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Only One
Danny
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Danny Garvey was a sixteen-year-old footballing prodigy. Professional clubs clamoured to sign him, and a glittering future beckoned.

And yet, his early promise remained unfulfilled, and Danny is back home in the tiny village of Barshaw to manage the struggling junior team he once played for. What's more, he's hiding a secret about a tragic night, thirteen years earlier, that changed the course of several lives. There's only one Danny Garvey, they once chanted ... and that's the problem.

A story of irrational hopes and fevered dreams - of unstoppable passion and unflinching commitment in the face of defeat - *There's Only One Danny Garvey* is, above all, an unforgettable tale about finding hope and redemption in the most unexpected of places.

There's Only One Danny Garvey

DAVID F. ROSS



*For Nathan Ross,
and everyone who cares about the grass roots.*

'Mother I tried please believe me, I'm doing the best that I can. I'm ashamed of the things I've been put through, I'm ashamed of the person I am.'

—Joy Division, 'Isolation'

'A man who gives a good account of himself is probably lying, since any life when viewed from the inside is simply a series of defeats.'

—George Orwell

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'Aul' Jock Reid ... he's no' right in the heid. His wife's a hoor, an' his daughter's deid.'

Groups of youngsters and seagulls are rummaging around on the site of the old Barshaw tip. Piles of discarded rubbish are spread into every corner, only prevented from spilling outside the perimeter of the tip by a chain-link fence, which is straining with the effort. The tip is on the edge of the village and has long been abandoned by the local council, but its unlocked gates allow random dumping to continue unchecked.

An elderly man, familiar to the small humans, wanders in. He is barefoot and wearing pyjamas, although it's midday. That cruel and senseless refrain sings out. Chanted to get a rise out of a troubled old man prone to unpredictable outbursts that make the Barshaw youngsters laugh, that briefly relieve them of the interminable boredom of summer holidays.

The chant follows him around. But the old man takes no notice of it, or of us; the tuneless, baiting choir. He is – as always in recent months – miles away. Most likely, I can now appreciate, in a private, painless world where he doesn't have to deal with his granddaughter's abduction; or the terrible torment of knowing the entire community is convinced he was responsible for it.

Presumed dead. Unsolved child murder.

Or his daughter's subsequent suicide.

He is smiling, I notice. Something else has caught his attention. He ambles towards a partially hidden, upright wooden box. He clears it of the debris and black bin bags that conceal it. His feet submerged in a brown puddle of sludge, he gently lifts a hinged panel. He starts

massaging the black and white keys. The most majestic, mournful, colourful sound drifts across this swampy wasteland. It has me transfixed. Even the squawking birds fall silent. It is the first music to make me cry without my understanding why.

The others jeer. Make fun of me. Call me a *daft wee fucken lassie*. We get a chasing from clumsy policemen. They have arrived with the old man's concerned wife and a blanket to wrap him in. They drive him away. Through the rear passenger window, he is still smiling.

It's a recurring memory that has stayed with me, haunting me since I left this place thirteen years ago. And yet, something about that illusion is more real, more tangible and more pivotal to me than every moment since.

I was eight when he played the piano for me. I'm twenty-nine now.

One

Higgy

May 1996

—Christ almighty, this ground's a dump. For the semi-pros, I mean ... obviously not in comparison to ours back in Barshaw. Compared to The Barn, it's like fucking Wembley or something. Haven't been here for, what, five years? Since the last time they got in touch. It seems like less. He knows I'm coming, but he'll act like he didn't. Part of the game, me begging. Begging for him to come back. To come home.

I see it immediately for what it is; my complicated past and my short-term future, amalgamating in human form and sweating profusely in a garish green shell-suit. Stumbling down the old, empty ash-and-gravel terracing. Unsure of itself. Hesitant and anxious. A nylon-clad fire hazard. If only I'd been quicker to realise. If only I'd sparked a careless match. Might've saved a lot of trouble.

But, unavoidably, Higgy's here. Here to reclaim me. To drag me backwards. Backwards in time. Back to the bridge.

'Hullo son. How've ye been this last ... what'll it be? Five year?'

—I came because his bosses asked me to. Danny didn't want me here. He never does. It was a dark time for him back then, five years ago. One of many.

He was here three seasons ago. Trying, then as now, to persuade me to return. Time passes more rapidly at his stage of life, so I don't correct him. He shows up when he's hiding from something or running from it. It's a pattern. 'About that, aye,' I say.

