

The letter from the University was clear. I had to leave the hall of residence by Sunday 25th September and take all my belongings with me. I looked at the calendar on the wall. That gave me just under four weeks to find somewhere else to live, assuming that I hadn't managed to get a job between now and then. Given that I'd failed to do so in six months of looking, that seemed a fairly safe bet.

My dissertation had to be submitted in two weeks. There was still a lot of work to be done and time was running short. So, I spent the fortnight concentrating on my deadline and I got there just in time. After a night spent celebrating with some friends, I woke up the following morning with a hangover and a recognition that I had to get my finger out if I didn't want to be living on the streets.

I spent most of the next few days working my contacts, trying to find out if anyone had a spare room in a flat or house. I drew a blank so the next stop was the *Glasgow Herald*. The edition I bought had plenty of rooms for rent but, as I found out, getting hold of one of them was another matter. It was a very competitive market and one had to move fast.

That first night, every room was gone by the time I got there. The second night was the same and it was becoming clear that I was going to have to up my game. The following day, I was waiting outside the nearest newspaper shop as the *Herald* was delivered at half past one. I stood in the shop watching the owner snip the plastic binding around the bale of paper and at one thirty five I had a copy in my hand. I scoured the accommodation section and quickly marked off half a dozen likely prospects. Then it was off again to wear down the shoe leather.

I lost out again. There was always someone who was in the queue ahead of me, somebody who'd been able to move quicker or who had the inside track. I got back to the Hall of Residence that evening feeling disgruntled and sat down to review my strategy. I decided that the problem was that I was chasing after the rooms in the places where everyone wanted to live. I had to lower my sights.

The following day I was once again outside the newspaper shop when the *Herald* was delivered. I was in like a shot and opening out the page I needed before I was half way out the door. I looked down the list and ignored the places in Hillhead, Kelvinside and Mount Florida. I was now searching for addresses in areas like Carlton, Partick and Ibrox. I started walking.

It wasn't until six that evening that I struck lucky, if you can call it that. It was a bedsit room on the third floor of a tenement building located in the southwest of the city, a couple of hundred yards from Cessnock Station in one direction and Ibrox Stadium in the other.

The Landlord went by the name of McAllister. He was a medium height, bulky man, dressed in what appeared to be an expensive sheepskin coat. He had a goatee beard, salt-and-pepper hair cut close around his head, a thin, unsmiling mouth and a pair of hard, unblinking eyes. My impression was that this was not a man to be messed around, and I made a mental resolution to be careful.

We exchanged greetings and he explained that there were five rooms in the apartment, arranged as bedsits. All five were accessed from the central hallway in which we now stood. The other rooms were currently occupied and there was a shared bathroom and kitchen. The electricity was on a pay-as-you-go meter and took either ten or fifty pence coins. It was up to the occupants of the rooms to work out who put what money in the slot. That wasn't his concern.

He opened the door of the room that was for rent and I walked into the place that was going to be my home until I managed to find a job. It was a depressing place, with a single bed in the corner, a chair in front of a double bar fire which provided the only source of heat, a scruffy chest of drawers

and a beaten-up old wardrobe. There was a threadbare rug on the floor and the place had a particular odour which I couldn't quite place but which, over the coming months, I began to recognise as the stink of failed lives. The walls were painted a dirty, pale yellow and the only window looked out over an alleyway piled high with rubbish.

I asked how much it was and he told me. I still had some money, but it wasn't a lot and I was starting to hoard it carefully. I did a quick mental calculation and decided that it was affordable. We agreed the deal and I said that I'd move in the following weekend.

As we were leaving, he said, 'By the way, I only let to people who're in employment. No welfare cases. Are you working?'

I lied automatically, forgetting my previous resolution. 'Yes, I have a job in a pub in the centre of town.'

He nodded. 'That's fine.'

We parted with an arrangement to meet at ten the following Saturday for him to hand over the keys and for me to hand over the rent for the first month.

My worldly belongings at that time fitted into two black bin liners and a large rucksack. I carried them up the stairs and he watched me from outside the door of the flat, making no offer of assistance. I was puffing a bit by the time I reached the top and he handed me the keys, then left without a word. I opened the front door and then the door of my room before starting to unpack.

When I had finished, I went to the local shop to buy provisions. I was now having to choose what I was eating very carefully, selecting own brand items and from the reduced shelf, not that there was a lot of that. I bought as much as I thought I needed to see me through the week and returned to the flat. I found the kitchen and was gratified to see that the fridge was quite large, and that a shelf was reserved for each room.

