



MAROONED by TONY O'NEILL
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www.murderslim.com

THE SAVAGE KICK #4

**a literary magazine by
Murder Slim Press**

Marooned

I took the job out of pure necessity. I was out of the methadone clinics, the crack houses and the detox wards for now, and ingloriously, devastatingly sane again.

I was back in Blackburn, back living with my parents, and sleeping uneasily in my tiny, childhood bed. The job came about because I knew that if I didn't get some money and leave as soon as possible I would either end up back on heroin, or I would drink myself to death in this miserable, backwater town.

I took a sales assistant position at a local chain of off licenses called LOW COST LAGERS. I was paid minimum wage to serve booze to the human flotsam that washed in through the doors between 10am and 10pm. My branch was out on the outskirts of town, in an area where a large, prominently white housing estate uneasily bordered the town's biggest Asian neighborhood. The white locals referred to the neighborhood next to theirs derisively as the "Khyber Pass".

Returning to Blackburn for the first time in over a decade I was shocked by how racially segregated the town still was. I would walk up and down Whalley Range trying to pass the endless days, buying mango ice cream smoking weed, taking in the sights and the

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smells of the place. Without fail I would be the only white person there. It was as if there was some vast, invisible wall that the rest of the town's inhabitants were unwilling, or unable, to cross.

One of the first days I worked there, I was on a shift with my new boss, Mat. He was a disgusting, toady little man with cropped, bleached hair and an effeminate, hoop earring. That same day a festival called the "Mela" was being thrown in a local park to celebrate the town's Asian heritage. Mat was chatting to a disgusting fat fuck, buying a 12 pack of cheap bitter and 20 Lambert and Butlers. The front page of the local paper carried a headline about the Mela festival. Mat nodded towards the paper and smirked to the fat bastard who was signing his credit card receipt.

"Will you be going down there today?" he asked.

The fat cunt finished his name with a flourish and grinned obscenely at Mat with me stood mutely next to him.

"Oh aye," he sneered, "with a fuckin' machinegun, maybe!"

Mat laughed a disgusting, ingratiating laugh, joining in with the customer's guffaws. Not 3 feet away stood an old woman, looking through the selection of port wines behind the counter. To my surprise, instead of wrinkling her hairy liver spotted nose in disgust at this comment, she actually chuckled a little: "A machine gun! That's a good one!"

Oh Jesus, I thought, am I ever in the fucking sticks now.

The job was devastatingly simple. Take the customers money and restock the shelves. Once a week a delivery came that I would have to help unload, placing the bottles onto the shop floor. Mat though, seemed to think that the position I had taken on was something akin to that of a trainee brain surgeon. When he explained

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the job to me, he did it in the hushed, reverential tones of a man revealing how to turn base metals into gold. He took an instant dislike to me, upon hearing that I had just moved up from London.

“Oh,” he sighed, “*London*, eh? Bet you’re a bit clever then, huh? They’re all clever down there, aren’t they?”

If I would ask for time off, or to change my shift, or any other seemingly innocuous request he would sneer: “Well... I don’t know how they do things in *London* of course, but up here we don’t go around swapping shifts and taking time off willy nilly.”

“I grew up here,” I told him once, “It’s nothing to be proud of, you know.”

After my training was over I was put onto the roster part time. Everybody worked part time, because full time employees were entitled to benefits. One of my first co-workers was a big slow kid, with meaty fingers like hot dog sausages and acne scars all over his wide face. All he talked about was getting drunk. I would walk into the place at 10 in the morning and Steve would be waiting for me with a vacant grin on his face and the first thing out of his mouth would be along the lines of:

“Alright, mate? I got plastered last night. 10 fucking pints at least. At-fucking-*least*, mate. It was mental. Me and me mate Davo, the mad bastard.”

Then throughout the rest of the shift I would hear about this 23 year old idiot’s escapades in Blackburn’s pubs and clubs, none of which were terribly interesting and largely consisted of his getting drunk, getting into a fight and eating a kebab. His other topic of conversation was his girlfriend. She was 16 and would stop in at the shop sometimes to buy booze when Steve was on shift. Steve

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relished sharing grotesque details of their sex life with me, as we struggled to fill the time in-between customers.

“She’s proper dirty, mate. *Proper dirty*. Never seen a bird like her to be honest. She loves it in the arse. She’ll be shitting donuts permanently after I’m done with her.”

When she came into the shop though, there was a creepy dimension to all of this. She was 16, but she looked like a *child*. An ugly, acne ridden, slow-witted child, but a child just the same. Watching them together gave me an uncomfortable sensation. As if there should have been something illegal about it, even though there wasn’t. There was nothing remotely appealing about her, and although Steve certainly had the intellect of a 14 year old, he had the body of a big, beer-gutted man. She would hang around, sometimes alone, sometimes with another tiny looking school friend, chewing gum and trying to have ‘adult’ conversation with Steve and any customers that would come in or out. It was like watching your friend’s little sister trying to join in with the older kids.

Serving her underage friends eventually did Steve in. Somebody made an anonymous complaint, and one day Steve was gone just like that. He had finally sodomized himself out of a job.

