

A FINE HOUSE
IN
TRINITY

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Sunday

They tell you that Edinburgh is the most beautiful city in the world, the Athens-of-the-Whatsit and all that shite, but see when you're stuck on an East Coast train staring at Marionville industrial depot, you could be looking at the arse-end of anywhere.

I drain my lager and have another half-hearted flick through the *Daily Record*. For the first time in weeks there's nothing about the Stoddarts in it. I try reading the sport to take my mind off things but can't focus. Six weeks I've been thinking about nothing but coming home, thinking moving South was a huge mistake. But now I'm here I'm not so sure. It's probably the booze talking, and the thought squatting in my brain that tells me I'm not going to be too popular when folks find out I'm back.

There's an announcement and the train lurches forward the last couple of miles, past Calton Hill Observatory and into the station. I heave my rucksack off the shelf and let myself be swept along by the tourists and the locals squeezing out of the sliding doors. I have a nervous shufty up and down the platform. I'm not quite sure what I'm expecting to see: a welcoming committee of Isa Stoddart's laddies with pit bulls, perhaps, or the ghost of Lachlan Stoddart shaking its flabby fist at me. But there's nothing out of the ordinary, just the usual commuters, tourists and Big Issue sellers. I buy a copy of the magazine

off a laddie who looks like he's been round the block a few times. He winks at me and I sense a kindred spirit.

The possibilities. A drink at Shugs. Straight to the lawyers. Find myself somewhere to stay. But before any of that there is one visit I've got to make.

Marianne opens the door, sees me and screams. She does her best to slam it in my face but I manage to get my size 9s in the frame before she gets it fully shut. This doesn't stop her battering the door off my foot.

'Marianne.' (batter)

'I'm not here to cause any trouble.' (batter)

'It's just that...'

This time she slams the door so hard I have to move. Jeez, I'm hurting. For a wee lassie she's pretty damn strong.

One of her neighbours sticks her head out her door to see what all the racket is about. She takes a good long look at me, obviously trying to memorise my appearance for a statement to the Polis if anything happens to Marianne. *'Well, officer, he was average height you know, 40s, I'd say, with dark hair that's going grey and he was very, very, thin. He looked in a bit of a state, to be honest, like he'd been sleeping rough for weeks.'*

I turn and stare at her. 'You seen enough, missus?'

She tuts in disgust and goes back into her flat.

I drop to one knee and shout through the letterbox. 'It's just that with Lachie dying, you know, everything's changed now, hasn't it?'

'No, it hasn't,' she shouts back and throws something at the door.

I sit on my heels for a minute, then poke the letterbox

back open. 'Is your Uncle Mick around?'

'Just get lost, Stainsie.'

I know when I'm beaten and hobble off down the corridor. I'm half a dozen steps away when I hear the door open.

I turn back in anticipation and get a face full of dirty water. Never piss a woman off mid-mop unless you want to end up wearing the moppings.

'I'm glad that bastard Stoddart is dead.' With that thought she flicks her blonde curls over her shoulder, and slams the door again.

It's nice to be back.

The lawyer's office is near Princes Street, in one of the Georgian townhouses that make up the centre of town. Edinburgh New Town was built in the 1800s to tempt decent and respectable citizens out of the overcrowded tenements of the High Street. It worked at the time. Pity it's full of lawyers now.

The inside of the building is ultra-modern. The whole place has been painted white, and all the way up the staircase there is contemporary art with wee spotlights shining on it. The receptionist is encased by a huge semi-circular Perspex desk and is eyeing me suspiciously. I'm letting the place down with my three-day-old stubble and my rucksack. While attempting a discreet sniff of my oxters I catch the receptionist's eye; she doesn't look impressed. I swing my bag to the floor and nearly knock over a row of pot plants.

Murmuring an apology, I tell her about my meeting with Miss Spencely. The receptionist silently points a bright red fingernail in the direction of a waiting room.

She can't get me out of reception fast enough. She doesn't even offer me a cup of tea; I've had better treatment in the cells at Leith Polis Station.

I could tell the jumped up wee besom that I'm not just some dosser, that I've travelled the world, had lassies far better looking than her in more countries than I can remember, but what's the point? In reality my glory days are past. The time when my hair was black, my muscles were firm, and lassies lost their knickers after one wink of my eye is long gone. What am I now? Absentee father, false friend, liar?

She's got a point. If I was her I wouldn't want me hanging round either.

'Mr Staines?'

Miss Spencely is not what I was expecting. When I got the call on my mobile from Miss Spencely of Bell Muldoon Solicitors I assumed she'd be some middle-aged spinster. Instead she's a twenty-something looker with a figure that I wouldn't dare describe aloud, and long dark hair that falls poker-straight to her shoulders. Why do all young lassies these days have hair that looks like it's been ironed?

'Mr Staines,' she says again, offering me a perfectly manicured hand. I do a sly wipe of my paw on my jeans then give what I hope is a firm handshake. 'So glad you could take the time to see us.'

'No problem. I'm led to believe by your message it's in my own interest.' I lower myself into a not particularly comfortable seat.

She gives me a sad smile and a slight shake of her head. 'I wish I had only good news for you Mr Staines, but

I'm afraid it's a little complicated. You are aware of the recent death of Mr Lachlan Stoddart?'

'Oh yes. Unfortunate business.'

'Were you aware that you are the sole beneficiary of Mr Stoddart's will?'

