

## 21-24 Best worst years of life.

### Interlude

The truth is I always claim that these years are the worst years of my life, for a few reasons that I'm, about to get off my chest, I'm doing this to try and show to myself that it was actually the best worst years of my life.

I always said that as soon as my dog Hetty died that would be the day my childhood was over. The day I had officially become an adult, I let go of all the things that I had ever known in my life up to that point and became a responsible, mature person who had to fight through life instead of having everything given to him.

Hetty was significant because I had her since I was 10 and now at 21 I thought it was the perfect time to let go of all that had gone before. A new part of my life had begun. I never knew just how hard it would be becoming an adult. Between the ages 21 and 24 I had never cried so much, felt so worthless, and felt so underappreciated. Yet at the same time I had never smiled so much, felt so worthwhile and felt so appreciated, it is one of the most ridiculous periods of your life and no one really prepares you for it. The true transition from being a young adult to an actual adult.

A young adult is someone who has to really try at family gatherings to seem mature, seem polite, and every word you say is overthought by yourself, but ignored by everyone else, because you're still just a child. But as soon as you cock up those people will be the first to say behind your back, 'when will he grow up'. An actual adult is someone who stops caring about them sort of things, and just does what makes them happy and any circumstance that happens as a result will be dealt with by yourself because only you can direct your life when an actual adult.

This is a story of strange nostalgia, a story of many different people you come into contact with in such a short space of time in life. 3 or 4 years can seem so long yet when you look back it's so short. The nostalgia is bizarre because it stems from happy and sad times, sometimes the sad times are better thought of than the happy times because it teaches you a thing or two about certain people, and in the long run it is better that way. The happy times can sometimes be looked back on as quite fake, but that's just the pessimist in me talking.

Because so much happens in this space of time it is hard to come up with a reasonable structure for telling the stories. Do I tell them as little individual short stories, or one big story? Do I talk about each person I met individually, or do I merge them into a particular sector?

I ultimately decided to write this as an essay, a dissertation for some sort of qualification, a degree in life. This is life 21-24. My main thesis is that life is hard and I found out in these years I wouldn't surmount to anything because I haven't got the right mentality, I'm too nice. But the people I met during this time they're the people that truly make my life interesting. They really are the best worst years of your life.

Life can get a whole lot worse, in fact it almost without doubt does. Life gets serious when you become a proper adult. Bills, babies, divorces, pregnancies, death, crime, it all gets a lot worse and a lot more real. But as a young adult or a half adult, you can taste a bit of all that and it can seem awful.

My life between the death of my first dog and Covid-19.

### Setting

The main setting of my time between 21 and 24 is of course in the city of Liverpool and the outskirts in Wallasey where I grew up. The main building that held the most memories for me during this time was in the bar I used to work in, we'll call it the Red Oak. It was a nice bar in the day and an absolutely grim one during the night. It was lovely and quiet during the week and became the busiest place on earth on a weekend. It was such an awful place to work, yet has the most nostalgic feel for me.

Life seemed worse there but also better. It was sociable; it was full of friendly people who would be my friend for years. Yet it was ran by people who overworked you, the customers where horrible snobs and you would cut you finger every night on broken glass. Add lime juice to the cuts and you'll never miss that pain.

It was the first job I had really ever gotten on my own, the first one that didn't require a family members help to get and the first where I knew absolutely no one going in to it and was now too old to simply leave. I had responsibility for the first time, and it all fell on my shoulders. My interview was the day after Hetty died and the person interviewing me was called Jackie, to be fair I did well and it was only a few weeks later after I started that I realised she was the big boss and that it was always tricky to get the job when she interviewed you.

The bar was quite large, it had two separate bars, one on the top floor and one on the entry floor. They were called top bar and bottom bar. There where teles dotted around the site that were the most pointless screens ever, they showed nothing of any interest, just promotional deals, and the very occasional football match if it was very big and was on the cheap channels.

The toilets where down another flight of stairs and on the way was another bar called the 'club' and it stunk in there of shit. Like a dead rat smell constantly and it rarely opened for the first year or so I worked there. Not until it got refurbished. Beside the 'club' entry where double doors that led to the dirtiest and trampiest staff room I've ever laid eyes on. The toilet was out of order, and this would never change in the whole time I was there. There was a pair of socks that also never moved from the corner of the room and a sink full of litter and all kinds of crap that would get cleaned out once a blue moon.

The staff room was situated next to a large flight of stairs that had a corridor at the top for the large bins, the delivery of stock and the entry to the lift that lead to the stock room. Across the corridor from the lift was the office where Jackie and the other manager Chloe would spend most of their time, mainly being lazy and not wanting to actually serve on the bar, we all knew it. Further up the corridor was the kitchen, always infested. Rats, mice, cockroaches, it was well kept, and I feared ever seeing anything in there.

Upon exiting the kitchen you would end up on top bar where a duty manager would always stand keeping watch out for anything going wrong, again just trying not to serve customers. Before you got to the bar though there was a toilet for disabled people on the right and a glass room on the left,

this was the perfect spot to bitch and moan and go on your phone, there was no cameras in there. The perfect hiding spot to relax with a hangover for a few minutes, or cry about something that had happened, boy did I used to cry into the ice machine that was in there. Tears of joy and also sorrow.

Red Oak was a great place to start my journey, but not all things last forever. During my time there I also had university, but the less said about that the better, that was a boring waste of money. There were a few memories there, but not worth noting the surroundings, they're another story for another day. My university experience safe to say was not as outlandish as other people's, I didn't fully immerse myself in Uni culture, I didn't really fully immerse in anything like that, but the people I met really did.

My next job was my first after graduating, and although I had a spell for a week or two in another bar in Liverpool during my time at red Oak, I felt this was the first real time I had to engage with a new bunch of people. This was just an office job, a sales job where I sold nothing and in fact did nothing really. Just watched the clock count down every day, and I knew then I wasn't into office work. Despite this I got another office job after, I was just looking to pay my keep and build up savings.

The company I worked for was called Service Source, and it was a tragic company, but I met some interesting people there, I'll tell you all about it.

After Service Source I worked at a bank, not going to name which one, but that was another waste of a year, and I actually mean it, every day was boring, there were some great people in the office, but not lifelong friends. That's the difference between places like the bank and Red Oak; I met some proper friends there. The type of friends I never thought I could make after school. Even the people I don't speak to anymore from red Oak, they still hold such fond memories for me, and I hold them in high regard. Even if I didn't always get along with them.

The final setting I will just mention in brief is the first flat I ever rented with my mate Josh. Josh was a great lad who I'll explain in more detail later. But the flat we got was a rushed decision, we were just desperate to move out of our parents houses and have our own space. The truth is I actually wanted to impress someone in particular, and also semi impress some of the people at Red Oak. I pictured wild parties at my flat, being up till 5 in the morning with a girl I'd just shagged, it never worked like that, but there were still some funny things that happened, you'll see. But there was also some real down points in there too, and I actually hold that flat in high regard considering that I hated it at the time.

That's all the main settings for now. Let's crack on with the people that brought these seemingly boring settings to life.

## Characters

### **Tonica**

She was my second love affair I'd say. By love affair I mean someone who I was really connected with for a period that lasted longer than a couple of months. My first one was Rachel Smith from

university. She lived on campus and would visit her every day after my classes in first year, but sometime love isn't returned, and that was just the first example. Tonicia was the second example, but one that was easy to get over.

She was a lovely petit girl, a few years younger than me and I met her in The Nelson pub whilst working there in Wallasey. I got the job courtesy of my brother and worked there in two spells. The second spell was when I met her. She worked in the kitchen as a trainee chef. I thought she was really pretty. She would always get stick from the other people in the kitchen, just friendly banter really, but the way she took it all on the chin was exactly the kind of girl I like. Someone who can give it out as well as take it.

I did fancy another girl who worked at the Nelson at the same time but I eventually just got drawn to Tonicia more. Saffy was a nice girl but I could just see myself with Tonicia more. She was called Tonicia Blair and she told me that the reason for her name was that her parents wanted to call their child Tony Blair, and Tonicia was the closest female name to Tony they could think of. Always thought that was quite a cute story.

One day when my parents were away on holiday I invited Tonicia round to my house. I was, for the first time in my life, quite the opportunist, not in a weird way, in a romantic way. We'd been texting outside of work for a while now and normally that would mean that the girl fancies you surely, I sure as hell know it means I fancy them. No man ever texts a girl for any other reason do they, that's what I thought anyway when I was 21.

No dog in the way, Hetty was gone, and now there was nothing to worry about other than me getting laid. I know that seems harsh, but I did love Hetty, I just am what I am, a man wanting to have sex.

I invited her round on a Wednesday evening, rain was heavy. There was something magic in the air that night, I could tell. I waited outside my front door for her to come round the corner, she was meant to be at mine for half 7, it was 20 to 8 before she arrived. I'm not too punctual myself, so I couldn't be too angry.

I saw her at the end of the street and ushered her in to my house. I wasn't actually expecting anything from the night because I had tonsillitis from another girl I had been with a few days ago. That sounds like I'm some type of player, I'm really not, and that was a coincidence that week, but I was sick as a dog. It was fresher's week after all.

I was coughing like an elderly patient in a hospice, the Netflix wasn't bloody working, everything was going tits up on my romantic night. I electrocuted myself as I tried to spark the Xbox into life. It actually worked, and FIFA was available. She wanted to play so we played that and as she played it I just looked at her and thought she was gorgeous, even though she was sometimes a bit slow and a bit silly, and she really sucked at FIFA, my career as Ipswich manager was going down the drain. Didn't have to save it, she didn't know that she felt so guilty.

We never slept together than night, we never kissed, but we did do things. Things to assure myself that we definitely liked each other. I still remember the night well after she left, I basically celebrated like a proper virgin, I wasn't a virgin but I acted like one. This was six months of hard graft in work finally paying off.

I rarely think about Tonicia these days. We eventually kissed later that week when my symptoms cleared, but in the six months of us seeing each other, we never actually had sex. She would begin to cry on my bed, both of us naked ready to do it and then she would talk about how she was let down by her ex, how her ex wasn't that nice to her, how he took advantage of her.

Even though I was immensely frustrated with not being able to have sex and the urge growing ever stronger, I did remain coy. I listened to everything she was upset about and was perfectly understanding. Its only now that I look back at it and realise that she wasn't really into me at all, she was just using me as a sort of rebound. A common theme in these three or four years is that because I'm a nice guy I don't really get anywhere with women or money, the not so nice guys seem to have it all. Tonicia was an early, small example of the next few years.

But I'm not blameless, I have always been told by many of my friends that I always want what I can't have and once I have what I can have I quickly grow bored and fed up with it, like a young child. Girls, jobs, friends, food, drink, everything really, everything I can have I grow bored of, I always want something else. I have to take some of the blame I guess.

There was one particular moment with Tonicia that always brings a nostalgic feel to me. We were both in the car, I used to drive my sisters BMW, and I felt on top of the world in that thing, for a few months I lived the life of a drug dealer. Everyone in the Red Oak knew I drove it, they all made jokes about it, and some people genuinely thought I was a drug dealer, I even got asked about by Jackie. I was parked up on a hill looking down at New Brighton promenade in the dark, and could see the Liverpool skyline lit up, and me and her had a romantic kiss and maybe a little more. Best not tell my sister that. For the first time in my life I felt like I'd actually found someone who liked me as much as I liked them. Then she asked me to be her boyfriend, and it all changed. It was like something in my brain had gone weird, like a chemical had been released, I got the ick. The ick? As if I got that, as if that's real, I just got scared. I was a scared little boy, I didn't want the responsibility and I thought by the end of this few years it would have dwindled, but the truth is I'm still that scared little boy now.

For a few months she was my everything, but also my own little secret, my parents didn't know about her, my brother knew her but didn't know I was seeing her. My friends knew about her but I didn't go on too much about her, because again the fear of telling everyone and it all coming back to bite me, it was too much. Nothing this good could happen to me, not a chance; I preferred to keep my cards close to my chest.

I can't remember my response to being asked to be her boyfriend exactly, but I know it wasn't a good one. Three weeks later she wasn't texting me, and I wasn't texting her either out of stubbornness. I was thinking all that money spent on dates, taking her to Tribeca on Berry Street, its closed now, was all just a waste of money. All them lifts I gave her to her college where a waste of petrol.

The saddest thing about me and her not speaking anymore was that I realised that I didn't love her at all, I hardly even liked her. I saw her as some sort of trophy to try and make myself seem normal and cool with my new colleagues at the Red Oak. I was so worried about impressing them that I actually didn't care about my own feelings or Tonicia's. Maybe I was a bastard.

Anyway I found out that she cheated on me, kind of. She started speaking to someone after I refused to be officially her boyfriend. Literally the same week she started seeing this scally boy, who was actually a dealer. Not some fake one who actually drove round his inhibited sister's car. She texted me a few times to see if we could still be friends, and my response was to not reply. But Tonicia would appear again, like everyone in this story.

## **Jackie**

The owner of the Red Oak would be described by more or less every single person who I worked with there as a bitch. In fact even the customers described her as this, even her family members, Anton for example, he's for a later date him, he's a nob head too. In fact her mother who worked on the finance part of it who was well above 70 years of age was worked to the bone by her. I can't remember her name; we'll just call her Jo.

I had tonsillitis and she still expected me to come in. Granted I could do other things during my illness like invite girls round to my house, but she wasn't to know that the silly cow. I was on bloody deaths door for all she knew. I always remember her two deputies, Chloe Askin and Will D. My first thoughts of both where that they both kissed Jackie's arse even though neither would ever get her position, there was defiantly some kind of strict hierarchy when I first joined. At first it was very communist; to be honest not much would change.

When Jackie was on shift, which would hardly ever be weekends because it was too busy, the place was different, no one would talk, everyone would actually do work that didn't need to be done. Then Jackie would go home early because she could and the place would become a fun fair again. Everyone would start shouting, throwing stuff, honestly it actually became a big piss about. No one would even clean the bar properly, some shifts with no managers there would lead to customers not even getting served.

In a way we kind of needed a person like Jackie running it, it was only a few years in that I realised it. But she was good at her job; she was a scary woman, who actually mellowed towards me as time passed. I could never be seen to like her, because to be quite frank I hated people who seemed to like her myself. But towards the end it became quite tricky not to sympathise with her especially when she showed me quite a bit of compassion and certain other colleagues compassion who I really cared about.

However my growing to like her did take a lot of time and even though I did, I still celebrated every time she left the building, and her annoying mother who actually didn't do anything wrong, but out of association I didn't like her.

But let me warn you, just because I grew to like her, does not mean she didn't do some things to some people that where unacceptable, and this will get revealed, because she was like a dictator at time.

## **Will**

I was on the bus nervously looking out of the window as it pulled into the city of Liverpool. I used to have to get the same old 432 or 433 bus route through the tunnel that linked Wallasey to Liverpool. Turned out Will, my duty manager had to do the same kind of commute. He didn't know how to drive, so he go the bus too, or a taxi, but that was too expensive, I only resorted to taxis when I was on the late shift.

The bus pulled into the stop just outside the Red Oak and I was late for my shift. I eagerly waited for the doors of the bus to open so I could leg it to work. Leg it means run as fast as I can. When I got into work I was sweating like mad, my Lynx was becoming more pronounced as it did its function of fighting off the smell of BO.

Upon entering work after quickly dropping my coat off in the staff room, I could hear the noise of the regular playlist in the bar on a song that still to this day reminds me of the bar in such a nostalgic way. The sun was shining through on a midday shift and the sound of buskers across the road singing Beatles songs. But drowning out the poor renditions was the song 'Glass Animals' by a band called Youth. The song actually never reminded me of Will D, but of a guy who would become one of my closest friends in the bar, Joe.

I was panting from the small run I had to get to work and Will placed his hand on my shoulder as I went to serve someone straight away.

'You clocked in?' he asked me.

Before I could answer he knew I hadn't and directed me to the end till to clock myself in using my key card. Now that my shift had officially started I then went back to the customer. Will again stopped me, 'don't worry, Karsten will serve him. You seem too out of breath' I initially thought Will was a bit of a dick, but on reflection he actually did me a favour.

As the music changed on the playlist to Coldplay's Sky full of Stars, Will pulled out a big bag of mint stems and leaves.

'Do me a favour Sam, pull the leaves off these until you've calmed down and you're a little more presentable for the customers' I was so careful with picking the leaves. At first. They were for the Mojito cocktails, and honestly we must have gone through at least 20 bags a weekend. I took such care with the leaves that I picked, if they had any sort of mould or dirt, or just about anything I would ask whether I could still use it.

To think I took the job so serious now is actually quite funny, it really wasn't important. It was the job everybody wanted, but I was always given it for some reason, whether it be by Will, or Jackie. Will would sometimes use it as an excuse to talk to me I'm sure of it. He was an excitable chap, he definitely had some sort of ADHD I'm sure of it. He was harmless though.

We had a lot in common it turned out. Even though some of the things he did would annoy me and others, he was also one of the better liked managers. He was very down to earth. He was also the most hard working, he wouldn't shy away from getting his hands dirty. He wore a gold chain neckless and was pretty sure he was form the hood. He had a mole on his face that was partly covered from his olive skin tone and my sister who was a regular drinker in the Red Oak admitted to finding him quite attractive.

There was a part of me that was sure he only ever spoke to me to try and get to know my sister. I wasn't sure why I thought this but it also did seem to make sense. He wasn't a creep though, I don't think. I always think Will naturally got along better with Jake and Joe, but apart from us three he was a bit of an outcast, which was sad. You could tell that when he first started at red oak, years before me he was quite popular amongst his colleagues but they had now come and gone and he remained as Jackie's right hand man. I saw that happen to Karsten eventually too, his path followed a similar route.

Me and Will would talk about Wallasey a lot, it was a main topic of conversation, he used to work in a pub called the Dukes in Liscard where I used to drink regularly to watch the football before working at the Red Oak. Will even revealed that he met the mother of his child there as a bartender and she was a customer. That story always stuck with me because the character he portrayed in the story didn't seem the like the Will I knew, the Will I knew seemed sheepish, timid and too serious to ever chat up a girl whilst working. Maybe that's what adulthood does to a man.

Talking about football with him was a chore, he was one of them who claimed to be a big fan of Liverpool football club, but knew nothing about them and still thought that Gerrard was our captain, even though he'd left a year ago.

A final topic that we had to talk about was girls; he would always try and give advice on women. The advice would always end up being hatred, how he had been betrayed by them, how they're all horrible and they all want money, then it would lead to how he hated Jackie for never promoting him more and giving him more money. God time really does make his opinions justified. I have similar thoughts myself these days. In fact I'm pretty sure I have begun giving that advice to people myself who are younger than me. Will was 33, he had plenty of experience, if I'm like it now at 24, then I'll be a lot worse at 33 I'm sure of it.

Throughout my time knowing Will, he was rarely one for a night out, anytime he'd come out was seen as a treat. If he came out it was for a Guinness, he was one of them. Every so often you'd get him to let loose, and boy he hardly changed when he was drunk really, he would just rant more. He had to really be in the mood. He was a father after all, and he had responsibilities that us students and young bums never had. He had a promotion to chase. He had driving lessons to finish and eventually pass a test. He had ambitions something a lot of us never truly had, but said we did.

If he did go on a night out it tended to be a little more planned than the spontaneous ones after a stressful shift. It tended to be me, him, Jake and Joe, he had no interest in speaking to anyone else. I did feel a weird sense of pride that I was one of the ones he felt comfortable enough to really socialise with, although I always saw him as someone who I could never really have a good night out with on a one to one, not his fault, just the way life is, some people you can, some you can't.

I only really worked with Will during my BMW days, so a few months when I first started. In that time I would always offer him a lift home on late shifts if I had the car on me. The car journeys home were never anything other than work related. When do you reckon you'll get promoted? Isn't Jackie a bitch? Yes I fancy that girl in work, but it'll never happen will it? Joe was moody today why? Where the tills right?



Unfortunately I always associated driving Will home with a wasted night that I could've been out with the others socialising. But that all changed when I got my flat in Liverpool and lost the BMW. The truth is Will was a nice guy who was well worth his weight in chit chat. In those few months I knew him, he was well worth having in my life.

Will would leave the Red Oak and go and work at some pub over the road after a falling out with Jackie, two egos like that colliding. It was never going to last long, her prodigy wanted more out of the Red Oak than Jackie was willing to give anyone. That wasn't not the last I'd see of him though. Or the last Jackie would see of him either, as much as she would have liked it to have been.

