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THE MAN I THINK I KNOW

Written by MIKE GAYLE

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MIKE GAYLE

The Man I Think I Know



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To Claire, for everything

PROLOGUE

Headmaster's Speech, King's Scrivener Boys' School, Warwick 16 June 1997

'Thank you, Chairman of Governors, esteemed guests, governors, parents and last but by no means least, boys of King's Scrivener upper sixth. Today for you is perhaps the most special of your entire career here at KS, marking as it does the close of a chapter, but also a new beginning for you all, one in which you will no longer be merely scholars but King's Scrivener old boys. Henceforth you will join a fraternity that from its inception in 1765 has been at the forefront of making our nation great. King's Scrivener old boys, young men like you, have gone on from this esteemed institution to become leading lights in the fields of science, the arts, law, medicine, finance, education and politics. King's Scrivener has produced countless medics, academics and scientists at the top of their chosen field of study, along with Booker and Turner prize winners for work in the arts. In the world of politics KS old boys can count among their number members of government past and present, ranging from foreign secretaries to Chancellors of the Exchequer, not to mention two prime ministers.

'King's Scrivener old boys have lost their lives in wars to preserve peace, won Olympic gold medals in front of global audiences of millions, and saved countless lives with ground-breaking scientific discoveries. To my albeit admittedly biased mind, I can only conclude that wherever there is excellent work to be done, lives to be saved, history to be made and new frontiers to be explored, you will find a King's Scrivener old boy giving of his best and embodying the spirit of the school motto, "*Sic parvis magna*".

'In keeping with this tradition, you young men of the upper sixth have produced the single best A-level results this school has ever seen, resulting in a record-breaking number of you heading off to study at some of the world's greatest educational institutions. To single out any individual on an occasion such as this feels unjust, when you have all done so well. But as you know, it has been a longstanding King's Scrivener tradition to honour our founding father, Sir Thomas Carmody, by awarding a prize to a single pupil in recognition of greatness across the sporting and academic disciplines. While it's true to say that past winners of the Carmody prize have included a former head of MI6, a world renowned sculptor and a prominent media proprietor, it's no less accurate to say that every Carmody prize winner – whether or not in the global spotlight – has gone on to some form of greatness. And so it is with no small amount of trepidation that I announce that the winner of the 1997 King's Scrivener Boys' School Carmody prize for outstanding achievement is . . .'

1

Danny

'You're stopping my dole money?'

The employment officer sitting at the desk across from me here at Coventry Job Centre Plus – mid-forties, blond-highlighted hair and a permanent air of 'This is hurting me more than it's hurting you' about her – nods.

'I'm afraid you've left us with no other choice, Mr Allen,' she says despondently. 'According to our records you've been given several warnings both written and verbal that action would be taken if we failed to receive evidence of you actively seeking employment. That evidence hasn't been forthcoming, therefore we have no choice but to—'

'—stop my money?'

'I know it's difficult to hear, Mr Allen, but you must appreciate we only ever take action of this kind as a last resort.'

A half smile rises briefly to my lips at the use of the phrase 'last resort'. It sounds like a holiday destination for people too broke to afford a real trip abroad, a Benidorm for the dejected, a Mallorca for the clinically depressed.

Maya is absolutely going to lose it when she finds out about this. She's going to go through the roof. She always said this would happen if I didn't sort myself out, and now it has. This could be the straw that breaks the camel's back, the end of everything, the end of Maya and me.

'What if I apply for a job right now?' I say, grasping at straws. 'I mean it, any job at all – I don't care what it is, cleaning toilets, sweeping the streets, you name it, I'll apply for it. Surely that's got to make a difference?'

She shakes her head sadly. 'I'm afraid in terms of today's

decision, Mr Allen, it won't make any difference at all. The sanction comes into effect the moment you fail to respond to your third warning and I'm afraid it can't be repealed under any circumstances.'

Brimming with rage, I shove my hands deep into the pockets of my jeans and scatter the contents one fistful at a time on to the desk in front of me: a fifty pence piece, a receipt for two jars of grilled peppers from Poundland, a bus ticket and a crumpled tissue. For her part my employment officer wordlessly evaluates the pocket detritus as if it's an avant-garde art installation but I can see she understands what I'm saying, she understands completely. With eyes fixed on the pocket debris, she opens a drawer to her left and pulls out two crisp white business cards.

