

The Crown Prince

It was only a few hundred yards from their new house to the Crown, a quiet fifteenth-century pub opposite the small village green. Ellie York had helped her dad with the unpacking once the removals lorry had left around two. It was now seven and she was exhausted.

Her feet burned and she felt like she deserved something cold and refreshing. Dad had wanted the kitchen and bedroom boxes unpacked at the very least, and they were still far from finished for the day. But after her hundredth exclamation that they had the whole weekend to get it done, dad had suggested that she go check out the local pub with a glass of Chardonnay or something, and then come back with an honest report about their new local. Ellie was nineteen. A single glass of white wine just wasn't going to cut it.

It had been an impressively hot June day and the evening was still packed with heat. The sky was clear and blue and cloudless. Ellie slipped on her new Ray-Ban Aviators against the late brightness, and strode down the old footpath that ran beside the quiet main road. The path reradiated the day's ferocity, and sought to cook her feet as it came up through her thin summer flats. There was no breeze to cool her face, or dry the sweat where her lightweight summer-pattern dress stuck to her back.

Two old men sat out front on a bench table chatting over pints of ale. They looked like veteran farmers, their skin as weathered as the bench. An old black Labrador lay sprawled at their feet, more than matching them in dog years. Its eyes were closed and its tongue sagged onto the cobbles. It looked like it had died from the heat. Ellie felt how it looked. It didn't

even look up as she walked past the old men and went in through the heavy medieval-looking door.

There were lots of small timber-framed windows, all open. But with no breeze passing through the low-ceilinged building it did nothing to alleviate the stuffiness of the pub. They didn't let a lot of light in either.

It was busy inside but not full, most of the tables taken with people drinking. Some were eating, and the food looked good. There was a steady murmur of good-natured conversation rolling round the different areas of the pub like undulating waves on a warm sea. What took her a few moments to realise why it was so good-natured and calm was that there was no annoying jukebox or chirping fruit machine to jar the ear. It was the exact opposite of the pubs she was used to in Watford just twenty five short miles away, whose key features often included shoving, shouting and the occasional fistfight. There were more dogs than football shirts here too: a Jack Russell was sitting alert and expectant on a bar stool, a Labradoodle lay flaked out in the empty fireplace and two brown and white cocker spaniels wagged excitedly beneath a table. In a window nook a woman was quietly strumming an acoustic guitar to a circle of friends. In the far corner a young man was playing darts by himself.

Ellie stood at the bar with her purse in her hand, waiting to be served by the landlady who was pulling a pint for what looked like another farmer at the end of the bar. He was wearing a brown checked shirt, the same colour as his extensively tanned face and forearms. He had a cloth cap pushed back on his head. He was covered in dust from the fields.

The back of the bar was clean and brightly lit like it had just been flown in from a nightclub. A long line of optics hung suspended in front of a long

polished mirror on which was written the names of trendy cocktails in bright wax crayon. Ellie wondered if there was a different clientele that came in after dark.

In front of her were two white long-handled beer taps, with plaques that indicated they were from some small local brewery. Beside them were two modern chrome lager taps, indicating that they were foreign and mass produced, but glistening with beads of condensation and the implied promise of chilled refreshment. On the wall beyond there was a photo of the landlady next to a young man wearing a graduation gown and a black mortarboard. Beneath it was a framed set of darts with a little brass plaque that looked like it had been lifted from a trophy. Ellie didn't want a small glass of chilled wine when the landlady came towards her with a friendly smile, and she pointed instead to one of the lager taps.

"Pint of Heineken, please," Ellie said.

"Of course, love. Been a bit of a scorcher today, hasn't it?"

Ellie nodded agreeably.

The landlady took a long Heineken-branded glass down from the wooden shelf above the bar and angled it under the tap and began pouring. The lager looked like it had flowed off a glacier. She looked to be about the same age as her mum would've been, had she still been alive. She had dark brown hair tied back in a ponytail and Ellie noticed as she held the glass that she wasn't wearing a wedding ring. There was no husband in the photo either.

"It's certainly not the best of weather for lugging heavy boxes around," Ellie said to her.

The landlady glanced up at her as she poured.

"Moving house should not be attempted on the hottest day of the year," Ellie explained, and the landlady smiled and nodded her agreement.

