



JON LYMON

Ghostly twists and turns  
on the dancefloor

# Last Night at the Stairways

THE BEERFEAR NOVEL

## LAST NIGHT AT THE STAIRWAYS

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When you're a teenager at war with yourself, the first casualty isn't the truth. It's your mother.

She's the one on the front line, witnessing first-hand your self-doubt turn to self-hate. She'll see you off your food and on your bed for hours on end, staring out of the window, wishing you were someone else somewhere else. She'll see your tears and you'll swear her to secrecy with a 'Please don't tell Dad.' And she won't. Not at first. She'll keep it to herself. Until the self-hate turns to self-harm. That's when she'll draft in your father, if you're lucky enough to have one around. His opening salvo will be warning shots along the battle lines of, 'Get your act together, son, or else...'

And you either get your act together, or else you find yourself standing in a doorway about to take the biggest risk of your short life.

Lloyd Parker found himself standing in that doorway, intense heat radiating through him as it pumped up the stairwell down which the footsteps

were fading fast, their owners accepting their fate while Lloyd paused on the top step, questioning his.

‘This is it,’ the man standing next to him spluttered, the whites of his eyes totally red, the veins in his forehead and neck throbbing in four-four time, gums leaking blood over his teeth, causing him to spit spots of red onto Lloyd’s multi-stained white shirt when he spoke.

Lloyd didn’t bother wiping them off. What was the point? He knew there was worse waiting for him at the bottom of the stairway.

# 1

Alcohol didn’t need to audition to secure a major role at Lloyd’s eighteenth birthday, but calls had gone out to see if people were willing to chip in for some speed, Es, a bit of gear, ‘that sort of shit’. Lloyd was exempt. It was his night, and any extra incentives would be his for free whether he wanted them or not.

How many of these incentives actually found their way into his bloodstream was just one of the questions Lloyd struggled to answer as he stumbled home afterwards. He couldn’t remember

much about the night, and nothing about how many substances he'd voluntarily imbibed or been forced to. He also couldn't remember buying the kebab that had stained his fingers chilli sauce red.

The red marks across each of his palms were also a cause for consternation, although he felt no pain from them, numbed by the sheer weight of impurities flowing through him. And was it sambuca or something else that was making his torso feel so hot?

But most worrying of all, he couldn't work out why he was walking home alone. The plan had been to spend his first night of official manhood in the loving arms of his girlfriend, Sophia, sharing his single bed in his parents' house.

Where was she? He couldn't remember saying goodbye to her, or his best friend Will, who should have been walking with them to his parents' place just a few roads from Lloyd's.

This had to be an initiation, Lloyd concluded. His friends were testing him, seeing if he was ready to be regarded as a man. He was eighteen now. He no longer had to follow the set path that was the education system. It was time to

go his own way, and go it alone, and this was his first test. They'd all be waiting outside his house, applauding him as he stumbled into Roots Walk. Sophia would run up and plant a tonguey kiss on him. Or better still, she'd be waiting in his bedroom, naked under the duvet (shit, he'd forgotten to change the cover to one less childish). Fuck, no matter. The lights would be off, her clothes soon following them. And Lloyd would prove himself a man.

He walked in auto-pilot delirium, fairly convinced these thoughts of him in bed with a naked Sophia should be giving him more of an erection than he was experiencing. He was slightly less convinced that he was heading in the sort of direction that would enable him to reach his parents' semi before daybreak.

His thoughts meandered as wildly as his legs and feet. Alcohol had a tendency to exacerbate his self-loathing, and already on the trip home he'd berated himself for his failures. No job, no future, no girl he had any chance of holding onto (Sophia was *way* out of his league, he was just thankful she was being slow to realise it).

Above all, Lloyd was doubting his decision to turn his back on university. It was a big risk he'd taken, one that had prompted a permanent emptiness to take up residence in his gut. Nothing but nothing was on the horizon, nothing save unemployment, insecurity and invisibility. At least university would have provided a three-year buffer between him and all this nothing.

He regularly swallowed and prodded his ears, trying to rid himself of the ringing sound in his head. He was certain that the noise wasn't all down to the thumping music the American DJ had seen fit to subject them to all night. There were screams in the mix too, yells and the smashing of glass. And occasionally a blink would spark a vision of the venue's lightshow turning circles above a heavily armed and legged dance floor, mono faces pulling serious expressions, bodies employing questionable moves, intermittently lost in the mist of dry ice and the intense contrast of a strobe light.

The turn out had been strong, Lloyd recalled with a smile as he zig-zagged. School and college

friends, associates, hangers-on, wannabes, they'd all made the effort, rendering his pre-night nerves and fears of no-shows redundant. Of course he knew the night wasn't all about him. It was more about marking the end of an era, the parting of the ways, the champagne smash that launched them onto the great sea of life. But Lloyd didn't want this generic milestone to take all the credit for the healthy showing. It was his eighteenth. And he'd been a popular member of his secondary school and college, an enthusiastic socialiser who'd been to countless eighteenth's over the past year, invariably the first to arrive and the last to leave. Always willing to stay for just one more drink, smoke just one more cigarette, take to the floor for just one more dance, or try and negotiate his tongue's way into just one more girl's mouth.

'Stay for one more, Will, just one more. Come on, mate. You know I'd do the same for you.'

Lloyd didn't know why that line suddenly occurred to him, only that it sounded exactly like the kind of thing he'd say.

Where was he, Will? Will, who failed spectacularly to get the sorts of grades universities liked, and who had descended into a depression that manifested itself in majestic mood swings, gruelling silences and Trojanesque drinking. Together, as summer darkened into late summer, Will and Lloyd had ventured into Turpention's many public houses to get 'off their tits', Income Support in pocket, the desire to blot it all out on their minds. Often, they'd bump into Lloyd's older brother Nick who drank and dealt in The Anchor with his friends John and Luke who all mercilessly ripped the piss out of Will's acne and Lloyd's poverty.

'Leave him alone,' Lloyd would say, standing between Will and his aggressors.

'Don't be a dick, bruv,' Nick would say. 'John'll destroy you without breaking into a sweat.'

