

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Headhunters

John King

CONTENTS

Cover

About the Author

Also by John King

Dedication

Title Page

Part One

Beautiful Game

Cogs

Pigs in Knickers

Kicking off

Black Vinyl

Part Two

Dreamscape

Scum of Toytown

Beano

Balham on Tour

Death Tripping

Part Three

Skin-Bone-Drum-Bass

Rent Boy

Burning Rubber

Northern Lights
Happy House

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About the Author

John King lives in London. *England Away* is the third novel in the loose trilogy that began with *The Football Factory*.

BY JOHN KING

The Football Factory

Headhunters

England Away

White Trash

The Prison House

Human Punk

TO ANITA

John King
HEADHUNTERS

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

'What was even funnier was what happened when I went to sleep that night, O my brothers. I had a nightmare, and, as you might expect, it was one of those bits of film I'd viddied in the afternoon. A dream or nightmare is really only like a film inside your gulliver, except that it is as though you could walk into it and be part of it.'

A Clockwork Orange, Anthony Burgess

HEADHUNTERS

Following on from his bestselling study of violence, *The Football Factory*, John King considers Britain's other obsession - sex. Formed in the chemical mists of New Year's Eve, The Sex Division sees the once-sacred act of procreation at its most material, as five men devise a points system based on the higher levels of carnal achievement. In this lager-soaked league, the most that Woman can offer Man is 4 points - unless, that is, she leaves her handbag unattended...

Scurrilously funny and painfully true, *Headhunters* is a brilliant reflection on men at play, a wire-tap on a world of lust and lager by one of the most exciting novelists in England.

PART ONE

BEAUTIFUL GAME

CARTER WAS FIRST off the mark, and it wasn't much of a surprise. He walked into The Unity with a smile that didn't need explaining. The dirty cunt had been dabbling again. The others likened him to the Ooh Ah Cantona Man United side – he had flair *and* the ability to grind out a result when the occasion demanded. The lads did this on the quiet as they didn't want to give him the satisfaction. He got enough of that elsewhere.

The other four members of the Sex Division nursed half-full glasses, watering hangovers, prepared to wait for confirmation of the Carter score-line. If the result wasn't in much doubt, then there was still the small but important matter of totting up the points. But the shag man was going to take his time and passed the rest of the boys on his way to the bar. He ordered a pint of 4X and chatted with Eileen behind the counter, enjoying the warm smile, talking about electric shavers that break down a week after they've been given as Christmas presents and the odds on it snowing before the end of the week, both agreeing it would be nice to see everything painted white, though in London snow usually translated as slush. Carter finally went over to the Sex Division HQ in their usual place by the window. Will had left for the fruit machine while Carter was ordering, feigning disinterest but listening to the conversation with Eileen.

'Well?' Harry asked, forcing a note of indifference into his voice, not wanting to break rank with the rest of the

service crew, but keen to get the facts sorted and filed so he could get on with life, always needing to have things straight in his head.

‘Well what?’ Carter settling into his seat, dipping his hand between his legs to pull the chair under the table, lifting the glass to his lips and savouring the taste, taking his time and doing his best to wind the others up.

‘How many points did you get last night, you flash cunt?’

Carter smiled his Well Lads I’ll Tell You When I’m Good And Fucking Ready smile and continued with the lager, exaggerating movement of arm and hand. He wondered if 4X was brewed in Australia by Australians. Crocodile Dundee’s cousin giving it the big one down the brewers in between knocking off sheep in the middle of a radioactive desert, oversized wellies for the back legs just like the sheep-worriers he’d heard about on the Scottish islands; shearing the bastards then slipping them a length. Mad Max holding the poor little fucker still, rusty Harley parked up with an overheated engine. Probably not. The Aussies were all in Earl’s Court and Dundee was working for the yankee dollar. Him and the yardies. He looked at Harry and Balti, the Fat Bastards, then Mango, all of who’d stopped drinking and were waiting for an answer. The season was under way with a vengeance and they had to know exactly where they stood. Perhaps it was early doors yet, as Ron Atkinson would say, but what did the northern gold merchant know anyway?