'Ye've no' changed.' He's talking about appearances.

'Bollocks. We've aw changed. Some just fucken hide it better, that's aw.'

That's undeniably true. After twenty-five, the mould's set for everybody. For all he has aged, it's still obviously, outwardly him. The same man I've known my whole life. Inside? Well, that remains to be seen.

'Ye headin' up north? Plannin' on doin' a bit ae hikin' around the Cairngorms?' I see him puzzled. Then it dawns on him that I've clocked his rucksack. He sighs, then attempts a smile.

—I've brought a bag. Figured it might take a few days to get him to trust me. Trust was always something hard-earned with Danny.

'They treatin' ye awright?' he asks, as if I was in my brother Raymond's shoes.

'Nae complaints.'

'What's gonnae happen next season? There'll need tae be cuts tae the budget, club goin' down, an' that.'

'Probably. Cross that bridge when ah come tae it.' *Another* bridge. The direction of my life's been influenced by bridges. Particularly the one in Barshaw, the tiny Ayrshire village where I was born. Where I'm now urged to return, tail somewhat between my legs.

'Look son, can we go somewhere? Get a wee chat goin'?'

'Here's fine. Ah've got the nets tae bring in anyways.'

'Can ye no' make the team dae that for ye?'

'It's part ae ma job. Ah dinnae mind it.'

He laughs. Nervously. He's reaching. Looking up. Searching for a foothold. He thinks he's found one.

'The young boys played well. Good movement off the baw, an' that.'

'Aye.'

'Last game ae the season, tae. Minds usually on bloody Benidorm, eh?'

—He's always been a difficult person to reach. He was always a quiet kid. You never knew what he was thinking. Always somebody you had to drag the words out of, even in the good times. The silent insolence, his ma used to say. Keeping all that in ... it can't do him any good. When things get difficult, he hides ... withdraws into himself like a wee bear going into hibernation. When the wee girl in his primary-school class disappeared - must've been around 1972 - it was a major thing around here. She was never found. Danny went missing the same day. Somebody in the crowd out looking for both of them found him down under the Barshaw Bridge. He'd been out all night. Libby was absolutely frantic. The police were furious at us for wasting their time.

Raymond rattled Danny's jaw when he got hold of him, and Danny didn't speak to anybody for months and months after that. About a year, in fact. They had these social workers coming around constantly, right at a time when Libby was struggling badly, too.

We had teachers, doctors, therapists, even a child psychologist all look at him. Some nights, you'd listen at the door and you'd hear him, in his room, talking away to himself. Talking to her: to wee Louise-Anne, the missing girl. But he'd say nothing to anybody else. Not a word. Then, just when I thought he'd be taken off Libby, he suddenly opened up as if nothing had happened. It was strange. Things were fine then. Until the next time.

I look at him. He's wondering what to say next. Stumbling over the words like a drunk with amnesia trying to recite a poorly rehearsed soliloquy.

—I should've tried to get him more help back then. But I was too wrapped up in looking after his ma. Trying to keep the worst of it from the social workers, to keep them together, him and his brother. To not have them split up and put into care. I often wonder if we did the right thing by him.

'Ye must be right chuffed wi' aw the attention, despite everythin' else.'

'It's no' about me.' I say this and mean it. Football is about the players; that's until their manager fails them. Until he loses the dressing room. But this unexpected cup run has brought uncomfortable exposure. Scouts from the big clubs are following our progress. Looking to swoop in and land the young talent we've groomed.

—It still staggers me that he's doing this; developing youngsters. Imparting knowledge. Showing leadership. And doing it well, too. He's a good coach, there's no doubt of that.

The football was always his coping mechanism. Regardless of the domestic carnage that was going on around him, Danny always focused on the pitch. Watching him play, you'd never have known about the problems he had; about the overdoses he witnessed, or those endless bouts of screaming at his brother.

'But ye'll be lookin' forward tae takin' them at Hampden, eh?'

I nod at this. Pointless denying that it's satisfying to have navigated ten emotional, sometimes tortuous, rounds to reach the national youth-team final.

I'd always been told I was special. Not by my closest family, obviously. But by Higgy, and others who watched me play. Never questioned it. Not when barrelling around the muddy pitches of Scotland as a lauded and sought-after youth player. Not when the big clubs turned up on the doorstep with S-forms and a pen, and bouquets for my mam. Not even when Deek Henderson asked me to touch his cock the week before my debut for the Bridge. And certainly not when scoring in the cup against Auchinleck Talbot when I was sixteen. Whenever I pulled on the number-ten shirt, I was special. They all said it.

