

# Be Great!

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## The Walk Out

### 1 Loss

Dad died alone. In hospital. Of lung cancer. Early this morning. He had a wife and five kids. He liked us and we liked him, yet not one of us was with him when he died.

## 2 The Manor

I traipsed across Streatham Common to meet my brothers in the Manor. Catkins splayed like blanched elvers in a sea of grass, the willow's climax from the tender caress of the wind. Soft rain like the air gently crying. Musty stench of precipitation on dry ground. The hissing of zillions of rain drops on tarmac.

...The Manor pub, a detached house selling booze. That lubricant for anomie. That deceptive fuel of depression.

The Manor...a small beer garden enclosed by high walling. A hotchpotch cabal attracted like ants to honeydew. The plebs, the social misfits, the no-one-understands-me, the fun-loving, the complex, the humorous, the all-too-human, the shy-seeking-relief.

Dark, shiny wood with an abundance of red-patterned carpet like burnt chips smothered in tomato sauce. Bottles glinting like precious jewels in a pond. A kid in a candy store. Comfort and expectation. Booze gives me a fillip. I feel better with beer in the fridge. A compulsion thing.

*Four cans a night. Eighteen of a twenty-four pack left. They'll run out Sunday. I need another crate. It's mentally intensive really, being an alcoholic.*

Not that I really am one.

Then again Dad was sort of one and so are my brothers, and my grandfather back in Abbeyfeale, Eire, died middle-aged from cirrhosis of the liver. He'd get through a bottle of scotch before Sunday service. Maybe it is a genetic thing, like having green hair.

Not that I've got green hair.

I contemplated the occasion which brought me and two of my brothers to the pub and passed time scribbling onto a beer mat.

Soon, with due gravitas, I read aloud. 'Dad drank to mask his timidity...but paradoxically an egotistical timidity.'

They didn't say anything so I added, with annoying precision: 'What do you think then? As a tome on us and Dad, I mean.'

Jonjo gave one of his typical smart-arse ripostes. 'Mark,' he stressed, leaning forward, 'someone once said that everyone's got a tome inside them...and that's the best place for it.' He smirked and sat back all superior-like

raising the cold pint of Stella to his lips.

'I want to make it funny as well.'

Dad liked funny things. We watched Laurel and Hardy and the Marx Brothers with him when we were kids.

'Yeah,' said Dermi. His real name was Dermot, but we called him Dermi. 'Remember that film where Harpo was leaning against a building and a policeman told him off him for loitering. The policeman ordered Harpo away and of course the building collapsed, and Harpo had that look of I-told-you-so impertinence on his face.'

We laughed and I pictured Dad being with us now as he was then.

I placed my bar-stool to face the window. Looking out the window I watched life go by on Streatham High Road.

An old lady tottered by. Mingling not shopping. The back of her small head, bobbing around as if taking in the wonder of things. Stories locked up inside her skull, embedded in a morass of brain tissue.

Suddenly, the pub was shrouded in darkness. Not a solar eclipse but a huge bearded face, stuck on a blimp, decorated with bits of coloured cloth. It was Shamus, my eldest brother, occulting light from the window.

'Oi! Shamus, you fat sack of bacteria,' shouted Dermi.

Shamus strolled; no predisposition to rush. Didn't say a word. Sat down setting his gaze onto the table centre, head lowered by a burden of doom. Dad's death might be at him.

I felt like consoling him, but my vision was rasped by his triangularly-spiked dress sense.

'Shamus, what do think about a tractate on us and Dad?'

That was a word I picked up. Last Tuesday morning reading the small print disclaimer in legalese gobbledygook on one of those advertising circulars most people hate getting stuffed into their letter boxes, on account they think the postman just delivered some interesting mail like from a friend or something, and they go into a sort of miniature depression on seeing a single bit of paper lying on the hall doormat. But not me. I liked reading the small print over breakfast.

But Shamus, with his vast reservoir of general knowledge, a size in sympathy with his cetacean form, obviously knew it. 'Get stuffed, who'd want to read that crap.'

