



MY FRIEND TERRY

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The uncommon story of a one-time mobile disco owner, mental health nurse and international drugs smuggler that begins in Ipswich, England and ends in Spain via prison, addiction, love and forgiveness.

I was twenty-three and after my first job as a runner on a comedy show I thought writing was the way to go. I had an uncle who owned a small townhouse in an Andalusian village in the mountains an hour north of Gibraltar. There were some English ex-pats living out there, I'd met some on family visits, but I was looking for its perfect whitewashed isolation. It was called Gaucín and perched its parallel lines of terracotta rooftops along the crest of a south-facing hill. At the very top, dominating all, was a castle whose Arabic name *Zajra Guazan* – ‘Strong Rock’ – gave the place its name. Gaucín had been occupied by all sorts of foreigners since the Romans, I was just one of the latest. The whole setting, in my idealised view of what I was about to embark upon, was just right.

I am a sociable creative, the very worst kind. Around 90,000 words needed to be written before I returned home for Christmas in 2008. It was September and still hot when I hitchhiked up from the train station and let myself into the small house. Over the next few days I sat on a terrace typing the opening pages to a book about a writer going mad writing a book about an ex-military tailor moonlighting as an assassin. The tailor’s name was Milton Flynn. But the greater story that I returned home to England with that Christmas belonged to the man who happened to live next door to me during those months. His name was and is Terry Michaels. Well, one of them is at least.

Over the years I kept returning to this strange, beautiful eyrie to put more of Terry’s life together and to feed a friendship that gives me great comfort and whose conversations form the basis of this, a portrait of a man in talks, as Terry is himself a picture in words. Unlike me, who arrived holding the vague dream of a writer’s life on a hard, sun-baked rock in Spain, Terry was a man in his fifties whose words were based on experiences I could never have imagined for my fiction. Talking to Terry not only presented underworlds and otherworlds and ways and people up to that point hidden from me – it reminded me of the reason I wanted to write. I wanted to make myself ready for the life of adventures I demanded mine to be. To explain things to myself that had not happened, before they did. So that they did. It was my luck that I had moved into a house next to a man who had lived an incredible life but also had the gift of telling it so well and so honestly that the needle-sharp wisdom never pinched or patronised as it went in.

We would talk by a wood-burning stove on a damp November night in the mountains, out in the *campo* by the old river Genal that ran through the toes of our mountaintop town, when the sun sat glorious over the castle. We would ramble around John and Gilly’s farm – the original exiles, eighty years old, with pigs and an African garden of guava and kiwi trees hidden among the eucalyptus and cork forests. We would talk of everything. This is his story. My friend Terry.

I used to buy about two pounds of hash at a time and bring it back down to Suffolk. I felt the last time I'd been followed; I wasn't exactly sure but I had this intuition. I was going to my normal stash and as I was driving past it, at the end of this green lane in the middle of the Suffolk countryside, I saw two square headlamps. The local drug squad had just started using the new version of the Ford Escort and it was the first car to come out with square headlamps, so I knew that there was a chance it was them. So I drove past my stash to my parents' house, left the hash there and then drove home again. A couple of days go by, nothing happened, so I drove past my stash to my parents' house, left the hash in my parents' house and then drove home again.

The next day, bang, the back door came crashing down. And in poured all sorts of people. There was the drug squad, but there was also what's called the OSI, the Overseas Special Investigation; American CIA types in suits from the local US Air Force base. My wife Diane was holding our baby Tommy; he was just a few months old. A look passed between us that just said it's over. I remember that look so clearly.

Suffolk is an otherwise quiet, rural county north of London. Terry was born in 1955 in Ipswich. Up the road is Norwich, roughly the same size. Norwich had a sign on the motorway that said ‘Welcome to Norwich – A Fine City’. Ipswich responded a week later. It read: ‘Welcome to Ipswich – A Nice Town’. For him that summed it up completely.

Terry’s father worked at the same machine in the same factory for forty years. His job was to drill holes in the flanges of enormous pumps that were destined for the oil industry in the Middle East. His mother worked in a fish and chip shop. When he opened the pantry door, the smell of the two coats would waft into his nostrils: oil on his father’s, greasy chip fat on his mother’s.

It was a town you had to make your own fun in. Terry’s luck was that he grew up in the Sixties. His luck was music. He and his brother would get two-shilling-and-sixpence singles ordered out of their mother’s Kays catalogues. The Stones, The Who, The Beatles – all the bands. Soon they had a fabulous collection of 7” vinyl. He’d give his right arm to have them still. They would bop around the Dansette

record player. It came in a box, one speaker clipped to the other, which could be separated and placed a few feet away and jack-plugged in. He can remember listening to ‘Albatross’ by Fleetwood Mac in perfect stereo and date the memory – 1968. When he first met me it was over the garden wall. I was playing an Al Stewart tune as I wrote on the terrace. I heard a disembodied voice: “Is that Al Stewart?”

One night we were travelling back up the hill to the village, drunk on the outdoors and lingeringly stoned on good draw. As we pulled the curve into the village past its lonely petrol station, I suddenly saw a roadblock ahead: Guardia Civil vans, a man waving a day-glo baton. A shiny orange acrylic sash in the gloom after a day of ferns and river swimming. Neither of us was carrying, though I wasn’t completely sure. We were 100 yards away and I grabbed a glance at Terry. He wore a look that wasn’t him. Of pure stillness and neutrality. I could see the strong brow and the high forehead and the boy’s hair above it. The polished skin and the layer of tidy stubble at the jaw, the crow’s feet and the neat smile lines at the corner of his unsmiling mouth. Not an inch of him betrayed my nervousness. “No need to worry Josh, just slow down as you come alongside.”