‘Well lads, it was a free-flowing game as I’m sure you’ve already guessed, taking into consideration the quality of the opposition round here. I was up against a feeble defence trying to con its way through with a clean sheet, and I’m glad to say the old skills didn’t take long to have the desired effect. I was pissed and can’t remember the build up, but as you’ll imagine it was quality footwork, playing it through the midfield, out to the wing, a bit of skill, dribbling and all that, end of the knob job, a bit of

muscle getting past the hatchet tackle, a quick one-two, chipping the keeper. You know how it is when you're one-hundred-per-cent quality.'

'I don't,' Balti smiling despite the headache he was carrying and narked he was behind less than a day into the season, already following a leader he'd never catch. If only a self-made millionaire would turn up on the doorstep and offer to bankroll a successful championship push. But that kind of thing only happened up north.

Will came back to the table and remained standing. Carter got on his wick sometimes, but he said nothing, waiting for the mouthy bastard to get his bragging over and done with. He didn't like the idea of competitive football, turning the beautiful game into a business. He wasn't a tart like the rest of them. His sex was his own business. Even as a kid he'd never been into all the mouth, getting a couple of fingers in and running off to tell everyone. But he was signed up now and had to go along with it otherwise he'd look a prat. That's what a moment of pissed weakness did. The resolution had been made the previous night and if he bottled it he'd be branded.

He would keep his ideals, though, and wouldn't be changed by blatant commercialism. Play his natural game and bollocks to the rest of them, do an Ossie Ardiles even though Will was a Brentford man, do a Brazilian orange-juggling-on-Rio-Beach effort. It meant a place at the bottom of the table because he was no Pele and Ardiles was Argentinian, worse than that Tottenham, and they were charging over the top for oranges at the moment, vitamin C a luxury, but at least there was no chance of relegation. He could handle the tag and would live off the respect due a man with convictions, though when he left Rio and started filtering back into the pub, sucked under a dirty London sky, he knew it wasn't worth holding his breath.

'Get on with it will you,' he said, more to his Guinness than Carter. 'My pint'll be solid by the time you get your

report filed.'

'It was a four-pointer.'

'Four points?'

'Four points. That's what I said. That's the way it goes. I got lucky. I was expecting three and ended up with a bonus for good behaviour.'

'You gave that bird one up the jacksie?'

'That's right. One point for a knuckle shuffle, two for a shag, three for a blow job and four for six inches up the arse.'

Will shook his head, more in sarcastic mock awe than real disbelief. Balti smiled and yawned, rolling a stiff neck. Harry sipped his drink, frowning, looking at the floor, following the faded pattern, an intricate network of faded red and black lines, a bit of yellow tucked away, holding the information for a while before storing it in his memory. Only Mango wasn't letting the unstoppable sex machine claim instant glory and further develop his cult status. If he wanted to go round shafting birds up the arse, then that was his problem. Must be a fucking iron on the quiet. He couldn't imagine a bird taking it voluntarily first time between the sheets. Not unless you paid them.

'You're a fucking bum bandit mate.'

'That's right.' Carter fixed on Mango's eyes without much humour in his voice. 'Four points in the bag and the bird's got a dose of vindaloo fall-out for the next couple of days. Serves her right as well. Do you think I'd have shit-stabbed her if there was no points in it? It's total football. I'm like the fucking Dutch. Johan Cruyff and Neeskens. A touch of Rudi Krol and Johnny Rep. Keep the tradition going. It's like that with the clogs. Bit of blow and black tarts sitting in the window waiting for their share of the Englishman's wage packet. Pride of Ajax. Cross their palms with guilders and sample the dark African continent, or at least the Dutch colonies. Have a Jakarta special with the

gado gado at half-time. Total fucking football. You should try Amsterdam. The Dutch have got it sussed.'

'Were Cruyff and Neeskens bum bandits as well?' Harry asked, confused by the carpet, formation spinning and sending his head into orbit, red and black doing something to his brain, wondering what the fuck gado gado was. 'Cruyff's got a son. Seems a shame somehow, brilliant footballer like that, European Footballer of the Year and everything. I didn't know he was a shirt-lifter.'

'He's not, you cunt, it's the football I'm talking about.'

