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Opening Extract from...

Shtum

Written by Jem Lester

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SHTUM

Jem Lester



In memory of Stuart and Sharon Lester

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Wynchgate Children's Services
The Civic Centre
Brown Street
London N24 3EA

18 January 2011

Dear Mr and Mrs Jewell
Re: Jonah Jewell D.O.B. 11 May 2000

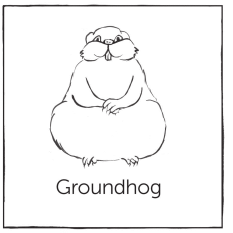
Having discussed your request for the SEN Complex Needs panel to consider placing Jonah in a specialist residential school for children with autism, it is the panel's overwhelming conclusion that Jonah's educational and social needs would be appropriately met by his remaining in borough.

It is the Council's policy to educate its children in borough wherever possible, using a multi-agency approach to support them both in the home and in an educational setting.

All garnered reports suggest that Jonah is making appropriate progress at Roysten Gate and that he is extremely well supported by a loving family. The panel has therefore recommended that Jonah's transition to the newly enhanced Maureen Mitchell Secondary School should proceed in September 2011.

Yours sincerely
Adele Latchford
Director of Children's Services

cc.
Claire McDonald, Speech Therapist
Anita Kaur, Educational Psychologist
Jennifer Porter, Headteacher, Roysten Gate School
Emilio De Rossi, Consultant Paediatrician
Mary Carey, Social Worker



Emma waits in the kitchen because the smell makes her gag. So the day unravels like every other: bath running, Jonah standing half-sodden while I open the windows, remove the bedsheets and spray the mattress cover with disinfectant. The sheets I ball together with his reeking pyjamas. The aromatic nappy and soiled wipes get tied in a plastic bag, and in he hops – the bubble-covered water turning to consommé on contact. I clean him vigorously, showering off the stubborn bits, and dry him with *his* navy towel – any other provokes a tantrum. Dressed, I shoo him along the corridor for breakfast. That's our division of labour – she deals with what goes in and I deal with what comes out.

The letter lies open on the table, evidently scrunched then patted down. We don't talk for ten minutes at least – any less and it'll be my fault. I've learnt to play the long game. Finally, I pick it up and read – it holds no surprises, but I still feel indignant, 'Well, that's it then.'

'Optimistic as ever.'

'They're bloody Orwellian. What is *appropriate*? Do you think they believe their own Newspeak?'

Sitting at the dining-room table with my head in my hands has become my breakfast yoga hold – the *why me?* position.

This minor swapping of self-pity has taken no more than a minute, but in that time our son has slid from view.

'Where is he? Jonah? Weren't you watching him, Ben?'

'I've been talking to you,' I say, making for the kitchen – which, unless supervised, is Jonah's morning workout. He isn't there but the evidence is, an empty tub of Cornish Vanilla. There's ice cream on the black gloss units, stainless steel fridge, marble floor tiles and – as I turn back to the kitchen door – also in his shoulder-length hair, all over his face and his blue school tracksuit. 'Oh you shitbag, Jonah – Emma, he needs showering and changing.'

We watch the minibus take him off with guilt-ridden relief.

Emma cries. 'I can't do this.'

Her sobbing turns my knuckles white.

I choose the wrong words with aplomb. 'Don't be so melodramatic.'

'Shut up, Ben. What bright idea do you have? Hold the panel hostage with your father's old Luger until they give in?'

'Like Bonnie and Clyde?'

The image makes her giggle. It neutralises the acid in my stomach. We've been here many times in the past eighteen months, but the life-saving humour has darkened to pitch and we can't really see each other. So she talks, a lot. Repetitively – a mantra of misery.

'I just keep remembering those words coming from his mouth: bubble, door, Dada, Mumma – why did he stop? Last night I dreamt he walked into the lounge and started talking to me and the strange thing is that it was *his* voice – I'm sure

of it. When I woke up I was convinced it was true and then I heard you in the bathroom, cleaning him up, and I felt sick with disappointment. Has that happened to you?'

'Sometimes.'

But it hasn't.

She studies the letter again while I finish my coffee. I watch her eyes tilt skyward and her fingers run through her chestnut hair, the spotlights highlighting a strand of grey. Her lips mouth words as she shakes her head and then her voice rises to a whisper as she repeats the phrase: *loving family, loving family, loving family*.

