

Corned Beef Sandwich

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Corned Beef Sandwich - chapter one

Bang. You know how these things happen. It's the end of the day. You've just finished recounting the coppers to make sure you've got it right. Bagging up the money, rolling up the notes, making a record of how much we've made today, how much we've lost. When it strikes you. The sheer horrible beauty of life. How much you want to carry on living despite everything. Despite all the losing and getting nowhere. In truth there haven't been many winners today. A couple of 10-1 shots in the 3:10 from Pontefract. The Capford Twins. They come in and bet the same amount on the same horse in the same race. I've asked them if they wanted me to put it through as a single bet, but they don't seem to get it. They look at me all despondent. They look at me like I'm the one that's slightly strange. Nose ring, eyebrow ring, another ring hidden from view, red hair, dressed in black, occasional deathblack eyeshadow. They have a point but it's more a question of situation. In the right situation you wouldn't give me a second look. That situation is probably the moshpit of a Marilyn Manson gig. This situation is a rundown prole bookies in south central Manchester. So yes, Mr and Mr Capford Twin with your badly shaved heads, unwashed polo shirts and nose dribble, you have a point. It's a situation I intend to deal with. This is only temporary; this has only been temporary for the past year and a half. Plus the fact I like it. I like the sense of danger when a nice man in piss-stained dungarees threatens to rip out your gizzard for not putting his bet through on time. The sense of life's wonder and splendour when the Capford Twins try and kiss you though the glass as they celebrate their £26.42 win. Someone'll have to clean the goss off the glass later, but it's understandable in the heat of the moment.

We did have a couple of big losers today. One big big loser. And Charlie Strange had inside information. He told everyone in the shop, real horse's mouth natter. Flashing his money like it was his proud new penis extension.

'Where you got that?' Capford One wanted to know.

'Borrow it,' goes Capford Two. 'He borrow it.'

'Gonna win,' said Charlie Strange as happy as a man that's already won enough money to buy himself a new set of teeth to replace the ones he had knocked out of his face only three weeks ago. Plus he's got one of those fantastically romantic Action Man style scars down one cheek. And you have to say it suits him. For a man with no teeth, a still freshly scabbed cut down the side of his face, wearing spanking new white trainers, a three-piece accountant suit with no shirt underneath, gold rope chain and hair sculpted into a bizarre antigravity Elvis quiff - you have to say Charlie Strange is looking good. The fact that he has skin the colour of brown sugar fudge, a body that's strong like an earthquake, and green eyes that drill into you like a Black and Decker soul invader helps.

In fact if he was just a pair of eyes on a stick he'd do for me, but then I'm just an old romantic.

'Two hundred on the nose,' he said. Then there's the accent. The sort of Irish voice that makes fully grown paratroopers weep with fear. If it's possible to have a voice that sounds like an iron fist in a green mock velvet glove, Charlie Strange has. 'Two hundred on the nose.' Those were his exact words.

No betting slip, he gets me to fill them out for him. It's not a service we offer normally but he can't read and write either, so I'm his Slip Slave. His Betting Bitch my maladjusted brother called me when I tried to explain. Theo Short Pants, Charlie Strange called my brother the one time he popped into the shop to have a laugh and gawp at me. Then introduced himself to Charlie Strange like the arrogant fool he is. I told him, no one in here's gonna be impressed by your Celtic thigh tattoos.

'Which horse?' I made a laugh sound like it was me that was simple. 'Which race?'

'On the nose.'

'Which horse?'

'On the nose.'

I wanted to ask again but he's got eyes like the devil when he's annoyed and the fire was starting to burn.

