Anywhere but Here

David Young

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Anywhere but Here

My passing will go unnoticed. That final moment will only be known to have occurred in hindsight. A doctor may make the pronouncement, "he has gone" or mouth some equally infantile words, but by then the actual moment will have slipped unknown and unrecorded into history. I will probably not notice either.

The moment I pass will be as unnoticed as the moment I arrived. At the moment of my coming, my parents were enjoying (or otherwise) a fuck. Thinking back to the moment that must have been, what fun I could have had announcing in a big booming voice, "Hello everybody, I am here" at the moment of impregnation. Interpolating later experience, I think I would probably have been ignored, or any recognition of my arrival put down to disappointed passion – or the passing of wind. Instead there was a long interlude before my existence was even suspected. I wonder if that moment of suspicion was a moment of joy or sorrow for the colliding bodies who caused me to be here?

I suspect sorrow for many reasons, including that it was the middle of World War II. The collision of bodies must have occurred during a brief leave period from my father's day job as a commando in the British Army. I have no recollection of my father at an early age, which is understandable because he was rarely present. I do have a photo of myself in my mother's arms with my father standing beside us in the obligatory pose of the day, taken when I was a month old, but I have no memory of him being in my early life. My father spent most of that part of my life parachuting behind enemy lines, silently slitting the throats of guards and generally doing the things commandos do before returning to their own side of the lines. It was a lifestyle I imagine he would have enjoyed.

When I was less than a year old my mother received a telegram beginning, "We regret to inform you…" and an extra little sentence that told her that, as from next week, she would not be receiving her dead husband's army pay. Later in life I could have almost felt sorrow for my mother had I not reluctantly deciphered, within a minimal period from my birth, that she was a total bitch.

The earliest moment I remember was, as a small baby, being in a small, grey, damp place inhabited by fearful squashed-up shadows, listening to planes flying overhead and bombs falling. Even as a very small baby I was fully cognisant of having come to life in a world where the objective of a significant portion of my fellow beings was to kill me. I remember knowing how far away the bombs were, when they dropped, by the pitch of the noise they made as they fell. The sound of their falling would change. They would start at a low pitch that would move up the scale unto they went bang, and the pitch they were at when they went bang indicated how far away they were. A low pitch meant they were at a distance, and a high pitch that they were close. Some things are remembered forever. Fortunately, I lived on the edges of London, so most of the bombs were far away. It was also fortunate that Hitler made the mistake of bombing London rather than Royal Air Force airfields because there was one of those a few streets away. The sounds of aircraft and air fighting were the dominant soundtrack to my early life.

What I remember mostly was thinking, "I have come to the wrong place". It was more a feeling than a thought. A very deep-rooted and uncompromising feeling from the depths of the ocean that I did not want to be here, and how I must have turned left instead of right onto the mistaken path to that moment of hell. Anywhere but here.

When I grew older a mystery developed around my remembering the planes and bombs. I learnt at school that the Blitz had ended long before I was born, and my memories must have been pure imagination. But there was a second round of bombings, the Baby Blitz (Operation Steinbock to the Luftwaffe) that happened from January to June 1944. This places my memories from a time when I was between two and eight months old.

The bombs have long stopped dropping on London. The planes, those shot down and those not, have passed into scrap to be recycled into Volkswagens or tin cans, and recycled again several times since. The pilots on both sides are mostly dead, traumatically or through old age, but the memory of

a small baby not wanting to be here continues as a moment that does not pass.

The second moment I remember was being surrounded by women, slowly removing glass and rubble from my pram whilst all I wanted was to go back to sleep in a vain attempt to escape that utterly miserable moment, and every other miserable moment before and after. I found out later in life that I had been close to one of Mr. Hitler's falling V2 rockets, and a shopfront had collapsed into my pram. A little closer and the unnoticed moment of my passing would have come sooner than the moment lurking sometime in the future. Mother had been inside the shop, but only the shopfront had collapsed, leaving a large, hungry mouth open to expose a retail space full of empty shelves and posters with dire warnings of the consequences of buying illicit goods on the black market. Inside, my mother was perfectly safe, otherwise I would have been taken to Dr Barnardo's orphanage and shipped to Australia at the end of the war.

The British had a very pragmatic way of solving population problems. In earlier times prisoners were sent to the Colonies as a way of filling the 'pink bits' on the world map with persons of British extraction, or they were hung. At the end of the war it was war orphans being sent to populate Australia. Prisoners or children? Who cares? If they, whoever they are, become surplus to requirements, ship them out to far-off places to fulfil the dream of the Empire, making the whole of the known and unknown world a British possession; a world where every bit on the map was pink. At least the alternative for war orphans being sent to Australia was not being 'hung by the neck until dead'.

Although I remember the mass of women removing glass and rubble from my pram as real, the knowledge that this had been caused by a shopfront collapsing as the result of a V2 rocket, and the remainder of the shop surviving, was handed down to me by my mother, told in a manner that suggested divine intervention had been at play. My mother was a devout, born again atheist, but she had an unshakable belief in her own divinity. There was no doubt in the telling of the story that my survival, and of the shop, had been entirely due to her presence. She also drank too much.

Shortly before, a vehicle – half-truck and half-tank – carrying eight terrified Nazis had driven slowly along a narrow track through forests near The Hague. The driver, concentrating obsessively on the track, avoiding the slightest bump or pothole in a hopeful but unassuaged attempt at arriving at the destination. Beside him sat an officer in a once immaculate Oberfeldwebel uniform that was now stinking of sweaty armpits and fear. In the back sat six common soldiers united in stiff, silent, repetitive prayer, knowing that blind faith in the Führer would only offer limited protection from the unnatural, brooding monster on the trailer being towed behind, should the monster, officially a Vergeltungswaffen (Vengeance) 2, decide to malfunction, as monsters have a habit of doing. On each side nature slides by, uncaring of the human need for global domination, safe and secure in the knowledge that no matter what the species calling itself human conceived and plotted, nature cannot be dominated. Nature would just make a few adjustments to accommodate human insanity and continue along the path of fulfilling Darwin's dreams.

The monster on the trailer consisted of a long cylinder about fifty-feet long and six feet in diameter. At one end of the cylinder rocket motors resided, whilst at the other a large bomb lay hidden beneath a witch's hat-style cone. The bomb was even more menacing from its hiding, a harbinger of death ready to strike from the darkness, unannounced, like Jack the Ripper planning a Saturday night out. The Nazi soldiers' fear of the weapon on the trailer, created by their demented leader's ideologies, was unfounded. If the monster had decided to fulfil its uncaring potential earlier than intended, that moment would have passed unnoticed by the soldiers as they rapidly converted into charred fertiliser, destined to be absorbed back into nature in an ancient process that constantly reinforces nature's disdain for the species that mistakenly refers to itself as being human. The German soldiers would not have felt a thing.

The task assigned to this group of humans was to launch the monster on a single vicious journey upwards and away, to pause for a moment, between up and down, and then descend on another group of humans some sixty miles away. On its journey it would view dispassionately the Northern French countryside, cross the English Channel and follow

the River Thames to the place where it was destined to eliminate multiple existences, indiscriminately, randomly and without moral concern. The arrival was to be faster than sound could articulate its presence by the sighing of the winds, and human ears would only have perceived the retrospective announcement of the ghost of death completing its journey long after life had departed.

Arriving at the launch site, the next task of the crew was to tilt the monster upright so that its tail sat upright on a flimsy metal structure that resembled a card table without a top. The arrival, and transformation from horizontal to vertical, did nothing to lessen the fear. The launch crew had completed this task several times before, but this only increased their certainty that statistically the monster, this time, must stumble on its launch frame and demonstrate, with unstoppable certainty, that their moment of passing was due to arrive in about ten seconds. This possibility was heightened to a dull crescendo by the twisted mass of a previously existing half-truck, half-tank vehicle that had been viciously cast away from the centre of the launch site by a long past, uncooperative monster of a few days before. In a rugged circle around the launch site stood burnt and grotesque decimated and demented trees, half standing and half lying, testifying to the reach of death the crew were preparing to launch on fellow humans. Already new growth had begun appearing on the surface of destruction, showing the utter indifference of nature to the foibles of humanity.

When the monster was in place and tested, a technical crew arrived to fill the fuel tanks with psychotically unstable rocket fuel and adjust the turntable so that the rocket would head in the direction of London, before handing control back to the launch crew. When the monster was ready to launch, the crew hid in slit trenches, except for the Oberfeldwebel, who launched the eager monster from the control panel inside the control vehicle. The monster grumbled and rumbled loudly before slowly rising and ever faster vanishing through the clouds, and the crew drove back to base, euphoric in their appreciation of nature manifest in the Netherlands countryside.

Pausing for a moment at the point between up and down to survey East London for a suitable arrival point, the monster decided on a shop with a pram parked outside, not knowing that a woman in the shop had divine protection. At the moment before arrival it was roughly thrust to one side, extinguishing the future dreams, and the never-to-be dreams, of innumerable unborn generations of humans less deserving than the divine one who, at that moment, was buying her weekly two ounces of butter, two ounces of tea and three eggs. Later that night, a bomb from a RAF aircraft sent three of the launch crew to join the victims of the V2 they had recently launched.

Scrumping

Artwork David Young
Charcoal on paper

Scrumping

The divine one never relied on her ration book as the sole source of food. The pram, operated by my sister and with myself as cover, played a significant role in providing sustenance for the woman during that period of national near starvation. My sister was my unremembered, unwilling and unappreciated carer and pram pusher. My mother would send my sister out for a walk with a preplanned route dependent on the season. My sister was required to push me, sleeping or otherwise, in the pram. The designated walk would pass the farm at the end of the airfield or along the path beside the little stream across from the orchard. On her return, there was the expectation from my mother that the space below my little ark, reserved for nappies, blankets and bottle, would be stuffed with potatoes, carrots, apples and whatever was in season at the time. None of these items were rationed, but it saved the effort of turning the back and front gardens into vegetable patches and engaging in the unseemly practice of bartering with neighbours – except of course when my sister had been particularly successful the divine one would barter excess for eggs with the man over the back fence who kept chickens.

When the space below the false bottom of the pram beneath my sleeping self was full, I was expected to hide fresh produce under the blankets surrounding my tiny person without staining the blankets with any evidence of the ground from which it had been ripped. It was a condition that all items consigned to the pram were cleaned beforehand. Fagin had calculated with her usual precision that, whilst many tried to steal from the farm and orchard at night and were routinely apprehended for what was then a major and shameful crime, nobody would suspect a seven-year-old urchin girl pushing a pram containing a cute little bub in broad daylight. I might add that the crime and shame referred to the act of being caught, always the only crime for residents living in that part of Essex. Years later, when I finally got to know my sister, we would swap childhood memories and I was left in no doubt that the cute, smiling self she had to push around as a cover for her thieving missions was, at that time, universally resented and loathed with a bottomless passion. A particularly telling story she recalled was that stealing apples involved leaving my pram on the narrow path amongst trees and crossing the adjacent stream on a fallen log to the orchard on the opposite side. She would then, using my pram as a target, lob apples across the stream trying to bomb me. From her telling of the story, years later, I am in no doubt that the intent to cause grievous bodily harm was present. Fortunately, she grew out of it, and (many) years later we actually became friends. For some reason thieving food from farms or orchards wasn't called stealing, it was called 'scrumping'. I surmise now that this was to legitimise an activity and avoid acknowledging the true nature of the act.

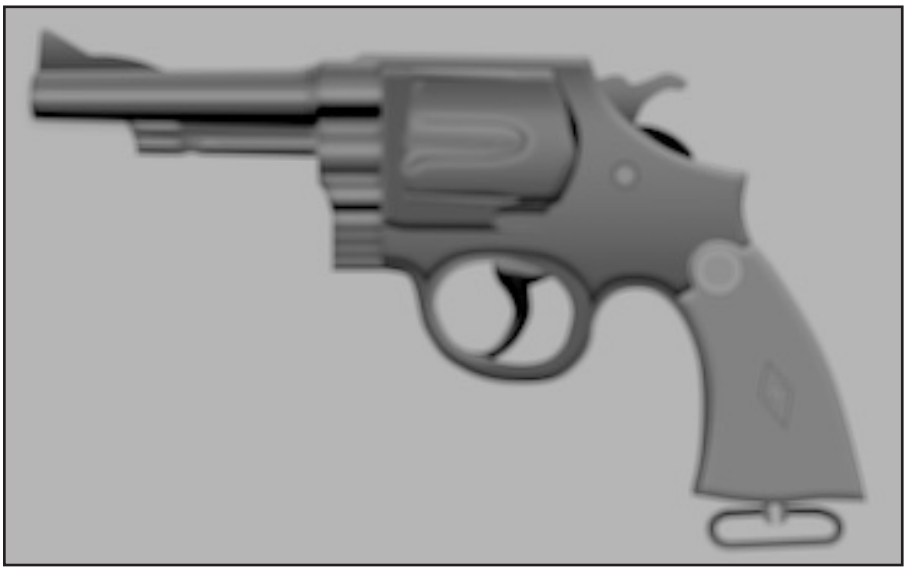
Father in Stalag VIII

Artwork David Young
Charcoal on paper

Father's miraculous resurrection

Sometime later my Father was 'found' in a POW camp and mother got her army pay back. He had been captured on the bridge at Arnhem in Holland, but initial reports had been that no British troops on the bridge at Arnhem had survived. Arnhem was supposed to have been the gateway into the heart of Germany, but it was an ignominious flop. My father had been wounded. He survived because he was still wearing his jump suit and was mistaken for an officer worthy of interrogation. By the time it was realised he was a common soldier, he was in captivity: too late to be shot in battle.

I suspect my mother was more interested in the restoration of my father's pay than the miraculous resurrection of her husband. I do not remember meeting her husband until I was two years old. I disliked him instantly, and although I did try to be nice to him for many years he never forgot his rank of sergeant major, and mine as a lowly recruit. Later, I came to understand my father better and decided he could have been a reasonable father if he had married another woman and not gone to war as a commando. One of his few virtues was that he was extremely loyal, and misplaced loyalty surfaced within my parent's relationship in the way he protected my mother and covered up her excesses. For me, this meant that whatever misdemeanours I had committed during the day, imagined or otherwise, were saved by my mother until the sergeant major arrived home from work. I would then receive my punishment whilst my mother stood to the side with her arms crossed and a little smile on her face. When that was done, father would give my mother a hug, after which I was expected to forget both crime and punishment and play happy families. The almost nightly burlesque re-enactment did nothing for me except make me wish to be in some other moment far, far away in another place, another time, or even in the place I had mistakenly left to venture into the grey dankness of the uncaring, unforgiving existence; the inconvenient offspring of an unfortunate coupling.



Mother's Gun

Artwork David Young
Didital Artwork. PhotoShop

Mother's gun

There was another threat that ended about this time. My mother would become consumed by rage at the slightest provocation and threaten to get her gun and shoot my sister and/or myself. We had serious doubts that she really did have a gun but thought it wise to accept the possibility. There was a large hole in the back door of our house that was nailed over with a piece of tin sheet. The story emerged over time of how, when invasion was likely, my father had acquired an American service revolver for my mother and was demonstrating how to leave the first chamber empty so that the trigger had to be pulled once, on the empty chamber, to make the gun active. My father had forgotten that American revolvers rotated in the opposite direction to British Brownings, left the empty chamber on the wrong side and blasted a hole through the back door. The idea of mother with a Colt 45 revolver is a very scary thought, even now, many years after her death. I have no idea what happened to 'mother's gun,' but I assume that at some stage father also realised the possible consequences. Years later, when I attempted to teach my mother to drive a car, I discovered she had no idea of the ideological difference between left and right, and so the empty chamber in her revolver had a 50/50 chance of being on the wrong side.

I envied the children who had been sent to Dr Barnardo's orphanage who departed, almost weekly, for the adventure of being cowboys riding off to tame the last frontier of Australia. There must have been cowgirls too, but I didn't think of that in that time and age. My favourite option at the time was to dream of returning to wherever I had arrived from. I had the strange notion that if I did I could start again, at another moment and another place, where the couple responsible for my return would be happy when I announced my arriving.

Picking up Donald

Artwork David Young
Charcoal on paper

Donald

In mid-December 1946, maybe 1947, my sister and I were taken for a ride in the sidecar of my father's motorcycle. The sidecar was an oblong plywood box, tapering slightly at the front. It was mounted on two leaf springs attached to a single axle, with a single wheel fixed to the side of the motorbike. The night was very cold and clear. The further we drove into the country the clearer the stars became. It was a beautiful night, but it was very cold. Being the youngest I sat on the inside nearest the bike and had the warmth of the engine. My sister, on the outside because she was the eldest and had to stop me falling out, froze. We stopped by a farm gate and a clandestine meeting took place in the dark involving a quantity of cigarettes and a duck. By the time we arrived home my sister and I had given this duck the highly creative name of Donald. My sister and I really loved our first ever pet, Donald.

On Christmas Eve my sister and I were told that a flock of ducks had flown over and Donald had decided to go home with his brothers and sisters. It was a great disappointment that Donald would choose to leave us, but we got over it because he was happy with his brothers and sisters. Next day, whilst we were having Christmas lunch, my mother said something like, "Would you like some more duck?" and my sister and I realised, at exactly the same moment, Donald's real fate. Many tears later, my sister and I resolved to add Donald to our growing list of 'never to be forgiven' moments.

Pat's Mum

Derek

The Author

Artwork David Young
Charcoal on paper

Pat's Mum, Derek and John

For a short period, there was a place I liked to be. My mother used to go to places in the evening, when dad was on night shift, without me. I have no idea where she went, but I would stay at Pat's mum's house, sometimes staying overnight. Pat was a budding friend from a very early age, and she had a loving family. Pat and I would play at her house, and her mother would play with us. Pat's dad would play too. Pat and I would have a bath and be put to bed. It was a pleasure to wake in Pat's house and play before breakfast, but then the divine one would pick me up and spoil everything. If I had understood adoption at the time I would have asked to be adopted by Pat's mum and dad.

But then it stopped. Suddenly, for no reason. I did go to Pat's house once after that. Pat's father was there and he was nice enough, but very distant. I was about four at the time and decided that Pat's dad did not like me and I had better stay away, and I lost Pat as a friend.

Years later, my sister told me Pat's mum had died of breast cancer, aged twenty-eight, and at the time I decided Pat's dad did not like me he was grieving. Some fifty years later another friend's mother died and I was jealous she had a mother whom she cared for to grieve that much. It was then my love for a woman I only knew as Pat's mum came back and I grieved with my friend. I grieved both for Pat's mum and my friendship with Pat, lost for no reason, who was one of my only two real friends from childhood. I have no idea whether it was my mother and father who had strange ideas, or if it was the general belief at the time that children did not grieve and did not have to be told bad news. Just don't tell them and they will forget that someone important has disappeared from their lives. Illness or disease was never spoken of by our parents because they feared they would catch it.

