RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Back from the Brink

Paul McGrath

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About the Book

Paul McGrath is Ireland's best loved sportsman and also its least understood. An iconic football presence during a professional career stretching over 14 years, he played for his country in the European Championship finals of 1988 and the World Cup finals of 1990 and 1994. But, behind the implied glamour of life in the employ of great English clubs like Manchester United and Aston Villa, McGrath wrestled with a range of destructive emotions that made his success in the game little short of miraculous.

That story has until now never been told. It is a story that runs from a hard, hidden childhood spent in Dublin's orphanages all the way to the pain of two marriage break-ups and the struggle to cope with life after football. Quite apart from his all too public struggle with alcoholism, the story runs through the surreal highs and calamitous lows of a life lived habitually on the edge of chaos.

It is not just a football story. It is an extraordinary human story that is certain to surprise with its candour.

Here, for the first time, read about the father he never met; the mother whose love never died; the routine loneliness and ritual bullying endured by a black kid growing up behind closed doors in 1960s Dublin; the emotional breakdown suffered on leaving that institution; the recovery that - remarkably - brought him all the way to Old Trafford; the rollercoaster ride that followed. Here, the guilt, fear, self-loathing are all laid bare in a story fired with hope and determination for the future.

It may well be the most candid sports book ever written.

About the Authors

Paul McGrath was born on 4th December 1959. He joined St Patrick's Athletic, Dublin, as a teenager before joining Manchester United in 1982. He won the FA Cup with United before being sold to Aston Villa for £400,000 in 1989, where he was voted Player of the Year four times and earned the nickname 'God'. He was also PFA Player of the Year in 1993. He also played for Derby and Sheffield United, before retiring in 1998.

McGrath also won 83 caps for the Republic of Ireland, appeared at the 1990 and 1994 World Cups, and was Ireland's first black captain. Paul now works as a columnist for the *Irish Times*.

Vincent Hogan is a highly respected sports correspondent for the *Irish Independent*. He has covered the 2002 World Cup, the 2004 European Championships, the 2005 British & Irish Lions Tour, and many other major sporting events.

To all of my children and to the late Dr Patrick Nugent.

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And, finally, sincere thanks to the supporters out there, be they of Manchester United, Aston Villa or Republic of

Ireland persuasion, who stood by me through good and bad. I will never forget that.

Paul McGrath

PAUL McGRATH

with Vincent Hogan

Back from the Brink

arrow books

INTRODUCTION

On Saturday, 17 December 2005, I flew to Birmingham to meet Jim Walker.

We took in that afternoon's Premiership game between Aston Villa and Manchester United at Villa Park. It was an abject game, won 2-0 by a United team never required to leave second gear.

Afterwards, in a directors' lounge, Jim introduced me to Dr Barrie Smith, the former Villa team doctor. Both men had been left deeply unimpressed by Villa's performance. 'Compare that to what we were used to when big Paul was playing,' sighed Walker.

There was a distinct air of melancholy to the conversation between a man who had been the club's senior physio for seventeen years and one who had been team doctor for twenty-four.

For the benefit of this book, they swapped anecdotes about McGrath and the remarkable seven years he spent as an Aston Villa player. Both men clearly retained a deep affection for Paul.

That night I flew home and two rows in front of me on the Aer Lingus flight sat a guy in a Villa shirt. He was fifteen at most, yet on the back of his shirt was the number five and the surname McGRATH.

Nine years after he left the club, Paul's legend was still vibrant enough for that kind of tribute. He had been due to travel with me that day, but cancelled because of feeling

‘unwell’. I felt a pang of regret that he wasn’t with me to see that kid.

On touchdown, I texted Paul to tell him the day had gone well. And I mentioned the guy in the McGRATH shirt. Paul immediately texted back. It read ‘Glad all went well. Talk soon.’

And it struck me that seeing his name on a kid’s jersey wouldn’t have offered the buzz to Paul McGrath that it might have offered most other ex-professional footballers. It never could. Because, throughout his life, Paul hated few things more than he hated the limelight.

He is, undeniably, Ireland’s best loved sportsman. But he is also painfully shy and, worse, guilt-ridden over a life spent visiting the edge of chaos. Large chunks of that life are a blur to Paul and, for that reason, this book is threaded with other voices. Voices from inside and outside the game. Voices belonging to people who have had a bird’s-eye of his remarkable story unfold.

