Treacle Town

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About the Author

Brian Conaghan's young adult and middle-grade novels have been published in a variety of languages. His 2014 book, *When Mr Dog Bites* was shortlisted for the Carnegie Medal, while *The Bombs That Brought Us Together* (2016) won the Costa Children's Book Award. *The Weight of a Thousand Feathers* (2018) won the An Post Irish Teen Book of the Year as well as the Children's Books Ireland honour award. To date, his middle-grade novels, *Cardboard Cowboys* and *Swimming on the Moon* (2021, 2023) have been nominated and shortlisted for a slew of awards.

Brian's work is primarily focussed on the lives and relationships of working-class teens, and those characters who live in the margins of society. *Treacle Town* continues in this vein, but is the first of his novels to be set in his hometown of Coatbridge; giving him first-hand knowledge and experience of the lives lived within the book.

Before becoming a full-time writer, Brian worked as an English, Theatre Studies and Classics secondary school teacher in Scotland, Italy and Ireland. After twenty-one years of work and travel, Brian currently lives back in his native Coatbridge.

Biscuit

It takes three people to hold up Biscuit's mum. Poor woman's bawling her pipes out; squealing like a banshee, so she is. Hits you deep in the pit. It's hard not to look, but every time I do, Biscuit's big sister Denise fires hate-hissing daggers my way. Rotten to the core that one, always said it. I glance at Wee Z, Trig and Nails cos they've been getting daggers too. My face is probably as ashen as theirs. Grey with guilt. Or just lost in the loss. Truth? I want to bawl like Biscuit's mum. No joke, feels as if my throat's gonna explode from my neck and splatter all over the altar. I do a silent scream, which I seem to have mastered over the years.

The sight and sound of this scene would shatter anyone's heart. That noise of death stokes memories. Nightmare stuff; loathe it, that noise.

Tell you one thing for nothing, there's two ways I'm turning on the waterworks in front of all these people: none and fuck all. Imagine the slagging afterwards?

'That's my boy in there,' Biscuit's mum keeps screaming. *That's my laddie in there.*

That's my laddie.

Until it fades into:

My laddie.

My.

Laddie.

Before ending with a murmur of: *My wee boy.*

Her howls echo right through the chapel; makes you fear for the stained glass.

Biscuit, my mate. Our mucker. One of the troops. In there. Lying in his crisp shirt and tie like some posh waiter. Not as much as a scratch on his chops. Zero hint of carnage. Peaceful. Adorable. A proverbial angel. He'd probably have preferred to be in his North Face trackie right enough. He loved that thing. Mint, so it was. Didn't tell him that though. Should've. Eighteenth birthday present. I got him a bottle of Mad Dog. *Mad Dog for a mad dog,* I told him.

We first saw the angel in him when we went round to his gaff for the prayers. Special invite from his mum. You had to squeeze sideways to get through to where he was; think the whole town was belting out the rosary that night. As soon as we made it to the living room, it was game over. Nobody told us the lid would be open, and him lying there as if it was siesta time. I just thought everyone would be sitting around sobbing, sipping tea and munching the odd triangle sandwich. Well, they were actually, but . . . the lid. Fuck me, some shock that was, I'm telling you. But, what

could we do? No option to bolt, same door in, same door out. So, like every other awkward person, we queued for our final gander.

I'm standing there, peering in at my pal, and Wee Z kept tugging at me; thought he was gonna rip my new Berghaus jacket to bits. Ordinarily you'd get a sore jaw just for the thought. Trig and Nails shuffled and sniffed behind.

I clutched the side of the coffin for dear life, it's practically holding me up, and I notice that all his freckles are gone. How? I placed four fingers on his forehead. Dead gentle like. All I wanted to do was bend down and give him a wee kiss on the cheek; whisper something like, *I'll miss you forever, ya zoomer*, but for some reason I couldn't do it; too scared in case I wouldn't be able to get off him again, pulled the whole thing to the floor, two of us rolling around on the rug. One last hurrah. I put the back of my hand against his cheek, and, in my head, said, *Sleep well, Biscuit. Love ye, son. Always have. Always will*. Then I slunk away to let the others have their go. Mrs McVitie was sunk on a chair. Zombie-esque. I was shittin' it. Didn't want to speak to her but there was no escape, you had to pass when waddling away from the coffin. It was an unofficial one-way system in his living room. Some woman was beside her, sitting on the arm, rubbing her shoulders. I didn't want to look at Mrs McVitie, or spout the usual shite people say. My face was matted with guilt. Legs felt like liquid. She must've known I was heart

