

Diet Croydon by James Foreman

Chapter 1

*"human action continues, as a whole, to be nothing but pure obedience to the brutal spur of an immediate necessity; only, instead of being harried by nature, man is henceforth harried by man"*

Simone Weil

Blood coming down the windows. After a while everything smears together, the lights on the other side of the glass, the lights inside, the sounds, the pain, the tastes in your mouth. Your own mouth doesn't belong anymore, to you or anyone. It just smears into everything else, part of the tapestry of pain, soaked through, washing away into everything else. Only the little details remain. The pointless, tiny things. The human hairs that grow out of the wall over the toilet. The cut on your face from shaving two mornings ago. The curious ringing that accompanies having somebody stamp on your head. All the rest just smears together.

But we've been here before, we've taken that dive, busted our head against every concrete step on the way from the top to the bottom. We know what to do now, how to hold on, how to stop being smeared away completely. It's the little details we have to hold onto, the tiny ones, the things which wouldn't be important otherwise. It all makes sense in the end, it's just a matter of not getting there too soon.

Just hold on.

Just hold on . . .

Come to Croydon, Gateway to the South. Croydon, where we've got it all. Croydon, that place amongst the stars, that wet dream of a thousand town planners. Croydon, with its flyovers and underpasses and triple heart by-passes. Croydon, with its glamorous nightspots, each with an enlightened door policy toward teenage girls with mini skirts. Croydon, where even if you're balding and forty and wearing a red shirt/medallion combo you can still strut your stuff on the dance floor. Croydon, where hard men and flabby women come together. Oh, sing Croydon to the world! Croydon, where the stars in your eyes have been put there by a skinhead called Kevin. Croydon, with its beautiful car parks and lakes of piss, where Old meets New, where a thousand bouncers learnt their manners. Croydon, the place where everyone who was nothing still is. Croydon, the Land That Taste Forgot! Croydon, home of Crystal Palace football team, and a thousand other sporting stalwarts! Croydon, the off-the-back-of-a-lorry version of Romford, with half the charm and twice the price! Croydon, where every bus arrives but none ever leave! Croydon, the place too small to be cosmopolitan and yet just too big to be quaint! Croydon, home of Nestlé and XR3i Man. Croydon, where a million ravens roost! Croydon, Surrey's answer to London! Croydon - where everywhere else seems so much better! The McDonalds of England, where you always end up but never wanted to go to, where everything is the same whether you're Oop North or Dahn Sarf, a pustule of mediocrity clinging to the skirts of much bigger things! Croydon, the one that didn't get away, the middle child that lacked its elders' cunning and brute force and the cutesy-pukesy smile of its younger siblings, neither here nor there. Croydon, twinned with Nowhere, and only half as far. Croydon, one step too many from heaven.

Bromley is a failure. Of all the mediocrities it could aspire to, Croydon had to be the one, and yet the one that Bromley fell short of. Rather like failing to find work as a beggar through a lack of the necessary qualifications, Bromley ended up the Ugly Sister to Croydon, the watered-down Croydon, the low-budget Croydon, Croydon shorn of its bypass, half its pubs and only one shopping centre. Bromley. Diet Croydon.

october

I'd say that Bromley had improved, but that was only because you didn't see people receiving kickings in the doorway of the Bell every week any more. In the old days, before they redeveloped the Bell and stuck bouncers outside, somebody would be getting their head kicked in on a nightly basis. One poor sod would lie there while a couple of blokes took four or five yard run ups before placing their fashionable footwear in the unfortunate person's face, ribs or (the preserve of the cultured gentleman) genitals. So regular were these kickings that I sometimes wondered, safe behind the kebab shop's window, whether the participants took it in turns to lie on the ground, employing a rota system so that Barry always needed to visit the dentist on Tuesdays and the shoe shop on a Wednesday, while Matt would be pissing blood on Wednesday morning but have no worries for the rest of the week other than cleaning someone else's blood off his boots. I suppose with the end of the regular beatings, Matt and Barry and Ed and Stuart and all the other small town hard-men-cum-victims may have found life more difficult, as arranging their fights became more hit and miss. Not really that much of an improvement.

