

THE REPROBATES

THE REPROBATES

Benjamin Grose

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2022 by Benjamin Grose

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without written permission of the copyright owner except for the use of quotations in a book review. For more information, address: bggrose25@gmail.com

First paperback edition 2022

Book design by PublishingPush

Print ISBN : 978-1-80227-772-2

eBook ISBN : 978-1-80227-773-9

benjamingrose.co.uk

For all the people who remember how it used to be.

You are not the kind of guy who would be at
a place like this at this time of the morning.
But here you are...

—Bright Lights, Big City

You can disappear here without knowing it.

—Less Than Zero

my spirit was long ago
broken
in lonely places.

—Charles Bukowski

I work in a nightclub where the only people more reprehensible than the customers are the people serving the drinks. People come here because we're still open when everywhere else shuts, and the drink is cheap because they know someone behind the bar—and even if you don't, you soon will.

Welcome to Munks. The ceiling is sweating. The lights are coming on. The dance floor is illuminated. The bouncers are shouting for everyone to go home. The staff are collecting plastic cups in big green recycling bags. The customers are no longer customers—they're the unwanted, the wasted, the faceless. Some are collapsed on the old red leather sofas. Some are hunched over the round tables, asleep. Some are still dancing, even though the music has stopped. Some want more, they always do—but the big boards are up on the bars, and the only way out of the dungeon is up the stairs and out into the night.

I'm the manager, and I'm responsible for them all.

*

Cashing up—staring into a screen of numbers, trying to make everything fit and restore some balance to a place

of moral bankruptcy. A thousand pounds here, a thousand pounds there. I'm ten pounds down on the upstairs bar till, but find it in the door till, use a pound from my pot on the desk to fill a gap, discover we're twenty quid down on downstairs till #2 but find it hiding in the change drawer, then print out the cash sheet on the dodgy printer, put it all in a bag and into the safe below to which only the new owners have a key. I've put hundreds of thousands of pounds in there. Never to be seen again.

There's a knock on my office door. Meet Mike, the head bouncer. He comes in with the doormen's radios to put them on charge for the night, and a couple of Vodka and Cokes that, knowing him, will only have a dribble of Coke in them—it has that muddy water colour with a few bubbles in the bottom and it makes my vision spotted with each sip.

He rubs my back—"Don't worry, sweetness, that's another Saturday night all over."

He's a fifteen-stone skinhead who used to own a gym and has a newborn daughter with his Eastern European wife who used to do the door till here. We're a very close bunch, and the night shifts turn us into strange creatures, the likes of which you won't find on any David Attenborough programme.

*

There are names and dates on the wall of the upstairs bar. The Smiths 83, Oasis 94, Klaxons 06, Blur 90, The Cure

The Reprobates

83, the Killers 04, Radiohead 92. Bands play here before they get famous. That's the foundation of Munks' reputation. The other reputation is one the new owners are trying to wipe out—we're infamous for being the place where the customers drink cheap booze until they collapse in their own vomit and are then laughed at by the staff, who are almost as inebriated as they are. The new owners have started the cleansing of this place by making the upstairs bar into a Music Café and making a new daytime entrance. If the rumours are true and they are as mad as they seem, soon they'll be serving food. In a nightclub? you might ask. But no. Officially, this is no longer a nightclub. It is a Live Music Venue that does club nights.

It is a common practice these days apparently—abandoning any reason for madness.

*

Meet the people who are in the business of getting people drunk.

There's Harrison, the closest I have to a best friend—thespian extraordinaire, Jackson—Jeremy, our resident homosexual—Cub, who lives with Jeremy and is currently studying for her second Master's—Bran, who looks like Sideshow Bob, has worked here ten years and at twenty-seven still lives with his mum—Freddy Nelson—Freddy Nelson's girlfriend Leah who got Freddy his job (everyone here has got at least somebody a job)—the dreadlocked Freddy Maytal—Tattoo Paul—Shelly—Laura the Essex

girl—and Inez, the Spanish expatriate who has been in this city longer than anyone.

