

## A Winter Behaving Oddly

'Old men will dream dreams, young men will see visions. People who run around the moors at night will be lucky to see anything at all'

Joel, Chapter 2, Verse 28 (*Almost*)

### Scene One

**21.30, September 20th**

#### The Hollins- It begins!

It's time I was on my way home, maybe then I can work out what has just happened.

It all started when I was standing at the bar trying to keep my head down. I noticed Batman working the room like an old pro, identifying quarry like a crafty hyena in amongst elderly gnus. He had already signed up Rohyp, Stalwart, and Bear. Now he was after me with promises of secret clubs and shiny badges. In-between man sized gulps of cloudy Bitter, he was also bragging about his success with the ladies of the club. Apparently, unlike in the masons girls are very much allowed, encouraged even. Crispy and the Newbie had already been conscripted.

I know I'm weak, they used to say I was easily led at school, this means that I'm easy game. Before I could break away from the herd and make a run for it he targeted me and made his move. It only took a few seconds and against better judgement I signed up. Oaths have now been taken, there's no going back

So tonight the Tod Bats have been born, or maybe the Tod Batties, although for obvious reasons *never* the Batty Boys (although some of our less 'street' members may need this explaining to them).

Before I leave the pub I ask Batman for the low-down. What gear is recommended? Is there a website? A secret handshake? A best selling book about a code indicating that the new messiah will come from our ranks?

Apparently not.

It turns out that it's disappointingly straightforward. All I need is my usual fell stuff, plus a decent headtorch. Reflective bibs should still be worn, as rescue helicopters are equipped with searchlights.

Fair enough.

### Scene Two

**20.00, October 24th**

#### Dicks Lane -Do you remember your first time?

The moon has illuminated the clouds above Langfield Common and I almost don't need a headtorch as we leave the still expanse of Erringden Moor and go onto the derelict lane with its tumbledown walls.

Looking back over Erringden Moor, it has a weird, lunar feel about it, almost a one-dimensional quality. It also has a very wet quality. At this time of year it's made up of 96% water. Us carbon-based bipeds have a similar H2O content, and by extension a similar molecular structure. On several occasions I have been in mortal danger of morphing into the bogs we have just waded through, but now we're safely on Dick's Lane and decide to stop for a bit of a social. Ever wondered how Dicks Lane got its name? If you'd been here tonight you would never ask the question again. How silly we must look? Standing about with sodden feet and squelchy pants, making small talk about headtorch batteries whilst Batman tries to work out where to go next. Stalwart has brought his old cavers lamp which is bright enough to confuse air traffic. He is experimenting by signalling to a passing airliner, worryingly its landing lights flicker and it seems to drop its altitude. We all panic a bit, 'Easy Jet... flying from Manchester to Amsterdam, Prague, Benidorm, and Langfield Common'. Almost.

Meanwhile, Riley Coyote is doing his best Ray Mears impression, filling in my obvious knowledge gaps by pointing out what he claims is the North Star, '...find the formation that looks like a cappuccino machine, follow it to the constellation that looks like a profile of Jimmy Saville, and it's the bright one at the end of his cigar (*something like this*). Weren't you ever a scout?'

I tell him my days in the scouts consisted of playing football in the Central Methodist's car park and trying to buy cider from the off licence on Halifax Road. I confess that it remains a bitter pill that neither of these activities entitled me to a badge.

'Right' says Batman, after a lengthy discussion with Rochdalian, 'This way. Follow me!' he turns and falls over Rohyp, who has knelt down to tie his shoelace.

It's been that kind of night.

### Scene Three

**20.20, November 1st**

#### Bridestones-Do we really need the masks?

As if nature didn't hit us hard enough with the ugly stick, Batman decreed we wear Halloween masks tonight. Although I expect in Hebden Bridge it's not PC to call it Halloween, we probably have to call it Samhain, or Allentide, or something, and probably recognise every pagan's right to paint their genitalia whatever colour they like and dance about naked in a free-form fashion. Grants may even be available from the Arts Festival Committee.

Thankfully we were all fully clothed as we made our way up from Tod and across Whirlaw Common to the Bridestones. It's sub arctic, the first really cold night of the year and there are bits of frost hanging off the turks heads. There's no moon tonight and the sky's blacker than Granny's back molars, but I would have thought that this place with all its weird rock shapes and associations with new age jiggery pokery was a likely spot to stumble across the odd hapless Wicca. But tonight we've seen no sign of even the most half-hearted cavorting and summoning of pixies. Perhaps the coven saw us coming and scarpered.

We've stopped briefly for a communal photo, and a simple head count shows that masks are evidentially a boy thing. The girls, Chrispy and Judy (not Richard) just have to gurn as best they can and try to look demonic. The masked boys look as scary as buttered toast on a Sunday morning, but the girls make me want to contact a priest.

### Scene Four

**19.55, 8<sup>th</sup> November**

#### Stoodley Pike -Fools with fireworks.

We have a unique and touching relationship with the local mountain biking lads who, I think, call themselves the 'Night time Off-road Bikers' (NOBs). Our perception of each other is best summed up as,

'They think we're odd, we think they're mental'

Not unreasonable in either respect. Think about it, we only run about in the dark which I will concede is probably strange behaviour but hardly certifiable. They career down serious gradients at 30mph with no idea if they'll get to the bottom in one piece. In the dark. Mad as drunken chipmunks, the lot of 'em.

