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Snodgrass

a novelette by Ian R MacLeod

Foreword

Which is more fascinating, success or failure? You can supply your own answer, but I think we all have a voyeuristic horror about lives gone wrong, not least us writers, who probably lie down with failure as our bedfellows and dream-mates at least as often as do double glazing salesmen - and rock stars.

Which is where the idea for 'Snodgrass' probably came from. I've always been fascinated by those characters who leave bands after some row in the back of the Transit just before the band becomes famous. And why not John Lennon? Why not, indeed. Like most great bands, the Beatles were always a hair's breadth away from imploding.

I've never been a big Lennon fan, although only an idiot would deny his great talent. In this story, however, he was cypher for all kinds of music and art and dreamy ambition, and for all kinds of failure. The music I was listening to as I wrote 'Snodgrass' was actually mostly Starless and Bible Black by King Crimson, another fine-but-imploding band, and the most eagle-eyed reader may even detect a few lost scraps of lyric. But if you're a rock star of any kind, or a even a double glazing salesman, I hope you find something relevant and entertaining in what follows.

Snodgrass

I've got me whole life worked out. Today, give up smoking. Tomorrow, quit drinking. The day after, give up smoking again.

It's morning. Light me cig. Pick the fluff off me feet. Drag the curtain

back, and the night's left everything in the same mess outside. Bin sacks by the kitchen door that Cal never gets around to taking out front. The garden jungleland gone brown with autumn. Houses this way and that, terraces queuing for something that'll never happen.

It's early. Daren't look at the clock. The stair carpet works greasegrit between me toes. Downstairs in the freezing kitchen, pull the cupboard where the handle's dropped off.

"Hey, Mother Hubbard," I shout up the stairs to Cal. "Why no fucking cornflakes?"

The lav flushes. Cal lumbers down in a grey nightie. "What's all this about cornflakes? Since when do you have breakfast, John?"

"Since John got a job."

"You? A job?"

"I wouldn't piss yer around about this, Cal."

"You owe me four weeks rent," she says. "Plus I don't know how much for bog roll and soap. Then there's the TV licence."

"Don't tell me yer buy a TV licence."

"I don't, but I'm the householder. It's me who'd get sent to gaol."

"Every Wednesday, I'll visit yer," I say, rummaging in the bread bin.

"What's this job anyway?"

"I told yer on Saturday when you and Kevin came back from the chinese. Must have been too pissed to notice." I hold up a stiff green slice of Mighty White. "Think this is edible?"

"Eat it and find out. And stop calling Steve Kevin. He's upstairs asleep right at this moment."

"Well there's a surprise. Rip Van and his tiny Winkle."

"I wish you wouldn't say things like that. You know what Steve's like if you give him an excuse."

"Yeah, but at least I don't have to sleep with him."

Cal sits down to watch me struggle through breakfast. Before Kevin, it was another Kevin, and a million other Kevins before that, all with grazed knuckles from the way they walk. Cal says she needs the protection even if it means the odd bruise.

I paste freckled marge over ye Mighty White. It tastes just like the doormat, and I should know.

"Why don't yer tell our Kev to stuff it?" I say.

She smiles and leans forward.

"Snuggle up to Doctor Winston here," I wheedle.

"You'd be too old to look after me with the clients, John," she says, as though I'm being serious. Which I am.

"For what I'd charge to let them prod yer, Cal, yer wouldn't have any clients. Onassis couldn't afford yer."

"Onassis is dead, unless you mean the woman." She stands up, turning away, shaking the knots from her hair. She stares out of the window over the mess in the sink. Cal hates to talk about her work. "It's past eight, John," she says without looking at any clock. It's a knack she has. "Hadn't you better get ready for this job?"

Yeah, ye job. The people at the Jobbie are always on the look out for something fresh for Doctor Winston. They think of him as a challenge. Miss Nikki was behind ye spit-splattered perspex last week. She's an old hand -- been there for at least three months.

"Name's Doctor Winston O'Boogie," I drooled, doing me hunchback when I reached the front of ye queue.

"We've got something for you, Mister Lennon," she says. They always call yer Mister or Sir here, just like the fucking police. "How would you like to work in a Government Department?"

"Well, wow," I say, letting the hunchback slip. "You mean like a spy?"

That makes her smile. I hate it when they don't smile.

She passes me ye chit. Name, age, address. Skills, qualifications -- none. That bit always kills me. Stapled to it we have details of something clerical.

"It's a new scheme, Mr Lennon," Nikki says. "The Government is committed to helping the long-term unemployed. You can start Monday."

So here's Doctor Winston O'Boogie at the bus stop in the weird morning light. I've got on me best jacket, socks that match, even remembered me glasses so I can see what's happening. Cars are crawling. Men in suits are tapping fingers on the steering wheel as they groove to Katie Boyle. None of them live around here -- they're all from Solihull -- and this is just a place to complain about the traffic. And Monday's a drag cos daughter Celia has to back the Mini off the drive and be a darling and shift Mummy's Citroen too so yer poor hard working Dad can get to the Sierra.

The bus into town lumbers up. The driver looks at me like I'm a freak when I don't know ye exact fare. Up on the top deck where there's No standing, No spitting, No ball games, I get me a window seat and light me a ciggy. I love it up here, looking down on the world, into people's bedroom windows. Always have. Me and me mate Pete used to drive the bus from the top front seat all the way from Menlove Avenue to Quarry Bank School. I remember the rows of semis, trees that used to brush like sea on shingle over the roof of the bus. Everything in Speke was Snodgrass of course, what with valve radios on the sideboard and the Daily Excess, but Snodgrass was different in them days. It was like watching a play, waiting for someone to forget their lines. Mimi used to tell me that anyone who said they were middle class probably wasn't. You knew just by checking whether they had one of them blocks that look like Kendal Mint Cake hooked around the rim of the loo. It was all tea and biscuits then, and Mind dear, your slip's showing. You knew where you were, what you were fighting.

The bus crawls. We're up in the clouds here, the fumes on the pavement

like dry ice at a big concert. Oh, yeah. I mean, Doctor Winston may be nifty fifty with his whole death to look forward to but he knows what he's saying. Cal sometimes works at the NEC when she gets too proud to do the real business. Hands out leaflets and wiggles her ass. She got me a ticket last year to see Simply Red and we went together and she put on her best dress that looked just great and didn't show too much and I was proud to be with her, even if I did feel like her Dad. Of course, the music was warmed-over shit. It always is. I hate the way that red-haired guy sings. She tried to get me to see Cliff too, but Doctor Winston has his pride.