'Been told the name of the horse.' Charlie Strange looked like he was holding himself back; he closed his eyes and waited while his brain did some ticking. Behind him the Desponds had started queuing. There are about thirteen regulars. The voices muttering. The accents, the Bangladeshi, the Turkish, the Scottish, the Jamaican, the Irish, the Clampetts. The shop's like a social club for the local retired and terminally underemployed. All men in their fifties and sixties spending the day shooting the shit and taking advantage of the electric convector heaters, the unlimited collection of blunt stubby pencils and the free vend coffee machine. They could make all their 50p bets in one go at about ten past eleven in the morning when they arrive but that'd spoil their fun presumably. They like to wait till the last possible moment. Get me to make a mistake so they can get their money back when the bet gets void. They all know they're not going to win. They bet like other men fish. It passes the time; it makes them feel at one with nature. Not nature in the green fields, hello flowers, hello trees pastoral sense, more nature in the dog eat dog, chaos theory, sucked into a black hole of addiction sense.

Meanwhile Charlie Strange is explaining, 'It's a tip, do you see? Very good fella I know gives it to me. That's all there is to it. S'all I can say. He tells me he knows the jockey of a horse. Of a different horse to the one I'm betting on but he tells me he's very good. He says. The horse.'

'Okay.'

'So don't be asking me what race because I don't know. It's all new information to me. Straight from a friend of a jockey's mouth.'

If it was colder in here. If the electric convector heaters weren't turned up so bloody high there'd be steam coming out of Charlie Strange's flared nostrils. He's like a wild stallion that just needs taming and whispering to.

I'm able to think - sitting behind an inch thick sheet of bulletproof glass. Though I'm not sure anyone has ever tested it to make sure. Though it does withstand hammer attack - or it did the last time someone tried.

'On the nose.' He pushed an elastic band wrapped bundle of notes through to me.

'Of which horse?'

'Is the name of the horse.'

'Oh.'

'Don't know what race it's in.'

'I'll have a look for you.'

They do this all the time. Race horse owners. For their own amusement probably, to annoy me more likely. Sit around in their mansion houses deciding what to call their new geegees. Names like Brian, Trevor or Lorraine get instantly rejected. For some reason Polly Golightly, Gay Challenger, Magik Babe, Mucky Jim, Gay Lover and Lady Boxer get accepted. It passes the time, gives them something to do when the horse is having its oats. Except some of the owners have to prove how clever they are. Come up with names like On The Nose, Some Horse, Give Us A Kiss, Another Horse and The Won Wot Wun.

So I had a look through the runners and riders and found the race starring the mighty gelding On The Nose. Counted out Charlie Strange's roll of notes. £205. He kept a fiver to buy him and his Capford Twin friends some chips and gravy. £200 On The Nose. Filled in the slip. 16-1. The horse came fourth. Charlie Strange took it quite well seeing as that is by far the most money he has ever held in his hand or had hidden down his jockey shorts. He didn't break anything. Harry my boss was very surprised. He expected trouble. Charlie Strange just sat slumped in the corner, then rolled up in a ball and started wailing, biting his nails and dribbling on the lino. I wanted to go out there and comfort him, but I didn't want him to blame me and start screaming and telling me he was going to kill me and all my dependants, which has happened before. But from an 80-year-old incontinent it's not as frightening as it would be from Charlie Strange.

Besides he disappeared eventually and the Desponds kept the 50ps rolling in. Then came the big one. Two big bets in one day, it's almost enough to keep us in business. In fact this one was more than enough. £3000.

Someone we'd never seen before. Harry said he knew the type but it wasn't a type I'd ever seen before. Hey Big Spenders usually fit a pattern.

First there's the Social Spenders. They like to show off to their mates about how brave and rich and stupid they are. Then there's Secret Spenders.

They're all furtive looks and three-day stubble. Need to bet to pay off their gambling debts. Convinced this is the big one. If you're a Social Spender it's not so bad; part of the point is that you're proving you can afford to lose.

Lose easy, lose cool, win big, spend big. It's a nice philosophy. It would be nice to have the money to waste. Secret Spenders usually save enough money for a new pack of razor blades. Or go shoplifting for rope on their way home.

Funnily enough we don't get many old people betting big. Seems the old people round here prefer to spend their pension money on dog food and bleach. Apart from the Desponds, but I won't be drawn into criticising them. They pay my wages. Their loss is my £4.10 an hour.

