

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

“I Was Young”

An immersive autobiographical journey into the troubadour tradition.

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by

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Abstract

There are two key problems in the field of autobiography: (i) How does one choose which scenes from a life to include? (ii) What is the most effective way of presenting those scenes?

This thesis investigates structures that address these two issues of autobiographical *content* and *presentation*. It deals with the question of what to put in, and also examines the related concerns of who presents the content (narration of self) and the techniques by which they present it (style).

The primary research questions are: (1) Is it possible to construct a coherent and involving piece of memoir if the author relinquishes some degree of control over the book's content and, instead, is prepared to make decisions about what goes into the book based on the guidance of an external device? (2) Is it possible to reveal more of the author's character and also enrich a reader's emotional engagement with a memoir if, along with the written text, the author also expresses aspects of their life through a second creative voice?

The creative element of this thesis is a memoir that engages with the past in order to build a present and future narrative. Its starting point is a lost path: the one my nineteen year-old self embarked upon when he left law school in the hope of becoming a pop star. My fifty-year old self then reengages with the intervening years and asks what happened? and what might I and others learn from what happened?

I was a professional comedy writer and I use comedy to engage the reader in my story, but comedy can also be a way of evading deeper issues. My motive for writing a

memoir was to learn how to stop evading deeper issues and start revealing them, and to find a voice that could encompass human frailty in a way that might have value and resonance for the reader.

The chapters are coupled with an album of related songs, which represent my *second creative voice*. The exegesis examines the interactive process of joint creation and how, in the case of a memoirist, a second creative voice might deepen that of the primary writing one, or, at least, deepen the impact of the memoir as a whole for both author and reader.

For my *external device* I used the song categories of the medieval troubadours. The arbitrary dictates of the song categories (celebrating youth, offering political comment, lamenting dead patrons, etc.) not only provoked a re-evaluation of my past, but also propelled me into immersive, forward-looking research. Focus on the troubadours' secular breadth of commentary led me to examine how, in practice, I might exemplify some of their social relevance to develop a form of memoir that looked out as well as in.

This practical application of an *external device* and a *second creative voice* create possible new frameworks for a memoir that aims to push the field forward.

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On the many occasions that I doubted, Professor Martin Goodman continued to brim with creative and constructive confidence. He inspired me to start, inspired me to keep going, and inspired me to finish. His help ranged from the practical to the sublime, and, most important, it was always, *always*, available.

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I am also in the ever loving debt of my beautiful mum, Mary, and my indomitable brother, Jim. They kept me buoyed when emotions and finances were low. And where would I be without my dad, Good Old John Tom? Departed in life, but alive in these pages.

Finally, a boundless thank you to my partner Julia, at my side throughout, in word and deed, in person and in spirit – in love.

Thank you everyone.

Gender bias apology

I have used the male third person throughout. It was a creative choice, and I hope does not cause any gender offence. As it is a thesis centred on autobiographical writing, I wished to keep a sense of my authorial presence in the mind of the reader, even if only on a subliminal level.

Accompanying CD

Please find a CD of eleven songs attached to this page. Each song corresponds to a chapter in the creative part of the thesis called: *I Was Young*. To enjoy the concept as intended, I would be grateful if you read the chapter first before playing its song partner. The songs are also available online along with the university's publication of this thesis. Thank you for listening.

I WAS YOUNG

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One
I Can Hear Voices

13

Chapter Two
Until You

29

Chapter Three
Catch That Train

45

Chapter Four
Good Old John Tom

75

Chapter Five
Samba Turn

113

Chapter Six
Skimming Stones

147

Chapter Seven
Fellow Traveller

176

Chapter Eight
I Was Young

204

Chapter Nine
Blue Sky

239

Chapter Ten
I'm Reminiscing

264

Chapter Eleven
Let Love Come

301

EXEGESIS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

305

Chapter One

How creative can one be with creative non-fiction before it becomes more ‘fiction’ than ‘non-fiction’?

309

Chapter Two

An examination of the *everyman* voice: connecting the “I” of the narrator to the “I” of the reader.

335

Chapter Three

The second creative voice.

363

Chapter Four

An examination of the literary theory behind the incorporation of an *external device* and the ultimate linguistic constraints on personal expression.

401

Conclusion

409

Rationale for the interviewees

413

Appendix i

Song lyrics

416

Bibliography

431

Vida

(The troubadour's biography)

The fifty-odd years of David Tomlinson

David Tomlinson was born at Westow Nursing Home, deep in the countryside of North Yorkshire, on the 4th November, 1961. It is perhaps no coincidence that the life of this obscure man should start in the back-end of nowhere.

David was a forceps delivery, which left him oddly shaped and purple and with a lifelong distrust of salad tongs. His pre-school years were unremarkable, save for an obsession with all things American – in particular, Bette Davis. This trans-Atlantic fervour in a four-year-old disturbed David's dad, but was indulged by his mum who, misguidedly, let him attend the Saturday morning pictures dressed in a white (Las Vegas period) Elvis Presley suit, complete with green silk scarf.

As a young boy David excelled at a number of things that would, in future life, be of no use to him at all, such as the St. Martin's Primary School fancy hat competition and miming Greensleeves on a recorder.

His teenage years were a hormonal chaos of one embarrassing incident after another, for which he is still apologising. However, there were two sources of constant solace for David during those years: his parent's portable typewriter and his granddad's piano.

In *I Was Young* David writes and sings about his life in the hope of making peace with whatever remains of it.

I WAS YOUNG

Chapter One

I Can Hear Voices

(Gap: the troubadour song category for boasting)

Man is indeed an object miraculously vain, various and wavering. It is difficult to found a judgement on him which is steady and uniform.

Michel de Montaigne

I was sitting in a Chelmsford pub on a summer evening in 1981, and I was happy. It was only my second pint, so the beer couldn't take all the credit. Leaded windows spread soft squares of sunlight over the walls and the table tops, and my thoughts were as airy as the floating motes of dust. I was happy because at the age of nineteen I had discovered something important: I knew who I was.

I was a popstar.

Comforted by the pub's conversational hum, I settled into my new identity. The old one, that of law student, had been officially terminated, dispatched along with all the other adolescent aspirations such as actor, dentist, playwright, novelist, investigative journalist, RAF helicopter pilot and dress designer. I had vacillated from the sensible to the silly, not because I chose indiscriminately, but because I was by nature a boy of unresolved predisposition – just clever enough to entertain a profession, and just stupid enough to run away with a circus. I had teetered between worlds, formless and unsure. But no longer. Now I was a popstar. And that was final.

I was one pub behind the rest of the pub-crawling gang of law students, alone in a corner, sitting on a worn, red velvet bench, flicking beer mats. Some of the lads could flick and catch several mats in one go. I tried it with two. One of them ricocheted off the ash tray and the other skimmed over the head of my pint and into the lap of a large middle-aged lady.

“S-sorry,” I said, more Jerry Lewis than bad boy of rock. I leaned over to retrieve the beer mat, but thought better of it. It was bad enough that I had pelted the lady’s pudenda with a coaster; probably best not to shove my hand down there as well. My second thoughts, considerate as they were, had, however, left my hand hovering between the lady’s thighs. I was a frozen tableau of lewd illustration, fingers spread as though I were introducing the lady’s privates to the rest of the pub. The lady picked up the beer mat and made a point of not giving it back to me. I sat down, slowly, like a piece of amateur panto scenery being withdrawn into the wings – my Shakespearian sense-of-self, reduced to a Widow Twanky reality. If only I hadn’t started life in such thrall to Jerry Lewis, I might have grown up much cooler.

I used to skive off school with fake stomach aches if there was a Jerry Lewis film on in the afternoon. I was a film nut. From the age of four I could identify dozens of major Hollywood stars.

I remembered one occasion sitting in front of our black and white TV screen with a pile of building bricks (no more adroit with them than I was with beer mats) and shouting out the actors’ names as they came on.

“William Holden,” I said.

“What?” Dad lowered his newspaper.

“It’s William Holden.”

Dad watched the screen. “Right.” Then he looked at his toddler son, sitting amidst his fallen tower of bricks.

“Gloria Swanson,” I said.

Dad looked back at the screen, saw Gloria Swanson. “Okay,” he said.

“Erich von Stroheim.”

That took the biscuit. Dad called for mum. “Mary!”

Mum came in from the kitchen.

“What’s he doing?” Dad said. “He just said Eric von Stroheim.”

My parents assumed my interest in films meant I was going to be an actor. I assumed the same. We were almost right. I became a dreadful ham. At the age of thirteen I played the interpreter in Scarborough Amateur Operatic Society’s production of *The King and I* and trod the boards with the exaggerated stride of a man on stilts. When I wasn’t delivering lines I pulled faces up stage that were big enough to constitute a scene change. My every entrance caused unrest in the stalls, and in some cases the front rows flinched in unison.

It was not an actor’s life for me.

I held my pint aloft like the skull of Yorick, turned it in the sunlight and admired its amber clarity. I was pensive. Contemplative. Here. In the now. At one with everything including my pint. Not caring about anything beyond the flight of bubbles in a glass. I was in a wistful mood. Enigmatic behaviour was to be expected from a popstar. Incapable of throwing TVs out of hotel windows, or biting the heads off small

mammals, or indeed of doing anything at all anti-social, I could at least feign the odd moment of creative distraction.

“Better leave Dave alone,” the gang had said. “He’s musing.” They’d mocked but it was the truth, although, I confess, my thoughts were not one hundred per cent creative. The bubbles in my glass popped, and I thought of the explosion that was Diane; reminisced on what had happened only an hour ago...

The end of the academic year. Everyone out on the town. The lads at the bar of the Plough, loud and physical, giving me a hard time, questioning my decision to dropout and concluding in the main that I was not in my right mind.

“You’re not really quitting law to form a band, are you?”

“You’re nuts.”

“What’s wrong with law?”

“You’re nuts.”

“Why don’t you like law?”

“You’re nuts!”

Establishing an identity, I realised, could be as contentious as defending a faith, and holding on to that identity could be misconstrued as an attack on someone else’s faith. To want to be in a pop band instead of practising at the bar was heresy and, in my case, it did sound ‘nuts’. The only band I’d ever played in, *Fungus in a Cup*, wasn’t really a band. We only had two guitars and a bass, never got around to learning a whole song, and only ever played our song fragments in my room in the hall of residence. And when I say we had two guitars and a bass, I don’t mean we had the players to go with

them. Gareth only knew half a dozen chords, which was twice as many as me, and Simon could do little more with his bass than plug it in.

The lads were right to take the piss, but it made no difference. I was impervious to the call of ‘precedent’ and ‘chambers’ and ‘cross examination’. All I could hear was my inner voice, a restless and reckless rallying cry to twang three chords on a guitar.

Nick entered the pub and joined the gang. There were big roars of greeting and then a dumb-struck silence. He had a beautiful girl with him. Not a common sight in our gang.

“This is my sister Diane,” Nick said. He’d told us she was coming up for the weekend but we hadn’t thought anything of it.

I thought a lot about it now. Diane was beautiful. And her beauty was surprising, because Nick was not beautiful at all – funny and charming, yes, but not beautiful – and therefore nobody was prepared for just how stunning his sister was going to be: blonde, luminous, intelligent, witty, modest...the complimentary adjectives scrolled on and on the longer I stared.

The lads swarmed her. I hung back. What to say amongst all the boisterous welcomes? It wasn’t long, however, before I was the subject of conversation again; an excuse for the lads to show off in front of Diane, crack some gags at my expense. Nick introduced each of the lads as fellow law students, except me. I was an ‘ex-law student’.

“Ex?” Diane said.

“He’s going on Top of the Pops,” someone said. “Thinks he’s Donny Osmond.”

“I write songs,” I said, competing with the derisive howls. “Going to try and do something with them.”

“I think that’s very brave,” Diane said. “It takes a lot of courage to make a decision like that.”

What a girl! Just as thoughtful and gentle as her brother, but so much better looking. Her appearance on my last day of law and first day of pop stardom was a divine endorsement of my transition. Some of the lads might query my big, bold vocational decision, but Diane admired it.

Diane’s approval was a moment so perfect, so life-affirming, so me-affirming, that part of the reason for my staying behind when the crawl moved on was so that I could remain languishing in that moment, in the sun, categorised and endorsed. Identified.

I sat alone, awash in the first person. I. I. I. Alone but content. Not embarrassed. Not self-conscious. I knew who I was. I knew where I was going. In a few years time I might return to this pub and sit in this corner to mark the day my new life had begun, and everyone would steal glances at me, because they, like me, would also know who I was.

I finished my pint and walked out onto the street, light-headed and with a jaunty sway in my hips, imagining the Bee Gees’ song “Staying Alive” accompanying my summer strut. It occurred to me that I knew nothing about the song – what key it was in, what instruments were used, or what the vocal harmonic intervals were. I was not a proficient musician, not even a proficient pop musician. But I wasn’t worried. Why not? Because I was young and I had the desire and I had made the decision. I believed it wasn’t possible to make such a decision unless I really was talented. It was one of many

pithy insights I was working on. I'd need them for my interviews. I wanted to come across more John Lennon than Cliff Richard.

Chelmsford High Street was not the ideal backdrop for my Bee Gees bounce, but a setting sun can make any building look exotic, even *Boots* had something of the Taj Mahal about it. I was passing from a euphoric state to a mystical one, acquiring the necessary profundity of an artist. The Rugby shirt and jeans would have to go. A popstar-seer required a white linen suit and possibly a silk scarf. The blinding glint off shop windows and car bumpers left me squinting and serene, developing the furrowed brow of a thinker. I stood on the threshold of the Golden Fleece, cast a long shadow across the red-patterned carpet, retained something of my squint, and made an entrance. I was Clint Eastwood, the man with no name, stepping through saloon doors.

The pub was in uproar, shoulder-to-shoulder with locals and gangs of celebrating students. The lads were sitting round a table in the far corner. Clint Eastwood had to push through the crowds, apologising all the way.

"Excuse me," I said. "Sorry. Excuse me. Can I get- Can I get- Thank you..." I wasn't imposing myself on the scene as I'd hoped, instead I scooted sideways, arms knotted above my head, trying to avoid jostling anyone's drink. But then Diane turned and looked at me, fascinated by the loner, the maverick, the outsider. Ah, the power of my identity. I lowered my arms and joined the group to parade my difference.

My dad's dad, Pop, had been different. He was a WWI hero; a dog-fighting ace who had survived bailing out of a burning bi-plane without a parachute. So I once thought I might enlist in the RAF and keep the family tradition of heroism alive. In my early teens

I joined the Air Training Corps to prepare myself for the life. They let me shoot a rifle and I imagined the Red Baron in my sights, but my limbs were always too long for the quartermaster's store. My sleeves didn't trouble my wrists much, and my trouser legs never got within shouting distance of my hobnail boots. Dad took to singing the Freddie and the Dreamers' song "We Wear Short Shorts" every time he saw me in uniform. I looked like Max Wall when I walked, like Norman Wisdom when I put on the beret (that didn't fit either) and Benny Hill when I mangled my salute. Each turn I took on the parade ground was a brief history of British Variety. I quit the Air Training Corps and allowed the heroic family tradition to end with my grandfather.

It did look, however, as though I might have to fight for Diane. I had competition – Owen, a tall and handsome Welshman. He also had another attribute, the kind that tends to put young male rivals in love on the back foot.

He had an enormous dick.

So enormous it contributed to the wear and tear of his jeans and left a permanent stretch mark in the denim. The stretch mark meandered like an ox bow bend in a river and finished somewhere close to his right knee. It was tough competition even for someone of my sturdy identity.

Owen had revved up to full chatty-lad mode, monopolising Diane. I let him blather. He had little more than property law and rugby to talk about. I had my pithy insights, which I lobbed like grenades, explosive pearls of wisdom such as: *Never yield to peer pressure, Live without a safety net, Die knowing you tried.* Diane was blown away by all of them, left ablaze by my perception. Owen's chat was mundane by comparison. Nothing incendiary there; nothing to compare with my visionary

declarations. I was going to write songs, record a demo, get a deal, tour. There was no doubt about it in my mind, and what made Diane so irresistible was that there appeared to be no doubt about it in her mind, either.

I finished off another beer on the back of another snappy line. Owen was losing ground with Diane but he hadn't spotted it yet. I walked to the Gents like a gunslinger leaving a dead body behind him. Owen followed. Dead man walking.

Inside the loos, Owen bragged about how well he was doing with Diane and then went on to ridicule all the other dicks at the urinals, which, as the length of his enabled him to stand some distance further back than the rest of us, he was entitled to do. But my confidence remained intact. Diane had depth. She'd never fall for someone of Owen's bluster, no matter what appendage came with it. Diane and I were connecting, even when we weren't talking. We looked at each other, smiled, raised eyebrows, sent tiny signals over other people's conversation. Kindred spirits. John and Yoko. The moment I had made my decision, chosen to follow my heart, reveal my true identity, I had become attractive to someone like Diane. Another pithy insight born out: *Follow your heart*. Not original, I know, but I believed it.

The first in my series of pithy insights came at the age of twelve when I wrote:

Life may be sweet

Life may be sour

But why sour for the sweet

And sweet for the sour.

I was still optimistic about dropping it into the evening's conversation, Confucius-like. It was one of the things I had been inspired to write after discovering my parents' manual typewriter. Neither of my parents typed, so it was a while before I stumbled across it, neglected at the bottom of a wardrobe in the porch amongst old wellies and fishing rods. When I found it and was given permission to use it I placed it on the kitchen table like a treasure chest brought up from a cave. I knew even then, at the age of twelve, that its true value lay not in its intrinsic metal components but in what they could be summoned to deliver. I inserted paper, raised two forefingers and started my autobiography. Pure gold. I arrived at the age of twelve sooner than expected and had to abandon the autobiography until I had lived a few more chapters. But something had been released. I needed to keep writing.

I wrote throughout my teens: sketches, silly poems, the opening chapters to novels, and a play about a boy who questioned the importance of sitting 'O' levels. The play worried my English teacher, Mrs Walker. Was I planning to 'do something silly' instead of sit my exams? No. It was, I promised her, 'all made up'. I was just writing. 'Mm,' she said, but did not encourage me to do any more of it, and from then on read all my homework with suspicion.

Diane, on the other hand, thought me full of poetic charm. I fancied myself Byronesque, though I couldn't quote a line of his. Diane read modern literature. She was in the middle of a book by John Fowles. No wonder she recognised my soliloquizing soul.

"Have you read *The French Lieutenant's Woman*?" she asked.

I squatted on a stool next to her. The question was my excuse to get close. My answer, however, could kibosh the evening. I hadn't read the book. Didn't even know who the bloke John Fowles was. What an idiot. Should I lie? Or, fudge the issue and ask if she'd read any Clive Cussler?

"No," I said. "I haven't read it." Who would have guessed it, the new me appeared to be honest.

Diane talked me through *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, summed it up and appraised it with such sensitivity I could do nothing by way of response except sip my beer in quiet awe. I was happy to be silent in the company of this girl.

The usual roar went up at closing time; a chorus of drunken denials. The evening couldn't end at 11.00pm. We all bought cans over the bar and nominated Nick's room in the hall of residence as a party venue. Back at Nick's we inserted Talking Heads into the tape deck, aimed the angle-poise lamp at the poster of the girl lifting her tennis skirt to scratch her bum, and transformed the student cell into Stringfellows.

More drunk students arrived. Word was out: "Party at Nick's." It was the end of the year, the last weekend of the term, and every student pub crawl was converging on Nick's. In a few days time he and I and several other lads were off to Corfu. We gathered in the corridor, danced like Zorba the Greek and boasted about our capacities for Ouzo. My plan, after the summer, was to return to Chelmsford and move into a house with Nick. I'd then commute to London and work as a temp to finance the demo tape. Everything was clear. I told my story to everyone who hadn't heard it and to some who'd heard it more times than they cared to. I continued to pontificate and dazzle and dance like Zorba the Greek.

And then Diane wasn't there.

She was in the room next door with Owen. Alone. How had I misread that? He was dull, wasn't he? Not a popstar. I warned Nick, "Your sister's in there with Owen." Nick shrugged his shoulders. "Just the two of them, Nick," I said. But Nick wasn't his sister's keeper. I hovered outside Owen's door, beer can in hand, and tried to eavesdrop on the conversation on the other side. At least there was a conversation. For the moment, they were only talking. I couldn't hear any laughter, though. Good. Diane and I had laughed. Owen was doing most of the talking. He was, I think, boring her. Yes, he was boring her. And in a Welsh accent, which is not easy. The Welsh accent is fruity and expressive, made for singing. You have to work hard to strip it of animation. I was still in with a chance. I looked in through the keyhole, felt terrible about it, but I'd live with the guilt. I could see Owen's single bed. They were using it like a settee; Owen sprawled out, head and shoulders against the wall. I couldn't see Diane's face, just her knees bunched up to her chin. The couple weren't embracing, although Owen's sprawl was a definite come-on with his legs apart and his crotch on display. His damn dick dominated my keyhole skyline.

Half an hour later Diane came out of the room. I tried not to look as though I'd been waiting, which was difficult because I was standing at the door like it was the front of a queue.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi."

"Interesting chat?"

Diane smiled. I don't think she had it in her to be unkind about anyone, but she knew I meant 'how was the turgid Taff?' We had already reached a point of telepathic understanding, the sort of communication that normally takes years to acquire. In just one night I had found not only myself but also a mate for life. The two of us fell into an easy, jokey conversation. We sauntered down the corridor, away from the hubbub, our voices lowering, party postures relaxing. We kept sauntering, out of the building, across the campus, into the park, until everything was just us and the night sky; a midnight promenade on a couple's starlit catwalk...

My mum used to design and make her own dresses, partly because it was cheaper than buying them and partly because she could never find anything off the peg that was flamboyant enough for her. The results were sometimes simple, sometimes stunning, and sometimes alarming depending on how the wind played in the mysterious excesses of material. I used to copy the preliminary sketches she made of her outfits and then doodle my own. Nothing to it, I thought. So this was dress designing. They made a lot of money, didn't they, dress designers? I'd be a dress designer, then. I only needed a pencil and some paper. I told a friend how simple it was. I couldn't believe everybody else wasn't at it. My friend told the rest of the school, and I soon discovered why everybody else wasn't at it. It was an impossible dream to hold onto in a circle of friends that wanted to be motorbike mechanics, or teachers, or army PT instructors, and who also accused me of wanting to wear dresses as well as design them. I turned my pencil over to the rubber tip and erased 'dress designer' from my list.

Diane and I sat on a park bench running through our short histories, listening to ourselves take shape in front of one another, sensing the shapes interlock, feeling the words dry and leave us set as one. I put my arm around her and squeezed her shoulders, tired. David Tomlinson had been presented in his entirety – an exhausting business. Exhausting to deliver; exhausting to sit through. But we'd made it, identities established and accepted. And there were still enough stars left to kiss under, to do it right. Our lips touched, no more words, perhaps the most honest use of my mouth all night.

My grandfather (Pop), the war hero, was also a dentist and I'm told he once held the town record for extracting the most number of teeth in a minute. I was proud, but also had private concerns about the circumstances of the record. Taking teeth out against the clock didn't sound like the modern face of dentistry; more like a Wild West procedure. I wanted to know who had timed him. And why speed might be prized higher than accuracy? Did all the teeth belong to the same patient? But those same teeth-tugging fingers of Pop's could also play the piano. And I loved those fingers then. They were podgy but pliable, and the ivory keys rippled under them in easy compliance. Sunday afternoons with Nan and Pop: Pop playing rags and music hall songs; Nan drinking sherry; Pop playing one-handed for a moment while he reached for his whisky and soda in a cut glass tumbler. According to Dad, Pop, as well as war hero, dental 'record' holder and pianist, had, during his youth, also been an impressive boozier, gambler and womaniser; so impressive he'd blown the entire family fortune.

I was lucky, so early in life, to have discovered my role model. Dad had offered the information as a warning, but told it with such resigned good humour it had the

opposite effect. And there was no shaking off the effect when I discovered that Dad had also been something of a stage-door-Johnnie in his youth with a reputation for dating ‘chorus girls’.

I would sit at Pop’s piano and play it like I typed, with two fingers. He showed me the notes on the keyboard and how they corresponded to the stave. I worked out the melody for a song called “Little Dolly Daydream”. Then I worked on two-fingered melodies of my own. In my naivety, I began to wonder if the key to this instrument and the rest of the debonair debauchery my grandfather had excelled at was not, as I had first thought, in learning to fly with the RAF, but in dentistry. I would be a dentist and therefore, inevitably, a piano man. But plans to be a dentist vanished in a gargle and a spit. Science was my downfall. I needed to know something about it to be allowed anywhere near a person’s mouth, especially if I had designs to poke about in it with a pair of pliers. Despite taking ‘O’ level Chemistry, Physics and Biology, I couldn’t distinguish one from the other. I failed my mock Chemistry and Physics exams, and was removed from the Physics class all together, not for my sake, but to protect the class from my idiotic contributions. There was a fear that the borderline students might be influenced by me. My lack of knowledge was so dense as to operate like a black hole on the more impressionable students. I was not removed from the Chemistry class but the teacher did have a nervous breakdown; whether or not the two things were linked never came to light.

My interest in Diane’s mouth was not clinical. I didn’t need a degree in Dentistry for the kind of attention I was lavishing on it. We kissed, talked, and kissed again; kissed until

starlight gave way to birdsong and the morning chill got the better of us. We cuddled against the cold and wandered back to campus, nestling our heads together, snatching extra kisses. Diane returned to her brother's room, but we made plans to hang out the following day, to grab coffee somewhere, to sit and read in the sun. I was sure the sun would shine. And it did. It was the start of something.

I was nineteen and I knew who I was.

Two months later I was the doorman at a holiday camp on the North Yorkshire coast and Diane had dumped me. My work uniform was a maroon polyester suit, which did nothing to enhance a bouncer's menace. It was hard to break up a scrap looking like Zandra Rhodes. The resident MC and singer at the camp had promised to give me the names of some A & R men he knew in London, and one of the girls who used to come and chat to me on the door was married to Chris Rea's keyboard player. These were, I admit, tenuous connections to the music world, and I hadn't got around to recording a demo yet or forming a band, and yes, I lived with my parents and spent every night dressed in a uniform the colour of a 1970s bathroom suite, but...

But nothing.

I applied for a place on a degree course in English & Philosophy. I was a writer. And that was final.

Chapter Two

Until You

(Partimen: the troubadour song category for a debate in which a specific problem is posed)

We are never 'at home': we are always outside ourselves. Fear, desire, hope, impel us towards the future; they rob us of feelings and concern for what now is, in order to spend time over what will be.

Michel de Montaigne

Three o'clock in the morning in Dover. In an outdoor car park. At the start of it all.

The car park has too many spaces. One space would suit me better. It would remove the need to make a decision. All these choices, at three o'clock in the morning.

I can't decide.

I have a lot on my mind at the moment: the rest of my life and how to spend it.

Concentrate.

There is not a lot to consider when parking in a car park, but with so many spots available I'm overwhelmed by the thought that there *is* something to consider, only I'm too stupid to think of it.

I slow down underneath one of the car park's street lights; contemplate the spaces within its circular glow. Too bright. We're in a camper van, planning to sleep; don't want a spotlight keeping us awake all night. I veer off towards the shadows. Too dark. The black holes are ideal for a car thief to operate in without being seen. Move on. But

not too close to the road; it'll get noisy in the early hours. Another thought: when I park, wherever I park, will it be better to reverse into the space? If I reverse into it, then it'll be easier to get out in the morning; no tricky manoeuvring to avoid the hundreds of other cars that have parked in the meantime. Okay, I'll reverse into the space. Not a space in the middle, though – too exposed for a camper van, too much likelihood of spectators gawping at us when we eat breakfast. It's windy. Perhaps somewhere more sheltered, close to the interior perimeter wall. So...a space in half-light, against the wall, out of the wind, and reverse into it.

I turn the steering wheel every time I add a qualification, and to anyone watching it must look like the camper has no one at the wheel at all. But nobody is watching. Not at three in the morning. I make my choice of space. Park. Turn off the ignition.

Ah. Bugger! I haven't gone into the space backwards. I turn the ignition back on.

"Leave it," Julia says.

"But I didn't reverse in."

"Leave it."

Julia has seen enough of the car park for the night.

The following morning, after a night of disturbing dreams featuring car park attendants (I'd booked parking permission via an automated system and didn't trust it. Automated systems, in my case, are wont not to automate), I note that the camper van hasn't been wheel clamped and, also, that the sun is shining. I claim our good fortune is the result of where I'd parked – the secret value of having chosen the right spot.

"It's all down to me," I say.

“Including the sun?” Julia says.

“Yes, I’m responsible for the sun. And it’s a good omen.”

I’m not one for omens, but Julia is. For her, a break in the clouds usually means something more significant than a mere change in the weather, and I’m in the mood to go along with that today.

Thirty years after that night in Chelmsford, I have made a bigger choice about my life.

Or, rather, I have not made a choice, but I have *not made it* in a decisive way. Instead of choosing between writing and music, I’m going to combine the two: a book of memoirs accompanied by a collection of songs. The subject matter for both will be based on the song categories of the medieval troubadours. Sounds bookish, but bear with me. The song categories of the medieval troubadours covered everyday stuff like politics, death, dancing, and all aspects of love from the courtly to the bawdy. Plenty to go at there. Plenty of potential for contemporary interpretation, which might lead, in the words of Michel de Montaigne, to ‘the pleasure of honest entertainment’.

Will that be enough? I’m not an expert in anything and therefore I’m not likely to increase a person’s knowledge. Whatever I study will be in keeping with Montaigne’s philosophy: ‘[T]he only learning I look for is that which tells me how to know myself.’ These chapters and songs will be my flights of whimsy, on the wings of which I will ‘make no attempt to convey information about things, only about myself...to reveal the extent of my own vision, not the measure of the things themselves’.

Michel de Montaigne is one of the reasons I’m heading to France and why I’m quoting him left, right and centre. Montaigne originated the literary format of essay

writing. The French word *essai* means test or trial. In 1571, at the age of 38, Montaigne retired to a tower on his estate in Bordeaux and wrote three volumes of essays, testing his feelings on a diverse number of subjects from friendship to thumbs. He wrote in order to learn something of himself, rather than of his subject, and wanted to ‘appear in [his] simple, natural, and everyday dress, without strain or artifice’. It is a sentiment that strikes a chord at my time of life. I have accrued enough ‘artifice’ over the years to cake myself in it from head to toe.

If I am to rediscover, or more likely discover for the first time, how I look in my ‘natural and everyday dress’, and wish to write with the same attitude as Montaigne, then I will also have to offer the same apology as he did: ‘So, reader, I am myself the substance of my book, and there is no reason why you should waste your leisure on so frivolous and unrewarding a subject.’

Frivolous and unrewarding. You have been advised.

Julia and I and the camper van are onboard a PNO ferry. Julia and I are sitting on the ferry’s observation deck. The sun continues to shine. A seagull lands on the handrail, tucks in its wings, stands upright and faces into the wind. It looks like a small figurehead carved into the wrong end of the ship, or boat, or whatever a ferry is. The seagull’s feathers ruffle in the breeze but it is unconcerned, keeping its balance without any sign of a sway or trembling knees. Why are there no outward indications of the effort it takes to retain its balance? Shouldn’t it be teetering, wings outstretched, screeching ‘Whey hey’? I can’t fathom the engineering. How can something so fragile and twig-legged remain so immobile?

Now, it is just a seagull, the sight and sound of which, as a lad from Scarborough, I have always taken for granted, but on seeing this seagull, perched on the railing, insouciant to the throng of people, I am, in an instant, just as fascinated by it as I would have been by the appearance of a Dodo, and it appears that I am not alone in this response. I hold up my camera, and so do five hundred other passengers, to take a photograph of a seagull that is just standing – not juggling, not offering racing tips, not even swallowing a fish – just standing.

I take a photograph and review it in the viewfinder. It shows a seagull sitting on the rail of a ferry.

It is not enough. I want something more. I take another photo, and another, changing my position with the same frequency I had changed parking destinations. The other passengers annoy me, getting in the way of my shots, doing the same thing I'm doing, snapping away at a seagull that isn't engaged in anything more spectacular than standing still on the rail of a ferry.

“What *are* you doing?” Julia says.

“I've got to get it,” I say.

“You've got it.”

“No, no, it's...I haven't...”

Julia watches the seagull and looks out at the white cliffs of Dover. I look through a camera lens, see the seagull second-hand. Miss the cliffs altogether.

What is causing my manic impulse to photograph a seagull? There is a comic element, of course – a seagull hitch-hiking to France – and perhaps that is the main motivation for the rest of the shutterbugs. They click once, capture the comedy and walk

on. I click and click until the seagull flies off, and not one of the photographs satisfies me.

“Did you get it?” Julia says.

I’m not sure if she’s taking the Mick. “Yeah,” I say, but I don’t think I have.

When we land in France the weather is miserable. Non-stop rain against the camper van’s windscreen. It is not until we are four days into our journey, driving through the vineyards of Bordeaux, that we finally get a glimpse of sun.

“A good sign,” Julia says.

“Of what?”

“Of how you’re meeting will go with Montaigne.”

“Meeting? The man’s dead.”

I am not at my most sensitive when driving the camper van.

“Pilgrimage, then,” Julia says.

The country back roads, which the SatNav appears to prefer, are narrow – too narrow to accommodate two-way traffic and not even that confident about accommodating it one-way. We’re in a camper van as broad as a barn.

It is too early in the season to catch the vineyards in all their ripening glory. The gnarled and twisted stems are still bare, looking like leprous arms that have clawed their way out of the grave. The ancient vines, the road that thinks it’s a cart track, my slavish adherence to the divine laws as laid down by SatNav – there is indeed a mood of medieval pilgrimage. Julia is right. I *am* going to meet Montaigne. And I *will* commune with him, receive his wisdom and pass it on.

The road bends to the right, taking us round a woodland boundary. The view opens up on the left and a hill rises in front of us. I see the chateau of St. Michel de Montaigne, Montaigne's home and the place where he wrote all of his essays. The chateau sits on the tree-covered hilltop; white stone walls and grey slate turrets framed in lush, leafy green. I grab my camera, jump out of the camper van and take endless photos. Zoom in. Zoom out. Use auto-focus and then experiment with other settings.

"Wow!" Julia says.

"Mm," I say, reviewing the photos and noting the same bereft nature in them that I had seen in those of the seagull.

I repeat the process walking around Montaigne's tower, the place where Montaigne had sat and thought and written. I trot up and down the spiral staircase, in and out of the rooms, sucking everything up with a 12 megapixel Hoover. Julia sits in the alcove of one of Montaigne's bedroom windows, head back and resting against the stones, sunlight on her face. I sprint past her, back and forth, clicking, capturing for later, turning here and now into there and then.

The 14th C. circular tower is the only original part remaining of Montaigne's estate (the rest of the Cinderella chateaux is a 19th C. rebuild) and when approached on foot, the tower is the first part of the chateau to come into view. It is built out of irregular chunks of grey stone, weatherworn and covered in patches of moss. There are small, leaded windows, and the red-tiled roof looks like an old straw hat. Before entering, I had placed a hand on the wall and Julia had taken my photo to commemorate what I'd hoped would be a moment of significant contact. But there had been no electric rush of inspiration. Still, I thought, early days. The real creative vibe would no doubt hit

me once I got inside. And so I'd gone in search of it with my camera, and Julia had settled into the sun-lit alcove.

“Can you feel his presence?” Julia says.

I hold up my camera. “I've got the bedroom,” I say. “I'm going up to his library.” Julia is a psychotherapist and what I can or cannot feel, is a regular topic of conversation between us. I'm not sure it would be appropriate to feel Montaigne's presence in his bedchamber.

I continue up the spiral staircase, run a hand along the plastered wall. It's pockmarked and cool. Still no electric rush of inspiration. I come out into the library: a circular penthouse room, bright and airy, white plaster walls, wooden-beamed ceiling and terracotta tiles on the floor. Montaigne's books, some say as many as a thousand, have long gone. There is a desk and a chair, a statuette of Montaigne, a couple of rotting saddles on plinths (riding was Montaigne's favourite outdoor activity) and a glass covered display cabinet. Meagre testaments to Montaigne's life. Difficult, I suppose, to adequately represent a thinker's mind with solid artefacts.

I sit where Montaigne sat, though I doubt it is the original chair and desk, and do my best to summon him by reading an extract from his essay on the imagination: “The imagination brings on the event.”

I read it in my head, and then I read it out loud, but it doesn't bring on any ghostly appearance, or even a tingly feeling. My imagination fails me, too distracted by base material thoughts. What is this place worth? I want a tower and chateau of my own. How many book sales would it take? I realise it would take more than I am ever likely to manage if I insist on writing about medieval troubadours and a long dead essayist.

But I do insist – a perverse and as yet unidentified insistence that is manifesting itself in bizarre quests for the perfect parking-spot and photo of a seagull.

The lack of spiritual spark in Montaigne's tower reminds me of a previous research trip to Jerusalem. I touched the spots, according to believers, where Jesus had been born, where he had been crucified, and where he had ascended to heaven. But in touching them, I dispelled the mystery and, with that, any possibility of faith. Direct contact had been like looking up a magician's sleeve.

Nevertheless, although less influential than Christ, Montaigne is more verifiable. To accept that he existed does not require a leap of faith, and so, in his case, perhaps proximity to the man himself is exactly what I need if I'm to feel his presence.

"We have to go to his tomb," I say to Julia.

Julia is floating around the tower like a wraith, serene and glowing. The sun appears to catch her wherever she stands. An empty picture frame rattles against the wall. Julia looks at me.

"Not a sign," I say. "Just the breeze."

Julia shrugs. "I think he's here."

"It is not a sign. The window's open. Shut the window."

Julia shuts the window. The picture frame rattles.

"Must be a draft," I say. "We're going to his tomb."

Montaigne's tomb is in the Musée de Aquitaine in the city of Bordeaux. The sides of the tomb are decorated with ornate engravings of wild foliage and winged heads. A stone carving of Montaigne lies on the top, decked out in armour with his hands held together

at his chest as if he's in prayer. He is bearded and bald-headed. The yellowing stone shines under the angled museum lights. I touch his bald head and remember my dad. I had once persuaded Dad to let me shave his head on a number 4 setting. I'd told him it would make his wispy grey hair look thicker. It did, but he missed the dapper habit of setting his hair with a comb and grew it back straight away.

My dad had not been as bald as Montaigne, but he did have something of the philosopher about him. If my dad saw me drinking and smoking he advised 'moderation in all things'. If I saw my dad drinking and smoking and reminded him of what he'd said to me, he countered with 'if you like something get plenty of it'. As Montaigne says, '[T]he virtue of moderation is rarer than that of patience.' My dad died of lung cancer at the age of 67.

I stare down at Montaigne's face but he remains tight-lipped, so I take photographs of him. It is difficult to generate the reverential atmosphere I'm after because the sarcophagus is not in its original church setting. It is in a museum, on a carpet, with two comfy chairs against the wall behind it, one of which is occupied by Julia, marvelling at me more than Montaigne.

"Have you got it?" she says.

That elusive 'it' again.

Without the proper backdrop the sarcophagus looks like something from an amusement arcade; stick in a coin somewhere and Montaigne's praying hands will clap like a monkey.

"Nope," I say. "Not here."

And the quest, for I'm not sure what, continues.

The Palais de Poitiers, or Palais de Justice as it's called today, was once the home of Guillaume IXth Duke of Aquitaine, the first known troubadour. I have come, as I had done with Montaigne, to footsteps a creative originator and to kick-start some creative thoughts of my own. The creative thoughts of my own are proving shy. I cannot coax them out no matter how much I prod them with history.

We walk across the square at the centre of Poitiers Plateau, the oldest part of the town. The entrance to the Palais, on the far side of the square, is not that impressive. There are a lot of steps up to the large double doors and a portico with columns at the top of them. The architecture looks 19th Century and municipal.

“Is that it?” Julia says.

We had caught a bus into town and the driver had told us this was the Palais, but it lacks the magnificence of Montaigne's chateau. I know that it's used for council business these days, so have they remodelled it accordingly? Dressed it in a drab post-revolutionary overcoat? We mount the steps and read a sign on the door: 'Palais de Justice'. The right place, at least. We walk in and stand in a small foyer. There is a glass-fronted reception on the right and a walk-through security scanner on the left and a large red-headed security guard in the middle. I have my guitar in a padded gig-bag on my back, but under the guard's stare I'm made to feel like I'm smuggling in a hunting rifle. I am not even sure the Palais is open to the public, and here I am, walking in off the street with the shaved head of an assassin and carrying a hunting rifle.

“Is the Palais open to the public?” I say. “Because I’ve come to shoot some of them.” No, I don’t say that, but I fear the guard is thinking it. He touches the handgun on his hip and tells me the building is closed but opens again at two.

“Okay,” I say. *I’ll come back and shoot some people at two.*

The French take a couple of hours for lunch. In England we’re lucky if we have half an hour to grab a sandwich, and it’s frowned upon if we eat it away from our desk. We have ‘working lunches’: make telephone calls between mouthfuls of ham and cheese, read computer screens staring down the sides of a can of Coke. The French languish over foot-long baguettes and half-carafes of red wine. I don’t know how workplace productivities compare, but I do know that if the French lag behind, they’re unlikely to give a damn.

Julia and I are warming to the continental lifestyle, and although we are in France, we think *when in Rome* and go for a foot-long baguette and half a carafe of red wine. After one generous glass each, not only do we join the French in not giving a damn about work place productivities, we are hard pushed to give a damn about anything else, either.

Replete long before the Palais re-opens, we potter round to the other side of the building and discover a far more impressive aspect. The other side looks like a proper palace, with round towers and cone turrets, squatting gargoyles, angelic statuettes, carved fleurs-de-lis, and elongated buttresses shaped like arrows ready to be released towards the heavens. It looks like a different building altogether. I take photographs.

“Why don’t you try a little busking?” Julia says.

A low stone wall runs along the narrow street; on the other side of it is a small gardened area at the base of the palace. I have a wall to sit on and a troubadour's palace behind me. An ideal spot to sing and play. It is why I'm here, what I have come to do.

"Nah," I say.

I've played the odd festival and theatre before, even played live on radio, but I don't have the nerve to sit on a quiet street and strum. Why? Overwhelmed by the setting? The history? I walk through the garden to the foot of the palace wall. There is a stone bench under a tree. I sit on it and watch the pedestrians pass by on the street.

"So you're not going to play?" Julia says.

"I'll play here," I say.

"No-one'll hear you from there."

"A private performance. It's all I need to do. Just so I can say I've played at the birthplace of the first secular singer-songwriter."

"Chicken."

"No, no. More intimate this way."

"You've busked before."

"I know, I know. But I'm not ready. I haven't practised enough. I'll muck it up."

All true, but excuses nevertheless. "I'll just play a few verses of a couple of songs," I say. "Get me on camera and I'll stick it on Facebook."

I finger-pick a few notes on the guitar and murmur-sing, testing the water. Will the sound carry and turn heads on the street? Or can I get away with it unnoticed? I raise my voice by degrees until I reach normal pitch. Nobody appears interested. I'm cocooned in the garden. I'm ready for the camera. I make it through two lines of a verse

before a large group of tourists floods into the garden, led by a garrulous French lady. I stop playing and put the guitar down.

The French lady points over my head at the palace, but most of the group's gaze doesn't rise beyond my guitar. The lady tour guide talks on, regardless of whether she has her group's attention or not. I try to make it clear to the group from my folded arms that I have no intention of picking up the guitar again while they are here. The tour guide sounds intent on relating the entire history of France, rolling guttural 'R's until I expect to see her cough up a furball. She is annoying me in the same way as those passengers on the ferry who had muscled in on my seagull. This is my bit of garden and this Gallic gobshite is trespassing. When she finally moves on, the group is slow to follow, every one of them looking over their shoulders at my guitar. I have to shoo them off.

Alone again, I pick up the guitar and Julia rolls camera; that is, she presses a little button on her mobile. I play faster than normal, wanting to get it out of the way before anyone else intrudes, and I cock-up several times as a result.

“Slow down,” Julia says.

“I haven't practised enough.”

“Stop making excuses.”

“What are you recording?”

“I'm getting the turrets.”

“Don't waste time on the turrets. I'm not putting turrets on Facebook. What are you doing now?”

“Wide shot.”

“Pointless. Just get me in full-frame and stand still, will you?”

“I thought you wanted the palace in.”

“I want me in. The palace isn’t doing anything.”

The conversation bickers away like this until both of us settle. I play the opening verses and a chorus of “Good Old John Tom”, a song I had written about my dad. After the first verse the birds sing along.

“How do you feel?” Julia says.

“Okay.”

“Get any sense of Guillaume?”

“Not really.”

“How about your dad.”

“A bit. Maybe.”

“Did you hear the birds?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m surprised.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re rushing everything. You keep missing the moments; collecting them to analyse later instead of feeling them when they happen. You’re too detached.”

I thought about this.

“What are you feeling now?” Julia says.

“I’m thinking about it.”

“Well, stop it. Stop thinking. Feel. Tell me what you’re feeling.”

“Annoyed.” I point at her phone. “Did it record?”

But I know Julia is right. Again. And it accounts for everything: the obsessive hunt for the right parking spot, the right seagull photograph, the foot-stepping of Montaigne and Guillaume, the reluctance to play for fear of not being perfect. I'm frozen in conjecture instead of burning up with passion.

We walk around the corner, heading back to the main entrance. I hear singing and the loud thrash of an acoustic guitar. A young man, with a beard and a dog, is sitting cross-legged in a doorway, cranking out a song with gusto. I don't recognise the song, but I don't need to. The young man is singing like his life depends on it. He's in combat; pushing and testing; asking of himself, and in his answer I know him better. He is a man of *moment*, not of *retrospect*. There is blood in his veins.

At last, the elusive 'it' identified.

And so, in the chapters that follow, I am not just writing autobiographical anecdotes and songs – I am checking myself for a pulse.

Chapter Three

Catch That Train

(Enueg: the troubadour song category for unpleasant things)

We should set aside a room, just for ourselves, at the back of the shop, keeping it entirely free and establishing there our true liberty, our principal solitude and asylum.

Michel de Montaigne

One day in 1985 I was sitting at the kitchen table, typing, enclosed in a bubble of comic thought. The typewriter was new and electric, which meant I no longer needed to stab the keys with pneumatic force as I had done with the old manual machine, although the smack of metal typeface against the roller remained just as loud. The clackety-clack vibrations were enough to set the table in motion, and the linoleum flooring meant that every clackety-clack echoed throughout the flat. I typed on in my pleasant creative hum until a male voice shouted up a request from the flat below:

“STOP THAT FUCKING TYPING.”

Now, Sartre claimed that *hell is other people*. And I would go along with that. But the real problem with other people is that I am often one of them. Therefore, it is impossible to assume, though I have tried, that I don't take my turn being hellish. The difficulty is in deciding whether I am suffering the hell or causing it. “Stop that fucking typing” implied that on this occasion I might be causing it. On the other hand, did I have an excuse for feeling indignant because my neighbour had not said “Stop that fucking typing, *please!*”? How was I to react?

The hell of other people, I admit, is not so much in their actions as it is in my reactions. It is the evoking of my appalling judgement that I object to.

On returning from France and having resolved to take a closer look at myself, it is my failings that appear most insistent on making themselves known first.

The catalogue of embarrassing occasions when I have either over or under reacted during moments of *other people* conflict is my equivalent of a troubadour Enueg; it is my 'list of unpleasant things'. And there have been many such occasions, because other people are everywhere: living next door to us, working with us, holidaying with us. We can't escape them. So what's the best way to handle the conflict?

Here's how I do it, and why I suffer so much hell. Where rage would be appropriate, I'm accommodating and apologetic. Where a mild rebuke would suffice, I let loose the dogs of war.

My neighbour downstairs had sworn at me. But I had been making a noise. Which way to go? Apologetic? Or dogs of war?

I stopped typing. The plea had been angry. It had also had something of the 'wits end' about it; a desperate cry for mercy as much as anything else. What had been a happy state of oblivion for me, had been torture for my neighbour. I thought of letting him read the hilarious results of my labour, but doubted that his mood would be improved by a couple of gags written for *The Roland Rat Show*.

(As it transpired, they didn't improve anybody's mood. When the show was broadcast, Alan Coren described it as a 'miasma' and 'such tosh'. It would have been in everyone's best interest if my neighbour's protests had been more violent. He should have taken my new electric typewriter and brained me with it.)

Surprisingly, this was the only neighbour in London I ever had a problem with, apart from the one whose face would pop up at the top of my garden fence like Mr Punch and ask to borrow a tenner. But he was quiet and I always got the tenner back. Neighbours only became a real issue once I moved into the country, and my 'principal solitude and asylum' came under serious threat.

"There's something going on out at the back," Julia said. She was in the back bedroom, which (and I keep meaning to have a word with her about this) she had taken over as her walk-in wardrobe, dress by dress and bra by bra.

"Like what?" I said from the bathroom.

"Like a bulldozer."

I stopped brushing my teeth and joined Julia at the bedroom window, toothbrush in my mouth.

"Look," Julia said.

I lived in a terraced cottage. A dirt track ran behind the terrace providing rear access. It also divided our back gardens from the back gardens of the next terrace further up the hill from us. A fifteen foot hedgerow, comprising bushes and trees established over eighty years, separated the property behind me from the dirt track. At least, it had done. There was now a hole in my green vista with a mini-digger driving through it, chugging out clouds of diesel fumes where once butterflies had flitted.

The new neighbours had arrived.

"Can he do that?" Julia said. "I thought it was a private road."

"It is. I think."

But I wasn't absolutely one hundred per cent sure. The neighbours on my terrace had always referred to it as a private road but what was their source of authority?

I drooled toothpaste.

"Keep calm," Julia said.

I did my best. It is not something I'm good at. I live in a permanent state of imagining worst case scenarios and already had it in my head that the man was digging a runway for a new regional airport.

I ran downstairs.

"Don't jump to any conclusions," Julia shouted after me.

I ran out into the street and up to the front of the new neighbours' house. It was a cool spring morning with a low-lying mist on the fields behind me. The digger at the bottom of the garden lurched backwards and forwards, its mechanical arm striking at the earth.

I knocked on the door. Dew drops jiggled on a spider's web in the stonework of the door jamb. Keep calm I told myself. Keep calm. Nobody answered. Keep calm.

I knocked again. Heard something on the other side of the door. Movement of some kind. But still nobody answered. The digger grated its gears.

I knocked again. This time the door opened. A blonde girl in a white bathrobe stood on the threshold looking up at me. Sweet girl. She held her bathrobe together with one hand and the door open with the other. I smiled. A big big smile, keeping calm, but disconcerted by the bathrobe. Did I look like I was leering?

“Morning,” I said. “I’m one of your neighbours from the other terrace. Um, thought I’d better tell you I think that’s a private road. Not, not sure you’re allowed to create access onto it.”

“Oh, gosh!” the girl said. “Is that what you think we’re doing? Oh, no. No. We’re not doing that. We just need to carry out some landscaping in the garden.”

Ah, I thought. Not creating permanent access. And the word ‘landscaping’ sounded horticultural despite the pile of uprooted hawthorns and splintered cherry blossoms. While I was under the impression that the road belonged to my terrace I wasn’t so sure about the border. What if that belonged to the new neighbours? If it did, then wouldn’t it be petty of me to deny the digger temporary access? *Show largesse, Dave. Be reasonable.*

“Ah, oh, I see, great,” I said. If there’s one thing I can do faster than blowing blood vessels, it’s lapsing into abject apologies. “Well, just didn’t want you spending money on a car port or something if you were only going to have to take it down again.”

“Oh, no, we’re not building a car port. Nothing like that.” The blonde took half a step back and nudged the door forward an inch. My cue to leave.

“Came round to save you money, really,” I said.

“Ok. Thanks.” The blonde nodded and closed the door.

The digger chewed at the ground and tore up a holly bush.

I know in my heart I am one of life’s mugs: I buy cleaning materials I don’t need from door-to-door Lithuanian salesmen, answer street questionnaires on my shopping habits, handout personal details to cold callers, and make donations to every cause from starving babies to retired dancing bears. And so when faced with conflict I

overcompensate, assume I'm being taken advantage of from the off, and try to show I am not a man to be trifled with. But my initial huff and puff of indignation soon collapses into a squeak and squawk of compliant contrition. I have little faith in my spontaneous assessment of anything.

“So what’s going on over there?” Julia asked.

“They just need temporary access to landscape their garden.”

“But they’re *destroying* the landscape.”

“Only temporarily.”

Julia looked at me. “Did you go round there with toothpaste on your lips?”

“Oh, bloody hell!”

I wiped my mouth and went to work. When I came home I walked straight out into the back garden to check on my neighbours’ progress. Where once I had looked upon a dense wall of green foliage, nesting birds and wild flowers, I now looked up the exhaust pipes of a white transit van and a black Range Rover.

“They lied,” I said to Julia.

Her look of incredulity was not prompted by the lie, but by my surprise at it.

The following day the digger returned. When one of the other neighbours from my terrace tried to stop it, asserting, as I had thought was the case, that the lane was private, the digger driver not only drove the digger down the private lane but also at my neighbour. This, as if it were needed, confirmed the deception. Landscaping had been a lie. It was all about creating car-parking access. I had been taken for a mug again.

I learned that the driver of the digger was also the blonde’s husband – a squat and hairy man, flapping his arms in his cabin like a squirrel monkey in the Space Shuttle,

and no easier to reason with. He trundled up and down in his digger shouting “Fuck off!”

Our serene, picturesque village was under siege.

Residents accustomed to the trill of birdsong and the clippity clop of horses’ hooves were now subjected to a new soundtrack of effing and blinding incomers as they continued with their unauthorised building works, laying rapacious waste to the local wildlife habitat.

Barbarians were at the gate. I could no longer sit in my garden cocooned in rural tranquillity, seeking wisdom and goodness in the detached spirit of Montaigne. Instead I heard the constant polluting rumble of a transit van, a four-by-four, and the equally polluting shriek of the barbarian’s termagant wife, not such a sweet girl after all. Her shrill voice and its choice selection of obscenities stung the atmosphere like mustard gas.

I contacted the police. They were polite and uninterested. Trespass is a civil matter. I contacted National Parks. We were after all in a conservation area. One cannot so much as put up a bird table in a conservation area without permission from National Parks. “Quite right,” National Parks said, “But it’s too late now. They’ve already gone and chopped the trees down, haven’t they.” “In which case,” I said, “what is the fucking point of National Parks?” To which they said, after a sulky silence, “We hope you’re not thinking of putting up a bird table Mr Tomlinson.”

The only recourse left to me was county court, which meant interminable procedure, astronomical costs and no guarantee of a sympathetic judgement. It would take an idiot of the first order to pursue that line. I knew such an idiot. In my defence,

the rest of the neighbours on my terrace urged me on. They suggested that we should fight it as a collective and spread the costs. I thought about it and got carried away with the theme of brothers-in-arms. I had a friend who was a solicitor. I might get a mate's rate. "Okay," I said. "I'll organise a letter on behalf of the whole terrace."

But a single letter was not enough. What followed was a three-year labyrinthine quest that would have made *Bleak House* look iridescent; a quest that meant negotiating a path through deeds, land registry records, National Parks guidelines, parish councillors, town councillors and my local MP. Every twist and turn of which (too tedious to relate in detail) brought me to the brink of mania and madness. My room 'at the back of the shop' was piled high with legal paperwork, and my head was stuffed with grievance and worry.

But...WE WON. And here I will allow myself the immodest claim that we won because of me, because of my doggedness and meticulous research. It was me who dug up all the evidence we required and me who managed the strategies. Me who wrote a hundred letters and spent hours and hours on the phone. All of which also meant, of course, that it was me who bore every ounce of the conflict and the stress.

So yes, we had won, but it was not something that I had been able to do with any sense of detachment, or with any sense of proportion. I had suffered too much contradictory bureaucracy at the hands of too many ineffectual people. My emotions had been inflamed and dowsed so many times that they had fallen out of synch with the events. No natural wax and wane. Just a constant jarring and jolting.

Other people had put my head in a spin, and my moods had arrived accordingly, as though delivered by the random turn of a roulette wheel. One minute I would react

with numb compliance, the next with fevered outrage, too dizzy and out of control for any logical explanation. I had kept my temper when I was entitled to lose it (whimpering when the solicitor presented the invoice for his legal fees – several thousand pounds more than our agreed budget), and lost it when I needed to keep it (chasing one of my neighbours across the gardens when he refused to pay his share of said legal fees).

Brothers-in-arms had gone for a Burton. I could not, it transpired, cope with other people even when they were on my side.

My mum called me while I was working as a writer and producer in the comedy department at the BBC.

“Have you read the article by John Birt?” she said.

At the time John Birt (now Baron Birt) was the Director General at the BBC.

“No. What does it say?” I didn’t read industry news.

“He’s complaining about the state of English sit-coms,” Mum said, “and wants to know why nobody’s producing good ones anymore.”

“Oh.”

“You’re at the BBC,” Mum said. “Why don’t you write to him? Tell him why nothing decent is getting made.”

It was touching that Mum believed I knew why, but then it was not surprising given how often I’d told her I was an expert on the subject.

“I can’t write to John Birt, Mum.”

“Why not? He’s asked the question. Give him your thoughts.”

“I’m not a staffer. I’m only here on contract.”

“What’s the difference? You know the system. You know what’s wrong with it.”

I didn’t, of course. I just had a big mouth. The sensible thing would have been to keep it shut from then on.

So I wrote a letter to John Birt.

A week later I got a call from the secretary to the Controller of Entertainment. Would I come to the office that afternoon? The Controller of Entertainment was Paul Jackson, a producer and director of monumental proportions. He’d done eight series of *The Two Ronnies*, won a number of BAFTAs, including one for *The Young Ones*, and had worked with (and in a lot of cases discovered) every other big name in the comedy world: Stephen Fry, Hugh Laurie, Dawn French, Jennifer Saunders, Tracey Ullman, Lenny Henry... The list ran on and on. Paul’s secretary didn’t mention the subject of our meeting, which meant only one thing. I was in trouble.

I entered Paul’s office in a reverential sweat, hardly able to breathe. His reputation took up all the air. The office was big and curved, on the inside of the oval at the old White City building, overlooking the fountain below. There was a large desk by the window and a small conference area on the left comprising armchairs and a coffee table. Paul was older than me but had a youthful face and exuded energy in every movement. He couldn’t pick up a pencil without it looking like a rocket launch.

“Come in, David. Take a seat.”

Was there any hope in the tone of the greeting? Any hope at all that I hadn’t been summoned for execution? Paul looked down at something on his desk. I saw my letter to John Birt and heard the swish of a guillotine blade. Paul was not smiling, quite an

achievement for a man renowned for his irrepressible charm and good humour. I tried to encourage him with a big smile of my own.

Paul tapped the letter. “John has asked me to deal with this,” he said, his voice quick and precise.

Writing to John Birt had been an inexcusable breach of the accepted hierarchy. I should not have bypassed the department heads. I looked at the letter in Paul’s hand.

“My mum told me to write it,” I said.

I couldn’t off-load the blame fast enough, which was pitiable, but to think that using my mum as an excuse was any kind of sensible grown-up reply was even worse. A lot worse. Couldn’t get any worse.

Well, actually, it could. I could keep repeating it. Which I did.

Until Paul said, “David, I think I probably know more about comedy than your mum.”

But I had said it so many times that I thought I heard an element of doubt in Paul’s voice. Should I press home my advantage? Argue the toss about who was the greater comedic authority: Paul Jackson, BAFTA-winning Controller of BBC Entertainment, or my mum, who ran a boarding kennels in Scarborough?

Don’t be ridiculous. This was how out of kilter my reasoning could get when under pressure, and this was the incident that prompted me to question the nature of my chosen career. Right then and there. While Paul paced, I concluded that I was a sweaty gormless tit in the wrong business.

I knew this because I was nothing like Paul. He was self-assured and equally adept at dealing with people as he was with scripts. Even my carpeting was controlled

and gracious. Paul had every right to feel angry and disappointed, but he didn't use the opportunity to rant, or grandstand his ego. My reprimand was measured, presented as a piece of career guidance as much as a reproof. The man was the master. It was all I could do not to kiss him with gratitude for my bollocking.

I told fellow comedy producer Hugo Blick what had happened. He roared and made me repeat the story every day for a week.

"Tell me again," he said.

"No. You know what happened."

"Yes, yes, but tell it again. Go on." Then he'd prompt me. "So your mum told you to write to John Birt..."

Was this really the life to which I was best suited? I was hopeless at judging when it would be wiser to either stand my ground or give ground. There were too many job titles and egos on a TV production, and the permutations for giving or taking offence were infinite. Guessing them accurately was beyond me. I needed a simpler set of relationships if I was ever going to find and protect that mythological room that Montaigne talked of at the back of the shop.

And so, a few years later I took a job teaching at a college of Further Education. Teaching, I thought, now there's a worthwhile occupation.

The Yorkshire Coast College of Performing Arts campus was the old Stephen Joseph Theatre in the round, and before that it had been a school. The exterior of red brick and tiles remained the same while the interior had morphed and re-morphed into an impressive but dilapidated collection of performance spaces. The students ebbed and

flowed along the corridors in waves of tattoos, body piercings, ludicrous hairstyles and ill-fitting clothes.

“Okay, take your notebooks out, please,” I said to the class on my first day.

“We don’t have notebooks.”

“No notebooks?” I said.

“No.”

“Then how do you keep a record of your lessons?”

The students looked at one another.

“We do assignments.”

“Based on what?” I said.

“Eh?”

“Aren’t your assignments based on your lessons?”

“Yeah.”

“Then how do you keep a record of what you study in your lessons?”

The students looked at one other again. There was a pause. A long one. Then one of them said, “We don’t have notebooks.”

This was how my teaching experience kicked off. I was delivering an NVQ on Performing Arts and had expected the same fervent attitude to learning and training that I’d seen on the TV series *Fame*. But the students didn’t have notebooks...or pens.

I told them to bring both in future. The following day some of the students had brought a notebook but not a pen, some had brought several pens but no notebook, some had forgotten to bring either. After a lot of ripping sheets out of notebooks and throwing

biros across the classroom, everyone had a blank page and something to write with. That in itself felt like a good day's work.

"Today, we're going right back to the start of it all," I said. "We're going to take a look at Greek theatre."

A few students dropped their pens.

"Has anybody read any of the Greek playwrights?"

A couple more pens fell to the floor.

"You have heard of the Greeks, right?"

Silence. Then someone said, "I've been to Corfu."

Oh, dear. I launched into a brief history of Greek theatre using the old school teaching technique: chalk and talk. I spieled, wrote on the whiteboard, told them to copy everything down, to collect the facts on paper. And I did it all at speed, accompanied by their cries of panic.

"You're going too fast."

"My pen's run out."

"Me thumb's cramping."

I ignored the students' complaints, ignored their sighing and squirming and, in some cases, their florid sweating. I crashed on, pacing in front of them, waving my arms, declaiming 'Sophocles this' and 'Aristophanes that'. They stared, they scribbled, captivated by my maniacal performance. At the end of the lesson they threw down their pens, ran fingers through their hair and took deep breaths on inhalers. But they had notes, illegible scraps in the main, but words on a page nonetheless. They rocked in their chairs and panted. I'd broken them. I thought.

The following day started in exactly the same way: some of the students had brought a notebook but not a pen, some had brought several pens but no notebook, some had forgotten to bring either. Three students didn't turn up at all, and never would again. I quizzed the class on what they knew about the Greeks. Knack-all, it appeared.

“Can't read my writing, Dave.”

“Someone stole my notebook.”

“Corfu's nice.”

Despite my encouragement, the appearance of notebooks in the classroom remained sporadic, and my expectation that students should remember anything from one day to the next was met with daily derision. The prevailing response on being asked a question was one of puzzled indignation.

When I once found the entire class in the canteen at 9.15am eating breakfast instead of studying in my classroom, where they should have been from 9.00am, the interruption of their breakfast was treated as the greater crime. When I asked a girl not to use her hair straighteners during a lesson, the class booed me. When I threatened to confiscate another young girl's mobile phone if she didn't terminate a call to her mum, she refused and then offered her mum a running commentary on the confiscation.

“Yeah, he's seen me talking to you...No, he's not happy...He wants me to stop talking... He's pulling a face...He's threatening to take my mobile...He's walking down the aisle...Pointing at the phone...Reaching out...Grabbing it...Goodbye, Muuummm...”

The only people who showed less regard for the educational system than the students were the managers. Students represented funding, so they were regarded more

as units of currency than as young minds that we had a responsibility to educate. Aaron, one of my NVQ students, had an erratic attendance record, refused to take any speaking parts during workshops and had yet to hand in a single assignment. Janet, my line manager, asked me to award Aaron his diploma all the same. I refused.

“He hasn’t earned it,” I said.

“But surely we can make an allowance?” Janet said. “He has ADD and Aspergers.”

“Then he needs specialist help, not an honorary NVQ in Performing Arts.”

“But if you worked with him and brought him up to speed...”

“What? You mean get him to complete a whole year’s work in the last three weeks of term?”

Janet grew tetchy. “Do what you can and bring me the results in a fortnight. We’ll take it from there.”

Janet was close to retirement and ready for it. The managers above her demanded high pass rates, regardless of whether they reflected genuine ability or not. Janet was not going to make waves by failing those students that couldn’t tie their own shoelaces.

I did what I could and a fortnight later I brought the results to another meeting with Janet. I also brought Aaron to help give some context. Aaron looked fretful, like a wild animal being manhandled, an expression not helped by his startled hairstyle and darting eyes.

“What’s this?” Janet held up Aaron’s work – a single sheet of A4.

“That’s Aaron’s assignment,” I said.

“The cover sheet?”

“All of it.”

“All of it?” Janet checked the other side. Blank. She flipped it back, tried to read the felt tip squiggles, hoping to decipher a piece of pithy genius. “What does it say?” she asked me.

“I have no idea.”

“What’s it say, Aaron?”

Aaron shrugged.

“But you wrote it.”

“Yeah, it’s my assignment,” Aaron said.

“Assignment on what?”

Aaron looked at me, eyes wide.

I answered for him. “I asked them to research the number of different jobs involved at a theatre like the Stephen Joseph, and to describe each one – what it involved, what qualifications were needed, that sort of thing.”

“So what kind of research did you do, Aaron?” Janet asked.

Aaron shrugged.

“Did you go to the library? Go online?”

“They have actors,” Aaron said.

“Yes, good.” Janet was optimistic. “And what other kinds of jobs are involved in the theatre?”

“Acting.”

“Other than acting.”

“Performing.”

“That’s acting, Aaron. Apart from performing and acting, can you think of another job in the theatre?”

“Performing arts.”

“That’s not a job, Aaron. It’s your course title. I want a job associated with the stage.”

“Acting.”

Janet slammed the sheet of A4 onto the table. Aaron was red-faced and petrified. Attention Deficit Disorder and Aspergers were the kinder and more politically correct ways of expressing Aaron’s learning difficulties, but they hardly seemed adequate.