My sister had no illusions about death and destruction. As a seven-year-old she had kept up the family tradition of childhood scams by running a book on whose house would be bombed and whose would not. Her system for calculating odds was based on the possibility of German bombers missing the high-value targets; the hangars and offices in a string along the east of the airfield that were the main focus of their endeavours. German bombers would attack along the east side, depending on wind either from the north or the south. Occasionally, there would be an attack across the airfield. Houses were bombed when the attackers missed the airfield, which happened regularly, making the houses along the east boundary the most likely to be hit, with the odds decreasing with distance from the airfield. Bombs would fall in a pattern that usually meant every fourth or fifth house would be hit, depending on the height of the attack. By estimating which house would be the first to be hit from an offline attack and which houses would be 'jumped', my sister had a matrix of odds to apply to any house in a given area.

Our house was in the far south-east corner of the matrix and never likely to be hit. The closest a bomb came to our house was my sister's friend's house across the road, which was not hit but destroyed by the blast from a bomb that was way off target, landing in the rear garden. My sister's friend, Joan, and her mum and dad had been asleep in the upper-floor bedrooms at the time of the attack, giving an indication of how seriously we took air raids in our little corner of hell. Joan and her parents suddenly woke unharmed, still in their beds, in the middle of the road, dazed, wondering where they were and what had happened. Their house had collapsed sideways, placing the upper floor in the middle of the street. The unscathed survival of Joan and her parents was just another example of the unpredictability of war. Everyone could be dead in a house that appeared to have only minor damage whilst others, like Joan, could survive unharmed in a house that was reduced to a pile of rubble. My sister never ran a book on who would be killed and who would not, not through any sense of morals or decency, but because death in war is so random that making odds would have been a gamble. My sister has never gambled.

My other friend, Derek, was often mistaken for my twin brother. Derek had a close, loving family who had moved to London from Lancashire. I used to wonder, in my childish mind, if, when my parents died, Derek's parents would adopt me? As we grew older, Derek and I earned a reputation for being trouble and destined for a life of crime. It

Avro Anson

Slingsby T31

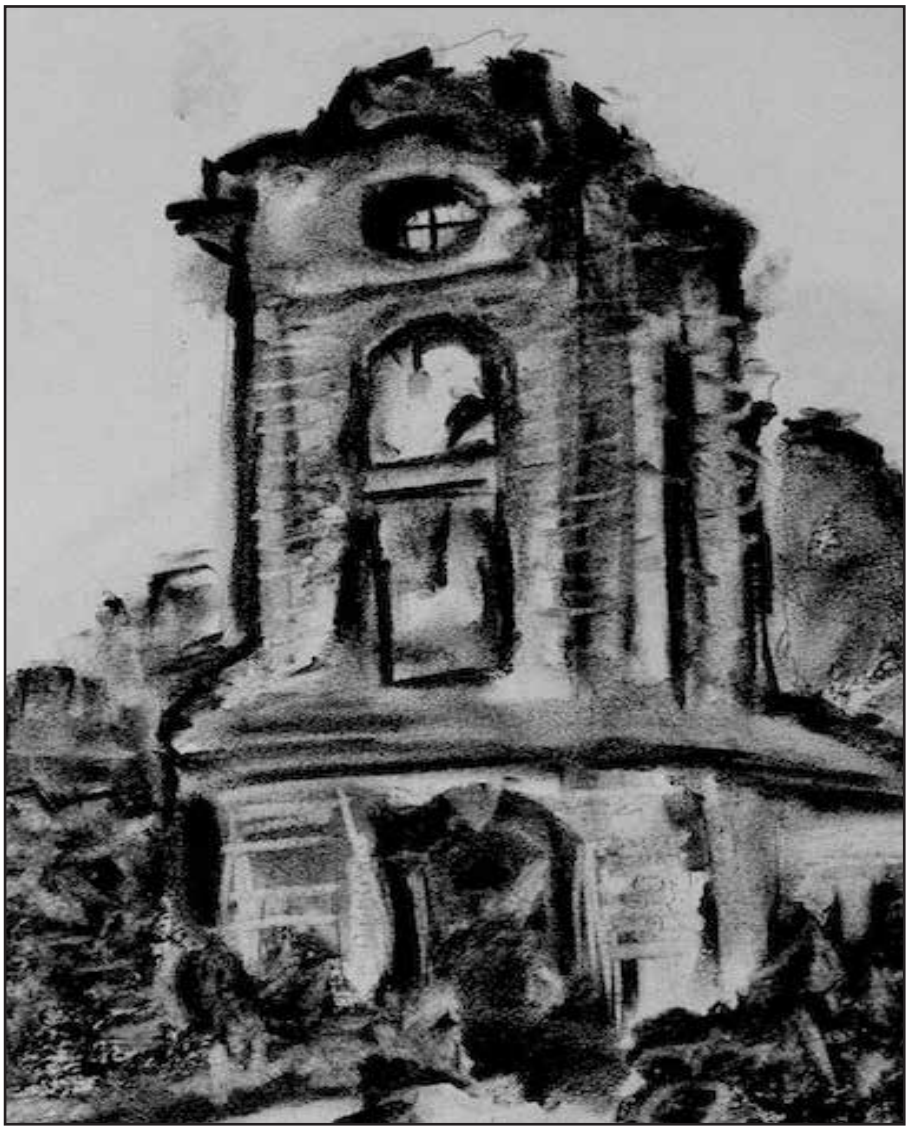
Artwork David Young
Charcoal on paper

was an unjust reputation; we just liked to explore and find out what would happen if...? Once we spent several hours trapped in the bathroom when a wall in a bombed-out house we were exploring collapsed. Another time we heard that bombs were made by mixing garden fertiliser with icing sugar. After many months slowly collecting the raw materials, we made a bomb in a large tin can with a screw-on lid. We decided to bury our bomb under a tree in a neighbour's garden. A long fuse made up of string soaked in petrol from the tank of my father's motorcycle was used to test the concept. The result was a substantial explosion that threw Derek and me to the ground as well as uprooting the tree, which fell on the neighbour's greenhouse. Fortunately, we made our escape undetected and without serious injury. The explosion was put down to an undetected, unexploded German bomb. By far the most unfortunate outcome of my friendship with Derek was the discovery of my father's hidden stash of black-market cigarettes, leading to Derek and I becoming addicted to smoking at an early age. Derek died of Multiple Sclerosis when he was thirty-two.

I did have another 'sort of' friend, John. John and I joined the air cadets when we were about twelve. I didn't like the military then any more than I like it now, but every now and then we would get to have what was called 'air experience'; a quick circuit around the airfield in an Avro Anson. About ten or twelve cadets would climb into the back and sit in canvas seats. I can't remember if we had seat belts or not. The crew would ask if anyone would like to sit next to them. The newbies would all compete for the chance, but the wiser amongst us pretended to be invisible because we knew that sitting next to the pilot meant turning a big, heavy wheel many times to raise the wheels after take-off, and just when the wheels were up wind the wheels back down again for landing. Ten minutes in a dilapidated canvas-covered rust bucket ex-wartime trainer from Bomber Command made the months marching back and forth for no apparent reason worthwhile. The real payoff came when I was sixteen and scored a week at a cadet gliding school flying Slingsby T31's. At the end of the week I made my first solo flight in an aircraft. The routine for a flight in a T31 was to be towed aloft by a winch operated from a big truck, and at the top of the launch release the cable and make a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn. This was followed by a quick dash down the airfield, followed by another turn and a landing facing the same way as take-off. All this was achieved in the hope that the final turn and landing would arrive before the ground. It required imagination to label a T31 a glider.

Early one Sunday morning, John and I were walking to the airfield for a dose of air experience when I saw a classic UFO hovering a short distance away. It was either a very large UFO a long way away or a small UFO close. Either way it was a classic UFO round thing with a bulge in the top and flashing lights around the edge, just like in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. It was silently hovering, motionless. I looked at John and there was no sign that he was experiencing anything unusual, so I tried to pretend it wasn't there, but it refused to go away. Then it suddenly accelerated very fast in an arc and disappeared straight up. After a while I couldn't keep quiet any longer and I said to John, "Did you see that?" John replied, still looking straight ahead with an emotionless straight face, "Yes."

We formed a silent agreement in that moment that there are some things, such as flying saucers, that are to be never mentioned to anyone, not even each other.



Dresden Burns

Artwork David Young
Charcoal on paper

Dresden

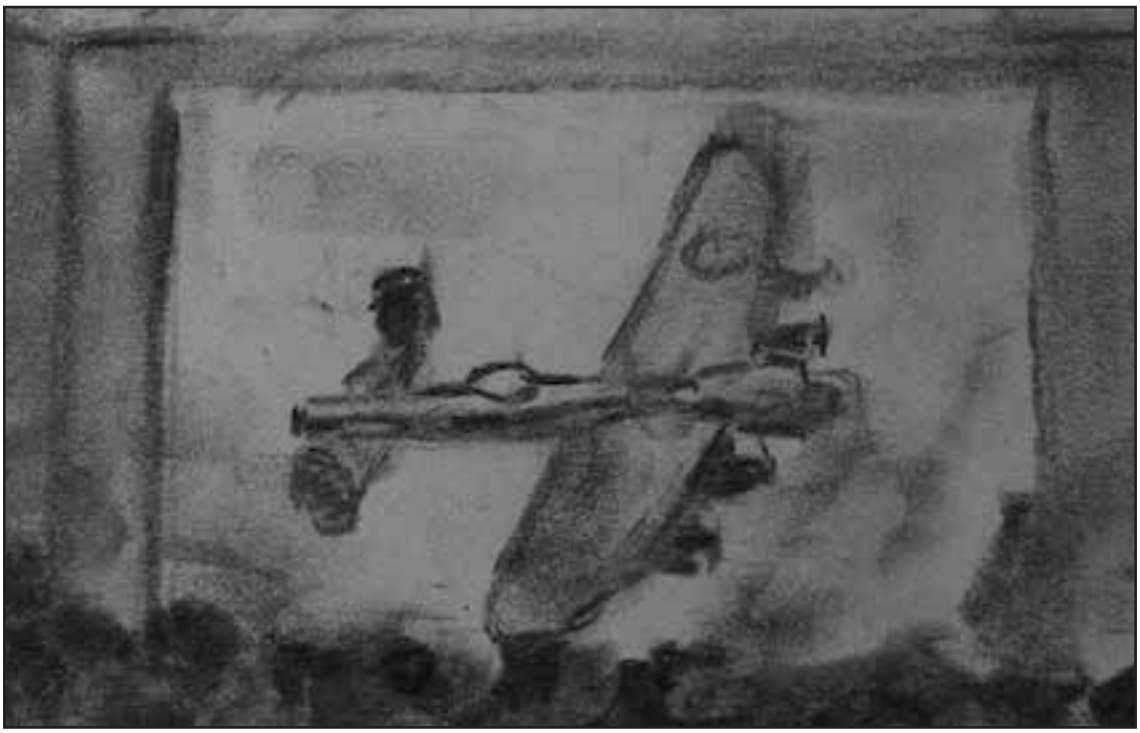
I saw, just once, human understanding and compassion in my father. The occasion was when he told me of his wartime experience as a POW. As a POW my father had one possession, a book The Four Feathers given to him by the Red Cross which he kept as a diary and to record gambling debts. A note slipped inside reads: "9-12-44. Escaping is no longer sport, Germany is fighting for her life, would-be escapees will be shot. Notice on the gate of Stalag VIII C." The prisoners were rounded up and told they would be marching west, away from the advancing Russian juggernaut. It was never explained if this was for the benefit of the prisoners, or whether the guards were shit-scared of being captured by the Russians but were unable to set the prisoners free.

After being marched west in an extended freezing shuffle that killed many of the prisoners they camped outside a town called Dresden, along with swarming multitudes of refugees also fleeing the Russians. My father watched sleeplessly for two days and nights as the proud, medieval cultural Centre of Northern Germany was reduced to a flaming pile of rubble and molten bodies by Allied bombers using a dreadful tactic called firebombing. Firebombing works by bombing the centre of town to create an intense fire that acts as a chimney, drawing air in from all sides. Incendiary bombs are then used to start a ring of fire around the outside of the town which gets drawn into the centre as a wall of flames, leaving no path for escape.

When the fires had ceased the prisoners were paraded on a slow, silent walk of shame through the centre of what had once been Dresden, passing the vacant eyes of small groups of once human, silent zombies who had somehow physically survived the slaughter, watching motionless without any real comprehension of what had happened.

The begrudging friendships that had begun to appear between guard and prisoner, born from the uncomfortable, nagging consequence of a shared uncertain existence should they be caught by the Russians, evaporated as my father and his company came to understand that their imminent execution was the only logical conclusion to the day. All my father said at the end of the story was that "there was no need to do that". I left him sitting in a semi-comatose state, reliving the grotesqueness of two February days and nights in 1945 that had sucked the life from ancient Dresden. It was many hours before my father emerged. Dresden was never mentioned again, but I doubt if my father ever forgot, or forgave.

I was too young to remember the end of the war, but in a recent conversation with my sister I was told there was the expectation that when the war was over everything would be happy and beautiful. As my sister remembers, at the end there was a big street party, after which the all-consuming miserableness of a country in the grip of food rationing, homelessness and the grey rubble of what had once been a proud Victorian Empire continued as in wartime but without the bombs. The war had been exciting for my sister, but peacetime only added mind-numbing boredom to an already miserable existence.



Winning the War Again

The Projectionist

The colour grey

Everything was grey. The endless stream of black and white war movies designed to convince a doubting population that Britain had actually 'won' the war were shot in various shades of grey. The projectionist at our local Odeon cinema was a small, grey, twisted little man without any visible sense of humour. He chain-smoked American Lucky Strike ciggies, of uncertain origin but probably obtained from my father, disguised in a 'Woodbines' packet. The little grey man would go to work and play the same dingy little grey movies three times a day for a week depicting English superiority in warfare over a slightly demented German Army on the ground, at sea, or in the air. The film would be watched in a smelly, stinky little theatre that smelled of the decay of war, through a filter of rising smoke, giving a cloudy ghostly effect to a grainy, badly scratched film that was a mixture of bad dialogue and very bad special effects that become ever more scratchy with each playing. All the time this little man would chain-smoke through each performance surrounded by reels of highly flammable celluloid films. The audience never thought to question the chained and locked fire escapes that were located each side of the screen, because this was inner Essex, and it was understood if the fire escapes were not locked the theatre would be populated by non-paying patrons. Fortunately, the little grey projectionist never dropped a cigarette butt on a roll of celluloid film. Each Tuesday there would be a change in the film but not the routine.

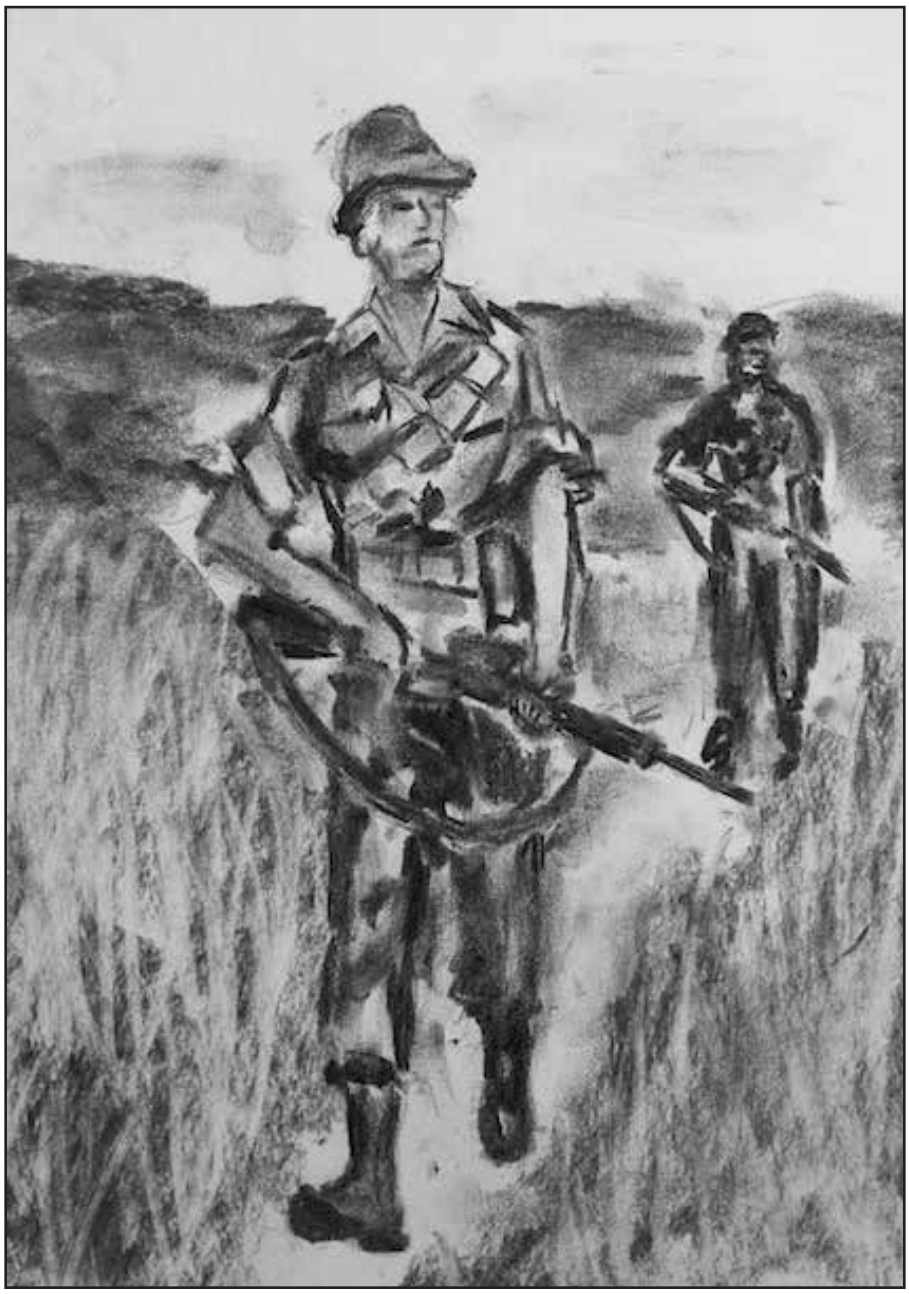
The Odeon theatre had once been a proud, optimistic Art Deco building from an age gone by when the world had been alive and vital, and the future had the promise of an abundance and carefree living. But now it was sad, grey and unkempt, covered in grime. The Odeon had become, for those who thought or cared of such things, the symbol of past dreams smashed into nothingness by Hitler's Bombs, still standing as a defiant remainder of past glories. In a final act of vandalism, in the then unseen future, the Odeon was to be turned into a bingo hall, and later to be demolished to make way for a supermarket.

