

**SHAUN ATTWOOD**

author of the acclaimed *Hard Time*

# PARTY TIME

**OUT OF HIS HEAD. OUT OF CONTROL.  
OUT OF HIS DEPTH.**

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## About the Author

Shaun Attwood is the author of *Hard Time: A Brit in America's Toughest Jail*. He regularly speaks to audiences of young people about the perils of drugs and the horrors of prison life.

# PARTY TIME

Shaun Attwood



EDINBURGH AND LONDON

For my Koestler Trust mentor, Sally Hinchcliffe,  
and all of the staff at the Koestler Trust  
and Prisoners Abroad.

The world would be a better place with more  
people like you in it - helping prisoners  
to a second chance in life.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

WRITING MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY in a cell, after sobering up from years of drug use, I thought, *How lucky you are to be alive*. In prison, Gerard Gravano - the son of Salvatore 'Sammy the Bull' Gravano, a Mafia mass murderer - told me he'd once headed an armed crew dispatched to take me out to the desert. I credit incarceration with sending my life in a whole new positive direction. I now tell my story to students across the UK and Europe to educate them about the consequences of drugs and crime. I mention people in this book who lived fast and died young. Almost daily, I get emails from young people:

You came into my school this week to talk about your life so far. Firstly, your talk was amazing. It was the highlight of almost everyone's day. Secondly, I have recently started taking some of the less hardcore drugs as a follow-on from smoking. I didn't really see how a few highs here and there could cause a problem, but your story really spoke to me. Thanks for taking the time to come to my school.

Sarah

I'd just like to say that your story really got to me and many other people unlike any speech or advice we've ever had. It was enjoyable, but also a very important lesson for all young people. I think it's great that you are trying to teach people not to make the same mistakes. You are an inspiration, and I'd like to thank you for spending your valuable time speaking to us because it was certainly a reality check for many people. Yours is a story I will never forget. Thanks again.

James

Some names and other details in this book have been changed to protect people.

If you'd like to send feedback on any of my books ask or ask a question, here's my email address:



attwood.shaun@hotmail.co.uk.

# QUIZ

THE FIRST PERSON to email [attwood.shaun@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:attwood.shaun@hotmail.co.uk) the correct answers will win a signed first-edition US hardback of *Hard Time* plus an original postcard I mailed from the maximum-security Madison Street jail in Phoenix, Arizona. Two runners-up will receive signed copies of the UK paperback of *Hard Time*. The winners will be announced at my blog, Jon's Jail Journal.

1. Which name in this book sounds like the part of prison that houses inmates awaiting execution?
2. Identify three sentences in this book that contain the words 'hard' and 'time', not including mentions of my previous book.
3. T-Bone - an ex-Marine who used his fighting skills to stop prison rape - shares his stories at Jon's Jail Journal. Which catchphrase of T-Bone's is used in this book?
4. In my previous book, *Hard Time*, to which this is the prequel, if you take the first letter of each name (excluding surnames) in the order in which they appear in the eighth paragraph of the acknowledgements, the names of two philosophers will appear. Who are they?

# CHAPTER 1

WE APPROACH TWO drug dealers, lads about our age, 20, skulking in a corner of a dark nightclub, skulls shaved.

'Can we get two hits of Ecstasy and two grams of speed?' my friend asks.

My fingers and legs start to shake.

'E's twenty quid. Tenner a wrap of Billy Whizz.'

'Here you go.' My friend offers our money.

The dealers exchange looks as if pondering whether to rob us. My body stiffens like plaster setting in a cast. The biggest snatches our cash. The other passes the drugs imperceptibly. They vanish. I worry about getting arrested for possession. It's 1989, and drug deals rarely end happily on my TV. Bracing for undercover cops to grab us, I spin my eyes around the room.

My friend yanks my arm, rushes us to the toilets, locks us in a stall. He reveals two white pills and speed meticulously wrapped in little paper rectangles. 'You put the Billy Whizz in your drink,' he whispers, tipping white powder into a bottle, 'and neck the White Dove.'

