



WARNING

CONTAINS SEX, DRUGS
AND ROCK'N'ROLL

**THE
OSSIAN'S**
DOUG JOHNSTONE

*A gripping, compelling road
trip around modern Scotland in the company
of a drug-ravaged, untamed visionary* NIALL GRIFFITHS

*A powerful and moving commentary on the
country and its defining myths* IAN RANKIN



The Ossians
by
Doug Johnstone

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I

Edinburgh

*'I know that we've been drinking
But I've had a great idea
Let's drown this land tomorrow
Let's wash it all away'*

The Ossians, 'St Andrew's Day'

'Connor, I don't know why I let you drag me to the stupidest places.'

Connor watched Kate peer over the edge of the stonework, pulling her heavy coat tight against the biting wind. A tousel of black hair whipped across her sharp, pale face, a couple of strands catching in her mouth which she pulled at, briefly irritated. She looked tall despite leaning into the wind, her slim frame lost in the dark folds of her coat.

Behind her, the regimented north of the city sloped down towards the water where oil tankers made their way serenely up and down the firth. A small shaft of light pierced the claustrophobic cover of cloud, reaching down to Fife, like something from a biblical epic. Strange, thought Connor, surely God has better things to do with his time than make Fife look good.

Two hundred feet below, buses chugged down Princes Street, the strain of their engines merging with bagpipe wails, rackety drills and dull, throbbing hammer sounds. The pavement was a crush of shoppers.

Connor examined the graffiti on the crumbling black gargoyle next to him. Japanese, Icelandic, Italian, Spanish – it seemed like every nationality except his own had climbed the monument to leave a mark.

He looked down. Workmen bustled about in the gardens below,

raising tents, assembling metal frames and spreading flooring, preparing the city's Christmas fairground for its onslaught of spangle and glitz. It wasn't even December, yet Edinburgh had festive fever.

'Because you're my sister and you love me,' he said, waving his half-full bottle of gin and tonic airily. He took another swig.

'Yeah, right,' said Kate, brushing more hair away from her face. 'Explain this one to me again?' She swept her hand around the view. Spots of rain began to fall.

'Don't go into a huff. I just thought I'd create a vibe or something. Bring a bit of momentousness into our lives. What with the record release, the launch party, the tour and everything.' He paused to take another hit from the bottle. 'Is "momentousness" a word?'

'How drunk are you?' said Kate. 'We're not on until ten tonight.'

'Just soak up the view,' said Connor, ignoring her question. He started to walk round the cramped third tier of the monument and Kate followed grudgingly.

Southwest lay the castle on its hunk of volcanic rock, then the distant solitude of the Pentland Hills. As they turned east, the big plug of Arthur's Seat then the fake Greek columns of Calton Hill came into view. A plane glinted briefly as it banked high above, heading west.

He looked at the leaflet he'd been handed.

'Guess how many steps we just came up.'

Kate frowned. 'I don't know. Too many.'

'Two hundred and eighty-seven to be precise. Says here it's the largest monument to a writer in the world. And the architect drowned in a canal before it was finished. Think he was steaming?'

'Not everyone drinks like you.'

Connor looked at the giant Ferris wheel erected twenty feet away for Christmas revellers.

'Look at this thing,' he said, waving his bottle at the wheel. 'What a fucking joke.'

'What's the matter with it?' said Kate. 'It's just a big wheel. A bit of fun, you know?'

'This monument is higher, has better views and is a hundred and

fifty years old, plus you get a bit of exercise climbing it. That's just a piece of modern, flashy tat.'

'So what?' said Kate. 'And since when did you give a shit about getting any exercise?'

Connor was silent. He felt another headache creeping up on him and gulped down two large mouthfuls. Not enough gin in the mix.

'Modern life is rubbish,' he said, smiling.

'Great,' said Kate, sweeping his chaotic fringe away from his face to expose tired green eyes and a pallid, taut frown. 'Now you're quoting Blur. You must be drunk.'

The familiar malty smell of the breweries swirled around them. Down below, Edinburgh had an air of anticipation as the city prepared for the festive season. Connor saw the shaft of light over Fife disappear, plunging the north into gloom.

'Come on,' he said, heading for the stairs. 'There's something else I want to show you.'

They emerged minutes later from the dark, dizzying spiral of the Scott Monument's stairway, blinking in the fading light, Connor two steps ahead. He turned left, pointing with the bottle.

'This way.'

'Where are we going?' Kate sighed.

'You'll see.'

When he acted the fizzy little kid with innocent, puppy-dog eyes, it somehow forced her into the grumpy, funless older-sister role. She never felt dour or dowdy with anyone else, just him. Although only half an hour separated their entries into the world she'd always thought of Connor as years younger, and often wished he would grow up. She sometimes wished she hadn't grown up quite so much.

They walked through the German Christmas market, a collection of stalls selling overpriced crap, Connor goading the stall owners and waving his bottle recklessly about.

Kate wondered whether things would've been different if Connor had been first out the womb. But that wasn't his style. Let his big sister go first, let her take all the responsibility, let her get all the pressure, and then he could play the runt-of-the-litter role. Did that

nasty big sister starve you of oxygen in the womb, did she? Aw, diddums.

Connor stopped at a stall selling dreamcatchers and other new-age junk and began hassling the owner.

