

# R&R

## Michael Botur

The street sign's writ in fuckin' gibberish Pig Latin or some shit, all the letters is out of order. Have you noticed everythin's hard to read? You gots ta arks Ruffy if yous've got the right street and it makes you hoha as. You hate all these state houses, one design rotated so they're facin' different ways, as if no one would notice, painted sad pale colours wiv no guts.

'You sure he ain't patched?' you ask Ruffy, hopping out of the car.

'Positive.'

'Open up, it's Rose.' If this fucker makes you have to knock one more time, you're gonna kick the door down. Ruffy's waitin in his ride, playin music on his phone, keepin the engine running. It's a WRX wagon tinted to the max, you and Ruffy painted it yourselves. Yous was so blazed you sprayed paint on the tyres, windows, everyfing. Them was fun times. \$shakeel got paint on her hands and done handprints all over the driveway, lol.

You open the boot, give your gears a quick squiz. Your saw's in there, shovel, gloves, hammers and wheel brace. You've never used the wheel brace to change a tyre. You strut on up to the flat and this Asian comes to the door. He's only got on a t-shirt and undies. Paaaaa-fetic. He could still be patched, though, what is them gangs they got? The Accusa?

'Heard you're in need,' you go, stomping into his pad in your gumboots and track pants and Oakland Raiders jacket. You never expose your skin to no one.

‘You are Rose?’

‘Hard out. Who else you expectin?’

‘It is honour to meet you.’

There’s plastic on all the furniture. Good, might be some stains today. His hands are behind his back. ‘Dosh,’ you go. He puts money into your hand. You check it to make sure it’s our dollars, not, like, Japanese dollars. You dig inside your tits, take the baggie of R&R pills out, the ones that make you feel like you won Big Wednesday, push the bag into his palm and bend his fingers over it as hard as you can. He goes ‘Ah’ and you go, ‘Ah Ma’am.’

He looks at you like he’s fuckin’ gay. He’s probly seen your pic in the paper, that gay-as mug shot when you didn’t even have any earrings in.

‘Heard you got a stash of CDs?’

He leads you frew to his bedroom. Yup, this carpet’s quite new. Musta been somefin spilled on the old carpet. You used to come round here and tax the old peeps that lived here. The rubbish bins is stuffed wiv pizza boxes; the phone book’s from ‘06. The phone’s lyin on its side. You can hear the buzzing of huge black computers wiv little glowing blue lights in each bedroom, wiv these screens the size of TVs. Lots of bullets flyin on Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare. Thas all the exercise Ruffy gets, eh, games, the fat fuck. Games isn’t proper exercise. Runnin wiv a baby? Thas exercise.

In the Asian’s bedroom is towers of CDs, swaying like them high buildings round the plaza. Stacks and stacks of CDs, not a lotta music in them cases though, ya know? He grabs only a few. ‘I give you three CD, for the fifty dollar?’ he goes, ‘I don’t need change. That is cool.’

You bite off your fingernail so it’s nice and ragged, then poke the cunt in the eye. He stumbles backwards against the wall, ripping the poster what his arse lands on.

'FREE?!' you scream at him, bent over so that your tits brush his knees, 'I'll take the lot! I'll take every fuckin' fing!'

He closes his eyes when you yell at him. White bubbles settle on his cheeks. \$hakeel don't close her eyes when you're psyching out at her, \$hakeel just stares atcha. \$hakeel's just like you, she's been there when shit gets real. Nuffin' scares her, tough girl, like you, made of wood.

How much will you owe Pauline for the babysitting when you get back from work? Pauline hardly asks for anyfin' but you like to leave a few twenties in her bathroom and shit, Corrections don't pay her shit-all. Maaaaan, she loves \$hakeel, like her own daughter or something.

You tell the Asian to get a washing basket and start bringin them CDs out to your boot, all of them, the lot. You yell at Ruffy to keep the boot open. His chins wobble as he turns away from your yelling and takes a milkshake from the drinks holder and slurps the straw wiv his little finger out real dainty. You roll a ciggie, light it and puff. Mmm, fresh air.

You go over and lift up Ruffy's two t-shirts and free hoodies and pat his belly. Everyfin's sweet. 'Jeez, I could open up my own market wiv them CDs eh. Eh? Eh, dick?'

'I think the neighbours called the 5-0, Rose. Can't we get outta here?'

'What, that terrist lady? Behind the curtains?'

