

## The Gravediggers – Part One

Chris pulled up outside the Gravediggers Arms in his Post Office van. He picked up a bundle of mail and pushed at the heavy wooden door. A little surprised to find it open, he walked into the public bar. His boots stuck slightly to the floorboards as he strode and a sickly aroma hung in the air.

‘Evening Chris,’ Old Pete, called from his barstool.

‘It’s only half-twelve,’ said Chris looking at his watch.

‘Would have finished and been down the pub an hour ago when I was doing the job. Those were the days, weren’t they Joe?’

‘So they were, so they were,’ said Joe, sitting next to Old Pete by the bar.

Ruddy-faced Pete and rotund Joe were the only two customers in the pub.

‘Tony around?’ asked Chris.

‘Hidin’ round the back, watching telly as usual,’ Old Pete said. He raised his voice: ‘Shop!’

After several seconds of grunting and snorting emanating from the room behind the bar, Tony walked out dressed in a stained vest.

‘What do yer want?’ he asked.

‘Got something here you have to sign for, Tony,’ Chris said offering Tony a pen. ‘Not just the normal bills and junk mail today.’

Tony snatched the small white envelope from Chris and inspected it carefully. He began to smile. ‘Been waitin’ for this for a few days,’ he said, grinning. ‘Do you a fancy a quick half on the house, Chris.’

Old Pete and Joe stopped dead and dropped their glasses to the bar in amazement.

‘Blimey, I’ve not heard those words in at least five years. What’s come over him?’ asked Old Pete.

‘I’ve got this nice vintage real ale here, been maturing for three months now. Fancy a taste?’ Tony asked, pointing at a row of five handpumps and proudly skimming the layer of dust of the pump nearest to him.

‘Sorry Tony. Still got my round to do. Can’t drink on duty and all that,’ said Chris backing out towards the door.

‘Suit yerself,’ Tony called after Chris as he disappeared out of the door.

Tony opened the envelope, read the letter inside, then brought the paper to his lips and kissed it. ‘I’m going to be rich,’ he said to himself but then his volume increased. ‘I’m going to be rich, rich, rich!’

‘He really has taken leave of his senses this time,’ muttered Joe, swilling back his pint of Stella Artois.

Tony lifted the hatch of the bar counter and walked out into the public bar. He flung his arms wide and sang at the top of his voice ‘If I Ruled the World...’

‘Flaming Norah,’ said Old Pete. ‘There’s only two explanations for that. One is he’s won the lottery.’

‘Nah, he’s too mean to ever enter,’ said Joe.

‘Or he’s sold the pub,’ said Old Pete.

Tony climbed on to one of the bar’s rickety tables to continue his celebration. The thin table legs wobbled and started to buckle under the mass of his considerable beer belly and the whole piece of furniture soon collapsed under his weight.

‘Only ever good for firewood anyway’ said Tony, picking himself up and dusting himself down.

'You said last week only when my missus fell off and cracked her hip that they'd be good for another twenty year,' complained Old Pete.

'What a difference a week makes,' Tony said and smiled.

The three heard the catch on the front door being lifted. A jolly man walked through the door wearing a full beard that contained plenty of clues about what he'd had for breakfast. A mousy woman in a woolly hat followed him in. The three men glared, gurned and glowered at them as they approached the bar.

'Ah. Landlord. What are the finest ales you have to offer me this lunchtime?' he bellowed.

'Well, if you took the trouble to read the pump clips you'd see. Look, there's Septic Fleabite, Old Knackers' Yard, Undescended Gonad, Lobotomised Blonde and Rabid Rat's Arse,' Tony muttered as he pointed at the row of pumps.

'A fine selection,' said the real ale enthusiast. He took a small notebook out of an old satchel he was carrying on his shoulder and eagerly scribbled the names of the beer. 'I don't think I can resist a Lobotomised Blonde, ha, ha.. Two pints please.'

'Best sort there is,' Old Pete called out while sipping his Southern Comfort and Coke.

'And what's the lady having?' asked Tony.

'One of those pints is for her, of course.'

'No woman drinks a pint in my pub. You can have a pint and a half.'

'I can't believe it,' said the woman in the woolly hat. 'You're not going to let him get away with that are you Conrad?'

'What if I buy a pint and two halves instead?' the man asked.

'S'alright, I s'pose,' Tony grunted.

Tony strained at the handpump, gradually filling the pint glass with small increments of opaque yellow liquid until he gave up and handed over the glass filled about three-quarters full.

'Seven quid,' he demanded.

'Would you mind topping it up please?' asked the customer.

Old Pete and Joe whistled in unison and Tony's eyes looked up to the ceiling. 'You'll be wanting the shirt off my back next.' He reluctantly topped up the glass, filled the two halves in silence and then slammed them in front of the customer and turned his back to speak to Old Pete and Joe.

'Whatever's happened, I hope it don't last coz smilin' don't suit yer,' said Joe. 'Aren't you going to share the news with your regulars?'

'Is it anything to do with those men in suits with tape measures that you had in here last week?' asked Old Pete.

'Might have but I can't say, it's what they call a commercial secret,' Tony said, tapping his nose.

'A bit rich that, comin' from someone who only last month was sayin' they'd have to carry him out of his dear, beloved pub in a box,' said Old Pete.

'Pub trade's a mug's game. No one wants 'em any more. Those that do are miserable, ungrateful bleeders,' Tony said.