‘Can we just go where we’re going, then meet the others?’ said Kate. ‘I need a drink.’

Connor offered up his gin and tonic, now barely a fifth full.

‘A proper drink, in a pub.’

‘I get the message,’ said Connor, heading for the exit. ‘We’re about to visit an invaluable part of our country’s heritage, something with particular relevance to today. And’ – he made a shushing motion with finger to lips and his voice dropped to a whisper – ‘no fucker knows anything about it.’

Kate shook her head as the rain thickened, then followed her brother down the darkening street.

Connor pushed open the heavy oak doors and tiptoed in, cartoon style. They were inside St Mary’s Cathedral at the top of Leith Walk. The distant grumble of traffic was the only sound apart from their clacking footsteps across the cold marble floor.

The church was dark except for strips of weak daylight from the high windows. Two prim-looking girls were lighting candles and praying at a small shrine near the main altar. The high, vaulted roof made every sound resonate, and the girls looked round at the sound of Kate’s and Connor’s footsteps before turning back to their prayers.

Connor led Kate past the confessional booths to an empty bench beside another small shrine. As they sat down, a grey-haired, middle-aged man in jeans and a jumper came out a side room carrying a stepladder and cloth. He set the ladder in front of the first booth, climbed up and began dusting the top.

Connor and Kate watched him for a moment then turned back to the shrine. In the alcove was a small altar. An arrangement of thistles in a vase stood on the altar beside a modest wooden statue of a man carrying a cross. Below that, set into the marble, were

two spotlit glass display cases. In the middle of each was a small object like a pebble, flanked by two six-inch golden angels.

‘Know what we’re looking at?’ Connor said in a hushed voice.

‘You know I don’t. Let me guess – the Holy Grail? Two rocks?’

‘These are the actual remains of St Andrew. Or at least some of them. A bit of shoulder, I think, and something else. Maybe a toe.’

‘Really? Just sitting here?’ Kate was irritated she hadn’t hidden her surprise. She looked around the cathedral. ‘Shouldn’t there be security or something? Or tourists, for that matter?’

‘That’s the thing,’ said Connor, animated. ‘Typical of Scotland, isn’t it? Our patron saint’s relics, on our patron saint’s day, in the capital city of the country, and there’s no fucker here. No one even knows about it. There’s hardly any song and dance today, just a half-arsed celebration at best. OK, we’re not all Catholics, but still. Look at what Guinness did for St Patrick’s Day. That bogtrotting alkies’ piss-up is known all over the world, and St Patrick was just a fifth-century ex-Roman with a thing for snakes. St Andrew was one of Jesus’ best mates. And what are we known for? Sean Connery and Billy Connolly. Tartan and golf. Whoopee.’

‘Bogtrotting alkies,’ said Kate, smiling. ‘What does that make us? Heather-munching, haggis-chasing smackheads?’

‘Maybe.’ Connor picked up a leaflet from a pile next to them and examined it. He let out a laugh, making the praying girls raise their heads and frown.

‘Sorry,’ he stage-whispered. He looked at Kate and prodded the leaflet. ‘It says here that St Andrew is the patron saint of singers and sore throats. How cool is that? My very own patron saint. What else’ – he ran his finger down the leaflet, reciting in a singsong voice – ‘the patron saint of Russia, fishmongers, spinsters and gout. A strange bunch, eh? Here’s another one – the patron saint of women who want to get pregnant.’

‘How about the patron saint of irritating arsehole brothers? Is he that?’

‘Now, now.’ Connor folded the leaflet into his pocket and put

his hand on her arm. 'That's no way to talk to one of the rising stars of the country's thriving indie rock scene, is it?'

Kate playfully punched her brother on the arm. 'I wish you'd never seen that review. Shows what journalists know.'

'Hey, don't forget you're the sultry, Amazonian bassist, cooler than an iceberg and hotter than hell, if I remember rightly.'

'Exactly my point.'

The man had finished cleaning the booths and was folding down the ladder.

'I see you're examining the relics,' he said in a soft Edinburgh accent. 'And what do you make of them?'

'Are they really bits of St Andrew?' said Kate.

'We believe so.'

'We, as in . . . ?' said Connor.

'As in the Catholic Church,' said the man. 'I'm the priest here, Father William.'

'I'm Connor and this is my lovely sister, Kate. Care for a drink, Father?' Connor offered the bottle to the priest, who shook his head.

'And what brings you to see these old bones?' he asked.

'Him,' said Kate, pointing at Connor.

'I thought it would be good to see them,' said Connor. 'Today and everything. I thought there would have been more interest on St Andrew's Day.'

'I suppose,' said the priest, 'but we're happy enough to look after them whatever their wider appeal.'

'So you consider them a Catholic treasure rather than a national treasure, do you?' Connor took a last swig from his bottle and wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve. Father William eyed him thoughtfully.

'Both, son,' he said slowly. 'I take it you're not of the faith?'

'No, but I am of the nation.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' said Kate.

'Fuck knows.' Connor turned to the priest. 'Sorry. No offence.'

'None taken,' said Father William. 'I think I'll leave you to it. No rest for the wicked and all that.' He gave Connor a measured look.

‘I hope you find what you’re looking for,’ he said, picking up the stepladder and heading off.