'They're perverse. This whole thing is upside down. We're being punished because we love and care for him and he's not as good at autism as he could be.'

'He'll never play autism for England.'

'It's like they're persecuting us for not being completely destroyed by the situation. Things aren't bad enough, yet. He doesn't need to wear a crash helmet or headphones and we aren't crack addicts.'

'Yet.'

It is truly a system to behold, a cost/benefit analysis without the human element.

I say, 'Maybe I'll have a nervous breakdown, you could grope a client and get disbarred, then we'd be poor and insane – that would boost our case? And if the worse came to the worst we could always split up, they love a single parent.' I laugh to myself at the craziness of it all.

I look at her, but she isn't looking at me and she isn't laughing. She grabs her briefcase and heads off.

'See you later,' I say to the closing door.

*

I'm at the warehouse by eleven – where hundreds of plates sit waiting to be washed, caked in the remnants of celebratory food that has gone hard and rank over the weekend. This is my daily rhythm: tables, chairs, crockery, cutlery and glasses – sent out for hire in pristine condition, picked up in chaos, washed, wrapped and sent out again. It's a living for the sick of life.

'I'm going to lunch.' Valentine, who, at well over six feet with his massive shoulders, looks like a West Indies fast bowler, doesn't look up from his glass polishing. 'I'm going to lunch.'

'Heard you,' he says. 'Got your phone? I'm not answering it.'

'I'll only be an hour.'

'Uh-huh.'

'Back by twelve.'

'Right.'

'Leave it to go to answerphone.'

'Okay.'

'If my dad comes in, tell him I'm on a delivery.'

'Okay.'

I swipe twenty quid from the cashbox and head through the next-door printers to the high road. Vinod blocks my way.

'Need to talk to you about the rent.'

'Have a meeting. Twelve?'

'You said that yesterday.'

I push past him and dive through the front door.

'Six hundred and twenty pounds, Ben.'

'No problem.' But it is.

'Morning, Ben.'

'Andrea.'

'Guinness?'

'Please, darling.'

She talks and pours. 'How the flats going, love?' Permed brunette Andrea has the height of a supermodel and the voice and Adam's apple of a prizefighter.

'Still waiting for the bloody council to sort the planning permission out. Bastards.'

'Bastards. Still, suppose it gives you time to work on your house?'

'Sure,' I say, settling on to a stool at the snug's horseshoe bar. 'Bloody planning.'

This is my alter ego, relayed to the other members of the Professional Drinkers Club – all tradesmen, all Irish – in an effort to fit in. So, it's early and I'm happily alone in the snug with a pint of Guinness, drowning my angst. I like the wood panelling, sticky floors and Irish company. I love that they think I'm one of them. It happened by accident, but I didn't correct them and now I wax lyrical on everything from plastering to the Pope. It feels good being Catholic for a couple of hours a day, I like to try it on for size. It certainly beats the ignominy of hiring out catering equipment and I love the anonymity. It wasn't easy, I had to earn this seat – five months in the public bar before I plucked up the courage to join them. I'm just beginning my second pint, when my mobile wriggles on the bar top like an upturned woodlouse. JONAH: SCHOOL.

'He's fine.' Jonah is grinning, looking over my shoulder toward the car park without blinking. His eyelashes could catch dragonflies. 'Are you sure he was sick?'

'Mr Jewell, it was a projectile.'

'But he's clean as a whistle?'

'Yes, but Miss Glen needs a dry cleaner.'

I resist offering to pay.

'It's the coughing that triggers it, he's not ill. Seriously, look at him.'

Jonah is jumping up and down at the door, following the manic formation flight of an advance group of starlings.

'I'm sorry, Mr Jewell. He has to stay off school for forty-eight hours following a sickness episode – it's borough policy.'

'Brilliant. What am I supposed to do about work?'

'I'm truly sorry. Could his mother not look after him?'

She's new, Maria. Only joined at Christmas. I don't know how she copes. She is pale-skinned, red-haired and willowy – very attractive in an ethereal way – but no physical match for Jonah and his gang of unpredictable classmates.

'Friday, then?'

'Yes, Friday, as long as he isn't sick again,' she says.

'And what about Cherrytree?' The play scheme that he visits twice a week after school and on Sundays – a blissful day free from nappies. She grimaces.

