

Burn A little Brighter Now

By

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(Writing as Saul P. Tiler)

3861 words

"You're smoking?"

It was as much an exclamation as a question. Gabe couldn't answer, coughing profusely as he forced in another inhale of tar, nicotine and all the other lovely chemicals that made it feel so good. At least for me. Gabe's looked like he was drowning.

"Sherlock Holmes has nothing on you mate," he said, finally managing to exhale out. Then he managed to mumble 'hypocrite' before attempting another puff.

"Me yes, but you, come on mate."

Gabe ignored me, but there was a list of things that you don't know about yet that meant that his new addiction made no sense. But that's the thing about stories, sometimes you didn't understand them until the end. Until you had all the facts.

But these were the things I knew that meant Gabe smoking made no sense:

Lung cancer, the marathon and Bethany.

I was so shocked by Gabe sparking up that I hadn't noticed the shiny rectangle he had used to do it. It was a zippo. Not only had my best mate taken up smoking but he had a top of the range lighter to boot. I squinted, the glare of the sun in the beer garden making it hard to focus on the letters.

It read 'Cowboy up motherfucker'. I had never ever heard Gabe swear before.

I was about to ask him where he got it from and, for fuck's sake, why? when he produced another silver rectangle. He held the badly smoked fag in his mouth as he clipped the new object open.

It was a tiny ashtray. It had a compartment with an overhanging lip, already full of cigarette ash. Gabe must have been going for it even before he got here. No wonder he was coughing.

Gabe folded out a hinged leaf shape piece of metal from the ashtray and used it to balance his fag on it, before coughing his guts out.

"What the fuck is that?"

"Ashtray," Gabe said.

"Yes, I know that, what the fuck are you doing with it?"

"It's for ash," he said, his voice slightly annoyed and then, almost spitefully, picked the cigarette back up and sucked unprofessionally at it again.

"Mate, I know it's only been a few days since the funeral but you're going to screw up your training-"

"My choice Matt. My effing choice."

I left it for a moment. He could get like this. Touchy, not liking being questioned. His parents were the same, strict conservatives, religious. Always right, in both senses of the word.

They fucking hated me. So did his bird, Beth, but she was going to go mental when she realised he had started smoking.

If he got in that touchy sort of mood, then the night would last about five minutes and I really fancied a drink. I decided solidarity would be the best way and lit up a cigarette of my own.

Marlboro red. Proper. Not the dirt that Gabe was smoking. Cheapest menthols you could get, barely anything dangerous in them. They were called Guardians, for Christ sake.

"Gabe, I know your dad's death hit you hard, but I just don't want you to fuck your life up. I mean where did you even find this pub? No one comes in here."

He wasn't listening. It was his idea to have our weekly piss up in the Jackdaw, but he never answered. Instead Gabe had that look that men in their twenties normally reserved for hot women in tight clothes.

Clothes so tight that if you stared at their crotches you could probably count how many eggs they had left. Yeah, I know that's not very PC nowadays, but as the lighter said, 'cowboy up mother fucker'.

But he wasn't looking at a girl. He was looking at an old man who had waddled into the beer garden. He was wearing a flat cap and an overcoat, both of which must have been too hot for the weather. The old boy was holding a newspaper under his arm and was staring at his CAMRA approved pint intently as if he was going to spill it t any moment.

"Give me a minute," Gabe said and followed the bloke over to a bench on the other side of the garden.

By the time I had recovered from the weirdness of my friend's behaviour enough to say something, Gabe had already sat down with the man and started talking to him. I could only put it down to grief. What was even weirder was that he had left the lighter and fags and took the astray with him.

Gabe had obviously cracked.

At least that's what I thought.

I was about to call it quits when Gabe stood up and made his way back toward our own seats. He paused at another bench and emptied the ashtray onto the floor underneath it. A glass collector eyed him suspiciously and then decided that it wasn't worth the argument. Gabe pocketed the ashtray and plonked himself down next to me.

"Whose round is it?" he said casually, picking up the fags and lighter and dropping them in another pocket.

"Never mind that, what's wrong with the bin?" I asked, wondering why he hadn't used it for the ash.

"That's for rubbish. Stella?"

I gave up. If you can't beat them, then at least get pissed and hope it gets better.

"Go on you fucking freak, not in those shit glasses though."

And when he came back it was as if nothing had happened. Old Gabe was back. Laughing and joking and drinking one pint to every three of mine. I decided to risk pushing the issue.

