

The Boy

Reg sat in the pub nursing a lager.

He mulled over the night Sarah had left. She was a silly blond tart, fifty if she was a day, and no common sense, but he liked the sex and the comfort she gave him. God knew, she bled him dry to feed her drug habit though. They'd had a lot of drink and were sitting in the same pub, when her dealer had arrived. He had her right there when she needed a fix. Sarah started to shake, and whine at Reg. "Reg, go-on love, lend us some money for a cut, love". This time Reg had said no. "Get away with you Sal, you know it'll only give you a bad time, give it up won't you?" Somehow he'd had enough of her habit. She was ruled by it and he just seemed to be the one who paid for it. Enough was enough. She turned on him with her claws and tried to get his wallet off him. "You mean old bastard, Reg. You get what you need from me when you want it!" she said. That was it. He had stood up. "Get off you stupid cow, you're not having any." Then her dealer took his wallet off the table. After that all hell broke loose. He could remember hitting the punk with his crutches and then later the police pinning him down. She walked out with the dealer and most of his cash. He was the one who took the rap because of his disability. The police just took the easy target.

It was a hot day and he was reduced to his Reading Football Club kit, which left a lot of tattoos on display. Their theme was the Union flag and Help for Heroes. He sat in the corner of the public bar, where he always did, laying his crutches on the bench next to him. The walls were of yellowing paint and there was an old pool table in the corner. Some copper pans hung on the walls, with dusty photographs of a darts team hanging near the window. He could smell the disinfectant from slopping out in the morning. The place was clearly on its knees, but neither the landlady nor the brewery seemed to have noticed. Several bluebottles were competing to land in Reg's beer.

The landlady was avoiding his eye. She knew that he was banned, but custom was poor and sometimes you had to stretch a point. He did drink a lot of the product at least, and it was lunchtime. The pub was empty apart from them. It lay on the Oxford Road in Victorian Reading, all yellow and red brick with red tiles. It had become his front room since he had had the fall. He could only walk so far because of the back injury, so if he didn't take a bus this was his local. Reg browsed some copies of the Sun which were left on the bar. His old Nokia went off and he fumbled to answer it. It was his solicitor. "Hello Reg," she said, "the hearing has been postponed again. You're not due in Court now until three months' time." He hated that. If he had to do time, he wanted it over with. At least he didn't have to pay his solicitors, the legal aid saw to that. Putting his house in his boy's name had been a great idea.

His son Dickie was a wise one. Without assets no-one could touch Reg, and he knew his boy would honour the "deal". He was the one who got Reg a pass to take his grandson to the matches in Reading. Life hadn't been easy when Dickie was a lad. Reg tried not to think of the times he had come home pissed and beaten the boy. Money was short and the wife had left him to bring Dickie up. He was a right monkey and it hadn't been easy. Sometimes he wondered if the boy remembered. They seemed to get along now though.

His son's wife Maureen was a harridan and didn't approve of Reg. She was a right tart, with her short skirts and heavy make-up. She tried to ban him when she could. "You're a bad influence, a jail bird and a drinker, Reg. Why would I want little Jason to go to footie with you?" she said. If it wasn't for

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the free child care, and the kid's enthusiasm, he wouldn't get the grandson out. Bloody Bitch! He never knew why his son had married her.

Reg heaved himself up and gripped his crutches. He had to meet his probation officer in the Retail Park over the road. He nodded to the landlady who muttered something and cleared his glass. The journey was painful. Reg took more painkillers. Why she couldn't meet in a pub like anyone else, Lord knew.

Emma was waiting in the Mall with a cup of tea, pulling on a vaporiser. She was a realist and an ex-copper, hard as nails. Reg hobbled into view wincing with pain, his grimace showing his false teeth. Emma thought he was hamming it up. "Hello Reg," she said, "Can I get you a cuppa?" "Alright then", he said, sitting heavily on the chair. She noticed the tattoos on his thighs, and went to get some tea. The funny thing was, Reg was basically a nice guy. He liked to take his grandson to the match and buy him a burger. He liked to dress the kid in Reading kit and collect programmes with him. Butter wouldn't melt. Don't take the piss on a Saturday night that was all.

Emma went through the pie-chart test on quality of life. Employment, volunteering, cash, social life, family, accommodation etc. Reg grunted the answers as ever, and slurped his tea. It seemed his fancy lady had walked out with a "smarmy git" and taken some of his money. Money was otherwise good because of his injury pension. Reg had been a trusty in the building trade. Although he couldn't really read much, he had been a good worker, snagging by marking drawings on the plans. He had fallen off a gantry and hurt his back. It seemed his son also held a fighting fund for him, of sizable proportions. Friends seemed absent, and his family were standing off after the last arrest. His daughter in law didn't think he was a good influence on the grandson. Recently he hadn't been able to get his boy on the line. Reg had had to go to the back clinic, which was a bit of a journey, and he complained about that too. Usual stuff. Reg was dependent on his son and alcohol, but was a lonely, crippled old man. Now, he'd lost his girl too.