With their help, Paul invites us into the heart of a life less ordinary. I trust you enjoy the read as much as I did the journey.

Vincent Hogan, 11 August 2006

Prologue
GOOD TIMES

18 June 1994. Down to the last, stubborn seconds in New Jersey and it sounded as if the earth itself had begun to whistle. I couldn't hear myself breathe. Ireland were within seconds of beating the mighty Italians at the World Cup.

All around, people were jumpy, eyes now burning a path towards the Dutch referee. I could see Big Jack flapping on the touchline. 'Fook's sake!' he was mouthing, angrily tapping the watch on his wrist.

An Italian player, Daniele Massaro, came surging through. I tracked the run, forcing him wide and – just as he spun to cross – launched myself to make the block. Bullseye. The crowd convulsed. Ninety-three Fahrenheit in the evening sun and time for just one last Italian corner.

So I chugged back in to take up my station. Massaro played the ball short to his fullback. And that was when it happened. That was the moment somebody turned down the sound and everything slowed. The moment I felt unbreakable.

As the fullback prepared to cross, I knew it no longer mattered where I stood. The ball would find me. He was a fish in a barrel.

It came to me as if radar-guided and I cleared, an Italian player lunging into my back, knocking me to the ground. I heard the whistle. An Irish free. Roy Keane pulled me to my

feet again and grabbed me in a headlock. The stands trembled like a green bouncy castle.

And I could feel the tingle of goosebumps.

On the really good days, football could be like that. Child's play. The effort wasn't conscious. I could play at an independent pace, bossing the striker with my ability to read things, to anticipate. On the really good days, you see, football was never physical. It was a mind game.

I reckon I was maybe sixty per cent fit for US '94 and playing largely on instinct. My left arm was useless because of a virus in my shoulder and I needed about five paces simply to find my stride.

Against the likes of Giuseppe Signori and Roberto Baggio, that made for a pretty nerve-wracking ordeal. If you look at photographs of that game, my arm might as well be in a sling. It's hanging limp down by my side, like a snapped branch on a tree. Yet the longer the game went on, the more confident I became.

There's a chemistry that kicks in between defender and striker. One eventually knows that he is being manipulated by the other. That day, Baggio was no longer inclined to move in my direction. Signori had been substituted. It was over.

The final whistle triggered an extraordinary outburst of emotion, and a cavalry change from the Irish dugout.

I stayed sober from start to finish of Ireland's involvement in that World Cup, and being dry allowed me to absorb that victory over Italy fully. I remember the Italians being quite gracious afterwards. Paolo Maldini, Baggio … just hugs and respect. No hard feelings. Franco Baresi? Maybe less so.

I remember the feeling of having achieved something pretty monumental here.

After that game, the Irish players moved literally next door, to a party at the Meadowlands racetrack. I stayed on the bus. The windows were blacked out, so no one could see me sitting there. It was heaven. I didn’t feel remotely envious of the other lads and the ease with which they could mingle with our supporters and down a few beers in celebration.

What did I feel? Euphoria? Not really. My abiding feeling was simply that I was sober and in a good place. I was safe.

1
BORSTAL BOY

I am sitting in a cubicle, the width of a Portaloo, handcuffed to the side.

A fist keeps thumping the panel by my head. A voice keeps searching. ‘Who’s in that one? Who’s in there? Cat got your fucking tongue, mate?’ Doors are banging. The fumes of the prison van carry up through the floor. Someone screams that we’re going to suffocate in here. I am headed for Manchester Crown Court. Humiliated and trembling.

There’s an ugly, weeping scab on my forehead. I keep fingering it, as if hoping it’ll disappear and I’ll wake up in a familiar bed. But the doors keep banging and the voices keep on tearing at me.

‘Guggi, that you, Guggi?’

‘Yeah.’

‘What’s the story?’

‘I’m goin’ down!’

‘Nah.’

‘Definitely, I’m goin’ down …’

I catch a glimpse of the lad in the cubicle opposite. He’s a Pakistani and he winks. I nod back, warming to his sense of calm. Then the door slams shut again and the van lurches away from Stretford Station. And I sit there

thinking that I'm now at the bottom of the barrel. Nowhere left to sink.

It doesn't feel like it yet, but I'm here for my own good now. The angles have been getting narrower. I'm running out of places to go, people to ring. My bolt-holes have begun to dry up. I am now, officially, of 'no fixed abode'. I hate the man I have become, but I'm angry too. For twelve hours, I've been asking the same questions. What am I being charged with? What have I done? Who am I supposed to have hurt?

