

AND IT GOES LIKE THIS features jokes and a seen better days night club in Essex. It is personal in as much as I often use humour as a shield and the nostalgia element of the haunting is alive in me today, especially as I get older. The description of the young Press is me as I remember my younger self. The camel joke I first heard told by Barry Manilow at a concert in the 80's as my wife is a huge fan of his. The title is a line from Moves Like Jagger by Maroon5.

A reader said, 'Superb. I love the idea of the man haunting himself, and you capture his dissolution very well. He's very human, and one has a lot of empathy with him. It's nicely handled. The jokes are very good and had me chuckling in some places and groaning in others.'

AND IT GOES LIKE THIS

Many clubs will come alive at night. The noise, the chatter of excited voices, music, the sounds of people determined to enjoy themselves. Glasses clink as drinks are bought, consumed, and a fresh trail leads back to the bar. Men lean into women to shout above the loudness, to voice their thoughts into welcoming ears. Women lean forwards as if eager to hear what their partner has to say, even if most of what is said gets drowned out by swirls of cacophonous shrills of shouts and laughter.

Robbie Press didn't enjoy the *Roadside Club* much these days, but then there was an increasing lack of enjoyment to most of his existence. At night, three evenings a week, he would perform his comedy routine, starting at ten, and ending when the catcalls and heckling grew more amusing than his jokes. His act was getting shorter as each year passed by.

By day the club was like an elderly woman first thing in the morning. Presentable when dressed for the evening, but caught as a rabbit in headlights in the glare of sunlight. The outside was in dire need of a coat of paint, the dull green dripping off the sills. The windows looked out into a side street, in which the club was located, with the numb stare of the terminally ill.

Once inside the warped front door, the gaudy red carpet was flecked with stains from spilled drinks, and unidentified bodily fluids. The lobby smelled of disinfectant that was fighting a losing battle against the stench of sweat, alcohol, and fatigue. The main room was laid out with tables and chairs in a misguided attempt to recreate a Vegas showroom. Under the harsh strip lights of day lay revealed the cheap and gaudy truth behind the nightly illusion. Sticky rings on table tops from wet glasses, dust and debris beneath grimy chairs. The thick red curtain across the stage that sagged where it should have held firm, was a pale imitation of colour.

'It wasn't always like this,' Robbie said.

The barman cleaning the glasses wasn't really listening; he'd heard it all before. Working at the bar was the only job he'd been able to get since coming over from Romania. Doru thought this sad little man wasn't very amusing, but then his grasp of the English language wasn't strong yet.

'Used to be a classy place. You could hear a pin drop when I was performing.'

Doru shrugged, he didn't know if that was good or not, and said, 'You want a whisky?'

Robbie made a show of looking at his watch for a few long drawn out seconds. 'Sure, why not. I'm not on for hours yet.'

His second performance of the week wasn't until gone nine that night, and with it barely past midday he had a lot of hours to kill. Terminal boredom was his worst enemy, alongside the booze, and the gambling, and the cheap women; truth was he had no enemy that was worse than the others, they all held equal sway. If there was one foe that he had never beaten it was the one that looked back at him from the mirror each morning as he shaved.

As Doru handed the large whisky over to him, Robbie glanced in the smeared mirror behind the bar. The face that looked back was at least thirty years younger than his fifty six years. Hair longer, darker, swept back from an unlined forehead.

‘I was quite handsome when I was younger,’ he said.

And then the face in the mirror winked at him.

Robbie slammed his glass down on the top of the bar, spilling some of the drink from it.

‘What the...’

‘Whisky no good?’ Doru said.

Robbie wiped his hands over his eyes, dry washing them, and then looked back at his reflection in the mirror. It was him, his face as it was now. The lines were buried deep, the hair grey, and receding faster than the tide from a beach. He wasn’t fat, he didn’t eat enough for that, but the face had sagged from his prime, and his body was out of touch with exercise, and, if anything, it had started to creak.

He swallowed the whisky in one, and held out the glass for a refill. ‘No, it’s fine. Just someone walked across my grave that’s all.’

Doru hadn’t heard the phrase before. Perhaps it was one of his jokes, this supposedly funny man. Doru didn’t laugh, just in case it wasn’t a joke. He didn’t laugh much during the full routine at night either, and that had little to do with his grasp of the language.

