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TAXI DAYS

Yi'll nivir guess whae ah hud in ma cab the other day, "Juice" Terry Lawson explains, his solid build contained by a luminous green tracksuit. His luxuriant corkscrew curls lash wildly in the gale that slaps up against the side of the perspex barrier winding from the airport concourse to a bank of parked taxicabs. Terry stretches, rips out a yawn, sleeves riding up to expose gold chains at the wrists and two forearm tattoos. One is of a harp that looks like an egg slicer, with HIBERNIAN FC and 1875 scrolled above and below. The second is of a fire-breathing dragon, which offers the world a lavish wink, inviting it in winding letters beneath to LET THE JUICE LOOSE.

Terry's mate, Doughheid, a thin, asthmatic-looking man, gazes blankly in response. He sparks up a fag and wonders how much of it he can suck back before he has to deal with the approaching planeload of passengers, jostling their luggage-laden carts towards him down the enclosed ramp.

—That cunt oaffay the telly, Terry confirms, scratching his balls through the polyester.

—Whae's that? Doughheid mumbles, sizing up the piled suitcases of a huge Asian family. He's willing a distracted man who struts behind to overtake them on the ramp, so that he won't have to load the many bags into the cab. Let Terry get that one. The man wears a long cashmere coat, open over a dark suit, white shirt and tie, with black-framed glasses and, most strikingly, a Mohawk haircut.

The man suddenly sprints ahead of the pack, and Doughheid's spirits soar. Then he stops dead, and looks at his watch, as the Asian family trundle past him, all over Doughheid like a rash. —Please, please,

quickly, please, please, a cajoling patriarch calls, as buckshot rain suddenly lashes against the perspex.

Terry watches his friend struggle with the cases. —That stand-up boy, oan Channel 4. Eh wis ridin that burd, what’s-her-name, tidy fuckin boady oan it. He traces an hourglass, then steps up snugly against the perspex barrier for shelter.

But as Doughheid strains and grunts with the cases, Terry regards the bespectacled man in the long coat, his incongruous hair blowing everywhere in the wind, fingers delivering heavy number-punches into his phone. Terry recognises him from somewhere, a band perhaps, then sees that he’s older than the haircut suggests. Suddenly, a cowed associate appears, blond hair shorn above a tense face, cautiously standing alongside him. —I’m so sorry, Ron, the car we had ordered broke down—

—Get outta my sight! the punk businessman (for this is how Terry now thinks of him) barks in an American accent. —I’ll take this goddamn taxi! Just have my bags delivered to my hotel room!

The punk businessman doesn’t even make eye contact through his pink-tinted lenses with Terry, before climbing into the back of his cab and slamming the door shut. His shamed associate stands in silence.

Terry gets into the cab and keys the ignition. —Whaire is it yir gaun, chief?

—What? The punk businessman looks over his light-reactive glasses, into the back of a mop of curls.

Terry pivots round in the seat. —Where. Do. You. Want. Me. To. Take. You. To.

The punk businessman is aware that this corkscrew-headed taxi driver is talking to him as if he, the punk businessman, is a child. Fuckin Mortimer, can’t see to anything. Puts me through this BS. His hand tightens on the straps of the cab. He swallows tightly. —Balmoral Hotel.

The Immoral! —Good choice, mate, Terry replies, his mind spinning through the database of the sexual encounters he’s enjoyed there, usually during two discrete periods on the calendar. There was nothing like the International Festival in August, and Edinburgh’s Hogmanay, for adding garnish to his basic diet of scheme minge and jaded porn performers. —So what line ay work is it yir in?

Ronald Checker is not used to being unrecognised. An influential property developer, he is also a reality-TV star, known widely for his

successful show *The Prodigal*. The scion of a wealthy Atlanta family, the Harvard graduate had followed his father's footsteps into real estate. Ron Checker and his father had never been close, this fact making him utterly mercenary at utilising the old man's extensive contacts. Thus son became more successful than father, breaking out of America's sun-belt states to go global. Ron decided that he would pitch a TV show to the networks, positing himself as a Southern, youthful, punkish version of Donald Trump, who had enjoyed success with *The Apprentice*. A designer friend gave him the Mohawk look, and a researcher at the network coined his catchphrase: "Business takes balls." Now *The Prodigal* is a third-season globally syndicated show and Checker knows it screens in the UK. Uneasily, he asks the cabbie, —Have you ever seen *The Prodigal*?