The routine at the Odeon was the standard of the day. There would be a main feature, a 'B' grade movie and the *Pathé News*. The *Pathé News* was a strange attempt at projecting a positive spin on denial. Often it would depict 'inspiring' stories of the greatness of the British race in far-off places, or patronising depictions of indigenous people being taught the ways of Western civilisation in a way that suggested the British Empire was destined to resume its prewar dominance whilst ignoring the reality of a once-great miserable little country that was never going to be returned to its former glory. The 'B' grade movies usually involved a variation on the theme of Indians, a pretty girl and rescue. There seemed to be no beginning or end to the greyness because the movies ran one after the other in a continuous loop. The last movie for the night was the main feature, and so the first must have been the 'B', with the newsreel in the middle. Entry was at any time and if a person came in halfway through the main film they would see the end of the main film first, then the 'B' and the news before seeing the first part of the main. Part of the attraction of seeing the last bit first presentation was trying to work out how the story would get to the point of entry, which was now the end of the movie. Because of the constant coming and going it was normal to stand up several times during a performance to let other patrons take or leave their seats aided by ushers with little lights showing the way and ensuring patrons did not fall up or down the steps. Depending on the film and the patrons that night, it was not uncommon to be told to "sit down" many times, and it was deemed good manners not to arrive or leave during significant parts of the movie. In winter, half the patrons would have coughs and colds, and the soundtrack was continually modified by coughs and sneezes. Cinemas at that time were not healthy places to visit. It was traditional that at the moment of greatest sorrow, the first kiss of the on-screen lovers (before the quick cutaway) or a moment of great significance, a youth in the back row would roll a handful of Maltesers down the timber steps between the rows of seats. At the end of the last film there would be chaos, as patrons did their best to pass through the doors before the *King* whereas those who had not managed to escape in time stood stiffly to attention whilst the national

Back Row Of The Odeon

anthem was played. It was strange how escaping the *King* was acceptable, even desirable, but a lack of respect by those who were caught still inside was a heinous crime.

Occasionally, such as at the children's 'Saturday morning' single performance pictures, it was possible to see the cinema with the lights on and find out how dilapidated and run down the Odeon was. But in a time before television it was the local Odeon or nothing. One social function the Odeon performed was that, in the time before general car ownership, the back row of the seating provided many adolescents with their first mild introduction to the mysteries of sex.



Uncle Fred

Family martyrdom

About this time my family acquired its obligatory martyr who died in the cause of the British Empire. News arrived that my Uncle Fred had been killed in Penang fighting in what the British press called the 'Malaysian uprising', completely ignoring the geographic reality that the land belonged to the Malays. After surviving World War II, Fred remained in the army and had volunteered to take part in another doomed attempt to re-establish the British Empire. Fred was duly canonised for his defence of the British Empire, and even my mother joined in. I never met Fred, being (according to my mother) one of the untouchables until he died, whereupon he was miraculously resurrected as the family saint. I thought he must have been lacking in intelligence for, having survived Hitler, not quitting whilst he was ahead. Maybe he just liked fighting, or maybe life in the army was more comfortable than in the miserableness of East London.

Selling Flowers at the Markets

Artwork David Young
Charcoal on paper

A little bit of larceny

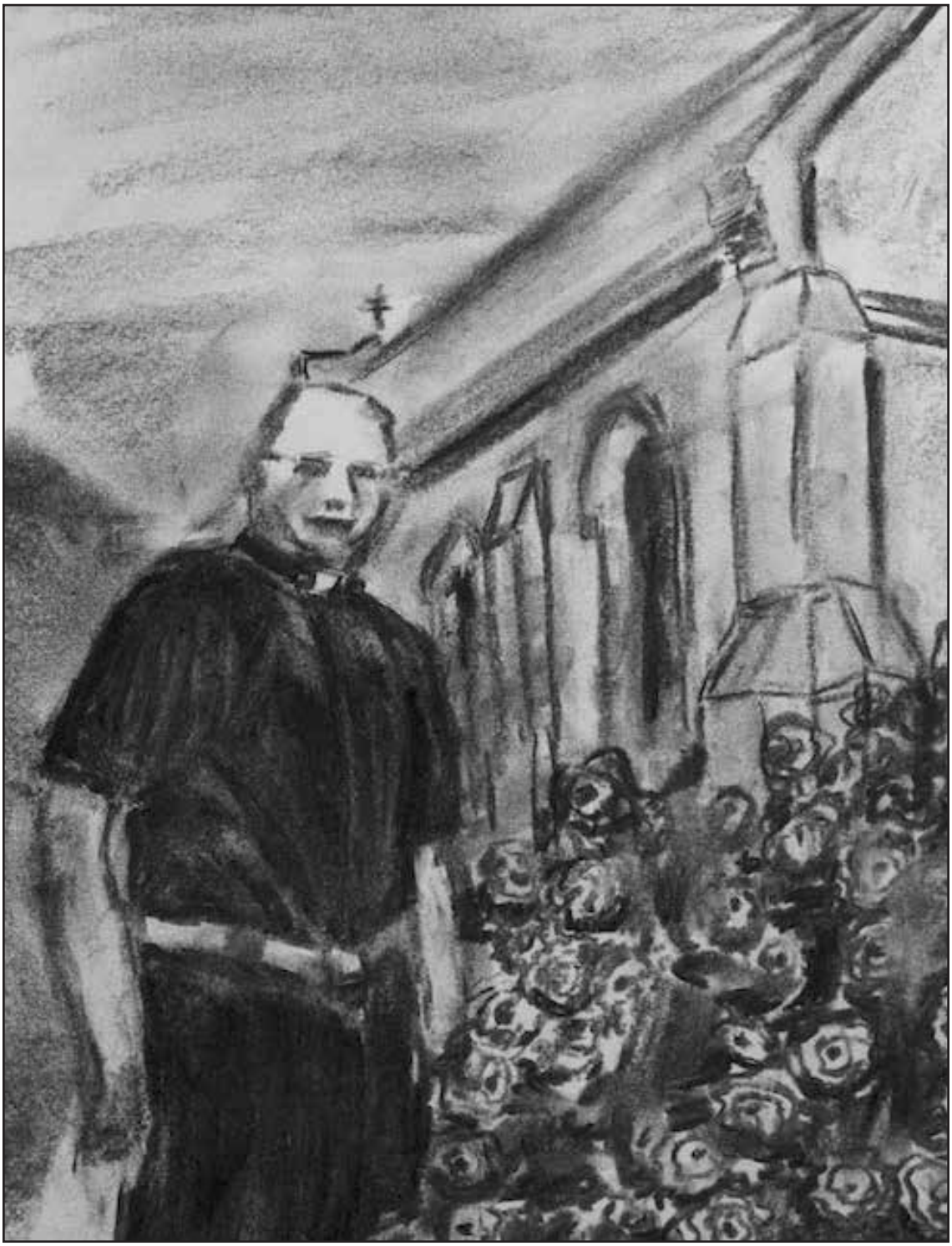
A few years after the war ended there were warnings of rebellion to come. It started with endless lines of grey duffle-coated youths parading outside drab grey American air force bases outside London protesting the existence of nuclear weapons whilst carrying signs proclaiming that in war nobody wins. Later, when my father had acquired a television set from a person at the pub, we huddled around the tiny little screen, uncomfortably minimalised by the great big box that it peeked out of, and watched grey images of the anti-nuclear Easter protest march on the Aldermaston research centre. On that occasion my father invented a string of words that was to be his mantra for the rest of his life, "stinking, rotten, dirty, filthy unwashed long-haired louts who should be put in the army to learn some discipline and respect". To my father, the answer to any and every misdemeanour was to "put them in the army". This 'put them in the army' approach was undoubtedly born from the memory of how my father became a soldier in 1926.

My father had been apprenticed to a farmer but did not like the agricultural lifestyle. He stole money from the farmer and ran away but was caught. The century before, my father would have been hung by the neck until dead, or sent to Australia, but, English justice had moved on slightly and the choice had softened to joining the army to protect, and possibly expand, the British Empire or go to jail. I found out of my father's ignominious entry into His Majesty's Army from his brother Art, who voluntarily joined the army and had served in the same unit with my father. Amongst the stories told to me by Uncle Art, when my father was not nearby, was how father had joined the Royal Military Police, was sent to Egypt and rose to the rank of sergeant. He and two other MPs decided to steal the company safe on the night before pay day when it would be full of money. The safe was on the second floor of the quartermaster's store, and the plan was to steal the Commanding Officer's car, lower the safe onto the luggage rack on the roof the car and drive to a secluded part of the camp to crack the safe. Unfortunately, the safe slipped from its sling as it was being lowered onto the car, resulting in the safe squashing the CO's shiny black Humber. The next morning, the whole company stood to attention for hours whilst my father and his two mates walked up and down between the lines of soldiers, berating them profoundly and loudly, and suggesting in truly colourful language the likely fate of the perpetrators of this most heinous of all crimes. An exhaustive, in-depth investigation, led by my father, failed to apprehend the culprits.

The strange dichotomy of seeing no problem with receiving objects that had 'fallen off the back of a truck' but protesting against the establishment was a near treasonable offence was lost on my father, who till his dying day believed in the infallible sanctity of the long-departed British Empire.

My father's career as a 'tea leaf' had begun in childhood. As I was to hear from Uncle Art, my father would travel out of Poplar to more affluent suburbs and steal flowers from the front gardens of the wealthy. Back in Poplar he would make them into bunches and sell them at the Sunday morning markets. I can imagine my father as an eight-year-old at the Petticoat Lane Sunday markets, sliding up to ladies saying, "Er, lady, wanna buy a lovely bunch of flowers? Only one penny," and being refused, saying "Only for you cos it's such a luvly day, three half-pence then."

Another family connection with nicking flowers came shortly after World War II. My Uncle Jack had an allotment beside the railway line. Allotments were small pieces of land in any little corner where tenants could grow vegetables during the war and persisted for a few years after. Uncle Jack had a passion, probably more of a fetish, for roses. He used to acquire them in much the same way as my father acquired flowers in his youth. Jack's little allotment was wondrous when the roses were in bloom. One day, the little allotment was full of new roses. Unfortunately for Jack it was noticed that the rose garden outside the Catholic Church that was Father O'Brien's pride and joy was missing. Nothing left but dirt. Father O'Brien was my father's best friend (a strange relationship), and my father took it on himself to explain to Jack that nicking roses was okay, but nicking from his mate Father O'Brien was a mortal sin, even if they were not Catholics. That's how it was in East London. Thieving was



Father O'Brien with his Roses

okay, but there were rules. The problem was solved by Jack 'donating' a new rose garden that looked remarkably like the old one, to replace the one stolen by "persons unknown". Jack was thanked profusely by Father O'Brien at Mass the next Sunday for his generosity.

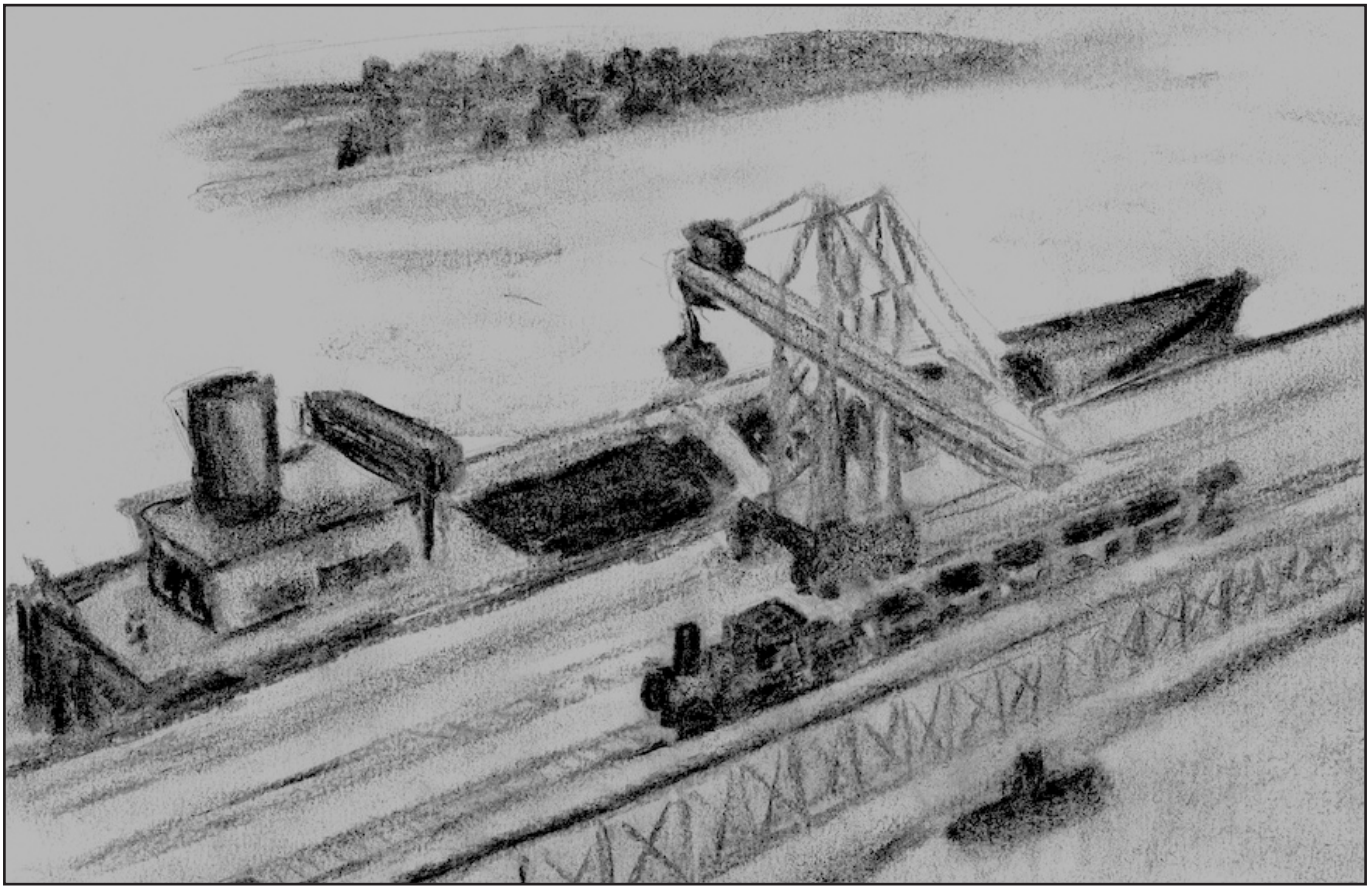
Another incident involving Father O'Brien was the case of Patrick, the father of my sister's friend, and the missing paint. Patrick was a sober, hardworking Irishman who loved his family. He had one failing. Every three or four months he would go on a 'bender' and not arrive home until the early

hours of Monday morning. Patrick's wife, Mary, woke one Monday morning after Patrick had been missing for the weekend to find that the front room contained several large tins of paint. That morning the local gossip was the local paint shop had been robbed the night before. After some discussion, the very hungover Patrick agreed to go to see Father O'Brien and seek forgiveness from God. When he returned home, he told Mary that Father O'Brien would be there at 5pm on Friday to bless the house. The problem of what to do with the paint was solved when Mary agreed Patrick had chosen the right colours to steal, and so Patrick and Mary spent the week repainting the inside of the house with the certainty that after the house was blessed by Father O'Brien they would both be in the clear with God.

After returning from the war, and whilst others were taking care of television sets, refrigerators and washing machines, my father's specialty was cigarettes. Before the war my father had worked, after leaving the army the first time, as a crane driver on the docks at the Ford Motor Company factory in Dagenham. As a reservist recalled to active service, he had been guaranteed his job back at the end of the war, and on returning had found himself in the perfect place to import items of scarcity from ships bringing car parts from America. Our first television set was swapped for a substantial quantity of cigarettes, which made a readily portable money substitute at a time when there was a massive 'alternative' economy operating to replace the failed official economy. There was a certain ritual that had to be followed to obtain black market items, one that was supposed to make the trade anonymous. The ritual was that the buyer would sit on a 'special' stool at the bar of the local pub and order a mild and bitter. After a short while a second person, the seller, would sit on the next stool and enquire, hypothetically, what item the buyer would like to have if it was available. A silent trade written on drink coasters (to be destroyed immediately the deal was set) would take place without buyer or supplier looking at each other or showing any sign of recognition. The buyer would then go home and set his alarm clock to be up before dawn to retrieve the desired item that had somehow arrived on his doorstep overnight.

I never knew with whom my father bartered with for the TV set, but my sister had a friend who lived across the road, and there was a trapdoor under the carpet they were not supposed to know about. One day, my sister and her friend opened the trapdoor and went down some stairs to a place that sounded to me like Aladdin's Cave, full of fridges, TVs, washing machines and other wondrous things. In keeping with tradition nobody in the district knew such a place could exist.

In spite of the world I lived in, my father insisted that I be scrupulously honest. The slightest deviation from the straight-and-narrow on my part resulted in a session with his belt. I remember one of my father's favourite pieces of advice if I was to avoid extreme sanctions at his hand was to "do as I say, not as I do". In his defence, this was a time and place when being a successful petty crim was close to being an honourable profession – the 'crime' was getting caught, and my training was possibly intended to teach me the results of getting caught. The black market was a way of surviving in those times of scarcity, but there is, however, a nagging suspicion that a little bit of larceny was central to the composition of my father's soul.



Fathers's Crane

Father's crane

I once visited the place where my father worked. It was, I think, one of those company ideas of trying to be part of the community – father and son open days – but for me it was another 'anywhere but here' experience. My father's crane was a sort of mobile platform that ran backwards and forwards on the dock. It didn't swing or turn. Instead there were two pairs of steel towers with a long cross arm between them. A scoop thing my father called a 'bucket' hung below a trolley. The trolley ran back and forth along the cross arm. The operator's cabin was on top of the trolley, with windows front and in the floor, and it went backwards and forwards with the trolley so the operator could look down at the bucket at all times. Access to the cabin was only available when the trolley was parked at the top of an open steel ladder mounted on one of the steel towers. My father's friend was killed falling off the ladder.