I stare at Miss Spencely's unnaturally shiny hair while I try to take this in. I'm surprised enough that Lachie even had a will, never mind that I'm in it. After all, I wasn't top of his Christmas card list when he died.

Miss Spencely is staring at me, awaiting a response.

'He may have mentioned something about it.'

She smiles politely and continues. 'Mr Stoddart had very little money in his own name, but as you are probably aware, the death of his mother, Mrs Isabella Stoddart, settled a considerable amount of money on him.'

A lot of good it did the poor bastard. Still, it's an ill wind and all that.

'Did you know Mrs Stoddart well?' Miss Spencely asks.

I start to cough and she offers me a drink of her water. I nearly choke on it. *Know Mrs Stoddart well?* Well enough to have had nightmares about her since I was five years old. Well enough to know what she did to people that didn't pay their debts. Well enough to want to keep out of her road, even after she's dead. Miss Spencely is still waiting for an answer so I keep it factual, 'I worked for her up until her death, actually.'

'Really?' She looks surprised. 'In what capacity?'

I shrug. 'Doing this and that.' *Babysitting her Number One Son.*

She pauses for a second, then, sensing she's not going to get any more out of me, continues. 'Unfortunately,

there are a number of issues relating to the settlement of Mrs Stoddart's will.'

This makes me sit up straight. I knew it was too good to be true. 'What kind of issues?'

The solicitor stops to pour herself a glass of water. *Jesus, woman, cut to the chase.*

'At the time of her death Mrs Stoddart had sunk most of her money into the conversion of a large Victorian house into a block of flats. However, subsequent to her passing we have been contacted by a number of her creditors who would appear to have some claim over her estate.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning that we are unable to wind up either of the estates until these claims have been examined more closely. Consequently we will not be in a position to pay you any sum from Mr Stoddart's estate for quite some time.' She drains the glass of water. 'If ever.'

My head falls, involuntarily, into my hands. After a second a thought hits me and I sit back up. 'So, this house she was converting – where is it exactly? And what happens to it now?'

'It's on York Road. The Trinity area of Edinburgh – are you familiar with Edinburgh?'

I nod.

'Here are the plans.' She slides a set of architect's drawings across the table and starts to flick through them. 'This is the original house, Mavisview, which is being converted into three flats.'

I pick up the picture. It shows a three storey, stone-built house set in its own grounds. The building is not quite symmetrical.

'It's got a tower.'

‘Yes, Mr Staines, I believe a lot of houses in that area have. Anyway, work on Mavisview is at a very early stage. The other part of the development is much more advanced.’ She flicks to a drawing of a more modern block of flats. ‘This is being built in the grounds of Mavisview, and I’m informed, is more or less completed. There are six one-bedroom flats in the block.’

‘Nine flats on one site? This development must be worth a fortune.’

She shakes her head. ‘I wish that were true, Mr Staines, but this kind of development is always a speculation.’

Her eyes flick away from me as she says it, and I wonder if she’s being straight with me. I open my mouth to speak but she continues on.

‘However, in discussion with the late Mrs Stoddart’s business partners, we have decided that it makes sense to continue with the development for the moment.’

We look at the pictures in silence for a minute, until I have an idea. ‘As an interested party I hope you have good security on the site.’

She blinks. ‘Good security?’

‘You know – a night watchman or something to keep the neds off the foundations and that.’

‘Well... we don’t have anyone there at the moment but I suppose I could look into that.’

‘No rush, Miss Spencely, I’m sure you know what you’re doing.’

A house conversion with no security.

I think I’ve just found my accommodation for the next few weeks.

I spend the last of my money on a carryout, then take

a leisurely walk down Dundas Street in the direction of Trinity. I'm in no rush. I want to wait until it's dark before I break in, in case any of the neighbours see me and do their duty as a citizen. Trinity's that kind of place; if you farted round there they'd be on the phone to the Council worrying about the impact on the ozone layer.

I don't really know the area that well. *The posh bit of town*. As a kid I'd no friends there, no business being there. Maybe that's not changed. Now that I'm taking a proper interest in it I can see that, posh as it is, there are layers of affluence. The first layer is solid family housing, one-up-one-downs, usually with a bit of garden to the front. I'm not knocking them – I'd be working a hundred years before I could afford anything like that.

Push through that layer, and you come to the houses round Lomond Park. Huge, stone built properties with driveways and gardens hemmed in by iron railings. Not as posh as they seem at first glance: if you look closely you can see a second door or a side path that hints at furtive subdivision.

But for real old-money luxury, the streets round Russell Place and York Road take some beating. The oldest of the houses round here, they are by far the quirkiest. It's as if creating the new area of Trinity gave them confidence to build whatever they liked. Want some Greek columns either side of your door? No problem – this is Trinity. Mock Tudor frontage? On you go – this is Trinity. Pointy Gothic turrets on each corner? Get building – you know where you live. And of course, make sure that every second house has its own tower.

I stop outside Mavisview. She must have been a beauty in her day, but the old girl is showing her age. A couple

of the windows on the upper floor are broken, and there are a handful of tiles missing off the roof. The garden is completely overgrown, with only the different shades of green to identify which was once a lawn and which a weed-covered flower bed. The general look isn't improved by all the building crap that's been left lying. There are planks of wood and bits of pipe all over the place.