‘Almost a U2 quote,’ said Kate. ‘Scary. What next, someone quoting Abba at us? The winner takes it all?’

‘There’s nothing wrong with Abba, Kate.’

Connor put on a comedy pout for her benefit. Kate looked at him closely for a second.

‘Connor, why do you always assume that you’re right and everybody else is wrong?’

‘Because I’m an egocentric, introspective, self-absorbed, narrow-minded bigot?’ he said cheerfully, getting up sharply and heading down the aisle. ‘At least, that’s what my therapist says.’

‘You don’t have a therapist,’ said Kate, turning away from the bones. ‘You could do with one, though.’

‘Pub!’ shouted Connor, making the praying girls jump. ‘Sorry!’ he cried, then opened the doors and was outside.

When Kate caught up he was standing on the church steps, looking at the building’s Gothic façade. The roar of traffic on the Greenside roundabout filled their ears. The last rays of weak sunlight had disappeared and the cars had their headlights and wind-screen wipers on.

Kate turned to follow Connor’s gaze. Hanging from the front of the cathedral was a large banner with the words:

ACT JUSTLY

LOVE TENDERLY

WALK HUMBLLY.

‘Good advice,’ shouted Connor over the noise. ‘I’ll need to nick it for a song.’ He got the leaflet and a pen out his pocket and scribbled for a moment.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘It’s quite definitely time for a drink. Let’s meet the others.’

★

The Barony was dead. Two Australian girls in matching black polo necks, bar aprons and neat ponytails stood at the end of the bar, arranging cutlery into paper napkins. The coal fire at the back was nearly out, and the scatter of wooden tables around the L-shaped room contained some studiously casual twentysomething and thirtysomething slackers, too old to be young, too young to be old.

Hannah was walking to the bar as Connor and Kate came in, her small frame revealed in a tight T-shirt, suede skirt and boots, her bobbed red hair pulled away from her face on one side by a kirby grip. She was two years older than them, but her petite body and sweetly relaxed features made her look a good deal younger.

‘Hiya, babe,’ said Connor, kissing her on the cheek. ‘You getting them in?’

‘Looks like it. What you after?’

‘Gin and tonic? Stretch to a double?’

‘Suppose so.’ Hannah turned to Kate. ‘The usual?’

Kate nodded.

‘Danny’s round the corner,’ said Hannah, and Connor sauntered off. ‘What have you been up to?’ she asked Kate.

‘Don’t ask. He’s in one of those moods. Plus he’s half-cut already.’

Hannah pressed her lips into a line and paid for the drinks.

At the table Danny was swigging the last of his pint. The glass seemed lost in the unruly growth of his dark beard. He was wearing a zip-up hoody, tatty black combats and a pair of beat-up Golas, and he smiled as he spotted Connor.

‘Hey, big man,’ said Connor, slapping him on the back. ‘How’s it going?’

‘Sound,’ said Danny in a low Belfast rumble. ‘What’s happening?’

‘Me and Kate have just been seeing the sights, getting in the mood and all that.’ Connor sat down and the girls brought the drinks over. ‘We should probably have a toast,’ he said, scraping his stool forwards and leaning in over the table. ‘To The Ossians, a successful third EP and a cracking fortnight of adventure on the open road.’

They clinked glasses and started discussing how they’d each wangled time off work for the tour. As a teacher Hannah had

the most trouble, resorting to two weeks' unpaid leave from Marchmont High. Kate was using up valuable holiday days from her engineering job at an avionics company, while Danny had just jacked in his crappy temp programming job, hoping to pick up something else when they got back.

Connor was drumming on the table absent-mindedly. His home-made bottle of gin mix had loosened his headache, eased the pressure and created a warm glow in his chest, but the drink in front of him wasn't nearly strong enough.

He looked at the other three round the table. His sister, girlfriend and best friend – the perfect set-up for a band. He wondered how they'd get along, being on the road together for the next fourteen days. The other three had been dubious when he said they were touring the north of the country, but he'd insisted. They'd played Edinburgh, Glasgow and London to death, and he was sick of it. He wanted to see what else was out there. He'd only ever lived in the dead-end fishing town of Arbroath and here in the capital. The trip ahead would be a real life experience, Scotland was out there to be discovered. How many people think they know their country, when nine-tenths of it lie outside their experience? He'd had twenty-four years of pampered, middle-class living, with scarcely a story to tell down the pub. No wonder he got depressed. A year studying maths at Edinburgh University had ended in disillusion, and since then there had been a bunch of useless jobs. Pubs, a library, a museum and now he worked in a poxy little record shop, dealing all day with skinny indie kids in tight tank tops until he felt like ramming Belle and Sebastian CDs down their annoying throats. He sure as shit wasn't going to miss that place for the next two weeks.

He'd been in plenty bands before, of varying incompetence, but things seemed different with The Ossians. In the last two years they'd steadily built up a following around the toilet circuit of central Scotland, and they'd worked the MySpace thing cleverly, too. Their first two EPs received critical acclaim – journalists liked them but they sold squat.

