

Them *Feltwell* Boys

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Author's Note

While the larger towns and cities in this novel go by their own names, the village that features in its title has no connection with the real Feltwell in East Anglia (beyond the fact that the author once played football there).

Although every attempt has been made to present them realistically within the context of the novel's setting and characters, featured scenes of alcohol abuse, physical and sexual assault may be offensive or upsetting to some readers. The same applies to the occasional use of words or phrases now generally considered unacceptable, but in the past – and still in certain sectors of society – much less so.

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Chapter 1

I first met her at the TB clinic. That was what I used to say. I thought it sounded kind of romantic. Actually, it was just a room at the Whitefriars hospital. I can't remember what the tests were. X-rays I assume, with the nurse saying the radiation is nothing to worry about, then making sure she's in another room altogether when it hits your chest. Maybe they took blood, tested your lungs by having you blow into a machine, one that will take every last bit of puff from you and still be unimpressed.

I thought tuberculosis had died out a million years ago. Apparently not, since Uncle Jack and Aunt Margaret both caught it. My cousin Janet tested clear. I was never told whether it was hereditary, contagious, infectious or what. Although they only lived ten miles away, that was a different county, different schools, so I only saw Jan odd times at holidays, christenings or weddings. We had not yet discovered funerals.

The distance between the women of the family, the in-laws, was much more than ten miles. The brothers Peter and Jack would enjoy a pint together at those same family occasions. They obviously didn't care enough to make it a more regular thing, not enough to break the custom of our family where women ruled the social side. Still, we all had to be tested, despite not having been near the sufferers on any regular basis. We did not see them during their convalescence either, which as far as I know was local. Mountain sanatoria were evidently not, or no longer, an indispensable part of the recovery process, since our part of East Anglia was at or below sea level, nowhere for so much as a hill start in a driving test.

We were all clear, Mum, Dad and me. My aunt and uncle did make a full recovery. I never found out what Tina was doing in the clinic that day; perhaps having treatment for anaemia or anorexia, if her extreme pallor and skinniness were anything to go by. I probably wouldn't have remembered her at all except for the long blonde hair, almost white. If I'm honest I didn't remember her enough to make the connection. She was the one, at our second meeting, to

remind me of the first when, in our grammar and high school uniforms, we sat briefly together in a waiting room without exchanging a word.

Although I liked Uncle Jack and other male relatives well enough, my hero was Mum's brother Dan. His sisters always said he was spoilt as a child, hinting or sometimes saying outright that even now, in his early thirties, he had not left that childhood behind. Through his twenties he had a variety of jobs, and women, some of whom even I had to jib at calling Auntie. He had only married the once. I loved Aunt Jackie dearly, but that was not enough to keep her with us. 'She said after me she could never love another man,' I heard Dan say once with a kind of rueful bravado. It was only as I grew a little older I saw the double edge to this remark; later still when I could put it into the context – Jake it was who told me – of her living quietly with another woman who worked at the Metal Box.

By the summer I was approaching my third year at Washtown Grammar School, Dan – working as a lorry driver – had moved into a small flat on the Feltwell side of town. His relationship with his dad had taken a blow with every new job, woman, tattoo and drunken night out, basically with every adult year he failed to adopt the same settled pattern of life as Grandad Will.

Over Sunday dinner a week earlier, on the strict condition of no drinking with me in his car, Dan had pocketed Mum's permission to take me to Hunstanton. 'No problem, we'll wait till we see the sea before we crack the first can,' he had promised.

The Blacksmith's Arms did not have a sea view, nor did Dan's pint of lager come from a can. He put a top of lemonade on it, making sure I had noticed as we retreated to the garden. We were the first customers of the day.

'If your mum asks, mind, that dash takes all the strength out of the beer, makes it like a shandy.'

'Why couldn't I have a shandy then?'

'Steady Eddie, you can have a shandy later if you like, to impress your girlfriend.'

'What girlfriend?'

'Shame I didn't get a sandwich, could of toasted it off your face.' He leaned across the table to frame my cheeks with his hands, leaving the cigarette in his mouth. 'I don't know her name. Forgotten it tell you the truth, but you'll find out soon enough. We're off on a double date, mate. See I'm a poet and don't know it.'

If Uncle Dan did have a girlfriend lined up for me, she would be my first. I was past the stage of seeing no useful purpose at all to females of my own age, without yet having found a role for them in my life. It didn't help that the Grammar was boys only. Washtown High for girls was across the river. Our only sight of its pupils was on the buses to and from the different establishments. The convent school was over the road from our main gate, and there was a brief window of opportunity to mix there as classes ended each day. Like the back seats on the bus, this was open only to older and bolder boys than us. Even our Catholic James 'Jambo' Haslett was no use. He had been at the Convent in its primary section, to be turfed out with all the other boys at the very age you begin to see the benefits of mixed education. He had no contacts, or none he was admitting. I envied Jake – my best mate since our own primary in Feltwell – his mixed secondary modern. He was not yet in the front line. Still, he could get a view from the edges at breaks when sometimes a girl was separated from the herd to be mauled by a pack of boys.