Ruffy sips his milkshake til it growls and puts it down and grabs your elbow. 'Please don't hurt her too bad.'

You're about to deck the cunt for grabbing you when you feel the vibrations as the Asian presses stacks of CDs into the boot. The tools he sees in the boot'll put the fear of God in him, specially the five inch nails.

'How many CDs he holdin?'

'Five hundred, it looked like.'

‘That’ll be werf a few bucks.’

‘I’d say ten large. How much is that each?’

‘That’d be twenty each.’

That’s the costa them not askin’ questions. No way you’re stickin around to sell ‘em retail, you been stung for that small-time stuff before. Snitches is always following your arse, traitor-arse mufuckers. Snitches get stitches.

‘Keep the boot popped,’ you tell Ruff, ‘I’ll go tie the dude up.’ From the boot you take the rope, and a wheel brace as well. You make sure there’s a packet of tailies in your pocket, Superkings. They burn for ages, them ones. They ain’t for smokin.

‘Want a computer, Ruff?’

‘Rose... who’s lookin’ after bubs?’

‘Probation chick. Same as normal.’ You notice something about his car that pisses you off. ‘Why ain’t you got a baby seat for \$hak?’

‘I promise I will. Can’t we just go?’

‘You want a computer or not?’

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When the shadows of the oak trees start lickin’ your windows, and the day turns brown, Ruffy drives yous up the hills, one hand chewing a drumstick like a toothbrush, and you scope the view, little X-mas lights all over the show. You look for the little wharf town where you grew up but you can’t see that far in the distance. You smoke a couple cones. The Asian fulla’s coughing is still in your ears. He was a crybaby, he got blood on your hoodie, he deserved it, tried to say he had friends who were Bulldogs and the doggies were gonna get you. As if. You used up all your ‘spensive ciggies on him. You had to untie the cunt so’s he could write down his PIN number for you, coz his mouf was all Sellotaped up.

Untie looks like UNITE in your brain. Whoever wrote

words made 'em too hard. It's real frustrating when you're like filling out forms and shit and you spell your name wrong and it doesn't match up wiv your driver's licence and they don't reckon it's you.

You forgot to even offload his CDs, your CDs, you mean, the ones wiv the pills stashed under the black plastic, but you got your pills back, your R&Rs. Ruffy finks it's hell funny, they're sposda stand for Ruffy & Rose he reckons, Ruffy & Rose 2getha, R&R. As if.

When Ruffy drops you home, he follows you in, coz he must reckon you need a man in your house or somefing. You don't need no man, get the fuck out, besides, Ruff's a boy, anyway, not a grown-up man, and he's got tits from eating too much KFC. His eyes is real big and he always blinks too much when he looks at you.

He feeds \$shakeel and eats a whole can of her mashed potatoes and changes her and wipes her bum while you put anuvva hoodie on over top and curl up and shiver on top of your mattress, towel rolled up under your skull like it's a pillow. He makes sure you got free blankets over you and you don't even realise coz you're so mad but you raise your legs up and let him slide your pants off. When was the last time a man done that to ya who wasn't chuckin ya on the block?

'Big Wensday tomorrow,' he goes. 'I'm feelin lucky.'

'Who cares,' you go, 'You won't win. Need some cash on ya to get the bitches.'

'Thas all G. I got you, Rosie.'

'I'll rip your lips off, you call me that again.'

'Night Ro- night. I'm here if you need me.'

Soon as there's a little knife of light at the bottom of the closed door, you slip a R&R inside your mouf, tongue it under your gums and suck. You have mental dreams about a rope sliding around like a snake trying to bite you and

coughing until you pull your rope-tongue out and tie it in a knot, but you can sleep through anyfing. It's when you're not asleep that the nightmares play.

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You crack open fresh bottles of Janola and Spray & Wipe and get stuck into the barfroom and scrub just in your knickers and Bob Marley t-shirt, scrub like you're punching someone's head in, and your furry teef are gritted and it feels good to sweat and you notice how ammonia's the only fing your nose can really smell these days, that and diesel.

When you hear Pauline roll up your driveway, you put on a puffy jacket, it's a extra layer to protect you. Pauline's your probation officer, and she looks after \$hakeel when you're out workin, just sneakretly, on the d-low. What she says every time she sees you is she's not here to take sides, she always says that, you can put money on it. You laughed in her face the first time she said it, now you just roll your eyes. Everyone takes sides against you. \$hakeel was against you at five this morning when you were trying to pray the R&R out of your blood, doin the shrimp fing. You had to sing \$hakeel that Rexona jingle til she stopped bleating. Part of you can't wait til she's old enough to cop a good hiding for getting smart. \$hakeel's the only person in the city ain't scared of you.

