

THE TWITCH

BIRDWATCHING CAN BE MURDER



KEVIN PARR

unbound

THE TWITCH
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Three handwritten signatures in black ink, arranged horizontally. The first signature is 'Dan', the second is 'Justin', and the third is 'John'. Each signature is fluid and cursive.

Dan, Justin and John
Founders, Unbound

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JANUARY

JANUARY 1ST 2007

59 SPECIES

I'm not certain whose head I can see the top of, bobbing rhythmically into view above the low brick wall by the potting shed. There's a little plume of steam billowing up into the cold air: up and down, up and down. The hair colour's hard to discern in the moonlight, as both Mick and our landlady share differing shades of grey-flecked mousy mess.

Ah. It's stopped – and presuming whatever form of sexual encounter I was privy to has now reached its conclusion, Mick will soon be padding through the bedroom door full of drunken guilt – possibly crying, but certainly in need of his bed.

Tomorrow, of course, the bravado will be back and Mick will be bragging that he could have had the barmaid, or the girl in the petrol station or any one of the females we met throughout the day, but instead *chose* to shag the less-than-attractive, middle-aged landlady of this little Cornish B&B because nothing could quite compare with the experience; a lady with no inhibition who knew just what she wanted and just how to please a man.

No, Mick, I quite agree. If I were in your position, there's no way I would have blown out a chance with that ridiculously cute little barmaid in favour of a muddy roll in the garden with dear Mrs Bellchambers as her husband sleeps upstairs. And as for *her* experience, well, surely your encounter two years ago was enough to keep you out of Cornwall, leave alone the same bloody guesthouse.

Here he comes – will he speak? Cry ...? No. Straight into

bed, not a word, duvet pulled tight over his head.

If I sound slightly bitter, it's because I am. Today we were supposed to grip a gyr falcon: not just a near mega-tick on the first day of the year, but a lifer for me. I fear, however, that there never was a gyr. Instead I've been convinced to charge down to Cornwall, hungover, on New Year's Day, for the sake of Mick's libido – and his pride. His sudden decision to leave the party last night two hours before midnight seemed to neatly coincide with an apparent rebuff from the girl with the brown bob – Jackie's cousin, I believe. Mick would never admit to it, not with his ego, but he isn't the man he was twenty years ago; the hair is thinner and much greyer, the eyes are tired and the belly's hard to hide even under the baggiest of shirts.

At twenty-four, though, Mick had the looks and the jabber to back them up. He worked his way through most of the girls in Surrey, had an eighteen-month shagfest in Bristol, and then returned to marry Kerrie Bowers, the hottest girl in Guildford. The fact that Kerrie was in the kitchen last night as Mick leered all over the girl with the brown bob – accompanied by her sister-in-law to boot – was further proof of his utter delusion. Successfully pull and then what? Sneak her upstairs and hope no one noticed? Because if Kerrie got wind of anything untoward and her brothers found out, then, by God, I would not want to be in Mick's shoes.

Fortunately for Mick, though, the girl with the brown bob was quick to dash his efforts with a sneer of disgust, and I was probably the only one to notice his humiliation – and certainly the only person slightly suspicious of his announcement minutes later that he was going home, to bed, in order to be up before dawn. A probable American golden plover had just been sighted at the London Wetland Centre in Barnes, his pager had buzzed to tell him. At half nine on New Year's Eve? Did he think everyone was daft? Someone was calling an American golden in the pitch black

at a wetland centre that closed at *five*?

Still, I was gullible enough to buy his gyr story this morning.

‘What about the American golden?’ I asked.

Mick paused.

‘False ID,’ he muttered, ‘but the gyr is a definite.’

‘But I’ve been paged bugger all ...’ I reached for my pager. The message box was still empty, though I couldn’t help noticing the time. ‘Mick, it’s not even seven. Who the fuck is down at Land’s End calling a gyr on New Year’s Day when the bloody sun hasn’t even come up?’

