A Graywolf Press Reading Group Guide

City of Bohane

A Novel

Kevin Barry

Discussion Questions

1. *City of Bohane* is set in the near future, but it isn't overrun with technology. Why do you think Kevin Barry avoided the dystopic techno-future that other writers of similar novels have embraced? How does this choice affect the novel's atmosphere?

2. Kevin Barry was influenced by his love of comics, film, music, and other elements of pop culture when writing *City of Bohane*. How does that blend of influences combine to make something fresh and new? What impact, both positive and negative, does pop culture have on literature?

3. The narrator of the novel is revealed late in the book as an archivist at the Ancient & Historical Bohane Film Society. How does the archivist's unique vantage point inform the book?

4. Unlike many novels set in the future, *City of Bohane* does not explain what happened to the West of Ireland to make Bohane become a city so decrepit and overrun by gangs. There is no apocalyptic event or sudden economic downturn. Why do you think Kevin Barry chose not to come up with an elaborate explanation for all the changes that have taken place between the present day and the time of the novel?

5. Bohane is a city with a rich blend of cultural groups, some familiar, some invented. How does Kevin Barry impart the weight and heft of real life to cultural groups as diverse as the Sand Pikeys, the Norries, and the Hartnett Fancy?

6. The streets of Bohane are populated by criminals, gang members, and petty thugs, all of whom have committed any number of violent acts. Do you find yourself sympathizing with them despite, or perhaps because of, their rough edges? Does the novel succeed in making you care for the fate of people you wouldn't want to encounter in normal life?

7. Kevin Barry employs a unique jargon to represent the slangy, streetwise speech of Wolfie Stanners, Logan Hartnett, and others. Does it matter whether or not you understand all of the phrases he uses? Does the use of invented slang deepen the world of Bohane?

8. The novel's foreground is dominated by imposing male characters like Logan Hartnett and the Gant Broderick, but by the novel's end it becomes clear that the women of Bohane—Jenni Ching, Macu, and Girly Hartnett—are the ones really in control. How does this revelation change your understanding of how gender and power function in the novel?

9. Throughout *City of Bohane,* Kevin Barry meticulously describes the clothing each character wears. Do these detailed descriptions help you to understand what type of people these characters are? If so, how?

10. The inhabitants of Bohane have a shared sense of nostalgia for the "lost-time," which Kevin Barry says was inspired by the Portuguese term *saudade,* which means melancholy or longing. How does Barry create a feeling of nostalgia in the book without fully defining the "lost-time"?

On the Writing of *City of Bohane*

Kevin Barry

Every writer is born a megalomaniac. To believe that you can create viable works of fiction, you must possess an ego vast enough to believe that it can create worlds within our own world, that it can make alternative realms in which different terms apply and different rules must be obeyed. I am very much in this megalomaniacal mold, and when it came to the writing of the novel in your hands, I knew in some detail what the world I wanted to create would look like. It would be a massively deranged city in the West of Ireland, with distinct similarities to the actual, massively deranged Irish cities in which I misspent my youth, but there would be subtle and not-so-subtle differences. I wanted to create this city in all of its strata, from top to bottom, and to present a view of it in the round. It was the summer of 2008, and I was poised to begin, with the nib of the pen hovering with boyish anticipation above the white field of the page, but I had a one very serious problem—I didn't know what my city was called.

And here, I'm afraid, we must lurch into melodrama, for I can only report that the city named Bohane came to me in A Vision. I was at home in County Sligo, in the humid soup of an Irish August, and in the middle of a dense, thundery night, when suddenly I sat bolt upright in the bed, shot from sleep, and I found myself in a feverish sweat, and I said aloud the single word: 'Bohane!'

Of course, at this point, my girlfriend turned from her own sleep and used some frankly industrial language and kicked me furiously. But nevertheless I put a pen to the

notebook on the bedside table and I scrawled the word down and I returned to a sleep of the just—I knew then that I would be able to begin the novel.

It was actually a few weeks later, in the city of Porto, that I began to write the first chapter. I was technically on holiday, but I detest holidays—that horrible sense of enforced leisure time—and so I bought some notebooks and I started to write. As I looked out from my cheap hotel room across the rooftops of the old Portuguese city, I realised that its geography would do just fine for my invented Irish one. There was a broad, majestic river gushing through town, a labyrinthine warren of mysterious old alleyways leading up from the river, and the city was perched dramatically on the bluffs and hills that looked down to the waterside and the wharfs. Also, there was that fact that the West of Ireland has ancient maritime links with the cities of Portugal and Spain, dating from the wine-and-brandy trade routes that go back to medieval times and beyond, and that Iberian influence on Irish West is palpable still to those of us with a romantic cast of mind. And then there is that wonderful Portuguese melancholy, or longing, that they term *saudade,* a kind of yearning for a lost-time, and this came quickly to infuse the novel's spirit.

