Stuart: A life Backwards

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Extract

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Stuart does not like the manuscript.

Through the pale Tesco stripes of his supermarket bag I can see the wedge of my papers. Two years' worth of interviews and literary effort.

'What's the matter with it?'

'It's bollocks boring.'

He fumbles in the lumpy bulges of his pockets, looking for roll-up papers, then drops into my armchair and pushes his face forward, surveying the drab collection of twigs and dead summertime experiments on my balcony. One arm remains, as it landed, squeezed in beside his thigh. Outside, it is getting dark; the trees in the garden have started to grow in size and lose their untended shapes.

'I don't mean to be rude. I know you put a lot of work in,' Stuart offers.

Put briefly, his objection is this: I drone on.

He wants jokes, yarns, humour. He doesn't admire 'academic quotes' and background research. 'Nah, Alexander, you gotta start again. You gotta do better than this.'

He's after a bestseller, 'like what Tom Clancy writes'.

'But you are not an assassin trying to frazzle the president with anthrax bombs,' I point out. You are an ex-homeless, ex-junkie psychopath, I do not add.

Stuart phrases it another way, then: 'Something what people will *read*.'

There are numerous types of homeless person:

There are those who were doing all right beforehand, but have suffered a temporary setback because their wife has run off with another man (or, surprisingly often, another woman). Their business may have collapsed. Their daughter has been killed in a car crash. Or both. Self-confidence is their main problem and, if the professionals can get hold of them in the first few months, they'll be back at work or at least in settled, long-term accommodation within a year or two.

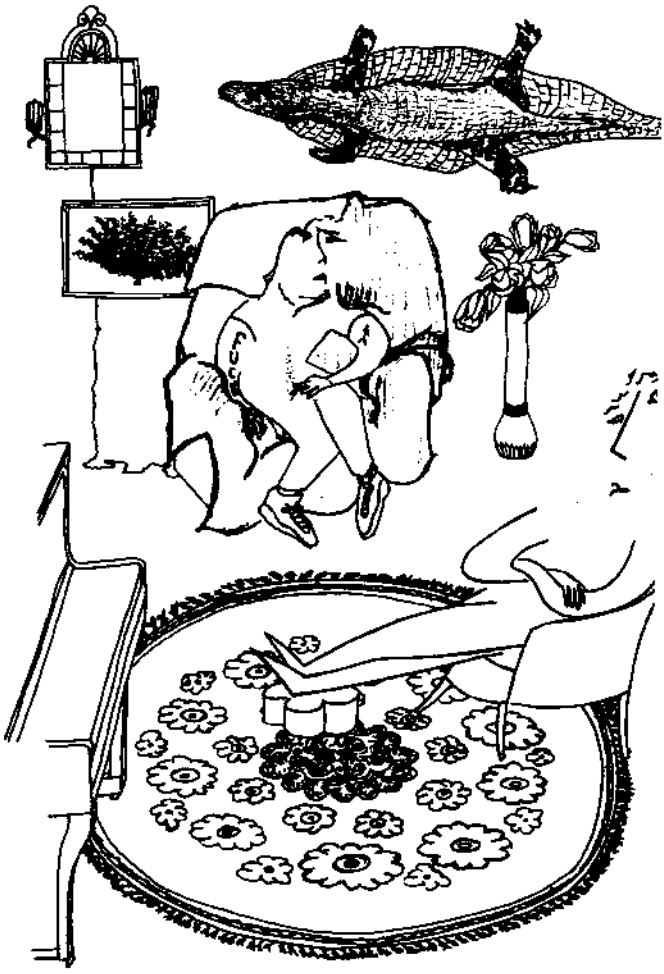
Men outnumber women ten to one on the streets. For women, it is usually sex or battering or madness that has brought them to this condition. They are better at coping with financial failure and betrayal, or their expectations are more self-effacing.

Then there are the ones who suffer from chronic poverty, brought on by illiteracy or social ineptness or what are politely called 'learning disabilities'. Perhaps they are dyslexic, autistic, shy to the point of inanity, never went to school. They may be just ill or blind or deaf or dumb. They move from garden shed to bedsit, shelter to hostel to garage to friend's sitting-room floor, to the wheelie bins at the side of King's College. They are never quite able to rise above their circumstances.

The youngsters who have fallen out with their parents, or have come out of care and don't know what to do next or even how to make their own breakfast: they're a third homeless category. If they haven't, within six months, found a job or a room or a girlfriend to put them to rights, there's a good chance they'll be on the streets instead.

Ex-convicts and ex-army – take away the format of their lives and all they can do is crumple downwards. This is just the beginning.

Right at the bottom of this abnormal heap are the people such as Stuart, the 'chaotic' homeless. The chaotic ('kai-yo-ic', as Stuart calls them, drawing out the syllables around his tongue like chewing gum) are beyond repair. When Stuart was first discovered, Kaspar Hauser-like, crouched on the lowest subterranean floor of a multi-storey car park, the regular homeless



One arm remains, as it landed, squeezed in beside his thigh.

wanted nothing to do with him. They called him 'Knife Man Dan' and 'that mad bastard on Level D'.

