

Ian Brotherhood

Tales of The Great Unwashed

-Any chance of a late lunch?

-How?

-I'm away down the town to see Muhammad Ali.

Marty just laughs, but he doesn't know the man's in town for the book signing. If he knew he'd be wanting to go as well. But I only just got the call from my brother to say that the man's definitely showing, so I've says we'll meet down The Shoe.

He lets me go at one on the dot cos the place is pretty dead. The cellar's organised and the deliveries are all checked and stacked, so I'm offsky. I know Marty'll likely have a right go at me for not telling him what's what. But he did ask, and I did say, so no comebacks as far as I can see. Maybe I can get a picture took with the big man to prove it.

It's pure bitter outside, and I never took a proper jacket out. If Mark would've called me earlier I could have nipped home and grabbed the bunnet and gloves and that, but no chance now. So it's only the wee thin cagoule I've got and the trainers are totally dodgy, big wide mouths at all sides and much coldness coming in.

Thank god it's not wet. The sun's out good-style, but it's the likes of that winter sun with no heat in it. It's dead bright, and it's coming at you from a dead low angle so you think you're a wee microscopic beastie getting examined, and every hair on your head, every crease on your clothes, every movement you make is like dead obvious and clear to everyone, and even the folk you pass in the Sauchie, they're all dead bright and feel really close, like you can see all their pores and that, every bit of them, and the likes of the lassies with the make-up, you can see where the make-up's on their skin and where it isn't.

So I make it fast down Sauchie, and it's dead busy what with it being like office lunch-time, and all these punters from the lawyers and accountants and call centre offices and all that are all sort of running about giving it shop and grub and dash and panic, back before they're late and all that, and I know I'm rushing as well but it's nice to think that I just work in a bar and I don't have all this big hassle about clocking in and out and all that.

Marty's great about a wee ten minutes here and there, but it's fair enough cos I'm always in dead early. I really am, every day. I'm in there first thing, when the rolls and pies and that are getting delivered, and that's usually half-seven. So I slow down a bit and try to look cool, or cooler than the panicky office types anyway. I'm just having a wee walk. I'm walking brisk-style to combat the cold. That's it. I'm a student. I'm studying Chinese medicine or, aye, I'm into ancient languages and that and I'm having a wee lunch-time stroll to ponder what I got at the lectures this morning. That's it. Maybe one of these office babes will stop me and ask the time, and I'll tell her, well, I'll tell her a guess cos I don't have a watch, but she'll be smiling anyway and ask me if I fancy grabbing a quick coffee somewhere but I'll be like that, sorry doll, I'm off to meet Muhammad Ali and I'll walk on as cool as you like, and she'll stand watching me heading off round the corner into Buchie, and she'll wonder if she'll ever see me again.

By the time I reach The Shoe I'm totally freez-

ing, and I know my nose is starting to go that way it does. My ears are nipping something desperate, but I don't rub them cos that just makes them worse. No sign of Mark. He says he would be right outside, likely cos he's no cash as usual. But he maybe nipped in to use the bog, so I go in.

The place is packed. The Shoe has one of those like really old fashioned insides, with a massive great bar that runs right round the place in a big circle. It's stacked with yet more office types, all these guys with cracking long coats on and smart breeks and brilliant white shirts and mad ties of all colours and patterns, and they're all laughing and smoking, and the box is showing some football on like about twenty different screens of all sizes, and it's so packed I have to squeeze my way past a few of these guys and the smell of the booze is a bit boaky when you're not drinking yourself. Don't get me wrong, I like a few pints, but when you're working with it all the time and then suddenly you're on the other side of the bar, it's a bit weird sometimes.

So I go round the whole place, check the bogs, no joy, so back outside. The lane's quiet compared to The Shoe. I stay in the doorway, cos it's big enough that you can stand there and folk can still come and go and that, and I make a smoke. That takes ages right enough cos my fingers are sort of stiff and like frozen, but making the smoke is good cos it loosens them up a wee bit and they get tingly and I get some heat back in them and I start smoking the thing and that's when Mark turns up, standing at the end of the lane looking down. He doesn't see me at first, so I raise my arm.