### **Chloe A**

Chloe A, Askin, was a 29 year old, brunette, freshly single, lesbian. Not going to swerve away from it, the first thing I think of when I think of her was she was a lesbian, and one that would absolutely destroy me in a fight but was also very pretty. She was next in line after Jackie and this was something that pushed Will's buttons daily. When I first started at the Red Oak, most of the people who worked there seemed to be gay or lesbian. It was something I really noticed when I started there.

It's a school of thought that when I think back on it was very immature of me. I'm pretty sure I can only think of four gay people who worked there in the whole time I worked there but I had some presumption because it was a cocktail bar and that the first person ever to flirt with me there was a gay guy that everyone was therefore homosexual.

I remember he was one of the campest man I have, or ever will meet. He was so incredibly gay and was two years younger than me, yet looked about 40. He was sacked not long after I arrived for stealing tips. He claimed it was because Jackie was homophobic, which just made no sense at all. He was a strange man anyway, he would touch people inappropriately all the time so I think that might have been something to do with his sacking. I always remember a girl who worked there for a week or two called Simone left because he poked her arse with a pen, which I couldn't help but laugh at to be honest, and she seemed to find it funny at the time. Of course on reflection she might have just been scared to make a fuss.

But bar life became like that, touching girls on the bum who you worked with, and they in return would sneak some ice down the back of your neck. It was playful, but maybe he just took it too far. He was incredibly sassy though, so maybe that got him into trouble too.

There was another camp gay guy who was there when I started but he was more loveable, Dylan. He was very funny and would always threaten people by claiming he would 'rag their face off' a term that I still use to this day in jest.

In the time I knew Dylan I knew that he wasn't scared of Chloe A. Chloe A scared me though. For the first year and a half I thought she was one of the hardest people ever to read and tried to avoid her and at all costs. Which is very hard when you work with them and get along with a lot of their friends.

Jackie loved Chloe A, and I always remember there was a time when Chloe left to go to a call centre job and Jackie was lost for weeks after, there was no Will or Chloe and she was in tears. As

soon as Chloe returned she was demoted to supervisor, Jackie didn't mess around, she made her pay.

It wasn't till about a year after joining the Red Oak that Chloe started coming out with us on nights out. I don't really recall her that well on nights out, I seem to remember her just being more insulting on nights out and a lot more blunt. Bluntness wasn't something she shied away from anyway when sober. She would tell me straight drunk or sober whether a girl did or did not like me in work in a romantic way. She would tell me if I was shit at the job or not, she didn't care.

Chloe A was someone who I never had to have much contact with in my time there, but she was best friends with Chloe D, who was a good friend of mine during my time at Red Oak and there was a quite a few interesting stories that made Chloe A very relevant during my half adult years.

### **Chloe D**

Neiked- Sexual is a song that summed up the way I thought of Chloe D when I first met her. For the first few months that I knew her this was a hit song and was played everywhere including the Red Oak playlist on a Saturday night. But that song doesn't do Chloe D justice, because she was one of the most incredible people I'd ever met in my life.

It was my first Friday night shift, possibly only my second shift at all. I was in Jackie's office asking for my uniform. As I waited, people came and went in the office, loads of different members of staff. Chloe A was sat at her desk and Will was in his grafting clothes ready to lift stock. I didn't have a clue who they were at this point. Karsten came in too asking Jackie for the keys to stock room, Jackie didn't give him them, Will was on duty to collect stock. Karsten asking for keys now seems ridiculous in my mind. Amongst the crowd of people who came and went during that hectic five minute in the office was little 5 foot 2 Chloe D.

I knew of her because plastered on the wall outside the office was graffiti saying 'Chloe loves the D'. An anecdote that I didn't find amusing or witty. I was wondering what kind of GAY losers I had got myself in for here.

'Jackie?' Chloe D precariously asked and was ignored.

Swiftly turning her head in a sarcastic manner, the cheek of her, it was just so Chloe D, she didn't care. 'Chloe... old buddy, old pal, can you check if I've been paid right this month' she asked Chloe A.

'Oh will you piss off Chlo. Ow much you been underpaid this time?' Chloe A jested.

'You tell me bitch' Chloe D joked back.

'Yes I'll check and let you know friend' Chloe A assured her.

'Thanks friend' she responded.

As Chloe D turned away and left the office she spotted me and I spotted a Harry Potter referenced background on her phone, she loved Harry Potter.

'You new? Another new one?' she asked me, I felt very small when she said that, like I'd be there for five minutes and then leave like everyone else who worked there it seemed.

'Been here four years and I've seen people come and go like that. Karsten said that you worked with him the other day, he thinks you'll last five shifts' Chloe D smiled. Her teeth so goofy and a big gap between the front two. She had a nose piercing and smooth ginger hair, one heck of a fringe on her.

'I'm called Sam by the way' I introduced myself.

'I'm another Chloe, lots of us here... you look like a Sam' she then walked off.

It wasn't long before I heard a cackling loud sound come echoing down the corridor. Karsten's obnoxious manc accent joining it.

'Can you tell Chloe D to keep her laugh volume down, she's your friend' Jackie ordered Chloe A.

The laugh would make me laugh so many times; it was actually ridiculous how silly it was. Chloe D was 26 too, she was too old to have a laugh like that, but it was amazing.

After claiming my uniform I made my way onto the bar to start the shift from hell. Friday nights were never busy and this was no exception, but my god, when it's your first Friday night, it is so busy in your mind. You don't know how to make any of the drinks, cocktails, take food orders, pour a pint, open the till, what bar you're on, you know nothing, and it's so overwhelming.

Then the smart arse Karsten is there shaking his Boston shakers and making what he thinks are the perfect cocktails and wondering why you can't do it like he does it. He was so annoying. Him and Chloe D would get along so well, he fancied her you could tell. I hated him for that. They were just laughing at the end of the bar not serving, why don't they serve someone, but no Chloe D was a supervisor so she didn't have to. She was wrong, she just knew how to get away with it, and was teaching Karsten how too.

I got asked by a customer to make a Pina Colada and out of fear I ran into the glass room to check what goes in it and how you make one. I was close to breaking down, I rested my head on the ice machine, a tear was building, I was ready to quit. My first job as a half adult, I was ready to quit within two shifts, Karsten was right to doubt me. I was just a kid still, trapped in a young adult's body. Come on Sam, Hetty's dead now, your childhood is over, get out there and earn your money. Doesn't matter how hard the job is and how harsh the people are you work with you get on with it.

'Hey, Sam?' Chloe D I could hear at the entrance of the glass room. She slowly shuffled in closer.

'Hi Chloe'

'Thank god I remembered your name right!' She laughed loud and quickly covered her mouth. 'Sorry my laugh can shock people sometimes, it sounds a bit like a seagull' she chuckles.

I chuckled too and my tear slowly disappeared from my eye.

'So Sam, I've got a question, and I ask everyone this, I mean everyone who starts here' I stood up tall from the ice machine and pretended to wash some glasses in the sink.

'Put the glass down, you don't have to prove you're working constantly, don't worry. Not unless Jackie, Will or Chloe A are there, and I'll sort out Chloe A' she whispered.

'What's your favourite colour?' she asked me.

'Erm..' I hesitated 'Purple I'd say'

'Unusual, ok' she backed away.

'What, what about yours?' I asked quickly before she left.

'Black' she replied and in that response I got a clear idea of what type of person Chloe D was. I knew we'd get along fine when she said black, and I have no idea why, just a hunch you get. Black was the perfect colour for her to sum herself up.

'You know black, isn't actually a colour, it's a tone!' I responded with the cheekiest of responses I could think of.

'Oh well I'm sorry' Chloe D smiled. 'You know Sam, Karsten gives you five shifts, I think you'll be here a lot longer, I like yer'.

Chloe then left and I quickly shouted her back 'CHLOE! Can you help me make a Pina Colada'.

A few weeks had passed and I still hadn't fully settled in. The cocktails were all still so new to me, I guessed the ingredients half the time. In a way I was quite lucky that none of my customers had allergies because I didn't know what half the stuff was I was putting in my drinks. Though I did know now how to make a Pina Colada thanks to Chloe D, 50ml Half and half (Milk and cream, I didn't know what it was either) 50ml Malibu, 25ml lime juice and 25ml coconut Gomme. Gomme was some type of sugar syrup thing that basically went in everything to make it taste nicer. If a customer had a problem with how a cocktail tasted just chuck a bit of gomme in and they'd stop moaning. It was an easy way of getting rid of people. The lime juice would later cause some issues, especially when Jackie tried to go easy on stock, she would have some very controversial tactics on how to lower stock outgoings.

In that few weeks at the start of my time at Red Oak me and Chloe D had struck up an understanding, not so much a friendship, I was quite careful at the time when it came to making friends, I wouldn't label anyone too soon. But we were quoting Harry Potter and Friends on a regular basis. I was always quite curious as to what she thought about me when I wasn't there. She did tend to gossip a lot so this made me nervous.

I was worried she was a bit two faced, but then again so was I, I still am now. Chloe D definitely helped me settle in better though, possibly more than anyone else, Joe likewise, but he helped me in a quieter way.

On the long 12 hours shifts on a Friday and Saturday night at around 2 in the morning we would all finally get our breaks, half an hour we got, it was bloody labour that was. You'd start the shift at 4 in the afternoon and a lot of people couldn't hack it, neither could I at first admittedly.

Chloe D would always have a word with Chloe A to make sure she was on a break at the same time as me; I only knew this because Karsten told me later on.

Breaks on a weekend night would normally always go the same way, you'd run to somewhere that was open at that time of night, McDonalds, Burger King, a kebab shop, especially the one over the road, a very dirty place. You'd then run back and either eat it outside in the seating area of the Red Oak, or you'd eat in the kitchen that had closed down at 11pm. The first few weeks I didn't do this routine.

I would eat on my own in Burger King, it was so quiet there at that time of night, no one went there because there was McDonalds over the road from it. I would only go there if I was sad, tired, angry or lonely. My sit down visits there became less frequent the more I worked at Red Oak and my confidence grew.

Chloe D one time ordered me to stay in the kitchen for my break once. I did as she told me and we quoted Friends all break. Her loud laugh caused people to pop their heads around the corner to see what the fuss was about. She was just so easy to get along with, like the perfect person to meet at the perfect time.

During the breaks we would sometimes day dot the fruit that was no longer used on shift. It was a way of getting the close down finished earlier. Close down was basically to clean all the bars and get rid of the stock before leaving the building at about half 4 in the morning on weekends, sometimes later.

Day dotting was basically just sticking a sticker on the fruit containers, it was supposed to be a specific date but only the nerds really cared about that, the likes of Karsten, jobs worth's. I just stuck any old date on it. When I did it that was.

Chloe D always found it funny that I actually had a bit of a fear of stickers. I just don't like them. The way it gets stuck to your thumb and then your finger and then your thumb again, I hate them. So she would always say she would do them if I served a customer or did something else. She would do it with a smile on her face. I'd give her a hug to thank her for being my hero, meanwhile everyone else found it just weird and not amusing that I didn't like stickers. People would soon see the funny side.

On a random Tuesday night shift in the early weeks of my time at Red Oak, when close down was over, me and the two Chloe's lined up outside waiting for our taxis to take us home. Tuesdays weren't busy, they only required a few people for the close down. Chloe A said to me 'so Sam, how are you finding it here?'

In reality I was looking for another job to tie me over whilst at university, this was too hard. I hated it really. 'I like it' I responded to her question.

'How you getting home?' Chloe D asked.

'Taxi like you!' I responded and then the two of them laughed.

'We're not getting a taxi, I'm giving Chloe a lift to her flat in city centre, where do you live, want a lift?' Chloe A offered.

'I live in Wallasey' I said smiling

'A maybe not them, bit far, can't drive on water' Chloe A sarcastically said, I wanted to respond with, there is a tunnel you know, but I thought she obviously knew that.

'So where do you live Chloe then?' I waited for an answer and they both looked at me then each other 'D, Chloe D?'

'Oh I live in the same building as Karsten does, do you know?' she replied.

'I actually do know yes... by Duke Street, back of Mayflower' Chloe D gave me a thumbs up. I knew because I had walked Karsten home one night whilst waiting for my taxi.

'I took my girlfriend on a first date around there once' Chloe A said and I saw the opportunity to for the first time in my life and the only time since to say, 'oh my god same, I took my girlfriend around there not too long ago'. Tonicia wasn't my girlfriend, I made that quite clear to myself, but we were seeing each other a bit at the time. I never lied like that ever, or since. Well maybe a little bit.

'You have a girlfriend?' Chloe A asked in shock, as if I could possibly have a girlfriend.

I just nodded 'Oh and there goes my heart splatted all over the front step of the Red Oak, brilliant' Chloe D said with a hint of seriousness. I tried to brush her reaction under the carpet, but it was all I thought about for the next week until I was on shift with her again. Did she fancy me?!

No one had actually confessed their fancying of me since I was like 16. This was a new feeling. My taxi arrived and I left the two Chloe's to go home. I was bringing the BMW in from now on, I had to impress.

## **Karsten**

Karsten was a 6 foot 3 lanky streak of piss with big bushy curly hair and a massive bald patch that he just could not accept. He was from Stockport and had a manc accent that became more and more prominent the more I got to know him. He would always wear a flowery smart shirt for basically every occasion. But the first time I met him he was wearing Red Oak uniform.

My first encounter of Karsten was on my first ever shift. It was a sunny day and as I made my way up the stairs towards top bar I could see Dylan stood there laughing with Will at the end of the bar. There was one customer in there and behind the customer I could see the big bush of hair that was Karsten with a serious face.

I approached Dylan, avoiding Will because he looked a bit threatening to speak to, being 'from the hood' as Will was. 'Hi babe, can I help?' Dylan asked in a camp fashion, interestingly Dylan got less camp and gay the more you got to know him. When he opened his mouth for the first time I was pretty convinced that everyone was going to be gay in this place, including Karsten and even Will. Will seemed to me at first like he would have been one of the hard gays, who grafted but loved a bit of cock. Karsten just looked like he was a bit of a loser.

'He's with Karsten, Jackie told me earlier Dylan' Will interrupted and then walked away.

'That's Karsten over there' Dylan pointed me towards Karsten.

I approached Karsten slowly, taking in everything about the bar, where the spirits where, where the ice was, where the fruit was, the pumps, the wine, everything. There was one customer in the whole bar, it was a Wednesday afternoon shift after all, the graveyard ghost town shift. There were only a few types of shifts.

Monday to Thursday you were on-

8.15am-5pm, 12-5pm (the best, but also felt the longest) or a 4.15pm-close (close was around half 11 or midnight)

Friday you were on-

8.15am-5pm, 12-5pm or a 5.15pm- either a close, or 11pm. (close was about 3am)

Saturday you were on-

8.15am-5pm, 12-5pm or a 4.45pm-close (close was about 4 in the morning)

Sunday you were on-

8.15am-5pm, 12-5pm or a 4.45pm-close (close was about 1am)

This was a Wednesday 12-5. The rota was divided into an obvious hierarchy, it was the main woman herself Jackie at the top, Chloe A followed, then Will, then Chloe D with Karsten who was also a supervisor on the bar with Dylan. Then full timers and part timers. All were in different colours depending on what group they belonged to. Depending on where you were in the group depended on how well liked you were. Top was popular, bottom was newbie. I was bottom. The very bottom.

'I'm Sam' I introduced myself to Karsten.

Karsten looked at me like I was weird. I think he had issues with people coming and going by the time you got to know them in this place. I thought he was definitely gay. He definitely wasn't my type of person, I knew it.

'Karsten, nice to meet you? Who do you support?' Karsten asked me a football question, I hope it was a football question, not political or something; it so easily could have been politics judging by the way he looked.

'Liverpool, how about you?' I asked.

'Ah another one, Man United me mate' yeah that confirmed I definitely didn't like this guy. Then again if he is truly into football then I suppose we got something in common. He better not be like Will who half arse cared about football.

'Good that you like football though' Karsten said 'I don't trust lads who don't like football'.

Every time Jackie came outside of her office and onto the bar he would suddenly shower me in attention, 'this is how you make this cocktail, you have to slap the mint to let out all the flavour, check the date on everything'. Then when Jackie went back into the office Karsten would go and speak to Dylan or Will, he wasn't interested in me at all.

He was such a jobs worth, every time I went over to him to speak about football he would suddenly go all sheepish and move away, 'be careful Jackie might hear us talking, there's a customer to serve over there' he would point at someone who was closer to him to serve.

I'd be serving someone a pint of Peroni and would overheard Karsten and Dylan quoting a film that I like, Shaun of the Dead and Hot Fuzz mostly. It was really annoying, I wanted to be involved. Instead I was talking to some guy who was apparently a local in the Red Oak. How can you have a local in the city centre? Turns out there are a lot of them. People who would come in for a pint or two after a day in the office. His name was Ken; Ken looked a bit like Karsten actually thinking about it, a much older version. Also Karsten would never drink Peroni; he went for indie pale ales.

That first shift was an awkward introduction to half adult life. People don't shy away from the fact they don't want to talk to you. They make it quite obvious. Karsten was quite an honest, up front guy; he would talk to you when he wanted to. He never opened up really to people he didn't know. He was a bit like me in the sense that he tried to play it cool but deep down I knew he wasn't, just like me.

Karsten was 26 when I first met him, and was a worrying sight, I hope I wasn't like him at 26 is what I thought. He cared so much about being promoted in this bar, he wanted to one day own his own bar, this is the type of information he wouldn't tell you until you got to know him. But it was obvious he loved bar life, he loved making drinks and serving people. He would always put the customers first before any friendship on the bar. That's what I thought anyway, until I saw him on that first shift with Chloe D on a Friday night. He was open with her; he would really let himself go with her. That was a different Karsten, the Karsten that grows on you.

After a shift, whilst I waited for a taxi sometimes it would take up to an hour for one to arrive, I would walk around with a member of staff. Sometimes walk them back to their flat, or house in the city centre, sometimes grab something to eat. It was either a good way of bonding, or an excuse to stay out with someone I liked. The first time Karsten asked me to walk back to his flat in the city centre with Joe, I accepted out of social awkwardness.

It was my second Friday shift, not the one that I first met Chloe D on, but the first one where I met Joe and it was my first weekend close shift. Joe didn't walk with us for too long, he just wanted chicken selects from McDonalds before getting home, he really like chicken selects, chicken fillets, chicken fingers, any sort of chicken in breadcrumbs. Me and Karsten however kept walking. Before Joe left I didn't actually say anything on the walk.

Karsten lived just outside of the clubs and lively bars in Liverpool. The main drinking area being called Concert Square, Slater Street and Seel Street. Places that even when I just write them down send a shiver of excitement down my spine, I have had some bad times there but I've also had some incredible times there, it gets an unfair rep of being a rubbish place to drink. Full of youths and students, Christ I love it.



However as me and Karsten walked the whole city seemed sleepy. No one was out anymore, the place was getting cleaned up, every bar was closing, and drunken people were getting in their taxis. That was the reason I couldn't just get a taxi home straight away, all the drunk deadbeats where using them.

'What do you think of Kev?' Karsten asked to break the silence in the normally busy and lively part of the city.

'Kev?' I wondered, I hardly really spoke to Kev. Kev was someone I'd describe as poor. He was also not very attentive to his job, he didn't care much about his role, he just wanted money, he had just come out of prison. He begged Jackie for a second chance and she let him come back to work at the Red Oak on his second spell. Kev was a nice guy, a friendly guy, a loyal puppy that's what would best describe him.

'I don't mind him, he seems nice enough, bit chavvy, but seems no harm' I replied.

'Jackie's got her eye on him and so have I' Karsten said with seriousness.

Ok who died and made him deputy manager, you're not Chloe A or Will, I thought to myself.

'He just seems to hang around by till 6 on the bottom bar and rests his head, I feel like he's always stoned on shift' Karsten speculated.

'I think he's just a bit dopey isn't he?!' I felt bad for Kev.

'I'd like to think so but Jackie sacked him once for being high on shift and then obviously he got arrested for having a fight outside Heaven nightclub. I don't know I just feel he's got something to hide' Karsten continued to stir up a rumour mill.

'So is that just you and Jackie who think this?' I asked trying to get away from the judgement of Kev's character.

'No, no, the two Chloe's think it too' Karsten replied.

'Will too?' I asked.