But I had expected that. What I saw was more than poker-face passivity and it rested in me, in the situation and in my knowledge of him. I saw this night-time encounter on a Spanish hillside stretch backwards into a lifetime of similar moments: the animal shrinking behind this alien carapace, alone, or with a boy beside him being told it’s alright, it’s alright. At borders, on ferries; the phantom of terror, its resistance, the terrible repercussions not fantasised but known. Approaching faces, the dreaded wave.

We drew up to a Guardia who motioned us away after a glance. It was a drink drive patrol, random stops. Not ours today. Terry explained, voice steady, still unphased. But something had lodged and when we were parked and back in the warm womb of his house, it had to be spoken.

As soon as I got stoned I realised I had to do as much as possible to stay stoned for as long as possible. That dictated the entire course of the rest of my life, there's no getting around that is there?

Terry had always liked good music. For so many lively minds in small towns, it becomes a religion and an escape. Terry wasn’t one for school and the highest aspirations the local comprehensive had for them was menial labour – housewifery for the girls, teaching at best for the brighter sparks. He left school at sixteen and began the life of the dazzling autodidact he continues to this day. He and his friends built their own speakers, cut holes in the ply diligently, soldered their own mixers, made stroboscope light arrays. Put together with their record collection they had a mobile disco.

For three years they booked village halls and word got around they had a disco. People were charged at the entrance and the punters came in their hundreds because there was nothing to do on a Saturday night in Ipswich. Soon Terry and his mates became cynical, saw most of them as idiots. and the whole thing became a job in their minds. They bought more equipment, spotlights, a truck to move them in. Soon they needed to do commercial work to underwrite their scaling enterprise. Terry wanted to play Pink Floyd’s *The Dark Side of the Moon* but the punters wanted ‘Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep’ and the bad pop music of the day. When they were booked by the Hells Angels, it was ‘Born to Be Wild’ on repeat all night. He’d had enough.

In 1972 I got in the back of a beaten up Zephyr with some hippies to go to the Bickershaw festival in Lancashire. Grateful Dead were playing. I remember it so clearly. This guy turned around in the van and in his hand he had a little black dot. He said, "Have you ever heard of LSD?" I said, "Yes I have but I've never tried it." And he said, "Do you want to?" I looked at the dot and I thought, it's smaller than an aspirin, what could it possibly do? So I swallowed it. And about eight hours later I remembered my name. And I fell about laughing at the fact I thought I was that person. The acid was so strong in those days that it tore you to pieces and you had to put yourself back together all anew. I remember thinking from that moment, ha, things are not quite what they seem...

I just about remember The Grateful Dead and listening to them coming down. My dear friend Nick turned up the next morning. He'd taken the acid too. He was covered head to foot in black mud, barring the back of his white leather jacket, which had a perfect tyre track on it. On the acid, he'd fallen into the mud and a Mini Moke, like a small Jeep, had run him over. He was so out of it, he'd suffered no damage at all.

I met up with him a few years ago and he'd gone the complete opposite way to me. Businessman, worked for the electricity company, big house, paid off his mortgage, car. He was miserable as sin. He died soon after of an aneurysm of the stomach. How curious, for a moment I had been envious, he had everything I didn't have. Then his wife rang up and said he was dead, I thought hang on, what's he got now? And I don't mean that nastily. Perhaps my path isn't so bad despite what society would say and how it might congratulate his.

Before getting stoned there was hospital. He was six years old in 1962 and had been crawling around in pain for the best part of eighteen months. His parents were angry with him, said he was putting it on. Fussing. He remembers a lot of shouting. When the doctors finally looked at him they diagnosed he had Perthes disease, his hip had turned to jelly.

For one whole year the child Terry lay in bed with heavy weights strapped to his leg, otherwise it would have withered several inches shorter than the other. To this day one of his legs is much skinnier than the other. Had it been a few years later and his family better off, things might have been different. He remembers the smell of bandages, the witch hazel rubbed on his bottom to stop bedsores.

Putting it together in his mind now, he sees the image of that small boy in the bed as the first in a lifelong pattern of hospitalisation and imprisonment. His mother he found out later had severe post-natal depression and had rejected him in the first minutes of his life. At sixty he hopes the trajectory of abandonment and incarceration is over. He promises me that he would rather commit suicide before repeating his experiences in hospital and prison. In the strange even-handed way of his, he's also extremely glad to have had the perspective.

Do you ever think of the idea of the introverted-extrovert? For me, people need to be handled. You have to pretend to completely trust people while in reality not trusting them at all. Perhaps I haven't put that right. You have to express the maximum expectation, but have in you the minimum. At some point, I also learned that unless you had a genuine love and interest in other people, they weren't going to have a love and interest in you. It's selfish in some ways really.

The dangerous talk of a decent man unpicking his decency. Teenage Terry had no expectations of himself. Nor did others. The acid had opened up his dome to the wonders of the universe and Ipswich seemed smaller than ever. Then in his late teens he got his girlfriend pregnant and took a job in his father's factory to pay for the abortion. For three months and sixteen pounds a week, he had the grim nature of this alternate future hammered home before he could take it no more and stumbled into the one rewarding and legitimately salaried job he has ever held, working as a mental health nurse.

From the ages of seventeen to twenty-one, he worked with psychotic, Down's syndrome and autistic children. He found the work fascinating and rewarding. On some days he would go into the wards on acid.

