

The town centre was even more miserable than I remembered. It had already been run-down in the 2000s and now it seemed to have run down even further. Many of the red-brick shops and pubs stood empty, their windows boarded up or broken, and on the streets I saw only a few homeless people and drunks. The warm and sterile atmosphere of Decathlon was a welcome contrast and I spent a good while browsing the aisles and trying on boots.

Then, as I walked towards the checkout with my selection, I heard a deep voice behind me saying, 'Rafi? Is that Rafi Orchin?' I knew immediately from the voice's rural twang that this was an acquaintance from the village, though it wasn't until I turned around that I recognized Darren Hallam, cradling two large tubs of protein powder in his arms.

'Ayup, mate,' he said, moving closer to me than I'd have liked. 'I've not seen you in a long time. What are you doing around here?'

'I just moved back,' I said.

'To Hayfield?' Darren said.

'God, no,' I said. 'To Manchester.'

'Nice one, mate,' he said. 'You gonna come out for a visit?'

'No,' I said. 'I don't intend to.'

'Funny fucker, you,' he said. 'You've not changed.'

'I have,' I said, though he seemed not to hear me.

'Do you still see much of anyone? Joey Pound or anyone like that?'

'Not for a long time,' I said, and then I tried to let a silence kill the conversation. I ought to have held out, and almost did, but finally I weakened and said, 'What about you? What's new in the village?'

There began a litany of marriages, deaths, beatings and imprisonments. One mutual acquaintance had had a heart attack at the age of thirty-two due to his use of steroids, Darren said. Others, former schoolmates of ours at New Mills Secondary, had been convicted of violent crimes or had died of drug overdoses or road traffic accidents.

*Tinhead*  
*Five Dials, Spring 22*  
*Gabriel Flynn*