Ellie looked around the pub as the landlady topped off her glass.

"Is that you moved into the old dairy?" the landlady asked, setting the chilled pint glass down on the drip mat in front of her. The glass was frosted with welcoming condensation. Tiny beaded bubbles raced in zippy lines from the bottom of the glass to its crisp foamy head.

"Yeah, how did you know?" Ellie asked. She picked up her glass and took a long and welcome drink. It was super-cold. When she swallowed, her throat seemed to stick itself together so parched dry was it. She coughed and noticed the landlady laughing.

"Wexley Green's a small village, love," she said. "It doesn't take long for word to get round. Not when you're only a stone's throw. Plus I saw you through the window. Four eighty please."

Ellie handed her a five pound note. As the landlady rang it into the till Ellie took a longer drink, so long in fact that when she set the glass down half of the lager was gone.

"You needed that then?" the landlady said, placing a twenty pence piece next to the glass.

"I guess I did," Ellie said. "So what is there to do in Wexley Green?"

"You're looking at it," she said, wiping the bar with a small towel. Then she held her hand out across the bar. "My name's Suzie Bradbury, I'm the landlady here at the Crown. You are officially welcome to the village."

Ellie shook her hand.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Ellie York."

"So, Ellie York, what brings you to our little quiet corner of the world?"

"My dad really. He wanted to be out of London but still be commutable. A semi-retirement kinda thing,

I think.”

“What does he do?”

“Civil servant. Local government. Accountant.”

“Ahh,” Suzie said.

Her expression visibly glazed, the same as everyone else’s did when Ellie told them what her dad did for a living. Even her description had glazed over time. She’d got it down to five words, and sometimes she got it down to just the last one. There were never any follow up questions, just that same blank expression.

“There are a few young people your age that come in,” Suzie went on, “and I’ve got a pool table out the back where they hang out on a Friday and Saturday night. But mostly it’s the farmers and the retired lot. And I’ll be honest with you Ellie, Magaluf it’s not.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine,” Ellie lied.

She hadn’t wanted to leave Watford, not really. All her friends were there, for one. Dad hadn’t forced the idea, but at least he’d waited until her GCSEs and A-levels were done before uprooting her. Plus dad had bought her a VW Polo so she’d at least be mobile, and it was only half an hour or so back to Watford if she was desperate. She hadn’t been entirely against the move out of the built-up and fairly rough London suburb, and she wasn’t exactly dead against nature and open country fields either, although she’d kept much of that part to herself.

The landlady had gone back down the bar to serve another customer and Ellie sat on one of the tall bar stools and had a more leisurely look around what was now going to be their local. Dad was looking forward to the quiet pub scene, he’d said, where everyone knew everyone else. Ellie not so much.

The Jack Russell was barking now, and no one seemed to notice or care. The acoustic guitar had moved

round the circle and was now being almost played by someone else, everyone laughing as the group offered different ideas on how to play. The young man at the dartboard was retrieving his darts and returning to the oche without turning to face the pub.

Dad had been something of a decent darts player in his youth. He'd bought a dartboard when her brother Jeff had shown an interest at about the age of fourteen. Dad had put it up on the back garage wall and it had lasted considerably longer than Jeff's interest. Dad had said it was good for their maths, and where Jeff had given up Ellie had gotten pretty good.

She took another drink. She hadn't drunk much water that day and she was probably hugely dehydrated. The cold beer was making her head swim. She swayed a little when she poured the last of its crisp suds down her throat and slammed the empty glass a little too loudly down on the mat. Suzie Bradbury reappeared with the experience of someone used to refilling empty glasses quickly.

"Another one?" she asked, picking it up and placing it face down in the empties rack under the bar whilst simultaneously reaching for a fresh one.

"I'd like to say yes," Ellie said, gripping the edge of the bar lightly. "But I'd better get back, there's still so much to do. I was just gasping before."

"You don't need to preach to the choir," Suzie said, wiping the bar with her towel again.

Ellie looked at her. Suzie explained.

"It was a massive move when I took this place on. That was in the middle of summer too. I was a single mum, and that was well over twenty years ago."

"You still single?" Ellie found herself asking before she could stop herself.

