VINTAGE

SEÑOR NICE

HOWARD MARKS

Contents

About the Book

Howard Marks was released from Terre Haute Penitentiary, Indiana in April 1995 after serving seven years of a twenty-five year sentence for marijuana smuggling. It was time for a change of career. So he wrote two best-selling books, became a sports and travel writer, stood as a parliamentary candidate in Norwich North, Norwich South, Southampton Test and Neath, applied to become the UK's Drug Czar, and embarked on a long-running, sell-out series of one man shows.

After the death of his parents and a chaotic homecoming book talk which left the Royal Pavilion in Porthcawl stinking of marijuana, Marks began to reflect on his roots. Was Elvis really Welsh? Was there really a tribe of Welsh-speaking Native Americans? And was his great-great-granfather really the half-brother of Billy the Kid? With trademark wit and an inimitable sense of adventure, Marks travels from Jamaica to Panama, Brazil to Patagonia, asnwering these questions and finding out a whole lot more . . .

About the Author

During the mid-1980s Howard Marks had forty-three aliases, eighty-nine phone lines and owned twenty-five companies trading throughout the world. At the height of his career he was smuggling consignments of up to thirty tons from Pakistan and Thailand to America and Canada and had contact with organisations as diverse as MI6, the CIA, the IRA and the Mafia.

Following a worldwide operation by the Drug Enforcement Agency, he was busted and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison at Terre Haute Penitentiary, Indiana. He was released in 1995. *Señor Nice* tells the story of what happened next.

Also by Howard Marks

Mr Nice
The Howard Marks Book of Dope Stories
101 Uses of a Dead Roach (with Simon Bond)
Sympathy for the Devil

Dedicated to the memory of my mother, Edna Rhyfelgar Marks

HOWARD MARKS

Señor Nice

Straight Life from Wales to South America

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

When a person endeavours to recall his early life in its entirety, he finds it is not possible: he is like one who ascends a hill to survey the prospect before him on a day of heavy cloud and shadow, who sees at a distance some feature in the landscape while all else remains in obscurity. The scenes, people, events we are able by an effort to call up do not present themselves in order but in isolated spots or patches, vividly seen in the midst of a wide shrouded landscape. It is easy to fall into the delusion that the few things thus distinctly remembered and visualised are precisely those which were most important in our life and on that account were saved by memory. Unconscious artistry sneaks in to erase unseemly lines and blots, to retouch, colour, shade, and falsify the picture.

Far Away and Long Ago, W. H. Hudson

One

THE SHOW

Wherever I travelled, whatever scam or profession I was engaged in, I always returned to my birthplace Kenfig Hill: as an Oxford student on vacation, a source of pride to my parents and no doubt mystery and resentment to my friends; in the 1970s before skipping bail while awaiting an Old Bailey trial for smuggling tons of hashish in the equipment of rock bands such as Pink Floyd; in the 80s celebrating my acquittal, having been charged with importing fifteen tons of Colombian marijuana into the UK (I persuaded the court I was working for the Mexican secret service); in the 90s, having served a lengthy sentence at the maximum-security US Federal Penitentiary, Terre Haute, Indiana, to spend time with my parents, who had hung on to life just long enough to share my experience of freedom.

Winter 2001. Paddington, looking like an airport with its check-in facilities, escalators and shopping malls, was wet and windy – a foretaste of South Wales, to where its trains, on the hour every hour, were constantly bound. I bought a ticket to Bridgend, 200 miles away, gateway to the coal mining valleys and the nearest railway station to Kenfig Hill. Notices depressingly announced that all Great Western services were now strictly non-smoking. Outside the ticket office a conveyor belt of sushi and sashimi plates trundled around in front of delayed passengers. I sat down,

took half a spliff out of my top pocket, lit it, and stared at the raw fish and rice whizzing around.

'Sorry, sir. No smoking,' the sushi chef commanded abruptly.

How could anyone purporting to be Japanese disallow smoking? Japan has always had the highest cigarette consumption in the world and the lowest rate of lung cancer, a fact I found most comforting.

'Are you Japanese?' I asked the menacing, knife-wielding chef.

'Korean.'

'Maybe that explains it.'

Irritated, even slightly enraged, I ambled off to the platform, got on the waiting train, and sat down at an empty table as the train began to fill with people off to see Wales play England at rugby at Cardiff's Millennium Stadium.

'*Swt Mai*, Howard?' It was Gruff Rhys, lead singer and guitarist of the Super Furry Animals, on his way to Cardiff to record his next album. 'Going to see the folks or down for the match?'

