

# Ozzie Rozzie

by

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Ozzie Rozzie, misfit country boy, confronts bullying with unexpected consequences, in this short story set in 1970s London suburbia.

“Great story on the subject of kids not being innocent and adults not being grown up.

Humor throughout.

Nicely clever without being showy.” - Charles Haupter

"Your details were dynamic and filled with imagery... the pacing magnificent.

Thank you for this wonderful story." - ME Strauss

**CAUTION: THIS STORY CONTAINS  
PROFANITY AND TRACES OF NUTS**



## CHAPTER ONE

In 1970s south London suburbia, there were parks and roads and bombsites and gardens, new estates and derelict Victorian houses, old woods and new playgrounds with roundabouts and swings, cars parked, cars wrecked, cars being fixed, garages both used and unused, and dumps official and unofficial. There were no meadows with tall summer grasses, there were no fields of golden corn, no tractors, no ploughs. There were cats, foxes and rats, but no sheep, horses, or chickens. Nothing like that where we lived, just flickering glimpses of fictitious ancestral rural idyll on TV, which of course, we all completely believed.

"The Country" we called it, and we went there on Bank Holiday weekends, sometimes, when the first choice - the beach - was considered an option too often exercised. We took pocket-sized "Observers" books on birds and trees and sundry wildlife. We observed the

Country Code, walking along lanes in single file on the right, facing the traffic.

We saw bobbing heavy yellow heads of wheat, we noted the long fronds of barley. We ruminated upon orchards and saw the dairyman bringing in the herd, mooing and bulging. We observed the cows and their amazing pissing and shitting ability. We watched cattle not being able to cross cattle grids. We fell in ditches, ran and hid in bracken, and threw dry rabbit shit at one another. These were single day adventures, after which we returned home to tarmac and brick, net curtains and broken glass, with Johnny Morris, David Attenborough and Tom and Barbara Good once again our narrators on all things natural.

One morning at school arrived a new boy with an unusual name: Oswald Rosbotham. Within minutes, he was popularly dubbed "Ozzie Rozzie".

Oswald stood out a mile. He was clearly from "the country". He had an funny air about him, somewhere between farm labourer and genius scientist. He should have been in a black and white film. He was big and gawky, with a prominent Adam's apple and large hands with long fingers.

Ozzie spoke little, and when he did so it was with elongated twanging vowels and a skipping alien rhythm. His trousers were too short and his jumper was wrong. Ours were v-neck, regulation grey, thin, acrylic, more often than not purchased in Hewitt's, the official school uniform shop at the end of Surrey Street. His was brown-grey, made of lumpy wool, thick enough to double as a blanket, and clearly hand-knitted. He looked hot in it, and on his pale freckled face, his round cheeks often glowed patchy red beneath sandy coloured, frizz-dry hair.

Apart from his rural background, which was obvious, we couldn't say where he came from. He wouldn't tell us why he was in Croydon, so we invented. We said his mother had run away with a black man who was her pimp.

The fact that several of the boys saying this were of African and West Indian, mostly Christian descent mattered not, and in the context of a London school this in fact was no racist slur; neither was it meant to cast aspersions upon the many mixed-race relationships whose children attended the school. Neither was it taking the piss out of prostitutes, who we secretly admired. It was the allegation of cross-cultural transgression and reduction in circumstances that mattered, which was calculated to spark an emotional reaction - but Oswald with his potato head and patchy haircut gave us nothing.

Perhaps he didn't understand, we couldn't tell. We couldn't tell if Oswald was bright or not. He looked directly back at us only sometimes, and sometimes spontaneously licked his thick lips. We licked ours back, expectantly, calculatedly teasing him, but more often than not he turned away, back to whatever he had been doing, or even just to stare out of the window or at the wall. It didn't seem to matter to him. He didn't always blank us, he sometimes said in his country accent, "Snot treew" and wouldn't be drawn further.

The jokers and the bullies became rapidly bored with this failure to engage, and after a couple of weeks he was left alone; but his passive misfit presence still irked, and he remained the easy butt of class jokes. Even some of the duller girls resented him - he didn't respond to their bulging sweaters and flashing eyes, and his refusal to be ritually humiliated and exposed kept

him from us, an outsider, unknown.

This 1970s comprehensive 11-14 school was co-educational, and at that most delicate time of incipient puberty, classes were a strange mix of fully formed, child-bearing-age young women and squeaky boys, girls with pigtails and breasts, and strapping young men with deep cracking voices and prolific acne. Sixty percent of us were nervously wondering when the great time would come that we would join the adult sex club, and either feigned disinterest or made ridiculous claims to the contrary.

Meanwhile, Oswald showed zero interest in sex or girls and yet, he was up there in the lead with the hormonal crew. In the P.E. changing room, underwear off, we saw his large male member with a sprig of dark pubes at the base. We told him he was gay. He said, "Snot treew." James Bunce said his arse was a bum-boy's magnet, which had most of us rolling around in stitches, but he didn't react and carried on drying and putting on clothes. Adam Torridge said, "He doesn't know what a magnet is!" and we sniggered. Clive Allen said, "He doesn't know what an arse is!" and we all fell about once more, silenced by loud threats from the vicious P.E. teacher. On it went, for weeks, as Spring term went into to Summer.

He seemed to enjoy some kind of dispensation from on high, some strict teachers who we would have expected to bully him significantly didn't dish out their usual punishment, and we realised he was being spared for some reason. This started to brew torrid resentment among the tougher kids. Edwin Witter, the school psycho, decided to beat him up one day on the way home, but Oswald obviously got wind of it and didn't emerge from school. Twenty or more children waited

for an hour to see the showdown, but we became bored with Edwin's self-aggrandisement - and after all, we could be next on the list if the wind changed - and we drifted away.

Kim McManus, who stayed after school for music lessons, gossiped the next day that she'd seen him being driven out of the school gates by Mrs. Osterberg the R.E. teacher at 4.45pm - very odd. We gave him a wide berth after that, and restricted ourselves to the occasional playground or corridor comment about combine harvesters, groups of black men shagging his mum, his shit jumper, and occasional raucous playground cries of "Ozzieeeeeeeeeeeeeee" which could be taken up by the entire boy's population at once.

One June day, at exam time, we were "revising". Revision was being demonstrated as a useful academic skill designed to take us into college education, whose hallowed corridors in those days welcomed only 5% of the national student population. The majority of pupils left school at 15 or 16 and a minority of those with G.C.E. "O" Levels. Revising for most children meant pretending a. that you had adequate lesson notes and b. that you were referring to them to reinforce the teaching of the curriculum you hadn't been taught. Mostly these revision periods were unsupervised - there were teacher shortages. Today, we were stuck in a classroom on a hot day, bored, unattended, books out on the desk in case an adult head appeared to check on us, and several boys were discussing life, football, girls, with Oswald in front of him, or rather, several rows behind them, as he steadfastly either read or pretended to read, nobody could tell.

"Ozzie definitely wanks. He makes so much

spunk that when he comes, it makes a river that takes his mum to Jamaica" said Edwin to kick us off. This was to our early teenage minds standard fare, meant less as comedy, more as a test of our resolve not to react. There was no knowing how far it would go.

"Ozzie, he's a tosser, a tosser is our Ozzie" three boys sang in passable barbershop harmony.

Nothing.

"No, Ozzie doesn't wank, he fucks his mum's black boyfriend up the arse because he's bisexual," said someone from the back. Oswald didn't flinch, but we liked this by now, it was perverse and getting interesting, so we carried it on.

"Yeah, and then he fucks his mum - up the arse!" chipped in Andrew "Clint" Eastwood, a boy guaranteed to reduce the class to a combination of delight and disgust. The boys laughed heartily, a few girls groaned and told him to shut up. Encouraged, Clint continued, "Yeah, and then when he comes, it pushes her teeth out of her mouth and smacks her boyfriend in the eye and he gets a white eye." Ewwww. Ignoring Oswald entirely now, Clint was standing up, eyes rolled heavenward, flecks of spittle in the corners of his mouth, his tie askew and his stained white shirt looking like a preacher's laundry, channeling stream of consciousness obscenity.

"Ozzie's knob is shaped like a turnip and he fucks the farmyard animals, fills them up with spunk, then he kills them and feeds them to his mum. Then his mum get pregnant and she has a baby that looks like a cross between Oswald and a cow and tastes like a

turnip that shits and Oswald fucks that too!" he ended triumphantly, opened his eyes, to utter silence.

Behind him Oswald had risen. His face was pink and blotchy, his mouth turned down in an uncharacteristic grimace, and he was holding a hardback text book like a grenade. He was 6 inches taller than Clint, and twice as heavy.

"Yew fucking shut your fucking mowth!" he said, in a strangled voice, his effort to speak choked with pent up emotion.

Oswald was a man confronting a boy. Clint knew he was on very dodgy ground. Oswald stood between him and the exit. We could see Clint rapidly examining his options and he looked scared. The hushed room watched as Clint realised his predicament and turned white-faced to look at his accuser, several desks away at the front of the classroom.

"Alright, Ozzie, I'm just pissing about, can't you take a joke?" he asked lamely. The hushed room was still, the girls visibly scared, the big boys calmly reviewing the showdown with interest. Oswald looked very threatening. His knuckles were white as he held the book, his fleshy lips narrow and stiff, and his eyes bulging.

