

# WARNING EXPLICIT LANGUAGE

‘A&R (artist and repertoire): *The branch of the music industry concerned with finding and nurturing new talent.*’

I’m smoking and looking out of my office window while I listen to some guy, some manager, crapping away on the speakerphone. Five floors below me a group of black guys – probably some band – are lounging in the car park. The glass is bronzed, honey-coloured, and they can’t see me. It’s icy winter out there and their breath rises with the smoke from the spliff they’re passing around, shrouding them in a pewter cloud. Beyond them, along the Thames at Hammersmith Bridge, is a gigantic poster of the Labour guy, Tony Blair. A slash has been ripped across his face where his eyes should have been and a pair of red eyes – hellish, demonic eyes – burn out instead.

Back down in the car park and one of the kids is actually leaning against my car now, his hands in his pockets and his back arched against the silver Saab as though it were the counter of his local KFC. I keep an eye on him as my mind wanders back to the voice coming out of the speakerphone. It’s saying stuff like this:

‘And EMI, Virgin and Chrysalis. Warner Chappell are doing the publishing and they’ve, well, I shouldn’t be saying this yet, but . . .’

Don’t tell me, they’ve got a major TV advert confirmed?

‘They’ve got a major TV advert as good as confirmed.’

‘Wow,’ I say, sounding like nothing.

‘But you know we like you,’ the cretin says.

‘Yeah, great, send it over.’

‘It’s a rough mix. Your ears only?’

‘Sure.’

‘Great. Bye, Steven.’

‘Bye,’ I think for a second. ‘Mate.’

I hang up as Rebecca comes in. It’s almost eleven, the crack of dawn around here. ‘Good morning,’ she says, placing a stack of mail on the coffee table, next to a pile of demo tapes of new bands – Cuff, Fling, Santa Cruz, Magic Drive, Montrose Avenue – which Darren, one of the scouts, has left for me to go through.

‘Rebecca,’ I say, not turning from the window.

‘Mmmm?’

‘Could you please interrupt whatever you’re doing, run downstairs and tell security to get that fucking great *darkie* off of my car?’

She shrieks, pretending to be horrified, and joins me at the window.

‘God, who on earth are that lot?’ she says, chewing on a strand of her fine, long blonde hair.

‘Fuck knows. Probably some imminent signing of Schneider’s. The Jew is using the black man as muscle. Against us.’

‘You’re *terrible!*’ She gives me a little elbow as she heads

for the door, pleased because I'm in a good mood. 'There's your post. Don't forget, you've got the business affairs meeting at twelve.' Rebecca is tall with full gobbler's lips. Great legs. Decent rack. But the face is beginning to go – little crow's feet creep around the eyes, grooves deepening at the corners of the mouth. She is a couple of years older than me – dangerously close to thirty – and terrifyingly single. She needs to be sorting this out and she knows it. Today she's wearing a tartan miniskirt a foot wide, trainers and a tight black T-shirt that has the word 'WHORE' picked out in little diamond studs. Like all the girls who work here – apart from Nicky, our Head of International, who is so ugly it actually makes me angry to have to be in the same room as her – Rebecca dresses just the right side of prostitution.

'Rebecca,' I say as she reaches for the door handle.

'Mmmm?' she says, turning round.

'The hotel?' I am off to Cannes next week for MIDEM and so far, depending on whom I choose to believe, either Rebecca or our worthless travel agents have failed to get me into a suitable hotel.

'I'm on it, Steven. Relax.' She turns to leave.

I believe her because Rebecca, like most girls, loves to organise things for you. She's never happier than when she's got the travel agent on one line, BA on another and copies of *The World's Great Hotels* and the Zagat and Harden's guides flattened out on the desk in front of her. It strikes me as very odd that she enjoys planning these trips for me even though she will take no part in them, will in no way benefit from them. I cannot comprehend planning something from which I will not gain anything. Something

about the girl mind, I suppose – taking pleasure from knowing that the flight will arrive in time to make the restaurant reservation, that the hotel will be lavish and unexpected.

‘And, Rebecca?’ She turns back again, trying not to sigh. ‘You look nice today.’ (Carrot and stick.)

‘Thank you,’ she replies, smiling coyly. Well, as coyly as a girl who probably sucked a minimum of thirty cocks last year is capable of smiling. ‘So do you.’