'No. Dad's dead, and Mam is very ill. She's living in Yorkshire now with my sister. And these days I've completely lost faith in the Welsh rugby team. In the 1970s no one could beat us; now, we can't win a match.'

'It must have been great back then. Did you play when you were at school?'

'I was never any good, Gruff, but yes, I did.'

'What position?'

'Second row forward. In fact, two of the school's front row, John Lloyd and Geoff Young, went on to play for Wales and the British Lions when they beat the All Blacks.'

'So you've had your head stuck between a couple of very famous arses.'

'That's one way of putting it, Gruff, but I'm not here for sport; I'm doing a show tonight at the Pavilion, Porthcawl.'

‘Yeah? Great! Can me and a couple of the boys come?’
‘Of course. I’ll put you all down on the list.’
‘*Diolch*, Howard. I’ll get us a couple of beers now.’

My rehabilitation has taken a curious path which never ceases to branch out in unexpected directions, of which one is a career as a stand-up comic. This evolved from fulfilling vaguely contractual commitments to promote and publicise my autobiography, *Mr Nice*, by appearing on TV and radio shows, being interviewed by book reviewers and other journalists, and reading passages from the book in bookshops. Many authors arrogantly take the view that their creative output speaks for itself and excuse themselves from such duties. I couldn’t begin to take that risk and am a firm believer in blatant self-promotion, but I found it difficult to come to terms with bookshops as suitable venues for any event. First, the reading has to take place during normal working hours, when most of the staff want to get home and most of the potential punters can’t attend. Second, the booze is in short supply and of poor quality. Third, the reading takes place against a background of all the competition, which seems to me an absurd marketing strategy. Admittedly, some bookshops go out of their way to create a sensible ambience at an appropriate hour, but generally book readings are sterile, boring affairs. Getting a laugh from the audience always helps, so I included as many funny passages as I could find. The reading would be followed by a question-and-answer session, which was invariably more stimulating than the reading itself.

This was during the mid-1990s, when other writers such as Irvine Welsh, Nik Cohn, Roddy Doyle and Nick Cave were beginning to do readings in pubs and clubs. I attended a few and was encouraged to do the same, but I felt the authors invariably made two important errors: they would insist the bar till stayed inactive when reading so no

booze could be purchased, and they would read passages precisely as they were written. Very few if any authors write prose with the thought that one day they might have to read it standing on a stage in front of an audience hell bent on having a good time. I modified my extracts severely, bearing the listeners in mind, and let the cash tills ring and the booze flow all night. It worked.

Mr Nice did not draw a veil over my consumption of drugs and my desire to see them legalised, so much of each question-and-answer session was devoted to that topic. This suited me perfectly as probably for the first time in my life, I had a sincere social agenda. Organisations devoted to drug legalisation invited me to speak. Universities asked me to debate. At the end of each debate or talk I would be asked to sign copies of *Mr Nice*. It couldn't have turned out better if it had been planned: I could use the book readings to advance my social agenda and use my agenda to sell books.

I did both talks and readings without charging – it never occurred to me to even ask for a fee – but in August 1997 I read at the Edinburgh International Book Festival and was approached afterwards by comedy promoters Avalon, who offered to finance a series of one-man shows and pay me £500 a gig. I agreed. Within a few months I had sold out at Shepherd's Bush Empire more times than anyone except Abba. A year later, I did twenty-three consecutive shows at the Edinburgh International Festival. I enjoyed learning how to banter with audiences, battle with hecklers, cope with cock-ups and experiment with multimedia.

But tonight would be the real test. I had to perform in front of a home crowd at the Royal Pavilion, Porthcawl, four miles from Kenfig Hill, where I was born. I was last there thirty-five years ago as one of a number of drunken yobs participating in an Elvis impersonators' contest. I came close to last. Would they remember? I was now playing the part of a prison-hardened gangster in front of people who

terrified me as a schoolboy. How could they possibly take me seriously? Worse still, the whole performance was going to be filmed for a *Mr Nice* DVD.

Gruff stepped down from the train at Cardiff, lighting a cigarette as soon as his foot touched the platform. Twenty minutes later, I did the same at Bridgend and took a taxi to Kenfig Hill. The semi-detached house in Waunbant Road had been empty for just a few months, but already the home-made weathercock was dangling from the rotten chimney, and the front gate had almost come off its hinges. A carpet of decaying litter covered what used to be the front lawn. I knew there was a garage behind the brambles and ivy; I just couldn't see it. My key still turned the lock, but the damp door didn't want to open. I forced it and stumbled through a pile of mail to switch on the light then walked up the stairs and into the infinite familiarity of my parents' bedroom, where fifty-five years previously I had first breathed in harmony with the universe. Now both my parents had gone. Just the house lived on. It couldn't stay empty forever; it would have to be sold or rented. No rush. First, it would need to be emptied of boxes and several generations of memorabilia – but some other time. It was mid-afternoon, and cameraman Martin Baker, son of Welsh actor and director Stanley Baker of *Zulu* fame, was due any moment.

