

The Freebie

Chris Page

BILLY WAS just thinking he ought to call The Enemy when the phone rang. It was The Enemy.

‘Hi, this Justin Lastname of The Enemy here. Can I speak to Billy Freeb?’

The Enemy? Justin Lastname of The Enemy? *The* Justin Lastname of *the* The Enemy? Billy was not sure what to make of this. On uncountable occasions in the past howevermany years Billy had not called The Enemy. Whenever he was conscious he thought he ought to call The Enemy, but he never actually did. Now they were calling him.

‘Yeah, this is Billy Freeb,’ he said.

‘How’re you doing Billy?’ asked Justin, brightly business like. ‘Your name has been buzzing round the office lately. We at The Enemy are very excited about what you’re doing.’

Billy was picking his nose. He stopped and said ‘uh.’

‘Yeah, we thought we’d do a short number on you. Nothing grand just yet, maybe five hundred or a thousand words, a photo. See how it pans out.’

‘Ah.’

‘If, of course, you agree. What do you think, Billy?’

‘Er . . . How did you find out about me — my work?’ he mumbled at the edifice of awe and fear that had popped up next to the telephone.

‘Well I have a big memo right here on my desk, Billy. Makes interesting reading, almost enough for a story but without one crucial thing — you yourself, Billy.’

‘I see . . . As a matter of idle curiosity, do you know why you happen to have a big memo about me on your desk?’

‘Oh, I imagine one of our staffers saw one of your gigs and put your name about.’

‘I haven’t actually done any gigs,’ said Billy. ‘That’s kinda the point, isn’t it.’

‘Oh . . .’ the sound of a seismic shift of papers, something heavy toppling, ‘that’s — ’ and the light summery rustle of memo, ‘right. Well, I suppose one of our staffers didn’t see one of the gigs you didn’t do and decided to put your name about. So what do

you say, Billy? Why don't we meet for lunch? I . . .'

'Aaaaaaaaagh!'

'Billy? Billy? You all right?'

The mention of food had sent Billy into peristalsis.

'Aaaaaagh!' he expanded, but pulling himself together with an eviscerating drag on his cigarette, he arranged to meet Lastname at an Indian restaurant in Islington.

'See you there,' said Billy.

'Check,' said Justin.

Great! Fame! And Billy had done absolutely nothing to earn it but think about it! And a free lunch to boot! Not that he ever ate — that was against his principles, or against the chemicals in his blood — but a free lunch means free booze — and that was very for his principles and the chemicals in his blood, both.

But fame. 'I don't believe it' said Billy lamely, the dead receiver still in his hand. 'Help.' Abandoning the handset to the floor, he lit a cigarette and stumbled giddily from the hall into his room.

He felt profoundly nauseous. His body didn't miss food too much so long as he remained supine or drunk, but he was neither at the moment, and now with this adrenaline rush on top of this morning's quart of black instant coffee and ten Camel, his legs suddenly felt rubbery and he badly needed the toilet.

'I don't believe it. I can't believe it. I refuse to believe it. Someone's yanking my chain.' Either that Lucien Savage had put someone up to it — in which case he was dead meat in the Kropotkin Arms — or the call was genuine, in which case he would have to face an interview with the gargantuan Justin Lastname . . . and therefrom, record contracts, gigs at Wembley, TV spots, fame, wealth, an active and varied life — unlimited sex, drugs — everything he had ever wanted. Really, it was a no-win situation.

The thought of drugs helped to steady his mind.

He had to get rid of this deeply settled sensation of poison and incipient death, get clear-headed, get on top of the situation. He did this by making another pint of black coffee and pacing round his flat drinking, smoking and retching.

He reasoned his next job was to find out whether the call from Justin Lastname was straight up. With this new task he took his pacing into the spare room of his spare, lopsided flat.

The spare room was unused except by himself. He would sleep there once or twice a week when that Lucien Savage squatted Billy's own bedroom, overriding Billy's own squatter's rights in order to do sex in Billy's bed to whomever. That whomever was invariably a very recent whomever whom Savage had just met — perhaps just minutes before — in Billy's neighbourhood, from whom he wished to keep his own proper location a secret and/or whom he couldn't wait the length of time it took to get across town from Stoke Newington to do sex to.

Savage hated Billy because Billy had a two-bedroom squat which he refused to share with anyone, because it was the only squat in the world with a telephone, and because Billy's universally connected parents had found the gaff for him and sent round a council workman with keys and a claw-hammer to open it for him. Billy's parents had done this in the hope of keeping him off their backs and out of their pockets. Indeed, with Billy safely stowed away down here in Hackney they might be able to make that move to Richmond without him finding out where they had gone or even noticing.