They were interrupted by the real ale drinker.

'Excuse me, landlord. I think this pint is off,' he called.

Tony turned to face the drinker with arms folded.

'No, it's not,' Tony said.

'It's rather astringent and acetic,' said the woman.

'Don't start using funny long words with me. That's what it's meant to taste like.'

‘It’s got bits floating in it as well,’ protested the man.

‘Show’s it’s natural,’ said Tony.

‘Look, I’ve visited that brewery and their other beers taste nothing – ‘

Tony cut him off. ‘Oi, hoppit. I’m the landlord. It’s my job to know about beer. You’re the just the customer. If you choose to insult my beer, then you know what you can do.’

The man angrily packed his notebook into his satchel and stormed off, muttering to himself and the woman trailing behind him. Tony returned to the regulars at the bar.

‘See what I mean, we just get troublemakers.’

‘They was probably some of them CAMRA nutters,’ said Joe.

‘Don’t want their sort in here,’ said Old Pete.

‘Yes, boys. Business is slow,’ said Tony.

‘Out of interest, when was the last time you served one of them real ales to anyone, Tony?’ asked Joe.

‘Dunno, maybe three days ago. I’ve had some of the barrels open down in the cellar for six months – maturing. But do the customers come? No. It’s the death of a great English tradition.’ Tony shook his head. Shafts of sunlight shining through the windows picked out the fug of dust circulating in the stale bar room air.

‘You’ve tried everything haven’t you Tony?’ asked Joe. ‘Even food.’

‘Yup. Bought a freezer and a microwave. Got some plastic flowers to put on the tables.’

‘I told you £15 was a bit steep for frozen spag bol,’ said Old Pete.

‘I have to cover me costs, Pete, mate,’ said Tony. ‘And people who eat food in pubs are loaded. But sod them if they don’t know a good thing when they taste it. I’ve still got those frozen meals to get through five years on.’

‘And you extended your opening hours,’ said Joe.

‘Too right. Opened at five rather than half-past one Friday and no-one came in. Not one customer. I won’t be wasting my electricity like that again.’

‘You know some pubs, these days, they let children in,’ Old Pete said.

‘Don’t know what the world’s coming to,’ said Joe.

‘That’s where I draw the line,’ said Tony. ‘Kids? What next? What’s wrong with a bottle of coke and a packet of crisps in the car outside?’

‘Yeah, didn’t do us any ‘arm did it?’ said Joe.

‘Suppose you could put a lick of paint around the place. Those window frames have flaked off so much you could bag the peelings and sell ‘em as crisps,’ suggested Old Pete.

‘Tempting, tempting...but what’s the point. The whole lot will be smashed down and carted off in a skip before long. Then a dozen commuter hutches at half a million quid a go will bloom up in place of this dump. If I don’t do it, someone else will,’ said Pete.

‘But you’re the last pub in the village,’ Old Pete said.

‘So?’ asked Tony.

‘You won’t get planning till you prove you’re not viable.’

‘Have a look around Pete. I don’t see many villagers in here, do you?’ asked Tony.

‘Yeah but course you’re viable while you’ve got loyal, regular customers like us – the amount we drink – ‘said Joe.

‘That’s easy to deal with,’ Tony said, cutting Joe short. He walked to the door and opened it wide. ‘You’re both barred.’

## The Gravediggers – Part Two

James, a rugby playing type in his early thirties, stood proudly opposite the pub, pointing out its idyllic features to his girlfriend, Kim.

‘Isn’t that the essence of the British countryside – a beautiful thatched, old-fashioned pub right on the village green, next to the church? You don’t find those in Hackney do you?’

‘No, but we’ve got plenty of dives with the same grubby net curtains hanging in the windows,’ she said. ‘Looks like they’ve not been cleaned in years.’

‘Part of the olde world charm,’ James said. ‘Just like the roses growing over the door.’

‘Roses?’ asked Kim. ‘That’s just a bunch of mangy old ivy. Looks like it’ll pull the place down if it spreads any further – the returning to nature look all right.’

‘We’re right in the heart of Midsomer Murders country here, you know?’ he said.

‘You don’t say? Looks like you’d be taking your life in your hands going in that place,’ said Kim. ‘What a creepy name – the Gravediggers – and the pub sign’s hanging half off like it’s about to drop on someone’s head and kill them. Wouldn’t be surprised if you found the landlord hidden dead under the floorboards.’

‘We do find him down on the floorboards sometimes, usually after he’s been at the Cripplecock scrumpy for a few hours,’ said James. ‘But you really need to see how unspoilt it is inside.’

The two crossed the lane running past The Gravediggers and James pushed at the door. And pushed again. It was shut firm.

‘Well, it’s only five to one,’ said Kim looking at her watch. ‘You know, in London, we have pubs that actually open their doors at lunchtime.’

James hammered on the wooden door. ‘Tony. Tony. Open up you miserable sod.’ He turned to talk to Kim. ‘Look, I’ve got a plan. I’ll go round the back – take a look through the windows. See if he’s left any doors open so I can flush him out. You stay here in case he opens up the front.’

He rushed around the back of the building into the beer garden – an expanse of long grass peppered with the odd rotten bench and shredded parasol. Kim could hear shouts of ‘Open up, I want a drink’ from behind the pub

Kim was a peroxide London girl from Hackney and she dressed more X-Factor than Midsomer – with leather boots and ripped jeans. She stood in front of the pub door as it slowly creaked open.