Today's real Hey Big Spender was Welsh from what I could gather from the few words he spoke. Looked like a painting and decorating Clint Eastwood. Forties, short legs, moustache, blue paint speckled hair, acne pitted face making him look like he'd been attacked by a peddle-dashed wall earlier in his life. Razor creased white tracksuit and vee of chest hair, flip-flops and sunglasses. Passes over the yellow slip before the money. Cheese Hamper 3-1 on. Simple enough. 4:20 at Goodwood, heavily fancied, likes it in the rain. Or so the Capford Twins were telling me. All well and good. £3000. Is an amount I'm not used to seeing scribbled in blunt pencil. Mr H. Big Spender pushing the noteage through the gap to back up the paper promise.

It takes you a moment to tally up this kind of happening. You have to take it in silently, make sure you don't show your shock. Or that's what I think if only cos the punters like it when you're shocked. Adds to the Social Spender thing. You're just someone else to show off to. Even if they do think you're a muppet with a Miss Piggy nose ring. They're like rich flashers. Except their wallets are bigger than their genitals.

'Harry, can you have a look at this for me?'

If we've got a bet this big I don't have the authority to accept it. That's Harry my boss's job. You don't do a job like this to accept responsibility. You get to age twenty-six and you're working as a betting shop counter assistant for precisely the opposite reason. You want to avoid making decisions; you want to carry on thinking big thoughts about your big dreams that are going to turn to gold reality any day now. Or dust if you're feeling worthless and realistic. So we take the bet. Mr H.B. Spender exits the shop with his slip tucked in his zipped up pants pocket. We watch the race with crossed fingers and legs. The Capford Twins get excited.

'Be gonna win,' says Capford One.

'Wet,' says Capford Two. 'Horse not like wet.'

'Horse like a fish,' says Capford One.

They go on blah blah horsey blah.

The horse runs hard, the commentator gets hoarse. Bracey Butter wins at 5-2.

'So, Harry, what's the chance of me getting a bonus?'

Harry looks at me with his boss face.

'I took the bet after all. Surely I deserve a bonus? That's £3000 pure profit.' Hermit Harry is stonefaced. He's too busy pushing his glasses up his nose, scratching his slaphead and picking his nose and chewing his crows to have any interest in anything I might want to say.

'What about a bit of that performance related pay stuff. Isn't it about time we had an employee share buying scheme where you buy shares for me type of thing?'

Harry huffed and wandered back to his office to do his so-called paper work.

So it gets to the end of the day. A good day. Leaving me yawning, wondering what I'll have for tea then remembering how I went over to Abdul's micro-mini-mart across the road about twoish. How I bought myself a halal corned beef sandwich but never got round to eating it. Got distracted by Charlie Strange, two packets of cheese'n'rotten crisps and a white chocolate Twix. So there's tonight's worry and tribulation taken care of. A culinary delight is in the offing. Toasted halal corned beef sandwich with a cup-a-soup chaser. And a sprig of parsley because parsley's nice and it's the only thing I've got in the fridge. Theo says it won't grow if I keep it in the fridge. He says I have to water it, it needs sunlight and warmth. But I want to keep it fresh. I don't want it going off.

So I put my sandwich in a brown canvas moneybag and shove the rest of my things in with it, keys, Maltesers, chewie, lip balm, deathblack eyeshadow, orange stick. I'd carry a little rucksack or shoulder bag but I'm not a shoulder-bag/handbag sort of person. They tend to fall off your wrist when you're in the moshpit at a Marilyn Manson gig. But I throw everything in and have a quick tidy round in the hope I might be able to knock off early for a change.

Harry's locking up. 'Don't mind cashing up tonight, do you, Harry? Only I've got to get home to feed my fish before half past. Or. Or they won't be happy.' I've got to get home. To watch telly and wonder why I never go out. To end up poking at the blackheads round my nose and end up looking such a mess I'll never be able to go out for about a week and a half because I'm all scarred.

