Minkins interrupted some soup dish to greet us. He stood up and gave my date a big hug then shook my hand.

“My God boy I didn’t believe it but I do now.”

“Believe what?” I asked him.

“Some people told me that you were the best sales guy that we had and I didn’t believe it.”

“But after checking my figures you changed your mind.” I said proudly.

“Fuck-get your figures boy.” He said laughing to himself. “If you can convince this,” He looked Kasia up and down, “to date you then you might be the best fucking salesman I’ve ever had.”

“We’ve ever had.” Mrs. Minkins returned just in time to remind him. It was her money and his ideas. Her family were rich and he resented that. That’s what the gossips said anyway. “Glad to finally meet you James and this must be...”

“Kasia.” I said.

“Let the darling speak for herself.” Mrs. Minkins replied.

“Well we have the job for you, we sure do.” Mr. Minkins said excitedly. They weren’t even offering us any refreshments. I was surprised. “We have planned a service centre in Poland but there has been a few hitches.”

“You had planned?” I enquired.

“We have been planning, we are doing, it will open.” He continued.

Note to self: ignore your boss’s grammar mistakes, decipher his message and shut the fuck up.

“Taking advantage of the EU grants no doubt.” I said hoping to impress them with my business acumen.

“Something like that.” Mrs. Minkins added, taking a long slurp of what appeared to be a Long Island Iced Tea.

“Well a couple of hiccups mean that we need a temporary manager over there and am sure your girlfriend would enjoy six months in Warsaw. So what do you say?” He asked.

I was shocked. Firstly she wasn’t my girlfriend and I quickly assumed that’s why she was needed, that’s why I was given this shot as he didn’t seem to give a damn about my stats.

What the fuck did I care?

It was a manager’s job.

A country manager’s job!

Wait did he say service centre?

“Did you say service centre?” I queried.

“I did. Congratulations.” He said shaking my hand.

“That’s great news honey.” Kasia said hugging me. “Thank you so much.” She now turned her attentions to the old man and then his wife.

Minkins made some signal and champagne was brought over followed by lunch. Through it all Kasia or Katarina or whatever her real name was cooed and generally entertained the Minkins as I sat shocked.

I was going to Warsaw.

To run a fucking service centre.

My fears were partially allayed though as before he left Minkins let me know I was getting everything paid for and a monthly salary of £4k. He said over there I’d live like a king.

I asked about Kasia and he said I could take her as an assistant or some bullshit for £2k a month. If he only knew.

We laughed. I thanked him and returned to Kasia. I was dumbstruck.

Could I just turn it down on Monday?

Would Warsaw be that bad?

Winter was coming and I imagined Poland would be cold in the summer and freezing in the winter.

“This is why you needed Polish girl.” She said laughing at me.

“I guess so.” I answered.

“I can come with you if you are scared.” She said patting my knee.

“I’d love that but I can’t afford you.” I said honestly.

“I’d love to go back but...” She trailed off and just stared out of the window.

We both did.

A squirrel chased among the trees and by the time it got dark I drunkenly suggested that we returned to our room.

We did and we didn’t wake up until it was time for check out the following day.

#### Chapter 4

“Quicker.” I urged her but just as quickly as I got angry it dissipated. There was something about her that I just couldn’t stay mad at.

She pulled an angry face at me but in all honesty she was as happy getting on that flight as I was that she was getting on it with me. What would happen once we arrived in Poland would happen but for now she was mine.

She had told me about how they had got her over to the UK from Poland with modelling work, then when that slowly dried up they offered other work. Less artistic nude and more get your tits out for the boys. It wasn’t a huge leap from there to dancing on a video, then letting a man pose simulating sex with her and finally the last straw of any modelling integrity was moving into the movies. Once you’d been fucked raw for a week making a movie for everyone to see, getting paid for private jobs was less of a stretch.

She had resisted drugs but enjoyed a few beers, nothing stronger but she often needed the few beers for the simplest tasks. I had learnt even for getting out of bed. She had handed her notice in when we got back and for the last week had stayed with Me, Royce and the Finn. I know they both tried it on with her and who was I to get jealous but I did.

She was mine. She was escaping with me. I was the hero and the hero always gets the girl. It is practically the only reason to do good. In the movies at least.

It hadn’t been much of a week though. I desperately tried to get my life in order and find out as much as I could about the project that I was jumping or getting thrown into midstream.

The hardest thing for me though was splitting up my contacts and handing them over to other undeserving sales team members. Those lazy fucking deadheads just got a sack load of free money off me.

I hated dividing my contacts up but as far as M&M were concerned and what they were telling me was that I wouldn't need them anymore. I hoped that meant a senior position upon my return but equally I knew that failure would mean unemployment. Poland was a risk but anything worth doing always would be a risk.

I spent Monday and Thursday in the office doing that task and Tuesday and Wednesday being brought up to speed on the Poland project. Monday started well enough with congratulations from the sales team, am sure there were a lot of false smiles. Am sure a lot of the nice words were meant to help butter me up so I'd pass along my best clients to the nicest ass kissers.

I didn't though.

Not by choice but Minkins ordered me to hand off my client list to the longest serving underachievers. Am not sure why, it's not the move I'd have made but I did it anyway. John who had hair growing out of every orifice except his mouth, out of which he channelled only halitosis. John received a long list of clients who had purchased from me at least twice in the last three months.

Every call went the same. I'd dial up, ask for my contact, inform them of my promotion at which point I'd introduce our young go getter named John. Once he had killed any good will that I'd built up we'd repeat and rinse.

That took all day Monday and while he was chatting I'd be looking over my files. I had to hand off none repeat business and leads to Marty. I can't ever remember meeting Marty but I made the list and annotated files with relevant info such as: Spurs fan, likes the cold, wife is a Hindu. Anything I thought could be useful.

I used everything and talked about everything and that was why in my eyes I was so successful. I had worked in a working class, old school, pub during university and once you can balance pontificating with lecturers and cursing out drunks you can communicate. That was one of, if not my finest skill. People want to be a people person and the most idiotic people say they are people persons, no they aren't, other people hate them. Me though, I am a people person because I walk a fine line between good and bad. I am unspecial in the most special way.

I am unassuming.

They never see it coming, until it's too late.



You can't teach that. Also I am not a people person, I hate most people. I think they are stupid. I hate religion, that is the stupidest shit ever. I hate other people's babies. I hate talking to people about their fucking hobbies, if I liked it I'd do it too numb nuts. But they liked me listening and a good listener, who knows when to nod, is seen as likeable and thus a people person. So all you cheerful, bubbly fucks stop your yapping and open your ears, fill that vacuum between them and repeat enough of what the speaker is saying so they think that you agree with them. They like people who agree with them.

That would be the wisdom I would have passed down to my team. You can't really teach that though and it is a delicate balancing act to keep up the facade of caring when you don't. The last thing you can appear to be is arrogant, humble and dumb beats knowledgeable and arrogant, if you can pull off knowledgeable and humble that is divine.

The best contacts or big fish I was ordered to split between the big six. I hated those pricks but on Thursday I was going to be given an hour with each of them and run through all aspects of the sales and contracts of the clients. That day was horrible but that night I was on a plane to Poland, staring at the girl, the woman I now knew to be called Elzbieta. I called her Elly.

We nearly didn't make the flight though as I hadn't factored in a terrible accident that paralysed Leeds city centre. I had to abandon a taxi to take the train to the nearest train station to our flat. Once I was there I had hoped that Elly would be good to go and we'd be on our way. Unfortunately she was still getting dressed after spending all day in bed it seemed. Well she might have considered staying in bed all day work once upon a time but I hoped that in Poland she would be more lively, more of the time.

We took a taxi to the airport where I was surprised to see my Mum and Dad. I had returned to Bradford during the week to tell them about everything, see a couple of mates and offer open invitations to Warsaw. No one seemed that interested unless I'd be staying for the Euro in two summer's time but I told everyone that it was highly doubtful. My brothers had made time for a quite beer but I didn't get to see my nephews, who were at their mothers. I said I'd send them some Polish candy, I later changed my mind once I'd tasted it and ordered my brother to give them some Cadbury's and pretend it was from me. You miss the chocolate you grew up with the most. It isn't so much the taste but the taste reminding you of simpler times. That is my guess any way.

"Erm, hi guys. This is Elly." I said by way of an introduction. "These are my parents." I said turning to her.

“Oh, I thought we’d missed you love.” My Mum said giving me a hug while sizing up Elly over my shoulder.

“Do you work with him?” My Dad asked.

“A-ha.” She said.

“We are really late. Am sorry but I think we have to get to the check in desk.” I said shaking my Dad’s hand, then pulling him in for a hug.

“You’re over there.” He said spinning me around. “Desk twenty three.”

He was right.

We all trundled over together, my Dad ever the gentleman helped Elly with her bags. I should have been doing that I guess but for the time being she wasn’t a girlfriend and I didn’t want to give her any power over me.

I don’t really remember what we said as we waited. I remember sweating nervously. How would it look if I couldn’t even make it over there on time? Someone from the office was going to be waiting for us on the other side and the first impression my new team, my first team would get of me was that I couldn’t even catch a flight.

We waved off my parents as we rushed through checking in and the security guards who made us take off our shoes and made Elly throw away her make-up and drink. I told her I’d buy her new ones and that expedited the process. I took a look back to see my Dad consoling my crying Mother. I felt guilty. I never felt guilty, even when I knew I should do, it just wasn’t there. Sometimes I worried about being a sociopath but here it was, guilt.

I didn’t know why. I shouldn’t feel guilty now. I should feel proud. I imagined they were proud of me, tears of pride. Arrogance can work in your favour if you know when to let it roam free and when to muzzle it.

Home free or so I thought.

Elly was checking out the make-up in the duty-free shop.

“Come on.” I shouted. “I’ll buy you more in Warsaw.”

The scowl was back. Sullen princess stood statue still and looked away.

They called our flight.

She stood still.

“Ok.” I gave in. “Quickly.” I produced my debit card and reminded myself that it’d all be worth it.

She was happy again and we were moving again so I was, well not happy but frantically moving towards my Polish challenge. I should have known that Elly was the true Polish challenge but hindsight is a wonderful thing.

The queue wasn't that long but there was a lot of aggressive pushing and I couldn't believe how quickly one old woman pushed her way to the front. She skilfully used her walking stick to jab and cajole her way through and once she reached the front her speed was gone. No nimble jabs. No powerful thrusts. Just patient shuffles that made everyone groan.

Finally we boarded and we sat down on a row with three seats, her next to the window, me in the middle and the aisle seat free.

"I think I should sit next to the aisle so then we have the middle free for our stuff." I suggested.

"You must sit next to me." She said gripping my hand tightly.

"Ok." I said happily.

"I never flown before."

"What?" Could it be true?

"I came by bus and it was my first journey on board."

"Abroad?" I asked.

She nodded but if she knew that was right, why did she say on board?

It didn't matter.

"By bus? You came by bus? How long did that take?" I was astonished.

"One day." She said smiling. She looked out of the window and then back at me. "I am scared."

"Don't be. I have flown lots and this is very simple, very quick." I looked at our estimated landing time. "Less than two hours."

"Will we see much?"

"At night. Not really. Lots of lights. It'll be pretty. Like you."

Always so smooth.

"You are so kind."

With that she kissed my cheek and she gripped onto my hand. The cabin crew began their safety notifications and as I attempted to flick through the in-flight magazine she watched diligently. She even tried to locate her life jacket under her seat. At least that's what I think she was doing. I had never listened. I might have watched if the stewardess was hot but even if she was today I wasn't about to be caught checking out another woman. I had even bought The Economist to read instead of FHM or Maxim for that very reason.

We taxied to the runway then were up and away. A new adventure awaited me, us. Poland.

## Chapter 5

We landed safe and sound. Well except my left hand which had deep nail indentations that would last for several more days. The surprising thing was I didn't mind. I liked being her rock. I liked that she could be vulnerable with me.

As everyone jostled to be the first off the plane I stayed calm and told Elly to do the same. I'd spotted the buses that would ferry us from the plane to the part of the airport where we needed to be. Last on, first off and then we'd be first in line at passport control. It worked but I couldn't help but be appalled at how all the other passengers were pushing each other needlessly. Where had we landed?

We breezed through passport control. Me with my purplish passport and her with a red and white ID card that not only worked as a passport but a driving licence as well, then we located the luggage pick up point. I stood back as nothing was rotating and we chatted a little. She seemed more nervous than on the plane. I wondered if she was planning on making a run for it. If a husband or boyfriend was coming to meet her but before I could figure anything out the belt started up.

Once again old people pushed past with no regard for manners. Others rammed their empty luggage trolleys in your heels until you ceded position. I was less than an hour on Polish soil and I had begun to dislike them as a breed. In England I had only met a few and by and large I liked them. The builders had a cheeky chappy appeal and the waitresses were all attractive and attentive. As a group they generally smiled and seemed happy. I hadn't seen one smile yet inside the airport and while it wasn't the most modern terminal in the World it wasn't the grey communist blocks I was expecting.

I packed our cases onto the trolley and we wheeled away. As soon as we got through the doors to the waiting families we began searching for the woman who was set to pick us up. We were swamped by old men offering us taxi rides that Elly insisted weren't real taxi drivers.

"I saw show about them." She said.

"What do they do, pick up unexpectant foreigners drive them around in circles then rob them?" I joked.

I shouldn't have joked apparently. We saw the sign that I guessed was for me Jones Wallminsons. The woman holding it was about five foot tall, short black hair, glasses that

made me think of Mr. Magoo and barrel-esque around the mid section. Surprisingly her ankles and calves could have belonged to a supermodel.

“Hallo.” She said as I approached her. “Mr. Val-im-son?”

“Er, I guess so but just call me James.” I said. “This is Elly.”

“Hallo Jam-s and Elly. I am Monika.”

She started to walk away so I began to push my trolley and Elly followed in silence. She seemed to be taking it all in and actually for both of us it was our first visit to Chopin Airport. It wouldn't be our last and very soon it was more familiar to us than the dentist or doctor's office, well dentists at least.

Monika drove a little Nissan and though she and it were small, she drove like a bat out of hell. She weaved between traffic on three lane roads as if it was an intricate ballet and all the other drivers obliged in taking part as well. There was no slowing down for red lights, only screeching halts. Then up to top speed as quickly as possible.

I noticed trams running parallel to most main roads. I had seen them before but much older ones and more as tourist attractions rather than a genuine means of transport. As we flew along the bumpy roads Monika said that we'd been booked into Grandma Towers which didn't sound very good and it was next to a mall.

A mall? Was I in America.

Grandma Towers was actually fabulous. The lighting in the foyer was more nightclub than apartment block and there was a guard and receptionist. I felt like I was checking into a hotel. We rode the lift to the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor. Everything was clean, everything felt modern and when she opened our door to a spacious apartment the opposite wall was completely made of glass and it gave a view which I imagined would be spectacular in the day. I was wrong though. I could only see a graveyard and a few of the many building sites. Actually Warsaw was like one big building site.

She gave us a quicker tour. The bathroom with shower and Jacuzzi, radiators on the wall to keep your towel warm and heated tiles for the winter months, a small bedroom with a massive bed, a fully equipped kitchen that could have done with less appliances and more space and finally the living room or saloon as she called it with a wall mounted flat screen TV, surround sound and wi-fi internet access to complement its leather couch.

“There isn't any food in but the mall across the road has a Carrefour and some nice restaurants.”

“Thanks. I think we will just take a shower and get to bed.” I said.

“Ok. I will come and pick you up at nine a m tomorrow then.”

I walked her to the door and we said our goodbyes. She shouted through to Elly but she was already in the shower.

I unpacked my stuff and was getting a glass of water from the tap.

“Don’t!” Elly shouted.

I turned around and there she was again, looking more beautiful than I had remembered. Wet hair, towel covering breasts to ass and dripping all over my new hard wood floor.

“Bottled is safer.”

“Thanks.”

“Do you want to try the Jacuzzi with me?”

What an offer.

I sure did.

So we did.

For the first time, when she didn’t really need me, when she was back home, away from the terrors of England and she could have returned safely to her family, we made love. We made love in the Jacuzzi, in the bedroom and on the leather couch.

I was beginning to get hungry and I was damn sure thirsty.

“Do you want to eat?” I asked.

“Sure.” She said. “There will be a kebab place open somewhere.”

“You have kebabs.” I chuckled.

“Better than in England. In England kebab is drunk food, in Poland we eat for pleasure.”

Sure enough there was a kebab place nearby and we got a Fanta to share as well. As we walked around and I took in my new home we spotted several more kebab shops and a funny little run of huts where it went kebab, sex shop, kebab, sex shop for about twelve little huts or shops.

“I see what you do for fun.” I said pointing them out.

“Urrgh. So disgusting.” Her reaction surprised me.

We made a loop back around and nodded to the guard as we took the lift back to the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor and flopped into bed. I slept fully dressed.

I was awoken by Monika banging on the door and when I answered fully dressed she seemed glad. Elly was still asleep as was her norm and I needed to talk to her. To ask if she would be there when I returned, to ask what last night meant but Monika handed me a coffee and we were off to work.

## Chapter 6

First morning nerves?

Bollocks.

I was raring to go and get them.

I was usually smooth and sleek getting dressed. It was as if I was dancing in my own morning opera. Clean motions, twirls and hops.

Not this morning.

That didn't take the wind out of my sails though and as Monika raced from traffic jam to traffic jam I imagined for the first time how I might greet them.

"They all speak English, don't they?" I asked.

"All who?"

"The staff." Obviously.

"We let all the people that Wally hired go. I just started Monday and my job was to clean house." She replied.

Shit.

Wally was put in temporary charge of the project six weeks ago. It was first given to The Ice Queen by Mrs. Minkins. I had never met The Ice Queen but she was the kind of legend most big firms had. She had worked in accounts or legal for a lifetime and she was given the project, so I was told, as a reward.

It didn't seem very likely so either she knew something she shouldn't have or she had lost her touch and they wanted her out of the door.

I knew this because Wally had to be shifted from the training department because of sexual misconduct. Wally by name, Wally by nature had gotten drunk, come to work and proceeded to proclaim his love for a new trainee. She laughed it off at first and he was told to go home but when he returned at the end of the day with flowers and chocolates he didn't want to take no for an answer.

Luckily he was stupid enough to do it in the foyer where the security guard could stop him. Everyone assumed he had been fired. Only on Wednesday did I find out the truth. Anyway The Ice Queen had gotten pregnant somehow and so she handed off the project and Wally got a shot at redemption. The HR rep told me there were mitigating circumstances and he had been a solid employee up to that point.

He hadn't hit rock bottom though and after a month or so in Poland HR had noticed that all his hires had been young ladies who had questionable skill sets. They fired him and

suspended the project until HR had found Monika and that's where the file ended. They didn't say much about Monika and what her role was but obviously she had the power to fire whoever she wanted so maybe she was my HR manager.

"So if there isn't any staff what are we going to do today?"

"Well first we need to get the office organized like you want. Then we will start to set up a new recruitment process and I think most importantly you will need a new PA."

"PA?"

"Personal assistant." She snapped back and pulled in, well tried to pull into a parking spot. She tried and failed several times, it was a very makeable opportunity but she seemed allergic to turning the wheel.

"Would you like me to try?" I offered.

"Are you sure you could? The wheel is on the other side."

"I'll give it ago."

"At home I have a Spanish neighbour who does it for me." She said as if it was the most normal thing in the World.

"He parks your car for you every time?" I asked sliding it into place at the first attempt.

"If he isn't home it's ok. He has the spot next to me so I park it then he gets my keys if I haven't left him enough room."

I decided to let it drop and looked around to see a sign for Minkins and Minkins. The roads were busy and there was a huge building with a clock on the top. I saw churches, a Mcdonalds, a row of shops with Marks and Spencers, H and M, C and A, ha I thought they'd gone out of business in the 90's.

"That's The Palace of Culture." She said.

"It's nice."

"It's a Stalin gift." She spat on the ground.

Note to self: Don't complement anything until you know who built it and if it's approved of.

"Where's the office?" I tried to change the subject.

"Here."

"Aren't they flats?" They sure looked like flats.

There were about six, maybe more around a courtyard area. All at least 15 storeys high, painted dark green and a shade of the colour spectrum that Dulux may have named Dog Sick Autumn.



“Some are. Some are offices. There is a dentist there and a hair stylist over there.” She said pointing at different buildings.

I got envious as I spied some nice modern buildings which were yellow and black, they looked like office buildings with restaurant cafes on the ground floor. Our building had a man in a wheel chair with a comb over who tried to start a conversation with me.

“What does he want?” I asked.

“Ignore him. He is just a cripple.” She said striding towards the lifts.

Well I should say lift and this wasn't the modern transporter that I had at Granny Towers this didn't even have an automatic door that opened and closed. You opened a door with a latch, stepped inside, pressed the floor you wanted then watched as the open side of the lift slowly took you past doors and walls, door then wall, door then wall.

Finally we arrived on the 11<sup>th</sup> floor and disembarked. I'd keep fit taking the stairs I thought. That was until I arrived at work one morning to find tramps sleeping in the stairwell on the third floor and hoping over them was a dangerous and smelly activity.

Monika opened up a decrepit wooden door and the despair I had been feeling subsided slightly as I saw more hardwood floors and a hall that spun off into seven different rooms. There was a tiny bathroom, a little kitchen, a room with a shower that really didn't need to be there but it was so small we could only use it to store office equipment, an office that I decided would be mine, a big room with multiple desks and phones, a smaller office that Monika appeared to have set up shop in and the last door of all only led to the balcony.

“Where are the computers?” I asked.

“What computers?” Monika replied.

“Well I see you have one but I don't and none of the operatives have computers at their desks.”

“Do they need them? I thought everything was done on the phone.”

“They still need to access the system.”

“We don't have internet so they couldn't do that even if they had computers and if we had staff.”

“So let's make a list of things we need to do.”

We did and the list took us up to lunch time. Since we needed to visit a shopping centre I suggested that we get lunch in the food court while we were there. Monika seemed displeased as she looked at a little bowl of what I guessed was soup. It didn't look very edible but she agreed to lunch as long as it was Mexican.

We sat at El Cactus and ran through our list again as we waited for service. I needed a phone. I needed a PA, I thought about suggesting Elly but I didn't need another headache at work and the complications would have been immense. We needed the internet and I needed a computer. I could bring my laptop but without the internet it seemed pointless. We needed to start hiring new staff and then begin training them.

I had the training package and the call flow charts that they were expected to follow. I hated call flow charts. I thought of them as dot to dot drawing while I preferred to be a free hand artist. For the Poles though maybe dot to dot flow charts would be better. I know British callers hate the call centre experience and got very tense if they thought they were talking to a foreigner. Best stick to the script.

Over dinner we chatted about Monika's passion for salsa dancing and she insisted that I give it a try. There was some sort of salsa festival at some club that weekend but I said that I needed to settle in. Then she quizzed me about me and Elly and I couldn't help but smile. I didn't know what she was doing, where she was or if she'd be at the flat when I got back.

We waited an eternity to get our bill then to get the change once we'd paid the waitress. It was strange because she had been so attentive and fast when we arrived but it was a fault I had to get used to. We went to get my phone and had a problem finding a contract phone as I wasn't registered in Poland and I didn't have a visa number. In the end we took a pay as you go phone and some credit. I now decided I needed to get on the internet and we searched for an internet cafe, finally finding a grimy hole in an underground walkway. I tried hopelessly to get through on Skype to someone at HQ but ended up leaving e-mails detailing my despair with my new mobile number.

I told Monika that there wasn't much else to do today and once I bought a map and blue travel card that gave me access to trams, the Warsaw Metro which consisted of a straight line and all buses I said my goodbyes.

I saw her head into a shoe shop as I looked at the map and tried to decipher how I got from where I was to my flat. There was a massive road called Jana Pawła II and all I could think was if this is JP2 how long is fucking JP 1? It turns out the road was named after John Paul the Second, who was from Poland.

Who knew?

Anyway my trip home was easy enough. I just had to get a tram and it took me straight there. That was if I could figure out where to catch the bastard things. All the underpasses weaving together various routes confused the hell out of me and once I caught a tram I ended up going in the wrong direction. The timetables were very unhelpful in that they listed all the

stops and didn't actually indicate which direction the tram was heading. You have to get on and see if it's getting closer to the name you can't pronounce where you get off or the name you can't pronounce where you are totally fucking lost.

I got home and as I reached the door I thought I should go shopping. I wasn't in the mood. Maybe tomorrow morning.

## Chapter 7

I was happy to find that Elly hadn't wasted her Friday lying in bed. She had actually gone shopping and bought some food. Noodles, vegetables, fruit, milk, eggs and that was it, questionable food but food none the less. She had also unpacked so I guessed she was staying.

We decided she needed a mobile for Poland as her old phone didn't seem to be working. I suggested that we could visit the shopping centre tomorrow and buy some meat, pizzas, beer and a phone for her.

She seemed restless but I only wanted to collapse and flick through the channels. What was I going to do with the disaster that was work? She cuddled up next to me and we flicked through all the channels at least twice with either one of us disapprovingly 'urgh-ing' at each show.

"How about a game?" I suggested.

"What kind of game?" She turned and smiled suggestively at me.

"Erm, I don't know." And I didn't. I didn't have any cards, no monopoly, no chess set. What was I suggesting?

"We could go to a club."

"Ok." I was tired and stressed but what the hell could a club hurt?

Damn!

There were too many hot women. I mean 9 and 10's all over. Elly never left my side all night and as soon as I opened my mouth a harem engulfed me. It seemed that English guys had it pretty easy in Poland. Elly marched me to the dance floor and made it impossible for me to think about anyone but her. I was never the greatest dancer but I put my two-step to good use, or so I thought. She pouted and writhed, twitched and boogied then pouted some more.

Before I knew it we were back home and the clock said 4 am. I didn't believe it and I moved the couch into position for what I promised Elly would be a romantic sunrise. We both fell asleep soon after and the sun rose on the other side of the building anyway.

Waking up with Elly's drool was about as nice as it got. Someone once told me that baby sick was the least offensive sick of all. In that case Elly's drool was the diamond encrusted platinum bracelet of the drool kingdom.

I didn't want to wake her but as I slid out she stirred.

"Morning beautiful." I said stroking her hair out of her eyes. She just rolled her eyes back in her head and fell into the crevice of the sofa, her head facing away from the sunlight intruding on her sleep.

I got up, showered and decided to nip over the road and investigate the shopping centre by myself. It was only 8 am but the supermarket was already open and I took a trolley. I leisurely made my way around picking up Nescafe, green tea, sugar, bread, cheese in all its forms yellow, green, white cheese, cottage cheese, brie and some gorgonzola. I was astonished when I found the meat counter and realised I couldn't order anything.

I pointed at the thing I thought I wanted and then the old woman asked me a series of questions I couldn't answer so I shrugged and headed off towards the refrigerated section hoping to find some meat there.

I did, lots of hotdogs in plastic packages instead of tins or jars. Later I discovered that each individual hotdog was wrapped in its own plastic casing, inside the plastic packet, weird. I couldn't find any bacon but I think I found turkey and ham slices as they had little pictures on the labels. As long as they weren't logos I was ok.

I found pizza's, some French bread style ones and normal ones but none were deep pan and deep pan was my favourite. I loved mini Chicago Town pizza's, the pepperoni or breakfast pizzas were my favourite but I couldn't see them. Then I found pizza pockets, a treat that had disappeared from British shelves when I was a teenager or at least where I or my mother had shopped. Maybe Poland wasn't so bad after all.

I finished off getting some domestic products like cleaners, bin bags, toothpaste, shower gel and bars of soap. I felt proud of myself. I was striking out on my own. I had never really considered being by myself in a strange country, managing a new team in a new discipline for me. It had all happened so fast but here I was doing it. Living it.

I returned to the flat to find Elly awake. I started to put my shopping away and she smiled at the pizzas. I had bought too much and hadn't checked the size of my fridge or freezer. It turned out that my freezer wouldn't fit one pizza in and was basically useful only for ice.

“You don’t fancy a pizza, do you?”

“Ok.” She said happily skipping over to the couch.

“Can you put me one in as well please?” I said as I searched for a place to put the cleaning stuff and bin bags. I found a spot, next to the bin bags and cleaning stuff that was already there.

Elly stayed glued to the couch watching Gummy Bears in Polish.

“Hey.” I said. “Do you want a pizza?”

“If you will eat.” She said only turning to me for an instant before returning to her cartoon.

“You mean if am cooking it you do.”

“Yes.” At least she was honest about her laziness.

I put the pizzas in and finished unpacking my food. When I was done I ran a glass of water from the tap and she simply turned to me and wagged her finger. I had forgotten the water. What had she drunk?

I got the pizzas out and settled down next to her as the Loony Toons came on, they were followed by Inspector Gadget and finally a turtle called Franklin that I’d never seen before. She was so cute singing along to the theme tune quietly like I couldn’t hear or see her bobbing about. I washed up as she finished watching him and his bear friend on their adventure.

“Let’s get you a phone.” I said.

“Ok.”

With that she was up and we were out the door and I was back across the road at the shopping centre for the second time that morning. It was surprisingly warm for September, maybe 15 degrees or something. I didn’t bother with a jacket but I hadn’t packed my sunglasses and I wished I had. Most other people were in their large winter coats and that is when I wondered if it really did get cold there.

“How cold does it get here?” I asked Elly.

“Why did you expect Polar bears in the street?” She seemed disappointed with me.

“Nothing like that.” I said as a man dressed as a giant tankard passed us by.

“Do you think we are all car stealers as well?”

“Thieves. Car thieves.” I corrected her. “And no, why would I?”

“Come to Poland, your car is already here.” She said. It made no sense but we were inside the shopping centre, so I let it rest.

We found her a phone and she got a contract. She wanted to look at some dresses and handbags so we did. I was bored. Well bored as a kid in a candy shop and my sweet tooth was nourished by the endless stream of beauties swanning about.

We returned to the flat at 5 or 6 pm to drop off the days' bounty and we planned to eat then return to the shopping mall and watch a movie. I had remembered to buy water, four big five litre bottles of the stuff and she had bought some apple juice and fresh orange.

