



UTOPIA AVENUE

DAVID
MITCHELL

AUTHOR OF CLOUD ATLAS

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David Mitchell

David Mitchell is the author of the novels *Ghostwritten*, *number9dream*, *Cloud Atlas*, *Black Swan Green*, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, *The Bone Clocks* and *Slade House*. He has been shortlisted twice for the Booker Prize, won the John Llewellyn Rhys, Geoffrey Faber Memoiral and South Bank Show Literature Prizes as well as the World Fantasy Book Award. In 2018, he won the *Sunday Times* Award for Literary Excellence, given in recognition of a writer's entire body of work.

In addition, David Mitchell, together with KA Yoshida, has translated from Japanese two books by Naoki Higashida – *The Reason I Jump: One Boy's Voice from the Silence of Autism* and *Fall Down Seven Times, Get Up Eight: A Young Man's Voice from the Silence of Autism*.

Born in 1969, he grew up in Worcestershire and, after graduating from university, spent several years teaching English in Japan. He now lives in Ireland with his wife and their two children.

Also by David Mitchell

Ghostwritten

number9dream

Cloud Atlas

Black Swan Green

The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet

The Bone Clocks

Slade House

UTOPIA AVENUE



David Mitchell

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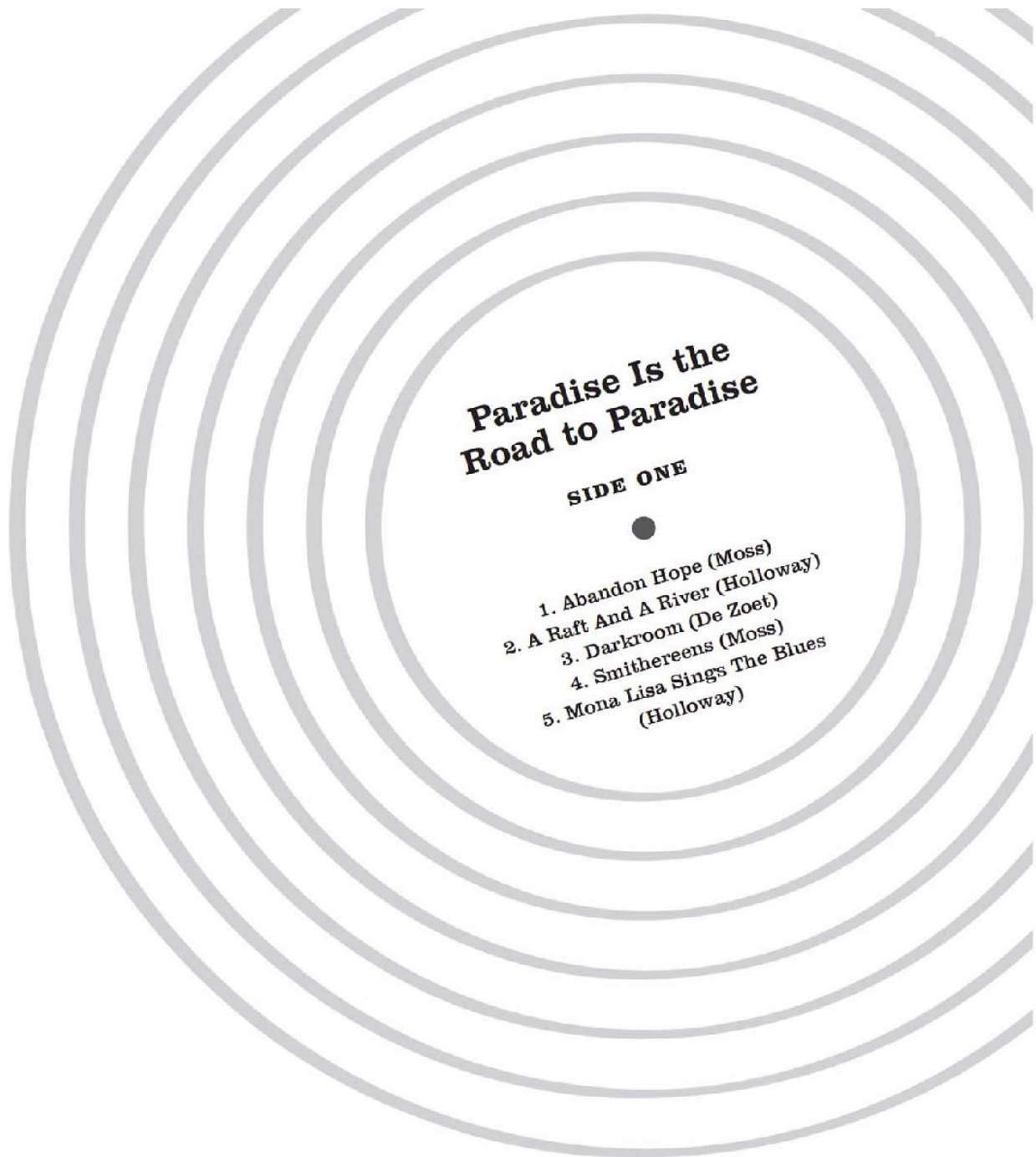
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To Beryl and Nic

for the robins and the years



**Paradise Is the
Road to Paradise**

SIDE ONE

- 1. Abandon Hope (Moss)
- 2. A Raft And A River (Holloway)
- 3. Darkroom (De Zoet)
- 4. Smithereens (Moss)
- 5. Mona Lisa Sings The Blues
(Holloway)



Abandon Hope

Dean hurries past the Phoenix Theatre, dodges a blind man

in dark glasses, steps onto Charing Cross Road to overtake a slow-moving woman and pram, leaps a grimy puddle and swerves into Denmark Street where he skids on a sheet of black ice. His feet fly up. He's in the air long enough to see the gutter and sky swap places and to think, *this 'll bloody hurt*, before the pavement slams his ribs, kneecap and ankle. *It bloody hurts*. Nobody stops to help him up. *Bloody London*. A bewhiskered stockbroker type in a bowler hat smirks at the long-haired lout's misfortune, and is gone. Dean gets to his feet, gingerly, ignoring the throbs of pain, praying that nothing's broken. Mr Craxi doesn't do sick pay. His wrists and hands are working, at least. *The money*. He checks that his bank book with its precious cargo of ten five pound notes is safe in his coat pocket. *All's well*. He hobbles along. He recognises Rick 'One Take' Wakeman in the window of the Gioconda café across the street. Dean wishes he could join Rick for a cuppa, a smoke and a chat about session work, but Friday morning is rent-paying morning, and Mrs Nevitt is waiting in her parlour like a giant spider. Dean's cutting it fine this week, even by his standards.