Savage would usually show up between one and six in the morning and put upon Billy's sleepy-stoned-drunk head while propping the unconscious whomever against the doorframe. Billy would put his foot down: not this time. Invariably the argument would get round to the flat theme and Savage's line would go like this:

'Listen, man, you've got all this space here which you jealously guard, which you — which you squat like a Tory. You've even got a telephone which you never use, for Christ's sake — I mean what's the point of having a telephone if you never talk to anyone? You're a bloody hermit, Billy, you don't deserve friends. Look, if you won't let anyone live here, why not just be a human being once in a while and let your mates dip a finger in your manna?'

Savage was not rankled because he was without adequate accommodation, having talked himself into an overly generous share of someone else's squat in Kentish Town, and neither did he believe that Billy was taking space that could be better used by any of London's tens of thousands of more deserving people. Savage was rankled simply because he was that kind of guy.

'I'll tell everyone in the Kropotkin that Mummy had your squat cracked for you,' Savage would threaten. Savage knew a lot of things. He was a stockbroker and in order to trade his shares — his cathode blips, his abstracts, his non-products; like an air traffic controller trading radar contacts — it was imperative that he knew an awful lot about

different things. Dragnetting for knowledge, he ended up knowing a lot of things that were not strictly relevant to his trade. Thus, for example, he knew that Billy had not come by his squat by the usual ritual of crowbars, Loony Brew, sweats, and cold nights on raw floors. In fact, he knew a lot else about Billy, almost everything in fact. He knew so much about Billy partly because they had grown up together, and partly because he was secretly shagging Billy's mother.

With this Kropotkin threat Billy always gave up arguing. Of course, Savage could simply have said 'Mummy, Kropotkin' as soon as Billy opened the door, sending him to the greasy, malodorous sleeping bag in the spare room without debate, saving everyone a lot of time and precious calories, but that would have been no fun. It was no victory unless you rubbed your opponent's nose in the futility of opposition. For his part, Billy could have surrendered the moment Savage rang the doorbell. However, he was strongly possessed by an optimism derived from an over-active compensatory fantasy function, and this optimism consistently told him, adamantly, without any apparent irony, and without any obvious reference to the unencouraging mountain of precedents, that this time he would fend Savage off.

It was this same mechanism that allowed him to believe that his outward lack of activity was in fact tightly-coiled potential.

Billy could call Savage, find out by oblique means whether he had made the Lastname call. He could address Savage as Lucien. Savage hated the name Lucien, and insisted that people call him Savage or, better, Sav, because Sav was reminiscent of savvy which kind of means suss. However, this plan was fraught with danger and required some careful thought. Hell, he could just call Justin Lastname at The Enemy. That was the only sure way to find out. Yes, that was what he would do. With that, his nausea intensified, and without thinking he fled the flat.

A little later, bolstered by a very rapid can of Stupor Brew and wearing a second in his hand, he made the call expecting to be greeted with indignation and outrage. Billy was risking his life with this manoeuvre: one harsh word could be the end of him and nearly had been on many occasions. A less than dotting word or look from the staff at the local burger joint where he went for the free smiles could condemn him to bed on a vodka drip for a whole week. Instead, after a suitably important time on hold, he found himself talking to the same Justin Lastname.

'What's up, Billy?'

Once Billy had laboriously explained that the cat he did not have had mistaken the big dog-eared memo pad on which he had not written the name and address of the place they were to meet for the big dog-eared Persian that had never lived next door — on which Billy's cat would have certainly had a crush had they both existed — and had raped the note into illegibility, they reconfirmed the time and place of their meeting,

'Cheers Billy. Thanks for calling,' said Justin.

Now Billy's elation was unrestrained. He drained his can in one, and while he waited beerily by the phone for a whole two minutes for Savage to call so he could say 'Sorry Lucien, can't make the pub for lunch, I've got to see Justin Lastname about the band,' he reflected that The Enemy could not have called at a better time. Yesterday was Giro day and he still had nearly twenty pounds left, and he was at a relative peak both mentally and physically. Then he stumbled into the toilet, threw up and fainted when he tried to stand.

By the time Billy arrived at the restaurant he was in much better shape; he had got himself together.

He had got himself together with an unpretentious but proficient bottle of red — something with Graves on the label — while sitting on the big mausoleum in the middle of Abney Park Cemetery. The fog — like everyone in London, a late riser — laboriously and reluctantly lifted itself off its dense mattress of trees and shrubs and grass and sloped off to find a quiet spot in which to while away the day. Billy toasted the dead, he drank himself normal, and as he did so he even managed to lose the feeling that the Lastname call had stirred in him that he had been caught *in flagrante delicto* with a sexual fantasy by the very object of the same.

