

A Snowball in Hell

Christopher Brookmyre

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Extract

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LITTLE BROWN

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I

The Great Grease-Tailed
Shaven Pig Hunt

Death notices

Ladies and gentlemen, roll up! Roll on up! Step inside!

You'll find it all in here, you've never seen anything like it, I promise you.

Oh, what a show awaits you, roll up!

You want sick jokes? You want vicarious excitement? You want prurient voyeurism? You want emotion-by-proxy? You want the morally insulated buzz of seeing *other people* behave appallingly? You want sex? You want clashing egos? You want bitching, scheming, clawing, back-biting? You want deceit? You want betrayal? You want violence? You want horror? You want balletically choreographed and spectacularly executed brutality? You want anguish, suffering, humiliation? You want blood? You want death? You want murder?

And you want all of that delivered neatly in a package that lets you lap it up but still feel good about yourself?

Course you fucking do! You're British!

So step right this way! Roll up! Log on! Download the podcast! Tune in! Sky-Plus it, so you can replay the best bits!

It's all here, I tell you. A freak show like nothing you've seen before.

But don't worry, it's perfectly safe. The weirdos, the psychos, the nutters and perverts are all safely insulated on one side of the glass, one side of the CRT, the TFT, the LCD.

Yeah.

Your side.

Napoleon really nailed the British psyche with his 'nation of shopkeepers' remark. He didn't merely mean to disparage our modest ambitions and cowering insularity: he truly understood that what went on in those shops defined us more than what went on in our parliaments, palaces or places of worship. His perceptiveness and indeed outright prescience is vindicated in that the quintessential shop he envisaged hadn't even come

along yet: the local newsagent, wherein we purchase our beloved tabloids, and over whose counter, accompanied by smiles and please-and-thank-yous and self-satisfied civility, passes the judgmental gossip, envy-driven spite, petty-minded prejudice and that secret delight, that most deliciously savoured hypocrisy, a wee bit of postured outrage.

A nation of shopkeepers, yes, serving a nation of curtain-twitchers: hermetically sealed behind the glass as they spectate upon an absurdly hallowed elite whose lives mean more to them than their own timorous limbos. Never really doing, never really being, always merely looking on, watching other people fight, watching other people fuck. Vicariously living their lives through the attention-gluttonous conduct of the crass and vulgar, and worse, of cyphers just as dull as themselves, but upon whom this latter-day sanctified status of 'celebrity' has been conferred merely by the act of being spectated upon, after which every aspect of their future lives is considered valid and eligible for presentation to the watchers behind the glass.

And listen, listen to that sound this nation of curtain-twitchers makes as it gazes, rapt. It's like the humming of tens of millions of little cicadas in concert, so get yourself close to just one window and concentrate: isolate the sound. Hear it? Yes, there it is: tut-tut. Tut-tut. For disapproval is the keystone: the pitifully unconvincing façade behind which they hide their pallid cowardice, the means by which they try to fool themselves that this emotion they are feeling is something other than jealousy. Tut-tut. It's the talisman that protects them from confronting the truth: that they also have all of the appetites, the lusts and hungers they profess to be disgusted by: they just don't have what it takes to feed.

That's why I've never exactly been inclined to hang my head in shame any time the newspapers called me a monster. I *was* a monster. I am a monster. But let's not pretend for a second that they anything other than fucking loved me for it. I'd have more respect for the cunts if, the next time a serial killer embarked upon his squalid pursuits, one of the tabloids officially sponsored him. They could be honest for a change, have a champagne celebration every time he killed again, in anticipation of their sales going up. Your Soaraway *Sun*: Proud Sponsor of the Summer 2007 Derbyshire Prostitute Slaughter

Spree. In tomorrow's *Mirror*: the only *official* coverage of the New Gay Ripper. They could run competitions, like the old spot-the-ball grids you used to get: 'Put your cross in the square on the map showing where YOU think the next mutilated corpse will be abandoned, and you could win a white Escort van, *the* vehicle of choice of several top serial kiddy-murderers!'

Those ridiculously excitable little midgets pulled the head off it every time I pulled off a job. For an industry that practically runs on moral opprobrium, I wasn't merely a tanker of fuel, I was an oil strike, a gusher of the black gold, a gift that kept on giving. They competed to say who hated me the most. I particularly relished the keyboard vigilante types, the ones who called *me* cowardly and wanked on about how much they'd like to be left alone in a room with me. (Careful what you wish for, children.) But deep down, I knew, they were grateful. Christ, look at where they're reduced to getting their moral impetus when I'm not around to provide it. Witch-hunting Jade Goody, I ask you. Almost as much invective spunked out over her as was ever expended on me, not to mention three times as much column acreage, when all she did was be herself – her charming, charitable, literate, intelligent and highly photogenic self – and in the process give the nation a collective showing up. I killed several hundred people, but I think I'd have won a popularity poll against her after Shettygate.

They called me a monster, but they lapped up my every performance. No show without Punch, after all, and my goodness, doesn't this nation of curtain-twitchers love a show.

