



the
Shame
of
John
Slade

PHILLIP DROWN

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one

Life changed after I was caught with the lollipop lady. However scandalous it was at the time, the very public shaming that followed turned out to be little more than a passing storm. For in a town like Tenderbridge, episodes of disgrace are as common as seeing dog poo on the pavement.

Take my ex-wife's best friend. Rather than splashing paint about in the art class she signed up for, Bea had instead been plunging around in the local swimming baths with the pool attendant, caught without bathing suits by a gaggle of old duffers who turned up early to their Aquafit class. And how I laughed when I found out. Because it was Bea who told Kirsty about me and Sadie, the lollipop lady.

Since the days of staring at Debbie Harry on the cover of record sleeves, I have always had a weakness for girls who wear too much makeup. Sadie had mounds of it. Combined with the sculpted body peeking out from beneath her hi-vis jacket, Sadie was incredibly sexy. Just like the song.

She clearly couldn't stand kids. It was the fathers that Sadie batted her fake lashes at each day, standing on the

crossing with one hand on her hip, as if she was trying to sell her lollipop on some late-night shopping channel.

As any good lollipop lady would, Sadie moonlighted as a barmaid in one of the local pubs. Back then, I was a popular (local) musician in my thirties, so naturally I did what any singer in a popular (local) band would. It took only a lingering blink of her lashes to suggest that Sadie and I should go outside for a cigarette. We did end up having a cigarette, but only after Bea came stumbling outside to find me and Sadie going for it up against one of the picnic benches, vaguely hidden by an overgrown laurel.

There she was, trotting towards us, wobbling all over the patio in her stilettos, flirting dangerously with the shrubs. Attempting to point at us, she was performing some kind of strange street dance.

‘You’re for it now, you bastard,’ Bea cawed from within a cloud of passion fruit-scented vape.

‘We . . . were only . . . chatting,’ I replied breathlessly.

The truth was, at the very moment Bea busted us, Sadie had been spilling filthy lines into the blue air while I yanked on her ponytail. Even as I was puffing out my lame defence, Sadie still had her palms spread out on the table in front of her. And I still had her ponytail in my grip.

‘Oh, you and the lollipop lady,’ Bea said, staggering towards us. ‘That’s poetry, that is.’

‘It’s not what it looks like,’ I protested, zipping myself up.

‘I can see her pulling up her knickers, mate,’ Bea retorted, pointing in her disco dance fashion.

I looked, and Sadie was. Just simple white cotton briefs. That surprised me, given the low cut of her dress.

Staring triumphantly at me and the lollipop lady, Bea took another drag on her vape. A moment later her cheeks bulged. As I watched her vomiting into the laurel, I hoped that Bea

would be too drunk to remember the episode in The Humphrey Bean beer garden. When Kirsty got home from work the next day, one look at her face told me differently.

Even though I found it hard to like a single thing about Bea, I could see why Kirsty would be friends with a woman like her. Kirsty is the sort of person who would be the first to throw a stone, and then frown upon someone who accidentally kicks a pebble.

When I first met her, she was my northern rose: fiery and confident, dressed up in an edgy, riot grrrl glamour. I would smile every time she opened her bud lips and coarse brogue slipped out, a contrast so endearing to me at the time. Yet as the petals began to fall, her prickles grew, until the flower that I had adored finally no longer bloomed. The faded bud of her lips only ever opened to reveal withering disdain. The decay of our romance. Not that there is really any excuse that can be made for a married man banging the lollipop lady from his daughter's infant school in a public place.

Excluding the occasional snog, and some light-hearted, mutual fondling with a few girls, Sadie was my first and only infidelity. Caught first time, pretty much. But despite my protestations, I was defenceless: before spewing in drunken delight, it transpired that Bea had taken a shaky picture of Sadie and me.

Even though my love for Kirsty had long since evaporated, when she returned home that day, found me dozing in the backyard, and started spitting spiky shards of northern glass, I begged for the ground to swallow me; for the sun lounger to fold in half and file itself into the earth, with me plugged in its cushiony middle. Beneath being busted was the absurdity of hearing the words "*shagging the lollipop lady*" screamed over the rooftops, and the humiliation that people streets away would have heard it. But on top of it all, above it

all, encompassing everything, standing shoeless in her favourite dress, hugging her doll so tightly, Ella had been watching.

It is not cheating on Kirsty that still wakes me in the night – to stay with her would have been to commit to a life of misery – but each morning, afternoon, every evening, night, wherever I may be, I miss my daughter.