When a ship delivering iron ore was at the dock, the bucket would open and drop into the ship's hold and scoop up some ore before being lifted out. The trolley would then run to the other end of the of the cross arm and the bucket lowered to discharge its load into a wagon of a train that would, when all the wagons were filled, run to the end of the dock to tip the contents of the wagons into big hoppers. The pier and the crane had been built sometime in the early '30s and was covered in dirt, grime and ore from being there far too long. The train was a really old 'puffing billy' that must have been second hand when the jetty was built. All of the bins and hoppers were open, and dust and ore filled the air with a never-ending fog. Powerful spotlights burned permanently, day and night. Looking up to where the sky should have been, there was a dark, shimmering cloud of iron ore dust like a continuous macabre alien night. Rather than being impressed I decided my father must have been sub-human to work in those conditions and understood why he had enjoyed the war more than going back to work at Fords. I was also filled with total dread at the prospect of this being my future life.

Ships from America came to the docks with parts from the American Ford factory that were not manufactured in England. This would coincide with my father attaching the sidecar to his motorbike to go to work to collect large quantities of Camel and Lucky Strike cigarettes. The sidecar journey would also coincide with father's friend the security guard being on duty at the security gate. The importation of American ciggies was a team effort, but I think father was the boss.

Ford Anglia

Life at Fords

I did work at Ford's for about eighteen months after leaving school. I was one of the elite selected to be student apprentices. Being a student apprentice at Fords meant spending six months of the year at college learning engineering and design, and six months of factory experience. Part of the factory experience was working on the assembly line. We were supposed to observe the workers and learn how to use our developing engineering and design skills to reduce the skills needed to assemble a car to zero. Observing was so boring we would relieve the workers for a while so we had something to do. Because the line was under constant supervision, and there was no interference to our participation, I surmise that taking over from the workers was part of the teaching program. What I learned from the experience was how it feels to be treated like a mindless robot. My abiding memory of the assembly line at Fords was the mind-destroying task of placing and tightening three bolts to secure the driver's side front suspension frame to the body of a Ford Anglia before the next Anglia arrived on the assembly line.

Surviving the assembly line was made possible by joining in the banter of the workers on the assembly line. As a student apprentice I was a natural target for 'piss-taking', but with a little practice, and building on natural East London humour, I became passable at returning insult for insult and even enjoyed the contest as a way of forgetting where I was. After a while my joining in the banter led to my acceptance on the assembly line, even if officially I was still a snotty-nosed little college kid. I learned to hate everything about Fords – the noise, the dirt and grease, the polluted air that was unfit to breath, but most of all I hated the complete inhumanity of the system.

Fortunately, my time at Ford's came to an end with the second-year exams where I failed every subject except English. My English teacher at the technical college suggested I follow a writing career, but that not being an option for a lad from Dagenham I settled for office temping, which had the happy side effect of meeting several lovely young ladies.

Wartime Picture of Vera Lynn

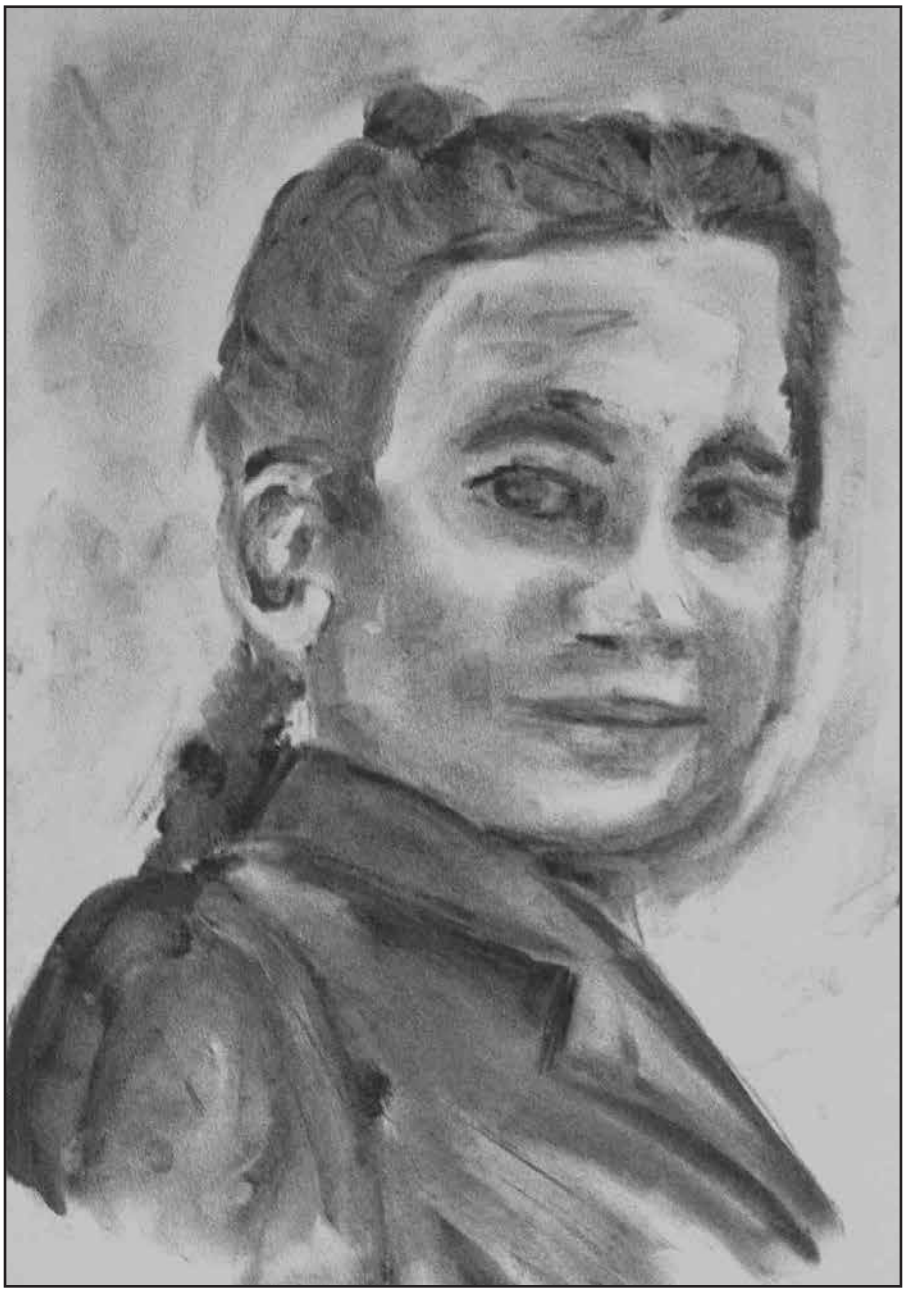
The Big Grey of '47

The greyest of greys of postwar Britain, the winter of '47, was the long line of grey peoples with wheelbarrows and prams waiting patiently in the permanently relentless grey drizzle of the English weather hoping to arrive, some hours later, at a coal yard that had not run out of coal. This happened every time a rumour was started that Joe, in the next suburb, had received a consignment of coal. One thing that the war and its aftermath did teach the British people was how to queue in long, silent hope without any real expectation of satisfaction. From a material perspective, relative to our surroundings, my sister and I had privileged childhoods. Even a shortage of coal could often be bypassed with a suitable quantity of fags. We did not even have to collect the coal.

The importance of coal, apart from keeping warm, was that if a fire was not kept burning throughout winter the hot water piping would freeze and burst and, come spring, when the ice thawed, the house would be flooded from above by a torrent of water that could not be stopped because the controlling external water meter was still frozen open. Come rain, snow, ice or cold grey fog, lining up for a barrow-load of coal was as essential as finding a shop with sufficient stock to spend the weekly family food coupons. In 1948, news appeared in the newspapers of the Berlin Airlift and the grey mood of Britain became even greyer. There was a division of opinion between standing up to the Ruskies and "We won the war, why should the Krauts get all the food", coupled with fear that the grey peace was only a pause before the next round of bombs.

The soundtrack to the miserableness of existence in postwar Britain was my parents playing scratched 78 Vera Lynn records on their prewar wind-up record player. I grew to dislike Vera Lynn with a vengeance, which dissolved into laughter some years later when I saw the closing credits of Stanley Kubrick's *Doctor Strangelove* which ran over a backdrop of multiple mushroom clouds from atomic bombs breaking through cloud cover to the sound of Vera Lynn singing, "We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when".

Grey was not a colour; it was a state of mind. My primary school was a prewar temporary timber building painted green and cream, but it was grey. British Rail public toilets were clad internally in green and cream tiles, and the station painted green and cream externally, but nothing was greyer than a British Rail station. Inside hospitals the walls were painted green and cream, but the hospitals were very grey. Maybe, before World War II, green and cream might have been the latest fashion. But after years of total warfare which smashed and ground down the country into specks of tiny grey dust nothing was as dead as a world long gone, but still lingering on in the ghostly form of green/cream refusing exorcism because there was nothing to replace it.



Big Sister

The lost days of school

Primary school I consider the lost years. I know I was there but remember very little of it. I remember events out of school but nothing much of being at school. Maybe I didn't go there very often. One thing I do remember was the execution of Ruth Ellis. The usual morning assembly became a memorial service, as she was executed at 9am even though her name was never mentioned. Ruth Ellis was a victim of domestic violence, and her execution opened up the debate of domestic violence and the death penalty that eventually led to the end of capital punishment in the UK.

I don't remember primary school being particularly violent. Out of school I had special protection; my sister, six years older than me whom I seldom saw because of the age difference. However, if anyone touched her little brother she would appear from nowhere as a very large and scary avenging angel of retribution. I had my very own semi-evil superwoman keeping me safe from the marauding beasts of the jungle. If I found myself in a difficult situation all I had to say was, "I will tell my sister" and the problem would go away. On one occasion, when my words were not heeded, an unfortunate boy ended up with his head buried in a pile of sand at a nearby building site. A lesser avenging angel would have buried the whole boy, but my sister only buried his head, and then sat on it, leaving the remainder of his being to thrash around in fits of uncoordinated terror. Such acts of retribution would invariably end with my sister receiving a beating from my father, but she still never failed to come to my rescue.

My protector told me years later that when she had pushed my pram around, stealing potatoes and carrots, she had been utterly terrified I would be hurt, even when bombing me with apples, and would have to face the wrath of Fagin. In spite of her desire to commit GBH against me, an overly protective instinct had developed when it came to my safety. She didn't like me, not in the slightest, but felt compelled to protect me.

A Successful Commando Raid

The enemy

Whilst violence within the group was never far from the group reality there was always a coming together when we had a common enemy. Typically, that enemy would be the ‘air force kids’, who lived in the air force housing about half a mile to the south, or the ‘posh kids’ from the middle class area a mile to the north. All of the gangs were fiercely territorial, and intrusions, even by one inch, into another’s ‘manor’ would lead to attack and counter-attack that could last days.

The protection of the manor would reach hysterical heights from the beginning of October through to November 5 – Guy Fawkes night. At the beginning of October each gang would begin building their bonfire, added to continuously from daily collections of rubbish and waste. Each night, guards would be posted to protect the bonfire from invaders, whilst commando units would head out to set light to the enemy’s bonfire. Commando units would do the full bit. Dark clothing, blackened faces, hand signals instead of talking, scouts and everything. Having a real-life commando for a father meant I was thought to be somewhat of an expert in these matters. Usually such attempts were unsuccessful, but occasionally the beginnings of a glow, spreading to a major fire would be seen coming from past the end of the street. This was met with great jubilation, quickly followed by full-scale mobilisation to repel the inevitable retaliatory attack by an enemy really angry over the loss of their bonfire. At these times the play fighting was replaced by all-out warfare, with some serious injuries requiring trips to hospital resulting.

For some reason a particular member of a rival gang would come in for special attention. There was never any reason for this other than seeing the person as the anti-Christ who had led the rival gang to some minor victory. October was the month to avenge rivals’ successes with some nasty tactics like sticking firecrackers to the windows of a rival’s house in the early hours of the morning using a mixture of syrup and flour. Whilst the local police generally turned a blind eye to the antics leading up to fireworks night, the blasting of windows would invariably lead to a rounding up of the members of the offending gang to be given a stern talking to about the consequences of being caught blasting windows. In keeping with the times and the place the talks were always about the consequences of being caught, not the act of blasting windows. These rather violent but somehow innocent times came to an end for me when I was stopped by a man with a clipboard who said he was surveying the likes and dislikes of boys. After a few innocent questions, he suggested we go to a quieter place to finish the survey, and believing him to be an authority figure I did. From that point my dreams of my ‘real’ home became my real home.

Mosquito Aircraft Landing

Charlie

Big school

I had achieved the distinction of learning nothing at primary school, residing at the bottom of the 'D' stream in a system that classified students according to perceived ability from 'A' to 'D'. I didn't see the point of education because the boys were universally destined to be slaves on the assembly lines at the Ford Motor Company for fifty years, and then receive a gold watch, whilst the girls were destined to breed the next generation of Ford Motor Company factory fodder. This system was augmented in high school with an extra division added: boys and girls. As was fitting with their respective fates, the boys were taught subjects like woodwork and metalwork, whilst the girls took the quaintly named 'domestic science' stream, which, stripped of the concept of being scientific, meant girls were taught to cook and clean.

At high school a hierarchy developed amongst the students, based on fighting ability. Top of the heap was a large Jamaican boy, Kenny, who had been born with a six-pack. Bottom of the heap was me. This changed slightly once Charlie, who loved to fight but was useless at it, worked his way down from Kenny until he found someone he could beat up on – me. Charlie would beat me first thing in the morning, every morning, until one morning I was so completely lost in anger that I would have beaten Charlie to a pulp if a teacher had not dragged me away. I received the customary six strokes of the cane from the headmaster, who, in my case, felt the need to use his 'special' cane. The special cane was old and was split in many places along its length. Passing through the air the splits would open into multiple segments to close, instantly, on contact with the fleshy palm of its victim, causing debilitating pain way beyond the pain inflicted by a normal cane. My fear of the special cane was overcome by the need to instil into Charlie the complete understanding that a new order existed in the school hierarchy, and so Charlie received a beating every morning for a week. On the last day, instead of using the special cane the headmaster conceded defeat and asked why I kept beating up on Charlie, and I told him. His only comment was, "I think you have made your point". The morning ritual had become redundant.

Some ten years later I met Charlie at Romford markets. We talked and had a coffee at the coffee shop at the end of the markets, and I was surprised to find that he was a pleasant and likeable person. In the course of our conversation it became apparent that Charlie had the same feelings of not wanting to be there as I had, but we had different ways of surviving life in postwar Essex. It was a surprise to find Charlie had swapped fighting for stamp collecting, and he was the treasurer of the local stamp collecting club. Many, if not most, of my peers sought hobbies or interest to give meaning to a meaningless life. My hobby was making model aircraft. My hobby gave an outlet to explore my creativity and search for meaning in a world where I had little control. Another ex-school mate became a national ballroom dancing champion, and in line with the general attitudes of the time this raised a few eyebrows and questions along the way.

There was another pathway to 'the cane' apart from fighting. The ritual changed, but not the end result. At high school the ritual was that any boy who transgressed what seemed to be a totally random set of rules had to stand outside the door of the classroom. Just near the end of each teaching period, a prefect would tour the corridors collecting boys to be marched off in single file to the headmaster's office where they would wait outside until lunch break or the end of the day. The boys would then enter the headmaster's office one by one to receive a number of strokes of the cane, dependent on the misdemeanour. Looking away, closing of eyes or flinching were not allowed and punishable by having another stroke of the cane added to the total.

I lived three streets from the edge of an active Royal Air Force base, at which point suburbia abruptly ceased. The airfield had, at one end and on the far side, a dirt path that separated the airfield from the farm where my sister (using me as cover) had been sent by Fagin to scump potatoes and carrots at an earlier age. In a rather strange act of planning, a two-storey 'secondary modern' school had been placed in the middle of the farmer's field, with access from the far side only, with the school

The Trial of Adolf Eichmann

less than a quarter of a mile from the edge of the active RAF base, in line with the major landing strip. The school was made up of two squares, each with a central courtyard, with the two halves joined by the assembly hall, where we would start each day singing hymns and nominally pretending to believe in God. It was, of course, the British god. This process was made easy for the teachers by a high-tech device called a radio connected to large speakers that broadcast, at 9am, Monday to Friday, the BBC daily church service for schools. This morning ritual was made bearable by the game of singing 'alternative' words to the common hymns, switching back and forth between official and alternatives words to avoid being trapped by teachers patrolling lines of assembled students. Students caught using alternative lyrics would immediately be sent to the line outside the headmaster's office for the first caning session of the day. I particularly enjoyed *Lloyd George knew my father* because it could be sung with gusto using a limited vocabulary. The simple lyrics did provide a problem in that it was difficult to remember whereabouts in *Onward Christian Soldiers* to swap back to when the teachers came prowling.

The RAF airfield next to the school was an 'all over' field, which meant there were no runways and aircraft could take-off or land in any direction according to the direction the wind was blowing. When the wind was blowing to the north or south the 'Mosquito' aircraft in use at the time of my school days usually passed, maybe a hundred feet horizontally, to the east of the school at very low altitude when landing or taking-off. Mosquito aircraft had two big engines; were not equipped with exhaust mufflers; and made an enormous amount of noise. Students in classrooms on the second floor would hear the aircraft coming from a long distance and rush to the windows to wave at the pilots as they passed by the windows. New teachers would become agitated and animated as students ignored repeated instructions to stay in their seats,

whilst the more experienced teachers would join the students at the window. The result, for me, of watching aircraft was to modify my dreams of my real home to one of getting into an aeroplane, taking off, and never coming back. Some years later, when I became a pilot, I discovered that even pilots can only escape an unsavoury reality for limited periods before coming back to earth.

My sister nearly bucked the system and almost avoided the 'domestic science' trap when she won a scholarship to grammar school. My father refused to let her go to grammar school on the basis that there was no point in educating a girl because she would only get married and have children. It was another cause of distress between my sister and myself when, after a rapid spurt of learning after deciding that if I wanted to read books about aeroplanes I had better teach myself to read. I moved from the 'D' stream to the 'A' stream in two years and also won a scholarship to an 'advanced technical' high school. I was allowed to go because I was a boy.

The planning of my new high school was also unfortunate. There were two high schools on the site, separated by a common sports field. On one side was the school I attended, and on the other side of the sports field, a private Catholic secondary school. To avoid a twice-daily melee, it was found prudent to stagger the start and finishing times of the two schools by thirty minutes. I never understood what was so evil about Catholics, but the conventional wisdom of the day was that they were almost as bad as Jews. Anti-Semitism was rife in Dagenham. This was before Hitler's treatment of European Jews, and the Holocaust becoming general knowledge when Adolf Eichmann was tried in Israel for crimes against humanity. It is hard to imagine now, but for years after the end of the war Hitler's treatment of Jews was not general knowledge in Dagenham. In hindsight, the 'crime' of London Jewry at the time was having the knowledge and connections to make things work when nothing else would. We needed them, but resented that need. The Protestant/Catholic fight had been going on forever, or at least since Henry VIII, and we were still fighting the civil war. I didn't realise at the time that I had an Irish Catholic grandmother and my father had been raised as a strict Catholic. My mother kept very quiet about it, and I never met the many Catholic cousins I never knew I had. If I had known I had a Catholic father, I would have kept quiet about it too. Catholics and Jews were beginning to drop down the list of enemies because a new menace was beginning to arrive: Jamaicans and West Indians. Kenny with the six pack had been okay because at the time he had been a novelty, and we were scared of him.