Everywhere is empty round here, knocked down and boarded up, postered over. There's a group called SideKick playing at Digbeth. And waddayouknow, the Beatles are playing this very evening at the NEC. The Greatest Hits Tour, it says here on ye corrugated fence. I mean, Fab Gear Man. Give It Bloody Foive. Macca and Stu and George and Ringo, and obviously the solo careers are up the kazoo again. Like, wow.

The bus dumps me in the middle of Brum. The office is just off Cherry Street. I stagger meself by finding it right away, me letter from the Jobbie in me hot little hand. I show it to a geezer in uniform, and he sends me up to the fifth floor. The whole place is new. It smells of formaldehyde -- that stuff we used to pickle the spiders in at school. Me share the lift with ye office bimbo. Oh, after, *you*.

Doctor Winston does his iceberg cruise through the openplan. So this is what Monday morning really looks like.

Into an office at the far end. Smells of coffee. Snodgrass has got a filter machine bubbling away. A teapot ready for the afternoon.

"Mister Lennon."

We shake hands across the desk. "Mister Snodgrass."

Snodgrass cracks a smile. "There must have been some mistake down in General Admin. My name's Fenn. But everyone calls me Allen."

"Oh yeah. And why's that?" A voice inside that sounds like Mimi says *Stop this behaviour John*. She's right, of course. Doctor Winston needs the job, the money. Snodgrass tells me to sit down. I fumble for a ciggy and try to loosen up.

"No smoking please, Mister...er, *John*."

Oh, great.

"You're a lot, um, older than most of the casual workers we get."

"Well this is what being on the Giro does for yer. I'm nineteen really."

Snodgrass looks down at his file. "Born 1940." He looks up again. "And is that a Liverpool accent I detect?"

I look around me. "Where?"

Snodgrass has got a crazy grin on his face. I think the bastard likes me. "So you're John Lennon, from Liverpool. I thought the name rang a faint bell." He leans forward. "I am right, aren't I?"

Oh fucking Jesus. A faint bell. This happens about once every six months. Why *now*? "Oh yeah," I say. "I used to play the squeezebox for Gerry and the Pacemakers. Just session work. And it was a big thrill to work with Shirley Bassey, I can tell yer. She's the King as far as I'm concerned. Got bigger balls than Elvis."

"You were the guy who left the Beatles."

"That was Pete Best, Mister Snodgrass."

"You *and* Pete Best. Pete Best was the one who was dumped for Ringo. You walked out on Paul McCartney and Stuart Sutcliffe. I collect records, you see. I've read all the books about Merseybeat. And my elder sister was a big fan of those old bands. The Fourmost, Billy J. Kramer, Cilla, The Beatles. Of course, it was all before my time."

"Dinosaurs ruled the earth."

"You must have some stories to tell."

"Oh, yeah." I lean forward across the desk. "Did yer know that Paul McCartney was really a woman?"

"Well, John, I -- "

"It figures if yer think about it, Mister Snodgrass. I mean, have *you* ever seen his dick?"

"Just call me Allen, please, will you? Now, I'll show you your desk."

Snodgrass takes me out into the openplan. Introduces me to a pile of envelopes, a pile of letters. Well, Hi. Seems like Doctor Winston is supposed to put one into the other.

"What do I do when I've finished?" I ask.

"We'll find you some more."

All the faces in open plan are staring. A phone's ringing, but no one bothers to answer. "Yeah," I say, "I can see there's a big rush on."

On his way back to his office, Snodgrass takes a detour to have a word with a fat Doris in a floral print sitting over by the filing cabinets. He says something to her that includes the word Beatle. Soon, the whole office knows.

"I bet you could write a book," fat Doris says, standing over me, smelling of Pot Noodles. "Everyone's interested in those days now. Of course, the Who and the Stones were the ones for me. Brian Jones. Keith Moon, for some reason. All the ones who died. I was a real rebel. I went to Heathrow airport once, chewed my handbag to shreds."

"Did yer piss yerself too, Doris? That's what usually happened."

Fat Doris twitches a smile. "Never quite made it to the very top, the Beatles, did they? Still, that Paul McCartney wrote some lovely songs. Yesterday, you still hear that one in lifts don't you? And Stu was *so* good looking then. Must be a real tragedy in your life that you didn't stay. How does it feel, carrying that around with you, licking envelopes for a living?"

"Yer know what your trouble is don't yer, Doris?"

Seems she don't, so I tell her.

Winston's got no money for the bus home. His old joints ache -- never realised it was this bloody far to walk. The kids are playing in our road like it's a holiday, which it always is for most of them. A tennis ball hits me hard on the noddle. I pretend it don't hurt, then I growl at them to fuck off as they follow me down the street. Kevin's van's disappeared from outside the house. Musta gone out. Pity, shame.

Cal's wrapped up in a rug on the sofa, smoking a joint and watching Home And Away. She jumps up when she sees me in the hall like she thought I was dead already.

"Look, Cal," I say. "I really wanted this job, but yer wouldn't get Adolf Hitler to do what they asked, God rest his soul. There were all these little puppies in cages and I was supposed to push knitting needles down into their eyes. Jesus, it was -- "

"Just shaddup for one minute will you, John!"

"I'll get the rent somehow, Cal, I -- "

" -- Paul McCartney was here!"

"Who the hell's Paul McCartney?"

"Be serious for a minute, John. He was *here*. There was a car the size of a tank parked outside the house. You should have seen the curtains twitch."

Cal hands me the joint. I take a pull, but I really need something stronger. And I still don't believe what she's saying. "And why the fuck should Macca come here?"

"To see *you*, John. He said he'd used a private detective to trace you here. Somehow got the address through your wife Cynthia. I didn't even know you were *married*, John. And a kid named Julian who's nearly thirty. He's married too, he's -- "

" -- What else did that bastard tell yer?"

"Look, we just talked. He was very charming."

Charming. That figures. *Now* I'm beginning to believe.

"I thought you told me you used to be best mates."

"Too bloody right. Then he nicked me band. It was John Lennon and the Quarrymen. I should never have let the bastard join. Then Johnny and the Moondogs. Then Long John and the Silver Beatles. It was *my* name, *my* idea to shorten it to just The Beatles. They all said it was daft, but they went along with it because it was *my* fucking band."

"Look, nobody doubts that, John. But what's the point in being bitter? Paul just wanted to know how you were."