Buying drugs is one thing, taking them another. *Will I be hooked for the rest of my life?* My fear of ending up in an ambulance and my parents finding out recedes as the thrill rises. *I can experiment a few times, have fun, quit whenever I want ...*

'Come on, get on with it,' he says, having taken his.

I dump the speed into a bottle of Lucozade, pop the pill, take a swig and gag on the chemical aftertaste. *Oh my God!*

*What happens now?* I turn to my friend. 'How long before I feel it?'

'Within the hour.'

My friend is a fellow student at the University of Liverpool, where I'm doing business studies. Raves are making headline news, so I'm at The Thunderdome in Manchester to find out what all the fuss is about. The bare square room with a stage at the front is unimpressive. Only a few people are dancing to music that makes no sense. Repetitive beats and beeps like signals from outer space. Most of the ravers are stood by the walls, gazing at the dance floor as if expecting an elephant to materialise. Nightclubs intimidate me. I feel shy in them. I don't dare talk to anyone other than my friend. Convinced I'm about to overdose - die, even - I spend the next half-hour checking my pulse, timing the beats per minute.

An expression blossoms on my friend's face as if he's having an orgasm. Exuding the kind of bliss seen on angels in medieval paintings, he can't stop smiling or stand still. He asks me to dance. I haven't enjoyed dancing since the days of punk rock. I say no. He bounces off. I regret letting him down. Frustrated that the drugs aren't affecting me, I finish my drink. I walk towards the bar. My knees buckle and the strength drains from my legs. I try to soldier on but wobble as if on sinking sand and have to sit down.

Someone kicks me. 'Sorry, mate.'

Staring up at a happy raver in baggy jeans, I break into a smile that wraps around my face and refuses to go away. There's a strange feeling on my back. *Has a bug landed there?* I reach over my shoulder to slap it off. *No bug.* It's the sensation of my T-shirt against my skin. Running my fingertips up and down the nape of my neck feels like feathers are tickling my skin. *Or are my fingers melting into my skin?* A sensation so pleasurable, I massage myself. Breathing feels different, too. Each inhalation pulses pleasure through my body as if I'm getting fondled by an

invisible woman. Smiling at the forest of legs growing around me, I remember I was going to the bar – but that doesn't matter any more, nor does losing my girlfriend, the engine problems with my car, the calculus-heavy 5,000-word balance-of-payments essay due on Monday morning ... The high is demolishing every worry in my life, leaving me no choice but to be happy with the way things are.

The club fills. Time is irrelevant. Ravers are everywhere, a kaleidoscope of coloured clothing. Hugging, grinning, grooving, jumping happiness machines, raising the temperature with their body heat. My desire to join them gains strength; it's just a matter of time. My high keeps rising, interrupting the flow of my thoughts, making my eyeballs flutter upwards as if under the influence of the moon's magnetic pull. Hot, I want to take my T-shirt off; pondering the urge melts it away. The music and beeping noises are making sense now. They're saying, *Get off your arse and dance!*

I'm bobbing my head, playing the piano on my thighs, when my friend finds me. He smiles. Our eyes sparkle in recognition of each other's highs.

'Come on,' he says.

I follow him into the thicket of bodies. He starts to dance. I jump from side to side, trying to find my groove, and settle into the same rocking motion as everyone else. I'm dancing, loving dancing, surprised by how natural it feels, experimenting with moves copied from those around me. My heart is beating hard and in time with the *boom-boom-boom* blasting from giant black speakers. My arms are jerking up and down as if I'm throwing boulders at the ceiling when everyone stops dancing. *Has someone turned the music off? No.* Only the beat has stopped, leaving a soothing sound. Hands shoot up. Whistles blow. A machine hisses out smoke. A black woman sings with beauty bordering on spiritual, tingling my skin all over. Piano notes

are struck. We sway, our fingers reaching into the beams of the sun laser. An air horn sounds. Bracing for a lorry to plough through the club, I jump. The absurdity of the notion makes me laugh aloud. The soulful woman's voice fades as DJ Jay Wearden mixes in a Guru Josh track: '1990s ... Time for the Guru'. A saxophone solo sends a tremor through my body. My eyeballs shiver. In the square room that had bored me earlier, I feel as if I'm at one with God. I never want the party to end.

