

The Getaway

Home & Dry. It was done. I'd got away, no one would know. I had left a few crumbs leading to nowhere, for peace of mind more than anything, but for all intent and purpose, it was done!

As I sat on the sofa bed amidst the gathering of a few people I didn't know, in my newly acquired lodgings, I quietly contemplated the previous 36 hours.

Did I get everything I wanted? Scrub that. Did I get everything I *needed*? What next? What work? Have I done the right thing? Would he find me? All the usual stuff that might go through the mind of someone who does *not* want to be found.

I thought of my family, scattered about all over the place, the nearest, 100 miles west of where I was right now. It was thinking of these people that suddenly made me stop. Oh no!! My heart skipped a beat. Then it started racing. No. Pounding! I felt the blood drain from my face, and burn through every part of my body as panic hit me. It's difficult to describe – the feeling of panic, fear and worry all at once – kind of like the fear a kid has when they've been sent to see the headmaster for putting a boot through a window.

A feeling, incidentally, that I was no stranger to.

So far I had got away, all the stuff that meant anything to me, all the possessions I needed were in a small pile in the corner of this very room. Everything except one thing!

A small, seemingly irrelevant, scrap of notepaper, folded in half. To the casual observer it would be nothing, but to someone looking for a lead it would be the jackpot! This small scrap of notepaper had written on it a small list of names, addresses with their phone numbers. The names, addresses and phone numbers of my close family members.

The small throng of people in the room now seemed like they were on a small TV screen disappearing into a tiny dot on the screen and the nondescript music faded away as the beat of my pounding heart took centre stage!

I rummaged hopelessly through my pockets on the off chance I had scooped up that precious scrap of paper. I hadn't.

There was only one thing I could do. I had to go back. Tonight – but late, very late.

36 Hours Earlier

The door to my grotty bedsit swung open. What the hell! What's going on? From my uncomfortable sofa bed, that sunk ridiculously low in the middle, I lay, blurry eyed, confused and wondering why The Landlord was stood over me, glaring down with a menacing expression.

"Alright?" was all I could manage, as I woke from my slumber, looking around the room making sure all my smoking paraphernalia wasn't visible. Fail – it was everywhere, bongos, bags of weed, hash, scraps of Rizla packs and all the rest of it were everywhere. Oops!

He wasn't here for that. He was glaring down at me for the £3,000 I apparently owed him.

Oh... that.

To be fair to myself, I had no idea. I wasn't the best with money at the best of times, and this clearly wasn't the best of times. I was a prolific stoner at this juncture in my life, getting through half an ounce of weed and hash a week. This dizzy state of mind had already led me to sign up to Life insurance with family and kiddie cover, home insurance and medical/dental cover with all the trimmings. Well, the lovely person on the phone made it all sound so great, so I signed up for all of it! Brilliant, if I was a fully functioning family man with responsibilities this would have been perfect. However I didn't have a wife, I didn't have kids, I didn't own a home and was definitely not fully functioning.

So here he is - The Landlord, demanding, and rightly so, the £3,000 I owed him. As previously agreed in my tenancy agreement with The Landlord, all payments were to be paid by cheque every month to Pete who lived in the downstairs bedsit.

Pete, was a wretched old man who you never saw out of his bedsit in any capacity, not even to wash. That was evident on meeting him.

Every month I would knock on his door, he would poke his red, blotchy head through a tiny crack in the door, mutter something and step back, allowing me to step over the threshold of the grimmest habitation I had ever seen. He was normally just wearing pants, a dirty vest and flip-flops. He would take the cheque, say "wait here" in a quiet, disinterested voice and disappear with it. I would wait and look around at the clutter that sprawled about me. I thought *my* bedsit was a

shithole!

This place was bleak! Curtains shut, ancient carpet that no longer displayed any colour and had become smooth with years of trodden in grime. The smell was intense - a damp, musty smell of filth and squalor. (This smell would linger up your nose for a few minutes after leaving). Food containers everywhere and the cluttered shelves each home to empty lager cans and brimming ash trays. I called him Stinky Pete.

So Pete would return with a little book, with which he would scribble the date, the cheque number and get me to sign it. Job done. Get the hell out of there!

I had been through this ritual every month for months.

Meanwhile, I had got dressed, explaining to The Landlord that I had given all my cheques to Pete and he will have done what needed to be done. However, I suspected that my basic bank account didn't have an overdraft facility, therefore my cheques may have been bouncing, and I will have kept on spending, spending, spending, thinking I was in the black! Fail again!