It was then time to introduce myself to my neighbours. Mine was the middle room of the five rooms so I decided to start at the first door on the left as one entered the hall. I knocked on the door and a female voice with a pronounced Northern Ireland accent answered.

'Who is it.'

My name is Patrick,' I said. 'I'm your new neighbour. I thought I'd introduce myself.'

I heard footsteps and then the door opened a few inches. The face that looked out at me was, I guessed, somewhere in its mid or late forties, pinched and thin, framed in dark, shoulder length curly hair. Her eyes were anxious, darting from one side to another.

'Hello. I'm sorry for bothering you,' I said, smiling. 'I've just moved into the room and I thought I'd say hello.'

'Well, thank you for that. My name's Maureen,' she said, and closed the door.

I stood rooted to the spot in surprise for a few seconds and then decided to try the next door. In response to my knock, a blonde haired woman, aged, I guessed, somewhere in her twenties showed herself. She had a ready smile and, when I introduced myself, she reached out her arm and we shook hands.

'I'm Darleen,' she said. 'I work in the local bars. Do you like football?'

'I do. I'm a big fan, although not of any particular club.'

'Well then, you'll like my boyfriend. His name is Roger and he's a huge fan of Rangers. He's round here all the time and you'll get on like a house on fire.'

I agreed that this was likely, and so it proved. We chatted for a few more minutes before she made her excuses and I moved on to the third door.

My knock was answered by a short, skinny woman in her forties with bleached blonde hair, a pair of hard eyes and a mouth like a rat trap. Despite appearances however, she turned out to be friendly and told me that her name was Linda. We had a chat and she also told me that she had a boyfriend, Robbie, who also spent a lot of time in the flat.

I left her, knocked on the last door, and my day suddenly got a whole lot better.

She was a knockout. Slim, with dark hair framing a heart shaped face, her eyebrows were arched above almond shaped eyes and her slim straight nose sat perfectly above a full, sensuous mouth. She was tall for a woman, almost my height and probably no more than twenty one years old. I swallowed hard and introduced myself.

'Hello,' she said, in that lovely gentle accent which distinguishes people whose origins lie in the Kingdom of Fife. 'My name is Eleanor. I'm a student at Glasgow University. I'm pleased to meet you. I'm going out shortly but why don't you knock on my door again this evening and we can have a coffee together.'

I agreed that this sounded like a jolly good idea and I went back to my room, wondering what a woman like that was doing in this dump. I got my answer later.

Later that evening, I was introduced to one of the rituals of my new home. I was watching the news on my small portable TV set, a single bar on the heater providing a trickle of warmth, when the power went off plunging the room into darkness. I cursed and fumbled my way to the door and into the hallway. I was not alone; Darleen was there before me waving a torch in the air.

'What's happened?' I asked.

'The electricity meter has tripped,' she said. 'It happens regularly if we plug in too many things at the same time. You have to knock on the doors and tell everyone to turn off anything that is using electricity. Then you replace the fuse wire and knock on the door again and tell them it's OK to turn it all back on.'

I had two questions about this statement. 'Why is it me that has to do that?' I asked.

'Because you're the man Patrick and it's your job.'

Her logic was sound and it didn't seem to be worth arguing.

'Fair enough,' I said. 'Where's the fuse wire?'

'We don't have any. The last was used up a few days ago. But if you go down to the electrical shop at the end of the road, they'll have some. You'll need to hurry though. They close in about fifteen minutes. I'll do the knocking on the doors this time.'

I grabbed my coat and ran down the stairs, out onto the pavement and headed for the shop. I got there just as the owner was closing up and bought the wire. When I got back to the flat, Darleen was waiting for me and she showed me the meter. I carefully replaced the broken wire and the lights sparked back into life. Then I knocked on the doors and told the women that they could switch everything back on again. Darleen thanked me and said that she'd leave the torch on top of the meter in case I needed it again.

As I was heading back into my room, something occurred to me.

'Darleen,' I asked, 'McAllister told me that the electricity was on a pay-as-you-go meter. How does that work?

She walked back to the meter and pointed at a grey steel box set discreetly to one side. There was a slot on the top.

'You're supposed to put the coins in there,' she said. Then she flipped the lid up and showed me that it was empty.