## CHAPTER 2

I'M 12 AND the lunch bell just rang at St Joseph's. The herd drifts to the canteen.

In a black blazer, grey pullover, white shirt and yellow-and-blue-striped tie, I jog to a corner shop, burst through the door - *jingle-jingle* goes the entry bell - rest my hands on a glass counter and ask, short of breath, 'Can I get two ounces of pear-drops and two ounces of strawberry bonbons, please?'

Weighing the sweets, the shopkeeper wafts a smell of powdered sugar that wets my mouth. He puts them in bags and hands them over.

I pay and dash down the road and across a field back to school. My customers are waiting. I sell sweets individually for twice the price, delighting in haggling. I accept a lunch coupon for pear-drops. All sold out, I strut to the canteen for fish fingers and chips, the joy of profit jangling in my brain like the coins in my pocket.

Thirteen and my parents - a secretary studying to be a teacher, and an insurance salesman - move from a terraced house near the centre of Widnes, a small chemical-manufacturing town, to a semi-detached in a neighbourhood where they believe the children are better behaved.

I befriend four lads addicted to watching the same American street-gang movies. We christen ourselves The Sweats; the other boys in our neighbourhood are The Wets. When we encounter The Wets, we rough them up. When we

don't see them, we throw rosebuds at their windows to get their parents to chase us.

We amuse ourselves in a variety of ways. We dash across motorways in a game of chicken, flipping off drivers. We stick our legs out of carriage windows in the path of oncoming trains, pulling them back in at the last possible minute. Whenever we find a dead cat on a road, we put it in a plastic bag and show it to local girls, animal lovers, claiming to have killed it in a satanic ritual. We find videos stashed in parents' bedrooms. Watching horror movies, we get blazed on Southern Comfort. We masturbate to pornography, keeping an eye on the size of each other's penises. We steal knickers from the washing lines of beautiful women, sniff them and wear them on our heads. We occasionally shoplift, even though we have money to pay.

I don't tell The Sweats that I watch birds, play chess, programme computers and collect coins and stamps.

The leader of The Sweats is Dez. Tall. Curly-haired. The oldest. He specialises in tormenting his younger brother, Peter.

I'm with The Sweats outside a pub called the Black Horse when Peter approaches.

'Put some of that dog shit in your mouth, Peter, if you wanna join The Sweats!' Dez barks, pointing at the ground.

Peter spots the dog dirt on the pavement at the foot of a red telephone box. A lengthy central coil, tapering off at both ends, surrounded by sausage-like chunks, all light brown. 'Any piece?'

'Just put some in your mouth if you wanna be a Sweat!'

Peter squats and pokes each piece as if prioritising them by consistency. 'I'll be a Sweat, right?'

Revolted by what he is about to do, yet in awe, I step closer to get a better look, but the smell shoves me back.

'Put some in your mouth, for fuck's sake!'



Peter picks up a piece, examines it, puffs. He chucks it into his mouth. His face puckers until he looks cross-eyed. 'It's fucking horrible,' he mutters. 'Is this good enough, Dez? Can I spit it out now?'

'If you wanna be a Sweat, you've gotta swallow it,' Dez cackles.

'Yeah, swallow it, Peter Patheticus, or you'll never be a Sweat!'

Determination appears on Peter's face. He gulps as if clearing a rock from his throat. He opens his mouth. Empty. 'Urghhhhh ... It's nasty! I did it! I did it! I swallowed it! I'm a Sweat now!' Scratching his throat, he stares at Dez.

'You daft fucking bastard! I tricked you, you stupid git! Now fuck off home. You're no brother of mine. You eat dog shit and you fucking stink. Get home before I beat the shit out of you.'