Striding up Upper Street from the wrong bus stop, soiled wine glass stowed in the pocket of his old overcoat, there was even a spring in his step. The spring came not from his undeniably light spirit, but from the persistent rubberyness of his legs, one or other of which would occasionally spring the wrong way causing him to go down on one knee to make gentlemanly proposals to lamp posts, passers by or clouds. Compared to lying unconscious on the toilet floor, head wedged between bowl and wall and pillowed by a pile of grey, shredded newspaper, he was doing very well indeed.

The restaurant was not crowded but neither was it quiet. A small group of off-duty BT engineers were filling the empty tables and chairs with an overflow of laughter and

shouting. They were enjoining one of their band to eat two whole tablespoons of lime pickle on one narrow wedge of papadam. Billy stood inside the door looking for Justin Lastname who was not there.

‘A table for one, sir?’ inquired a waiter.

‘I’m meeting someone,’ said Billy. ‘I believe we have a reservation.’

‘Name?’

‘Lastname.’

‘That would be helpful, sir.’

‘No, the name is Lastname. Lastname is the surname.’

‘We don’t have Lastname on our list, sir.’

‘Er, try Justin.’

‘Mr. Justin? No, I’m afraid not.’

‘No, Justin’s not a last name, it’s Lastname’s first name. Justin Lastname — that’s his full name.’

‘And your name, sir?’

‘My first name or last name?’

‘We do have a reservation in the name of Enemy.’

‘That’ll be it, sir,’ exclaimed Billy, stumbling in his much unused restaurant etiquette. ‘I mean . . .’

‘This way Mr. Enemy,’ said the waiter.

Billy took his window seat and ordered a bottle of wine to further calm his nerves.

‘Freeb!’ said Billy, slapping his head when the waiter left.

He was a little early; it could not be said that the journalist was late. Billy lit a cigarette and composed himself. He wondered whether any of the big men laughing across the restaurant had heard his conversation with the waiter, had heard Lastname mentioned and was impressed. He wondered if any of them had even heard of Justin Lastname. None of them were looking at him in any manner, impressed or otherwise. They were impressed with the lime pickle and were negotiating with the waiter for another bowl, even though they were already sweating quite profusely. Maybe they would be more impressed later when Justin himself, who they would surely recognise from the TV, came in and sat at Billy’s table.

On the other hand, Billy mused, maybe the loud men hated music and never ever watched TV. Maybe they spent every spare hour in Indian restaurants drinking lager and

making their brains bleed with lime pickle and vindaloo in which case they would have no idea who Justin Lastname was.

If they hated music, they would probably like Billy's.

In a sudden outbreak of affection for everything in the universe, Billy wanted to go over and talk to the men about music. He wanted to tell them that their laughter and the purple veins bulging from their red foreheads were forms of music in themselves. They were happy, they were preoccupied, he left them to it.

Billy's wine had arrived. Lastname had not. It could now be said the journalist was late. He sighed and stifled a gag. He lit another cigarette from the one he had just finished. He drank some wine.

Justin Lastname came in.

Billy stood. They shook hands.

'Billy Freeb.' said Lastname, sounding a little impressed and sizing Billy up. 'How're you doing?'

Billy wondered whether he should say "Nice to meet you".

'What's up,' he said.

The BT curry club fell silent and looked round. They were clearly impressed that Billy was meeting Justin Lastname for lunch. Billy was really very impressed that he was too.

'Let's eat,' said Justin.

Lastname's physical presence confirmed what Billy had suspected: he was a big man. Short and skinny, what he lacked in physical stature he made up for in pandimensionality; he was big in five or six dimensions, maybe more, and when he had parked himself and his other-realm protuberances into a seat, he looked uncomfortably wedged in, far too big for the table or the restaurant. He would have looked more at home reclining on a comet between solar systems thought Billy.

Talking of comets — those eyes! Those eyes that preceded him everywhere! He had brought them with him today — the full pair, the big, too wide, slightly bulging ones that were wild and keen and savvy as a nocturnal predator's. Hyperanimated, Lastname's eyes were like those of an owl that had strayed into a pet shop full of gerbils. Oh yes, feral and hungry, thought Billy, and they had done some things, those eyes. You could see it in them and around them in the taught blast lines that radiated from the craters of their orbits. They had seen some life, they had seen some parties, they had

seen some shows. They had put on some shows too, fronted many a show put on by E, C, LSD and ESB. And not just his eyes, his face holistically carried his life, the sum of Justin Lastname (what baggage! Billy traveled light): thrusting assurance in his beaky nose, appetite in his tomato-splat mouth, momentum in the friction-tanned leather of his skin.

