Billy was a local drunk. Everyone knew him. He was nothing short of a gift to people like Mummer and Father Wilfred who used him as shorthand for what drink could do to a man.

This extract is taken from ‘The Loney’ by Andrew Michael Hurley. Two boys and their mother come across a character called Billy Tapper.

Legend had it that he had been a music teacher at a boys’ grammar school, or the head of a girls’ school in Scotland, or down south, or in Hull, somewhere, anywhere. His history varied from person to person, but that the drink had sent him mad was universally accepted and there were any number of stories about his eccentricities. He lived in a cave. He had killed someone in Whitehaven with a hammer. He had a daughter somewhere. He thought that collecting certain combinations of stones and shells made him invisible.

I wasn’t sure how much of it was true, but it didn’t matter. Once you’d seen Billy Tapper, anything they said about him seemed possible. I’d never seen a man be so unkind to his own body. His fingers and his palms were shattered with filth. Every crease and line was brown. Either side of his broken nose his eyes were twisted deep down into his skull. His hair crawled past his ears and down his neck which had turned sea-coloured with dozens of tattoos. There was something faintly heroic about his refusal to wash, I thought, when my brother and I were so regularly scrubbed and towelled by Mummer.

He slumped on the bench, with an empty bottle of something evil lying on its side on the floor and a small, mouldy-looking potato in his lap that comforted me in a strange way. It seemed right that he should only have a raw potato. It was the kind of thing I assumed down-and-outs ate, nibbling at it bit by bit over weeks as they roamed the highways and byways looking for the next. Hitching lifts. Stealing what they could. Stowing away on trains.

When he woke up and noticed we were there he tried his best to be courteous and sober, offering a grin of three or four twisted black teeth and doffing his beret at Mummer. Like most drunks, Billy bypassed the small talk and slapped his bleeding, broken heart into my palm like a lump of raw beef.

‘Don’t get taken in by the demon drink, lads. I’ve lost everything ’cause of this stuff,’ he said as he held up the bottle and swilled the dregs. ‘See that scar?’

He raised his hand and shook his sleeve down. A red seam ran from his wrist to his elbow, threading its way through tattoos of daggers and melon-chested girls.

‘D’you know how I got that?’

I shook my head. Hanny stared.

‘Fell off a roof. Bone ripped right through it,’ he said and used his finger to demonstrate the angle at which his ulna had protruded. ‘Got a spare fag?’

‘Have you got a spare fag?’

I shook my head again and he sighed.

I wondered if that was what had set him onto the booze, the war. It had done strange things to some people, so Farther said. Knocked their compasses out of whack, as it were.

We stepped on the bus and, whatever the reason, Hanny and I couldn’t take our eyes off him. We gorged ourselves on his dirtiness, on his brutal, alien smell. It was the same fearful excitement we felt when we happened to drive through what Mummer considered a *bad* part of London and found ourselves lost in a maze of terraces that sat shoulder to shoulder with industrial plants and scrapyards. We would turn in our seats and gawp out of the windows at the scruffy, staring children who had no toys but the bits of wood and metal torn off the broken furniture in their front yards where aproned women stood and screeched obscenities at the men stumbling out of corner pubs.

Mummer tutted and peeled our faces away from the window to look at her instead.

‘Be warned,’ she said, as the bus pulled away. ‘That man is already inside you. It won’t take more than a few wrong choices to bring him out, believe me.’

It happened so easily. Drink quickly possessed a man and made him its servant. Father Wilfred always said so.

In the same way, I knew after that conversation around the dinner table that Billy was going to die soon. The thought came to me as an established fact; as though it had already come to pass. No one could live like that for long. Being that filthy took so much effort that I was sure that the same merciful God who sent a whale to save Jonah and gave Noah a nod about the weather, would put him out of his misery.