I look across the rutted turf. Sigh deeply. I turn to look down at the stooping, stunted shell I spent my teenage years calling uncle.

'Look, Higgy, nae offence but ye could've phoned tae bum me for tickets tae the final. Why the fuck are ye *really* here?' I say it with more anger than I intended. He's just Raymond's fucking messenger after all.

—Fuck me, it's freezing up here. He can't be wedded to this, surely? I want him to come back. Back to the Bridge. It'll do him good, ultimately. People here are worried about him just like they were before. Five years ago, during the summer break following his first season as Arbroath's youth team coach, Danny was found to be defacing books at the local library. He was finding it hard to get over the injury that ended his professional chances. He needed real help back then, but we weren't close enough to him to see it. He'd been ripping pages out of novels and sellotaping them into medical textbooks. Scoring out names in books and writing 'Louise-Anne Macdonald was here' all over them. He got caught and charged. He told the club's directors that he was just bored; it was something that had passed the time. The club paid the fine. Made it go away. His young team was very successful, but few considered or cared

about the mental toll the job was taking on him. They didn't want their wee boat rocked. The club doctor thinks he's overworking himself again, that he needs a clean break. I think he just needs to see his ma, his brother. Focus on helping our village club. I suspect he knows this, but he's making me work for it.

He doesn't answer. A floodlight bursts into life. It isn't dark but the sudden dull sound of it kicking in takes us both by surprise. A weekend test of the electrical circuits following the embarrassment of last week's cup-tie cancellation. He takes off his bunnet. The wind lifts the wispy strands from one side of his head and wafts them straight up like a flip-top bin lid. He quickly scratches the scalp. Skin flakes. He pulls the hat back on, maybe hoping that I haven't noticed.

'Ah've mind ae a match here ... must've been sixty-seven or that.' He's reaching for another ledge, another branch that he must hope won't come away by the roots. 'You'd just been born. Me an' Deek brought Raymond.' My face offers no clues about either man's name being raised. 'It was his first-ever game. Away tae fucken Arbroath. In torrential rain. Jesus! If that's no' enough tae put ye off fitba for life, ah dunno what is.'

I look at my boots. I conceal a smile as I remember Raymond telling me years later how much he hated that game. The cold. A thunderstorm. Daft auld Higgy telling him that was just God rearranging his furniture. Then him gagging from the sickening, stale smell of the smokies that polluted the car on the long journey back home.

'It was bloody Baltic back then anaw. We were leavin' the ground in the rain an' walkin' back tae the motor. Despite his fingers bein' blue wi' the cold, wee Raymond asked for a pokey hat. The smile on his face when the boy handed it down tae him. He was that excited; like Santa

Claus himself had gie'd him it. Then he turns an' trips ower a kerb. It was aw ower his jacket. Ah don't think he'd even licked the bloody thing. Poor wee bastard. He's lyin' there, in the mud, covered in ice cream. Greetin'. He just wouldnae get up. Stubborn as fuck, even then. Aw these strangers watchin'. Ah was affronted.'

Jesus Christ. Fighting every impulse not to, I reach out an arm. I put it around my uncle's shoulder. I resign myself to this; knowing what's coming. His voice is breaking.

'That fucken ice-cream cone ... why did ah no' just go back an' get him another one?'

At regular intervals - typically following another of Raymond's lapses in judgement - Higgy would drag out the ice-cream cone defence; the pivotal point at which he believed Raymond's destructive life course was set. It conveniently shifted responsibility for his actions from my brother and placed them at the feet of the principal martyr to the cause: Saint Higgy of the Blessed Bridge. My brother disappeared the night they got back from the match in Arbroath. Squeezed himself out of the bedroom window at Higgy's place. He was missing for twenty-four hours. A policeman found him asleep under the Barshaw Bridge. He was suffering from mild hypothermia.

—Raymond doesn't even know I'm here. I didn't even discuss my suggestion of the Barshaw Bridge manager's position with him. But it might pay to let Danny think I did. There's a lot of unfinished business between the three of them, Danny, Raymond and their ma. I just wanted to bring Danny home.

'Why could ah no' take better care ae the two ae ye'se?' he wails.

'Cos it wisnae your fucken responsibility!' I yell in response.