The doorbell rang.

'Who is it?'

'Martin.'

It wasn't Martin Baker but my oldest friend and first dope-smuggling employee, Marty Langford. I had been home for twenty minutes. Word gets around.

'Julie from the shop just told me you were home. Why didn't you call me? All this author and performer stuff has gone to your head, hasn't it? Put the kettle on, then. I'm dying for a brew and a blast. Got anything decent?'

‘I’ve got some excellent hash for a smoke, Marty, but there’s no milk in the house for tea.’

‘I knew I should have bought some milk at Julie’s. And hash is no good for me, Howard. I don’t smoke tobacco, and I can’t be messing with pipes and buckets and things at my age. Haven’t you got any skunk?’

‘A bit, just a third of a spliff, actually. We could smoke it and go down the pub.’

‘What! For a cup of tea?’

‘I thought they sold everything in pubs now from Thai food to cappuccino.’

‘Not round here, Howard; it’s still just beer and crisps. But we might as well go down. I fancy a walk. Haven’t been for months and months. I usually stay in these days – on the computer.’

The pub was a good twenty-minute walk. On our left we passed the furniture shop, once Kenfig Hill’s only cinema, and then the Institute, where we had been taught snooker by miners working nights and where I had first dared imitate Elvis in public. The skunk hit hard. Marty and I looked at each other and started giggling like the children we still were. On our right we could see the Prince of Wales and the old Victoria Inn, both smothered in scaffolding on account of their being converted into flats.

When I was in my mid-teens Kenfig Hill had a population of just over 5,000, one church of Wales, one Roman Catholic church, four Welsh Nonconformist chapels – Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist and Welsh Congregationalist – and nine pubs. Since then, housing estates and new streets have sprung up but the population is approximately the same; the accommodation is just less crowded. Television keeps the elderly at home while cars and motorbikes have enabled the young to get away from the prying eyes of family and neighbours. Accordingly, there are now two fewer pubs and one less place of worship. The chapel that bit the dust was the Welsh

Congregationalist one, named Elim, the first chapel in Kenfig Hill. Members of my family attended Elim for several generations, preaching, deaconing, singing hymns and playing in the tiny orchestra, but lack of interest closed its doors a few years ago. At the tender age of ten, I was taken to Elim and introduced to the serious side of God. Until then he had been little more than a powerful Father Christmas figure from whom one occasionally asked for serendipitous gifts and various forms of assistance. Learning that God is everywhere at once and saw everything had conjured up the idea of a wonderfully active and clear-sighted person.

Unlike my father, my mother was deeply religious, and she insisted I went to Sunday school in the afternoon and to either the morning or evening service. My mother also insisted my father went with her to the evening service. I hated both Sunday school and services. I opted to attend in the morning alone rather than go in the evening under the watchful eyes of my parents, partly to get the chore behind me, but mainly because I could get away with not going at all. I would leave the house at 10 a.m. and go to Marty's place for an hour to chain-smoke cigarettes and listen to 78s on his impressive radiogram. Eventually I was grassed up by one of Marty's neighbours and forced to attend the evening service.

Thousands of unhappy Sunday walks flooded through my memory as Marty and I turned the corner at the Victoria Inn. This used to afford the first sight of Elim, a dull grey roof pointing hopelessly at heaven.

'See what's happened to Elim, Howard?'

'Jesus!'

Elim Welsh Congregationalist Chapel had been replaced by red-brick houses surrounded by manicured gardens and little fences.

'That must mess with your memory circuits, Howard.'

‘I used to hate the place. I feel worse about the Vic being turned into a house.’

‘C’mon, there must be some good memories. That’s where you first got married, right, in 1967? On a Thursday, wasn’t it?’

That was, indeed, a good memory. Loads of people turned up to witness my marriage to Latvian beauty Ilze Kadegis. It was followed by a hard-core drinking competition in Kenfig Hill’s pubs between the Welsh and visiting Latvians. Both sides definitely lost.

Not only was Elim Chapel where I had lost my bachelorhood, it was also where I had lost my virginity some years earlier. This had happened on a Saturday.

