

Wonderboy

‘What’s that noise?’

Walter heard the rustle of a paper bag in the darkness. He stared up at the Day-Glo stars stuck to the underside of his elder brother’s creaking top bunk. His hand stretched towards the dog-eared corner of a Superman poster by his head. The paper edge tickling the tip of his finger helped him fall asleep. His ears tuned into the distant rumble of a train pulling into Barking station, three hundred yards away from their pebble-dashed terraced house.

‘Sweets.’

Arnold smothered a red and white Woolworth’s paper bag under his pillow, and the room was silent again. Walter squeezed his eyes closed. Blackness. He opened them again. Plastic stars flickered, the room seemed brighter.

Walter noticed Arnold’s outstretched arm dangling a sweet in the air from the comfort of his top bunk. He squinted. It was a cola bottle, hovering in space, just south of the darkened globe lampshade. Maybe gravity’s pull would free it from his brother’s sugar-coated fingers and send it to the no man’s land that was their bedroom carpet? The lampshade had survived Arnold’s kiddieshit purge, he couldn’t be bothered claiming that territory. Maybe Arnold would let him, if he asked...?

‘Can I have it?’

‘Fuck off.’

‘Mum says you’re not supposed to eat after you brush your teeth.’

‘I didn’t brush my teeth.’

Silence. Walter licked his gums and tasted boring Punch and Judy toothpaste residue.

‘Pleeasse.’

Arnold leaned through the break in the wooden rail where the bunk bed ladder ended. His upside-down head was framed in the space between the steps.

Walter’s mouth curled into a smile of innocence and naivety.

Fffffwhhhhhppp.

A faded red aniseed ball pinged off his forehead.

‘Owwwccch.’ Walter wiped stinging skin with the palm of his hand.

Arnold flopped back onto his bed, chuckled, and stuck the cola bottle in his mouth.

Walter wiped away the traces of his brother’s coloured saliva with his blanket and flicked the sweet away. The spit-coated ball fell into the space between the mattress and the wall on the second attempt. The eight-year-old boy turned his pillow and stared at the height chart on the opposite wall; Mum still marked it, for Walter. ‘Catch me if you can short arse!’ Arnold had scrawled beside his last height marking. That was over a year ago, just before Arnold entered his teenage years and another barrier was built.

‘Where did you get them?’

‘Dad.’

‘Maybe he meant for you to share with me?’

‘Gloop... gloop... gloop.’ Arnold chewed loudly. ‘He’s not your dad,’ he said. ‘I heard him tell Emma.’ Arnold made her name sound like a chocolate bar. ‘Said you wouldn’t have ginger hair if you were his son.’

‘It’s strawberry blond. Mum says.’

‘It’s fucking ginger, don’t argue!’

‘Who’s Emma?’ Walter asked sheepishly.

‘His new bird, spazzo.’ Sweetened saliva fought to shrink the sticky sweet rolling around inside Arnold’s wide open mouth. ‘She says I’m a little treasure. We went to the toy museum together while Dad popped into the bookies. It’s dead good, but it’s more for kids really...you’d like it.’

Walter stared at one of his brother’s punk rock posters. He could make out the ghostly face of a scary-looking man with white make up, black hair and an evil grin. The singer in a new band called The Damned. He didn’t like looking at that picture in the dark.

‘He’ll be here on Christmas Day. You can ask if he’s your dad then,’ Arnold suggested.

Walter’s eyes settled on the pile of albums leaning against the skirting board, his brother’s records. Walter played them when Arnold went to see their dad, Arnold’s dad. He tried to think about something else. He’d be getting his own tape recorder for Christmas, a Philips one, with all the buttons at the bottom, the speaker at the top and a pull-out handle, he could carry it up and down Glenny Road, so the neighbours could see. Walter had cut a picture out of the Argos catalogue and taped it to the letter Mum prompted him to write: ‘for Santa, in case he gets the wrong one,’ she said. Walter didn’t really believe in Santa, but Phyllis had kept on at him, ‘so he can see how good your writing is’.

‘Mum says uncle Dermott will be here too,’ Walter murmured.

‘That’ll be interesting,’ the chomping teenager shot back. ‘What kind of fucking name is that? Durrr-mot.’

Walter had learned to work the record player from watching his brother, but he didn’t like the new music Arnold played, those singers shouted all the time. Walter liked the band that sang *La-la-la* lots of times in their songs, The Kinks. Their father had left those albums behind when he moved out. Their mother told Walter he didn’t love her any more, so he decided to leave. Walter had only seen Bill twice since. He didn’t miss him so much, but he felt

jealous when Arnold talked about him. He sometimes sang one of The Kinks' songs in his head instead of counting sheep.

*'Day is as light as your brightest dream,
Night is as dark as you feel it ought to be.
La la la, la la la, la la lala...'*

'I wonder what colour hair he's got,' Arnold muttered.

Walter's eyelashes were moist.

'We watched the gee-gees in the pub, on a big screen,' Arnold's voice was louder now.

Walter stared at the faded threadbare circle just below his brother's bunk bed ladder. Sometimes when he woke for a wee in the night he thought it was the moon's beam shining on the blue carpet, sometimes he didn't wake for a wee in the night. Arnold went to a different school, Eastbury Comprehensive, he couldn't tell piss-in-the-bed tales to Walter's classmates.

'Emma bought me crisps when Dad's horse started lagging behind,' Arnold said as he chomped and shredded the cola bottle with his teeth, making sugary spit. He pushed it to the side of his mouth and spoke again. 'Ready salted, she even let me have a sip of her rum and blackcurrant.' He clicked his tongue, chewed again and swallowed. 'I saw her tits once, when she was getting out of the bath, they're normal, not saggy, like Mum's.' Arnold stretched over the wooden railing and gazed down again. 'Dark brown nipples.' Walter's head faced the wall. Arnold flopped back on his pillow, put his hand inside his burgundy and blue West Ham pyjamas and felt his warm semi-soft member.

'I bet Angela Rippon's tits don't sag,' Arnold continued. 'No wonder everyone watches the news. If I robbed a bank, you could watch her lips move while she said my name.' It was almost hard. 'But you wouldn't know what to do, would you?'

‘No,’ Walter mumbled.

‘Queer.’ Arnold kept talking to the darkness. ‘We might go see Arsenal play sometime... my dad doesn’t support West Ham any more.’

