

# Apeman

*The Opening Chapters*

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## ***1. What Would Colin Firth Do Now?***

*What would Colin Firth do – right here, right now?*

Lenny Jones cursed inwardly and closed his eyes, shutting out the mocking glow of his Iphone.

*I doubt if Colin Firth even possesses a mobile, he thought, drumming his fingernails against the useless touchscreen of his own. Colin Firth doesn't handle cash or go to the toilet. Colin Firth has lackeys to do that kind of thing for him.*

*‘Fanny... arse... bollocks!’*

He opened his eyes and glanced along the street, appalled at his outburst. *And I bet Colin Firth doesn't prance around outside fancy restaurants, babbling to himself like a mentalist,* he reproached himself. *Not at four thirty in the afternoon. Not with his entire career hanging in the balance.*

Lenny closed his eyes again, catching his breath and holding it, waiting for the panicked *thud-thud-thudding* in his ears to subside. Had anyone inside the restaurant overheard his potty-mouthed ejaculation? It seemed unlikely. Celebrity hangouts like Flock worked hard to keep the demented rantings of the *hoi polloi* away from The Talent. *Thud, thud, thud.* He frowned. There wasn't any possibility that Casper Coxon had registered his expression of drop-jawed idiocy as he'd stepped from the gunmetal Mercedes, was there? No – the director's attention had been utterly absorbed by the beautiful, achingly familiar girl on his arm. *Thud. Thud. Thud.*

Without leaving his shop doorway, Lenny craned his neck for a better view of the restaurant, trying to manoeuvre his gaze beyond the frosted swirls of its smoked glass windows. Only the ghostly shadows of indistinct faces were visible in the interior darkness, surfacing at intervals like silent koi in some distant, fathomless fish bowl. Lenny bit his lip. If just *one* of the variables had been different – *different restaurant, different director, different girl* – he reckoned he might have risked it. Maybe when he was younger. Maybe if he'd been a bit more flush. But not today; not without backup. He reached back into his pocket and withdrew his mobile, still warm from before, still useless. *What would Colin Firth do now?*

Lenny breathed deeply, fixing his gaze on a passing taxi as he tried to dismiss the teddy-faced actor from his thoughts. It had always been Colin Firth, of course – waiting for him, whenever he got stressed, in the wings of his mind. He supposed it was because Colin Firth had been the

first 'proper' actor he'd met. Or semi-met, anyway, years earlier, just after moving down to London. It had been a phase he'd gone through – an absurdly cocky, world-is-my-oyster phase – during which he'd blagged his way into film premieres, casting agents' offices, BBC parties. Colin Firth had materialised at one of the latter, and for two gawkish hours Lenny had hovered on the periphery of his entourage, blinking myopically into the nebulous glimmer of distant stardom.

He groaned. Now he came to think of it, Colin Firth *had* possessed a mobile – an anonymous sliver of platinum upon which he'd made a single, discreet call immediately prior to his departure. *If only you were here now, Col,* thought Lenny. *Freezing your knackers off in my shop doorway. You and your sexy phone.*

Lenny peered at his own mobile, scrolling through the 'Contacts' list again – faster this time, barely registering the names, no longer wondering how to pitch his unlikely proposition

to Sol, or Charlie, or Becca. He glanced over his shoulder at the restaurant window. *His unlikely proposition.* How would his handful of remaining acting friends respond to it? Like ravenous wolves, he supposed. After all, they were hardly household names, none of them tipped to be the next James Bond or Dr Who. He sighed. None were exactly A-listers on the 'mates' front, either – those embittered veterans of provincial rep, long-shelved sitcom pilots, profit-share theatre-in-education – although it scarcely mattered, reflected Lenny grimly, since he couldn't phone any of them anyway. *Bollocks.*

Clearly there was only one thing left to do. Retreating further into his shop doorway, he dialled.

‘Good afternoon. You're through to Customer Services. This is Michelle speaking.’

Lenny glanced heavenward. *A woman. Northern, by the sound of her. Thank God.* ‘Hi. My name's Jones. Leonard Jones. I have a – uh, *situation* – that you may be able to help me with.’

He crossed his fingers.

‘What appears to be the problem, Mr Jones?’

‘Well, I'm in a bit of a fix. My phone appears to have run out of credit. And the awkward thing is, I need to make a couple of urgent calls. Emergency calls, really.’

A momentary silence.

‘Calls to the emergency services are free, Mr Jones. Shall I put you through?’

He closed his eyes. ‘Ah, well, no. It's not really that kind of emergency. I just need enough credit to call a couple of people. A couple of rather influential people.’

‘Then you'll need to top up your phone. Would you like to buy some airtime?’

Lenny fought the urge to wince. ‘I would *love* to, Michelle,’ he said. ‘But the thing is, I don't actually have my, uh, credit card on me.’

Another silence.

‘I see.’

‘And I wondered whether you might be

prepared to let me, uh, *borrow* a few minutes of airtime in lieu of my next top-up. As a one-off gesture. To a valued customer.'

'I'm reviewing your account details now, Mr Jones.'

*His account details. Shit.* Lenny felt a silent chasm opening in his gut, a sickening vacuum that seemed to tug at his testicles, urging them to withdraw deep inside his body. *Possibly forever.* He fought the urge to cup them. 'My account details? Is that absolutely necessary?'

'Apparently so. Because this doesn't appear to be the first occasion when you've asked for free airtime.'

'No?'

'No. You asked for some on the fifteenth of the month. And on the seventeenth. And three times, yesterday.' The operator's tone grew icy. 'In fact, as far as I can tell, you haven't actually *paid* for a call in over two months.'

'Yes, yes. But like I said – this is an emergency.' Lenny glanced over his shoulder at

the restaurant door. No one had entered or left since he'd been on the phone – thank God. ‘I'm having a genuine crisis, here.’

‘What kind of crisis, precisely?’

Lenny glared at his handset. *A fuck-off-and-mind-your-own-business crisis.* ‘It's... uh, a *professional* one,’ he said.

‘I can't help unless you're more specific.’

Lenny gritted his teeth. Being specific – particularly in relation to actual, unequivocal facts – was something that only ever led to misunderstandings. Still, his current circumstances were exceptional and – he realised with a shudder – he had little to lose from divulging at least *part* of the truth. He cleared his throat. ‘You have, I assume, heard of Casper Coxon?’

‘The film director? That American? The bald one?’

*The brilliant one,* thought Lenny. *The one whose visionary brilliance has seared the very hair from his head.* ‘That's him,’ he said. ‘The

bald one. And you've also heard about the restaurant, Flock?’

‘That posh London place, where all the celebrities go?’

‘That one, yes.’

‘What about it?’

‘Well, Michelle – I am an actor – an extremely dedicated and talented young actor – and there's something I need to talk to Casper Coxon about. He's over from Hollywood to cast his next film, and I'd like to discuss the possibility of getting a part in it.’

‘So?’

Lenny glanced over his shoulder again, reassuring himself that the restaurant hadn't changed hands in the last sixty seconds, or turned into a laundrette, or grown legs and wandered off down the street. It hadn't. ‘Well, about five minutes ago I happened to see Casper Coxon going into Flock,’ he began, trying to disregard the new, manic, sing-song quality of his own voice. ‘He was accompanied by an old

acquaintance of mine. Someone who owes me a favour. Someone who could introduce me to the big man. So I want to go into Flock too, except I can't, because I haven't got anyone to go in with.'

'Can't you just go in on your own?'

'Don't be ridiculous,' snapped Lenny.

'Why not? You're a talented young actor. You said so yourself.'

Lenny winced, regretting having caused the injured note in the operator's voice. 'Where are you from, Michelle?' he said gently.

'Whitby.'

'Wow. Really?' said Lenny, momentarily stunned. 'Me too.'

'Small world, Mr Jones.'

'It is.' He leaned back against the wall, his energy suddenly spent. 'Well, going into Flock isn't like popping into the Magpie Cafe for a bag of chips and a saveloy. Things are different down here.'

'I know that.'

'And I don't want Casper Coxon seeing me

on my own. I want him to see me looking like the popular, successful, social individual that I am.'

'Mm.'

