

TICKET OUT



MAX BLAGG

1

The soothing murmur of women's voices hummed gently above my head as I lay beneath the kitchen table, curled around my sister's long white feet, which smelled of talcum powder and soap, fresh from the bathtub. My mother was sitting with three of my sisters, Shirley, Olive and Judy, drinking tea and gossiping on a summer afternoon. Local news was traveling along the jungle telegraph: the china Mrs Cowrie had just received from an aunt who died, the sudden collapse of Mr Bescoby, the Maltbys' annoyingly immaculate front yard and, yes, Lorraine is pregnant, looks like. They scrutinized and picked apart the neighbors with exquisite glee. Teacups clinked, more strong black tea was poured. Digestive biscuits spread on a china plate.

It was safe under there, encircled by that stockade of legs, smooth and long, thick and slim, shaven and unshaven, covered from the knee upward by the hems of dresses and skirts. Beyond the hems lay mysteries, the dark corridors of a faerie garden. The stimulating fragrance of the nylon slips worn beneath their skirts, in turquoise and peach and pale blue. A slightly acrid smell, with a delicate underlay of perspiration that dominated the other exotic odors freely floating in the air of this Aladdin's cave. Shoes kicked off, feet flexed and moved on the carpet, scarlet nails winking like Christmas lights. Whose bright red toes were those? Shirley's, most likely. Attached to long legs of which she

was rightly proud. Mum's legs were more generous, traveling up to massive thighs, observed at close range whenever I fixed her garter onto the stocking top, stretching across that expanse of white flesh between corset and hose. I ran my hand across it, fascinated by its soft, moth-wing texture...

"Ey, yer ticklin' me, yer little devil. Don't do that!"

They spoke mostly in code, lives discussed in detail that I couldn't understand – Dez wouldn't marry her but he wanted "everything". How much was everything and why did he want it?

"Well, 'e's not gettin' that yet, is 'e?" Mum said, and they all laughed. Knowing, conspiratorial laughter.

"Anyway, Joe talked Lorraine into it, didn't 'e?"

"She's far too young ter be a mother."

"See, that's what 'appens wi' no supervision. If I ever caught you girls, there'd be the devil ter pay."

"Listen 'oo's talkin'! Twelve kids and we're not even Catholic!"

Someone giggled. Their voices were soothing as running water. I drifted in and out as Judy began talking about Rampton, the mental hospital where she was training to become a nurse. A Victorian castle outside the town that held many dangerous lunatics, axe murderers, Judy walking calmly among them in starched blue uniform.

"Oh dear, our Judy, I don't really want yer workin' there, it's too dangerous."

"Oh Mum, stop worryin'! They're perfectly fine most of the time. Summat just messed up in their 'eads. Or the full moon, that always gets 'em goin'. But most of 'em wouldn't 'urt anybody but themselves."

"It's lovely ter 'ave Jake back at 'ome," my mother's voice.

"Audrey were such a nice girl when they first got married. Why did she mess about wi' another bloke when she 'ad our Jake all to 'erself?"

"And he were a such a good 'usband."

There was a silence but no one disagreed.

"It were Audrey 'oo made 'im misbehave," Mum said. "E put food on the table, went down that pit every night. She's a bluddy witch, that woman is, the trouble she's made round 'ere."

Jake had arrived at our house late one night, walking through the back door, covered in blood, his face a mask of rage, his infant daughter in a laundry basket that he handed to my mother.

"Oh my God, there were blood all over 'im. Weren't yer frightened, Mam?"

"Aye, but then 'e told me 'e hit a donkey on the way over."

"But Mam, surely yer don't believe that? There are no donkeys anywhere between here and Worksop. And 'e 'ad the baby in that basket balanced on his gas tank. Besides, don't yer think it would 'ave fetched 'im off 'is motorbike if 'e'd run into a donkey?"

"Well, why else would 'e tell me summat like that?"

"Mam, yer know very well 'e 'ad a fight wi' Johnny Morris before 'e left," said Judy. "They say Jake 'alf-killed 'im – Mrs Docherty works at Kilton 'ospital, she saw 'em bring 'im in. The man could hardly walk. Audrey were 'oldin' 'im up."

"Yer see what I mean?" Mum said angrily. "What kind of woman would be seen wi' 'er fancy man in public like that?"

From my vantage point I could see through the French window onto the little garden behind the house. A small rockery surrounded a patch of grass where three dogs sprawled in the June sunlight: Candy, a small poodle, Laddie, a boxer, and Fritz,

my Jack Russell terrier, all temporarily benched from their energetic pursuit of the cats and Jake's ferrets. Elsewhere in the house were another sister and two of my five brothers. Five brothers and six sisters altogether. The family was so big I felt I scarcely knew some of my siblings, especially the older ones, John, Stephanie, Shirley and June, who had already left home and started families of their own by the time I was born.

"I 'ad a letter from June yesterday, says she's thinkin' of openin' an antique shop."

"Ooh, she'll be good at that."

"First thing she ought ter sell is that antique she's married to," said Mum, to general laughter.

As the women talked on, the summer weather abruptly changed. Lightning flashed over the housing estate. Thunder cracked above our heads. Mum was delighted.

"There's God movin' the furniture round," she said.

The noise was tremendous, the furniture huge, scraping across the sky. What kind of furniture did God have? Was it like ours, a battered table always spread with delicious food, a worn-out sofa with a beautiful old silk cover that had once been a bedspread, tasseled and embroidered with figures in a landscape, made of the same itchy silk as the frayed cushions of the dining-room chairs that tickled my bare legs? A gust blew the kitchen window shut with a bang. The dogs were getting up from the lawn and trotting back indoors. Fritz came sniffing around the table but Shirley shooed him away. It began to rain quite fiercely and thunder boomed directly overhead. China rattled, the dogs went in their cupboards. Mum jumped up and threw open the back door, then hurried down the hallway to the front door and opened that, too.