Walter sniffed but didn’t respond, wiped his nose with his blanket.

‘You can play my records as long as you’re careful,’ Arnold said. ‘I know you’ve been listening to them. DON’T LIE.’

‘Do you? How?’ Walter mumbled.

‘Forensics,’ he said. ‘Your fingerprints are all over the bleeding things, you need to hold them right. I’ll show you tomorrow if you like.’

Walter smiled. ‘OK.’

‘You’ve been playing that song “Wonderboy” again haven’t you?’

‘Mmhhmm.’ Walter’s *Rescuers* blanket made an arch above his mouth, heat from his breath gathered underneath, he wondered about igloos. Mr Brown had told his class, year 4B, how they kept heat in. His toes stretched and felt his school trousers. He kept them under the sheets so they’d be warm in the morning, a trick he’d picked up from Arnold.

‘That’s OK. I’m sick of that lot myself,’ Arnold said cheerily. ‘No self-respecting punk could listen to that shit... It’s bender’s music. The younger brother in the group’s done as many bokes as he did birds.’

What does ‘done’ mean? Kissing? Hugging? Making the bed move? Arnold had started to make the bed move in the night. His was the only bed that moved in this house.

‘My dad had a brother called Arnold too, you know?’ Arnold said, ‘but he died, when my dad was your age.’ His bed squeaked as he shifted around. ‘Would you miss me if I wasn’t here?’

‘Maybe.’

‘What if I was dead?’

‘Yeah.’

‘That’s nice, cheers mate.’ Arnold shone his torch on the bottom bunk, Walter smiled then covered his eyes with his hand when the glare became too much. ‘Fuck knows who you’re named after,’ Arnold said before flopping back down and hiding the torch in the space between the bunk bed frame and the wall.

Part One

1964

One

‘There’s a couple of bands playing at the Granada, Sunday night, down East Ham way, I got two tickets off a mate...’ Bill ran a finger along his chin as he spoke, his fingertips hovering over some missed stubble. *Bugger it*, he thought as he wondered if she’d got a whiff of the Brut aftershave that was last year’s Christmas present from his mother. ‘That new band The Kinks are playing and all.’ He was thankful they had the café to themselves for his staged invitation. ‘Have they got R&B music back in Ireland?’ he quipped.

Phyllis’ mouth curled up at one side, her eyes twinkled, her fingers re-tied the knot in her apron. A late customer walked in. Bill winked while he had the chance.

‘Afternoon, Phyllis.’ An old codger tipped his flat cap at her.

‘How’s yourself, Walter?’ She beamed. ‘Will it be the usual?’

‘Hole in one, all-day breakfast in a bun!’ Walter tapped a little drum roll on the counter. Bill stood back and silently studied the blackboard menu he knew by heart.

‘Coming right up!’ Phyllis said to Walter, before catching Bill’s eye. ‘I’ll be with you in two ticks, if you don’t mind waiting?’

‘So sorry, didn’t mean to intrude.’ Walter said, putting on a friendly face.

Bill blanked him. ‘Take your time, love, I’m done for the day.’ He retreated to the counter by the window and opened a tattered copy of the *Daily Herald* that was folded on one of the stools.

The café was silent while she cracked an egg in the frying pan and buttered two slices of Burton's white sliced pan, delivered that very morning by one Bill Knighton.

Bill remembered walking in here that July morning Phyllis first started work alongside Vera, the battle-axe that the boss called a wife. This slender, soft-brown-haired Irish woman smiled at him like a long-lost friend. The gap between her front teeth turned him on. That smile made him forget about the broken rear light on his Bedford van, kicked in by some bearded Bangladeshi who didn't come from the Ghandi school of turning the other cheek to a bit of harmless racist banter.

But she's just given that same look to the happy-go-lucky fucker with the flat cap?

Eddie was whistling The Shadows' 'Apache' as he skipped around and pretended to be a chess piece on the chequered black and white floor tiles.

Phyllis shook the pan. Crackling egg white slid around on a bed of oil and kissed not quite browned sausages; a flick of her wrist and they were separated again.

Maybe she's a bit of a goer? Bill already had a vision of fucking her in the back of his van, on a bed of upturned plastic crates, newspaper bedding, yesterday's loaves for pillows. If the plastic ridges dug into her back she could go on top, he'd take the pain.

Maybe she has a bloke already?

Maybe the smiles are part of that Paddywack friendliness she dishes out to all and sundry, like great train robbers tipping taxi drivers?

He scanned the pages but no news sank in. His fingers scratched at some exposed chipboard on the side of the counter as he was distracted by a homeless bloke outside, wearing a Spurs hat and scarf in the sweltering sun, prattling on about having had his way with Christine Keeler before she hit the headlines.

Maybe he was wasting his fucking time and he should chase that girl Kelly in Mario's with the buck teeth and blonde hair, at least the blow jobs would be interesting.

Phyllis Noonan cut both hot sausages in half lengthways. Four hilly lines of pork were placed on top of butter-smearred bread and covered by the crispy-bottomed, oil-dripping egg. She held the top slice firmly in place with her palm while the knife she used like a third hand cut Walter's early supper in two. Once wrapped in tin foil, it was swapped for a handful of change.

Walter tipped his cap to Bill on the way out. 'Adios amigo,' he chirped.

Bill studied the headlines and nodded nonchalantly.

'Here, I made you a cuppa, three sugars, on the house.' She plonked a dark brown mug on the counter, flipped the Golden Wonder door sign from 'open' to 'closed' and pulled a stool up alongside him. 'I'd never seen an electric guitar till I got off the boat-train. It was wall-to-wall diddly aye shite back home.'

He was halfway through an article about some Krauts digging a tunnel under the Berlin wall when he folded the paper, slapped it on the counter and gave her a grin bigger than the Blackwall Tunnel.

'So...where is it you're taking me?' She casually flicked the corner of his pack of fags. It spun on the Formica top. Her Irish eyes were smiling. His pecker was pointing towards the grease-stained, foam-tiled ceiling.

The Kinks were the only group that Bill really wanted to watch. The Ronettes were good looking girls, but they were a bit on the dark side and it was all a bit wishywashyshoobydoolwantyoubaby for him. Billy J Kramer was just some Scouse runt that The Beatles were partial to because he sang whatever songs they threw his way, but The Kinks, The Kinks were a proper band.

