

3rd Place – Andrew Dutton for “Fair Game”

Went down the Spacker house last night. What a pissar. It's always brilliant down there. It's not far off, handy like. You can just stroll up. The Spackers are local - but they int part of us.

A bits-and-pieces darkness was down when we got there last night. Me and three others all drifted down, there was nothing else going on anyway. There was a small gather going on already, there's usually someone at the place once the sun's down. Some lads said hi, you missed nothing so far. They're in but pretending not to be. Not much happened for a bit. Then we saw a shadow move in the house, and that was enough to get it started.

Sten got things fired up. He often leads. He ran up to the window where the movement was and drummed his palms on it.

“GOO WAKKA-WAKKA! GOO WAKKA-WAKKA! GOO WAKKA-WAKKA!”

Sten yelled so hard; from where we were it looked like he was kissing it. It wobbled like a wave as he slapped it hard.

“GOO WAKKA-WAKKA! GOO WAKKA-WAKKA! GOO WAKKA-WAKKA!”

He's got a great voice, ought to be a singer. Everyone picked up the war-cry and sang along. The Spackers hate the war-cry. It's the thing they hate most of all. We shout loads of stuff but that gets the best response. Sten invented it, but we worked on it, all of us, chipped in noises and changes till it was right. Sten's not our leader; this thing belongs to us all. There are three Spackers in the house. Mother, two kids. The kids are the real spackers but the mum lives there with 'em so she's one too. We know we done well when we hear her scream and them howl. Sometimes the Spackers just let things happen to them. It's better when they react. When they get a bezzer on they're so damn funny.

They think they're clever; when they see a gather starting they turn the lights out and sit tight. They got no curtains or nets; fish in a tank, they are. Stupid. Easy. Sten brought night-vision binoculars the other week, it was a stunner, you could see 'em plain. He should of charged for all those as had a look, he'd be minted.

The gathers are so great. It was just kids at first, clumping round the gateway and throwing stuff, shouting a bit. No-one stopped 'em. The Spackers didn't like it but they couldn't stop it. Then others started to realise it was a good grin to hang round that house, and the kids got sort of pushed out though they still do their bit. It's become like a bit of a club, you get to meet people, get to know their names, nicknames anyway. It's real social. A shared interest, like.

Tell you what it's like, it's like Guy Fawkes Night; the people, the chat, the laughs, making our own fun like in the old days. People bring food and drink, pass it round. There'll be a burger van soon, ace business opportunity. There are real fireworks too sometimes. We like the twizzling, screaming ones that you can aim rough-ish at the house and see what they hit – doorway, windows, roof. Some people shove bangers through the door, but where's the fun in that? Babyish, really.

People throw stones but try not to break windows as they'll only get boarded up. The Spackers are best when you can see 'em. Stones are best aimed at the roof for the good loud clack they make, and then the slide and rattle on the tiles, the short silence as they fall and the thunk when they hit ground. If we all chuck stones at once it sounds real lovely, like loud rain.

The Spackers don't fit here, they int like us. Their house is bad too, dirty windows, crumbling bricks, peeling paint. They don't do nothing about it, they int got pride. We're proud people here. Some people really hate the Spackers, like they're serious afraid of them. One or two want to run 'em out of town, even torch the house with them in it. They seem to think you can catch it, see, and they so don't want to turn into spackers. But they're only a few, the rest of us don't hate 'em and no way are we frit. The Spackers are funny. It's what they're there for.

The mum is the funniest, she makes the most noise when she bezzes. You can see her trying to keep the kids calm as the stones go over or soggy veg hits the window or the fireworks go twizzzzzz towards 'em. Ignore them, they'll go away you can almost see her saying. And she tries to take her own advice, but the whole time she's getting madder and scarer and like a good Mam she wants to protect her babies.

So eventually she bezzes and comes to the window and shouts and screams, pissoff fuckoff gerraway leavuslone whydonchajusleavus? She starts off like a proper mum or a teacher, you almost want to do what she says, then it's like a spring breaks in her voice and boing off she goes, shrieking like a crazy, enough to kill bats in mid-air. The laughs come big when this happens, she even gets applause. One cultured type yells bravo-bravissimos at her. She blarts next, and this puts some softies off, ahhh leave 'er now they'll say, but it's not often they walk away from the gather.