A dishevelled man in a vest emerged.

‘What d’yer want, then?’ he said, blinking into the sun.

‘Perhaps a drink?’ she suggested.

James came running from round the back of the pub. ‘Ah, Tony, there you are,’ he called.

‘Alright James. Look what the cat’s dragged in here. I was just about to tell this, er, lady about our dress code at the Gravediggers.’ He then whispered to James ‘We don’t want her sort round here.’

‘What’s wrong with me?’ Kim said.

‘No work clothes. Yer jeans are all ripped,’ said Tony.

‘I bought them like that. They cost me £150 from Diesel,’ she said.

‘Diesel? Funny looking mechanic. If you wear ‘em in a garage then they’re work clothes aren’t they? £150?’ Tony scratched his head.

‘Tony, the only way that dress code makes sense is because hardly any of your regulars has a job – or at least a legal one,’ said James. ‘Anyway, you seem to have met my new girlfriend, Kim.’

Tony looked at them both and snorted.

‘Well, can we come in?’ asked James.

‘S’pose,’ Tony grunted.

He turned his back and walked through the door. James and Kim followed Tony into the gloom. As soon as she entered Kim started coughing and spluttering. ‘What’s that smell?’ she asked.

‘I think Tony would say it was the unique ambience,’ said James.

A loud shriek rent the air, followed by a thud and cursing as Kim tripped over and hit the carpet. ‘What the hell was that on the floor that I fell over? Can’t you turn the lights on?’

Tony was behind the bar. ‘Sorry love, seen the price of electricity? And look you’ve woken up Old Pete.’

‘What? Was that one of your customers on the floor I just tripped over? I thought you’d only just opened up?’ she asked.

‘What? What?’ Old Pete shouted in confusion as he awoke. ‘Another Southern Comfort and Coke please barman.’

‘See you had a lock in last night Tony?’ James asked. ‘What time did you go on till?’

‘Don’t ask me,’ said Tony. ‘I passed out behind the bar about one o’clock. Rest of ‘em had their drinks lined up.’

‘So he’s been lying there all night?’ Kim asked.

‘People say he lives here anyway,’ James said and turned to the man on the floor. ‘Alright Old Pete. Joe not here?’

‘Oh, all right, James. Oh yes, Joe’s here somewhere.’ Old Pete kicked a shadowy pile lying under a table. It yelped. ‘Oh there he be.’

Kim heard scuffling and looked down at the floor. A small furry creature darted from under the table to the wall, brushing past her boot. She stood still. ‘Was that a m-?’

‘Mouse? Yeah, little bugger but don’t worry, I’ve put loads of poison down all over the place. He won’t last long,’ said Tony. ‘Anyway, I ain’t got all day. You said you wanted a drink. What d’yer want?’ Tony said to Kim.

‘My head’s a bit sore this morning – so I’ll have a coffee please.’

Old Pete whistled. Tony’s eyes rolled to the ceiling. James muscles tensed.

‘I said, what yer drinking? This is a pub.’

‘Coffee’s a drink,’ Kim protested.

‘No, it’s not. It’s food...’

‘If it’s anything like his beer it’d come in slices –’ chipped in Old Pete.

‘– and the kitchen’s shut anyway,’ Tony continued.

‘When will the kitchen be open again?’ she asked

‘Probably never. It’s been shut the last two years,’ Old Pete shouted from the floor.

‘Can’t you just put the kettle on, Tony,’ asked James. ‘You can do some instant Nescafe can’t you?’

‘Health and safety,’ said Tony. ‘All that boiling water...anyway you’ve been lettin’ me down James. I suppose it’s all her fault.’ He pointed at Kim.

‘What’s my fault?’ she asked.

‘My poor sales. You’ve been damaging by business through taking him away from his natural environment – the friendly local. He don’t drink enough beer any more. Truth is, he ain’t much good to me now. Time was he’d come in here every night – eight pints minimum, double figures most nights of Tony’s well-kept nectar. And then, more often than not, he’d puke up there in that corner because he wouldn’t make it to the toilets but, course, he’d come back for more.’ Kim glared at James in disapproval. ‘Them were the days – now he’s down to six pints a night and it must be all your bad influence. I’m a landlord and I deserve a better class of customer – not jokers who come in a pub and asking for coffee? Dear me. What is the world coming to?’

‘Pubs do coffee in London,’ she said.

‘Yeah? You’ll be telling me next that pubs in London are open all day or that most of ‘em do food or they even have families in ‘em or they let the customers try the beer first or even that they make any money. Well let me tell you Miss, this ain’t London and there’s no demand for any of that gimmickry round here.’

‘Tony, why don’t we do this? You pour us a couple of pints of your finest Septic Fleabite and then go and make yourself a cup of coffee,’ suggested James.

‘Was what I was going to do anyway,’ said Tony.

‘But then, bring the coffee out here, I’ll swap it for a proper drink and then Kim can have the coffee – so then it’s like I’m treating you to a proper drink.’

Tony scratched his head. ‘Err. Nice one James. I’ll go and put the kettle on.’ Tony disappeared behind the bar.

‘Miserable old sod he is,’ said Old Pete getting up from the floor and crawling to his barstool. ‘You know he’s not a happy bunny?’

‘Is he ever?’ asked Kim.

‘Suppose not,’ said Old Pete, ‘but he’s worse than ever now. You know he thought he’d sold the pub?’

