

XXXmas Box

Mark Staniforth

Smashwords Edition

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XXXmas Box

Hi, I'm Kola Kubes, and I love Christmas! When people ask me what it is that makes it so special, I tell them plain and simple - *Winter's Tale*. Folk may laugh but I still get goose-bumps every time I hear that song. It takes me back to the night I was curled up on the back seat of Wayne Thackeray's Datsun Cherry round the back of the Kwik Save, sucking on a post-shag Superking, head thumping to his hardcore acid house. All of a sudden his tape chewed up and sent the radio crackling into life, drifting a few precious seconds of David Essex out of his souped-up Kenwood speakers for the whole of Fryup to hear:

*it was only a winter's tale
just another winter's tale
so why should the world take notice
of one more love that's failed*

I swear at that exact same moment, the first virgin flakes of snow began to fall. It was like a fairytale, and to me it was a sign that I should make every Christmas an extra-special one, even if it meant shacking back up with the Wayne Thackerays of this world beneath the fluffy dice. Luckily it didn't come to that. As soon as I went and got my first boob job I found a whole lot better things than Datsun Cherries to curl up in at Christmas time.

One guarantee about being a global megastar is that you never go short of friends, especially when it comes to the time to hand out presents. You find friends you never knew you had and other folk sucking up who poured nothing but scorn at least until the time the cash started rolling in. I've done some crazy things in my time, but giving a brand new Pontiac Firebird to a high school kid on the basis of a one-night stand just about takes the biscuit. I loved that kid, though, and even since our quickie divorce I still wear the friendship bracelet he made me in return. Funny how a silly bit of string's survived through all these years yet that Firebird got totalled into a tree within a week. I've never been big on the moral of the story or any other morals come to that, but I guess it shows that Christmas isn't all about cash and fast cars. I learned the hard way that it's something a whole lot deeper than that.

Ever since that night in the Kwik Save car park, whenever I've found myself at a cross-roads in my life I've been able to credit *Winter's Tale* for helping me through it, and that's one of the reasons I decided to record a cover version. Since I was a little girl I'd always dreamed of appearing on *Top Of The Pops* and the idea that a plain old buck-toothed, flat-chested kid from Fryup could one day challenge for the Christmas number one just seemed like a fairytale to me. I still hand on heart believe I could have done it if the copyright wrangles and the legal mess over the song's XXX-rated video hadn't stalled its release until February. Apparently it was David's people who kicked up the stink. I can tell you I lost a whole load of respect from him that day. As a matter of fact I ripped up all the old *Look In!* centrefolds of him smiling up out of that necker-chief that I'd kept through the years for the times I felt low. Whatever, the song still helped open a whole new chapter in my life, and I guess I ought to be grateful for that. If it touched just one other person in the same way it touched me in the Kwik Save car park that night, then I reckon it was all worthwhile.

People often ask me, Kola, what ever happened to that super-skimpy Santa outfit you wore in your controversial Christmas nativity movie, *Kola's XXXmas Box*? Well, the answer is I save it for special occasions, and far as I'm concerned there's no more

special an occasion than Christmas Day itself! Last Christmas, I hooked up with a few friends and the camera crew who are filming pilots for my new reality show, *Kola & Co* - which we expect to air on cable shortly - and we drove round LA tossing out chocolate money to the poor and needy. I know how lucky I've been in my life and it was just my little way of giving something back to those less fortunate. The looks on those poor folks' faces when I unfurled out the van in that sexy little outfit of mine - it was like all their Christmases had come at once!

My charity work has always been very special to me but it is not something I especially like to talk about. At my *Kola Kubes Foundation*, which provides advice and support to young girls looking to find their feet in the adult entertainment industry, we have a tradition of each year cooking up a little Christmas party of our own. Cherry, one of my assistants, hauls in whole trays of the best mince pies you've ever tasted from the Wal-Mart over the way, and we ship in supplies of my favourite super-strength lager from back home just for the occasion. We have a tradition of playing Secret Santa with a difference: we pull pairs of names out of one of my double G-cup bras and the winners are the first couple to get it on there and then! I'm proud to say I've won it six years straight - even the year I got paired with our old Korean cleaner!

Like the song says, it's the season for love and understanding, not that I knew it when I was growing up back home in Fryup in that little long-stay static of ours. It was like Christmas didn't hardly exist. We would sometimes have a fold-out tree and a few sprigs of tinsel hanging limp around the place. Mum would string a line of red fairy lights across the window when the nights drew in. I remember reckoning it was a sign to show Santa we were waiting up for him. It's funny though, all kinds of blokes would get attracted by those lights of ours and there wasn't a single one of them who showed up in a Santa outfit. As for stockings, the first I set sight on were the pair I swiped from the Woollies and pulled over my knees when I was twelve years old to impress the boys. Mum used to say Santa must have run out once he'd finished in town, how that somehow made us special as we had what we had and knew how to be thankful. If we'd been especially good, she'd let us scoff out the coconut eclairs from the bottom of the Quality Street box. Most Christmas Days, mum and her new bloke would be off down the pub for the early-hours lock-in bright and early, and leave my brother Bobby and me to fend for ourselves. If we were lucky, we'd find an out-of-date packet of Crispy Pancakes in the back of the fridge. Bobby would fry them up and we'd eat them huddled on the sofa in front of the Christmas movie. We'd be long gone to bed by the time mum and her new bloke rolled back in from the pub, and if they were full enough of festive spirits they'd sometimes drag us out and feed us crisps and fizzy pop. Other times, they'd keep us awake with their shouting and the rest of it right through to Boxing Day dawn.

As we got older, Bobby and me used Christmas to have a little more fun. What with mum and her new bloke pretty much camped out down the Hounds, we'd guarantee the place to ourselves. By then I'd started posing up for the Polaroids and some of the best I had Bobby take were of me sprawled almost nude on the couch, wrapped in just a twist of tinsel or pouting up in a Santa hat under mistletoe. One Christmas morning Bobby handed me a present stuck up in a brown paper bag. It was the first wrapped gift I'd ever got and I'll be honest, it could have had a lump of coal inside and I'd still have been happy. I tore it open and found a copy of *Razzle* with one of my tinsel shots in the *Readers' Wives*. I burst out crying and tugged Bobby close. To me it was the first sign that I should follow my dream, that I wasn't going to be living my life the same way for much longer. Me and Bobby have had our

differences over the years, but I'll never forget that moment. To me that copy of Razzle was and always will be a better Christmas present than Santa could ever bring.

Some folk are surprised to hear me say that I'm a very spiritual person. Just because of what I do for my day job, it doesn't mean I don't have feelings, and I'm proud to say I've never forgotten the real meaning of Christmas. By now, everybody knows the story of how Bobby and me would clamber up on the church roof when we were kids and he'd egg me on to give them a flash through the vestry window. At Christmas I'd pull on my special pair of musical Santa knickers for the purpose. The way I saw it, I was giving some of the old dears down below a festive treat they'd never forget! Looking back now, it's a chapter of my life I'm not too proud of. I've come to learn there are some folk out there who don't like what I do and never will. I don't have a problem with that, just so long as they get on with living their lives and let me live mine. Sad to say I've found out the hard way there are some who will have nothing but hate in their hearts for me, and no matter how I try to go about my business, nothing's going to change that till I'm six foot under.

When I came up with the idea for my Christmas movie, *Kola's XXXmas Box*, I can honestly say I had no idea of the controversy it would create. I've lost count of the number of times folk have asked me, Kola, if you had your time again would you still have done that movie? My answer is always the same: hell yeah. Sure I'm sorry for the innocent folk who got caught up in the riot that day, the distributor guy who lost a finger opening that awful threat letter, my couple of co-stars who got knocked cold by placards at the stable shoot. I've been through enough in my life for none of that stuff to scare me. My biggest regret is that *XXXmas Box* got taken off the nominations for the XVNs. My six career XVN awards mean so much to me, and I'm convinced *XXXmas Box* would have swept the board. We shot the movie in two days in my co-star Chesty Coceres' place in the Hollywood hills. We'd had to scrap the location shoots over security once Fox News got wind and ran that piece about our so-called porno nativity that got the fundamentals frothed up so much. Okay, so Chesty's place didn't look too much like a stable but that's when we came up with the idea to change the plot a little, find a way of persuading the inn-keeper to get us a room for the night! I still say my scene with the three wise men was one of the most satisfying of my career. It's just too bad it was never made public for my millions of fans to enjoy. By that point the fundamentals had scared everyone enough to not go near it. There was the odd scene that got spliced in some straight-to-videos, and there's a bunch of stills you can see exclusively on my website, kolakubes.blogspot.com, but that's about all. To say I was angry is an understatement. I'd dreamed that *XXXmas Box* could do for the porn industry what *Winter's Tale* did for the festive charts, only a bunch of narrow-minded folk who probably never saw a pair of fake tits in their whole lives saw it different. Well, if those folk are going to keep hunting me down till I'm dead and gone I guess we'll have to let God be the judge. One thing's for sure, the day I reach those pearly gates I'll be wearing my super-skimpy Santa outfit – if that doesn't swing it, nothing will!

I guess every one of my Christmases has been special in its own way. Each one helped make me into a little more of the woman I am today, and I wouldn't change any of it for the world. I remember the first year I was married to Roscoe, it was just after we'd shot our world-famous porno-biography, *Sweet Tooth*, and we were superstars - he could have wrapped up almost half the Vegas Strip as a gift if he'd wanted. Instead he drove me out in the desert where we waited up swigging Southern Comfort for the stroke of midnight. Then we made love on a blanket illuminated by the lights of our rented pick-up – and guess which song he'd had burned to CD

especially for the purpose?! It was right then I thought back to the Christmas I spent with Wayne Thackeray in his Datsun Cherry round the back of the Kwik Save, and truly came to realise just how far I'd come.