No mere manic street preacher, no simple mind, no pretender, he lived by his words. Always more than a man at work, he was kraftwerk, wonder stuff, a blur. The most incisive hack since Brutus's was hailed as a mother of invention, ever provocative and never simply read; he was to musicians everywhere kingmaker, slayer of iffy pops, anthrax to sheep on drugs, airheads, lemonheads and radioheads; the difference between nirvana and pavement. Auteur, proclaimer, mapping the musical swells in living colour, he was a credit to the nation, the hack who can. Take Justin Lastname or take that!

As a result, Lastname was not only the most respected writer for the most respected rock journal in Britain and a presenter of at least all the TV shows for the under twenty-fives, he was a recording star in his own right, had a column in the Sunday Telegraph and had just been paid an undisclosed sum in the upper six-figure range to write a novel he had not even begun to think about yet.

They ordered: samosas, onion bhajias and chicken tikka to get warmed up; vindaloo for Billy, phall for Justin; bindi bhaji, saag bhaji, alur dom, biriani, and pullao for balance; plenty of naan, roti, chupattis, and papadams to fill up on; chutneys chilli, onion and mango, and vinegared chillies for a bit of oomph. On some macho impulse to prove they could eat something that would not actually induce delirium, they asked for raita, and as an afterthought, for the sake of authenticity, dhal. Finally, Billy ordered a bottle of Mindanao-deep St. Emilion ('88) to add some 3D to the spices.

As the waiter skipped away, Lastname placed his pocket tape recorder on the table between them.

There was an expectorant pause. Billy apologised.

'Shall we?' asked Justin with raised eyebrows and a gleam of devilry in his eyes.

Billy assumed an interview posture. He had never been interviewed before but he knew all about it from *The Enemy* and from the TV and it was, in truth, not a wholly unrehearsed move. Moreover, this was just one in a whole repertoire of postures he would be employing this lunchtime. This opener was a very relaxed, very low slouch over his place mat with the glass of wine suspended between thumb and forefinger,

hovering near the crown of his head.

‘For sure,’ said Billy.

With a much-ado flourish, Justin hit the play button on the tape recorder.

‘Billy,’ began Justin, ‘you’ve kept a very low media profile for a long time. Why break the silence and agree to an interview now?’

Billy thought about this carefully. ‘Justin,’ he started, ‘I haven’t kept a low profile for an awfully long time. I’ve carefully maintained no profile at all. I’ve kept a zero, a subzero media profile. In fact I’ve made absolutely no attempt to get my profile in the media at all, nor have I felt any need to project myself publicly,’ he lied. In reality, Billy had tried to call The Enemy almost everyday in the past howevermany years, but was each time forbidden by his howling, gibbering fear function. Each day, Billy sat on the floor in the hall by the telephone, neutralising his fear centre with napalm strikes of vodka or Loony Brew, or buying its silence with gifts of fine wine or single malt scotch. When he came round, hours or days later, on the floor, curled round the legs of the telephone table, his fear function would be his only still-active faculty. Far from exorcising this little monster, all the years of struggle and alcohol had only strengthened it. The bugger obviously like a drink; so did Billy and they achieved the kind of detente where they agreed to destroy each other indefinitely because they did not like the alternative of not destroying each other. A bit like the Middle East.

But what the hell? The Enemy had called him. It was meant to happen.

‘I’m breaking radio silence now,’ he went on, ‘because I’ve reached a point in my personal and artistic development where it becomes necessary to break that radio silence.’

‘Check,’ said Lastname. ‘So this new openness toward the media is a change in strategy.’

‘Not at all. It’s merely the one strategy unfolding.’

‘Are we going to see a media blitz now?’

Billy did not answer immediately. He changed pose: he straightened, drank, leaned forward with his weight on his elbows, and his forearms neatly folded on the table in front of him overhung by his Tweety Pie rib cage. He made a conscious effort to look absorbed and forgot what the question was.

‘Ideas,’ he began once he remembered where he was, ‘have a life of their own independent of the progenitor. You have an idea and kick it out into the world and you

can no longer say “this is my idea”. You can say “I gave birth to this idea, spawned this idea”, that’s OK, you can say that. You can’t say this is my idea except in the sense that you had that idea. It’s like becoming a parent. If you have a child, it’s yours only in the sense that it issued from you, but when it gets to say, seven or eight, it’s going out by itself and you don’t even know where the hell it is or what it’s up to anymore. It’s totally got a mind of its own. It has nothing to do with you anymore and to assert possession is an act of denial. Like, my project was conceived way back and since then it’s been working as much on its own as I’ve been working with it. I suppose it must be a strong concept because it’s embedded itself in the human psychic field, replicated itself and finally manifested itself as a memo on your desk suggesting you call me.’

‘Right,’ said Lastname, making notes on his linen napkin which may have been questions to ask Billy later or the first draft of his novel.

‘Now, you see, things are that developed, the concept and myself have entered a dialogue. It learns from me as much as I learn from it. Progress and development come from the mutual dynamic interplay which is, by its very nature, an unpredictable thing.’

