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## *Chapter One*

# Her Majesty's Gravy

The Northern Ballet School is situated next door to Greggs the bakers. It's a bizarre juxtaposition and if you drive up Oxford Road at lunchtime you can regularly see hordes of beefy ballerinas queuing up for Steak Bakes in their tutus. Inside the school is the Dancehouse Theatre, where I'd been booked at short notice by Agraman – The Human Anagram to perform my stand-up as part of the annual Manchester Comedy Festival.

I was scheduled to be the opening act for John Thomson, the comedy actor who was experiencing the dizzy heights of success after appearances in the highly acclaimed *Cold Feet* and alongside Steve Coogan in *Paul Calf's Video Diaries*. I'd never seen him do stand-up before and thought I may never get the chance, as with only ten minutes left to show time he still hadn't arrived. 'He's still filming,' panicked Agraman (– The Human Anagram) (I have to give him his full title – it's comedy law), as he clipped his house-brick-sized mobile phone back on to his chosen belt loop.

'Peter, could you do me a favour, could you pad it out a

bit?’\* he said to me as I stood nervously in the wings, spying on the arriving audience through a pinhole gap in the curtains.

‘Er . . . well . . . ?’ was my reluctant response.

This was only my second ever fully professional gig, in front of the largest crowd I’d ever played to. The Dancehouse holds over four hundred people, as far as I was concerned it was Wembley Stadium. I’d be lucky if I could remember my fifteen minutes of material let alone do any ‘padding’.

I’d been honing my material all week, during both of my part-time jobs, working as a cinema usher and as a steward at the Manchester Arena. Not a single customer had been spared my selfish and shameless attempts to try and crowbar my act into any given conversation. I’d completely ruined Gabrielle for a couple from Halifax by bombarding them with my observations on the O. J. Simpson trial and the disappearance of white dog shit.

But how else was I going to practise my stand-up? Since winning the North West Comedian of the Year three weeks previously my life had been turned upside down. With both a booking for a Labour Club in Glossop and an interview for my local free paper, suddenly I found I was a man in demand! Winning the competition may have declared me a ‘professional stand-up’ to the powers that book, but I still had to rehearse my material before I presented it to the world. I was a total perfectionist, still am, the fact that you’re reading the thirty-eighth draft of this first chapter proves my point.

The thought of ‘padding it out’ now sent me into a panic. But

\* By the way, ‘Could you pad it out’ is one of the worst things you can ever say to a stand-up comedian, it’s right up there with ‘Can I pay you next week’ and ‘Get off, you’re shit’.

reluctantly I agreed to his plea and before I had time to even contemplate just how I could possibly extend what material I had, Agraman (– The Human Anagram) was centre stage introducing me as ‘the prestigious winner of the 1996 North West Comedian of the Year, ladies and gentlemen, he’s come all the way from Bolton at very short notice, please would you give a very warm welcome to Peter Kay.’

I walked on stage to the sound of applause and left my ‘other me’ in the wings. Now when I say ‘other me’ please let me explain: I don’t suffer from schizophrenia but every time I ever perform stand-up I get a bizarre out-of-body experience. Part of me takes to the stage yet I always leave another part of me in the wings, watching. The only thing I can compare it to is that advert they used to show on TV for Locketts, you know the throat lozenge that helps aid the symptoms of colds and flu? It featured a farmer sat on bales of hay, who magically splits into two. One half of him says, ‘Sore throat?’, while his other half nods sympathetically adding, ‘Runny nose.’ ‘Try Locketts!’ says the patronising voiceover offering hope. And Hey Presto! They both pop a honey Locket into each of their mouths and before you can say ‘Swine flu’ they’re back out fighting ‘blue tongue’ or whatever else is top of the ‘crops’ that week.\*

Whilst I may not suck a lozenge on stage, I’ve found this out-of-body experience has remained with me throughout the years and as much as I truly admire the part of me that can perform stand-up, the other part of me finds it completely terrifying. The question is which one of them is real? Ooooooh, that’s a bit deep for Chapter One.