I would love to head back to Fryup and give my mum a taste of the Christmases we missed growing up. Because of her medication mum can't fly, but I always make sure to wrap and send a bunch of my latest videos so she has a little piece of me to keep her company on Christmas morning. Sometimes I find myself wishing I was back there, necking pints with the boys in the Hounds, maybe teasing out a quick strip on top of the pool table before picking my way back to the static through the glooped-up lanes. Most of those boys I grew up with are married and moved out now and there's fresh folk moved in who act up like they own the place, would raise merry hell at the thought of me heading home for a festive visit. I suppose you could say it's just what I deserve, what with all the trouble I caused them when I went back to shoot *Sweet Tooth*. Re-creating that church roof scene maybe wasn't the best idea, what with it being Easter Sunday and all. But it still makes me sick to think of those do-gooders cramming the pews preaching forgiveness to all when they're not even prepared to give the time of day to a girl whose only real crime was to head out of that place and make good of herself, even if it meant having to pull a bunch of her clothes off along the way.

This year, I'll be spending a quiet Christmas at home with my agent, my lawyer, the crew from *Kola & Co*, my cat Misty, my six Dalmatian puppies and my security guy, Kane, who's a six-foot-eight ex-champion wrestler. A typical Christmas Day will start with one of the crew banging my bedroom door around midday to tell me it's time to start shooting. I'll head down around two and find a whole heap of presents under the tree and my people sitting round waiting patiently. All those pending libels and lawsuits over *XXXmas* Box may mean my days of unwrapping sports cars and plunge-pools are over for now, but it doesn't mean a girl can't dream! This year my wish-list includes shoes and lingerie and a deep-fat fryer. Folk who know me know just how much I miss the fish and chips from back home, and when my chef left last year he hooked the last one out with him and I haven't had a decent chip since. Over here they go heavy on the stick-thin fries and there's no scraps in sight, no matter hard you try to explain them to restaurant folk.

My Christmas is just as much about giving as getting, so I'll hand out a bunch of extra-hot *Kola 2011 Kalendars*. They might not sound much but I'll have had them especially mocked up for the purpose and exclusively available only to my closest friends and also to you via my website, kolakubes.blogspot.com.

Where festive food's concerned, I can think of no better idea on Christmas Day than rustling up a bunch of special recipes straight out of my very own *Kola's Khristmas Kookbook*. It's just a little something I threw together based on my favourite festive flavours, and I have to say I was amazed by the response, even if the health folk kicked up a fuss about the calories. Personally, I'm a big fan of the *Kola Roast Ham* on page 23, followed by the *Kola Pancakes*, which never fail to hark me back to the days me and my brother Bobby would search the bare shelves in the static for the packets of Findus. There's something extra-special about gathering round the stove on Christmas Day with those you love most, sniffing up the treat that's soon in store.

This year, with our hectic schedule, we're having a change of plan and we'll be buying in fried chicken from a little place I know down the road who open up just for the purpose. They'll chuck in a few extras to mark the occasion. We'll have buckets of fries - ordered as thick as they can make them, but still not the same - and onion

rings, and my all-time favourite super-giant five-litre tubs of double chocolate fudge cake ice cream. My record's ten minutes to scoop out a whole one, which I can't help but suppose is a talent I learned in my brief days as host of my very own competitive eating event, *Kola's Khampion Khowdown*, which aired on cable.

Afterwards I'll hook on my super-skimpy Santa outfit and perform my traditional live *Kola's XXXmas WebKam* for my fans. With all that action there likely won't be time for my traditional chocolate money hand-out for the homeless, but they can rest assured if I can't be out there on the streets with them, I sure will be in spirit. Later we'll lounge round the pool till late sucking down plenty of gallons of festive cheer. As far as I'm concerned, Christmas Day doesn't come a whole lot more perfect than that!

Kola Kubes donated a percentage of her fee for this article to the Kola Kubes Foundation. For exclusive pictures and for more information on Kola's XXXmas WebKam, Kola 2011 Kalendars, Kola's Khristmas Kookbook and Kola's forthcoming biography, Sweet Tooth: The Ballad Of Kola Kubes, visit kolakubes.blogspot.com. Follow Kola on Twitter [@kolakubesXXX](https://twitter.com/kolakubesXXX).

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12 Days

1

Cowan went in the Kwik Save and tried to push a pack of own-brand mince pies up his anorak. The box split and spilled the mince pies in the aisle. Cowan panicked and took a bottle of sherry from the shelf to steady his nerves. By the time security reached him it was half gone.

2

Rivis was running late for work and reckoned if he got the sack he couldn't afford presents for his girlfriends' kids. He jumped in the Shop mobility buggy but accidentally rammed it in reverse. He scratched up two parked cars and smashed in the window of Dorothy Perkins.

3

Sleightholme dressed as Santa to give the kiddies a laugh. It was the same suit he wore each year only this time he'd lost two stone due to having half his bowel out. His trousers snaked round his ankles outside the school gates. A couple of the kids' dads gave him a kicking.

4

Quickmire popped out for a quick half but lost track of time. She couldn't recall how she came to be lying in the bins round back of the SpiceRite with her skirt fished up round her waist and a chicken tikka masala daubed down her bare front. She spewed up race taunts at the guys who found her.

5

Collins had been through a tough time and figured as the collection plate was to help the needy God wouldn't be all too bothered if he laid a claim to it. He tried to leg it out the church bull fell over a pew and banged his head on a sharp edge. He'd since had blackouts and reckoned God had taught him a lesson all right.

6

Peters saw the Christmas tree in the town square and couldn't help thinking it would look kind of pretty in his own place. He lugged it two miles home. When he found it wouldn't fit in his front door he took out his chain-saw and sliced the trunk plus a foot-long, bone-deep gash in his thigh.

7

Manning wrapped a Christmas box and took it down the Cat Protection League. She left it on their doorstep. When they ripped off the wrapping they found a cat dead, rock-cold and suffocated. She left a card in the box wishing them a merry Xmas and asking them to take good care.

8

Curtis lobbed a 12lb frozen turkey off his second floor balcony, said he saw red at the carol singers interrupting his night-shift sleep with Good King Wenceslas. He gave a couple concussion then waded out for the turkey, told them on second thoughts he might be needing it after all.

9

Hornby was banned from every pub in town but it didn't stop him trying. He crashed in the Black Bull and told the bouncers he'd be back to torch it. They found him flat out on a park bench with an empty crate of Super and a lighter clasped up in his shiny hoar-frost hand.

10

Marsden could have swore she put the sign on the grotto saying shut for lunch. She didn't expect the boss to burst in and find her straddling Santa. The Santa said she'd forced herself on him, told him it was time for his Christmas box. Marsden cried rape but the CCTV proved it different.

11

Craven said the other kid always got the best part in the school nativity on account of being in a wheelchair. Said she saw red when she got told hers was a poxy inn-keeper for the third year running. Said she had nothing against the handicapped, but having Jesus as a cripple just took the biscuit.

12

Robinson took next door's six-foot snowman to teach them a lesson. Said it lit his living room like Blackpool illuminations. So he cracked its head off and lobbed it straight through their ground-floor window, said he reckoned on finding out just how they liked it.

* * * *

Burgerland

Shane Birtles ate eighteen Burgerland nice 'n' spicy chicken chilli burgers in ten minutes straight. No relish, no fries, no meal-deal bullshit – not even the sesame buns. After, he wiped his mouth with his sleeve and gurned at the local TV news crew: 'I just can't get enough of their nice 'n' spicy crispy coating' Sergio leaned in, nudged - '..it's the hottest deal in town.' Shane parrot-gurned, '..it's the hottest deal in town.'

Shane had reckoned on twenty bap-less burgers being a respectable enough mark to lay down. Anything less, in his opinion, frankly sucked. He had been distracted by his friends throwing the spare sesame buns around like frisbees. Still, the news crew got their wrap and the local paper got their pictures. Sergio had agreed to give the food for free, provided the Burgerland logo featured prominently in all ensuing publicity. Shane wrote to invite a man from the Guinness Book of Records. They sent a terse note back, saying they stopped publicising speed-eating records in the 1970s for health reasons. Shane responded quoting experts who said there was no danger of speed-eating causing significant long-term damage to health. He tossed it in the bin, sent a burger instead, with the word 'wankers' carved in the nice 'n' spicy crispy coating. He wrote to the British Olympic Association too, hoping they'd lobby for inclusion, told them he'd love the chance to eat for gold. They did not reply. He toyed with the idea sending another wanker-burger, but in the end he chickened out: reckoned it wise not to flame-grill all his bridges, just in case.

Shane stood six-foot-one and weighed around 196lbs. According to official health freak height-weight charts, this tipped him into overweight by a just a couple of pounds. It is a common misconception that champion competitive eaters are necessarily obese. Patrick 'Deep Dish' Bertoletti, widely regarded as the world number one, who holds more than twenty competitive eating world records, including forty-seven glazed and cream-filled doughnuts in five minutes, 9.17lbs of blueberry pie – hands free – in eight minutes, and 1.75 gallons of vanilla ice cream in eight minutes) is reported as six-foot-nothing and 190lbs. Japan's Takeru Kobayashi, known variously as 'the Tsunami', 'the Black Widow' and 'Big Wave', and who holds, among others, the respective records for cow brains (57 in 15 minutes) and lobster rolls (41 in 10 minutes), stands five-foot-eight and weighs 165lbs, making him positively trim. Joey 'Jaws' Chestnut (grilled cheese sandwiches, 47 in 10 minutes; Nathan's hot dogs, 68 in ten minutes, with buns) is six-foot-two, and 210lbs. Shane had never been called fat. At school dinners, he often skipped dessert. He worked hard for his father's removal firm. He went to the gym twice weekly, ran three miles most Saturday mornings. He press-upped and squat-thrusted. It just seemed to so happen he was blessed with an elastic stomach.

Shane and his friends met up in the pub most Friday nights. They played snooker and got drunk. Girls came and went; the group remained. Saturdays some played local football, others were on shift at the bacon factory. All counted down the hours till session time began again. Sundays, it had become tradition to head down to the Pizzarama and gorge themselves silly on the early bird all-you-can-eat.

