



# The Front Page

The nags were against me. Six races. Six bets. All blown out before the finishing line. *I'm going to change bars*, I told myself, *this place is bad fucking luck for me*. Superstition and gambling become more impassioned bed fellows the worse your luck is –and mine, mine hadn't seen anything to show for it in months.

I sat at the bar in the Front Page cursing my luck, cursing the Racing Post, cursing the barman who had talked through the back page of form listings and most probably caused me to rush to a decision when time and a clear head was required. As the stranger pulled up a seat beside me I cursed him too. Wednesday afternoon, quite possibly the quietest time in a bar's week and in a room full of empty, cold seats this prick parks up alongside me.

'Scotch and water and whatever this guy is having.'

My good friend –the stranger.

The drinks arrive. I tear up my docket, push the Racing Post to one side and cradle my spiced rum like it's a new born. I toss it back as he nips at his, I order up including my new amigo's tastes in my request. He looks the grifter type. He's a well-worn face, a pair of shoes that have passed too many miles under them and a smile that just doesn't go with his overall presence.

I take a moment. Savouring how awkward the silence is.

'You got any tips for the next one?' he asks, throwing a glance towards the television set and the list of pun-based names and racing colours.

'Believe me buddy, you don't want my tips.'

'But if you had to choose.'

I consider him, what the fuck's his problem?

'If I had to choose... I'd play Glengarry, with maybe Dirty Uncle to place.'

'Ok.' the stranger replies 'thanks.' Tossing back his drink he gets to his feet, dusts himself down, pushes in his bar stool and leaves. I turn back towards the TV, towards the bartender and a minute later the creak of the door triggers a ray of light to dance across the tavern before it sighs shut again and there he is. Parked up alongside me again, unlit cigarette tucked behind the ear, racing docket in his hand.

'Two more.'

The bartender pours. We drink. The race runs. He loses.

'I told you so,' I say 'I'm going through a slump.'

The stranger nods, gets to his feet and leaves. This time I watch the door. The bookmaker's is across the street and I can all but see him in my mind's eye casually looking left then right before crossing over and going inside. Inside for what? Did the prick win? Can't have, he's left the docket behind. I look around for support but nobody else seems remotely interested in what's going on. Maybe this is why I want to be a writer while most other people in this city just want to be left alone.

The door opens, and he's returned. With two hands bursting with bank notes of all denominations; he smiles the smile of a first-prize wanker before he slips back up on to his stool and counts his take. I look on in awe, and now so does everyone else. So there are still some things that can get the attention of the perpetually sauced.

'A round of drinks for all my friends!' the words are met with an uncoordinated chorus of cheers from the little pockets of high functioning alcoholics that litter the floor on this –one of society's optimum slaving days.

My rum appears but the stomach has fallen out of me and I tentatively nip at it, all the while offering up some side-eye. He plays at pretending like he hasn't clocked me but he has, I know he has, and he knows that I know he has. The games we play.

I go to speak.

He beats me to it.

'Harvey,' he says extending his hand, spinning on his stool 'Harvey Neary.'

'Doug Morgan.' I shake.

'What do you do for a living, Doug? That's the sort of questions people ask when they meet new folk and fain interest, right?'

'That's one of them, Harvey. I'm sitting in a bar in the middle of the week. I'm a Captain of

Industry. I'm a CEO. I'm the Venue Events Manager of one of those fucking entertainment complexes down by the river. What about you? And kids, that's another one of those questions. You got any fucking kids Harvey?'

He laughs.

'Exactly. No Doug. No fucking kids. Based on how rough your fingertips look and the fact that you're six litres of piss on a Wednesday I'd say musician.'

'Writer, and I'm only four litres of piss. What about you? You back a better pony than the one I picked or...'

'Actually I just walked in and took this money Doug.' his voice was cold, low and sincere. It gave me a shiver.

'From...' my eyes chart their way to the door.

