

Stuart: A Life Backwards

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Extract

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Stuart does not like the manuscript.

Through the pale Tesco stripes of his supermarket bag I can see the wedge of my papers. Two years' worth of interviews and literary effort.

'What's the matter with it?'

'It's bollocks boring.'

He fumbles in the lumpy bulges of his pockets, looking for roll-up papers, then drops into my armchair and pushes his face forward, surveying the drab collection of twigs and dead summertime experiments on my balcony. One arm remains, as it landed, squeezed in beside his thigh. Outside, it is getting dark; the trees in the garden have started to grow in size and lose their untended shapes.

'I don't mean to be rude. I know you put a lot of work in,' Stuart offers.

Put briefly, his objection is this: I drone on.

He wants jokes, yarns, humour. He doesn't admire 'academic quotes' and background research. 'Nah, Alexander, you gotta start again. You gotta do better than this.'

He's after a bestseller, 'like what Tom Clancy writes'.

'But you are not an assassin trying to frazzle the president with anthrax bombs,' I point out. You are an ex-homeless, ex-junkie psychopath, I do not add.

Stuart phrases it another way, then: 'Something what people will *read*.'

There are numerous types of homeless person:

There are those who were doing all right beforehand, but have suffered a temporary setback because their wife has run off with another man (or, surprisingly often, another woman). Their business may have collapsed. Their daughter has been killed in a car crash. Or both. Self-confidence is their main problem and, if the professionals can get hold of them in the first few months, they'll be back at work or at least in settled, long-term accommodation within a year or two.

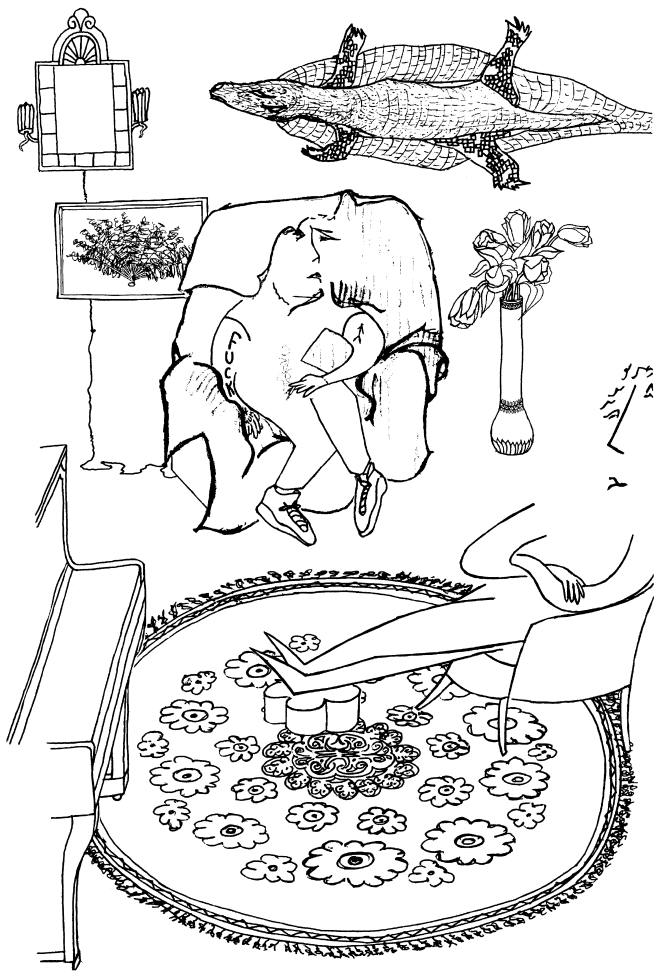
Men outnumber women ten to one on the streets. For women, it is usually sex or battering or madness that has brought them to this condition. They are better at coping with financial failure and betrayal, or their expectations are more self-effacing.

Then there are the ones who suffer from chronic poverty, brought on by illiteracy or social ineptness or what are politely called 'learning disabilities'. Perhaps they are dyslexic, autistic, shy to the point of inanity, never went to school. They may be just ill or blind or deaf or dumb. They move from garden shed to bedsit, shelter to hostel to garage to friend's sitting-room floor, to the wheelie bins at the side of King's College. They are never quite able to rise above their circumstances.