'Don't know about Will, Joe doesn't see it, he's a bit like you, indifferent' Karsten confirmed.

I had no idea what to do, do I join in in the Kev bashing, tell Karsten that I saw him smoking a spliff before shift, or do I stand my ground and become liked for humour rather than a gossip. Karsten seemed like one massive gossip, a tell-tale, a man who couldn't be trusted, I could never trust him. I would refuse to tell him anything.

My first outside of work with Karsten was not a nice one, but it ended with one of the best pieces of advice I would hear whilst at the Red Oak. Something I would teach everyone who work there with me after. Karsten turned around as he walked through his front door of the lobby to his flat, and he said 'next time you order a taxi after work, say 'can I have it for staff?' it puts you to the top of the queue for taxi drivers, much rather pick an honest worker up than some drunken nob head'.

'Thanks' I smiled and thought that's the type of Karsten I like.

'Wanna come in and wait?' He offered me; he was really coming across alright all of a sudden. I took up on his offer and as I went to exit the lobby and enter the same lift as him he stopped me.

'What are you doing?' he asked me.

'You said I could wait in yours?!' I responded confused.

'No I meant in the lobby' he points to the couch in the lobby as the lift doors closed, 'see you on Monday nights shift' the lift door slammed shut. He is such a prick.

## Joe

Joe to me is the Red Oak. He embodies everything I loved about it and everything I hated about it. He embodies everything I love about my life 21-24 and everything I hated 21-24. He was miserable, but he loved being miserable. He was funny and easy to get along with. Everyone liked Joe but everyone was confused by Joe. Joe is an enigma.

One person Joe really didn't like was Jackie, and I mean he really didn't like her, there was never a good word said about her. Joe was diabetic and was very overworked for someone suffering with diabetes, Jackie didn't care about that though.

He seemed a very short guy when I met him, but it actually turned out he was taller than me, I was 5 foot 10 so he must have been 5 foot 11. But I always saw him as small. I have no idea why. The first time I ever spoke to Joe was on the steps going from the top bar to the bottom bar. I was still getting my bearings and he was looking for Gomme. The music playing loud was Rihanna and Calvin Harris 'this is what you came for' and Joe shared my opinion in hating this song with a bloody burning passion. Didn't stop us dancing and singing to it when in full flow on shift though.

Straight from the off I got along with Joe. On the stairs he found time in his stressful search for Gomme to stop and speak to me. 'Ok mate, what's your name?' he asked me.

'Sam, you?' I asked back.

'Oh Sam, the Liverpool fan, Karsten told me you won't shut up about football. Its Joe mate' I was relieved, he was into football too, and he wasn't another gay. I'm not homophobic, but I just know I get along better with straight people.

'Some fitties in here isn't there?' I nudged the conversation towards being as straight as possible to confirm that he was in fact not gay.

'Yeah mate, get loads of hot women in here like' Joe confirmed. 'They always ask for Pornstar martinis though, you'll end up hating the fit birds in here, they're the annoying ones, and Pornstars are shit to make mate, terrible'.

I'm sure they're not that bad, I was very wrong to think that. Every. Single. Girl. Would order one. Joe tapped me on the shoulder and walked on looking for the gomme. I watched him go and at the end of the bar everyone seemed to want to talk to him. Chloe D, Karsten, Dylan, Kev. He was a popular lad at the Red Oak, but he just seemed to hate the whole thing.

Later on that same shift, me and Joe where on glass collecting together. Glass collecting was only scheduled on busy shifts so weekends and weird Sundays that were ridiculously busy and understaffed. On the podium at the end of the top bar would always be a shift sheet, and on the shift sheet would be where each member of staff was on the shift and what time they were glass collecting, and who with.

Some shifts I'd be on top bar, some shift even the club, but most of them I was on bottom bar. The reason for this was because I was not very good because I was new. However as time went by I still remained on bottom bar despite becoming what I thought was a competent member of staff. Someone though was fiddling with the sheet. Someone wanted to always be with me on shift, someone didn't trust my ability to work the top bar and someone knew I loved it on bottom bar away from the hustle and bustle. But I didn't know who these people where just yet, they certainly where not Jackie, she wouldn't give two hoots if I liked it on bottom bar or not.

So in terms of glass collecting, it would start to be organised from 4pm on a Friday or Saturday, and each hour two people would swap with the two people currently on it. Of the two people who were on duty one would stay in the glass room and keep the machines going, clean the sink, and then the other would collect the glasses off the floor. This system would work till about half 9 and then plan would go to shit, every time. The place would be too busy, you'd end up having to go out and collect glasses with the other person, the machine would break, the sink would be full of crap and ultimately, it would turn into a shit tip.

My first time on glasses with Joe sold me a big bag of lies then. Me and Joe had a shift on glasses at 6pm on a Friday, easy peasy. To think I thought it was hard, just seems silly now. Joe was tired, his diabetes was kicking in so he asked me to go and collect glasses politely. I did so and when I came back he had kept the glass room spotless.

'Sorry to order you about lad, I'm just a bit, my sugar levels are low' he explained.

'Diabetes?' I asked him.

'Yeah, it's a nightmare on shift. Doesn't help when JACKIE is such a horrible, none concerned manager' Joe returned to the sink and cut himself on a bit of broken glass.

'You ok?' I asked concerned.

'Yeah, don't worry, you cut yourself all the time on shift here, just don't get lime juice in it, that really stings and Jackie goes mad, don't waste the lime juice god forbid' Joe was quite funny, especially when he was mad and we ended up bouncing off each other in our hatred of certain things to do with the Red Oak.

He ran the cut under a cold tap, 'you should be fine running it under a cold tap'

'We took the jabs in the Isle of Wight' Joe responded quickly finishing off a Shaun of the Dead quote.

'Oh my god, well done' I was impressed.

'Love that film' he laughed.

'Joe, Joe... how are you, you ok?' I could hear Chloe D creep up behind me. 'Oh hi Sam, can I squeeze passed you there please to inspect Joe's cut'

'Chloe its fine I ran it under a cold tap' he winked at me and smiled.

'I don't get it why did you just wink' she asked.

'Shaun of the Dead' Joe explained.

'Oh right, don't know that too well' Chloe looked at the cut on his finger. She was so caring and attentive to everyone, she was hard to read.

'Guys' Will poked his head into the glass room 'it's getting busier out there, stop having a mothers meeting'

'Piss off Will' Joe shouted, and I couldn't believe it, that's our deputy manager and he just told him to piss off. Will poked his head back and pointed at him 'cheeky, get back to work'.

Is that it, he tells him to piss off and nothing bad happened, I had never experienced anything like that ever, a normal peasant in the work place calling a big cheese out, and no punishment.

'You ok Sam?' Chloe D asked me as she squeezed passed me out of the glass room, 'how's your first Friday shift?'

'Yeah, yeah good thanks' I was too shocked to think of a response of any whit.

Glass collecting was just a small example of how much you could manipulate the Red Oak. Authority existed here but it was also easy to escape the authority and mess around with it. There was no anarchy there, but there was a lot of clever people, with clever ways of bending the rules. I would become the pioneer for a lot of it.

You rarely glass collected with someone you didn't like or want to be on with. If it said me with anyone other than Chloe D, Joe, Jake (sometimes), Andy I would change it with a pen quickly as time went by and my confidence within the Red Oak grew. There was a period where I would be on glasses with no one else other than Katie, I'd make absolute sure I was always on the glasses with her and everyone knew it and eventually duty managers would just write my name down with her.

The first time me and Joe interacted properly outside of the Red Oak was thanks to Karsten actually. It wasn't a walk home that I joined with them both out of social awkwardness. It was the shift after Chloe D had done all but confessed that she fancied me a little bit. It was my first ever Saturday close shift. Kev was on shift too, and he and I had really bonded.

I had gotten into a routine on shift by this point; I knew how to make a few cocktails, enough to get me through shifts. I was asking only a handful of questions each shift now as appose to 25 or 50 questions. The cocktails I knew to make off by hand where the simple ones, the type of cocktails

that if a customer came in and asked for the best one, you'd recommend these on the back of them being easy to make rather than the customers satisfaction. Unless you were Karsten or a manager. You would recommend the likes of Woo Woo, Sex on the Beach, Pina Colada, Cherry Cola. Drinks that required minimal ingredients and no need to shake. Between you and me I never shook Pina Colada's though you were supposed to.

So now I could be more relaxed on shift and Kev was a big help towards that. Kev would come up to me midway through shaking a cocktail and serving a customer and dare me to ask for the next girl's number. I would tell him that I was seeing someone, Tonicia. He would then just say 'do it for me then, please'. I would, to this day I think what a pig I must have looked like, I hate cheaters, and here I was doing exactly what I despise.

After asking and failing to get a girls number, with Kev stood there for a good five minutes waiting whilst the customer still waited for his/her drink, Kev would laugh and say 'now you dare me mate, honestly lad it's getting me through these shifts'.

Kev was one of them guys who had no side to him; he was too dopey to be two faced, too slow to be nasty about anyone. He had it tough you could tell, and I pitied him but also just really liked him. I like guys like Kev. Joe liked guys like Kev.

Me and Joe would always laugh about how Kev would lean on a till at the end of the bar and stand there doing nothing for a good ten minutes whilst everyone else would serve. Eventually he would awaken and shout either me or Joe over because he trusted us and ask us to run the shop and get him a chocolate bar. 'Sure what do you want?' I'd ask him and he'd always reply 'Lion bar'. He was obsessed with Lion bars.

One time Joe asked Kev for a Dairy Milk from the shop and Kev came back with a Lion bar for him. Joe couldn't eat Lion bars. Maybe he just didn't like them, I can't remember exactly, but either way that really summed up Kev, why would anyone just get someone a Lion bar, he probably thought he was doing Joe a favour buying him a more expensive chocolate bar. He was just miscalculated but both me and Joe thought of him fondly.

I approached Kev with a dare of my own 'I dare you to ask the next customer who you serve if they are old enough to drink even if they look blatantly old enough' and sure enough he did it without hesitation, he asked a 60 year old man for ID. Kev didn't have a filter, he didn't care, he just wanted to have fun. This type of behaviour with us two would go on for a month. We never even got caught, we never got in trouble for it, no one knew, except for Joe who really didn't care and Chloe D who I'd hoped was impressed by my charming wit and devil may care attitude to the Red Oak. Thinking back how could any girl be impressed by such immaturity?

The best one me and Kev used to do was one of us would come down to bottom bar shouting loud like we were a manager on shift and tell the other to get to the office immediately. It would be for little things, robbing the tills, wasting stock or not cleaning properly. But unfortunately Karsten overheard the worse one.

'Sam!' Kev shouted coming down the stairs in front of a group of customers on a quiet Tuesday shift, 'you horrible nonce get in my office now, looking at little kids on the internet on works time'. Kev meant no harm by it, it was just a joke, an ill-advised joke at an ill-advised time. Karsten told him off

for it. Joe had a word with Karsten over it; Joe had the authority and popularity to smooth things over for Kev. If I kept Kev entertained, Joe kept Kev safe in the Red Oak.

Karsten crept up on me as I was cleaning the till on close down on the Saturday night, and whispered 'keep this quiet but the UFC is on tonight in the Legends sports bar downstairs. It's on at 5 in the morning, want to come watch it with me and Joe?' I was invited to a night out, however I did try for the first few months to keep myself away from drinking with the Red Oak gang, I didn't want them to see drunk me too soon before actually knowing the real me and how nice I was.

'Sure I'll come, but I might not drink, I'll just watch the fight' Karsten shrugged his shoulders as if to say that was fine. 'Oh and can I invite Kev please Karsten?'

'If you have to sure' Karsten didn't seem too bothered who came as long as he could watch the fight.

Joe followed not too long after to ask me something himself 'did Karsten ask you to come watch the UFC yeah?'

'How did you know?' I asked him.

'I said to him to invite you, you like footy so maybe you like UFC?'

'I don't like UFC really, but I'll come' I replied.

'Neither do I really, Kev better be coming too!' he said it loud enough for Kev to hear.

'Sure will lads' Kev answered, 'especially you boys are going'.

Kev would have gone with just Karsten; he didn't discriminate, he was just happy to be invited.

Just before the fight started I thought I could use this opportunity to get to know if Chloe D liked me or not. I thought Joe was a bit preoccupied keeping a close eye on Kev like his dad or something, so I'd bond with Karsten. 'What about Chloe D hey?' I started the conversation terribly as it drifted from the fight.

'What about her?' Karsten's ear perked up through his bushy hair. 'What do you know?' he got very defensive.

'Nothing, I was just going to say do you like her?' I asked innocently.

'As a colleague yes, a great work friend she is' he responded like a nervous Yoda.

'I was just thinking of something she said the other day to me'- Karsten interrupted.

'Something flirty I'd imagine' he said. He was right.

'Kind of yeah, I was wondering if maybe she liked me in that way?' I asked him.

'What like to sleep with, you, you? Karsten said with a wry smile.

'Yes me? That's so hard to believe?' I went a bit red with rage actually.

'Sorry pal, I don't think she'd ever go near you, sorry to disappoint you, you're a child in her eyes' he pal'd me, and then called me a child. I hated him. What was up with him why was he such a little bitch I thought to myself.

Unfortunately what was meant to be a quiet night, never is quiet when there is fighting or boxing on. Kev was on something, some form of drugs. Me and Joe tried to hide it away from Karsten who was suspicious of Kev already. Kev though, had a tendency to lash out when he was on cocaine. He started a fight with someone in the Legends bar and we were all kicked out.

Karsten therefore missed the fight.

'Go home Kev' Karsten said trying to stay calm. 'Order a taxi for Kev Joe'

'Hey I'm sure he's sorry' I tried to fight Kev's corner not realising he was still brawling with the same guy now in the middle of the street.

'Look Sam, you're new' Karsten pointed at me 'Kev is going to let you down time and time again trust me. People are already talking on shift about the pair of you, you need to be careful. You don't want to be dragged into that' I look at Kev on the floor getting beaten up by a man I didn't even lay eyes on. Before I knew it the guy he was fighting had gone and Kev laid on the floor in a heap.

Joe helped Kev up whilst on the phone to the taxi rank. Kev wasn't the first person I ever saw on drugs, but he was the first person I ever saw get in trouble because of them. He was the first person who I ever saw get corrupted by them. In answer to Karsten's earlier question of whether I thought he was ever high on shift, my answer is yes, I think he was high on weed quite a bit. In fact I knew it, he told me that once he was stoned. I laughed it off and never told anyone. He was unfortunately a drug user, and one that couldn't hack it too well anymore. Joe came up to me laughing one shift and said 'have you seen how stoned Kev is, me and Chloe D are guessing how long it'll take before he moans to Jackie about being tired'. Sure enough half an hour he did exactly that, he moaned to Jackie about tired, Jackie told him to piss off and get to work.

That's the kind of place it was, people would do all kinds and get away with it, it turns out a lot of places are like that. Especially in Liverpool.

Joe and Karsten would invite me out again to watch Liverpool Vs Man United, but I refused to watch any United game with a United fan. I was surprised how much Karsten was inviting me out considering I was sure he didn't like me at all. I had a feeling Joe was more to do with it, he really was an instigator when it came to inviting new people out on nights out at the Red Oak.

**Come back to this and make more detailed. Didn't feel right.**

## Jake

It was a first and very rare occasion; I had a Friday shift in the morning. The classic 8.15am-5pm shift. For some reason there was stock in the corridor waiting to be taken down to the stock room, but that normally happened on a Wednesday. Nothing was normal about this morning. Will was on duty and had me cleaning the tables and chairs outside to give me something to do.

I did question him on it, why couldn't I do the stock. Will replied 'Because I'm stronger' that put me in my place. I left the back doors slightly open so I could move in and out to the kitchen to get hot soapy water to clean the tables and chairs.

As I scrubbed away at around half 10 in the morning, I caught in the corner of my eye someone looking around the outside of the Red Oak, young lad about my age. He was looking up and down, trying the front door which was locked, we didn't actually open for service until half 11. I ignored it and kept scrubbing.

Soon the man made his way round to the back door that I had left open. He looked like a Beatle impersonator, his hair was floppy over his forehead, his chin was slightly chiselled, a very whiskered beard. He was about the same height as me.

'Do you know where Jackie is?' he asked me in a scouse accent, a real scouse accent, not like my semi posh one from over the water.

'She isn't in!' I replied and returned to my sponge.

Then I could hear the squeak of the back door opening and he had just walked into the corridor.

'Oi' I shouted him, 'you can't be in here mate' I used my authority of having two months experience working here behind me.

'I work here you melt, I'm meant to be on shift now you melon' he replied, melt and melon in one insult was quite impressive.

'Oh, sorry' I laughed and just showed him my soapy water for some reason, I don't know why and he just looked at me like a freak. He looked like more a freak than I did the cheeky bastard.

'It's my second shift, I had one yesterday and I was told by Joe to just ask for Jackie when I came in, who's the manager now then, you?' He asked me like a fool.

I laughed 'I am not the manager, do I look like the manager, you... melt!' He didn't respond, 'Will's the manager he's in the office.'

'Will again, Jesus is there any other managers here like, I had him the other day. William, I need to sign in mate' He took to this place like a duck to water. He was calling Will, William already, like they'd been mates for years.



I was sorting out the bars with the right equipment ready for when we opened like the good little employer I was for the first few months. Making sure the bar had the right fruit on each section, there was six sections, three on top bar, and three on bottom bar, each section had its own sink and ice section. There were two more bonus sections in the club, but they're not important right now. Each section needed strawberries, cherries, passion fruit, lemons, limes and a bowl of mint leaves. It's never had them all, Jackie never stocked everything, too many expenses she'd say. The ice section had to be full of normal cubed ice and crushed ice. There needed to be four Boston shakers, two strainers, one steak knife (for the fruit) a bottle opener (Called a bar mate) and the correct measurement jiggers, 25ml and 50ml two of each resting on a bar mat with the Boston shakers.

It was whilst I did this that the same man approached me on bottom bar. 'Hey Sam is it?' he asked.

'Yeah, what's your name sorry, did I catch it before?' I know I didn't, I was too blown away by how annoying he was.

'Jake, I'm Joe's mate from school, he got me the job her. He said you're sound so...' Jake shook my hand and headed back up the stairs to top bar and started swinging around his house keys thinking he was cool. The beauty of Jake is that he is so uncool that he actually ends up being loveably cool. He dropped his keys for example, looked around to make sure no one saw and picked them up whistling like nothing had happened, I saw Jake.

Jake was annoying, he still is in my opinion, but he wasn't annoying in a nasty way, he was annoying in a loud, loveable obnoxious way. I didn't trust him, maybe trusted him a bit more than Karsten, but I still felt like he was in the Red Oak for himself and no one else. There was something deeper though with Jake, he was so similar to Joe in so many ways, yet they couldn't have been more different. Their mentalities were similar, but the way they acted was completely different.

He was a flirt too. He would flirt with everyone, he didn't care and he didn't even know it either, and I didn't think he was even that good at it, he just tried a lot. Like me with my jokes, if I keep trying eventually one of them would make someone laugh. On the same shift towards the end and the sun was beginning to set, and all the offices were beginning to shut for the weekend, Chloe D was on the till next to me. I had 45 minutes with her until my shift ended and I would always try and squeeze in a little bit of flirting before we parted ways, or at least make her laugh. But today I wasn't in the mood, I just wanted to go home, I was tired. She asked me if I was ok and I was, just exhausted and I had a shift the next day so I wanted to go as soon as possible.

A few days before Chloe D had asked me at the end of one of our close shifts if I 'actually loved Tonicia?' to which I said 'No, obviously not' then she asked me 'what's the point in being with her then?' it was one of the most poignant things anyone had ever asked me, it's so true if you know you don't love someone why even bother. Tonicia kind of annoyed me anyway. If she hadn't cheated on me I probably would have ended it anyway. Surely only a girl that was into me would ask me such a question as that, I was sure Chloe D liked me. She used to sometimes refuse to go out drinking after work because I wasn't going, that's how much she cared about me. She would beg me to go out, I was literally her everything, I know I was.

'Chloe A is it?' Jake came down to bottom bar again, where he didn't belong for this shift he was supposed to be with Karsten getting trained up.

'Chloe D actually, Jake is it?' Chloe D replied with such sass, you go girl. I literally thought that, I'm not even exaggerating.

'Whatever Chloe A,B,C,D,E... how do you make a penis colada?' Jake asked smiling.

