





Focch aff!

No, you fuck off.

Looch jus ge'me a focchn pint.

No, you've had y'ticket I dunno how many times.

*No foccher gev me no ticcher, I barred meself cchosa
tha ccchont.*

What?

Donsher wha me ye—

Not this time. Not with this hangover. I came out from behind the bar and went to open the door. Eddie must've thought I was going for him cos he backed up and took himself out. I followed, trying to keep my distance so I didn't have to smell him. Outside, he stood in the middle of the street, hands fumbling for his tobacco tin but eyes, unfocused, in my direction. I leant on the doorframe, trying to look casual.

Focchn tell youse sumert, y'little cchont. I wz focchn



drinch'n'ere foreyuzborn.

Really, yeh?

*Focchn chhnt uwa landlord fchn rhunedafcchinpub
n'fcchnnWHUUU!*

He was interrupted by a dirty blue transit van bipping its horn, bumper inches from him. He span round towards it, throwing two fingers up at the windscreen.

FOCCCH AFF YA CCHONNT!

The driver's door flew open. Eddie's raised hand turned into a limp shield against the red mist about to engulf him. It was Kronenbourg Kev. Eddie was fucked.

*S-s-sorry, s-s-ssohr, s-sohr, dint rearlyse twuz yo'zz—
sohrr—*

He reeled backwards to the far side of the road, tripped on the kerb and went flat on his arse. Kev loomed over him, arm raised, fist clenched.

D'YOU FOCKIN CALL ME YOU LIL TWAT?

S-s-sor—

FOCKIN STANDIN MIDDLE OF THE FOCKIN STREET!

S-sor I—

*FOCK OFF OUT OF IT FORE I BREAK YA FOCKIN
LEGS Y'CUNT!*

Kev's fist unclenched, and he span round to walk away. Just as sharp, he doubled back and booted Eddie in the bollocks. As he completed the full 360, he caught my eye.

FOCK YOU LOOKIN AT?



My macho adrenaline turned to burning fear, my gaze straight to the floor. As I dared to look back up, he was jumping in his van. Slamming the door, he flew off with a stamp on the accelerator, leaving the cars behind to trundle warily in his wake. Once they'd passed, I saw Eddie fumbling round for his tobacco tin, the contents now scattered in the gutter. With a wince, he stumbled to his feet and shambled off across the car park opposite the pub, probably to nurse his pride and bruised balls in Wetherspoons. They served anyone over there.

I needed a fag. Patting my pockets, I remembered leaving them in my coat and went back inside for them. I looked up at the clock behind the bar. Five past twelve. I'd been here less than ten minutes.

I'm starting my story here because it's one of the only interesting things that ever happened on a lunchtime shift. It was also a year to the day since I'd started at The King George. I felt quite proud for hanging in there. I was on til eight, a horrible long shift, but Jason had text at the last minute asking for cover – dickhead – and I could do with the money, else all my wages would be going back to the Gaffer for what he'd subbed me. My coat was still slung on the bar from when I'd rushed in on the hour – you were meant to turn up at quarter to, although you didn't start getting paid til midday. I got my ciggies, lighter and can of Blue Charge and stood in the porch between the bar door and the pavement. Sparking up, I watched Eddie, who was almost across the car park. I hoped he'd turn back so I could give him a cheery wave to piss him off, but he kept his head down, probably trying to fix a rollie with shaking hands.



It was a nice day, the kind when you know summer's on the way: bright but with a chill in the air. I would've enjoyed it more if I wasn't hungover and worrying about Kev. To be fair, I wasn't hanging as badly as I had been lately; those hangovers where you feel poisoned, like there's vodka flowing through your veins. This was more a sluggish, thirsty one. I hadn't text Gemma either, so I can't have been that pissed. Maybe I'd finally broken the habit?

It was a while before anyone else came in and, as usual, it was Cedric, with his walking stick and carrier bag. He came hobbling in and hung his stick on the edge of the bar.

Morning, Cedric! It was gone one, but I'd woken up late. Mild?