The youngsters who have fallen out with their parents, or have come out of care and don't know what to do next or even how to make their own breakfast: they're a third homeless category. If they haven't, within six months, found a job or a room or a girlfriend to put them to rights, there's a good chance they'll be on the streets instead.

Ex-convicts and ex-army – take away the format of their lives and all they can do is crumple downwards. This is just the beginning.

Right at the bottom of this abnormal heap are the people such as Stuart, the 'chaotic' homeless. The chaotic ('kai-yo-ic', as Stuart calls them, drawing out the syllables around his tongue like chewing gum) are beyond repair. When Stuart was first discovered, Kaspar Hauser-like, crouched on the lowest subterranean floor of a multi-storey car park, the regular homeless



One arm remains, as it landed, squeezed in beside his thigh.

wanted nothing to do with him. They called him ‘Knife Man Dan’ and ‘that mad bastard on Level D’.

The chaotic have usually been to prison, but they are not career criminals. Stuart’s conviction sheet is twenty pages thick, but he has only once stolen to make himself rich and on that ridiculous occasion he scooped (after taking overheads into account) £500, or £100 for each year he spent behind bars as a result. Among the few staples in a chaotic person’s life are heroin and alcohol. For some their habit is what has brought them low, while for others addiction is like a hobby taken up since arriving. The chaotic are not always poor, even if they are on the streets. During the three years I have known Stuart, my income has rarely exceeded his from the state. An unemployed man with a physical or mental disability, or alcohol or drugs dependence, can qualify for up to £180 a week from social services. On top of this, housing benefit pays the rent.

What unites the chaotic is the confusion of their days. Cause and effect are not connected in the usual way. Beyond their own governance, let alone within grasp of ours, they are constantly on the brink of raring up or breaking down. Charity staff fuss especially hard over these people because they are the worst face of homelessness and, when not the most hateful, the most pitiable extremity of street life.

Two years ago, Stuart was living out of skips. When the city outreach workers discovered him, he was a polydrug-addicted, alcoholic, ‘Jekyll and Hyde’ personality with delusional paranoia and a fondness for what he called ‘little strips of silver’ – knives, to you and me.

He still is.

But something remarkable has happened since then: he is not quite so much of a drug-addicted nightmare. No one can understand it. It is highly unusual, suspicious even. All chaotic people have good and bad periods, but Stuart genuinely appears to have turned over a new leaf. He has separated himself from the street community, got himself on to the council housing

list, started a methadone programme to get off heroin, renegotiated his court fines and begun paying fortnightly instalments, bought himself a discount computer. None of this is normal. Many of Stuart's old friends would rather die than take a shower and pay debts, and quite a few do: overdoses, liver or kidney failure or both, hypothermia. Rough sleepers have a life expectancy of forty-two years. They are thirty-five times more likely to commit suicide than the rest of the population. In the great bureaucracy of the police and social support services, everyone is patting their backs at Stuart's extraordinary return from this medieval existence towards respectability and secretly waiting for him to grab the nearest meat hook and run amok.

Furthermore, not only has Stuart enough undestroyed brain cells left to describe what such a life is like, but he can pinpoint, almost to the hour – between 4 and 5 p.m., one weekday in early summer, when he was twelve – the symbolic moment when he made the change from (in his mother's words) a 'real happy-go-lucky little boy', always 'the considerate, very considerate' one of her two children, into the nightmare *Clockwork Orange* figure of the last two decades. If his own life were not still so disordered, he could make good money explaining to parents what makes children turn into authority-despising delinquents.

'This is what I don't like, Alexander,' observes Stuart, interrupting my thoughts and picking out a page from the dog-eared manuscript that he has now tipped on the floor. 'Joyriding.' It concerns his adolescence, when he used to sneak around streets at night smashing the windows of Ford Cortinas. I have opined:

Technically, joyriding does not involve stealing a car, because the person who takes the vehicle doesn't intend to keep it: he 'twocs' it. It's an acronym that comes from the charge: *t*aking a vehicle *w*ithout the *o*wner's *c*onsent. In the *Juvenile Joyrider*,* Jeff Briggs proposes, in addition to theft

* Jeff Briggs, 'A Profile of the Juvenile Joyrider, and a consideration of the efficacy of motor vehicle projects as a diversionary strategy', extract of MA Thesis, University of Durham, 1991.

of a car's contents, five different categories of car crime: a) 'twocking for profit', b) 'long-term twocking', c) 'twocking for the purposes of joyriding', d) 'twocking for use in other crimes' and e) 'utilitarian twocking'. To date, Stuart has been guilty of c), d) and e).