For £5.99, they scoffed near on every last inch of pizza in the place. The whole experience was garnished by a waitress named Sinitta. Mouths full, they ogled legs soft and long as linguine, the sweet plunge of her frosty-frilled blouse each time she leaned in more slices. Shane reckoned the promise of the plunge was worth six extra slices alone. They ate for the moment she tickled her tongue-stud through the slight gap in her front teeth and teased, 'Jeez, you're one bunch of hungry boys, all right.'

Sundays became structured so as to take optimum advantage. Breakfasts were big – cereal, a four-egg omelette, maybe some toast. Stretched the stomach muscles for later. Small snacks followed through the day, enough to keep the stomach big but empty. By eight o'clock, the boys were ready. They egged each other on, beckoned more plates from Sinitta. Friendly competition soon gave way to the Shane show. The others could barely clear ten chicken chilli slices. He pushed twenty. They bet him a free meal from each of them he couldn't break it. In secret, his friends told Sergio the pizza guy, who doughed up the crusts and cranked up the chilli heat for the purpose. Shane still ate twenty-six. Sergio was so impressed he held his hands up, said, 'you ruin me.' He said, 'one day you'll eat yourself right out of this place.' Sinitta stood by, twirled her ice cream curls.

Burgerland and Pizzarama were one and the same. It began with the burgers then branched into a kind of deep-fried fusion. That's when Sergio did his spot of re-branding. His real name was Dave. His Mama's World Famous Chicken Chilli Pizza Topping was bits of chicken chilli burger mushed up with canned tomatoes, and a pack of dried birds-eyes stirred in. His neon sign had part-fused so it blacked out some letters. At night it shone:

BU GERLAN P Z RAMA

The locals came to calling it Buggerama. This is how things go: a place gets a pervy name and the next thing you know Sergio's the local paedo for the way he serves up nuggets to the kiddies. Rumours get round he spunks in the home-made mayo. His glass shop-front gets put through, a fat spurting penis daubed on the wall close by. The stupidest thing was, Sergio knew for the price of a new **R** he could more or less fix the problem. Business was bad enough that it had to wait.

The first Friday after what became known locally as Twenty-Six-Slice Sunday, Sinitta unfurled those al-dente legs of hers into the Fox and Rabbit, poked out from a spaghetti-hoop skirt. Heads turned, the jukebox stopped: the pause of noise added to the wow. She caught the boys noshing up on packs of dry roasted peanuts and plunge-fronted herself into a seat next to Shane.

'All right?' said Sinitta.

Shane tipped six packs straight down his neck, looked at his watch and crowed, 'told you!' His friends fished for fivers, tossed them across the table. Shane wiped his mouth, turned to Sinitta. He said, 'all right?'

Two hours later, Shane was propped back on the bed in room twenty-six of the high street Travelodge. The twenty-six was no coincidence: Sinitta had bartered the key from her older sister Bonnie, who slouched spread out behind front desk, in exchange for the free doggy-bags she brought her from the Burgerland kitchen at the end of her shift most nights.

Sinitta poised at the foot, peeled off her pale yellow crop-top and let her milky-tan tits scoop free. She said, 'suppose you wanna know why they call me Sinitta?' Without giving Shane a chance to answer, she swished off her spaghetti-skirt in a Bucks Fizz fashion and proceeded to prance and sing the whole of '*So Macho*' into a standard-issue Travelodge hair-dryer, wearing just a pair of blancmange-pink undies and her fur-foamed Ugg boots. She finished up coiled over Shane on all fours, purring hot garlic bread-breath in his ear: 'Still hungry?'

After, while Sinitta turned away and dabbed herself, Shane watched the glisten drops on her spine and thought of the adverts for ice-cold Sprite. He waited long

enough to be polite, then reached for the laminate, scoured it and said, ‘room service sucks.’

The burger-eating competition was Sergio’s idea. The sight of Shane eating him out of pizzas every Sunday spun an idea in his head. He figured all publicity was good publicity: things could hardly get much worse than plunging profits and paedo graffiti. He did a little research, pressed an internet clipping in Shane’s palm. Shane read it through, said, ‘you’ve got to be joking me?’ He took it home and read it through again.

Takeru Kobayashi and Joey Chestnut tied the Nathan’s Hot Dog Eating Contest in July 2007, each eating 59 Hot Dogs in ten minutes. Chestnut won a five-dog sudden-death eat-off to win the title. Chestnut said: ‘He wanted it, but I needed it.’ Kobayashi said, through an interpreter: ‘If I put one more mouthful in, I could have won.’ Despite his defeat, Kobayashi’s eat technique – the ‘solomon’ - is considered the classic. It has done for competitive hot dog eating what Dick Fosbury’s flop did for the high-jump. Kobayashi breaks each hot dog into two pieces and stuffs both pieces in his mouth together. After the dogs, he eats the baps separately. He dunks them in Kool-Aid to help them down. In 2003, as part of the Fox Network’s ‘Man Vs Beast’ series, Kobayashi took on a 1089lb grizzly bear in a bap-less hot dog eating contest. The bear won, eating fifty in just over two and a half minutes, to Kobayashi’s thirty-one.

So they staged their first chilli burger challenge: the local paper shot Shane tucking in with a grin, a squeeze of fat down his chin, a sweat-bead on his forehead. By fluke, Shane’s head was even blocking out the missing **R**. The headline said, ‘*Chilli Burger Champ Chows For Charity*’. Sergio was a little irritated that there was no sign of Shane’s quote about not being able to get enough of the nice ‘n’ spicy crispy coating™, nor about it being the hottest deal in town. He was also more than a little perturbed that he’d been pretty much prodded into handing over any profits in exchange for the publicity. Still, as far as Sergio was concerned, it was just the start.

Shane brought Sinitta down the pub most Friday nights. After, they often headed to the Travelodge and did their doggy bag deal. First time he took Sinitta home with him, his old man’s face popped out penny-tray eyeballs. Sinitta sweet-toothed forward, extended a soft dough hand.

One day, Sergio sent word through Sinitta that he wanted to see Shane down early.

The place smelled of disinfectant and old fry-oil. Flies helter-skeltered for crumbs. Bright sun bleached the tables. A tinny radio crackled pop tart tat. Sergio said, ‘I’m telling you, I got a plan.’

Shane beamed back, ‘I think I’m in love.’

Sergio frowned, slapped the table. He said, ‘well, you know what they say about food being the, you know, the music of love..’ he tailed off, looked out at passing traffic - ‘.. or some shit like that.’ He clasped Shane’s hand, looked deep in his love-filled eyes. ‘Man, if this comes off, man, you’ll be able to fall in love with any fucking girl you want.’

In the year so far, as well as the hot dogs, there had already been world championships for garlicky greens, tamales, grits, burritos, cannoli, chili spaghetti, nugget ribs, calamari, funnel cake, sweetcorn, deep-fried asparagus, oysters and crawfish. At the b.good Garlicky Greens Eating Championship in Dedham, Massachusetts, Pete ‘Pretty Boy’ Davekos had retained his title by eating 7.5lbs of spinach in ten minutes, beating opponents including King Hungry VIII and The Garlicky Green Giant. At the Kings Island Skyline Chili Spaghetti Eating Championship in Cincinnati, ‘Humble’ Bob Shoudt set a new world record of 13lbs

9.2oz, also in a ten-minute limit, to take the \$2,500 first prize from a total prize fund of over \$5,000.

Sinitta rubbed Shane's belly, massaged his shoulders. She told him, 'I'm with you all the way.' As far as Shane was concerned, it was the heady combination of those blancmangy undies and Ugg Boots, and the glass-smash crescendo of '*I – I am in need of a man!*' chewed out all at once that made up his mind.

Sergio begged the cash to fix the neon. He plastered up home-made adverts for the Burgerland/Pizzarama Chicken Chill Burger Championship. Shane got in some serious training. Urged on by Sinitta, he broke the twenty mark. It was a four-minute-mile moment; Usain Bolt on appetizers: he smacked his lips, tossed down chicken chilli burger number twenty-one by way of underlining his achievement, then high-fived Sergio, was hugged by Sinitta. The truth was, Shane had no recognised chilli burger record to break. In the States, Don Lerman held the quarter-pounder-with-buns record at eleven in ten minutes. In the UK, Martin Henderson ate twenty-two standard Tesco quarter-pounders – no buns – in five minutes. As far as Sergio was concerned, the extra chilli kick of his burgers made them a much harder speed-eat, and took an equivalent total to match that of Henderson to round about twenty-five in ten.

Sergio tracked down the relatively obscure UK Speed-Eating Council and persuaded them to validate the new record in exchange for publicity and a couple of nights on expenses. Sergio reckoned it was a price worth paying. He scanned the newspaper pictures of Shane into media mail-shots. He paid Sinitta overtime, had her help strip-scrub the tables and clean the windows. He forked out more to have his grills professionally cleaned. He washed the spurting penis off the wall close by. He changed his whole menu, sold five-tall Championship Stacks for a competitive-eating £3.99. He promised printed-out certificates for punters who could polish off a £6.99 Championship Super-Stack. He offered money back to anyone who could devour a whole Championship Pizza Sandwich - two extra-large chicken chilli pizzas stuck together with enough extra birds-eyes to secure his margins.

Shane sunk down in his table by the window. He courted a couple of local newspaper types. He stretched his stomach to twenty-three. When he flagged, he had Sinitta warm-breathe more 'So Macho' lyrics, or, if it was gone closing, flash a smear of blancmange or a furry Ugg. Shane washed the burgers down with gallons of water, intended to lubricate his stomach muscles. He got the tactics off web print-outs. While he filled his mouth with burgers he filled his head with dreams of those big money match-ups in the States. His mother said, 'are you sure what you're doing is safe?' She'd discovered the results of a medical report which found competitive eaters were at serious risk of gastro paresis, obesity and heart disease. Shane said, 'it's under control.' He fixed lunch. As part of his training, he stayed in Fridays and Sundays. His friends said he seemed tired and distant. He exhaust-piped out chicken chilli fumes. Even Sergio said, 'shit, maybe we shoulda done it open-air.'