Harvey nods, then orders two more drinks, much to the disgruntled disappointment of the rest of the booze house who now sit dry. I switch to beer. His eyes are dead and I know for sure I no longer have the stomach for spiced rum.

'So let me get this straight,' the beer is cool on my lip 'you just walked over to Sean Graham and *took* all that money.'

'There was one or two more steps to it but... yeah.'

'And now you sit here.'

'And now I sit here.'

'Aren't you worried about the police?' As I ask the question I look around at all my fellow drunks. All of Harvey's potential meat-shields should he decide to take them hostage when the pigs roll up all lights flashing, ready for big business. The drink has sapped a lot of my strength. I'm not the man my frame suggests. If Harvey was to get serious in here, could I stop him? Could I do anything other than watch and know that the fear of the moment would be nothing compared to the emasculation that would follow should I make it through the ordeal alive?

'There's nothing to worry about. I don't envision the police...'

'Why?' I lean in, almost trying to sniff the answer from him. 'Why don't you *envision* the police...'

'Because everyone in the betting shop is dead.'

Emasculation suddenly looks a lot more appealing and even though I don't want to ask, I have to.

'What do you mean dead? Did... did you kill them?'

Leaning in Harvey maintains my eye 'Sort of. I mean it's complicated Doug. I didn't take my hand to any of them, and I didn't shoot, or stab, or strangle any of them or kill them in what would be deemed a conventional way but yes it was my decision to stop their clocks.'

'What did you do?'

The questions just keep coming.

'You wouldn't believe me Doug, and you wouldn't *really* want to know. You think you want to know but believe me. You're much better out of it.'

I look around. So many pre-corpses.

'So what, you walk in here, strike up a conversation, kill a betting shop full of people, tell me about it and then what? Just walk away?'

'Well, no Doug.'

I'm next.

'I've still got a good two-thirds of a drink in front of me.'

'And when that's done?'

'Depends... is this place any good for lunch?'

'How'd you kill them?'

'Leave it alone.'

'How'd you kill them?'

'You really want to know?' his heckles were up.

I nod, even though I'm no longer sure I do want to know. Maybe it's more a need. His eyes wander in their sockets as he picks over his words. Reaching into his pocket he pulls out his phone and starts typing. Setting it on the bar he pushes it over to me. It reads: *Cinderella Rockerfella*.

'What is this?' I ask.

'Asked and answered.' his grin knowing.

'I don't understand, what does this even fucking mean?'

With a sigh of exasperation and a roll of the eye he collects his phone, tucks it away and considers me... again.

'You asked how I killed all those people, I've just shown you.'

'No,' now my heckles are rising 'no. All you've done is type some shit into your phone and piss me off.'

'In 1967 Esther and Abi Ofarim recorded a song written by Mason Williams and Nancy Ames. That song was Cinderella Rockerfella. Now, when it's sung or when you watch a recording of it... like that on the Eamon Andrews Show it's harmless, annoying but harmless, but when you whistle it...'

'Whistle?' I laugh. 'Fuck Harvey, fuck. Fuck you *really* had me going there. Shit.' Turning to the bartender I tell him 'Pour Harvey another drink, I'll have one too.'

The sound is almost a squawk and as Harvey whistles *do, do, do-do, do, do doo-do, do-do-do* my eyes take a turn around the bar. At first nothing happens. At first the old salts, and drunks, and burnouts carry on carrying on but then there's a moment. A moment when they realize that something inside them has stopped. Clutching their throats, chests, hearts they turn one-by-one to face Harvey, to look to me; to plead for help. But there's no help to be given.

They're dead before they touchdown on the cold, sticky, floor tiles.

I turn to Harvey, breaking away eye contact with a bum I've grown particularly fond of during my time at the Front Page. He used to be a writer too. A newspaper man. Harvey is smiling, more of a smirk really. A real dickhead smirk, a "I told you so" know it all kinda deal. The type you couldn't ever get tired of hitting. I don't though. The booze has left me weak and the shock has all but painted a yellow line down my back.

'See?' he says.

I nod.

'Now you know what it is, so the good news is that it can never take you.'