'Uty-*what?*' Stuart sucks in his cheeks for a final attempt. "Uty-lity-aryan twocking." What's that when it's at home?"

I cut the passage.

The accompanying flow chart, entitled 'Dr Kirkpatrick's Joyrider-Progression Schematic', he dismisses with: 'Looks like an Airfix kit.'

He knows about Airfix toy-aeroplane kits: he used to sniff the tubes of glue from them.

'Kilpatrick hypothesises that joyriding guides children into delinquency for the sake of interest, then delinquency for the sake of profit, and then adult crime,' I see that I have written. *'It is one of the conduits of corruption, from innocence to criminality.'*

Stuart does not bother to comment on this one.

'And another thing . . .' he says.

'Yes?' I sigh.

'Do it the other way round. Make it more like a murder mystery. What murdered the boy I was? See? Write it backwards.'

So here it is, my second attempt at the story of Stuart Shorter, thief, hostage taker, psycho and sociopathic street raconteur, my spy on how the British chaotic underclass spend their troubled days at the beginning of the twenty-first century: a man with an important life.

I wish I could have done it more quickly. I wish I could have presented it to Stuart before he stepped in front of the 11.15 London to King's Lynn train.

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‘It was cutting me throat what got me this flat.’

Stuart pushes open the second reinforced door into his corridor, turns off the blasting intercom that honks like a foghorn whenever a visitor presses his front bell, and bumps into his kitchen to sniff the milk. ‘Tea or coffee, Alexander?’

He is a short man, in his early thirties, and props himself against the sink to arch up his head and show me the damage. The scar extends like a squashed worm from beneath the tattoos on one ear to above his Adam’s apple.

The kettle lead is discovered beneath a pack of sodden fish fingers. ‘How about a sarnie? Yes?’

Stuart stretches his hand to the other end of the kitchen, extracts a double pack of discount economy bacon from the fridge and submerges six slices in chip-frying oil. ‘Cooked or incinerated?’

It is a cramped, dank little apartment. One room, ground floor. The window looks across a scrappy patch of grass to a hostel for disturbed women.

‘One of the few times I’ve been happy happy, the day I got this flat,’ Stuart smiles at me. ‘That’s why I want you to write a book. It’s me way of telling the people what it was like down there. I want to thank them what got me out, like Linda and Denis and John and Ruth and Wynn, and me mum, me sister and me dad, well, I call him me dad, but he’s me stepdad, if truth be told.’

The bread starts to burn. Stuart pumps the toaster release and the slices fly high into the air.

‘Cos there’s so much misunderstanding,’ he concludes angrily. ‘It’s killing people. Your fucking nine to fives! Someone needs to tell them! Literally, every day, deaths! Each one of them deaths is somebody’s son or daughter! Somebody needs to tell them, tell them like it *is!*’

I move into the main room. There is a single bed in the corner, a chest of drawers, a desk – sparse, cheap furniture, bought with the help of a government loan. Also, a comfy chair. I drop into it. It is not comfortable at all. I flop on to the sofa instead. A 1950s veneer side cabinet, with bottles and pill cases on top, is against the inside wall, and in the corner a big-screen TV standing on an Argos antique-style support.

Stuart likes his TV. He has thrown it at the wall twice and it still works.

In return for a crate of Foster’s, Stuart explains from the kitchen, ‘the bloke upstairs has promised to make me a James Bond mattress base that folds up against the wall, which will give me more room. It’ll have big springs on either side what does the moving, and latches on the floor, because otherwise, it’s boing, boing, whoosh.’

‘Boing, boing, whoosh?’

‘Well, a bird’s not going to be too happy if she suddenly finds her face squeezed against the plaster, is she?’

Another friend is going to put up shelves, partition off the kitchen and repaint the walls gold, instead of green on the bottom half, cream above, as they are at the moment, like a mental institution.

The man in the bedsit above is a cyclist – a short, bespectacled Scotsman whose legs hardly touch the pedals; next to him a mute woman who beats out chart tunes on the floor with her shoe heel; and on the other side of the entrance lobby, Sankey, son of an RAF pilot – he sleeps with an aluminium baseball bat beside his bed.

