

Chapter One

By the time...

By the time you read this I may or may not be dead...

You're still reading?

Good. But please don't expect F Scott Fitzgerald or Steinbeck or Hemingway from the get go. I'm new to this novel writing game. Nobody promised you this would be the next great American novel. I'm not even American for starters.

Our first step on this particular journey takes place on the eve of my fortieth birthday and included among those present are one member of my family, such as it is, and a few friends, such as they are, some close, some who simply had nothing better to do that evening. As we go along you'll get to know some of them a little better but I expect what you want to know right now is why I can't be confident that I'll survive until the end of the story.

As far as your favourite writers go, I'm guessing Dickens isn't your thing but, for all I know, you might want the story to build slowly with detailed character descriptions and all that kind of guff. And, if I were a more traditional story teller who'd won numerous fancy writing awards in the past for style and general dullness, I might do that. But I'm really not expecting a Pulitzer prize for fiction from this and nor should you.

I'm not going to start this book like that for two reasons. First, I don't like that sort of book and second it was a really rubbish party and the less said about it the better. One of the reasons I thought it was a rubbish party is that I don't like parties, especially birthday parties, reserving a particular dislike for parties which coincide with *my* birthday.

My friends and family know this, so, well... why bother? Why go to any trouble for someone who hates parties and particularly hates their own birthday parties. We'll get back to my friends and family later. Who was there and why they were there and who wasn't there and why not later. A lot of the people who were at that party aren't really important to the story so... why bother?

And why bother going to any trouble like hiring a stripper, a traditional way of celebrating a single man's fortieth year? Presumably it signifies that it's all downhill from here and that gravity, contrary to what you learned in school, is not a constant force and acts with increasing vigour on the body in a downward direction with every year past forty.

But my friends hadn't booked a stripper. They'd hired an amateur psychic and magician of dubious skill, whose idea of fun or supplementing his income was to turn up at appalling social gatherings and make them worse. He was such a dreadful magician that it was something of a relief when he swapped playing cards for tarot cards and proceeded to tell

my fortune. Most of which was nonsense. You have not yet met the love of your life... that sort of thing. Well, any fool could have told you that. If I had met the love of my life it stands to reason she might have come to my party.

The Great Alfonso's last two predictions were somewhat more tantalising.

"You will win a prize in the next lottery."

"You've put your cards on the table there," I said. "The next lottery draw is in about ten minutes. How much am I going to win? Enough to hire a stripper?"

"Enough to change your life."

"Gosh, as much as that... How much is that by the way?"

"That may depend on your next and final card" he replied with as much psychic grandeur as he could muster.

"Go on then. The clock's ticking," I said.

The psychic began to turn over the next tarot card...

He stopped and replaced it on top of the pack.

"Never mind... That's the end of your reading".

"You can't stop now. Come on, I can take it. Between you and me I don't really believe in psychics."

"Very well. If you're sure."

"Quite sure."

The psychic again turned over the next tarot card... DEATH... The Death Card....

If there had been any party spirit still bubbling at that moment that's the sort of thing which might have put a damper on it. But this party was so... well... dead that the appearance of the Death Card actually livened things up a bit. Or at least it did for my best friend, Stuart, who was the first to greet the news with a snicker. The first but not the only one and within a few seconds the prediction of my imminent death filled the room with happy laughter that had been notably absent hitherto. Charming, no?

"Sorry, I usually take that card out of the pack for parties..."

"Why? Afraid you'll spoil the mood?" I asked.

"It hasn't spoiled my mood," said Stuart.

"I should explain that the card doesn't necessarily spell death, you know," the psychic continued.

"So, good news, then?"

“Shut up, Stuart. Let the man finish.”

“As the actress said to the bishop.”

“Shut up, will you?”

“Okey dokey. Let’s hear what the Great Alfonso has to say.”

The psychic drew breath and continued, apparently immune to any inference of sarcasm which, for all I know, may be a common failing among incompetent magicians and psychics. It was certainly not one likely to promise a lasting friendship with Stuart.

“The Death Card often implies a change in life. An abrupt change.”

“Unless it’s the other thing...”

“Thank you, Stuart. We’re trying to move on from there.”

“The change is usually complete and often unexpected and unpleasant,” the Great Alfonso continued unhelpfully as if auditioning to be Stuart’s straight man.