'That wasn't what total football was about,' said Balti snapping awake, big belly grin on his face. 'Total football was the whole team attacking and the goalie the only one at the back playing sweeper. It was scoring more goals than the other side. They just went out on the pitch and played the game and didn't give a toss how many they let in. Didn't follow systems and did whatever they felt like. No rules. Natural, free-flowing football. If the other side scored five then as long as the Dutch got six they won and went home happy. It was a sound attitude. Like that Brazil team with Pele, Tostao, Jairzinho. Remember the keeper Felix. Dear oh dear.'

'Didn't they have Rivelino as well?' Mango asked. 'I remember him. Big bushy tash and always bending the free-kicks round the defensive wall.'

'We're talking total football, Dutch style. I'm a fucking Orange man stuck in Black Town, adding colour to London's black-and-white approach to the beautiful game. What do you know about football apart from how much Man U are worth on the stock exchange.'

Will sat down and deliberately placed his glass on a beer mat, Germanic lettering and a red coat of arms covered by the Irish stout. He was half cut. He still hadn't got over last night, New Year's Eve, and his right eye was murder. He'd left the party about four or so and was waiting for a cab with Mango. Fuck knows where the rest of the lads went.

Pissed, stoned, useless. Except Carter on remote control looking to get his end away. Then Mango wanders off for a piss and the taxi pulls up. Three blokes appear from nowhere and try to nick it, a bunch of chancers, and when the barney started he got smacked in the head but was too pissed for aggravation and ended up in the gutter with decaying leaves for company and a kick in the head for good luck, that split second when he focused on the foot driving into his eye, like a slow-motion replay waiting for some expert analysis from Alan Hansen.

The cab left without Will, the driver only bothered about getting a fare, ignoring the body in the street. Mango returned too late, as usual, and found Will sitting on the curb, shaking his head, pissed off that they'd have to call another car, knuckles wedged into his eye socket replaying the kick. He didn't even know what they looked like. Didn't know them from Adam. Dark shapes with dark hair. White faces without eyes, noses, mouths. Moving, living, stropky waxworks. Any one of them could be sitting in the pub and he wouldn't have known. Will hated violence.

'I'll tell you, Carter,' he said. 'You're more like Liverpool. The old Liverpool. Grinding out a result. Going home with a 1-0. Or Arsenal. Boring, boring Arsenal. Up the arse with the Arsenal; 1-0 to the bum bandits. Tony Adams pushing up all the time playing offside then moving upfield for a ninety-eighth minute corner heading in the winner. Bad news that, getting a length off the Gooners.'

The Sex Division stopped talking and watched Denise, who'd just come in the pub. She nodded their way as she went towards the bar, dressed almost to the point of looking like a King's Cross tart; one of the girls Mango admitted shafting just before Christmas. A youngster. A nice treat for Santa. Not more than sixteen, he'd said, though he secretly reckoned she was fourteen tops. Plastic mini-skirt and six-inch heels, and the cut so short there was an inch of childlike flesh exposed, goosepimples and

something extra in her Christmas stocking, just the strap of the suspender belt against innocent white skin. He'd paid his money and rolled the rubber on, knobbed her up by Regent's Park near the mosque, then dropped her off again in King's Cross. He had class, he told them. He wasn't shagging some Halifax teenybopper in the back of his car round the station, not with junkies and dossers everywhere, bloodless faces pressed up against the window screaming heaven and hell, Aids and smack and rich punters in the blood, a dose of new-economics care in the community. He got his money's worth and said the bird offered him the night for free. She'd liked him. Will knew it was bollocks, about the girl offering Mango a freebie, but the others believed him, reckoning he was bang out of order shagging a kid that young forced on the game, sixteen still the right side of a kicking. A year or two younger and Mango would've been in trouble. He knew as much. Will reckoned they were mugs. The lot of them. Especially Harry, who pissed his wages up the wall worse than the rest of the lads, a big man with his square, shaved head and dreams. Mango was a cunt. Someone's daughter, sister, lover.