The only problem Stuart has in his desirable new home is mould. It prickles up the bathroom wall and creeps across the ceiling in speckled clumps, so that he has to stand on a chair and scrub it back once a month as though he were stripping paint. Now and then it floats down the hall to his bed side and his clothes; he smells like a garden shed on those days.

‘By the way,’ he calls out, ‘I’m thinking of sticking a reflective sheet over that window. What d’you reckon?’

‘It’s dark enough in here as it is – why make it even darker?’

‘It’s to stop them spying on me.’

‘Don’t be silly. No one’s spying on you. Who’s them?’

‘I’ve seen them but not seen them, if you know what I mean. Red sauce or brown?’

He is also going to block up the air vent above the freezer because there could be microphones secreted between the slats. ‘Not being funny, you got to think about these things when you’re redecorating.’

Stuart has also had a ‘brilliant’ idea for a job. If it works, it will be the first honest work he’s been able to hold down in his life. New flat, new job, new Stuart. Already he has signed himself up for an IT course.

‘Think about it, right? For the foreign businessman what hasn’t got time to waste, what’s he need? An office! In a van! It’s lateral thinking, isn’t it? Gets off the plane at Stansted, straight in the back of me van and I drive him to meetings. No time wasted, see? It’ll have everythink, this van. Good-looking bird – one what can do shorthand – fax, Internet, mobile phone. His own office, just for the journey. Wires all over the fucking gaff. Brilliant!’

In the centre of Stuart’s table is a brown folder with his purple handwriting on it:

THEORY DriViNG
QueSTiOn’S & PRATCiL HELP

A moment later, Stuart is at the desk himself. He has remem-

bered an important engagement with an Internet-savvy friend, and now has his diary out of its home-made plastic wallet and pressed against the table.

In order to keep track of his newly busy life, Stuart has devised a special colour-coding for this book: green highlighter for family, yellow for social, orange for duty. His handwriting is not excellent. Even when there's only one word to be got down, he sometimes begins his gigantic letters too far across the line and has to pack the end into a pea-size, as if the letters had bunched up in fright at the thought of dropping off the page. At other times the phrases are neat and slow. His spelling is part phonetic, part cap-doffing guesswork: 'Monday: ADDanBRocK's.' 'Tuesday: QuiSt going to Vist VoLanteR service's. ASK for NAME & ADReSS For AwarD orgation.'

March: SAT'S LOTTO 5 10 17 20 44 48
7.30 Cam. 2 meeting Bath House if not
Brambram.

April: Phone to DR P——. CAnCell if in court.
2OCLOCK go TO ALEXDER'S BooK must go
ScriPt PicK 200 100.

May: MuSic FesTerville.
STUART LOOK —▶ SET ALRAM.
MAKE SURE ALRaM
Button is up not Down. When WeaK up is
needed.

'I still don't know me alphabet,' he calls out blithely. 'First place I get stuck is N. I only remember the S, T, U bit because it's me name, Stu.'

Pages stiff with Tipp-Ex in his diary indicate appointments made too far ahead, subsequently cancelled, because events take place with startling swiftness in Stuart's life and he can never be certain that, though happy and full of plans on Monday, he won't be in prison, or in hospital, by Friday.

‘ADDanBRocK’s’ is Addenbrooke’s, the hospital complex of beds, smoke stacks and research departments on the edge of Cambridge; it looks over the wheat fields and the train line to London, like a crematorium. ‘Brambram’ is Babraham, a village three miles outside Cambridge. You’d think he could get at least that one right: he’s been a local boy all his life. ‘When WeaK up is needed?’ Who knows what that means. ‘ScriPt PicK 200 100’ refers to his methadone prescription. 100 ml is high. Between 60 and 80 ml is the average for street addicts. 200? In his dreams.

‘ALEXDER’. That’s me. In speech, Stuart is careful to give my name its full four syllables. But in writing, he always drops the third syllable: not Alex, but Alexder.

Stuart’s backwards inspiration has turned out to be excellent. At a swoop, it has solved the major problem of writing a biography of a man who is not famous. Even with a well-known person it can be boring work to spend the first fifty pages reading facts and guesses about Grandpa, Granny, Mum, Dad, subject aged one, two, three, seven, eight. But introduce Stuart to readers as he is now, a fully-fledged gawd-help-us, and he may just grab their interest straight away. By the time they reach his childhood, it is a matter of genuine interest how he turned into the person that he is. So we’ll move backwards, in stages, tacking like a sailboat against the wind. Familiar time flow – out the window. Homogeneous mood of reflectiveness – up in smoke. This way, an air of disruption from the start.

