

STILL SEARCHING FOR THE BIG CITY BEATS

Excerpt from Chapter Fifteen

It's Saturday. There we were outside Murphy's. It was mid afternoon and Shaun the manager had all the doors of the pub open. He'd put white plastic chairs and tables outside with massive banana yellow umbrellas. Shaun walked about with sunglasses on and was wearing an outlandish Hawaiian shirt and the most ludicrous Day-Glo green and yellow Bermuda shorts. The Copacobana comes to Whitechapel – drink al fresco and die of carbon monoxide poisoning – yeah!

There we were. Gene was sipping a mineral water with ice and lemon, he had decided that alcohol fucked your brain and he needed to think straight. I was impressed with his resolve. Gene was wearing a white T-shirt, white shorts, and a sailor's cap. He was reading intently, reading theatrically (*is that possible?*), anyway I had to ask...

"What's the book Gene?"

"Interesting Spike. Very interesting yer-rh."

"Yer-rh?"

Gene pretends to read some more. I try to ignore him. Probably two minutes elapse, then very deliberately G puts the open book face down on the table. "Yes, it's called *Everything Is Negotiable*, and you know? This guy is right."

"Waddya mean, 'everything'?"

"Everything Spikey, everything. Sex, money, fame, power... everything."

"Everything?"

Gene nodded.

"Yeah? Well what if you've been kidnapped by a psycho who had a gun to your head?"

"You negotiate Spike, ne-gotiate. You admire the fact that he's in total control – tell him you think he's got pizzazz, guts. You play to his strengths. Then you point out to him that there are bigger, far more profitable people who he could abduct. Tell him that a man of his wherewithal doesn't want to waste his time messing with small fry."

"What if he won't listen?"

"You wait to catch him off guard, nick his gun and blow his brains out."

"That simple," I say sarcastically.

Gene pretends not to notice. He looks out, across The Strip, eyes squinting against the glare – then, without looking at me, he speaks steadily, deliberately. "Like the book says, everything is negotiable – everything..."

I decide to force the situation. "And The Beats – are we negotiable?" I ask.

"Flexibility Spike. Like a reed will bend to the force of the hurricane, while others, less inflexible get shattered into so many fragments." Gene still stares down The Strip, "The Beats are art, but just like any other art that you've ever heard of, it's not as simple as

just being good – you’ve got to be marketed – do negotiations. Andy Warhol understood this. It’s a matter of knowing when to stand firm, when to compromise.”

Gene’s know-it-all guru calm was making my blood boil.

Compromise! I feel I’ve compromised most of my life. Everything had been a fucking compromise from avoiding the school bullies to ending up as a supermarket shelf stacker following some stupid love dream that ended in nothing. My white collar nine to five was a compromise, my engagement to Clare was a compromise, and now Gene wanted The Beats to compromise. Fuck it. Fuck the fucking compromises.

“**Fuck!**” I shout out loud.

Gene does not even move or alter his expression. Nobody walking by turned or said anything.

“Fucking fuck fuck fuck fuck.”

I look around, nothing had changed, but I felt better. Sometimes we all need to shout “FUCK”. Maybe you should try it. Go on.

So there we were, me and G sat there – catching the last rays of summer and looking down The Strip in silence. Nothing is being said. Nothing has happened for a while. Nothing is planned. I look at Gene in his immaculate matelot outfit, his suntan. I’m sat here with the top button of my shorts undone. I’m twenty nine now, and I am old, I’m fat. The flesh of my belly looks like potato – a creased and puckered, hairy spud. What is going to happen? Where is my life going? I mean my plans didn’t even stretch as far as next week, never mind a strategy for life. I was thinking I’ve had enough compromise. I was always thinking that. But this time I opened my mouth.

“Well if everything is negotiable isn’t it time we started some negotiations?”

“Ooh Spike, I love it when you’re all manly.”

Gene turns to me. He fixes me firmly with those dazzling eyes, his gorgeous smile. “Television, Spike.”

“Yes?” I said.

“Yes, Spike.”

“Yes, what?” – Jesus who writes these scripts? It’s a game. Some game G’s devised. A game of catch – and dumb me – I always get caught.

“Spike, imagine, even if we go on Night Network at 4am, we’re gonna reach more people than a lifetime of schlepping round the poetry circuit. Video Spike. Video.”

What the fuck am I doing? I’m a fucking dupe again – a victim of Gene’s marauding mind. Gene’s got me playing in his mind games again, and I’m IT! I shouldn’t let him play with me like this. I shouldn’t.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I wail.

“Come on Spike, stop messing me around. We’re gonna make a video; we’re gonna be legends in other people’s living rooms. Spike, we’re gonna make ourselves TV celebrities. Yey-heh-hey.”

Acting. G’s always acting – always, always.

I decided it was time to challenge him. “Do you always talk in

sound bites? There aren't any cameras. What is this shit?"

Gene shrugs his shoulders, sticks out his bottom lip and responds with "You've got to be in it to win it."

In it – that's where I was – hook, line and sinker – he knew how to draw me in. Yeah, I wanna be a TV star. Yeah of course I do – just like you. Any kinda star, any would do. TV, Movies, Media – I wanna be famous. I wanna be seen in *Hello* magazine with a staple through my navel, waving you goodbye. Is my honesty overwhelming you? I hope so. Yes I'm selfish and self centred and aw, I'm a lot of things, just like everyone else. I have been a punk, a rapper, a poet. I've been a brother, a son, a lover, a friend, an enemy, employed, unemployed, abused, abusive, I've been cruel, kind, happy, sad, busy, idle etc., etc. – I am many things, at the same time and at different times. Would you believe me if I told you I was a victim of circumstance? Thought not.