

England and a broken radio

Reilly was off on one. He was becoming loud. Becoming dangerous. Jacob had thought they were talking about the new Stereolab album, but really should have known the next rant was just around the corner.

“It used to mean something, *they* used to mean something, now every bastard’s got ‘em. Why does everything good get hijacked and watered down?”

Reilly’s question wasn’t the kind that wanted an answer, but Jacob felt compelled to fill in the gaps, to jump in front of the train.

“Come on mate, it doesn’t matter, lighten up a bit. It’s Friday night – a few lagers, a laugh. Come on, it’s your round – mine’s a Stella.”

“No, don’t try to put me off, I’ve got something to say, and you know I’m right.”

Jacob didn’t yet know the source of Reilly’s disgust, but knew better than to ask. Having a chat over a pint had become a delicate operation. A walk through a minefield. Jacob now had an extensive list of subject matter to avoid. These included the

National Lottery, Jimmy Carr, brand name charities, Craig Bellamy, TV licensing, the family off the BT ads, The Stereophonics, *Watchdog* and Lexus cars. Not easy. As a result, Jacob had started to feel like an extra in the opening minutes of *Casualty*, going about his business while fifteen million viewers at home guessed what hideous accident he was heading for. “I bet he gets his hand stuck in that vice...” “No way, that combine harvester’s going to malfunction and tear his legs off!” “You’re both wrong – Reilly’s going to piss someone off again and they’ll both get glassed...”

He tried again – “Reilly, I said it’s your round and I’ll have a Stella.” Reilly was not receiving. His eyes were fixed on the couple at the next table who were developing the uneasy look of the stared at. A look Jacob was now learning to recognise. Jacob stole a glance at Reilly’s latest targets, and immediately noticed the bloke’s hair. It was one of those haircuts, styled upwards into a ridge, as if acknowledging the existence of the mohican without actually going all the way. It looked like the roof on a shed, didn’t sit right.

Reilly began to speak. In a bizarre sing-song voice, not what Jacob was expecting at all -

“Ooh Gary! Yes, Lisa? Let’s do something crazy and zany today, like on *Friends*. Lets’s take a walk on the wild side – let’s buy matching combat trousers! Great idea, Lisa – let’s go down Gap straight away – and why don’t we get matching soulless black polo necks and wear them down the Flyer tonight.” The sing-song in Reilly’s voice gave way to a shout-scream, “and after the Flyer we’ll head home and look at car brochures while listening to fucking Dido!”

Silence. The worst kind. Jacob broke it. What he wanted to do was turn to the Gap twins and say something brave, something decent. Something like, “Ignore this idiot, he’s mental. Your

cargo trousers and polo necks are actually really nice, really suit you, can I get you both a drink?” But Jacob wasn’t feeling brave or decent, he was feeling embarrassed. He turned to Reilly –

“What’s fucking wrong with you? Go and get your fucking round in!”

The Gap Twins had heard enough and without saying a word, shuffled off to the other end of the pub, as balanced right-thinking people tend to do in these situations.

Jacob exhaled. That was grim, but not nearly as bad as it could have been. A 4.4 on the Reilly scale. A city shaken but able to laugh about it afterwards – no casualties. But would there be an aftershock? Jacob pictured the Gap twins waiting outside at closing time, with a scrum of rugby-playing mates summoned by mobile, all too willing to deal out some sweet Friday night justice – “That’s the bastard who slagged off my clothes – and his friend did nothing – get ‘em both.” Jacob tried to blank out these thoughts.

“Reilly. I need a pint. Now.”

“Yeah yeah, but did you see how badly made those combats were? You remember those ones I had in ’97? Now they were cool. The real thing.”

“I want a pint. And I didn’t know you in 1997! And I was wearing combats back in ’95. And anyway shut up. Listen to yourself, you’re going off about fucking trousers now?” Jacob said this with genuine concern. This was indeed a new level. He wondered at what point an alcohol-fuelled gob-shite became a card-carrying madman. He made a mental note to look it up on the internet Monday morning. Go to Google, type in ‘Combat Pants Psychosis’ – click ‘I’m feeling lucky.’ He smirked at the thought.

“What’s so funny? I’m serious. It’s because of people like

them that I'm back in a jeans phase. They've left me with no other choice." Reilly was indeed back in a jeans phase. He'd also taken to getting T-shirts printed with his own slogans. Tonight's T-shirt read 'SITUATIONIST.'