'I'd love to knob that,' Balti said, watching Denise disappear into the back of the pub. 'She's beautiful. I'd settle down and work all hours to bring her the good life. I'd give up the drink and curries and eat bean sprouts and grated carrot on crackers, lose four stone in a week, leave the coffee alone and drink grapefruit juice. I'd go and buy myself some decent gear and get my hair cut in an Italian unisex effort rather than a Greek butcher's. We'd have babies. Snotty-nosed brats puking up all over the place, shitting themselves twenty times a day for fun, dribbling like they're a minute from the grave. Anything Denise wants. I'd even change them as well. I'd take electrocution lessons and have my teeth capped, get those broken fuckers at the front mended so I look good when I get to meet her mum and dad, roses in one hand, bottle of sherry

in the other. I'd do anything for that woman. Build a family and live happy ever after in the Green Belt away from you lot. And if you called up and wanted to go out for a pint I'd just have to tell you to fuck off and put the phone down, get back to the dishes.'

The others were laughing, Will pointing out that if he took electrocution lessons Denise would get a shock first time he tried it on. Denise was a cracker in anyone's book. She was also going out with Slaughter, who happened to be a Grade 1 nutter, a bloke whose jealousy wasn't worth stirring up for something as minor as sex or love. They all knew the score. Denise could prick-tease as much as she liked when Slaughter wasn't around. Winding the blokes up. Flashing her teeth and the top of her tits. Bending forward to collect the glasses and leaving it that extra couple of seconds that made all the difference, showing off her figure. She enjoyed it because they were a bunch of hooligans in The Unity. Dead lager on their breaths next day and black eyes, like that Terry watching her bum move tight inside her jeans when she arrived. She liked getting them going, knowing they'd bottle it if she offered them the business. None of them would chance it with Slaughter around. But she liked Terry, specially when she heard the others call him Carter. An unstoppable sex machine they said. Denise liked blokes who preferred women to drink and football. Mango gave her the creeps though, and Terry wasn't exactly a teetotal or football-free zone. She wondered if he had the guts. Maybe, with a bit of encouragement.

'If you settled down you'd end up bottom of the league,' Carter said. 'Imagine that, Balti. Four points maximum all season. You'd be shackled up living the life of a cunt and your mates would be on the rampage enjoying themselves, running up points while you're shovelling gerbil shit for the kids.'

‘I’d never give Denise one up the arse. She’s too nice for that. What kind of woman do you think she is, a slag? Denise is a solid lady. We’d make a good couple. I can see us with the trolley now, working our way through the freezers, loading up on steak and burgers, frozen peas, a nice bottle of wine to wash the meat down and some of that expensive Italian ice-cream.’

‘You would mate. Believe me. A bird like that needs a good six inches up the dirt box to sort her out. Dirty old cow. No wonder Slaughter’s a headcase. She must shag him rigid. Mind you, any woman hangs around with that cunt isn’t letting herself in for French cuisine and vintage champagne. Must be a fucking battlefield when they get going. Can’t imagine old Slaughter’s into hours of foreplay and romantic meals for two. More like a quick knee-trembler and a samosa with his chips.’

‘Me neither, but it’s bad news sticking it up a bird like that. Mango’s right. That kind of stuff’s for queers, even if it is worth four points. You’d never catch me going that way.’

Eileen came round picking up glasses. She was an average looker, but friendly enough. Denise had sex and Eileen warmth. Will reckoned that meant more. He’d fancied her since she first started working in the pub four months before, though she’d never paid him much attention. It always worked like that. The women you took a shine to were either with someone else or not interested. The ones that pushed themselves were generally a bit iffy, with glazed eyes and desperation in their moves, thinking they were getting left out, craving love and affection so they’d shag anything and hope to hang on after the event. Like a lot of blokes. Will didn’t think there was that much difference. Women could have babies and men couldn’t. Straightforward really. He hoped Carter didn’t get to grips with Eileen.

She took the glasses to the bar. It was only half-seven, but the pub was busy. Will was surprised. First day of the year and the world should've been staying home watching the game shows. Mind you, he was filling up fast enough, and would have a few more before he went home. It was like all that enthusiasm had been watered down the night before, and though everyone was going through the motions, not admitting they'd been fooled by the Christmas tinsel and extended drinking, persuading themselves it really was a brand new start, that this was the year when they'd finally get somewhere, be happy and satisfied with their lot, they knew deep down it was just going to be more of the same old bollocks.

'Where did you get to with that bird then?' Harry asked. 'Last I saw, you were chatting up Mick Gardner's sister. She's a right old slapper, even Balti's serviced it. Fanny like the Channel Tunnel. Half French by the look of the hair under her arms, but then she's gone and Mick said you'd pissed off with some decent-looking blonde which seems a bit suspect because everyone knows you're a pig-fucker.'