'The poor wee fella. His da'd just beat it ... an' Libby wis done. Ah shouldae stepped in, like ah did wi' you.'

He has a skewed view of the history. Libby is our mother; Raymond and me. She's the love of Higgy's life, God fucking help him. He's not our *real* uncle; it's just easier for us to call him that - it avoids more painful truths. We are four points of a compass determinedly pointing away from the centre. Trying to escape that centrifugal force that periodically drags us back to confrontation. Only Higgy seems unable to resist it.

'Fuck off, Higgy. Libby's always been her ain worst enemy,' I say. 'Olympic-level selfishness, hers is.' Sackcloth and ashes. Both of us. What a fucking pair. I pity him his cloistered existence in a tiny working-class village where fuck all happens and the only thing you have is time; to regret, to relive, to put the few 'what-ifs' on a pedestal. But am I any better? The environment is different, that's all. Isolation takes hold of me now in colder air.

Words ricochet around my head, flipped incessantly like a steelie in a pinball machine. *Ashamed of the things I've been put through. Ashamed of the person I am.*

A headache is forming. Starts at the base of the skull and quickly works its way towards the temples, like an amphibious army invading a pristine beach. I haven't had one of them in a while and I silently curse this old bastard for bringing it on.

'We've missed ye, Danny. We need ... we *want* ye tae come back, son. Back tae the Bridge.' It's a rehearsed statement. Planted there by a Janus-faced cunt with a PhD in advanced manipulation. I withdraw the arm. Raymond's behind this. I know it.

'That's no' gonnae happen,' I tell him. He knows why. Same reasons as the last time he tried.

'Jesus, Danny, it was donkey's years ago, son. Water under...'

I rummage around in the pocket of my tracksuit. I retrieve a pack of cigarettes and my tiny lighter. I'm trying to give up but failing heroically. It takes a few sparks, but I light the small, white nicotine stick. I fleetingly visualise a smoking pile of green nylon ashes, but I dispose of the lighter, fulfilling its destiny. His tone changes.

'Danny, the Bridge needs a new manager. It's gonnae be a tough season ahead, nae doubt, but it's a good opportunity for somebody.'

'Good. *Somebody*'ll be fucken happy then.'

'We want ye to come home, boy. Yer mam...'

I turn sharply at this; a line crossed. Raise a finger. Challenging him to say another word. None comes. Higgy pulls up his collar and shoves his hands into his pockets. A stiff North Sea breeze billows in suddenly, like a shoulder charge from a fifteen-stone centre half. It catches us off-guard.

'How can ye even stand it up here?' he says. 'It's fucken freezin'. Just as well my baws are past their sell-by date. They've just dropped at my feet.' The guns of the invading army in my head fall silent. He grimaces, then smiles. It takes time, but eventually I do too. He isn't wrong about the weather. Even at milder times, the cold seems to wire straight through the ribcage, its sharp, bony fingers compressing the lungs. He'll know I'm not happy here. Futile trying to deny it. Would it really be any worse back in Barshaw?

'Christ's sake, you live in Barshaw, no' fucken Barbados,' I say to him.

'Come back tae the Bridge, son. The club needs ye.' Higgy sits on the rough timber slats of the dug-out bench. He looks exhausted. 'Fuck it, ah *need* ye! Imagine it ... you an' me, back at the Bridge. Turnin' it aw around. It's a big chance for ye, son. An opportunity tae—'

'Tae whit? Apologise? Atone? Fix things wi' folk that ah let down. That's whit ye mean, int'it?'

He slumps, head in hands. He looks like he might cry.
'Ah'm desperate, Danny.' The daft auld cunt.

—I knew he'd come home.



He knew I'd comply. A subtle twisting of the grapple hold Raymond has on me via this weak, pitiful man ... the closest thing I have to a father. It may be that Raymond has grown a conscience over Libby. The vacancy at the Bridge a chance to absolve himself of his guilt, but through me, since he's behind bars? But this also seems unlikely. Prison may have changed him, but he can't rid himself of his self-centred streak.

Higgy stays with me for the week. My mother's medication is being changed so she has daily carers coming in, therefore Higgy doesn't need to be around. He tells me he's allowed himself a wee break. A week's holiday in Arbroath. Sleeping on the worn sofa of my tiny rented flat. With its broken front window frame and the wind that whistles relentlessly through it like a drunken, tuneless lounge crooner forgetting the words of his own songs.

