

## **This is in Kensington**

Fender (real name Steven) would be recording all this himself if only he could. But Fender being quite young is not really up to it; maybe years from now, but not today. The other thing is that these events are unfolding at this precise moment, so no-one can know what will happen or what the future holds, not even young Fender. Even as I write (on his behalf) he is walking up the street thinking about his Uncle Cam. He supposes they get on alright but Uncle Cam being of a different generation and nearly as old as his old man there's got to be a gap. But Fender is more thinking about Uncle Cam and his Mum. How they have always hit it off.

His Uncle Cam runs the new bike shop on the Daly Street corner where the video shop used to be. On his way, Fender calls in to see what goes on and Uncle Cam gives him a new bike pump. There's nothing wrong with Fender's other pump but he takes it anyway and then heads up Argyle carrying this white pump tucked under his arm like a baton. When he takes it out to cross the street he can still feel the sensation of it tucked under there. Fender is thinking it's as though your body's feelings take a while to catch up with what's actually happening. Like when you hurt yourself; why does the pain last so long? Isn't the first stab of it lesson enough? Fender figures that it's like that with your feelings inside as well: when something in your life turns out to be a real pain, you can carry it around like a dead weight long after.

He is reflecting on that when he notices this small thing on the ground up against the curb that looks like a living organism. It has a flat head, a kind of wrinkled look and it is about the size of a finger. Then he sees it *is* a finger; a real finger. A man's or a woman's finger he's guessing, one of the big ones and a kind of fawn colour, bluish-black where it has come off. If you can imagine the feeling he has it is like he's seen this thing but really doesn't want to; like being drawn in as an eyewitness to something that's got nothing to do with you. It has *complication* written all over it.

He's had that all his life. For fifteen years complication's been following Fender around. He figures everyone has *something* in their lives, things they'd rather keep back there out of the spotlight, or they're not human. He thinks his problems at home are probably a bit weirder than some but it's definitely not stuff he would go public with. He figures he never had a say in a lot of it anyway – and everyone knows you can't change the past or maybe do much about the future either. Not the big things.

So here he is and there is this finger. He can't deny he's seen it. Does he pick it up? Then what? Can he put someone else's finger in his pocket? Does he take it down the cops and end up on the wrong side of the Law for disturbing some kind of evidence? Does he just go and report it? What if it's gone before he gets back? That's the way things are with Fender: a chance discovery, then a major problem. Like when he first learned the news about his Mum and Uncle Cam.

Then he gets the idea that maybe he could keep the thing. Get some of that transparent liquid from the chemist and keep it in a jar at home. From one angle it sort of beckons him and from another it seems to be pointing at something far off. People come and go but no-one he can trust with the knowledge of it. Then a man comes out of a house and comes over in a way that says he's seen him in advance. Fender doesn't like the look of him either but there's no choice now.

*Have a look at this,* says Fender, pointing with his bike pump.

*It's a bloody finger,* the man says. *Where'd it come from?*

*Don't ask me. I just saw it. I was coming up the street and just saw it.*

*Wait 'til I get something,* says the man.

He is gone a minute and returns with a plastic bag. He puts his hand in the bag and uses it like a glove to pick up the finger. He draws the bag inside-out as he takes it off his hand. He's enclosing the contents hygienically, thinks Fender, the way butchers do in the shop.

*That's the way we do it in the shop,* says the man. *I'm a butcher.*

He holds up the bag so they can study the brown form. The light streams into the plastic and Fender thinks the whole thing looks remarkable, like something in a museum. He wants to tell the man that he'll take it from here but the man is already heading for the house. And the next thing Fender knows he's following the man up the passage into the kitchen.

Fender sees a calendar on the wall and a smaller one next to the fridge. He notices they both have girls. The larger one has a girl in bathers with her arms wrapped around. Fender thinks she looks like she is trying to cover herself up but it's a scam; there's nothing hidden, quite the opposite. Around the room he sees glasses in a glass case, some kind of a trophy and a pile of dishes dirty in the sink. Next to that there's a meat cleaver on a wooden slab. If he's a butcher, thinks Fender, how come he doesn't butcher his meat at work? He observes the man over near the voluptuous picture clearing a spot to put the finger and he thinks next we'd best call the police.

*I think we'd best call the police,* he says.

*You're right,* says the man. *Sit over there. I'll be back in a moment.*

When he's gone, Fender sees *Donahue Smallgoods* written on the calendar. The smaller one has nothing written on it. He looks at the bag on the bench with the finger. He reaches over and touches it to check again that it really is one. The girl on the calendar looks as if she can really see him, while she pretends to cover up her top half. No-one's falling for that one. Then he has this flashback to a day in the back garden at the back of the old house with his mother and Uncle Cam. She is in her bathers and Fender's old man is away on the rig. Fender sees the calendar again. Mum's got a lot of this girl in her. That's why his Uncle Cam's been hanging around his place as long as he

can remember. He figures he can handle it though. He thinks his Uncle Cam is OK, treats him better than his old man really.

*Like the pictures do you son? It's the butcher. Over as soon as they can. You might as well go now. I'll take care of the rest.*

When Fender doesn't stand straight away he says, *This is a mad day, I've got a lot of stuff to get through, you better get going.*

*Can I wait until they get here?*

*No need for that. I'll fix it up. What's your name?*

The man gets a biro and writes Steven Holmes on his hand.

Fender thinks that the next thing, he'll ask if I'm related to Sherlock and then I can say, I don't know; it's an unsolved mystery.