‘Tom. Picked it up yesterday afternoon. Sent me a text, which I didn’t get until this morning. He wants to hush it for his bird race today.’

Cornish Tom was a regular Cornwall tip-off and a reliable caller, reporting both the white-billed and pacific divers at Hale in October before anyone else had a sniff and finding the gyr last March on three consecutive days; a bird I’d dipped on three consecutive days.

This news gave Mick’s phone call a little more credence. The Cornish New Year’s Day bird race was one of the biggies, so it would be natural for Tom to keep schtum on a gyr; it could give him the edge.

‘Okay, I’ll come. But not for a couple of hours – I need to have a stern word with Nicola this morning. She didn’t roll in until five.’

‘Gave some lad a very Happy New Year, no doubt, lucky sod.’

‘She’s fifteen, Mick ...’

‘And regularly plucked, Ted. I’ll pick you up at eleven.’

He was right, no doubt. My second daughter certainly acts as though she’s sexually active. But I did *not* appreciate my best mate making lurid reference to her, his bloody goddaughter, in fact. Sick. And, with hindsight, it was Mick’s lecherous behaviour – and the subsequent explosive confrontation between Nicola, Abi and myself –

that had distracted me enough not to question Mick's contentment to not leave until eleven. With at least four and a half hours on the road, we would have less than an hour of daylight, at best, to find the gyr. Futile, surely? Normally, Mick would be champing at the bit; outside, tooting the horn, within minutes. 'It'll fly, it'll fly!' he would panic, before breaking every speed limit en route. Today, though, he seemed happy to plod along at seventy, even on the dual carriageway, and I might have read more into that had I not been so damned tired and so confused about Abi's indifference this morning to her daughter's behaviour; she'd all but condoned it, in fact.

'What was his name?' she'd whispered as I left the room post-rant, referring to the eighteen-year-old pervert who had been knobbing our daughter while the rest of the country had been cheering in 2007. 'Was', she had asked, 'was' - past tense - not 'is', not 'what-is-the-name-of-this-boy-you-admit-to-sleeping-with-and-who-therefore-must-be-a-long-term-boyfriend-because-otherwise-you-wouldn't-dare-consider-dropping-your-knickers-until-you-had-spent-months-getting-to-know-him-and-earning-his-respect'. No. My wife said 'was'. To my little girl who's still six months from sexual legality, my wife enquired, 'what was the name of your one-night-stand?'

Half two already. I've gone beyond tired. I may as well sit up and wait for Mick to stir in that early morning burst of sobriety that wakes you so rudely after a night on the sauce. He'll want to leave immediately - desperate to avoid Mrs Bellchambers, despite her award-winning breakfast. If I stay awake now, I can sleep all the way home. At least that way I can avoid the steady torrent of self-proclaimed sexual prowess dribbling out of Mick's mouth, the showboating becoming ever more vociferous as we near home and he tries to suppress his guilt and fear.

At the moment, though, Mick is snoring like a trooper - honking out a stench of stale booze (and I don't want to

think what else) with every rasping breath. He put an awful lot of Mermaid's Revenge away in the relatively short time that we were in the pub.

Naturally, there had been no gyr falcon, and no sign of Cornish Tom. Mick didn't seem at all surprised and remained unperturbed that the only room we could get was back at the Porthcove Guest House; the very same room that we shared two years ago on my first ever twitch. I say shared, but Mick spent that night next door in Mrs Bellchambers's bedchamber, tending to her needs while her husband was away tending to his ailing mother.

This time the husband's home but was fizzing when we arrived, an empty keg of scrumpy already under the table. Mick insisted that he came to the pub with us and got the poor old bugger straight on the single malts. Within an hour he was on the floor and the landlord was driving him home to bed. Another half an hour and Mick suddenly announced he needed his bed, just after that text ...