I take them from her one at a time and read them carefully. The first has contact details for Coventry Citizens Advice Bureau emblazoned across it and the second is for a local food bank called Helping Hands.

I am truly screwed.

She straightens up in her chair as if to say, 'I think we both know that this is the end of the conversation.' I consider tearing the business cards up as a final act of defiance but in the end even that seems too much like hard work and so instead I tuck them into my jacket pocket, scrape the rubbish from the desk into my open hand and thank her for her time.

Taking a seat on the low brick wall outside the job centre, I roll myself a cigarette. While I smoke it I marvel at sights of the city I call home on a grey January Monday morning: huge grimey lorries loaded with goods from continental Europe, an assortment of cars carrying solitary passengers lost deep in thought, daredevil motorcyclists weaving in and out of the traffic. Across the road a group of young Muslim college girls wearing brightly patterned hijabs are laughing and joking, while on my side of the pavement two young men dressed in sharp suits and reeking of mid-priced aftershave stride purposely towards me, talking intensely about targets and sales figures, barely registering my existence.

I'm going to have to get a job.

I know this but at the same time it feels like I don't.

I'm going to have to get a job.

Maybe I should say it aloud instead of simply whispering it in my head?

'I'm going to have to get a job.'

No, it doesn't make any difference. I still don't want to work. I don't want to do anything at all. If I'm honest, all I really want is to be left alone.

There's no physical reason why at the age of thirty-six I can't work for a living.

I have two arms, two legs and the body that goes with them. Obviously with the fags, junk food and lack of exercise I'm not exactly what you might call a prime example of physical fitness but if I rocked up at my doctors' surgery and asked to be signed off work due to poor health, I'm pretty sure they'd laugh me right out of the consulting room.

Equally, it's not as though I couldn't find a job if I actually tried. Only last week I saw adverts for vacancies for work in an abattoir, on a building site, six retail 'opportunities', half a dozen telesales jobs and a position as a trainee embalmer. There are jobs aplenty if you're that way inclined. But I'm not interested in any of them and haven't been for a very long time.

It's not as if I haven't worked in the past. I've had plenty of jobs in my time: bar jobs, cleaning jobs, cooking jobs, warehouse jobs, labouring jobs, retail jobs, telesales jobs, call centre jobs and (and this was my least favourite) a job filling large metal drums with cooking oil day after day. While most of the jobs I've had I've hated, there have been a number I've enjoyed (I have particularly fond memories of a job I had once planting bulbs for the Council's Parks and Recreations Division) but the one thing they all have in common is that I never lasted more than a few months in any of them.

Employment and me do not work well together.

Employment and me do not get along.

The thing about work is that it's a habit. If you do it enough. it sort of sticks so that you feel wrong if you're not doing some-

thing. But when it doesn't stick, if for example something happens somewhere along the way so that you don't form that habit, and instead spend long periods of time barely going outside, let alone being part of the labour market, then work will inevitably always feel sort of alien. Like a thing that other people do. Like a foreign delicacy made of animal entrails that the locals love but you just can't seem to drum up the appetite for. Even thinking about working makes me feel queasy.

This I know makes me sound a lot like I have no ambition. It presents me as almost having given up on life. It suggests that I'm content to just exist like some corpulent bluebottle basking in the sunshine on the windowsill of life. The thing is, I just don't see the point in it all any more and haven't done for a very long time. I don't get it: why would you willingly spend a huge chunk of your finite time on earth doing stuff that ultimately amounts to nothing, spending day after day with people you can't stand, in order to earn money to buy things you'll never use? Wouldn't you much rather be sat at home in your favourite old tracksuit bottoms and hoodie watching a compilation edition of *Homes Under The Hammer* while some other mug pays your way? I know I would.

I leave it until after Maya returns home from work and we've eaten tea to break the news to her about my money being stopped. When she inevitably says, 'I told you this would happen,' I nod and look away because it's true. Her exact words to me a little over a week ago as we sat on this very sofa, watching this very same TV programme were, 'The dole are going to stop your money if you're not careful,' to which I'd replied, 'Think about it, babe, how many long-term unemployed people are there claiming dole? Do you really think they're going to bother with me? I'd have a better chance of winning the lottery.'