So I had the city's name, and I had its shapes, and I had its feeling, and quickly then I found the characters that came to populate it. As a writer, I work primarily from the ear, and the voices of Bohane are sprung directly from the voices of the actual Irish cities in which I grew up, Limerick and Cork. If you can get the speech, I believe, you can get the soul, and there was no difficulty at all in getting the characters of Bohane to speak to each other; if anything, there was difficulty in getting them to shut up.

It was only as I wrote the first chapters that I realised that the book was set in the future. This was Bohane in the middle of the twenty-first century but it was a retro-future rather than a techno-future. In fact, the discovery that this story occurred in the 2050s was wonderfully liberating—it meant that I could invent at will, that I didn't have to hove to the actual, the real. I wrote a first draft in three madly intense months during which I seldom slept but occasionally fainted. The second draft took another six months, and it was a quieter, more controlled process. The third draft took a month, and was again a madly intense experience—I suspect that during this final period I may, technically, have been nuts.

There are definite literary influences on the novel (I would certainly list Anthony Burgess, Cormac McCarthy, James Joyce) but as many of its influences are from television, film, and the graphic novel. It is as much influenced by TV shows like *Deadwood* and *The Wire,* or by movies like *The Wanderers* or *West Side Story,* or by comics like the Hernandez Brothers' *Love and Rockets* series, as it is by anything in the ripe inheritance of Irish literature. It is structured much as a screenplay would be—three acts and an epilogue. Many of its narrative techniques—montage sequences, and so forth—are shamelessly pilfered from the better HBO shows. It was enormous fun to write, and I hope it is to read.

Building this city of the future in the West of Ireland involved building a new language, too. *City of Bohane* is many things but among them it is a guess at what hipster street-talk might sound like in just such a wild Irish town in the middle of this century. Bohane is a malevolent, evil, murderous, triple-crossing, and very sexy place. It is full of

vicious killers and hoods and rogues, and I adore them all. The story is written in technicolour. It is of a gang leader coming to the end of his reign, and the succession battle that brews among his scheming ranks. There's a sweaty love triangle thrown in for good measure. It is a weird kind of neo-Western—all of its characters conform to classic Western archetypes. It is intended as a visceral and innovative piece of literature but also as a grand entertainment. It is antirealist. It's built for kicks. It is, perhaps most importantly, a comedy. It is written for anyone who wants to open a book and find a truly lurid good time, but it's written in the high style, too. I hope that it is like nothing you have read before, but that on every page you will experience the weird lurch of déjà vu; that *saudade* again. Its language is in many ways a new-formed tongue, but is built on strong rhythmic lines, and this is a book that is fun to read aloud. Try it, and you should maybe think about trying out some of its fashions, too—unleash your inner Jenni Ching or Fucker Burke; the clothes are described in close detail for good reason, and in terms of the costumes, the author would strongly encourage reader participation.

Of course it is a truth, and it should be acknowledged, that all stories set in the future are in some sense a projection on the present moment. If you read *A Clockwork Orange* now, for example, it seems very clearly to be about Britain in the 1960s, the decade in which it was written—the Britain of emerging youth cults, of ultraviolent mods and rockers battling on Brighton Beach, a Britain that Anthony Burgess could not quite describe directly but did so perfectly by describing it at a future remove. And, certainly, *City of Bohane* is influenced by the changes that have occurred in actual Irish cities over the past couple of decades, when they

have become much more multicultural places, cities that are thrumming on fresh energies but dealing with fresh tensions, too. A visitor to a contemporary West of Ireland city who is already familiar with the rhythms of Bohane may find herself in some strange ways very much at home.

Finally, a couple of notes about the name: First, a pronounciation guide—the first syllable, 'bo', is pronunced as in 'crossbow'; the second, 'hane', has the same sound as a delicious Indian 'naan' bread. Phonetically, it might look like this—'Bo-hah-n'.

Second, I should say that the word itself is not quite an invention. It is in fact a very old and quite a rare surname, which is chiefly found in County Cork; it's an old Irish-language name, a Gaelic name. A few months ago, long after the novel had been written, I read at a literary event with the wonderful Cork poet Thomas McCarthy, who is a font of all knowledge, and he asked me did I know what exactly 'Bohane' meant, in the Gaelic? I said I did not. He told me that it means 'a little dwelling place'.

Enjoy a sneak-peek of a story—the winner of the Sunday Times EFG Private Bank Short Story Award—from Kevin Barry's forthcoming collection, *Dark Lies the Island,* which Graywolf Press will publish September 2013.