I just checked his phone. **He's asleep** reads the last text received: the stupid sod's given her his number this time. A long way to come to get over his shun from the girl with the brown bob. And one hell of a guaranteed lay! Mrs Bellchambers ... well, she's certainly all woman.

I may as well tot up my first day total: 59 species. Dreadful. It's not a sprint, I know, but that's a pitiful effort, not least because there's *nothing* special there – I suppose the barn owl can be a mildly tricky tick, but the rest I could have picked up in a lunchtime stroll to the Barleymow. Mick's list will already be 150-odd. It's cheating, really, but he ticks all the 'dead certs' first thing on January 1st every year.

'The race is twelve months long, Ted,' he argues, 'and I will, without doubt, see all of these ticks by the end of December. This way I don't miss anything stupid off.'

He has a point. In 1999, Scott Mitchings, whose list was always completed chronologically, missed out on the title

by one species only to notice a month too late that he had forgotten to include woodlark. Woodlark! A schoolboy error, and it was too late; his final list had already been accepted. Today, of course, everyone ticks a box for fear of 'doing a Mitchings', but Mick's own special method isn't foolproof. He admitted to me this evening that he couldn't recall having actually seen a little owl all year – and yet he had ticked the box, probably on January 1st, and submitted the list. Perhaps I should expose him to the board. Harsh, but fair – and he would most likely face a lifetime expulsion ...

I've just checked his list for 2007 and little owl is unticked. For the moment, at least, the board will remain uninformed.

JANUARY 26TH 2007

87 SPECIES

I must admit that I came very close to shelving it this year. My heart's simply not been in it for much of this month.

Work hasn't helped. I got dragged into Whitcombe's office on the first day back after Christmas to discuss my sickness record. Apparently, I seem to have had a worrying number of single and half-days off sick in the last year, and obviously any ongoing health problems are of great concern to the Service. I muttered something about recurring migraines, and Whitcombe nodded impassively. I'd be a bit more open with a decent boss – I mean, let's be honest, if a brown shrike turns up at Box Hill, I'm hardly going to be fretting about Mrs Chakrabati's deputising allowance, or Terry's sick note for his angina – but I should be aware, Whitcombe lectures, of my duty to those on my desk – *my team* – and should most certainly be seeking medical advice for an ongoing affliction that may cause long-term issues for my managerial capacity.

Blah, blah – I let it wash over me. Though I'll have to be a bit more careful this year; I've already warned Abi that she might have to take the girls away without me in November if my holiday quota's spent. I've since toed the line at work, though, and Whitcombe has stopped passing my desk every morning these last few days, so he should be satisfied for a little while at least. He was happy enough to let me sneak off an hour early this afternoon for the awards ceremony, though until lunchtime I had been pondering my own attendance. Then Mick emerged from his near month-long incommunicado, hallooing down the phone with his usual

gusto.

'You've got to go, Ted – you can't let the crowd down.'

'I suppose not ...'

'Of *course* not – Rook of the Year! Come on, mate – you can only win it once. My mate Chip, Rook of the Year ... and I haven't seen you for weeks. I'll drive, mate, I will happily drive.'

That made the event more tempting. The venue was some pub near Reading, so the prospect of a few pre-award ales was a pleasant one. Plus, the Focus was back at Ford for its 60k service and the thought of turning up in Abi's Ka just didn't wash. Anyway, I was, after all, Rook of the Year for 2006 – with a total only one away from the all-time record for a rookie. I had to go.

So I did. And the lauding and plaudits from my competitors stirred up the passion again, though I was cagey with my efforts this year, brushing off the inevitable questions with indifference when in truth I had all but stopped ticking already.

My own reception was nothing compared to that of Rod 'Emu' Smyth: overall champion for the second consecutive year, an achievement marked by the scope guard of honour, lenses pointing skyward as he left the podium. They raised the roof for him, helped on by the beer, and I decided there and then that I wanted a piece of it. Nigh on two hundred people on their feet, cheering and applauding. I knew many of the faces, and recognised some that had been casting doubts on some of Rod's ticks through the previous twelve months. Not tonight, though. Tonight they loved him. Tonight he was invincible. Tonight he was a god.