‘So I heard,’ said James.

‘Well, he’d got his stuff out and wanted to knock it down. He’d even slipped old Armstrong a couple of hundred quid to have a so-called accident in the middle of the night with his bulldozer that would smash into the pub wall. But the council got wind of it all and they wouldn’t allow for a change of use.’

Joe stirred from under the table and clambered along the floor. ‘On account of the pub providing a community service, like,’ he said. ‘What would we do all day without it?’

‘So what’s he going to do?’ asked Kim. ‘The place is an unhygienic, dark, depressing, scruffy, untended pit that hasn’t had any money spent on it in twenty years and his customer service skills are out of the stone age.’

‘Yeah, that’s what we like about it,’ said Old Pete, wistfully. ‘Well, he’s still selling, but for less money, to a bunch of village nobs who want to keep it as a sort of community asset.’

‘But ‘course they’re not going to actually run it theyselves,’ said Joe. ‘No. They’re looking for some mad fool to do it for them.’

Tony returned with a cup of coffee, picking up the end of the conversation. ‘A mugs game is the pub game he said. They’ll make no money out of it. I’ve sweated and worked every hour of the day for this pub, tried everything to make it work – ‘

‘How about cleaning it?’ asked Kim.

‘Cleaner died three years ago...’ chipped in Old Pete.

‘I expect she’s still here somewhere,’ suggested Kim.

‘People like this...authenticity,’ Tony said, dragging his finger through the coating of dust on the bar and licking it off his fingertip.

‘Problem is, who’d be mad enough to take this place on?’ asked Old Pete.

James sank his pint of Septic Fleabite down in one and cast a glance around the place and gestured with open arms. ‘Who indeed, gentlemen? Who indeed?’

Kim looked at James with mounting horror. ‘Oh no, James, you’re not dragging me into any mad scheme you might have.’

‘Why not – someone could even start serving proper coffee,’ James declared.

He winked at Kim but her gaze was fixed on the mug. ‘James, what’s this in my coffee?’ she asked before letting out a huge scream and collapsing on the floor. The mug dropped on to the flagstones by the bar and shattered into pieces, creating a brown puddle on the floor. In the middle of the pool was a small, dead, furry creature.

‘You can’t please some people,’ said Tony shaking his head. ‘Not even happy when they get a free gift.’

## Gravediggers' Arms Part 3

The three men sat around a dusty table in the cold, unheated function room.

‘When will we three meet again?’ asked Gordon, the grey-haired doctor.

‘When we find some sucker who’s deluded enough to think they can take this place on,’ cackled Clive the estate agent.

‘Are you sure we need to go through with this plan,’ asked Will, the solicitor. ‘I reckon I could have a word down the lodge, pull a few strings.’

‘Very true, Will,’ said Gordon. ‘I don’t want my hundred grand tied up too long.’

‘Sorry gents. It’s the last pub in the village,’ said Clive. ‘Got to prove to the council that it’s completely unviable before we realise our asset.’

‘And what do you think again that our asset might be worth, Clive’ asked Will.

‘Nice plot like this – maybe half a dozen family commuter pads at half a million or fifteen starter shoeboxes at two hundred grand.’ He traced the figures £3,000,000 out in the dust on the table top.

‘Take away the developer commission and construction costs and we’ve still tripled our dosh,’ Gordon chuckled.

‘Yeah but I’m worried if we’re not careful we might get landed with a viable pub,’ said Will.

‘You really think so – after the disaster that Tony made of this place. It’s guaranteed to fail,’ said Clive. ‘Look at the state of the place. It’s ready to be condemned.’

‘But there’s quite a few pubs in other villages that the locals have bought and turned around – taken what the pubcos had given up on and revived them as proper community pubs that actually make money,’ said Gordon.

‘That’s other pubs and villages. This is the Gravediggers. Even the best intentioned couldn’t make this work. It’s the biggest dive in the county. The beer lines are so gunged up it’s a wonder liquid comes out, the kitchen uses more rat poison than salt and if you added up the IQs of the regulars you still wouldn’t get to three figures,’ smiled Clive.

‘So we’ve got to make sure it stays that way. We need to pick our landlord very carefully,’ suggested Will.

‘We need a plausible idiot, preferably someone local with no experience or business sense and who’s likely to drink away any profits that he might make by chance,’ said Gordon. ‘Then when he goes bust the council will have no choice but to let us flatten the place.’

‘Right, let’s find him,’ said Clive. The three men downed their gin and tonics in celebration.

Gordon, Clive and Will entered the main bar of the Gravediggers and slammed their empty gin glasses on the bar.

James was leaning on the bar, draining another pint glass and waving a piece of paper at Lisa the surly barmaid.

‘Redundancy money. What am I going to do with it, Lisa? I’ve only ever worked at a desk in the city,’ James said, slurring his words and collapsing off his stool.

‘Ever thought about running a pub?’ asked Clive.

## Gravediggers' Arms Part 4

Gordon, Clive and Will, the new freeholders of the Gravediggers from the local village, slammed their empty gin glasses on the bar.

James, much the worse for wear, leaned on the bar, draining another pint and waving a piece of paper at Lisa the surly barmaid.

'Redundancy money. What am I going to do with it, Lisa? I've only ever worked at a desk in the city,' James said, slurring his words and collapsing off his stool.

'Ever thought about running a pub?' asked Clive.

