

Cutting Corners – Chapter One

by Martin JP Green

It must be all of twenty years ago, now I think about it. I can't fathom where those years went, any more than I can begin to explain that point in my life at which everything seemed to be crumbling into irreparable decay and yet when, out of nowhere, things started to solidify and even make some sort of sense. In the midst of mindless routines and a proportionate and progressive loss of focus a light suddenly went on. Most mindless was the drinking. I still do that, but in a more disciplined way, a sort of palliative process rather than the all-out self-assault that applied as I neared the end of my thirties. Why did I do it? I was reasonably well educated, experienced enough to know better, and yet Monday morning after Monday morning I found myself suicidally hungover.

So why do it? Like so many other things in my life it was a routine, one which started off as a tactic to cling on to the fleeting remnants of the weekend but which, like most routines, ending up just being what I did. Sunday night offered the last chance to stick two fingers up at the week ahead. Isobel hadn't helped over the years. Isobel and I were a 'thing', except we weren't much of a thing by then and only got together to remind ourselves of all the good reasons why she'd moved out of my cosy little cottage on the outskirts of town. Mind you, we got together a fair amount considering. It was handy for the sex as much as anything else. We sort of knew what to do and in what order. It was another routine, another pre-ordained pattern of behaviour, another way to avoid thinking or making an effort. Routines provided a prefabricated structure to hang my shapeless existence on. Sometimes they even fooled me into thinking it had actually got a shape.

Isobel was as bad as me in many ways, certainly when it came to boozing, and she smoked too, which got under my skin a bit sometimes, that is until I got so pissed I'd start bumming fags off her which got right under hers.

'Why don't you buy your own, for Christ's sake?'

'I don't smoke!' I would state with exasperating illogicality, inhaling deeply and making the most of the transitory dizziness.

Isobel and I hadn't hit it off one Sunday night which meant the occasional routine end of the weekend tumble had never materialised. Actually, for me at least, this had been a relief. I'd not been 'up to it' on a couple of occasions round about that time. A cooling off period had been agreed – not because of that but a difference of opinion. Certain haunts would be avoided by her, certain by me, all by mutual consent and all long ago established: another routine.

The difference of opinion? A clash of interests, basically. She wanted us to go to Paris the following month (August) for some exhibition or other and I'd already told the band that I'd be OK for Ironbridge. I was in a band, not a professional outfit, it was more 'vocational' than that. We played for the hell of it; fast, bluegrass stuff mostly, with a sprinkling of standards and covers and a dash of original numbers. I played banjo (still do, as it goes), quite a challenge when you'd 'done it' in the bar before the gig. The lads kept an eye on me unless it was my turn to drive the van. This task I loathed, but adhered obsessively to legal drinking limits having already been banned once for a year back in my twenties.

Ironbridge was the big bluegrass festival of the year. We were booked for the Saturday in the big tent. It was the first time they'd let us in it. It may have been an administrative error.

It was almost certainly an artistic one, but we weren't likely to draw attention to it, not till after they'd paid us - assuming they did.

Isobel wrote for an art magazine called *Art and About* which had a circulation of about thirteen. She'd been asked by the editor to review a show by some North African artist who was exhibiting for a week in Paris and at the same time as Ironbridge: the middle of August. She wasn't even getting her expenses covered, would have to make her own way there on Euro Star and then fork out for a zero-star hotel about ten miles out of the centre of the city with panoramic views of the Peripherique.

Now I was keen on Paris and not at all averse to modern art but Ironbridge the previous year had been a milestone for the band. We had drunk the local pub dry. Not just us. There had been other serious musicians in there too. Come Sunday evening, they were down to the last crate of Babycham. It was a rout! Further glories awaited us in just over four weeks.

So, there I was on the bus on the way into work on Monday morning, another wave of nausea rising with each application of the brakes. Why did I do it? My stop next. North St, bang outside the Employment Exchange or the 'Dole Hole' in common parlance. I had a shop next door which nestled in an ancient, six storeyed heap of cutlers' workshops built around a central courtyard. The frontage of the business sported a gaudy sign which said 'Cutting Corners'. We framed pictures, mirrors, posters, photographs, that kind of thing. My father used to sell cutlery in it but I had big ideas when he packed it in. I was going to bring Art to the masses. Picture framing was on a bit of a roll at the time, back in the nineties. Cutlery sales are on a roll now and picture framing is in the doldrums. It's a sign of the times. But picture framing had become a routine and, well, you know me and routines! Isobel didn't like the name though.

'Why do you call it 'Cutting Corners?' It sends out all the wrong messages, makes you sound like a market stall!' she would ask as I bemoaned the paltry takings for another week.

'Because that's what we do, cut corners, picture frame corners. And the shop is on the corner of North St and Benjamin Lane. It's a play on words. It's supposed to be witty!'

'Is that the best you can do?'

'Well, what would you call it?'

'I'd call it a day, sell up and get a job working for Stephen!'