"YEW DON'T KNOW NOTHING YEW STUPID CUNT YEW DON'T KNOW ABOUT NOTHING!" Oswald suddenly screamed at full volume.

Half the class physically drew back and the boy and the girls either side of him froze in terror. The whole school seemed incredibly silent - not a sound outside or in, no ball bouncing, no corridor yelps, no desk lid banging, no trapped fly searching a way out, not even the endless droning sound of Mr. Spickle the

Maths teacher's soporific voice explaining algebra.

Clint didn't know it yet but he was about to learn something that he would never forget.



## CHAPTER TWO

**T**hirty uniformed adolescents were held spellbound, their faces a mixture of morbid fascination and fear and shock, watching closely to see what would happen next. Something had snapped in Oswald, that was clear. The violence of his scream was shocking, primal and raw, it still echoed down the dirty dark corridors and stone stairwells of the school. Confronted by Oswald's momentous wrath, Clint's slender, boyish figure was utterly fragile and disposable. Sunlight streamed in upon him from a high window, reflecting his grubby white cotton school shirt into his face, making him look like a sacrificial virgin ready for the altar, his bright summer face turned pale.

Clint's jaw moved silently as he searched for the words that would dismantle the bomb that was now Ozzie, his fast mouth utterly useless. His mind was racing in blind panic at the terrifying, towering sight of Oswald, and all he could think of was Camel - Camel hair - Ozzie's farmboy frizz had been called that by some boys, for one week only, special offer - Ozzie's got the hump - Would you like a Camel? - Ozzie Rozzie, the final straw - torrents of words, useless, glib, mocking words, that would not rescue him now.

Oswald dropped his book and moved across the classroom all at once, his gawky lumbering frame suddenly possessed of an athlete's grace as he reached a long arm towards Clint, grabbing his tie and shirt with one huge hand, lifting him bodily towards his own reddened, distorted face. As Clint's shirt buttons popped and fell on the floor with a tiny distinct scatter, there were gasps, and a girl began to sob.

Ellington, one of the more sober boys who was a match for Oswald in size, coughed responsibly, quietly, from the back of the class and said in a stuffy adult voice, "Oswald, I think you've made your point now..." There followed an uncomfortable four second silence while the class waited to see Oswald's reaction to this attempt at normality.

But Oswald was concerned with one person only, and that was his tormentor. Drawing him close and staring right into his eyes which widened pleadingly, he barked into Clint's terrified face, "You don't know fucking nothing, you fucking don't know nothing! Yew fucking twat! Yew FUCKING TWAT!!!"

He paused, and shook his head, as if his thoughts were a buzzing bee trapped in his skull.

"Do yew want to come and see my Mum? DO YER? WELL FUCKING COME ON THEN!!!" he rasped, and he spun Clint around in one deft movement, grabbing his arm up behind his back like a pro, and held him like a puppet. Clint yelped in pain, and at this, Oswald hit him from behind, twice, hard in the side of his head, splitting his ear with the second, harder punch.

Blood began to stream dramatically down Clint's face onto his white shirt, and he moaned once, the awful sound of an animal trapped. The room made a collective gasp of outrage, horror, fear and admiration, and some of the bigger boys looked at each other pulling oo-er faces, and began gingerly to close in on Oswald, as at speed he pushed and dragged the bleeding Clint like a piece of luggage towards the open door.

Two girls in his exit path jumped up and ran, but Oswald was oblivious. There were three desks between Oswald and the door, and he marched himself and Clint through them banging elbows and shins into hard wooden furniture. Edwin Witter, exulting in the status of lead school psycho, was visibly impressed by this sickening noise of bone and wood, and he stood up on his chair, and started to whoop excitedly and howl excitedly. Several girls started to cry and hug each other, jaws hung loosely from gawping faces too astonished to make sense, pens and books flew across the classroom, and revision was abandoned in total chaos.



## CHAPTER THREE

Andrew "Clint" Eastwood was a nice enough kid, blessed with an observant eye and a vocabulary beyond his years. He had his mother's capacity for a pithy well-rounded phrase and his father's dedication to getting the most from every situation that presented itself for self-glory. Unfortunately, at the age of 13, he was among the last of the boys in the school to hit puberty, and this, combined with his rather self-obsessed, glamorous parents, who were far more into themselves, and, it would eventually be revealed, a local swingers club, than they were their two bright offspring, had caused Andrew to vie for the status of class clown in order to get the attention he craved, and his grades had started to slide.

Andrew's older sister Julia was already eighteen and about to take the "A" level examinations that would propel her into the fastidious life of a dental

assistant, and eventually take her to Australia where she would discover, after years of dutifully sucking dentist's cocks whilst hiding her displeasure, her love for women.

There was something of the same sexual compulsion/revulsion in Andrew, the same unspoken family forces were at work in his dumb body, even before it had learned to speak the language. His belated physical development didn't stop him knowing everything about sex, or vocalising daily fantasies for the benefit of anyone who would listen. Actually he was sweet on ice-cool Angela Spender, the studious netball star who had the cleanest, whitest shirt in the class, and a classic fifties jawline, brow, and clear complexion, and who frequently recorded word for word his spoutings from the back of class in her tidy mind. She found them arousing as she quietly masturbated herself to sleep at the end of each day.

Andrew was called "Clint" for the same reason that Oswald Rosbotham was called "Ozzie Rozzie" - the classroom nick-name lottery, which dispensed winning and losing name tickets for everyone. Nobody was exempt, but you had to be quieter about speaking some of them in front of burgeoning teenage dignity - unless you were Edwin Witter, whose capacity for whimsical cruelty was legendary.

This time, however, Edwin had been dramatically trumped by the spectacular explosion of Oswald's anger, excited out of his normal dull tolerance of lessons into high expectation of action, left standing on his chair making animal sounds with his arms aloft like a victor, and this was how the large, bullish figure of Mr. Thompson found him, with the rest of the class

in uproar, when he entered the scene vacated five minutes previously by Ozzie and Clint.

"EDWIN! GET DOWN NOW! and stand in the corner. The rest of you: return to your seats IN SILENCE!" he bellowed, standing in the doorway. Casting his eyes down at the debris and the upturned desks, his eyebrows moved up to the top of his forehead and stayed there. As the class started to settle, he ignored them, and turning to Angela Spender, he said, calmly, "Angela, would you like to tell me what has happened here?"

"Oswald has kidnapped Andrew Eastwood, Sir," she offered simply.

"What do you mean, kidnapped, girl?" he hissed, "explain!" She attempted to fill in the details of the action, with occasional helpful additions from other students, until a look of weariness came over Thompson's face.

"Where did they go?" he asked. "To see Ozzie's mum, Sir," the class chorused.

"We'll see about that," he said, then, "Carry on with your revision until the bell IN COMPLETE SILENCE. Witter: back to your desk, and STOP SNIGGERING. I don't want to hear a single noise: IS THAT CLEAR?"

To a collective murmur of "Yes, Sir," he swept out of the classroom and began heading to the school entrance double-quick.

Thompson was thoroughly alarmed, although he was doing a good job of hiding it. He was plagued by headlines as yet unwritten: CHILD KIDNAPPED - SCHOOL RIOTS - and haunted by the knowledge

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that, had he not been chatting up Ms Butcher the fabulously attractive young geography teacher, he would have been on hand to prevent this disaster. He vaguely remembered that there was something up with Rosbotham. He found the boy hard work, and spent as little time on his education as he could, preferring the brighter children, like Eastwood. Why the fuck had that rural retard kidnapped Eastwood? Now he regretted not having more fully appraised himself of the boy's circumstances.

No sign of anyone outside the gates. He sighed, swallowed, and went to the office to retrieve the boys' details and home address. If it was not too far away, he might be able to cut them off in his MG at the high street, and return them to school before things got even worse.

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Clint had gone into a resigned, passive state of shock. He felt no physical pain, although he was aware that he should, but he had the condemned man's awareness of his surroundings. Suburban tableaux passed before him like flickering, unconnected dioramas. He was able to recall details of this forced march for the rest of his life: the man reading the Morning Star at the bus stop: the two children running around their mother's legs as she chatted to her friend: the collision of blue and orange plastic outside the bakers: Oswald's heavy breathing and the sound of his over-large boots on the pavement: the crow cawing incongruously on the zebra crossing.

The size differential between them was immense - they looked more like father and son than school colleagues, despite their uniforms. Oswald still held Clint in a violent embrace, and as they marched down sunny streets, under the railbridge, towards the large open space of the public playing field, occasional adults in gardens and cars and shops would look up, see these two boys locked together, see the blood and the bruising on one face, the grim anger on the other, the torn shirt, the bleeding knuckles, and do nothing.

Alarm passed over the faces of two women who stood chatting on the corner of the field, as the two boys marched through the hole in the fence which most people used instead of the gate, being more conveniently situated on the junction; but still, like all the adults who saw them pass by that day, they did nothing, just a pause, a look, a tut-tut and a well-I-never comment, before returning unconcerned to their endless gossip, as Oswald and Clint traveled on towards their destination, across dry grassy fields littered with dogshit, coke cans, cigarette butts and crisp packets.

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Thompson stood in the school office, explaining the situation to the Deputy Head, Mr. Morrison. Morrison was two years from retirement, clipped, grey, old fashioned, and religiously optimistic, whereas Thompson was five years into the job, well-groomed, just turned thirty and fashionably cynical, so there was no natural affection between them whatsoever. However, right now, they shared the same

disturbed regard, which brought them together as one.