Ar.

You're in luck; you missed Eddie the Skip.

Thought the Gaffer give im is ticket?

Don't stop him though, does it?

Bloody nuisance, he is.

Ar. One eighty-five please, Cedric.

I don't wanna buy the bloody pub!

He said this most days. I put his pint on the bar, and he performed his usual theatre of lifting it off the brass tray, onto a beer towel and turning it slightly to wipe the overflow off. He put it back on the tray, went in the pocket of his grey old-man trousers and dumped a load of change on the bar.

Y'cn ave some o'this shrapnel back n'all.

He always paid in silver and coppers; fuck knows where he got



them all from. As I sifted through the pile, looking for the twenties and fifties – I wasn't counting his pennies for him – he tapped the side of his pint with a long fingernail.

See this [tap tap] I can get this for one [tap] pound [tap] eighty [tap tap] down The Midland Red.

Really? (Well tap tap fuck off down there then.)

Tell that to that gaffer [tap tap] uh'yourn.

I'll mention it at the next AGM.

The what?

Nothing.

I finished counting the money and scraped it off the bar to put in the till. With a sigh, Cedric swept the rest into his hand and back in his pocket. Pint in one hand, bag and walking stick in the other, he plodded to his seat in the corner and sat looking miserably through the *Daily Mail*.

After him, it was always Arthur Guinness. Arthur was cut from a similar template to Cedric: no stick, but always a flat cap and green-grey anorak. He had a pale, open-mouthed, slightly breathless look. He never ordered his drink, just seemed to agree when you asked, *Half a Guinness?*

Maybe he came down every morning thinking, *Now come on, Arthur, today's the day you're going to order that glass of shiraz, not just keep letting them give you Guinness. You hate the bloody stuff!* If he did, he was screwed cos soon as I saw him dodder past the windows, I had half a Guinness under. The Gaffer was always onto us about waste, so I wasn't chucking it.

Once Arthur had got his drink, he'd slowly turn, looking over at Cedric in the hope of saying hello. Cedric never looked, so



he'd sit down in front of the bar. The pair would nurse their drinks and loneliness – Cedric engrossed in the paper, Arthur gawping into space. Both would sigh loudly at intervals – Cedric in the hope of inviting questions on the article about immigrants or the BBC he was reading, Arthur in a, *Well I'd love a chat, but no one wants to talk to poor old me*, way. When Siobhan did the days, I'm sure she talked to them. Mind you, she probably chatted to the fruit machine if there was no one in.

What will have happened after that is, well, fuck all for the best part of an hour. I stocked up the crisps and flicked through the papers (we always had the *Mirror* and the *Mail*). Then Tony came in. Tony was an odd fucker, a travelling salesman who, judging from his endless parade of paisley ties, left for work in 1987 and hadn't been home to change. His hairstyle was even older, a feathery concoction that, like his beard, was greying. No one was quite sure what he sold, but anyone who went near him knew his patch (the Midlands and North Wales), every A-road he took to get there and how quickly he'd got to the pub.

I'd do a Carling and chuck a bag of plain on the end of the bar as soon as his old Toyota zoomed onto the small car park, but he'd still call, *The usual* as he strode in, taking off his grey suit jacket to reveal a short-sleeved blue shirt with sweat patches.

Anything else?

A tenner out the till?

He said that every time too. I'd run out of reactions other than ignoring it. He'd sit at the end of the bar, have four Carlings, four bags of plain crisps, announce he had an imminent meeting in Uttoxeter or similar and zoom off.

That, a couple of fag breaks, a bag of crisps and maybe some



passing trade from a random alcy or OAP kept me occupied til three. Although, on this particular day, not busy enough to keep Kev off my mind. I stared out vacantly across the car park opposite, imagining scenarios where he came in and leapt over the bar at me or called me a useless prick, but where I told him to fuck off and glassed him.

He came in not long after three, and there was no glassing or mention of our earlier exchange. Instead, it was the old resolution of being extra polite to each other.