John was the kind of bloke who looked tall even when he was sitting down, being several inches over the six foot mark, a target Lloyd was still hoping to reach through a combination of stretching exercises and frequent vegetables.

‘I’m not having him rip the piss out of my mate,’ Lloyd would counter.

Will would then try and pull him away, suggesting they go and drink somewhere else and John and Luke would advise Lloyd to listen to his boyfriend, and come out with some other homophobic comments before Nick escorted his brother out, with a ‘go drink somewhere else, dickheads’ parting comment.

Lloyd’s eighteenth birthday had provided him and Will with a glorious opportunity to forget about all that, and put the mire their lives were in danger of slipping into onto the backburner. Born on the 31<sup>st</sup> August, Lloyd’s date of birth made him the last of his school and college friends to reach the numerical landmark, good reason for a locally based celebration before everyone headed off in the different directions that life was forcing them in, some over the hills to faraway universities, others down the road to mundane jobs. It seemed like only Lloyd and Will were going nowhere.

The route home Lloyd assumed he was taking was never advisable after dark, and many made alternative arrangements even before dark.

Turpention was a town derided by those who'd never been there, and occasionally berated by those who lived there. At its centre was a mass of unimaginative, grey concrete office blocks with nothing to offer the architectural world and little to offer anyone else beyond space for unremarkable insurance firms, solicitors and small-time businesses.

With car parks outnumbering green parks four to one, and extra wide roads squeezing the pavements against the crumbling walls of unkempt front gardens, it was clear that Turpention had been built for the car first and the pedestrian second. Anyone brave enough to walk from the outskirts into the centre was forced down into a network of grey, foreboding and piss stained subways that gave vehicles free rein on the surface.

But the cracked and cocained subworld of the underpass of the underclass Lloyd was about to enter was the only option if you lived south and wanted to avoid the swaying, shouting cab queue at Turpention East station, or the night buses rammed with swearing, sweating and shouting knife wielders with forked tongues, or the

unpredictability of the illegal cab drivers who plied their lecherous trade up on the surface.

Lloyd descended into the subway, recalling it had been the scene of several murders in the last few years. He couldn't remember if there'd been three in the last four years, or four in the last three. Either would have been enough to send a chill down his spine, had it not been enveloped in his beer jacket, that cloak of warmth and invincibility that embraces the drunk.

As Lloyd's steps echoed through the subway, he tortured himself with visions of shining knives wielded by dirty hands being thrust into his meaty flesh and slicing through a pulsing artery, giving rise to a fountain of blood. He thought about those murders (it was three in four, no, four, definitely four in three), the murderers apprehended and jailed now, their places, their sleeping bags, their blades in this subterranean hostile hostel taken by murderers-in-waiting who used the underworld as a pisser cum shitter cum bedroom cum lounge cum training ground.

Lloyd glanced at sleeping bags stirring like writhing slugs in the dank recesses, the grey and

graffitied concrete pillars serving as resting posts. A man was sitting with his back against one pillar, his head tipped back, eyes watery and vivid, watching a lane of liquid slowly make its tearful way down another pillar from the surface. So entranced was this man by this trickle from the sky, he didn't notice Lloyd walk past, mentally prepared for an approach or attack from one of the urchins. Lloyd felt armed and invincible, his beer jacket fashioned from chainmail, the house keys he gripped in his pocket poison-tipped daggers ready to be swiped at an addict's throat, and swiftly followed by a winding blow to the gut and a knockout knee to the chin. Lloyd was ready to teach the losers down here that not everyone who lived up there was easy-pickings.

As he walked unchallenged, Lloyd felt the haze of inebriation bowing before the irresistible force that was the hangover. And Lloyd knew the hangover that awaited him was an express delivery from hell. He squinted at the path ahead, recognising the steps that led up to street level ten metres in front of him. Their familiarity relaxed him, but as he approached them he froze. Someone

was behind him. Running towards him. Shit. He felt an inexplicable thrill. This was more like it. Finally, some action. The subway was about to live up to its reputation. A drug-addled assailant was preparing an assault. Maybe a fifth murder in four years (or would it be the fourth in five?)

Lloyd steeled himself for the shouted ‘Oi’, swiftly followed by a profanity-filled threat, spat with bad breath through a matted beard.

Lloyd imagined the runner wielding a pick-axe, ready to bury it in the back of his skull, Trotsky-style. Lloyd considered turning to pre-empt the assault, catch the assailant by surprise with a stab to the chin, but that would risk taking the pick-axe to the forehead.

He slowly walked up the first few concrete, phlegm circled steps, knowing each could be his last. Whoever was behind him, their heavy breathing was now audible. Lloyd clenched both fists, wishing one rock-like super-powers that would fell the mightiest foe with a single blow, wishing the other bravery and accuracy as it gripped the keys.

His assailant-to-be took another step nearer and Lloyd swivelled, clenched fist ready to connect with a jaw or gut. Instead, he saw an ashened-faced man in a pin striped suit, shirt undone to his waist and stained chilli sauce red all the way down the button strip, carelessly folded tie leaking out of his trouser pocket like the head of an abducted snake. He appeared to be running for his life, or home to his wife (both equally serious), taking the steps up to street level three at a time.

Lloyd watched the guy, admiring him for risking the subway alone and in a suit, as red a rag as you could dangle in front of the tramps down there. Lloyd ran up the final few steps and called after the guy, 'Hey, what you running from?' But the guy's head wasn't for turning. Lloyd looked back down into the underpass but saw no one.

The fresh air at the surface invigorated the alcohol and other substances that still swilled around his system. Such was the impact of the air, it was several seconds before he realised that he'd wandered into the road and had played chicken with an obviously drunk and clearly illegal cab driver who had eyes only for the trio of

unrestrained girls in his rear view. He shot the cab's tail-lights the fingers and a few choice words before taking a left onto Mayweather Avenue, then right into Roots Walk, the cul de sac that housed his parents' home.