Well that wasn't funny surely. No apparently it was, it was hilarious. Chloe D was crying, she was in tears. Jake looked at me with a right cheeky smile. It really wasn't that funny, stop laughing, and then I realised, I think I might well fancy Chloe D a little bit more than I thought.

'I'll show you' Chloe D grabs Jake's outstretched hand and is escorted up to top bar away from me, I felt like the elephant man, no one was anywhere near me, I was all on my own on bottom bar with an old woman waiting to be served. I could see Chloe D's mascara on the floor from her tears of laughter.

'What can I get you?' I asked the old lady.

'2 Pina Colada please' she said, you couldn't make this shit up, and the worst part is, I never heard Pina Colada ever again, I always heard Penis Colada, and it doesn't even sound the same, it was sending me nuts for the next two years.

## **Andy**

The next day I had a 12-5 shift on the Saturday and that was when I met Andrew. As I walked in to start the shift I was hardly able to lift my head up from my phone as I had texts coming through to me from all kinds. I had the work group chat that was called Rota going berserk sending in the same rota three times for next week with different slight changes made to it. Jackie, Chloe, Will whoever it was could never get the darn thing right first time. I also had messages coming through from a few of my school friends, Jonny, Danny and Tom Jones, yes like the singer. All where arranging to meet me after work when I finished at 5.

We would always go the same places; it was a strange time in my life. It was something I like to call the long hair days. I had longer hair back then, which a lot of people in the Red Oak would give me stick for. The three of them where slowly moving away from the type of person I wanted to be friends with. But at the time I didn't see what was wrong with them, though a few of my other close school friends where distancing themselves away from them.

I was introduced to Andy immediately as soon as I got on shift and placed my phone away in my pocket. Joe approached me 'come and see the new guy lad!' everyone seemed very chirpy on this shift, all happy faces. Karsten was shaking his cocktails with a smile on his face. Chloe D was laughing with Chloe A in the office. Will was cutting limes and pulling mint leaves. Jake was, nowhere to be seen.

'Everyone sees very happy today? What's going on?' I asked Joe as we walked towards bottom bar to see the new guy.

'Jackie's not in mate, she's off today' Joe was interrupted by Kev who quickly snuck a bit of ice down his neck. 'Kev, what are you doing lad?' Joe was very good at acting angry and pissed off, he turned around and smiled at me 'I'm gonna get him back in a minute you know'.

'Stick a lime down his arse when he bends over' I suggested. Joe put his thumbs up in approval.

'Right then, Sam, this is Andy. Andy this is Sam' Joe introduced us to each other. Andy was a 6 foot 1, hairy bastard with a quiff. He was a smoker and you could tell, but he was also incredibly welcoming looking. I didn't look like he had a bad bone in his body, but he could gossip. He had the strangest beer gut I'd ever seen, he was 26 years old so I was looking at what my gut look like if I kept drinking the same rate as him. Like he was constantly bloated.

'What this' he brought attention to his gut, 'I'm proud of this mate, years of practice'.

'Nice to meet you Andrew' I called him Andrew for the first few times I met him because of his name being Andrew on the rota, I rarely drifted away from the rota. Hence why I called Chloe D, Chloe D in the person. Andy was too polite to just correct me and say call me Andy. I would later find out he hated being called Andrew.

'Right so you two are on bottom bar together it says on the shift sheet, so Andy any questions just ask Sam yeah?!' Joe said as he walked back up to top bar.

It didn't take Andy long before he realised I had absolutely no clue what I was doing really, and it didn't take me long to realise that he actually didn't care about what we were doing.

'Do you wanna just cut limes Andy?' I asked him knowing that he would obviously say yes to such a mundane job.

'Bit mundane isn't it?' He said in his scouse Garston accent. I didn't expect him to argue it.

'It's easy like yeah, do you not like easy?' I asked.

'Yeah I like easy, but I don't like boring, I just came from an office job that was mundane I'd rather do something more hands on' he explained to me.

I used to think he was crazy, he gave up a dignified office job to come and work behind a bar for minimum wage, what silly man. I feel like me and Andy lived our lives in reverse from each other, we were quite different yet so similar, just on different paths. Whereas I was a man who wanted to work in an office, being boring and mundane after bar life, he wanted to work in a bar job after the mundane and boring office life. Why would anyone want to graft for their money when they can just sit there and have it injected into their bank accounts.

'Ok then you can serve Andy if you want, I'll cut the limes happily' I picked up my knife and began cutting on the back bar whilst he served. Every now and again he would ask me for help, and most of the time I couldn't help him. He took to the job a lot better than me which made me a bit envious.

Whilst I was cutting limes I could hear the conversations behind me, the introductions. Kev asking does he smoke weed or do cocaine, to which he answered not to both. Chloe D asking him what his favourite colour was and his answer wasn't as special or witty as mine, 'red, because of the mighty red' he meant Liverpool FC. Jake asking him about his facial hair and whether he likes getting pissed, his response was 'Does a pope shit in the woods, is the bear catholic'. I liked that one, that was the type of comedy Andy was, stupid but absolutely nailed his delivery. He'd outstretch his arms on the punchline, pull a face that made him look like De Niro or a stroke victim and everyone would laugh.

Andy would never start a conversation, he didn't like conversation, it bored him, he liked making jokes and taking the piss. Life wasn't serious for Andy, but Karsten took to him well, Karsten could tell him things and Andy would just listen. He's a good emotional punch back, a funny one. Karsten at the time had a lot to get off his chest.

'So Andy, what are you doing after, I presume you finish at 5 today? First shift and that' I asked him making conversation.

'No I finish at 6 me today, want me to cut the limes now, bit out of my depth here' He definitely wasn't out of his depth and I was a bit confused by 6 o'clock.

'Yeah sure, I'll do them with you as there's no one to serve anymore, you serve fast' I grabbed him a knife and a bucket of limes. As we both sliced the limes we continued the conversation 'so 6, that's an odd time'

'Yeah I'm gutted actually, I'll miss the first half of the Liverpool game, might go and meet my dad for it in the Bierkeller' Andy told me his plans.

'No really, I'm going there too, meeting some mates not from the Red Oak like, I never drink with these lot' I told him.

'Oh yeah, well after the game I'll hang around with you and your mates' Andy invited himself on a night.

Bit rude of him to invite himself out, I couldn't really say no, the annoying thing was that Jonny and Danny were very clicky people. They liked their own kind around them. But what could be the worse thing.

'Sure yeah, sounds a good plan' I invited Andy out, I'd known him an hour and already we were going on a night out, I had never been this spontaneous with a person ever in my life.

'my da's in here no actually, should I just chuck a lime at his head' Andy joked and then actually grabbed a lime.

'By the fruit machine?' Andy nodded.

'That would be quite funny' I said to him.

'Be like Mrs Doubtfire, "Oh I saw it!"' he quoted a film that I knew very well.

'Yeah' I laughed 'it was a member of the kitchen staff it was a run by fruity, I'll get him for you don't worry' in my best Mrs Doubtfire impression.

We were curled over the back bar laughing before Will came and told us promptly to serve the customers who had appeared out of nowhere to be served.

'Oh shit!' Andy said quoting Mrs Doubtfire again, brilliant, just brilliant.

Kev suddenly interrupted Will 'Will my arse is killing dunno what's happened!'

'Kev, don't say things like that in front of customers' Will told him.

'Will lad honestly there's something stuck down there, like slimy and that' Kev explained.

'Kev, stop it now. Go into the back and take out whatever it is before I send you home with no pay'.

'Oh go on Will be sound, send us home' Kev just didn't understand life.

'No Kev, take the slimy lime out of your arse, wash your hands and serve please, with cream and cherries on top' Will asked politely although somewhat sarcastically. 'Joe, try not to stick limes down Kev's arse every shift, thanks' Will smiled, he didn't mind it really, he knew it was all fun.

Because I had left an hour earlier than Andy on that shift I had become well established with my school friends by this point, I had already sunk two pints during the first half of Liverpool's struggle at Selhurst Park. It was like Andy was a good look charm as soon as he arrived looking dirty and scruffy after his first shift, he looked spotless when I left him, and he now stunk of fags. His dad and him enjoyed the footy with each other and before I knew it, I was also into my fourth pint with the boys, and Liverpool eventually squeezed out a win. Tom Jones wasn't too impressed being an Everton fan, but he unfortunately for him had to just grin and bear it. Tom would actually have a very short stint at the Red Oak, courtesy of me.

I introduced the guys to Andy, Jonny hadn't yet collected the little bits of white saliva that congealed around his mouth when he was the sniff (cocaine) something I didn't delve into myself. Jonny was like a walking advert not to try cocaine. Danny was off the drugs for good after suffering anxiety after a few wild years when he was younger. Tom loved the sniff, but was more controlled on it than Jonny. This was the first glimpse anyone from the Red Oak had seen of my life outside of work, and it was a shambles.

Andy however, didn't seem phased, to him the night was fresh and new, little did he know that I had done this exact same night now four times in the last two months. It would always go the same way, so much so that it would become a joke that we would mock Jonny for the way he directed us around. He thought he was in control, the truth is, he was a bit of a victim.

I could Jonny saying it down Andy's ear, chatting his head off on cocaine, poor Andy, but he never seemed bothered by annoying people, he'd just get on with it. I think it did bother him, but I think he liked me already enough to know that I wasn't a bad guy, and I wasn't really like these lads.

'So Andy, good to have you on board' Jonny said as I sunk into my pint in a cringe, 'we start off here, at the bierkeller, finish our pints, play a bit of pool, go to the Restaurant bar and grill, fancy little place,

do a sniff, do you sniff?' Andy shook his head 'clubhouse after that, no worries that you don't sniff, we sniff, Danny doesn't, and neither does Sam, its fine, its fine. Then Roxy's ballroom for a bit more pool, some beer pong, table tennis, then we go conny square' he meant concert square, no one ever called it Conny square, loser. 'Then quad vod in Slaters' Ah the quad vod, four shots of Red Square vodka topped off with a bit of blue WKD, or on a day the reds win, cherry WKD, but that was mostly with my other mates we did that. 'Then we finish by going Bar Bars or Heebie Jeebies smoking area, more lines then bed' Andy looked happy to do all that, believe me Andy that routine gets very boring very quickly, and you will hate Jonny by the end of the night.

Turns out I can tell the future, Andy was sat outside Heebie Jeebies in the smoking area with me having a cigarette, he offered me one, but I don't smoke. Andy finally, and very much intoxicated, snapped. 'Why's your mate so annoying?' he asked me about Jonny.

'He's a very insecure person, and he's off his face on drugs, which doesn't help. He's always been a bit weird, but ever since he got on that stuff, he just chats your head off. He's a bit victimised by my other mates, I feel a bit sorry for him. Also we think he might be a closeted gay too' I revealed all.

'Really? How so?' Andy looked shocked.

'He's always had a weird fetish in school, he used to be into fellas too but then decided he wanted to be cool, everything you see from him, is all just an act'. Just like that something clicked in my mind, why on earth am I friends with him if I think it's all an act. Truth is I didn't have many friends after school, I had never made a group of friends after school was finished. I still hung around with school friends who I liked, but also ones that I dislike because I was desperate. There were some from school that I still loved, but the likes of Jonny, he wasn't me. Being off his rocker every Friday and Saturday and being just generally annoying. I wanted a new set of mates who didn't require five or six years of lessons with me to actually like me, but liked me from a few meetings. Maybe the staff at Red Oak could be my new school friends, my new set of mates.

'Danny's alright like' Andy told me.

Danny was alright, he was actually my best friend up until about a year before I started at Red Oak, but we just began to drift. He was more into going out with Jonny and I wasn't. I still like Danny but one day me, him, and my two best friends Alex and Jesse went on a night out and I don't know what happened, but Danny was never the same after that. He just stopped being our friend. That was a few months down the line, and to be honest, it's ok, if he doesn't want to be my friend that's fine, I don't need anyone in my life who can drop me like that. I'm more important than that.

My trail of thought was abruptly interrupted by the sudden action of Andy. Drunk Andy was outrageous, a girl walked passed our table who worked there. She was dressed in provocative clothing to sell shots and Andy just slapped her right on the arse. I was stunned, speechless. I didn't know what to say other than 'What the hell?!'

'I dunno why I just did that' Andy held his hands out puffing his cheeks and laughing. His hands and cheeks stayed in the same place as he got dragged out by the bouncer.

The night ended for me with a memory of Danny and Jonny ranting down my ear about how much of an idiot Andy was for doing that. It was something different I guess from the usual routine.

Maybe that's really what they both didn't like about it. On reflection, it was funny, but wrong. But funny.

The next shift I had with Andy was an interesting one. I had been in the University all day. I'd had some interesting news that day. I thought I'd milk the news big time for some attention even though I didn't care less. Tonicia confirmed to me that day that she had started seeing someone else. After a quick look in the University toilet mirror at the man who wasn't good enough for her I was conflicted. On one part I was sad that she had gone, but on the other I was happy to be happy and free to make my move on Chloe D if I so wished. Obviously if the opportunity arose too.

I rubbed my hands together thinking of the best way to mail the news on shift. I couldn't tell Chloe D, she'd think I was telling her just to get into bed with her; I didn't want that, her knowing that. I had to play this smart. Couldn't tell Chloe A, she just wouldn't care, neither would Karsten, Joe didn't even know I was seeing anyone, Jake would try and sleep with her probably, but Andy, he could work.

I walked out looking as glum as possible and the first person I saw standing at the end of the top bar was in fact Andy. And Jake, both talking to each other. Kev was nearby too I'm sure wanting to play some joke on me. I went up to the podium at the end of the bar with the shift sheet on it and saw that I was on glasses with boring Paula and that Jackie was on the same bar as me. My head dropped straight into the sheet. Now I actually was upset.

'You ok mate?' Jake and Andy both asked at the same time.

'No' I replied.

'I was just telling Jake about when I slapped that birds arse, what a nob head I am, sorry about that I'm embarrassed' Andy explained himself.

'Nah it was funny mate, I thought it was gold' I told him smiling.

'Really was wannit' he then put his arm around me 'what's up?'

'My girlfriend left me today, I found out she cheated on me' I can't believe I actually said stuff like this, she wasn't even my girlfriend, we never even slept together, she used me for attention.

'Oh that's horrible that mate' Andy said.

'Yeah sorry to hear that' Jake heard it too.

'You know what though' Andy started to tell me 'you're in the same boat as me, my bird, Donna, she cheated on me, and I'm in two minds as to whether to get back with her or not'-

'You shouldn't' Jake interrupted. Suddenly I was listening to real problems, not made up ones that I fabricated in my head, I felt so immature.

'My bird left me too not too long ago as well Sam, and I've decided to just go mad, starting on our next shift, on Friday. Me, you and Kev all finish at 5. We're going out and getting some girls' Jake basically told me we were doing it and I was quite taken aback by it.

'YES LAD!' Kev shouted in agreement as he walked passed us three talking.

Jackie was suddenly out of her office and right behind me 'Kev, don't shout when there are customers around, Sam get on a station, Andy, Jake welcome to the Red Oak'.

### **Kev**

Kev had been a no show this week; he was in Jackie's bad books. The excuse he gave for him not turning up to his shift was that he simply overslept because his big sister kept him up and watching out for a ex coming round to knock her out. Sounded serious, but Kev revealed to me on the next shift that it was absolute bull shit. He just had to think of an excuse.

'Kev' I said to him after he revealed that he'd lied and was laughing 'please be careful mate, I don't wanna lose you lad, if I lose you at this place, I got no one' I told him with sincerity.

'I know lad, I know, I'd hate to let you down, last thing I want to do' he put his hand on my shoulder and then slowly I felt the full weight of his body collapse on me as his doiness kicked in and he began using me as a rest on shift.

'Kev, I'm not the till, stop resting on me' I smiled.

'Sorry lad' he apologised and then Jake came down to bottom bar.

'Ladies' Jake referred to us as, like a nob. 'Ready for tonight, we heading straight out?' he asked us both.

'I can' I replied.

'No can't' Kev gave us a response we didn't want to hear.

'Excuse me!' both me and Jake exclaimed.

'I can't, I've got a shift tomorrow now in the morning, Jackie said I can make up for not turning up to shift the other day by doing tomorrow instead' Kev explained well, but we weren't having it.

'Please?! As if that will stop you coming out' Jake said.

'Maybe we should take a rain check though Jake yeah?!' I suggested.

'Kev you'll be sound, just come out' Jake wasn't letting go.

It honestly didn't take much persuading for him to come out, no more than a Lion bar. Jake didn't even pay for it, I did, and I was quite happy for Kev to stay in and be safe.

Five in the afternoon came round fast that day, the shift was over and Kev didn't let me leave without him. As we both signed out at the same time Jake flew passed us 'I'll see you guys in Concert Square outside, don't be late'.

'Hang on Jake... don't you live in Walton?' I asked him.



‘Yeah’

‘Well so does Kev, and we need to go back to his so he can get himself sorted and that, he needs to feed his cat’ I explained.

‘Alright then we’ll share a taxi then’ Jake shrugged.

‘Ah that’s amazing that, I’ve got no money what so ever you know, can you two pay?’ Kev wasn’t asking us, he was forcing us to; we weren’t just going to leave him at the Red Oak alone.

Walton wasn’t a nice place; it was very similar to where I was from, a working class, scummy area basically. Some people had nice houses, a lot of people didn’t, some people where up to no good, a lot of people where avoiding the people up to no good.

Walton was pretty well summed up by Kev’s house. A beautiful cat, a loving family home, but a mess. Proper mess, kids toys everywhere, an Xbox not plugged in a tele left on standby. Food was left on the side, the classic pot noodle in the sink full of water. A deliberate mess, like a work of art.

I stood on one of Kev’s stray shoes and Kev apologised ‘sorry let me move that Sam lad’ he moved the one shoe, the place was a mess but that shoe had to be moved, thanks Kev. ‘Have a seat’ he told me, where’s the couch I felt like asking, under all these unwashed clothes.

Anyway Kev scrubbed himself up and we were ready to head out, and then out of nowhere Jake pulled up outside his house in a car. Jake had a car and this wouldn’t be the last time I’d see it, his blue banger that he drove at ridiculous speeds. He took pride in the fact that he could rev his car up to 110 mph, and that he once drove back from Manchester pissed and never got caught. Annoyed me that.

‘Why’ve you got your car?’ I asked Jake thinking that he had some ulterior motive. I had to be the one to ask because Kev was away with the fairies.

‘Cheaper than a taxi isn’t it?!’ his logic made very little sense.

‘No its not, because you’re drinking aren’t you?!’ I felt like I had to explain it to him.

‘Yes I am drinking, I’ll drink then drive home’ he explained elegantly.

‘And you know the consequences of doing that yes?’ I just wanted to make sure, wasn’t being sarcastic or smart.

‘Yes, I save myself ten pounds on a taxi’ Jake laughs. ‘Now get in!’

Jake always parked his car in the car park on Pall Mall, that used to be a house but was knocked down to rubble.

‘Ok I understand why you would park here for work, because its close by, its only up the road, but we’re going Concert Square on the other side of town, is there nowhere closer to park?’ I asked in the most polite, again none sarcastic way possible.

'Stop being a weapon, let's go' Jake called me a weapon, the maniac who nearly crashed three times on the way from Walton to City centre called me a weapon. Was beginning to hate this guy.

The night started with a few innocent games of pool, it was there that I found out about Andy's secret talent. 'Played pool with Andy the other day' Jake told me and Kev 'you know he plays Snooker all the time, he's outrageous at pool, he beat me 4 games in a row'.

'Good at throwing as well' Kev informed me, wasn't really that important, but I would soon find out he was in fact quite good at most things.

'Really? When I went out with him he refused to play with me and my mates' I explained.

'He's hiding his talent, he probably didn't wanna hustle all your mates and annoy them' Jake found a reason.

'You know what you're probably right actually, if he's that good' I didn't believe he could be that good.

In the Soho nightclub we lost Jake to a girl. We were on fire that night, I remember just going out all guns blazing trying it on with every girl in there and getting a lot of dirty looks off of them. Kev was getting dirty looks off the men who had just seen him whisper in their girls ears. Kev ended up pulling some dwarf girl. I looked over from speaking to some girl at the bar and saw her getting on his shoulders.

Soho wasn't created for people like Kev, in fact I take it back, it was made for exactly people like Kev. Kev eventually came back to me like the loyal puppy dog he was and with a lot of white powder around his nose he told me that I was a good friend. I smiled and returned the favour.