So roll up, roll up, roll up! Ladies and gentlemen, step this way, and the best part is it won't cost you a thing. The only price is what you're admitting about yourself, and that's no price at all, because we both already knew that about you anyway.

Inside is the reality show you *really* want to see, the star-studded entertainment you're truly craving when you're forced to settle for all that insipid fly-on-the-wall tedium.

It's called *I'm a Celebrity and I'm Never Getting Out of Here*.

I really believed I had given up all this sort of thing, you know. A retirement self-imposed largely, I admit, for reasons of self-preservation.

I had a very disastrous and very public failure back on September the sixth, 2001, since which I have endeavoured – most of the time, at least – to maintain the extremely low profile that a widespread belief in one’s being deceased affords. The mercy for me, I suppose, was that five days after my snafu at Dubh Ardrain, it was wiped off the news pages and consequently all but erased from public consciousness by events that told me unarguably that the whole game had changed anyway. Talk about burying bad news – New Labour’s spin-meisters couldn’t possibly compete with the way serendipitous happenstance delivered me my consolation prize. A thwarted terrorist attack on a remote hydroelectric facility in the middle of salmonshire was a big story, especially accompanied by the revelation that it had been the work of the notorious terrorist-for-hire known to police across the globe as the Black Spirit. But there was more: it also emerged that the international contract killer’s true identity was that of one Simon Darcourt, Glasgow-born oil-industry executive believed to have perished in the ScanAir Flight 941 bombing over Norway, a terrorist atrocity subsequently attributed to the Black Spirit and thus preceding the Madrid cinema bombing as his acknowledged major-league debut.

Clearly a rather cringe-worthy few days to be me. But once somebody had gone to the bother of hijacking four passenger jets, using two of them to bring down two of the most globally recognisable buildings in one of the most populous and absolutely the most famous city on the planet, killing upwards of three thousand people, before belly-flopping a third airliner into the single largest and most heavily defended building in the known universe for an encore, I realised my own recent travails had been relegated to chip-wrapper status.

I realised also that, even if I had pulled off Dubh Ardrain, it would have been merely a high note to bow out on. September the eleventh would have brought down the curtain upon my stint on the world stage either way.

I was a professional: contract terrorism, some called it; my services available to any individual or organisation who had the contacts to procure them and the budget to meet the price. I’ll admit the bottom line was important, but my most compelling

motivation in those days was the challenge of pulling it off. I had professional pride, yet it might be more accurate to say, like the Victorian gentleman-amateur, I played for the love of the game. There was no place for me in that game after September the eleventh. The field now belonged solely to the new breed of Islamist fanatics, and they didn't need hired help when they had a host of disposable brainwashed drones to deploy as non-payment-seeking mayhem-delivery systems.

What also became dishearteningly clear in the aftermath was that from here on in, the Incredible Exploding Arabs would be the only show in town. The USA, having finally endured the indignity of terrorism curling a very large jobbie in *their* fridge for a change, belatedly decided it was unequivocally a Bad Thing. As opposed to an Occasionally Useful Thing when the CIA were trying to destabilise or prop up any given regime in the Middle East or Central America, or a Romantic Misty-Eyed Thing when Noraid were filling buckets to aid 'the struggle' back in the Oul' Country.

I had worked for a variety of, frankly, interchangeable ethnic and political separatists, usually with more money than they had any sense of what they might plausibly ever achieve. Half of them were just playing at soldiers, kidding themselves they were part of some great destiny. The other half knew deep down that their struggle was futile, but in the red-misted tantrum of their frustration, wanted to get a few kicks in at Mummy before they inevitably got their bottoms smacked and sent early to bed. I don't know which constituency was the more pathetic, but I did know that the smarter ones would realise it was now time to cash in whatever chips their armed struggle had accrued and start playing politics with them.

As a theatre of war, terrorism was no longer going to have roles for such minor players.

I did once carry out a contract for an Islamist cell, when I bombed the US Embassy in Madrid. (It was described as 'a cowardly attack via the back door' - or more accurately the back wall, which conveniently abutted a cinema complex.) Back then, so many such groups were disparate, discrete and frequently conflicted, each in dispute with all the rest over whose strain of fundamentalism was the most pure. This particular

faction wanted to strengthen their hand at the Islamist nutter table, and reckoned a high-profile attack would be the very dab. They had the funds but not the infrastructure, which was where I came in.

Al Qaeda is usually described as a network, but with 9/11 it was obvious that they had discovered global branding, corporate synergy and vertical integration. They would *not* be outsourcing any more, would not have dealings with anyone who was not a fellow fundamentalist headcase, and had in any event no need for mercenaries when there were thousands of idiots willing to do the work for free.

My skills were not only redundant, they were arguably anachronistic. Any fucking lunatic can take out a target if he's prepared to sacrifice himself to do so. But never mind the skill, where's the fucking fun in that? The real talent, the real *panache* is in being able to pull off the job then get away clean and clear so that you can trouser the greenback and read the headlines.

