



Ultra-Belfast

I had been in hell a week by this point. It looked a lot like Belfast. I knew it was hell because I couldn't find any of my favourite bars and it was the 12th of July every day. The streets were awash with track-suited skinheads and chippie wrappers, and smelt of dark orange piss. I died the same age as Bukowski, seventy-three years-old. He had wanted to go at eighty making it with an eighteen year-old, I was just happy making it beyond fifty. It was a rare landmark for the men in my family.

I stepped out of the bookmakers on the Lisburn Road having lost *again* and tore up my ticket. The nags were against me, and everywhere I looked I saw memories and places I had worked hard at forgetting. I started walking towards town. I passed my old bed-sit on Wellington Park Avenue, and Kelly's house on Dunluce, and Henry Roscoe's large old pad, that was once my own, and Lee's, and Cara's and just about everyone else I knew. Soon I was in the city centre, and the march was whipping up into the nose-thumbing, showboating, one-upmanship bullshit that Northern Ireland wraps the thin veil of *tradition* around. Turning sharply I walked towards the water, towards the bridge, towards the East and the happiest of memories to come out of such a bitter town. Purposefully I drifted towards my house; the house I shared with Donna, my wife. My long suffering, beautiful, intelligent, funny, caring wife. What she saw in me was anyone's guess but we've all got something wrong with us, right?

Suddenly I was outside the Bunch of Grapes, where was I? This was the wrong road. It didn't make sense, this bar wasn't meant to be here. Wasn't meant to be on the Woodstock Road but this was no longer Belfast, this was hell, this was Ultra-Belfast. The sensible soul inside of my weathered, old chest murmured something about not going inside. The Bunch of Grapes was not a hospitable bar to anyone other than the clans frequenting it for generations. Another one of Belfast's traditions, another device to retard change, another stunt to progress, development and enlightenment but the door seemed to open to meet my hand and before I could work out how, and why, I was inside. I was confronted by the thick stench of newly disturbed dust, the reek of a world without light, the touch of an unwashed carpet beneath my feet. I took the three strides but didn't need to get the barkeep's attention; he was already looking at me. They all were. The jukebox was polite enough to carry on playing, but all drinks stopped draining down, all chatter died, even the competing football teams on the television set put aside their instincts in order to walk to the touchline, gather round the camera broadcasting their demi-god images worldwide and ask *what the fuck are you doing there?*

'Gimme a whiskey.' I said.

'Sure.' he replied, sizing me up.

'Two fingers... actually make it three, give me enough to paddle around in.'

He poured the drink and pushed it across the hard wood counter to me before turning to the register and ringing it up. 'One pound.'

'Really? But there's...'

'Here,' he said waving his arms in the air and rolling his eyes around him '*everything* costs one pound. It's hell, I work twenty-three hours a god-damn day and can't even...'

'Pour me another,' I said interrupting him 'some people's hell, huh...'

I handed him a quid. I was beginning to like the Bunch of Grapes. Taking my glass I found a quiet corner to slip into, resting my right leg on a low bar stool I settled in. Slowly the drinks began to flow down necks again, I caught the odd word in the air and watched as normality returned to the Grapes. I was accepted. Or maybe they were waiting. Reaching into my inside jacket pocket I pulled out my dog-eared copy of *Post Office*. I read the inscription again, and started into it good and proper. I was no sooner enveloped by his words than someone bumped my table yanking me out of Los Angeles, out of the world according to Hank and back to Ultra-Belfast.

'Sorry there buddy,' he said waving a hand in my face 'you got a quid for...'

'Dad?' my shock so all-encompassing that for a moment I was fifteen again.

Oh yeah, he lived around here. How had I forgotten that?

'Who are you?' barked Jack.

'It's me,' I replied extending my hand 'it's Doug.'

He stood rooted to the spot, stone and unblinking. Scanning my face for sincerity he pondered how his own son could have two decades on him, maybe even how his son ended up in hell... but then

again.

'How have you been Douglas?' with a wave Jack ordered two more drinks before inviting himself into a stool across from me.