sorry. She must've. How could she not? Beyond sorry, devastated. But nowhere near as bad as her. She looked up and grinned. Her eyes! Those waterfalls made me want to greet as well. I held it together. Then she asked me in a croaky voice: 'Would you do a bidding prayer at the mass, Connor, son?' How could I refuse when the bold Biscuit was lying in a box at the other end of the living room?

'Aye, no bother, Mrs McVitie,' I went. 'Be an honour.'

'Mark would've liked that,' she went, then gazed off into the distance again.

Apart from when school dragged us, I don't remember Biscuit ever traipsing along to mass. Although we did contemplate becoming nine-year-old altar boys, mainly so we could batter into the blood and body of Christ: cheap wine and communion wafers. Yum!

But if he'd have *liked* it, then I'd do it. I'd do a belter of a bidding prayer.

In bed that night I heard the soundbites in between people's sobs. Their voices didn't leave until sunlight shone through my curtains.

Aw, look at him. You'd think he was just sleepin'.

That's another angel got their wings.

He'll get to see his daddy now.

Wit a waste! Whole life in front of him.

God knows how they'll cope way this.

Images from our primary school days flashed up,

producing these mad projections inside my head. I saw him, as if he was standing at the foot of my bed, I saw him. Cheeky grin, wonky teeth, face smacked with freckles. I don't believe in angels and stuff like that, for me, Biscuit isn't getting any wings. Sorry to break it to you, but my boy's going deep into the ground and flying nowhere.

Denise put it on Facebook that the family didn't want anyone to wear black at the funeral. Or green. Or blue. *But jeans are OK*. And, *under no circumstances trackies, hoodies or C.P. Company goggle jackets.* Me and the troops wore white shirts. No ties. *Black trainers are fine, but best if they're white,* she'd written. I wore my Nike Air Max 95s. Or, as Trig calls them, one-tens, cos that's what they cost. We all wore our one-tens. Serious currency, trainers are these days.

I'm walking up the aisle and can sense the troops nudging each other; probably trying not to giggle. In any other circumstance they'd be careering over each other to put me off. This one's a game changer for everyone. My legs are vibrating under my trousers. It's seriously not funny. But even though there's a riot raging in my stomach, I'm desperate to do the job for Mrs McVitie and her clan.

When I step up to the lectern, everything seems to slow to half-speed. Hundreds of eyes glaring, waiting for the action to start. The sound of sniffs, heavy breaths and dry coughs attack as if they're all ganging up. Similar, but different, to when we're battling. Especially those Fleeto

cunts up in Airdrie, who'll, and mark my words, get theirs soon enough.

Mrs McVitie has to be steadied by Denise and another woman. I'm guessing an auntie. Mrs McVitie's decked top-to-toe in black. Obviously she's been spared in Denise's what-to-wear-at-a-funeral post. I spy my dad. Sitting, arms tightly folded; black Crombie coat snug against his muscles. Pure bouncer pose. Aye, well, you're not at work now, mate. His daggers are ten times worse than Denise's. As if all this was my fault. Like I was the one that plunged Biscuit. Nuts. I wasn't even there. Poor fucker got ambushed sauntering through the park. Alone. You'd need to be some special shite stain to jump someone on their own. I told them everything I saw, which was nothing and fuck all. Same as the troops, who are now bowing their heads, by the way. Being here is sore for us. We've lost our mate. One of our limbs. People don't get that. The venom in their eyes when they look at us. You should see it, man. I'm not stupid, I know they think we're a bunch of hopeless Neds with fuck all going for us. Aye, mibbe, but not me. I'm more than what's etched on their faces. Much more.

I adjust the wee mic and suck in some air.

'In thanking you for the life of Mark, we ask you, Lord, to accept the good things he has done. And that you may lead him, in your mercy, to eternal life.'