BEER TRIP TO LLANDUDNO

It was a pig of a day, as hot as we'd had, and we were down to our T-shirts taking off from Lime Street. This was a sight to behold – we were all of us biggish lads. It was Real Ale Club's July outing, a Saturday, and we'd had word of several good houses to be found in Llandudno. I was double-jobbing for Ale Club that year. I was in charge of publications and outings both. Which was controversial.

'Rhyl . . . We'll pass Rhyl, won't we?'

This was Mo.

'We'd have come over to Rhyl as kids,' said Mo. 'Ferry and coach. I remember the rollercoasters.'

'Never past Prestatyn, me,' said Tom Neresford.

Tom N – so-called; there were three Toms in Ale Club – rubbed at his belly in a worried way. There was sympathy for that. We all knew stomach trouble for a bugger.

'Down on its luck'd be my guess,' said Everett Bell. 'All these old North Wales resorts have suffered dreadfully, haven't they? Whole mob's gone off to bloody Laos on packages. Bloody Cambodia, bucket and spade.'

Everett wasn't inclined to take the happy view of things. Billy Stroud, the ex-Marxist, had nothing to offer about Llandudno. Billy was involved with his timetables.

'Two minutes and fifty seconds late taking off,' he said,

as the train skirted the Toxteth estates. 'This thing hits Llandudno for 1.55 p.m., I'm an exotic dancer.'

Aigburth station offered a clutch of young girls in their summer skimpies. Oiled flesh, unscarred tummies, and it wasn't yet noon. We groaned under our breaths. We'd taken on a crate of Marston's Old Familiar for the journey, 3.9 per cent to volume. Outside, the estuary sulked away in terrific heat and Birkenhead shimmered across the water. Which wasn't like Birkenhead. I opened my *AA Illustrated Guide to Britain's Coast* and read from its entry on Llandudno:

'A major resort of the North Wales coastline, it owes its well-planned streets and promenade to one Edward Mostyn, who, in the mid-19th century –'

'Victorian effort,' said John Mosely. 'Thought as much.'

If there was a dad figure among us, it was Big John, with his know-it-all interruptions.

'Who, in the mid-19th century,' I repeated, 'laid out a new town on former marshland below . . .'

'They've built it on a marsh, have they?' said Everett Bell.

'TB,' said Billy Stroud. 'Marshy environment was considered healthful.'

'Says here there's water skiing available from Llandudno jetty.'

'That'll be me,' said Mo, and we all laughed.

Hot as pigs, but companionable, and the train was in Cheshire quick enough. We had dark feelings about Cheshire that summer. At the North West Beer Festival, in the spring, the Cheshire crew had come over a shade cocky. Just because they were chocka with half-beam pubs in pretty villages. Warrington lads were fine. We could take the Salford lot

even. But the Cheshire boys were arrogant and we sniffed as we passed through their country.

'A bloody suburb, essentially,' said Everett.

'Chester's a regular shithole,' said Mo.

'But you'd have to allow Delamere Forest is a nice walk?' said Tom N.

Eyebrows raised at this, Tom N not being an obvious forest walker.

'You been lately, Tom? Nice walk?'

Tom nodded, all sombre.

'Was out for a Christmas tree, actually,' he said.

This brought gales of laughter. It is strange what comes over as hilarious when hangovers are general. We had the windows open to circulate what breeze there was. Billy Stroud had an earpiece in for the radio news. He winced:

'They're saying it'll hit 36.5,' he said. 'Celsius.'

We sighed. We sipped. We made Wales quick enough and we raised our Marston's to it. Better this than to be stuck in a garden listening to a missus. We meet as much as five nights of the week, more often six. There are those who'd call us a bunch of sots but we don't see ourselves like that. We see ourselves as hobbyists. The train pulled into Flint and Tom N went on the platform to fetch in some beef 'n' gravies from the Pie-O-Matic.

'Just the thing,' said Billy Stroud, as we sweated over our dripping punnets. 'Cold stuff causes the body too much work, you feel worse. But a nice hot pie goes down a treat. Perverse, I know. But they're on the curries in Bombay, aren't they?'

'Mumbai,' said Everett.

The train scooted along the fried coast. We made solid headway into the Marston's. Mo was down a testicle since the spring. We'd called in at the Royal the night of his operation. We'd stopped at the Ship and Mitre on the way – they'd a handsome bitter from Clitheroe on guest tap. We needed the fortification: when Real Ale Club boys parade down hospital wards, we tend to draw worried glances from the whitecoats. We are shaped like those chaps in the warning illustrations on cardiac charts. We gathered around Mo and breathed a nice fog of bitter over the lad and we joshed him but gently.

'Sounding a little high-pitched, Mo?'