Sergio's publicity worked. The competitive-eating guy rounded up a couple of contestants. One wrote on his entry form, under occupation, 'professional gurgitator.' He claimed to have downed twenty-five bap-less burgers in five minutes. Sergio knew it was bullshit, but he got the picture. Another had his weight at 325lbs. Sergio told Shane, 'you'd better crank up the training.' Sinitta asked Shane, 'are you sure about this?'

The competitive-eating guy rolled up with his couple of big boys. He was thin enough to have it all on to hold down a solitary fish-finger. He looked like a Dairylea Stick in a two-loaf sandwich. He slavered over Sinitta. He said, 'I wouldn't mind getting a mouthful..' then tailed off under Shane's hard glare. Sergio introduced

Shane. Shane shook his hand, said, 'this – it's my dream.' The thin guy's eyes glazed over like doughnut icing. He wrinkled his nose at Shane's slimline form. He said, 'big names, big bellies – it's what we're about.' The loaf guys sniggered.

On the morning of the day before the competition, Shane rolled out of bed and picked up the local paper. Sergio perched on page three between the two professional gurgitators. The headline said, 'Eating Giants Eye Burger Record'. There was no mention of the local boy. Shane downed his four-egg omelette and shut off his phone from Sinitta's calls. He headed straight down to Burgerama and found Sergio schmoozing the thin guy over a couple of poxy croissants. Sergio said, 'hey, champ!'

Shane slapped down the paper. Sergio shrugged. With the thin man out of hearing, Shane said, 'you'll crank up the birds'-eyes, huh?'

Sergio fixed-grinned: 'hot, hot, hot!' He stood, tried to make excuses. Shane swung his shoulder, surprised him with his force. He said, 'some might be hotter than others?' He tried a wink. Sergio said, 'I'm not getting you.' Shane felt heat rise in his cheeks. He said, 'remember whose idea this was.' Then, 'I need this.' Sergio half-turned, started wiping non-existent crumbs from the gleaming Formica. He said, 'shit, you've changed..' – he added a sarcastic '.. champ.'

Shane foamed speechless.

Sergio said, 'One shop-worn blast of *'So Macho'* and you think you're all that?'

Shane burned shock-horror. He said, 'how'd you know about that?'

'She give you the whole skimpy undies and Ugg boots routine? Lemme guess..' – he swung his hips, screech-mimicked – '.. *I am in need of a man!*' Sergio swivelled back to face him. He said, 'Shit, Shane. Is this what it's all about, huh? Ever cross your mind that that bird of yours might not have got her job here for her waitressing skills? The speed she doled out those pizzas to you guys most Sundays, it was driving me to the brink of bankruptcy. Had to be a few perks, mate. I mean, it wasn't no X Factor, but it sure sounded sweet..' - Sergio paused, flashed a smirk - '..truth is she's using you, Shane, just like she used us. Maybe she sees you eating her a ticket right out of here..' - Sergio frowned down at Shane's spreading belly - '.. but whatever it is she wants, you mark my words, it sure ain't the fat guy.'

Shane scrunched up a fudge-fist and dolloped it on the end of Sergio's nose, cracking out ketchup. Just then, the thin guy dinged back through the door and saw Sergio on his knees, blood pouring through his hands. He said, 'problems?' Then he turned to Shane, sneered, 'looks like you've got some work to do before the big one, boyo.'

That night, Sinitta booked them back in the hotel – entirely legit, this time, so as to minimise the chances of officious owners or errant cleaners disrupting them on the eve of their big day. Room thirty - she thought he needed to aim higher. She laid out a selection of cold, low-cal snacks. She massaged Shane's shoulders and assumed he'd adopted a pre-match trance. She started on the *'So Macho'* routine, saw him watching half-hearted: before she'd finished the first verse, Shane had picked up the phone for room service and her 'big and strong' lyrics had been ate up by his order for soup of the day, prawn cocktail, fish pie, herbed goats' cheese, pasta arrabiata with garlic bread, cheese platter, cheeseburger, Greek salad, salmon fillet with herb crust, orange crème brulee, and a selection of triple-decker sandwiches. He ended, 'just bring it,' and slapped down the phone. Sinitta swung to a halt, said, 'charming.' Her eyes spilled with questions. She said, 'you can't eat all that shit.' Shane said, 'who said owt about eating?'

As the plates piled up, Shane made Sinitta sing the whole song again from the start. He tossed handfuls of food at her till the order ran out. With each throw he fired a question. Sinitta spilled the truth in the verse-breaks. Finished, pasta arrabiata slid down her bare front. Her hair stuck up with orange crème brulee. Soup of the day – tomato and basil, it smelled like – shone her thighs, stained the fur of her Ugg boots. Shane flapped the last stick of steamed salmon fillet, spilled tears of his own. She came to hug him. He said, ‘I just needed to know.’

Next day, a small crowd gathered, watched the professional gurgitator beat the fat guy. He cleared thirty-two bap-less Burgerland nice ‘n’ spicy chicken chilli burgers in the ten minute competition period, a figure of which Shane could only ever have dreamed. They hunched over the trays, slurped paper cups of water to help the burgers down. Drool pooled their shirt fronts. They slopped and gooded. Shane sat between them, fixed his eyes on Sergio, half-heartedly eased down five. A couple of local snappers flashed pictures. The news crew hovered to have a word with the winner. Shane shook hands and headed over to Sinitta. She shimmered in mustard-yellow hot-pants and a sorbet-frilled tight white vest-top. He wiped his mouth and kiss-smear her lips. He slung his arm round her waist and they swung unseen for the door. They kept walking, till the Burgerland neon fizzed to dark and the smell of nice ‘n’ spicy crispy coating was finally gone from their nostrils.

* * * *

Four Queens

Pearl

She rolls up at school with the word MAYHEM marker-penned across her stomach, wrote so big the first and last letters graze each inner thigh bone. She says it's in honour of some rock star I never knew.

Next day she's revving an old ice cream van up on the pavement. The sun's washing down and she's shouting me to lamp in the back if I've got the balls.

She's fourteen years old. She's been living in a fantasy world since the night we got spliffed up and ended up watching Natural Born Killers on the couch, feeling each other up while her fat-arse sister snored in the arm-rest close by.

She rams the van off down a side-track and just about totals it in a tree. She twists out the driving seat and tugs her belt so her combats snake down to her ankles and her candy pink g-string shows. She tears off her tee-shirt with a single yank and falls right on top of me. She says, ‘how sexy am I now, huh, flirty boy?’ She says it in a fake American accent that sounds more like Paki to me. It's her favourite line from the film. She has me call her Mallory the whole way through.

Nicole

Nicole says she speaks to the dead. She takes us up the haunted house at the end of our street. Says she sees something good on its way. She's small enough to be an almost-midget, though her tits float out front like life-buoys. There's a joke goes round that if you laid her on her back she'd stand taller. There's plenty who've practised. Something good sounds something good, all right.

She whips out a Ouija board and whisky glass but even when the glass gets moving it's the tit-jiggle that gets to me and Clint the most.

Nicole call, 'are you with us?'

Clint says, 'bullshit'.

A kind of chill comes over. I goose-bump up. Clint reaches over and paws a whole hand down her blouse-front like a bear scooping honey.

Next thing I know, Clint and Nicole are going at it on the foamy old couch. She's underneath, her skirt's rode right round her waist and her dough-white thighs are rippling up. She's got her eyes clamped shut and a part-smile that says she's still tranced up with the dead folk.

Heading out, Nicole tugs me back and whispers next time it's my turn, and I figure she already knows it.

S ____

She swings on a swing and kicks her legs up and tells me girls who wear mini-skirts and over-the-knee socks are sluts. Her mum's left her home alone, headed off to Vegas on a two-for-one deal with her brand new man. She calls from the steakhouse at Four Queens, asks what salad dressing she should choose. She doesn't name them, just asks for a number one to six. S ____ says six. Her mum hoots 'honey-walnut!' and a man's voice chokes with laughter. S ____ hangs up. She fingers out her gum and swings over and clamps her mouth to mine. I taste Juicy Fruit. That night I head round hers and we smoke her mum's dope stash and watch Ghostbusters three times over. We play a game where we say what we'd never do for money. I say screw a guy. She says screw a dog.

She asks me, 'do you love me?'

I say, 'uh-huh'.

Next day she wears a mini-skirt and over-the-knee-socks. We go to the Odeon and watch some film I don't remember. Her mum rings while the credits roll. S ____ picks two, creamy pepper. Her mum says, 'shit, S ____'. You know I don't like creamy pepper.'

The next day's school.

Tamasina

We go to church and her old man's in the pulpit. We sing 'Onward Christian Soldiers'. She tugs me out before the end.

We head round the graveyard and she tugs off her dress, strips to all but her Amber Flash. The sun makes her skin shine golden. She skips round the slabs, darts her eyes like an elf.

She pants back up, breathes life. I drop my jeans, haul my tee-shirt, do the same. The breeze flits my skin. I brush stones then bundle back for my clothes. We kiss, blaze life. We're back in the pews for the prayers. We beg for daily bread, hide our giggles behind hymn books. Later I head round her folks' place for cake.

* * * *

[Haverigg, Cumbria](#)

The day we clamped eyes on a photo of a naked man on a wind-surf, a woman who might be his wife splayed out on a nearby beach-front sun-lounger pointing her bush at the sky, we made a pact.

It was this: we'd go to that place, and feast our eyes (on the women, that is).

It was what Fat Gavin would have wanted.

Fat Gavin had found the magazine in his old man's attic. It said: *'exploring the freedom of naturism – these holidaymakers soak up the sun at the new nudist camp in Haverigg, Cumbria.'*

They were not page three material, not even close. They looked like our parents. They had rolls and droops, square jaws and flabby thighs. But the way we saw it, where there were nudist parents, chances were there would be nudist daughters too. As Fat Gavin put it, 'maybe they were all inside playing table tennis that day.' Then, suddenly serious, 'let's go.' He raised his palm: 'To Haverigg, Cumbria.' We met it: 'Haverigg, Cumbria.' That's when he backed off the kerb. Our pact was deafened by squealing tyres, a dull thud. Fat Gavin still had hold of the magazine when they scraped him up.