'Someone broke the lock a long time ago. All we do is put fifty pence in, the electricity comes on and we take it out again. We take it in turns to do it. If we put the coin in about ten times, that does for a few days.'

'So we have free power?'

She shrugged her shoulders and smiled. 'Yes.'

'And McAllister doesn't complain.'

'Not as long as I've been here, and that's almost eighteen months.'

Things were indeed looking up.

An hour later I knocked on Eleanor's door and we made our way into the kitchen. I dug out the jar of coffee that I'd purchased that day and she boiled the kettle. When we had two steaming mugs, we sat down at the table.

'You go first,' she said. 'How come you ended up here?'

I explained that I'd gotten a scholarship to do a masters degree in offshore engineering at the University, but earlier in the year the industry had undergone one of its frequent spasms and crashed.

'Instead of hiring,' I said, 'they're laying people off by the thousands. I was up in Aberdeen a few weeks ago to see if there was anything going at all and one of the pubs on Union Street had a big banner across the front saying, "Lord, send us another boom and this time we promise not to piss it up against a wall"'

She laughed and asked what my plan was now. I replied that I couldn't really go home. I was from a large family that lived in a small house and my parents had been glad to see the back of me when I went to University. I was now more or less broke and I had to find a job of some sort soon. I was looking anywhere and everywhere and would take anything.

'Anyway,' I said, 'enough about me. What about you? How come you landed up here?'

'She arched one eyebrow coyly. 'You mean, how did a nice girl like me end up in a dump like this?'

'Well, now that you mention it, yes.'

'OK. The situation is that I'm doing a degree in social science, and that's what I want to work in. But I come from a background that most people would call comfortable. To tell the truth, a lot of people might consider my parents to be rich. I grew up in a nice house with a big garden and I went to a nice school. That's about as far removed as I could get from the lives of the people that I want to work with. So, I decided that I should slum it for a while so that I could understand what they have to go through.'

It was good stuff. In the modern world, such behaviour might be classed as virtue signalling, and I was sure that there would be lots of people who would sneer at her and claim that what she was doing was condescending. But it showed that she was genuine about what she wanted to do and I was impressed.

We chatted on for over an hour before we went back to our rooms. The uplift to my spirits however lasted only another thirty minutes. I heard a knock on the outside door and I went to answer it. I opened it to find my eyes on a level with a man's chest. Whoever this was, he was bloody huge. I craned my neck upwards and my eyes met a smiling face topped off with a mop of unruly dark, curly hair.

'Hello,' he said. 'I'm Billy. We haven't met before. I'm Eleanor's boyfriend.'

Monday was the most depressing day of my life, up until then at least. I left the flat at nine o'clock and walked the mile and a half to the local job centre, where I registered for unemployment benefit. The weather matched my mood, with dark, sullen skies which defeated any efforts by the sun to break through and a persistent drizzle that threatened to work its way through my coat at any moment.

I got there at half past nine and was told to take a ticket with a number on it. I'd be called when it appeared on the board. I sat hunched up and miserable amongst the detritus of society, men and women with cold, pinched faces, looking at the floor or staring into the distance at a future where hope had long since receded out of sight. I was the youngest person there by some distance and the only relief I had was the knowledge that I had something behind me that meant I wasn't going to get stuck in this hellhole. But for most people in that room, this was probably as good as it was going to get.

My number eventually came up and I was directed to a chair in front of a desk. A large woman with a crew cut and bored, disinterested eyes took my details. At the end of the process, she announced that I was due thirty two pounds a week, payable every fortnight. She counted it out in front of me and I took it gratefully. It wasn't much but, if I was careful, it was enough to get me through the next fourteen days.

I asked how I might get help with my accommodation costs and was told that I'd have to contact the council. I took that as my cue and left.

Dealing with Glasgow City Council Housing Department turned out to be like trying to pick up mercury with a boxing glove. At first, it all looked relatively simple. I went along to the office to which I had

been directed at the job centre, explained my situation and asked about the process of applying for housing costs. A bored looking young woman took my name and pointed towards a chair.

‘Sit there,’ she said, ‘and someone will be out to see you soon.’

Soon, it transpired, was council speak for forty minutes. Eventually a fat woman with a butch haircut and two rings through her left nostril sat down beside me, introduced herself as Irene Brown, and asked some questions. She gave me some forms and told me to go away, fill them in and bring them back as soon as possible.