"Oh, it's *Paul* now is it? Did yer let him shag yer, did yer put out for free, ask him to autograph yer fanny?"

"Come on, John. Climb down off the bloody wall. It didn't happen, you're not rich and famous. It's like not winning the pools, happens to everyone you meet. After all, The Beatles were just another rock band. It's not like they were The Stones."

"Oh, no. The Stones weren't crap for a start. Bang bang Maxwell's Silver bloody Hammer. Give me Cliff any day."

"You never want to talk about it, do you? You just let it stay inside you, boiling up. Look, why will you never believe that people care? *I* care. Will you accept that for a start? Do you think I put up with you here for the sodding rent which incidentally I never get anyway? You're old enough to be my bloody father, John. So stop acting like a kid." Her face starts to go wet. I hate these kind of scenes. "You *could* be my father John. Seeing as I didn't have one, you'd do fine. Just believe in yourself for a change."

"At least yer had a bloody *mother*," I growl. But I can't keep the nasty up. Open me arms and she's trembling like a rabbit, smelling of salt and grass. All these years, all these *bloody* years. Why is it you can never leave anything behind?

Cal sniffs and steps back and pulls these bits of paper from her pocket. "He gave me these. Two tickets for tonight's show, and a pass for the do afterwards."

I look around at *chez nous*. The air smells of old stew that I can never remember eating. I mean, who the hell cooks *stew*? And Macca was here.

Did them feet in ancient whathaveyou.

Cal plonks the tickets on the telly and brews some tea. She's humming in the kitchen, it's her big day, a famous rock star has come on down. I wonder if I should tear ye tickets up now, but decide to leave it for later. Something to look forward to for a change. All these years, all these *bloody* years. There was a journalist caught up with Doctor Winston a while back. Oh Mister Lennon, I'm doing background. We'll pay yer of course, and perhaps we could have lunch? Which we did, and I can reveal exclusively for the first time that the Doctor got well and truly rat-arsed. And then the cheque came and the Doctor saw it all in black and white, serialised in the Sunday bloody Excess. A sad and bitter man, it said. So it's in the papers and I know it's true.

Cal clears a space for the mugs on the carpet and plonks them down. "I know you don't mean to go tonight," she says. "I'm not going to argue about it now."

She sits down on the sofa and lets me put an arm around her waist. We get warm and cosy. It's nice sometimes with Cal. You don't have to argue or explain.

"You know, John," she murmurs. "The secret of happiness is not trying."

"And you're the world expert? Happiness sure ain't living on the Giro in bloody Birmingham."

"Birmingham isn't the end of the world."

"No, but yer can see it from here."

Cal smiles. I love it when she smiles. She leans over and lights more blow from somewhere. She puts it to my lips. I breathe it in. The smoke. Tastes like harvest bonfires. We're snug as two bunnies. "Think of when you were happy," she whispers. "There must have been a time."

Oh, yeah. 1966, after I'd recorded the five singles that made up the entire creative output of The Nowhere Men and some git at the record company was given the job of saying, Well, John, we don't feel when can give yer act the attention it deserves. And let's be honest the Beatles link isn't really bankable any more is it? Walking out into the London traffic, it was just a huge load off me back. John, yer don't have to be rock star after all. No

more backs of vans. No more Watford Gap Sizzlers for breakfast. No more chord changes. No more launches and re-launches. No more telling the bloody bass player how to use his instrument. Of course, there was Cyn and little Julian back in Liverpool, but let's face it I was always a bastard when it came to family. I kidded meself they were better off without me.

But 1966. There *was* something then, the light had a sharp edge. Not just acid and grass although that was part of it. A girl with ribbons came up to me along Tottenham Court Road. Gave me a dogeared postcard of a white foreign beach, a blue sea. Told me she'd been there that very morning, just held it to her eyes in the dark. She kissed me cheek and she said she wanted to pass the blessing on. Well, the Doctor has never been much of a dreamer, but he could feel the surf of that beach through his toes as he dodged the traffic. He knew there were easier ways of getting there than closing yer eyes. So I took all me money and I bought me a ticket and I took a plane to Spain, la, la. Seemed like everyone was heading that way then, drifting in some warm current from the sun.

Lived on Formentera for sunbaked years I couldn't count. It was a sweet way of life, bumming this, bumming that, me and the Walrus walking hand in hand, counting the sand. Sheltering under a fig tree in the rain, I met this welsh girl who called herself Morwenna. We all had strange names then. She took me to a house made of driftwood and canvas washed up on the shore. She had bells between her breasts and they tinkled as we made love. When the clouds had cleared we bought fish fresh from the nets in the whitewashed harbour. Then we talked in firelight and the dolphins sang to the lobsters as the waves advanced. She told me under the stars that she knew other places, other worlds. There's another John at your shoulder, she said. He's so like you I can't understand what's different.

But Formentera was a long way from anything. It was so timeless we knew it couldn't last. The tourists, the government, the locals, the police -- every Snodgrass in the universe -- moved in. Turned out Morwenna's parents had money so it was all just fine and dandy for the cunt, leaving me one morning before the sun was up, taking a little boat to the airport on Ibiza, then all the way back to bloody Cardiff. The clouds greyed over the Med and the Doctor stayed on too long. Shot the wrong shit, scored the wrong deals. Somehow, I ended up in Paris, sleeping in a box and not speaking a bloody word of the lingo. Then somewhere else. The whole thing is a haze. Another time, I was sobbing on Mimi's doorstep in pebbledash Menlove Avenue and the dog next door was barking and

Mendips looked just the same. The porch where I used to play me guitar. Wallpaper and cooking smells inside. She gave me egg and chips and tea in thick white china, just like the old days when she used to go on about me drainpipes.

So I stayed on a while in Liverpool, slept in me old bed with me feet sticking out the bottom. Mimi had taken down all me Bridget Bardot posters but nothing else had changed. I could almost believe that me mate Paul was gonna come around on the wag from the Inny and we'd spend the afternoon with our guitars and pickle sandwiches, re-writing Buddy Holly and dreaming of the days to come. The songs never came out the way we meant and the gigs at the Casbah were a mess. But things were *possible*, then, yer know?

I roused meself from bed after a few weeks and Mimi nagged me down the Jobbie. Then I had to give up kidding meself that time had stood still. Did yer know all the docks have gone? I've never seen anything so empty. God knows what the people do with themselves when they're not getting pissed. I couldn't even find the fucking Cavern, or Eppy's old record shop where he used to sell that Sibelius crap until he chanced upon us rough lads.