Last night had been a rowdy crowd. Robbie hadn’t gone on until ten minutes past ten, and there were a few groups of men in who had spent all evening downing as many drinks as they could manage. Beer, shots to follow, and with a minimum to eat, they were loud and not afraid to make a nuisance of themselves.

Robbie came on with shouts of ‘Get them off.’ And ‘Here, it’s him off the telly.’

The spotlight was blinding, it was always worse after he’d spent the afternoon propped at the bar. His head pounded, but any fears he might have had about forgetting his routine were dispelled by his familiarity with the material. He had been using it for so long now it was an old friend, his closest, probably his only one.

‘Evening ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the *Roadside*, arsehole of Essex.’

That always got a few cheap laughs, and the management had grudgingly allowed him to keep it in. He drew a decent crowd, courtesy of his fifteen minutes of television fame, and even if he didn’t, he kept profits up by spending most of his wages on drink.

‘And it goes like this,’ someone shouted from the audience. Laughter followed as others mimicked his catchphrase.

Robbie smiled with good humour, though on the inside he cringed. If he had a pound for every time he’d heard those words parried back at him, well, he wouldn’t be a rich man but he’d be an extremely drunk one.

‘And it goes like this – There’s a preacher, Billy Graham type, you know the kind, seen them on TV. I used to be on TV... anyway, he’s got a huge crowd at a concert hall. He’s a healer he tells them, can cure the sick, heal the lame, a regular Jesus this bloke. Listen if you youngsters don’t know who Billy Graham is then ask your dad, or your granddad.’

A voice shouted, ‘I’ll ask you, you’re older than my granddad.’

‘Ah, I remember my first drink... he calls for someone sick in the audience to come up on stage. ‘Come on,’ he says. ‘Don’t be shy, I’ll change your life.’ So a bloke stands up. I say stands, he was on crutches so it was more of a slouch than a stand. ‘Come on up,’ Billy says. That wasn’t his real name but you know what I mean. This bloke on crutches hobbles down the aisle, and eventually gets up on stage. The crowd is clapping and cheering. It’s quite a show.’

‘Not like this then,’ an audience voice shouted, and people erupted in laughter. ‘Only joking, mate,’ the same voice called.

‘More than he is.’

Robbie had grown used to the behaviour of the punters these days. Plied with cheap drink in Happy Hour – which lasted most of the night. Drunk even before they arrived a lot of them, necking from supermarket cans and bottles at prices that made sobriety a challenge.

‘Billy makes a great fuss of him. Asks him how long he’s been crippled, and all that. The bloke says his name is Henry. Then Billy tells him to go behind a large screen and wait. So off the cripple goes. Then Billy asks if there’s anyone else needs healing. Up jumps this fit looking young bloke, muscles, tan, looks great.

‘Billy looks worried. ‘You look okay to me,’ he says. ‘Are you sure you’re sick?’ The bloke steps into the aisle and nods. ‘What’s wrong with you?’ says Billy. ‘I-sh caaa-shh-t tss-alss-k proper,’ the blokes slurs. The audience laughs because he sounds really weird, but Billy quietens them. God loves us all he says. The bloke says his name is Pete – though it comes out as schPeeete. Billy asks the bloke, Pete, to stand behind the screen with Henry.’

‘Get on with it.’

‘And it goes like this – Billy starts calling up to God. ‘Lord, help these poor wretches.’ ‘Jesus, in your mercy heal these poor souls.’ The audience are lapping it up. Billy thrashes them into a frenzy. They’re whooping and shouting. Then he lowers his hands and it all goes quiet.

‘Henry,’ Billy cries out. ‘I have asked the Almighty to channel his strength through me. Throw away your crutches, you are cured.’ And would you believe it, the crutches fly out from behind the screen. The audience goes wild. It’s like a pop concert on speed.

‘Now, Pete, poor Pete who couldn’t speak a sentence that anyone could understand. Speak, Pete, speak out loud and clear.’

‘And Pete speaks out, voice still slurred and distorted like before, no different - and it goes like this - ‘Henry’s fallen over.’”

Robbie waited for the laughter, and was rewarded with more than he anticipated. Louder and longer. The heckling had stopped, for a moment, and he was on his way with his routine. He came alive on stage. It was where he felt most comfortable. Off stage his life was a mess, and had been for a long time. When he stepped out under the lights, the faces of the people all but obscured from view, he felt something inside reach out and grab hold of him. He was more confident, more assertive, more in control of himself than he could ever achieve in the real world.