When the words exit my mouth, I can just hear Biscuit's reaction: *Wit are you on about, ya fanny?*

Blame the priest. It was him who gave me the bidding prayer.

If it was up to me, I'd have said something like: *Biscuit was one of my best mates; a diamond. He'd have done anything for anyone. Wasn't a bad bone in his body. All he wanted to do was have a laugh and become a joiner or a rapper. It's a tragedy that he won't get to do that now.*

I lean into the mic and increase my volume: 'Lord hear us.'

'Lord graciously hear us,' everyone goes in return. And that response thrusts a power right through me. That's what respect does. I wouldn't mind doing a few more of these bidding prayers. *Mark would've liked that.* Aye, you think?

I want to heave my chest out when stepping away from the lectern; kinda proud of myself. Mrs McVitie tightens her lips as if to say 'Thanks, son.' Denise is still launching daggers. Utter bin-lid. The look on Dad's face hasn't changed, his arms haven't shifted out of their fold either. I see the troops, a wee bit of me wants to run over and hug them, but, instead, I gently run my fingers over the length of Biscuit's jazzed-up coffin lid as I pass. That slams me back down to earth.

Some coffin, a belter, but honestly, tacky as fuck.

Shrine

'Fuckin' nick of all this,' Nails keeps muttering to herself as she wades through the stuff people have left at the scene. 'I mean, who leaves leftover party balloons?' She boots a deflating gold number eight. 'What're people all about?'

'Aye, some amount of guff here, man,' Wee Z goes.

'Check this,' I go. 'Some clown's left Communion candles.'

'And all these.' Nails crouches and straightens out a Celtic top. The hoops. Rubs her palm over the four-leaf clover badge. Some luck, eh. 'Bet some serious spons could be made here. A fortune.'

Wee Z, now holding a long thin Communion candle, stops in his tracks. 'Nails, you actually thinking of raiding Biscuit's shrine?' He points the candle at her. 'You'd punt these old Celtic jerseys?'

Nails stands, grabs hold of her ponytail and whips it behind her neck. Screws up her eyes. 'Did I say I wanted to blag stuff and sell it on?' she snarls, not interested in waiting on an answer. Screwed-up eyes and snarls aren't a good sign;

seen it since we were weans, right before Nails's about to go yeeha on somebody. And, let me tell you, that girl goes full tonto and then some.

'Did I say that?' she goes, punching out the aggression.

'No, but—' Wee Z tries to explain.

'No but nothing.' Nails tramples over a few bunches of dead flowers, some manky Celtic scarves and heads for Wee Z. 'Accuse me of anything like that again and I'll knock your fuckin' pan in. Got it?'

And she would've, no bother; she's almost a head bigger. Wee Z practically shrinks in his own terror. Can't blame him. Nails started doing taekwondo when she was six or something, and it only took her eight years to become a black belt. Says she wants to go to the Olympics one day. I think she'd win gold at a canter. We all rocked up to the Time Capsule to see her last competition and, no joke, she scudded everyone she was up against. Like within minutes. Every time we went to her gaff Biscuit would tie her black belt around his trackie and start throwing shapes. That boy was some laugh when he wanted to be. No one would even dream about calling her a lezzie now. Unless you were after some free dental extractions, that is. Means nothing to me who she's into, I couldn't give a flying fuck. Trig and Wee Z took a bit of time to get their domes around it though. But now, honestly, no cunt cares, it's not even a thing.

'Aye, OK, Nails, keep yer blouse on,' Wee Z goes.

'You two rap it and stop nipping at each other.' They look at me. 'Remember where we are.' I do my best teacher bit and gesture to the shrine.

'Aye,' Nails goes. 'I know.'

'Right,' Wee Z goes and puts the candle back.

We spend the next few minutes sifting and having a proper gander; lifting and replacing things again. Lots of raised eyebrows and shaking heads at all the daft crap that's been left. A bit of me feels guilty for not bringing something. I was half-thinking of printing one of our Insta pictures, but I couldn't find one without someone either holding a bottle of Buckie, making a gang sign or sticking their middle finger up. It wouldn't have hit the right note.