You chuck the kettle on. When she knocks, you tell Pauline to hold up. You quickly bite off all your leftover fingernails. You do a budget tidy-up, chuck your shovel behind the couch, sweep pills and sticky shot glasses under the cushions. Your building gear – the tape measure, level, shovel, rope, saw, all of it – just hangs out in the corner, waiting to be used on someone.

There's tonnes of deadbolts on the door to undo. She's lucky you're even letting her in; Court said you had to.

Pauline knows you'll smash her if she tries to kiss or hug you, so she heads straight for \$hakeel's room and lifts her up, sniffs her bum and puts her finger in \$hakeel's mouf.

Pauline brushes bottlecaps and bits of Port Royal and scabbed tomato sauce off the couch before she sits down. Pauline smells like a jewellery store, and her eyes is cold and blue like moufwash and the white bits of her eyes aren't pink.

You pour her a cuppa. 'I've only got trim milk. Sure you don't want a proper drink? I got Cody's, Woodstocks, Jim Beam...'

She arks you about Ruffy, same as always. 'Pray tell: are you two official yet?'

'Official Gs,' you go, and fold your heavy arms.

'Do I hear wedding bells?!' Pauline winks at you. Paulz is the kind of nerd what stops after car accidents and phones the feds when she sees smoke.

'G.T.F.O.'

Pauline lays out some documents. She's usin one of your Glad bags as a coaster. You keep a eye on it – them bags is expensive, yo. If that skank rips you off, you'll... Jesus, you can't even say. Nah, okay, that's mean. You won't do that, maybe just roll her laptop and jewels. Actually, that's not a bad idea. She'd be too nice to squeal on you.

'You still in that pad down Walfum Road?' you go.

Her lips pucker up like a asterix. She goes, real quiet, 'I am, yes.' Then she taps the papers and tries to start–

'Number 148 eh? The one wiv the fence all busted up eh, you was tellin me how your daughter crashed her Legacy into it and–'

'Rose: what we have here will certify that I've checked up young \$hakeel and confirmed that she's in good physical health, that her home environment is stable and that there's no reason to recommend the removal of \$hakeel from

your, um, care, of your-your family – provided you commit no, further, you know...' She clicks a pen on and off. 'Offending.'

'It ain't a family. It's just us.'

'There's Ruffy... has he not been in your life for a year or two?'

'Yeah you already said that. Jus let me sign. Tell me if they've wrote anything different, I can't read it by my own.'

She strokes a big spiderweb what stretches from the ceiling to the carpet, and she's turned away from you as she speaks. 'Actually Rose, I'm going to leave these unsigned until this time next month. I'm afraid I can't in good conscience sign these until we can be assured that your home is alcohol and drug free. I'm sorry, sweetheart.'

'It is, honest.' You pick a shot glass out from under your arse and hiff it towards the sink and Paulz's shoulders go all hunched and she gasps like the Asian did. She picks up her cuppa tea and takes a sip while the sound of the glass breaking fades. 'I'll fix that, straight up.'

'Well, the clinic hasn't ticked you off, and neither do I intend to, willy-nilly.'

'But they're a buncha softcocks, they're too scared to come round. I only broke that nigga's arm in, like, one place, oi. They set me up, Paulz, honest.'

\$hakeel makes a noise and it cranks you up somefin fierce. You stand up, not sure if you're gonna go staunch out your baby or your friend. No one oughta fuckin squeal.

**I DON'T GIVE A FUCK IF CUNTS RESPECT ME OR NOT. I CAN GO LEGIT ANY TIME. EVERY MOTHERFUCKER KNOWS WHO THE FUCK I FUCKIN' AM.**

Pauline makes a tut-tut sound in her throat what you don't like. '\$hakeel's been having nappy rash. You need to use baby powder after you've bathed her and changed her.



Every time, Rose. The rash won't just clear up by itself. D'you remember what we discussed? If it's wet, make it dry; if it's dry, make it wet.'

'Yeah I know, nuffin' fixes itself. I know it pisses you off and stuff when I phone you up like after hours and shit. But you don't even got kids anymore, the fuck would you know?'