Peter's brown eyes glaze over in a sad way. He hangs his head and tries to leave. Dez trips him up. They stick their boots in. Feeling sorry for Peter - so young and vulnerable - I don't contribute my Dr Martens.

After that incident, Peter knocks on my door a lot. Two years his senior, I take him under my wing. We hang out at a local petrol station, blasting Bronski Beat on his boombox, harassing The Wets and boys straying in from other neighbourhoods. At weekends, we offer a car-washing service at a pub. Peter gambles his earnings on slot machines, whereas I save mine.

At fourteen, I elect to do economics. My teacher, Mr Dillon, gives me extra classes on my own. He explains how to read the *Financial Times* and follow the stock market. From the library, I order dozens of books on the subject. I spend less time playing computer games and more dreaming of becoming a millionaire on Wall Street.

The Sweats are on the prowl up Pex Hill, a patch of countryside at the top of Widnes. It's a clear day, but I don't care much for the view: buildings all the way to Liverpool, including two cathedrals in the city centre; on the banks of the River Mersey, eight giant cooling towers blotting out the sky above Fiddlers Ferry Power Station as if manufacturing clouds; in the distance, the mild slopes of the Clwydian Mountains in North Wales.

Under an oak, Dez hawks phlegm, spits a green ball accompanied by considerable spray at a cloud of midges, scattering them, and tells us to forge tunnels through the bracken. We arm ourselves with acorns, pelt girls on horseback and take off into the tunnels on all fours like a pack of wild dogs.

When the novelty wears off, Dez says, 'Let's go see who's in the quarry.'

We follow him along a footpath, winding around heather bushes and hawthorn and elderberry trees giving off a musky perfume that refreshes my lungs. We squeeze through a gap in the railings around the quarry. I'm gazing at the graffiti on the sandstone cliffs - RAFFY, SEAN, NEZ AND NIGE - when The Sweats grab me. They force me to the edge and dangle me off.

Staring down - *I'll die or break my spine if I fall* - I clench my sphincter, barely able to hold in what's trying to come out. Terrified to struggle in case they lose their grip, I shout, 'Stop! Stop! Stop!'

'Teach you to hang out with my brother!' Dez yells. 'Let's just drop him.'

'Make sure he hits the rocks. We don't want him to live to tell the tale.'

They swing me back and forth for what feels like half a lifetime. Tears leak out; reluctant to add to their satisfaction, I scrunch my face to retain the rest. Eventually, they yank me up. Walking down Pex Hill, I swear my days of being a Sweat are over.

Sixteen, but Mo, an aunt I worship – every time she gets a windfall, she flies me to Arizona and spoils me with endless shopping sprees – is changing the age on my passport to twenty-one. Mo busts people trying to embezzle banks, earning her a reputation for being one of the toughest fraud officers in the Wild West. Through this work, she understands the ways of criminals.

‘Almost done,’ Mo says, running a pen over sticky tape attached to the curves on the left-hand side of the 8 in my year of birth, 1968. She lifts the tape. The 8 is now a 3.

‘I just aged five years!’ I say.

‘Now you can get into bars.’

Later, Mo takes me to a nightclub, Zazoo’s.

‘ID!’ the bouncer yells over a Prince track.

Trembling at the prospect of the alteration being detected, I surrender my passport.

He examines it, hands it back. ‘All the way from England! How cool.’

Mo smiles at me.

Inside is a wonderland of neon lights, disco balls, adults dancing, well-manicured hands flaunting glitzy cocktails.

Mo goes to the bathroom and reappears with a blonde beauty. ‘This is Alexis, Shaun. She’s dying to meet you.’

‘Hi, Alexis,’ I say, blushing. *Why on earth is she so keen to meet me?*

‘Your accent’s so cute,’ Alexis says, intensifying my embarrassment. ‘Mo’s been telling me about you being Paul McCartney’s nephew.’

I look at Mo. She winks.