"So, when are you going to visit your mother?" I asked her just to make small talk. She nearly choked on her orange juice though and then gave me a sheepish look.

"Am still in England." She said.

"What about your friends?" I would have wanted to see my friends and am the most anti-social person I know.

"In England I am success, here am failure." She sounded sad. "They should live in hope."

"That's nice." I lied.

"Anyway you hate your friends and family." She said to my surprise.

"No I don't. Why do you think that?"

"You left England and them behind."

"I know that after six months here I will go back to a better job and opportunities. The people who love me, the friends who are true will be there when I get back and we'll slip back into things like nothing ever changed."

"Things always change."

"They do." I conceded. "But the true centre of a person doesn't and real relationships are based on true centres. Superfluous things like hobbies, fashion or music change but true centres rarely do."

"Moze."

I heard this a lot. It meant maybe, among other things. Sometimes it was a good place to leave a discussion but I wasn't sure if I was convincing her or myself at this point.

"It wouldn't matter if it was 6 months or 6 years." I continued. "When I go back I'll still be able to have a pint with my friends or brothers while watching the footy."

She didn't answer. She just slinked off to the bathroom. Maybe it wouldn't work for her. Am not sure I carried any hope with me on my foreign adventure. I doubted anyone would have been surprised to see me back. Well I was determined to succeed and I didn't want to feel like a failure so I could understand her from that perspective.

## Chapter 8

We had watched a movie about vampires the night before which sucked. The next day I had gotten up early and gone for a run. When I got back Elly was still asleep so I took a shower.

“Anything on today?” I asked as she still lay in bed.

“Nothing.” She replied wafting the duvet up to flash her naked body.

“Nice.” And it was. “I meant, are you doing anything today?”

“My brother is coming.” She said examining her nails.

I was surprised, more than surprised, more than shocked even.

“When?” She hadn’t mentioned a brother before. Younger? Older?

“This afternoon.”

“Were you going to tell me?” I said exasperated.

“I am telling you now.”

“Maybe we should prepare a special dinner or something.” I offered.

“Why?”

“I’d like to make a good impression.” And I genuinely did.

“Just talk to him about cars. He loves cars.”

“Does he speak English?” I asked.

“A bit. He’s been to Sweden.”

So what?

That wasn’t my question.

“Tell me about him.” I said trying to get her to open up.

“What’s to tell?”

“I don’t know that’s what am asking.”

“How can I know what you want me to tell if you don’t?”

“How old is he?”

“26.” Older than both of us. Unless she lied to me about her age.

“What does he do?”

“Do like what?” She asked confused.

“Sorry, for a job. What’s his job?” I corrected myself. Straight and simple, remember to keep it straight and simple.

“Nothing. Maybe you have a job for him.” She perked up at that idea.

“I don’t know baby. Anyway Monika is head of HR. It would be her decision.” I said deflecting.

“You are big boss man. You make the decisions. You tell Monika to pay my brother, she does.”

“Erm, not quite. Do you fancy going to the park?” I said.

“Why?”

“Maybe we can watch the people and look at the dogs.”

“It’s so cold outside. Come and cuddle me here and we can watch Chip and Dale.” She opened the covers once again revealing her naked body, how could I refuse such an offer. The park and dogs would be there next week.

We emerged for dinner then Elly wanted to show me how to make perogi. I don’t know what inspired her but it was her first flash of domestic goddess since I’d met her. I liked cooking and being instructed in the kitchen reminded me of when my Nan taught me to bake buns. I hoped that I wouldn’t make such a mess with Elly as I did back when I was a kid though.

The kitchen was a small room so we worked in the main room not giving a hoot what got dirty or how. Was this going to be my future? Making perogi on Sunday afternoons waiting for her family to arrive? It didn’t seem that bad. I slipped on The Killers album and swung myself into motion.

We started out by measuring the stuff for the dough. This included most interestingly for me a whole egg then another egg yolk. I showed off my skills by juggling the yolk between broken halves of egg shell until all the white or clear at that point had been drained off.

Elly was busy measuring other stuff out but I allowed myself a smile.

When it was time to knead the dough I of course took advantage of it and got in the Ghost position and really worked it. I even had Unchained Melody playing and everything but she didn’t seem into it.

I hadn’t thought, did they get movies back then?

Were they all little mouse cartoons on acid?

We moved on. Women responded to certain things in my experience, pottery making, Dirty Dancing and Titanic. I fucking hated them all. Boys responded to Top Gun quotes or the acronym MILF. You just had to mention entering a zone that might have an increased level of threat or crack out a volleyball and a reference about a wing man to instantly bond.

I guess this was what people called cultural differences.

Once the dough was done we covered it with tea towels.



Why?

I have no idea but we did.

We then set about making 'ruskie' fillings. I guess that translated to country or something because they were very village. Cheese, onion and potato. Lots of potato. Everything got mashed together once the potatoes were boiled. Elly added lots of salt and a dash of pepper. I added various cheeses but she refused anything too powerful.

We balled the mixture up and put them into little half moon shells. Elly used a fork to seal them, then rolled the seal back onto the moon tightly. I tried and failed a few times, I was more efficient at eating the remaining filling.

Her brother arrived in the late afternoon, early evening and we were relaxing with a glass of white wine. Elly had asked for beer again but I told her to try this German number and what do you know, she liked it. He, her brother, Marvin, as in Marvin Gaye wanted some even though he was driving. A glass couldn't hurt could it?

A glass maybe not but he had swigged the remainder of the bottle and was searching for the next while I was cleaning a glass for him. He smiled at me as if I'd be impressed with his macho act. I wasn't. That cost me some money and I'd hoped to impress his sister with it. I was starting to get the impression she didn't actually like it and finally gave her a beer instead. Marvin took one of those too.

He plonked himself down on the sofa and ate the perogi we had prepared. He was tall, gangly, no muscle or form beyond his bones. They were a skinny family. He and Elly jabbered away about God knows what but I just perched on my bar stool and tried to concentrate on the TV.

That grew tiresome so I fired up the laptop and checked the footy results on the BBC website. I was already missing Jeff Stelling and the rouges gallery.

"So English." He said to me, I guessed. "You give me job."

"Er, do you speak English well?" I asked guessing I had my answer from his instant pleasantries.

"I am man of culture like you. I visited Sweden. I can work with you." He grunted monotonously.

"What was your last job?" I asked looking for a way out.

"I am pizza delivery." He said very proudly.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty sex." I wasn't sure if it was a slip of the tongue or a joke.

"Did you like it?"

“Yes I like it very much. I am my own boss. I work when I want and don’t do so much.”

What a perfect employee.

“Well you weren’t your own boss were you? That would have been stupid.”

“Yes.”

Yes to what nimrod?

“I need car and phone. I must be manager. You treat me with respect.”

I don’t treat anyone who grunts with respect. Respect is earned not given and the comical exchange that we had, considering it was the first time we met, confirmed that he had earned nothing. He wanted a job from me and he couldn’t really speak English. It had me thinking it was all a horrible joke.

I quietly prayed that the applicants next week would be better than this fucking knuckle dragger.

“I use internet.”

Was that a question?

Obviously not as he disappeared with my laptop into my bathroom.

“Has he taken the laptop into the bathroom?” I knew he had but I needed confirmation.

“Yes he likes to take long shits everywhere he goes.” Elly replied.

Marking his territory like a wild beast.

“You will give him a job.”

Again that didn’t sound like a question.

“I doubt it. He lacks motivation. Nobody gave me anything for free.” I said, strongly believing that.

“That Mink gave you job because of me. Now you give my family back.”

Was she fucking insane?

“Sure honey. He can have a job. We just need to figure out what will suit him best. After all there aren’t many management positions left.”

“Oh you are good man James.” She said crossing the room to kiss me.

Later in the evening He popped his head in and said goodbye. I had honestly forgotten that he was still in the flat. I couldn’t see my laptop so I went looking for it.

The bastard hadn’t flushed the loo and the internet was still open on a website which exclusively showed naked vaginas in extreme close ups.

Yes he was a real man of culture.

## Chapter 9

I knew this was part of the job and at first I liked the idea of the power of it all but now the day was here and the interviewees would be turning up, looking at me hopefully with their big puppy eyes and I'd hold their fate in my hands. It was a big responsibility. Real responsibility. Oh fuck, I thought, what have I got myself into?

The truth of it was that once I'd told Monika what I wanted, it took about a week to get the first interviewee in. UK HQ got back to me and said that the computers and Saj from IT would be with me in about two weeks. Saj would come with two women I knew well from the training department, Stacey and Sharon. They sound like an Essex nightmare but really they were two young and competent businesswomen.

I had got nothing back from the internet company so I set-up the desks or re-arranged them a few times to keep busy then finished my day at 2 pm. I asked Elly if she wanted to play tennis and she did so that afternoon we went and bought the clothes, new shoes of course, rackets and balls. We had to wait until the next morning for a free court but it wasn't like I was over flowing with work.

The rest of the day was wasted at the pet shop cooing over little animals but I really wasn't ready to commit to caring for anything yet and I didn't believe that Elly could do it either. We went to a very generic Asian cuisine restaurant. They advertised it as Chinese, Vietnamese and Thai. I should have known from that that it wasn't going to be very authentic. It was ok but I think coming from the UK I had been ruined by how fantastic and genuine the foreign food restaurants were.

If I ate carbonara it was by a really Italian who complained about the supermarket versions but then again the Mark and Spencer ready meals were so delicious that you didn't mind how fake they were or how bad it was for you. I missed the ready meals or the general microwaveable potential in the British supermarket.

There were few ready meals in Poland and I gathered even fewer microwaves but then again the cost of the ready meals were significantly higher than buying the produce and losing half your day cooking for yourself. I had the time and found recipes on the internet so I gave it a crack. I didn't think it was that bad but Elly was happy when Monika had organized interviews all day Thursday and Friday, meaning she could return to her pizzas or dining out.

I had tried to convince Elly to book us a tennis court so we could continue her learning experience but amazingly she said all the courts were booked up. Am not surprised if am

honest because after she insisted that she could play and we spent good money on clothes and equipment we turned up on the Tuesday morning to find ourselves located in 'the balloon'.

The balloon turned out to be a blessing in disguise. It was an inflated oval shaped tent with a tennis court in the middle. The incessant hum of the air being pumped into our dome was off putting at first but I quickly got used to it. What I couldn't get used to was how bad Elly was.

She later confessed to having only ever seen tennis being played even though the afternoon before she seemed quite an expert when trying out the gear. She had trouble returning anything even in the warm-up rally and I spent the best part of our two hour block chasing down errant balls. I knew I wasn't great but I had hoped to build up a little sweat and rivalry on the court and thought that tennis might be something to bond over.

We didn't really have much and we felt like a very empty relationship. I was searching to find it, to find anything that could be the foundation to build on but instead the roof was being finished before the first floor had been started. I knew I was falling for something in her and she obviously liked spending time with me, she wasn't a prisoner or anything and I started to realise that maybe there never would be any solid ground.

After the tennis we were both quite. I think she was sulking and I wasn't that happy either, not to say I was angry or unhappy. In my neutrality I used work as an excuse and when I finally checked in Monika was looking ever so busy.

"I have the applications for your PA." She said breathlessly.

"Great." Something to do, not that I needed someone else to take any of my none existent work off my hands.

"Can you sort it into a shortlist of between seven and ten. Try to balance out the shortlist though, you know between men and women, ages, ethnicity?"

She didn't know though and looked at me as if I'd taken a shit on her desk.

"Ethnicity?"

"Sorry. The different nationalities like Chinese, maybe Indian."

"We don't have." She replied.

"No foreigner applied for the job?" It seemed strange but coming from England to a country which probably had less than 2% foreigners it was completely possible. "Oh, ok then."

"We had an African apply for other job though." She seemed very happy now.

"African?" I said hoping she would be more specific than a continent.

"Ok. Too lazy?" She questioned. "I won't invite him."

“No.” I protested. “Nothing like that, please do invite him. It is important that you invite him actually. I just wondered were in Africa he was from.”

Her blank look told me I'd be better off reading his CV so I went through his and several other applicants CV's all of whom were wanting to work in our new customer service section. Monika found me about an hour later with seven CV's with the diversity of a Justin Bieber fan club.

There were five females and only one was over 25, two males both of whom were 24. I started to look at the CV's and decided I needed to invite the forty plus year old Beata if for nothing else not to look ageist. Ageism is a bigger issue now than it was back then but Wally had me scared. I invited the two guys and I chose two women whose CV's seemed to be written in the more readable English.

Monika helpfully arranged for them to drop in throughout Wednesday. I still had no internet but was homing my managerial skills on my favourite computer game, Football Manager. I had decided to start a game in Poland, to get a feel for the place but I quickly abandoned that for the familiar feeling of England.

It felt weird not working, not harrying and harassing for the next sale. I don't think I could be unemployed or retired for that matter. I needed to occupy my brain and even took up Sudoku but I was still bored. I joined Monika on the balcony for a cigarette and later regularly took up smoking to fill a void for three minutes, that's how bored I was.

When I got home I was reminded of the morning's tragedy as the tennis rackets and balls were ominously staring at me from a corner. Elly wasn't haunted by them and busied herself with any TV show she could find. I made small talk and then jumped in the shower. My attempt at bonding seemed to have backfired but as depressing as that might have been I had a full day of interviews the next day and that lifted my spirits.

Finally, something to sink my teeth into.

I started my day with a very excited guy who called himself 'Woo-cash'. I wanted to get up and do some stylin and profiling Ric Flair style but I resisted. I kept calling him Luke because to me that is how his name looked and I couldn't say 'Woo-cash' without it sounding like a rapper. He was enthusiastic and full of confidence but he imagined a much grander scenario for my PA than I did so I let him fall into last place.

Next I interviewed Marta then Magdalena who was far too pretty to be given my assistants position so I convinced her to take one of the customer service positions. I met Beata and was underwhelmed by her but at least I gave her a shot and my last guy Paweł was

the standout candidate. He was funny, focused, great at English and he had a young family so I knew he was going to be loyal.

In the end I felt like I had done a real day's work for the first time since I'd landed. I went home with a spring in my step and the promise of returning to two more days filled with interviews. Paweł was going to start straight away and would help organize the candidates for the customer services jobs, again mainly young females.

I had planned a simple test. For each candidate I'd run through a call flowchart then have a little chat with them about their history, studies, ambitions etc and then do it again. If they seemed coachable I would give them a try and since I wanted to hire about twenty for training with only twelve full time places I knew I could trim the fat latter.

The last two days of the week flew by and I was feeling really good about myself on Friday. I think part of my good mood was because of an early morning exchange with Paweł.

"You're already here." I said surprised when I arrived an hour earlier than expected at the office.

"Yes." He said proudly. "It is my personality to be coming early."

"I bet your wife isn't happy about that." I smirked.

"She knows my behaviours and accepts them." He said sternly.

I think the whole thing went over his head but it put a spring in my step. Unfortunately he had set himself up in my office and I had hoped to watch a few episodes of South Park on my laptop in peace. What the hell though, we sat down and sifted through the days applicants and he was very interested in why people were chosen or not chosen from Thursday's interviews. I explained my method, my madness and that like everything else it was subjective. Now I had some team members I needed others who'd fit in with them. I also explained that if I had made a mistake I could rectify it in the trimming down phase.

He looked at me as if I was a newborn. He saw that when you got a job in England you turned up for it but holding back his condescending tone he explained that in Poland, even though people shake your hand and promise they'll come, hell most of the time you are doing them a huge favour, they don't. I nodded and smiled and asked Monika and she confirmed Paweł's version of Polish recruitment. I must admit I was taken aback.

I thought I had the power.

I thought I would have been the one to do the hiring and firing. It turned out that it was more of a negotiation in Poland than in the UK. I finished up Friday back in the good mood that I'd started it with and was confident in the team I'd put together.

I had a week with them before the UK team arrived and when they came, the crew, my team, finally had computers.

The UK weren't sure about my team's ability. For the whole time Stacey and Sharon were in Poland they just trained the team. Saj tried to configure the network to get the computers operable. He thought he had it fixed then something I had no idea about happened and everything failed. I was beginning to see that a good team would be sat on their arses unless the technology worked. All the things we took for granted, we needed to work without putting any effort it to them, all the services we paid for, all these small insignificant things could stop everything else unless they were properly looked after. It was the sort of thing somebody else had to think about until you became the boss.

## Chapter 10

I remember this day very well. I remember my anger. I remember it being very frustrating.

I had arrived at the office to see everyone sat reading various books, magazines or playing with their gizmos. Nobody was working.

"What the fuck is happening?" I asked accusingly.

"The internet is down." Magda replied.

"The internet? The World Wide Web? That thing? That is broken?" I asked sarcastically.

"Yes." She answered without a hint of humour.

"Where is our router?" I thought I could handle this. It usually only required switching on and off again anyway.

"What is router?" She asked sounding fed-up.

"The thing that connects our computers to the internet." I motioned with my hands the rough size of it. "A little plastic box."

"We have some boxes over there." And with this insight she returned to reading her Polish version of Hello called 'Flesz'. I wasn't sure if I should understand it as Flash or Flesh. Either way I was going to need another assistant on this one.

"Piotr. Pomoc." Roughly translated, 'Peter, help.'

"What can I do for you my nigga?" He asked in his best hip-hop voice.

"Erm, we don't say that Piot." I felt very uncomfortable.

Was this Polish street lingo? There weren't many foreigners here let alone different looking foreigners and most of them that I'd seen would have been from Asia.

"Don't hate the playa, hate the game." He replied.

"It's not a game Piot, it's an office and you can't use that word." I said firmly.

"But my bitches love it when I talk about my niggas. You gotta feel me homes. I love the black boys, I throw them some bananas when I have the chance." He was now tugging on his belt and I couldn't tell if he was a Neo-Nazi or just an idiot who'd watched too many bad movies.

"Enough. Talk in a formal business manner while at work Piot." That was the end of that. "I need your help with the router."

"It's not working."

"I know that's why I need your help."

"We called Net-A. They said it's going to be fixed today." He answered. The first intelligent thing to come out of his mouth all morning.

"When today?" Maybe I could take the group through some training exercises and then treat them to an early lunch then crack at it when we got back.

"Today. They didn't say." He assumed we were done and went back to his tablet or big phone or something that wasn't made by Apple so I didn't care.

There had been a strong wind the night before but I couldn't accept that we would be without an internet connection. I used the landline to call the UK HQ to ask about getting a second connection from a separate provider. They agreed that it was a sensible idea for out here so I asked Paweł to set it up. This Net-A might fuck us over again and there was no guarantee their rivals would be any more reliable.

Paweł happily said that the rival firm would be installing our new connection tomorrow. I told Monika to get the staff to run drills, practice their phrases and then if we still had no internet by lunch they could go home for the day. I said I was off to use the internet. I really wanted to see Elly again.

All the way home I wondered what she was doing and when I got back I found her sleeping. Was she getting up in the middle of the night and secretly tapping out her master's thesis?

I never could sleep-in, even after a skin full I was up and at them.

So, I actually did use the internet and after checking my e-mail and facebook I decided that I could play a few matches on Football Manager before Elly woke up. Just as it was



loading up my phone went and Monika said that there was a problem at the office and I should come back as soon as I could.

“Is it with the internet? Did the guy come?” I asked.

“No. It is your brother. He is here.”

“Which one?” Seemed the obvious question but really the obvious question was why would my brother come to visit without telling me and turn up at my office? I didn’t even think they knew my office address. I would actually have been surprised if anyone but my Mum knew my home address. “I am coming. Just get him some coffee and let him sit in my office.”

I rushed down the stairs in a very dramatic fashion but in truth the lift would probably have been faster. Waiting for the next tram, the right tram, your tram when you’re in a hurry is beyond frustrating. Sometimes nothing happens. It’s empty, it’s quiet and the minutes tick by, the promised arrival doesn’t come and as you watch buses sail by you curse not choosing the bus. You know at the same time though that if you make your way over to the bus stop that the tram will pull up and you’ll be cursing again.

Finally I made it back to my office and I was excited about seeing my brother, younger or older I didn’t care, it was just wonderful that he came. My racing heart stopped cold when I saw Marvin, Elly’s brother, with his feet up on my desk getting biscuit crumbs all over my floor. I slowly walked into my office and he smiled.

“Nice office.” He spluttered and I was covered in cookie debris.

“Yes it’s mine. How can I help you?” I knew a lot of ways I could help him but I wasn’t sure how many were legal or would be supported by Elly.

“I am here for my work.” He stated.

“You don’t work here though. Oh do you have another job?” I said hopefully.

“No you said you get me job. I work with you. Partner.”

Partner?

Are you fucking kidding me?

Partner?

“I said I’d try but unfortunately we are fully staffed.” I said very diplomatically.

“You owe me.”

“I don’t owe you anything. Nobody owes anybody a job. You owe people money sometimes but you earn a job, you deserve a job.” I felt like a father talking to a lazy teenager.

“Yes. I deserve.” He said solemnly.

What a fucking retard. I started to look at his features, his sunken, lost eyes and wondered if he did have some kind of mental or social interaction defect. It was possible that he was just in need of some medical assistance. It was also possible that he was just a cunt.

“Well since we don’t have the internet everyone is going home.”

A loud cheer from the rest of the staff let me know that no conversation was private in the office. I would remember that the next time I was giving Elly an ear infection with my dirty talk. They didn’t wait to be formally dismissed but as I stood with my back to them and my face to this asshole who still had his feet on my desk, the staff quietly left. They were quicker at getting out of the office than they were at getting in and ready in a morning. That I had learnt.

“Ok, bye.” I said to him rounding my desk.

He didn’t take the hint and as I stood over him his stench wafted up, it nearly made me sick. I would have to sit down with Elly and talk about her getting a job. I knew she wanted to study but I didn’t know if I was going to pay her way, had I adopted a stray?

It didn’t matter that much. She paid for all the clothes she bought and most of the time she returned nearly everything and then spent the rest of the day trying new things on. The shop girls must have gotten used to her after a week because there wasn’t that many shops. Maybe it was more of a Polish thing, maybe more of a woman thing, I had never paid attention before.

“You want beer?” He asked.

“It’s only eleven thirty.” I said. It hadn’t stopped me in the past but I didn’t want to see any more of this leech, let alone drink with the bastard.

“So we go meet Elly.” He mumbled.

He finally rose out of my chair and spread more of his cookie crumbs around my office and started towards the exit. I could see why he would want to visit his sister, I had been so excited about seeing my brother. I guess siblings have some bond and no matter how much times passes, those first few years of life that you spent together builds something that can’t be torn away by a simple falling out like friendship or romance can.

“I must stay and work but feel free to visit her.” I said.

I went to get the vacuum cleaner and Hoover up his mess. He was still standing there like a giant fucking lemon. He looked so docile, menacing yet innocent at the same time. There was a lot that unnerved me about this guy and part of me wanted to confront him about his behaviour at my flat. I let it slide. I wasn’t going to let this monkey throw a wrench into mine and Elly’s relationship.

Finally he left and I walked around the empty office straightening out desks, picking up the odd bit of rubbish and since I didn't want to leave I just stared out of the window. I tried to calculate how long he would spend with Elly. How long I could pretend to do nonexistent work and most importantly, how long it was worth doing nothing against doing something but having to face him?

I knew it would involve a confrontation with both him and Elly. She must have told him where the office was and must think that he had a job with me. I could tell him to go to hell but I don't know if I was ready to disappoint Elly yet. I decided that the best course of action was to lock up the office and have a wank. A clearer head makes better decisions and wanking is fun.

On my way home I tried to craft my arguments in my head and I thought I had reason and logic on my side, nothing could go wrong, right?

"Elly." I shouted as I entered an empty apartment. I don't know why I bothered. If I craned my neck I could pretty much see into every room.

I hoped they had gone shopping or that she had taken him to the bus depot. He still lived with their mother, about an hour's bus ride out of Warsaw. Hopefully he would get sick of that journey and stop showing up and embarrassing me. How could I explain him to the staff?

I didn't see Elly until the next day when I woke up. I shook her awake and asked what was going on. She explained that Marvin was staying with their Aunt who lived in Warsaw but she tried to convince him that there was no job for him. She didn't seem angry about it. She said that she had spent time with her Aunt and knew that she'd have to go back home sooner or later, she preferred later and went back to sleep.

My head was spinning on the way into work.

Was this the end for me and Elly?

Would she take me back with her?

How would she introduce me?

Who was I to her?

The spinning only intensified once I got into the office. I saw a technician in grey overalls checking our wiring. Monika and Paweł were closely shadowing him. None of the customer service reps were in, even though their shift should have started already. It shouldn't have annoyed me as they'd have had nothing to do but it did.

"This is the guy from PT." Paweł said.

"Oh about the new connection. Great. When will it be up and running?"

“There is a problem.” Monika deflated me as quickly as the optimism of perpetually functioning internet had risen my spirits. “Net-A and PT run off the same cables.”

“So?”

“You can have one or the other. Not both.” She replied.

“I don’t get it.” And I didn’t but after an hour of listening, asking questions, laughing my arse off at the ridiculousness of the situation I was finally fully aware that in Poland only PT owned any connection. The other companies rented them, maybe it worked the same everywhere, but the basic thing was that if we got it from any provider it would work or not work. Other than that it could be a problem with our hardware.

The guy fixed the problem though and I got on the phone to see where my staff were as Monika and Paweł both said that they hadn’t told anyone to come in late. As they arrived in dribs and drabs I informed HQ that we were functional again. I hoped that this would be the last hiccup along the way but as I thought about Elly and what our future held I realised that whatever happened at work, there were going to be a lot more headaches to come.

## Chapter 11

A game of football.

A game of football with some beer.

A game of football with some beer and ex-pats.

There was a winner in there somewhere.

I had read about this bar in the tourist guide book and it sounded very homely. The book stated that the bar had Sky TV and staff who spoke English along with all the normal beers you got in a UK pub. That meant there was Guinness, Strongbow, Heineken and the Polish beers. They also served an all day Irish breakfast.

The bar looked sufficiently like The Queen Vic to call itself a proper British pub and as I mentally flipped a coin about what to drink I came down firmly on the side of Guinness. It was a good decision and even though it was more than double the price of a Polish larger, it was worth it.

I asked the bartender about the football and he put it on a projector screen behind me. The pub was empty except for a few skinheads and their Barbie girls. The barman brought me a menu and an ashtray. I had to return to the bar shortly after I had gotten comfortable

because as good as everything else was, there was no sound at all. The bartender rectified that and a booming surround sound kicked into action shaking the windows.

“Down a tad.” I suggested.

He grunted.

I made flamboyant hand gestures that I had intended to indicate turning the music down but more than likely it looked as if I was performing a forgotten rain summoning ritual.

I returned to my seat and was beginning to get adjusted to it when I heard an unmistakably Middle England accent. I turned around to observe a man dressed in tweed whose long grey hair was flowing over his brown rimmed glasses.

“I said, are you deaf?” He looked as if he was talking to me. He was certainly approaching me.

I shook my head.

He then turned to the barman and shouted something at him in Polish. A moment later the sound was much quieter but still audible. I turned my back to him and was glad to see Andy Gray and Richard Keys chewing the fat over the upcoming match.

“Am Giles.” The man in tweed said sitting down next to me. “I own the place. If you haven’t eaten, a lot of our regulars love the all-day Irish breakfast.”

“Actually I was thinking about the chicken burger.” I said.

“Whatever. So are you a Spurs man?” He asked. It was Spurs vs Man U that was going to be shown.

“Not really. Am a Leeds fan.” I said. Instantly he’d assume that I was a Spurs fan today but the only team I hated were Liverpool.

“I’d keep that quite in here son. You are about to be overrun with Reds.” He patted my shoulder lifting himself out of his chair then he went to sit with the skinheads and Barbie girls.

Elly had come with me but then slinked off to go shopping before we arrived at the bar. She promised to come and rescue me after she was done but once she asked when the football finished I knew I wouldn’t see her until the final whistle. It would have been nice to have had company, I just played on my phone. A type of Tetris with colours.

I drunk another Guinness before kickoff.

Slowly the bar began to fill up with English speaking patrons. I sheepishly looked around and saw mainly middle aged, beer bellied guys who sat at the bar and flirted with the waitresses as the barman waited to take their order. After flirting they made their way to the tables around me and sagged down into the hard wooden chairs.

“Who’s playing?” One asked me.

“Man U and Spurs.” I said helpfully.

“Ha ha. No. Who is in the team?” A table of three chubby, unshaven guys cracked different jokes between themselves about me.

I ran through the teams and subs and told them that fuck all had happened yet. They asked what I was doing there, so I told them. I asked them the same question. It seemed to me that they thought I was a mug. They ran through their imaginary CV’s and I wondered who these jokers were. Telling me that they were CEO’s or managing directors, I might have been young and I did feel young amongst these dinosaurs but I wasn’t stupid.

At half time I grabbed another Guinness and returned to my Tetris knock-off. The Masters of the Universe left me alone, thankfully. The second half was about to kick off and I needed to answer nature because when she comes calling you don’t want her to leave a message. I looked around but I couldn’t see a toilet. I got out of my seat and walked around the bar. Still nothing.

I stood at the bar patiently and by now it was heaving. I was going to lose my seat. I could feel it. All these Johnny come lately’s. I tried to grab the bartender’s attention.

Fuck.

I was hopping around now and even throwing in a little jig as I tried to hold myself threw my pocket. I felt my left eye beginning to twitch and spied a tree outside. I could go but I’d never be allowed back.

What was I supposed to do?

I started to edge out of the bar. No big strides just in case.

Another round of twitching and jiggling.

“There is a bathroom outside and round the corner on the right.” A round and smiley woman told me.

I nodded to her and waited for her to waddle past before bursting out the doors and to my right.

“Golden.” I half sighed as I spotted the little man in the middle of the blue circle on the white door.

The relief was palpable. The stream didn’t want to end, so I just let it flow. Finally the storm river turned into a few drops and then everything was dry and the sun was out.

I felt great striding back into the bar and I located my pint and coat safely next to the table of nobheads. I was quickly joined by the Buddha who had just saved me.

“Mind if I sit here?” She asked cheerily.

“Be my guest.” I said. “Am James.” I said extending my hand.