Stephen was the editor of the local weekly rag and an old grammar school friend who had long been dangling this carrot in front of my progressively reddening nose. We used to co-edit the school magazine. I still did a bit of writing, usually when I got a bee in my bonnet about something the Council was up to. Then there was the odd song or poem I couldn't get a tune wrapped around. Unfortunately, I'd never had much confidence about the writing so most of it stayed buried away from public view, except the bits and pieces Isobel got to see, and some of the songs the band did, *I'm the Biggest Drinker in the Band* generally the one that went down best.

So as per usual on a Monday, I dithered on the pavement before entering the premises. On some occasions in the past, I had even failed to make it through the door. Today might have been such a day, the cares of life lying heavily on my shoulders as they were, but Daisy spotted me through the glass door and gestured frantically for me to enter. What could this portend? Had there been a robbery over the weekend? Had her eldest son been spirited away by the press gang?

'Thought you wasn't coming in for a minute!' she snapped with a meaningful glance at the clock behind the counter.

'No, well I had to check the VAT returns before I came out.'

Why did I have to lie to my own employee like this?

'VAT returns, is it?'

Daisy seemed unimpressed with the alibi. Had I used it before? These occasions were becoming worryingly frequent. Mind you, at seventy plus years of age, Daisy had probably heard them all before from any number of pathetic male specimens. I made a desperate and futile bid to reassert my authority.

'Did you bank Saturday's takings?'

'For what it was worth, I did. We only took twenty quid and one bloke brought back four pictures what need new mounts cutting. They looked like Terry'd cut them with a bread knife!'

Terry was doing all the framing by then. I just handled the books while Daisy manned the counter. On our day we were a formidable team. Sadly, our day was essentially a thing of dreams. I'd had Terry since he left school. He was a paranoid hypochondriac with a chip on his shoulder a foot and a half deep. It was a constant strain just to keep him in good spirits, his moods having a tendency to plunge without warning and with the odd catastrophic bi products. He tried to kill himself with whisky and pills when his girlfriend chucked him, would probably have pulled it off too if he'd taken Paracetamol instead of Rennies.

'Is he in yet?' I asked more in hope than expectation. Daisy tossed her head back as far as her aged neck would permit.

'Huh! Said he was going to an all-night party on Saturday. He's probably still sleeping it off!'

I warmed to Terry for a moment. We had this much in common at least: a penchant for high living and brotherhood in the regrettable after effects.

'Was he.....all right?'

'Terry? Oh aye! Right as ninepence. He was sat in the shop all afternoon chewing the fat with us. Thought he'd never shut up.'

I scowled at this. I'd left Terry a fair amount of framing to do and now it seemed he probably hadn't finished it. I made a move for the back door which leads from the shop into the *shop*. The workroom had the same name as the retail space. It dated back to my dad's days when they used to grind scissors in there. In the cutlery world the buffing and grinding space is always called the 'shop'. We used a slightly different inflexion to distinguish the two. A pile of empty gilt frames stood in my way which I demolished before I could check my stride. My delicate nerves shrilled in horror at this unforeseen acoustic trauma.

'What the fucking hell are these doing here?'

'Mind your tongue!' Daisy scolded, a bit rich coming from an ex 'buffer girl' with a lexicon of profanity at her disposal which would have brought a blush to the cheek of a Glasgow docker. I bit my tongue, nevertheless.

'Terry left them there,' she continued. 'Said he'd pick them up on his way out. Must've forgotten to.'

‘Oh, he did, did he?’ I growled with a knowing narrowing of the eyes. From my father I had inherited an intuitive mistrust of the moral standards of my employees and this had absolved both of us over the years from the burden of having to scrutinise our own.

‘A man was in just now. Said he’d arranged to meet you. I told him you was always late in on Mondays and you’d probably forgotten.’

‘Thanks for that, Daisy!’

‘Anyway, he left some pictures he’d painted for you to frame up for his wedding anniversary. They’re in a packet on the bench next door.’

‘Did he say what he wanted doing with them?’

‘Just plain frames. Said you could pick the mount card. They’re watercolours. I said you’d probably use the ivory.’

‘Maybe, maybe.’ I qualified, unwilling to surrender the prerogative even though Daisy had got as good an eye as anyone, certainly as good as mine. I had to keep the upper hand in some matters though, for Christ’s sake!

I picked my way gingerly through from the shop into the *shop* and prepared myself for the inevitable. The inevitable didn’t disappoint. The *shop* was a complete shambles, bits of mount card scattered next to the guillotine, shorn stumps of moulding strewn under the mitring machine, hardboard sections of all sizes leaning against any available upstand or lying on the floor ready to slip under your feet at any moment and send you flying.

‘If a factory inspector came in here he’d have a field day!’ I muttered, resolving to get Terry to tidy the place up when he eventually deigned to turn in. On the bench was a packet with a note taped to it. An elegant script conveyed the following -

“Please frame these to hang as a set of four. Needed by the weekend. I’ll collect them on Friday. Michael Quarmby.”

With a stab of guilt I remembered the telephone conversation last week when we’d arranged the rendezvous I’d just welched on. Michael Quarmby was an elderly, gently spoken and well thought of writer who lived in Heatherholme, a large village, more of a small town really, just outside Cliffe field.

Cliffe field, home to me, John Aloysius Chrism; home to Daisy, Isobel and Terry; home to ‘Cutting Corners’, God help the place!

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