Grandad Will kept a caravan on site at Hunstanton all year round, letting it to relative strangers (there was no advertising, so all came recommended by someone he knew) as well as relatives. He was shocked the first year Dad said we would be going somewhere different for our summer holiday, somewhere we had to pay for accommodation. This turned out to be another van – there were strict limits to Dad's sense of adventure – further down the Norfolk coast. We were now on our third year at Caister-on-Sea, smaller and quieter than 'Sunny Hunny', which suited Mum. Dad and I liked its proximity to Yarmouth; he for the variety shows with people he watched on telly all year, I for the much greater volume of arcades, amusements and fairground attractions it offered.

As we pulled into Searle's, I thought at first Dan must have some errand for his father. We went straight to the four-berther, in the back row before vegetation began sloping untidily upwards away from the sea. He knocked on the door rather than use one of our keys.

My first impression of the woman who answered was a fine pair of legs, visible to mid-thigh under some kind of beach-wrap thing as she stood two steps above us. She came down one of these to bring her face level with Dan's. She kissed him on the lips, I noted, but not at length. Easing him to one side she joined us at ground level, barefoot on the rubberised mat with its blurred 'Welcome'.

'Hello there, you must be Ray. Glad you could come with your uncle today, he said you might. I'm Julie.'

I shook the proffered hand, a ring on its third finger but none to match on the left. She was hardly taller than me, a pretty face without much make-up as far as I could tell, the shape of her head clearly defined by blonde hair cut shorter than mine (or Dan's – he was joking about getting a ponytail 'to finish off your grandad').

'Cat got your tongue?' Dan used a favourite phrase of Mum's. 'He's not normally shy, must be nervous about his date, like me.' Allowing her to re-enter the van first, he used one hand to give her backside a boost.

'No need to be, you haven't got a date yet, neither one of you. Tea or coffee? Or would you rather have a cold drink, Ray?'

Why was there nowadays so little space in caravans compared to when I was a kid? This one was roomy compared to the tourer Grandad also had, kept at home. Dad had been obscurely annoyed when he bought that, although it served well for our Caister holidays after that first independent one. There was more opportunity for Dan to grab Julie's waist as she ushered us by her at the small gas stove, into the slightly broader living area. 'This is Christine, my daughter. You've already met Dan, sweetheart. This young man is his nephew, Ray.'

I was instantly reassured that Dan had been joking with me. No way the child sitting in the window, a pile of newspapers spread all over the table in front of her, was girlfriend material. More likely I had been brought along to babysit her.

'Hello, Dan. Mum, how can I expect anyone else to call me Tina if you won't make the effort? There's so many Christines at school, I only wish you'd named me Christina at least in the first place if Tina was too much bother. Have you got a nickname, Ray?'

'No, there's not a lot you can do with mine.' I was not going into David Carlton who'd tried to make Roland Rat out of Roden, Ray in my early days at Grammar. I had smacked him in the face, his lip trembling as it fattened.

'Tina here' – the old smoothy hadn't remembered any variant of her name half an hour ago – 'is a lot cleverer than you, mate. This one does all right in his schoolwork.' High praise indeed from Dan, before putting me back in my place. 'Can't play football though. Tina's top of the class in high school.'

'I was in my first year, not this last one though.'

So she was in the same year as me! She had the grace to look embarrassed, sitting there in a green bikini top which had nothing whatsoever to fill it out.

‘She’s not always as clever as she likes to think.’ Julie was standing between me and the table. ‘Still needs her mum’s help with the *Telegraph* cryptic crosswords, don’t you? Perhaps Ray would like to give you a hand with it while I make the drinks.’

I would rather have read the football pages, but Dan had already snapped up the *News of the World* (had Julie bought it specially for him? If so, it revealed an unexpected depth to their relationship). Whatever he said, I had no fear of any girl being brighter than me. I sat down at an angle from her, making her turn the puzzle so I could see it.

I had no idea what I was doing. The clues made no sense to me. Half a dozen were already filled in. Soon realising my silence was due to ignorance of the conventions, not sulkiness or an attempt at superiority, she tried to help, and wasn’t too cocky about it.

“A pen’s rote badly – that’s common language!” “Badly” probably means it’s an anagram, for them I like to write the letters in a kind of circle then see what order fits. We’ve got an “E” already from “SMEE” – Mum did help me with that one, “Pirate’s ungrammatical introduction”. I was annoyed because I’ve read *Peter Pan* and seen the film and pantomime and everything like a thousand times. Are you listening, Mum? Any idea? Or Dan?’

My uncle grinned at me over the top of his paper. He was quick with figures, not so hot on words. ‘I told you, boy. She’s a terror. You wouldn’t be top of the class if she was in it.’

‘I’m not top anyway,’ I snapped. I didn’t mind doing well at school, it kept Mum and Dad happy. Still, I didn’t want to come across as a total swot, here or anywhere else.