"A pint. Of Stella. Please." Jacob had one final try.

Reilly stood up, held up his hands in a 'you win' gesture, and headed to the bar. Left Jacob alone at the window seat. He rolled a cigarette – Drum Ultra Mild, green Rizlas and a Swan filter. Bristol loped by outside. The usual line up of wide-eyed kids, cackling girl's nights outs and the like. A huge homeless guy (what was he, 6' 4 and 18 stone?) lurched in and out of the traffic, shouting as he went. Care in the Community. Jacob imagined the homeless guy knocking on doors up in leafy Redland, housewives welcoming him in with the words, "Hi! Come on in, cup of tea? I'll run a bath for you. You poor thing – all part of the service, care in the community."

Inside the Flyer, the jukebox was running through the usual mixture of the sublime and the banal. Lauryn Hill's *X-Factor* and Massive Attack's *Teardrop* had sandwiched Toploader's *Dancing in the Moonlight*. The jukebox was now playing something by Destiny's Child – soul music with no soul. The Child were boasting that not only did they have lots of material possessions, but none of these were paid for by men. Jacob wondered idly what Germaine Greer would make of this.

He scanned the pub as he dragged on his cigarette. By the door, a group of impossibly good-looking boys and girls were lobbing thin chat up lines at each other like grenades. Jacob presumed them to be freshers at UWE, bright-eyed and far too healthy looking, as he himself had once been. At the bar, middle aged divorcees staggered around, as the compulsory perma-pissed ex-army guy moved in, picking up on the ham-fisted make-up and smell of desperation. The Gap Twins

marched past the bar and out of the door. Poor bastards. Jacob relaxed, slightly. Maybe that was Reilly's explosion out of the way for tonight. A mere pipe bomb to last weekend's atomic blast.

Jacob took a mouthful of Stella, stubbed out his cigarette and rolled another. He considered Reilly's behaviour. Was he really losing it? Or was it just the beer? He had been working very hard this week, perhaps overdoing it a bit, like a real workaholic. A workaholic who could perhaps offer Jacob a way out of this accelerating downward spiral. He knew they had a real shot at a recording contract, a fawning music press and a big fat goodbye to the battleground of an everyman existence. Bye-bye, Bristol.

He'd grown up in Kidlington, a little pocket of nothing just outside Oxford, and Bristol had initially blown his mind. But in nine years, he'd done all the pubs, done all the clubs, done most of the drugs, and now had little left to do. The scene that had once seemed vibrant and full of possibilities now felt desperate, cancerous and worst of all, infectious. He needed a change, needed Reilly to keep it together long enough to dupe some A&R man into chucking them a huge advance.

Jacob finished the cigarette and stared at his empty glass. Where the fuck was Reilly? How long can it take to order a couple of Stellas?

A squad of fat-headed locals marched past the window and into the pub. Four, no five of them. Jacob instantly had them pegged. Happy-go-lucky salt of the earth types who liked a laugh, who liked too many pints of Fosters. Great guys who ineptly harassed women and would beat the shit out of Jacob for dressing like a fruit. He feared them and hated them for it.

Incredibly, but perhaps predictably, they dressed almost identically – brutal hair gel, cheap silky shirts in various

colours, chinos and shiny shiny shoes – the towny uniform. There were small differences, perhaps signifying some kind of tribal hierarchy. The fattest and loudest of the five wore a thicker gold neck chain than the rest, and his sovereign ring dwarfed the others on display. They were now at the bar, and sure enough five pints of Fosters were ordered. King Fat Head was relating an anecdote that Jacob couldn't quite hear, although he caught a couple of snippets – the story involved “the fucking Mrs...” and “...*TV Times* in her gob.” Jacob missed the punch line, but the other fat heads didn't, falling about with cruel laughter.

Jacob studied the demographic of the group. How old were they? Four of them had that Alan Shearer thing going on, looked mid-forties but was probably only 27 or 28 – no older than Jacob and Reilly. The fifth was a raw faced 16 or 17, King Fat Head's younger brother perhaps, out on a summer evening for his first proper pub crawl? He had the uneasy, queasy look of someone who knows he has already had too much beer but is desperate to hide the fact. Jacob fully expected him to vomit Fosters at any moment, right there at the bar. Nonetheless, Raw Face was laughing when required and gazing up at his heroes with the right amount of reverence and awe. Despite himself, Jacob admired Raw Face's effort in the face of adversity, he was giving it his best. Good on you, trainee towny!

