

## Church Street

*Ronan O'Shea*

It didn't matter how many Tom Petty or Kurt Vile albums I listened to, I would never be *in*. The crowd was cooler than me, woker than me, sexier than me.

Still, I had a seat.

Kick-off was in ten minutes. The bar staff had yet to turn the music off and the commentary on. As the area around the bar began to swell with people, I worried they would forget, leaving us to watch the game distracted by chart pop. Watching Tottenham Hotspur to an Ed Sheeran soundtrack is no easy task but, fortunately, the audio came on before kick-off.

After a few minutes, however, it became clear we had a poor view of the screen. The twentysomethings in front seemed to multiply every two minutes, growing into a mass of effusive and oblivious hugs and laughter. As a man in his thirties with a friendship circle of one, I was angry and jealous, until Devereux — that circle — arrived. He bought a round and sat beside me. We caught up.

'Alright?'

'Yeah, you?'

'Sound.'

'Good good.'

And that was that.

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Liverpool scored twice in ten minutes. A Spurs fan, I was sanguine about the situation, watching on, just glad to be out of my flat. With someone. And then the man arrived. He was smiling as he walked towards us, eyes alive with recognition. I immediately knew we had a *character* on our hands. He pointed at Devereux but spoke to me.

'He's a Gooner, in'e?'

I shook my head and answered for him. 'Spurs.'

The man shook his head. 'Ah, that's alright. I'm Arsenal. We can get along. You?' he asked me. 'Who's your team?'

'Same as him,' I said.

The man slapped his forehead as if he had forgotten his keys, said it was a pity, but nothing to argue over the way he would have 'back in the day' when, we were told, he had got into all sorts of trouble.

Adrian, he said. He was called Adrian. He extended his hand, which I shook.

'Micky,' I replied. Devereux smiled and told him he was also called Michael.

'You brothers?'

I paused a moment to gauge whether he was joking. He was not.

'No,' I said. 'We went to school together.'

'You look the same,' said Adrian with a laugh, impersonating us, sat there on our high stools, slouching unhealthily. That aside, we were nothing alike. Devereux had short, cropped red hair and green eyes. He was lean where I was stocky, and my hair went down to my shoulders and was brown like my eyes. Hoping to appease Adrian, I said we got that a lot.

The strange newcomer looked out of the window. The Garrett was a historic pub in Stoke Newington with untraditional insides; craft beer, the staff tattooed and non-binary.

Its chairs were of a latticed iron that scraped loudly along the floor. The windows were dimpled. Adrian pointed to the one nearest, and Church Street.

'I live down there,' he said. 'Eighteen years. Mad how it's changed.'

It had gentrified, he said, as if me and Devereux were not there for that reason, watching football surrounded by people like us who, it seemed, were different enough in style and form as to render the illusion of diversity.

'You wouldn't have come to this area eighteen years back,' said Adrian. He told us how it had changed. His eyes flicked around the room, then back to me and Devereux.

'You see kids now. They'll tell their dad to fuck off. Can you imagine us boys doing that to our dads?'

He must have been fifteen years older than us, but I was glad he thought us one of him, not they, the gathered Sunday crowd in synthetic Liverpool shirts, none of whom seemed in possession of a Liverpudlian accent. They were blow-ins from various universities, who had settled in this cooler corner of North-East London. The financiers had their territory, Clapham and the nicer bits of South; the creatives theirs, Brixton and the North East. The hipsters had the East in its entirety, which they shared cheek by jowl with those financiers not keen on the South.

We did not quite seem to fit, pub, postcode or otherwise.

For whatever reason, Adrian seemed to think we were local and continued to talk about the area as if we must inherently have known it like the back of our hands. We muddled through, familiar enough to play along, Devereux gamely making use of the runner job he'd done a decade earlier, running errands out of a television production studio in Camden. As he spoke, Adrian laughed fulsomely, yet it appeared as if he were not truly taking any of it in, as if he were rooted on whatever he'd said before myself or Devereux spoke.

'If I said that to my dad when I was a kid,' he said, 'I wouldn't be standing here now.'

The that was not Devereux's line — something about Pret a Manger's taking over the place — but of young people, and of his father, of whom he'd spoken not long before. 'Old man used to beat me senseless,' he said. 'You get it. You're my generation.'