Pauline stands up and looks at the carpet.

'Oi but you said eh, when you was round here that time, when me and you had a—'

'That wasn't during work hours. I recall, I think, I said to you then...'

You snap your fingers then slap your forehead. 'SHIT! You was sayin you had that daughter eh and she used to cut herself. That was you eh? My brain gets no signal half the time, from the Prozacs. You was all cryin' about it. Said she was my age oi.'

Pauline shuffles her papers real expert, pretending to forget that her daughter got smoked in this car crash and she tried to return to work and couldn't do it and got so unprofesh she almost lost her job as a probation screw, comin' round here crying at 7.30 in the morning, sitting on the kitchen floor begging for a sesh, getting bogies on her big earrings when she blowed her nose. 'Next week I'll come by. I'll call you before I come over. Which phone are you using, dear?'

You choose a phone from your pocket, sorting through the burners. 'Skinny mobile. Pink one.'

'Honestly Rose, you need to remove every shred of drug paraphernalia. If my supervisor required me to drug test you...'

'Some of it's legit though. Like the Seroquel's cause of my head-fing, straight up. I could get eight bucks for these if I wanted, but I don't cause I'm good.'

‘And that’s medically documented, but this— ’ she lifts a skanky-as bong off the coffee table— ‘Things like this, we just can’t ignore.’

‘But I washed it?’

‘I’ll give you a bell next week. When are you next working?’

‘Dunno, I make my own hours.’

‘I’m so glad you’ve found some work, Rosie.

Repossession, you said? I’ll note that. When shall I pick up \$hakeel?’

‘I’ll let you know. Might not go to work today. Might just stay home wiv her.’

She looks like she’s about to fall over, and her arms is out wide and she stumbles into a hug. ‘Oh angel,’ she goes, ‘Take the day off. Get away from all this. Can’t I recommend a little R&R? Can’t you get out of town? What do you do for fun, sweetie?’

‘Same as what I do for work.’

You follow her to the door, quietly trying to tuck a couple R&Rs into her hand, but her hand won’t grip them.

‘Sorry bout nutting off before. S’pose I could get out of town, but I can’t get town outta me.’

Ruffy tex you about some repo work, and “Can I get my car bk plz.” You have to check four phones before you can tell what one he’s messaging. You give him a rark-up about saying too much over the phone, forgetting the code words, tell him to jus come round. The sound kinda unfreezes the air and you get up and wipe the water off the windows, scope the day, put \$hakeel in front of the YouTube, text Paulz, tell her you need her to babysit. Ruff’s a good boy, a learner. It’d be stink if he went off and worked for someone else, workin for you is... well, he works for free some days, most days, and he’s into graphic

novels, he can read. He always reads the pizza coupons in your mail box real good, gets all stoked over the two dollar garlic breads. The piglets can monitor ya tex and read ‘em in court. Court’s unfair-as, like how only one side can read and the other can’t, that’s why it’s good when peeps talk, coz the words just vanish in the air.

Today you feel pretty average. The air’s real clean and blue but it’s chilly too, and the trees look cold wivout their leaves. You plug your seatbelt in, then unplug it. Today might be a alright day to die. You drive over to Ruffy’s. Spose you oughta give his car back.

\$shakeel was bawling her head off this morning about some bullshit. Ruffy tried to change her nappy again last night and you cracked a dinner plate upside his head then when he was on his back holdin his head, you stood on his shoulders and yelled into his face. He cried worse than \$shakeel, man, and you think it gave him a head injury coz later that night he started actin all buzzy, askin what your address is and what the best way is to get to your place, even though he’s been there like every day for five years! When your temper’s up, a hurricane comes on eh. It’s like the winds out in Central, when it’s real bad winter, like how you had to sleep on bales of hay when your mum was hooked up wiv that farmer coz he had a tattoo gun and she thought that was sexy-as. Reckoned she was in love. You missed out on, what was it, like free years of school.

Ruffy comes out in his jammies and you get out and go round to the shotgun seat cause you’re too tall to crawl over the handbrake and Ruffy plops into the driver seat and you and him spark a cone and hotbox the car. You don’t say nuffin’ for a while. Then Ruffy goes, ‘There’s this chef dude, Bela. Mate of mine works wiv him in the kitchen at the working men’s club, you bin there eh Rosie?’