“You washed that didn’t you?” She smiled.

I thought of the old joke about the marines and the SAS, where the marine complains about the SAS guy not washing his hand to which he answers, ‘We’re trained not to piss on ours.’

It didn’t seem the time so I just nodded. She was followed over by another guy I assumed was her boyfriend or husband.

“Alright fella, am Gordon.” He said grabbing my outstretched hand. He sounded Liverpudlian. Fucking Scousers.

“James.” I repeated then looked at the mystery woman. She was now attentively watching the game.

Gordon pulled up on the other side of me to the woman, maybe they weren’t together. He too ignored small talk and was instantly out of his seat swearing at a bad decision from the linesman which had allowed Man United to slip in and score the opening goal.

“You’re not a scum are you?” Gordon asked me.

“Erm, no. Not Manchester. Not a Manchester fan.” I muttered.

“Oh, that’s a shame. I am.” The woman said. She looked at Gordon and raised both hands with her fingers displaying the very British ‘V’ sign and laughed at him.

Maybe that is why they wanted a gooseberry.

The game ended 1-0. The party was just starting and as the noise level rose I missed several calls from Elly. It turns out she was just calling to say that a shopping emergency had delayed her and I could come to find her if I wanted to. As I headed out to the toilet again and found her messages and tried to call her. As I unbuttoned my jeans with one hand and dialled with another I saw her emerge from round a corner. She was saddled with bags but looking very pleased with herself.

“Just a second, I need a slash.” I went to the toilet and returned to her wiping my wet hands in the arm pits of my shirt. “What did you get?”

“Just what I needed.” She replied. “Can we go?”

“Don’t you fancy a drink?”

“Not in there.” She shuddered.

“How about you sit down and I’ll bring us some drinks out.” I said pointing to a round Heineken table with a massive green parasol overshadowing it. “What do you fancy?”

“Whatever you are drinking.” She said nonchalantly.

“Guinness.” I told her, asked her.

She said the Polish beer that I couldn't pronounce. It began with a Z but the sound wasn't zed or zee. I could point it out though and that was all the barman needed. I invited the Scouse and Manc fan out to join us.

They declined.

I was glad.

"Did you have fun?" I asked.

"It was essential." She answered. "You?"

"I guess. I met a couple who were quite funny. Better than most of those nobheads anyway." I answered. In truth I was glad to be out of the bar and if I hadn't loved football as much as I did I doubt I would have returned.

"You must introduce me." She announced and gathered her bags.

We finished our drinks then went inside to find them with a group of other ex-pats. Elly charmed the barman into stowing her 'essentials' behind the bar and we spent the next few hours hearing only English.

I realised how much I missed it. I needed an ally. I needed another Englishman to laugh with about the quirks of Polish life and in among the bullshit I think I might have found the guy.

## Chapter 12

I needed help. I needed more than help. I needed an ally, a confidant, a Robin to my Batman. Well maybe not a Robin but someone who was on my side. I found him among the hapless fucks who tried to pass themselves off as translators.

A guy at the bar named Curtis had recommended him to me after I had been complaining about my situation. It seemed that he was not only the best Polish speaker among the foreigners but was mainly self taught. The group were a little standoffish about him as he didn't really socialise with them. They all knew his work though.

I liked the idea that he had the good sense not to associate with the barflies. I quickly found him on Google the next morning at work, Kinsley Andrews. He was working for a translator not a million miles away from my office so as the crew answered call after call from the UK, I picked up a few documents in Polish and headed down to meet the guy.

I enjoyed the stroll and the excuse to get out of the office, where I was increasingly not needed. The team were functioning and Monika cracked the whip then looked to me for approval. I spent most of my time acting as liaison between various departments in the UK. I



had learnt very quickly that the biggest enemy, biggest threat to M&M was itself. The infighting and mudslinging between departments, between managers and senior staff was a joke but nothing was funny about it.

HR might have preached about strategic alignment but they were too focused on their battle with Finance and Legal to follow through on it. Legal and Finance co-operated or more accurately left each other to their own devices while Sales, Marketing, Customer Service and Logistics battled for relevance. Only Catering, Security and Production were free from the vicious barbs and vitriol of office politics. This simply was because everyone else knew that those three were at the bottom of the food chain.

Did anyone wonder about translation services?

Where did they fit in the corporate hierarchy?

Well I finally made my way past what was called the Jewish Ghetto to a small office above a printers. I was amused to see that the translation service's door was padded with the kind of material that they use on mental patients walls in movies. I wondered why it was and came to the conclusion that if they were closed it must drive their clientele insane. I still don't know why it was that way in truth and sometimes in Poland there is no explanation, some things just are.

Inside the office there was a tiny receptionist buried under a mass of hair. It could have been Slash if you'd slipped an axe into her hands. She smiled at me and asked in Polish if she could help me. I was beginning to understand their utterances but I couldn't reply yet. I just looked at her blankly while I tried to form something in my head that might work on my tongue.

I was at a translator's for God's sake though. If I could just walk in anywhere and speak English this was the place. So I did. I explained myself and as I was asking about this fellow named Kinsley a short bespectacled individual popped his head around a door and peered out at me.

"Hello." He said. "Can I help you?"

"I hope so. I have some work for you." I waved the handful of documents at him.

"If you leave them with Caroline I'll get to them this afternoon. Is there a deadline you need met?"

Ha.

Deadlines.

I had forgotten about those fucking things.

Like we agree a time or date that something should be done by and it is?

Not in Poland pal.

Oh he was so British.

I needed him on my staff or at least to hang out with.

“Could we talk privately for a moment?” I asked not wanting this to end.

“Erm, sure.” He looked across at the door opposite then walked across and ushered me in. He spoke to the women occupying the office and then we were alone. “So what’s up?”

I explained my situation and the story of how I came to be in Poland and finally to him and his office. He seemed genuinely touched that people thought so highly of him and his work. I was right though, he felt the same about the ex-pat scene as I did. He said that he’d tried a few of the websites and casual meet-ups but he felt more comfortable with the Poles now. I was waiting to pounce with my job offer but he struck first and asked if I fancied grabbing lunch. I wasn’t really hungry but why not.

He returned to his room for his coat while I smiled at Slash. All the time I was waiting I was hoping she would unleash an epic guitar solo out of the ether. She didn’t and as Kinsley emerged from his office wrapping his scarf around his neck, he was followed out by a procession of six young ladies.

The first I recognised as the women whose office we had used for our little chat. She was followed by a tall thin brunette, a short blonde, another two tall skinny brunettes and then finally a vision, an Adriana Lima look-a-like who gave Kinsley a peck on the cheek as she floated past.

My job to convince him to come and join M&M just got a lot harder. I could see why he liked the company of Poles. Anyone would like the company of any nationality if they were surrounded by such a harem and the only male in the office.

“That’s Monika.” He said.

“I have a Monika at my office too but not like that.”

The voluminous hair, lips and wide eyes were hard to forget but then Kinsley said what I had learnt all Polish people think.

“She is beautiful but here they think she is fat. They think all English girls are fat too and eat nothing but chips. You have got to let them have their small glories. The poorer the country, the more they pride themselves on the beauty of their women and their men’s ability to drink. The truth is that while Poles do drink more, most Brits would drink them under the table and like you saw there are a lot of women with nice bodies but not much going on in the face department and totally bereft of any character.”

“What about Monika?” I asked. I guess I was asking about her personality because I had seen a woman who filled her jeans but wasn’t spilling out of them.

“Very pretty. Good English. Shy. Loves cats.” That seemed to be it.

Who was I to judge?

What did me and Elly have in common?

Oh yeah, we both thought she looked great and we both loved her.

We found an Italian place and he ordered a green salad and pasta, I got the lasagne. It was a quiet little place and gave us a chance to talk. I felt that he needed it just as much as I did and even though he might have shunned ex-pat bars it didn’t mean he didn’t want contact.

I learnt his back story and found out that he was from the wrong side of the Pennines but not Liverpool thankfully. He had a brother and spoke German and Russian as well as been self taught in Polish. He asked if I was going to learn but I told him that I didn’t plan on staying and that I’d started to pick up the odd word but in truth I worked all day in English and could point out the stuff I wanted at the supermarket. I had learnt to ask for ‘plaster-key’ when I wanted meat and they’d cut me some slices. That was enough.

“I never planned to stay either.” He said knowingly.

“Why did you learn the language then?”

“I was working in Russia and started to learn so I had something special on my resume. I came for some experience and now I’ve been at that office for three fucking years.”

He seemed angry with himself reflecting on the time he had spent there but by and large he was the happiest guy I’d met in Poland. Some of the younger women had a bubbly energy that would be stripped out of them once they woke up to adulthood but the men were less optimistic and ex-pats were all quasi-suicidal.

I tried my best to convince him to come and join me but I could see that it would be difficult to get him out of that office. He checked over the contracts I had brought pointing out several things that would seem strange to a foreigner but not to a Pole and thus wouldn’t have been mentioned by Paweł. He knew his stuff and refused to let me buy his lunch. He didn’t even charge me for his consultation. Instead he invited me and Elly for a BBQ with him and Monika at the weekend in some forest. He explained how I could get there and then decided he would meet us at the last Metro stop.

We said our goodbyes and I waited eagerly all week to go for a BBQ. I knew the weather was shit and that a BBQ was a strange idea but something might have worked out. On Friday though he called and said there wouldn’t be a BBQ and asked instead if we fancied a wine tasting.

Wine tasting?

With a plate of cheese?

Have you got any Pimm's while you're at it?

Sure I said, knowing Elly would hate it. Well she'd have to suck it up for a bit and she could talk to Monika. It would be nice for her to have a friend in the city. She nodded and agreed and seemed happy like always but when the weekend came around I could see she was searching for excuses to get out of the BBQ, the wine tasting didn't capture her imagination either but after a quick chat she decided that getting out of the flat was better than another cartoon marathon.

Elly wanted to grab a McDonalds on the way there which was strange as she usually ate nothing. I didn't mind though. I just assumed that she was happy with me and had stopped dieting and waiting for her Mr. Right to come along. I hoped that she already had him.

We met Kinsley and Monika by a different Metro and moved away towards the wine tasting. To say that the Metro was only one straight line and a few stops a lot of Warsaw revolved around it, especially for the younger people.

The wine tasting was a crock of shit. Other than trying to shift a load of second rate Hungarian wine, the cheese platter was vile. We were all laughing and getting along but Monika and Elly were sneering at each other when backs were turned followed by smiles and polite but guarded comments to each other's faces.

Kinsley insisted on being called Kins and we agreed a flat rate fee for consultations. Monika was happy as it was her friend's mother's firm and it looked good for Kin's. I felt good about signing a deal and actually doing something in Poland, even if it would mean that I didn't really do much.

The Hungarian Ambassador joined us at some juncture during the evening and invited us to a gallery opening. When we got there it was much more a celebration of alcohol than art and mixed with the offensive wine we had just drunk, we all ended the night in quite a state.

### Chapter 13

It was a beautiful sunny morning and life was good. I was the boss. I had a trusty sidekick or more appropriately confidant and I had a beautiful woman in the bathroom throwing up.

Wait a minute.

“Are you ok?” I asked nervously.

“You bastard.” That was what I understood.

It was sandwiched in between a lot of Polish. I am pretty sure she was cursing me out in Polish too but ignorance truly is bliss sometimes.

“Was it the Mexican food?” I asked. “I doubt they were really Mexicans.”

Not that it mattered.

She emerged from the bathroom, hair strewn in more directions than a compass had ever known, sick dripping from the corner of her mouth and her eyes red and puffy.

“The Communists didn’t come.”

“Erm, good.” I said not sure what she meant.

She just stared at me. Looked down at herself and then back at me.

It hit me.

It hit me like a mother fucking Mack truck.

The Communists were her period and oh shit they hadn’t invaded in sometime. Her boobs had gotten bigger as well. I just thought that Jesus had finally opened his heart to me and let me in.

Damn.

This is going to be a tricky conversation I thought.

I have to admit even then, in the middle of this life altering realization, I was still looking down at her naked bottom half, except for her skin tight zebra print briefs, and thinking about doing to her the thing that got us to this point.

I don’t know how she understood my sex haze but she pushed past me and dived head first into bed. She was sobbing loudly but when I turned around all I saw was the peach popping out of the zebra.

God damn!

What was wrong with me?

What was so God damn right with her?

I shuffled over and put my arm around her.

Why was she crying?

Did she want to get rid of it?

Was she happy?

Was it my reaction to the news?

Or was it just that she'd been retching up her guts and this time it wasn't to make weight for a shoot?

"What's wrong baby?" I tentatively asked.

"Baby? Baby?" Momentarily she lifted her head to question me then buried it again followed by her muffled words, "You've ruined my life!"

Those are strong words.

Even muffled they are shocking.

I didn't have a response to that.

It seemed pretty clear that she wasn't ready to be a mother.

I had to offer her a way out.

"We can get rid of it if you want. We can always get pregnant again." It seemed right saying it then but I don't know if I wanted to get rid of it. I wanted a family in the future and it felt too soon at that time.

You may never be ready for your first child. The stars are unlikely to align how you hope they will but in this scenario I was very happy. Breeding animals is an art form and I believe that attraction, physical attraction works in the same way. Humans want to mate, to breed with the correct specimen. Elly was a great specimen; tall, beautiful, elegant. What more could I ask for?

"I am happy either way." I continued.

I was trying to be supportive.

"I won't kill it." She sobbed.

"Great." I said sitting down.

"No. Not great. I wanted to study."

"You are young. You have your whole life ahead of you." Maybe I was better at customer services than sales, wait, which one would this fall into?

"I'll never be in a disco again." She had stopped sobbing and mucus bubbles were inflating and popping on her right nostril.

I tried to ignore it but it had a rhythm that wouldn't quit. She became self-conscious and rubbed her nose back with the inside of her wrist, she instantly looked like a pig. It was the first time I found her unattractive. I think she noticed as she headed back into the bathroom.

I sat and stared out into the grey abyss that was the view from my window. The Warsaw sky looked like someone had opened up Microsoft paint and put a grey paint can on the sky. I had no texture, no shades. It was flat and lifeless grey.

Was it significant?

Everything has significance if you attribute some to it but I wasn't interested in playing fate and futures. Elly got pregnant because we weren't safe. We weren't safe because we were drunk or too 'in the moment'.

Could I believe that I had planned this?

That I had meant for her to get pregnant?

I didn't believe it after her tearful performance but it was just as likely that she planned such mischief. Even, it was possible, that we both planned it secretly and we were both celebrating our evil plan while cursing dumb luck.

A baby would be a joyous thing anyway. I had nephews that I loved. I had grown up babysitting for my cousins and now I was going to be bonded to another human being in the strongest possible way. Me and Elly were going to be a team, we were no longer two separate hearts, we were three and we would beat as one.

I can't remember how long she was gone or how long I stared into the abyss. I had stopped seeing the sky anyway. I was remembering my past and attempting to forecast our future. The future is so hopeful. However much shit you have had to live through there is always that bright new day which until the sun sets again holds all the possibilities imaginable and then some. I now had more structure to my future than I think I had ever had.

When I snapped out of my trance I was smiling and when I realised Elly was cuddling my arm I smiled harder and wider. I rubbed her tummy, then the back of her neck, underneath her hair. I knew then that we were a family, we were three.

"We should buy a test." I said. Better to be safe than sorry. Or disappointed.

"Sometimes I missed when I modelled." She said calmly.

We both knew why that was and that wasn't a factor now. Other reasons could have caused it or the lack of it, depending what we are referring too but a test wouldn't hurt.

"Shall I go alone or do you fancy a walk?" I asked.

She didn't say a word but she got her coat so I got mine. We went downstairs in the lift and the speed made your tummy flip if there were no other stops. It made me nervous and I held Elly's hand tighter. She pulled it away then put her hand on mine.

I could not do with nine months of crazy lady mood swings.

We disembarked and made our way over to the shopping centre. Once inside we used the map of the stores to locate the Boots like retail pharmacy called Rossmann's. It had a large selection of make-up and toiletries and other things I didn't need but I couldn't find the pregnancy test kit. I checked next to the condoms but they weren't there.

“I can’t find them.” I confessed to Elly. She was finishing off her ice-cream on a bench. I helped her up, it was almost as if the whiff of pregnancy had induced chronic back pain and restricted her knees ability to bend.

“I’ll do it.” She said.

I followed close behind and observed her as she talked to the store-girl. An observant security guard was either checking me out as a potential thief, my baby-mama’s ass or the store-girl who was way too young for him. I ventured over to him and he nearly stood his ground but as I got closer he started on a lap of the perimeter.

I returned to Elly.

“Which one do you think?” She said holding up two boxes.

The only difference I could tell was that one box was purple and white and the other was green and white.

“Take them both. Athletes need a B test to confirm.”

She banged the boxes against my head but took the advice. Since we were there I took gum, honey chap stick and some more toothpaste which came with free mouth wash. Elly seemed happier now and we rushed back to the flat to test out our theory.

“I can’t make it rain.” She shouted through.

“Here, here.” I said passing another glass of water to her.

She squatted down smiling and drinking her water, just waiting for the magic to happen then it started. We had read the instructions on both sets of tests and after the glory of the rain we had to wait to see what the tests said. The rain seemed to be a downpour so Elly handed off both tests to me and I was never happier to possibly have piss, someone else’s piss, all over my fingers.

We waited and waited but you know what they say, a watch stick of pee never boils.

“I want it to be true.” She said and for a moment everything stopped.

“So do I.”

I kissed her and by the time I’d finished we looked down to see that both tests agreed. We kissed again and started dancing around, finally landing on the bed.

“I hope it’s a boy.” She said. I did too really. “It’s better to have a boy first.”

“I just hope it’s healthy.” That was also true. “How many are you planning on us having?”

“Two.” She said without any hesitation. She had clearly thought more about this than I had. “A boy and a girl but I didn’t expect him yet.”

“Well he’s on his way so let’s make him welcome.”



## Chapter 14

I used to take the time to hold a weekly meeting on Fridays and then take the guys out for a beer. They usually only had one or two all night so it wasn't that expensive. They were going to need that beer this week though because the meeting was going to be rough.

We listened to call after call of unhelpful comments, rude behaviour and a general lack of customer service. I asked them what they thought and nobody thought anything was wrong. They shrugged when I reminded them about their training. It hadn't been that long ago but you'd have thought that it happened at the fall of the wall.

I thought, 'God it's like trying to teach a tiger how to wipe its arse'. I looked around the room at their blank expressions and wondered how they didn't see what was wrong. I told Monika that she could go if she wanted to and asked Paweł if he wanted to stay. He wasn't in a rush to return to his wife and I was glad. I would probably need him because the angrier I got at the nonchalance, the less understandable my English became.

"Do you guys know what a rim job is?" I barked.

By the looks I guessed not. I looked at Paweł who was smirking. I just widened my eyes and he translated it for me. The room laughed. Am glad they found that funny because what I was about to tell them wasn't funny at all.

"If you get off a call and you can't taste the clients shit in your mouth then you weren't nice enough." The laughing had stopped and they straightened up. "This is customer services, you service the customers. On Monday I need you guys to start putting your necks into it."

I think the last part largely went over their heads but they got the message. I wasn't interested in going for drinks and felt that they needed time alone. I handed a few hundred to Paweł and wished them all a nice weekend. Hopefully something would sink in over the weekend and Monday morning would be a lot more satisfactory.

I went back to my office and wrote up the numbers. Targets seemed random and I think that any true numbers wouldn't emerge at least for a year and then we could compare like for like. Using the UK as a benchmark wasn't realistic or maybe I just wasn't doing a good job. I left the office depressed by work but happy at the thought of a weekend alone with my women.

I had planned to whisk her off to a hotel just for the hotel sex. Well, maybe to rekindle some of the Courtly Lodge atmosphere as well or even just to get out of Warsaw. It was a

nice modern city but without you realising, something built up inside and you needed a few days away. To be surrounded by more green. I think Elly felt the same and we got a taxi to a little spa just outside Warsaw.

A weekend of massages, jacuzzi's and general relaxation. It promised to be blissful.

Elly got upset as soon as we got there and worried about whether she could get massaged or how many of the services she could use. I said we'd check it out with the receptionist the next morning but tonight was for us. She was extremely tense and frigid though. In the end she fell asleep at 8 o'clock and I was left with nothing to do.

I then had an idea.

I would make something for her.

I looked around for inspiration but saw none. I could make a mix tape but I wasn't thirteen and it wasn't the 1980's. I could do a mix CD or mix mp3. Is that what the kids had to do today? An mp3 compilation or a playlist on youtube or grooveshark?

I felt old. What did old people do?

I could write her a poem.

Even better, write her a poem then translate it into Polish.

That would cheer her up.

The only problem was that I didn't speak Polish. Google translate, you mother bitch, to the rescue. I love our time, we really do live in the blessed age.

So I tried to remember what I'd learnt in school. I remembered Mrs. West an angry old drunk who always remained seated, never writing on the blackboard or later whiteboard all the years she taught me.

I remembered Shakespeare, sonnets and iambic pentameter. I wondered if I could do rhyming couplets or this thing called a haiku. I knew whatever it was in English didn't matter so much because once in the translator it would sound strange. I started out simple.

Roses are red

Violets are blue

I am 13

So here is a mix CD for you!

I popped it into the translator then opened a second page and translated it back to make sure I wouldn't end up with some garbled nonsense. Luckily it gave me back the same simple verses that I had just written.

Time to get down to some romancing.

*You are my day and night,*

*My everything I want in life.*

*Together we make each other better,  
These days, weeks, months are treasures.*

*I don't know the future,  
But tell me your past.*

*I want to learn the beginning to our story,  
Remember all the members of the cast.*

*If we died tomorrow,  
They wouldn't remember our names.  
Our love living on,  
That would be our fame.*

I thought about adding more about *our legacy created* but who knows when I might need to cheer her up again. I didn't see the point in using up all my good stuff in one poem. If am honest though I didn't really work at it, I just let it flow out.

I poured myself a whiskey and got some paper. I had spotted some flowers in the hotel garden that I'd pinch and use to create a border around the hotel stationary. I planned to write the poem out in Polish and present it to her in the morning. If I had a printer I would have used it. My handwriting looks like a spider crawled through an inkwell then tangoed across a page.

My target was romantic not perfect.

I had to leave room to grow otherwise where would we be in six months?

Disappointmentsville.

Google translate spat this out for me to scrawl into cipher:

*Jesteś moim dniem i nocą,  
My wszystko chcę w życiu.*

*Wspólnie tworzymy siebie lepiej,  
Te dni, tygodnie, miesiące są skarby.*

*Nie wiem na przyszłość,  
Ale powiedz mi swoją przeszłość.*

*Chcę dowiedzieć się początek naszej historii,  
Zapamiętaj wszystkich członków obsady.*

*Jeżeli umarliśmy jutro  
Nie chcieli pamiętać nasze imiona.  
Nasza miłość żyć dalej,  
To byłaby nasza sława.*

I got to work writing it up and when I was done and done with my whisky I tried to translate it back. A few things changed but it generally stayed the same. I thought about memorizing the lines but there were too many sounds in my mouth and the whisky wasn't helping my tongue wrap around the words.

In the morning I snuck out and picked the violet flowers I'd spied the night before. I plucked the petals and wet the paper around the edge, applied the petals and put it under my laptop to dry. By the time Elly woke up it was getting close to the end of breakfast so we both rushed down.

There wasn't much of the meat left but Elly was happy to see pancakes and I loaded up on fruit hoping that I'd need the energy later. She asked what I did last night, she never apologised, not for falling asleep on me, not for anything, ever!

I told her that I tried learning some Polish which made her laugh.

"So tell me something." She said between bites.

I got really shy and hide behind my fruit.

"Maybe you can teach me later." I said.

"No you must tell me something now." She demanded playfully.

"I wrote you a poem."

"In Polish? For me?" She seemed touched just by the thought of it.

The waitress came back from the kitchen with a plate of sausages so I made my move, even taking a couple for Elly then refilling my coffee and juice and Elly's tea and juice. There is no better place to make a pig of yourself than at a free breakfast.

Elly didn't eat her sausages and I struggled them down with the last of my orange juice. Elly couldn't wait for her surprise so she was rushing me and I really felt that I shouldn't have eaten so much.

I was doing little burps as she sped ahead of me, the sausage wafting back at me as I tried to keep pace. We reached our room and I slid in the key, a proper metal one, not an American movie plastic card thing. She jumped on the bed and I lifted the laptop up and passed her the poem.

As she wondered around the room absorbing it, I collapsed onto the bed and unbuttoned my pants to allow the girth the freedom it needed. I was releasing a sausage smelling groan when she finished reading it and jumped aboard the Smelly James bouncy castle.

I held in my vomit but as she pressed her lips strongly against my mouth I felt myself asking, why now?

I rolled her over and excused myself to the bathroom for a little gargling.

"I don't mind the sausage." She said undressing at the bathroom door.

It turned out that we never got around to asking the receptionist what she could or couldn't do.

## Chapter 15

It felt strange leaving the office. I was nervous about how the guys would get on without me. I was also nervous about the scan. It was the supposed 10 weeks scan. I didn't know if we'd learn our baby's sex today or not. I had only seen these things in the movies.

Did they really rub jelly on the belly?

Did they swipe what looked like a barcode scanner across the bump and get a black and white image of a baby?

Of my baby?

Of our baby? Our baby, that made me smile.

We located the office which in typical Polish fashion looked like all the other non-descript buildings it was surrounded by. Why can't you put a big sign all over something to say it's a hospital? Why paint it in the same colour schemes as the blocks of flats that it's hidden between?

To confuse me?

Well that explains it then. Poland's city planners all got together and on the off chance I'd show up at some point and then get a woman pregnant, they played a massive elaborate practical joke on me. Good job I came otherwise they would have looked quite the fools.

We got inside and followed the signs through the vacant hallways to a cluster of doors and plastic chairs. We sat around a corner, hidden from everyone else who wasn't there. There were little name plates next to the doors so you knew which office contained your doctor. It was so quiet I almost felt bad breaking the peacefulness of it all.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" I wasn't.

"Tak." Yes.

She just stared at the floor as if she was waiting for someone to punish her.

A young guy came and opened the office we were sat next to, switched on a light, located the desk, plonked down the files he was carrying and left.

"He was pretty." I said nudging her. "You wouldn't mind him having a look down there would you?"

"I didn't notice."

"Bullshit." I replied even though it could have been true.

"Shut up." She started tapping her feet impatiently.

"Maybe he likes pregnant chicks. Swollen ankles and..."

"Ch-e-ho." She interrupted me by telling me to shut up in Polish.

I would hear that word a lot and probably rightly so. Somebody once accused me of having verbal diarrhoea so I stopped talking to smell my breath, minty fresh, and continued with what I was saying.

We were still alone and I was so nervous that I couldn't stay quiet for long.

"Are you nervous? I am nervous. I hope it isn't twins." I couldn't shut up.

"Don't say stupid things."

"You want twins?" Was it stupid not to want twins? Did they bring good luck in Poland? In Catholic families? I'd never heard such a thing. "It's possible. There is no history in my family so it's unlikely. Is there in yours? It could be twins."

Yep verbal fucking diarrhoea. I couldn't shut my mouth. I didn't have a mute button either so Elly decided to engage me in futile debate and speculation.

"He could be blue."

"She could be green." I replied. I wanted to say more but I caught myself. I stood up and looked around, still nothing. "Do you want a drink?"

"Lemon tea." She replied.

She probably didn't but fancied some peace and quiet. I went off all hunter gatherer, stalking my prey, quietly tracking it down then waiting for the right moment to pounce and punch in the letter and two digits on the vending machine.

Today we shall feast. Father did good on the hunt today.

I got myself a water and then on the way back spotted a free water cooler with cups, shit! When I finally made my way back around the maze of corridors and found our hideaway there were two other pregnant women waiting. Elly was still sat right next to the office door then there was an empty seat and finally another pregnant woman. A third pregnant woman was standing and as I gave Elly her lemon tea she looked up at me and patted the seat next to her.

"I saved it for you." She said proudly.

While you were out hunting I protected the homestead.

"Tell her she can sit down, she is pregnant after all."

So she did and then the ladies talked among themselves. There was another older lady, am guessing the mother of one of the other two but that did leave one woman here alone. I was glad I could come with Elly and we could share all this stuff together. Waiting in hospitals is never going to be fun but I knew I had to get used to them because I'd be back there or in hospitals in general a lot more now I was a father.

The young man who brought the files returned and unlocked his office door, this time he had on his doctor white lab coat. I looked at Elly and laughed as he invited her in. The little office was dark, really dark and it had a bed at the far end, a desk, some medical equipment that I guessed was the sonogram machine and a little swivel stool that would have put the doctor at the right head height when his patients were lying down, legs akimbo.

"Ch-e-ho." She repeated as I giggled.

I didn't know where to stand and as they jabbered over dates of birth, names and blah blah medical stuff I rested against the wall. I tried to position myself so I could see Elly and the screen where our child would first materialize.

As Elly laid down and took off her pants but not her top I realised there wouldn't be any jelly on her belly. Instead the doctor produced a massive phallic looking instrument and started lube-ing it up.

"Don't enjoy it too much." I said to Elly.

She was busy in conversation with the doctor who pulled a screen around her bottom half and he got to work. I ignored them and focused on the white that started to emerge on the

black screen. The doctor checked on the screen then starts to move his device around. All of a sudden he found the zoom button and the clarity was amazing.

It wasn't a little blob or a peanut, it was a fucking astronaut. It was moving about but I could see arms, legs, two of each, the correct amount and a big bulbous head.

"Can he print us off some photos?" I asked her knowing that he could. I really should have asked how much he wanted.

She asked him and there seemed to be a problem with it so I start to pull out the large notes from my wallet. I had come prepared for any bribe that I needed to make. Elly returned to the vertical position while continuing a quiet debate with our doctor. As I produced a few hundreds she said that he wanted three, expensive but it's my first child so I gave him them.

"No. Three, not three hundred." She said after he had objected.

"Erm, I don't have any change."

"In my bag."