It could be you.

I can feel Maya's eyes on me, even though I'm not looking at her. I can tell she wants to know what I'm going to do about this. She wants to know that I have a plan. But the truth is I

don't know what I'm going to do about anything and I don't have a plan. And so I keep quiet and she keeps quiet too, until we use up all the quiet in the room so that finally one of us has to say something.

'What are you going to do?' she asks. 'What's your plan?'

'I don't know.'

'Well, you should.'

'We'll be fine, I promise.'

'How exactly? Have you got a secret stash of money I don't know about? Isn't it enough that I already pay for everything around here? Isn't it enough that I've put up with this for so long?'

I turn my head towards Maya and our gaze meets awkwardly. While I'd been fully braced to see disappointment in my girlfriend's eyes, I'm taken aback by the depth of it. It's as if I'm looking into two vast tawny reservoirs of disillusion and regret. I think perhaps Maya is aware of how she's feeling, because she is the first to look away. She hates herself for being hard on me. She thinks that somehow she's letting the side down. She thinks that somehow she's letting down the version of her that first fell in love with me. The version who, two and a half years earlier, when I'd informed her that I wasn't really boyfriend material, had responded with the words, 'We'll see about that.'

She sighs and runs her fingers through her hair. 'I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that, it was spiteful.'

'But that doesn't mean it isn't true.'

She looks tired and ground down by life. 'I think I'm going to have a bath and get an early night.' She makes her words sound deliberately half-hearted as if to take the sting out of the fact that we both know an early bath followed by bed is shorthand for, 'I can't be around you right now.'

As she picks up our empty plates, I smile to make it clear that I'm grateful she's even vaguely considering my feelings at this moment and she returns it in a perfunctory fashion before leaving the room. For a moment I wonder if I should follow her and

reassure her that somehow things will be okay, that I'll work something out. Before I can get to my feet, however, she's back at the door, but only half enters the room, almost as if she's afraid of getting sucked into the vortex of despondency lurking within.

'Danny?'

'Yeah?'

'I know you might not want to see it this way but I've been thinking this could be exactly what you need. I hate that you're stuck is this pokey flat all day, every day. I hate seeing you wasting your life like this. There's so much that you could give the world if only you'd try, so much that you could do if only you wanted to.'

I thank her for being so kind because it is nice of her to try and see the world from my point of view, when it's probably the last thing she wants to do, but once she's gone from the room and I hear the bath running, I make a special effort to delete every word she's just said from my mind. I adore that woman, I really do, from the hairs on her head to the ends of her toes, but she's wrong about me having anything to offer the world. She's wrong about the difference trying hard would make to anything at all. What she doesn't understand is that even if I got a job tomorrow, one that paid well, engaged me on every level and handed me back my self respect, nothing about me is ever going to change, not now, not ever. Some people are simply beyond redemption or salvation or whatever, some of us are simply stuck being what we are.

2

James

'But I asked you not to do that.'

'Do what, darling?'

'Cut up my food.'

'Oh, I am sorry, have I done it the wrong way? Is that the problem?'

'I have asked you lots of times not to do it and you have just carried on. I am thirty-six years old. I am a grown man. I can cut up my own food.'

It was last Monday when I reminded my mum, Erica, not to cut up my food before she brings it to the table.

I know it was a Monday because my dad, Don, and my mum, Erica, and I were having lamb chops, potatoes and broccoli. We always have lamb chops, new potatoes and broccoli on a Monday. On Tuesdays we have baked salmon, new potatoes and broccoli. On Wednesdays we have chicken, mashed potatoes and broccoli. And I think that if I thought about it for long enough, I could probably remember what we are having for supper for the rest of the week too.

Anyway, last Monday my mum, Erica, put my food in front of me already cut into tiny pieces and I said, 'Mum, please don't cut my food up when you bring it to the table. I can cut it up myself.' And she said, 'Of course, next time I won't.' But when next time came around, she just did it again.

My dad, Don, says my mum, Erica, sometimes forgets things because she is a bit run down and needs an early night. And because I sometimes forget things too since The Incident, I try not to make it into a big deal because I know that she means well. So that is why I did not say anything all the other nights

she carried on chopping up my food. But when she did it again just now, I felt as if I had just had enough. I felt like I did not want her chopping up my food any more. It was okay for her to do it when I was getting better but I am stronger now and can cut up my own food.