This third record would be the breakthrough. The *St Andrew's*

Day EP was a leap forward. The band were finally beginning to sound like he always imagined they could. Record companies from down south were showing interest, requesting meetings and details of forthcoming gigs. But Connor wasn't going to bite at the first hook. Let those London bastards come up here, see what we're about. If they want us to move south, they can get to fuck. This is a band with character and independence, not some bunch of Scottish, kowtowing London-industry arse-lickers, the likes of which were ten a penny in the fucking charts. They would succeed or fail on their own terms. Let the A&R guys come, waving chequebooks and buying dinner, and let's see who ends up getting their own way.

At the table, Danny was asking him a question.

'Sorry?'

'When's soundcheck?'

'Not till six,' said Connor, downing his drink and standing up. 'Still time for a wee snifter. Same again?'

Feedback squalled around the Liquid Room until Hannah stamped on her scuffy yellow Boss overdrive pedal. A faint electric hum continued to buzz around the room. Connor approached his microphone, shielding his eyes as each bank of lights flashed in turn.

'Sounds fine up here,' he said to the loose-limbed, afro-haired kid in a Mogwai T-shirt behind the mixing desk. 'Can I get a bit more of Kate's vocal through the monitor, and that's it.'

'OK,' said the engineer. 'You wanna try another one?'

'Not arsed,' said Connor. 'Anyone else?'

The rest of the band shook their heads, and the four of them downed their instruments and wandered off as the support band lugged their amps and guitars onstage. Doors opened in an hour. Hannah checked her watch and followed the rest as they walked out the back door to the Portakabin that served as their dressing room. That was a pretty slick soundcheck, she thought, compared to some of the shambolic efforts they'd had in the past. Her AC30 might be a beast to lug about, and it was a pain in the arse buying new valves every time one blew, but Vox knew how to make amps,

all right, and it sounded great onstage, creating a warm, throbby sound when she played her faithful, scuffed old burgundy Gibson SG through it.

Inside the Portakabin, a gas fire flickered uncertainly and a large fridge in the corner thrummed. Zebra-stripe fur covered the walls and a small, rickety table was spread with sandwiches, a bottle of Jack Daniel's and a bottle of gin. The fridge was stacked with lager, Coke and tonic water. Kate and Danny got themselves beers and slumped into a threadbare sofa in the corner where Danny started to skin up, while Connor went to fix himself and Hannah drinks.

The door opened and a short, sturdy, stubble-headed man wearing a black denim jacket and jeans bustled in waving a handful of paper at them. He had an air of comic menace, like a spoof East End hardman. Paul was their manager. He'd come to Edinburgh ten years ago as a stand-up comedian at the Fringe and never left. These days he ran a promotions company, but still liked to put on a show, even in a zebra-stripe dressing room.

'People,' he declared in a thick London accent. 'Don't ever say that Paul doesn't look after you. I have here a schedule covering the next two weeks.'

The four of them raised their eyebrows.

'Schedule?' said Danny. 'Oooh, la-de-da.'

'Shut it, Irish fuck,' said Paul.

'Northern Irish fuck to you.'

'Whatever, you'll be praising me in a fortnight when everything's gone smoothly and you haven't even had to scratch your arsehole for yourself. All gigs, accommodation, travel, riders, support bands, interviews, payments and piss stops have been sorted.'

He handed out sheets, which they scanned casually. There were ten gigs in fourteen days on a route which saw them skirting round the country anticlockwise.

'Any questions?'

'We finish in Glasgow on Friday the thirteenth?' said Danny. 'Nice touch.'

'Where the hell is Durness, and what exactly are we going to do there?' said Kate.

‘Northwest tip of the country. It’s a long drive from Thurso to Ullapool, so I thought we should break it up. I’ve been up that way a couple of times – bleak bastarding landscape. Still, it’s what your man wanted.’ Paul gestured to Connor. ‘His odyssey of self-discovery into redneck, pig-squealing country, or whatever it is. Anyway, all the gigs seem solid enough, there are good local supports to boost numbers, and we’re getting decent money.’

‘Sounds great,’ said Connor. ‘We get to see our own country, find out what the fuck’s out there, and get paid for the privilege, right?’

‘We should come out with a tidy profit,’ said Paul. ‘Oh, and while I remember, I’ve had half a dozen guarantees that London labels are sending people up to the Glasgow gig, and a couple are meant to be coming tonight as well. Which should mean that maybe, if we’re lucky, one fucker will bother his arse. Whatever, just make the most of these gigs to get up to ramming speed, so you can blow their bollocks off on the thirteenth.’

Paul’s mobile started ringing and he flipped it open as he strode out the door, waving as he left. Danny sparked up his joint, took a toke and passed it to Kate as they started chatting about the tour schedule.

‘How you doing, honey?’ said Hannah, approaching Connor at the drinks table.

‘Fine.’ Connor pressed the heel of his hand into his eye socket.

‘You don’t look fine,’ said Hannah, massaging his shoulder. ‘Is it another headache? I told you to go to the doctor. Christ, I hate nagging you, but you’ve got to look after yourself. You can’t go pissing off round the country with splitting headaches and insomnia.’

‘I’ll be OK,’ he said, taking a swig from his plastic cup.

‘That’s not helping.’

‘Fucking hell, love, give it a rest. Everyone drinks.’

‘Not like you.’

‘I’m the troubled artist, amn’t I?’ said Connor, wagging a finger. ‘The old Cobain syndrome, nobody understands my torment and all that pish.’

‘Don’t joke about it,’ said Hannah, letting go of his shoulder. ‘Don’t even joke about it.’