Ray's bank order only arrived yesterday and the queue to cash it just now took forty minutes, so he pushes on, past Lynch & Lupton's Music Publishers, where Mr Lynch told Dean all his songs were shit, except the few that were drivel. Past Alf Cummings Music Management, where Alf Cummings put his podgy hand on Dean's inner thigh and murmured, 'We both know what I can do for you, you beautiful bastard: the question is , what will you do for me?', and past Fungus Hut Studios where Dean was due to record a demo with Battleship Potemkin before the band booted him out.

'HELP, please, I'm—' A red-faced man grabs Dean's collar and grunts, 'I'm—' He doubles over in agony. 'It's *killing* me ...' 'All right mate, sit down on the step here. Where's it hurt?'

Spit dribbles from the man's twisted mouth. 'Chest ...'

'S okay, we'll, uh ... get yer help.' He looks around, but people rush by with collars up, caps down and eyes averted.

The man whimpers and leans into Dean. 'Aaa- *aaaggh*.'

'Mate, I think yer need an ambulance, so—'

‘What seems to be the problem?’ The new arrival is Dean’s age, has short hair and a sensible duffel coat. He loosens the collapsed man’s tie and peers into his eyes. ‘I say, my name’s Hopkins. I’m a doctor. Nod if you understand me, Sir.’

The man grimaces, gasps and manages to nod, once.

‘Good.’ Hopkins turns to Dean. ‘Is the gentleman your father?’

‘Nah, I never seen him till now. His chest hurts, he said.’

‘Chest, is it?’ Hopkins removes a glove and presses his hand against a vein in the man’s neck. ‘Highly arrhythmic. Sir? I believe you’re having a heart attack.’

The man’s eyes widen: fresh pain scrunches them up.

‘The café’s got a phone,’ says Dean. ‘I’ll call nine-nine-nine.’

‘It’ll never arrive in time,’ says Hopkins. ‘The traffic’s blue bloody murder on Charing Cross Road. Do you happen to know Frith Street?’

‘Yeah, I do – and there’s a clinic, up by Soho Square.’

‘Exactly. Run there as fast as you can, tell them a chap’s

having a heart attack outside the tobacconist on Denmark Street and that Dr Hopkins needs a stretcher team, *pronto*. Got all that?’

Hopkins, Denmark Street, stretcher. ‘Got it.’

‘Good man. I’ll stay here to administer first aid. Now run like the bloody clappers. This poor devil’s depending on you.’

Dean jogs across Charing Cross Road, into Manette Street, past Foyles bookshop and through the short alley under the Pillars of Hercules pub. His body has forgotten the pain of his fall just now. He passes dustmen tipping bins into a rubbish van on Greek Street, pounds up the middle of the road to Soho Square, where he scares a pool of pigeons into flight, nearly loses his footing a second time as he turns the corner onto Frith Street, and bounds up the steps of the clinic and into a reception area where a porter is reading the *Daily Mirror*. ‘DONALD CAMPBELL DEAD’, declares the front page. Dean gasps out his message: ‘Dr Hopkins sent me ... A heart attack on Denmark Street ... Needs a stretcher team, on the double ...’

The porter lowers the newspaper. Flakes of pastry cling to his moustache. He looks unconcerned.

‘A man’s dying,’ states Dean. ‘Didn’t yer hear me?’

‘‘Course I did. You’re shouting in my face.’

‘Then send help! Yer a bloody hospital, aren’t yer?’

The porter snorts inwards, deep and hard. ‘Withdraw a hefty sum of money from a bank prior to your encounter with this “Dr Hopkins”, did you?’

‘Yeah. Fifty quid. So?’

The porter flicks crumbs off his lapel. ‘Still in possession of that money, are you, son?’

‘It’s here.’ Dean reaches into his coat for his bank book.

It’s not there. *It must be*. He tries his other pockets. A trolley squeaks by. A kid’s bawling his eyes out. ‘*Shit* – I must’ve dropped it on the way over ...’

‘Sorry, son. You’ve been hustled.’

Dean remembers the man falling against his chest ... ‘No.

No. It was a real heart attack. He could hardly stand up.’ He checks his pockets again. The money’s still missing.

‘It’s cold comfort,’ says the porter, ‘but you’re our fifth

since November. Word's got round. Every hospital and clinic in central London has stopped sending stretchers for anyone called "Hopkins". It's a wild goose chase. There's never anyone there.'

'But they ...' Dean feels nauseous. 'But they ...'

'Are you about to say, "They didn't look like pickpockets"?''

Dean was. 'How could he've known I had money on me?'

'What'd you do if *you* were going fishing for a nice fat wallet?'

Dean thinks. *The bank*. 'They watched me make the withdrawal. Then they followed me.'

The porter takes a bite of sausage roll. 'Hole in one, Sherlock.'

'But ... most o' that money was to pay for my bass, and—'

Dean remembers Mrs Nevitt. 'Oh shit. The rest was my rent. How do I pay my rent?'

'You could file a report at the cop shop, but don't hold your breath. For the Old Bill, Soho's surrounded by signs saying, "Abandon Hope, All Ye Who Enter Here".'

'My landlady's a bloody Nazi. She'll turf me out.'

The porter slurps his tea. ‘Tell her you lost it trying to be a Good Samaritan. Maybe she’ll take pity on you. Who knows?’

Mrs Nevitt sits by the tall window. The parlour smells of damp and bacon fat. The fireplace looks boarded up. The landlady’s ledger is open on her writing bureau. Her knitting needles click and tap. A chandelier, forever unlit, hangs from the ceiling. The wallpaper’s once-floral pattern has sunk into a jungle gloom. Photographs of Mrs Nevitt’s three dead husbands glower from their gilt frames. ‘Morning, Mrs Nevitt.’