I'm still nodding. I've nothing to say until a question pops into my head; so cautiously I open my mouth and ask it.

'And what's the bad news?'

'Well Doug,' he takes a sip of a fresh pint abandoned on the bar 'the bad news is you're going to need to be real careful about when you relax because one way or another you will end up whistling it and when you do...' another sip from the pint that was destined to go room temperature and flat passes his lips 'when you do god help whoever you're around. It'll strip everyone you've ever loved right out of your life.'

The click of his fingers snaps me out of my head, back into the room, back into the Front Page surrounded by almost a dozen slowly cooling corpses. Downing the pint Harvey climbs from his stool, fixes his shirt collar and walks to the exit. I follow suit.

Outside the city is warm, humming with life and the first bar almost passes my lips simply because I'm trying so hard *not* to whistle it.

A Fast City teen-mom passes by dressed in her best going-out onesie, pushing a twin-seater stroller and smoking a Berkley Blue. Harvey smiles my way and with an expanse of the eyes and a double nod of the head all but dares me to do it. *Go on, do it.*

The street is busier than normal. Commuters and curious alike line the other side of the road along a strip of yellow tape as the police (shit! The Police!) chalk up, and photograph, and dust the multiple crime scene that was once a busy Sean Graham's bookmaker shop. Walking head-on into the middle of it Harvey yells to the police, daring their attention maybe? Or maybe he's up to something else?

'Officer! Officer! Excuse-fuckin-me officer!!'

'Sir, watch your tongue.' the beat cop advises.

I don't hear much of what's next due to the hurly-burly that seems to be making its way through the crowd of nosey-parkers but I do recognize the finger of suspicion and it's being pointed my way. Harvey winks as he lowers his hand, the police officer's face is stern –serious and the locals are all clucking away dead-eyeing me and making sure to get all the facts right in their heads for the forthcoming days of gossiping. With his radio clutched under his helmet strapped chin the cop calls through something. Soon the betting shop is empty of boys in blue as they all advance towards me with Harvey bringing up the rear.

'Yup, that's the guy officer. I saw him kill every single one of them. If you ask in that bar you'll probably find someone who could corroborate the fact that he left with enough time to do all of

this.'

I knew he was a prick the moment I saw him, and now this. A betting shop full of necro-fuck-sleeves, a bar populated with more of the same and this charismatic motherfucker with the unflinching finger pointed my direction. As the police surround me I pray. I pray that I'm fifteen again and sleeping off a particularly unpleasant side-effect of some cheap soap-bar. That one of the police officers would break stoic stride, smirk and let me in on the fact that all *this* was some elaborate trick played on me for the entertainment of the masses on some hidden camera show. That maybe I was mad and I haven't lived a real day in twenty years but the circle kept closing, the officer's eyes got bigger and closer and fixed while their hands rest on their sidearms. Without realizing I'm whistling it, I'm whistling it. Unsure of what'll happen I blow out *do, do, do-do, do, do doo-do, do-do-do*. The boys in blue turn purple from the neck up, grasp at thin air as though they could pluck and swallow it to stave off the on-coming death.

When they're all dead Harvey gives me a round of applause and leaves.

I return to my stool in the Front Page in an effort to get an idea of what's next for me while life at New Market races on.

## Author Biography

Belfast native David Loudon is the author of the roman á clef neo-beat novels *Lost Angeles* and *Bone Idol* [*bohn ahyd-I*] chronicling the life of his alter-ego Doug Morgan. His major influences in literature have been cited as Charles Bukowski, John Fante, William S. Burroughs and Brendan Behan. Reoccurring themes in his work include alcohol & drug abuse, death, sex and catholicism.

At present Loudon is developing a Noir project for television set in Belfast which he hopes will go into pre-production within the year.

## Contact Information

David Loudon

16 Hatton Drive

Belfast

BT6 9BD

Tel: 07403 388 329

Email: [dave@knifedinvenice.com](mailto:dave@knifedinvenice.com)