They're an eclectic bunch. At least to begin with they are. Then, a week into the job, the drink, the drunks, the twilight hours take over. Their new shoes fall apart thanks to the sticky floors and the grime—scuffed, puked on, full of holes after a few nights of dealing with the juice mob. This place has moulded them into a ragtag bunch of students and ex-students stuck in the same city, band members with a dream of the big time, once upon a time teenagers now in their mid-twenties, then their mid-thirties, always about to get a real job—but all going nowhere except the pub next door on their night off.

I'm as bad as any of them. I've been here eight years, manager for two and a half of those, and I can't remember the last time I left this city.

*

There is no shame in this place. When people walk through those doors, pay their money and receive their stamps, all inhibitions, all concerns, all sense is stripped away. It leaves people like this guy, who is currently urinating in the corner of the dance floor whilst smoking a cigarette. People start to notice, and they stand back, some laughing, some speechless, as the doormen push their way through to him just as he's doing a final shake. He puts his cigarette out in his puddle of piss and turns around, a satisfied, pleasant expression on his face as if he's just decided to go to the

The Reprobates

bar for another drink. He starts walking in that direction before the bouncers steer him through the fire exit and shut the door behind him.

*

Meet the people who are in the business of throwing the drunks out. Mike, the head bouncer—Stacie, the hairdresser bodybuilder—Sam who has an IQ of 11 or maybe 12 and hands out humbugs to fat girls—Pete Bone, the meanest, most ignorant bastard you will ever meet—Judo Phil—Pete 2, the electrician—Bill, the social recluse and suspected virgin—Slicer, who is only five feet tall but grew up fighting his way through his many cousins in a bare-knuckle boxing ring—and Abasi, the biggest, hardest son of a bitch in the city.

*

In this place, I've watched some of the best bands I've ever seen in my life. I've also seen some of the worst.

Take tonight for example. I'm sitting at the door till, and four people have paid six pounds each to see a band called Upside Down Clinic—a fat woman in a pink dress banging a snare drum and warbling in a language nobody recognises, and a skinny man on a keyboard wearing trousers several sizes too big for him. It is quite possibly the worst thing I have ever heard. I'm preparing myself to go downstairs and find corpses. Not the sound man though.

Jeff has seen worse—he's been here for twenty years and will probably be here another twenty.

When it finally ends, and the four customers come back up the stairs to leave, I turn my gaze to the floor, not wanting to make eye contact in case one of them asks for their money back.

They have a right to.

I blame the new promoter.

*

Meet the new promoter, Dom. A thin, pale kid with a whiny voice and a permanently pinched look on his face. He wears chunky white trainers with wings on. Seriously—big, bulky things with silver wings on the laces. We should start calling him Pegasus. He supports Wigan Athletic, drives a Ford KA and still lives with his parents in the neighbouring city.

Dom—much younger than me, barely twenty-one—the man tasked with bringing this place back to its glory days by the new owners.

I think we have different opinions on when the glory days were.

*

Meet the guy passed out in the left-hand cubicle of the Gents' toilets. Mike, Sam, and I have just found him, collapsed, sitting with his back to the door, what we can see of

The Reprobates

his jeans wrapped around his ankles, pants down, belt loose, naked arse cheeks on the grimy floor, his boxer shorts so stained and wet it's difficult to tell their original colour. Sam tries to open the door but the guy's jammed between the toilet and the door and the gap isn't wide enough to get in.

"Mate! Wake up!"

Sam and Mike try everything—knocking, knocking louder, throwing water over the top of the door, everything, until finally he mumbles and starts fumbling for something and his belt buckle jangles and scrapes along the tiled floor and he moves a bit and Sam can see all of the way in. He swears and says, "He's fucking shit himself, the dirty bastard."

He hasn't just shit himself, he's pissed and puked on himself too, which we find out when we finally get him to stand up, and he walks out, a dead stare on his face, caked in crap and dirt, a great big globule of toilet roll stuck to his neck. He stands at the sink in front of the mirror, says nothing, and runs the water.

Mike sniggers—"I think he's got more pressing problems than dirty hands."