‘Barely, Mr Moss.’

‘Yeah, well, uh ...’ Dean’s throat is dry. ‘I’ve been robbed.’

The knitting needles stop. ‘How very unfortunate.’

‘Not half. I got out my rent money, but two pickpockets did me over on Denmark Street. They must’ve seen me cash my bank order and followed me. Daylight robbery. Literally.’

‘My my my. What a turn-up.’

She thinks I’m spinning her a yarn, thinks Dean.

‘More’s the pity,’ Mrs Nevitt continues, ‘you didn’t persevere at Bretton’s, the Royal Printers. That was a proper position. In a respectable part of town. No “muggings” in Mayfair.’

Bretton’s was indentured cocksuckery, thinks Dean. ‘Like I told yer, Mrs Nevitt, Bretton’s didn’t work out.’

‘No concern of mine, I’m sure. My concern is rent. Am I to take it you want more time to pay?’

Dean relaxes, a little. ‘Honest, I’d be ever so grateful.’

Her lips pinch tight and her nostrils flare. ‘Then this time, this time *only*, I’ll extend the deadline for your rent payment—’

‘*Thank* you, Mrs Nevitt. I can’t tell yer how—’

‘—until two o’clock. Never let it be said I’m unreasonable.’

Is the old cow putting me on? ‘Two o’clock ... *today?*’

‘Ample time for you to get to your bank and back, surely.

Only this time don’t flash the money as you leave.’

Dean feels hot, cold and sick. ‘My account’s actually empty right now, but I get paid on Monday. I’ll pay yer the lot then.’

The landlady pulls a cord hanging from the ceiling. She takes a card from her writing bureau: 'BEDSIT TO LET – BLACKS & IRISH NEED NOT APPLY – ENQUIRE WITHIN.'

'No, Mrs Nevitt, don't do that. There's no need.'

The landlady places the card in the window.

'Where am I s'posed to sleep tonight?'

'Anywhere you wish. But it won't be here.'

First no money, now no room. 'I'll be needing my deposit.'

'Tenants who default on their rent forfeit their deposit.'

The rules are pinned up on every door. I don't owe you a farthing.'

'That's my money, Mrs Nevitt.'

'Not according to the contract you signed.'

'Yer'll get a new tenant by Tuesday or Wednesday. At the latest. Yer can't take my deposit. That's theft.'

She resumes her knitting. 'You know, I detected a whiff of the Cockney barrow-boy about you from the first. But I told myself, *No, give him a chance. Her Majesty's Printers see potential in the young man, after all.* So I gave you that chance. And what happened next? You abandoned Bretton's

for a “pop band”. You grew your hair like a girl’s. You spent your money on guitars and Heaven knows what so you have nothing left for a rainy day. And now you accuse me of theft. Well, that’ll teach me to second-guess myself. What’s born in the gutter stays in the gutter. Ah, Mr Harris ...’ Mrs Nevitt’s live-in ex-army goon appears at the parlour door.

‘This –’ she glances at Dean ‘– *person* is leaving us. Immediately.’

‘Keys,’ Mr Harris tells Dean. ‘Both of ’em.’

‘What about my gear? Stealing that too, are yer?’

‘Take your “gear” with you,’ says Mrs Nevitt, ‘and good riddance. Anything still in your room at two o’clock will be in the Salvation Army store at three. Now go.’

‘God al- *bloody*-mighty,’ mutters Dean. ‘I hope yer die soon.’

Mrs Nevitt ignores him. Her needles click-clack. Mr Harris grips the back of Dean’s collar and hauls him up.

Dean can hardly breathe. ‘Yer choking me, yer scumbag!’

The onetime sergeant shoves Dean into the hall. ‘Up to your room, pack and get out. Or I’ll do more than choke

you, you nancy-boy faggot layabout ...’

At least I’ve still got my job. Dean tamps the coffee into the metal pod, clips it into the brew socket and pulls down the handle. The Gaggia blasts steam. Dean’s eight-hour shift has dragged. His body’s bruised from the tumble he took in Denmark Street. It’s a freezing night out, but the Etna coffee shop on the corner of D’Arblay and Brewer Streets is warm, bright and raucous. Students and teenagers from the suburbs are talking, flirting, arguing. Mods meet up here before hitting the music venues to take drugs and dance. Well-groomed older men eye up smooth-skinned youths in need of a sugar daddy. Less well-groomed older men stop in for a coffee before a visit to a dirty flick or a knocking shop. *Must be over a hundred people crammed in here,* thinks Dean, *and every man Jack of ’em has a bed to sleep in tonight.* Since he began his shift, Dean has been hoping that someone he knows who owes him a favour might drop by so he can cadge a sofa. His hope has grown feebler as the hours have passed, and now it’s faded away. The Rolling Stones’ ‘19th Nervous Breakdown’ blasts out of the jukebox.

Dean once worked out the song's chords with Kenny
Yearwood, back in the simpler days of the Gravediggers.

The Gaggia's nozzle dribbles coffee, filling the cup two-thirds full. Dean unclips the pod and empties the grounds into a tub. Mr Craxi passes by with a tray of dirty plates.

Ask him to pay yer early, Dean tells himself for the fiftieth time. *Yer've got no choice*. 'Mr Craxi, could I—'

Mr Craxi turns around, oblivious to Dean: 'Pru, wipe the farkin' counters at the front, they's disgr *azz* ful!' He barges by again, revealing a customer sitting at the counter, between the cold-milk dispenser and the coffee machine.

Thirtyish,

balding,

bookish-looking,

dressed

in

a

houndstooth jacket and hip blue-glass rectangular glasses.

Could be a queer; but yer never know in Soho.

The customer looks up from his magazine – *Record*

Weekly – and meets Dean’s gaze, unembarrassed. He frowns as if trying to place him. If they were in a pub, Dean would ask, ‘ *What d’yer think yer looking at?* ’ Here, Dean looks away and rinses the pod under the cold tap, feeling the customer’s eyes still on him. *Maybe he thinks I fancy him.*

Sharon arrives with a new order slip. ‘Two espressos and two Cokes for table nine.’

