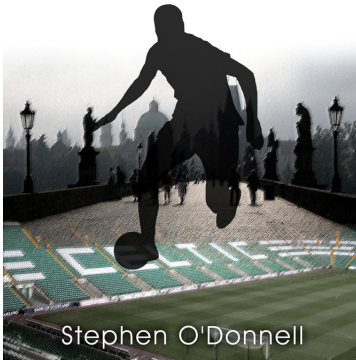


# PARADISE ROAD



## **PARADISE ROAD**

By Stephen O'Donnell

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## **Dedication**

FOR MY GRANDMOTHER EILEEN O'DONNELL  
1922 – 2012

All those candles worked in the end, Nana

## **Acknowledgements**

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Alan, Monica, Paul, Kevin, Lizzy, Irene and Lisa

Special mention also to Sandy Jamieson, my publisher and Isobel Freeman, my editor, at Ringwood Publishing, and to David Fletcher and Joe Bradley.

Huge thanks to all

Ryan is marketed as heart throb to adolescent girls, who form a growing element of United's 'demographic'. Following on from a soft-soap Ryan autobiography, with its black-and-white shots of the boy wonder semi-naked, there is a bedspread, Ryan looking sexy-but-vulnerable, keeping your bed warm every night. No similar duvets appear to have been made featuring Gary Pallister.

David Conn, "*The Football Business*"

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## Part One

### The Rangers End

#### Chapter One - Another Planet

They're no happy these bastards, are they, unless they're giein every one ay us grief? This game's been switched to an early kick-off in a misguided and, I think it's fair to say, unsuccessful attempt to tackle the dreaded alcohol issue. Looks like it's back to the drawing board wi their latest plan. This place is heavin wi Celtic fans, all firing into their Guinness, their alcopops, their expensive watered-down lager; you name it, they're drinking it. I can even make out one or two mid-morning spirits already being tipped doon their throats an aw. It's all because ay the by-laws, strictly speaking you're no supposed to serve the bevvy before a certain hour ay the day here. What's the rule, 1pm...? Noon...? I doubt too many of this crowd knows or even cares, but that's how they've shifted the game. This is the solution the Polis have come up wi, in conjunction with the clubs, in conjunction with the media, in conjunction with the browbeaters at the S.F.A. Get them oot their beds before the fuckin post arrives. That way, they'll no be able to get a drink in them before they get up to the ground. That's the idea anyway, I'd hate to be the one who has to tell them.

The pub's busy, but every face is known to the proprietor and the doors are closed. Bus and social conveners wander vaguely about, shouting out names and distributing tickets. Everywhere people are laughing wildly and chatting anxiously, no able to shut up or stand still for two minutes, which is a pain when you're waiting on your mate to come back fae the bar. Wee Coyler does well though, twisting his way through the odd 'Sorry, son', 'On you go, pal', 'There you are, Martin' and arriving back wi three pints ay the Nigerian lager.

"You don't want to break the law, dae you, but you're no exactly left wi much choice, eh?" I observe, savouring the stout's bitter, creamy taste. God, I love this stuff. It's imbued with mysterious, revitalising properties, one decent-sized glug is all that's required to feel its immediate restorative effects. Just what you need after a Saturday night out on the ran-dan, chasing the Glasgow talent to all hours. At least it was Skelton that was daein most ay the chasing last night, I dimly seem to remember. He was treating aw the lassies to his 'I was a male model' routine which, considering the face Skelton has on him, takes a fair amount ay brass neck. I told him, he had as much chance wi that line as his team had the day, and so far at least I've been proved right because I lost count of the number ay times he was hunted. Later on, I caught up wi him on George Square at Christ knows what time, slumped on the steps, waiting for a night bus. The seagulls and pigeons boldly helping themselves to what was left ay his pie supper. When the bus finally arrived he wasny for moving, so I just had to leave him there. Let's hope his bad luck continues for a few more hours yet.

"You're no breakin nuhin," Coyler informs me. "It's him that's serving you."

"Is that right?"

"Aye. And he's covered an aw, it's a private event. There's nae cash registers open, you put a fiver in the glass for the cause, and that's it."

I'm surprised at Coyler, there's no way a man of his calibre should be taken in by that garbage. Maybe it's just the time ay day and he's no fully into his stride yet, although I'm vaguely aware as well that he could be trying it on wi me.

"What are you saying, Martin? You've no fallen for that old line, have you? The war's over, have you no heard? That donation you gied him is going right into his back pocket, believe me," I assure him.

I'm still searching Coyler's face for any sign of a wind-up, but either way he's no letting on. He's decided he's no speaking to me and is just quietly sipping his pint. I can't say I blame him, I think this boy's in pretty much the same state as me, he'll feel a lot better wi a few cans and a couple ay his loose reefers on the go. Just as well we don't have the McGoldrick boys here to remind us that, regardless of ceasefires and peace processes, the struggle for a United Ireland is still ongoing, and continues to depend on the generosity of ordinary people. It's no that I don't agree. In fact, I agree completely. The Free State was only ever a stepping-stone in my book. But I cany be bothered with any ay that nonsense right now, there'll be plenty ay time for aw that later on. And the truth is, I couldny have cared less where Coyler's fiver was going. After last night and the heid I had on me, he could have gied it to David Murray as long as there was a pint ay Guinness heading my way. I swear, the bastard that started us on they double vodka red bulls has some serious fuckin explaining to dae, I'm no kiddin.