When I got back to Mendips I suddenly saw how old Mimi had got. Mimi, I said, yer're a senior citizen. *I* should be looking after *you*. She just laughed that off, of course; Mimi was sweet and sour as ever. Wagged her finger at me and put something tasty on the stove. When Mimi's around, I'm still just a kid, can't help it. And she couldn't resist saying, I told you all this guitar stuff would get you nowhere, John. But at least she said it with a smile and hug. I guess I could have stayed there forever, but that's not the Doctor's way. Like Mimi says, he's got ants in his pants. Just like his poor dead Mum. So I started to worry that things were getting too cosy, that maybe it was time to dump everything and start again, again.

What finally happened was that I met this bloke one day on me way back from the Jobbie. The original Snodgrass, no less -- the one I used to sneer at during calligraphy in Art School. In them days I was James Dean and Elvis combined with me drainpipes and me duck's arse quiff. A one man revolution -- Cynthia the rest of the class were so hip they were trying to look like Kenny Ball and his Sodding Jazzmen. This kid Snodgrass couldn't even manage that, probably dug Frank Ifield. He had spots on his neck, a green sports jacket that looked like his Mum had knitted it. Christ knows what his real name was. Of course, Doctor Winston used to take the piss something rancid, specially when he'd sunk a few pints of black

velvet down at Ye Cracke. Anyway, twenty years on and the Doctor was watching ye seagulls on Paradise Street and waiting for the lights to change, when this sports car shaped like a dildo slides up and a window purrs down.

"Hi, John! Bet you don't remember me."

All I can smell is leather and aftershave. I squint and lean forward to see. The guy's got red-rimmed glasses on. A grin like a slab of marble.

"Yeah," I say, although I really don't know how I know. "You're the prat from college. The one with the spotty neck."

"I got into advertising," he said. "My own company now. You were in that band, weren't you John? Left just before they made it. You always did talk big."

"Fuck off Snodgrass," I tell him, and head across the road. Nearly walk straight into a bus.

Somehow, it's the last straw. I saunter down to Lime Street, get me a platform ticket and take the first Intercity that comes in, la, la. They throw me off at Brum, which I swear to Jesus God is the only reason why I'm here. Oh, yeah. I let Mimi know what had happened after a few weeks when me conscience got too heavy. She must have told Cyn. Maybe they send each other Crimble cards.

Damn.

Cal's gone.

Cold. The sofa. How can anyone *sleep* on this thing? Hurts me old bones just to sit on it. The sun is fading at the window. Must be late afternoon. No sign of Cal. Probably has to do the biz with some arab our Kev's found for her. Now seems as good a time as any to sort out Macca's tickets, but when I look on top ye telly they've done a runner. The cunt's gone and hidden them, la, la.

Kevin's back. I can hear him farting and snoring upstairs in Cal's room. I

shift the dead begonia off ye sideboard and rummage in the cigar box behind. Juicy stuff, near on sixty quid. Cal hides her money somewhere different about once a fortnight, and she don't think the Doctor has worked out where she's put it this time. Me, I've known for ages, was just saving for ye rainy day. Which is now.

So yer thought yer could get Doctor Winston O'Boogie to go and see Stu and Paulie just by hiding the tickets did yer? The fucking NEC! Ah-ha. The Doctor's got other ideas. He pulls on ye jacket, his best and only shoes. Checks himself in the hall mirror. Puts on glasses. Looks like Age Concern. Takes them off again. Heads out. Pulls the door quiet in case Kev should stir. The air outside is grainy, smells of diesel. The sky is pink and all the street lights that work are coming on. The kids are still playing, busy breaking the aerial off a car. They're too absorbed to look up at ye passing Doctor, which is somehow worse than being taunted. I recognise the cracks in ye pavement. This one looks like a moon buggy. This one looks like me Mum's face after the car hit her outside Mendips. Not that I saw, but still, yer dream, don't yer? You still dream. And maybe things were getting a bit too cosy here with Cal anyway, starting to feel sorry for her instead of meself. Too cosy. And the Doctor's not sure if he's ever coming back.

I walk ye streets. Sixty quid, so which pub's it gonna be? But it turns out the boozers are still all shut anyway. It don't feel early, but it is -- children's hour on the telly, just the time of year for smoke and darkness.

End up on the hill on top of the High Street. See the rooftops from here, cars crawling, all them paper warriors on the way home, Tracy doing lipstick on the bus, dreaming of her boyfriend's busy hands and the night to come. Whole of Birmingham's pouring with light. A few more right turns in the Sierra to where the avenues drip sweet evening and Snodgrass says I'm home darling. Deep in the sea arms of love and bolognese for tea. Streets of Solihull and Sutton Coldfield where the kids know how to work a computer instead of just nick one, wear ye uniform at school, places where the grass is velvet and there are magic fountains amid the fairy trees.

The buses drift by on sails on exhaust and the sky is the colour of Ribena. Soon the stars will come. I can feel the whole night pouring in, humming words I can never quite find. Jesus, does *everyone* feel this way? Does Snodgrass carry this around when he's watching Tracy's legs, on holy Sunday before the Big Match polishing the GL badge on his fucking Sierra? Does he dream of the dark tide, seaweed combers of the ocean

parting like the lips he never touched?

Me, I'm Snodgrass, Kevin, Tracy, fat Doris in her print dress. I'm every bit part player in the whole bloody horrorshow. Everyone except John Lennon. Oh Jesus Mary Joseph and Winston, I dreamed I could circle the world with me arms, take the crowd with me guitar, stomp the beat on dirty floors so it would never end, whisper the dream for every kid under the starch sheets of radio nights. Show them how to shine.

Christ, I need a drink. Find me way easily, growl at dogs and passers by, but Dave the barman's a mate. Everything's deep red in here and tastes of old booze and cigs and the dodgy Gents, just like swimming though me own blood. Dave is wiping the counter with a filthy rag and it's Getting pissed tonight are we John? Yer bet, wac. Notice two rastas in the corner. Give em the old comic Livipud accent. Ken Dodd and his Diddymen. Makes em smile. I hate it when they don't smile. Ansells and a chaser. Even got change for the jukebox. Not a Beatles song in sight. No Yesterday, no C Moon, no Mull of Kinbloodytyre. Hey, me shout at ye rastas, Now Bob Marley, he was the biz, reet? At least he had the sense to die. Like Jimi, Jim, Janis, all the good ones who kept the anger and the dream. The Rastas say something unintelligible back. Rock and roll, lets. The rastas and Winston, we're on the same wavelength. Buy em a drink. Clap their backs. They're exchanging grins like they think I don't notice. Man, will you look at this sad old git? But he's buying. Yeah I'm buying thanks to Cal. By the way lads, these Rothmans taste like shit, now surely you guys must have something a little stronger?