Robbie drained his third whisky, and shook his head to free his thoughts from the recollections of last evening’s performance. That one was dead and buried. Tonight was another gig, another sea of blank faces and loud shouts.

He pushed himself away from the bar, slipped off the red vinyl stool, and said goodbye to Doru. His eyes swept the room. The cleaning team was doing its best to make the old lady presentable, but there was only so much that a duster and polish could gloss over. The smell was still there, the marks and the dents; the memories of the life he had been reduced to living.

Outside he was mildly surprised to find it was a bright and sunny day. Without a backward glance to the club, he turned left, in the general direction of his lodgings, and started the slow walk home.

The *Roadside* was situated on a road, that much was true, but it wasn’t a highway or any other route of note that the owners had tried to engender when they named it. The name was another illusion that worked only occasionally. The street was one of a labyrinth of pinched side streets in an area of Essex that didn’t feature in any tourist brochures. Populated by overspill from East London, and increasingly by immigrants from Europe, there was a rundown feel about the place.

At the end of the street was a boarded up and disused factory that used to make toys that would be exported all over the world. Now the same toys were manufactured abroad, mostly in China, and sold in large retail hyper markets rather than the small family owned and run corner shops that Robbie could remember.

His mother had worked at the factory. He took a job there two summers running, when he was at school. Happy days now he realised, when responsibility was a stranger, and his only concern was whether Spurs would win something that year.

He didn't hear them until they were almost on top of him.

'Oi, got a light, granddad.'

Robbie turned in alarm at the rough voice. There were three of them, dressed smartly enough he supposed, but their intent was evident. They had found a victim.

'You deaf?' one them, the biggest, pushed Robbie's shoulder. 'He asked for a fag.'

Robbie shook his head, fear gripping every part of him. He had never been a brave man, using humour at school as a weapon against the many bullies. 'Sorry,' he said. 'I don't smoke.'

They had him surrounded. One of them was plucking at his pocket as if trying to magic it open to get at the contents.

'I don't have any money,' Robbie said.

'We'll just have to see about that.'

One of them wrapped around Robbie from the rear, trapping his arms. Up close the youth smelled of sweet chilli. The other two fanned out in front of him. Suddenly one of them punched him in the stomach, once, hard.

Robbie let out a groan and sagged at the middle. If the boy behind him hadn't held him in such a tight grip he probably would have sagged to the floor. They were at his clothes now, hands into pockets, searching out what they could steal.

Then they stopped.

Robbie opened his eyes, which he hadn't consciously closed. He could hear running footsteps, getting closer. Surely there weren't more of them.

As the figure got nearer, Robbie could see it was a man in his twenties. He couldn't see the face clearly, but the body looked capable of handling itself.

'Leave him alone.' The voice sounded familiar.

'What you going to do...'

When the newcomer finally reached them he didn't say another word. He punched the biggest yob on the chin, and raised his leg in a vague Karate kick to another. Robbie felt the arms around him ease, and was aware of feet running away.

As quickly as they had attacked him, so they were gone.

Robbie knelt forward, his hands on his knees as he gathered his breath. He wanted to speak, to thank the man for coming to his rescue. But when he stood upright he was alone.

Robbie was scared. The potential mugging had unnerved him, that much was true. He had never been able to cope with violence of any kind. That was part of his fear.

The other part, the far more worrying portion, was that he recognised the man who had saved him. It was the clothes that first confused him; flares were out of fashion thirty years or more ago. The hair was the same, long, down to the shoulders, the face was what he had glimpsed in the bar mirror. He had been saved by himself; the self that existed all those years ago.

He hurried along the street, pausing at the end to stare back, willing there to be someone there that he could attribute his safety to, but he was alone.

Two streets along there was a bookmakers, and he popped in to collect his small winnings from yesterday's race meeting at Newmarket. He'd been there once, the racetrack, guest of a TV big-shot, at the time his star was in the ascendancy, and others wanted to be associated with him, in case some of the gloss rubbed off onto them.

'Afternoon, Robbie,' the tired woman behind the counter greeted him. He was a regular.