Now, I've seen loads of shrines online and a couple in real life, but I've never seen anything like Biscuit's. The pure and utter shite that people brought, man:

- Plastic daffodils
- Roses
- White flowers we don't know the name of
- Blue ones, same as the white ones, no clue
- 23 Celtic scarves
- 14 assorted Celtic tops
- 1 Scotland top. Why? We supported Celtic *not* Scotland

- A picture of Tupac and Biggie
- 2 empty bottles of Mad Dog. (Aye, cos Biscuit loved nothing more than a tanned bottle of MD)
- 1 empty bottle of Buckie. (Same as the MD)
- 2 half-bottles of Buckie. (One still full; think Wee Z has his eye on it)
- A picture of Denise and Biscuit when they were wee
- A picture of Mrs McVitie with Biscuit on her knee when he was a wean
- 4 Communion candles
- 6 balloons (3 number 1s and 3 number 8s)
- An Eminem CD
- A picture of Biscuit in his full Celtic away strip when he was about 5
- 1 Rangers top (better not be some Airdrie fanny taking liberties)
- 5 teddy bears
- 1 empty packet of Marlboro Gold (Biscuit didn't smoke, not fags anyway)

All chat and banter stop. We concentrate on reading the messages and being in our own thoughts. At least I do anyway. Wee Z's probably struggling. He was in dummy English at school, whenever he went. There's a deathly silence as we plough through the words. I've zoned out of

everything else; all I hear is balloons bashing into each other and cars coughing in the distance.

Fly high, ma boy

You'll never walk alone

Out of sight but never out of mind

Thinking and praying for yeez all

Please Lord, bless their broken hearts

RIP wee man

I hear imaginary wails from his family and all of his mates. Us, basically. Even the bams who did this are greetin' their eyes out. And we all know who that was. Everyone does. But around here knowing who's done it isn't essential; you don't grass. Simple as. You just don't. I've even thought about making a secret call to the polis myself; yap about everything I know. But honestly, if it ever got out that I'd grassed, life wouldn't be worth living, and I'm not ready to press that self-destruct button yet. No danger. Even my dad would go off his tits. No, much safer to be a stabber than a grasser in these parts. Just leaves you feeling angry and hopeless. Some world, man.

Reading all those *love ye*, *miss ye*, *too soon*, *another angel*, *blue-eyed boy* begins to batter at your insides. You feel yourself welling up, your body tensing. Your fists clench until the veins on your hands pop, until they're ready to crack something. Jaws. Cheeks. Eyes. Anything. You don't know what to do with your rage. You want to do something with these fists. You want to scream into the clouds. You want to phone the polis. You want to talk. You want to shake some sense into this community. You want peace. You want to fuckin' crown some cunt. You want to cry or run. You want to lock yourself in your room and not come out for fifty-nine years. You just want away from here.

I turn my back on Nails and Wee Z, hunker down and pretend to read more of the messages. I thrust and twist my knuckles into the grass, which helps me breathe properly again. My eyes refocus.

I wonder what they'll do with all this crap after everything becomes a *something bad happened here* memory, and poor Biscuit gets shrunk to *that wee guy who got murdered in the park, remember?* Council will have to bin it. Mibbe Biscuit's mum will keep some of it. I don't want a thing. Not a sniff.

'Awright, troops.' Trig's voice booms from the distance. He's marching towards us with his arms stretched out wide as if he's Jesus on the cross. More like Jesus in a grey Kenzo trackie and Burberry hat, which is perched on the top of his

dome instead of a crown of thorns. He's grinning from ear to ear. Some bounce he's got in his step, you'd think he was off to a stag do. As he gets closer I see that his eyes are like a pair of Swarovskis; don't tell me he's been on the swally already. 'WestEnd Young Team in the area,' he goes in a stupid Manchester accent.

'Awright, ma man,' Wee Z shoots back at him.

Nails fires me a glance. 'What's he all about?'

'Mibbe he's steamin',' I mutter to Nails, not wanting to believe that he's been swallying at this time of the day. But it's Trig we're talking about here, so I wouldn't put it past him.

'He better not have been,' Nails goes. She hates steamers, nothing to do with her fitness or the fact that she's practically training for the Olympics, she just can't stand how it turns people into complete and utter tools. But, in my opinion, it's cos her dad's always rattled every time you see him. The king of the tools.

'Awright, Trig,' I go.