She’s not wrong. I’ve just spent a month on holiday – Thailand–Vietnam–Australia – and I’m tanned to the fucking eyeballs. I’m wearing a black cashmere V-neck sweater, black jeans and black suede loafers, all of which are box-fresh.

She leaves and I flip through my post, mostly waxy Jiffy bags containing demo tapes, feeling the usual reflexive anger at the attempts at spelling my name – there’s ‘Stalefox’, ‘Stellfax’ and one mongoloid has even gone for ‘Stellarfix’. It’s Stelfox. Steven Stelfox – before settling down with the new issue of *Music Week*. Some guy who works there has died. Heart attack at thirty-two. Nasty. Very fucking nasty.

As I turn the pages I feel the floor shake, concentric rings ripple in the black coffee, and I look up in time to see Waters come lumbering past the glass wall that separates my office from the rest of the floor. He’s really something, Waters. Six two, six three, about eighteen stone. He’s clutching a piece of paper and trying to look purposeful in a ludicrous attempt to mask a mammoth hangover. He’s red-faced and pouch-eyed, with blips of sweat dotting his forehead. (Doing anything, lifting a cassette, dialling a

telephone number, causes Waters to break into a filthy rapist-sweat.) He wearily flashes me a devil sign, extending the pinkie and forefinger of his giant left paw. He is trailing his rat-dog, a little Jack Russell, behind him. He thinks bringing the fucking thing into the office makes him eccentric and interesting. It makes him look like a cunt. Like the brontosaurus, his colossal frame is powered by a brain the size of a grape, and this grape-brain itself, none too dynamic to begin with, has been further buffoonerised by years of chronic chang abuse. I nod a needlessly business-like hello, just to rub his lateness in, and pick up the TV remote.

I watch VH1 for a bit – Blur, Radiohead, Oasis and the Brand New Heavies – and am about to turn it off when there’s a little preview of the upcoming Brit Awards. We get Dodgy, the Chemical Brothers, the Prodigy, Longpigs, Mansun. I light another cigarette and watch as Ellie Crush is interviewed. ‘Yeah,’ she says, ‘I know there’s people out there that fink a woman can’t do all the stuff I’m doing. That she’s a puppet? Yeah? But, y’know, I’m here, writing the lyrics and checking on the arrangements and doing all of that stuff. Yeah? My songs come from in *here*.’ She flattens a hand sincerely across her heart.

Crush, nominated for Best Newcomer, is a twenty-one-year-old east Londoner who was signed by Parker-Hall over at EMI. Her critically lauded debut LP was released last spring and charted at no. 63. And, mercifully, it looked like that was that. Game Over. See you later, Sooty. Then, gradually, horribly, it started to sell. Word of mouth. Suddenly they got a single playlisted at Radio 1 and the album went gold. I do not want to contemplate what might

happen to the fucking thing, what might happen to Parker-Hall, if Crush wins Best Newcomer. I make a note on my 'to do' list to put a matey call in to the fucker.

'Cause that's what it's all about,' Crush says to the interviewer, '*integrity*. Yeah?' I turn the sound down as she goes on to discuss gun control or something.

It's interesting, I remember being at her signing party a year ago when someone used the phrase 'artistic integrity' in her presence. Her brow knotted and she asked her manager – not rhetorically – 'Wot's "*integrity*"?' I mean, here is a girl who can barely read. A girl who, just twelve scant months ago, would have sucked the curdled sweat from a tramp's dimpled nutbag to obtain a record deal, and yet here she is talking about 'integrity' and Christ knows what other nonsense. When they sell no records, it's a nightmare. When they sell lots of records – it's a whole other nightmare. Because then these fools, these one-GCSE merchants, these casualties with half a fucking thought to rub together, they suddenly think that the fact that a few hundred thousand of the Great British Public (yeah, those *animals*) enjoy their ditties and respond on some primitive level to their doggerel, means that they have something of value to say about anything from the FTSE to the Middle East peace process. So, the next time you see some Mercury Music Prize/Brit Award/Grammy-nominated diva up there giving it the whole 'I am a strong independent woman with interesting ideas' bit, remember this – it is only because of the tiniest quirk of fate, a deranged quiver of serendipity, the most unlikely of miracles, that her big speeches are not climaxing with the words: 'I'm sorry, sir, this checkout is closing,' or 'Anal is an extra twenty quid,

mate.'