'Rita. Come to collect my winnings.' He handed her a crumpled betting slip.

'Blimey, Robbie, that's not like you. Maybe it's the start of bigger things for you.'

'Don't bet on it.'

She laughed politely as he opened the door to leave.

'I get off at five if you've time to buy a girl a drink. I'll make it worth your while.'

Rita was a regular fixture in Robbie's routine. Not a girlfriend, he would never deign to honour her with that title, but they shared a mutual love of whisky, old black and white films, and fumbled unsatisfying sex.

'Sounds good to me. Meet you in the *Black Lion* about half five?'

Rita looked like the cat that had lapped the cream, and Robbie felt a tug of sadness wash over him. If he was the reason her world brightened he had nothing but sympathy for the woman.

Outside, the sun was threatening to burn the skin from the top of his thinning head. He considered retreating to the nearest pub but resisted. If he was going to drink with Rita he would need to keep this side of sober to be able to perform later. He laughed. *Perform on stage I mean, not with... you know what I mean.* He was getting worried about himself; seeing things and now talking to himself. *First sign of madness, Robbie boy.*

He had a room in a large terraced house that faced the park. It was a nice spot to live, although his room faced the back, and overlooked the lorry depot. He couldn't afford the rates that the rooms with a view commanded. Mind you he had lived there a while now, perhaps it was time to remind Mrs Gilder that her regulars deserved some special treatment.

As if on cue the door opened before he had the chance to get his key from his pocket, and Mrs Gilder stood there in all her splendour.

'Mr Press.'

'Mrs Gilder,' he said. 'I was just thinking about you.'

'Never mind all that. I've had complaints.'

Vera Gilder was in her eighties if she was a day. Widowed over twenty years, she rented rooms out in the large and rather commanding house that she used to share with her husband, before cancer dragged him away, and left her alone. With no children to lighten her load, or brighten her days, she existed on the tittle tattle of gossip that her guest brought her.

Robbie was conscious he was standing on the steps, for all intents and purposes was on the street, and passers-by might hear what was being said. He had no false hope that he was in any small way famous, but television makes faces recognisable, as he well knew from the times his catchphrase had been shouted at him from cabs, cars, and people walking past.

'Might I come in? We can discuss it inside.'

Reluctantly Mrs Gilder moved her tiny frame aside to let him pass. Once he was in the hallway she shut the front door and turned towards him; she was bristling with indignation.

'I don't mind visitors, honest I don't, you know me, I turn a blind eye when I need to.'

Which was just as well, as Robbie had brought an inebriated Rita back to his digs on more than one occasion, and the woman was a noisy drunk.

'Indeed not. You are an excellent host, and I am fortunate to stay here. What's the problem?'

'Problem. I'll tell you what the problem is. I give you a key for you to use. Not to hand out to all willy nilly.'

Robbie fished in his jacket pocket and drew out his key ring. 'Here it is. Safe and sound. I only have the one key.' *As you well know.*

Mrs Gilder hesitated, for a moment. She knew what she knew, but couldn't deny that the only key the man had was being held up for her gaze.

'That's as maybe, but you had a visitor in your absence nonetheless.'

'A visitor? Who was it?'

'I don't mind all sorts, I know it goes on these days. You're in show-business and all that. Lots of them in there, I know that.'

'Lots of who? Whom?'

'Homosexuals,' she spat the word out.

'I'm not gay,' Robbie said. 'But if was, which I'm not, so what? It's not illegal any more you know.'

'Maybe not, but I don't appreciate your young man friend coming in here as if he owns the place.'

Young man friend? 'Are you saying a young man came here to see me?'

'Barged in as if he lived here, he did.'

Robbie felt a frisson of unease scrape along his back. For some reason his mind leapt back to the run-in with the louts.

'What did he look like?'

Mrs Gilder wrinkled her nose. 'Smelled like those hippies used to, Juniper...'

'Patchouli, it's called patchouli.' *Or cannabis*, he thought, they smelled of that too, but wisely kept silent.

'Dressed like a hippie too. Flared denims jeans, tight tie-dyed T-shirt. In a play or something? Some sort of revival?'

'Not that I know of. I don't know anyone who looks like that.'

'Young, long hair. Looks a bit like you, now I think of it. Here, not your son is it?' Her voice softened. Perhaps she had misjudged Mr Press.