‘Two ’spressos, two Cokes, table nine, got it.’ Dean turns to the Gaggia, flips the switch and milky foam settles on the cappuccino.

Sharon comes round to his side of the counter to refill a sugar pot. ‘I’m sorry you can’t kip on my floor, honest I am.’

‘’S all right.’ Dean sprinkles cocoa onto the cappuccino and puts it on the counter for Pru. ‘Bit of a nerve to ask yer, really.’

‘My landlady’s half KGB, half Mother Superior. If I tried to smuggle you in, she’d ambush us and it’d be “This is a respectable house not a bordello!” and she’d turf me out.’

He fills the coffee pod for an espresso. ‘I get it. It’s okay.’

‘You won’t be sleeping under the arches, will you?’

‘Nah, ’course not. I’ve mates I’ll ring.’

Sharon brightens. ‘In that case –’ she hip-wiggles ‘– I’m glad you asked me first. If there’s anything I *can* do for you, I’m here.’

Dean’s not attracted to this sweet but dumpy, dough-faced girl with raisin eyes too close together ... *but all’s fair in love and war*. ‘Could yer lend us a few bob till Monday? Just till I get paid?’

Sharon hesitates. ‘Make it worth my while, will you?’
Oh, yer flirty flirt. Dean does his half-grin. He yanks the cap off a Coke bottle. ‘Once I’m on my feet again, I’ll pay yer a *ravishing* rate of interest.’

She glows and Dean almost feels guilty at how easy it is.

‘I might have a few bob in my purse. Just remember me when you’re a millionaire pop star.’

‘Table fifteen still waiting!’ yells Mr Craxi in his Sicilian Cockney accent. ‘Three hot chocolates! Marshmallows! Move it!’ ‘Three hot chocolates,’ Dean calls back. Sharon slips away with the sugar pot. Pru arrives to whisk the cappuccino

away to table eight and Dean spikes the order slip. It's up to the two-thirds mark. Mr Craxi should be in a good mood. *I'm bloody snookered if he isn't.* He starts on table nine's espressos. Donovan's 'Sunshine Superman' takes over from the Stones. Steam hisses through the Gaggia. Dean wonders how much Sharon's 'few bob' is likely to be. Not enough for a hotel, that's for sure. There's the YMCA on Tottenham Court Road, but he has no idea if they'll have a spare bed. It'll be ten thirty by the time he gets there. Once again, Dean combs through his list of Londoners who (a) might help him out and (b) have telephones. The tube closes around midnight, so if Dean shows up on a doorstep in Brixton or Hammersmith with his bass and rucksack and nobody's home, he'll be marooned. He even considers his old bandmates in Battleship Potemkin, but he suspects that bridge is well and truly burned.

Dean glances at the customer with the blue glasses. He's switched *Record Weekly* for a book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Dean wonders if he's a beatnik. A few guys at art college posed as beats. They smoked Gauloises, talked

about existentialism, and walked around with French newspapers.

‘Oy, Clapton.’ Pru has a gift for nicknames. ‘You waiting for them hot chocolates to make themselves, or what?’

‘Clapton plays *lead*,’ Dean explains for the hundredth time. ‘I’m a bloody *bassist*.’ He spots Pru looking pleased with herself.

The little courtyard behind the Etna’s kitchen is a soot-encrusted well of fog with space for dustbins and not much else. Dean watches a rat climb up a drainpipe towards the square of under-lit night-cloud. He draws a last lungful of smoke from his last Dunhill. It’s gone ten o’clock, and his and Sharon’s shift is over. Sharon’s gone off back to her digs, after lending Dean eight shillings. *That’s a train ticket to Gravesend, if all else fails.* Through the kitchen door, Dean hears Mr Craxi speaking Italian with the latest nephew to arrive from Sicily. He speaks next-to-no English, but you don’t need any to serve up the bubbling vats of Bolognese sauce that, dolloped onto spaghetti, is the Etna’s only dish. Mr Craxi appears. ‘So, you wanna’d a word, Moss.’

Dean stubs out his cigarette on the brick-paved ground.

His boss glares. *Damn*. Dean retrieves the stub. ‘Sorry.’

‘I don’t got all night.’

‘Could yer pay me now, please?’

Mr Craxi checks he heard correctly: ‘Pay you “now”?’

‘Yeah. My wages. Tonight. Now. Please.’

Mr Craxi looks incredulous. ‘I pay wages at Monday.’

‘Yeah, but like I said earlier, I got robbed.’

Life and London have made Mr Craxi suspicious. *Or maybe he was born that way*. ‘Is misfortunate. But always, I pay Monday.’

‘I wouldn’t ask yer if I wasn’t desperate. But I couldn’t pay my rent, so my landlady booted me out. That’s why I’ve got my rucksack and my bass in the staff cupboard.’

‘Ah. I think you going on holiday.’

Dean does a phoney smile, in case that was a joke. ‘If only. But, nah, I *really* need my wages. Like, for a room at the YMCA or something.’

Mr Craxi thinks. ‘You in the shit, Moss. But is your shit what you shitted. Always I pay wages at Monday.’

‘Could yer just lend me a couple o’ quid? Please?’

‘You have guitar. Go to pawnbrokers.’

Blood from a stone, thinks Dean. ‘First off, I haven’t paid the last instalment, so the bass’s not mine to sell. That’s what the money the robbers took was for.’

‘But you say it was for the rent money.’

‘Some of it was rent. Most of it was bass. Second off, it’s gone ten on a Friday night and the pawnbrokers’ll be shut.’

‘I’m not your bank. I pay Monday. End of the story.’

‘How am I s’posed to *be* here on Monday if I’ve got double pneumonia after sleeping in Hyde Park all weekend?’

Mr Craxi’s cheek twitches. ‘You no here at Monday, is okay. I pay you fuck-all. A P45 only. Understand?’

‘What’s the *difference* between paying me now and paying me Monday? I’m not even bloody working this weekend!’

Mr Craxi folds his arms. ‘Moss, you is sacked.’

‘Oh, for *fucksake*! You can’t bloody do this to me.’

A stubby finger jabs Dean’s solar plexus. ‘Is easy. Is done. Go.’

