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In a matter of seconds Glasgow was wiped off the face of the earth.

Callum Pope felt little emotion as he watched his city evaporate, as he saw his family, his friends, his history become consumed by a dense and voluminous cloud.

Glasgoing-going-gone.

The 757 continued its ascent, elbowing its way through the vapour that cocooned it. *Grey candyfloss*, thought Callum. *Sky soup*. He was lost in the gloomy cumulus, his forehead pressing hard against the fat window by 7A. The thrumming glass was the only thing preventing him from being sucked into oblivion like meat through a straw.

The cloud got thicker and darker, dropping a black shutter over the window, but Callum remained glued to the view, a punter at a peepshow waiting for the reveal. And when it came, the show was dazzling. The plane levelled out over a stratospheric snowscape illuminated by interminable purples and unblinking pinks. It was a scene that might have fooled him into thinking he had already arrived in Iceland, the country where he had chosen, on a whim it seemed, to spend the rest of his life.

He was bursting for a piss. A backlit icon above his

head reminded him that he was not yet allowed to unfasten his seat belt. He considered his options. Pee in the sick bag? Its paper was wax-coated but he wasn't sure if this rendered it waterproof. Remove a shoe? Grab the handbag belonging to the woman next to him? She had been rifling through it prior to take-off in search of a boiled sweet for her ears. Callum had noticed that she was carrying a pregnancy-test kit. If he peed in her bag would it confirm, beyond all doubt, that he was about to become a father?

This wasn't supposed to happen.

Whenever Callum had thought about becoming a dad he had always pictured himself – like his father before him and his father before that – dragging his frazzled reflection across a polished hospital floor, an uncut cigar in his breast pocket pulsing expectantly with every heartbeat as he incanted the mantra: *please God let it be healthy*. He had never imagined it would be like this.

Sure, he had butterflies. He had dragonflies, if he was honest. His heart had lodged in his throat. And yes, he had a cigar. Difference being that Callum's cigar was 150ft long with wings and a tailfin and it was propelling him at improbable speed towards a new home with a new woman and a new life as a father to her eleven-year-old daughter.

This wasn't supposed to happen, repeated Björk.

Callum removed his earphones and killed the music on his new iPod. His staff had presented him with it at his leaving lunch earlier that afternoon. In the end only four people worked for him at Strawdonkey. He appreciated the fact that they'd all dug deep.

'Neil, Morag, Becca and myself had a whip-round,' said Young Kenny, handing Callum a small box wrapped in Eeyore paper. 'It's just a wee token to say

thanks for six unbefuckinlievable years at The Donkey.'

'Jeez, Kenny,' said Morag. 'Thank Christ you're good wi' IT, cuz you're S-H-I-T wi' speeches.'

Trattoria Porchetta was packed. It was all-you-could-eat for £4.95 and the queue was two-thick onto Argyle Street. Tables were butted up to each other from the front door to the WC and diners sat tightly together doing their best to keep their elbows out of each other's linguini. Callum could have chosen any restaurant in Glasgow as the venue for his leaving do, but the Strawdonkey posse had become part of the furniture at 'Porky's', regulars on the last Friday of every month, and Callum saw no reason to make an exception for this, his last Friday ever.

All eyes were on him as he carefully unpicked the tape from his tightly wrapped gift.

'Hurry up, wull ye,' guldered a well-sozzled Morag. 'There's drink tae be drunk.'

Callum slid his present out of its wrapping. 'An iPod,' he said, stating the bloody obvious. He was good at that. He removed the gadget from its box.

'Two thousand songs in your pocket,' explained Young Kenny. 'Six and a half ounces of audio wizardry with super-fast FireWire auto updating. If you scroll down the menu bar, you'll see I've already started your iTunes library.'

'You shouldn't have.' Callum toyed with the buttons. Two dozen songs had already been uploaded into the smooth white brick the size of a chocolate bar and every damn one of them was Björk or Sugarcubes.

'I thought it was apt,' said Kenny.

'Really, you shouldn't have.'

'Speech!' cried Becca, clanging a knife against the rim of her wine glass.

'Where do I begin,' said Callum. Where *do* I begin,

he thought. He cursed himself for not having prepared something. 'I, em . . . that is . . . Young Kenny is right. These last six years have been unbleedylievable.'

'Unbefuckinlievable!' corrected Morag.

'That too,' said Callum. 'But I . . . I don't feel it is me who should be making this speech. Sarah was much better at this sort of thing. I guess none of us would be sat round this table if it weren't for her.'

Neil bowed his head.

Morag reached for her napkin.