"No more fags then?"

I deliberately didn't look him in the eyes and picked up my phone as if I'd got a text. Trying to make the question less important, as if I didn't care. But I did. He was my best friend and I didn't want him to fuck his life up just because his old man had died. I mean, they weren't even close.

"Nah, not tonight. Let get pissed."

And we did, and I thought it was just a phase and I thought maybe it was out of his system and I thought everything would go back to normal.

And I was wrong.

Flintholme was a town on the edge of everything exciting and the Jackdaw was on the edge of that. It didn't use to be, but the shape of towns change, the same way the shape of people change and it ended up on the periphery. But in its day, it was the centre of everything. Hells angels, Mods, bands, in its youth it was blood black and angry and wasn't going down without a fight. But like any pugilist, age got to it. Now the roarers and the ragers spent most of the time talking about the good old days while running out the

future that they never really wanted. I know it's hard to believe now but its true.

"Why the fuck are we drinking in here again?"

"My Dad used to drink in here," said Gabe.

Absolute mother fucker.

I mean what could I say. 'Well he was a fucking idiot'. He wasn't even cold yet. And then to make it worse Gabe got the fags out again and the lighter and the stupid, stupid, fucking, and yes, I'm going again, stupid, fucking ashtray. And it was full.

I don't know a lot, but I know smoking and he must have had a couple of packs to fill it up like that.

"Gabe look--"

"Just leave it alone Matt, I just need to deal with my Dad's stuff in my own way, it wont last forever."

He forced down a couple of Guardians, but the ashtray was so full that he flicked the ash on the floor, at least he was coughing less. Which meant he was getting used to it.

"Still up for the marathon?" I asked.

"No, I'm ditching it."

"Fuck mate really?"

"Yes mate, really."

This is what I didn't get. Gabe was doing the marathon to make money for a cancer charity. His Dad's illness had appeared out of the blue and he had just wanted to do something for him.

Which was always his problem. The poor bastard had always wanted to please his old man. The University that he never wanted to go to, the city job that pissed him off, the 'perfect' girlfriend. Bethany was from a family that not only had the right status but even had the correct sort of silver spoon hanging out of their mouths when they were born. Which is why all this smoking bollocks made no sense.

I was about to explore the whole marathon ditching decision further when some bird who was about a hundred and ninety-six came up to the table and said:

"Are you Gabriel?"

He really needed to change his tinder settings. Gabe smiled and held up five fingers to indicate how long he was going to be and then vanished into the pub to talk to her. Fags still on the table and I the lighter telling me to 'cowboy up' on the table. Twenty-five minutes later than he said he was going to be, Gabe remerged.

"Hang on, "he said gliding passed the table. He walked over to a piece of fencing which was only used to cover up the fact that bins were stacked behind it. Gabe vanished behind it and then reappeared with an empty ashtray. Just as the landlord walked into the garden.

"What the fucks going on with you and that ashtray son?"

I mean, it was like he read my mind.

"I was just emptying it,"

"Yeah, all over the fucking place, you know I've got CCTV in this pub, don't you? I had to have that bloody pool table cleaned after you dumped that crap on it."

And that's when I realised that it wasn't just when we were drinking. He had been coming in here without me.

Despite being in his sixties the landlord moved quickly. He was tall, thin and his arms and legs were all angles. Sharp, menacing, almost arachnid in the way he covered the distance between him and Gabe.

A nobbled finger shot out and hovered an inch away from Gabe's nose.

"You're a drink and a smoke off being barred old son. One more and that's it. I've fucking told you already."

With which the landlord scooped up the empties and exited.

Gabe sat down, and I looked at him with raised eyebrows.

"Well?" I said.

"Shit yeah, my round," he said and then followed the angry landlord into the pub leaving me none the wiser.

I fucked up.

I mean Gabe wasn't going to tell me and with the smoking and drinking on the increase I was worried. Like I said he was my friend.

His mum had passed years ago, and he didn't have any other siblings, so I didn't have a lot of choice as to who I could talk to about it. I decided to meet up with Beth. And was brutally outwitted.

"I don't know if I should say anything," she said eyeing the beer-soaked environs of the Jackdaw with a look of mild disdain on her face.

"You know he's not himself Beth, I'm just worried about him, I mean drinking by himself."

"How do you know he's been doing that?"

"Landlord mentioned it the other day when we were in here."

"When was that?"

"Couple of days ago, something like that."

She looked thoughtful for a moment and said 'Tuesday' under her breath.