'I'll let them know Jonah won't be coming.'

Sentenced. No parole. 'Okay, come on, Jonah.' I reach for his hand, but he jerks it away, so I follow his skipping form to the car – dividing the coming two days into hours and minutes and seconds – and clench my fists in my pockets.

'No I can't, Ben. I'm in court both days.'

'But you know Thursday and Friday are my busiest days. Can't we at least do one each?'

The pause and heavy sigh is the answer. She pushes some rocket leaves around her plate with a fork.

'What about your dad?'

'You know we haven't spoken since Yom Kippur in September.'

'You're both so childish. What you have to understand is . . .'

Here we go.

'. . . that if I miss court, someone stays on remand; if you stay at home, someone may not get their fish forks. Do you want me to phone him, he'd love to see Jonah?'

'No. Have you finished?' I ask, taking her plate. But she has me and she knows it and I can't face her now, so instead I begin the washing-up – my rage as hot as the gushing water.

'I'm going to check on Jonah. Meet you in the lounge?'

She's back in seconds.

'He's wide awake and the room stinks.'

'So change him.'

'Ben . . .'

'Tell you what, I'll do it, shall I?'

He's not a baby any more, physically, anyway. As the years have passed I've watched other people's kids developing quickly, dreading the inevitable day when – like a burn-up at the traffic lights – my son remains in neutral as they roar off into the distance. Month by month the chance of hearing words again grew fainter. Now he's ten, statistically those words will never escape. His mind is like a dictionary with the pages glued together. I kiss his forehead and pull the duvet up to his chin. I don't know if he sleeps at night, but as long as he's quiet I can live with it. The trouble is he rarely is.

Before I join Emma, I quietly dispatch the remaining half bottle of wine and return the empty bottle to the fridge.

'Is he all right?' She's curled up on the sofa. 'Are we all right?'

'I'd say we're all about the same, aren't we? Sleepwalking?'

'Suppose a shag's out of the question?' she asks.

I laugh, flute-like and nervy, and file it in the drawer marked 'rhetorical'. It's been months and her half-suggestions and hints

leave stab wounds all over me. It's not that she's lost her attraction for me; it's the possible result. The silent knowledge of her desire to extend our family, her outward broodiness in baby company. This has yet to become a full-blown crevasse between us, yet the cracks are appearing. Maybe if Jonah had been born second . . . She unfolds herself from the sofa, walks down the hall and into the bathroom. It's the fourth time this evening, five minutes of sanctuary, I suppose.

'Could you get me another glass of wine?' she asks when she comes back.

'It's finished.'

'No, there was at least half left.' She stares into my eyes.

'What?'

'You know what.'

'Suddenly I can't have a glass of wine after dinner?'

'It's what you seem to be unable to do after your glass of wine and your brandy or scotch. Don't think I don't realise why you're always suggesting I go to bed early. I'm not stupid, Ben.'

I'm not good at being caught, humiliated. It invokes silence, heavy with unwashed linen. We both know it's my method of avoidance, but I don't know if she suspects that her wriggling bottom – pushed into my groin in the early hours of the morning – feels like an attempted rape. There is nothing carefree about sex any more and a thick blue line appearing on a stick of piss-washed plastic may be her foremost desire, but it just might finish me off for good. It's easier to fall back on a drink problem than admit I don't share her wish. So occasionally I succumb, praying that my sperm have zero sense of direction and the motility of a sloth – they are, after all, mine.

She goes to open another bottle and pours herself a glass.

'Ben, I spoke to a colleague today.'

'Oh, yes.'

'She specialises in educational tribunals.'

'And?'

'As it stands, she doesn't fancy our chances.'

'And that fabulous piece of insight is worth?'

She digs me in the ribs. 'She said *as it stands*.'

'And how does it stand?'

'Us. Together. With the resources we have.'

'I thought this whole thing is about Jonah?'

'It is about Jonah. I showed her the letter; we discussed other cases – successful cases. There were commonalities, certain things that would help him.'

'Such as?'

'This morning's conversation. Splitting up. They love a single parent, remember?'

'That was a joke, Emma, and not a good one.'

'Do you hear me laughing?'

'You're serious? Pretending to split up?'

'It would be for Jonah.'

'Just for him?'