I take another big swally from my pint glass, and as I do, I notice, mid-gulp, that I've become locked in eye contact with none other than Jock Stein. The big man and the rest of the Lisbon Lions are smiling broadly down at me; so is Kenny Dalglish, Danny McGrain, Paul McStay, and there's the real King Billy - McNeill - holding up the European Cup. I know we have a tendency to go on about this, I don't know how many times I must have heard it aw myself, but that's the image which captures the high point of the club's history. Vindication in one photograph of the worthy ideals of the club's inception. Don't believe what the animals say, yes Celtic was unashamedly Irish and Catholic in its origins, and the supporter base across the world today is still drawn extensively from that community, but so what? It's only when that starts to become a problem for people that the bigotry kicks in. Way back in the nineteenth century the decision was taken that Celtic would only employ people on the basis of their ability, a concept the Huns were still coming to terms with as the twenty-first century hurtled towards us. Orange bastards, man. The thing is, they've nae excuse either. They can't trot out the old line about standards of the day, that's just the way things were back then, because all the while, right from the off, they had Celtic alongside them, conducting themselves in an appropriate manner. If the club I followed was indulging in those kind ay practices, checking up on people's names and backgrounds, rummaging around in their past in order to find out what school they went to, and refusing to sign players on the basis of their religion, then my attitude would have been quite simple - fine, you do that, but I'm no gony support you. And I'm pretty sure a lot of other Celtic supporters, down the decades, would have felt the same way. The fact that Rangers managed to escape any form of serious censure for so long, in the light of such blatant and overt discrimination, only goes to highlight the complicity and indulgence they were afforded by the media, and other institutions and pillars ay the establishment. This country didn't exactly blaze a trail for equal opportunities employment. I'm only glad that Celtic never went down the same route, because then the supporters just wouldn't have been interested. The club would never have been special, it would never have grown into what it became, and McNeill wouldn't be up there, haudin up the Big Cup.

"There the bus," I nod, as the awkward big vehicle hauls itself into The Gallery car park.

"Haud on just now Kevin. Nae rush, eh?" Coyler tells me.

"No, I'm just saying. Take your time, enjoy your pint. After you're done wi that, it's Tennents Lager aw the way," I laugh, holding up my carry-out.

One or two of the Lisbon boys have been in this pub. Willie Wallace is a Kirkie man himself and McNeill, Auld and a few others have all turned up here at one time or another for various functions and anniversary celebrations. Wee Jimmy Johnstone was always at his exuberant, inebriated best. One time he came up to my da and was shaking his hand. I think the old boy was a wee bit star-struck, all he could manage to say to his idol was, "For twenty-odd years I've been wanting to shake your haun Jimmy, and now here you are, shaking mines."

I was never really one for that sort ay hero worship masel, but I suppose that's one thing I could always ask wee Jinky, if I ever see him or any of the other members ay that team in here again; what's it like having your picture sprayed over every wall ay this pub? It's some sight that's on display here, there are a multitude of images everywhere you look, no just of Celtic, but the flags and colours of many ay their opponents can be seen as well. The effect is to provide a fairly well-detailed, illustrative history of the club, which only goes to offer a bittersweet reminder, given the team's present circumstances, of the kind of illustrious company that Celtic used to keep, and hopefully will keep again soon.

Not today though.

Millsy's pleased to see that I'm up and about and have managed to put in an appearance the day.

"You get a ticket Garra, aye?" He shuffles through the ranks with a broad smile on his face. "Well done! I wasny sure you'd make it."

"I wasny sure masel, Darren," I acknowledge. "It was a last minute thing. I was up the house last night and the old man calls me to the phone. He's wantin me to speak to his mate Jamesy Gallacher, you know Jamesy, aye? I'm wondering what this is aw about, then Jamesy goes to us, 'Do you want to go to the game Kevin, right enough? There's a spare sitting here and I've nae takers.' I'm trying to tell him, 'Stay right where you are Jamesy, don't fuckin move or dae anyhin, will you, I'll be right there.' The old boy's just laughing at us, telling me to come round and pick it up if I want it."

"He paid forty pound for his," Millsy points to a rather sheepish looking Danny Igoe. Danny's wearing a Celtic shirt with a big number 32 on the back. Across his shoulders, where conventionally you'd expect to see the player's name, is written the word 'COUNTIES'. I swear, following this club gies you a better understanding of Irish geography and history than you'd get fae any school.

"That's no real. Couldn't have been a Celtic fan if he took forty pound aff you," I suggest.