'Best job in the world, most blokes would say,' replied James, picking himself up.

'This business opportunity could be yours,' said Clive, practising his best estate agent patter. 'We're looking for a suc...I mean suitable candidates to take on the leasehold of this magnificent establishment.'

'With a world of potential,' added Will, leaning nonchalantly on a rickety stool. Its chair leg gave way under his considerable girth and he stumbled on to the floor.

'An opportunity for a complete refit, for example,' continued Clive. 'Put in some big pine tables and sofas and the ladies will be flocking here in their droves for their Pinot Grigio.'

'Now you're talking,' said James, a huge leery grin on his face, winking at Old Pete who had crawled from the public bar, wondering what all the commotion was about. 'Could do with a bit of totty in here, couldn't we Pete?'

'Women? Nah. They don't belong in pubs – can't keep up with our level of conversation. Brains are smaller you know?' said Pete, opening his copy of the Daily Sport.

'Of course, there's been a huge amount of interest in running this hostelry,' said Clive, winking at Gordon and Will. 'We've had Michelin starred chefs practically breaking the door down...such potential for a trendy gastropub...they say it's rather convenient for the motorway.'

'Celebrity chefs in this village? Never!' shouted James.

'People paying twenty quid for a butcher's offcut? No, we'd much prefer the pub to be run by someone in the community – but it's a matter of economics...'

Lisa, the surly barmaid, shoved James in the back. 'Oi, James, you've just come into the money. If you give them your twenty grand towards the lease I'll give you a pint on the house.'

'Hold on, first of all we need to ask if you've got professional experience in the hospitality business of running a pub or restaurant,' asked Will.

'None whatsoever,' declared James.

'Right, you're in,' said Clive. 'I'll show you the cellar at noon tomorrow.'

Will, the solicitor thrust a pen into James' hand and had him scrawl his signature on some documents, immediately after which James passed out.

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James, hangover as hell, wandered into the cellar, thinking he'd have a look around while waiting for Clive. A foul, putrid stench emanated from the far corner. He tentatively wandered over, realising his feet were paddling through pools of fetid,

brown liquid. His foot stumbled upon a dead rat. He steadied himself against the wall, his hand squashing into a near-luminous coating of green-orange slime. In the half-light he saw a hulk of cylindrical objects coated in a bubbling, grey fungus several inches thick that seemed to rise and fall as if breathing the noxious air. A few pipes, looking like pus-encrusted tentacles, stretched upwards towards the ceiling.

‘Ah, hello James,’ shouted Clive arriving in the cellar. ‘I see you’ve found where Tony kept his real ale.’

## Gravediggers' Arms Part 5

'Ah, hello James,' shouted Clive arriving in the cellar. 'I see you've found where Tony kept his real ale.'

'He always said there was a certain magic to the way he kept his beer,' said James. 'Looks like it's the sort of magic that's about to incubate a new life-form.'

'Quatermass and the pit,' said Clive. 'You probably don't remember the television programme – the original was about fifty years ago.'

'A lot more recently than Tony cleaned his beer pipes then?' said James. 'It doesn't look like anyone's disturbed this for months. How did Tony go about changing his barrels?'

'Ah now, young man, you're making the common mistake of thinking that if Tony changed the pump clip then the beer might be coming from a different barrel down in here.'

'Well, that *would* seem to be the logical conclusion to draw.'

'Not if you sold about ten pints a week and were too mean to throw away spoilt beer – he left his barrels untouched for months. No, Tony was in on this ale ticker scam.'

'Ticker? Scam?' James was confused.

'Yes, a bloke in a white van would come along every month or so and sell him these pump clips for beers that were completely made-up from non-existent breweries. Tony just stuck them on the handpump and carried on serving the same old crap that was already down there.'

'And the tickers?'

'Ah, they're the stamp collectors of beer – always looking to try something rare and unusual. The mad sods will travel the country to do it.'

'Even though the beer might taste disgusting?'

'Oh yes. They seem to prefer it that way – less other people try it.'

James' eyes were drawn to a stack of shiny, gleaming casks at the other side of the cellar – a complete contrast to the fetid, stagnant disaster area where he'd found the real ale.

'So, if that's the ale. What's the clean stuff over there?'

'Ah, that's all the keg lager and cider and so on. Tony was quite fastidious about looking after those – look, here's the secret ingredient.'

Clive held up a bottle of Domestos.

'I'm surprised he'd bother cleaning the kegs with that,' said James, now having a feel for Tony's style of cellar management.

'He didn't clean anything himself. He watered the bleach down and put it in the barrels. Easiest line cleaning technique he said – and he thought the drink itself was so full of other chemicals that his customers wouldn't notice.'

'I've been drinking that for five years,' groaned James, clutching his stomach.

'At least it gives the lager a bit of flavour,' said Clive. 'And it hasn't done you any harm, son.' He thought for a second and then spoke under his breath. 'But it *has* made you mad enough to want to take on this place.'

'So is that the cellar tour done?' asked James.

'Yes. Not much work needed to make things all ship-shape. Now come upstairs.' Clive looked at James with a little concern – some of the putrefying matter in the cellar had condensed out of the air and was already settling as a gooey mass on James' sleeve. The two climbed the steps out of the cellar.

‘Now, Gordon, Will and I were thinking that what we always thought was lacking in this pub was a conceptual mime artist. Come and meet Mariela Meringue.’