He informed her that 'You Really Got Me' was actually their third single, while they waited in a queue that stretched around the block onto Hartley

Avenue. That song had reached the number-one spot at the height of their late summer flirtations over jam donuts and Swiss rolls.

‘Is that so?’

He nodded.

Her eyes gave him a once over. ‘Spruce up well, don’t you.’

‘I do me best, darling.’ Bill had spent the best part of a week’s wages on a burgundy tonic suit from Andrews clothing store in Becontree. The scent of aftershave was once more out in force. His talcum-powdered tackle was wrapped in a brand new pair of BHS Y-fronts. Two Durex in the right trouser pocket, just in case. ‘I like your lipstick,’ he muttered as they stepped inside the main door. ‘It’s their own song too, not some silly cover version like all those other R&B bands,’ he continued, doing his best to keep his eyes trained on her instead of scanning the talent. The muffled sounds of ‘Doo Wah Diddy Diddy’ by Manfred Mann boomed through the red leather and gold studded doors.

A doorman wearing a red tuxedo and matching top hat shouted, ‘Anyone with tickets walk this way.’ Phyllis got ready to skip the queue, but Bill held her by the arm.

‘I thought you had tickets already?’ she said.

‘Yeah well, I meant to pick them up but I didn’t get round to it.’

‘Ooohh, I see.’ She rummaged inside her glittery silver purse. ‘C’mere, what do I owe you?’

‘Nah, put it away, love. This one’s my treat,’ he quipped.

Punters with tickets sailed past the doorman.

‘Did they have anything to do with that song “Kinky Boots”?’ she asked as she read their name on a poster.

‘Nah,’ he said dismissively. ‘That was him and her from *The Avengers*.’ The line moved slowly. ‘This lot are from North London, two of them are

brothers.’ He followed her eyes to the small photo stuck under all the other band names on the marble-effect painted wall.

‘Brothers, eh?’ she said. ‘I saw *The Avengers* once. It’s not on Teilifis Eireann yet, but I watched it when the boss had me babysit. Television.’ She muttered the word dreamily. ‘I’d love to have one of those things.’

They were in front of the desk now. Phyllis checked her makeup in a vanity mirror while Bill handed a ten shilling note to the blonde girl behind the counter, she didn’t notice his finger holding the cash in place until she tried to grab it a second time. He gave her a coy smile and pondered trading Phyllis in for a second too long.

‘Are we sorted so?’ Phyllis snapped her handbag shut.

Bill turned round and wondered if Phyllis had picked up on his tomfoolery, he didn’t notice the counter girl sticking her tongue out behind his back.

Phyllis did. ‘Attitude to beat the band,’ she muttered.

‘You what?’

‘Nothing,’ Phyllis turned around and gave him that smile, ‘just an expression.’

Bill unbuttoned his jacket. She eyed his dark-blue pinstripe shirt with its pristine starch-stiffened white collar. Bill’s hand sought hers, their feet glided along the lush burgundy carpet.

‘So, tell me about yourself, Bill. Got any brothers or sisters?’

‘I had a brother, but he’s long gone.’

‘Gone? Where?’

‘Dead.’

‘Lord Blessus and saveus!’ she said. ‘That’s shocking.’

His body stiffened.

She squeezed his arm tighter as they walked through the studded double doors. ‘What happened?’

‘Are you religious?’ he asked.

‘Are you coddling me?’ She slapped his hand delicately and ran her fingers across his knuckles. ‘Don’t be going evading the subject, Bill Knighton.’

He was about to correct her vocabulary, but Phyllis’ eyes brimmed with empathy, the way she said his name had given him a little shiver down his spine. Bill told her about his brother Arnold, how he had hung himself when the bullies at Eastbrook secondary school went one step too far. She moved her hand down his arm and weaved her fingers into his while he got lost in his story. She steered him in the direction of two empty plush red seats at the end of an aisle.

‘I don’t think he was made for this world,’ he said, pulling a pack of Strand cigarettes out of his pocket and striking up. ‘Mother spoiled him something rotten when he was a baby. The old man was off in Europe fighting for Queen and country. It was just the pair of them for the best part of three years.’

Phyllis didn’t smoke, but she took a drag when he offered.

Bill tried not to stare at the smoke curling out of her beautiful soft lips. He rubbed the armrest like it was a pet. She handed the cigarette back. He savoured the stickiness of her lipstick traces.

‘Go on, I’m all ears,’ she said, squeezing the back of his hand.

‘I popped out a year after the old man came back from the war. Can’t say I come from a happy family, Dad’s got a right temper on him.’ His face brimmed with emotion. ‘Arnold bore the brunt of it. I got off scot-free, until he died.’ The smile he gave her wasn’t real. She made it real by kissing him full on the lips.

‘Sure that’s an awful story.’ Phyllis was blushing so she kept her eyes focussed on the stage curtain. The mirrorball sent out speckles of light that danced across the heaving crowd and rippled along velvet curtain waves. Men in suits and brothel creepers with gravity-defying quiffs danced clumsily while

their partners shook their bodies and bobbed hair in time to 'Good Golly Miss Molly'. Bill noticed a glint in the tiny triangle at the corner of her eye. Talking to her was addictive, he felt an overwhelming desire to wrap his arms around her. She turned and folded into him right on cue. They kissed until the curtain parted and The Kinks strode onstage.

The crowd loved it. Dave Davies scanned the punters, winking at any pretty girl that caught his eye. His elder brother Ray focussed on his guitar playing while a roadie tried to fix the mike stand, they both repeated the same riff over and over. Then Dave started crouching as the microphone slipped down. Ray was not amused. The audience were on Dave's side.

'I've got enough brothers to form a small football team, but my Da hates that game, it's not Irish enough,' she told him in between songs. 'He's the reason I'm here.' They moved away from the dance floor once the band finished and someone put a record on. 'Gollld-fin-gerrrr,' Shirley Bassey's unmistakable screech bled through the speakers.

'Shall we get a drink in?' Bill suggested, nudging her elbow. She nodded and he steered her through the human wall of happy-go-luckies heading towards the stage, ready to battle for the best upskirt view of the Ronettes.

Phyllis asked for a Snowball. Bill got a pint of Courage in.

'So your old man is on the side of that IRA lot then?' Bill jibed as he handed her a short tumbler of egg-yellow liquid and ice cubes.

