Contract

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Published by Headline

Extract

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Quotations from 'Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas; A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream' by Hunter S. Thompson (Vintage, New York, 1973)

First published in Great Britain in 2007
by HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

First published in Great Britain in paperback in 2007
by HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7553 3590 9

Typeset in Garamond by Avon DataSet Ltd, Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette Livre UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hodderheadline.com

Interview Room 2

This sort of guy, the way he jangles his keys, you just *know* he's sexually frustrated. This sort of guy, if this was in a bar, he picks at the corner of his beer label and peels it up till it rips. He flips cardboard mats off the edge of the table and tears them without thinking. This sort of guy, if this was in a bar, he eats complimentary peanuts when he's not hungry and jiggles his left foot up and down like a street drill.

Today and here and now, this is not in a bar. Where this is, you've got to assume it's underground. This place, with the guy and his keys, with the woman prodding me along from behind, the thing is: lack of windows. The thing is, strip lights, meaty walls. Cables and pipes on the inside.

This place, you've got to assume that thing with the air, that *stillness*, that heaviness, it means we're buried. You've got to assume it's rock and soil behind every breeze-block, worms and moles headbutting at concrete. You've got to assume, somewhere, there are stairs going up.

This place, when you shout out loud, eats up the echoes like soundproofing. This place, down here, everything is migraine-noisy.

So these two goons, this man and this woman, these two pinstriped nightmares in smart worksuits and polished shoes, these two fashion-corpses with name badges and

matching socks, with jangling keys and shoving hands, they lead me to a door that says 'Interview Room 2'.

Heavy-arsed hinges, hardcore locks. Opening, it groans like a whale.

The funny thing is, seriously, I have no idea how long I've been underground. Down here you've got to assume they turn lights on and off at the same time every day. You've got to assume they feed you three times during Lights On, and they're not just messing with your head.

They could, you know. Disrupting diurnal rhythms. Fucking with your circadian cycles.

The funny thing is, underground, until these two robot-suits, these dead-faced smuganauts, these paid-to-be-grim authority machines, until they came and fetched me from my cell, I hadn't seen another human being since I arrived.

Whenever that was.

Given why I'm here, you have to wonder what sort of sick bastard ends up in Interview Room *1*.

Down here, underground, these clockwork thugs, these law-chimps, these smarm-monsters, they cluster round and do that shove-in-the-small-of-the-back thing. This is like you've seen on American police shows. This is propelling me out of the corridor and through the door.

'Sit,' the guy says. The guy with perfect teeth, this sexually repressed gimp, this floppy-haired public-school disgrace to the gene pool, his name is Jason Durant. It says so on his badge. I recognise him from somewhere, and I think maybe he visited me in hospital. I can't be sure. I don't know how long ago that was.

He doesn't look like a Jason.

He looks like a Paul, maybe. Or a Jim.

Or a Sam. He looks like a Sam.

Scratch that. What he looks like is an arsehole.

In Interview Room 2, if you want to know, there's a smell. This smell, it's from every school hallway you were ever in, every doctor's waiting room, every public toilet, every terminal-patients-only-easywipe-walls-AIDS-zombie-in-the-corner hospital ward. This smell, it's something to do with magnolia paint and breeze-blocks and linoleum floors. It's something to do with cheap detergent and plastic chairs and forgotten urine and Confused Old People, et cetera et cetera.

Listen. That smell, seriously, what it's mostly to do with, just so you know, is this: a complete, one hundred per cent lack of hope.

I'm sitting in a plastic chair. Not *on* it, you understand. It's that kind of chair. Down here I'm sitting without any handcuffs, without a light in my face, without a packet of cigarettes and without a mirror.

I expected a mirror. A big one.

'You're Michael Point?' asks Jason a.k.a. Jack a.k.a. Jim a.k.a. Sam. This is from the other side of the table, with him and the woman facing me. This is him still fiddling with his keys in his jacket pocket.

I expected a mirror, a big unnatural one-way-glass mirror, because where else will the sergeant stand to watch? Or the little guy, you know the one, with wide-rimmed glasses and old-style recording gear? And a clipboard. In movies, he's always got a clipboard, that little rat-man.