"Yes, still on my own, love. Probably one of the reasons why I never moved on."

Ellie pushed herself unsteadily off the stool.

"Well, I'll certainly be back again," she said.

"I'll look forward to it, Ellie York. You know where we are. What am I saying? I bet if you hang out your bedroom window you could see me waving. And next time, why don't you bring your dad with you? We're a family pub, you know."

"Thank you, Suzie, I'll do just that."

"So how was the pub?" dad asked, without looking up. He was on his hands and knees on the living room floor, rummaging through a big cardboard box marked Fragile - Pictures in black marker pen. "What was it called, the Crown?"

"Yeah. It's traditional. Old fashioned. Full of beer. You'd love it."

"See? I told you. How many times have I told you we needed to get out of London?"

"At least twice," Ellie said, with a grin.

There was a big pile of ruined empty boxes and torn bubble wrap in the middle of the room. It looked like it was waiting for Guy Fawkes to climb on top of it. At the moment the living room, being the largest room in the house, was the central dumping ground. The big flat rectangular box which had had the tv in it had been pushed to the back wall and was half hidden by other boxes yet to be unpacked. It was the last thing that was going up, dad had said.

"You know what else they've got in there?" Ellie said to him, kneeling down beside him to help him search through the box.

He glanced at his daughter with his eyebrows raised. "Morris dancing? Witch ducking?"

"Nothing nearly as much fun as that. They've got a dartboard. When was the last time you saw an

actual dartboard in a pub?"

"Not often, not with the health and safety police about. I used to like a bit of darts, you know?"

"I know, that's why I mentioned it."

"I wonder what happened to our old dartboard."

"You got rid of it, dad," Ellie said. "When Jeff moved out, you gave it to some charity shop."

"Did I?"

"But I'll play with you, dad. In the pub. Over a pint. And they've got some kind of trophy behind the bar too. Maybe there's a local league we can join."

"I'm not sure about that," he murmured. But his creeping smile said otherwise. "I don't even know if I've still got my old darts."

"Well if you don't, we'll get some new ones. I'm sure your Crafty Cockney ones are a bit old hat now anyway."

They had moved in on the Friday. Saturday saw more unpacking and the distribution of box contents to appropriate rooms. By Sunday the house was taking shape. And they were sick of sandwiches.

"Do you think the Crown does a Sunday roast?" Ellie asked, out of the blue.

"I'd be surprised if they didn't," dad said, heaving a box of books upstairs to the third bedroom that was going to be his study.

Ellie led the way. It took only a few minutes to walk the stone's throw, past the small village green and in through the heavy timber door. It was one o'clock and the pub was busy, and almost all of the tables were taken with people eating. Suzie Bradbury was behind the bar, her long dark hair tied up in a bun on top of her head. She was busy pulling a pint, but she looked up at

the two new customers as they entered. She smiled at Ellie when she saw her.

“Brought pa this time?” she called.

“As promised. We were hoping for a Sunday lunch. Any chance?”

Even though it was busy, Suzie was in complete control. Without even looking up from the glass in her hand, she said:

“Got a table coming free in about ten minutes, sweetheart. You can have a drink at the bar if you want, while you wait.”

Ellie looked at her dad for confirmation, who nodded that that was fine. It was better than more sandwiches.

Ellie waited for Suzie who was ringing the pint into the till. She pointed out the framed set of darts behind the bar to her dad, and then noticed that the lad was back in and practicing his darts again at the board in the far corner. She remembered what her dad had said about the health and safety police, and smiled to herself as she thought that maybe it was a bit dangerous having darts flying about in a pub that was full of people eating.

“So, this is dad I presume?” Suzie asked, appearing back in front of them with a welcoming grin.

“Jim York,” dad said. “Nice to meet you. Ellie’s said nice things.”

“And in so short a space of time too. What can I get you both?”