'But I could describe his early life back in Eire.'



Our dad born in 1920 in Abbeyfeale, a catapulted leprechaun's distance from the west coast of Ireland, south of Limerick.

He had schooling of sorts until he was twelve years old when he became an apprentice wheelwright making and fixing the wooden spoked wheels of horse-drawn carts.

His house had no gas, water or electricity.

'Can't be true about having a well, can it?' I said directing my gaze towards Shamus.

'Yeah. I went there ten years ago after I came back from the kibbutz.'

Jonjo could see what was coming. 'Shamus, we don't want to hear all that boring kibbutz stuff again.'

Shamus was proud of those days, the carefree life with lack of responsibility. The unattached travelling life suited him and backed up his hippy-style outlook on life. 'His' philosophy I called it.

Dad lied about his age and came to London during the war as an Irish navy to repair the bomb-damaged buildings. At King's Cross they were given lapel badges and marched through the streets to their allotted digs. The locals jeered, mistaking them for German prisoners-of-war. Dad reckoned his later affinity for the Caribbean race was borne from these times. Empathy of racism. Boarding houses displayed signs, "Vacancies - No Irish or Blacks need apply."

Eventually the blacks made it easy for the Irish. They took the brunt of that ignorant attack; a more physically obvious target. Later Dad's skill with wood enabled him to move up from a labourer to a carpenter.

'Give it a rest. Stop going on about Dad,' said Dermi.

Leanly built Dermi. And his stupid hair. It was not a bad haircut. On the contrary, it was almost too neat and stylish. Like a scalp painted brown. Not a hair out of place. It was just so annoyingly immaculate. But that wasn't all. His clothes matched his haircut. They had to be immaculate also. He shopped in all the best men's boutiques in Streatham; Chez Lui or other froggy-wop sounding names. Not that he was a dandy or anything, more the opposite really. It was to do with being sarf-London street-cred working class. He was in the Crystal Palace football firm and they had to look smart. Part of a uniform. Also he had this habit of glancing around to see if women were being impressed by him. If he was in mid-sentence he would still give a quick glance, like he had

done a while back, glancing over there where he had spotted a chickeroonie. He couldn't stop himself. He dated the loose kind of girls that liked being chased: the verb rather than the adjective. I bet Dermi would be glancing around for a pretty face even at the funeral.

Dermi's history placed him into a tearaway group at our Catholic grammar school, steeping himself in the working-class activities of early smoking and watching the Palace. Surrounded by values of under-achievement. Image taking precedence over imagination. Culturally dependent rather than independently cultured.

Dermi hadn't much of an attention span. He could watch four videos on a Saturday night in fast-forward. He had a keen mind though and an irritatingly tenacious naïve sense of observation.

'The thing I can't fathom,' Dermi said trying to change the topic, 'is all this archaeology garbage. I mean, why do they have to keep digging things up? Where does all the dust come from? I mean, why don't they just go to where the dust comes from and things will be automatically uncovered there. '

His dress sense though. Ping. Ping. Ping. It was just so damn pingy and sharp.

'Anyway I didn't really know him that well, he always came home from the pub late at night. I am younger than you lot remember. Me and Dad just didn't interact much.' Dermi dragged on his cigarette and glanced around seeking empathy for his analysis. He didn't get any, so he went on the offensive. He stared at me. 'Anyway it's all right for you to have these rosy memories just 'cause you were his favourite,' he goaded with a scrunched-up, damning face.

'Don't be daft,' I said, suggesting this wasn't true.

'Leave it out, Mark. You were even more his favourite after you got that poxy degree,' added Dermi, becoming jokily aggressive.