Robbie shook his head. 'No, I have no children.' He wanted them, but his wife of insufficient years did not, and that resolved that little discussion.

'Well, all right then. I'd better let you get on. He went up to your room. I couldn't stop him. You'd better make sure nothing is missing.'

Robbie lived on the top floor, and he took the stairs two at a time, until the last flight, when his breathing was ragged, and the undefined tightness in his chest slowed him.

He opened the door, and the familiar smell assaulted his nostrils. It wasn't a smell that he had come into contact with recently, but in his past he had encountered it at festivals, music clubs, and when he and his friends got together. As smells can, his nostalgia was pricked. Life had been good then, he had liked himself, most of the time.

Closing the door behind him, he nervously looked around the room, checking if anything had been touched.

The room felt different. It wasn't just the pungent aroma. There was something about the atmosphere that didn't feel the same as it normally did. If he had been a more poetic man he might have spoken of an aura, but he just knew someone had been here - might still be here.

Alarmed, he grabbed the nearest thing he had to hand as a weapon; it was a book. Hardback, big, but of little use if he had needed to fight off an intruder. A cursory search around reassured him that he was alone in the room. It wasn't really large enough to conceal anyone, but even so he checked under the bed; just dust and an old pizza box.

He slumped onto the chair by the window and laid the book down on the chipped table top. He snorted a kind of laugh. The book contained his jokes. He had been diligent in the early days, scribbling them down as he thought of them. They came thick and fast when he was in the mood, often catching him out in the bath, walking along the street, or out shopping. He found he had to write them down fast or else the essence of them was gone, like mist drying in the morning sunshine.

He wasn't too proud to admit that a few had been pinched from other comics. But then that was par for the course, the name of the game. Jokes were like buses he often said, you wait for a new one to arrive and then hear it everywhere for weeks.

Those were the days. Every week he had jokes added to his growing library. The circuit was good in those days. Working men's clubs, social clubs, the end of the pier theatres that catered for variety acts in a way that didn't exist nowadays. It was all television now, and that drained a comedy routine of originality quicker than Robbie could drain a glass of whisky. Not that he shied away when the TV opportunity came knocking. It was the dream of them all. He accepted the congratulations when he signed the contract; even though many of his fellow

comedians said it through gritted teeth. To be on television on those days was a mark that you'd made it. The money was good as well. If only he hadn't found so many wasteful ways to spend it.

He sat back in the chair. He could remember his first joke he told on TV as if it was yesterday. Young, brash and confident – well into his thirties, but he felt and looked younger than he was.

'And it goes like this - A Lady goes into a bar in Waco Texas, that's in America for those who don't know. She sees a cowboy with his feet propped up on a table. He has the biggest boots she's ever seen. The woman asks the cowboy if it's true what they say about men with big feet being well endowed.'

Here he paused for the laughter from the studio audience. No heckling from them. They'd been warmed up by the resident comedian and were ready for more laughter.

'The cowboy grins and says, 'Shore is, little lady. Why don't you come on out to the bunkhouse and let me prove it to you?' The woman wants to find out for herself, so she spends the night with him. The next morning she hands him a \$100 bill. That's about fifty quid ladies and gents, he didn't come cheap. Blushing, the cowboy says, 'Well, thankya, ma'am. Ah'm real flattered. Ain't nobody ever paid me fer mah services before.' The woman looks at him as if he's mad. 'Don't be flattered ... take the money and buy yourself some boots that fit!'

They loved it, and he was off and running for the evening.

Then he noticed something out of place in his room. He hadn't seen it before, but now he had he couldn't take his eyes away from it. On the floor of the small kitchen area was a photo frame. He knew without picking it up what it was. It was a picture of him from the end of the first TV series. The producer had given them out to all the main performers and Robbie had kept it in pride of place in his study, back when he was young and proud. When he owned a decent sized house that had survived the divorce; when he could afford any house.

The trouble he had with it being on the floor now was that he had lost it years ago.

It could only have been his mystery visitor who had put it there. He went over and picked it up. The glass was smashed. The face, his face, was scratched out, as if someone had run a sharp knife over it time and time again. The incisions went deep into the card backing of the frame. Obliterating the man who had smiled back for the camera.

He put it down gently onto the Formica work top of the kitchen and pressed the switch to the kettle. He needed tea.