That evening, I did the filling in and dropped the forms at the office the following day. I then waited for something to happen. Two weeks later, I was still waiting. I went back into the office and spoke to a different bored young woman and was ordered to wait again. I did so and Ms Brown eventually appeared an hour later. She remembered me but claimed that no forms had been handed in. We disputed this for a few minutes but there was only one way this was going to be resolved. I asked for another set of forms, went back to the bedsit, filled them in, dropped them in the following day with her name on the envelope with a request that it be handed to her directly. Then I waited, again.

After another two weeks, I called in to the office. This time reception was manned by an older woman who clucked disapprovingly as I told her my tale.

‘You’ve been getting messed about,’ she said. ‘Wait there and I’ll see if I can find Ms Brown,’

She disappeared through a door and came back ten minutes later. ‘She’s not in,’ she said. ‘I’ve been told that she’s on holiday. Can you come back next week?’

I pointed out that I’d seen Ms Brown with my own eyes disappearing through the door when I entered the building. The woman’s smile slipped and her face took on a look of inscrutability.

‘Are you accusing me of lying?’ she said.

I knew where the power lay in this discussion and I backtracked. ‘No, of course not. I’ll do as you say and come back next week.’

The following week, I spoke to another bored young woman. I was beginning to wonder if they were breeding them somewhere in the back office. When I asked for Ms Brown I was told that she didn’t work there any longer. Apparently, she’d been transferred to another office.

I felt like the top of my head was going to explode and I struggled to keep my temper. I pointed at the door behind her and spoke slowly and carefully, my voice tight with suppressed anger.

‘Can you go in there,’ I said, ‘and try to find someone who will talk to me about how I might get some help with my accommodation costs. I am running out of money and if I can’t pay my rent, I’ll be out on my ear.’

She didn’t look too happy but she slid off her chair, went through the door. I waited and she came back ten minutes later to tell me that an interview had been booked with Mr. Stevens the following Tuesday at two PM. He would sort out my application. I thanked her and left.

On the appointed day, I turned up at half past one and found the older lady from several weeks previously at the desk. I informed her of my appointment and she asked me to take a seat. I did so and I was still sitting there at half past two. I went to the desk to enquire about the delay and she

picked up the phone and dialled a number. She spoke into the receiver, listened to the answer, then put the phone down.

‘He’s been delayed in a meeting. He’ll be out as soon as possible.’

I resumed my seat and at a quarter past three, the scene was repeated. I was again told that Mr. Stevens was delayed in an important meeting. At four o’clock I approached the desk for the third time. The phone was lifted, words were spoken, the phone was replaced and I was told that Mr. Stevens had gone home for the day.

I left the building replaying the events of the previous three hours over and over in my mind, trying to figure out if I’d done something wrong. I realised that the system had closed ranks against me and that I wasn’t going to get any help from the Council. I also considered how I’d been played over the previous month, the way in which everyone in that office had known their role and how they had carried it out to perfection. They were well practised masters of their trade.

I’d hit a new low and I made my way back to my grotty, ugly bedsit through a dark, Glasgow evening. Every penny had to be carefully hoarded and so I walked from the city centre to Ibrox, a distance of perhaps three miles. The route took me through what had once been the Gorbals, which I’d first heard about by reading Ralph Glasser’s account of growing up there in the 1930s. By now, the Thatcher economic boom was beginning to take hold and waves of regeneration were sweeping through the city. The old Gorbals had been demolished and what had once upon a time been one of the worst slums in Europe had now been levelled to the consistency of a pancake. It was an eerie place, totally deserted and it is strange now to think that it is covered in yuppie flats and one of the most desirable areas of the city.

I got to my room and lay on the bed for ten minutes, staring at the ceiling, my hands behind my head. My efforts to find a job had so far met with total failure and I was aware that everyone in my class was now employed except me. I was close to tears but consoled myself with the thought that I’d probably hit rock bottom and the only way from here was up. That’s when the lights went off.

I swore softly, swung my feet off the bed and scrambled for my shoes. I went out into the hallway and found the torch, then knocked on the doors and asked the women to turn off anything electrical. I replaced the fuse wire and the lights flickered into life again. I knocked on the doors to tell everyone that they could turn on the heaters again. When I got to Eleanor’s I had my hand up to knock when she opened it.

She was wearing nothing but a smile and a small white towel. She clutched it at her neck and it rode up almost, but not quite, to the point where it would have become redundant.