It was fascinating. I saw the reality of these kids in a way that was inconceivable to most people. Each day there was a young girl who would take the same book off the shelf and she would fan the pages in the air, looking at them from an angle. She would root out this specific book for its glossy pages. On the acid, I could see the girl – it sounds ridiculous, it is ridiculous – was entertaining herself by playing with light, bending it by flicking this book a certain way.

Another example was a child hammering what seemed to be a cacophony in a corner. In a certain state of mind you could hear the harmonies in it. The Down's syndrome children were amazing beings, manifested in the most curious ways. One or two in particular. They were, in a way, only

using their bodies to project their psychic self. I remember looking at one child's eyes and thinking he was a kind of sorcerer using the elements to raise and lower his hallucinogenic state. He wasn't on this planet, his body was adopted.

Terry was entrepreneurial and good with people, whatever he claimed his motives to be. He worked backwards from what he knew and in between shifts with the children he was selling hash. For his first time he collected money from eight friends and went down to Colchester, bought the hash and realised he had overcharged each a pound. Eight pounds was a half a week's wage at the kids' hostel. He looked at it and thought, 'I don't have to go to work!'

After four years, the hash business and the mobile disco were taking so much of his time and making enough money that he stopped working with the children. He had done his precious small part and he had glimpsed an institution that through lack of funding and empathy had failed individuals. He would see more like it.

I lived with this American couple in this cottage. He worked at a local American Air Force base, teaching the young GIs to load bombs onto the McDonnell Phantoms. You know what was amazing, Josh, we'd actually drive right into the base, him in uniform, me beside him and go straight up to the hangers and sit watching these huge war birds taking off. Anyway, I'd sell all the young guys over from the States hash. Maybe that wasn't the most moral thing to do considering we still don't know whether they were tactical nuclear payloads they were taking off with!

Anyway, Diane and I got married after I was busted because it was meant to help with the judge. I was arraigned at a Crown Court and the judge felt he had to "award me two years", his words. I remember being taken down from the dock in cuffs and my wife was going crazy, screaming the place down. She had my son on her hip and she broke a front tooth in her anger. I got a two-year prison sentence for four ounces, which is what they actually busted me with. 112 grams it was. I had a young baby. It destroyed our family. We never got what we had back after. In the eight months I ended up spending in prison, she went in one direction, I went in another. We eventually split up in 1982, a couple of years later.

One of the strangest things happened at my appeal. It was at the Old Bailey. The Old Bailey for heaven's sake! Three beaks – judges – head to foot in black in a balcony halfway up the wall. You in another balcony halfway up the wall with your screws – prison guards – and down below are the lawyers. At one point the judge leaned down to my barrister and said, "I see here the quantity was 1.12 grams of hashish." My barrister didn't skip a beat and said, "Yes m'lud, a tiny amount." The judges retired and reduced my sentence from two years to one year.

Terry maintains that it was no accident. I often think about the typist who had saved a year of a man's life with the position of a dot and the reason they did it. An important point in every sense. How arbitrary that as a society we have chosen to apportion a sentence of human life to the quantity of a crime rather than just the fact of it; how strange that a system that wields so much power has such capacity for error; how ironic that it might be that within the machine of criminal justice there are intentionally faulty levers fighting against the poor laws given them.

The strange logic of incarceration and the darkly comic term 'rehabilitation' hits home immediately. Busted January 24th 1978. Sent down two years later on April 16th 1980. A double sentence. His first night in Norwich prison has the indignity of a strip search. The officers intentionally abusing him and poking him to see if he would be a problem. He won't be. Norwich prison is like the BBC comedy *Porridge*, wrought-iron landings and as Victorian as the Old Bailey courthouse. The first night in a cell, the old man beside him gives him a pill, "You're a druggie, you'll like this." Terry pretends to take it and lies down in bed. An hour later he feels the sheets being lifted. He rises untranquilised and the old boy stammers out how he has lost his lighter. Terry chuckles at the memory now, endlessly forgiving.

He sews mailbags between thick-fingered bank robbers and rapists, eight stitches to the inch, so many mailbags a day to earn a wage – between 87p and £3.67 depending on the work. And the cold, twisted prison logic of a wage that enables a lag to buy either a packet of tobacco and a box of matches, or a packet of tobacco and some papers but never all three. Immediately, the lag finds himself in a state of need and introduced to a prison economy whose currency is tobacco. "Two's us up mate" – share us that cigarette – ringing round the landings.

Another twisted thing. Prison is a class system like any other. One day Terry has his audience with an allocation officer and putting on his very best middle class accent manages to persuade him that he should serve his stretch at Ford Prison in Sussex, a cushy number for bent accountants, bank managers, lawyers, policemen, anyone from the establishment caught with their fingers in the till who couldn't serve real time in a real prison.

A real prison being Wormwood Scrubs. Terry spends one night there. In transit to Ford in a Ford Transit. It is hell. At night he hears screams, the banging of doors then the screams silenced. Transvestites walk the corridors and the mattresses are two inches thick from decades of backs. He looks out his tiny window and all he sees are a grey London sky, barbed wire, glass lining the top of the wall and a solitary man with a solitary Alsatian patrolling.

Ford Prison is a surreal experience after that trauma. It had been an RAF camp in the war. On arriving, a screw takes him round the perimeter fence and points out the holes in the fence. “Please don’t make any new holes,” the pleasant man says. “If you wish to escape to the pub, use the existing holes.” Every week the men draw straws to see who will do the booze run after dark. It is what Terry imagines boarding school to be like. They sleep in dormitories and the visiting wives go to the local Marks & Spencer to buy them their woollies. In one hut there are still the billiards tables from the RAF officers’ mess. At weekends they play cricket.