Theirs was the first house on the right, their semi-attached neighbours to *their* right a family who'd been threatening to sell-up for years. Left of Lloyd's house was home to an unsightly and almost certainly unhealthy electricity generator that constantly hummed as if in permanent deliberation over whether or not to break out of its fenced-in suburban isolation.

A few steps down the cul de sac, Lloyd froze. His father was sitting on the doorstep, the yellow front door half open behind him, his sleeping head using the door frame as a pillow that was as unforgiving as he'd be to his late son.

Lloyd's father had always been strict and struggled to hide his disappointment with the way both his sons had turned out, especially Lloyd. The troubles started soon after Lloyd became a teenager. His parents racked their brains, trying to figure out what they'd done wrong. Doctors were

consulted and they referred Lloyd to consultants who were content to frown, pontificate and spin clichés. ‘He’ll grow out of it - it’s just a phase’.

At this stage, Lloyd’s father usually shot to his feet or slammed his fist on a table if one was within reach.

‘It ain’t normal for a thirteen year old to steal his father’s car and bring it back five hours later with a hundred extra miles on the clock and a full tank of petrol. Is it? It’s illegal for starters. And it’s bloody frustrating,’ his father told the latest member of the medical/legal profession to be assigned to Lloyd’s case. ‘I wanted to tear strips out of him when he came home, but somehow, it ended up with me thanking him for the petrol.’

‘Lord knows how he afforded it,’ his more placid but no less emotional mother added. ‘He had no job, being so young. Not even a paper round. But he’s always been a very difficult boy to tell off, hasn’t he?’ She’d turn to her husband, who’d nod without listening.

‘I’ll give you another example,’ Lloyd’s father would say, leaning towards the doctor/lawyer to accentuate the importance of the point he was

about to make. ‘A year later, he goes missing for a whole weekend. November I think it was. Thankfully, he didn’t nick the car this time, but we heard nothing from him until he got back late Sunday afternoon, looking like he’d been dragged through a hedge backwards, forwards, upwards, whichever-wards you bloody like. I wanted to knock seven bells out of him. But he says, ‘Dad, Dad,’ all enthusiastic and then drags me out into the garden. Freezing it was. Minus something out there. But do you know what he did?’ Lloyd’s father always paused at this point to ensure he had the undivided attention of the person/people in the room. ‘He showed me how to make a fire from ice. *A fire from ice,*’ he repeated whenever he didn’t get the wide-eyed looks of amazement he wanted. His wife always looked amazed even though she’d heard the tale hundreds of times before. ‘You wouldn’t think it was possible, would you?’ she’d add.

At this point whoever was listening would invariably shake their head and write something with an expensive pen.

‘You have to make the ice into a lens shape or something,’ his father would add, watching the pen flit up and down. ‘And then you hold it up to the sun. It’s clever, really clever. But it’s mad that a boy his age would know that. Crazy.’

If Lloyd’s mother sensed her husband losing his calm, which he often did, she’d grip his hand, the signal for him to let her talk. ‘He’s a very clever boy,’ she’d say, hoping that would positively influence whatever was being written. ‘He’s still very young. The reason we’re here is because we’re worried where all this might lead, you know. Whether the risks he’ll take will get bigger and bigger until he hurts himself. Or someone else.’

As Lloyd cautiously approached his front door, he saw his father’s mouth wide open in snoring shock. He crept up the short drive and slowly glided around the sleeping obstacle, fearing the sudden flick of an opening eye, followed by the sharp grip of a clenched fist hauling him in for an eyeball to eyeball, a holy father to son questioning along the lines of ‘what time do you call this?’ and ‘what the hell have you been up to, me and your mother have been worried sick.’

Lloyd knew he was a constant cause of consternation for his parents, but lately, having seen an improvement in his behaviour and signs of a return to common sense, they had begun to loosen his leash, little by little. That hadn't stopped his father setting the curfew for 2.30am which, after much negotiation and pleading for clemency (I'm 18 now, I'll probably have to queue to get a cab back with Will) Lloyd had managed to push back to 3.00 am. It was now 4.30.

Lloyd crept past his father into the house and paused at the base of the staircase, distracted by the faint smell of smoke drifting out of the lounge, the scene of many a skirmish between work-tired father and loose-cannon son. Its door was ajar, letting Lloyd slip in without so much as a hinge creak. His mother was sitting awkwardly upright in a floral chair, wrists drooping off the cliffs of the armrests, the nico-stained fingers of her left hand scissoring a cigarette that dripped ash onto an aged, pockmarked carpet. The still rising smoke suggested she'd only recently fallen asleep. Lloyd blew on the tip several times to kill the flame. "Love you, mum," he whispered, regretting each

and every drag of the cigarettes he'd smoked that night, and the liver rotting pints of Gates and the necked shots too numerous to recall, all now thumping their revenge against the inside of his skull. Seeing his sleeping mother before him prompted strange feelings of guilt in Lloyd. Why was he so desperate to waste the life this woman had given him?

Lloyd wondered if him being a difficult son had contributed to her looking older than her fifty-three years. Had he been such a handful in his first few years, such a disappointment and nightmare that his parents abandoned all plans to extend their family beyond him, their second son?

These were the last thoughts of Lloyd Parker on the occasion of his eighteenth birthday.

## 2

Lloyd awoke in his bedroom, a boyish box room dominated by a single bed draped in a mauve duvet which featured illustrations of World War II aircraft, Allied and Nazi vessels flying peacefully

alongside each other. Stukas next to Spitfires. Messerschmitts beside Mustangs.

Lloyd's shoes were beside each other too, still on his sweating feet – a common post piss-up phenomenon. His eyes explored their black leather which was already showing signs of scuffing to grey around the toecaps. A sharp pain on the bridge of his left foot then announced itself, forcing him to reach down and rub through his shoe.

Where was Sophia? Why hadn't she come home to bed with him and let him do a bit of whatever he was capable of doing?

His attention turned to the window through which he could see nothing but darkness. Confusing. The clarity he felt in his head suggested enough time had passed to dull the worst of the thumping in his brain and dilute his hangover. He must have slept the whole of Saturday.