‘Yuh,’ you go, finkin’, I’m a workin’ bitch, BITCH! What

would Paulz say if she found out what you actually do for a living? Far, you'd pay to see her face... You shake your head to make sure you don't laugh. Keep that happy shit locked down.

'He's into his R&Rs. Mate reckons this guy holds onto all his money to send home to his family in Hungry and never buys drinks, just puts his bourb in a Pump bottle when he goes out. Aw, and he drinks hardout. He's alkie-as. Could be good for a tax.'

'Is he holdin'?'

'Mate reckons he might be.'

'Dirty alkie,' you mumble, packin' a fresh cone and tryin to make Ruffy's Zippo work. 'He won't even know we been there.'

'He'll remember you. Everyone remembers you.'

You suck the smoke inside yourself and hope you never breathe again, but your lungs is too used to it. You blow the smoke back in Ruffy's face and his eyes water and he blinks a fousand times.

'So aren't we workin' today?'

'I was thinkin' Thursday?'

'Whatevs. Why're we in your car, then?'

'Dunno, I just like pretendin' we can get away from all this,' Ruffy goes quietly, opening a Kit Kat, 'Take the wife and kids or whatevs. Can you imagine? Not that you're... ?'

'Not that I'm what?'

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**BAM-BAM-BAM-BAM-FUCKIN-BAM!**

Some bastard's knockin' on your door! Shit it must be late...

You sit straight up and a bong falls out of your hand and the gross bong water turns the carpet black. When you went to sleep, Ruffy was under your arm, wasn't he? Or were you trippin'?

BAM-BAM-BAM!

‘HOLD YA HORSES!’

\$hakeel starts up the waterworks. You try to shoosh her by showing her the coins you got for them Seroquels. That doesn’t work so you carry her through to the lounge and show her the piles of CDs and put her down so she can play wiv the shiny discs after you’ve taken the pills out of each disc. ‘Don’t be a dick,’ you hiss at her. You take out the discs and make ‘em catch the light. You break them in half. You’ll make a hanger out of them, that’ll be nice.

BAM-BAM-BAM! BAM-BAM-BAM!

‘Shut up,’ you go, pickin’ sleep out of your eyes. ‘I’m comin.’ God damn pigs. The fing is, if you don’t open, they’ll just keep knockin’ then get out the pepper spray.

You put \$hakeel back to bed wiv a couple of CDs and say Sssshhhhhh, Mummy’s got a customer. She crumples up, knees on her chin, curled like a shrimp. You spread one of your good hoodies out under her and fold it over her and tie the arms until she’s like a taro leaf stuffed wiv meat.

You got free deadbolts on your door and one chain. See, there’s heapsa crooks out there. It’s probly Pauline having a panic about her daughter, needing a smoke. She’s been straight for ages, though. Go her.

The glass is muffled, like bein’ underwater. You undo the deadbolts and let the door open a crack. There’s one dude standin’ there, but you can’t see his police hat, his shirt’s not even blue, it’s black wiv long sleeves wiv flames wiv—

His foot kicks your door in. You had yourself a good stance so you don’t get knocked over, you charge back at the door and crush the dude’s hand as he’s fumbmlin’ wiv your latch. It’s not heaps of the time you’re grateful for bein built like a wardrobe and born wiv a head like a punchin bag, but you are now.

‘Mighty Mighty!’ he barks, ‘Bowowowowow!’ Then there’s another thud, he’s got another bulldog helpin him. They keep missin the wood and they kick in the lower two squares of glass. You can hear \$hakeel howling.

You let the door go and run to the kitchen, hauling the cuttelry drawer so hard the whole thing slides outta its frame and rains knives and forks all over your floor. You’re reaching for the first fing you see – a little baby spoon wiv a Bob the Builder handle– when you get a boot in the back, stompin you all over the cuttelry. On the lino, you can see how filthy it is under your fridge, all these hairs and shit stuck to dried-up Coke. Old chips and hot dog sticks. Pills, bitsa cat food, pills, all those pills you ever blamed Ruffy for losin’.

They haul you up by your hair. They’re real average height and you’re a big girl, it’s not fair. You never bin the same size as anyone. You wham your elbow back and crack one fulla’s jaw, and he gets spit all over your elbow, then his mate stands in fronta you. First nigga you ever seen wiv red eyes instead a brown. There’s silver paint all over his lips. He’s holdin up his hand. Why’s he got so many rings? As your nose explodes like a tomato, you see he’s dressed all in black, heavy boots, black jeans, a belt wiv heapsa studs on it, black t-shirt, gut. Studs everywhere, like he bin dipped in nails. His vest gots a bulldog on a red background, white lettering. That’s sumfin you can read: You can read a dog.

