

# The Community

Joe Hakim

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Contact the author via twitter: @JoeHakim\_

Editor: Tracey Scott-Townsend

Cover Design by Tracey Scott-Townsend

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## The Community



# 1

## **Steve**

Something is pulsating, a non-stop throb somewhere over my head.

My throat's dry, so I get up. Hear a gurgling noise in the distance. Stumbling through the kitchen, I realise that it's the sound of the boiler, the giant mechanical heart at the centre of my flat. Hot water gushes out of the tap and straight down the drain. An arterial spurt.

Off with the hot tap, on with the cold. I fill the kettle and switch it on, distracted by the continuing grumble of the boiler. I make a cuppa and take it through to the living room. After a few loud clunks and clicks, the boiler finally gives up. It's quiet after that, and the silence feels ominous, like the flat has gone into cardiac arrest and I'm just a bystander, unable to step in and revive it.

I'm pissed off. Has the tap been running all night? Have I got a huge gas bill heading my way? Judging by the sound of the boiler, there's a good chance that it's on its way out. *Great.*

I peer out through a gap in the curtains before opening the window to let a bit of air in, expel the previous night's odours

of vinegar, smoke and feet. It's quiet outside. The houses opposite, with their terraced Lego-brick uniformity, are docile and safe. No slamming doors, no shouts or whistles. I think about opening the curtains but instead head back over to the sofa to have another smoke.

I sit down and my phone starts to vibrate. I pick it up and see that it's work. I ought not to answer it, but I do.

'Now then,' I say.

'Steve?' It's Matt; he sounds out of breath.

'This is I, me. . . Steve,' I say, following up with a phlegm-filled cough.

'How's it going?'

'Not bad.' At this early stage of the conversation, no one wants to give anything away.

Matt crumbles first. 'I've got a favour to ask. . .'

'Really?'

'Yes, really,' he says.

'Let me guess. . . someone hasn't turned up.'

'That's about the size of it.'

'And you want me to come in?'

'Yeah,' he says.

'Can I ring you back in five? Just woke up, man.'

'Look, he needs to know sooner rather than later.'

'If I have to give you an answer now, it will be "no". Give me chance to drink some coffee and think about it; it may turn into a "yes".'

There's a pause. Then Matt says, 'Five minutes?'

'Make it ten. Five is just a figure of speech.'

'Speak soon,' he says, and the line goes dead.

Guzzle some coffee, finish a cig. I don't *want* to go in, and don't feel any sense of obligation or company loyalty or any of that shit, but I need the money. And it grants me a favour in return, a day in lieu, should I need it. It will also get me up off the sofa and out the house for the day. The prospect of having yet another dressing-gown-and-weed day is enticing, but the truth is I spend more than enough time

clad in my dressing gown, smoking dope and playing video games. Too much time, you could say. In fact, my whole life is a battle against the strong desire to do nothing except sit in my dressing gown, smoke dope and play video games all day.

Soon enough, the phone goes off again.

'So, what are you going to do?'

'I'm going to come in,' I reply.

'Thanks,' Matt says. For him, expressing gratitude in any form is painful.

'Just need to get my shit together. Should be there in the next half-an-hour or so.'

'See you when you get here.'

Before I leave the house, I realise that it's Wednesday. That means it will be mainly inventory and stock duties. That's why they need more staff. Ordinarily, they'd battle on short-staffed, but there are lists to be printed off and ticked, shit to be moved around on shelves. Stock rotation. All hands on deck, and they need all the hands they can get.

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The shop is part of a corrugated industrial complex, which resembles an aeroplane hangar that has been split into units. As I reach the entrance, my phone rings. It's an unknown number, probably someone trying to sell me something, so I ignore it. Opening the door, I wheel my bike in. Matt is at the other side of the shop, behind the games counter, peeling orange-coloured cut-price stickers from a roll and placing them onto DVD and game cases stacked up in front of him. Behind the main counter, Georgie files discs away into drawers.

I nod at Matt and he nods back.

'Hey Georgie,' I say.

She smiles at me. 'Hey.'

The sole remaining female member of staff, Georgie's presence exerts a calming influence on the rest of us. Without her around, we'd quickly descend to the level of fart

jokes and conversations based around high scores and unlocked achievements.

'Where's the boss man, man?' I ask.

'He's in the back,' she says.

This week, her hair is the colour of pea and ham soup.

'ALRIGHT MATT!' I shout across the shop.

He doesn't speak, instead raises his hand. Matt's face is a deep red, and perched atop his bright green polo-shirt, it makes him look like a set of traffic lights.

There's no one in the staffroom, so I open the stockroom door and poke my head around. Paul sits on the floor, surrounded by piles of stuff. There's a clipboard and a stack of paper in front of him. He's chewing the end of his pen, zoned out.