‘Thanks, Patrick,’ she said. ‘I don’t know what we’d do without you. I can have my bath now.’

I suppose that I should have been flattered. I knew that what I was supposed to do now was to step forward into the room, close the door and let nature take its course. Instead, it was the last straw. I’d just had one of the worst days of my life and standing in front of me was a woman inviting betrayal and danger.

In that moment everything that was going wrong in my life: the unfairness of what had happened that day, the five hard years that I’d put down at University which had promised so much only to end up in this godforsaken hole, and the way in which all my contemporaries were starting their lives while I was still hadn’t gotten out of first gear, caused something to give way and a bolt of

rage shot through me. She must have seen it in my face because her smile was suddenly replaced by a look of alarm. She took a step back and quickly slammed the door.

I stood there for what was probably about ten seconds before returning to my room. I had never scared a woman before, at least, not that I was aware of, and I was beyond ashamed. I thought about apologising but I knew that that was likely to make a bad situation worse. Instead, I searched under the mattress and pulled out the tenner that I'd been keeping for emergencies. That night, I went out and got very drunk.

The following morning, I lay in bed with a hangover, feeling sorry for myself. I looked at my clock and saw that it was just after nine. Usually, I was up and out of the room by now but I was at a low ebb. I felt the stirrings of self-pity and was struggling to suppress it when the door shot open and McAllister was in the room. He pointed his finger at me and shouted, 'Stay there. Don't come out of the room.' Then he was gone, slamming the door behind him.

I didn't quite believe what had happened. In the first place, although it shouldn't have surprised me, McAlister had a key to my room, and that was deeply worrying. But what was frightening was not knowing what the hell was happening out there in the hall and why had I been ordered not to leave the room. My heart was thumping but the truth is that I did what I had been told and I stayed in bed.

I kept my ears open but heard nothing. Just after ten, I got up and got dressed. I went out to the hall and was walking towards the kitchen when someone knocked at the door. I opened it and found myself facing a man in a suit and a briefcase.

'Are you Mr. Burger?' he asked.

Before I could answer, a young woman burst out of Maureen's room. 'It's OK,' she said. 'This is for me.'

I knew what was happening immediately. McAllister was running a benefit scam, claiming money for the rooms where we lived, and I was potentially caught in the middle of it. I went back into my room and sat on the bed. I thought about the question that he'd throw at me when I came to see the flat, 'Are you working?' and the lie that I'd told him in return. I knew that if the people at the Glasgow Housing Department had played ball and payed me the money I was owed, I would now be in big trouble. I let out a big sigh of relief and decided to get on with my first priority, trying to get a job.

It was looking hopeless. Every day was the same. Going along to the library, checking the papers, phoning up the lads in the class to see if they'd heard anything. At one point I used up much of the small amount of money I had to go to London to trawl around the employment agencies. I stayed with a friend who shared a flat in the centre of the City. One of his flatmates worked for a security company and he said that he could get me a graduate job at a good salary if I wanted it. I was sorely tempted but I wasn't ready to give up yet. Meanwhile, back in the bedsit, things had taken another turn for the worse.

The problem this time was Linda. When I'd knocked on her door to introduce myself, she'd mentioned a boyfriend called Robbie. I'd met him a few times by then, usually if he arrived or left when I was preparing my dinner. He was a few inches taller than I was but any resemblance ended

there. He was as bald as a coot with tattoos running down a neck that was the same diameter as my head. His shoulders were broad, his chest massive and his legs like two tree trunks. We passed a few words between us, during which I found out that he was a bouncer in some of the clubs in the centre of town, something which didn't surprise me in the slightest.

When I returned from London, I threw my bag in the room and went to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. That was where Darleen found me. She was nervous and on edge.

'Patrick,' she said, 'Where have you been?'

I told her and asked her if something was wrong.

'Yes,' she replied. 'Last night Linda and Robbie had a huge argument in her room. They finished it in the hall and he belted her.'

My stomach turned. I could imagine what a punch from a man like Robbie might do to such a slight woman.

'How badly is she hurt?'

'She has a huge bruise under her eye. I took her down to A&E and they had a good look at her. There's nothing broken but she's in shock. She's been in her room all day and refuses to come out.'

'Have the police been told?'

She laughed, but bitterly and without humour. 'Nobody does that around here. If the copers were called every time some bloke hit his wife or girlfriend, they'd have no time for anything else. Anyway, Robbie's protected.'