Hannah stood there as Connor downed his gin, gave her a quick kiss and turned to fix another drink. He was drinking too much, but she didn’t know what to do about it. They all drank a lot, a shitload in fact, but he drank differently. They all relaxed when they got pissed, but Connor only became tighter and tighter with every gin. She would have to keep an eye on him on this tour, as per usual.

The Liquid Room was typical of Edinburgh’s sprawling, labyrinthine Old Town, full of old stone nooks, crannies and cubbyholes. A recent makeover failed to hide the centuries of damp that permeated the dingy, subterranean club.

It was filling up. Connor and Danny stood outside the open loading doors to the side of the stage, smoking an alfresco joint and watching the support band. The Hydraulics were a gang of pale-skinned, teenage glamour pusses with backcombed hair, spangly Danelectro guitars and self-righteous anger as their weapons of choice. It all screamed early Manics to Connor but he liked them, they were supremely confident despite a lack of talent. They ended in the obligatory shriek of feedback, contemptuously eyed up the crowd, and strutted off as if it was Wembley Arena. Connor laughed, took a last drag from the joint, flicked the roach in the gutter and headed backstage. Danny looked miffed at not getting a final toke but followed Connor without saying anything.

The Ossians played a stormer. Connor teetered on the brink of being shapelessly drunk and incoherent during their fifty-minute set, but held it together. Through the gin haze, he stared out at the five-hundred-strong crowd, soaking up the admiring looks. For some reason his attention kept being drawn back to one particular face, a young guy at the far edge of the crowd, half-shrouded in darkness. Connor thought he recognised him to begin with, then smiled as he realised that in the half-light the kid actually looked a bit like himself. A younger, taller, thinner version of him. Jesus, they were even modelling how they looked on him – that was

fucking scary. He looked again later in the set, but the face was gone. Around him, the rest of the band pushed the songs into vibrant new shapes in a show that was edgy and wired, with The Ossians always just in control. Danny was a clattering maelstrom of rhythmic energy at the back as he battered away on the vintage white marine pearl Ludwig kit he'd bagged dirt cheap at a car boot from a fellow drummer who had no idea what he was selling. He and Kate made a perfect rhythm section, Kate sauntering about with her sunburst Gibson Firebird bass like she owned the place, when she wasn't helping Connor out with vocals. But it wasn't all full-on rock attitude, the band could do quiet and atmospheric as well as bash out killer riffs. They finished with a relaxed stroll through 'My Evil Twin', the simple country melody and sweet harmonies belying the dark humour of the lyrics. Connor gently strummed his black Tele, the sound shimmering as it resonated from his Fender Twin Reverb, while he and Kate shared a microphone. Hannah, abandoning her usual guitar to knock out hypnotic little lines on a noddy eighties Casiotone keyboard, drifted off into her own wee world, while at the back Danny put down his sticks, slugged on his pint and slapped a set of sleigh bells in time. The crowd loved it.

Afterwards, Connor hung about out front, taking slaps on the back, pretending to be modest about the attention but secretly lapping up every indulgent second. He was bought drinks at the bar, doubles on his own insistence. The rest of the band came out from a brief rest backstage and the praise renewed. Shy teenage boys hovered a distance away from Hannah and Kate, besotted and scared. The girl fans were much more brash, rushing up and kissing Connor, asking him to sign CDs, all exposed midriffs and cleavages. Connor looked awkwardly at Hannah, who just smiled. She didn't mind, it was innocent enough. She had plenty of worries where Connor was concerned, but infidelity wasn't one of them.

Looking around, she noticed a couple of familiar faces in the crowd from fifth and sixth year at Marchmont High. Some were underage drinkers, but she couldn't be bothered worrying about it. She got grief when she first started teaching, mostly from bitchy

girls who felt threatened by her looks, but when they found out she played guitar in a band that wasn't lame, grudging respect took over. She wasn't back in the classroom for the next fortnight, so she could forget about all that shit for now. When she was up on that stage, she felt like a different person playing the guitar, the history-teacher part of her subsumed completely. But then, that's why she did it, wasn't it?

A Franz Ferdinand classic kicked in over the PA and the dance floor began to fill. The Ossians found a padded leather booth and sat down.

'Well?' said Hannah.

'Fucking great or what?' said Danny. 'That was one of the best we've ever played, easy.'

'Yeah, it was pretty cool,' said Kate, smiling.

'It was good, right enough,' said Connor. 'A great start to a fucking brilliant tour.' He looked at Hannah, touching her hand on the table. 'What were you on, love? What was that solo in "RLS" all about? You went off on one. And the end bit of "Justified Sinner", too. Fucking superb.' He kissed Hannah's cheek and she smiled.

'Maybe she was just trying to keep up with you, Mister Unpredictable,' said Danny. 'You were all over the place tonight.'

'But in a good way,' said Connor. 'Just keeping everyone on their toes. Right, I'm off for a single fish.' He looked at Hannah. 'And I'm having a dance when I get back, OK?'

He headed to the Gents, pushed open the heavy door and went into one of the two cubicles. He finished pissing, zipped up and took a speed wrap out his pocket. He licked his finger and stuck it in the speed then sucked it clean, repeating the move four times before folding the wrap up and sticking it in his pocket.