There was one mirror in the room, on the wall by the door. There was just a shared bathroom, along the landing. He avoided looking in the smeared glass of the mirror. He had glanced at it once since he'd come into the room, and he was sure it was the young man who looked back out at him.

The kettle boiled and he made himself a cup of strong tea. Settling back at the cheap chair and table, he sipped his tea and rubbed his hands over the book. In many ways it was his most precious possession. He seemed to remember the fuss when Bob Monkhouse had lost his joke books many years ago. Robbie could understand how bereft the man must have felt. This was his livelihood in these wrinkled pages. Though for how much longer, with dwindling audiences, and less gigs than he used to have.

With a mouthful of tea he opened the page at random. Ah, this was good – a few pages of one-liners, some of them were even written by him. 'Which sexual position produces the ugliest children? Ask your mother.' Nicked that one from an act at Bournemouth. 'What's the difference between love, true love, and showing off? Spitting, swallowing, and gargling.' Used that in the second series but got a rap over the knuckles for it after viewer complaints. 'What is the biggest problem for an atheist? No one to talk to during orgasm.' He still liked that one, he might use it tonight. He checked his watch, he didn't want to keep Rita waiting. 'Who is the most popular guy at the nudist colony? The guy who can carry a cup of coffee in each hand and a dozen donuts. Who is the most popular girl at the nudist colony? The one who can eat the last donut.' That was from a season in Margate, the pier, happy days. Now, this one he would tell

Rita, get her in the mood. ‘The three words women hate to hear most during sex: ‘Honey, I’m home!’”

The book suddenly slammed shut, with such force that he spilled tea over the cover.

‘What the...’

He tried to avoid looking but he was drawn to it. The mirror looked clear, the surface free from the usual pock marks and smudges. Staring back at him, fire of anger in the eyes, was his face. Not the one he owned nowadays; but the face of his twenties, his happy days, his prime. Before the big time, it was true, but before it all went wrong as well.

He stood, knocking the chair to the floor. He wanted to tear his eyes away from the face but he couldn’t. It held him like a butterfly pinned to a board. It was drawing him in, beckoning with the eyes. He couldn’t stand it. He didn’t need to be reminded of who he used to be.

He picked up the cup and threw it at the mirror. The glass cracked as the broken cup fell down, and then the mirror cracked and shattered as he threw the saucer at it.

His feet crunched over the debris as he opened the door to leave. It slammed shut behind him, and as he marched down the stairs he wondered if he would have the courage to return.

The *Black Lion* was quite crowded for early on a Wednesday. The good weather had brought a lot of people out of doors. Many spilled out onto the pavement where a makeshift assembly of assorted tables and chairs had grown. Rita wasn’t outside, he hadn’t expected her to be anywhere than where he found her.

Gambling was in her blood, and she was leaned against the slot machine, feeding in coins as he joined her. He nodded at her glass and without breaking stride she nodded back. At the bar he waited for a family man to order drinks and food for his brood that seemed cowered against the far wall, as if this was some kind of bandit country they had entered.

Robbie took the two drinks back to Rita and waited patiently while she ran out of coins and out of luck.

‘There’s a table over there,’ he said, and made a dive for it just before it was snapped up by three women, office workers by the looks of them. He ignored the ugly looks, and pushed back a chair with his leg so that Rita could sit.

‘They let all sorts in here these days,’ she said.

‘They seemed all right.’

‘I didn’t mean the women from the tax office. The likes of him.’ She jutted her chin out in the general direction of the bar. ‘Student types.’

Robbie didn’t need to look to know who he would see. Sure enough, as cool as the breeze, standing alone in the saloon bar, with a pint of beer in one hand and something else in the other, was the young hippie-type who had been stalking him all day.

‘You can see him?’ Robbie said. If Rita could see him as well perhaps it wasn’t as bad as he imagined. There must be an explanation.

‘See who?’

‘The boy, well young man, over there with the pint. Long hair and tie-dyed T-shirt.’

Rita made a performance of craning her neck to get a good look.

She shook her head. ‘No one like that, Robbie boy. How many of those have you had? No, I mean that lot by the snooker table.’

Robbie looked across, and the group of young people there could easily be described as ‘student types’, although they were just as likely to be unemployed these days.

When he looked back into the saloon, the young man had gone.