So I got her bag, found the small change and gave him it. He traded it for a beautiful little picture. At the top of a white square was a black kidney bean and relaxing in the kidney bean was my little astronaut. I could see its arms and legs, its little belly and am sure it wasn't but it looked like it was winking at me. It was so relaxed, so peaceful with its massive head that any fears I had subsided for that moment.

Elly ushered me out into the corridor and as we ghosted past the waiting mothers they cooed at us huddled over our little photo. They would be next and it was a precious thing.

"Look at him. He is beautiful." Elly said.

It took me a moment to hear it and process what she was saying.

"Him?"

"Yes. It's a boy." She announced.

I picked her up and spun her around just outside the hospital doors. An old man walking his dog looked at us like we were crazy and took another drag on his cigarette. We were crazy. We were in love. I believed we were in love. In that moment I was sure of it. All was right with the World. I was going to be a Dad.

We sat on a park bench and just stared at him, the little spaceman. I didn't want it to end. I could have stayed in that moment forever. We were on the edge of potential.

"To work?" She asked.

"Unfortunately yes." I answered. "I hope they haven't burnt the place down."

"We are real now." She said.



I wasn't sure if it was a statement or a question. She kept her eyes on the road but I could see the tears welling in them.

"We always were for me." I said.

"You know Poland is a very Catholic country and my family is very Catholic."

"That's nice." I replied.

I wasn't really listening though. I was debating if he would play football for England or Poland then I realised that he had such a great chance, instead of one he had two chances at everything.

"Children should be with married parents." She added.

"The most important thing is that children grow up in a loving environment." I said seeing where she was going. "What do you think about the name Andrew?" Now it's a boy he should have a name, I thought.

"Would be good. Could be Andrzej in Polish." She said.

"Or he could just be called Andrew." I said. "We are Team Andrew then. No more Elly and James, we are Team Andrew. He comes first always and we work together to make him happy."

"I like that." She said smiling.

"Me too."

## Chapter 16

I'd asked Elly if she wanted to visit her Mum and show Andrew off but she declined. We had booked some flights back to the UK to tell people but when I spoke to my family on Skype that week I didn't give any hint of Andrew or coming back. They had gotten used to Elly being at my place but never asked about her.

Elly instead wanted to visit her friend who lived in Krakow. I was very interested in going somewhere new so we bought some train tickets and set off on Saturday morning. I hadn't been on a train in Poland up to that point and I never really imagined what they would be like. The trams were comparable to the modern trains in England so I was surprised when it was more Thomas the Tank Engine than the trams were.

There were no signs or announcements in English and Elly didn't seem too sure about much but we did the best we could and when the train I thought was ours pulled up we

showed the inspector our tickets and he pointed us to a different carriage. I looked at our ticket and it said carriage 4. I passed carriage 3, then 17, then 9, WTF dumbasses?

Finally we just got on and sat down in a rather luxurious cabin. There were six plush chairs to each cabin with ample leg room and overhead storage. I was pleasantly surprised and I watched out of the window as we chugged away.

“I wish I had my camera.” Elly mused.

“Did you forget it?” I asked not having ever remembered seeing her with one.

“No I don’t have it yet. Maybe when I will be a photographer.” She said wistfully.

“You want to be a photographer?” I asked.

I was surprised.

“Yes. Don’t you?” she asked.

“Not really.” I said.

I liked photos but I thought that with today’s cameras and software it didn’t take an artist to take a good photo. I also thought that the subject was the interesting thing and while a photographer might catch a subject at the right time, don’t they need the subject to comply. An artist can create something from nothing, by themselves. An artist can shape things to their vision, a photographer just captures what is there.

“I would like to write though.” I said opening up.

“A writer. Like the poem you wrote for me?” She said remembering my terrible attempt at a romantic gesture.

Well the gesture was solid, the poem was terrible.

“I have been working on a book called Dojo Football. It’s about a billionaire who takes children from orphanages and raises them in an elite academy in Scotland. He teaches them various sports and then when they are old enough they become champions, Olympians and revolt against the billionaire.”

“Oh.” She replied and returned to looking through her baby magazine.

“It’s about nature verses nurture.” I said trying to capture her interest. “Whether natural ability can be overtaken by technique and training.”

“Well can it?” She asked.

As if such a complex question could be adequately solved by me and my book.

“Gifted people have an easier route to the top but you can train people to a very high level. If you have someone who is gifted and trained well then they can become the best.”

“That’s interesting I suppose but do people still read books. You should make a movie.” She said reading her magazine.

“A movie? Writers never get any credit. Stars and directors get famous and producers get rich. Writers, they only get forgotten and blamed if the movie sucked.”

My impassioned rant ended when the ticket inspector popped in to punch our tickets. He had a conversation with a girl who'd been sitting opposite us and she must have been in the wrong place as she got her stuff and left.

“You want to be famous?” Elly seemed interested in this idea.

“Not really. It would be nice to be remembered after am dead. The thought that I could touch someone's life after am gone, if only to humour them appeals to me.” I said honestly.

“You will touch a life.” She said rubbing her belly.

“It would be nice for Andrew as well, he could read my book when he is old enough.” I said smiling to myself.

“It might be scary.”

“Scary? Why?” I was confounded.

Why would Andrew be scared by my book?

Why would anyone for that matter?

“I don't know.” She said and returned to her magazine.

I looked out of the window angry and by the time I'd calmed down and turned back Elly was asleep. I decided I'd get up and have a wonder around the train. I walked passed a few rowdy guys flagrantly drinking and stepped over a sleeping youth who looked like a stowaway. I found the toilet and was pleased with how large it was. I had a walk down a few more carriages looking for some form of food but couldn't see anything so I turned back. I passed the ticket inspector who wished to check my ticket and we had a mangled discussion about me going back to my seat and whether it was possible to buy food on the train. I ended up back in my cabin foodless and bored.

Elly woke up just as we were approaching Krakow and smiled at me.

“Juz?” She asked and this was a kind of now/already word that seemed to be employed as often as moze and ch-e-ho.

“Yes my dear. It went by in the blink of an eye didn't it?” A very sleepy blink.

We disembarked and a woman clad in bright red pants, stilettos and the same red overcoat came bounding over towards us. Well towards Elly. They embraced and jabbered away in Polish as I politely waited to be introduced. I couldn't help but notice the jealousy her 'friend' was oozing. Sure she was smiling like a dolly bird, looking at the stomach as if it was a crystal ball and honestly I think Elly felt the same when she observed her friends clothes. She was obviously doing well for herself and was dressed to impress.

Could I muster a fake smile? I tried but I have no idea if I mastered it.

We dragged our bags off towards Klaudynia's car. She insisted that I called her Klau but pronounced like clou in cloud but obviously without the 'd', obviously. She drove us around the city pointing various things out and we stopped for a coffee and finally we ended back up near the train station, I could see it. Our hotel or guest room was very close to it.

We went inside had a shower each then got ready for an evening with Klau. It would be dinner then the theatre.

How exciting!

I was bored by the end of the meal and excused myself for a ciggy while they got desert. Elly screwed her face up at me but if she was going to yak it up in Polish I could smoke.

It wasn't illegal then to smoke in restaurants but I went and stood away from the diners just to be polite. I overheard a group speaking English so I pretended to do something with my phone while I edged closer.

"What do you call a women in the board room?" One asked in a non-descript accent.

"Dunno. What do you call your mum in the boardroom?" Another replied.

Your mum, nice.

"The cleaner."

They all laughed and braced themselves for a shot of vodkas. I was still struggling to make out their accents but I suppose after a while abroad you lose that regional twang, as you struggle to make yourself understood by the masses. I wondered if I was losing my Yorkshire twang.

I remembered that people at university said they couldn't understand me and then when I went back to Bradford I got told that I was speaking like a toff. That could mean anything and nothing in Bradford though. I think I learnt to balance my speech and actually tailor it to the individual or group I was speaking to.

They went through another round of jokes and vodkas and when someone would tell a stinker he had to drink. Clever game. I had run out of my Camels and threw a joke out at them as I walked passed.

"What's the worst thing about being a clown?" I said then answered without missing a beat. "Getting the cum stains out ya costume the next day."

It was a pretty risky joke but I believe that outrageous can be funny, ridiculous can be funny, actually everything can be funny with the right build and circumstances. They must have agreed because they roared with laughter and invited me to sit down.

We exchanged pleasantries between jokes and it turned out that the four lads all actually came from Liverpool and had been doing management consulting and IT assistance in the 'region' for about five years. When they asked what I did I played down the customer service gig but they were quite polite about it and I thought maybe it wasn't actually that bad.

Through the course of the night they taught me that I was wrong about people from Liverpool, they weren't all cunts. I thought about it really hard and decided that you probably got all sorts in every type of group and while I still believe that stereotypes exist for a reason, individuals can buck the trend and be different. Maybe I was the knob for being so judgemental about such a large group of people. Me starting off on the wrong foot maybe pushed the Scousers I'd met before into acting in a negative way.

What wasn't up for discussion was the shit I stepped into upon my return to the digs me and Elly were staying at. It was about 7 am by the time we'd finished drinking and I'd paid a taxi driver and shown him the address I'd earlier programmed into my phone. I got back not longer after expecting Elly to be sleeping.

I'd told her that I was going to have a few with the lads and then head back, which turned out to be what happened. When she got back from her fun filled evening she had sent a message saying she was tired and wouldn't wait up for me but the door was unlocked. I had a second key so I called her back, told her to lock up and I'd see her in the morning. I didn't imagine that the drinking would keep going and am sure at some stage of the night we had all been asleep.

"What's the bitch's name!" Elly screamed at me when I got in.

"Who?" I asked.

She looked furious but I went towards her with my hands held up and my head ringing.

"Where have you been?" Her interrogation continued.

"Drinking." I belched.

"All night?" She looked like she was going to hit me.

"Yes." I stumbled towards her.

It took a while but she stopped screaming and I jumped in the shower. I went to bed and said she could meet Klau alone and I'd meet her before the train would set off. It wasn't popular and neither was I on the train journey home but I needed to sleep.

"It's not normal." She sulked when we got back to Warsaw.

I didn't need another argument.

"No, it's not normal is it? It doesn't happen all the time does it?" It was a fair defence for an indefensible crime.

That seemed to be the end of it.

“Don’t do it next weekend. We will visit Mama.” She said walking off into the bedroom.

I was going to meet her mum. A week full of nerves and worry, I was still hung over the following Wednesday and only on the Friday did I begin to feel happy about us taking that awkward step of meeting the parents.

## Chapter 17

“Fist-say-go n-eye-lep-sh-ish-a-go.”

I was trying to learn how to say happy birthday in Polish. It was for Elly’s mum, even though it wasn’t her birthday. It was her name day. The communist’s may have been defeated but the communal celebrations continued. Name days perplex me because sometimes the day of celebration is months away from your actual birthday and sometimes there are different days on which you can have a party for your name.

Two birthdays or more a year, every ageing woman’s worst nightmare.

I also later learnt that the phrase I was learning translated more into ‘best wishes’ or ‘all the best’ than happy birthday.

I spent all the Friday and the car ride over on the Saturday getting Elly to coach me on that one phrase. I thought it’d be easier to learn the language and now I was going to be eternally connected with the place I had started to pay more attention to it. I wasn’t having a good time but I wasn’t the worst foreigner and at least now I was trying.

We had rented a small green Fiat to go over to her Mum’s. It felt like a shed on wheels and shook when you got any kind of speed up on it. Elly was driving though and this was the car she chose. I had seen the Seat sedan and thought that it looked more comfortable and respectable. Elly didn’t want to show off. She dressed down for the occasion and made me wear a simple polo shirt and jeans. I kept telling her to calm down, I was fully confident that her family would love me. After all she was some village girl done good.

She wasn’t sure.

I wasn’t catholic.

I was excited about going back to the UK and had arranged some flights for a few weeks later. I had even called up my old football club and booked their social room for the Friday night. I had sent a facebook request to my people in England and told my Mum that there would be a party and an announcement.

She got very tetchy when I told her she'd have to wait to hear what it was like everyone else. I think most other people would have guessed that it wasn't a welcome home party or I've got a promotion party, which only left wedding or pregnant. My friends and family didn't need a named excuse to have a drink though, as long as it ended in day, there was a reason to drink.

As we left the offices and tower blocks behind and passed through the outlying area which was mainly warehouses and cheap motels Elly said nothing and remained focused. I kept pestering her about Polish and had bought a small book but the hardest thing was the pronunciation. Just like with many languages the key is training your eyes to see familiar letters then letting your brain spit them out in an unfamiliar sounding way. I was also hugely confused by how the endings of the words changed. I read about all the rules but none of that would stick and it all seemed very random. I stuck to learning simple phrases and trying my best with the harsh pronunciations.

We got to a railway crossing where even when no trains were approaching everything was forced to slow down to a trickle as the quality of the road was so poor. A lot of people had commented about the roads but having been in Warsaw and Krakow they didn't seem bad but as we ventured towards the wilderness I could see why people complained. The three lane super roads that were omnipresent in the capitol had given way to thin strips of concrete. If two cars approached each other, one or both of them had to eat a little dirt or there would be a crash. When we got stuck behind one of the innumerable delivery trucks we had to play Russian roulette or sit patiently. There was no stereo in the car so I decided I should sing for Elly and not being very good I made up a few stupid songs. My favourite tune to make up songs to was Jarabe Tapatío, the Mexican hat dance.

The traffic started to thin out and the fields grew larger. Elly was still nervous and I was still learning how to give my birthday wishes. I didn't feel nervous at all. I saw this as a challenge to be overcome. If anything the most uncomfortable part of this was going to be sitting down with that oaf Marvin. Elly didn't mention him to me and I wasn't about to say anything to her.

"Who will be there then?" I asked.

"You, me, Mama, Marvin, Baba e J-ad-eck." She replied.

I had learnt the 'e' meant 'and' and even though it sounded like 'e' it was written as 'i'.

Every time I heard it in Polish it confused me. Their 'i' sounded like English 'e' and vice versa. When I was on holiday in Greece I learnt that 'oui' was 'no' and 'non' was 'yes', very strange and when drunk it messed with my high school French. I had never seen the point of

learning a second language when I lived in England but now I realised that communication, not just pointing at things to get what you wanted in a shop, was essential to understanding. I knew that if I was in England I could use my words to sell myself to her family, here I could only use my actions.

I was about to be become a mime, how the hell do you mime ‘am going to be a good father and look after your daughter’?

I didn’t know either.

We passed a sprawling hotel and a Pepsi and Mintos factory then turned into a field that had porter cabins plonked down in the centre of it. On closer inspection they were closer to chalets but this was home to Elly, her Mum and Marvin. I tried to find something nice to say while I surveyed the surroundings but Elly made her way past some kittens who were playing and up the stairs to a door.

“Don’t touch them.” She warned as I bent down to stroke them.

I didn’t ask why and just skipped up the steps. She took off her shoes outside and I did the same and then we entered without knocking. You never knock at your parent’s house but it felt strange just drifting in. It was a small and dated abode and as you entered there was a kitchen off to the right, a room to the left and then four rooms at the back.

Her Mum was busying herself in the kitchen and when she came out it wasn’t a long lost embrace it was a quick hello, she looked me over, a smile and then back to her cooking. Elly led me off into her bedroom. There was no bed, only a fold down couch which was the style in Poland. Functional and efficient, the businessman in me liked it.

There were lots of wardrobes in her room and most were filled with clothes that didn’t fit her anymore and stacks of books. There was an armchair which I slumped into as she put her things down and lay on the bed. She seemed relieved.

Was that it?

Was that what all the stress was about?

“Come on. We go for walk.” Elly said seeming to desire an escape.

“Maybe we could offer to help her.” I suggested wanting to seem useful.

“No. Come on.”

So we left.

We walked along a thin strip of worn out grass and she showed me the corner shop, it wasn’t on a corner, just another vacant lot. We passed the government building with peeling paintwork and made our way onto a country lane. I could still hear the occasional delivery



truck whizzing by but the sound faded as we continued down the winding path, engulfed on one side by apple trees and the other with cherry trees.

I had always liked glacier cherries as a kid and got a rude shock when I bit into a bitter one as an adult but I had grown to like the taste now and when Elly reached through some barbed wire and offered me some I didn't think about pesticides or washing them, I just wolfed them down.

Elly started to get tired so we began our slow return, not really saying anything. In different circumstances I would have assumed that she was angry at me but I think she was just remembering and taking it all in on her return. When you are away you either romanticize things or vilify them, neither really holding true on your return.

When we got back I could smell the food, I wasn't sure what it was and I won't say it smelled delicious. I could hear voices in the room to the left and guessed that we had been joined by some other family members. We popped our heads in, Elly first then me. It was her Grandparents. They gave her a kiss on each cheek and a cuddle then shook my hand. The old man had workers hands but seemed frail now. There were six places around a small table and it was a squeeze settling down. I inadvertently knocked the table and spilt Granddad's soup, way to make a splash.

All through the meal nobody said much. A comment here, a pass the potatoes there but while we all ate in silence Marvin sulked in his room and when we were nearly finished he stomped in and crumpled into the empty chair. I had brought him a car collectors glossy magazine full of photos of old cars, super cars and crap like that. I thought I'd try to give it another go since me and Elly were linked together forever, me and Marvin would be too.

I waited 'til after we had finished eating and went to Elly's room and returned with it. Everyone except Marvin seemed impressed. He threw it down shouted something and stormed out. His Mother followed him out and as he slammed his bedroom door like a drama queen she cackled at him.

"What was all that about?" I asked Elly as her Grandparents watched on.

"He said that you come here and steal his job and take the women, you are an invader like all evil foreigners."

"Why did your Mum laugh at him like that?"

"She knows how lazy he is and told him that she has organized a job for him next week with an uncle. It will be hard work and then he will be sorry."

Elly didn't seem to care and her grandparents really didn't seem shocked by such childish behaviour from an adult. Elly's Granny just kept looking at me and half smiling. In a bar I'd have sworn she was coming on to me.

"What do they think about the baby?" I asked.

"I haven't told them yet." She said.

I pulled out our little astronaut's mug-shot and waved it at Elly. She instantly called her Mum back into the room took the snap and showed it around. Her Mum and Gran burst into tears and her Granddad who had been giving me the stink eye pulled me in for a rib busting hug.

"That went well. I told you they'd love me." I said smugly when we were alone in her bedroom.

"You still have to stay in the other room tonight."

I laughed it off and cuddled up to her until she fell asleep.

The next day she took me to a local lake which I imagined was where the local kids got all Dawson's Creek. It was nice and even though every place you'll ever visit has a special little spot, they all have their own charm. I could also equate the dangers of this place to the quarry lagoon back in Bradford from my childhood.

It is almost a certainty that once the local youths started to experiment with each other's bodies, they would find a way to drink alcohol. Young sex, drunken antics and a large body of water don't mix that well after dark. There would have been tragic stories, in the UK that would have meant reefs of flowers for those lost too soon, too tragically. Too stupidly if we are honest but that's what being young is, once you survive the stupidity we call it maturity or wisdom.

Surviving being stupid, that is the challenge of youth.

What is the challenge of adulthood? Am still figuring all that out.

Marvin jumped into the same lake later that day breaking his ankle and thus preventing him from having to go to work. Maybe he was older than me but he sure as fuck was dumb. He might of meant to do it or not but the result doesn't consider the intention.

I wasn't a doctor though and I doubted that he really had broken his ankle, it was more than likely a work shy excuse. He probably sat around with his underage girlfriend, plying her with drink and concocting his story while biding his time until he copped a cheap feel in the 'romantic' moonlit setting.

Young love, another idiotic thing we must all survive.

## Chapter 18

The next two weeks passed by with unusual normality. I was getting used to Polish culture and behaviour, work was functioning seamlessly and me and Elly were like an old married couple. I had a plan in mind, I wouldn't broach the subject of moving back to England full time until Elly had gotten comfortable with my family.

I knew she was scared about going back and she told me that Polish women in England were either baby sitters or waitresses. She missed out the third category and that is what probably scared her the most. I wasn't even sure that I had a job there anymore and while the Polish office was running smoother it wasn't a World beater.

I had a little fun with the people at the office and as I was leaving on the Wednesday to return the following Tuesday I told them that I had a critical meeting regarding the Polish office on the Monday. It wasn't true. I was going to pop in on the Friday morning just to make sure people hadn't forgotten me but I thought it was a smart move.

When I got back to Poland Monika told me that the staff had been so nervous that many had gotten sick with worry over the weekend and on the Monday they couldn't function. What a bunch of pussies. I was glad that I hadn't told them that they were constantly missing targets and would likely be shit-canned soon. Sorry not shit-canned, right sized, steered leaving or given an opportunity at external growth. I don't think many people work well with their back to the wall, just the best do but I couldn't believe a little stress made them so sick, so quick. I didn't care though, well not until I got back and had no staff to work.

Elly was a little more comfortable with our second flight and things certainly went a lot smoother both at check-in and on the plane. We flew into Doncaster-Sheffield airport which was called Robin Hood and I had always thought that he lived in a forest near Nottingham, or maybe just the villain was called Nottingham. It was a nice little airport though, clean, spacious and efficient. We breezed through passport control and baggage collection into the expectant outstretched arms of my Mother.

She took one look at Elly and hugged us both. Like always she was prepared and had drinks and snacks for us. We chatted about the flight, the weather in Warsaw and in England as we made our way through the car park. I had the urge building up inside me, am sure my Mother was bursting at the seams wanting to ask but neither of us mentioned a baby, mine and Elly's baby.

The drive back took us past a Tesco superstore and when we got inside I remembered so many things that I wanted to eat and stocked up on so many treats that Poland didn't have,

custard being my favourite but simpler things like vinegar, treacle, Kellogg's cereal. All the small things that you take for granted but love even more when you are denied them.

"What do you want for tea?" My Mum asked.

"Fish and chips." I said.

"Not lasagne?" She sounded disappointed.

"I always want lasagne." Which was true.

"Good. I made you a chicken lasagne, you can have fish and chips tomorrow night. The boys will like that, they are coming tomorrow." By the boys, she meant my older brother Keith and his two sons Ross and Peter.

"Are you trying to scare Elly?" I said jokingly.

"No." She snapped defensively. "They are so excited to see you again and meet Elly. Everyone is excited for Saturday, to meet Elly."

She smiled at Elly in the rear view mirror. Elly had been inspecting the rolling hills of Yorkshire that were filled with sheep. You didn't see as many sheep in Poland as you did in Yorkshire. We got back into Bradford and it was more exhilarating than I had imagined seeing the streets where I'd grown up. I never felt so joyful on a visit back from Leeds but this time I had Elly, maybe she was the difference.

We pulled into my parent's driveway and an old neighbour came over to say hello. It was different now. I remembered pestering her about getting my ball back when me and my brothers would play football in the street. I bet it was horrible for the elderly people having obnoxious kids yelling and playing in the street all the time, for us it was just fun. I wondered if when I got a house I'd shout at the kids for making a racket and tell them to go and play on their own streets. I even thought about what people would yell at Andrew, not that many kids played out that much anymore because of the increased fear about pedos. Anyone who reads knows that it wasn't a phenomenon of the 1990's and that even if you let your kids play out it's more likely to be your weird cousin or uncle than a stranger who'd abuse your kids. Still they call it irrational fear precisely because it's irrational.

We went in the side door, through the kitchen into the dining room then down the hall and past three of the rooms which at one time or another had been mine and finally into Scott's room. It had a king sized bed and he was generously giving it up to me and Elly. In the other downstairs bedroom were bunk beds for my nephews. Scott's room had some history for me though, first it was my parent's bedroom when they had moved there about fifteen years ago or however long it had been. Then Keith claimed it as his when they moved

into the loft, I had it for a short while and finally Scott inherited it and I was pretty sure Ross and Peter would be fighting over who got it once he finally left the home nest.

I walked around and inspected the new wallpaper in the front room, I guess other people would call it the living room or the TV room would be more accurate. I checked out the bunk beds with their Ben 10 covers and inquired to who Ben 10 was. It made me nostalgic for my old Garfield duvet which proclaimed that he didn't like Mondays. I was never a massive Garfield fan but I did like the idea of a cat who ate lasagne. The only cat based cartoon for me was Thundercats.

Since no one else was home I took Elly out for a tour of the neighbourhood. We stopped at Bolton Road, a long steep road which led down into the city centre and I pointed out my old high school in the distance. It had grown since I had left adding numerous more buildings and losing a playing field. It looked like an industrial complex more than a school but what did schools look like these days anyway?

Next we walked up to a small row of shops. On one side was a pizza place, a mini-market and then where there used to be a video shop was now a tanning salon. The other side of the road had a church, a baby shop and a pub. It was actually the first local pub that I worked at. It had a small and loyal crowd but was all boarded up now. I thought about looking in at the baby stuff with Elly but we wouldn't be buying anything so I didn't see the point. We walked up and past the old newsagents where I had my first paper round and where I used to steal porn mags and sell them at school. Well actually me and a friend used to take them apart and sell each page separately.

We continued walking, passing more and more pubs which amused Elly. It was like churches in Poland though, every few steps and you happened upon another one. I took her past my dentist, which reminded me that I should try to make an appointment so I didn't lose my place there. Then I took her towards the pub where I really learnt a lot, not from bartending but from the regulars. I learnt a lot about life, about relationships and how not to do things.

There were some families where the brother had married the cousins ex-wife then the kids were hooking up and from their council estate they were living out a modern Greek tragedy. Other families had the comedy of wives chasing alcoholic husbands and all his friends covering for him. They were characters, they were living highs and lows, most of all they were trying to survive.

I hoped me and Elly would have something more solid. A relationship that didn't require a comedy escape routine every weekend. I knew that a couple shouldn't be together all the

time and even the strongest need a little time alone with friends but I hoped that we would never reach a stage where one of us was looking for answers in a seedy bar at the bottom of a glass.

I had wanted to take her in and show her off but as we got closer I just pointed it out to her and we walked past. She was feeling tired by now so we caught a bus back. The price seemed to go up every time I caught a bus and it was over a quid each. I thought to myself that the taxi business must be booming in England. I had caught taxis in Poland after nights out, but I could imagine in England that it was a smarter move if there were a few of you to pay for the taxi anytime.

We got home to find my Dad's work van in the driveway and Scott's new MG was parked up as well. He had bought it while I'd been away but he had put the snaps up on facebook. It was his first car and beat the shit out of my first car, a banged up VW Polo. I loved that Polo though, even if I did nearly wreck it learning to drive. I couldn't work the clutch and stunk the thing up terribly one Sunday morning with my Dad mastering the art and then the following Sunday he took me out to get some milk, in York! It was a good experience though and I was a relaxed, comfortable driver in England but I wasn't looking forward to getting behind the wheel in the madhouse that was Poland.

When we entered the kitchen Scott was perched against the window running through his day as my Mum cooked and my Dad sat in the next room reading his copy of The Sun. He always bought me a copy of the Times when I was at home but he never read it, not even the sports pages. I had gotten used to reading my news online by now but I liked the feel of reading an actual paper again. I remembered hearing a statistic about the Times, that if you read one edition cover to cover you would have read more news than an individual 200 years ago would have heard their entire life. I don't know if that was true but it was interesting to think about.

I formally introduced Elly but she excused herself and went to lie down. After checking if she wanted anything to drink and if she was alright in general I return to talk football with my Dad and Scott. That was our fall back. We discussed football or UFC and nothing had changed. We were family and we didn't need to say I missed you, I love you, just what a goal? Did you see that fight? Keith got a lot more animated about football and could argue with you passionately about the minutest detail of any game but mainly we regurgitated the same things that we read or saw discussed on the TV.

After a while my Mum announced that the food was ready, that meant that you had about fifteen minutes. It was a long standing joke and one tradition that made me smile. I woke Elly

up and she joined us for my childhood favourite. Chicken and lasagne, you couldn't go wrong. I threw Elly a look to ask if I could reveal our big news and she just looked dazed but I pressed ahead anyway. I pulled out the spaceman picture of Andrew, well actually a photocopy. I had scanned the original as soon as I'd got home and put it away for safe keeping. I had a ton of copies in my bag, I knew my Mum would want one and my Nan too but I brought more just in case I wore my copy out.

"Can you pass the salad?" I asked.

As my Mum passed it across to me I exchanged the copy into her outstretched hand.

"What's this?" She said part indignantly and part confused.

It didn't last long though and a big beam spread across her face and she turned it to my Father.

"What's that then?" Scott asked. "Have you got her pregnant?" I think he was joking.

I just kind of nodded and he shook his head at me and with a mouth full of food told me, "Haven't you learnt anything from Keith? Kids and weddings are no good."

Thanks douche bag.

You can think it and hell you might be right, but not in front of Elly.

I did know of his legendary subtlety though, as on several nights out I had witnessed his pulling technique. My favourite of his was approaching a rather hefty girl, "Hey sweet cheeks, you are very lucky that tonight I had a bet with my mate about who could pull that fattest bird. Saddle up and enjoy the ride."

It actually worked as well though. He was charming and good looking, he was even developing a work ethic but he was still the baby of the family and I think he would need a woman who would mother him if he was ever to be enticed out of his actual Mothers house.

My Dad had a tear in his eye. He had stopped eating and was just looking at Andrew. He put his fork down and squeezed my Mothers hand. I knew he had been mellowed by becoming a Grandfather but this was a different side to him than I was used to.

The New World Order had arrived.

## Chapter 19

Having all the people you love in one room sometimes feels overwhelming. There aren't many circumstances which allow it to happen and it never occurs naturally. One of the occasions will be without you and that is the most natural of all but for this, probably the second most natural occurrence I had everybody under one roof.

I was stood next to the DJ in the social room of the football club I played for as a teenager. All those eyes fixed on me and I felt the love, the love of the room. The expectation of the announcement was weighing on people and I think most of them guessed it was a wedding announcement. Elly wasn't showing yet and had been so busy that no one had been able to pin her down and buy her a drink. Actually no one knew that she drunk beer except me.

It felt great though. Looking out to my audience. It felt better than the ecstasy highs of university. It was another powerful drug that had me dancing that day. Love was pumping through my veins, taking me higher than I ever thought I could float.

"As most of you guessed." I paused and winked at Elly. "Or were informed, much like myself," A few polite chuckles. "Me and Elly are getting married."