Phyllis raised her eyes to heaven. 'I couldn't give a tinker's cuss for the bloody IRA, Hurling, or Gaeilge,' she ranted. Bill wondered what the last two words meant. Phyllis sipped her drink. Bill liked the fire in her eyes and the way she tried to lick her lips without him noticing. 'The Irish are an awful shower of stubborn bastards, I don't know what the feck they'd moan about if your lot hadn't eaten all the spuds way back when.'

Bill spotted some bloke checking her out from behind, and felt lucky.

'Sweet suffering Jesus, I didn't come here to talk about bloody potatoes!' she spluttered laughter into a cupped hand.

'There's that bloke again. Anyone would think you're two timing me.'

'Who?' She held her arm up and cocked her head like a *Stingray* doll.

'Him, up there.' Bill pointed skyward. Phyllis stared at the ceiling in confusion.

'Oh, right, the other fella.' She nodded her head and clicked her tongue.

'So it's true what they say about Paddies not being too sharp?'

'T'will be if I take up with you!' She cracked a smile, pecked him on the cheek and stood on his big toe.

Bill wasn't one for dancing, but his heart did the asking. She didn't exactly press herself up against him, but things were going in the right direction.

He walked her home in the hope that he'd get an offer of late night refreshments of the sensual kind. Phyllis' flatmate was listening to rock 'n' roll in the living room with her latest flame. The hours-old couple stood outside and listened to Buddy Holly's lustful hiccups for 'Peggy Sue' through the open window.

'They're probably sitting on my bed.' She sighed.

Bill arched an eyebrow.

Phyllis told him they had the decorators in. Bill thought she was talking about her monthlies.

'Ye can come back as soon as my new room's done and dusted.' He smiled understandingly as she leaned in to him one more time.

Her passionate breath tickled his neck and ears until his mouth lost patience and found hers. His tonic trouser fabric pressed against her dogtooth Mary Quant skirt. His dry cracked hands moved coarsely across her smooth silk stockings. When midnight hit she squeezed his hand, pecked his blushing cheek and bid him goodnight.

They arranged to meet up for a bite the following Wednesday. His weekly darts team would have to whistle for another player.

Twenty minutes later he was humming some mushy Beatles love song to himself as he walked down Devonshire Street, his home for the last nineteen years. In another six hours he'd be driving back this way in the company van, ready to load it down with loaves and buns for the corner shops and sandwich bars of Barking and Dagenham. He tried to ignore the lump in his trousers, knowing it would rise again as soon as he was snug in bed.

'You're out late,' Old Bill barked from his armchair as Young Bill rustled around in the kitchen. 'Where'd you get drink 'til this time on a Sunday night?' The old man was basking in the glow of the brand new Bush TV set that had cost more than his wife's wedding ring.

'Been seeing someone, haven't I?' Young Bill snorted whilst chewing on a peanut butter sandwich.

'Hope you didn't get beard rash.'

'You weren't there,' he muttered.

'You what?'

'Nothing.'

Bill knew his father would still be up. He'd ran a scene through his head on the way home, one where the old man actually turned the television off and offered his son a drink, where they had a talk and laid the past to rest, everything. The evening with Phyllis had unlocked something in him.

But that didn't happen. Emotion was a no-go zone in this house, from long before Bill's brother Arnold was found dangling from the ceiling of his secondary school bike shed. Young Bill was only six, half his brother's age, and he couldn't understand where Arnold had gone. Questions fell on deaf ears, nobody wanted to talk about it. He ate dinner in neighbours' homes and played Ludo with children he hardly knew until his trancelike mother called around to pick him up and put him to bed.

Arnold had been a smart boy, smart enough to hide the rope he'd bought specially in the caretaker's shed that morning, smart enough to pick the highest part of the scaffolding underneath the gently sloping makeshift corrugated tin roof, smart enough to tie a knot that didn't sag when he jumped from some bully's stationary bicycle to hang limp in front of his alleged persecutors mode of transport.

'That bastard made me do it,' was all the suicide note he'd left behind said. It was taped to the bicycle seat he'd jumped from. He must have paid extra attention not to tear it when he jumped. The teachers hid the note from his parents but when word got back to them on a wave of Chinese whispers, Veronica marched into the school on a mission to seize possession of those six final words. 'You needn't have bothered,' her husband blurted when he read the note.

Reggie, the bike owner's father, was one of Old Bill's drinking buddies. Reggie refused to believe that his son was a bully. Bill moved to another pub, their friendship came to an unspoken end. Veronica was thunderstruck as to why her hard-man husband had turned the other cheek. He never shied from letting his fists do the talking behind closed doors. She kept her mouth shut.

Old Bill's double standards weren't questioned when he insisted young Bill kept going to the same school. 'You gotta look these scumbags in the eyes, show 'em you're not scared, take the strongest one out and the others will run a mile,' Old Bill ranted as he channelled all the ugliness inside into telling the only heir to his armchair that the best way to deal with what happened was to 'make sure no fucker ever picks on you'.

Did that mean his father too?

Boxing lessons were the answer. The unspoken implication was that Arnold had been weak.

Young Bill learned to box, in an attempt to win over any paternal affection left in his father. He was treated to Vimto and chips if he boxed well, nothing

if he didn't. After sitting in on his son's second lesson, Old Bill found a pub on Sunningdale Avenue where he could read the paper and sip in peace. Young Bill learned to lie about his weekly sessions between the ropes. It didn't seem to matter, as the winning prizes slowly faded away.

The more Arnold turned into a memory in Devonshire Street, the more his memory spelt failure. Young Bill would be a failure too, unless he showed those around him what was what, unless he learned the power of anger. But there were different rules at home.

The boys in school liked Young Bill because he stuck up for himself. The girls liked him because he was popular. Confidence grew in the playground while it shrunk at home.

'You're a right cocky little shit, aren't you?' Old Bill snarled one day when he walked into his son's room to be greeted by a barely teenage boy strutting in front of a mirror in vest and underpants, with a hairbrush in his hand, mimicking the latest sensation with a quiff. Father pointed accusingly at the sleeve of 'Hound Dog' in front of the Dansette, saying, 'You can listen to that rock 'n' roll Nancy boy when you've cleaned out the pigeon shed. King of Rock 'n' Roll my arse.'