'And I can't go into Flock on my own because... because I haven't really got a 'Flock' income at the moment.' Lenny stared at his shoes, one of which seemed to be attempting to hide beneath the other. Fashionable when he'd bought them some years earlier, the two-tone brogueing had long ago decomposed into indistinct scribbles on the ravaged leather. *We are you*, his shoes appeared to say. *In 'footwear' form*. 'So I just need to phone a friend,' said their owner quietly. 'Someone who can get here really, really quickly. Someone who'll go into Flock with me and make me feel like less of a loser in front of Casper Coxon. But if you don't think you can help—'

'Do I know your voice? From the telly or something?'

Lenny frowned. 'Possibly.'

‘You aren't the voice on the Chokstix advert, are you?’

*Oh God. Bloody, bloody Chokstix – again.*  
‘Among other things,’ he said, as lightly as he could. ‘Yes.’

‘I love that ad,’ said Michelle. ‘How did they get the dog to move its mouth like it's talking?’

‘Computers. It's not a real dog.’

At the other end of the line, Lenny could almost hear the operator deflate. ‘Oh. Right. Of course. Computers. So – do you use a professional name? When you're working?’

‘Maybe,’ said Lenny, frowning again. ‘Why?’

‘Well, I've just looked up 'Lenny Jones, actor' on the internet and nothing came up. What do you look like?’

Lenny didn't miss a beat. ‘Caucasian, twenty-nine, acting age of nineteen to thirty-three, five foot seven and a half, slim-to-athletic build, smooth-chested, light Mediterranean

complexion, hazel eyes, clean shaven with a full head of thick, natural brown-black hair.' *Plus athlete's foot, a permanent stress rash on my left buttock and all the early symptoms of zinc deficiency,* he mentally added, catching sight of himself in the shop window opposite. He sighed. Michelle wasn't going to budge; that much was clear. 'Imagine a boy band composed entirely of poor quality Peter Andre look-alikes,' he said resignedly. 'I look like the gay one.'

'So would I recognise you from the telly?'

'You might,' he lied. 'I've been on *Eastenders*. *Holby* a couple of times. I was one of the regular 'background' policemen in the fourth series of *A Touch Of Frost*. And I was on *The Bill* three times.'

'They've stopped making *The Bill* now, haven't they?'

'I'm afraid they have.' Lenny edged out of the shop doorway and allowed himself a last lingering look at Flock. 'Look, Michelle, I'd love to carry on chatting, but I've really got loads I

need to do. First I've got to mug someone for their mobile. Then the police will probably want me for a few hours and—'

'I *have* put a minute's airtime on your account, you know.'

Lenny's heart leapt. '*What?* Seriously? You've given me airtime?'

'Just a minute. Literally sixty seconds. And only because I like the talking dog that you do in the Chokstix advert. Call me if you ever make it to Hollywood.'

It took Lenny some moments to find his voice. 'Thank you so—' he began – but the line was already dead. He jiggled his phone nervously from hand to hand, then clutched it tight, suddenly aware of how precious it had just become. *So who should he phone?* Sol was an arsehole, but only lived ten minutes away. Becca was a crashing bore, but unlikely to outshine him in Casper Coxon's company. And while Charlie could afford to fund an evening in Flock, he'd definitely try to corner Casper Coxon for

himself...

Lenny stared at his Iphone.

*What would Colin Firth do now?*

## ***2. Dangerously Fashionable. Edgy.***

‘So you called *me?*’ said Jeremy, shaking out his napkin. He regarded Lenny unblinkingly over half-moon sunglasses. ‘I mean, I’m no actor, kid. They wouldn’t even let me do the school panto.’

Lenny winced as one of Jeremy’s steel toecaps gently connected with his ankle. It was the third such accidental impact in as many minutes – the fifth, if you included the number of times Jeremy had inadvertently kicked his own tool bag. ‘Just check out the starters, mate,’ Lenny urged. ‘That waitress will be back in a

tick.'

Jeremy grunted and flipped open the menu. Suddenly the furniture restorer grinned. '*Ha*. They do fish finger sandwiches,' he declared triumphantly. 'And French bread pizza. And chicken nuggets and *fuck me will you just look at those prices.*'

Lenny winced again. Flock was not the kind of establishment where people normally enjoined their companions to '*fuck me*'. Nor was it customary to comment on anything so vulgar as the prices. People who dined in Flock – cultivated, smartly-attired media types with fat wallets and skinny girlfriends – conveyed their opinions through murmured asides, effervescent banter, or well-regarded columns in some of the glossier monthlies. *And they didn't usually bring bags full of hammers and chisels with them, either.*

He groaned inwardly. Asking his old school friend to meet him outside Flock had clearly been a dreadful, dreadful mistake. At the time, of

course, it had struck him as the opposite – a plan so brilliant and off-the-wall that it simply *had* to work. *Don't phone one of your actor friends. Phone someone you can trust. Phone Jeremy.* Jeremy, after all, was reassuringly substantial; good-looking; self-confident and fun. Women liked Jeremy. Everyone liked Jeremy. When you walked into a dodgy bar with Jeremy, you felt protected. *Psychologically tooled up.* Lenny shivered. Except, of course, Flock wasn't a dodgy bar. And Jeremy's only contribution to making Lenny feel 'tooled up' had been in the form of – he glanced once more at the floor – tools.

*Tools. Oh God.* Lenny glanced at his friend, now flicking a fragment of bread stick from his oil-stained shirt. 'Fish finger sandwiches, French bread pizza – that's Flock's USP,' he said at length. 'The food's all cheesy retro stuff, but with a *haute cuisine* twist. Dangerously fashionable. Edgy.'

'Edgy?'

'Certainly. It's... uh, retro-modernist. Kitsch.

Colin Firth eats here. All the big names do.'

'Like what's-her-name?' Jeremy inclined his head towards Casper Coxon's table. 'Your actress friend? The one sitting with Bald Eagle?'

Lenny felt his throat tighten as he followed his friend's gaze. The elfin figure at Casper Coxon's side was almost invisible in the dark seclusion of the restaurant's rear enclave. 'Like Kate and Casper, yes.' Suddenly a thought struck him. 'What's Kate eating, anyway?'

'Go have a butcher's,' said Jeremy. 'Use it as your opening gambit. *Hello, Katie. Remember me? Your old mate Len? Hey, what's that you're scoffing? Spaghetti hoops? 'Cos they look bloody gorgeous...*'

'No, no, *no*,' said Lenny, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. 'That's not the way you break the ice with a girl like Kate.' He bit his lip. 'I just need the right angle...'

Jeremy shook his head. 'Well, I shouldn't leave it too long, kid,' he advised. 'We've been here twenty minutes already.'

‘Mm.’

Jeremy closed the menu. ‘So, what do you reckon your Uncle Jezzar should have, then?’

‘Whatever you want.’

‘Irrespective of cost?’

For a moment, Lenny's brow furrowed in incomprehension. ‘What do I care?’ he eventually shrugged.

‘Cool, cool. Well, I reckon I'm going to have...’

Suddenly Lenny looked up. ‘*Don't have a burger,*’ he hissed.

‘Why not?’

‘Because you're not in a bloody Wimpy bar.’

Frowning, Jeremy shifted his muscular bulk in his seat. The sinews in his neck pulled gently against his shirt as he very deliberately peered around the restaurant – at the curving zinc-topped bar, the *faux* crystal chandeliers hanging above it, the lurid flock wallpaper everywhere else. Finally his aggrieved-looking eyes came to

rest once more upon his companion. ‘Are you sure?’

Lenny said nothing.

‘I *do* know how to behave myself amongst civilians, mate,’ pressed Jeremy, a note of injured pride now tangible in his voice.

‘Okay. Sorry. I’m stressed. I just don’t want to muck things up with Kate, when we finally get talking.’ Lenny glanced over towards the shadowy booth at the rear of the restaurant. ‘Which is why it might be best if you don’t tell her what you do for a living.’

‘Oh?’

‘Tell her you’re an actor, like me. Tell her—’ Lenny’s eyes narrowed on his friend’s sceptical-looking countenance, his lumberjack shirt and beloved Greek army boots. ‘*That’s* it. Tell her you’re getting into character.’