They ordered their drinks and Suzie fetched them while they sat at the bar. Ellie couldn’t help but watch the lad practicing darts on his own. She knew from experience that it wasn’t the most fun game to play by yourself, and she wondered how receptive he’d be if she went over and asked him for a quick

leg before dinner. She'd tried a few times on her own when the board had first gone up, when Jeff had been too bored with it and dad was still at work or on his way home from work. Even from this distance he seemed to be pretty good. He even had a black short-sleeved shirt with something embroidered on the back like the professional dart players wore, but from this distance she couldn't read what it was. She couldn't see what scores he was getting either, but he seemed to keep pulling his darts out from around the treble twenty area. She looked at her dad to comment on it, but he seemed more interested in watching people and waiting for a table to open up than the lad doing well at the board. Then a waitress in a short black skirt and black t-shirt laid her hand on Ellie's forearm and told her that her table was free now if they wanted to follow her, and of course Ellie forgot all about it.

Their table was at the opposite end of the pub by a window. It looked out over a beer garden and a whispering reed bed that fronted a calmly flowing stream. People were sat at the tables, eating and talking, shaded by large brewery umbrellas beneath the heat of the midday sunshine. A few small children ran between the tables. Some dogs barked happily.

The food when it came was as agreeable as the view, and the two of them finished a bottle of house red quite quickly. After their desserts were gone and they were waiting for the bill, Ellie got up to go to the bathroom. The waitress pointed out the complicated route back through the pub while she cleared the table.

Ellie weaved her way through the twisting avenues of the old building, apparently a tavern built in 1450AD and showing allegiance to Henry VI, and ended up walking behind the dart player on her way to the ladies. She could see the back of his shirt clearly

now, and she smiled when she read The Crown Prince embroidered neatly in scarlet thread against the black of his cotton polo shirt. Now it all made sense, she thought, no wonder he was practicing so hard if he was representing this pub, despite it being so busy in here on a Sunday lunchtime.

She went to the bathroom, washed her hands and checked her hair in the ornately framed mirror, and on her way back to the table lingered just far enough behind him so that he wouldn't notice her, and watched him play for a bit, just to see how good he really was.

He was right handed, and with the board placed in the left-hand corner of the room, she could only see the back of his head and the back of his shirt. He leisurely banged in a one forty as she watched. He collected his darts and returned to the oche without turning round. Then, as he banged in a quick one hundred, Ellie noticed a small patch of something wet and red at his feet. The droplets looked like blood but the dart player seemed not to notice or to mind. Again he collected his darts from the board and retreated back to the oche without turning round. Maybe it was a nosebleed, Ellie thought to herself with a private smile, brought on by the speed of his playing as she watched him effortlessly bang in another hundred, and then another one forty. She was waiting for him to turn around so that she could compliment him, but he didn't once deviate from his quick and well-practiced routine. No wonder he was so good, she thought.

She left him to it and returned to the table where dad was waiting for her. No doubt she'd see the pub champion again, with or without his nosebleeds. As they were leaving, Suzie caught Ellie's attention on their way past the bar.

"Hope you all enjoyed your lunch," she said.

“Beautiful,” dad said, rubbing his belly.

“Ellie, love, I wanted to ask you something,” Suzie said to her. “I don’t know if you’ve had any experience behind a bar, but Wexley Green’s not exactly teeming with unemployed and energetic young people, and I’m a girl down, if you fancy it?”

Ellie had tried it, very briefly, in the Red Hart, a hectic and sometimes frightening pub in Watford, and it had been bedlam. Constant shouting, swearing at the bar staff, and drunken fights. The Crown, by comparison, seemed sleepy, quiet and nothing but pleasant. For some reason she glanced across at the Crown Prince on the other side of the pub still throwing his darts. In her head she saw the small patch of blood still dripping at his feet. Something about it suddenly made her uneasy, and made the Crown just as unsettling as the Red Hart had been, only in a different way. But Suzie seemed lovely. She was smiling, waiting for a reply. She sensed her hesitancy.

“We can try it for a week,” Suzie suggested, answering Ellie’s unspoken concern. “See how we both feel about each other.”

Ellie found herself nodding. If nothing else she’d get to know the locals a bit quicker. So they agreed on Tuesday at 5pm, the quietest night to learn the ropes, when only the regulars were likely to be in and nothing untoward was likely to happen.

So Tuesday afternoon came and Ellie appeared on the doorstep of the Crown at 5pm. Suzie was just putting a blackboard out front by the bench tables, the evening’s lonely special written on it in white chalk: local pheasant and ale pie, mash and gravy £9.95.

“Good timing,” Suzie said, when she saw her. “I’ve just opened up.”