I stifle a grin. ‘Er ... yeah. Ever been to Liverpool?’

‘I’ve never been out of America.’

‘Would you like to visit?’

‘Hell, yeah! C’mon, let’s dance ...’

In England, over Sunday dinner, I ask my parents for money to invest in British Telecom shares.

‘What do you think?’ Mum says, turning to Dad.

‘Bugger off,’ Dad says. ‘I’m not supporting Margaret bloody Thatcher’s privatisation programme.’

‘It’s only fifty pence a share,’ I say in my best salesman’s voice. ‘Mr Dillon thinks it’ll start trading much higher.’

‘No!’ Dad says. ‘We’ve got a Tory in the house now, have we? Just like your grandmother.’

‘Of course – Nan! Why didn’t I think of that? Thanks, Dad!’

After eating, I jog to Nan’s for a second Sunday dinner. The smell of Grandfather Fred’s chicken gravy rekindles my hunger. After mmmming and ahhhhing over the meal, I tell Nan about British Telecom shares. She gives me £50 to invest. When the news reports that BT shares have doubled on their first day of dealings, I pogo like a punk rocker up and down in the living room in front of my family, yelling, ‘Yes! Yes! Yes!’ I sell the shares, and keep the profit for the next privatisation.

Seventeen and I’m up Pex Hill with my two best friends, Hammy – formerly of The Sweats, a year younger than me but built more solidly, and much sought after by the girls – and Dez’s brother, Peter, who never made it into The Sweats and whom we now call Wild Man, a nickname bestowed on him – based on misbehaviour – by his uncle Bob, a whisky-nosed old-timer. We’re sat on a tree that leans over the quarry; we call it the Thinking Tree.

Marvelling at the drop below, I ask, ‘What’re you two gonna do when you finish school?’

‘I’m going to prison,’ Wild Man says.

‘Why’s that?’ I ask.

‘I see these red and white dots.’

‘Red and white dots! Why’d you see them?’ I ask.

‘White dots are fine. They’re normal everyman’s anger. Red dots are slaughter.’

‘How often do you see the red ones?’ Hammy asks.

‘More than enough.’

Hammy's laugh declares how proud he is of Peter's ability to see dots.

'Are the red dots because of Dez beating you up?' I ask.

'I can't even have a wank without getting punched in the face by our Sweat, Dez,' Wild Man says.

'But look at the size of you!' I say. 'I'm surprised you haven't thrown him through a window by now.'

'The teachers at Fairfield are so scared of Peter,' Hammy says, 'they've stuck him outside, raking leaves with the caretaker.' Hammy and Wild Man attend the same Protestant school, Fairfield, whereas I'm at Widnes Sixth Form College doing A levels.

'What about when you finish school, Hammy?' I ask.

'I don't know. What about you, Atty?'

'I'm going to be a millionaire in America.'

'You probably will, with all that stock-market stuff,' Hammy says.

'Will you take us with you?' Wild Man asks.

'Deffo. I'm not going to stop until I buy my own island. When I make enough money, I'll fly you two over.' I have it all figured out: I'm going to repeat the success of the legendary investors I worship.

'If you bring Wild Man over, you'd better build a cage for him first. We'll give him grub but won't let him out. When he misbehaves, we'll poke him with sticks.'

Wild Man snaps a branch off. His eyes search below. 'What's it like in America, Atty?' He hurls the branch at hikers in the quarry. It misses. They spot us, scowl, shake fists. Wild Man smiles and waves.

'The people talk funny, but they're dead friendly,' I say. 'The birds buzz off our accents. Everything's massive. Roads. Houses. Cars. And they've all got swimming pools in their back yards.'

'In their back yards!' Wild Man says.

'Like on *The Beverly Hillbillies*?' Hammy asks.

'Yes, exactly,' I say.

'Bloody hell!' Hammy says.

'How come they all have swimming pools in their back yards?' Wild Man asks.