'You mean,' I said, 'because he's a bouncer?'

She shook her head. 'There's a couple of criminal gangs operate on the south side of the river. They have drugs and prostitution and the protection rackets sown up. Robbie is involved with one of them. If you want someone duffed up, he's your man.'

This was sobering information and I began to realise that I was in deeper shit than I'd thought.

'Is there anything I should do?' I asked.

She shrugged. 'I just thought you should know. There's bugger all you can do about it. If he does it again all I can advise is that you stay out of it. Linda comes from the sort of family where this thing happens all the time. She expects it and won't thank you if you interfere. And you risk a bad beating if you do.'

I couldn't disagree and there was nothing for it except to keep my head down. However, two nights later, the problem arrived at my door in a way that made it difficult to avoid.

At half past midnight, I was woken by a fist pounding at the outer door. I buried my head in the pillow hoping that it would go away but it just went on, again and again and again. It was like a dog barking and I knew that it was just never going to stop unless I did something. Eventually, because I knew that nobody else was going to do it, I pulled myself out of the bed, put my dressing gown on and went out into the corridor. The banging was incessant and I could see light coming from under the other doors. Everyone was awake.

I called through the door, 'Who's there?'

The banging stopped and there was a pause for a few seconds. Then a voice said, 'It's Robbie. Tell Linda I'm here to say I'm sorry.'

This left me in a dilemma but I was saved by Linda opening her door. She peered out and said, 'Is it.....?'

I nodded. 'It's Robbie and he wants to say that he's sorry. He sounds drunk. Should I let him in?'

She sighed. 'If you don't, he'll be banging on that door all night. Hang about there.'

She disappeared into her room and reappeared a few seconds later with a chair. 'Put that in front of my door,' she said, 'and tell him to sit on it and to me through it. But I'm not coming out.'

She shut her door and I heard the lock being turned. I had little confidence that, if push came to shove, three inches of veneer would halt a determined drunken Scotsman, especially one the size of Robbie but I did as she had told me with the chair and then, with my heart beating like a trip hammer, I opened the front door.

Robbie was standing there in his bouncer's uniform of black shoes, trousers, shirt and heavy coat. He was swaying gently and he peered at me as though he'd never seen me before. He was rattled. It took him a while to work out who I was but eventually he said, 'Hello, Patrick. Is Linda in?'

'She is,' I said, 'but she won't let you in the room. She'll talk to you through the door.'

'That will do,' he slurred and lurched towards me. I caught him before he fell but almost buckled under the weight. I kept him upright and moved him towards the chair. I helped him to sit down on it and then I called to Linda.

'Robbie's here Linda. He's sitting on the chair in front of the door and he wants to speak to you. I'm going back into my room now and I'll leave you at it.'

I made sure that Robbie could stay upright and then went back into my room and closed the door behind me. From the hall, I could hear muttered conversation, although I couldn't make out the words. I stayed awake for an hour until I eventually heard Linda's door open and close, then I drifted off to sleep.

The next morning the flat was silent as I got up and prepared breakfast. I headed out about nine with a new plan. I walked into the city centre and made my way to the student union building. There I managed to persuade someone to lend me a copy of a graduate opportunities directory, the famous GOD book. Later that morning I hung about the entrance to my old department until the man who'd acted as my supervisor came out. I followed him to the café where I knew he always had his lunch and waited until he was seated. I went in and sat across the table from him. We hadn't been particularly friendly or close and had not spoken since my graduation, but I thought that he was a decent man and I was just about to test that theory.

He was surprised to see me but he folded up the newspaper he was reading and said hello. Then he waited to see what I wanted.

'I need your help, Phil,' I said.

He became wary. 'In what way?'

'I'm in trouble. I have tried everything to get a job and I've fallen flat on my face. I'm living in pretty horrible circumstances and I need to try something different.'

'OK,' he said slowly, drawing out the syllables. 'How can I help?'

'I need access to a phone for a day. And I mean a full day. Can I use the one in your office?'

This was a big ask at a time when telephone calls were expensive and, in truth, I was expecting a refusal. But he must have seen or sensed something of my desperation. He thought about it for a few seconds and then said, 'Yes. Come in tomorrow morning before nine. That way you'll be there before the departmental secretary and she won't see you. I have a full day of lectures and you'll have the room to yourself. Stay until I get back and then you can come out with me.'