There's *always* a mirror. Only, look, not in Interview Room 2.

'Call me Mike,' I say. 'Aren't you going to record this?'

The thing with there being no mirror, also: there are no cameras.

And Jason, all sexually frustrated, all hitching curtains of hair out of his face, he looks across at his colleague. Her name badge, it's sort of hard to read on account of being right next to her boob. I keep getting distracted. Her name badge, I think it starts with an 'A'.

Jason says, 'Yeah. We're recording this. We're recording everything.' And he waves a hand, like maybe I'm an idiot for not noticing the cameras and microphones poking from the walls. Like maybe only a complete fuckwit would ask a question like 'Aren't you going to record this?' Like maybe out of all the pond slime that's sat in my seat, across the table from him in Interview Room 2, no other stupid moron has *ever* voiced such a twat-brained query.

Only I still can't see the cameras and microphones.

'So, Mike,' he says, and he smiles. I told you already he has perfect teeth. 'Why don't you tell us what you do for a living?'

And I figure: fuck it.

So I tell him.

Chapter One

Today is Wednesday. Today I'm delivering pizza.

Yesterday I was a minicab driver.

On Monday . . . let's see. On Monday I was busy. On Monday I was a delivery man. Also, a jogger. On Monday night, I bought groceries and walked them back and forth outside this gigantic grey apartment block. Up the street. Round the roundabout. Back down again. Monday was hardcore.

Already I've had three different careers in this town. I only got here on Sunday.

This could be anywhere. This could be Bristol or Birmingham or Brighton. It could be Edinburgh. Maybe Norwich, maybe Guildford, maybe Exeter. Maybe this is Cardiff or Southampton or Bradford or Swindon or Liverpool. Nottingham, even.

Get a pin. Fetch a travel atlas of the UK, flip open to any page. Jab that puppy in there. Anywhere you like, maybe that's where I am. Maybe that's where I'm delivering this pizza. Maybe that's where, yesterday, I sat out in the car park and waited for my fare.

With pizza delivery, the clothing is important. Don't try to emulate one of the big chains. Not Dominoes or Herbies or Papa John's. You choose one of those, you might bump

into another employee, which, let me tell you, is awkward.

The one place this isn't, the one place this couldn't be, is London. I don't work in London.

This is what you could call a Rule.

For the record, this is a town called Bracknell. But, really, truly, it could be *anywhere*.

Pizza firms like red. They like blue. They like baseball caps and Aertex shirts. They like name badges. Also bum-bags for tips and change. Also chewing gum. Chewing some chewing gum is a good idea. Apart from the name badge and the gum, you can pick up the kit from a charity shop for a fiver. The name badge, you make yourself.

Bracknell is what happens when a capital city runs out of room.

Bracknell is what happens when London has been bombed to paste by the *Luftwaffe* and needs a place to lick its wounds.

The way I look at it, Bracknell is the twentieth century's urban carcinoma.

Also, check out Milton Keynes. Also, Hatfield, Peterborough and Harlow. Corley. Northampton. These places are all what you might call secondary tumours.

A tumour, which the Americans spell without a second 'u', is a patch of cells that don't want to stop. A tumour is your basic cellular workaholic. A tumour is cell division gone wrong. A tumour is where your body gets impatient. A tumour is evolution on speed. Abnormal or morbid growth, the dictionary says.

This is a metaphor. Bear with me here.

The gum, you buy at a local petrol station. This is important. Being seen, being recognised, is important. This

isn't about stealth. This isn't about wearing black and bursting through windows. This is about misdirection.

Abseiling off the roof? Fine. Cool. Very Hollywood. Very stealthy. But how the hell did you get up there? Huh? You think Mrs Gibbs in flat 3A, on her way out to the bingo-rama, is going to smile politely at the balaclava-wearing ninja as he wanders past on the stairs? You think that evil shit of a dog, the one being taken out by Mr and Mrs Mudharki from 5C, the one on its way down for an evening crap in the car park, is going to wag its tail and dribble at the spicy aromas of Mr Suspicious-looking-SAS-wannabe as he sprints on by? Shit, no. He's going to bark.