Young Bill hated the pigeon shed. When his dad wasn't looking he tried to shoot them with his spud gun, but they were too fast. Pigeons had been Old Bill's idea of a bonding exercise. Arnold had wanted pigeons, but Old Bill never got off his arse to buy them until his son died. Building a pigeon shed was his way to keep on keeping on while young Bill asked his mum what pigeon tasted like over tea for two.

'Night, Dad.' The lovestruck teenager hauled his weary frame upstairs. The casual comment wasn't reciprocated. But young Bill had a whole different world to think about now, with Phyllis.

Two

'I feel all deck-a-dent being driven home after a hard day behind the counter,' Phyllis said before laughing heartily. Bill thought about giving her something hard over the counter as he yanked the steering wheel and his white van pulled away from the kerb outside Sarnies.

He was smitten. The sound of her voice, her freckles, the way those dimples came out when she smiled, everything about her turned him on. She made him bacon butties every morning. He moved his rota around so he could drive her home. She tidied the delivery docket tucked inside the passenger side sun visor. He snapped one out of her hand and pretended to throw it out of his side window until she reached over far enough for him to kiss her.

'The new hair looks nice,' he said.

'Thanks,' Phyllis replied, 'I tore a picture of Cilla Black out of the *Melody Maker* and showed it to the hairdresser.' Phyllis caressed hair strands between her fingers. 'Cheeky monkey told me she could do that one with her eyes closed.'

Bill laughed while he gripped the steering wheel.

Phyllis told him about the clothes she'd bought in Bodgers. 'Audrey gave me a great discount,' she enthused, 'so I let her off whenever she wants a custard donut!'

'Lumme.' Bill chortled as he nodded his head and repositioned himself in his seat. Phyllis was on a roll.

‘Some cocky sod wolf-whistled me at the 169 bus stop the other day.’

‘Oh yeah?’ He ruffled his eyebrows and gave her a possessive look.

‘He wasn’t a patch on you though.’ She patted his leg. ‘I thought I’d save the pennies and walk home.’

‘Too right darling.’ His fingers tapped the wheel while he looked in the wing mirror.

‘Just as well,’ she tapped the side of her head. ‘The noggin felt so big I wouldn’t have fit on the bloody bus!’ Phyllis laughed like a baby being tickled, her whole face lit up. She’d fallen for all his funny lines over pasta a la fromage in The Lexington Café on Ripple Road. They’d seen each other almost every day for over two weeks, but he’d still not got his end away. Impatient hands had fondled soft breasts and squeezed hard lumps in trousers, but the darker corners of her body were still a mystery to Bill.

Phyllis might have been a fresh off the Sealink naïve Irish colleen, but she wasn’t stupid. Give everything up on a first date and you’d be left like a squeezed spot. That fictitious handyman only had another week of work left on her bedroom, the one Bill didn’t know she already occupied. If he kept the charm coming she knew he meant business.

‘So tell me about your clan, that’s what they call them over there, isn’t it?’ Bill said, fumbling for the fags in his pocket. She took them out of his hand and pushed in the dashboard lighter. Her lighting his cigarettes had become one of their rituals.

‘The old man’s only a flag-waving republican bowsie, you know that much. He’s the reason I’m here.’ She took a drag of the cigarette before handing it to him. ‘That country’s in a right fecking state, and all the nationalism in those bloody-minded republican hearts isn’t going to turn things around.’

Bill flicked the windscreen wipers. The grim grey cinemascope that was the A123 became clearer.

‘Did your old man want you to leave?’

‘Sure he hadn’t a notion I was gone till my ship had set sail. The old dear played cuckoo, didn’t want me washed up and wasted away like her, with the kitchen sink for company.’ Phyllis drew a heart on the window with her finger. ‘I send a letter once a week, to my auntie’s address. The auld fella’d tear them to shreds if he saw a piece of paper with the Queen’s head coming through his letterbox.’ She tried to hollow all the condensation out of the heart, but the drips ran south.

‘Have ye got something to wipe this with?’

He nodded at the glove compartment in front of her silk covered knees.

She leaned forward and tugged at the handle, a naked Marilyn Monroe air freshener fell onto the floor along with a yellow cloth. She bent further, her hand reaching for the floor, gravity made her breasts fill the pale green fitted top, fabric slid up her back, revealing soft white freckle-free flesh and a hint of frilly black underwear.

‘Distract you from driving did she?’ Phyllis said, picking up the cloth and the cardboard actress.

He eased the gear stick into third. ‘Lost her allure a few weeks back.’

Phyllis sniffed Marilyn. ‘Doesn’t smell much either.’ She bent forward again, Bills eyes strayed. ‘Have you got Diana Dors hidden in there somewhere?’ she asked. Her manicured fingers kept rummaging around.

‘I couldn’t find any shamrock-shaped ones,’ he said, flicking the indicator and turning right into Rutland Road.

‘I’ll ask me mammy to send one over. There’d be wigs on the green if she knew I was hanging round with a fella that kept naked women in his glove box.’ She tutted.

He was about to ask if prudishness ran in the family. ‘So...how many brothers and sisters have you got then?’

‘Six lads, three girls. Two of the boys are under five, two over in America, one in Belfast working at the shipyard, the rest at home. The older boys help Dad on the farm, feeding the animals and whatnot, while the girls do housewife training.’

‘What’s wrong with being a housewife?’

‘Nothing, as long as it comes naturally.’ She stared out the passenger window like it fed her memory. ‘The departed are all excommunicated, apart from Lorcan, the one up north. The old man thinks emigrating is some kind of betrayal, sure what harm leaving a sinking ship?’ She turned to look at him.

‘I can see a bit of sense on both sides,’ Bill said, keeping his eyes on the road. ‘This country is way too liberal about who they let in the back door.’ He peeked at her from the corner of his eye, wary about putting a foot out of place.

She seemed nonplussed. ‘Sure, I’d not laid eyes on a black man until the mother and me came across one in Galway city. He’d have made fierce money if he charged a penny for every head he turned.’ She wet her finger with falling window drops and used it to wipe dust off the dashboard. ‘The mother thought it was the devil himself when she set eyes on him.’ She glanced out the window at an old man with a cowboy hat and enormous sideburns, walking a poodle in the rain. ‘Sure it takes all sorts I suppose.’