There was no way to thank him enough. All I could do was reach across, shake him by the hand and leave.

The following morning, I was at the front door of the department at half eight. He arrived five minutes later and at quarter to nine I was sitting at his desk with the phone in front of me. I had spent the previous afternoon going through the GOD in detail, marking off all the companies that I thought might be prepared to give me a look.

By this stage, I'd already sent off scores of CVs, some of them chasing specific jobs, but most of them speculative. I had grown inured to the letters I'd received in return with their various ways of saying, no, piss off and go away. I had come to the conclusion that I had to search for contacts, someone I could actually talk to, somebody who would listen to me and might take a personal interest. It was a long shot, but it was all I had left.

I had identified twenty eight potential employers and I dialled the first one just after nine o'clock. The call was picked up and I asked to speak to someone in personnel, which is what they called the Human Resources department in those days.

'Did I have a name?'

No. This was a speculative call but if she knew who dealt with graduate recruitment, I'd be very grateful if she'd be able to put me through.

She asked me to wait and I heard her speak to someone, her voice muffled and indistinct. Eventually, she came back to me and said, 'I'm putting you through now.'

The phone rang and was picked up by a youngish sounding woman. I launched into my prepared speech, which she listened to patiently before carefully explaining to me why they had nothing to offer me, although if I sent her my CV, she'd keep it on file. Yes, I thought, if your filing cabinet is the waste paper bin beside your desk. But I thanked her and hung up. I made a record of the conversation and moved on.

The first five were like that and I was starting to get discouraged but I struck gold with the sixth call. I spoke to a young woman, they were all young women, who was bright and cheerful. She told me that they had openings for graduates and to send my CV in to her. She'd make sure that it was seen by the right people. My morale lifted immediately and I started dialling again with a fresh heart.

I needed almost all the time that Phil had given me. When he came to collect me hours later, he asked me how things had gone. I looked at my record sheet and told him, my voice dry and my throat sore.

'I phoned twenty eight companies initially. Ten of them were polite but non-committal. Another five told me that they had nothing and I was wasting my time. Five more told me that they had nothing but pointed me in the direction of other companies that they thought might have something. I called all of those, so I've made thirty three calls in total. A load of them asked me to send in my CV and they'd keep me on record. But I spoke to five people who said that if I sent in a CV, they'd send it round to see if anyone was interested. So, I have to post those letters tomorrow morning.'

'It's not a lot for such a huge effort,' he said.

I shrugged. 'It's all I've got, Phil. And it's a damn sight more than I had this morning.'

In the end, it worked. Those five letters that I posted the following day got me four interviews and three job offers. None of them was in the offshore industry but one of them, the one I accepted, was in marine research and development, which was the next best thing. The woman I'd spoken to at that company was called Cathy and I later found out she'd personally taken my CV around to every head of department until she found someone who said that it looked interesting.

I left Glasgow for my new life a few weeks after that day in Phil's office. Given the way that the timings worked, I still had to pay a month's rent, even though I only needed the room for a few days. The person who came to collect it was a well-spoken woman with an English accent who introduced herself as McAllister's wife.

'Where is he?' I asked.

'He won't be around for a while,' she said. 'He was sentenced to two years last week for benefit fraud.'

There was nothing to say so I paid her the money and left her knocking on the other doors.

Before I left, I took Darleen, Maureen and Linda out to one of the local pubs. Eleanor was gone by then; the experiment with living the low life had been abandoned after Robbie had hit Linda. Her parents had turned up a few days later in a Daimler and helped her strip out the room. The last I'd seen of her was the three of them hurriedly disappearing down the stairs. Her place had been taken by a small, slight girl with long brown hair who smiled shyly at me when we met, but who seldom came out of her room.

I bought a few rounds of drinks and we chatted for an hour or two, but the atmosphere between us was strained. We all knew the reality of the situation. I was taking my first step to a new life which would propel me into a different world. In the future, wherever I ended up, I would live in places like Anniesland and Mount Florida, but for them, this was their life; scratching out an existence in near poverty, living in shit housing, with violence and exploitation around every corridor, and no way out.

I left the following day. I was supposed to be out of the room by ten but I got delayed. As I was putting my last bag out into the hallway, McAllister's wife appeared with a woman and two children. Before I pulled the front door shut behind me, I handed the key to them. I walked down the stairs and hailed a taxi to take me to Central Station.