'Yes. But don't tell me you think I'm loving life at the moment.'

'And you've noticed me tap dancing in between arse-wiping?'

'It wouldn't be real, Ben, just a temporary arrangement until the tribunal is over.'

'That could be months. You're being absurd. How would you cope with Jonah and work by yourself? And where would you move to in this charade? Next door? Wouldn't it look a little suspicious?'

'I agree, it would. But single fathers are one of the commonalities I mentioned. Ben, for this to work, Jonah needs to be with you.'

'Just hold on a second, I don't remember agreeing to the first part, the splitting up, let alone the idea that I could cope with him by myself. Emma, the two of us can barely cope together. To be frank, I'm not interested in either suggestion.'

She groans. 'But it would help our case.'

'Jonah's case, you mean? Get the lawyers and judge to live with him, he'll convince them inside an hour.'

As if to hammer home the point, Jonah has rejoined us,

'Go back to bed, Jonah,' I say. But my tone must have given away my irritation and he's jumping so hard that the floor is shaking. Emma approaches him, calling his name softly, but as she closes in, he forces one hand into his mouth and smacks his head with the other, violently.

'Emma, keep away,' I say as he swipes an empty wine glass off the table. It thuds on to the carpet and he kicks it. I throw my arms around him, but he slips my grasp and buries his teeth into my shoulder with force. I have to slap him on the head to get him to release me and it forces the tears from him. Emma moves in to console him and lead him back to bed. She kneels on the floor before him and grazes his chin with the gentlest of kisses. Jonah falls forward until their foreheads touch. I leave them like that and go in search of antiseptic cream.

It's half an hour before Emma returns, pale and yawning. She falls heavily on to the sofa beside me. 'Are you okay?' she asks.

'Yeah, just another souvenir. You'd better take a picture, I suppose.'

She goes to our bedroom to grab the camera and takes half a dozen snaps of my red and punctured shoulder. One more for the album of cuts and bruises, smashed glasses, plates and picture frames – the supporting evidence of Jonah's aggression

and unpredictability, saved for a hoped-for tribunal – his anti-matter CV. She hands me a glass of wine.

'I'm not doing it, Emma.'

'There is another solution,' she says.

'What, a straightjacket?'

'To you living here by yourself with Jonah.'

'I've already told you, Emma, that's not going to happen.'

'Ben, do you think you can survive this for another year, two, three, ten? I don't think I can. Not to mention poor Jonah. He needs more than we can give him, more than is on offer at Maureen Mitchell. He needs and deserves better than this. He needs to be given the chance at a little dignity. He needs a residential placement, Ben, he needs the consistency, it may be his only chance.'

I drain my glass.

'Ben,' she continues, 'we have to do whatever it takes, however painful it is in the short term. We have to do it for Jonah.'

'So what's this other solution?' I ask. Already feeling my need to please her overwhelming my sense of self-preservation.

Jewell
14 Oakfield Avenue
London N10 4RG

23 January 2011

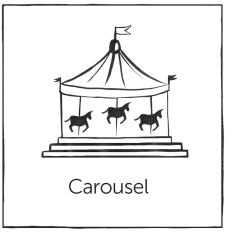
Dear Ms Latchford

Re: Jonah Jewell – change in domestic circumstances

Unfortunately, Jonah's mother and I have separated and Jonah's care is now solely my responsibility. It has been decided that Mrs Jewell will remain in the family home, while Jonah and I will move in with my elderly father at the above address.

As you will no doubt understand, this is a less than ideal situation – especially for Jonah – and I would be grateful if I could meet with you at your earliest convenience to discuss any help that may be available.

Yours sincerely
Ben Jewell



'So. I'm honoured.'

Jonah pushes past his grandfather and, like a guided missile, heads directly for the kitchen.

'Coming in?'

'Just a couple of months,' I say, 'like I told you on the phone.'

'So.' He opens the door wide and invites me in with a sweep of his arm. 'What did you do?'

'Nothing.'

'Let her go without a fight then?'

He turns and glides down the dim hallway. His wiry frame may have receded from its five-feet-eleven-inch zenith, but it remains erect and there is threat in the way he holds himself.

'JJ? Are you in my cupboards, already?'

There is rustling and the crack of MDF against wood – Jonah is scavenging.

'What have you found? So! You like bagels, eh?'