A natural outcome of my school days was an unrelenting, compulsive-obsessive questioning of the meaning, or otherwise, of my existence. Basically the question was: "What the fuck am I doing here?" This question was extremely basic at first but developed quickly into a deep, philosophical questioning way beyond my years. I became totally introverted, dreaming of being anywhere other than where I was. Dreams of my 'real' home were where I spent my childhood, even if my body insisted on residing in Dagenham.

Market Day in Poplar

Ancestry

Both my parents had been born in the slums of Poplar, lived through two world wars and spent most of their lives dodging bombs and bullets, the Great Depression and a lifetime of general shit. They both told me at different times of the awe and wonder of how, as children in the First World War a previously unseen Zeppelin burst into a symphony of fire and dancing light, filling the night sky with its burning hulk descending slowly to the ground as its human crew jumped as flaming Icaruses to fall to earth, reminiscent of cinders from a spent firework to the silence of a disbelieving audience. Some contemporary accounts say that people danced and cheered; some even that they sang the national anthem. The shooting down of the Zeppelin would have been seen over a wide area, so it is possible that all accounts are true.

My father was one of thirteen siblings, and my mother was one of nine. It could have been that my grandparents did not fully appreciate the inevitable consequences of fucking in the days before female contraception. My paternal grandmother, being an Irish Catholic, may have seen it as her duty to out-populate the Protestants. My grandfather had been gassed in the First World War I but survived several years after that before dying. During that period my grandfather was able to continue the family tradition of breeding. Although I only met my paternal grandmother once, when she was in her nineties, I have much respect for a widow with thirteen children who was able to support her family by doing other people's laundry in the days before social support. I never realised my father had been brought up as a practising Catholic until after his death, and never understood why mother dear always referred to my father's family as "those people". I did know that Lydia, my grandmother I was never allowed to visit, had Irish Catholic heritage, but sometimes there are situations that are so obvious they become invisible like a tractor in a cornfield. I do hope for my father's sake that the god he tried so hard to avoid is not Catholic because he never made his confession before he died. Maybe he did it silently. But he would probably be okay because his best friend was the local Catholic priest. Sometimes Father O'Brien would try to convert (or save) my father but would stop as soon as his supply of American ciggies seemed in jeopardy. My father was a complex person.

One confession my father did make just before he died was that his permanent suntan was not, as claimed, due to his years serving in the army in Egypt. It was the result of a Maori grandmother. When my sister found out she was livid, and I think she would have killed him if he had not died before the opportunity arose.

The problem was not that my sister was racist, but of lost opportunity. My sister grew into a very beautiful young woman, but she was continually embarrassed by questions about her heritage. Was she French, Spanish or maybe Italian? Where did her sultry looks come from? This could have been avoided if she had known great-grandmother was Maori. As she said in an outpouring of rage and contempt reminiscent of my childhood anti-Christ avenging angel, had she known great-grandmother had been Maori she could have promoted the image of being a mysterious South Sea Islander maiden. My father was never forgiven, and nor should he have been. This totality bigoted, racist, sexist, homophobic person had an Irish Catholic mother and a Maori grandmother. Had anyone been destined to be tolerant and accepting of everyone it should have been my father, and he might have been if he had not married my mother, who forgave nothing. There were times when father did show himself to be a tolerant and compassionate person, which only added to the uncertainty of the complex family dynamic.

There was one family mystery that my father's confession of having a Maori grandmother solved. Why did my grandfather spend the whole of his working life before World War I as a merchant seaman on the same two ships, the *RMS Rimutaka* and the *TSS Ruapehu,* going backwards and forwards between England and Auckland, New Zealand? That part of my family history is very confused. Did my great-grandmother live in England or New Zealand? Did my grandfather have two lives – an English one and a Maori one? Do I have as many unknown (to

RMS Rimutaka

me) Maori relatives as I have Catholic ones? If my grandfather had a second family in New Zealand, and he bred there as efficiently as in England, there must be hundreds of them. What family secrets did my father take to his grave? One thing I can be certain of is that whatever secrets my father had hidden away in the closet, my mother would have seen to it that they stayed in the closet. No hint of scandal must ever touch her family. I think I would have enjoyed growing up in New Zealand instead of Essex.

Suzy

The end of violence

It would be wrong to think of my sister as a naturally violent person because she is not. Growing up in wartime and postwar Essex meant that a line had to be established that nobody crossed; it was a matter of survival, and my sister set her line in concrete. My father crossed that line for the last time the day my sister came home after her first week at work and had bought herself a pair of very fashionable high-heeled shoes with her first week's pay. When she came home from work, my father gave a very loud and vindictively judgemental assessment of the moral character of girls who wore 'those' sort of shoes. He pushed her and she stumbled, breaking the heel of one of her beautiful new shoes. The line had been crossed. My father was set upon by my sister, unleashing many years of anger and fear given voice by a broken heel. Her broken shoe became an effective weapon of mass injury, and my father escaped up the stairs under a deluge of blows, eventually finding refuge by locking himself in the bathroom. Thus ended the problem of father's violence towards my sister.

The problem of my father's violence towards me was solved a few years later. I came home from high school after staying late for judo lessons. I didn't like judo. I didn't like any of the physical activities at school, but I was motivated to take judo lessons because Suzy, the girl of my fantasies, was extremely competent at judo and acted as a junior instructor. To be thrown around the mat by Suzy was heaven on a stick. Arriving home, my father attacked me. Why I cannot remember, but I instinctively did exactly what Suzy had shown me. My father hit the wall, upside down, before sliding down onto his head and transitioning to a crumpled heap on the floor. Suzy will always hold a very special little place in my heart. About that same time violence faded from my life. I don't know why. Maybe the violence of war was a fading memory and the world was changing. When a country lives with violence as a way of life for so long it seems to take a while to get over it. Maybe I just grew up. Whatever the reason, life continued as usual but without the violence.

Upward Mobility

At least Essex wasn't Poplar

I was saved from the greater evil of growing up in Poplar by my mother's belief in upward mobility, and I was born in the Essex part of Outer London, close to an active RAF base. My mother's superiority had its roots in her grandmother. My sister and I were constantly told throughout our childhood that "grandmother Norton" (my mother's grandmother), had been such a lady and had come from a very posh family, and how my mother had learned how to be a "lady" from staying with her. My sister nicknamed great-grandmother Norton "the coal miner's daughter". It seems her father never actually worked down the coal mine; he owned it. I would liked to have met both of my great-grandmothers. I could almost have felt sympathy for my parents if I hadn't disliked them so much. I tell myself they were a product of the times, but I still disliked my mother, and although I did come to accept with some compassion my father's plight, I never went as far as actually liking him. But not hating him was a major step forward. There is the societal expectation, almost a law, that we 'love' our parents. Sometimes it just does not happen, and I suspect that it does not happen with considerable frequency. I was just left with the question: "What the fuck am I doing here?" But I am grateful for growing up in the greyness of inner Essex rather than the squalor of Poplar. Funny, how the place my parents grew up in is now worth millions of pounds and the home to the obscenely rich, and Canary Wharf is now one of the top addresses in the world.

Ted

Rebellion

I read a while back an auto-biographical piece by an ex bikie on how rebellion was the duty of youth because without it social change would not happen. The moment my rebellion gained focus was when I heard Bill Haley's *Rock Around the Clock* for the first time, but the moment passed unnoticed because it was not recognized at that time as the beginning of rebellion. That passing moment was closely followed by another, Elvis Presley with *Heartbreak Hotel*, but the best moment was hearing Chuck Berry's *Johnny B Goode*, an event that started my life-long love/hate affair with guitars. My sisters' rebellion had started a little earlier with the postwar jazz era and artists like Cleo Lane with her husband Johnny Dankworth, and Humphrey Lyttleton. This was not too hard on my parents because they had been exposed to jazz before the war, but they were not prepared for Elvis Presley. It is a universal law that each rebellion must have its own soundtrack and anthems. The overnight change from Vera Lynn to Bill Haley and Elvis Presley was like a light going on all over my world. Our parents fought a valiant rear-guard action, but they were always going to lose. My father fought his battle on the issue of trousers. He issued a fatwa decreeing that if I could not put my shoes on before my trousers my trousers were too tight. I ignored him, and continued to wear 'drainpipe pants', as was the fashion of the day, and the fatwa died a lonely death.

My sister bought home a boy named Ted. Ted's name was really Ted, or Edward and not just called Ted because he was a Teddy Boy. Ted was the full gum chewing item – every father's nightmare. Black drainpipe trousers; long Edwardian jacket with valet collar; blue suede 'brothel creeper' shoes with two-inch-thick soles, narrow cut-away white shirt with country and western string 'Maverick' tie; shiny, wavy piled up hair full of Brylcream. He spoke as if he had just escaped from juvenile detention. My sister confided later that she didn't like Ted, and had only bought him home to stick it to our father. My sister and I derived great satisfaction from the slow realization of our mother and father that there was nothing they could do to stem the onslaught of the new order, and that Vera Lynn was not going to have a second-coming. I was still young but my sister was careful to educate me in the new order of things. I think she needed an ally living in enemy territory and I did not need any encouragement to join the rebellion. By the time I was old enough to become a Ted the moment had passed, but I still had the pleasure of confronting the parents with the first pair of 'winkle-picker' shoes they had seen. Father didn't like that much.

As rebellions go it seemed, at the time, a very little one, akin to using the wrong fork at the vicar's tea party. It moved up in intensity a little when American rock and roll artists like The Everly Brothers and Jerry Lee Lewis began to arrive in Britain, usually playing at local Odeon cinemas. The oldies and the press seized on Jerry Lee Lewis' child bride as confirmation that youth was totally decadent, but nothing was going to stop the new order.

When there was a concert, long lines of teenagers would queue along the street whilst bouncers would walked up and down the queue giving the evil eye to anyone who dared look at them. I used to get in by being surrounded by my sister,s Teddy mates so I was not seen by the bouncers. It is strange that a simple thing like knowing how to queue can become a national characteristic from the experience of food rationing. At the door we would pay our five shillings and find a seat as close to the front as possible. The concerts would begin with a stern lecture, delivered in monotone sobriety by the manager of the cinema who would tell us that we were to remain seated and quietly listen to the music, and that dancing in the aisles would not be tolerated, and how anyone violating these rules would be severely dealt with. To enforce these few, simple, and entirely unreasonable commands several thugs, masquerading as bouncers, would patrol up and down between the rows of seats to deal with discontents. The bouncers were backed up by uniformed cops standing around the perimeter walls.

The outcome would have been obvious to any thinking person. As soon as the concert began we all stood up cheering and clapping. The criminal

Osward Mosely

elements would begin dancing in the aisles only to be roughly dragged away and charged with disorderly conduct by waiting police officers. The manager would come back on the stage screaming into the microphone that if we didn't all sit down and behave he would stop the concert. The manager usually had enough intelligence to understand that stopping the concert could only lead to many unhappy concert goers. Occasionally there was a fight, which could turn into a mass brawl, usually starting with a bouncer with wandering hands violating the person of someone's girlfriend or sister. It took a long time for the establishment to realise all that was needed was to get rid of the security thugs and relax, and everyone could then enjoy a night out listening to a band and go home happy. It is strange to think that in Britain today, there must still be hundreds of people with criminal records obtained by dancing in the aisles of the local Odeon.

There was a ritual which was never violated. No matter what sort of mayhem was happening at the end of the concert the sounds of *God save the Queen* would come over the speakers and everybody, even if they were in the act of throwing a punch at a bouncer, would stop and stiffly, silently stand to attention until end of *'The Queen'*. And then the mayhem would recommence. Youthful rebellion or not, we were all British. The coming of rock and roll to Britain was a very small victory to the youth of Britain, but a major defeat for the establishment. My parents view, probably more a despairing prayer to a god they did not believe in, was that it was just a fad that would pass, and we would all go back to listinening to Vera Lynn.

The problem that many oldies had with rock and roll was that it was 'black' music, and racial discrimination was cranking up in Britain at the time. Before World War II 2 racial discrimination had been confined to a few small pockets of fanatics like Oswald Mosely's British Union of Fascists . That changed with the arrival of the (segregated) American army. Rather there were two separate armies. Britain welcomed both the black and the white armies, which went against every racist attitude the white American army command could muster. There was a concerted effort by the white American army hierarchy, and some British politician's, to impose segregation onto the British people, which was met with considerable pushback by many who went out of their way to welcome Afro-American soldiers. At the time of the coming of rock and roll Britain was deeply divided on the question of race, or more correctly, colour. The deep schism in attitudes, imported from America, invariably degenerated into "I love Americans, it's the white bastards I can't stand", countered with "But would you want your sister to marry one?" I did hear that one of my father's sisters had dated an Afro-American soldier during the war, which only added to the perfect one's assessment of "those people". My mother's attitude to the love of my aunt, who was killed in Europe, was that my aunt had "a lucky escape". My aunt never married. I suspect my father's rampant racism had more to do with not wanting to be associated with his grandmother's 'blackness', and to distance himself as far as possible from his sister's wartime indiscretions in order to appease my mother. I almost forgot his Irish Catholic mother.

The divirsive nature of segregation impacted significantly on Britain, even though it did not officially exist. The stream of Bible thumping, fundamental evangelical, born again Christian ministers preaching racial hatred in the tradition of the American deep South, proclaiming rock and roll to be satan's music, and the youth who listened to it were destined to burn in hell's fire for eternity, did not help. Whenever Billy Graham came to England another wave of racist hysteria would be unleashed by the British media, with rock and roll being blamed for the collapse of the Empire, plummeting sexual morals, and the national debt. My point of no return was hearing Howlin' Wolf with *Smokestack Lightning*, thus booking, at an early age, my own special place alongside Hades in the underworld. As long as Hades played Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker, I was happy .

Even with rock and roll life was still grey pretending to be green and cream, but now there was a focus for our discontent, and the wheels of

Billy Graham

change had begun to turn. The incessant line of war movies began to give way to films like *On the Water Front*. with Marlon Brando, and the scandalous *And God Created Woman* with Briditte Bardot showing a naked back on screen. Rebellion and sex had made it to the big screen, a sure and certain sign that the establishment was realising that rebellion and sex can be converted into money.

The second coming of the rebellion coincided with the lurid reporting of rampant gangs of Teddy Boys ripping cinema seats to shreds, and trashing the local Odeon at last night's Everly Brothers concert losing traction: it had become normalised. Mods versus Rockers became the new law and order focus for the media.

Rockers at the Ace

Noddies and the Ace

Youth was becoming mobile. Few could afford a car so the choice was motor bike or scooter. I bought a motorbike, wore a fashionably scuffed 'Montana' black jacket and riding leathers and black crash helmet, and frequented places such as the Ace Cafe, a truck-stop on the North Circular Road . I could not afford a real Montana leather jacket so I had a cheap copy from Pride & Clarkes, who were at the time, a sort of motor cycle K-mart.

The Ace Cafe was grey. Not green and cream grey, but really grey. I never knew if the Ace was painted grey or if it was the result of decades of cigarette smoke clinging to unwashed, unloved walls. Slightly above head height cigarette smoke formed a permanent cloud semi-hiding the lights, that shone with an unearthly glow suggestive of flying saucers approaching through a thick fog, just like the black and white horror movies at the local Odeon. The ceiling seemed to be grey, but that too could have been the hazy cloud of cigarette smoke through which it was viewed. The cloud would have extended to the floor if not for the regular opening of the door that allowed the lower levels to escape. Grey tables stood at a right angle to a central aisle, with one end against the wall. The tables were usually packed with chain-smoking bikies dressed in black, loudly orating lies to each other about their latest exploits. Some patrons occasionally tried using ashtrays, but usually cigarettes were discarded onto a floor that was swept regularly – twice a year. The tables were cleaned every time they were devoid of clients. The big, unshaven owner, dressed in dirty clothes and wearing a highly stained apron would flick discarded food scraps onto the floor, to join the cigarette butts, with his only tea towel that would have been washed had he a spare. The tea was dreadful, and the only food on offer was over-cooked greasy hamburgers, with or without sauce. It was in essence a truck stop much like any other, but for some strange reason it was the 'go to' for a bikies' night out. The Ace on the North Circular Road was too far to travel on a regular basis. At a local level there were several substitute cafes.

Disputes about who had the fastest bike arose several times a night, resulting in the need for a race around the roundabouts, observed by the patrons who would pour out onto the forecourt to form two rival groups. Bets would be taken by the only person, whose name I cannot remember, considered to possess sufficient integrity for such a task, and we were not too sure of him either. I once won a race around the roundabouts, but only because a mate had switched the plug leads to my rival's bike. Such behaviour was not considered British – and would possibly have resulted in death had the perpetrator been caught – but was not uncommon. Sometimes we would have a mass race around the roundabouts just for the fun of it. The local cops riding their little 'noddy-bikes', would attempt to catch offenders, but had no hope. I formed the theory that they enjoyed the racing as much as we did, and the show of force was just an excuse to join in. Sometimes we would taunt them by slowing down so that they could almost catch us, and then give them a traditional salute before speeding away. Occasionally the police would arrive back at the Cafe several minutes after the end of the race demanding the participants in the race confess, only to be met by vacant stares of disbelief that anyone would be so reckless as to race motor cycles on public roads. The noddies invariably left when the movement in the crowd threatened to form a circle around them. There was no way known a noddy-bike was going to catch a Norton or a Triumph Bonneville, but noddies tried. I saw a Triumph Bonneville some weeks ago. It had 'Veteran' number plates and moved very slowly.

The effectiveness of noddy bikes was that they were the stealth fighters of their day, arriving silently from behind before an escape could be made. One of the noddies, nicknamed 'Copper Bob,' lived a short distance from where I lived, and his mission in life seemed to be to catch me doing something, anything, criminal. He almost got me the day I passed my motorbike licence test. I rode to the testing place with my mate Derek on the pillion seat, put the 'L' plate on my bike, took and passed the test, took the 'L' plates off my bike and rode home with Derek once again on the back. On the way home Copper Bob rode up, unheard, alongside Derek and myself, and requested we stop. Copper

Copper Bob

Bob asked for my license and I showed him my learners permit. I was politely told me it was illegal to carry pillion passengers with a learners permit. We were both aware of this, but in those days all transactions between police and civilians had to be conducted conforming to certain, long established ritual, and, if a civilian was about to be nicked, with extreme politeness. After starting the 'nicking' ritual with customary slow unbuttoning of the left breast pocket of his uniform, Copper Bob proceeded to carefully slide his little notebook from the pocket, and remove the indelible pencil from the spine of the notebook, before carefully folding the notebook back to the first empty page. After a suitable pause Copper Bob lightly licked the end of the indelible pencil, as required by convention, and was about to make his first mark in the notebook when I revealed the pink slip, which should have been inside the learners permit, to signify I had passed the test. After a long silence he slowly reversed the rituals until he reached the point where he re-mounted his noddy-bike and slid silently away. I never understood why I received such close attention from Copper Bob, but surmised it must have had something to do with father, cigarettes, and insufficient evidence.