‘So, ah, you don’t know whether you’ll be thrusting yourself into the public eye.’

‘Yes, I don’t know. I think so, but we’ll have to wait and see.’

The food was arriving. Lastname magicked a bottle of Tabasco from the ungulate folds of his jacket and began drooling the red stuff on the different dishes.

‘You’re putting your head on the editing board here, aren’t you, Billy? Your band, your project is a tad unconventional. A lot of people are just not going to understand, are they. You could be exposing yourself to a degree of public ridicule.’

‘That’s right, Justin. New ideas, radical ideas, are often greeted with distrust, hostility and fear . . . even destruction. They used to burn witches, didn’t they, and had Jimi Hendrix been born in the seventeenth century, it would have been interesting to see what the Witchfinder General would have made of Voodoo Chile. As it was, Hendrix burned his own guitars. A retroactive fear of heterodoxy? Was he a little afraid of what he was doing? If you spend all your time breaking ground aren’t you going to wonder once in a while whether there’s going to be anything left to stand on? No, I’m not worried. I’m quite a bit older than most in this business. I’m twenty-four, I’ve seen this happen a lot already and I think I have some defensive resources.’

‘Jimi Hendrix has recently been deified all over again and he’s dead.’

‘Maybe being dead makes it easier. A god choking to death on his own vomit once

may not unduly hurt his career but twice is going to be hard to swallow.'

'So you think of death as a valid career move.'

'Crucial. I've often considered it. Death is the purest form of activity. It's kinda Zen in its unselfconsciousness; engagement is total . . . it requires a lot of commitment and there's no room for compromise. I respect that.'

'Look Billy,' said Lastname, addressing an ostrich-sized leg of chicken tikka, the clouds of garlic billowing across the table making Billy's nose hairs stand erect. 'When The Enemy comes off the presses every week, I look at it and I think "wow, I wrote all that? I wrote about all those bands in one week? How did I find the time? Where did I find the energy?"'

Billy nodded appreciatively as if he spent all his time doing huge amounts of work too and not languishing in bed wanking. He poured more wine, pulled carefully on his Camel leery of gagging.

'Because there are an awful lot of bands out there, Billy. An awful, awful lot. Hundreds and thousands of bands, all different colours and shapes, some of which are tops, some of which are bollocks. But everybody's in a band, Billy. Everybody. My grandad's in a band. And they're all very, very busy, Billy. Very bloody busy. Except Take That of course. Take That are packed in refrigerators when they're off duty so they don't go off. But apart from them, everybody's very bloody busy, Billy, working their ends off for music. Why aren't you in a band Billy? Why am I interviewing you?'

Billy half swiveled in his seat to sit side on to his interrogator, twisted back to face him, jabbed a pointy elbow into his own groin, and rested his chin on the heel of his upturned palm. Billy liked this arrangement because with a cigarette in the hand supporting his chin, he could smoke without moving any part of his body but his fingers. He also liked it because in this pose he rather fancied himself as a post modern version of Rodin's Thinker.

'I have no band: it consists of four people besides myself who I picked at random from the phone book and who I've never met. As far as I know, they don't know each other and don't know they're in a band because I haven't told them. They may even be dead by now.'

'So you're the only one who knows you don't have a band.'

'Wrong. Quite a few people know I don't have a band. But I'm the only one who knows the specifics. That's been a bit of a problem, a bit of a flaw, keeping things from

myself, but art can only aspire to perfection. However, it can be said that for some considerable time I was myself unaware that I wasn't in a band. Then one day it occurred to me. I suppose these things happen.'

'I assume then that all the creative input is yours, that you write all the songs.'

'Yes and no, Justin. In that nobody's writing anything, the project is the purest form of composition. Our input is exactly equal. Well, almost . . . in that I am to some extent aware that nothing is happening, I suppose things are a little lopsided my way. But I don't dominate and I don't dictate. We all have an equal say in what doesn't happen and what isn't produced. I don't interfere with the creative needs of the other people who aren't in the band with me, I give them as much space and time as they need to do what they feel they have to do artistically. And they don't impose on me at all. It's very egalitarian that way. We're very good about that. It's very pure in that way.'

'But, Billy,' insisted the journalist, dolloping Tabasco onto his okra. 'But, Billy, even Kate Bush writes songs once in a while. Even My Bloody Valentine write songs from time to time, for Christ's sake. No songs, no lig: it's a rule. What gives you the right not to write songs?'

'Well,' said Billy carefully, 'it all depends what you mean by a song, doesn't it. Burt Weedon's guitar book will tell you that a song is verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus, verse, chorus, or whatever, and we all know that's a total load of rubbish. Just listen to John Peel for ten minutes and we learn that Weedon is a stray extraterrestrial.'