'Don't remember Gardner's sister. I gave her one last year. Well rough. No. I said I'd walk this other bird home so she wouldn't get mugged. It might've been New Year's but businessmen never sleep. Time's money if you're a sick cunt waiting in the shadows looking for an easy target. She wasn't bad. Lives down Ramsey Road and has her own place. Looks over the train track, but you wouldn't know it at night, just in the morning when the wagons roll through. Fuck knows who travels that early. Probably shipping nuclear waste through or pigs for slaughter. That lot don't rest. They're the real pig-fuckers. But this bird was very polite when we got back, very proper, went and turned the lamps on and chose a CD, shitty music, Mango sounds, and then when I'd had a drink, a couple of glasses of quality Scotch to warm the throat and thaw the vitals, I delivered

some of the usual patter and she was away before you could say "Mango's a wanker".'

Will went to the bar and ordered a cheese roll. He hadn't eaten all day and was starving, but still had enough nous to concentrate on Eileen walking along the counter towards him, plate out in front. He self-consciously watched her breasts move gently under the wrap-around top she was wearing, long silver earrings brushing against the fabric covering her shoulders. She had a small nose-ring all the way from Rajasthan via Camden. He was feeling embarrassed just thinking about her breasts so close to the material, nipples rubbing erect. He liked the smell she brought with her, character embedded in the face. Perfume always worked with Will. Made her stand out exotic in an everyday London boozer. He wished he'd asked for some salt-and-vinegar crisps or peanuts as well, but didn't want to send her down the bar again and make a fool of himself. Nothing turned a woman off more than indecisiveness. If a bloke stammered or didn't know what he wanted they'd look straight through you like you were scum. A man with appeal was a man who never glanced sideways. That was the way he'd been told to look at the problem. You had to have the dosh to back yourself as well, otherwise you were nothing. The rappers had it worked out well enough.

'What happened to your eye?' Eileen asked, a hard edge to her voice that he couldn't identify. 'Been getting in trouble, have you?'

'Three blokes had a go at me last night.'

'What did they do that for then?'

'Don't know really. I was standing there waiting for a cab, minding my own business, thinking about the new year and everything, wondering if today was going to be any different from yesterday, brand new life and all that, and when these blokes turned up and tried to nick it I told them it was mine, that I needed to get home because I was knackered and had been waiting around for ages. Tired and

emotional like, with the end of the year and Christmas over. They just piled in. There was nothing I could do and after they'd given me a bit of a kicking they nicked the cab.'

'You should get it looked at.' She was more sympathetic now he'd shown himself the victim rather than one more pisshead causing trouble. 'They might've damaged your eyeball. You could've ended up getting blinded. The eye's very sensitive you know. It's come up quickly. You won't be impressing the women looking like that.'

She smiled and put the cheese roll on the bar and Will tried not to look at her tits, wondering whether it was a real diamond plugged in her nose. Whether she took it out at night so the butterfly didn't come out and slip into her head, working its way into the back of her skull, wishing he knew why she'd mentioned women.

Will hoped he wasn't going red, blushing like a kid as he paid his money and went back to the others without delivering the killer punch that would show he was a smooth cunt with a good line of humour. He should've followed up with a sharp one-liner, but words didn't come easy. Least not with the opposite sex. He was too much of a gentleman, that's what he told himself when confronting the truth that he was probably just shit at chat-up lines, though he'd never say it out loud. He just went along with things, they all did, expecting nothing, except for Carter always aiming to get his leg over. It was unnatural somehow, looking to get stuck in all the time, no chance for a decent chat with his mates, a couple of pints and he was off for the night sniffing round anything that moved. But she was alright, Eileen behind the bar, and maybe it was better he wasn't one of those blokes who could talk about anything and say nothing, because someone like Eileen, with a Rajput ring in her nose and classy perfume, would see through the shit and tick him off as one more brain-dead wanker thinking with his knob. One day though.

‘Getting in with Eileen are you?’ Carter asked, looking over his shoulder at the barmaid, talking now with Denise who’d dumped her handbag out back and was ready for the evening’s work, having a smoke because the landlord was out and not due back till after closing. ‘Didn’t know you fancied her.’