"Well at least it was you and not another girl, that's what I thought it was and probably trash at that," she said.

Like I said, a tad conservative.

"Why did you think he was out with a girl? That's not really his thing Beth."

"Neither is drinking in this chavhole, but he's been doing that, hasn't he? And then there's the smoke."

"Yeah, like a chimney. Do you know when he started on the fags?"

This time the disdain was not mild. She stared at me, the corners of her mouth tight.

"I meant that I thought that whoever this girl was she must have been cheap because he smelled of her second-hand smoke," she said.

It wasn't second hand and now she knew it.

F.u.c.k ucked.

Beth knew nothing, and I'd dropped him in it.

"Matthew you had better tell me everything and you had better tell me--"

She stopped as she stared over my shoulder, surprise slowly turning into rage.

I looked around to see Gabe walk in with a mid-twenty's stunner. That's an attractive girl for your information. We would say things like that back when we were allowed to use words to describe a hot piece.

Gabe just looked at us with a deadpan expression and then turned and walked back out of the pub leaving the girl standing there looking confused. Beth shot out of her seat, knocking the table hard enough that both drinks spilled.

"Get back here Gabriel," she said. Beth pushed her way passed the lost girl, hissing the word 'tart' at her as she did so and vanished outside to pursue Gabe. As I was too busy watching the drama I never noticed the landlord spider up and start to wipe the table clean of alcohol.

"I ought to ban both you lads. It's only of respect for the Bowman that I don't," he said.

That was Gabe's surname.

"Respect for him, you were going to throw him out the other night," I said.

"Not that bag of balls. His old man Ricky."

No one called Richard William Bowman, 'Ricky'. At least I had never heard anyone call him that in my lifetime. Before I had time to ask anything else the Landlord had moved back toward the bar, stopping only to talk to the girl on the way.

"Now are you having a drink love, or do you want to flounce out too and ruin my paintwork by slamming doors too."

He didn't stop to receive an answer and Stunna didn't look like she was going to give him one. Her eyes darted from him to the door to me, obviously not knowing what the best course of action was.

I made it easier for her by getting up to talk to her. Like I said, she was very attractive.

(Thanks, I think)

"Are you okay?"

"Um, not really, me and Gabriel were going to have a talk and that girl seemed really angry."

I decided not to tell her that Beth was Gabe's girlfriend. I'd opened my trap a little bit too much that night already.

"She gets that way. How do you know Gabe?"

And then my friend, I got caught out for the second time that day.

"I'm his sister," she said.

She had a name.

(Cheeky sod, who's she? the cat's mother.)

It was Ellie Bowman. And she explained everything.

(And I still bloody have to.)

Gabe came back two hours later looking emotionally battered. He had obviously gone twelve rounds with Beth and it looked like the fight should have been stopped in the second. He looked horrified that I was sitting with his sister. Well, half sister as it turned out, but I waved him over before he had the chance to retreat a second time.

"Sit down mate for fuck sake, you look as happy as a bastard on Father's Day."

It had slipped out before I had even realised what I said. As Gabe sat down I risked a glance at Ellie. But, thank fuck, she was smiling.

"Nice one Oscar Wilde," she said.

(And he hasn't got any better)

"Matt I'm sorry I should have told you it's just, well you know what it's like."

"Yeah, he was a strict sod, but a bloody black sheep as it turns out eh?" I said, nodding at Ellie.

That's all it took. Gabe had a catch in his voice and tears in his eyes, but he told the story. And he looked relieved to get it off his chest.

Gabe knew that his father loved him, despite the man never showing it. And when he sat next to his old man's bed in the hospice, he still couldn't say that he loved him.

"But I do, you know, you know don't you?" Richard said, wheezing as the breaths struggled their way between the rare gaps in his lungs which were not occupied by tumours.

"I know father," Gabe said, even then trying not to meet the man's now rheumy eyes,

"I know I've been hard on you, I tried my best when your mother went, I just didn't want you to make the same mistakes I did."

"I understand, and I hope you're proud of me. Philip at Towers and Sitzler says that I could make broker in two years," said Gabe.

"That's exactly what I mean," Richard said. With some coughing, he turned and pulled a leather-bound book from underneath his pillow and gave it to his son.

"You have to be brave when Death comes for you. Take a risk. You understand that, working for Mammon son. Well I'm going to take that risk now. I have wasted my life. I don't want you to do the same."