## The Gravediggers – Part Six

Clive and James climbed the steps out of the cellar after their inspection of the keg beer section, disinfected with neat bleach, and the fluorescent, fungus-encrusted real ale barrels.

‘Now,’ said Clive. ‘We new owners – that’s Gordon, Will and myself – were thinking that what we always thought was lacking in this pub was a conceptual mime artist. Come and meet Mariela Meringue.’

‘Mime artist? Surely what you need is friendly bar staff if you want me to any money,’ said James. ‘Lisa smiles less often than Tony cleaned his real ale lines.’

‘Can anyone avoid smiling in over twenty years?’ asked Clive. He paused. ‘Yes, you’re probably right – Tony couldn’t abide encouraging customers – he wanted them to know who was in charge.’

Smiling wasn’t a problem for Mariela Meringue. She stood behind the bar in a tight red leotard, hair scraped back into a bun and teeth clamped together in a rictus grin. She mimed picking up a glass and then held the imaginary pint before her, flicking the top of an invisible tap then tilting her hand as if filling the glass.

James was agog at the spectacle, about to walk out on the absurd spectacle when he realised the advantage of mute bar staff – they couldn’t insult the customers, verbally anyway. Instead, he decided on a test to throw this French freak.

‘None of that keg lager rubbish for me. I’ll have a pint of Fit Shaced – 7%.’

Mariela the mime-artist put down the pint she was filling, grabbed another imperceptible glass from a virtual shelf and bent her arm as if pulling hard on a handpump in a rather impressive dispensing action. She ‘served’ the drink to James.

‘How is it?’ asked Clive.

James took an imaginary sip, playing along grudgingly. ‘Best pint I’ve ever had here,’ he said. ‘But you can’t make money serving invisible beer – even if it *is* an improvement on that poison in the cellar.’

‘I want a pub that supports the local arts,’ said Clive.

‘She’s local?’ asked James. ‘From where?’

Mariela suddenly clutched her stomach as if doubled in pain. She then stopped and made a digging motion, like turning over soil with a shovel.

‘What the?’ James had almost had enough but then twigged. ‘Ah, erm, sick gardener...er, dig vomit...no, I get it...Ails bury!’

‘Wonderful isn’t she?’ said Clive. ‘We need to provide a cultural feast – enriching entertainment – mime, poetry, comedy, painting. Folks expect more from their local now than just food and drink. Have a chat with Mariela – you’ll enjoy working together.’

‘But don’t we need *real* food and drink to sell to them...?’ James called after Clive as he disappeared out of the door, barely suppressing a snigger.

‘So he’s given you a job here...to do *this*?’ asked James, turning to Mariela, who nodded manically.

‘I’m going to be a laughing stock, ruined before I’ve even started. Do those idiots *want* the pub to make money?’ James sat holding his head in his hands but then felt a slap on his back.

‘Seems crazy to me too...but how do you I think I learned to pull those pints?’ said a female voice.

‘You speak?’

Mariela unfastened her hair, which tumbled on to her shoulders, suddenly a normal, attractive woman.

‘My name’s Mazz.’ She extended her hand. ‘I’m an actress – ‘between-jobs’. Answered his advert for a pub mime artist. I’ll do whatever pays but I want a gig that’s going to last – and I’ve worked a lot in pubs – enough to see you need someone who knows what they’re doing around here.’

She slipped on a top and pair of jeans she had in a bag behind the bar.

‘Tell him Mariela Meringue turned out to be a lemon...and you got yourself a pretty mean barmaid instead,’ she said. ‘Let’s sort out that cellar. Then we can try that Fit Shaced.’

## The Gravediggers – Part Seven

With half an hour to go before opening time, James flicked through a copy of the new Good Beer Guide as he stood behind the bar at the Gravediggers. Since Mazz had got to work the bar had taken on a new, unfamiliar quality that it probably hadn't possessed in several dozen years: it was clean.

In fact, it was so polished that you could vaguely see your face in it and last night Old Pete had managed a fifteen minute drunken conversation with his own reflection as he slumped on the bar – which was much to his normal victims' relief.

'What a fascinating book,' James said. 'It's given me all sorts of ideas to improve the Gravediggers. I'm glad you lent me your copy, Mazz.'

'Good quality beer, welcoming smile, clean pub, maybe a bit of food – get those right and you can't go too far wrong,' Mazz said as she pulled on the handpump, flushing the beer pipes with water.

'I didn't know there was so much work involved in the good beer side,' said James. 'I mean, do you have to clean the pipes every week.'

'Depends if your regulars like drinking beer that's so flat, infected and vinegary that it may as well be fermented rhinoceros urine that's been left to stand for five years in a dirty oil barrel.'

'Oh. You must have drunk here when Tony was in charge. That's exactly how the regulars like it.'

'Ah. Then you might need to do something slightly more spectacular to restore The Diggers' reputation,' said Mazz. 'Good job you're seeing those CAMRA people later.'

James and Mazz sat with their two visitors at a table in the bar. Each had a pint of real ale to sample.

'I'm Trevor Ticker, how do you do?' said a scrawny man with a straggly beard shaking James's hand. 'I'm chairman of the local CAMRA branch.'

'And I'm Bea Belle Lea, editor of the magazine,' said a robust, ruddy-faced woman. 'I've heard you'd like to place an advert with us.'

'Yes,' said James. 'I've got great plans for The New Gravediggers but I haven't knocked up any artwork or anything yet.'