"Did you not know about Rosbotham's circumstances?" asked Morrison, shaking his head, as he reached into the filing cabinet. "His particulars were not widely circulated, but it was clear we have a duty of care to him over and above the norm. The boy has been in the worst of situations." He threw a file onto his desk for Thompson to peruse. "And why Eastwood?" continued Morrison, "the boy has verbal diarrhea that is certain, but otherwise, he is pleasant enough."

"Wrong time, wrong place, I think," replied Thompson, frowning deeply as he scanned the reports that had accompanied Oswald Henry Arthur Rosbotham's entry into the school. "I mean, he takes a bit of teasing, like everyone, but he's not been known to fly off the handle like that.. "

"No telephone listed for the boy," remarked Morrison calmly, "Surely not?"

There was none. The address was a couple of miles distant. Thompson mentally calculated his route against the walking speed.

"Shall I call the police, or do you want to see if you can catch them up?" asked Morrison levelly. Thompson looked up and shot a look of gratitude towards his fellow teacher.

"I'll go. I think I can get there first." He turned to the door, exited as Morrison gently admonished after him, "Be careful, especially in the boy's home, won't you. And call the office as soon as you have them."

"Will do. Thanks."

Blessing this lease of life, Thompson began jogging towards the car park, uttering fervent prayers to a God he didn't believe in under his tobacco-flavoured breath.



## CHAPTER FOUR

As Oswald marched and Clint stumbled the last quarter mile across the sun-soaked playing field, to where run-down Edwardian terraced houses' dark, sunless gardens abutted the eastern side of this once-industrial plane, Clint knew he was exhausted and powerless, but somehow, the naked terror had left him. Oswald, though physically large, was now streaming with sweat and puffing heavily as he impelled them the final hundred yards.

"You don't have to drag me, Ozzie, if you want, I'll come in and meet your mum," said Clint

quietly, mumbling a little through a swollen lip.

"Shut up!" retorted Oswald, but somehow, the walk had defused the entirety of his anger. He kept them both going without altering pace, his big feet leaving heavy impressions in the thickening grass at the perimeter.

"Look, Oswald," said Clint, reasonably, "I said bad things, you fucked me up, fair enough. OK?"

This time, Oswald said nothing, and slowed up. Sensing a possible improvement, Clint continued, "Oswald. Please stop. Just stop a minute. I am sorry about what I said, really I am, it was stupid. I am stupid. But, if you want me to come with you, just let me go, I will come. You don't have to make me, I'll come."

Oswald stopped, and releasing Clint's arm, stood in front of him, between his captive and the long wall at the back of the houses marking the boundary of the plot. Large bins marked the positions of back gates, which were mostly overgrown and disused. There was a dank smell here, of rot and rats, a shopping trolley long abandoned with ivy growing through it.

The two boys faced one another.

"Orlrite," said Oswald, strangely quiet, adrenaline nearly spent.

"Thanks," said Clint, not daring to look around in case Oswald took this as a prelude to flight. He adjusted his shirt, pulled it down to cover his torso, cautiously touched his bloody face, rubbed his wrenched shoulder. He still hadn't a clue what to do next, but at least he was free from the death-grip. Normality, that's what we need, he thought, a little bit of Norman Normal.

In good middle-class English, as if speaking to the Vicar, Clint asked politely, "Is your mother expecting us?"

"No," said Oswald, and he paused thoughtfully. A wasp buzzed around his head and he swiped at it. A flicker of concern crossed his features, and he licked his fleshy lips. Looking at Clint's face, blood caked down the left side from the ear, the torn white school shirt red with a liberal drenching of blood, he seemed to be weighing up options. "Yew better get cleaned up first."

It was all so bizarre, thought Clint, that he wouldn't be surprised if Ozzie produced a wizard's cloak and demanded he wear that and quote from Lord of the Rings, but relieved that his arm was now free, and possessed of a diplomacy born of necessity, he replied, "OK, then. Where's your bathroom?"

Oswald turned towards the back gardens. "This one," he indicated, showing a foot-worn track through untended brush leading down to one of the functioning entrances. "You first!" he scowled, and pushed Clint in front of him.

Nettles as high as their heads crowded in either side as the short bank carried the boys down to the gate. It was surprisingly cold, thought Clint, and he suddenly felt the lack of clothing beyond his torn shirt and thin summer trousers. He could see the remains of an outside toilet, crammed with rusty ironmongery, upturned old enamel bowls, and bedsprings, as he pushed the gate and entered the back garden. Brambles, nettles and ivy grew everywhere, except the twenty foot path leading to a frosted glass back door, its black paint peeling and putty brittle. There was a

sharp smell, of cats or foxes, or both.

Conscious of Oswald's presence two paces behind him, Clint picked his way up the path towards he knew not what.



## CHAPTER FIVE

Thompson's MG was a bit of dog, a red dog, with not-so-hidden rust, which growled and occasionally bit its owner. He had bought it in an emotional moment after splitting up with his long-term girlfriend. He knew it was an early-mid-life choice, fuelled by fears of imminently waning powers, and dissatisfaction with almost everything in his life. Like him, it was developing bald spots. You had to be careful not to lean on the body in certain places or filler would detach from panel. Ms Butcher had once laughingly draped herself across the bonnet after Thompson had given her a lift home, allowing him a

generous eyeful of her long, perfect thighs, and he'd had to go to the garage to get it open again. God how he'd walked the politically correct tightrope for that moment. "Prick-teasing bitch," he muttered, as he fingered the ignition key, and prayed for an easy start.

The engine fired and choked into neat, mechanical regularity. Thank God, thought Thompson. He was controlling his anxiety, but it was real. Her reversed the car towards the double gate, and as he did so heard "POP! POP!"

Sticking his head out of the window, "Bastard kids!" he cursed, seeing two milk cartons which had been placed beneath his bespoke wheels, now flattened, their remaining contents sprayed across the tarmac and he guessed, the back end of his car. He didn't notice the legend "THOMPSON EATS BUTCHER'S PUSSY" which had been neatly written above the front number plate in black marker.

The small red car nosed out of the green iron gates. The school was set halfway down a suburban road, houses opposite and either side, shops at either end of the street. Rosbotham, if it was to be believed, had kidnapped Eastwood, under his watch. The thought made him wince involuntarily. There were two routes they could have taken, the more likely being the one straight down the high street, he reasoned, and looking quickly left and right, he chose right.

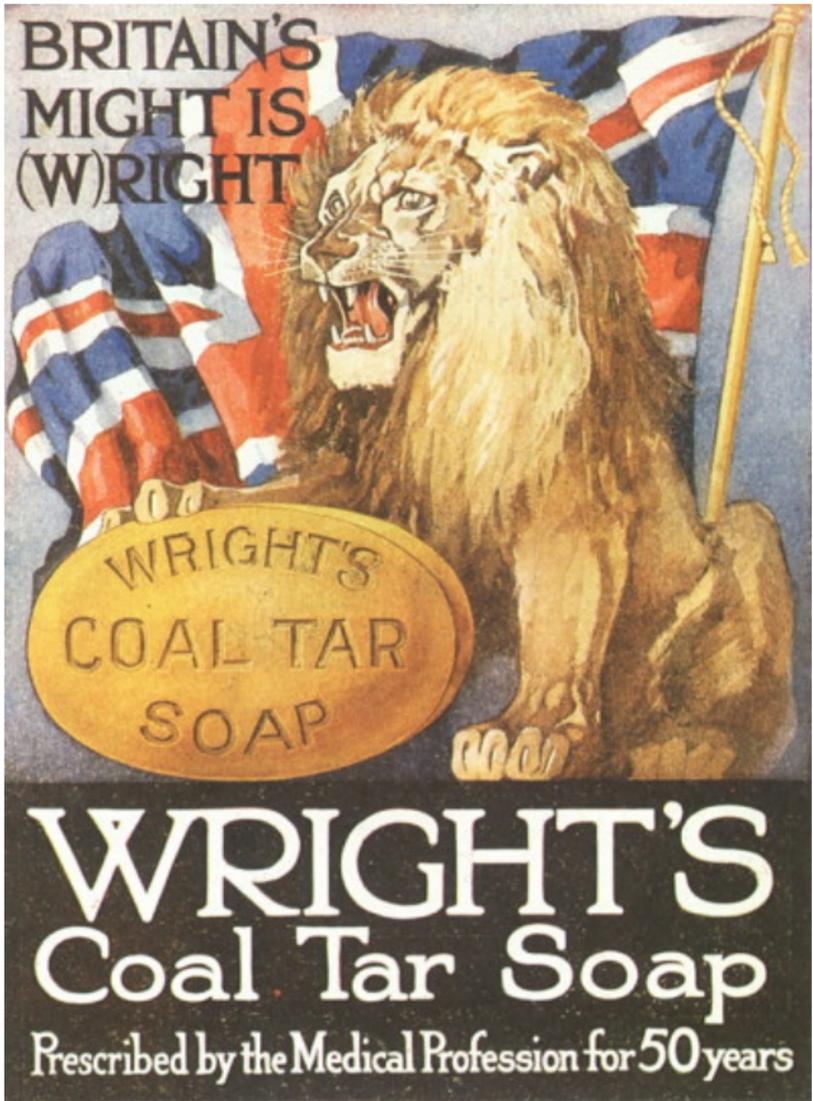
The sun streamed down through pollarded trees either side of the road, lines of parked cars obscuring pedestrians. Thompson drove slowly, scanning ahead, trying not to let distracting thoughts stop him seeing the boys. Five minutes later, the MG arrived at Harold Road, which the school records

declared was the Rosbotham home address. It was completely deserted.