In Kev's honour I decided to call it a night early for his sake. I didn't want him turning up to tomorrows shift hungover and potentially get in trouble. Because Jake had left though it required us to get a taxi.

I didn't know why but it was really hard to get a taxi that night considering it was early. Then I checked my phone and it was actually half 3 in the morning. Time had flown I was more drunk than I thought.

Finally after an hour of walking around waiting for a taxi I tracked one down and called Kev to join me, he was however on the phone. This was important, I needed to get him in the taxi but the driver was not in a patient mood. 'Kev come on mate' I tried shouting hi, but he covered his right ear and listened to his phone down his left, he couldn't hear me. I just apologised to the taxi driver.

Kev then came running over to the taxi and knocked on my window, I just opened the door so he could tell me something 'Sam lad, I'm staying out-'

'No you're not'

'I am Sam, my ex just called me, she saw me in Soho kissing the dwarf, she wants to see me, maybe she wants to get back with me, that would make my life' he had a tear in his eye. He was so daft.

'Kev, if you don't turn up to work tomorrow, you'll be sacked!'

'I know Sam, I know, but Jake went home and got his nuts and I want mine'

I just shook my head and because I was quite drunk I decided to just let him go.

'See you next week in work Sam when I'll be back with the love of my life' Kev then ran off like an excitable child Liverpool high street passed the McDonalds and beyond.

The next day with, not so much a bad headache but a poisoned pain in my stomach from drinking excessively, I received a text off Jake saying 'have you heard?'

Wasn't good news.

Kev had been sacked by Jackie, later finding out that the reason behind this was that he didn't turn up to his shift at all, he no showed again. This time his excuse was his bus never turned up. That was Kev. He was gone just like that, Jackie got shut of him completely, and when she sacked someone she never allowed them into the Red Oak again.

I went up in all the managers estimations after that, I was known as the guy who got him sacked for the next week or two, which is something I didn't want at all. Jake even joined in, even though he was just as culpable. Karsten tapped me on the shoulder and said 'well done' and I think he meant it, even though he was smiling whilst saying it.

To really make me feel guilty on my next shift after Kev was sacked, Chloe D and Joe both came up to me whilst as was cutting passion fruits and wanted to show me something. They were laughing to themselves like little school girls. They showed me the fridge in the kitchen and inside was Kev's Lion bar.

'I can't eat them!' Joe told me, again.

I grabbed it with an anguished, fed up face. 'wanna share it Chloe D? wanna try my bar?' I said smiling like a pervert. She laughed the whole place down; I was back on top of the world. Sad for Kev though, the guilt has still never truly healed.

## **Heather**

It wasn't often that someone new would come rolling into the Red Oak as a manager. But about four months into my time at the Red Oak Heather started. She came prancing into the bar in her own clothes like she owned the shift. Granted she did. She looked too friendly to be a manager. Always smiling I wondered what Jackie saw in her.

She came up to me as I was serving and introduced herself 'hi I'm Heather, where are the Guinness glasses?' I laughed, shouldn't you know Miss manager, of course I didn't say that 'Hi Heather' I responded politely, 'I'm Sam, and the Guinness glasses are right here' pointed them out right underneath the Guinness pump, silly Heather.

Heather was a year older than me but my god I can't tell you how much more mature she was than me. She was so upfront, she knew what she was do in within a week, she knew how to do clos downs on her own, and by this point Jackie had promoted Karsten to a duty manager, and

Heather knew more than him after a couple of weeks. She was a Mary Sue of the Red Oak management team if ever I'd met one.

Karsten's promotion did not come as a shock to any of us, he was such a teacher's pet, he was bound to get promoted eventually. It gave Karsten a great excuse to get out the flowery shirts he so desperately wanted to wear and it gave me, Joe, Jake and Andy an excuse to have a right old laugh at them.

Yes Heather was the perfect newbie manager, until you got a drink down her, and she then let herself go, she would go from quiet, manager Heather, to student, hair down mad Heather. We were all like it.

It was around Halloween when she started at the Red Oak. My attractiveness to Chloe D had become infatuation by this point. I was really beginning to like her, she was just so easy to talk to, so funny and actually found me funny. I could flirt with her and it would seem normal, because I knew there was a bit of her that also fancied me.

It was the Friday shift around Halloween and I was in university in the day before having a shift in the evening. On my way to Uni that day I quickly nipped into the costume shop to buy a costume for Halloween, something that I admit I had never done before, but everyone was getting involved in the Red Oak, except Joe, who just didn't care and Karsten, who had a flowery shirt.

I looked around the shop for ages indecisive, and considering the shop in the centre of Liverpool isn't that big, I circled a lot I must have looked confused. I actually saw a footballer in there with his family, Roberto Firmino, he knew what he wanted, he had his costume sorted and even though he was quite ugly he and his girlfriend pulled off their costumes well.

I looked at the happy couple and thought maybe I need to think about wearing something to impress someone I liked. So I dressed as Harry Potter. It was actually very expensive, the plastic glasses were seven pounds, the scarf ten pounds, the wand ten pounds. Absolute rip off. But it was to be and not for the first time a silly amount of money I was willing to spend to impress someone I liked. I never used to buy anything to impress Tonicia or Rachel before her. I just simply didn't care, if anything they would buy things for me, but as time went on I felt myself becoming more and more of a beta male.

I couldn't even remember what Chloe D was dressed as, some type of witch, but not from any specific show, just a generic one. Chloe A was Frankenstein, Jake was a vampire, Joe eventually squirted his white shirt with strawberry puree, and Heather went for the smart Victorian Florence Nightingale look.

Chloe D loved that I was Harry Potter, when she eventually clicked on to that was who I was. I had to put the glasses on and take them off and put them again before she realised. Chloe A saw me and said I looked like the worst Harry Potter she'd ever seen, I just thanked her. Andy came in as Harry Potter too, and he really put effort in. I asked him how much money he spent, he said a lot. Andy wasn't too good with money; he was in a lot of debt that he didn't tell us about until he knew us better. He was half ashamed about it I think, but nothing to be ashamed about we all have things we'd rather hide.

Every Saturday night in the Red Oak at around 8 in the evening, the DJ Pete West would begin playing. He would go on and on all the way until we closed at 2am, and it was rare that the playlist would change, and when it did it was so noticeable. He would put one or two new songs in a month. Halloween was one of them occasions he would add two songs. Not Halloween themed though, he just through any song in that was in the charts. 'Shout out to my ex' by 'Little Mix', and 'Closer' by 'Chain-smokers' where added with DJ West's classic backing track quietly in the background, and a small chant and screaming women that he put into every song that was on the hour. That was just to make it seem like people were having a good time, but on some nights where it was quiet it would catch him out. The bar would be dead but you could hear girls screaming on the audio. It was obvious that Pete West put them screams in their for an ego boost.

DJ West was such a small fella, and he was about mid-40s, and around 5 foot 4, maybe 5. He would always be a right flirt at the end of shifts when he finally turned his music down and everyone would just go along with it for his sake to make him feel a bit better about himself. The truth is we all wanted his music to just shut up to symbolise the bar was closed. At the time I thought he was a terrible DJ, but he grows on you in a nostalgic way, the music was that shit that you actually miss it, it demonstrated his personality.

One song he did play and I only heard it once but I liked it a lot was 'Heading Home' by a DJ called 'Gryffin'. He never only put a song on once, it would tend to play for the next four months at least, but this was a one off. I just managed to Shazam it in time. I would quickly download it and listen to it in the car as I drove home in my BMW.

That song always reminds me of that Halloween shift and Chloe D talking to me and Jake. That feeling that would become so familiar to me, when someone just has a better chat with a girl than you. Even though you like the girl you can't help but think she has more than one eye on the other person in the conversation. Chloe and Jake seemed to be having a laugh, not as loud as what me and Chloe had, but a different kind of laugh. A guilty laugh.

Jake would piss her off, she would get mad at him, hit him on the arm and storm off, she never did that with me. I was too nice to make her upset or angry, I treated her with respect, I treated every woman with respect, I think. There was that time with Danielle, when me, Kev and Jake took bets on who could make her break up with her boyfriend first, we got caught out for that and I did come across as a pig then. I blamed Jake and Kev. Nearly got sacked for that.

I was getting quite nervous about the Jake and Chloe D thing. I was cleaning the fridge doors on close down, which was one of the easier jobs, just getting hot soapy water and wiping it with a sponge and then getting a squidgy on it and wiping the excess soapy water away. I took little pride in my clean fridge doors.

As I cleaned them and DJ West had turned his awful/loveable music off, I could hear clearly Jake and Chloe D in the glass room having a right good laugh and flirt. I kind of sat there deflated in my Harry Potter costume thinking that this was tough and I just wanted to go home, but I was so down that didn't want to clean, like an ironic vicious circle.

Heather came up to me and as all good managers do, spotted I wasn't quite alright. 'Sam, you ok?' she asked.

'Yeah' I lied, but I may have been overthinking it all too, I was tired.

'Heard you had a recent break up?' Heather referred to Tonicia.

I couldn't think what she was on about, then remembered oh, the lie I told, 'oh yeah, yeah she cheated'.

'What a cow, there's plenty more fish in the sea Sam, probably haven't even met her yet, how old are you?' Heather spoke like she was 30, so mature.

'21, how about you?' I asked.

'Guess!' she ordered me to and she was my manager, try not to piss her off.

'25' I guessed just to be safe, always go younger.

'I'm 22' she said disappointed, 'but thanks'

Great I managed to piss off Heather now too, is there anything I couldn't do.

'I'm mature I know' heather explained myself to myself. God she was so mature. 'End fo the day Sam, there's girls here that might like you, there's Danielle' defiantly not after what happened 'Hannah' not my type, but she did like me a little I reckon, 'Chloe D' don't get me started, I'll cry, 'Shannon' not a chance, she was a big girl.

'Me, even' oh hello, I thought that came out of nowhere, is she flirting with me.

'Point is, people will come and go in your life and I wouldn't get too upset over a girl leaving you, it's her loss' Heather just cleared up that she wasn't flirting with me, but was in fact making a point, and a point well made. Even if things didn't work with Chloe D it's not the end of the world, there will be other women surely. If Jake sleeps with Chloe D I'll kill him though.

At the end of every shift we would count our tips in the booth right by the main till. By this point on a weekend Jackie had well gone home, she always got off early about 1 in the morning to tend to her dogs. We would always look on enviously at the people who had made the most tips, it was always Chloe D or Hannah as they were on the restaurant. Heather on her first shift had collected nearly no tips. Karsten came out of the office with Will like a big pair of gays. Andy's joke, not mine.

'The tills are down!' Will told us all, this was never a good thing. 'Jackie's gonna fume tomorrow, luckily I'm not in for a week, so I don't care, Karsten, you'll have to deal with it as the new manager' we all kind of smiled at Karsten's misfortune.

'Yeah smile now you lot' Karsten said 'I'll be checking that CCTV footage all day tomorrow to find out who made the mistake' it would take Karsten a while before any of us really took him serious in those flowery shirts.

'Want a lift home Chloe?' I could hear Jake ask from the other side of the booth.

'Got the car' Chloe A replied.

'Not you, you weapon' Jake said back, 'Chloe D'.

'Oh sorry, didn't realise you were flirting there Jake' Chloe A encouraged him.

'You guys stop it!' Chloe D pandered to Jake's flirtatious ways.

'Well' I looked at Heather and just thought why not 'I have my BMW if anyone wants a ride' I put my thumbs up like a real lemon.

I stood up and left that for people to ponder, it was the first time I'd revealed my car to the gang, and I quickly nipped to the first Coca-Cola pump and would always have a quick shot of coke just to wake me up. Every weekend close I would do it. Like a treat.

'BMW ay, over compensating are we, dealer Sam over there' Chloe A jested as she stood up and readied herself to leave.

'No I have a big dick too' I confirmed, 'just also have a BMW'.

'A black man's willy as well' Andy said.

Everyone laughed, thanks Andy he really caught me out there.

'Don't get it' Chloe D was a little slow to the joke.

'BMW, black man's willy, that's what it stands for you melt' Jake explained.

'Oh yeah, obviously' Chloe D laughs loud, that classic clown laugh.

'Right I'm off' Karsten was about to leave.

Chloe A had already slipped through the back door and gone. Jake and Chloe D also began to make movements towards the front door. Will swung the building keys in his fingers, and started ushering us all out.

We stood on the step outside the building and once Will had finally locked up the front door he turned to me and asked 'so can I have a lift home then as I live over the water?'

I couldn't really say no could I, 'sure'

'Could I as well?' Karsten asked, 'Joe isn't here and I don't like walking on my own really'

'In that shirt I can see why' Andy said and Karsten didn't get it. 'What do you mean?'

There was an empty silence. Only broken up by taxis honking horns and club music in the distance.

'Sure' I answered Karsten, although this drive was becoming more arduous the more people asked.

'What about me?' Andy asked.

'You live in Garston!' I answered him. He looked at me plain faced, 'sure, why not!'

'What about Heather?' Jake said.

‘Well there’s no space’ I explained, ‘Chloe D makes it five, can’t you take Heather?’

‘It’s ok’ Heather played as peace keeper, ‘I can walk, its only Kensington’.

Kensington was not a nice area in Liverpool, nor was it particularly close enough by to walk to it, a good half an hour to an hours walk. I acted apoplectic, my arms were out and my shoulders shrugging ‘well we can’t have you waling there can we?’

‘Jake, can you not take Heather and Chloe D to save me some petrol please?’ I asked politely and with pain etched across my face, I was giving him Chloe D. It was exactly what he wanted, the two girls in his car, whilst I had three men in mine. What a back stabbing, friendly prick.

Off they went, Jake in the middle with his arms around both girls walking up the road and Andy rested his hand on my shoulder and I immediately shrugged it off.

‘Can’t wait to see you drive this Beemer Sam’ Karsten said genuinely looking forward to it. Felt like telling him to shut up. Heather had gone; my first shift with her was over. Unfortunately I had another shift that night, a late taxi drive. One that I was paying for.

Garston was absolutely ages away. Andy had dragged me to the other side of Liverpool; I was closer to Wigan than Wallasey. Andy lived in a rough area, a council house, on the back of the Liverpool airports main train station. The journey wasn’t too bad though we just listened to some tunes, mainly Spandau ballet. Me and Andy from that day where determined to sing Gold at Woody’s bar on the karaoke.

After we said our goodbyes to Andy it was time to head back to the city centre to drop Karsten off, it was strange having both my team leaders in the car with me, I never was one to speak to managers, always too scared, now here I was with two of them in my car, I was the one in control. There was a moment of silence in the car. Then Karsten filled it with ‘Funny how Jake thinks he has a chance with Chloe D’.

‘Go on’ I wanted to carry on.

‘I just don’t think he’s her type. She goes for taller more rugged men, Will knows’

‘I do actually’ Will then carried on Karsten’s point ‘I’ve worked with her now for a few years and I can tell you, Jake is not her type, though Jake is a charmer, he’s barking up the wrong tree’. This was music to my ears.

Suddenly the world was filled with hope and happiness, the night lights of the city centre looked so bright and full of life. I was on top of the world.

I was outside Karsten’s flat and as he got out he turned to me and said, ‘you know what that was the best bit of driving I’ve had from someone your age, you could still pass your test now I reckon’. I took me a while to fully register the praise. Karsten had never given me praise before. ‘Thanks Karsten’.



'It's ok, Chloe D thinks you're a top bloke, and so do I, she's a good judge of character' I have no idea where that came from, but I liked it, it was very heart felt. Suppose Karsten wasn't too bad, not friend material, but certainly a suitable colleague.

Not even ten seconds after driving off and seeing Karsten enter his flat lobby, Will said the words that made my opinion on Karsten change to slightly annoyed with him again, 'Karsten fancies Chloe D a lot'.

### **Callum**

Callum was so quiet and reserved. H was from Nottingham, but I didn't know that for a while because he just wasn't interesting in pointless conversation. He didn't like small talk, though he was very inquisitive. When you got Callum talking he was a funny guy, and when you got him talking you really felt you'd achieved something.

Quite a few people didn't take easily to Callum's lacklustre social approach. I was one of them, I admit I was quiet when I first started, but never rude, Callum appeared to be rude with his quietness, like he was too good for us. He would snigger sometimes when he overheard something that one of us would say, something that wouldn't be particularly funny, something like an opinion on politics, or something that he was clever at.

It was a Wednesday night shift and I was on a 4.15-close. Callum had been working at Red Oak for at least a week now and so far no one had an opinion on him really. Except Joe of course who managed to squeeze some sort of conversation out of him. Joe told me that he was actually funny and could quote Star Wars well.

I arrived to my shift early deliberately so I could snatch a bit of time with Chloe D before she finished her shift at half 4. Any advantage I could get was working for me. Chloe was happy to see me, she came and gave me a big hug, though I was a bit sweaty as I ran to work to get there early.

'Got any spray Chloe?' I asked her, she backed away from my smell of BO.

'No I have not' she looked at me baffled, I understand why; I have no idea why I practically admitted to smelling.

Heather popped her head out of the office and into the corrido where me and Chloe were reconvening. 'Sam! Hi, you're early!' She said.

'I am' I looked proud, like a good little employee.

'Want to jump on the bar and help out Callum, he's new?' Heather asked so politely and innocently, little knowing she was ruining my chance to get the better of Karsten and Jake in claiming what was rightfully mine. Not really the way to talk about a girl I was into but I was only 21.

'Sure' I smiled.

'Thanks Sam' Heather replied back in her Barrow accent, it was so excitable all the time; it was a nice bit of relief from Jackie's scouse strict accent. She popped back into the office and Chloe grabbed me by the arms as if she was about to kiss me. This was it.

'Sam' she said to me looking into my eyes, I looked into her big blue eyes too. I could feel it. A guilty kiss before my shift started. 'Sam' her eyes weren't so pretty anymore, they were a little bit more aggressive and mad. 'Sam!'

'Ok this is weird, what?' I asked her, it obviously wasn't going to be a kiss.

'Callum is so quiet, he really annoys me, I actually hate him' Chloe D was serious, she hadn't hated anyone yet since I'd been working there. Though had heard that every person she did hate at the Red Oak in her time there did get sacked within a week. She was like some evil witch who put spells on people's employment there.

'The new guy?' I asked shocked.

'Yes Sam. He doesn't say anything; he just floats around the bar like a ghost and then makes some chuckle noise when you say something he thinks is stupid. Come out to top bar I'll show you' She grabbed my hand and dragged through the kitchen and out to the top bar. The chef shouted 'service! Oi, food to go!' the door slammed shut on the kitchen.

To be fair she was right, I could see Callum walk around and he walked from top bar into the glass room and passed us like we didn't exist. There was no hello or smile or anything acknowledgment of our existence.

'See!' Chloe D thought she had proved her point.

'No not really, I mean he might just be shy!' I defended him.

'Quick ask me something, something debatable!' Chloe D ordered me.

'Ok, do you like my long hair?' I asked.

'That's not debatable, I love your hair' she said laughing.

'Cats or dogs?' I asked again.

'Dogs' Andy answered as he walked through the kitchen door and onto the bar to start his shift with me.

'Cats, duh!' Chloe D argued with Andy's answer.

'It is dogs though' I put my answer in there. To be honest Chloe's answer of cats put me off her a bit, for like twenty seconds. How could anyone not be a dog person?

'Ask another!' Chloe whispered.

'Erm...' I struggled to think the pressure was too much 'Who's going to win tonight Trump or Clinton?'

'What?' Chloe looked annoyed, 'I don't know!'

Callum walked passed us again after putting some dirty glasses through the machine, on his way past he chuckled to himself. I looked at Chloe and she had clenched a fist and went very red in the face. 'See what I mean?' she asked me and Andy.

'She going on about Callum yeah?' Andy asked.

'Yeah I don't see it' I explained.

'Sam, the other day I asked him what his favourite colour was and he just laughed and walked off' Chloe tried to back up her point.

'Could say his answer wasn't as amazing as mine then' I still claimed that answer as the best. 'I dunno he just seems quiet and nervous. Andy what do you reckon?'

'Don't care me mate, I just come in, do the job, get paid and get laid' Andy's answer was very diplomatic.

'Get laid?' I asked.

'Me and Donna are trying to make things work' Andy explained. Me and Chloe looked at one another with an eyebrow raised, why would he ever go back to her after what she did to him. 'Oh you two wouldn't know, proper Scouser's forgive, you two a just fake ones from Wallasey and Skelmersdale' Andy walked off and started serving customers with Callum.

