

Chapter Four

Mark and the Inmates

On first glance I thought he looked like a psychopath who'd been badly photographed by the tabloids, you know, scuffed up to look worse than he actually was. His appearance put him in the, evil son-of-a-bitch section, but once I got to know him my views changed. After all he had one of the worst mental illnesses I think anyone could have, he was, and still is a paranoid schizophrenic. Mark had a slight frame for his height. He had short, spiky, jet black hair and a pair of piercing blue deep-set eyes. His teeth were in a bad condition and were heavily stained by hand-rolled tobacco. Like many of us in Claybury, personal hygiene was last on the list of priorities. Mark was one of life's unfortunates and our upbringing couldn't have been more different. One Sunday afternoon, the worst day in any psychiatric hospital save a bank holiday or Christmas day, he told me about his childhood. Sit back and when you've read this next passage count your blessings

Mark's father wasn't around the family home much, but when he was everybody suffered. From what I gathered his dad was a heavy drinker, and became abusive when he was tanked up. He used to take out all of his insecurities on anybody who was in the house at the time. This was mostly Mark as his mother worked during the day. He was both mentally and physically abused by his alcoholic father and in the end he was rejected by his mother. He'd bunk of school and was constantly in trouble with the police and at the tender age of 14 Mark was diagnosed with schizophrenia. As a result of being abandoned by both parents, he took drugs and drank alcohol and when this failed to get the much-needed attention he was craving, he turned to something a little more drastic: self mutilation.

I saw the scars he had on both of his arms and wrists. All made with a rusty Stanley knife, he informed me. Mark gave me a lesson in suicide for the uninitiated. "You don't cut across yer wrist if yer seriously finkin' about topping yerself," he said. Of course I had to ask the question, why? He replied in his usual matter of fact way, "Coz it's 'arder to stitch a vein that's been cut lengff ways." "Hmm, nice touch I replied morbidly.

The scars on his forearms were massive. The dozen wounds were all over eight inches in length, with five or six one-inch cross-stitches. They looked as though a blind nurse using a blunt size eight knitting needle had sown them up. In the years ahead, Mark's father disappeared off the scene, leaving his mother to cope with their son and his illness. Already emotionally, mentally and physically scarred, Mark couldn't be trusted to take his medication. He either forgot to take it or didn't bother.

Under the rules of his section paper this allowed a doctor to visit Mark at home to inject him once a fortnight. This made sure that his medication was in his system, rather than in the dustbin or down the toilet. Once he was administered with his quota

of drugs, he was visibly stupefied for a couple of days. He couldn't stay out in direct sunlight for more than a few minutes if he did his skin became blotchy. This was just one of the side-effects of his potent liquid cosh. However, Mark still managed to retain his wicked sense of humour and I think that's why we clicked when I first met him. He had feelings like any other human being, and like me he needed a good laugh, not that there was much to smile about in Claybury. Mark may have not looked like it, but he was a kind, polite person underneath his rough looking exterior.

He went on to tell me about his failed suicide attempts and how he became a long-stay patient. He had me in fits of manic laughter. His own laugh was contagious and I had to keep asking him to stop so I could get my breath back. One his most elaborate suicide bids was set in a tube station. The odds of his survival I rated at about one in a million when Mark decided to take a dive under some 1967 rolling stock.

My first bout of uncontrollable giggling began when he told me he'd bought a return ticket! He stood right next to the tunnel where the tube entered the platform. Mark made his lunge but miss-timed the speed of the train so instead of ending up under the wheels and a quick death, he landed head first between the first two carriages. The train carried him in this position down the length of the platform and when it came to an abrupt halt it dropped him straight into an inspection pit. To add insult to very little injury, no one saw the incident. He dusted himself off and made a swift exit from the station. Marks next venture landed him up in front of the beak, facing an eight year stretch in one of her Majesty's hotels. However, because of his illness, he was granted a reduced sentence if he agreed to go into a mental institution, what a choice! He plumped for the 'happy factory' which knocked three years off his penance to society.

Still intent on gaining some attention, he went out one morning with a loose idea of holding up his local sub-post office. His choice of weapon, a sawn-off cucumber wrapped in a black bin liner! At this point I had another laughing fit and what made it worse Mark told me that he'd queued up. To this day I still have a vivid mental picture of this scene, and grin when I recount this story. Mark was next in line, concealed cucumber at the ready. He asked the cashier to fill up his carrier bag with money. The bloke behind the counter looked bemused until Mark unzipped his jacket and brandished the first two inches of his twelve-bore salad fruit. With no cash forthcoming, Mark tried again to get his message across. "Look you dozy bastard," he said losing his rag. "Fill up the bag or I'll blow yer fuckin' 'ead off. Before the teller had time to panic, the customer behind Mark came to the rescue. He'd overheard the hold-up demands and, before Mark knew it, he was lying face down on the post office floor. The public-spirited man was now sitting on Marks back, forcing his hands up towards his neck. Well, at this stage of the story I was in need of a cylinder of oxygen. I waved at him to stop as I felt my chest cavity begin to implode. He was no better, we only had to make eye contact and the whole manic giggling fit started again. I laughed so much that I couldn't smoke for half an hour afterwards. What Mark didn't know of course was the bloke standing behind him in the queue was an off-duty police officer. Now what are the chances of that happening?