Killing the motor, Thompson pulled up silently a good fifty yards from the place he calculated Rosbotham's front door to be, and exited the car. He walked cautiously up to the front of the terrace, and peered into the lower windows, some of which were barred. No sign of anyone at all. It was a shared house: he observed bins and bells with A, B and C on them. He wasn't certain the address had a number - *damn!*

*They must have come the long way after all,* he realised. The other way was a loop around Old Factory Lane by the playing fields. He would definitely land Rosbotham and Eastwood now. Thompson brightened for the first time in thirty minutes. It was just a question of waiting for them, here on the bank, and reeling them in. He felt, and then checked, a surge of inner relief. *A bird in the hand,* he chided himself, *a bird in the hand, old chap. A big feathery squawker in the grasping, sweaty old palm.*

He walked back a little way along the street, took up a discreet position behind a post box and a lime tree, lit a cigarette, and began to wait.



## CHAPTER SIX

**R**osbotham fixed Clint with a steel eye as he fished in his pocket for the backdoor key. He put the key in the lock, turned, and said quietly, but with obvious threat,

"Now listen to me. Yew are going to clean up. I will give you one of my shirts. Then we are going to say hello to my Mum. OK?"

It was quite the longest sentence he had ever heard from Rosbotham, but Clint simply nodded, as his pale blank face said nothing. Rosbotham grabbed his arm again, and spoke directly into Clint's ear:

"If you fuck about in there, I will kill yew. OK?"

"OK," whispered Clint.

Ozzie pushed Clint firmly through the door, and the boys abruptly found themselves in a corridor lined with bookshelves and boxes. A single bulb failed to light the place after the bright sunlight. Clint blinked rapidly, his breath shallow. He couldn't see much as his eyes adjusted, just that the front room must be away to the sunnier front of the house, as a distant glow of daylight came from his left. A doorway leading to a small modern kitchen was in front of him. The place smelled, inside as outside, of cats.

"Bathroom," spat Rosbotham, shoving him carefully right past the kitchen and into the utility room. There was laundry, a mop and bucket, a butler sink surrounded by cracked white tiles, and a thin brown sliver of Wright's Coal Tar soap. The window onto the garden was small, high and barred.

"Wait here. Do yer face, go on!" ordered Rosbotham, but he showed no sense of enjoying his role as captor, and Clint could sense this. Frowning, licking his thick lips as if he were thirsty, the country boy closed the bathroom door and jammed it from the other side with a chair.

For a moment, Clint could not believe that he was alone, and he rapidly scanned the room. He could feel his bruises now, they were dull and heavy and he

felt deadly tired. His ear hurt less than his shins, which had taken a real hammering, and he knew one of his ankles was too damaged to stand on. He staggered over to the mirror and looked through a layer of soap splashes at himself. For a moment he struggled to focus. At the awful sight, his morale dropped once again.

He crossed the room and pushed the door which moved, but would not open. Ozzie would be back in a minute. Clint turned on the cold tap and it ran loudly splashing into the sink, then grabbed the mop, and winced as he found another bruise on his ribcage. Shit, he couldn't even defend himself with a weapon. Still he could lock the door from the inside if he used the mop to bar it. Physics not being his strong subject was not going to stop him working out an effective block. The door opened outwards, so he jammed the mop up behind door handle and up against the top of the doorframe. Looking at the thin metal lever held by a piece of wooden handle as thick as one of Ozzie's thumbs, Clint despaired. Ozzie would break that down in about three seconds and be narked at the attempt. He hastily removed the mop, mistimed the move and it clattered loudly onto the tiled floor.

Clint froze. Hearing a noise above him, he realised this was possibly Ozzie on the hunt for a clean shirt. He returned to the sink, and drank thirstily from the still-running tap, thinking as he did so whether trying to buy time was a good idea. Ozzie seemed to have calmed down at least. Maybe he just wants me to meet his mum, thought Clint wearily. He splashed cold water on his face, and started to remove his ragged shirt.

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Thompson had a secret, aside from his sorties to a squalid stripper bar in the Walworth Road, which was that he had been writing for the past twelve months, a novel of sorts, something so dark that it surprised him. It was neither comic nor tragic, but it was deeply warped, and much influenced by his Holy Trinity, *Bataille*, *Burroughs*, and *Ballard*.

He supposed it would never be published, and this gave him the freedom to write, finally, from within, from deep inside his sexually frustrated, snobbish, cynical, depressed mind; and to his surprise, his discipline was decent. He knew it was compelling in some way, although he had not shown it to anyone, or even worked out quite why he was writing it. He would have liked to have shown it to Ms Butcher, whose intellect he respected as much as he admired her breasts, but he feared that should she scorn it, or worse, react blasé, this precious lifeline would slip from his grasp, and he would drown in a sea of assemblies, registers and detentions.

Thompson had not set out to be a teacher. He had worked hard to get to Cambridge with every intention of joining *Footlights*, becoming a comic actor, and eventually a television stalwart; but once there, and particularly onstage, he was completely outshone by dozens of better, cleverer, funnier talents, whose words raised howls of laughter as his fell like damp gardening gloves onto an old wooden bench.

"A word to the wise," said one old lag, seeing his post-gig suffering. "Everyone wants a good straight man." Pride however would not let Thompson accept that his role in this celebrated, illuminated crowd would always be support, and he turned his back on them, announcing drunkenly to his comedy comrades in the

bar that he had heard the calling of 'serious drama' and would no longer be wasting his time attempting to elicit chuckles from a bunch of uptight upper-class fanny-wipes such as they. *Fuck them and the fucking BBC.*

Thereafter followed what Thompson's scathing ex had termed, "The Chekhov Years", during which time Thompson ceased smiling, as much an existential act as a ruse to increase gravitas, and he discovered that, even if he sometimes detested the works he was now performing and occasionally directing, he was at least getting regular sex, since "tormented, intense, deep" played far better than the "world's best comedian" in his attempts to interest the women whose idea of a good night out was *Krapp's Last Tape*.

He even went so far as to invent various tragic family occurrences which pain still troubled him, and it worked well, so long as nobody cared enough about him to make further enquiries into the terrible accident in the hotel room which had destroyed his parents and all five sisters. Not so well that he was ever going to get any serious work, however, and three penniless years later, he was back in school, his Cambridge 2.2 degree beating a South London Polytechnic 1st to the post of Head of English at this not-too-appalling south London comprehensive.

As he smoked his cigarette, he reflected that without the job he hated so much, the failure of his relationship, and the sexual tension of his friendship with the tantalising but elusive Ms Butcher, he probably wouldn't have been moved to write anything. *Fucking human condition.* He grimaced, and spat into the gutter, and glanced at his wristwatch. *Where are those two boys?* Had they returned to school? Was he out here on some wild goose chase? He coloured, suddenly feeling

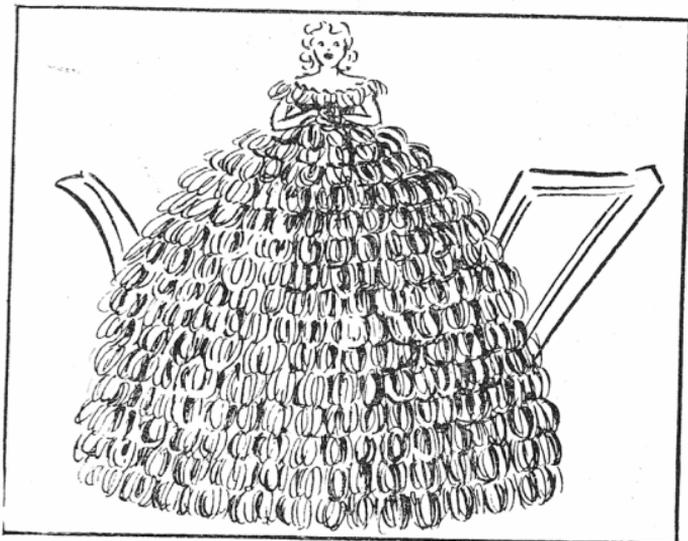
violently frustrated, threw the cigarette after the phlegm, and strode up the road to his car. There was a telephone box he had passed two streets away. He would call and check. *Bastards*. Jumping into the MG, he started the warm engine, turned a tight 180 degrees.

*Right you little wankers*, he thought as he accelerated, *we'll soon see about that*.

Proceed as follows:—

1st Row.—Work throughout in loop stitch, as previously described.

2nd Row.—Purl to end.



Repeat these 2 rows four times more.

11th Row.—As 1st row.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

**C**lint stood shivering in the bathroom, trying to force suds from the hard sliver of soap. His shirt was a write-off. As he wiped cold water on his swollen face, he winced, and gave up being in any

way thorough. He could hear Oswald returning, the heavy tread of his size thirteen Clarke's causing stairs to creak and groan. Looking at himself in the dirty, dull mirror, he thought, *I'll play it by ear*, then grimaced as he caught his own unintentional pun. *Amazing how funny stuff always happens*, he observed, *in the worst times*. He thought briefly of his bedroom, posters from childhood not yet removed, cars and fighter jets, and the one pornographic magazine which he had carefully stashed away from prying eyes under his mattress. At this familiarity, a lump came to Clint's throat, and he felt like weeping.