On Friday evenings during the early 1960, the vestry of Elim Welsh Congregationalist Chapel served as the only youth club in the community. This weekly transformation was achieved by pushing the pews and chairs to the side, placing a Dansette record player on a bench, and setting it to continuous full volume. I and other village teenagers brought our 78s, and taught each other to jive before snogging and smoking in the dark rooms and cellars adjoining the vestry. As I was one of the very few kids who was both a member of the youth club and the chapel, I was entrusted with the keys, and it was my duty to go there every Saturday morning to tidy up.

On one particular Friday, a new girl, Susan Malone, whom I had asked for a date a few days before, came to the club. I went up to her and asked her to dance just as the Shirelles were singing those very same words. We jived furiously to Danny and the Juniors’ ‘At the Hop’, then moved into one of the unlit rooms for a frantic snogging session that left us breathless but wanting more, lots more. I asked if I could walk her home, and she agreed with far more enthusiasm than I had expected. Susan lived in a caravan and was the daughter of an Irish construction engineer who had just started a three-month contract at

Port Talbot. I secured another date for the next afternoon, but I had no idea where to take her. It was bound to be raining, and we were too young for the pubs. Overnight I had a brainwave. I would leave the club-tidying chore until the afternoon and take Susan with me.

We sneaked into the damp vestry. Cigarette butts and sweet wrappings littered the wet floor, but the chapel was much warmer, ready for Sunday's services. I switched on the organ and, out of respect, played some classical chords. Then I played 'The Twist'. We lay down on the front pew. And then I shagged her. We had a few more dates over the next month, after which she left the locality as suddenly as she had arrived.

'Shall we go to the Oak, Howard? The Masons has just been pulled down.'

Marty and I walked into the public bar of the Royal Oak. We were completely ignored; everyone was transfixed by the rugby match on television. Wales lost; nevertheless, the pub would still stay open continuously for two days and play host to hundreds of tales of successful and heroic Welshmen, past and present. As the drink flowed, the tales got taller.

'Well, now they finally have the proof,' said Eddie Evans, the village sage. 'Elvis was Welsh.'

'You mean Tom Jones, don't you, Eddie,' said Ivor Prior, who loved to catch Eddie out. 'And you are right, Eddie. Tom was born in Treforest. His real name is Tommy Woodward.'

'I'm not talking about him. I'm talking about the real original Elvis, Elvis Presley.'

'How do you mean, Eddie?' I asked.

'Well, it's obvious, isn't it? His mother's name was Gladys, and they've now found out that his surname a few generations back was Preseli, same as the mountains in Pembroke where the stones in Stonehenge come from.'

‘But Elvis is hardly a Welsh name, Eddie,’ I protested, a little discomfited to hear that my god’s grandfather might have been a neighbour of my grandfather.

‘Of course it is, Howard. I thought you would have known that, having been to Oxford. Elvis was the name of the bishop who baptised our patron saint, St David. The parish of Elvis still exists. It’s very small, but it’s definitely there. No doubt at all. It’s not far from St David’s itself, which, as you should know, is the smallest city in the world.’

‘How did they move those bloody huge stones from Pembroke to Salisbury then, Eddie? There’s a question for you,’ said Ivor Prior.

‘There’s two theories. One is they were taken by boat; the other is that the great wizard Merlin moved them. Take your choice, Ivor.’

‘How the hell can a boat get to Salisbury? It’s not even on the coast.’

‘Ever heard of rivers, Ivor?’

‘There’s no river from Pembroke to Salisbury, Eddie,’ said Ivor a little uncertainly.

‘Obviously not, but there is a river from Pembroke to the bloody sea, and there is another river from the bloody sea to Salisbury.’

The pub liked this explanation.

‘Merlin was Welsh,’ added Eddie.

‘Doesn’t sound like much of a Welsh name,’ teased Ivor. ‘You’re not getting mixed up with Mervyn, are you?

‘Merlin is what the bloody French call him,’ explained Eddie. ‘His real name was Myrddin, and he was born in Carmarthen, which is shortened from Caer Myrddin. He died near there as well, after ruling the roost for a bit at Stonehenge. Awful boy he was too.’

‘In what way, Eddie?’ I asked.

‘Well, just think a bit about it. Merlin’s father was the Devil. His mother was a virgin. And he ends up telling

Arthur, the ruler of the first Christian kingdom, how to run the country. Don't forget Camelot was very close to here – in Caerleon, just by Newport, in fact.'