\* That was a truly awful and lazy joke. I’d like to offer my sincerest apologies to both you the reader and the publishers, I promise I’ll try harder.

I watched in astonishment as the other me walked on and proceeded to sit on the edge of the stage. What was I doing? This really wasn't the normal comedic etiquette but immediately it created a much more relaxed atmosphere in the theatre. Ahhh, I thought to myself, he's padding it out. Apparently Danny Kaye did a similar thing when he first played the London Palladium in the fifties. Sitting with his legs dangling over the orchestra pit, sipping a cup of tea, he told anecdotes of his life, working in Hollywood. I admired that technique and thought, What the hell, we roughly shared the same last name.

*So how are you? You don't mind if I sit down, do you? I'm knackered, it's been non-stop since winning the competition. I've never won anything in my life. Except once I won a copy of that film Mask on video, I like Jim Carrey an' all but it turned out to be that other version of Mask, the one with Cher and The Elephant Man on a motorbike. And you know what my prize was for winning the competition? A four and a half litre bottle of whisky, I don't even drink, I'm tee-total. And it's one of those huge bottles, it's sitting in the kitchen at home. I'm dying to pour it down the sink just so I can start filling the bottle back up with 2p's. My mum and dad used to have one of those, a huge whisky bottle in the corner of the front room. In went the loose change and shrapnel every week and then every year, just before Christmas, out came those polythene banking bags and you start coppering up on the carpet. Stacking your change, 'Five twos is ten, Ten tens is a pound, bag it up,' my dad would shout, 'quick, son, bag it up.' I was the bagger. I'd hover round my dad with my bag ready. Five hours we'd be counting. Five hours for £8.60. Then he'd go to the off-licence and buy a bottle of whisky.*

Like I said, I'd been rehearsing my material all week and had no idea I was going to do this. But that's what happens when the adrenalin takes over, it can take you to places you never dreamed you'd go. And go with the flow you must, because down that route lies the excitement, down there lies the secret ingredient that makes each and every performance you give unique.

So there I was, positioned on the edge of the stage chatting to the audience. As with most of my early stand-up I recorded my performance that night on my Dictaphone. I used to archive all of my stand-up so I could study it later and check what worked and what didn't; it also used to come in handy for keeping a record of what material I performed and when, so if I returned to the same club I could change my material accordingly. I've just listened back to my performance at the Dancehouse that night once again and I was shocked at how high my voice sounds for a 23-year-old. I thought the tape must have warped over the years or something.

I'm also amazed at how confident I come across, as this was only my second ever professional booking. My first had been the previous Sunday at Manchester's legendary Boardwalk – they've got one of those blue plaques on the wall outside now as it was home to one of Oasis' first ever gigs.

I can't believe I forgot to bring my Dictaphone for that very first performance so the only memory I really have is being on the bill with a comedian called Frankie Doodle, who is the son of TV's own Jimmy Cricket. I remember Frankie being quite a gentle, polite bloke who had a series of visual gags; one of them involved him pulling out a package made out of newspapers, the kind you use for Pass the Parcel. He furiously began to unwrap it for what seemed like an eternity due to the deafening silence

in the room. He'd tear away at the layers, finally revealing a large pair of comic scissors which he held up to the audience, once again in silence. He's since given up comedy and entered the priesthood. This isn't a joke, he really has.

I honestly can't remember what material I did my first night at the Boardwalk. You'd think it would be up there with the first time I ever had sex or completed a Rubik's Cube,\* but I think I was that nervous I've blanked it out. My other overriding memory is that for a fifteen-minute performance Agraman (– The Human Anagram) paid me £35, which was twice as much as I got for working a full week in both my part-time jobs.

Coincidentally I had to ask Mrs Hayworth, the cinema manager, if I could finish my shift early so I could go and play my second gig at the Dancehouse as I usually worked until 7 p.m. on a Saturday. Thankfully she obliged, meaning I was spared the arduous task of having to sweep up a screen full of popcorn left by two hundred sweaty kids who'd been watching *The Indian in the Cupboard*.† I can still vividly recall the flutter of butterflies in my stomach as I took off my usher's bow tie and headed towards the train station in the rain.