The evening starts to fill out. I can see everything happening even before it does. Maybe the Doctor will have a little puke round about eight to make room for a greasy chippy. Oh, yeah, and plenty of time for more booze and then maybe a bit of bother later. Rock and roll. The rastas have got their mates with them now and they're saying Hey man, how much money you got there? I wave it in their faces. Wipe yer arse on this, Sambo. Hey, Dave, yer serving or what? Drinky here, drinky there. The good Doctor give drinky everywhere.

Jukebox is pounding. Arms in arms, I'm singing words I don't know. Dave he tell me, Take it easy now, John. And I tell him exactly what to stuff, and precisely where. Oh, yeah. Need to sit down. There's an arm on me shoulder. I push it off. The arm comes again. The Doctor's ready to lash out, so maybe the bother is coming earlier than expected. Well, that's just fine and me turn to face ye foe.

It's Cal.

"John, you just can't hold your booze any longer."

She's leading me out ye door. I wave me Rastas an ocean wave. The bar waves back.

The night air hits me like a truncheon. "How the fuck did yer find me?"

"Not very difficult. How many pubs are there around here?"

"I've never counted." No, seriously. "Just dump me here Cal. Don't give me another chance to piss yer around. Look." I fumble me pockets. Twenty pee. Turns out I'm skint again. "I nicked all yer money. Behind the begonia."

"On the sideboard? That's not mine, it's Kevin's. After last time do you think I'm stupid enough to leave money around where you could find it?"

"Ah-ha!" I point at her in triumph. "You called him Kevin."

"Just get in the bloody car."

I get in the bloody car. Some geezer in the front says Okay guv, and off we zoom. It's a big car. Smells like a new camera. I do me royal wave past Kwicksave. I tell the driver, Hey me man, just step on it and follow that car.

"Plenty of time, Sir," he tells me. He looks like a chauffeur. He's wearing a bloody cap.

Time for what?

And Jesus, we're heading to Solihull. I've got me glasses on somehow. Trees and a big dual carriageway, the sort you never see from a bus.

The Doctor does the interior a favour. Says, Stop the car. Do a spastic sprint across ye lay by and yawn me guts out over the verge. The stars stop spinning. I wipe me face. The Sierras are swishing by. There's a road sign the size of the Liverpool Empire over me head. Says NEC, 2 miles. So *that's* it.

Rock and roll. NEC. I've been here and seen Simply Red on Cal's free tickets, all them pretty tunes with their balls lopped off at birth. Knew what to expect. The place is all car park, like a bloody airport but less fun. Cal says Hi to the staff at the big doors, twilight workers in Butlin's blazers. Got any jobs on here Cal? asks the pretty girl with the pretty programmes. It's Max Bygraves next week. Cal just smiles. The Doctor toys with a witty riposte about how she gets more dough lying with her legs open but decides not to. But Jesus, this is Snodgrass city. I've never seen so many casual suits.

I nick a programme from the pile when no one's looking. Got so much gloss on it, feels like a sheet of glass. The Greatest Hits Tour. Two photos of the Fab Foursome, then and now. George still looks like his Mum, and Ringo's Ringo. Stu is wasted, but he always was. And Macca is Cliff on steroids.

"Stop muttering, John," Cal says, and takes me arm.

We go into this aircraft hanger. Half an hour later, we've got to our seat. It's right at the bloody front of what I presume must be the stage. Looks more like Apollo Nine. Another small step backwards for mankind. Oh, yeah. I *know* what a stage should look like. Like the bloody Indra in Hamburg where we took turns between the striptease. A stage is a place where yer stand and fight against the booze and the boredom and the sodding silence. A place where yer make people listen. Like the Cavern too before all the Tracys got their lunchtime jollies by screaming over the music. Magic days where I could feel the power through me Rickenbacker. And that guitar cost me a fortune and where the bloody hell did it get to? Vanished with every other dream.

Lights go down. A smoothie in a pink suit runs up to a mike and says ladeeez and gennnlemen, Paul McCartney, Stuart Sutcliffe, George Harrison, Ringo Starr -- The Beatles! Hey, rock and roll. Everyone cheers as they run on stage. Seems like there's about ten of them nowadays, not counting the background chicks. They're all tiny up on that launch pad, but I manage to recognise Paul from the photies. He says Hello (pause) Birrrmingham just like he's Mick Hucknall and shakes his mop top that's still kinda cut the way Astrid did all them years back in Hamburg. Ringo's about half a mile back hidden behind the drums but that's okay cos there's

some session guy up there too. George is looking down at his guitar like he's Bert Weedon. And there's Stu almost as far back as Ringo, still having difficulty playing the bass after all these bloody years. Should have stuck with the painting, me lad, something yer were good at. And Jesus, I don't believe it, Paul shoots Stu an exasperated glance as they kick into to riff for Long Tall Sally and he comes in two bars late. Jesus, has *anything* changed.

Yeah, John Lennon's not up there. Would never have lasted this long with the Doctor anyway. I mean, thirty *years*. That's as bad as Status Quo, and at least they know how to rock, even if they've only learnt the one tune.

Days in me life. Number one in a series of one. Collect the fucking set. It's 1962. Eppy's sent us rough lads a telegram from down the Smoke. Great news boys. A contract. This is just when we're all starting to wonder, and Stu in particular is pining for Astrid back in Hamburg. But we're all giving it a go and the Doctor's even agreed to that stupid haircut that never quite caught on and to sacking Pete Best and getting Ringo in and the bloody suit with the bloody collar and the bloody fucking tie. So down to London it is. And then ta ran ta rah! A real single, a real recording studio! We meet this producer dude in a suit called Martin. He and Eppy get on like old buddies, upper crust and all that and me wonders out loud if he's a queer jew too, but Paul says Can it John we can't afford to blow this.

So we gets in ye studio which is like a rabbit hutch. Do a roll Ringo, Martin says through the mike. So Ringo gets down on the mat and turns over. We all piss ourselves over that and all the time there's Mister Producer looking schoolmasterish. Me, I say, Hey, did yer really produce the Goons, Meester Martin. I got the Ying Tong Song note perfect. They all think I'm kidding. Let's get on with it, John, Eppy says, and oils a grin through the glass, giving me the doe eyes. And don't yer believe it, John knows exactly what he wants. Oh, yeah. Like, did Colonel Parker fancy Elvis? Wow. So this is rock and roll.