As he came out the cubicle he was grabbed by a massive pair of bear mitts and thrown hard against the far wall, banging his head against the cold tiles.

'What the fuck?' he said, shaking his head. In front of him was a tiny man, not much more than five feet, with a bald head and heavily creased face. Behind him loomed a big bastard mountain

of a guy, rubbing his hands together like a kid eagerly awaiting his dinner.

‘Nick, I was going to come see you tomorrow,’ said Connor to the smaller guy. ‘Honestly, I just had to get this gig out the way then . . .’

The short man held up a hand gently as if trying to flag a bus.

‘Save it, Con,’ he said in a high-pitched Highland accent. ‘You’re just embarrassing us all with that bullshit. We both know you’ve been avoiding me, and we both know why. The little matter of thirteen hundred quid for drugs which, I assume, you either gave away when you were cunted, or just took yourself, with no intention of ever paying me back. It’s my own fault, of course. I should never have let you run up a fucking tab. Stupid really.’

‘I’ve got the money, Nick, I just need to get it . . .’

Nick held up his hand again, this time gesturing slightly to the big lump of meat behind him, who strode forwards.

‘Shug, wait . . .’ said Connor as the big guy punched him square in the face, making his head crack off the tiled wall again.

‘Jesus fucking Christ,’ said Connor, holding his nose. Blood seeped through his fingers.

‘Hold your head back,’ said the big guy in a friendly voice, handing Connor a tissue. ‘And pinch the bridge of the nose, that helps stop the bleeding.’

‘Listen to Shug, he knows what he’s talking about.’

‘Fucking cheers,’ said Connor through his hands, but tilting his head back nevertheless.

‘Now,’ said Nick. ‘What are we going to do about this debt?’

Connor kept quiet. Pain throbbed back and forth across his face and his forehead as he dabbed at his nose and lip with the tissue.

‘Initially, I was just going to have Shug here put you in hospital, teach you a fucking lesson,’ continued Nick. ‘But then as I was scooting around the Internet I read on your site that you were planning a tour of the Highlands. A quick email exchange with your helpful manager gave me the details. Which led to an idea. I need to conduct certain transactions, as it were, outside Edinburgh, but I’m having trouble moving around at the moment, because

those twats at Drug Enforcement are watching me. The transactions I'm talking about aren't exactly legal. I'm sure you understand. For a while I've been wondering how to get round that. You see where this is going, don't you? Suddenly here was good old Connor, who happened to owe me quite a lot of money, and who also happened to be in a band about to tour round Scotland. So I thought, why don't I get you to conduct these transactions for me? No cunt suspects you of anything, except being a gobby wee shite, and the tour is the perfect cover. So. What do you think so far?

'I'm not getting involved in any fucking drug deals,' said Connor, his head still tilted back. 'Are you mental?'

Out of the corner of his eye Connor saw Nick signal again to Shug, but before he could prepare himself he felt a powerful fist to his stomach, knocking the wind out of him and making him double up.

'Sorry,' said Shug.

Just then the toilet door opened and a gangly student came in. Nick stared at him, blocking his path. The student quickly took in the situation, turned and left without a word. Connor was still trying to get his breath back, wheezing a little as he tried to get air into his lungs.

'Don't be an arsehole all your life,' said Nick. 'All I'm asking is that you take care of a wee bit of business for me, and we'll write off that money you owe.'

Connor saw Nick's hands move, and looked up from his crouched position to see a Stanley knife pointed at him. The wee nutjob had arrived in Edinburgh a few years back from somewhere up north, and had started working the door with Shug at one venue or another. Like all these shortarse hardmen, Nick was the psycho of the pair, but somehow it was Shug who did the donkeywork. Pretty soon Nick realised that dealing a bit on the side at clubs and gigs could double the money they earned as bouncers, and gradually the dealing took over, until eventually the pair went into it full-time. Connor had been buying off Nick on the sly for over a year now, without the rest of the band knowing. He knew Nick well enough to know he would use that fucking knife if it came to it.

‘I don’t think you have much choice,’ said Nick.

Connor looked at Nick and the knife for a few moments in silence. ‘I don’t suppose I do,’ he said eventually.

‘Good,’ said Nick, smiling and putting the knife away. ‘So here, take this.’

Shug took a small army surplus kitbag off his shoulder and slung it at Connor.

‘Inside are four packages,’ said Nick. ‘Each one has got written on it who it’s for, and where you’ll meet them. There’s also a mobile in there. Keep it on you and switched on at all times. The folk you’re dealing with will get in touch before each deal. And I’ll be keeping tabs on you as well. At each drop they’ll exchange packages with you. Just bring me back what they give you. Think you can manage that?’

‘Jesus,’ said Connor.

‘Is that Jesus yes, no worries, Nick. Or Jesus, no fucking way, I’m a fucking moron and I can’t even tie my own shoelaces?’

Connor looked from Nick to Shug then back again.

‘Jesus yes, no worries, Nick.’

‘Good. Now just to show that I’m not totally heartless, here’s a little something for your trouble.’ Nick pulled a plastic bag of white powder out a pocket and threw it at Connor. ‘Speed. You’re not worth coke, and I know you prefer the cheap shit anyway. Consider it an extra wee bonus to keep you going on the road. One last thing, don’t be tempted to open any of the packages. I find out that anything’s missing, or any of these deals have gone tits up, and you’d better never show your sorry fucking face in Edinburgh again. Understand?’