I actually told the audience that night all about Mrs Hayworth letting me bunk off early so I could do the show. In fact I kept on padding it out until I heard an exaggerated cough from the wings and turned to see Agraman (– The Human Anagram) with his thumbs aloft and John Thomson stood by the side of him beaming like a Cheshire Cat (if indeed they do beam). It turned

\* I never actually ever did, I just peeled the stickers off R Julie's while she was out at the cinema watching *Mad Max 2*. She was underage, I know, but my uncle Tony sneaked her in backwards through the fire door.

† Which was a film incidentally and not a children's entertainer.



out my material didn't need that much padding after all and I was very relieved to see him.

I chatted to John backstage during the interval. He was a lovely man, I was in awe of him as a comedian and his success had been an inspiration to me. He'd used stand-up to break into the world of comic acting and that's exactly where I wanted to go. I'd managed to get myself a local acting agent after completing the HND in Media Performance I did at the University of Salford but I quickly realised that the acting world was brutal enough without me limiting myself to just taking comic roles. After seeing John Thomson's and Steve Coogan's success I decided to follow a similar path. And now just four months after receiving my diploma here I was, supporting John on stage in a comedy festival. It was a huge moment for me.

It was also the first time I'd ever met anybody really famous before, apart from Sir Jimmy Savile at the Bolton Marathon in 1982. Even then we didn't really meet, he just threw a wave in our general direction as he jogged past, flanked either side by minders. Three hours we stood waiting in the piss rain and all we got to show for it was a photo of the back of his head as he ran off.

I also once bumped into a local TV celebrity called Bob Greaves while I was out shopping. He was famous for reading the news on *Granada Reports* and having his genitals sniffed by an elephant on *It'll be Alright on the Night*. I've no idea which one he's most proud of, you'd have to ask him.

I also spent a few hours chasing Rod Hull and Emu around Bolton Town Hall in an effort to get his autograph but was eventually told by security that his reluctance to sign anything was due to the simple fact that his writing hand was up the bird.

Oh, and Jon Pertwee, it's all coming back to me now. He was on the back of a carnival float dressed as Worzel Gummidge and I'd tried to touch his straw as he came past. Casually, he leaned forward and, smiling, he snapped, 'Get off, you little fucker', but in Worzel's voice. I leapt back in fear and then I watched in shock as he sped off at 4 mph. I should have grassed him up to the Crowman.

What surprised me about John Thomson was how nervous he was before going on stage. Pacing back and forth in the wings with a fag in his mouth, mumbling his act to himself in between drags. He confessed it had always been like this and that it never got any easier. I was relieved to find that it wasn't just me who suffered with nerves but was shocked to discover that it wouldn't get any easier. I'd been under the misguided assumption that experience and success would calm the nerves, that they would eventually pass just like with any other job, but I quickly started to realise that being a stand-up isn't like any other job. It's just you, on your own in front of an audience, and you've got nowhere to hide.

John had nothing to worry about, his act was brilliant and the audience loved him. His comic timing and talent for mimicry is incredible. He'd cleverly constructed a showcase for his talents, with his impressions displaying the range of voices he had. I quickly saw that there was a lot more to the man than the characters he'd portrayed so far on TV. Basically he always seemed to play himself in roles when in fact he was clearly capable of playing anybody. I sat on a chair in the wings, soaking up the opportunity to study him at work.

It was also an education playing in a theatre for the first time. It was such a different vibe to the brief experiences I'd had playing

clubs. When I first came on stage I was thrown by how attentive the audience were. In clubs it felt as if you had to fight for their attention. There were so many other distractions when you played a club, for a kick-off the audience is usually in what they call cabaret-style seating, round tables and chairs with candles sat in wine bottles which was all the rage in the mid-nineties.