It would be fair to say that I am a tormented man. But it's fine. I have ways of dealing with the torment.

two

Before Kirsty yelled at me in front of Ella and I was booted onto the streets, the three of us had lived together on the south side of town, close to the train station. If trains once rattled and chugged along railway lines, in modern Tenderbridge packed carriages shriek into the station with a tormenting regularity, deep into the small hours. Basslines beat through tight-knit terraced houses. Domestic arguments rain all day over the tiny backyards. Raised voices of drunk men and women fill the fuggy air. Kids on mopeds tear around the streets, all through the night. Others congregate in car parks, revving the engines of their thirty-year-old Vauxhall Novas and Ford Escorts. Along those streets, litter from the numerous fast-food outlets decays in the kerbsides. Cats and mangy foxes forage, fight and fornicate.

While the south side of Tenderbridge howls, the neighbourhoods in the north end of the town are greeted by morning birdcall. Those houses have gardens for the children to run around in; to kick a ball, bounce on trampolines, splash in pools and frolic in hot tubs. Kids on the north side don't have to play hide and seek in confined spaces, where the only

place to hide is a grubby dustbin, later emerging from it smeared in bacterial sludge.

They lounge on their lawns, drink tea at a table and scoff scones in their summer houses. Electric cars are lined upon driveways, lawnmowers stowed in sheds, recycling bins parked in purpose-made stores, and all dwellers are rewarded for their Tory votes.

Within a year of Bea sending Kirsty the picture of me catching a piggyback ride on the lollipop lady, my soon-to-be-ex-wife and daughter moved in with Dan – a wealthy bachelor with a BMW and a four-bedroom house. Dan's house is in north Tenderbridge. And Dan only wears blue ties.

The divide of the town, from middle class to working class, is historic. In the nineteenth century, an outbreak of cholera plagued those living in the south side, possibly from playing hide and seek inside toxic bins. Guards stood sentry on the Great Bridge, separating the classes, protecting those that were more well-to-do from those who were literally dying in their own shit. The sentries are there no longer, yet the divide remains. In modern Tenderbridge everyone knows their place.

Having walked past the fried chicken shop, various vape stores, the kebab, the Poundland and the charity shops, I pass over the Great Bridge now. My tired, dirty town surroundings are replaced by the manicured riverbanks, the cycle paths, the picturesque motte and bailey castle, and the world-renowned public school.

On this hot, sunny day, it is my walk of shame.

That I have to ask permission to see Ella – calling from my pay-as-you-go mobile phone, only to have Dan answer and tell me that my own daughter is at this club, or at that class, or at the house of some friend I have never even heard of – should leave me feeling approximately two feet small. And

yet the greatest indignity is knowing that she is living a far better life than I could have ever afforded her.

The new gate, installed after some little oiks from the south side tried to thieve Dan's Beemer, has a security buzzer. Standing on the street, feeling like a chicken on a peacock farm, I am finally granted entry onto the pebbled driveway. It was these same pebbles that apparently betrayed the little oiks after I told them of a sparkling new BMW they could nick.

Kirsty opens the front door before I get there. I shamble towards her, hands in the pockets of my scruffy jeans, wearing my same old worn-out leather jacket, and with who knows how many days of beard growth. Once upon a time, when I found her voice endearing, Kirsty had liked my ruggedness. And yet now we must go through this routine, Kirsty looking me up and down disapprovingly enough times to ensure that her scorn registers. Yes, we are all disappointed and disgusted by John Slade. And probably I am the only one of us who doesn't give a shit about it.

'Couldn't you have washed?' Kirsty asks, her fake tan sparkling in the sunlight. I am getting a healthy dose of vitamin D off her radiance.

'Where's my girl?' I ask, as affably as possible.

'Come in,' Kirsty says with a weary lip-sneer. 'Shoes off,' she adds before my tattered boots have passed the threshold, let alone touched upon the palace pile. 'Ella!' she screeches, 'John's here.'

Sparing a bitter glance over her shoulder, Kirsty disappears into the kitchen.

Waiting at the foot of the staircase, I don't rise to the *John*. I refuse to show Kirsty that her snipes affect me in any way. And honestly, they don't. The mirrors in this house are huge.

I can't hear any movement upstairs. Although I guess you

wouldn't hear the lightest shuffling about, unlike in our old two-up two-down terrace.