'He'll get laid tonight, no question,' Mick chattered on the way home, 'Rod – I mean Emu. They were all over him.'

'There weren't exactly many women there though, Mick.' I was mindful of Mick's driving. He'd had more than his two-pint limit, and was back to his pacy old self. 'I should slow down a bit, Mick – not worth losing your licence.'

‘I’m fine, Ted, fine. And if we get pulled over we just show ‘em our trophies! They’ll probably want an autograph and let us on our way.’

Mick had also left the event with silverware: a small shield recognising his fifth consecutive top twenty finish. A nice touch, but very much a Best Costume Oscar compared to my Best Actor. Rook of the Year was the second-to-last award of the evening – second most prestigious in other words – and was an award that had eluded Mick. He was trying to be gracious, but I knew deep down that he would be oozing with jealousy, particularly as he’d had such an influence on my achievement. I thanked him in my speech, of course, and bigged him up a little, pointing out that despite so many shared journeys, he had still beaten me by five ticks (including the phantom little owl, which I didn’t mention) which was a country mile at this level of birding. Mick didn’t much appreciate my little dig at the New Year trip, however, in which I suggested that, though he’d dipped out on a gyr falcon, he’d dipped into a bit of Cornish pasty.

‘What if that gets back to Kerrie?’ he scolded me afterwards.

‘It won’t,’ I assured him, ‘everyone thought I was having a poke at your belly.’

Mick visibly breathed in.

‘It’s just a little pot,’ he pleaded, ‘a sign of good living.’

Cornish Tom was among those quick to shake my hand afterwards, and quick to mention our Cornish debacle.

‘Who sent you off to my patch for a gyr, then?’

‘Er, you did, Tom. Apparently.’

I’d turned to Mick for clarification, but he had slipped away, well aware that the final thread of his wild gyr chase was unravelling. I was quick to mention it on the way home, however, though Mick was ready for it.

‘Ah, you know Tom,’ he reasoned, ‘getting a bit forgetful in his old age. Or keeping his cards close to his chest.’

Either way, he was pretty bloody pissed by the time we left – propping the bar up with Emu, he was.’ Mick was gabbling again. ‘Spoke to Emu when we arrived – he reckons the board might be extended to a dozen. They’re due to discuss it at tomorrow’s AGM. Imagine that, Chip – it could be me and you. Just think ...’

Both of our awards now give us select eligibility to join the board as and when a vacancy arises, and I’d certainly love a seat, despite the fact that half the members are jumped up little pricks. No one outside of that elite panel of ten has won the individual trophy for seventeen years, mainly because being on the board carries both perks and prestige. If two members are both witness to a mega-sighting, photographic evidence isn’t required for acceptance, no matter how mega the mega. And being on the board means you aren’t going to miss a trick, either. Most people, especially the less serious birders, get so excited at a mega-sighting that they submit the details there and then. The board have a code of conduct where they share tip-offs, and bingo, it’s not unheard of for all ten board members to be on site within a few hours of a bird’s discovery.

For the time being, though, my thoughts are very much fixed on this year’s campaign. I’m not aiming top twenty, or top ten. I want top spot. And though I’ve wasted much of January fretting over errant family and friends and being far too work-conscientious for my own good, it’s been a pretty unspectacular month for everyone. I missed a few biggies, though nothing that shouldn’t reappear later in the year. Now I just need to focus and get a game plan together.

‘I’m thinking of Sheppey tomorrow, Mick – do you fancy it?’ I asked on the way home tonight.

‘Damn right. I’ll drive. But it’s the last Saturday of the month, Ted, isn’t that yours and Abi’s special evening in – *sans* kids but *avec* erection?’

Bugger. It was, too – just when my twitching fire had reignited, the flames were going to be dampened by the prospect of cosy marital sex.