An overwhelming fear and dread then struck him, accompanied by a flash of a pretty girl with dark hair and heavy mascara. She was rapidly replaced by Sophia scowling, Will shouting, glass shattering, someone else yelling 'move back, move back,' then the snap of what sounded like bone.

He checked his bedside table for the glass of water and biscuit his mother faithfully left for him when she knew he'd be hanging. Neither was there. Only the wooden bedside table lamp into which were carved the snarling heads of jackals. Maybe his mother was showing her disappointment in him for failing to obey the curfew.

He sat up on his bed, a move which prompted a surge of what felt like an oil slick to flow to the front of his brain, causing a build up of intense pressure behind his forehead he hoped his skull could hold in. The pain prompted another flashback, Will standing at a silver blue bar telling him he was going home, then buying a rare round of lagers and a pair of even more rare shots, the sweet aniseed hell that was sambuca, dispatched in seconds, followed by who knows how many more.

Lloyd's head was crying out for him to lay back down, to spread the oil slick evenly about his brain again. His lungs were crying out for him to sneak a smoke out of the window. Lloyd considered it, looking at the butts he'd crammed into a crack between the window ledge and wall. But his father was strictly anti, always leaving the

room when his mother lit up. He'd long given up, but knew he was always only a bad day away from his next cigarette. And Lloyd knew there were burned bridges downstairs in dire need of rebuilding. He dreaded hearing the stomp of footsteps up the stairs, seeing the accusatory wagging finger, the menace in the eye, the spittle at the sides of his father's mouth that would shoot in his face from angry words spat with venom, against which he had no defence.

His father was a strict nine-to-five, Monday-to-Friday man, who drank in moderation and expected nothing from life except debt. Not for him any ambition beyond his capabilities as a moderately successful civil engineer. He'd told Lloyd how he'd seen his own father destroyed by disappointment and drink, a showman with nothing to show for years of office toil which he endured while waiting for the leading roles in his evening and weekend amateur dramatics to turn into something professional.

For sure, he would make sure that both Nick and Lloyd did not follow in those doomed family footsteps. They would not tread hollow boards

riddled with trapdoors on his watch. Lloyd's father vowed to instil into his sons the importance of a settled life and the need to set sights low.

Although only three years his elder, Nick was already well versed in the disappointments of the real world. He'd left school at sixteen, shunning the idea of college in favour of work as a decorator. As a result, he was now in a position to afford his own flat, his own girlfriend, his own debts and recently, his own daughter.

Lloyd had more of his grandfather about him and that spelt trouble. The gene that skipped his father's generation had landed slap bang entangled in his DNA. Lloyd's parents had discussed their son's predilection for unnecessary risk-taking on numerous occasions, propped up by puffed-up pillows in the matrimonial bed after busy days, heads bowed into tepid hardback fiction that transported them to impossibly exciting worlds that still reflected their middle-class morals.

'Life is much harder for youngsters these days,' his mother would reason, and his father would look up, stare at nothing in particular and wonder if anything about that statement was true.

*He* didn't remember having anything easy and tried to recall if *his* father had ever berated him for lazing around in bed all day, jobless and directionless.

'I'm not saying it's easy,' he'd tell his wife. 'But slouching around isn't the answer. He needs to get out there and do something with his life. We've supported him for eighteen years, and he needs to know we're not going to do it for another eighteen.'

Despite this hard-line attitude, he was conscious that Lloyd's was still a life he was responsible for creating, nurturing and, ultimately, financing. So he tolerated Lloyd occasionally milking him for money for nights out, even loaning him a generous thirty pounds for his eighteenth birthday which his mother secretly supplemented with another twenty.

As he lay in his bed, Lloyd checked his pockets for any change that he could return to his parents, but found only a scrunched-up yellow raffle ticket. He unfolded it. Number thirty-two. He had no idea where it had come from. He put it back in his pocket and tried to work out where all his money had gone. He was pretty sure he hadn't been

mugged in the underpass or at any other stage on his way home. So that meant he'd spent it all on drink and cigarettes. On his own birthday. He sat up and sighed, disappointed by the costliness of his own generosity.

Right. Enough hanging around, delaying the inevitable.

Quietly, he descended the stairs, preparing himself for his father's verbal onslaught, suspecting he'd be spoiling for a confrontation. Lloyd knew he'd have to take whatever was coming his way, shoe gaze and carpet explore and nod and mumble and agree to buck up his ideas. He'd have to negotiate himself a few more weeks and hope for brighter economic news or a clearer picture of how he saw his own future.

The lounge door was still ajar. Looking through the gap, Lloyd frowned. The television was on but the picture was wider and more vibrant than he remembered. His mother sat alone and asleep in a chair slightly lower and noticeably less floral than the one he'd left her in the night before. There were pictures on the wall he'd not seen before too. Christ on a cross. An oil painting of a basket of flowers,

one of them wilting. Another of a dog that looked like it had been painted by a child. As he edged further into the room he saw on the Seventies-style sideboard a silver framed shot of him and Nick when they were kids. Next to it was another picture of an uncle or someone with typical Parker facial features (the arched eyebrows, the square jaw, the slightly over-sized teeth) standing next to a smiling young blonde child no older than six, who was sitting on a bike with stabilisers.

‘Sorry, Mum,’ Lloyd whispered, kneeling beside her chair, being careful not to wake her while still keeping an eye out for his father. ‘Sorry for getting home late. Lost track of time, didn’t I? Lost track of where I was, if I’m honest. But I’ll make it up to you and Dad. Promise.’

He suddenly remembered the row he and Nick had endured over the phone just before he’d left for the party. He’d deliberately not invited Nick, and Nick had taken exception to that.

‘You could have at least given me a chance to turn you down,’ his brother had said.

Lloyd had countered with ‘I don’t remember getting an invite to your eighteenth.’

‘That’s because you were only fifteen at the time, dick.’

‘I’m not a dick, you dick.’

‘You were too young to drink, you dick.’

‘I’m glad I didn’t invite you, dick. You’d only embarrass me.’

‘Me embarrass you? You want to take a look closer to home, mate. Don’t forget I know about the balcony jump. If Dad finds out about that performance, you are fucked, mate. And I mean out on the street fucked.’