“A bit like death then,” Stuart said.

Either the Great Alfonso was starting to catch on to Stuart’s sense of humour or else his allotted, or failing that paid for, time was up. He stood up.

“And when will my time be up?” I asked. “When will this final, unexpected...?”

“And unpleasant...”

“Thank you, Stuart... When will this big change...”

“Or death...”

“Happen?”

I gave Stuart my best Paddington stare and this silenced him for now. Either that or he’d just run out of material.

“I can’t say exactly but since the prediction may be linked to your birthday...”

“Which is tomorrow. Or in about five hour’s time to be exact.”

“Yes, I can’t be exactly sure but if you make it through tomorrow you’ve probably got a year. If it’s not this birthday, I’d say it will very likely happen on or around your next birthday.”

“Very comforting.”

“Or anytime between now and then.”

“Super, thanks so much for coming. Can you find your own way out?”

The Great Alfonso gathered his cards together with an apologetic smile.

“Happy Birthday on the morrow by the way. Hope it all goes well. I expect you’re used to surprises, you being an April Fool” he said, replacing the tarot cards in their box.

“So that prediction was what, a joke? A prank?” I asked

“Sadly, no. Sorry.”

“Well, thanks. I’ve always hated my birthday but you’ve made this one really special. Very memorable indeed.”

“Best one yet,” Stuart said, palming a fiver by way of a tip as he shook hands warmly with the Great Alfonso, who bade farewell with an elaborate bow and made for the door.

“Well, that livened things up no end” I said after he’d gone.

“Pun intended?” asked Stuart.

And strangely enough the psychic’s prediction of my impending doom or at the very least impending unpleasantness did further liven up proceedings and the party continued with a bit more fizz for a good five minutes before some bright spark turned on the television so we could hear the results of the draw for the lottery.

“Bloody hell!” I said, looking at my ticket... Then back at the television.

“Bloody hell!” I said looking from the television back down to my ticket.

“How much did you win?”

I didn’t see who asked the question. I didn’t see anything other than the letters and numbers and the matching sequence on the television.

“Enough to be cryogenically frozen, I think.... Should the need arise.”

“ So... enough to buy yourself some time... Should the need arise.” I looked up at Stuart and attempted something that I hoped approximated to a smile.

I’ve never really mastered the art of smiling. Laughter comes easily enough if I hear something genuinely funny, but laughter’s an instinctive thing, like cursing when you stub your toe. Perhaps smiling is as instinctive as laughter if you’re one of the shiny, happy people REM used to sing about, but I’m not one of those people and, now I think about it, I never saw Michael Stipe smile much either. Even when he was singing about shiny, happy folk.

Smiling for photos is about as much fun for me as a ticklish kiss from an ageing aunt, which never endeared me to my agent (or to my aunt) when I was a struggling actor in

London and boxes of 10 x 8 photos bearing my pained grimace remained stacked in her office as a reminder of my dormant career as actor, a monument to just one of my dormant careers. And, by dormant, I mean failed.

I'm a bit of a Renaissance Man, you see. I've failed in any number of different careers. Perhaps that's why I've never mastered the happy, natural smile of those blessed with perfect pearly whites and straightforward lives. In any case I'm left to conclude that, while others can control what their face is expressing, it's never been an area of excellence for me.

So I don't know exactly what my facial expression conveyed at the precise moment of my lottery win. Let's go with surprise.

And I don't know if winning a million pounds on the lottery would be a life changing event for everyone, but it certainly changed mine for the next few minutes. I hadn't won the *actual* lottery. I'd won the millionaire raffle. Four letters denoting one of twelve colours like BLUE and GOLD and AQUA followed by an eight digit number. I didn't even know that aqua was a colour. I thought it was the Latin for 'water' or the name of the girl who sang *I'm a Barbie Girl*, but there it was, printed on the little pink slip, followed by those eight life changing digits.

The unexpected news that their host was now a millionaire changed the tone of the party suddenly and completely. For the next five minutes it was a bit like New Year's except that for once I was the recipient of most of the kisses. More kisses than I'd had in a whole year of New Years if such a thing were possible.

"It appears money can buy you happiness," I announced raising my glass by way of a toast.

"Or failing that a number of attentive women," said Stuart.

"Right now I'm going to call that a distinction without a difference."