Janet tried again. “Aaron, can you not think of another single job in the theatre?”

“Dinner lady.”

“What?”

The pressure was too much for Aaron. He had thrown in the only other occupation that readily came to mind, that of his mum.

The pressure was also too much for Janet. She blushed the same livid crimson as Aaron.

“No. Not...” Janet stood up, looked at me. “Alright,” she said, “forget it.” And left the room.

For nine months I continued to deal with the impenetrable rationale on either side of me, from the assortment of Aarons in the classroom, to the assortment of Janets in the management offices. And finally I blew.

It was a hot day at the end of the summer term and the sun laser-ed us through the windows. There were no curtains or blinds and so we sat squinting and frying.

“Can you all be quiet, please?” I said at the start of the lesson.

I was met with the usual chorus of responses, coming so fast I couldn't tell who had said what; my voice plaintive somewhere in the mix.

“But I feel sick.”

“She's not sick, Dave. She's hung-over.”

“I'm not. I was in bed by four.”

“Yes, well,” I said, “*if you could all just be quiet for a minute while I-*”

“Ow! He's drawing on my face.”

“*Stop drawing on her face.*”

“It's make-up.”

“It's biro, you twat!”

“*Who's playing music?*”

“It helps me concentrate.”

“*Could you turn it off, please?*”

“I can't concentrate without it.”

“*Turn it off.*”

“Tina says she's gonna be late.”

“*Why?*”

“She hasn't finished her breakfast.”

Uproar and mayhem and absentees.

“*Please, could you all just sit down and be quiet.*”

“I really do feel sick. Can I go and be sick?”

“Don't let her, Dave. She only wants a fag.”

“I do not.”

“Check her for fags before she goes.”

“She’s not going anywhere. Everyone. Be quiet.”

“Where’s Aaron?”

“Be quiet.”

“He’s never here.”

“Will you be quiet.”

“The boy’s an idiot.”

“BE QUIET YOU BUNCH OF LITTLE FUCKERS!”

Not only did the ‘bunch of little fuckers’ fall quiet, but they also froze solid: mid biro-face-graffiti, mid pulling-a-sick-expression, mid MP3-table-drumming. I looked at their shocked expressions and felt ashamed. I had lost my temper and sworn. Not professional. I felt ashamed because for all their boisterous and undisciplined behaviour, I liked them. I felt ashamed because the problem was really mine. I paced in front of them, remorseful and whiney.

“I’ve tried with you lot, I really have. Haven’t I? I’ve tried everything I can think of.”

I continued in this wheedling vein, back-peddalling from the scary bastard I’d been only minutes ago, sending out confused signals. Did I mean business or not?

The students were quietish for the remainder of the lesson, but I felt like the biggest kid in the class by the end of it. I had started the job with a notion of teaching that belonged to the era of Mr Chips. Inexperience and vanity had got the better of me. I had assumed there was a level of respect inherent in the role of teacher, but I was out of

touch. The students were not performing according to the script I had in mind. And where did I get the idea that there was a script? A natural order? A predictable chronology of responses?

I have a script for everything, I realise, but I'm often no better at remembering my lines than anyone else. Living and working in close proximity to *other people* starts with a simple premise: show a little respect and consideration. It is not hard to grasp. And yet time and again in my life these straightforward scenarios career out of control like the filming of *Cleopatra*, and I end up adding another incident to my list of unpleasant behavioural memories.

Julia and I took the camper van to a cliff-top campsite near Whitby Abbey. Our old van, beige and dented, sat amongst the super-duper chromium glow of ultra modern caravans. Although it was a chilly and cloudy afternoon, we had a spectacular view of the sea.

"I'd like the awning down," Julia said.

"It's too cold to sit outside."

"I don't care. It looks nice."

Julia likes to create the illusion of camping in southern Spain even when we're on the North Yorkshire coast. So I wound down the awning and muttered about the pointlessness of it, breaking off every now and then to comment on the clouds.

"And put the windbreak round," Julia said.

"But we're not going to sit outside."

"It'll look cosier."

“But...Ah, flippin’ ’eck!”

I hadn’t attached the windbreak before, which was one of the reasons Julia wanted it putting up. She wanted to see what it looked like, wanted to imagine a blistering sun and the need for a shady spot. I attached the windbreak; a hell of a job when a) it’s windy, b) you haven’t done the job before, and c) even if you’ve done the job before, you don’t know a hammer from a hedgehog.

The windbreaker wall, once up, leaned this way and that; taut in places, baggy in others, with guy ropes set like trip wires on either side of it. Nevertheless, it stayed up.

“Ah, lovely,” Julia said.

“You’re crackers! Now can we go inside?”

And so we left the awning and the windbreaker for the warmth of a gas heater and a bottle of red wine. By the time we had finished our meal the wind had gone from blustery to gale force and the awning and the windbreaker were flapping fit for take-off.

“I can’t sleep with that racket going on,” I said.

“It’s fine. Everything’s secure.”

“But the noise. Listen to it.”

The awning creaked, metal against metal.

“That can’t be good for it,” I said. “It’s not designed for North Yorkshire.”

“Fine. Fine. Take it down. But it’s pitch black out there.”

“You hold the torch.”

Despite the torchlight I tripped over each guy rope in turn and wore the windbreaker like a winding sheet before bringing it under control and shoving the whole damn contraption into the luggage compartment. I then wound in the awning. Although

I turned the handle at the speed of Superman circumnavigating the globe, all that blurred effort translated into an awning speed of no more than half-a-mile per hour, and all the while the wind bounced the canopy up and down on my head like the wing of an angry seagull.

Job done, I collapsed inside the camper and requested another bottle of wine.

“Was it worth it?” Julia asked.

I nodded. “Listen. Just the sounds of nature now.”

We listened. A second later an alarm sounded nearby. Julia laughed. I sighed.

Probably a car alarm triggered by the heavy winds.

“Pour the wine,” I said.

Whoever owned the car would come out and turn off the alarm in a minute.

A minute passed and the alarm continued.

“Ah, no,” I said. “You know what that means. The owners aren’t on site. Bloody thing is going to blare away until they get back.”

“Maybe it’s not the wind. Maybe someone’s breaking in. We’d better check.”

Julia and I stepped outside. The wind was howling but the alarm was a great deal louder. The whole site must have been able to hear it.

“I’ll hold the torch,” I said. I’d tripped up enough for one evening.

We followed the whir-whir sound and discovered that it was not coming from a car but a caravan. The caravan was in darkness.

“Obviously no-one in it,” I said.

“And I haven’t seen a car with it today.”

“Bloody thing could ring for the rest of the season. What kind of people alarm their caravan?”

I walked around it looking for signs of someone having broken in. I couldn't see any damage. I looked underneath it in the hope of finding the source of the wailing. Perhaps there was a circuit box and a reset button. But no. Nothing. I hopped around in circles, frustrated. I wanted to shout “TURN THAT FUCKING ALARM OFF!” but there was no-one to hear.

“What kind of people...I mean an alarm, for God's sake! On a secure site of family campers, on a flamin' cliff-top miles from anywhere...What kind of bloody prissy people...”

Julia guided my hopping circles of fury back to our camper.

“Someone'll return sooner or later,” she said.

We put on a Ron Sexsmith CD. I filled my wine glass and let Ron's melodies work in conjunction with the grape to mellow my mood. Julia and I chatted and relaxed, and I grew philosophical about the drone of the alarm.

Until about midnight. Then my philosophical outlook went up in sparks.

“That fucking alarm!” I said. “I don't think anyone's coming back, you know.”

“Let's take another look. There must be something we can do.”

We walked back to the caravan.

“You'd think the site owners would do something,” I said.

“Rock it.”

“Hey?”

“Doesn't that sometimes turn car alarms off? If you rock the car?”

“Rock the caravan?”

“Yeah.”

“Rock it? Julia, it’s bigger than my house.” I put my shoulder to it to demonstrate the insignificance of my weight against the caravan’s immobile tonnage. “Rock the caravan,” I said to myself, incredulous.

We slouched back to the camper, hoping someone else might come out and share our anger with us. No-one did.

“We can’t be the only ones who are pissed off, can we?” I said.

“Somebody must be staying in it. Did you see that it was plugged into a mains power-point?” Julia said.

“Ah, wait. So if we disconnect the mains, then maybe the alarm will shut down and re-set itself,” I said.

“Maybe.”

“Right. Go on, then.”

“Me?”

“Okay. Okay. I’ll go.”

I returned to the caravan and stood by the power-point. I felt about as discreet as Inspector Clouseau. I looked over my shoulder several times and then disconnected the mains cable. I waited a second. The alarm continued. I waited a while longer. The alarm rang on. I sighed, seethed, and cursed and then reconnected the cable. I walked back to the camper, clenching my fists on every whine of the alarm.

“No go,” I said. “The bloody thing must be running off the caravan’s leisure battery.”

“So leave the mains disconnected. Let the battery run down.”

I thought it through. “That’s evil genius, Julia. But what if they have stuff in the fridge?”

“Then their milk will go tepid.”

“Tepid milk. I can live with that. Wait. They’re bound to have a freezer.”

“Can you sleep through that alarm?”

“No.”

“So disconnect the mains.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“I daren’t.” Disconnecting the cable was one thing. *Leaving* it disconnected was another. “You do it,” I said. “I’ll keep a look out...From in here.”

“You’re priceless.”

“They’ll go easy on a girl.”

“Who will?”

“Whoever catches you.”

“No-one’s out there.”

“That’s alright, then. Hurry up.”

Julia, in admirable SAS style, slinked over to the caravan and detached its mains cable. I, in a less commendable way, watched her do it from behind the camper’s net curtain. Julia slinked back.

“Well, done,” I said. “Anyone see you?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“We’ll leave early in the morning, before any possible repercussions.”

Within an hour the alarm had stopped, after a slow incriminating waahhwaahh dying moan.

“Brilliant!” I said. And slept like a baby.

In the morning, I wanted to de-camp straight away. Julia wanted a fried breakfast. She threw open the camper door to let in some fresh air.

“Can’t you just have cereal?” I said.

“I’m not running away.”

“Please.”

Julia put the bacon on. Five minutes later three four-by-fours arrived together and each parked outside a caravan; one of the caravans was the subject of our raid.

“Oo, shit!” I said. “How’s that bacon doing?”

“We did the right thing. We had no choice.”

“Look at the size of those blokes.”

The three four-by-four drivers flexed their body-builder biceps and stroked their shaved heads. Their wives were no less dainty. They were clearly all friends who’d been travelling together.

“Fried egg?” Julia said.

“You’re kidding?”

“With fried mushrooms and grilled tomatoes, I think.”

“Julia. The wives alone could kill me.”

“Probably no harm done.”

The couple entered their caravan and came out only a few seconds later. The man picked up the unplugged electric cable. He called to his wife and showed it to her. They called to their friends, showed them the disconnected cable. The wife re-entered the caravan, came out angry, waving her arms, presumably having discovered tepid milk, or worse.

I shut our camper door.

“They have no idea who did it,” Julia said.

“Somebody might have seen us...you. Last night. Hey, there might be CCTV cameras. They could be reviewing the footage right now.”

“It was pitch black.”

“They might come round and ask us if we saw anything.”

“I’ll tell them what I think of their alarm, if they do.”

“Don’t you dare.”

“I’ll tell them what you think, too.”

“Julia!”

“Look at you. You were furious last night. Aren’t you going to say anything if they come round?”

“No.”

The three bald men and their wives buzzed between their caravans and walked past our camper every time they did so. I heard their muttered voices and caught keywords such as ‘battery’ and ‘freezer’ and ‘murder the bastard!’

Julia and I ate our fry-up, me watching the bald heads bob by our window, waiting for one of them to head-butt the door. Julia's entertainment was watching me watch them. She then languished over toast and marmalade.

Julia is better at speaking her mind and remaining consistent in her feelings. She's more confident about the legitimacy of her actions. I can't sustain the heat of the moment in any cool rational way, and I knew I wouldn't be able to retain my indignation over the alarm if confronted with an irate baldie and a de-frosted chicken.

"Can we go now?" I said.

"You disconnect the electrics and put the cable away. I'll tidy up in here."

Disconnecting the electrics meant going outside. I waited for a break in the parade of bald heads and then scooted out, keeping my eyes down throughout the procedure, not bothering to rollup the cable into a neat coil before dumping it into the luggage compartment on top of the scrunched up windbreaker.

"Right, let's go go go," I said, jumping back into the camper like it was the start of a *Starsky & Hutch* episode. I drove off at five miles per hour, staring straight ahead, refraining from the usual courtesy of nodding at fellow campers.

"Are they following?" I asked.

Julia sat in the passenger seat, already reading a magazine. "Yeah. They've got a posse up."

I chanced a glance over my shoulder. Not a bald head in sight. "I think we've made it."

Julia turned the page of her magazine.

I was relieved, but unsettled by yet another wild see-sawing of my emotions: a man of blood and thunder the night before; snivelling, jellified coward the morning after.

What's the answer if you suffer from *other people* in this way?

One solution is to shoot them. It's tempting, and quite popular in the shopping malls of America. Another option is to call them a 'bunch of little fuckers'. Less newsworthy, but still a far too damning indictment of one's own social inadequacies.

Or, and this is what I plan to stick with in the future. You find yourself a Julia, think of humanity as a train and get onboard regardless of the risk. Who wants to spend their life standing on a platform?

Chapter Four

Good Old John Tom

(Planh: the troubadour song category for lamenting a dead mentor or friend)

In judging another man's life, I always inquire how he behaved at the last; and one of the principle aims of my life is to conduct myself well when it ends – peacefully, I mean, and with a calm mind.

Michel de Montaigne

I breathed in. The air was a fuggy mix of germ-ridden gloom and terminal decay, scented with the forlorn hope of antiseptic. A large lady pushed a tea-trolley. The crockery chinked and clattered. The lady called out inane comments to her bed-bound 'loves' and 'darlings'. Some of the 'loves' and 'darlings' responded in kind, others could do no more than dribble and blink.

I didn't want a cup of tea, and tried not to breathe in through my nose any more.

"Get me out of here," Dad said.

"I'm not sure I can."

"No, listen to me, David. I can't stay here. You have to take me home."

My Dad was in Scarborough Hospital, one of six men on a ward. None of them looked in good shape. Not that I'd expected to find them in the middle of a Pilates class, but some small signs of recovery in at least one of them would have been encouraging. Dad had spent three nights here with five men at death's door for company. His GP thought he had pneumonia, but there were test results pending. The consultant was due

to give his assessment today. I had a list of questions for him: Was it definitely pneumonia? Would pneumonia account for Dad's back pains? Why couldn't we get him to eat anything? And how long before we could take him home?

A nurse told me the consultant had finished his rounds and was ready to see me. Was she a proper nurse? I couldn't tell. No two nurses appeared to wear the same uniform. There were numerous colour schemes for trimmings and epaulettes, which, as far as I could work out, denoted nothing more than the distance somebody was from being fully qualified, although all of the faux nurses offered medical advice with the confidence of a surgeon. Even the trolley lady handed out prognoses as readily as cups of tea and looked primed to take out someone's appendix with a teaspoon.

"I mean it, David," Dad said. "Get me out of here."

I entered the consultant's little office with my list of questions. I was going to get to the bottom of everything and then return to Dad with a release date.

"I'm afraid your father has lung cancer," the consultant said. "Too advanced for any treatment."

I nodded and felt the list of questions in my hand. Redundant. I nodded again. What questions should I ask now? The news: blunt and irreversible. But I had known it was coming from the moment I'd stepped into the office. There had been no initial courtesies. Just 'Sit down, Mr Tomlinson.' No coming back from an introduction like that. I'd wanted some chit-chat on the weather. Please comment on the weather, I'd thought.

The consultant wore a three-piece suit and spectacles and had, inexplicably, the indignant manner of a bank manager calling in a loan.

I'm afraid your father has lung cancer – too advanced for any treatment.

I wanted the weather. *Miserable out, isn't it?* “And there's nothing you can do?”

“No.”

Looks like rain. “How...how long?”

“A week. Maybe two.”

Oh, dear. I didn't bring a brolly.

I was the first in the family to be told; the only one in the family at that moment who knew. My brother Jim still thought he had a dad for years to come. My mum, on her way to the hospital, had a husband and holiday plans. Jim at work, Mum driving, both in a different world to me. I envied them.

“My mum's coming,” I said, like a school kid sweating in front of a headmaster. “She'll want to talk to you.”

I waited in the corridor outside the consultant's office, alone with my piece of cancerous information. How was I going to tell Mum? Not in the way the consultant had told me, but then it wasn't in the choice of words. Not really. That kind of news just bleeds through the pores of your face. It seeps. The words don't break the news; they are only a means of lowering it gently to the ground, or, in the consultant's case, of bouncing it off all four walls.

Mum appeared at the end of the corridor, her hands in the pockets of her grubby grey anorak. She wore jeans, odd socks and a pair of leather shoes with concertinaed heel supports, the result of always sliding her shoes on like slippers. Her light red hair

lay about her head where the wind had left it. She'd come straight from cleaning out the cattery (Mum's business: looking after cats when their owners go on holiday) and hadn't wasted any time tending to her own hygiene.

The news, as I expected, broke itself. It transmitted and permeated before Mum was even half-way down the corridor. Her walk changed, her world changed. She took her hands out of her pockets and set her face.

"It's not good, Mum."

She nodded. She knew.

I put my arm around her. "I'm afraid it's cancer."

Such a cruel word no matter how softly spoken.

Mum held her face and turned away for a second; a private collapse, no hysterics. She was a passionate woman with a short temper, but never one to indulge in self-pity. I could tell her thoughts were all of Dad and only Dad and how much more pain lay ahead for him.

"The consultant's waiting for us," I said.

Mum nodded again. She was ready. We entered the consultant's office.

The consultant repeated his piece of terse terror and was eager for us to pass it on to Dad.

"We're not telling him," Mum said.

"You have to tell him," the consultant said.

"We have to tell him, Mum," I said, but only because the consultant had said so.

"We're not telling him," Mum said.

"You have to."

“We have to.”

“No.”

It was awkward for me, caught between two authority figures: my mum and a consultant. Mum had a good track record for being right, and I had a good track record for taking her advice. A consultant, on the other hand, is god-like, with the power to determine if you're fixable or fucked.

Mum said she and Dad had discussed possible death scenarios in the past and Dad had made it clear that if Mum ever found out he had a terminal illness he did not want to be told. The consultant didn't appear to give two figs for what Mum and Dad had discussed in the past.

“He has a right to know,” the consultant said.

“He doesn't want to know,” Mum said.

“I think we should listen to the doctor, Mum.”

The consultant agreed; we should listen to him.

“We're not telling him and that's that,” Mum said.

And indeed it was. The consultant, for all his knowledge of the internal organs, knew little about the convolutions of my mother's mind. Confronted with the logic and resolution of Mary Tomlinson, all the consultant's god-like attributes were reduced to nothing more than the knack of a mechanic. My mum left the mechanic speechless and I felt ashamed of my unthinking deference to him. I'd accepted the consultant's ruling without question, hadn't even raised an eyebrow at the lack of compassion with which it had been delivered. He was a bully. And I'd let him bully me. Dad had taught me better than that...

I'm ten years old and I'm learning to swear.

“Fuck off!”

I don't say it too loud. Not just yet. I'm C. of E. At least our school is. I couldn't even say it in my head to start with. The 'F' word. Nobody says it at our school. I said 'bloody' once, not thinking. I got smacked in the eye with a cricket ball and thought I'd gone blind. “Bloody hell, I'm blind!” I'd said, only I'd said it right in front of the Headmaster because he was the Umpire. I didn't get told off, though. I was screaming that loud the Headmaster knew I hadn't meant it, and what if I really was blind? You can't tell a blind kid off for swearing.

We played Friarage last Saturday. Drew one-all. They're from the bottom end of town and they do swear. There's this song we sing: “Friarage Bulldogs never get a wash | If they do they think they're posh.” I don't think they're C. of E.

I was waiting for Dad to pick me up and this Friarage lad, after the game, he told me to 'Fuck off'. His head was shaved and he had some mates with him. They called him Skinhead. I think his dad must have done it to him. Shaved his head, I mean. Why would he, though? No-one has short hair. Anyway this kid pushed me in the chest and told me to 'Fuck off' again for no reason except maybe because I went to St. Martin's C. of E.

I felt tears coming but I couldn't go anywhere because I was waiting for Dad. This lad was smaller than me but mean, like he hated looking up at me. I could see the white of his scalp and smell Wrigley's Spearmint on his breath, he was that close. He yanked the boots out of my hand and twirled them above his head, waiting to see what I'd do.

His mates were laughing. I didn't do anything, couldn't think what to do, so he swung my boots up into a tree.

That's when I did say something but I wish I hadn't because I upset myself with the sound of my voice. It was all trembly. "My dad bought me those," I said. I went to get the boots and the lad made baby noises at me. "Fuckin' diddums", he said. I tried to get my boots out of the tree without showing my face. I couldn't really do much about the boots because they were too high up and I was shaking too much to think how to get at them. One of his mates said, "Forget it Skinhead, he doesn't want to know." "Fuckin' diddums," Skinhead said again but I could tell he was losing interest. I think he was a bit surprised as well. I don't think it usually took more than 'Fuck off' to start a fight at the bottom end of town.

I was quiet in the car home. I told Dad, though, when he asked what was wrong. And he said you had to stand up to bullies. You had to get them alone and stand up to them.

So I've thought about it all week, and I've practised, and it's Saturday down at the sports field where all the local schools play their footie, and I find Skinhead after his match. I get him on his own and I say, "Fuck off!" Like I've practised. Not loud, in case someone else hears, like a teacher, but Skinhead hears me and that's all that matters. He looks for his mates but they aren't there. Then he looks up at me, thinking a bit, then he just says something like "Phuff" and walks off.

On the way home Dad asks 'how did it go?' and I say, 'He didn't want to know.'

Mum and I have to go and talk to Dad. Two separate worlds again. Dad in his, where he's going to get better. Mum and I in ours, where Dad can't be saved. The consultant said that he would be 'obliged' to tell Dad he was dying if Dad asked him. Mum said he wouldn't ask. That was the clincher for me. That was when I knew Mum was right. Dad wouldn't ask. And he didn't.

"So can I go home now?" Dad said.

He made no enquiry at all about his health, expressed no anxiety about his symptoms, only nagged to be taken home.

Home.

Dad didn't travel well. He'd been to Malta and Egypt during his national service. Malta was okay, he said, but Egypt had given him malaria. The world abroad held no appeal for Dad after that. He preferred our house in the country. *Fieldside*. Fieldside was not a grand house; just an old railway cottage on a disused line, painted white, with blue shutters and a big garden. The bottom of the garden was about as far as Dad liked to roam. He'd pop into the village for a beer and the paper, but a trip into town, four miles away, bordered on an expedition, and going anywhere via an airport was pure science fiction. For Dad, it was familiarity that brought contentment. Perhaps because he had little in the way of a natural compass.

My Auntie Barbara and Uncle Harry lived five villages away. Their village was built around one main street, no side streets or parallel back streets. They had lived in the village for fifteen years and Dad had driven there innumerable times. It was an easy route; you only had to turn the car twice between our house and theirs, but one bonfire night, in the dark, when we were going to my auntie's for food and fireworks, Dad

drove us into a farmyard. Not only did he drive into the farmyard, he also parked and got out, still prepared to accept – despite the tractor and the cowshit and the grain silo – that we might be at my auntie’s.

Dad’s natural orientation, always. Home. Anywhere else just left him bemused.

My brother and his wife Mandy joined us for evening visiting hours, as they had been doing for the last three nights. On that first night Jim had come straight from work. The nurses had let Mum and me use a side room to break the news to him. My brother – six foot two, broad-shouldered, fifteen stone – defenceless against ‘the news’. But like Mum, he’d been quick to rally, to think only of Dad’s best interests. “Right,” he’d said. “Let’s get him out.” And I knew that meant Jim would carry Dad out himself if it came to it.

Mandy was nine months pregnant, and so her bump rose like a bookend to Dad’s time with us, drawing out the old clichés of ‘life goes on’ and ‘one out, one in’. I stood between my prone Dad and Mandy’s bump. Impotent. Unable to slow down the departure of one life or speed up the arrival of the other. Despite all the love, the come-and-go of life is arbitrary.

There was a newspaper on Dad’s bed. He hadn’t read it; couldn’t read it. But he must have asked for it. Old habits die hard; cling on longer than the wherewithal. The ordinariness of the newspaper made me want to scream. Nothing ordinary had a right to be here. This was not an ordinary moment. My Dad was dying.

Dad sat up in bed, in need of a shave, his grey bristles like a thin cloud on the landscape of his pillow. Nobody had shaved him. Why not? “When can I go?” he said.

His voice was hoarse, not much more than a whisper, the result of the cancer in his throat which our local GP had diagnosed as laryngitis. The rasping timbre of his voice, amusing to us as laryngitis, excruciating to hear as cancer.

“We’re sorting it out, Dad,” I said.

“Tonight?”

“For tomorrow. We think it’ll be tomorrow.” Mum and Jim had set wheels in motion.

“I’d like to go tonight.”

“We have to organise stuff first. We’ve got to sort a bed out for you downstairs.”

“I can sleep in my own bed.”

“We can’t get you up the stairs, Dad. Besides, it’ll be cosier downstairs, in front of the fire.”

“No. Please, just get my clothes and take me home now. I really need to just...David, go and tell the doctor I’m leaving.”

This was only the second time Dad had been admitted to hospital. If only the circumstances could have been the same as that first occasion...

I’m up from London, visiting Mum and Dad. It’s sometime in the early hours of the morning. I can hear mum’s voice next door. She’s anxious, frightened. There’s a commotion going on. I get up and step out onto the corridor. The lights are on in my parent’s bedroom. Jim is attempting to give my Dad the kiss-of-life. Dad is telling him to get off. It’s not obvious if Jim has saved him or is being premature, administering a kiss-of-life to be on the safe side. Mum is watching the tussle between father and

younger son. Jim relents and lets Dad sit up. You have to concede the kiss-of-life isn't necessary when the patient is threatening to put you in a headlock.

"I'm alright," Dad says.

"What's going on?" I say.

"It's your father," Mum says.

"I'm alright," he says.

"I've called an ambulance."

"You've done what?" Dad says.

"I thought you were breathing your last, John."

I knew Dad had a bug, but I had no idea he was close to breathing his last.

"I gave him the kiss-of-life," Jim says.

"I didn't need it," Dad says. "I'm not dying."

"What did you give him the kiss-of-life for?" I say.

"He wasn't breathing," Mum says. "He's had a heart attack."

"I have not," Dad says. "I've got flu."

"Jim gave him the kiss-of-life."

"I heard."

"I'm having you checked," Mum says to Dad.

"I don't need checking."

But it's too late for Dad to argue. The ambulance arrives. Mum rides with Dad. Jim and I drive behind. I am still, in the main, clueless as to what had gone on before my arrival in my parent's bedroom, and am not sure if I can make that much sense out of what I witnessed afterwards.

They put Dad on a trolley and we wait with him in the A&E department. He looks fine. He's calmed down and so has Mum. A doctor arrives and wheels him off for tests. Dad smiles with mock dread and waves goodbye: a comic final departure, taking the Mickey out of our over-reaction to his runny nose.

Dad had been right. He'd had flu and some minor respiratory problems, not a heart attack. And he'd known it in his bones, which was why he could joke, just like he knew something else in his bones this time around, which was why he wasn't joking. Dad knew he was going to die, even if the thought hadn't crossed his mind, that's what his instincts were telling him. They were all for home. *Get me home. Don't let me die here.*

“Tomorrow, Dad, I promise. We'll get you home tomorrow.”

Dad was urgent but not petulant; vulnerable without being child-like. He was still my dad. Quintessentially my dad. All of him intact, except for his blasted lungs.

Jim had talked to the doctors. They'd said that as there was so little they could do for Dad, there was no point in making him stay in the hospital. He could go home. The Macmillan nurses would call in twice a day, but the family would supply the twenty-four hour care. I wasn't ready for this, no matter what examples Dad had set in the past...

I'm waiting in the car, reading a comic, on the way home from school. Dad has gone to the pet shop. Mum has a cattery and kennels so she and Dad are always popping in and out of the pet shop for odds and sods. I see Dad coming back across the road. He gets into the car and sits for a second, thinking.

“Listen,” he says. “Would you like a rabbit?”

“Oh, yes, Dad. Please.”

We have a dog called Dingo and a cat called Dougie and I love them, but they aren't mine, as in all mine and only mine. They belong to the whole family.

“But,” Dad says, “this rabbit is poorly. Very poorly.” He pauses. “It's probably going to die. But I thought we could give it a nice home for a while. What do you think?”

“Are you sure it's going to die?”

“I think it will.”

“But we can take it home if I want?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Yes, okay. I'd like to.”

“Well, let's take a look at him first. See if you're sure. We don't have to take it if you're not sure.”

We walk across Falsgrave Road, Dad holding my hand. The pet shop window is full of Guinea Pigs and Rabbits, all snuffling and scratching. The rabbits look plump and healthy. The pet shop door *trings* when we open it. Dad nods at the owner behind the counter, a man in a brown button-up smock. We walk down the aisle along a row of cages and stop at one with a skinny grey rabbit curled up in sawdust.

I press my fingers against the wire mesh. “Is this him?”

“Yes.”

“What's his name?”

“Leapy. But you can change it if you want.”

It feels mean to change his name just because he doesn't look like he has a leap left in him. "No. That's his name," I say. I stick my nose closer to the cage.

"So are you sure?" Dad says, "Shall we get him?"

"Yes."

"You can see he's poorly."

"Yeah. I don't mind."

Dad talks to the man in the brown coat and we take Leapy home in a cardboard box. Dad spends an afternoon at the bottom of the garden, in and out of his shed. I stare at Leapy in his box and prod him with lettuce. At the end of the day Dad has built a hutch – Leapy's new home.

I monitor Leapy for as many hours in the day that I can get down to his hutch. He never gets frisky, just stays grey and skinny and curled up, but he does eat a bit. He's going to die, but not really, I think. Not if I keep stroking him.

A week later we have to go away for a few days holiday. I don't want to go. Who will look after Leapy? Dingo and Dougie are going to my Auntie Barbara's. But what about Leapy? Dad says I can get my mate Brian to come and check on him. Brian says great he will.

I think about Leapy all the time I'm away, keep asking Dad how he thinks he is. When we get back, I'm out of the car like a rocket and run all the way down the garden to Leapy's hutch. Leapy is curled up. Not moving. I open the hutch, stroke him. He's not breathing.

"Dad! Dad!"

Dad walks down the garden, joins me at the hutch. He looks in at Leapy.

“We knew this was going to happen, didn’t we?” he says.

I nod. I’m going to cry.

“But just think of the lovely home you gave him while he was poorly. Think of all the stroking he got to make him feel better.”

I nod and Dad puts a hand on my shoulder.

Although Dad says we knew it was going to happen, I’d convinced myself it wouldn’t. While Leapy was alive all I could see was life; life going on and on and on.

In the hospital I wanted to believe that the energy Dad summoned to plead for his release indicated he was likely to make a miraculous recovery once he was free. He’d threatened to walk out if we didn’t take him, and for a moment my brother and I had thought he was capable of it. He grew calmer during the evening after we had promised he was going home the following day; calmer but still suspicious, and every now and then he had to be reassured. He did, however, regain some focus when my brother brought up the business of what to call the baby. Mum ran Jim and Mandy’s suggestions by him.

“They’re thinking of Ben, or Dan, or Sam...Something like that, something short.”

Dad nodded at mum and then looked at Jim and Mandy. “Dan,” he said. “I think Dan.”

In that brief and thoughtful interaction I had my Dad back. I felt him amongst us, participating in the conversation on equal terms and no longer only the subject of it.

The consultant had described Dad’s cancer as ‘bolting’. It didn’t sound all that medical, but it left us in no doubt as to the speed with which the cancer was spreading.

The consultant said Dad had anywhere between three days and three weeks to live. But the word ‘bolting’ had me convinced Dad would die the second I turned my back on him. When the time came to say goodnight I knew it might be the last time I would see my dad alive, and yet I couldn’t betray any of that feeling in my manner or voice. I couldn’t hug him for too long, or attempt anything too ‘significant’ in my farewell. I had to leave in a way that gave him every confidence he’d see me again tomorrow, while also framing the moment as a possible final memory.

My brother and I stepped away from the bed to let Mum say her goodnights alone. She held Dad’s hand and whispered close to his face, touched her forehead against his, then lay across his chest. Dad patted her back. A second later she stood up, composed her face and joined us. We all smiled and waved at Dad and then left. Out of sight, in the corridor, we put our arms around each other, squeezed shoulders.

We all stayed with Mum that night. The hospital had promised that Dad could come home the following morning. We sat at the kitchen table and talked about Dad, slipping between tenses when we referred to him, one sentence in the present, the next in the past.

Dad was born into a wealthy, well-to-do family. There had been a prep school, a boarding school and a succession of nannies.

Snatches of his childhood: the school friend Rufus de Rufignat who farted along to hymns in church; Granny Tom playing the mandolin in a little-old-lady mandolin trio; his dad flying gliders, and his mum following in the car to collect his dad wherever he landed.

Sporting achievements: Dad played rugby and football for the school, played rugby for Scarborough. These were the athletic benchmarks of my youth. I grew up determined to excel at sport in the same areas Dad had done.

Teenage years: Dad turned down the offer of a place to study art at Dublin University, choosing instead to go to Askham Bryan agricultural college. His dad had promised to buy him a farm.

After college came National Service: basic training at Catterick, postings to Malta and Egypt; *The Duke* his boxing nickname in the army because of his 'posh' accent.

Discharge from the army: nobody to meet him at the station after two years overseas. His mum was playing golf. His Dad said, "Ah, John, there you are," as though Dad had been temporarily mislaid. "Fancy a drink?" No farm on Dad's return, just the revelation that family funds were on the wane. No explanation why.

Pop: the drinker, the gambler, the womaniser.

Dad became a farm manager instead of a farm owner. He courted my mum. My mum the country girl, seven years younger than Dad. Mum passionate, Dad funny. They married, had me. Dad couldn't make enough money to support a young family, so moved into town and changed his job. Worked in graphics. Sat in a cubicle for years of artwork between back projectors and magnifiers that ruined his eyes. Took voluntary redundancy, bought a shoe shop and practised as a chiropodist (he'd qualified in the army). Self-employed and never happier. The little old ladies who came to buy shoes called him 'Sexy Rexy' because of his resemblance, not that close, to Rex Harrison. When he struggled to accommodate the old ladies' bunion-burdened feet he'd joke that the only things in the shop big enough to fit them were the boxes the shoes came in.

Old age: retired to the bottom of the garden, to the summerhouse and the newspaper and an occasional book by P.G. Wodehouse or Somerset Maugham. Two years of retirement, six months of which were spent in constant back pain that was treated as sciatica. Not sciatica, though. Just as it hadn't been pneumonia or laryngitis.

"If they'd only thought to check for cancer earlier," I said over dinner.

"It wouldn't have been early enough to change the outcome," Mum said. "And he'd have had all those months knowing he was going to die."

Would I want to know if I were dying? And how much time would I like to have to think about it? I'd had four near-death experiences in my life, all the result of reckless behaviour: a motorbike crash, a car crash, and two half-drownings. On each occasion I'd thought 'This is it.' My life hadn't flashed before my eyes, there hadn't been time. 'This is it' was as much as I could manage. Or, to be more accurate, 'This is it, you idiot!' No time for spiritual reflection, just a nanosecond to spare for self-reproach.

Spiritual reflection was more Dad's thing. He was open to every new theory, scientific or otherwise, relating to mind and body. He believed in holistic medicine, took distilled essences and wanted to believe Uri Geller could bend spoons through psychic manipulation. He went to a faith healer for the arthritis in his knee. The faith healer claimed he could see Dad's aura, would comment on its colour, and told Dad he had an Arabian horsemen as his spiritual guide. Dad was not impressed with his guide and often commented on his short-comings. 'Hardly worth having,' he would say.

Dad dabbled in Yoga but only had a repertoire of one position, which also may have been one of his own devising. He called it *The Stork*, but it looked more like Eric

Morecambe mid stage exit. He stood on one leg, held the other behind his back, and stretched an arm out in front of him. He couldn't tell me what the benefits were but he persevered with it all the same, adopting the pose in a wobbly manner when and wherever the notion took him. He tried meditation and bought a lot of books by various shamans and yogis and cloistered monks. He was impressed by stories of Swamis who were buried alive for several years without suffering any detrimental side-effects. His own meditations, however, lapsed into prolonged bouts of reading the paper. The faith healer told Dad that Dad also had the gift of healing hands, and so for several months Dad kept laying his hands on other people's twinges.

“How does that feel?” he would say. “Can you feel the heat?”

“No, not really, Dad.”

Arthritis wasn't the only health issue Dad had to bear. He contracted a virus in his so-called 'good eye', which never recovered. As Dad said of old age, “Once one thing goes wrong, everything else soon follows.” In pursuit of the inner him, he spent a lifetime dieting – diets that never worked, because while he claimed to be on them, he didn't let them interfere too much with what he ate: bread and butter with every meal and a fried breakfast every Sunday morning. He said it wasn't possible to listen to *The Archers Omnibus* without egg and bacon.

“The most important thing is not to let your dad know he's dying,” Mum said.

I nodded.

“Not that he has any great fear of death,” Mum said. “When he worked in his chiropody surgery he always said it was very important to give people hope. Dealing

with the elderly all the time, they were often saying that they really wanted to die, but he always used to say that their feet were wonderful and would last them for ages.”

Jim and I chuckled. We’d both worked in Dad’s shop and knew what a tonic the old ladies found Dad to be.

“He never took that hope away from them,” Mum said. “If your dad has a philosophy then that’s it. Hope is the most important thing in life.”

I looked up at the picture hanging on the wall above the kitchen table. It was an unusual picture, created entirely out of driftwood, showing a girl on a horse, her hat flying off her head and releasing hessian pigtails. The horse’s legs were at full stretch, the girl leaning forward, riding at full tilt, full of life. An abstract image in flotsam and jetsam and yet so evocative of reality, of youth and energy and endless horizons.

It was a picture made by my dad. One of the many arty crafty examples about the place for which he was responsible.

Dad pottered and tinkered but always to great and surprising effect. Things would appear in the house such as abstract paintings, figurative paintings, pictures made out of driftwood, lithe feminine statuettes carved from fallen branches he’d discovered on countryside walks, chunky doorstops hewn from cross sections of laburnum, a wooden coffee table, which, despite its four legs, still had more in common with a tree than a table.

Things would crop up in the garden, too: faces in a flower bed, sculpted out of breezeblocks; wooden cats sitting on a fence with pendulum tails attached by wire; a lop-sided brick and ironwork barbeque set. And all these things made their entrance into our lives like rabbits from a hat, and had a wonky individuality that said more about my

Dad than any personal introduction or written description could. He had a bigger shed than most, because we had a bigger bottom of the garden than most, and he potted and tinkered in it with the distracted contentment of Caractacus Potts, emerging with constructions no less marvellous than Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. One birthday he promised me a bicycle – not a bought one, a homemade one. We weren't fussed about shop-bought in our family. We lived in the country and Mum and Dad made things. Mum made her own dresses and Dad made whatever took his fancy.

I counted the days down to my birthday, walking past the shed, playing around it, but not going in. My bike was in there in some stage of production or another, taking shape. There was an unspoken rule: no peeking, and despite my curiosity I wasn't tempted to break it. On the morning of my birthday Dad wheeled the bicycle out. It had the body of a racing bike, with loads of gears, and was painted sky blue. Dad had chopped up a Silk Cut fag packet and clipped the strips of cardboard into the spokes so it made a *brrrrr* engine sound. But it's most exciting quirk was the set of cow horn handle bars that rose up-and-out at the front with preposterous angular arrogance. When I sat on it I felt twenty feet tall, sitting straight-backed and regal, like the leader of the pack. And I could pull wheelies like nobody's business. The handlebars were inspired; that was my dad for you. He knew how to add that dash of something-or-other to give rise to a touch of who-knew-what. The handlebars were, just as he was, humorously skewed.

My brother was angry, struggling to retain his sense of Dad's humour. The hospital didn't want to let Mum ride in the ambulance because they were worried Dad might die

en route. Jim argued that was exactly why Mum should be there. Jim kicked up a fuss, wouldn't stop kicking up a fuss, and so they let Mum on board. I was pleased it was Jim at the hospital. I wasn't sure how effective I would be at kicking up a fuss. I realised I had become, like Dad, a bottom of the garden man.

The ambulance brought Dad home late on Tuesday morning, with Mum riding alongside him. Jim had followed in his car. Dad didn't look well. Of course, I knew he wasn't well, but I'd hoped to see an amazing transition brought on by his return to Fieldside. Mum said, "You'll be happy now you're down Pasture Lane, now you're back home." But Dad didn't appear to register either Mum's comment or where he was. The medics wheeled Dad in and lifted him into the single bed that I'd set-up in the lounge. That had been my job – making the bed, not kicking up a fuss.

A male McMillan nurse arrived to show us how the oxygen tank worked, followed by two female District nurses. They were kind, reassuring, but I barely registered them. There was nothing they could do for Dad. They couldn't save him. They were just bodies getting in the way. I wanted them gone so the family could settle. The District nurses offered to come regularly and give Dad a bed bath.

"No, thank you," Mum said. "I'll do it."

The nurses understood, but said they were there if we changed our minds.

The professionals left and it was just Jim and Mum and me sitting around Dad's bed. Mandy was at work. We made a fire and drew the settee closer to the hearth so the bed and settee formed an L-shape, all cosy together. We planned to stay at Mum's for the duration, which meant Mum needed to go shopping for food. Such a mundane task felt incongruous and inappropriate to her.

“How can I walk the aisles of Morrison’s when your Dad’s dying?” Mum said, writing up a shopping list in the kitchen.

But we had to eat and we couldn’t all sit in a row staring at Dad until he wasn’t there to be stared at any more. Maintaining as much normality as possible was the order of the day.

That first night with Dad at home, we all stayed up late with him in front of the fire. When it came time for bed, Mum took the night shift, curling up on the settee with her duvet. I didn’t sleep well and in the early hours of the morning went downstairs to relieve Mum. She was awake in front of the dying embers of the fire.

“Hello, love,” she said.

Dad was asleep. I checked. Double-checked. Definitely asleep and not dead.

“How’s he been?” I asked.

“Fine. No problems.”

“Have you managed to sleep?”

“A little.”

“Why don’t you go to bed for a while? I’ll sit with him now.”

“No, no, it’s alright. I’m okay. You go back to bed yourself.”

“I’ve slept. I’m awake now. You go.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve got a book and the fire.”

Mum took her duvet up to her bed. Mum and Dad’s bed. Not, I realised, as comforting a prospect for her as I’d thought, given the solitary sleep that awaited.

Dad slept on. I listened to his breathing and let it lull me into false hopes. The quiet of the morning and the temporary piece of my father's lungs set up an intimacy beyond conversation. I sat and read beside him. When daylight broke, Mum came downstairs to feed the cats. Dad stirred. He didn't say anything at first, just looked out of the window, thoughtful.

"Morning," I said.

"I've decided," he said, his voice rasping, "that from now on I'm going to start being...I'm going to be a lot more..." He slashed his hand in a forward direction, indicating an attitude of get-up-and-go, but he didn't finish the sentence. It was a momentary flash of life, a desire for life, flaring like a spark that had been spat out from the fire, inspired perhaps by the light of dawn coming across the fields and through the window.

"Would you like some drops?" I asked.

The cancer was creeping up from his lungs and into his throat. The drops helped alleviate the dryness and the discomfort of swallowing. Dad nodded. I found the dropper and Dad opened his mouth. He was patient, uncomplaining. I targeted the sore areas one drop at a time. He settled back into his pillow and I set his hair straight.

Hair was something I didn't have in common with Dad. I was bald and had taken to shaving my head to save the embarrassment of a mad professor look. Dad, on the other hand, still had hair on top, grey and flighty but enough to part. I'd electric-shaved my hair shorter and shorter over the years until I was down to the '0' setting that left nothing but bristle on my scalp. Dad was curious about the variety of effects the shaver

could conjure up on a head. He coveted other people's gadgets regardless of their functions. The Caractacus Potts in him. Exploiting his interest, I persuaded him to experiment with a standard number '4' setting on his own head. I promised it would make his hair look thicker. That was enough to hook Dad. He agreed to the experiment and came round to my house. I set up a 'barber's chair' in the garden, put a towel around Dad's neck and then plugged the electric shaver into the Fly-Mo's extension cord. I placed a controlling hand onto Dad's head and started the shaver. It hummed by Dad's ear.

"You've only set it on 4, haven't you?" Dad said.

"Yes."

"I don't want your style."

"I know."

"What will it look like?"

"Better than Rex Harrison."

I ran the shaver over Dad's head and took off the first clump of fine grey hair and shook it to the ground. Dad saw it fall at his feet.

"Crikey!" he said. "That's a lot."

Dad was from the Bertie Wooster school of swearing. 'Crikey!' and 'Lawks!' were as far as he went with expletives. I shaved off another clump.

"Crikey!" he said, picking the hair up from where it had landed on his knee.

"What are you doing to me?"

"Relax," I said. "It'll look better." I shaved on. Another clump fell.

"Lawks!"

I had no idea if it would look better or not. The shaving process had become something other than a hair cutting session – an excuse to sneak up on a little tenderness without embarrassment. I had my hand on Dad’s head, tilting it from one side to the other, backwards and forwards, holding it steady, feeling the warmth of his scalp. I had a chance to look at my Dad up close, at the creases in his ear lobe, the strong profile, the glint of gold from his crown, the curve of his cranium, the shades of grey in his hair. And Dad was compliant and trusting, despite his qualms expressed in 1920s vernacular.

I shaved the last strip and then checked that the length of hair was even all over. I stepped in front of Dad to get a full-on view.

“Well?” Dad said.

I’d created a silver sea anemone on top of Dad’s head, his hair fluttering like fronds caught in an underwater current. “Don’t worry,” I said. “It’ll grow back.”

Dad retired to the hall mirror and ran a comb through the fronds. They refused to do anything other than stand on end.

“Crikey!” he said. “I don’t know what your mum’ll think.”

Mum reacted in the same way she did whenever she found Dad on one wobbly leg adopting the pose of *The Stork* – with resignation and raised eyebrows.

The fire was down to nothing more than a glow. I had to let it die out before I could clear the grate and re-set it for the day. Dad was dozing again. The morning post arrived and I stepped into the porch to pick it up. In the corner of the porch were several handmade walking sticks and thumb-staffs, further examples of Dad’s handiwork. Every Sunday morning Dad would road test the sticks round the porch, leaning on them,

banging them into the carpet and twirling them at his side, before selecting whichever stick or staff would best suit his mood and the walk he had in mind.

In amongst the walking sticks there were also a number of fishing rods tied up in canvas bags. Fishing was normally a solitary activity for Dad, his idea of escape. But there was one occasion I remembered when he'd taken me with him. I was just a kid, still at primary school...

Me and Dad are walking through Forge Valley, following the squelchy banks of the River Derwent. The grass is long and I have to high-step through it, holding onto saplings for support. Dad walks with a stoop, crouching like a commando. He's even wearing a green jacket. I ask him where we're going. He says 'shush' and holds his hand up. He looks nervous. I don't know why. We're only walking. We stop at a bend in the river by a tree with a sign on it: *Private Fishing*. My jeans are wet from the knees down. They're sticking to my calves. Dad looks out across the river. The water is clear, and I can see the rusty coloured pebbles on the river bed and bits of twigs and weeds floating above them.

Dad pulls on his jacket sleeve and brings something out from inside it: a telescopic fishing rod. Funny place to carry it, I think. It looks like he's taken an ordinary fishing rod and cut it down.

"Keep a look out," he says, and casts a spinner into the river.

Hey? What? Oh, I get it. We aren't walking any more, we're fishing. No. Wait. Poaching. Oh, bloody hell! The sawn-off fishing rod makes me sweat like I'm looking at a sawn-off shotgun. Dad reels the spinner in. "Anybody coming?" he says, the reel

whirring in his hand. I've no idea. I haven't been looking, too busy watching the spinner. I look up and down the river, can't see anyone. "Don't think so," I say. "Keep your eyes peeled," Dad says. He walks on a bit and casts again. Plop. The spinner lands in the water. It's just a plop but it still sounds too loud to me, like the splash of a dead body being dumped. The fishing line cuts the surface of the water and the spinner glints over the pebbles below. I'm rubbish as a lookout. I can't take my eyes off my Dad breaking the law. There are 'Private Fishing' signs nailed to trees everywhere. I'm standing under one of them.

"Stay here," Dad says. "Whistle if anyone comes."

Dad strides along the bank, grass swishing at his feet, branches cracking, the smoking rod in his hand. I look behind me, put my lips together ready to whistle. What kind of whistle, I think? I only know how to do a wolf whistle. What if the person who comes is a bloke? My trainers are soaked through and my toes are squidging in my wet socks. I scramble further up the bank, try and find a drier bit of ground. I'm shivering; put my hands in my pockets. I can't see Dad anymore, too many trees and bushes. What if a gamekeeper shoots him? I bounce up and down to keep warm. The sky is grey. It might rain. I bounce up and down, hands in pockets. I'm freezing. Mum said "Wear your big jumper" before I left. I should have listened. I didn't know I was going to be a lookout, though, did I?

Oh, bloody hell! Someone's coming. A man and a woman, walking towards me. I turn my head in the direction Dad went, try to whistle. My lips are cold and I'm nervous. I blow but there's no sound from my mouth except a wish wish of air that makes me dribble. The couple walk past and nod at me. I wish and dribble. That's it, I

think. Dad's for it now, and then I'll be for it because I didn't warn him. I bounce up and down. Should I shout out? Should I run past the couple and find Dad before they do? What if he's already seen them and put the rod away, and all I do by shouting or running is to make everything look suspicious? I bounce up and down. A few seconds later Dad comes back into view, no sign of the rod but he's walking with a stiff arm again, so I know where the rod's gone. Back up the sleeve.

“Dad,” I say. “There was a couple-”

Dad shakes his head at me and waves a silencing hand. His face is pale.

I look at his baggy jacket pockets, but can't see any fish tails sticking out. “Did you catch anything?” I say.

Dad puffs out his cheeks and then says, “I think we'll pop back to the car now, don't you?” He leads the way along the river bank.

The telescopic rod doesn't make another appearance, not on that day or any other.

I brought the mail in from the porch and put it on the mantelpiece. The fire was ready for raking out. When it came to the telescopic fishing rod, the gap between concept and practice had been too great for Dad. He was more 'Q' than James Bond, happier in the design and making phase than out in the field.

He didn't like working to order, either. Long after childhood, when I was living and working in London as a scriptwriter, I devised a concept for comedy greeting cards. It was just a whim, not my area of expertise, but I recruited Dad to illustrate the cards. He called me a 'flaming nuisance' for asking him, but produced some delightful and original cartoons. I took the final mock-ups for a meeting with a big card company.

They passed on my concept but asked if they could use the cartoonist for their own publications. Dad said ‘No.’ For him creative work was a thing of spontaneity, not deadlines, unless it was for someone’s birthday, of course.

Dad was always the dilettante. He went through a hot phase of writing poetry, a short effulgent burst. The poems were poignant, nostalgic, mystical, like snapshots of another person coming up for air; a brief spell in Dad’s life when the door was ajar to an alternative universe. But still his humour prevailed, got the better of too much introspection, and led to him writing poems about a boastful rat in a waistcoat, a one-eyed spider with a lack of depth perception, and an enormous stick of Rhubarb.

The poem about the stick of Rhubarb was published in the November issue of *The Dalesman* in 1969. A copy of the issue was kept in Dad’s desk. I’d read it dozens of times over the years. I went to the desk and looked through the drawers. The magazine was still there. The cover showed a cartoon of a scruffy kid with a well-dressed Guy Fawkes. I’d never understood the significance of it and it remained just as perplexing now. I leafed through the pages until I found Dad’s poem.

“Remember this, Dad?” I said. He was still dozing. I read it out loud.

RHUBARB! RHUBARB!

In a village close to Grassington a stick of rhubarb grew

To such alarming magnitude you’d hardly think it true,

Ramblers trekked from far and wide to feast their envious eyes

Upon this lofty king-sized stick unrivalled by its size.

*The Minister of 'Ag and Fish' flew down from London town
 To photograph the ripening stem before they cut it down,
 Oh! Goodness! My and Crikey! Said the minister with glee
 Whoever heard of rhubarb growing higher than a tree?*

*When at last the day came round for harvesting the stick
 A lot of Dalesmen fainted and a few were even sick,
 They were the ones who'd tended it with all their loving care
 And knew at once with rhubarb gone their lives would seem quite bare.*

*The sorrow that there might have been was quickly swept away
 When a baker came from Ribblesdale with one enormous tray,
 In this he made a pie so large it fed 5,000 head
 It's only happened once before with 'fishes and with bread'.*

I finished reading and looked at the old copy of *The Dalesman*. There he was. My Dad in print. Published. The curling copy of the magazine in my hands – a trophy to his words.

Painter, sculptor, poet, raconteur and nervous poacher – that was my paternal gene pool. No wonder I couldn't settle to any one creative outlet. I'm a writer, I'm a musician, I'm a writer, I'm a musician, I'm a writer, I'm a nervous poacher.

Wednesday afternoon passed peacefully enough. Dad slept more and more. Jim and I asked him crossword questions between his naps and he would sometimes blink at us as though pondering. Every time Dad looked at me and I felt his recognition, a part of me continued to believe anything was possible; that the doctor had got it wrong, or that Dad would succeed in ‘being more...’ and then get up and walk to demonstrate what he meant.

“What a wonderful smell,” he said at one point. There were two hyacinth plants in the room, both in full flower. Mum looked at me. Dad was still with us. Anything was possible. I kept telling myself this for the next twenty-four hours. Why not? Wasn’t it Dad’s belief that hope was the most important thing? So I hoped. The hours passed. Dad slept, occasionally spoke. A McMillan nurse called in to see if we needed anything. I built fires, read, talked to my brother. Mum made meals. And we all hovered.

On Thursday night Mum prepared a Chilli con Carne. The kitchen and lounge were semi-open plan with a big glassless arch window connecting the two rooms. Dad asked if Mandy was home. The enquiry surprised us. He’d been quiet for the last hour or so.

“Not yet, Dad,” Jim said. “Soon. She’s on her way.”

Dad nodded. Five minutes later Mandy arrived from work. Dad recognised her as soon as she came into the room.

“Hello, Mandy,” he said.

He could still make conversation.

Anything was possible.

We sat with Dad, chatting amongst ourselves, Mum popping in and out of the kitchen, the fire crackling. After a while Dad's eyes closed while the rest of us continued to chatter. A few moments later Jim gave me a nudge and nodded at Dad. He was raising his right arm, eyes still closed, with his fingers formed into a V shape to hold an imaginary cigarette. He drew the cigarette to his lips and took a drag, asleep all the while. Jim, Mandy and I laughed in silence.

During the course of the meal Dad's breathing became more laboured. I told myself it would settle. No-one else had mentioned it, so perhaps I was being hypersensitive. We talked over our plates of Chilli, not that hungry, not that conversational. Was I the only one who could hear the strained panting in the room next door, or was everyone else just ignoring it? I looked up from my Chilli. We'd all stopped talking and were all wearing the same expression. It was clear everyone else had been thinking exactly the same as me.

"I think it's getting worse," I said.

Mum stood up and cleared some of the table. We all followed suit, piled dishes next to the sink while Mum ran the hot tap. Jim and Mandy offered to wash up but Mum wanted to do it. I walked through to Dad's bedside. He inhaled long and wheezy breaths, chest rising, then exhaled in rapid gushes. He wore the oxygen mask but it could only help so much. There just wasn't enough of his lungs remaining.

I sat on Dad's left, held his hand, squeezed it, but he didn't squeeze back. Mum and Jim sat on his right, Jim by his waist, Mum by his head. Mandy sat in the rocking chair by the fire, pregnant tummy fit to burst.

Dad's breathing required more and more violent effort. He tilted his head back on the in-breath. The gaps between heaves grew shorter. His eyes were closed. He didn't see anyone, but we all talked to him.

"Come on, Dad," I said.

"We're all here," Jim said. "We're all here, Dad."

Mum stroked his cheek, and then touched her forehead to his as she'd done in the hospital. "You're home, darling," she said. "Down Pasture Lane." Then she sat up and gave him room to fight.

I kept saying the same thing over and over, "Come on, Dad. Come on." As long as he was breathing, I thought. As long as he was breathing.

And then he stopped breathing. Just for a second. I felt my own breathing stop in unison.

"Come on, Dad," I said. "One more."

Dad obliged. His chest convulsed and he was back into the rhythm of short, desperate gulps. Adrenalin pumped and my heart made a din in my ears. A few minutes later he stopped breathing again, for a few beats longer this time. I held my breath with him, waited. His chin jutted forwards and he took a breath. I let mine go. This became the new pattern, and each time he stopped breathing it took longer for him to reignite, and the renewed period of breathing grew shorter, until it became nothing more than a single breath; one single, snatched breath followed by a long hold. Once. Twice. How many more times?

"One more, Dad. Come on, one more."

Silence.

“One more. Come on, Dad.”

“David,” Mum said.

She shook her head at me. I was torturing him, thinking of myself, frightened of the grief that threatened. Mum, as ever, was ahead of me, selfless, thinking only of Dad and the peace he deserved no matter what it might cost her.

I looked at Dad, his face tense. I waited for the spasm in the cycle, the kick-start, but Mum had judged it to the final heart-beat, in synch with Dad all the way to the end.

He didn't breathe again.

Only an hour ago Dad had said ‘Hello, Mandy.’ They were his last words.

Nothing was possible any more.

“He's gone,” Jim said, putting a hand on my back.

I knew it and I felt it straight away. The stark nature of permanent loss struck me down.

The doctor came to confirm Dad was dead. Afterwards she stood by the fire and advised us on procedure from here on in. She smiled, nervous, uncomfortable amidst the private grief. Her professional title was no match for it. I sympathised but the smile annoyed me. I remained by Dad's side and was relieved when the doctor left. Then Auntie Barbara came to help lay Dad out. She was a retired district nurse.

Mum and Auntie B removed Dad's pyjamas and then washed him. It was a silent, reverential procedure, their touch even more gentle than it would have been for someone living. I removed Dad's wedding ring and clenched it in my fist, trying to squeeze the essence of Dad into my flesh. We all then put a clean pair of pyjamas on

him and Jim and I carried him through into the dining room where we laid him down on a mattress. Auntie Barbara raised his head on a number of pillows and placed a rolled towel under his chin to keep his mouth shut. The jaw locks open if this isn't done. I thought of Marley from *A Christmas Carol* whose ghostly form appears with its jaw tied up.

It didn't feel right to leave Dad alone and on the floor, but we couldn't leave him in the bed by the heat of the fire. The body, which was what Dad had become in just a matter of seconds, needed to be kept somewhere cool. Before we said goodnight to him, Jim ran upstairs for something. When he came back down he knelt by Dad's side and combed his hair. It had long since grown out from the sea anemone style I'd inflicted on it and was back to its Sexy Remy best.

"There you go, Dad," Jim said, stroking with one hand and combing with the other. "All in order."

That gesture, for the briefest of moments, made Dad look alive one last time, and was the final intimacy anybody would ever share with him.

The church was packed, people stood at the back and outside the main doors. I knew Dad was popular but the size of the congregation still took me by surprise. It looked like everyone he'd ever known had lined up to form a tableau of his life, his past laid out in people: old friends, new friends, ex-work colleagues, pub regulars, customers, patients and villagers.

Jim and I made speeches, tried to sum Dad up in our own ways, but both presented the same portrait – that of a gentle man with a gentle sense of humour. Jim

read out one of Dad's sillier poems about someone who talked to themselves when alone in the car, and I finished by reading something Dad had written for Mum.

The Apple

Inside the apple is the core

Inside the core, the pip

Inside the pip, the force of life

Which makes the apple tick.

Inside of me there is a heart

Inside the heart there's you

Inside of you, another heart

Which means that I have two.

Inside the child there is a heart

And inside his there's two

So if ever mine should cease to beat

Through him, I'll still love you.

After the funeral we all retired to the local pub. I stood at the bar in Dad's old corner and remembered the conversations I'd had with him in the exact same spot, in particular how he'd point to my fourth or fifth pint and umpteenth fag and issue the warning, "Moderation in all things, David." And how, if I then pointed to *his* fourth or fifth pint

and umpteenth fag, he'd say, "If you like something, get plenty of it." Had I had plenty of my dad? No, but at least there was plenty of him left in chunky doorstops, hand-carved walking sticks, varnished statuettes, configurations of driftwood, breeze block busts, abstract oils, and a lopsided BBQ. Talk about mementos.

Montaigne was worried that by not dying well (whatever that means) a person might in some way negate the honourable life that had gone before it. But when the curtain fell on Dad he wasn't conscious enough to deliver a grand finale, although smoking an imaginary last fag in his sleep was something of a showstopper. Even Montaigne, however, had to concede, despite his wish to go 'peacefully...and with a calm mind', that one's final exit wasn't worth losing too much sleep over: 'If you don't know how to die, don't worry; Nature will tell you what to do on the spot, fully and adequately.'

If only Nature could be equally as clear cut on telling me how to live. I suppose, for that, I will just have to continue trusting in Dad.

Chapter Five

Samba Turn

(Estampida: the Troubadour song category for a dance song).

When the soul is without a definite aim she gets lost; for, as they say, if you are everywhere you are nowhere.

Michel de Montaigne

Scalby Comprehensive School disco, 1974.

My feet were everywhere; prospects with the opposite sex nowhere.

“Tiger Feet” by Mud had a hundred and twenty kids bouncing in the school hall: the boys in a series of warrior-like circles; the girls mingling in more sociable clusters. The smaller, nimbler boys took turns bouncing into the centre of the circles, thumbs in their waistbands, flairs flapping over the rapid heel-to-toe actions of their crepe-soled shoes.

This was the Mud dance, which the taller, ganglier lads (like me) couldn’t do without kicking themselves in the ankles. I had to settle for an approximation of the moves, which kept me bouncing but would never carry me into the centre of the circle, not without incorporating an involuntary somersault. I was just too tall to keep an eye on what my feet were doing, and the attenuated distance between brain and toes meant that instructions from the former to the latter never arrived on time for the next beat.

This was when I learned, with the aid of some laughing and finger-pointing from my mates, that I could not dance. I took as long to get off the ground as a Mute Swan

and landed like something invented by Barnes Wallace to demolish a dam. My height delivered the double embarrassment of keeping my steps off balance while also ensuring that my lurching figure could be seen from any point in the hall.

I danced on regardless. Partly because even dancing like a frantic loon gave me a better chance with the girls than standing against the wall, but mainly because it felt so bloody good. I was sweating and oblivious to ridicule.

Tim Carter, already blessed with dark wavy hair and a Kirk Douglas dimple in his chin, was also, it transpired, the ideal physique for coping with the speedy springy nature of the Mud dance. He hopped into the centre of our circle and flicked his feet about like a flea on a Mariachi drum. The girls looked over from all four corners of the hall. Tim's expression remained indifferent and cool, betraying nothing of the frenzy going on down below at ground level, whereas out on the periphery of the circle, my facial muscles looked to be in the throes of electroconvulsive therapy.

"Tiger Feet" came to an end, and a few seconds later so did I, once my feet had got the message. Tim Carter was surrounded by other limber lads wanting to compare footwork. I stood alone, lank and panting, trying to shake some feeling back into my thumbs. They'd been gripping my waistband with such intensity they had turned white.

Some of the girls filtered over to Tim's group. None of them filtered past me, despite the allure of my cheesecloth shirt.

Kenny's "The Bump" started playing. A big relief for me. The dance routine for that required nothing more than banging one's backside against someone else's, and as I was prone to doing that anyway. I was a natural for it. Tim Carter didn't bother. Clashing bums didn't qualify as impressive choreography. I and the rest of the big

galoots could have the floor to ourselves. And besides, Tim was talking to Kathy Murphy, who had the most developed pair of breasts in our year, and which, according to the lads' weekly review of them, were still developing.

While my buttocks ricocheted around the room doing "The bump", Tim left the hall with Kathy. It caused a stir. The girls huddled and criticised Kathy for being a 'slag'. The boys huddled and praised Kathy for being a 'slag'. Both groups could talk of nothing else until Tim and Kathy returned several songs later. The two of them were besieged. Kathy was sealed off in a unit of girls at one side of the hall, Tim in a unit of boys on the other.

"What did you do?" the boys asked in overlapping unison. "Did you get 'em out? Hey? Did you get 'em out? Did you?"

"I can't tell you," Tim said. "I told Kathy I wouldn't."

"That means you did."

"Yeah, I did. I got fifty."

'Fifty' was our code for fondling breasts, although a single breast also counted.

The revelation led to a lot of other breast related questions: How big were they in the flesh? What did they feel like? Did they jiggle? But for all my curiosity about the nature of Kathy's knockers, the thing that struck me most was how Tim had acquired access to them in the first place. He had danced his way into her bra.

Scarborough, Queen Street Methodist Hall, 2014.

My first dance lesson. It's forty years too late for getting my hands on Kathy Murphy's bra, but I want to rediscover the exuberance of teenage dancing, co-ordinated

or otherwise. I want to re-connect with the primal explosion I had experienced during “Tiger Feet”, which kept me bouncing and in the mood for devil worship regardless of how embarrassing I looked.

Inspired by Montaigne’s testing spirit and the impassioned busker in France, I am putting my two left feet forward.

Julia had been concerned about what I was going to wear to the class.

“Football shorts,” I’d said.

“No. You can’t wear football shorts. Keep your legs covered.”

It wasn’t clear what Julia thought my naked legs would provoke – a display of passion, a fit of the giggles, or a loss of appetite.

I pulled up at the hall and sat for a second. It was dark; early evening in early January. Through the rain on my windscreen I could see the distorted outlines of ladies walking towards the hall. Were these members of my class? I knew it was an all female group. Men were not allowed, but Margie, the dance instructor, had told me it might be okay to come along if I explained it was for research purposes. Most of the ladies were sixty plus, and one or two, including Margie, hovered around the seventy mark.

Julia arrived from work and parked next to me. At least I wouldn’t have to walk in on my own. Julia was an old friend of Margie’s and already a member of the class, though I must add, or I’ll get into trouble, Julia was not sixty-plus.

“You okay?” Julia said.

“Are you sure they know I’m coming?”

“No.”

“What?”

The hall was semi-subterranean with a stage at one end. Margie stood on the edge of the stage, a petite beacon of pulsing energy. She waved and ‘halloood’ at us when we entered.

“You made it, then?” Margie said.

Margie had started dancing at the age of four, turned professional at sixteen, and was still teaching at seventy-one. Her hair was dyed and cut into a golden bob, her skin was dark with a year-round genuine tan, courtesy of her second home in Mallorca, and her limbs appeared to retain all the malleability of a pre-pubescent.