The candles often came in handy as an act would soon discover how well they were being received (or not) by the amount of hot wax that was flicked at them by the audience. This trial by hot wax, rather than fire, was harsh but fair; however, it soon became apparent that naked flames and comedy should never mix. This was highlighted for me during a Christmas party for the C.I.D. one night in Burnley when a drunken detective inspector tried to set fire to the stage during an act. I was compèring that night and remember pleading to the bar staff, 'Who should we call?' As we already had three hundred police officers in the building, the correct answer quickly turned out to be the fire brigade. Luckily I managed to get paid and leg it as chaos ensued at the fire assembly point outside Abrakebabra.

Another difference between performing in a theatre as opposed to a club was how quickly the level of laughter died off. It really threw me. Don't get me wrong, my material went down well at the Dancehouse and the laughs were strong that night but I'd previously found that when I performed in a club the laughter seemed to linger for a lot longer. I'd never noticed the laughter tailing off due to the general hub-bub in the room.

I started compèring regularly at a comedy club in Manchester and for some reason the audience for the first hour on Friday nights were always painfully quiet. So I hit upon an idea. I went to my local library and hired a sound-effects CD that featured

a variety of different atmospheres – shops, airports etc. I listened to the interior pub atmosphere and it sounded just like the busy club. It was four minutes long and I thought if I could get the sound man to put the track on repeat and play it very low for that first half an hour then it might just relax the audience. So he did just that, I came on stage and it worked beautifully right up until about two minutes in and somebody on the track won on a fruit machine. Everybody in the club looked round to see who the lucky person was, only to find there wasn't a fruit machine. Confused, they turned back to me, and although I was in a mild panic I successfully managed to distract them until four minutes later (and with the CD on repeat) the lucky bastard won again. What a fool, I hadn't played the track all the way through, had I? And why should I? Never in a million years would I have expected to hear the musical fanfares of an invisible jackpot.

'Stop the track,' I shamefully shouted to the sound man, and he did so immediately, thereby revealing the deafening silence I'd been trying my best to disguise. I attempted to explain what I'd been trying to do. But they just stared at me more confused than ever and everything I said just made me sound like a moron who hung around public libraries listening to sound-effects CDs, which of course was the truth. A few seconds later I felt the first splatter of hot wax on my cheek.

Hosting a comedy night and being a compère was a role that I quickly fell into working as a stand-up. I enjoyed it because it was a lot less pressure than having to perform an act for a solid twenty minutes. It also gave me the opportunity to try out any new material that I'd written during the week and if it didn't get

a laugh I just brought on a comedian. Being a compère also meant regular work and luckily I managed to get a booking as one of the resident compères at a local club called the Frog & Bucket. There were quite a few comedy nights in and around Manchester in the mid-nineties but the Frog & Bucket was the only fully-fledged comedy club. Previously a Yates Wine Lodge, it could easily hold up to three hundred and fifty sweaty punters on the weekend, a figure that would easily have doubled if the manager Dave Perkin could have found a way around the health and safety regulations.

The Frog & Bucket was a chaotic circus of drunken laughter and loud music. Then there was the unforgettable aroma of the place. Stale beer soaked through a wooden floor combined with the stench of over a billion cigarettes. I can still taste it. This was in the days before the smoking ban, and when the club was full on a hot Saturday night, the nicotine-stained sweat used to drip into my eyes and blind me. It was almost as painful as the hot wax. The place used to be roasting all the time too. I'm sure Dave Perkin used to turn the heating up full to sell more drink.

The club was on two levels. A grand spiral staircase led up to the balcony directly overlooking the stage. This was acknowledged as the VIP area (Very Ignorant People who often saw fit to talk during the show because they felt they were above the rest of the audience and they were too, about fifteen foot). They also had a hatch leading to a kitchen that served a variety of foods such as potato wedges, curly fries, potato wedges with cheese, and curly fries with cheese. One of the standard lines the compères used when having to advertise the serving of the food was 'and please avoid the dips as it's the chef's last night'.