This was greeted with applause and whooping. I had never been whooped in my life and it felt good. I held out my hand and Elly joined me, we kissed and there was another round of thunderous applause.

"Wait." I said holding up my hands. "We will be welcoming two new members into the Williamson Clan."

It took a moment to sink in and then people began to realise. My Mum produced the scan of Andrew looking like a spaceman and girls began to cry.

I have never been so happy to see my Nan crying but am not sure I had ever done anything that made her so proud and happy before.

Then the party got started, appropriately the DJ chose the Black Eyed Peas, and I went to collect my free beers, hugs and handshakes.

Luke and David sandwiched me between them and bear hugged me.

"That isn't the one we met before is it?" David asked.

"Nah." I replied.

"So what, you ordered her off a bride website?" Luke joked.

How close was that to the truth?

What did it matter if we were in love?

"It's a weird story. I'll tell you later." I said plonking myself on the bar.

"You're full of weird stories." David said and got the drinks in.

Elly made her way through the throng smiling and then when she got to me finally let go of her smile, she looked like she had bitten into a toffee and tasted lemon. I hoped it wasn't too much for her. I had a big family and they weren't quite.

"JD is a pervert."



I laughed.

“Yes he is but he is also one of the smartest and coolest guys I know.” I replied.

“He doesn’t look cool.” She said sullenly.

“He might not look it but he is reliable, if I needed help I know I could rely on him.” My words seemed to bring her round.

“What kind of *fuck*-in name is JD?” I loved how she swore.

“It’s James Dean.” She didn’t recognize the name and continued to look at me blankly.  
“Like the movie star.”

“I don’t like movie.”

We got back to the guests, the rest of whom she seemed to like as much as they adored her. I introduced her to David and Luke, my best friends from school, Pedro who was trying to be a rock star and doing a reasonable job of it. She said his name was Polish when we told her that his real name was Hugh-Bert, hyphenated like a trailer park beauty queen. He said his mother was from Poland but when Elly spat a few words out in her native tongue Pedro looked as confused as anyone.

We made our way over to my Nan who was still puffy eyed and her second husband sat at her side. I’d never called him Granddad out of respect for my Mother’s father but he was the only Granddad figure I’d ever had. He had been a good influence and had earned my affection through the way he supported my Nan.

Next to them were my aunt and uncle whose motorbikes I used to pose on with my brothers when we were kids. They didn’t look like Hell’s Angels back then and now they had their own teenage hell raiser. I felt instantly older, looking back on all the life that I had led up to that point and then thinking about the future with Elly and Andrew. It made my head spin more than the shots I was doing.

Two of my cousins pulled me aside.

“Fucking ROCK star.” They said in unison.

“Thanks.” I said shaking their hands.

I remembered babysitting them.

“How did you pull a porn star?” The youngest one asked and his older brother elbowed him in the ribs.

“Magic and charm, you should practice your magic and charm.” I said smugly, not knowing what I was babbling on about.

Elly came and cuddled my side. “Who are these handsome guys?” She said playfully.

I think they filled their pants and we moved over to my Dad's side of the family. There were a lot of grandkids already because I had three female cousins who between them had eight kids. One who was the same age as me had already popped out four. Her and her husband looked shattered. Her mum and dad, the grandparents, by contrast had never looked better. They were joking around and so full of life I guessed then that the fun of kids is that they'll grow up, stop being your responsibility and produce another little thing that is fun for you.

I had a long time to wait and too many dirty nappies to think about so I downed another shot and moved on to the next round of hugs and congratulations.

I finally wound down and relaxed at the table of my high school friends. A kid whose step dad coached the team had come along and brought several of the old crew. My Dad had helped out as well and in truth that was probably how I was part of such a successful team. These guys were the stars and I was the weak link included because of who his father was.

Elly looked at Stanley's girlfriend.

"She's pretty." She said.

"I think she is called Louise. I have only met her a few times but she seems sweet."

I introduced them and then left her and Elly complementing each other's dress's, jewellery, hair and shoes. I sat down and remembered the glory days with the guys. Most of them that Stanley invited didn't even know I had been to Poland. We weren't close but in truth I hadn't made an effort to stay in touch with them either.

There was a small circle of people I really kept in touch with, Luke, David, Pedro, JD and Stanley. I knew some people who were in their circles and I didn't mind them but as I said early I am the most anti-social person I know. I like the quite. That is one of the things that made mine and David's relationship so strong, we were both quite. We could sit together and watch a game peacefully without feeling obliged to fill in the empty air with nonsense small talk.

Royce and Ranier made a late appearance and I was surprised at how warmly Elly embraced them. They were the only familiar faces I guess.

"Could you have found a more inconvenient location?" Royce asked.

"Google maps, fucker." I smiled back at him.

Ranier was scanning the room so I helped him out.

"Toilets are at the back on the right, there is only one bar and it's there, the food is right at the back opposite the toilets and if you fuck anyone you meet here tonight there is going to be trouble."

Ranieer smiled.

“I mean it.” I said sternly.

I wagged my finger at them for effect but they were already heading to the bar.

Just as they arrived, people started to leave. Me and Elly stood graciously at the door and watched the smokers outside. There were a group of Luke’s friends and by friends I mean people who stayed at his house played video games and got high. It was the kind of 24 hour party mansion that Reader’s Wives would have and Luke was their Hef.

There was a young couple from my younger brother’s year at school and he was reminiscing and smoking with them when I signalled to him that our Nan was leaving. He quickly passed it off and wafted away the smoke.

“Oh, it was good to see you love. When is the wedding going to be?” She said hugging me harder than a women of her stature might suggest.

“I don’t know.” I answered honestly.

“Is it going to be over there or over here?” She asked expectantly.

“I think we are going to do one in each country.” I lied.

I had no idea and I hadn’t thought about logistics. I had just been swept up in it all if I was honest with myself.

I walked them to their car and waved them off. I swung by the smokers and grabbed our kid in a headlock for a laugh. I stood there and talked to the young couple, Sandra and Sam. How American, finding a mate whose name started with the same letter as yours. I bet there was a specialist dating website for that shit.

They were nice though, a cute couple and seemed to have their shit together. They had a house and everything. I needed to think about getting my family a house.

Where would we live?

Would it be England or Poland?

There were more questions than answers and when I got back the room was still sparsely scattered with people. Elly sniffed me and pulled a face. My Dad’s friends must have thought I smelt. I did, just of smoke not sweat. I made my way over to them and asked about their son who was the same age as me and their daughter who was roughly the same age as my younger brother.

I sat down and for the first time in the evening I wasn’t enjoying myself. I was worrying about the millions of new questions swimming about in my head.

## Chapter 20

I returned to Poland to find my translator, Kins, AWOL.

Once me and Elly had settled back in I got to work and needed his help with a few things. I desperately needed to sort out my work life because my private life was beginning to give me a headache. Elly enjoyed England but made it clear on the plane that she was more than happy to be getting back to Poland. I must admit that after a few days of madness it was a pleasure to retreat to our flat and the quiet of work.

For the quiet of work to remain quiet I needed my translator to hold my hand through a few documents. There were so many different forms and things to sign but I wasn't going to be putting my autograph to anything I didn't understand. Too many historical figures had been sunk by blindly signing things handed to them.

I had tried to call his mobile but it was switched off, maybe it had been stolen or lost. I had sent him an e-mail and since he was usually working on his laptop that was as quick as a text message but nothing, again. I thought that the walk would do me good, a chance to burn off a little of the celebration weight I had put on in England. As I made the short journey to the translation office I felt the sweat build up on my back and chest, I was really getting out of shape and enjoying too much cake and sugary tea.

I bounded up the stairs ignoring the print shop workers, through the padded door and into the startled gaze of Slash. She seemed shocked to see me then forced out a smile.

"Is he in?" I asked.

Nothing.

A little nervous shuffling and then the girls all emerged at once. It wasn't a bad thing to be engulfed by these wonders but they weren't their perky selves and it started to make me uncomfortable. I asked again if Kins was in but he was absent and so was Monika. I pressed a third time and Slash told me that he didn't work there anymore.

I was fucked.

They didn't know where he was but they were sure he wasn't with Monika, who also no longer worked there. That was about as much as I got out of them and being stonewalled in your own language is bad enough but they soon forgot English and only answered me in Polish. I decided to leave and headed to the Metro station. I knew where he lived, roughly. I had been there a couple of times but usually after drinking a bit. While I was sure I could locate the building I didn't know if I'd remember the flat number.

I pushed on regardless and powered through the host of leaflet-ers which seemed to be growing exponentially on the streets of Warsaw. They mainly huddled at the entrance/exits of

Metro stations but you could find the odd ones scattered about the streets. They were a depressed and persistent bunch, thrusting their advertisements into your chest then muttering when you didn't take them. Most were advertising English schools, if it happened in England they'd have been hocking credit cards or more probably debit advice services.

I liked riding the Metro, I had been on the Underground in London and in Seoul, and while Warsaw's single line was less impressive it was efficient and clean. There were usually ample amounts of eye candy to enhance the journey as well.

I disembarked at Imielin and walked out of the artificial light into the real sun busting day. Warsaw got a lot more sunshine than I had imagined. They had some terrible fog as well but even when it snowed the sun shone over Warsaw. As I tried to find my bearings, spinning round and looking at the ten or twelve identical tower blocks I realised that I couldn't even locate his building.

I was getting peckish so I headed to a little 'delikatesy' or delicatessen in English. While I sat there mulling over what to do next I spotted Kins trudging across a grass embankment with shopping bags weighing him down. I picked up my coat, dropped down my money and ran after him.

"Kins! Kins! Kinsy!" I shouted.

He turned around and his unshaven sullen face did not make for a joyous reunion. Something bad must have happened. I could see through the thin red plastic bag that he had bought crisps, chocolate and Spirytus, a 95% vodka. I considered my words and as I did he focused his bleary eyes and spoke first.

"James, how you doing?"

"Golden, you?" I could see how he was doing but we all play such games.

"Been better but could be worse, you know."

I didn't know though. I did want to find out.

"Do you fancy a coffee?" I offered.

"Sure. Come on back to mine." He said.

I hoped it wasn't going to be Polish coffee in the style of an Irish coffee. We had tried the Spirytus devil juice before and it did not end well. We actually felt quite fine until a friend turned up and pointed out that we were worse than legless.

We made our way across the embankment and to another array of carbon copy shit stack block of flats and into what I call the post box bit. All the post went into little metal boxes and you got to see how many fuckers you shared the mammoth building with. I guess it was

easier for the postmen but mainly all that was stuffed into them was pizza flyers and more stuff about language schools.

We took the stairs up to the fourth floor and again I realised how horrible my level of fitness had become. He unlocked his battered door and the stench from the apartment is enough to wake the dead. He cracked a window but I suggested that we sat on the balcony. I made my way past the half empty beer cans, over the partially eaten food and the swamp of abandoned clothes. The balcony was cramped but at least it had fresh air.

He returned with the coffees and looked steady enough. He slumped down in a deck chair and took in the depressing view of other high rises and a busy road.

“What brings you down here?”

“You do. I went to the office and you weren’t there. They said you and Monika had left. What’s going on bro?”

“That snivelling little horse shit bitch.” He sneered. “She went back to her sponsor and I may have fucked with a few translations as pay back.”

“Her sponsor? She was an addict?”

I was surprised because she didn’t seem the type but really what is the type?

“Not that kind of sponsor, silly.” He replied condescendingly. “The kind of dick that pays young girls, sorry gives gifts to young girls while they have a wife and kids somewhere else.”

I hadn’t heard of such a thing. It sounded like prostitution or a mistress. I thought about foraging for more information but as I tried to couch the question in my mind Kins offered a more comprehensive definition.

“Sponsoring is a very Polish thing. Usually girls who are attending university or moving to a big city get sugar daddy types.” Not that unusual. “These guys pay for the girls flat then get to stay there when they are in town or want to. Sometimes they buy the girls gifts as well.”

“Like sugar daddies.” I stated.

“Kind of. I don’t know really. It happens a lot.” He seemed convinced about this. “Any way Monika’s split up with his wife and she went back to him.”

“Had they kept contact all along?”

I wanted to ask if they’d kept fucking really but even I wasn’t that brash, unless I was drunk.

“I don’t know but I guess so.”

I wanted to move off the subject and onto something more positive.

“So are you gunna come and work for me now?” I asked hopefully.

“I don’t know. I am thinking about setting up my own firm. My neighbour Magda wants to setup a firm as well so maybe we’ll share an office.”

“That was quick. Well make sure am a priority client.” I smiled, he didn’t.

“You have a contract with the place we don’t name.”

“A formality to be ignored.” I pronounced.

“I can’t take any of their clients.” He said dejected.

“Well if they don’t know it won’t matter will it.”

“We’ll see.”

We sat and drank our coffee. We watched the sunshine fade and rainclouds appear. It looked like it was going to be a storm so I made my excuses and left. I got his new phone number and promised that I’d be in touch. It was a sad sight but this is what could happen when you opened your heart to another. I realised how delicately balanced relationships were and I never really cared before but on the Metro ride back to work I kept thinking about Elly and her past.

I muddled through the day and the crew appeared happier than they had ever been. They were starting to get the hang of customer services and the routine nature of the calls was comforting for them. I knew that soon they would get bored and disinterested but for now I was happy coasting along. I stayed late trying to decode the documents I had to sign with the help of Google translate but I was making slow progress and when Elly called to see where I was she told me to bring them home and we’d do it together.

It sounded like a plan so I headed out. All thoughts of her past indiscretions were forgotten and we were back to being Team Andrew. We whizzed through the documents, mainly with her glancing over it and confirming that everything was ok. We got to one that she didn’t really understand and I put it down for special attention. Unfortunately I forgot about it and it stayed in my flat for over a week until I realised and took it into the office to talk over with Paweł and Monika.

The rest of that night me and Elly theorized what Andrew would do, what his favourite colour would be and which food he would hate. Elly loved fish and I hated it, only if it was battered and came with a side of chips would I even touch the stuff. I remembered about Kins and relayed the story to Elly. She seemed quite indifferent about the whole sponsoring thing which made me nervous but she told me that she never did it. She didn’t say she wouldn’t have but just that she was modelling instead of studying.

I guess you have to pay the bills, or have someone pay them for you.

“Do you think it is so different from us?” She said.

“I do yeah. We love each other. It isn’t about money or survival. At least I hope it’s not. We will have a child, a future together.” I said passionately.

“I like your word, sugar daddy. Like a daddy full of sugar.”

She pushed in at my ever expanding waist line and giggled.

## Chapter 21

It felt like we had just been there the week before meeting Elly’s grandparents, announcing our relationship and Andrew all in one go. It wasn’t though and today we were heading past the Mother’s little abode and on towards her Granny’s and Aunt’s. I wasn’t sure who owned what exactly but there was a big house where her Aunt, Uncle and two cousins lived then a smaller, older building. If I wanted to be nice I would call it a cottage, if I wanted to be horrible it might be reminder of the bombing.

There were a lot of other buildings on the huge farm, some housed equipment, some workers and others fruits. As we got out of our rented car, three young puppies swarmed around our feet; two black and brown, one completely brown but all as cute as a button. I had wanted a dog for as long as I could remember. I got one for a birthday when I was four or five but it died within a week. When we were older, me and my brother’s shared a hairy little black thing that we called Meg. She was lovely and taught me a lot about responsibility so I thought a dog would be a good idea for Andrew.

“Are these your Aunt’s?” I asked.

“No. They are village dogs.” She replied.

That was a nice sounding idea. Dogs that the whole village looked after and cared for very lovingly. The reality was that they were strays that nobody loved or really cared for. They would literally live off the fruit of the land and be given scraps and water. This wasn’t the city or civilization as I knew it. Elly told me to leave them and we first went to the dilapidated hut that her grandparents inhabited. Granny smiled as she made her way over to hug Elly then me. The old man gave me a stiff hand shake and pulled me in for kisses on each cheek, how French.

We were offered tea and cake, I looked at Elly for guidance and she refused explaining that we would be going over to her aunts. A small conversation followed and I just took in the small living space. There was a rudimentary stove system which was powered by fire, not gas but wood and cardboard. It was impressive because I’d never seen such a thing before but also a stark reminder of how different life could be inside the EU.



We said goodbye but promised to return before we left proper and made our way over to the big house. This was very modern and we were met at the door by Elly's Aunt. She was a typical middle aged Aunt. She hugged Elly and kissed both cheeks and then smiled at me. She invited us in and shoo-ed away the puppies who were desperate to get into the warmth. Once inside we took off our shoes and I declined a communal pair of slippers. There was a large wooden stair case which seemed excessively varnished. The large hall led to several different rooms, each spacious and very homely. The kitchen looked like something out of Hunter's Wives magazine and I could imagine Elly's Aunt gutting a fish or skinning the bounty of the hunt.

Soon a little urchin appeared and was grinning manically at Elly. He held out a grubby paw to me which I shook and then nodded and smiled at him. His head slopped off the left and he had a weird sound to his pronunciation. All the emphasis was in the middle and it sounded like he was vomiting his words rather than speaking. As we entered the room where the TV was playing, Elly's Uncle looked up and smiled. He was laid out across the couch and suddenly rose to meet us. We shook hands and I admired his quiff. It may have been stylish in his youth but now it had the unmistakable style of faded Dad. I bet he loved to get up and dance at family parties as well. He said something to Elly and motioned to me. They both laughed and then she took out Andrew's picture.

"What was so funny?" I asked.

"He asked who was pregnant, me or you." She said.

It was true, since arriving in Poland I had put on a few pounds, well in Poland they measured it in kilos and I had put on a few of them as well. It was a lie I told myself but I thought I was busy. I knew busy and my life was pretty empty at the time. I always worked better to a tight schedule than an open ended deadline. I thought that I should go on a diet and start running again, maybe even take up yoga or some shit like that.

I was ushered out of the TV room and into a room with a long table. We were joined by Elly's other cousin a thin tall kid of about sixteen or seventeen. He made his way over and shook my hand, I immediately liked him more than his brother. I don't care that people say you shouldn't judge other people by how they look, it is a very good indicator of personality, you just need to know what to look for.

Someone who is dirty or unkempt maybe having a bad day or they may lack self esteem, they may even be depressed. Someone with good posture, who looks you in the eye is generally confident and confident people achieve more. I could go on but I firmly believe that appearances really do let us know things about others. You would be foolish only to judge on

appearance or to refuse to change your assessment once you have fresh evidence of a person's character but when you know nothing else, your eyes can help you see.

At the table I just sat and nodded as the conversation happened around me. Elly was happy, so I was happy. There is tea, with tea leaves or granules or something in the bottom which shouldn't be drunk, cake, cake and more cake, cold meat, bread, various salads, all of which had been unhelpfully encased in mayonnaise. As everyone talked and feasted I tried a few different things. The bread was softer in the centre than I had experienced so far in Poland but I longed for Hovis.

I got self-conscious as they all looked at me and laughed. I was their jester, there to amuse them so I smiled and laughed a little too, at what? I don't know. They might have been nervous or just enjoying the superiority over a foreigner. Elly forced more cake on me and her Uncle produced a bottle of liquor, maybe vodka. We drank, Granny and Granddad joined in. It was some kind of flavoured vodka. I prayed it wasn't a home brew made in their bath that would make me delusional or blind. Another round of vodkas and I was counting down the minutes until we could get back in the car and head home to Warsaw, back to civilisation.

The thought of Warsaw representing civilization made me sad. It was an ok city but it didn't offer anything more than Leeds did, actually I preferred Leeds. The house prices were better, the wages were higher and opportunities more plentiful. The only thing Poland had in its favour was Elly. That was enough though.

There was silence for what felt like an eternity and the half an hour of chatting must have been enough time to catch up on all the village gossip. I doubted that Elly told her family too much about what happened in England and our story of how we met had been simplified to 'through the internet'. Everyone assumed a dating site and we didn't correct them, usually we shared a giggle about it.

Elly excused us and said she wanted to show me around the grounds. I needed the fresh air and my legs were glad to be moving too. As we got outside and headed towards what Elly described as a river, more or a trickle, I breathed in deep. I remembered as a child my Dad would always breathe in deep at the smell of cow shit and proclaim it to be fresh air, this didn't smell like cow shit exactly but whatever was wafting off the 'river' gave the impression of freshness.

The annoying imp had followed us out and continued to scuttle around us like an expectant puppy. We stopped in a woodland and as I looked at Elly I noticed the imp scamper back towards his house. I took the chance and pressed her up against a tree for a long, meaningful kiss. The trees were tall and thin like her and I wrapped my arms around the bark

and trapped her. The next thing we knew, when we opened our eyes after that kiss, that perfect, peaceful kiss was her diminutive cousin bounding back from the house with a hunting blade in his hand and a goofy look across his face.

He started to hack wildly at one of the trees. Elly wasn't as taken a back as I was and she took the blade off him and skilfully separated the bark from the tree without damaging it. They continued to do this for some time and then picked up the bark and carried it back to the house. He was practically skipping back to the house with the blade wildly thrusting back and forth, I held Elly's hand for protection and comfort.

When we went back into the vodka and cake room we saw that Elly's Mum had arrived along with another Aunt. Everybody hugged and kissed, then smiled at me. That was all Elly's Mother's side of the family except Marvin who wasn't missed. I heard his name a few times during the conversation and each time Granddad screwed up his face. It made me laugh but obviously Granddad was a better judge than me and I felt he confirmed my fears. I wondered what he really thought of the youngest member of the clan.

We had planned to go and see other members of Elly's family that afternoon and then return to Warsaw in the evening but her family didn't want us to leave. Every time we got up to go they said, "Are you going already?" Even when Elly got up to use the bathroom they started to say it to her. When she got back from the toilet there was a hushed muttering and they all looked very pleased with themselves. I was sat there like a panda trying to work chopsticks.

Suddenly Elly's Mum spat something out and everybody cheered, Elly looked surprised and then her Uncle shook my hand, followed soon after by the simpering mite.

"What's happening?" I asked bemused.

"My Mum is giving us a house." She replied.

"Holy shit!" I gave her Mum a big hug and everyone seemed happy.

Wait.

I had seen their houses.

"What kind of house? Where? How does she have the money?"

It seemed unreal and I didn't want to be a country bumpkin, Warsaw was rural enough in most aspects.

She explained that her Mum and Dad had started to build a house just outside Warsaw before her Dad died. It had stayed there untouched for about twenty years and was basically a shell that was missing doors and windows. It had plumbing and most of the electrical works done but there was no floor, just concrete.

Our family needed a house and we had saved some money but outfitting a house with everything was going to be a chore. I relished a bit of manual labour, not too much but a little bit was a nice contrast to the boredom of office life. It seemed that we were staying in Poland. I was going to have to try harder at work and even begin learning the language.

We ate again then of course washed it down with another round of vodkas before we finally made our exit. This time everyone gave me a hug and a kiss as well as Elly. It hadn't been long since I'd spilt Granddad's soup but I think he really liked me now.

A few months ago I was single and could have been fired after ranting at my boss. Now I had a fantastic woman pregnant, was a country manager and seemingly had my first home.

## Chapter 22

We got in the car still numb from the shock of being gifted a house. A house with no doors is still a house and I wasn't thinking about what work was waiting for me, I wasn't really thinking about it seriously as I didn't believe it would happen.

"Where next then honey?" I asked.

Elly had taken it all in her stride and she still didn't seem to believe what had just happened either. I could hear the puppies yapping outside but I think an earthquake could have hit and Elly wouldn't have noticed.

I repeated my question.

"We will visit my daughter." She said calmly.

"You have a daughter?" This was turning into quite the surprise fest.

"Yes." She said as if it was a stupid question.

"How old is she?"

I wondered what else I didn't know about Elly.

I might have been having a kid with her but we hadn't even known each other six months yet and she could have had a million different skeletons lurking in her closets. I doubt there would have been any room though, not with all the clothes she bought.

Truth was that I hadn't told her all my deep and dark secrets either. If they didn't come up I doubt I would. There was plenty of stuff from when I worked in bars and there was the summer I'd spent in the Greek tourist trap called Kos. I could have written a book about the months I spent there and the crazy shit that went down. I certainly wouldn't be offering her any of the gory details freely and maybe she had similarly grim memories that were better forgotten.

I already knew about her funding secret but I couldn't wrap my head around the fact that she had a kid, a daughter.

"Three..." She paused and thought about her response. "Maybe four."

Top quality parenting. I would have to be the responsible one.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I raged.

"I tell you now." She said defensively. "It isn't most important."

"It's pretty fucking important. Where's her father?"

I should have asked why she wasn't at the family gathering.

Was she another one of Elly's little secrets that her family didn't know about?

Could I trust a woman who had lied to the rest of her family so freely?

"He will be there."

Aha, she lives with her father. That explains that then.

"Will it be a problem that I will be there?"

The thought of it made me uncomfortable.

"No. They are excited to meet you."

Well at least she told them that I existed even if she didn't tell me about them.

"I guess I should get to know them. She will be Andrew's sister after all." Maybe Scott had been right in England. I should have learnt from Keith's mistakes.

"Not that kind of daughter, a church daughter." She replied as we pulled out of her Aunt's driveway.

"You mean your Goddaughter?"

Phew, that was a relief.

What an emotional rollercoaster. I hoped no one took my picture while I was on it because it wouldn't have been a flattering snap. After that slow crawl up to the dizzying height then stomach churning drop down I was in need of a smoother ride. The undulating surface of the Polish country roads physically mimicked the emotional turbulence that I felt.

"You are so silly." She said.

Maybe I was silly but that kind of misunderstanding could have ended very differently. One of us was going to need to get better at the other's language and fast. I knew that I couldn't complain about her not understanding me or mixing a few things up while I didn't speak any Polish. I knew that I needed to make more of an effort to learn and that was going to be a priority next week.

I had seen the adverts for school declaring that they could teach someone English in ten weeks and was sure that I could start to become better, maybe a low level Polish speaker in such a short amount of time as well.

I didn't know then that Poland didn't have very strict advertising laws and the kind of practices that would have attracted big fines in the UK were perfectly legal there.

We pulled into another farm. This one had a sprawling one floor home and several wooden barns. There was another dog roaming freely in the yard and several cats relaxing on the porch. We were greeted by another large middle aged woman. She had a warm smile and didn't wait for introductions before hugging me. Her husband a relatively thin man with a pronounced moustache followed with a firm handshake and smile. They embraced Elly and invited us inside. More tea and various cakes were offered but my jeans were already cutting in to my waist and I declined. They wouldn't be dissuaded though and produced a plate and a cup of tea. It seemed rude not to so I sampled a cream and fudge effort that was divine. Again the fat jokes flowed and by now I was oblivious to it.

I would have to learn how to be self-deprecating in Polish. Once I had found a school to learn at, I'd need to get the teacher to teach me some jokes. I had heard more about the English sense of humour in the last few weeks than in my whole life. It seems the rest of the World is confounded by what we find funny. The Poles don't get the word play, which is understandable, I was constantly pestered about an advert in which a cartoon dog is supposed to chase a stick but makes a joke about something falling on the floor. Yep, I didn't get it either but it had Poland splitting its ribs.

Elly's Goddaughter was a cherub of a girl with Shirley Temple curls. It didn't take her long to warm to me and as everyone else ignored both of us she showed me her collection of stuffed animals. A dog eared elephant, a giraffe that's neck that had been hugged into a limp submission, a balding lion whose mane had been over combed by a loving owner and a rhino that was leaking polystyrene balls whenever it moved.

It must have been an endearing site as her parents kept checking and smiling at me. Elly liked witnessing my fathering, caring side and when I finally returned to her she moved her hand onto my knee. Another slice of cake was forced on me and washed down with more vodka.

Another boy and girl appeared. They were both teenagers, the boy maybe 13 and the girl was probably 15 or 16. The older I get the harder it is to tell people's age. When I was a teenager I could have told you the difference between a 13 and a 15 year old but now am happy to guess the right decade someone was born in.

We made our excuses as it was starting to get dark and headed off to the next part of Elly's family. I was now sure this would involve more cake and vodka. In the car I let my pants open and allowed my boys to breath. Elly laughed at me and I told her that unless she wanted me to turn into a meatball she needed to do more to protect me.

"Just say no."

"It's not drugs Elly, it's your family. I want them to like me."

Elly had a hard time locating the exact street and had to call her Uncle to ask for directions but since we didn't have a map it wasn't much use. We had left the farms behind and were in a very pleasant village. The houses looked like holiday villas on the outside with their white walls and clay slatted roofs.

One turn, then the next in the opposite direction, reversing back the way we came and peering hopefully down suburban streets. We finally spotted the one Elly was sure was her Uncle's and got out. A St. Bernard roared at me from beyond the gate.

"Ladies first." I said, ever the gentleman.

A young man came out and wrestled the dog by the collar. Another cousin that Elly introduced to me and instantly I forgot his name. It was all getting too much and I'd had too much to drink to function properly. Her cousin was wearing a Manchester United training vest and seemed a happy sort. Me and Elly climbed the stairs and at the top were greeted by her Aunt. Again she visibly enjoyed her cake and I began to wonder if they had all been as slender as Elly in their youth.

I've heard it said that to see your future wife look at her mother, well from looking at her female relatives the size 10 dresses wouldn't last much longer. Elly's Uncle hugged her as soon as her Aunt had finished and then he shook my hand. We were invited to the dining table not for cake this time but for meat and veg in jelly. I politely refused and was offered something else but I had Elly explain that I was set to burst.

Her Uncle laughed and rubbed his belly. He produced a bottle of Old Smuggler whiskey, I liked this guy and his family already. After the horror that was vodka a good whiskey was heaven. We had drunk a few measures before Elly had finished talking to her Aunt and came to rescue me. Me and her Uncle continued to drink and laugh, his daughter emerged with her 5 year old son. They too were content souls and since they enjoyed Poland I thought that it couldn't be that bad. The whole family was joyful, it was a real pleasure to be in their company but sadly time was against us so after a quick catch up with her cousin we were on the move again. Not before I had a chance to bond with another little one though. I was on a roll and it wasn't about to stop. I was throwing him about and pulling out my best physical

comedy. Entertaining a 5 year old entertains those around him, there is something infectious in their laughter.