I kept reading about the daring and mental fortitude of the 9/11 pilots, but point of fucking order: mental fortitude implies a cogent decision-making process, which is patently not going on if you believe that flying a jetliner into a skyscraper is your fast-track portal to paradise, where you'll get to pump six dozen assorted teenage virgins. They weren't mentally strong, they were deluded beyond the point of insanity. And what is it with these fucking people and teenage virgins anyway? Have they ever actually shagged one? I have, more than once, and none of the encounters would appear on my list of sexual highlights. Why wouldn't they rather their paradise be hoaching with women who genuinely know how to fuck? Unless, of course, it's that they're holding out high hopes for that first-time tightness, due to their dicks being so small that shagging an experienced woman is like flinging a sausage up a close.

I digress, however, putting off the contemplation of my own embarrassment. My hubris: the sin of pride. Professional pride is a guarantor of discipline, of protocol, checks, balances and downright fastidious attention to detail. Personal pride, however, is a decadent luxury that I ought to have known better than to indulge during anything other than my spare time. In striving to pull off my greatest achievement, I took my eyes off where

they needed to be and suffered instead my calamitous, career-ending fuck-up.

It all came down to a chance encounter with someone from my student years, someone who, like everyone else, believed me dead. Larry the Little Drummer Boy, I called him, aka Raymond Ash. I've had several years to contemplate just how statistically unlucky was this fleeting glimpse we shared at Glasgow Airport, but it's how you respond to the unexpected, even to the astronomically unlikely, that makes the difference between the professional who gets the job done and the whining loser who bitches about his luck. I know that now and I fucking well knew it then. I didn't panic: in a way, it would have worked out better if I had. Instead, I got cocky.

I knew I couldn't afford to let him live, but I should simply have put a bullet in him before he could tell anyone he'd seen me, then disappeared his corpse. Instead I tried to get cute, used him to mislead the authorities, telling myself that this was an integral part of the plan, when it was really an act of reckless arrogance that I couldn't afford. He saw me at the airport, but I made sure he never saw me during his consequent abduction, which I ordered. I guess I was relying upon the cops thinking he was deluded about having seen me, just shaken up by the other things that had subsequently happened to him and pointlessly linking one to the other without any evidential foundation. I let him escape in order that he might lead the authorities to decoy information, and planned to tidy him up as a loose end later, while the cops were busy picking through the wreckage at Dubh Ardrain. But I underestimated him, and certainly underestimated the risk of putting myself in the arena with someone who knew just a little too much about how I think. Foolishly, arrogantly, I handed him the advantage, and he handed me my arse. Him and that cop, the X Woman.

I lost every one of my crew and was lucky - extremely lucky - to escape with my life. Worst of all, my identity was compromised. The police and very soon the whole world knew my real name, my face, and the fact that I did not, after all, perish in the ScanAir bombing.

But maybe, just maybe, there was a subconscious reason I

was so reckless. Maybe deep down, as I have often pondered, I knew my cover was irredeemably blown when Larry's eyes met mine, so briefly but crucially, at Glasgow Airport. Perhaps I knew that it was the beginning of the end of that chapter of my life: that Dubh Ardrain was going to be the Black Spirit's farewell performance, one way or the other. Nobody likes to bow out after a failure, but you have to ask yourself whether that failure is a sign that you're not as sharp as you once were, and thus that the time for bowing out is in fact overdue.

The silver lining was that the world believed me dead once more. It was a chance to begin again, to commence a new chapter; though necessarily a quieter and less dramatic one. I had always planned for this. You don't go into any job without knowing how you plan to get out, and furthermore how you plan to get out if that route is suddenly cut off. Just like I had a back-up passport and route out of the UK for if Dubh Ardrain went sour, I also had my short-notice retirement package in place for if I didn't have time to fade away on my own schedule. For years I had not just an identity, but a house, money, a *life* set aside, in stasis, ready for me to step into if it suddenly came time to disappear.

The cops traced me to two houses in France and recovered around eight million euros from various accounts, but they recovered only what I intended them to if ever I had to invoke my emergency escape plan. The assets they got were the larger part of my holdings, but I had always understood that to be part of the price I might have to pay in order for them to conclude that there was nothing more to be found and I wasn't coming back. However, merely being believed dead wasn't going to prove quite the same talisman it had before. There had been only a handful of people who remembered what Simon Darcourt looked like when I 'died' the first time. After Dubh Ardrain – for a brief few days, at least – I was on every front page and television screen in the world. That was why I needed surgery, as were the police's misapprehension to be corrected, my personal apprehension would surely follow. And make no mistake about this: it wasn't being caught by the cops I was worried about.

I have, in my life, once been in locked a jail cell, and once

been a guest aboard a billionaire's luxury yacht. It is the latter I am more concerned with ensuring never happens again.