The chaotic have usually been to prison, but they are not career criminals. Stuart's conviction sheet is twenty pages thick, but he has only once stolen to make himself rich and on that ridiculous occasion he scooped (after taking overheads into account) £500, or £100 for each year he spent behind bars as a result. Among the few staples in a chaotic person's life are heroin and alcohol. For some their habit is what has brought them low, while for others addiction is like a hobby taken up since arriving. The chaotic are not always poor, even if they are on the streets. During the three years I have known Stuart, my income has rarely exceeded his from the state. An unemployed man with a physical or mental disability, or alcohol or drugs dependence, can qualify for up to £180 a week from social services. On top of this, housing benefit pays the rent.

What unites the chaotic is the confusion of their days. Cause and effect are not connected in the usual way. Beyond their own governance, let alone within grasp of ours, they are constantly on the brink of raring up or breaking down. Charity staff fuss especially hard over these people because they are the worst face of homelessness and, when not the most hateful, the most pitiable extremity of street life.

Two years ago, Stuart was living out of skips. When the city outreach workers discovered him, he was a polydrug-addicted, alcoholic, 'Jekyll and Hyde' personality with delusional paranoia and a fondness for what he called 'little strips of silver' – knives, to you and me.

He still is.

But something remarkable has happened since then: he is not quite so much of a drug-addicted nightmare. No one can understand it. It is highly unusual, suspicious even. All chaotic people have good and bad periods, but Stuart genuinely appears to have turned over a new leaf. He has separated himself from the street community, got himself on to the council housing

list, started a methadone programme to get off heroin, renegotiated his court fines and begun paying fortnightly instalments, bought himself a discount computer. None of this is normal. Many of Stuart's old friends would rather die than take a shower and pay debts, and quite a few do: overdoses, liver or kidney failure or both, hypothermia. Rough sleepers have a life expectancy of forty-two years. They are thirty-five times more likely to commit suicide than the rest of the population. In the great bureaucracy of the police and social support services, everyone is patting their backs at Stuart's extraordinary return from this medieval existence towards respectability and secretly waiting for him to grab the nearest meat hook and run amok.

Furthermore, not only has Stuart enough undestroyed brain cells left to describe what such a life is like, but he can pinpoint, almost to the hour – between 4 and 5 p.m., one weekday in early summer, when he was twelve – the symbolic moment when he made the change from (in his mother's words) a 'real happy-go-lucky little boy', always 'the considerate, very considerate' one of her two children, into the nightmare *Clockwork Orange* figure of the last two decades. If his own life were not still so disordered, he could make good money explaining to parents what makes children turn into authority-despising delinquents.

'This is what I don't like, Alexander,' observes Stuart, interrupting my thoughts and picking out a page from the dog-eared manuscript that he has now tipped on the floor. 'Joyriding.' It concerns his adolescence, when he used to sneak around streets at night smashing the windows of Ford Cortinas. I have opined:

> Technically, joyriding does not involve stealing a car, because the person who takes the vehicle doesn't intend to keep it: he 'twocs' it. It's an acronym that comes from the charge: *t*aking a vehicle *w*ithout the *o*wner's *c*onsent. In the *Juvenile Joyrider*,* Jeff Briggs proposes, in addition to theft

* Jeff Briggs, 'A Profile of the Juvenile Joyrider, and a consideration of the efficacy of motor vehicle projects as a diversionary strategy', extract of MA Thesis, University of Durham, 1991.

of a car's contents, five different categories of car crime: a) 'twocking for profit', b) 'long-term twocking', c) 'twocking for the purposes of joyriding', d) 'twocking for use in other crimes' and e) 'utilitarian twocking'. To date, Stuart has been guilty of c), d) and e).

'Uty-*what*?' Stuart sucks in his cheeks for a final attempt. '"Uty-lity-aryan twocking." What's that when it's at home?'

I cut the passage.

The accompanying flow chart, entitled 'Dr Kirkpatrick's Joyrider-Progression Schematic', he dismisses with: 'Looks like an Airfix kit.'

He knows about Airfix toy-aeroplane kits: he used to sniff the tubes of glue from them.

'*Kilpatrick hypothesises that joyriding guides children into delinquency for the sake of interest, then delinquency for the sake of profit, and then adult crime*,' I see that I have written. '*It is one of the conduits of corruption, from innocence to criminality.*'

Stuart does not bother to comment on this one.

'And another thing . . .' he says.

'Yes?' I sigh.

'Do it the other way round. Make it more like a murder mystery. What murdered the boy I was? See? Write it backwards.'

So here it is, my second attempt at the story of Stuart Shorter, thief, hostage taker, psycho and sociopathic street raconteur, my spy on how the British chaotic underclass spend their troubled days at the beginning of the twenty-first century: a man with an important life.

I wish I could have done it more quickly. I wish I could have presented it to Stuart before he stepped in front of the 11.15 London to King's Lynn train.