Before April, before the hospital and before the long months of lying on my back, staring at the ceiling and doing little else, I used to spend a significant part of my time in Bromley in the kebab shop. Thus, on my first night back, it was naturally the place I ended up at.

It was a greasy little place, forever undergoing name changes that involved little more than permuting the words "Bromley" and "Kebab". There were various possible motives for this; reinvention of the brand (unlikely), an attempt to avoid creditors (quite possible) or some effort on the owners' part to frustrate the food and hygiene inspectorate by slipping away from any listing of fast food joints. This last, which seemed the most probable, I tried to reject, knowing its implications for the quality of the food that would be served up. If I'd allowed the illusion to be shattered, a little safe haven would be lost forever.

The people who ran the place were at once transient and a permanent fixture. Just as the fruit machine in the corner was forever changing in its minor details, whilst always remaining the fruit machine, so the staff never seemed quite the same people, yet always seemed to have been there forever. You thought you should remember them even if you couldn't, just like the adverts for soft drinks on the front of the counter were that bit too far out of date for you to recall, and yet imbued with a certain familiarity that you couldn't shake off. The soft drinks themselves, Panda Cola, Cresta Cream Soda, Diet Dr Pepper and Cherry Mountain Dew were always wrong, and thus just right for a place that wasn't all there. For the kebab shop was somewhere you'd only ever inhabit in that gap between closing time and waking up in your bed without recollection of your route home, a place of pure metaphor, shadows and dreams.

Some things about it were always the same. The red plastic tablecloths on the tables at the back, in the gloomy restaurant area that nobody was ever seen in. The framed photograph of the Queen. The counter, off-white Formica that soaked up a thousand years' grease. The doner, slowly rotating on its spit. And then there was The Fork.

The Fork always fascinated me. Never did I see anyone pick it down from its hook on the wall over the chip fryer. It remained hanging there like some huge good luck charm, an immense, foot long leather handled, chromed metal implement, with four wicked looking spikes jutting out from the end of its stem, the outer ones bending forwards so that the four points would have marked out a trapezium if they had been stuck into anything. Each spike was barbed, two long inches of metal that doubled back on itself and sprang out again in weird curlicues. It wasn't the kind of fork that a sane person would eat with, or do anything much with. Therein lay its fascination to me; while everything else in the kebab shop was forever being used, rightly or wrongly, cleanly or far more often coated in grime, The Fork was inviolate. It hung there, waiting. Well, maybe.

I took special interest in staring at The Fork on that first night back in Bromley. It was the first time I'd ever looked at it with entirely sober eyes. Waiting there for my chips, staring at The Fork, musing on what an awful night I was having. While I'd been away, the place hadn't stood completely still, but had renovated itself, made a few shifty steps to one side. Not

content with its lot, Bromley had suffered to reinvent itself as somewhere with an attitude.

It was Thursday night, and boy racers were rumbling down the high street in souped-up Mini Metros. That in itself was bad enough. If you reckoned your chances in the South London Rally Challenge, you'd get yourself an XR3i, twin spoilers, bass tubes and a chrome exhaust pipe. Not a Mini Metro with purple trim down the sides and neon lights round the number plate. It was worse than ridiculous. It was embarrassing, that people in Bromley couldn't even get that right. It wasn't as if much attention to detail was required in order to purchase a proper wide-boy motor.

Outside every pub there were bouncers, and outside every pub people were queuing to get in. On a Thursday night. In Bromley. Didn't anyone understand? Maybe I didn't understand. After all, I was the one who'd gone to Bromley wearing trainers, not realising that everyone had to have a stout piece of black leather on each foot to gain admittance to the temples of beer. The Bell was rammed full and the Irish pub by the shopping centre was heaving with surplus humanity. The Greyhound didn't like the look of me and I didn't like the look of the Firkin, the Star was shut for renovations and the guy on the door of the Swan was arguing with two Welshmen, which, in my experience, never boded well. I toyed with walking down the high street again, checking out all the other pubs which had sprouted like fungus where there used to be shops, and thought better of it. I was out of breath after walking a few hundred yards, and I didn't really feel like drinking on my own anyway. It made more sense to get a kebab, and get the bus home. Even if it was only half past eight. On a Thursday.