"Fuckin wasn't either," Danny confirms gloomily, but deep down I know he'd have probably coughed up twice that amount. I better not mention it, but all I paid was the price for a few cans of TL that I stopped off and bought on the way round to Jamesy's. He wasn't going to take them either, but eventually he accepted a four-pack off us, leaving me to keep a few tins back for the day.

"We're heading out now, you coming?" I think Coyler is starting to get itchy feet. He's drained his pint already and now he seems eager for action.

"Aye, we'll be right with you, Martin," Millsy tells him. "Give us five minutes."

I finish my drink and big Duffy, who guards the pub's rear entrance, lifts the steel shutters for us and we're among the first on the bus, settling into our seats pretty much right up the back. Coyler's in the row behind and I'm next to Michael McAleer, who we picked up in the pub earlier on. Young Michael was pretty much by himself in there, but there you go, that's what these ballots can do for you. He was pouring what looked like quite a tidy sum of money into that fruit machine that sits in the corner. The wee twally ended up rooked, so I bought him a drink. I can't say I know Michael all that well, he was a good few years below us at St. Ninian's. Not a bad wee football player though, I seem to remember. I mind his big sister though, that's for sure. Nicola McAleer was a pure darling, and a dead nice lassie as well. Inevitably though, because of her looks and her roving eye, she was the subject of many a scurrilous and unfounded rumour. Big Tooncy was one who was always bragging that he'd went with her, it's just a shame you can't believe a word big Tooncy says. He has a bit of a track record, does Tooncy, when it comes to boasting about his exploits with Catholic girls, which he's happy to elaborate for you quite openly to your face, usually embellishing his sordid stories with all the lurid details that his twisted imagination can conceive of. And there's never any notion that he might be giving offence, either to any Tims, or women, or anyone with half a brain who might be within earshot of one of his ridiculous rants. This is because for Tooncy, his own prejudices are merely a watered down version of the much more sinister and calculated sectarianism passed on to him down the generations. The boy probably believes he's behaving like an enlightened new man, sharing a bit of banter with his Catholic mates, and in comparison to some of his elders, he could well be right. You don't want to stand in the way of progress, unlike his old man, at least Tooncy'll not think twice about inviting you into his hooose. With Nicola though, he had overstepped the mark. She angrily confronted him in front of all his pals, and he was forced to admit that, no for the first time, he'd been talking a load of shite, claiming unconvincingly that he'd mixed Nicola up with some other bird from the opposite end of the attractiveness spectrum, who he had in fact copped off with. I'm tempted to ask Michael if they still stay in touch, but I decide it's probably not a good idea. Young guys like that can be quite overprotective of their big sisters, one false word here and I don't think I'll be his new pal for much longer.

"I wish to fuck they'd hurry up man," Michael remarks, suddenly sounding a wee bit anxious beside me, as the pub gradually empties out.

"Stay cool, Mikey," I advise him. "I don't think we're going to miss the game or nothin."

"Aye but it's the nerves, man, is it no?" he suggests, plausibly enough. "Aw this sitting about before we go to these games, it's bad for the fuckin nerves, man, sure it is?"

"It's no easy," I concede. "I'm in a similar state myself. I'll feel a lot better once we're three of us up."

"I'd settle for that right now Garra, I'm telling you. I can't stand this waiting about."

"It's Mister 'cool hand' Coyler there," I indicate. "He makes you feel worse because he's that laid back, is that not right Martin?"

Coyler has lit his reefer and is standing up to open a window. "What's keeping them, Willie?" I shout down the front at the old legend, Willie McCreery, as he drags himself, with a groan and a wheeze, onto the bus in stages. There's a famous story of how Willie, when he used to run the bus many years ago, caused a major panic up at Tanadice one time, believing they were a man short. He had everybody waiting about for forty-five minutes, trying to figure out who it was they were missing. Every other bus is long gone, all except the Kirkie Shamrock. They're still sitting there in the Tayside twilight, then some genius goes and points out to him that he's forgotten to count himself. That's the sort of thing that legends are made of round here, believe me.

"Christ knows, son," he says to me by way of an answer.

"Fuck's sake," I complain, but I'm only letting off steam. Michael's right, it's no easy, trying to deal with the nervous tension before one of these games, especially the way Celtic have been playing recently, although Coyler's clearly mastered the art. I'm not sure how he manages it, but I take a puff on the man's reefer and pass it over, just as the bus is finally filling up.

A group of about six or seven come out the pub, laughing and stoating about, led by Eddie Orr and a crowd ay his mates. Orrie's leading them in a chorus of 'If you hate the fuckin Rangers...' I'm still waiting on the day some guy goes, I'm no clappin, I've been meaning to tell yous, I quite like them in actual fact.