Callum fought with his throat. He could feel them looking at him in that way again, the way they always did whenever he mentioned Sarah's name. It was a look that managed to be both deferential and accusatory at the same time. Callum tried hard not to let it get to him.

'Back in '96, when I had the idea for strawdonkey.com, I didn't know the first thing about the Internet or setting up an e-business,' he said. 'Christ, I still can't program my video recorder.'

A murmur of laughter.

'All I had then was the beginnings of an idea, but it was Sarah who was prepared to not only back it, but to jack in her job and go into partnership with me, turning that idea into something that would revolutionize travel publishing. And that simple idea, as we all know, was a website that publishes travel diaries written by the public. Sarah was convinced that Strawdonkey could become a valuable resource for millions of travellers. And she knew how to get the right backing.'

Callum was aware that other diners were eavesdropping. His leaving speech had become a sales pitch. The irony wasn't lost on him.

'The real beauty of Strawdonkey is that our travelogs are written by real people with real stories to tell. In

1996, all the big-name travel guides were operating defensive web strategies, providing only top-line content to protect sales of their guide books. I identified a gap in the market but it took someone like Sarah, with her business nous, to get Strawdonkey off the ground. She was the one who had the venture capitalists falling over themselves to back our concept of an online travel community *written by you, for you*. These have become famous words. These were Sarah's words. It is a tragedy that she was never able to share in our success.'

Callum raised his glass. He made an unspoken toast and necked his Amaretto. He saw that Morag was dabbing her eyes with a napkin. He let her blow her nose before he continued.

'You are a talented, hard-working bunch of arseholes and Sarah would be proud of you.'

'To arseholes!' cried Neil, spilling red wine onto a shirt that already looked like the 'before' side of a split screen in a soap-powder advert.

The interruption threw Callum. He was sure that the 'arseholes' was directed at him. It took him a few seconds to find his thread.

'In the . . . em. Sorry. Over these last six years, the dotcom industry has experienced massive ups, but also massive downs. Nobody, not even Sarah, could have foreseen it. But you lot made sure our bubble never burst. By showing initiative and implementing some innovative revenue strategies, notably the selling of hyperlinks to restaurants, bars and hostels . . . no names, Becca . . . you guys have made Strawdonkey the eighth most visited site in the UK. I suppose it was inevitable that a big-money player like Backpackers would one day make an approach.'

A sarcastic grunt from Neil. He had never been good at hiding his feelings.

'My decision to sell Strawdonkey may seem like a sudden one but I can assure you it is something that I have agonized over for a long time,' explained Callum. 'I know there are those among you who think I am selling you all down the Clyde, and I don't blame you, but it was not a decision that I took lightly. I wish I had been able to discuss it with Sarah.'

'Sarah would never have sold out on us,' barked Neil.

'Don't listen to him,' urged Becca. 'He's pished.'

'Neil might be right,' said Callum. 'Sadly, we will never know. What I do know is that it was important to Sarah, in the event of a takeover, that the Strawdonkey name and ethos should remain intact. Fortunately, your new owners agree. They want you to carry on doing what you've always done best. The extra investment that Backpackers have promised will enable Strawdonkey to attract a larger global audience. So it's a case of business as usual. And even though the time is now right for me to pursue a new life and resurrect an old career, Strawdonkey – and by that I mean all you guys around this table – will always have a special place in my heart.'

Yeah, yeah, Callum, their eyes appeared to be saying. Take your money and run.

Whatever they were thinking, they gave him a clap.

The cappuccinos arrived and Callum swapped places with Becca to sit beside Neil. He needed a word.

Neil edited all the travelogs submitted to the Strawdonkey site. Now that Callum was leaving, Neil was to run the Glasgow office, but he had reacted badly to Callum's decision to sell up. He made no secret of the fact that he was considering other options. Callum recognized that Neil, more than anyone, was the creative juice at Strawdonkey. He was key

to the company's continued success and it was important to keep him on board.

'I guess I'm leaving you holding the baby.' Callum refilled Neil's glass.

'For now at least,' he conceded. 'But I'm a bit like you, Cal. I've got some important life decisions to make. I don't want to edit travel diaries for whatever I have left of my three score and ten.'

'What sort of thing are you thinking of?'

'I'm juggling a few irons on the back burner.' Neil pushed his glasses back up his nose.

Callum didn't think that Neil suited his new specs. They deadened his expression, like those novelty glasses that come with the eyes already printed onto them.

'I think I'd like to concentrate on writing, not editing,' continued Neil. 'In fact, I'm working on a screenplay at the minute. *The Inaudible Man*. I'm going to give it the big Hollywood sell: *He was a man with something to say, but no way of saying it*. Hell, I might turn it into a West End musical. Two hours of show-stopping instrumentals.'