'When the plane comes in to land, you see all the swimming pools. America's the richest country in the world. That's why it's easy to be a millionaire there. Even you can get a job as a wrestler or something, and you won't end up in prison.' *I'll see to it that Wild Man has a good life in America.* 'There's no hope for you in Widnes.'

'There's no hope for any of us in Widnes, Atty,' Wild Man says. 'That's why you're going to America.'

Eighteen and I'm visiting Aunt Mo in Phoenix.

Along a desert road, torrential rain pounds her car, overwhelming the squeaky windscreen wipers. She parks at a video store. Getting out, I slip in my flip-flops, cutting my foot.

The sight of blood widens Mo's eyes - but not with alarm. 'Listen to me, beloved nephew. Do exactly as I say if you want to make a ton of money from an insurance claim. Go in the store, slip again and fall. I'll do all the talking. Can you handle that?'

'Er, yeah. Sure. I think so,' I say.

I push the door open, walk in, fall theatrically and end up face down.

Mo takes charge. 'Did you see what just happened to my nephew? How can you have a wet floor with no warning sign or anything to prevent slips? I want to see the manager!'

The clerk's round, rosy face pales into a full moon. She fetches the manager, who agrees - in the tone of someone trying to placate a bomb-strapped terrorist - with everything Mo says and surrenders the insurance information.

Mo speeds to a hospital. The doctor says the cut doesn't need stitches.

*Thank God!*

'He's here on holiday from England. We can't take any chances. He needs stitches ...' Mo all but puts the doctor in a headlock until he produces a needle and thread.

On a sore foot, I limp from the hospital

Mo puts a reassuring hand on my shoulder. 'The bigger the medical bills, the bigger the compensation.' She coaches me on what to say to the insurance adjuster.

I get \$5,000 from the insurer and £1,500 on a claim from my travel insurance. After the crash of '87, I invest the money in drugs by way of shares in Glaxo Pharmaceuticals.

Twenty and I'm driving home with Wild Man from a rave at the Eclipse club in Coventry; we're dancing in our seats to the acid-house beat of DJ Stu Allan. The engine warning light turns on in the old Talbot Horizon I inherited from Mum. I park on the shoulder. In the early-morning chill, Wild Man and I shiver off our Ecstasy highs. I use a screwdriver to jimmy the bonnet open. As usual, the car needs water. We wander off with an empty bottle and stop at a canal hemmed in by steep walls.

'There's no way we can get to that water,' Wild Man says.

'Yes there is: if you hold one of my arms tight and dangle me over the edge.'

'If I drop you, you're fucked. Look how deep and fast it is.'

'Then don't drop me. If we drive for much longer with no water, it'll destroy the engine.'

'OK.'

Holding out an arm, I say, 'Grab me and lower me down.'

Wild Man's big hands fasten around my wrist with the strength of a gorilla. I flash him a look that says, *Don't let go*. Digging my sneakers into gaps in the wall, I work my legs down, descending steadily, leaning my arm out with the bottle, gagging on the smell of chemicals ascending with mist from the canal surface, my heartbeat vibrating in my ears louder than the water whooshing.

'You're almost there. Try it now!' Wild Man says, my weight destabilising him.

Tilting as far as possible, I feel blood rush to my head. I submerge the bottle. 'It's full! OK. Please get me up.'

'Yes, la.'

The force of his pull almost wrenches my arm from its socket.

'Thanks, la',' I say. 'We did it.'

'You've got the brains and I've got the brawn,' Wild Man says.

Twenty-one. I graduate from the University of Liverpool with a BA in business studies, a 2:1. Researching employment in America, I discover it takes years to get a work visa - shattering my dream. I apply to be an investment analyst in London, convinced the American brokerages can magically transfer me over to Wall Street. Certain of being hired on the spot because of my passion for the stock market, I go through months of gruelling interviews. Each rejection crushes my optimism. I call Mo for advice.

'Phoenix is booming. It's expanding so fast, the city limits are like shifting sand. Ten thousand people moved here last winter. It's the place to be for good jobs in every field. Why don't you move in with us and give yourself a year to see if things work out? Worst-case scenario you'll get a suntan.'

