

Ian Brotherhood

# Tales of the great unwashed

Bill dropped one of the bags as he struggled to get the pram into the close. The woman downstairs was right behind and she picked it up for him.

'Some day Bill, eh?' she said, but he didn't answer. He pulled the pram up the last of the four steps and held the door open for her to get in out the rain. 'Thanks,' he said, hand out, but she passed by still carrying the bag with the eggs and milk and frozen stuff. He reached out to take the bag but she held onto it and walked a bit ahead. 'You're alright son, I'll take this,' she said, and she looped the carrier over the arm already bearing her own shopping, then used her free hand to take off the wee square of plastic she used to cover her blue hair. She was a nosey old bastard, always had been, that's what Sharon said. He remembered then that he had to remind Sharon about that call earlier, but he didn't know what it had been about. If he hadn't written it down he'd have to do it as soon as he got in. Factors. Factories? The bastards wanted money anyway.

'Aye, it's a filthy day to be out with the weans right enough,' she said. Young Billy was already half-way up the first flight. Bill shouted after him, 'Billy, get back here!' but the lad kept climbing.

'He's coming on grand the wee one,' she said then, all smiles and close enough to him that he could smell stale milky tea and strong fags off her and it gave him the boak. Ever since the 'accident' he'd hated the smell of cigarettes, even though he'd been a heavy smoker himself before it.

'That's him two now eh?' she asked.

Questions again. Sharon said she was going to bust the old bastard one of these days what with her always asking about him and the weans, and were they still getting the health visitor up, her knowing fine well it was the Social checking up and just wanting to get a bit of gossip for her pals down at the bingo.

'Billy, I'm not going to tell you again, I swear it, get down here now!' he shouted then, but the lad was too busy staring at old Mrs whatever-the-fuck-she-was-called, now nearing the top of the second flight and her own front door.

Bill went up the stairs fast, Louise firmly under his arm, and Billy made a bid to start up the second flight, laughing excitedly like it was some game or something, but Bill grabbed his arm hard and yanked him down off the third step, and the lad sort of swung in mid-air, his arm twisting too fast so Bill dropped him and he hit the landing, cushioned by his thick quilted 'Broncos' jacket, and when he got up again he grabbed onto the railings and made a swift descent of the first flight as Bill followed him down.

So Billy took one of the carriers, and Bill managed with the pram under one arm, Louise under the other, and the other two carriers hanging from the fingers clasped under Louise. Old fuck-face was already inside but Bill knew she'd be standing at her wee peek-hole at the door, watching out and seeing if he was doing anything to the weans, ready to pounce on the fucking phone and tell her pals.

But eventually they got in, and even though it was just the third floor it might as well have been

the top dancer of a high-rise. His fingers were all stiff and cramped, red and wet and freezing cold. The boy's face was the same colour, his chin and mouth all wet with snot and slabbers.

Bill stuck the telly on for Billy, then put Louise on the couch behind where the lad was sitting. 'Right, you watch her son,' he said, and went to the bog for a quick slash before getting some grub for them. Louise could wait until she woke again, and she'd be due a feed. The trickle at the bottom of the bottle told him she'd almost finished the last batch but he couldn't be sure when exactly he'd given her that—just before they went to the shops? That must've been, two, half-past? What was it now anyway? She had to be overdue for another feed, but he'd let her sleep anyway.

It didn't take long to get the stuff out and into the fridge, but most of it went into the freezer. He meant to check all the stuff against the receipt but he'd forgotten all about it until he found the receipt in the third bag, so he took out what he'd already put in the fridge and freezer then started checking it. Then it became a waste of time when he realised that he'd been putting tins of beans and spaghetti into the fridge. Should've been the cupboard, so he stopped checking against the receipt. Sharon always said you should, but it would take too long. Anyway, if she really wanted to do it she could do it herself later.

He poured most of a tin of beans on top of the three potato waffles and stuck the lot into the micro for five minutes. Sharon usually cooked the waffles first but it was all he same. He stayed well away from the micro when it was on—Sharon always said how it was bad rays and shite coming out the thing so he always made sure that Billy was in the room when they were cooking so he wouldn't get blasted and end up fucked-up like him.

Starting to think about the accident always got him het up to fuck, so he left the kitchen and went to the bathroom to get a towel to dry his hair. Bastard rain had been on all day. Summertime. It was a song that came back then, just a snatch, Summertime and the living is easy. So, it was alright anyway, that was the shopping in, and a few quid left so he could maybe see the guys for a jar later if Sharon got home on time. This was, what, Thursday, aye, had to be, so she'd be home before seven.