You don't find a professional assassin via a sponsored link on Google. Nor was I out leafleting in ethno-political hotspots offering my services. There was a conduit, a very, *very* powerful conduit, a veritable ventricle through which an engorging volume of blood-stained commerce flowed back then, and no doubt still does. For a while I thought the way the game had changed might have impacted on him too, but it would have been like mere ripples beneath the hull of his vast, gleaming vessel. A man afloat on a sea of blood, always working to ensure that the flow is never stemmed, never missing an opportunity to siphon off some more, and inventively adaptable to an ever-altering environment.

For instance, he had noted the emotional impact of suicide bombings in conveying the strength of feeling that apparently motivated such acts, and the bastard successfully *marketed* the idea by procuring suicide bombers for terrorist causes insufficiently inspirational as to compel any of their adherents to play the human party-popper. However, at that time, suicide bombing was rare enough to still make people stop and ponder the enormity of such a sacrifice. Since then, the impact had been somewhat diluted by what you might call the Gynaecological Proliferation Effect: every cunt's doing it.

He told me the volunteers were 'those who were closest to their god', by which he meant aged and terminally ill individuals ensuring their families were looked after by committing highly conflagratory euthanasia. He may, I realise in retrospect, have been lying about the whole thing. I knew him as Shaloub 'Shub' N'gurath, but he was known to seldom, if ever, give himself the same name to two contacts. He was a man who understood not only the importance of anonymity, but the further effect of concealing himself behind a miasma of myths, rumours, counter-impressions and outright fear. I met him once and once only, before the first job he subcontracted me for, which was when, for all the myths and stories, I was made to understand one thing as fact.

'Professionals do not get caught,' he told me, sharing champagne on one of the sun-drenched, golden wood decks of his

ocean-going palace. 'However, I am experienced enough to know that nobody is perfect. Accidents can happen. How is it your own poet puts it, Mr Darcourt? *The best laid plans of mice and men . . .*'

'Gang aft agley.'

'Go often wrong, yes. The professional knows when the situation is retrievable and when it is not. If it is not, he knows when to walk away, and he knows to clean up the mess. If you compromise yourself, as far as I am concerned, you have compromised me. If you fear you are contaminated, it is your responsibility to amputate and cauterise before the infection spreads. You find yourself on the run? You do not run to me. If you can stay hidden, stay hidden, but always remember my people will be looking for you too . . .

'If the authorities reach you first, we will get to you wherever you are held. We will break you out if possible, to find out what you told them. If that's not possible, we can get to you inside. There's a lot of things we can do inside too, but ideally we'd bring you back to the boat.'

Did you spot the ellipsis? That's the occasion of some quality curtain-twitcher hypocrisy right there. Yeah, let's just leave it at three little dots, shall we? Because that's the part where he turned on the telly and showed me the hospitality I could expect if I ever found myself on board again. Go on, pretend you're relieved. You can tell yourself it was something best left to the imagination, meaning your sensitive wee self wouldn't even be capable of beginning to picture it. But truth is, you're disappointed that I was coy. You don't want three little dots. You want the gory details.

I saw, on video, a naked man strapped to a steel table, propped upright against a wall, while two guys in plastic coveralls bored holes in every part of his anatomy, using power drills so heavy-duty even these colossi needed two hands to heft them. Let me I assure you that those details remain the goriest I have ever witnessed, but time is marching on, otherwise I'd spare you - spare you? Ha! *Deny* you - nothing.

Suffice to say, it provided a compelling motivation, after Dubh Ardrain, to keep playing dead, and for the most part I did. I didn't entirely keep myself to myself, as any good serial killer's

neighbour might attest, but I was careful – usually – to leave no clues suggesting that Simon Darcourt was the author of those deeds. For the truth is, when you possess certain abilities, it is difficult to sit back and watch when you know they would make a difference. Sometimes, a sense of duty prevails. If there are things that truly need to be done, for the common good, and you have the wherewithal to accomplish them, then you could say there is little choice but to step off the bench. There *were* things that truly needed to be done, in as much as there were people who – let's be brutally fucking honest about it – truly needed killing. And don't even begin to argue with me over whether it was for the common good.

However, for me to step fully out of retirement has taken the inspiration of a very special individual, and though I can't truthfully present the common good as a central motive, it does feature as an auxiliary beneficiary. I can't reveal that person's identity quite yet, but I should at this point give a special mention to another remarkable individual with a figurehead role in this affair. There is one overseer, one mastermind of this game, operating at a far higher level than even Shub, who can seek you out when the time comes, no matter how well you've covered your tracks and regardless of where you've chosen to hide. Pale and skinny cunt with a very wicked sense of humour, on whose behalf I have carried out a lot of work over the years, and from whom I have accepted one final contract.

All those jobs, all those hits, all those years, and I never once received a death warrant in the form of a dossier in a manila folder like you see in the movies. Yet that was my cue to commence my current project: an A4-size file, containing every detail I needed, complete with ten-by-eight photographs. Small scale, really: single subject, just one individual who had to die, and it would be hard to find anyone who'd argue that this fucker didn't have it coming.