'He seems a bit triggered' Chloe noticed about Andy.

'I'll take care of him' I said like I was the father of the place.

'You better, right my shifts finished so... are you coming out next Thursday night after work, yes!?' before I could answer Chloe left and almost like a revolving door as she left through the kitchen Danielle appeared.

Me and Danielle where still not 100% friends again after mine, Kev's and Jake's little bet and it was rare that I would be on shift with her and so little other people. I was quite nervous. Danielle was a nice girl, she was from y side of the water and was quite a small brunette girl, about 20 I think she was.

'Who's the supervisor on shift?' Danielle asked as she looked at the shift sheet as soon as she came on for Chloe D.

'What is there no one else in?' I looked at the sheet myself quickly stumped; surely it wasn't just me, Andy, Danielle and Callum all night. 'Andy, is there no one else in tonight?'

Andy walked over to the podium where the shift sheet was throwing a lime in the air and failing to catch it on the way down. 'I believe this is us yeah'.

'Who's the supervisor then?' I asked.

'Oh yeah' Andy finally clicked, 'Callum?!' Andy made a joke and to be fair it made me laugh, I looked over at Callum and he was just stood there picking his nose and flicking it on bottom bar.

Heather came out of the office to claim a till to count up some money so I thought best ask her. 'Heather, any supervisors on tonight?' I asked smiling.

'Oh, well it looks like not' Heather laughed, 'I'm going to put you and Andy in charge, you can flick a coin to see who the shift supervisor is'.

Andy managed to yank a two pence piece out of his pocket, 'heads or tails?'

'Heads' I replied. He flicked into the air and again on its way down Andy failed to catch it. The coin went under the fridge. Andy laughed and I laughed, Heather saw the funny side.

'Andy, I thought you were good at catching and that, what's up with you?' I asked him, this wasn't the legend that I had been told about Andy.

Andy reached for another coin and couldn't find one.

'You can both be supervisors, supervise each other if you want, I don't care really. Going to go and count this till anyway' Heather walked off back to the manager's office.

Suddenly there was a large queue of customers waiting to be served. Me and Andy looked at each other clueless. Danielle took the lead 'I'll just stay on restaurant' which was great there was no customers in the restaurant.

As the shift passed and Callum remained glued to his bottom bar on his own me and Andy had become well accustomed to being supervisors. After serving a big batch of customers, no one really came in after that, it was very quiet. So quiet that we could begin to have a bit of fun.

'Andy. Don't just stand there, wipe them spirit bottles on back bar!' I told Andy in jest to do as I say.

'Oh my god, sure thing master Sam, what direction should I wipe them?' Andy joked back.

'The right way!' I said laughing.

As I returned to look out on the bar and see if there was anyone to serve I heard Andy shout me.

'SAM, you stupid prick you haven't top and tailed these bottles, why I oughta'.

'Oh no Andy, master Andy I'm so sorry'

I quickly strained as many near empty bottles of spirit into the ones that were nearly full. Topping and tailing was basically when a bottle of Jack Daniels was emptying for example, you would find another bottle of Jack Daniels on one of the bars that would have enough space in that bottle to fill up with the dregs from the near empty one.

'All wiped yet Andy?' I asked in my most serious accent I could muster.

'Wipe my arse' Andy responded.

'Tell you what Andy; we seem to be running out of sugar syrup!'

'Are we?' he asked with sincerity.

'Sure we are, it's all Gomme' I revealed the punchline.

'That's good, that is good. Marie Brizzard Gomme, what a lovely girl, can't believe she's gomme' Andy came out with his own one.

Marie Brizzard was the name of the Gomme we had stocked in.

'I'll tell you what that was Sam, that joke was' He pulled off a bottle of rum 'Kraken'

'Oh yes, on fire, very good' I appreciated that one.

Andy returned to wiping the spirit bottles clean and when he wasn't expecting I hit with another joke.

'Tell you what that Marie Brizzard, she's lucky I haven't tried tequila yet' I could even hear Callum laughing at that one. Andy collapsed like a heap onto the back bar in hysterics.

'To kill her' Andy repeated the joke, 'genius that is genius'.

'Excuse me' I heard a sudden serious voice come from behind us, it was a customer, an actual customer, in mine and Andy's bar.

'Can I help you?' I asked the customer, a fragile old man.

'Can I speak to the manager please?' he asked.

'Well' I thought long and hard, 'he's the guy you want' I pointed at Andy still laughing and slamming on the back bar.

'No, no, no' Andy awakened from laughter, 'I'm not the guy you want, he's the big cheese' pointing at me.

'I beg your pardon' I act shocked and disgusted, 'he's the head honcho'.

'Look who's the manager' the man seemed desperate to speak to someone.

Both of us went 'He is!' and then burst out laughing again.

'That man downstairs with the glasses is so rude' the old man was talking about Callum. 'He told me that there was no white wine when I can blatantly see white wine in your fridge'.

'CALLUM!' I shouted at him and he turned around looking rather unmoved. 'I'll have a word with him immediately, he's new you see, and he won't be here for long on my watch, not with behaviour like that' I said sarcastically.

'Look I don't want sarcasm, I just want my wine' the old man basically begged.

'Andy get his wine, I'll go actually have a word with Callum'.

I moved to bottom bar to speak to Callum.

'Callum!' I tried to get his attention.

'Yeah' he said in his Southern Nottinghamshire accent. It was the first time I'd heard him speak and the first time I'd actually proper looked at him. He wore glasses skewwhiff, his hair was messy and curly and he was quite short. Cracking facial hair. I was envious of that stubble he had.

'If you need wine come up to top bar mate, and ignore jobs worth's like that guy, fancy complaining about you for that' I told him.

'I was lazy to be fair' Callum argued confessed.

'But also very honest... good member of staff, you've made your supervisors very happy this shift' I smiled and returned to the top bar.

'He wants a pint of Genius too Sam when you're ready' Andy told me whilst handing over the glass of white wine.

'Pint of Guinness' I confirmed his pun.

'The exact same' he confirmed the pint.

'Love it' I concurred with his joke.

Something caught the corner of my eye, a familiar figure as I poured the pint of Guinness. 'Hi Sam, Heather in?' It was Jackie and I shit myself.

'Jackie! You're in, here, for some reason!'

'It's my bar Sam, Heather in the office?' she was very impatient.

'Yes she is'

'The bars sticky Sam, clean it up come on!'

'Will do Jackie'

The old man was not satisfied with the way my Guinness pint looked and passed comment 'This isn't the right pour of Guinness son' I composed myself for a polite response before Jackie intervened.

'That looks fine to me; you can either drink it or leave it!' Jackie was a bit of a badass, she was annoying but when she was on your side, she was pretty awesome. I felt sorry for the old man; he didn't stand a chance if she was being short with him too.

'Ay I got another one' Andy approached me from the other side of the bar not knowing Jackie was here, 'what spirit does a ghost drink?'

I interrupted him quickly, 'no shows over, Jackie's here, reign it in a bit I reckon' I walked away and I just about heard Andy's punchline, 'Maliboo'. I was definitely robbing that one.

When the shift was over we collected once again at the booth just the four of us. Me and Andy had agreed to go for a pint after work with each other. Heather came out of her office after counting up the tills.

'Hi guys' Heather threw me my bags of tips from last week that I caught like a professional, 'you better have a belter night with that, supervisor'

'Here you go first pint on you then' Andy joked, definitely a joke.

'How was it then? Supervising guys?' Heather asked.

'Wish I could say I had something to report on, but I really can't think of anything' I answered, 'I suppose I've learnt that I don't really want to be supervisor ever again'.

'Is Jackie still here Heather?' Andy asked.

'No she went ages ago'.

'Thank god, yeah me and Andy pissed about all shift to be honest, the bars probably still filthy and sticky, and we're not even sorry' I explained with relief.

'I don't care' Heather smiled and walked away with the keys 'come on lets lock up'.

Heather quickly got in a taxi and went home, we did ask her to stay for a pint but she was in early the next morning. On the step outside the Red Oak me and Andy dilly dallied, not sure why.

'Danielle what are you doing then?' I asked.

'Watching the American elections, Trump vs Clinton' Danielle told us.

'Oh yeah forgot that was tonight, wouldn't mind watching that myself, Andy?' I suggested.

'Whatever yeah' He was easy to please.

'Well you should come, I'm watching it in the guild of Students at the uni of Liverpool, tag along' she invited us, even me, the guy who she hated a few weeks ago for misogyny, is this place magic, how come everyone seems so forgiving and nice here. 'I've literally ordered a taxi to go straight there so just hop in'

'Callum you coming?' I asked him thinking he would definitely say no, or more than likely say nothing at all and a just walk away.

'Yeah, I kind of have to, its right by where I live' He not only agreed to come but he explained too. 'Me and Danni had already agreed to doing this at the start of the shift' Danni? He calls her Danni, who is this Callum? And why have these two agreed to something without me and Andy, and why does Andy not care about things like that as much as me?

After a pint in the guild of students I was calm, I was over the betrayal that the two of them had done. The men were drinking Carling, Danielle was drinking vodka and coke, double of course she's a student.

'You know what really annoys me about Carling' Callum was speaking again, he wouldn't stop speaking now 'is that I doesn't half make me burp a lot, wonder why that is?'

'Gassy' Andy explained in simple terms.

'I don't burp with other lagers though' Callum went on.

'Shall we play pool?' I asked noticing that the nerds who'd hogged it for the last 40 minutes had gone finally. The place was full of nerds, proper politics students, crammed with them, I mean it made sense, but it was weird. Lots of posh drunk accents, and one of them was with us, Callum.

'I don't think so' Andy was reluctant to play pool with me, and I didn't know why, well I had an idea, Jake told me he was very good at it, but if that was me I'd be dying to play.

'Should we play then perhaps?' Callum stood up and walked towards it and downed the rest of his pint.

'God he's like a different person isn't he?!' I just had to confirm that Andy was noticing this too.

'Nah he's just got a pint down him hasn't he?!' Andy explained again nice a simple.

The pool table was located right in front of the main projector screen showing the results as they came in. People were playing drinking games, every time Trump got a state a shot, every time Clinton got a state a shot. It really wasn't that creative. The pool table though was ridiculous, no cue end on one of the cues and a big divot pot hole right in front of the top left pocket.

'Not ideal conditions' I complained.

'I'm not excessively bothered' Callum shrugged it off; he'd turned into James Dean since having a pint.

I beat him, just about. I then encouraged him to drink the rest of his second pint as punishment. He obliged without argument. It was winner stays on so it was me against Andy next.

Andy won.

Andy beat Callum.

Andy beat me again.

Andy beat Callum again.

Andy beat me again, and again, again.

Andy beat Callum again.

Andy emotionally scarred me by beating me again.

Six pints in and this quiet pint had become a student filled, election night extravaganza filled with pool and drunk nerds. I had no idea where Danielle was but every now and again I could hear her shouting me and saying 'I forgive you'.

'Andy, for god sake, how are you so good at this, the tables dodgy' I begged him for answers.

'I play snooker, should try playing me at that' he responded, and I did play him at snooker one time and lost, didn't get a single point. 'Callum's up next isn't he?' Andy pointed out his next opponent.



'Nah I need the toilet me' Callum backed away.

'Oh come on don't be scared' Andy terrorised him, I could see now why he was a bit timid in showing us just how good and competitive he was.

'I really don't think'-

'Come on Callum, you can do it this time, beat his ass' I encouraged him. 'Andy has the shit cue'.

The game was a blur to me overall, I just remember seeing Callum grasp the cue out of Andy's hand like a man possessed and he lay down on the black to win it. Andy seemed very below par this match. I was cheering Callum on. I loved this posh Nottinghamshire guy.

'Come on Callum, you've got him by the bollocks, you'll be a Red Oak legend son' I encouraged hi, but may have also pressurised him. 'As your supervisor, I suggest you finish him off'

'Finish off your supervisor Callum yeah, you'll get in trouble' Andy threatened.

'You're not a supervisor, I was the supervisor' I argued back, this was between me and Andy, and the six pits we'd had.

'Your tequila joke, I've heard it before, I faked them tears of laughter' Andy got to me, he cut me real deep.

'Finish this son of a bitch off Callum Now!' I ordered Callum and he stroked the black in with ease. I gave Callum the biggest of hugs and the pair of us chanted to Andy who looked hardly bothered in defeat. Meanwhile people jeered the election results; the nerds began to turn on us thinking we were fans of Trump.

Andy came over to me and put his arms around me 'I was joking about the joke not being funny by the way, I was just adding to the suspense of the shot'.

'I know' I laughed to myself, 'who wouldn't laugh at that joke it was Guinness?!'

'I like it, let's go home' Andy and I waited in the Starbucks on campus for two and half hours a taxi that night. Whilst we waited Callum and Danielle walked passed us and we caught a glimpse of them having a big old smoochy kiss. I wasn't going to judge Danielle for cheating on her boyfriend, it was only a kiss and I was in no place to judge after what I did to her.

We found out the next shift that it wasn't only a kiss and that they slept together, fair play to Callum. He'd really come into his own since Chloe said she hated him. I liked him, Andy liked him, just because you don't talk all the time doesn't make you a bad person, and eventually Chloe D grew to like him too. I could take a leaf out of his book, and maybe talk a little less and listen a little more.

'Andy, you're quite good at pool' I said to him with my arms crossed cold waiting for the taxi, 'but Callum beat you, what happened there?' I laughed out loud watching Callum getting pulled away by Danielle to a quieter place.

## Sean

I couldn't help but notice that Karsten seemed very down on a shift. He was surrounded by Christmas decorations that he had freshly scooped out of the basement of the Red Oak, the basement was called Phase 2, and I have no idea why. Anyway Karsten had spent most of my morning Saturday shift in mid-November with Will in phase 2 fishing out any decoration he could find. Meanwhile Jackie was in the office changing the playlist to something more Christmassy. Chloe A was in too just to order the restaurant staff around.

With all the managers in I presumed that was why Karsten was so down. Maybe he felt overwhelmed, his floret shirt looked fairly out of place compared to Will's plain black workmen like T-shirt, he was ready to get down and dirty. Chloe A was dressed ready to have coffee and food spilt all over her and Jackie was safely tucked away in her office.

All I can say is thank god Joe was in with me, there was no Andy, no Chloe D, and no Jake even, I would have had him even. I missed Kev. Callum wasn't in for another hour.

'Shit today init?' Joe said perplexed.

'Yes, why is there more managers in than us lot, the normal ones?' I asked.

'Do I look like I do the rota? Who knows what the girls thinking when she does the rota?! I presume she put managers on to sort out the Christmas stuff like' Joe had a reasonable answer, it made sense.

'I'd rather do the decorations than serve if I'm being honest' I stupidly admitted and Chloe A overheard me.

'Oh would you Joe?' Chloe A asked with perked up ears.

'No, Sam said that' Joe desperately revealed.

'Well there's no one to serve now, why don't you both clean the lamp shades above the booths' Chloe A asked us like she was doing us a favour.

'Sam will, I've got to sort out the bars before we open' Joe pushed me forwards.

'To be fair I did say I'd help out with the decorations happily' I explained, I definitely didn't mean cleaning.

'I'll go get your hot soapy and you can clean the lamp shades' Chloe A walked off to the kitchen.

When she came back she introduced me to Sean who had started not too long ago but I hadn't fully been acquainted with him yet.

'This is Sean have you met him yet?' Chloe A asked.

'No, nice to meet you Sean' I introduced myself 'Sam' Sean was a clean, well-polished, Aryan man from Hull. He had tattooed sleeves. I'm pretty sure piercings but I can't remember where. He had an unforgettable smile, like a crooked one, it wasn't as perfect as he looked. His smile let him down I

reckon, but apart from that he was definitely the most attractive man on the bar at that time in the Red Oak. Sean had one feature about him that always stuck with me, and all the lads who grew to know him well, he loved Lago's more than life itself. Lago', pronounced lar goes, was a place of worship for us all, our church. We would go there at the start of every night out more or less and get silly on a shot of tiki fire, a pickle back shot, a chilli shot, or just a cheap £2.50 double house spirit and coke. It was a weird little place, like a shack that you would see on a skiing resort, but it got absolutely rammed in there full of people. There was a pool table in there that was just in the way. Not many people remember the night after Lago's. Sean was the pioneer for the Red Oak when it came to Lago's, he put it in all our minds.

Anyway safe to say I took advantage of how kind Sean was as a person and I let him clean most of the lamp shades that morning. I did it in a very subtle way, I would ask him to clean a lamp shade with me and then start a conversation with Will about Wallasey, Will was always sucked in by conversations about his mad past life. Sean knew what I was doing but he was too nice to say anything.

My attention to detail in my conversations with Will where dwindling as I kept noticing Karsten at the end of the bar sticking random bits of decoration up and looking so glum. Duller than his normal self, which I have to say wasn't chirpy since I'd met him.

'What's up with Karsten?' I asked Will whilst he was in the middle of telling me all about his history in knife crime gangs, which in hindsight might have been more interesting.

'Oh, I don't know ask him' Will answered with a smarty comment.

'He looks down' I said again.

'Ask him, anyway I need to help him out with the decks anyway, stop trying to get out of doing the cleaning by talking to me, help Sean'. He uncovered the truth, he knew my plan, and he still went along with it. Anything so he could talk about himself.

After me and Sean, mainly Sean had cleaned all the lamp shades; I could see Callum come through the kitchen doors and onto the top bar to start his shift. Immediately Joe said hello to Callum and I could see them having a laugh about something, then Joe walked straight over to me.

'What's so funny?' I asked Joe.

'Callum, he just asks so many questions' that shocked me, Callum had never asked me a question sober. 'He just said to me who's the new guy, speaking about Sean, as if he's been here for ages'

'Did he yeah' I laughed, 'he's probably been here about the same time the weapon' I said.

'Weapon?' Joe looked at em with an eyebrow raised.

'Yeah I don't suit saying that you're right' I admitted. It didn't feel right saying it.

'Anyway now that Callum's in we can go on a break' Joe told me whilst tickling me playfully.

'Stop it, stop it... GET OFF!' I found it funny but then annoying. 'Sean you coming too?' I thought it was kind to ask.

'Yeah sure' Sean put the hot soapy on a table in front of a customer and followed us, 'where we going?' Jackie would find out about the hot soapy and would get to the bottom of who left it there, eventually. There were a few mysteries she would struggle to solve in my time at Red Oak.

On our way outside Callum stopped all three of us 'Why's the sink leaking?' he would always ask questions that no one else would ask, and he'd ask them in the most inquisitive way possible. Every question would be life or death it seemed. Every question he asked though had a purpose. He wasn't just making conversation.

I checked the sink and saw it was on and the tap was running. 'Oh ha-ha very funny Callum, the taps on. Callum was making a joke guys'.

'No it's actually leaking' Callum continued, 'look underneath it, it's dripping and the water is trickling under the fridge'

'Oh, yeah. I'd get Karsten or Will to have a look at that' I told him.

'I'm Sean, nice to meet you Callum' Sean introduced himself.

'Callum nice to meet you, why you wearing motorcycle boots?' Callum asked.

'I was a bit of a mosher back in the day, just trying to cling on to my teen years, 23 now can't be too careful' Sean explained.

'Same bro' Callum laughs as he reveals his own pair of boots and then gave Sean a handshake.

We took our break outside in the outdoor seating area of Red Oak. Sean didn't need any introduction; he took to our group very well. As I munched on my Tuna crunch baguette from Greggs and Joe drank his Orange juice in a desperate attempt to balance out his sugar levels, Karsten walked outside to throw a few decorations in the bin; he slammed them into the bin and then went back through the back door.

'Ok, there's something up with him, he's more miserable than usual, what's up with him?' I asked Joe about Karsten, I thought he would know more as he was quite close with him.

'Shouldn't really say' Joe replied.

'You can tell me, I won't tell anyone else, and I'm sure Sean won't either, will you?' Sean shook his head. I had a feeling it was something to do with Chloe D because I knew that Karsten liked her. Therefore I really needed to know. Normally I wouldn't have cared about Karsten's emotions, but if it meant it might affect me, then I had to know.

I sipped my Gregg's labelled bottle of water and as I took a most satisfying of sips I was repulsed to spit it out of my mouth at full force when Joe revealed 'Chloe D has been sleeping with Jake'.