Oswald entered the room, brandishing a voluminous grey shirt. "This'll do," he said, and threw it to Clint. "Put it on."

Clint struggled to comply. The buttons were huge, the wrong size for the garment. He lacked the finger strength to push them through the holes. Instead, he opened up the shirt and ducked his head through the top. The shirt fell down to his knees like a maternity dress, and Clint began systematically to tuck the billowing tent into his trousers.

Oswald absently pulled at his wiry hair, assessing the results. Aside from the thick circle of cloth from the shirt, which sat around his middle like a lifebuoy, Clint looked more presentable.

"Right. Right. Right." Oswald seemed nervous suddenly, his anger finally drained away with the efforts to make good. He didn't move, and for a long few seconds, he just stared blankly in the direction of the kitchen. Clint wondered if this was a pre-death ritual Oswald performed on all his victims.

Oswald licked his lips, turned to Clint, and said, "Cup of tea."

Clint thought Oswald had totally lost it for a moment, but he was tuned into his persecutor too keenly, and he knew that wasn't true. He hadn't lost it, he was worried about something.

"Any teabags?" asked Clint.

"Yes. Yes." Oswald seemed genuinely surprised by Clint's practical suggestion, but still didn't move.

"Would you like a hand with the tea, Oswald?" asked Clint slowly, sensing the beginnings of a change in the balance of power, coaxing reason from its hiding place.

"Orlrite then," assented Oswald, and led the way to the kitchen, where a wide-bottomed whistling kettle stood on a gas ring. Moving slowly, trying not to use his damaged left arm, Clint took it over to the sink, and filled it. Oswald lit the ring, and started to assemble cups and saucers on a tray. The porcelain cups were feminine, small, clean, and brightly and delicately decorated in red, quite unlike the chipped mugs in Clint's house, adorned with saucy seaside slogans, stained brown with tannin that nobody ever attempted to remove. While Clint watched, Oswald carefully and precisely laid out a silver sugar bowl, containing cubes, with small tongs, a medium-sized pot, a white tea-cosy with images of cats, three teaspoons, and reaching up above the cooker, a small biscuit tin.

As the kettle began to make a wobbling rising note, Oswald lifted it with a huge hand, and poured an inch of boiling water into the pot, swishing it round for a few seconds. Astonished at this act above all others, Clint observed precise, practiced movements. *He's warming the pot, thought Clint, just like Gran does.*

As if reading his mind, Oswald looked up and said, matter of factly, "I have to do this. She can always

tell."

He poured the water away, added three teabags, and filled the pot. Picking up the tray, he nodded to Clint, indicating the direction of the living room down the corridor. "Go on," said Oswald, "and don't mess about." There was nothing in his manner which was threatening anymore. The rituals of cleaning, of making tea, seemed to have calmed him, and the nervousness was more a case of protocol being followed, Clint realised. Fine then, he would follow.

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Thompson's mind was racing, and he was furious as he pulled up outside the telephone box. Inside was a young woman with thick glasses, who was clearly doing an excellent job of listening. She gazed distractedly out at Thompson as he began to wait. After a minute of pacing around and hovering into view, looking at his watch, and staring at her, she showed no sign of letting up, so Thompson summoned up his most inconsolable face, and tapped lightly on the glass. She turned round, irritated, but noticing his forlorn, beseeching face, said into the mouthpiece, "Hold on, someone's saying something to me," and pushed open the door with her foot.

"I'm so terribly sorry," said Thompson in his tragic-but-smooth voice, "An awful thing has happened - an accident - I am a teacher and I have to call the school - would it be possible - do you mind..." and as he said this he manouvred himself into the box, removing the handset from the woman, who stared at him with concern. "Thank you so much," he said into the mouthpiece, put the telephone down whilst

reaching into his pocket for change. He lifted the woman's hand, and putting 10 pence into her hand, said "I'll just be two minutes," closed the door and started to dial.

*Come on, answer!* thought Thompson, determined to get the situation back under control. His blood pressure was up, he knew it was. It had killed his father. *Damn Eastwood and damn Rosbotham. What is it they call him? Ozzie Razor, or something. Like some fucking popstar.*

The phone clicked into life.

"Hello, Colin Thompson here. Is Mr. Morrison about?"

"One second please."

Thompson drummed his fingers on the glass, remembering to maintain his doleful look as he saw the young woman watching him from outside the box, hand on hip. She looked cynical, but she was giving him the benefit of the doubt for the moment.

"Hello, Morrison here," came the cultured tones of the Deputy. "Success?"

"Hi - look, um, I.. " said Thompson in a quiet voice, suddenly feeling like a boy whose dog has eaten his homework. "I've been hanging around here for a while and there's no sign."

"Hmmm, not good. Where can they have got to?" pondered Morrison. "Have you knocked?"

"It's a shared house, I mean, a house divided into flats... is there a note of the flat number there?"

"Ah yes, now let me see..." Thompson could hear Morrison at his desk in the distant school office, moving a pile of books with a thump, and rustling papers. He looked up and made sad eyes at the waiting woman, but she looked away scornfully. She wasn't fooled.

"It would appear that it is Flat A" said Morrison, loud again in the earpiece. "Look here, these are exceptional circumstances, so be a good old chap, go and knock on the door, and apologise if necessary. Perhaps it would be best to let the police know at this point..?" Morrison's voice trailed off enquiringly.

"Give me ten minutes. I'll either call back, or come back," said Thompson.

"Right you are," said Morrison, and the line went dead.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Clint walked down the hall, still very conscious of his throbbing ear, battered shins, bruised rib and wrenched shoulder. The bizarre fact that he was now engaged in a procession to deliver tea with the man-sized boy who was responsible for his injuries was not lost on him. Oswald walked carefully behind him, carrying the doylie tea tray. Clint could hear the small spoons chinking in the porcelain saucers.

Clint was a sensitive, imaginative lad, and it was only the protection of his older sister, and the love he received from his Grandmother that served as replacements for the tarnished, conditional, occasional care his parents dished up as it occurred to them to do so, which had given him enough emotionally to survive his thirteen years and four months. It was this lack of domestic affection that gave him the resilience of a rubber ball - perennially disappointed, and eternally looking for more - which meant that he was, despite his physical immaturity, eager for experience, and somewhat blind to risk. He was used to his quick humour making him friends and getting him out of danger. This time however, it had precipitated the tumultuous occasion of Ozzie's anger, and Clint was already updating his philosophy to include the maxim: be careful who you mock, because they might hit you. Later he would enlarge this to mean: be aware of how exactly much mockery you can get away with at any given time. Still later, in the context of his career, it would become, get away with as much mockery as you can, as often as you can.

For the moment, he was entering a basement living room which despite its low level was filled with

light. On the left he could see a tall, shrouded birdcage, on the right, chairs, a sofa, a television, and Oswald's mum, in an armchair. She was wearing dark glasses, a long lime-green dressing gown, and an obviously synthetic brown wig, which in the company of his schoolfriends would have provided Clint with a thousand opportunities for wit. He kept tactfully and respectfully silent, as Oswald walked past him with the tray and set it down on the small table in the middle of the room, next to the Radio Times.

"Hello, Mum," said Oswald.

"Hello, my dear," she replied. "Aren't you home a little early?"

Her voice was gentle, posher than Oswald's though still with a rural note, and although Clint lacked the hormones to fully appreciate it, attractive. He found himself before her, and saying politely, "Good afternoon, Mrs. Rosbotham," and offering his hand.

"How lovely!" she cooed. "Oswald, you must introduce your friend."

"Um, this is Clint, Mum. Clint Eastwood."

"Oh come on," she retorted, chuckling, "surely not?"

"They call me Clint, Mrs. Rosbotham, but my name is Andrew. Andrew Eastwood." said Clint, by way of explanation.

As Clint looked at Mrs. Rosbotham, he noticed that one hand was badly scarred, burned, with strangely thick whirlpools of distorted skin and crooked fingers. She took his hand with the other, and shook it. He looked into her face, and saw carefully applied makeup, not really hiding the right side of her face, where the same awful scarring had reduced her complexion to dripped wax.

Clint turned to Oswald, who stood behind him, licking his lips, clasping his enormous hands in front of his groin.

"Tea: how nice. Are you hungry?" she asked, slowly adjusting herself on the armchair, pivoting on one elbow to lean forward and take charge. "Oswald: go and make a couple of jam sandwiches. Clint, sit down." She indicated the sofa next to her armchair.

Oswald looked at his mother, and at Clint, then said simply, "OK then," and left the room.

"Such a loving boy," said Mrs. Rosbotham, "and so patient while I have been in and out of hospital. I expect he has explained all that, you being a friend."

Very carefully, using her good hand to grip the handle and the damaged one to steady the pot, she lifted the cosy and poured tea into the cups.

"Are you MIFF, or TUFF?" she asked.

"Sorry?" said Clint, nonplussed.

"Milk First, or Tea First. I never think it makes a blind bit of difference myself but there you are, some people are incredibly fussy. Now, " she said, pouring milk into the cups, "Is Oswald doing well at school, do you think? He's not a very popular boy, I know that, too self-absorbed, and especially so since we moved here."

"Where did you live before?" asked Clint.

"Has he not said?" asked Mrs. Rosbotham. "We come from Gloucestershire, near Stroud. Lovely place, green and friendly." She paused and for a moment seemed to be in severe physical pain. A shadow passed across the room as someone passed by outside, and Clint heard footsteps and the rattle of a pram.