'Can't do tonight, I'm afraid, Sunshine. Just had a call from the security people. Running fifteen minutes late. Apparently they've got traffic on the roads tonight.'

'Traffic on the roads?' As opposed to diseased geese on the roads wandering like shell-shocked Vietnamese war refugees. Now that's an excuse I wouldn't mind them offering. It's a geese issue. Sorry we're ten minutes late. We tried to tell Mother Goose but she just kept going on about the horror the horror and rubbing the top of her head with her wing. Still, we managed to shoo them into a lay-by and here we are, so there's no harm done, hey?

'Ah but, Harry?'

'Ah but nothing, Sunshine. We're both of us need to stay until the money's collected. You know company policy.' His voice up and down like an opera singer. An opera singer that smokes 50 a day.

'That's not what you normally say, Harry.'

'Sure and for normal we'd not have a total of almost four thousand nicker waiting to be collected. Hughie Jones wouldn't like it.'

'Yeah, yeah.' Hughie Jones is the owner, Harry goes on about him all the time. About what great friends they are. I've never seen him.

He owns a chain of bookies in the South Central part of town and probably elsewhere, I don't really know. I'm not even sure he exists. Hughie Jones Turf Accountants is probably just a loveable name to make the shop seem more homely. Otherwise we'd be called Steal From The Poor Bookies or Betting Is For Idiots. 'Even so,' I start whining, 'couldn't you just let me go early this once?'

'No chance of that t'night. Or do you not think ...'

'What?'

'Oh nothing. You get on with the counting, Sunshine.'

'Alright. I'm counting aren't I?'

I'm counting money as carefully as Mr Scrooge. Except none of it belongs to me and if I knew a little Cratchett boy with spindly legs who really needed a turkey I'd buy him one. To keep as a pet mind. I don't eat anything that's intelligent enough to fly or swim. Pigs and sheep I have no qualms about slaughtering. Cows have a big eyelash model girl look that annoys me so they get the chop. Hens and their tastier younger chicken sisters I'm in two minds about. They fly about as well as I do. Though if you're sat in a metal cage all day you're never going to learn, so the juries out.

'Harry, do we accept Irish money?'

'In theory no. In practise it depends how much they're betting and whether I'm due to go and visit my mammy.'

Harry's going through the books. I don't know what he does but he sits in the office smoking and looking over his glasses at sheets of paper with numbers on them. That's probably all he is doing because I don't think he understands all this turf accounting nonsense.

'Harry, do we accept Monopoly money?'

'In theory no. In practise it depends how big the fella is.'

I've finished counting. I've finished re-counting. The money's in a bag ready to go.

'Harry?'

'No Bulgarian money. No buttons, money off tokens, wage slips or fake gold watches.'

'Harry?'

'Yes?'

'What do I do when someone's pointing a gun at me through the glass?'

'The glass is bullet-proof, Sunshine, you've nothing to worry about.'

The glass is over an inch thick and very strong. My skin if penetrated by a bullet is paper thin and very soft thanks to years of Vaseline Intensive Care and Oil of Olay rubbed into the elbows.

'Harry?'

'What is it now?'

'Harry please.'

It must be something in my voice. A note of horror, alarm, fear, anguish. Or perhaps he can smell the fact that I am rapidly wetting my pants.

As if from nowhere, like a genie out of a magic lamp, or a ski-masked armed robber from an unsupervised gent's toilet, stands a silent man with a revolver. He's not saying anything. He's not doing anything. Or I should say, he's not doing anything else apart from pointing his gun directly at my face. I'm protected by inch thick bullet-proof glass but at this very instant my faith in a bunch of workshy glaziers from Warrington is perhaps not total.

'What d'you want?' Harry asks the masked invader.

There doesn't seem much doubt in my mind what he wants. He just can't bring himself to ask. He's too polite. Or he doesn't want us to recognise his voice.