"One or two of these are no gony make it in the ground," Coyler suggests and he could well be right. There's a few boys already starting to struggle and they've no even cracked open their carry-outs yet. That's what happens though, with these kick-off times, folk just get tanked up aw the earlier. Then after the game, it's a case of having aw afternoon to get as blootered as you like. That's how incidents start to spill out onto the streets, but the Polis are happy because most ay the bother takes place away fae the ground, even if their event has passed off in relative good order. It was the riots after the 1980 Scottish Cup Final, when McCluskey scored in extra time, that provoked the crackdown and they've no let up ever since. Drink was supposedly the main cause ay aw the rioting, although I personally believe the 'Huns no being able to take a defeat' line of inquiry was worthy of further investigation. I'm no sure what scenarios, real or imagined, they'll be anticipating here once more, but we'll be herded about the place like cattle again the day. Of course they claim it's all justified, because there's no the same trouble wi football crowds now that there used to be, but still, the Accident and Emergency departments of the Glasgow Infirmaries will be busy again this weekend. But as long as it doesny happen live on television, in full view of a horrified nation, exploited every inch ay the way by pontificating media cunts, then the operation will be deemed a success.

The irony is, I'd be quite happy to walk through a crowd ay Rangers boys on the way to this game and as long as they left me alone, I'd leave them alone an aw. I know that by and large the feeling on the other side wouldny be too dissimilar, most Rangers fans are just ordinary punters. Fair enough, they can be a wee bit misguided and confused at times, no two ways about that, and they seem to have a fairly slanted view, a lot ay them, on certain aspects of their own history. But still, it's the full-time bigots I take exception to, no the ordinary guys that just go to follow their team. The authorities clamp down, blame it on football supporters, move the kick-off times, segregate the fans, because that's what authorities do. Without the perception of imminent all out mayhem, their authority begins to wane. But people cany be bothered with fighting at football grounds, it's no the done thing any more. Hooliganism was never my scene in the first place anyway, the idea of young working-class boys, fae different parts ay the country, battering lumps out ay one another at football matches, while their communities and their way of life, and the industries that sustained them, were being systematically dismantled by vindictive politicians, always struck me as a pretty counterproductive way for people to express themsels. A far better idea, it seems to me, is to try and foster solidarity between supporters of different clubs, because we have enough threatened common interests to be concerned about. These Polis cunts should be targeting their resources on the real troublemakers, no ordinary football supporters, who for the most part try to maintain a good-natured approach, despite the way they're treated. But no matter what happens during the game itself, some innocent young boy will take a battering the night, for nothing other than being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and there'll be nae sign ay a copper to offer him assistance.

Millsy's been watching Eddie Orr and Georgie Matheson with interest as well, and has noted our concerns. "You're mair likely to see a dead man wi a stiffer than you are to cut out drinking before wan ay these games," he turns round and tells us, emptying his can ay lager wi a flourish, just to illustrate the point. I cany argue, he's dead right, but he might have warned us. He has me spluttering my beer all over the back of the seat in front.

"But that's rank though, is it no?" Young Michael seems less amused. "Aw the bother you go to, to get yoursel a ticket for wan ay these games, and then some Polisman goes and takes it aff you at the gate."

I think the boy can suddenly see himself being turned away from the ground for the sake ay a few cans.

"You'll be fine Michael," I assure him, as Orrie and his merry band stagger aboard. "We're awright, we're no falling about the place like that." I can understand where Michael's coming from though, because I've seen supporters turned away from Celtic Park for no particular reason dozens ay times. Harmless wee guys, who were probably just a bit the worse for wear. But I find avoiding the harassment is usually pretty straightforward, no that I've no been fairly blitzed before the odd game or two. Aw you need to dae is keep your heid doon and wait in line, as if you're queuing for communion, that way you don't gie the bastards the excuse they need. Michael's only about eighteen or nineteen, so I continue to bletcher away to the boy, giving him the benefit of my broad experience, playing the role of the guy who's been around a while, done a few things, seen it all. He seems happy enough to listen, and nods carefully at my pearls of wisdom, which is pretty funny because I'm basically just talking a load ay shite to pass the time. Feeling a bit ay a buzz, looking forward to the game, cany shut my mouth. He's a smart cookie though, Michael, I think I mind now he goes to Strathclyde University.

"Aye," he confirms sternly when I ask him. Touched a nerve there, it seems. I don't think he's that keen to advertise his student credentials, although I cany see how no. Still, at least he'll be able to sign us into

Strathy Union, there's a few ay us looking for someone with a card now that Armie's wee brother doesn't go any more. They clubs up the west end ay Sauchiehall Street are all dead studenty now, but I mind when it used to be ned city up there. We'll arrange something in a couple of weeks, I tell Michael, and we'll fire into some tidy student fanny. Michael seems to like the sound ay this idea, he's hud one or two ay they dolly birds himself, he assures me, and we agree, they're all sex maniacs. Except for one I bagged one time, who was nice enough looking but wasny much cop when I had her in the sack.

"I'd have been better aff trying to shag a fuckin ironing-board, Michael," he's amused to hear me tell him.