‘No.’ *First my money, then my digs, now my job.* ‘No. No.’

Dean swats Craxi's finger away. 'Yer owe me five days' pay.'

'Prove it. Sue me. Get a lawyer.'

Dean forgets he's five foot seven not six foot five and

shouts in Craxi's face: 'YER *OWE* ME FIVE DAYS' PAY, YER THIEVING BLOODY SHIT-WEASEL.'

'Ah, *sì, sì*, I owe you. Here, I pay what I owe.'

A powerful fist sinks into Dean's stomach. Dean folds over

and lands on his back, gasping and shocked. *Second time*

today. A dog is barking. Dean gets up, but Craxi is gone,

and two Sicilian nephews appear at the kitchen door. One

has Dean's Fender, the other holds his rucksack. They

frogmarch Dean out through the coffee shop. The Kinks are

singing 'Sunny Afternoon' on the jukebox. Dean looks back

once. Craxi glowers from the till with his arms folded.

Dean lifts an up-yours finger at his ex-employer.

Craxi makes a slashing gesture across his throat.

Out on D'Arblay Street with nowhere to go, Dean runs

through the likely consequences of hurling half a brick

through the window of the coffee shop. A police cell would

solve his immediate housing dilemma, but a criminal record

wouldn't help in the long run. He goes into the telephone box on the street corner. The inside is littered with Sellotaped-on pieces of paper with girls' names and phone numbers. He keeps his Fender close by, and his rucksack half propping open the door. Dean gets out a sixpence and leafs through his little black book. *He's moved to Bristol ... I still owe him a fiver ... he's gone ...* Dean finds Rod Dempsey's number. He doesn't know Rod well, but he's a fellow Gravesender. He opened a shop in Camden selling leather jackets and biker accessories last month. Dean dials the number, but nobody answers.

Now what?

Dean leaves the phone box. Freezing fog blurs edges, smudges the faces of passers-by, hazes neon signs – GIRLS! GIRLS! GIRLS! – and fills Dean's lungs. He's got fifteen shillings and threepence and two ways to spend it. He could walk down D'Arblay Street to Charing Cross Road, get a bus to London Bridge station and a train to Gravesend, wake up Ray, Shirl and their son, confess that Ray's hard-earned fifty quid – which Shirl doesn't know

about – was nicked within ten minutes of Dean cashing the bank order, and ask to sleep on the sofa. But he can't stay there for ever.

And tomorrow? Move back into Nan Moss and Bill's? At the age of twenty-three. Later in the week, he'll take the Fender back to Selmer's Guitars and beg for a partial refund on what he's already paid. Minus wear and tear. Rest in peace, Dean Moss the professional musician. Harry Moffat'll find out, of course. *And laugh his tits off.*

Or ... Dean looks down Brewer Street, to the clubs, lights, bustle, peep-shows, arcades, pubs ... *I roll the dice one last time.* Goof might be at the Coach and Horses. Nick Woo's usually at the Mandrake club on Fridays. Al's at Bunjie's over on Litchfield Street. Maybe Al will let him sleep on his floor until Monday. Tomorrow he'll look for a new job at a coffee shop. Ideally, some distance from the Etna. *I can live off of bread 'n' Marmite till I'm paid again.*

But ... what if Fortune favours the prudent? What if Dean rolls that dice one last time, spends his money on getting into a club, chatting up some posh girl with a flat of her

own, who then clears off while Dean's in the bog? *Wouldn't be the first time.* Or what if a bouncer dumps him, pissed as a newt, onto an icy puke-spattered pavement at three in the morning with his train fare gone? The only way back to Gravesend then'll be Shank's Pony. Across D'Arblay Street a tramp sifts through an overflowing bin in the light of a launderette. *What if he once rolled the dice one last time, too?*

Dean says it aloud: 'What if my songs are shit 'n' drivel?'

What if I'm just coddling myself I'm a musician?

Dean has to decide. He takes out the sixpence again.

Heads, it's D'Arblay Street and Gravesend.

Tails, it's Brewer Street and Soho and music.

Dean flips the coin into the air ...

'Excuse me, Dean Moss?' The coin falls into the gutter and

out of sight. *My sixpence!* Dean turns around to see the

possible queer beatnik from the counter at the Etna. He's

wearing a fur hat, like a Russian spy, though his accent

sounds American. 'Jeez, sorry, I made you lose your coin ...'

'Yeah, yer bloody did.'

‘Wait up, here it is, look ...’ The stranger bends down and retrieves Dean’s sixpence from a crack. ‘There you go.’

Dean pockets it. ‘So who are you, then?’

‘My name’s Levon Frankland. We met in August, backstage at the Brighton Odeon. The Future Stars Revue. I was managing the Great Apes. Or trying to. You were with Battleship Potemkin. You played “Dirty River”. A great song.’

Dean’s wary of praise, especially from a possible queer.

On the other hand, this particular possible queer is a music manager, and of late Dean has been starved of praise from anyone for anything. ‘I wrote “Dirty River”. That’s my song.’

‘So I gather. I also gather you and the Potemkins parted ways.’

Dean’s nose-tip is icy. ‘Got booted out. For “revisionism”.’

Levon Frankland laughs straggly clouds of frozen breath.

‘Makes a change from “artistic differences”.’

‘They wrote a song ’bout Chairman Mao and I said it was a crock o’ shit. The chorus went, “*Chairman Mao, Chairman Mao, your red flag’s not a holy cow*”. Honest to God.’

‘You’re better off without them.’ Frankland takes out a

pack of Rothmans and offers Dean a smoke.

‘I’m bloody skint without ’em.’ Numb-fingered, Dean takes a cigarette. ‘Bloody skint and neck-deep in the shit.’

Frankland lights Dean’s cigarette, then his own, with a fancy Zippo. ‘I couldn’t help but overhear ...’ He nods at the Etna. ‘So you’ve got nowhere to stay tonight?’

A platoon of mods marches by in their Friday night finery.

On speed and off to the Marquee, Dean guesses. ‘Nope. Nowhere.’

‘I’ve got a proposal,’ decides Frankland.

Dean shivers. ‘Do yer? What kind o’ proposal?’