Jeremy’s frown deepened. ‘What character?’

‘Axe murderer?’ ventured Lenny after some moments’ consideration. ‘Some sort of rural

simpleton?’

A moment later, the waitress's slender shadow fell across the table. Like all of Flock's staff, she was crushingly youthful and attractive – her flawless complexion only a shade lighter than her wide, chocolate-coloured eyes. Unlike most of her colleagues, however, she'd somehow managed to make her 'flock'-effect waistcoat flatter an already intoxicating figure. Lenny glanced sidelong at his friend, surprised that Jeremy – once again engrossed in his menu – had apparently failed to register her heart-stopping looks. *No tongue hanging out. No obvious palpitations.* He glanced back at her face, confirming his initial assessment, and feeling his own stomach flutter a little as she unblinkingly returned his gaze. ‘Hello again,’ he managed at length. ‘I think I'm going to go for the chick–’

‘My colleague and I will have a pair of Flockburgers, please,’ interrupted Jeremy, thrusting the menus back across the table. ‘Extra rare, very bloody. With loads of chips. And two

of your most absurdly expensive beers.'

For an instant an expression of disquiet flitted across the waitress's face. 'You'd like two Flockburgers... and two Yen-Birus?' she said.

'Are they your most absurdly expensive beers?' asked Jeremy patiently.

'Erm, yes.'

'And are they retro-modernist? Kitsch?' he pressed. 'Are they what Colin Firth drinks?'

'I couldn't say.'

'Well, are they ludicrously overpriced and pretentious?'

The waitress laughed nervously. 'Well, they're not to everyone's tastes.' *Or pocket*, her eyes seemed to add.

'Well, we want them. We're famous actors, me and Jonesy,' said Jeremy. 'You've probably seen us on telly. I generally play axe murderers. Lenny does adverts for haemorrhoid cream.' He pulled a pantomime expression of agony and pointed over his shoulder at his backside, just in case there was any doubt in the waitress's mind

regarding where the cream might go. ‘Sales have gone through the roof since Jonesy's been flogging it. Remember the name – *Lenny Jones, the haemorrhoid guy.*’

‘I certainly will,’ said the waitress, nervously retreating from the table.

Lenny waited until her footfalls had disappeared beneath the restaurant's slough of insipid loungecore before leaning across the table. ‘You – utter – *wanker,*’ he hissed.

‘What, me?’

‘You complete *bastard.*’

‘A bastard? *Moi?*’

‘Yes, you. You couldn't just be normal, could you?’

Jeremy raised his hands defensively. ‘I was getting into character, like you told me to,’ he said. ‘Actors are all arrogant egomaniacs, aren't they?’

‘Certainly not,’ Lenny lied.

‘Up their own arses? Off their heads on drugs?’

*Only the ones with jobs,* reflected Lenny bitterly. ‘One or two of them,’ he conceded.

‘Right. I’m off to the gents, then,’ declared Jeremy loudly, pushing back his chair theatrically. ‘*Powdering my nose.*’

Lenny watched his grinning friend amble towards the rear of the restaurant, past Kate and Coxon’s table, terrified for an instant that he might try to engage them in conversation. *Maybe I should do it now,* he reflected, swallowing hard. *Get it over with, before he comes back from the gents. Just go over and say hi. Because if I don’t do it now...*

He looked up, startled by the shadow that had once again fallen over the table.

‘One Yen-Biru for the axe murderer,’ said the waitress, placing a frosted flute of amber liquid next to Jeremy’s abandoned sunglasses. ‘Missing, presumably dismembering someone in the toilet.’ She leaned past Lenny, close enough for him to catch a hint of something mouth-wateringly cinnamon-scented emanating from

her hair. He closed his eyes, trying to commit the sensation to memory. ‘And one Yen-Biru for Lenny Jones. Lenny Jones... *the haemorrhoid guy.*’

‘Ah,’ said Lenny, opening his eyes and smiling wanly. *Thanks, Jeremy.* ‘You remembered.’

The waitress smiled, a smile that broke briefly into a half-suppressed grin; then she tapped her forehead once with an immaculately-manicured fingernail and started for the kitchen. Unable to watch her leave, Lenny turned to his beer. A second later he was on his feet. ‘Hang on a sec,’ he said. ‘Just a minute. There's something in my drink.’ He wiped a two-inch window into the condensation on Jeremy's glass. ‘Actually, there's something in *both* our drinks.’

‘Uh... well, yes.’

Lenny picked his glass up and held it to the light. ‘What is it?’

‘It's a 10,000 Yen note.’

In his stomach, Lenny felt something stir.

Ten thousand Yen sounded like an awful lot of money. Gingerly he returned his glass to the table. ‘And why's it there?’

‘Because your friend ordered two Yen-Birus.’

‘And a Yen-Biru..?’

‘Has a 10,000 Yen note in it, yes.’

A series of non-verbal grunts and whines auditioned at Lenny's throat before he finally found words. ‘But... *why?*’ he said.

The waitress glanced at the bar. Clearly, Flock's staff were not encouraged to discuss the restaurant's distinctly quirky drinks policy with the customers. ‘Well, it's a novelty thing, isn't it?’ she said quietly. ‘A sort of postmodern joke – obliquely parodying consumer culture, while simultaneously celebrating its excesses.’

Lenny's mind filled with questions. *You're not just a waitress, are you?* was the most pressing, closely followed by *Can we pretend that my idiot friend never ordered these stupid drinks?* and *Have you ever felt yourself*

*hopelessly attracted to a member of the acting profession?* He swallowed hard. ‘And how much – roughly – is 10,000 Yen?’ he said.

‘Just over seventy-three pounds,’ said the waitress. ‘At today's exchange rate.’

‘So the beer is..?’

‘One hundred and twenty-five pounds a glass.’

Lenny's vision swam, the restaurant's lurid flock wallpaper melting horribly into the shimmering globe lanterns behind the waitress's head. For a fleeting moment, he wondered whether he'd somehow been transported back to the non-ironic, non-postmodern squalor of his Golders Green flat. Then his vision cleared. ‘And what happens to the banknote?’ he said.

‘Well, I once had a customer who tried eating one. But most people keep it as a souvenir. Real high-fliers leave it in the glass, as a tip for the waitress.’

‘I see. Thank you so much. You're been extremely informative.’

The waitress smiled. 'Your Flockburgers will be along in a minute,' she said, turning for the kitchen.

Lenny managed to wait almost five whole heartbeats before sliding two furtive fingers into his Yen-Biru. A second's frantic fishing was enough to see his 10,000 Yen note drip-drying over the edge of the table, Jeremy's joining it only moments later. He cursed under his breath. *Bloody Jeremy. Bloody Yen-Birus.* Lenny shivered, catching sight of Jeremy's cowboy swagger silhouetted against the wall of tangerine neon at the toilets' entrance. He hastily pulled his napkin over the two 10,000 Yen notes as his friend sat down. 'Ah. *Drinkies,*' said Jeremy, grinning as picked up his glass and inclined it in salutation towards Lenny. He swallowed half its contents. 'Can't see what's so special about this stuff.'

'You'll appreciate it more if you drink it slowly,' urged Lenny. 'Savour it. And for Christ's sake, *don't* order another.'

Jeremy grunted equably, leaned back in his chair, raised his glass to his lips and downed the remainder of his beer. Lenny closed his eyes. ‘You didn't savour it, did you?’ he said at length.

‘It's lager. It's meant to be quaffed.’

‘It's *meant* to be savoured,’ hissed Lenny, failing to hide his frustration. ‘So tell me, Jez – are you going to be *quite* such a pain in the neck when I'm talking to Kate?’

‘I'm not *being* a pain in the neck,’ said Jeremy. ‘I'm just having a nice relaxing time with my good friend Leonard.’ He lowered his voice. ‘And frankly, kid, you're not *going* to talk to Kate. Not until you make the effort of going over to her table and alerting her to your presence.’

Lenny squirmed in his seat. ‘I told you,’ he said. ‘I just need to think of an *approach*—’

‘I mean,’ pressed Jeremy, ‘if she's really your *friend*, she won't mind having her dinner interrupted, will she?’ He stretched back and yawned. ‘Of course, if she *isn't* your friend –’

‘She *is*,’ snapped Lenny.