But as Jacob looked more closely, he lost his bearings. His stomach lurched. He noticed something was wrong with this picture, something was not complete - something in Raw Face's uniform. He had the gel, the shirt and chinos, but instead of shiny shoes he wore a scuffed old pair of Hi-Tecs.

This detail struck Jacob like a knife in the heart. In that moment he felt it was the saddest thing he'd ever seen. Was nothing attainable? Even that which was plainly not worth

attaining? What did this mean? For Jacob. For his band. He cursed himself for once again noticing this kind of shit. He wanted to grow another skin – why couldn't he just hate everyone like fucking Reilly? He tried another tack, a positive slant. Maybe Raw Face was an individual, striking out on his own by refusing to conform – or, perhaps apprentice townies had to go through certain stages before the whole uniform could be awarded, like geishas – “Raw Face-san, it is with great honour, that the Filton okiya, bestows upon you, your shiny shoes...”

Reilly returned with a couple of pints to break Jacob's train of thought. “Jesus, Reilly, how long can it take to purchase beer?”

“I went for a piss, if that's alright with you, Mum.” Reilly handed Jacob his pint and sat down. “And anyway, there was some girl wearing an Arsenal shirt, so I had a word.”

“What did you say?”

“Well just said that her choice of attire signalled a moral and intellectual shortcoming. So I'm ready for a bit of a debate, you know, a bit of an argument, but she asks if I want to go to some party after the pub. She thought I was chatting her up.”

Jacob laughed. “Was she nice?”

“Jesus - did you listen to anything I just said Jacob? I said she was wearing a fucking Arsenal shirt!”

Stevie sauntered in, clocked Jacob and Reilly, mimed the pint to mouth movement and headed for the bar. Good old Stevie. They both liked him. Reilly respected anyone who could argue back. Jacob admired his fearlessness. He showed what life could offer someone who wasn't crippled by cynicism and self doubt. Plus, he anchored Reilly, kept him in check. Jacob was pleased to see him.

Stevie got a bottle of Becks and came over, all rude health and wealth, the Brummie plutocrat. Jacob noticed Stevie's new

Schott jacket, what were they - four hundred quid or something? Not Jacob's thing, but fair play.

"The mighty Serpico - thought I'd find you two here, how's that difficult first song coming on?"

"Fuck off yuppie," said Reilly, "what's with the new jacket - dealing again, are you?"

"No mate - an honest day's work for an honest day's pay, you know me. Anyway, Jacob - I've got something for you." Stevie pulled out a CDR and handed it over. "It's a load of rare Radiohead stuff I downloaded, there's some weird shit on there - not my cup of tea really. But have you heard *Big Ideas*?"

"Yeah, what a song mate."

Reilly took over. "It's not called that - it's *Nude/Newt* or something. But anyway, it's god-like. And they couldn't even be arsed to put it on the album. Thom Yorke just pisses genius."

"Dear oh dear, Stevie," said Jacob, "what would Metallica say? You stealing music and depriving poor old EMI - how they going to pay for limos and cocaine now?"

"Actually, I was thinking a bit about that," said Stevie. "I'm mean I know Radiohead aren't going to starve because I download a couple of out-takes, but you wouldn't expect a plumber to work for nothing, would you?"

"That's not the point," replied Reilly, "why should music be for sale in the first place? If people only understand something in terms of a market value, it might as well be fucking shampoo. But it's too important for that. Don't forget the music industry has only been around for two minutes. And it can't last. All these fuckers at the majors know the game's up, they're just squeezing out all the drops while they can."

Jacob didn't like the sound of this. "Yeah, but that's what we want isn't it? A record deal. The chance to... well, have people hear the songs."

“If a record company wants to give us money then great, but that’s not the end in itself. I want to write the most challenging, awe-inspiring, scary, and beautiful music in the world – I want to write the best fucking album ever made. I’m aiming for nothing more, nothing less.” The opening bars of Bjork’s *Batchelorette* rose from the juke box speakers. “Like this, Jacob. Couldn’t you just die happy if you’d created something as articulate and complete as this?” Reilly leant back in his chair, raised his eyes to the ceiling, as if to drink in the music.