"Have you seen Frisbie? That's the cat, you know," explained Mrs. Rosbotham. "Charming animal,

but does like to stay out for days on end. We put butter on his feet when we moved - it's an old wives' tale, supposed to stop them hiking back to where they came from. I always thought they came back because you feed them, nothing more than that. Fickle creatures, cats, but a lot less bother than a dog. Do you have any pets, Andrew?"

"Not allowed," said Clint. He had always wanted a dog.

"Ah, shame, yes, not everybody's cup of tea. Speaking of which, do help yourself." She indicated the tray, and Clint leaned forward to carefully take a cup.

It was dawning upon Clint during this easy exchange that for all her banter, Oswald's mum was really very badly off. She moved with difficulty, and he could see that her place in this room was the centre of her world. Around her were placed the objects necessary for her day; a second pair of glasses, a collection of pill bottles, a pile of library books, two hospital-issue walking sticks propped up against a small bureau, and a typewriter, next to which was a stack of papers and letters. Mrs. Rosbotham noticed Clint's wandering gaze.

"Do you enjoy writing?" she asked, slowly turning to indicate the typewriter. "Journalist. That was my job, before all this. Now of course, I am mostly dealing with tedious matters, bills, et cetera, and the court, of course..."

"What did you write?" asked Clint, curiously. He couldn't countenance that someone so oafish as Ozzie could have a mother who wrote for a living. Neither could he quite reconcile this fragile, damaged woman's easy charm with her son's lack of it.

She began to speak, but her reply was interrupted by the reappearance of Oswald bearing sandwiches.

"Righty-ho," she said, "Eat boys, eat." Oswald placed the sandwiches on the table, sat down, and began to stuff his face. Clint paused for half a second, then did the same.

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Thompson pushed open the heavy door of the telephone box. The young woman he had usurped stood leaning on a fence opposite, looking at him disdainfully. Abandoning pretense, Thompson sneered, "Don't spend that ten pence all at once now, will you?" and, as he opened the door of the MG, he added for good measure, "I think you'll find you can reverse the charges for the Samaritans."

Without looking over his shoulder to witness the effect of this snide comment, Thompson cursed under his breath, *fucking bunch of cunts*, as the sporty engine sputtered once more into life. He wheeled the car around once more, and pushed his right foot down to the floor. *Flat A* he repeated mentally. *What was it in the boy's file? Something about a court case and an accident - a crime - something horrible.* He couldn't recall.

Turning left at the end of the quiet road, he drove back towards Rosbotham's house, accelerating with a growl into the straight. Suddenly there was a flash of ginger and white from his left, and a loud bang as something hit the front of the car. "SHIT!" yelled Thompson, as blood appeared on the windscreen. He braked and the car skidded, out of control, mounting the kerb and careering into the wooden gatepost of a neat 1930s white-fronted house. There was a metallic

crack as the car hit the gate and then a low brick wall, the entire length of which promptly fell backwards into the garden, demolishing a decorative line of foxgloves.

The impact threw Thompson forward with a lurch, and he felt his body lift out of his seat. His head hit the windscreen with a dull smack. He fell back and clutched his brow. Blood started to run down into his eyes. He felt sick and dizzy, and there was a sharp pain in his chest where his abdomen had hit the small wooden wheel. He could see the bonnet of the car was open, and a jet of hot steam was hissing from the engine. With great effort, he forced the door open, pulled himself out of the car, and looked up and down the road, which was completely empty of people.

Thompson staggered to the front of the car, and took in the wrecked vehicle and the fallen wall. He breathed in and felt another sharp pain. *Broken rib*, he thought, *Shit*. Breathing shallowly, he sat down on the side of the wall, now facing the sky, and looked into the road. There, lying still, was the half-flattened body of a cat. Next to it, his shattered number plate, with writing upon it. His vision blurred, as he tried to focus from three yards distant. He could just make out the words in neat black marker,

## THOMPSON BUTCHER'S PUSSY

Reading this, a chill ran through him, nothing to do with the misuse of the apostrophe. He was being irrational, he told himself, *it couldn't possibly say that*. His head was splitting. He pulled himself up and looked into his wing-mirror, which had twisted round to face forward. A garish bloodied ghoul looked back at him. He was shocked, and his intake of breath caused

another intense spasm of pain in his chest. Then all the light in the world was sucked into a deep drain, and consciousness deserted him.



## CHAPTER NINE

There was a long dark corridor which sloped downwards and to the left. It was narrow and high, and the sides were cold, dry, stone cut perfectly flat and smooth. The scene reminded Thompson of a hospital, but with something else mutated into it, from a childhood memory of playing in underground medieval tunnels below a French castle in Rouen; something about the curve and the scale and the inexorable descent.

"Where are my glasses?" he asked.

He had no glasses and yet he could see passably well in the gloom as he stepped down and down and down. Cold lights glowed in token respite every few metres, set into the walls. They were gas, Thompson realised, but there was no evidence of pipes.

"Where is my pipe?" he asked. He had given up smoking, he remembered, but he wanted to rekindle his lost love. A bowlful of *St Bruno*, a fireside, and a good book.

The corridor ended, leading abruptly to a large, studded door, which seemed to have been constructed from trees rather than wood. He wanted to turn around but he couldn't, and the thought of returning filled him with fear. He couldn't go back. He would have to knock.

Thompson lifted his hand, only slightly surprised to notice that he was wearing a huge, heavy gauntlet, and banged the thick timbers twice. A hollow *boom-boom* echoed morbidly down the length of the corridor behind him, and within the space beyond. Abruptly the door opened into a bare room within which a fire burned. A tall man in robes and sandals was kneeling before an image of the Virgin, head bowed, hands clasped. He was intoning in a low voice something which sounded like a list of names. Thompson approached the kneeling figure, and bent forward to catch the words.

"Roger... Eudes de Châtillon... Landuin... "

This was a lament, Thompson realised, for lost friends. At the thought, he filled with unspoken grief. Falling to his knees, he begged the praying holy man in a voice thick with pain,

"Please! Please! Let me have fellowship! Let me serve!"

The old man turned towards him, his eyes were filled with compassion and an elegiac luminance.

From beneath his robes, he pulled a pipe. He thumbed down the tobacco, which hit Thompson's nostrils like elixir, and his eyes became round. Reaching into the small fire for a splint, the holy man puffed carefully at the bowl, breathing in deep, allowing time for the smoke to filter through his beard, before passing it across. Thompson reached for the pipe, but as he did so, the holy man took his fingers and held them firmly.

He looked deep into Thompson's eyes, and even as he accepted the pipe, Thompson knew that he was giving up something in exchange. Wordless, effortless understanding passed between them. Thompson felt the burden of disappointment and pain slip slowly from him as if he were shedding a silk garment. He took the pipe, and acknowledging the gift, drew the smoke into himself.

"Fred," declared the robed figure gravely, "was the best pace bowler of his generation; why then did he demean himself selling pipe tobacco? This famous sporting son of Doncaster could surely have done better than encourage the consumption of this highly toxic, highly addictive substance, which frankly, has not yet even been discovered and taken back to Europe... I pray for the blessing of Our Lady, that she may cause cautionary messages to be placed upon tobacco products and instill a ban on such advertising across the land... "

The holy man's low voice spoke of things from another place and time, but without incongruity or dissonance. As the tobacco hit his brain, Thompson felt slightly sick and dizzy, but it was also a

homecoming. Yes, he wanted to smoke, he wanted this very much, he wanted to smoke tobacco in a pipe, and he wanted to bowl fast, and he wanted to make people laugh, he wanted a pipe like Eric Morecambe, and he wanted a cigar like Groucho Marx, and he wanted a *Gauloise* like Jean Paul Sartre... he thought he was going to vomit, and he doubled up, crouching on the cold floor, but he didn't vomit, and he couldn't straighten again. He could hear things going on in the room behind him, but he couldn't turn to see anything.

He started to panic, crying, "I was only obeying orders!" but as his chin was stuck to his chest, his voice traveled nowhere. He could shout as much as he liked, nobody was going to hear him. The thought plunged him into despair. He was still puffing the pipe, but now it was stuck to his lips, which had dried and cracked and tasted foul. He could feel his eyes closing. Where were his glasses? He was very, very sad, and he started to cry, something which he had not done for years, but the tears had nowhere to go.

"Sir! Sir! Are you alright? Sir!"

It was the voice of Angela Spender.



## CHAPTER TEN

They had been entirely wrong about the black pimp, mused Clint as he scoffed the jam sandwich, staring across at Oswald busily doing the same. Mrs. Rosbotham, he decided, was cool. She was clearly a government agent, and had been burnt almost to death whilst kept captive in a house, and then gone into hiding for her own safety. Which explained why Ozzie was here, and why he was so weird.

He contemplated for a moment the spectre of his own mother wreathed in flames rather than *Chanel Number Five*, which she wore constantly in honour of

her heroine, Marilyn Monroe. She would insist on applying this even before getting dressed, accompanying him to the front door in a smothering show of care, her full breasts spilling out of her frilly silk nightgown, into the street and halfway to school. He was frequently embarrassed by this excess of sentiment and scent. Why she did not just get dressed like other people's mums? In a year's time, he would return having forgotten his games kit, and find her in bed with a delivery man, in the throes of loud and prolonged orgasm. For Clint, this cliché was the beginning of his adult life, the final fire through which his malleable child's mind would pass and be tempered into sharp adulthood.