'As movie tag lines go, that's right up there with the one you suggested for *The Usual Suspects*.'

Neil adopted his best straight-to-video VO: '*Kevin Spacey IS Keyser Soze, in . . . The Usual Suspects*.'

'Glad to see you haven't lost your sense of humour, despite everything.'

'That's what keeps me going, Cal. And that's what I've always loved about The Donkey. We're a bunch of mates. There's no hierarchy here. We've always been able to take the piss out of each other. But all that's going to change now that we're answerable to a load of suits down in London.'

'That won't happen,' said Callum. 'You'll still have a laugh. You're running the show now, nobody else.'

And I've never known Neil Byrne to take the day job too seriously.'

'True. But is this still the day job I want?'

'Course it is,' Callum assured him, but Neil looked like he still needed to be convinced. 'You said it yourself. You love this job. It's a gag. Picture it, Neil . . . a rainy Monday morning, your train's late into Queens Street and you're still trying to recover from watching the Jags ship five goals to Motherwell on the Saturday afternoon . . . but you get into The Donkey and there's a new travelog in your inbox and within ten minutes you're creasing yourself. That's what you love about it. And it's not going to change. Hey, remember the diary we got from the guy who went bush-walking in Mozambique?'

Neil nodded and allowed himself a wry smile. He knew it word for word but he was still happy to let Callum retell it.

'I would advise all people travelling into the bush,' said Callum, 'to wear little noisy bells on your clothing. This will give advance warning to any lions close by, so you don't spook them. I would also advise that you carry pepper spray in case you encounter a lion. And stay vigilant for signs of fresh lion activity. It is important to be able to tell the difference between lion-cub shit and big-lion shit. Lion-cub shit is small and contains lots of berries.'

'Whereas big-lion shit has bells in it and smells like pepper,' concluded Neil.

'Classic!' laughed Callum. 'You see . . . you live for that stuff. It's why you get up in the morning.'

Neil's face soured. 'I can see what you're trying to do, Cal, but it's not working. I'm not stupid. You don't give a shit about what I do or don't live for. You're just trying to make yourself feel better about fucking off on us. You've jumped ship and I'm

starting to get the feeling that the ship is about to sink.'

'That's not true.'

'Bollocks!' said Neil, his voice rising above Dean Martin who had been crooning brassily through the trattoria's speakers. 'Something smells, Callum. You don't just suddenly decide to sell a company you've been building for half a dozen years and then piss off to live with Eskimos. Not unless you know something that we don't.'

'I know there are no Eskimos in Iceland.'

'That's not the fucking point.' Neil wrapped his wine glass round his mouth and nose and drained the remaining liquid. His dead eyes fell on Callum again. 'It's the timing of it that I don't get. Why the big hurry to sell? If I were a conspiracy theorist, I might think it had something to do with the visit of the Strathclyde polis to our offices last month. And I wouldn't be alone in thinking it. The whispers have started, Cal.'

'I think we should take this conversation somewhere more discreet. I know a few hacks from the *Herald* who like to eat in here. I don't want the ins and outs of Strawdonkey splashed over the business pages.' Callum prised his legs out from the table. 'I'll see you in the Gents.'

He made his way down a set of cabin stairs and entered the cavernous bogs in the dark and unventilated bowels of the Italian. The tiles reeked warmly of garlic and piss.

Neil followed and stood beside him at the urinal. They didn't say anything for a while. One of the chefs was standing next to them, holding his cock in the same hand that held a lit fag. They waited for him to shake himself dry and zip up his blood-covered trousers before they spoke.

'Jesus, you'd think he'd wash his hands,' said

Callum, once he heard the chef clapping back up the wooden stairs. 'I won't be eating in here again.'

'Is that supposed to be funny?' asked Neil.

Callum shook his head. 'Look, we've been through this. You know my reasons for leaving The Donkey. These last few years I've done everything that I wanted to do with the business. It's been a hell of a journey but I've gone as far as I can with it and now it's time for a change. I'm starting up the film-production thing in Iceland because that was my first love. I gave up my job as a locations scout to launch Strawdonkey but I always promised myself that if I ever got bored with it, or if I had a bit stashed away in the bank, I'd start my own production company. This is something I've wanted to do for a long time.'

'That may be so, but I still don't understand your rush to sell. You took the first bid on the table, Callum. If you'd been serious about raising the dosh for your new venture, you would have held out for a better offer. The company is valued at nearly twice what you sold it for. Backpackers have got themselves a bargain.'