Hence the kebab shop. At least when the rain started up I was in the dry for a few more minutes than everyone else. As soon as my food was ready, I left - it just wouldn't feel right to eat it in there - but I put off the soaking for a moment or two. Like confused cattle, the people waiting to get into the pubs just stood there while the rain poured down. It terrified me to think how much hair gel was washed into the gutter that night.

By the time I got to the bus stop on the hill I was wet through. There was no shelter on that side of the road, just an old bench, so I made my way to the other side, which offered a plastic roof and the opportunity to run like an idiot back across the road to hail my bus when it came. I sat there in the darkness with some soggy chips and a badly cooked piece of meat, dripping and waiting for my body to settle down. My breathing was ragged and I ached all over, not just in my bones. My body worried me; things were still mobile in there. Nobody knew when I was meant to be better again.

Sat there in the darkness, shielded by a shoddy plastic roof from the perils of English Water Torture, I began to build myself up for a nice long session of self-pity. Then she asked me for a chip.

I almost choked on my kebab in surprise at this sudden materialisation in the bus shelter. When you think you're safely on your own in your little sanctuary, even a request for a piece of potato comes across like a threat. I tried to confirm what I'd just heard.

"You want a chip?"

"That's right," she said. I offered her the chips and looked at her, surprised that somebody could have sat down on the next seat without me even noticing. She was silent, concentrating on her food; when she stopped chewing and looked up, I averted my gaze and took a mouthful of chips myself. Alternately we'd take chips from my supply, and while she chewed I looked at her, and I suppose while I ruminated she looked back.

She didn't look like anyone I could remember. Her face didn't give away much; framed by a bob of dark hair it seemed little more than a luminous oblong in the murk of the shelter. I couldn't make any judgments about the rest of her, shrouded in the dark. As we approached the end of the chips, I asked her if I knew her.

"Don't think so" she said, licking her fingers clean and then wiping them absently against her body. "Why?"

"Oh, no reason. Do you often go up to strangers and ask them for food?"

"Only the interesting looking ones."

Now it's not every day I get told I look interesting, but I'm a hopeful kind of guy, so I took this to be a compliment, if a somewhat elliptical one.

"What are you doing in Bromley?" she asked me.

"Oh, I just came out for a drink."

"A bit early for you to be going home, isn't it?"

It's not every day that someone comes up to me, tells me I'm interesting, and then suggests I stay around for a while. I thought a hint was being bandied about, so I reacted like I figured I was meant to.

I gently lay the remains of my kebab down on the seat to the other side of me. I couldn't have finished it anyway. "You thirsty?"

"You know my name" she said. I thought that was some smart comment that had evolved while I'd been away, and took it to mean yes. I bought two pints of Heineken in the Railway and we sat down in the alcove behind the fruit machine. The Railway was strangely almost empty; I should have tried it instead of giving up, I supposed. Instead of the usual gang of leathery bikers and metallers, there was a bored looking bar woman and a pensioner in a brown coat sipping a pint of stout. Maybe things had changed since last I'd been there.

One thing hadn't changed; I was no good at making conversation with somebody I didn't know. What was I meant to say? Initiating a discussion of the merits of the Bromley Kebab chip didn't seem the greatest opening gambit, but it was the only thing we had in common. I took a large gulp of lager and looked at her again. She looked back at me.

"Come here often?" she said, smirking.

"Not for a while. I've been away." I didn't think it was a good idea to labour her with where I'd been for the past few months.

"Anywhere nice?"