He looks even colder than I feel. Mark's the same size as me, looks the same about the face and that. He's five years younger. He doesn't really remember Ali like me. He knows all about him right enough, all the stats and that, dates, opponents, he's better than me at all that type of thing, I'll give him that. But he can't remember the Thrilla and the Rumble. He's tried, but he just can't. He even got the old self-hypnosis tapes to see if he could get back to it, but he was just too wee, and when I tell him he was definitely there with us in the room for the Foreman fight, that really gets him mad. I can still remember he was a right pain that day, getting in the road and jumping about on his space hopper thing and causing chaos till eventually the old man slapped his arse and put him in the room so we could watch it in peace.

Have you seen that queue? he asks, like it's my fault or something.

I've no even been there yet I say, and he gabs on about how the old man wouldn't tap him the bus fare so he had to hoof it, and that was an hour, so odds-on he'll be trying to get into me for a fiver, or at least his fare home, so that puts me on 'a downer just waiting for it to happen.

We plod round to the book-shop, and right enough there's this almighty queue from the door of the shop, round the corner, and then down to the next corner, and there's this wee cobbled lane running down the back and the queue's away down there as well. And it's a right tight queue too, like the folk maybe think they'll get in faster if they squash up, but maybe they're wanting each other's heat as well. The punters in the queue sort of look at us as we cross the road heading for the

main door, as if we're going to try and jump ahead and they're just dying for an excuse to pounce us and give us a doing, just cos they've got the fifteen sovs for the book and we don't.

There's two security guys on the door, and they look like they want to run away. One of them's gabbing into his walkie talkie, and the other one's just pure scared looking. But it's not like the crowd's going mad or that. Inside, there's so many bodies that you can't make out anything through the legs and coats and heads, but you can hear wee like waves of applause coming out over them, so it's a cert he's in there somewhere.'

It's only half-past says Mark, so the man must've got in early. Thing is, he's due in Edinburgh at half-three, so surely he'll not be hanging about that long. We should get to see him when he leaves.

So we're just kind of hanging about near the door, and you can see there's no way the security guys are shifting away from their patch, no chance, so I figure we're safe enough standing here, but the next thing you know there's two cops coming up Union Street along the pavement on our sides with their arms out and they're moving folk along and telling them to clear it, and the punters in the queue are like squashing against the window, and the ones with copies of the book are sort of half holding them up as if they're big tickets, so we shift away before we're asked, to the opposite corner of the junction where we can still sort of half-see in the windows over the heads of the punters in the queue.

It's good at this bit cos the sun's on us, but it's still so cold I can hardly move my face, and after about five minutes Mark's teeth are going.

Got any dosh? he says, and he rakes about in his pocket and I take ages getting my fingers into mine cos they're so frozen and stiff, and I take what change he has and put it with mine and it's like two-fifty we've got, not even enough for a pint each anyway, and if we go for a half-pint we might miss the man coming out, so Mark says what about a coffee then, and I give him the shrapnel and he heads round to the chippy and I'll give him a shout if the man shows.

The coffees last about twenty minutes. Inside the shop we see the crowd shift all the time, and now and then we get a glimpse of a bright white shirt with a black head, and that must be him. You can tell by the way all the bodies and heads are angled towards him, and whenever he moves they move too, and even when he's out of sight we can sort of guess where he is by looking at the folk pressed against the windows outside, cos they're on their tiptoes and telling each other they can see him.

What's happening boys? says this old guy right behind me, and a right fright I get too cos I didn't know he was there. He's wee-er than me, and he's got this like mad scab right down the side of his face, like he must've gone on his ear, and there's a line of black stitches and dried blood where half of an eyebrow should be, and right stinking he is too, even with it being so cold that you think smells like that would be frozen, and I step a wee bit away from him and tell him it's Muhammad, and he laughs then sort of growls and says Cassius, Cassius was his name, and they brain-washed him and used him and all that, and Mark

gets involved then and says how he's a hero and he never did anything against anyone and it's not right talking him down and you can see this old lad getting a bit sort of wound up and like mad about the eyes, then he calms down a bit and asks us if we've any spare change and Mark tells him where to go and starts loosing the rag a wee bit so I have to sort of step in halfway. So this old bloke kind of shuffles off, but he only goes so far as the corner by the shoe shop across from the book shop, and he stands there watching, same as us.