I was not left to stew too long in the alphabet soup Tina was stirring with every appearance of enjoyment – *she* must be a real swot. I didn’t expect Dan to hang around drinking tea for long. Sure enough, he soon offered to take us all for lunch somewhere along the front. I kept quiet about Mum’s carefully packed sandwiches.

I stood outside with Dan while he smoked a cigarette, leaving Julie and Tina the caravan to get themselves ready. They emerged looking no different to my unpractised eye, except that they now wore hats: Julie’s one of those broad-brimmed straw things against the sun, Tina in a baseball cap worn back to front. It was a Yankees one, which was a point in her favour.

‘Do you like United as well, you know they’re linked with the Yankees, merchandising and all that? Apart from being the best, that is.’

'Excuse me? Oh, you mean the hat. No, I only wear it because I like the logo. My Dad took us to Yankee Stadium and bought it for me. Which United do you mean?'

'There's only one.' Even if she could do poncy crosswords, there were still important life lessons I could teach her. I didn't want to tread nearer on the matter of her dad. My uncle's arm around Julie as they shuffled along behind us suggested he was off the scene. Divorced was fine. Dead I didn't want to risk bringing into the conversation.

'I suppose you mean Manchester United.' She followed my nod at the ball I was dribbling along the prom, playing it off the wall now and again. The name and crest were right there on it. 'I don't think Dad likes them. He doesn't see football much now anyway because he lives in the States.'

'What is he, a Yank?'

'No, he's English. We were living in America but Mum had to come home to have me, something about being born in Yorkshire, God's own country he always calls it.'

'You might have a chance of playing for the county the way they're going.' I had already consigned Mr Whatsisface to the Elland Road terraces, where he was welcome to stay.

'I doubt it, I'm not very sporty.'

'Not a problem.' I picked up my ball, looking back at Dan for confirmation that we would be going up the stone steps to the Saracen's Head, next to the Kit Kat club. I could not think of Tina as anything but much younger than me, which meant I could talk to her normally. I was not beyond a bit of showing off all the same, wanting to impress her by my familiarity with Hunstanton. I somehow assumed it wasn't her normal sort of holiday place.

I got my shandy at the Saracen's, even if Dan did cut my order back from pint to half. I was grateful he put it in a glass, since I saw the barman give him one of those cans, pop tasting like it, not the proper thing with real beer. Julie had half a lager and lime, Tina a coke she drank from the bottle, through a straw.

I had no expectations of getting Dan down to the beach for a kick about. He picked up on my intentions the third time I tried to pass the ball through his chair legs.

'Julie, is it all right if Raymondinho here takes Tina down to the beach for a paddle? I think he's worried about missing the Punch and Judy show if we keep him here any longer.'

Looking at her daughter, she saw no objection if no bursting enthusiasm either. 'Come here and let me put some sunblock on first, you know how you burn,' she said.

'There you go, boy. Have this for a donkey ride or ice cream or something – and not just for yourself. No skinny-dipping. Look, me and Julie may not stay here all afternoon' – she remained expressionless at his enquiring glance – 'I'll tell you what, how about we meet right here again about half five? Is that OK?' I knew he wasn't asking me. 'If you like I can give him Dad's key to the van, so they can go back if it starts to rain or anything and we've gone for a walk.'

'Walking in the rain, you romantic devil? I'm going to have to bolt the caravan door every night if you're wandering around with a spare key. Does that work for you Chris – Tina? We can perhaps get some fish and chips for tea.'

It was walking down one of the stone ramps to the beach that she reminded me of our first meeting. If I was flattered at first that she remembered me from the TB clinic, I had to set her right when she said I'd looked proper nervous as they called my name.

By unspoken agreement we walked a hundred yards away from the Saracen frontage, where Dan was bringing another couple of drinks out to the balcony bar. It was my turn to be rebuked when we put our clothes together, removal of her denim shorts revealing the bottom half of the green bikini. I only asked where her bucket and spade was.

'I didn't bring them. Your uncle told me you'd sulk and start crying if I didn't play with your stupid football. Let's go in the sea before one of the big boys takes it off you.'

She was game enough, I'll say that. At first we pat-a-caked the ball to each other, standing waist-high in the water. I started heading it, and she had a proper go at that, not closing her eyes and letting it bounce off randomly, like her nut was a fifty-pee piece. Her hair was still very long, pulled back tight from her forehead and ears, gathered up somehow behind so it wasn't in the way.

I soon saw, as she dived to pursue the ball when I slammed it past her, that she was a much better swimmer than me. Had to be, since I couldn't swim at all. There were a good few people in the water. I was keeping half an eye out for anyone I might know from school, so I could put on an air if necessary of having less fun than I was.

Luckily Tina did not suggest a swim into deeper water. Perhaps she really wasn't sporty. As I had expected, she tired of the ball game sooner than I, suggesting we walk further along the front. Despite the heat of the day, she shivered briefly when we left the sea.

'Want to borrow my T-shirt?' I awkwardly thrust out the red singlet, Dennis the Menace standing proud on it in some material between plastic and Velcro, not altogether pleasant to the touch.