Silence took over. Bill pictured her family home on some rain drenched rocky hillside, cows in the background, sheep chomping at the field in front, horse-drawn carriage piled up with bales of hay and ginger-haired children trundling along a distant winding dirt road wearing shorts and wellies, waving at the chickens.

‘And how did you find it moving to London?’ Bill got the conversation going again – they’d be outside her flat in a minute and that would be the last he’d see of her for another day.

She sighed. 'It wasn't easy. Coming from a big family, I'm used to company. I was fierce homesick at first. Silence isn't golden, it's empty.' She paused as if she was choosing her words. 'But, getting the job was a real boost, and...and now,' she smiled at him, 'I seem to have landed on me feet.'

A removal van was stalled outside a house on Albert Road. The loving couple waited patiently while the driver got his engine going again. Bill put his hand on her leg. She placed hers on top of his. He stretched his seat belt. They stared at each other longingly until the removal van pulled away and the car behind beeped its horn. Bill's van stalled, he cursed as he turned the key in the ignition.

She smirked out the window while he wrestled with the gear stick.

A minute later they pulled up outside her door. 'Would you come down the pub with me tonight?' he asked her.

'Not tonight,' her rebuff oozed kindness. 'Maybe next week?'

'Okey dokey.' He should have felt disappointed but he was still looking at her pretty face. 'How's Tuesday sound?'

'Right as rain.'

Bill talked soft shite to Deano down the Spotted Dog that night.

'Decorators my arse, she's playing the waiting game,' his barrel-shaped older workmate told him while they propped up the counter. 'Save the white stuff up till she lets you into her velvet cove and give those walls a coating she won't forget, that's the best you can do, mate.'

Jameson, Haig, Johnnie Walker, Bushmills. Bill was reading the whiskey labels behind the counter, wondering which ones were Irish.

'As soon as they drop a sprog...' Deano continued '...and we can't be bothered no more, they get particularly partial to those magazines with stories about how to keep the mystery alive,' he sipped his pint. 'And then, when we *really* can't be arsed, they move on to knitting, bingo, puzzle magazines and all

that other baloney.’ He wiped his five o’clock shadow dry with the sleeve of his donkey jacket. ‘Then they have the cheek to get the hump when we buy the odd fanny mag. Fuck twenty-four across, Bill, give me 36D anytime.’ He emptied the rest of the KP packet into the palm of his hand and picked the nuts out one by one. ‘She’s sitting home, bored as a pair of snowshoes in July, singing Sandie Shaw songs, painting her toenails bright red, thinking you’re her Cliff bloody Richard. I told you, Billy boy, women are deluded.’ He held his head back, threw the last of the nuts into his mouth and washed it down with a mouthful of Bombardier.

Deano’s words went in one ear and out the other. Phyllis wasn’t like any other girl. He’d sail an ocean...he’d cross the Irish Sea for her, he’d tear down the Playmate of the month posters on his walls, he’d lick her armpits, he’d push her around if she was in a wheelchair, for a month.

Bill had thought about ordering a Guinness earlier, just to see what it tasted like, but he knew Deano would take the piss. Bill sipped his pint of Courage and tapped the bar with an upturned Strand cigarette while Deano wandered off to empty the two pints he’d already downed into a ceramic bowl filled with piss-soaked cigarette butts.

Bill’s mind drifted. *What does her old school look like? Did they wear uniforms over there?* He’d have to remember to ask her in the morning, along with all those other thoughts floating around his mind that he needed a notebook to remember. *I hope to Christ she’s at home and not out someplace where other blokes will notice her, pick up on her beauty, charm her with small talk, have her up against some back alley wall before the landlady screams ‘last orders’. Leaving yours truly to perfect the five fingered shuffle...* He sipped his pint and concentrated on thinking. *Nah not her, not Phyllis, she’s not like that.*

Bill was pushing a lone peanut around the counter with his little finger when Deano came back from the toilet.

‘D’you like a bit of Indian food, Bill?’ Deano asked him.

‘Depends who’s cooking.’

‘You ever had a matta boo-boo?’ Deano picked his pint up and knocked back a mouthful.

‘What’s a matta boo-boo?’

‘Nothing, Yogi.’

The invisible plasterer had finished his work. It didn’t look like a new job to Bill. He asked her how much it cost the first weekend he stayed over.

‘You’re having me on, Phyl! Thirty shitters,’ he said. ‘I’ve got a mate could do it for half that, and a lot bloody quicker too.’

She confessed as soon as he climaxed and collapsed. Those two long weeks Bill spent with a tortured dick for company didn’t seem to matter, now that their sweaty satisfied bodies lay next to each other.

He brought his Dansette round to Ilford Mansions the third weekend he stayed over. The autochanger played all Bill’s favourite 45’s while they sat starkers on her floor, assembling a *Coronation Street* jigsaw. She tickled him to tears when he took the piss out of her *Flintstones* model collection. He told her his old man had joked about renting his room out. Phyllis’ box room became their world, her bed, their island. When they weren’t sleeping or having sex, they were staring into each others eyes, blowing smoke at the ceiling, sharing all their thoughts, putting the big bad world to rights without moving an inch. Breakfast was at 3 p.m., they’d throw some clothes on around six, take most of them off again for a quickie before hitting the pub round about eight. After a few pints, they’d saunter off back home to get it on again while the rest of the world drank like the last bell was a drought announcement.

The Kinks new single ‘All Day and All of the Night’ was the soundtrack to Bill’s sexual and emotional urges.

I'm not content to be with you in the daytime,

Girl I want to be with you all of the time.

All day, and all of the night.'

The way Ray Davies' melody line had a sense of lustful anticipation that rose as it came to the chorus, and broke into that primal scream, the way Dave Davies' guitar sounded distorted and lecherous, their songs were crammed with pent up passion and energy, those boys knew what was going on in Bill Knighton's head. How could anyone think The Beatles were better? *Love Me Do? Love me fucking do. Get your blooming kit off girl, we're going at it again, grunting and moaning till the milkman delivers his morning round, that's when Billy boy unloads his white stuff, bugga milk, treat yourself to a dose of Knighton's home brew.*

When Bill wasn't staying over he was talking to her on the phone. Veronica's pencil-thin pinched lips almost broke a smile when he came into the kitchen after kissing the receiver goodnight. She could sit in that kitchen forever, stained marigold-patterned apron hanging off her skeletal frame, fag in hand, wavy grey-brown hair straggling either side of her Portland stone face, sink full of dirty dishes, a humming refrigerator for company.