'Yeah, lah-dee-dah swot Mark, and his poxy degree,' Jonjo mocked, shaking an imaginary rolled-up parchment in his hand next to his snooty face. When it was not snooty it tended to have an arrogant demeanour. Yeah, Jonjo sitting there with that arrogant look, like he knew everything. Him and his shoulder-length, straggly black hair and big clompy boots with his black leather motorcycle jacket on, full of buckles which made a sort of chinking sound as he walked, like chain-mail. He never

took that damn thing off. He wore it on the beach last year in Corfu in the height of summer. Jonjo showed me the photographs. That heavy black jacket supported by spindly white legs. I had to look carefully for Jonjo's legs since they sort of got lost in the bright sand, and it looked like that heavy too-black jacket was hovering in free space, levitating so to speak. A smiling, mop-headed, dark sun-glassed hovering jacket. I bet he'd wear that jacket to the funeral. Not out of any disrespect. He was fairly respectful of other people's feelings. It was just that he felt that motorcycle jacket was *him*.

Jonjo exuded the spirit of a non-conformist artist. Well, graphic designer anyway. Tagged an artist by us since winning an art competition when he was young.

The brothers were not tough guys or ignorant people that swore a lot. As a group their language was often lazy but they were flexible enough to behave according to the situation. Comparing their mental outlook to a skyscraper: if the penthouse was no interaction with reality and the ground floor represented their true, innermost feelings, then they'd normally reside at around the thirteen floor, assuming they had thirteenth floors, on account of people being superstitious and all.

Jonjo and Dermi chatted about football as Shamus went to the bar. He was always going to the bar even if it wasn't his round. He was impatient about getting drunk. He wanted to hasten the appearance of his new character: kiss the second-rate one goodbye. But we preferred the second-rate one.

Dad was an alcoholic of sorts; not a nine a.m. cider-swilling one, more of an old soak, usually drinking from midday onwards. Perhaps a social alcoholic, drinking and chatting too much. His relationship with the pub originated from his early times in London. 'The pub was warmer than my digs,' he had explained. The habit hadn't faded with time. If ever I wanted to find him I would go to the pub first. Look for him in 'His' corner of The Hope in West Norwood, South London. A rather ironic name for such a refuge.

I don't know why things turned out like they did. Him dying alone in that hospital with us being so close, geographically, rather than soul mates, which we weren't. There were too many barriers between us. We couldn't straddle them and we didn't have the analytical tools to open them. I couldn't remember what caused the barriers.

It was too complicated. Chaos of interaction.

Strange for me to stand in a church again. The time-displaced feelings would return. I was a lapsed Catholic - a lapsed human being, Dermi had said. I was indoctrinated into this religion when young, learning by heart their little red book - the Catechism. It defined the pope as infallible. I had felt sorry for the pope then thinking it was some sort of embarrassing disease.

'Don't worry about me dying,' Dad said to me a month ago in his digs in Gipsy Road. But I wasn't sure he was dying then. It might have been benign cancer.

That day he wasn't apprehensive about dying, he even joked about it as he lay, pale and emaciated in a stranger's bed. 'Get an extra-large coffin and put in a barrel of Guinness,' he whispered.

### 3 Show Me Saturn

We left The Manor and staggered towards the corner of Mitcham Lane and got a Chinese. We ate on the move; minds swimming upstream against the torrent of alcohol and headed towards Jonjo and Dermi's flat in Babington Road where we lived with mum. I straggled behind, ears ringing from too much booze. I couldn't feel myself walking. *Footsteps like those of a dead man.* Fred MacMurray - Double Indemnity. My dad's footsteps. Seemingly taking over me. Living another day on this Earth through me.

I rested on a wooden seat in a small triangular area of grass that was out of place amidst the littered urban decay. My brain pickled in thoughts of Dad.

An orange moon poked through the bricky horizon. It hardly broke the darkness and I felt some apprehension. Slow-moving clouds tinged dark pink from the urban glow. I recognised the constellation of The Great Bear making a transient appearance through the clouds. I felt better for seeing a celestial friend.

The Great Bear...I had looked at it so many times. As a kid in my backyard I'd stare and stare. Hypnotised by its swirling whirls of light. Starlight, eddies in a field of wheat seen from a hilltop. The stirring of an invisible hand. Van Gogh's visionary *Starry Night*: "I have a terrible lucidity at moments, these days when nature is so beautiful..." his, not my, words. But I felt their meaning splash over me.