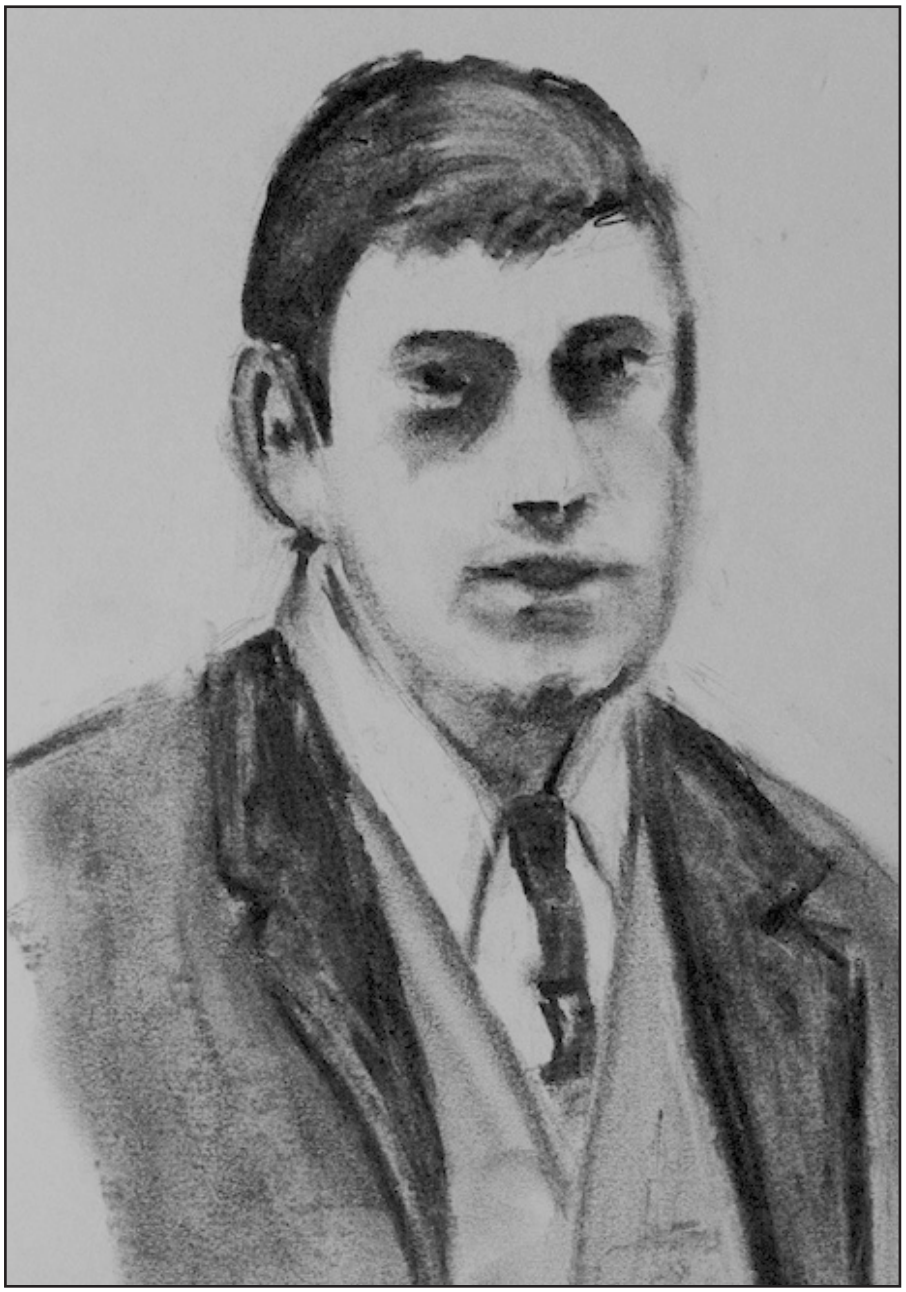
There was one occasion when Copper Bob would have thought he had me on toast. The train fare to work in London used to cost me a third of my wages, and so I availed myself a common little scam of buying a return ticket to the next station from each end of the trip and using the return half to exit the station the next day. The odds of being caught on the crowded Underground system were zero to none, but I was caught. After some intense interrogation which was making me later and later for work I suddenly thought, "I am going to Australia next week" and confessed everything. I would have confessed to the great train robbery if they had asked me to.

My father wrote to me in Australia to tell me how Copper Bob had arrived at the door with a big smile on his face, went through the ritual of slowly removing his helmet and placing it under his left arm, and then politely asked to speak me. When he was told he would have to go to Australia the smile faded and he said "I won't be needing this then" as he pulled a summons for allegedly defrauding British Rail out of his tunic, tore it in half and dropped it on the doorstep before slowly replacing his helmet and silently riding off. My father seemed pleased that Copper Bob had once again left empty handed. Many years later I returned to England for a short visit and half expected the ghost of Copper Bob to slide up behind me on his noddy-bike to hand the taped back together summons.

Don't Mess with the Krays

The Underworld

Whilst at my little suburban level the games with the noddies were mostly harmless fun on both sides, at a deeper level there was an underworld developing in East London that was to be avoided at all cost. Our local villains, the Jones brothers were to be treated with utmost respect because not to do so could result in very serious injury, usually involving a ‘flick knife’, a spring loaded old time barbers razor. It was a world that resided like a ghost in the background of the mists of non-existence. My Father would have been very careful not to cross the line between a little mild larceny and the hard core criminal gangs. The youngest of the Jones brothers would have been about ten at the time, but even he was treated with extreme care and respect. Beyond the Jones there was a hierarchy of increasing violence going all the way up to the almost mythical Kray twins, who were believed to exist but most people had the good sense to avoid. Those who did know the Kray’s usually kept to a policy of speaking, hearing and seeing no evil. Here my father and I were in complete agreement. Playing with the noddies was fun, but stay away from the rough stuff.



Dressed for the Palais

The Palais

Whilst the week day evenings of my youth were spent as a ‘rocker’ being chased around by Copper Bob and his mates, at weekends I would dress in my ‘mod’ gear and catch the train to meet with the scooter set, who included several patrons of the Ace Cafe, at the Ilford Palais to dance with the dolly birds. It was usually Sunday night at the Palais because of the tradition of parties on a Saturday lasting all night before going home, having a bath, changing, and staggering to the Palais to show, as a matter of pride, that we could do it.

The Palais was the opposite of the greyness of the Ace Cafe. Inside was well lit and clean with a mixture of soft fabric and bright plastic surfaces. There was a large, highly polished timber dance floor with neat little tables around the fringe under a balcony that had more neat little tables looking down onto the dance floor. There was a definite Hierarchy. The young males would stand talking in groups strutting the finery of their new suits. The girls would sit at the tables waiting to be asked to dance, and after dancing, if a couple wanted to move to the conversation phase they would move upstairs to the balcony. There were also two large glass faceted balls on chains hanging from the ceiling causing the reflection of different coloured spot lights to move around the dance hall as coloured spots. It was agony if one of these little brightly coloured spots shone directly into bloodshot eyes after a heavy Saturday night.

The difference between the Mods and Rockers was music and the Rockers hatred of drugs whilst drugs were beginning to infiltrate the Mod sub-culture. It is strange how a movement beginning with fierce opposition to drugs could become inseparably linked to drug dealing in today’s world. Mods and Rockers had different sound tracks to their lives, with many, such as myself, moving effortlessly between the two. The Rockers insisted that (then) hard core rock and roll such as Chuck Berry, Eddie Cochrane and Gene Vincent was the only real music. I enjoyed bikie music but I kept quiet about my preferences for Howlin’ Wolf and Muddy Waters who, at the time, were very much underground with records difficult and expensive to get through sources such as seamen returning from America. There was some cross-over with Bo Diddley and other black singers. The motorbikes and the black leather were the image accessories made popular by American hard rockin’ motorbike rebel movies starring the Hells Angels. In the beginning Mods were the followers of the American non-descript pop sausage factory nothingness music of manufactured artists like Del Shannon and Neil Sedaka. There was some relief when Chubby Checker arrived with the twist. I tolerated the Mod music, but it was not the motivation for frequenting the Palais. I had sufficient understanding of the world to realize I was not going to meet the girl of my dreams at the Ace Cafe. By this time, I was seeking a new focus for my fantasies because Suzy had migrated to America, with her parents, and I had heard rumours of a far-distant engagement.

There were hard core adherents to one life style but the generally duality of Mods and Rockers was not a duality at all, it was a product of a blended life. It was an accepted part of that so-called duality that a patron of the Ace Cafe might meet a girl at the Palais and disappear for a period of time, only to reappear when the romance faded. They would arrive back at the Ace with the usual tales of how women were total bitches before having a race around the roundabouts. I experienced this cycle several times. I don’t think my rocker mates actually believed women were total bitches but there were certain standards that had to be maintained by patrons of the Ace. Living between Mods and Rockers was fluid, and which side of the fence one resided at any time was dependent on the state and quality of a person’s romantic life. The only constant was the miserable cold drizzle and the oppressive greyness of London fog that seemed to go on forever.

Country Hospital

The Removal Truck

There was an incident with a removal truck which could have been disastrous for my tribe of friends but which became a happy event. I was supposed to have gone riding with my mates on the weekend but on the Thursday before I had ridden my 'Beeza' (BSA) into the side of a car that had been turning left into a petrol station from the outside lane. It all happened in slow motion, including the aerial view of a Ford Escort with a crumpled left side and a very broken motorcycle. I was uninjured, which is surprising as I landed some distance on the other side of the Escort without touching it. My bike, however, was a mess.

On Saturday, when I was supposed to go riding I did nothing much until I went to the Palais. It was not until the next day that I learned that my friends, riding as a group rounded a corner at high speed in a little country village and had hit a removal truck standing stationary outside a cottage. In the East London tradition of using exaggeration to create a great story from the smallest incident, it soon became truth that the truck stood with the rear loading gate down and all twelve of my friends had ridden up the ramp into the back of the truck and the driver had gone to investigate the noise and found his truck full of Rockers and their bikes. The truth is that the front two riders did end up in the back of the truck but the others had hit various other obstacles in trying to avoid the truck. Unfortunately, the obstacles they were trying to avoid were mostly their already fallen mates. Whilst there were no fatalities all suffered injures sufficiently severe to be ferried in groups to the local hospital by the one ambulance the hospital possessed, where they took every bed in the male ward. A ward full of Rockers in a country hospital was always going to be a challenge.

On Sunday afternoon myself and a friend Eddie, who had also missed the ride, but for the much more pleasurable reason that he had spent the night with the current friend he had met at the Palais, decided to visit the boys in hospital. We decided that beer was probably the most needed gift we could take, so after attaching the sidecar to Eddie's bike and filling it with crates of beer we set off into the countryside. Our mates were in a sorry state. Arms and legs in plaster, shoulders strapped and neck braces, but fortunately no serious head injuries, as we were sufficiently aware to always wear helmets when riding. All were in a state of semi-consciousness from sedation and pain killers, so Eddie and I decided to return with the beer on Thursday.

Thursday was another day. When Eddie and I arrived we found a full on gambling syndicate in place, based on laps up and down the ward between the beds and a sophisticated handicapping system. It seems that it had started as a mass event but several crashes on the first turn had resulted in events being converted into time trials. The handicapping was difficult as it kept changing as recovery progressed at different rates. Mike, the most severely injured was in a wheelchair with both legs and an arm in plaster and strapped ribs. He would have been confined to bed if the nursing staff had not feared a mass revolt had they tried to keep him immobile. Terry had what was basically a sprained ankle and would have been discharged had he not been having so much fun. He kept inventing phantom symptoms to keep the doctors in a continuous state of bewilderment and they decided to keep him there for observation. By a semi-unanimous vote, it was decided Mike and Terry added together formed an average injury and were allowed to compete in the time trails as a team. The only thing missing was a few noddies to make the boys go faster. Two of the nurses seemed to have an affinity with the boys and it became the norm that doctors and other staff could visit provided they were escorted by at least one of the affiliate nurses. This seemed a good time to deliver the gift of beer and this was achieved with the help of the two nurses and an instrument trolley with little curtains hanging down the side.

One by one the boys received a hero's welcome back at the coffee bar. By this time the story of the magnificent twelve and their adventures in the back of a removal truck had been elevated to the level of urban myth, with many extras and embellishments added according to who it was doing the telling. Nellie and Frank returned only briefly to tell us that they had taken the association with the two nurses to the next level, and six months later we all went to

The Wedding

a double wedding where Frank told the story of how he met his bride which, apart from a motorbike, removal truck and a hospital, had little resemblance to fact. But facts don't matter if it's a good story.

The last I heard of Nellie and Frank was that they were happily married, still close mates living near each other in little suburban two up, two down terraced houses in what was the standard working class existence of the day.

Hell's Angels Invade Brighton

Newspapers

It was all very innocent but, if the mass media was to be believed Britain was headed into the abyss with considerable help from the Mods and Rockers. I never had much faith in the ability of main stream media to report objectively. One Easter I went for a ride with my biker mates. We met another group of bikers who said they were going to Brighton for the weekend. This seemed like a good idea so we went too. The closer we got to Brighton the more the roads were filled with bikes, until on our arrival there was nothing but bikes. My group was lucky enough to find a small group of caves at the east end of the beach that had not already been claimed as sleeping quarters. By Sunday lunchtime the shops were beginning to close because they had run out of things to sell. All the food outlets were closed by 10am. A detail was dispatched south towards Folkstone to buy food for the remainder of the weekend, with strict instructions not to forget the beer. Sunday night was one big party on the beach. There were rumours on Monday that petrol stations on the way back to London were running out of petrol and so we decided to go east and head home via Folkstone and Rochester. It was a good weekend.

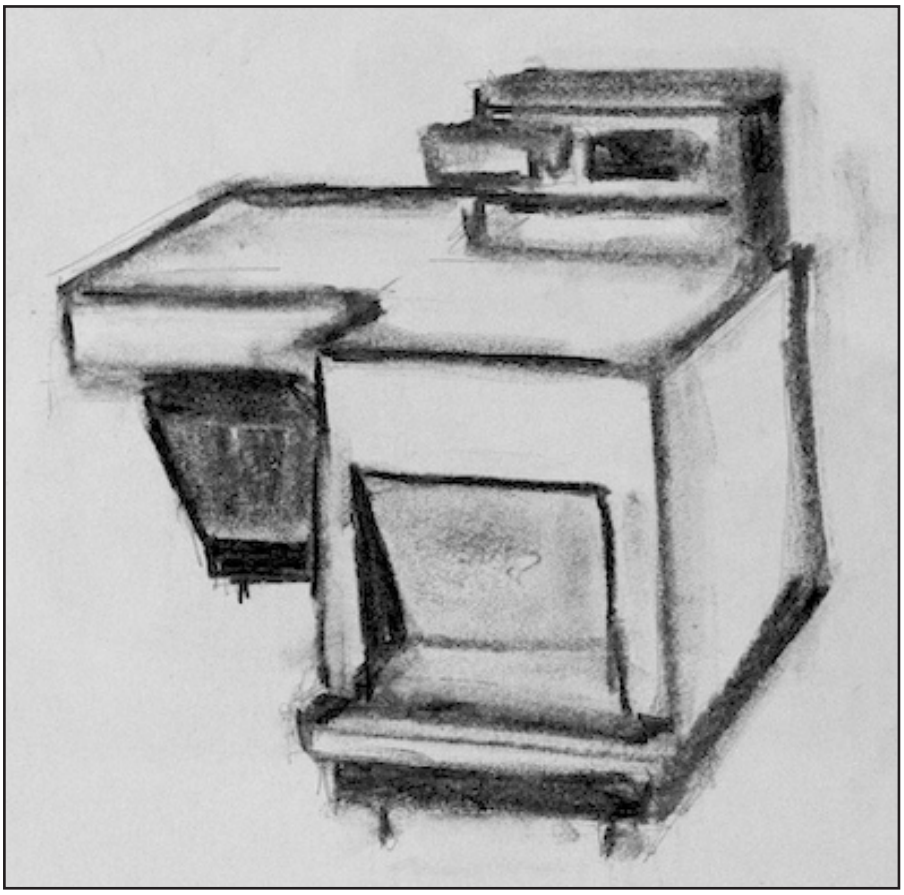
The next day I bought my customary newspaper to read on the train on the way to work. The front page headline, proclaimed in large, bold, capitalized block letters, "HELLS ANGELS INVADE BRIGHTON". There was little room for anything else on the front page, but the next six pages were taken up with stories detailing how shopkeepers had to close and barracicade their shops, and how they had cowered in dark backrooms fearing for their lives whilst drunken hordes of unwashed bikies, with murder and larceny in their hearts and using motorbike chains as weapons, tried to smash their way in. There was no mention of shopkeepers having the best weekend of the season, and who had gone home early due to a lack of stock. But why spoil a good newspaper story with the facts. There were reports of satanic nude rituals, dancing around flaming crosses on the beach, along with the usual drunken orgies and other comic tales of group sex and depravity. I spent most of the journey to work that day laughing at the absurdity of the reports. My father, however, believed every word of it, and was convinced I had sold my soul to the devil and would be lost forever.

The Beatles

The Beatles

The Beatles arrived and killed the rebellion stone dead. How can you possibly have a decent rebellion when the 'oldies' like the music you listen to? It's not natural. Even my parents accepted that if they could not have Vera Lynn, they could live with the Beatles. It was strange that the neat little suits of the Beatles, and their clean shiny little faces totally fooled the oldies. How can you sit down to watch *Six O'Clock Rock* on the BBC with your parents joining in? The essential part of any rebellion – that it has to be opposed – was lost. The illusion of sex and debauchery of the rebellion, longed for but never fully achieved became normalised with the Beatles, but it slipped under the radar with the oldies because it arrived to the sound track of *Love Me Do* sung by four cheeky little boys in nice suits. The moment the revolution became mainstream was another moment that passed unnoticed. One moment mainstream media was reporting on the decadence of youth and how Britain was descending into the oblivion of the underworld, and the next they were chasing the Beatles around trying to report on what they had for breakfast.