"You can afford your own stripper now."

"Yes, but can it buy me more time?"

"You're not still harping on about that Death Card, are you?"

"It makes you stop and think. A big change, the guy said. A life changing moment."

"Or the other thing... Death."

"But either way, painful."

"You'll probably see quite a lot more of me. I've never had a rich friend before."

"That will no doubt be painful, of course, but it's not what you'd call an abrupt change. I see a fair amount of you already. Especially when you're broke."

"So very little change there. Speaking of which, you can't see your way to reimbursing me

for that fiver I gave him, can you?”

“And so it begins,” I said handing over a five pound note.

“So what’s the plan, lottery man?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea. Normally all I have to worry about is what I’m going to do tomorrow. Which pair of slightly elderly, saggy trousers should I wear?”

“If it helps you can give all the money to me. You could be the saggy *Ragged Trousered Philanthropist*.”

In between acting jobs, which were as thin on the ground for Stuart as for me, he often worked in a second hand bookshop for a friend for whom the business was little more than hobby. Or a way to spend time away from her appalling husband. Quite possibly both. Unfortunately this only fuelled Stuart’s enthusiasm for jokes of a literary nature.

“Did you know the original title page of that book carried the warning, “the story of twelve months in Hell, told by one of the damned.”

“Remind me to read it. It might help me plan what to do with the next year.”

“Assuming you’ve got that long.”

“You’re not going to let this lie, are you?”

“Not as long as it’s funny.”

“It stopped being funny some time ago.”

“Cheer up, you’ve just won the lottery.”

“But for how long? How long have I got? It’s not very nice living under a possible sentence of death. Assuming it’s true. And if it’s not true-“

“It’s not true. We got the Great Alfonso off the internet. Not exactly a guarantee of competence or truth. And whether it’s true or not shouldn’t make any difference to how you live your life. I know what you should do with your next year. *Carpe Diem*.”

“Learn Latin? I didn’t like it much the first time around.”

“Live every day as if it were going to be your last; for one day you're sure to be right.”

“*Breaker Morant*. Good movie and strangely appropriate. He was about to face a firing squad. You’re really very wise in your own way, so long as you’re quoting books or movies.”

“Every man dies. Not every man really lives.”

“*Braveheart*. Okay, you can stop now. I think I get your point. Subtlety never being one of your stronger suits.”

“Buy a new suit. That would be a start. Dump the saggy trousers. Clothes maketh the man.”

“Where does that one come from?”

“I think that one may be mine. I might have made that one up or paraphrased a bit. No, hold on, it’s coming... *Hamlet*- ‘Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy... but not expressed in fancy; rich, not gaudy; for the apparel oft proclaims the man.’”

“You forgot something. ‘Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice’.”

“I’ve got that one on a coffee mug,” Stuart said.

“I know. I’ve made you coffee in it. The irony never escapes me.”

“Meow. Saucer of milk for the cat who just won the lottery?”

“I think I’m tired of playing *Hamlet* hockey. His life expectancy wasn’t that great.”

“You could give your acting career another go. You could just about buy your own small theatre now. Turn it into a barn.”

“I was never really cut out to be the lead. Just another spear carrier, that’s me.”

“What you need is a good old fashioned mid-life crisis. To be honest, you needed one before but now you can actually afford one.”

“You mean buy a little red sports car and start dating a gold digger.”

“Let’s start with the sports car. Baby steps...Hi, Fiona, have I told you you look incredibly sexy tonight?”

“Not lately, Stuart. It’s nearly midnight. Can I be the first to give the Birthday Boy a kiss?”

Fiona kissed me on the cheek and gave me a hug that I wished could last forever, or failing that, a little longer. She smelled faintly of vanilla. All too soon the hug and the hint of vanilla were in the past. Like the remotest chance that Fiona and I would ever be a thing.

“Well, Birthday Boy. How are you going to spend all that lovely money?”

“Don’t you start.”

“I like Stuart’s idea of buying a sports car. I look sensational with the top down,” she said, eyes twinkling and flashing the sort of smile only people with perfect teeth whose eyes can twinkle can smile.

“I bet you say that to all the boys...”

“Only the ones who’ve just won the lottery, Stuart. Be a dear and get me another drink.”