Maybe I am in denial over that last one. I'm not a violent man, but I've still spent much of my life hurting the ones I love. The policemen are kind, but evasive. 'Settle down, Paul, don't worry, you'll be in and out in no time …'

They had picked me up the night before after a call from Claire. She had had enough of the drunkenness and the bullshit. Claire is my first wife and mother of my three eldest boys. With my second marriage now in meltdown, she had taken pity and allowed me to crash under her roof. Actually, she had done much more than that. She had weaned me back off the alcohol with painstaking patience, only for me, typically, to abuse her kindness.

At the time, I was in free fall, drinking everything I could get my hands on, popping tranquillisers. My relationship with Caroline had completely broken down. I was barred from the house. I was free, essentially, to drink myself into an early grave and I felt trapped. Trapped by that very isolation.

Phoning Claire was the final, pathetic gesture. We'd been through a painful divorce ten years earlier, spending three days in court under the full glare of media scrutiny. Yet, the recriminations had never dipped towards hatred. Already, our three boys – Christopher, Mitchell and Jordan –

were back living with her after moving out of a house in which their barred father had become an object of disgust.

Now I was begging to follow suit. Claire had moved on. She was in another relationship, pursuing a profession and, generally, living a life free of angst and dysfunction. Yet, she took pity.

I still retain this awful image of my slow rehabilitation in a spare room of her home in Northenden. It is of Jordan, our youngest boy, bringing me up a mug of wine. That was the weaning process. Smaller quantities of alcohol every day until, eventually, you can get through twenty-four hours without a drink. It was difficult and fraught, but Claire's compassion had brought us all through. Habitually, she would explain to the boys that their father's addictions didn't make him a bad man. She was a mother, friend and counsellor rolled into one. And, remarkably, in a matter of weeks she had me healthy.

Yet, that image of Jordan – who would have been fourteen at the time – coming to the door with a mug of wine is one that doesn't leave me. When you live the kind of life that I've lived, there are certain snapshots that tend to reef at your senses. And that one still lingers and troubles.

To rehabilitate an alcoholic, you first need to understand their capacity for deceit. To tap into their deviousness. To recognise the mind games that become instinctive. Without even realising I was doing it, one of the first things I would have done on arrival in Claire's would have been to stake out the nearest pub. Not because I had a specific plan to go there. Just subconscious strategy. Getting my bearings.

Claire knew what she was dealing with. She'd been through it with me before. She recognised the signals, knew the angles. We've spoken many times about this illness. She makes no bones about the fact that she hates the person I become with alcohol. She knows it's slowly

killing me. It's ruining the relationships I have with my children. She sees them go into themselves when I'm drinking. Suddenly, they've got a father who makes an exhibition of himself in public. Who can't socialise properly. Who just becomes a drunk with no interest in anything beyond sourcing his next bottle.

Yet, she sees the positives of when I'm well too. The palpable change in the kids. The confidence they take from having someone resembling a decent human being for a father. The inexplicable love they still show me. That would have been her motivation in taking me in. I don't remember the actual moment that I threw it all back in her face. By and large, I never do. Remember, that is.

All I know is I started drinking again. Heavily. All told, I had been under her roof for about a year – lapsing occasionally – when I returned to an old trick of hiding bottles in the house. Vodka. Brandy. Southern Comfort. Under the bed. In wardrobes. Claire would search the house as thoroughly as she could, locking anything she found in the boot of the car, then taking the car keys with her to work.

She understood the futility of this, of course. She couldn't lock me in the house and I was now a glassy-eyed regular in the pubs of the area. I was routinely picked up by the local police and ferried home for my own safety. They were always sensitive. 'This is going to have to stop, Paul …' One night, I slept rough outside the house, slumped face down on a little grass area maybe fifty yards away, unable to find my way home. I woke up freezing, aching for the warmth of a strong drink.

It had to come to a head and it did soon after. This night, I returned to the house, extremely drunk. I had fallen and cut my forehead. The boys wouldn't let me in and I walked around banging on doors and windows. It must have been scary for the children and I particularly remember

Christopher and his girlfriend, Lucy, the expressions on their faces as I yelled at them to, at least, throw me out my car keys.

Thankfully, they didn't. Next thing I knew, I was in handcuffs.