Two o'clock. That's me well late now, even if I head back. Mark's leaning against the lamp post, shaking. He doesn't want to go yet. Neither do I. There's a phone box on the other side of the street just by the entrance to Central, and I'll still have a view of the main doors, so I head over, call the work. Marty's on like a shot. Any chance of an extra half-hour? No way. He's in a right mood as well, says he's to meet the regional manager at that trade show at half-three, and if I'm not back Sharon'll tell him, and I'll have my balls in my hands. Half-two latest, or else. He wants me to sort the snacks order for next week and he's on about something else when this cracking big black limousine draws up outside the shop and the beeps start going so I hang up, and before the receiver hits the box I can hear Marty shout, half-two, half-two.

Another half hour later, the limo's away cos it got moved on by the cops. The queue doesn't seem to have moved at all. We see a couple of footballers knocking about, trying to get in, and a guy

who used to be a boxer but we can't remember his name, but no-one's bothered with them.

Mark gets another coffee, and we share it. The old guy comes back over. He's worse than us, totally freezing. Mark gives him the last of the coffee and I pass him my baccy to make a roolly. He must've managed to get some dosh off someone cos he's got a fresh can of dead strong cider, and he cracks it open and offers us a slug but we both say no thanks. He starts on about how he remembers when Ali was drafted and that, how he lost the best years, and Mark starts asking him stuff, like quizzing him about the early fights and that and you can tell this old lad knows his stuff. He gets some of the names and dates wrong, but Mark puts him right, and after ten minutes it's like they're having a competition, and I'm happy to listen cos I'm no use at all that stuff. And all the time we've got our eyes glued on the big windows.

The sun's shifted away behind Central. I can't feel my toes any more, and even jumping on the spot is just pure sore. The limo draws up again, but there's no reason to suppose he'll appear this time either. The punters in the queue in Edinburgh must be freezing as well.

Then, right across from us, one of the windows moves. Not the folk inside, the actual glass shifts and swings, and it turns out it's not a window, it's a door at the side of the shop. There's reflections, black and white on other glass, a kind of a metally scrape, and he's here. He's right there. Ali. Me and Mark move across the road. The old guy stays put.

So we're on the road, right at the kerb. Ali's

maybe come out for some fresh air. He's about ten feet away. He's huge. It's almost impossible, how big he is. He's on a wee step right enough, but it's the breadth of him, the size of his arms, his face. Maybe it's the light reflecting off the new shirt, but it's like he's glowing. Folk in the queue on either side of him shift and crane their necks and mutter, but none of them move cos they're not wanting to lose their places. No-one says anything. We all just stare. Ali stands there, dead still, and he smiles, just a wee tiny smile right enough, but his eyes are bright, looking down at the faces. Maybe he's glad of the cold air for a few seconds.

Mark's got my arm, and he's holding it so tight that he's nipping my skin. I want to say something, do something, but can't. All I can do is try to remember it, freeze it in my head. Ali scans everyone dead slow. From behind us, the old guy shouts, gaun yersel big man. Ali raises his arm to chest height, palm up, like a wee wave to everyone, then starts turning back towards the shop, so slow, still smiling. The door swings behind him, and the white shirt is swamped again, and that's him gone.

We go back over and see the old lad, and he's well chuffed, makes us takes a swally of his cider to celebrate. I saw Cassius, he says, I saw Cassius.

Mark walks me back up the road so I can see if I've still got a job. We horse about in the precinct, boxing the air as we jog up Sauchie. We saw him. No picture right enough, and no autograph. But we saw the man. So we did.