'Other lad's going to be worked overtime.'

'Diseased bugger you'll want in a glass jar, Mo. One for the mantelpiece.'

Love is a strong word, but. We were family to Mo when he was up the Royal having the bollock out. We passed Flint Castle and Everett Bell piped up.

'Richard the Second,' he said.

We raised eyebrows. We were no philistines at Ale Club, Merseyside branch. Everett nodded, pleased.

'This is where he was backed into a corner,' he said. 'By Bolingbroke.'

'Boling who?'

'Bolingbroke, the usurper. Old Dick surrendered for a finish. At Flint Castle. Or that's how Shakespeare had it.'

'There's a contrary view, Ev?'

'Some say it was more likely Conwy but I'd be happy with the Bard's read,' he said, narrowing his eyes, the matter closed.

'We'll pass Conwy Castle in a bit, won't we?'

I consulted my *Illustrated AA*.

'We'll not,' I said. 'But we may well catch a glimpse across the estuary from Llandudno Junction.'

There was a holiday air at the stations. Families piled on, the dads with papers, the mams with lotion, the kids with phones. The beer ran out by Abergele and this was frowned upon: poor planning. We were reduced to buying train beer, Worthington's. Sourly we sipped and Everett came and had a go.

'Maybe if one man wasn't in charge of outings *and* publications,' he said, 'we wouldn't be running dry halfways to Llandudno.'

'True, Everett,' I said, calmly, though I could feel the colour rising to my cheeks. 'So if anyone cares to step up, I'll happily step aside. From either or.'

'We need you on publications, kid,' said John Mosely. 'You're the man for the computers.'

Publications lately was indeed largely web-based. I maintained our site on a regular basis, posting beer-related news and links. I was also looking into online initiatives to attract the younger drinker.

'I'm happy on publications, John,' I said. 'The debacle with the newsletter aside.'

Newsletter had been a disaster, I accepted that. The report on the Macclesfield outing had been printed upside down. Off-colour remarks had been made about a landlady in Everton, which should never have got past an editor's eye, as the lady in question kept very fine pumps. It hadn't been for want of editorial meetings. We'd had several, mostly down the Grapes of Wrath.

'So how's about outings then?' I said, as the train swept

by Colwyn Bay. 'Where's our volunteer there? Who's for the step-up?'

Everett showed a palm to placate me.

'There's nothin' personal in this, lad,' he said.

'I know that, Ev.'

Ale Club outings were civilised events. They never got aggressive. Maudlin, yes, but never aggressive. Rhos-on-Sea; the Penrhyn sands. We knew Everett had been through a hard time. His old dad passed on and there'd been sticky business with the will. Ev would turn a mournful eye on us, at the bar of the Lion, in the snug of the Ship, and he'd say:

'My brother got the house, my sister got the money, I got the manic depression.'

Black as his moods could be, as sharp as his tongue, Everett was tender. Train came around Little Ormes Head and Billy Stroud went off on one about Ceauşescu.

'Longer it recedes in the mind's eye,' he said, 'the more like Romania seems the critical moment.'

'Apropos of, Bill?'

'Apropos my arse. As for Liverpool? Myth was piled upon myth, wasn't it? They said Labour sent out termination notices to council workers by taxi. Never bloody happened! It was an anti-red smear!'

'Thatcher's sick and old, Billy,' said John Mosely.

'Aye an' her spawn's all around us yet,' said Billy, and he broke into a broad smile, his humours mysteriously righted, his fun returned.

Looming, then, the shadow of Great Ormes Head, and beneath it a crescent swathe of bay, a beach, a prom, and terraces: here lay Llandudno.

'1.55 p.m.,' said Everett. 'On the nose.'

'Where's our exotic dancer?' teased Mo.

Billy Stroud sadly raised his T-shirt above his man boobs. He put his arms above his head and gyrated slowly his vast belly and danced his way off the train. We lost weight in tears as we tumbled onto the platform.

'How much for a private session, miss?' called Tom N.

'Tenner for twenty minutes,' said Billy. 'Fiver, I'll stay the full half-hour.'

We walked out of Llandudno station and plumb into a headbutt of heat.

'Blood and tar!' I cried. 'We'll be hittin' the lagers!'

'Wash your mouth out with soap and water,' said John Mosely.

Big John rubbed his hands together and led the way – Big John was first over the top. He reminded us there was business to hand.

'We're going to need a decision,' he said, 'about the National Beer Scoring System.'