I almost answered before it dawned on me that she was joking, sitting there still smirking away. Mischievously, I reckoned, rather than hurtfully. I wondered what the difference would be.

"So . . ." she said.

"So . . . ?"

"So this is where you say something interesting, right?"

I had another mouthful of beer. "That would seem to be appropriate."

"So . . . ?"

Nothing interesting had happened to me for quite a while, and I didn't really want to talk about what had happened before that. I hesitated, unsure of what I could substitute.

"You say something interesting. I got the beers in."

"Fair comment. I suppose it's unfair to expect you to provide the chips, the beer and the conversation."

"Shall we try having a normal conversation?"

"It's a while since I've had one of those. What would it involve?"

"I'm not so sure myself. How about we start with the usual things."

What's your name, what's your shoe size, can you put two fingers in your mouth and whistle, that sort of thing."

"You start."

"Okay. My name's Steve, but you can call me Steve. Everyone else does."

"And your shoe size?"

"I forget." I put on my best seven-year-old voice: "Mummy buys all my shoes."

She smiled. Her smile was better than her smirk.

"Your turn."

"You know my name" she said again, like she had in the bus stop. "Size six, and never Nike."

I looked under the table; she had a pair of green trainers on, black jeans. Nice legs. I blinked, wondered if that was correct behaviour or not, and resurfaced.

"So what do you do, Steve?"

I didn't know what it was that I did any more. I didn't know what I did that I could tell somebody I'd only met ten minutes ago. I lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling. That was all I'd done for ages, apart from taking painkillers. "I take drugs"? I think not.

"This and that. It's all so so-so."

"So."

"Quite. And yourself?"

"This and that." She had blue eyes, deep blue. Pale skin, not pasty. Slim, not thin. She was a nice set of adjectives for sure. "So what are you

doing here tonight?"

I shrugged. She reached across the table and stroked the scar over my right eye. I don't like people touching my face like that, but the movement was too unexpected, too surprising to startle me. Her fingers were warm against my skin. It was the first time in ages I could remember somebody touching me without them wearing a white coat and a stethoscope.

"And what has somebody done to you?" She looked sad then, almost pitying me. I've never been able to get used to pity, it makes me feel even weaker than usual. I gave her the stock answer.

Stock answer: "That wasn't somebody. That was some stairs."

Her expression didn't change, and her hand stayed there a moment longer. I missed it when she moved back again.

"I'm sorry. It's hard to explain."

"Some things you don't have to talk about, Steve." She drank a little. At the bar, the old man hacked up some mucus. It bothered me that we couldn't string together more than a few sentences. I tried again.

"Well. Can you put two fingers in your mouth and whistle?"

"Whose fingers?"

"I'm too much of a gentleman to suggest anything."

She shrugged. "I don't think I'm that much of a lady."

"Really. Tell me more."

"Oh, I'm not sure as I should. It's easy to get a reputation." She looked around the pub and then winked at me conspiratorially. "With all these people around . . . there's some things that I just won't do in public."

"Me too. The washing up, matching up socks, going to sleep . . ."

"That's some private life you've got."

"Some times it's just too exciting. Yours any different?"

"Ooh, I couldn't say. It's just too much, sometimes."

The door of the pub banged open and a gust of cold air came in.

"You planning on being around for long?" she said.

"I don't know. Depends on how much more entertaining this place gets."

"I don't mean tonight."

"Same answer. Twenty years of Bromley should be enough, but there always seems to be another reason to stay."

She looked at her watch. "Well, I'd better be going, Steve. Thanks for the drink."

"You going to be around again some time?"

"I'll probably be here again next week, if you're around. I'll buy you a round if you're lucky." She stood up, pulled her jacket on.

"Okay. See you Thursday."

A pause. "Hey." She looked just the way she had in the bus stop, delivering that line. "You know my name." And then she went, leaving me to muse on the curve of her hips and the shape of her breasts underneath that tight top.