Will it work? Can a person’s history be broken up? Isn’t a life the sum of its pasts? Perhaps Stuart’s approach is possible only with Stuart, whose sense of existence is already broken into fragments.

At long last, the sarnies arrive, dripping marge and ketchup, the top slice of bread moulded into the shape of Stuart’s palm.

Stuart Clive Shorter – the first time I saw him, in 1998, he was pressed in a doorway next to the discount picture-framing shop, round the corner from Sidney Sussex College in Cambridge. He had an oddly twisted way of sitting on his square of cardboard, as if his limbs were half made of rubber. Pasty skin, green bomber jacket, broken gym shoes, hair cropped to the scalp and a week's worth of stubble; his face, the left side livelier than the right, was almost mongoloid. Several of his teeth were missing; his mouth was a sluice.

I had to get down on my knees to hear him speak.

'As soon as I get the opportunity I'm going to top meself,' he whispered.

He picked at the sole of his gym shoes. The tattoos on his hands were home-made. A huge 'FUCK' began on his bicep, right arm, and ended just above his cuff.

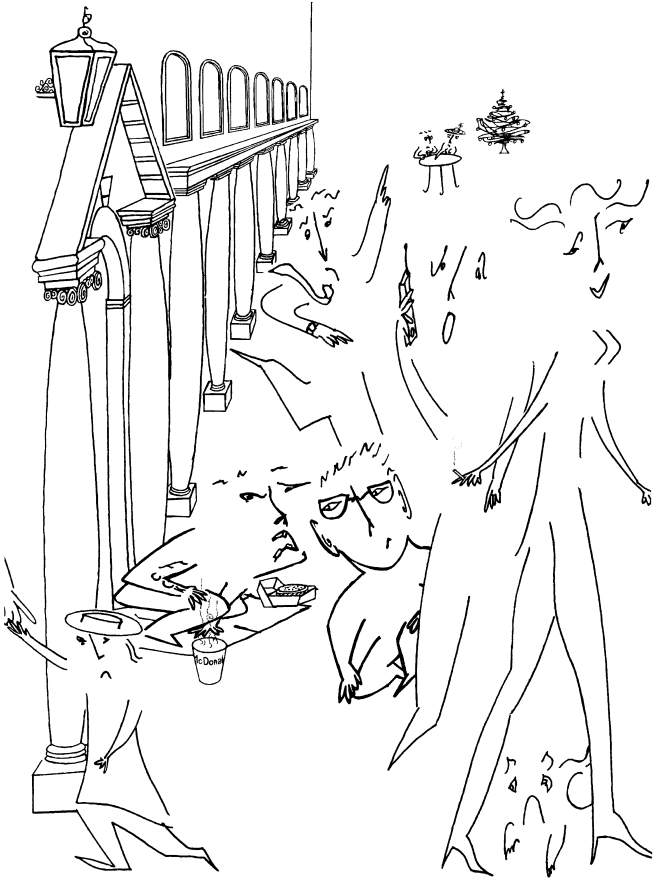
'Yeah, I'm gonna top meself and it's got to seem like someone else done it. Look, if you're not going to give me money, do you mind moving on?'

The legs of Christmas shoppers and delayed businessmen hurried beside us. Clip, clop, clip, clop – a pair of high heels rushed past, sounding like a horse. It was, it struck me, comforting to be at this level: a two-foot-high world, shared with dogs and children. Adult noises dropped down with the context of the conversation missing and sibilants exaggerated. The smell of street grime, the wind and hot underwear of passers-by, was not unpleasant, rather like salami. Someone stooped and dropped a coin; another person threw across a box of matches. A third declared he would buy a sandwich, but 'I won't donate money. You'll only spend it on drink and drugs.' Stuart opted for bacon and cheese.

On Christmas Eve a beggar can earn £70–120 in Cambridge.

'But how are you going to make suicide look like murder?' I asked.

'I'll taunt all the drunk fellas coming out the pub until they have to kill me if they want a bit of peace.' He slurred; it was



I had to get down on my knees to hear him speak.

as if the words had got entangled in his lips. 'Me brother killed himself in May. I couldn't put me mum through that again. She wouldn't mind murder so much.'