This is bigger than anything else I've ever attempted, and I'll have to cope with all of it alone; no back-up, no infrastructure, no second chances. Thus the planning has been exhaustive, the preparation meticulous and the inventory all but bankrupting, not that that will be a consideration in the end. For this is the most important job I've ever undertaken, as well as being

undoubtedly the last. I know that what I am commencing will blow my cover again, and how that must ultimately end, but I know also that it will be worth it. And besides, this time I'll have one hell of an out.

He wakes up in a hotel room, feeling very woozy. His throat's dry as a camel's fart, breath to match. He's got a bastard of a headache, though he can't remember what he may or may not have drunk last night – if in fact last night it was: he feels like he may have been asleep for days. He can't recall anything about the last time he was conscious, or even when that was.

Something feels wrong, something disorientating about his immediate environment. He places his feet down delicately on the floor, at which point he registers that it's a laminate and not a carpet. He squints, his eyes still blurry and not a little sticky from sleep. That's when he screws up his face, registering that the hotel room is not the one he remembers checking into. He looks at the bed, confirming it's a double, checking the far side for evidence of a second occupant, but it's not been slept in, the covers still neatly tucked under the mattress just south of the undisturbed pillows. So that's not it.

He's thirsty like never before in his life. There's a glass of water on a nightstand built into the headboard, and it's as he reaches for it that he notices a folder and a folded copy of a newspaper, *his* newspaper, as well as a remote for the TV. He takes the glass in his right hand and drains it in a parched chain of pulsing gulps, unfolding the tabloid with his left to reveal the front page. His face screws up again and he inadvertently dribbles some of the last gulp from his mouth as he takes in the headline, the picture, the splash bar trailing another story inside. This paper is from last year. What the fuck? He discards it and reaches impatiently for the remote, wincing as the suddenness of his movement exacts a price from somewhere in his skull.

His thumb tries several buttons before the TV responds, coming to life with a high-frequency static ping that causes his eyes to tighten shut for a moment. The TV is showing *Strictly Come Dancing*. He squints at it, checking for the marquee along

the bottom with the time and a channel sig that would contextualise the clip as part of a morning news show. There is nothing, just two dancing figures filling the whole screen. That's when he looks to his wrist, then around the room for where his watch might be. He has no idea what the time is. There's light behind the curtains, though his head isn't ready to have the sun blazing into his eyes, so he's not going to open them yet. He paws at the remote again, changing the channel. It shows the same thing. Maybe he just pressed the button corresponding to the channel that was already on. He locates the Channel Up button, gives it a push, then another, and another. There's nothing on but *Strictly Come Dancing*.

He ceases the frantic switching, now paying closer attention to what has been established as being the only programme available on the television. His mouth opens just a little, sign that he's realised more specifically what he's watching, and that it's not the new series, it's a repeat. It's the last series. The series *he* was on.

He doesn't like this. You'd think, wouldn't you, that someone of his make-up would be happy that he's on every channel, but instead he seems to find it disconcerting. Pity. He'll be on every channel again soon enough, for real, but he won't be watching when that happens.

He reaches for the folder now, his hand tentative in its final approach, like he's expecting a static shock from it. He's afraid of what he might find inside. He places it on the bedsheets and delicately takes hold of the top right corner, opening it like it's some centuries-old tome that might disintegrate. He uncovers a sheaf of A4 papers. They're all copies of his columns: mostly photostats, some printouts of the online versions. Paragraphs, individual sentences and isolated phrases are picked out in yellow highlighter. He looks at the pages like they're in Sanskrit or might be some alien artefact. He doesn't seem very reassured by such a familiar sight, familiar words. Starting to get scared now, which is odd, because the clippings all say he's fearless: Darren 'The Daddy' McDade, Britain's Most Fearless Columnist.

He's the scourge of scroungers, pummeller of paedophiles, a one-man border patrol repelling asylum-seekers, the valiant

rearguard resistance waging a guerrilla war against political correctness, the toast of white van man and the last advocate of that oppressed minority: the white middle-class heterosexual male. We're going to hell in a handcart, but it's our own fault for listening to the do-gooders and not being tough enough. Tough and fearless like The Daddy.

Some of the blockbusters that he found picked out in yellow in the clippings file:

Muslims are to the new century what Germans were to the last. It's not about a non-representative minority, it's about the majority's eager appetite for what this supposed minority is selling. The Germans bought into this myth of their destiny, time and again, until it was bloody well knocked out of them by John Bull. The Muslims are doing the same thing, with the same visions of world domination, and the same solution is called for. Like the guy who gets too mouthy down the pub, the earlier you give him a slap, the quicker he learns his place and the less chance of him trying it on later.

The inescapable truth nobody likes to bring up about asylum seekers – and I mean the precious few genuine ones – is that if they caused so much trouble in their home countries that they were forced to leave, why the hell would we want to let them start rabble-rousing afresh in ours? If you saw some drunken thug getting ejected from a pub for being out of order, you'd hardly invite him round to your house and tell him to make himself at home, would you?

It's ridiculous, but I'm not laughing.