See the kick in the bollocks I give im? he enthused out of nowhere on his third pint. Little prick wound me right up. I was ripping a kitchen out over by Winson Green. Them units come out fockin quick, I can tell ya!

Nodding and murmuring politely kept me from clock-watching til four, when Siobhan came in.

I don't know how I'd describe myself so that you could easily categorise me. Like, if I said that I used to sit at the front of the class in school, or always sit on the upstairs back seat of the bus, you'd have an idea of who I am. But I've never had a preference for where I sit in any situation, as long as I don't have my back to the room. Anyway, you'll work out more about me as the story goes on. My point is that I can tell you about Siobhan and you'll know exactly who I mean: not big but not thin, with mousey-blond hair always scraped and sprayed into a huge, tight bun. She'd worked at The George two years, and it was made for her. She was a mother-hen type: twenty-one and childless but with the talk and mannerisms of a forty-something mom-of-ten. The threat of quick temper surrounded her. She lived with her fella, who no one ever saw, in a flat over Castle Vale way. They were engaged but she never talked about planning a wedding, only leaking washing machines, rent and



other alien concepts. I'd tried wanking over her but didn't fancy her.

Her taxi pulled up, and she rushed in in a flurry of hellos to the regulars. We made eye contact, but she didn't acknowledge me until she was behind the bar and her coat was off.

Hi-yaa.

Alright, mate.

Quiet innit?

Fuckin dead as ever.

Dumping her large handbag by the side of the glass washer, she made herself a coffee from the machine in her own big, round flowery Poundland mug and stood cupping it close.

Anything happened?

Nah— oh... fuckin Eddie the Skip tried coming in.

Nooo.

Yeh, I fucked him off and then he was outside giving it the biggun and I was going like fuck off you twat and then fuckin Kev comes along.

Kev?

I gestured as subtly as I could towards Kev, who was still behind me at the bar.

Oh yeh, yeh.

And Eddie tells him to fuck off.

Siobhan's eyes widened. He never!

Yeh, so, I lowered my voice, Kev jumps out his van and



goes for him.

Nooo. Did he hit him?

Nah, well, give him a kick in the balls. Had a go at me too.

You? What the?

Ah he just goes, 'What you looking at?' Then he sped off.

He alright with you now?

Oh yeh, it was all fine, said he went to rip some kitchen out, proper angry, like.

Fighting again I hear, Kevin? she called over my shoulder.

Kev looked up with a short laugh. Ha! E told you bout silly bollocks earlier?

Naughty boy! she said, without sounding serious.

I said, Ello, sexxaayyyyy!

Spinning round, Siobhan semi-waddled to the end of the bar where a gaggle of regulars always stood early evening – all day on weekends. Only two were in at the moment: Paul and Home Brew.

Hello, boys, she chirped. Are we all well?

All the better for seeing you n'them big tits, hahaha!

Erm, can we behave please tonight, Mr Paul?

We was pissed last night weren't we, bab?

What, you two been on a date? laughed Home Brew.



Chance'd be a fine thing. The fella never takes me out.

I'll tek yer out, bab. We'll go doggin up Barr Beacon.

Hahahaha.

Classy as ever.

So who was pissed last night then? You two?

Nah, me'n'Wicksy. I was meant to be goin ome for eight. Fuck me, we had a few den't we, bab?

You certainly did. Double GnTs these two, Home Brew.

Oof.

Mate, I was on a fuckin roof half-seven this morning.

Coorrr, fuck that!

That job up past the Beggars? Tell you, mate, the fuckin sweat puttin them tiles on? Fuckin pourin out. I had to go ome at twelve, get me head down for an hour.

Same again tonight then?

Nah son, fuck that! It's a couple, a Chinese and goodnight Vienna for me.

Bout Wicksy, spoke to him today?

Ha, get this right? Right? He was meant to be out first thing too, right, out Lichfield somewhere pricing this big job up. Ten o'clock this morning e's text me, right, going, 'Just got out of bed. Fucked.' Just like that, haha. Paul underlined the air in front of him. FUCKED.