'Moreover, it's taken as read that music must involve instruments and melody and rhythm and all that, but we don't really think about that assertion very deeply do we. I mean, look at Test Department and Einsturzende Neubaten: suspension units from locomotives, oil drums, sledgehammers, pneumatic drills, bed springs . . . they thought about it, they challenged every notion of what music was about. Except one.'

'Now look at Philip Glass and John Cage and Stockhausen and Schoenberg: they knew. And in there comes the non-song, non-music. They would sit down at a piano for exactly a minute and thirty-four seconds, or whatever, without playing a note, stand up, bow — and the audience would go mental. George Chest, the Times' music critic threw his underpants on stage after one such performance.'

'My God,' said Justin, 'you mean . . .' He allowed a gloop of curry to escape from the roll of chupatti paused halfway to his mouth and splat on the table cloth.

'Yes,' resumed Billy, 'we've gone that one step further. We've done away with the

silent piano, we've lifted all time limits on non-compositions. We brainwashed the pianist into forgetting how to play, then sacked him anyway. We burned down the stage and demolished the auditorium. Then we prized all the sliders off the sound deck and dropped them down the toilet.'

'My God,' repeated Lastname urgently, showering food across the table. 'The temerity!'

'As you once said, Justin, all life is rock 'n' roll, all rock 'n' roll is life. It's everywhere, it's in everything. It's a way of looking at things, it's a spirit of absolute engagement, of total involvement with everything you do.'

'Once said? I say it as often as I can at least.'

'When I feel a song coming on, Justin, you know what I do?' Lastname said something encouraging in samosa.

'When I feel a song coming on, do I pick up my guitar? No way! I do the washing up!'

The illustrious Lastname's ears were wagging visibly, which could have been because they liked what they were hearing but could just have easily have been attributable to the chili.

'Or I clean the windows or swab the kitchen floor — '

'You must have a very clean flat, Billy.'

'— or I watch TV, or go for a stroll. Anything I want, man. It's all the same.' He shrugged and waved the flat of his hand at the restaurant to show to show that all the tables and chairs and waiters were the same. 'Or, you know, I might take a shower, have a crap, have a smoke, drink, get out of my head, bonk, read the paper . . . anything.'

Ooh, you little liar! Billy never cleaned his flat, never took showers, never read newspapers and never, ever bonked. Billy spent most of his time, whether in creative mode or not, in a delirium of psychotropics and malnourishment.

'Music is creation,' Billy asserted confidently. 'It's the creation and preservation of moments. But the moment is the important thing, not its pickled remains in the song. Songs: sensation, emotion, thought, all collected together, neatly packaged and tied with a price tag and sold to whomever who promptly forgets about it. Look at all the music that's churned out every day, every week, every year. On the radio and the TV alone there's more than a reasonably sane person would want to keep track of, then there's the universe's worth of other stuff that never makes the playlists, still more that never gets

recorded, and yet more that never even makes it out of the garage — most of it better than the rubbish that actually makes money.

‘Now, how much of last year’s output do we remember? How much of it did we hear? How much of it do we want to remember or hear?’

‘I heard all of it,’ said Lastname, a little surprised.

‘All these moments the songwriters have concretised for us . . . in the end they mean doodly to us. I mean what kind of spiritually dead goon identifies with the songs of U2 or Sting? It’s all just a sound, an ego and a nice line in threads. What about Yes or Simple Minds? A browse through a thesaurus and the music pulls at your heart strings like a trigonometry lesson does. How many of these moments resemble any moments we’ve had in our own life?’ he said, leaning challengingly across the table at Lastname.

‘Bugger all. But — ’

‘But that’s not the point, is it!’ finished Billy triumphantly. ‘The music, the lyrics, it’s all irrelevant, man! It doesn’t matter what you do. Music is totally disposable. You write the songs that get you the fifteen minutes on the stage, that gets you the interviews and next week it’s all forgotten. And the punter is totally hypnotised by all this. It just keeps going on and on — being a fan is a bit like getting into the star’s belly with his curry dinner. Great colours, lots of movement, all sorts of exotic stuff — creates the impression there’s actually something going on, and creates the illusion that the punters are part of this activity. Meanwhile, they are being digested by the process.

‘It’s a big wank,’ asserted Billy, deftly karate chopping a papadam and not showering fragments over the table at all.

Billy arched back his head and opened the curtain of My Bloody Valentine locks on his face but sprang right back. ‘Let’s cut through the crap and get to the moment — not somebody else’s moment, but your own moment! That’s what you are, your own time, your own experience, the nitty-gritty minutiae of each day. When we turn on the stereo or the radio or the TV, we suspend ourselves, we’re living by proxy for that time — time created, time packaged for us. The media is prophylactic; it protects us from life. Strip off, get unsafe!’