“I know, I’ve been watching from my window.” She jabbed a thumb behind her in the direction of the old dairy, and to her bedroom window at the front.

“Ahh yes. Well come in, come in. We’ll start you off behind the bar, I think, take it nice and easy. It’ll be quiet tonight, Ellie. Just a few of the regulars, mostly farmers once it starts getting dark. You’ll find it a slightly different crowd to Watford, I think.”

Suzie Bradbury began with a whirlwind tour of her pub, starting with the kitchen where Pete Newman was peeling his way through a bucket of potatoes, sweeping round the wooden tables of the dining areas, the back room with its pool table, both sets of gents and ladies toilets, down to the cellar with the beer barrels and the stacked crates of mixers, before ending at the bar. Suzie ran through the long line of spirits on the optics, the bottled mixers and beers in the under-counter fridges and the beers, ales and lagers on the taps. The till seemed fairly straight forward but the POS system Ellie thought was going to take a bit of getting used to.

“You’ll get the hang of it,” Suzie said. “I appreciate that it’s a lot to take in all at once.”

“Yeah,” Ellie murmured, looking at everything behind the bar again. “Only there was never any food at the Red Hart, unless you count crisps and pork scratchings.”

Suzie laughed, and brushed a strand of hair from her face. Then she looked up at the front door as their first customer came in.

“Here’s the first of your regulars,” Suzie said quietly. “His name’s Bill Scott, he’s got the big arable farm up the road. Been in his family since forever. He’s gruff but he’s sound. He’ll try and cadge a free beer out of you once he realises you’re new, but don’t take any crap from him. Hi Billy, how are you, my love?”

A big man in a very worn checked shirt and with a cloth cap perched on his head, Bill Scott heaved himself onto one of the bar stools and exhaled a huge dusty reply. He was covered in wheat chaff and had more white hair in his dishevelled beard than he had under his cap. He lumped two great hands down on the bar.

“Gaspin’, that’s how I am,” he said. “Swallowed half me field today, and I’ll prob’ly swallow the other half tomorrow.” He looked at Ellie but continued to speak to Suzie. “New girl, is it?”

“This is Ellie York,” Suzie told him.

“Pleased to meet you,” Ellie said. “We’ve just moved in, up the road.”

“Old Joe’s place? I saw the sign’d come down. Well, welcome to the village, Miss York. I trust Miss Bradbury ‘ere has instructed you on the tradition of new staff returning said welcome with a complimentary drink of their choosing?”

“Told you,” Suzie said to Ellie with a private wink, and then left her to it while she popped to the kitchen to see Pete Newman about the gravy for the night’s lone special.

Bill Scott asked for a pint of Bishop’s Finger, and begrudgingly dropped a crumpled ten pound note onto the bar while Ellie poured an angled glass under the tap. Her sight flickered up as she pulled the handle a second time, and settled on the figure of the lad who was back at the dartboard. She frowned because she hadn’t seen him come in. He was still wearing his black short-sleeved shirt with the Crown Prince embroidered across the back. She wondered about how vain he must be to keep wearing it on non-league nights when everyone in the pub must know exactly who he is. Then she recalled the patch of blood at his feet and wondered if it had been cleared up.

She craned her neck and went up on tiptoes as she pulled on the handle again, as if she might see it from here, but of course she couldn't. She'd meant to ask Suzie about him and the darts league. Seeing him again reminded her. She set the pint of Bishop's Finger down in front of Bill Scott who sipped it instantly and greedily like some lone traveller lost in the desert.

"Can I ask you a question, Bill?" Ellie said, as she picked his ten pound note up off the bar.

"Be a sad world if you couldn't," Bill said, when he pulled the glass from his lips.

She was at the till making change. "Who's the Crown Prince?"

Bill was quiet for a moment, and then took another long and refreshing draw on his pint, almost draining it. Then came some kind of growl in his throat.

"Now there's a question for your first day," he said, and Ellie watched as he put his pint glass down without another word. Then he heaved himself up off his barstool and then swaggered away in the direction of the gents.

Ellie waited for a few moments just watching the only other person in the pub, the young dart player in the far corner. She watched him go through his undeviating routine: throwing the darts at the treble twenty, tugging them out, then stepping hurriedly back to the oche to throw again, without ever once turning round.