Even on a day like today. But I wasn't about to hack my ear off. However a scarred face could be beneficial in blending my singularly nerdy appearance into Streatham's nightlife.

With the Great Bear...I felt I wasn't alone. People have stared at it for centuries. King Arthur's symbol in Welsh Lore. In Dad's Ireland it was King David's Chariot. The Viking's Chariot of Odin. The Great Wagon to Swedish people. So it goes on and on. Like the rotating constellation itself...around and around the north star in a ceaseless vortex. Seven hundred thousand times since a Christ died. And another circuit today...the day Dad died.

Dad loved the stars, even though he didn't know too much about them.

As a teenager in the backyard at Romany Rise Dad came out after another late night at the pub.

'Show me Saturn,' he said eagerly, breathing beer fumes into my face and banging the lens of his spectacles onto the eyepiece, rocking the telescope all over the place.

'Dad!' I said slightly impatiently, flicking a finger towards his glasses: 'You don't need those. You can focus with this knob.'

Dad, irritatingly, had switched the kitchen light on, and it was flooding the small backyard. It washed out the stars. I kept asking him to check whether I was out there before switching that light on, but he never did, when he'd been drinking, which recently seemed to be all the time.

Dad turned around and, surveying the sky, said in his rich, Eire accent: 'Look! That's the north star.' He pointed to a bright star in the south! 'It's the brightest thing in the sky,' he proclaimed and seemed pleased with his knowledge. He smiled at me.

'Actually, Dad, that's Betelgeuse, the brightest star in Orion, The Hunter,' I said, pointing towards it. I didn't want a confrontation with him on the subject but I should have realised I couldn't get away with such a cursory dismissal.

Dad tutted and added, somewhat disdainfully, as if I didn't really know anything about the stars at all and he was the real expert, just from his perceived sheer brilliance rather than having spent any serious amount of time observing them. 'Mark, everyone knows the north star is the brightest thing in the sky.' He flicked his eyes upwards as if he were an impatient professor correcting a tardy student.

'Dad,' I stressed, putting my hand gently on his sloping shoulder and pointing toward the horizon. 'Look, that's south, right, and that star is therefore in the south, okay! So how can it be the north star?'

'Tut!' he uttered, turning his head toward me: 'You don't know nuffink,' he said in one of his east-end accents which he used as a get-out clause. He smirked as he made his unsteady way back to the kitchen. A shaft of light beamed from the opening back door. As a parting shot I heard him say: 'Me, fantastic genius. You dumb.'

I let out a frustrated sigh and swung my telescope back towards the moon.

#### 4 Abbeyfeale

In Abbeyfeale Dad had shared the house with his blind father and three brothers: his mother had died when he was a toddler.

'They were hard times of work and hunger,' Shamus had recalled the story, gingerly eating his second spring roll as steam puffed up from its crispy surface. How times have changed for their family in just one generation.

'Starvation certainly isn't your problem,' I had said, patting his expansive stomach which wobbled like there was a gnome inside trying to break free.

'Get stuffed,' he laughed, swinging a playful foot towards my leg.

Sitting here now with a greasy chin, I remembered teasing Dad about his past.

'It must have been a nightmare, Dad, in those old days back in Ireland without all the mod cons; I mean how did you send your faxes?'

'Awww...Mark, you've never been hungry,' he replied in a doleful voice.

'Yes I have. Last week when I was coming home from school I was really hungry,' I remembered saying, acting as a willing foil to his reminiscence.

'No! I mean really hungry. Hunger from not eating for a whole week; not just a few hours. The type of hunger that gave you stomach cramps so bad you couldn't walk and you could even pass out.'

'Anyway it was your own fault.'

'What!' he replied abruptly.

'Well, if you were that hungry, why didn't you just go

down to McDonald's? Simple!

'Tut!' he uttered, with a smirk on his face, glad I never had to endure such discomfort.

## 5 Don't Worry

What did Dad say to me last month? 'Don't worry about me dying, Mark.'

It was hard to take that advice when at this moment he was lying in some cold lonely hospital mortuary.