Here was kerfuffle. The NBSS, by long tradition, ranked a beer from nought to five. Nought was take-backable, a crime against the name of ale. One was barely drinkable, two so-so, three an eyebrow raised in mild appreciation. A four was an ale on top form, a good beer in proud nick. A five was angel's tears but a seasoned drinker would rarely dish out a five, would over the course of a lifetime's quaffing call no more than a handful of fives. Such was the NBSS, as was. However, Real Ale Club, Merseyside branch, had for some time felt that the system lacked subtlety. And one famous night, down Rigby's, we came up with our own system – we marked from nought to

ten. Finer gradations of purity were thus allowed for. The nuances of a beer were more properly considered. A certain hoppy tang, redolent of summer hedgerows, might elevate a brew from a seven to an eight. The mellow back-note born of a good oak casking might lift an ale again, and to the rare peaks of the nines. Billy Stroud had argued for decimal breakdown, for 7.5s and 8.5s – Billy would – but we had to draw a line somewhere. The national organisation responded badly. They sent stiff word down the email but we continued to forward our beer reports with markings on a nought to ten scale. There was talk now of us losing the charter. These were heady days.

'Stuff them is my view,' said Everett Bell.

'We'd lose a lot if we lost the charter,' said Mo. 'Think about the festival invites. Think about the history of the branch.'

'Think about the bloody future!' cried Tom N. 'We haven't come up with a new system to be awkward. We've done it for the ale drinkers. We've done it for the ale makers!'

I felt a lump in my throat and I daresay I wasn't alone.

'Ours is the better system,' said Everett. 'This much we know.'

'You're right,' said John Mosely, and this was the clincher, Big John's call. 'I say we score nought to ten.'

'If you lot are in, that's good enough for me,' I said.

Six stout men linked arms on a hot Llandudno pavement. We rounded the turn onto the prom and our first port of call: the Heron Inn.

Which turned out to be an anti-climax. A nice house, lately refurbished, but mostly keg rubbish on the taps. The

Heron did, however, do a Phoenix Tram Driver on cask, 3.8 per cent, and we sat with six of same.

'I've had better Tram Drivers,' opened Mo.

'I've had worse,' countered Tom N.

'She has a nice delivery but I'd worry about her legs,' said Billy Stroud, shrewdly.

'You wouldn't be having more than a couple,' said John Mosely.

'*Not* a skinful beer,' I concurred.

All eyes turned to Everett Bell. He held a hand aloft, wavered it.

'A five would be generous, a six insane,' he said.

'Give her the five,' said Big John, dismissively.

I made the note. This was as smoothly as a beer was ever scored. There had been some world-historical ructions in our day. There was the time Billy Stroud and Mo hadn't talked for a month over an eight handed out to a Belhaven Bombardier.

Alewards we followed our noses. We walked by the throng of the beach – the shrieks of the sun-crazed kids made our stomachs loop. We made towards the Prom View Hotel. We'd had word of a new landlord there an ale-fancier. It was dogs-dying-in-parked-cars weather. The Prom View's ample lounge was a blessed reprieve. We had the place to ourselves, the rest of Llandudno apparently being content with summer, sea and life. John Mosely nodded towards a smashing row of hand pumps for the casks. Low whistles sounded. The landlord, hot-faced and jovial, came through from the hotel's reception.

'Another tactic,' he said, 'would be stay home and have a nice sauna.'

'Same difference,' sighed John Mosely.

'Could be looking at 37.2 now,' said the landlord, taking a flop of sweat from his brow.

Billy Stroud sensed a kindred spirit:

'Gone up again, has it?'

'And up,' said the landlord. 'My money's on a 38 before we're out.'

'Record won't go,' said Billy.

'Nobody's said record,' said the landlord. 'We're not going to see a 38.5, that's for sure.'

'Brogdale in Kent,' said Billy. 'August 10th, 2003.'

'2.05 p.m.,' said the landlord. 'I wasn't five miles distant that same day.'

Billy was beaten.

'Loading a van for a divorced sister,' said the landlord, ramming home his advantage. 'Lugging sofas in the piggin' heat. And wardrobes!'

We bowed our heads to the man.

'What'll I fetch you, gents?'

A round of Cornish Lightning was requested.

'Taking the sun?' enquired the landlord.

'Taking the ale.'

'After me own heart,' he said. ''Course 'round here, it's lagers they're after mostly. Bloody Welsh.'

'Can't beat sense into them,' said John Mosely.

'If I could, I would,' said the landlord, and he danced as a young featherweight might, he raised his clammy dukes. Then he skipped and turned.

'I'll pop along on my errands, boys,' he said. 'There are rows to hoe and socks for the wash. You'd go through pair after pair this weather.'

He pinched his nostrils closed: what-a-pong.

'Soon as you're ready for more, ring that bell and my good wife will oblige. So adieu, adieu . . .'

He skipped away. We raised eyes. The shade of the lounge was pleasant, the Cornish Lightning in decent nick.