Jonah sprints past me into the lounge as I reach the kitchen and he claims the brown chenille sofa like an invading colonial power, a bagel lodged between his jaws.

'JJ, you can't eat it plain. Let me put some salmon in it . . .'

'He doesn't eat salmon.'

'This he's told you?'

The same old carousel. 'I've tried, he spits it out.'

'This salmon? It's from a delicatessen, or from a supermarket?'

'Neither, Alaska.'

'Always so clever. I'll make him a salmon bagel.'

His accent is no longer strong, but has a noticeable, lilting rise at the end of questions that has always hit me as disdain. It's time to retreat.

'I can't stay, I've got a load of things still to pack and bring from the flat. Can you look after Jonah, just for a bit?'

He shrugs. 'You'll be back when?'

I check my watch. 'Two-ish?'

'It's already midday. Get back by four. We'll go walking, maybe see Maurice.'

'You sure?'

He holds his hands to his chest – palms up. 'What can happen?'

I'm about to list the possible outcomes but he's gone. I hear him humming from the kitchen. He's enjoying this. I'm crying inside and desperate for a drink and my father is in his element. I check my watch: every minute I lose to his bagel-making is robbing me of some much-needed solitude. Finally, the perfect salmon bagel is ready and is being delivered to the lounge. Jonah is halfway through his first and flicks it nonchalantly behind the sofa as the second arrives. From the safety of the hallway I watch as his tongue makes contact with the smoked salmon. And now he's eating it. Little bastard.

'Florsheim's Deli, Temple Fortune. There, something else for your menu, eh, JJ?'

Jonah doesn't flinch as his cheek is pinched. I'd swear he is staring right at me. But I know better.

'His bag's by the door,' I call. 'Dad?'

'Four. Not before, we won't be here.'

Three hours and twenty-two minutes at home. I'll pack up in an hour, but I must sit down first. I want a drink, something to eat, but a disarming thought floats into my head: maybe I could stay the night? It could be a date – we could try proper sex and sleep through the night without the threat of interruption. But no, Emma will worry about Jonah, she'll worry about my dad. Still, the idea of a secret liaison seems to flick my libido switch.

I turn the TV on and the sofa devours me. I'm panicked by the notion of not seeing her for weeks, of being ignored, and – despite all evidence to the contrary – the efficiency with which this status quo has been engineered. I want to cry. Instead, I drink and pass out. In my stupor I hear chickens, cows, the triple-whistle of a shepherd. Some Wordsworth gives way to a chanting football crowd, the rising pitch of celebration, a gunshot, the clack, clack, clack of manual typewriter keys, more gunfire, the rousing, sweet scream of a boy soprano.

My right arm is dead beneath my chin and glistens with saliva illuminated by the cathode glare of the TV. The walls repaint themselves green, then red, then blue and back to green. The sound is muffled by darkness. Darkness. I begin to make loose connections, but they're transitory, almost imperceptible – like Jonah's presence. Darkness. Dribbling. Dead limbs. Daylight. No daylight. Shit.

I jump to my feet and invite the vertigo. Fall to my knees and scrabble for my watch on the floor. Hold its face to the light of the TV screen. Eighteen-fifteen. Shit, shit, shit. Should I

phone? I stumble like a drunkard to the front door. Double back to the kitchen to slug from last night's wine. Light a cigarette. Slug again. Glug. Drain the bottle. Shuffle the deck and deal my thoughts to the left, to the right. Pull them together. Shuffle again. Spread the pack. Demon thoughts are alcohol soluble. Additional vodka clears the remaining dregs. I grab my car keys from the table.

The front door is open. Does he think it's the 1950s? The single bare bulb burns circles into my vision, so I feel my way inside the house. The Van Gogh 'Sunflowers' block-print swings like a pendulum as I make contact with it and dust flies off like a Saharan sandstorm. The wrought-iron and glass telephone table eats a chunk of my shin as I try to blink away the floating white spots from my cornea. Who else but my father would swaddle an Edwardian terrace in brown and orange? The last remaining vestige of seventies minimalism in Muswell Hill.