Know what else? He sorta looks Asian, just enough to make you go ‘Damn’ as he kneels on your arms.

They don’t ask questions, just unzip their pockets and one takes out a pack of Superkings and starts fishin for his lighter while the maybe-Asian starts stuffin CDs into a garbage bag and you scream at them, ‘I’M A WOMAN! I’M A WOMAN!’

Your blood's made of energy drink, hot and fizzy. Ruffy can't stop lookin at the bits of hair what keep fallin out from under your hood. Your feet are up on the dash, knees around your ears. Hoodies make you feel like a Eskimo, all tucked up and safe.

'Watch the road,' you go. You can't stop pulling out strands of hair.

From outta nowhere he goes, 'They weren't sposda do that.' He hoons over a speed bump and what he said just falls out your ears. He's real concerned that you lost your pills, not as concerned about your ears almost gettin ripped off from the stompin on your head. 'They shouldna done that.'

That Hungarian that Ruff told you about, he lives in like this heinous old place what looks like a campground toilet, all made of painted cinderblocks. Couple stories tall; dark windows, lots of old peeps wiv driftwood and aloe plants in their windows. Shoes over the power lines. Tags what you don't recognise. The building's got old lettering on it, you get Ruffy to read it to you.

You got a tube of Bepanthen in your pocket. You never used to put it on your tats, that was for softcocks, not even when you got R&R done on your neck and it hurt like a motherfuck (Ruffy pussied out and got it done on his tit where you can't even see it unless... unless he's got his top off, but don't even go there.) You keep reaching up your sleeve and putting cream on the burns, a 20 pack of burns. You had to sleep wiv nappies taped around your arms, soaked in water. You pissed yourself twice. Your arms was cold and wet as you hugged \$hakeel – except, for some reason, she didn't cry much. You could hear yourself breaving. You had ta breave out your mouth, coz your schnoz was all full of dried smoke and bogies and dried

brown blood like bark off a tree.

Ruffy's still eyeballin you, nibblin a spicy wing, droppin crumbs on his jeans.

'RUFF! This building, what's it called?'

'It says, uh, Art Deco Apartments 1951.'

'What's that mean? Poes? Why's it blue? Crips? Yozas?'

'It's cool.' He pats you on the head. You shake his hand off. 'It's cool,' he goes again.

This is over Eastside. The flats is the colour the swimming pool at your school after they emptied it. But you spose this one'll be sweet if it's blue. It's red and black you're scared of seeing.

You and Ruff jump out of the ride and gap it across the parking lot, chugging a can of Woodstock each, then you find the right number and you kick the screen door in like Mulder & Scully, except if Mulder was a big fat softie who always closes his eyes and points his feet inwards when you tell him off. Guess he's more of a Scully, maybs.

Your leg gets stuck in the screen door as you kick it in. You fall over as you try to rip it back out. 'Fuckin' alkie!' You burp a bit of puke into your mouth. It's orange inside the alkie's place. Bedsheets is pulled over the broken windows. Ruff goes in while you pull the metal threads of the screen door out of your shoe laces.

'Hello my fren,' the Hungarian chef alkie goes, slumped across a car's back seat. That's all he's got for a couch, straight up: the back seat of a car. You can even see the springs underneaf, jaggin the carpet. It looks like the pad's been tipped upside down already – maybe the same bulldogs that got you last night've been here, looking for R&Rs in the CD cases. A hump of big fick books is explodin out of the hot water cupboard. Behind them are dusty electrical tools, pliers. Maybe you'll score you some a them.



The books make you edgy. You can't trust cunts that have their heads buried in books all the time, scheming, plotting against you.

You stare him down. His eyes are all watery. The ciggie between his fingers is ninety percent ash, he hasn't moved his fingers in a while. He got a teacup of vodka in his other hand.

'Heard you wanted to trade for some R&R,' you go. It's how you always start, all business, all fair, legit, trade, settle, bro-shakes. You drop down and start gropin frew his vids. 'These are all useless,' you go, 'How'm I sposda sell this shit?' You pick a video and chuck it at his head. He jerks, spilling the cup of booze wobblin in his hand. The ash finally falls off his ciggie. He rocks then puts his hands over his face and crumples up, knees up to his chin. Like a shrimp—

Like a shrimp.