They keep telling us 'Islam' means Peace. Well, I wish they'd all bloody well give us some.

I've come over all liberal. I've realised the true, genuine plight of the asylum seekers I've previously been so tough on.

They're on the run from a regime they can't live under: the regime of putting in a hard day's work for a hard day's pay. Happily for the oppressed, Britain offers asylum from such archaic, non-PC practices. The Land of the Free Handouts is

their hope and salvation, a land where they will no more face the threat of having to break sweat.

It's ridiculous, but I'm not laughing.

'Generalisation' is a word liberals use as a distraction to obscure the bleeding obvious. It's ridiculous, but I'm not laughing.

My heart was truly moved this week by the footage of those manacled prisoners in Guantanamo Bay. And the more of the bastards I see manacled, the more I'm moved. Apparently we're supposed to be concerned about their human rights. Seriously. It's ridiculous, but I'm not laughing. If it's all right with the muesli-munchers, we'll worry about preventing these scum from blowing up any more tube trains before we worry about their human rights. The truth is, loath as the hand-wringers are to admit it, you don't end up in one of those orange jumpsuits without a bloody good reason.

As far as I can remember, there has been no end of fat, sweaty, pish-stained, prematurely middle-aged arseholes seeking the cheap route to notoriety and populist approval by acting the keyboard hardman in a tabloid. Some of them were sad enough to believe their own shite, some thought they were just playing the game, posturing for effect or, even more pathetically, playing cheerleader for their proprietor's agenda. They were a pitiful breed of attention-seeking inadequates, little more than drunks shouting at the rain, deluding themselves that they were as tough as they talked. And like drunks, they were largely ignored. Best to give them their space and let them make tits of themselves, because they'll get moved on soon enough, only for an even more revolting specimen to take their place.

That was how it was meant to work, anyway, but that was before Darren McDade. That was before The Daddy inexplicably turned his very loathsomeness into a marketable commodity that made him a regular fixture on TV chat shows, comedy panel games, political discussion programmes - *Question Time*, for fuck's sake - and even, consecrating his loveable rogue status, as one of the celebrity contestants on that fossilised turd from

television's Mesozoic stratum, excavated and resurrected to stink anew: *Strictly Come Dancing*.

He had pulled off the audacious cake-and-eat-it strategy of acting like he was a knowing, wink-to-camera self-caricature when he was in TV-personality mode, yet still being able to deliver the hard line straight and true in the next morning's paper. 'String me up, it's the only language I understand': that was his signature hey-it's-all-just-showbiz quip, delivered with what was supposed to convey a good-humoured self-awareness but in practice barely masked a seething contempt for those to whom he clearly felt he owed no apology.

It wasn't a seamless transition between media and between personae, however. Prior to *SCD*, he had generally been confined to later-scheduled shows, so the decision to ratify him as a fitting personality for family entertainment drew quite a bit of flak, particularly coming shortly after his 'Muslims are the new Germans' article had succeeded (and let's not sell him short by suggesting it was anything less than his intention) in getting him reported to the Press Complaints Commission. However, it could be argued that the BBC would be on shaky fucking ground rejecting McDade for a family show while they continued to vomit cash all over that horrible little cunt Danny 'DJ' Jackson. Despite having built a career on pandering to sub-literate bigots, the Beeb were happy to let the Cockney mutant loose all over Saturday teatime, presumably on the understanding that he wouldn't be spewing out remarks about niggers and pakis in front of the kiddies. Thus it followed that McDade could be trusted to keep quiet about poofs and asylum seekers in between bouts of gracelessly hauling his pot-bellied little frame around a ballroom, all the while trying to see down his unfortunate partner's frock.

Besides, it was just spoilsports who were trying to stop him. He was a popular figure, after all. 'He only says what everyone else is thinking,' claimed his editor, Jeremy Seele, 'and in an age when people are gagged by political correctness, he's got the courage to wear his heart on his sleeve.'

He spreads the sheaf unintentionally with his right hand as he leans on it in his effort to climb gradually to his unsteady feet. He's decided he needs to physically explore the room,

maybe see if moving about the place shakes loose any sense of familiarity. He grimaces as he reaches a standing position, the ascent of a few feet proving slightly more of a change in altitude than his head can comfortably endure. He stands still for a few moments, like he's making sure he can manage that before trying anything as ambitious as walking. He's dressed in just a pair of pants, one of the leg-holes riding up his crack and exposing his left bum-cheek, a fold of his belly overlapping the elastic stretched around his abdomen. For a guy never done castigating the lazy, he's done well to disguise his athleticism. He turns slowly to his right and looks at the two doors: as with any hotel-room layout, the near one must lead to the bathroom and the far one to the corridor. He can't see a wardrobe or a chest of drawers. Bladder is very full. Time for a pee. Maybe his clothes are in the bog. He sighs and it turns into a yawn, even a bit of stretching going on there. Starting to come round. A pee, maybe a shower. He'll work this out after that. A mate taking the piss, perhaps?