The woman I was on shift with most often was a tired looking old girl called Julie. Julie was a chain-smoking redhead in her late 40’s, with sad eyes and a brood of 3 rotten to the core kids. I had even less to talk to her about than with Steve. The branch itself was doing badly, as most of the people in the Asian neighborhood were Muslim and did not drink alcohol, and most of the people on the housing estate across the road were on heroin and only came in to try and shoplift aluminium foil. At night, the gaps in-between

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customers could last seemingly forever. Julie constantly had to the radio tuned to Radio Lancashire, a local station so awful that I could go a whole 3 hours without hearing one song I liked. Julie was Mat's second in command and was paid 75 pence an hour more than the rest of us. For his 75p Mat got a woman so loyal to the little prick that she took every ludicrous work to fall from his lips as gospel.

One night we went an hour with nobody walking through the door. We drank milky tea in silence. Then I watched her pace around the shop like a jittery speed freak, obsessively checking and rechecking bottles, dusting the same barren patches of shelving, repositioning the displays of pork scratchings and cheese and onion crisps. The radio carried on, mercilessly.

"What do you do to pass the time?" I asked eventually.

She stopped what she was doing, and cocked her head to the side, quizzically.

"How do you mean, pass the time?"

"In-between customers."

"We restock," she said, then smugly repeating one of Mat's maxims verbatim, "There's always something to do, you know."

"It doesn't seem like it."

"Well Mat is always watching on the cameras. If he catches you slouching or not working he'll dock your pay. Mat says that there is always something to do."

"Mat is obviously mentally defective. There is not always something to do. The very idea is ludicrous."

"Well what were you thinking you were going to do to pass the time? I don't understand."

"I dunno. I thought I could read a book."

The look I got for suggesting I could read a book in the slow

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periods! It was as if I'd suggested that I sexually abuse an innocent child every time things quieted down in the shop. I didn't bring that up again, and resigned myself to the mind numbing routine of it all.

Julie's oldest kid was a regular at the shop whenever she was working. His name was Darren Darren had already been in and out of special schools and the youth courts for most of his life. Julie had nothing else to talk about, except what a rotten little bastard Darren was, and how he was going to send her to an early grave.

"He's never been the same since his dad left" she told me sadly one night, "That was the final straw. That's when they had to put him on all of that medicine. The Ritalin and the Valium and that. But it doesn't help. He never sees his proper doctor because he says he's just a stupid paki and he can't even understand a word the bloke says. But I tell 'im – *They're all paki's these days!*

"But that's when he started really getting into trouble. Fighting and that. He broke every piece of furniture in the house one night. Even threw his bed down the fucking stairs. That was the first time I had to have the police come around. Seems like they're round at ours for one thing or another every other day, now..."

He'd lurch in to the shop in his uniform of a cream Fila tracksuit, dirty looking Nikes, a Burberry cap and a thick, ostentatious looking gold chain, picking at his hollow acne scarred cheeks with nicotine yellow fingers...

"Mum!" he'd yell, accompanied by his pasty looking, sad faced girlfriend who dressed in an identical, sexless fashion to him, "MUM!!!!!"

"Yeah Darren?" she'd hiss, staying nervously behind the counter, "I'm at work! Can't wait?"

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“You got a fiver?”

“Nuh. M’skint, luv.”

“Fuck off y’tight cow! Y’tellin’ me you don’t have five quid?”

He’d walk over to the counter. I’d be lounging around, thinking about pipes full of good LA barrio crack and wondering where it all went wrong.

“Alright, mate?” he’d say to me before turning his glare back to his mother.

“Darren, I told you...”

“It’s just ‘til tonight. Sheila’s mate owes her a tenner. I’m fuckin’ skint. I ‘avent eaten.

Just about then a customer would walk in. This would force Julie to hand over the money from her wallet to avoid a scene in front of paying customers. She’d slip into the back to get her purse and he’d yell after her “Lend us a fag, mum! And one for Sheila too!”

After they’d left one time, money and cigarettes in hand, Julie shook her head and cursed.

“He has more money than I do! That’s the fuckin’ joke! He gets 3 quid a pill for his Ritalin and 2 for the valium, y’know. But he spunks it all on weed and then comes here mooching off me.”

Sometimes I worked in the store alone when they were short staffed. Then I would blast decent music and catch up on my reading. On one rare sunny afternoon I was interrupted from my reading when a car pulled up outside, and a hulking, red-faced asshole with a shaved head and a Blackburn Rovers top staggered out of it and through the doors. I was listening to *Trans Europe*

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Express by Kraftwerk.

He walked straight over to the crates of lager and pondered them for a second before cocking his ear like a dog. He seemed almost physically shocked to hear music that wasn't top 20 chart music.

“What the fuck is this shit?” he gasped, seemingly offended by the song that was playing.

“Kraftwerk.”

“It's fucking queer, is what it is. You some kind of poof?”

I could smell stale lager wafting over from him. This big sweaty monster had obviously been on the piss all day. Maybe it was giro day. He picked up a crate of Skol and walked over to me.

“I'm taking this out to the car.” He hissed, “I'll come back and pay later. Alright, queer boy?”

I shrugged my shoulders. I wasn't going to stop him. It wasn't my fucking beer, and I wasn't going to get beaten up over it. Getting no reply from me he walked to the door. The hyenas in the car started revving the engine, ready to do a runner. He stopped again before exiting, and half turned to me.

“Don't try and fuckin' stop me, soft boy” he hissed, rather redundantly, before he walked out to the parking lot, threw the crate in the trunk, scurried into the passengers seat and took off with a screech of rubber on gravel. I didn't get the license plate, nor did I even step from behind the counter. I was not paid to defend the stock. I had to smile at the thief's lack of imagination. He could have lifted anything in the shop, unless it was my Kraftwerk CD.

--- END OF SAMPLE ---

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