“Are you sure this is okay?” I asked her.

“I don’t know.”

“You haven’t told them?”

“It’ll be fine.”

“You haven’t told them?”

I’d been under the impression Margie had cleared my presence with the whole class, but now I discovered there was a possibility I was standing in the middle of enemy territory. I looked over at the ladies, huddled along the side of the hall, removing coats and changing into their dancing pumps. Jenny, a lady I’d met before at one of Margie’s parties, was the only person wearing Lycra leggings. She was an old dance colleague of Margie’s and, at 69, still had the legs for the leggings.

The rest of the ladies wore loose-fit T-shirts and baggy tracksuit bottoms, similar to my own attire. I’d decided against the football shorts. Although some of the ladies’ physiques were as relaxed as their clothing, I noticed a marked absence of grey hair,

except for Jenny's, which was dyed a fashionable ice white. The remaining hairdos were a mix of salon blondes, redheads and brunettes, which, combined with the effort of coming to a dance class, implied that a youthful spirit prevailed.

I wasn't sure how many of the girls (from here-on-in 'girls' felt more appropriate than 'ladies') knew who I was or why I was there, so I kept my distance and sat on the edge of the stage, wagging my feet, hoping Margie might make a general announcement on my behalf, even though it was clear Margie herself had only the vaguest idea of why I was there.

The hall had a bare wooden floor with four square pillars near the corners. The walls were painted pink. An odd colour choice, I thought, for a Methodist Hall. Hardly evocative of the joyless abstinence I associated with Methodism. The stage had purple curtains drawn in at the sides and was full of panto props. There was a backdrop of a medieval castle, which made sense, and a wheelchair, which didn't, unless Buttons had gout. I imagined being wheeled home in the wheelchair after my first attempt at a plié.

Margie put a CD player on a chair and searched for the right CD in her bag. She'd had a fall and broken a rib. It wasn't going to interfere with running the class. Margie was an old fashioned trouper. She'd never missed a show in her life. Her soul had 'a definite aim': keep dancing, keep moving.

Her instinct for perpetual motion also applied to her mouth. She liked to talk.

I interviewed Margie at her apartment. She lived in an old Edwardian building, with a communal staircase broad enough to accommodate the descent of a high-kicking chorus line. I could imagine Margie choreographing an entire Busby Berkeley routine just to

collect the mail. She met me at the door of her apartment. I pointed to a Stannah Stairlift at the top of the staircase behind me.

“That’s not for you, is it?”

“No, not yet.”

The walls of the apartment’s hallway were covered in photos taken by Margie’s husband, Alan ‘Scorp’ Pickering. Some of the photos were landscape shots of Scarborough and foreign cities, but most of them were of Margie, either dancing or posing in costume, or in one case, not in costume, unless you count hot pants and a pair of thigh-length boots as a costume.

I stared at Margie’s naked breasts. It was more out of shock than lust. One minute I’m admiring a sunset behind Scarborough Castle, the next I’m face-to-areole with Margie’s boobs. She caught me staring.

“Nice boots,” I said.

“I was a lot younger then.”

I nodded silently. I’ve grown better at recognising those moments when my mouth can’t be trusted. Walking on, I had the uncomfortable feeling that Margie’s nipples were following me down the corridor.

A faded black and white photo on the sideboard showed Margie in a Flamenco outfit standing next to Tom Jones, pre-nose job. That’s pre Tom’s nose job, not Margie’s. The only surgery Margie has had is the fitting of a pacemaker, which appears to have made her indestructible.

We walked through into the large lounge. A bay window overlooked Oriel Crescent cricket ground. The right hand wall was shelved from floor to ceiling, full of

holiday reads and celebrity biographies. There was also a built-in stereo unit. Radio 1 was playing. I hadn't listened to Radio 1 in over thirty years. At 52, I was far too old for it. At 71, Margie was not. Even when she wasn't dancing, she needed to keep a rhythm throbbing away in the background.

"How shall we start?" Margie said.

"Well-"

"Vodka and tonic?"

"Ah, okay."

It was four o'clock in the afternoon but we were due to embark on a conversation about theatres and cabaret and all things showbiz, so perhaps the subject matter was decadent enough to justify drinks in the afternoon.

With ice clinking and lemon swirling, we got under way.

"The Russians came in," Margie said.

I was lost already. Perhaps the Russian vodka had prompted the reference.

"The Russians?"

"Yes, they came to every part of the world. They came to Japan. And they'd do anything. Half of them couldn't dance, but they always looked good. And they picked up Japanese very quickly."

Margie's recollections had not started at the beginning of her professional career, but at the end. The collapse of communism in Russia had also finished off Margie's days of touring dance troupes around Europe and Asia. Thousands of ambitious Russian girls had flooded the capitalist dance economy.

“The Russian girls would work for less money. They would also sit with customers and chat, hostessing, so they’d make more money for the venue. We were gradually pushed out; not just our group but most of the English. The Russian girls hadn’t really got much idea. They weren’t talented. They were not trained dancers.”

It wasn’t the competition that upset Margie so much as the offence to her art – the devaluation of talent and skill, the sudden redundancy of a lifetime’s training and practice. I coaxed Margie to take me back to when it had all started.

“When I was four my mum said you’re going to dance class. I was always dancing around. So my mum made me do something about it. I knew I wanted to go on stage then. That was all I wanted to do.”

A grey cat strolled into the lounge, pawed at the cheese plant, rolled on its back, sprang to its feet, and then ran up and down the furniture.

“Mad half-hour,” Margie explained. “We’re cat sitting for a friend. Does this every day at this time. Can’t stop it.”

The cat ran across my lap then disappeared under the coffee table. Its erratic and irrepressible spurts of energy put me in mind of my moves on the dance floor.

I sat on the edge of the stage while Margie gave me a half-arsed introduction to the rest of the class.

“This is David. He’s joining us to...” She turned to me. “What are you here for again?”

I launched into a convoluted explanation, but nobody appeared that bothered by my presence or interested in my reasons for it. They cut me off with a cheery chorus of hellos and “Very brave”. All that anxiety for nothing.

We began with a warm-up session. I was positioned at the back and told I could stand in for Laura. I said, “Why? Is Laura tall and bald?” The girls laughed and I thought, okay this might work out.

I feared warming up might mean pirouetting to strains of the Sugar Plum Fairy, but it was quite the opposite: a lot of rigorous bending and stretching to the sound of Katie Perry and “Roar”. It was a far more butch affair than I’d expected and despite being a regular five-a-side player, I experienced a level of muscular discomfort, especially in my ankles, which I assumed could only mean I was doing myself a lot of good.

Margie directed the moves from the stage. Her cracked rib prevented her from demonstrating a lot of them. She had to settle for calling them out. I took my lead from the rest of the girls who were familiar with the routine. One or two of the exercises were more embarrassing for me than others, such as the pelvic thrusts and bust toner, but in the main I held my own with a modicum of flexible dignity.

After twenty minutes we were ready to start work on a routine. The girls returned their exercise mats to the side of the hall and shook themselves out. I hadn’t brought a mat. Something to remember for next week. I’d had to settle for doing my sit-ups on bare floorboards. Julia asked me what I’d thought of the warm-up session. I said I felt better prepared for childbirth.

“How’s your rib, Margie?” Patsy asked.

“I can do the dance, but still struggle with the floor exercises.”

Matters of physical health cropped up a lot over the coming weeks, but according to Margie nothing short of the Black Death was ever deemed a good enough excuse to skip a class.

One of the earliest recorded uses of dance was in healing rituals. I think this remained entrenched in Margie’s psyche. Dance represented well-being for Margie and any departure from it brought dissonance and discord. She reverberated to Gene Kelly singing “Gotta Dance”. It was hard to think of her sleeping without at least one leg twitching like that of a dreaming dog. I envied her sense of vocation; the fact that she’d identified it so early in life and then spent the rest of her life expressing it.

Margie walked us through the first step – a literal step forward and then a step back. Simple, though something of a revelation for me. My previous dancing experiences had only involved bouncing from side to side, or up and down. It had never occurred to me to go forwards and backwards.

Margie’s steps were fluid and spring-loaded. Mine looked as though I were swerving to avoid dog dirt on the pavement.

While I was aware of how I looked, it wasn’t how I felt. With only one move under my belt, I was Fred Astaire putting on his top hat. All I wanted to do forever was take one step forward and one step backwards. I was dancing – until it came to the second move: the Samba Turn, as impossible to describe as it was to do. There were three tap-style alternating steps to the side, then a ‘step, push and turn’. It was a move the girls had done before in another routine, so they had a head start on me in every sense. I kept meeting them on their way back from the ‘step, push and turn’.

Margie shouted out the rhythm of the steps in time with her feet striking the floor, 'Dah, dah, dah – dah, dah, dah – dah, dah, dah'.

I could hear the rhythm but I could not reproduce it anywhere in my body. To confound me further, Margie was doing something with her arms, curling them forwards like an eagle's wings enveloping their prey. It was "Tiger Feet" all over again, with me doing nothing more than an approximation of the routine. I was a clod-hopping calamity.

What surprised me was how angry I was about it. I maintained a jokey façade but my inner child wanted to stamp his foot, and I would have done if I hadn't been afraid of how much it would emphasise my lack of rhythm. I could not get the move and it bothered me.

"What are you doing, David?" Margie asked.

"I don't know. I can't get it."

Margie came down from the stage. I was going to get some sympathetic one-on-one. She walked towards me doing what looked like an impression of John Wayne fresh off his horse and suffering with piles, but was in fact her impression of my Samba Turn.

"What's all this?" she said.

Not quite the sympathy I was in need of.

"I can't get it."

Margie repeated the steps in front of me. "Dah, dah, dah – dah, dah, dah...And don't forget your arms."

My arms flung themselves up, independent of any instructions from me. My body was in shock. I was attempting to steer it with unfamiliar impulses. Synapses were firing with random effects.

Margie had been on the stage from her early teens.

“At twelve and thirteen I was at the Open Air Theatre. I performed in *White Horse Inn* and *Oklahoma*. I was in the chorus at the back.”

Scarborough’s Open Air Theatre was built in 1932, taking advantage of a natural amphitheatre. The stage was on an island in a manmade boating lake, and the audience sat across the water on the hill opposite. The arena could seat 8,000, and the Scarborough Amateur Operatic Society put on dozens of musical productions from *Merrie England* to *Desert Song*.

I remember going as a child, sitting snug inside a blanket, and although I was too young to follow the storylines, the lights reflecting on the water made the whole landscape glitter with the magic of a giant Santa’s Grotto. The last production was *West Side Story* in 1968. After that the arena played host to *It’s A Knockout* for ten years. In 1977 the staging and seating were all demolished. Temporary structures were put up to host the occasional concert by James Last, but in 1987 it closed down and fell into ruin.

I would go for nostalgic walks amongst the cracked concrete and rampant weeds and try to summon up an image of its old twinkling majesty. For twenty years it lay crumbling and derelict, but in 2010, after extensive renovation, it was officially re-opened by the Queen and has subsequently played host to Status Quo, Dionne Warwick,

Sir Elton John and Sir Tom Jones: a lifetime of fluctuating entertainment tastes, throughout which Margie kept dancing.

“Do you remember Lesley Sturdy?” Margie asked.

“No.”

“You haven’t heard of Lesley Sturdy?” Margie was shocked. “He was a pianist and he used to put shows on. I would be fourteen or fifteen then. He did a lot of plays and shows and things and I don’t know how but I got into that.”

I learned that Leslie Sturdy had written songs recorded by Vera Lucy, Dinah Shore and Burl Ives. So, while Margie was only a teenager at school, she was performing in front of crowds of 8,000 and being hired by a musical director with an international reputation. She may not recall how she got the Leslie Sturdy shows, but I can guess. She has the kind of energy that makes things happen and which doesn’t appear to have diminished over sixty years of hoofing.

“It was called *The Crackers Show*, the Lesley Sturdy show, and we did it down at the Futurist. I was the only young one. I also danced at the Gaiety Cinema on Aberdeen Walk– it’s a furniture shop now. They used to put dancers on between the films.”

The Futurist is yet another Scarborough theatre that has gone dark. Unlike the Open Air Theatre, it won’t be revived. There’s talk of more functional plans such as a block of flats, car park, or supermarket.

“I left school at fifteen. Mum and Dad said you can’t go away working as a dancer at fifteen. So I worked at Wrays Bakery. I’d start at about half seven, finish at half five, go to dance class, then rehearsals for Leslie Sturdy, then cycle home at about midnight.”

The cat had stopped running around, either from its own exertions or from listening to Margie recall hers.

“But I couldn’t wait to get away. I was confident, thought I could dance alright, but it’s a small town. It’s when you get out and get away that you learn your trade. When you work with other choreographers and when you travel. I couldn’t wait to go.”

Even as a child, Margie wasn’t afraid to tackle new experiences.

I, on the other hand, gave up on the Samba Turn. I would have to work on it in my own time. I just about had the steps but could not do them in time with everyone else. Margie had already moved onto the next segment of the routine: a shimmy into a slide. The girls shook their breasts, fanned their arms wide, then leaned to the left but slid to the right.

“What am I supposed to shimmy?” I asked, shaking my empty rib cage.

The girls laughed and shook their breasts at me to show off what I hadn’t got. I exaggerated my shimmy as though I were a double D cup, threw out my arms and slid.

“That’s it, David,” Margie said.

Praise from the teacher. I adjusted my non-existent cleavage; no longer John Wayne, but one of the girls.

“Let’s try what we’ve got so far to the music,” Margie said. She put on the CD, stood on the stage with her back to us and wiggled her hips to the introduction, then we were off: step forward, step back, step forward, step back, Samba Turn, return to position, shimmy and slide. I got the first steps right, flopped around like a landed fish for the Samba Turn, but then shimmied and slid with busty confidence.

Mucking it up didn't appear to matter. There was a feeling of exhilaration that came even with a botched attempt, and I wasn't alone in that feeling, because the girls applauded themselves when we'd finished. I'd assumed my twinkle-toed delight was the result of being a newcomer. However, the veterans of the class were just as pleased with themselves as I was. Nothing blasé or cynical about this lot. Dance brought out the happy child. I launched into another shimmy and slide and sang a few bars from *West Side Story*.

“Nah nah nah nah nah nah-merica, Nah nah nah nah nah nah-merica...”

Inhibitions were fading fast.

“When you're ready, David,” Margie said, interrupting.

“Yes, sorry.” I brought my quivering boobs to a halt.

The next move was a ‘step, push and turn’ and then a walk in a large circle, but Margie had choreographed it in her lounge, a much smaller space than the hall, so nobody ended up where they were supposed to, which meant a lot of shuffling about and bumping into one another before returning to our start positions. We scrambled to find our bearings, the shorter ladies looking out for recognisable landmarks.

“Is this the orienteering class?” I asked.

Margie was unfazed. “Make it a larger circle. Take more steps.” She came down from the stage and paced out a larger circle. “Step, push, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Land on eight. It'll work if you land on eight.”

We all complied and found our starting spots without any collisions or map references. It resulted in another round of applause.

By the end of the lesson I was a full-blown cast member of *Fame*. I couldn't stop rehearsing the steps while I chatted, arms flowing, legs crossing. I continued dancing in the car park, getting extra tuition from Margie. I had another stab at the Samba Turn. "Mm," Margie said, "Keep practising" and lumbered off like John Wayne. I didn't care. I'd crossed a threshold and was stepping out.

The next big step for Margie was to get out of town. She'd danced on all the big stages in Scarborough as an amateur and now she wanted to see what lay beyond.

"Dancing was one of the only ways for a young person during that era to see anything of the world. This was long before package holidays."

Margie's parents, Jim and Dot, had supported Margie's dancing ambitions from the start and understood that she needed to keep pushing, keep moving.

"I saw this advert in the stage for a panto with Lonnie Donegan in Birmingham. 'I'm sixteen,' I said to Mum and Dad, 'I'm going.' There were millions of jobs in those days but you had to audition for them. Anyway my parents drove me through to Birmingham. I did the audition and the guy said, 'Yeah, you, you and you, you've got the job.'"

Margie's recounting of the audition was brisk. She had passed her first audition outside of Scarborough, beaten off dozens of rivals who'd travelled the length and breadth of the country, but it appeared as nothing more than a matter of course to her. At the age of sixteen she was a full-blown professional.

“But having got the job, then you’d got to find your digs and everything. You’re on your own. At sixteen. But you’re probably more confident then than you are now, because you’re young and you’re starting out. The world’s your oyster, sort of thing.”

For all their support I wondered how Jim and Dot felt about their sixteen-year-old daughter being away from home.

“I don’t know if my parents were worried because we were naïve and twitty in those days. Not like the kids of today. We didn’t know anything about anything. Mother and Father didn’t tell you anything, because they didn’t know anything, either.”

If Margie’s parents weren’t worried, was Margie?

“I wasn’t homesick, which is terrible, but I wasn’t. I thought it was great. Going to the theatre, getting ready. Boom! This is the start. I loved it.”

After my first dance lesson with Margie, I had a similar feeling of ‘Boom! This is the start.’ But when I turned up for my second lesson the following week, Julia was late. I waited in the car park. She didn’t come. I was caught between being punctual on my own, or entering late with Julia. The anxiety of being late won over the fear of being left standing in the hall without anyone to talk to. I entered, accompanied only by my exercise mat (I’d remembered it this time).

“Where’s Julia?” Margie said. She didn’t like absent students. Although everyone attended for the fun of it, Margie still ran the class like a boot camp, a hangover from the discipline required to keep a professional dance troupe in order.

“She’s on her way,” I said. “Just late.”

“She hasn’t texted me to say she’s not coming.”

“No, because she is coming.”

“She doesn’t want to miss a class. She’ll fall behind.”

“She won’t. She’s coming.”

“Not like her to miss a class.”

“Margie! She’s coming.”

Rather than keep the girls away, health problems and personal crises brought them scampering along all the more eagerly. The lessons had a curative power. Patsy had a large dressing taped to the side of her face.

“What’ve you done?” Sandy asked.

“I’ve had a growth removed.”

We all did our best not to go ‘Eugh!’

“I had it for ages but the doctor didn’t like it. Said it had to go.”

“What kind of growth?”

“I don’t know. They’ve sent it off for a biopsy.”

Despite the freshness of her wound, Patsy remained gung-ho, only skipping those warm-up exercises that threatened to pull her stitches apart.

Julia arrived a few minutes later. She tip-toed, hunch-shouldered across the floor, but there was no escaping Margie’s gaze.

Margie tapped her watch. “You’re late.”

Julia waved a ‘sorry’ and threw herself into the warm-up to make amends. The sooner she got a sweat on, the sooner Margie would be appeased. Julia glanced over at me. I returned a haughty expression.

When we moved onto the floor exercises I was able to join the gaggle of girls at the side of the hall, collecting their mats. It was an inclusive act. Collecting my mat at the same time as the girls better identified me as a dancer.

Putting the mats away after the exercises provided the same opportunity for everyone to congregate and gab. It was just like being back at school, letting off steam as soon as there was the briefest of breaks between activities. And just like school, Margie had to clap her hands to regain our attention.

We reviewed the start of last week's routine. I still struggled with the Samba Turn, whereas Margie had got her John Wayne impression of me down to a T. It put me into such a dither I couldn't even remember how to take a step forward followed by a step back. It was not just remembering the steps that was the problem; it was also remembering the sequence they came in.

"What are you doing?" Margie asked. She asked that a lot.

"I don't know."

"Dah, dah, dah," she said. "Dah, dah, dah."

"I can't see what you're doing." Watching Margie's feet was often like listening to a foreign language and not being able to hear how the sounds were made, no matter how slowly they were enunciated.

Margie came down from the stage to give me some one-to-one tuition. Even up close her feet moved no less mysteriously. While performing the steps, her feet appeared to also disguise them, just like a magician's sleight-of-hand.

"Slower," I said. "Do it slower."

Margie did it slower and still the steps disappeared before my very eyes.

“You’re swinging your legs out too far,” Margie said. “Don’t take such big galumphing steps.”

“I’m not taking steps, I’m falling over.”

“What have you got on your feet?”

“Trainers.”

“They’re huge.”

“So are my feet.”

Margie returned to the stage as John Wayne, my one-to-one over with. I was slowing down the lesson. Margie had to keep moving.

“Smaller,” Margie shouted from the stage. “Keep the moves smaller. You’re not doing the triple jump.”

I minimised my galumphing and Margie moderated her John Wayne gait by way of reward. Though Margie’s complexion was smooth, she had the skin of a rhino and assumed everyone else had, too. She never got cross but she just had to, had to, had to keep moving. Even in retirement she gave the impression of being on a tight schedule.

Margie’s teenage years were a breathless cycle of summer seasons followed by panto seasons.

“You’d rehearse for about two weeks before a season, then do your dress rehearsals, then put the show on. Usually you’d do afternoons and evenings. My first summer season was at Skegness; the end of the pier show. It was hard going. I was still only sixteen. Had five different shows to learn. That’s a lot, and all different styles. But we had a good time. It was nice to be earning your own money.”

Margie's independence remained innocent enough, though.

"I didn't drink in those days. And I wasn't troubled by the opposite sex too much. I was too much into my dancing. I didn't want anything to interfere with that."

This was perhaps why Margie took a dim view of absenteeism or late arrivals. It meant dance was coming second, a position it had never occupied with her. It also marked her out from some of her contemporaries who were happy for the stage to be a platform for romance. Lonnie Donegan married his Cinderella, and one of Margie's fellow dancers hooked up for a while with Cliff Richard.

"I worked with the girl Jackie Irving. She used to go out with Cliff Richard and she thought, oh, nothing's happening here. On her 21st birthday she was hoping she was going to get a car, but he gave her a gold watch instead. So she thought bugger you and married Adam Faith."

"He's a brave boy."

"Very brave."

This had become my regular welcome at the dance class, a rippling wake of awed approval. I thought the same was true of the girls. Most of them had never danced prior to taking lessons with Margie.

Jenny had come wearing a T-shirt with a cat on the front. All the girls cooed around it as though it were a real cat. She was also wearing a lime green sash with golden tassels on it, the kind of thing one sees on belly dancers, plus, of course, her usual skin-tight Lycra leggings. I was not ready for Lycra, but perhaps it was time to think about buying some footwear that didn't require clearance for landing.

An elaborate move required the two front rows to turn and face the two back rows and then walk through one another in a dissecting pattern. Rosemary couldn't remember where to stand. At last, someone else other than me was getting into a muddle.

With Rosemary marshalled into the right spot, we took off in bold strides, but mass panic set in the minute we drew close to our opposite lines. The steps eluded us when we were faced with a full-frontal assault. We all threw in extra hops, skips and jumps to avoid each other. I entered into a game of Chicken with Jenny, my opposite number, the two of us forced into taking last minute half-steps to avoid interlocking our shins. At twice the height of most of the ladies, my steps were also twice as long and so I had to start my line further back. To Jenny, it had the disconcerting look of a run-up.

Although my presence in any routine threatened to take the girls out like skittles, they were all developing a real concern for me. They whispered encouragement and tips between Margie's lightning instructions. Linda showed me how to turn my leading foot without tearing any ligaments. She advised me to stay up on my toes throughout the move, showed me how to introduce a little 'boing!' into my steps. I dared to try it. Felt funky. Then Margie spoiled my groove by putting on the music. I couldn't think fast enough to keep the funk going at speed.

This particular move had a rhythm of 'slow, quick, quick, slow'. I was a beat behind everyone else. When it came to the 'quick, quick' steps I overcompensated with a juddering sprint that had me clearing the field in the style of a palsied Usain Bolt. Margie, however, still preferred the analogy with John Wayne, aping me with a bow-legged strut.

"Oh, Margie," Jenny said. "You're awful."

The other girls echoed Jenny's disapproval. They had grown quite protective.

"What?" Margie smiled.

"It's okay," I said. And it was. I didn't mind. John Wayne kept me motivated and taking the Mick out of me spared my blushes, rather than cause them. Nevertheless, no matter what similarities I still bore to a saddle-sore cowboy, I was getting better. At least I could now see where I was going wrong. The template was in my head at last, it was just a question of letting the feet in on it.

After a few seasons of regional summer shows and pantos, Margie was ready for a new challenge: London. She was offered a job at the Embassy Club, and moved into a flat at the top of a building opposite Harrods. "It was four guineas rent. I was earning eleven pounds a week at the Embassy, so I had enough. My hair cost me more – a week's wages – because I went to Vidal Sassoon's."

Margie worked every night at the Embassy except Sunday. It was a popular venue for the stars of the day. "Kenneth Moore, he came in. It was an upper crust club. It wasn't one of these seedy ones." After her show at the Embassy, Margie would often roll onto the Ad Lib Club, London's first discotheque.

"I sat next to one of the Rolling Stones – the one that died in the swimming pool, Brian Jones. The Rolling Stones were chattering and twittering on. I don't think what'sit was there, the main one. Jagger. There was the model Tania Mallet. Blonde girl. Grace Coddington. Nureyev was flinging himself about. It was a brilliant place. Jackie Collins, she was there. It was mainly theatricals."

For Margie, dancing gave her life purpose, but for the rest of her class I'd assumed it was just a means of keeping fit. However, something else emerged over the weeks; something more important. Rosemary said she came dancing 'to get out of the house'. It was a prosaic way of describing the poetry of interaction that I witnessed each week. When the girls turned up in their tracksuits, carrying their mats, they would hug and joke, enquire after each other's health, express concern, receive concern, talk about work, talk about their families. Dance class was a sociable escape, the girls' opportunity to make contact with other kindred spirits.

Ann, Margie's sister-in-law, had been attending Margie's class for nine years. She was seventy, but like Margie and Jenny, she didn't look or sound her age. She was slight and spry and chatty. I felt a part of this community of girls when Ann confided in me how useless her husband was at cooking.

"Men!" I said, tutting.

Andrea was an ex-nun. She'd left the order to get married. She had grandchildren now. The class was a collection of these life-changing choices. I enjoyed the dancing for its own sake but realised the importance of 'getting out of the house'.

London, at the start of the swinging '60s, offered too many opportunities for a young girl to waste her time thinking of marriage.

"I had this wonderful boyfriend, a doctor, who I liked but I thought I don't want to get involved because it'll ruin my career." On her 21st birthday the doctor made the mistake of buying Margie pearls and a twin-set. "Not me at all. He tried to make me more elegant. I preferred these skirts and loose tops with straps, you know the latest

fashion.” Margie’s sense of style was a regular cause for argument. “He’d say you’re only a dancer in a nightclub. But I was proud of being a dancer.”

Margie enjoyed almost two years of ’60s London during its most scandalous and culturally exciting times, through the Profumo Affair and the explosion of Beatlemania. Her job, and a doctor with money, put her at the heart of it.

“When I was walking to the flat near Harrods, I bumped into John Lennon with a girl, but not Cynthia. He was with a dark girl and they were just walking along talking.”

The doctor, however, continued pressurising Margie to take up a more conservative role. “He wanted me to be a stay-at-home-wife. I didn’t want that. I just wanted to dance. So that’s when I went to do operettas in Torino, Italy. This would be ’64. The job was advertised in the Stage.”

Margie had done it again, glided over the audition process. She saw a job advertised, auditioned for it and got it. Simple as that. Was she that good a dancer?

“I was. I was a very good dancer. I was confident.”

Despite her broken rib, Margie completed every exercise in the warm-up routine at the beginning of our fourth lesson.

“Hey, I did it! Did them all.” She touched her rib and then punched the air. The old trouper was back to full strength.

We had a new step to learn. Margie continued to add to the routine, making it harder and harder to remember. The latest move involved me, on the back row, taking several skips backwards.

“Margie, I’m going to have to open the window to complete this move.”

“Don’t take such big steps.”

John Wayne got off his horse and milked it. But I was no longer the only person Margie impersonated. As the routine had progressed and become more complex, it had exposed everyone else’s weaknesses. Margie paraded the stage in a variety of guises: Max Wall; Norman Wisdom; Wilson, Keppel and Betty doing the sand dance; and John Cleese at the Ministry of Silly Walks. Her running commentary on our cock-ups was no less tactless.

“Someone’s doing it wrong...Sandy.”

Then Margie waddled behind Lucy, flapping her arms like a duck. The rest of the girls had to gather round and assure Lucy she looked nothing like Margie’s impression. Warded off from Lucy, Margie made a crack about the size of my feet again and walked back to the stage like Frankenstein’s monster, arms horizontal in front of her.

But I liked the fooling around, even when it was at my expense, and I think the rest of the girls did, too. We couldn’t take offence, because for all her clowning, Margie never lost her temper. She might single the odd one of us out for some light relief, but her attitude towards the group as a whole was always encouraging; even after a kaleidoscopic catastrophe of wrong turns and collisions, she would say nothing more critical than “Mm, that didn’t look quite right.”

At the end of the lesson Margie had some news to break, which she did in the same blunt way she critiqued our dancing.

“Scorp’s been to the hospital. They’ve found a suspicious lump in his colon. They shoved one of those things up his culo.”

“Culo?”

“You know...his...”

Margie indicated her bum with a vague wave of her hand, detaching herself from bodily functions as readily as she could use dance to detach herself from romantic involvement.

“It could be cancer,” Margie said. “Who knows?”

Neither she nor Scorp were dwelling on it. Not yet. Scorp had helped Margie run her dance troupe for twenty years and had been the totem male dancer in the early days. The two of them were the embodiment of ‘the show must go on’, and when faced with life or death scenarios it had, in their case, transcended professionalism or creative compulsion to become a philosophy.

Margie returned to London after her contract in Italy. Her two years at the Embassy had established her reputation in town.

“Once you got in on the London scene you could go for years. I was offered a job at the Stork Club. I was there when the Kray Twins were at their height. It was a good club. Shirley Bassey used to come in, usually on a Sunday night, and throw her arms about and shout a bit. She was quite theatrical, always had four or five fellas with her.”

I’m a Shirley Bassey fan, and I’m interested to hear about her wild arms and the number of men she had hanging from them, but I’m more intrigued by the casual mention of the Kray Twins.

“Yes, they owned the Stork Club. Controlled most of the West End at the time. And they owned the Cabaret Club where whatsit was...What’s her name? They’re doing a show about them now. Christine Keeler and Mandy Rice Davis. They tiddled

about a bit on stage. They weren't trained dancers." Christine Keeler, remembered and dismissed by Margie, not according to her indiscreet affairs, but because her dancing was no better than a tiddle about. Dancing – infinitely more important than national security. Anyway, we're digressing.

"Yes, the Krays. You had to be careful. Pip, the Maître d' chap, foreigner probably, very nice, he used to greet everybody, and he'd say "They're in" and we'd walk round the other way to the dressing room. They'd always sit at the back – four or five of them. They wouldn't pay for anything. They had drinks and hostesses. And one night something went off. And there were dead bodies on the street."

According to Margie things were always 'going off' at the Krays' table. She and the rest of the dancers did their best to stay clear of it.

"But one night, for some reason, me and one of the other dancers walked past the Krays' table when we left the club. And they said goodnight girls and we just went oooo and shuffled out. And one of them got up and followed us out and said if you don't bloody well say goodnight the next time I say goodnight to you I'll chop your bloody legs off. Argh! And we ran down the road."

Dance classes now started with conversations about Scorp's suspicious lump.

"He went into hospital yesterday to have it removed but they weren't able to get it," Margie said. "All they could manage was to snip a bit off for a biopsy."

"How's he dealing with it?"

"He's not worrying yet. You know what he's like. He joked around a lot with the nurses. Finished reading his book. Looked forward to coming home for a whisky."

I nodded. It was a level of stoic fortitude I didn't think I was capable of. Perhaps I hadn't been dancing long enough.

"Have you been practising?" Margie asked.

Keep moving was the message.

We returned to the latest routine.

Margie kept shouting out "One, two, three, bum!" The 'bum' was to emphasise the beat, but some of the girls looked at one another as though Margie had a real and prominent bum in mind. Was she taking the Mick out of someone again? They checked out their behinds for a clue.

"You're doing something funny with your arms, Elaine," Margie said, and to underscore how much they were flailing she added, "All three of them."

Sandy had brought in a newspaper clipping showing a lady with an enormous tumour on her cheek. She thought Patsy might draw comfort from seeing how severe her own growth could have become if it hadn't been operated on. It had the opposite effect. The whole class groaned, and Patsy kept tapping her bandage to see if the growth had returned.

Margie survived her run-in with the Krays and was ready for her next challenge.

"I heard about an audition for a new TV show – *Rolf Harris and the Young Generation*. They held the audition at a big place somewhere off High Street Ken, and there were millions of girls there. There were girls lining every floor. It was on the scale of today's X-Factor. I was just the type they were looking for, someone funky and modern. In the end there were about fifteen of us chosen."

They recorded the singing for the show on Friday night, and then performed the dance routines live on Saturday. “Poor old Rolf Harris shaking like a leaf. Wouldn’t dare talk to anybody because he had to remember his words.”

Recording live on TV meant that any mistakes were seen by an audience of millions. It didn’t bother Margie. She enjoyed the new experience. It was an opportunity to keep pushing her skills. “I didn’t get nervous. I remember one time I opened the show. I was supposed to be taking a shower. And I’ve got the brush and I’m thinking oh my mum will be pleased I’m opening the show.” Week-in and week-out Margie’s mum and dad could see her dancing with the stars of the day. “There were all sorts on the show: Shirley Bassey, Lulu, Petula Clarke, Dudley Moore with the club foot,” though I don’t think that’s the way Rolf introduced him.

Margie stayed with the Young Generation for two seasons. She left when the show made plans to tour the Netherlands. “It was time to move on.”

Margie’s moving on took her to Mallorca, Athens, back to Italy, and then over to America. During this time she also moved on from a couple of boyfriends. After her extensive travels she ended up where she had started. Back in Scarborough. And that’s where she met Scorp.

Scorp’s biopsy had confirmed cancer and he was due to have his operation to remove it on Thursday.

“Oh, no. He’s cancelled it,” Margie said. “Going next week now instead.”

“He’s what?”

“Well, we have tickets to see the Australian Pink Floyd in Newcastle this weekend. He doesn’t want to miss that.”

Keep moving.

Patsy had just had the biopsy results back on her tumour. It was not cancerous, but her celebration was muted. She couldn’t get too excited while Scorp’s fate was still pending.

We picked up with where we had left off in the latest routine.

“Don’t do a Hitler,” Margie said to me. By which I assumed my graceful glide with outstretched arm had lapsed into a goose-step with Nazi salute.

The lesson finished as it had started with everyone gathered around Margie on the edge of the stage, worrying about Scorp. Margie was proud that she was managing to keep the classes going, despite her anxiety.

“It sounds like the two of you are organising the treatment to suit your existing diaries,” I said.

“Oh, yes,” Margie said. “You’ve got to keep dancing. It keeps your mind right.”

Scorp’s eventual operation was a success and tests showed the cancer hadn’t spread to his lymph glands. Margie had danced it into abeyance. This was how it felt when she told the class the news, especially when she clapped her hands afterwards to get the class underway. Launching into a dance was Margie’s prayer of thanks.

“We’ll do the old one,” Margie said.

She was referring to the routine, but Elaine heard it differently. “Which one of us is that?”

“Could be any of us,” Patsy said.

The girls laughed.

The nights were getting lighter and so was the mood in the class. Personal traumas were coming to an end and I had an opportunity to put my confidence in skipping and prancing to the test: Andrea had brought her granddaughter to join in with us, and a prospective new class member, another middle-aged lady, had come to observe. Neither of them knew my reason for being in the class. Could I skip and prance without inhibition? Without feeling the need to justify my presence?

Yes, I could.

I flew like Billy Elliot.

The cat was sleeping on the headrest of my armchair, purring into my left ear. Its mad half-hour long since over.

“Another vodka?” Margie asked.

I’d had three stiff ones already.

“No, no, any more and I’ll have a mad half-hour of my own.” My feet were tapping away to Radio 1. A bad sign.

Margie had talked at length and at speed in breezy butterfly flits, taking me through her life from the age of four to seventy-one. The last twenty years of her professional life had been in partnership with Scorp. He’d prevailed in the boyfriend wars.

“He was funny and didn’t argue,” Margie said.

Together they'd set up *Chelsea Dancers*, a professional dance troupe, and toured it around the world.

"Tokyo, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Malaysia, Korea, Tehran, Portugal, Spain, Mallorca...I forget where else," Margie said. "Then the Russian girls came. No-one wanted legitimate dancers any more. Lap dancing and table dancing became the fashion and we weren't into that. But if the real dancing work was still there, I'd still be rehearsing the girls and doing the shows.

She finished her drink and, unlike me, looked like she could handle another.

"Running the dance class – I'm still dancing basically. I would have stopped it last year but it's still what I like to do.

"To be a dancer, what a wonderful life is that. To travel to all the places I've been to. Meeting different people, seeing different ways of life. I can't just sit at home and watch television."

Perhaps to give life meaning, a soul doesn't have to be profound, it just has to have a 'definite aim' that drives us hard – until we've mastered the Samba Turn.

I thought I had, and on the way to the door I threw in a three-vodka version of it in the hallway. Margie walked behind me, rolling her hips in a familiar bow-legged strut.

"Have you got enough for your story?" she said.

"Yes, I think so."

We stopped at a photograph Scorp had taken of Scarborough's South Bay. The view had brought us to a standstill at the same time. It was what we both had in common. The one constant throughout all our travels. The place we came back to.

"Scarborough," Margie said. "It's a wonderful place. Don't knock it."

Chapter Six

Skimming Stones

(Amor de Lohn: the troubadour song category for distant love)

We see also that by nature there is nothing so contrary to our tastes than that satiety which comes from ease of access; and nothing which sharpens them more than rareness and difficulty.

Michel de Montaigne

My first love posed a couple of difficulties. To start with, it came early in life – somewhere between the age of three and five – and so there was the question of whether or not I was mature enough to handle it. Second, the subject of my adoration was 4,242 miles away. A distant love by any standard. Nevertheless, I was besotted. Done for, you might say. It was an infatuation that would have repercussions.

The flames of passion were sparked, as well as I can remember, by *The Flintstones*. But it was neither Wilma nor Betty who were, as with many a pre-school boy, the subject of my intense desire. It was not even a girl. And no, it was not Fred or Barney, either.

The love of my life was a place.

A country.

America.

The Good Old US of A, crystallised for an English toddler in the domestic set-up of *The Flintstones*. The paradox of *The Flintstones* was that despite its Stone Age

setting, it still appeared more modern than a 1960s Britain in North Yorkshire. The Flintstone's kitchen had a fridge that dispensed ice. Our kitchen didn't even have a potato peeler. And Findus had nothing to compete with a Brontosaurus Burger. We dined on slivers of luncheon meat and thought the good times were rolling. Even Fred's car, powered by his feet, looked more state-of-the-art than our Hillman Imp.

But it was *A Man Called Flintstone*, the feature film version of the TV series, that really set me alight. It was my first experience of the cinema and my first experience of colour. Both would forever be associated with America. Mum took me to see the film at Scarborough's Odeon. I remember the crush of people in the foyer, the fluorescent lights and jumbo posters, mum holding my hand and leading me through a forest of legs, down the aisle of the stalls, past kids bouncing in red seats, leaping off them, letting them snap up, other mums shushing the kids and telling them to sit still. I climbed onto an acre of spring-loaded seat, legs dangling over the side. The screen was vast. We were so close to it I couldn't take it all in at once. I had to scan it, twist my neck from side to side and up and down.

"When's it start?" I said.

"In a minute," Mum said.

I bounced in my seat. "How much longer?"

"Shush. Sit still."

A grown-up minute is an eternity in a five-year-old's world. I kicked the chair in front of me because someone was kicking the back of mine. I looked round at all the other kids who were also looking round at all the other kids, our little heads bobbing

and twitching, wondering if the film could possibly start somewhere else in the theatre other than on the screen.

“When’s it on?” I said.

“Any minute.”

“Soon?”

“Any minute. Be patient.”

Who’s patient at the age of five?

“Come on,” I said, staring at the screen. “Come on.”

The lights dimmed.

Hundreds of kids sighed and murmured. All kicking and bouncing ceased. The screen lit up. The titles rolled. Colour drenched my vision and then carried me in its backwash to the Flintstone’s suburban home.

It was a moment of shock and awe. Up until then America had only been flirting with me, teasing me with black and white TV shows like *Champion the Wonder Horse* and *Casey Jones*, but after the garish and irresistible advances of *A Man Called Flintstone*’s opening scenes, America and I were officially going steady. From then on I yearned for that glossy, shimmering other world, where everything was big and the sun always shone.

A few days after the film, Mum bought me a plastic Fred and Barney toy. The two men, dressed in animal skins, had their arms around each other’s shoulders and, if you put them on a slope, their hinged legs and flat feet let them waddle downhill. The difficulty was finding a slope smooth enough. Dad told me to try the driveway. But it was no good. Our drive was made of rough concrete, too pitted for Fred and Barney to

manage more than two steps without toppling over head first. American driveways were made from smooth black ‘asphalt’. It was just another example of Britain’s lack of refinement and imagination compared to America.

I wanted an ‘asphalt’ drive, and I also wanted a talking horse like *Mr Ed* and a witch for a mum like Sam in *Bewitched*. That much perhaps was typical of any five-year-old, but I also had a precocious sense of lifestyle. At the age of five I craved French windows that opened onto a patio and swimming pool, and the idea of having Hispanic servants was intoxicating – someone to answer the door for me and say, “Master Daveed ee cannot play, ee’s beesy weeth ees talky horse.” And because all of these images of America came to me via Hollywood, it was Hollywood that came to represent the country as a whole. The question was *How did one get to Hollywood?* The most obvious answer to me back then was by becoming a film star, and a stellar performance in my nursery school’s nativity play as a Wise Man suggested I was already well on my way.

I watched films with an avidity not shared by my dad. If I told Dad a good film was coming on he’d say, “Is it American?” And if I said, “Yes” then he’d say, “Isn’t there anything else on?” Mum, as a veteran principal boy of Pickering pantomime, was more tolerant of my enthusiasm for all things trans-Atlantic. She was impressed that I could identify stars such as Bette Davis and Humphrey Bogart when they came on the telly. Dad, an inveterate Old Mother Riley and George Formby fan, just puffed on his pipe with disappointment and disappeared behind his paper.

What made America all the more alluring was that nobody went there. Not when I was a kid. It was so distant it may as well have been another planet. For our family holidays Dad drove us to the Dales. That wasn't even out of the county. It was as far as Dad went, though. Any further and he ran the risk of suffering flashbacks to his time in National Service. Lancashire, as far as Dad was concerned, held just as many unacceptable 'foreign' terrors as Egypt. Then, one summer in my early twenties, America came to me.

My cousin Helen got married. The reception was held in a marquee in her home village. All the male cousins met in the local pub after the service before going onto the marquee. Helen's brothers, Peter and Richard, came in with the daughter of one of their Dad's friends.

An American girl.

Better than that. An American girl who corresponded to the Californian golden girl stereotype: blonde, tanned, white teeth and...she really was from California.

She walked (or should I say surfed) in soft focus slow-motion, into a bar of half-cut country bumpkins. Mum's side of the family were all, as the Americans say, 'hayseeds' from the 'sticks'. We were gob-smacked and formed a circle around her.

She became even more glamorous under interrogation. Her name was Elena and she was half Spanish. We jostled for prominence in the circle and bought her more drinks than she could hold. A local lad, Benji, asked her what language she dreamed in. A smart question. I nudged him to one side. This girl was mine. She was mine by virtue of being American. Our meeting was fated. I was convinced of it. Everything in my life was falling into place. Within the last few months I'd sold some sketches to the TV

show *Spitting Image*, had made plans to start a new life in London with my mate and co-writer Sean, and now I had the perfect girl. I was a young man making his enterprising way in the world. It was my version of Reagan-omics. I was living the American dream, albeit in England.

Elena and I walked through the village together, towards the wedding marquee, chatting all the way. Her voice was not the usual American whine. It had a soft, husky quality to it. She was nineteen, full of confidence and laughed a great deal, which, as a freshly minted comedy writer, I took all the credit for. I would have been jubilant if Elena's dad owned a hardware store, as Richie Cunningham's dad did in *Happy Days*, but I fair fell sideways into the hedge when she told me he worked for NASA. Short of riding to work on a horse shouting "Yeeha!" he couldn't have been any more American. If that wasn't a sign that America was calling me, I don't know what was. I was walking and talking with a first class ticket to Hollywood. But it was not a cynical realisation. It was romantic fulfilment.

Showbiz.

A pretty girl.

America.

"Yabbadabbadoooo..."

I'd only been abroad three times before: a trip to Austria with the school, and then a couple of times with the family, once to Mallorca and once to Spain; short haul flights, supervised by teachers, or Mum and Dad. (We'd managed to bully Dad twice into taking us beyond the Dales but he took his revenge on each occasion by wearing socks

with his sandals.) Now I was flying to America on my own. It was a big deal, but I wasn't nervous, just excited. I had faith. Elena and I were meant to be together and so I didn't believe the gods would allow any temporal interference, such as getting stuck in traffic, misreading the plane's departure time, or losing my luggage.

After hitting it off at my cousin's wedding, Elena and I had met up again the following day. We'd kissed and I'd seen fireworks flashing behind the Statue of Liberty. You'd think my experience with Diane would have calmed my enthusiasm for 'fated' relationships, but no. A few years down the line and I remained the same starry-eyed fool. Elena had flown back to America and I had lapsed into a period of moping and sighing and murmuring "Oh, Elena" until, after a long soppy phone-call, we'd agreed that in the interests of sparing my friends and family any further sighing and murmuring, I should fly out to California for a holiday.

I walked through the baggage claim at LAX and into arrivals. I'd made it. I was in America. Dozens of people were leaning over the rails, watching the doors, all clad in garish shorts and T-shirts, and blazing behind them through huge windows was a glorious Californian sun; a scene of bright light and colour that struck me with the same force as the title sequence of *A Man Called Flintstone* had done.

All of a sudden I felt terribly terribly English and out of place, only a bowler hat and a brolly could have made me feel any more self-conscious. I wondered if my Englishness was obvious to anybody else. One of the peering faces peered at me. Tanned skin glowed, white teeth gleamed. It was Elena. She waved, smiling, bouncing. If it hadn't been obvious I was English before, then it was now. I smiled but held any waving and bouncing in check, while all around me there was the wail and flail of

Americans re-uniting, roaring their recognition and flapping their arms like cheerleaders, which some of them probably were for all I knew. I let loose in my own way with a slight and silent incline of the head towards Elena.

Elena wasn't alone. She was with a girl in her twenties and a young boy of four or five. Elena flashed a hand at them and made a brief introduction. The girl was her cousin Carmel who had driven Elena to the airport, and the boy was Carmel's son, Angelo. All three were delighted to see me, including Carmel and Angelo who didn't know me from Adam, and I felt the same delight in being reunited with Elena – I just didn't have the vocabulary for it. The trio gushed about me while I clung to my rucksack and felt the strain of my English smile.

“Hello,” I said.

The waist-high rail remained between us and I wasn't sure if I could duck under it or whether I was supposed to walk all the way to the end of it. I chose to walk to the end. Elena, Carmel and Angelo walked the length of the barrier with me, wondering where I was going, but we all met up at the final post and they appeared relieved when I turned to face them again. This time I gave Elena a hug, my passion tempered by Carmel's gleeful proximity and Angelo tugging on my trouser legs.

“I can't believe you're here,” Elena said.

Neither could I. It had been an interminable three weeks waiting to see Elena again after cousin Helen's wedding, and an interminable twenty years waiting to see Uncle Sam for the first time.

Elena lived in Orange County on 1091 North Granada Drive. 1091! That meant everywhere you looked there were houses. Just houses. There were no shops, no churches, no community centres, no pubs, and as a result there were no pedestrians because there was nowhere for them to walk to. The streets were broad with a lot of trees and shrubs planted along the pavements. The houses were all chocolate brown bungalows that squatted on the other side of green lawns. Although the lawns were cut short, the grass was coarse and looked more suitable for grazing livestock on than playing footie; big butch blades intermingled with chunky clumps of shorn weeds, which no doubt tumbled if they were allowed to grow big enough. None of the bungalows had windows facing onto the street. They were anti-social enough to deter burglars and I wondered if the owners were also ever tempted to just keep driving.

But the sun was shining, so at least the land of mini brown fortresses looked more golden against a blue sky. The inside of the house was less disappointing. We entered through the 'car port' and walked past crates of Coke-Cola and Dr Pepper. I only ever bought soft drinks by the can and never kept any in store at home. What kind of extravagance was this? I came to a reverential stop by the crates.

"Are you coming in?" Elena said.

"All these cans?"

"Yeah, it gets hot out here."

"So many cans."

"We got cool ones in the fridge. You want one?"

I followed her into the kitchen and came face-to-face with a silver fridge that loomed from floor to ceiling and hummed like a hovering spacecraft. Elena opened the

door and revealed enough fresh produce to keep Scarborough going for a week. One whole shelf was dedicated to fizzy drinks.

“Dr Pepper?” Elena said.

“Thanks.” I’d heard of Dr Pepper but never tried one. This felt like the right time for my first time.

Elena popped a can and then shoved an empty glass into a slot on the outside of the fridge door. There was a whirr and ice clanged into the glass. Elena then poured the Dr Pepper over the ice. Her every movement was casual and prosaic, but I heard an orchestral score swelling in my head and contemplated doing a Viennese Waltz around the table.

“It made ice,” I said, nodding at the fridge like a caveman catching his first glimpse of fire.

“Sure. You can have it in cubes or crushed.”

“Cubes or crushed,” I repeated, stroking the fridge with my Neanderthal knuckles. Not just ice, but ice *options*.

“Let’s dump your bag and I’ll show you round.”

“I’m not leaving the fridge.”

Elena laughed.

I took my first sip of Dr Pepper: sickly sweet ice cold nectar. “Wow! What’s in this?”

“I don’t know. Chemicals mostly, I guess.”

“They’re great. Great chemicals. I love them.”

Elena took my hand and led me out of the kitchen. The bungalow was built around a shaded glass-walled atrium, full of plants; a micro-jungle in the centre of the home.

“Bloody hell!” I said. The jungle was unexpected. I looked for parrots or a naked man swinging on a vine.

“It lets the light in,” Elena said. “We can’t have big windows in the rooms because the sun just fries everything.”

It was a nifty idea but the tiny windows, high up towards the ceilings, turned the rooms into freight boxes. Not one room had a view. The rooms were no doubt cooler for it, but it felt like a high price to pay. I was glad of the privacy when Elena showed me into my bedroom. Here I was. In America. In a bedroom with a gorgeous Californian girl. We lay on the bed and I immediately cried out in alarm. It was a waterbed. As heady as I felt, I hadn’t expected a tidal surge under my buttocks.

“What the..?” I said, and rolled onto all fours, undulating like a seasick dog.

“Have you not been on a waterbed before?” Elena said.

I think it was obvious that I had not from the way I tried to make it splash. I reared up on my knees and brought my hands down either side of Elena’s head, which then bobbed like flotsam beneath me. “Cool!” I said, and did it again. As far as foreplay goes, it worked for me, but if you wish to try it I’d recommend you keep the whooping to a minimum. Your partner, on top of having their head made to bounce, might find it annoying. Once I was satisfied that the bed could support us both without springing a leak, and Elena had stopped feeling queasy, we settled into a lapping embrace and made

love. I was as happy in that moment as I could ever remember being, aroused and yet relaxed, floating in profound communion.

And yet, despite the glorious sanctity of our rippling bodies, I couldn't help launching into an internal nautical commentary of 'all aboard', 'haul away' and 'thar she blows!'

Over the next several days, my love for Elena and America grew. I felt like an illegal immigrant who couldn't believe his luck. We drove to the 'Mall' and I bought a pair of 'sneakers' for 'ten dollars' and the shop assistant told me to 'have a nice day'. I ate food I'd only ever heard about, such as 'hash browns', 'Twinkies' and 're-fried beans' (Mexico's answer to mushy peas). I talked to a black man at a set of 'stoplights' as we hung out of our car windows. He asked me if I was going to the game. I said no I was on holiday. He said hey you're from England and I agreed with him. Then he howled and told me to 'have a nice day'. I promised I would and said cheerio.

"What were you doing?" Elena asked.

I said, "I think we were 'jive talking'."

We went to Universal Film Studios, where I was splashed by the animatronic shark from *Jaws*, watched the recreation of a Western shoot out and had my photo taken on a bicycle with a plastic E.T. We went to Disneyland and rode rides like kids, snacked on 'dogs' and ice cream, bought souvenirs (Elena bought me a Winnie the Pooh stuffed toy and I bought her a pig who she christened 'Bonker Pig' because of some inappropriate coupling I made him do with Pooh), and then we watched the end-of-day

parade, Elena whistling at the fireworks, me whistling at Snow White, Elena thumping me in the arm.

The Stars and Stripes whirlwind continued: down to the beach in San Diego where I discovered my Scarborough tan from lifeguarding for the summer looked anaemic compared to those of the natives. I didn't help my appearance by being the only man on the beach wearing a pair of 1970s Speedos, too brief to accommodate both testicles simultaneously and which, while still all the rage in Scarborough, were a good fifteen years out of date anywhere else in the world. Nevertheless, I was on an American beach splashing in the waves like Burt Lancaster in *From Here to Eternity*, making real those fairytale images of my enamoured youth. I rolled in the sand and the surf with Elena, and America was no longer once removed, but held tight in my arms and surging all around me.

We saw a Sci-Fi movie at a drive-in theatre and ate popcorn and 'necked'. I watched MTV for the first time on Elena's satellite TV; watched it for hours on end, pop video after pop video after pop video. Mark Knopfler and Dire Straits sang "Money for Nothin'" and Sting sang "Fortress Around Your Heart". They were Brits making it big abroad. Why couldn't I do the same? I watched them accompanied by the buzz of air conditioning, another first for me. There was no call for a domestic gadget in North Yorkshire to cool people down. To refresh the novelty I kept popping outside to get a sweat on, just to feel the thrill of the chill when I stepped back inside.

And then, after a week of being urged to 'have a nice day' every-day, and having complied so enthusiastically, I returned to England. The sun was still shining, even in Scarborough, but nothing glittered in quite the same way as it had done in America.

Elena promised to come to England in November, but that was the best part of three months away.

Sean and I found a two-bed maisonette in Willesden. The flat was cosy enough but the high street, while bursting with the community life I'd missed in America, made it much harder to maintain my celluloid dreams of the future. It was easy to believe I was going to write film scripts when I cruised down Rodeo Drive, but not so easy when I walked past laundrettes and bookies, breathing in Asian spices from the food stalls and listening to shoulder high ghetto blasters pumping out reggae music. Willesden was rich in multi-racial culture, but that was real life. Tough and raw. I wasn't into that. I was too young and immature and only interested in the remove that came with fame and wealth and making up stories. I was looking to detach myself. Writing for me was about the imagination, not experience. And I could imagine walking down Rodeo Drive with Elena more vividly than I could experience walking down Willesden High Street with Sean.

The temptation was to fly straight back to America, but Sean and I had a show to write. We'd been commissioned for Noel Edmond's *Late Late Breakfast Show*. It was meagre pay but represented a substantial break. For a few weeks I applied myself to the task, but as summer faded and the weather turned, my mood also deteriorated. I was nostalgic for hash brown breakfasts in bed, with Elena's laugh 'on the side'. But there was no prospect of enjoying them again in the near future.

Once a week I slept on the lounge floor by the phone so I could answer calls from Elena in the middle of the night without disturbing Sean. The conversations started

brightly but the distance between us stretched the words thin until they snapped into silence. How many times could we say how much we missed each other?

“Are you still there?” Elena would say.

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“Talk to me David.”

“I am...I’m talking...”

Then there’d be another silence as the distance sucked us both dry once more.

Three weeks separation had been hard enough, now we had three months to get through.

The *want* was unrelenting. Elena and I wrote every day and our expressions of missing one another escalated into the wildest declarations of abject despondency. How could we live another day without seeing one another? we said. How could we bear the separation? We would surely die if we had to endure another twenty-four hours apart. And the more we wound each other up in this way the longer the days stretched out and the further away any reunion appeared. It was an intense, hyperventilating correspondence, and I’m embarrassed to recall how freely, and floridly, I abandoned myself to it.

Missing Elena had become something else. All rational behaviour had been obliterated by a high fever, which at first I’d justified as ardent romanticism, but which was now just plain painful and pathetic. How to make the pain go away, though?

The next time Elena called I had a topic of conversation.

“Why don’t you delay going to college?” I suggested to her. “Come to London and live with me for a year. See how things go?”

“What would I do?”

“Get a job. Anything. Just for a year. See how it goes.”

“Okay,” Elena said. Just like that. She’d already had the same idea. “Let me look into it. Talk to my mum and dad.”

The next time Elena rang she said, “I want to come, but there’s no way I can get a work permit.”

“You’re kidding.” I was back to square one. “Are you sure? Not even for six months? Some kind of short-term student permit?”

“No. Well, yes, there is something, but not that.”

“What then?”

“I can only get a visa if I’m married.”

Married. Who wanted to get married?

“Talk to me David.”

I breathed out. My chest had a rugby team sitting on it.

“Okay, I said.”

“Okay what?”

“Well, I suppose we better get married.” *What was I saying?*

“You think so? Are you sure?”

“It’s the only way, right?” *I was still saying it.*

“Yeah. It’s what the Embassy said.”

“Right, then. Okay.” *Stop saying it, Dave.*

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s get married.” *WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?*

The proposal, if you can call it that, low-key and somewhat vague as to who'd initiated it, bore no relationship to the romantic frenzy of our letters, but from then on there were no more silences during our middle-of-the-night phone calls. Getting married took care of that. There's a lot to talk about in the run-up to a wedding, especially with a wedding present list as long as ours. I tried to explain to Elena that we'd be living in a small flat with Sean (I couldn't leave him stranded) and not only wouldn't we have need of a twenty-four piece crockery set, but there wouldn't be anywhere to store it, either.

However, Elena's mum, Sofia, saw it as her job to guarantee that her daughter had the kind of excessive dowry associated with the daughter of a royal household. There were enough towels and linen on the list to open a hotel. Plus a silver-service set (also for twenty-four people) and a selection of domestic appliances that even my mum and dad hadn't acquired after twenty-five years of marriage.

"Elena, this is crazy," I said. "We don't need a chandelier."

"We can put it all in storage until we get a bigger place."

It was not a subject for debate. It was some kind of wealthy Spanish tradition. This was what her mum's family did, Elena said, which would have been fine if we were moving into a Catalonian Castle but was absurd for a flat in North London.

Finding suitable accommodation was my job. The maisonette Sean and I shared was only on a short let, so I now had to find a place for the three of us. Elena talked of being prepared to 'rough it' during our early years together, but she also told me to make sure I found a place with a big kitchen, and that maybe the rest of the flat shouldn't be too small, either. We didn't want to be falling over each other, did we? No, no, of course not.

Though I was not a Catholic, I agreed to a Catholic wedding to appease Sofia. How could I quibble when she'd been so understanding about her daughter getting married in the first place? But Elena, who hadn't previously struck me as religious, was now attending Mass every day and had taken to thanking God for things in her letters. What disturbed me was not so much the incipient religiosity that I hadn't bargained for, but the lack of spirituality that came with it. Elena had an altercation with her college postman. She accused him of withholding letters from her rather than work the overtime needed to deliver them all.

'He's a queer,' she wrote. 'I hate queers. I wanted to make him cry.'

As far as alarm bells go that one was resounding. Unequivocal. Not much ambiguity in 'I hate queers'. Very little in the way of subtext there. You'd have to be a moron not to get some notion of how Elena felt about 'queers' from that line. Still, I thought, Elena was young, and it was probably just a rash regression, the result of her mother's Old Testament prejudices. She'd probably regretted having written it the moment she'd posted it.

And then another letter came.

Elena wanted to take charge of buying the wedding rings whilst she was still in America. I requested something discreet. She wrote 'a thin ring would make me look like a faggot'.

Okay, so now I knew for sure where she stood on homosexuality. We were clear on that. Alarm bells still ringing. Going quite berserk, in fact. But, I reasoned. BUT. Surely a cosmopolitan life in London would bring Elena's sensibilities up to date. Surely.

Another letter came.

Elena's college campus was in the middle of a slum area in St. Louis, with a high ethnic American crime rate, and she complained that college security was not all it should be. She feared she'd 'wake up one morning face-to-face with an axe-wielding nigger'.

Forget the alarm bells. 'Nigger' had a klaxon going. AROOGHAH, AROOGHAH. Did I listen?

Despite each of Elena's shocking revelations I clung to the vain belief that I had influence over her. A love like mine would inspire her to embrace all minorities. Reason would prevail. While I waited for it to do so, Sofia said she wasn't happy with any of Elena's wedding dress suggestions. Sofia had seen something she liked in Vogue and had hired someone in Manila to make a bespoke version of it. *Someone in Manila?* How many more nations were going to play a hand in my wedding? It was going viral, and in terms of expense, growing vulgar. The more 'generous' Elena's mum was, the less grateful I felt.

When at last Elena and I were reunited, the relief that I'd expected never fully materialised. The pressure of what we had set in motion was overwhelming. Elena had left her family and friends and education to be with me. Her dad had spent thousands on a term's worth of education that Elena had abandoned on my say so. It was a massive sacrifice. I'd promised Elena a bright showbiz future but *The Late Late Breakfast Show* had finished by the time she arrived and I was out of work. The pressure on us both was enormous.

And then there was the Tuna Bake Incident.

Elena and I (and Sean) lived together in North Finchley during the run-up to the wedding, planned for January 25th. I'd found a place 'not too small' and with a kitchen that had a 'semblance of counter space'. Elena wanted to cook every meal for us. She saw it as her job to 'take care' of Sean and me. It was a kind and motherly intention, but Elena was feeling the pressure as well and her 'kind and motherly' intention had an undercurrent of threat that put Sean and me on edge from the start. Elena earmarked a Tuna Bake as her first evening meal. Sean and I exchanged a look of foreboding. Tuna was an unfamiliar ingredient to us. Up until Elena's arrival we'd lived primarily on takeaway pizzas and red wine. We'd never used the oven and couldn't even advise Elena on how it worked.

"Leave me to it," Elena said.

Sean and I were happy to do as we were told. We watched telly in the lounge for half an hour. All was quiet in the kitchen. Sean and I exchanged another look. Was the silence a good sign? We shrugged. Sean went to his room and read. Another half hour later he came back into the lounge.

"How long does tuna take to bake?" he said.

"No idea," I said. "Go and ask her."

"No chance. But it can't take an hour, can it?"

"It's the pasta takes the time, probably."

"Pasta's only ten minutes on the hob."

"Well go and ask her."

"No chance."

We were both wary of taking Elena to task on any domestic fronts after Sean had caught her that morning collecting up his dirty laundry, including his underwear. Sean didn't like the idea of Elena handling his discarded boxers and told her he'd prefer to do his own laundry, thanks. She'd told him that wouldn't be possible. There was such an eerie quality of indisputable fact in Elena's tone that Sean had let his soiled boxers go without any further protest.

Sean and I continued to watch telly, glancing from time to time at the lounge door, both of us working out in our heads the possible preparation and cooking time for baking tuna with pasta. Neither of us could get it to add up to the hour and a half we'd been waiting. And the silence. It was killing us. There were no sounds of activity coming from the kitchen; no happy whistling while the cook worked; no background radio; no clatter of utensils. The silence suggested a level of creepy concentration that a tin of tuna and grated cheese just didn't warrant.

"I'll make a cup of tea," I said. "Give me an excuse to go in."

"If she's scrubbing my boxers in the sink," Sean said. "I'm moving out."

I entered the kitchen humming an insouciant tune, hoping not to betray any signs of tuna anxiety. The kitchen was empty. No Elena in sight. I checked the oven. It was off. I checked the kitchen table. It was set but there was no sign of food, cooked or otherwise. The cold tap was dripping in the sink. I walked over to turn it off. Inside the sink there was an oven tray with a small dish on it containing something wet and black.

Sean popped his head round the door. "What's going on?" he whispered.

I pointed at the dish. "Tuna's off."

Sean joined me at the sink and stared at the charred lump. “Was that meant to feed all three of us?”

Elena had retreated to the bedroom and pulled the duvet over her head. I told her not to worry about the tuna. She didn’t reply. I told her we could get a pizza instead. She didn’t reply. I paced the room, placatory, coaxing. And still didn’t get a reply. The longer Elena refused to talk, or even come out from under the duvet, the more vociferous I became, until I was up and running with a full-blown monologue that rose from caring solicitation to whining confusion. It was the most obdurate sulk I had ever encountered and what scared me most was that it looked like the result of long held practice. This was no aberration. It was a habit to which I was doomed. Running away from the weedy sound of my solitary voice, I hit the pub and drowned myself in the weedy sound of my inebriated thoughts.

Elena and I made up on my return from the pub but it wasn’t to be her last sulk. Sulking and making-up became the pattern for the next few weeks, and I spent a fortune in the pub.

Elena’s mum was half Spanish and half Filipino, which was like being Catholic with extra Catholic thrown in. She went away to retreats on a regular basis to receive religious top-ups. As a result she brimmed with God. Elena and I had decided to get married in England as that’s where we were going to live. We’d settled on St. Joseph’s Presbytery in Pickering, about twenty minutes away from where my parents lived. Sofia and my mum came with Elena and me to meet the priest. The Presbytery was cold and claustrophobic, with dark wood furniture crowding in and a carriage clock on the

mantelpiece ticking me into submission. Dogma hung heavy in the air along with twee paintings on the walls of Jesus and the Virgin Mary, and photos of the Pope and President Kennedy.

The priest was middle-aged and amiable with greying hair and black-rimmed spectacles. He was warm and welcoming towards Elena and me, and to our surprise and relief, expressed no anxiety about how young we were or the short length of our courtship. We chatted about the significance of our commitment and our plans for the future.

The priest was a sympathetic soul and showed real interest in the young couple he was due to unite and bless. Sofia, on the other hand, appeared to be only interested in the nature of the service. She wanted the full-length Mass and she wanted it all in Latin. The priest's pen, which up to this point had been happily making notes, froze above the pad on the priest's lap.

"The full Mass?" he said. "But that could take up to two hours. Nobody does the full Mass for a wedding service. Not these days."

"And in Latin," Sofia said again, as though the length of the ceremony had already been established.

"No, no," the priest said. I could tell he hoped he'd simply been misunderstood. "It isn't done in Latin any more. Not in English Churches. We use the vernacular."

"I was married with the full Latin Mass and I expect the same for my daughter."

"But we don't do it anymore. I don't even have it. Nobody has it. I'm not even sure it's permitted. I'd have to go to the Bishop."