'Ella?' I call up the stairs, to no response. 'It's dad.'

And still, silence.

I amble through to the kitchen – big enough to fit the entire downstairs of our old house – and look at the digital clock on the cooker. 14:01. Bang on time, for once.

'Where is she?'

'Don't touch the surfaces,' Kirsty replies, pouring herself a glass of Chardonnay. 'The cleaner's been.'

The glass has cool, sweaty beads curving over its side. Catching my hankering, Kirsty takes great and deliberate delight in slowly taking a swig. And there it is, the tight-lipped smile, the one that comes with a slight tilt of her head. I know what's coming next.

'Perhaps Ella doesn't want to see you.'

Kirsty knows that comment does bite, deeply. After they moved in with wonderful, rich Dan, Ella's attitude towards me soon changed. No longer were there the carefree smiles, a bundle of joy who bounded my way as soon as I arrived. The child who spent her first years curled up on my chest. The little girl who would say *I love you* and gaze up at me with wonderment.

Who knows what is said behind the gates after they close at the end of my visits. I can only imagine the bitter poison that Kirsty is capable of drip-feeding to build up Ella's immunity to me. Or maybe Ella has forgotten being curled up on my chest, and only sees me as a scruffy bloke who turns up now and again, mostly hungover, if I turn up at all.

Through the open bi-fold doors, I see Ella skulking around in the garden. Her pet mutt, which has better grooming than I've ever had, is following her. I wave. Even across the broad expanse of immaculate lawn, I see Ella's eyes roll. Reluctantly,

she begins to head my way. The dog, some little designer breed, traces her scent over the grass.

I catch the wisp of a sigh from between Kirsty's wine-moistened lips. Do I witness signs of distress?

'It's hard to get her to do anything at the moment,' Kirsty says, surprising me like never before by admitting it, betraying the image of the perfect life she lured herself and my daughter into. Hidden within her expression is the reluctance to confess it, of course, but also a kind of pleading. It's a look I remember well, from the rare occasions when Kirsty was prepared to admit that she was in the wrong. I haven't seen it for a long time.

'It's as if when she hit thirteen a switch just went off in her,' Kirsty continues. 'I don't think I've seen her smile in a month. Maybe more.'

'Thirteen, is she?' I ask, still eyeing the wine glass.

Kirsty leans on the polished granite island, bigger than our old bathroom. 'Your daughter swore at me today,'

'Right, I see.' I slap my palms down on the island, damn the cleaner. 'I can't see Ella without pretty much having to apply for a court order, but when she swears she's all mine?'

'Well, she didn't bloody well get it from me.'

'I didn't swear,' Ella says, stomping into the kitchen, wearing an expression so fierce that it makes her look oh-so-much like Kirsty. 'I called you a stupid cow.'

Ella sees me grinning, scratching behind my ear.

'And you, dickhead, you're just an embarrassment. Not only to me, but to *everyone*. Look at the state of you.'

That wipes the smile from my face. It is clearly something that she's heard her mother say, and we all know it. Even the dog is glaring at me, posh little twat.

'Dan's the only one who behaves like an *actual* adult

around here,' Ella continues, glaring at us each in turn. 'He might be a prick, but at least he's got a job.'

I raise my hand to protest, to proclaim that I have got a job, *actually*. A proper job. Not just playing half-arsed cover songs to pissed people in local pubs. But Ella's not done yet.

'Dan's taking me and Keira to the Amex this weekend.'

'What's the Amex?' I ask. 'Other than a card in Dan's wallet.'

Ella looks my way, chooses to ignore me, and then redirects her invective back to Kirsty.

'When do you take me anywhere other than to your friends' houses so that you can gossip and drink gin?' she says, hands on her hips. 'Well?'

Wait a minute, since when did my little girl have hips?

The dog yaps at me.

I mouth *Fuck off* to it.

'I took you to the cinema to see Dumbo,' Kirsty says, uncharacteristically softly. She really is struggling.

'No, *mother*, you dumped me at the cinema so that you could get your nails done and go shopping. You didn't even pick me up! I had to come and meet you in the wine bar.'

Kirsty's mouth opens, but it seems that she sure isn't about to argue. I lean against the island, quite enjoying watching my tiny progeny popping off. What's not to like? While I'm *dickhead* – a standard acknowledgement in most places I go – behind my back Kirsty has become *mother*, and *you stupid cow*. God, I love this little brat. But what the hell is the Amex? When Ella stops for air, I intend to ask her. Again.