My hopes of a long and meaningful conversation with Fiona were regrettably short-lived and imaginings of what Fiona might look like, top down, all too fleeting and mostly in the distant past. Before Stuart could come back with a drink she announced that she had to be up early in the morning and with another kiss on the cheek she was gone, moving through the assembled gathering of minor characters and spear carriers with the grace of a former

ballet dancer.

Which is what she was. Had been once. Until she got too tall. And long, legged, lovely...

And way out of my league, lottery win or not.

*Shopping and F***king*

Fans of the London theatre scene of a certain age might remember Mark Ravenhill's f***king stage play of that name, produced at the Royal Court Theatre by a company called *Out of Joint*. Out of joint was mostly how I felt around that time because it was the sort of show I never got auditions for as an actor and got the sort of plaudits and attention that no play of mine ever did as a writer.

Yes, that's right I was briefly a struggling, and for struggling, read failed, playwright as well as an actor back in the day I shared a flat in Stockwell on a street whose only claim to fame was that it had been home to one of the victims of the Stockwell Strangler a few years before. I shared the flat with Stuart. Two struggling (failing) actors together. Probably not a healthy combination.

Believe it or not Stuart made more money selling second hand books, none of which included my plays which, unlike "Shopping and F***king", were never published except in obscure anthologies with titles like *Audition Scenes for Actors*, read only by other struggling, failing actors like myself. Don't bother looking for them. They probably all had very short print runs and are therefore extremely hard to find. You won't even find them in a second hand book store. The only place you're likely to find them is on my bookshelves. One of the courtesy copies sent to me by the publishers instead of.. oh, I don't know... paying me? Regrettably their rarity has never added to their value.

Unlike any of the characters in Ravenhill's play, shopping was never one of my favourite activities for some reason (see above, to actor/writer failed, add the word starving) and as for fucking? Forget it. Not never but not often either. I certainly never associated shopping with fucking or any other pleasant activity because, unlike one of the characters in Mark Ravenhill's play, I have never had oral sex in Harvey Nichols.

I imagine if I tried anything like that I'd get caught, possibly arrested, or at the very least receive a polite request not to darken the doors of Harvey Nicks again. Or possibly the request might be less than polite if I were still looking poor and wearing saggy breeks. That's slang for trousers by the way if unlike me you're not from north of the border. Perhaps we'll cover my early life, a Scottish childhood, later. Or not.

I was still not suitably dressed for a shopping trip to the West End like the recent lottery winner I was, having not as yet collected the cheque. I had, however, telephoned the good people at the lottery and found myself the beneficiary of a seemingly enormous line of credit. Taking all this into account I decided to go shopping online.

And quickly tiring of shopping for trousers- I don't know about you but nothing I've ever bought online fits, hence trousers that are saggy- I decided to follow Stuart's advice.

I bought a little red sports car...

But you don't want to hear about shopping. If you wanted to read about that sort of thing you'd read *Bridget Jones' Diary* again or perhaps you've never read *Bridget Jones' Diary* but want to read more about f**king...

In that case I can only suggest you read Mark Ravenhill's play, available in all good book stores. Or try the internet. It's full of that sort of thing though none of it bears any likeness to my experience of horizontal jogging up to that point. They seem to do it very fast and for a very long time.

My recent encounters with that sort of activity in real life were anything but recent. One of them included a brief fling with a girl who carried me into her bedroom over her shoulder in a fireman's lift and warned me on our first night together that her cherry red bed head made her look like Sideshow Bob the next day. It did. A valediction, forbidding morning, to misquote John Donne. And yes, I was a little scared when I opened my eyes in the cold light of dawn.

*Busy old fool, unruly Sun,
Why dost thou thus,
Through windows and through curtains call on us?*

"Hello, Bob..."

With apologies, once more, to John Donne for ruining his poem. But seriously, it really was like waking up next to Sideshow Bob.

My most recent encounter of all was after a drunken party on a barge on the Thames. Just as I was falling asleep on a tiny bunk a girl from New Zealand, known only to me as Kiwi, climbed into my sleeping bag beside me to "share my warmth". This pleasant and entirely unexpected surprise led to a few minutes of mutual fumbling and rummaging in the dark before she left as abruptly and unexpectedly as she had arrived.

She took me to one side the next morning and explained herself with the not altogether flattering line,

"I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else."