Lloyd had looked around, trying to think of a way out that didn’t involve having to invite his brother along to his bash.

‘OK, OK, you can come along. Just don’t bring too many of your dickhead mates.’

‘As if any of them would want to come along to a party for a dick like you. Put Dad on the phone, I’ve got something important I want to discuss with him. Something about a balcony.’

‘Fuck off, Nick.’ Lloyd had slammed the phone down at this point, and waited with trepidation for the next fifteen minutes, ready to intercept the call before his parents answered it

downstairs. But even though Nick was a bit of a dick, Lloyd knew his brother wasn't *that* much of a dick.

Lloyd knew his mother must have had a terrible night to make her flesh look as pale and lined as it did. Her ashtray was heaped, a volcano of grey, white and black surrounded by butts smoked to their very ends, pointing outwards like stumpy gun barrels in between the turrets of the ashtray. 'Sorry for missing the curfew. I promise I won't do it again,' he whispered. A smile crossed his mother's face but she remained asleep.

Lloyd leant forward and gently kissed her on the forehead.

Standing up afterwards caused intense dizziness. This hangover was in danger of being the most epic of his fledgling drinking career. It was crushing his appetite for a confrontation with his father. All he could think of was his pillow. Fearing his father might emerge from the kitchen with a carving knife, or enter through the front door with a baseball bat, he ran back upstairs, taking three steps at a time and dived headfirst onto his bed. Just one more hour's sleep will do me, he thought. Then I'll

get up, phone around, see how everyone else is feeling. See who else feels like death.

## 3

An almighty crash woke Lloyd. The lone window in his bedroom rattled in its rotting frame, the pane thick with dust and dried exclamation marks of bird shit. Through the grime, Lloyd could see it was light outside.

Another crash. From downstairs. He sat up, imagining his seething father losing the plot in the hallway, threatening to clump his cowering mother for defending her idle son. ‘What the hell is he doing still in bed? Get him up. Get him out doing something, earning something. I’m not subsidising a fucking slouch.’

Lloyd’s fear of his father soon gave way to confusion brought on by the fact that he was lying on his bedroom’s bare floor. His arse and legs were cold and numb, his bed and bedside table also gone. Even the lampshade and light bulb were missing. Fear and dislocation swept over him like an unwelcome duvet (also gone) and he was shocked

into action by the shudder of the front door slamming wide open against the hallway wall.

This was serious. His father had really lost the plot this time. Lloyd looked around for something with which to defend himself against the anticipated attack, but there was nothing. Ripping up a floorboard wasn't an option, unless he wanted to piss off his father even more.

His stomach turned as he considered the possibility that someone else was downstairs. Although southern Turponton was comfortably middle class with a moderate crime problem and a high profile neighbourhood watch scheme, like anywhere, it wasn't immune to burglary. There was much to be made from looting the prosperous semis in the neighbourhood, especially as the local crime hotspot, West Bertram (which lay to the east of Turponton) had been fleeced by criminals to such an extent that the resulting increase in police presence and government regeneration projects in the area had forced thieves to spread their breaking and entering operations further afield.

Lloyd crept out of his room, pausing at the top of the staircase. Peering down, he saw a blonde

girl, about twenty-years-old edging backwards out of the front door carrying one end of his mother's sideboard, a worthless heirloom that had been in the family for as long as Lloyd could remember. It had short, stumpy legs 'just like your father's' his mother would quip, much to his and Nick's childhood amusement. Lloyd was concerned for the safety of the memory stirring cutlery and crockery inside, the best china that only came out at Christmas or when the grandparents were well enough to come over for tea. The sideboard was also home to ornamental candleholders, ornate ashtrays and a severe-looking Buddha figure wielding a scythe made of brown and beige soap. As she moved out of sight, a man carrying the other end of the sideboard came into view, greying at the temples, directing her with a 'left, a right, and a back a bit. Watch the step. That's it.'

'Oi,' Lloyd called down. But he was drowned out by the crash of the sideboard hitting the loading deck of the getaway transit van that was backed up in the drive as far as it could go.

Lloyd crouched on the top step to get a better angle on the back of the van, looking for a

read of the registration number. He couldn't see the plate, but saw the van was loaded with soft and hard furnishings, most of which he didn't recognise. He watched as the antique brown carriage clock that had adorned his grandmother's hallway table before she passed away, and it passed into his father's possession, was nudged out of the way as the burglars dragged the sideboard on board. The girl pushed the unit into place, stumbling over a tightly rolled but loosely tied patterned and tasselled rug which Lloyd recognised as having been the centrepiece of his parents' lounge for many years.

'Mum? Dad?' he shouted, running first into the bathroom, its champagne suite definitely no cause for a celebration, but exactly as he remembered it, save that it was devoid of the paraphernalia of daily life. 'We're being robbed,' he shouted, stunned to discover that Nick's old bedroom and his parent's room at the end of the L-shaped landing had both been stripped as bare as his own. They'd even pilfered the carpet, exposing the pockmarked wooden flooring beneath.

Lloyd stood in a daze. This had to be a terrible nightmare he was in, or a bad trip he was on. Feasibly, it could be both. Or maybe he'd wandered into the wrong house in his sleep, crashed somewhere abandoned, somewhere eerily similar to his parents' place.

The sliding shut of the van's rear doors and the charging of its engine shook him into action.

'No,' he yelled, leaping down the stairs. He reached the bottom to discover that the hallway and lounge had also both been relieved of everything.

'Liberty taking, fuc...'

Lloyd looked along the hallway to the kitchen, all white units and slate grey worktops. His parents' kitchen was oak wood with red tiles.

This was getting stupid now. The joke was over. If this was still part of his initiation, his mates still taking the piss because he was the last of them to turn eighteen, it was time to stop. 'OK Will, Tam, Stu, Sophia. You can all come out now,' he shouted.

Nothing.

He sprinted out of the house, reaching the van driver's door just as the girl walked back to the

house from the passenger side, wiping dust from her watery eyes. She gently closed the front door to the house.