But he isn't really dead, is he? There is heaven and all that stuff. Isn't there? Yeah...sure! And maybe he'll see that snail I just accidently crunched in the darkness.

Of course a comforting thought, and insidious for that reason – a conceited idea catching you at your weakest.

So Mark didn't hold any truck with these unsophisticated concepts. Religion and God. Give us a break! Ideas from an agrarian-age species that in the same 'vain' put pinprick Earth at the centre of the universe! Let's just get over ourselves!

I scrunched up the remains of my Chinese into a ball and continued the short distance to mum's flat. I tossed the paper ball into a wastebasket standing to attention at the railings. A difficult shot, especially when walking. 'Yessss!' I said, jumping into the air as the ball hit the rim and bobbed in.

## 6 Mum's Flat

The following morning I felt strange, like I wasn't here or something. Being with my brothers around mum's flat midweek when I should be working made it seem as if an occasion was going on.

With a bit of a hangover I moved unsteadily down the hall towards the kitchen, Shamus had his elbows on the kitchen table, staring out the window, smoking a roll-up. Mum, out of habit, standing at the cooker.

'All right,' I said. Shamus nodded. He didn't talk much when sober.

That was a really nice table I thought. 'Mum, is this pine?' I asked, but she was not deflected from her singular purpose.

'Do you want some bacon'an egg?' she asked with a

mild northern Irish lilt.

'Cheers.'

She didn't answer about the table. She didn't mean to be rude or anything, it was just that she hadn't quite got out the habit of doing first-things-first. A throwback to the time when we were kids and she had to get us fed and off to school, with no time for distractions. If I persisted I would eventually get a reply.

'Is this table new, Mum?'

'There you go,' she said, plonking down a plate of steaming buttered brown toast. She used brown bread after she read a book down the library on its roughage benefits. She often read things down the library when we were young, because during the school holidays she'd cart us down there for the day, just to get out the house. Being free was the major attraction. This could explain why we tended to have good general knowledge, especially Shamus who, being the eldest, remembered more from those early times.

'Mum, is this a new table?'

She was at the cooker again. A five-foot whirlwind of activity. A maestro orchestrating the frying pan, toaster and tea cups in beautiful harmony, synchronising everything perfectly.

'Don't be daft,' she replied, slightly laughing as she plonked the bacon and egg in front of me: 'I can't afford that.' She liked shopping in the small ads.

'Are *they* having bacon an'egg?' she asked me, and I understood by the word 'they' she meant Jonjo and Dermi. She was always indirect like that. Asking me whether 'they' were going to have breakfast. How the hell did I know!

I canted my head around the door and shouted down the hall. 'Oi! you unter-mensch. Breakfast!'

I heard 'uhh,' followed by a slow dragging noise. Dermi appeared at the doorway wrapped in a quilt using it like some sort of obese shawl. 'Great! Bacon and egg.'

Mum had forgotten to put enough sugar in my tea again so I reached towards the container on the shelf overhanging the sink. Dermi flicked out a right jab towards my leg and I collapsed, in a small amount of pain, on the floor. But we were just laughing really.

Mum ignored our behaviour as if it wasn't really happening or maybe just happy to be part of it but letting it wash over her.



'Is Jonjo there?' she asked Dermi, and he opened his quilt showing off his skeletal torso.

'Well, he's not in here.'

Dermi shouted: 'Jonjo, get your ass in here.'

A yawn followed by sliding on of clothes, then chinking. He was putting on that bloody motorcycle jacket again, for breakfast!

A face appeared at the top corner of the doorjamb. Jonjo for some unknown reason was hiding his body in the hall and had craned his neck around so all that was visible was his head.

I laughed: 'What a grizzly apparition.' Jonjo had his eyebrows raised producing an even more distorted abstract-from-body sort of look.

'What do we have to do today?' I asked, not to any one in particular, more of an open question. I knew what we had to do but wanted it to be their idea.

Jonjo heaved in a sigh. 'Registrar to sort out the death certificate, and the funeral arrangements.' He looked at Shamus for confirmation: 'That's right innit?'