Emma set out her stall. The case conference on Reg had come to some hard conclusions. "Reg you need to move area." She said. "At sixty-eight you're not getting any younger. We've got to break this jail habit. If you're lucky enough to get away without time at the next hearing you'll be back in the pub, getting violent again." Emma felt she'd got the picture. Dealers known to Reg dropped by the pub to do trade. You couldn't stop it, they moved around and sold crack. The problem was they hated Reg, and he was easy game. He had history. Reg got to seven or eight pints of a Saturday night and then they would call him out. They called him a nark or a wanker or worse, or called the girl with him a prozzi. That was enough to get him up. Just one push and he'd go over. Great fun it was, what with the injury and all. Then he would go ballistic, swinging his crutches in a red mist, fuelled by the drink. The police turned up, and he would assault and resist arrest. Caput. "What you need Reg is new pastures" she said (and preferably out of my patch, she thought!). "That way, Reg, you'd miss the old crowd" she said, (and drink yourself into a happy and early grave in peace, she thought). "A clean start, a new break, a nice area, a different local, the other side of town would do, what about Caversham? Somewhere near the golf course. You could start with a bed-sit while your house is sold." Reg went quiet. He'd had enough to be honest. He wasn't a quitter but he was being bullied and he knew it. It was a good idea. All he wanted was a bit of peace. He had started reading those Martina Cole books. He had never had much truck with reading, but he liked those ones. He liked to sit and read with a beer and forget his problems. It was time to go out to grass. Since he had lost his girlfriend to that f***** drug dealer there was no reason to hang around.

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“Alright,” he said “I’ll sort it.” Emma was amazed. He seemed resolved, in an instant. No more to say. They finished their tea, until the next meeting then.

Reg sat in the lounge with a cup of tea. The small terraced house had been cosy. Two up, two down and 12 feet square in all four rooms. Just right really. He would miss the house, but not the stairs and the cleaning. He could hardly get up to bed now, what with his bad back and all. Sarah still hadn’t collected her stuff. It was all in the corner in a bin bag, bulging with cheap clothing and worn shoes. It made him sad. She had been a right tart and used him badly, but he still missed the company. Everything was falling apart somehow, but it couldn’t go on the way it had. She was impossible, no mistake.

Reg rang the boy. “I’m moving out, son. You can get some tenants in and earn a turn while I live in a small rental, Caversham way. I need to get away from these low-lives on the Oxford Road.” The boy could run it. He trusted the boy. The boy would honour the deal. Reg found a nice bed-sit on the edge of Caversham. They were mostly students but he didn’t mind. He had no stairs and no maintenance. It was a studio flat so the cleaning was easy. He could live in comfort close to the shops with his new local, the Griffin pub. The drinkers were posh London types and he couldn’t see his old crowd bothering him here. The boy moved him in and sorted his stuff out. He was a good lad. He said he’d found a tenant for the house and he would put the rental in a new account for Reg as soon as the dust settled.

Reg’s new beat was good and life seemed to flash by. At last the court date came and his brief took him to the hearing. The mitigation plea was all about the new life. He had moved on, he had left the old crowd behind, he was drinking less (like heck he was!). The drug addict girl friend had gone. Despite the suspended sentence, more time inside would destroy his progress. A heavy fine should replace his jail time, with further time suspended. Counsel was advised the family could pay. The judge was nodding sagely, the convict was old, and more prison would not serve any purpose. He was little more than drunk and disorderly, despite the veneer of assault and resisting arrest, put on it by the police. But there had to be severe retribution. The fine must be paid. The order was made and judgement given. The prisoner would be remanded in custody for the full period of the suspended sentences, unless and until the price was paid. Reg smiled, he knew his son would see him right.

Maureen sat on the terrace overlooking Double Bay in her new home, and sipped her double Marguerite. It was hot and the pool was lovely. At last they had got away from Reg and his criminal past. She had worried that Jason would be twisted by his grandpa, but no more.

Maureen remembered the row. She had found the bank statements and the deeds to Reg’s house in Dickie’s desk. They had always said they would get away for a better life if they could just break free. Reg had just been put inside for another stretch and suddenly she knew they could go. There was no reason not to. Dickie had muttered about looking after his dad, but what did they owe him? By all accounts Reg had abused Dickie as a boy. Now he was slaving away for low pay in the council offices and going nowhere. Dickie had the skills to start again and could take the family. Anything else was just excuses. Maureen was good at forms and did the paperwork. In no time they had gone. Dickie couldn’t argue with that. Serve the old man right for the way he’d treated Dickie all those years ago.

They had made a clean break, just as the law had caught up with Reg. As luck would have it Reg had given Dickie his house, which had more than funded the move. Reg was doing time back home and

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would probably die inside. Good riddance, and good luck Reggie! At least Dickie was straight, and looked after his family.

Reg lay on his bunk and looked at the ceiling. His brain cycled the obsession which filled his days. His own son had screwed him. The boy had left him to rot in jail. Now he had no-one and nothing, and no reason to live. He couldn't even have a pint in here. If he survived his time there was nothing left to get out for. No money, no girl, no life. Even the care for his back was poor. Constant pain. Reg looked at the ceiling and thought of his boy in the Australian sun.