He went back into the kitchen and checked the calendar where Sharon marked up her hours in advance every week. Thursday? Right—Thursday—eight to six. Billy helped him to get Louise washed and changed and then it was back into the room and Billy wanted to see even more cartoons, so that was okay, it kept him happy. Bill started reading the paper, trying to get through the Sports pages, but it wasn't really making much sense. He could get the headlines about this new signing from some German club, but the name of the outfit stumped him time and again and he kept having to go back to the start and try again. He had to get the name right. That was the sort of thing the boys would laugh at—if you tried to get your tongue round some foreign team or player's

name and made a cunt of it then you got a beast- ing for it. Fuck, wasn't that how he'd had the 'accident' in the first place? Something trivial, nothing at all really, but then there's a bit of name-calling and then it's just mad fists and feet flying and jeers and strangers joining in and it's just a bit of rough play but then he's on the deck and there's that kick from nowhere and it all goes brilliant white then dead and it's hospital-time, and will-you-be-bringing-charges, and sorry-we-can't keep you and all that shite.

He eventually folded the paper and let it lie in his lap. He was maybe dozing a bit what with the room getting dry and too warm with the electric fire. That was making Louise's skin dry, so Sharon said, so he got up and turned it down a bit. Billy started on about wanting crisps 'cos he knew they'd got some earlier, so he went and got a couple of packets and that would keep him quiet for a wee while anyway, and it was still more cartoons. It was almost six. Sharon would be home soon if she managed her bus. That reminded him what he had to tell her. That old bastard underneath. What the fuck was her name? He could never get it, even though they'd been neighbours for what, three years, more now? It didn't matter, but he would be sure to tell Sharon 'cos she was a bit like-that with the old fuck, wanted to know if she put a foot wrong. Something had been said one day, but he couldn't remember what it was. It had put Sharon's nose out anyway, and she was dying for any excuse to go down there and sort her out.

Something else to tell her. That call. He went into the kitchenette and found a bit of paper, took it back into the room, but there was no pen to be found. Into the bedroom. Billy came in after him, not saying anything, just sort of girning stuff about Mum and wanting something. What do you want? Moan, moan, girn. What is it then? Grabbing at his legs, wanting lifted up, sucking his thumb and all sorts. Back into the room and plonked him back in front of the telly. The Superwings were coming on so Billy quieted again and slumped down at the sofa.

Then it was old cartoons, the sort Bill had watched himself when he was wee, different colours, different faces altogether, but Billy didn't like them, started on about wanting Superwings back. The phone started up, bastard thing was too loud, he'd have to work out that volume button, get it turned down. Sharon. Late. Something about that cow Julie not turning up, she had to stay 'til nine. But there's a game on, I was going to go down see the boys and that—but it's overtime, right, you're always moaning otherwise so tough, and that was that.

He went back into the room. Louise was still out for the count. Maybe seven before she'd wake again for a feed. Half six? Billy was half conked out, eyelids giving it heavy close. Fuck it then. He checked the paper. The game wasn't even on the telly, only being on the satellite. Fuck all else on.

Bill checked what he had left. Twenty-three quid and some change. Enough to get a few cans anyway and maybe a quarter-bottle, that would never break the bank, and if she was getting a few

extra hours anyway, well, it was only fair seeing as he never got out the fucking door.

He made it quiet going down the stairs. That old cow would know that Sharon wasn't home. He wasn't even out the close when he remembered that he still had to write something down about factories, factors, money overdue, whatever. He should've said to her on the phone and that would've been that.

Round to the offy and a half-dozen cans, but no quarter-bottle 'cos he remembered there was still some stuff in the kitchen after the New Year, some brandy or rum or something that Sharon had got in for her old dear coming up, so that would save a few bob. Well, she could hardly complain if it was just a few cans. Then back home rapid, quiet as fuck up the stairs, and Billy was asleep where he'd left him, dead to the world.

It wasn't much past seven. Billy looked alright, happy enough out for the count and Louise still breathing nice and quiet right beside him. He kept the telly low, just some crappy sit com but the jokes were too fast so he gave up watching and went back to the paper. No point looking at the Sports pages either—why spend the time trying to get the news on this and that, all foreign bastards anyway, and he wouldn't get to see the lads tonight and tomorrow's gossip would be all different. He went to the start of the paper, skipped all the heavy politics shite with the usual beaming gobs and promises and election shite, but then, near the start, came a familiar face, none other than good old Elton, Elton John having his birthday. He was hardly recognisable, all painted white face and done up in a dress and all sorts.

He put the paper down, remembering that he had to write down that message before he forgot. The piece of paper was still on the table where he'd left it earlier. He went through to the kitchen and rooted about in the drawer under the cutlery drawer until he got a pen, then went back in, wrote down 'factors called about money' and then put it on the mantelpiece where Sharon would be sure to see it, so that was that done.

He cracked open the third can. The beer was sweet and warmish, nothing like drinking it in the pub. That reminded him about the stuff that was left. In the cupboard over the cooker. He went through. There were two bottles. One was dry vermouth, almost a full half-bottle of that, and the other was some mad liqueur-type thing in a cracking curvy dark-green bottle that had hardly been touched. Bendick, Benidectin, fuck it, it was forty-odd percent so it was the real stuff.

Sharon would probably get back about ten, what with the buses being a bit dodgy after six, so the wee one would need fed and changed again before then. He went back in with the liqueur stuff and a glass full of ice and checked on her. She was still sound. The wee man had wakened again but was just lying looking up at the ceiling, all sweaty and red. Alright son, he asked him, and the wee man just stared on as if he was looking at something right through the roof, still dreaming about something maybe. Bill fetched through some more crisps and a glass of milk for Billy, but the boy just ate the crisps and got back to watching the telly. It was a drama about vets, so he let him watch that, and went back to the paper.