'No thanks. I like it though.'

'All you have to do is join the fan club in *The Beano*, then you can send away for one. You still have to pay for it, mind.'

We agreed not to bother with ice creams, to save our money for the amusement arcade. Again, she was a good sport. She stood her share of games, didn't ask me to do that stupid one where you put your feet on coloured pads and jig about to music, wasn't quite as hopeless at air hockey as I'd expected. I didn't beat her by that many.

Outside the big, free-standing entertainment complex, couples and families were picnicking on the green leading up from beach to town, many of them probably waiting for their homeward excursion buses. Cannily I kept us to the lower end as we passed, with the girl to my left so I could appear to be talking to her while scouting for flashes of flesh, always more exciting than the matter-of-fact display of bikinis on the beach.

'Do you think we've left them enough time for sex?'

I thought she was referring satirically to a couple of teenagers eating face ten yards away. When I realised she meant Dan and Julie, to my horror I blushed. 'You shouldn't talk about your mum like that,' I then made matters much worse by saying.

'Why not? She always says we should be able to talk about everything to each other. Not that I always want to, not about my stuff.'

Having no wish to hear about her 'stuff', whatever it might be, I felt some need to defend Uncle Dan against the imputation that he would rush Julie back to the van for sex as soon as we were out of sight; not so much to cast him in a better light, more to save us being billed as stock comedy nuisance kids. 'I wouldn't be surprised if they're still at the Saracen's, been there all afternoon. Else he might have taken her to the Con Club. I went there with him once, they've got a full-sized snooker table.'

She did not seem persuaded. 'I don't mind, you know. Your Uncle Dan's all right. Have you got a girlfriend?'

‘Not right now. Let’s go and look at the dirty postcards over there.’

Dan and Julie were still, or again, sitting at their Saracen’s table when it came into view. I saw her hastily stub out a cigarette when she caught sight of us, before I elbowed Tina. ‘See, told you they’d be there.’

She gave an irritating smile, one of those saying she would let it go this time, as long as I was clear she knew better.

Dan did not seem as if he’d been drinking all afternoon, which would have made him a bit slower on the uptake than normal, a bit quicker to get annoyed at the slightest thing. Julie appeared to have caught a bit of sun, greeting us brightly and asking what we had been up to. I dreaded this, giving Tina the opportunity to embarrass her mother with some arch variant on the same question, but she answered neutrally enough. Dan said little. I was pleased to see he felt no need to ingratiate himself with the daughter to please Julie, equally so that she did not go overboard with me, friendly enough but not babbling or intrusive like some adults.

‘You going to marry Julie then?’ Comfortably full of chicken and chips, I was watching Dan grow increasingly irritated at the slow pace of traffic heading back towards King’s Lynn.

‘Whoa, Silver. Not so fast. I’ll give you a tip, that’s a typical woman’s question. Do you want to sound like a girl as well as look like one?’

I knew he was right straight away. I could almost hear Mum asking him the same thing. Trying to put a tone of apology into it, I said, ‘She seems nice, anyway.’

‘Who you on about, the mare or the filly? You needn’t think I’ll be taking you along every time I see Julie so you can chat up the daughter.’

‘You joking me? I’m not interested in little kids, and that’s what she looks like.’

‘Aah, young love. Another couple of years she’ll be fighting ’em off, and you’ll be lucky if she gives you the time of day. Don’t come crying to me then, you can’t say I didn’t give you a starter for ten.’

‘She might have to talk to me if she’s my cousin,’ was the best I had. Dan ignored it. Neither of us had a clue that girl would give me some of the best moments of my life. And the worst.

Chapter One

'And this is the Alamo,' Ray announced, already claustrophobic between Jan, Denis, Kimberley and Sanjo in the windowless corridor of their bungalow, giving onto the living room, bedrooms and main bathroom. 'If things get too bad, this is where we'll come. There'll be no need to worry, even if Hurricane Martin doesn't sheer off from all the people on Culebra and Vieques banging pots and pans at him, like his sister Lois did last month. I know you've got the day off school, lucky devils, but don't get under Mum's feet. Try to help her with shopping and getting the house ready. And Kim, this is your special job. Make sure you've always got an eye on Sanjo, today is no time for him to go walkabouts.'

He didn't expect Kim's brother to fret about not having a special job, but mindful of Jan's constant nagging to treat them both the same invented one for him anyway. 'Den, you can help your mum secure the perimeter. We'll bring the ping-pong table in when I get home. Maybe we can have a little indoor championship, only one winner there.'

He turned to Jan. 'You OK, love?' Putting a hand on her upper arm, he wondered briefly when exactly he had stopped kissing her goodbye every morning. It would be too showy, melodramatic or whatever to do so today, he decided.

I'm fine. Be home as soon as you can. No going to Frankie's.'

'The very thought of it.'

I mean it, Ray. And don't forget to tell Eddie he's welcome to come round here.'