As the groom, I chipped in with a jaunty plea for the short vernacular version, but jaunty pleas, I discovered, held no sway in ecumenical matters. My mum also had a go at broaching a compromise, to no avail. Sofia was not interested in anything more contemporary in the Catholic Church than the Inquisition and it worried me that she had Elena's support in putting the priest to the rack. He was sweating and his pen hand was shaking. Even if the priest could find a copy of the Mass and the Bishop sanctioned its use, he wasn't confident of learning it well enough to deliver on the day. He threw his pad and pen down and left the room. On his return, composure not restored but at least functional, Sofia concluded the meeting by re-stating, "Full Latin Mass."

In the car home, Mum and I were quiet. Sofia and Elena were furious, vehement in their outrage at Britain's shabby Catholicism.

The night before the wedding day I still hadn't written my speech. I went to my bedroom with pen and paper, telling myself it wouldn't be a problem to write a whole speech in an hour. I picked up my guitar to help me think, started strumming, and didn't write a word.

Mum stuck her head round the door. I was lying on the bed with the guitar.

"How's it going?" she asked.

"Not so good."

"Have you written anything?"

"Nope."

"Are you going to?"

I stared at the wall. I had no idea what I was going to do. I strummed a chord.

“It doesn’t have to be long, does it?” Mum said.

“I suppose not.”

Mum sat on the edge of the bed. “Listen...if you’re not sure...”

I couldn’t take my eyes off the wallpaper. I felt like a baby in a cot with Mum looking in at me. I may as well have been sucking on a dummy as strumming the guitar.

“It’s okay, if you’re not sure,” Mum said. “You can always get divorced if it doesn’t work out.”

I shrugged. Small comfort. Dad joined us and leant against the radiator.

“Or,” Mum said. “Just call it off.”

I nodded and rolled and might have murmured “too late now” once or twice.

“I haven’t had a haircut, if that means anything,” Dad said.

“I’ll get on the phone right now if you want me to,” Mum said. “If you want to call it off.”

I don’t know where the baby in me went, but I put the guitar down and sat up. I had just enough wits left to summon a grown-up response.

“Okay,” I said. “Make the calls.”

Elena was dining at the *Coachman*, a village pub restaurant not far from my Auntie B’s where Elena and her family were staying. Elena was at a table with her mum and dad and a number of relatives who’d flown over from Spain. The table, as it could only be in a scene like this, was at the far end of the restaurant, the full length of which I had to walk, under everyone’s unflinching gaze. Elena’s dad, Gerry, introduced me to the Spanish guests. Mum had called ahead to let Elena know I was coming for a chat, so my

arrival wasn't unexpected, but how much everyone knew or had guessed, I didn't know. Perhaps they thought this was just another one of our crisis talks (we'd had a few of those); one last kink to iron out. I said hello to the Spanish relatives, knowing it wouldn't matter if I forgot their names. After a few subdued pleasantries, I nodded at Elena. She took the cue and rose from the table.

We drove up into the forestry and parked in a lay-by. It was pitch black and cold. Elena thought, as I'd suspected, that I just had some revisions to make to our pre-wedding deal.

"I don't think we should be getting married tied to any conditions," I said.

"I thought we were just making plans."

I'd promised to get a proper job after three years if I wasn't making a regular living as a writer. I was clinging to this as my opt-out clause, though Elena didn't appear that bothered about imposing it any more.

"But we keep arguing," I said.

"We'll work it out. We've been under a lot of pressure."

I'd been hoping for a more volatile response, something more typically Elena that I could justify myself against. But she was yielding, and the softness of her appeal, and the fear in her voice, left me wondering if I had misjudged the whole thing. It was hard to hold onto the stabbing hurts of the previous weeks. We were incompatible. I knew it, I knew it, I knew it...and yet.

I tried to stay resolute. "I just think the conversation we had a week ago, when we both agreed that it would be best to call it off...We should have stuck to that, maybe."

No matter how mutual the decision had been seven days ago at the end of one our crisis talks, Elena was not now prepared to return to the same state of mind, and I knew I was in danger of being carried away on another bout of ‘making up’. I kept talking to skirt the temptation. I waffled and Elena listened.

“You’re not calling it off, are you?” she said.

I’d been trying to do just that without actually saying it, but the fudging had gone as far as it could go. This was the moment. Say it or live with the consequences.

“I have to,” I said. “We have to.”

Elena stared up at me. “No, David. Please.”

I looked out of the window. There was nothing to see and nothing to hear; a dark, still abyss on the other side of the screen.

“Please don’t call it off,” Elena said. Her voice was uneven and her eyes were wet with tears. I could have cried them for her.

I’m sure she was worried about the shame and the practical repercussions of calling it off, just like I was, but that wasn’t the controlling tone of her request. She loved me and wanted to marry me. That was the tone. She had dared to lay herself bare. It was probably the most honest moment of our short relationship. I wanted to respond in kind; allow myself to be borne aloft by high-flown feeling and grand gesture, to sweep her off with soothing declarations: “I’m sorry. I love you. Forgive me. It’ll all be alright and we’ll live happily ever after.” The romantic in me was ready to run riot again, send sparks of jubilation crackling out into the quiet, black night. But... There remained a ‘but’. A ‘but’ of *sulks* and *prejudices* that would not evaporate in the

moment, no matter how much I tried to overheat it with idealism. It wouldn't work, I thought.

"It wouldn't work," I said.

Elena disagreed, tearfully, again and again, retaining her sincerity in every word, never lapsing into anger or wounded pride; delivering a sustained appeal of nothing but love. And I continued to say 'no'. Where the strength to do so came from I couldn't say. Never had I felt so cruel, or so full of self-loathing. This was a hurt of my doing, and even when I told myself I was now acting responsibly to prevent any further hurt, it didn't diminish my blame for the hurt I had caused already.

After a while Elena ceased her appeals and reached a serene acceptance. We talked with a bizarre nostalgia about all that had gone before, recounted the funny moments and acknowledged the less happy ones. We talked until Elena had not just accepted it, but was of the same opinion: it would never have worked. At that point we hugged and cried. And still the romantic fool howled inside me to take it all back.

I dropped Elena off at my Auntie B's. It was too late to return to the restaurant. We hugged one last time and Elena joked that I had to make sure whoever I did end up marrying knew how to cook my hash browns properly. She got out of the car, holding my hand until our fingertips released, then walked through the headlights waving goodbye. I waved back and watched her fade, disappearing into the darkness of the driveway.

And that was it. I had called off my wedding the night before. Fitting timing, I suppose, for an aspiring comedy writer. And the northern edition of the *Sun* newspaper thought so too when a few days later it published the story under the banner: *TV*

Writer's Wedding is a Write Off. Embarrassing, not just to have the non-event made public, but also because I was a writer of such little note with only a handful of credits to my name and currently out of contract.

In the aftermath of such events, accusations fly. Was it Elena's fault? Was it mine? Well, I can tell you that whenever anyone asks my opinion, I'm unequivocal on the matter. I blame the Flintstones.

Two days later I ran back to London chastened, ashamed, wretched, but the first hopeful signs of my recovery appeared within only twenty-four hours. Faced with a no-refund policy, I asked Sean if he'd like to take Elena's place on the honeymoon.

Chapter Seven

Fellow Traveller

(Sirventes: the troubadour song category for social/political subjects)

We owe justice to men: and to the other creatures who are able to receive them we owe gentleness and kindness. Between them and us there is some sort of intercourse and a degree of mutual obligation.

Michel de Montaigne

Julia and I were driving down the A1, listening to *Queen's Greatest Hits I, II & III* on the stereo. Every time Brian May played a guitar solo I cranked up the volume. I felt relaxed, despite what lay ahead in Guilford.

After a couple of hours we followed signs for 'services', took a slip road and stopped at a truckers' café. It was an old café, pre-franchise fashion, still exuding a 1970s Formica charm. Behind it, gangs of trucks were parked on a piece of enclosed scrubland, like a scene from an episode of the *Sweeney*.

I walked to the food counter across a worn out linoleum floor and asked for a latte.

"Hot milky coffee?" the lady behind the counter said, as though I were a foreigner struggling with English. She looked a similar age to the linoleum, but wasn't wearing as well.

"Yes. Please." I was not going to quibble over the correct term for my drink. We were sufficiently stuck in the '70s for 'latte' to cause offence. If I took it further the

word 'barista' would probably crop up, and then we'd be in real trouble. When the lady got to work on the coffee, I saw that I'd been mistaken. She hadn't been offering an alternative description, but an alternative type of drink altogether. She added hot milk to a lukewarm filter coffee, which was not a latte. It was not even, as she had claimed, a 'hot milky coffee', because only half the cup was made with hot milk. She placed the hybrid coffee on the counter.

I blinked at it; blinked at her. She smiled, opening canyon creases in her cheeks. I took the coffee without complaint and sat down at a table by the window. The sun was shining and although I was crestfallen over my caffeine crisis, my nerves remained intact.

"How are you feeling?" Julia said.

"Fine. Except for the coffee."

"Not nervous?"

"No, no." And I wasn't. At that point I was still more distressed about the state of my coffee.

Before hitting the road again, I popped to the loo. A kid of four or five was at the sinks with his dad. Dad was drying his hands on a paper towel. The kid was jabbering away ten to the dozen.

"I don't know what you're talking about," the dad said.

The kid jabbered some more, his voice rising.

The dad nodded and listened. "I still have no idea what you're talking about."

Dad tossed the paper towel into the bin and the two of them walked out, the kid continuing to jabber away, the dad continuing to roll his eyes.

I thought ahead to the following day at 2.51pm. There was every possibility I could find myself suffering the same degree of jabbering incoherence as the kid.

Now I felt a bit nervous.

I was due to play a solo acoustic set at Brian May's Wildlife Rocks festival at Guilford Cathedral. The festival, as the name suggested, was in aid of numerous wildlife and environmental causes. What if the audience reacted to me in the same way the dad had done to the kid, with the same puzzled head-shaking: "*We don't know what you're on about. What are you doing up there? Put that guitar down.*"

I'd received the invitation to play some months ago over the phone while lying on a beach in the south of Crete. My friend Sara was Brian May's personal assistant and had wangled a slot for me. It was easy to say 'yes' feeling so distant from the event. Besides, I reasoned, if I'd had the nerve to put on a pair of twenty-five year old Speedos, playing the guitar in front of Brian May should be no problem.

However, I was no longer lying on a beach in Crete. I was on the A1, twenty-four hours away from 2.51pm.

Julia and I checked into Guilford's Travel Lodge around six. The room was clean but the budget price was reflected in our pillow allowance – only one per person. The first thing I did was get out my guitar and practise. Julia took a shower and then lay on the bed, wearing only a towel and drinking a vodka and tonic. We always took our own booze to hotels. We were big on aperitifs and nightcaps. I was also big on drinking between the two.

I played a selection of songs. I hadn't finalised my set list yet. Nothing sounded good enough to me. After only a few bars of any song, Julia said, "You're not playing that one, are you?"

I defended my choices. I was already babbling like the kid from the truckers' café. Was this how it was for Brian May before a gig?

I'd seen Brian play a few months before at the Spa Theatre in Scarborough. It was hard to imagine his wife Anita listening to him practise beforehand, responding to the guitar solo in *Bohemian Rhapsody* with "You're not playing that one, are you?"

"Have a vodka," Julia said.

"I shouldn't drink the night before a gig."

"Fair enough."

"I'll have a small one." I mixed a large vodka and tonic. "I won't drink any wine with dinner."

We left the Travel Lodge in search of somewhere to eat. There was an Italian restaurant next door but we gave it no more than a cursory glance – walking fifty paces didn't feel adventurous enough.

"Let's suss out where the Cathedral is first," I said. "Save time tomorrow."

It was a warm evening. I felt mellow. Excited even. Nerves subsiding under the influence of vodka and sunshine. We'd potter up to the cathedral, possibly identify the little nook where I was due to strum, then find a restaurant, have a cosy dinner for two, maybe one more drink, and finish with an early night. I was looking forward to it.

We followed the brown council signs for the cathedral and came to a hill that looked like the kind of mound they used to build medieval forts on. The cathedral signs

pointed towards the brow of the hill. We followed the signs. The top of the cathedral came into view over the horizon. It was a modern red-brick building with low sloping roofs. We walked on. I expected to see more of the cathedral and perhaps a car park area.

The festival had two playing venues: one inside the cathedral and one outside. I was playing outside. I had it in my head that ‘outside’ meant a corner in the car park, where I’d stand, unnoticed, like a charitable busker. Instead of seeing more cathedral, I saw a row of stadium lights.

My stomach turned over. We kept walking. The lights, as I’d feared, hovered over a huge stage, which stood at the end of several acres of grassland and obscured most of the cathedral. A number of crewmembers clanked around the structure, lugging steel bars and crates. Julia and I came to a standstill.

“Is that where you’re playing?” Julia said.

“No, no. It can’t be.”

“It’s outside.”

“There’ll be another outside.”

“More than one outside?”

“A smaller acoustic stage. Tucked away.”

“They’ll never hear you on a smaller stage. Not if someone’s playing on that big one. Look at the size of the speakers.”

A stack of Marshall Amps flanked the stage like segments of the Great Wall of China.

We walked up to the cathedral and searched the grounds for signs of a more modest performance area, something along the lines of an upturned tea chest. There was nothing.

“That must be it,” Julia said. “That’s where you’re playing.”

The stage took on the proportions of Mount Olympus; an impossible climb for a mere mortal. Legendary bands such as the Troggs and Hawkwind were playing at the festival. This stage had to be for them, not for a nervous nitwit from the north. Sandwiched between rock giants like the Troggs and Hawkwind my walk onto the stage would look like a roll of tumbleweed.

“I can’t play on there,” I said. My kneecaps were already twitching. “I’m not sure I could even manage the steps.”

Julia led me away, my head twisted back over my shoulder, staring at the stage. “Too big,” I said. “Too big...”

We walked into the centre of town. Julia suggested Jamie Oliver’s restaurant. I said it would be a waste of money. I wasn’t in the mood to savour either good grub or a convivial atmosphere. I just wanted to go to bed, preferably in a foreign country, somewhere a million miles away from that stage.

“Let’s go back to the Italian,” I said, only because it was nearer to my bed.

The inside of the Italian restaurant wasn’t quite as Italian as it looked from the outside. It was a brightly lit bastard mix of pizzeria, slash diner, slash fast-food-fun-for-all-the-family crèche, and worse still – it was happy hour. The place was full of kids, some of

whom were crying, most of whom were screaming, and all of whom were being ignored by their parents. Julia and I didn't have the energy to walk back into town.

"Sorry," I said. "Looked like a cosy Italian from the outside."

We grabbed a table in the corner, as far away from the crying and screaming as we could get and, without realising it until we'd sat down, as close to the toilets as we could get, only eighteen inches from Julia's left shoulder. The door clattered repeatedly as crying and screaming kids ran in and out, dragged or chased by ineffectual mums and dads.

A kid, two tables behind us, knocked his glass of coke onto the floor. The glass smashed and coke sprayed within a radius of exactly two tables. I looked down at my coke spattered shoes. The dad did nothing; didn't apologise; didn't alert a waitress; didn't even mop his table with a napkin. Other parents of a similar dead-eyed disposition walked their crying and screaming kids over the broken glass without any show of concern. Nothing, it appeared, was going to deter them from banging that toilet door.

"Sorry," I said. "It really looked like a cosy Italian."

"You're still worrying about the gig, aren't you?"

"I can't walk onto the stage after the Troggs. How do I follow "Wild Thing"?"

I ordered chicken Caesar salad and a pint of lager.

"I thought you weren't drinking," Julia said.

"I'm not. It's for the shock."

"So, should I order one glass of wine for me or a bottle for both of us?"

"Did you see the size of that stage?"

“I’ll get a bottle.”

The gig was one dilemma; how much to drink was another. Julia can drink a couple of glasses of wine and call it a day. She can leave wine in the bottle. For me, that requires the kind of discipline I associate with a Zen master, and I don’t have it. I don’t leave wine in the bottle. I have a hard time leaving bottles in the shop. But I have a temperamental throat that suffers after a night on the booze. To drink tonight before the biggest gig of my life would be plain stupid. Why risk losing my voice? It just wasn’t worth it.

“Yeah, get a bottle,” I said.

Idiot. Not only was tomorrow ‘the biggest gig of my life’, but also one of the world’s greatest rock guitarists might be watching. Idiot.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Idiot. Idiot. Idiot.

Perhaps the recklessness of my decision meant that I really was a bona fide musician after all, and not the pretender I thought I was. I had all the self-destructive attributes required, although one vodka and tonic, a pint of lager and half a bottle of wine hardly compared with the heroin excesses of Keith Richards. How did these rock stars do it night after night on a world tour?

“You’ll be fine,” Julia said. She put a hand on mine and smiled. “You always are.”

And at this point I realised even more crucially: *how did these rock stars do it without Julia?* I tell myself I can do things and don't believe a word of it. Julia tells me I can do something and I take it as read.

"You are going to do it, aren't you?" Julia said.

"Oh, I'll definitely walk onto the stage, no matter how nervous I am."

Sheer willpower could guarantee that much. What happened once I reached the mike was another matter. Excessive adrenalin didn't interfere with putting one leg in front of the other. It did, however, interfere with the subtler business of memory, the power of speech and the intricate twiddling of fingers over guitar strings. I could open my mouth with willpower, but willpower alone wouldn't be enough to dredge up lyrics, or deliver them without a falsetto quaver. Good old willpower could place my fingers in the general vicinity of the guitar, but had no control over which strings I then plucked.

Adrenalin can stiffen the fingers until they operate with as much dexterity and accuracy as a bunch of bananas.

"It's time to find out, isn't it?" I said. "Have I anything of the genuine troubadour in me or not? Tomorrow's the test. If I cock it up, it's not meant to be."

"You won't cock it up."

How did those rock stars do it without Julia?

My chicken Caesar salad arrived. Or, rather, the waitress presented something on a plate with that name. The chicken was rubbery enough to cosh a kid with (I was tempted); the salad comprised minced lettuce and a forlorn tomato, and Caesar, it appeared, hadn't left Rome, or at any rate hadn't left the kitchen. All those things that

defined a salad as ‘Caesar’ were absent: the rocket, the parmesan, the croutons, the anchovies, and (and this takes the biscuit) the dressing.

There was a time when I would have chewed on the fraudulent chicken without complaint. Those were the dark days of timorous dining, before Julia introduced me to, and schooled me in, ‘being congruous’. I say ‘those were the days’. They still were the days, to be honest. I hadn’t complained about my ‘hot milky coffee’, had I?

For all Julia’s patient encouragement, I was a poor student and continued to increase my tip the less satisfied I was with the service. But tonight I was the condemned man and the least I could expect was a decent last meal. I sent the chicken back and changed my order to a pizza.

“I’m impressed,” Julia said.

“I wasn’t rude, was I?”

“No. You were honest, and the waitress understood.”

“I’ll leave a big tip.”

“Don’t spoil it.”

Empowered, I ordered an extra pillow from reception on our return to the Travel Lodge.

“No stopping you now,” Julia said.

And there wasn’t. I was swaggering a little, but then I’d drunk more than my fair share of the wine (and planned to have another glass in the bedroom). I was in that mellow merry drinking stage, where problems evaporate.

I woke up sweating and palpitating. I was in that middle of the night post-drinking stage, where problems re-introduce themselves with a strident fanfare and then buzz around your head, hornet-like, stark and spot-lit.

Who was I kidding? No matter what Julia said, I wasn't up to playing on that stage tomorrow. My last live performance had been a couple of songs at my local folk club, mumbling and strumming over a pint in front of six fellow enthusiasts. From six forgiving folkies to several hundred Brian May fans; the transition was too great. It was a Grand Canyon leap that required an element of Evel Knievel madness and was bound to end in the same cataclysmic anti-climax. I still hadn't settled on the four songs I was going to play. My head was a paradox of spiking anxiety and mud bound depression.

With any luck I would have a heart attack before dawn.

"How do you feel this morning?" Julia asked.

"Fine. Had a bit of a scare in the middle of the night. Actually thought about driving back to Scarborough."

"So did I."

This was a revelation.

"I didn't think I could cope with watching you fall apart," Julia said.

"Fall apart? Am I going to fall apart?" I started to fall apart.

"No, of course not."

Mixed signals here. "But you thought about driving back to Scarborough?"

"Only in the middle of the night. I just suddenly panicked. I could tell you were in trouble and couldn't bear the thought of seeing you suffer in front of everyone."

This was far too much honesty to start the day with.

After breakfast, I returned to the bedroom for a final few hours practise. I didn't want to 'suffer in front of everyone'. I practised myself to a standstill, concentrating so hard on every millisecond of sound that my performance had the appearance of a staring contest: me versus the notes. My level of focus became microscopic, leaving me cross-eyed and clueless amidst the sparks of overloading musical synapses. I was over thinking and under feeling. Words wouldn't come, chords wouldn't sequence. The songs were dying.

I needed help.

I wrote out cue lines for each set of lyrics and taped them onto the topside of the guitar. I looked down, couldn't read them without my glasses. I tore the sheets off, re-wrote the cues twice the size on fresh paper and re-decorated my guitar with them. I felt better. Lyrics sorted. Just the chords, finger-picking and my voice to worry about now.

"I'm going to drop 'Kinder Way'," I said. "The picking is too intricate. It'll never hold up if I'm nervous."

"Good," Julia said.

"What? You don't like it? What's wrong with 'Kinder Way'?"

"It's a lovely song. But you've got two slow songs out of four. You might need more energy in the set."

"You don't like 'Kinder Way'?"

"You need energy."

"Okay, I'll play 'Hey Lord'."

"No."

“What’s wrong with ‘Hey Lord’?”

“Too pubby. You write lovely songs. Don’t be afraid to sound like a singer-songwriter instead of a pub act.”

“But ‘Kinder Way’ is a ‘lovely song’. A singer-songwriter song.”

“No energy.”

“I’m playing ‘Hey Lord’, then.”

“No.”

It was too late to consider any other alternative fourth song. I could only just entertain “Hey Lord” because it had three chords and a simple strum pattern.

“That’s it, then,” I said. “I’ll only play three songs. No-one said I had to play four. It’s a fifteen minute slot. Three songs and some chat and that’ll do it.”

“Like it.”

“And I’ll play ‘Hey Lord’ if they want an encore.”

“No.”

We set off for the festival with my three songs in place: “All Down to You”, a jazzy song about taking responsibility for one’s own life; “Living Alone”, a song about living and dying alone; and “Fellow Traveller”, a song about participating in the world and showing due respect to all living creatures.

I’d written “Fellow Traveller” especially for the festival, hence the rather cloying theme of ‘respect to all living creatures’. Did I believe that? I wasn’t even a vegetarian. Should I be playing at a Wildlife Rocks festival if I not only ate steak, but liked it rare enough to make its own way to the table?

Julia and I retraced yesterday's walk to the cathedral. I was calmer than I had expected after my midnight heebie-jeebies. A couple up ahead of us stopped walking. They crouched and stared at something on the pavement. What was it? I couldn't see. Whatever it was, I guessed it was a living thing because they cooed at it, like one does over a baby in a pram. They bent down. The man cupped the invisible creature in his hands and placed it in the hedgerow. They were saving something – something tiny, because even as I walked past I had no idea what it was. I hadn't seen it on the pavement and nothing of it was visible in the man's hands.

The four of us were heading in the direction of the Wildlife festival and I had the irritating feeling that I was probably witnessing the rescue of something as insignificant as an earwig or a centipede. If that was the case this couple would never make it all the way to the festival. The amount of pavement dawdling 'wildlife' between them and the festival would keep them occupied for the rest of the day.

We heard music long before we saw the band. Girls' voices shrilled across Guilford, born aloft on a booming bass rhythm. I imagined my own voice – air-born and squeaky with panic – startling cyclists, scattering dog-walkers and making babies cry. I imagined the whole of Guilford gripped in auditory terror, relieved only when they heard a scuffle at the mike and the sound of scraping feet being dragged off the stage. Whatever embarrassment lay ahead of me, the tremendous acoustics of the stage guaranteed its delivery, in perfect stereo, to the greater part of Surrey.

We crested the hill and were confronted with a field of stalls and people. Dozens of stalls. Hundreds of people. A girl band sang and danced to a backing track. They

were all coated in fake tan and, in an act of brave denial, had squeezed their not so thin legs into ever so hot pants.

To the girls' credit, they waddled and high-kicked their gammon-sized pins in perfect, gravity-defying unison. It looked like Fantasia in a butchers shop. The effect grew more alarming the closer I got. The girls finished their song with an elaborate step. A bar later the shuddering of their fleshy thighs also stopped. The crowd cheered. And rightly so. The girls had energy. More than I was likely to muster.

Another band replaced the girls on stage. The band's teenaged members busied themselves with plugging in their instruments. Stagehands busied themselves assisting with the plugging in. It was a slick and professional scene. I had no business up there.

It was still possible, of course, that no-one expected me up there. Perhaps there was a smaller venue I hadn't seen yet.

Tim, the stage manager for the day (and Sara's husband) stood in the wings. He called out to me. Tim was a rock circuit veteran. He'd been tour manager for Brian May, The Pretenders, Simple Minds, Madness, and Blondie. Organising this one-day festival was a breeze for him. He was too casual by far.

I tried to match his nonchalance by striking an attitude of *Yeah, just another solo gig in front of hundreds of people, man. What a drag.* I was wearing a cool Fedora hat with a feather in it, which I hoped would help the cavalier pose, although at best I probably looked like a pretentious ostrich. That's the trouble with accessories. They do not, of themselves, make a person cool. One has to be cool in the first place to carry off eccentric accoutrements. I am not cool. I walk into lampposts and leave evidence of sandwiches on my top lip.

What was I thinking? *Wearing a fedora with a feather in it, for goodness sake!*

Tim confirmed that I was indeed playing on the big stage. All hope gone. He told me where to go to pick up my VIP pass.

VIP pass? This was becoming too surreal.

“There’s a back-stage area inside the cathedral,” Tim said, “where you can leave your guitar and grab some refreshments.”

Tim also showed me where my slot was in the running order. I already knew my time: 2.51pm, which I couldn’t fathom. Who would schedule anything to for 2.51pm rather than 2.50pm? Too surreal. I looked at the list. I was on after an amateur female choir and before the musical theatre ‘love rat’ Darren Day. I wasn’t sure what to make of my bookends. At least I wouldn’t be walking on after an encore of “Wild Thing”.

I picked up my VIP pass from a security guard who tried in vain to recognise me. I retained an enigmatic silence. The Green Room was at the end of a corridor on the left, and the indoor stage, which we were behind, was at the end of another corridor on the right. The corridor on the right acted as a back-stage area.

Julia drifted into the Green Room. I stood in the corridor and glimpsed the back of an Elvis impersonator on stage. Not the kind of artist I’d expected at the festival. Sara was sitting on a bench in the corridor, chatting on the phone. It sounded like business. She cut her call short when she saw me.

We hugged and helloed. She asked if I was happy playing out on the big stage. I said, “Oh, yees, yees...” and wanted to cry. She apologised and said she’d asked if I could go on just before Brian on the indoor stage but hadn’t been able to swing it for me. I said, “Oh, no problem” and wanted to kiss her for letting me down. I could not,

even at my most manful and egotistical best, have stepped onto the stage to ‘support’ Brian May.

“So then I thought,” Sara continued, “I’ll bring him outside to watch your set instead.”

Please, God, no. You crazy bitch.

“But unfortunately he’s playing at the same time as you.”

I love you, Sara. You angel.

“If he finishes early, though. I’ll rush him out.”

For fucksake! You’re killing me, girl.

I was ready for lying down.

“Come and say hello anyway,” Sara said.

Hello? Hello to whom?

Sara pointed across the corridor. Brian May was standing against the wall, long and lean and looking regal, with his curly grey hair as resplendent as a Regency wig. He was talking to someone. I couldn’t cope with the thought of Sara interrupting him to introduce me. I had nothing to say. Why interrupt the poor man to present him with the silence of a grinning goofball?

“He’s waiting to go on,” Sara said.

“Ah, no, Sara,” I said. “No need to introduce me. He’s busy.”

“No, it’s fine.”

“No, he’s busy.”

“Brian...”

Ahrghhhhh!

Whomever Brian was in conversation with melted away. Brian turned to Sara.

“Brian, can I introduce you to David?”

Brian looked at me, pale and ethereal in a white shirt, those grey curls caressing his shoulders – a vision of genuine rock royalty. I fought the instinct to kneel before him.

“David’s kindly agreed to play for us,” Sara said.

Brian nodded. ‘Kindly agreed’? I thought. Too grand, Sara. Too grand. Who was I to ‘kindly agree’ to play for Brian May? Sting might have ‘kindly agreed’. Sting was a busy man of international fame. More appropriate in my case would have been ‘David can’t believe his shit scary luck’.

“David’s written a song especially for the event,” Sara said.

“Really? Thanks,” Brian said.

We shook hands. He smiled.

“No problem,” I said. There I was again, bestowing favours on Brian May.

“David’s playing on the big stage outside,” Sara said.

“Yes,” I said. “Bit nervous. Playing out there is my equivalent of you playing on top of Buckingham Palace.”

I laughed. Northern nitwit. Brian nodded at the nitwit. I stopped laughing.

Thought about kneeling again.

“You met before,” Sara said to Brian. “In Scarborough. When you played at the Spa.”

“Oh, yeah?” Brian showed no sign of recognition.

“Yes,” I said. And then, from nowhere, added, “Good luck with your set.”

I should have left it at 'yes'. I'd gone five words too far. Me? Wishing Brian May 'good luck'? I'd kindly agreed to play, condescended to write a song for him and then wished him good luck. I may as well have gone the whole hog and patted him on the head and called him 'sonny boy'.

I bowed an exit and back-tracked to the Green Room.

"Was that Brian May?" Julia said.

"I wished him luck with his set," I said.

Julia looked at me.

"I know," I said.

I had no idea what the Green Room normally served as. The walls were wood panelled and there were rows of benches on either side of the room that curved round the corners. An enormous wooden table stood in the centre, covered in bowls of fruit, packets of biscuits, coffee and bottled water. I wasn't sure if I was expected to cross myself before taking any of it.

Orthodox religion made me as uncomfortable as lentils. Where was my soul? What was I doing here? I was as fraudulent as last night's chicken Caesar salad; a dreadful meat-eating heathen who, by the end of the day, was likely to be struck down by lightning or congealed arteries.

"Let's take a look around," I said.

I dumped my guitar and we headed back out to the main stage. A young girl, possibly still a schoolgirl, was playing an electric guitar and singing lead vocals for a band. A BBC film crew was recording her and presumably all the other acts. Brilliant. I'd be able to watch my nervous breakdown on the 9 o'clock News.

Julia led me away for a stroll around the stalls. Wildlife, as one would expect, was well represented. Banners read: *Hunt Saboteurs still saving wildlife; Ferret Rescue; Hedgehog Preservation Society; Dorset Badger Vaccination Project; RSPCA; Compassion in World Farming, and Anglican society for the welfare of animals.*

A lot of the stalls had brought along live examples of what they were saving. Snakes and lizards slithered round handlers' shoulders, ferrets ran up arms, guide dogs sat obediently still. Where real animals weren't enough, one or two folks had dressed up in animal costumes. Giant-headed six foot badgers and foxes walked on two legs and had their photos taken with petrified kids.

Along with the wildlife stalls there were also craft stalls (crystals featured heavily, obviously) and veggie food stalls, plus a beer tent and a bouncy castle, which were kept sensibly apart. Milling amongst these attractions were loads of old hippies, smoking rollies and smiling benignly; an abundance of floral skirts, beads, braids, and babies in papooses; and herds of kids with painted animal faces whose parents, unlike the parents in the Italian restaurant, appeared interested in their off-spring.

The 'mummies' and 'daddies' held their kids' hands and danced to the music, swapping adult views on the coalition government. Dare I say it? They were tuned in, man. But, for all the peace-and-love and save-the-planet stereotypes, there were also ordinary looking people in the crowd. These environmental campaigns and causes are no longer the domain of the fringe elements in society. They have become core issues.

The Steve Yam Band came on stage. Steve, Tim had told me, was Brian May's gardener. Steve had floppy schoolboy hair (although he must have been somewhere in his forties), a tanned face and grey stubble. He wore tinted aviator sunglasses and a

crumpled green linen suit that added a suitable gardener's 'organic' demeanour to his appearance. He chatted amiably and earnestly to the crowd before he began his set.

“Hey, man. We talk about fox hunting, but at this time of year we're the killers.”

He had my interest. I couldn't recollect having killed anything at this or any other time of the year.

“Yeah, man,” Steve said. “Because at this time of year there are lots of little animals on the road. Lots of little baby creatures. So we have to look out. We have to drive carefully, man.”

Ah. I got it. He was anti-roadkill. The couple I'd observed earlier on the pavement had rescued something from under their feet, and now we were being urged to watch what we rolled over with our wheels. One couldn't move without laying waste to something or other. There were few species left on the planet that I was not being exhorted to save, or being made to feel personally responsible for annihilating.

I'd never hunted a fox or so much as accidentally caught a rabbit in my headlights, but the guilt was overwhelming. I stood there wringing imaginary blood from my hands. Tricky to keep one's original insensitive perspective under this kind of pressure. These people were getting to me.

Peter Donegan, son of Lonnie, the '60s King of Skiffle, followed the Steve Yam Band. He came on and sang his dad's songs: “Rock Island Line”, etc. He was confident and sang well, but there was little variety in the tempo of his songs and he wasn't afraid to accompany himself with the same repetitive strumming style throughout. It was easier to compare myself with him than it was with the Troggs. One man and his guitar.

The crowd were lapping Peter up however, even though his performance was ‘pubby’.

“Play ‘Hey Lord’,” Julia said.

“You’re kidding?”

“I was wrong. Play ‘Hey Lord’.”

I left Julia watching Peter Donegan and returned to the Green Room for a final practise, but there were too many people in there for me to concentrate properly. I was beyond practise, anyway. I slung the guitar over my shoulder like Wyatt Earp strapping on his gun, and walked towards the stage, the sound of Ennio Morricone in my ears. This was it. Do or die. Was I a performer or a deluded ninny?

Peter Donegan had finished his set and the amateur female choir was on stage, warbling away in matching T-shirts. I was on next.

I walked round the back of the stage and strummed the guitar, checking for any onset of tremor in my hands. No sign of a tremor. Promising. I tried finger-picking. The fingers worked. I sang out, strong and clear; vocal chords resonant, lyrics appearing on demand. I concentrated on my heartbeat. It was banging away at a normal rate. I was only minutes from going on stage and everything was working as it should. The nerves were in check. I was looking forward to playing.

This was not the state of affairs I’d expected.

I returned to the side of the stage. Ricky, the MC, asked me if there was anything I wanted him to say when he introduced me. I shook my head. I couldn’t think of my own introduction as well as remember what I was going to play. I was not a natural self-

promoter. I had a Facebook page and a Twitter account and had failed to use either to publicise the gig. Tim asked me if I had any tech requirements.

“Just need to plug in to a DI box,” I said.

“No problem.”

The choir finished singing. The girls filed past me. Ricky walked on stage and urged the crowd to give one more round of applause for the choir. The crowd clapped – a friendly, compliant bunch. Julia left me to join them. She had my lyrics written out on A4 paper. Her job was to stand close to the stage and act as my prompt, plus take photos and any video footage she could manage.

One of the crew led me onto the stage. I walked up the steps. I was doing it.

Climbing Mount Olympus.

I hit level ground. Strode across it. Hundreds of faces stared. I didn't mind. The stagehand showed me where to plug in my guitar lead. Ricky cracked a few funnies I didn't catch. The stagehand placed a single mike stand front and centre of the stage. I strummed the guitar until he gave me the thumbs-up. The sound desk had a signal. Ricky turned to me and began his introduction, made a reference to my height. *Were they all as tall as me up north?* He asked if I was ready. I was. He announced my name. I removed my hat and bowed. Ricky made a quip about my bald head. I only half-heard anything he said.

Let's get on with it, I thought, before I start thinking too much.

The crowd applauded. Ricky finished his intro and walked off; left me alone; front and centre. Just me and hundreds of faces, staring at a tall bald bloke from the north.

Relax, Dave. They're friendly. They're smiling. They're wishing you well. Guitar feels good in your hands. Don't rush it. Talk to them. Pretend you're an old pro. Trust the hat.

"Like Ricky says, I've come all the way from Scarborough today to support this great cause. Even staying in a Travel Lodge. Don't get more committed than that."

They laughed.

"Anyway, if you don't mind," I said. "We're a bit perverse up north, so I'm going to start with a big finish."

More laughter. Perhaps I shouldn't bother with the guitar. Just keep talking. I launched into "Hey Lord". I belted it out and stamped a foot. Parts of the audience clapped along. I finished on a high note and a final strum flourish of 'dah-dah-dah-dah.' The audience clapped and cheered. I hadn't made a single mistake. Everything was functioning. I felt great. I was, at last, a full-blown Fedora wearer.

Time for a bit more chat. Julia had warned me to steer clear of any wildlife gags. Dachshund dogs had been bred to hunt badgers. I'd threatened to ask the audience to kick a Dachshund if they saw one. Julia said in no circumstances was I to say that. Not to an animal loving crowd.

"I have a badger fact," I said. Julia's eyes widened. My lyric sheets fluttered in her trembling hands. "Did you know," I said. Julia shook her head. "That 'brock' is old English for 'grey'? Hence Brock the Badger." Julia reeled with relief. "I know it's not funny," I said, and the audience laughed. "But it is a badger fact."

The audience laughed again. I could do no wrong. Even my delivery of straight facts was striking the crowd as amusing.

“This next song is called ‘All Down to You’ and it’s about taking responsibility for your own life. It was inspired by a friend who’s always making excuses for not doing anything with his life. Probably an ex-friend after this song.”

A few titters.

I started “All Down to You”, jazz chords with a Bossa Nova beat. A good contrast to the rowdy “Hey Lord”. I miscued the intro. It didn’t matter. I started again. Got it up and running and delivered the first verse with moody Tony Bennett conviction. Then I forgot the first line of the second verse. It still didn’t matter. I made up another line on the spot and improvised a new melody to fit. Julia scanned the lyric sheets in front of her, flicked from one to the other. Where was I? What was I doing? I sang in a holding pattern until the original lyrics returned, and then I just carried on as normal.

I should have been rattled. I wasn’t. I’d made exactly the kind of mistakes I’d dreaded making, and yet the world hadn’t collapsed. I hadn’t collapsed. I’d kept going. And nobody was any the wiser. Perhaps a few ears twitched at my diversion, but there was no baying for blood or the sound of ambulance sirens heading my way, just the ring of applause when I finished.

I think I was prouder of having survived the mistakes of the second song than I was of having played the first one perfectly. It was a revelation. I could cock-up without dire consequences. There was nothing left to be afraid of.

I played “Living Alone”. It was a song that I’d written over Christmas; a time when I imagined lonely people felt their loneliness most acutely. I explained my inspiration to the crowd, encouraged them to go knock on the door of any neighbour

they knew that lived on their own, then tagged it by saying, “Lonely people. They’re buggers, aren’t they? Ruined my Christmas worrying about them.”

The crowd laughed. It was a cheap gag that the song and lonely people didn’t deserve. That was something I had to work on. Honest chat as well as honest writing. At least I hadn’t told the joke about two nuns. Another gag that Julia had strictly forbidden.

“If you see me staring at my guitar while I play,” I said. “I’m not being intense...”

I showed the crowd my lyric sheets taped all over the top of the guitar.

“I’m cheating.”

They roared.

I played the song without mistakes. More applause. Only one song left.

I saw Sara in the crowd standing with Julia. Did this mean Brian had finished playing? Was he out there watching? I was ready for him, if he was. What the hell. I thanked everyone for listening, said what a privilege it had been to play, hoped they enjoyed the rest of their day. I introduced my last song, “Fellow Traveller”.

This was the song I’d written especially for the festival. It started with the chorus: *There’s a wildlife knocking at your door | So don’t hide away no more.* It had an anthem feel and by the end of it people were singing along. I was Freddie Mercury at Live Aid, although I don’t remember Wembley Stadium having a bouncy castle. I bowed and took my humble leave. Darren Day was waiting in the wings. “That was great,” he said.

Kind words from a professional. It meant a lot.

I stepped down from Mount Olympus, Prometheus bearing fire.

In the Green Room, Peter Donegan was talking to someone about moving to America to further his career. One day, I thought. One day. I dumped my guitar and joined Julia and Sara out in the crowd.

They were gushing and complimentary and I was embarrassed and grateful. Brian hadn't been watching after all. It didn't matter. I felt the best I could remember having felt in years. I'd handled the pressure and set a precedent. I could play in front of a big crowd. I could stand alone and make a connection with people, armed only with my guitar and a bit of banter. As long as I continued to steer clear of the gag about two nuns, perhaps I really did have half a chance of becoming a troubadour.

"Enjoyed your set," someone said to me. A complete stranger. A stranger no more. A fellow traveller.

Julia bought us both an ice cream and we pottered around the stalls, hand-in-hand. Two men in blue sequined jackets approached us. They were a telepathic act, laid on by the festival as free entertainment. Both men held small white boards. The first telepath asked me to write one word on his board, and to then concentrate hard on that word so his partner could pick up my thoughts. I concentrated. His partner wrote something down on his board. I showed him mine. He showed me his. He'd written the same word as me: *Love*.

I couldn't have been feeling the word more. It wasn't just the high from not having fallen off the stage. It was the people around me; people who stopped to scoop up earwigs; people who urged me to watch out for 'baby creatures' on the road.

Shirley Higton came on stage. She was a middle-aged piano teacher from Bridlington who'd been inspired to write a song called "Badger Boys". The song had

become the Badger campaign's rallying cry. I hadn't heard it yet. Shirley stood at the mike, amazed at the warmth of her greeting. She smiled, shrugged her shoulders, said she was worried about forgetting the words, but something in her soft Yorkshire accent suggested there was no chance of that.

Brian May watched from the wings, beaming encouragement. Shirley started singing. By the time she hit the first chorus I was clapping my hands and tapping a foot, which in my case counted as wild abandon. The song was catchy and rousing and the perfect end to the day. The crowd danced, hands punched the air, Brian even came on stage to jig about arm-in-arm with one of the festival organisers. Come the final chorus everyone was singing: *Team Badger Boys will have their say | The government will be made to pay | Coz come the next election day we'll vote for Brian May.*

"Badger Boys" was as much a Troubadour song as any I'd sung. More so. It was political and passionate. A plea on behalf of life.

I really hadn't a clue whether the science supported Badger culling or not. The statistics of the matter weren't the issue for me. It was the sentiment behind it that touched me more. What kind of society would we be without these pleas and protests? They don't have to be right to be valid and necessary in my book. We need the eco-warriors and the lentil-lovers and the crystal-healers to counter the don't-cares and the money-grubbers and the total-bastards.

I might be capable of stepping on an earwig without too much remorse, but I'd rather live in a world with an earwig preservation society than one without.

Chapter Eight

I Was Young

(Joven: the troubadour song category for youth).

...my opinion is that we should consider whatever age we have reached as an age reached by few.

Personally I reckon that our souls are free from their bond at the age of twenty, as they ought to be, and that by then they show promise of all they are capable of.

Michel de Montaigne

From the clock tower to the lighthouse: I

In 1911, Alfred Shuttleworth erected a monument to celebrate the coronation of George V.

I don't know what George thought of it, or even if he was aware of it, but I for one am grateful. When I was young, Alfred's monument stood less for a dead king, and more for the prospect of sex and alcohol. It was a portal to adolescent adventure. All of that promiscuous promise represented by such a modest edifice called the *Holbeck Clock Tower*.

The clock tower stands on the southern end of Scarborough's esplanade like a giant sandstone carriage clock looking out to sea. It has four legs, which are high enough and far enough apart for several people to promenade through side-by-side. It's

midday, but all four clocks say 4.30. Time is standing still, as though pausing on my behalf, allowing me to review the past without feeling hurried.

When I was a teenager, I used to take girls to the Clock Tower after a night in the pub. I hoped the magnificent moonlit view of Scarborough's South Bay would bring on a romantic quiver and leave the girls more susceptible to a snog and a grope.

Sometimes the view was enough; sometimes I also needed to bring a car blanket and a bottle of cheap wine. A great deal of my youth was spent down in the South Bay, and the Clock Tower became the iconic emblem of every descent into salt-aired juvenile folly.

I have returned to remind myself of those days. I want to hold them up for inspection, like I might a shell from the town's beach. I'm going to walk from the Clock Tower to the lighthouse, the full stretch of the South Bay, and see how many times I bump into myself along the way, the younger me who had big plans.

It's early April and spring is underway. The sun is out, troubled only occasionally by a thin drift of white clouds. Sparrows and blackbirds sing in the trees, seagulls flap and caw. A car engine revs high – an Audi TT showing off along the Esplanade. The car is red and furious and impresses no-one but the berk with his foot on the accelerator. A lapdog on a lead prances in quick prissy steps at the feet of an elderly lady. The dog is wearing a harness, elaborate as Lederhosen, the purpose of which isn't obvious. The dog is either a beast held in check, unlikely given its size (it barely has the strength to keep the lead taut), or the lady enjoys swinging the miniature mutt around her head like a bolas.

The dog stops at a council flowerbed to cock its leg – sacrilege – though it produces no more than an effeminate spritz. The flowerbeds are in full, exhilarating bloom, flourishing colours like magicians’ hankies: a silken fluttering of reds and yellows and blues and whites. Pale green tropical grasses sway and swish above the petals.

Two middle-aged couples walk along the path, admiring the flowers. They recognise the building across the road. It was used as the hospital in the TV series *The Royal*. It triggers a general conversation about Sunday night telly. I haven’t seen any of the new series they’re talking about.

I walk under the Clock Tower and down the steps to a small grass plateau at the top of the cliff. There’s a green wooden shed and a board outside it that reads: *Holbeck Putting Green. Open. £2.10 per person per round. Lost balls charged at £1.00 each. Pencils available.*

Where one might lose a ball on a featureless putting green is anybody’s guess. The only real hazard is dying of boredom before the 18th hole. Even at a punitive £1.00 each it would be worth losing a ball just to spice things up.

An elderly couple are the only two people playing. The man is bald with a groomed strip of grey hair round the sides. He wears beige slacks and a blue jumper draped over his shoulders, a stab at looking casual. The woman is a few years younger, wearing a yellow fleece and a prim leather handbag. The strap of the handbag binds her tight from the left shoulder to the right hip. The man is keeping score. The woman swings at her ball and miss-hits it.

“Can I take that again?” she says.

“No,” the man says. He has an ‘available’ pencil and doesn’t intend to waste it.

The putting green attendant is a young kid. His hair is cropped close at the sides with nurtured curls on top. He sits inside the hut, eyes transfixed on the screen of his phone, ears plugged into it. The sun is shining, and the view from the putting green is one of the most spectacular along the North Yorkshire Coast. The young kid taps the screen of his phone.

“That was nearly in,” the female golfer says. “You can give me that one, can’t you?”

“No,” the man says.

At the edge of the cliff top the path winds and plummets in a series of hairpins down to the beach. I lean against the fence at the cliff’s edge. The top rail is smooth in the palms of my hands.

Scarborough’s South Bay curves from left to right: a sloping cliff face of trees and bushes, which, after half a mile or so, gives way to a horizon of houses and hotels. It’s low tide. The yellow beach is stippled with black rocks.

This is the South Bay. It contains the heart and history of my youth. From the Clock Tower to the lighthouse, the wake of my past ripples on and on.

Two elderly ladies in heavy overcoats step up to the rail and look down at the beach.

“There’s a chap down there running,” one of them says. “He’s a fool.”

A blue fishing trawler lined with bright orange buoys chug-chugs towards the harbour, trailing a white 'V' of foam. It's heading for the lighthouse at the mouth of the harbour, and so am I.

Further down the hill are the Italian Gardens, a dainty riot of flowerbeds and pagodas.

"Grandmaaaa..." a double-chinned boy shouts, trailing after a portly lady through the gardens. She laughs at a joke I've missed. Neither of them stops to look at the flowers.

The steps down to the bay are cracked and uneven; daisies and dandelions fringe the concrete. Shrubs on either side of me are in bud. I don't know what they are, but I feel ready to burst with them.

"Let's march down this hill," a girl with red hair says. She and her mum and her Gran stride past me. "March, march, march." The girl swings her arms.

A young lad cycles up the path, legs peddling at a ludicrous speed compared to the progress he's making – frantic knees, leisurely wheels. It would be far less tiring to get off and push, but then he wouldn't be 'cycling', which would be a waste of his skin-tight luminous yellow Lycra.

The cliff path terminates at an expanse of flat circular concrete with a network of metal strips laid out on the surface. When viewed from the top of the cliff at night, fibre optic lights, embedded in the concrete, illustrate the forty-two most prominent stars that can be seen in the night sky above Scarborough. A novel idea, to have the night sky mirrored on the ground. It's a feature I might have brought a girl to see in my teens; another romantic ruse.

The Star Disk, as it's called, also gives my exact location: Latitude 54 degrees, 16 minutes, 15.4 seconds NORTH of the Equator. Longitude 00 degrees, 23 minutes, 36.8 seconds WEST of the Greenwich Meridian. It's good to know your place. I feel fixed and secure, set in a new foundation.

But the Star Disk is no substitute for what was here before it. The expanse of concrete used to be an outdoor pool.

Young boy and the Aqua Lovelies

The South Bay pool had once been one of the largest outdoor pools in Britain, built in part as a sea wall defence. It was an arena-sized oval with wooden seats set in concrete tiers all around the sides. There were springboards and slides and separate paddling pools with fountains. In the corner of the fifteen-foot deep-end there was a series of high-diving boards: the lowest was the round table, literally that, a circle of concrete about twelve feet up; then there was the bread board, a smaller platform about twenty feet up that was covered in hessian matting to prevent slipping; and finally the 'top board', an even smaller perch of concrete about thirty-six feet high.

When my dad was a kid, the pool was always packed during the summer. Despite arctic temperatures it was regarded as the luxurious alternative to swimming in the North Sea. The pool was a place of entertainment as much as it was a place of recreation. There were diving displays and swimming competitions, and a group of synchronised swimmers called the *Aqua Lovelies*, a name I've spent my life conjuring with. Dad was always full of these names. The *Fol de Rols* was another – the name of a

seasonal variety troupe. Summers of *Aqua Lovelies* and *Fol de Rols* evoked a time that I missed without ever having known it.

The South Bay Pool was like an heirloom. Another place in the heart handed down by my dad, which I then polished up with my own experiences. I spent most of my school summer holidays down there.

Tribes around the world have initiation tests to mark the transition from boyhood to manhood: teenagers run barefoot through the desert surviving on lizards' gizzards and cactus juice; or bind their ankles to jungle vines and bungee jump over snake pits; or tease tigers, armed only with a loincloth. All these tests pale against the terror inspired by my tribe's test. In my gang, we were not men until we could jump off the South Bay Pool's top board.

The concrete steps leading to the top board rose up like a walk to the gallows. There was a definite gloomy sense of a one-way trip about them. Rumour had it that someone had once belly-flopped off the top board and their guts had burst open. This had been my excuse for delaying any attempt at the jump. I was lucky that my contemporaries were a cowardly bunch and so peer pressure was minimal. We were in our mid-teens, still making excuses, still terrifying each other with the burst guts story, still doing our best to undermine anyone's rash threats of courage.

"I'm going up."

"What about your guts?"

"I'm coming down."

We were safe in our collective fear as long as no-one broke rank. And then one day, when I was busy describing to my friends, in explicit terms, the consequences of

splitting one's stomach open, ensuring we all remained top board virgins for another summer season, the peer pressure passed, in one gob-smacking unexpected moment, from minimal to intolerable.

I'd been keeping my eye on my friends, thinking they were the threat. It had never occurred to me that my shame could come from another source. It had never occurred to me while shivering poolside with my pusillanimous pals that I might look up and see, hurtling down from the top board – his arms crossed over his chest, his legs tight together, his feet pointing straight down, and his sun-bleached hair flaming like the tail of a comet – the skinny figure of my eleven-year old brother.

Plop.

After thirty-six feet he hit the water with no more kerfuffle than a pebble dropping into a puddle.

“Was that your kid brother?”

I hugged my towel.

“He's only eleven, isn't he?”

I was done for. Off the top board at eleven. My younger brother. Setting what was probably some kind of pool record, and keeping his guts intact too.

Mine, on the other hand, felt like they were spilling out all over the place. I knew I wouldn't be able to delay the dreaded leap for another season. Could I perhaps get away with it for another day, though? Keep a low profile. Just give myself time to adjust to the inevitable.

“Hey, isn't that your kid brother?”

I could keep a low profile; my brother could not. He was at it again. Standing on the top board and crossing his arms over his chest.

“He’s only eleven, isn’t he?”

Oh, bollocks!

By late afternoon I’d made it as far as the bottom of the top board steps – a steep avenue hemmed in with iron railings painted light blue. The paint was peeling and rust bled through. It wasn’t helpful to think of anything bleeding.

“Are you going up, or what?”

Kids were queuing behind me.

“Yeah, yeah...” I said, without speeding up.

“Come on.”

“I’m going, I’m going.”

It was bloody freezing. It was always bloody freezing on those steps, even when the sun was shining. I’d been up them before, but just to have a look. I’d only ever climbed the steps with the intention of coming back down them. The wind blew in from the North Sea and a pair of Speedos was no protection. I had two sets of goose-bumps; the first due to the cold, the second due to fear. They piled on top of one another in icy pertness.

The pool was filled with sea water and not heated. We were lucky if the temperature ever reached 50 degrees Fahrenheit. Little kids splashed in the shallow-end until their lips turned blue – that was the agreed signal for mums to drag them out.

I reached the platform at the top. Kids nudged past me, impatient. They recognised a first-timer. You can't hide it. It was all I could do not to call out for my mum. The veteran jumpers showed no mercy.

“Get on with it, you big pouf!”

I held onto the rail with both hands, squeezing hard enough to strangle a small elephant. I had no retorts, afraid that even opening my mouth would interfere with my balance. I looked across the bay, at the lighthouse, wished I was out there somewhere, walking on the beach, playing in the arcades, doing anything anywhere but standing on the South Bay pool's top board.

“Jump, you big pouf!”

Taunts lacked imagination or any sense of political correctness back in the 1970s.

The wind was remorseless and the surface of the pool looked hard and dark and miles away. I wanted to turn round, walk back down, but the veteran jumpers were having none of it. They blocked my descent.

“Where are you going, you big pouf?”

There were girls in the queue. Girls! I edged out along the platform. Kids insulted me, ran the length of the platform and disappeared off the edge. I recognised someone at my shoulder. It was my brother. It was the third time he'd come past. I couldn't work out if that was getting more, or less, embarrassing. My mind bubbled and spluttered, lava-like, intense and irrational.

“Don't think about it,” my brother said...for the third time, and then bombed off.

I looked over the edge, caught up in the pull of my brother's swirling aura.

Don't think about it.

Let go. Let go. Let go.

Fingers obeyed the mantra, releasing their grip on the railing. Two hands shaking at my sides.

Don't think about it.

Lanky in my Speedos, feeling naked, shivering, people looking up, the whole of Scarborough looking up. A peevish breeze, slapping and pushing; someone climbing the steps behind me. All those eyes staring. The eyes of the world upon me. No going back.

Don't think about it.

I jumped.

And then all I could do was think about it. And scream about it. My arms shot out sideways, my legs parted. Neither arms nor legs, no matter how wide I spread them, slowed me down. Despite plummeting at gut-splattering speed, I swear I had enough time to take another huge breath and start another scream. I hit the water, balls first. The elasticity of my scrotum faced the greatest test of its pubescent life. If I stopped screaming it was only because I had a mouthful of testicles.

When I emerged from the pool like a half-culled seal, flapping in agony on the cold wet concrete, I thought, 'Okay, at least I've done it. I've done it. The accolades will now flow.'

"What did you scream for? You big pouf!"

From the Clock Tower to the lighthouse: II

Not only has the pool gone, but also the entire infra-structure that used to serve it. The sloping cliff-side was once lined with wooden beach chalets, a large café and three or

four souvenir shops. During the summer, whenever I wasn't studying or working at a holiday job, this was where I would come. Dave Thornton and I sauntered in our Speedos, bumped into friends, read Wilbur Smith, and no matter what the weather, we swam. The pool was great, but the sea was better, and a rough sea was better still.

The cliff-side is now covered in wild grass. Not a splinter of a chalet remains. It's not even clear where they used to stand. I try to visualise the café where Dave's sister Sara (the same Sara who booked me to play at Brian May's Wildlife Rocks Festival) had worked during the summer and given us free ice creams when the manager wasn't in. I can only bring it back when I close my eyes, and then everything returns with a sunny vibrancy: people eating cakes, teaspoons rattling in cups, distant shouts, distant splashes of water.

I keep remembering, and fast-forward through a typical beach day...

The café shuts, the pool closes, the sun dips, but there are still people at the chalets, sitting in deckchairs wrapped in tartan blankets, drinking pots of tea. Dave and I wait for high tide and an early evening swim before going to the pub.

Later still, after the pub, in the dark and under the stars, Dave and I are back again with friends, this time for a midnight swim, followed by an impromptu chalet party.

When I open my eyes there is nothing but grass in ragged clumps, mottled with the remains of winter brown.

I walk down to the sea wall from which Dave and I used to dive when the tide was high. I read a familiar bright red sign:

WARNING
DANGER FROM HIGH SEAS
BREAKING OVER SEA WALLS
AND ON TO FOOTPATHS

It was typical of Dave that we should enter the sea from a point that warned us against it. Set twenty feet back from the sign there used to be a flagpole. When a red flag flew it meant swimming in the sea was forbidden. But ‘high seas’ and red flag conditions were the ones that Dave preferred. He didn’t regard it as swimming unless there was a threat of drowning. We’d hang around until late evening if there was the chance of pitting our Speedos against a tsunami.

Young boy and the High Seas

“Come on, Tommo,” Dave said. “The red flag is up.”

The tide was high, a good four feet higher than usual; it came slopping over the top of the sea wall and swamped the walkway. We were ankle-deep in water before leaving land. We’d been sea swimming all day. I was tired and my muscles were heavy.

“Look at that swell, Tommo,” Dave said.

I didn’t view the swell with the same relish as Dave. It was large enough to capsize the QE2. The part of the sea wall that we stood on was like a mini-horseshoe; the sea rolled in from the left, caught the curve of the wall, rushed round the arc and came out the other side, crashing back against the next oncoming wave. A short submerged barnacle-covered jetty jutted out from the end of the horseshoe, churning up a rage of foam.

Dave dived into the swell, his head rising and falling by several feet in the Himalayan heaves of water. This was play for him. I followed. My head also rose and fell, coursing up to the top of a wave, then plunging down its back. I tried to pretend it was also play for me, but I was swallowing too much of each wave. Dave was a stronger swimmer, beefier, more buoyant. I had all the floatation properties of a cast iron bedstead.

“Tide’s too strong, Dave,” I shouted, and turned back for the shore.

Now I couldn’t see the waves coming. They broke over the back of my head on every mistimed intake of breath and had me jerking my arms in circular spasms like the forepaws of a panicking dog. The tide swept me down to the end of the horseshoe where the incoming waves crashed into those being slung back out. I was caught in the crossfire. I yelled Dave’s name with a rare lungful of breath. It was a warning yell as much as anything. We both needed to get out.

The sea was chewing me up.

My arms and shoulders burned, every stroke felt like it was the last I could manage. White water battered my head on all sides. The jetty was my only hope. If I could grab it, I might be able to hold on and crawl along. I brought my arms and legs forward, frantic to meet something solid. My hands touched rock, sharp angles – the shallow steps of the jetty. Knees followed, banged hard. I tried to ‘land’ myself, limpet-like; tried to cling on, but there were no handholds, just a serrated landscape of barnacles.

I tried to stand. The sea broke over the jetty like a Boeing 747 hitting the runway, pressing me down and dragging my flesh over the barnacle bed of nails. Beyond the

jetty there was nothing but open water between me and the neighbouring seaside town of Filey. My muscles were shot, my skin was shredded. I was going to die.

I'd come close to drowning several years ago in a boating accident. There was no way the Fates would let me off a second time. They were calling in the debt.

"Tommo! Grab on."

The angry spitting of water about my head parted for a moment, let me gulp a last breath, let me see Dave, holding onto the sea wall in front of me, arm outstretched. I kicked out, reached out, not swimming any more, nothing synchronised in my movements, just a straining for life. One chance only.

Fingertips touched, hands touched; a yank on my arm.

"Hold on, Tommo," Dave roared above the waves.

My arms around Dave's waist. His arms over the lip of the sea wall. He'd never hold us both. I was going to kill him if I didn't let go. Cold currents prised at our torsos, salt water fretted our lungs. A wave tore us free and we rolled inside its callous crest, our bodies tumbling against one another...and then tumbling against concrete.

The wave had thrown us over the wall and onto the land. The wave receded, sucking at our bodies as it went, surrounding us in a seething froth. As one, Dave and I stood up and staggered several paces further inland in case the next wave retrieved us.

"Think you were right, there, Tommo," Dave said, panting. "Tide was a bit strong."

A posh lady with a poodle walked past. "Enjoy your swim, boys?"

I could have thrown her in and kicked the poodle after her.

A moment later I calmed down and laughed. I'd faced death three times before. Once in a moped pile-up (yes, it is possible to pile-up mopeds), once in a drunken car-smash, and once in a capsized boat. On each occasion I'd had just enough time to think, 'Uh-oh, this is it.' But on this fourth occasion I'd had enough time to think 'Uh-oh, this is it' over and over again.

It had been by far my most prolonged flirt with death, and as a result of not dying after all, I was euphoric. I interrupted the laughing with cries of "I'm alive! I'm alive!"

It was a story for the pub that night. The more times I told it, however, the more I abused the details, belittling the real fear I'd felt with excessive exaggeration and theatrical re-enactment. It remains a good source of colourful recounting, but I never tell it without remembering that the difference between the life or death of David Tomlinson had been the outstretched arm of a friend.

Hold on, Tommo.

From the Clock Tower to the lighthouse: III

Round the corner from the filled-in pool and the big red warning sign, there is the first visible remnant of the old days when the pool was still operating: a row of condemned chalets. These, unlike the demolished chalets, are concrete structures, which is probably why they've been left standing, like abandoned WWII gun emplacements. Even when they were used, they were no more prepossessing. The sun is high in the sky behind them, casting a gloom over the boarded up doors, reminding me of why this row was always so unpopular. A sunny day only deepened the shadows the chalets skulked in.

I'm not surprised to see Dave's Discovery Land Rover parked a little further on, underneath the South Bay's only remaining set of chalets still in operation. This area is known as Children's Corner. It's where civilisation kicks in again. There's a café and a souvenir shop, and a tram service connecting the Esplanade to the beach.

Dave's parents still rent a chalet every year and Dave is busy stocking it up for the season. He has kids of his own now; acquiring beach memories similar to Dave's and mine, only Dave will be hoping their memories are based on far less reckless behaviour.

We chat for a minute, looking out to sea, standing where once we sat in deckchairs reading Wilbur Smith and monitoring breaks in the clouds, or, when the sun wasn't shining, reading Wilbur Smith and listening to the foghorn. We're standing in our own footsteps, older, balder, saggier, but no wiser.

For Dave's 50th we had a late night party at the chalet, and Dave and I had stripped down to our boxers and run onto the beach, splashing our legs high in the shallow waves and then diving headlong into the breakers. We'd swum in hyperventilating breaths, yelping against the cold, but delighting in the torture. There's a theory that swimming in the sea can increase your lifespan. Certainly in the case of Dave and I it rolls back the years.

I leave Dave to his unpacking.

Although it's only April, there are families on the beach, determined to help summer along. The good old plastic bucket and spade is in evidence everywhere. A young boy lies upside down in a rubber ring, wailing, his legs akimbo. If he can't manage the ring on dry land, what chance does he stand taking it out into the water?

Other kids are paddling, screaming at the arrival of every wave. Two of them are well-equipped in shortie wet-suits. Wet suits are a sign of the times – parents are no longer prepared to see their kids’ lips turning blue. Another group of kids is standing on a large sandcastle. They’re clinging on to each other, the incoming tide causing landslides at the castle’s base. A little boy cries, the sand slipping away beneath him. It’s like musical chairs set to waves.

I hear the rumble of the tram behind me, then the clatter of the concertinaed metal gate being opened. Next door to the tramway is the Spa Complex. ‘Strange waters’ were discovered percolating to the surface at the bottom of the cliff face in 1627, which led to Scarborough becoming England’s first sea-side resort. In the 1930s, three hundred years after their discovery, the waters were declared unfit for human consumption, but the Spa had long since been more popular for its music hall entertainments than its curative/poisonous waters, and it remains the town’s premiere music venue. It also plays host to charity balls, graduation ceremonies and various daytime activities, one of which I used to host.

Young boy and Two Large Breasts

Copies of the Daily Mail criss-crossed my vision like leaping dolphins. If I turned my head they swam along side. If I looked over my shoulder they trailed in my wake. Little children carried them, nudged into my path by zealous mums; Grannies waved them with an unashamed ‘coo-wee’; and tattooed arms threatened to shove the paper up my nose. Everybody in my immediate orbit carried a copy of the Daily Mail.

In 1979, at the age of 17, I was a Daily Mail Money Girl escort. My job was to walk alongside the Daily Mail Money Girl and announce her presence with an electronic megaphone. If we spotted someone with a Daily Mail, the money girl would ask them a question from the paper and award them a pound if they got it right. That's a 1979 pound, of course. And to give some idea of what a 1979 pound was worth, the cost of a 1979 Daily Mail was only 9p. So in today's terms there was approximately a free tenner at stake, hence a landscape of swarming Daily Mails.

The Money Girl wore a blue sash over her shoulder with 'Money Girl' written on it like a banner headline. She was a local girl, pretty enough, but diminutive and demure and always decked out in long summer dresses; not the kind of professional page three busty type I'd expected, and if I dare admit it, hoped for, and if I dare add, what was really needed for the job. If ever there was a role that demanded hot pants and a cleavage, that was it. We were supposed to be promoting sales of the Daily Mail, and therefore the Money Girl sash would have been far more effective if it had parted two large breasts. As it was, people wasted time reading it.

The Daily Mail Money Girl team (which was the money girl and me, plus two paper boys on our flanks, and Jeff, the Daily Mail rep in charge of us) was heading towards the Spa Ballroom, where I was due to host a Daily Mail Money Girl coffee morning.

I was due to what?

"Did I not mention that?" Jeff said.

"No, you did not."

Hailing all and sundry through a megaphone was about as much embarrassment as I thought I could stand. Catching the elderly unawares with a megaphone while they dozed in their deckchairs was enough to bring on an attack of angina and, in some cases, the complete collapse of the deckchairs. The degree of startle that an unexpected megaphone blast could cause – first the pistol crack of the ‘on’ button, followed by an amplified adolescent yodel – was a menace I never learned to feel comfortable with, whether it was good business or not.

“What do I do?” I asked Jeff.

“Write a list of questions from the paper, shout ’em out, give a pound to the first to answer.”