‘I’ll think of something, Mick – we’ve got to get to Sheppey while the rough-leggeds are about.’

JANUARY 31ST 2007

131 SPECIES

Rough-legged buzzard, marsh harrier, Jack snipe, bittern, smew, bearded tit – the list could go on, but suffice to say a weekend in Sheppey has very much kick-started this year's campaign. I'm still over twenty species short on January of last year, but from here on in my planning will be meticulous.

I knew Sheppey could tick a lot of boxes just as long as I kept calm, kept to the schedule and didn't fart-arse about. No time for admiring: the only bird I would pause over would be one requiring a photograph, and none did. Job very well done.

I nearly didn't make it, though. Mick dropped me off on Friday evening without leaving his new mobile number (he had officially 'lost' his old mobile phone, though in reality it lay at the bottom of the Basingstoke canal, probably still gurgling with endless texts from Mrs Bellchambers). I'd told Mick not to call round unless I texted to confirm I'd got the all-clear – otherwise, I would train it down to Sittingbourne and meet him at the station.

First up was Abi, though, and a subject that would be tricky to tackle. With a few beers inside me, however, I tried my luck as soon as I got home from the awards.

'Sorry darling, I know we only have one evening a month alone together, but –'

'No need to explain, Ed,' Abi had interrupted, 'I spoke to Kerrie this evening – you should have told me. No need to be embarrassed. Just don't share a tent next time.'

I had absolutely no idea what my wife was talking about,

but happily went with it. A weekend pass was seemingly secured, and if she had spoken to Kerrie it was obviously because of a story Mick had hatched.

Mick! I couldn't call him – and a check on the train times revealed engineering works were closing off most of Kent for the weekend. And I couldn't use the Ka; Abi was taking Lucy into town to get their hair done, reward for success in her A-level mocks. Fortunately, my phone bleeped – an unknown number, but it had to be Mick. **If Abi mentions little friends go with it. Will explain. Pick u up @0500.** The gist was nonsensical, but all I needed to hear was the final part. Sheppey was on, and Mick could elaborate the cryptics en route.

'Sorry about that, Ted – I didn't realise Kerrie would phone Abi while we were out.'

Mick had been seriously grumpy when he picked me up, and half an hour into the journey was only just starting to communicate, now that the carbs and caffeine from our Maccy D breakfast were kicking in.

'You see, Joyce – er, Mrs Bellchambers – gave me some ... *friends* to remember her by. And I promptly passed them on to Kerrie. I had to think on my feet.'

'Crabs?' I was slow on the uptake.

'Yeah, lice – Kerrie was fuming at first – who'd I caught them off? Rah! Rah!

So I sold her a story. Said that you and I had both got them – caught them off Cornish Tom.'

'Why the fuck would we catch crabs off Cornish Tom?'

'I told her we'd shared a tent, the three of us, and Cornish must have been riddled because we were scratching all the way home and had to torch the tent in a lay-by.'

'Torch the tent? Mick, what bloody tent? And why would we be in a tent in the middle of winter?'

'I know, I know, it sounded dodgy as I said it, but Kerrie bought every word. And I told her that you had struggled

with the itchiness so I had lent you the rest of my cream ...'

'Touching, Mick – thanks – but now my wife thinks that I've got bloody *lice*!'

'Erm, not anymore, she doesn't. But, er, she does think that you have no pubes. The cream is a moisturiser, or something. Kerrie gave it to me after I shaved mine off – she uses it on her legs. Stops the irritation when the hairs start growing back.'

I was speechless. Momentarily.

'You utter bastard, Mick. You nail some aging old crone who gives you lice, and it's me, an innocent bystander, who ends up with no bloody integrity!'

'And no pubes.'

'Eh?'

'You mustn't forget – Abi thinks you've shaved 'em off. I brought a razor for you; thought we could duck into Clackett Lane. Sooner the better.'