We're underway at last and the bus is heading up towards the Stepps bypass. Pat Kelly comes round to do a headcount, sharing a joke wi one or two folk, telling us for definite who is and who isn't playing the day. I wonder where he gets his information from, because usually it's about as reliable as yesterday's Daily Record. There's no sweepstakes or any of the usual fun and games on these occasions so he takes his three quid aff us and that's it. It's not long though before the singing starts up in patches: *Hail! Hail! The Celts are here. What the hell do we care, what the hell do we care? Hail! Hail! The Celts are here. What the hell do we care now? For it's a grand old team to play for...* and so on. I really think they should be saving it for Castle Greyskull, they'll need their voices there awright. But no: *Bring on your Hearts your Hibs your Ran-jurs, Bring on your Spaniards by the score, Barcelona, Real Madrid who the fuck you tryin to kid, Cause were out to show the world what we can do.* Somebody's clearly had enough ay this already, because they're waving a cassette about, which seems to catch the mood, and it's passed down the front to the machine.

That combine harvester song comes on, but rather than a bunch of Westcountry yokels singing about swilling cider, instead it's a soft, mocking Ulster voice we hear:

*My friend Clive, he's in the SAS  
He said a change was as good as a rest  
But then they went and posted him way down to Crossmaglen!  
He's praying to God to be in Wormwood Scrubs again*

*Oh I've got a brand new shiny helmet and a pair of kinky boots...*

That's more like it. Taking the piss out the army, you can go far wrong. Next, it's 'Sean South of Garryowen':

*It was on a gloomy New Years Eve as the shades of night came down  
A lorryload of volunteers approached the border town  
There were men from Dublin and from Cork, Fermanagh and Tyrone  
And their leader was a Limerick man, Sean South from Garryowen*

An absolute rebel classic. One or two boys are up in their chairs, looking about, singing. Numerous flags and banners and scarves have appeared and are now brazenly on display. We're starting to get into the swing ay things now and I crack open another can of TL and tuck in, just as poor old Sean South is being laid low by the oppressor's guns.

Michael's trying to convince me to swap my ticket with somebody else. The hypo wee bam has found the guy with the seat next to his and he's trying to organise some sort ay exchange. It's all because he has this big tricolour, and he wants me to stand next to him in the Broomloan, hold up the other end, and shout some heinous sectarian abuse at forty thousand Orange bastards. It's a fine idea, I'll admit. A fine idea at the best ay times, but especially the day, because these cunts aren't gony sit quietly and watch the football when they see us appear, that's for fucking sure. It's Frank McGuire who has the ticket Mike wants, and I can see the man's no that keen to part wi' it.

"It's awright Frank, never mind," I tell him, but Michael's no letting it go. I've nae idea where I'm gony be sitting the day and to be honest, I'm no really caring. I only landed this ticket at the last minute because Jamesy Gallacher decided at his age, he didn't need aw this nonsense on a Sunday afternoon and offered me up his seat. There's a big discussion being conducted with Millsy and one or two others joining in, and eventually me and Michael have a couple of seats next to one another, although Christ knows how it's all been sorted.

"Gony be magic man, we'll be right there," Michael tells me. It's pretty funny, this boy is under the impression that I'm some sort of big IRA man. I'm no sure where this idea comes from, I certainly don't

propagate the notion, even on a day like this when there's a lot ay bravado and other high jinks going on. But Michael's no the first one to have bothered me wi this, the wee apprentice at my work was the same, he was always pestering me for information about Ireland, asking me loads ay questions, treating me as if I was the font ay aw knowledge. It's not something I'm particularly comfortable with in all honesty, I'm no like my uncle Pat, who was on the civil rights march in Derry on Bloody Sunday, in 1972. He was there, singing 'We shall overcome,' on the day when it all kicked off, and there's no way he could be regarded as any sort ay sympathiser, so I don't see how I can be either. It's true, I've read Tim Pat Coogan and I know a bit about the history of Ireland, but that's no quite the same thing as being dragged out your house in the middle ay the night, or being battered by drunken polismen and shot at by soldiers. There's a fair chance that one or two of the family anecdotes may have sharpened my opinions on one or two subjects, and maybe that's what leads to the confusion; my auntie Rosemary, only just married, rushing out of their house up on Eastway in the Creggan Estate, leaving the front door wide open behind her, and running down to the Bogside looking for Pat after she heard the shots – the terrifying crack of the live rounds from the Paratroopers' self-loading rifles making an altogether different sound from the dull thud of the rubber bullets they were used to hearing on an almost daily basis in Derry at that time; then there were the letters which the parents of the victims received from Loyalist paramilitaries, saying that they hoped their sons would all burn in hell, an outrage only slightly mitigated by the fact that malicious lies were being put out by the army, claiming that the young boys they'd just murdered were all active IRA men; how the whole experience brought the community closer together in their fight for justice, and so on. But still, despite my relative proximity to some of these events, I'm of a different generation and living across the water in another country. So I always try to make sure that any opinions I hold are as fair-minded as they can be, and informed by books that are based on intelligence and academic study, no just naked sectarian self-interest, which is what you're up against half the time. I really should try and set Michael straight but the chances are, that would only provoke further inquiries, and there's no way I'm about to engage in any sort of big discussion with him right now. If he continues to look curious, I'll steer him well away from the subject.