'Christ, the Alamo will be crowded enough as it is. Of course I'll ask him, don't worry. Martin will be his cherry-popper, can't have him facing up to it alone.'

'Edward William Jemson, aged twenty-six – twenty-six, lucky bastard – Modern Language graduate from Nottingham from his CV, which is all I've seen of him.' So Ray had first mentioned Eddie to his friend and colleague

Jaime Benitez almost a year earlier. They were waiting for their boss Ken Thompson at San Juan's Luis Muñoz Marín airport.

'Yeah, but you can trust Kenneth, can't you? He's been working for him a couple of years, right?'

'Perhaps the crafty old sod wants to unload him now, or put someone in to spy on me.' While both had worked under Thompson in the same office, as they now did remotely, Jaime was the more respectful of him. Fair enough, Ray thought. Jaime had been promoted to president of Sovereign Insurance's Puerto Rican operation when Ken repatriated from there to England after thirty years in points east and west. Ray's move from Hong Kong came at the same time, but his new role as Caribbean Coordination Officer could in no way be construed as a promotion. He had not been asked to run Hong Kong when Ken left *there*, only to support the incoming local. Similarly, Ken had given him some flannel about using his experience to support Jaime in his first number-one appointment. Ray assumed Jaime knew he had himself applied for the grander title of president. It didn't matter, they were mates.

Ken was carrying his own bag, a suitcase to fit overhead in any Business Class. He was easily visible, never stooping to conceal his six feet four, his bespectacled, bald head swivelling above the crowd to spot his reception committee. Ray felt a pang of sympathy for the kid trailing behind his boss, pushing a trolley with two massive suitcases, a bulging rucksack and a laptop bag. That collection must have taken a while to come off the carousel, which Ken would normally stride past before it even got into gear.

'Evening, James. Ray. Good to see you both. We'll do the introductions later. For some reason this young man needs enough clothes for a year before his sea freight arrives in a month. I need a gin and tonic. No, don't fetch the car round, we'll walk out to it.'

'Right, that's a lot better.' Ken ducked his massive head at the G and T in the small bar by the casino of the Condado Plaza. He smacked his fleshy lips together in ham appreciation, leaning forward slightly in his chair to survey his troops from under a thicket of eyebrow. He was always clean-shaven, the remains of his hair trimmed tightly and neatly around his ears. The monobrow maintained a vigorous life of its own, not even yet a matching white. It could only have survived at Ken's explicit command, since the crannies of his ears and

nose were carefully barbered. 'Here's to another hurricane season successfully negotiated.'

Ray tapped his own head; Jaime rapped the table in front of them at the customary challenge. 'Let's see the year-end figures put to bed first, Ken. You know there have been hurricanes on Christmas Day, even the official season doesn't end till November thirty.'

'Come on, James, don't listen to those wet farts in Florida. I say the same as you every time I put pen to paper back home, but we're not in London now. You know the old saying, and it's been good enough for me since I was setting up the company in Barbados with Willie – October, all over. Remind me to have a word with you about Barbados tomorrow, Ray.'

Jaime touched the table again, this time from underneath.

'What's the new boy like then?' Jan asked as she left him to fix his own vodka and coke on arrival home that evening.

'Boy is right. Still wet behind the ears. You might fancy him though, stocky, deep tan, even hairier chest than me. Jaime was saying he could almost be my younger brother in looks.'

'Why would I fancy him then?'

'Ha ha. You'll get a chance to meet him soon enough. I've invited him down to Cerromar with us one weekend.'

'I hope you do mean with *us*, because if you're going off to golf with Jaime and Tito you'd better make sure you take him with you. Unless I do fancy him.'

'Jan the man-eater. I don't know if he plays golf, but apart from that he seems all right. Could have been worse, Ken said the other choices were a woman and a poof.'

'I didn't think he was as prejudiced as you. How is Ken anyway... and Elizabeth, I should think she hardly sees him?'

'She's all right, except giving him a bit of a hard time about their son, you remember Ryan?'

'Yes, he was a lovely boy. What about him?'

'Mate of Eddie's apparently, so that one's got an inside track with the Big Man. Ken muttered something about drugs. Ryan's living the student lifestyle basically, except he left uni three years ago. Without a degree.'

‘Whatever Elizabeth says I bet Ken takes more responsibility than you ever do for our kids. I sometimes wonder if Denis is getting into drinking at his friends’, you know the Puerto Ricans treat beer as a soft drink.’

‘It is *Medalla Light*. You’ve got to expect it, he’s nearly seventeen now. It’s Kim you need to keep your eye on. You see the way these little girls go out, dressed in next to nothing.’

‘Denis isn’t sixteen yet. If you can’t set a good example at least don’t encourage him.’

‘Ken said he wanted to talk to me about Barbados tomorrow. How would you fancy a posting there?’

‘Barbados? Could be worse places I suppose. Like Hong Kong.’

These were choppy waters. While grateful for Ken’s intervention in the Far East, she blamed him both for allowing the situation to develop and then not punishing her husband severely enough. Ray decided to fight another day, but could not resist a parting shot before taking Sanjo out for his late-night walk. ‘Yeah, like Hong Kong, where our daughter was born, none of it’s been any good really, has it?’