‘So how do you know her?’

‘We did a movie together. Last year. Got on like a house on fire.’

Jeremy frowned. ‘You weren't in a film last year,’ he declared, swapping Lenny's full glass for his own empty one. ‘You never do any proper acting. All you do is ponce around in daft costumes giving away promotional samples of Sunny-D and Cillit Bang.’

‘I was in a film last year,’ Lenny insisted.

‘You spent most of it hobbling round with your foot in plaster.’

‘The only reason I ended up with my foot in plaster is *because* I was in a movie,’ said the indignant actor. ‘I *did* tell you about it, but you were always drunk back then. It was when Lisa was working in Shanghai...’

Jeremy frowned but didn't speak. His girlfriend's six-month sabbatical in China, courtesy of Deutsche Bank, had been a trying time. ‘What was this film, then?’ he said at length.

*'The Corsair's Hat.'*

The furniture restorer's frown deepened as he drained Lenny's beer. 'Seriously?' he said. 'I bought that for Lisa on DVD. It was quite horny. Don't remember seeing you, though.'

'Kate and I were in a crowd scene together. That bit where the Spanish mercenaries lay siege to the convent—'

'I bet you were just an extra,' grinned Jeremy.

'I had a supporting role, if that's what you mean...'

'*You were an extra!*' crowed Jeremy. 'What was it you said? *A rural simpleton*. Who was your mate Kate playing, then?'

'Consuela's younger sister.'

Behind the opaque lenses of his half-moon shades, Jeremy's eyes narrowed. *The Corsair's Hat. Consuela. Consuela's younger sister. The siege at the convent.* Then he sat bolt upright in his seat, swivelled left, then right, peering first into the darkness at the rear of the restaurant and

then, over the rim of his sunglasses, at Lenny. ‘Is *that* Kate Amundsen?’ he gasped. ‘Back there, with the bald guy? *The* Kate Amundsen? The A-Bomb? Bloody hell. I didn't recognise her with her clothes on.’

‘Keep your voice down, for God's sake,’ hissed Lenny.

‘But you *know* Kate Amundsen?’

‘Yes,’ said Lenny. ‘Vaguely. She owes me a minor debt of goodwill. Which is why I hope she'll introduce me to her good friend, Casper Coxon.’

Jeremy blew his cheeks out in speechless admiration. Then, collapsing back into his chair, he inclined his empty glass in the direction of the restaurant's rear alcove. ‘Well, you'd best look sharp, mate,’ he said.

‘Why?’

‘Because they're leaving.’

### ***3. An Intervention. A Reality Check.***

Jeremy extinguished *Emergency Hangover Cigarette No. 3* and gazed across the glittering waters of West India Quay, happy to let the sunlight spatter mindless graffiti over the insides of his brain. *Hell's bells*, he thought, shivering in the morning chill. *What did I drink last night?* Pulling Lisa's cardigan tight around his shoulders, he nudged the balcony door open and tottered back into the coffee-scented fug of the flat. *It was a bit frisky, whatever it was*, he

reflected, trying hard not to visualise the row upon row of empty bottles that he and Lenny had managed to squeeze on to their table. *So many fun-filled bottles. So many pretty labels.*

He shivered again, tiptoeing to where Lisa stood at the foot of the sofa. ‘He’s sweet, isn’t he?’ she whispered, nodding at Lenny’s sleeping form. ‘Like a little kitten. He even snores nicely.’

Jeremy frowned. There was nothing remotely kittenish about Lenny Jones as far as he could see – apart from his shameless freeloading and a tendency to annexe people’s sofas. He grunted as loudly as he dared, less for fear of waking up his uninvited guest than the effect a truly contemptuous grunt would have on his headache.

‘I’ve always felt like a big sister to him,’ Lisa continued, *sotto voce*, gazing affectionately at the slumbering thespian. ‘Ever since school.’

If the throbbing behind his eyes had allowed it, Jeremy would have taken this opportunity to shake his head in wonderment.

Why had women always taken pity on Lenny? Fed him. Let him sleep in their beds. Lent him money. *Was it because he looked like a gay Peter Andre?* Jeremy glanced sidelong at his girlfriend, another hot flush of shame engulfing him. She'd lent *both* of them a dizzying sum of money the previous night, he reflected, when she'd come to bail them out of Flock.

*Slightly over five hundred pounds.* That was how enormous their bill had become by the time Lisa turned up with her Deutsche Bank platinum card. Jeremy had contributed as much as he could – forty quid in rumpled fivers and assorted shrapnel. *And how much had Lenny thrown into the pot, yanking out his pocket-linings and dancing a moronic jig around the table?* Jeremy glared at the dozing actor. *Nothing. Not a bean. Zilch.*

Lisa squeezed his fingers. 'Let him sleep,' she whispered. 'Seems like he needs it. I don't think he's been looking after himself.'

'No?'

‘I don't think so, no.’

Jeremy glanced at Lisa, then at the actor-shaped lump on the sofa. The only thing Lenny Jones had *ever* looked after was himself, he reflected. Failure to notice this was like failing to notice that Mr Kipling enjoyed the occasional spot of baking, or that George Michael was fond of bracing romps across Hampstead Heath. And Lenny's almost absurd selfishness was one of the things that made Lenny... *Lenny*. Self-obsession was the deranged dynamo that propelled him through life, the drug that insulated him from awareness of his million-or-so major personal defects. Jeremy glanced across at Lisa's furrowed brow, silently amazed that she could simultaneously be so brainy and so naïve. ‘He's fine,’ he finally volunteered, a note of avuncular gruffness entering his voice. ‘This *is* Lenny Jones we're talking about. He's not made of bone china.’

For a second, Lisa bit her lip in apparent indecision. Then she took Jeremy's wrist and

gently steered him into the shadows of the hallway. Passing Jeremy her coffee cup, she slipped on her jacket. ‘Lenny's been having it really tough, recently,’ she said, glancing back at the still-snoring body in the sitting room. ‘His landlord's trying to evict him for rent arrears. He kept ranting about being pursued by the Golders Green mafia in the taxi last night, after you fell asleep.’

The possibility that Lenny had said *anything* coherent in the taxi seemed unlikely to Jeremy, but he declined to say so. He'd been scarcely capable of speech himself – even before he passed out – and didn't feel up to much beyond monosyllables now. *Monosyllables and low intestinal growls*. He closed his eyes and held his breath until the prickly wave of nausea had passed. ‘Yeah. Poor Len,’ he said drily.

‘He's been really unlucky getting work and he's never got any money.’

‘That's because he's an actor, kid. Actors *like* being poor. It gives them something to

whinge about that *normal* people can identify with.'

Lisa sighed dismissively and continued her preparations for leaving the flat. In her own mind, Jeremy knew, she thought he was being wilfully obtuse. He also knew exactly what Lisa believed to be the source of Lenny's problems. *His lack of any regular, stabilising female company.* 'Lenny'll be fine,' he reassured her, turning to kiss her forehead. 'But if it makes you happy, I'll take him out for breakfast and have a proper chat with him. Man to actor. Callum's not expecting me at work 'til this afternoon.'

Lisa smiled as she opened the front door, inclining her lips towards Jeremy's, only veering away when she caught the full horror of his bed-breath. She nodded in the direction of the sitting room. 'Oh – and tell Lenny not to worry about last night. You can tell him I don't mind about the money.'

'Okay. Right,' said Jeremy, momentarily stunned. Even for Lisa, who did something

almost laughably lucrative in mergers and acquisitions, five hundred quid was a lot of cash to write off at a stroke. 'You sure? Seriously?'

'Tell him it was my treat. Early birthday present or something.' Lisa shrugged, turning lightly on her heel and making for the lift at the end of the corridor. 'And you can give me your half on Friday, when you get paid,' she added, her words echoing along the tube of brushed steel and glass that connected their Docklands eyrie to the rest of the world. 'I won't be home late.'