'Hello. Dad? Jonah?' The kitchen light is off. The lounge glows halogen from the peeping-tom streetlight. From the Bakelite radio the clipped tones of Radio 4 caress the ancient oak-hewn furniture. The ugly, obese dresser and dining suite, dark as ebony – its Marmite-varnished surface saved from scarring by crocheted doilies – dominates so completely that in the gloom it embodies some ancient gargoyle, a Golem carved by a wizened shtetl mystic bent on vengeance and vigilantism. I turn the light on and the radio off.

'Hello.'

'Up here.'

'Where?'

'Here. Bathroom.'

He sits on a plastic garden chair next to the bath, massaging Jonah's head with a green sliver of soap.

'So when did he get hair down there?'

'You didn't have to bath him.'

'We had an accident.'

'Wasn't he wearing a nappy? I left you the bag.'

'We were in the garden, so why should he always have to suffer the discomfort?'

'And I suppose crapping in his pants is comfortable?'

'He was just wet. I rinsed his trousers and put them on the radiator. They should almost be dry – it's been three hours.'

'Look, I'm sorry I'm so late . . .'

'Did I say anything?'

'Not in so many words, no.'

'Not in any words . . .'

Jonah starts laughing and stuffs his mouth with foam.

'You have bubble bath?'

'Washing-up liquid.'

'Jesus, Dad. He can't eat that.' I move sharply to scoop the bubbles from Jonah's mouth. 'It's full of detergent and other shit, he'll be ill.'

Jonah reacts by sliding back and forth – the laughter stops. Waves of brackish water break over the bath and seek gaps between the lino and the skirting. I put my hand on his shoulder but he swipes it off and bites down hard on his own hand. My scalp is prickling. Singing calms him down – singing and dancing.

'Bu-de-bu-de-bum, bu-de-bu-de-bum, boo-di-boo-di-boo.' Dad's hands are raised above his head screwing in two imaginary light bulbs. Jonah is still splashing, but his face has relaxed, reverted to angelic. He makes rhythmic, guttural noises in time

with his splashing and his eyes – shining – seem to be locked on to my father's.

'Going to make myself a coffee,' I say, leaving.

The ancient kettle dances a jig on the hob as the water becomes steam and billows towards the whistling spout. The coffee, when I finally locate it in an unmarked earthenware container, looks archaeological and tastes as though it accompanied Dad from Budapest. I hear them pad down the stairs, Dad chatting to Jonah and answering for him as well. I stand in the kitchen sipping my coffee and hear Jonah chuckle. I am flooded with jealousy, not towards my father but towards Jonah. I enter the lounge like an intruder.

Do they look alike? It's hard to tell with Jonah's heavy-metal hair. Do *we* look alike? I study them as they sit close on the sofa, examining the refracting light from Dad's prize crystal paperweight.

'JJ, let us look at this closely. Now, what happens is this: the light that we think is white is actually made up of lots of different colours. How many? Well, I don't know exactly but if we look really carefully, we can see them coming out of the crystal. Look, here.'

Dad holds the crystal in front of Jonah's face and twists it gently from side to side. At certain angles, a rainbow forms on his cheek. He reaches toward the crystal with his thumb and forefinger so, so slowly, like he's pulling a thread through the eye of a needle, and gently plucks it from Dad's hand. He doesn't blink. Not just now – as he examines the miracle of splitting wavelengths – but ever. At least, I don't think I've ever seen him blink. Even when I've tried to catch him – by clapping close to his face or clicking my fingers – he stares straight through. No

reflex action, or just no fear? It comforts me to imagine the latter.

'Have I ever told you about this magic crystal before, JJ? No? Well, it's been in the family for over a hundred years. It is made of Bohemia Glass, very famous and beautiful glass.'

I carefully place my coffee mug on a doily. I've never heard the paperweight's history before, just assumed – as with the rest of the tat in this musty house – it was bought on a whim and for too much money in some East London 'antique' shop.

'Dad, it's well past his bedtime.'

'He's happy, leave him be.'

'You want to deal with the fallout?' The oversleeping, over-full nappy and shit-smeared walls.

'He doesn't look tired, Benjamin. Anyway, you are not my lodgers, you are my family, so I will put him to bed.'

'He needs his medication . . .'

'Then maybe you should have arrived at four as I asked instead of spending the afternoon in the pub. He wants to hear the rest of the story.'

'He doesn't give a shit about the story, Dad. He just wants to twiddle the crystal.'

'And how would you know?'

'How would you?'