He turns off the TV as he passes, and makes his way slowly towards the first door, gripping the circular handle. It doesn't move. He tries the other direction, still nothing. He gives it a dunt with his shoulder, then has a go at pulling and pushing the handle while twisting his wrist. The door remains closed.

The TV switches itself back on. He turns sharply to look at it, confirming where this sudden sound has come from. He sees himself on the screen, responding to the record low score the judges have handed down.

I saw it, it was a fucking injustice, mate. You were worth at least half a point more than that total.

The locked bathroom is not good, not good at all, and not just because he's realising how much he needs to pee. Could all be a joke, what with the *SCD* on telly, but something's telling him to worry. He goes for the other door. It's locked too. He stands back a second, breathes, tries again, in case he's just got himself in a state. No luck.

His attention turns inevitably to the curtains, the promise of light beyond, an answer to where the hell is he. He walks across the room, round to the other side of the bed, and pulls the right-hand edge of the right-hand curtain slightly away from the wall

so that he can just peek behind it. His face contorts in his consternation at what he finds; or rather what he doesn't, that being a window. He hauls the curtains apart and finds only a rectangular white plastic panel, illuminated from behind, and on top of this is a transparent laminated blow-up of another choice quote from his column.

The Daddy. More like the slightly strange unmarried uncle.

The press response plays out as I intended; the better to contextualise the truth when it emerges. Starts off as a bit of a kicker story, the other tabloids having their fun as it comes out that their rival's big-name columnist has gone awol. Lots of 'Jeffrey Bernard is unwell' references when his page has to be filled by some other cirrhotic twat while the paper's senior staff dispatch minions to scour every drinking hole in London in the hope of finding him before the competition do. By day three, Jeffrey Bernard on a bender has become Stephen Fry bailing out of that play. Police have gained entry to his home and reckon his passport is gone. It looks like McDade has left the country. Rumours abound. There is some deal afoot to switch papers. He is in bother with the Revenue. He is under cover, planning to sneak back into the UK by illegal means to show how easily our borders were being penetrated by asylum seekers .

I let it all simmer for four days, then post McDade's heart, pinned to his sleeve, direct to Jeremy Seele. I knew they'd get a DNA match, save me taking the risk of dumping the body somewhere they would find it. Then I wait for the presses to roll.

Funny, his paper comes over all coy and unsensational in announcing this unquestionably earth-shattering development. None of the ghoulish slavering over the visceral details that normally colours their reporting of such excitingly blood-drenched discoveries, nor the uninformed speculation about sexual depravities that may have preceded or even led to the grim deed. All the more admirably understated given that I had handed them a head start (or was it heart start?) on the competition, a genuine exclusive to splash. Have I succeeded in ushering in a new era of restraint and sensitivity in the British press's attitude to murder? I bloody well hope not, given what else I've got lined up. Of course, it soon emerges I had no reason

to worry. The rest of the press fail to suffer the same sudden bout of squeamishness, filling their boots with undisguised alacrity. Naturally, with no details other than what the police and McDade's employers are prepared to reveal, they have to fill the void with two things: constructing their own competing versions of the late Daddy's life, and speculating blindly about the manner and motive behind his death.

Very disappointingly, it takes two days before any of them show a sufficient knowledge of the history of their own profession as to recall that vital organs had been posted to the press during the hunt for Jack the Ripper. And again, they don't quite warm to the theme as much as one might expect. A murderer putting the press front and centre while invoking the most famous serial killer in British history? They should have been spraying their pants at the prospect of further atrocities. Amazing what a sobering effect it has on them to think that their profession might be the one being preyed on for a change, and that it is a different kind of whore who might find himself giving new meaning to the phrase 'newspaper hack'.

Yes, they might be a bunch of two-faced, back-stabbing twunts, but they can still pull together when facing a common threat. Spirit of the blitz and all that, gorblessem. Hence beaucoup quality po-faced revisionism in all printed recollections of the departed, facilitated by the impressively audacious hypocrisy only the British tabloids can truly pull off.

People will no doubt say I was sadistically cruel to the man, but for a few days at least, I turn him into a fucking hero: from a pot-bellied, beery-chopped little bigot into a paragon of British values and a legend of journalism. Oh, the humanity. What a tragic loss! All that charity work, apparently. (No specific charities are named, but that is surely down to his colleagues respecting his well-known modesty regarding such matters, rather than there not actually being one with any record of him having lifted a finger for.) A wonderful colleague to work with. Admired by his readers, feared by his enemies. And as for those accusations of minority-bashing and that slight blemish of being referred to the PCC, where it isn't Photoshopped out of the picture altogether, it is justified as stout-hearted, fearless defence of his principles. He called it like he saw it in the face of the

PC backlash; what you saw was what you got, didn't care if his views were fashionable or popular (yeah, right); unflinchingly endured the slings and arrows blah blah cliched blah. His paper even manages to wheel out his local Asian shopkeeper so that they can play the 'look, some of his best friends were darkies' card.