The guy goes without a fuss, but a few hours later, when I'm leaving after locking up, I walk past him again, collapsed on the steps of a house on the next street. His head is in a polystyrene box of half-eaten chips and there is ketchup and mayonnaise in his hair, and if I didn't know better, it would be a reasonable assumption to think he'd been clubbed to death whilst frantically filling his throat with dregs and dog cuisine from 'Yummys', the local kebab shop.

I stand there for a while, then walk on a few yards. Stop. Go back and sit down next to him on the steps, pull out a cigarette, light it and look at him again. See myself lying there. Then I find my phone and ring a taxi, hoping he'll wake up soon and give me an address.

*

I don't know whether it's just a coincidence, or that the guy who put it there is a pervert, but the cloakroom is opposite the Ladies' toilets. The cloakroom—discounting the manager's office—is perhaps the strangest place in this godforsaken club. Philosophy litters the walls—**DRUGS SEX & TEA—HOMOPHOBICS ARE GAY—COATS ARE FOR TWATS—DON'T EAT CHILDREN**. It is a money-making scheme, a shopper's delight, a place of solitude, desperation, and ill health. Mould is climbing the walls and polluting our lungs. It epitomises this club, and there are ghosts here suffering from an endless hangover.

I sit in the old leather chair, covering for Tattoo Paul whilst he goes for a fag or three. He has clipped out a line from a food and drink magazine, scribbled out the **TAIL**, drawn an upwards arrow and stuck it to the shelf below the counter so it reads **COCKTAIL ↑ OF THE MONTH**. It is currently pointing to a very well-dressed, well-spoken chap holding a memory stick.

“What?” I ask him.

“My parents used to come here,” he says.

“Great.”

The Reprobates

“Can I DJ?”

“Sorry?”

“This DJ is frankly absolute shit. I will double the numbers through the door. I guarantee it.” And he thrusts out a hand to shake on it. “I won’t even ask for a fee.”

I agree with him about the DJ—it is drum and bass night—but I’m shaking my head.

“What are you going to use?”

“This!”

We both look at the memory stick.

“Mate, think about it. I’m not letting you DJ.”

He stands back—suddenly aloof, shaking his head, aghast.

“My parents used to come here.”

He storms off with his memory stick and his music morals, and I sit back and look down at the words written across the shelf below the counter.

WHY DID I TAKE THIS JOB?

And below that—

BECAUSE YOU FANCY MIKE!

*

Tuesday night is Cheese Night. Students come from all over the city in stupid clothes to drink cheap doubles and get greased up on the sticky dance floor to S Club 7, Total

Eclipse of the Heart, and the Grease Medley. It's thirty deep at the bar and you can't move.

I hide in my office until I feel guilty and go out and give them a hand behind the bar. The tide always breaks at 1:30 am when the great exodus starts and they all beg for water and find somebody, anybody, to sleep with.

A ginger kid wanders through the midst, no shirt on—the words **MY PARENTS ARE COMING TOMORROW** written in pink pen on his stomach.

*

The four most important things I have learnt about this place—

Come 2 am, the Ladies' toilets are always in a worse state than the Gents'.

If you're short of cash then look to the floor at closing time.

Every night brings a new minesweeper.

The customer is always wrong.

*

Meet the new owners. Terry is a small, balding man with friends in high places and a wife equally as high because she is four feet taller than him. His business partner, Karen, is an odd woman who looks like she didn't smoke enough weed as a teenager but tells everyone she smoked too much. I don't know what to make of her, but it's

The Reprobates

clear that she's the driving force of the partnership, the axe-wielder, the one who's not afraid to chop off heads.

Karen is talking bollocks—droning on and on about the future of Munks.

Terry sits back, says little—a strange, small man with a rough voice.

Dom nods every few seconds and says, “Hmmm... yes... I agree.”

I think agonisingly of what else I could be doing right now. Washing the car. Hoovering the flat. Cleaning the toilet.

The current topic of conversation is the new Friday night they're developing.

“Of course, Dom will come to you soon with all the details...”

“What are you going to call it?”

It's the first thing I've said—they look at me, bewildered, I think more by the fact that after half an hour I've finally said something than by my question itself.