'Of course you can cut up your own food,' says my mum, Erica. 'I'm such a silly to forget like that. I promise it won't happen again.'

Everything goes back to normal after this. My dad asks my mum about her plans for the rest of the week and my mum asks my dad the same question, and they chat away to each other until I ask my mum to pass me the salt.

'I'm not sure you should be eating so much salt,' she says, 'it's not good for you.'

'But I like salt on my food.'

'I know you do, darling, but my GP is forever telling me to cut down on my salt intake because it's not good for my blood pressure, so he's bound to say the same about you. I'll get you the Lo-salt if you like. I haven't seen it for months on end but I'm sure it's in one of the cupboards somewhere.'

As she gets up from the table to get the Lo-salt, I say, 'Why?' and she turns around.

'Why what darling?'

'Why would your GP say the same about me? I have not got high blood pressure.'

My mum, Erica, and my dad, Don, look at each other then at me. Dad says, 'I think what your mother is trying to say, James, is that we all probably need to cut down on our salt intake. Isn't that right, darling? I mean my blood pressure is fine but then again, cutting down on my salt intake won't do me any harm.'

I push out my chair so that I can stand up. This is quite difficult for me to do because my right leg does not work as well as it used to.

'Where are you going?' asks Mum.

'To my room,' I say. 'I am not hungry any more.'

Dad says, 'James,' in a voice that sounds as if he is really tired,

and Mum says, 'No, Don, it's all right. Let him go,' in a voice that sounds a lot like she might want to cry.

The next day after breakfast my dad and I go out in the car to Stratford-upon-Avon to run some errands while my mum has some quiet time. My parents and I live in their farmhouse in Stow-on-the-Wold. Before The Incident, when I was just about to become an MP, I lived with my girlfriend Zara in a penthouse apartment in the centre of Birmingham. The apartment was in one of my own developments from when I used to be a property developer. Now though, I live with my mum and dad and I am not an MP or a property developer, and Zara is no longer my girlfriend.

Today is a Thursday.

My dad, Don, used to work in finance but he does not now because he is retired. He used to work in The City and was almost always away from home even at the weekends. These days he is at home all the time and mostly mows the lawn and plays golf with friends and takes my mum to all the places she wants to go.

When I asked my mum, Erica, what she would do with her quiet time while dad and I were out, she smiled and said, 'I'm sure I'll find something to occupy me.'

In the car my dad listens to the radio. On the radio two women are talking. At first my dad, Don, seems fine listening to the two women talking but the more they say the more he sighs. When one woman on the radio asks the other woman on the radio how important the role of breastfeeding is to her as a young mother, my dad sighs and switches it off.

'I'm as much a man of the world as the next fellow,' he says, 'but I genuinely have no idea why they feel the need to talk about that sort of thing on the radio. Can't they just chat about books or tell us something interesting about history? Why does everything these days have to be about bodily functions?'

I am not sure if my dad wants an answer because it is not clear from his voice. I have not got anything to say anyway so I decide to keep quiet and look out of the window.

Where we live in Stow-on-the-Wold there are lots of trees and the roads are narrow and everything is very green. But soon all of that is left behind and there are lots of houses, shops and petrol stations and the roads are big and wide. When I lived in my penthouse apartment in Birmingham, I was so high up that I could see all across the city. It was a lovely view during the day but it was absolutely at its best at night because the city looked like it went on forever.

'You know you shouldn't have spoken to your mother like that,' says my dad as we sit at traffic lights. 'She was very upset by what you said.'

'All I said was that I did not want her to cut my food up any more.'

'I know, son, but your mother . . . she's . . . well . . . I suppose what I'm trying to say is that she tries her best, you know that, don't you? And well, I think perhaps we shouldn't have any more outbursts like that.'

'But I was just telling her that I did not want my food cut up.'

'I know you were, James, and I understand that completely but your mother's not like you and me, is she? She's well, you know, sensitive and so all I'm saying is whatever that was yesterday, let's try not to do it again, okay? It's just not worth the botheration.'