‘What are you doing?’ Lloyd shouted up to the driver, who was too busy struggling to find first gear to notice him. Lloyd looked around for something with which to smash the driver’s window, but the only credible weapon in the weed-ridden front garden was the stake that was holding up next door’s permanent For Sale sign. He ran towards it but tripped on one of the few rocks that remained wedged in the ground from the pond project Lloyd’s father had half heartedly started with him and Nick before they were teenagers, and half-finished on his own when they *were* teenagers.

As Lloyd picked himself up, the girl slammed shut the passenger door.

‘Help me, somebody fucking help me,’ Lloyd yelled out to the residents of Roots Walk. ‘We’re being burgled.’

The van pulled out of the drive and took a wide left, accelerating away far more slowly than Lloyd expected a getaway vehicle would, but still too quickly for him to catch. It paused only briefly

at the junction with Mayweather Avenue before turning right towards Turponton town centre.

‘Call yourself neighbours?’ Lloyd yelled. ‘You’re useless, selfish bastards, all of you.’

Lloyd looked around, desperate to see a familiar face or friendly smile. An upstairs curtain twitched in the house opposite as a giant four-wheel drive glided past, full of family. Lloyd turned away, back to face the house that used to feel like his home. Something about it disturbed him. The ivy that was twisting its way up and across the front was thicker than he remembered. And rather than climbing, it seemed to be dragging the sorry-looking house down into the ground.

He trudged the few steps back to the front door but stopped short. He didn’t need to pat his pockets to discover he had no keys. He slowly turned and slumped onto the top step, to wait, as his father had on the night of the party, for someone to come home.

#### 4

Lloyd’s bones started feeling the cold before his skin which was still beaming in a way he’d only

ever experienced once before, after the last ever Parker family holiday to Tenerife four years ago, during which he and Nick argued incessantly and after which their father vowed ‘never again’.

Lloyd soon grew tired of watching the lifeless pass him by as he sat on the steps, the few neighbours he saw studiously ignoring his V-signs and shouts of ‘cowards’, resisting being drawn into an argument with someone who was spoiling for one.

Wherever his parents were, they wanted to be there without him, Lloyd concluded. Maybe that was their plan. Get the hell out while he was comatose. Teach him a lesson he’d never forget. Force him to stand on his own two feet and make his own way in the world. Whip out the comfort blanket from under him.

Hands in pockets, Lloyd trudged down the short drive, pausing at the end and contemplating going back and knocking on the door. He wanted his mother to open it and smile down at him, that familiar and endearing network of red veins criss-crossing her nose and cheeks, flour on her elbow tips. He’d kiss her on the forehead and pull her into

a hug, then walk in to find dinner steaming on the kitchen table, his dad hidden behind the West End Final of the evening paper, his dog, Ted, shooting him the eye while he licked his lips in silent anticipation of a dropped square of bacon.

Lloyd followed the path the burglars' van had taken towards Turponton town centre earlier in the day. The route was the reverse of the one he'd walked home after his eighteenth, events of that landmark night still hazy, although flashes of memory were still sporadically coming back to him at unexpected moments. Like the name of the girl with the mascara. Amy. It was definitely Amy. But who was she? He didn't know anyone called Amy. And he still hadn't heard anything from Sophia.

Lloyd hoped his party hadn't been cut short by another of his foolish stunts. A pinch of the DJ's arse perhaps, (actually that wouldn't be so bad). Another jump from the first floor balcony into the arms of a group of friends on the dance floor below would be worse. A quick grope of a girl out of his league that led to a mass brawl would be controversial, but out of character.

He checked his knuckles for grazes, his arms for bruises. But the only suspicious ailments were the centimetre thick lines of soreness running horizontally across each of his palms, and the stinging pain on the top of his left foot.

He clenched his fists and felt aching in each of his fingers. He looked around and realised how rare it was for him to be out in Turponton during daylight hours. His only regular forays since finishing college had been to sign on for his benefits at the job centre in town once a fortnight or to help his mother carry the food shopping from the car boot to the kitchen once a week.

Living in the same area for so long had dulled his senses, rendered him unobservant, he concluded. He'd started taking the scenery and people within it for granted. Only something radically different registered, a front door painted a different colour, a new car parked on a drive, a light-blocking tree felled.

But today, although Mayweather Avenue still cut its way across the same land and curved and straightened and dipped and rose in the same places it always had, the size and uniformity of the

cars travelling along and parking on it nagged at Lloyd. He knew that suburbia never attracted the outlandish or the experimental, but the similarity of the shape and colour of vehicles that glided past him and turned in their droves into picturesque drives as he walked into town, suggested to Lloyd that the area was in the midst of an identity crisis that had become critical. Everyone wanted to look and live and work and play – and die – like everyone else.

Lloyd felt the urge to shake these middle-aged family men and women out of their semi-detached stupor.

The few pedestrians who passed him on their way home from Turponton's bland offices were all heads down, striding glumly forward, plenty of work on their minds and in their briefcases.

The traffic's volume increased significantly as the initially distant outline of the town centre imposed itself. Someone had once compared Turponton's skyline to Dallas, but it was Dallas without the heat and the cowboy hats and the glamour and oil. So, for Lloyd's money, it was a poor analogy.

A siren rattled his ears, causing him to stop. If this was a bad trip or a nightmare, it ought to be wearing off, or he ought to be waking up by now. Maybe his parents were home and he should go back and apologise, double his efforts to get a job, increase his paltry contribution to the household budget from his dole money. Be a better person in general. A more considerate son. A washer-upper. A folder of clothes. A tidier of bedrooms. A better brother too. And an active member of the community. All suggestions his father had thrown at him during the calming conversations that always followed a conflict. Lloyd always met each suggestion with a sulky nod and mumbled promises of new leaves being turned over.

He reached the comfortably familiar and typically busy three-lane, six-exit oval Turponton roundabout that represented the last chance for motorists to avoid the speed limitations, pedestrianisation and one ways of the high street. The three exits to the east led towards West Bertram. The three to the west led to various parts of town, the restaurant quarter, the shopping mall quarter, the downtown quarter. As he stood at the

top of the subway steps, Lloyd realised he had no idea where and what the fourth quarter was.