Me and Paul, we got it all worked out. Hit the charts with Love Me Do, by Lennon and McCartney, the credits on the record label just the way we agreed years back in the front parlour of his Dad's house even though we've always done our own stuff separately. It's Macca's song, but we're democratic, right? And what really makes it is me harmonica riff. So that's what we play and we're all nervous as shit but even Stu manages to get the bass part right just the way Paul's shown him.

Silence. The amps are humming. Okay, says Mister Martin, putting on a voice, That was just great lads. An interesting song. *Interesting?* Never one to beat about the proverbial, I say, yer mean it was shit, right? Just cos we wrote it ourselves and don't live down Tin Pan bloody Alley. But he says, I think we're looking at a B side for that one lads. Now, listen to this.

Oh, yeah. We listen. Martin plays us this tape of a demo of some ditty called How Do You Do It. Definite Top Ten material for somebody, he says significantly. Gerry and the Pacemakers are already interested but I'll give you first refusal. And Eppy nods beside him through the glass. It's like watching Sooty and bloody Sweep in there. So Ringo smashes a cymbal and Stu tries to tune his bass and George goes over to help and I look at Paul and Paul looks at me.

"It's a decent tune, John," Paul says.

"You're kidding. It's a heap of shit."

Eppy tuts through the glass. Now *John*.

And so it goes. Me, I grab me Rickenbacker and walk out the fucking studio. There's a boozier round the corner. London prices are a joke but I sink one pint and then another, waiting for someone to come and say, You're so right John. But Paul don't come. Eppy don't come either even though I thought it was me of all the lads that he was after. After the third pint, I'm fucking glad. The haircuts, the suits, and now playing tunes that belong in the bloody adverts. It's all gone too far.

And there it was. John Quits The Beatles in some local snotrag called Merseybeat the week after before I've had a chance to change me mind. And after that I've got me pride. When I saw Paul down Victoria Street a couple a months later yer could tell the single was doing well just by his bloody walk. Said Hi John, yer know it's not too late and God knows how Merseybeat got hold of the story. He said it as though he and Eppy hadn't jumped at the chance to dump me and make sure everybody knew. There was Macca putting on the charm the way he always did when he was in a tight situation. I told him to stuff it where the fucking sun don't shine. And that was that. I stomped off down ye street, had a cup of tea in Littlewoods. Walked out on Cynthia and the kid. Formed me own band. Did a few gigs. Bolloxed up me life good and proper.

And here we have the Beatles, still gigging, nearly a full house here at the

NEC, almost as big as Phil Collins or the Bee Gees. Paul does his old thumbs up routine between songs. Awwright. He's a real rock a roll dude, him and George play their own solos just like Dire Straights. The music drifts from the poppy older stuff to the druggy middle stuff back to the poppy later stuff. Things We Said Today. Good Day Sun Shine. Dizzy Miss Lizzy. Jet. They even do How Do You Do It. No sign of Love Me Do, of course. That never got recorded, although I'll bet they could do me harmonica riff on ye synthesizer as easy as shit. It all sounds smooth and tight and sweetly nostalgic, just the way it would on the Sony music centre back at home after Snodgrass has loosened his tie from a hard day watching Tracy wriggle her ass over the fax machine in Accounts. The pretty lights flash, the dry ice fumes, but the spaceship never quite takes off. Me, I shout for Maxwell's Silver Hammer, and in a sudden wave of silence, it seems like Paul actually hears. He squints down at the front row and grins for a moment like he understands the joke. Then the lights dim to purple and Paul sits down at ye piano, gives the seat a little tug just the way he used to when he was practising on his Dad's old upright in the parlour at home. Plays the opening chords of Let It Be. I look around me and several thousand flames are held up. It's a forest of candles, and Jesus it's a beautiful song. There's a lump in me throat, God help me. For a moment, it feels like everyone here is close to touching the dream.

The moment lasts for longer than it decently should. Right through No More Lonely Nights until Hey Judi peters out like something half-finished and the band kick into Lady Madonna, which has a thundering bass riff even though Stu is still picking up his Fender. And the fucking stage starts to revolve. Me, I've had enough.

Cal looks at me as I stand up. She's bopping along like a Tracy. I mouth the word the word Bog and point to me crotch. She nods. Either she's given up worrying about the Doctor doing a runner or she don't care. Fact is, the booze has wrung me dry and I've got me a headache coming. I stumble me way up the aisles. The music pushes me along. He really *is* gonna do C Moon. Makes yer want to piss just hearing it.

The lav is deliciously quiet. White tiles and some poor geezer in grey mopping up the piss. The Doctor straddles the porcelain. It takes about a minute's concentration to get a decent flow. Maybe this is what getting old is all about. I wonder if superstars like Macca have the same problem, but I doubt it. Probably pay some geezer to go for them, and oh, Kevin, can yer manage a good dump for me while yer're there?

Once it starts, the flow keeps up for a long time. Gets boring. I flush down

ye stray hair, dismantle ye cigarette butt, look at the grouting on the tiles, stare around. The guy with the mop is leaning on it, watching me.

"Must be a real groove in here," I say.

"Oh, no," he laughs. "Don't get the wrong idea."

I give percy a shake and zip up. The last spurt still runs down me bloody leg. Bet that don't happen to Paul either.

The wrong idea? The guy's got the plump face of a thirty year old choirboy. Pity poor Eppy ain't still alive, he'd be in his fucking element.

"I think all queers should be shot," fat choirboy assures me.

"Well, seeing it from your perspective..." The Doctor starts to back away. This guy's out-weirding me without even trying.

"What's the concert like?"

The music comes around the corner as a grey echo, drowned in the smell of piss and disinfectant. "It's mostly shit, what do yer expect?"

"Yeah," he nods. His accent is funny. I think it's some bastard kind of Brummy until I suddenly realise he's American. "They sold out, didn't they?"

"The Beatles never sold in."

"Bloody hypocrites. All that money going to waste."

Some other guy comes in, stares at us as he wees. Gives his leg a shake, walks out again. Choirboy and I stand in stupid silence. It's one of them situations yer find yerself in. But anyone who thinks that The Beatles are crap can't be all bad.

"You used to be in the Beatles, didn't you?"