'Yeah, we'll just go down there quickly...' Shamus replied in one of his sober, weak voices, like he had the thought but couldn't really be bothered to share it.

I could tell by the way Shamus said 'quickly' he meant there would be plenty of time to go down the pub first.

Mum popped back with a pile of washing. She plonked it on the floor and left again. She likes plonking things down. I heard crisp sheets being extended in Dermi's room. Although we were grown up she still looked after us like we were kids.

It was hard to gauge her feelings but I felt she wasn't sad about the funeral situation. She had been separated from Dad for quite some time and they hadn't seen each other since. They would have separated a lot earlier if it wasn't for the fact that she wanted to wait until we were grown up before she left. Some duty to something. It would have been better to leave with us when we were young teenagers, the time when Dad started to drink more heavily and behaved like we were a burden. Even though Dad outwardly behaved like that, I thought part of him did actually want us around. This was an example of our whole confusing situation. If mum had left when we were younger it would have spared us a lot of aggravation. It might also have shaken Dad into behaving more responsibly. Maybe mum really believed in that Catholic

garbage about sanctity of marriage vows etcetera. Not that this was exclusively Catholic garbage. It was just that she was brought up as a Catholic. She almost became a nun. She was saved from this socially challenged existence by, just before taking her final vows, looking out the convent towards the picturesque greenery of the rolling northern Ireland hills and catching sight of a carefree young couple holding hands as they walked down the country lane. She wanted to do that.

Dermi asked, 'Anyone fancy a kick around up the park for old time sake to get some fresh air...' He breathed in and out deeply, and playfully choked, '...okay, freshly polluted air.'

'What about the funeral arrangements and headstone?'

'We'll sort that out later. Well, park, Jonjo?'

Uncharacteristically, Dermi was sounding really keen about his idea: 'Come on. Let's get out this smoky air.' It was only booze or chicks he was normally this keen about.

Inertia from our past pushed us towards Streatham Common. We stopped off on the way for some cans of Stella.

We splayed onto the park like startled wildebeest. I threw the ball to Shamus which he parried with his knee before cradling it skilfully with his foot, bringing it softly to the ground before stroking it with his instep to Jonjo. That was the sort of skill we had with the football. We were never big-headed about this ability, well maybe Shamus was, now he was older, and not having anything else extraordinary about him. He was an excellent footballer when he was half his present age and weight. The skill was natural. We could take no more credit for it than for the colour of our eyes. Apart from Shamus, when he was in a particularly obnoxious mood.

The exchange of the ball held us together but we exhausted ourselves after too-little real effort.

I lay down. The kaleidoscopic sky. Brilliant white clouds mutating shapes like jasmine petals in a stream.

The ball thudded onto the grass near me landing on my stomach second bounce. 'Shamus!' I yelled, and heard him laugh not too far away.

Percussion of the ball mingled with laughter and the traffic hum. I was drifting off.

Eventually they collapsed next to me, breathing heavily like farm animals.

Shamus reached for his tobacco in the bulging top

pocket of his baggy lumberjack shirt which was opened to the waist revealing a tight, grey sweatshirt. Jonjo and Dermi also smoked.

Shamus nudged Dermi's thigh with his training shoe. 'Beer.'

He placed the bag gently on the grass between us. I snatched at the bulging opening and Shamus lightly punched my arm: 'Oi!' he scowled, but we smirked and I threw him a tin.

Traffic skulked the perimeter of the common like germs banished from the green membrane.

It seemed quiet because the brain filters the constant noise.

I skewered my can into the soil and lay back soaking up the warm sunshine. The dappled-orange sun diffused like bright pimples through my eyelids. I sensed Jonjo sighing and lying back on the grass, followed by Dermi. I heard Shamus blowing smoke. I canted my head and squinting against shimmering lightness could see him in a semi-recumbent position, arms straight back, like buttresses, supporting his huge dome-like gut.