Yap.

Whatever.

The answer is pizza.

Sometimes you get a tumour wrapped up in a layer of fat. Like a snowball, only greasier. Sometimes the tumour can't keep growing, on account of having nowhere to grow to. So what it does is relocate. It 'seeds'.

This is called metastasis.

The gum, by the way, is just for appearances.

Think of that fat, that white capsule of soggy shit, that surrounding, suffocating bundle around the tumour, as suburbs. Think of the fatty layer as street after street after street of identikit houses with identikit cars. Think of that grease-thick spooge as two point four kids, stable middle-tier managerial job, firm Christian values, keep-your-perversions-in-the-cupboard Johnny Everyone.

A city, like, say, London, can't grow when it's wrapped up in fat. It's got to relocate. Start a new colony.

Welcome to Bracknell.

The upshot is, Bracknell has no old buildings. Bracknell has no local history. Bracknell might as well have been dropped out of an army helicopter, prefab.

Insert slot A in shopping mall B. Score along the jagged pedestrian-path, then fold.

In Bracknell, the stones have no sense of weight. In Bracknell, there's not much to respect. In Bracknell, everyone's what you might call equal.

In Bracknell, equality is like suspicion. Everyone's eligible.

In Bracknell, you want to avoid the stares and glares, you drive a minicab.

You deliver parcels.

You go for a jog.

You buy groceries and walk them home.

You deliver pizzas.

On the way up to the eighth floor, I nodded at the old lady. On the way up, the dog smelled the pizza and wagged its stubby little rat's-arse of a tail. On the way up, I smiled and said hi to the mutt's owners.

I said hi to the girl in the petrol station when I bought gum. On the way up, I'm chewing it.

These people, maybe, will remember me. It's important to be polite.

On the eighth floor, flat 8A is empty. Mr Whatever-the-piss-his-name-is, with the steroid-shoulders and the moustache, he works evenings.

On the eighth floor, flat 8C is empty. Little Miss Single-parent makes a point of heading out with her kid every evening. Two hours, sometimes three. My guess is, swimming lessons. Piano lessons. Cinema. Junk food. Ice skating. Bowling.

My guess is, your-daddy-left-us. My guess is, he's paying maintenance and she's spoiling the kid rotten. My guess is, it's none of my business.

On the eighth floor, flat 8B is not empty. On the eighth floor, I use the pizza box to jam open the lift. On the eighth floor, I rummage in my bumbag. In America, these are called fanny-packs.

There is no money in my bumbag.

In my bumbag there are several bits and bobs. There are two narrow rods, which look a little like hacksaw blades. There are two pairs of flesh-coloured latex gloves.

On the eighth floor, in flat 8B, someone is watching TV. I can hear the *EastEnders* theme tune.

In my bumbag there are two matchboxes which do not contain matches. They rattle a little when I shake them.

EastEnders is a soap opera about a community of miserable, melodrama-prone men and women living in a miserable, mythical part of London's East End. Remember the tumour thing? The East End is Bracknell's spiritual home.

In my bumbag there is a fixed-barrel Ruger Mk II .22, with a disposable silencer which I made myself. It's easier than you might think.

I also made the pizza-company name badge, which says my name is Kristoff. My name is not Kristoff.

The two rods which look like hacksaw blades – guess what? They're hacksaw blades, filed away in interesting patterns along each long edge. One is called a torsion bar. The other's an insert bar. A more effective lock pick you will not find.

In the matchboxes are spare bullets, just in case.

I'm not here to deliver pizza.

Interview Room 2

It's important you understand how simple this all is.

Back in Interview Room 2 – remember that? – I'm telling Jason Durant and his scowling partner, hey, it's simple. I'm saying, there's no mystery, no hidden agenda, no deep-rooted social psychosis. There's no Freudian psychoanalysis bullshit, no externalised self-loathing manifesting as destructive tendencies, and there are no – no – *no* strings attached.