'Just reel off these plans and we can put something together at our end,' said Bea.

Trevor sipped some of his beer. His face contorted into a grimace, which he managed to convert into a polite smile.

'How's the Fit Shaced?' asked Mazz.

'Well, it's certainly an improvement over what was on offer before,' said Trevor. 'I've not had to rush to the toilet...yet.'

'Well, that's progress,' said James. 'Now the advert – something like rustic, characterful, country inn, thirty real ales –'

'Oh you're doing a beer festival, what a super idea,' said Bea.

'Not that I know of,' said Mazz, looking quizzically at James.

'No. Thirty real ales on all the time,' said James. He picked up the Good Beer Guide. 'I look through here and it raves about all these pubs that do ten, fifteen, eighteen real ales. CAMRA seems to love them – so I thought if I had thirty then it would knock spots off the others and I'd have queues of real ale lovers outside – you know people with sandals and birds nesting in their beards. And if I have thirty on at

once then I maybe only need to get a delivery every three months – it'll save me a lot of work.'

'I take it you're not a member of CAMRA yet,' said Trevor.

'James, once you've opened a barrel of real ale, it only lasts a few days before it goes off,' said Mazz.

'How flipping stupid,' said James. 'Can't they irradiate it or put some chemicals in it to make it last forever?'

'Course they can but they sell that stuff far cheaper at the supermarket than you'll ever be able to sell it,' said Trevor.

'You make it sound like it's alive,' said James.

'In a manner of speaking, it is,' said Bea. 'But that's why it tastes so good – if you keep it right.'

'So if I hadn't have cleaned up the mess that Tony left in the cellar then it might have mutated into some killer alien sludge monster from a horror film.'

'From how I remember his beer that might have been one of the least frightening possibilities,' said Trevor.

'Can't we just sell lager instead?' James turned to Mazz.

'If you want to be sweeping up the glass and hosing down the blood from the fights every other night. But your lager boys will want ear-splitting Gansgsta rap, pool, big screen sports in 3D and a wall of flashing, noisy machines,' said Mazz.

'Sounds like a bit too much investment to me,' said James.

'Start with two or three ales from local breweries and build up your trade from there. Why not do that?' asked Bea.

The door burst open and Old Pete rolled into the bar. He staggered to the bar, clutching a tankard in one hand. He spread an enchanting aroma of stinking pig manure around the room.

Old Pete yelled 'Oi, James, boy. A pint of Old Filthy when you're ready. And in my special tankard too.'

Trevor and Bea held their noses as Old Pete approached closer with an indignant expression.

'I had to take this home with me, would you believe, to stop 'er washin' it.' He pointed at Mazz. 'Not been washed since 1976 – beer just don't taste the same out of anythink else.'

Mazz turned to the CAMRA visitors. 'Looks like we might need your help with some "re-education" first.'

## The Gravediggers – Part Eight

It was seven o'clock on a Friday and the Gravediggers' was quiet. James leaned against the bar whilst Mazz polished the glasses with a tea-towel for the third time that night. Even Old Pete had left his residence at the bar, wheezing outside for a fag.

'You know, what they're saying about all these mobile phones, internet and stuff seems to be coming true,' said James.

'You mean everyone's at home playing games on their iPhones instead of coming out down the pub?' she said.

'Some of these people have hundreds of friends on Facebook – they're never going to keep up with that many down the pub,' said James. 'Even though it's all virtual.'

'Virtual has its advantages,' said Mazz. 'Look at the regulars here – red-nosed, breath like a brewery sewer, teeth stained with nicotine and reeking of fags and body odour.'

'And that's just the women,' agreed James. 'I read an article in the paper about how young people had started getting into real ale in a big way – if we could just connect with that market in the sort of way that's relevant to them.'

A blast of the David Bowie's 'Heroes' as massacred by this year's X-Factor contestants echoed around the empty pub's walls. Mazz picked up her phone and fiddled with the buttons, staring at the screen.

'Sorry, text from my mum about Katie. What were you saying?' Mazz asked.

Suddenly the penny dropped in James's mind. It was so obvious.

'Mazz, you know how there are some pubs where they actually ban mobile phones?'

'Me and my mates wouldn't be seen dead in that sort of uncool place,' she said.

'Exactly,' said James. 'Why don't we make the Gravediggers' the first mobile-phone only pub?'

The next Saturday night Mazz stood behind a prominent sign over the bar of the Gravediggers that read 'TXT n TWEET n FB ONLY TN8 – WKD INIT x.'

There was no conversation but the pub drummed with the sound of tapping keyboards. Throughout both bars people sat in silence with laptops open, luminous screens reflecting off their blank faces. But they were all drinking away at a furious pace.

James and Mazz were rushed off their feet – with orders popping up via e-mail, Twitter and Facebook on the computer on the bar.

'I never realised how much drinking time was wasted when people opened their mouths to talk in pubs. It's like how they drink faster when they're watching Sky Sports but this goes on longer than ninety minutes,' he said. 'This is the way of the future. We'll make a mint.'

Mazz employed her professional mime artist skills by cupping her hand against her ear then pointed at her mobile phone. 'Text me,' she mouthed.

A loving, tactile couple walked together through the door and then headed for opposite ends of the pub from where they texted each other on their mobile phones. James delivered a half-bottle of champagne to both.