We entered the ballroom. I froze and leant against the door jamb. There must have been at least two hundred coffee guzzling, tea swilling pensioners, their dentures clacking along with the clatter of crockery.

“There’s your stage,” Jeff said.

“Stage?”

“Don’t worry; I’ll get you a mike.”

“A mike?”

A stage, a mike, and two-hundred pensioners all expecting Bruce Forsyth, or someone similar. I gave the megaphone an involuntary squeeze, triggered the pistol crack. Three pensioners went down like flies, hands flailing about their hearts and hearing aids.

I wrote my questions and walked across the stage, pulled the mike from the stand and set off a terrifying whine of feedback that echoed around the ballroom. Three more pensioners bit the dust.

What I should have done was start by asking people where they were from. Were they having a good time? Was anybody staying long enough to watch a whole Ken Dodd show? That sort of amiable, introductory small-talk. But, overwhelmed by so much elderly expectation of Bruce banter, I just said, "Question one..." and never got any more entertaining than that, unless "Question two..." counts as progress.

Due to the average age of the audience members I had to repeat the questions endlessly. Everything I said rang with rasping echoes of "What?" and "Pardon?", and the awarding of the pound notes took longer than some members had left to live, given each winner's interminable trek through the crowd with their Zimmer frame.

"Well done, lad," Jeff would say at the end of these sessions, with a half-smile that always made me wonder if I had been conned into a job that really fell within his remit as rep.

From the Clock Tower to the lighthouse: IV

Beyond the main building of the Spa, but still part of the same complex, is a terrace of shops with a covered walkway. The first shop in the terrace is a surf shop, an indication of Scarborough's new national reputation as a cool place for dudes to catch a wave. The same waves that had once tried to kill me now have commercial value.

The rest of the quaint Victorian terrace is full of souvenir shops, selling 21st Century tat and beach essentials: bookmarks, belts, hats (including furry ones), fridge

magnets, balls, buckets and spades, nets, wind-breakers, flip-flops, and books by Dan Brown, Dean Koontz, Jo Nesbo, etc.

The sun continues to shine, though a few more clouds are gathering. I walk towards the Spa Bridge, which connects the Esplanade and the South Cliff to the centre of town. The bridge was built in 1827 from stone pillars and iron arches. Seagulls sit on top of the pillars and squawk. Seagulls always sound so agitated. They don't appear to have a contented sound in their repertoire of birdsong. A big blue motorbike roars onto the roundabout under the bridge and heads along the foreshore. The seagulls are enraged.

The roundabout is a circular brick wall that surrounds a large hole in the ground. The hole in the ground is a subterranean hub, from which there are walk-ways that lead under the road, either to the underground car park, or out onto the beach. Within the hub there are public loos, a first aid station and, long ago, when I was twenty-two, there used to be a council office.

'Office' is overstating the case. It was a windowless storage area with a desk. I was a lifeguard for the summer and this was where we met in the mornings to receive instructions, which were never usually any more elaborate than 'Go and lifeguard'.

I was living in a caravan at the time. The caravan was in a friend's back yard in town. It meant I could cycle to work every day. I'd dropped out for the second time after selling a couple of TV sketches that I'd written with Sean, my mate from Sixth Form. Sean and I were saving up to go down to London. Someone from the BBC had called and asked if we were interested in writing for Noel Edmond's *Late Late*

Breakfast Show. It was an upfront commission. Our first. Sean and I were on our way at last.

But before we could go, we had to earn some rent deposit money for a London flat. Sean was working for his dad over the summer as a painter and decorator. I was getting paid to catch a tan.

Young boy and Captain Speedo

I'd begun another lifeguarding day by locking my bike up in the 'office', and then strolling along the foreshore to the Harbour Bar, an award-winning ice cream parlour still sporting its original art deco décor: mirrored walls, aluminium stools with red leatherette seats, yellow Formica counter, and waitresses in yellow and white smocks that buttoned up the front, which, if you were a lucky leech, gaped at the bosom.

I sat at the counter with the other two lifeguards, Paul and Baz, drinking hot milky coffee and leaning from left to right, following the chest buttons of the waitresses, waiting for the strain to tell, occasionally glancing back down the road to the Spa Bridge, also keeping an eye out for George on his moped.

George was our boss, the council's man in the South Bay. He wore a blazer with the council logo on it to illustrate his executive status. We were supposed to walk straight to our boats, not stop off for coffee, so every now and then George would hop on his council scooter to check we were following proper procedure. We always saw him coming and had plenty of time to duck out of the café. His high-viz orange top, pootling along at scooter speed, alerted us like the slow arc of a flare.

We walked to the lighthouse and picked up our boats from the marina. Our boats were rowboats fixed with outboard motors. The three of us would head out into the bay and then use the boats to set up a swimming perimeter, dropping anchor so the boats were in a line parallel to the beach.

Nobody was supposed to swim beyond the line of our boats. To make life easier for ourselves we'd drop anchor in only four foot of water. On a busy day the bathers would be congested into a narrow strip of shallow water so densely packed as to displace the tide altogether. When toddlers in nappies started peering over my gunnels I knew I'd dozed off and let the outward tide leave me behind. We weren't supposed to doze, so it was a bit of a give-away when I had to climb out of my beached boat and recruit sunbathers to help me push it back out to sea.

It was a safe beach, no rocks and no dangerous undercurrents. I'd bought a huge piece of foam from an upholsterer's to make a nest for myself on the bare boards of the boat so I could then recline in comfort, watching the beach, baseball cap over my eyes, shades on, listening to Radio 4. We weren't allowed a radio, but we all had one. Eight hours on the boat would have been impossible without it.

The summer days rolled away in this soporific state of contentment. I was brown and wind-burned and slept soundly every night. I could watch as many bikini-clad girls as I wanted in the name of professional vigilance.

Dave sometimes swam out to my boat, or waded, depending on how mean I'd been with my perimeter. We'd pass comments on those bikini-clad girls that I was so conscientiously keeping my eye on, and Dave would give updates on his job applications.

He'd graduated that summer and was resigning himself to the business of entering the adult world. We'd arrange to meet for a few beers in the evening. Dave the Dish and Dave the Rave out on the town. (Dave had been nicknamed Dave the Dish by an ex-girlfriend of mine. Feeling left out and, I admit, a tad jealous, I'd nicknamed myself Dave the Rave, although it never caught on and I remained the far less party-animal-sounding 'Tommo'.) It was a summer of, in the words of Disney's Tigger, 'fun fun fun fun fun'. I had so much life ahead of me, and a huge appetite for it. Not a care in the world. Nothing to interrupt my fantasies, until one morning...

The tide was on the turn. I was standing up, stripped down to my Speedos; spit-roasting myself as the tide rotated the boat under the sun's glare. A strong breeze swept across the bay, clipping off the tops of the small waves, sieving them into a salty spray. I'd anchored further out than usual, anticipating the receding tide.

I heard a kid shouting, looked to my right and saw bony arms flapping. It was a boy, no more than six or seven. His panic was real. I threw off my baseball cap and shades, ready to put to use all the lifesaving qualifications I'd lied to the council about having.

The boy's arms continued to flap. No, not flap. They were pointing. And he wasn't drowning. He was standing. Safe. Secure. I looked to where he was pointing. A friend in trouble, perhaps? Yes, there was a substantial shadow of something floating out towards the harbour's entrance, towards the lane of the fishing trawlers. Real danger.

I stared, focused, the kid's cries as shrill as those of the seagulls overhead. A cloud covered the sun. No time to haul in my anchor and fuss with a temperamental

outboard motor. I felt the chill of the breeze, shuddered, and dived into the sea. I knew what I had to do.

I had to save that kid's Lilo.

I swam for the mouth of the harbour. A trawler's propellers would tear the Lilo to shreds. When I drew closer to the Lilo, I realised that a trawler's propellers would do the same to me. Oh, what an idiot! *He died a most hideous and bloody death saving a Lilo.*

The kid kept on screaming. He must have really loved that Lilo. I, on the other hand, within the space of twenty-five feet, had developed a degree of antipathy towards it. And yet on I swam, committed to my foolhardy gesture. This, it struck me, was my nature. I did a stupid thing, then having recognised the scale of the stupidity, followed it up with a succession of further stupidities, each dumbfounding the last.

The kid's treble screams were joined by a bass line from somewhere. It was the sound of a trawler's engine, revving up inside the harbour.

Shit oh shit oh shit. Now was the time to turn back.

I swam on. The prow of the trawler came into view round the harbour wall, catching the last of the day's high-tide. Only a few feet left between me and the Lilo; not many more between the Lilo and the trawler. I reached out.

The Lilo had a tow-line attached, floating in front of me. I grabbed for it. Missed. I rose up on the swell from the trawler's prow. Made another grab. Got it. I put the tow-line in my mouth and did the breast stroke on my back, kicking away from the trawler. The trawler's steel sides slid past like a guillotine blade, missing me and the Lilo with an indifferent swipe.

The trawler's wash rolled over my face, sent the Lilo surfing away from me, tugging on the lead in my mouth. I rolled onto my front, coughed water, let the lead go, then caught up with the Lilo again and towed it back to the kid.

I staggered to a halt, ankle-deep in the lapping waves, still coughing water, Lilo in hand. The kid was crying. It had all been too much for him. Poor kid. He took the Lilo from me, sobbing gratitude. I patted him on the head like I was Captain Speedo. I waited until he'd walked off before I dropped to my knees and thought of having a sob myself.

As far as incidents went during the day, this was a biggie. I looked forward to mooring up at five o'clock and recounting it to George and the lads back at the 'office'.

George didn't look in the mood for a good story when I returned. I wondered if he'd seen us at the Harbour Bar in the morning. Get my anecdote in quickly, I thought. Soften his telling off.

"Hey, George-" I said.

"Listen, lads," George said. "No mucking about today, alright. There's been a jumper off the bridge. While you were all out."

"A jumper?" I said.

"A suicide. Off the bridge. This afternoon."

"I thought I saw an ambulance," Paul said.

"A young lass. She didn't die outright," George said. "Can you imagine that?"

I could. The awful thing was that I could. And if I hadn't been busy saving that Lilo, I might not have had to imagine it. I might have been reclining in my boat with a

dreamy eye on the bridge. I might have seen the ‘young lass’ falling through space. I might have stared, everything over with before I could think to turn my head away.

From the Clock Tower to the lighthouse: V

Opposite the Spa Bridge is a yellow coin-operated telescope. A boy in baggy shorts, made baggier by his stick thin legs, steps up onto the plinth and inserts a coin. “It’s working!” he says. “I can see the castle through this, Nanna.”

Will he walk this way again at my age? Will the telescope still be here?

Another little boy yells, “It’s a pirate ship!” The pirate ship is a tourist attraction; a flat-bottomed motorboat decked out as Long John Silver’s ‘Hispaniola’ with fake masts and a skull and crossbones flag. It chugs round the bay on 20 minute tours; the short, commercial illusion is transparent to mum and dad, but will set up a lifetime of rich nostalgia for the kids.

A young woman drops her towel in the sea. “Oh, my God!” her boyfriend shouts. From the boyfriend’s reaction I think there must have been a baby wrapped in the towel. There wasn’t. The woman shivers in her bathing suit, picks up the floating towel, holds it at arm’s length and watches it drip. These two are not regulars to the seaside. For them a wet towel is indeed a catastrophe.

A little sun brings everyone out, young and old alike. The beach is covered in baby buggies. Parents huddle around the buggies like they’re campfires.

A young mum returns to her husband, dragging a crying child behind her. “Someone kicked his fucking ball!” mum says.

One lady is attached to two Husky dogs with a body harness. Not a usual beach sight. She slaloms through the baby buggies, kicking up sand, straining to keep the dogs in check.

A beach ball rolls in the breeze, tumbling over sand castles and buggy parties, no-one in pursuit. It could have been travelling for days.

Across the road is the Futurist Theatre, recently closed. It's where Margie once danced, and where I first attempted to cross over into adult dating status.

Young boy and The Frozen Alps

“Will you go out with Rachel?”

The question was not addressed to me, but to Tim Carter. This question, suffixed with a variety of girl's names, was frequently addressed to Tim. I received different requests such as, “Will you stop bothering Karen?”

Tim shrugged. It was the duty of the much-desired boys and girls at school to feign a degree of relationship lethargy.

“Yes, he will,” I said on Tim's behalf.

Tim looked at me. The reply to this kind of question was often delivered by, as was the question itself, a duelling second. It helped maintain the lead protagonists' distant air of cool, but as yet Tim hadn't given me his response. I took him aside.

“If you go out with Rachel, then her mate Lynn might go out with me. We can go on a foursome.” This was my best chance of a date, riding in on Tim's coat tails.

I reckoned I had half a chance with Lynn. She and I had gone to the same primary school and she'd been my first real girlfriend. My mum had taken us on a picnic to

Pickering Castle. Serious stuff at eleven. I hoped to exploit those sweet memories of rolling down the moat at Pickering Castle and parley them into a grown-up thirteen-year-old date.

The upshot: Tim said yes and Lynn said yes and we arranged to go to the pictures.

Everything was going swimmingly up to that point, until the others made the mistake of letting me choose the film. I chose, for our romantic icebreaker of an evening, the war movie *Where Eagles Dare* based on the Alastair Maclean book.

I'd seen it before a few years previously with my mum and dad. I didn't think it would matter what the film was. It was just an excuse to sit in the dark next to a girl. That was what I thought, but I was wrong. It did matter. If you were going to sit next to a girl, in the dark, and you hoped for some amorous contact, then it was difficult to broach if the girl was in a permanent state of horror at the sight of wounded soldiers screaming for their mothers. I had skipped the necessary business of foreplay, which at thirteen, need only have been a better choice of film, such as a romantic comedy. The best warm-up for a kiss, I learned, was not a blood-spattered Nazi.

Another mistake was the choice of venue. The Futurist Theatre was a cavernous old building that seated two-thousand. In the middle of winter, however, when the film being screened was not even a new release, the audience could be as few in number as, oh, let's say, four: Tim, Rachel, Lynn and me. So, a) I'd brought the girls to watch a war film and b) I'd brought them to watch it in a place no cosier than an aircraft hangar.

We sat there in our anoraks, shivering, watching our breath as much as the film, which was appropriate, given that the action took place in the frozen Alps. Nevertheless, undaunted, as the libido is in a thirteen year old boy, my objective remained the same:

to put my arm around Lynn before the credits came up, which would mean I was in with a good shout of a kiss, if not during the film, then at least afterwards, outside on the foreshore.

The credits rolled and the film began: a solitary plane flying over the Alps, the anxious faces of Richard Burton and Clint Eastwood preparing to make a parachute jump. I empathised. I had my own jump to make. When to put my arm around Lynn? Was she expecting it? Hoping for it? Or was she really just helping her friend Rachel? Or worse still, using the occasion to get close to Tim? Mm. A few more complications at this stage than expected. No need to rush anything, though. Lots of time left. No pressure yet.

And then Tim put his arm around Rachel. Just like that. Without a single hesitant twitch.

I tried to judge Lynn's reaction, but it was difficult to read anything through the fur of her Parka hood.

From then on, throughout the film, I kept giving myself five more minutes. Within the next five minutes, I'd tell myself, I'll put my arm around her. Each block of five minutes ticked away, blown out of the evening by every stick of dynamite that Clint Eastwood threw.

Before the credits roll became my last desperate deadline. Do it. Do it. Do it. It was the top board all over again. A test of manhood. I couldn't go to the pictures with a girl and not put my arm around her. I'd die a virgin.

And so, at the last and most inappropriate moment, when the film was at its bloodiest, and Lynn was at her most cold and bored and least romantically inclined, I

made my move. I put my arm around her, landing my hand on her right shoulder with all the tenderness of a dropped anchor. Lynn didn't react to it one way or another. She was too numb to care, and too sweet to complain even if she did.

The credits rolled. I was triumphant, and feeling about as exhausted as Clint Eastwood.

My relationship with Lynn, however, did not pick up again. There was no return to the passionate perfection of rolling down the moat together at Pickering Castle. Nevertheless, we did remain mates all the way through school and beyond. We hung out in the same gang and dated each other's friends. We had one more go at being boyfriend and girlfriend in our early twenties but it was too late, the habit of 'just good friends' had become engrained.

At eighteen Lynn joined a modern dance troupe and toured the world. It wasn't until I met Margie twenty years later that I learned it was Margie's dance troupe that Lynn had joined. Unlike Margie, Lynn didn't plan to die in a leotard, mid Samba turn. After several years she left the troupe, trained as a nurse and came to work in Scarborough. Another wanderer who returned home. Back to the Boro.

Not long after her fiftieth birthday Lynn died from lung cancer. On receiving her prognosis, she'd said, "I don't understand. I always smoked the most expensive cigarettes."

The funeral was like a school reunion. Some people have that effect. They carry you with them forever on memories that feel like only yesterday.

From the Clock Tower to the lighthouse: VI

The sky appears to grade itself from one end of the foreshore to the other. Behind me, the sun shines over the Spa Bridge; above the Futurist Theatre, white clouds marble the blue; and ahead of me, creeping over the walls of the ruined castle, dense grey clouds muscle in on the fluffy white cloud's territory. For the time being the sun prevails, giving the grey clouds an electric steely sheen.

Ride the donkeys in one direction, and it's a glorious spring day; ride them in the opposite direction, and a storm's brewing. A donkey ride costs £2. My donkey riding days were pre-decimal. 6d to cling on for dear life to the back of 'Daisy' or 'Tara'. In those days eligibility for a ride was governed by age – no-one over twelve. These days they've added a weight restriction – no-one over seven stone.

This is the biggest change along the foreshore; not the buildings, but the people. The people are much larger than they were in my day. Judging from the size of the kids, the donkeys are not just in danger of being over-burdened, but also of being eaten.

The donkeys and a disappointed eight-stone nine-year-old are at the base of a slipway that leads down from the road. A mum pushes a buggy over the cobbles. The buggy bounces up and down and the baby jiggles about inside.

The beach terminates at the West Pier. I swap sand for pavement and walk on to the harbour.

Small fishing boats are moored along the West Pier as though on a starting line, their timbers painted in bright blues and yellows and reds like athletes' running vests. They look too clean and toy-like to be part of such a dangerous trade. Each one has a

tiny cabin at the front with standing room only, radio masts and spotlights on the roof, some of them with winches at the back. I'm aware 'front' and 'back' are not the correct sea-going terms for a boat. Along the sides, which probably also have a more specific and salty terminology, there are protective rows of tyres, or orange balloon-shaped buoys. On the decks I see colour-coded coils of rope, empty crab pots, and life-belts with the name of the boat on: JANN DENISE III, DOLPHIN, MADASHELL 4, SYLVIA, and HOLLY J.

Seagulls land on the boats and strut like delinquent teenagers, sticking their beaks into empty buckets, pecking at the fish-scented cracks in the boards. They take off and swoop low over the water, diving and bickering, attempting to steal one another's titbits.

A young girl shouts, "Look! Penguins!"

Definitely a tourist from inland. I worry that I don't hear mum or dad correct her.

Towards the lighthouse pier I catch further snippets of other people's conversations, tantalising intimacies where I either miss the set-ups or the pay-offs.

A Geordie bloke says, "I know what I would have done. I'd have bared my fucking arse at them."

Two ladies approach. The listener is intent, serious. The talker is distressed. The talker says, "It was due to a childhood trauma."

I stop off at the public convenience at the start of the lighthouse pier. A freckle-faced lad is standing guard on a cubicle door. He shouts to someone on the other side: "Jake, do you know how to get back?" Jake answers, "Yeeees." "Ok," says the kid standing guard, and he buggers off without another word. There's a pause, then Jake says, "Why do you ask, Kyle?" My first instinct is to shout "Kyle's gone", but I'm not

sure it'll put the kid at ease, and the prospect of explaining who I am and how come I know about Kyle's whereabouts is just too embarrassing a conversation to contemplate through a toilet door. I leave Jake to find out for himself.

The lighthouse stands at the end of the pier. Like the Clock Tower, the lighthouse was often a romantic destination in my youth. One could look back at the foreshore and see the neon of the arcades, illuminating the bay like the French Riviera. Easier to imagine the Riviera at night when the lights reflect on the rippling sea and ugly architecture is obscured by shadow. Harder during the day, when discarded chip trays float in the harbour and donkeys are tucking into their nosebags.

I sit on a bench at the end of the pier and look across to where I started my walk. I can trace the route from the Clock Tower to the lighthouse, a stretch of coast approximately two miles long that contains the preface to my life.

This is where I tweaked and toned a template for the future, and got a sense of myself through a series of tests. Why did I have to make everything such a test for that young boy? I had to jump off the top board. I had to go swimming in high seas. I had to stand clueless in front of a mike. I had to put my arm around Lynn. I had to risk my life for a Lilo.

It's been a short walk, but a long journey. I search for some significance in it. One of the donkeys interrupts my concentration by dropping a heavy load of manure onto the beach.

Maybe that's as significant as it ever gets – from nosebag to rose garden. I'll settle for that.

Chapter Nine

Blue Sky

(Soudadier: the troubadour song category for a hired man, sometimes a knight)

...the target in the sights of any soldier, let alone a commander, must be overall victory and that no events, no matter what their importance to individuals, should divert him from that aim.

Michel de Montaigne

Prologue:

I bumped into David Slack in a café on the seafront. It had been thirty years since I'd last seen him. The change in his physical appearance was dramatic.

Thirty years ago he was stocky and carried himself with an imposing self-assurance. Now he was whisper-light and liver-spotted. He wore a beige windcheater and a pale blue cotton cap; a jaunty ensemble which suggested, along with his solo appearance at the café, that his independent spirit remained alive and kicking. One would never guess the history of the man from his sartorial care, or from the slow, determined sips of his coffee. His brittle decrepitude was proof of *a* history, certainly, but there were no tell tale signs of its nature, no obvious outward indications of the moment that had marked him forever.

This man, sitting in a Scarborough café, enjoying a regular latte, had once been tortured by the Gestapo.

It was always the first thought that came to mind whenever I saw David. That and *the girl in red socks*. David had never told the full story of the girl and the torture. I wanted to hear it now, though, with a desperation I couldn't explain. The image of a young girl in red socks defying the German army is irresistibly romantic and redolent of Hollywood symbolism: a pair of red socks against the black Gestapo tunics.

I walked over to David's table and introduced myself.

"Oh, yes," he said. "John and Mary's boy."

David's story:

"There's an awful lot of flak around that target, isn't there, sir?" Flight Sergeant David Slack said.

"What's the matter with you, Slack? Do you want to live forever?" the Canadian CO said.

The other pilots in the briefing room laughed. Few of them would survive the war, let alone live forever. At least two of them would not see out the day.

Seventy years later David Slack is having the last laugh on his CO. David isn't going to live forever, but he has made it to 90, which is about as close as one can get.

We're sitting in the lounge of David's four-bed semi in Scarborough. He moved to the town after the war when a friend told him it was a good place to start a business and 'a good place to live'.

In 1943, David was a fighter bomber pilot with the 175 Squadron, based in West Hamnet in Surrey. The young lad in the briefing room who made the naïve observations about flak had red wavy hair, a thin moustache, and a compact, sturdy physique. The

old man sitting opposite me is shrunken and frail and walks with a stick. It's hard to imagine him ever having sat in the cockpit of a Typhoon fighter bomber, though he remains David Niven dapper with a silver goatee beard.

“We rarely came back without losing somebody,” David remembers. He speaks with slow precision, as though waiting for his breath to catch up with the words. “I saw a lot of comrades die. You'd think thank God it's him and not me. There was no feeling of sympathy or anything like that. You were hardened to death. You were living with it every day.” For these young men it was a case of one mission at a time; the target always paramount in their minds. “You didn't dwell on death. At that age you thought you were immortal.”

As a young man I had similar feelings of indestructibility. I never faced death on a daily basis, though. Would I have ‘dwelled’ on it if I had? Of course, for any soldier during WWII there was not just the possibility of dying, but also the possibility of killing.

“Some of them suffered mental problems,” David admits. “Bomber crews mainly. It was called LMF – lack of moral fibre. They were taken to an aerodrome at Eastchurch, on the Isle of Sheppey. I don't know how they were treated.”

The term ‘lack of moral fibre’ (as it was used during the war) was damning and unsympathetic; to ‘lack moral fibre’ was to be branded a coward. We have a better understanding today of such things as Battle Fatigue, Shell Shock and Post Traumatic Stress. The Moran Principle of Biochemistry states that courage is not an absolute human characteristic, but expendable capital every man or woman possesses in varying quantity.

Of course, a few more cowards in the world and there'd be no-one to start wars in the first place. Humanity might benefit from one or two more yellow streaks like mine. I wonder how well this line of reasoning would have gone down in the briefing room:

“What’s the matter with you, Tomlinson? Do you want to live forever?”

“Well, sir, I do have a few thoughts on that...”

Unlike me, David was not the kind of person to equivocate. He remained focused on the target. “I never thought we’d lose. Not even after Dunkirk.”

At the age of twenty, David Slack flew fighter bombers across the channel at 400mph. To avoid radar detection he had to fly as low as six feet, and when he reached his target in France, he flew through heavy ack-ack and machine gun fire. He saw many of his friends blown out of the sky. And he did this not just once, but 39 times.

Whatever one thinks of war, that action, repeated 39 times, required something that I’m never likely to know if I possess. For all my soul searching, I’ll never know that truth about myself. When *I* was twenty I was dozing through lectures, drinking away my grant money, and in a perpetual dither over the opposite sex. I thought myself an action hero if I dared to ask a girl the time.

“We targeted V1 launching sites,” David says. “On the way out there’d be small arms fire, just tracer bullets: continuous lines of red metal, streaking past the cockpit. Then you’d see the black puffs of smoke from the anti-aircraft guns.”

Despite the deafening boom-boom of ack-ack, the rat-a-tat-tat of machine gun fire and the collective roar of Typhoon engines, none of it penetrated the cocoon of David’s cockpit. “You could only ever hear your own engine. We never even heard the explosion of our bombs going off. By the time you came out of your dive you could be

a hundred miles away.” The soundtrack of a single engine amidst the cacophony of battle helped keep the pilots calm. “You were quite relaxed.”

Once the Typhoons were within sight of their target the Germans put up a box barrage: all the machine guns on the perimeter of the aerodrome fired straight up, creating four walls of bullets around the target. “And of course you had to fly through two walls – one going in and one going out. But once you were through there was a great sense of relief. You’d survived another one.”

I admire what David did, but do not feel any contempt for those who were unable to do the same. There’s no doubt we owe the victory of WWII to men like David; there is also no doubt that I may well have been one of those men shipped off to the Isle of Sheppey with LMF. Once, in a street brawl, I ended up prostrate in the gutter with my assailant bouncing my head repeatedly on a kerbstone. Instead of defending myself, I contemplated with astonishment, between skull-cracking thuds, the extreme violence that some people were capable of. In the face of that overwhelming violence my response was not anger. It was surprise and sadness. All very touching if you don’t mind having a permanent dent in your head.

Whether or not this moment of strange detachment means I lack the necessary ‘guts’ for combat, I don’t know. One of the war’s toughest and most courageous of men – Wing Commander Yeo-Thomas, a British spy – had a similar experience to mine when he suffered his first blows at the hands of his interrogators. He remembered ‘thinking in a completely impersonal manner just as though it were another person being beaten up, and it was a very extraordinary feeling’.

David asks if I'd like a drink. I suggest coffee. He suggests Champagne. It would be rude not to oblige my host. He's glad of the opportunity to pop a cork. "When you get to my age, there's no-one left to share a bottle with."

He brings a bottle in from the kitchen and for a while I think the foil and the wire are going to get the better of him. When the cork blows, David sighs – a combination of effort and satisfaction. David has always enjoyed Champagne. Mum tells me that in his younger days he was known as 'Champagne David'. "That's right," he chuckles.

I didn't know this when I was a boy. I only knew of David's other much more horrifying history, that of his torture at the hands of the Nazis.

I don't think I ever heard David's name mentioned without a hushed reference to 'torture' and the 'Gestapo'. It made for a fearsome aura, especially as he never gave away any details. The only part of his war experience that he'd touch upon was his first encounter with the girl in red socks; a girl from the French Resistance who had risked her life trying to help him escape. But David always remained tight-lipped about the time he'd spent in the hands of the Gestapo. I was left to imagine the worst kinds of barbaric acts, all committed to the clicking heels of Nazi jackboots.

At the age of 90, however, David is ready to talk. "It was all seventy years ago," he says. "It shouldn't worry me now, should it?"

David's war memories are twenty years older than I am. It's difficult to imagine thinking that far back and remembering anything at all, let alone being distressed by whatever comes to mind.

"I volunteered at seventeen, but put my age down as eighteen." Something of David's youth returns to his worn out voice, perhaps due to the revitalising nature of

Champagne bubbles as much as the memory of being a teenager. “I got my mother to write a letter confirming I was eighteen. I’d told her if you don’t give your permission, I’ll forge a letter anyway. I was determined to get in it.”

Like David, I also lied about my age when I was seventeen, but only so that I could get served in pubs and see ‘X’ rated films. The study of David’s life brings my own into ludicrous relief. At the age of seventeen, David signed up to fight a war. At the age of seventeen, I rehearsed a *Two Ronnies* sketch for the VI Form College review.

“I felt excited about it all,” David says. “It was the beginning of a great adventure. I was either going to have a good life or I was going to die.” His reputation as a Champagne drinker is a clue to how things turned out for him.

David’s flying comrades were predominantly public school boys who spoke like Leslie Howard. David was the son of a dental mechanic and had attended Maltby Grammar school in Rotherham: “They had some fun with my Yorkshire accent.”

The war brought people of all backgrounds into contact with one another, like an extreme version of the comprehensive school system, of which I was in the introductory year. If the war can be said to have brought any benefits to Britain, then it was the social reforms that arose from the enforced mix of classes. Likewise, the introduction of the comprehensive system meant that I had mates at school who were the sons of brickies as well as barristers. At eleven years old I based my friendships on a mutual interest in sport and the *Goon Show*, not on whether someone lived in a big house or on the local estate.

“There was no class distinction when we flew,” David says. “We had a job to do. We were unified by the target. Although we used to tootle up the Thames Valley in

Tiger Moths and I'd see all these mansions on the river bank. Huge houses with swimming pools for mile after mile after mile, and I thought, Good God! Is this Britain?" It was a Yorkshire lad's first glimpse of how the other half lived. "I knew I'd never be able to afford one of those. A three bed house would be enough for me."

David survived as many missions as he did due to flying skill as well as luck. "I was the first in my section to fly solo. I buzzed around for half an hour or so while the rest of the section waited." On his first landing approach David came in too high. "I was afraid I was going to make a mess of it, so I pulled up and went round again. I could see all the rest of the section waiting to board the coach shouting, 'Hurry up!'" David's second attempt went off without a hitch. "I made it. You were so glad to be alive."

David laughs and then recites a verse from a song the pilots used to sing:

What did you do in the war Daddy?

How did you hope to win?

Circuits and bumps and turns laddie

And how to get out of a spin.

After his Tiger Moth training, David was sent to bomber school in Little Rissington. It was not what he wanted. "I'd joined up to be a fighter pilot."

David had heard of bomber pilots failing their basic training because they were too short to reach the rudder pedal. "I was so determined to get off; I told the instructor on my first flight that I couldn't reach the rudder. I sat right back in my chair, deliberately failing to reach." David's sleight-of-foot convinced the instructor to send

David to single flying school instead. “You could live longer as a fighter pilot than you could as a bomber pilot.”

David met his future wife Audrey at a dance in Oxford. “We more or less clicked together straight away. Though there was never any talk of marriage while the war was on. My flying was the most important thing in my life. I wanted to get into operations.”

He nagged his CO for a transfer to an active outfit and was posted to the 175 Squadron. The squadron flew Hawker Typhoons – fighter bombers known as ‘Tiffys’ in RAF slang.

David sips Champagne with one hand and shows me a picture of a Typhoon cockpit with the other. The dashboard of the Typhoon is an expanse of dials, switches, buttons and levers. It’s seventy years since David flew one but he reckons he could still do it. Despite his frailty he drives a big Volvo, though he can barely climb into the driver’s seat unassisted, and when he’s on the move, little more than his peaked cap can be seen over the dashboard.

“We didn’t have ejector seats. We had to slide the cockpit open and then turn the aircraft upside down and just slip out. You couldn’t practise it, but you soon did it if you had to.”

An average mission would last about an hour and a half. Thoughts of dying were quashed under the weight of youthful exuberance. “We loved flying. It was exciting.” The Typhoons only operated during the day. They were virtual bombers, which meant they had to see the contact. Once they’d crossed the Channel they’d climb to a height of ten to fifteen thousand feet, then roll backwards and dive back down. “At 500mph everything shook and the engine screamed. On one occasion the plane in front of me

was hit. Within seconds the pilot was out, his chute opening up. There was nothing I could do except fly past.”

How did it feel to fire 20-mm wing-mounted cannons and drop 500lb bombs?

“That was your object. To kill as many Germans as possible. But I never knew if I had or not.” The Typhoons swept over their targets at such a speed it was impossible for a pilot to see the damage done by his own plane. “I just thought of how many people might die if I didn’t stop the V1 rockets from taking off.”

The Typhoons were equipped with two fuel tanks. The first tank was jettisoned after a bombing raid and the pilot would switch over to the second tank for the return journey. At around 4pm on Feb 5th 1944, after strafing a German airfield in the north of France, David released his first fuel tank, but the second one failed to kick in.

“It must have been an airlock. When suddenly the propeller started to slow down I thought, God! The Engine’s gone. I’ve lost power.” The squadron flew on above him. “I gave the ‘I’m going down. I’m going down’ radio message, but there was no response. There was nothing they could do. They couldn’t turn round.”

The Typhoon dropped. Air howled over the cockpit. David was too low to bail out. “I had a matter of seconds. I saw a green patch in a wooded area. My only option. I had to go for it and get it down as soon as possible.”

David kept his wheels up. It was safer to belly flop when crash-landing in rough terrain. The landscape blurred, everything too close to focus on. The Typhoon thumped into the grass, skidded and slewed. “I went careering through a maze of fully grown poplar trees. Completely demolished them.”

When the plane came to rest, David was covered in blood. “My head had hit the gun-sight. I thought Good God! My head is split. I’ll need plastic surgery. I thought it was that bad.”

The plane had a full tank of fuel on board. A single spark could blow David all the way back to Surrey. He slid open the cockpit cover, his hands bloody from the head wound, scrambled over the wing and dropped onto the cool grass. “You’re supposed to set the plane on fire. We carried a canister in the cockpit for the job, but I was just too intent on getting away. I thought crikey I’m alive. I’m going to live.”

This was David’s first reaction. A perfectly understandable one. His second is more remarkable. “I thought *I’ve got to get back. I’ve got to get home. I’ve got to start again.* I took off pretty quickly to the road and there was a Frenchman with a bicycle. He’d been watching.”

David and the cyclist stared at one another. David stood breathless and trembling. Was the Frenchman friend or foe? Was the game up already? The Frenchman waved. “He beckoned me over, motioned me to sit on the saddle and then peddled me into the nearest village about a mile or so away.”

The French cyclist was a young baker called Andre Hewlin. The village they cycled to was Thezey Glimont, little more than a main street populated by railway workers. Andre dropped David off in the middle of the village and told him to get into one of the houses. Children were walking home from school. They looked at David in his blood spattered RAF uniform and fled.

“I didn’t know what to do. Then suddenly this woman came out of a house and grabbed me and took me in.”

She was about fifteen years older than David, somewhere in her thirties. Her husband, one of the railway workers, joined them about ten minutes later. The lady sat David by the fire, bathed his head and bandaged it. The man brought out a bottle of red wine. David, from a Methodist family, was not a drinker during the war. "I thought the wine was medicine of some kind."

David told the couple he couldn't stay. If they were caught sheltering him, the man would be shot and the woman sent to a concentration camp. He'd sleep out in the woods. They wouldn't let him go. In a state of shock, weak from the loss of blood and sedated with wine, David accepted the offer of a bed and fell asleep within minutes.

At three in the morning David was shaken awake to see three gendarmes leaning over him. "I thought they'd come to arrest me. I went for my host and tried to throttle him. I was so mad, so wild. I said, 'You fucking French have betrayed me.' I'd never used that word before."

The gendarmes had not come to arrest David. They were friendly, and David was placated with coffee and more wine. "The French got wine out at every opportunity." The gendarmes were anxious for news of the invasion. When would it start?

"I said soon, possibly six months. 'Oh, no. Not six months', they said. They were disappointed. France had been occupied for nearly five years. Anyway, they told me the Germans were looking for me and they had to get me out of the area."

David's hosts decked him out in civvies and took his uniform away for burning. One of the gendarmes removed his police cloak and kepi and told David to put them on. The bandage on David's head prevented the kepi from fitting properly. The other two gendarmes led David outside. It was still dark. David felt the chill after his warm bed.

All three of them then mounted bicycles, a gendarme on either side of David, and pedalled for the next village. In the breaking dawn they saw that a German soldier had been posted to guard the crashed Typhoon.

At the next village, David transferred to a motorcycle and rode pillion to stay in the home of one of the gendarme's, Robin and his wife Antoinette. David was in the hands of the underground. "These people were starving and yet Antoinette fed me on steak, though I realise now it might have been horse meat." Antoinette proved to be generous in more ways than one. "On my last day there she climbed into bed with me."

David raises his eyebrows, gauging my moral standpoint. "I had no option," he says. "She made all the running. She said it was okay because Robin had a mistress in the next village."

David laughs, warmed by the memory, no longer caring what my moral standpoint might be. "I thought if only the lads in the Squadron could hear about this. An Australian in the Squadron used to say, 'Slack, I know what you want. You just want to get shacked up with one of those French girls, don't you?'"

For the record, my moral standpoint is vive le France.

The following night was cold and wet. Robin drove David to a safe house in Amiens. A few miles down the road a set of headlights flared in the windscreen of Robin's van. "We'd met a German convoy head on," David says. "There were at least half a dozen trucks."

Robin pulled over. David sat in the passenger seat, dressed in civvies. If he was arrested, he'd be arrested as a spy. The Germans tortured and shot spies. The first truck rumbled past. The driver looked weary, didn't even turn his head towards the van. The

lights of the next truck lit up the van's cabin. What would Robin do if the Germans stopped and asked for papers? Robin tapped his revolver. "I thought my God he's going to try and shoot his way out of it – get into a pistol fight with an entire convoy. I'd sooner be a prisoner of war."

The headlights of the last truck passed by and the van's cabin fell dark again. The sound of the convoy faded until all David could hear was the falling rain on the windscreen. Robin gave his pistol another teasing tap. David blew out a lungful of air.

Amiens was the headquarters of the German army in Northern France. Despite the thousands of enemy troops parading the streets, it was easier for evaders like David to remain anonymous in a city than in a village. "I was taken to a big house. 137 Rue de Vulfran-Warme. It was kept by an elderly lady called Madame Vignon Tellier. There were other young men there. At first I thought they were French, but they were all English and American."

The airmen would be passed on to the underground escape route known as the Bourgogne (Burgundy) Line, which ran across the Pyrenees to Spain and then on to Britain. It was a slow process. False travel papers had to be made up and safe houses in Paris prepared. "I played chess and read. We had an illegal radio, so we knew how the war was going. When movement did come, it came suddenly. We had only a day's notice that we were heading for Paris. The train station was just down the road. We were to travel in pairs with a guide called Joe Balfe."

Joe Balfe was a powerful man with a large stomach and bore a striking resemblance to Winston Churchill. He'd fought in France during the First World War and stayed on to marry a French girl, but he kept his Mancunian accent.

“We boarded in our pairs, spreading ourselves along the train. I was partnered with another RAF chappie called Eddie Findlay, a bomb aimer on Lancasters.” All the airmen travelled on fake IDs. David was Amos Robert. Their instructions were to get off the train at Gare du Nord and wait. Someone would come and take them away.

Gare du Nord was crowded. David had no idea who his contact might be, or how they would find him. The station, just like the train, was busy with German soldiers. Orders rang out in hard consonants and glottal stops. How long should David wait? How long could he afford to wait?

He and Eddie stood side-by-side feeling frightfully English, and convinced they also looked frightfully English. A flash of red caught David’s eye. It was a pair of red socks. They were on the feet of a pretty young girl. “It’s what I always remember,” David says. “The red socks.”

The girl was Michelle Moet. She was seventeen, studying to be a teacher. She was also a courier for the underground. Help came for David from so many different quarters: a baker, a railway worker, a gendarme, a middle-aged lady, and now a teenage girl. “Just ordinary people. All risking their lives.”

Julia and I once caught the wrong bus in Poitiers. By the time we realised it, we were miles away from where we wanted to be. It was late afternoon and raining hard. When we told the bus driver of our mistake, with the aid of a map and some appalling phrasebook French, he shook his head and said, “Je suis désolé.” He then, as far as we could gather, apologised to the rest of the passengers and took a detour to get us at least somewhere near to our original destination. So much for the French being rude and petty bureaucrats. At heart they’re all still active members of the underground.

David and Eddie and their young courier caught a Metro train east to Vin sur la Seine and the temporary safety of Michelle's family home at 22 Rue de Sacrot St Mande. "It was a large apartment with a balcony. Michelle's father, Gerard, had worked on the Paris Stock Exchange, but was in the Ministry of Food during the war." The family spoke English well enough. It helped David feel he was getting ever nearer to home.

Young Parisian men not serving in the forces had been sent to work in German factories. It was hard for evaders to walk the streets without alerting suspicion. "At this point I think half the men in Paris were RAF. It was not advisable for us to roam the streets, but the underground wanted us fit for the long walk across the Pyrenees. The Moets took us out for trips to the zoo." A young French firebrand called John Cabot was also living at the Moets', hiding out from being press-ganged into the German labour force. "He'd walk out with us sometimes and when we passed any Germans he'd say, 'Bloody Bosch!' I'd think Oh God! He ought to keep quiet."

When I was a toddler I'd play hide-and-seek in the house with my dad. He'd turn the lights out and adopt a ghostly voice. "I can see you. I know where you are. I'm coming to get you." I could stand only a few seconds of this suspense before I'd burst out from my hiding place flapping my arms and screaming, just wanting to get the whole thing over with.

Several weeks after arriving, David and Eddie were alone in the Moets' apartment. "I was reading a book at the time, a thriller, and then suddenly real life bursts in. The door flew open and I was looking down the barrel of a revolver. Have you ever

had a pistol pointing at you? It looks that big.” David gestures a two foot gap between his hands. “You think My God! If he pulls that trigger I’m a goner.”

I never have looked down the barrel of a revolver. It’s another of those questions that talking to David keeps throwing up. A wannabe Scarborough gangster once threatened to blow my kneecaps off with a shotgun for chatting up his wife, but I was nineteen and he wasn’t in possession of a shotgun at the time, so I laughed it off with a cocky tilt of my head. In a hypothetical situation I’m as devil-may-care as Errol Flynn.

The person pointing a revolver at David was a member of the Vichy police. “I could have perhaps overpowered him, but he wasn’t alone and I knew there’d probably be more back-up outside. Besides, where would we run to?” It was not clear if the safe house had been betrayed, or if the two airmen had been spotted while out walking.

The Vichy policeman had a bad arm, injured during an air raid. It didn’t leave him well disposed towards the RAF. David was in no doubt that he would pull the trigger if he had to. “Eddie and I were taken to Gestapo headquarters on Rue de Fosch. In the meantime, the Vichy Police waited at the apartment for the return of the Moets.”

The Moets were arrested later that day. Michelle and her mother Genevieve were sent to Ravensbrook concentration camp. They survived the war. Michelle’s father was sent to Buchenwald concentration camp. He did not survive. “I think he died from grief more than anything when he thought of what had happened to his family.”

David was taken to Fresnes prison, about five miles south of Paris. Because he was captured in civilian clothes he was treated as a spy. “I was in the Gestapo system. If I’d been captured in uniform I’d have been a prisoner of the Luftwaffe. The Luftwaffe were human. The Gestapo and SS were sub-human.”

His cell had a concrete floor and bare brick walls scrawled with graffiti. David shared the cell with an Australian and an American. “We had a blanket each and one cess pot.”

A starvation diet of mangel-wurzel soup and a slice of magma bread left them weak and susceptible to any number of ailments. “I got scabies. I was scratching all over all of the time. But I always felt resourceful. When you’re twenty you can do anything, can’t you?”

David could. That’s all I can be sure of. The closest I’ve ever been to dietary deprivation was during the five days I spent living on porridge and potatoes before flying out to see Elena in America. I’d spent most of my cash on the air fare and only had enough left for a bowl of Quaker Oats in the morning and a plate of boiled King Eddies in the evening. At the end of the week I’d have told the Gestapo everything for a single chicken nugget.

During his incarceration at Fresnes, David came into contact with Wing Commander Yeo-Thomas, one of the few men imprisoned at Fresnes who was a real spy.

Each of them had removed a small pane of glass from his cell window in order to call out to other prisoners for any news.

“There was a short distance between our windows, but we couldn’t see each other’s faces. Yeo-Thomas, or Tommy as we called him, waved a bandaged arm so I could see which cell he was in. ‘Target sighted,’ I said. He told me who he was, that he was an agent and likely to be shot or sent to a concentration camp.”

In Yeo-Thomas the Gestapo knew they were dealing with a genuine spy rather than a serviceman caught in civilian clothing. He suffered brutal, 'sub-human' punishment.

The two men heard the firing squad carrying out executions most days. Yeo-Thomas remained upbeat. David promised to write to Yeo-Thomas's wife if he got out first.

On 6th June, the Allies landed on the beaches of Normandy. The prisoners at Fresnes were relocated to Germany. David was sent to a prison in Frankfurt. Yeo-Thomas was sentenced to death and transferred to Buchenwald for the execution.

In Frankfurt, David's interrogations became physical. "My interrogator there was a sod. I was beaten around the head, slapped across the face, and he'd shout 'Answer my questions' 'Where did you come down?' 'Who helped you?'" David takes a swig of his Champagne, looks at the glass for a second. "I got the impression he enjoyed his job."

Interrogation sessions lasted about half an hour. David was with the Gestapo in Frankfurt for five months. A secretary took notes while the interrogator punched him in the head. "She was attractive but had a stony face."

David gave nothing more than his name, rank and serial number. The Gestapo put him into solitary confinement. "I had a very thin mattress. No blanket. Just clothes and a mattress. They'd come for my cess pot at 6 o'clock in the morning. They'd open the door for five seconds and you had to get this thing out or you got a clip round the ear."

My brother Jim and I used to wrestle as kids, and for reasons I cannot remember, the objective was to make the other person shout out 'Skegness' instead of 'I surrender'.

Jim is five years younger than me. I'm ashamed of how many times I shouted 'Skegness'.

As part of their advance the Allied Forces launched a thousand bomber raid over Frankfurt. The bombs shook David's cell for twenty minutes. Lumps of cement fell from the walls and ceiling. "I sheltered in the doorway of my cell and thought get on with it. And then it all just stopped."

Half the prison was destroyed.

One morning David heard German troops marching through the streets towards the frontline. They were singing heartily. "I thought sing as much as you like but you're going to your death. You're beaten. I knew by this time that we were winning. If it had been 1940 I would have despaired, really."

The continued advance of the Allied Army meant that David had to be evacuated once again. This time David was handed over to the Luftwaffe and transported to a POW camp in Poland. "It looked like Butlins – a new construction with machine gun towers. The guards were old men, too old to fight. They'd come in the morning to rouse us for roll call. We'd say 'Deutschland ist kaput! Fuck off!' and they'd say 'Deutschland ist nicht kaput!' When they were eventually beaten they came in and said 'Deutschland ist kaput! Fuck off!'"

David was initially classified as Missing in Action, and then after six months reclassified as Missing Presumed Dead. For the best part of a year Audrey and David's family thought they'd lost him. His transfer to a POW camp meant that he could finally get messages home. He also wrote to Yeo-Thomas's wife. Meanwhile Yeo-Thomas escaped Buchenwald and was making his way back to England.

By Christmas the threat of the advancing Russians in the east meant that every POW camp in Poland had to be relocated to Germany and Austria. The transfer on foot of all the POWs became known as The Long March or Death March.

Thousands of exhausted, half-starved POWs set off on foot towards Germany and Bavaria during the coldest winter of the 20th Century. Temperatures dropped to as low as -25°. Those who were too weak or cold to walk were shot. “I’d been issued with an ill-fitting uniform in camp, and I had a decent pair of Barratt shoes. I didn’t dare take them off while we were marching, or someone would have flogged them to the Germans. Most of the guards were in the same sorry state we were.”

Half the civilian population of Germany and Poland appeared to be walking in the same direction as the POWs, scared to death of the oncoming Red Army. The civilians had to scavenge for food, reduced to eating dogs and cats and rats and grass, anything they could lay their hands on. Some of the luckier POWs like David were fed along the way at state farms. “At night I’d sleep in the cow sheds, put clean straw over the cow shit to keep warm.” The alternative, if you didn’t freeze to death, was frostbite and amputation.

Apart from his scabies, David remained in relatively good health. Hundreds of others on the march died of exhaustion, pneumonia, diphtheria, pellagra and various other diseases. In addition, there was the danger of ‘friendly fire’. In a village called Gresse, sixty Allied POWs died when they were strafed by a flight of RAF Typhoons – the same type of plane that David flew.

For David the end of the Long March came at Luckenwalde, a POW camp thirty-two miles SW of Berlin. Luckenwalde had one of the highest death rates of any camp due to its chronic overcrowding. “But one morning we saw that all the German guards had just melted away, although they’d left the gates locked.” Later that day the Russians reached the prison and opened the gates. “They were quite friendly but they stole a lot of the American POW’s watches. They’d never seen a watch, these Russians.”

Luckenwalde residents welcomed the POWs into their homes to protect them against the Red Army. David stayed a night with a local family: a couple and their three children. “In the morning the boy came downstairs and instead of saying ‘Good morning’ he said ‘Heil Hitler’. His father clipped him round the ear and said, ‘That man has cost us enough already.’”

David was intent on hooking up with the Western Allied Forces. “Four of us took off for Torgau on the banks of the Elbe. We had to get over the river before the Germans blew up the bridges. We covered up to 40km per day, living off the land as we went, sleeping in abandoned houses. But we were never knackered. Because when you’re in your early twenties...you’re like these footballers, aren’t you?”

The bridge at Torgau was still intact. David and his pals were welcomed by American soldiers on the other side. “It was fantastic. They had an abundance of food. Chocolate more than anything. 1,200 of us from our camp had been on the Long March. Four of us crossed that bridge. I don’t know how many more of that 1,200 ever made it home.”

David married Audrey in 1946 and shortly afterwards they moved to Scarborough, which proved to be, as his friend had promised, ‘a good place to live’.

“I had a wife and two children to support,” David says. “The last thing I wanted to think about was the war. I thought I’m never ever going to grumble about anything. And I’ve kept that feeling all my life.”

In 1949 David returned to France. It was to be the first trip of many. “I had a relationship with France after the war. I was a Francophile.” Robin the gendarme had left Antoinette for his mistress in the next village. David thought it best not to risk paying Antoinette a visit as well, in case ‘she made all the running’ again. The most significant reunion for David was with Michelle Moet, a reunion that led to a lifelong friendship.

After the war, Michelle finished her studies and became a teacher. France honoured her with the Croix de Guerre and the Legion d’Honneur, and in England she was presented to the Queen. She went on to marry and have children and see her mum Genevieve live to a ripe old age. Even though Michelle is now 87, to David she will always be ‘the girl in red socks’. And to me, her story is a beacon that cannot be extinguished: whatever weapons a bully possesses, whatever intimidating iconography he struts under, a girl in a pair of red socks will always have the power to make a mockery of him.

We’ve come to the end of the Champagne. David reflects. “When you’re twenty, anything can happen to you and you can overcome it. Not like now. Am I going to wake up in the morning? I’ve had a good innings, if I don’t.”

Audrey died some years ago. On the corner table there’s a black and white picture of her with David. It was taken just after the war. David is in his Flight Lieutenant Battle dress (his commission was confirmed while he was in France), cap under his arm,

gloves in hand. Audrey is clutching a handbag and two roses to her chest and has one arm linked through David's, her fingers resting on his. Both of them are smiling – the couple that 'clicked together straight away'.

"I might as well go, too," David says, "Why am I hanging around?"

Epilogue:

David did not hang around much longer. A year later I gave the eulogy at his funeral. It was not the last chapter on his life that I'd expected to write.

After the eulogy, I was surprised by how little anyone else knew of David's war history. His daughters kept saying "I never knew that". There aren't many occasions when I feel I've done something useful. That was one of them.

But I didn't have the full story. David told me he didn't suffer any psychological trauma after the war. Friends of his told me he'd woken screaming from wartime nightmares during a holiday they'd taken together back in the '60s. These nightmares were a regular occurrence. I asked David if the adrenalin rush of flying and risking death had left him seeking thrills elsewhere after the war? He said no. Friends at the funeral told me of his reckless descents on black ski runs and the stunts he pulled on a mono-ski in Scarborough's South Bay.

The Escape Lines Memorial Society meets once a year to celebrate the work of the French resistance and of the Special Operations Executive (SOE). A few weeks after David's funeral, I attended that year's ceremony with Julia and one of David's

daughters, Judith. We went to pay our respects on David's behalf and to meet one surviving member of the resistance in particular.

The girl in red socks.

I was excited. It felt like I was about to meet a heroine from fiction, rather than a real person. The girl in red socks had assumed a mythological status in my mind.

"That's her!" Judith pointed to a lady on the front row.

It was a windy day and we were sitting at the back of the congregation on the parade ground at Eden Camp. A short lady in a dark overcoat and knitted beret waved at Judith. I'm sure I felt the shock waves of that old lady raising her arm. She had, as they say, *presence*. I think it was the knitted beret, colourful and careless, which, in the absence of red socks, shouted out a defiant *joie de vivre*.

At 89 Michelle has the voice and expressions of a young girl. Her skin is smooth and even her big smile refuses to bring any wrinkles out of hiding. When we talk I have an internal chant running through my head of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. It's all I can do not to interrupt our conversation with a rendition of *La Marseillaise*. I'm told that Michelle has suffered health problems ever since her time in Ravensbrook. You wouldn't know it from her constant laughter, just as you'd never have guessed David suffered nightmares from the way he raised a Champagne glass.

"Shall I open another bottle?" he'd said at the end of our last conversation.

"Yes," I said.

I'd learned that much from him at least.

Chapter Ten

I'm Reminiscing

(Plazer: the troubadour song category for listing those things one likes.)

No one characteristic clasps us purely and universally in its embrace. If only talking to oneself did not look mad, no day would go by without my being heard growling to myself, against myself, 'You silly shit!'

Michel de Montaigne

I like reminiscing, no matter how many times it leads me to conclude that I'm a 'silly shit'. To reminisce is a way of keeping lessons fresh, friends and family close, and the future on track. Here are some examples of the memories I frequent the most. Not all of them are *Cider with Rosie* golden days. Some of them are cautionary tales, gentle rebukes that I allow to bubble up and pop in my face. I have been, and can still be, an objectionable oaf. The hope is that the more I remind myself of this, the less likely I am to let the oaf make further appearances. I release the oaf in memory to make sure that's where he stays; the sharp jolt of shame reminds me to watch my 'p's and 'q's. The following episode is one of those sharp jolts of shame.

'Baby Writers':

Sean Carson and I sat at a circular table in a Chinese restaurant in Canary Wharf. Half a dozen other writers sat with us, including our host Geoffrey Perkins, the Script Editor on *Spitting Image*.

Geoffrey would become Head of BBC Comedy and a much loved producer of numerous hit shows such as *Father Ted*, *The Fast Show* and *The Royale Family*. In 2008 the British Comedy Awards would posthumously honour him with an Outstanding Contribution to Comedy Award.

Now, while all this was yet to come in Geoffrey's career, the fact that it did come gives you some idea of the kind of man who presided over the table – smart, articulate, funny – and the fact that you haven't a clue who I am gives you some idea of the gap that existed between us.

The lunch meeting had been arranged to encourage 'baby writers'. Baby writers were non-commissioned writers who had shown promise. Sean and I had sold half a dozen sketches. We showed promise. We were also sulking. What were all these other writers doing here? When Geoffrey invited us, Sean and I got the impression it was only us he wanted to see. Just Carson and Tomlinson. The cream of the crop. How could these other writers be of any interest to him? Had any of them sold as many as half a dozen sketches?

After some blunt enquiries, we learned that yes they had.

Our sulk deepened. I drank a surly pint in a matter of seconds and ordered another one straight away. I got the idea from Sean, ever at the vanguard of drinking initiatives.

Sean also helped himself to the red wine. Shrewd. It was the least we were owed after Geoffrey had misled us so badly.

The problem, however, was that apart from script editing *Spitting Image* (and having a spectacular future CV), Geoffrey was also a writer and performer on *Radio Active*, a radio show that Sean and I loved, and so we had to work hard at keeping our sulk going.

Conversation round the table was polite and intelligent, an indication of just how quiet Sean and I were. Part of my silence was due to the distraction caused by something that I later discovered was called a ‘Lazy Susan’. It was a piece of technology I hadn’t encountered before. At first I thought it was a faulty platter, until I saw how everyone else but me was happy to see it spin round. Nobody complained about the bloody thing being loose, which had been my reaction. Once I realised it was meant to spin, I kept nudging it like a cat with a ball of wool.

“That might be a question for Carson and Tomlinson,” Geoffrey called out from across the table.

I looked up from the Lazy Susan, my head still rotating in unison with it. Sean and I had been singled out. By Geoffrey Perkins. The other writers turned to us. They’d been talking about the Royal Family (the real one). Two of the sketches Sean and I had written for the show were about the Royal Family. It appeared that we were now regarded as the Royal Family sketch-writing experts. The Royal Family comedy gurus, you might say. At least, that’s how we received the attention at the time. We had recognition. In an instant our sulk ended. Sean took a partial bow and I launched into something resembling an Oscar acceptance speech.

From then on Sean and I couldn't shut up. We talked with an overblown authority that made our six sketches sound like a lifelong career. Our whole tone was one of *Weeell, when you've been in the business as long as we have*. It was an awful mix of arrogance and free booze. Not only did we abuse the free booze for our own consumption, we also assumed responsibility for keeping everyone else topped up, ordering pints of lager and bottles of wine as though we were paying for them.

At the end of the meal I could tell how drunk I was from Sean's insistence that the Chinese waiter sell him a packet of cigarettes, despite the waiter telling him the restaurant didn't sell cigarettes. However drunk Sean was, I knew I was only ever one garbled syllable behind him.

"Of course you sell cigarettes," Sean said to the waiter. "Why wouldn't you sell cigarettes?"

"Very sorry, sir. No cigarettes."

"Silk Cut. You must have those?"

"No, sir. No cigarettes."

"Dave, tell him I need some cigarettes. He doesn't understand."

Geoffrey led us out of the restaurant. A line of Chinese waiters thanked us as we left. Sean asked each one in turn for a packet of twenty Silk Cut.

The baby writers' lunch was rounded off with a tour of the *Spitting Image* workshop at Limehouse Studios. The workshop smelled of rubber and chemicals, the fumes of which were probably more intoxicating than the lager and wine at the restaurant. Rubber heads of celebrities lay on benches with a disembodied and disturbing reality. Sean got into a

conversation with a head of Margaret Thatcher and asked it for a fag. Geoffrey hurried the tour along.

We returned to the main foyer and Geoffrey said goodbye to us all, or thought he had. Sean and I waved the other writers off and once Geoffrey had disappeared we returned to the building and went walk-about. We thought we were being dynamic, stealing a march on the other writers. The show's producer was John Lloyd. John had won a BAFTA for producing *Not the 9 o'clock News* and, like Geoffrey, would go on to legendary TV comedy status, producing the *Blackadder* series and *QI*, and picking up two more BAFTAs and a CBE along the way. Enterprising writers that we were, we wanted to meet him, pass on the benefit of our six-sketch experience. We'd spoken on the phone but had no doubt he would find us all the more impressive in person.

I opened a door and walked into a large open plan office. There were girls behind desks everywhere. It was like finding Inca Gold. Lots and lots of girls and all of them working in telly. I forgot about talking to John and perched on the edge of the nearest desk, which, by good fortune, also appeared to have the prettiest girl sitting behind it.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello."

"I'm one of the writers."

"I know," she said. "I saw you when you first arrived."

"You did? Where?"

"Here."

"I've been here before?"

"You all met here before the meal. Remember?"

“It looks familiar. A lot’s happened since then. How’ve you been?”

“Fine.” She smiled.

I was in my drunken ‘sweet spot’: chatty, confident, slurring on this side of coherence, not bumping into anything, and not swearing at inanimate objects that I could no longer operate when drunk, such as staplers and swing doors.

The girl continued to respond kindly to me even though she was busy. Her friend at the next desk joined in the banter. We all got along famously until the first girl left her desk and never returned. My ‘sweet spot’ was at an end. Time to go before someone asked me to staple something. I looked around for Sean.

“Your friend is in with John,” the second lovely girl said. She pointed to a glass fronted office.

Behind the glass I saw Sean sat with his feet up on a desk, inhaling a cigarette like it was the last breath he ever intended to take. John Lloyd sat on the other side of the desk, looking from Sean’s feet to his cigarette, alarmed by the feet and also curious to see how much of the cigarette would remain after Sean finished drawing on it.

I knocked on the door and entered.

“Would you like me to take him away?” I said to John.

“No, no, come in, please. Join us,” John said, without taking his eyes off Sean and the cigarette, a sense of anxiety growing as he realised that the outgoing breath was likely to be as fierce as the one going in. The room was already thick with a low lying cloud.

Sean blew out: dragon smoke swirled, John’s eyes watered, the Yucca plant coughed. “And here’s another way you could improve the show,” Sean said. He gave

John further tips on how to be a better producer then stubbed out the remains of his fag and took the last one from John's pack of Benson and Hedges. "You're out of fags, by the way, John. Shall we send a secretary out?"

I had little to contribute to the conversation. Sean was on a roll with his views on comedy and politics, and I wasn't sure what my thoughts were regarding his Berlin Wall theory. He said its real purpose was to stop the Germans from uniting and rising up once more. I had to admit that Sean probably did know something about German politics given that his attack on John's time and cigarettes had all the hallmarks of 'Blitzkrieg'.

Twenty minutes later I repeated my offer to John. "Would you like me to take him away?"

"Well, I do have quite a bit of work to do," John said, courteous to the end of the onslaught.

I got up and nudged Sean along with me, though I was hardly any more sober than he was.

"You're out of fags, John," Sean said. "I'll send someone out."

We then stumbled our way through the outer office. John watched us leave from his side of the glass; the rest of the production team watched us from our side.

The pretty girl was back at her desk. "How- how've you been?" I said.

She smiled but didn't reply. Sean and I then launched into a slow, ricocheting free-fall towards the main foyer.

"Where are we?" Sean said.

"Canary Wharf."

“Where’s that?”

“I don’t know.”

“I need the toilet. Where’s the toilet?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll go behind a bush.”

Fair enough, I thought, although I couldn’t recall there being any bushes on the way to the studios. I heard the sound of a zip and turned to see Sean peeing into an enormous pot plant by the swing-doors. After a few seconds he had to lean against the plant for support. It bowed with his weight and the two of them swayed from side to side. Sean relieved himself with the same protracted intensity that he applied to inhaling a cigarette. The urine collected in the pot faster than it could drain. Soil flowed like a Guatemalan mudslide.

“Bloody hell, Sean!”

“Nearly done,” he said.

I was on my third go round in the swing-doors. Sean continued his tango with the plant, one minute leading with a branch, the next leading with his penis.

Sean has been T-total and off the fags for over ten years, and I haven’t pestered any girls behind TV production desks since 1998, and to make sure neither of us relapses into old habits, we periodically punish ourselves with the retelling of that story. It’s a salutary lesson that binds us – two blundering bumpkins down from the sticks, cocky way beyond our talent and obnoxious in our belief that even when drunk we carried ourselves with irresistible charm. Whenever one of us brings that day up, we enjoy a

mutual cringe. We can even laugh about it, but it's not a reveller's laugh, it's the kind of drawn out moan that implores the heavens for absolution. "Lest we forget," we say to each other.

Less damning tales of excessive drinking centre on the idyll of my Auntie B's house. Although having said that, there was the time I came close to killing someone...

'Four Elms':

"What's that?" I said.

"A pint of Martini."

"Ah- I don't, um-"

"Try it. It's not bad. It's proving very popular."

My cousin Peter and cousin Richard were manning the bar. The bar was a trestle table in the utility room at my Auntie Barbara and Uncle Harry's. The house was called *Four Elms* and it was my favourite place to be outside of my own home. It was a beautiful old red brick building with a Virginia creeper blazing up the walls. There was a wooden porch with a tiled-roof at the front that sheltered a swinging chair and a boot scraper. A stream ran through the garden on one side of the house and there was an overgrown orchard on the other. The family gathered at *Four Elms* every Christmas at the behest of the family matriarch – Grandma – who sat in an armchair bestowing blessings like Don Corleone.

Peter was 17, his brother Richard was 16, and I was 14. To the grown-ups, Peter and Richard served the drinks they were asked for; to the cousins, they served cocktails

of their own invention. At the time Peter and Richard were feeling particularly proud of having emptied a bottle of sweet Martini into a pint pot. I took the Martini from Peter, hoping to impress.

“You’ll want a cigarette with that,” Richard said.

“Ah- I don’t, um-”

Richard handed me a cigarette. I took it, hoping to impress. Richard lit the cigarette.

“Sorted,” he said.

The brothers watched me, waiting for some kind of explosion. I took a sip of the Martini.

“Better if you gulp it,” Peter said.

I glugged down a couple of mouthfuls. “Not bad,” I said, and then wheezed.

Peter nodded, satisfied. I’d impressed. I followed the drink too soon with a puff on the cigarette and coughed Martini out of my nose. The boys howled. I laughed. I was a big lad now. I wandered round the party with my pint of Martini in one hand and a glowing tab in the other. I kissed Grandma and spilled Martini on her buffet selection. Her Cheesy Puffs did a circuit of the plate like plastic ducks round a plughole.

“Have you been drinking?” Grandma said.

“No, it’s lem-lem-lemonade.” I hiccupped and left ash on her sodden Cheesy Puffs.

I returned to the bar. Peter and Richard were in full cry. Every under age cousin had been launched with either a pint of Martini or a wicked combination of liqueurs and mixers, such as Cointreau, Absinthe and Advocaat. I was half-way through my pint.

“Good lad,” Peter said, and topped it up.

Richard put another cigarette between my lips, lit it and nudged me back towards the party like a floating stick of dynamite.

“What are you doing?” Mum said.

I looked from my Martini to my fag. The words were slow to come. I offered up the Martini and cigarette to Mum in the hope that she could explain them to me. Mum understood the moment as a rite of passage.

“Well, if you want to be sick,” Mum said.

I didn't want to be, but I was. I was sick in the car on the way home. Sick all the way through *Fiddler on the Roof* when we got home, and then hung-over for three days afterwards.