—No live, but ah ken what yir talkin about, Terry nods. —That "Smack Ma Bitch Up" wis controversial, aye, but thaire's some burds thit like that. A bit ay rough action, if ye ken what ah mean. No thit ah'm sexist or nowt like that. Tae me it's ladies' prerogative. They demand, you supply, it's what gentlemen dae but, ay, mate?

Checker is finding it difficult to understand this cabbie. All he can do is respond with a gruff: —Yes.

—Ye a mairried man yersel, mate?

Unused to being talked to with such presumption by a stranger, this common Scots taxi driver, Checker is thunderstruck. About to respond with a terse "Mind your own business," he recalls how he's been urged by his PR team to try and win hearts and minds after the Nairn fiasco. As part of the development process, a cove and a couple of listed cottages had been demolished, with a few rare nesting ducks relocated. Rather than welcome the golf resort, apartments and service jobs it created, the natives had largely taken a dim view of the enterprise.

Forcing his sense of violation into a gallows grin, Checker permits, —Divorced, three times, while moved to think of Sapphire, his third wife, with some rancour, then Margot, his first, in sharp, poignant pain. He tries to remember Monica, the fleeting middle incumbent, but can scarcely summon her image to mind, which both cheers and dismays him. All that flashes into his head is a grinning lawyer's face and eight fat figures. For a man still a year shy of forty, three is a troubling statistic.

—Snap! Me n aw! Terry buzzes in empathy. —Kin find thum n gie

thum a guid seein-tae awright, that part's never been a bother, he sings triumphantly. —Auld Faithful here, Terry pats his groin reassuringly, —husnae had too many days oaf, ah'll tell ye that for nowt! Goat tae be done but, ay, mate? Terry's grin expands as Checker enjoys the sensation of his back flush against the hard seat, which feels good after the executive planes and limos he is constantly in. —See, keepin a hud ay thum but, well . . . you ken the score! Worse thing ye kin dae is faw in love. Ye kid yersel oan that's the burd yir gaunny be shagging exclusively the rest ay yir life. But wir no made that wey, mate. So eftir a few months, the auld rovin eye n stiff cock come back oot tae play! Guaranteed!

Checker feels the sides of his face redden. What newfangled Tophet had Mortimer cast him into? First an engineering failure in the Lear, which had forced upon him the ignominy of a scheduled flight, and now this!

—Ma days ay gaun through ceremonies ur ower. Terry drops his voice and briefly turns his head. —Listen, mate, if yir eftir any nook n cranny ower here, jist geez a shout. Ah'm the boy. Kin sort ye oot wi anything ye need in this toon. Just sayin likes!

Ron Checker has scant clue as to what this man is “just saying.” This asshole really has no idea who I am! Yet through the rush of contempt he feels for this cabbie, something else is happening: Ronald Checker is experiencing the phantom excitement at being cut adrift, of being a traveller again, as in his student days, as opposed to a cosseted business tourist. And those unyielding seats feel good on his spine! Strangely, Checker is conceding that part of him, that piece liberated by the most recent divorce, is enjoying himself! Why not? Here he is, striking out on his own, free from the sycophantic incompetents like Mortimer! Did he have to be limited and hemmed in by other people's perceptions of Ronald Checker? Wasn't it fun to try and be somebody else for a while? And this back! Perhaps it was now time to give it a start. —I appreciate that . . . er . . .

—Terry, mate. Terry Lawson, but ah git called Juice Terry.

—Juice Terry . . . Checker lets the name play on his lips. —Well, pleased to meet you, Juice Terry. I'm Ron. Ron Checker. He looks at the cabbie in the mirror for any traces of acknowledgement. None. This clown really doesn't know who I am, so self-absorbed is he in his own petty, trivial life. But he'd seen this before in Scotland, during the Nairn debacle.

—Check thehhht! Juice Terry bellows, at what appears to Checker to be a rather ordinary young woman, who is stopped at a pedestrian crossing.

—Yes . . . fetching, Checker forces himself to agree.

—Ah'm gittin a twinge fir that minge!

—Yes . . . Listen, Terry, Checker begins, suddenly inspired, —I love these cabs. These seats sure feel good against my back. I'd like to hire you this week. You'd drive me around locally, some tourist places, one or two business appointments further north. I have some negotiations at a distillery in Inverness, and I'm a keen golfer. There will be some overnight stays, in the best hotels, of course.

Terry is intrigued, but shakes his head. —Sorry, mate, ah've goat ma shifts planned oot, ay.

Unused to non-compliance in others, Checker is incredulous. —I'll pay you twice what you earn in one week!

A big grin framed by a mop of curls gazes back at him. —Cannae help ye, buddy boy!

—What? Checker's voice screeches in desperation. —Five times! Tell me how much you earn in a week and I'll pay you five times as much!