The police station cell was small and claustrophobic. A heavy mattress on the floor, one flimsy yellow blanket. No pillow. They had taken my shoelaces and belt away, apparently for my own safety. Every half-hour, the little viewing latch on the door clicked open and abruptly shut again. The noise was unrelenting, doors being kicked, people screaming obscenities at their jailers. A girl's voice in the midst of it.

Sleep was impossible. I just lay there, feeling a conflict of terror and anger, one voice wrestling with another. 'You've brought this on yourself you know,' then 'Fuck it, I didn't assault anyone, I wasn't driving a car …'

Next morning, one of the police officers dipped his head into my cell. He was going off duty. 'Look,' he said, 'I just wanted to say that I used to stand on the Stretford End when you played for United. You were a hero of mine. I hope you get yourself well.' The door closed again and I felt like weeping. His kindness filled me with shame. I looked down at my shoeless feet. I peered over at the empty bowl I had just emptied of cornflakes, like a man who hadn't eaten for a week. I listened to the noise of prison life. This was my domain now.

I had been charged with threatening behaviour. To me, it was a trumped-up charge. I hadn't threatened anyone. But I knew people were losing patience. Claire. The boys. The police I had come to use as an almost nightly taxi service.

Poor Claire was inconsolable. I spoke to her by phone from the police station. She was crying. 'I didn't want to, but I had to do something,' she said. I knew she was right.

That this had been the only kindness left to her. ‘Jesus, do you know something?’ I said, suddenly guilt-ridden at her distress. ‘You may have done me the biggest favour. Because I don’t ever want to come back to this place.’

So, the morning after, I am given back my shoelaces, but not my belt. I am handcuffed again and led out to that prison van. Uncuffed, then recuffed again to the cubicle. Recuffed again on arrival. Led into the courthouse. Silent. Humiliated.

‘Paul, do you want a cell on your own?’

‘Would you mind?’

‘No problem, mate.’

‘Could I go to the toilet?’

‘Course you can.’

They undo the handcuffs. In the toilet, I find the furthest cubicle and vomit loudly. Wheeling around, I look in the mirror. The reflection is of an animal. Bleeding, trapped, defenceless. A police officer reads my panic.

‘Paul,’ he says, ‘I’m sorry, but I’ll have to put the cuffs back on you again to bring you into court. Look, I’m going to get you out of here as quickly as possible. Don’t worry, don’t be panicking. When it’s over, we’ll bring you out the back way.’

Everyone knows me now. The whole world is nudging, pointing at me, squinting. I’m brought into this little dock, handcuffed to a policeman. It strikes me that I must be perceived as a threat to someone. All this security. All these chains. There are maybe seventy people in the court and most of them look like students. Rows of them, gathered maybe out of nothing more than idle curiosity.

I can feel their eyes burn through me. I know I’m being recognised. And oh sweet Jesus, the shakes have set in. My body is screaming for alcohol. I’m still coming down. And I

can hear a chorus of voices in my head, reciting the same thing over and over: ‘God, isn’t it sad to see him like that …’

I have been provided with a solicitor. A total stranger, thank the Lord. My own solicitors are based in an office block directly across the road from the courthouse. Can’t bear the thought of them happening upon this scene. Want them still to think of me as an upstanding member of society. That is assuming they already do.

Three men face me with expressions I read immediately as hostile. The one in the middle is telling me to speak up. I want everyone to whisper. Then the anger begins to kick in again. Someone is asking me how I plead. *How do I plead? I’m not guilty, for God’s sake. I haven’t actually done anything. Maybe I haven’t been whiter than white in the past, but I’ve done nothing here*.

The word ‘affray’ is used. I am unequivocal. I might have ‘knocked loudly’ on the window, I say. I might have ‘shouted something in at my son’. But I didn’t threaten anyone. Hear that? *I did not threaten anyone*. I am advised to plead not guilty and am remanded to appear at a later date.

The nightmare is just beginning.

It is just after eleven in the morning as I walk out of a back door of Manchester Crown Court. Without the belt, my jeans keep slipping down. Of late, I have been drinking too much and eating too little. A court official informs me that my belt and mobile phone will be available from the police station in a couple of days.

So I am a free man in the centre of Manchester with nowhere to go and no money to get there. What do I do now?