'Backpackers offered enough, that's all that matters.' Callum shook himself dry. 'I'm not a greedy man, Neil. They offered me enough money to do those things that I've always wanted to do. Sure, I knew they had more in their coffers than they were letting on, and if I'd held out they might have stumped up, but I figure it's better that they pour their surplus cash back into Strawdonkey and make it a stronger and more profitable company for all of you.'

'Ha!' laughed Neil, his voice sparking off the tiles. 'You make it sound like some great, philanthropic gesture. But it doesn't wash, Cal. The polis are onto something, aren't they. Why else would you suddenly decide to sell up at a fraction of the asking and then announce that you're leaving the country for good . . .

to pursue your first love of film production? Smells like bullshit to me.'

'Believe what you want to believe.' Callum made his way over to the sink and ran his hands under the tap. 'I don't know why you're so bitter. You've got a promotion out of this.' He was addressing the Neil reflected in the bathroom mirror. The glass had been decorated with enthusiastic graffiti: *AMORUSO IS A DEAD MAN*.

'It's hardly a promotion, is it,' said Neil.

'Course it is. You're running Glasgow.'

'Aye, I'm running an outpost. I'm not running the business,' Neil protested. 'Before you sold out on us, I reported to just one person: you. Now that you're gone and I'm "promoted", I'll be reporting to a board of fucking directors in Mornington Crescent. I'd hardly call that a step up.'

'Fuck sake, would you stop feeling so bloody sorry for yourself and deal with it.'

'Deal with it?' Neil got Callum by the throat and slammed him against the hand-drier, triggering a blast of hot air. 'This is how I'll fucking deal with it.'

'Easy now,' said Callum. The air was scalding his back. 'I know you don't mean this. You've made your point. Just put me down and we'll blame it on the booze.'

'*Volare!*' yelled Dean Martin as the door to the toilets was opened. Young Kenny bounced in. His face dropped when he saw the pair of them. 'What's gan on?' he asked.

'Nothing,' said Callum. 'Neil's just showing me his Vulcan death grip. Isn't that right?' He looked hard at his pal.

Neil said nothing. He removed his hand from Callum's neck and forced his way past Young Kenny. They heard him stumble twice on his way up the stairs.

'Fuck me,' said the youngster. 'He's guttered.'

Callum ignored Kenny and checked himself in the mirror. He bent his head to the sink and rinsed his face with a few handfuls of cold water. When he checked his reflection again, his forehead still read: *DEAD MAN*.

The Strawdonkey posse, minus Neil, had kept their departing boss generously topped up with JD and Coke for the remainder of the afternoon. Callum's inability to say no to a drink was now contributing to the urgency in his bladder. It had become a large inflatable castle with several small but excitable children bouncing on it. The turbulence didn't help.

He checked the time with the woman in the seat next to him: the woman with the pregnancy kit and the sweets for her ears.

'It iss a kortur aftur seffen,' she replied in that clipped singsong that the Icelanders have with the English language. It was this *delishoss* accent that had first attracted Callum to Birna Sveinsdóttir: her elongated esses, her curt kays, her softened vees.

Callum adjusted the nozzle above his head, forcing cold air onto his face. He needed a drink, something to suppress the anxiety, something to straighten him out.

He hated this feeling: this sick, pithy feeling. It had stayed in his gut too long, six years too long, like some parasitic worm eating him from the inside out. He knew that Iceland might not eradicate it, but he also knew that he had to make this move. Sure, he wanted to be with Birna. He loved Birna. At least, he thought he did. As much as you can love someone you've known barely a year. But he was kidding himself if he thought this move was motivated by anything other than fear: the fear that the past was about to come knocking on his door.

Callum thumbed his Icelandair magazine. *March 2003*. Two months out of date. No matter, he studied each page with the same determination that he'd studied the clouds; trying hard to take his mind off the things he was running away from.

He read the feature article, an exciting piece of investigative journalism detailing the huge export market for dried fish heads from Iceland to Japan. It contained an interview with Tokyo chef Ruichi Kim, an enthusiastic advocate of Icelandic seafood and a man famed for his 'Baby Mackerel Tofu'. Ruichi detailed his dish in the article. It involved placing a hunk of tofu into a pot of cold water in which an infant fish is happily swimming. The pot is then plonked on a hotplate and set to boil. As the temperature of the water becomes unbearable, the young mackerel seeks refuge by burrowing his way into the cool chunk of bean curd. Sadly, there can be no escape and the fish is cooked in his safe house.

Callum raced towards Reykjavík feeling for all the world like that mackerel.