'Awright, Con, ma man,' he goes.

'Magic, innit?' Wee Z points to the football tops. 'Should see the amount of swag here, Trig.'

Among the lads Trig is by far the biggest Celtic fan. Or IRA head. For him, winning and losing is the difference between a night of shitehousery or shindig. Wee Z pretends to be a football fan, but you could scribble on the back of a

stamp what he knows about it. He hides it, but he loves cricket. No joke. He told us that his dad was a bit of a player back in the day. And when you go into his house, which is rare cos we never get invited, there's loads of cricket trophies everywhere. Four bedrooms and three bogs, too. Pure posh fuckers. Dad runs a cash 'n' carry somewhere in the Southside of Glasgow. Nobody's seen Wee Z playing cricket, right enough. Bore the nugget right off you, so it would.

Trig gawps at the shrine, nodding his head in agreement. He's in awe. He'd definitely want something similar. No danger.

'Fuckin' magic, man,' Trig goes. 'Tellin' ye, some popularity on the Biscuit boy.'

'Fact,' Wee Z agrees.

'Me and our Sean were down for a swatch yesterday.' Trig then gently toes one of the teddy bears in the face. 'Our Sean says you could probably make some serious wedge off those old Celtic tops.'

I look at Wee Z and give him a *don't even go there* nod. Once again Nails does her eyes thing and straightens up her shoulders. She's about to say something, but I get in there first:

'He'd have liked it,' I go. 'All the stuff and the mentions.'

'Fuckin' right he would've,' Trig goes. 'He'd have been buzzin' aff this.'

'And then some,' Wee Z goes.

'Shows you people cared, you know,' I go. 'Mean, look at some of those mentions.' I turn and start to reread another.

> You wur taken too early bro, but yool always be in our hearts and minds

'Better believe it they care,' Nails goes.

Trig boots another bear in the face, harder this time. It flies in the air and lands on a bunch of blue flowers.

'Aye, but some cunts don't care,' Trig spits out.

'That's not true, Trig,' Wee Z goes. 'Look at all this.' He swings an arm the length of the shrine and back again.

'Am no talking about that, ya rocket,' Trig snarls at him. He then whips out his phone. 'Come here and see this.' He gestures and we all huddle around. 'Look.' He starts scrolling through some Reddit comment pages. 'Check all this out.'

We read:

> *Biscuit wiz a wee dick*
>
> *Geez got wit wiz comin to him*
>
> *Good riddance to the wee shitebag*
>
> *Live like a ned die like a ned*
>
> *This wiznae yer wrong time wrong place stabbin*
>
> *BOOM! Another headache aff oor streets*

‘Fuck sake, man,’ Nails goes.

‘A bit harsh,’ Wee Z adds.

I say nothing.

We can’t be everyone’s mucker. But still. I agree with the others, it’s harsh as fuck, especially given that it’s still raw. He was eighteen, man. Still a wean. People are vindictive pricks hiding behind a phone.

‘And check this wan out,’ Trig goes. ‘Found this on TikTok.’

As soon as the video kicks in I recognise them right off the bat. Six pricks bouncing around to some DJ Rankin tune. And get this, Biscuit’s face pops up all over the screen as if he’s dancing along as well. Worst bit is when they start to reenacting what happened that night in the park. No, this is a full-on roast. A total liberty.

‘Thing is,’ Trig goes, ‘they cunts think they’re getting away with it.’ He sniffs hard. ‘Ain’t happening as long as I’ve got anything to do with it.’

‘Wankers,’ Nails says. ‘Nick of them. I’d knock fuck out of every one of them. In a heartbeat.’

‘Can’t even dance,’ Wee Z goes.

‘This is a message,’ I go.

‘No shit this is a message,’ Nails adds.

‘Aye, well,’ Trig goes, turning off TikTok and firing up his Instagram. ‘If you think *that* was a message, have a gander at this.’

Three snaps of the same gang are standing beside Biscuit's shrine, grinning their heads off. Buckie bottles held up like trophies. One and two finger salutes. The works. They're all wearing some kinda Rangers gear: scarves, hats, jackets. Then, worst of all, there's a snap of one of them pishin' on a Celtic top. No joke, man. Lowest of the low. Below shite. Must've been yesterday or the day before. Pics were posted this morning. I wipe my nose.