The new development looks more or less complete. It's your typical modern complex: no character and rooms the size of rabbit hutches. Nonetheless I opt for this for the night, mainly because some daft prick's left a ground floor window open round the back of the block. When I'm officially in charge of all this, some heads are going to roll. Though judging from the way the lawyer wifey was speaking, that's not going to be any time soon.

I unroll my sleeping bag on the bare floorboards. It's not going to be comfortable, but it will be wind- and watertight, which is an improvement on where I've spent my last few nights. I get into the bag and crack open one of my cans. I light up a fag and I'm finally ready to go over what's happened today.

In my head I replay the conversation with the lawyer, because there's a lot of things I'm still not sure about. This site not being valuable? I don't buy that. Way I see it, if this place is finished and sold on, there must be enough to pay Mrs Stoddart's debts, and be something left over.

The beer and fags are working their magic and I can feel myself starting to relax. The last thought that goes through my mind before I fall asleep is that so long as I'm awake and out by 7 am nobody's going to be any the wiser that I've been here.

Under normal circumstances I pride myself on knowing

how to deal with Her Majesty's Constabulary. If, for example, two representatives of the Queen's law enforcement agency were to come across me sound asleep in a place I had no business to be, I know that the correct response is to sing them profuse apologies, with a chorus of 'it'll not happen again, Constable,' while hinting at the amount of paperwork involved if they do bother to book a lowlife such as myself.

Unfortunately, when I am kicked awake by the Plod after oversleeping by some four hours, with the mother of all hangovers, the first thing that comes out of my mouth is, 'You can't touch me - I own this building.'

This causes much mirth. The bigger of the two Polismen, who I recognise from my last visit to the station, says, 'My apologies, Mr Trump. I didn't recognise you lying there. Maybe I was a wee bit put off by the sleeping bag and empty *Special* cans, or maybe it was the resemblance you bear to this wee runt called Staines that's wanted to help with our enquiries into the death of a Mrs Stoddart?'

I stare at them in disbelief. They're not pinning that one on me. 'I had nothing to do with that. And how did you know where to find me?'

'Don't flatter yourself - we didn't expect to see you here.' He stamps on one of my empty cans in a manner I find quite unnerving in my present state. 'Not that we're not delighted to stumble across you.'

I sit up and pull my sleeping bag round me. I wish I was wearing more clothes. 'What are you doing here then?'

'The builders knocked through a wall in the big house and found a body.'

'Shit.' Just my luck.

'Shit indeed. Would he have been a tenant of yours,

Mr Rachman?’ He gives me another prod with his foot. ‘Anyhow, get your clothes on because the Super wants a word with you.’

‘Which Super?’

Please not Jamieson, please not Jamieson.

‘DS Jamieson of course.’

As I sit in the Interview Room waiting for Danny Jamieson to turn up, I make a neat list in my head of all the possible reasons he could want to see me. It’s not beyond the realms of possibility that he just wants a chat for old times’ sake. After all, he *was* at school with Lachie and me, even if the toffee-nosed bastard never said two words to us. Best case scenario – a couple of old acquaintances catching up.

The worst case scenario is that he’s found out about me pumping his wife on her Hen Night and has been waiting to frame me for the first suitable murder. On the other hand, maybe he also pumped some lassie on his Stag Night and is not too bothered about Babs and me. After all it was eight years ago, and you know, what happens on tour, stays on tour.

Who am I trying to kid? He’s going to kill me.

‘Staines.’

‘Hiya Danny, I mean DS Jamieson. How’s it hanging?’

Danny looks like he’s not slept for a week. His ginger hair is receding fast, apart from an optimistic tuft that’s clinging tight to the middle of his forehead. His face is the colour of wet suet, and I’m sure I can see white hairs sprouting in his moustache. He ignores the pleasantries and waves a folder in my face. ‘The late Mrs Isabella

Stoddart. Anything you'd care to tell me about her death?'

'I am as baffled as you are, I swear to God.' Aye, well, maybe not quite as baffled. A picture of a heavily-indebted blonde goes through my mind. If Danny was a half-decent cop at all he'd know the answer to Mrs Stoddart's death lies in her tallybook; even Lachie knew that much. If he was any kind of plod at all, he'd at least wonder where the tallybook was.

'Really? 'Cause here's the funny thing – all over the scheme people can't wait to grass you up to me as Mrs Stoddart's killer.'

'What?' I can't believe what I'm hearing. 'People think I killed Mrs Stoddart?'

He nods. 'That's what I'm hearing. You,' he points at me, in case I've not got the message, 'killed Isa Stoddart.'

We look at each other over the interview table. I don't understand what's going on, and I'm starting to panic.

He drops the files onto the desk. 'Care to tell me why everyone is grassing you up?'

This is no good. No good at all. 'There are some right backstabbing bastards out there that would tell all sorts of lies about a person.'

'You're not wrong. And I think to myself, I've known Stainsie a long, long, time. Can I really picture him as a murderer? Can I really picture him repeatedly battering a woman over the head? So, I pull out your records and what do I find but Mr J Staines with a cast-iron alibi.' He waves Isa's file at me again. 'Isabella Stoddart – Pathologist's Report - estimated time of death, early hours of February 4th'. He picks up another folder. 'Joseph Staines – early hours of February 4th – sleeping it off in a police cell in Gayfield Square.'

He flings both the folders onto the table. ‘Why is half of the scheme trying to finger you for a murder you couldn’t have committed?’

‘Jealousy of my good looks and high-flying lifestyle?’ I don’t know exactly what the bastards are up to but I’m going to find out.