For some moments Jeremy stared mutely along the converging lines of the corridor as though gazing into a fathomless pit. Then, when the lift door finally opened and Lisa had disappeared from view, he slumped against the doorjamb, unable to move. *You can give me your half on Friday.* That's what she'd said, hadn't she? *Tell Lenny not to worry about last night. Tell him I don't mind about the money.*

Jeremy shook his head, immediately

regretting having done so as fresh nausea fluttered at the base of this throat. Then he gingerly levered himself upright and retreated into the flat. He didn't *mind* paying Lisa what he owed her, he reluctantly reasoned, crossing to the balcony and stepping back into the azure Docklands morning. He'd fully *expected* to have to pay her back for bailing him out, anyway. It was just that letting Lenny bloody Jones off his two-hundred-and-fifty quid folly seemed... *wrong*.

He lit his second cigarette of the morning, inhaled deeply and thought hard. Then, fortified by the cloud of blue smoke that now engulfed his head, he strode back into the sitting room and over to the sofa. There was nothing, he reasoned, that actually *prevented* Lenny Jones from earning an honest crust. He was a quick learner, physically fit, sharp as a tack, a tenacious little git when he wanted to be. And God knows, he was *qualified* enough to make his own way in the world – a fully trained teacher, for heaven's sake.

Jeremy stared down at his sleeping friend, his brow furrowing behind the soft-focus swathe of cigarette smoke. Lenny's membership of the teaching profession had always been a source of mystery to him – a source of mystery to most people, actually – particularly since Lenny so seldom spoke of it. It was easy to picture *Mr L Jones, teacher, BA(Hons), PGCE* as a limited edition action figure, still in its cellophane, too pristine and valuable for the rough and tumble of the classroom.

Still, it was easier to picture Lenny as a professional teacher than an actor. Only in his own mind did Lenny's career prospects extend any further than 'sleazy drunk' in *Eastenders* or 'corpse on mortuary slab' in *Holby*, or sharing a crowd scene with Kate Amundsen and five hundred other starstruck mentalists. Jeremy peered at Lenny's sleeping face, waving aside the lingering miasma of smoke, recalling the times he'd seen his old school friend's appearances on TV – none of which, *not for one second*, had

convinced him that Lenny Jones was anyone other than... well, Lenny Jones.

*Aye, thought Jeremy, shaking his head sadly. The truth is that Lenny Jones couldn't act his way out of a wet paper bag. And maybe it's time someone gave the bugger some friendly careers guidance.* He strained to remember the titles from Lisa's bookshelves that he'd flicked through, and the mad jargon they'd contained. *Life coaching. An intervention. A reality check.* Then he glanced across at where he'd abandoned his Greek army boots the previous evening. *A kick up the arse.*

Jeremy leaned low over the snoring actor, stopping only when his mouth was an inch from his ear. 'Oh *Leonard*,' he said. 'Wakey-wakey. Rise and shine.'

Nothing.

'Lenny. Lenny Jones. Time to get up and greet the day, mate.'

Nothing.

Jeremy's hand disappeared beneath the

duvet, closing a moment later around one of Lenny's ankles. He gave it a gentle tug. 'Oi. Champagne Charlie.' He tugged harder, his voice dropping to an ominous growl. 'Last chance. Wake up, you little sod.'

And then, when the body on the sofa had shown no sign of animation beyond a couple of agitated grunts, Jeremy pulled hard against the dead weight of the comatose actor. Lenny's unconscious body slid gently off the smooth leather and fell on to the parquet floor with a thud – and only then did his eyes open. 'Ah. Jez,' he said at length, apparently unsurprised at finding himself spread-eagled on the floor in only his underpants. 'Sleep well?'

'Like a top. You?'

'Good, good.' Lenny gently rubbed the buttock that had absorbed most of the force of his landing, his eyes panning from side to side around the unfamiliar room. 'No danger of a spot of brekkie, is there?'

'I thought I'd take you out, actually,' said

Jeremy, his soft voice belying an icy smile. 'My treat. Little caff I know down Greenwich way.'

'That's uncommonly civil of you.'

'Think nothing of it, kid. Stick your head under the shower and get your drawers on.'

Lenny eyed his friend accusingly across the chipped formica table. Over the previous ten minutes, he'd slid further and further down the scab-coloured banquette until now only his neck and head were visible. 'You *said* you were taking me out for breakfast,' he finally declared.

Jeremy inclined his head towards the plate on the table. 'And there it is,' he said. 'Your breakfast. A Truckers' Special with extra fried bread and double hash browns, no mushrooms. Just what the doctor ordered.'

Lenny shivered in spite of the cafe's warm, greasy atmosphere. He seriously doubted whether any member of the medical profession had ever entered the premises, except perhaps in

the company of a health inspector, and the possibility that either of them would willingly endorse the Truckers' Special seemed even less likely. The entire female cast of *Casualty*, stripped naked and lightly oiled, couldn't persuade him to put any more of it in his mouth. 'Can't eat it,' he said.

'What's wrong with it?'

Lenny subjected his friend to a withering look. 'Well, mate, it appears to have strings attached.'

For some moments, Jeremy feigned confusion. Then he grinned. 'Oh. Oh, I get it. Very clever.' He nodded towards the plate of congealing fats and carbohydrates. 'You think that if you accept my generous breakfast-y gift, I'll feel justified in frog-marching you into the supply teaching agency across the road. You think it's some kind of...' – he waved a hand lightly above the plate – '*...quid pro quo* arrangement.'

'There's no 'think' about it, Jez,' Lenny

snapped. 'That's why you brought me here, isn't it? To get me a job.' He glared at his friend. 'A *non-acting* job. And you think that if you've bought me breakfast, I'll somehow be morally obliged to go...' – he glanced nervously past Jeremy's shoulder at the brightly-lit recruitment agency over the road – '*...in there.*'

For a second Jeremy appraised his friend over the rim of his tea mug. Then he shook his head amiably. 'No, no, no,' he said. 'You've got the wrong end of the stick, Len. Possibly the wrong stick altogether.' He leaned over the table towards Lenny, his eyes suddenly flint-hard. 'I'm going to frog-march you into that supply teaching agency anyway. And you're going to get yourself a job. A *proper* job. A *teaching* job. And it doesn't matter whether you eat your Truckers' Special. All condemned men get a decent breakfast whether they want one or not.' He leaned back in his chair, all smiles again. 'No one's forcing you to eat it.'

'And no one's forcing me to get a job as a

supply teacher, either,' Lenny muttered.

'Oh, but they are.'

'*Oh no they're not,*' declared Lenny emphatically. He closed his eyes as theatrically as he dared and inclined his head to the left, giving Jeremy – and the two stunned workmen sitting in the adjacent booth – the full benefit of his profile. 'I am an *actor*, Jeremy. A trained actor.'

'You're a trained *teacher*.'

'I trained at the *Central School of Speech and Drama*.'

'Yes, as a *teacher*, on their *teacher training* course.'

Lenny slumped back in his seat as though winded. Jeremy had just voiced a truth so awful that he felt physically repelled by it, forced back against the greasy leatherette by its invisible mass. Mentioning that Lenny's only drama training had come in the form of a Postgraduate Certificate in Education was such a long-standing taboo that he could scarcely believe his

friend had broken it... in a *caff*... where *anyone* might hear. *Anyone*. He glowered at Jeremy. 'I've got my Equity card,' he hissed.

'What you've *got*, mate, is debts.'

'Lisa told me not to worry about last night. You said so on the Tube.'

'You've got other debts.'

'I haven't.'

Jeremy sighed, not unkindly. 'Your landlord's trying to evict you. You're going to be homeless if you don't cough up.' He pulled Lenny's plate across the table towards himself and began assembling an impromptu bacon sandwich. 'Lisa told me this morning.'

'*Judas*.'

Jeremy frowned warningly. 'That's enough of that, mate. That lass bailed us both out last night. She's entitled to take an interest in your financial affairs.' He dipped his sandwich in the small reservoir of brown sauce on the side of Lenny's plate and took a bite. 'And anyway, where will you live if you get hoyed out of your

flat? Not back at your mum's, in Whitby? Not many acting opportunities up there.' He kicked his mute companion gently under the table. 'I'm just giving you a friendly nudge in the right direction.'