Billy was getting well into it now and even allowed his carefully arranged arms to flap about a bit of their own accord.

‘Make your own moments, revel in the now — your *now* not somebody else’s *then*. We could be inventing every second of our day, reinventing ourselves with each breath.

‘What I’ve done is dispose of the disposable product. Why even try to preserve what’s dead?’

‘Lets get on with what’s important; let’s get on with the interviews and the fame. Let’s save a lot of time wasted in senseless writing and tiresome touring. Let’s get on with the celebrity parties, the ligging and the bonking; let’s get on with the filet mignon and champagne breakfasts, the eco-benefits, the flights to New York for lunch, the yoga and the drugs; let’s get on with the trashed hotels, the big houses that use as much energy as a town; let’s get on with having opinions however trite or muddled or misinformed on every subject from the arcane to the trivial; let’s get on with the senseless trips to Bosnia, the adulation, the need, the love . . . and the freebies.’

Billy sat back again. Lastname was wiping spilt curry from the tablecloth and catching it in his other hand which ferried it to his mouth. Billy slugged his wine and went on.

‘I have erased the alien distinction between life and art, between corporately appropriated rock ‘n’ roll and its true, universal, seamless soul. And in so doing I have unshackled the artist!

‘Rock ‘n’ roll will never die! Long live rock ‘n’ roll!’

‘You,’ spluttered Lastname, spraying curry sauce back onto the tablecloth he had just wiped it off and pointing at Billy with a brown and yellow finger, ‘have created a vast melting pot, a steaming, bubbling, frenetic stew where the distinction between participant and observer is, is, is . . . melted — quantum-wise — where the producer and the consumer become one in a fiery cauldron of activity, each tossed and turned, constituted and dissolved and reconstituted again — ’ Justin was in copy mode now, and the little tape recorder whirred approvingly ‘— but a bit different; difference made meaningless in an overheated realm of bifurcation and diced carrots!

‘Do you dare test your toe or any other part of you in this mayhem of energy? C’mon strip off, dive in, lose your skin, ma-an! Get served up in a boiling bowl with your middle digit proudly erect! Come ye of little faith, taste and choke: this is not a meal the soul-dead can digest!

‘Man,’ said Justin shaking his head, chewing hunked meat and waving his stained finger, ‘stuff the Sex Pistols, they were dilettantes compared to this.’

Billy shrugged and glugged his wine.

‘Tell me, Billy,’ gasped Lastname between great sucks of mouth-cooling air, ‘do

you practise your scales?’

‘Uh?’

‘Scales, you gotta practise them. There’s nothing but scales.’

To give the journalist time to gather himself, Billy went for a lengthy pause. He drained his glass and emptied the last of the bottle into it.

‘Another, please,’ said Billy, waving the empty at the waiter.

‘Are you ready to order?’ he was asked.

‘What time is it?’

‘Two thirty-five,’ said the waiter. ‘We’d like to close soon.’

Billy looked at the wine bottle he was holding, half raised in mid-wave and back to the waiter, who sympathetically shook his head: not if Billy was not going to eat.

‘OK, thanks,’ said Billy. He ran the interview through his head another couple of times in truncated form, trying to home in on and hone the rough bits. It did not look like Lastname was going to make it after all.

He looked out the window hoping to see salvation. He just saw fog. Fog was an odd thing to see on a bright and sunny day, but there you are, that’s London for you. Billy had the unpopular opinion that London was a foggy city, just as the old films and folk who had never been there would have it. Funny that nobody else in London ever seemed to notice. Here they all were, plying Upper Street in loud shirts and black shades, not bumping into each other at all. All ready to deny fog; having renounced fog, having thoroughly expunged fog. But there the fog was, like grey candyfloss and thick enough to chew. It was weird fog since it seemed to be generated between Billy’s ears and seep out of his head to fill the pubs and the clubs and the streets. Billy wondered if there was a drug you take for it.

Now finding his glass drained, his fags spent, the bill before him and a cordon of silent and implacable waiters around him, he figured it was time to leave.

Leaving left Billy well short of dosh. To show Lastname that he knew what he was doing he had ordered a bottle of wine from near the bottom of the list. He had also assumed Lastname would pay.

Yesterday’s dole cheque was ragged down to the stub.

He had also been counting on an advance on a record deal to see him through the next two weeks. That may, he mused, have fallen through as of this lunchtime.

However, the wine had left him thirsty, the lunch hour had left him stressed, and he felt that he now deserved a drink. He also needed to sit down. He was walking with a limp — not because he had hurt his leg but because for some time now his exhausted and neglected body had been shutting down nonessential portions of itself in an effort to conserve energy. It had started at the top and worked down. In the last hundred metres it had reluctantly turned off most of Billy's left leg just to keep the right one working. His head and arms dangled uselessly and his torso lolled loosely on top of his pelvis.