He looked down into the entrance to the maze of piss-stained concrete corridors that led pedestrians to all three of Turpention's quarters, which according to the defaced signposts included places of dubious interest such as the town hall, the police station, the Quakers church, the high street, the bus garage, the railway station. Walk there, the white graphic suggested, as long as you're prepared to die.

Lloyd found his view down into the underpass intimidating in the fading light, leaves swirling in vortexes on the steps around him, exposing circles of chewing gum and piles of dried excrement, both canine and human. A hollow and morbid groan of an addict crying out for a hit bounced off the concrete walls and pillars, the sort of ghostly noise that was enough to put off most people from venturing down.

But Lloyd had no intention of being like most people. He was unable to resist the red rag of danger. As he paused on the top step, he remembered the times he and Will (and latterly

Tam and Stu) would dare each other to go down there alone and see who could stay down the longest. Will rarely lasted over a minute, finding the dark and the noises from the druggies and the stench of their stale piss and the risk of being murdered incredibly unsettling. Tam and Stu were quick to mock him, but seldom lasted much over two minutes each, always insisting on going down together, usually citing boredom or the fact that they'd killed everyone down there as their reason for resurfacing. Tam and Stu regarded themselves as bullies, even though their peers saw them merely as inseparable and multi-untalented nuisances. Stu did all the verbal bullying, selecting words from a vocabulary a child five years his junior would be ashamed of. His short hair and small, deeply creased, slanted forehead made him look older than his sixteen years. Tam was several inches taller and wider than anyone else in their school year, possessing a permanent grin and the kind of dimensions Stu wanted by his side in case anyone responded physically to his bullying.

When it was Lloyd's turn to enter the ghostly underworld, the others ended up having to

call down to him, saying they were bored and heading home. Lloyd would then run up the steps, triumphantly punching the sky, imagining himself a boxer taking the plaudits as he jogged through an adoring crowd after a knockout bout, his waist encircled by a gleaming belt.

Now alone, Lloyd couldn't have felt less heroic. But something about the figure ambling towards him at street level from the other side of the roundabout stopped him from entering the subway. The gait was familiar, the narrow hunched shoulders, the stoop, the hands in pockets. Whoever it was wasn't bothering to look up and acknowledge that he was crossing three lanes of the area's deadliest road. Fortunately for him, his steps were skilfully timed and paced so that no drivers were forced to screech tyres, slap horns or spew expletives.

Lloyd moved away from the subway entrance towards the road to get a closer look, stopping only when he reached the kerb. If this was who he thought it was...

The man walking towards him reached the central reservation that divided the lanes of one of the roundabout's eastern exits.

‘Will?’ Lloyd called out.

The man looked up, and looked ill. His eyes widened with surprise when he saw Lloyd. ‘Stay there, stay there,’ Will shouted, motioning with his hands for Lloyd to step back from the kerb. Lloyd retreated as directed and watched as Will glanced first left then right, suddenly showing some concern for his own welfare, even allowing a truck to pass before he crossed.

‘Hello, mate,’ Lloyd said enthusiastically, offering his hand which Will shook lightly with typically cold hands and bowed head. Lloyd stepped back and stooped, like a photographer searching for a new angle, trying to get an unobstructed view of his friend's face. Will bowed even lower until his chin rested on his chest.

‘What's up, mate?’ Lloyd asked.

Will shook his head. He seemed nervous, upset even, not at all comfortable in his own skin, and stunned to see Lloyd. ‘I'm just cold,’ he mumbled, his shivering lips tinged blue.

He smelt awful, Lloyd noticed. The stench of damp mixed with piss and sweat.

Finally, he looked up at Lloyd, revealing eyes bruised by tiredness, surrounded by deathly white flesh punctuated by acne scars and boil pits and oversized pores filled with blackheads. It was the worst Lloyd had ever seen Will look.

A silence followed as the two friends struggled to find a subject to kick start a conversation. Will was never the easiest person to talk to, but between them they always found something to chat about, even if it was boring or pointless.

If he'd had somewhere else to go, Lloyd would have made his excuses and walked away right there and then, leaving Will to wallow in his moodiness. But with no such options, Lloyd fleeced his mind for something else to talk about. He settled on, 'That was some night, wasn't it?'

Will shrugged his shoulders and looked down at his feet.

'Hope I didn't get up to anything bad,' Lloyd continued, wanting Will to say something

that would give him an insight into what had happened on his birthday.

‘No more than usual,’ he replied flatly.

Lloyd frowned and watched as Will lifted his left foot and rotated it around and around on the axis of its ankle.

‘You smell pretty bad, Will,’ Lloyd said.

The comment had the desired effect. Will paused his rotations and looked at Lloyd, ready to kill him.

‘Come on, we’re mates aren’t we?’ Lloyd continued. ‘If I didn’t tell you the truth, I wouldn’t be a proper mate, would I?’

‘You’re not smelling so great your fucking self,’ Will replied.

Lloyd knew Will was seething as he rarely swore.

‘That’s better,’ Lloyd told him. ‘Get whatever’s on your mind out in the open, mate.’

‘Fuck off, Lloyd.’ Will turned away.

‘What’s up with you?’

Will shook his head.

‘Come on Will. I don’t need this. I’ve been having a bad time of it,’ Lloyd told him.

*'You have?'* Will's tone was thick with sarcasm.

*'I've not been well, mate. Things have been weird. I think my parents have walked out on me for starters. And to make matters worse, I've had all my stuff nicked. My CDs, books, all gone. I woke up this morning to find thieves loading up their van with my folks' stuff. In broad daylight. Sideboards, chests of drawers, beds, all gone. I mean, who fucking nicks beds?'*

The expected expression of sympathy from his friend failed to materialise.

*'I need to find out what's happening,'* Lloyd continued. *'Find a phone box and call someone who might have a clue about what's going on. Nick should...'*

*'No.'* Will's interruption was curt and aggressive, taking Lloyd by surprise. *'Don't tell me anymore,'* said Will more calmly. *'I've not been well myself. Things have been weird for me too.'*

*'Someone nicked your bed?'* Lloyd asked, but Will didn't appreciate or react favourably to Lloyd's attempt to make light of the situation.