Rita got the next round, then Robbie, and by the time it was Rita’s turn again, Robbie was starting to feel the effects, and his internal warning system was sounding alarm bells; he needed to slow down if he was to go on stage later.

They shared some crisps and that soaked the alcohol a little. After a while a man approached their table.

‘Excuse me,’ he said. ‘Are you Robbie Press?’

Robbie smiled, and inwardly gave a loud cheer. It used to happen, requests for autographs when he was recognised. Not so often these days.

‘I am. Autograph is it?’

The man looked confused. ‘No, why... No, the young man asked me to give you this.’ With that the man scuttled away.

‘What is it?’ Rita said.

Robbie held it in his hands, rolling it between his fingers, caressing it with the palms. It was the letter he’d received terminating his television contract with immediate effect. It was midway through the third series, and he seemed to remember they replaced him at short notice with Jack Dee.

He’d had warnings about his drinking. The gambling forays were tolerated because they didn’t impinge on his performances in front of camera; apart from the time the heavies came knocking at the studio door looking for a lump sum payment. The dalliances with the females were frowned on but everyone was at it then, the freedom of the sixties was fully alight by the late eighties and early nineties. No, it was the allegations about some of them being under age that did for him. He swore, and would do until the day he died, that there was no truth to the rumours, but someone had it in for him. He was out and never invited back. He still waited with trepidation for the knock at the door, the way the police were looking at old cases.

‘How did...?’

‘You all right? You look as white as a sheet.’

Robbie swallowed his drink and coughed as it caught in the back of his throat. ‘Yes, just unexpected that’s all.’

‘Can I see?’

‘No, I mean, it’s nothing.’ He stuffed the letter into his pocket, and stood from the table. ‘I’d better get off. I’m on at ten and I need to get ready.’

He left the noisy pub, and walked out into the diminishing sunshine.

He didn’t need a crystal ball to tell him that his days in the game were numbered. It was a young person’s business now; they were even letting women in, not like when he started out. It was all Michael McIntyre and road-shows, formulaic quiz shows, Peter Kay and huge concert audiences. The days of the pier theatres, variety clubs, and the like, had gone.

His agent was far too old, should have retired years ago. His contacts were at least ten years out of date. What work Robbie did get was down to his own resourcefulness, and pity from some who knew him in better times. It was low-level clubs and holiday camps now, and the future that beckoned did so with rheumy eyes and an arthritic finger. Even the owners of the *Roadside Club* had been embarrassed when they told him they may have to let him go come the autumn.

He was getting too old, and not yet sixty. He just didn’t *feel* it any more, he didn’t *feel* funny. It used to be said that someone like Tommy Cooper, or Eric Morecombe, could just walk on stage and people would be laughing even before they said a word. Robbie had never had that kind of charisma but he had a gift of holding the audience in his hand. He could direct them to the punch-line without signposting it. He could gently string out a gag until he had milked it for everything it was worth, even if it was worth very little to begin with.

He wasn’t the man he used to be.

‘Thor, the Viking God of Thunder, and his pal Odin were up in Valhalla, when suddenly Thor says to Odin, ‘It’s been a long time now. I really need to have sex.’ Odin stands and ponders for a while, before replying, ‘Go to Earth, O Thor, and find thyself that they call a ‘lady of joy’ and treat her to your manly pleasures.’ And this Thor did. The next day, he comes back up to see Odin, and tells him about the previous night’s events. ‘My friend,’ he says, grinning from ear to ear, ‘It was wonderful. We had passionate sex 37 times.’”

‘More than I get from my wife.’ The heckling started early that night.

“37 times!” exclaims Odin. “That poor woman! Mere mortals cannot endure such treatment. You must go and apologize this instant!” So Thor goes back down to earth and finds the aforementioned prostitute, and he says. “I’m sorry about last night, but you see, I’m Thor...”

‘Heard it before.’

‘And it goes like this - ‘You’re Thor?’ shouts the girl with a lisp. ‘You’re Thor? What about me? I’m tho thor I can hardly pith!’”

‘Rubbish, get off.’

When Robbie got to the club from the pub he was greeted by Eric, the doorman.

‘Someone been asking for you, Robbie.’

Robbie’s heart sank.

‘Nice young fellow. Said he used to know you.’

‘Where is he now?’