We watched from the railings while they buried him. We were not invited. With the circumstances - the magazine - we did not expect to be. Not just the magazine. His mother never liked us since the time we were caught spray-painting rude words on the side of the Methodist Hall. Or the Christmas we scoffed her Black Magics. No matter it was Fat Gavin holding the spray can, wiping the melt from his mouth. 'You lead my son astray, so help me God' - she spat the words. My mother said, 'just cos her old man goes to work in a shirt and tie each day, she thinks she's all that.'

We wore our football tops. They knotted round the church. The sky threatened. Fat Gavin's mother stooped with sobs. His father placed the flat of his hand on her back, held her upright. We sat, then sat some more.

Top five super-powers:

- 1 x-ray vision
- 2 invisible-ness
- 3 laser-eyes
- 4 super-strength
- 5 immortality

When the crowd left, we headed over to the fresh-dug earth. Our clothes sagged wet. Willo looked round, cross-armed off his jumper. Then his tee-shirt, boots, socks, jeans, pants. He stood straight-up naked. Dazzler did the same, then me. Lined like soldiers. Willo said, 'Haverigg, Cumbria.' He raised his palm. We turned, met it. 'Haverigg, Cumbria,' we said. Then we pulled our wet clothes back on, went home.

We saved paper-round money and set off one sunrise. We did not leave notes. We figured our parents might hardly notice. The mill was shutting up and people were taking it bad. Mine and Willo's old men, they supped up most of their concerns down the Fox and Rabbit. Already, Dazzler's father had applied elsewhere. Those that were left trudged empty-eyed to shift most mornings. Long gone the times we'd wave to them in their all-green overalls, mock some with the Ghostbusters theme. Forty-tonne trucks pushing back the lane hedgerows, hitting the weigh-bridge all hours. Then the big thresher malfunctioned, sucked in a new guy and chewed him up like mincemeat, so they said. That and turning the beck green once in a while which left all the

rainbows belly-up, it probably convinced the owners it was time to quit. Seemed Dazzler's folks were next. Dazzler told us, 'if I'm leaving, I'm leaving with you.'

We hit the bus stop an hour early. Sally Morris tripped over from the flat above the ice cream parlour. It had chipped window-frames and old sheets for curtains. Like us, she would be starting big school after summer. She stank of cheese and onion crisps. Fat Gavin used to say that her and her mum, they must be the poorest people in the world. Poorer than Ethiopians, who got free stuff from Live Aid. The Morrises, they had to buy theirs at Co-Op. Sally Morris' mum looked like an Ethiopian. She either refused to eat, or couldn't afford. She had legs like sticks. Fat Gavin said we should set up our very own Live Aid on the village green. Meantime, we posted Mr Kipling's Country Slices through their door at night. It felt right.

Sally Morris stood in front in a nightie-dress. Squinted up at the weak new sun, then back at us. She said, 'all right?' We looked past. She eyed each of us in turn, teased her hips. Boys kissed her for dares. She said, 'you up to?'

We shrugged. She got braver. Said, 'I seen you.'

Dazzler said, 'seen us what?'

She grinned, said, 'not telling.' Then, 'I seen you nude.' She wiggled a finger in front of her crotch. 'I seen your worms.'

I flushed red. Willo said, 'you're dreaming. Dreaming cos you wish you did.'

Sally Morris said, 'it warn't dreaming. In the graveyard, when they buried your pal.' We ignored her. She said, 'if you don't tell me where you're going, I'm telling. Telling everyone at that big school. Telling all the girlies what worm things you got.'

The bus turned in. Willo said, 'so tell them.' We hauled our bags, did not look out the back.

The fittest girls in our class, in order:

- 1 Alison Aveyard
- 2 Debbie Bullock
- 3 Carly Smurthwaite
- 4 Tammy Marsden
- 5 Marnie Sleightholme

Fat Gavin wasn't really that fat. When people told him he was fat, he said, 'John Brower Minnoch – that's fat.' Surprising how few asked him who the hell John Brower Minnoch was. Supposedly, he was the fattest man in the whole wide world. Needed twelve firemen to come and lift him every time he needed to go for a shit. Besides, Fat Gavin was the only one of us who'd ever had a girlfriend. Him and Tammy Marsden, they held hands after class, kissed at the disco. We watched and jeered, slid on our knees to Bruce Springsteen. Tammy Marsden was the first girl in our class to wear a bra. Fat Gavin never saw it, but he knew.

We were kicked off at Pickering. The driver called up the aisle, 'end of the line!' Dazzler said, 'how'd we get to Haverigg, Cumbria?' The driver looked blank. He said, 'Haver-where?' We sat at the station, crowded over Dazzler's map. We'd travelled less than a centimetre. We had almost the whole of a double-page spread to go.

We ate almost all our provisions. Dazzler said, 'remember when Gav..' – he was Gav now, in death – '.. remember when Gav tried to pay Tara Jenkins to show her tits?'

Willo said, 'that Robert Metcalfe, he's so full of bull-crap.'

I said, 'maybe two pounds fifty wasn't enough.'

Willo said, 'it's what Robert Metcalfe said.' Then, 'I should have brayed him.'

If we were the A-team, Willo was BA, Dazzler was Hannibal, because he always came up with the plans, I was Face – least, I always kind of hoped I was – and Fat Gavin was Murdoch. Hannibal's plan wasn't looking too hot. We spent most of the rest of our money on the next bus to Thirsk. It was the furthest we'd ever gone. We didn't know Thirsk. We hung round the market square. Dazzler took a look at the map. He said, 'well, we're getting there.'

We sat and watched shoppers. Dazzler said, 'we couldn't go home, even if we wanted to.' He said, 'it's the pact.' He said, 'if you're in the army and you go home, you get shot for it. It's called desertion.'

Willo said he saw a film once. In it, a bunch of sailors jumped in rowing boats and sailed off to live on a desert island because they hated the captain so much. The women on the island wore grass skirts and no tops. The men got married to the women with no tops, and they all lived happily ever after. We hoped it was how Haverigg, Cumbria would be.

Dazzler said, 'if you had the choice of going to live on a desert island where all the women never wore any clothes, but you never had a telly or sweets or football scores, what would you do?'

I said, 'I'd put a message in a bottle and put it in the sea. When someone came to rescue me, I'd get the woman to come with me. Then we'd go and live in Haverigg, Cumbria. And she'd lie on the beach in the nude, and I'd go wind-surfing. Only I'd keep my trunks on.'

I sensed someone listening. I looked up. A girl with Dolly Parton boobs blocked out the sun. She said, 'what the fuck are you saying?' She was our age, a little older. She said, 'huh?' Dazzler said, 'our friend's died.' She said, 'oh.' Willo said, 'could you lend us a fag?'

The girl took us nicking. She said, 'you make a scene.'

I pushed Dazzler in the veg stand. Oranges tumbled on the floor. The shop guy said, 'oi!' Willo bowled an orange like a tenpin ball. He shouted, 'strike!' The girl reached round the counter, swept fags in her bag. The guy chased us out. The girl was gone.

Best last meals:

- 1 giant hamburger
- 2 banana longboat with squirty cream
- 3 make-your-own pizza
- 4 a Hansel-and-Gretel house, skyscraper-sized
- 5 never-ending Knickerbocker Glory

At big school, they chucked you in the fish pond on your first day. They punched all your teeth out if you brought a Man U bag. They made you play rugby when the pitch was like concrete. They made you miss your bus and walk two miles home. They locked you in the art cupboard over lunchtimes. They shoved your head down the bog and pulled the chain.

We made a scene somewhere else, stole a pack of shortbread biscuits and a jar of meat paste. Dazzler said, 'it's all I could get.' We dipped the paste with our fingers, asked the bus driver where he went. Figured it was another centimetre just about the right way. We tipped out coppers till the guy sighed and flapped us on for free. From the bus we saw boys our age, and stuck them the fingers. We got to Ripon. The bus driver called, 'all out!' There was no-one else on. We asked him, 'have you heard of

Haverigg, Cumbria?’ He lit a fag and said, ‘Cumbria? Jesus, that’s a long way, boys.’ Dazzler said, ‘is it true no-one wears clothes there?’ The driver clacked a laugh. He said, ‘believe me, son – if it were true, you think I’d be sat here in this sodding bus?’

We were, at one point, the Outlaws. We made Junior Kick-Start courses for our push-bikes in the back-yard. Built ramps and see-saws out of planks and bricks. Fat Gavin’s cousin came to visit. He had a proper mini-motorbike. Said he’d be on it, next series. Said he’d ride his bike over our see-saw, no probs. We rigged it so the bricks would fall when the bike hit it. He dented his bike and broke his arm. His father raged. Mine threw my push-bike in the car boot and took it to the dump. That’s when we started having Huck Finn dreams about running away.

Dazzler said, ‘what happens if we get there and you can only get in if you’re nude?’

I said, ‘well, we’ll sneak in.’

Dazzler said, ‘but what if it’s protected by guard dogs and an electric, non see-through fence?’

Willo said, ‘we’ll wind-surf round it, stupid.’

The day slid into afternoon. The sun faded. We explored, hoped for girls. Steered clear of a gang of rat-faced kids on the war memorial. We wondered about back home, remembered the pact. We loped past a row of posh hairdressers. One caught us looking, joke-waggled her tongue. Willo said, ‘I’m sure I’ve seen her on page three.’ I said, ‘ask her.’ Then, ‘dare you.’ Best dares: kissing Sally Morris. Smashing a window round the back of Kwik Save. Nicking Sherbet Fountains. Dukes of Hazzard-sliding over the bonnet of Danny Aveyard’s new Capri. Now this. Willo pinged the door, said, ‘excuse me?’ She smiled up. He said, ‘have I seen you somewhere before?’ A woman at the back tutted, said: ‘they start ‘em young these days, Trudi.’ Willo said, ‘like, page three?’ We scarpered, didn’t wait for an answer, laughed till our throats went sore.