‘I was only talking to her. Why does everyone have to be looking to get into a bird’s knickers just because they have a bit of a chat? She asked me about the eye, that’s all. Wanted to know what happened last night. She’s not going to stand there ignoring something like that bulging out of the socket at her, is she?’

‘Alright Mildred, I was only asking. No need to cry about it. Here, I’ll wipe your eyes. She’s alright. A bit skinny in the legs but at least she’s not a heifer you’d have to string up and open with a chainsaw, blood all over the shop as you hook up a rope and pull out the Tampax. I wouldn’t say no if she was offering me a quick one in the cellar. Wouldn’t turn her down so I could piss off upstairs and service old Balti breath over there.’

‘What’s wrong with my breath, you cocky cunt? Didn’t even have a curry last night, though I wouldn’t mind a bit of a feed right now, but I’m off them. That’s my New Year’s resolution, to shift a couple of stone and give those Kashmiri boys down Balti Heaven a break.’

‘You’re a slob,’ said Mango, laughing as he rocked back in his chair.

‘And you’re a toerag who hangs about with nonces in pinstripe suits, sucking cock, so you can piss off back to your stocks and shares or whatever the fuck it is you do for a living.’

‘I made forty-grand last year touching my cap for my betters, milking the smug bastards, getting them all worked up so they hand over their liquid assets. But at least I’m moving, not stuck in the shit like you or one of those kids in King’s Cross or Streatham. At least I’m

dealing in prime genetics, not the mongoloid swill kids from Halifax get shoved down their throats for a few quid. Wake up lads. It's a material world. Even Madonna knew that much. Maggie understood what it was all about. Best prime minister we ever had that woman. Gave me the break I needed.'

Balti felt himself losing it a bit, looking to smack Mango if he went on. His head was heavy and he wasn't in the mood for propaganda. He fucking hated Mango sometimes and everything he was into; the expensive gear and three-bedroom flat in Fulham, that Jag he'd bought and the holidays in Spain three or four times a year, the Jag with its five-grand stereo and automatic sun roof, Spanish resorts full of English slappers who left their knickers at Customs and collected them again on the way home; and the Jag shifted when Mango put his foot down, blowing the rest of them away. It made him sick just thinking about it all, and there was Balti, sweating his bollocks off lugging bricks around, coriander and garlic in his water, slave to a lippy Belfast cunt of a foreman, and the tosser opposite was sitting in a luxury office near Liverpool Street punching buttons on a keyboard, juggling figures and probably working out his own pay packet. It wasn't fair, and Balti was left behind in the wrecker's yard with his big end fucked while Mango cranked up the volume and disappeared down the Western Avenue in a cloud of lead-free exhaust fumes. It wasn't like Mango was smart, except when it came to maths and making money, dedicated more like, but he'd always been that way. Always had to have what he reckoned was the best of everything. Into the image rather than content. Listening to disco shit at school when the rest of them were into punk and 2-Tone, going for the soul patrol gear when he should've been wearing DMs.

The Sex Division members knew each other from childhood, sharing the same streets and school and most of the same lessons, once or twice the same girls. Like that

time Balti had stopped seeing Helen Peters and Mango was straight round, filling the void. Now Carter was getting involved, telling Mango he was a wanker, that he thought he was better than his mates, that if he really thought odds and ends were all that mattered then he could fuck off to some other pub, back to Fulham and a poxy wine bar, or better still fuck off to where the cunts he worked with lived and drink cocktails and talk about the rugby, then bend over and touch his toes while he got some public schoolboy's fist rammed up his arse. You don't even like football, you tart. But Balti was giving up on the argument. It was the same old stuff that Mango dismissed as the politics of envy, turning off and drifting back to those turn-of-the-year days when he was a kid. Balti's dad would have a hangover so he'd keep his head down knowing he'd get hit if he made too much noise, maybe go see Chelsea play if there was a game on in London. Like that time they'd gone up the Arsenal, Boxing Day maybe, he couldn't remember exactly, when Micky Droy was playing and they'd gone in the North Bank, kept their mouths shut, shitting it, then there was a roar and the Chelsea North Stand steamed in and kicked the shit out of Arsenal who pegged out the other side. They were all there, everyone except Mango, even Will who supported Brentford, Mango busy with Zoe, that Iranian bird who got him into the soul music, knocking around with her Hawaiian shirt mates. He was a wanker even then, listening to love songs when any sussed kid was into decent lyrics.