—This is the busiest time ay the year, mate, the run-up tae Christmas and Hogmanay—even worse thin the fuckin festival. Ah'm clearin two grand a week, Terry lies. —Ah doubt ye could pey us ten grand a week jist tae drive ye roond!

—Consider it a deal! Checker roars, and dives into his pocket, producing a chequebook. Waving it at the back of Terry, he shouts, —Do we have a deal?

—Listen, mate, it's no jist about the money; ah've goat regular customers whae depend oan ays. Other activities, if ye catch ma drift. Terry turns, tapping the side of his nose. —In business-speak, ye cannae compromise the core enterprise, no just for a one-off. Ye huv tae look eftir the long-term client base, mate, the steady-income stream, n no git hijacked wi side projects, as lucrative as they might be in the short term.

Terry can see Checker in the rear-view mirror thinking about this. He feels pleased with himself, although he is only quoting his friend Sick Boy, who makes the porn videos he occasionally stars in.

—But I can offer—

—Ah've still got tae say naw, mate.

Checker is astounded. Yet deep in his core he is sensing that there is

something about this man. Perhaps it's even something he needs. This notion compels Ronald Checker to utter a word that he can't consciously remember leaving his lips since he was a child at boarding school. —Terry . . . please . . . He gasps at his use of the word.

—Awright, mate, Terry says, flicking a smile into the mirror, —we're baith men ay business. Ah'm sure we'll be able tae strike up some kind ay a deal. Just one thing but, pittin ye in the picture, Terry's head swivels round, —they overnight steys in hotels . . . thaire's gaunny be nae bum banditry gaun oan!

—What?! No way, man, Checker protests, —I ain't no goddamn faggot—

—No sayin nowt against it, if that's yir thing, like, n ah'm no sayin thit ah'm no partial tae a bit ay back-door action masel, but a hairy erse-hole wi a pair ay hee-haws dangling under it, well, that jist disnae dae it fir the Juice felly here. Terry shakes his head violently.

—No . . . you sure won't have to worry about that! Checker says, wincing on the bitter aftertaste, but just about managing to swallow the power-ceding pill.

The cab pulls up outside the Balmoral. Portering staff, obviously anticipating Ron Checker's arrival, literally drop what they are doing, in one instance the luggage of another guest, to descend on the cab as the American steps out. The wind has intensified, a surging gust whipping Checker's oily black-dyed locks skywards, holding them up in a formidable peacock-like display, as he talks to Terry.

Terry Lawson is far more aware of the hovering porters than Ronnie Checker, taking his time and savouring the slow punching of digits into his phone as the two men exchange contact details. They shake hands, Terry going in aggressively to the hilt, without leaving trailing fingers to be crushed, reckoning that Checker is the type of man who would self-consciously work on a dominant shake.

—I'll be in touch, Ronald Checker smiles, a charmless display that most people could only evoke reflexively and privately if fortunate enough to stumble upon a much-hated rival falling under a bus. Terry tracks Checker's departure, the American's stride jaunty, as he tries in futility to flatten his hair against the ministrations of the gales, visibly relieved to walk past an obsequiously grinning doorman.

The porters are miffed to discover no luggage in the taxi, giving Terry some dubious looks, as if he is in some way responsible. Terry bristles,

but there are pressing matters to attend to. The funeral of his old friend Alec is due to take place this afternoon. He drives home to his South Side flat, where he changes and calls Doughheid, to take him down to Rosebank Cemetery.

Doughheid is prompt, and Terry gratefully settles back in the cab. However, it's an older, less slick and upholstered version of his own beloved TX4, made by the London Carriage Company, and its spartan environment makes him feel overdressed in his black velvet jacket, yellow shirt, buttoned up to the top with no tie, and grey flannel trousers. He's tied back the corkscrew curls in an elasticated band, but a couple have already popped out, jumping irritatingly across his eyeline as he scans women on the streets towards the inner-city district of Pilrig, which looks frosty and threadbare around the park. As Terry steps out the cab and bids Doughheid farewell, the cold drizzle assails him. This is the first ever burial he's been at, surprised when he'd heard that Alec's do wouldn't be in the usual venues of Warriston or Seafield crematoria. It was disclosed that there was a family plot of land purchased many years ago, and Alec was to be buried beside his late wife, Theresa, who had died tragically in a fire. Terry had never met her, and he'd known Alec since he was sixteen, but had learnt over the years, through the odd tearful bout of alcoholic remorse and lamentation, that Alec, inebriated, had accidentally started the chip-pan fire which had led to his wife's demise.