'That's really interesting, Eddie. I wish I could stay and listen to more, but I'd better go now. I'm doing a show tonight at Porthcawl.'

'As if we didn't bloody know that already,' said Eddie. 'The whole village has been talking about bugger-all else. Why anyone should pay good money to listen to you chopsing on a stage about smoking weeds is beyond me. What a waste of an Oxford science education. What a bloody waste!'

'Would you prefer I was a nuclear physicist, Eddie?' I said walking to the door.

'You've got a point. No, I'm only joking. Good luck tonight, boy *bach*. Break a leg, as your understudy might say. That's where the saying came from you know: a Welsh actor was once performing . . .'

Marty and I left. Eddie's voice receded as my mobile picked up several voice messages: Martin Baker was waiting in his car in Waunbant Road; Christine from Lloyds asked if she could have twelve tickets to give the bank staff; Polly, the area's best skunk grower for the last ten years, wondered if she should bring some buds along tonight; Leroy, my Jamaican friend from Terre Haute prison and current security man, had called from Birmingham to say he had got lost driving from London but knew the way now; and Kelly Jones of the Stereophonics asked if I could ring him back.

'Hi, Kelly. Howard here.'

'All right, butt? Tell you why I called: I heard you were doing a show tonight.'

'That's right. You want to come along?'

'Aye, but any chance of another ticket as well, like? I can have a lift down then.'

Kelly is one of the country's highest-paid rock stars and could probably have a fleet of limousines on twenty-four-hour call without noticing the cost, but you can't take the valleys out of that boy. It was hard enough getting him out of the valleys.

'No worries, Kelly. You can have more if you want.'

'No, two is fine, butt. Thanks, How. Good luck for the show.'

'Hello, Polly. Just got your message. Everything all right?'

'Oh hello, Howard. Yes, everything is fine, thanks. Do you want me to bring something along tonight?'

'Of course.'

'Right, I will. You'll never ever guess what it is: it's my first crop of your Mr Nice Seedbank's Super Silver Haze. I haven't tried it myself yet, but it looks as if it's going to be the best I've ever grown or known.'

Back outside the house, I introduced Marty to Martin.

'Hello, Marty. I've heard a lot about you. Any chance of filming an interview with you later?'

'Oh, I don't know about that,' answered Marty. 'Last time I answered any questions about his nibs here, I was put in jail for a few years. Sorry. No offence, but I'd better say no right away and be on the safe side. Well, I'll be off now to pick up my mother from bingo. See you later, How. Best of luck and all that.'

I led Martin Baker into the house.

'I find that a lot of people I was hoping to interview take the same attitude, Howard. I hope Leroy won't be the same. Do you think he'll agree to be interviewed?'

'If he ever gets here, yes. Just keep off his past.'

'Shit! There's nothing else I want to know about him other than his past. I'd better get to the venue; it's five o'clock. I'm late as it is. Ian's there already, I suppose?'

'Yes, of course. He's been there since two.'

'I should have guessed. See you later. Good luck.'

Ian Johnstone was my tour manager. His duties, invariably executed with complete professionalism, included setting up the lighting, sound equipment and props, ensuring the dressing room had ample booze, fags and cigarette papers, determining from the venue's management their attitude to tobacco and dope being smoked on stage, in the dressing room and in the auditorium, and lastly every tour manager's nightmare – managing the guest list and any after-show activities. The show had been hosted by venues ranging from subterranean ecstasy clubs to pristine theatres staffed by old-aged pensioners wearing evening dress. Rules varied. The Royal Pavilion, Porthcawl was a council-subsidised music and pantomime venue. The management might be difficult. It was time I called Ian.

'They don't seem too bad here, Howard. All the props are on stage, the dressing room is equipped as usual; smoking is allowed in the auditorium; but they want you to sign a declaration that you won't use any illegal substances. Apparently, there's going to be a demonstration against your appearing here. The management want to cover their backsides.'

This was nothing new. I had done well over 200 shows. At each of them I had smoked either a bong of marijuana or a joint of hashish on stage. Although venue personnel and the odd season ticket holder must have called the authorities dozens of times, local police had not once done anything about it. But it was always possible they might. Accordingly, licence holders and the like often wanted to ensure they weren't compromised. This was easily achieved by my signing a piece of paper stating that I would behave myself. It never stopped me lighting up, obviously, but it made matters easier for them. And we actively encouraged demonstrations by out-of-touch parents; it was great publicity.

‘No worries, Ian. I’ll sign the paper as usual. There probably won’t be more than a handful of demonstrators. Just give them free tickets; it’ll liven up the show a bit.’