A man of principle, no matter what else anyone might say. That is the consensus. Love him or loathe him, you had to respect the fact that he stood by his beliefs. The phrase 'he wore his heart on his sleeve' is entertainingly conspicuous by its absence, but his journalistic heroism is rendered so unquestionable that they are all but erecting a statue to the prick.

For a few days.

I hold off until it has reached what I estimate to be its zenith before leaking the video on to the web. I time it for when I know the final editions have gone to print, so that the press are effectively a whole day behind the biggest story in the country - cutting them out of the news cycle and underlining their growing obsolescence.

It's funny watching McDade's newspaper trying to get the file-hosting sites to delete it. The same paper whose online edition runs links to the Saddam execution and hostage beheading videos. The best part is witnessing this endangered species of a medium doing a King Canute act in the face of the technology that is superseding it. There are no exclusives and no injunctions in cyberspace. Once the file is on the web, I know it will proliferate exponentially. Christ, b3ta.com are already Photoshopping image-captures from it for sick laughs before the first print response will hit the streets.

So let's go back to that video now, shall we? Okay, where had I paused it? Oh yes.

McDade stands back so that he can read the text.

How did we ever lose our moral grip to the extent that the muesli-munchers convinced us we need to be 'understanding' of murderers, rapists and other scum? Can you imagine trying to explain to school children that they mustn't step out of line because if they do, they'll get taken to one side and given counselling? Better still, can you imagine that classroom about

half an hour after that particular lesson has sunk in? Now fast forward to those same kids all grown up. 'I felt like shooting this jeweller and ripping off his store, but the threat of being sat down with a psychologist stayed my hand.' Don't do the crime if you can't face the sympathetic ear.

It's ridiculous, but I'm not laughing.

Criminals need to fear prisons. Prisons need to punish.

Who would you rather find yourself locked in a room with? A thug who knows anything he does to you will be paid back in years of hard time, hot sweat and cold fear, or one who knows the scariest thing he'll face as a consequence is a weekly session with a *Guardian*-reading sociologist called Quentin.

He stares at the panel for a few seconds. He recognises the words, doesn't have to read them all; he remembers. But he's starting to ask himself why he's seeing them in lights, and more pressingly, what significance they have to what he now understands is his captivity.

I let him ponder that for a while, long enough for him to try both doors again. His bladder's really insistent by this point. The doors remain locked. He tries to shoulder the one he reckons leads to the bathroom, then when that fails to budge, takes to thumping the one he has assumed to be the exit. There is, of course, no bathroom; and for this piece of excrement there is, most definitely, no exit.

At last, he speaks.

'Hello? Hello? Okay, come on, you've had your joke. Who's there? Come on, for fuck's sake, I need to piss.'

There's an edit on the video at this point, black screen captioned: 'Time passeth', with a digital clock fast-forwarded to show twelve minutes elapsing. It fades up the action again to show McDade pacing the carpet between the two doors.

'Listen,' he calls out. 'I need to piss, and if you don't let me out, I'm pissing on your fucking carpet, all right? I'm warning you.'

Yeah, he's giving out warnings at this point. Still the Daddy. 'Okay, that's it.'

With which he stands in one corner, gets out his piggly-wiggly little tadger and urinates copiously on to the laminated floor.

Another 'Time passeth' caption. This time six hours.

He's rather fraught when we see him again, sitting on the bed, biting his thumbnail and looking like he's thinking seriously about the comfort sucking it might once more afford.

A voice suddenly booms through the room, causing him to shudder and stiffen.

'Darren McDade,' it says. He looks around for the source, but it seems like it's coming from all directions at once. 'Are these your words?' I ask, and cue the lightbox to flash.

'Who's there?' he asks, getting to his feet.

'Are these your words?'

'Well of course they're my words, you know they're my cuntung words. Who the fuck is this?' He's trying to sound defiant; there's anger in there, but he can't quite disguise the fear.

'Read them aloud,' I demand.

'Listen, whoever you are, you've had your fun. But I'm warning you, I'll be having mine. Do you know who I... I mean, you should bloody well remember who I am. I've got a lot of friends in the police, cops fucking love me. And if you don't let me go right now, you'll be falling down a lot of stairs when they get you in custody, do you understand?'

Six more hours passeth. The floor getteth wetter.

'Read them aloud,' I request again.

He reads the passage perfunctorily, doesn't exactly sell it. But who needs to be an orator when the words themselves carry such weight. Oh, and when the words espouse such sincerely held principles.

The TV switches itself back on, no longer showing *SCD*. Instead, it displays CCTV footage of a tall, heavy-set but muscular, shaven-headed white male, stripped to the waist the better to show off a body, arms and scalp so oversubscribed with tattoos as to resemble a public lavatory wall bearing at least a decade's graffiti. Hard to gauge his age: could be anything between thirty-five and fifty, but however long he's lived, he's clearly lived hard. Very, very, white-supremacist-prison-gang-crystal-meth-biker-crew hard. He's pacing a short, blank-walled room, restless, twitchy, apparently muttering to himself, though it's a silent feed.