I didn't, I wasn't, and my father had died before I knew how to talk. All the same, I nodded.

Adrian looked to be in his early forties and had a nervous, disconcerting energy, his eyes dancing around as he spoke. He had a hole at the bottom of his t-shirt and was wearing a black leather jacket on a hot April's day. Despite his attempts to play along, I could sense Devereux's unease.

A loud *ooof* sound went up in the bar, a missed shot on goal. Adrian peered at the screen like it was an unwanted distraction. He pulled out his phone, which was buzzing.

'Hold on, that's Letitia,' he said. He stepped to one side.

I turned to Devereux. 'Why always us?'

It was true. With misanthropy, the two of us tried to keep society at arm's length. And yet, in our nation of two, we seemed to attract its off cuts; the lonely, the mad and, most often, the lonely *and* mad.

Loners would settle in beside us when we wanted a quiet pint; chancers would try to sell us stolen meat or goods, whilst drunks purportedly only after a cigarette or light would nestle in for a lengthy chat, proceeding to tell us their life stories at nauseating length and with an impressive degree of inconsistency.

'If he's still here by the next round,' said Devereux. 'Let's find another pub.'

Adrian returned.

'That's Letitia, my girlfriend,' he said. 'She's coming. You'll meet her. She's having problems with her man.'

He paused, like he was waiting for us to ask about it. 'He's got an anger problem,' he said, putting a finger to his temple. 'But you boys are friendly. You'll like her. She needs people to love her. Know what I mean?'

We nodded.

'She's had it hard, you know,' he said, rambling on a while about Letitia, how she needed to be loved.

I said I understood. After arriving at the pub, I'd looked with malevolent jealousy at the reservations on the tables; Richard @15:30 (Five people), Debbie @15:30 (Four), Martin @15:00 (an outlandish eight). I envied people with their groups of friends.

I looked back to Adrian. 'You said this area has changed?'

He nodded frantically. 'Yeah. I'm from the Cally Road originally, you know it? *You* know it.'

I nodded. He slapped my arm enthusiastically. He repeated once more what it was like now compared to some nebulous then; the difference, like here in Stoke Newington, being that it had been "hard" where now it was "posh".

'A tough place to grow up,' he said. 'You know how it is.'

I was from Harrow. But I nodded. Adrian scanned the bar.

'Ain't been here in years. Used to be a rough gaff. Old boys, you know what I mean?'

I nodded. 'All hipsters now,' I said.

Adrian smiled. 'Yeah, young ones. Don't know what it's like, do they?'

'No,' I said. 'Not in the least.'

I looked towards the group in front of the screen, who looked like me, were likely educated like me, had probably migrated into London from its suburbs or beyond, like me, yet didn't huddle over their pints with the same resigned indifference the way me and Devereux did.

Adrian took my attention, lightly slapping my arm again with the back of his palm.

'My dad was the sort of man no one messed with,' he said. 'Used to find him down at Carter's boxing club, in Bethnal Green. You know the one I mean?'

'Yes,' I lied.

'The Krays boxed there. If he walked in, they stood up and said, "Hi Georgie." You didn't mess with Caribbean boys back then. They were *tough*.'

I nodded. In the corner of my eye, Devereux buried his mouth in his pint like it was a trough.

'I'll show you a picture,' said Adrian, opening his wallet. 'Pierre,' he said, showing us his debit card. Not Adrian. 'It's French. Guadeloupe. I've lived on this street eighteen years. My daughters live a minute away. This area has changed.' He looked out of the window. 'My dad was a *hard* man. I'll show you a photo.'

He took out his phone and began to scroll through his pictures, which were mostly women in various states of undress; a pair of breasts here, a woman in a padded, lacy bra there, legs that were only just crossed, others less so.

He had a fondness for rear ends, I surmised.

Scrolling down, past an incongruous picture of himself with what appeared to be a family member, Adrian finally landed upon another of a woman with blonde hair.

'That's Letitia,' he said. 'She's Norwegian. She'll be here in a bit.'

'She's your girlfriend?'

'Yeah,' he said, scrolling through his phone again, as me and Devereux glanced at one another.