‘Well, I think we are more than sold out, Howard. I trust you don’t have too much of a guest list.’

‘I’ll bring it down with me. There might be a few, I’m afraid.’

‘Fuck! They might have to stand at the back. I’ll send a cab to pick you up?’

Outside the venue, the long queue waiting for the doors to open jeered at the small group of protesters carrying placards decrying the dangers and evils of drugs. A smaller line clutching copies of *Mr Nice* was outside the stage door. Ian was by an unmarked door, flashing his torch at the cab. He had done his research, as always. The door opened. Then an almost invisible figure jumped out of the shadows.

‘Hello, Taff. How are you? I didn’t expect to see you here.’

Taff was rarely seen working anywhere outside a festival or holidaying anywhere outside a tepee village.

‘Not so bad, How. Remember last Glastonbury you said I could come to one of your shows?’

‘Yes, of course I do.’

‘Well is it all right if me and six of my friends come to the show tonight?’

‘Sure, Taff. Just give the names to Ian here.’

‘But he’s the cunt who just told me to fuck off.’

‘OK, give them to me then. Ian probably didn’t realise you were a friend of mine.’

‘No, I suppose not. But I did tell him, like. Anyway, thanks a lot, How. Good luck for the show.’

I had a look at the stage. Cameras, lights and props were all in place. The microphone worked and was at the right height. The way to and from the dressing room was clearly marked by strips of shiny white tape stuck to the

stage floor. I gave the OK for the venue doors to open, put my guest list into Ian's hands, and walked off the stage as Ian began playing the first track from the walk-in CD, 'I Just Want to Smoke It' by the Super Furry Animals.

Leroy greeted me in the dressing room.

'Hey, mon, di road signs a bullshit. Mi tek more dan six hours fi gu.'

Leroy Bowen is a mustee, fifteen sixteenths black and one sixteenth white. I first met him while serving my prison sentence at the United States Federal Penitentiary, Terre Haute, Indiana. Born in Jamaica, he survived a cut-throat childhood in Kingston's Spanish Town and rose to become a sergeant major in the army, a special security policeman and finally the governor of Jamaica's personal bodyguard. While holidaying in the United States Leroy inadvertently overstayed his visa and was sent to Oakdale Aliens' Detention Center for deportation. He witnessed several incidents of physical and mental abuse of his countrymen by the institution's staff and began to complain. The complaints turned into an organised prisoners' protest; the protest turned into a riot. The prison was burned down, and Leroy sentenced to several years' imprisonment at Terre Haute. We spent most of those years together and were deported the same day from Oakdale in Louisiana, where his problems had begun. It was the most important day in both our lives. I remember so well how we looked at each other and at the prison space we were leaving behind. Then we looked again at each other.

These were no mere glances; they were attempts to understand the intense emotions suddenly swamping our minds, the confusing but comforting knowledge of a common destiny, a shared future. Had I known Leroy in every previous lifetime but only, at that moment of intense farewell, just started looking through his eyes rather than at them? Would we one day work or scam together? We had both been shafted enough by those we had trusted in our

respective lives, those for whom we would have gladly risked our lives, done our time inside, not grassed and never cheated. Could we ever trust anyone again, ever correctly predict anyone's actions or ever even give a fuck? Leroy and I hadn't dared talk about scamming – too many hacks, too many grasses, too many listening walls and far too many nosy troublemakers. But through those 10,001 games of Scrabble, chess and backgammon, we had learnt each other's deviousness, ruthlessness and courage. We had always respectfully looked away when the other had tears to be stifled; we had never dared share a bad mood and had always tried to find somewhere else to shit. 'Su dis a Wales. Yeah, mon. At las. Mi finally dyah.'

Several decades ago Leroy's family had set out from Jamaica for Britain, and had come to Tiger Bay, Cardiff for fortune and fun. That was the last Leroy had heard of them. Until we became friends Leroy had not even realised his last name was Welsh – Bowen is an abbreviation of ap Owen – or that Tiger Bay, the first-ever British Jamaican community, was in the heart of Wales's capital city.

'So dis a yo home town, mon. Yo mus feel irie.'

'I feel more nervous performing here than anywhere else in the world, Leroy.'

Ian barged in looking hassled. 'Howard, they're saying sixty-five is far too big a guest list. There just isn't room, even if they all stand. And they are absolutely adamant about no more than twelve in the dressing room at any one time.'

'Don't worry, Ian. Lots of them won't turn up. You know what it's like. And Leroy can control the numbers in and out of the dressing room. But can you ask them if they can put aside a special room for an after-show party? That will take the heat off a bit.'