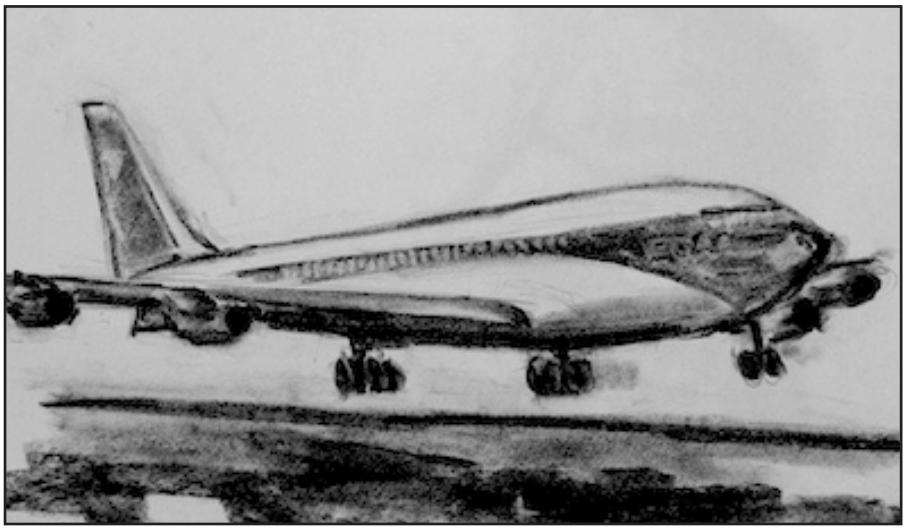
The sexual revolution had arrived a few years earlier but was largely underground. The Beatles made it mainstream. Before the Beatles the 'pill' had been gaining acceptance but was only considered 'proper' for married women until Nikita Khrushchev intervened. The Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 was a very scary event, and there was a genuine fear of nuclear war resulting. World War II was still raw in the memories of Europe, and waking up the next morning was not a certainty. Sexual activity accelerated whilst the opportunity was seen to still exist, and by the time the crisis was over sexual activity amongst the (unmarried) youth of Dagenham had become normalised: a rapid but still hidden revolution. Another result of the Cuban missile crisis was that it became abundantly clear the British Empire had gone and England and was now an American colony. But with Jack Kennedy as President there was an optimism that life could get better. The following year came the assassination of Martin Luther King and President Jack Kennedy and optimism for the future disappeared. Two years is a minuscule timeframe in the scale of things, but 1962 and 1963 changed everything. The beginnings of the Sixties had seen a softening of my desire to be anywhere but here. I had began to dream that there could be a better future, but that new sense of possibility was gunned down with MLK and JFK. The Beatles arrived not long into a world that had changed forever. The final hope of lasting peace died a few years later with the assassination of Bobby Kennedy.



1960’s Technology. 11 Dry Process Black and White Copies on Plain Paper in One Minute. No Chemicals

The Beginning of a New Revolution

Finding myself to be mainstream was a real shock. From clandestine listening to Radio Luxembourg to mainstream in such a short time was a culture shock. Radio Luxembourg was difficult to tune into, but it had the universal condemnation of the 'oldies' as being a symbol of the decadence of British youth, so it had to be listened to. The Beatles arrived at the beginning of the mass technology revolution, where clever technical things became accessible for ordinary mortals. First the electric golf-ball typewriter appeared, which was considered very clever, but the marvel of the age was the Xerox copier. One morning the staff of the office I worked in were summonised to have the operation of this wonder of technology demonstrated. The document went into the machine and a black–and–white copy would emerge several seconds later. There was none of the old creating negatives using smelly chemicals, stretching the negatives on a drum and turning a handle like some old clothes wringer used before washing machines had been invented. The new machine had a heat lamp inside and sometimes the paper would jamb under the lamp and the paper would smoulder but seldom catch fire. The new machine seemed like magic. The down side to the magic was that when the machine ran out of black toner the unlucky last person to use it had to don a a full length plastic apron, long rubber gloves, and attempted to retrieve the container from the machine and refill it without covering the machine, the room, and themselves in smudgy black patches. It would take many days and much scrubbing before the black would fade from the skin. If this happened on a Friday it was a disaster. Black patches on the skin were okay for the Ace, but definitely not for Sunday night at the Palais. I hated that machine. The technology revolution began with a whimper, much gnashing of teeth and many black patches.

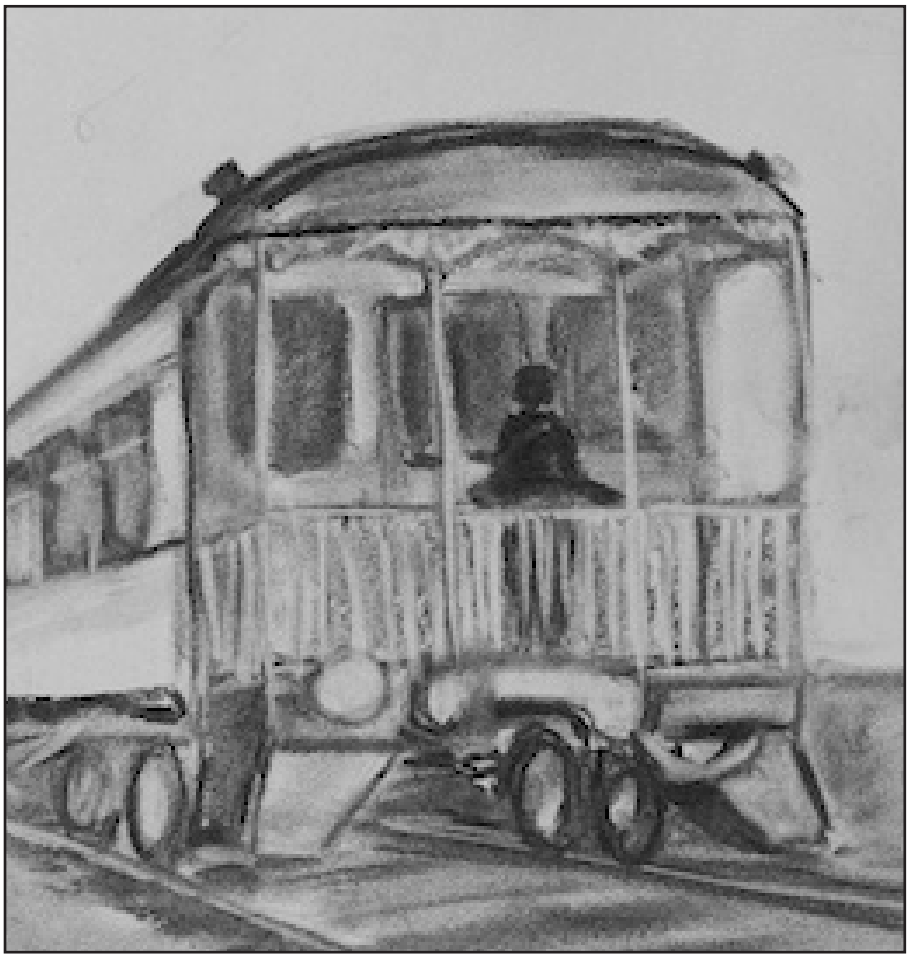


Goodbye Dagenham

Australia

Shortly after, I migrated to Australia and spent several months suffering from severe culture shock. The problem I had was that I had come to Australia seeking freedom. But having found freedom in Australia did not know what to do with it. With just a one-way trip on a Boeing 707 I was free, totally free, without the slightest idea what being free meant. One thing that did not change was that I still had to earn a living, and initially this was achieved by standing at a machine making screws eight hours a day. I didn't actually make the screws, I put the spiral bit on the shank. Bins of 'blanks' would arrive at my station. A blank had the general appearance of a screw but with a cylindrical shape where the spiral bit was supposed to be. My job was to scoop a quantity of blanks into a hopper at the top of the machine and the blanks would pass between two plates that slid backwards and forwards pressing the spiral shape into the cylindrical part before a fully formed screw would fall into a bucket. The scooping and falling would continue in a rhythmic zombie automation until the bucket was full. When the bucket was full of screws I would slide the bucket sideways and replace it with an empty bucket. After producing thirty thousand screws in each eight hour shift I received a small bonus for every extra thousand screws produced. Apart from there being little difference to working on the production line at Fords in Dagenham and making screws in Marrickville, life in Australia outside of work was good . One big difference was the Marrickville factory was kept clean and there was a difference between day and night.

After learning how things worked in Australia I lied about my age, dropping it by two years, and applied for a job as a junior draftsman. And after working as a junior for three months I left, and lying about my age again, this time increasing it by two years, I worked as a design draftsman. It was a good system in Australia at the time. When applying for a job it was permissible, even expected, that the applicant would lie outrageously. If the boss liked the applicant's face he would be given a week to prove he/she could do the job. I was now rescued from making screws, I had money and time to enjoy life.

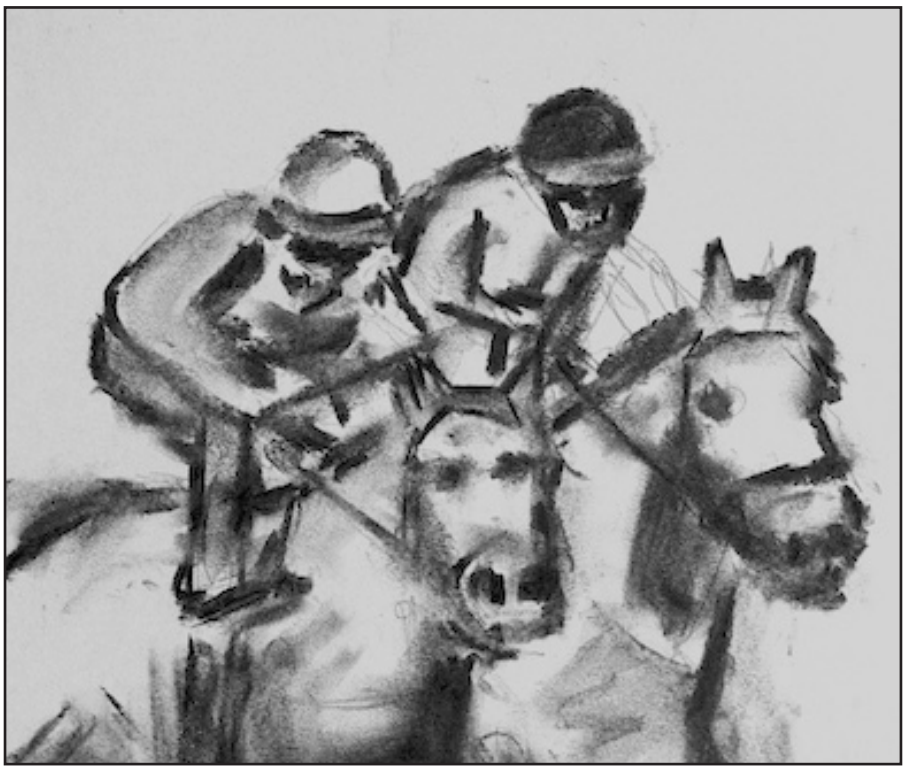


Arriving in the Wild West

Perth

I decided to travel across Australia to Perth by train for no other reason than I could. A wonderful train trip in the days when trains were cheap and flying was dear. I woke one one morning on the train to see kangaroos in the distance hopping across in front of a bright red dawn and I knew for certain this was Australia. At Kalgoorlie I changed to the local train to ride into Perth. The Kalgoorlie to Perth train was really old, with a verandah on the rear carriage with steps to get on and off the train. When in motion there was a wrought iron gate across the steps to stop passengers falling off. I had heard before leaving Sydney that Western Australia was the 'wild west' and traveling on the train from Kalgoorlie to Perth I believed it. I had a great time standing on the rear verandah looking for Indians. Arriving at Perth station I stood outside with my single suitcase and was overcome by the decision of having to turn left or right. For the first time in my life I was aware that my decision at that moment meant deciding between two possible futures. If I turned left I would meet people and create a future; if I turned right I would meet different people and have a different future. I had never imagined growing up in East London that such choices existed. I decided to go forward before turning left and found a room in a boarding house on Adelaide Terrace, I still wonder what my life would have been like if I had turned in the other direction. I got a job the next day by answering an advert in the paper for a draftsman. The only question I was asked was if I could start the next day. I said yes and was given the address leaving me with the problem of where it was and how I would get there. I never asked how much I would be paid, I never had time. When I received my pay I thought it was a mistake because it was twice what I had been paid in Sydney. I also discovered in Perth that the only qualification required to be a draftsman was to be male and able to hold a pencil. It was many years before I saw a woman in a drawing office who wasn't a typist.

After a few weeks I had enough money to buy a motorbike. After a week riding a motor bike in Perth it became obvious that riding a motorbike in Perth was slightly delayed suicide so I traded the motorbike for a car.

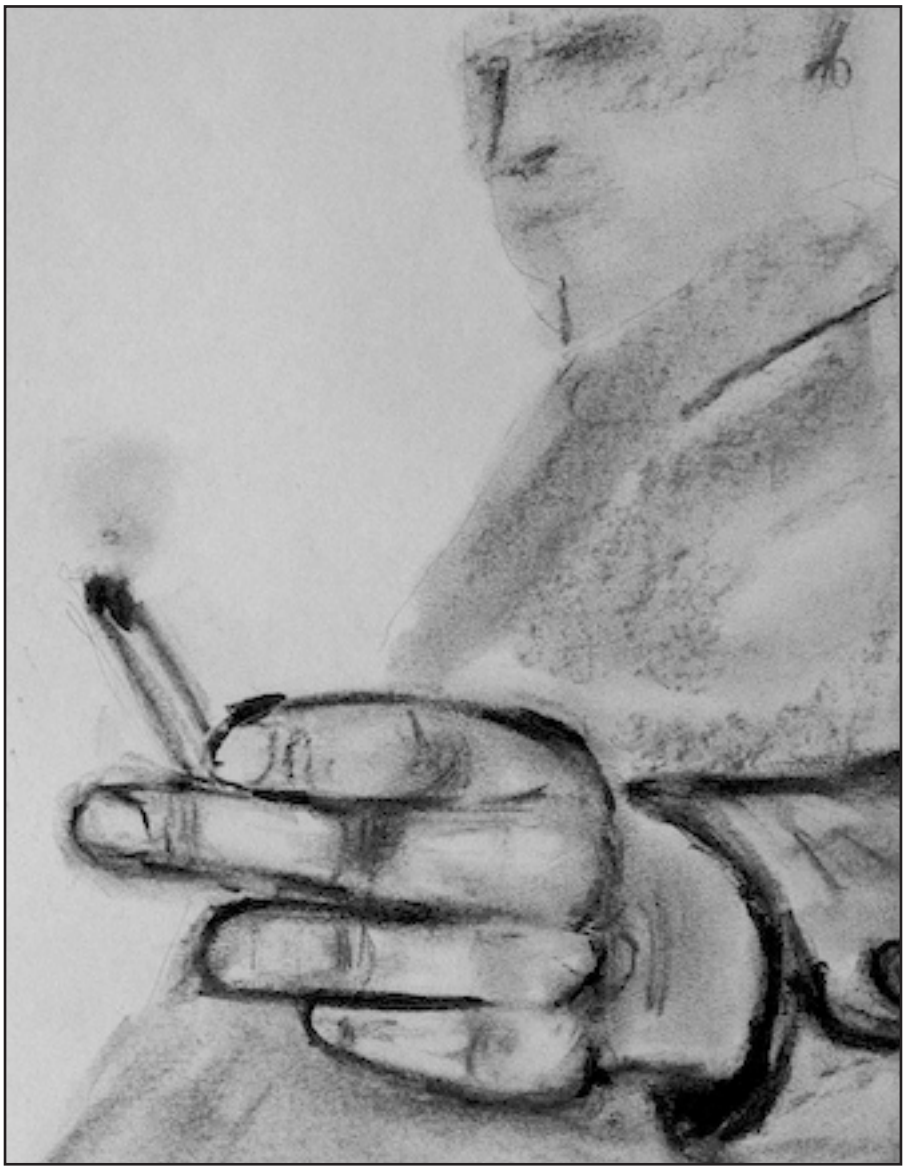


Jack's Horse Coming Second

The Share House

After a few weeks at the boarding house I moved into a share house with a group of equally irresponsible, wild–twenty–something year–olds and settled into a life of drunken nights at the West End nightclub. Perth liquor laws were strange. The West End could not sell alcohol, but clubbers could bring their own beer and pay 'corkage.' The problem was that arriving at midnight with a three mates and a carton of beer meant that all of the beer had to be drunk because we were not allowed to take it home. A solution would have been to buy less beer but we never thought of that.

Three of us had a lucrative source of second income. Jack was a gambler and every Saturday he would pick the horse that would run second in every race on the card. He would back to win, and end up broke, whilst the rest of us would ask him for his tips and back the same horses to place. Worked a dream until the estate agent arrived one Saturday to tell us we had one week to get out because we had not paid the rent for three months. That was when we found out that Jack was using our rent money to bet on horses that ran second instead of taking it to the estate agent. I think we were too stunned to speak to Jack. It was not a good week for Jack because the following Wednesday a lovely looking young lady showed up claiming to be Jacks wife saying it had taken months to track him down. As well as gambling our rent money he hadn't been paying maintenance for the support of his daughter. An unsuspecting Jack walked in and his wife totally lost her cool and attacked him with such ferocity we could not have intervened if we had wanted to, which we did not. The attack stopped as suddenly as it had started and his wife just walked out. Jack was in a bad way. He was bruised and bleeding with what could have been broken ribs, and could hardly move, but the rest of us just ignored him as before. The strange thing was that the gambling, the wife, the attack was never spoken of, it was as if none of it had happened. On the Saturday, Dougie and I moved into a fourth–storey flat in Wembley and carried on with our lives, but it was not the same. We had grown up rapidly in that week. We would still go clubbing but drank in a responsible way and did not believe everything that we were told. Not long after, Dougie met a girl and after a while got engaged. I was best man at his wedding and in spite of good intention we grew apart. The last I heard of Dougie he had a thriving import business and had built a house in City Beach.



Passing the Joint

Drugs

There is an old saying that goes “If you remember the Sixties you weren’t there”. I do remember the sixties, possibly because I once tried pot, just once. I was invited to a ‘party’ in a dim room that had chairs arranged in a grey circle. To the sound of Ravi Shankar’s sitar we sat in the circle whilst a joint was passed around . The arrangement of the chairs was not unlike what would be expected at a twelve step recovery program, which is possibly why recovering addicts feel comfortable sitting in circles. The idea was to take the joint, inhale the smoke deeply, and pass the joint on. I watched the others slip into strange body positions with silly smiles on their faces, muttering about beautiful butterflies, visits from loving aliens, elephants riding on feathers and the such, whilst I felt and saw nothing other than what was happening in the room. It was a most disappointing experience. The outcome was that I spent a week alternating between staring down a toilet bowl wishing I could be violently sick, but never succeeding, and lying on my bed praying for oblivion. By the time the ordeal passed I was weak and dehydrated to the point that it took another week to gain sufficient strength to return to work.