So suddenly here I was, cinema usher/steward by day, stand-up

comedian by night. Thrust into an exciting world of comedy. Winning the North West Comedian of the Year competition meant that I was able to leapfrog the usual rigmarole that comes with establishing yourself as a stand-up comedian. I never had to endure the painful route of touting my wares at open-mic nights. I never had to perform at open spots for free in an effort to get a booking. But I was thrown in at the deep end. Winning meant I went straight to the top of the bill. It really was sink or swim. But thanks to a large amount of material gathered over fourteen part-time jobs, I quickly learned the backstroke.

I felt like *The Karate Kid* when he's unwittingly taught by Mr Miyagi. He has him sanding his deck and painting his fence, waxing on and waxing off. And he isn't happy – just like me when I was working at Netto and Top Rank Bingo, I wasn't happy, hottest summer for fifty-three years and I was working shifts. 'I want to learn karate, Mr Miyagi, not paint your goddamn fence,' said Daniel-san. Then Mr Miyagi says, 'Paint the fence', 'Sand the deck,' and suddenly a stunned Daniel-san says, 'Oh, Mr Miyagi, you've taught me karate.'

The similarity between Daniel-san's situation and my own was spooky. There I was thinking I was trapped in these mundane part-time jobs for ever, when unbeknownst to me, they were actually arming me with all the stand-up material I'd ever need.

Finally being able to make people laugh on stage instead of in some work canteen was the beginning of a very happy and creative time for me. I used to thrive on the opportunity to perform each week. I lived for the weekend and being up on that stage, and I used to love the buzz I'd get on a Saturday afternoon, knowing that I had a gig that night, a combination of butterflies and excitement.

Every Saturday I went through the same ritual before heading

off for a gig – when I say ritual it wasn't a black mass or anything but just a particular routine. I'd cycle home from the cinema as fast as I could. I lived at the top of a hill. It used to take me four minutes to get to work and over forty-five to get home – that hill was a killer, my friends. Dashing into the house I'd promptly place my tea order with my mum, who'd be sat watching the *Brookside* Omnibus, and then I'd run in the shower (though why I ran after all that cycling I'll never know).

Saturday teatimes meant it was always chips and something with beans or peas. The something could be a number of things and usually they'd be breaded, ranging from McCain's Cauliflower Cheese Grills to Findus Crispy Pancakes (minced beef and onion). But since I'd started earning some extra money from stand-up I'd become a bit of culinary snob and had started opting for Chicken Kievs.

It took two songs to have a shower; my tracks of choice were usually 'Xanadu' – Olivia Newton-John, and 'Kiss from a Rose' – Seal (or the full version of 'Bat Out of Hell' if I was feeling frisky), then a quick spray of Insignia, a splash of Kouros and I was ready for anything. After vaulting the stairs I'd position myself on the old pouffe in the front room (he never minded), where I'd simultaneously try to shine my shoes and eat my Kiev whilst watching *Noel's House Party*. Now there's a fella who knows how to please people on a Saturday night. Mr Blobby and Grab a Grand up Crinkly Bottom. Young bucks, take note and get on YouTube for a few tips from the master.

Back upstairs, I'd put on a whistle and flute (and my suit as well). I always wore a suit, nice shirt, no tie. It was important to look smart. Some comedians wore what they arrived in but I always felt the need to get ready. I tried doing stand-up a few

times in jeans and trainers but I always felt a bit scruffy. I would already have devised a crib sheet with bullet points of key words that linked my material together, and there are a couple of examples on the next page.\*

My notes were all I needed, one of the benefits of being a stand-up was that there was no lugging huge dirty great pieces of equipment up fire escapes for me. All I needed was a couple of sheets of A4 tucked into my trouser pocket and I was away. Then I'd kiss my mum goodbye, assure her that I had my keys and leg it down to the bus stop on the main road. It was times like that I really wished I had a car. It had taken me six years and five attempts to finally pass my driving test and now I couldn't afford one. It was very frustrating. I used to have to invite my friends who had cars to gigs, 'Do you fancy coming to this gig with me?', and once they'd said yes, I would ask if they didn't mind giving me a lift. Cheeky, I know, but I thought it was a good deal: they got a night out, I got a lift home.