Danny doesn’t laugh.

I’m getting so desperate to move the conversation away from me being an alleged murderer I try a high-risk tactic. ‘How’s Babs?’

He throws me a sharp look but he answers. ‘She’s fine.’

‘And the bairns – is that three you’ve got now?’

‘Number four arrived two weeks ago.’

‘Jesus! You’ve been blessed and no mistake. Is the wee one keeping you up?’

Danny shakes his head, but, try as he might, he can’t quite stifle a yawn.

Danny knows that I’m not being straight with him, but he’s got nothing of substance on me, so two hours later I find myself free to go. I’m not quite sure what to do with my freedom due to my current cashflow problem, but I scrape together enough loose change for a couple of cans of *Special* and head for my favourite bench at the Foot o’ the Walk.

It’s a great spot for people watching, and I’m on the lookout for a certain someone, possibly the only person who can shed some light on my reincarnation as an assassin of elderly crime bosses. Michael Murphy, known to most people as Wheezy, and to Marianne as ‘Uncle Mick.’ I’ve known him a long time, although I wouldn’t exactly call him a friend. But, then, these days I’m not sure I’d use that term about anyone. Anyway, if old times’

sake isn't enough to persuade him to help, I'm pretty sure he'll know it's in his own best interest to get me back out of town as soon as possible.

Mr Murphy shouldn't be hard to track down, but I'm reluctant to show my face in the pub or the bookies until I've worked out what's going on. However, if my instincts are correct, sometime this afternoon he'll scurry out of Shugs and along to his favourite book-maker, so if I sit tight and keep my eyes open, like a small, scruffy comet he will pass through my orbit.

After about ten minutes my patience is rewarded when I see a donkey-jacketed figure hurrying along the other side of Great Junction Street.

'Wheeze,' I shout and wave him over. God, it's good to see a friendly face.

He turns and stares at me, open-mouthed. Rumour has it that in his day, Wheezy was quite the Dapper Dan. One of the old guys from Shugs told me that way back when, all the lassies were after young Michael. Which just goes to show what a lifetime of alcohol, gambling and dental neglect does to you, because the kisser on him now would frighten a ghost.

He hobbles across the road as fast as his legs will carry him, all the time hurling a string of obscenities in my direction, which leads me to believe that he's not quite as pleased to see me, as I am to see him.

'What are you doing back? Does Marianne know you're here?'

'Aye, I went round to see her.' And I've still got the bruises on my foot to show for it.

'Did she take it all right?' His face is scrunched with worry. One of Wheeze's very few redeeming qualities is

that he's genuinely fond of Marianne. Possibly because she's the only family member he has that still speaks to him.

'Oh aye – she invited me in for a cup of tea and a range of sexual favours.'

Wheezy smacks me so hard I drop my can. 'That's my niece you're talking about.'

Shit. I'm not being overly tactful here. 'Sorry, pal – shouldn't have said that.'

Wheezy grabs my shoulder and leans in toward me, until his face is an inch away from mine. His breath smells like a pub toilet. 'Ach, save the apologies – you're coming with me.'

I stare past him at my can, which has rolled as far as the man selling hot chestnuts from the fake Victorian oven. He's not noticed yet that he's standing in a wee pool of *Special*, and I suspect he's not going to be happy when he realises.

'Aye, Wheeze, whatever.'

'I have to say I'm very disappointed, Staines, very disappointed indeed.' Father Paul shakes his head to emphasise his unhappiness. I feel like I'm fifteen again and in confession admitting to lustful thoughts. I stare at Wheezy. For a man who hasn't set foot in a church since his bairns were christened, he's suddenly very pally with the priesthood. Needs must, I suppose. He glares back at me over the top of the sports page of the paper, and jerks his head in the direction of the priest, indicating I should pay attention. Father Paul continues with the lecture.

'We gave you that money in good faith, in return for

you leaving town with...' he lowers his voice, 'a certain *item*. We certainly didn't expect to see you back here a mere six weeks later.'

'Amen to that,' says a voice from behind the paper.

Father Paul looks mildly irritated at the interruption, then returns to his interrogation. 'Are you looking for more money, is that it?'

'God no, I just...' And I'm not entirely sure how to answer that question. I don't feel inclined to share the real reason for my return.

'Are you thinking blackmail, perhaps?'

'That'll be it, Father,' the sports pages pipe up.

'No!' I grab the newspaper out of Wheezy's hand. He smirks at me, and I realise I can't think of a convincing explanation for my reappearance. 'I'm just...' I tail off.

Father Paul sighs. 'Right. We can't have you wandering round the scheme shouting your mouth off the first time you get drunk. You can stay here where I can keep an eye on you.'

'In the Priest's House?'

He nods. I can't say I'm too struck on this idea. The Priest's House consists of three floors of Gothic misery, and the general gloom isn't helped by Father Paul having taken out every second bulb in an effort to save money. I play for some time.

'Will your housekeeper not mind?'

'While you are living here, Staines, you *are* my housekeeper.'

Wheezy snorts.

'And perhaps your first task could be to see Mr Murphy to the door?'

A couple of hours later I've had time to reflect, and

on balance, things could be worse. I've got free digs and all that's required in return is that I stay put and see that Father Paul gets fed of an evening. I live up to my end of the bargain by giving him a hearty meal of sausage and mash, and he departs to continue ministering to his undeserving flock. I've not had a chance to talk to Wheeze about Danny's comments, but then he wasn't in what I'd call a cooperative mood. I'll seek him out again tomorrow, if he's not round here at the crack of dawn, threatening me with further violence for upsetting his niece.