Adrian scrolled further, the pictures haphazard and candid, until finally he reached a technicolour photo of three young black children standing in front of a man in a white suit, with a cane, two white adults either side of him.

'That's my dad,' he said. 'Everyone knew him by that cane. He didn't even need it.'

I nodded. 'A Caribbean tough guy?' I said.

Adrian nodded, staring at me intensely as he spoke. 'The toughest.'

I was relieved then when his phone buzzed. The pair of us looked down, the name *Letitia* appearing — somewhat to my surprise — on the phone screen.

'That's her. She's on the way. Promise me you'll be nice to her when she arrives? She just needs people to love her. Okay?'

'Yes,' I said.

'Sure,' said Devereux.

Adrian went outside. A few moments passed. The game continued on-screen, Tottenham still two-nil down, the large groups of people watching but, for the most part, focused on their conversations. There was a pleasant smell of capricciosa pizza from Table Sixteen, nearby, and I couldn't help but wonder if this was our lot, to humour the likes of Adrian, who were mad, possibly lonely, possibly both.

I looked over at Devereux, who was blunter in his assessment of the situation.

'Every time,' he said.

'Did you see the naked women?'

He looked at me curiously. 'There wasn't much else to look at.'

I nodded. 'There was the guy with the cane.'

The Liverpool fans cheered as a Spurs player misplaced a pass.

'Let's just go,' he said.

I looked at the bar. I had worked behind them often, or sat in corners by myself on midweek nights, desperate to get out of the cloying solitude of my small, rented room about a mile and a half up the road, the loneliness beckoning me to the lights, chatter and warmth of a pub, where I would buy a pint, sit in a corner, glad that I was out and about, albeit alone, in London.

I went to the pubs when Devereux wasn't available. I hadn't a woman to love. Other friends had bred and fled the city. While it unveiled my solitude to sit in those pubs with a book, as couples and groups passed the evening by, it was a relief also, from the flat where I lived, between four walls barely more legal than Adrian's photos, listening to the groans of lovemaking from one of my neighbours, the arguments and sex of my housemate and her boyfriend, the drum and bass of someone elsewhere in the building.

I had often sat in the pub, alone, fantasising that a group would beckon me, or that I might meet another lonely stranger, a woman, drinking alone in the pub. There were not many of them, and when I did see them, usually with a book and a glass of wine, I shied from them as the lonely are wont to shy from each other.

I thought of Adrian in that flat down the road, if he really did live there, unable to sit still for any length of time, shuffling about restlessly before going out, less in search of company, more distraction from the chaotic thoughts in his head, which were expelled to me and Devereux now by way of

*Daughters*

*Tough*

*Rough*

*Letitia*

*Caribbean*

*Krays*

*Arsenal*

*Change*

*Gooners*

and everything in between.

'Come on,' said Devereux. 'I'm not watching the second half listening to a loon talk nonsense about the Cally Road. It has a Pret and a Yo Sushi. It's not Buckingham Palace.'

I looked outside. Adrian was cadging cigarettes from nervous-looking customers. I wondered whether we should stick around to humour, mollify or contain him. I felt bad.

But I couldn't do it, knowing how he was and would be.

I got up, sinking the rest of my pint, quickly checking I had my things, looking towards a couple in front of us who had been standing up throughout the first half.

'All yours,' I said, as we walked out of the front door.

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'Utterly crazy,' said Devereux, as we walked down Church Street, away from the pub, with its hipster crowd in Converse and Liverpool shirts. We walked towards The Coach & Horses, where it was mostly old or older men, or bearded and single men who drank alone, or in pairs, who at most commented on that tackle or red card, that cross or goal.

'You reckon Letitia was real? She was in the phone.'

Devereux shook his head. 'I'm not willing to find out.'

He was just a little mad, I'd say, a few screws gone and loose.

All the same there I was with Devereux, walking away and down the road.

A neurodivergent author from London, **Ronan O'Shea**'s writing explores mental health, belonging and place. O'Shea's debut novel will be published in Spanish translation by Fulgencio Pimentel in 2023. O'Shea is a creative writing teacher in Belmarsh Prison and has been a mental health worker, barman and journalist.