Hahahaha! He not been in then?

Won't be out tonight, son. Won't be out the fuckin week the money we spent last night.

Get through a bit?

Fuckin casino til God knows when.

Fuckin ell. Again?

Tellin you mate, it's gotta stop. Paul drained the last of his glass. No good mate, s'gotta stop.

Siobhan reached for his glass. Another?

Please, darlin. Paul reached into the pocket of his jeans. He nodded to Home Brew on his left. Better get this reprobate here one n'all.

And so went the last half of the shift: Siobhan, Paul and Home Brew in their triangle of tips, innuendos and one-for-the-roads. When I finished, Ian came on. Siobhan hated Ian. I mean, I couldn't stand him, but I couldn't match her venom. Ten to eight, she saw him coming across the car park.

Oh fuckin hell, here he comes.

Who? Oh, Action Man.

Four hours of complete and utter bullshit. I can't do it, mate; I just have to zone out. All his shit about the army and do I know this and that and this is how you pour beer. Excuse me, love, she wagged her finger like she was on American telly. You didn't even know what a lager dash was when you started here. Prick.

There was a pause as her wrath rippled out across the bar.



Feel better for that?

Yes, mate, sorry, I just... RRRRR! When he's about... I was tellin the fella last night that—

Evening, boys and girls, lads and lasses, how are we?

Ian was behind the bar with a grin on his pockmarked face. The measure of the man was that this was 2005 and he still kept his mobile – a brick of a thing – in a leather holder on his belt. An implausibly large bunch of keys hung, jangling, from the other side.

Alright? I mumbled. Siobhan said nothing.

Cor, s'abit quiet in ere, innit?

You don't say, she muttered as she made herself another coffee.

Who's finishing now?

Me.

Me n you then, Shivvy.

Hooray, she intoned. She hated being called Shivvy.

Ian took an exaggerated look around. *Corrr, don't need two of us tonight does it, bab? If I were the Gaffer I'd say you get off and I'll see to the rest of it.*

Hmmm, yeh.

I'd grabbed my phone and fags; I wasn't hanging around. *Well, see you later!*

Siobhan glared at me with wide don't-leave-me-with-this-cunt eyes. *Not having a pint?* she asked, loudly.



Nah, not tonight mate, I was pissed last night. Livin off me tips til tomorrow.

I'll buy you a drink.

Nah nah, I've got the money but—

Just have a drink, kid, piped Ian, as he poured a pint down the other end of the bar.

(No one asked you, you bell-end.)

Come on, hair of the dog, Siobhan said, already reaching for a Carling glass.

I gave up the pretence. *Oh, fuckin hell, alright.*

Good boy.

Last orders and four pints later, I was on the phone upstairs to the Gaffer advancing twenty quid out my wages: some more fags from the machine, one more pint and maybe a couple in Wetherspoons.

Paul and Home Brew had gone. I never drank with them anyway, didn't know what to say to them. There were a few randoms in and a couple of regulars to have kind-of-conversations with. But after a while, they descended into awkward silence, so I just sat at the bar, rifling through old messages. No one had text all day.

Ian was smiling again. *Thought you weren't stopping?* He was talking to me, but his voice was aimed at everyone else.

I shrugged. *Well... fuck it... Siobhan's fault.*

Siobhan looked up from her phone. *Don't blame me.*



You said stay and have a drink.

A drink. That's singular. The rest is up to you. And I guess you're going over Wetherspoons?

You coming?

Oh God no, I've got the fella at home, ain't I? He's gotta be up at half-five. They're down near Cheltenham somewhere this week.

You never come out. I never talked to her so needily, but I'd stopped caring.

I don't do going out in the week cos I'm always here. I only like going up town or clubbing anyway. Classy bird, me.

I was up for more drinking. More importantly, I didn't wanna go home. But I was stranded, pissed up on a Tuesday in Sutton Coldfield. Why did I never go to bastard uni? Fuck it, Wetherspoons it was.

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