'And you,' she says, turning her untamed bollocking my way. 'What have you *ever* done but take me to the park? And always with a bag full of beers.'

'Come on, Ella, I took you to London that time.'

'Yes, you did.' Ella's voice is getting a bit screechy now. The mutt is sneering at me again, too. This is why we are a family better suited to the south side. 'Our one and only family day out so that you can go and see some band you like.'

'R.E.M.' I say.

'What?'

'We went to see R.E.M.' I repeat. 'In London.'

Somehow, I've dragged a fallen branch in front of the runaway caboose.

R.E.M. are my favourite band. They were Kirsty's favourite band, too, before the lollipop thing. They were our band. R.E.M. broke up a few years before we did, but the difference is that they had thirty years of hard work behind them.

Do I see an expression close to hungering in Kirsty's eyes? Possibly it is just continued shock at the abuse piping out of this little daughter of ours.

'Dad, that was, like, eight years ago. I was five years old! And. It. Was. Shit.'

'Now, hang on,' I say, raising my voice, thumping my palm down on the granite countertop. At least she called me dad. I plan to turn that round on her in a minute.

'I hate both of you,' Ella shouts before storming out of the room, denying me the opportunity.

It turns out that you can hear people moving around upstairs in a house like this, if they are stomping hard enough.

'I can't believe she said that,' I say, shaking my head, resetting myself against the island. 'Yes, I get that they're not to everyone's taste, especially some of the early noughties stuff, but she can't say that about R.E.M.'

Kirsty bites her bottom lip. Her eyes move while she stares

into the depths of the granite, as if watching a shoal of fish swimming beneath its surface.

'Kirst?'

She glances towards the ceiling, and then levels her worn expression upon me. 'Ella always behaves like this when she's got PMS.'

I think I sort of wince. It felt like I winced. And then I make three different tones of huffing noises.

'But she's . . . too young for that, isn't she?'

'Ella got her period over a year ago, John. While you have been off . . . doing whatever, doing nothing, our daughter has been growing up, you know. How can you not have noticed? In fact, don't answer that.'

'But she's so . . . *small*.'

Kirsty again examines the countertop. Even after a relationship that was strained to the very extremities, six years of living apart, a mutual dislike and distrust burgeoning in the years since, I can still read Kirsty. One thing is obvious: Ella is getting the better of her, and on a regular basis.

The thought of it almost makes me laugh out loud.

Kirsty looks at the dog. With the stubby tail drooping between the permed fur of its thighs, it leaves the room.

'We're moving to Canada,' Kirsty says.

Her words take a moment to filter through the air to me. Once they reach, those words swirl around my head, hypnotising me to dizziness. I try to understand what they mean.

'What?'

'Dan's company are transferring him,' Kirsty says. 'All of us. We're all moving to Canada.'

'I'm moving to Canada?'

'What? No, all of *us*, you stupid prat,' she replies, brushing me and my confusion aside with a wave of her fake nails. 'Me, Dan and Ella.'

'But . . .' Can someone do that, just take your only child and move to a whole new country without first checking if it's alright? 'Why *Canada*? It's so far away. Why not, fucking . . . Margate?'

'I don't think that Margate is a business hub for shipping companies, John.'

'It's by the sea.'

'Oh, I'll be sure to check with Dan, then. See if they'll transfer him to Margate rather than Canada. Because it's *by the sea*.'

Again, Kirsty looks up at the ceiling, her eyes glittering with the reflection of the integrated lighting.

'Ella's been,' she waves her nails in the general direction of upstairs, 'like *that* ever since we told her. But it's decided, John. *We've* decided, between us, Dan and me. We leave in a month.'

three

When I have finished saying what I have to say, Darren seems baffled. The thing about Darren is that he looks baffled when he's reading the menu screen in McDonald's, so it's hard to gauge his reaction.

'Canada's quite nice, isn't it?' he finally says.

'Yes?' I reply. 'No? I don't know. I've never been.'

'Hmm.' Playing with his beard, Darren frowns, as he always does when he's trying to grasp a thought.

Darren is the lead guitarist in our band. He has had long hair – like, ZZ Top length hair – and a scraggly beard ever since he could grow one. The long hair came before the beard. Playing guitar and taking part in epic games of Warhammer – a grown man moving miniature figures around for hour after hour – is all that Darren has ever been interested in. A great guitarist he may be, but Darren has never been the sharpest axe in the armoury.