Father Paul has given me a bedroom on the first floor. From the smell of damp, it's not been used for a year or two. I wrestle with the window for a good ten minutes before I can persuade it to open, then prop it up with a copy of *Lives of the Saints*. There's not much in the room, just a bed, bedside table and a wardrobe full of old clothes. I go through all the pockets methodically and I'm rewarded with a bundle of fifty notes that has worked its way into a coat's lining.

I reap even more rewards in the little sitting room next door. There's a drinks cabinet that doesn't seem to have been opened since Noah was a lad. I'm just in the process of opening a dusty bottle of *Macallan* when I think I hear a noise. Not anything loud, more like a chair or something being knocked over. I wonder if Father Paul has a cat, though to be honest he doesn't strike me as the Saint Francis of Assisi type.

I'm a bit jumpy so blame my paranoia and continue hunting around for a tumbler. I've just laid my hand on a wee crystal number that will really do justice to the *Macallan*, when I hear what I could swear is the sound

of glass breaking. Perhaps the cat that Father Paul never mentioned has upset something in the kitchen. I pour myself a healthy measure and settle down in an armchair. There's a television in the corner with a layer of dust over it. Nothing happens when the on switch is pressed. It's disconnected so I get down on all fours to look for the socket.

I plug it in, press the button and the ten o'clock news appears. I've just settled back on my heels to admire it when the picture disappears and the lights go out.

At first I assume that I've fused the lights; maybe sticking an old TV set on was not such a good idea. Then I hear the distinct sound of someone moving about downstairs. There's nothing to hand to use as a weapon except the whisky bottle and I'm damned if I'll risk wasting a twenty-one-year-old malt. On all fours I shuffle over to the curtains and pull them open. They shed some light into the room, but it's fairly dark outside now as well. I carefully open the door and feel my way to the top of the stairs.

My best bet is to head for the front door then leg it, so I edge down the stairs keeping my back to the wall. I make it down one and a half flights before smacking into someone large and unmoveable, and bounce arse-over-tit down the last half-flight. My trip leaves me face down on the hall carpet, which immediately sets me off coughing. It's not seen a Hoover for quite some time.

I push myself up onto all fours as quietly as possible. It's dark as the Devil's heart down here and I'm trying desperately to get my bearings. I try shuffling gently forward but the movement of my hands unleashes another set of dust bunnies, which makes me start coughing again.

Next thing I know I've got a boot resting on my neck.

It pushes me gently back down until I'm eating carpet again. I hear a match being struck and the room lights up briefly. The intruder takes a draw on his cigarette and speaks.

'So, Stainsie, you're back then?'

1939–1949

See, if I had to blame somebody for the state of my life, if I had to root around in the dark recesses of my past and choose the one person that I could legitimately point a finger at and say, ‘It was you. You started all this. You started me on the drinking, the sleeping around, the not holding down a job. Everything. It was you.’ See, if I had to do that, I know exactly who I’d name as the culprit, and I know exactly the date of his crime. The date? 24th July 1948. The person? Josef Wiśniewski. My grandfather.

If you’d met him though, God rest his soul, you’d have thought him the sweetest old fellow going. And to give him his due, my grievances aside, he was a good man. He steered clear of most of the vices of men of his generation. His wages never went to line a bookie’s pocket. He never had his fill in the pub then gave his wife the benefit of the back of his hand. I never even heard him curse, although maybe he confined his bad language to his mother tongue. And he was always, always good to Granny Florrie (who wasn’t really our granny but, well, we’ll get to that one later).

In fact, to my eyes the man only had one fault – an overwhelming love for Her Royal Highness Queen Elizabeth II. I know not everybody would see that as a flaw, but when you grew up in the Workers’ Republic

of Leith like I did, it seemed a wee bit odd at least. But, Christ, the man was mad for royalty. His front room had so many pictures of Elizabeth II it would have put your average RUC canteen to shame.

But to understand why he did what he did (and by-the-by ruined my life) you have to understand where he was coming from. Grandad Joe was born in 1924 in a wee village just outside Lvov in Poland. To hear him talk, it was a bloody countryside paradise. A rural idyll. Birds singing in the trees, sheep in the fields, yadda yadda. The only fly in the ointment was that he was Polish, and most of his neighbours were Ukrainian, but for the most part they all rubbed along together.

There were five of them – Dad Filip, Mum Ewa, and his two younger sisters, Alicja and Anna, and Filip had high hopes for a couple more junior farmhands in the next few years.

By 1939 Joe was fifteen. He was at the local school with ideas in his head about going on to university (first one in his family to go, if he made it, and everybody was rooting for him). He wasn't really keeping an eye on world events, to be honest none of them were; politics was an urban thing - what did the government of Germany have to do with getting the harvest in? What did they care who was in charge of the Soviet Union? Stalin knew squat about keeping your chickens happy. No, Joe was not worried. He was spending the best part of his time mooning over the lassies in his class, with big plans for getting into their knickers. After all, they were not short of hay to roll around in.

But that's the thing about politics – just 'cause you

choose to ignore it, doesn't mean that it'll choose to ignore you. On the 1st September 1939 German forces invaded Poland from the north, south, and west. A couple of weeks later, the Soviet Red Army invaded the eastern regions of Poland with the full support and cooperation of the *Führer*.