They were good times. Eddie McCreadie's Blue And White Army and the Clash releasing White Man In Hammersmith Palais. That was the best song, fucking magic. Balti felt guilty suddenly, remembering Mango's older brother Pete who'd had all the records and lent them out left, right and centre, turning them in the right direction. Will, meanwhile, had always been a few years ahead when it came to music. Then one day Pete went

missing. He'd walked down the tube saying he was off to Greenford and hadn't been seen since. No postcard, no letter, no nothing. The old bill had tried to trace him but without any luck. Everyone had a theory. Maybe he'd just had enough, signing on, not seeing anything on the horizon, just Maggie raving about law and order.

Balti looked into his glass and watched the bubbles popping, thinking of Mango sitting on the swings across from the station, waiting for his big brother to come home. It was seventeen or eighteen years ago now and Mango must've given up. Just before Christmas he'd seen Mango's Jag and the bloke was down the same playground, swinging back and forward. Every year he went back and didn't give a toss if the mothers down there thought he was a nonce after their kids. Maybe he cried when he thought about it all, the sadness and that, and Balti couldn't blame him. He wondered what Pete was doing now, if he was still alive, if he'd ended up on the game. Mango had told Balti that was the worst thing that could've happened, one time when he was pissed. Or a smackhead, clean now but a wreck, living in a graveyard in Stoke Newington or Hackney, sleeping rough. Mango was pissed Christmas Eve, mumbling on about Pete being a crack addict or a wino, weighing up the options. Balti had told him to look on the bright side. If his brother was alive he'd come back one day. But they were only words. Mango had never been the same since his brother went missing.

'Get a round in then, you tight cunt.' Harry was sick of the squabbling, like a load of kids the lot of them, back in the playground. 'You're the money man round here Mango, so shift yourself and go to the bar.'

'Alright. Forget I said anything. It's the change of weather, the time of year, just gets me going and everything and I've got to hit targets and keep people sweet. You don't know what it's like working for a bunch of stuck-up wankers who've got money behind them and sit

there waiting for you to fall down and mess up. Forget what I said Balti. It's the pressure does it.'

'Leave it out. It doesn't matter.'

'Go on, give him a fucking kiss,' Carter said, puckering his lips. 'Couple of fucking irons you two.'

Mango stood up and went to the bar, Denise coming over to serve him, swapping pleasantries, the entrepreneur acting casual. Denise thought he was a wanker. She wouldn't trust him to water her plants. He was a right turn-off with the expensive clothes and big-man attitude, eyes shifting here and there, never following the line of conversation. His wallet was stuffed with tens, twenties, fifties, propped on the counter, credit cards jutting out. He thought he was special and she had half a mind to set Slaughter on him, take off the muzzle and let the pit bull loose. Except Mango hadn't done anything wrong really, it was just the way he stood and talked and everything about him. But that Terry, he was gorgeous when she concentrated on the back of his head and she knew he was interested. Those kind always were. She could see them getting together and though Slaughter would hospitalise them if he ever found out, probably worse, he would never hear it from her lips. Anyway, she could control him if a rumour started. She had him wrapped round her engagement finger. A sincere expression and good sex would convince lover-boy that the person spreading rumours was spreading lies and he'd be round to see them with that machete he kept under the bed looking to mend their thinking.

Slaughter was a nutter, mental about Denise and life in general, but it was amazing what a healthy bit of sex did for a man like that. It was the strippers on stage and bikini girls on advertising boards that caused problems. Agency models in sight but out of range; winding them up, taking their wages, then stabbing them in the balls for having tattoos and tatty gear, chasing wealthy fashion clones with

funny haircuts. Slaughter would drink out of the dog's bowl if she told him. He trusted her, believed her sexual appetite meant he was major, more than sex and protection, that he was the man of her dreams or some other romantic rubbish. That Terry was smart. He was dead ahead. No complications. She'd ask him why he was called Carter when she got the chance, straight out, confirm her suspicions and learn the details. She'd blow his mind.