'Hey Paul.'

It takes him a moment to acknowledge my existence. 'What are you doing here?'

'Matt asked me to come in. Said you needed an extra pair of hands.'

'That's right,' he says.

'That's why I'm here.'

'Good.'

Pause. 'So what's happening, Paul?'

'I'm taking stock.'

'Need any help?'

He shakes his head, slowly. 'No, I got this.'

'I'll leave you to it then.'

I shut the door behind me as I leave and head out the double doors that lead onto the shop floor. Straight to the fridge. Take out a tin of Monster and go over to the counter. 'Put this through for me please, Georgie,' I say, dropping some coins on the counter. 'Think I'll need a couple of these before the day is out.'

'Rough night I take it?'

'No more than usual.'

'How's Paul?'



'I think there's a real chance that today might be the day,' I say, cracking open the tin.

'Really?'

I take a big gulp. 'Yup. He's got that look in his eye. I just hope he doesn't decide he needs to take us down with him. Thank god for our country's strict gun control laws.'

Georgie giggles at this. Since the announcement of the store's upcoming closure earlier this year, Paul's mental health has become the focus of much speculation. Going into administration has crushed him. And now, almost twelve months after finding out, the end is nigh. I watched a YouTube video about *Groundhog Day*, the Bill Murray film, last week. It was a theory about how the film is structured around the Kubler-Ross model of grief. It made me think about what's happening with the store. We're stuck in the denial phase when we should be dropping toasters in the bath.

The problem is the increased stock. When the other stores shut, we received their stuff to shift. It feels as though we're trapped in a perpetual state of price-slashing – the closing-down sale to end all closing-down sales. *Everything Must Go*. Ironically, the huge amount of surplus we have to stick in the bargain bins means we're busier than ever, which prolongs the agony, as we will limp on until there's nothing left to sell.

No wonder Paul is losing the plot.

I grab a basket and go over to the drop-box, the little caddy at the front door where people can post their returns if they can't be bothered to come in and leave them on the counter. Undoing the padlock, I open the door and pile all the cases into the basket, and then take them over to the counter. I stack them up at one side, open each one and remove the discs in their plastic sleeves, then sling the empty cases into a trolley. I then take the scanner, run it over the barcodes on the discs. Each one generates a *ping* as it registers on the computer screen. Sometimes, there's a double-ping, which indicates an overdue item.

Put all the discs into a box, ready to be filed away, and take the trolley around the store, placing the empty cases back on the shelves. Done it so many times I don't need to think about it. The only problem is I've got more time to ponder other things. Like how I've been here in this job for nearly ten years. Ten fucking years. Flashback to my late twenties, out of work and out of luck, handing over the completed application form to Paul, then getting the phone-call. *It's just temporary*, I told myself. *Something else will turn up.*

Ten fucking years. If I'd robbed a bank, I'd have been out by now.

The layout of the shop floor is so familiar I could do this in my sleep. In fact, I *have* done this in my sleep. Horrible, repetitive dreams, just going through the motions of daily life – the mundanity: repetition, repetition, repetition. Indistinguishable from the waking world and far, far worse than any nightmare. Because waking up and going to work is just a continuation of the dream.

Has boredom ever killed anyone?

All manner of thoughts pass through my head: jumbled up, random nonsense. The background noise of my brain is intensified by the confused buzz of weed and caffeine.

Today's thought for the day is another regular ponder, a real favourite: *how the fuck does some of this shit get made?* It hits me every time I put some obscure independent British film or generic American action sequel back on the shelf. Scanning the backs of the cases as I take them out of the trolley, I don't recognise a single name in the credits. The four-star ratings and quotes on the front cover are attributed to publications and websites that I've never heard of. Where does the money come from to finance these films?

Finishing my rounds, I go and say hello to Matt at the game counter. He's about half-way through the trade pile. His face seems baggy, suffering the physical after-effects of trying to maintain a false smile for hours on end. 'Thanks for coming in,' he says. 'I owe you one.'

'It's no problem, no problem at all.' I try not to sound too smug.

'What's Paul up to in the back?'

'Trying to do the stock count, I think.'

'He's been in there all fucking morning,' Matt spits the words out. 'I mean, why does he even bother turning up?'

'Habit, I guess.'

Sauntering around the counter, I pick up a stack of DVD cases. Take a roll of stickers, and start peeling the old stickers off the cases, so I can place new ones on. Each new Sale brings its own "point of sale". We put up posters, reassemble the cardboard bins and stands in different configurations, and plaster stickers all over everything. The following week, a New Sale is brought in to replace the old one, so all the posters and bins and stands and stickers have to be removed and replaced. This has gone on week after week, for nearly a year.

'He needs to pull himself together. I mean, he's still getting a decent salary. He's gonna get a big fucking redundancy. And me: fucking muggins, is stood here running the fucking show.'