‘You behaving yourself then, Ray?’

Ken’s abrupt way of beginning his review meetings was nothing new, though Ray was more used nowadays to the leisurely Caribbean pace of things, along with elaborate Spanish courtesies. You were often on the coffee and liqueurs before you learned what lunch was all about. ‘Well, I had a detention last week for not handing in the reinsurance returns on time, and Janet is always threatening to ground me, otherwise not too bad.’

‘Never mind ground you, I’m surprised she hasn’t decked you before now. Is she happy enough here?’

‘Yes, she doesn’t work for Sovereign, does she?’ The edge to his tone was to indicate that work was work and his private life his own. Ray was admittedly at a disadvantage there, in that he had left the boss no option but to intervene when he managed to tangle up the two in Hong Kong. Ken had gone above and beyond then, helped out as a person. It was no less than the truth when he added, ‘She would cook you a dinner though, says you’re always welcome during your visits if you want a change from eating well.’

‘Tell her thanks, I don’t have my old appetite. Since they gave me the Eastern Front to watch as well as this side of the pond I’m always on a plane, always with a gut-ache.’

‘You sure that’s not one too many G and Ts?’ For a moment Ray thought he had gone too far. The monobrow arched briefly chinwards before Ken laughed, showing a set of teeth to make American dentistry proud (a legacy of his own time in Puerto Rico). ‘Pot and kettle, my lad. I don’t want to know how much vodka you get through over here. Might be good training for a new posting, if you’ve been giving any thought to that.’

‘You know me, Ken. Go with the flow, take what’s offered as long as Jan will follow with the kids. I don’t believe in long-term planning. Have you been doing some thinking for me?’

‘Jesus Christ, a year ahead is hardly long term. You need to show a bit of initiative, can’t rely on Staffing to sort you out a new job every time – look how they left you there in Hong Kong, too long probably. Don’t want to make the same mistake here. It’s all opening up for us in eastern Europe. I want people I can count on there, but I might make an exception for you. Could be a move to make your career.’

‘Or scotch it.’ Ray did not remark that no sparrow fell on Ken’s patch without him taking the keenest interest. Perhaps he rather than Staffing was the one who had made Ray do extra time in Hong Kong. ‘Sending someone to Siberia isn’t normally a sign of special favour. Especially when I was waiting for you to offer me Barbados.’

‘Barbados? Oh yes, I mentioned it last night, didn’t I? I’m afraid you’re not going to be as lucky as I was, we haven’t had an expat in Bridgetown for years.’ He paused a moment, as if in fond remembrance of his own posting there. ‘You might have a bit of spare capacity as we’re going to switch the US Virgin Islands over from you to Jaime. It makes more sense with Puerto Rico, both US jurisdictions.’

‘I thought you were the one who made the switch the other way when they were setting my unit up? You know it represents nearly half my premium income?’

‘More like a third, don’t exaggerate. I was persuaded into the change, let’s leave it at that. You always bitch to me about Dumpy and Hairpiece anyway.’

Had Ray really shared his nicknames for their USVI agents Frank Bridges and Joe Makepiece (B & M Insurances) with Ken, knowing he never forgot anything. ‘I don’t say I enjoy working with them, but they’re my biggest

producers. So I'm being cut back, Jaime boosted and you've brought a new guy in underneath me. I mean, what's he going to do unless it's replace me?'

'I'm glad to see you've still got a tiny spark of interest in your career. You don't always give that impression. That's where Barbados comes in. I thought you might help me out, initially by becoming my formal alternate on the board there. That would raise your profile a bit with the people back home, they're always impressed by board memberships.'

'What, they don't know the Barbados AGM is always at the Kensington Oval?' Cricket was a well-documented passion of the Big Man.

'Don't get ahead of yourself, laddie. I said my alternate, and I didn't say you'd be standing in for me at *that* meeting.'

Ken was already back in England, without Jan having shown any interest in what else he might have had to say during his visit, when Ray got round to talking to her about eastern Europe as an alternative to the eastern Caribbean. In persuading her to a second Cuba libre once the kids were upstairs, he first had to promise he was not offering the drink in hope of sex. 'Please yourself. Only Ken said I should talk to you a bit about our future.'

'He's a marriage guidance counsellor as well now, is he? I've been telling you long enough we need one of them.'

'Not so's I'd noticed, Jan. Our future as a couple, I don't suppose Ken gives much of a shit about that. I'm talking about my career.'

'Why should he give a shit about that either? You're always saying he doesn't rate you, or doesn't like you.'

'I'm not saying he thinks I'm a superstar or anything, but it's like football managers, take some players all over with them, different clubs. They know their weaknesses sure, but how to get the best out of them too, make them play.'

'The transfer window was shut a hell of a long time in Hong Kong.'

'Don't keep on and on about fucking Hong Kong.' There was only so much Ray was prepared to take. 'Not only is it the other side of the world, it's in the past, for me at least. Let it go, can't you?'