“Erm,” says Dom, “we have drawn up a hit list of names.”

“Oh yeah... which are?”

He just looks at me.

“Why don't you ask the staff? They can be a creative lot at times.”

“Well,” Dom looks sideways at Karen, “it's something we'll consider...”

Benjamin Grose

This building is old. Nothing works. The sinks are blocked. The drains smell. The toilets are broken. The walls are crumbling. The ceiling is leaking. The cellar is a cold stone hole with muck and rat skeletons behind the barrels, all lined up in a row along the wall. I spend all day there, avoiding the daylight, scrubbing, cleaning the crap and muck away even though I know it's going to come back.

*

I'm standing on the edge of the dance floor when a girl comes up to me and asks if I work here.

"Why?"

"Because there is a man over there who is scaring me and my friends."

I look over. Meet Freddy Nelson. Fluffy blonde hair dishevelled, he's grabbing onto the bar like he's hanging off the edge of a cliff. Skinny jeans so low they are almost below his thighs, his eyes wild, his mouth opening every few seconds to shout words like "WOWSER"—"REVVING"—and "GOD YEAH!" in a high-pitched yelp—before clotheslining all the drinks off the bar with both arms.

I walk over to the bar for a closer look and the girl follows. Bran and Jackson are in fits of laughter. Inez is trying to give Nelson some water. "Freddy... Freddy," she says in her high-pitched Spanish accent.

He half stumbles—grabs a random drink and pours it down his front.

"Don't worry," I say to the girl. "He works here too."

The Reprobates

*

I get one or two nights off a week—if I'm lucky. Jeremy manages in my place. Well, he does his best. I still get twenty-five phone calls a night when things go wrong—tonight, he calls saying someone has just been glassed on the dance floor. What should he do? I say an ambulance might be a good idea. Looking back on it, I should have chosen someone more reliable like Freddy Maytal or Cub to be assistant manager. But Jeremy has been here longer than they have and maybe it wouldn't make any difference anyway. The interference of man is futile. Places like this are built to go wrong.

*

Meet Tattoo Paul, the cleanest man in here. He has not drunk or taken drugs for twenty years. The cloakroom is his domain. His vices are tattoos, roll-ups, and tea.

Like the merciful manager I am, I cover him for a cigarette break again, staring into the face of a moody girl with a nose ring who wants to know why she can't put her coat in for free. Her eyes are glazed. The DJ is playing 'Road to Nowhere' by Talking Heads.

"Paul lets me."

"I'm not Paul."

"Where is he?"

"Heaven."

"You're a prick."

She fiddles with her purse.

“Look, come on, it’s only a pound. Is it really going to ruin your night if you have to pay?”

I think she’s about to relent, but she looks me in the eyes and says—“Why do you think you’re better than everyone else? Just because you’re posh, I do not fear you.”

She leaves with her coat on, bunched up around her neck and shoulders like Cruella de Vil. A few seconds later, Paul comes back.

“Alright, mate.”

“You’re too kind to these cretins,” I say.

“It’s Paul’s Coat Room Emporium.”

“Some girl just called me posh...”

“Ah, tally ho, Bertie, did they call you posh? Fancy that, darling.”

We talk posh for a while and I sit with him for a bit, swigging Coke from the can and eating the box of Roses that he invariably has in here—he only gives them out to pretty girls. They might even get a few if they have a tattoo.

*

An hour before closing time, I watch Cruella girl with the nose ring crawl to the bar and beg for water.

*

Thursday’s Indie night. It’s called Empire and run by a little chap called Kyle who is covered in tattoos, wears

The Reprobates

jeans with a chain, and has three piercings in each ear—a spirited sort of guy who it's impossible not to like. He's good for playing anything you want, and early on in the evening, I'm feeling a bit morose so go to him with a large large vodka and ask him to play three Smiths' songs in a row, starting with 'This Charming Man', 'How Soon is Now' in between, and finishing with 'Pretty Girls Make Graves'.