I finished my pint, finished her pint, and got up, ready for the bus. Keith Beef was standing at the bar, drinking out of a bottle of Budweiser. I paused, feeling a pang of something akin to guilt.

You can have friends, sometimes, where it's unusually intense. It's not the kind of thing where you just go on the piss with them, have a few laughs; it's deeper than that. You can rub one another up the wrong way as much as you like, but they're still your friends. You'd do anything for them, and expect the same back. A friend will save your life: a real friend will kill someone for you. And yet, paradoxically perhaps, you can stop seeing each other just like that. Without even meaning to, the two of you lose contact, fly apart without any perceptible reason to do so. Then, a month, a year, however long later, you meet again, and things are just the same as they were. I hadn't seen Keith in a year and a bit, not since his wedding day.

Things hadn't gone exactly to plan, and I suppose I was partly to blame, what with being Keith's best man and all. In retrospect, maybe we should have staged the stag night a few days earlier, and given him a chance to recover. But that would have meant being sensible, which would have missed the point entirely. Just the same as a sensible person might have thought that hiring a sixty-five-year-old, eighteen stone "Roly-Poly-A-Gram" to strip in front of Keith, wouldn't be in the best possible taste. But the force of tradition is something most sensible people don't reckon with. That's one way of putting it.

I woke up drunk on a compost heap in Keith's next-door neighbour's garden, with Keith next to me. Half an hour after the wedding was meant to kick off. We ended up there an hour later, both still pissed, holding onto a bottle of champagne each, and Keith weeping and saying over and over again "what have I done?" Obviously, nobody else was around. After a while it became clear that Keith had missed his wedding in no uncertain terms; I put him in a taxi home, and went to clear the vomit off my clothes. And then I didn't call him the next day, because he'd still be ill, and the day after that I was too tired from work, and the week after I . . . and a year and a sizeable bit later, there he was in the Railway, and so was I, fresh out of my cocoon, ready to live again. I sauntered over to where he was, wondering how to break the ice.

"Beef" I said, walking up to him. He turned round, surprised, and paused for a moment.

"Sherlock! Shit, how are you?" He grabbed my hand and shook it, and I felt my carpals grate against one another.

"Not so bad. What have you been up to?"

"Been moving, actually."

"Moving what?" I felt stupid asking. A pint and a half of beer and I was already slurring my words.

"Moved out, haven't I? Couldn't take it at home no longer, so I said to myself, Keith, time to get out of here."

"Whoa. So where have you moved to?"

"Me mum's old flat. She's letting me have the rent cheap, seeing as I'm between proper jobs at the moment."

"Not bad. What's your new place like, then?"

"Big. Two bedrooms and a dining room and a kitchen and all that - hang on. Where are you these days?"

I shrugged. "Still at home."

Keith seemed taken by an idea. "Well, how's about moving in with me, eh? I mean, there's room enough, and it would be a bit of company, wouldn't it? Besides, it can't be that wonderful staying with your parents now, can it? Why d'you think I moved out? Eh? What do you reckon?"

I was nonplussed. Hadn't seen him for a year, and the next thing I knew he wanted me to share a flat with him. "Uh. Well, that'd be nice, Keith. You sure?"

"Course I am. It'll be a laugh, won't it? Like the old times."

"Yeah, well, I'd have to see . . ."

"Sure you can take a look. Tell you what, come round tomorrow and have a gander."

"No, I mean - " I looked at Keith's grinning, drunken face and couldn't bear to burst his bubble. "Sure. I'd come and have a look tomorrow."

"Grand." Keith banged his empty bottle down on the bar and ordered two more. "Drink to it."

I was worried that I might have already accepted Keith's spare room. After all, there are your friends, and then there are people you can live with. Musing on this, I drank my pint too fast, half listening to Keith ramble on about nothing in particular, and the rest of me thinking about that girl.

"Another?" Keith gestured to my empty glass.

"You know my name" I said. Keith gave me a funny look - he didn't always keep up to date with slang. I nodded, something flickered behind his eyes, and he got two more Heinekens.