'Oh, I'll never let that go.' She stared him down.

Ray went a few more rounds after hitting the canvas, though he would have been far from confident in raising his arms to claim the points victory at the final bell. Yes, she was happy enough in Puerto Rico, no she did not like

the sound of eastern Europe, all they did was drink over there and Ray hardly needed more company in that. Barbados sounded lovely, but after raising her hopes wasn't he dashing them again there? Would it be any more than a few jaunts for him each year? Didn't he travel enough already, leaving her with the kids? In the end, her first loyalty now was to them and the crucial last years of their education before university. Couldn't they go back to England?

'My fault I suppose, asking you for input,' Ray said. 'Lovely idea to go back to England, as long as you've got a job at least as good as mine here lined up for yourself. I'll be glad to be left with the kids then. And what about this little fellow?' He bent to stroke the ears of his treasured black pearl, always around his ankles. 'I know he'd fit in a handbag but he's probably rabid. You ready for your walk, Sanjo? You bet he is. Come on, boy.'

As the succession of iguanas were Den's pets, Sanjo belonged nominally to Kim. The reptiles never seemed to last long, though it was only the first one the boy had left tethered outside, baking to death while they were at the club one day. Sanjo, in contrast, looked to be with them for the long haul. One of the Commonwealth Association busybodies was active in the 'Save a Sato' campaign, *sato* being the local name for street dogs usually with spiky ears bigger than their heads, body smaller than a chihuahua, and often a permanent limp from a kick or car-clipping. Kim knew now to close her eyes on their way to Cerromar when her dad said so, to avoid seeing another lifeless bundle pitched onto the side of the road.

There was no question of taking Sanjo out except on his lead. If another dog should cross his limited field of vision, no matter its size or pedigree, their half-pint pit bull would strain to attack, yapping furiously with teeth bared. He would not stop the row even when Ray had yanked him into his arms, grinning and mouthing apologies – no point trying to speak over the dog, who would not be silenced – at the other animal's bemused owner. The precaution was not excessive, since he had seen Sanjo swinging from an Alsatian's lip, as well as clamped to a poodle's balls, before they all got wise to his tantrums.

It was particularly hard to manage the snarling *sato* when Ray also had a drink and mobile to juggle. He would never make a call until he was out of sight and earshot of their home. Jan was normally asleep on the settee within half an hour of getting the kids to bed, at weekends sometimes long before they had finished watching a family movie with carry-out KFC or pizza. Like Sanjo, however, she could be unpredictable when stirred, and he preferred not to risk her waking at an inopportune moment. Her Spanish was not great but

she knew enough to bridle at even a standard enough greeting like '*Hola amor, cómo estás?*' He preferred to spare her knowledge of such calls.

Cerromar, the junior of two Hyatt resorts on the northern coast, forty minutes to the west of San Juan, was raucous with children as well as the parrots in its tropical grounds. Its signature feature was a meandering flume over half a kilometre long debouching into a broader swimming area with slides and volleyball nets. Ray hardly used it nowadays, but the kids were anxious to show the so-called river pool to Eddie. The one exception to Den's resolute anti-athleticism was that, like the whole family except Ray, he was an excellent swimmer.

Ray left his colleague to the kids, his wife to Stephen King by the serious swimmers' salt-water pool, dipped his head in the sea for form's sake, then bellied up to one of the *cabañas* – thatched circular beachfront bars selling snacks and, more to Ray's point, cocktails and beer. His forty per cent member's discount brought the price of a can of Medalla down to the ridiculously expensive.

The Hawaiian-shirted waiter produced a frosted glass and two cans without Ray having to ask. He probably came out about even with Carlos financially, his generous cash tips matched by the free beers he would be slipped from time to time.

Ray always enjoyed drinking alone, at least until the alcohol infused him with sociability. He had reached that stage of benevolence when the kids brought Eddie up to his wicker-seated metal stool. 'Give Uncle Eddie a break now,' he said. 'Do you want a hot dog or something?'

Kim seemed well at ease by now with their guest. 'Daddy calls everyone our uncle or aunt, like all Nan's neighbours used to be to us. We call him Uncle Dad because he never tells us off hardly.'

'It's not because of that is it, Dad?' Denis was not to be left out. 'It's an Irish joke, isn't it?'

'To be sure, to be sure. And why are Irish jokes so simple?'

'So the English can understand them,' the kids raced to give Eddie the punchline.

'A beer, mate? Den, go and see if Mum wants a punch, tell her I'll be happy to provide it.'

'You go, Kim. Can I have a shandy, Dad?'

‘Not here, Lawman, you’d get me and Carlos both arrested.’ While the Puerto Rican attitude to drink in general, as well as niche areas like drink-driving or underage drinking, was much more relaxed than in continental USA, Cerromar adopted a stricter policy than most places on the island. He wished he could have bought the boy a beer, since the strawberry daiquiri he ordered instead, even virgin, cost a deal more. When Kim returned with an order for piña colada for Jan, emphatically not virgin, Den suddenly became helpful, offering to carry it over for her.