"If there's a fireball down the chimney it will run right out the 'ouse," she announced gleefully.

"Aye, I saw an 'ouse go up in flames once. Struck by lightnin', it was. An' Mrs Clannan's lad were 'it by a bolt crossin' Staniland's field. 'Is hair turned white on the spot. 'E was never right after that. Daft as a brush. It's already gone over, though, just count between the lightnin' and the thunderclap and that'll tell yer how far away the storm is."

I began counting after the next flash illuminated the darkened kitchen, but had only reached two when an enormous bang made all the girls scream. Rain poured down outside the open doors, everything smelled clean and fresh. Any wandering fireball would be able to enter and exit without destroying our home. The gas was lit under the kettle, time for another pot of tea. A nice cuppa could solve any problem. The thunder banged again and the house seemed to shake. Rain drummed on the tin roof of the little conservatory attached to the side wall, where Mum's plants grew in profusion. She had put half a dozen of them out while the storm was rising, to catch the rain. I watched the fireplace like a cat watching for a mouse, ready for that blazing meteor to come crashing down the chimney and go rolling out the door, scorching the curtains on its fiery way.

12

My brother Rodney, or Sir Rodney, as he insisted I address him, worked as a slaughterman's assistant on a local farm that had its own abattoir. I would sometimes visit him there to observe the awful carnage as an endless procession of livestock was rapidly dispatched, disemboweled, drawn and quartered. Sheep and cows went blandly to their doom, but pigs, possessed of a greater intelligence, did not go gently, protesting loudly all the way to the steel bolt that would stun them before their throats were cut.

The slaughterman, a moronic youth named Derek Crosby, was manhandling a large pig.

"Nah then, Maxie, yer want ter kill summat? 'Ere Rodney, gi' 'im that stun gun."

Rodney handed me the murderous instrument. The two youths then dragged the unwilling swine forward to where I stood. Derek held the pig by its ears as it squealed in fear.

"Press t'barrel agin its forread and pull t'trigger."

How had this happened? I didn't want to kill anything, certainly not something this big. The pig was thrashing and squealing and I held the heavy gun with both hands and fired. It jumped in my hands and the steel bolt protruded from the barrel, inches from the pig's head.

"Aw, yer useless fookin' tool. Reload that fooker, Rodney!"

Rodney reloaded and fired into the pig's head. As the

animal collapsed, Derek's wicked blade stroked its chin and blood spurted from the open wound in its throat. I jumped backward to avoid the crimson fountain. How much blood does one pig contain?

Enough to fill a bathtub, a pond even, the scarlet liquid poured out, oxidizing to a darker brown as it pooled on the floor. As Rodney rigged a chain and hoisted the animal into the air Derek was already walking back from the holding pen with a full-grown sheep under one meaty arm. He dropped it onto a steel cradle, brandishing a gutting knife in his thick fingers.

"These sheep are much easier ter 'andle. See?"

He was looking directly at me as he slid the skinny blade into the animal's neck. A fine spray of blood jetted out, although the sheep scarcely twitched as its life leaked away. It seemed to die very quietly beneath the slaughterman's brutal hands. Quickly affixing a steel chain to its hind leg, Derek pressed a button and it was jerked aloft to hang alongside the pig. He began to eviscerate the sheep's carcass, then paused.

"Look at that, they's a fookin' live one in theah!"

I gaped. A baby lamb looked out at a new world through a curtain of blood and steaming entrails. With a flick of the knife Derek severed its umbilical cord and tenderly lifted the tiny creature out into the air, his solicitude in shocking contrast to the mayhem he had just perpetrated on the animal's mother.

"Ere, tek that 'ome ter yer mam, she'll look after it."

He cleaned it off with a piece of filthy rag, handed it to me and turned back to his work.

Rodney was leading in another protesting pig as I wrapped the lamb in a burlap sack and carefully carried it from this charnel house. I walked the mile home with the lamb in my arms and showed it to my mum, who was washing dishes at the sink. She

immediately took it from me and set to work cleaning the tiny creature. The dogs gathered around, but she shooed them off. No orphan was ever turned away from our house. Apparently delighted to have another mouth to feed, Mum quickly took charge, swaddling and nursing the lamb, bottle-feeding it every four hours, even getting up in the middle of the night to minister to its needs.

The lamb grew rapidly, as lambs do, quickly mutating from toy-sized picture-postcard cuteness to the more ungainly dimensions of a juvenile sheep, far too large for the house, where it was also subject to the native hostility of the dogs. Tethered in the back garden, it quickly stripped clean large areas of vegetation.

"Tek that lamb down ter playin' field, Maxie," my mother commanded. "It's ruinin' me garden."

"I can't, Mam, the bluddy thing won't walk on a leash."

"Go on, I tell yer, let it get some fresh grass."

My first appearance with a lamb on a leash caused a small sensation among the kids lollygagging around the playing field, the footballers and the junior teddy boys hanging around the playground swings, even though many of them were aware of the zoo-like conditions in our household. I dragged the uncooperative lamb around the perimeter of the soccer field while boys my own age made vulgar remarks concerning the nature of our relationship, and offered me the use of their wellington boots. A few weeks later the lamb was almost a sheep. One day a van arrived, the lamb was loaded in, and off he went. I never learned his destination. Was it a green field down by Bolham Butts, or a return to the slaughterhouse from whence he had been so recently delivered? My mother, if she knew the sheep's fate, never revealed it, but neither did she ever serve us mutton or lamb.