I stare at him. No one's recognised me just from me face in years. I've got me glasses on, me specially grey and wrinkled disguise.

"Oh, I've read all about the Beatles," he assures me, giving his mop a twirl.

I've half a mind to say, If yer're that interested give me the fucking mop and yer can have me seat, but there's something about him that I wouldn't trust next to Cal.

"Hey," he smiles. "Listen in there. Sounds like they're doing the encore."

Which of course is Yesterday, like Oh deary me, we left it out by accident from the main show and thought we would just pop it in here. Not a dry seat in the bloody house.

Choirboy's still grinning at me. I see he's got a paperback in the pocket of his overall. *Catcher In The Rye*. "They'll be a big rush in a minute," he says. "More mess for me to clean up. Even Jesus wouldn't like this job."

"Then why do yer do it? The pay can't be spectacular."

"Well, this is just casual work. I'll probably quit after tonight."

"Yeah, pal. I know all about casual work."

"But this is interesting, gets you into places. I like to be near to the stars. I need to see how bad they are." He cracks that grin a little wider. "Tell me," he says, "what's Paul really like?"

"How the fuck should I know? I haven't see the guy in nearly thirty years. But, there's...there's some do on afterwards...he's asked me and me bird to come along. Yer know, for old times I guess." *Jesus, John, who are yer trying to impress?*

"Oh," he says, "and where's that taking place? I sometimes look in, you know. The security's round here's a joke. Last week, I was *that* close to Madonna." He demonstrates the distance with his broom.

Cal's got the invites in her handybag, but I can picture them clear enough. I've got a great memory for crap. They're all scrolled like it's a wedding and there's a signed pass tacked on the back just to make it official. Admit two, The Excelsior, Meriden. Boogie on down, and I bet the Lord Mayor's coming. And tomorrow it's Reading. I mean, do these guys paarrty every night?

Choirboy grins. "It's here at the Metropole, right?"

"Oh, yeah, the Metropole." I saw the neon on the way in. "That's the place just outside? Saves the bastards having to walk too far." I scratch me head. "Well maybe I'll see yer there. And just let me know if yer have any trouble at all getting in, right?"

"Right on." He holds out his hand. I don't bother to shake it -- and it's not simply because this guy cleans bogs. I don't want him near me, and I somehow I don't want him near Paul or the others either. He's a fruitcase, and I feel briefly and absurdly pleased with meself that I've sent him off to ye wrong hotel.

I give him a wave and head on out ye bog. In the aircraft hanger, music's still playing. Let's all get up and dance to a song de da de da de dum de dum. Snodgrass and Tracy are trying to be enthusiastic so they can tell everyone how great it was in the office tomorrow. I wander down the aisles, wondering if it might be easier not to meet up with Cal. On reflection, this seems as good a place as any to duck out of her life. Do the cunt a favour. After all, she deserves it. And to be honest, I really don't fancy explaining to Kevin where all his money went. He's a big lad, is our Kev. Useful, like.

The music stops. The crowd claps like they're really not sure whether they want any more and Paul raises an unnecessary arm to still them.

"Hey, one more song then we'll let yer go," he says with probably unintentional irony. I doubt if they know what the fuck is going on up there in Mission Control.

He puts down his Gibson and a roadie hands him something silver. Stu's grinning like a skull. He even wanders within spitting distance of the front of the stage. A matchstick figure, I can see he looks the way Keith Richards would have done if he *really* hadn't taken care of himself. He nods to George. George picks up a twelve string.

"This one's for an old friend," Paul says.

The session musicians are looking at each other like What the fuck's going on? Could this really be an unrehearsed moment? Seems unlikely, but then Paul muffs the count in on a swift four/four beat. There's nervous laughter amongst the Fab Fearsome, silence in the auditorium. Then again. One.

Two. Three. And.

Macca puts the harmonica to his lips. Plays me riff. Love Me Do. Oh, yeah. I really can't believe it. The audience are looking a bit bemused, but probably reckon it's just something from the new LP that's stacked by the yard out in the foyer and no one's bothered to buy. The song's over quickly. Them kind of songs always were. Me, I'm crying.

The End. Finis, like they say in cartoon. Ye Beatles give a wave and duck off stage. I get swept back in the rush to get to ye doors. I hear snatches of, Doesn't he look *old*, They *never* knew how to rock, Absolutely *brilliant*, and *How* much did you pay the babysitter? I wipe the snot off on me sleeve and look around. Cal catches hold of me by the largely unpatronised tee shirt stall before I have a chance to see her coming.

"What did you think?"

"A load of shit," I say, hoping she won't notice I've been crying.

She smiles. "Is that all you can manage, John? That must mean you liked it."

Touche, Monsieur Pussycat. "Truth is, I could need a drink."

"Well, let's get down the Excelsior. You can meet your old mates and get as pissed as you like."

She glides me out towards the door. Me feet feel like they're on rollers. And there's me chauffeur pal with the boy scout uniform. People stare at us as he opens the door like we're George Michael. Pity he don't salute, but still, I'd look a right pillock trying to squirm me way away from a pretty woman and the back seat of a Jag.

The car pulls slowly through the crowds. I do me wave like I'm the Queen Mum although the old bint's probably too hip to be seen at a Beatles concert. Turns out there's a special exit for us VIPS. I mean, rock and roll. It's just a few minutes drive, me mate up front tells us.

Cal settles back. "This is the life."

"Call this life?"

"Might as well make the most of it, John."

"Oh, yeah. I bet you get taken in this kind of limo all the time. Blowjob in the back seat. It's what pays, right?" I bite me lip and look out the window. Jesus, I'm starting to cry again.

"Why do you say things like that John?"

"Because I'm a bastard. I mean, you of all people must know about bastards having to put up with Steve."

Cal laughed. "You called him Steve!"

I really must be going ta bits. "Yeah, well I must have puked up me wits over that lay by."

"Anyway," she touches me arm. "Call him whatever you like. I took your advice this evening. Told him where to stuff it."

I look carefully at her face. She obviously ain't kidding, but I can't see any bruises. "And what about the money I nicked?"

"Well, that's not a problem for me, is it? I simply told him the truth, that it was you." She smiled. "Come on, John. I'd almost believe you were frightened of him. He's just some bloke. He's got another girl he's after anyway, the other side of town and good luck to her."

"So it's just you and me is it, Cal. Cosy, like. Don't expect me to sort out yer customers for yer."