Was I going to be that easy to please in a few years?

If someone entertained Andrew would I take them into my heart as well?

The next journey didn't take long and was thankfully our last stop. On one side of a thin road were Elly's Aunt and Uncle and on the other side her Grandma's brother and his wife. While the road might have been thin it was a perfect surface, a stark contrast to the joke of the roads near the farms.

I stood in the middle of the road and turned my head to one side then the other. These were really beautiful homes and even more eye-catching gardens. I had only ever seen such gardens in magazines or on the TV. You could have put a football pitch in the Aunt and Uncle's but they had a deck for 'performances' instead.

The edges of the garden were inhabited by flowers which ran the colour spectrum of the rainbow and beyond. We got a quick tour of the houses, refused more food, had a cup of tea to sober me up and keep Elly alert for our drive back and we were gone. I don't know how Elly really felt after the party in England but I loved her family and the last few families we visited were my kind of people. Everyone was so warm and loving. I felt relaxed, so comfortable and then I remembered Marvin.

How could he emerge from such a family?

How could he be so different to Elly?

Finding a mate is a tricky business and while the individual maybe perfect they unfortunately come as a package. They are inseparable. Sometimes they are further removed but I was getting the impression that now she was pregnant Elly felt closer and closer to her family.

The Mother she hadn't been eager to see was now becoming an important ally, rightly so. The family that she had hidden from, not wanting to disappoint them, were all happier to see her back in Poland than in England. Her idea that she meant more to them as a beacon of hope than in their arms was quickly changing. The strangest turnaround of all was that the first family member she reached out to was the one who was pulling away.

She had doubted if the others would embrace me but they had and the brother that she thought would support her, support us, was nowhere.

"I wish you had a chance to meet my friends." She said.

"We can throw a party. I'll book a club." I offered.

"No. We should save our money for the baby."



For the baby, not for the house.

“We can just book some tables then.”

In Poland I had learnt that you could reserve everything, including seats in a nightclub. It annoyed the hell out of me though, when I'd pop out for a beer after work to see reservation written on empty tables. The idiot staff would refuse to let you sit down at 6 pm for one beer at a table reserved for 9 pm.

Their loss!

### Chapter 23

I was minding my own business reading John Grisham's 'The Testament' on a bench outside the Palace of Culture when an old man came and sat beside me. It puzzled me because there were lots of empty benches, maybe his legs got tired exactly there though. I continued reading and after a few minutes he turned to me. I said hello but I told him I didn't really speak Polish. He produced a small battered old chess set. It came out of a hand held zip up case and the pieces were worn down, some of the pawns to just stubs. I smiled and explained that I didn't really play. He asked if I was a tourist and I said no. He asked if I was English and I said yes.

“London, Covent Garden, Queen.” He muttered then smiled at me revealing his metallic teeth. Or rather his teeth had large vertical oblong plates on them. It was if Jaws from the Bond movies had been shrunk and wrinkled in the wash.

I gave in and helped him set up the pieces. I had played the computer a few times so I might as well humour an old man. After two moves he produced a 20 note and placed it under the board.

Was he trying to hustle me?

The crafty old fucker.

I waved him off and explained I had no money. He replaced the 20 with a 10 but I produced my empty wallet and showed him I had nothing. He picked up his pieces and wondered off. I must say that I respected that geezer, at least he was trying to do something. Before I could get back to my book Kins arrived and he was looking well.

“Hey you're all happy again.” I said slightly disappointed.

“Yes I am.” He grinned.

“I had a joke prepared to cheer you up.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“So this girl I want to shag said I was shallow because I wasn’t passionate about any political causes.” I started.

“And.” He interrupted.

“Wait, I told her that I’d found something I could really get behind.” Dramatic pause. “Queuing.”

“Are those for me?”

He said pointing at his Mr. Kipling’s French Fancies. I nodded. He’d asked me about bring him some back from the UK, another little treat that was worth so much more abroad than at home.

“I have something else for you as well.” I said producing the letter that Elly couldn’t explain.

The letter that I’d put aside for special attention and then promptly forgotten about. When I finally remembered about it and took it in to discuss with Paweł and Monika, the news wasn’t good.

“Your landlord is kicking you out.” He said after looking it over.

“I kind of got that. I need you to come and meet him with me. It wouldn’t be good if we had to move.” I said.

I had no experience scouting office locations let alone moving an office and the mountain of paperwork it would have required in Poland. Kins agreed to come along between bites of pink then yellow miniature cakes. When we arrived I couldn’t help but laugh. The guy looked exactly like Gargamel from the Smurfs he had the crazy eyebrows, bald head and hunch down but he didn’t have a cat.

We got straight down to business and he didn’t want to budge. I tried to strong arm him but I had no real leverage as the law was on his side. He had received an offer to sell and wanted to get rid of the place while valuations were still high. It made sense and I understood him but it left me in an awful pickle. I wasn’t relishing returning to the office to call Leeds but it had to be done.

Elly kept calling me to ask about various materials or shades of green that we should decorate the house with. We had driven past and looked at it and I saw more work needed to be done than I’d imagined but I hadn’t even stepped foot inside yet. I promised we’d go up at the weekend and start making plans. She had already got a list of things from the IKEA website and the Polish DIY stores.

It was all she had to do and now she was expanding a little she had stopped shopping for clothes. To me it seemed strange, now was a good time to go shopping for something new but she hated the idea that she didn't fit in a size 10.

I got into my office and sent a few e-mails to try to set up a conference call or Skype. I got a few people on the phone but they had no answers for me and when I gave up both Monika and Paweł were waiting for news. I had nothing positive to say but after my last joke about people getting fired there was no reason to worry them. I told them that we were evaluating options and that if they heard of a viable location they should tell me.

I started to think about myself.

Would Elly kick up a fuss if we had to move back to England?

What about the house?

That was a pretty sweet deal, even if it did need a lot of work.

I knew that it was a waiting game now though. Let the guys in Leeds make the decisions while I smiled and kept everything calm here.

Was my Polish adventure over?

After a few day of silence I got the damning response that the Polish office wouldn't be relocating. The staff weren't to be notified until two weeks before we had to leave when they would be told that they could go straight away or work their contracts out. I was told to stay and oversee the sale of the computers and I could remain in my apartment for a further two months. I was been given an extra two months in Poland free.

I would be paid.

I would have a free apartment but then what?

I didn't get the feeling that they wanted me back and starting from scratch, cultivating clients didn't really appeal to me. Maybe they were trying to tell me something. Take two months for yourself and find another job there, stay there, don't come back. Whatever they were saying, whatever my future held I had no idea about it at that time because my head felt like it was in a vice.

After everyone had left, eager to search out new locations and tap their contacts for some real, high level business dealings, I was left in an empty room feeling empty. I had to tell Elly but there was no point telling her what I didn't know and stressing her out. I'd read that stress was the worst thing for a pregnant mother, even worse than smoking or drinking alcohol.

I agreed with Elly to visit the house, our house that weekend and this time instead of renting a car we took the tram and then the bus when we got to the end of the tram line. It took an hour from the centre to reach the house and that didn't excite me. It didn't matter that

by the time we moved in I wouldn't have a job in the centre, it should have done though. I knew that when I had a moment alone at home or at work I had to start making enquires about finding a new job. I couldn't risk Elly or any of my staff finding out and I could feel my hair thinning and waist expanding as the pressure grew.

The street which the house was on was called Church Street, well in English anyway. It was very quiet and standing on the street you'd never have guessed that only another row of houses away was one of the busiest roads in Poland. There was a little shop or grocers at the end of the street and a huge church after a small river. The church was painted a sickly yellow, the kind a dog might cough up after swallowing a frog.

We ambled down the bizarre street. Some houses looked half finished while others were beautiful. There was an empty lot with overgrown grass and as me and Elly peered in at it a big dog popped its face out. We were both taken aback by it but it was very friendly. We continued down to our place and heard our neighbour's music blaring out.

They call it Disco-Pol and it is a love child from a drunken meeting of cheesy disco and lounge jazz. I didn't mind it but it made Elly cringe. It was soon replaced by thumping Euro-Trance and I laughed when I saw the small old man who was listening to it. He was chopping wood. He looked about a hundred but the rhythm and strength he had suggested that he was much younger.

I looked at the place and didn't see the neglected shell that it was, I saw what it could be. I saw a home for me and my family, a garden for a dog to play in or for me and Andrew to kick a ball about in. The garden was actually full of rubble and discarded rubbish. It looked like the local hobo's had congregated in the garden and smoked and drank as there were large piles of cigarettes and beer cans. I was a bit scared to go in the house so as I pried open the wood panel that covered where a door would be with a claw hammer I kept it and edged inside slowly. As I moved the board to one side a spider crawled across my knuckles. I dropped the board and it made a loud thud. I felt other movement in the house.

"Are you sure no one is here?" I asked Elly.

"No one. Don't be so scared. I will go if you want."

"No way. You and Andrew wait here while I investigate."

I could at least pretend to be brave even if I was shitting it. As I entered, a small space opened into a large hallway which then led off to four rooms and a staircase. To call it a staircase is a misnomer. It was a series of steps starting about half a metre off the ground and turning back on itself and into the second level of the house.

I checked the other rooms and other than odds and sods there was nothing about. I went and fetched Elly who had already got her notebook out and my camera around her wrist. I hadn't had much chance to snap anything in Poland yet. I had a lot of pictures of Elly, the Palace of Culture, a couple from Krakow, I really should have taken more there, and now there would be a few of our future casa.

I heard something scuttling around upstairs so I grabbed the claw hammer, pulled myself onto the stairs and made the short walk to onto the second floor. This floor seemed bigger. The rooms were bigger and one had a balcony. The balcony wasn't fenced off so I don't know if that would be considered a balcony technically or just a health hazard. I saw the bastard. Trying to hide in the corner and when he knew I'd seen him he sped past me and down the stairs. As I stumbled down the stairs trying to catch him I fell.

When I woke up Elly said I'd banged my head. She had caught our trespasser though and he was purring at her feet. I had a little gash on my forehead and was bleeding badly from biting the inside of my cheek. Today the house had won but I was determined to get back and tame it. I would clean out that garden, install a proper door, put something down on the floor and paint its walls. I might have been a desk jockey but my weekends were going to be full of manual labour and I couldn't wait.

## Chapter 24

I put my fears about work to one side and decided to let life happen to me. I don't believe in such thinking but the truth was that if I had tried to fight against it I would have lost and losing takes away your spirit. I needed all the spirit I could muster and started planning for things I could control.

I got Elly to organize for doors to be installed at our new home and also to have insulation put into the roof then sealed off. Another thing we needed sorting were the stairs but I didn't want to pay for stairs when builders would be going up and down scratching them. I had never applied my brain to solving building site logistical problems but it seemed obvious to me that we should build a little step then just let the builders use the concrete base and install expensive wood steps when everything was finished.

It also seemed logical to get an electrician in to install light fixtures and plug sockets. This was where we had our first real headache. The sparky needed to know what each room was going to be and where everything would go. I had never thought about where I'd put the

TV aerial, where plug sockets would go and how many I'd need. I had just dealt with what was there when I arrived.

Me and Elly sat down and started to think things through.

We identified what would be our kitchen and bathroom. We picked rooms either side of the bottom floor. I knew that I wanted to get our bedroom and Andrew's room designed and finished next. That took up the whole of the ground floor. I thought that was enough and once we'd moved in we could organize the upstairs. I had wild plans for a home gym, a guest room for friends and family, I even thought about a second room for a second child maybe we would have a girl in the future.

I was getting carried away with myself and told Elly that we needed to be practical and do things in stages.

Stage one was the electrician and roof, well after the doors.

Stage two would be getting the kitchen and bathroom sorted.

Stage three would be the bedrooms and stairs.

Stage four would be organizing the horrid garden.

Since I wouldn't have any work soon, I'd have plenty of time to do things myself and as Elly got to work finding the men we needed most urgently I decided to hit up some bars.

Nothing is as depressing as a depressed person drinking alone in a bar. There is something to be said for drinking with friends but when you catch sight of yourself drinking alone it is even worse than watching one fat girl stuffing down a family size pizza

No. It wasn't a clever idea.

Once I'd had enough to drink in one place I was stumbling my way along the pavement to the next. People could see from my Ali shuffle that I was a little enthusiastic for so early in the day. It wasn't an uncommon site and I probably saw at least five or six drunks who were stumble bumming around worse than I was.

I happened to notice the Hair Club for Men as I steadied myself against a bus stop. If I wasn't angling my head up I would never have noticed it as it was so high up, on the top floor of a building. No signs on the ground floor. I wasn't going to be perturbed though and as I stumbled through the foyer and lent against the elevator burping along to the muzak, I thought about returning to Elly with a stylish new do.

I walked into an open plan salon and was greeted by a very happy little Asian man. I want to say he was Chinese, maybe Vietnamese but in all honesty I have no clue. He had a typical jet black Beatle's cut hair do, not what I'd be leaving with. He sat me down on some minimalist leather puffs with style books full of handsome men and their wonderful new

haircuts. He returned with green tea and as I pointed out the style I wanted, he said things I couldn't comprehend.

He wasn't dissuaded by our lack of communication and he led me off into a booth. It was a bit strange as it was curtained off. I could see the appeal of such a thing, a bit more privacy but I was getting drowsy and the curtain restricted the light and made me even more sleepy. A woman entered and smiled at me.

She was about five foot eight in heels. She had a very tight short dress on and to say it was tight was to ignore the fact that she was a little chunky. She spun me round and tipped me skyward to start washing my hair and massaging my scalp.

That felt good.

She brushed up against me repeatedly with her breasts. Sometimes hairdressers do this by accident, it's just part of the job but I was getting the feeling that this was too frequent for that. She started to wash my eyebrows.

Are you supposed to condition and shampoo your eyebrows?

Does that go for all your hair?

She certainly was thorough and began to wash my pubic hair as well. I laid there part intoxicated, part aroused and just let it happen. She had a zip at the front of her dress and zipped it off. She was naked underneath and a light bulb went off, I understood what the curtain was for. A strange, unique front but am guessing a successful one.

She turned around and started squatting onto me. A not unpleasant phenomenon. I checked my watch and thought about hitting the office up afterwards or just heading back to the flat and Elly.

God, Elly.

It was too late though and as I bucked to try and get her off she just rode me harder and that felt even better. This was turning into a battle of wills and mine was being divided and conquered. She was the victor and she knew once the war was over.

She produced some wet wipes and cleaned me off. When she'd done herself she zipped back up, popped me back in my pants and sent me on my way. The little smiling man presented me with a calculator with a number on it. I produced a fist full of notes which he grabbed at and he returned some to me but how much he took I'll never know. I don't think I really want to know and with my hair still damp I stumbled back out into the World.

I decided that I should grab some food and a coffee then I walked home. The walk took about an hour and when I finally got home I was sober enough to spin a good story and say it

was just two beers after work with Kins. Elly was so caught up in decorations she wouldn't have noticed. I went to bed early and slept like a baby.

The next day I told Elly about my work situation or future lack of work situation. I then repeated that we should decorate the downstairs first, move in and do the rest when we had the cash. I wanted to do a lot of the work anyway and now I was going to be forced into it. I was glad that I'd been so enthusiastic at first because I certainly hadn't planned to do so much but once we'd budgeted the materials and contracted out the doors, roof, electrics and plumbing jobs, there wouldn't be much left.

I wanted a dog and after seeing the cute puppies at her Aunts that were so uncared for I asked if we could go and take one. She surprised me by agreeing and then telling me that builders would be arriving to start work the following Monday. She wanted to set-up there to greet the builders and keep an eye on them. I had to be convinced that it was safe for her and as stupid as it sounds I was slightly swayed by the idea of the puppy.

I had some pretty big cheques to sign and Elly seemed nervous about asking for the money. I asked to see the contracts and said it would be better if I paid them via the internet but she said that she'd contacted friends of the family and would pay in cash.

Alarm bells were ringing loud and clear at that announcement.

"I'd rather have real builders do a proper job than some village drunks botch it up."

"Just because Polish does not mean drunk. Look at you yesterday English." She stormed.

"That's not what am saying." It might have been. I wasn't sure of much at that point.

"Why can't they give us a contract with a guarantee?"

"Word is guarantee."

"If your word is good then you'll sign a legal document which says the same things. Contracts don't lie."

"No one is cheating you. You are cheating me. My family give you so much and now you want to question long time friends of my family?"

Yes.

That was the obvious answer.

I wanted a contract and not a vodka stained handshake.

I wanted to be able to take them to court when in two years the half assed job they'd done started to bite me in the ass. The argument raged on. It wasn't my house anyway. It was her family's and who was I to choose who would do the work there or what should be installed.

Who was I?

The fucking mug who was paying, that's who.



By the time the weekend had rolled around guilt and the realisation that things needed to be done on the cheap led me to agreeing to hiring or well, paying Elly's Granddad's friend's son and his crew. The electrician was an old friend of Elly's Mum and the doors had already been fitted by an actual professional who gave a receipt and everything.

I knew he was a professional because we made an appointment, he came, measured up, came back and fitted the doors. That is how things should work. I knew there were some sensible business people in every country, unfortunately that did not extend to the son's of friend's of Granddad's of women with foreign lovers. No the roofers should have turned up on horseback with their six-shooters holstered to their hips because they were cowboys plain and simple.

We visited Elly's Aunt and Uncle's come her Grandparents the weekend before they should have started and I was warmly welcomed. I thought that it was because they really liked me, maybe they just liked me pouring more vodka money into the village.

We had come not for a visit really but to collect one of the dogs. A black and brown one, at least he'd look like an Alsatian even if he was pint sized. We had already prepared by buying a food and water bowl, a lead and some toys. We had brought a blanket, some doggy treats and the toys with us to the countryside to collect him.

Elly didn't really care and spent much of her time talking to her family. I studied the three dogs and saw that one was a little calmer. When the other two were rough housing, the third watched on. He disappeared one time only to return moments later with a slice of watermelon in his mouth that was bigger than he was.

That was my dog. That was my Krueger.

I couldn't have been happier returning triumphantly in the back of Elly's Mum's minivan with little Krueger to our home. We had our first baby in our hands and he did fit into the palm of your hand. He was so excited, so nervous, so full of fleas. He watched excitedly out of the window as we drove off. He had never been out of the village before and I got a feeling, a strange and wonderful feeling showing him something that he'd never known. I poured some water out of a bottle into my cupped hand and as it seeped through he lapped it up. Elly wanted to do it but giggled when he licked her and dropped the water on her leg.

They were beginning to bond but I'd read that she should be careful of the fleas and we had brought some spray and doused him with it in the van. I didn't think about checking if the chemicals were ok for Andrew.

Krueger gobbled up doggy treats from Elly's hands and then she produced a soft pink elephant and he curled up and fell asleep on it. That elephant was later subjugated to

Krueger's sex toy/wife. He ripped her stuffing out when he'd had enough of her and moved on.

That was true love.

Falling asleep on each other, frantic humping, ripping each other to shreds and then moving on to the next victim, I mean romance.

## Chapter 25

Kins had invited me to a 'native mixer' which made me laugh as the guests were all foreigners. Native speakers in Poland weren't Polish speakers like you'd imagine but speakers of foreign languages who are from the countries which speak those languages such as a Spanish speaking Spaniard or an English speaking Brit, Aussie or Yank.

We were greeted upon entrance by a cockney named Dave but I couldn't see his mate Chaz anywhere.

"Welcome, here's a name sticker guys." He gushed as he handed us a large white sticker and felt tip pen. "The bar is over there and most people are mingling, just introduce yourselves around guys."

I remember thinking that it might not be too bad. Kins had been to these things before and hated them. He needed them now though as they were a major opportunity for his new company. Most of the 'natives' didn't speak Polish and would need a translator. There were practically zero English translators who spoke Polish. Kins was a rare breed and if he appreciated how rare he was, the power that he held in this kind of company, he would have been more confident than he was.

We slapped on our name tags and grabbed a drink then began circulating. I had gotten accustomed to such schmoozing working for Minkins and Minkins but this time I wasn't selling anything, I should have been selling myself. I would have been as well if I knew what I wanted to do.

There was a woman coming our way so I nudged Kins to alert him and as he turned to her she spoke.

"Tulisa." She said offering her hand to Kins.

"To lose a what?" I laughed.

Kins shot me a look that I hadn't seen before but instantly knew meant that he wanted me to go fuck myself. So I obliged and I left him to mingle while I drunk.

I sat at the bar and threw back the whiskey while I thought about what I wanted to do. I eyed up the barmaid as she shook her cocktail shaker and rump in unison. She was positively Kylie sized tiny and she was working the room harder than anyone. She saw me watching her and I saw her watching me watch her but said nothing. I just listened to the bad pick-up lines that came her way from all the ex-public schoolboy journalists.

“What’s the biggest story you’ve broken?” I questioned one of the aforementioned journos.

“Am not an investigative journalist. I write up,” He checked himself and readjusted his oversized tie. “I keep people informed of developments within the industry am writing about. What do you do? Teach?” He snarled.

“No.” I answered and downed my whiskey.

Just as he picked up his drinks and turned to leave I decided I could find some fun at the drab event after all.

“So you write up press releases?”

This was before Twitter but am sure if it happened now I’d ask his handle and followed him immediately for all his earth shattering insight.

“More than that.”

“What then?”

He turned back around placed his drinks down and saddled up next to me. If it was an attempt at intimidation the fields of Eton have something to learn from the streets of Bradford.

I just smiled at him.

“Last year I won awards in my profession, what did you win?”

He shimmed his shoulders like a peacock fanning its feathers.

“I won a trip to Poland. What award? A Peabody?” I enquired.

“No. I won the feature writer for Eastern European Development Publications.”

I actually fell off my stool laughing.

“What the fuck? Then I won the most improved managerial achievement award within my own office and employee of the month the last six weeks.”

I hailed the barmaid for another drink while the award winning journalist stomped off to another round of back slapping and jolly-ho’s.

I got my drink and felt revitalised enough to start mingling. I met a lot of boring people but I had never been in a room with so many aspiring writers who weren’t actually writing. I heard tons of bad plots, woes of writers block which I always countered with, ‘Wayne

Rooney never seems to get footballers block'. They'd invariable say that he had off games but miss the point that he still actually played. Writers write bad books, some writers never write a good book but if you can't write it isn't writers block it's just that you're not a writer.

My favourite example was one of the teachers who babbled on about his story set in Roman times following various leaders and warriors lives. It sounded suspiciously like the BBC and HBO TV show 'Rome' but when I mentioned it to the guy he snapped back furiously that he 'had thought of it first'. That show had already finished two seasons so if he had thought of it first, how the fuck hadn't he finished his book?

I was also quiet sure that you can't claim to have thought of a story about Rome first. I know there is a Hollywood trend where they like to copy successful formulas but I doubt even J.K. Rowling thinks she thought of a schoolboy wizard first, she was just more successful than most with the concept.

I kept quiet about my writing aspirations. I didn't want to be another Hollywood waitress pretending I was something I wasn't. I would say I was a writer when I had written something, not when I sat in a coffee shop with my laptop open. These people made me doubt myself, made me hate my dream.

Was that who I was to other people?

An obnoxious cunt who was so obsessed by his stupid idea that would never come to anything?

I had to let it go so I plonked myself down in the first available seat and started shaking hands and grinning wildly. Among others on the table were three very fresh, very smiley, arrogant fucks who proudly announced that they thought they were better than everyone else as they were lawyers who were on loan from the British office to the Warsaw office of Eversheds.

"Oh did you study Polish law?" I asked.

"No." They echoed.

"EU law maybe?"

"No." They said laughing among themselves.

"So what the fuck do you do then? Make coffees and photocopy stuff?"

And with that their better than you attitude faded into the ether, thought so fuckers. You are nobody, actually you are a Polish secretary's bitch.

How are those law degrees working out for you now?

I could have been nicer to the female of the three but she had obviously been charmed by one of the males, while the third was his bum bitch. They took their little love triangle to a different table as everyone else laughed it up.

The only thing worse than being useless, is thinking that you are useful when everyone else can see that you're not.

"Well we know who to call when we need a lunch run." A Scottish guy sniggered. "Hi fella, am Danny."

"James." I said shaking his hand.

Danny was an IT guy and his wife was some sort of artist. She had a modern art hairdo that seemed inexplicable to the rest of the population and by the time I'd figured it out, it would have fallen out of fashion.

I bit my tongue. Danny seemed like the coolest person there and the easiest in his own skin. In a room full of try-hards me and Danny were about as cool as it got.

"Thanks for getting rid of those wankers." Danny said.

"At their hourly billables you wouldn't want those fuckers holding a door for you let alone getting your coffee. They might be useless but they'll be on double what their Polish colleagues get and it's those poorly paid fucks who will actually do all the work." I pointed out.

"This guy here is Hamish, my wife is Zonda and these two are Mandy and Astrid." Danny said rounding the table.

Hamish was another Scot with typically fire red hair, while Mandy and Astrid were both from Sweden. I know what you are thinking and no they weren't leggy blondes. Mandy looked like she survived on baby seal blubber and Astrid wasn't ugly but she wasn't attractive either. She was forgettable.

The time passed quickly as I yakked it up with Hamish and Danny. Zonda who had adopted her 'African' name was happy talking to the very forceful Mandy while Astrid just sat quietly, like I said, she was very forgettable. Mainly because she just blended into the background. Kins waltzed over to our table and looked weary.

"Shoot me now." He uttered as he closed his eyes and collapsed onto the table resting his head on his arms.

"Let's make a move then." I said. "Danny, do you wanna come?"

Only Danny and Hamish interested me as possible friends but Mandy and Astrid got up to leave as well. They were not only dead weight, and a lot of it, but annoying dead weight.

Fighting our way out was nearly as hard as surviving the earlier part of the night and as we made our way through the throng we were accosted by two Spanish property salesmen. They thrust cards in our faces but as we smiled and tried to move past they almost straddled us. I took the card and read it, Miguel Puyol, head of La Cactus apartment complex.

“Hola Miguel. Bueno mucho.” It sounded Spanish.

We continued but his leg was between mine and I didn’t want to end up on the floor in some unseemly tryst.

“How are you doing my friends?” He said. “Can I have your cards?”

“I don’t have a card. It’s not the 1980’s but Kins does. Give him your card.” I ordered.

He had already fished out two cards for the Spaniards and handed them his details before they finally moved to one side.

“You don’t fancy some señoritas do you?” I asked flicking my head in Astrid and Mandy’s direction.

He shook his head and disappeared. As Miguel and his buddy headed off Danny stood in awe of a group of men at their table.

“It’s the Legia lot.” He gushed.

“How do you know?” I asked.

I knew Legia were one of the Warsaw football teams and probably the most famous in all of Poland but I didn’t know any of their names, never mind what they looked like.

“Our company has a box.” Hamish answered. “Am not asking for an autograph.”

“Me neither.” Danny agreed and we kept moving towards the exit.

We were nearly free until that cockney bastard Dave sprang in front of us offering to introduce us to the Legia boys. We politely refused and started to move but once again he stopped our advances. This time he was introducing his ‘good friend’, a painter whose name escaped him. The artist didn’t mind, in fact he seemed to care more about boring us with details of his style. Only Zonda was interested and as she amused him we sloped off.

Outside we made our way to some Turkish dive bars and then texted her the directions. It hadn’t been a bad night after all but it wasn’t giving me any reason to be optimistic. I had learnt that my skill was verbal and that skill was lost here. I couldn’t sell much when most people didn’t understand the nuances of my vernacular.

I sat around a shisha pipe with the Warsaw misfits and wondered how I was going to support my family with no transferable skill set.

I had booked us a few tables at a highly regarded and hard to find club called Masquerade. It was reportedly partially owned by an ex-boxer. A boxer neither me or Danny had heard of and both of us were boxing fans. The guest list for our soiree included Danny and his Mrs, Kins who was coming stag but I suspected he had begun a thing with his neighbour Magda, Monika from my office, Paweł and his wife Anetta and a few of the girls said they might pop in.

How gracious of them.

From Elly's side she invited Klau, Emily and Victor, Monika and Gustav, a second Monika with her fiancée/boss/possible sponsor, Aniesto and finally Elly's oldest friend Mona who was going to come with what sounded like a sponsor but he cancelled on her at the last minute with an urgent work matter. That or his wife needed him.

I had invited Hamish but he was back in Scotland at a wedding. Sadly I felt a potential friendship fail before it even began.

Once the guests were assembled we order a tray of shots and a few people ordered bottles of champagne. Things started to get wild. Elly wasn't drinking and was officially put in charge of photos. She was just as adapt at taking them as ordering others to take them when she wanted to be snapped.

We weren't the only people there as the club was open for normal business and someone was having a birthday party at the tables behind us. It was as good a club as I'd been to while in Poland and I was having an amazing time. Gustav, one of the husbands had never been to a club in Warsaw and wondered around taking it all in. He was truly amazed by it all but he was an amazing sight to look at. He was a life sized Ken doll, the hair, the chiselled features but mainly the fake orange tan.

He was a nice guy though and while the rest of us were getting sweaty on the dance floor he just wondered around. I thought at first he was busy scanning the club for hotties, which there was an abundance of but he seemed immune to their glances only having eyes for his bubbly wife.

Mona wasn't upset about being spurned. Well maybe she was but she was smiling, she was flirtatious and busied herself by rubbing up to anyone and everyone. Kins got all flustered when she turned her attention to him for a song. She ran her hands up her neck and flicked her hair over her head and pounced at him like a cat. He fled to the safety of the toilets. She simply moved onto the next guy. You had to admire her spirit and confidence.

The office girls came and went, Paweł and his better half left, well she dragged him off and Monika continued dancing the same dance steps whatever song came on. I didn't know that it was possible to force a salsa dance into a Kings of Leon bass line but she sure tried. I think that when I was swaying hopelessly out of time a dawn of realization engulfed me; I could survive here. I didn't need the arseholes. I could surround myself with the good. I could insulate myself and refrain from ending up like the sad barflies that I'd met.

I snaked across the black and white tiles, offered my hand to my lady and spun her onto the dance floor. Even when she was pregnant she was more graceful than I could ever hope to be but Kins was running a close second in the most uncoordinated mess so I didn't feel too bad. The night wore on and the crowd thinned.