Anyway it was close enough to Bonfire Night to arrange a meet with these NOBs up at Stoodley and mess about with light explosives and now I'm cowering in the Pike's solid stone doorway watching the halogen bike lights coming up slowly from London Road. All I can think about are those adverts that used to be on telly to educate kids on the dangers of messing about with fireworks. This is due to the fact that someone has put Batman and Bear in charge of the whiz-bangs. These two have such a spectacularly poor instinct for self-preservation I'm surprised their genes made it this far through the Darwinian process. At this moment they are experimenting with the concept of horizontal rockets into a high wind. OK for me as I have the comforting bunker of Stoodley Pike to shelter in, not so good for the more unwary of our number who were caught out on the moor as the strafing began. It's all gone a bit 'Baghdad' out there with people diving for cover as Standard's finest goes flying about like Exocets over the heather. Stalwart has just given us all a laugh by displaying a lightening burst of flat speed to evade a 'Flying Fountain' that was inches away from his jacksy and actually pursues him over the moor for a hilarious 100 metres. Luckily its' little propulsion system was burnt out before his (I should clarify that this incident was hilarious for us, not him).

Every time one of these things flares, the moors are illuminated and a hundred startled sheep are suddenly visible and look up from their nighttime meanderings with dim, puzzled frowns. They haven't seen anything like it in these parts since the Luftwaffe.

Thankfully, the NOBs won't arrive within the next five minutes and we'll be gone before they can put the big industrial fireworks that they've promised into the hands of Batman and Bear.

Richard (not Judy) has just pointed out that we're going to be an hour late for our beer appointment. Time to leave.

#### **Scene Four**

**20.05, December 20th**

##### **Somewhere above Fairfield -Santa's little helpers.**

Cards on the table, here's my problem with tonight. If you're going to play at dressing up, it needs properly managing. I feel tonight we've let ourselves down. We're all Father Christmas. If the farm kids of upper Callis and Horsehold have looked out of their bedroom windows as we passed tonight they are going to grow up believing Father Christmas to be six different people of varies sexes, ages, and stages of physical deterioration and deformity.

I mentioned this potential pitfall to Batman last week, I would have preferred one Santa, assorted elves and maybe an odd reindeer (Rohyp has had a cold for weeks now and his nose could indeed guide a sleigh).

As we drop down black dark lanes the noise of our feet seem to echo around the stone walls and the noise multiplies in the cold air. Underneath this pitter-patter I can vaguely hear a brass band playing in amongst the fairy lights down in the valley. It's all very festive. I half expect to run into a gaggle of Edwardian carol singers and a flustered Mr Scrooge rushing to market to buy a fat goose.

#### **Scene Five**

**20.20, January 10th**

##### **Blackstone Edge Trig Point-Something evil this way comes!**

Trig Points have loomed large in my life for the last few months. Tonight is no exception. Daniel 'Robinson Crusoe' Defoe called Blackstone Edge 'The Andes of England'. I prefer to think of it as 'The Blackpool Tower of the South Pennines', principally because it's much more interesting because of what you can see from it, than what it is. Tonight, on a shivery, soggy, night, when damp hangs thick in the air like the smell of an ill judged fart in a two man tent, we're looking out over the whole of the North West of England, watching the twinkling lights as people work late in offices in Manchester or arrive home in Oldham and put the kettle on

We're gathered around the Trig point, having a communal breather because we've been disturbed by a sound, a vision, and a smell. In that order.

We have just climbed up the Roman Road, with all its connotations of doomed clanking chariots and abandoned legions at the furthest outpost of a crumbling empire. Beneath us, the uneven, rutted, stones made it necessary to concentrate on placement of our feet and not much else. Visibility was down to just a few yards and hidden moorland stretched out endlessly from the furthest extent of our lights.

Most of us stopped at once the first time we heard it.

The noise from hell, or at least one of the better suburbs of hell where a demon who's done quite well for himself might buy a modest semi. Anyway, bowels were slackened and breaths were held. Then we heard it again. A scream like a banshee who's got a bit over excited at a hen night and will have a sore throat in the morning. The noise was close, somewhere just off the path. In the darkness. Somebody muttered something about foxes. Someone else mentioned owls. We all agreed that it was nothing to be scared of, us being rugged outdoor types. Although I did noticed we ran a lot faster after that. That was, until the vision...came into view and stopped us in our tracks...again...

Shuffling over the brow of the hill, swinging a lamp and moaning.

The noise was behind, the vision was in front. Rocks and hard places. Frying pans and fires.

As it neared us we could see its features. Some looked away, so what a relief it was to realise that it was nothing to panic about, only Mr Lateagain. He'd set off on his own due to an achy leg and was reversing the route we were doing. When we warned him about the not-really-scary noise, he muttered something about peacocks and carried on his way.

We struck out on the rocky path to the Trig, soon noticing the sweet, sickly smell of a dead sheep, somewhere OUT THERE. Perhaps the scream monster had been busy.

Trust me that you always feel safe at a Trig point. There's something solid and dependable about them now we're here. But we've still got to find our way down through the dark tundra without any further monster related incidents. Not a happy prospect.

Perhaps we've pushed our luck enough for one year.

Perhaps I'll give the roads a go next week...

Colin Duffield