‘There’s a band playing at the 2i’s club tonight. I’d like your opinion as a musician on their potential. If you tag along, you can crash on my sofa. My flat’s in Bayswater. It’s not the Ritz, but it’s warmer than under Waterloo Bridge.’

‘Aren’t yer managing the Great Apes?’

‘Not any more. Artistic differences. I’m’ – glass smashes nearby and demonic laughter rings out – ‘scouting for fresh talent.’

Dean’s tempted. It’ll be warm and dry. Tomorrow he’ll be

able to cadge a bite of breakfast, get cleaned up and work through his little black book. Frankland must have a telephone. *Problem is, what if this lifeline has a price-tag attached?*

‘If you’d feel vulnerable on my sofa’ – Levon looks amused – ‘you can sleep in my bath. There’s a lock on the door.’

So he is a queer, Dean realises, and he knows I’ve guessed ... but if he’s not hung up about it, why should I be? ‘Sofa’s fine.’

The cellar of the 2i’s Coffee Bar at 59 Old Compton Street is as hot, dank and dark as armpits. Two naked bulbs dangle above the low stage made of planks and milk-crates. The walls sweat and the ceiling drips. Yet only five years ago, 2i’s was one of Soho’s hippest showcases for new talent: Cliff Richard, Hank Marvin, Tommy Steele and Adam Faith began their careers here. Tonight, the stage is occupied by Archie Kinnock’s Blues Cadillac, featuring Archie Kinnock on vocals and rhythm guitar; Larry Ratner, bassist; a drummer in a vest whose kit is too big for the stage; and a tall, thin,

wild-looking guitarist with pinkish skin, reddish hair and narrow eyes. His purple jacket swirls and his hair dangles over his fretboard. The band is playing Archie Kinnock's old hit 'Lonely As Hell'. Within moments, Dean can see that not one but two of the Blues Cadillac's wheels are coming loose. Archie Kinnock is drunk, stoned or both. He blues-moans into the mic – ‘*I'm looo-oonely as hell, babe, looo-oonely as hell*’ – but he keeps fluffing his guitar part. Larry Ratner, meanwhile, is lagging behind the beat. His backing vocals – ‘*You're looo-oonely as well, babe, you're looo-ooo-ooo-oonely as well*’ – are off-key, not in a good way. He barks at the drummer, ‘Too bleedin' slow!’ in mid-song. The drummer scowls. The guitarist launches into a solo, sustaining a winding, buzzing note for three bars before checking in with the world-weary riff. Archie Kinnock resumes his rhythm part, sticking to the E-A-G underlay while the lead guitarist takes up the melody and, bewitchingly, inverts it. The second solo impresses Dean even more than the first. People crane their necks to watch the lead guitarist's fingers fly, pick, clamp, pull, slide and

hammer up and down the fretboard.

How's he even doing that?

Muddy Waters's 'I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Man' is followed by a lesser Archie Kinnock hit, 'Magic Carpet Ride', which segues into Booker T and the MG's 'Green Onions'. The guitarist and the drummer play with accelerating verve while the two old hands, Kinnock and Ratner, drag the band down. The bandleader winds up the first set by saluting the double-figures audience as if he just blew the roof off the Albert Hall. 'London, I'm Archie Kinnock and I'm *back!* We'll be out again soon for part two, okay?' The Blues Cadillac retire to the sunken bunker off to the side of the 2i's stage. Cream's 'I Feel Free' wails from tinny speakers and half of the audience plod upstairs to buy Coke, orange juice and coffee.

Frankland asks Dean, 'Well?'

'Yer brought me here to see the guitarist, didn't yer?'

'Correct.'

'He's pretty good.'

Levon makes an is-that-all? face.

‘He’s bloody amazing. Who is he?’

‘His name’s Jasper de Zoet.’

‘Christ. Where I’m from yer’d get lynched for less.’

‘Dutch father, English mother. He’s only been in England six weeks, so he’s still finding his feet. Care for a splash of bourbon in that Coke?’

Dean holds out his bottle and receives a good glug.

‘Cheers. He’s pissing his talent away on Archie Kinnock.’

‘He’s like you in Battleship Potemkin.’

‘Who’s the drummer? He’s good too.’

‘Peter Griffin. “Griff”. From Yorkshire. He salted his burns on the northern jazz circuit, playing in the Wally Whitby ensemble.’

‘Wally Whitby the jazz trumpet player?’

‘The very same.’ Levon swigs from his hip flask.

‘Does Jasper de Thingy write as well as play?’ asks Dean.

‘Apparently. But Archie won’t let him play his own material.’

Dean feels a throb of jealousy. ‘He’s really got something.’

Levon dabs his glazed brow with a spotted handkerchief.

‘Agreed. But he’s also got a problem. He’s too much his own man to slot into a pre-existing act like Archie Kinnock’s, but he’s not a solo act either. He needs a hand-picked gang of bandmates as gifted as he is, who’ll spur him on and who’ll be spurred on by him.’

‘Which band do yer have in mind?’

‘It doesn’t exist yet. But I believe I’m looking at its bassist.’

Dean snorts a laugh. ‘Right.’

‘I’m serious. I’m curating a band. And I’m starting to think that you, Jasper and Griff might just have that magic chemistry.’

‘Are yer taking the piss?’

‘Do I look like I am?’

‘No, but ... what did they say?’

‘I haven’t approached them yet. You’re the first piece in the puzzle, Dean. Very few bassists would be punctual enough for Griff *and* creative enough for Jasper.’

Dean plays along. ‘And yer’ll be the manager?’

‘Obviously.’

‘But Jasper ’n’ Griff are already in a band.’

‘Blues Cadillac is not a band. It’s a dying dog. Putting it out of its misery would be an act of mercy.’

A drop of sweat from the ceiling finds the back of Dean’s neck. ‘Their manager’d beg to differ.’

‘Archie’s *ex*-manager ran off with the piggy-bank, so Larry Ratner’s managing the band. Unfortunately, he’s as good a manager as I am a pole-vaulter.’

Dean swigs his bourbon and Coke. ‘So this is an offer?’

‘A proposal.’

‘Shouldn’t we have a try-out, at least, before we —’ Dean stops himself saying ‘jump into bed together’ ‘— decide anything?’

