

I

I, Ira Retru Grade, was born with a question in my mouth – ‘What the fuck am I doin’ out here?’ Then I saw Lotte and screamed, ‘Let me back in!’ Then I saw myself reflected in a mirror. Too late! The spittin’ image. You have to understand that my old mother, bless her heart, was not exactly a rose. In fact, were you to cross Serge Gainsbourg with Karoline Wilhelmine Blamauer and toss in a dash of Lionel Stander you’d come up with a good approximation of the unique blend of vision and sound that she passed on to me – with her Cupid’s bow lips that lead me to flatter myself as a Belmondo now and again. A corrective to ‘The Bells, the Bells!’ I also had a father, I understand, but somehow he remained shrouded in anonymity, to Lotte in the first place, and ever after to me, an accident that happened. But she glimpsed enough of him to give me a *pensiero*. ‘Your father was a prick,’ she said, ‘and that’s how you should visualise him.’ I suppose he left me that, at least. I seldom have nightmares any more but, seldomly, I have just woken up on the right side of one. I can’t remember where I was in it. I can’t even remember where it took place. But I do remember the face, Bollocs, the Hungarian fire-eater. He’s always good for a nightmare. But this time the pleasure was mine. There I was, the ace of the tile-hard shamuses, axeing the shit out of him and loving it, putting the blade in with relish, then, just when I was switching on the cement mixer, the doorbell rang.

At five o’clock in the morning! At five o’clock on a winter’s morning, a miserable sleety winter’s morning in the mid-European city of Fex, the capital of Fexacia. No time to be tomorrowred out of bed and hauled before Mr Tuz by Maxie Macushla and Philly Con Carney, his brace of tumultuosos. I’m accorded an audience with the bald bowelero in his wood-panelled Biedermeier water-closet, which is a step up from the cludgie he was raised on. It makes me one of the few people on this planet to know the sheer turn of turd he can churn out. He’s reaching the end of his excretions and is scudding out boomers left, right and centre. The more he gyrates on the seat the faster they emanate from his sudorous obesity. I can take his effervescence but not the nauseous stench. It calls to mind the spectacular *culo a culo* he lost to Maxie Beerboom III on the latter’s glass-encased, two-seater designer