'And what if I don't want to go in that direction? What if I just walk away? You can't *make* me teach, you know.'

'*Au contraire*, Leonard. *Au contraire*.'

'How?'

For some moments, Jeremy chewed in silent contemplation. Then he put down his sandwich and raised his hands to Lenny's eye level. They were big hands; furniture restorer's hands.

'You wouldn't *hit* me?' said Lenny, aghast. 'You wouldn't physically assault one of your oldest, dearest friends?'

'I wouldn't *want* to, Len,' shrugged Jeremy. 'But these things happen.'

The actor smiled, trying to make light of the situation. 'You're a lover, not a fighter. *Violence*

*is the last resort of the morally enfeebled* – that's what Lisa says, isn't it?

‘Uh-huh.’ Jeremy smiled blandly. ‘But Lisa's not here, is she?’

For some moments Lenny fought the urge to peer manically around the café. Then, on the wild off-chance that Lisa might have slipped silently in for a skinny *mochaccino*, he did so anyway. Eventually his eyes returned to Jeremy's. ‘But wouldn't hitting me be counter-productive? In the long term?’ he said, desperation creeping into his voice. ‘It'd ruin my chances of getting any acting work.’

‘Nonsense. It'd mean you could audition for parts requiring cauliflower ears and coved-in noses. Character parts. *Men's* parts. No more pretty-boy nonsense.’ Jeremy smiled broadly and reached for one of Lenny's hash browns. He popped it whole into his mouth. ‘So the position's clear?’

‘I think so. If I *don't* go to the supply teaching agency across the road and get a job...’

– Lenny's eyes narrowed on Jeremy, searching his face for any hint of an escape clause – ‘...then I get a slap.’

‘Which you don't want, right?’

‘I suppose not.’

‘Good lad.’ Jeremy stood up, flicking the toast crumbs from his shirt and jeans, then leaning across and doing the same for Lenny. He adjusted the tie he'd given his friend twenty minutes earlier and straightened the lapels on his borrowed jacket. Despite extending at least three inches too far at the sleeves, he looked tolerably presentable. ‘All set, then?’

‘I guess so.’

Placing a hand squarely in the small of Lenny's back, Jeremy began steering the reluctant jobseeker towards the café door. A moment later they were outside in the crisp Greenwich air. ‘What happens if I try my very best to impress them and they *still* don't want me, though?’ said Lenny as they weaved through the crawling traffic towards the agency door. ‘You

won't still hit me, will you?’

From somewhere behind him, Jeremy's voice sounded genuinely hurt at the suggestion. ‘Bloody hell, Len,’ it said. ‘I'm not a complete monster, am I?’

‘I know, Jez. But how will you *know* whether I've tried my best or not?’

‘Oh, I'll know, mate.’ Jeremy leaned in close as the two men drew to a halt at the agency's doorway, his breath uncomfortably warm on his friend's neck. ‘In fact, it'll almost feel like I'm in there with you.’

*It's true what they say*, thought Harriet ruefully. *All the good ones really are gay*. She put the second photocopy of Lenny's driving licence in the folder with his application form and carefully wrote his name on a fresh index card. *Leonard Jones*. Then she crept back to the door to the outer office, peered through the gap, and sighed. They were a sweet couple, clearly in love. It'd

been obvious from the moment they stepped through the door – the way Lenny's boyfriend had seized his hand and held on to it, clasping it to his side and refusing to let go. *What was his name again?* Jeremy. That was it. He was the deep one; the quiet one, his soulful eyes boring into Lenny's whenever he spoke. Harriet sighed again. It had been Lenny she'd fallen for, of course. She wondered whether anyone had ever told him how, from a certain angle, he resembled a young Peter Andre. Gathering Lenny's paperwork into a tidy bundle, she turned briskly on her heel and headed for the row of ancient filing cabinets next to the staff toilets. *Yes, a young Peter Andre*, she reflected sadly. *Only much, much gayer.*

Hearing Harriet's light steps receding, Jeremy loosened his grip on Lenny's hand a fraction. As sensation began returning to his fingertips, Lenny rounded on his friend. 'What the hell do you think you're playing at?' he gasped.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Telling Harriet that... that me and you...’

Lenny waved his hands in the vague direction of Jeremy's midriff, then his own. ‘Well. You know.’

‘What? Telling her I was your boyfriend?’

‘Yes. Yes. Why did you tell Harriet that you were my boyfriend?’

‘Because otherwise she'd have made me wait outside.’

‘So?’

Jeremy looked sidelong at his friend and smiled. ‘So if I'd waited outside, you'd have deliberately cocked up your interview. Wouldn't you?’

Lenny turned away and stared pointedly out of the window. Despite being unable to see his face, Jeremy sensed him deflating – and when Lenny next spoke, it was with ill-concealed bitterness. ‘Not necessarily.’

‘Liar.’

‘Git.’ Lenny turned to face Jeremy again,

his eyes ablaze. ‘You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?’

‘Hardly.’

‘Yes you are. You’re enjoying it. You’re deriving some perverse satisfaction from watching me suffer. I’m like... I’m like a dog you’ve taken to the vet to be neutered. Except you’re not content just to have me emasculated. You actually want to watch the operation. You want to take ‘Before’ and ‘After’ pictures for your Facebook page.’

Jeremy weighed Lenny’s words in his mind, trying to divine their deeper meaning. Eventually he shook his head. ‘She wouldn’t have gone for you anyway.’

‘*What?*’

‘She wouldn’t have gone for you – Harriet. Even if you weren’t gay.’

‘I’m *not* gay.’

Jeremy waved aside the minor irrelevance. ‘Don’t take it personally. She can’t help being immune to your puckish charms. It’s recruitment

consultants – they just see people as walking CV's. You might see young Harriet as a beautiful young woman with a trim little bum and a cute button nose. But Harriet will only ever see you as a third class degree from Bretton Hall with a PCGE in media studies from Central.'

'I'm not interested in Harriet.'

'You're not?'

'No.'

'But she's gorgeous. Smart. Funny. Sexy. Nice well-paid job in recruitment.'

*'I'm not interested.'*

'Oh. I see.' Jeremy cupped his hand over his mouth, coughing into it at the very moment Harriet re-entered the room – a cough which, to the trained ear, sounded suspiciously like the word 'gay'.

Clearly oblivious to the lovers' tiff taking place in her office, Harriet strode briskly to her chair and sat down, pushing an A4 print-off over the desk towards Lenny. 'Here it is,' she announced, reaching across and circling a few

words in blue biro. ‘It came in this morning. It's a tuition job, working for a local government unit that supplies teachers to children who can't get to school. Technically, you'd be an Alternative Provider of Education – an 'APE' man.’ Harriet allowed herself a guilty smile. ‘They need someone long-term pretty urgently. Might be just your cup of tea, given that you've been out of the classroom for a while.’

Lenny picked up the paper and stared at its lines of incomprehensible text, acutely aware of Jeremy's expectant expression in his peripheral vision. ‘What sort of children are we talking about, here?’ he eventually muttered.

‘Poorly ones. It's the sort of job that'd suit...’ – Harriet glanced knowingly at Jeremy and smiled again – ‘...well, a more *sensitive* kind of person.’

‘I see,’ said Lenny slowly. In his mind's eye, it wasn't hard to visualise a line of queasy, grey-faced children, hawking and wheezing and clutching their bandaged limbs. ‘And I'd be

teaching them at home?’

‘Apemen teach in the children's homes, yes. Sometimes public libraries or hospital schools. You live in Golders Green, don't you?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘Well that's ideal. Most of the children come from Camden, Brent or Barnet. I think the unit gets a few from Haringey too.’

‘Right, right.’ Lenny's eyes continued flitting unseeingly over the sheet, his mind racing. ‘But this job doesn't start right away, does it?’

Harriet shrugged. ‘Well, you'd have to report to the unit and meet your manager. She said there's a quick aptitude test you'd need to complete. She said she could do it tomorrow morning, if you're free. The office is in Cricklewood. You could get to Cricklewood by nine, couldn't you?’

‘Course he could,’ said Jeremy. His hand tightened over Lenny's, clamping it hard to his thigh. ‘This is so exciting, isn't it, Len?’