This semi quiet Sunday of jollity was blighted by the sound of a new arrival to N2, Malcolm. He was a tall, thin, balding chap wearing thick black-rimmed glasses. From a distance he appeared to be dressed in a matching 'Bacofail' two-piece number. As the policeman helped Malcolm into the day room, I could see it was a silver thermal suit. My initial thought was that he'd taken a dive in a local river to end it

all? I never did find out. Mark recognised Malcolm, and said in his usual dulcet tones, "Ere he comes, alright Malc." Then at the top of his vocal range he shouted, "Houston we have a problem, the Martians have landed in Claybury." I creased up. Even the copper had a smile on his face. As I was about to find out, Malcolm was a compulsive talker when he became ill. He sat down next to Mark and I at the bay window end of the day room. After a short burst of verbal drivel, Mark in his inimitable style said, "Fer fuck sake Malc, shut up will yer." We then had to listen to an endless stream of apologies. "Sorry," he kept saying, repeating it over and over again. "I try to stop talking but I can't, I annoy everybody in the end. He wasn't kidding. "Sorry, see, there I go again, sorry, ah sorry, sorry." Mark repeated his plea for silence. Malcolm managed to keep 'schtoom' for 15 seconds but that was all. He was literally biting his bottom lip. Suddenly he burst forth with a torrent of unrelated spiel and couldn't keep his mouth shut for love nor money, poor bloke. Mark and I made a hasty retreat to the tearoom, leaving Malcolm in his own little world having a two-way conversation by himself.

Naturally enough with the smooth came the rough and there was a patient on my ward who was a real pain in the arse and I nicknamed him 'the weasel' amongst others. He was a horrible little shit who thought the ward revolved around him. As far as I could work out, he was in for a detox but like a few inmates he managed to get hold of alcohol and weed. I was still in a weak condition when we first set eyes on each other and I couldn't have told you what time of day it was, come to that I couldn't have told you what day it was either.

I remember a group of us were sitting in the day room it must have been a ward round or something. I had run out of cigarettes, which was unusual for me, sitting opposite me was the dreaded 'weasel.' He got up and made his way to the tea trolley. As he did so I noticed a packet of Benson & Hedges lying at the back of his chair. It hadn't occurred to me that they belonged to him. I opened the box, stuck one behind my ear and lit up a second one, putting the packet back where I found it. Puffing away to my heart's content I slid into the toilets thinking I'd got away with my day-light pilfering. When I returned to my seat smoking the second cigarette the gold pack was where I left it. It was almost shouting at me to pick it up and slip it in my pocket. The cigarette box shone like a beacon as the sun's rays hit it. The temptation was too great to ignore, so I headed towards the toilets again to check the bounty.

Unbeknown to me 'stoat face' must have been watching my every move. As quickly as the bog door shut behind me it opened again. He shouted, "Oi, you seen my snout pal?" Quick to have a smart put-down, I was going to say, "Yes, it's between your gob and your eyes, all you're missing is a set of whiskers." But he looked incensed, as if he'd seen the 'red haze' and his eyes looked like a couple of ordinance survey maps, so I thought better of it. Pity though, if I do say so myself it was a blinding line to fire back at him, particularly considering how drugged up I was at the time. We were now retina to retina as I handed over the hospital currency back to him. I could tell he wasn't too impressed with the amount of cigarettes that were missing. In the friendliest way he knew how the wiry little wretch told me, if I touched them again he'd punch my lights out. Not being one given to violence I gave him a wide berth after that.

On the odd occasion 'rat fink' had visitors, I had a chance to work out what sort of a background he'd come from and how he was dragged up. True to form I wasn't disappointed by my findings. His dad and step-trollop were the most frequent visitors

and what a win double they turned out to be. The father was a tall, over-weight, over-bearing bigot covered in naff looking tattoos. To add to this adornment, he was wearing far too much Argos gold. His vocabulary comprised of an expletive every other word and he had the IQ of a radiator. His peroxide bint reeked of Halfords' top-selling perfume. I was in two minds as to which one it was, 'Hint of Gusset' or 'Eau de Brothel.' She too was dripping in an over-abundance of catalogue gold, and her brain capacity was equalled with pond life. In the unlikely event they were selected for Mastermind, their chosen subjects might have been alcohol, 1945 onwards, and swearing through the ages.

They seemed to think that there wasn't much wrong with their little Hitler, well nothing that a good clump wouldn't sort out. To help him through his detox step-mater and pater took the little shit to the pub for the afternoon session. Some people defy belief. If he's not dead from alcoholic poisoning or drug abuse, I imagine he's still on the outside causing havoc wherever he goes...