—Jesus, he lives like a monk, this boy. The room is meticulously laid out. He could evacuate this place in ten minutes and not leave a trace. Maybe that's the point. No television, only a few books, his records and a radio. He always lost himself in his music. When he was upset or hiding ... or even when his team won and he'd played well, the radio was his thing. Hidden away in a room, on his own. His brother was the opposite. Raymond craved

attention; needed to be the centre of everything, regardless of the personal cost.

'Long ye been in this place?' He means the flat, not the town.

'Couple ae seasons, mibbe,' I reply, having to think about it, and still not sure I'm right.

'It's aw'right though, eh?'

'It's fine.'

'Close enough tae walk tae work though. Ah used tae love that.' In all the time I've known Higgy, he's never worked a regular job. Window cleaning and odd-jobbing funded the years following my youth teams' games in the far-flung outposts of Scotland. Libby won't have paid him to run after her these last few years, that's for sure. And with the Bridge's current predicament - which he has started to educate me on - it's certain that he wouldn't be on the meagre payroll there. A beneficiary of the state, God fucking help him.

'Yeah. Ah enjoy takin' the bike,' I say.

He looks at me strangely, as if I've just cracked a joke that isn't particularly funny. 'Ye gie up the wee motor, then?' he asks. It jolts me. I don't answer. 'Probably wise.'

Over the course of the two days since I made the decision to return to Barshaw, Higgy has investigated this living space like Columbo building a murder-case theory. There is nothing to reveal though. I live, by choice, in a very spartan way. There are no indications of my past life. Apart from the vinyl - my one indulgence - it's as if I only exist in the present tense. He acknowledged this when he first walked in.

'Nae telly?'

'No time for it,' I told him.

'What about the fitba,' he asked. 'Ye no' thought ae gettin' a dish?'

'Can see any games ah want at the club. An' ah don't have tae pay for it there.'

Forty-eight hours later and he's exhausting my patience. And wearing out the stylus of my record player. With little else to do, Higgy has unsuccessfully attempted to understand how anyone could content themselves with friends like Morrissey and Marr, Ian Curtis and Nick Cave without reaching for a cut-throat razor. We choose our friends, not our relatives.

—This town, my God ... I thought Barshaw was bad, but Arbroath? It feels like weeks since I got here. Danny coaches his young team and I stay here, listening to his favourite music; songs that make me want to slit my wrists.

He's lonely here. His attitude's a dead giveaway. No wonder he's under a cloud. But he's promised to return. To attend the interview with the Barshaw committee. After his youth team's cup final, of course. He was forced to run out on one before, thirteen years ago. I can't expect him to do the same thing again.

Higgy's staying for his own reasons. But also to ensure that I give Arbroath's director my notice. I'll stay for the youth cup final. But that's to be my last game. Unless Arbroath cancel my contract early. They won't do that because the youth cup final is a glimmer of light in an otherwise dismal season for the seniors. Those on the board couldn't give a fuck as long as the youngsters are still winning. Changing the coaching team now, ahead of a major final, would just be unsettling for young players becoming used to routine. Older players manipulate the position of managers and coaches to suit their own individual or collective agendas. It's a skill that the youth players haven't yet mastered, and why I prefer working with them.

The first team has been relegated. The players gave up months ago. The manager took the rap and the early pay-off, as they always do. But the damage was done. A hefty fine is sure to descend following the floodlighting failure that resulted in the postponement of the cup tie. And a lifelong fan is suing the club for emotional distress; a broken nose resulting from a stray shot hit during a warm-up ... as opposed to the more general distress of following the first team. It's a good time for me to be getting out. I just wish there was somewhere more worthwhile to go.

We sit and eat. A pie and chips from the seafront. *Louder Than Bombs* sets the tone: *'If you have five seconds to spare, then I'll tell you the story of my life.'*

'What's the script, then?' I ask.

'What d'ye mean? Wi' me?'

'Naw. Wi' the Bridge,' I say.

He *ahs*, as if I'd just translated from a foreign language. 'Bad biscuits,' he says, conspiratorially. 'Been on the slide for about six year. Slow, like ... but every season, slippin' further.'

I knew nothing of the club these last two seasons. The black dog is myopic. It only looks inwards.

—We're a fucking laughingstock, and that's the truth. Tiny wee village, always punching above its weight. Had some great teams, great players ... young Danny being one of them. But last year? Fuck sake...