I roll my jeans up to stop them dragging on the pavement and decide to get out of the city as quickly as I can. The journey will take me through Moss Side. Now

Moss Side can be a hard and dangerous place to walk through, but right now I see it as the quickest route to becoming invisible. Paranoia grows with every step. Walking past bus stops I feel more conspicuous than I've ever done in front of a packed football stadium. I know people are whispering.

Once in Moss Side, I decide to buy some time. I need the cover of darkness. I can't bear being seen like this. So I start walking circuits. Through the park, around the back of the office buildings, their windows always staring. Painfully slow, tentative circles. Maybe an hour, each time. If someone is walking my way, I double back. I am like an animal in the bushes.

The jeans are almost around my ankles now. I am losing all self-respect. Losing my mind, it feels. I hear voices. I feel I am hallucinating. Mentally and physically I am slipping under.

This black man walks past me in the park. Black as the ace of spades. He looks at me and spits out the word 'Nigger'. I smile back weakly. I feel like I'm going to get a good kicking here. It's just minutes away. Someone's going to descend upon me any moment and beat me to a pulp.

I turn after the black man and mouth the words 'Fuck you, you twat,' making sure it's not loud enough for him to hear me. I keep walking.

There's a warm voice in my head, telling me to go to a pub. To say to the barman 'I'm Paul McGrath' and I'll drop the money in later if he'll just let me have the comfort of a few pints.

I had walked past a hotel, advertising rooms for £44. All I wanted was a pillow, somewhere to lie down, to become invisible.

Another voice has been gnawing away ever since leaving the court building in Deansgate, telling me I should be

headed for Old Trafford. Just tell the receptionist that you're terribly sorry, but could anyone please lend you £100 and you'll promise to drop it back to them. Pride is the only barrier. The stadium was no more than a mile away when I walked out that back door. Someone was bound to take pity. 'Come in, big man, let's get you sorted …' But I knew how I looked. I knew I couldn't let them see me.

So it's coming up to six in the evening. Seven hours since I was set 'free'. I've sat down just once since leaving court. I walk into this building and ask a girl at reception if she knows the name of a priest or a social worker who might help. I tell her I have nowhere to go and she can see that I'm not bluffing.

She gives me a can of Coke, the number of a hostel and 40p to make the call. 'Tell them your situation and they'll take you in,' she says. I feel I've met an angel. The Coke is magically soothing on my throat. I go to a phone box and dial the number. A voice at the other end is giving me directions. He's telling me what time I need to be there. The beeps go off. He is in mid-sentence when the line goes dead. I am alone.

I haven't the nerve to ask the girl for more money. I am walking again. Up past the stadium now, its back turned towards me as if I never existed. It feels surreal. Straight up towards Stretford in the direction of Sale.

Just short of Stretford, I stop at a dental clinic and ask the receptionist for a glass of water. I am desperately dehydrated. My next port of call is the house of an old friend, but she is out. Her son, who looks about sixteen, answers the door. He doesn't know me and, from his expression, isn't inclined to change that. Can't blame him as I probably look menacing. After another glass of water, I leave the poor lad in peace.

The darkness is a comfort now. I'm becoming invisible. Yet, a group of black kids recognise me and shout across the street, 'Hey, how's it goin', Paul?' They're being nice and I just give a breezy wave. I know what they're thinking though. 'Fucking hell …'

Now, I am outside a development on the edge of Altrincham where my old mate Norman Whiteside lives. I stand at the private gates, peering in like a hungry man looking through the window of a busy restaurant. I know Norman will help me if I can just reach him. Two ladies approach from inside and, with a buzz, the gates swing open. I want to charge straight through, but choose the diplomatic route instead.

'How ya doin', would it be all right if I just go in, I'm a friend of Norman's and …' One of them brusquely pulls the gate closed after her, mumbling something about not knowing Norman's number. She doesn't like what she sees.

It's at that point I see Steve. I know this bloke. He's standing across the street, looking towards me. Maybe forty yards between me and him. I shout towards him. He pretends that he can't hear me. There was a time when Steve was all over Paul McGrath. When I was a player, he used to come at me with a blur of business proposals. But I'm not a player now.

I can hear what he's saying. 'It *is* him, holy shit …' Steve walks briskly off in the opposite direction. I know that he's seen me. Silently, I curse. I keep walking.

Three more miles. I think about sleeping on a park bench. Just one thing stops me. I am scared of rats and I recall someone once telling me about how accomplished rats are at climbing. The thought of me lying asleep on that bench, with a rat tiptoeing across me is terrifying. I only sleep rough when I'm too drunk to care. Now I'm excruciatingly sober.