What I'm telling them is: it's nothing personal.

What I'm telling them is: It's. All. About. The. Money.

It's like my personal little mantra.

'Have you ever heard', I ask them, 'of George Bernard Shaw?'

This is fidgeting like maybe I could use a smoke. I don't smoke.

I say, 'He was a playwright.'

They look like maybe they already knew.

'So?' the woman says. The way she's sitting, with both elbows on the table, it makes her blouse sort of ruck up in between each of its buttons, like a mountain range with its valleys fastened down. I shouldn't be staring at her blouse. I should be Answering Questions and Paying Attention.

The point is, I can see her bra. In Interview Room 2, I feel like a twelve year old catching a look.

Her saying 'So?', that's the first time she's spoken.

'George Bernard Shaw', I say, oh-so-very-fucking-matter-of-fact, 'said the people who get on, they're the ones who get up and look for the . . . the *circumstances* they want. And if they can't find them, they make them.'

I'm pushing the envelope labelled 'Smart Arse' here. I memorised that line years ago and I still misquoted it all to hell. I memorised that line in some dusty schoolroom with the same grey-yellow walls and the same fruity hospital ward detergent stink as Interview Room 2. That line appealed to me even then.

Borrowed wisdom. Give it a go.

Try casually dropping some double-clever quote into conversation, like you thought of it yourself. Try getting around the fact that people write things differently to how they say them. Try blagging your way through a discussion where everything's already been said before, and everyone knows it.

'What's your point?' the man says. Jason Durant. With his eyes, he's telling me that he doesn't give two self-removed foreskins for George Bernard Shaw, socially viable life-goals, or whether I, his captive, his piece-of-shit prisoner, his man-in-the-crosshairs, feel stupid or clever.

Jason Durant, I do not like one little bit.

The thing with borrowed wisdom is, pretty soon there'll be nothing else. Pretty soon it'll be that you can't say a single thing that hasn't been acid-etched on someone's gravestone before.

One day we'll run out of music.

You borrow too much wisdom, you forget what originality is.

The way I see it, at least I *told* them I was quoting from memory.

I still haven't looked at the woman's name. Her name badge is two inches from the lacy edge of her underwear.

'The point *is*,' I say, staying focused, 'I've always known what I want.'

'And what's that?'

I smile, like our boy Jase must be thick not to get it. He pulls that shit on me, I pull it on him. This is karma.

'Money,' I say. And I smile wider. I smile and tell him things are oh-so-much, *much* simpler when what it all boils down to is basically deep-rooted personal avarice.

The woman's bra, that tiny matinée-performance sneak-peek it's treating me to, it puts me in mind of a doily. The kind you'd maybe put a drink down on, in some mouldering old lady's home.

Speaking of which . . . 'Could I have a glass of water?' I ask.

Doilies are to old age what pornos are to adolescence. Cats too. I think of old ladies, I think of doilies and cats. I think of so much cat shit everywhere that little old Beryl, or Maude, or whoever-the-hell-she-is, she's slipping about in it like a drunken slag at an ice-disco. I think of little Agnes or Mavis or Ethel, I think of her stumbling about, smelling of soap and piss and cat food, and I think of her brittle hip popping right out. Then it's ambulances, operations, artificial joints, cyborganic grannies, blah blah blah.

Doilies and cats. Doilies and cats are to ancientness what erections are to puberty.

You've got to wonder how much money the excretion habits of the feline population of the UK is costing the NHS.

Me, I'm more a dog person.

In Interview Room 2, as the woman huffs and stands to fetch a drink, as her blouse creeps open a fraction more, as the perfect camber of a perfect breast sears itself across my eyes, I'm remembering how it felt to be twelve.

If these guys ask me to stand up any time soon, I'm in trouble.

And look, I know. A grown man shouldn't be struggling against the disobedient behaviour of his prick in response to nothing but a frilly bit of underwear.

It's just that this is probably the last real boob I'll ever see, and if you don't mind, I'd sort of like to enjoy it.