Bill Scott was taking an age in the gents, and Suzie was taking an age in the kitchen. The rest of the pub was dead. Time seemed to have stopped. Even the clock behind the bar seemed to have stopped. Ellie hovered behind the bar, waiting for someone to come in, waiting for Bill or Suzie to come back. The only sound was the rapid thud thud thud of the Crown

Prince's darts hammering swiftly into the board at the far end of the pub.

Ellie eventually left the space behind the bar and wandered carefully across the room, tidying chairs that didn't need tidying, squaring beer mats that didn't need squaring, and all without taking her eyes off the dart player. Surely he would turn around at some point so she could at least see his face.

The pub remained in a weird limbo of silence and deserted time. Her eyes drifted to one of the old timber-framed windows and to the leafy street outside. There were no customers about to come in, no one outside at all, not even a car passing by on the quiet road.

She was just yards behind him now, she could see his darts thudding into the dartboard. She watched as he pounded in a one forty. Her eyes dropped to the oche where he stood and saw that the patch of blood hadn't been cleaned up. If anything it had gotten bigger. And it looked wetter and redder than it had before.

He stepped backwards to throw again, his black shoes sliding through the blood and leaving smeared tracks. Ellie swallowed a sudden knot of fear that had risen up into her throat. She watched as he banged in a quick one hundred and then almost ran to collect his darts.

As he retreated back to his place at the oche his shoes slid again, slip-sliding through the muck. More droplets of blood dripped into the rich puddle of thick blood puddling there, but he still seemed not to notice.

She was growing afraid now, afraid that he would finally turn around and look at her with a face glistening with blood. But he just banged in another one hundred and forty, and then a quick one hundred and eighty. But there was no yelp of joy at this feat,

no fist pump, nothing. Ellie couldn't help the comment that came.

"That's brilliant," she said.

But he didn't even reply. He didn't say anything. Or even acknowledge that she was there or had even said anything. He just collected his darts, retreated to the oche, and threw again.

The sound of the gents' toilet flushing broke the silence. Ellie looked up as if Bill Scott was about to appear. She hurried quickly back across the pub, away from the Crown Prince, and retook her place behind the bar once again. She realised that her fingers were trembling. Suddenly the Red Hart didn't seem half as bad.

Bill Scott came swaggering back across the room, adjusting his loose belt. It was a wonder his dusty trousers stayed up at all. He ran a large clean hand through his nest of sweaty, dusty, white hair while he held his cap up with the other, and then slumped down onto his barstool once again. When he took up his near-empty pint glass again, examining it from different angles as though someone else had been drinking it while he'd been away, Ellie realised that she was shaking all over.

"You alright?" he asked, looking past his disappointing glass at her.

Ellie nodded. Of course she was alright. It wasn't as if she'd seen a -

"What made you ask about the Crown Prince anyways?" Bill Scott asked her.

He put his glass back down on the bar and nudged it towards her with a weathered finger.

She'd forgotten she'd asked.

Ellie lay awake in bed that night. She couldn't sleep. Bill Scott had drunk another two pints and then gone home. A few other local farmers had come in. An older couple had turned up at nine for a late supper. And that was pretty much Tuesday night. Apart from the Crown Prince at the far end of the pub; he had thrown his darts all evening. Plus he'd never come to the bar or gone to the toilet either. And he'd never turned round, not even once, and Ellie had found herself watching his back almost all night.

Several times she had wanted to ask Suzie about him, but the more she left it the more she felt like she couldn't ask, and the more she felt like she couldn't ask, the more ridiculous and frightening it seemed that he just played by himself, all night without anyone else noticing. Not even Michael van Gerwen practised that much.

And of course the more she thought about him, the more she thought about the puddle of blood building at his feet. It must've been like a river come the end of the night. Was it even blood? What else could it be? She hunkered down under her duvet, even though it was a sweltering June night and her window was wide open. Dad was in the room next to hers, but she couldn't talk to him about it any more than she could talk to Suzie. Because every time she opened her mouth it all just sounded so ridiculous.

Wednesday night was busier. Thursday night was busier still. More people came in as the weekend approached, inside the pub as well as out in the beer garden. And food came regularly out of the kitchen.