My tongue is sandpaper. There's a deafening hum in my head. The wound on my forehead keeps weeping. I feel as if death would be a release now.

Bill Woofe is my last hope. Bill and Lorilea. He's a corporate lawyer who's always been a good friend. Lorilea's a music teacher who taught Christopher and Mitchell the piano. I'm too drained now to care about the humiliation of turning up on their doorstep, so filthy and dishevelled. It's almost midnight and, deep down, I know I've been walking towards this house all night.

So here I am, maybe thirteen hours after walking out of that courtroom, standing on an Altrincham doorstep, praying that there's someone home. Through those thirteen hours, I reckon I've been on my feet for all but ten minutes. My mind was in too much of a frenzy to let me sit down. Constant overload. Where should I go? Who do I need to avoid? How do I get through this unseen?

A light comes on in the porch when I press the doorbell. I pray Bill comes to the door. 'Please, God, let him be home. Please, God …'

Bill opens the door. 'Jesus, Paul, what's happened?'

Hot tea has never tasted better, kindness has never been more welcome. Bill listens to my story. He listens without giving an impression that he's judging me. He just shrugs, shakes his head and gives little words of re-assurance. A bed is made up for me in the guest room above the garage. Bill assures me that everything will be sorted out tomorrow.

I can't explain the relief I feel at walking into that guest room and seeing that bed. I feel more shattered than I ever thought possible this side of death. I feel like crying again. I shower and shave, then fall into bed like a man without the remotest intention of ever getting up again. I am asleep before my breathing settles.

The next morning, this beautiful Swedish au pair greets me in the kitchen, as if I'm a member of the family. The kids dip in and out, tossing light hellos my way. I'm being made incredibly welcome, though everyone must know that only something bad has brought me here. Bill cancels all meetings for the day. He's already been to the police station and retrieved my belt and phone. He's been on the phone to Frank Mullen in Dublin. They're getting me help again.

We drive over to Claire's house so that I can get a suitcase. I am barred from entering now, so Bill goes in. He explains to the kids that their dad is going back to Ireland to 'get some treatment'.

It is then that Christopher comes out of the house with Lucy. He leans into the car and gives me a big hug. I am shivering and ashamed. I have worn out my kids again, worn out Claire, worn out anyone who wants to help me. No one knows what to do any more.

I glance into Christopher's eyes and I see that familiar look of emotional ruin. That's what I've done to him again. I see the enormity of it, but I've seen it before and still reached out to a glass for comfort. I can't trust myself to be a decent father. A decent man.

Driving away from the house, Bill senses what I'm thinking. There is nothing to say now. We travel in silence, headed for the Priory again. Arrangements are being put in place to establish my next port of call. Frank is coming over on the ferry to take me back to Dublin. I am booked into the Rutland Centre.

My last visit there precipitated sixteen months of sobriety and peace. I may be back at the foot of the mountain right now, but I know I have the strength to climb it.

2
END GAME

Ipswich. November grey. Handshakes. Back slaps. ‘Well played, big man …’ Lies.

I had always lived in fear of the end, and now I wasn’t exactly bowing out on Broadway. The next day’s papers recorded that there were 9,695 people at Portman Road for the home side’s 2-2 draw with Sheffield United. Mostly, I was spared the embarrassment of detail. Mid-table obscurity brings its blessings.

Walking off the pitch, I sensed Caroline’s embarrassment. She was shaking her head, almost avoiding eye contact. This performance had been coming for a while, but it still shocked her. I wanted to sprint for the tunnel and hide. My right knee ached, but it wasn’t much compared to the sting of humiliation ringing between my ears. A familiar voice was goading me: ‘So what the hell was that then?’

I’ve played games in my time that stank the house down. I’ve been half drunk on a pitch. I’ve had days where I’ve tried to hold my breath so the centre-forward wouldn’t keel over from the fumes (Alan Shearer, for one, would probably vouch for the fact). But I had never felt like an extra in some Monty Python sketch. Not sober at least.

This time, all contact between brain and legs had been severed. I’d tripped, stumbled and lunged my way through a farcical ninety minutes in East Anglia. I’d fluffed ten-yard

passes. I'd mistimed tackles. I'd tried jumping for balls and failed to get lift-off. I'd become an accident waiting to happen.