I knew the times of the buses off by heart – I knew the times but whether they actually turned up was a different story. Three would come at once. I still had my bus pass left over from uni, it'd expired three months previously but when I flashed it to the driver I'd deliberately place my finger over the date. Most of the time they never even looked but occasionally they'd ask for a closer inspection only to discover it was out of date. I'd have to act all surprised and pay up the 75p fare. I knew my acting training would eventually come in handy.

\* I'm afraid you'll have to make do with a shitty black and white photocopy. Apparently the colour stuff can only go in the middle of the book. I don't make the rules. If I'd wanted colour in Chapter One the lady at the publishers said they'd have to send it off to the Far East 'in advance'. I thought she said 'in a van' but clearly I misheard her. I thought she was being a bit specific.



FROG Fri/Sat 8/9th August

Are Friends Electric?  
 Summer Old People Meaning  
 Play out / Water Fights / Manfredi / Mr. Freeze  
 Mr. S. Oftee. ~~!!!~~

Welcome to the Pleasure Dome, the Frog and Bucket the biggest  
 and brightest comedy club on Oldham St. We've got a  
 fantastic show for you tonight 35 Minutes of entertainment  
 spread over a 3hr Show.

I'd like to welcome on stage

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DAD CRABS '94

Council Sand / Blackpool - Alan Brazelley  
 Pleasure Beach - Revolution (Jim'll Fix It) Wanted Swing  
 Funtairs  
Abroad

Phone Home - Weather  
 Family from Bradford / Keepin' Touch  
 London Pubs  
 Nikatel

Watchdog - Sexes On Wall  
 Arcades / Tracks in Field / Money Grabber

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Slippers / Orripy  
 Don't Dirty Any Plates  
 Rola Cola / Hit Me / You Fudhin Drink It Bitch  
 Lord forgiveness / Crucify his own Son NUNS  
 Jesus Of Nazareth - a thorn / ~~Sister~~ Sister Sledge  
 Dreams / Martin Luther  
 Valentines / Dress Up Jesus

Trendy Teardrops  
 Jackson / School trips  
 Lollies / Rola Cola Lollies - why Don't You!  
 594 Walk Goodbye!

Club Tropicana

Then I'd run across Morrisons' car park over to the station and jump on a train to Manchester. If it was after half six I could get an Evening Ranger ticket, which meant I could travel anywhere between Rochdale and Buxton for a quid. But being a tight-arse I used to try and fake being asleep when the guard came to check the tickets. I'd even have my mouth open just to make it look as if I'd been travelling for a long time. Sometimes I'd even drool for

believability. One time I heard the guard coming, 'Tickets please,' he said, and like a travelling narcoleptic I immediately fell into my fake slumber. Unfortunately I couldn't gauge where he was in the compartment. I waited for what seemed like ages, surely he must have gone by now. Slowly I squinted one eye open and there he was, crouched down, face to face with me. 'Tickets please,' he said in a deliberately slow voice. I tried acting all disorientated, with a 'How did I get here?' kind of look, glancing around shocked. Oh the shame, a bloody pound, was it worth it? After that debacle I just took to hiding in the toilets on future journeys.

Twenty-two minutes later I'd arrive at Manchester Piccadilly and walk across town to the Frog & Bucket, 'Manchester's Only Alternative Comedy Club' it used to say over the door (although the first thing you saw when you walked in was a huge framed picture of the manager Dave Perkin shaking hands with Stan 'The German Focker' Boardman).