I say, 'Fine okay,' because I do not really want to talk about it any more and then he turns the radio on again. The first woman on the radio has stopped asking questions about breastfeeding and is now talking to a different woman on the radio about being a political activist in Iran. My dad grins at me and pretends to wipe sweat from his forehead. I think this might be a joke about breastfeeding, but then again I am not sure.

In Stratford-upon-Avon we run errands that my mum, Erica, has scribbled down on a sheet of paper for my dad, so that he does not forget them. Dad will be sixty-seven on his next birthday and is always saying his memory is not quite what it used to be. Whenever he says this, I always think to myself, 'Well, at least it is not as bad as mine.' I never say this out loud though, because I do not think he would find it funny. My parents never joke

about The Incident. In fact, if they can help it, they never talk about it at all.

On my mum's list are things like picking up an Internet order from Waitrose, getting spare keys cut for the lock for one of our outbuildings, buying cards for some family members who have birthdays coming up, returning a cardigan that she bought from Laura Ashley which on second thoughts she decided made her look like 'mutton dressed as lamb', and picking up some broccoli from the Sainsbury's local for tonight's supper.

As we leave the supermarket with our broccoli, my dad, Don, tells me about the last item on the list.

'I need to pick up mum's necklace from the jeweller's,' he says. 'You know, the one I'm getting her as an anniversary present.'

My parents have been married for a long time. I cannot remember how long but it is long enough for them to be having a big party to celebrate. They are inviting lots of family and friends and it is being held at their favourite Italian restaurant in Broadway which is not very far from where we live.

I am not looking forward to it.

I do not like parties.

I do not like to be around too many people at once.

It makes thinking even harder.

Dr Acari, my neurologist, once tried to explain to my mum, Erica, what it is like to be me in a room crowded with people. He said, 'Imagine trying to say your thirteen times table while half a dozen people are shouting in your ear and you'll not be far off the mark.'

Dr Acari is right. It can be a lot like that. I think it is also a lot like trying to remember what you had for breakfast two weeks ago while a wasp buzzes in your ear.

Before The Incident I was the Labour MP for Birmingham South. Well, when I say that I was an MP, what I mean is that I was elected. Because of The Incident I never got to make my maiden speech in parliament. This makes me sad when I think about it because I think I would have been a good MP. And I think I would have made a good speech too.

Before I became an MP I was the managing director of DeWitt and Partners. It was a property development company.

My company used to turn old office blocks into residential apartments.

I do not work in property development or have ambitions to be in politics any more.

Mostly I just sit in my room watching DVDs.

My five favourite DVDs to watch are:

1. *Friends* (box set)
2. *Die Hard*
3. *The Matrix*
4. *The Bourne Ultimatum*
5. *Bad Boys II*

In the jeweller's Dad shows me Mum's necklace. I tell him she will love it because it is exactly the sort of thing she likes. Mum has lots of jewellery like it already and I tell Dad that he has chosen well. The lady in the jeweller's asks me if I think my mother will like it but because my speech is so slurred, she has to ask me to repeat what I say. Ashley, my speech therapist, says that even though my voice sometimes sounds fine in my head, it can come out slurred. I am a lot better than I used to be though. I used to be a lot worse and not even my mum, dad or my sister Martha could understand me.

In the car on the way home Dad tells me how he is going to present the necklace to Mum on Saturday at their wedding anniversary party and then tells me the story again of how they met.

It was at a summer ball.

My dad, Don, and my mum, Erica, were both at Oxford University.

My dad, Don, was studying Economics and my mum, Erica, was studying Art History. At the summer ball Dad asked Mum to dance with him, even though he could not dance. Dad stepped on Mum's toes a lot of times during that dance but Mum did not let on that he had hurt her feet until they were married four

years later. 'And now here we are,' says my dad, and he laughs like he has made a joke.

I cannot help thinking that what my dad, Don, means is that because Mum did not tell him he was hurting her feet forty years ago, he is sitting in a car with me. If Mum had told him that he was hurting her feet, he could have got embarrassed and then I would not be here and my dad would be in a different car with a different son called possibly James or more likely something else.

That evening at dinner my mum, Erica, does not cut up my food and she does not do it the evening after either. But the evening after that, as Dad and I sit down at the table, she presents me with a meal of baked cod, potatoes and broccoli already chopped into little bits. I look at Dad and Dad looks at me, but neither of us says a word.