I paid the two quid.

'I've been ok I guess.'

'So what have you been doing with yourself?'

'Not much. I tried being a writer, you were right...'

'I always am.'

'Now, that's just not true.' his heckles rose 'But you were right this time. There's no money in it.'

'You die broke?'

'I died broke-*n*. Like all of God's servants. Office work for fifty years and within three months of retirement...*boom!* I yelled banging my hand on the table sending a flinch through the alehouse. 'All those things I put off. All those books I wanted to read, wanted to write. It just wasn't enough.'

'It's never enough, kid.'

'You play banjo down here?'

Raising his hands to within an inch of my face I see the open, seeping wounds that are sitting on the tips of the old man's fingers.

'Got them the day I arrived here. I tried playing once but it was worse than wanking with a hand covered in vinegar.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Not your fault.' he replied, greedily gulping down what's left of his scotch 'I'm off to a card game at the Longfellow. You fancy coming for a few hands?'

'I'm not much in the mood for company at the moment, dad.'

'Awk come off it! I haven't seen you in nearly sixty years and you're going to blow me off because you're *not much in the mood for company*. That's exactly when a man needs company the most.'

A thought crossed my mind.

'Any of your other children down here?'

'I haven't seen your brother or sister, no.'

'Come off it.' I barked 'Don't piss me about. What about the rest of them? The ones to that nasty cunt you curled up with.'

'Don't you talk of her like that!'

'I'll talk of her anyway I god-damn want, Jack!'

He nodded, understanding. 'No. You're the first... but then again... you *were* the first.'

'Let's go play some cards.' getting to my feet I pulled my coat back on and followed the old man back outside, into the heart of the city.

In the time we'd been catching up the city had grown dark, menacing. The parade had marched by leaving behind it a sea of garbage for us to wade through. Dragging one foot after another through the two foot thick tide of trash I'd follow Dad across the street, down My Lady's Road to the doorstep of the Longfellow.

Kicking off a plastic six-pack holder I scrape the sole of my shoe against the front step smearing brown across it and then enter. Inside, the Longfellow is not how I remembered it. Not how it was. A green felt table sat in the middle of a black box. A single spotlight hanging down from the ceiling to a foot above where the communal cards would appear and all but two seats occupied. Turning to me Jack smiles, he doesn't mean it but I can't place what's behind those tired old, familiar eyes.

'You ready?'

I nod.

'Ok gentlemen,' calls the dealer 'if you're here for the high rollers game then take a seat. Otherwise we're going to have to ask you to leave, this is a closed table. No tourists.'

His grin was forty teeth wide, and alluring. Taking my seat I sat shoulder-to-shoulder with Jack and realised that my hands were shaking for some reason and that I didn't actually know what we were playing for. Looking up I caught the dealer's eye, there's those teeth again.

'What exactly are we playing for?' I asked.

The room was already silent, but if it wasn't I got the sense that a sharp intake of breath would have been followed by a void. I could feel twin eyes in every head around the table stare through me. Who was this old bastard? What was he doing *here* at *this* table? Especially since he didn't

actually have a fucking clue what was on the line.

'Heaven, old timer.' was the dealer's reply 'Five card Texas Hold'Em. No wild cards, winner gets a spot upstairs in heaven.'

'This is the annual St. Peter's tournament. Every year one person goes up, and one person comes down.'

'Why the fuck would anyone want to come down?'

'What's your name, old man?'

'Doug Morgan.'

'Some people are happier in hell, Doug Morgan.' the dealer grinned and I knew it was time for business.

As he broke eye contact and released my gaze I took a turn around the table. They were all there. Adolf Hitler sat at my eleven o'clock, Josef Stalin to my one, to their sides sat Jack the Ripper and a Roman Catholic Priest with the final seat being taken up by Charlton Heston. The Ripper tossed in the small blind, Hitler the big. The dealer broke the deck, worked his magic with it and delivered us all two cards. They landed inches from our finger tips, all perfectly face down and side-by-side as though they'd been placed there. Thumbing them over to the edge of the table I snuck a peek of what had come my way; 8-Heart, 3-Diamond.