A few weeks earlier, I'd also had a bit of a mare against QPR at Bramall Lane. Something was beginning to give. I could sense a loss of trust around me in the dressing room. People were squinting. Wondering.

I didn't know it, but coming off that Portman Road pitch on 9 November 1997, I had played my last game as a professional footballer.

When I got to the dressing room, the reflection in the mirror was jarring. There were great bags under my eyes. I looked old. Some of the kids gelling their hair next to me were literally half my age. Energy came off them in waves. They were headed out on the town now. I felt envious.

This had been building. I was making inexplicable mistakes: trying to deliver a fifty-yard pass and just under-hitting; an intended ball over the top dropping on the chest of a startled midfielder. My legs were getting weaker and weaker. I was a liability.

Ipswich had been just my twelfth game in a Sheffield United jersey. I liked playing in the First Division. The grounds were decent and full of atmosphere, yet there wasn't the same draining pressure I had begun to feel in the Premiership. The scrutiny was gentler. Maybe I was just more comfortable at that level now.

There was a sense of denial too. As the knees ached and the off-days accumulated, I reasoned that – if need be – I could just drop down another division and keep playing. Retirement was still a long way down the road. I wouldn't countenance it. After all, here I was still playing almost eight years after Manchester United reckoned my career was over. Proving people wrong was my thing.

Not sure who I thought I was kidding.

My right knee just wasn't functioning properly. A week after Portman Road, I had it washed out by a specialist in Sheffield and set myself a strict training regime for recovery. But I could never get back. It never felt right again. I found I couldn't kick the ball any distance. Training with the youths, I had regular moments of embarrassment.

'Paul, give it, give it … FUCKING HELL, PAUL!'

This is how bad it had become. I would stand thirty yards out from goal and try to chip the ball into an empty net, only to watch it barely trickle across the line. The pain was constant. I was thirty-seven and finally busted. So I made the call before it was made for me. No histrionics, no melodrama. 'Gaffer, I think I'm going to have to quit.'

I never said anything about being petrified.

Nigel Spackman was the United player-manager and, in playing terms, a contemporary of mine. He understood the way an old pro's legs could begin to betray him. 'Paul, you've got to do what is best for you,' he told me. I could detect a small strain of relief in his voice.

More than my knees had begun to slow me. I was a barely functioning alcoholic now addicted to tranquillisers. It had always been assumed that my drinking and my knees were parallel stories. To some extent they were. I had eight knee operations during my time with Manchester United, and often chose to dull the loneliness of rehabilitation with serious binges.

But even playing the best football of my life at Aston Villa, I was still drawn towards the pursuit of oblivion. I didn't drink rationally. I drank to blackout. There was no pleasure in the social pint for me. Players would have seen the madness at close quarters. Sometimes, I needed a drink just to go training. I'd stop off at an off-licence the way others might dip into a newsagent's.

Pre-season was the worst. After maybe six weeks out of the dressing-room loop, I dreaded meeting up again. I remember at one point commuting to Villa pre-season with Michael Oakes and Alan Wright. Two kids. We'd take it in turns to drive and I'd routinely suggest stopping off somewhere en route for 'a couple of cans'.

Always the same dialogue. 'No, Paul, we can't, we can't …'

'Please, lads, you have to do this for me …'

I was a veteran of the first team, someone they were supposed to be looking up to and here I was, pleading with them to help me get tanked up on the way to training. I could see their turmoil. I was manipulating them. They knew what I was doing was wrong, but out of loyalty (or fear?) they wouldn't break the confidence.

It didn't even have to be pre-season for me to do this. Habitually, throughout the season, I'd have a few cans in the car on the way to training. I might be fighting the shakes and feeling the need to settle myself before arrival at Bodymoor Heath. Then I'd miscalculate the amount I required to function properly and arrive the worse for wear.

It's a horrible feeling when you know you've lost control. You're craving a heavy hit of something just to bring you back to what you perceive to be normality. And that's the weird thing. Sometimes you manage to function. Sometimes you get through it in a relatively inconspicuous way and find yourself thinking, 'That was fine today.'

Then you try to do the same with tranquillisers …

It was quite late in my Villa career that I discovered the miracle of Zimovane. Just a late-night card game and the customary eve-of-game sleeping tablet. 'Last hand' had been called. I swallowed the tablet, expecting to be in bed within ten minutes. Half an hour later, I was still at the table. Floating.