Terry works in the tailor’s shop turning collars inside out before stitching them onto the rest of the shirt. In order to earn the wage they have to rack up an hourly rate of collars. They are marked on their first hour’s work. If they spread the work through the day they lose money so all work is done in the first hour and little after. Even the screws think it’s stupid. The prison population is immaculately turned out. Greys are your smarts: flannel trousers, blouse jacket and a tie whose colour depends on how much time you’ve served. A little like a karate belt, Terry points out to me.

The atmosphere can be that of a Spitfire pilot knees-up. A scrap metal tycoon has bought himself the job of drain inspector so he can secrete an unending supply of champagne and contraband down the manholes. Prison is corrupt; it lives out its own skewed logic. A medical miracle never repeated happened at Ford a few years after Terry leaves. A member of the Guinness family is sent down for insider trading and contracts Alzheimer’s while in prison. He is released on ill health and fully recovers.

When Terry’s wife comes to see him, at the end of her visit she kisses him long and lingeringly and pushes a lump of hash into his mouth with her tongue. The screws know it, maybe about the booze too, but a medicated prison population is a docile one. One day Terry stands in the showers of a brand new dormitory, in lovely hot water, deliciously high with a glass of top quality champagne, thinking, prison life...

Near Ford, there’s a town called Chichester, which has a clinic for STDs. Now I’d heard in the prison on the grapevine that they’d treat you in house for all conditions apart from STDs. So I wrote to my wife telling her the day I had to be examined there. I arranged for my wife to meet me there and we made love in the toilets of the clinic. It’s a very poignant memory. I was four months into my sentence and I could tell then from her whole manner that she’d been with other men. I didn’t say anything and I went back to the prison and sat with 500 men and thinking I’m the only one that’s been laid today and I’m sad. But it was very bittersweet and very, very hard to take. I suppressed it completely until I got out of prison but then it became very obvious that our marriage was over.

I used to do an hour of yoga a day and after a few months in prison I was incredibly fit and self-contained. I’d stopped smoking. She had found that her only defence was alcohol. As soon as I was in prison all our old friends had turned up at the door. She was a very attractive woman and they had chanced their arm. She’d unfortunately become pretty much an alcoholic she was so devastated by my disappearance into prison.

She was working nights in this pub, and when I got out I asked a friend to babysit so I could go and meet her at the pub and halfway there I could hear a couple making love in one of the alleyways, I suddenly realised it was Diane. And it totally broke my heart. So I went back home and she eventually came back and I was disgusted and totally heartbroken. She woke up the following morning and couldn’t remember it. That was the point I realised she genuinely had a split personality, that the drunken woman at night was not recognised by the sober woman in the morning.

Terry still loves her. Despite everything and the holes they tore out of each other and the ways they failed one another. She is alive but not well. Her mind is slowly receding in a home in Ipswich. What he says about alcohol is no joke.

I can point out Josh, in all of this, that it’s only ever hash. Never anything else. My dealings were with hash, never more dangerous drugs like alcohol and tobacco. I want to make that very plain. Those are dangerous drugs that kill people.

He used to say that when I first met him with a smile, but now I can see the sadness behind it. At various stages of his life Terry has tried to resurrect what he knows was lost when his back door was kicked

in. They both tried hard after he came out of prison. For their son and small family. Then, in a last fit of desperation to save their marriage the fragile three moved to Amsterdam at the end of 1981.

Terry had a friend called Sandy, a business contact who owned a hash boat at the top of Keizersgracht Canal in the centre of town. Sandy invited Terry to come work on it. It was called the *Cornelia*. Terry and Diane had barely left Suffolk in their lives. They carried plates and cutlery in a rucksack like they were going to the moon. When they arrived Sandy had provided them with a luxury flat that had everything they needed. They could have arrived with just a toothbrush.

Dutch society was liberal, in reality its laws were not. *Opiumwet* or ‘Opium Law’ outlawed the use of psychotropic drugs but left the enforcement to the discretion of the judiciary and criminal system. As such, the rule became, in the grey area that emerged, that the *Cornelia* could not carry more than thirty grams per person. There were at least three people working the boat at all times, and if footfall came to buy more it was sent for. When the police came onto the premises they would weigh the hash on the scales the business used to sell it.

On the top of a wooden post in the boat was a wallet that would have the minimum of 2,000 guilders, about 750 quid in 80s money. Much more now. Every week one or two uniforms would turn up and make a big show of searching the boat. They’d find, amazingly, this wallet and say, “Who’s is this money?” “We don’t know.” “We’re confiscating it then.” And they’d leave. Corruption wasn’t sitting down and negotiating a deal. It was much more subtle than that.

The money was good and so was the life. Amsterdam in the 1980s was not a place to go to save a marriage. Terry was living in a special time and a special place. The early Eighties were pre-AIDS; he was a handsome man with money in the pocket, in a very liberal atmosphere. The scene was fast and loose, he moved among the *Krakers*, local anti-capitalist squatters who mixed freely with the similarly anarchic ex-pats who frequented the boat. While others were moving their businesses into taxable coffee houses, Terry and Sandy considered themselves pirates on the water.