“Reilly?”

“Yes Stevie.”

“You’re a pretentious twat sometimes, you know that?”

Jacob doubled up, the joke’s impact being amplified by the fact he had a mouthful of beer. Damn it, spilt a bit.

Reilly didn’t take his eyes off the ceiling, calmly shooting back, “Call me what you want mate. Especially pretentious. I love it. Pretentious is a word used by people who listen to David Gray. It’s the word people resort to when something is just too hard for them to understand.”

This irked Stevie. “I tell you what I understand,” he said, “a drummer, a bass player, a shit hot lead guitarist and a kick arse front man. Big tunes, energy – fucking rock ‘n’ roll.”

Jacob knew what Stevie was really getting at. There was some history here. A few years ago, Stevie and Jacob had formed a band. Jacob played the guitar hero and Stevie the charismatic vocalist. This was back when Oasis ruled the world and Stevie was definitely Mad For It. It was Stevie’s show. He roped in a couple of scousers, names long since forgotten, to play bass and drums. He insisted on the band name Mirage, developed a bizarre simian swagger and started writing songs with titles like *Hey come on now*, *Walk this world*, and *Don’t bring me down, man*.

Jacob had liked the first Oasis album as much as anyone but didn't really want to sound like them. For him, this was a chance to jam a bit and maybe play some gigs. His heart was never really in it, and he still felt bad about it. Stevie had paid for weekend long sessions at the Drumbank rehearsal studios and bought a dazzling array of PA equipment, mikes, and digital effects processors. Jacob's interest began to wane when it became clear that these gizmos were solely for the use of the front man. Jacob and the scousers would manfully hold the songs together with cheap guitars and drums hooked up to 12 inch practice amps, while Stevie stood in front of an 8 foot PA stack booming out his nasal cod-mancunian vocals, eighty quid tambourine in hand.

Reilly had missed out on the Mirage experience first hand, but on hearing Jacob's stories begged for a copy of the demo tape. He still played it once a month or so and would cry with incredulous laughter every time. His favourite track was *Tomorrow people*. The chorus ran, "*Yeah, tomorrow people, in the sky now, come on now, tomorrow's just begun...*"

Mirage disbanded after about six weeks. Jacob knew it was time to go when he looked up during a song to see Stevie with his arms behind his back, head cocked up towards the mike in full Liam Gallagher pose, checking himself out in the full length mirror he'd started to bring to rehearsal. Jacob told Stevie that they had musical differences. Stevie took it quite well, acted the jilted lover for a while but seldom brought it up again.

"Jesus wept! Who put this shite on? I'm not listening to this." Bjork had been replaced by Reef. Reilly slammed down his pint and headed for the door. He stood outside, indignantly checking his watch.

"There goes a man who really needs to chill out a bit," said

Stevie, “needs a girlfriend or something.”

Jacob laughed. “Between you and me I think he’s, er, having a few problems with his brain. I mean he’s always had tendencies, but it’s getting a bit much.”

“He’s not mental. Not violent or anything. He’s just eccentric.”

“Well he’s a fruitcake alright, but he’s a great songwriter... er, not that you’re not.”

Stevie ignored Jacob’s faux pas. “I know he can sing, but I thought he just sat around playing on the Playstation all the time?”

Jacob had been planning to keep his cards close to his chest on Reilly’s new songs. He’d been messing around in nearly-there bands for long enough to know never to shoot his mouth off. It always came back to bite you. But what the hell.

“Not this week. I don’t know what brought it on, but he’s been writing like a demon. He phoned in sick every day, locked himself in the flat and went for it. Fifteen songs and I’m not shitting you Stevie, they’re the real thing. I mean, I was blown away by these songs. He’s really pushed himself.”

“What’s it sound like? Fucking clever-clever art school rock I bet.”

“No not at all – it’s just acoustic guitar and vocals. Nirvana *Unplugged* kind of sound. But there’s this... I’ll probably sound like a wanker here, but there’s this... purity to these songs. That bit of magic you can’t fake. There’s this ache in the vocals. It’s bruised, beautiful, it’s fucking transcendent.” There, he’d shot his mouth off. Shit. Stevie raised an eyebrow. Jacob took this as a queue to add a disclaimer. “I mean, I might be wrong, I’ve only heard the tape once. It’s very raw. I’ll need to do a lot of work on the arrangements, get the drums programmed, we’ll need to completely re-record it all.”

