

PROLOGUE

*The Worst
Birthday Ever*

WOLVERHAMPTON, 5 APRIL 1988

Here I am, on my 13th birthday. I am running. I'm running from The Yobs.

'Boy!'

'Gyppo!'

'Boy!'

I'm running from The Yobs in the playground by our house. It is a typical playground of Britain in the late eighties. There's no such thing as safety surfaces, ergonomic design or, indeed, slats on the benches. Everything's made of concrete, broken Corona pop bottles and weeds.

As I run, I'm totally alone. I can feel the breath in my throat catching, like sick. I've seen nature documentaries like this before. I can see what's happening here. My role is, clearly, that of 'weak antelope, separated from the pack'. The Yobs are 'the lions'. I know this never really ends well for the antelope. Soon, my role will turn into a new one: that of 'lunch'.

'Yah pikey!'

I'm wearing Wellington boots, NHS glasses that make me look like Alan Bennett, and my dad's *Withnail*-style army coat. I

do not, I admit, look very feminine. Diana, Princess of Wales is feminine. Kylie Minogue is feminine. I am ... femi-none. So I understand 'The Yobs' confusion. They do not look as if they have dabbled much in either a) the iconography of the counter-culture or b) the inspirational imagery of radical gender-benders. I imagine they were confused by both Annie Lennox and Boy George when they appeared on *Top of the Pops*.

If they weren't so busy chasing me, I would probably say something to this effect. Maybe I would tell them that I have read *The Well of Loneliness*, by famous, trouser-wearing lesbian Radclyffe Hall, and that they need to open their minds to alternative modes of dress. Perhaps I would mention Chrissie Hynde, too. *She* wears masculine tailoring. And Caryn Franklin on *The Clothes Show* – and she seems *lovely!*

'Yah pikey!'

The Yobs stop for a moment, and appear to confer. I slow to a trot, lean against a tree and hyperventilate wildly. I am knackered. At 13 stone, I am not really built for hot pursuit. I am less Zola Budd – more Elmer Fudd. As I catch my breath, I reflect on my situation.

It would be amazing, I think, if I had a pet dog. A well-trained German Shepherd, who would attack these boys – almost brutally. An animal really in tune with the fear and apprehension of its owner.

I observe my pet German Shepherd, Saffron, 200 yards away. She is joyfully rolling in a slick of fox shit, and waving her legs in the air with joy. The dog looks so happy. Today is working out really well for it. This is a much longer, and faster, walk than usual.

Although today is obviously not working out very well for me, I am none the less surprised when – having finished their

tête-à-tête – The Yobs pause for a minute, and then start throwing stones at me. That seems a bit extreme, I think. I start running again.

You don't have to go to this bother to oppress me! I think, indignantly. I was already pretty subjugated! Honestly – you had me at 'Pikey'.

Only a few of the stones actually hit me and, obviously, they don't hurt: this coat has been through a war, possibly two. Pebbles are nothing. It's built for grenades.

But it's the thought that counts. All this time spent on me, when they could be engaging in other, more worthwhile pursuits – like abusing solvents, and fingering girls who are actually dressed *as* girls.

As if reading my mind, after a minute or so The Yobs begin to lose interest in me. It looks like I'm yesterday's antelope now. I'm still running, but they're just standing still – throwing the occasional rock in my direction, in an almost leisurely way, until I'm out of range. They don't stop shouting, however.

'You bloke!' the biggest Yob shouts, as a final thought at my departing back. 'You ... *bummer!*'

I get home, and cry on the doorstep. It's honestly too crowded to cry in the house. I've tried crying in the house before – you explain why you're crying to one person between the sobs, and then you're only halfway through before someone else comes in, and needs to hear the story from the top again, and before you know it, you've told the worst bit six times, and wound yourself up into such an hysterical state you have hiccups for the rest of the afternoon.

When you live in a small house with five younger siblings, it's actually far more sensible – and much quicker – to cry alone.