Filip was worried, but as he kept telling Joe, Poland wasn't on her own. The British and the French would be sending in troops any minute, there would be a bit of bloodshed, he couldn't deny it, but Poland would be liberated.

He was still holding to this line when the Red Army arrived at their house to tell them they didn't live there anymore. Eastern Poland was now officially part of the Ukraine, and therefore the Soviet Union. Poles were no longer welcome to stay. Within days, Joe and his family were booted out of their house, and were on a train bound for the Soviet Union, and a life of communal paradise on a labour farm.

Siberia was cold. Brutally, mortifyingly, cold. Before he left Poland, the coldest Joe had ever been was on the ritual 3 am trip to the outside lavvy in the middle of winter, standing there with his hands shaking and hoping his wee man didn't get frostbite, and by the time he got back to bed he was always so damn cold he needed to go again. That kind of cold? Siberia on a good day. In summer.

Wee Anna was the first to go. It started with a cough, then she lost her appetite for the meagre rations that were on offer, then she couldn't get out of bed. Two months after moving to the camp, Ewa woke to find Anna dead beside her. She didn't have long to grieve though, because

within six months, both Ewa and Alicja had also passed away.

So, Joe and Filip were left on their own to try to make the best of life on the farm. They were used to life being hard back in the Ukraine but it didn't compare to this. No equipment, no horses – they were trying to farm the soil with their bare hands. Just when they thought they couldn't stand it any longer, politics found them once again. By 1941 Stalin and Hitler were no longer bosom buddies, the Poles were no longer the enemy, and they were pretty much free to go, if they could find their way back to Lvov.

Joe and Filip got themselves on the first transportation they could find back to Poland. Joe would have been on top of the world, if it wasn't for the fact that he'd noticed that Filip had started with that oh-so-familiar cough. Sure enough, Joe waved goodbye to his last remaining family member somewhere in Azerbaijan, as the train door was opened and Filip's corpse was dumped by the side of the track.

At the age of eighteen, Joe was orphaned and alone in the world. He joined the Polish Army, and saw out the rest of the conflict in Italy. Come the end of the war, the Polish situation had become a bit of an embarrassment to Churchill. Stalin was keen to hang on to control over Poland, and Churchill was not going to rock the boat, so it was the bum's rush for Poland and the Polish Army.

Joe was flown to England, and demobbed. He was then given the choice – get flown back to Poland and take his chances with Stalin, or stay in England and take his chances here. He talked it over with his pals and they all came to the same conclusion. God Save the Queen.

One of his pals had a brother living in Edinburgh, so the pair of them took the next train North. Old Joe'd got a few bob in his pocket from the demob, so when he got to Edinburgh he decided he was going to get a room to himself. *Lebensraum*. He'd never had a room all to himself before, between his sisters, the labour farm, then five years sharing with other squaddies, but Joe decided – the good life started here.

He waved goodbye to his friend then wandered down the cobbled streets of Edinburgh until he saw a 'Room to Let' sign and chapped the door. An old wife answered.

'I looking for room.'

The old wife looked him up, and down.

Joe, sensing reluctance on her part, tried to reassure her. 'I have money. Can pay good.'

'Oh, aye. And what's your name, son?'

'Josef Wiśniewski,' he said proudly.

To his surprise the woman started shaking her head. Through the rapidly closing door she said, 'Oh no, son, I'm not having any of you Poles staying here. You lot should be long gone by now.'

And with this welcome to Scotland, Joe realised that not everyone was all that grateful for their war effort.

Joe was sleeping on a bedroom floor with five other men and working twelve-hour shifts down Leith Docks. But he was not without ambition. He could do well in this country, he thought, if only he could be a bit more, well, British. He looked at his fellow Poles, all living on top of each other, drinking themselves insensible at weekends, and wondered if there wasn't more to life than this.

One Sunday morning he was out for a walk when he

saw a sign in a newsagent's window. 'English lessons. Good rates. Enquire within.' Suddenly it all became clear to Joe. He was going to improve his English, get a job in an office and go to night school. He'd get his degree, get a better job and woo some Scottish lassie. He pushed open the door to the newsagent's and nearly fell over the step in his haste to begin his self-improvement.

Miss Ailsa Morrison was a very proper-looking young woman. She explained that she was a qualified primary school teacher and was offering English lessons in the evenings. Her father did not approve of her teaching foreigners so she was holding the lessons in the back room of the newsagent's. She named her price.

In the first lesson he learned about English nouns, and noticed how beautiful Miss Ailsa Morrison's eyes [noun] were. The second lesson covered verbs and adverbs, and Joe noticed how delightful Miss Ailsa Morrison's laugh was. She laughed [verb] beautifully [adverb]. By the time they reach prepositions he realised he was completely in [preposition] love with Miss Ailsa Morrison.

Ailsa, for her part, played her cards close to her chest. It must have been obvious to any observer that she'd got a lovesick Pole on her hands, but she didn't encourage, or for that matter, discourage, him. She was, however, happy to listen to his stories at the end of each lesson. He told her about his family, his experiences in Italy, and what life was like for him in Scotland. When he suggested they meet for a walk one Sunday afternoon, she blushing accepted.

After six months of careful tutoring, Joe felt confident

that his English was good enough to start implementing his plan. So he headed into town and presented himself at the first office he came to. There were three men in the office, so he addressed himself to the one who looked the most senior.