'What? She what? Why? I don't understand?' I was absolutely distraught.

'They've just been flirting a lot since Jake started here and they've been on a few nights out, I have to say I honestly think if you'd been on a few nights out you would have had a shot with her you know' Joe revealed.

'Me? No, I'm... more concerned for Karsten, he liked her didn't he?' I tried to get the conversation away from me.

'He does, yeah, he has since he met her' Joe was the fountain of knowledge, the indifferent one and I just sighed and took a big breath out in disheartenment. I even began to play with my long curls like a little girl.

'Is Chloe D the little one?' Sean asked, no one answered him because he knew; he was just trying to get in on conversation.

'How long they been sleeping together?' I asked with a slight quiver, 'pardon the quiver its quite cold'.

'About two weeks I think, they've only slept together like three times I think, but I think he really likes her' Joe was breaking my heart more with every word.

'Poor Karsten' I said, really meaning poor me.

'He saw them on a night out last week going home together and then he saw Jake leave the next morning from the flat' Joe knew all the information, he was like a telephone line.

'So is she stringing people along then?' Sean asked, he was clueless.

'No nothing like that' Joe explained 'Chloe and Karsten are good mates with me, kind of like a group of three, and Karsten has feelings for her, but she doesn't like him in that way' I remained quiet and thoughtful, trying to hold back my emotions. 'But now she's started sleeping with Jake it makes people realise just how much they like them when something major happens' major was a strong word for the situation, it wasn't major, but when you're 21-24 scenarios like this are major. They are the most important thing in the world, more important than life and death, more important than football or degrees. Who a person is sleeping with is the be all and end all.

'So what you're saying is she's on the market then?' Sean asked insensitively. I looked away, anywhere but the Red Oak, I looked across at the roadworks being down by the kebab shop on the corner. I can't believe Sean wants Chloe D now too. Who next, Callum?

'So Joe, you said if I went out on a night out with her, she'd be interested?' I was desperate.

'Well, I can't guarantee it, but I know she fancies you a bit and when she's drunk she gets quite frisky. She's not exactly tied down to Jake' Joe was like a referee.

I wasn't going to go out on Thursday after work with Joe and Chloe D, but now it was game on, project going out on nights out with the Red Oak was in operation.

'We still going out after work Thursday Joe yeah?' I asked.

'Of course' Joe replied immediately.

'I'm on the close Thursday too' Sean basically was coming now as well. Brilliant who next Jake?

Callum popped his head outside to see if we were still outside.

'When are you coming back off your break?' We would ignore Callum's question.

'How's Danielle?' I asked trying to move the conversation away from Chloe D as I could see Karsten behind Callum.

'She's a nice girl, but I'm not too bothered about anything happening really' Callum was a player in my eyes, a ruthless womaniser.

'Callum get on the bar, people to serve' Karsten said with no filter.

'Why are you outside?' Callum asked, and he made a good point, Karsten had nothing in his hand, he was just getting fresh air and Callum caught him out.

'I'll be in in a minute' Karsten replied. Karsten then backed up against the dirty wall of the Red Oak by the back doors where the bins rested overnight and took a horrible deep breath of the garbage air and looked emotional.

'Callum and Danielle?' Joe asked moving the conversation on and wanting to know more about something he didn't have inside knowledge about. Joe and Sean gathered closer to hear my story until the break ended.

Turned out that Thursday close had a lot of people working on it, there was some function going on, which meant that it was me, Heather, Chloe A, Karsten, Joe, Chloe D, Sean and Andy all on shift together. Three managers? That's almost as many as there was the other day, the only difference was, no Jackie, the shift went by quick, it was just a laugh really.

'So who's coming out tonight then?' Joe asked as we all sat around the booth at the end of shift. I chose not to answer too quickly, build up the suspense, and not let Chloe D know that this would be the night I would finally drink with her too soon.

'I'll be out' Chloe D confirmed, 'I'm always out, I'm never in' she smiled like it was something to be proud of.

'Wouldn't be too impressed with yourself about that Chloe, it's quite sad' Joe was abrupt and Chloe looked hurt by it and quickly lowered her arm that she had initially put up in excitement.

'I'm there' Sean confirmed.

'I like a few pints' Andy was in.

'As do I' Karsten through his name in the hat.

'I actually spoke to some people' Heather began 'Lily and Courtney are coming to meet us too'.

They were newbies, didn't really know them too well, would soon enough.

'I'll come too sure why not' Chloe A was even out, this was unusual, most unusual indeed. I couldn't wait to wind them all up.

'I'm going to give it a miss I'm afraid guys' I teased.

'Brought the car in?' Joe asked, forgetting that I had literally agreed to come out a few days ago.

'No, gonna get a taxi' I said knowing they would beg me to just come out if they knew I had no reason to not stay out.

'Sam never comes out, I give up' Chloe D said without a second thought and they started to stand up and leave.

'Whoa' I had to stop them, 'hold on a second, are you not going to beg me to come out?' I asked.

'There's no point anymore Sam, you don't want to come out with me, you must have some sort of problem with me?' Chloe D started to argue 'you must just be a boring person'

'I am not a boring person, I'll show you, where we going first?!' I snapped.

'Good, shall we go Grapes first?' Chloe D turned around and started walking with Chloe A and Karsten who wouldn't leave her alone all night, like a fly around shit.

Is that it though?! Is that all I get for coming out with her for the first time, she didn't even seem bothered. I thought I'd wind her up turns out she actually really did wind me up.

'Dunno why you bothered trying to tease us then?' Joe saw right threw me.

'Just having a laugh' I said back to him very unconvincingly.

Grapes was a dark dingy, kind hearted place, with a low ceiling and a karaoke singer in the middle of Matthew Street. Tonight the Grapes was quiet, not in the sense of the music, that was stupidly loud, but the conversation was very dead. It was too tricky to have flowing conversation, it was just so loud with Beatles and Oasis tracks. At the time I hadn't grown to like Oasis so there songs where quite annoying to me. The two Chloe's where having a good little natter in the corner, Karsten was staring at them pissed off, I was staring at them and him pissed off. Joe was talking to the girls, Heather, Lily and Courtney, I couldn't be bothered getting to know them, not in this noise. Andy and Sean were on the quiz machine, could always join them. They were having a right good laugh.

On my way over to them I saw the fruit machine and put a pound in from my tips bag. I won three pounds, then won again, twelve pounds. With that twelve pounds I bought three shots Jägermeister.

I brought it back to the table where we were all now sat at after Andy and Sean gave up quizzing. I slammed the shots on the table and confirmed that we would do a drinking game.

'Right guys, shall we play a drinking game?' I asked them, they didn't hear me at first. But they all agreed.

'It's a game called fives. All you do is, you put your fist out to represent zero, or your fingers out to represent five, not four, not three, not two, not one, just five or zero. Each person takes a turn, clockwise; to guess how many people are going to put their hand out, the answer will be a multiple of five. Once a person guesses correctly, they say these words without smiling, laughing, any emotion at all, "thank you very much for a nice game of fives" the other players can try and put that player off, but not physically touch them. Once a player has achieved that without smiling and had their sip of drink they are out of the game. If you fail to guess the right number you have a sip and it goes to the next person. The last person left in the game does all three shots of Jägermeister I kindly bought for the table' believe me, not everyone got it, I had to explain that four or five times. Even after we had to do a practice round.

'Pints at the ready' Andy held his pint aloft; he couldn't wait to play it. Even Karsten had a little smile on his face, better wipe that smile Karsten or you'll be doing three shots, out of the race for Chloe D tonight I'd think.

It was me first, they all collectively counted down '3,2,1' and I guessed, 35, I was wrong, I had to sip.

Joe was next, 20, he was wrong.

Courtney, 10, she was right but cocked up on her delivery of the line, she was back in.

Andy, zero, he was wrong.

Sean, 40, correct, and he nailed it perfectly, he was safe.

Heather, 20, correct again but she laughed, back in.

Lily, 15, and she was out just. I could see her lip trembling, but she pulled through without laughing.

Chloe A, 5, she was out too, with ease.

Chloe D, 10, she was laughing before she even guessed a number, still in.

Karsten, 35, he was so close to being out but Chloe D pretended to lift her shirt in front of him and this put him off.

'Chloe can't do that love' I told her, I was annoyed, I was jealous; nothing in the rules technically says she can't do that.

Back to me, 25, was wrong

Joe, 25 was correct, he was out.

Courtney, guessed it right again and this time pulled through, she was out.

Andy, 10, was incorrect.

Heather, 20, fantastic, she just pulled through.

Chloe D, was a no hoper, she was poor at this game, she couldn't stop laughing. Still in.

Karsten, 10, guessed wrong.



It was me again, and this time I guessed correct, but I felt. My. Self. Going. Into. A. Fit. Of. Laughter. But I just about made it. I was out.

It was just three left, Andy, Karsten and Chloe D. Titans of the Red Oak. Completely different people, with different backgrounds. Andy from his council house, lives with a single father and has massive, crumbling debt, he needed this. Karsten, from a rich family in a nice part of Stockport, he's got it all, but he hasn't got the girl, he really needed this. Chloe D, not sure about what her personal life was like, she was secretive about it for the bad reasons, but she was from Skelmersdale anyway, she needed this.

Andy went first, 25. Rookie error, what a fool, that was impossible for there to be 25, he begged for another go, he claimed it was a lapse in concentration, but unfortunately this game doesn't care about your misfortune, it breeds on it.

Chloe D was up next, sensing there was a chance to get out of this game. She guessed 5 and was spot on, but she forgot her lines. She was back in.

Karsten guessed next, 10 and he was correct, and then he smashed the landing perfectly. He was out. It was down to the final two.

The crowd went wild, there was people on Chloe D's side, people on Andy's side, I just simply couldn't choose.

I then had to explain the rest of the rules, 'So when there's just two of you left, you put both your hands out and each one is a life, same rules apply, you don't have to say the words "thank you for nice game of fives" on the first life, but you do on the second'

'You're going down' Andy threatens Chloe D.

'I agree' She replied with her hands out ready.

Andy guessed 10 and was correct, he was down to one life.

Chloe guessed 5 and was also correct, and she celebrated, Andy looked around puzzled, I had to retell him that that action by Chloe was allowed on this occasion. Andy apologised for forgetting.

'Come on Andy' Sean shouted loud, Chloe looked heartbroken by this, 'I liked you Sean' Chloe said.

'Come on Chloe' Chloe A started to shout, then the girls joined in, it was girls against boys. Me and Karsten put our love for Chloe on hold and got behind Andy.

Andy guessed again, and was wrong with 5.

'No!' the boys shouted.

Chloe swooped in fast with her guess, zero and she was right but could she handle it or will she bottle it. She began 'Thank you very much for a nice. Game. Of. Fives.' But she forgot to sip.

'Sip it Chloe' the girls shouted at her reminding her.

'Shit!' Chloe D shouted and scrambled for her pint, 'which ones my pint, oh damn it!'

'She cocked up, I'm still in yeah?' Andy double checked, of course he was still in.

Andy counted down quickly and guessed 5 he was right and then smashed the line and took a sip of any lager he could find and slammed it back on the table. The boys had won. We cheered and celebrated as Chloe composed herself to down three shots of Jägermeister. Then we didn't know what to do after the excitement was over.

'Shall we go Lago's' Sean suggested. So that's where we went.

Lago's was a weird little place because I loved the prices of the drinks there, but the actual music was something I just couldn't remember. I couldn't name you a single memorable song that I heard in there.

Quite a few of the crew had gone missing at this point. Courtney had left with Heather to get a kebab and go home; Chloe A had left Chloe D in our safe hands. Joe was taken up all night by Lily who had a crush on him at the time. Joe wasn't really interested in her at all, but that didn't stop him talking to her and giving her hope. He'd speak to her all night and then come up to me or Andy and say 'god I hope she pisses off soon she's ruining my night I just want to talk to you like' so obviously not the case.

Me, Karsten and Andy carried on having our own little games of fives. The game would spread like wild fire across the Red Oak, every member of staff there would hear of it, the kitchen staff even. Whilst we got ourselves drunk silly, Sean and Chloe D were getting comfortable with each other's company. Too comfortable, me and Karsten both had one eye on them and one eye on the game. My word Karsten was obsessed, he needed to chill out.

Joe suddenly popped up behind me and tapped my shoulder with Lily at the bar, he saw this as a chance to speak to us. 'So I was just talking to Lily... about Callum' something clicked in my mind.

'Oh right, so are you trying to get information on Callum that I won't know because I knew something about him that you didn't before. Joe believe it or not other people can know stuff too, you're not the Red Oak Times' I suss'd him out, Joe hates it when people know gossip before he does. He'd been quiet with me all night and that explains why, he's been waiting to hear gossip about Callum so he could out gossip me.

'Danielle had split up with her boyfriend beforehand so she didn't actually cheat' Joe said impressed with himself.

'Who told you this?' I acted surprised.

'Lily, just then' he said proud of himself.

'I was there with Lily when Danielle told us both. Nice try Joe' I looked at him with a nasty little smile and I could see a vein pop in his forehead with anger.

'This isn't over' Joe said angrily. I'd cracked the Joe Vinci code.

Joe ran off to Lily at the bar to ask for more gossip. I had a game of fives to win and Karsten had left, I don't know where, but he back doored the night. 'Where's Karsten Andy?' I asked.

'He said he was going for a piss, but he left, unless he's going outside to urinate on a wall' no that image was in my hand I would have taken anything, anything to get rid of it. I turned around and saw Sean locking lips with Chloe D in the crowded Lago's. My knees, they wobbled, I could feel myself about to collapse but something kept me up. I needed Karsten to look at for reassurance that every bit of pain would be shared, but he wasn't there. I felt like someone had just punched me in the stomach with knuckle duster. It was the most important of unimportant things.

'Callum was a virgin until her slept with Danielle you know!' Joe came back with a new piece of gossip about Callum. I was too shell shocked to even acknowledge it.

Andy however couldn't believe it 'what? No way? He seems quiet but not virgin quiet!'

'Ha, there you go, Sam I'm back on top of the gossip world at the Red Oak' Joe bragged and then saw what I was looking at 'oh, damn, it's alright Sam. Where's Karsten?' Joe asked, 'he left again?'

'Think so' I said still not taking an eye off the pair of them kissing.

Andy went and met up with Donna despite Joe and Chloe D's desperate pleas for him not to. We left Lago and I was still rather speechless. It was raining and it was cold, that was my excuse for not talking, but I could hear Joe and Chloe talking still.

'So what's Sean doing?' Joe asked Chloe.

'Oh I think he's staying in Lago's, he really likes it in there doesn't he?!' Chloe said.

'How was he? You know kissing wise?' Joe asked and Chloe quickly gave an embarrassed, awkward face as if to say not too good. 'I won't be going back, that's all I'll say' Chloe confirmed.

Small consolation win for me there.

We all got a McDonalds; Chloe got a veggie burger with her being a vegetarian. I got my Quarter Pounder and Joe got his Chicken Selects. On the walk back to Chloe's flat to get a taxi home; there was still the hope that she would tell me she loved me so we could just sleep together. But I don't think I could not on the night I saw that happen and I heard she slept with Jake too.

'guess what Chloe' Joe began excited 'Callum was a virgin before the other night, in fact he hadn't even kissed a girl before'.

'What? Before Danielle, no way, not even kissed?' Chloe was shocked and happy, she still didn't like him.

'You never told me he'd never kissed anyone' I said slightly shocked myself.

'Probably because he's so quiet' Chloe suggested.

'Or he's not a slag, like some people' it was in that moment that I was taught another valuable lesson by Karsten. When you see a girl you like do something that causes you that much pain, just go

home and sleep it off, don't stay out and hope things get better. Never stay out when you feel like that.

'God why don't you go marry Callum if you love him so much!' Chloe said back laughing.

'Guys' Joe could sense it was getting tense.

'You probably will marry him knowing you, or at least sleep with him, I give two days before you kiss him' I regrettably said.

'What's that supposed to mean?' Chloe said angrily.

'All I'm saying is, have you ever slept with Chloe A, she's a lesbian isn't she?' I was drunk, I had to stop, I needed to stop.

'What's that gotta do with anything?' Chloe seemed a bit hurt, but I didn't notice because I was hurt too.

'I'm just saying she is a lesbian, you can't deny she is a lesbian, Joe? Isn't she a lesbian' I needed to stop saying lesbian. 'I like lesbians, their hot'

'Chloe A is a lesbian to be fair' Joe backed me up and managed to defuse the situation slightly.

'You just called me a whore Sam, I'm hurt' Chloe D said slightly aggrieved.

'I can't bloody win with you' I finished my point on something that made no sense as we got to Chloe's flat and I waited in the lobby for my taxi. The worst thing is that when I'm drunk I'll never admit that I'm in the wrong. It's only when I'm sober that it'll hit me that I was the bad guy.

'I'll talk to her' Joe put his hand on my shoulder as I lay there on the couch waiting yet again for a taxi in that bloody same lobby.

I rested my head in my hands and felt nothing but emotional pain right through my body. I was so badly hurt.

The next day I went all the way into the Red Oak just to apologise to Chloe D. On the way to see her I saw Chloe A at the podium giving me an evil stare.

'Hi Chloe, is Chloe in please' I said hungover and deflated.

'Chloe D, you're friends here!' Chloe A said looking angry about something.

'Hi Chloe' I greeted her with a smile and a card as way of apology.

'Don't be silly, we were both drunk, just brush it under the carpet its fine, I've also managed to calm Chloe A down now, I may have let it slip what you said yesterday about her' Chloe revealed.

'Oh shiz, really, why did you tell her that?' I looked awkward.

'She asked about last night and I mentioned it in passing, so I'm sorry' She chuckled and gave me back the apology card which I thought was quite clever.

'You're forgiven' I gave her a pat on the head and turned around to leave her to her shift.

'Erm... Sam' Chloe A shouted me and I turned around, 'come here!' I obliged and Chloe D ran into the glass room poking her little head out miming the words sorry.

'Heard you were shouting from the rooftops that was lesbian yesterday!' Chloe A began what I presumed was going to be a slap on the wrist 'You judge me for being a lesbian again, and I won't get you sacked, I will actually knock you out. That butch lesbian stereotype enough for you?!' she was not happy.

'sorry!' I didn't know what else to say, I just left.

'See you on Wednesday night Sam!' Chloe A said, little did I know that she was smiling and went back and high fived Chloe D after, they were just winding me up, but they got me back, I was petrified for my next shift.

## **Lily**

Lily was a lovely innocent girl when she started at the Red Oak, either I thought that or she never was. I mean she was a nice girl, and a girl who I thought was quite attractive when I first met her. But she was the perfect example of someone who changes the more you get to know them. I feel that the Red Oak did change her a little bit. Or maybe it was university that changed her, something definitely moved in that girls' mind.

When she started she had the most luscious blonde hair, lovely, smooth, clean. She had a small button face, a rosy cheeks. She was very small but her body didn't look wrong, she was the perfect size for her height. She had a really nice smile too. She liked riding horses as a hobby back at home in somewhere down south, I can't remember. I'd go as far to say as this place changed her the most. She wasn't someone who changed the most in my life, but she certainly was the one who changed the most in my time at Red Oak.

When she started she was the type of push over girl who wouldn't argue with anyone, if someone flirted with her she was happy to receive the compliment, she wasn't bothered about bickering. If someone asked her about her friends, she was polite about them, she wasn't a gossip and she would never be scared to enjoy herself on shift and let herself go.

The first time I noticed Lily as a person I could really speak to and get along with was when I was on bottom bar with her on a Saturday night shift with Sean. 'Freed from Desire' by Gala used to play in the Red Oak on the lopping playlist, even at Christmas time, and I looked over at Lily who was singing it quietly to herself. Me and Sean joined in to encourage her to sing louder. She looked over and smiled and started singing it louder and louder the more confident she got.

Eventually I could actually hear the lyrics she was singing, she was singing 'Will Griggs on fire' and me and Sean just laughed and joined in until one of the managers told us to shut up. I would always go up to Lily whenever she seemed down and whisper that song in her ear. She would do the same for me. I miss that Lily.

'Why are you so obsessed with Joe?' Callum would ask his unfiltered questions to Lily whilst he played around with the ice with his scoop.

'I'm not' Lily would argue and defend herself.

'Just seems like you are!' Callum would respond and walk away leaving Lily a little upset. Me, Sean and Lily went through a stage of having the bottom bar to ourselves and both me and Sean would always try and make her feel better. We both knew Joe didn't really like her, and that she really did like him.