'Call.' stated Stalin, his thick accent surreal in the middle of Belfast.

'Call.' went the Priest.

'Fold.' sighed Dad, tossing his cards back into the middle.

I folded too, but then Heston raised and before the flop.

'You're an even bigger prick in real life.' I said.

'Excuse me?' replied Heston.

'Call.' barked the Ripper before chasing everyone off on the turn.

I hadn't seen a hand worth playing but I was the big blind now so unless Heston raised pre-flop again I was going to taste some action. The Ripper had won three of the four hands already played, Heston had picked up the other. I was convinced he had bluffed that one. He was an aggressive player, aggressive but with little strategy and I knew it wouldn't take much of a hand to trap him. Thumbing the cards towards me I looked to my Dad, he was feeling the pressure. If there was anything left of his heart it could give out at any moment. I watched him wipe the sweat from his heavily knitted brow before turning back to my cards.

A-Club, 6-Club.

Very nice. I'd take that.

It was Heston's turn to bet, and he did raise. The Ripper considered it a moment, returned to his cards and shook his head before tossing them back into the middle. Hitler's shoulders dropped before grabbing a few chips and yelping 'Call'. Stalin called too.

'I'm surprised to see you here,' I said to the Priest 'was it the kids?'

'No, never touched the stuff.' he replied turning to his cards 'Call. No, most of us down here are here for a different reason.'

'Oh yeah, and what's that then?' asked my dad.

'Corrupting the word of the Lord. The whole *no woman priests* and *gays are an abomination* and *johnnies are a sin*. Turns out he isn't a big fan of paraphrasing.'

'There's a whole bunch of them penned in down by the Short Strand.' said Dad.

'Protective custody.' added Hitler.

'But this one,' interjected Heston 'this one likes the juice.'

'Can we get back to the table, gentlemen?' the dealer reminded us why we were all there.

'I fold.' Dad sighed again.

'Yeah, I'm in. Call.' I said throwing in my chips to meet Heston's bet.

The flop came down cold; Q-Heart, 5-Club, 8-Diamond. Heston checked, Hitler checked, Stalin checked, the Priest checked and I raised. They all called bar Hitler who folded. Who would have thought he'd be the least aggressive at the table? On the turn came 7-Club and suddenly I was sitting on a flush with the possibility of a straight. Heston raised chasing everyone else off. I called and the river came.

5-Spade.

I took another look at my cards, hoping they had managed to change in my hands. I had nothing. I raised, but Moses called and he took the pot with two pairs, 5s and 8s. I was red-faced,

seething at myself. Charlton-Fucking-Heston had been the aggressor the entire hand with a pair of god-damn 8s. Fuck.

The next hand I lost my cool, went all-in early and chased everyone away. The take was minimal but I was able to put a tick in my win column and it helped to cool the furnace. We were deep into the second day of playing when the dealer called a ten minute comfort break. Everyone by this point had won their fair share of hands and the stacks were pretty close to being as they started out, Hitler's was a little light, as was mine. I stood on the doorstep of the Longfellow puffing down a cigarette when the Priest slipped up beside me.

'How are you Father?' my Catholic guilt and civility getting the better of me.

'Michael, please. I'm fine. Christ-alive that Charlton Heston is a stone-cold prick!'

'I don't even care about winning anymore,' I puffed 'as long as he doesn't. The asshole has as much blood on his hands as any of us around the table.'

'Present company excluded, yeah?'

'Respectfully Michael, no.'

'And what about you? What's got you here? You're a little mouthy but that's no reason for you to be in this place.'

'I tried to kill myself when I was a younger man.' I confessed.

'But you didn't succeed, right?!'

'It's the thought that counts padre.'

Crushing the cigarette out under my foot I returned to the table with Michael. Dad had got a round of drinks in, without having to look to him I could see his plan. Loosen everyone up, get them betting a little freely and make a killing. It could come down to me and him. Father versus Son, Morgan-on-Morgan. How fitting.