Monika and Aniesto snuck off somewhere with Klau, Kins made his excuses and returned home a sweaty mess. Gustav and Monika and Emily and Victor headed back to the countryside together and a little more merry than they should have been to say they were driving. Polish drivers think they are the best in the World but the figures don't reflect that and the number of accidents involving drunk drivers is appalling.

Elly couldn't dance anymore so we said our goodbyes and went to get our coats. She still wasn't showing that much and the amount of men who blatantly were checking her out while I was stood next to her was disturbing. I have to hope that I was less obvious in my gawking than those idiots were. If I was in England and as drunk as I was that night I think there would have been fighting, there certainly would have been words but it was so wide spread in Poland that you got accustomed to it.

Is that an example of relativity?

Einstein sat in a lab thinking up reasons why the circumstances for decking someone staring at your woman altered based on the societal factor?

Probably not.

We got outside and there wasn't a taxi in sight so we began to walk.

"We could catch the bus into the centre." Elly suggested and it seemed like a good idea so we did.

It was only a journey of a couple of minutes and nobody checked if we had a ticket. It was crowded and Elly had to stand. I tried to force her into guilting someone to giving up their seat but she wouldn't. Since the journey was so short I didn't fight it, my explanation would have lasted longer than our trip. We arrived at the Central Station where you could catch a bus, train or tram. Since it was late the trams had stopped running and there were



plenty of taxis waiting. As we approached one a bus pulled up and Elly squealed that it was our bus and dragged me on.

“What do you mean our bus? I thought we were getting a taxi?” I asked as we sat at the back, putting our feet up on the empty seats opposite.

“This will be cheaper and takes us all the way home.” She seemed pleased with herself.

Elly nestled into my neck and as I stroked her hair I felt her fall asleep. The bus sped along empty roads and the distance didn't feel too bad. I knew that we'd be back home soon enough. We past petrol stations and bakeries that were lit up even though they were closed and no one was working, observed drunks dancing along to the songs they'd heard earlier that night and watched the ubiquitous drunken arguments between couples.

After about fifteen minutes I felt myself nodding off then jerking back awake. I felt myself falling but waking before I hit the ground. I tried to shake myself awake whilst simultaneously letting Elly sleep. I gingerly edged closer to the window and tried to open it. A security guard told me off and told me that the bus was air conditioned. I think that's what he said anyway.

I rested against the window watching the now familiar roads as we headed out of Warsaw proper. I swung awake, this time waking Elly as we were in some woods that I wasn't familiar with. She checked the route and told me that the night bus turned down a long street then looped back on itself and we would be heading back to familiar territory soon enough.

She went back to sleep but I waited until we got back on the main road. Once we did I saw that we were only minutes from home and I remember the joy I felt. The next thing I felt was the security guard shaking me awake.

“What the fuck?” I mumbled.

He just grunted at me.

I checked my wallet and phone then shook Elly awake.

“Are we home?” She asked.

“Not quite.” I said helping her off the bus.

We were actually in an IKEA car park about half an hour's walk from our home. Elly asked the security guard when the bus was going to set off and he told her about half an hour.

We should have walked.

Neither I nor Elly were in a state to though so we bribed the guard and driver to let us sit on the bus and wait as they had wanted us to wait outside. I also bribed the guard to wake us up at our stop.

I think the taxi would have been cheaper.

It definitely would have been quicker.

As we waited we looked at the pictures from earlier in the night.

We laughed at an ice cube fight that started with me trying to get some into Elly's cleavage, as if I was a basketball superstar. It didn't work but her netball training helped her nail three in a row into my cleavage. It continued on the dance floor as Kins got a handful into his ass crack and then it was a free for all which spread beyond our group.

It was enough to see us home and even though we didn't need him to wake us I honoured my agreement and gave the guard his money. I tried to give Elly a piggy back but I underestimated either how drunk I still was or how much weight she had put on because I collapsed onto one knee outside the church. I ripped my jeans and bloodied my knee but I continued stumbling towards our home.

In the peace of the night with the moon reflecting of the river, Raszyn actually looked good. By the time I woke up the sun had been up for a long time shining into every defect of the not so sleepy suburb. Elly slept longer than me even though she wasn't hung over. It was my job to trek around the inconvenience stores to see which opened on a Sunday.

I am a Catholic so nobody can do anything on a Sunday.

What a crock of shit.

The church goers drove like bats out of hell after the service and headed straight off to the large shopping centres. If the local stores wanted my business they should learn to open on Sundays. I am a firm believer that everybody should work every day. Not in the same week but you wouldn't be happy if the firemen or doctors refused to work because it was Sunday.

Twenty four seven is the only answer. It would increase jobs as well, as businesses would need extra staff to cover the hours. It might not be profitable for all businesses but if a shop is open on a Saturday then it must also be profitable to keep it open on Sunday.

That is logic and unfortunately the World isn't run on logic.

## Chapter 27

We felt things moving along and even though we had our bed, a bed Elly chose without me, it was time for the floors to go down. I had managed to convince an Opel, Vauxhall to the Brits, dealer to let me test drive a car on the vague understanding that I was the country manager of an English firm who might have been looking to rent a fleet of cars for his staff. It

wasn't exactly honest but feeling guilty about conning a car salesman was like worrying about feeling a pretentious cunt while watching a French film on your iPad.

The battle plan was simple, buy all the stuff we needed before I had to return the car then actually start doing some work. We had already done the hard part of choosing between the greyish white, dark red, yellow, dirty yellow and all the other stupid colours of floor panels we could buy, choosing the mahogany. The panels slid in through the boot, over the back seat that had been let down and in between the seats in the front of the car. It was riding low to the ground and when it scraped the floor going over speed bumps I was thankful it wasn't really my own car.

It did the job though and after several trips for various things including paint, underlay and tools we retired it as a delivery vehicle and took ourselves off to scope out kitchens. We priced up several kitchens at various retailers and even wholesalers. They were either in our budget and shite or what we wanted and expensive. The installation was going to cost nearly as much as the units so we took ourselves off to the black hole of young couples weekends that is IKEA. We had our measurements and designed our dream kitchen. I forget exactly how much they wanted to install it but they were pushing their services hard and am not surprised considering they wanted more than the cost of a beer to screw the handles on. We persistently and politely refused.

I was going to lay the tiles and the panel flooring so I was sure I could build the kitchen as well. Marvin had been staying with Elly when the workers had been there and he helped move the boxes to the second floor. According to him he had been the foreman, overseeing the workers. Elly had let him stay because his Mum had thrown him out after an argument. I was suspicious but the help moving the large boxes was welcome.

It did bother me that he was eating food that I'd paid for, using my bathroom again and he had even planted some trees in the garden. Elly said that they were his present to us but he had a weird obsession with them. He also seemed to be constructing something out of the rubbish in the garden. To me it was just him slipping further into insanity but whatever kept him occupied.

He didn't help when it was time to paint. He had to go on a pilgrimage with his friend. If you understand pilgrimage as a walk involving drinking then giving up when you realise that even though your fellow walkers are devout Christians they are not stupid enough to give you money for more booze. He returned to our house sullen but defiant. He had his excuses and watched on as I laboured. He kept walking through our bedroom while I was laying the

panelling. He would stand over me and offer up some pointless advice but mainly he was just getting dirt on the floor and Elly had to follow him around with a brush.

He vanished again when some guys picked him up in an old maroon BMW.

“He can’t stay here.” I told Elly.

“He isn’t hurting anyone.”

“He isn’t helping either and am sick of paying for him. I am not his mother, am not his keeper and he is a lazy cunt of a grown man.”

“Are you going to eat that.” She said pointing at a stacked burger.

“Yeah. Am hungry and I’ve earned it.” I said squashing it together.

The egg yolk ran over the thick slice of cheese and down onto the even thicker slab of meat that was my burger. I loved a good sandwich and after a day of hard labour I certainly thought that I’d earned the right to eat what I wanted. Elly and her brother sat back and supervised but I was a doer and when I was done doing it was time to eat.

“You are what you eat.” She said snobbishly.

“So you are cucumbers and ice-cream.” I said playfully.

She flipped me the bird and started to read a baby magazine.

“It can’t be true anyway.” I said.

“What can’t be?”

“That saying, you are what you eat. I haven’t eaten any sexy beasts recently.”

I put down my sandwich and rolled Elly onto the floor. Our new mahogany panelled floor. It seems stupid but having measured up and cut the pieces, laid them down and connected them finishing off the aesthetic with the skirting board, I felt really proud. Much more so than I ever had from work, more than winning football matches or anything else, I knew what it meant to build something now.

After I’d finished laying Elly on the newly laid floor we disassembled our bed and moved it into our bedroom. The walls which I had planned to be a deep purple were an off white pink. I don’t know what Dulux would have called it but it looked like a baby’s strawberry yoghurt. The bathroom was orange and green, the kitchen was the dark purple on two walls and coffee on the others and Andrew’s room was sky blue. The hall was yellow but a sunset yellow, not the horrible yellow like the village church.

We slept well that night and the next day was dedicated to tiling. The bathroom was more difficult than the kitchen as it already had the toilet and shower installed so I needed to use the rotary saw to cut the tiles. It was fun but when the tile chipped up and nicked your skin it hurt like a muther fucker. I needed the protective goggles as well because a few times it

would have caught me in the eye. I had read a lot about how to lay tiles on the internet and had also spoken to my Dad and Scott about it but I still managed to fuck up my first attempt. It took me much longer to chisel the mess I'd made back up and flatten the surface than it did for me to lay it correctly.

You live and you learn though. Mistakes made add wisdom.

It was nice to return to work and my sore limbs needed the rest. Marvin returned to my house and spent the week with Elly but there had been no progress on the construction of the kitchen or anything else when I returned on Friday afternoon. He had added to his weird structure in the garden and it now began to look like a fort.

I was king of DIY though, I could have published a book on it. I would have left the pages blank and sold it with a pen. I was relishing building my kitchen and was glad when Marvin left, leaving me, Krueger and Elly alone. The three of us worked in unison putting the cupboards together. Krueger must have thought it was too easy as he kept nicking my screwdriver, that or he wanted to do it all by himself.

The self assembly stuff from IKEA was a disappointment though. I opened the boxes and the pieces just laid there, self assembly my arse. No you needed the DIY king and helpers. The cupboards took time but were essentially easy, joining the separate units together was harder. A few doors might have gone on the wrong way round the first time and a few handles were screwed into the wrong place but it was all fixable. The worktop, heavy as it was, slotted neatly on top and fixed into place smoothly enough. The real indomitable bitch was cutting the hole for the sink to fit in.

Measuring the dimensions was an art form in itself so I gave myself a little wiggle room. I drew out the oval and drilled enough holes to get the jigsaw in and keep it on track. It was hard work forcing the jigsaw around bends and I broke a few blades as it thrust into the two inch thick MDF.

I would never have guessed that was the easy part. I slid in the sink only to realize that the wood had cut at an angle. I got out the sand paper but it wasn't something that could be rubbed away easily. I fired up the jigsaw again and tried slicing off thin layers, it was like trying to peel a potato with a hedge trimmer. A more experienced craftsman might have done a better job but for me it was a game of attrition.

I conquered the hole and celebrated as I slide the sink into its resting place. The battle was won but the war wasn't over. I had to fix the pipes and secure the sink into position. I had to slide inside the awkward space underneath the sink, my back and legs on the kitchen floor, my neck and head uncomfortably raised onto a hard wooden pillow. I reached up and

fixed one part of the sunken basin into place only for another part to pop out. Krueger must have felt my frustration because just as I was ready to hand a beat down to the insubordinate sink he climbed up on my chest and gave me a very unwelcome wet kiss. The extra strain on my already sore neck encouraged me to give up for a bit and take the little guy for a walk.

The break was what was needed and everything slotted into place at the first attempt upon our return. Next I went to help Elly with the wardrobes that she had been trying, unsuccessfully to build. I was crouched over on the floor assembling one when a large side piece slipped from the wall where Elly had perched it and cut a chunk out of my back.

I jumped up and hopped around swearing like a sailor. I finally calmed myself down and found a tea towel to press against it. I wet the tea towel but it wasn't enough so I looked in the freezer for something cold to hold against my wound. Frozen peas were always the best and when I ran or jogged regularly I'd always keep a bag of frozen peas handy to numb any niggles I picked up.

I was upset that I had bleed on my new floors but then I saw Elly balled over with her face buried in her hands. It sounded like she was crying.

“Am ok, it's just a bit of blood. I might need a few stitches.”

I put my arm on her to comfort her.

Comfort her?

I was the one bleeding!

I lifted her head and saw her teary red face. She was crying but only because she was laughing so hard.

“Glad I could amuse you. Take a look at it.” I said removing the tea towel.

“Is ok.” She said between snorts of laughter.

I had to drink some beer to numb the pain. The wardrobes could wait. After a couple of cans and a shower I proceeded to make my way into bed and collapse until it was time to go back to Warsaw and work. I admired my handiwork before I left. Slowly, screw by screw, this house was becoming my home.

## Chapter 28

It was a Saturday morning and me and Elly had been preparing for a barbeque. There were some things that were missing so I headed off to a local shop to get them. The one at the end of our street didn't have the type of cheese that Elly 'needed' so I went a little further and

got the correct mountain cheese for the barbeque. On my way back I heard shouting, 10 am on a Saturday morning, what lovely neighbours I thought.

As I got closer to our house I suspected the family across from us but as I entered my garden I knew I was wrong. The shouting was from inside our house. I rushed in to find Marvin stood over his pregnant sister, shouting down at her. I put myself in between them and told him to shut up.

I turned to Elly who was sobbing so hard her face had turned red and asked what was going on.

“He says we can’t have party.”

“Fuck him, it’s our house we will have a party.” I said definitely.

“Not your house English. Moj Tata’s house.”

My Daddy’s.

My dead, cheating Daddy’s.

“Ignore him baby. He is just jealous because he doesn’t have any friends. He doesn’t have anything and we have it all.”

I walked Elly into our kitchen and returned to preparing snacks for our guests.

What kind of animal would reduce their pregnant sister to tears?

He stomped back off upstairs and turned on his radio.

“He can’t do that to you. I won’t allow it.” I said to Elly. “He gets a few passes because he is your brother and you love him but I won’t let him hurt you or Andrew.”

“He is fine. He only shout.” She said still wiping the tears away from her eyes.

“It isn’t fine. He is unstable, he is mental. I don’t want him here. Tomorrow he has to go.”

“Go where?”

“Back to your Mother’s, where ever. We are a young couple starting our family. We don’t need him here making life difficult.”

We continued our preparations and the Neanderthal stayed out of the way. Our guests arrived and we made our way outside for a pleasant barbeque. Things were winding down when he decided that he would emerge and attempt to lure one of Elly’s friends to his lair. It didn’t go well and he appeared to be drunk, intoxicated at least and I wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d been huffing gas.

The lady in question had brought her sponsor this time and he was the perfect man to deal with her flirtatious nature as he had a military background. He quickly put Marvin in his

place and he scattered back to his hole. It made me laugh and when we were cleaning up he returned.

“You think that was funny English piggy?” He snorted from the top of the stairs.

“Yes. Yes I do. You are a fucking dick and a bully. You bully your Mum, your pregnant sister and your Grandparents. You aren’t a hard man, you are a freak.” I stood there expectantly with my garbage bag in one hand and a plastic fork in the other.

“I am more man than you English piggy.” He then emitted a squealing grunt that had to be heard to be believed.

I couldn’t help but laugh and as I did he came stomping down the stairs and Elly tried to come between us. I stepped in front of her and my child.

I was ready.

I had grown up, as the middle child, with an older and a younger brother to practice fighting with. I didn’t mind getting punched in the face.

Anyway, bullies never like people who fight back.

He swung wildly and I pushed him against a wall. As he came at me with his gangly limbs flailing around he stuck his leg out and I charged him. I knew that he was taller than me but on his back that didn’t count for shit. I started to choke him.

“I can’t breathe.” He wheezed.

“I know. That’s why am doing it dickhead.”

After a moment I thought about Elly behind me and I took my forearm off his wind pipe. I raised my hand to pound his face in and then thought about using my elbows. I guess I had calmed down by then because I became quite rational.

“I can let you up, we can shake hands and this is done.” I said.

He spat at me and kept muttering about getting me.

Fucking A-Class moron.

“Or I can pound you into the insignificant shit that you are.”

“Stop!” Elly shouted.

She had waited long enough.

I told her to make him agree that it was finished. If he tried that shit again I would hurt him, he should have got up and thanked me for not hurting him then. Most of all he had to fuck off.

She relayed the message and he grudgingly agreed.

Dick.

I could take your fucking life. Stop being such a nob!



I returned to the kitchen and slide a knife into my pocket. I didn't believe this was over, with a smarter man it would have been. With a man who understood honour and pride it would have been. He was none of those things. He was a child trapped in an adult's body. He was anti-social, had major mental health problems and posed a deadly risk to my unborn child.

I waited for him to leave but he didn't.

"Is he fucking off or what?" I asked Elly.

"He is too drunk. He will go in the morning." She answered.

I was glad that I had put the locks on each door and went around and made sure any steal-able items were moved into our bedroom. We watched TV and went to sleep. It had been a stressful day and once the adrenaline had worn off I just collapsed into slumber.

At about 3 am I was back up as I heard him trying all the doors. Then he stomped back upstairs. I woke Elly up.

"He is trying to nick our stuff." I said and she was still half asleep.

She muttered something and ignoring the situation returned to her dreams. I still had the knife so I unlocked the door and switched on the hallway light. As I did he lunged at me knocking the knife to the floor.

He had been waiting in the shadows like a coward. I was awoken and it was fight time, me in my briefs against him all padded up in his boots and thick coat. If that's what he needed so be it. I had a lot of anger to work out. I was ready to knock someone's fucking block off. I was bleeding from a gash on my right arm where he had pushed me into the wall.

I didn't feel it.

I waited for him to pounce, the uncoordinated mess that was his attack would leave ample opportunities for a counter attack. Instead he started smashing things. He had a hammer and was swinging wildly at the wall, the tiles in the hall way and when Elly emerged he barely missed her and got it stuck in our bedroom door.

He ranted at her in Polish as I tackled him and started to wail away. I was caught in the doorway and couldn't land anything properly. I think I did myself more damage than I did him. Elly picked up the knife and as he squirmed away she handed it to me and he was gone into the night like a scalded dog.

I just looked at her.

She was more steeled than ever.

"I can't go on with this shit. He can't live here. Tomorrow we go to the police."

She agreed and we locked everything up. The house had an inside bolt so he wouldn't be back and even if he did he wouldn't get in. Krueger had been barking for a few minutes before he settled down but he was no good as a guard dog. Elly held onto him and we tried to go back to sleep. I went upstairs to examine the state of things but there wasn't enough light and it stunk. I held back on opening a window because I didn't want another route into the house.

When I returned to Elly she was still shaking but she was aware enough to complain about my arm bleeding onto the bed. I went to the bathroom and cleaned up. I returned to my family and we nodded off. I don't know how long for but we were rudely awoken by banging on our door.

It was the police and I could see Elly's brother stood behind them like a battered wife waiting for the police to remove her crazed husband so she could return to her children. I couldn't help but chuckle and we invited the police in for coffee and to make our complaint on the provision that Marvin wasn't allowed back in the house.

The police maintained that I was there illegally and he was a rightful owner. The assertion that he had threatened to kill our unborn child, his mumblings in Polish to Elly last night, didn't move the Police. They saw it as a domestic dispute and they explained that many domestic disputes occurred but few were prosecuted.

"Tell them about the hammer." I pleaded and Elly did.

"They said that he didn't hit us and just wanted to scare us. He said that you had a knife." Elly replied after conversing with the officers.

They were blatantly checking out her expanding cleavage as well.

"So what they want to wait until someone dies?" I asked.

The Police got very antsy at that remark and told Elly to tell me not to threaten him. They would arrest me.

"Not England now English." Said the bespectacled junior officer.

Great.

Incompetent, racist, pervert cops.

Just what village life needed.

Krueger emerged and started to bark at them.

Kids and dogs know douches on sight.

They rambled on in Polish laughing intermittently. When they had finally left Elly explained that Marvin had visited the police on several occasions to complain that Krueger was having parties in our garden and Marv wanted the police to intervene.

“Fucking nut job! What were they laughing at?” I asked.

“They think he is funny.” She said.

“Mentally ill, attempted murder is funny to them?”

That sums it up.

It wasn't funny to me and I found a deterrent. Pepper spray for me and Elly and a taser if that didn't stop him.

## Chapter 29

I was sat on the bus reading Keane: The autobiography, totally immersed, totally oblivious. It was one of those books that you got for Christmas, always meant to read but life kept getting in the way. Now with my hour long bus rides I had no excuses and I was glad. The book was almost as good as watching him play. He was the engine of the best midfield quartet ever assembled and for me one of the greatest players of all time.

The pure enjoyment I felt that afternoon, lost in a world of words, was unceremoniously interrupted by the unmistakable squeal of Marvin. I heard him behind me.

“Eak, eak.” He squealed.

I refused to turn around. Even if I couldn't concentrate on my book I wouldn't give him the pleasure of thinking he had interrupted me.

I sat there calmly thinking what to do. I thought about what his plans were. Was he going to attack me on a crowded bus?

I doubted even he was that stupid.

That went for the main road where the bus stopped. As I have mentioned before it is one of the busiest roads in Poland and even if cars were whizzing past the chance of someone seeing an attack and stopping would be pretty high. There was a short walk, maybe four or five hundred metres where he would have his chance to pounce uninterrupted. That would be what he was planning, I was sure of it.

I fingered around in my bag, locating the pepper spray I had bought for such an occasion. I had bought Elly a simple spray can but mine was disguised as a fountain pen so it didn't look strange when I took it out of my bag and slid it into my pocket. I started to feel smug, he didn't know what I had in my pocket and then I realised that I didn't know what he had in his pocket either. He had a hammer before and if he had brought it with him or worse I could be in real danger.

I thought about calling or texting Elly. I was sweating, I could feel my heart beating fast. The other noises faded away and all I heard was my heart thumping and his snorts. I decided Elly was safer at home and if Marv wanted to go at it again so be it.

I wanted to fuck him up.

There would be no mercy.

There would be no hand shaking this time.

Only the hand of justice, my justice, hard justice!

The stop approached quicker than I expected, I had been lost in my own thoughts. I struggled to get my watch off and into my bag along with my phone. I didn't want to damage them. I should have waited and gotten off at the following stop.

Thud!

My hands still in my bag, barely off the bus and whack, he had hit me.

Surely the passengers had seen, surely the bus driver would stop, the other passengers who got off would intervene, passing motorists whizzing by.

No.

He dragged me to the ground. I tried to free my hands but they had gotten caught up in my bag strap and coat sleeves. I was bucking and writhing around but I was a sitting duck. A more competent foe would have had me a bloody pulp but he seemed to be enjoying being on top of me too much.

Finally I flung him off and released my hands, smoothly whipping out the pepper spray. It sent him back in surprise and I wasn't about to chase into it. I stood my ground and he regrouped. He charged at me again, this time with a screwdriver in his hand. I didn't spray pepper at him this time though, I waited.

I waited until I could smell him then flashed the taser. It emitted a hideous echoing cackle and flash of blue light that danced between the metal prongs. He ran off into the traffic and I thought about giving chase but he still had a screwdriver and enough screws loose to use it.

I returned to my bag and coat then continued on my journey home. When I got in Elly couldn't believe it but my face was red, swollen and had a few cuts. There wasn't much blood and I just looked like a sunburnt fatty rather than a victim but it felt sore after the adrenaline wore off. When it did we were at the police station banging our heads against a brick wall. It was their legal and bureaucratic opinion that in a court of law it would come down to my word against his. They wouldn't then press any charges, they wouldn't even question him.

I took it as a sly wink to do him in big style. As long as there were no witnesses these fuckers didn't seem to care. Maybe they would if it was a foreigner on a Pole. I considered it as advice though, if no one was around to see it and there was no direct evidence then they wouldn't do too much.

Lazy? Yes.

Good for revenge? Yes.

There was justice to be served now. No eye for an eye bullshit. Just a simple truth, you hurt me and I have to hurt you worse. He hadn't done too much and after his weak physical showing the only thing I feared was his unpredictability. He was much taller than me but I knew I was stronger and the better fighter. That wouldn't count for shit if he stabbed me though.

There could be no rules, no law where this fucking nut job was concerned. He might have thought that his bully boy tactics would work, they had worked on the women of his family for so long but he had unleashed the beast.

I wasn't stupid though and I knew a war couldn't be won by bombs alone. Hearts and minds had to be swayed as well so I got Elly to invite her Mother and Grandparents to dinner that weekend.

The charm offensive went into overdrive and we hadn't heard a peep for numb nuts until the day of the meal. Elly's Granddad couldn't make it but Elly's Mother and Gran came. They were enjoying the tour of the house, cooing about the baby and other such things until we got to dessert and Marvin turned up playing the victim again.

I let him spin his story and Elly counter it while I prepared the desert. I had made a treacle sponge and was using my last tin of Ambrosia custard, that's how much this day meant to me. I wanted to show how fair I was so I offered to let him eat dessert with us. I could smile at him knowing his hate would betray him. He was bubbling over with jealousy and me being gracious just made it worse. If I thought he would have stayed I'd never have offered.

It worked like a treat and he went from being a victim to a hate spewing monster. It started with squealing and swearing and quickly escalated as I laughed it off. His Grandmother begged him to calm down and then he turned on her. She stood with her arms open trying to embrace him, telling him that she loved him and wanted to help him, in return he spat at her and threatened to burn down her hut as she slept.

There was a lot wrong with this guy. I had heard of some fucked up losers but even the dirtiest junkies loved their Gran. I was gobsmacked. I couldn't believe it. I had hoped to win

them over but Marvin was throwing them over the bridge and burning down at the same time. I had never witnessed such vitriol in the face of pure love.

Finally his Mother had heard enough and she stood up to confront him. He wasted no time in physically striking her. There he was, the man of culture, the man of honour against his frail Grandmother and own Mother. I stepped forward to intercede. The coward backed up and I saw Elly going for her pepper spray.

When I had given it to her she protested that she would never need it because he wasn't really dangerous. She might not have needed it to protect herself but for her family it was essential.

My thinking was that he had gotten away with cheap shoving me and I wanted him to hit me in front of witnesses so I could prosecute him. I wasn't afraid of his punches but he cowered away. Elly's Mum didn't though and as she flexed with a golf umbrella I wasn't sure who she was going to hit. It was her son, her attacker who felt the brunt of her anger.

He was off like a scalded dog once again.

Elly and her Mum wanted to go to the cops but her Granny was protesting. I suggested that he needed mental help and that was the route we should pursue. I knew the police weren't going to help us and it seemed caring and reasonable. It won me more brownie points to boot.

The idea that he would be confirmed as insane would be helpful in keeping him at arm's length as well. We all trundled off to the Police Station after washing up and we got a better response than we had previously. I knew it wasn't going to be a priority as they only begrudgingly agreed but the choice they had was to help commit him or arrest him for various threats and assaults. I guess that getting him committed was less paper work.

They weren't triangulating his cell and I doubt he even had any debit or credit cards to chase down so realistically even though they said they were going to look for him I think they were waiting until he turned up on their doorstep. It wasn't a bad strategy considering he used to pay them regular visits to complain about Krueger's garden parties. Time was an issue for me though. Bad pennies do turn up but normally they don't try to run you down.

I was returning home with Krueger after his evening walk and in the pitch black I was struggling to find the key to the padlock I'd bought to keep idiot out. It had been a good investment in terms of the fact that it actually kept him out. It wasn't such a hot idea in terms of the fact that while I was fumbling around with it I heard him revving up a car and start speeding towards me.

I quickened my unlocking and frantically dragged the dog into the garden before spinning around to lock the gate behind me. It was too late though and the car was upon me so I swung the gate outward into the street. It smashed into the bumper and rattled loudly.

I later found out that he had been staying with his Uncle from his Father's side of the family and this was the guy who'd given him the car as a gift. Well it was truly spoilt now and I pulled the gate back and swung it viciously into the front of the car a second time. I saw him sat in shock.

He started to reverse and I searched for artillery among the rubble left by the builders. There were plenty of useful projectiles and since I had locked the gate he wasn't getting in, I could stand their safely pelting him and the car if he tried anything. I noticed Elly at the window and most of our neighbours were probably watching too. They would have heard his wheels screech as he came at me, they would have heard the gate clang off the front of the car and if they hadn't heard those noises it is extremely doubtful that they would have heard a concrete slab land on the roof of his car.

I had been aiming for the windshield but either I was stronger than I thought or I had miss calculated how fast he was coming at me. I saw his spirit crushed under that slab. It left a dint in the roof but in his eyes, in his eyes there was a signal, a signal of realisation. He had come to have his way again but he wasn't prepared for me. No one had fought back with him until now and when I did he couldn't deal with it. He couldn't adapt his plan. He had no 'plan b'.

He thought he could hide out in the dark and mow me down.

That summed him up.

No spirit, no fight.

He had nothing to fight for.

I had Elly and Andrew. Something bigger than myself.

I continued to pelt him and he stopped to abuse me verbally when he should have fled. He ate a mouthful of sand for his troubles. Numb nuts couldn't even tell when he was beaten. I had told myself that I would show no mercy but he was so pathetic that it had stop being a challenge.

He wasn't nemesis material.

The pigs, or dogs as the call them in Poland, wanted to charge me with damage to the car but guess what fuckers it was his word against mine and he was been taken into a mental hospital.

I still can't believe how events unfolded and the end to the Marvin story isn't one which the Polish system can be proud of. Where ever you live and however much you think the people who run your government institutions are pains in the asses, you should be thankful that you weren't in my position, in Poland.

After a week of evaluation in the mental institute where he repeated his accusations against my dog, myself, my demon child, his mother and grandparents they released him. Not because they didn't think he was mental. They had grave concerns. He had an unhealthy obsession with his sister who he referred to as his 'honey love', persistently had delusional fantasies and talked about 'the bad people or the bad voices' who made him say things that he didn't want to.