'This is the best anniversary night I've had in years. We all know women are so better at multi-tasking than men so this way I can exchange amorous messages

with Jeremy while browsing the designer fashion online. What a super idea,' the woman cooed.

The bar was thronged with young professionals, wordlessly exhibiting the latest technology. The occasional mumble of words like app, Android and Symbian could be heard over the karaoke cacophony of polyphonic ringtones.

It was so busy that James didn't notice the phalanx of bearded misfits until they squeezed their colossal beer bellies hard against the crowded bar counter.

'Three pints of your best *Old Ratarsed* please,' said the grizzled ringleader.

Mazz pointed at the sign silently. Then ringleader grabbed an iPad from a suited yuppie on his left and cracked it over the man's head.

'Hey. What's going on?' yelled James.

'Haven't you heard sonny,' the man said as pandemonium erupted in the bar. The air was thick with mobile devices being flung as missiles. 'We're the Campaign for Real Acquaintanceship – Militant Wing – and this is direct action.'

## The Gravediggers – Part Nine

Mid-January – the dead time of year when the more respectable of the Gravediggers' regulars, those who didn't work exclusively for cash-in-hand or had been on benefit all their lives, had suffered near coronaries when they'd received their post-Christmas bank statements and credit card bills.

Fortunately, Mazz had thought ahead and planned an event she thought would bring in the young, high-spending demographic and pump up the business's volume.

'Looking forward to the G-Factor tonight? It'll be great,' she said to James as he stood at the bar calculating how much extra the VAT increase would raise their prices.

'Drunken, tone-deaf teenagers called Will and Catriona trying to mumble some ear-splitting rap about machine-gunning their "hos" in a crack den?' said James. 'I can't wait.'

'Listen – you said it – drunken – money behind the bar – and all the contestants will bring twice as many friends – just make sure you've got enough of those 'Chernobyl' luminous alcopops,' Mazz said.

'I've got so many that I feel I should carry a Geiger counter when I go down to the cellar,' he said, flicking through the diary. 'Hold on. I don't see the G-Factor in the diary for tonight. I've got The Fungus Folk Ensemble down for eight o'clock.'

'Which diary is that?'

'The new one I bought when I couldn't find the old one a week or two ago?' he said.

'So we've been using two different diaries?' she said, aghast. 'We've been so quiet, though, it doesn't seem to have mattered so far. The G-Factor's been advertised – look at the posters. We can't cancel it.'

'We'll have to put the old fungus faces in the public bar and the screaming teenagers in the lounge – good job we haven't knocked that wall through yet.'

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'Glad to see you got our favourite real cider in for us,' said a round man with a huge woolly jumper and a beard that looked like it was home to several field mice. James handed over a pint of a reddish-orange semi-liquid that reminded him of what he'd had to hose off the floor of the gents after the Young Farmers Charity Drinking Marathon.

'Organic Old Mildew – twelve percent, the little beauty,' said the folkie, turning to his female companion, who looked like a scarecrow only lacking its sense of fashion. 'It's got to be made in the spring from apples that have rotted on the ground all winter – and those floaty bits come from the worms and maggots that get thrown in the vat – what makes it organic, you see.'

Taking their places in the public bar with the rest of the Fungus Ensemble the man picked up his instrument – an 'authentic' bagpipe type affair fashioned from a preserved badger's stomach – while the woman took up her seven-stringed lyre. An ancient old woman stood ready to tap out a rhythm on a selection of animal skulls.

'Now, this song is a ballad about a pretty wench called Elizah Poorsod whose whole family was wiped out by a meteorite before she catches the plague which then makes her nose drop off...' he continued to address the solemn group of folkies with his introduction for another ten minutes. He was just about to put the bagpipes under his arm when an ear-splitting, electronic blast came from next door. It sounded like

someone was being murdered on stage with a pneumatic drill. The vibration knocked Old Pete off the stool where he'd taken refuge at the back of the public bar.

'BABY! I'M HOT 4 YA. GIMME SOME OF IT NOW. YEAH YEAH.' The G-Factor had started with whelps and hollers in the lounge bar from the teenage revellers. When James saw the singer was a sixth-form girl from the convent school gyrating in a leopard-skin leotard and tiny skirt he decided the G-Factor wasn't such a bad idea and congratulated Mazz on the idea.

'But won't we have a riot when the folkies and the teenies get sick of each others' noise? That lot in the bar will have another massacre to sing about,' said Mazz as the Fungus Ensemble joined with the audience in their half of the pub with a defiant, deafening chorus of 'Elizah Poorsod'.

'Let the Chernobyl and Old Mildew work their magic,' James said.

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Eleven o'clock and there *was* a riot at the Gravediggers – except it was on the stage where the unlikely winners of the G-Factor, Nuclear Fungus, were performing an encore.

Barely able to stand, but putting in a performance that was out of this world, was the Gravediggers' own crossover group. The bagpipe-blasting, skull-tapping folkies shimmied in time to pole-dancing Cressida while shiny-faced Sebastian performed a soulful duet of 'I Will Always Love You' with Old Pete, all accompanied by the local village grunge band.

The pub door opened unexpectedly and a woman so thin she couldn't be seen sideways walked through the door with a few burly minders.

'That's Belinda Botox,' said Mazz, in awe.

Belinda brandished her phone. 'Someone posted this amazin' video of your act on me Facebook wall. I'm signin' 'em up right now before Simon gets his hand on 'em. How much do you want?'

Charlie Mackle