'Ah knew right fae the kick-off that he was a rank bad yin,' he says, referring to the previous Barshaw Bridge FC manager.

'That right?'

'Aye.' His brows furrow like wartime trenches. 'He swans in eighteen months ago, aw Fancy Dan ... a suit an' a cigar. Like he wis the Junior league Malcolm Allison.'

Higgy's blood pressure is up now, no question. His disgust at such middle-class appropriation can't be hidden. His words curl and corrode. They need to be spat out. But once done, he composes himself.

'First few games were total bloody chaos. Whole team clueless, an' him effin' an' blindin' at everybody fae the dugout. Somethin' just wisnae right. It wis embarrassin'. He's got the wee Irish lad O'Halloran at right back!' He pauses here, holding out his palms. 'Ah mean, for fuck's sake, Danny.'

I have no knowledge of Sean O'Halloran, or for that matter, Adie McGinty, the outgoing team manager. But I nod along anyway.

'Fucken McGinty ... man. Close tae ruinin' the Bridge.' Not for the first time since he's been here, it feels like Higgy might cry. I'm intrigued by this; the heightened anguish over something so superficial. I've often witnessed it at the fag-end of the game in Scotland. Maybe there's more to it this time.

—There are few things I love more than life itself: his ma ... and God help me, this daft wee inconsequential local team. Soon, Libby will be gone. Her boys, an' my team are it for me. There's nothing else. Nothing.

I never quite felt the way Higgy does about football. Certainly not after the injury. Before that, I loved playing. I loved the feeling of superiority it offered for ninety-plus minutes. I loved being in total control with the ball at my feet. It was an escape from all the other tortures. But I was never obsessed with it, like Higgy is. I suspected there were other things in life that were more important. I just didn't have the access to them.

But for Higgy, the club is his reason for existing. Without it, he simply fades away. Sometimes I envy him

his life spent on an island with like-minded people, where rational thinking is displaced by passion and loyalty.

‘Weren’t gettin’ any decisions. Players were leavin’, naebody’d go an’ watch the team...’ He gulps. Lowers his voice. ‘An’ then, the fucken scandal. It’s just about sunk us.’

I understood little of why Barshaw Bridge were even contemplating me as their new manager. Until this next revelation, that is.

—I had to tell him.

‘Knows fuck all about fitba, does McGinty. Stupid bastard kept forgettin’ it’s three points for a win now. Second half ae the season, he’s playin’ for a draw every bloody game. We’re in the bottom three. Four games tae go. Eck Dunbar, the striker, punches the Hurlford Juniors goalie square in the face, then boots him in the baws, and spits on him for good measure. Sent off. Banned for three games. We’ve got two or three other yins out injured. A draw an’ a four nil humpin’ away at the Glens leave us needin’ tae win the last game ae the season tae avoid gettin’ relegated.’ He draws air in deeply, as if reliving this might be the end of him.

‘Dunbar’s a big hairy bastard. Long ginger hair, an’ wi’ a beard like the Big Yin. Palest skin ye’ve ever seen tae, like he’s been coated in white emulsion.’ He sees my confusion. ‘McGinty persuades him tae shave the beard off, get a number one buzzcut, an’ spend the whole week oan a sunbed. Slathers aw this dark-brown fake tan stuff ower him tae. The boy looks like a bloody Brazilian. Christ, when he turned up that last Saturday, ah didnae recognise him either. McGinty lists him as a trialist.’

Higgy pauses. Sips the beer from his can.

‘Tight match, nothin’ in it for the first three quarters. A goal’s aw we need, ah’m thinkin’. One bloody goal, an’

we're stayin' up. The baw bursts through an' our new trialist's after it. He's past their centre half. The big bastard reaches out an' grabs at Dunbar's shorts. Well ... that wis it!

'*What wis it?*'

'They'd sprayed the tan everywhere except his arse an' his bollocks!' Higgy's enraged still, but I can't not laugh at this. 'The shorts are aw ripped tae bits an' the bloody clown's chasin' their defender wi' his big white knob hingin' out, an' a big massive white arse ... swingin' punches, an' bawlin' the odds at the ref for haudin' up a red.'

Fielding ineligible or unregistered players happens a lot in the lower leagues of grass-roots football, but Higgy reinforces the severity of this one.