When this thing started, people wrapped up – wore scarves, hoods, like they were doing something wrong or shameful. They soon stopped thinking like that. We all come to the gathers. It can't be wrong. The cops do nothing – they drive by slow occasionally, but we all wave and blow kisses and they fuck off again. They got no sympathy for spackers. Some do-gooders bleat about it but they never do nothing about it so they plainly don't care neither. Community Action they call themselves – can't they see that this is community action?

And it gets us away from the TV and out in the good air, int that supposed to be good for you? I even met a smart bird once at a gather, got chatting, got on real well, I hoped I was in there. Some excitement happened, there were lights going on in the house and a big GOO-WAKKA war-cry went up and I lost her in the scrum. I come back regular hoping she'll show again. No luck yet but you never know. Wouldn't it be magic if I found her and we got together and then came back here for anniversaries and stuff?

Everyone's got a Spacker story. We share them, neighbourly-like, when things go quiet. The best one is the Metronome story. The youngest is the worst spacker, see, he's in a wheelchair, he's eighteen they say but the size of a ten year old, he's got jug ears and half-closed eyes and a droolly chin. Folk don't like going near him. He don't speak, just makes this one noise, ehhhhh, ehhhhh, ehhhh and he rocks back and forth, in time, as he does it. So people call him Metronome, brilliant name. Not much fun can be had out of Metronome himself, but there was this once, some lads tripped the mum as she wheeled him and she lost grip on the chair, right at the top of a hill. Metronome, he couldn't put his own brakes on see, so off he goes, down down down, gathering speed, all the time bucking back and forth faster and faster going ehhh, ehhhh, ehhhh, EHHHH, EHHHHHHH! Didn't believe the story till I saw some blurry phone shots of it, bad sound but you can pick it out, crapped myself laughing, man I thought I was gonna fuckin' die.

The other spacker's called Brainiac. When he tries to talk his tongue rolls slow, the words all dragged out, he sounds bladdered. Problems in the head, dumb as fuck. Fat, he is, with a wobbly walk. People follow him in a crocodile and copy the walk, fuckin' comedy parade, god oh god. Girls grab him by the crotch and pull hard, "Got somethin' for me darlin'?" He don't even understand, soooo funny. But funnier when his mum sees what's going down and comes screaming. The whole show'd be nothing without her.

The Spacker garden is untidy and overgrown. Place is full of thick, tall weeds and dead stuff and broken bicycles and odd car parts, god knows what crap – it's a bit of a local dumper. The Spackers don't do nothing about it, see what I mean about no pride. We even did some 'volunteer gardening' for 'em once – Sten led a group through the hedge, punched a big hole in it, then tore up everything they could get hold of, set fire to some stuff. Made the mum scream bigtime but it was an improvement, we was getting together and helping out, sort of. Suck on that, 'Community Action', you and your drippy talk of 'cohesion'.

Sten's even got this idea of throwing a Spacker Party – bust our way in and take our food and booze with us, "Brighten up the Spackers' boring lives". Most think that's going too far: we like having walls and windows between us and them.

The good thing - only good thing - about the Spackers is they bring us together, they make us realise who we are, what we got in common. They're someone we can all throw shit at.

It's brilliant to have someone like that. People leave gathers with smiles on their faces, and this is a town as int had much to smile about in years. If everyone but three spackers is happy isn't that a result?

This is a whole new world. And I'm loving it.

END

What Darci said:

There's a strong and clear narrative voice in this dystopian version of Big Britain. The writer showed some bravery in making the main character so unabashedly loathsome, and depicting mob dynamics with such brutal honesty. This is a story that makes the reader question the darker side of 'community' in the necessity of finding a common scapegoat: 'The good thing...about the Spackers is they bring us together, they make us realise who we are, what we got in common. They're someone we can all throw shit at". A timely, if sobering, snapshot of modern Britain.

About Andrew:

I have been writing on and off for a number of years, but usually I have never even tried to show my work to anyone and writing has been a sort of secret vice! In the last few years however I have become either bolder or more shameless, and I have been writing short and long stories in any non-work time that I can find, and I have tried my luck in various competitions.

My working background is in debt and benefits advice, and people in desperate financial situations can often be found populating my stories. I don't however confine myself to stories about poverty or debt.

There isn't any defined thing that I 'write about' – I find all sorts of situations fascinating. However my work will often feature people who are helpless before a life-changing decision, mesmerised or terrified by the past, or caught up in events beyond their control. Music, childhood, politics and pubs also feature a great deal in what I do. I wonder why.....