Ruffy steps over you, goes over to the guy and sticks his hand out. 'Hey bro. I'm Ruff.'

'Shut up, Ruff,' you go, 'Don't tell him your name.'

'We heard you got some junk you're wantin' to swap.' Ruff tosses down a bag of R&Rs.

'Please,' he whimpers. He curls his fingers around the cellphone in his hand.

'I heard him go Please,' you decide. 'Thas a go-ahead.'

The walls are close together and the ceiling is low. There's hunks of broken glass in the sockets where the lightbulbs is sposda go. He got half a dinner table and one wooden chair.

'I fort you said this cunt was holdin?'

The alkie goes to Ruffy, 'Hey, I know you face, you are my friend of—

'Hushamouf, bro—'

'And this, she is your wife you are saying?'

‘What’d you say to me?’ you hiss.

Ruffy nudges the nigga wiv the toe of his shoe. Ruff would never kick anyone. ‘Sorry bro, I had to...’

‘Please you do not take my phone away,’ he says. Words all mixed up like... Ah, he sounds like a fuckin little kid. By now he’s took his pants off and his knees is pushed into his eyes. His dick – lookin like a shrivelled sock - leaks between his thighs. He stinks. There’s crusty sauce on the face of the fridge, empty bottles inside. Plate of fried sausages. Leaf of lettuce all on its own. The sink’s fulla white crawly fings and bread tags and ciggie butts.

‘No one said to take ya clothes off, what the fuck?’

‘Please, you take my car,’ he goes.

‘Well obvious.’ You kick his legs. ‘Keys?’

‘I’m bros wiv your bro,’ Ruffy goes, and offers him a bite of his chicken. He sits down beside the alkie and puts his hand out for a gangsta shake, but the dude moves his body away. He’s hidin somefin in his hand.

‘Put some pants on,’ you tell the dude.

He’s pissed all over today’s clothes; his other pants are on the washing line. Ruffy gives him a escort. The dude puts the pants on backwards, then turns and tries to jump over the rear fence, shinning against the unpainted planks, all splintered. He scrapes his knees red. You and Ruffy grab one leg each and yank him down, then you yank his shrivelled ballsack and put your weight on him and pull his leg back. He screams like \$hakeel.

Straight away you let him go, like he’s a electrified fence.

You gotta help him search for his keys. Sucks to be you. You turn over everyfing. You grab all of his saucers and plates and drop them on the kitchen floor. It’s pretty cool when stuff shatters – okay, you like building shit better, but... okay, you hate it when shit breaks, you’re just used to it is all. You stop breakin his plates. You grab his spices

and dishwash and cloths and washing powder and old plastic McDonalds sundae spoons and a can of flyspray and bung em all in the microwave and set it on High for ten minutes and press the Start button.

You unpeel his fingers from his phone, like his hand's a orange wiv real fick skin. Bogies stream into his mouf.

'Goneburgers,' you go to Ruffy.

You grimace as the plastic in the microwave starts bubbling and this real rank smell comes out.

'Fuck are my Superkings?'

'Shit, Rose,' Ruffy goes, 'We gonna burn him?'

'I just need a ciggy.'

Your head's all fuzzy then you're in the car and Ruffy gets the engine going and does a u-ey and you're off to – Nahp. Not hapnin.

You yank the handbrake on, walk across the middle of the road, your knuckles hurtin, your tongue still throbbin from last night. It hurts to blink. When you waste people, does it actually feel better or does it just, like, distract you from your own agony? Ruffy pushes the horn so hard you reckon his hand's gonna go right through the steering wheel. Ruffy always waits for you. Ruffy's never left you behind, even when the breakfast menu's about to end at Burger King and his forehead gets all shiny.

You yank the alkie's door open. The air's turned white and stinks like when you boil the kettle and there's no water in it. He sees you and yelps like a puppy. You shove the microwave off the bench. As it falls, the power cord disconnects. You toss his phone back to him and he rings all these digits so quick he must be on crack, and he speaks this trippy language real fast into the phone, then his voice goes all girly and while he's crying, he's giggling at the same time and pressing the phone against his ear as hard as he can. You can tell he's talkin' to a lil kid.

Ruffy sparks the engine but you go, 'Not yet,' and he switches off. Where did all the light in the day go? The sun's goin down. You unclip your seatbelt to make it easier to die.