Pulling up the collar on his jacket, Terry heads across to where a large group of mourners have gathered around a grave. It's busy, but then Alec's passing was always likely to precipitate a jakey convention. What surprises Terry is that many old faces he has presumed either dead or in prison are discovered merely not to have ventured past their local supermarkets since the smoking ban.

It isn't all low-rent style though. A green Rolls-Royce pulls assertively through the gates, crunching the gravel of the path. All the other cars are parked in the street outside, but, much to the chagrin of the bemused cemetery officials, the Rolls inches as close as it can to the gravestones, before two suited and overcoated male passengers exit ceremoniously. One is a gangster whom Terry knows as The Poof. He is accompanied by a younger, wily-eyed, narrow-featured man, who, to Terry's eye, appears too physically unimpressive to be a minder.

The grand entrance, which has certainly attracted the attention of the

mourners, fails to hold Terry's, his gaze soon turning in other directions. Experience has taught him that grief affects people in different ways. Along with weddings and holidays, funerals afforded the best pulling opportunities. With this in mind, he remembers how Councillor Maggie Orr has returned to her original surname from the clumsy designation Orr-Montague, the latter part belonging to the solicitor husband she'd recently divorced. Terry is armed with two pieces of knowledge: one is that Maggie has worn well, the second is that relationship breakdown and bereavement means double vulnerability. Perhaps he'll get the old Maggie back, the bewildered Broomhouse girl, rather than the slick, self-actualised professional woman she's morphed into. The thought excites him.

Almost immediately, he sees her standing by a large Celtic cross gravestone, talking to a group of mourners, wearing a sombre dark suit and gently drawing on a cigarette. Tidy enough, Terry thinks, licking a crystallising layer of salt from his top lip. He meets her eye, allowing first a faint smile then a sad nod of acknowledgement to pass between them.

Stevie Connolly, Alec's son, sidles up to him. Stevie is a wiry guy, with a permanent bearing of semi-indignation that he inherited from his father. —You found ma faither, ay?

—Aye. Died peaceful like.

—You were his mate, Stevie says, in accusation.

Terry recalls how father and son had never been close, and partly empathises, being himself in a similar situation of paternal alienation, but is unsure of how to react to Stevie's contention. —Aye, worked oan the windaes thegither, he says blandly, recalling another eventful chapter in his life.

Stevie's doubtful scowl seems to be saying: "And the fucking house-breaking," but before he can voice the thought, a series of calls and signals ripple across the cemetery, compelling the mourners to bunch slowly around the graveside. The minister (Terry gives thanks that Alec, though originally a Catholic, had left instructions that the funeral would be as secular and short as possible, so this meant Church of Scotland) makes a few non-contentious remarks, centring on how Alec was a social man, who missed his beloved Theresa, cruelly taken from him. They would now be together, not just symbolically, but for all time.

A couple of psalms are sung, the minister gamely trying to garner the

enthusiasm of probably the weakest and most self-conscious backing chorus in the history of Christendom, unaided by indoor acoustics. There follows a short speech from Stevie. He just about manages to cover up his resentment towards Alec and his role in his mother's demise, before inviting anybody who feels so inclined to come up to the microphone to give testimonial. There follows a nervous silence, with much studying of the blades of wet grass.

Then, at the urging of both Alec's son and niece, Terry gets up to speak, standing on a box behind the microphone. Looking out at the sea of faces, he cracks what he thinks is a winning smile. He then taps the microphone in the manner he's seen stand-up comics do at Edinburgh Fringe shows. —Once Alec goat the results n kent thaire wis nae wey back, eh took oaf oan a massive session, drinkin his wey through half the local Lidl's stock! That wis Alec, he thunders, waiting for laughter to erupt.

But there is mostly stillness around the grave. The few who choose to react polarise between half-stifled chuckles and gasps of horror. Maggie shakes her head ruefully at Stevie, whose hands are balled tight and white, his teeth almost cracking as he hisses through them, —He thinks it's a fuckin best man's speech at some waster's wedding!

Terry elects to soldier on, raising his voice above the intensifying grumbles. —Then he decided tae pit his heid in the oven, ay. But Alec bein Alec, he wheezes, —the cunt wis that pished he thought the fridge wis the fuckin oven! Pardon ma French but, ay. Aye, eh went intae the boatum freezer compartment, couldnae git ehs fuckin heid in, cause ay the wire basket n the McCain oven chips, so eh stuck ehs heid intae the plastic container next tae the basket n filled it wi ehs puke! Terry's laughter explodes across the cold, wet cemetery. —Any cunt else ye'd blame it oan the medication, but that wis Alec, ay!