But he's no, he's settled down now and looking out the window as the bus pulls up outside one of the most notorious Rangers pubs anywhere in the city. There's one or two of the blue uniform brigade parading about and, as well as the shouting and swearing, you can tell by some of the gestures and ridiculous posturing that's going on just how pleased they are to see us turning up on their doorstep. We don't hang about, that's for sure, we're straight out our seats, leaning over to the window, blessing them all, like the Pope does when he steps off the plane. Guaranteed to do the trick, that one. It's all too easy really, one or two ay them are already wound up like fuckin cuckoo clocks. Millsy's no shy, that's for sure, he's right up to the window, and he's giein them some right abuse, so he is.

Then something goes smash at the back of the bus.

I never seen what happened but there's a lot of simmering anger coming to the boil now, despite the calls from the older heads at the front to keep the heid and no to lose the rag. The driver swings open the door and steps out to see what's going on and about half a dozen ay us are down the front and out right behind him, Eddie Orr stomping past everyone, trying to shove his way out and across the street, which isn't easy, because the lights have changed now and the traffic's flowing round the side of us.

This big Hun is shouting across at us above the noise of the road but the stones are being flung from another direction. A group of five or six young boys are hanging about not far away, acting smart and looking guilty, but not daring to come any nearer.

"Haud on the now Orrie," I tell Eddie. The driver's round the back of the bus, inspecting the damage and I point the young crew out to him. Suddenly we're after them, but the wee arseholes are sharp out the blocks, they track suits and trainers they're wearing aren't just a fashion statement, and they've bolted it up side streets and closes, over fences and into buildings. I catch sight of one wee scally lobbing a bottle in our general direction and I tear after him. He's caught out in the open and I take the boy's legs, in the classic manner of the professional foul.

He takes a flying heider into the tarmac but he's straight back up again, staggering away to a big wooden fence, sliding along it, trying to stay on his feet while all the time I'm hovering just beside him. I can't make up my mind what to do, whether to grab the wee dick and frogmarch him back to face the music, or whether to just let him scarper. I take a haud ay him and fling him to the ground until I can decide what to dae wi him. I'm fed up wi these wee chancers trying it on by lobbing bricks, bottles, you fuckin name it, at our buses. It's no as if it's never happened before.

Then I catch sight ay the knife. It confuses me momentarily because it's been in his hand the whole time and if he'd turned round and waved it at me, there's no way I'd have been peggin it after him wi quite so much enthusiasm. My brain's trying to compute everything just a wee bit too fast, and I can't figure out what his original intentions were, but I'm glad he was left isolated because I wouldny fancy squaring up to



a whole crowd ay these bams. Either way, there's no much he's gony be daein wi the thing now, wi ma foot on his heid. I bend down and retrieve the offending weapon from his hand.

Orrie and a few others arrive.

"You got wan, Garra!"

"Wee bastart's cairrying a fuckin lockback, look!" I announce, still genuinely struggling with the full implications.

"Fuck's sake! So he is. Here, gie us it." Orrie takes the knife from my hand and opens the blade, locking it into position.

"Touch me, ma brother'll kill yous," a splutter comes from the pavement. "I knaw whit bus yous are on." The wee toerag's no exactly giein himsel much ay a chance. Even if I wanted to, there's now nothing I can do to prevent him from suffering the consequences of Eddie Orr and Georgie Matheson. I just hope the boy is gony shut his mouth and no try anything funny, because I don't think he knows what he's dealing wi here, and at that age these wee idiots can be too gallus for their ain good. The big man has a haud ay the boy. He picks up his head by the hair and shoves his face into a pile of dog shite that's lying by a nearby lamppost on a slab of broken concrete.

"Up you get pal, did you fall oor? I'm only trying to help you. Aw, you're doon again." Orrie continues to torment the boy, rubbing his face repeatedly in the dog muck. Then, using the blade, he starts scooping the shite into his mouth, face and hair, ignoring the squeals and sputters. "There's some for your big brother an aw," he tells him, the cruel pretence finally at an end.

Sirens wail in the vicinity.

"Go!" Orrie announces and he shies the blade as far as he can over a semi-demolished old factory wall and we jog back to the bus. One or two of the Rangers boys are just where we left them, still looking for all the world like they're dying to come over and start a big rammy, although to be fair to them, I think they just look that way anyway. A Polis car pulls up behind the bus and that seems to disperse them for some reason, the majority disappearing back into their manky wee hovel.

The driver's out the bus again and he wants to go and speak to the cops. This is unnecessary, folk are becoming restless now, because we're sitting here holding up the traffic outside one ay the worst fuckin holes this side ay the river. He's no very popular when he eventually returns.

"Gony get us the fuck oot ay here mate, you shouldny have come by this way anyway."

"That's fuckin three hunner pound damage tae ma bus," the driver complains.

"So whit!? No even your bus anyway, is it? Just you drive the fuckin hing," Orrie shouts at him, which cracks us up.