‘Yes,’ said Lenny, trying not to wince.  
‘Really exciting.’

‘So I can call the unit and tell them you  
want to be an Apeman?’

‘Yes. Yes, fine.’

‘Well that's great. The head of the unit's  
called Toni Bryan. I'll write down the address.  
You'll need to report to Reception for ten to  
nine.’

#### *4. I'd Love To Be An Apeman.*

‘Benny? Benny James?’

Lenny closed his eyes and tried to blot out the incessant background thrum of office activity – the buzzsaw conversation, the jarring trill of competing telephones, the remorseless scything of a photocopier. For a second he toyed with the prospect of jamming his fingers in his ears – anything to insulate him from the seething babble beyond the Reception area. He shook his head morosely, scarcely able to comprehend his

run of lousy luck. Letting Casper Coxon and Kate Amundsen slip through his fingers in Flock – well, that had been bad enough. Then trying – and manifestly failing – to chat up the gorgeous waitress in the flock-effect waistcoat. *But then getting press-ganged by Jeremy into signing up as an Apeman...*

‘Benny? Is there a Benny James here?’

Lenny peered around the Reception area, blinking in the unforgiving florescent light.

‘For the *last time* – is there a Benny James here?’

*Benny James? Who the fuck's Benny James?* For two or three shell-shocked seconds, Lenny found his eyes idiotically searching out his near-namesake. Then he felt the icy finger of realisation tracing a familiar path down his spine. He scanned the Reception area again, confirming that he was now the only male in the room, and slowly raised his hand. ‘I, uh, think that must be me.’

A harassed-looking face loomed into his

line of vision. Its owner, a woman of indeterminate years, regarded him sceptically through thick, plastic-rimmed glasses. ‘You *think* that's you?’

‘My name's Lenny Jones. I'm from the agency. I'm here to...’ – Lenny scoured his mind, searching for the best way to assuage this woman's obvious fears for his mental health – ‘...help out with your poorly children.’ He smiled ingratiatingly. ‘The ones with the broken legs and... suchlike.’

Lenny held his breath as the woman's unblinking eyes bored into his own. Then, seemingly satisfied, she turned on her heel and took off down the corridor she'd emerged from. ‘I'm Toni Bryan,’ she called over her shoulder. ‘Head Apewoman.’ She paused momentarily, aware for the first time that Lenny was still struggling to retrieve his macintosh from the hat stand. ‘Quick sharp, Lenny. Great Ape wants to grill you.’

‘Great Ape?’

‘Gareth. My *manager*,’ said Toni, the same way that some people might say ‘cold sore’. ‘He does the ‘pervert’ tests. Don’t be surprised if he lays it on a bit thick. He doesn’t like agency Apes.’

‘He doesn’t like agency... *Apes*?’

Toni leaned closer still. ‘No. And he doesn’t think I need another *Ape-man*.’

‘And you do?’

‘*Christ*, yes. You couldn’t put an *Ape-woman* in with some of the kids we deal with.’

Lenny frowned. ‘The kids with the sprained ankles and the ingrowing toenails?’

As though mirroring him, a frown now settled on Toni’s face. ‘Something like that,’ she said slowly. ‘Look, Lenny – what *exactly* did they tell you at the agency? About being an *Apeman*?’

Lenny shrugged. ‘That I’d be tutoring sick children. In libraries and hospitals.’

‘And what did they say you’d be doing today?’

‘An aptitude test. Proving I know which hole the Calpol goes in, that sort of thing.’

Toni nodded resignedly. ‘Yes, they always say that,’ she breathed, gently propelling Lenny towards a battered grey door. ‘Can't work out whether they're liars or idiots at that agency. Bit of both, probably.’

Lenny smiled as best he could, hoping it might eclipse the sensation of queasy foreboding that had begun making its way south from his stomach. ‘You couldn't tell me a bit *more* about the job, could you?’

‘No point really, dear. Not yet, anyway.’

‘Why not?’

Toni smiled and rapped smartly on the door. ‘Because we haven't worked out whether you're a pervert, have we?’

*We haven't worked out whether you're a pervert.* Lenny swallowed hard. He'd never been a pervert, he was reasonably certain, but it wasn't something he particularly wanted to discuss with strangers. He was on the verge of making an

unambiguous statement to this effect when his thoughts were interrupted by a low male voice from behind the door. ‘*Come,*’ it said.

Toni opened the door and ushered Lenny into the small office beyond. Sitting at the room's only desk was a man in late middle age, a shapeless mound of flesh in a three-piece suit, crowned with a slick of greasy curls. ‘Gareth Darlington,’ said the man, baring his teeth in what might have been a smile. ‘Deputy director of Youth Services. Or Great Ape, as Toni likes to call me. And you're Benny.’

Lenny took the hand and shook it. ‘It's Lenny, actually,’ he said, ‘Leonard Jones.’

‘Well sit down.’ Gareth Darlington nodded curtly at Toni. ‘You too. Right. Now then, Lenny, we're here to find out a few things about *you*. Some of our questions might seem a bit personal, but we need to know whether you're the right sort of individual to be working with vulnerable children. Understand?’

‘Sure.’

‘We need to find out about your attitudes. Your feelings about things like punishment and discipline. Your relationship with authority. Your suitability for working alone with children in their own homes.’

‘Fine.’

‘Good, good. So. Tell me.’ Gareth Darlington leaned back in his chair and regarded Lenny over liver-spotted cheeks. ‘When you think about your parents having sex, how does it make you feel?’ He licked his lips. ‘Picture them for me, Benny. Picture them now.’

Twenty minutes later, it was all over.

The grey door opened and Lenny, with the lightest of touches on his elbow from Toni, was ejected into the corridor. ‘You okay?’ she whispered.

Lenny nodded mutely.

‘It's just that you looked a bit off-colour in there. When GA asked you about... well, you

know.'

'No. No, honestly, it was fine,' Lenny lied.

'Wait in the Monkey House,' said Toni, indicating a half-open door on the other side of the corridor. 'Joel's in there. He's one of our permanent Apeman. He'll answer any questions you still have. I'll get Great Ape's verdict on your 'pervert' test.'

Lenny nodded and made his way to the door. On the other side was a larger office than Gareth Darlington's, in which half a dozen desks, mostly strewn with abandoned paperwork and coffee cups, fought for floor space with a seemingly random assortment of chairs, bookshelves and cupboards. Sitting at one of the desks, partly obscured by a copy of the *Racing Post*, was a man in his mid-thirties, stoutly built with close-cropped black hair and puffing vigorously on a hand-rolled cigarette. Lenny coughed to attract his attention.

'Yes?'

'Are you Joel?'

‘Possibly.’ The man put down his paper.  
‘Who are you?’

‘Lenny. I might be working here.’

‘Oh, right. Cool.’ Joel shoved a small pile of books off a chair. ‘Sit down, sit down,’ he said, reaching into his pocket and producing a battered tobacco tin. ‘Snout?’

‘No thanks.’

Joel nodded with quiet equanimity and pulled a fresh paper from the packet. ‘So – agency?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘Had your 'pervert' test?’

Lenny nodded.

‘Who with?’

‘Toni Bryan and Gareth Darlington.’

Joel winced. ‘Ooh, Great Ape. Nasty. Did you get the works?’

‘The works?’

‘Uh-huh.’ Joel leaned back expansively, wedging his freshly-made rollie behind his ear. ‘Lots of probing questions about your wanking

habits.'

'Couple, yes.'

'And how often you get your end away?  
And who with?'

'Oh yes.'

'Whether your old man used to thrash the  
life out of you?'

'Yes.'

'Whether you've ever knobbed a Year 11?'

'Yes.'

'Whether you've ever *thought* about  
knobbing a Year 11?'

'Yes.'

'Whether you're frequently beset by horny  
Year 11 girls who want to knob *you*?'

Lenny nodded. 'That too, yes.'

For a moment Joel was silent, absorbing the  
information. Then he sat up in his chair. 'He  
didn't make you do the role-play where he  
*pretends* to be a horny Year 11, did he?'

'No.'