'So . . . do they not want to go to Canada?'

'Darren, that's not the point. My daughter is moving to Canada. *Ca-na-da*. As in, thousands of miles away.'

'We were going to go to Canada on our world tour, remember? Follow the same route that Motörhead did in eighty-one.'

It's true. Years ago, after playing a passably good gig in the pub, we did talk about going on a world tour. We talked about lots of things. The reality is that we very rarely travel any further than the county borders. I don't know of many generic cover bands who get booked to tour the world, no matter how good they might be.

'You're still missing my point,' I say, looking into his wide, green eyes, brimful with the two-dimensional innocence of a cartoon character. 'I don't want Ella to move to Canada. I'll miss her. And there is no way that I could ever afford to go and visit.'

'It would be good, though. Like, if you could,' Darren adds, helpful as ever.

After leaving Dan's palace and sweating the entire length of Tenderbridge on my way to The Tap, I puzzled over what I could possibly do to stop Ella from leaving.

I could try and break up Dan and Kirsty's marriage.

That would only happen if he woke up skint one day in the next month.

Surely they can't go if he loses his job.

So, what, get one of the girls from the pub to phone the police and say that Dan had done horrific things to them? As if the police wouldn't side with the rich man.

It seems that the only possible way I can stop them moving to Canada is to kill Dan.

But what if Ella doesn't come and visit me in prison? I only see her once a week now, if I remember to make an appointment to go and get my weekly abuse from her and her mother.

'She called me a dickhead,' I say, taking a sip of my pint, smirking in spite of myself; still unable to decide whether to be proud of Ella's brazen effrontery, or if I should be offended.

'A dickhead?' Darren says. 'That's harsh, mate. You're not even the worst one in here.'

We look around The Tap. Old boys are cupping their beers or shorts and staring into space. Lads in polo shirts are perched on stools at the bar. Colourless morons and dole monkeys are sitting round the tall tables, drinking their hard-earned benefits away. A couple of younger fellas are playing pool, one of whom I recognise from the chicken shop.

I picture Dan leaning back in his tall leather chair, tapping a Montblanc against his walnut desk. His suit that I couldn't afford if I played thirty gigs a week. His watch that I couldn't afford if I played fifty gigs a week.

'Do you know what the Amex is?' I ask Darren.

'A bank, isn't it?'

'No, not that. And it's not a bank, exactly, it's a . . .'

Staring at me, possibly through me, Darren's mouth is open, his tongue resting on his bottom lip.

'Never mind,' I say, a pair of words that I often use when talking with Darren. 'I think that the Amex is a place. A place that someone can take you.'

'Hmmm.' Again stroking his beard, Darren surveys the cocktail menu painted on a supporting beam above the bar. 'Is it . . . a cinema?'

'That's the Imax. And I don't know what the Amex is. I was just wondering if you do. Whatever it is, Dan is taking Ella there this weekend. If he's doing that, then I should probably take her somewhere too, I suppose.'

'Brigh'on.'

I swivel to face an old boy sitting behind us. He has a proper outlaw's handlebar moustache, bristly whiskers and a flat cap. The weight of an invisible pipe turns down one side of his mouth. A crossword is open on the table in front of him. I am pretty certain that he's the source of at least one of the nasty smells.

'Brigh'on,' he repeats.

'Brian?' I say. 'Which Brian?'

'No, Brigh'on. S'where they play their 'ome games.'

'Games?' I ask. 'What sort of games?'

'S'eir footba' team,' he says in his old-fashioned Kentish drawl, a curious blend of cockney London and rural west country. 'Brigh'on n'Ove Alb-yon.'

'Ah. Cheers, mate.'

The man nods, and then returns to staring at his newspaper. His saggy-faced mate sitting next to him is just staring at the wall.

'Why is *Dan* taking my daughter to watch *football*?'

'Hmm.' Chewing on the inside of his cheek, Darren's narrowed eyes again stare away at the cocktail menu. 'Does she like football?' he eventually asks.

'I don't know. That's it, I don't know anything about her anymore. I didn't even know that she's started . . .'

Darren gazes at me with his usual absent expression, possibly wondering what colours he'd paint me to look like one of the elves in his fantasy craft game.

'Started what?' he asks.

'Never mind,' I say, tucking the PMS conversation away. 'She slagged off R.E.M. today, too.'

'Woah, mate. No one disses The Rem.'