'Call it a six?' said Tom N.

Nervelessly we agreed. Talk was limited. We swallowed hungrily, quickly, and peered again towards the pumps.

'The Lancaster Bomber?'

'The Whitstable Mule?'

'How's about that Mangan's Organic?'

'I'd say the Lancaster, all told.'

'Ring the bell, Everett.'

He did so, and a lively blonde, familiar with her forties but nicely preserved, bounced through from reception. Our eyes went shyly down. She took a glass to shine as she waited our call. Type of lass who needs her hands occupied.

'Do you for, gents?'

Irish, her accent.

'Round of the Lancaster, wasn't it?' said Everett.

She squinted towards our table, counted the heads.

'Times six,' confirmed Everett.

The landlady squinted harder. She dropped the glass. It smashed to pieces on the floor.

'Maurice?' she said.

It was Mo that froze, stared, softened.

'B-B-Barbara?' he said.

We watched as he rose and crossed to the bar. A man in a dream was Mo. We held our breaths as Mo and Barbara took each other's hands over the counter. They were wordless for some moments, and then felt ten eyes on them, for

they giggled, and Barbara set blushing to the Lancasters. She must have spilled half again down the slops gully as she poured. I joined Everett to carry the ales to our table. Mo and Barbara went into a huddle down the far end of the counter. They were rapt.

Real Ale Club would not have marked Mo for a romancer.

'The quiet ones you watch,' said Tom N. 'Maur*ice*?'

'Mo? With a piece?' whispered Everett Bell.

'Could be they're old family friends,' tried innocent Billy. 'Or relations?'

Barbara was now slowly stroking Mo's wrist.

'Four buggerin' fishwives I'm sat with,' said John Mosely. 'What are we to make of these Lancasters?'

We talked ale but were distracted. Our glances cut down the length of the bar. Mo and Barbara talked lowly, quickly, excitedly down there. She was moved by Mo, we could see that plain enough. Again and again she ran her fingers through her hair. Mo was gazing at her, all dreamy, and suddenly he'd got a thumb hooked in the belt-loop of his denims – Mr Suave. He didn't so much as touch his ale.

Next, of course, the jaunty landlord arrived back on the scene.

'Oh, Alvie!' she cried. 'You'll never guess!'

'Oh?' said the landlord, all the jauntiness instantly gone from him.

'This is *Maurice*!'

'Maurice?' he said. 'You're joking . . .'

It was polite handshakes then, and feigned interest in Mo on the landlord's part, and a wee fat hand he slipped around the small of his wife's back.

'We'll be suppin' up,' said John Mosely, sternly.

Mo had a last, whispered word with Barbara but her smile was fixed now and the landlord remained in close attendance. As we left, Mo looked back and raised his voice a note too loud. Desperate, he was.

'Barbara?'

We dragged him along. We'd had word of notable pork scratchings up the Mangy Otter.

'Do tell, Maur*ice*,' said Tom N.

'Leave him be,' said John Mosely.

'An ex, that's all,' said Mo.

And Llandudno was infernal. Families raged in the heat. All of the kids wept. The Otter was busyish when we sludged in. We settled on a round of St Austell Tributes from a meagre selection. Word had not been wrong on the quality of the scratchings. And the St Austell turned out to be in top form.

'I'd be thinking in terms of a seven,' said Everett Bell.

'Or a shade past that?' said John Mosely.

'You could be right on higher than sevens,' said Billy Stroud. 'But surely we're not calling it an eight?'

'Here we go,' I said.

'Now this,' said Billy Stroud, 'is where your 7.5s would come in.'

'We've heard this song, Billy,' said John Mosely.

'He may not be wrong, John,' said Everett.

'Give him a 7.5,' said John Mosely, 'and he'll be wanting his 6.3s, his 8.6s. There'd be no bloody end to it!'

'Tell you what,' said Mo. 'How about I catch up with you all a bit later? Where's next on the list?'

We stared at the carpet. It had diamonds on and crisps ground into it.

'Next up is the Crippled Ox on Burton Square,' I read from my printout. 'Then it's Henderson's on Old Parade.'

'See you at one or the other,' said Mo.

He threw back the dregs of his St Austell and was gone.

We decided on another at the Otter. There was a Whitstable Silver Star, 6.2 per cent to volume, a regular stingo to settle our nerves.

'What's the best you've ever had?' asked Tom N.

It's a conversation that comes up again and again but it was a life-saver just then: it took our minds off Mo.

'Put a gun to my head,' said Big John, 'and I don't think I could look past the draught Bass I had with me dad in Peter Kavanagh's. Sixteen years of age, Friday teatime, first wage slip in my arse pocket.'

'But was it the beer or the occasion, John?'