Most of the tables were busy. People stood at the bar and in nooks and alcoves with drinks in their hands. She wondered where they all came from. And

between the bodies of customers Ellie could always see the Crown Prince up at the dartboard whenever she looked up, which was often.

It was gone seven when Bill Scott came in on Friday evening. He was wearing the same dusty checked shirt and cloth cap, and he lumped his hands down on the bar with exhaustion. He coughed and a cloud of wheat chaff came out.

“Pint of Bishop’s Finger?” Ellie asked, before he could say anything coherent.

He winked and pointed a dusty finger at her. His voice sounded like he’d been sleeping in a pigeon loft when it came out. “We’re gonna get on fine, you and me, I can tell.”

Ellie pulled his pint and set it down in front of him, and took the well-thumbed ten pound note he was holding out for her. He poured almost half of it straight down his throat as she turned to ring it into the till. He gasped noisily as he slammed his glass back down on the bar.

“By god I needed that,” he said.

Ellie came back with his change. She looked at him as she put it down next to his glass. He saw her scrutiny and held her gaze for a few moments. The growl came back into his throat.

“You still thinking ‘bout what I think you’re still thinking ‘bout?” he asked.

From the corner of her eye she could see the Crown Prince still throwing his darts. She shivered. In her head she could see the slick of blood pooled at his feet. She pursed her lips and nodded. Bill Scott craned his head left and right, furtively looking around like a police snitch in a drug den. He leaned in closer and kept his voice down like he was in a confessional.

“The Crown Prince was the hero of this pub,” he said. “Beat everyone he did. Could’ve gone pro.

Should've done too, with the right breaks."

"But who is he?"

Bill Scott took a long slow drink and set his glass down carefully on the bar, considering whether or not he should carry on with his story. "Henry Bradbury was his name. Suzie Bradbury's son. Only son. Apple of her eye. Clever. Representative of this 'ere pub. One hell of a dart player." He lifted his glass and drained it this time, and then set it down in front of her. Suds slid slowly down the inside of the glass. He poked it closer towards her with a grubby finger. "Same glass is fine."

"So what happened?" she whispered, as she angled the glass under the tap and pulled again. Soft creamy beer swirled into the glass as it slowly filled.

"He died, love. That's what happened."

Ellie stopped at the end of the handle's pull and stared at him.

"It's a shit story, excuse my French. A full pint please, love."

Ellie pulled on the beer tap twice more and then set the glass down in front of him with a hand that was now noticeably shaking. Bill had a rumpled five pound note in his hand. But she never asked him for it and he never gave it.

"So what happened to him?"

She suddenly thought that if she looked over there right now she would see him still playing and then she would definitely scream out loud.

Bill Scott took another long drink. Parched he might be, but this story needed some alcohol to help it out.

"It was so daft, it really was," he went on. "It was a league night, the Crown was playing the team from the White Rose up the road. Well o'course Henry ended up playing Win Griffin - and the two o' them went way back. They was at every school together,

fought tooth and nail all the way up - and o'course they gets to both be in the final. It's neck and neck the whole match, course it is. But then it comes down to the final leg, doesn't it?"

"So Henry won," Ellie guessed, "and what, this other guy didn't like it?"

"Nope. Henry lost, fair 'n square. It was Win Griffin that won with Shanghai, an unbelievable one twenty checkout. The pub was packed, everyone saw it and everyone cheered. Everyone from the White Rose, that is.

"See, Win was named after his grandfather Winston, but he'd always rub Henry up the wrong way with his stupid little catchphrase - Win by name, Win by nature - and he'd laugh. Whenever he won at anything he'd laugh, and boy did he love to rub it in. But this night, with everyone cheering an' all, Henry just lost it. He threw his fistful of darts at the back of Win's head as Win triumphantly pulled his darts out of the board. Two missed, but one of 'em stuck in the back o' Win's head. Course, he screamed. He went down like a sack o' spuds too and hit the deck. Then both teams fell in on each other. Big ol' fist fight. Police had to come break it up. Never seen police at no dart match before."

"So what happened to Henry then?" Ellie wanted to know, desperately trying to figure it all out and to keep from looking over to the far end of the pub where she knew, just knew, that the Crown Prince would still be playing.