Stevie's face crumbles as he takes this in, and a hyperventilating fit starts to seize him. He looks to Maggie and the other relatives in appeal. —What's eh sayin? Eh? What is aw this?

But Terry, the wind whipping up his curls, has the floor and, in full flow, is all but oblivious to the reaction from the mourners. —Well, even wi the door open, it was such a cauld night that when ah found um in the morning, his heid wis frozen in a solid fuckin block ay iced-up seek-water, fae jist under his chin tae the back toap part ay his neck. Thaire was an aypil frozen in the water for some reason. Like he'd been tryin

tae fuckin dook fir it, before eh passed oot! But that wis Alec, ay! Terry pauses. There follows a few tuts, with some heads shaking. Terry glances at Stevie, being restrained by Maggie, who has a firm grip of his arm. —Some boy for a peeve! But it's great tae see um buried next tae his beloved Theresa . . . Terry says, pointing at the grave next to the one they are standing around. Then he indicates a patch of grass between the two graves. —That's whaire they buried the auld chip pan; in between the two ay thum, he says, poker-faced, drawing real gasps of disgust, and some barely suppressed guffaws. —Anywey, that's me done. See yis back at the boozer for a scoop, for the boy's memory, like, and he hops down into the body of the mourners, who stand apart from him like he has a contagious disease.

The rest of the service passes without controversy, though there are some teary eyes when the inevitable "Sunshine on Leith" strikes up on the rickety sound system, as the coffin is lowered into the ground. Terry is too cold to wait for the closing hymn. He shuffles away and heads down the street to the Guilty Lily pub, where the reception will take place. He is the first person to get to the alehouse, and it's a relief to be in the warm on this foul, dreich day. Outside it is already pitch dark at barely 4 p.m. A sombre barmaid points to a white-clothed table full of glasses of beer, whisky and wine, and another with a buffet of traditional funeral spread; the mini sausage rolls, the ham-and-cheese sandwiches. Terry hits the toilets, doing a livener before returning to get himself a bottle of beer. As he takes up position by the bar, the mourners file in. Terry, his eyes on Maggie's entrance, fails to notice Stevie's discord. As she moves elegantly over to the big fireplace, on the other side of the room, he wonders how long it will take her to come his way.

Maggie, comforting and placating a pent-up Stevie, has guided him away from Terry, in the hope that he'll cool off. As she glances across at Terry, she recalls their early trysts, how she (perversely now) preferred him to the sweet and successful Carl Ewart, who had such a hopeless crush on her. But Terry had possessed that bombastic confidence, which obviously hadn't changed. And, it has to be said, from his cocky bearing, perched at the bar on a stool, that he looks well. He is obviously taking care of himself and still, implausibly, has those force-of-nature corkscrew curls. They seem not to have thinned or receded at all, though she suspects he runs Grecian 2000 through them.

Maggie is thus moved to give her own reflection a surreptitious glance in one of the full-length windows, pretending to be looking outside into the darkness. As a younger woman, her small body and breasts had never felt much of a blessing, but as she drew close to her forties, Maggie had grown grateful for them. There was little for the hungry ravages of gravity to work with, and any potential traction was thwarted by a four-times-a-week gym regime, an obsession with healthy eating and the discipline of moderate food portions. Maggie also finds it hard to pass a spa, and indulges in high-end skincare products and exfoliation treatments. That she is often genuinely taken for her daughter's elder sister is a great source of quiet pride to this elfin woman.

She turns to see that Terry has caught her lingering glance of self-regard. Her heart sinks as a smile splits his face and he moves over, waving a lecturing finger. —Aye, caught ye thaire, checkin yersel oot in the gless! No that ah blame ye mind, ah'm likin what ah'm seein n aw!

Maggie feels an invisible hand tear her face into a smile. —Well, you look very well yourself, Terry.

—Goat tae make an effort but, ay, Terry winks extravagantly.

He hasn't changed, Maggie thinks. He never changes. She looks back across to the fire. Stevie has a whisky in his hand, and is thanking some elderly guests for coming.

—So how's things? Terry asks, and before she can inform him, answers on her behalf. —Big changes wi the divorce n the lassie bein away at college, or so ah'm hearin.

—Aye, well, impeccable sources. Maggie raises her glass of whisky to her lips.

—Aw oan yir lonesome, Terry beams, pitching it as a statement.

Maggie chooses to answer it as a question. —Who says ah'm on my lonesome?

—So thaire's a new felly? Well, eh's a lucky laddie! Tell ye that for nowt!

—I never said that either.