Whatever had happened, I needed this guy out of my face and out of my bedsit, pronto, so I told him I would have the £3,000 for him on Monday morning.

He confirmed "Monday morning!"

The Landlord was gone. For now...

It was Saturday morning. Three grand in two days? I probably had two hundred quid. Not quite enough.

What was I going to do? First thing's first as always – roll a big fat joint and have a think... I'm sure a solution will present itself. These things always work themselves out... Right?

Wrong! A few hours had passed, I was getting worried now! No solution had presented itself, just Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant taking the piss out of Karl Pilkington on the radio. I had done nothing!

It was during this radio broadcast that something very strange happened. My phone rang. Strange because no-one had my number and those that did weren't the kind of people that phone up for a 'quick chat'! But this time was different. It was a good friend of mine called Dan, I knew him from

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College, he had lived round the corner from my family home years ago. He was now at University in Brighton. He called to see if I wanted to go sea fishing the following weekend. Sounds great but I've got a bit on my plate at the moment - I told him my situation. He listened and responded by simply saying: "Move down here mate, we've got a spare room".

Was this the solution presenting itself, right now?

Could it be that simple? I had a job that I liked, lived in an area that I liked. The offer was there. All I had to do was let him know....

Battling my young conscience, looking at the mold that went from floor to ceiling and thinking about the world's biggest spider that was living somewhere beneath my tired sofa bed and not a hope of getting £3,000 in 48 hours. This was the solution... Don't miss it!

Let's do this! Now! I called Dan, booked my residency in sunny Brighton and began to hatch my plan.

I could do this only once – no coming back and forth for all my stuff. Do it once, do it right! If Stinky Pete heard me coming and going then it was game over, he would figure it out and alert The Landlord. However, the fact he was a recluse reassured me I wouldn't have to worry too much about any encounters with him.

Phase 1.

Get my car and park it as close as possible to the front of the property for rapid exit.

Phase 2.

Quietly pack up essential stuff only, as my getaway car was a tiny three door Ford Fiesta – a 1.6 Diesel at that – possibly the worst getaway car ever, but it would have to do!

Phase 3.

Phone up work, it was Saturday, no-one would be there – perfect. Leave a message, (remember the crumbs?) saying that I have had to move to Cornwall as a matter of urgency for family reasons. This was essential, as The Landlord knew I was a lorry driver for a firm operating out of Wimbledon – all he had to do was find out from them where they sent my P45. I made up a fake delivery address and asked them on my message to forward the P45 and my stuff in my lorry cab

to that address, with my sincerest and genuine apologies.

Phase 4.

Wait until it was late so I could load the Fiesta in cover of darkness being very careful not to be seen by anyone else living in the property. This bit I really enjoyed. Even as a kid it felt great doing what you weren't allowed to be doing, so all this 'Cloak & Dagger' stuff really gave me a buzz. (If only I had applied myself this thoroughly during my previous years, perhaps I may not have found myself in this predicament. In the first place).

Phase 5.

Go Go Go. It must have been about 9 o'clock at night. Everyone else was down the pub or playing computer games or whatever. Now's the time. Pitch black, freezing cold, boxes and bags packed with essential items only. I went downstairs, quick check for any signs of life, opened the boot and door of the car, which I had managed to park right outside. All doors open ready for the load. Two trips and it was done. Loaded. No witnesses, no problems. Brighton here I come!

30 Hours Later.

I had waited for hours since realising what I had left behind in the grotty bedsit. One tiny little scrap of paper with all the contact details of my family members who The Landlord could pay a visit, to claim my outstanding rent arrears. This fella was no slouch when it came to collecting payments. Two of the other tenants had warned me of his very robust methods of collecting outstanding debts, and I really didn't fancy any of my family getting this guy banging on their door with his team of goons ready to carry out a beating!

Got to get that scrap of paper!!

The gathering of strangers had disbanded from my new bedroom, giving me plenty of time to worry about everything that could go wrong. Chiefly that The Landlord was waiting for me with his team of nutters, ready to beat the £3,000 out of me.

It was time to go! The palms of my hands were noticeably wet!!

This time I really did have to be careful. If anyone had realised that I had done a runner I had to

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be invisible. The Landlord was expecting payment on Monday. It was still Sunday night, and as far as I knew, no-one knew I had gone. The only problem was if I had any visitors perhaps they may have asked where I was. This whole situation was fuelled by absolute paranoia and the adrenaline was pumping!

I set off from Brighton at about 1am to arrive in Wimbledon just after 2am.