'Oh,' said Joel, visibly deflating. 'He did

with me.’ He retrieved his fresh cigarette and put it to his lips where it hung limply, unlit, while he spoke. ‘He pushes a bit harder with the blokes. Tries to dig out all your horrible Freudian urges.’ He frowned. ‘I haven't had an urge for years. He wouldn't believe me when I told him. Eventually I had to make something up about fancying my sister.’ Suddenly Joel grinned again and leaned forwards. ‘Tell any porkies, yourself?’

Lenny shrugged. ‘I might've intimated that I was gay.’

For a second or two Joel appeared to turn Lenny's words over in his mind. ‘But... you're *not* gay?’

‘No. But everyone at the agency seemed to think I was, so I decided to stick with it.’

‘*Bravissimo!*’ Joel laughed. Clearly Lenny's confession had sealed their conspiracy. ‘You're a dark horse, Len,’ he said. ‘You'll fit right in. Assuming you pass the 'pervert' test, of course.’

‘Do many people fail it?’

‘Nah,’ said Joel. ‘Then again, Gareth

Darlington's a proper bastard. He's always trying to stop Toni hiring new Apemen. He hates us all. Can't see the point of us. Thinks the whole team's a waste of money.'

'And is it?'

Joel's appeared to consider this for a few moments, and when he finally spoke his tone was slow and measured. 'No. No, I don't think we *are* a waste of money. It's a slightly intangible exercise, though.' He lit his cigarette and leaned back in his chair. 'It's a subtle form of alchemy, what we do here.'

Allowing his gaze to wander from the ripped carpet tiles to the stacks of dog-eared textbooks, Lenny found this hard to believe. 'So...' he said, 'what *exactly* is it that Apemen do, then? No one's told me.'

Joel's eyes narrowed theatrically. 'Officially... or unofficially?'

'Both, I think.'

'Well, *officially* Apemen – and Apewomen – teach the kids who can't attend school. So – say

little Jimmy's just got his ear chewed off by the family rottweiler – multiple lesions, very nasty. What happens is that an Apeman will go round Jimmy's house, five hours a week, and teach him English, maths and science until he can hobble off to school again.'

'And unofficially?'

'Well, *unofficially*...' Joel frowned for a second, clearly struggling to find the most appropriate form of words. Then he leaned closer, lowering his voice. 'Unofficially, Apemen babysit all the kids who are too weird, evil or fucked-up to go to school. The sad, the bad and the mad. Crims, dossers, loonies...' he began, counting them off on his fingers, 'tinkers, crips, school refusers, druggies, teenage mums, asylum seekers, sex offenders...' Having run out of available fingers, he sat back in his chair and shrugged. 'And other assorted ne'er-do-wells,' he finally added, smiling warmly.

For some moments Lenny was too stunned to respond. *Dossers, crips, tinkers*... He replayed

the list in his mind – the bits he could remember, anyway – but despite Joel's unsavoury choice of words, there'd been nothing but a strange, wistful fondness to his tone. 'I see,' he finally said. 'But Apemen *do* teach little Jimmy with his poorly ear too, right?'

'Oh yes. Sometimes. *Sometimes*. But I doubt whether *you'll* be seeing much of him.'

'Why not?'

'Because you're an Ape-man. Toni tends to give blokes most of the high-risk cases.'

'High risk to us... or them?'

Joel nodded knowingly. 'You're catching on, Lenny-boy. You're catching on.' He gently punched Lenny's shoulder, smiling. 'Chin up. It's not all bad. The high-risk ones are always best, if you ask me.'

'They're *best*?'

'God, yes. Definitely.'

'Why?'

'Well, firstly because they've got more entertaining stories. But secondly...' – he licked a

fresh cigarette paper and began gently rolling – ‘...because they frequently don't turn up. And even when they do, they'll often tell you to fuck off.’

‘Will they?’

‘A lot will, yes.’

‘And what do I do then?’

Joel finished rolling his cigarette and shrugged. ‘Well... you fuck off, don't you?’

‘Just... fuck off?’

‘Well, *technically* you're supposed to fuck off and come back to the Monkey House. Do your photocopying. Plan your lessons. Have a little cry. But no one'll know if you've actually sloped off down the pub or gone to fetch your dry cleaning.’ Joel stretched back in his seat. ‘I like to pop home for quick nap, myself.’

‘And doesn't Toni mind – if you pop home for a nap?’

‘Our dear Head Apewoman doesn't *know*. And you get paid, regardless. They even pay for your petrol.’

*You still get paid – even your petrol.* For some moments, Lenny turned the idea over in his mind like a precious gemstone, examining it for potential flaws. Eventually he thought he might have spotted one. ‘But isn't that - you know – a bit iffy?’ he said. ‘Nipping home for a nap when you should be in the... Monkey House?’

Joel shrugged amicably. ‘Maybe. But if I were from an agency – like you are – I'd see it as the only perk of the job. After all, you don't get holiday pay, or sick pay, or pension contributions. You don't get training, or planning time, and there's no job security whatsoever – and you're doing a high-risk assignment with people shitting on you from every conceivable angle.’

‘People like who?’

‘Educational welfare officers, advisory teachers, twats like Gareth Darlington, social workers, parents – if they're middle-class parents, anyway – the kids themselves...’

‘*If they turn up...*’ Lenny interjected.

‘If they turn up, yes.’

*If they turn up. If they turn up.* Lenny weighed the words carefully. *If they turn up.* But what if they *didn't* turn up? What if they *never* turned up? The prospect was almost too thrilling to contemplate. And how hard could it be to persuade a handful of 'dossers, druggies and loonies' to turn down five hours of irregular verbs and quadratic equations every week? It seemed like a scenario from which everyone emerged a winner. The kids – who had, after all, already made the highly mature decision to opt out of school – would be able to continue their independent lives, unencumbered by the one-to-one mollycoddling of the state. *And as for Lenny himself...* well, it wasn't too hard to picture a different lifestyle developing *chez Jones...*

*An early morning jog round Golders Hill Park. Jumping in the car and tooling off to some kid's house with an armful of text books. Being told to fuck off. Picking up a copy of The Stage on the way home. A late breakfast.* Lenny

frowned. Proper actors were the sort of people who had brunch, weren't they? *Aye, brunch – with my new agent – discussing... projects. Lucrative, high-profile projects. Then perhaps an audition in the afternoon, or trotting to the South Bank for an arty Spanish film at the NFT...* It was too good to be true, wasn't it?

‘So...’ he eventually said, ‘these kids I'd be, erm, *dealing* with. Is there a fixed timetable I'd have to stick to?’

‘Not really,’ said Joel. ‘Unless you're working in a hospital, Apemen are free agents. You negotiate it all with the parents. As long as you offer them five hours' teaching per kid, your time's pretty much your own.’

‘Right, right. Cool.’

At that moment, both men's heads turned as the door opened and Toni Bryan's face appeared round the side. ‘Lenny?’

‘Uh-huh?’

‘Congratulations, dear.’ Toni pushed the door open and began picking her way through

the desks and chairs. ‘You’re not a pervert. Not as far as we can tell, anyway.’

Lenny smiled, relieved without quite knowing why. ‘That’s good to know.’

‘Promise not to *become* a pervert before July, and you’re an Apeman.’

Lenny swallowed hard.

‘If you *want* to be an Apeman.’ Toni’s voice sounded fractionally less amenable, now. Tenser.

Lenny looked up, caught in the twin headlights of Toni’s stare. *Don’t muck me about*, her eyes seemed to say. *I’m a busy woman*.

‘So – is that what you want?’

*If they turn up. If they turn up.* Until this moment, it’d all been hypothetical. Now Lenny was expected to make a decision. A commitment. *If they turn up. If they turn up. If, if, if.* He smiled, looking first to Joel, then Toni, then at the spectral face of Colin Firth that had silently shimmered into existence between the two of them. *Do it*, its eyes seemed to say. *I would*.

‘God, yes,’ said Lenny, surprised at the

apparent sincerity and conviction in his own voice. ‘Yes, please. I’d *love* to be an Apeman.’

*Thanks for reading.*

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Spike Evans was brought up in Yorkshire.  
He is married and lives in north Hertfordshire  
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