One of the advantages of being allergic to pot is that I got to enjoy the sound track of the psychedelic era whereas to many it is a vague memory, if they can remember anything at all. Drugs were not part of my general awareness at the time the Beatles first appeared. My awareness of the drug culture began much earlier but it didn’t become ‘real’ until the Beatles’ release of the *Sgt Peppers* album with *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds*. From there drugs became increasingly prominent. Rebellion thrives on opposition and the drug rebellion was driven in part by prohibition . I was sharing a house with a group of single males who had not had the same experience with drugs as myself. It became normal for me to be fully present whilst my friends sat in chairs, seeing and hearing many wonderful things from whatever reality they were residing in at the time. Naturally I would have to agree what a great party it was the night before, aware that nobody would remember that when the drugs started flowing I had left to go to a local nightclub to meet others, who whilst possibly being slightly inebriated were not shit-faced on drugs. I do still like Ravi Shankar though.

Last year a friend from the sitting in circle days, an ardent follower of Timothy Leary, died a lonely, chain smoking, pill popping alcoholic death. I didn’t bother saying goodbye to him because there was no one left to say goodbye to. He had departed many years before. My week of staring at toilet bowls and praying for oblivion had played a useful part in my life.

The Lottery Nobody Wanted to Win

The Lottery

After Dougie met his wife I moved into another share house. It was much like the old share house, without a gambler, but with an equally wild group of young men. Each month we looked in the newspaper to see the birthdays published for the Vietnam lottery. I had arrived in Australia with no idea of the most ill-conceived monthly lottery imaginable, the lottery to see which young males were going to Vietnam to be killed or have their lives destroyed. The idea of pulling birthdays out of a hat to determine who is going to be sent for slaughter had to be the product of a very sick government.

The monthly lottery was published with my birthday in it. There was no way I was going to Vietnam and I had two choices, go to jail or go back to England. I had no idea of the politics involved, I just did not like the idea of being shot at. I decided returning to England voluntarily was marginally the better than going to jail, and when I told my mates and they said they would buy me a plane ticket as a going away present. I was not certain if there was any hidden meaning behind the offer. I was told I was booked on the Saturday morning flight. Friday night was a big night. I was very miserable but my mates were having a great time telling me how I could come back when the war was over, if they let me in. By which time they would be happily married with three children each and very rich whilst I was cold, wet and miserable back where I had come from. I was still drunk when they took me to the airport, and when the boarding call was made they made a big fuss about giving me my ticket' which was in a white long envelope. I opened it and instead of an airline ticket there was a piece of the newspaper stuck on part of a cornflakes box with the section of the lottery with my date of birth on it underlined in red ink. The day was correct but the year was wrong. I was a year too old. After being very judgemental about the character of my ex-mates and their parents I decided to forgive them and we went upstairs to the airport bar before going home, having a sleep and then going out clubbing. I was feeling very happy to be in Australia. I even promised my mates I would become an Australian citizen. They decided by a three to two vote that they would let me be an Aussie, and only then because I had almost gone to Vietnam to fight for them. Later, when I looked at the date the law was bought in, I realised I had not been a year too old; it was only nine days.

It was not, at the time, true that I was opposed to the war because I had no idea of the issues involved. My basis for not wanting to go to Vietnam was purely selfish. Every night the war continued on the television news like the next instalment of a soap opera. The war was shown in all its horror; the killing and maiming shown in graphic detail including napalm attacks and the summary execution of enemy officers. It was all in black and white like an old John Wayne cowboy movie, but the effect was sufficient to make me very afraid of going to Vietnam. Possible the memories of my childhood in London led to me to understand war better than my Aussie mates. Maybe I didn't want people trying to shoot me, but whatever the reason there was no way known I was going to fight in a war that I had no idea about. At least Hitler had been a real enemy. Even if the 'Ruskies' of the Cold War had been more intellectual than actual, they seemed real.

Mickey, another inmate of the share house became a good friend and we would often go to clubbing on a Friday or Saturday. One evening I came back from the bar with drinks to find Mickey sitting with two girls. They were lovely, but I thought I had been drinking too much because they looked exactly the same. Mickey introduced me to the twins. They had been at school together and they were reminiscing how nobody could tell them apart, so they would continually swap identities; swapping clothes during the day so nobody would know them by their clothes. If one got into trouble they would give the others name, and then swap back again when punishment time came. The teachers solved this problem by punishing them both. At test time they would sign the same name, but since their scores were always similar the teachers would average the result and give both the same mark. Needless to say by the end of the evening I was totally in love but with no idea with which one.

Over a short time the four of us became a foursome. The twins were Michelle and Josephine, usually Mickey and José. Two Mickey's was confusing so when I wanted to distinguish between the two I called male Mickey by his real name Nigel, which he hated. He was called Mickey because his surname was Finn. Mickey particularly hated Nigel when I recited John Lennon's "Arf, Arf", from his poem *Good Dog Nigel*. Usually it was just easier to call the twins the twins because I didn't know which one I was talking to anyway.

Nightclubbing gave way to food halls and weekend camping trips with, of course, segregated sleeping arrangements. Nigel and I surmised that we might be able to tell them apart if we slept with them, and when Nigel let this idea slip on one camping trip, after his third or fourth Bacardi, the twins smiled in unison and together said "dream on." Which we did, often.

One issue that concerned the twins was that they had a younger brother coming up to conscription age and they were scared he would be conscripted and had started subscribing to Moratorium News, the newsletter published by the Vietnam Moratorium Campaign. After my experience with my near miss with conscription I was with the twins on the campaign to end Australian involvement in the Vietnam War and conscription in particular.

This resulted in my first encounter with the great unwashed long-haired louts who, in the rhetoric of my father, should get a proper job, came when I went to a university guild rally against the Vietnam War. There I met an older student who was a little wierd. I attributed his weirdness to two factors; his studying for a PhD when I had no idea what a PhD was, and his obsession with the philosophies of Timothy Leary. I did not share the same enthusiasm for Timothy Leary because of my earlier experience of staring at toilet bowls and praying for oblivion, but Mickey, myself and the twins loved discussing, often rigorously, the most obscure and unimportant subjects with him that grew more heated and exaggerated as we all became drunker and less inhibited. Somewhere in this environment I discovered that for all their sameness the twins could have different thoughts. I wasn't certain which of the twins was having the different thoughts, but there was definitely hope of a future where I could tell them apart.

It often seemed like the old share house days but there was a difference that was difficult to define except that, within the hedonistic behaviour, there seemed to be some glimmer of meaning whereas before there was none. I didn't realise how different until the four of us went to a University of Western Australia psychology club dinner followed by an after-party starting at 2am. As I remember the evening was a long series of very short speeches followed by a toast. The speeches become progressively less coherent as the night progressed. I remember very little about the after–party. My companions of that night are now the respected elders of the Perth psychology profession.

But I digress. I began mixing with University students passionate about ending conscription and the Vietnam War, and after a while I was accepted as a rather old but okay sort of apprentice protester who didn't know much, and at the time I found that staying quiet was the best course of action when I didn't understand. Gradually I began to learn about Descartes and other philosophers simply by listening to discussions, and whilst I had never had any doubt that 'I am' I wondered at the idea of having to think about it to make it so. I had always been aware that 'I am' even when I had wanted to be somewhere else. I was also not that happy that some members of the movement insisted on calling each other 'comrade.' There was a commonality I could fully share. The Vietnam war also had a wonderful soundtrack.

Organising a protest was part of the act of protesting and took far longer than a protest itself that was over in a few hours. First there had to be a focus and a theme, and the setting up of a system. There had to be posters written and created, followed by clandestine operations to paste them in prominent locations. The posters had to be compelling and dramatic. There were many different groups involved with a multitude of agendas that needed orchestrating into the appearance of a united front. A group was organised to plan advertising and lobbying local retailers for the placement of often hand drawn and written campaign posters. Meetings were often intense affairs until someone

rolled a joint and the meeting mellowed rapidly. After the first joint I would wait a short time until nobody would notice my departure for a local pub or nightclub. Unlike Twitter, Facebook and emails events participating in a protest required real commitment. All this had to be accomplished whilst appearing to be a normal Aussie of the day, only interested in surf, beer and women at my day job where the general racist, prejudiced and misogynous attitudes reflected in Australian values of the time. It was fun playing a sort of partisan spy in hostile territory joining in conversations about unpatriotic commies trying to destroy the sanctity of the great Australian dream. It was like listening to my dad, but this time I always agreed. Being a pom I was already suspect of being unworthy of living in Australia so often I needed to be at the forefront of anti-protest dogma whilst crossing my fingers and hoping not to be recognised.

In spite of communication difficulties, at that time limited to letters and arranging long distance phone calls, the little collection of protest cells in Perth heard about a big protest planned for Melbourne, and we were expected to organise events in Perth. A number of us decided to go one step further and organized a convoy of cars to drive to Melbourne and join the big event.

There are some events that seem like a good idea beforehand, are a source of pride and make for greatly exaggerated storytelling after the event, but during the process of enactment they are as miserable and uncomfortable as any self-inflicted act of ignorance can be. The idea of a convoy of vehicles of barely roadworthy student cars driving to Melbourne was formulated with no understanding of the road conditions on the Nullarbor at that time. We heard there were three hundred miles of dirt road in the middle with no petrol stations or accommodation, but we decided we would take lots of petrol in jerry cans, get up early in the morning, drive the three hundred miles and have a shower and dinner at a motel on the other side. We also thought it would be a good idea to check the spare tyres before we left.

Our collection of tired student cars and vans was totally inadequate for the task, but luckily we had one vehicle, a Volkswagen Kombi Van that was to prove the saviour of the whole expedition. We arrived at Norseman without too many problems apart from a lack of sleep and hygiene. At Norseman we persuaded the local publican that we would have a free spending evening in the pub if we could have a shower first. I think the decider was that the publican was afraid we would spend the evening in his pub without having a shower if he didn't agree.

The next day, we set off to cross the Nullarbor with various degrees of hangovers, semi-clean even if our vehicles were still putrid, and a Kombi van carrying several cartons of beer that had been part of the deal with the publican. We would have bought the beer anyway but is was useful to conceal this until after we had morning showers as a bonus from the publican. The first part of the journey east was like a long Sunday drive, boring but no drama. We became so used to the bitumen road that we thought the horror stories of Nullarbor were exaggerated until we came to the West Australian border where the bitumen stopped in a very neat line exactly on the border between WA and South Australia. I had images of two surveyors, one from WA and one from S.A. haggling over the exact position of the end of the road. We came to a halt about two hundred yards into the three hundred miles of dirt road. We had a discussion about the condition of the road that was more like a scar in the scrub than a real source of progress. The Kombie went out to survey the road ahead to see if it got better, and returned a few hours later to report that the track got worse the further they went. The debate was divided between going on and going back. Having democratically decided that those who wished to return would, and those who wished to continue would do so. This was followed by lengthy negotiations on how to divide the vehicles in the most efficient way. Mickey, myself and the twins wanted to go on, not so much to get to Melbourne but because we had somewhat romantic dreams of camping out in the middle of the Nullabor with a bottle of Bacardi gazing up at the stars. Luckily the decision that the Kombi van was essential for carrying our gear was made early, and after a bush party lasting most of the night the two groups said their goodbyes at dawn the next day.

The Melbourne convoy – the Kombi, an EJ Holden, a Vauxhall Wyvern, a Ford Falcon 'Woody'

Daddy Cool

and a Nissan Cedric – set out for Melbourne. It was a horror trip. We had been expecting hot days that did not eventuate, but nobody warned us of the cold nights. The Cedric fell into a large pot hole about fifty miles into the dirt road and broke the front suspension. It wasn't going anywhere. Whilst we were stuck a truck came up that couldn't get by, and so with the help of the truck Cedric was pushed to the side of the road and abandoned. The truck driver was not very polite about slow-learner uni students driving on the Nullarbor with a totally unsuitable collection of cars. In fact his first sentence began "What the ….". He then went on to explain in colourful language the rules for crossing the Nullarbor. We were told that we had to stop at every roadhouse and make certain we spoke to the operators. This, he said, was the way, if we got lost or stuck, searchers would know where to look. We also had to note other cars and where they were, so if they got stuck we had information for searchers. Also, he said we had to make room in the Kombi for two or three to sleep and swap drivers and passengers around every two hours. Driving at night would be easier for amateurs like us because it would be easier to see the potholes, but we had to watch for the wombats. We were told they had a habit of running along the lights of the car. If that happened, we had to stop and turn the lights off for a few minutes, but had to be on the lookout and listen for other vehicles so we could turn them on again. A little later I was driving the Kombi at night at the front of the convoy when a very large, fat wombat got into the headlights. and I followed it for a while as it waddled slowly down the road at full speed before I stopped and turned the lights off. I was fascinated by the first wombat I had seen. It also seemed to know the way.

Go on or go back? We decided to go on and found we were rapidly running out of water and petrol, especially as the Woody was constantly overheating and taking most of our water, but contrary to reports of no fuel or water on the Nullarbor there were a reasonable number of roadhouses. About fifty miles past Ivy Springs the Wyvern had two blowouts at

the same time but only had one spare tyre, and the Kombi went back to Ivy Springs to return hours later with a tyre that was smaller than the original but it was on a rim with the same bolt holes. We decided to put the small tyre on the front because stopping the Wyvern going around in circles was less of a problem that the strain on the differential if we put it on the back. When the dirt finally ended we thought we were almost in Melbourne but when we arrived at Ceduna it was decided that it might be a good idea to buy a map to find out where we were, and realised we were only half way there. More decisions. The Wyvern was a wreck on wheels. It still went but it was agreed that it was in a terminal condition, yet because of the lack of vehicles it had to go as far as possible. At the outskirts of Port Augusta, the Wyvern gently rolled to a stop. We held a little ceremony where we thanked the trusty steed for carrying us so far, poured a bottle of beer over the bonnet and wrote a note to place on the driver's seat with the key, "Free to good home" before going in search of a cheap motel.

Without the Wyvern there was no way we could all continue by car so Mickey, the twins and myself caught the train to Adelaide and then an overnight trip to Melbourne I don't remember because I slept all the way. In Melbourne we phoned our contact and were taken by tram to a share house in Fitzroy. The others arrived the next day very tired in an almost zombie state, but were happy it was over. We had planned three days in Melbourne before the march but the march was next day.

Crossing the Nullabor, there had been no contact with the wider world. We had spent a week devoid of papers or news of any kind, and our Melbourne hosts brought us up to date with recent events. Nixon had backed South Vietnam with U.S. troops in attacking across the border into Cambodia, supposedly to stop North Vietnam troops using supply routes in Cambodia. Unfortunately for Americans by the time they reached their targets the Viet Cong had disappeared, but the Americans did destroy several trees. There was a problem for Nixon in that he ordered attacks into Cambodia without telling Congress. Gough Whitlam had condemned the American attacks into Cambodia saying "It was not a turning point in the war – it was a turning point to disaster " but the Government and the Democratic Labour Party had backed the U.S. intrusions into Cambodia. The U.S. warned North Vietnam that if it retaliated against the U.S. actions in Cambodia it would resume bombing of the North. The Australian Minister for Labour and National Service, Billy Snedden, speaking in the House of Representatives, labelled the organisers of the moratorium "political bikies pack raping democracy." This resulted in an elderly lady at the march carrying a banner saying "I'm a pack-raping bikie." There were accounts of archbishops saying hell was going to break loose, totally ignoring the many Christian organisations planning to take part in the march. Others said the streets would run with blood. The massive one-sided reporting by the print media was brilliant for the organisers of the moratorium, giving the anti-war movement more publicity than they could have dreamed of.

I have never seen so many people in one place as there were in the first moratorium march in Melbourne. It was massive. It was both daunting and inspiring. In Perth there had been very dedicated but small groups of activists, but Melbourne was huge. It felt that like being part of something big and important.

It started with a speech by Jim Cairns at the Treasury Gardens before we marched down Bourke Street. It was called a march but it was more like a slow saunter with placards and slogan shouting. The dress code was eclectic, anything from scruffy jeans and tee shirts to suits and ties. Given our method of arrival and lack of time to wash our clothing our small group was wearing the cleanest dirty clothes we could find. Not everyone was marching to stop the war. Some only wanted to get Australia out of it and didn't care how many Americans or Vietnamese died. Some were pro-war, but that was mostly from the pavement. The uniting factor was passion. I spent time talking to some mothers from the 'Save Our Sons' group who only wanted an end to conscription. Later I was talking to a group of communists who wanted to tear down capitalism. This was when I was approached by a man who I thought was a reporter who took a photo of the group and asked me who I was, where I was from and my reason for marching. That was the

beginning of my ASIO file. Later I spoke to two police officers, who seemed very bored and were only there because of the overtime. They didn't seem to care about Vietnam but did seem happy that the march was peaceful. They were happy not to use the special crowd control tactics they had spent a week practising.

The march came to a halt as we approached Elizabeth Street because of what I saw as general confusion as to where we were going so we sat down where we were wondering what was going to happen next. In the distance we could hear what sounded like speeches and I thought I could recognise the voice of Gough Whitlam, a hero of my little group of Uni students. I couldn't hear what he said, but I cheered when everyone else did. The main thing about the day for me was the passion, and the sense of belonging. It was huge. It was also the first time I felt I really belonged to something, rather than being an outside observer watching life drift by with no say in the process.

The end of the moratorium march was an anti-climax in that it slowly dwindled away as protesters drifted away in small groups. I departed with the sadness of knowing the battle was over. Now it was just the time it took to complete the end of conscription, hopefully before the twins little brother was conscripted. Somehow the victory was hollow. I had needed the focus and now I would have to find something new. In the evening our Melbourne mates took Mickey, myself and the twins to a concert to see Spectrum, but it was a new group, Daddy Cool, that was the best, and I was an instant fan. It was like hearing Bill Halley for the first time. I became separated from the others, but the atmosphere was magic and everyone was so friendly I wasn't concerned; I would see them back at the house. I saw Michelle and said "Hi Mickey, where's José?" and realised, as I said it, that I really liked Mickey, but she wasn't José. Mickey smiled and gave me a kiss on the cheek that felt like a parting kiss. We found the other Mickey and José waiting by the entry. We decided to have a late Chinese and usually the twins would sit on one side of the table with Mickey and I on the other, but that night the Mickey's naturally sat together on one side and José and I together on the other side. I never mistook Mickey for José again. The best day.