And what a ship they had. The finest hash in the world passed through and the most interesting people after it. The boat had begun life in the Sixties, at the beginning before the market grew so rapidly it sold to hippies, body or pack padding the kilo or two they took away. When the Russians invaded Afghanistan the good black headed to Moscow and they were left with inferior Pakistani hash known as ‘border’ – produced in bulk and cheap for the English and French markets. As quality declined, focus shifted to the Lebanon but after initial promise that quality disastrously declined too. Towards the end of the Eighties tastes moved to the delicious Moroccan hash coming from the south. That particular gold would shape Terry’s later years in ways he could not have imagined sitting on the *Cornelia* back then. But that’s not for now. There is a chronology here.

The average day would find him at the boat smoking chillums with customers and friends until 9pm. A phone call ahead to the local Guinness bar and then a saunter to find Amsterdam’s most perfectly poured pints waiting. Drinking and dancing until 1am then back to someone’s flat until sunrise. He found coke was a vital ingredient to keep him going. In the Eighties it was good quality and cheap. He was getting a little too fond of it but it helped him push through. He was in his late twenties and had time to make up.

His marriage foundered, Diane drank too much, Terry partied too hard. He tried to help her set up a coffee bar, which failed disastrously. The hedonistic life was too much for both of them. They had already separated when Diane fell pregnant and returned to England to give birth. After six weeks the baby died. She was already on the edge Terry thinks now, and that tipped her over. He doesn’t know whether the child was his. But she took Tommy away and blaming Terry, refused him contact with his son for two years.

Alone in Amsterdam, Terry made the most of the life. Women flocked to him, he was mild-mannered and sweet, always a small guy but with a way that could disarm either sex. The prostitutes he knew were self-employed, independent women without pimps and he earned in a day enough to buy a night with them ten times over if the fancy took him. He was and is easy with a smile, high cheekboned, the cheeky fellow in the corner who, quiet and friendly, gets what he wants. The police would arrest him on the boat and let him go, again and again. All relationships were fluid in those years; easy come, easy go.

One rainy day in 1984 Terry was followed onto the boat by the police and arrested once more. The head of the narcotics brigade was very civil. Terry’s leash had run out of rope. He was to go back to England, the officer said, and establish a new identity and come back as someone else if he wanted to keep doing what he did. They had arrested him so many times the next would be prison.

Terry went back to Ipswich and visited his parents. He found the place much the same and that he didn’t miss it. A local lawyer changed his surname by deed poll to Terry Michaels, placing an ‘s’ on his middle name. He had never liked his original.

He started seeing Tommy again. Ironically his relationship with his wife had started to improve when she took up heroin and started drinking less. For some periods he would look after his son in Amsterdam. Diane and Terry had a system going, if an unconventional one. The deals got bigger. He began to handle clients in his flat. He had the reputation for decency and honesty, the consummate middleman. Everyone came to the business from different angles. One Italian couple planned to sell hash until they’d built a certain amount of money to open a legitimate business. They would buy a kilo here, four kilos there then at twenty-five kilos, money made, they stopped. Terry was really happy for them.

In Amsterdam there was a man in those days called ‘The Voice’. There were two or three wholesale firms for hash. I knew him from the English firm, the head of which I scored off in my Ipswich days. The Voice was his number two. People would come in with 10 kilos, 20 kilos, or 100 kilos, and The Voice would immediately assess it and put a price on it. He’d say 2.3 or 1.8 guilders to the gram etc. The market was such at the time that he would be more or less right, but he might be 10 or 20 cents out.

I remember I gave a quote on the 25 kilos that the Italian couple were very happy with. It ended up The Voice’s original quote was a little high and it came down in the interim and just because of that little variation I ended up with thousands of pounds. I threw the money in small notes into the air. But I remember very clearly I was a single parent and I was more concerned with getting my son’s food ready for school than I was with this massive deal. I’d become blasé. Being a father was my priority.

It wasn’t all plain sailing. One evening, the full moon of January 1982, Terry and a friend Pete were on the boat when three men came over the gangplank. One pushed the barrel of a shotgun through the hatch. Terry had thought ‘Don’t shoot!’ was a movie cliché but that’s what came out of his mouth. They were smacked about and tied up with electrical tape. The robbers made off with a bit of gear, not much. Terry was shaken up.

On the full moon of February 1982, Pete arrived at the *Comelia* and Terry joked that the last time he had turned up they had been robbed at gunpoint. An hour later, it happened again. Only this time Sandy was there with friends. Three guys came down: one shotgun and two pistols. Suddenly a fight started. A gun smashed down on someone’s head – it broke, a toy. Sandy was a big strong guy and so were his friends. Even Terry had a go bashing one of the assailants across the back with the metal tube from an industrial hoover, to little effect. He isn’t built for fighting. The would-be robbers were beaten up severely and thrown in the canal. No deaths, Terry insists. I often wonder how this peaceful, slight man could ever have put up with the intimidating atmosphere of drug deals and enforcers. But presumably in the same way he has dealt with anyone in his life, total openness and warmth.

I had a friend called Susie who came to stay. She’d escaped London and her gangster boyfriend who’d been shot in London the day before. In the thigh down the pub. Early in the morning, the postman knocked. I went down and opened the door, instead of pulling a letter from his satchel he pulled out an enormous gun. It had a ridiculously long barrel. He pulled me down the stairs, a big Nigerian guy, and two of his friends followed behind. I was terrified for myself and for Susie who I thought would be hurt or raped. As luck would have it, someone had left a couple of kilos of lovely weed that I kept in my cabinet. They tied us up once I showed them where the gear was. The postman was poking around in the cabinet and his gun went off. It was a huge explosion and that spooked them and they grabbed what they could and ran off. To think what might have happened if the gun hadn’t. I think I lost about 20,000 quid or so. Susie immediately jumped on the boat back to England. Poor thing, she was safer with that boyfriend than me.