"It might be a quiet country pub, love, but it's still a pub. Most people were drunk and gettin' drunker at that point, and during the brawl someone smashed a pint glass into young Henry's face."

"Oh my god," Ellie clasped her mouth.

"Did him a treat too. Sliced him every which

way. There was blood everywhere, and o'course we're twenty minutes or so to the nearest hospital, so he was dead before they even got here."

"Oh my god," Ellie said again.

Bill Scott aimed his glass towards the framed set of darts behind the bar, and the photo of Henry and Suzie at his graduation.

"They was Henry's darts," he said. "We had them framed up as a kind of memorial for Suzie. She always called the Crown a family pub, so she kept them behind the bar along with the photo." Bill Scott took a drink. He licked the foam from his lips, contemplating the past. "She took the Crown out o' the darts league o'course, not as though anyone from the pub wanted to play in it no more. And she took the dartboard down too, so no one could play here n'more either." He took another considered drink and licked his lips again like they were permanently dry. He looked Ellie straight in the eye then. "Told you it was a shit story, didn't I? If you'll excuse my French. But you asked me and I told you the truth of it."

Ellie nodded, and felt another frightened shiver pass through her as Bill's story played through her head again like a repeat on tv. She could see Henry Bradbury in her head, what his face looked like from the photo behind the bar before it was opened up. He was standing in the shadow of his gloating lifelong nemesis as everyone cheered for Win Griffin. She could feel the red face of Henry's torment, his glowing anger as he threw his darts like a playground brat at the back of Win's Griffin's head. Then thud, the lethal one piercing the bone of his skull, and then a scream, and then all hell breaking loose.

Ellie forced herself not to look in the direction of Henry Bradbury at the far end of the pub, because she knew he would still be there throwing his darts at a

board that wasn't there, practicing for all eternity. She went instead to the photo of him and his mum behind the bar, and to his darts that hung framed on the wall. She looked at the little brass plaque beneath his darts and read for the first time what was engraved on it:

Henry Bradbury
The Crown Prince
1988-2010
Checked out far too soon

Tears came as she looked back at his photo and his grinning happy face and then across the busy pub to where he was still slamming in his high scores.

She walked out from behind the bar now, as if she was in a dream from which she couldn't wake, and made her way through the throng of customers holding their drinks and laughing. A dog stood up and moved out of her way. She was heading towards the dartboard that Bill had said Suzie had taken down. She could feel Bill watching her, wondering where she was going, but she didn't care. The board was still there, she could see it as plainly as she could see the deceased Henry Bradbury throwing his spectral darts into it. Thud thud thud. Henry banged in another quick one hundred and forty as she approached. Ellie swallowed again. Her throat felt sore and scratchy. The sea of blood at his feet had grown bigger too. It was washing across the floor halfway to the gents. Blood ran in rich scarlet trails to and from the board, dragged by Henry's feet. And still he continued to throw at the board, his back always towards her.

She remembered what Bill Scott had told her, about Henry being glassed in the face, sliced every which way, the face she still couldn't see.

Thud, a treble twenty. Ellie began to step

around to the side of him to see him for herself. Thud, another treble twenty. She took another step, her eyes on the back of his head. She could see his ear now. Thud, another treble twenty.

Ellie tripped on her own feet and thought she might fall sprawling, right in front of Henry Bradbury. But she caught herself in time, and continued to step around. She looked up and for the first time saw the side of his deathly white skin-stretched face. His graveyard cheek was torn open, hanging with scraps of sliced skin that glistened wet and raw. She could see white teeth and bone inside, smeared with fresh blood. It dripped from the open wound, down to the ocean of blood pooled at his feet. His dark eye sockets gaped. His lips had retracted to reveal the cold grin of a death mask. He hesitated in his throwing only briefly, enough to acknowledge her close scrutiny, and his dead head rotated only marginally, but he saw her, he saw her. Then, without looking back at the board, he threw his darts again, but blind this time. Thud, a treble twenty. Thud, a single twenty. Thud, double top. Shanghai for the match. His dead teeth seemed to crease into a knowing grin, as though the two of them now shared a secret. And then Ellie screamed, as all the customers in the pub suddenly fell silent and turned to stare at the new girl standing alone in the corner of the pub.