Lloyd could see sadness in Will's tired eyes. He'd never been the happiest or best looking of guys, but the Will before him now looked haunted, broken.

'Mate, did we take something we shouldn't have the other night?' Lloyd asked, trying a different tack. 'A bad 'shroom or something? Because I think I'm still tripping.'

'We didn't touch anything like that. At least *I* didn't.'

Lloyd panicked. 'What did *I* do? Do you know?' He grabbed his friend's arm tightly. 'You'd tell me if I got us into a fight, or if I did the dirty on Sophia, wouldn't you?'

Will shook his arm free. 'It's none of my business what you did.'

'Shit, I knew it. I fucking knew it.' Lloyd turned away and cupped his hand over his forehead. 'That's why no one's called me. I've pissed everyone off, haven't I? Bollocks.'

Will looked up and saw two pedestrians approaching them.

'I didn't...I didn't hurt anyone, did I, Will?'

Will gently nudged Lloyd out of the path of the pedestrians and onto a square of grass that was exclusively used as a dog toilet.

‘Tell me I didn’t hurt anyone, Will. Please.’

Will just stared at him.

‘Shit. I’ve got to go,’ said Lloyd, turning to do precisely that. ‘I’ve got to get away from here. Clear my head.’ He started walking back towards his parents’ house.

Will looked at him, wanting to let him go. Never wanting to see the bastard again. But he knew he had to call him back.

The others were relying on him.

‘You didn’t hurt anybody,’ Will shouted.

Lloyd stopped and turned to face him. ‘I didn’t?’

‘Not as far as I can remember, anyway. We had a laugh. It was a good night.’

Lloyd walked back, finally feeling able to smile. ‘Shit, man. I’ve been really worried. I’ve been having flashbacks. Fucking bad ones with screaming and crying. I thought I might have, you know, killed someone.’

‘Maybe you did take something,’ said Will.

‘It feels like I did. Something well dodgy. Either that or someone spiked me.’

‘Who’d want to do that?’

Lloyd shook his head and looked at Will. ‘Mate, I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t desperate, but can I stay at your place tonight? I don’t want to go back home. Not right now, with what’s happened. Not until I’ve got my head straight.’

Will was more takenaback by the request than he should have been. Lloyd had never been one to bite his lip or bide his time when something needed saying or an awkward question needed asking. He’d always been prepared to ask for what he wanted. His ball back at break time, extra chips at lunchtime, a kiss on the lips from the prettiest girls at home time. He recalled the time their French teacher, Miss Allen, came into their class, sat down and burst into tears. Everyone watched her weep in disbelief, some even starting to giggle. It was Lloyd who summoned the courage to ask her what the matter was, had her boyfriend dumped her or something? Sure, the intensity of Miss Allen’s crying quadrupled after the question and she’d stumbled out without answering, causing the girls

in the class to blame Lloyd, calling him horrible, selfish, insensitive etc. But Will knew his friend hadn't meant it maliciously. Someone needed to say something and, more often than not, Lloyd was that someone.

'I don't think going back to my place is a good idea,' Will told him.

'You won't notice me, promise. Look at me, do I look like someone anyone will notice?'

Will wondered if his friend knew just how much he was standing out in his dirty white shirt, baggy stonewashed jeans and scuffed black shoes.

'I just need to stay somewhere warm for the night,' Lloyd continued. 'And your folks will be pleased to see me, won't they? It's been a while. Not since before the court case.'

Will couldn't look his friend in the face and struggled to keep his emotions in check. 'How about we go for a drink first?' he suggested.

Lloyd raised his arms by his side. 'Mate, I haven't got a penny to my name. It's all been stolen. Everything.'

'You won't need cash,' Will told him. 'I'll pay. We can go back to the club.'

‘You want to take me back to the scene of the crime, eh?’ Lloyd joked.

Will was close to losing it, but knew he had to hold it together for the sake of those waiting. ‘It’s free entry on a Monday,’ he told him.

‘What?’ Lloyd exclaimed. Monday meant it had been three days since the party, which meant he’d spent all of Saturday and Sunday in bed. And that meant he hadn’t eaten since Friday’s kebab on the way home, his appetite murdered by the drink, the drugs and his hangover from hell. No wonder his parents had got fed up with him.

‘I don’t know if I’ll ever drink again, mate,’ said Lloyd. ‘Friday really knocked me out. I’ve got to be honest, after the first few pints, most of the night is a complete blank.’

‘Sounds like you need hair of the dog to me,’ said Will, finally sounding like he was warming to the idea of a conversation. ‘We can talk about what we remember. You went a little mad as usual, I think, but, look...’ he tipped his head to the darkening sky. Deep grey clouds were rolling in from the north on a breeze so cold it was cutting right through them. ‘Let’s go back, have a drink in

the warm and try and remember what the hell we got up to.'

Lloyd was uneasy. 'Can't we go somewhere else? I really don't feel like going back there yet.'

Will had rehearsed his answers to questions like this. 'Look mate, I'll be honest,' he said. 'I was really getting somewhere with the barmaid that night.'

'Yeah?' Lloyd looked surprised. Will was not someone the ladies naturally gravitated towards. He was seldom comfortable in their presence and severely lacked the ability and stomach for the kind of small talk needed to pull.

Will nodded. 'She's working again tonight.'

'Who is she? I don't remember you chatting her up. Did you get her number? You going to try and get in there?'

'Calm down,' said Will. 'I'm just going to play it cool and see what happens.'

Lloyd put his arm around him, a move that caused Will to stiffen. 'I'll help you mate. If I've got anything to do with it, you'll walk out of that club with her tonight. Mark my words.'

Will shook himself free from his friend's unwelcome attention and headed across the road towards a town centre gradually being lit by street lamps, house lights and neons. Lloyd watched him go, baffled by his coldness.

‘What’s up with you, mate?’ he called out.  
‘Will? Come on, tell me what’s up?’

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