This was how the parties went at *Four Elms*. I was always a few years younger than Peter and Richard and always aching to make up the gap. When I hit eighteen, Peter was a Royal Marine and Richard was in the RAF Regiment, which went by the nickname of the ‘Rock Apes’. That made the gap even larger. The boys were also now allowed to throw seasonal parties of their own. And as they had a sister, Helen, just one year younger than me, it guaranteed a healthy number of girls attended these parties.

I'd learned to steer clear of drinking Martini by the pint, but still guzzled a lot of ale to impress the boys and to fuel the courage I needed for dancing. The utility room had large doors that opened up into the garage, and as the garage was big enough to house my Uncle Harry's HGV, the two spaces became the size of a small ballroom.

Cousin Helen was dancing with a group of girlfriends. I joined them, beer can in hand. Helen introduced me to Suzie. Suzie and I got along fine. I made her laugh, and

not just because I danced like a man recovering from rickets. I'd hit my drunken 'sweet spot'. I took a breather in an armchair and Suzie sat on my lap. Peter and Richard gave me the old 'nudge nudge wink wink' from across the dance floor. I was doing well – can in hand, girl on my lap. I kissed Suzie to make sure the boys knew she was on my lap of her own accord.

“You know I'm older than you?” Suzie said.

“I thought you might be. Just a bit, you know.”

“More than a bit. Quite a lot.”

“No.”

“You don't recognise me, do you?”

“Aren't you the girl I was dancing with earlier?”

“I was your babysitter. Suzie. Remember?”

“Oh, oh...” I did remember. At least, I remembered having a babysitter called Suzie, but I'd been a toddler then. This sexy girl couldn't be her. “Are you sure?” I said.

Suzie nodded. “Your folks live down Pasture Lane, right? In the old railway cottage?”

Wow! I really was kissing my old babysitter.

Peter and Richard were still watching from across the room. I returned a discreet 'nudge nudge wink wink'. They raised their cans to me.

“Shall we go outside?” I said to Suzie.

“Are you sure you want to?”

I was quite sure. I suggested we take a walk into the deep shadowy recesses of the orchard. Lights from the house spilled onto the driveway, but left the orchard

untouched. I swept Suzie up into my arms in a drunken romantic gesture. She whooped and threw her hands around my neck. All the signs were good. I strode into the long grass. Suzie chuckled away. I couldn't hit the shadows fast enough. What happened next was my own fault for being so ardent.

I walked Suzie into a clothes line suspended between two apple trees. I might have got away with a simple garrotting, but I'd walked her at such speed the line had ripped her from my grasp. Even then I might have got away with garrotting her and dropping her, if she hadn't landed on an old piece of iron cultivator and split her head open. The poor abused girl lay groggy and bleeding. I tried to pick her up. Despite her semi-conscious state there was one thing she was quite adamant about.

"Don't you dare pick me up again," she said.

I ran inside to get Helen. She rang my Auntie Barbara, who was also the district nurse. Auntie B came back from the local pub, applied a provisional dressing to Suzie's head and rang an ambulance. The blood seeped through Suzie's dressing. I was in shock, mumbling incoherent apologies. I kept raising an interfering hand wanting to help in some way. Auntie B sent me from the room.

The ambulance arrived and Suzie was carried onboard. Auntie B followed her inside. I hovered at the back and before they closed the doors I said, "Shall I come as well?"

"NO!"

It was probably my imagination but the 'no' sounded like a chorus. Auntie B definitely said it but there was something about Suzie's raised head on the gurney and

the twisting necks of the paramedics that made me wonder. The ambulance roared off, lights flashing, and I stood in the driveway, flanked by Peter and Richard.

“Nice one,” Richard said.

“Pint of Martini?” Peter said.

When Auntie Barbara passed away, Peter and Richard asked Jim and me to be pole-bearers at the funeral. I imagined Auntie B shouting ‘NO!’

Jim and I are over 6ft 2ins, the tallest of the other bearers was 5ft 10ins and the shortest was 5ft 7ins. No-one had thought of this when we first placed Auntie B on our shoulders. Jim and I started off by taking the strain on the same side and so my Auntie B listed to the right. We then tried a different arrangement. Jim and I stood at the rear and on opposite sides. It wasn’t much better. The coffin sloped forward at a 45° angle. It looked like we were going to lower Auntie B into her grave standing up. Until that is, I slipped on the ice and caused the coffin to lurch nose skywards like the prow of the Titanic going down.

After the service there were refreshments back at *Four Elms*. The reminiscing began straight away.

“Remember when you got me drunk on pints of Martini?”

“Do you remember when you nearly killed your babysitter?”

We told the stories as a collective, chipping in with embellishments. Jim reenacted the carryon we’d had with the coffin, using a cheeseboard to illustrate – our final salute to Auntie B. It would be the last of the *Four Elms* anecdotes, but not the last time of its telling.

Peter and Richard were my first teen role models. No wonder I got off to a shaky start. A couple of drunken reprobates, the pair of them. Richard would occasionally abandon his scooter in the village after a big night at the local boozier. He'd then spend the following day retracing his steps trying to find it. Peter was notorious for dishing out, as Richard describes it, 'a bit of knuckle'. He was forever getting involved in other couples' domestics, asking the girl if she'd like her bloke taking outside for said 'bit of knuckle'. But they were grafters, and bloody tough, and tirelessly good-natured, and if I showed off too much in their company, who could blame me? After their time in the forces Peter became a Fire Chief and Richard joined the CID.

A memory revisited can often serve not just as a one-to-one hug, but also as a great big group hug; some anecdotes are for the benefit of the crowd, requested for the communal good...

'My Big Younger Brother':

"Shouldn't we pay?" I said.

"Don't worry, lad. It's an honour system. Entirely discretionary."

I was in Hamburg with my younger brother Jim, getting onto the S-Bahn at the airport. Jim had brought me along to help him start up a new business. It was my first time in Germany and my first experience of being a 'businessman'.

"Explain that to me," I said, sitting down on the train. "About the honour system."

"You don't have to pay every time, if you don't want to."

“Really? Wow! It would never work in England. Where’s the hotel again?”

“The Reeperbahn.”

“The Reeperbahn? Isn’t that where all the prostitutes hang out?”

“We’re in the good part.”

“There’s a good part?”

We got off the train at the Reeperbahn. I ambled along the underground platform towing my case and following my brother’s black beanie which bobbed above the heads of the crowd. At the top of the steps to the exit I saw a row of beefy, square-jawed, pistol-toting POLIZEI. I wasn’t used to seeing policemen with guns. It’s an unsettling sight. I wondered who they were looking for. I kept my eye on my brother’s beanie heading for the row of policemen. When I reached the top step I saw that the police were checking everyone’s train ticket. A bit unnecessary, I thought, for a ‘discretionary’ system.

My brother’s beanie stopped at the line of policemen. The crowd thinned out in front of me and I realised it wasn’t my brother’s beanie. I’d been following the wrong person. The wrong person produced a valid train ticket and passed through the line of security. It was clear, even to someone as gullible as me, that public transport in Hamburg did not, after all, operate on an honour system. Where was Jim? No sign of him. And too late for me to turn back without looking like a startled terrorist. I came up toe-to-toe with a copper, his hands on his gun belt. He looked at me, eyes steady.

“Um- I- I’ve come from the airport,” I said. “Flughaven. Ich Reisse...No, ich komme aus-”

“You’re English?”

“Yes. Very.”

“Ticket?”

“No. You see, I didn’t quite understand your system.”

The policeman looked at my suitcase and then beckoned me to follow him. He marched me to a ticket machine.

“You must have ticket. Every station has machine like this. Okay?”

“Okay. Yes, I get it.”

The policeman smiled at me. “Next time,” he said, and then waved me on.

I was impressed with both his English and man management. What a courteous country. Jim was waiting for me outside the station.

“How did you get out?” I said.

“Other exit, lad. What were you doing?”

“It’s not an honour system.”

Jim raised his eyebrows at me. “Got to be a bit quicker next time, lad.”

“No, I’ll buy a ticket next time.”

Jim winced.

I took in our surroundings. “Bloody hell!” I said. It was the first time I’d been outdoors since landing in the country. Snowdrifts were piled along the side of the pavements and the pavements were covered in a six-inch layer of impacted ice. I’d never known cold like it. “’oody ’ell!” I said again, but my lips were already freezing up.

Jim looked at the hotel address on a computer printout. “This way,” he said.

We skated along the pavement with our suitcases. We were not, by any stretch of the imagination, in the ‘good part’ of the Reeperbahn. A dozen homeless people huddled under blankets in a large doorway, giving off steam at such a rate I thought they might evaporate entirely. Perhaps we were just passing through this part.

“Here it is,” Jim said.

No. Not passing through.

I couldn’t see a hotel. We were standing at the entrance to a dark alley. On one corner there was an establishment called *Pussy Parlour*, on the opposite corner was a shop best described as *Dildos-R-Us*.

“It should be here,” Jim said.

A lady stood at the entrance to *Pussy Parlour*. She wore a skin-tight black leather mini-skirt and a furry purple bomber jacket, her hands thrust deep into the pockets. She saw Jim staring at the printout and me gawking through the window of *Dildos-R-Us*, hypnotised by a display of two pulsing pink vibrators attached to a pair of slippers. The lady approached Jim and nodded at his printout. He pointed his woolly-gloved finger at the non-existent address. The lady took a hand out of her pocket and waved for us to follow her into the dark alley.

This is it, I thought. We’re going to be mugged, or forced to pay for sex with a monkey while someone secretly films it and then blackmails us with the footage. I was tensing myself for one encounter or the other when the darkness lifted and we approached the faint yellow glow from a glass doorway. The lady waved us towards it.

“Danke,” Jim said. He was thanking her for the directions.

“Danke,” I said. I was thanking her for not spanking me towards a horny monkey. I looked above the doorway. A neon sign flashed.

“It’s a hostel, Jim.”

“No, no, lad. A ‘hostel slash hotel’.”

“‘Hostel slash hotel’?”

We stepped inside. There was no indication of the ‘slash hotel’. The décor was bleak, and young people with mangy dreadlocks and wrists full of friendship bracelets hovered around the reception area, all of them competing to roll the longest cigarette. I was dressed in smart shoes and trousers with a navy camel hair overcoat; the consummate business professional. I felt a hundred and three years old.

Our rooms were no more ‘slash hotel’ than the reception had been. They had linoleum flooring and wooden framed beds that reminded me of Stalag Luft III. But, and this was the saving grace, they had huge iron radiators that belted out heat twenty-four hours a day.

“I know a great place for a kebab,” Jim said.

I was cheered. Just the ticket. A warm restaurant and a hearty meal. We left the ‘hostel slash hotel’ and walked past *Pussy Parlour*. The same girl was on the door. She nodded at us.

“You come inside now?” she said.

I wanted to say, ‘No, thank you. I have a girlfriend’, but even I could hear how pathetic that might sound.

Jim laughed and told her we were going for something to eat first.

First?

“Relax, lad,” Jim said. “Don’t want to sound like tourists, do we?”

“She knows we’re tourists. She just showed us to the hostel.”

“Slash hotel, lad. Slash hotel.” Jim stopped walking. “Here we go,” he said.

We had stopped at a hole in the wall with a moustachioed Turkish head sticking out of it. Behind the Turkish head was a hunk of fatty meat on a spit.

“It’s a take-away,” I said.

“You’ll love it, lad. Best kebab in Hamburg.”

“It’s minus 15°, Jim. Where are we going to eat them? I daren’t even take my gloves off.”

We ate them on a bench in the hostel reception (no hot food allowed in the rooms) being jostled by mangy dreadlocks and friendship bracelets amidst the aroma of dodgy tobacco.

Kebab finished, save for the indissoluble grease on my fingers, I retired to my POW bed and lay down.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

A repetitive bass line vibrated through my mattress and pillow. I got up and looked out of the window. My room was above a nightclub. And, as it turned out, an all-night nightclub. I sighed. It was the inevitable end to my day. I lay awake on the bed and vibrated against my will.

At eight o’clock, after less than two hours fitful sleep, I entered my brother’s room to see what time he fancied breakfast. He was sitting up in bed sending a text.

“Did you hear that music last night?” I said.

“Mm?”

“Last night. The club. Did it keep you awake?”

Jim removed a pair of earplugs. “What’s that?”

“Did you- Are those earplugs?”

“You want to get yourself a pair, lad. Slept like a baby.”

I stared at the earplugs.

“You go down for breakfast, lad,” he said. “Tuck in. It’s all-inclusive. I’ll catch up with you in a few minutes.”

At least the breakfast buffet looked impressive. I picked up a tray and eyed a counter covered in a selection of cereals, rolls, hams, jams, cheeses, yoghurts, juices and hot beverages. I felt revived and reached out for a plate.

“Morgen,” a lady in a white smock said. She was standing at the start of the counter.

“Morgen,” I said. Polite people, these Germans.

She held out her hand, palm facing upwards. Unfamiliar with German customs, I thought for a moment it might be a Teutonic version of a ‘high-five’.

“Yes?” I said.

“Your token,” She said.

“Token?”

“Yes. For breakfast.”

“I- What?”

“You must have token for breakfast.”

“But I’m all-inclusive,” I said.

“No, no. You need token. You buy from reception.”

I was beginning to resent how well every German spoke English. It appeared that their sole use of the language was to point out what an arse I was. I abandoned the queue and saw the people behind me handing over their blue tokens.

“All-in-fucking-clusive,” I said to myself, and headed for the reception.

I bumped into Jim on the way.

“Where you going, lad?”

“All-in-fucking-clusive,” I said.

I explained that we needed to purchase blue tokens from reception before we could eat.

“No problem,” Jim said.

Few things are ever a problem for Jim. He’s a natural born problem solver, which is handy given how many problems I have a habit of presenting him with.

“But you haven’t paid for any tokens, sir,” the male receptionist said to Jim. He was double-checking a breakfast chart.

The blue breakfast tokens sat in a white bowl on the reception desk.

“Really?” Jim said. “I’m sure the booking was all-inclusive. Would you mind checking on the computer?”

The receptionist sighed, got up and walked over to the computer on the desk behind him. He sat with his back to us. Jim reached into the bowl, took a fistful of blue tokens and handed them to me. I stared at them as though he’d handed me the head of John the Baptist.

“Pocket, lad. Pocket,” Jim whispered.

I shoved them in my pocket. The receptionist returned to face us.

“No, sir. No breakfasts booked,” he said.

“I can’t understand it,” Jim said. “I could have sworn I’d pre-paid. Never mind.”

I stood with my heart pounding and two pockets stuffed with tell-tale disc shapes.

“So how many would you like?” the receptionist asked Jim.

“Two.”

The receptionist frowned. “For the whole week?”

“Two’s fine.” Jim smiled.

We handed over our two legitimate tokens to the girl in the white smock at the breakfast counter. I took a bowl of cereal and some yogurt. Jim took one of everything that was on offer and sat down with a tray of food piled high enough for the elephant house at a zoo.

“Good grief, Jim!”

“It’s the custom, lad. Stock up for the day. This isn’t just breakfast. It’s lunch and supper, too.”

“Custom?”

“German custom. They all do it.”

I looked at my meagre bowl of cereal and yogurt. Jim began buttering up endless rolls, stuffing them with ham and cheese. He’d formed a small pyramid of them when a large, big-busted blonde lady walked over to our table swinging a bunch of keys. She moved with all the authority of a Panzer tank. My instinct was to throw my hands up in surrender.

“No, no, you can’t take food out,” Brünnhilde said, jangling her keys at Jim’s European food mountain.

Jim looked up and stopped buttering. It took a lot to make him flinch. Brünnhilde had what it took. He put the knife down and picked up a completed roll.

“Not taking it out,” Jim said. “It’s all breakfast.” He took a big bite out of his roll.

“All?” Brünnhilde said.

Jim nodded and chewed.

Brünnhilde narrowed her eyes and retreated to a vantage point by the door. She leant against the wall and kept her narrowed eyes on our table.

Jim finished his roll. “Is she still watching?”

“Mmhum,” I said.

“Shit!” he said, and picked up another roll.

Brünnhilde jangled her keys and kept up her vigil.

“Have a roll, lad,” Jim said.

“Ah, no thanks. I’m fine with my yoghurt.”

“Tell you what. You leave the dining room.”

“Yes.”

“Go outside.”

“Yes.”

“Then meet me by the open window.”

“No.”

This is the ‘hostel slash hotel’ story, often requested amongst Jim’s friends, and I have no hesitation in repeating it here because although Jim is prone, as he describes it, to a bit of ‘fiddly diddly’, he is one of the most generous people I know. It’s a contradiction

I'm not sure I can explain. I think perhaps that the challenge of 'getting away with it' is a compulsion for him, no matter what the 'it' may be. Saving money is not the drive so much as an incidental benefit. He'll dodge a two euro train fare, and yet to accompany him on that trip to Germany he paid his flat-busted brother a small fortune. A friend of ours was going through a difficult time with his clothes shop and so Jim bought wardrobe upon wardrobe of ties and jumpers and suits that he didn't need. This is what we all know about Jim, and so when we laugh at the 'hostel slash hotel' story, we're honouring him, delighting in the unique attributes he possesses that can bring about good fortune and anxiety attacks in equal measure.

He worked at the Wimbledon tennis championships one summer when he was a student and was able to sneak me into the grounds, not only into the grounds but onto the front row of Centre Court. The catch that came with the VIP entry he 'brazened' for me was that I had to spend all day masquerading as a high level executive from the Bass Brewery. It's the kind of charade that for Jim counts as sport, but for me is the precursor to a dickie fit. Without Jim's barefaced nerve, however, I wouldn't have seen Andre Agassi playing in the tournament the year that he won it. Without Jim my dad might have died in hospital instead of at home with his family. It was Jim who took on the consultant and made that possible. If I could be anyone else, it would be Jim, even though he's wanted by the German transport police.

Sometimes the joy of reminiscing is a private pleasure, like a long stare out of the window on a sunny day, thoughts drifting one into the other, dwelling on a time, or a place, or a person. I think of Dad to bring him back; I think of Mum to stop her leaving...

‘Number One Fan’:

One of my earliest memories of Mum is from around the age of three. I was sitting on the loo and failing to produce the goods. It caused something of a panic. This was my first experience of constipation. My bowels refused to deploy and I was bent double with stomach ache. Mum told me not to worry, that it wouldn't last, but even at the age of three I had the kind of catastrophic imagination that conjured up hospitals and doctors and the need for urgent surgery to remove my hesitant poo.

Mum dosed me up with a spoonful of something which she promised would fix the problem, and then lay me on a pile of pillows by the coal fire. I curled up on my side in a foetal position and watched *Champion the Wonder Horse* at a horizontal angle, calmed by the black and white images of the wonderland that was America.

The stomach ache eased, and a few hours later I produced a small hard stool, albeit a reluctant one that fought my sphincter all the way and made the passing of a camel through the eye of a needle sound like a case of the runs. I ran into the kitchen, panting, and announced the results of my heroic struggle like I was the sole Spartan survivor of Thermopile.

Mum offered up a cheer to my valiant bum. This is the pattern of our relationship. Me: melodramatic in my suffering, declarative in my triumphs. Mum: forever proud of me, even if all I've managed is a successful trip to the loo.

When I was four we moved into the flat above my grandfather's dental surgery. The Victorian building was at the top of a hill that led straight down to Scarborough's South

Bay. During the summer Mum and I would often picnic on the beach. There was always a sense of urgency to get down the hill before the sun disappeared. Mum would sunbathe on a car blanket and I'd sit nearby digging holes and making bucket-shaped sand castles. Whatever potted meat terrors the picnic presented, there'd always be an ice cream later on to compensate.

It was here, on Scarborough's foreshore, that I learned from Mum the English art of monitoring cloud cover. The 1960s was a bad decade for good summers. Catching a tan was a piecemeal affair, which required the biblical patience of Job and the mathematical genius of Euclid. Mum would shield her eyes and search the sky for the next patch of blue, note wind direction, assess cloud density, factor in the time of day, and then calculate whether or not there was a cat in hell's chance of the sun ever appearing in that patch of blue. Mum spent the day alternating between two positions: flat on her back when the sun came out; sitting up and shielding her eyes when it disappeared.

The perpetual transition from sweaty hot to shivery cold was something I took as the summertime norm when I was a kid. Running into the sea was, as much as possible, based on the same cloud monitoring calculations that governed Mum's sunbathing: sun out, everyone into the water; sun in, everyone out of the water. All along Scarborough's South Bay beach a line of pre-school tots ebbed and flowed in splashing, shrieking unison. I was always led to believe my splashing and shrieking was the most remarkable. From Mum's response you'd think I'd swum to Holland and back.

Mum was easy to impress and hard to disappoint. The kitchen in the flat opened up onto a fire escape. There was a short balcony with a coalbunker on it. My friend Johnny came to stay. One afternoon we stood on the balcony like kings of the castle. The girl from the basement flat came out into the yard and looked up at us. She smiled and waved. It was an angel choir moment. I was too young to understand anything about the 'opposite sex' but it was then, at the age of four, that the desire for, if not the understanding of, the opposite sex began.

Johnny suggested we throw coal at her. He hadn't heard the angel choir. Throw coal at a girl who was smiling and waving? The idea was pure evil. Not that I had any better understanding of 'pure evil' than I had of 'the opposite sex', but its arrival in my life was just as sudden and elemental. My stomach tightened. Johnny picked up a piece of coal from the bunker and threw it at the girl. He missed.

The girl watched the piece of coal bounce in the yard. She looked surprised. I was shocked. And then, like a zombie copycat, I picked up a piece of coal and threw it. The girl's expression changed from bemused to heartbroken. My guts twisted. Johnny threw another lump. The girl ran, crying. Mum stepped out onto the balcony behind me. It was a big day for experiencing new sensations. Shame came next. Overwhelming, tear-inducing shame.

Mum sat me down at the kitchen table. She was curious more than angry.

"I didn't want to do it," I said. "It was Johnny's idea."

Fortunately, though lots of new concepts were dawning, that of being a 'grass' was still some way off. I could dob Johnny in, no bother.

"You know you don't always have to do what your friends tell you to," Mum said.

There it was. The final revelation of the day and my first lesson in the perils of peer pressure. The calm in Mum's voice had far more authority than a telling off. The message landed with a leaden thump somewhere deep in my brain and the bugger has been impossible to dislodge ever since.

We returned to the country when I was five. We lived down Pasture Lane in a converted railway cottage called *Fieldside*. The railway line had been closed and dismantled a long time beforehand. Life down Pasture Lane as a kid was like living on Walton's mountain. We were simple folk but honest, running around in dungarees and tending the sawmill. Well, not quite, although childhood definitely thrummed around our kitchen and Mum did go through a dungaree phase.

Mum's attitude towards clothes was schizophrenic. When she went out at night she looked like a Mary Quant model. During the day she looked like an unwashed donation to Oxfam. We'd moved to *Fieldside* so Mum could open a boarding kennels and a cattery, which meant her jeans and anoraks were permanently pawed with a fifty-fifty mix of mud and shit, and pet hairs appeared to grow out of her as naturally as they did from their original source. Dad was always threatening to hose her down. She's since retired the kennels but still runs the cattery, and to this day Jim and I are often tempted to give her a scrub in a tin bath.

Not only did mum have cats and dogs to look after, she also had my baby brother. This meant I often missed my school bus. If there was a problem with a dog or a cat or Jim then I would have to wait for my lift to the bus stop. When there wasn't a problem with a dog or a cat or Jim, then there was frequently a problem with Mum's succession

of clapped out cars. They were tiny, tinny crates that either refused to start, or if they did start would then only reverse as far as the middle of the road before conking out again. As a result, I was late for school every other day for the best part of two years and fell behind the rest of my classmates by at least half the alphabet.

One morning, after spending too long treating a mongrel that had tried to eat its own tail, Mum carried Jim (and dragged me) to the car, strapped Jim in (bundled me in), yanked out the Fiat 500's choke and then looked heavenward. There was always a moment's silent prayer before turning the ignition. The engine coughed optimistically, Mum encouraged it.

“Come on, come on.”

She shoved the choke in, worried she might be flooding the engine, and then yanked it out again, worried she might be starving it. Mum could never tell if the engine was spluttering into life or gagging its last. Every morning she played that choke like a slide trombone. Choke in, choke out, it made no difference. The optimistic cough became a despondent whine. The engine quit. Mum appeared to suffer a similar breakdown. She slapped the steering wheel with both hands and head-butted it, crying out on each whack.

“YOU. LITTLE. SHIT!”

I missed my bus again. Was late to class again. Mrs Shaw, my year two teacher, had grown tired of this (as I think she had with everything else in her life, the short-tempered, grey-haired meanie) and she marched me by the ear to see the headmaster, Mr Smith.

“He’s late again, Mr Smith,” she said, as though I was an inveterate miscreant of the lowest kind and not a six-year-old boy with a working mum who had a new born baby and a crap car.

Mr Smith was portly and bald and wore a green three-piece suit. He kept a Green Flash gym shoe on his desk for spanking ‘inveterate miscreants of the lowest kind’. To be spanked by the gym shoe was called ‘getting the slipper’. The slipper was to become a regular acquaintance of mine.

“Not late again,” Mr Smith said.

“Again,” Mrs Shaw said.

“The car wouldn’t start,” I said.

“It hasn’t started for two years, boy!” Mr Smith said.

“No, sir.”

“Two years, boy!”

“No, sir. It’s a little shit.”

Mr Smith reached for the Green Flash gym shoe like an asthmatic in need of his inhaler. The gym shoe appeared to strain in his quivering hand, like an incensed guard dog on the end of a chain just itching to kill on behalf of its master.

The following day Mum came with me to school, carrying Jim in a papoose, fresh from her rounds with the animals, a perfect storm of Pedigree Chum and cat litter. I peeled off at my classroom; Mum blew on and into Mr Smith’s office. He never stood a chance. It’s impossible to say what surprised Mr Smith more – Mum’s protective fury over the treatment of her six-year-old son, or the pool of pet hairs she left on the carpet.

I was due to be one of those guinea pig kids in the first year of the comprehensive school system. Scarborough's grammar school had closed down and there was no more Eleven Plus. Parents with so called 'smarter' offspring were frantic, all jostling to get their kids into the best new comprehensive.

The town was divided into school catchment areas. I was in the catchment area for the school that everyone regarded as the worst by far. By a mile. And as the only kid from my primary school who lived in that catchment area, I'd be going on my own. Friendless. Parents could, however, plead various kinds of extenuating circumstances.

Mum made an application to the council (without my knowledge) pleading that the prospect of attending a school without my friends had left me with mental health problems. I was given an appointment to see a female child psychologist.

"I've got to see a what?"

"It's nothing," Mum said. "All you have to do is tell her you're very unhappy about not going to a school with your friends. Just make sure she understands how much it's upsetting you."

"Is it upsetting me?"

"A lot. Yes."

"Okay."

"Tell her you're having bad dreams, for example."

"What kind of bad dreams?"

"Nightmares. Just say you're having nightmares, that's better."

"Okay."

“And that you’re sleepwalking.”

“Sleep walking?”

“Yes. That sounds seriously disturbed, don’t you think?”

“Yes. Yes, it does.”

Pause.

“Perhaps tell her you also wet the bed.”

“Bloody hell! Mum.”

Thus briefed, I attended my session with the child psychologist. I recounted the tales of my sleep-walking nightmare terrors, all of them stolen from Edgar Allen Poe, and each one ending with me peeing my pyjamas. The psychologist scribbled notes. She scribbled even more notes when she saw how much my suffering appeared to make Mum proud.

The council let me go to the school of my choice. I was lucky not to be sectioned.

I was still only eleven when I told Mum I had a ‘serious’ girlfriend.

“Great!” she said, “Where are you going to take her?”

“Take her?”

“On a date.”

“Oh, right. The playground, probably.”

“Oh, no. That won’t do. That’s not romantic at all. We’ll take her to Pickering Castle. Have a picnic.”

“We?”

And so my Mum and I (and little brother Jim) took Lynn Christian to Pickering Castle. Once inside, Mum kept a discreet distance and let Lynn and me walk on ahead. We strolled through the grounds, me acting as guide, telling Lynn about the tower and the dungeon and pointing out where the steps to the parapet were. I tried to sound worldly with all that knowledge, a Pickering castle expert, as though that's what girls looked for in a boy.

Lynn was so pretty and gentle, but with a self-confidence that left me in awe. It didn't matter how much I knew about Pickering castle, I'd never know as much as her. By late morning I'd stopped talking like a fifty-year-old curator and conversation had become more playful. I rolled down the moat and Lynn followed me. We laughed at the bottom and then scrambled back up to do it all over again. We rolled and rolled, and when we were too hot and sticky to roll any more we sat on the bank and chatted. I helped her pick new mown grass off her cardigan. Our cheeks were flushed and we simmered side-by-side with innocent desire. Well, I know I certainly simmered, because I can't recall that day without simmering all over again. New mown grass always brings it back.

Then Mum and Jim appeared with the picnic and the potted meat put paid to the nascent lust.

It was Mum who taught me to drive. We'd go up and down the lane, taking it in turns to grind the gears. She was only marginally better at driving than I was; the kind of driver who, at forty miles per hour, would take both hands off the wheel to look for something

in the glove compartment. I developed my ‘Just-in-time’ driving style from her, based on missing obstacles at the last minute.

When I passed my test (something of a miracle. I felt like I’d gone through every other letter of the alphabet before completing my ‘U’ turn), Mum put me on her car insurance. The whole of my teen social life was dependent on Mum’s car. There’d have been no rallying on the beach without Mum’s car, no taking girls to the clock tower, no midnight swims down at the chalet.

I wasn’t a great driver, and I’m ashamed to say, not always a sober one, either. Because Mum was no better behind the wheel than I was, whenever I had a prang I’d say, “I see you’ve had another accident in the car, Mum.” And she’d believe it was her.

After my eighteenth birthday party at the *Copper Horse*, the village pub, Mum let me use her car to taxi friends back into town. I squeezed eight people into her Fiat 127. Their faces were squished up against the windows. I’d drunk nine pints. One of the flattened faces screamed “Let me out!” for the whole four miles into town. Dave the Dish, who understood the pressures of being drunk at the wheel better than anyone, said, “Stop squealing. You’ll wake the driver.”

Sometimes I think Mum bases all her faith in me on a single incident that happened when I was fourteen. The school held a summer fete. There was a greasy pole competition. The pole was suspended horizontally four feet off the ground. It wasn’t actually greasy but you had to straddle it and fight your opponent with a cushion. The winner stayed on. I stayed on all afternoon, beating all-comers, including the fifteen and sixteen year olds. Mum cheered from the sides, hopping up and down and swinging an

imaginary cushion. It was just like Olive Oil rooting for Popeye. In the end the teacher had to ask me to retire, not so much to give someone else a chance but to relocate Mum's exuberant pride to another part of the fete. Even now, forty years later, after each new folly in my life, Mum will assure me I still have her respect by citing my triumph on the greasy pole. It's as though I earned all the credit I'd ever need that day.

When Dad died I lived with Mum for three winter months. Mum didn't know if she would stay at *Fieldside*. Could she cope with the isolation? We spent nights by the open fire, watching TV. The same kind of soothing restorative treatment that had worked for my first bout of constipation. Only now I was the comforter. We chatted about Dad and developed an unhealthy portfolio of favourite TV shows. When spring came Mum said, "I'm ready." We fitted a burglar alarm and I returned to my own house. For the first time in three months Mum spent a night alone. I rang her the following morning. "I was fine," she said. "I'm staying. Now, how do you turn this bloody alarm off?"

Perspective changes with age, memory falters, the narrator becomes less reliable, though more consolable. I chased girls a lot but I never acquired the reputation of a great lover. The only way I was ever capable of making a serious impression on a girl was to jilt her at the altar or send her home in an ambulance. For me, reminiscing is a form of reconciliation, a means of making the past serviceable, and if it's done in company then it's also a sneaky way of saying "It's okay" or "I'm sorry" or "I love you."

Why ask Mum if she remembers the time she threw a teapot at Dad's head? Better by far to remember those occasions when she came home from the pub and said, "Oh, your father was funny tonight."

Chapter Eleven

Let Love Come

(Fin 'amor: the troubadour song category for pure love)

There is no need to cast light so deeply and keenly on to our affairs. You lose yourself in them by contemplating so much varied brilliance and such diverse forms [...] He who seeks out all the circumstances and grasps their consequences impedes his choice.

Michel de Montaigne

It is fitting that I have ended up here.

I'm sitting in Farrer's bar and café, part of Scarborough's Spa Complex in the South Bay, waiting to play a gig. The café is like a hall with a high ceiling and high windows. Wherever one sits there is a view of the North Sea. This weekend the café is serving as the music venue for Coastival, Scarborough's annual arts festival.

Every table in the café is occupied, and a standing crowd ebbs and flows at the back. Chairs shuffle and shift to accommodate gathering groups. Friends recognise one another and either call out or send semaphore signals with hats and scarves. Bar staff twist and turn between coffee machines, optics and hand-pumps; a balletic scurry that repeatedly climaxes in the electronic beeping of a till's keypad.

Julia and I have got front row seats at the edge of the stage area. We're watching a band called the *Woolgatherers*, an accomplished country blues outfit. The lead singer, Phil Hooley, is tall and rangy with a warm 'been around the world' voice.

“Are you okay?” Julia mouths at me between songs.

I’m on next. I hold out a hand. It’s steady enough. I’m nervous, but there is none of the pre-Wildlife Rocks heebie-jeebies. Today is going to be the first outing for the songs that accompany these chapters; their first real test. It’s three years since I travelled to France hoping to find inspiration in Montaigne and the troubadours. Who will emerge on that stage when I step out?

Despite the wide range of songs in the medieval troubadour’s repertoire, he is most popularly associated with songs of courtly love. In particular, songs of yearning, where the joy of an imagined union is coupled with the pain of knowing it is never likely to happen. The object of desire, too perfect and pure, remains forever elusive.

I began that night in Chelmsford with the same heightened sense of romantic expectation for my future, and therefore continued to live for many years in *expectation* instead of the far more rewarding state of *appreciation*.

The *Woolgatherers* play Bob Dylan’s “Simple Twist of Fate”. I drum out the rhythm on my knees. A band of rain marches over the sea in a million pelting footsteps. I wait for it to break against the windowpanes. Phil Hooley sings on:

*A saxophone some place far off played
As she was walking on by the arcade...*

I should be concentrating on my own set, reminding myself of lyrics, thinking of what I’m going to say between songs, but I’m too happy listening to the *Woolgatherers*.

Time spent with Montaigne and the troubadours has helped reacquaint me with my younger, floundering, impatient selves. It has been a review of reconciliation, so that now all of us sit together where we belong: in Scarborough ‘in sea breeze harmony’.

The troubadours may have enjoyed the business of pining in vain, but for the most part it was a poetic conceit, a sentiment to play with in verse, not to live by. I have at last learned that much. No point seeking something if you're not going to recognise it when you see it. *Don't take too many photographs of the seagull, otherwise it will have flown by the time you put the camera down.* A wise man once said that. Just now, in fact.

The *Woolgatherers* finish the song:

*I was born too late
Blame it on a single twist of fate.*

Rain hammers on the windows. Nobody cares. We're all listening to the music. The *Woolgatherers* receive hoots and hollers of appreciation and then make their exit. I walk round the back of the stage and plug in my guitar. Tom, the MC, steps up to the mike. I hover behind him. The crowd calms. Tom is a good friend and so gives me a big flattering intro. Do I deserve it? How will the gig go? Does it matter? Julia nods at me and smiles. No, it doesn't. To hell with consequences. I choose the here and now. *Remember the seagull.* Tom winds up his intro. I'm ready to start.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, without further ado...Dave Tomlinson.”

EXEGESIS

Introduction

This thesis researches the possibility of creating new approaches towards some of the problems that face the autobiographical writer. It examines authorial choice of content, the intrusion of fiction into non-fiction, the narration of self, how to cast a fresh and more revealing light on one's history, and how to deepen one's engagement with a subject by reflecting on it with more than one creative voice.

There are two significant 'firsts' that are the sources of inspiration for my research: the medieval troubadours and Michel de Montaigne. The troubadours originated in the south west of France (1100-1350AD) and were the first singer-songwriters to insert the 'I' viewpoint into secular expression, cited in Gaunt and Kay as 'self-reflexive hermeticism' (1999: 6). The influence of the troubadours had a profound impact that spread throughout the whole of the western world.

The significance of the troubadours is acknowledged in the space assigned to them in many different academic contexts: as part of the history of European poetry and music; as evidence for the history of social, gender and sexual relations, and the political and ideological world of medieval Europe; as a strand in the linguistic diversity of the Romance languages (Gaunt & Kay 1999: 1).

Montaigne (1533-1592AD) was the first autobiographical writer to employ the 'I' perspective as an inquisitive voice, asking questions of himself, but without an overt wish to teach, preach, or philosophise. In his introduction to Montaigne's *Complete Essays*, M.A. Screech says, '[Montaigne] is a bridge linking the thought of pagan antiquity and of Christian antiquity with our own' (Montaigne 2003: xiii).

The troubadours and Montaigne are the formative voices of life-writing. The troubadours wrote in the vernacular about love and sex and everything in between, which appealed to peasants and Dukes alike and, indeed, the troubadours also came from both ends of the social scale – from the impoverished to the aristocratic. Montaigne wrote in a self-effacing and humorous style, which, again, appealed across the class divide. According to Screech, ‘He treats the deepest of subjects in the least pompous of manners and in a style often marked by dry humour’ (Montaigne 2003: xiii). It is for this reason, I suspect, that Montaigne remains popular today.

What the troubadours and Montaigne have in common is the *everyman* voice. The term ‘everyman’ originates from the 15th Century morality play *The Summoning of Everyman*, and has come to mean, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, ‘an ordinary or typical human being’. An ‘everyman’ is not superhuman. An ‘everyman’ is ‘the man on the Clapham omnibus’ or an ‘average Joe’, someone with whom we can readily identify. In literature, John Bunyan’s Christian in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is an ‘everyman’. Bunyan contrives to ‘describe the familiar behaviour of people as we know them’ (Bunyan 1987: xi). Kafka writes of characters overwhelmed by circumstances over which they have no control. These characters are, in my opinion, also everyman characters, because I feel and share their frustration; impotent protest is a ‘familiar behaviour’. The everyman voice, as I refer to it from here is one that touches upon universal themes, and which offers insights on humanity as opposed to God, or gods, or mythological characters.

The origins of the ‘I’ viewpoint are, however, also the origins of the unreliable narrator. The troubadours could be boastful, so one asks what was true and what was

exaggeration? Montaigne confessed to a poor memory, so one asks what was true and what was *approximation*?

Despite the many forms of autobiographical writing, which date as far back as Caesar, literary criticism did not turn its full focus to bear on the subject until the 1950s, triggered in particular by Georges Gusdorf's essay, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" (1980). Since then, essays on autobiography have proliferated, and 'literary journals nowadays devote special numbers to the question of [it] – *Sewanee Review*, *New Literary History*, *Genre*, *Modern Language Notes*, and *Revue d'histoire litteraire de la France*' (Olney 1980: 7).

One of life writing's most complex areas of academic research concerns the narration of self as character, and more recent 'autobiographies' continue to fuel debate on the primary matter of how one defines autobiographical writing in the first place, with intense controversy surrounding works of fiction that masquerade as non-fiction on the (perhaps Aristotelian) pretext that they contain just as much truth. James Frey's story of drug addiction, *A Million Little Pieces*, did not interest anyone as a work of fiction, but when he re-presented it as a memoir it warranted a promotion on *Oprah*. Binjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments*, a story of holocaust survival, was also a complete fabrication. Given that autobiographical writing is comprised of a voice in the present that recalls a voice from the past for the benefit of a reader in the future, is it possible to clarify the parameters for autobiographical writing in a way that will lead to a coherent, unified representation of 'self'? How do we combat the limits of language to that end? Barthes says 'the voice is *already* dead' and

Whereby we may understand what *description* is: it strives to render what is strictly mortal in the object by feigning (illusion by reversal) to suppose it, to desire it *living*: ‘as if alive’ means ‘apparently dead.’ The adjective is the instrument of this illusion; whatever it says, by its descriptive quality alone, the adjective is funereal (Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes 2010: 68).

If this is the case, what more can be done to leave a reader feeling they are in the ‘presence’ of the writer and not at his wake?

The following quote from Louis A. Renza probably best describes the ongoing academic questions relating to autobiographical writing:

Perhaps more than any other literary concept, autobiography traps us into circular explanations of its being. Is it an indeterminate mixture of truth and fiction? Is it based essentially in fact rather than self-invention? Or is it a full-fledged “literary” event whose primary being resides in and through the writing itself – in the “life” of the signifier as opposed to the life being signified (1980: 268).

My thesis tackles these questions through a conscious engagement with myself and my community. I explore the possibility of finding oneself via relationships with others and a relationship with one’s place of origin – in my case, Scarborough. Interviews with industry professionals also work to shift the subjective field of autobiography into a more objective narrative that has a goal in its sights, that of becoming an effective 21st century troubadour.

Chapter One

How creative can one be with creative non-fiction before it becomes more ‘fiction’ than ‘non-fiction’?

I first approached my memoir in the same way I approach telling a story in the pub and allowed myself the license that comes with a convivial atmosphere.

I assumed most events in anyone’s life would benefit from some degree of editorial control and that exercising that control was a duty not so much to ourselves, but to our audience. The truth about the truth is that it can make for a boring story; but then entertainment without the truth can be equally tedious.

This was the problem I had at the start, prizing entertainment above honesty. My attempts at self-revelation came with flippant asides and created a carapace of gags. William Zinsser says, ‘Humor [sic] is the writer’s armour against the hard emotions – and therefore, in the case of memoir, one more distortion of the truth’ (1998: 10-11).

Before I could address the distracting issue of humour, however, the first question was what did we mean by ‘truth’? What is the truth that I distort when I employ humour? The attempt to determine the nature of truth is a discussion that goes at least as far back as Plato. He believed that the truth, or reality, could not be perceived directly: ‘To them, I said, the truth would be literally but the shadows of the images’ (2000: 178). A hard and fast definition of truth has remained elusive despite the finest philosophical minds in history applying themselves to the question.

The will to truth, which is still going to tempt us to many a hazardous enterprise; that celebrated veracity of which all philosophers have hitherto spoken with reverence: what question this will to truth has already set before us! It is already a long story – yet does it not seem as if it has only just begun? (Nietzsche 2003: 33).

Bertrand Russell complicates the discussion further by asking: ‘Are there many different truths, or is there only *the* truth?’ (1906-07: 28). Or, as a memoirist, need I only ask, ‘What is *my* truth?’?

The theories on the nature of truth are extensive and wide-ranging, and so I have, in the main, restricted the examination of truth to the academic debate that is of specific relevance to the field of autobiographical writing. The truth relevant to me related to whatever lay behind my emotional evasion. I wanted to know myself better; to meet myself head-on instead of repeatedly swerving off at the last minute with a diversionary joke.

What possessed me, though, to imagine anybody might be interested in what I had to reveal? I found an answer in Walt Whitman: ‘One’s self I sing, a simple separate person| Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse’ (2010: 1). I took this democratic view. Everyone has a story, and every story is valid. So what was my story? How would I ‘celebrate myself, and sing myself’? (Whitman 2015: 1). I did not know. Perhaps the search for my story would be the story itself. If my research could establish effective techniques for finding and releasing a story, then perhaps it would encourage the telling of other stories from other people; people who might not otherwise have thought of themselves as writers. Some writers employ their skills to represent the unheard voices within society, whereas I wanted to develop the skills that would help me speak for myself and in turn help others speak for themselves, too.

Once I had some sense of rationale for the memoir, I then asked what ‘type’ of memoir it was likely to be. There are so many. Where would my story begin? Not in celebrity. I am not famous for anything. Was there anything I could tell from my childhood that might prove inspirational like Mary Karr’s *The Liars’ Club*? Karr grew up with a heavy-drinking, fist-swinging father and a mother who suffered bouts of psychosis. Karr says, ‘Reading *Liars’ Club* seemed to crowbar open something in people’ (2007: xv). My relationship with my parents offered no such opportunity. I had had a relatively privileged life – not only relatively privileged but also relatively unadventurous, which, therefore, also ruled out any story of super-human, life-or-death struggle, such as Ernest Shackleton’s *South: The Endurance Expedition* (1999), in which he tells of the two years he spent marooned in the Antarctic. Neither did I have any problems with substance addiction that could fuel a tale of ‘self-conquest’ similar to Thomas De Quincey’s in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (2003: 4), or drive a stream-of-consciousness outpouring, depicting ‘huge bat’ hallucinations like those in Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1993: 3). Jean-Jacques Rousseau states in his *Confessions* that he is ‘different’ (2008: 5). Could I make that my controlling premise? That ‘I am different’? I could not. Indeed, as we shall see later, I discover the opposite is true. What about a celebration of my ‘great achievements’ in the style of sixteenth century goldsmith, sculptor and musician Benvenuto Cellini’s *Autobiography*? (1981: 15). No. I could not do that, either. I would need to achieve something great first.

I was faced with the same dilemma as the young Keith Waterhouse, who, when it came to contemplating his first autobiography said, ‘I discovered that I had done

nothing at all except live for twenty-two consecutive years' (2013: 25). This was heartening and at the same time salutary. Heartening because Keith Waterhouse had gone ahead and found a way to write about those twenty-two years, but salutary because I realised it took a Keith Waterhouse to do it, and I was no Keith Waterhouse. It is worth noting, however, that his book *How to Live to be 22* was not published until after Waterhouse's death in 2013.

This was the point at which I think I settled into my task. The objective of this research was to find a way for a non-famous person to tell his story and make it of interest to others. Through researching possible new life-writing techniques, could I find a voice capable of discerning and expressing the significance of the 'everyday'? Could I help others do the same? James Boswell describes Plutarch as 'the prince of ancient biographers' (1968: 32), and it is, therefore, encouraging to see that even Plutarch concedes: 'the most glorious exploits do not always furnish us with the clearest discoveries of virtue or vice in men; sometimes a matter of less moment, an expression or a jest, informs us better of their character and inclinations' (2004: 3).

To an extent, I knew that whatever voice I found was likely to be predisposed to humour, so for guidance I needed to look to the type of memoir where matters of 'less moment' appeared, but which were given their significance through an amusing perspective. I was looking for writers who had found that balance between humour and honesty, who could present 'hard emotions' without either being glib about them, or being floored by them. The writers I settled on in this regard were primarily Colin Dunne, James Thurber, David Sedaris and Bill Bryson.

I knew I did not want to distort the truth. And yet I did not want to be dull, either. How to remain interesting without becoming a liar? According to Elizabeth Bruss '[N]o autobiographer ought to depict himself without first becoming aware of how much fiction is implicit in the idea of a "self"' (1976: 18). So how much fiction can the 'self' absorb before the 'self' bloats into another identity altogether? James Olney¹ suggests an approximate ratio of fiction to truth when he discusses the autobiographer's attempt to impose a design on one's life after the fact: '[I]s it not more relevant to say that the autobiographer *half discovers, half creates* [my italics] a deeper design and truth than adherence to historical and factual truth could ever make claim to?' (1980: 11). Olney makes a distinction here between types of truth; one verifiable, the other more elusive, which he can only describe as 'deeper'. This, I assume, is the truth that relates to human nature – so difficult for us to define, and yet we recognise it when we see it. Terry Eagleton says, 'There is a difference between being true to the facts and being true to life' (2014: 121). I suspect that it is 'being true to life' that interests the artist most, and is certainly the kind of truth that I am groping for during this discourse.

In *Man Bites Talking Dog*, the memoir of journalist and novelist Colin Dunne, he talks about his time in Iceland when he covered the world famous chess match held between the American Bobby Fischer and the Russian Boris Spassky. A female journalist in Dunne's hotel slept with one of Spassky's advisors. Dunne writes:

One morning she burst into breakfast to announce that she had just screwed a grandmaster from Prague. 'Ah,' I quipped, 'that would have been a Czech mate.' Actually, I lie. Like all the best lines, it only came to me nearly 40 years later, about ten minutes ago (2010: 92).

¹ James Olney was described in his obituary (TheAdvocate.com 09.02.15) as 'the veritable founder of autobiography studies'.

I like Dunne for this. He is a man of wit, but also one of conscience and, in this example, conscience gets the better of him. Dilemmas of conscience are common. Dunne therefore shows himself to be one of us. In confessing his brief quandary over gag versus fact, he is ‘being true to life’. When I interviewed Dunne, a dry-humoured Yorkshireman, he expressed a clear guiding principle for his writing: ‘The only fiction I introduce into a piece is to protect someone’s identity’ (Interview: 17/4/15). I took my cue from Dunne in this respect. I would stick to the factual truth as much as possible.

The creative process of the creative non-fiction writer, including their choice of voice, applies not only to the *what?* and *who?* of content, but also to the *how?* of presentation. Too much creativity applied to the *what?* and *who?* can lead to making up facts and personalities, and too much creativity applied to the *how?* distorts genuine facts and personalities to the point that they may as well have been made up from scratch in the first place. Both types of excessive creativity are prevalent in the world of memoir, and have been since the origin of the form.

In the 17th Century, the printing press and a rising literacy rate made it possible for writers to make a living from their work. Factual stories were amongst the most lucrative. Daniel Defoe was one of the first authors to realise the advantage of presenting fiction as non-fiction (for example: *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*), although Ben Yagoda says, ‘Defoe wasn’t trying to deceive anyone. He merely recognised, and was one of the first authors to exploit, the fact that human beings respond powerfully to narratives that are (or make credible claims to be) true’ (2009: 47-48). I disagree with Yagoda’s claim that Defoe was not trying to ‘deceive anyone’. The original title page of *Moll Flanders* says: ‘Written from her own

MEMORANDUMS’, and the title page of *Robinson Crusoe* says ‘written by himself’. ‘Himself’ refers to Crusoe, not Defoe. Defoe’s name did not appear.

In America, during the 19th Century, the narrative power of the memoir took on a social purpose in numerous slave histories, such as *Solomon Northrup: 12 Years a Slave*, which ‘became a crucial document for abolitionists in the last decade of American slavery’ (2014: viii). Some of these slave histories, in the spirit of Defoe, were less verifiable than others, as in the case of *Archy Moor, The White Slave; Or, Memoirs of a Fugitive*. Yagoda cites an anonymous abolitionist who defended the book in *The Christian Examiner*:

‘[I]f Archy Moore is a fiction, inasmuch as its particular series of events never actually occurred, it still is fact in a much more important sense, inasmuch as events of a similar character, only we doubt not of even greater horror, are occurring every day wherever slavery exists’ (2009: 96).

Today, motives for manipulating the reader via fraudulent memoir have little to do with literary innovation or humanitarian causes. The argument that these bogus memoirs are in some way ‘being true to life’ does not feel ‘true to life’ at all. James Frey’s tale of drug addiction, *A Million Little Pieces*, began life as a novel, but only found a readership once it was re-packaged as a work of non-fiction. The switch in the book’s identity appears to have been motivated by a desire to be published rather than a wish to bring about social change. Benjamin Wilkomirski told us of his harrowing holocaust survival in *Fragments* – only it was not his story. He is not even called Benjamin Wilkomirski. Nor is he a Jew. His real name is Bruno Grosjean, a Swiss Gentile. A fiction may accurately represent genuine horrors, but if the way in which those horrors are represented proves to be a deliberate deception, then the horrors are demeaned and

reduced to mere story material. They are belittled by the deception and, for me, as I read, they set up a contrary voice. When Frey writes at the beginning of his book, ‘I wake to the drone of an airplane engine and the feeling of something warm dripping down my chin’ (2003: 4), my contrary voice that knows otherwise says, ‘No, you didn’t.’ When I read the subtitle on the cover of *Fragments* which says: *A Memory of Wartime Childhood*, that contrary voice says, ‘No, it isn’t.’ The content of the books is therefore negated throughout by my knowledge that a deceit is being perpetrated.

Even when authors wish to be accurate, they are hampered by the unreliability of memory. St. Augustine says in his *Confessions* that when we go to the ‘storehouse’ of memory ‘we enlarge upon or diminish or modify’ our thoughts (1987: 214). In Rousseau’s *Confessions* he admits ‘there are voids and lacunae [...] which I can only fill with the aid of anecdotes as confused as the memory that remains of them’ (2000: 127). Montaigne’s powers of recollection are no better: ‘There is nobody less suited than I am to start talking about memory. I can hardly find a trace of it in myself’ (2003: 32).

Do such admissions from three of the most influential originators of the ‘I’ perspective have any bearing on how we receive their work? When Augustine says of God ‘you are Truth itself’ (1987: 61), does it undermine an atheist’s appreciation of Augustine’s achievement? God, for some, is *not* the ‘Truth’, but is the *Confessions* any the less honest for that?

Memory, defined in the Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘the capacity for retaining, perpetuating, or reviving the thought of things past’, is, according to Dr Julia Shaw, plagued by ‘biological flaws, perceptual errors, contamination,

attentional biases, overconfidence and confabulation’ (2016 241). And yet, for all that, ‘memories form the bedrock of our identities’ (2016: 28). Whatever we remember, whether accurately or not, is, therefore, *what* and *who* we are. And *what* and *who* we are may change along with our memories. Does that matter? Where does the desire to fix oneself in any one definite form come from? I believe it is permissible for us as individuals to ebb and flow as do all other aspects of life, and that, perhaps, is the nature of truth – the recognition that we are incomplete and inconsistent beings. Shaw says, ‘Even if I know that what I am seeing on stage is an illusion, and am able to explain what I have seen to myself in those terms, that illusion still has all the appearance of reality’ (2016: 28). If one accepts Plato’s theory that all we ever see of reality is its ‘shadow’ then perhaps all we are doing with a memoir is throwing more ‘shadows’; illusions upon illusions. Can the critical analysis of a memoir be regarded in the same way as a good illusion? Though we know we are being deceived by ‘illusions’ we nevertheless admire the ingenuity of their presentation.

When it comes to motive, Sarah Bakewell says of Montaigne, ‘He wanted to know how to live a good life – meaning a correct or honourable life, but also a fully human, satisfying, flourishing one’ (2011: 4). My memoir takes up this theme, with how to live being the emphasis rather than how I used to live. I review the past in the hope of suggesting a preview of how things might be for me in the future. Can the process of going back establish a way of going forward? Mine is a ‘re-boot’ memoir; a chance to re-experience with the benefit of hindsight, in the hope that what went before may serve whatever is left to come.

For most of my adult life I have moved at speed with my head down, mistaking the passing blur at my feet for a useful flurry of activity. Now I wish if not to put the brakes on, then at least to look up once in a while and shoot the breeze with anyone whose eye I can catch. It is time for a dialogue with someone other than my deluded self. I am ready to participate in the world; whether or not the world will let me depends on how much it believes I am sincere. The question is can I run deep, or at least deeper, as well as run fast? Is it enough, though, to be sincere? Bruss says, 'Sincerity can offer no guarantee, since it is a creation of will and appearance, and may be as easily feigned or as much a chimera as anything else' (1976: 128). Jean Starobinski shares Bruss's view: '[D]espite the vow of sincerity, the 'content' of the narrative can be lost, can disappear into fiction' (1980: 75). However a reader judges sincerity and the veracity of content, one hopes they come to Georges Gusdorf's conclusion: '[T]he truth of facts is subordinate to the truth of the man' (1980: 43). No matter what conclusion I hope for, it is, nevertheless, disconcerting to accept how little control I might have over the identifying and presenting of truth.

What emerges is that 'the truth of the man' or 'being true to life' is not the same thing as recording accurate times, dates, locations or sequences of events. These are the areas where fiction is acceptable; the facts that are 'subordinate'. What, then, is the nature of that truth which does not allow for fiction? Where can it be found? Can it be observed in an individual when the individual is in isolation? Is it possible for an autobiographer to disclose truth without placing it into the context of our interactions with others? How is truth evidenced if not in action?

In respect of action, I looked at other entertaining, non-fiction writers like Eric Newby and George Plimpton, but they did not write memoir so much as record one-off immersive experiences. While I admired their writing, I knew I did not possess the kind of temperament that could endure the hardship of Newby's *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* (1981), or the prolonged de-camp from home of Plimpton's *Paper Lion* (2009). There was something of the immersive experience, however, that I did find appealing, or rather necessary. The idea of challenging myself in some small way, of subtly unsettling my usual footing, felt synonymous with an attempt at self-discovery. One needs to push and shove oneself to discover parameters. I realised my research would not be a simple question of exploring ways and means of relating past events, but would also demand the acquiring of new experiences: performance-based research. I had to 'do' and 'be' as well as remember having 'done' and 'been'. Montaigne says, 'Learned we may be with another man's learning: we can only be wise with wisdom of our own' (2003: 155). That 'wisdom of our own' comes, I believe, from making contact with others. The need to exchange histories is a view endorsed by Katherine Nelson: 'Sharing memories with others is in fact a prime social activity' (1988: 266-67). The more sociable I can be, therefore, the better chance I have of revealing something, anything, that might take others and me by surprise. Of course, *how* one engages in that social enterprise is another matter. Aristotle says, 'Astonishment gives pleasure, evidence of this is the fact that everyone exaggerates when passing on news, on the assumption that they are giving pleasure' (1996: 41). This brings us back to the key question: how creative can one be in creative non-fiction before the integrity of the non-fiction is lost? When does sociable exaggeration become alienating invention? For me

the significance of Aristotle's sentence lies in the words 'news' and 'pleasure'. The quality of my pleasure and any 'astonishment' that I elicit is determined by how real the news is that I exaggerate. The more real the news, the more triumph I take from the laughter. For this reason I was never tempted to manufacture incidents. That would be cheating. There would be no 'pleasure' in it for me. I have told you everything exactly in accordance with the way it appeared in my memory at the time of its summoning. I have written in the belief that everything happened in the way I say it did, though I admit in some cases I have made a director's cut, returning to the original release years after the event, editing and retouching, but always in the spirit of the first version. Even someone of Dunne's scrupulous integrity admits, 'I may have been guilty of polishing up a quote occasionally, if it makes the story better or funnier' (Interview: 17/4/15). This amendment to Dunne's earlier declaration that the only fiction he introduced into a piece was to protect someone's identity (which I had also taken as my own starting point), felt like a welcome piece of licence.

'Editing' and 'retouching' are necessary to carve story-sized chunks out of a life of random incidents. 'Ends and origins are not inherent in the world. It is you, not the world, who calls the shots in this respect' (Eagleton2014: 105). And it is in this respect, that of mini-narrative, where I suspect most autobiographers would confess to factual indiscretions – heightening their scene setting, compacting time frames, punching up a resolve – all to satisfy a reader's expectations of beginnings, middles and ends.

The director reference is appropriate given the nature of my second creative voice on this project, that of song-writing. The songs are the equivalent of a film score; they are the musical means by which I say, 'Let me put it another way.' By bringing my life

into focus via two creative perspectives, my aim is to create the illusion of a 3D image – a deeper representation of my life than the prose alone might be capable of. Or, at least, that my manipulation of prose is capable of. My feelings often surface more instinctively in a song, and if I am lucky they betray their source long enough for me to access them for the purpose of writing prose.

Whenever I write prose I feel predisposed to humour, but whenever I pick up a guitar I simply feel. The unconscious reveals itself through the relaxed repetition of placing my fingers on the strings. John Keats describes his experience of a similar sensation as the imaginative mind's 'silent Working coming continually on the spirit with a fine suddenness' (2009: 36). Revelation comes to the fore more readily in my music and so adds another mood or viewpoint to supplement that of the writing. The combination of text and songs is an effective way of drawing me deeper into an understanding of my own creative interior.

In his collection of interviews with memoirists, Zinsser notes that most of them 'wrestled' with 'the problem of what to put in and what to leave out' (1998: 16). What might be significant? What will be of interest? What will represent the author in the way they most wish to be represented? This is the advantage of using an external device, such as the troubadour song categories. In delegating the decision-making to a device, I was left feeling as though I were in the hands of a therapist. I was nudged towards areas of my life that I might otherwise have avoided. If I was looking for an honest voice then it was most likely to come from relinquishing a degree of control over the questions asked of myself. To take full responsibility for setting the questions ran the risk of

leading to stage-managed answers that would present the David Tomlinson I am familiar with instead of the David Tomlinson previously undisclosed.

The first problem for me was learning how to exercise Dunne's control over the 'wise-cracking retrospective voice'. How much creative after-the-event manipulation is enough to validate a scene's presence in a memoir? In short, how much staging can it stand before it loses credibility? In my early pieces I swapped feelings for gags, and was checked repeatedly by my supervisor with the question 'Is that how you really felt at the time?' The cutting out of gags jarred. I had been a TV sketch writer where the working practice was to stuff more gags in. But then there was a huge difference between the subject matter of my sketches and the events of my life.

What I admire in Dunne's memoir is that he maintains a sense of believability throughout, no matter how extreme the people he presents or the times he records. 'Was it all true? Amazingly, it was; a unique combination of soggy sentimentality and hard-eyed cynicism that soaked into every second and every sentence' (Dunne 2010:6). I also detect a sense of accountability in Dunne's writing, an awareness that too many other colleagues shared those times and that to lie about them would be unacceptable to the fraternity; it would dishonour their profession. Any liberties with facts are tongue-in-cheek, and only presented with the common consent of those involved and who 'prefer the legend to the truth' (Dunne 2010: 97).

Dunne's creativity is in his use of language – evocative details and strong, simple imagery – rather than in the use of manufactured events. This is how Dunne describes his first encounter with the poet Basil Bunting:

And who was that funny old guy at the bottom of the subs' table? A shabby, baggy figure, with NHS pebble-specs barely visible through an explosion of greying hair, bushy eyebrows and overgrown moustache, so he looked like a Morris Minor bursting through a hedge (2010: 46).

Dunne is just as deft in setting a scene: 'Among the tea-ringed desks, the ripped lino, the curling files and the jammed Underwoods, the office style was a bit Baden-Powell: hard work, clean living' (2010: 16). Dunne's voice entertains while retaining our trust. He knows how to deal with 'hard emotions' when he needs to – his style does not duck the punches, it rolls with them. The fight is real, but he survives, and the bell that saves him each time is a self-deprecating smile. It is an honest persona.

I did not realise it until I began writing, but the quest for an honest persona had been with me all my life. In my opening chapter, "I Can Hear Voices", it is clear I had been running through possible identities since I was a boy and that the desire to write perhaps came from the desire to create a character for myself which I would be happy with. That night in Chelmsford, after dropping out from a law degree, 'I was happy because at the age of nineteen I had discovered something important. I knew who I was.' I had discovered no such thing, of course. It was merely a momentary refuge, a set of false papers on which to travel for a while so I could escape from jurisprudence. All I really knew at nineteen was what I was not. I was not a lawyer.

Writing about myself at that age was difficult; to confront so much optimism and certainty in someone thirty-five years my junior was sad. I hardly dared break the news to myself that I never did become a pop star. Straight away, there it was, the temptation to dodge the truth. The American humorist James Thurber says:

Human dignity, the humorist believes, is not only silly but a little sad. So are dreams and conventions and illusions. The fine brave fragile stuff that men live by. They look so swell, and go to pieces so easily (1991: 218).

It sometimes feels as though I have spent a lifetime going ‘to pieces so easily’.

How to present the absurdity of my youthful assurance was not as big a problem as how to present other people. In the chapter “I Can Hear Voices” I called Owen a ‘turgid Taff’. Was it fair to express that opinion? Did I have the right to put it in print? I decided that yes, I did. If not, then my writing was likely to become just as turgid as Owen’s conversation.

The problem became more acute when I wrote about Elena and her mum, Sofia, in the chapter “Skimming Stones”. Elena feared ‘niggers’ and hated ‘faggots’. Sofia’s Catholicism was cruel and reeked of holy relics. And yet Elena loved me, and her mum was generous enough to make it possible for Elena and me to be together. I have evidence of Elena’s prejudice in the letters that she wrote to me. I have a reliable witness to Sofia’s Inquisitorial bullying of a priest, but just because something is true does it give me the right to tell it? Is the truth the only justification one ever needs? And in this case the truths were thirty years old. Elena and Sofia may have changed considerably since then.

This crisis of conscience led to an unpleasant truth of another kind: I was more selfish than I realised. I was prepared to write the story, despite my reservations. I also discovered, however, with some relief, that there were limits to how creative I was prepared to be in the telling of it. I could not knowingly misrepresent Elena and Sofia in order to better represent myself. Falsifying them would only corrupt the writing. I would learn nothing of myself that way. On the other hand, the more I obsessed about

learning something, the more elusive the something became. I drove to France to commune with the troubadours and Montaigne. I expected visions and revelations – truths galore. What I found was a relaxed attitude towards lunch-breaks and an addictive sweet called canelé. I was looking for truths that came with a blast of fanfare trumpets, or the peal of cathedral bells. It was the folly I had been guilty of all my life. I over-idealised; lived by the influence of film and TV scripts. I was the model of Cartesian separation: ‘[I]t is certain that I am really distinct from my body’ (Descartes 2003: 62). My body walked and talked in the here and now, while my mind operated in a place once removed. Julia and I talked about this dislocation outside the 9th Duke of Aquitaine’s Palace in Poitiers:

“You keep missing the moments; collecting them to analyse later, instead of feeling them when they happen. You’re too detached.”
 I think about this.
 “What are you feeling now?” Julia says.
 “I’m thinking about it.”
 (Extract from the chapter “Until You”)

I had a lot of work to do. My problem was not so much *how* to live as *when* to live. If I could not connect to moments as they happened, then I was unlikely ever to give a good account of them on paper.

In the first draft of “Skimming Stones” I struggled to connect with the moment even after the event. In the original draft I did not introduce Elena until page nine. It was a distressing period in my life, which, for all my criticism of Elena and Sofia, I knew I was responsible for. I had swollen a single interesting encounter into a fateful fairytale union, inflating the relationship with terms of reference like ‘destined’ and

‘meant to be’. If Elena had not been an American living in California, we would probably have had no more than a couple of dates before going our separate ways.

I had assumed that after writing about my dad in the chapter “Good Old John Tom”, I would also be able to write about Elena. I was wrong. They were too different kinds of intimacies, posing two different types of problem. To have feelings is not a straightforward matter. I had hoped it would be a case of one size fits all. Not so. All my creative instincts are comedic, but the death of my father was not funny and neither was jilting Elena. How to use my ‘true’ voice and yet also be ‘true’ to a serious moment? In my father’s case, writing a song was the key. I think far less when I am writing a song. The song “Good Old John Tom” was a natural outpouring, and the feelings fell into harmony with one another of their own accord.

There is an uninhibited speed to song-writing that puts me in mind of Thurber’s description of his cartoons ‘catching fugitive moods just barely in time’ (1991:148). The song about my dad gave me the confidence I needed to attempt doing something similar in prose, and inspired the whole idea for a memoir accompanied by songs. It was the first time I realised the distinct difference between the two mediums of prose and song and how I might only ever develop a legitimate creative honesty of my own by combining the two. It also became obvious that the kind of voice I was interested in relied heavily on sticking close to the truth, and therefore the extent of my creativity would always be bound by that. What mattered to me was that writing should not be just a provocative agent; it should also be a connective agent. Whatever feelings I aroused in others had to have been aroused in me first, otherwise I was perpetrating a sham.