18

Once again I was up in the bedroom with a magnifying glass, looking for the beginnings of manhood. Everyone was sprouting a solid tuft now; we were fourteen years old, it was time for the wrinkled little ball bag to fill out, the knob to lengthen, to be surrounded by an unruly thatch of hair. It wasn't happening for me, and the showers were a true test of friendship. Nobody mentioned my smooth-skinned little wiener while we frolicked under the spray of water after soccer practice. My friend Frank was goalkeeper. He was better developed and taller than any of us. He invited me back to his house after practice, and I gladly went – because his mother was Italian, she made all sorts of exotic foods that I occasionally got to taste. She was cooking something that smelled heavenly when we arrived. Puttanesca.

“It means ‘whore’s food’,” Frank whispered to me.

“What’s a whore?”

“Yer know, prossies, like them girls we saw in Doncaster.”

“What do they do?”

“They do anythin’! They’ll suck on yer knob for ten bob!”

“Oh, yer filthy basted! Do they really do that?!”

“Aye, ’course they do, all women do that. They love doin’ it. *The Ronettes* do it every night after their show!”

Frank had his own record player, and after dinner we went to his room, where we played his collection of singles very loud.

His mother was extremely tolerant. Frank was her only son. She even let him lock his door. The electric chords of *She Loves You* pummeled us as we danced spastically around, and then Frank put on our current favorite, *Be My Baby* by *The Ronettes*, an all-girl singing group whose striking foreign looks had intrigued and excited us both when we saw them on *Ready Steady Go!* While *The Ronettes* trilled away in exquisite harmonic lamentation, Frank swung open his closet door, revealing a photograph of the trio in full war paint, sloe eyes ringed with black make-up, great beehives of hair rising from their heads.

“Look at Ronnie,” he said, pointing to the lead Ronette, touching her face on the picture. “She is so fookin’ wankable!”

Ronnie’s dark eyes stared back in silent agreement. Then Frank unzipped his regulation gray flannels and extracted his strangely swollen knob. He began pulling at it madly as the music blared. Just like that dirty bastard on the river bank! I was laughing but deeply excited, imagining my own penis having magically grown to the same size as Frank’s. He was leaping around as he jerked himself, whooping like a madman.

“Oooh, look at this bugger! Oh won’t yer say yer love me! I’m givin’ it to ’er!” He bucked his hips. “Come on, lass, get this in yer!”

I was terrified his mum would come barging in and catch him in the act, but Frank didn’t seem to care, grunting and singing, his hand a blur.

“Ere, watch this!”

He moved closer to the picture, kissing the paper as he gunned himself to a sticky conclusion, an explosion of plasma erupting from the head of his knob, splashing the inside of the wooden door.

“Ohh, what were that, Frank?”

“It’s spunk, yer daft basted!”

Frank quickly wiped up the mess with a handkerchief, which he balled up and placed carefully in his pocket. There was a knock at the door.

“What yer want, Mum?” he said, astonishingly casual.

“*Ragazzi, state facendo un casino. Volete dei biscotti?*”

“Speak English, Mum, we live in England.”

“You boys are being very loud in there. Would you like some biscotti?”

“Yes, please. We’ll be out in a minute.”

“What’s biscotti, Frank?”

“Biscuits,” said Frank, tucking his still-enlarged privates back into his flannels. Mine would never be that big, there was no way...

When I got home I showed my mum the biscotti Frank’s mum had given me.

“Oooh, very fancy!” was all she said.

I went to my room and whipped out my equipment, searching again for hair. Frank’s penis looked like a real man’s, mine still looked like a child’s model, even through a magnifying glass. I put it away just as the door opened and Judy walked in.

“What yer doin’ with that microscope? Are yer lookin’ for yer willie?”

“It’s not a microscope, it’s a magnifying glass...”

“I know what it is and I know what yer up to. Better behave yerself or I’ll tell me mam...”

“Tell ’er what?” I asked indignantly. “I weren’t doin’ anythin’, Judy!”

“I know what boys do, don’t think I don’t. All ’em crazy

buggers up at the ’ospital. I’ve seen ’em doin’ it, too, the dirty devils...”

I imagined all the lunatics in Rampton Mental Hospital, where Judy worked, howling like wolves, whacking themselves like Frank just had...I could hardly wait.

28

After a long weekend's consumption of beer and spirits, cozying up by the glow of the coal fire at home in the evening still exerted its appeal. *Ready Steady Go!* was the only taste of pop culture that TV provided to hungry teens. A massive transfusion was what we wanted. Sucking on Cadbury's chocolates, I undressed Cathy McGowan, the show's host, whose long hair obscured her rather pedantic looks. Cathy was worth a shag, but tonight Cher was performing with her partner, Sonny, a smiling, asexual, Californian elf. Cher's pseudo-Indian-maiden style, swaying black hair, the sordid, delicious possibilities of her pneumatic lips, quickly got my full attention.

It was slightly uncomfortable to sit there spinning randy fantasies as Mum doled out the Cadbury's.

"Ave another choc, love," she said, as my eyes focused on that ample mouth, capable of unimaginable excess.

There was a touch of the foreign about her, Egyptian or Lebanese, or what I imagined those races to be. What would it be like to shag a foreign girl, to hear her moan in French or Turkish, uttering words of love in an unknown tongue? There weren't any girls like that around Retford.

The sweet milk chocolate was melting on my tongue when I noticed with a jolt the faint hint of a moustache around Cher's upper lip. No doubt there were tiny black hairs around her

nipples, too, and the furry triangle black as night. Anna Magnani had a moustache, her picture had just appeared in the *News of the World*, "a tempestuous Italian" the paper said, and Cher bore some resemblance, though she was supposed to be Cherokee or some other Hollywood-Indian tribe.