Famous people we’ve seen:

- 1 Derek Griffiths
- 2 Cally Donington
- 3 Keith Walwyn
- 4 Elizabeth Shields
- 5 The Men They Couldn’t Hang

We found a park, some trees to toss our bags. Hung round outside pubs, hoping for something. Someone to take pity on us, hand us a four-pack, some cigarettes. Some women clacked up: one was Trudi. She said, ‘cheeky bastards.’ She smiled. Her friend said, ‘don’t fancy yours much.’ I said, ‘lend us some fags.’ Her friend plucked one, said, ‘they don’t grow on trees.’ I said, ‘can you get us some booze?’ Trudi eyed the wine shop, said, ‘what is it you’re after?’ Dazzler said, ‘owt.’ We fished our last few quid. Trudi headed over the shop. Her friend leant against the wall, weighed us up. She said, ‘where you from?’ We told her. She said, ‘what you doing here?’ We told her. We told her we were sleeping in the park. She said, ‘yeah?’ Then, ‘be careful.’ Trudi came back with a four-pack. Her friend said, ‘they’re sleeping in the park.’ Trudi said, ‘ain’t you got homes to go to?’

We swung back to the park at night-fall, lamped the locked gates. Snuggled in sleeping bags and watched the stars through black branches. We swigged the beer, screwed our faces at its taste.

I said, ‘we really did it.’

Willo said, 'do you think Gav's gone to heaven?'

We squinted up like we might find an answer.

I never cried when my grandma died. She was old. I knew she was going to die. My mother told me. She said, 'she's ready.' She brushed tears. I thought of the fudge she used to make. Marshmallow fudge, with walnuts. That's what I thought about. I didn't cry. I tried.

Dazzler said, 'maybe he's been reincarnated.' He said, 'if I was reincarnated, I'd come back as a fly. I'd fly in the girls' changing rooms. If I was swatted, I'd just keep coming back.'

Willo said, 'if you came back as a fly, would you fancy girls, or would you fancy girl-flies?'

Last summer, we found a may-fly. May-flies lived for a single day. This one had a broken wing. Fat Gavin said, 'that's bad luck.'

List of ace wrestlers:

- 1 Giant Haystacks
- 2 King Kong Kirk
- 3 Catweazle
- 4 Kendo Nagasaki
- 5 Andre The Giant

We slept till almost-light. A park keeper said, 'go on, piss off with you.' We rolled our sleeping bags and trudged out to the road. The sun smeared pink.

Willo said, 'what would you do if we got there and we knew Alison Aveyard and Debbie Bullock and Carly Smurthwaite were there..' – I said, 'and Tammy Marsden' – '.. but the only way we could see them in the nude was if we were in the nude too?'

Dazzler said, 'I'd go to the café and buy loads of food and pile it on a plate and walk round holding it in front of me so they couldn't see.'

We slouched down, smelled the bacon shop. The sun came up. The market scaffolds clanked.

Dazzler said, 'Trudi!'

We hung in the alley next to her shop. She turned in, jumped, said, 'you lot!' She took a last drag, said, 'you really slept in the park?' She looked at her watch, ushered us in. Willo said, 'I'm starving.' We sat in the swirl seats, got warm. Trudi switched lights, pulled blinds. Electrics whirred. Another girl came in, looked wide-eyed. Trudi said, 'they slept in the park.' The girl raised her eyebrows. Trudi said, 'do us a favour.' She pressed a tenner in the girl's hand. The girl sighed, disappeared. Came back with bacon sarnies. Dazzler said, 'you got red sauce?' The girl snarled. Trudi said, again: 'haven't you got homes to go to?'

We told her about Fat Gavin, about our pact. Only the wind-surfing bit, not the nudists. She touched Willo's arm. He was nearest. She said, 'he'd be proud of you.' Then, 'why not Filey?' We shrugged. Our bones warmed. Butter-fat glistened our chins.

We made some scenes: stole chocolate bars, pop, a wrapped turkey salad sandwich. Plucked a newspaper from the bin, scoured it for mentions – manhunts, tearful, repenting parents – but there were none. Watched the sun shine up the city hall clock-face on the stroke of midday, then move off. Cadged a couple of cigarettes from shoppers. Chatted up a bunch of girls, were chased off by the rat-faced boys. Hung at the bus stop, watched the sign-boards: Harrogate, Knaresborough, Thirsk, Helmsley, Leeds. The sun tucked away, the rain came back. We huddled back in the

alley, got in our bags. I said, 'you think anyone's noticed?' Dazzler said, 'I don't care if they have.'

Top five mags we'd nick if we could:

- 1 Razzle
- 2 Escort
- 3 Fiesta
- 4 Men Only
- 5= Penthouse
- 5= Mayfair
- 5= Knave

Trudi shrugged on her coat, sparked up a fag, sighed: 'come on.' She said, 'keep your frigging distance.' She muttered into a mobile phone. She clicked the lock, let us into her flat. It was warm and white-clean. She said, 'you can kip on the floor. Then we're taking you home.' A man came – hard and wide, hair slicked back. He looked at us like we were in a zoo cage. He smirked, 'this them?' Trudi called from the kitchen, 'no, I've more out back.' He said, 'ha, ha.' He swung the kitchen door – through the crack we saw them kiss. Trudi said, 'this is Rick.' He passed out beer. We drank, watched TV, ate oven pizza. Later, Trudi showered, came back in a dressing gown. Her hair was plastered. Her skin shone. They laughed at our bug-eyed looks. Rick said, 'go on.' Trudi tugged her gown-belt, let it undrape, fall from her shoulders. She stood, page three-poised. Her slide of bush, her curve-out tits. Sucked in soap-fresh skin. She crossed a leg, swished out her arms, said, 'da-dah!' She wrapped back up, swung back in the kitchen. Called, 'you want more pizza?' We found no words.

Next day, Rick drove us home in a car that went twice as fast and made twice as much noise as any other car we'd ever been in. He said, 'where we off? We looked uncertain, said, 'Haverigg, Cumbria.' He scoffed. We were glad in secret.

Fat Gavin always said if he found a million pounds the first thing he'd buy was one of those massive long cars with a TV and a bed and even a bubble-bath in it. It'd have windows you could see out of but not in, and that slid up and down without the need for winding. It'd have a screen you could press so the driver couldn't see back. It'd have a giant telly and a hi-fi that played any album you wanted. It'd have food and drink vending machines, and a horn that made a tune. We had to admit, it beat any other car we could think of, even the General Lee or the Knight Rider one.

Rick pumped up the music and shouted tips about girls we could only hear when we stopped at traffic lights and the engine sighed. We hoped whatever he said had somehow filtered in our heads without us knowing. Hoped it would equip us to pull girls like Trudi for ourselves.

We tipped the hill and saw the old mill hulking dirty-brown against the rape fields. No men in Ghostbusters suits, no forty-tonne trucks. We jumped out at the church, waved thanks to Rick, lamped the railings. We stood round Fat Gavin's grave, spoke down like he might hear us better.

I said, 'we kind of did it.'

Dazzler fished in his roll-sack, pulled out a great white bra. He saw our faces, grinned: 'we did it, all right.' Swung it in the sun, lay it down careful, in front of the flowers. Willo raised his palm, screwed his eyes. He said, 'Haverigg, Cumbria.' We met it. 'Haverigg, Cumbria,' we said.

* * * *

Three Poems About Pornos

1

I saw you the other day
in *Tanya And The Arse Burglars*
- I remembered your smile -
I was quite surprised:
your name isn't even
Tanya
Remember the time
we went to watch *Ghostbusters*
and we laughed so much
you missed your mouth with popcorn
and I tried to feel you up
and you said, *hey, get the fuck off my arse?*
Huh, ironic

2

Ryan was best at nicking pornos,
Then Pete, then me.
When I think of Ryan now
I think of the film *Saving Ryan's Privates*:
(it's my favourite all-time porno parody,
except maybe *Star Trek: The Next Penetration*).
I'm sure Ryan would have liked it,
especially if they'd been his privates.
Ryan stuffed them up his jumper
while we distracted the shop assistant
by loitering at the penny-chew tray.
You got five points for a Razzle,
three for others:
Ryan had ten, Pete five, me three.
We read them in the car park woods,
imagined the muffs belonged to girls we knew
like Cheryl Bell and Carly Munt.
There was a rumour May Ventress
would take off her bra for a tenner
but we only had £4.37
between us.

3

We went round to Lee's
to watch the boxing.
We ordered out for pizza
Lee said the bird he spoke to sounded fit
and gelled his hair,

but it was a bloke who came.
Lee tried to get it cheaper but the bloke wouldn't have it
then Lee picked all the mushrooms off.
Before the boxing started Lee put a video on
and said, you've got to see this.
I think it was an Irish wolfhound
but I couldn't be sure -
dogs aren't my strong point.
Lee said which one's the dog then
and thought it was funny.
It put us right off our pizzas
and Lee ended up eating ours too.
When the boxing came on
the first bloke was announced from Barking:
we pissed ourselves laughing,
what with the dog and that.

* * * *

The Ballad of Sara Lee

When I heard my mother had passed away, I headed straight down to Kwik Save and stole a Sara Lee Double Chocolate Gateau. Took it out of the freezer section and walked right out of the shop without paying for it. Stole it. It felt good.

Next day, I did the same. Just carried it out of the store, all casual, like. Third day, I took another. A till girl said, 'excuse me, have you paid for that cake?' I looked at the Gateau. I said, 'it's not a cake, it's a Gateau.' I looked at the till girl. She had a kind face. I said, 'my mother has died.' She sighed, turned away. I continued to the door. It patched wet in my blouse.

I continued to take Sara Lee Double Chocolate Gateaux in the same manner for a number of weeks. I would take the service bus into town. I worked, loosely, to a rota system: Mondays, Morrison's. Tuesdays, Iceland. Wednesdays, Kwik Save. Thursdays, Farm Foods. I took Fridays and the weekends off, gave them time to restock. Sometimes, I walked straight out. Others, I slid them in my bag, bought a couple of other everyday items. Deflected attention. Each time, as I crossed the threshold, I thought of my mother.

I was stopped a number of times. First time, I made out I'd slipped the Gateau in my shopping bag by mistake. The girl on the till rang it up. I said, 'I don't want it.'