'Yeah, I know.' Taking a mouthful of beer, I replay the scene in my mind. 'I didn't respond well.'

'What did you say?'

'Well, except for slapping my hand on the kitchen counter, I didn't get a chance. Ella just said that she hates us both and stormed out of the room. Our quality father-daughter time, as usual.'

'Said that she hates Kirst, too?'

I nod. No longer does it feel entirely amusing that Kirsty has lost control of our daughter; that her perfect world isn't quite as shiny as it seems. Although Ella did call Dan a prick. Sometimes I wonder if Kirsty only married Dan because he has some of my worst qualities – except for the one of never having any money in my pockets. Being a prick is the only thing that I can compete with when it comes to *Dan*.

The realisation that I will forever be losing the one thing I truly care about is settling in stages. The stage I am now in is making me fidgety. My skin feels cold; my stomach is spinning like an out-of-control tombola. I'm familiar with anxiety and despair, but never has it ever felt as crippling as this.

I down the rest of my beer and head straight to the bar. The standard solution.

'What else does she like?' Darren asks once I have sat back down, our fresh pints in front of us. 'Other than football.'

Now it's my turn to search the cocktail menu. There's one called a Rusty Duck. That must be a new drink that Kev, the landlord, has made up. His Frilly Dipper is legendary for inducing a painful amnesia. Thinking back over the years, trying to recall a single one of Ella's interests or hobbies, feels a bit like struggling through a Frilly Dipper hangover.

Surely I must have taken Ella to some things that she's enjoyed.

We went to the park so that I could drink.

We went to go and see R.E.M. because Kirsty and I liked them.

I used to take Ella to the soft play centre when she was tiny, but a menstruating teenager is probably past that stage.

When I was thirteen, me and my friends used to go to the local rec. While some of the lads were kicking a ball around, I would see how far the girls would go with me, offering them sips of my stolen booze.

The thought now terrifies me.

Suddenly I have a thirteen-year-old daughter.

Pushing aside that weighty reality, I pick through the things that the girls from the rec used to do to entertain themselves.

They definitely liked to go shopping.

I hardly ever have any cash. Who's the real hero if I take Ella on a day out to spend *Dan's* money?

Everyone likes the cinema.

But we'd have to get the bus there. What's more, on the way to the bus stop we'd have to walk past *Dan's* BMW. And then I'd probably only end up waiting for Ella in the pub, like Kirsty does.

Some of the girls used to go ice skating.

Most of the time I struggle to walk in a straight line with normal shoes on.

Bollocks to it, I'll just take her to the park. If any boys begin to circle us, I'm sure I'll be able to fend them off.

Darren sits suddenly upright, looking around like a meerkat that's just woken up. He prods a finger at me. 'You should take her away first.'

'It would be kind of illegal to move somewhere with my daughter just so that Kirsty can't, Darren. Even if Ella agreed to it, which she wouldn't. And if she doesn't agree to it, that makes it even more illegal.'

'No, I'm not talking about taking her away for good. Take her on a trip, something like that.'

Because I am so used to dismissing most of the things that come out of Darren's mouth, his suggestion almost escapes me. But as the idea of a trip settles in, the greater its significance expands.

'What sort of trip?' I ask.

'Dunno. Like . . . somewhere she's not been before. You just said you don't get any quality time together, so that's what you need. Just the two of you, where no one else can get in the way. Try and impress her. A camping trip, or something.'

Bloody hell, he's right. I know almost nothing about Ella anymore, and I need to learn while there is still a chance. I need to bond with my daughter. There is surely no better way than to remove Dan and Kirsty entirely – preferably without murdering either of them.

I'll show Ella exactly who her old man is.

I am Captain Reliable. I can do it.

I am not Captain Reliable, but I can do it.

Captain Football can piss off.

We have one month, that's plenty of time.

'That's it,' I say. 'It's a brilliant idea. I'm going to take her on a trip. Let's celebrate. Pint?'

Just as I'm saying it, Bea walks in with her pool attendant. While pool boy radiates youth, health and vitality, Bea looks as rough as mildew. She's sniping away; pool boy looks as though he's at the end of his rope. So I have a good chuckle, obviously.

Confused as ever, Darren is back to being baffled. Perhaps his one helpful thought has worn him out. Bea's presence turns me off the idea of having another pint here, so I suggest we go to The Humphrey Bean instead.

Rusty Ducks can wait for another time.

[End of free sample]

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