The Killers Guide to Iceland

Zane Radcliffe

Chapter one

In a matter of seconds Glasgow was wiped off the face of the earth.

Callum Pope felt little emotion as he watched his city evaporate, as he saw his family, his friends, his history become consumed by a dense and voluminous cloud.

Glasgoing-going-gone.

The 757 continued its ascent, elbowing its way through the vapour that cocooned it. Grey candyfloss, thought Callum. Sky soup. He was lost in the gloomy cumulus, his forehead pressing hard against the fat window by 7A. The thrumming glass was the only thing preventing him from being sucked into oblivion like meat through a straw.

The cloud got thicker and darker, dropping a black shutter over the window, but Callum remained glued to the view, a punter at a peepshow waiting for the reveal. And when it came, the show was dazzling. The plane levelled out over a stratospheric snowscape illuminated by interminable purples and unblinking pinks. It was a scene that might have fooled him into thinking he had already arrived in Iceland, the country where he had chosen, on a whim it seemed, to spend the rest of his life.

He was bursting for a piss. A backlit icon above his head reminded him that he was not yet allowed to unfasten his seat belt. He considered his options. Pee in the sick bag? Its paper was wax-coated but he wasn't sure if this rendered it waterproof. Remove a shoe? Grab the handbag belonging to the woman next to him? She had been rifling through it prior to take-off in search of a boiled sweet for her ears. Callum had noticed that she was carrying a pregnancy-test kit. If he peed in her bag would it confirm, beyond all doubt, that he was about to become a father?

This wasn't supposed to happen.

Whenever Callum had thought about becoming a dad he had always pictured himself - like his father before him and his father before that - dragging his frazzled reflection across a polished hospital floor, an uncut cigar in his breast pocket pulsing expectantly with every heartbeat as he incanted the mantra: please God let it be healthy. He had never imagined it would be like this.

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Sure, he had butterflies. He had dragonflies, if he was honest. His heart had lodged in his throat. And yes, he had a cigar. Difference being that Callum's cigar was 150ft long with wings and a tailfin and it was propelling him at improbable speed towards a new home with a new woman and a new life as a father to her eleven-year-old daughter.

This wasn't supposed to happen, repeated Björk.

Callum removed his earphones and killed the music on his new iPod. His staff had presented him with it at his leaving lunch earlier that afternoon. In the end only four people worked for him at Strawdonkey. He appreciated the fact that they'd all dug deep.

'Neil, Morag, Becca and myself had a whip-round,' said Young Kenny, handing Callum a small box wrapped in Eeyore paper. 'It's just a wee token to say thanks for six unbefuckinlievable years at The Donkey.'

'Jeez, Kenny,' said Morag. 'Thank Christ you're good wi' IT, cuz you're S-H-I-T wi' speeches.'

Trattoria Porchetta was packed. It was all-you-could-eat for £4.95 and the queue was two-thick onto Argyle Street. Tables were butted up to each other from the front door to the WC and diners sat tightly together doing their best to keep their elbows out of each other's linguini. Callum could have chosen any restaurant in Glasgow as the venue for his leaving do, but the Strawdonkey posse had become part of the furniture at 'Porky's', regulars on the last Friday of every month, and Callum saw no reason to make an exception for this, his last Friday ever.

All eyes were on him as he carefully unpicked the tape from his tightly wrapped gift.

'Hurry up, wull ye,' guldered a well-sozzled Morag. 'There's drink tae be drunk.'

Callum slid his present out of its wrapping. 'An iPod,' he said, stating the bloody obvious. He was good at that. He removed the gadget from its box.

'Two thousand songs in your pocket,' explained Young Kenny. 'Six and a half ounces of audio wizardry with super-fast FireWire auto updating. If you scroll down the menu bar, you'll see I've already started your iTunes library.'

'You shouldn't have.' Callum toyed with the buttons. Two dozen songs had already been uploaded into the smooth white brick the size of a chocolate bar and every damn one of them was Bjšrk or Sugarcubes.

'I thought it was apt,' said Kenny.

'Really, you shouldn't have.'

'Speech!' cried Becca, clanging a knife against the rim of her wine glass.

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'Where do I begin,' said Callum. Where do I begin, he thought. He cursed himself for not having prepared something. 'I, em . . . that is . . . Young Kenny is right. These last six years have been unbebloodylievable.'

'Unbefuckinlievable!' corrected Morag.

'That too,' said Callum. 'But I . . . I don't feel it is me who should be making this speech. Sarah was much better at this sort of thing. I guess none of us would be sat round this table if it weren't for her.'

Neil bowed his head.

Morag reached for her napkin.

Callum fought with his throat. He could feel them looking at him in that way again, the way they always did whenever he mentioned Sarah's name. It was a look that managed to be both deferential and accusatory at the same time. Callum tried hard not to let it get to him.

'Back in '96, when I had the idea for strawdonkey.com, I didn't know the first thing about the Internet or setting up an e-business,' he said. 'Christ, I still can't program my video recorder.'

A murmur of laughter.

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