My Dad had a lovely sense of humour and to relate time spent with him was uplifting. When he was dying, the feeling I had to contend with was that of devastating loss. To remember that time was to risk an acute resurgence of the feeling. If I wished to go deeper with my writing, it was a risk I had to take. My memories of Elena did not have the same number of lighter moments to compensate for the hurt, and the feelings they evoked, though not as painful as the loss of my dad, were uglier, laden with guilt and shame. I thought writing about Dad would be the hardest test, but in fact it was writing about Elena, which was why, in my first draft of the chapter, I could not face her until page nine.

How to apply one's creativity to other people made the most demands on my conscience throughout the memoir. To misrepresent someone is an act of betrayal. I have to leave the room whenever there is an adultery scene on television. I cannot cope with the duplicity. This degree of undue respect led to my voice dropping out altogether during the first draft of the chapter on the war veteran David Slack ("Blue Sky"). I was frightened to death of appearing irreverent in any way. Despite the remarkable nature of David's story, I had failed to connect it to my own. As a result, the work was descriptive and honourable, but stood in heroic isolation amongst the other chapters. The creative work that it required was, once again, a matter of acknowledging and expressing my own emotional responses. In the re-written chapters I did not just record David's story, but also drew comparisons between his story and mine, between the choices we were faced with in our youth and what those choices revealed in terms of character. For example, at the age of seventeen David signed up to fight a war. At the age of seventeen I signed up to perform in the Sixth Form College Review.

My relationship with David led to something of a breakthrough. I was asked to deliver the eulogy at his funeral and had to keep pausing to regain control of my voice. I knew more about David's war years than anyone else at the funeral, and in my struggle to get them down on paper and to get them down right, I had worried away at myself until I was raw. Make them see, I thought. Make sure they understand. To be responsible for another man's reputation is sobering. Not so sobering that I refrained from cracking a few gags, but sobering enough to bring me, erupting, to a state of proportion.

The difficulty I had in delivering David's eulogy was not all about his death, some of it felt like the crying of a newborn baby after its welcome-to-the-world smack on the bottom. David Tomlinson, the writer with feelings, had arrived at last. Out in the congregation, Julia was also in tears. I was hundreds of miles and thousands of words away from the 9th Duke of Aquitaine's palace in Poitiers.

At the drinks do afterwards I had several requests for copies of the eulogy and the finished chapter. Family and friends added stories of David to my research and I learned that he had not been entirely honest during our conversations. *I was not the only one who struggled with his feelings.* Contrary to what David told me, he had suffered nightmares long after the war, and he had pursued daredevil activities such as black-run skiing to recreate the adrenalin rush of his flying days. I chatted with the various guests and I enjoyed it. Mind and body were together in the here and now, connecting with people, participating in the world. And this much I knew: I had written myself there.

The 'creative' in creative non-fiction can be misleading. The word is suggestive of fiction and makes 'creative non-fiction' something of a non-sequitur, and therefore one

can, if one wishes, be creative with the word creative. My use of the word does not extend to making things up from scratch. Whatever truth I am looking for is to be found in what I have experienced and not in what I can imagine experiencing. My use of creativity is limited to the heightening or underscoring of a scene. I present what I remember, and if I am guilty of touching it up (as I confessed earlier), then the touching up always starts in memory, not fantasy.

The work of the humorist David Sedaris fuels the debate about the boundaries between fact and fiction. David Sedaris's first book, *Barrel Fever* (1994), clearly demarcated the difference between 'stories' and 'essays'. *Naked* (2006), a subsequent book, was supposedly all memoir, although he later described the stories as only 'realish'. When asked about the outright lying of people like James Frey, Sedaris says, 'I can't understand the self-righteousness that goes along with that anger' (Knight 2007: 80). If he were to discover Frank McCourt had lied, he says, '[I]t wouldn't change my feelings about the book at all. I think autobiography is the last place you'd look for truth' (Knight 2007: 80). Which begs the question, does Sedaris mean historical truth? or poetic truth? Does he share Aristotle's view that art can often elucidate truths in a more powerful way than real life? '[I]f the objection is that something is not true, perhaps it is as it ought to be' (Aristotle 1996: 43). It is a view shared by many contemporary authors. In an interview with the novelist Julian Barnes he told me, 'I think truths of fiction are "truer" than from other sources' (Interview: 14/11/13).

I asked Sedaris if he could clarify what he had meant in his conversation with Knight:

When I said it's the last place you should look for truth I meant that when you're writing about yourself, you're controlling the way that a reader will perceive you. You're naturally making yourself smarter or dumber or more humble. You're not yourself, you're the character of yourself (Interview: 27/6/15).

Is the truth, I wonder, any easier for the non-humorist memoirist to discover? If he does not have the pitfalls of cheap gags to negotiate can we better trust his writing? Nabokov begins his memoir with, 'The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness' (2000: 5). Is Nabokov's poetic language the most direct way of conveying truth? Does it speak of honesty as much as it does of artistry? A plainer speaker like Hemingway constantly advised himself to write the 'truest sentence that you know' (Hemingway 2000: 12). To which extreme should I look for guidance? Nabokov? No. I possess just enough intellect to grasp that I share none of his. Nor his imagination. I had not, for example, 'learned numbers and speech more or less simultaneously at a very early date' (Nabokov, 2000: 6), and I could not say that at the age of four 'I [saw] my diminutive self as celebrating [...] the birth of sentient life' (2000: 7). Hemingway, as a writing guide, is more confusing. When he says write the 'truest sentence that you know', does he mean the simplest? If not, then he fails to ever define his notion of 'truest'. And even if one takes it as *write the 'simplest' sentence*, there are times when his effort to do so sounds self-conscious and clumsy. Note the breathless length of the following sentence with its jarring use of the verb 'make' and the repetition of 'so' and 'and': 'Some days it went so well that you could make the country so that you could walk into it through the timber to come out into the clearing and work up onto the high ground and see the hills beyond the arm of the lake.' Nevertheless, I decided to follow Hemingway's advice

(though not his execution of it) on the assumption that we shared the quest for an honest voice. Hemingway made sure we knew about his obsession with truth through a neatly ‘remembered’ piece of thirty-year-old dialogue he had had with his wife in Paris:

Yes, Tatie [Hemingway], and you and Chink always talking about how to make things true, writing them, and put them rightly and not describe. I remember everything. I remember the lights and textures and the shapes you argued about (2000: 47).

The information is too precise for me to believe that Hemingway remembered his wife remembering such things. And even if he did, any truth relating to ‘lights’ and ‘textures’ and ‘shapes’ remains nebulous. Hemingway also made great play of his ‘fight against poverty’ in Paris, and wondered if being ‘belly empty, hollow-hungry’ (2000: 59) might help his art. Not everyone believed he ever suffered in this way:

[C]ritics have long suspected that *A Moveable Feast* teeters somewhere between a self-serving nostalgia (only the fairly well off – as Hemingway surely was during the Twenties – fabricate romantic sagas of bohemian deprivation) and a mean-spirited effort to settle old scores with ghosts of the past like F. Scott Fitzgerald or Ford Madox Ford (Pinsker 1992: 470).

Whatever Hemingway’s notion is of the truth it does not appear to encompass much in the way of self-doubt or self-mockery, even though he took his own life. Weakness and fallibility is evident only in the ‘worthless characters’ (Hemingway 2000: 131) around him. Ford Madox Ford is a ‘heavy, wheezing, ignoble presence’ (2000: 73). Fitzgerald is an ill-informed hypochondriac who, when he first met Hemingway, ‘did not stop talking’ about Hemingway’s writing and ‘how great it was’ (2000: 131). The extent to which Hemingway presents himself as an astute appraiser feels equally as unbalanced as the writing of an inveterate joker. The joker avoids feelings; the so called astute

appraiser denies poor judgement. Neither character is complete. There is no sense with Hemingway that he ever looked back at his life and blushed, whereas my cheeks are permanently rosy.

George Orwell, another ‘serious’ writer, also expected the reader to accept huge conceits. In *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1986: 8-12), chapter II has a five page monologue from a man called Charlie. The monologue is not a transcription, so those five pages must be the product of substantial Orwellian creativity.

Which of the memoirists then – the serious literary types or the humorists – are the most creative in their creative non-fiction? Hemingway, despite his undoubted influence on contemporary writing, left critics unconvinced by the integrity of his memoirs, and David Sedaris is deliberately oblique when it comes to his. Alex Heard says, ‘I do think Sedaris exaggerates too much for a writer using the non-fiction label’ (2007: 2).

For Kylie Cardell and Victoria Kuttainen the blurring of genres is not a problem. They regard it as a necessary device: ‘Sedaris refuses the categories of fiction and non-fiction, not for the sake of “bankability”, but rather because Sedaris is interested in a higher kind of truth’ (2012: 102). When I asked Sedaris to comment on this quotation, he said, ‘I never read anything about myself so have no idea what people mean when they say I’m looking for a higher kind of truth’ (Interview:27/6/15). Sedaris takes a far less ethereal view on truth than that which Cardell and Kuttainen ascribe to him:

The stories I have in *The New Yorker* are all fact checked, every word. If I say it was sunny on March 20, 2005, they look at the weather report. They interview all the characters. So factually, I think I’m covered (Sedaris, Interview: 27/6/15).

This appears to contradict Sedaris's earlier comment that 'autobiography is the last place you'd look for truth', unless one makes a distinction between the kind of factual truths stated above and the 'higher truth' to which Cardell and Kuttainen refer. Cardell and Kuttainen go on to say of Sedaris:

His Horatian satire (applied to others) and his more caustic Juvenalian satire (applied to himself) reveals this inclination to lay bare hypocrisy, and it is a tactic that requires a humorous rhetoric that shifts between the real and the fictional to do so (2012: 109).

I think perhaps there is something of the actor in Sedaris as well as the writer. Because Sedaris performs his work, he becomes the 'I' character of whatever he is reading. For a moment there is no distinction for him between the 'I' persona of memory and the 'I' persona of invention. Sedaris lets other people worry about the truth of his work, and that in itself is probably as much truth as we need to know about Sedaris. He claims not to pursue truth and yet people recognise it in his work. Perhaps the more one strives for it, the more one pushes it away. Maybe it is as simple as following the old adage of 'just be yourself'.

In answer to this chapter's question – *How creative can one be with creative non-fiction before it becomes more fiction than non-fiction?* – the short and obvious answer is as creative as you like, as long as you do not get caught out. It is a matter for each autobiographer's conscience. What does my conscience dictate? It demands that I make choices that are about self-discovery, not self-promotion. The benchmark I use in terms of factual truth is to ask whether or not the incidents I describe would be recognised by those who played a part in them? I only write scenes that could stand the corroboration of witnesses. If I adhere as much as possible to the factual truth, then the events and

situations I describe are more likely to be recognisable to the reader and therefore also more likely to convey truths about people as much as they do truths about specific circumstances. My truth, I have decided, is in applying the above as a guiding principle. However I emerge from the scenes that I relate, and whatever readers think of me, whether I concur with their conclusions or not, will feel as close to *my* truth as I can get.

My creativity embraces the techniques of writing fiction, such as framing narrative and smartening up dialogue, but it is not *applied* to fiction. To write fictional non-fiction is to conceal, whereas my aim is to expose, not to the point of irradiating myself to a martyred cinder, but enough to let in the sunlight and see what blossoms; with any luck, ‘a fully human, satisfying, flourishing’ life (Bakewell 2010: 4).

Chapter Two

An examination of the *everyman* voice: connecting the “I” of the narrator to the “I” of the reader.

In the previous chapter I determined where my boundary lay between fiction and non-fiction. I can accept exaggeration in my work, but not fabrication. Truth might be present in fiction; truth about the author might not be. In this chapter I want to look at why authorial truth is important to me. What are the benefits of authorial exposure? If we accept that personal relationships grow deeper the more revealing we are prepared to be, then perhaps the same is true of the relationship between narrator and reader, and between the narrator and all those people he encounters during the collection of his experiences.

My desire to deepen relationships is like the desire to join a club of which I have only just heard it is cool to be a member. In this case the club is the world at large. These pages and these songs are my effort to get on board and to demonstrate an attitude that takes one from the solitary to the sociable, which is perhaps most directly expressed in the chapters and songs “Fellow Traveller” and “Catch That Train”.

Alain de Botton says of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, ‘Far from a memoir tracing the passage of a more lyrical age, it was a practical, universally applicable story about how to stop wasting, and begin appreciating one’s life’ (1998: 8). My feelings exactly. So perhaps I should start by asking how I become a fellow traveller. First of all,

I have to persuade the readers that I am indeed a ‘fellow’ like them. This is not the motivation of every memoirist. Rousseau says:

I feel my heart and I know men. I am not made like any that I have seen; I venture to believe that I was not made like any that exist. If I am not more deserving, at least I am different (2000: 5).

According to Sarah Bakewell, ‘Montaigne, by contrast, saw himself as a thoroughly ordinary man in every respect [...]. That is the whole point of the *Essays*. If no one could recognise themselves in him, why would anyone read him?’ (2011: 193).

The Romantics recognised the everyman appeal of Montaigne’s voice and strove to emulate something of it in their own work. According to Bakewell it was their enthusiasm that helped revive interest in Montaigne’s writing: ‘Only with the coming of Romanticism was Montaigne’s openness about himself not merely appreciated, but loved’ (2011:223). Montaigne says of his essays, ‘Here I want to be seen in my simple, natural, everyday fashion without striving or artifice’ (2003: xiii). In his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth echoed Montaigne’s desire to present himself in ‘everyday fashion’:

I have proposed to myself to imitate, and, as far as is possible, to adopt the very language of men...I have wished to keep my Reader in the company of flesh and blood, persuaded that by so doing I shall interest him (2013: 100).

Wordsworth’s use of the phrase ‘flesh and blood’ may well have been inspired by Montaigne’s description of his own writing as “‘essays” in flesh and blood’ (Montaigne 2003: 951). Percy Bysshe Shelley was of the same mind as both Montaigne and Wordsworth and stated the importance of seeking out what was common amongst his fellows: ‘A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he

must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own' (2015: 41).

'Flesh and blood' and 'pains and pleasures' became two of the controlling phrases for my creative writing. I applied the notion of 'flesh and blood' not just to people and behaviours, but also to environments in order to enrich atmospheres and make places feel as real as the people in them. For example, my description of the hospital where my father lay dying: 'I breathed in. The air was a fuggy mix of germ-ridden gloom and terminal decay, scented with the forlorn hope of antiseptic' (Good Old John Tom: 70).

When it came to 'pains and pleasures' I first asked whether or not the circumstances of my 'pains and pleasures' were recognisable, and then second, I asked whether or not my reactions were also recognisable. For example, I wrote about the 'pain' of getting into trouble with a boss: 'I entered Paul's office in a reverential sweat, hardly able to breathe. His reputation took up all the air' (Catch That Train: 50), and I wrote about the 'pleasure' of young lovers meeting for the first time – in my case, the Californian girl Elena: 'She walked (or should I say surfed) in soft focus slow-motion' and as we talked she 'became even more glamorous' (Skimming Stones: 143). I believe both of these scenarios are familiar, as is my anxiety in the first encounter and my thrill in the second. Also, the inclusion of active, participatory research was crucial in this 'flesh and blood' and 'pains and pleasures' respect, because it infused life into the memoir and was my way of showing research development in progress.

Colin Dunne concurs with the views of Montaigne and the Romantics, although he is more succinct in telling us how he regards himself in relationship to the 'many others'. He says, 'Okay, I know I'm not unique' (2010: 38). 'I'm not unique.' This is

the mantra I repeat before writing. I look for the common aspect of my experience. The way I present it might be original, but the experience itself must be recognisable, and so must the emotional responses. My memoirs are not of a man who has climbed Everest without oxygen, or saved many a small child from a burning building. I am not marked out by a single astonishing attribute, other than the realisation that my so called unique existence up until now has run in exact parallel to everyone else's. I was not alone in youthful folly, or in having aspirations; not alone in suffering career disappointment and sexual embarrassment and romantic failure; and not alone in laughter and the occasional moments of getting lucky.

I was not – am not – alone. Not alone, and not unique. My acceptance of this was a key moment for me as a writer, and was identified during a mentoring session. It was my professor who suggested that I look for how I am the same as other people, not how I am different. As well as changing my approach to writing, it changed my approach to life. I stopped bemoaning 'difference' and started celebrating 'same'. The less different I realise myself to be, the more conversations I have. I talk to strangers in shops, in restaurants, on public transport. I have become 'chatty'. According to Julia there is a better word for it: Relational. Paul John Eakin, Professor Emeritus at Indiana University and one of the leading academic authorities on autobiographical discourse, claims that '*all* identity is relational', and stresses 'the self is defined by – and lives in terms of – its relations with others' (1999: 43).

This idea of inter-connected lives brings us back to the troubadours. Theirs are 'relational' voices because they write about the affairs of man as opposed to those of God or mythological characters. Although they are most readily associated with courtly

love, they also write about sex, and explicitly so, too – they refer to it as the ‘law of the cunt’ (*leis de con*). Troubadour voices cover satirical songs, political songs, dance songs, riddle songs, debate songs, songs about shepherd girls, songs about the things troubadours like or the things troubadours don’t like, and laments for patrons or friends. All of these categories are about feelings and opinions that are based in the secular world. The troubadours are people writing about people. They are being relational.

In the case of the troubadours their relationship with the audience was more intimate than a pop star’s relationship is today. One could only hear a troubadour’s music ‘live’. Today’s audiences can hear a singer-songwriter’s work second-hand through digital recordings. The direct accountability of a troubadour to his audience kept his work honest. Talent went further than hype. In my interview with singer-songwriter Neil Innes he said, ‘Social Media is all about people farming. About collecting as many ‘followers’ or ‘likes’ as possible. It’s not about the truth’ (Interview: 5/3/14). In his song “One of those People” he sings ‘I don’t want no smartarse media clown wising me up and then dumbing me down.’ Innes is one of the few singer-songwriters around today who keeps the old troubadour tradition alive, because he writes songs that connect him with his environment, both social and political, and he plays them on a single instrument. Innes recognises the importance of being ‘real’:

Woody Guthrie – he was real. The tradition was still alive then. Folk singers going round the honkytonks during the depression writing songs about people. That was at the death throes of the troubadour tradition. Somebody with enough originality of thought who could put it in simple terms. Writing a simple song that people could understand (Interview: 5/3/14).

When it comes to commenting on human relations, it is fair to say that sex figures as prominently as love, even for the chivalrous troubadour. Lindsey Diggelmann says, ‘[T]he poet’s quest is as much for bodily as it is for spiritual satisfaction’ (2005: 6).

According to Diggelmann’s assessment of Bertran de Born’s work, there is

a continuous tension in Bertran’s lyric between the high-minded and the humorous, between the physical and the spiritual, between the pining heart of the poet as courtly lover and the ironic, winking eye of the poet as literary creator (2005: 16).

Like Woody Guthrie, Bertran knew how to ‘keep it real’.

The songs that existed pre-troubadour era advocated virtues that encouraged subservience to the church or the feudal lords. Aubrey Burl says, ‘It was manly courage, loyalty, death before cowardice that they praised. There was little trivial or frivolous in the poetry’ (2008: 20). The troubadours introduced humanity to their songs; they espoused high ideals, such as spiritual love and gallantry, and spoke out against moral hypocrisy and religious intolerance, but they also accepted our capacity for low carnal urges. They presented weakness as well as virtue; they lightened up the world of song and let in the laughter. According to Burl, ‘A man like Guilhem would delight in taking over a religious form and turning it to bawdy use’ (2008: 48). Guilhem writes of a man who pretends to be dumb in order to sleep with a lot of sex-starved nuns. It was important that he masquerade as dumb so the nuns would think him incapable of broadcasting their insatiable indiscretions:

I fucked them, I precisely state,
A hundred times, plus eighty-eight.
I thought I’d split my loins, the rate
Became excessive (Burl 2008: 57).

In my opening chapter, “I Can Hear Voices”, I talk about Owen’s ‘dick’. I hesitated at first. Would that be deemed too coarse? Would it diminish the reception of the text? It was a prudish qualm compared to the explicit confidence of Guilhem:

Comrades, of many cunts I’ve been denied,
and I must sing about my injured pride,
but I don’t want the mishaps gossiped far and wide (Burl 2008: 51).

Owen’s dick stayed in. No word play intended. But despite Guilhem’s example, I did not feel inclined to match his level of graphic detail.

My first draft of the chapter “Skimming Stones” made no mention of my sex life with Elena. For a chapter on passionate love it was a noticeable absence. I confess it was an act of avoidance rather than tactful omission. I did not know how to write about myself naked, in any sense of the word. In Guilhem’s *Vida* (biography) he was described as ‘one of the greatest deceivers of ladies’ and we are told he ‘long time went through the world beguiling ladies’ (Mahn 2006: 17-18). The troubadours’ *Vidas*, written some fifty to a hundred years after their lives, are often humorous exaggerations based on the troubadours’ boastful, tongue-in-cheek claims made in their songs.

Guilhem was amongst the most mischievous:

My name is ‘Lord of Love’, bed’s troubadour.
A woman after my night of teaching Cupid’s ways
Next day implores, entreats for more (Burl 2008: 33).

The playfulness associated with the troubadours was my cue for going back to the bedroom with Elena (in the chapter, not in life). Sex needed to be present in my story,

but it did not need to be taken too seriously – the waterbed made that impossible, anyway. Next day Elena did not entreat for more. She did, however, make me hash browns for breakfast and let me watch *Happy Days* in bed. I do not know how satisfied Elena was, but I could not have eaten another hash brown.

When I chose the troubadour song categories as the subject matter for my chapters, it gave me a head start in trying to find that everyman voice, because the troubadour songs deal with everyman issues: sex, love, loyalty, disappointment, death, war, morality, politics, etc. And wherever I was short on experience of a song category, such as dancing, then I felt encouraged to go out and get some – all in the spirit of participation; the desire to get involved, connect, go deeper, to experience ‘pains and pleasures’. A lot of my research was ‘active’ like this. Reading widely triggered analytical thought, but action gave me something to apply those thoughts to other than memory. It brought self-analysis into a more dynamic present. I had to travel to France before I understood what it was that I had gone there searching for. I had been afraid to busk in the streets, unsure of my rationale. I could have examined the theories behind that hesitation for a lifetime and never come to any satisfactory conclusion. It was not until I came across a young man in the street doing what I had failed to do that I discovered some truth:

The young man is singing like his life depends on it. He’s in combat; pushing and testing; asking of himself, and in his answer I know him better. He is a man of *moment*, not of *retrospect*. There is blood in his veins. At last, the elusive ‘it’ identified. And so, in the chapters that follow, I am not just writing autobiographical anecdotes and songs – I am checking myself for a pulse (“Until You” 40).

My memoir is not just about remembering; it is also about plugging holes. When I reflect, I ask what it is that I missed. What is it that I need to do in future that will help de-isolate my attitude? I need to live actively, seek out experience, talk to people and empathise with them. I need to add other people's experiences to mine. With this in mind, I drove to France to footstep Montaigne and the troubadours, joined a modern dance class, and conducted a number of interviews to collect stories. Mine is a memoir that occasionally provokes me into action. It has a live aspect to it and is as much about my life now as it is about my life then. I am not just dusting off the past but polishing up the present, preparing myself for a more interactive future.

It took a lot of courage to join Margie's dance class. I was the only male, taller than anyone else by a foot and almost twenty years younger. There was nothing discreet about my membership, nowhere to hide my two left feet and flapping arms. It was a challenge to my dignity. But I learned that a preoccupation with dignity prevents us from stepping out – into life as well as onto the dance floor. My elderly dance colleagues hurled themselves about regardless of body-shape and with only a passing consideration for rhythm. It was liberating for mind and body alike. Three bars into any song and we were members of a tribe cavorting around a campfire. It was elemental and communal. And because my new community was exclusively female, I had the bonus of developing an *everywoman* voice as well as an *everyman* voice. I do not know how exactly, but I was able to join in when the girls shared complaints about their husbands. I discovered an empathy with the opposite sex that I had not possessed as a younger man, and which, if I had possessed it, might have made a significant difference to episodes in my life such as the one with Elena and her mum.

To mix with people outside of my usual acquaintance is an informal means of broadening my emotional repertoire and does not take much in the way of forethought. But when contact with other people is only casual, then significant revelations of character are unlikely. It is, however, a much tougher prospect talking to someone when ‘revelations of character’ are the specific agenda. When I launched myself into the dance class, I thought what will be will be. When I sat down to interview Margie and David, a purely conversational approach did not yield the results I was after. My initial interviews with them elicited plenty of facts, but failed to draw out any significant emotional responses to what I assumed were key emotional markers for them. Their facts lacked feelings. I returned for further interviews with this in mind and discovered that both of them were either lacking in emotional responses, or not prepared to reveal them. Some of the problem was no doubt due to my inexperience as an interviewer. This troubled me until I remembered it was *my* memoir. The purpose was not to judge other people’s feelings, but to measure my feelings against theirs, even the lack of them. What could someone else’s story tell me about my own? In Margie I recognised the creative drive that enabled her to end relationships when they risked impeding that drive. I recognised the coldness and the calculation. I had made similar choices in my life, and like Margie I had missed out on having a family because of them. Margie had no regrets. I could not say the same of myself. After talking to David I realised how little I knew of my capacity for physical or moral courage. I felt ill-defined and knew I was unlikely to ever meet with the kind of life-threatening circumstances that would bring me into sharper focus. Taking an interest in other people is not just a simple courtesy, it is an education.

The lessons, however, are for me to learn, not for me to teach. Virginia Woolf says of Montaigne, ‘He refused to teach; he refused to preach; he kept on saying that he was just like other people’ (2003:59). I am ‘just like other people’ too – no smarter, and no more privileged with insight. This is the appeal of Montaigne for me – his lack of self-importance or dogmatic certainty. Woolf writes, “‘Perhaps’ is one of [Montaigne’s] favourite expressions; ‘perhaps’ and ‘I think’ and all those words which qualify the rash assumptions of human ignorance’ (2003: 63). Shelley, although more concerned about posterity than Montaigne, also stressed the importance of not moralising in one’s work: ‘A poet there would do ill to embody his own conceptions of right and wrong, which are usually those of his place and time, in his poetical creations, which participate in neither’ (2015:41). Julian Barnes describes his attitude towards a reader as follows:

It seems too authoritarian an approach to the reader to try to change people. My view of me and the reader is that we are side-by-side at a table in a café looking out on to the street and commenting, “What do you make of that?” (Interview: 14/11/13).

To imagine sitting ‘side-by-side’ with the reader is as good a way as any to help realise an everyman voice.

To recap: I am looking to bring the perspectives of author and reader closer together by developing an authentic everyman voice. The everyman will appeal to more readers, and the search for it necessitates leaving the house. I must refrain from preaching because to preach is to set myself apart, the antithesis of the everyman. The everyman does not speak *to* but as *one of*. To be the everyman writer one must not get ideas above one’s station. One must acknowledge the baser instincts and recognise the humour that exists in the disparity between our high ideals and our low behaviour,

between what we want and what we get: my earliest lustful urges found a displaced satisfaction in rolling down a moat at Pickering Castle; it took me an hour and a half to summon the nerve to put my arm around my first teenage date; the consummation of my distant love took place on a water bed and made me giggle inwardly as I thought *man overboard* at the climax.

I wonder if the affliction of the everyman is to be in a permanent state of disjunction between expectation and fulfilment; how I would like things to go, and how they actually go. This certainly appears to be the common theme with me. The everyman, as I mentioned earlier, does not climb Everest without oxygen, or save children from burning buildings. So what does an everyman writer write about? The answer, I think (the influence of Montaigne, there), is that life has something to say for itself even in the smallest of details. This is also view of Thurber: ‘Any humorist must be interested in trivia, in every little thing that occurs in a household’ (2007: 30).

Everyman writers write about what people know. They write stories about neighbours and parking problems and trouble with the boss. It is not big life, but it is significant life. When I connect my life to others I cease to be an inconsequential speck. I am part of a greater whole. Bill Bryson says of his autobiography, ‘So this is a book about not very much: about being small and getting larger slowly’ (2004: 53). While it may not seem like ‘very much’ to Bryson, millions of readers would disagree. Dunne, similarly, is not deterred by any absence of lofty material in his life. ‘[Y]ou can write about nothing if nothing is all you’ve got’ (Dunne 2010:40).

But if one can write about it, then is it really nothing? It was not nothing when Dunne, as a cub reporter, ‘sat through hours of parish councils where they discussed the

siting of litter-bins and the problem with dog mess' (2010: 15). Litter bins and dog mess are mundane, but we have all looked for a bin or trodden in dog mess at some point in our lives. We recognise these issues. Even when Dunne covers more exciting subject matter such as interviews with Brigitte Bardot, Kirk Douglas, and Mohammed Ali, his sense of frustration with his career is the kind of frustration many others have had with theirs: 'What I wanted to cover was the meaty stuff of which front pages were made: war, famine, pestilence and death – with the odd cricket match on a Sunday – but all I got were the chuckle stories' (2010: 30).

Dunne's expertise exists, whether he likes it or not, in being able to make something out of nothing. It is a gift that took him a long time to stop complaining about: 'The way my career was going, I was to journalism what George Formby was to the dramatic arts' (2010: 30). How many of us have moaned about our jobs? About our bosses not recognising our talents? Or about being in the wrong job altogether? Dunne is aware he is not alone in this and associates the 'I' of the reader ever more closely to his 'I' narration by addressing the reader directly: 'Tell me, dear reader, when you were making your way in life, did you follow a carefully researched route to the top? Or did you go just because it sounded like fun?' (2010: 34). This is very much in the rhetorical style of Henry Fielding, which helped a reader feel involved in the fortunes of the protagonist. Wolfgang Iser says of the technique:

For innovation itself to be a subject in a novel, the author needs direct cooperation from the person who is to perceive that innovation – namely, the reader. This is why it is hardly surprising that Fielding's novels, and those of the eighteenth century in general, are so full of direct addresses to the reader, which certainly have a rhetorical function, though this is by no means their only function (1978: 29).

An everyman voice, then, is that of a fellow traveller. It speaks of what most of us know. The ‘I’ of the narrator is recognised by the ‘I’ of the reader through the subject matter. But is the shared subject matter enough to make us respect or like the narrator? Is it enough to make us trust him? How stable is that voice? How much control do I really have over it? Eakin concludes:

Use of the first person – the ‘I’, autobiography’s dominant key – compounds our sense of being in full command of our knowledge of ourselves and stories; it not only conveniently bridges the gaps between who we were once and who we are today, but it tends as well to make our sense of self in any present moment seem more unified and organised than it possibly could be. But who is the “I” who speaks in self-narrations? And who is the “I” spoken about? (1999: ix).

Who indeed? I do not think I am the same writer that I was at the start of this project. The writing and the research have brought about change. But has it been real change or merely an act of discovering what was already there? A narrative arc of re-interpretation rather than one of reconstruction. Am I changed? Or am I revealed? Does it matter which? It is a dizzying semantic cycle. Roland Barthes describes it as follows: “‘What takes place’ in a narrative is from the referential (reality) point of view literally *nothing*; ‘what happens’ is language alone, the adventure of language, the unceasing celebration of its coming’ (1977: 124).

Has nothing taken place during my three years of writing and research? Has it all been only an adventure in language? I have experienced new feelings; I have acquired a new attitude. Are these neurological shifts subject to Barthes’s theory even before they have been put into words? *Is* there such a moment before the words? Is the moment that we are conscious of a feeling, of self, also the moment that we label it and bring it into

the realm of language? Eakin says, 'Is there, we should ask, a demonstrable difference between the psychological reality of selfhood and the linguistic articulation of that reality?' (1999: 4).

I began this memoir assuming any examination of the self would be beneficial. My model was Montaigne, and I came to a conclusion similar to his. The only difference is that I see an advantage in Montaigne's conclusion that he perhaps does not. Bakewell cites Montaigne as saying, '[T]he more I frequent myself and know myself, the more my deformity astonishes me, and the less I understand myself' (2011: 173). I, on the other hand, regard my deformity and lack of understanding as grist for the memoir mill, based on the assumption that deformity and ignorance are common. 'Our self is an object full of dissatisfaction: we can see nothing there but wretchedness and vanity' (Montaigne 2003: 1132).

The humorist David Sedaris appears to be aware, though perhaps unwittingly so, of the appeal that a flawed narrator has with a reader when he confesses, 'The character of me is a lot lazier than I am in real life. He's less capable, less generous, less interested in other people' (Interview: 27/6/15). Sedaris does not just acknowledge 'wretchedness' in himself, he creates it. The gap between the real him ('I'm pretty happy with the real me', he says) and the character of him is a deliberate one, although the gap narrows again when he says of his character, 'I don't feel boxed in by him. I feel I can push the confines, and express, for example, my interest in the macabre' (Interview: 27/6/15). Here it sounds as if Sedaris is saying he uses his character to express more of the real him, a contradiction that in itself implies a frailty of logic that most of us would recognise in ourselves.

The writing process for me has definitely identified my shortcomings, but I accept them, happy to agree with Anthony Paul Kerby: ‘As human beings we are quite simply fallible – prey to self-deception, misunderstanding, and to self-justifying discourse – with no neutral vantage point from which to make final judgments’ (1988:242). To make things even more complicated, we are not just one unreliable self, we are a whole catalogue of them. ‘[T]he self is dynamic, changing, and plural’ (Eakin 1999: 98). So, I am not just one narrator in need of definition, I am a collection of them:

The complexity and variation in approaches to life stories and self-definition reflect a growing sense, especially during the last half-century, that the individual self is fragmented rather than unitary and fixed; accordingly, one’s narration of self varies with circumstance, with discourse form and context, so that one’s self is seen less as an anchor and source of narration than a product of it; self becomes discourse (Peacock and Holland 1993: 368).

I started this chapter by wondering how I was to connect the ‘I’ of the author with the ‘I’ of the reader, only to learn that the ‘I’ of the author is ‘fragmented’. Before addressing the issue of the reader I had to figure out a way of connecting the ‘I’ of the author with all of the other ‘I’s of the author. I had to be relational with myself. ‘[T]here are many stories of self to tell, and more than one self to tell them’ (Eakin 1999: xi). As if that was not demanding enough, Iser cites Wayne C. Booth who suggests the author should also be responsible for *creating* the reader:

In the act of reading, we are to undergo a kind of transformation, such as W. Booth has described in connection with fiction in general: ‘The author creates, in short, an image of himself and another image of his reader; he makes his reader, as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement’ (Iser 1978: 30).

Here Booth talks about the author in the singular because he is referring to the writing of fiction, but in a memoir the author has the problem of connecting any number of remembered selves to the reader, as well as connecting the reader to the author's 'I' of the present (at least, present at the time of writing). If we look at James Olney's assessment of Augustine's *Confessions* we can see that he makes a distinction between the 'I' of the past and the 'I' of the present:

There is what one might term the naive narrative, as imagined from the young Augustine's point of view, which shows no knowledge of the ends to which God's providence is directing it all, and at the same time there is the entirely non-naive narrative, which locates its point of view as it were at the end of the narrative with full knowledge of where, under God's guidance, the story is tending (Olney 1998:39).

Iser makes a similar distinction in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*: 'The narrator is able to see the whole of the road – unlike the pilgrim, who can see only what lies immediately before him' (1978: 7-8).

Despite these separations of the authorial 'I', Eakin believes most authors still think of themselves in the continuous singular tense:

Most autobiographers, however, proclaim the continuous identity of selves early and late, and they do so through the use of the first person, autobiography's most distinctive – if problematic – generic marker: the "I" speaking in the present – the utterer – is somehow continuous with the "I" acting in the past – the subject of the utterance. This simultaneous double reference of first-person autobiographical discourse to the present and the past masks the disruptions of identity produced by passing time and memory's limitations (1999: 93).

I take a pragmatic approach to my 'disruptions of identity' and, as much as possible, entrust the storytelling to the 'I' that was present at the time of the action. It helps retain

a clear viewpoint and enables me to ‘show’ rather than ‘tell’ the action. Each of my chapters begins with a scene, locating the reader in time and place. I want a reader to feel as if they are participating in the action, for them to ‘see’ it more than ‘hear’ about it. This is in part due to my scriptwriting background, but was also endorsed as a technique by the autobiographical works of writers such as Mary Karr, Tobias Wolff and Laurie Lee. Karr opens *The Liars’ Club* with an incident from her childhood when she was taken away from her family by a doctor and a police sheriff. Wolff opens *This Boy’s Life* with a truck losing its brakes and driving over a cliff. In the classic *Cider with Rosie*, Laurie Lee hooks the reader with a defining piece of action in his first sentence: ‘I was set down from the carrier’s cart at the age of three; and there with a sense of bewilderment and terror my life in the village began’ (1981: 9). In these opening chapters I am not, as a reader, required to be patient. I am led into the narratives straight away.

However, the rule of show rather than tell, mimesis over diegesis, does not appear to apply as much as I thought it might to the genre of autobiographical writing – certainly not to the introductory chapter. Here are some examples: John Burnside, in *A Lie About My Father* (2006), begins with a discussion on the soul, albeit one that is exquisitely expressed. David Shields, in *The Thing About Life Is That One Day You’ll Be Dead* (2008), opens with the physiological statistics relating to a foetus and a new born baby. Robert Graves, in *Goodbye to all That* (1929), starts with some family history, as does Frank McCourt in *Angela’s Ashes* (1996). Jack Kerouac’s *On The Road* (1991) offers some set-up information first, and Christopher Hitchens adopts a dissertation style in his introductory chapters to *Hitch-22* (2011). Rudyard Kipling

draws breath in *Something of Myself* then says, ‘Looking back from this my seventieth year’ (1981:7) and launches into a memory montage.

Autobiographers often summarise more than they dramatise. I hesitate to call it a failing because even the best life-writers do it. In his autobiography *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid* (2004), Bill Bryson does not get into a scene proper until page 39. Prior to that we are given a number of statistics, historical facts, and descriptions of generic behaviours. Character portraits use the modal ‘would’ after the noun: ‘My father would’ or ‘My mother would’. The use of ‘would’ is another form of listing. It presents habits, not a single incident. I think single incidents have more power and invite intimacy with the reader. Perhaps it is significant that Bryson’s autobiography, according to Yagoda, ‘sold less well in the United States than in Britain’ (2009: 19). Maybe the American reader is less patient than the English reader. They want action. Now. It is probably only fair to also make a distinction between Bryson’s autobiography and his travel writing. His travel books are invariably far more immediate in their scene setting.

Just as diegesis puts distance between the author and the reader, so can the way in which individual sentences are constructed. Indirect language leads to glancing blows instead of knockout punches, although the nuances of comedy make this a harder line to argue. Sometimes a joke relies on a slow burn, a circuitry of language, a little extra effort in constructing the image. If not checked, however, excessive use of adverbs clutters up the read: ‘Since it looked uncannily, if unfathomably, as if he were trying to force a hole in the side of the plane, this naturally drew attention’ (Bryson 2004: 17). I look to cut adverbs wherever I can. I think of it as an experiment as much as a rule. My

problem with proliferating adverbials is their evocation of school essays, in which nothing could be said or done unless it was said or done in a particular way. I used to think ‘he ran hurriedly’ was *writing* whereas ‘he sprinted’ was not. Based on my memory of school essays, the injudicious use of adverbials implies cliché to me. Alain de Botton says of clichés:

[They] are detrimental in so far as they inspire us to believe that they adequately describe a situation while merely grazing its surface. And if this matters, it is because the way we speak is ultimately linked to the way we feel, because how we *describe* the world must at some level reflect how we first *experience* it (1998: 97).

Even this comment on the evils of cliché uses the adverbs ‘adequately’, ‘merely’ and ‘ultimately’. They imply cliché to me because they are easy to employ; they are the first descriptive forms that come to hand and therefore lead to familiar patterns of expression.

Talk of mimesis and diegesis, adverbs and clichés, takes my evaluation of the everyman voice into the realm of style and the application of writing techniques. How to carry that everyman voice in an effective way? But effective for whom? In reaching out I am forced to look closer at where all my efforts are being directed – the reader. I cannot think about what I have to say without also thinking about how it will be received:

A literary text must [...] be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader’s imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative (Iser 1978: 275).

After asking how much control I have over determining my voice, I now need to ask how much control I have over the reader’s response. According to Booth (Iser 1978:

30), as cited earlier, I not only have control over the reader, I am also responsible for *creating* the reader. Therefore the question of style is important, because how I reach the reader is also how I shape the reader, and the essence of the everyman voice does not exist in the abstract, but in the very forms of its expression. Developing the everyman voice strikes me as a two stage process. First of all one has to identify the author's common ground with a reader; try and pre-empt the 'agreement' that Iser and Booth talk about. According to Eagleton, '[H]uman beings are not fundamentally all that different from each other' (2014: 54). Although, as Eagleton goes on to say, '[I]ndividuals combine these shared qualities in very different ways, which is part of what makes them so distinctive. But the qualities themselves are common currency' (2014: 55). So we have a combination of 'common currency' and 'distinctive' individuals, which suggests to me that the everyman voice, while talking about what we have in common, might be more appealing and, paradoxically, more 'everyman', if it talks about the 'common currency' in an *individual* way. In my conversation with musician and songwriter Brian May, he said, 'I think the differences – making us individuals – are as vital to explore as the 'in common' things. But certainly the success of art depends on sharing emotions in an effective way' (Interview: 22/2/14). Dunne accounts for the success of his writing and also that of his colleagues by saying, '[E]very piece had to be held together by the style of the writer, all the way through' (2010: 226). Style, as Dunne explains, shapes the voice: '[I]t had to be assembled and written with a clearly defined voice' (2010:226). I think Montaigne has a 'clearly defined voice', shaped in the main by his humour and humility, and also by the limit of his initial ambition for the essays. He wrote for family and friends and not with a view

to promoting himself far and wide: 'I have not been concerned to serve you nor my reputation: my powers are inadequate for such a design' (Montaigne 2003: xiii).

When I began writing and wanted to find a relaxed, non-pedantic style, I had Montaigne to guide me, whereas Montaigne had no such template. According to one of Montaigne's translator's, M.A. Screech, 'No one in Classical Antiquity had done anything like it' (Montaigne 2003: xv). Perhaps to originate such a style it was necessary to remain uninhibited by thoughts of what other people might think. Montaigne's everyman voice had a profound impact on Virginia Woolf:

But this talking of oneself, following one's own vagaries, giving the whole map, weight, colour, and circumference of the soul in its confusion, its variety, its imperfection – this art belonged to one man only: to Montaigne (2003: 58).

Montaigne allows for 'vagaries', 'confusion' and 'imperfection', but not, in the manner of Augustine, as a device to promote our salvation in God or to rejoice in His mercy.

Montaigne's writing is of a secular nature:

I am offering my own human thoughts as human thoughts to be considered on their own, not as things established by God's ordinance, incapable of being doubted or challenged; they are matters of opinion not matters of faith: what I reason out *secundum me*, not what I believe *secundem Deum* (Montaigne 2003: 361-62).

Opinion unfettered by doctrine leads Montaigne to a humorous acceptance of his failings, and in my opinion the humour in his writing goes a long way to maintaining its contemporary relevance. When describing some women's attitude towards sex he says there are times when 'they only set about it with one cheek of their arse' (2003: 998).

It is secular humour that, for me, connects the troubadours and Montaigne and

which plays a big part in creating the everyman voice, especially when the humour is at the author's expense. If the author directs his humour at others, there is the risk that the reader may associate himself with the 'others' and feel attacked. In Bill Bryson's first book, *The Lost Continent* (1994), there is an occasional harshness in his humour, such as an imagined response to an over-attentive waitress: 'Well, you might just piss off and let me eat my dinner' (1994: 159). While the line is only imagined, there is still a meanness in 'piss off' that is disproportionate to a kind waitress doing her job too well. It is possible that Bryson came to the same conclusion because his humour in future books is much more consistently gentle.

Self-effacing humour is a collapsing force, an implosion, drawing the reader in as if it were a black hole. Pointing a critical finger at others is an outward force that might prompt the reader to duck, worse still, stop reading. Some women might object to being thought of as having only a one-buttock enthusiasm for sex, but Montaigne redeems himself by confessing to a small penis and premature ejaculation.

Dunne, like Montaigne, embodies this self-effacing everyman voice: 'Mistakes, I've made a few. A few thousand actually' (2010: 220). He is not afraid to recount these mistakes and he is not afraid to offer up other people's low opinion of him: 'He told me I was a disgrace, but since Ron invariably identified at least three disgraces before breakfast most days, I wasn't too worried' (2010: 129). When Dunne, in the name of honest assessment, is forced to say something critical of someone else he always softens the truth with humour, until the foible almost sounds like an attribute:

The lovely, gentle Don Gomery could judge his intake of nicotine and alcohol so finely that he kept himself amiably anaesthetised for years. Although I don't think anybody actually tried it, I believe you could have removed his tonsils without pain (2010: 125).

Despite working in a cynical world, Dunne's honesty is compassionate.

Dunne also makes great play of his Yorkshire roots to give his voice a distinctive flavour throughout his memoir. Where he comes from is important. It gives him an attitude, a context by which to judge everything else, which features in his comic juxtapositions: '[A]lthough I may have been a living legend along the boulevards of Grassington and fashionable soirées of Giggleswick, I had never been south of Leeds' (Dunne 2010: 22). I recognise this association of place in my own writing. Scarborough is my place, although I have come to think of it more as a person than a location:

If everything in life serves the artist, then he will value his native soil as highly as his personal talent. The dramatic autobiographer always pays special tribute to his earthly locale, whether Florence, Dublin, or Paterson (Howarth 1980: 104).

The everyman voice has a lot to remember when it comes to the technical application of language. Demonstrating an impressive vocabulary can be a risk. Dunne knows this: 'Churchers was really only a grammar school with delusions of Eton, but the headmaster, aghast at the thought, averred (sorry: no other word for it) that no boy of his would ever enter journalism' (2010: 11). When there is 'no other word for it' then a long word is acceptable, just as an adverb is sometimes exactly what is needed. Andy Summers, the guitarist for the rock band *Police*, had me reaching for the dictionary when he used the words 'saurian' and 'lutescent' in his autobiography *One Train Later*. It did not, however, deter me from reading on – perhaps because Summers mixed up his

exotic vocabulary with equally prosaic informal language: ‘Get a grip, you wanker’ (2007:5).

I discovered during the writing process that rules are useful and that challenging them is also useful. Style is not determined by the number of rules one is aware of, but by the blend of how many one accepts or rejects. The problem with writing is the overwhelming urge to *write* all the time. Sentences creak under the strain of either too many words, or words that are desperate to do a job they are not best designed for. In an early draft of my chapter on Dad, “Good Old John Tom”, I wrote, ‘The lady called out inane comments and suffixed them all with ‘love’ or ‘darling’. Some of the ‘loves’ and ‘darlings’ responded with equal, good-natured vacuity, others could do no more than dribble and blink.’ Here ‘suffixed’ sounds as if it belongs in a legal document, and ‘vacuity’ sounds like an annual shares dividend.

I also need to guard against rogue adjectives. In an early draft of my chapter on ‘youth’, “I Was Young”, I wrote, ‘Pale green tropical grasses sway and swish above the myriad petals.’ ‘Myriad’ had sneaked into a garden description like a weed. A poor choice of word strikes a wedge between narrator and reader, and the everyman voice needs to be alert to this. A piece of imagery might be original, but if the reference is obscure then the originality is lost and, once again, so is the reader. In the same early draft of “Good Old John Tom” I wrote, ‘I stood between them like a scrivener licking his pencil, totting up the profit and loss columns.’ How many readers are likely to know what a ‘scrivener’ is? In the first version of the chapter “Fellow Traveller” I wrote, ‘This was becoming, in the words of Hylde Baker, ridicidoodalous.’ How many readers are likely to share my enthusiasm for a Lancashire born music hall comedienne who

died thirty years ago? This is not, however, a straight forward issue on which I feel I can draw a consistent view. It is not possible to determine the exact parameters of an ‘average’ reader’s frame of reference and, indeed, it may be more engaging for a reader to feel as though they are being made to work. But with this memoir I chose to err on the side of caution.

For a reference to work well it has to be understood. It also has to keep the reader in the moment that is being described, unlike the following that appeared in an early draft of “Samba Turn”:

The devil, they say, has all the best tunes, and I bet every one of them is a dance song. I was sweating and oblivious to ridicule, and if the high priest of dance had urged me to, I would have happily participated in the sacrificing of a goat.

The image of sacrificing a goat is some distance away from dancing in a school hall.

The wrong tone for a piece can alienate a reader just as much as an obscure word or inappropriate image. In my first draft of the chapter “I Was Young”, I wrote: ‘Sparrows and blackbirds accompany the springtime flirt, trilling tunefully; seagulls swoop and caw in petulant disapproval.’ This was too lyrical and abstract. The everyman is a plain speaker.

Lofty language leads to a preachy voice. In my first draft of the chapter “Until You” I launched into a comment on social media:

Social networks promulgate artifice; they thrive on presenting the opportunity for it. Reinvent yourself in the ether, they urge. Add a few bells and whistles to your persona – download colourful page designs, upload flattering photos, hawk embellished histories, spout self-promotional inanities. All strain. All artifice. All attention seeking. Look at me. Look at the shell of me. Look at my fancy doo-dads.

I presented information with absolute authority, as though I knew what I was talking about. I did the memory of Montaigne a disservice.

Opinionated writing excludes the readers who do not share the opinions. On the other hand, if the narrator's voice disappears from view, the reader is set adrift. A narrator's attempt to be reasonable can slip into a detached formality. In an early draft of "Blue Sky" I wrote, 'For the record, my moral standpoint is happy to recognise and celebrate that lust is irrepressible even when life is at its most threatened.'

When writing about David Slack I was guilty of reining my voice in. When writing about my father I was guilty of letting it gush. The following is my first conclusion for the chapter "Good Old John Tom":

As far as I'm concerned Dad could have 'behaved' any old way he liked at the end and it would not have diminished him in the slightest. Of course he had his faults. He was by no means perfect. But while he lay dying the strongest and most immediate memories I had were all of a man I liked and loved.

On reflection I was worried that this might sound too sentimental.

Distance between the narrator and the reader can also be caused through inappropriate use of grammar. In earlier drafts of my chapters, too many passages were told in the past perfect tense:

The ambulance brought Dad home late on Tuesday morning. Mum had ridden in the ambulance with him. Jim had followed in his car. Dad didn't look well. Of course, I knew he wasn't well, but I'd hoped to see an amazing transition brought on by his return to Fieldside.

The past perfect tense takes another step backwards and another step away from the reader.

The difficulty of matching the 'I' of the narrator to the 'I' of the reader arises from the narrator's tendency towards inconsistency and the reader's tendency towards impatience. There are many ways a narrator can cause a reader to take umbrage, which is why I chose to fix on identifying a suitable everyman voice, inspired at first by Montaigne and the troubadours, and so ably embodied by contemporary humorists such as Colin Dunne. A good everyman voice is simultaneously a representative one and a 'distinctive' one. It talks of recognisable subjects in a language we understand and a tone that embraces, and it does all of these things with some good humour. My objective is parity with the reader, or in Booth's words, 'agreement' (Iser 1978: 30) with the reader, and the everyman voice serves this purpose well.

Chapter Three

The second creative voice

In the previous chapter I talked about the importance of finding an everyman voice. In this chapter I expand upon the theme and explain the purpose of adding a second creative voice to that of the first, even though Roland Barthes claims:

[W]riting is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing (1977: 142).

To accept that the ‘subject slips away’ is dispiriting for a memoirist, because the subject is the content of the book as well as the author. It leaves a memoir somewhat bereft to lose both. Although I follow the linguistic logic of Barthes’s theory, if I think of the author as inert once the words have left him then it presents me with a bloodless text – it might be the technical truth of the matter but I prefer the illusion of a heartbeat punctuating the sentences. Barthes makes such an illusion difficult to hold onto. He reminds the author:

Did he wish to *express himself*, he ought at least to know that the inner ‘thing’ he thinks to ‘translate’ is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely (1977: 146).

Barthes supports his claim by telling us that for Mallarmé ‘it is language which speaks, not the author’ (1977: 143) and that for Valéry ‘all recourse to the writer’s interiority seemed to him pure superstition’ (1977: 144).

Perhaps these conclusions are, in part, responsible (on an unconscious level) for my decision to supplement the written memoir with songs. At the start of my thesis, I doubted my ability as a writer to convey sufficient emotional content through words alone. The introspection involved in writing a memoir took me on a tour of the mind that did not feel exclusively literary. Wordsworth says it better: ‘The mind of man is fashioned and built up | Even as a strain of music’ (1995: 10). I take this to mean that the mind resonates in relation to its environment in ways that are so subtle and multitudinous that it cannot express them in words alone.

I can describe feelings in a text, but whether or not they are also aroused in the reader is dependent on the intellectual process of interpretation. The brain is the necessary middleman between a text and an emotional response, even when the response is more neurological than cerebral. Sounds, on the other hand, transcend the written word and when combined with the written word can help it to also transcend. Neil Innes says, ‘The song is in the human heart, if that doesn’t sound too corny. It is a fusion of the most abstract thing we do, which is music, and the opposite of abstract...the hurty bit of the brain. The thought’ (Interview: 5/3/14).

Creative people are often creative in more than one medium. Are these mediums merely separate forms of expression that replicate one another, or does each medium say something different about us? Do separate mediums inform one another and provide a more comprehensive picture of subject and author? Neil Innes, though a musician by trade, has a degree in art from Goldsmiths and also studied drawing at the Central School of Art: ‘Ever since I was young I’ve drawn things. So I look. And if you look, you also listen. I’ve never been analytical’ (Interview: 5/3/14). This is certainly how

Innes feels about drawing, but it is hard to accept the same is true of his song-writing. His songs, in the main, are driven by lyrical content; he is a parodist, satirist and social commentator, which is all about analysis. His song-writing is different from mine in this respect; it is connected far more directly to the thought process of prose. For Innes, it is drawing that provides the unthinking, spontaneous release that song-writing provides for me.

The notion of a second creative voice is not new and there are any number of artists, such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Lear and William Blake, that have expressed themselves in more than one medium, though not always professionally, and rarely simultaneously. It is in this respect that my research may prove to be most original. For the majority of creative people, that second creative outlet is usually one of drawing or painting and is indulged in expressly for the purpose of relaxation. Miles Davis painted to relax between concerts. Robert Irving III, Davis's musical director, quotes Davis as saying, 'Music is a painting you can hear, and painting is a music that you can see' (BBC Radio 4, 2016). In Davis's case both his creative mediums were instinctive – two voices drawing on the same source of emotional spontaneity. By Davis's own admission they were almost one and the same – two voices coming from the same place, although not at the same time. For novelist Kurt Vonnegut, his second creative voice, that of graphic artist, was occasionally integrated into his prose. He included original illustrations in his novels *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*. In a letter to the students of Xavier High School, Vonnegut urged them to

Practice any art, music, singing, dancing, acting, drawing, painting, sculpting, poetry, fiction, essays, reportage, no matter how well or badly, not to get money and fame, but to experience becoming, to find out what's inside you, to make your soul grow (2013).

I like Vonnegut's use of 'becoming', because it implies a never ending journey of self-discovery. There is no sense that one will ever reach the state of having 'become', only that we should always make the most of the process. I found it a healthy way of looking at the writing of my memoir. I prefer not to reflect only on what once was, but also on what is and what might be. This approach necessitates combining a degree of participatory research with the act of remembering past events. While Vonnegut encouraged artistic practices across the board, he recognised the more unconscious aspect of drawing: 'I just sit and wait to see what's inside me. And then it comes out' (2015).

Beat Generation and postmodernist author William S. Burroughs was also an artist, perhaps most famous for his Shotgun Art. This entailed blasting tins of paint with a shotgun to create abstract canvasses. In an interview for *The Paris Review* he revealed his thoughts on the shortcomings of the written word: 'I think that words are an around-the-world, oxcart way of doing things, awkward instruments, and they will be laid aside eventually, probably sooner than we think.' Whereas, he saw 'painting as an evocative magic, and there must always be a random factor in magic' (1966).

Julian Barnes, although his own attempts at a second creative voice only ever amounted to a piece of sculpture made out of cicada cases called 'London Literary Life', is also fascinated by the power of art and music to express the ineffable, although

he does his best to put words to that power. He has written books on Van Gogh, Shostakovich and recently published a collection of essays on art:

Flaubert believed it was impossible to explain one art form in terms of another, and that great paintings required no words of explanation. Braque thought the ideal state would be reached when we said nothing at all in front of a painting. But we are very far from reaching that state. We remain incorrigibly verbal creatures who love to explain things, to form opinions, to argue (2015: 5).

Louis de Bernieres, author of the bestselling *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, admits that he always wanted to be Bob Dylan, although his tastes have become more classical and cross-cultural over the years. De Bernieres is an accomplished multi-instrumentalist, and as well as writing and playing music, he occasionally paints: 'His attempts "come out something like a 13-year-old's work" he says, but he has a strong sense of aesthetics and ideas about the "right" way of doing things' (Jupp 2012). It is perhaps significant that de Bernieres finds his notion of 'the right way of doing things' in the naivety of child-like expression. It is the unguarded honesty that I associate with artistic and musical voices.

Long before these contemporary artists, however, there was the definitive all-rounder of creative voices in the form of William Blake (1757-1827AD), a poet, artist, printmaker, and song-smith. Blake is the real forerunner when it comes to combining two creative voices simultaneously to express the same subject matter. Martin Myrone, lead curator in British art to 1800 at the Tate, is in no doubt about Blake's combined skills: 'I think of Blake as a visual artist as well as a poet' (2014). In 1788 Blake invented a new form of relief etching in colour. It was 'a form of etching that he called "illuminated" printing, perhaps in reference to medieval illuminated manuscripts in

which text and pictures were combined' (Bindman 2009: 7). It is worth noting Blake's coincidental connection in this respect to the troubadours, for some of their Chansonniers were also illuminated. And like the troubadours, Blake's work reflected the 'cultural life' of his times. His etchings represented scientists (Newton), politicians (Pitt), state celebrities (Nelson), and fellow artists such as Milton and Shakespeare. Unlike Montaigne, however, Blake was not averse to preaching. He did have a message. He was anti materialism and empiricism and was worried that science was 'destroying the imagination' (Myrone 2015).

Blake's innovative form of etching allowed the dynamic integration of text and design on the same page, and made it possible for him to complete his books without any interference from printers. 'For this reason Blake was able to convince himself that his method could empower and liberate all writers, enabling them to express themselves freely to a universal audience without leave from worldly authority' (Bindman 2009: 7). It could be argued that this was an 18th Century equivalent of the freedom of expression facilitated by the Internet today. Blake was ahead of his time, undoubtedly, but perhaps over-estimated how many other writers also had his talent for the visual, and therefore how many other writers were likely to take advantage of his new form of etching.

Although Blake combined two creative voices, there is no record of what he felt their individual roles were, or how they impacted on one another. My assumption is always that the artistic voice is the one most likely to access the unconscious, but in Blake's address to the public in *Jerusalem: The emanation of the Giant Albion*, he says, 'When this verse was first dictated to me' (2009: 300), which implies that for Blake the composing of his verse was also an 'unconscious' process. Whatever the relationship

between the two voices, there is no denying the power of their combined creative force. His paintings make graphic the kind of torment we suffer in the struggle between good and evil, spiritualism and materialism, God and Satan. His figures writhe and grimace, coil into one another, sprout claws on their feet, or crouch in skeletal despair. His pictorial imagination is explicit in mood, though not always in meaning. For someone with such a specific vision ‘the final question to be addressed is: why are Blake’s illuminated books so hard to understand, even for professional scholars?’ (2009: 11). Whether we fully understand Blake’s work or not – whether it is made clearer or more obscure by his visual voice – I feel as though as a result of the two voices I still have a stronger sense of the man himself than I would have from his writing voice alone. What I *see* of Blake helps me trust what I *read*. His imagery is no less honest for being strange and arcane, and Bindman believes that ‘Blake’s larger motive, as far as we can discern it, was to lead the reader into a process of perpetual discovery, without the closure given to a simple understanding’ (2009: 11). This, for me, chimes with Vonnegut’s notion of ‘becoming’. It is an ongoing, relational state. What Blake wants is for the reader to ‘tease out meanings, make connections, get to know the characters, and in the process to move further into the work’ (2009: 11). If that is the case, then I am happy to comply. My fascination with Blake, and my desire to explore more than one creative voice in a similar fashion to him, is not motivated by a shared quest for religious salvation, but by the recognition that for me to achieve Blake’s level of truth also demands his level of exposure.

As if the gifts of poetry and painting were not enough, Blake was also known to set some of his poetry to music, which, of course, connects him even more closely to the

nature of this thesis. In his biography of Blake, Peter Ackroyd quotes a guest who attended one of Blake's evening soirées: 'There I have often heard him read and sing several of his poems. He was listened to by the company with profound silence, and allowed by most of the visitors to possess original and extraordinary merit' (199: 83). Blake brought several senses into play to create his work, and therefore demanded several senses be brought into play to receive it. Memories are enriched for both artists and recipients as a result of what Dr Julia Shaw describes as 'multi-sensory' employment. It 'makes us create as far-reaching a network as possible' (2016: 251).

I write prose and I write songs, but I had never previously thought about combining the two, or even of asking questions about where those two voices came from and how they might differ, or how they might influence one another. Only when I turned to the prospect of writing a memoir did I entertain the question of what these voices said about *me*. What did I expect to discover about myself by merging those voices and giving them full rein? What was it that I hoped to achieve through cultivating a musical voice in tandem with the writing voice? In particular, what was it I thought a song-writing voice might contribute to that writing voice?

I asked Brian May if he could elucidate his motivation as a song-writer. What did he think song-writing could do?

My motivation is probably to find that perfect connection. That which we all dream of, deep down - bottomless love and abandonment of self. How does music head us in that direction? I don't know. But sometimes it seems as if it does. Making music seems to bare the soul, so it is open to the ultimate fusion with the object of our desire! I'm sorry if that sounds obscure and unlikely, but I think for me, it's the truth (Interview: 22/2/14).

This echoed my own conclusions on truth. As a song-writer I felt I could instinctively present a song and say, as Brian May does, that ‘for me, it’s the truth’. As a prose writer, I did not feel that confident. I needed the influence of the musical voice.

In *Music and the Mind*, Anthony Storr (Fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists) collects a number of interesting views on the musical voice. He quotes Ellen Dissanayake: “‘No matter how important lexico-grammatical meaning eventually becomes, the human brain is first organized or programmed to respond to emotional/intonational aspects of the human voice’” (Storr 1997: 9).

According to Storr’s research, what we hear has more immediate impact than what we read: ‘In Schopenhauer’s view, music is different from all the other arts because it speaks to us direct: it bypasses the Ideas’ (1997: 140). In Schopenhauer’s own words: ‘Music, since it passes over the Ideas, is also quite independent of the phenomenal world, positively ignores it, and, to a certain extent, could still exist even if there were no world at all, which cannot be said of the other arts’ (1969: 257). Storr argues that not only is music ‘different’, it also came first: ‘Darwin [...] supposed that music *preceded* speech and arose as an elaboration of mating calls’ (1997: 11). Storr concludes: ‘[I]t makes sense to think of music as deriving from a subjective, emotional need for communication with other human beings which is prior to the need for conveying objective information or exchanging ideas’ (1997: 16).

A primary objective of my thesis was to develop a more participatory way of life. I think an everyman voice is one way to help with that, and music is another. ‘Nietzsche believed that music was one of the arts which so sharpened our sense of participation in life that it gave meaning to life and made it worth living’ (Storr 1997: 150). Nietzsche

was emphatic on the primacy music had in the world of creative expression: ‘We see language doing its utmost *to imitate music*’ (2003*: 33). As a means of probing emotional recesses music is even given its due by Plato: ‘[M]usical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul’ (2000: 73).

If music precedes speech and operates beyond the constraints of language, touching ‘the inward places of the soul’, then perhaps, when it is combined with a text, it helps draw us closer to the author. The fluid nature of a recorded melody, although it is equally as set in its presentation as a page of text, sustains the illusion of the author’s presence. Music penetrates, and in so doing it also reveals. ‘Music is so very much more powerful and penetrating than is that of the other arts, for these others speak only of the shadow, but music of the essence’ (Schopenhauer 1969: 257). Here Schopenhauer echoes Plato’s theory of ‘shadows’. Music gets at what is ‘real’ in a way that nothing else can.

The precision of the written word can sometimes anchor thoughts, whereas music has the power to un-tether them, to let them float upwards and soar until wider vistas present themselves. ‘In [Schopenhauer’s] view, the function of the arts is not to depict particular instances of reality, but to represent the universals which lie behind the particular’ (Storr 1997: 134). Representing the ‘universals’ is at the root of the everyman voice. I think songs can help access these universals and assist with their expression. ‘*Melody, then, is both primary and universal*, which is why it can therefore bear various objectifications in various texts’ (Nietzsche 2003*: 33). At least, by adding

another creative perspective I double my chances of expressing those universals. If the writing fails, the songs may come to its rescue.

The dialectic between musical and linguistic voices brings more of the reader's senses into play. '*Any true understanding is dialogic in nature. Understanding is to utterance as one line of a dialogue is to the next*' (Bakhtin 2003: 35). This approach sits comfortably with my desire to lead a more participatory life. It demands conversation, with others and with oneself (of which the interaction between text and song is an example). 'Dialogism is the name not just for dualism, but for a necessary multiplicity in human perception' (Alfaro 1996: 272). I would like to think that when an author instigates a 'multiplicity in human perception', it is like presenting evidence of his vital signs. The stronger the perception, the stronger perhaps is the sense of the perception's origin – *me*. I have to keep this dialogue going because as Dr Julia Shaw says: 'Research is me-search' (2016: xi).

My motivation to couple songs with text came from having a partner who is a psychotherapist. Julia would forever ask me how something made me *feel* and I would answer with a *thought*. I over-analysed and used words like a ribbon to tie subjects into neatly repressed packages. My awareness of this became most acute on our research trip to France when Julia quizzed me on how it felt to play the song about my dad, "Good Old John Tom", outside the palace of Poitiers. I said, 'I think-' and Julia stopped me there. "Until You", the song for the chapter on France, is the result of being repeatedly stopped by Julia and asked what I feel.

Things are different with the guitar, however. I rarely think anything when I have it in my lap. Even when I am writing lyrics the tune takes charge and grammar happily

goes to pot. An inner voice is released – a more emotional, feeling voice that does not need to explain itself. The modernist poet Basil Bunting says, ‘There is no need for any theory for what gives pleasure through the ear, music or poetry’ (2011: 42). In Bunting’s view music is not a separate entity. It can be a quality of the written word that emerges when spoken out loud: ‘Poetry, like music, is to be heard’ (2011: 42). Bunting was happy to present his poem “Brigflatts” as his autobiography, regardless of whether one followed the meaning of the words or not. In his view the sound of the words conveyed something beyond the literal sense of them.