—Well, what is it, then?

—“It” is my life, and it's none of your business!

Terry spreads his arms. —Hi! Kin ye no comfort an auld pal in her hour ay need?

Maggie is about to retort that Terry's attempt at mass comforting at

the funeral speech has given him near-pariah status, but now Stevie is tearing towards them, murder in his eyes. —What was aw that about? That speech, he confronts Terry, in bug-eyed rage.

—Wis a tough balance, Terry nods, seemingly oblivious to Stevie's seething anger. —Ah wanted tae keep it Alec-friendly but at the same time gie the family some closure, ay. He nods semi-smugly. —Ah think ah pilled it oaf if ah say so masel, and he pulls out his mobile phone and goes into photographs. —Ah took some pictures oan the mobby, like that Damien Hirst gadge. Huv a shuftie, and he thrusts the camera phone in Stevie's face.

Stevie had never been close to Alec, but seeing the image of his father's head frozen into a block of ice, with yellow vomit trailing from the mouth, is too much to bear. —Ah dinnae want tae see that! Git the fuck oot ay here!

—C'moan, mate! Closure!

Stevie lunges to grab Terry's phone, but Terry shoves him in the chest and he stumbles backwards. —C'moan now, pal, yir makin an exhibition ay yirsel here . . . Alec's day but, ay . . . Terry warns.

—FUCK . . . FUCK YOU, LAWSON! Stevie stammers, as two relatives are on hand to pull him away. —Cunt's fuckin mental . . . ye see what he's got on that phooooone . . . Stevie's voice rises to breaking levels, as he is protestingly hauled off to the other side of the room.

Terry turns to Maggie. —Ye try n gie some cunts, the family n that, a wee bit ay closure n git nae fuckin thanks!

—You're crazy, Maggie says, and not in a flattering way, her eyes bulging in disbelief. —You huvnae changed!

—Keepin it real, Terry says proudly, but Maggie tears across the room to comfort her cousin. She always was a snooty wee cow, he thinks. Besides, Stevie never got on with Alec, what's the hypocrite doing, playing the grieving son?

And now The Poof has caught his eye and is heading across to him. Despite rarely dressing in anything other than expensive designer suits and button-down shirts, there is always something slightly soiled-looking about The Poof. It's as if he's slept all night in his clothes and just been disturbed into consciousness. This impression is reinforced by the fact that The Poof is almost blind, his permanently screwed-up mole eyes adding to his sleepy demeanour. For a man who sadistically enjoys

violence, he is paradoxically squeamish about anything to do with his eyes. Laser surgery is no-go, and he even balks at fiddling with contacts. The Poof is also prone to heavy perspiration, thus clothes quickly look grubby on him. He has driven Edinburgh's (and some of London's) finest tailors to despair; despite their best efforts, around four hours will see him go from spruce to loose. The Poof's younger sidekick, his face all tight angles, is backed up against the brickwork pillar in the centre of the bar, drink in hand, slyly scanning the gathering's few younger women.

Terry turns back to The Poof. He recalls how everybody got called a "poof" at Forrester High School in the seventies. Back then, only "wanker" possibly rivalled it as the most common term of abuse. But The Poof was the Poof. Continuously bullied, rather than take the stock revenge route of joining the polis to get payback on the world, The Poof had gone against the grain and become gangster no. 1.

Of course, Terry knows that The Poof, strictly speaking, isn't homosexual, and that he is one of few folk who still refers to him by that old school moniker. This is dangerous, as The Poof has worked his way up through the ranks by being a wide, vicious bastard. However, in Terry's consciousness, part of Victor Syme will always be the dippit wee cunt in the brown duffel coat, whom he regularly took a crusty roll and crisps off of from outside the baker van at school break.

The game-changer for The Poof was his totally left-field attack with a sharpened screwdriver on Evan Barksdale. Barksdale was a bully: a twin who, along with his brother Craig, pursued a campaign of systematic, unremitting viciousness that pushed The Poof into the frenzied, psychotic bloodletting that instantly caused the world, and Victor Syme himself, to redefine his street status. Evan Barksdale, like a scheme Dr. Frankenstein, had unwittingly created a monster substantially more dangerous than he, or his brother, could ever hope to be. Of course, The Poof had met with some pain and grief along his violence-strewn personal road to Damascus, but Barksdale's persecution had schooled him well; everything else was insignificant compared to the psychic torture he'd already undergone.

On The Poof's approach, Terry feels his buttocks clench involuntarily. There's going to be trouble. He has done some business with The Poof before, delivering cocaine to the sailors at the naval base in Helensburgh, before a security crackdown had burnt his fingers and made it

too dangerous a market. —Terry . . . A familiar fetid cabbage-stalk breath assails him.