There is talk of the Ellie Crush record starting to take off in America. Were this to happen it is conceivable it could sell millions of copies rather than the few hundred thousand it takes to constitute a reasonably big record over here. I know Parker-Hall has two points on the record because I got his lawyer drunk at a Christmas party. If the record properly took off in America Parker-Hall might well become a millionaire. He's twenty-five. Two years younger than me. Admitting the possibility of his success into my head makes me reel back. I feel faint. Sick. I take my mind off the subject by smoking another cigarette and doing some expenses, noticing with some surprise that I managed to spend nearly two thousand pounds on 'entertainment' last December.

Actually, it's not strictly true that my mind is *on* the subject, or any subject, for very long. Here's the deal with the inside of my head: picture a giant bank of screens, dozens of them, reaching high into the air, like you see at NASA, at Mission Control. At any given time many of them are simply showing hardcore pornography: banks and banks of close-ups – some so close they are pixellated to the point of image-degradation – showing troublingly large cocks punching in and out of cunts, lurid dildos violating angry rectums, cocks gliding stiff and imperious between lubed breasts. Other screens show financial stuff: graphs of London house prices, City traders screaming in their striped blazers, pie charts of record-industry market shares, bricks of cash being stacked up, balance sheets, red figures, black figures, recouped acts, unrecouped acts. A few screens show bands and singers: acts I've signed in the past,

new acts we're thinking about signing, successful acts I wanted to sign and didn't (the most haunting images). A small row of distant monitors, tucked away high up in a dusty corner, randomly shows footage of colleagues and rivals being baroquely tortured.

There are guys in my head too. The technicians in their short-sleeved shirts, with the pens in the breast pocket and the little headsets on and their styrofoam cups of coffee. They sit slack-jawed in front of the monitors. They aren't happy about any of this. They know it's not good. But they can't seem to do anything about it. They run around and shout at each other. They gather anxiously around blinking computers. They shake their heads over crazily spooling printouts and mutter, *'This can't be right, goddammit,'* but the monitors just go on showing what they show.

That's what it feels like in there – like there's a Mission going on, but there's no Control.

Before I go down for the meeting I pick up my paperback copy of *Unleash Your Monster*, by the American self-help guru Dr David S. Hauptman, and open it at random: *'In every age men are born who, in their hearts, in the black of their blood, are warriors. But, for most of us, there are no longer wars to fight. What must they do, these men?'*

As I leave my office I can hear the sound of celebration – laughter and corks – coming down the hallway from the accounts department. 'What are those clowns so fucking happy about?' I ask Rebecca.

'Oh, Rick's just found out he's going to be a dad,' she says cheerfully, and I realise that she's genuinely happy on his behalf.

This astonishes me on two counts: 1) actual happiness at

someone else's good fortune in which you have no personal stake, and 2) why is this guy celebrating the fact that he has terminated his life? You might as well run out of the doctor's surgery screeching with joy as you wave your positive cancer test around. The notion of children makes me ill. The thought of having one . . . when you see those guys in the supermarket, wheeling the trolley around while their brats whine and wheedle and some blundering sow questions every little thing they take off the shelves. I mean, just the fucking idea of it, the very word: *family*. Whenever I see it, on travel brochures, on house schedules (*family holiday, family room*), I feel sick.

Also I'm thinking, Rick? Who the fuck is Rick from accounts?

So here's what I do. I listen to music – singers, bands, songwriters – and decide which ones stand a good chance of commercial success. I then arrange for them to be recorded in a sympathetic manner and we, the record company, sell them to you, the general public. Sound easy? Get fucked – you wouldn't last ten minutes.

Now, I don't have a perfect track record. No one does. But I'm pretty fucking good. On average I only get it wrong maybe eight or nine times out of ten. That is to say, if you played me ten pieces of unsigned music I might instantly dismiss three or four acts that might go on to enjoy enormous success. I have thrown the demo tapes of bands that are now megastars, bands whose records you own, across the room with tears of laughter running down my face. I have berated and insulted subordinates for having the temerity to play me tracks that have subsequently sold in