Although Bunting is referring to poetry, the same may be true of prose. The written word need not ‘anchor thoughts’ after all. The release of emotions through songs can give rise to a musical lilt in the text, and the more musical the text, the more emotional it is likely to be. In the case of the chapter on my father I could only contemplate committing my memories of him to the page after writing about him in song. The song came without interference or inhibition and created a mood from which I felt confident to let my dad emerge on paper. Without realising it, dialogue occasionally ran like free verse, or, perhaps more accurately, music hall banter:

“I’m alright,” Dad says.
 “What’s going on?” I say.
 “It’s your father,” Mum says.
 “I’m alright,” he says.
 “I’ve called an ambulance.”
 “You’ve done what?” Dad says.
 “I thought you were breathing your last, John.”
 (Extract from the chapter “Good Old John Tom”)

I am in good company when it comes to talking in musical terms about the business of writing memoirs. Vladimir Nabokov says, ‘I witness with pleasure the supreme

achievement of memory, which is the masterly use it makes of innate harmonies when gathering to its fold the suspended and wandering tonalities of the past' (2000: 128).

It appeared, therefore, that I could engage more fully with a subject if I combined creative voices. Casting a second light can cause the illusory effect of turning the contents of a flat page into a 3D model.

At first I thought that it might be a straightforward case of combining two separate perspectives. But the fact that the song "Good Old John Tom" inspired the chapter showed me that there was more interplay to be had between the two mediums. Each voice influenced the other. After writing the chapter on 'distant love' ("Skimming Stones"), it struck me that I might be able to amplify the universality of the theme through a generic piece of storytelling in the song as opposed to repeating my individual experience. As a result, I think that the song "Skimming Stones" returns an innocence to the subject of 'distant love' that my personal experience had tainted. I use old-fashioned terms like 'my sweetheart' and 'my true love' in the lyrics and a traditional folk tuning on the guitar called DADGAD, which, when combined with the flute, was more resonant of the medieval troubadours than any other song in the thesis. And yet, it was not a conscious intention. It was as though the spirit of the troubadours were operating through me. There had been great passion in the beginning of my relationship with Elena, and a real longing in our separation. I think the song recaptures that more effectively than my first draft of the chapter.

What is probably most revealing about *me* in this song, however, is what it did *not* reveal. I tapped into a sense of longing, but as I say, it was generic, not specific. I think this chapter, more than any other, exposes the chinks that remain in my writing voice. I

know I meant to express my responses to Elena and Sofia in the voice of the person I was back then, but I do not think I made that distinction well enough. I tried to make it clear at the end of the chapter that the responsibility for the fiasco was mine and that to this day I still feel the guilt. But I think that needed to be more evident throughout the telling. For the purposes of the PhD and illustrating my research process, it is more honest to let the chapter stand, reflecting as badly as it may do on my character. If I were to consider the book as a commercial entity then this is a chapter I would revisit and bring to bear what came to light during the research. In this case, the ‘distance’ of the song from its subject told me almost as much about my feelings on the subject as a more emotionally explicit song might have done.

Initially, I obsessed with songs taking me ‘deeper’; the second voice had to say ‘more’. Nevertheless, as I got into the process I realised that the songs were not slaves to the text. They did not have to serve the ‘demands’ of the subject matter. The subject matter was a catalyst only. I had to let the songs, as much as possible, write themselves. They represented the truly ‘free’ voice. They should be allowed to have an appeal of their own. It was okay if they ended up as stand-alone songs. I also realised that ‘deeper’ did not have to mean ‘more serious’. The truth can be light-hearted, too. “Samba Turn” is a humorous, foot-tapping song that works for a live audience regardless of whether or not they have read the chapter that goes with it. Even so, it remains an honest expression of *me*. I delved deeper, and on that occasion came up smiling.

Tackling subjects via a text and a song deepens my engagement with the subjects, and I feel I come closer to scaring up ‘universals’ than I might otherwise have done with

just one voice. For example, my chapters deal with issues such as death, embarrassment, a lover's heartache, and fear of failure. None of these experiences are unique to me. They are common. *Universals*. Does it follow that my deeper engagement with a subject also leads to a deeper engagement for the reader? If I present from two different angles then the reader has to receive from two different angles. The more senses I appeal to, the more dimensions my subjects may appear to have, and the more substantial the character of *me* becomes to the reader. Trueman Capote, who claimed to have invented the 'non-fiction novel' with *In Cold Blood*, held a similar view on the impact of the author: 'The writer's individual humanity, his word or gesture toward the world, has to appear almost like a character that makes contact with the reader' (2007: 30).

Like me, Hemingway also sought inspiration from another creative medium to help with his writing:

I was learning something from the painting of Cézanne that made writing simple true sentences far from enough to make the stories have the dimensions that I was trying to put in them. I was learning very much from him but I was not articulate enough to explain it to anyone (2000: 13).

In Hemingway's case the paintings of Cézanne appear to have moved him in a way one might associate with music: directly, and beyond the compass of words. Hemingway is not the only person from the literary world to have been affected by the work of Cézanne: '[A]t the moment when Cézanne paints his apples, it is clear that in painting those apples, he is doing something very different from imitating apples' (Lacan 1992: 141). Hemingway did not go so far as to paint as well as write, but Cézanne's influence on him shows that one medium can inspire what one produces in another. Hemingway believed the influence improved his writing. I think I can say the same of my songs.

They resonate with the essence of whatever I am getting at in the text, whether it is serious or celebratory. That resonance then folds back into my writing. The first draft of my chapter on ‘youth’, “I Was Young”, had a clichéd ‘old man in his rocking chair’ ending. I talked of ‘following the forks in the road of my past like a travel guide home’ and being ready to ‘return to Montaigne’s Tower without my camera, to listen and let the sun fall on my face through his bedroom window’. The chapter ended with a lyrical sigh, which felt inappropriate given some of the humour that preceded it. But in the song “I Was Young” the nostalgia is given a positive spin in the chorus. The wistfulness concludes with a real appreciation of the here and now: ‘And now I’m of an age, I’m lucky I can say, “I was young.”’ This then brought about a change to the final sentences of the chapter. Instead of straining for a philosophical truth, I told the literal truth of how my walk and period of reminiscing had ended: ‘One of the donkeys interrupts my concentration by dropping a heavy load of manure onto the beach’ (I Was Young: 225).

According to my research, no-one else has written a memoir with an accompanying original song soundtrack. Could it be the start of a new genre? I cannot be the only writer who plays an instrument. It is perhaps arrogant to dare claim that I can write a song, but then I wonder if the quality of the song is important. Just going through the process, no matter how painful or silly the result, might serve to release a writer’s feelings and give rise to that deeper engagement with their subject. Whether or not the song should then be attached to the piece of writing for the benefit of the reader is a question I cannot answer. If a song represents the author’s best endeavour and is an honest attempt to convey their feelings, is that all that matters? Would a reader forgive a tuneless voice and fumbled notes? I think they might. American stand-up comedian

Amber Tozer recently published a book called *Sober Stick Figure* in which she recounts her battle with alcoholism, but she also illustrates the book with stick figure drawings. The reader forgives the naivety of the drawings because they are authentic expressions – poorly drawn, but humorous, and like songs have been for me, another way of putting things.

Because I have expressed myself with two separate voices, it means I have exposed myself twice over. Is exposure another essential aspect of the everyman voice? I think it might be; a *degree* of exposure, anyway; enough to risk one's dignity, to acknowledge weaknesses and moments of poor judgement, to bring oneself into the realm of the recognisable. It is more everyman to confess one's cock-ups than to boast of singular achievement. I could not have started my memoir as Cellini did: 'I intend to tell the story of my life with a certain amount of pride' (1981: 15).

At the start I feared my prose would let me down, and that I would default to using gags as a means of avoiding feelings. Writing songs has been the best way to break that gag-writing pattern of avoidance. Visiting the place songs come from has brought a sense of proportion to my writing. I can, for example, return to a moment of sadness without the urge to dispel the mood with a crass punchline. In the chapter "I Was Young", when recounting the incident of a young girl's suicide, I let the moment register in full.

The humorist David Sedaris would disagree with me about exposure:

I just give the illusion of exposing myself, but really, I'm not exposed at all. There's a real me that lives inside my diary, and then there's a character of me. Whenever you write about yourself, real people live in the world, and characters live on the page, and you become a character. So, I don't think that I expose that much about myself (Knight 2007: 89).

Despite my suggestion in chapter two that Sedaris paradoxically uses his character to express more of the real him, there are echoes of Barthes in the above quotation. The ‘real’ David Sedaris, according to the quotation, no longer exists once he is committed to paper. Only his ‘character’ is left, which we then reconstitute in the reading. If this is what happens, then I am hoping to create a *me* character that resembles, as much as possible, the original *me* enunciator of the text. By contrast, Tobias Wolff, as a child, wanted to be someone else: ‘I wanted to call myself Jack, after Jack London. I believed that having his name would charge me with some of the strength and competence inherent in my idea of him’ (1989: 7).

The advantage Sedaris has of reading his stories out loud is that the audience will then hear that voice the next time they read his work. He is planting a mental audio track for the future, narrowing the gap between the real him and the character of him. I watched Sedaris in concert and, apart from hearing his voice, I also had the advantage of observing other aspects of his personality. He used a throat spray and applied lip balm throughout his reading. I am probably being unfair but they suggested a level of hypochondria that underscored his chronic early life problems with OCD as outlined in his story *A Plague of Tics*. The *me* of Sedaris’s memoirs is, as I would like mine to be, made even more so through his secondary medium of expression – talking out loud. I want to be heard, too. In every sense. I want my creative voice to be heard and I want my real voice to be heard. And I want to be seen being heard.

Although, as far as I am aware, I am the first memoirist to accompany his writing with songs, the general concept of music accompanying art may go as far back as the cave drawings at Chauvet in France. The paintings are 32,000 years old and are ‘located

at the points of greatest resonance in the cave network' (Goodall 2013: 7). It is thought 'people would sing not just as an adjunct to communal ritual, but more crucially as a bat-like form of sonar to provide location bearings in the vast labyrinth of the cave – rather like a musical SatNav' (Goodall 2013: 7). The further back we go with evidence of a 'singing' voice, the more elemental it appears to be and the more suggestive it is that music is in our DNA. Truth does not come any more elemental than that.

The American humorist James Thurber is a twentieth-century example of someone who uses two forms of artistic expression. He illustrates his written pieces with cartoons. He says, 'I drew just for relaxation, in between writing' (1991: 149). That also best describes how I approach my song-writing. It is a way of relaxing into the subject matter. Feeling not thinking. One's fingers can doodle on guitar strings in the same way as a pencil does on paper. It is a way of convincing me that the project is up and running even before I have articulated a single sentence. 'Speed is scarcely the noblest virtue of graphic composition, but it has its curious rewards. There is the sense of getting somewhere fast' (Thurber 1991: 148). Although he does not use the words 'everyman' or 'universals', Thurber's thoughts on his use of cartoons implies them:

Somebody once said that I am incapable of drawing a man, but that I draw abstract things like despair, disillusion, despondency, sorrow, lapse of memory, exile, and that these things are sometimes in a shape that might be called Man or Woman (1991: 149-50).

I interpret this quotation to mean that 'universals' are evident in Thurber's 'particular' men and women. His representations of 'Man' and 'Woman' are therefore everymen. Thurber is a good example of two creative voices – one intuitive, the other contemplative – becoming stereoscopic under the lens of a reader. His cartoons, like my

songs, tap into the ‘inner’ voice, which, when combined with the ‘outer’ observational voice, add contours to a subject. ‘My drawings have been described as pre-intentionalist, meaning that they were finished before the ideas for them had occurred to me. I shall not argue the point’ (Thurber 1991: 148). Here Thurber implies the hand of the unconscious at work.

David Sedaris also has recourse to a second creative voice to help animate the first. He reads his work out loud to audiences. ‘In living speech, intonation often does have a meaning quite independent of the semantic composition of speech’ (Voloshinov 2003: 36). The second expressive opportunity highlights any deficiencies in the written word and enables Sedaris to fix them accordingly:

When you read a story on paper, you don’t realize you’ve already said something before, or that you’re just treading water, or that something’s a cheap laugh. When you read a story out loud, you realize – I, anyway, realize – those things (Knight 2007: 86).

When I saw Sedaris perform he had a pencil with him and made the odd note on his script as he went.

In Sedaris’s case, his second creative voice is not, as it appears to be with Thurber, only a supplementary voice that offers another perspective; it is an informative voice that re-shapes the first. As well as being enhanced by the second voice, the first is also dependent on it. In reference to his stories, Sedaris says, ‘I’m changing them all the time. I wish I could go back to the ones that have already been published and have a week to read those out loud’ (Knight 2007: 86). And yet, having stressed the interplay between the two versions (the written and the read out loud) during their creation, Sedaris sees them as having very different identities once the process is completed:

Sometimes your biggest laugh when the story is read out loud comes from a pause, or from looking up. To imitate that on paper – putting five double spaces to indicate a pause – looks unprofessional. There are two different versions of a story: the story out loud and the story on paper (Knight 2007: 87).

The human voice, therefore, in the opinion of Sedaris, allows for subtleties of expression that are difficult to convey on paper. I asked him for clarification on this:

What I meant was that the paper version, or mine anyway, tends to be more careful. It's crafted rather than spewed forth. I used to write things so that I could read them out loud. Now I feel like I write them so that anyone can read them out loud. I feel it's right there on the page, the rhythm (Interview: 27/6/15).

Dunne takes a similar approach to his writing. He tries to make the words on the page sound as though they are being spoken, even though he does not go on to perform his pieces like Sedaris does: 'What I tend to do is talk a piece rather than write it. It prevents me from sliding into a pompous or literary style' (Interview: 17/4/15). I do my best to follow Dunne's example, because at some point, like Sedaris, I would like to 'talk' my chapters to an audience. This is the advantage of a song – a conversational quality is inherent in its design. Lyrics are relaxed and informal and can set a scene in a couple of lines: 'Two kids in a classroom | Laughing like drains' ("I'm Reminiscing").

In the preceding discourse I have examined what I believe to have been, in my case, the advantages of applying a second creative voice to make my memoir more representative of *me*, and how those advantages may also work to the benefit of other autobiographers. I would now like to attempt, in the following section called "Chapter & Verse", a more specific understanding of the interplay that took place between each chapter and its accompanying song.

Chapter & Verse

Introduction

The addition of a song-writing voice to supplement that of the text writing voice was an attempt to increase the level of immersion with the subject of myself and, in so doing, to also present a more engaging and emotional experience for the reader/listener.

The song-writing voice emerges from the subject matter of the prose. It occasionally feeds back into the prose, drawing out insight, inspiring revelation, and offering an alternative perspective, but it also proves to have a creative life of its own, capable of standing as a separate entity.

A lot of the following analysis is retrospective. During the process I tried not to rationalise the song-writing voice too much, regarding that as the ‘free’ voice. The less I questioned it, or tried to control it, the better chance I had of tapping into the unconscious, which, in the opinion of some thinkers, such as Jacques Lacan, is the origin of all our actions: ‘Psychoanalytic experience consists in nothing other than establishing that the unconscious leaves none of our actions outside its field’ (Lacan 2006: 428).

1. “I Can Hear Voices”: Gap (a boasting song)

This opening chapter is about the arrogance and insecurity of youth. When I was a boy I was tormented by numerous, grandiose career ambitions. At the age of nineteen I settled on becoming a pop star. I was overwhelmed by a sense of life’s potential, wanting to be

all that I could be. In my case, though, I wanted to be everything for which I did not have the talent.

The troubled and over-reaching mind of a teenager is evident in the opening lines of the song when I sing ‘You’ve lost yourself again’. I did not realise how fractured and misguided I was – how lost I was – until I heard myself sing that line. The lyrics for all my songs tend to ‘bubble up’. I open my mouth and the words form themselves around the feeling, even if I have not identified the feeling to myself beforehand. But the song not only reflects the state I was in that night in Chelmsford, but also alludes to the problems that the over-confident boy and his grandiose attitude would encounter in the future. The ‘doctor of the brain’ refers to the endless psychotherapy sessions that I had. And the ‘doctor’ saying ‘no cure could be applied’ is how those sessions concluded. That changed, however, during the PhD. This research has proved to be the cure; a form of extreme psychotherapy. Psychotherapy is known as ‘talking therapy’ which Lacan practised for ‘the unconscious knowledge it brings out’ (Bailly 2013: 187). He believed it contained repressed ‘wishes, desires, fears, and images’ (2013: 49). With this research I did more than talk, I sang. And in singing I think I brought out more of the unconscious, freeing a lot of those feelings that had previously been repressed. What I turned my back on as a teenager – an education – became my salvation in middle-age.

The tortured mind of the teenager is evident in the disturbing tone of the song with its throbbing bass line introduction. It starts with a dark and low voice, then another voice comes in higher, suggesting the ‘split’ between fantasy and reality, between aspiration and failure. This dichotomy proves to be a central theme throughout

the rest of the chapters and is a good source of humour and for those everyman points of recognition for the reader.

2. “Until You”: Partimen (the posing of a specific problem)

In my research trip to France I identified the ‘specific problem’ that has controlled my fate ever since that night in Chelmsford when I dropped out of a law degree to become a pop star. I over-thought and I over-romanticised, which led to high expectation and crushing disappointment. It left me in a permanent state of dislocation from feelings and any chance of mindfulness.

But it was the physical research of sitting at Montaigne’s desk and strumming the guitar outside the first troubadour’s palace – the adding of active participation to the memoir – that in turn brought about some real ‘contact’ with myself. Instead of only analysing my past in a contemplative manner, it provided access to the present and posed questions for the future. It was a way of confronting the here and now. I was lucky that I had Julia on hand to interpret my behaviour. Her presence was like an ‘intervention’ that helped break my addictive cycle of ‘thinking not feeling’.

The song appeared on a sunny evening in a campsite just outside Bordeaux, the mellow result of red wine from a local vineyard. I can only assume the 3/4 time signature was the influence of being in France. The waltz is a favourite of French twentieth-century singers such as Edith Piaf and is a sound I associate with Parisian café society. “Until You” obviously refers to Julia, but in a more abstract sense could also refer to me. The active research of going to France asked questions of me that I might not have asked if I had remained with my head in a book. I gave myself circumstances

to react to, which made empirically manifest the gap that existed between how I thought and how I felt. I had never come quite so face-to-face with myself. I saw myself, or, at least, saw that aspect of myself that had so hindered the acquiring of profound happiness. On the surface, the song is an acknowledgement of Julia's influence in my life, but on another level there is something of the conscious voice talking to the unconscious voice; one version of me talking to the other version. 'I had a face that I put on' might be the conscious face disguising that of the unconscious one. Later, however, 'you drew me out', and so through my participatory research and Julia's quizzing of my reactions, feelings were released.

This recording is the original first-take demo track. There was a quality to the vocal that echoed the exposure I had witnessed of the French busker on the streets of Poitiers. The voice sounded 'honest'. It resonated with Montaigne's desire to write 'without artifice', so we left the track alone; the guitar buzzes occasionally, but that also felt honest. Taking time to make everything perfect, or to add extra instruments, did not feel in keeping with the brief moment of truth I felt I had achieved.

3. "Catch That Train": *Enueg (things one doesn't like)*

I am by instinct a solitary creature. Or, at least, I was prior to this research. This chapter began by sharing Sartre's sentiment that 'hell was other people'. At first, the writing of the chapter was a self-justifying rant, presenting myself as the victim of 'other people' and their unreasonable behaviour. That was the nature of the verses: 'Too many people crowding out my day | Too many faces with too much to say' and 'So overwhelming, other people in my space | I wish they'd all disappear without trace', but when I came to

the chorus the lyrics did not echo the verses as I had expected – they cut against them, coming to a different conclusion entirely: ‘But you’ve got the love that puts me to shame | You live and let live again and again | I’ve just gotta catch that train | Just gotta catch that train to be human once again’. The song would not concur with the chapter. It would not let me stay in that self-justifying mood. It reminded me of Julia’s more temperate and balanced and positive endurance in the face of frustration, and how much more at peace she always appeared to be with herself compared to my bottled rage. I looked again at the chapter and realised that the real anger I felt was not the result of other people’s ‘bad behaviour’ as much as it was my own unhappiness at the way in which I dealt with conflict, by either over-reacting or under-reacting. I therefore returned to the chapter and tempered some of my harsher criticisms. For example, I cut the following paragraph from my teaching experience with Aaron: ‘Attention Deficit Disorder and Aspergers were the kinder ways of expressing Aaron’s learning difficulties, but neither of them quite described Aaron as well as the simple statement that *Aaron was a moron.*’ Aaron was not bright, true, but I was just as inexperienced as a teacher as Aaron was disadvantaged in his comprehension of the world around him.

The song uses jazz chords (such as minor sevenths and major sevenths) which help create the dreamy feeling of contentment that can come with looking out of a train window. However, the chord choice was made before I had any idea of where the lyrics would take the song, before I knew that it would conclude with the kind of revelation that it did. The chords, like the lyrics, presented themselves from somewhere outside the conscious process. And in the case of this chapter, they had a specific impact on the writing. The song suggests a moment of enlightenment, which also lightened the mood

of the prose. The combination of text and song underscores the folly of wasting too much time in conflict. The conclusion was that I had to let these conflicts go in order to become 'human once again'. I do not think I have the power as a writer to bring about social change, but in a song I can say something positive and maybe put someone in a positive mood, if only for as long as the song lasts. That is change of a sort.

4. "Good Old John Tom": *Planh (lament for a mentor)*

This was my first ever attempt at a piece of biographical prose. The song came first and was the catalyst that made writing about my dad possible. It set up the whole notion for the book: combining songs with prose. The song came first because I did not know how to approach my dad on the page. I think the song flowed freely because I did not announce that the subject was my dad. I was an anonymous narrator rather than a son. Paradoxically, keeping my distance in that way enabled me to get closer. The biographical nature of the song fell naturally into a traditional folk song chord progression, starting in a minor key. Folk songs are renowned for mythologizing characters and for having a lot of verses to encompass a character's life. On this occasion, the choice of chord structure was deliberate. This was the start of the whole concept, and when it came to the arrival of the songs I had not at that point developed the confidence of 'trusting to luck'. I was still very much in a 'thinking' mode. So, instead of waiting for the song, I went searching for it. Nevertheless, once I began improvising around the traditional folk framework the song took off. I had made the right choice, but then maybe I had not made it all. Maybe the unconscious voice was just a little more articulate than usual on this occasion. I played regularly at folk clubs

and so had probably developed some instinct for the unusual mix of humour and death that exists in folk songs. The verses are tinged with the sadness of loss, but the remembrance is celebratory. 'I'll tell you a tale of a man who set sail through the hearts of the people that knew him.' The past tense of 'set' and 'knew' rather than the present tense of 'sets' and 'know' alert the listener straight away to the fact that the subject is no longer with us. That is sad, but when I reach the chorus the chords segue into a major key, which gives the sense of the subject still being around. The switch to major is positive and happy, but unlike the start of the song, which I had pre-determined to frame in a folk mood, it was not intentional. That is the moment when the song took over and finally showed itself in its entirety. It grew from a song I had intended only to play to my mum and brother, to a song I could imagine being sung communally in a bar.

Once I had written the song I was able to take the pocket-biography of the verses and elaborate them into a more comprehensive prose portrait, but the tone had been set by the song. As a result of the song, I knew how to elaborate and which extra scenes to incorporate.

As with "Until You" it is also in 3/4 time. Once again, I think, due to the French influence. It puts one in mind of waltzes played on the accordion around café tables. I went the whole hog by adding an accordion to flavour the song to that effect. Also, as with "Until You", I kept the original demo version of the live guitar and vocals. Feeling is often most in evidence in the first take.

5. “Samba Turn”: *Estampida* (dance song)

I used to play in a jazz guitar duo, inspired by the Belgian gypsy jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt, and this was a return to that happy swing sound. When I joined the modern dance class of elderly ladies, the hope was that by forcing myself into an uncomfortable situation it would also force me into unfamiliar emotional territory. It was a way of acting on the conclusion drawn in “Catch that Train”, that I should make attempts to step into humanity rather than make excuses for withdrawing from it. It was also about experimenting with biographical writing as a means of informing my autobiographical writing. What might I learn about myself through taking more interest in others? I had no idea what kind of song would emerge from the experience until the first occasion I successfully executed a dance move called the Samba Turn. It was what I would describe as an overpowering ‘communal’ moment; a moment of transcendence, when troubles fell by the wayside and I experienced something akin to ‘at-oneness’. When I picked up the guitar the bounce in those feelings was immediately translated into a foot-tapping 2/4 gypsy jazz swing tempo. I wanted to dance and I wanted to sing about dancing. The communal and physical origin of the song made it more overtly a song for an audience. It was not just a personal song offering an insight into the song-writer (should anyone happen to ‘overhear’ it) it was also a song that demanded a level of performance and therefore reached out.

The opening lines to my songs usually come as unexpectedly as the melodies, but those lines will contain the concept and tone for the rest of the lyric writing: ‘Put one foot in front of the other | Well that’s just walking – why would I bother?’ That line said this was a song about someone obsessed with dancing. Anytime not spent dancing was

time wasted. The obsession with dancing then led to the play on the word ‘turn’ as in having a ‘Samba Turn’. Although it is a fun song, it still chimed with the aspect of my personality highlighted in “I Can Hear Voices” – that sense of the grandiose. I claim ‘Fred Astaire’s got nothin’ on me’. It is a theme that recurs throughout: big dreams, shortfall reality. It is in that gap, however, that I think the humour, sadness and truth of life dwells. The Samba Turn was the moment I did not care anymore about self-image. It was an eye-opening lesson; a discovery that even if we are out of step, we can still move forward.

6. “Skimming Stones”: *Amor de Lohn (distant love)*

This was the toughest chapter for me to write, because I was writing about other people (as well as myself) in less than flattering terms. I could not return to it directly in song. I could not find the register. I received no inspiration to retell the specific story. The significant aspect of all the songs in this research is that they came naturally whether sad or funny. This proved to be the only chapter where I resorted to writing a generic song – I wrote about ‘distant love’, not about being separated from Elena. And to find that mood, it helped to think as much about being separated from Julia today, as it did to remember how it felt to be separated from Elena back then. As with “Good Old John Tom”, I had to apply more ‘thought’ up front to get the song underway. Separation from your loved one is a common theme in folk music, especially as a lot of the songs were written at a time when a sailor could be away from home for over a year. So I used a folk tuning on the guitar (DADGAD) to help establish a mood and a starting point. The opening image of separation followed almost immediately as though pre-written: ‘I set

sail on the morning tide | Left my sweetheart skimming stones | She kissed me and she gently, gently cried | Don't let the sea wrap round your bones.'

This song, more than any other, sounds 'medieval' due to the folk tuning and the addition of a flute. It also has more in common with the troubadour tradition of the inaccessible lady and her unattainable love. As a song in its own right, it is simply about 'separation', but as a song connected to my memoir, as I mention earlier in the exegesis, it is revealing in terms of what it does *not* reveal. So, while I avoid singing about Elena, it still says something about me; it indicates what my emotional parameters were at the time. I remain a work in progress. The song, despite its unconscious voice, is still capable of leaving some things buried. For all that, it is perhaps one of the most lyrically poetic songs out of the eleven.

7. "Fellow Traveller": *Sirventes (political/social song)*

This is an example of a song that grew into itself. I was booked to play a charity concert on behalf of various wildlife and environmental causes. It had been organised by the rock guitarist Brian May, so I thought it might be prudent to write a song for the event in the hope of showing off to Brian. This song was written before I had the experience that it relates to. I was not what I would describe as a passionate 'wildlife campaigner' or 'environmentalist'. While I do not agree with hunting, I am a meat eater. I recycle (almost conscientiously), but I do not belong to any pressure group. This was a song which would require more imagination than most. After my experience as a dancer and the conclusions reached in "Catch That Train" it was easier to start thinking primarily in terms of my fellow creatures as my fellow man, to regard us all on the planet as 'fellow

travellers’: ‘There’s a wildlife knocking at your door.’ Without realising it at first, I was echoing the momentum that was underway with my research. I was encouraging contact, getting out into the world and embracing others. On the day of the concert, after coming into contact with so many passionate, principled people, the lyrics to the song took root. Imagined feelings became real. It was a song I had written to embrace everyone, but without realising it was also a reproof to myself. I was, as Julia would say, ‘owning it’: ‘Don’t hide away no more’.

8. “I Was Young”: *Joven (in praise of youth)*

This song is perhaps the most *me*, because it is centred so squarely in my hometown of Scarborough: ‘From the clock tower to the lighthouse’. It is my Wizard of Oz moment when Dorothy says ‘There’s no place like home’. I revisited physical scenes from my youth, but I incorporated the active element of taking a walk to bring them alive. The act of remembering as I walked helped give the memories contemporary relevance. I gave them a ‘flesh and blood’ opportunity in the here and now, so that I could ask questions of them and of myself. How disappointed, or how proud, were my past selves of my present self? How embarrassed, or proud, was I of my past selves? Was there anything to be learned from such an exchange? The answer, such that it was, came once again from the song, rather than from the evaluative efforts of the prose. In the early drafts of the chapter, I sat at the lighthouse at the end of the walk and was not sure what I felt. When I started the song I had the vague notion of being a bird gliding down from the cliff top to the beach, and so I automatically slid from a finger-picked F chord down to an Fmaj7 to a C. The verse chords then add top notes or use descending bass lines,

which recreated a sense of a bird swooping along the route of the walk. I felt the movement at the time, but only realised how I had created it after the event. The lyrics to the verse mirror the motive behind the walk – the desire for a dialogue with my younger selves: ‘Faces that I used to be are asking me now | How did we all make out?’ And when I see that young boy ‘putting pressure on his future’ I tell him ‘I do not blame him at all | And he in return says, “We’re okay”’. As the lyrics came, I understood how I felt. All identities, past and future, were reconciled – we achieved a ‘sea breeze harmony’. The over-reaching, grandiose *me* is calmer, prepared to let things go at last. No matter what I make of my younger self, or how I think he may judge me, I know that I am lucky still to be alive and have the opportunity to reflect on such matters. More than anything I am fortunate that I can say “I Was Young”, and I am happy for that also to be my excuse for past embarrassment. With any luck I will live long enough to justify the foolishness of today with the same phrase.

9. “Blue Sky”: Soudadier (song for a knight)

This chapter told the story of David Slack, a WW2 Fighter Bomber pilot. I drew parallels between David’s life and my own in the hope of discovering something about myself in the process. It was biography designed to aid autobiography. In the song, however, I wished to present David’s story in isolation. If the song had anything to say about me it would not be explicit in the lyrics, but implied by whatever emotional integrity they presented. It was a challenge to write a song that would encompass the life-or-death nature of David’s story. One of the most remarkable aspects of David’s story was that he signed up to fight when he was only seventeen years old. That was the

prominent thought when I sat with the guitar, and the line ‘Only seventeen...’ felt like the best place to start. It was a stream-of-consciousness exercise in lyric writing. Just say it, I thought, and see where it takes you. What shocked me more than David’s sign-up age was his preparedness to kill as well as die for his country. It is the noble sentiment of being prepared to die for one’s country that is most frequently hailed in war ‘heroes’, but the uglier necessity of killing is rarely related with the same degree of fanfare. Connecting the line ‘ready to die and ready to kill’ with David’s age was a simple statement, which, for me, said more than anything else about what fighting a war costs the survivors. To have risked death is one form of recurring nightmare. To have caused death is another far more harrowing spectre.

The escalation of David’s story from one danger to the next did not feel as though it could be contained within the usual verse, chorus, middle-eight structure of a song. It was bigger than that. The song needed to better represent those significant phases in David’s story: enlisting at seventeen, crash landing after a bombing raid, on the run with the French underground, capture and torture by the Gestapo, enduring the Long March, and then walking hundreds of kilometres to the safety of the allied lines. Each phase automatically brought about a gear change in the song-writing to give it the appropriate sense of scale and the passage of time. The song has many parts that pile up on one another just as the life-threatening circumstances piled up on David. It builds into a soaring dogfight of instrumentation and then finally releases all the tension to represent David’s safe return home and the long life that awaited in Scarborough.

A ‘Blue Sky’ is normally associated with peace and purity, but it has an ambivalence in this song. It is a place where innocence is suspended, or somehow

cocooned. David could only ever hear the sound of his own engine, never the machine gun fire or the explosion of bombs. He was at least protected from the sound of death, if not the prospect of it.

This song took me into uncharted territory as a singer and as a song-writer. It was far more complex in its arrangement and forced me to sing out on behalf of someone else, as opposed to myself. I got very emotional throughout the writing of it. Even though I wrote it on an acoustic guitar, I ‘heard’ the huge arrangement right from the beginning.

10. “I’m Reminiscing”: *Plazer (listing those things one likes)*

I feel I let the benefits of reminiscing shine in this song. It is celebratory. I am happy to look back, because I am now happy to look forward. It has the feel of a song playing over the credits of a movie, and that is almost the case. It is the last but one chapter. Remembering has led to a re-birth. I confess that I sat down and thought *Bob Dylan* when I approached this song. Let it roll, I thought, which led to a kind of talk singing and the occasional catch of laughter in my voice. It was the antithesis of an introspective song. I felt ‘out there’ and ‘in the world’ when I wrote it and when I sang it. It is some distance in tone and mood from the opening track “I Can Hear Voices”. It is light and uncomplicated. It represents an emergence of some kind. A simple I, IV, V major chord structure. The arrangement is like that of a pub band – down to earth, raucous and authentic. No sign of the ‘grandiose’ in this song.

The band vamped on two chords at the end and I improvised some vocals. There was a feeling of not wanting to leave the party. This chapter and song are

quintessentially what the whole book has been – an exercise in looking back to set up a way of looking forward. My sense of *me* based on people and a place.

11. “Let Love Come”: *Fin ’amour (pure love)*

In the previous chapter I felt as though I had arrived somewhere significant. The journey was to all intents and purposes over. But I did not want to leave it there. My feeling from the beginning had been that this look at the past had to be with a view to establishing some guidelines for the future. What, therefore, was the best way to describe my philosophy for the future? If I had a message, what was it? In Scarborough I have a place where I belong, and in Julia I have someone with whom I belong. So, I say: let love come; be prepared to put oneself in a receptive mood for it. Even though the song is not a duet, I brought in a female vocal harmony to suggest two people. I do not know what will come next in my life, but I feel better prepared for whatever it might be.

Conclusion:

It is true that not every song had a direct influence on the writing of the chapters. They did, however, serve as vital checking devices. If the writing lost its balance, then the song would somehow detect it and offer a corrective nudge. There was never any telling what role a song would play. Some of them offered emotional inroads for the prose, such as “Good Old John Tom”, some of them were in turn pushed by the prose, such as “Blue Sky”, and some of them were happy just to set toes a-tapping, such as “I’m

Reminiscing”. But all of them, I hope, add dimension to the words on the page and to the person behind those words.

With regard to the specific business of autobiography, I discuss the implications of adding a second creative voice at the end of the thesis. However, the addition of a second creative voice, whether it is closely integrated into the primary voice, or merely an alternative to it, has a variety of implications beyond autobiography – it can be of use to any creative endeavour. The following are, I believe, some of the objective conclusions to be drawn from my subjective experience:

A secondary voice, especially if non-verbal (such as painting, music, pottery, etc.), provides creative independence. It releases the artist from whatever strictures govern the primary voice. By removing the pressure to ‘deliver the goods’ in the first voice (whether it be non-fiction or fiction, textual or another non-verbal form) one may become more receptive to emotional states summoned in the second voice, because we perceive that as the incidental voice, the voice that does not matter. It is something of a psychological trick, but it enables us to access an emotional space and then to move through it and let it play out, perhaps finding ourselves flowing into another emotional space altogether. Once the emotional space is accessed via the secondary voice, it may well liberate expression in the primary voice. Of course, whatever revelation the secondary voice leads to does not always have to be ‘significant’. It does not have to *deepen* our level of expression in the first voice. The second voice may be nothing more than a playful one; a means of taking a break and acquiring perspective – on returning to the first voice we are content to discover there is nothing deeper to explore.

The use of a second creative voice is, therefore, a diversion that may often, paradoxically, speed the artist faster towards their creative destination, whatever that may be.

Chapter Four

An examination of the literary theory behind the incorporation of an *external device* and the ultimate linguistic constraints on personal expression.

Defamiliarisation

The addition of a musical voice to my textual voice brought unexpected advantages. I could have written my memoir in chronological order and selected moments from it to write songs about. Instead, to bind the two voices closer, I use the troubadour song categories as my subjects for both songs and text. I use a musical theme as the controlling device to bring parts of my life into focus. This is the second aspect of my thesis that adds something new to the field of memoir: an *external device* employed as a life-assessment framework.

The external device removes the common dilemma for memoirists of ‘what to put in?’ The decision, in the main, is made for me by the song categories. Also, the absence of an obvious sequence is reminiscent of Montaigne’s own lack of an organised system. The reader’s haphazard entry points to Montaigne’s thoughts and feelings lend a relaxed informality to them. ‘He displays himself embedded in the random contingencies of his life and deals indiscriminately with the fluctuating movements of his consciousness, and it is precisely his random indiscriminateness that constitutes his method’ (Auerbach 1987: 37). When reading Montaigne I feel as if I have dropped in on a friend and caught him talking to himself. ‘Montaigne, who is alone with himself, finds enough life and as

it were bodily warmth in his ideas to be able to write as though he were speaking’ (Auerbach 1987: 17).

Because the subject matter for my chapters is imposed on me from the outside, I am forced to work harder at interacting with my past and to deal with issues that I might otherwise have skirted round, such as my cancelled wedding, and I am forced to work harder at interacting with other people as I did in my chapters on Dance and the war veteran David Slack. I needed to re-interview Margie and David after realising how little in the way of emotion I had drawn out of them. I had to work harder.

The use of an external device to govern how I look at my life and the lives of others breaks up my normal pattern of reflecting. For a start I remove any sense of sequence, alighting on incidents and emotional responses rather than time periods. It is as though I parachute into my life at unexpected moments instead of waiting until the plane’s scheduled arrival, and so the landscape looks craggier and the walk through it less familiar. ‘If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic. Thus, for example, all of our habits retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic’ (Shklovsky 2006: 778). The way I reviewed my past life was automatic. Worse than that, the way I lived in the present was automatic. I let days tick away in treadmill oblivion. What my life needed was an artistic poke:

The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important* (Shklovsky 2006: 778).

The troubadour song categories provide an alternative perception of my life and the addition of a second voice helps prolong the process of that perception. One has to read *and* listen. The introduction of ‘art’ into my life is like an act of resuscitation. ‘[A]rt exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stoney*’ (Shklovsky 2006: 778).

In my case it is an attempt to make my life *lifelike*. ‘The poet has to disautomatize his medium’ (Holdheim 1974: 320). I hope to ‘disautomatize’ the medium of memoir and at the same time give my life a kick-start. ‘The aesthetic aspect lies in the freshness and palpability regained by unhinging tradition-bound associations. Historical change results from the succession of such fruitful violations’ (Holdheim 1974: 321). The notion of ‘fruitful violations’ appeals to me. ‘Violations’ suggests the degree of force necessary to bring about change. ‘Fruitful’ suggests a sense of proportionate reward.

Defamiliarisation is like being knocked off balance to encourage a more secure footing in the future. The more familiar we are with a subject the more common it is likely to be, and so wherever defamiliarisation is needed, the more likely it is to be a subject for the everyman voice. This appears to be the view echoed by many of the Romantics. The further into my research that I went the more unity I found amongst the disparate elements. I felt encouraged that I might be on track with my collection of themes. They overlapped; had common ground. The Romantics, for example, were fans of Montaigne, held similar views towards the vernacular language of the troubadours, and were also among the forerunners of defamiliarisation.

In his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth says he wanted to present

situations from common life [...] in a selection of language really used by men; and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way (2013: 96-97).

Coleridge, in his *Biographia Literaria*, re-states Wordsworth's intent to disturb the 'lethargy of custom' and to shake off the 'film of familiarity'. He says, '[W]e have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand' (Coleridge 2008: 314). Shelley also echoes Coleridge's adaptation of the Biblical phrase 'eyes have they, but they see not' (Psalms 115 and 135) when he says, 'Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar' (2015: 41).

This, then, is the rationale behind using an external device to shape my memoir; it is a means of shaking up, and hence sharpening, the way I look at my life. What I did not realise at the start of my thesis was that in using the troubadour song categories as my 'defamiliariser' I was engaging in a process employed by the troubadours themselves. Although they had a reputation for writing in the vernacular, enhancing the everyman voice, they also liked to play with form and meter, so that their works unsettled and surprised the listener: '[T]he emotions of love are a continual repetition of the same elements put together in new forms, in the hope of reaching a stable point of sense' (Lindsay 1976: 172).

At the forefront of these experimental troubadours was Arnaut Daniel. 'With a few exceptions he composed in a style characterised by brilliant ornamentation, particularly by elaborate rhyming and by the use of rare words chosen for their sound effects, the sense falling where it may' (Goldin 1973: 209). Letting the sense fall where it may is defamiliarisation in the extreme. Daniel was, admittedly, not looking to clarify

perception in his unusual use of language. He had a ‘natural tendency towards the incomprehensible and strikingly original’ (Hueffer 2013: 102). The following is one of my favourite examples: ‘Love polishes and aureates my song’ (Goldin 1973: 217).

‘Aureate’ is to make golden.

Originality appears to have excited Daniel more than making sense and his lyrical work is overwhelmed by a musical, rather than literary, sensibility. Gérard Gourian, cited by Gaunt and Kay describes his lyrics as having an ‘extraordinary texture of sonorities’ (1999: 93). Whatever Daniel’s intention, Goldin tells us his craftsmanship ‘was greatly admired by Dante’ (1973: 209). Dante goes so far as to write poetry in the troubadour language of Occitan to demonstrate its rougher, meatier charm over the elitist refinement of Latin and thus helped create a poetic link that would lead to the Romantics, Pound and Eliot.

The troubadours and Dante are as conscious of ‘voice’ as I have tried to be. They reflect upon it and analyse it. Dante wrote:

Since I find that no one, before myself, has dealt in any way with the theory of eloquence in the vernacular, and since we can plainly see that such eloquence is necessary to everyone [...] I shall try [...] to say something useful about the language of people who speak the vulgar tongue (1996: 3).

In his introduction to *De Vulgari Eloquentia* Stephen Botterill says, ‘Dante’s argument about the vernacular is as true of *all* vernaculars, in the abstract, as it is of Italian in the concrete’ (Dante 1996: xviii). According to Botterill, ‘[T]he *De vulgari eloquentia* itself – is conceived primarily as an exercise in the technical analysis, by a poet, of instances of his own literary production’ (1996: xi). It is one of the first, if not the first, example

of a poet dissecting his own work in this way. One might argue that Dante invented the exegesis.

Limits of language

Lacan's investigation of the troubadours in *Courtly Love as Anamorphosis* serves to further tie together the relevance of those elements that I combine in my thesis – the ethos of the troubadours, Montaigne's testing of himself and the pursuit of how to live, the everyman voice, the direct emotional appeal of songs – showing where they overlap in terms of sublimation, the controlling unconscious and defamiliarisation. 'In offering the imitation of an object, they make something different out of that object' (Lacan 1992: 141). When Lacan talks of sublimation, however, it takes me into previously unexplored areas of my rationale:

Here we see functioning in the pure state the authority of that place the instinct aims for in sublimation. That is to say, that what man demands, what he cannot help but demand, is to be deprived of something real (Lacan 1992: 150).

The inaccessibility of The Lady in troubadour love poetry becomes more than a corporeal pursuit. 'It is impossible to serenade one's Lady in her poetic role in the absence of the given that she is surrounded and isolated by a barrier' (Lacan 1992: 149). The Lady stands for something outside the symbolic code, or as Lacan might put it, *Das Ding* (The Thing). 'Dante's attitude towards little Beatrice is "to make her the equivalent of philosophy or indeed, in the end, of the science of the sacred"' (Lacan, 1992: 149). And so in Lacan's view 'the person in question is close to allegory' (1992: 149).

It made me ask whether my quest for a deeper engagement with life might be equated to the forever thwarted wooing of the unattainable Lady. Was my unconscious at work here? Recognising my affinity with the temperament of the troubadour? Is the thing that I am after the same Thing that Lacan refers to? That aspect of life beyond linguistics, beyond my subservience to the symbolic system?

This regulating structure of linguistic (and other institutional) codes makes up what Lacan calls the symbolic order. It interacts with what he calls the imaginary order, in which we fail to recognise our subjection to the symbolic, but instead nurture the delusion of being whole and autonomous selves. From the interaction between the symbolic and the imaginary orders, Lacan infers the existence of a third order: that of the real, which lies outside the limit of either, and which includes much that is unconscious (Gaunt and Kay 1999: 213).

In the previous chapters I asked whether it was possible to make my memoir more *me*. It is not just about finding an everyman voice, but *my* everyman voice. I have been operating on the principle that the everyman voice can only emerge if one connects with people and participates in the world, and that preparedness for intimacy with others forces a better understanding of oneself. Literary critical theory, however, confounds my simple rationale. According to Barthes I am dead, and according to Lacan I am delusional. I would like to say ‘the report of my death was an exaggeration’ but I can hear how delusional that sounds.

The difficulties one suffers when debating *identity* and *meaning* are not, I am encouraged to learn, peculiar to the slow-witted post-grad. Those who are responsible for creating the difficulties are also prone to suffering from them:

I would also suggest that Lacan's impenetrable style was due, surprisingly, to a kind of intellectual caution, which made him wary of making sloppy and indefensible pronouncements, and that his fear of being misconstrued, coupled with a natural ineptness in communication, led to him literally tying his meanings up in verbal knots, hedging about every half-statement with half a dozen qualifying sub-clauses, and obsessively weighing each and every word (Bailly 2013: 2).

So where does that leave the *me* I am in pursuit of? How close have I come to the impossible realisation of a 'whole and autonomous' self? 'He wrestles with his shadow, certain only of never laying hold of it' (Gusdorf 1980: 48). For the time being, in deference to Barthes, I am content to think of everything I write as a succession of epitaphs, just so long as they are entertaining and whoever deigns to read them recognises something of themselves in the sentiments.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the possibility of creating templates for autobiographical writing that might make it easier for the author to choose his content, but harder to obscure himself within it; a means of going deeper, amplifying discoveries, and of enhancing the illusion that the author is present at the time of reading.

James Olney tells us: '[T]here are no rules or formal requirements binding the prospective autobiographer – no restraints, no necessary models, no obligatory observances', which therefore make it 'the most elusive of literary documents' (1980: 4). When it comes to how one should describe or identify autobiographical writing, Olney concludes: '[N]o two observers, no matter how assured they may be, are in agreement' (1980: 7).

My intention was to tackle this lack of agreement by devising new forms of autobiographical structures that were readily identifiable, and which would provide a clear framework for any aspirant autobiographer who might be struggling with where to start their story and how to tell it with conviction.

Through the practical application of an *external device* and a *second creative voice* (analysed in the previous chapters through discourses on truth and identity) a common denominator emerged– that of *conflict*. Conflict, or, at least, extreme juxtaposition, was at the heart of every decision about what to put in and how to present it. The most common conflict is the disparity between how I would like the world to see me and how it actually sees me. A work of non-fiction, in my view, is shaped by the same literary considerations as fiction. Without presenting dilemmas of conscience or

self-image, there is no sense of truth. But as ‘truth’ remains difficult to quantify, then perhaps the success of a piece of life-writing in the eyes of a reader is not so much in knowing it is ‘true’ as it is in trusting that you are not being deliberately ‘deceived’. And for me as author, I am content to accept that there is no truth to a piece of life writing other than that which the reader assigns to it.

In the course of this research, I believe I have got to know myself better and in so doing have made it possible for others to know me better, too. I have learned that where my voice comes from is in part dependent on where I come from. Just as the troubadours are associated with the Aquitaine, I suspect this work will be seen very much as the story of a lad from Scarborough. Scarborough, I realise, is the psychological platform from which I address the world.

Brilliant autobiographies have been written without applying any ‘model’ other than letting the events of a life fall out in chronological order. For example, Nabokov and his *Speak, Memory*. My research, in addressing the two life writing problems of what to put in to an autobiography and how to present it, was not conducted in order to provide *the* alternative to traditional autobiography, but merely *an* alternative. The concepts of *external device* and *second creative voice* offer starting points for future autobiographers and open up the prospects for further research in the field.

For the purposes of this research, I used the troubadour song categories as my *external device*, but it is possible in a variety of ways other than using the troubadour song categories. For example, an author might wander round the National Gallery and only write up those scenes of their life that are inspired by the paintings they see – a landscape might trigger memories of childhood picnics; a portrait might remind one of a

cruel teacher. As for supplementing one's writing voice with a *second creative voice*, the second voice does not have to be a song-writing one. It could be any other means of expression that helps access the unconscious and dislodge writers' block. And, indeed, accessing the unconscious does not need to be the only objective of a second voice. It could be used the other way around: an artist working in a medium inspired by the unconscious might wish to develop a more literal second voice. For example, Bob Dylan might one day decide that he wants to write some essays to accompany a collection of ethereal songs. Or, perhaps the introduction of a second voice could be the opportunity for a creative partnership: a second person could be responsible for the second voice, and then two people as well as two mediums are brought into play. These are all possible examples of how the results of my research could be transferred, shared and challenged in order to help move the field of autobiography forward.

With regard to my own future research I have plans to broaden my interpretation of what constitutes an external device. My next book, and something of a sequel to this one, will footsteps *Trails of the Troubadours* by Raimon de Loi, a twentieth-century academic and folklorist, who, in 1926, wrote about his walks through the land of the medieval troubadours in the South West of France. In a case like this, the external device is that of an experience. The experience will trigger digressions of memory, which I will weave into the travelogue, and once again accompany with songs, this time inspired by both the journey as well as the memories.

I set out to find strategies for autobiographical writing that would encourage me to confront emotions at a deeper level and enable me to present them with a sense of proportion. I wanted to find the means by which I could tell my story and which might

also encourage others to attempt the telling of theirs. In the simplest of terms I am a collector and disseminator of stories, and I am proud to be that. Stories contain truths and, whether we can articulate them or not, we always recognise them. Stories are what bind humanity. Mary Karr says that the writing of and the subsequent response to her autobiography, *The Liars' Club*, constructed for her a 'mythic village of like-minded souls who bloom together by sharing old tales – the kind that fire you up and set you loose' (2007: xvi).

I would like to think that this research, and the original inspiration of Montaigne and the troubadours, has set me up as a sharer of tales. Montaigne helped me recognise that no subject matter is too trivial for contemplation. If he could write about 'thumbs', I could write about rescuing a Lilo. The troubadours helped me cast a more outward-looking eye and showed me that there was something of myself to be discovered in telling other people's stories. I do not think I am ever likely to be as politically or socially acute as a medieval troubadour, but I hope I may carry forward some of their humanity (and that of Montaigne's, too) into a twenty-first century arena.

Rationale for the interviewees

Industry Professionals:

Brian May (singer/songwriter): Interviewed 22/2/14

Brian May is the lead guitarist for the rock band *Queen*. He represents a singer-songwriter at the top end of the fame scale. *Queen* played the largest stadiums in the world. I wanted to talk to a musician who, in some respects, was as far away from his audience as it is possible to get. He writes big, anthemic songs, usually on generic or abstract themes. Recently, however, he has taken to going out in a duo with female singer Kerry Ellis, which has led to a much more intimate and conversational kind of gig.

Neil Innes (singer/songwriter): Interviewed 5/3/14

Neil Innes was the main songwriter for the *Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band*, most famous for their 1960s hit “Urban Spaceman”. The band still enjoys cult status, but Neil also plays as a solo artist, accompanying himself on a single instrument – either piano or guitar. He operates at the other end of the professional fame scale to Brian May. Neil’s gigs are up close and personal with his audience. He writes socially engaged songs, such as “Joe Public” and “Eye Candy”, mostly with a sense of humour, but also capable of being serious: ‘I laugh easily and think a lot.’

By choosing two singer-songwriters at either end of the song-spectrum, I operated a kind of triangulation, using myself as the third artistic point. Where would I place myself on the spectrum in terms of approach and output, having examined both extremes?

David Sedaris (humorist): Interviewed 27/6/15.

I chose David Sedaris because (a) he writes the kind of short, anecdotal pieces that I would eventually like to emulate and (b) there is a performance element to his writing: he reads his pieces out loud at theatres. I wrote my autobiographical pieces with a view to also reading extracts from them in front of an audience, followed by playing the text's song counterpart. Sedaris is a contemporary form of literary troubadour, taking his work out to an audience. He is populist and funny, but also at times poignant.

Julian Barnes (author): Interviewed 14/11/13

Julian Barnes writes at the more literary end of the scale to David Sedaris. *A similar triangulation technique to the one operated with Brian May and Neil Innes.* Unlike Sedaris, Barnes does not enjoy 'taking his writing' on the road. He avoids promotions and public appearances as much as he can. He has more in common with Montaigne than he has with a troubadour. Montaigne wrote from inside his tower. He did not 'participate' in the world in order to write about it. I was curious to see how representative Barnes felt he was, given his intellectual distance from an 'everyman' audience.

Colin Dunne (journalist and author): Interviewed 17/4/15

I chose Colin Dunne because I felt I had more in common with his writing style than any other contemporary humorist. As well as a feature writer for the nationals, he was also a critically acclaimed thriller writer. He has the voice I aim for: honest and humorous, able to write about the smallest of things. Along with Sedaris, Dunne represents the area of writing I would like to pursue on completion of my research.

Chapter interviewees:

Margery Pickering (dancer and choreographer): Interviewed 14/3/14

Margie is a Scarborough girl who has been around the world several times. I saw a parallel between her story and my own. We had both left the town to pursue big dreams but both had come home to Scarborough to roost. I joined her dance class in the spirit of the immersive writing of George Plimpton and to put myself into Margie's dancing shoes. She had the troubadour spirit. Her dancing voice came from the same place as my musical voice.

David Slack (WW2 fighter bomber pilot): Interviewed 10/2/14

David was a war veteran with a story to tell – a story that he was only ready to tell after 70 years. He came from a time when 'everymen' displayed extraordinary courage; a time when 'everymen' became heroes. In the case of both Margie and David, apart from collecting stories, the exercise was to step out of myself to get a better look at myself, to use biographical writing as a further means of autobiographical examination.

Appendix i**Song Lyrics**

(1)

“I Can Hear Voices”

There's a whisper going round
 Says you've lost yourself again
 No-one knows what to believe
 Who you think you are and when

I can hear voices in my head
 Everyday those lines I'm fed
 They're just fooling around with me again
 Change their minds like they were ten
 I hear voices, I hear voices in my head.

There's a rumour you're unsound
 Cannot settle on a name
 Someone said you've gone off track
 There's no station for your train.

I can hear voices in my head
 Everyday those lines I'm fed
 There just fooling around with me again
 Change their minds like they were ten
 I hear voices, I hear voices in my head
 I can hear voices in my head
 Everyday those lines I'm fed
 There just fooling around with me again

There's a doctor of the brain
 Went and took a look inside
 Made no sense of what he saw
 Said no cure could be applied

I can hear voices in my head
 Everyday those lines I'm fed
 There just fooling around with me again
 Change their minds like they were ten
 I hear voices, hear voices
 I can hear voices, hear voices
 I can hear voices, hear voices
 In my head.

(2)

“Until You”

I had a shell, hard as nails
And not a thing in the world could break through
Until you

I had a face that I put on
And not a soul in the world could see through
Until you

Now there's you and there's me
With all of the world left to see
Coz I feel
Now I feel
Yes I feel
Something now

I was stuck, somewhere inside
And you were happy to wait patiently
Until me

You drew me out, and there I was
Sorry I made you wait patiently
Until me

Now there's you and there's me
With all of the world left to see
Yes, there's you and there's me
With all of the world left to see
Coz I feel
Now I feel
Yes I feel
Something now

(3)

“Catch That Train”

Too many people crowding out my day
 Too many faces with too much to say
 Ah, but they say it anyway

Too many voices laying down the law
 Too much tension I can't take any more
 I want to show the world the door

But you've got the love
 That puts me to shame
 You live and let live
 Again and again
 I just gotta get that train
 I've just gotta catch that train
 To be human once again

So overwhelming, other people in my space
 I wish they'd all disappear without trace
 Ain't I the sorry case

But you've got the love
 That puts me to shame
 You live and let live
 Again and again
 I just gotta get that train
 I just gotta catch that train
 To be human once again

But you've got the love, baby
 You've got the love, yeah

Everyone pointing, they can see the fool I am
 There's no disguising the shame of this man
 Ah, what a lonely course he ran

But you've got the love
 That puts me to shame
 You live and let live
 Again and again
 I just gotta get that train
 I've just gotta catch that train
 To be human once again

I just gotta get onboard, baby
Gotta find myself a seat
Gonna look out of the window
And love the places we go
I'll go with you
We'll go together, yeah
And when I go
I'll be human once again.

(4)

“Good Old John Tom”

Well I'll tell you a tale
 Of a man who set sail
 Through the hearts of the people that knew him
 He made no demand
 For the love in your hand
 But we all let it flow freely to him
 We all let it flow freely to him

He stood in the bar
 Like a Christmas day star
 And we all gathered round just to hear him
 Laughed til we cried
 Then burst at the side
 Feeling better by far to be near him
 Feeling better by far to be near him

For he was known as Good Old John Tom
 Bring him on, bring him on
 That Good Old John Tom
 Up goes the cry for Good Old John Tom
 So bring him on, bring him on, bring him on.

There wansn't a gloom
 That could live in the room
 With Good Old John Tom making merry
 He banished your woes
 With his rhyme and his prose
 In this world men like him are necessary
 In this world men like him are necessary

For he was known as Good Old John Tom
 Bring him on, bring him on
 That Good Old John Tom
 Up goes the cry for Good Old John Tom
 So bring him on, bring him on, bring him on.

Now the Lord he got wind
 Of our good natured friend
 And St Peter was sent down to find him
 St Peter did say
 God loves cabaret

And has booked you to headline in heaven
Has booked you to headline in heaven

For he was known as Good Old John Tom
Bring him on, bring him on
That Good Old John Tom
And the Lord he cried out
Hey Good Old John Tom
I fell off my cloud when they brought you on
Brought you on

Now the funeral was sad
But we all knew we had
The best of good men to remember
His memory graces
The smiles on our faces
From January to December
From January to December

For he was known as Good Old John Tom
Bring him on, bring him on
That Good Old John Tom
And all of us left
Say Good Old John Tom
We look to the day when you bring us on
Bring us on
For he was known as Good Old John Tom
Bring him on, bring him on
That Good Old John Tom
Still hear the cry for Good Old John Tom
So bring him on, bring him on, bring him on.

(5)

“Samba Turn”

Put one foot in front of the other
 Well that's just walking
 Why would I bother?
 Take one step without a spring?
 Why waste time breathing
 If you're not going to sing?

Oh I, I had a Samba Turn
 And nothing's been the same since then
 I'm on the dance floor once again
 Oh I, I had a Samba Turn
 Now Fred Astaire's got nothing on me
 Poor Gene Kelly looking like a zombie
 Oh oh all the love you learn
 When you have a Samba Turn

A single kiss devoid of passion
 No that's not my style
 Cheek-to-cheek's the fashion
 Swing my hips, let down my hair
 Those Latin rhythms
 Got me devil-may-care

Oh I, I had a Samba Turn
 And nothing's been the same since then
 I'm on the dance floor once again
 Oh I, I had a Samba Turn
 Now Cyd Charise can't hold a candle
 Dear old Ginger says I'm too hot to handle
 Oh oh all the love you learn
 When you have a Samba Turn

Oh I, I had a Samba Turn
 Now Fred Astaire's got nothing on me
 Poor Gene Kelly looking like a zombie
 Oh oh all the love you learn
 When you have a Samba Turn
 My feet are tapping and they just can't help it
 When I have a Samba Turn
 Going crazy like Michael Flatly
 When I have a Samba Turn
 No, not a seizure, I'm just really happy
 When I have a Samba Turn.

(6)

“Skimming Stones”

I set sail on the morning tide
 Left my Sweetheart skimming stones
 She kissed me and she gently gently cried
 Don't let the sea wrap round your bones

God speed across the sea
 Will she wait for me
 Fair wind across the sea
 Will she wait for me
 My distant love

I keep clear on a course for home
 While I walk on foreign shore
 Does my True Love take her pleasures on her own
 Or are there callers at her door

God speed across the sea
 Will she wait for me
 Fair wind across the sea
 Will she wait for me
 My distant love

I count days running into years
 And I think of skimming stones
 How she kissed me and she gently gently cried
 Don't let the sea wrap round your bones

God speed across the sea
 Will she wait for me
 Fair wind across the sea
 Will she wait for me
 Will she wait for me
 Will she wait for me
 My distant love
 My distant love
 My distant love

(7)

“Fellow Traveller”

There’s a wild life, knocking at your door
So don’t hide away no more

Pack your bags, boy, hit the road
Say hello to your fellow traveller
Don’t play the ostrich
With your head in the sand
Go shake the hand
Of your fellow traveller

Coz there’s a wild life, knocking at your door
So don’t hide away no more

Take a breath, girl, how lucky you are
The world that you share with your fellow traveller
Walkin’ or crawlin’
Up on the wing
Come on now swim
With your fellow traveller

Coz there’s a wild life, knocking at your door
So don’t hide away no more

You’re not the only one
Who the hell do you think you are
Taking up all that space
Move along down the line
Make a little shoulder room for
Someone else in your place

Coz there’s a wild life, knocking at your door
So don’t hide away
No there’s a wild life, knocking at your door
So don’t hide away no more
No don’t hide away no more.

(8)

"I Was Young"

Sunshine and memory
 From the clock tower to the lighthouse
 Faces that I used to be
 Are asking me now
 How did we all get on?

Young boy, so insecure
 Putting pressure on his future
 I do not blame him at all
 And he in return
 Says we're okay

And now I'm of an age
 I'm lucky I can say, 'I was young'
 Some friends of mine have gone
 They'll never get to say
 They were young
 And you can take me if you please
 I've had a real good run
 May not have gone too far
 But I sang Scarborough Fair
 And found my true love there

Sea breeze harmony
 From the clock tower to the lighthouse
 Singing me home to her heart
 My harbour town
 She carries me still

And now I'm of an age
 I'm lucky I can say, 'I was young'
 Some friends of mine have gone
 They'll never get to say
 They were young
 And you can take me if you please
 I've had a real good run
 May not have gone too far
 But I sang Scarborough Fair
 And found my true love there (x 2)

I was young.

(9)

“Blue Sky”

Only seventeen
 Ready to kill and ready to die
 Left your love behind
 Time to let go and time to fly
 In a blue sky

Blue sky, heaven protect you in a blue sky
 Telling yourself you know why
 All of those bombs going down
 Blue sky, hell in a limbo in a blue sky
 Maybe today now you'll die
 Taking a turn going down
 And as you fall
 There's no reply
 On the radio

Living underground
 Holding your nerve and holding true
 What they did for you
 Risking their lives to see you fly
 In a blue sky

Blue sky, heaven protect you in a blue sky
 Telling yourself you know why
 All of those bombs going down
 Blue sky, hell in a limbo in a blue sky
 Maybe today now you'll die
 Taking a turn going down
 And the girl
 In red socks came
 And led you to the Burgundy line
 You see her still and you hear this rhyme

What did you do in the war, Daddy?
 How did you hope to win?
 Circuits and bumps and turns, laddie
 And how to get out of a spin

When betrayal came
 You gave away nothing in your pain
 Gave away nothing in your pain

And they beat you for the fun of it
Left you starving in your cell
Everyday someone against the wall
The firing squad like a tolling bell
Thought they'd kill you in the Long March
Didn't know you were tough as hell

And oo, but you made it
And oo, you got back home, yeah
Oo, such a lucky life
Always thought you were immortal

Then at ninety-one
You took your Typhoon one last time
Into a blue sky

Blue sky, heaven protect you in a blue sky
Leave you forever to fly
Over our heads looking down
Up in your blue sky, yeah
Up in your blue sky.

And the girl
In red socks came
And led you to the Burgundy line
You see her still and you hear this rhyme

What did you do in the war, Daddy?
How did you hope to win?
Circuits and bumps and turns, laddie
And how to get out of a spin

Only seventeen.

(10)

“I’m Reminiscing”

Two kids in the classroom
 Laughing like drains
 Same sense of humour
 But no sense of brains
 Just waiting for the bell to ring
 And for a ciggy in the portacabin

Two kids go to London
 Hoping for fame
 One of them got drunk
 And the other did the same
 Sulking ’til they got their applause
 And getting stuck in a set of swing doors

Now it does me good for a while
 To see my history smile
 I’m reminiscing

Sexy babysitter
 Taking her to bed
 Out into the orchard
 And dropped her on head
 Drinking when the ambulance came
 With cousins Peter and Richard again

Carrying the coffin
 For my Auntie B
 Slipped on the ice
 And all of us at sea
 The mourners thought that she was a gonna
 The last laugh in my Auntie B’s honour

Now it does me good for a while
 To see my history smile
 I’m reminiscing
 Oo I’m reminiscing yeah
 Just reminiscing

Reeperbahn in winter
 Breaking the law
 Ladies of the night
 Now need I say any more

Hangin' out with my brother Jim
Ah life is never dull with him

Thinking of my mother
How to describe
Her big open heart
A million miles wide
All the love we had down our lane
Raging like a hurricane

Now it does me good for a while
To see my history smile
I'm reminiscing
Oo I'm reminiscing yeah
Just reminiscing
Now it does me good for a while
To see my history smile
I'm reminiscing

(11)

“Let Love Come”

Let love be foolish
Lead a merry dance
Leave me stupid like
A zombie in a trance
But let it come
Let it come all the same
Let love come
Let it come all the same

Let love be shameless
At my expense
Play silly games
With my good common sense
But let it come
Let it come all the same
Let love come
Let it come all the same

Keep your fingers crossed
Hope it knows your name

But let it come
Let it come all the same
Let love come
Let it come all the same

Keep your fingers crossed
Hope it knows your name

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Industry Professionals: interviewees

Brian May (singer/songwriter): Interviewed 22/2/14

David Sedaris (humorist): Interviewed 27/6/15.

Neil Innes (singer/songwriter): Interviewed 5/3/14

Julian Barnes (author): Interviewed 14/11/13

Colin Dunne (journalist and author): Interviewed 17/4/15

Chapter subjects: interviewees:

Margery Pickering (dancer and choreographer): Interviewed 14/3/14

David Slack (WW2 fighter bomber pilot): Interviewed 10/2/14