"Problem solved mate, wee bastarts'll no be tryin that on again," Georgie adds. I don't know if he's heard them but the driver's no gony argue and we're underway once more, with the recent turn of events being variously described and elaborated on by some of the participants. I'm being dragged into the inquest myself, which is immediately and vociferously underway, but I'm still feeling a wee bit too dazed and confused to be able to offer much insight, after such a close encounter with the big city's knife-wielding subculture. It's little more than I can do just to nod, shrug or smile at the odd reference. I sit back and check my watch - less than an hour until kick off. I empty my can ay TL and crack open another.

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Twenty minutes or so later and Ibrox Park looms large on the horizon, or the smelly end ay Shite Street as it's sometimes known. Mordor, the Govan Shityard, Planet fuckin Zonkonia, it doesny matter what you call the place, the trick is to get in and out ay here in one piece, preferably wi your footballing dignity still intact. Victory in this midden is a sweet sensation and one that Celtic have savoured a number ay times recently, the more unexpectedly, the better. Let's face it, the last few years have not exactly represented the greatest period in the club's history, on and off the park, with the turmoil in the boardroom seemingly spilling over and affecting performances on the pitch at times. But once or twice we've turned up here, with the opposition foaming at the mouth wi overconfidence, and dished them out a footballing lesson. The general consensus seems to be that something similar might be on the cards again the day, although I'm no quite so unguarded in my optimism myself. We're conceding the home advantage, and there's one or two dangerous customers in this side that will need to be looked after. Tricky foreign bastards on twenty grand a week, which no doubt goes a long way to helping them assuage any doubts or scruples

they might have about the sectarian arseholes they've thrown in their lot wi. But then mercenaries I suppose will fight for anyone, we shouldny be surprised. It doesny half make you laugh though, hearing these players talking on the telly about what a great club they're at, and how they're happy to knock back Serie A just to be here, and aw the rest ay it. As far as I'm concerned, they deserve every penny they get just for managing to keep a straight face during these periodic assaults on our intelligence. They're quite an insecure bunch on the whole, these Huns, they need to be reminded on a semi-regular basis just how important and great they are, or they're no even gony bother turning up. Witness the early eighties for example, when if they managed a five figure crowd for a league game at Ibrox, they were doing well. So now it seems to be Celtic's turn to have a period in the doldrums, and we're certainly exploiting it to the full. I don't think Showaddywaddy were ever this bad for this long. At some point the club is gony have to take it a step further on from the occasional, spectacularly defiant but isolated victory to consolidating some of the recent improvements and eventually winning trophies again. Whether that means compromising the attacking style, I'm no sure, but we certainly need to lose the inferiority complex. The mercenaries, the bigotry, the planet-sized egos - leave aw that shite to this mob, because that's no the Glasgow Celtic way. I think we're starting to appreciate that now, and if everything goes to plan the day, then the team with the better footballing instincts will hopefully win through, in which case there can only be one winner. That's the theory anyway. You'll no catch me running to any bookies though.

Eddie seems a wee bit emotional as we step down off the bus. He's waiting by the side ay the road for me, so he can give me a hug or a pat on the back or something. I'm no that keen to let him, he's a friendly big guy, is Orrie, but sometimes he can be a wee bit overfriendly, especially wi a drink in him, and I'd rather gie him the slip.

"Haud on there the now, Garra!" he yells at me. He's obviously fired up for the occasion and so are his pals, they're all here too, so there's no escaping. I'm surrounded and Eddie slaps a chunky arm round my shoulder and grabs me, "That was just as well, Kevin. There's me ready to steam into they Huns, but thank fuck somebody was wise to what was happenin back there. Otherwise we might have ended up battered, or doon the cop shop, or Christ knows where."

He's stinking ay drink and starts bawlin: *Hail! Hail!* One or two join in, including some boys across the street: *The Celts are here, What the hell do we care now! For it's a grand old team to play for...*

There's a wee crowd of us now, young Michael with his Ireland flag wrapped round his shoulders. Coyer has the Celtic scarf round his neck and covering his chin, he's hanging back with Millsy and Danny and Stephen McParland, sharing a sneaky joint. Mad Brian McClure, who walks about like the leaning tower ay Pisa because he suffers from that water-on-the-brain syndrome, and he cany haud his heid up straight, he's along for the ride as well. There's Georgie Matheson, and Davie Dunn, and one or two others fae Orrie's crowd, James Caldwell the student, trying to look the part, with the Wolfe Tones headscarf round his noggin. Then there's Eddie himself, like so many others, sporting the latest version of the famous hooped jersey. He's forty quid worse off than me though. Cross gleaming on my collar, jacket off and tied round my waist, I managed to resist the urge to splash out on the new replica strip. Consequently my chest isny scrawled with any commercial graffiti, although I don't know why I'm being so precious about it. Naebidy's gony notice another mobile fucking advertising board around here.

Eddie's still going on about the scallies we battered.

"That boy'll need to get a haud ay some industrial strength toothpaste, if he's ever gony nip ony ay the wee birds again. No unless he's wanting to gie them a moothful ay dug shite. Wee arseholes deserved what was coming to them, flinging fuckin stanes at oor buses like that..."