I tossed in the small blind and take a look, K-Diamond, K-Spade. Yes.

Heston fired a glance towards me and grinned. I snarled back at him.

'You know when I was working with...'

'I've nothing to say to you Chucky, so why don't we get back to cards.'

'You've got one hell of a mouth on you.' he roared. His acting voice was impressive. 'You'll sit *here* and shoot the shit with these people, these *monsters* but I'm what? What am I to you?'

'Worse than all of them, worse because some people still remember you fondly. Some have forgotten your *cold dead hands* speech on the warm graves of infants. Worse still because you could have made your country a better place, a safer place but you opted to bastardise the purity of those who came before you for personal gain. You're worst of *all* before me because you knew better but did it anyway.'

I had him enraged, he bet big and I bit the tip of my tongue in order to trap him. He scared everyone else off other than my dad who raised. I called as did Heston and I won the pot. We did this a few more times before the luck turned. Leaning to one side I pointed my mouth into my dad's ear.

'You need to stop raising otherwise you're going to bust yourself.'

'Don't worry about me boy.' he had the eyes on.

I had A-Club, K-Club but I managed to spy a look at the old man's hand. He was pocketing 6-Diamond, 4-Diamond and the flop was pretty with 5-Diamond, 7-Diamond, 8-Diamond. I raised for the turn and the river before bailing out and leaving him to pick Michael off.

At the two week mark the margins were no clearer. My stack was up, as was Jack the Ripper's; everyone else was down, though nobody was out. Eventually a light appeared in the distance, beyond the back wall of the Longfellow; somewhere off in the depths of hell. The Devil appeared before us, he wore red horns and a spiked tail but it was a fancy dress costume and we were informed that it was Halloween.

'I'm shutting the game down Klaus,' he said addressing the dealer 'I need the space for something else and them lot upstairs want to know what's holding up the transfer.'

'How are we going to pick? They've been at this for weeks and every time someone pulls ahead they lose their wad cheaply. It's god-damn agony.'

'We're going to settle it in the next two minutes.' the Devil stated producing a rich tea biscuit from behind his back. 'Gentlemen, the name of the game is soggy biscuit. Get your peckers good and hard, the last one to spill his sap on it has to eat the fucker and is eliminated... *and* we're playing 'til there's only one man left so I want to see plenty of protein.'

I looked around me, Heston, Jack the Ripper and Stalin were already unbuttoning their

trousers. Clearing my throat I stepped forward with my hand in the air, just like school.

'Hey, this is bullshit.' I said 'I'm seventy-three fucking years-old. I've an enlarged prostate and my pud hasn't worked for the best part of six months. I'm automatically at a disadvantage.'

With a click of his finger I dropped to the ground like I'd been shot. It burned throughout my body, my kidneys shook and convulsed and it felt like I needed to pee, or maybe that I just had. Eventually the pain subsided enough that I was able to climb back to my feet. The Devil was smiling, the dealer was smiling. Michael's face beamed in awe and I wanted to smash that red faced cunt to bits, it hurt.

'What the fuck was that?' I barked.

'Douglas,' Dad said grabbing my attention long enough for him to point a path with his finger across the room towards the bar doors 'look!'

I caught a glimpse of my reflection and it damn near made me cry. I looked to my hands, I felt my face and my chest, and my stomach, and my legs, and my cock. I was young again, hard again.

'Now,' said the Devil with a clap of his hands 'soggy biscuit, round one...'

'One more thing.' I interrupted again.

'Yes, Mr. Morgan. What else would you like?'

'This competition's to get into heaven, right?'

'That's why you've been here for a fortnight.'

'And I'm young again, what... twenty-five, twenty-six?'

'Twenty-four.'

'Why would I want to go up there?'

'Excuse me?' exclaimed the dealer.

'I'm young, I've got fight in my turkeyneck again. Why would I want to go to heaven when I can stay here?'

'Why would you want to stay here?' cried Michael.

'It's like the man said,' I explained 'some people are happier in hell.'

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.

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