"Oswald. Have you shown Clint your construction?" asked Mrs. Rosbotham, at the moment when both boys were simultaneously chewing their last mouthful. Oswald swallowed and licked his lips.

"Um. No," he replied, looking suddenly more awkward than his usual uncomfortable country self.

"Well, go and show your friend, now he's here." She said it with a finality that Clint did not yet associate with women, and he looked up at her with interest. He felt safe in the room with her. He knew that Ozzie was not going to resume his earlier violence, that was a given, but he was not quite ready to risk another tête-à-tête session. His damaged ear was still throbbing, and underneath the oversized shirt he could feel his bruised body starting to stiffen up.

"It's alright, Mrs. Rosbotham," he said quickly, "I really have to get back soon. My mother is expecting me to go shopping."

"What a helpful boy you are, Andrew. It won't take a minute, though. Go on, Oswald, take your friend

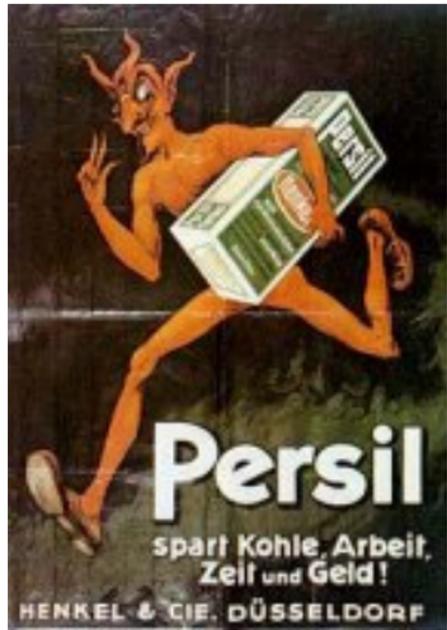
up and show him."

"OK," said Oswald, rising. He took the plates, and looking carefully at Clint said, "It's in my bedroom."

Clint winced as he rose to follow Oswald, pain from his knee reminding him of the school desks and the doorframe which Oswald had ignored upon their spectacular exit from school. By rights, he should now be about to leave school and take the bus home with ten of his schoolfriends, but reality had been long abandoned this strange summer afternoon, and so now he was going to see something Ozzie had made in his room. Perhaps it would be a full *Scalextric* track, perhaps, a working scaffold complete with noose.

"Come and say goodbye before you go," said Mrs. Rosbotham, "Oswald, when you come back down, would you bring me some water, please, dear." She turned to the multiple bottles, packets and containers of medication, and started to slowly sort through them.

Following Oswald as he left the room, Clint saw that none of the tops were screwed on. Mrs. Rosbotham's melted hand seemed to be scattering jewels in the bright, secluded room, as she tipped out different coloured capsules onto her tray one by one.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Colin Thompson stared up at the fresh face of Angela Spender. The sky behind her fair hair was blue, and so were her eyes, he realised. He had never noticed her natural beauty before, her clear skin, the gentle curve of her cheeks. He could smell her as she bent over him. She smelled of Persil. It was the same smell that his ex-girlfriend's underwear used to have.

"Are you alright Sir?" she asked urgently. "You've been unconscious!"

He pulled himself up and stared at the wrecked MG, which sat motionless and silent astride a fallen gatepost, blocking the path, battered red nose pushed into the base of the fallen garden wall, rear number plate standing proud like a propeller. *More beautiful in death*, thought Thompson, as he tried to stand.

The stabbing hot pain in his chest as he lifted himself told him that he probably had broken a rib, if not damaged a lung.

"Careful, Sir," said Angela, taking his arm as he wobbled unsteadily to his feet.

"Thanks, thanks, I'm fine, really," he said weakly.

*Bless her*, thought Thompson, *one of the good ones*. He turned his head to see an inert ginger and white cat, it's legs angled impossibly across the white line in the middle of the road, one end flat, staining the road dark. *Shit*. What on earth had he been doing? *Oh yes - Rosbotham and Eastwood. Damn!* Thompson remembered his mission suddenly, and in full, and groaned.

"Are you in pain, Sir? Shall I call an ambulance? There's a telephone two roads away," said Angela earnestly.

"I am better off than the cat, at least," he said. "What are you doing out of school anyway?"

"I have a dentist's appointment." She stood directly before him, eyes narrowed, searching his face for signs. "Are you sure you don't need help, Sir?"

*Not the kind you can give me*, he thought wryly.

"Thank you, Spender, no," he said officiously. "I shall report this, obviously, to the authorities, but frankly, I have had enough happen this afternoon already without also assuming the starring role of Cat Killer in every joke told at school from now on, so I would be grateful if you would keep this to yourself. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Sir," said the girl intelligently, wondering whether her teacher had suffered more than a blow to his forehead and to his dignity. "Are you sure you will be alright, Sir?"

"Quite sure, thank you, Spender. Don't miss your appointment now, will you."

She fixed him briefly with a piercing adult stare, flashed him a perfect, white-toothed smile, turned and walked across the road to her bicycle, which was leaning against a picket fence. Despite his injuries, Thompson was touched by her consideration, vaguely aware that straightforward, uncomplicated feminine consideration was something he not experienced in years, and as she mounted her bicycle, satchel on back, his eyes brimmed, and she flickered as if in heat haze.

"Take care, Sir," she called back over her shoulder, as she rode off into the sun.

Alone once more in the quiet road, Thompson breathed and attempted to calm himself. He considered knocking on the door of the house whose garden he had demolished, but rapidly dismissed the idea. Staring at the dead cat dead cat lying next to the inexplicably marked number plate, something drew him towards it; he limped over and stared down at the corpse of the animal he had killed. He'd written a dead cat sketch, once, which was nothing to do with the dead parrot sketch, and was quite good, in fact; but it had been derided by his comedy contemporaries on the basis it was *Python* plagiarism, and had never seen the light of day.

He noticed a red collar around the animal's neck. *This thing had an identity*, he thought, and impulsively bent down to look at it. *Poor bastard*, he thought, not sure whether he meant himself, or the cat, or both. *You had a home. You were loved*. He felt his throat block with emotion, and stifled a sob. *What the fuck is up with me?* he wondered, as two tears fell down his nose and onto the fur below. *It's a cat, for God's sake. Could've happened to*

*anyone.*

On one knee, with some difficulty, he detached the collar, went back to the wall, sat down, and unscrewed the tiny capsule. Inside was a rolled up, printed piece of paper with handwritten information. Squinting in the bright sunlight, holding arm's length for lack of spectacles, he read:

"My Name is: FRISBIE. I live at: Flat A, 18 Harold Road..."

A shudder came over Thompson. He had very possibly killed the cat of Rosbotham, who had kidnapped Eastwood.

*Oh shit,* he thought quietly to himself, *I am truly, truly fucked.*



## CHAPTER TWELVE

**I**t was truly enormous, and Oswald stood blinking and licking his lips in the middle of it. It stretched all the way around the room, from the door, past the bed to the window; and then back along bookshelves and under floorboards, to the door again. It was on the table, under the bed, and it was all long the curtain rail. It had levers, switches, buttons, control panels and screens.

The entire room was mechanised. Like electronic ivy, it had consumed it's host.

Clint's jaw dropped as his eyes moved along lines at right and other angles, across materials and objects the like of which he had never seen, upon wood, metal,

plastic, bakelite, rubber, which had been cut, shaped, filed, bent, tied, bolted, screwed, welded and clamped. Absolutely everywhere in the room lights winked, small rotors rotated, cogs whirred. The place hummed with a quiet, tuned efficiency.

Outside, the sun shone down on a flat expanse, ringed by beech, ash and poplar trees, flaking and rusting metal goalposts set at regulation intervals casting sharp shadows sideways, as the as the summer afternoon baked the mown grass brown. Inside, Clint felt as if he had entered the set of *The Tomorrow People*.

"Fucking hell, Ozzie!" ejaculated Clint "When the fuck did you do all this? This is AMAZING man, fuckin' amazing! Did you invent ALL OF IT?! You total genius! You country bumpkin fuckin' genius!" Clint whooped, forgetting all fear, all pain, reverting to his usual verbal torrent in surprise and delight.

Oswald was visibly taken aback, but his face flickered and he smiled spontaneously. "How long has it taken you to do all this?" asked Clint, closely examining a mechanism which had a alarm clock attached and which looked like it might be dangerous. "What, about.. six months or so?"

"Um, yes. That's about it," said Oswald, nervously.

"What's this then?" asked Clint, indicating the clock.

Oswald crouched down beside Clint, and began to explain carefully and in detail how the clock was wired up to various electronics so that he could automate various tasks throughout the day, mostly for the benefit of his mother. Clint remained in rapt attention. Oswald seemed despite his adult size to be a boy again, as Clint followed up Oswald's explanations

with more questions, demanding a full tour of the room, until ten minutes later, Clint was lying flat on his back on Oswald's bed, opening and closing the window with a finger and thumb, giggling infectiously. Oswald lit up, his farmhand frame shaking with silent joy, as he turned red and covered his grin with his fingers.

"Fucking cool! How fucking cool!" repeated Clint, as he understood the reason for Oswald's permanent distraction. "You just plan this in your head all day, don't you?"

"Yes," replied Oswald. "Sometimes stay up all night. Makes me bad tempered though."

"You mad fucker. Honestly. Where did you learn it?"