'Give us one of those, Mum.'

One hand held her elbow, the other kept the cancer stick close, her eyes rolled. Her head moved slightly to one side as Bill reached for the Embassy filters and sat down opposite.

'Bill's been moaning about the bill again,' she said with a bitter laugh.

'I'll pay the bleeding thing myself,' he said, cupping cigarette and lighter in his hands.

'No point,' she droned, 'then he'd have nothing to moan about.'

Bill leaned back in his chair, the front legs left the ground and the back ones squeaked under his weight. His mother exhaled. The clock ticked.

Leftover soup grew a skin on the stove. Veronica shrugged and studied smoke floating towards the ceiling. Television voices echoed down the hallway. Bill stared at his mother. *How did it come to this? Sitting in a stinking kitchen, making clouds as a bonding exercise.* He stubbed his half finished fag out, grabbed his jacket and stood up.

‘I’m off out Mum.’

‘That’s nice.’

Phyllis made extra-large sandwiches for her new man and only charged him for two slices of toast. Bill decorated the sliced pan packets with shamrocks, smiley faces and little loving messages stolen from hit parade lyrics to make his pretty flamingo smile her way through the working day until they saw each other again.

Two months into their love affair and his yeast had started to make her belly rise. Phyllis was nineteen, Bill was twenty.

‘Serves you right for courting a Paddy,’ His old man said from the comfort of an armchair that knew the shape of his backside better than his wife did. ‘They might be all God-fearing Catholics, but all those years kneeling on that alter, eyes closed, waiting for the body and blood of Christ to be slipped into their gobs by some bent bald priest with cum stains on his robe.’ He paused for effect. ‘As soon as they leave their straw houses, well, they go wild, that’s what they do! Like caged animals let loose.’

His confused words of wisdom came from behind a shimmering paper wall that was the *Daily Mail*. Looking at his son while he spoke would have made too much of a connection. ‘Then along comes muggins here...’ The elder continued, raising his voice a notch, hoping Veronica could hear him from the kitchen, ‘...falls for her Irish eyes, her rolling tongue, her loose fanny...’ The paper dropped, Old Bill’s hands gripped the armrests. Young Bill was glared

at the TV set, wishing it to come on. '...He fills her up like a custard donut and comes home crying wolf.' Old Bill puffed his cheeks up and snapped his paper back to standing position. 'And don't go telling me she doesn't believe in contraception. They won't need the six counties back at the rate you're going.' He paused to catch his breath, fiddling with his paper all the while. 'Five bob says the baby's black.'

Young Bill stomped out of the room. His mother's sorry eyes followed him up the stairs.

'You should have shagged a Paki, they're easier to extradite,' his father shouted after him.

He married her. The sentiment came from his heart, while the knowledge of how much it pissed the old man off danced around his head. The only people at the ceremony were Deano and his girlfriend Kelly, who caught the bouquet. The four of them made short change out of the platter Sarnies laid on before retiring to the Spotted Dog for a bottle of bubbly, on the house.

'If I wasn't already taken, I'd go for a fresh-off-the-boat happy-go-lucky Paddy lass,' Deano slobbered affectionately while Phyllis and Kelly made plans about shopping for baby clothes together. 'If I stick with that one,' he said, nodding at the object of his affection, 'she'll be wanting wall-to-wall carpet and MFI kitchens as soon as we set up shop.' He picked his pint up, his mouth was still trying to get words out while he knocked it back. 'I bet your one'd be happy with a plywood kitchen table and a couple of sheets of six-by-one balanced on breeze blocks for her Brendan Behans and James Joyces.'

Under duress from Veronica, Old Bill called in a favour from a mate in the council, who put the newlyweds' housing request top of the list. They moved into 91 Glenny Road two months before their status as a family was made whole. 'That's your wedding present and the sprogs all wrapped into one,

kiddo.' The old man's gruffness buried the goodwill gesture. 'Do me a favour and don't name the little fucker Bill if it's a boy.'

Three

‘AAAAARRRGGGGGHHHHHH, Jesus fucking Christ! H-h-has the little b-b-bugger even got h-h-his head out?’ Phyllis, on the hospital bed, was screaming blue bloody murder as her first son came into the world at 3.52 a.m., on April 19 1965.

Arnold Knighton was born while his father sat in the waiting room down the hallway, taking a break from pacing in circles to be informed by a two-year-old issue of *Reader’s Digest* that Liverpool was Britain’s funniest town.

Mother’s screaming tailed off as son’s started up, he was wiped down, wrapped tightly in a pristine white blanket by the calm and collected nurse from Hull and gently plopped onto his almost comatose mother’s welcoming breast, eight pounds and two ounces of soft, warm, pink flesh and bone. Phyllis simpered a cry of pure joy as his mouth sought her nipple. Her body no longer needed the gas still pumping through her arteries.

A boy!

Phyllis was a mother, part of a family once more.

She couldn’t remember feeling such happiness. A wave of regret passed through Phyllis that her mother, Kathleen, couldn’t be here, but she glanced down at the sweet little silent suckling face and nothing else mattered. Mother and child were steered through sleeping wards and settled into a room of their own.

A dizzy sense of pride overtook Bill’s tiredness as soon as he set eyes on the pair of them. He’d smoked half a pack of fags in the two hours before he

found himself here, staring at his very own Madonna and child. His eyes started leaking.

‘Daarrlin.’ His warm, rasping voice brought her back to the real world. Phyllis transferred her smile to Bill as he pulled up a seat and wiped tears away.

‘Touch him.’

Bill ran the tip of his index finger across the matted brown birth hair stuck to the baby’s head.

‘D’you want to hold him?’

‘Should I?’

‘Of course you should, he’s yours,’ she said through tears of joy. ‘Yours and mine,’ she whispered. ‘Our precious little baby boy.’

She loosened her hold. ‘Don’t be afraid,’ she prompted.

Bill started gushing as soon as he felt the weight of the child in his arms. Phyllis stretched over and kissed him lovingly. ‘I feel so proud,’ she whispered through lips overcome with emotion. The nurse smiled as she silently filled in the notes on the clipboard at the end of Phyllis’ bed. She could have been playing ‘Edelweiss’ on a washboard and the Knightons wouldn’t have noticed.