He found the page he'd been reading earlier. That was it—old Elton was fifty, so he'd had a big party somewhere and invited all and sundry who were pop stars or not, and it cost thirty grand. He stopped and read it again. No, it wasn't thirty grand, it was thirty grand for the cunt's outfit. No. He read it again. The fuck had hired some hotel or other, and that cost him a hundred grand what with the spread and all that and then the costume had cost twenty-something grand to make, and then there was the cost of getting him to the place

because the whole outfit was so big, like a Marie Antoinette sort of get-up, that he couldn't go in a car but it had to be a fucking removals van, and he had the van all decked out with candelabra and all these hanger-on lads dressed as angels and whatever and the whole thing altogether cost more than three hundred grand. Three hundred thousand quid. He closed the paper and went back to watching the box.

The liqueur stuff was nice. Very very sweet, but nice with a bit of lemonade in it. Billy took some lemonade. The glass of milk was still lying there, so Bill took that through and stuck it in the fridge. Waste-not-want-not Sharon always said. So that was alright.

After eight the wee one was overdue again, and even though she hadn't really stirred, Bill woke her up and gave her another bottle. Billy had fallen asleep on the sofa so Bill draped the sofa cover over him and tucked it under his neck in case he caught some of that draft from the door.

Louise would probably be needing another change but he left her. He was feeling a bit knacked now, and didn't really fancy fucking about with basins of water and all that. Besides, Sharon would be home soon, so they could do it together then. She might want a charge of this stuff. There was enough left for a couple each.

But she didn't come back. It was half-nine, then it was ten. There was a film on. He'd started watching it but wasn't really following what was happening. Black and white, war-time stuff, lovers separated, all that shite. There was some good stuff with fighter planes and beach-scenes, sort of Dunkirk stuff, but then it got bogged down in some mad plot so he flicked about and it was this one on about politics, and there was the news, and such another one was on about fucking stock prices and shite so eventually he put it back to the film and turned it right down and put a music tape on. It was songs that his Dad used to sing when he got pissed, all sort of maudlin and supposedly stirring and that, and he didn't even really know the words but he stuck it on anyway and hummed along.

He cracked open the last can. It was almost eleven. She must've gone out with her mates or something. So fuck her anyway. Billy woke and started getting hyper, crying about Mum and wanting something again, and it was what-do-you-want but no answer, only crying, and the crying eventually woke up Louise and when he pulled back the cover to take her up he got a waft of shite and knew he couldn't get away with leaving her any longer, and there was Billy about his knees pulling and crying to get up, and he half kicked him away so he could get through the door to the kitchen to get her bottle. If he fed her first, that would quieten her, then he could change her again.

He got back into the room and settled down. Billy had eaten the piece-and-stork he'd made him, and was starting again with trying to get up between him and Louise, so he told him to get down between his legs and watch telly 'til he'd fed Louise, and he did for a few minutes, sort of sobbing and whining and rubbing his eyes and Bill tried to feed Louise, but she wouldn't take the bottle, jerking away like she was getting wind or something and kept up this mad crying, like really painful, and he put her over his shoulder just like Sharon would, and patted her back and patted her arse and waved her to and fro and the more he did it the more he felt kind of sick in himself like it would be him to belch first or maybe even throw-up, then Billy was between his legs again and pulling at his arms and giving it scream, bawl, about Mum and where's Mum, and Bill shouted to him to shut-up, and then to fuck-up, but the lad kept going, giving it full-tilt 'til he was that way that he was crying so hard that he wasn't making

any noise at all and his face was just this big red blot of pure misery and pain, so Bill shouted to him again to shut-the-fuck-up but he just screamed even louder, eyes screwed shut and tears and snot everywhere, and Louise shook her wee head away from the bottle and let out a roar and it was Billy's fault for upsetting her so Bill shouted again for Billy to SHUT-THE-FUCK-UP and as he did he banged his knees together on either side of the boy's head and he dropped right away onto the carpet.

Bill tried to get Louise to take more of the bottle, but then she screamed again and shook her face away from the bottle and then he remembered that he hadn't checked the milk so he shook some onto his wrist like Sharon always did and he got a shock at how hot it was. He grabbed her up and through to the bedroom, put her in her cot and went back to see Billy. The lad was face down on the carpet. Bill picked him up, turned him to face him, but the lad was out. It was time for bed anyway.

Bill put the wee man in the centre of the double bed, then pulled the covers up to his chin. He remembered that night again, the kicks coming in, the flash of lightning.

He went to the bog and honked up until there was nothing left. When he got back into the room, the wee man was exactly where he'd left him, eyelids twitching, slabbers making a damp patch on the pillow. Bill sat on the edge of the bed, leaned over, and palmed his hand across his son's head. Something shifted beneath the lad's scalp, a slight movement of bone, a ridge where it should be flat.

She would be home soon.