A familiar voice approached, singing along to Reef. It was little Alex, sweeping the pub for empty glasses. He saw Jacob and Stevie. “Alright, lads?”

Jacob raised his glass.

“Alex! The son I never had,” said Stevie.

Alex laughed nervously. “Having a good night?” he asked.

“Good mate,” said Stevie, “but is there any chance of table service?”

Alex missed the joke, shooting Stevie a bemused look. “No mate, you order at the bar. Are these dead?” he said, pointing at the empties.

“Yeah,” replied Jacob.

“Right, see you later. Take it easy.”

The pub was full now, an hour until last orders. The queue at the bar was four deep. Stevie was out of Becks, “Jacob, do you fancy moving on somewhere else. Down the Hobgoblin?”

Jacob froze. “Oh, no. Don’t fancy it. Here’s fine. You want a beer, I’ll get them.”

Stevie persisted. “Come on, I told a mate of mine I might see her down there tonight. Let’s get Reilly and go.”

“No, not the Hobgoblin, Reilly and I are kind of, well, barred.”

“Barred? Since when?”

“Last week.”

Stevie laughed. “Let me guess, Reilly slapped someone for saying the Doors were better than the Velvet?”

“No, no. Nothing like that.” Jacob was cringing as he recalled the details. He’d kind of been hoping to never mention it again, he hoped that silence would erase the humiliation somehow. Maybe it would help to tell Stevie.

“We went down there on Sunday lunchtime for a cheeky pint, but you know how it is, the beer tastes good, you get another

and the next thing you know you're trolleyed and it's only three-thirty or something. Anyway, Reilly's being calm and pretty funny, not like tonight. It's all good. But then I mention that *Godzilla's* on TV that night."

"What that fucking cartoon, with that little knob Godzooky and that?"

"No, the film. You must have seen it. Loads of special effects, *Godzilla's* running around Manhattan twatting skyscrapers and trashing everything."

"Oh yeah. I know it."

"So Reilly just turns. Like that," Jacob clicked his fingers for emphasis, "and starts ranting about US imperialism and stuff. He's saying that September 11th was just a Hollywood fantasy come true and he's getting really loud. There's all these people having a quiet pint, reading the Sunday papers or whatever, looking around at us and getting really freaked out."

"Fantastic!" Stevie was loving this.

"So he finishes his rant, goes to drink his pint, and I'm thinking – thank fuck he's shut up at last. But then he takes a swig of his beer, puts the pint down, climbs up on the table, and shouts..." Jacob's face screwed up into a ball of tight embarrassment as he remembered. Stevie was giggling in anticipation. He asked, "What? What did he shout?"

"He shouted, 'Ladies and gentlemen. Me and my friend Jacob here need your help. We are now going to march down to the American Embassy and burn the fucker down. Why? For the government's complicity in the events of September 11th, and for their subsequent empire-building in the name of peace. Who'll join me? Who'll join me?'"

Stevie let out a roar of laughter at this, his eyes moistening. "Jacob, stop. Tell me you're making this up. This is fucking brilliant."

“So anyway, of course he gets no response, then the landlord comes over, really calmly, and says, ‘Sir, three things – firstly, get off my table before you break it. Secondly, you’re in Bristol, there is no American embassy. And finally, get out of my pub, neither of you are welcome here again.’”

“Classic, I wish I’d been there! Why didn’t you tell me?” asked Stevie, now clutching his stomach, as if in pain.

“Why do you think, it was humiliating.”

“So I assume he didn’t watch *Godzilla* when you got in.”

“He watched it from start to fucking finish. Taped it too. Screaming obscenities all the way through he was. He’s got a load of those blockbusters on tape. You should see him watching *Air Force One*, he’s practically foaming at the mouth.”

The Reef track finished, and Reilly was back at the table. Stevie stood up, bear-hugged him and informed him he was a gentleman, a loan crusader, an inspiration. Reilly looked confused, but took Stevie’s words at face value, thanked him and took a seat. Stevie got the next round, more Stella with Rum and Coke chasers. Jacob’s nerves eased, the alcohol and Stevie’s presence soothing him.