Really he needed to lie down. Really he needed a drink. Really he needed to lie down and drink.

Ten minutes later he was in the King's Head on Upper Street with a stoutening pint of Guinness and a packet of Old Holborn.

Billy was just thinking he ought to call The Enemy when he heard a loud ringing noise.

Justin Lastname was also enjoying a well deserved pint. It had been a hell of a morning. At nine he had reeled out of a taxi — the same taxi that was delivering him from last night — and into an interview with that band. Forget the name. Big in the US. Begins with S. Or The. Never mind, he would check later. Except in the course of the interview it came out that the band was not — or claimed not to be — S or The, but that they were that other lot, N or V. In a fit of petulance that impressed even himself, he had screamed that he had come to do a specific job, i.e., interview S or The and if this band were going to bugger him around with existential crises or schizophrenia or whatever, their careers were off both sides of the pond. In the end, the band decided that they could be anyone Justin wished if it meant the interview would go ahead.

Then there had been lunch with that other guy. Monstrously famous. Big everywhere. He was from that band . . . something to do with small animals and anuses. Turned out he was completely sober, was funny and made a lot of sense. But Justin could sort that out when he wrote up the interview.

It was on leaving the restaurant that the big, bald bloke in the Hawaiian shirt had swung at this head with the cricket bat. Justin gathered between ducks and swerves that this was the manager of some band he had done a piece on not so long ago. When the waiters from the restaurant had finally formed a large enough pile on the assailant that he could not move, Justin had pointed out with a quick kick to the grollies that if he

raved about everyone, people would think he was failing in his job, then hurled himself into the nearest taxi.

There was much more to be done with the day, but right now Justin had created a very loud and invigorating hiatus, right here in the King's Head on Upper Street in which to recoil his energies ready to spring into tonight's bright nova of events. He was listening to a tape, a very good tape on his walkman. It was so good he wanted to dance right there in the bar, but because he was Justin Lastname, he kept his eyes down on his Telegraph, his face impassive and allowed only his feet to squirm a bit, out of sight, deep in his Reeboks. Here was that good bit where the guitar went GRRRAAAAAARRRSKREEE CHUGACHUGACHUGA before the band hurled itself once more off the pinnacle of the verse and into the precipice of the chorus without safety net or bungee rope. The band was called the Smarmpits and the tape had been given to him by that Lucifer Savage, the Smarmpit's frontman-singer-guitar hero wherever they had been last night. These lads were going far, Lastname would see to that. He was going to meet them this very evening at some place called the Kropotkin Arms, where they were playing and where, he was assured, he would find lots of booze, drugs and sex. Savage was a stockbroker in his day job so he knew all about drugs and money, and therefore music.

Which reminded him. Today he had done someone a favour. He had not interviewed a bloke with no band called Billy Freeb. That had been Savage's idea.

'He's a sort of conceptualist,' Lucifer had explained, a kind of performance artist, if you like, but this performance involves doing absolutely nothing. He believes that everything we do is art, that everything, like, going to the toilet or doing the washing up is an act of self creation, that we're inventing ourselves the whole time. Like, life *is* rock 'n' roll.'

'Does he make money from this?' Justin had asked, perplexed not just by the concept, but also by the whole external world and much of his internal world, both strobing at him deep in the acid belly of a Dead Dog event somewhere.

'No, he's on the dole.'

'Sounds like a load of bollocks to me.'

'Of course it is.'

'So wha — '

'So the point is you don't have to meet him. You just call him, make the

arrangement and don't show up. It's an interview with a non-musician in a non-band— . with a non-bloke, really. Look, he's been down in the dumps since, since . . . well, since he was born come to think of it. It's like, he's totally frightened of life, he's petrified of getting stuck in, so he makes up all this bullshit to make him feel like he's actually doing something. All you have to do is make a call and he'll be tickled pink. But for God's sake don't actually meet him, he'd be destroyed. Not that he'd show up: that would compromise himself.'

'I still don't get the point,'

'There are two points: if Billy thought The Enemy was taking him seriously enough to go along with his concept, he might put off killing himself. Second, if you do this the E's on me tomorrow night.'

'What's his number?'

How easy, thought Justin, to save a life and spread a bit of light and happiness in this frantic world. Yeah, this world is full of good blokes, mainly me.

Justin was feeling really good, well on top. Lastname was a winner, he was a bright star, a beacon of hope in London's foggy maze. And his effulgence intensified in the wasted presence of that sap across the bar now being carried out by paramedics, apparently dead, leaving behind only a pint of Guinness and a packet of Old Holborn as monuments to his passing.

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