'But I have no work visa.'

'I know one of the top immigration attorneys in Phoenix. If you come on a visitor's visa, we can apply to change it to a temporary work visa or another visa allowing you to work in a specific field. Just jump on a plane and we'll sort all that out when you get here.'

*She's right. I can go a long way in Arizona with my English accent.*

In 1991, Mum waves me off from Runcorn train station. 'My whole life's in that suitcase,' I tell her, sad to leave but buzzing at the prospect of conquering the stock market. //



*make my first million within five years. Nothing will stop me.  
Nothing at all.*

## CHAPTER 3

'WHAT'S YOUR REASON for coming to America, Mr Attwood?' asks a stern-faced immigration officer in May 1991.

'Visiting my aunt and uncle.' My heart somersaults over the lie.

'How long do you intend to stay in America?'

'A month.'

'How much cash have you brought?'

'Not much.'

'Then how do you intend to support yourself in America?' he asks, grimacing.

Unnerved, I fish my credit-card holder from my pocket and open it like a concertina. 'With these.'

He nods and stamps a visa. 'Have a good stay in America, Mr Attwood.'

*Oh, yes, in America money is king!*

I fly from Chicago to Phoenix. Getting off the plane, I'm ambushed by heat. My dazzled eyes slam shut. Opening them partially, I see desert air shimmering on the runways. As I walk towards the building, the sun stings my shaved head and a gust of wind deposits dust in my mouth. I spit and switch to breathing through my nose. By the time I get to the terminal, my brains are boiling like an egg. I hug Mo and retrieve my luggage.

On the drive home, Mo stops at a Circle K convenience store. My excitement at being in America somehow blows the lid off my 54-oz ThirstBuster. Pink lemonade spreads across the counter and drips on the floor.

'I'm so sorry,' I say, throwing my hands up.

'I'll clean it up, dude,' the clerk says.

Mo shakes her head. Outside, she yells, 'Don't ever fucking apologise! Blame the cup! Blame the lid! Blame the staff! Demand fucking compensation!'

'You're so right. What was I thinking?'

From Mo's house, I mail my résumé to the stockbrokerages in the phone book. In a race to make money before I run out of credit, I must find work fast. Days later, I find a letter from Kruger Financial in the mailbox. I dash inside, tear it open and announce to Mo that I have an interview.

A week later, speeding down the I-10, Mo says, 'If they ask to see your Social Security card, tell them your aunt has it in safe keeping, but you'll be happy to bring them a photocopy for their records.' On a previous visit, Mo had guided me through getting various other forms of ID.

'But it has "NOT VALID FOR EMPLOYMENT" printed on it,' I say, perspiring in my shirt, suit and tie.

'I'll fade that out of the copy.' A car cuts us off. Mo lowers her window and offers a middle finger. 'Motherfucking daft git!'

'And what if they ask for a work visa?'

'We'll get a printing set from Toys R Us or any stationery store, and stamp "H-1B professional-level job visa" into your passport. That should satisfy employers. I did the same in Chicago. I had no work visa. My immigration attorney advised me to file my tax returns correctly and on time. I did and the government left me alone. If you don't mess with the IRS, you'll be just fine.'

'You've got it all figured out,' I say, elevating her up the ranks of business geniuses. *It'll all be so easy with her guidance.*

'And just remember when you go into this interview: *it's fuck or be fucked in the business world.* Be honest about your abilities. The Americans have no time for the British

attitude of being reserved. Build yourself up to the hilt, so they'd feel pretty fucking stupid if they didn't hire you.'

We sign in at a security desk and take the elevator to the 13th floor. Mo stays on a sofa. I'm shown into a conference room.

I stride past a long mahogany table and stop at full-length windows, impressed by the view. Below a sky so clear it looks like a window into outer space, palm trees and buildings are scattered across the desert, shrunk to the size of matchsticks and boxes. Nearby is a cluster of high-rises – monuments to financial success, my kind of Stonehenge – and, further away, a mountain shaped like a camel, mansions riding its humps. *I belong there. It's just a matter of time.* The height gives me a sense of power over everything below.