'How can you separate the two?' he said, and we all sighed.

'For depth? Legs? Back-note?' said Everett Bell. 'I'd do well to ever best the Swain's Anthem I downed a November Tuesday in Stockton-on-Tees: 19 and 87. 4.2 per cent to volume. I was still in haulage at that time.'

'I've had an Anthem,' said Billy Stroud of this famously hard-to-find brew, 'and I'd have to say I found it an unexceptional ale.'

Everett made a face.

'So what'd be your all-time, Billy?'

The ex-Marxist knitted his fingers atop the happy mound of his belly.

'Ridiculous question,' he said. 'There is so much wonderful ale on this island. How is a sane man to separate a Pelham High Anglican from a Warburton's Saxon Fiend? And we

haven't even mentioned the great Belgian tradition. Your Duvel's hardly a dishwater. Then there's the Czechs, the Poles, the Germans . . .'

'Gassy pop!' cried Big John, no fan of a German brew, of a German anything.

'Nonsense,' said Billy. 'A Paulaner Weissbier is a sensational sup on its day.'

'Where'd you think Mo's headed?' Tom N cut in.

Everett groaned:

'He'll be away down the Prom View, won't he? Big ape.'

'Mo a ladykiller?' said Tom. 'There's one for breaking news.'

'No harm if it meant he smartened himself up a bit,' said John.

'He has let himself go,' said Billy. 'Since the testicle.'

'You'd plant spuds in those ears,' I said.

The Whitstables had us in fighting form. We were away up the Crippled Ox. We found there a Miner's Slattern on cask. TV news showed sardine beaches and motorway chaos. There was an internet machine on the wall, a pound for ten minutes, and Billy Stroud went to consult the meteorological satellites. The Slattern set me pensive

Strange, I thought, how I myself had wound up a Real Ale Club stalwart. 1995, October, I'd found myself in motorway services outside Ormskirk having a screaming barny with the missus. We were moving back to her folks' place in Northern Ireland. From dratted Leicester. We were heading for the ferry at Stranraer. At services, missus told me I was an idle lardarse who had made her life hell and she never wanted to see me again. We'd only stopped off to fill the tyres. She gets in, slams the door, puts her foot

down. Give her ten minutes, I thought, she'll calm down and turn back for me. Two hours later, I'm sat in an empty Chinese in services, weeping, and eating Szechuan beef. I call a taxi. Taxi comes. I says where are we, exactly? Bloke looks at me. He says Ormskirk direction. I says what's the nearest city of any size? Drop you in Liverpool for twenty quid, he says. He leaves me off downtown and I look for a pub. Spot the Ship and Mitre and in I go. I find a stunning row of pumps. I call a Beaver Mild out of Devon.

'I wouldn't,' says a bloke with a beard down the bar.

'Oh?'

'Try a Marston's Old Familiar,' he says, and it turns out he's Billy Stroud.

The same Billy turned from the internet machine at the Ox in Llandudno.

'37.9,' he said. 'Bristol Airport, a shade after three. Flights delayed, tarmac melting.'

'Pig heat,' said Tom N.

'We won't suffer much longer,' said Billy. 'There's a change due.'

'Might get a night's sleep,' said Everett.

The hot nights were certainly a torment. Lying there with a sheet stuck to your belly. Thoughts coming loose, beer fumes rising, a manky arse. The city beyond the flat throbbing with summer. Usually I'd get up and have a cup of tea, watch some telly. Astrophysics on Beeb Two at four in the morning, news from the galaxies, and light already in the eastern sky. I'd dial the number in Northern Ireland and then hang up before they could answer.

Mo arrived into the Ox like the ghost of Banquo. There were terrible scratch marks down his left cheek.

'A Slattern will set you right, kid,' said John Mosely, discreetly, and he manoeuvred his big bones barwards.

Poor Mo was wordless as he stared into the ale that was put before him. Billy Stroud sneaked a time-out signal to Big John.

'We'd nearly give Henderson's a miss,' agreed John.

'As well get back to known terrain,' said Everett.

We climbed the hot streets towards the station. We stocked up with some Cumberland Pedigrees, 3.4 per cent to volume, always an easeful drop. The train was busy with daytrippers heading back. We sipped quietly. Mo looked half dead as he slumped there but now and then he'd come up for a mouthful of his Pedigree.

'How's it tasting, kiddo?' chanced Everett.

'Like a ten,' said Mo, and we all laughed.

The flicker of his old humour reassured us. The sun descended on Colwyn Bay and there was young life everywhere. I'd only spoken to her once since Ormskirk. We had details to finalise, and she was happy to let it slip about her new bloke. Some twat called Stan.

'He's emotionally spectacular,' she said.