By 1987 Terry was in a bad state. His cocaine addiction had reached its peak, he was bored by his thriving business and he missed his broken family. He had just had his hip rebuilt by a specialist doctor and was lying bandaged and anaesthetised in a hospital bed when he got a call that the *Comelia* had been busted. It knocked him into a kind of coma. When he came round his hip had become infected. The bust was particularly heavy and while everyone involved only received suspended sentences, the business was done. For the next year or so he freelanced out of his flat through his old contacts.

One day a friend came around and freebased some cocaine in front of Terry. Terry had snorted but never smoked it in a pipe. He watched his friend’s face as he took it in and asked for a try. His friend told him, no, that once he started he would never stop. Terry ignored him and eight months of hell ensued.

All of my intense deep emotional pain disappeared and was replaced with the sparkling reality of this wonderful substance that made you God. Every pleasure chemical in your whole body is released. You feel amazing, omnipresent, omnipotent, omni-everything. That sensation lasts for ten, twenty seconds, a minute? As it fades away, you’ve got one thought in mind, and one thought only – do it again. So you make another roll. For the first couple of months, it was marvellous, you’re buzzing. You’re still physically fit, you’ve still got some money in your pocket, you haven’t alienated all your friends. But after two or three months, you realise suddenly you’ve got no friends, you’ve got no money, you’ve sold all your goods for cocaine. You’ve got no transport, no hi-fi, no telly, can’t pay the electric bill, can’t pay the gas bill, because every penny you get goes straight into cocaine.

At the time Terry was handling a lot of money for people. He lost his reputation for punctuality, honesty and decency, everything his business had been based on. The end came when his wife arrived and left Tommy in his charge. A customer turned up with 100 grams of coke and left 100 grams behind. Terry immediately locked the door and freebased the lot, thousands of pounds, in three or four days. When he woke up he realised his son had locked the front door and hadn’t let anyone in.

When I woke up he was hovering above me. He was just eleven years old. He woke me up with a glass of water – his dad – it’s just too much really. I remember thinking, what a cunt. I felt such a cunt. This beautiful boy who loved me so much was seeing his dad in such a state. I hated myself. That brought an end to it. Bless his heart he brought me back to life and we got on the road.

An old partner sponsored him the money and he went back to England. He and Tommy went to Madame Tussauds, an open bus trip. Booked into a top hotel. Terry bought an ex-Post Office van for scamming hash across borders and for nine months they were on the road in 1991. Just him and Tommy. They bonded and spent time and forged a love that lasts to this day. That limitless love and forgiveness that Terry has comes from that boy. I know it. Because he himself had been forgiven everything when he never deserved it.

Why did he keep doing it? Why didn’t he straighten out? He doesn’t know and nor do I. They had no money and Terry didn’t believe Diane was in a fit state to look after his son. He would drop Tommy off with someone before border crossings, do the job, then come back for him. One day he was asked to do another border. Fifty kilos of Moroccan across the Strait of Gibraltar hidden in the bulkhead behind the front seats of a VW Camper. He left Tommy with a friend’s girlfriend, a black Playboy centrefold in Marbella. It was almost as if they knew where to look. As they ripped the car apart and threw his stuff in a pile, the image etched on his mind before they led him away was a policeman kicking Tommy’s teddy bear away. He was given eight years, he would serve four. A voice in his head when he had accepted that job had said ‘you’re going to jail’. But hadn’t it always?

Modulo 10, C.P.Málaga, Alhaurin de la Torre, Málaga, España. 14th March 2011.

Dear Josh, as you featured repeatedly in my dreams last night I thought it was high time I wrote. The details have evaporated now as is the nature of dreams but I do remember we were cycling together: what would Jung make of that?

The address above gives the game away I imagine. Here I am where, as Cervantes has it ‘every dismal sound has its habitation’: a miserable cold damp stinking and noisy cell block surrounded by the mad, bad and merely unfortunate – not just dismal but deafening too as 140 men are crowded into a space barely adequate for the seventy it was designed for. In here it’s like something out of Midnight Express only the room is rectangular instead of round and this is no two-hour movie but an ongoing nightmare. Were it not for the books I brought in and the letters I write, I think I’d go quite mad.

.....

I knew the first few days would be hard and indeed they were horrific. I’d not helped myself by swallowing anti-depressants prescribed by the local quack in an attempt to ease my fears: only for a few days prior to my ingress but going cold-turkey on them subsequently was awful. My first night after the inevitable strip-search and general humiliations of entry was spent in a cold and dirty cell with a bungling boy burglar who looked disturbingly like my son; entirely sleepless with a head full of horrors and frightening heart palpitations. In my misery I almost hoped that it would stop dead. Then the next day I and other unfortunates were marched through echoing corridors to where I now reside: Cell Block 10.

Is this modern Europe in the twenty-first century? Dickens would recognise this place.We are crowded together like rats in a trap and it speaks volumes for the good nature of your average Spanish prisoner that there’s little or no violence in consequence. Sure a few, a small percentage, are best avoided – the bad – some are clearly mentally ill – the mad – but most are merely unfortunate. There’s far more to be said than I can put in a letter about the iniquities of this legal system. While corrupt but wealthy officials employ expensive lawyers to keep them free though their crimes have made them millions, kids languish here for years having snatched a purse and a few miserable euros. I won’t even begin to speak of a system that’s locked me and fellow hashines up for ‘crimes against the public health’ when that same system profits enormously from the sale of that deadly duo: alcohol and nicotine. No more of that, for now. I’ve brought in a battered, much read King Lear with me. ‘Through tattered clothes small vices do appear; Robes and furred gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold, and the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks; Arm it in rags, a pygmy’s straw does pierce it.’ Or something like that. Not for the first time, literature saves my life.