Again, I was struggling for words. Mick was suggesting a stop at the motorway services so that I could use the toilets to shave myself – *down there* – in order to continue the charade he had created to cover his own infidelity.

'Mick ... I just don't know what to say ...'

'A "thank you" would be a start, Ted. It's a Mach 3 razor, you know. Not cheap, and I'm not going to use it again. Oh, and another benefit – no pubes equals bigger cock. Or, at least, it looks that way. Even your chipolata will look like *eine grosse Bratwurst* in half an hour or so!'

That final sentiment had an element of truth to it, as I shortly discovered, but I hadn't felt so self-conscious of my nether regions since my vasectomy, and I made little other than small talk from the moment we left Clackett Lane until mid-afternoon. It was only then, and with the sudden appearance of a rough-legged buzzard, that my paranoia eased and I finally accepted that my fly wasn't undone – the draught I felt was for an altogether different reason. The rough-legged was a big moment, though, and perked me up

no end. I even laughed once or twice in the pub that evening and slept like a stone in the B&B, waking early on Sunday with an urge to get straight back out there. I woke Mick at six.

‘Time to get up, Mick – we ditch breakfast, go bag a beardie and bittern, quick pub lunch and home for the football. The Blues kick off at four.’

‘Bloody hell, Ted – can I at least have a bleedin’ muck out?’

The morning went like clockwork: utter proof of the value of planning. We knew after three weekends on Sheppey last year exactly where the birds would be and, sure enough, a pre-planned route had us ticking all the boxes. The only downside was seeing John ‘Peregrine’ Perry’s Volvo pulled up on the verge just outside Eastchurch.

‘What’s Perry the Prick found there, then?’ Mick’s question was rhetorical, though I was equally curious.

No one calls him Peregrine – at least, no one who knows him well does. Peregrine was a self-given nickname, and far too grand a nickname for such a snivelling little sod as Perry. He is on the board, mind you, and a very successful birder, winning the title back in 1997, and doesn’t he like to remind you. That’s the problem with Perry. He’s one of those guys who give twitchers a bad name: arrogant, ignorant and with zero respect for his peers and the general public.

The American robin in Grimsby was a prime example. It was skulking in a private garden with a whopping six-foot fence keeping it out of sight from the two hundred-plus birders crowded around the cul-de-sac. Then Perry turned up, and he wanted his tick. He couldn’t climb the fence, so he kicked it down, and then bagged the robin (along with everyone else) as it fled in terror. The owner was out in a second, and Perry just squared up to him.

‘Try it,’ he threatened, motioning to the crowd behind him, ‘and we’ll burn your fuckin’ house down.’ The owner

legged it, poor old bloke, not realising that if he *had* laid one on Perry, the crowd behind would have cheered.

For Mick and me, though, seeing that Volvo reminded us that for all we were bagging over the weekend, one of our main competitors had also ticked, and now he was parked off the beaten track, perhaps bagging something spectacular. We both reached for our pagers – nothing showing – but wouldn't you know it, three hours later as we pulled in the Medway Arms on the way off Sheppey, the same black Volvo was tucked into the car park. Mick couldn't help himself.

'What did you bag then, Perry? By Eastchurch. Saw you parked up there.'

We hadn't even reached the bar.

'That'd be telling, Michael,' Perry smirked, 'but I'll post it this evening, once the whole of the board are aware.' He turned to me. 'Good weekend, Rookie? Down for the rough-legs, I suppose. You'll need a few biggies this year, though, now you're mixing it with the big boys.'

Knob, I thought, and turned to Mick.

'Let's get going – the ale's rubbish in here.'

'I need a crap first.' Mick seemed happy enough to miss out on a pub lunch. 'I'll see you outside.'