‘They’re great kids, Ray, you must be very proud of them.’

In conversations with Eddie, Ray had already during their short acquaintance often had the curious sensation of talking to a man older than himself, not one patently younger. He caught himself formulating something about trying only to love them, not put pressure on them by showing pride they would need to feed with achievements, when he realised the drink was making him sentimental. ‘They’re not bad, but be careful what you wish for. You look as if you know how to get on with them, don’t let ’em monopolise your time though, we didn’t bring you as a babysitter.’

‘I know, and thanks again for the invite. I come from quite a big family, like Jan says she does, so I’m used to them. Don’t necessarily want any of my own yet, mind.’

‘Don’t blame you, mate. Two or three years in the Caribbean, single man your age, you should enjoy it while you can.’

‘I’m not exactly single. We’re not married, but I’ve been with Joanne back in England for two years now.’

‘That won’t last long with you out here. Wait till you see some of the girls on the islands, let alone here in PR.’

‘You’re probably right,’ he answered a little stiffly. ‘We agreed we’d see how we feel at Christmas.’

‘You know I’m expecting you to hold the fort over the holidays.’ Without a deputy, Ray had never felt guilty about returning to England for Christmas, leaving Nellie and Carmen to report to Jaime in his absence. They had not once needed to disturb his break. With Eddie he was setting down a marker, making sure the boy knew who had first pick when it came to holiday dates.

‘I understand that. In any case we thought it would be neat for her to come and enjoy some sun in the middle of winter. What you were saying about you and Jan did make me think. It was Jo who wasn’t sure she wanted to give up her career.’

‘There you go then, that’s fine. Jan couldn’t give up work soon enough once she’d tricked and trapped me.’

‘What did she do?’

‘The usual, she got preg... oh, you mean what did she do for work. She worked in Sovereign, believe it or not. Could do a good job here like she did in the UK, except she’s never had the visas to work on our postings. Does a bit of volunteer stuff here, a library and the Commonwealth Association. We’ll have to get you signed up for that too, piss-ups round each other’s houses every month or so mainly.’

Ray was joking about the pregnancy, in the sense that she had only told him about it once he had already booked her plane ticket (whatever his mother might persist in believing). He didn’t mind at all. His longer-term life projection of being divorced with two kids by age thirty was still very doable at that point, the more so if you counted the son she already had. He liked to brag of his adventurous move within twelve months from being a bachelor living in South London to a married man with two children in Southeast Asia.

Jan not only took the wheel on their way home from Cerromar but refused to stop at Pepito’s to play pool, or allow Ray to accept Eddie’s invitation (admittedly half-hearted) for a final drink at his Howard Johnson hotel – during the next week he would be moving into a beachfront flat in Isla Verde. Pointedly Ray poured himself an NBA hand of vodka as soon as they got home, taking it with a tint of diet coke on his evening walk with Sanjo.

Tonight he was inclined to be talkative, over the phone outside and back home with his second sextuple. ‘What did you think of Uncle Eddie then, kids? Never mind that rubbish on telly, answer your Uncle Dad.’

‘He’s cool,’ Denis allowed.

‘He’s cute,’ Kim granted.

‘Hold up, darling, I don’t want to hear you calling anyone cute unless it’s a baby or a puppy. They say he looks a bit like me. Did you think so?’

‘No Daddy, you’re old.’

‘Jan, I wish you’d have a word with that Kimberley Maria. She gets cheekier every day. Don’t think I don’t know where she gets it from as well.’

‘If you want to help with the washing-up, get yourself a tea towel.’ Jan ungently repelled his advance.

‘Christ, I’m only trying to make conversation, you moan enough when I don’t.’

‘That’s right, because you only want to “make conversation” when you’re bored or got a few drinks down you.’

Ray sulked for a while, until the children were in bed. ‘Get off,’ Jan warned, opening her eyes briefly as he sat down by her outstretched feet on the sofa. She was still wearing the light summer dress from the club, legs bare.

She tolerated his hand massaging her ankles. When he began to inch up her calf, she said ‘Ray’ in no welcoming tone. He was ready for the lunge of her right foot at him when he moved a bit higher. ‘Leave me alone, you’re drunk.’

It was hardly worth arguing about her increasingly liberal definition of ‘drunk’ to include evenings he could remember the next day. ‘It’s me and thee then, lad.’ He tried her further by inviting Sanjo up to bed. The dog evidently decided she was not deeply enough asleep for him to risk a smacked arse, looking up only briefly from that arse and the leathery balls at which his head was often to be found.

Feeling sorry for himself and – why not admit it now? – a little affected by the vodka on top of beer, Ray did not have the energy even for porn. The days when he would use Sunday evenings to map out his coming week at work were as remote as those of Alfie and Annie Rose, him reading their adventures to the kids as they lay either side of him in bed. Weekly advance planning might have served him yet, but nothing too strategic as at the end of the month it was announced that the Sovereign Group had been taken over by SRG.