'Not off me it won't. But I'll do what I can. Some local papers want to interview you. I told them to wait until after the show and that I couldn't promise anything. By the way,

there’s someone called Polly outside. She says you know her.’

‘Oh yes. Get her in as soon as possible. She has something I need. Take Leroy with you.’

Soon afterwards, Polly walked in with a few of her friends, closely followed by Taff and his motley gang. Polly handed me a packet of skunk. I asked Taff to skin up while I got my scripts together. Leroy came in with some letters left for me at the stage door. Most were invitations from people to go to their houses after the show for a smoke and a chat; some were requests for autographs and signed photographs; all wished me good luck for the show. But there was one long letter from an ex-workmate of my father’s about how Dad would turn in his grave if he knew the extent of my depravity in encouraging drug use among the youth of today. The twat obviously didn’t know my father very well; nevertheless, the letter made me even more nervous.

‘Twenty minutes before show,’ yelled Ian from the other side of the dressing-room door.

I offered drinks all round and downed a pint of bitter.

‘Here you are, How. You have this one, and I’ll roll one for us lot. It looks excellent stuff, by the way,’ said Taff, handing me an unlit spliff.

Ian yelled again as I sparked it up: ‘Ten minutes. Who the fuck is Psychic Dave?’

‘He’s one of my oldest friends, Ian; you have to let him in. Leroy’s on his way to get him.’

Psychic Dave was Dave Leatham. Back in the late 1960s he and Marty Langford were my first dope-smuggling employees. Unlike Marty, Dave escaped imprisonment and he became a fortune-telling fugitive on the streets of New Orleans. Now he was trying out his mystic skills in Tenerife in the winter and Cardiff in the summer. He had asked if he could come to my dressing room with his tarot cards and tell people’s fortunes and I had agreed.

Psychic Dave came in, accompanied by Leroy and Martin Baker. ‘Well at least Psychic Dave has agreed to do an interview, as long as I let him read my palms,’ said Martin, looking at my smoking spliff. ‘That smells fantastic. Can I have some?’

‘Sure. Be careful, though, it’s really strong.’

‘Five minutes,’ shouted Ian. ‘Everyone out of the dressing room, please.’

I always needed five minutes of peace before the show to collect my thoughts and calm the butterflies in my stomach. I achieved this in various ways: shouting at myself in the mirror, snorting a line of cocaine or briefly meditating.

My guests left, each wishing me good luck. I sat down and smoked the rest of Polly’s Super Silver Haze spliff. Christ, it was strong. I started giggling. I thought of my dead father and dying mother and cried a bit. I paced up and down and gulped some whisky.

‘Okay, mon. Dem a wait pon yo.’

I followed Leroy to the side of the stage.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome on stage Mr Howard Marks.’

Adrenalin pumped through my brain and body. Shouts, hoots and catcalls greeted me as I took my place behind the microphone. The noise subsided.

‘Are there any plain-clothes cops here?’ I asked the audience. ‘Because if so, now’s your fucking chance. Just fucking try it, motherfuckers.’

Loud cackles of laughter cut through clouds of marijuana smoke. I picked up my script and began reading ‘The Dope Dealer and the Terrorist’, my stage version of the passages in *Mr Nice* about my dope importing activities into Ireland with self-professed IRA gunrunner Jim McCann. September 11, 2001 had just happened, so the piece was appropriately topical and outrageous. My Belfast accent left a lot to be desired, but the show was working.

‘I’ve cracked it, H’ard. Send me all the fucking dope you want. I got the man I needed. He fucking examines everything coming into Shannon Airport and, if he values his fucking Guinness, he’ll let through what I tell him to. His name’s Eamonn. He’s a true Republican.’

‘Does he know we’re going to bring in dope?’

‘Of course he fucking doesn’t, you Welsh arsehole. He thinks he’s bringing in guns for the IRA cause. He’s dead against dope.’

Relieved to be speaking to a responsive audience, I relaxed and looked around the stage. Behind his camera, which was pointing at the ceiling, Martin Baker had gone white. Leroy was at the side of the stage looking at him with concern and worry wrinkling his magnificent face. Suddenly, Martin lost his legs and began falling into a giant spaghetti of electrical cables. Leroy dived, caught him, saved his life, and carried him off. Martin had done a whitey on Polly’s skunk. Fuck! I hoped no one else had. It would be bad publicity. And what would happen to the DVD? Never mind, the show had to go on.