I can understand Matt's bitterness, but I don't feel any sympathy. About three years ago, I walked out on the job after splitting up with my ex. Went mental. When I came crawling back, they only gave me a ten-hour-a-week contract, on the understanding that my walk-out would be seen as a break in employment. So officially, I've only worked here for the last three years for ten hours a week, despite the fact that I've never worked only ten hours. When the doors finally do shut, I'll be lucky to leave here with a month's wages in redundancy.

I take a break. Grab another tin of Monster from the fridge and head out to the car-park.

'Just going for a smoke,' I shout to Matt as I open the door. No response. I'd have never have got away with this before, but no one gives a fuck anymore.

I crack open the tin and take a gulp, take the baccy from my pocket and roll one. I spot Graham, the security guard at the Pound Shop next door, give him a wave. He waves back, puts his fingers to his head and pretends to blow his brains out. I give him a thumbs up, but I don't know why. Chances are I'll be slinging an application into the Pound Shop once this place shuts for good. The thought of working there fills me with dread, but I can't see any other options.

Anlaby Road is busy. About to flick my cig into the gutter, I spot someone shuffling along the pavement on the other side of the road. He looks like an extra in a zombie film. Even at this distance, his movements suggest that he is completely off his tits, smacked up or something. Suddenly, he stumbles onto the road, and begins walking across it. Horns blare as cars swerve to avoid him. One of them misses him by inches. I tense up, sensing that something awful is about to happen. He continues walking, narrowly avoids being hit by a bus. It's like a real-life version of *Frogger*.

But his luck doesn't hold out.

With mounting horror at the inevitability of what's about to unfold, I can only watch as a car coming in off the Boothferry Road roundabout ploughs straight into him. He's flipped into the air, limbs flailing. He lands on the bonnet, a dull metallic thud of flesh and bones hitting metal, followed by the sharp crack of glass as he smashes into the windscreen. There is a scream of rubber against asphalt as the car swerves into the path of oncoming traffic. As the driver of a lorry slams his brakes on, tyres screech. Another car comes off the roundabout, but the driver clocks what's going on and brakes in time.

A chorus of skidding and screeching.

Everything goes quiet. It's like everything has been suspended. A shiver rattles my body, and the hair on the back of my neck stands up. It reminds of that time on the school field when I saw a blue light in the sky. I feel the same sense of dread, of anticipation, like the world has stopped. I

find myself walking towards the accident – on auto-pilot. I feel numb, like it's not real, it hasn't really happened – it must be some elaborate piece of street-theatre. I half-expect someone to yell: "CUT".

I reach the road. Car doors swing open. Close up, someone opens his door and stumbles out of his car, shaking and confused, he vomits before collapsing. The guy who wandered into the road lies on the tarmac now, a broken, bloody mess, his arms and legs arranged into new and unnatural angles. Drawing closer, I realise that his eyes are open.

The lorry driver; a stocky, bald, middle-aged bloke with a tattoo of a spider on the side of his head, jumps down from the cab.

'What the fuck just happened?' His voice is shrill with panic.

A taxi-driver emerges from his car and runs over. 'I've called an ambulance,' he says, holding his phone up.

People filter out of shops and houses. Some of them go to the aid of the driver, while most – including me – gather around the guy on the pavement. Blood pours from his mouth; he's still conscious. Fucking hell. His mouth begins to move. I hear a gurgling noise coming from his throat – it sounds like my boiler. He tries to speak. He looks at me, tries to make some sort of gesture with his hand but it flops loosely on his wrist.

Crouching down beside him, looking at him more closely, I recognise him. Somewhere beneath the blood and mucus, there's a familiar face.

'It's going to be all right, mate,' I tell him, knowing full well it won't be. 'Stop trying to move, they'll be here soon.'

I want to hold his hand, but it feels like a bunch of broken twigs, so I place it on his chest.

He tries to speak again, makes a guh-guh-guh sound.

'What's he trying to say?' a woman asks.

I can hear the sirens. 'Don't try to speak,' I say.

Somehow, he lifts his broken hand. He tugs at my trousers, so I get onto my knees and tilt my head, place my ear near his mouth.

'They're going to fill the void within us all,' he says.

Taking his other hand, I notice something in his palm when he opens his fingers. They appear to be tablets. Little white ones. I move my hand over his and scoop them up. Poor fucker doesn't need to get caught with a load of pills on him, after going through something like this.

And then it hits me.

It's Pete fucking Ashworth. Pesky Pete. *Shit.*

I stand up, shouting. 'Where's the ambulance, for fuck's sake?'

The crowd surges forward. People have their phones out, ready to take photos and record videos so they can post them on social media. The police arrive and start moving people back, so I take advantage of the confusion, step away from the crowd and stash the pills in my pocket.