The gun stays steady. Stays pointed at my face. There's a click like a piece of machinery moving into place.

'We don't want any trouble,' says Harry. Me and Mr Gunman locked in a staring contest with the sound turned down. His piercing green eyes staring at me like Kryptonite laser beams.

'I think we better do as he says,' says Harry inching up by my side. I don't want to move, I don't want to make a wrong move. 'You know we have CCTV cameras here, don't you?' says Harry. 'You'll not get away with this.' Of course Harry forgets to say that the cameras haven't worked for about a month and Hughie Jones hasn't been arsed to send an engineer round to fix them yet. 'We're not going to try any funny business so you needn't get worried, Sir.' He calls the robber, 'Sir.' Like he's visiting royalty. That annoys me. I like an armed robber who defers to me. Gives me a bit of respect despite the fact that he's destroying my confidence and taking everything I've got. 'I'll pass you through this bag. That's all our takings for today. Then I'll come out there and open the door for you. We don't want any trouble.'

Harry seems to think that this isn't actually 'any trouble.' Whereas I'm sort of thinking this is the most trouble I have ever experienced in my life. Harry squishes the moneybag through the slot where I take the 50ps; pay out the £1.71 winnings to the Desponds. The gunman nods and takes the bag in his left hand, lowers the gun and waits for Harry to come through and let him out. He looks at me one more time and I don't know if he's smiling behind his ski-mask but he should be. Harry opens the door to the shop and the gunman runs off in his squeaky clean white trainers.

'Harry,' I say.

'I know, I know,' he says. 'We have to call the Old Bill.'

'But Harry.'

'What?'

And I'm about to say something. I'm about to say it for about three tenths of a second then it's like I'm at the dentist and he's sprayed freezing cold foam into my mouth so it won't move. It's the devil's dentist that often visits me in dreams, not Mr Crumbshaw who umms and ahhs and tells me I need another filling in my lower third molar.

'That was.'

'A terrible experience.'

'Do you know.'

'What it's like to have a gun pointed at your head? No, and it's not a feeling I want to know about either.'

'But I think I know who.'

'Is to blame for all this violence. It's the government whichever way you look at it. They should bring back hanging and birching. That must seem a funny thing to talk about right now but if I could get my hands on that big bugger I'd wring his bloody neck I would.'

'Harry?'

'Have we called the po-lice?'

'No, Harry.'

'And call yourself a cab why don't you, while you're at it. I'm not having you walking home on a night like this. Why you must be all shaken up.'

'Shouldn't I ... don't I have to stay for the police?'

'In the state you're in? Why, you're a bag of nerves, aren't you not? What, get yourself home and get your feet up, get a few drinks inside you.

They've got me to ask questions. I was here, was I not? Oh and Sunshine, when you've made your calls, will you put the kettle on for us? That'd be grand if you did. I know I'll be waiting me arse off for these police fellas to turn up. Take for ages they always do. Can talk to you in the morning can they not? As good then as it is now. Experience like this, it's not the sort of thing you're gonna forget in a hurry, is it?'

I'm too shaken to argue. It happened so quickly. I need to press reverse rewind and replay in my head. I'm in a daze as I call 999 then 226 7777 and tell the people on the other end where I am and tell them it's an emergency.

The taxi comes first and Harry tells me to get myself off home, so I grab my bag with my keys and my sandwich inside and go and sit in the back of the car. The driver's busy talking with Abdul from across the road about what's been going on. Then we're speeding away ultra-fast in the big black car like I'm escaping royalty. Escaping from a bunch of Kings and Duchesses who are giving chase on motorised scooters. Is the way I like to think about it.

And I know I won't be able to eat that sandwich tonight. I don't know what I even brought this bag with me for. But it's lucky I did because my keys are inside and my lip balm and corpse-black eyeshadow and orange stick. I pull open the neck of the brown canvas bag and reach in for my lip balm. At times like this you need all the protection you can get. Except. There is no lip balm in this bag. And no halal corned beef sandwich.