*You're not related to Sherlock, are you?* says the man.

*I don't know,* says Fender. *It's an unsolved mystery.*

The man does this funny kind of a laugh which Fender is grateful for because it buys him a bit of extra time to figure out what next to do. He thinks he is probably building for a full-on argument when a lady comes backwards through the back door with one of those vertical shopping trolleys. Fender notices the lady is big, real big, as tall as her husband. He sees the large coloured spots on her dress stretched sideways into ovals. When she speaks he can hardly believe the tiny voice that comes out.

*They didn't have your blades,* she says. *And I wasn't going to get another brand, you know what you're like, can't do anything right I can't, never could. Mrs Pearson wants her shears back. This afternoon.*

She comes right into the kitchen making Fender feel he is definitely in someone else's house. But she takes no notice of him and the man isn't going to worry about it. He just picks up the bagged finger and puts it in the corner out of sight and Fender can see he isn't going to say anything about it. That worries him; he is thinking someone else should know about this, just to share some of the burden – you can't have too many witnesses.

The man turns to Fender with his hands on his hips. Meat hands, Fender thinks, capable of anything. He was thinking about years of solid carcasses being chopped and skewered and whole sheep being drawn and quartered. And all that blood. Last Christmas Fender got a job in the canteen at *Jackson's Meatworks*. He remembers those men coming in for their pie and sauce at Morning Tea, still in their work overalls and the blood smeared along the front of the queuing counter. It's just like tomato sauce to a meatworker. Then Fender thinks of his own old man on the oil rigs – he might not come home but the consolation is he doesn't have to do what butchers do, and anyway, with the old

man at sea they never have to face the problem of who's looking after who or whose son he is. He, his Mum, Uncle Cam and his Dad go their own way. We make our own plans, thinks Fender, and we stay out of harm's way like everyone else.

*Well thanks Steven, says the man. You can go now.* He makes for the door as if going first might attract Fender the way it did when they came in. Fender was thinking about leaving and he might have but just then the man's wife turns around and Fender sees the bandaged hand. He starts to think about how long the man was gone when he said he made the phone call. In his mind he can't see the cops coming at all. He thinks maybe he should wait for the police.

*I think maybe I should wait for the police,* he says, realising he is glad the lady is there and hoping the man doesn't push it further.

*Police? What police?* The lady steps back to make space for this new development. Fender hears a fork drop into the sink.

*What's happened this time, Barry?*

*Don't worry about it, Dawn. It's nothing really. Don't forget your heart,* he says, giving Fender a solid look.

*Go and lie down, Dawn. Somebody's car was pinched, that's all.* He is looking at Fender in a way that says he could lose everything if he speaks up now. But Fender's mind is made up. There's no going back once a fresh idea is in his head. He looks at the man's wife about the same moment she looks at him.

*What did you do to your hand?* he says.

Her eyes go back to Barry.

*What's he want to know that for, Barry? What's going on?*

*It's nothing, Dawn, I'm telling you. Go and have a lie down.*

*Have you lost a finger?* says Fender. He has to swallow. There is a lot of heat in his face and he suddenly notices the bike pump again. He is gripping it hard which has the same effect as biting the bullet.

*Oh hell!* says the man. *Don't be bloody ridiculous, son! Dawn, show him your hand. Not that one, the one with the bandage. I can't believe this. Don't ask Dawn, just do it, pretend he's a bloody doctor or something.*

*Are you one of those medical students from the flats?* she says. She looks relieved, so Fender says nothing. He thinks sometimes it's best to keep your mouth shut and keep life simple, like keeping his old man in the dark about Uncle Cam. The things he could tell, but it wouldn't help, it would just blow the whole thing into a storm.

The man's wife goes for the kitchen chair and when she drops it makes a faint squawk on the vinyl. With her good hand she slips out the pin and begins unrolling the bandage. She goes around and around while her eyes jump from Fender to her husband in case she's misread the whole thing. She is getting a good pile of gauze on the table and Fender's chest is really going. He can feel his heart's energy kicking away like his Mum said he did before he was born. She said he was like a wild one trying to get out. Fender thinks that at that time she was probably feeling bad about her and Uncle Cam and maybe he was just picking up the vibes and getting angry about her and his Dad and why he has to call her friend *Uncle Cam* in the first place.

But Fender doesn't feel like that these days. He figures they're into a new century and everyone's liberated now. And no-one gets too close, that's the main thing. That way you can be yourself, be an individual.

He strains to get a better look at the bandage coming off but at the same time he doesn't think he wants to see the damage. He notices the butcher isn't taking much of an interest, which could mean anything – he's just pacing around and making everyone nervous. Fender wishes there wasn't a meat cleaver over there on the bench. The man's wife still has a couple of layers binding her fingers and Fender can just make out a stain of iodine when the doorbell goes. Fender recognises the same kind of bell-rattle they used to have at the old place near the freeway. The man leans across the island bench to get a view down the passage.

*There you are son!* he says. *You see? I told you not to panic.*

Fender looks down the hall and sees blue uniforms wobbling in the thick glass panels. *Don't call me "son"*, he thinks to himself, *I'm not your son, I've got my own family.* Then he gets this unexpected warm feeling; something that says maybe things can turn out alright after all. He is looking down the passage, possibly into the future. The lady, with a handful of bandage, stands behind him. The man is already halfway to the door.

Robert Hollingworth (Published in *Going Down Swinging* 1994)