Their house was a bubble of bliss. Every time they looked at the letterbox there was another card dangling from the spring-loaded flap. Phyllis opened the door one day looking for the milk and there was a bunch of tulips wrapped in pages of the *Barking Post*, tied with a silver bow, propped up beside two pint bottles. She leaned down to pick them up and heard the door of number ninety-six click closed. Only yesterday the baker down the road gave her free hot cross buns, even the old lady they’d never set eyes on was bestowing well wishes upon them.

Arnold was two weeks old when Bill finally made it back to the Spotted Dog. 'You should have yourself a Double Diamond,' Phyllis suggested while Bill paced around the living room. 'I hear it works wonders! We'll still be here when you get back,' she told him.

I'll have more than a fucking pint, Bill thought as he made his way down Wakering Road.

Deano and the boys couldn't help but take the piss out of the hard man turned soft. *He* had responsibilities. *He* was a father, Bill told his audience: 'an active perpetrator of the evolution of the human race. Moving things forward, the reason we're all put on the planet. Which is more than any of you lot have done.' His hand reached impatiently for a well-earned drink. 'Not unless anyone here's got a little secret none of us know about?' He downed a generous mouthful.

'You sound like that Attenborough bloke on *Zoo Quest!*' Larry piped up.

'What's the temperature in Madagascar right now, Bill?' Dennis quipped.

'What are you gonna call the little bugger? Dodo?' Deano joined in. Everyone laughed, except Bill.

'Actually, I'm naming him after my own brother.' He plonked his pint glass on the wooden counter for effect. 'Arnold was his name. My brother is sadly gone from this world.' His shoulders hunched, he shook his head heavily. 'Here's hoping that my son Arnold will live a full and fruitful life, unlike his namesake.'

'Drunk himself to death, did he?' Larry cut in.

Bill lunged at him, pint glasses fell from both their hands. Bill had Larry up against the wall in no time, his victim's brylcreemed hair smeared the framed print of Constable's *Haywain*. 'Watch your fucking mouth, sunshine!' Bill sneered as Larry held his hands up.

'Oi, Oi, leave it out, Bill.' Deano stepped in. 'We're only having a laugh.'

Bill loosened his grip on Larry's neck, stepped back, and took a deep breath in front of the captive audience. 'Fuck off, the lot of you.' He yanked his jacket off the barstool and made for the door. 'WANKERS!' he shouted over his shoulder as he did his best to slam the swing doors behind him.

He was homeward bound before it got dark, back to his cosy little nest, into the arms of his loving wife. They didn't need a TV set, they had their little bundle of joy to stare at.

Bill borrowed a camera from a workmate and took snapshots to send off to an unsuspecting faraway grandmother. The other one didn't need any photos, they could hardly get rid of her. Old Bill came round just the once, with a box of Cadbury's Lucky Numbers as a hapless gesture. Phyllis hated chocolate.

He spent more time snooping round the house than looking at his only grandchild. 'What you need to do here...' he said, hands on hips, beer gut dripping beneath a dark blue T-shirt resplendent with salty underarm sweat residue, '...is get the council round to sort that crack out, sharpish.' He stopped pointing his finger from the ceiling and wagged it at his son, double chin and neck merged. 'You don't want none of that falling into my grandson's porridge.' Young Bill kept schtum while senior asserted his authority. 'They had some sort of medieval fort not far from here years back, probably built this bloody street on marshland. Its scandalous the way they throw houses up these days.'

Phyllis wouldn't have minded the mother-in-law coming round so often if she was partial to a bit of banter. The closest they came to bonding was sitting at the kitchen table reading the *Radio Times* and *Family Circle* magazine. Phyllis felt like a prisoner in her own home whenever she answered the door to the half ghost that was Veronica Knighton, silently brushing past her, wobbling like a Fisher Price Roly Poly toy under the weight of brimming grocery bags.

‘Shouldn’t keep tomatoes in the fridge you know, they lose their flavour.’

She wore holes in J Cloths from dusting countertops hourly, she guarded the kettle like the crown jewels. ‘I don’t believe in tea bags myself, it’s their way of charging you extra.’ She straightened out yesterday’s newspaper so it looked like today’s, she favoured obituaries over the headlines. ‘Donald Turner died last week, 57, skin cancer, no wonder, worked for Baird and Tatlock all his life, poor old soul.’

‘Oh look at this,’ Phyllis enthused, ‘Harold Wilson’s opening that post office tower next week, now there’s something!’

‘Bill doesn’t like the West End, too many people.’

Still, Phyllis tried. ‘So...how’s he doing?’

‘Bill’s Bill.’ Veronica put the paper down and wiped the ink off her fingertips with some spit and a handkerchief. ‘He don’t like me talking about him.’

Phyllis found sanctuary breastfeeding in the bedroom, sitting on the double bed, cradling baby Arnold in her arms, watching the clock and wondering when she’d have the house to herself again. Downstairs, pots and pans clattered as steak and kidney pie was prepared, Bills favourite, as if Phyllis’ cooking wasn’t good enough for her husband.

‘Leave the nappies to me,’ Veronica instructed Phyllis as she reappeared. ‘I had two children, you know.’ Her voice lowered for the latter part, as if the angels were listening.

Here was an opening. ‘Really? I never knew...’ Phyllis jumped at the chance, making sure her voice emphasised sensitivity over curiosity.

‘He’s gone,’ Veronica said, cold and curt, turning the tap on full blast, running cold water over already clean hands. ‘We need another bucket so we can soak them overnight,’ she nodded at the dirty diapers immersed in a giant pot filled with steaming water and bleach. ‘I’ve got another one at home. Bill

won't mind, I'll ask all the same.' the latter words carried much more weight. She sniffed the air. 'And bleach too, we need more bleach.'

Typical mother-in-law behaviour, thought Phyllis. Applying the same ideology to all household chores, *why bother baking a cake when there's piss- and shit-stained flannel to run your fingers through?*

Veronica wasn't here to help out this brand spanking new happy family, she was running away from the remnants of her own, clear as the big brown birthmark on baby Arnold's arm. Phyllis used to forget they had a kitchen clock, not any more.

'I think he's hungry again,' Phyllis stifled a yawn as she trod upstairs. *Bill's sure to be home soon, and then she'll skedaddle*, Phyllis thought as she lay back on the bed. Falling asleep was the easiest thing in the world with someone who needs you, who loves you, suckling on your breast.