'I feel a severe bout of revenge coming on,' Nails goes.

'What should we do, Trig?' Wee Z asks. You can hear the fear spinning around his tonsils. Wee Z's many things but fighter isn't one of them; you'd worry taking him into battle with you.

'Well, wait till you see this, troops,' Trig goes, 'and then we can have a blether about what we're gonna do about it.'

He swipes onto some video. It's their top boy pacing about. Burberry Covid mask tight around his chops. Black Adidas down jacket zipped up to the neck. Hood up. Rangers hat peeking out. Nothing happens for a bit; fanny just seems to be walking about in circles. A bull waiting for his red rag. A caption comes up: *YOBBOY*.

'Keep watching,' Trig tells us. We're all glued. A techno beat kicks in and this YOBBOY starts riffing.

> Yo! Yo! Yo!
>
> Shout out to aw ma troops fae the Winhill Fleeto.

Young WF! Young WF!
Yo! Yo! Yo!
Doin' this puts me in deep danger,
but A thought A'd risk it.
See, up here, we're no greetin' fur yer wee boy Biscuit.
Tell me. How much you missin' it?

Yo! Yo! Yo!

Troops up here will make some clamour,
tell the world how
we saw yer boy sprint then stagger.
You lot can mourn his death.
But never forget this: it wiz the Young WF
who took his last breath.

Yo! Yo! Yo!

In the papers they wrote
aboot his wee angel face.
But that big gub wiz his real disgrace.
So ye can thank the Young Winhill Fleeto
for putting him in his place.

Yo! Yo! Yo!

Aye, mibbe it's a shame
cos yer wee soldier
will nivir git older.
Don't dispair
ye can all pop up tae oor place
an hiv a wee cry on ma shoulder.

Yo! Yo! Yo!

If you think you stand a chance
well, come see the YWF
and we'll have a dance.
Or, if ye prefer
we'll come down
and dance there.

We don't say anything. Lots of huffing and blowing cheeks. Trig starts swearing. Followed by Nails. Wee Z gets involved. There's anger in the air. We watch it again and again.

'That's the worst diss I've ever seen,' Nails goes, breathing like a knackered horse.

'Mibbe we just turn it over to the polis,' Wee Z goes. 'Mean, that's all the evidence they need right there.'

We all glare at him at the same time. Sometimes you wonder if he leaves home and forgets to bring his brain.

‘Shut it, ya spanner,’ Trig tells him.

‘Yobboy isn’t serious,’ I go. ‘It’s just bravado. Him being Billy Big Bawz.’

‘Totally,’ Wee Z adds.

‘And horrendous rap into the bargain,’ I go.

‘Aye, well, that’s true,’ Nails goes. ‘The guy’s half-illiterate.’

‘Half what?’ Wee Z asks.

‘Never mind,’ I go.

‘Half a fuckin’ brain cell is wit the cunt is,’ Trig spits. ‘We need to do a reply, our own diss.’

‘That’s it,’ Wee Z goes. ‘Belter.’

‘We can’t just sit on our arses,’ Trig adds. ‘And pretend we haven’t seen it.’

‘Course they’ll know we’ve seen it,’ I go.

‘Well, I’m no rapping,’ Nails goes. ‘No danger.’

‘Me neither. I can’t,’ Wee Z goes.

‘It’s a doddle,’ Trig looks at me. ‘Con’ll do it.’

The three of them stare at me and nod their heads, as if it’s a done deal already.

‘What?’ I go. Their eyes widen with some kinda excitement. ‘Are you lot off your nut? Fuckin’ no chance I’m doing a diss rap.’

‘But you were in the top set in English, Con,’ Trig goes. ‘Mrs Burns always said you could have gone to uni.’

Trig, as per, doesn’t know his arse from his elbow; bumbling idiot is getting me mixed up with Biscuit. *He* was

the one Mrs Burns harped on about going to uni, not me. I wish!

'And yer magic at making up rhymes when yer trying to be Eminem,' Wee Z goes.

You know, your words are quite dazzling at times, Mark. Mrs Burns actually said that, I remember it well. Biscuit looked at her as if she'd just called him a wasteful wanker. Her compliment gave him the biggest red neck.