"I'm getting too old for that, John. It costs you more than they pay. Maybe I'll do more work at the NEC. Of course, you'll have to start paying your sodding rent."

I hear meself say, "I think there's a vacancy coming up in the NEC Gents. How about that for a funky job for Doctor Winston? At least you get to sweep the shit up there rather than having to stuff it into envelopes."

"What are you talking about, John?"

"Forget it. Maybe I'll explain in the morning. You've got influence there,

haven't you?"

"I'll help you get a job, if that's what you're trying to say."

I look outa ye window. The houses streaming past, yellow widows, where ye Snodgrasses who weren't at the concert are chomping pipe and slippers whilst the wife makes spaniel eyes. The kids tucked upstairs in pink and blue rooms that smell of Persil and Playdough. Me, I'm just the guy who used to be in a halfway-famous band before they were anybody. I got me no book club subscription, I got me no life so clean yer could eat yer bloody dinner off it. Of course, I still got me rebellion, oh yeah, I got me that, and all it amounts to is cadging cigs off Cal and lifting packets of Cheesy Wotsits from the bargain bin in Kwicksave when Doris and Tracy ain't looking. Oh, yeah, rebellion. The milkman shouts at me when I go near his float in case The Mad Old Git nicks another bottle.

I can remember when we used to stand up and face the crowd, do all them songs I've forgotten how to play. When Paul still knew how to rock. When Stu was half an artist, dreamy and scary at the same time. When George was just a neat kid behind a huge guitar, lying about his age. When Ringo was funny and the beat went on forever. Down the smoggily lit stairways and greasy tunnels, along burrows and byways where the cheesy reek of the bogs hit yer like a wall. Then the booze was free afterwards and the girls would gather round, press softly against yer arm as they smiled. Their boyfriends would mutter at the bar but you knew they were afraid of yer. Knew they could sense the power of the music that carried off the stage. Jesus, the girls were as sweet as the rain in those grey cities, the shining streets, the forest wharves, the dark doorways where there was laughter in the dripping brick-paved night. And sleeping afterwards, yer head spinning from the booze and the wakeups and the downers, taking turns on that stained mattress with the cinema below booming in yer head and the music still pouring through. Diving down into carousel dreams.

Oh, the beat went on alright. Used to think it would carry up into daylight and the real air, touch the eyes and ears of the pretty dreamers, even make Snodgrass stir a little in his slumbers, take the shine off the Sierra, make him look up at the angels in the sky once in a while, or even just down at the shit on the pavement.

"Well, here we are," Cal says.

Oh, yeah. Some hotel. Out in the pretty pretty. Trees and lights across a

fucking lake. The boy scout opens the door for me and Cal. Unsteady on me pins, I take a breath, then have me a good retching cough. The air out here reeks of roses or something, like one of them expensive bog fresheners that Cal sprays around when our Kev's had a dump.

"Hey." Cal holds out the crook of her arm. "Aren't you going to escort me in?"

"Let's wait here."

There are other cars pulling up, some old git dressed like he's the Duke of Wellington standing at the doors. Straight ahead to the Clarendon Suite, Sir, he smooths greyly to the passing suits. I suppose these must be record industry types. And then there's this bigger car than the rest starts to pull up. It just goes on and on, like one of them gags in Tom and Jerry. Everyone steps back like it's the Pope. Instead, turns out it's just The Beatles. They blink around in the darkness like mad owls, dressed in them ridiculous loose cotton suits that Clapton always looks such a prat in. Lawyers tremble around them like little fish. Paul pauses to give a motorcycle policeman his autograph, flashes the famous Macca grin. Some guy in a suit who looks like the hotel manager shakes hands with Stu. Rock and roll. I mean, this is what we were always fighting for. The Beatles don't register the good Doctor before they head inside, but maybe that's because he's taken three steps back into the toilet freshener darkness.

"What are we waiting for?" Cal asks as the rest of the rubbernecks drift in.

"This isn't easy, Cal."

"Who said anything about *easy*?"

I give the Duke of Wellington a salute as he holds ye door open.

"Straight ahead to the Clarendon Suite, Sir."

"Hey," I tell him, "I used to be Beatle John."

"Stop mucking about, John." Cal does her Kenneth Williams impression, then gets all serious. "This is important. Just forget about the past and let's concentrate on the rest of your life. All you have to say to Paul is Hello. He's a decent guy. And I'm sure that the rest of them haven't changed as much as you imagine."

Cal wheels me in. The hotel lobby looks like a hotel lobby. The Tracy at reception gives me a cutglass smile. Catch a glimpse of meself in the mirror and unbelievably I really don't look too bad. Must be slipping.

"Jesus, Cal. I need a smoke."

"Here." She rumbles in me pocket, produces Kevin's Rothmans. "I suppose you want a bloody light."

All the expensive fish are drifting by. Some bint in an evening dress so low at the back that you can see the crack of her arse puts her arm on this Snodgrass and gives him a peck on the cheek. That was *delightful*, darling, she purrs. She really does.

"I mean a *real* smoke Cal. Haven't you got some blow?" I make a lunge for her handbag.

"Bloody hell, John," she whispers, looking close to loosing her cool. She pushes something into my hand. "Have it outside, if you must. Share it with the bloody doorman."

"Thanks Cal." I give her a peck on the cheek and she looks at me oddly. "I'll never forget."

"Forget what?" she asks as I back towards the door. Then she begins to understand. But the Duke holds the door open for me and already I'm out in the forest night air.

The door swings back, then open again. The hotel lights fan out across the grass. I look back. There's some figure.

"Hey, *John!*"

It's a guy's voice, not Cal's after all. Sounds almost Liverpool.

"Hey, wait a minute! Can't we just talk?"

The voice rings in silence.

"John! It's me!"

Paul's walking into the darkness towards me. He's holding out his hand. I stumble against chrome. The big cars are all around. Then I'm kicking white stripes down the road. Turns to gravel underfoot and I can see blue sea, a white beach steaming after the warm rain, a place where a woman is waiting and the bells jingle between her breasts. Just close your eyes and you're there.

Me throat me legs me head hurts. But there's a gated side road here that leads off through trees and scuffing the dirt at the end of a field to some big houses that nod and sway with the sleepy night.

I risk a look behind. Everything is peaceful. There's no one around. Snodgrass is dreaming. Stars upon the rooftops, and the Sierra's in the drive. Trees and privet, lawns neat as velvet. Just some suburban road at the back of the hotel. People living their lives.

I catch me breath, and start to run again.

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