You tell him how the doggies stole the CDs \$hakeel was havin' fun wiv. How they cleaned out all your R&Rs. How they stepped on \$hakeel's rattle.

Ruffy's noddin, but not really listenin.

'Oi, what did you mean, in the car yesterday?'

'Eh?' he goes.

'How you go, "They weren't s'posda do that." How'd they know where to find me, Ruff?'

He finks real hard and deep and reaches under the seat and cracks open a Vodka Cruiser and sucks it, keeps one nervous hand in his pocket. Alls you can hear is yourself breavin outcha mouf. Sounds like someone sawing wood. You don't even hear the traffic or nuffin. All this shit pukes out of his mouth, bits and pieces of words, like he's spewin' up a bowl of alphabet soup, I'm sorry Rosie, straight up I didn't mean to, I'm sorry, I fucked up, I was high, Rosie I'm—

'Sall good, Ruff,' you go, 'We gotta make fings right. I'm takin' you wiv me. Just business.'

'You mean— ?'

'Nuffin' personal's what I mean. Sall good.'

'Butbutbut what about \$hakeel, Rosie?'

'Babysitter's got her. Sall good. Quit cryin and drive. The shovel's still in your boot, eh? Sweet.'

You take out a Superking real slow. His hand's shakin like he's tryin to jimmy a lock so you have to turn the key for him. 'Don't do this Rose,' he's goin, 'Please don't— '

'Just drive.' You put the kiddy lock on. 'We gonna make this right.'

The headlights burrow into the dark, wet streets and

Ruffy makes all these real bad turns, and he keeps changing radio stations. Before you know what, tea time's passed and wet yellow leaves is sticking to the windscreen and finally you find the place, and curl into the driveway, full beams on, and you can see lights come on in the house.

'REVERSE UP! REVERSE! Don't go that way!'

'Sorry Rosie.'

'Ssh,' you go to Ruffy, 'Just ssh. Mama's gonna take care of you. Don't go nowhere. Pop the boot.' You fall out of Ruffy's wagon, pull the shovel from the boot, tossing out the bags of chips and six-packs, and unwind the rope from around it, make sure all your ovva bits are there, hammer and crowbar and stuff. You open the passenger door and Ruffy flops onto his knees and worms through the mud. Then you hook the rope round the wrecked fence, tie a end to your tow bar, and tell him to get the fuck back in the car. He drives forward slowly, pulling the fence until it stands up.

'I can't see,' he's cryin, 'Somethin happened to my eyes!'

'Shut up and give us a hand,' you tell Ruff. 'Bring me the five-inchers.'

'The what?'

'NAILS.'

'ROSIE! DON'T!'

It's all gonna end and here's Ruffy still sniffing and trying to smoke and drink wiv one hand as you make him hold the nails. It feels real good smackin them in wiv the hammer, real damn good. You get these buzzy flashbacks of fixing the wood chairs that would get smashed when your olds would have parties at your place. No pill feels better than fixin something that's broken.

BAM BAM BAM!

'Is it right yet?' you yell.

Pauline comes out of her place wiv some bundle and a

buncha papers curled up in her hand like she's gonna swat ya. It looks like she's bringin in a load of washing but you click: it's \$hakeel. She looks so right holdin \$hak that it buzzes you out.

'Who's there? The police've been called!'

BAM BAM BAM!

'Hurry up Ruff! Is it right or not?'

'Jesus, yes, it's right,' Ruffy goes, and you're outta there, and it's so funny, how there's like a word for like vandalisin shit and hoonin off but no word for fixin shit and hoonin off! It's funny as! Nothin on 'TV's this crack-up!

You make Ruffy drive back. Even though everyfin's black, it's not so bad wiv the fullbeams on. You can't hardly feel the ice forming, it's warmer wiv two people in the ride, and you ain't even needed to hotbox it. Shit just feels warm somehow. Yeah, all the state houses is built the same, but now you notice some is facing different directions. You can take a state house and make it face forward, look to the future.

\$hakeel sleeps in the baby seat in the back. When did Ruff get a baby seat? You oughta say Cheers to him for doing that, you didn't even have to arks him.

The tyres squeal when he turns corners, squeal squeal squeal. You plug your belt in, touch it, make sure it's plugged in for real.

'Where are you t-taking me?'

'K-Fry. Get a famly pack.'

'Straight up?'

'Straight up,' you go, 'Famly pack.'