Connor nodded as he pocketed the speed and shouldered the kitbag. The blood was still dribbling slightly from his nose, but he felt a little better.

‘Right,’ said Nick, ‘I think that concludes our business. Remember, keep the phone on, I’ll be checking in from time to time, OK?’

Nick opened the toilet door and headed out. Shug went to follow, then turned back at the doorway.

‘Nice gig, by the way,’ he said. ‘Great band.’

‘Thanks,’ said Connor as Shug left. He waited in the toilets a few minutes, touching his nose tentatively, and wondering what the fuck he’d just got himself into, then made his way out into the sweaty darkness of the venue. When he reached the table he could tell by the looks he was getting that his nose hadn’t stopped bleeding.

‘What the fuck happened to you?’ said Danny.

‘Just a wee altercation in the bogs,’ he said, nonchalantly sliding the kitbag under the table. No one seemed to notice, their attention drawn to his bloody face. He waved his hands around and tried to smile. A little blood dripped into his mouth.

‘Christ’s sake,’ said Hannah. ‘What kind of altercation?’

‘Just some punter had a problem with something I said onstage.’ Hannah passed him a tissue which he held to his nose.

‘You think we should get this looked at?’ she said.

‘Don’t be daft, it’s just a bloody nose,’ said Connor. ‘Anyway, we’ve got partying to do.’

Paul came over to the table, clearing a way through the crowd for a lanky, spindly young man in an expensive leather jacket, the pair talking as they came.

‘Jesus, been chasing parked cars again?’ said Paul, looking at Connor’s face.

The beginning of a black eye was already visible, and a trickle of blood lay just under Connor’s swollen nose. He discovered that his upper lip was bleeding, and he sucked the ferric taste into his mouth.

‘Danny gets upset when I muck about with arrangements onstage,’ he said smiling at Paul, then Danny, who just shook his head.

‘Anyway,’ said Paul, ‘this is Jerry Gould, he’s the A&R for K2 records, flown up specially to see you.’

The man offered a thin, cautious hand to Connor, who shook it aggressively, then he nodded acknowledgements to the rest of them. He seemed nervous and excited.

‘I thought you guys rocked!’ he said. ‘I mean, totally fucking rocked. I’ve got the three EPs and they’re great and everything, but The Ossians are just amazing live, really.’

‘Thanks,’ said Hannah. ‘Glad you liked it.’

Paul butted in. ‘Jerry says K2 are very interested in working with The Ossians. He’s bringing the label boss up for the Glasgow gig.’

‘He’s not really like a big boss,’ said Jerry. ‘He’s just a guy, you know? I’m definitely going to recommend that we sign you, but he always likes to see what’s going on for himself. When he sees you in Glasgow, he’ll be fucking blown away. It’s just his kind of thing – music with bollocks, but also with brains. I can’t wait to hear what else you’ve got coming up.’

‘The next EP’s already half-written,’ said Connor, fidgeting with the bag strap under the table. ‘It’s called *Argentina ’78* and it’s about Scottish national identity.’

‘First we’ve heard about it,’ said Kate.

‘It’s a work in progress.’

‘I think we need to talk about shit like that,’ said Kate, ‘before you go shooting your mouth off.’

‘Easy,’ said Paul. ‘Jerry’s just saying that K2 are totally into the band.’

‘Look, I’ll leave you guys to it,’ said Jerry, as Paul placed an arm on his shoulder and gently angled him away from the table. ‘But we’ll talk more at the Glasgow gig, yeah? And you can meet the boss. It’s been good talking to you.’

‘Yeah, good meeting you, Jerry,’ said Connor sarcastically, but Jerry and Paul were already out of earshot. He turned to the table. ‘What about him, eh? What a corporate fucking dicksplash.’

‘What’s your problem?’ said Kate, glaring. ‘He was just saying he liked us. You seem to be happy enough taking praise off fifteen-year-old girls, but not grown men who work for record labels.’

‘I just didn’t trust him.’

‘You only spoke to him for two bloody seconds, what are you on about? You’ve got some serious problems dealing with people, you know that?’

‘I deal with you lot OK, don’t I?’

‘I wouldn’t ask that if I were you,’ said Kate. ‘And anyway, we know what you’re like. We’re used to it. I’m not sure the wider world is ready for your little quirks.’

Connor was desperate to look inside the bag. He assumed he was carrying drugs or money, or maybe both, but who knew with Nick Simpson? That guy was fucking trouble, and now Connor was up to his arse in the shit along with him. Jesus. He needed a drink.

‘Whose round is it?’

‘Mine,’ said Danny, raising his bulk out the booth. ‘Same again?’

Connor took Hannah by the hand. He had to try and calm down.

‘Right, about that dance we were going to have,’ he said.

‘Are you asking?’

‘I’m asking.’

‘Then I suppose I’m dancing.’

Even at four o’clock on a winter morning, the sky above Edinburgh wasn’t dark. Bulging orange clouds raced overhead, bouncing streetlight back down to earth as the leafless trees in the Meadows swayed hesitantly.