A broad, chubby man swaggers in with the air of a Mafia don. Olive skin. Slicked hair. Silky cashmere suit. Facial shape and eyes like a Saint Bernard's. 'I'm Johnny Brasi, the boss of Kruger's Phoenix office,' he says in a New York Italian accent.

'Pleased to meet you,' I say, accentuating my Englishness.

Grinning, he gives my hand a few firm pumps. 'Take a seat. So, Shaun, tell me, why do you wanna be a stockbroker?' He rests his elbows on the table, leans forward and gazes at me as if reading my thoughts.

I launch into describing my adventures in the stock market, convinced my enthusiasm will win him over.

He listens patiently. 'Analysing stocks and selling them are two entirely different things. Do you have what it takes to be a salesperson?'

'I can succeed at anything I put my mind to.'

'I like your attitude, and I like your accent. That accent will really help you on the phone. So here's what I'm willing to do for you: I'm gonna offer you a job as a stockbroker with Kruger Financial.'

'Thanks very much,' I say, delighted. *Everything's falling into place so quickly.* 'When can I start?'

'To work as a stockbroker, you need a Series 7 licence. To get a Series 7, you need to pass an exam. To pass the exam, I recommend you sign up for the classes the next bunch of trainees are attending. If you do the classes and pass the test, you could have your licence as early as two months from now.'

'That sounds fine,' I say, unfazed.

'What you need to understand about Kruger Financial is that you'll be employed as an independent contractor. That means you'll not be making any money until you begin to generate commissions from selling stocks.'

*Here's the catch.*

'Cause you'll not be on any fixed salary, the amount of money you can make is unlimited. It all depends on how hard you work and the commissions you generate.'

'I like the sound of that, but I want to start earning commissions right away. How hard is this test? Maybe I can do it without the classes.'

'It's not the policy of this firm to enter a trainee for the test without doing the classes. There's a lotta math in it.'

'My degree involved loads of calculus and statistics. This test can't be any harder than that.'

'There's a lotta options questions in it.'

'I've traded options.'

Johnny laughs. 'I'll show you the study book. It's a big book. Then you'll see you need the classes.' He fetches the book.

Opening it, I say, 'You've got to be kidding!'

'I told you so.'

'No, not the size of it. It's all multiple-choice questions. This is easy. How soon can you put me in for the test?'

He narrows his eyes as if assessing whether I'm worth taking the risk. 'If you're that confident, I may be willing to

let you skip the classes. Are you sure you won't let me down?'

'I definitely won't.'

'When I put my trust in someone, I'm not the kind of guy who likes being let down.'

'It's not going to happen,' I say, trying not to imagine what he does to people who disappoint him.

He smiles. 'The earliest I can get you in for the test is about two weeks.'

'No problem.'

'Take this book home with you.'

'Thanks, boss.'

Johnny tells me to study at Kruger to absorb the atmosphere. The brokers, about 30 power-dressed men, arrive before 6 a.m., sporting sleep creases on their faces. They greet the secretaries and join the battle for the coffee-maker. From the vending machines, they load up on candy and Mountain Dew. The workplace is mostly open plan. The majority of the brokers are sat four to a quad: a cross-shaped table with corkboard divides. As 6.30 a.m. nears, their rate of caffeine consumption rises exponentially, as do their spirits. When the opening bell rings on the New York Stock Exchange, the brokers spring from their chairs and yell into their phones at volumes normally reserved for the hard of hearing.

'Dow's up twenty-seven!'

'Techs are on the move again!'

'Market or limit order?'

'It's ten and a sixteenth. Crap! They just raised the offer to an eighth!'

'ASA International's off three thirty-seconds on low volume.'

'I'm telling you, it's a dead-cat bounce.'

'Dump that dog!'

'It just bust through its year high!'