Sex barged in constantly, even sitting quietly next to Mum, her gray hair made golden by the firelight, completely absorbed in the threadbare plots of tepid TV shows. Did she feel the vibrations of these hormonal storms raging beside her on the couch? Thoughts of Glenda prowling the dark country lanes in her Rover made my throat tight. What if my mum found out I had been with a married woman, and my sister scarcely two months' gone... I refocused tight on Cher, then switched to Sonny. No threat there, a cheerful little man in a constant state of astonishment at his unlikely luck at finding himself on stage with this Indian princess, singing flat out and completely flat.

I got flowers, in the spring

I got you, you wear my ring.

Cher's equally tinny vocals chiming in. Outside, a car horn honked. I looked out the window. Quambro's ancient Ford Prefect stood at the curb.

"Oh, it's Quam, Mam, do yer mind if I go for a spin?"

"What, tonight? Again? Yer never 'ome at all these days! Go on, then, but don't drink anythin' and don't be back 'ere late. I shall lock the door!"

"Alright, love, don't worry, there won't be owt 'appenin' tonight anyway."

"Ere, take this in case yer want some chips."

She handed me a two-shilling piece.

"Oh thanks, Mam!" I kissed her and went out to the car,

where Quambro sat waiting, a half-smile on his handsome Irish face. We picked up Wilkin and took off for a Sunday-evening ride through the hinterlands, the villages nestled behind the town. Here we occasionally found clusters of girls, wandering around or standing outside pubs. We moved cautiously in this foreign territory, on the lookout for roving bands of local lads who would smash us as soon as look at us.

The heavy coins that would lubricate this evening clinked in my jacket. I had removed them as usual from the small watch pocket of dad's best tweed sports coat, hanging neatly in its closet, amid the rich odors of wool and suede and smoke. Their silver solidity inspired in me a curious mixture of guilt and resentment. My dad was not well-off like Wilkin's old man. But my small pangs of guilt were always overruled by the more urgent requirements of my own social life. I always believed I would pay Dad back one day, but I never did. He expired without warning on the living-room couch while I was away at college, succumbing to a heart attack despite the thousands of bicycle miles he had put into riding to work in the freezing pre-dawn darkness of so many winter mornings, knuckles gripping the frosty handlebars of his Raleigh, handicapped by the weight of a forty-pound bag of plumbers' tools, pedaling toward another inaccessible tangle of Victorian plumbing congealed in winter ice.

We cruised from pub to pub, but there was nothing happening on the Midlands circuit, the virgins asleep in their beds. Wilkin, with a full pint count, lay down in the back seat and we turned for home. Kenny Wilkin's employment in his father's furniture business often afforded us unlimited access to beds and bedding at all hours of the night, until old man Wilkin reluctantly bought his son an Austin Mini that was already in the garage after

a slight collision. So tonight we rode in the unglamorous Ford Prefect, a skinny, sit-up-and-beg-style car, with a long narrow bumper that curved around its front end. However the bumper on this car had been buckled outward, like the wheel blade of a chariot, in another vehicular skirmish. I much preferred the clandestine use of Wilkin's dad's full-size furniture truck, a mobile boudoir in which we rode from town to town, searching for girls, nice or nasty, it didn't matter as long as they climbed aboard and there was the vaguest possibility of physical contact. Wilkin Senior occasionally received reports from people claiming they'd seen the van parked in the woods or along some lonely lane, long after normal delivery hours, well, after suppertime, even. But he dismissed these ephemeral sightings, never dreaming that his son was riding around the countryside without benefit of license or insurance, with a truckload of passengers partying on his undelivered merchandise.

The Prefect was cruising smoothly, rapidly enough to overtake another car ahead of us, just squeezing by on the narrow country road. Or not quite squeezing by. As we passed the car Quam's outturned bumper scraped noisily along its passenger side door. A furious face looked into mine.

"Yer 'it 'im, Quam. Yer better stop."

"Fook that!" replied Quam, and he gunned the Ford to its top speed, about forty-five miles an hour. We raced along in the total darkness of an October night. The headlights of the car we'd hit disappeared behind us, then reappeared as the car crested the rise we'd just bounced over, and there was another bridge ahead. I reminded Quam that Ticker Jackson had fractured his skull crossing a humpback bridge at high speed, ramming his head into the unpadded steel roof of the vehicle.

“Aye, I know that, that’s why I want ’em ter speed up!”

There were already scars on this car. It was not a lucky vehicle. Janice Dempsey had left her front teeth embedded in the leather of the front passenger seat when Quam ran off the road on another drunken night. Wilkin stirred in the back seat as Quam slowed nicely at the bridge, hoping that our pursuers would not.

“What the fook’s goin’ on?” he snarled.

“Ah, yer alright, Kenny, go back to sleep!” Quam laughed.

He loved trouble. He knew these roads well and was confident he could elude our pursuers. For the next three miles he continued making elaborate evasive maneuvers before finally pulling into the silent darkness of a farmyard and dousing the lights. We sat there for a few minutes, giggling nervously, when suddenly the headlights of the other car illuminated the yard.

“Fookin’ ’ell! They found us!”

They pulled up next to us. The scowling fellow in the passenger seat already had his shirt off, but they hadn’t yet noticed the third man in our group. Wilkin rose up from the back seat like an irritated ghost, and the odds for the match were suddenly revised. The two youths jumped out of their car, hunching into aggressive postures as they confronted Quam.

“Yer scratched me fookin’ bodywork, mate, yer’ve got ter pay for that!”

“I’ll give yer a quid for t’paint,” was all Quam said, one short sentence, constantly repeated between the other driver’s ravings. “Quid for t’paint.”

The two youths stood there, one shirtless, both slightly off balance. Still ready to attack, but now not quite so sure of their quarry.

“Fook that! That’s more than a quid’s worth a’ damage,” the driver growled in a thick Yorkshire accent.