I nodded vaguely in Perry's direction and left, suddenly aware in the cold air that I would need a pee before going much further. A pile of old pallets at the end of the car park made a handy shield and I steamed out a steady dribble whilst visualising Perry's head squashed beneath the wooden slats. A nail hung limply from the broken bottom pallet, and having failed to work it loose with my piss, I hatched another idea. Perry might be leaving Sheppey with a mega, but he would also be leaving with a puncture. I propped the nail under the inside edge of the off-side front tyre – unavoidable for Perry as he had to reverse on that angle in order to get out of that space – and was waiting for Mick as he wandered out of the pub door.

‘Where shall we eat then, Mick?’ I called.

‘Clackett Lane, I guess, Ted – let’s hope the toilets aren’t blocked with your short and curlies.’

The toilets weren’t blocked, and our lunch was swift and functional – I was still eager to get back for the football. Chelsea could be going top that day. I needn’t have hurried, though, as we pulled back out onto the M25 and all three lanes were empty.

‘Must have been a smash,’ Mick commented. ‘At least Perry won’t be getting back home too early.’

‘No, he won’t,’ I said, smiling.

FEBRUARY

FEBRUARY 4TH 2007

147 SPECIES

The pager's been relatively quiet over the last week or so. There's plenty of good stuff knocking about, but mostly long-stayers, and I can tie them in with my weekend routing. High pressure has dominated the weather, meaning little wind and little likelihood of anything unexpected showing up and frazzling the pager network.

With this in mind, this weekend's route was easy to plan, and Abi was more than happy for me to have an overnighiter as long as I was happy for her to get her hair done on Saturday. After sitting with Lucy last Saturday while her respectable shoulder-length bob was hacked into a weird floppy-fringed mess, Abi decided she wanted something similar, and as it turns out, she's had an identical cut.

I'm not impressed. She's thirty-seven, not seventeen, and should keep herself looking a little more respectable. How will I be taken seriously at work functions when my wife's floppy fringe means she can't even look someone in the eye? I'm a *manager*, for God's sake. And the way she's spent this evening flicking her head in order to keep both eyes on the telly – she looks like she's got a facial tic.

'Well, you have a nice new trendy cut,' she argued, during the adverts.

'I have a respectable, modern style,' I affirmed, 'suitable for the office, but identifiable by my younger subordinates.'

'It's messy.'

'It's tousled. There's a difference.'

I opted for an early start on Saturday and headed down

to south Dorset, the only downside being that I would have to drive. It was Kerrie's birthday weekend, and Mick didn't dare miss it. Her family were big on birthdays, and they would all have been round on Saturday; Kerrie always likes an old-fashioned tea party. Fancy cakes and little crust-free sandwiches. Her brothers would have been drinking beer, but everyone else would stick with the Tetley - squash for the kids - and Mick doesn't dare drink at all, for fear of his loosened tongue getting him in trouble. He lives in utter fear of his brothers-in-law, and rightly so: the three Bowers Boys may all now be in their forties, but they're just as menacing, and wouldn't think twice about pummelling Mick into dust if he stepped out of line with their baby sister.

It does work both ways, though. Mick used to get into many a scrape when we were in our late teens and early twenties. He'd either get pissed and mouth off or get pissed and shag someone's girlfriend - either way, he'd have a fat lip on a Saturday morning. That all changed when he started seeing Kerrie, though. Obviously he wasn't still out shagging, but he would still get verbal after a few - only now, the whisper would go round, 'that's Kerrie Bowers's boyfriend', and anyone with any sense in Woking would back off.

Of course, Mick being Mick, he didn't see this new invincibility as a temporary and misplaced privilege. Instead he fancied himself as a bit of a boy, and abused his newfound status at every opportunity, pushing in at the bar and generally getting louder and cockier than ever before. People would leave him to it, but you could see the resentment building. One day, down at the George with two of Kerrie's brothers - I can't remember which - Mick overstepped the mark.

He fancied a game of pool, and strode over to the chalkboard, scrubbed it clean, and wrote his name at the top. Immediately, a couple of the kids in the pool room took