"Dad. And books. Dad's dead." Oswald offered this in the same careful manner as he had explained how everything worked.

"Shit," said Clint, and paused. Then, "Still, he got you really fuckin' going didn't he?"

"He fuckin' did!" Oswald grinned, his adolescent voice breaking as he spoke, so that "did" became an unexpected bass note, to both their surprise.

"Oswald, darling..." Mrs. Rosbotham's voice called faintly from a speaker in the ceiling. Clint swiveled his head to find the source, as the disembodied voice continued, "Would you mind finding Frisbie, dear? He hasn't been fed all day..."

"OK Mum," called Oswald through the open door at full volume, then, turning to Clint, he said quietly, "Look, um, Clint.. um, Andrew. I am sorry I hit you. I... I didn't really mean to." He paused, licking his lips, staring left and right, avoiding Clint's eyes.

Clint stood before the man-sized boy who had given him the worst beating of his life, looked intently

at over-large, introverted, shy, excluded, mocked, misunderstood, misfit Ozzie, and promptly forgave him.

"You can make it up to me, Ozzie," he said calmly. "Make me something cool."

Oswald looked so deeply serious for a second that Clint wondered whether he'd gone too far in asking for reparation, but his instinct trusted the Boys' Code to which, however much an outsider, Ozzie clearly subscribed. The Code allowed for injustices to be dealt with in this way. He knew that he had taken undue punishment, meant for the entire group, and that it was not only his right to ask for something, but his obligation. Such a reasonable request was a good thing, rescuing his status among his peer group, even in turn earning Oswald their respect, and thus finally drawing him into the fold.

"Well, OK," said Oswald, with a furrowed brow. "Just don't say nothing about my mum."

"I won't," said Clint, then added, "She's cool anyway. Deal?"

"Deal," said Oswald, looked him in the eye, grinned back, licked his lips, and offered his hand. As they shook, the doorbell rang.

\*\*\*\*\*

On the back seat of the MG, Thompson found an old red tartan blanket. Grimacing with pain, he lifted the dead body of the cat into it with great effort. He remembered he had once tried to persuade his ex into some alfresco sex by laying the blanket down upon a particularly beautiful part of the South Downs at dusk,

and producing with a conjuror's flourish a bottle of chilled wine he had packed in ice hours before; and her scornful, already drunk reaction, before she passed out, snoring all the way back to London. *Bitch*, he thought bitterly.

Holding the still-warm cat in the blanket, he attempted to orientate. Rosbotham's house was first left, first right. Limping, he set off. He felt sick and exhausted. Blood was seeping through the threadbare wool onto his shirt and trousers, and as he made his way towards Harold Road, he was on the edge of panic and despair. Sweat poured down his face as he walked, his foppish fringe sticking to his forehead like *Action Man's* plastic hair, a trail of bloodspots marking this macabre procession.

As he turned into the street, the girl he had met earlier in the telephone box was coming towards him. She startled. He ignored her, as she backed away from him, her jaw moving silently at his awful image. She turned and began to run back the way she had come, and the road echoed to the sound of her cheap shoes slapping on paving stones as she fled in horror, yelping.

Thompson finally stood before the Edwardian terrace, seven tiled steps leading up to a large door. The afternoon's dark shadows had begun to lengthen, but there was no shade to speak of beneath the sticky, over-pollarded lime trees, and the sun's heat absorbed by brick and black tarmac over ten hours was radiating through him as if he was in a sauna. He mounted the steps one by one, and finally, leaning up against the remains of a once-smart porch, released his left hand to push the round black button that bore the legend, *Flat A*.

*Bing-Bong* sounded the two electronic notes loud in the empty hall. Thompson stood unsteadily in the sun, looking down into the bright basement ten feet below.

Large flies from a nearby bin began to swarm around him, attracted by the smell of death, so that when Oswald, flanked by Clint, answered the door, they beheld the sight of Mr. Thompson with a halo of bluebottles circling his head. His face was a stripy mess of blood, dirt and fingermarks, his sweat making white vertical streaks through the grime like the bars of a cage, through which he peered into the dark communal hallway, blinking and uncertain. The blood-soaked blanket he was carrying had stained his pale shirt so it looked like he had taken a bullet in the guts.

"Mr. Thompson? Sir?" said Clint, incredulously. "Are you alright?"

Thompson found himself unable to answer, and took a breath, which caused a wave of sick pain almost to engulf him. He seemed about to fall backwards down the steps, and Oswald stepped forward to prevent it, taking his arm.

"Rosbotham," said Thompson faintly. "Eastwood."

"Yes, Sir," replied the boys, and looked at one another. This was outside anything they had ever experienced.

Thompson was cradling the dead cat like a baby, holding it close, as he sank to his knees in the doorway.

"Rosbotham... Eastwood... kidnapped..." Thompson was trying to articulate, but he could not.

"Oswald had to come home urgently, Sir, to assist his mother, and I offered to help him. Sorry about leaving school, Sir, but there was nobody to ask," Clint started to explain.

Thompson looked up, shorter on his knees than both the boys; he lifted the blood-soaked blanket, and said, "I'm afraid... I am very sorry... I have had an accident... I believe this is your cat... Rosbotham..."

Oswald took the blanket carefully and laid it on the top step. Thompson, relieved of his burden, felt his strength drain, and slumped onto his ankles.

"Silly bastard was always running in the road. Never really did understand cars. A country cat, see." said Oswald, with a gentle shake of his head. Then, looking at Clint, "I'd better tell Mum."

He disappeared into the hallway to break the news, as Clint took in the terrible state of his teacher.

"Sir - what happened? Do you need an ambulance?"

Thompson looked at Clint then, his kind, bright, bruised, intelligent face, and saw something of himself eighteen years past.

"Fuckers," he said in a hoarse voice, "Miserable fucking fuckers. Bitches and fuckers."

"Who, Sir?" asked Clint, concerned, and at the same time delighted, by this string of forbidden language from such an authority figure.

Thompson did not reply. Instead, he was staring into the distance, thinking of a hot afternoon like this one, but long past, in a beer garden he had once known, where he had once regaled a lively group of young colleagues with his best comedy ideas, who had found them all hilarious, witty and original... and how pleased he had been that one girl in particular had warmed to him, and how much love he had felt for her, and how he had never expressed it, and how he still felt that love, and how surprised he was that he had not

until that moment known it.

"Do you smoke, Eastwood?" Thompson asked, faintly. "I won't tell anyone if you do. Just need a smoke. I'll be fine. I'll be fine."

Thompson reached out and took Clint's hand, and Clint, understanding that his teacher was in another place, remained with him like this, until fifteen minutes later, the ambulance that Mrs. Rosbotham called arrived, and carried Thompson away to a place of healing.

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Frisbie was buried with full honours in the overgrown garden. Mrs. Rosbotham seemed to accept the cat's fate with the same phlegmatic attitude as her son, and Clint realised that this was a country thing. *In the country, life and death are much closer all the time*, he thought to himself. Later, in his life as a screenwriter, he was to use this knowledge in the comedy thriller that made him famous, *The Day Of The Dead Cat*.

Clint remained friends with Oswald, for the duration of their school life at least, who later joined the army and went on to design advanced prosthetics. Angela Spender coincidentally arrived to study medicine at the same London university where Clint studied drama, and one frosty autumnal night, they were finally able to combine his boyish longing and fabulous ability to talk dirty with her fine, relaxed physicality and enjoyment of Anglo-Saxon terminology, thus beginning a long love affair of great passion and sexual intensity.

Colin Thompson recovered slowly from his injuries - a collapsed lung, two broken ribs, a broken collar bone, and damaged vertebrae. The boys closed ranks and denied wrong-doing on anyone's part, and because of this, he managed to wangle a large industrial injury compensation payment and left teaching to travel. In India, he lived in an ashram, and learned Raj Yoga from his guru, whom he came to love and worship mindfully.

Returning to England three years later, he ritually burned his book, sold his flat, and took a job in a quiet Yorkshire town running an "alternative" bookshop. Happy in this niche, he started a comedy night in a local pub, taught yoga, smoked *St Bruno* in a pipe, and imported and quietly sold good quality hashish to anyone who wanted to get seriously stoned.





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dean Whitbread is a writer, producer, composer, and award-winning podcaster.

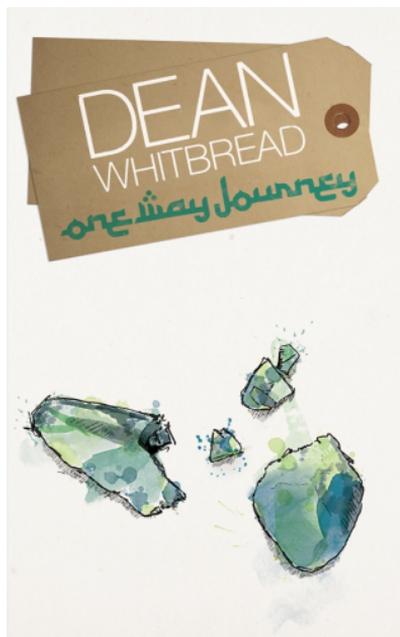
From humble beginnings at the birth of the web, having been the first to climb many peaks across the vast and sometimes treacherous internet mountain range, he now makes internet and mobile media for creative luminaries, makes music, teaches people how to do what he does, and writes half a dozen blogs.

Dean is 47 years old, and lives and works in London, UK.



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