“Quid for t’paint,” said Quam.

The Prefect’s door slammed behind Wilkin. I got out on the other side and we both joined Quambro.

“Where yer cunts from, Doncaster?” said Wilkin, naming the town with a sneer.

“Mind yer own fookin’ bizniz,” snarled the topless one.

“Where’s yer fookin’ shirt, then? Tryin’ ter get a tan from t’moonlight?”

“Yer’ve got ter pay for t’paint,” said the driver, plaintively.

“I said I’d give yer a fookin’ quid,” Quam said.

Wilkin, annoyed at having been woken from a sound sleep, then said to the bare-chested youth,

“Fookin’ Donny. What a shithole that town is.”

The boy did not respond to his provocation.

Wilkin leaned forward to the driver and asked in a very serious voice,

“Ere, can yer mother sew?”

“Yer what?” said the slow-witted youth.

“E said, ‘Do yer like ’ospital food?’” said Quam, carefully enunciating the words, right before Wilkin’s fist smashed into the boy’s face and he toppled with a grunt of surprise into the leaves that covered the gravel of the yard. As the other kid jumped forward Wilkin turned with an athlete’s grace and caught him perfectly on the point of the chin. He dropped to his knees, stunned like a bullock, and wavered there.

“First punch counts, cunt,” said Wilkin and struck him squarely on the temple, knocking him to the ground.

“E’s up, ’e’s down!” Quambro squawked excitedly in his

boxing-commentator voice, sardonically kicking the first youth in the ribs as he was beginning to rise.

A mere sixty seconds had elapsed since the two had entered our orbit. An entire prizefight had taken place and I hadn't even raised my hands. A light went on in the farmhouse, illuminating the bare-knuckle warriors with its ghostly radiance. Wilkin's teeth glittered sharp as a fox's mouth fresh from the massacre of domestic fowl and the moment entered my memory, a dim frieze of antic figures cavorting in an autumn landscape.

"What the bluddy 'ell's goin' on?" a voice boomed from the darkness, and we were caught in the beam of a powerful flashlight.

"Eh, turn yer fookin' brights off, mate, yer blindin' me!"

Adrenalized by violence, Wilkin strutted in the glare.

"Don't yer bluddy talk like that, me lad! I'll 'ave the police down 'ere!"

"Yer should call the police on these two, Mister! Tried to assault us, they did," Quam said indignantly, kicking the prone youth again as he climbed back into the car. He revved its engine. "Come on, Wilko, let's bugger off before 'e calls the coppers."

"Aye, ah bluddy well will, too!" said the voice behind the flashlight, but he came no closer.

We got back in the car as the fallen combatants, bathed in our headlights, slowly clambered to their feet, the fight gone out of them. They stood looking at us, paralyzed by the swiftness of their bad luck. Blood trickled down the shirtless boy's cheek from a cut over his eye. Quambro reversed out of the yard and gunned the Prefect's feeble motor.

"Anybody fer some chips?"

He pointed the car toward the motorway and we raced down the dark lanes.

"Them daft basteds, they didn't know we 'ad an extra man on board!"

"Wilkin, brought off the bench in overtime!"

"Aye, where were yer, Maxie? Yer shoulda got the boot in."

"I 'ad yer back covered, Wilko, don't yer worry."

But I was relieved that none of my clothing had been harmed in the incident. Nothing like a little violence to end the evening, but violence also stimulated a need for food and something approximating sex, or at least the idea of sex, as near as we might come to it, a whiff, a smell, a tiny taste.

The only place open within a fifty-mile radius was the filthy transport café on the main trunk road to London. The food was appalling, the proprietor serving up the most unappetizing provender he could find, yet still the place was crowded, 24 hours a day. A few lorry drivers sat at tables in the greenish incandescent glare, wolfing down the unsavory chow. We ordered tea, served in cracked white cups, and gazed in wonder at two heavily made-up girls in leather biker jackets playing the pinball machine. They looked like a provincial white version of *The Ronettes* with their black dyed hair, spike heels and tight pants. They likely thumbed a lift here and were now stranded at this way station, at the mercy of lorry drivers, an unreliable crowd liable to drop you off in the middle of nowhere after they'd shagged you. At least with us they might get a lift all the way home.

Their ugliness was almost beautiful, big rough birds, common as muck. The larger one had a very faint mustache, reminding me of Cher, who had stirred me up hours earlier with her Pocahontas look, or was it Cleopatra, that brainless pointy face framed by swaying black bangs. They'd probably shag for a chocolate bar like the girls in films about the war. A perfect end

to a wonderful evening. Wilko bought them tea and cake, certain they'd perform with one or all of us in the cramped back seat of the Prefect.

But they didn't, not for love or confectionery, though we drove them all the way to Worksop. They sat together in the back and only Wilkin managed anything, a touch of bloody finger pie the brunette let him have for spite.

"Oh, fookin' 'ell," he said indignantly, looking at his hand. "Why didn't yer say yer was on the rag?!"

"Yer didn't bluddy ask!" she replied, ready for a fight. But Wilkin ignored her, moving to the corner of the back seat, wiping his fingers on the floor.

The other girl had fallen asleep, and I studied her friend's raw face in the back of the Ford as another night ended, her ignorant accent squawking inanities, make-up smeared, hardly more than a child, despite the crimson of her monthlies that had despoiled Wilkin's fingers and the worn upholstery of the car.

"Where we droppin' these two?" asked Quambro sleepily as we approached the outskirts of Worksop.

"Tek me fookin' 'ome!" the big one squealed as the dawn rose over the silent town, and we did, to a rundown housing estate near the colliery. Their street was a rough-looking cul-de-sac, so Quam ordered them out on the corner, saying the reverse gear wasn't working.