—Sorry, Vic. On reflection, ah realise it wis in bad taste . . . the speech likes, Terry concedes, again checking out where The Poof's young accomplice is situated.

—Fuck that! It was brilliant! Some cunts huv nae sense ay humour. The Poof shakes his head. —Alec would be laughin his heid oaf. The day wis aboot him, no thaim, and he flashes a reprimanding sneer over at the grieving family.

Terry is so relieved, he lets his defences fall, showing a greater receptiveness to The Poof's subsequent pitch than would normally be the case. —Listen. Ah need a wee favour. I'm off tae Spain for a wee spell, two or three weeks, mibbe mair. The Poof drops his voice. —Between you n me, ah'm gittin a wee bit ay heat here. I need you tae keep an eye oan the sauna. Liberty, the one doon by Leith Walk.

Terry feels his meagre nod slowing to immobility. —Eh, ah dinnae really ken that much aboot saunas . . .

—Nowt tae ken. The Poof waves a dismissive, ring-covered hand. —Besides, ah hear yir still at that porno vid stuff, wi that cunt, what's his name again, him doon in London?

—Sick Boy, aye. Now and again. A wee hobby. Nae poppy in it but, ay.

The Poof raises a doubtful eyebrow. —Just check in a couple ay times a week, and he glances at his young cohort, now putting a sandwich and sausage roll onto a paper plate. —Keep that taxin wee cunt Kelvin, he's the wife's younger brother, and they fuckin nippy hoors on their taes . . . or thair backs. His face creases in a grin. —Make sure it's the doonstairs lips that's gittin wide, n no the upstairs yins!

Terry knows he should be sharing a collusive cackle, but feels his features sinking south. This is hassle he doesn't need.

The Poof is far too astute not to realise that threats are a last resort in securing compliance, and that, in the first instance, winning hearts and minds always works best. —Obviously, thaire's free cowps in it for ye, oan the hoose. Some nice goods n aw.

—Fair dos, Terry says, unable to stop the words spilling from his mouth, even though a part of him is outraged. He has genuinely never paid for sex, and he tells The Poof this.

—We aw pey for it in some weys, The Poof observes.

Terry considers his three previous divorce settlements and the CSA harassment he's been subjected to, and can't dispute this. —Yir no wrong. Ah'll swing by later.

—Kent ah could count on you, buddy. The Poof gleefully, and not too lightly, punches Terry's shoulder. —Kelvin! he shouts to the sidekick, who pivots, tuned like a dog to a high-pitched whistle, and bounds over.

—Terry, this is Kelvin. Kelv, Terry's gaunny be helping ye oot at Liberty while ah'm away.

—Ah telt ye, ah dinnae need—

—Done deal, The Poof waves his protests down. —Be nice, he warns.

Kelvin seems to contemplate this, before dispensing Terry a curt, gunfighter nod, which is returned in equally minimal measure. The Poof, catching the vibe, attempts to introduce levity by throwing out some football inanities. If Terry had wanted to extricate himself before, he is now determined to do so. He likes football, watches it on TV and still occasionally goes to Hibs games, but regards it as utterly pointless as a general topic of conversation. He excuses himself and goes to look for Maggie, deciding that it's time to build bridges. He finds her standing alone by the bar, drinking whisky, seemingly in deep contemplation. He grabs a glass from the table and holds it up to her. —Absent friends?

She reluctantly clinks drinking vessels.

—Sorry about the speech. Ah jist thoat it was what Alec wid've wanted.

—But what about what ma cousin wanted?!

Terry is delighted that the alcohol has brushed aside the professional refinement and Maggie's tones are, once again, straight out of Broomhouse. —Ah admit, ah wis wrong. Ah didnae think about that, Terry nods. The truth is that his speech was partially pitched as a wind-up to Stevie. Alec was a jakey, yes, but at least he had a good heart, unlike his own father, and Stevie had never appreciated that.

—You n him were close, Maggie says.

—He wis one ay the best, n we wir great mates for years, Terry agrees, then his face tightens teasingly. —Mind ay how him and I first met? Through you!

Maggie blushes through her whisky glow. —Aye . . . she says, evoking a younger, previous self to Terry, and with enough flirtation in it for him to feel encouraged.