'Stormzy, too,' Trig adds. 'Fuckin' dynamite, mate.'

'Good point,' Nails goes. 'And you read books.'

'What did Mrs Burns know anyway?' I groan at them.

She was spot on, Biscuit's words were dazzling, whenever we scribbled together, his outshone mine by a mile.

'Do the diss,' Trig goes, calmly. 'Then we'll stamp their heads like a fuckin' Irn-Bru can.'

I kick the grass, stare at my one-tens and shake my head. 'No way, man. Not happening. You'd need to be mental to respond to that. Yobboy's nothing. He's just full of his own fuckin' pish. And as for that YWF mob—'

'We have to respond,' Trig's voice is louder. 'We can't let these Hun nuggets just get away with what they've done, Con. We've got to do something.'

'Why?' I belt back at him. 'Why do we have to do something?'

'You want them laughing at us, Con?' Nails goes. 'You

want them thinking we're shitebag clowns?' I stare at Nails, craving her support.

'And what are you wanting to do, Nails?' I hear the anger in my voice. 'For us all to march right up to there and do battle?'

'Fuck, aye,' Trig goes. 'That's exactly what I want to do, Con.'

'It's not as if we're asking you to get tooled-up or anything. Or for you to take penalties into someone's napper,' Nails goes. 'All we're saying is that you should do a diss reply, that's it.'

'Write a proper banger, Con, man,' Trig adds. 'Something that they'll have no comeback for.'

'Come on, do it for Biscuit, Con,' Wee Z goes.

'Aye, good one Z,' I go, glaring at him. I've a feeling that won't be the last time I hear the *Do it for Biscuit* phrase.

They're all standing, waiting for me to do or say something. Mean, talk about peer pressure. Six eyes burning holes in my body. Worse than Denise. I'm not their leader. Even so, in this moment my mind revs itself up and goes into overdrive: words, phrases and beats begin to form themselves into something semi-concrete. I'm hearing Post Malone's tonsils in my dome; Biscuit was well into him. And suddenly all I'm thinking about is the best diss in the history of diss.

'Right,' I puff, 'I'll see if I can knock something out.'

‘Fuckin’ top man, Con,’ Trig goes.

The three of them salute each other. I can’t help thinking that they’ve planned this.

I jangle dosh in my trackie bottoms and remember what it’s for. Trig saunters over and slaps my shoulders. Sore. Nails does a swirling taekwondo kick that misses my face by inches, that’s one of her things. Wee Z shifts his feet and hands as if he’s back at one of our unders discos. Trancin’ the nut off himself.

‘I’m gonna post a message,’ Trig goes, ‘and tell that YWF mob to come down here anytime.’

‘Don’t do that,’ I go.

‘Don’t worry, bud,’ he goes on, ‘they’re fuckin’ getting it, just a matter of time.’

I grip the coins in my pocket and squeeze as hard as I can, pressing so firm that my thigh actually hurts. Wouldn’t be surprised if there is a bruise later.

‘Right,’ I go. ‘I better boost.’

‘Now?’ Nails goes.

‘Got to get my dad a batch of chicken for his lunch.’

‘Is that all he eats?’ Wee Z asks. Normal question cos quite possibly chicken is the only thing Wee Z’s ever seen him eat. Well, that and broccoli.

‘Only when he’s in competition,’ I go.

‘When’s the comp?’ Trig asks.

‘Dunno,’ I go. ‘Few weeks or something.’

‘You going, Con?’ Nails asks.

‘Aye, watch me.’

‘We should all go,’ Trig suggests. The others nod. ‘It’ll be good craic.’

I can just see Trig watching greased-up muscle men pulling shapes in their pants, he’d belt out something vile and get his cunt kicked in. And probably ours too. You’d only take him to a competition if you had a death wish.

‘You lot go if you want,’ I say. ‘I’ve fuck all interest in it.’

Before bolting I take a final look at Biscuit’s shrine. Wish the bulldozers would come and obliterate it today. That and this whole fuckin’ town.

When I’m about a hundred yards away, Trig shouts: ‘Don’t forget the rhymes, Con.’ I raise my arm and flick them the viccies.

I don’t turn around.