She said, 'you put it in your bag but you don't want it?'

I said, 'I wasn't thinking.'

She pressed for assistance. I said, 'my mother has died.' Security came. He looked me over, said, 'problem?'

The girl said, 'no problem.'

I thanked her, said I wasn't thinking straight. She touched my arm, said, 'no problem' again.

Another time, I walked right out, got past the trolleys, felt a hand on my shoulder. A man's voice said, 'madam?'

I tightened, turned. Considered running. I looked at the man. He said, ‘madam? Have you paid for that?’

He had a familiar face. His eyes were tired. He said, ‘Christine?’

He looked me over. I stiffened, felt his eyes over me. He said, ‘do you remember me?’

I shook my head. I lied.

‘David Brown,’ he said. ‘You remember.’

I said, ‘oh.’ He looked disappointed. He began steering me back in the supermarket.

He said, low, ‘it’s a job, Christine.’

I said, ‘my mother has died.’

He said, ‘I’m sorry.’

The Sara Lee Double Chocolate Gateau sat on the table between us. The older man said, ‘we always prosecute shoplifters. It’s company policy. I’m sorry.’

I said, ‘it’s melting.’ Frosting leaked off the box, softened the cardboard. I watched the drips create a pool.

David Brown said, ‘her mother has died.’

The older man said, ‘my mother has died. When my mother died, I didn’t go around stealing chocolate cakes. I’m sorry, lady, but if everyone in the world went around stealing chocolate cakes when their mothers died, the chocolate cake-makers, the.. the Sara Lee’s of this world, they’d be bankrupt. There’d be no more chocolate cakes left to steal.’

He looked at David Brown. David Brown frowned. He shrugged. He looked at me. I said, ‘it’s not a cake.’

He said, ‘pardon?’

I said, ‘it’s not a cake. It’s a gateau.’

The older man shook his head, stayed silent for a few seconds. Then he said, ‘shit, whatever.’ He motioned the door. David Brown steered me out. He said, ‘please do not come back into this store.’ Then, out of hearing, he whispered, ‘I loved you, Christine.’

When I needed to go to the big edge-of-town places I asked my brother, Michael, to drive me. Michael was on parole for lots of things. Some shop-lifting. Huh, ironic.

He said, ‘I’m not allowed in that store. Under the terms.’

I said, ‘You just need to wait.’

He said, ‘what do you want to go to that store for, anyway?’

I said, ‘it’s value.’

First time, I came out with a couple of bags of stuff, buried the Sara Lee Double Chocolate Gateau. Next time, just the Gateau.

Michael said, ‘you got me to drive you all the way out here for a fucking cake?’

I said, ‘it’s not a cake. It’s a Gateau.’

Michael said, ‘don’t fucking tell me that. Don’t fucking tell me it’s not a cake.’

We drove. Michael said, ‘I saw you had one last time.’ He looked across, down at my lap. He said, ‘Chrissie, it’s a fucking awful lot of cake.’ He said, ‘you got no pride?’

I looked at his scrawny arms, stuck with shapes of seaweed-green. I said, ‘I don’t eat them.’

‘You ever wonder why I had such a lot of friends growing up? Why they were always coming round? Me, mister fucking popular? It wasn’t me they wanted to play with.’

I said, ‘that’s disgusting.’

He said, 'it's true, Chrissie. Why'd you let yourself go?'

I said again, 'I don't eat them.' And then: 'I steal them, okay? I steal them because it makes me feel good.'

If that made Michael think of me as even more of a fuck-up, he wasn't saying. He got me working for my petrol money. He'd distract, I'd fill the bag. Are you watching, mother? This'll make you proud. Sara Lee Double Chocolate Gateau first. Always first. Spirits second. Sometimes, cigarettes. Sometimes, 'my mother has died.' Michael would drive and swig vodka. I would toss the Sara Lee Double Chocolate Gateaux from the window. Watch them flip back in the wing-mirror. Michael never asked. Just said, 'it's a buzz, huh? It's a fucking buzz.'

One day, half-way to Asda, I said, 'which boys?'

Michael said, 'you name them.'

I named them. He said, 'that's about right.'

'Really?'

He said, 'they'd have given anything to, you know..'

'Stop it.'

'You never wonder about your.. about stuff going missing?'

I remembered rummaged drawers. I said, 'You're making me sick.' Then, 'I had no idea.'

I stared front, hard. Blinked away tears.

Michael sighed, 'you were too wrapped up in your own business.'

I said, 'I had no choice, Michael. You know that.'

Michael shook his head. 'We all got choice.'

Michael pulled up in a parent and toddler bay. He looked across and said, 'let's do it.'

I watched the store-front. I said, 'I'm not feeling too good.'

Michael said, 'you just going to do a straight walk-out or you going to hide stuff. I'd say the straight walk. You got it off to a tee. You're a natural, sis.'

He smiled at me, bent to light a cigarette.

I said, 'I'm not feeling too good.'

We sat and he smoked the cigarette through. He said, 'we've come all this way.'

I said, 'can you go, Michael? Just this once?'

Michael laughed softly to himself. He said, 'I'm on parole.'

I said, stupid-voiced, 'we all got choice.'

He swivelled, 'you want me to put my freedom at risk to steal you a fucking.. a fucking *cake*..' – he spat the word like a cherry stone – '...so you can chuck it out the window so it makes you feel better about all that shit you did?'

Inside, I cried. I started at the shop-front and started, 'the day I was twelve years old..'

Michael looked out of the window. 'Ah,' he said. 'Don't give me the fucking sob story.' He crunched the car into reverse, squealed out of the car park. He muttered, 'fucking freak show.'

When we were on the by-pass, I said, 'the day I was twelve years old. You remember that, Michael? Or you choose to forget?'

I reminded him of the day I was twelve years old. How my mother denied me a birthday party, gave me double homework that night. Presented me with a new pen. 'Take care of it,' she said. 'It's a good pen.' She kissed my forehead, tight-lipped, left the room. I heard Michael outside, whooping Cowboys and Indians. I cried into my pillow. Next day, I took the pen to school. 'It's a good pen,' everyone said. I sold the pen to Charlotte Bartlett for two pounds fifty. I told my friends I was having a party

after all. I bought a Sara Lee Double Chocolate Gateau and a packet of candles and a box of matches. We went to the tree-house. Three of us. Me, Jessica Bell, Marnie Sleightholme. We lit the candles, hoped the warmth would de-frost the Gateau. Talked about boys. David Brown, I said. He's hot. Half-way through 'Happy Birthday', my mother burst in.

'What the hell?' she said. Her face was twisted. My friends coiled away. 'What in God's name?'

I sat there, in the middle of the tree house, ready to blow. Frozen. She saw the cake. She said, 'where's the pen?' She asked again, 'where's the pen?' Then she said, 'a bloody cake.'

I said, yeah, 'it's not a cake. It's a Gateau.'

And my mother stooped forward, slapped me hard, took the Gateau. Hesitated, snorted the candles out herself, my own birthday candles. Snot flying. Tossed the cake right out through the tree-house window. There was a period of silence, then I heard Michael shout below, 'hey, a fucking chocolate cake.' Then I felt my mother tear at my arm, pull me to my feet.

We crested the hill, saw the silos gleam. Michael said, 'We ate the lot. Me and Clint Jackson. We ate so much we were almost sick.'

I said, 'did she ask for me?'

Michael stared at the road.

'She didn't, did she. She didn't even ask for me.'

'She was.. she wasn't with it.'

'She never was.'

'She wanted the best for you, Chrissie. Me, she couldn't have cared less if I was dead or alive.'

I said, 'that's bullshit, Michael.'

Michael fumbled for his cigarettes. He didn't offer them. He said, 'you smoke menthol.'

I said, 'you're just like her.'

Michael sighed, glanced across. He said softer, 'it's not too late, Chrissie. Really, it's not.'

I smelled sweat and petrol grease. I said, 'you ate it? You and Clint Jackson really ate it?' Imagined brown on their fingers, round their mouths. Laughing, smearing.

Michael drove on. Swung the car in front of Kwik Save. He said, 'just this once. Just this once I'll fucking do it. Then this shit's over for good, okay?'

I nodded, forced a smile.

'Promise?'

'Promise.'

Michael wheezed up out of the car. Shut the door, slunk towards the store without a word. His oil-streaked jeans sagged behind him. He tugged his baseball cap low. He passed David Brown into the store. David Brown noticed me, headed over. Indicated me to wind down the window.

He said, 'hello, Christine.' Then, 'I hope you've not come to cause trouble. Cos they'd prosecute second time, that's for sure.'

I shook my head, tried a nice smile. Felt my face redden. I said, 'I'm sorry.'

He said, 'I'm sorry about your mother. Really I am.'

I said, 'don't be.' He looked surprised. I felt my eyes prick. He looked back and said, 'that's your brother, right?'

I nodded. He said, 'I read about him.' I coughed a laugh. There was silence, then I said, 'you might want to go and take a look.'

He looked blank. I nodded at his security badge. I said, 'I'd hate to get you in trouble.' Then, again, 'you might want to go and take a look.'

He half turned. I wound up the window. I felt him looking back, ignored his talking, his couple of raps.

I reached across for Michael's cigarettes, the lighter. I sat for hours, till I'd smoked the whole pack through.

* * * *

All Is Calm, All Is Bright

Kaycee tosses a Mr Kipling's deep-filled mince pie off the top of the multi-storey. She leans out, watches the butter-enriched fluted pastry case deep-filled with delicious mincemeat shrink to a crumb on the concrete. She tosses a second. It misses the bald dome of a man in a business suit by inches. He squints up. Kaycee turns to Della, says, 'I'd say the gravitational force of a Mr Kipling's deep-filled mince pie is exceedingly good.' Della smiles, rips another pack. Kaycee says, 'Merry Christmas.'