"Fook yer very much," the big girl said and gave us the V sign as she slammed the car door.

"Fookin' ungrateful slags, glad we didn't shag 'em – probably clapped up," said Wilkin.

"Aye, ah bet yer got it on yer finger," I reminded him.

The girls staggered off to their council houses, teetering

on cheap heels. What was their excuse for being home so late? I might need one, too. Quam left me on the corner of my street, so the rattling engine wouldn't wake my parents, and I crept through the creaky front gate and around to the side door. The dogs were silent, the door unlatched, despite Dad's standing order to "Lock the door and let 'im sleep in the wash 'ouse if 'e comes in late." Mum spoiled me far too much to ever consider that.

39

“Ere, Maxie, you wanna make some bread? ’Cos if you do, ah’ve got vis mate, see. ’E was racing ve Mini in Kenya and when it come back to ’Arwich ver darft barstards knocked ve maffler off it while vey was unloading it off ve boat. ’E’d stashed about two keys of excellent Kenyan grass in ve maffler. Now ’e’s too nervous to go an’ pick it up, but ’e sez if anybody wants to, vey can keep the grass, ’e just wants ’is fackin’ car back.”

Dennis Slocum spoke slowly, between puffs on an enormous tubular joint he had just rolled. We were sitting in his Indian-style pad on Steeles Road, watching *Match of the Day*, stoned to the tree tops on a new batch of Lebanese. It was, as usual, not where I wanted to be, but each time I sucked in a lungful of smoke, another day disappeared.

“Free grass, you say, and cash besides?”

“Aye, mate, plenty of it. Naffink to it!”

“I’ll do it, why not?” I said without thinking. “Can I get some Mandies to take the edge off?”

“You’re on, mate. I’ll get yer Mandies, no problem. Can you go termorrer?”

“Shit, that’s a bit sudden, Denny,”

“Yeah, but time is of ve essence, see. It’s been there two weeks already. ’E’s gotta geddit out by this weekend at the la’est.”

Less than twenty-four hours later, I was on a train to the

coastal town of Harwich. How I had gotten here? I had no interest in cars. I barely knew how to drive. And a bust meant certain jail time. After trying to slither out of it by explaining to Denny that I didn't have a license, he assured me that detail didn't matter, it was a racing Mini, not street legal anyway. All I had to do was roll it onto a tow truck that would meet me there and drop it off at a nearby garage, where the owner would then pick it up.

"Just take ve maffler, ven yer leave ve car."

It seemed simple, and the payoff would be enough grass to finance the trip to New York I was desperate to make. I got off the train and staggered confidently over to the customs buildings at the port of Harwich, inner voice babbling.

Remember that they don't automatically assume you're here to pick up drugs. Think legit, think straight.

The fear punched through the Mandrax shield when I finally reached the customs shed and the customs officer scrutinized the bill of lading.

"It's a racing-green Mini, just shipped back from Kenya."

"Oh, I thought they was never going to come for that car," he said with a smile.

What kind of smile was that? A friendly smile, a knowing smile, a cynical smile? Had the trap been sprung? He disappeared inside an enormous shed and I waited in the drizzle, certain that the long arm of the law was about to descend upon my unprotected neck. A tow truck drove up just then.

"Are you Dennis's mate? I'm 'ere for ve Mini."

He backed up to the hangar doors as the car was rolled out. The obliging customs officer even helped me to push it onto the trailer. I was so loaded I could barely steer. The muffler was lying on the back seat among other racing paraphernalia, spotlights

and obscure engine parts. It was a short drive to the garage, where the Mini's appearance immediately drew a crowd of interested mechanics, who began to fire highly technical questions at me.

"Six cylinder, is it?"

"Double valve clamp on the intake?"

"Er, it's not my car actually. I'm just picking it up for me mate. I just have to bring him this."

I reached in and took the muffler from the car. To my horror one of the mechanics actually grabbed it from my hands.

"You don't want vat, mate, vat's just the maffler, no fackin' good, that ain't."

"Well, he wants it anyway, souvenir of his trip."

I retrieved it as firmly as I could. Their puzzlement might turn to suspicion if they noticed it was heavier than a normal muffler, not to mention my lack of technical expertise. A quick call to John Law – my paranoia was gathering steam.

"Right, thanks a lot," I remarked as jovially as I could. "Er, which way is the railway station?"

A pimply mechanic pointed the way and I walked off, feeling their eyes in my back, the muffler cradled in my arms, blatant and terrifying as a machine gun. After about a half mile of nervous perambulation I noticed a laundromat in a row of shops. I went in, bought a large plastic laundry bag and placed the explosive object inside. The neck poked out of the bag like a barrel. All I needed now was an I.R.A. T-shirt. Flop sweat bathed my nose and forehead on the last excruciating half-mile to the train station. The insulating effect of the Mandrax had long since worn off. Now my nerves were on the outside – I couldn't do two months let alone two years, which was the kind of sentence law-and-order magistrates, unfamiliar with drugs, soft or hard, were

currently handing out. Quantity indicated intent to distribute, and judging from the weight of the container I had enough to qualify for some real time. My ringpiece quivered at the thought of sodomite convicts rattling the bars of my cell, maybe even sharing my cell.

Figures of authority loomed – even this provincial stationmaster had a menacing aura as he checked my ticket. But I boarded the train without incident and sat in a corner reading a copy of *Automotive News*. At Victoria Station every commuter looked like a narc, the words of Inspector Challoner of Scotland Yard echoed through my head:

“You’re fucking nicked, my beauty!”

Plain clothes everywhere, reading newspapers, eating sandwiches, browsing among the classics at W.H. Smiths. Denny was there, too, waiting. He discreetly waved me off when I tried to approach him, which only fuelled my raging paranoia. I took a train to Camden Town, then switched to the Barnet line to throw off any pursuers, eventually landing at Denny’s two hours after I’d gotten to Victoria.