‘Jim, the consignment’s left and it’s addressed to Juma Khan, Shannon, Ireland.’

‘You stupid Welsh cunt, what did you put my fucking name on it for?’

I suddenly realised the similarity in pronunciation between the names Jim McCann and Juma Khan.

‘Jim, Khan is like Mister in the Middle East. And it’s Juma, not Jim. Juma means something like Friday in their language.’

‘Jim McCann might fucking mean Man Friday in Kabul, but in Ireland Jim McCann means it’s fucking me, for fuck’s sake.’

I announced the end of the first half and went back to the dressing room. The sight that greeted me was appalling.

Martin Baker was trying to convince two St John's Ambulance men that he had suffered a migraine attack while Leroy kept repeating, 'Im woulda dead, mon. Im woulda dead, mon.' Polly was lying semi-conscious on a sofa and whispering over and over again, 'Never happened to me before, and I've been smoking dope for over forty years, and I grew this myself.' Psychic Dave was reassuring three other comatose bodies with carefully worded predictions of their imminent recovery based on the tarot cards, while Marty and Taff at his side were crying with laughter.

'Ten minutes to show time,' cried Ian.

The ambulance men shuffled out scratching their heads.

'Taff, can you skin up another joint?' I asked. 'Better use the hash this time. It's for me to smoke on the stage during the second half.'

Ian popped his head around the door.

'Five minutes. Clear the dressing room.'

This time I just snorted a huge line of cocaine.

Leroy came to get me, still repeating, 'Im woulda dead, mon.'

'Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome back on stage, Mr Howard Marks.'

I decided not to read an extract about life in a United States penitentiary as originally planned. I would read the Egyptian delegate's speech to the League Of Nations Second Opium Conference (1926) on the need to make hashish illegal. That always went down well and would be more in line with my legalisation agenda, which judging by the dressing room needed some support.

> 'Hashish is a deadly poison against which no effective antidote has ever been discovered. Users suffer from

two serious medical conditions: one, acute hashishism and two, chronic hashishism . . .'

I pulled out the spliff from my top pocket, lit it and smoked it until nothing but ash remained. The crowd went wild. Leroy and the Pavilion's own security looked around anxiously. I put a red fez on my head.

'The chronic hashish user eventually becomes hysterical, neurasthenic and completely insane. Hashish is beyond any doubt the principal cause of insanity occurring in Egypt.'

To rapturous applause, I sat down for the question-and-answer session, which always started with the same questions:

'*What's the strongest dope you have ever smoked?*'

'Nepalese hash from a place called Mustang.'

'*Do you have any regrets?*'

'No.'

'*Who was your best shag?*'

'Your mother.'

'*What is your favourite method of hiding cannabis?*'

'In a container.'

'*What are your favourite munchies?*'

'Sugar Puffs.'

'*Which is the easiest skunk to grow: White Widow, Purple Haze* or *Jack Herrer?*'

'I don't know; I'm not a gardener. I just deal with the finished product.'

Then some peculiarly local questions:

'*What do you think of today's performance by the Welsh rugby team?*'

‘Complete shite. If they wanted to score, they should have given me a call.’

‘*If Wales was independent, would there be a better chance for us to legalise marijuana?*’

‘Absolutely. Tom Jones has already sung our new anthem, “Green, Green Grass of Home”.’

Ian’s voice boomed from the side of the stage: ‘One more question.’

‘*Howard, how can we beat the piss test?*’

I was hoping this would be asked. Now American-style piss tests were becoming the bane of every pot smoker’s lifestyle. Convicts on parole, kids on probation, members of the armed forces and even ordinary employees of certain corporations were being asked with increasing regularity to demonstrate that their urine contained no traces of drugs. The British government had considered plans for police to be given the power to randomly stop any car and insist the driver step outside and piss into a bottle. Pot heads throughout the world had been experimenting with all sorts of foodstuffs, chemicals and minerals in the hope of neutralising evidence of dope in their urine. None seemed to work but recently, while on parole, Gerry Wills, my former Californian marijuana smuggling partner, had successfully invented a contraption to beat the test. Gerry called it the Whizzinator and sold them for $500 each. For old times’ sake he had given me one for nothing. The Whizzinator is an extremely lifelike false rubber penis (in a range of colours and sizes) which contains a small plastic bag of drug-free urine. Straps hold it in position. The instructions suggest you find some people who don’t take drugs, and take the piss out of them. When asked to do a piss test, all the smoker has to do to produce a stream of clean urine is to pull it out and squeeze it.

I took out the Whizzinator and explained the principles to the guffawing audience.