*

Meet Harrison. He's worked here as long as I have and is a bassist in a band on the brink of the big time—they've played here twice and have their name on the wall. He wears skinny jeans, derby shoes, a denim jacket, and a burgundy-coloured beanie hat. He also has a beard that makes it look like he lives in the wild when he's not here, which is more and more now his band is getting popular.

I'm walking past the toilets to my office at the end of Empire night when I hear him shout from the Gents'.

"What?"

He emerges holding a tower of plastic cups making a sound which is halfway between laughter and utter disgust, and with a screwed-up face.

"Have a look in there."

The Gents' walls are covered in shit—thick brown stains drip down the mirrors from stinking blobs of crap.

"What the fuck?"

Mike is at my shoulder.

All we can do is stare and wonder what sort of person paints the walls with excrement.

*

At the end of the night, Mike and I troll through the CCTV cameras for answers.

We watch a group of guys all wearing blue and yellow t-shirts that say LACROSSE SOCIETY come into the Gents'. Our viewpoint is from just above the entrance, looking at the cubicles. One of them is holding a pint and he goes into the right-hand cubicle and takes a piss without shutting the door. Another guy goes into the left-hand cubicle and does shut the door. The others go off camera to the urinals. After about ten seconds, the first guy finishes his piss and comes out to the sinks, stands in front of the mirror and downs his pint. Then he fills it up with water and goes over to the engaged cubicle and throws the water over the door. He turns and laughs. Soon, the other two get involved throwing water over the door. Then something dark comes flying over from within the cubicle and splats on the mirror. The door opens and the guy who has been doused in water has something in his hands raised to throw, a wild grin on his face. He throws it before disappearing back into his cubicle for more ammunition. Meanwhile, one of his mates runs into the other cubicle, takes down his jeans and sits down without shutting the door. After about ten seconds, he stands up, rolls out some toilet paper, and dips his hands into the pan.

The Reprobates

“Dirty fuckers!” says Mike.

In this manner, the situation unfolds, until they all wash their hands and exit.

*

Years mean nothing to me. It doesn't matter what month it is. Weeks pass like days. Hours no longer exist. They go far too quickly, sitting at home, alone, smoking and thinking about the people I used to know, too numb to think, too cold to feel, and before I know it, the day's over, like someone hidden in my wall has been pressing fast forward on my life. No wonder I don't get anything done on my days off. And then, when I'm back in that wretched building, walking around in the day when nobody else is around, shoes sticking to the floor, the place reeking of sweat left to fester, puke cleaned up but still lingering, the clinical whiff of every evil alcohol—time crawls. Maintenance. The beer order. Paperwork. Step outside for a smoke. Watch the cars go by. Back inside, to the jobs I don't have to think about but which have to be done.

Unlike Terry, Karen and Dom, my office is downstairs, deep in the basement, next to the cloakroom and the toilets and the fire escape. No windows to the outside world, no connection to anything. I could sit through a hurricane, through the rapture, holed up against nothing, staring at the pin board, the computer from 1998, the keyboard covered in fag ash. There's no phone signal down here. I'm unreachable. It is my domain.

Take my phone out of my pocket. Look at the screen. See a text a few hours old from a number I deleted weeks ago. At least, I deleted it from my address book weeks ago. If only I could delete it from my mind as easily.

I'll be coming round tomorrow to pick the rest of my stuff up. Please make sure you are not there. I'll put the key back through the letterbox. C

*

We're sitting downstairs after hours with a crate of beer and cigarettes spread over the round tables. The bouncers are grouped by the door, drinking their usual one before bedtime, swearing and re-enacting fights. I haven't cashed up yet and I'm already on my third beer and second large vodka. There are a few faces I don't recognise but that isn't unusual. Munks' after-hours lock-ins are infamous. I'm used to walking back out into the club to find a bunch of random people drinking my beer. Although, with the new owners, who knows how long this will be allowed to continue?

We're talking about Jackson's sexuality.

"So, are you gay too?" asks a girl I don't know.

"One third," says Jackson.

"One-third gay?"

He nods.

"Postman," says Bran. He is restless—glancing over at the bouncers. I've told him he's allowed to smoke a joint when they leave.