Eric could tell from the tone of voice that Robbie wasn’t pleased to hear about his visitor. Oh well, too late now. ‘Showed him through to your dressing room.’

Dressing room? That was a laugh. Robbie shared a broom cupboard with whatever other acts were on the bill. This week it was a ventriloquist with a stutter, and two strippers who spoke no English, and weren’t much younger than poor Rita.

Eric looked concerned. ‘Did I do wrong? Only he said he knew you way back.’

A long way back, thought Robbie. Far too long. Back when the future was laid out with some hope, before the dreams turned to sand, and were washed away by the tide of his own vices.

He hurried across the main room, and slipped behind the curtain to the area backstage. There was a narrow corridor that led to the side rooms, one of which was his ‘dressing room’. He pushed at the door, unsurprised to find it open.

‘Hello,’ he called out. More from fear of who he might find, than from politeness in case one of the other performers was there. There was no reply.

He inched his way into the small room. Sniffing, he found traces of the familiar smell from his boarding room, and he put one hand against the wall as a sudden sharpness pierced his chest. He clamped a hand against the place where he vaguely thought his heart was. It was beating, and he breathed more easily.

Further into the room he caught sight of his reflection in the cracked mirror. Standing beside him, slightly to the left, was the young man he had seen all day. Long hair flicked back as he shifted position. It was him. It was Robbie. There was no mistaking it. The clothes were ones he had worn, could even remember where he had bought the jeans – a shop in Oxford Street.

‘Who...no I know who. Why? How?’

The young man in the glass put his finger to Robbie’s lips and smiled.

As Robbie watched, scared to move, the man began to fade. ‘No! Wait!’

It was too late, and had been for a long time. The two images caught in the mirror merged as one, and all that was left was the Robbie of the present day; tired, worn out, defeated and dulled.

Later, nearer ten than nine, he was called on stage.

The spotlights did their usual trick of disruption, and it took him a few seconds to adjust his eyes.

‘A Nun and a Priest are crossing the Sahara desert on a camel. On the third day out the camel suddenly drops dead, without warning, stone cold dead. After dusting themselves off, the Nun and the Priest take a look around. After a while, the Priest says, ‘Well, Sister, this looks pretty grim.’”

‘Like this place.’ A lone voice, but backed up by grunts of agreement.

‘I know, Father. In fact, I don’t think we can survive more than a day or two.’ ‘I agree,’ says the Father. ‘Sister, since it’s unlikely we will make it out of here alive, would you do something for me?’ ‘Anything, Father.’ ‘I have never seen a woman’s breasts and I was

wondering if I might see yours.’ ‘Well, under the circumstances I don't see that it would do any harm.’”

‘Bring the strippers back on.’

‘The Nun opens her habit and the Priest enjoys the sight of her shapely breasts, gorgeous they are, a real handful, and he comments on their beauty. ‘Sister, would you mind if I touched them?’ She nods shyly, okay, and he fondles them for several minutes. After a while the nun says. ‘Father, could I ask something of you?’ ‘Yes, Sister?’ ‘I have never seen a man's penis. Could I see yours?’ ‘I suppose that would be OK,’ the Priest says, and lifts his robe. ‘Oh Father, may I touch it?’ The priest says all right, and after a few minutes of fondling he was sporting a huge erection. Massive dick.’

‘Like the one standing up there.’

Robbie felt it like a kick in the ribs. He knew what it was immediately, he'd had enough warnings, unheeded and ignored like so much of his life these days.

“Sister, you know that if I insert my penis in the right place, it can give life.’ ‘Is that true Father?’ ‘Yes, it is, Sister.’ And it goes like this - ‘Oh Father, that's wonderful... stick it in the camel and let's get the hell out of here!’”

There was laughter, fading into the distance, but he heard it as he fell.

‘What's he doing?’

No one rushed on stage straight away; they never knew with Robbie if it was all part of the act or not.

‘Is he messing around?’

Robbie felt warm breath on his face and looked up at Doru, who had seen his father suffer a similar attack. He pressed down on Robbie's chest, and began a rhythm that he had used before.

Before Robbie closed his eyes, the pain getting worse, he looked out into the audience. There was only one face he could make out from the blurred and shadowed shapes.

It was a young man with long hair. He was standing, and without looking back, he was walking away.