He spends five months in Algeciras Prison, awaiting trial into 1992. In Spanish law this period can stretch indefinitely. There are 140 men to a room, bunks three high. The room divides itself into nationalities, Moroccans in one section, Italians, South Americans, English. Not for the first time he is struck by how well people get along. Under each bunk are three buckets: one for fruit, one for water, one for *mila* – the dough the prisoners fermented for alcohol. One night he sees someone’s throat slashed, it is the only real violence he sees in the ensuing four years.

The prison has an ancient high-walled courtyard. At pre-determined times plasticine balls containing hash or heroin are thrown over the wall. The screws run to confiscate it and a surreal game of playground tag ensues, until a prisoner has hold of the ball. Then a rush of humanity pushes him into the outdoor latrine where the contents are with stunning speed spliced and distributed, the money collected later. On those nights the guards win, they come to lock the prisoners in their cells at lights-out with eyes like paper cuts. As high as the cons wish they could have been.

Like Ford, corruption is rife. In another prison Terry is moved through, Puerto de Santa Maria, there is the sound of a huge commotion in the prison offices one night. When the inmates wake up the next day the entire prison staff has disappeared and been replaced in a crackdown. Every sub director, officer chief and lowly *funcionario*.

Another day a man comes into the prison on a sizeable cocaine rap, perhaps three or four kilos. After three weeks he is gone and no one can say where. But Terry learns how from an Englishman called Derek. Derek was once a well-to-do art dealer in London who turned bad and started stealing the art he traded in. After serving time, he had taken up Terry’s game and come to southern Spain. There he set up through a notorious middleman, or rather middlewoman, a deal for half a ton of Moroccan hash, loaded up a yacht and crossed the Strait. He had been busted on the shores of Spain. That same go-between then scammed him again claiming she could buy him out of his rap; she knew judges, she knew the police. Derek was writing his autobiography and Terry helped him each day. He knew the details. The lady got kickbacks from the Moroccan dealers and the Spanish authorities, which had their own avenues to sell the hash back into the market. A three-tier scam.

One day Terry gets a tap on the shoulder. The director wants to see him. When he gets to his office the man is leaving. In the room is Derek’s woman, offering him the same deal. For 30,000 pounds Terry can be out in weeks. He doesn’t have it and the elegantly coiffed and manicured lady leaves the room in a trail of perfume. It is the last he sees of her. Terry is then moved to the prison he will serve the majority of his time, cellblock or *modulo* six of the Centro Penitenciario Málaga. Most of his cellmates are *gitanos* – gypsies. Illiterate and pinballing through the system, they are amazed when he can take their name and fill in their appeal forms. That he can by magic inspect a book and find the words he didn’t have before. That he understands other languages but not theirs which they, less educated than him, can speak perfectly. The head *gitano* Miguel ensures Terry is left well alone for his kindnesses. The *funcionarios* allow him his own cell and he continues the pattern of isolation started those many years ago in a hospital bed in Ipswich. He reads the classics: Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Shakespeare and Dickens. On the patio each day he leads the Anglophone prisoners in an ironic verse of ‘O What a Beautiful Morning’. He uses the formal ‘*usted*’ with everyone and learns that the amount of dignity he has is the amount he ascribes himself. He reclaims what the system is designed to strip him of by holding to a moral comportment that is equal or superior to it. The head screw *funcionario* Don Domingo considers Terry a proper English gentleman and extends every courtesy he can. Unlike the Norwich wardens, Terry considers the Spanish turnkeys essentially civil servants.

For two years Terry refuses visits. He realises that if he focuses away from the immediate day, the immediate moment, to outside the walls, he will drive himself crazy. For the first years the outside doesn’t even come into his mind – prison is his life. That is where he is and that is where he is going to be.

Finally he allows Diane and Tommy to visit him. The guards open the door and from where he sits...

I see my son two years on and suddenly he’s not the little boy who used to bounce on my lap. He’s as tall as me. He’s square-jawed. He’s got a little fuzz and his voice is breaking and he is in pieces, emotionally, to see me in that state. I see him and my little boy is dead. My little boy is gone forever and there’s this kind of weird guy here who’s in an emotional mess and it’s largely my fault. But, in the end it was brilliant. We had two fabulous hours and Diane was at her best – she was on methadone so she was handling it and Tommy was just as ever a fabulous little ambassador to the human race. But I’ll tell you Josh, when they called me out of that room, that was it. I could’ve topped myself there and then because I was hit by the realisation that everything I ever held dear was him and her and in spite of our break up and the many years that passed and the awful problems between us, they had been always been my world.

But he doesn’t top himself. He does the time. In the morning he plays chess with ETA terrorists, fills gypsy appeal forms in the afternoon, jokes with Don Domingo in the evening. Time passes slowly. His respect for humanity grows rather than diminishes. He hasn’t met a bad person yet. Just bad acts. One night he tells me the story of an old man sitting down on a chair in the mess hall and it breaking under him. Instead of laughter, a rush of concerned helpers goes to him. A glass of water is fetched; kind arms lift the dazed old boy up from the floor and lower him carefully onto a stool. Terry blinks away tears at the memory. It’s not what you think. Human beings are not what you think.