‘I am looking for work.’

The man looked him up and down in a way that was becoming familiar. ‘Oh aye. And who might you be?’

‘My name is Josef Wiśniewski.’ Joe hated himself for the small hint of defensiveness now in his tone.

The two other men sniggered.

‘The boss doesn’t employ papas.’

Joe thanked them for their time, and hurried back to find out what a ‘pape’ was.

‘Oh, Joe,’ said Ailsa, ‘It’s a rude word for a Catholic.’

Joe considered this new information. ‘But I do not go to church. How do they know I am Catholic?’

‘Well, your name I suppose.’ Ailsa sighed. ‘It’s a Polish name and Polish people are Catholic.’

‘I fight a war for this. I fight for Poland and now I cannot get accommodation and I cannot get job because of my Polish name.’

‘Oh, Joe,’ said Ailsa again. ‘I’m so sorry.’ And she took his hand.

They were sitting side-by-side in the room at the back of the newsagent’s. The newsagent had gone home.

‘Do not be sorry. It is not your fault. My name is my name and I proud of it.’

Ailsa was so moved that tears welled up in her eyes. Joe noticed her distress and wiped the tears away with his calloused hand. They were sitting very, very close together.

‘Oh, Joe,’ said Ailsa for the final time that evening. Joe put a finger to her lips and kissed her.

‘We can’t, Joe.’

They were sitting a respectable distance apart in the back room of the newsagent’s.

Joe threw his hands up in a gesture of disbelief. ‘I learn the words for nothing.’

‘And you said it beautifully,’ said Ailsa, tactfully ignoring the fact that he had just asked her to marry ‘it’. ‘But my father will never approve of me marrying a foreigner.’

Joe leaned forward and took Ailsa’s hand again. ‘Why not? I work hard, I get better job, I work harder for you and for our babies.’

‘The babies are the problem.’ Ailsa pulled her hands back to her lap. My father’s never going to accept his grandchildren growing up called Wiśniewski.’

Joe got to his feet. In one sentence Ailsa had confirmed all his fears. He walked slowly out of the room, and was halfway through the shop before he heard Ailsa call his name. He paused, looking at the tins of peas and the posters about sugar rationing.

‘I can still give you English lessons.’

He shook his head and opened the door.

Joe wandered the street for hours that night. He asked himself ‘in my position, what would Queen Elizabeth II do?’ (although I’m not sure she’d really have the frame of reference to imagine herself as a penniless twenty-four-year old Pole). But in a blinding flash of royal inspiration, Joe realised what Bessie would do, old Miss Saxe-Coburg-Gotha herself. What she would do is change her name to that of

an inoffensive local town. So, he borrowed a map of the UK from work, closed his eyes, crossed himself for luck, rotated his arm three times above his head and came down hard.

On Staines.

Three days later he marched into the Victoria Street Registry Office and changed his name by deed poll. On 24th July 1948 Josef Alojzy Wiśniewski officially became Joseph Aloysius Staines.

Now, I'm not saying that things couldn't have been worse. A couple of inches northwest and I'd be going through life as Joseph Bishop's Itchington. At least that would have spared me a lifetime of 'stain' puns. In Joe's position I might even have done the same thing. I can relate to his motives: he was too proud of his name to change it to get better digs, or a half-decent job, but the first whiff of a bit of skirt and he'd renounced all his patriotic fervour. I've done enough daft things over lassies myself.

And, I know that there was no malice in it. Old Joe didn't realise when he went into the Registry Office, the repercussions his act would have twenty-five years later. He didn't know the impact on my first day of primary school when the teacher sat us in alphabetical order. If old Joe hadn't messed with nature I would have been nestling safely in between George Thompson, who went on to be Dux of the school, and Angela Young, who everyone agreed was the prettiest Gala Queen they'd ever clapped eyes on. I could have spent my formative years sandwiched between brains and beauty.

Instead, on my first day of school I sat down, turned my head, and stared into the fat, four-eyed face of Lachlan Stoddart.

Monday

The boot is removed from my neck, and I roll over and take a few choking mouthfuls of air. A hand reaches down and pulls me up.

‘Thanks, pal,’ I say, but I’ve no idea who I am talking to.

‘This way,’ says the voice and pushes me toward the kitchen.

I bump into the kitchen table and bounce my backside into one of the kitchen chairs. The mystery man flicks the switches back on in the fuse box and the weak light of Father Paul’s economy bulbs fills the kitchen.

‘Surprised to see me, Stainsie?’

Standing opposite me and looking mighty pleased with himself is, well, I don’t actually know his *name*, but I know he’s one of Mrs Stoddart’s thugs. I’d never troubled to find out what he was called – to me he was just one of the laddies with pit bulls that followed her everywhere and I wasn’t that keen to pursue a friendship with them.

‘Good to see you, eh...’

‘Bruce.’

We sit for a minute in silence. He pulls a bit of fluff off his leather jacket. He’s a bit of a dapper dresser, is Bruce. I remember that much about him. I can’t recall ever seeing him dressed in anything other than head-to-foot black, which makes a nice contrast with his heavily highlighted hair. I like that kind of attention to detail in

a thug; half his time spent kicking the shit out of OAPs who can't meet the 2000% APR on their debts, the other half drinking tea and leafing through *Heat* magazine in some lassies' hairdresser's or other.

'Can I get you a cup of something, Bruce?'