Kaycee swipes the Mr Kipling's from the offer pile after having her way with Security Wayne. Kaycee's way's so good Security Wayne's gone and got her name tattooed on his neck. Almost her name: KC. Security Wayne thinks Kaycee's got the hots for him. Kaycee flirts, tugs her denim mini. Security Wayne says, 'you wanna go out?' Kaycee flits out after Della, says, 'maybe.' She heads up the lift to toss more spice-packed short crust pastry parcels.

Della doesn't much care for Christmas. She says one day, she'll follow the Mr Kipling's off the building. Kaycee says, 'if you go, I'll have to go, too.' They argue over who'd have the best downward trajectory. Previous experiments suggest the pies are more accurate, the slices prone to buffet. Della says her, on the basis that she's squatter, more cherry bakewell-shaped. Kaycee, she's more long and thin and nutty, like an almond slice.

One time, they threw a whole bakewell tart. It frisbee-d out, halted, almost floated down. It landed same as toast, icing down. Della said she'd seen some programme which explained why toast always landed butter-side down. She said she couldn't remember why it was now, but said it must be the same for bakewell tarts.

Della swings her legs off the edge. She says, 'we got more?' The streets below crawl with last-minute shoppers. She says, 'we're bound to hit, I can feel it.' Kaycee makes Della promise she'll still be there when she gets back. Della says, 'I wouldn't do it to you, Kayce.' Kaycee heads back down the lift. In the lift, she primps her hair, tugs down the front of her top, pulls a tired sprig of Mistletoe from her knock-off Liz Claiborne. Gets herself set for Security Wayne.

Della sits and watches the crowds. She lights a Lambert and Butler and wonders if she'll ever have the guts. Wonders if she might have gone and done it if Kaycee hadn't panted up that day, plaggy bag brimming with stuff swiped from the offer shelves. If Kaycee hadn't pulled out a box of Angel Slices, told her to chuck them off instead. Almond Slices or Jaffa Fingers, she'd have said thanks for trying and slipped off. But Angel Slices, there was something about Angels and Saviours that stopped her. Some crazy kind of confectionary fate. Same fate, perhaps, that dumped her on

the hospital steps when she was four hours' hold, swaddled in a Tesco's carrier bag. When they found her she was blushed blue as the bag stripes.

Security Wayne slaps his face with Aspen, checks and double-checks the ring box in his trouser pocket. He thinks, today's the day. He heads out the house, hits the sharp air, breathes deep, lights a Benson. He floats to work, reeking festive spirit. He sees the tramp he half-killed for half-inching cheap wine. He grins out, 'Merry Christmas!' He strides in the staff entrance, up the empty, last minute-stuffed aisles. He feels the eyes of the help-yourself salad girl, the one on oven-ready chickens. He thinks, yeah, today's the day, man. Today's the day.

The bald man in the business suit raps the glass. Between his thumb and his forefinger, he's holding the remains of a butter-enriched fluted pastry case deep-filled with delicious mincemeat. He spits, 'what are you going to do about *this*?' The car park guy sighs, glances up at the clock. The bald man says, 'well?' The bald man's so angry he's shaking. The car park guy flops down his tabloid, screws his eyes at what's left of the pie. He says, 'what do you want me to do about it, *Sir*?' The bald man fits and puffs and swirls his shoulders and raises his voice: 'WELL IT HARDLY FELL OUT OF THE SKY!'

Security Wayne is no longer Security Wayne, not for Christmas. He's handed an oversize Santa suit, told to yo-ho-ho it up and down the precinct. They're beefing up security for the last-gasp rush. They've bussed in a bunch of heavies. They want Wayne to show a little festive spirit. Santa Wayne. 'No, no, no,' pleads Wayne. 'Not today.' His boss snarls, 'well when's best for you? How 'bout summer?' Wayne says, 'you don't understand..' His boss points at the precinct, says, 'get that shit on, and get the shit out there.'

Sometimes, they recognise him. 'Hey,' they say – the early middle-agers, the freshly soft-bellied. 'Hey, is it really you?' They double-squint through the pay-glass. 'It can't be,' they say. Then they say, 'The Executioner! It's really you!' They have him sign their parking tickets. They tell him they were there in Great Yarmouth. Now, they take camera phone pics. They say, 'how ya doing?' He force-smiles back. He doesn't tell them about his busted shoulder, the arthritis daggering his hips, the angina, the bed-ridden wife, the kids who drop-kick his front door and chant paedo rhymes. He force-smiles long and hard, and says, 'I'm doing just great.'

Kaycee takes a call, says, 'hi, nan.' She heads in the store, scouts for Security Wayne. She says, 'soon, nan. I promise, nan. I promise.' She hangs up – she knows what her nan's thinking: 'it'll take more than a few sodding cakes to put things right.' That's what she said last time - '*it'll take more than a few sodding cakes to put things right*' - when Kaycee showed up two hours later with a stack of French Fancies. Well, the kid seemed to like them at least. He scoffed a whole box-full and sicked the lot back up through the night. Now she's seriously skint and has only a few hours left to rustle something up, somehow. Else she might as well kiss bye-bye to the visits. Meanwhile, her friend on the roof's ready to jump if she doesn't get her Mr Kipling's fix. Kaycee cusses under her breath, scouts once more for Security Wayne. She thinks, 'shit, Wayne – the one time I want you.' She cradles a tower of mince pie boxes in her arms, lingers till she reckons the coast must be clear. Then she saunters

out the in-way, all casual-like. She hears a voice call, 'hey!' She legs it straight for the lifts.

Santa Wayne's done enough yo-ho-ho-ing. He's been at it for hours, has a front spilled with canteen lunch special. Took enough abuse from snot-nosed kids. Even the old tramp seems to be finding it funny. Santa Wayne thinks what the hell, lights a cigarette. Mothers frown, swerve their pushchairs away. 'Merry fucking Christmas!' he shouts. Just then a butter-enriched fluted pastry case deep-filled with delicious mincemeat meteors out of the darkening sky, splats on his forehead, knocks him to the flags.

Della scores a direct hit on Santa. She says, 'I guess bang goes my Christmas list.' Kaycee whoops, flings another, strikes the stricken Santa in his mid-riff. A circle forms, mothers with pushchairs hung with heavy bags. Their cackles rise up storeys.

The car park guy stubs the lift-up button and waits. A shopper pants out the stairwell, laden with gifts. Her face tightens. 'It's broke. It stinks.' She flicks her head back at the stairwell. 'On Christmas Eve, of all days.' The car park guy thinks of home: his wife upstairs, a single slug of tinsel. The estate kids waiting to mock him. Thinks of the glory days – tag-teaming King Kong Kirk; taking a speaking part on Big Daddy's 'This Is Your Life' (*Michael Aspel: 'what was it like being on the receiving end of a Daddy Splash?' Him: 'Michael, it was like being the sponge finger at the bottom of a trifle'*). He inhales the fug of stale urine, draws breath, starts up the stairs.

Santa Wayne plunders his gift-sack for missiles. He strafes wrapped tat around the precinct. He screams – 'Merry fucking Christmas! Merry fucking Christmas!' He tears at his Santa beard, so it hangs skew-iff. Passing kids cry, are pulled away. He rips at his tunic. He raises his eyes, sees two stick-figures in the sky. Delicious mincemeat smears his forehead.

Kaycee says, 'shit, it's Security Wayne.' Della howls laughter, reaches for more. She says, 'that creep?' Then yelps, 'he's coming.' Kaycee says, 'good thing I jammed the lifts, huh?' Kaycee grins, hands Della another mince pie.

The car park guy stop on the fourth storey, rests his hands on his knees. Stops again two storeys later, bends so sweat drips from his forehead onto concrete. He strains on upwards.

Santa Wayne marches in the supermarket. He punches out products down the chocolate aisle, sends Quality Streets spinning. He roars, 'I quit.' He lurches left hooks at the new security. He lays two out, sends one crashing backwards in the cereal section. He shouts, 'I quit, I quit, I quit.' He grabs for weapons in the kitchen aisle, waves cake slicers and slatted spoons. He heads straight for the lifts, kicks dents in the jammed door. He starts stomping up the stairs.

Kaycee clicks off her phone, sees Della looking.
Della says, 'you got him owt special?'

Kaycee shrugs, stares out a little. She takes another mince pie, hurls it without aiming. A blonde in a business suit stumbles to the pavement. Della cheers, flicks distant V's. The woman recovers, glares upwards, shakes her fist.

The car park guy hits the last storey. He wheezes expletives. He pushes the door and the cold wind bites him. He sees the girls draping bare limbs. He shouts, 'hey!' He hopes they'll quit and run. Shouts, 'hey!' again. He feels a wrench in his chest.

Blue lights swirl and flash. Della peers in the mince pie box, sees it's empty. She shakes it, tosses the cardboard shell. She pauses, says, 'you hear that?' She shuffles along, looks at Kaycee. 'Kayce?'

Kaycee's peering down. She says, 'I'm gonna lose him, Della. They're gonna take him off me. I know it.'

Della says, 'there! You hear it?' She spins round, says, 'shit, Kayce.' Says it in a way that makes Kaycee spin too.

Kaycee says, 'shit, Dell.'

The car park guy claws for breath.

The four of them, they sit there through the street light switch-on, till the sky turns black. Kaycee snuggles deeper in Santa Wayne's red tunic. She says, 'it's beautiful.' The car park guy bites at air, gazes down at the ant-people scurrying below, the bowls of blue light. He says, 'sure is.' Della kicks her heels off the concrete, lights another cigarette. Snow starts to fall. Straps of baubles pulse from shop-fronts. A brass band strikes up, trumpets gleaming gold in the gloom. The first bars of 'Silent Night' fuzz the air. They listen in silence awhile. The lift groans back to life. The lights creep up. Della takes the final box of mince pies. She tears the flap, hands them out. They pelt the band. 'Merry Christmas!' Kaycee bawls, once more.

* * * *

About the author:

Mark Staniforth was born in 1974 and lives in a small village in North Yorkshire. [Fryupdale](#), his collection of short stories, is also published by Smashwords. He is working on his first novel. His latest work can be found at:

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Parts of 'Three Poems About Pornos' first appeared in [Red Fez](#)
'The Ballad of Sara Lee' first appeared in [Suss](#)