Gabe opened the book. It was a diary. His Dad had kept a diary. A lighter and an ashtray fell out of it onto the bed. Gabe gathered them up.

"For your Mum's sake I tried to be discrete, get my fun where I could. That all ended when you came. I had to be responsible. I had to look after you both. But I always regretted it."

"You regretted me?" Gabe said.

"No, God son, no. But I regretted working eighty hours a week and watching my life reduced as my bank balance increased. I haven't got long now, I want you to read the diary, see the man I could have been, if I had just been brave enough. The man you could be when I've gone and stopped trying to make you make the same mistakes I did."

A nurse arrived then and started to refill water jugs and plump pillows, subtly signalling that Gabe had tired out his father enough. He got up to leave but his father's cough hacked broken words followed him.

"After I'm burned, I don't want you to stick an urn on a mantelpiece as a reminder of what I was. I was what I was in that diary son, remember that instead, promise me."

And Gabe did.

I knew some of it from what Ellie had told me.

(Which is still the way he understands anything.)

Gabe's Dad had been a fucking force of nature in the Jackdaw when it was rocking and a rolling. Fighting, fucking, drinking and thinking. Even after he became civilised he'd drift back to the pub and occasionally get messy.

Which is where Ellie came from. A dalliance. Her mum had never pushed the issue, but Ellie had tracked Gabe's Dad down years later and they had met on the quiet. He was dying then and had told her some of the stuff in the diary.

"So, what's with the smoking and the bloody ashtray then, what's it for?" I said to Gabe.

"Not Oscar Wilde and not Albert Einstein either eh?" said Ellie, getting revenge for the bastard joke earlier.

(Which was still bloody awful)

"I told you mate, it's for ash."

And then the penny, that had been dropping for so long it had got vertigo, finally hit the ground.

It took a while to explain to the landlord.

(John. He had a name too, Matt)

It took a while to explain to John and we got funny looks from the other patrons as Gabe emptied the ashtray onto the bar. Another of his Dad's favourite places to sit if he wasn't outside smoking or banging some chick-

(girl),

-or banging some strumpet against the bins.

(Fine. I give up.)

It was the last batch of his dad's ashes that Gabe had slowly been distributing around the pub that his father had loved. John pulled a bottle of twenty-year-old Glenfiddich from the shelf. He poured shots for us all and one for 'the Bowman'. John lit it and poured it on the ashes and we looked at Gabe.

"To living," he toasted.

We sunk them and watched as his old man had one last drink.

The suited and booted millennial, who had walked into the pub just to have a piss, asked. He had been about to walk out after relieving himself and stopped when he saw me pouring ashes onto the bar. But this time it wasn't Gabe's Dad's remains. it was Gabe's.

The city boy had wanted to know the story, so I told him. For my friend.

"And you're the landlord now?"

"Yeah--"

"Well he thinks he is," chimed in Ellie as she walked toward them from the Jackdaw's kitchen.

"Woman I haven't been able to tell one part of this story without you chipping in."

Ellie responded by slapping my arse and then quickly draping herself over me to soothe any savage beast that might have awakened. I grimaced at her with mock anger and she gave me a smacker of a kiss on the cheek.

The suited boy, Franklin I think he was called, took a holo of us with his phone. I hated those bloody things, I always looked fatter in hovering 3D.

"As I was saying, yes I am. After the whole thing with the ashtray we all started to come in here a lot more. We had a lot of good nights and then when it came up for lease me and this monster took it on. Gabe jacked his job in and travelled for a bit. Cancer got him in the end but fuck me did he have a good innings."

"Well it all sounds a bit mental to me. Working in the city and he ends up drinking and smoking his life away. You wouldn't catch me doing that, my body's a temple," said Franklin.

I smiled.

"Of course, not son"

Ellie fetched the vodka from the shelf that had become Gabe's tippie of choice. I poured it over the ashes and lit it with the phone.

"Miss you mate, save me a pew in what ever bar you're drinking in up there."

Franklin looked at the flames and seemed mesmerised for a moment and then shook himself out of it.

"Thanks for the story guys, but I've got to get back to work," he said.

"Work? It's eight o'clock," said Ellie.

"Money never sleeps Mrs," he said making for the exit.

"Hang on," I said, and Franklin turned as he opened the door. He caught the silver rectangle when I threw it to him.

Franklin looked down to find Gabe's ashtray in his hands.

"Just in case the temple ever closes," I said, as Gabe burned a little brighter.

One last time.

End