'No, no, don't trouble yourself. I'll just say my piece and be on my way. Now, the thing is, I believe that you've got something that belongs to me.'

This confuses me a little. As far as I was aware the sum total of my possessions is a rucksack full of dirty washing. 'I'm not quite with you, Bruce.'

He leans back in his chair, contemplating his perfectly-manicured nails, and sighs. 'Then I'd better start at the beginning. I've been Mrs Stoddart's right-hand man for some years now, as we both know.'

If you say so. I rack my brains to see if there could be any truth in the statement. Bruce looks about a year or two younger than me, and I'd first become aware of him and his highlights maybe five, six years ago. Did that make him a likely candidate for taking over the Stoddart empire? Still, this wasn't the time or place for that kind of debate. I nod furiously.

'Oh aye, Bruce, I know that.'

'And me and Mrs S had an understanding. Lachie, God rest his soul, was not what you'd call a businessman.'

Too right. The poor bastard didn't know his arse from his elbow never mind which way up a balance sheet would go.

'Mrs S was relying on me to look after the family business if anything were to happen to her. Which it has, God rest her soul. So, I start looking into her affairs and what do I find? The one-and-only copy of her tallybook is missing.'

Aw Christ.

‘I respectfully ask Lachie if he’s seen it recently, and the daft little prick – God rest his soul – says that he’s given it to you.’

Bruce gets up and wanders over to the kitchen dresser. He pulls out a knife; using the knowledge I gained at catering college, I’d say it was a boning knife, ideal for cutting through raw meat and possibly small bones. With the knowledge I’ve gained in the years since I left catering college, I’d say it was very bad news indeed for me.

He sits back down at the table, and starts working the point of the knife into the wood. He’s making quite a mess of the polished surface. Father Paul’s not going to be too happy about that. Then I think that that’s really the least of my worries, seeing as the last time I saw Ma Stoddart’s tallybook it was floating down the River Tyne. Bruce continues with his theme.

‘And I was a bit worried at first because I thought that Lachie’s jakey pal is an even dafter wee prick than he was. But then, then, I thought even Stainsie will know what that book is worth. He’ll not have done anything stupid with it.’

I wouldn’t underestimate my stupidity, especially when there’s a lassie involved. ‘Aye, about that...’

‘Cause if he was, for any reason, unable to return that book to me,’ he stabs the knife head first into the table top. He stands and uses all his weight to push it in. The knife stands upright on its own. ‘I’d cut the daft prick’s balls off.’

‘OK,’ I say, getting swiftly to my feet. ‘I don’t actually have it to hand at the moment. Is there somewhere I could deliver it to you?’

Bruce laughs but doesn't move. 'You've got one week to find it. And don't worry about delivering it – I'll find you. Wherever you are staying.'

He's showing no signs of leaving so I try changing the subject.

'So, are you still partners with that other laddie with the dog?'

'Duncan? Naw. Him and me had a disagreement about who was in charge.' He smiles and tries to pull the knife out of the table. It doesn't move. He holds my gaze as he manoeuvres the blade slowly to and fro. The bloody thing still won't shift so he starts putting a bit more welly into it. This puts an unacceptable strain on the band that's holding his ponytail in place and his hair bursts free. On the plus side at least it means he's not staring me out anymore, but I can't help feeling that he's a man that doesn't like having his grooming interfered with. He lets out a couple of grunts then puts a stack heel on the table leg, and using all his weight, finally releases the knife, leaving a crater the size of a small orange in the table top.

He takes a minute to rearrange his hair and continues the conversation. 'A big disagreement.'

I watch him wielding the knife. 'How big?'

He laughs. 'Let's just say you'll not be seeing him again.'

An image of the Polis finding a body in Isa's development comes into my head.

'When you say I'll not be seeing him again...'

'Unless you end up in the same place as him,' he gestures hell-wards with the knife, 'because you don't get me that book.'

Clear enough. I start wondering how long I should give

it after Bruce leaves before I pack up my things and get out of town. Should I wait an hour or two, or is he likely to hang around to see if I try to run off? I decide that it makes sense to hang fire until the morning.

Bruce is just about out of the door when he stops and turns round. 'Do you know a blonde lassie that lives in the banana block? What's her name?' He makes a show of racking his brains. 'Marion, is it?'

I try to look as if I don't know who he's on about. 'Naw, don't think so.'

'Marianne!' He smiles. 'That's her name, isn't it, Stainsie? 'Cause a wee birdie tells me that you and her were pretty tight before you left town.'

I shake my head. I'm trying hard not to show that she's the last person I want dragged into this but when I speak my voice is an octave higher than usual. I sound like a chipmunk. 'No, honest pal, you've got it wrong.'

He walks back into the room and stands in front of me. I get a whiff of his aftershave as he leans forward and rests his hands on the back of my chair, one either side of my head. 'Now, I'm not sure of *all* the names in Ma Stoddart's tallybook, but I do remember that hers was in it. I just want you to know that, if for any reason, that book doesn't reappear, say 'cause you left town or something stupid like that, I just want you to know that I'll be starting my debt collecting with her.'

He steps back and gives my seat a kick. I jump about a mile.

'But I'm not an unfair man, Stainsie. If wee Marianne's a bit short of cash, I'm willing to negotiate how she pays me.' And in case I've not got the message

he grabs a handful of his leather-covered groin and leers at me.

Turning on his heel he gives me a cheery wave and disappears through the door. I watch him go and wonder how much more trouble that lassie is going to get me into.