'I'm sorry to hear it, love,' I said. 'Given you've been through the wringer with me.'

'I mean in a good way!' she barked. 'I mean in a *calm* way!'

We'd a bit of fun coming up the Dee Estuary with the Welsh place names.

'Fy . . . feen . . . no. Fiiiif . . . non . . . fyff . . . non . . . growy?'

This was Tom N.

'Foy. Nonn. Grewey?'

This was Everett's approximation.

'Ffynnongroew,' said Billy Stroud, lilting it perfectly. 'Simple. And this one coming up? Llannerch-y-mor.'

Pedigree came down my nose I laughed that hard.

'Young girl, beautiful,' said Mo. 'Turn around and she's forty bloody three.'

'Leave it, Mo,' said Big John.

But he could not.

'She's come over early in '86. She's living up top of the Central line, Theydon Bois. She's working in a pub there, live-in, and ringing me from a phone box. In Galway I'm in a phone box too – we have to arrange the times, eight o'clock on Tuesday, ten o'clock on Friday. It's physical fucking pain she's not in town any more. I'll follow in the summer is the plan and I get there, Victoria Coach Station, six in the morning, eighty quid in my pocket. And she's waiting for me there. We have an absolute dream of a month. We're lying in the park. There's a song out and we make it our song. "Oh to be in England, in the summertime, with my love, close to the edge".'

'Art of Noise,' said Billy Stroud.

'Shut up, Billy!'

'Of course the next thing the summer's over and I've a start with BT up here and she's to follow on, October is the plan. We're ringing from phone boxes again, Tuesdays and Fridays but the second Friday the phone doesn't ring. Next time I see her she's forty bloody three.'

Flint station we passed through, and then Connah's Quay.

'Built up, this,' said Tom N. 'There's an Aldi, look? And that's a new school, is it?'

'Which means you want to be keeping a good two hundred yards back,' said Big John.

We were horrified. Through a miscarriage of justice, plain as, Tom N had earlier in the year been placed on a sex register. Oh the world is mad! Tom N is a placid, placid man. We were all six of us quiet as the grave on the evening train then. It grew and built, it was horrible, the silence. It was Everett at last that broke it; we were coming in for Helsby. Fair dues to Everett.

'Not like you, John,' he said.

Big John nodded.

'I don't know where that came from, Tom,' he said. 'A bloody stupid thing to say.'

Tom N raised a palm in peace but there was no disguising the hurt that had gone in. I pulled away into myself. The turns the world takes – Tom dragged through the courts, Everett half mad, Mo all scratched up and one-balled, Big John jobless for eighteen months. Billy Stroud was content, I suppose, in Billy's own way. And there was me, shipwrecked in Liverpool. Funny, for a while, to see 'Penny Lane' flagged up on the buses, but it wears off.

And then it was before us in a haze. Terrace rows we passed, out Speke way, with cookouts on the patios. Tiny pockets of glassy laughter we heard through the open windows of the carriage. Families and what-have-you. We had the black hole of the night before us – it wanted filling. My grimmest duty as publications officer was the obits page of the newsletter. Too many had passed on at forty-four, at forty-six.

'I'm off outings,' I announced. 'And I'm off bloody publications as well.'

'You did volunteer on both counts,' reminded Big John.

'It would leave us in an unfortunate position,' said Tom N.

'For my money, it's been a very pleasant outing,' said Billy Stroud.

'We've supped some quality ale,' concurred Big John.

'We've had some cracking weather,' said Tom N.

'Llandudno is quite nice, really,' said Mo.

Around his scratch marks an angry bruising had seeped. We all looked at him with tremendous fondness.

''Tis nice,' said Everett Bell. 'If you don't run into a she-wolf.'

'If you haven't gone ten rounds with Edward bloody Scissorhands,' said John Mosely.

We came along the shabby grandeurs of the city. The look on Mo's face then couldn't be read as anything but happiness.

'Maur*ice*,' teased Big John, 'is thinking of the rather interesting day he's had.'

Mo shook his head.

'Thinking of days I had years back,' he said.

It has this effect, Liverpool. You're not back in the place five minutes and you go sentimental as a famine ship. We piled off at Lime Street. There we go: six big blokes in the evening sun.

'There's the Lion Tavern?' suggested Tom N.

'There's always the Lion,' I agreed.

'They've a couple of Manx ales guesting at Rigby's,' said Everett Bell.

'Let's hope they're an improvement on previous Manx efforts,' said Billy Stroud.

'There's the Grapes?' tried Big John.

'There's always the Grapes,' I agreed.

And alewards we went about the familiar streets. The town was in carnival: Tropic of Lancashire in a July swelter. It would not last. There was rain due in off the Irish Sea, and not for the first time.