The stellar fucking professionals who took the big picture view and proclaimed that they could only declare him coo-koo if someone, namely his mother, would take legal responsibility for him.

Now I know the government don't want to be over burdened with frivolous cases but this was a matter of life and death. He was a danger to himself and others. They wanted a woman to take care of a vicious, mentally ill individual who had threatened to kill her. After his release he ran a woman down on a zebra crossing. The beat up car that his Uncle gave him that he would have used on me finally claimed a victim.

Everyone's nerves were fraying.

Every day I went to work looking over my shoulder then I spent the whole day at work worrying about Elly and Andrew. Elly's Mum had moved into Andrew's room as Marvin had broken into her house out in the village to steal food and money. He had destroyed her possessions but again the police wouldn't act. There was no such thing as a restraining order at that time in Poland and he would tail her on the roads to her work then stake her out while she worked. Elly wasn't afraid to leave the house but me and her Mother were both afraid for her. Maybe she was just being strong or maybe she was too stupid to recognize the risk that he posed.

According to the police he was still a partial owner of the house and could come and go as he pleased. He had turned up with the police one day and they opened the lock on the gate, well snipped it open but when Elly told them he couldn't come in they stayed while he looked around and left. I shudder to think what would have happened if they hadn't stayed but then again they were stupid enough to give him access.



Elly's Mother called the Uncle where Marvin was staying but he wouldn't listen to her. Elly called him and told him the truth. He had already heard Marvin's lies and while he kept Marvin away they both phoned the Mother with threats.

The insanity of it all was that it was as if it was the government, the police and the state institutions that were pushing this along. Nudging it forward to a disaster where someone would end up dead.

I had a plank of wood by the door, we had changed the locks, I carried a knife with me in my bag and the taser just for good measure but I still didn't feel safe.

I was starting to think the unthinkable.

### Chapter 30

"Dude you are the worst pimp ever!" I said walking into Kins' office.

"Ok. Go on." He chuckled.

"I asked for a well read bitch and you gave me one with sunburn."

"Did it take you long to think of that one?"

"Just the tram ride over."

I had finally finished up with Minkins and Minkins as after the announcement that we were closing nobody had wanted to work their contract out. I sold the computers and vacated the offices early and was a free man. I had of course the work in the garden and the upstairs of the house to keep me busy but by and large I was free to amuse myself.

"Am glad you came in. I have an offer for you." Kins announced.

"You want me to work for you now?" I joked.

"Not me. For yourself." He wasn't joking.

He explained that many of his Polish customers pestered him about giving English lessons but he always refused. He asked me to consider doing what was called conversation classes. It sounded simple enough. I could talk in English but what would we talk about?

I had searched everywhere for what I considered a real job but the one thing that was really in demand in Poland was teachers. They called them native teachers. That use of 'native' again. At least if I set up my own company and co-operated with Kins I wouldn't have someone trying to tell me how to speak my own language. I had actually had a few meetings with school owners and it's possible that I met the worst three but in truth it's unlikely. Even the English guys who worked at schools were treated like school children.

The Polish system seemed to call for students to be shouted at when they made a small error. I didn't feel comfortable with that. I was learning Polish and understood how hard it was learning a foreign language. I certainly wouldn't have appreciated someone shouting at me.

I agreed that I would go and meet Kins' client to discuss teaching them. First I needed to establish my own company. Luckily my favourite translator had some experience setting up a company and he came along to show me how it was done.

In short it was done by waiting around a lot.

You started by going to one office to apply.

Then after they posted you their response, you returned to tell them that they spelt your name wrong, even though you had provided them with your passport. Of course it was my mistake great lord of the public office. I am sure that my passport or myself misspelt it and not you.

Then you took the little piece of paper with the all important stamp on it to another office across town. There you waited in a queue to be given a ticket to go to a desk where you were handed another form, this one was six pages long. You filled it in then once again queued to get your ticket to see the person who gave you the form.

Once you got there they told you that the original piece of paper which had been given to you with the all important stamp on had another error on it and that you must return to that office all the way across town to discover the person, the one person in the whole building who dealt with what you needed was on holiday. So after waiting two weeks you return to be told that due to that persons holiday there was a back log of work and you would be seen in three days time at exactly 3:15 pm. This is Poland though so they use military time.

After having started this process a young man you are able to pick up your toupee on your way to get your final piece of paper which comes with a different stamp. All the time the lovely people you meet tell you about the government's plans to streamline the process. That will be nice. It would have been better if they already had done that instead of costing me my sanity.

"What's your sign?"

"What?" I said confused.

I was sat waiting in the foyer of the accountancy firm that Kins had asked me to teach. The company's lovely secretary was reading her horoscope and wanted to tell me my future. I have to say the idea that there are only twelve personality types and those in one set have the same day didn't seem logical to me. The idea that in the vastness of Space, with galaxies

upon galaxies rotating around just to align on a wet Tuesday morning to tell an office worker in Warsaw that she should watch out because today a stranger would bring her good fortune was a bit much.

“Oh, I don’t believe in that stuff.” I said.

“Me too.” She replied.

She smiled at me, put her magazine down and returned to her computer. A group of four men in their thirties and forties came to greet me. They ushered me out of their second floor office and up to a conference room on the floor above. They all introduced themselves and then I introduced myself and I asked them what they were looking for in a teacher. The blond guy who looked the youngest answered first.

“Am interested in Africa and charity work.” He said.

“Well I don’t know much about either but am sure I could find a lot of stuff on the internet. Is that what the rest of you are interested in too?”

“I am more interested in discussing the International Accounting Standards.” The bald one answered.

The others screwed their faces up and it seemed that a consensus was going to be met.

“So you want individual lessons?”

More hours, more money.

“I want a woman.” Said the man with the obvious jet black dye job.

He then got up and left.

His partners just sat there stunned and the last guy who I hadn’t heard from just looked at me.

“What about you? What do you want?” I asked.

“Anything. I need practice and talk. Maybe football, maybe movies, some news. Everything is ok for me.”

“Well it is certainly different. Is there anything that you all want to discuss today?”

“No. It is ok. When will we start lessons?” Asked the amenable one.

That was that.

My first clients.

We ended up agreeing that we’d go over email templates, presentations, go through the International Financial Reporting Standards handbook and practice writing letters but the conversation aspect was still a point of debate. It was easy to pick up new clients, well actually accept new clients because the next day a friend of the bald accountant called and that snowball just kept on rolling. Friends of friends, neighbours and colleagues contacted me

about private lessons. People were more than willing to pay cash in hand and invite you into their homes or workplace so I didn't need an office. I still had the flat at Granny Towers but I only welcomed two or three clients there for our first meeting and then explained my situation.

Nobody could believe that I was staying in Poland or that Elly wasn't blonde. It seemed true that most ex-pats married Barbie girls but everywhere you go people like to file things away in neat categories. People, clients seemed more at ease when I explained that I was staying in Poland for a woman. I don't know why they found it so hard to believe that an Englishman would make it his home, it was really starting to grow on me. There was something very refreshing about walking down unfamiliar streets, like a permanent holiday.

Any time any clients told me how hard English was I shared my stories about trying to learn Polish. This was a really useful tactic and helped me put them at ease. I would purposefully mispronounce words or highlight things that made me laugh that they wouldn't have seen. Humour and patience were the key tools to building a rapport.

I started an online course teaching me how to teach English. I learnt that there were more than three tenses. Apparently there isn't just the past, present and future but a multiple of things called the past perfect and the past perfect continuous. The things we take for granted about English such as articles, no not those in magazines but the a's, an's and the's, are really difficult and have very specific rules of use.

Polish doesn't have equivalents so when translating thoughts in their heads into English they wouldn't use them. Where I might say that 'an elephant is too big of an animal to fit into the car', they would say 'elephant is too big animal to go in car'. Also you start to recognize such things as idioms, phrasal verbs and collocations. The worst thing I noticed when reading communication from English people to my Polish clients was the use of partial idioms.

A client was completely flummoxed by a distribution manager who sent her an e-mail saying, 'we shouldn't count our eggs,' omitting the part about only not counting them before they'd hatched. While I recognized the saying straight away the poor sales manager was left searching for other possible meanings.

After only a few weeks I was up to thirty hours of meetings a week. That sounds like a part time job but considering my preparation and travel it was closer to a sixty hour week. After the relative calm of managing the call centre I was too knackered to even try with the fucking mess of a garden. Even when I wasn't teaching I was doing my course online, learning about gerunds and modal verbs, about linking clauses and tag questions, all the things that you can't remember if someone ever taught you but you do subconsciously.

The hardest thing was not trying to make every student learn the same thing just to cut down on preparation time. It was very appealing to find one topic and make every lesson that week about it. Every client truly was unique and things needed to be fine tuned to their ability. When it was late on a Sunday night and I was tired I could have just given in to the laziness. I had heard an old man in the Bee Keeper Inn say a million times that if you only had a hammer every problem looked like a screw.

I was determined to be the best equipped teacher there was in Poland and when a problem required a screwdriver I'd have enough about me to see whether I need to use my flat head, crossed or even one of those fancy started bits you got in your IKEA toolbox. If I was going to teach I was going to be a fucking good one. I probably read more of the BBC website than the editors did.

I was my own man though and I was working again.

### Chapter 31

As the pregnancy moved along I knew I'd have to overcome my fear of driving on the Polish roads. It was a dangerous endeavour but realistically I needed to learn how to do it for Andrew's sake.

We had looked into buying a second hand car in Poland but you would have thought you were buying people's first born for the ridiculous prices they set. I had seen enough and knew that it would actually be cheaper to buy a car in the UK and drive it over. This plan had one obstacle though and that was that all cars on Polish roads must be left hand drives.

We contacted a garage that dealt with cars from the VW family and asked about the cost of importing and converting a Skoda Octavia. I had grown up making jokes about Skoda's but their reinvention was complete and the Octavia was the perfect family car. Luckily it turned out that the price of conversion was extremely cheap.

That in itself worried me.

The last hurdle was an administrative one and we had to get plates to register the car before we actually got the car. I know it's completely ass backwards but if public officials didn't make such stupid rules why would people bribe them?

I started scouring through the internet sites selling second hand Skoda Octavia's. The name Skoda in Polish is very funny or at least ironic as it's extremely close to accident. In times past that might have been where it originated from, the Poles did like to name things

after brands; Adidasy meant trainers and Rover (spelt with a 'w' instead of a 'v' but that is their pronunciation) meant bike but after all Skoda was a Czech name not a Polish company.

Then just as I was organizing finance for it Elly turned up at the house in a brand spanking new one.

"Nice. Where did you get that then?" I asked thinking she had rented it, a bit wasteful but it would be useful until we got ours.

"Mama bought." She said cheerily.

What?

Your Mum bought a new version of the car we wanted?

I know in Poland, especially the village, everything is a fucking competition but this was a bit much.

"For us." She added.

"Your Mum can't afford this. We can't afford this." I said.

"It's ok. It's on credit."

Well not really ok.

It was a hell of a gift and honestly not one we needed. We did need a car but buying a new car wasn't a sensible use of a limited budget. We still needed nearly everything for Andrew and the last list I made was four A4 pages long.

"Come on. You drive." She said throwing the keys at me.

"I don't want to." I really didn't.

It was one thing to jump into a car that I owned and had paid for but to climb into a car that Elly's Mum had bought and couldn't afford was too much pressure.

"Is it because the stick is on the other hand?" She asked as she stalked over to me.

"Not at all. I have things to do here. I can't lose the light. Maybe tonight when am done we can go for a little drive." And the roads would be quieter.

She agreed and parked the car in the garden. The rubbish in the garden was an issue to deal with and I still had no idea how we were going to fix it but the rest of the house was looking nice.

It wasn't long before I took it out and as the darkness descended the roads cleared and I felt more comfortable behind the wheel. It felt strange at first and I did put my hand down into the door when I tried to change gear but I quickly got used to using my right instead of my left hand. Roundabouts were easy enough as was driving on the opposite side, I guess it helped sitting in the wrong seat. If I'd been on the right side of the road in a car with a steering wheel on the right it would have been stranger than having the wheel on the left.

The biggest difference was that the person on the right had the right of way. Not the person on the main road but the person on the right and it confused the fuck out of me. It was bad enough that I needed my headlights switched on during the day but the idea that I could be driving along and then someone popped up to the right of me and he had the right of way. Also during the many traffic jams I learnt that unless you were bumper to bumper some arsehole would stick their car into your lane. They would indicate after they'd moved.

Polite.

I knew why there were so many accidents with drunk drivers. It was because the normal drivers were complete shits. I got so paranoid and nervous because I couldn't trust the fuckers that I got a nervous twitch and started to steer out of crashes that might never have happened.

The speed limit was lower than in England but you wouldn't have guessed it the way the drivers raced between traffic jams. I had a little experience from being in the car with Monika but where as I liked to slowly approach a set of changing lights to drift through, Poles would race up, screech to a halt then tear away again.

Everything was 100 miles per hour or 160 kilometres per hour and then full on brakes. I understood why they changed their tyres for the winter and summers, they thought they were all F1 drivers and liked the pit stops. Elly seemed as nervous a passenger as I was a driver, that could be said for me when she was driving as well. She seemed to wait until she got into the car until she'd start calling people. Sometimes she'd call people just to say hello.

Poles loved to drive and talk. Blue tooth or hands free where alien concepts and if they weren't talking they were eating or smoking. Nobody could just driver. It was like they required a distraction. The intricate ballet of constantly shifting lanes wasn't enough, they needed more danger.

I protested constantly about all the things that drove me crazy when I was driving but Elly and other Poles just shrugged it off. It wasn't that they justified those actions. They merely shrugged them off as if I was city boy trying to tame a horse to ride. It was the danger of the road. I think the Brits do the same with business, they shrug at people who don't understand finance or contracts.

You can't work PowerPoint?

Ha.

You learn that shit in the uterus.

For Poland they had that attitude to dangerous driving.

I had been invited to be a speaker at a conference in a place called Wrocław. It was in the south east of Poland close to the Czech boarder. It was a conference on accountancy

standards and the guys I was teaching had recommended me. I was going to give a forty five minute speech, well, presentation on how to present your findings in English.

I was excited as it was the first such event I'd ever been invited to and I saw it as an opportunity to spread my wings. I wasn't only going to be a teacher, now I was a speaker, a consultant. The only problem was that I'd have to drive there. I could have gotten the train, I should have gotten the train but I didn't.

I planned out my journey and knew that once I got out of Warsaw I had to get onto Route 8 or a road called the E67. It sounded like an artificial ingredient listed on a pack of gummy bears. The estimated time of the drive was six hours for about three hundred and fifty kilometres. That was about 60 kmph or about 40 mph for the journey. I never found out though.

Before I even hit the artificial flavourings highway I got a call saying the whole thing was cancelled due to insufficient ticket sales.

I couldn't believe that they had left it so late to tell me. I was sure that they knew the ticket sales had sucked for weeks but it was more the thought of being just a teacher again that depressed the fuck out of me.

I made my way back to Elly a sad but competent driver on the Polish roads.

## Chapter 32

Elly informed me that in Poland you couldn't just leave handfuls of invitations at your parent's house for them to distribute as they visited people and people visited them. You had to make an appointment and special journey to give out your fancy little invites. Since they knew you were coming the relatives would prepare some vodka, cake and tea. It wasn't helpful when you were trying to trim down to look good in your wedding photos.

I was so happy that my Mum was taking care of everything in England. I gave her the addresses of my friends and let her design the invites that she wanted. She did show me prototypes on Skype but I didn't care. I also knew that as much as she asked for my opinion it was more about confirmation than any artistic input.

Every mother feels that their child's wedding day is their big day as well. There is no longer the passing of the guard at wedding ceremonies, fathers may walk their daughters down the aisle still but they are no longer giving them away. Normally Daddy's little girl will be all grown up and will have given herself away to more than one man before she says I do.



Traditions persist against better reason, against evolution and common sense but they give comfort to others so we all partake in them.

The mass choreography of societal life is so delicate that whatever stage of life you're at you are part of it. It may be that you're learning or teaching, subverting or converting others. It is all the same and when individuals want affirmation of their lives they turn back to the age old steps and dance the dance of those before. Everybody dances along, some counting out the steps as they go and others free-styling because they haven't quite mastered it yet.

I didn't care but I practised my rhumba all the same. I considered Andrew our bond. I didn't see the purpose of paying for everyone to come together to be bored for an hour so they could have an excuse to drink.

Screw the boring bit and then we can afford more drink at the after party!

I knew that wouldn't work and I was scared of my Mum. She wanted a party and to get a party you had to have done something. She was from a different generation and had different rules. I would have thought that enough people had ignored their golden bands to render them worthless but even for Elly, whose father was a cheat, those golden rings signified so much more.

I thought we should get tattoos.

That would have been cooler but Elly vetoed it.

I nearly suggested that rings could be removed easier than tattoos but I thought better of it. I actually had a little speech prepared about how a golden ring had never stopped a pair of knickers falling off or a dick finding its way to somewhere it shouldn't have been. I would have finished by telling Elly that only love and commitment prevented straying but she was very sensitive on the topic and veering away from her strict line meant that you were actually cheating. She was paranoid about it and saw opportunities for me to cheat that I was oblivious too. She noticed women flirting long before I did and her spidey senses usually tingled then she unleashed the beast.

I had planned our Saturday perfectly and we would have been able to hit a lot of houses if we had only spurned a second drink of tea or second slice of cake. Elly agreed in principle but as we started at her Aunt and Granny's house we quickly fell behind schedule. The weather was on top of me and I was taking an entire pharmacy for my cold. This meant I wasn't pushing Elly as aggressively along our timeline, I was in fact silently enjoying the heady mixture of whatever rocket fuel I'd bought. This wasn't Lemsip or Benecol.

On the way out we stopped by Krueger's kin to say hello and stroke the flea bags. The fresh air only seemed to worsen my haze and I began to think the goodbye vodka wasn't

mixing so well with one or more of my medications. I really don't remember much of that meeting and the rest of the day is still a blur that I had to piece together over time and with the recollections of Elly and Kins.

I know that we visited an old lady but we didn't leave the car as we were surrounded by guard dogs. It was only Elly's Grandma's friend anyway. We argued about why we were inviting her. She wasn't close to Elly and it seemed absurd to me.

"What does she do anyway?" I asked Elly.

"She prepares animals for shows."

"What kind of shows?"

I thought about it and discounted the likelihood it was for television shows.

"Like they choose the best one." She replied after a moment's thought.

"She grooms animals then?"

Ha, I laughed to myself.

"What?" She asked.

"Does she ever do baby goats?" I said setting her up.

"I don't know, why?" She asked confused.

"Just wondered if I could ask her about grooming kids."

It seemed much funnier under the influence of dubious medication. We continued on our way and I began to make a mental tally of our guests and our cost. The Polish wedding was a real treat. We as the hosts put on free food, six courses and treats for the tables for in between the official dishes as well as free alcohol. The rule was a bottle of vodka for each guest and then a few bottles of wine for each table. The whole thing was a good excuse for free food and drink. One of our neighbours in the village invited themselves and their family. I went fucking mental with Elly when she told me.

That happened later.

What happened next that day probably set me up for my later problems. We visited the Uncle who had rubbed his belly at me, the one with the St. Bernard and the whiskey. I partially recall trying to explain my medical predicament then giving in and drinking heavily with my new favourite Uncle.

On my way out I told his daughter, the mother of the little boy, that if she was single one of my friends from England would be happy to look after her. Elly told me that I said that he liked girls with big boobs, it is completely possible but I don't remember it.

The next journey could have lasted minutes or hours because I was hanging out of the car window like a dog. It didn't work and when we arrived at Elly's friend's house, my favourite

Ken doll was chopping wood in the yard. The meeting didn't last very long though as upon my entrance I slipped down the stairs and straight into a tray of cakes.

This is where Kins filled in a blank for me because when I went to the bathroom to clean myself up I apparently called him and told him of my escape attempts. I think I had well and truly lost it at this point. I just remember waking up and feeling great. I had a hole the size of the Tatra mountains in my memory but physically I was great. Elly informed me that I'd been ribbing Ken doll with a load of farmer jokes. Again I wasn't sure if it was true but some of the stuff sounded like me.

I allegedly said that all farmers were gay because they spent so much time with their hands on cocks and asses, something about bulls charging that either Elly misremembered or wasn't funny when I said it and I also accused all farmers of being untrustworthy because they are known for spreading shit.

I made myself laugh anyway and it seemed that everyone else took me in good spirits. That or Poland really does love a drunk.

We spent the next few weekends handing out the invites but nothing as memorable happened. All that did happen was Elly devolved into a whining, self-centred princess. I wasn't sure if it was pregnancy or just that she had read too many fairytales and expected her English gentleman to take care of her.

Polish women where a paradox in that sense; I remembered seeing a father looking after his daughter during the day and Elly saying how sweet he was. I asked her if that was what she wanted me to be like and she sternly said no, it was the middle of the day and that he should have been at work. It was funny at the time but gender roles were used when it suited her. Then when it was time for cooking or cleaning it was time to talk about the rights of women or our relationship being a partnership.

She had given up worrying about spending my money. As 'our' money could be spent on anything she liked. I had gotten a second card made for her so she could get essentials when she needed them but soon she was pestering me about seeing my company accounts. I refused and she accused me of all kinds of things.

I needed to keep that clean and I had hired an accountant so I wouldn't get into any legal trouble. The last thing I needed was Elly siphoning off funds to pay for gifts for her Mum. She kept telling me how generous her Mum had been and how she needed to pay her back by buying her shit at IKEA.

It's not generous if you buy her shit too.

It's even less generous when she won't get the fuck out of Andrew's room and encourages you to do fuck all.

Elly had slowly learnt to cook and clean without her Mother but once she had moved in Elly couldn't even boil the kettle. She began to neglect Krueger, the dog she had adored only weeks before and one day she hadn't locked the gate and he got out. Unfortunately he had eaten brass balls and thought he'd pick a fight with a gang of dogs.

The police compelled me to go and clean him up from where they'd mauled him. I had to use marigolds as the blood was still fresh. I scooped up intestines and organs then buried him in the garden.

Elly played the grieving widow but she was the one to blame.

As I dug down into the rotten earth, tears streaming down my face I wondered if this was going to be my life. Me cleaning up Elly's mistakes, her Mother consoling her, probably filling her head with nonsense about men, husbands, fathers and somewhere in there Andrew would have to find his place.

I was reconsidering the teaching even though I had passed my online course easily. Lessons were also easy enough and I could feel myself improving but I missed sales. I don't know what I thought I could do.

I knew what was coming up though and I was looking forward to going home immensely.

I was looking forward to the time away from Elly.

That didn't feel right but hell not a lot felt right.

I was at the end of the tornado's spin.

I hadn't planned any of this. I had just been hoisted up into the sky, spun around and dumped down in a shit suburb of Warsaw.

There was the European Championships to look forward to a few years down the line but that seemed about it.

Except for Andrew.

He was all I could think about on the flight home.

### Chapter 33

"You have a visitor." My Mum said entering without knocking.

I loved being home and getting to see everyone but the conversation was always the same and I just didn't have the answers. Every time I had that conversation I realised a little bit more how hopeless my dilemma was.

"Nice to see you. How's it going?" They'd say.

"Fine." I'd lie. "Nice to see you too." That was true, usually.

"How's Elly and the bump?" They'd ask.

"Great. Still inside." That was about as much as I knew. I didn't understand the Polish doctors and Elly only said everything was fine.

"How long are you back for?" They'd ask.

"Just a couple of days. Got a meeting with my boss then back to the renovations."

This would lead to them remembering their first house, a DIY mishap or something along those lines and I'd be back to my thoughts. I didn't have much to say. I didn't know what to do. I think that I wanted to ask for help but I wasn't sure what specifically anyone else could do. It was on me.

It was all on me.

I had taken the journey from my parent's house to Leeds many times before but that day it seemed different. Things moved at the normal speed but the sound was muffled, like underwater.

I walked down to Bolton Road in my suit. I saw the other people waiting in line for the bus. So organized, so patient. I thought about the Polish system where as soon as the doors opened everybody scrapped and pushed themselves forward, even before the poor people who wanted to alight had a chance to get off. The bus pulled up and everybody filed on in an orderly fashion, paid the driver and took their seat.

It was a simple but comforting act.

It reminded me I was back home.

By the time we reached the city centre I had noticed my strange audio deficiency and it didn't worry me, it felt nice. Everything slows down under water. I strode past the hotel where my cousin had been married, down past large arches where trains or horses had been kept once upon a time. Out towards the retail park where sports shops and discount retailers sat comfortably with McDonalds in their car park. Before you reached that evolution of the market system you happened upon a train station. Here I caught a train to Leeds.

I walked up to the desk and asked the short fat woman the price, maybe she was some Pole's aunt, she had the figure for it. Bafflingly the ticket to Leeds Centre cost more than the ticket to the station after Leeds Centre.

“Is that right?” I asked confused.

“Is wot rit pet?” She said without looking up.

“To Burley Park is cheaper than Leeds Centre?”

“Aye ‘ts seem so.” She sounded as surprised as me.

“I’ll have a return to Burley Park then please.”

“Here you are love, don’t forget to change at Leeds Centre though.”

No, of course not.

Once I got to Leeds I had a brisk but memorable walk up from the train station to my old work. I always loved Leeds and there was a polite hustle and bustle to the city. People watched other people and tried to guess which way they were going. In Poland people didn’t watch you, they stared at you. They hunted you down and zoomed in on you, changing path then diverting at the last moment. It was disconcerting at first but you got used to it. I knew better than to stare in Yorkshire though.

I walked past law offices and banks, past a Church and a hospital, finally making my way to Minkins and Minkins HQ. The guard was still the same, nothing appeared to have changed.

That wasn’t true though.

Mr and Mrs Minkins had left the business in the capable hands of Stephen Coutts and it was Mr. Coutts I was set to meet. I told Todd, the guard and he checked the system. It spat out the appropriate answer because I was granted an all access pass and pointed in the direction of the lifts.

I saw familiar faces and nodded a few times but it seemed as if I was the forgotten man. Mr. Coutts hadn’t moved offices but had taken Minkins old secretary, Cheryl. She offered me a seat and coffee. I took the seat and refused the coffee. I felt plenty alert. My hearing was back and the nerves began to kick in.

Coutts appeared from nowhere, well probably his office but I didn’t notice him until he was stood over me. I was playing on my phone as had become my habit.

“Please come in James.” He said.

I entered the room and sat in a comfortable but not luxurious chair. I remembered Minkins office and Coutts was more business like. His chair was steadfast, no rocking or bobbing for him.

“I have this for special occasions.” He said holding up a bottle of whisky. “Sixteen year old single malt. She’s old enough to fuck.”

He poured the 16 year single malt whisky and I settled down.

“Taste your future.” He said offering me a tumbler.

I took a drink and liked the idea of drinking a 16 year single malt. It didn't taste like a future I wanted.

“Are we celebrating?” I asked.

“We could be.”

Could be?

What did that mean?

Oh yeah that meant he had an offer for me and flying all this way meant it was either going to be amazing or a shit task. I didn't know him well enough to decide what the whisky signified.

Was he buttering me up?

“I guess you have an offer for me then.” I said.

“No offer.” He replied.

Oh shit.

He was buttering me up.

Scratch that.

This fucker was jamming me up.

No offer.

That meant he was going to inform me of something. It couldn't have been that I was staying in England. That would be too ordinary. Too mundane for all the pomp.

What the fuck could it be?

“You have impressed us so much we are promoting you and am happy to tell you all about it.”

He sounded confident.

He felt in control.

“To what?” I asked perplexed.

“Country manager.”

“I thought I was a country manager?”

I was wasn't I?

“Of a real fucking country.” He answered.

Like I'd been managing an insignificant experiment.

God I had.

I had been a guinea pig for these fuckers and now he had decided I wasn't a guinea pig but a fucking tiger. A hungry tiger and he was going to let me play with the big boys.

“Where?” I asked.

“We’re going to base you in Dubai but you might be given one of the territories, regions or whatever they fucking name themselves there.”

He seemed to be getting annoyed. He gulped down his whisky and poured himself another. He motioned at my glass and when I didn’t move, I didn’t know what to do, he topped it up.

“What about Poland?”

I tried to balance the whisky that was practically overflowing. I lunged down and took a gulp as if I were a gull diving for a meal. Urrgh, I might not be a whiskey drinker after all.

It seemed that was that.

I was asking myself a rhetorical question and a beige folder on his desk held my future. One possible scenario for my future at least.

I remembered seeing a map of Dubai once, I think it was Dubai anyway. It showed a huge airport that took up about a quarter of the map, Metro stops scattered around the city. I had become accustomed to Warsaw’s single line Metro and had forgotten about the possibility of traversing a whole city that way. I remembered it being on the sea, that meant a beach and I knew it was as hot as hell.

Dubai sounded great.

I also knew somewhere in my mind that they had strict laws and little drinking. A large ex-pat community wouldn’t have existed without drinking though and I was also sure that they wouldn’t all have converted to Islam. The money would be good.

“What about the money?” I asked hoping that my estimation would have been confirmed.

“Six figures.” He said smiling. “Tax free.”

That did sound nice.

Hell if Elly didn’t want to move I could fly back every weekend with that kind of cash.

“Free apartment as well.” He interrupted. “The perks over there are immense.”

It was too good to be true.

Had I James Williamson really been offered a six figure salary with a free apartment?

I think I had.

I know I had.

“I will have to discuss it with my fiancée.” I said trying not to sound too overjoyed. “We are expecting our first child.”

“How delightful.” He said clasping his hands. “That salary increase will really come in handy.”



He wasn't wrong.

We shook hands and I returned home, to my parent's house I should say. It would always be a home but it wasn't my home anymore. My home was with Elly and Andrew. Elly had made it perfectly clear before I left though.

She wouldn't move back to England.

She wanted to stay in Poland.

She wanted to live in Raszyn with her mother.

Dubai or diapers?

That was the choice that was presented to me.

I know I said I needed your help to decide but a real man, and I do think of myself as a real man, knows when it's time to step up.

Now is my time.

I am going to be a father and I am looking forward to fatherhood in the mother's land.