'Dunbar's aw'ready oan a polis charge ae common assault for the nuttin' the goalie yin. For Christ's sake, Duncan Ferguson's no' long out the jail for less. On the way off, somebody shouts "Yer da sells Avon" at him. Big bloody eejit launches himself intae the crowd, feet first. Very near kills this guy.'

Eck Dunbar won't be coming back. He had vanished - taking several wallets with him - long before the final whistle. 'Good riddance,' mutters Higgy. The club will start the new season down a division and with a points deduction as a further penalty. This wipes the smile from my face. But Higgy isn't finished.

—Don't judge me just because you think I should've told him all of this before he handed his notice in at Arbroath. Don't kid yourself on you'd have acted differently.

'After the game, the ref finds a brown envelope wi' a stiff roll ae twenties in it. There's a note wi' it, signed fae our chairman, pleadin' for him no' tae report us. How fucken stupid did they think we were, eh?'

'What d'ye mean,' I ask. This last bit has me baffled. Higgy's desperation to get it off his chest means his account has more holes in it than one of the nets. However, what's crystal clear is that the blame for this botched attempt to bribe the officials falls squarely at one man's feet.

'It wis bloody McGinty. Ah'm tellin' ye, he wis absolutely off his head at the end. A complete mental case.' Higgy is laying it on thick. Hard to separate the fact from the exaggerated fiction.

'Never told me aw this before,' I say.

'Tellin' ye now!' he comes back, defences up.

I'm piecing it together: The Bridge need someone cheap, (relatively) young and part of a time in the club's history when it overachieved. A prodigal.

Higgy pipes up with my name - prompted from afar by Raymond - and Barshaw Bridge FC can make a grovelling appeal for leniency to the SFA. Which brings us to...

'So, what's the damage?'

'Dunbar *sine die*'d,' says Higgy. He sighs. 'But he went oan the run fae the polis anyway. Naebody knows where the daft bastard is now. McGinty banned fae fitba for five year.' He takes a deep breath. 'An' the Bridge docked nine points fae the start ae next season.'

It's my turn for anger. 'What, an' ye couldnae've fucken mentioned that right off the bat?'

'Ah thought ye'd turn it down,' he says.

'An' ye'd have fucken thought right then, ya sneaky wee bastard.' I get up. The chair tips over behind me.

Higgy looks crestfallen. He'd know I'd have found out sooner or later. Having reluctantly said yes to returning, he'll assume I won't go back on that. Even if I wanted to, the option to stay has been removed. My contract was up in the summer and there has been no rush by my employers to renew it. Higgy doesn't know this, but it's

02: Good To Be on the Road Back Home Again, by Cornershop - (*Singh*)
Available on Wiiiija Records, 1997

03: Little Bird (Are You Happy in Your Cage), by Moose - (*Fletcher, Davis*) Available on Hut Recordings, 1992

04: I Want You, by Spiritualized - (*Pierce*) Available on Dedicated Records,
1992

05: These Are the Dreams of the Working Girl, by Comet Gain - (*Feck*)
Available on Wiiiija Records, 1997

06: Isolation, by Joy Division - (*Sumner, Hook, Morris, Curtis*) Available on
Factory Records, 1980

07: Bizarre Love Triangle, by Frente - (*Gilbert, Hook, Morris, Sumner*)
Available on Mushroom Records, 1994

08: Bachelor Kisses, by The Go-Betweens - (*McLennan, Forster*) Available
on Sire Records, 1984

09: Live Forever, by Oasis - (*Gallagher*) Available on Creation Records,
1994

10: Lonesome Tonight, by New Order (*Gilbert, Hook, Morris, Sumner*)
Available on Factory Records, 1984

11: I Know It's Over, by The Smiths - (*Morrissey, Marr*) Available on Rough
Trade Records, 1986

12: White Love - Piano Reprise, by One Dove - (*Allison, Carmichael, McInven*) Available on FFRR Records, 1993

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David F. Ross was born in Glasgow in 1964. His debut novel, *The Last Days of Disco*, was shortlisted for the Authors' Club Best First Novel Award, and received exceptional critical acclaim, as did the other two books in the Disco Days Trilogy - *The Rise & Fall of the Miraculous Vespas* and *The Man Who Loved Islands* - and his most recent book, *Welcome to the Heady Heights*. He is a regular contributor to *Nutmeg* magazine, and in 2020 he wrote the screenplay for the film *Miraculous*, based on his own novel. Follow David on Twitter @dfr10 and his website: davidfross.co.uk.