"Outside that Huns pub an aw," I agree. "Staunin back watchin, hoping they were gony spark aff a major fuckin riot. Sneaky wee fuckers, man, they're no as daft as they look."

"Mind big Jackie, Garra?" Eddie asks me. "Boy I used to work wi fae Springburn? I was going back to his bit eftir wan game. See these wee dicks, they fuckin pelted us wi stones, bricks, bottles, rocks, the works. Smashed up aw the windaes. Jackie goes to us, 'That's nuhin Eddie. I've been by there when they've barricaded the road and flung fuckin petrol bombs at the bus!'"

"Jackie fae Springburn? Is that the boy fae Santa Rosa?" I ask.

Orrie's face bursts into a broad smile. "That's right, that's the man, Kevin. Well remembered, by the way!"

"Santa Rosa? What's that aw about?" Orrie responds with mock reluctance to his pals' inquiries. The flash bastard just about has them hanging on his every word, so he does. "Jackie has that internet system in his hoose, right?" Eddie relates. "We're sitting up there wan time on the thirteenth flair, listenin to that idiots' phone-in show on the wireless."

“Christ, I used to like that show,” Davie Dunn interrupts. “Fuckin sick ay it now. Fed up wi them nippin ma heid wi their agendas and their petty grievances.”

“What are they like, eh? So the presenter guy goes, and you can send us your emails, send us your fuckin opinions on this, that and the other, and aw the rest ay it, right? So big Jackie’s on the computer right away and he sends them in this message. Then he signs it aff at the bottom, Jackie Molloy, I’m in Santa Rosa, California, I’m listening to your fuckin shitey show on the internet system, it’s a beautiful day and I’m sitting here in the sun, sipping the Sangria, aw the birds are walking by and aw that carry on, right? Five minutes later the guy on the wireless reads the message oot, aw dead pleased wi hissel, ‘We have listeners all over the world you know, this one’s from Jackie Molloy, an exiled Scot in Santa Rosa, California! The Sunshine State! He’s sitting in the sun listening to our show on the internet, what a great time he must be having, is that no the life, eh? What does the panel think ay that yin? Is that no just wonderful?’ They’ve no twigged, the boy’s no sitting in the sun in Santa fuckin Rosa, and there’s nae Californian Red. He’s sitting up a highrise in Springburn, wi a fuckin king-size reefer in his haun.”

Every one of us is jam-rolled, including myself, even though I’ve heard that story before. Orrie plays it cool though, he just takes a big, self-satisfied ‘sure ma stories are the funniest’ swig from his can of Tennents Lager.

“Watch your can there Orrie.”

“What fir?”

“Polis are everywhere man. You know what they’re like, they’ll no let you in the ground.”

It’s a good point Millsy’s making, as a mounted copper trots by on his warhorse. I recheck the two cans that I’ve stored in my jacket pockets. They’re safely hidden away.

“Who was it that lamped the Polis horse in the mooth?” Davie Dunn asks.

“Christ Almighty,” Orrie adds emphasis. And off they go again, bouncing their stories off one another like a comedy act. They can be pretty funny though, that’s the thing. My personal favourite is the boy at the school who heidered a brick. Yes, he heidered a brick. They were all standing about bored clueless one day between lessons, when some guy started throwing a brick up in the air, kidding on he was gony heider it. They’re all joining in the fun, then this twally heiders the thing for real. It was no a bad heider an aw apparently, a real Scottish Cup Final effort. Although the guy needed eight stitches in the back ay his heid, but he was a real hero after that. In fact, if I’m no mistaken, I think he signed for Rangers shortly after that demonstration of his abilities. At least he should have. He’d be mair use than the shite they’ll have up front the day.

“...when the Huns were playing Aberdeen at Hampden,” Georgie’s still elaborating on the previous anecdote. “So Garvie telt us anyway. Says this fuckin horse was staggering about after he belted it, no knowing where it wis. Its eyes were away, and its legs were pure gone an aw...” Georgie starts falling about the place in demonstration, giving us his impression of a semi-conscious horse that’s just been tanned in the jaw by a big, hairy-arsed bluenose. “Garvie says he was gony boot it in the baws an aw, just to finish the bastardin thing aff.”

“Or the cunt on its back, he should have wellied it there,” I venture, minding the old joke about the police horse being the only animal whose fanny is half way up its back.

We’re nearing the ground now and one or two cans are emptied and then tossed. The boys in blue have cordoned off the streets behind our end and you can see the Huns on the other side with their Union Jacks and their red hand of Ulster flags, as well as other banners and regalia that you wouldny wipe your arse wi. We ignore them and move up towards the turnstiles. There’s one or two officials in Rangers ties chatting and joking with the Polis, thinking they’re smart, because they’re standing there in front of all these Celtic supporters. They’re treated to *Hail! Hail!* More and more Tims now are joining in the singing: *Hail! Hail! The Celts are here! What the hell do we care now!*