A stream of drunk people headed through the park down Jawbone Walk, away from the city centre. A trio of girls in short skirts were clinging to each other and singing Kylie. Two teenage boys stood by a large cherry tree, one resting his hand on the other’s back as his friend puked up the night’s intake. Over to the west a Gothic church spire split the purple edge of sky, as eerie white steam from the breweries drifted upwards behind it.

The five of them made their way home like twigs in the stream of people around them. Danny and Kate walked arm in arm sharing a bag of chips, while Hannah toked a joint alongside. Behind them Connor and Paul were propping each other up and moving as much sideways as forwards.

Connor felt peaceful. His headache was gone and his face had stopped hurting. He felt his lip with his tongue, it was swollen and raw but there was no pain for now. He saw his sister, best friend and girlfriend up ahead and felt a skelf of love jab his heart. He knew exactly how to wind them all up and could never resist doing so. They’d come to expect this, which made him subconsciously conjure up new ways of pissing them off.

He knew he drank too much, but he didn’t have a drink problem.

It became a problem when you couldn't handle it, right? When it was affecting your life and your relationships for the worse? All his mates got drunk all the time, just like him. Kate had told him recently that he didn't drink for fun. He was having fun now, wasn't he? She'd also accused him of thinking too much. How the hell do you think too much? That's like saying you breathe too much. But then you *can* hyperventilate. So could you hyperthink? Better to think too much than too little. He realised he was thinking about it too much.

'What're you thinking, Boy Wonder?' Paul whispered loudly.

'Just thinking about thinking too much.'

'Eh?'

'Something Kate said.'

'She's dead right, you do think too much.' Paul squinted at Connor. 'Hey, have you always had that bag?'

Connor clutched the kitbag closer to his shoulder. When they'd got chucked out the Liquid Room at closing he'd almost forgotten about it hidden under the table, which would've been a fantastic way of fucking up this whole ridiculous thing before it even got started. He was desperate to look inside. He felt nervous carrying it, keen to get home and stash it safely. Up until now, the rest of them had been too drunk to notice him carrying it.

'Yeah,' he said. 'Got my guitar shit in it – leads, pedals and stuff. Plus my lyric notebooks. Didn't want to risk leaving them in the van overnight.'

Paul shrugged. Connor looked across the park at the steeple needling the sky. Patches of low cloud sped overhead but beyond that he couldn't see the moon or stars.

'That's the problem with this fucking city,' he said, pointing upwards. Paul followed his finger.

'What, the sky?'

'See the stars?'

Paul stumbled forwards.

'No.'

'Exactly. Sometimes you just want to look at the stars, don't you? But you can't cos of all this fucking streetlighting everywhere.'

If you go to the countryside the sky's jam-packed with fucking stars, but here you can't see shit. All those alien civilisations millions of light years away, and what do we do? Block it all out. What if they're trying to contact us right now, and we can't detect it because of some stupid fucking street lamp? How shit would that be?

'You think that's happening?'

'Probably. How the fuck would we know? That's the real reason I want to get out of here – to see the stars. To see millions of years into the past. To see all those other fucked-up worlds and find out if they're as useless as we are. Fucking streetlights.'

He lashed out a foot and booted the bottom of the light they were passing. It rattled a little. Something caught Connor's eye – a black, shadowy shape on the unlit grass moving parallel to them.

'What's that?'

'Just a dog,' said Paul, following Connor's gaze.

'Looks more like a big cat to me,' said Connor. 'There are loads of big-cat sightings in Scotland, you know.'

'Yeah, but not in the Meadows,' said Paul. 'That's up in the mountains and shit.'

The dark figure turned and paced alongside the path twenty feet away. It came forwards, its quick feet and flat, downward tail flickering at the edge of the shadows as it was exposed. A fox. It stood and looked at them for a second before trotting off towards some nearby bins.

'Maybe we'll see some wild animals up north,' said Connor. 'Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!'

'I don't know what you think this tour is going to be like,' said Paul. 'Scotland's not exactly a fucking jungle. What are you expecting, a bloody safari?'

They were walking under the arch at the bottom of the path, heading towards the Marchmont Road flat that Connor, Hannah and Danny rented between them. The arch was twelve feet high and made of a whale's jawbone. It had stood there for a hundred and fifty years and it looked worn and tired.

'Reckon this is the real Moby Dick?' said Connor, slapping the bone. 'Old Father Abraham, or whatever his name was, searching

all those years for the white whale and here it is, sitting at the arse end of a park in Edinburgh, rotting away and no one gives a flying fuck.'

'Father Abraham was with the Smurfs,' said Paul. 'You mean Captain Ahab.'

'That's what this tour is, our search for Moby Dick,' said Connor as they closed on the other three. 'You think I'll make a good Captain Ahab?'

'Didn't Captain Ahab die?' said Paul. 'You'd be better off as Father Abraham.'

'Come on, there's more bevvying to be done,' said Danny as they left the Meadows. He looked at Connor and cocked his head sideways. 'Hey, you always had that bag?'

'Yeah,' said Connor. Fuck's sake, he thought.

'What have you two been talking about?' said Hannah, falling back in line with Connor and Paul.

'The stars, big cats and Moby Dick,' said Connor.

'And the Smurfs,' said Paul.

'Just the usual, then?' said Hannah. She leant in, kissed Connor softly on his swollen lip and passed him the remains of a joint.

'Yeah,' said Connor. 'And we're not even properly stoned. Yet.'