After another couple of drinks, their chary joint exit follows, with a stroll down Newhaven Road. It is cold and wet, and there are no taxis around. They take the gamble of pushing on to Ferry Road and the only vehicles in the vicinity are the heavy lorries that whip menacingly past them, bound for Leith Docks. Terry senses Maggie is quickly going off any boil she might have been on, but thankfully, a cab approaches, driven by Cliff Blades, a drinking friend of Terry's from the Taxi Club in Powderhall. —Hop in, Terry! Blades cheerfully sings in his English accent, before he notices their demeanour, dress and locale, and puts two and two together. —Ah . . . you've been at the crematorium . . . sorry for your loss. Anyone close?

—Naw, it wis the cemetery, ay. Aye, her uncle, Terry sombrely nods to Maggie, —and a very close pal ay mine. Maggie, this is ma mate Bladesey, and he forces levity into his tone. —Dinnae get him started on Scottish nationalism, for fuck's sake.

—Scottish independence, please, Bladesey ticks.

—No, I won't be doing that, she says pointedly.

Cliff Blades, despite being English, is a keen advocate of Scottish independence, while Maggie, though privately convinced of the argument, still holds the Labour Party whip in the council chambers.

Bladesey is known to be discreet and drops Terry and Maggie off at her place in Craighleith. Terry is surprised how rampant she is, how Maggie leads him straight to the bedroom without any pleasantries. Surely he couldn't have expected her to be the chaste, demure teenager he'd encountered in this scenario all those years back? It seems that Maggie is just pleased to get a bit of solid cock inside her, with no questions asked. He'd heard the split from this Colin guy had been long and protracted. Now with her daughter at university, she can let rip again.

And they do, with gusto.

Later, as they are lying in bed, and Terry is looking at his watch, wondering how long it will take him to get another erection after just spending himself (he reckons somewhere between three and four minutes), they hear the sound of the key in the door coming from downstairs.

—What . . . Maggie sits up, torn out of a satisfying post-coital doze, —what's that . . . ?

—Some cunt's in the hoose, Terry says. —You expecting anybody?

—Nuht . . . Maggie is out of the bed and into a robe. Terry follows,

pulling himself into his grey trousers. Used to leisurewear, the material feels strange against him.

On going downstairs, Maggie immediately heads into the open-plan kitchen and sees her daughter Amber, making a sandwich. —What . . . I thought you were in Glasgow, at the university . . .

—I've come home for Lacey's twenty-first this weekend. Amber briefly looks up.

—I've been at my uncle Alec's funeral; I was just having a lie-down . . .

—Evidently, Amber snorts, as she sees a bare-chested Terry appear behind her mother.

Maggie is torn. Part of her just doesn't want her daughter to see her like this, while another part tries, in futility, to stress to herself that it's no big deal. —I . . . we . . .

—Mum, what you do with your life is your business. Really. She looks at Terry.

—Terry. Ah'm . . . eh, I'm an old friend of your mother's.

—That's also pretty apparent, Amber says. There is a charge in her voice, and Maggie can't make out whether it is because her daughter disapproves, or is hostile to any assumption on her part that she might.

—Well, I'm going to stay at Kim's and give you guys some space.

—Nae need, ah'm just off. Shift on the taxis, ay. Nice tae see ye, Scarlett.

—I'm Amber.

—Sorry, wrong colour, Terry grins, and heads back up the stairs.

After a spell, Maggie follows him into the bedroom, where she finds him putting on his shirt and buttoning it. —Fuck!

—She's a tidy young lassie. A credit tae ye, Terry says, pulling on his jacket.

Maggie sees the glint in his eye. —Don't even think about it!

—What dae ye take ays for! Never crossed ma mind, Terry protests. He is never as convincing as when he is blatantly lying, and despite a lifetime spent in council chambers, Maggie just about buys it.

Terry calls Bladesey to see if he is still in the neighbourhood, but he's taken an airport job. Doughheid is around, however, and he picks him up fifteen minutes later, taking him to his South Side flat.

Terry immediately gets changed, then ventures back out in his own cab, as there are some deliveries to drop off in west Edinburgh, mainly

the schemes: Broomhouse, Wester Hailes, Sighthill and Saughton Mains. Having completed this task, he thinks about heading down to Liberty Leisure, The Poof's facility, but opts to swing by the Gallery of Modern Art at the Dean Village, in case there is any posh fanny kicking around. He is delighted when two young women flag him down and climb into the cab. —Whaire's it to be, girls?

—The Minto Hotel, one says in an American accent.

—Sound. Whaire's it ye come fae?

—The USA.

—Aye, ah'd figured that one out, Terry says. —Whereabouts in America?

—Rhode Island.

—Rhode Island? Tell ye something for nowt, Terry whips his head round, winking, —they should call it "Ride Island" if thir aw like you pair!