“Whachoo doin’ wandering round the Tube wiv vat fackin’ fing in yer arms? Cor blimey, you ain’t fackin’ cut out for vis, Maxie, are you?”

It was true: narcotic intrigue and police work were not my areas of expertise. Denny laid the muffler on the draining board in the kitchen and went to work with a hacksaw on its steel midsection. Ten minutes later, six pounds of high-grade African grass was shaken from its long concealment. He rubbed it expertly between two fingers and brought a fragment to his nose with the grace of a sommelier.

“Mmm, Kenya’s finest, grown on the slopes of Kilimanjaro.

We’ll get real money for this shit. I’ll call Liz Britten, she can turn this over in no time. We’ll split this facker.”

“Ere, wait a minute, Denny – I thought you said I get to keep all the grass?”

“*We* get to keep it, it’s our fackin’ deal, Maxie. Who the fuck put you onto this in ver first place, then? I was fackin’ shadowing you every inch of the way to make sure you didn’t fuck up, ’cos let’s face it, you’re not really qualified for this kinda work... Tell yer what, I take two, you do four, vat’s a fousand pound right there – not bad for an afternoon’s work.”

“Yeah, but Dennis, I picked up the fuckin’ car. It could have been hot.”

“Right, but it weren’t, Maxie, was it? Nah, I can put yer together wiv Liz tomorrer, or you can take this shit and wander round London for a few days wiv it, see how far yer get.”

I saw my ticket sliding away. It was useless to argue.

“Alright, keep yer fookin’ shirt on. Give Lizzie a bell. I’ll tek it over tomorrow.”

Dennis was a businessman and I wasn’t. Or Dennis was smart and I was thicker than two bricks. The next morning I swallowed a Mandrax and took a minicab over to Liz Britten’s place. The driver looked like a hashishin in his tightly wound turban. Would he detect that odor of home in my bag? Even though it was double-bagged in plastic, the powerful aroma might seep out and up his nose and he would re-route us to the nearest police station and turn me in. Luckily the Mandie smoothed out this paranoid train of thought and replaced it with a luxurious carelessness. Besides the driver was Indian, and this product was from Africa, and anyway, what colored person would voluntarily visit an English police station?

We turned into Liz's grimy street. I paid the driver, and clutching my precious package, pressed her doorbell. Liz was a housewife and professional dealer, an attractive divorcée who no longer had any interest in anything but making enough money to take care of her kids. She didn't do drugs herself, regarding them merely as a way to make a living. If she could have found a legitimate product with such a high profit margin, she would have been selling that.

Liz examined the grass with a professional eye and agreed without a quibble on the figure Dennis had told me to suggest. I had a brief revelation that Denny might have prearranged this little deal, that somewhere in this transaction I was being short-changed and shafted again, but it was money for rope anyway, enough to bail me out of England.

She weighed and bagged it expertly, sitting cross-legged on the floor, her miniskirt exposing long, pale limbs. The smoothness of the transaction, combined with the effect of the Mandrax and the money, filled me with a fuzzy desire. Lizzie's short black skirt looked especially ravishing in this domestic context of baby toys and a three-piece suite, a flowered sofa and armchairs that my mother would have loved.

"You can garnish that pay check if you let me shag yer," I said only half-jokingly, as she counted the bills like a croupier counting cards.

"Aye, you cheeky cunt! I may be a dealer but I'm not a fookin' prossy!"

Her rich northern accent only excited me further.

"Can ah just fuck yer, then, yer look so beautiful in that miniskirt, and I'm off to New York next week. I might not see yer for ages."

"Get away wi' yer, yer dirty devil."

She was laughing now as she walked into the kitchen. I followed her to the sink, where she was filling a glass with water.

"Put that down a minute."

She put the glass on the draining board. I grabbed her and kissed her roguish mouth, which opened to admit a little tongue, but not much.

"Stop that, me kids'll be 'ome any minute," she said without much conviction.

I pushed her up against the sink loaded with dishes, and her legs parted slightly under the pressure of my groin or perhaps the wad of cash I had stuffed into my front pocket. Her body language clicked into a vague affirmative, a slight inclination of the shoulder, a shifting of energy, the neurons in her glandular network sluggishly transmitting electrical impulses toward a compass point below the navel. She was going to let me shag her and even if she wasn't really into it, I didn't care. The dull suburban bliss of our surroundings had gotten me horribly excited, that and the success of our financial arrangement, the money she'd just handed me. My ticket out was just a phone call away.

I worked her panties down below her knees and she lifted a leg to let me unhook them, and even though she seemed about as excited as a nun at the gynecologist's I persisted, pulled up that scrap of skirt and entered her. After a few minutes' exertion I looked in her face and saw the blankness in her expression.

"Are you enjoyin' this, Liz? Yer don't seem like yer really into it."

"Course I am, love, you just choose some funny places to 'ave a go..."

She wasn't into it, but I was still hopeful of spinning the

compass inside that delicious body, the only thing I would miss when I left this island, and now the money's right there, bumping against her thigh. I would miss these rosy English girls with their diamond smiles and pale northern skin infused with seven shades of pink. But my new dancing partners were surely waiting in the midnight streets of New York, like the sun-yellow cabs, the steel-ribbed bridges and the golden skyscrapers, harsh blue western skies waiting to dwarf me with their monstrous insouciance. Broadway was waiting for my Frye boots to click along its bright pavements, poetry waiting to fill my greedy ears, and the bars that stayed open until the morning of the following day, they were waiting with Wild Turkey and Jack Daniel's and Rheingold beer and Ballantine Ale. New York would embrace me, shake me until my back was totally devoid of cartilage and bone.