After the stand-up was over they would always have a 'cheesy disco' where they used to play a lot of seventies music until 2 a.m. I'd have to hang around because the last train from Piccadilly wasn't until half one. I'd arrive back in Bolton and, too lazy and tight to queue for a black cab, I'd start walking back up the hill towards home and I'd always be starving. I'd only managed a handful of curly fries (with or without cheese) since my decadent Kiev eight hours earlier. But nothing would be open. Occasionally my hopes would be raised by the flickering of a distant neon sign but deep down I knew it was just the dry cleaner's or the tanning centre. Anyway, who was I trying to kid? I travelled up and down this road every day, it's not as if a shop could just pop up out of nowhere without me noticing, but then I saw it. An oasis of colour amidst the drizzle, shining out like a beacon of hope to every

hungry straggler venturing home in the middle of the night. Three simple words shone out for all to see: ‘The Complete Takeaway’, and it certainly was.

It had everything: chips, fish, pies, kebabs, hot dogs, quarter-pounders, half-pounders, chicken burgers, chicken in a satay sauce, spring rolls, chow mein, ravioli, lasagne, kormas, bhunas, madras and a large industrial microwave. I pinched myself. Surely I was dreaming? That hadn’t been there when I’d cycled home from the cinema earlier, or had it?

I opened the door and was instantly greeted by a Greek-looking gentleman with an enormous smile. He seemed delighted to see me, actually the way he greeted me he seemed delighted to see anyone at this hour of the morning. ‘Welcome, my friend, I hope you are hungry,’ he said in a deep booming voice followed by a laugh so loud it shook the Spastics Society box on the counter.

My God, I’d never seen so much food, it was like the banquet scene in Walt Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*. Piled high on every surface and crammed into every possible orifice, was just about every type of cuisine you could conceivably imagine, and all completely smothered in cling film. They must have been preparing this for days, weeks.

There was a girl behind the counter attempting to bang the debris out of the Insect-O-Cutor on the wall with a yard brush. She smiled politely but looked tired and weary, probably weary from being strong-armed into opening The Complete Takeaway by this Greek-looking fella.

Taking up his position, he proudly began rhyming off the menu. It seemed to take for ever and with a risk of passing out from malnutrition I had to intervene. ‘I’ll just have chips and gravy please.’

He looked at me confused. ‘Chips and gravy?’

‘Yes,’ I nodded.

‘Nothing else? A pie perhaps? Home-made?’ he elbowed the girl, and she quickly grabbed a manky-looking pie off the side and started peeling back the cling film as if it was the star prize on a quiz show.

‘Tempting,’ I said, well I actually shouted it to be honest as it’s what my dad used to do when he encountered anyone with a foreign accent. And it appeared to have been genetically passed on to me. ‘JUST CHIPS AND GRAVY WILL DO, BUDDY!’

‘No fish?’ he said, looking dejected.

Fish with gravy? This man clearly was foreign.

‘NO THANKS, PAL,’ I said.

‘Are you sure?’

Oh just give me the bloody food, I thought, but instead I just nodded again.

‘No peas, beans, prawns?’

Prawns? Christ, where was I? By now I was wishing this *was* the tanning centre.

‘NO PRAWNS, MY OLD SON,’ I shouted.

‘PEAS OR BEANS THEN?’ he shouted back.

‘NO, JUST CHIPS AND HER MAJESTY’S GRAVY, BROTHER.’

Reluctantly, he accepted defeat and as the penny dropped, so too did his smile. The happy façade was over, he clapped his hands and the girl lethargically started to make up my order as the Greek-looking fella just glared at me. All this food and all I wanted was chips and gravy? His stare was unnerving. The girl scooped the chips into a Styrofoam tray and then pulled a red thermos flask out from under the counter, unscrewed the lid and poured what looked like liquid cow shit all over my chips.

He leaned in. ‘HMMMMMM, home-made,’ he said in a crap American accent.

He elbowed the girl again. This time she pulled out a huge, dodgy-looking pink cake covered in chocolate sprinkles and strawberries with what looked like blue mould on them.

‘And for dessert?’

I paid him and left.

‘Tell your friends,’ he shouted after me as the door closed.

I looked down at my food, smelled it and chucked it in the nearest bin.

Four weeks later The Complete Takeaway was shut down after reports of salmonella.