The man she was serving was going on about something or other, a film he wanted to see, and she was smiling and doing her job, nodding her head, raising eyebrows, but all the time she had her eye on Terry leaning forward over the table telling a story to the three others, Will and the two men who shared a flat down the road. She wished she was a fly on the wall listening, a wasp with a sting, getting hot and bothered thinking about Terry having it off with one of his girls. She guessed it was that kind of story. She felt annoyed for some reason, Slaughter getting in a punch-up with a bloke in the West End the night before, putting the silly so and so's head through a car window because he'd paid her a compliment, a bloody compliment, nice arse. Anti-theft device screeching in her ear. Slaughter ran off leaving her to follow as best she could. It wasn't the kind of life Denise wanted.

When they'd got back to her place he'd stripped off and she could see him standing there now. Covered in ink with a dead penis full of lager, body swaying side to side, head back looking at the ceiling. She'd been ready for a Slaughter special, rough sex which was okay if she was in the mood but not when he was paralytic and biting into her neck like Dracula on a bad trip. She thought of that time when she'd pissed over his face, both of them burning up. She'd covered the bastard and he choked when it gushed into his mouth, eyes wide hoping it was okay, looking to her with a kind of appeal, a dumb kid. But last night Slaughter had looked at the ceiling like he was trying to find skin in

the plaster, first-year monsters in the woodwork. He fell back against the wall and sank down to the floor. Denise had to turn off the gas fire otherwise he'd have burnt alive. He didn't move till morning. Terry though, where was he last night? She watched the men laughing together, wishing she could get him on his own for a minute and arrange something.

'Here you go,' Mango was back at the table. 'Anyone want crisps? I reckon Denise fancies me.'

'Leave it out,' Carter said looking towards the bar. 'Take her on and you'll be into Slaughter as well. He'd fucking kill you. Chop you into tiny pieces and feed you to the penguins in London Zoo. Then he'd take your head and put it on a stake outside the Tower of London for the ravens and beefeaters, balls stuffed in your mouth.'

'Suppose so. Don't stare at her otherwise she'll think I'm talking about her.'

'You are.'

'What's your resolution, Mango?' Harry asked, bored with Denise, a right old slag by his reasoning. Those kind were trouble. They came in your dreams and gave you grief all night long.

'Going to get myself a Merc by the end of the year.'

'I thought you were shagging the Jag. Changed your mind a bit sharpish didn't you? Fed up creeping down at three in the morning in your boiler suit to get stuck into the exhaust?'

'I'll keep the Jag and get the Merc as well. I have to earn the money first. It's a target to aim for. You've got to plan ahead. It keeps you going.'

'Can I use the Jag when you get the Merc then?' Carter asked.

'Fuck off. You'd ruin the upholstery with all the birds you get through. It's a class motor. I don't want stains all over the leather.'

Mango regretted the comment right away because it recognised Carter's reputation. He liked to present himself on an equal footing, but never did as well as the sex machine and would have to lie his way up the table. That was okay, because Mango was good with the truth. The others wouldn't have the ability or desire to cheat, but a high position was important for Mango. He was a competitor and despite his relative wealth women didn't exactly come calling like they did for Carter. He did alright, anyone could do okay with a bit of effort, but he was nowhere near the Carter class. Sometimes it bothered him, but Carter had serviced some right old grinders in his time and Mango had long since convinced himself he was more into quality than quantity. Something stirred, the memory of that kid up in King's Cross, the girl from Halifax. Young and tender and fucked rigid by how many men he did not know.

'What about whores?' he asked.

'What about them?' Balti was feeling the strain, looking forward to a good sleep but too tired to get up and go home. He was fucked and not looking forward to getting up for work.

'Do prossies count?'

'Course they fucking don't,' Carter said.

He turned to look over his shoulder again and three Sex Division members considered the possibilities. Will wished they'd talk about something else, but was more concerned with the pain shooting through his eye than starting something off. Balti looked at Mango, then Carter, Harry catching his eye and winking as he lifted his glass and took a big swig of liquid gold.

'Why not?' Harry asked. 'After all, you're still doing the business. It's the same things you're doing so there should be the same points available. You've got to perform even when you're splashing out for the privilege. It's not that easy.'