I arrived right on point and decided to drive around the block to see if I could see any activity through the windows of the property. To my dismay I saw the light was on in my bedsit, I was sure I switched it off! Oh no! I've been found out. The Landlord is there. He's there! SHIT SHIT SHIT! was all I could here going through my mind. He's there sorting through my stuff. He's found the notepaper! SHIT SHIT SHIT.

I drove around to the front of the property and waited and watched for any of The Landlords goons to appear with armfuls of my stuff. I don't know how long I waited but I was cold and shitting myself!

I saw no-one.

Do something! Open the door. Shut it. Open it, shut it...Plan. Leave all doors open or just on the catch, It was the dead of night in South London, you can't be too flippant!

OK. Do it! I climbed out of the Fiesta, walked confidently, *but quietly* down the street, looking and listening for any movement. Like a gazelle in the bush that had just heard a twig snap! Full alert! Heart pounding out of my chest I reached the front door. The key was already in my hand, orientated the right way to eliminate any noisy key jangling. I pushed it into the lock, turned the key, opened the door. No sound. Nobody. Nothing.

I crept through the gap in the door, not wanting to open it a fraction more than I had to. Stop. Listen. Silence. All I had to do was go up the stairs, prey no-one was in the bathroom and then do the bedsit.

I crept across the blackened landing taking massive steps in an attempt to minimise any noise. Past the staircase in the corner, a faint rectangle of light spilled from around a doorway. Pete was up!! Oh no! Maybe he was up talking to The Landlord... No way. Just get on with it I thought to

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myself as I reached the bottom of the stairs. All old houses have a few squeaks, this place was no different. I crept up the stairs, two steps at a time, sticking as close to the wall as possible where I knew there were no squeaky boards. First floor. Done.

Past the freezing bathroom on the left. Empty. One more step forward was the door to the bedsit. It looked massive as I stood in front of it. Final thought. If there's anyone in there, don't stop, don't think, don't talk, just turn and run. Do the stairs four at a time, out the door, in the car. Go Go Go! Key still in hand, I stepped toward the lock, deep breath in, let it out. This is it, no hesitation I shoved it in the lock and turned the key. Swung the door open. BOOM. Empty! The weight of an elephant was taken off my back in that split second.

Wow. Breathe. Ok, I was here for a reason; get the notepaper, find it, pocket it and get out!! There it was. This tiny scrap of paper that was giving me palpitations was right there next to the TV. I grabbed it, looked at all the addresses of my family members and jammed it straight into my pocket and zipped it up. Job done!

The bedsit was just as I left it, light on, coin in the meter. Still no noise, I can get out and no one would be any the wiser. But hang on....just a moment.... The car is empty, I had no job - not a lot of money! I unplugged the video recorder and TV, one under each arm, quick look around. Adios. This time I meant it. There's no coming back now. I left the light on, door open and crept down the stairs, a little less carefully than before, and out the front door. All I had to do now was get back to my car with a TV and video under my arms without being spotted by any Police or vigilant locals. They would never believe whatever I told them and definitely wouldn't approve of the truth.

20 Years Later

Two decades later with that weekend all but a distant memory. I had moved on from Brighton and lived in 15 different addresses in four or five different towns and cities across three countries. Even Hercule Poirot would struggle to get a lead out of that! I thought, now I could tell my story, confident that Karma wouldn't catch me.

So one day, thinking about the events of that cold, January weekend, I decided to write a short

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story about it, and perhaps publish it. Who knows I might even win something!

So that's what I did, I wrote the story and entered it into an online, national short story competition, hoping it would capture the imagination of the nation. Think big - that's me now. Barely a spliff has been smoked since the getaway to Brighton all those years ago, with no regret whatsoever!

The story was popular, no doubt about it, with social media making it available to millions of people, it ranked quite highly, but not high enough to win anything other than a small nod in the literary circles.

However, it was read by 1000's of people online and it spread it's way around the internet.

One Saturday morning, there was a knock on my door. It was the postie, right on time, too. He handed me a couple of letters, all the usual crap except one. The envelope was marked and franked from the short story organisers - great, maybe *I have* won something after all.

I opened the letter and read with excitement.

This is what it said:

Dear Sir,

I thoroughly enjoyed your thrilling story of your experience 20 years ago. How ironic.

I never thought I would get the chance to judge the story about one of my tenants, ripping me off on one of my properties and

then writing to tell me all about it. I can

confirm that I had almost given up on finding you after all these years but I never forgot,

and now I know where you live!

I want my £3,000 and I want it by Monday morning!

The Landlord