

## The Club

It's early in the night and the concert room bar is shuttered so I walk through to the lounge. After a day of carving the names of the dead into one million year old marble, monumental mason, Billy Fiddler sits, a solitary figure, at the end of the bar. He likes five or six double gins before he starts serious drinking. He says it settles his stomach. "Ay up, Billy," I say. "It's looking a bit black o'er your mother's."

He just nods; he'll be more communicative after he's had the gin.

Behind the bar is the steward, Mick Sellars. Mick doesn't drink while he's working, but there is an ever present cup of tea on the bar.

I buy a pint of Magnet and let another night take its comforting and familiar course.

- The turn battles against the indifference of the early crowd with Andy on the Hammond and Badger on the drums
- Tables filled with glasses are quickly cleared by a battalion of kids.
- The Offal Bar shifts trays of tripe and trotters
- A crystal silence falls for the bingo, broken only by the euphoria of a shout
- The turn returns to rapturous applause. They'll keep clapping until they've drunk up.

It's the end of the night and it's time for Mick to have a drink. He quickly knocks back a shot of Wood's one hundred proof rum. When he's finished packing up and everyone has gone home, he'll have half a packet of Woodbines and a couple of pints of Wards's, but first there's a job to do.

"Time Gentleman Please," he says.

Then...

"You don't have to go 'ome, but yer can't stay 'ere."

And finally...

"We've 'ad yer money, nah bugger off."

And the happy amnesiacs drift out and weave their way back to rent and rates, bosses and bills.

(The world turns and my hair turns grey.)

The turns and tombola are long since gone and The Club is an Old People's Home. Today's youth gets its Bread and Circuses on street corners or without leaving the house. Widescreen MTV is a better home for Angels than some bleached baritone and his backing tapes. They're bored with beer and have other lives to live.

And in one of those ironies that show that God has a sense of humour, some of the regulars are now residents of The Club. Billy Fiddler's mum died ten years ago, so he sold his tombstone business and bought shares in the home. Mick Sellars is no longer as sharp as he once was and his caring family found it fitting to find him sanctuary in the place he once worked.

And in their spiritless rooms, Billy and Mick come to the end of another day. Without anyone to tell him, Billy Fiddler wonders if it's a bit black over his mother's and although there's no-one to send home, Mick Sellars calls time.