I opened my eyes. Liz's finely drawn features still displayed no emotion, she was utterly absent, the mind disconnected from the body, beautiful as a docked yacht, crewless, supine, an empty vessel. Both of us were someplace else.

The doorbell rang.

"Ooh, that's me baby-sitter wi' the kids! Just a minute, love!" she called over my shoulder.

I turned on the afterburners. We bumped against the sink and the glass fell from the draining board with a crash.

"Ooh, careful, duck, don't break me bloody stemware!" she squawked. "And don't come inside me!"

She pushed me away as I bore down toward the finish line and the last of England.

"You're beautiful and I'm comin'!" I yelped, misquoting Frank O'Hara and spraying the dishes in the sink with a thousand embryonic Maxes.

"Bluddy 'ell!" Liz yelled in that bawdy Yorkshire accent. "Yer can wash them off before you go!"

She straightened her skirt and walked toward the door. I zipped up. By the time the kids came roaring in I was up to my elbows in Fairy Snow.

TO BE CONTINUED ...

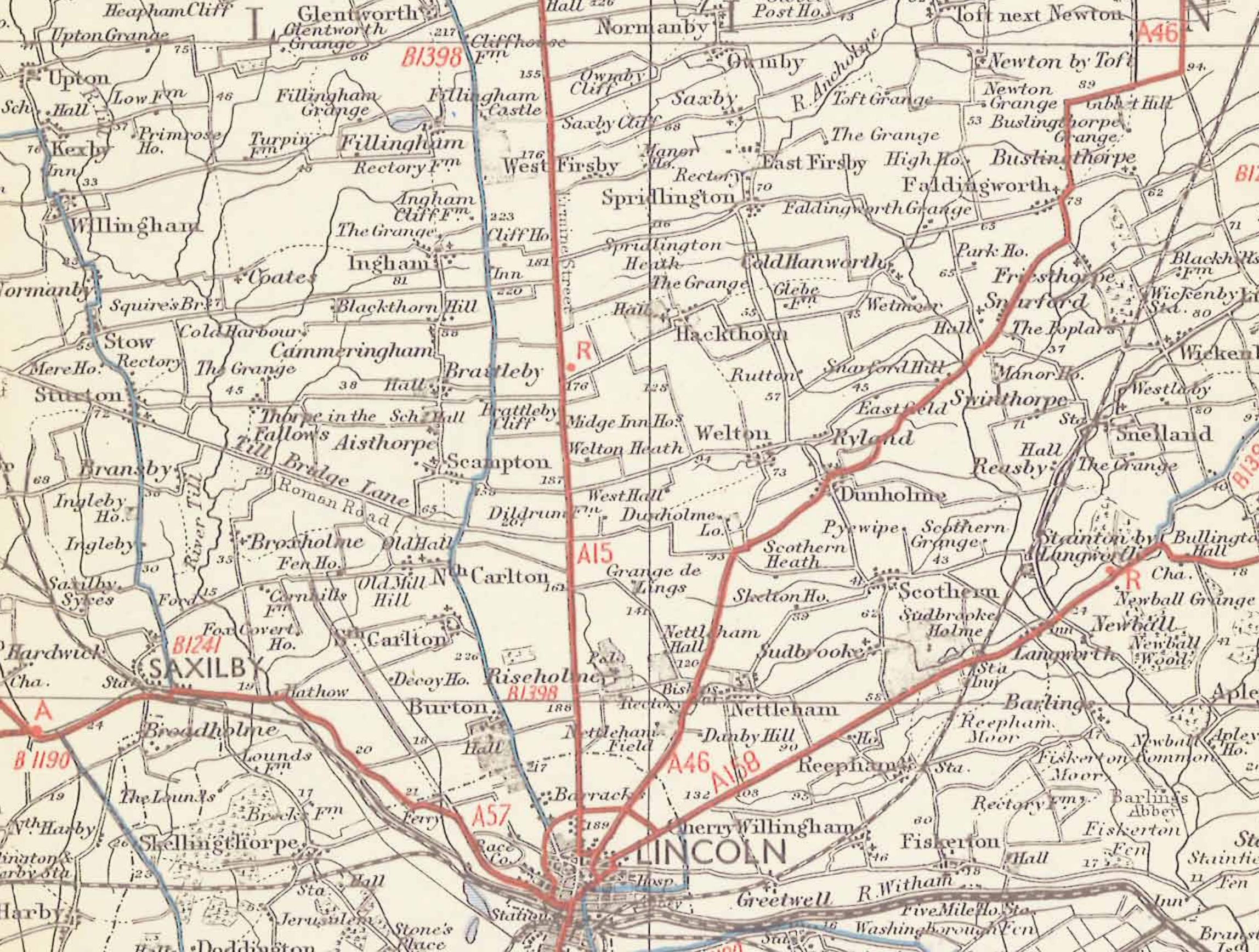
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THE AUTHOR

MAX BLAGG was born in England and has lived in New York City since 1972. He is the author of several books, including *Licking the Fun Up* [Aloes Books/London], *Pink Instrument* [Lumen Editions/Boston], *Monkey* [Appearances/NY], *Five Days* [Shallow Press/NY], *What a Man Should Know* [J Crew Books/NY], *The Little Dress Book* [Shallow Press/NY] and the forthcoming *Slow Dazzle* [Poems 1990-2010]. With Glenn O'Brien he co-edited the legendary art-lit magazine *Bald Ego* (2002-2006). *Ticket Out* is his first novel.



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Stainton

Harby

Jerusalem

Stone's Place

Station

Cherry Willingham

Fiskerton

Washingborough Fen

Barlings

Bransford

Upton

Low Fen

Primrose Ho.

Kexby Inn

Willingham

Upton Grange

Heapham Cliff

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