The biggest problem with the Lily and Joe situation wasn't that one was into the other more, it was that there was a third party involved. The third party was Amy. Amy was a big boobed scouse girl who was about the same age as Lily but completely different to Lily. Amy seemed hard as nails on the surface but was actually lovely to me, despite at first being quite a scary intimidating girl. In fact she'd probably get quite annoyed that she hasn't got her own chapter.

Anyway, Amy slept with Joe around Halloween time, and fell for him, pretty hard. Whilst in the middle of falling for him, Lily came along and also took a liking to Joe. Joe didn't like either of them, and it's not like he's some kind of Casanova, believe me, he wouldn't get offended hearing that.

Amy's tactics for getting Lily away from Joe were aggressive, and not ones I condone and where not the Amy I know and like. But love can do that to people our age, they turn us mad, they make us obsessive, they make us angry, they make us cry, they make you hurt. Love can kill, love can mend, love can turn a girl who had underlying aggressive tendencies into a real nasty piece of work for a poor innocent girl with her own underlying tendencies. That's what happened with Amy and Lily.

It was a Saturday shift and I had confirmation before Sean left that that kiss on Thursday night was in fact the only time he or Chloe D would ever lock lips again. He said she was rubbish, and she said he was rubbish, so that got me thinking maybe they were perfect for each other. Joe came down to bottom bar to say his goodbyes to me and Jake before ending his shift.

'See you later boys!' Joe waved adios.

'Why are you still here, go away!' Jake joked.

'Come here lad' Joe gave Jake a hug, I had never seen them so close before, I know they were school friends but they seemed to keep a distance in work.

'What you doing tonight Joe?' I had to ask and interrupt this weird charade, I was lonely.

'Oh sorry mate, not giving you any attention' Joe saw through me and gave me a hug too. 'I've got gossip but I think it's best Jake tells you it' that blew my mind, never had Joe given away gossip since I've known him. 'I am' as he broke away from my hug with him 'spending my night at home, with a pizza and not thinking or replying to either Lily or Amy, because they are really getting on my nerves'.

'You really are one moody c' - I interrupted Jake.

'crapbag' I quoted Friends to send Joe off smiling, and to make sure Jackie didn't hear C U Next Tuesday as she walked past bottom bar on the way to her office.

'I didn't even see her there then!' Jake looked relieved.

'What's this gossip you've got for me, what's with the hug, what's going on, you got cancer?' I asked like I was autistic.

'Horrible you, I'll tell you on our break' he left me in suspense.

'At 2 in the morning, so what in...' counting on my fingers '10 hours' time? Can't wait for this'.

The time had finally come and me and Jake managed to persuade Will to let us go at the same time, that is as long as he could come too. Lily was at the same time too.

'Where we going then lads?' Will asked us as he swung on his grey hooded jacket.

'Can't believe you're leaving Karsten in charge' Jake half joked.

'He's a good lad' Will defended him, kind of.

'Where do you wanna go Lily?' I thought I'd open it to the group; Lily looked snug as anything in her oversized pink jacket. There was a bit of me that actually fancied her at first. Not like obsessive but half arsed, like if it happened I wouldn't be opposed.

'Anywhere I can get something veggie' Lily said with a big smile on her face.

'Didn't know you were veggie too, Will stop employing veggies, its ruining my life' Jake said.

'It's Jackie who employs, not Will' I got my say in there because Jake was annoying me again, he was always so bloody friendly and cheeky with the managers I just wish I could be like that.

'Hey I employ, ok!' Will defended himself this time.

As we walked to McDonalds, where else?! I sensed that my attitude with Jake was because I was so inadequate myself, but I couldn't change that, I was raised to respect authority and he treated the managers like he treated women, he didn't care, they were the same level as him. I always put managers, teachers, women on a higher pedestal than myself, that's where I fall down I think. That happened next though shattered that theory and made my opinion towards Jake change a little.

'Sam, can I talk to you just us two for a second?' Jake asked so politely, this was something serious. Serious for a 21 year old. I could hear Lily complaining about the lack of veggie options available at the late night McDonalds in the background.

'Chloe's being a bit nasty to me, and I don't know what to do' He looked very down 'I spoke to Joe about it before and he couldn't really help me, but I feel like that's because he knows me too well, but you seem a nice guy, a nice new friend so I thought I'd confide in you' it got me thinking did Joe set this up, he knew I liked Chloe D, I hope Jake didn't.

'How can I help, mate?' I showed a bit of compassion.

'She's being really distant with me and at first I didn't really like her, but now I think I do. My girlfriend of like three years left me not even that long ago, and I think I'm a bit desperate for someone to love me again. I don't think Chloe loves me. Don't think anyone does. Look at this text, it broke my heart' Jake showed me a very short text by Chloe following a very long one by him.

'I think we should stop this' Chloe's read.

Jake's read 'I think it's time I just said it, I really like you and hope that we can maybe go somewhere with this. I know its corny but I felt like we were meant to meet each other. I must sound like such a weapon right now, but the truth is I can't see myself without you now. Every time I see you shake a cocktail it turns me on, and not in the horndog way it usually does but in a loving way, I could see us being together for years. Just give me a chance. I'm being brave and taking the plunge x' I really struggled not to laugh at how disgustingly cringe that text was. But it was also someone who hadn't gotten over his previous break up yet.

'You know what Jake, you're a nice fella, you just need to sleep with a few girls to get over your ex I think. You win though, you slept with Chloe a lot of people would like to at that place, but you did it, be proud champ' I said with real anger inside, but I did also mean it. 'Chloe's a perfect girlfriend I'm sure, but I don't think she, for whatever reason, wants to settle down, that's the reality of it' Jake shakes his head in agreement 'so just sleep about, I'll help you' Jake just laughs, great I'm a laughing stock.

'They didn't have any veggie options' Lily explains herself as she slams a Big Mac on the table me and Jake were waiting at. The first noticeable change in Lily since she started at Red Oak was that after a week and half she was no longer a veggie, I rarely saw her eat a vegetable after that night. 'So, what are you guys talking about?' Lily asked innocently.

'None of your business!' Jake replied half joking, half being very serious.

'Alright, rude!' Lily responded and returned to her burger. After her first bite she asks another question 'Why does Amy hate me?' she says whilst chewing.

'Because you like Joe and she also likes Joe' Will answers as he arrives at the table with his food.

'Yeah I thought that was obvious' I looked at her wide eyed.

'No I know, but what's wrong with me liking someone I don't get it, I mean she is practically bullying me out of competition' Lily told us.

'How do you mean bullying?' I asked.

'She just keeps saying nasty little things to me, and threatening me if I ever do anything with Joe' Lily revealed as she munched through her burger quite quick.

'God give the burger a chance' Jake says smiling through his emotions, he was still hung up on thinking about Chloe.

'She's pretending the burgers Joe' Will jokes and we all laugh, even Lily. Lily laughed more than us actually, she loved a bit of banter.



'Lily, don't worry about it' I comforted her; I felt like a shrink on this break 'we won't let her bully you, will we guys?'

'I say let the best woman win, let them rip each other's throats' Jake insensitively said but it got a laugh out of Lily and it meant Jake was cheering up to his usual self.

'Right then, now that we've established that Joe doesn't like Lily or Amy lets go do clean down and go home' Will went straight to the point, no messing around by him this time. Will was either the most direct man I'd ever met, or a bit of a beta, depended what mood you caught him in.

## **Courtney**

The first Irish person who I would work with in the Red Oak, the first of many. Liverpool was a hot bed for Irish students. They were everywhere but so far I had managed to avoid one in the Red Oak. Then Courtney started, with her blonde hair similar to Lily, her height similar to Lily but her face even more rounded. She had glasses on and this would lead to her saying glasses a lot in her strong Irish accent, 'Glarshis'.

I had grown familiar with Courtney quite quickly because her friendship with Chloe D blossomed early on so therefore I became very friendly with Courtney too. Courtney started early November and by early December she had already slept with someone at Red Oak. Joe soon informed me who of course, 'Guess what!' He said

'I'm sure you'll tell me' I replied looking at him smug at the start of one of my livelier shifts.

'Look if you don't want to know I have to tell you, I can keep it to myself' Joe teased.

'Fine!' I wasn't giving him an inch.

'Courtney slept with someone here, but I suppose you don't want to know' Joe teased more.

'Oh my god tell me!' I was no desperate, Joe had me by the balls and he walked off with them, and he refused to tell me all shift.

There was no Jackie on shift this day, meaning of course we could all have a bit of fun. By fun I mean managing to find out who Courtney had slept with since starting at the Red Oak. But how would I get it out of her. It was a busy Friday night in terms of staff, but a quiet one in terms of customers.

Chloe A and Chloe D spent a lot of their time in the office that shift. Me, Andy and Joe spent a lot of time outside of the office crushing cardboard boxes down to be able to fit them all in the bin for cardboard. There was a three week backlog of boxes needing crushing down. Karsten, Heather, Courtney, Jake and Sean maintained the floor was running efficiently.

It wasn't necessary for me, Andy and Joe to all be on box duty, but it just seemed fun. We could hear the two Chloe's mumbling and laughing so me and the boys tried to make it out like we were having the best time ever. We flattened the boxes down and began fighting each other with them like they were folded chairs from the wrestling.

By the time Chloe A came outside to check on what were all doing I was flat on the floor with one leg in the air lifted by Joe, meanwhile Andy was repeatedly hitting me in the head. Once Joe realised he let go of my leg and I got up and before noticing Chloe right there I then hit Andy with my own folded cardboard/pretend chair.

'Sam' Chloe A called my name 'all of you actually, grow up'.

'You grow up' Joe argued back, you and Chloe D haven't stopped laughing since the shift started.

'Don't be cheeky Joe, doesn't suit you' Chloe A responded.

'We'll stop' I butted in 'we'll be quieter'

'Why's there three of you doing a one person job anyway?' Chloe A asked.

'Oh will you wind you neck in' I snapped.

'Oh, Chloe D, your boyfriends getting charged up, he's growing pair of pants since he started here' Chloe A hit me right where it hurt, the heart, she knew the boyfriend joke would crush me. 'Just keep it down' Chloe A didn't tell us to go outside or stop working on the boxes, she was weirdly lenient like that, I think mainly because of Chloe D. I remember she said a friend of Chloe D is a friend of hers.

Once Chloe D and A had resided firmly back in the office Joe popped the question 'takin the Chloe's out of the equation, who would you shag, marry and avoid?'

I feel like Joe only asked that question to wind me up, he knew I was desperate to know who Courtney slept with. 'I could just ask Courtney that and find out'.

'Find out what?' Andy asked.

'Doesn't matter Andrew' I replied.

'Still call him Andrew yeah?' Joe asked.

'Ironically sometimes, don't worry I know him as Andy now' I explained.

'Go on Andy, shag, marry and avoid?' Joe asked again as he crushed the boxes down.

'Tough one, tough one. Shag-'

'Kirsty?' I interrupted, she was a girl who worked in the restaurant for a few weeks and then left on medical grounds.

'Joking aren't yer, she looks like a rat' Andy said without thinking.

'ANDY!' Chloe A shouted through her laughter and you could clearly hear Chloe D sniggering too 'don't be horrible, we can hear you so be kind'.

'It. Was. A. Jest' Andy holds his hands out in desperation, 'come on it was a just a jest, she's gorgeous' he pulls an awkward face, 'not really, she's very ugly' he says a bit quieter.

Me and Joe were in tears of laughter, poor Kirsty, at least she didn't know what Andy thought of her looks.

'No I'd shag Chloe D-'

'THANKS!' Chloe D shouted from the office. My laughter quickly decreased as feelings of jealousy hadn't fully gone away yet.

'Marry, weird this because I'm on and off with Donna so I feel like I'm cheating, marry Faye. Avoid Shannon'

'Good avoid that' I agreed and then laughed with Andy.

'Hey had to be done' Andy said in his De Niro impression, 'I had to whack her'.

'What are you gonna do' I De Niro'd back. 'What about yours Joe?'

Joe had a short think, 'I'd shag Amy, just to keep her happy and from chopping my cock and balls off. I'd marry Courtney' He was definitely winding me up and he was loving it, he wouldn't have slept with Courtney, he was trying to take me off the scent, he didn't even know her that well. Detective Sam wasn't falling for his evil mind games.

After Joe shook off his evil smile like some type of Bond villain he answered who he'd avoid 'I'd avoid Lily' that broke my heart a little, to actually avoid her I thought was harsh.

'Aw poor girl' I said.

'What about you?' Andy asked, giving me no time to rip into Joe on his choices.

'I'd snog Joe if he told me who Courtney slept with!' I joked.

'Courtney slept with someone? What here?' Chloe D came out of the office with Chloe A.

'I'm not saying' Joe backed away.

'I'll just go and ask her' Chloe D said with sass.

'No don't, lets wind Sam up a little longer first, let him uncover it' Joe managed to keep an excited Chloe D under wraps.

'Loving this aren't you?' I said to Joe.

'Teaching you a lesson that it isn't nice not knowing gossip from your old friend Joe' Joe thought he was teaching me some sort of life lesson.

'I'd shag Danielle, she's attractive, or maybe Lily, go on I'll go Lily actually' I looked at Joe and he didn't look phased at all. I wanted something out of him. 'I'd marry Chloe D of course' Chloe went red and smiled. 'I'd avoid Shannon' everyone looked at me as if I was being nasty because she was obese, 'no not because of anything other than the fact that she doesn't like Lord of the Rings, and Andy didn't pick her either'

'Sure' Joe moved on 'Chloe D?'

‘What is it shag, marry and avoid? I’d shag Andy, marry Sam and avoid either Jake or Karsten’ surprising choices.

I dropped to one knee as a joke to make her laugh and she said yes, I took it as serious and planned the wedding, I would do. There seemed to be a bit of sexual tension brewing between Andy and Chloe which was a surprise, and an annoyance all the same, get away from my friend Chloe D.

‘You have to pick one to avoid!’ Joe ordered Chloe to choose.

‘Oh this is horrible, suppose I’d avoid...’ I was begging she’d avoid Jake, poor Karsten needs something ‘Jake, too much has happened’ she confirmed, I was relieved, last thing Jake needs is false hope and Karsten didn’t need to be the least liked in the whole place by the girl she likes the most.

‘Next Chloe... go on!’ Chloe D dragged A into it.

‘I would shag Lily, marry little Chloe here and avoid Shannon’ she then high fived me and Andy as we all avoided the same person.

‘This is fun, let’s take this outside’ I ran out, the others didn’t follow they just watched me skip away like a little child. I was desperate to find out who Courtney had slept with.

‘Heather, doing a little game I know you’re busy, but shag, marry and avoid in the Red Oak, go!’ Heather was busy but she always just smiled and went along with it anyway.

‘Oh fun, I would shag Sean, marry you, and avoid Jake’ Good choices overall, avoiding Jake again was weird, something to investigate there perhaps. He wanted to marry me, which was a bonus I guess, I was beginning to see a trend that girls didn’t see me as someone they’d sleep with but someone they’d grow old with, you don’t want that really when you’re that age. Wanting to shag Sean was no surprise really, he was fairly handsome.

‘Karsten, Karsten’ I shouted trying to get his attention from the podium at the end of the top bar.

‘What?’ Karsten always seemed stressed out by something, just wish the guy would lighten up.

‘Where’s Courtney’ I couldn’t see her anywhere and she’s the only one I was really interested in asking this question.

‘Downstairs in the club cleaning with Sean’ Karsten told me. Sean of course, he’s a candidate, must make absolutely sure before going back to Joe with an answer.

‘Oh Karsten before you go’ Karsten had his hands full of dirty glasses.

‘What Sam?’

‘Shag, marry and avoid in the Red Oak?’ I asked him and Karsten being Karsten replied with ‘oh, let me have a think on that one’ he put his glasses down and got a pen and notepad out and began writing down ‘I’ll come back to you on that one’ Everything had to be planned with him.

I went to bottom bar and asked Jake his choices, he wasted no time in batting his answers out 'shag Danielle, marry Chloe D, sorry I would still, and avoid Shannon. I've thought about that question a lot in my spare time' I wasn't even surprised.

I entered the club and it was dark and gloomy. There was noise coming from the far end of laughter and tables scraping on the floor in phase 2. I was wondering what my eyes would feast on as I turned the corner to find... Sean and Courtney messing around with boxes in the exact same way me, Andy and Joe where upstairs.

'Will you two stop messing around please, we're all working up there and you're here doing what, folded chair wrestling matches with folded up cardboard boxes?!' I tried to act as serious as possible.

'How did you know it was fold up chairs?' Sean asked.

'All I'm saying is not cool guys' I said.

'You sound gay when you say that' Courtney said in her Irish accent.

I stopped and got a little frustrated, I gave up and turned around and asked them both the question. Sean went first.

'I'd shag Courtney here-'

'Oh I say' Courtney looked more than flattered.

'I'd marry Jake and avoid Karsten' I couldn't be bothered explaining the rules to him properly I just chuckled at how ridiculously stupid he was for not understanding the simplest of games.

'Courtney?'

'I'd shag Sean back-'

'Aye aye, cheeky' Sean interrupted. At least I'd solved the curious case of who Courtney slept with in the Red Oak quick enough.

'I'd marry Joe and avoid Shannon' I laughed at the Shannon one, but the Joe one got me thinking maybe it was him again. No it can't be.

I ran back upstairs without saying bye to them as they resumed their cardboard chair fight. I found Joe on top bar now, Andy was doing the cardboard on his own. 'Joe I've got an answer'

'Oh yeah, who do you think it is?' He asked whilst cleaning his sink on his section of the bar and serving ken a pint of his regular Peroni.

'It's either you or Sean and I think it's Sean because I don't believe you could keep it a secret if it was you'

'I have my answers' Karsten shouted holding a piece of paper in the air as he approached me on top bar. Karsten looked at his piece of paper and coughed to clear his throat like he was telling a best man's speech 'to share a bed with, I choose Courtney, lovely girl, taken to the team really well. To marry I choose Heather, organised, leader, a good all-rounder. To avoid, Chloe D, she is absolutely

fantastic, but she is also a very good friend, I wouldn't want to tamper with that.' Me and Joe look at each other rolling our eyes, Even Ken the local rolled his eyes.

'You're honestly like a cartoon Karsten' Joe tells him.

'That is all' Karsten backs away folding his paper up and putting in politely in the bin. Suddenly it hit me that Karsten chose to sleep with Courtney. No way is it Karsten, and he said he was over Chloe D, perhaps that suggests he got lucky not too long ago with Courtney.

'It's Karsten, Joe it's Karsten, he slept with her' I confirmed my final answer to Joe as Karsten.

'Cheers Ken' Joe thanked Ken as he gave him a tip 'no It's not Karsten!'

'What? Sean then?' I asked.

'Wrong!'

'You then, no way is it you?'

'Wrong again!'

'Oh just tell me Joe' I begged him, I gave up.

'It's Jake, he and Courtney slept together, there you go' I was pretty annoyed by that, I would have guessed him first normally, but for some reason Joe's mind games made me think elsewhere.

'Joe, never don't tell me gossip again, you are my Red Oak Times reporter, ok?!' I ordered Joe and he nodded and hugged me with a little gay laugh.

As Joe hugged me for a lot longer than I really appreciated I noticed Karsten stood at the end of top bar, smiling. He looked happy for the first time in ages. I think he appreciated his friendship with Chloe D more than ever now.

I made my way down to bottom bar to congratulate Jake on his success. 'Well done mate, just heard you slept with Courtney, that's two here now'

'Yeah about that, I'm not really that into her' Jake didn't cover himself in glory I have to admit. This weird arrangement with Courtney would go on a while.

**Katie**

**Hamish**

**Clare**

**Caolan**

**Faye**

**Ellis**

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**Kelsey, Ant**

Open bottle of champagne

Drinking games

Snog marry avoid

Jake and Chloe D memories

New Years with Sean in Krazyhouse

Tom Jones spell

Lime juice

Crafty chandler memories

Training week

Mayflower memories

Tiki fire shots

Certain football matches

Prague

Brussels

My long hair

LIMF

Botans

Joe and his Ting incident

Me and Joe in the club making puns.

The different way we all shook

Tips

Andy and Faye (Faye's party)

Footgolf

Ghetto golf

Drew and Molly

Popworld

McDonalds

Save for snog marry avoid

Events

Conclusion