‘Definitely. As Fate would have it, you have your bass here, and a fired-up audience. All I need from you is the nod.’

What’s he talking about? ‘This is Archie Kinnock’s gig. He’s got a bassist. We can’t do an audition now.’

Levon takes off his blue glasses and commences to clean the lenses. ‘But the answer to the question, “*Would you like*

a try-out with Jasper and Griff? ” is “Yes”, yes?’

‘Well, yeah, I s’pose, but—’

‘I’ll be back in a few minutes.’ Frankland puts his glasses back on. ‘I have an appointment. It shan’t take long.’

‘An appointment? Now? Who with?’

‘The Dark Arts.’

While he’s waiting for Levon Frankland to return, Dean stands in the corner guarding his bass and his rucksack.

The Small Faces’ ‘Sha-La-La-La-Lee’ is playing. Dean’s thinking the lyrics could be better, when a familiar voice says, ‘Mosser!’ Dean stares back at his beaky-nosed, wide-eyed, goofy-grinning friend from art school Kenny Yearwood. ‘Kenny!’

‘So, yer still alive. Christ, yer hair’s got longer.’

‘Yours is shorter.’

‘It’s called “Getting a real job”. Can’t say as I’m a fan.

Was yer back at Christmas? Didn’t see yer down the Captain Marlow.’

‘Yeah, but I had flu so I stayed at my nan’s. Didn’t call up any o’ the old gang.’ *Couldn’t face any of the old gang,*

more like.

‘Are yer still with Battleship Potemkin? I heard rumours about EMI signing yer or something.’

‘Nah, it all turned to shit. I left the band last October.’

‘Oh. Plenty more fish in the sea, right?’

‘Let’s hope so.’

‘So ... who are yer playing with now?’

‘Not ... uh ... well ... Kind of. We’ll see.’

Kenny waits for Dean to answer properly. ‘Are yer okay?’

Dean finds the truth is less exhausting than a lie. ‘It’s been a bitch of a day, since yer ask. I got mugged this morning.’

‘Fucking hell, Mosser.’

‘Six bastards jumped me. I got in a couple o’ decent punches but they took my rent money – all the money I had in fact – so my landlady kicked me out. To cap it all, I got fired from the coffee shop I was working at. So yer find me neck-deep in shit, my friend.’

‘So where’re yer staying now?’

‘Someone’s sofa till Monday.’

‘And after Monday?’

‘Something’ll turn up. Just don’t tell anyone in Gravesend, all right? People gossip, then Nan Moss ’n’ Bill ’n’ my brother’ll hear, and they’ll fret ’n’ stuff, so—’

‘Yeah, sure, but look. Have a sub till yer back on yer feet.’

Kenny’s wallet is out and he’s slipped something into Dean’s pocket. ‘That’s five quid, not me going for a quick grope.’

Dean’s mortified. ‘Mate, I wasn’t on the scav, I didn’t—’

‘I know. I know. But if the shoe was on the other foot, yer’d do the same for me, yeah?’

Dean considered giving the money back, for all of three seconds. Five pounds will feed him for a fortnight. ‘Jesus, Kenny, I don’t know how to thank yer. I’ll pay yer back.’

‘I know. Get yer record deal first.’

‘I won’t forget. Honest to God. Cheers. I—’

Shrieks and shouts break out. A man’s lunging through the crowd, knocking over punters left and right. Kenny dodges one way and Dean the other. It’s Larry Ratner, the Blues Cadillac bassist, bolting for the stairs – chased by Archie Kinnock, who trips over Dean’s Fender case, which

has slid to the floor. Archie Kinnock lands awkwardly and thumps his head on the concrete ground. Ratner reaches the steep steps and bounds up them, two at a time, barging past startled patrons of 2i's. Archie Kinnock gets to his feet – his nose is half mashed – and bellows up the stairs, ‘ *I’m gonna rip your bleedin’ heart out! Just like you ripped mine!* ’ Then he staggers up the stairs after his bandmate and is gone, too.

Everyone looks at everyone else.

‘What the hell was *that* about?’ asks Kenny.

Dean edits and stores Archie’s threat: *I’m gonna rip-rip-rip your heart out, just like you ripped mine.*

Levon Frankland appears. ‘Jeez, did you see that?’

‘Couldn’t miss it. Levon, this is Kenny, a friend from art college. We were in a band together in an earlier life.’

‘A pleasure, Kenny. Levon Frankland. I hope you both dodged Hurricanes Kinnock and Ratner just now.’

‘Yeah,’ says Kenny, ‘by a few inches. What was that about?’

Frankland performs an exaggerated shrug. ‘All I know is

gossip, rumour and hearsay, and who listens to that?’

‘Gossip, rumour and hearsay about what?’ insists Dean.

‘Larry Ratner, Archie Kinnock’s wife, a torrid affair and financial irregularities.’

Dean decodes this. ‘Larry was doing Archie Kinnock’s wife?’

‘An ounce of perception, a pound of obscure.’

‘And Archie Kinnock just found this out?’ asks Kenny. ‘Just now? Halfway through a gig?’

Levon looks thoughtful and sombre. ‘It might explain his homicidal rage, I suppose. What do you think?’

Before Dean can analyse the implications further, Oscar Morton – the Brylcreemed, owl-eyed manager of the 2i’s club – steams by, heading to the sunken bunker.

‘Would you mind keeping an eye on Dean’s rucksack for a moment, Kenny?’ asks Levon. ‘Dean and I may be needed.’

‘Uh ... sure.’ Kenny looks as confused as Dean. The manager steers Dean by the elbow in the wake of Oscar Morton.

‘Where’re we going?’ asks Dean.

‘I hear knocking. Don’t you?’

‘Knocking? What’s knocking?’

‘Opportunity.’

The sunken bunker smells of drains. Oscar Morton is interrogating the two remaining members of Blues Cadillac and doesn’t notice Dean and Frankland slip in through the door. Jasper de Zoet is in a low-slung chair with his Stratocaster on his lap. Griff the drummer is pissed off. ‘Off the nearest cliff, I hope. I turned down two weeks at Blackpool Winter Gardens for this fookin’ bollocks.’