It is 1996 and after four years Terry is released. He sees his files before he goes. Beside his new name is marked ‘MBG’ – *muy buena gente*. A very good man.

Modulo 10, C.P.Malaga, Alhaurin de la Torre, Malaga, España. 3rd July 2011.

Let’s lighten things with humour. Ha! That’s a joke! “I went to the offices of the RSPCA recently, they were tiny...you couldn’t swing a cat.” Boom boom. Or “I rang the ramblers association the other day but the bloke at the other end just went on and on...” Not much makes me laugh in here but the other day I had to grin. I was sat next to a Moroccan chap, a decent soul who passes his time making models out of scrap materials and rather well. Currently producing a popular line of miniature rubber powerboats complete with tiny bales of ‘hash’ strapped to the floor – he swaps the finished articles for cigarettes. Opposite us sat one of my favourite fellow unfortunates, just a boy really with part of his skull missing. Where there ought to be a metal plate, he gleefully invites you to poke at it. He’s a cheery simpleton with the atmosphere of a playful puppy. Out of the blue he said ‘me gustaría tener un mono como mascota’ – I’d like to have a monkey as a pet. My mild-mannered Moroccan model maker (sorry, couldn’t resist it) looked up and said it would be much better for both parties if the arrangement were the other way around. Funny, but what really made me smile was the look on the simpleton’s face as he tried to work out if he’d been insulted. Precious.

I’ve just finished re-reading A Short History of Nearly Everything by Bill Bryson. It’s packed with info on (for instance) the billions of stars in the amazing expanding universe, the trillions of cells that work so hard and mysteriously to make up you and me, and the quadrillions of atoms that – apparently – form all. Whilst it’s not free of the arrogance of science seen in the phrase ‘but we now know for certain that...’ it’s still a fascinating read. And so, given that our lives seem to be a miracle of brief being, and awareness, in an eternity of oblivion, it’s odd to think that a person could ever be in anything other than a permanent state of grateful and surprised amazement. Yet somehow, sometimes, we manage to be cynical, weary and bored. Very strange.

In four years, Terry wrote 1,640 letters and received 1,200 replies in Modulo 6. When he went back inside Malaga prison in 2011, a few years after I met him, for what we both hope is the final time, he was in Modulo 10.

Because of his good behaviour, Terry could draw benefits from the Spanish state. He had friends staying nearby in Gaucín that he moved in with. He remembered camping outside the village in happier days with Diane and Tommy back in 1989. After his friends moved on he stayed, paying about fifteen pounds in rent a week for a house that had four rooms, a veranda and a bathroom. He’s lucky. A friend and inmate ‘Hogsbreath’ is hit and killed by an ambulance after his release. The unluckiest man in the world. Terry had come to love the Spanish in prison. The local matriarch on the street Isabella took a shine to him and through her he became accepted by his neighbours. He was considered thoughtful and polite, though they never quite understood why he was there alone, so far from family. For several months he felt depressed. The weight of prison had made the rubber of his soul bend. It took time to reset. In the local town Ronda, he would see the beautiful women pass him and only feel sadness.

He was not the only exile there. Over twenty years he has made the strongest, most sustaining friendships of his life. Deep down he had always thought himself manipulative, self-serving, egotistical. For some reason the beautiful people living out their own unconventional lives on the farms around Gaucín see him as I do. He trusts them implicitly and they do him. When he had no money they even bought him new teeth. Kit the tree surgeon and his dazzling wife Penny. Old Testament John and the sparkling-eyed octogenarian girl-being Gilly. Stef and Tal, once lovers, now friends. Kindly Steve and Glynn. All have their own strange, elegiac answers to the question, what strange wind blew you up this hill? When Terry complains about his illnesses they patiently listen.

He is in the grip of cervical myelopathy. The tendon on the back of his neck is so stiff it can barely move now. He has large growths of bone on his spine and three of his vertebrae are now so calcified they are more or less glued together. Terry sometimes sleeps sitting upright, or the nerves that lead to his arms and legs pinch and he loses sensation

in his limbs. He has tried for years to halt the disease’s progress. He no longer smokes tobacco, survives on a euro a day for food and is a neurotic vegan. Since the recession, surgery has been near impossible in Spain without inside contacts for anything but the most life-threatening procedure.

One day in 2008, a few months before I first met him, Terry was driving down the road with three quarters of a kilo of hash and for some reason a bong in the passenger seat beside him. Around the corner appeared a drink-driving roadblock and he was arrested. In 2011 he finally went to prison for eight months where we wrote to each other often. He never permitted visitors during that last stretch, just letters.

He knows he will die on this rock. Not far away from home because this is home now. Tommy has two children and is married to his childhood sweetheart. Once, when his father was in prison and his mother a junkie, he walked the streets of Ipswich at night by himself. He called it Tommo-land. He survived and prospered. In Philip Pullman’s books, human adults have ‘daemons’ – animal familiars that follow them everywhere and embody the essence of their character – a monkey for the trickster, snow leopard for the powerful. Tommy is Terry’s daemon. I think he is the manifestation of what Terry would have been but for the life that got in the way. And though I’ve never met him, in a way I already have.

I remember a painting I had on my bedroom wall as a teenager in Ipswich. On it was written a quote from the artist John Minton: ‘We’re all awash in a sea of blood and the least we can do is wave to each other.’ That’s it really, isn’t it?