The 2i’s manager tries Jasper de Zoet. ‘Will they be back?’

‘I couldn’t say.’ De Zoet sounds posh and indifferent,

‘But what happened?’ asks Morton.

‘The phone went.’ Griff nodded at the black telephone on the table. ‘Kinnock picked up. He just listened, frowning, for about a minute. His face turned to blue fookin’ murder. He looked at Ratner. I thought, *Eh up, something’s not right*, but Ratner didn’t notice. He was restringing his bass. When whoever was calling finished, Kinnock hung up without saying a word and looked at Ratner who finally noticed and

told Kinnock he looked like he'd shat his pants. Kinnock asked Ratner, dead quiet, "Are you shagging Joy? And have you bought a flat together with the band's money?"

'Who's Joy?' asks Oscar Morton. 'Archie's girlfriend?'

'Mrs Joy Kinnock,' answers Griff. 'Archie's wife.'

'Oh great,' says Morton. 'So what did Larry say?'

'Nothing,' replies Griff. 'So Kinnock said, "*It's true, then.*"'

And Ratner came out with a load of garble about how they were waiting for the right time to tell him, and that the flat was an investment for the band, and how you can't choose who you fall in love with. Once he said the L-word, Kinnock turned full-on Incredible Hulk and ... you saw him out there, right? If Ratner hadn't been sitting closest to the door and got away, he'd probably be dead.'

Oscar Morton massages his temples. 'Who called?'

'Not a clue,' says Griff.

'Can you two play the second set?'

'Don't be fookin' daft,' replies the drummer.

'Electric blues with no bass?' Jasper makes a dubious face. 'It would sound one-dimensional. And who'd play

harp?’

‘Blind Willie Johnson just had a battered acoustic,’ says

Oscar Morton. ‘No amps, no drums, no nothing.’

‘If you want me gone,’ says the drummer, ‘just pay up.’

‘I agreed to pay Archie for ninety minutes,’ says Oscar

Morton. ‘You’ve done thirty. Until I get ninety, I owe you sod-all.’

‘Gentlemen.’ Levon speaks up. ‘I have a proposal.’

Oscar Morton turns around. ‘Who are you?’

‘Levon Frankland, Moonwhale Music. This is my client, the bassist Dean Moss, and we may just be your way out.’

I am? thinks Dean. *We are?*

‘The way out of what?’ asks Morton.

‘Of your dilemma,’ says Levon. ‘Outside are a hundred punters who’ll soon start screaming for refunds. *Refunds*,

Mr Morton. Rents are up. Christmas bills are due. A hundred refunds is the last thing you need. But if you *refuse* ...’

Levon winces ‘... half those kids are off their tits on speed.

Things could get *very* nasty. Riotous, even. What will the

City of Westminster magistrates make of that? You need to

conjure up a new band. Without delay.'

'Which *you* just happen to have,' says Griff, 'hidden cunningly up your large intestine?'

'Which *we* happen to have –' Levon indicates the players
'– right here. Jasper de Zoet, guitar and vocals; Peter "Griff" Griffin, drums; and introducing –' he slaps Dean's shoulder
'– Dean Moss, bass prodigy, harp, vocals. Has Fender, will play.'

The drummer looks at Dean askance. 'You just happen to have a bass with you, just as our bassist runs out on us?'

'My bass 'n' all my worldly goods. I had to leave my bedsit in a hurry earlier.'

Jasper has been strangely quiet throughout, but now he asks Dean, 'How good are you, then?'

'Better than Larry Ratner,' replies Dean.

'Dean's superb,' says Levon. 'I don't take on amateurs.'

The drummer puffs on his cigarette. 'Can you sing?'

'Better than Archie Kinnock,' says Dean.

'So does a castrated donkey,' says Griff.

'What songs do you know?' asks Jasper.

‘Uh ... I could do “House of the Rising Sun”, “Johnny B. Goode”, “Chain Gang”. Can you two play those?’

‘Blindfolded,’ says Griff, ‘with one hand up our jaxies.’

‘*I* run this venue,’ says Oscar Morton. ‘And if these three have never played together, how do I know they’ll be any good?’

‘You know they’ll be good,’ says Levon, ‘because Jasper’s virtuosic and Griff played in the Wally Whitby Five. Dean, you’ll have to take on trust.’

Griff’s growl sounds not displeased. Jasper isn’t saying no. Dean is thinking, *I’ve got nothing to lose*. Oscar Morton looks sweaty and sick and needs one more push.

‘I know showbiz is full of bullshit merchants,’ says Levon.

‘We’ve both met far too many. But I am not one.’

The owner of 2i’s releases a sigh. ‘Don’t let me down.’

‘You won’t regret it,’ promises Levon, ‘and for fifteen quid they’re a steal.’ He tells the musicians: ‘Gentlemen, you get four pounds each. My commission is three. Agreed?’

‘Hold your horses!’ Oscar Morton is appalled. ‘Fourteen smackers? For three unknowns? You’re putting me on!’

Levon stares back for a drawn-out moment. ‘Dean, I misread the situation. It looks as if Mr Morton doesn’t want a way out, after all. Let’s leave before the argy-bargy really kicks off.’

‘Wait wait wait!’ Morton’s bluff is called. ‘I didn’t say I’d pay *nothing*. But I was only paying Archie Kinnock twelve.’

Levon peers over his blue shades. ‘Ah, but we both know that Archie Kinnock’s fee was eighteen pounds. Don’t we?’

Oscar Morton hesitates for too long and is lost.

Griff darkens. ‘Eighteen? Archie told us it was twelve.’

‘Which is why you insist on paperwork,’ says Levon.

‘What’s not written in ink on paper is, *de jure*, written in piss on snow.’

A sweaty bouncer enters. ‘They’re getting rowdy, boss.’

Angry shouts find their way in: ‘*Where’s the fackin’ band?* ’; ‘*Eight bob for four songs?* ’; ‘*We’ve been had! We’ve been had! We’ve been had!* ’; ‘*Re-fund! Re-fund! Re-fund!* ’

‘What happens next, boss?’ asks the bouncer.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ Oscar Morton leans into the mic.

‘Due to –’ a jag of feedback buys Dean extra seconds to