With eyes straining from gluey brightness I looked at the clouds. It is hard to view them as three dimensional objects, for as a kid they were just flat shapes moving along the inside of a blue dome. But now I sensed their fascinating dynamics. A bulky cumulus with shadow and speed and shear, weighing a million tons, collides and melts into another, splintering wispy swirls. Rivers of water vapour flowing and climbing and bashing, guided by banks of air at different temperatures.

'Come on, let's go.'

Strolled lazily to the top of the common, tired from exertion. High with decent views. The towns like olive splodges on a pale green canvas.

'That's Mitcham innit?' Jonjo pointed.

Dermi turned: 'Yeah.' The word drifted out cocooned in cig smoke.

We paced slowly backwards. Dermi and Jonjo jogged to catch us. No open grassland now, just trees.

It cooled and darkened on entering the woods, walking along a dirt track with hoof prints. A waft of earthy dog crap.

'It used to be fun coming here when we were young,' said Dermi.

'Yeah. Getting Dad out of bed so we could see the

dawn.'

We had climbed most of the trees here, and perched high up to take in the first pink rays bursting over Croydon. Birds chirping loudly in the quiet.

## 7 Climbing Trees

One long past morning Dad came home tipsy but happy with the day's sunshine. He geed us to get up early to see in the dawn; he was an Irish country boy at heart. Fantastic. He could be fun like that. But an idea, a wick burning bright with alcohol at night, fizzles damply in the early morning air. When the darkness of pre-dawn came, Dad's enthusiasm had waned, so it took a degree of badgering from us at the foot of his bed to get him grumpily up. Once he had cleared his mind he was fine though.

And so Jonjo, Dermi, me and Dad set off for the mile or so hike to Streatham Common, taking a football. Like a holiday - something we never had. Not that we'd complain, not knowing a holiday.

Everything so different at that time of the morning. Quiet and stillness. No traffic. No people. Could be the only four people on the planet.

In Norwood park I swished through the frost-tinged grass like greying whiskers and glanced behind at the towering television mast on Crystal Palace Parade. The structure visible in the twilight. A white flashing beacon on top. Like an imposing skeletal rocket of such size it scared me when young. I remember a time when I ran, startled, away from it, thinking it was falling as the background clouds moved.

A trail in the sky exited slowly behind the mast, a seeming majestic hand etch-a-sketching on the celestial dome with a pink pencil.

'Is that a comet, Dad?' I asked excitedly.

He turned and put on his glasses to examine the object: 'No.' He assumed a professorial stance: 'It could be a meteorite.'

I had thought aircraft condensation trails were comets or meteorites, because Dad told me so.

At Streatham Common the grass smoked from the dawning sun and slid down the bank like wispy grey jam. A football pitch in the distance stapled to the ground by

goal-posts.

A drip on my neck from the tree-rain of melting frost tinkling down the leaves.

We played for hours on the common like frolicking puppies. Atop a tree I saw the bulbous shimmering dawn sun like a blood-orange squashing Croydon, rolling on the horizon with the swaying of the tree.

We played in the woods and ran to the flatter grassland, chasing the wind with infinite energy and playing football until the end of time.

We were the only ones waiting for the opening of the Rookery; an enclosure containing beautifully kept flower gardens.

The park-keeper unbolted its sympathetic wooden gates in the cool light of morning and we rushed in, the thin rubber of our plimsolls smacking the haphazard tanned paving, reverberating off the rose arch tunnels, startling the nodding daffodils.

I ran through a viridian rainbow of shrubs and trees to my favourite spot, a large ornamental stone sundial suffused with sweet blooms of flowers. Water springs burbled hypnotically on goldfish pools. Hidden ducts of water played as a pack of cards on granite.

I couldn't figure out the sundial.

'How do you wind it up, Dad?' I teased, and Dad played along with a smiling, 'Tut!'

All too soon people milled around and a wash of sadness dampened my enthusiasm. I wanted the Rookery as my private garden. The magical feeling evaporated like the mist. Time to go.

'Dad, what's the time?'

'Quarter past ten.'

'Wow! It can't be that early, Dad,' Jonjo said excitedly. 'We've been here for years.'

On the way home we bought chewy Black Jack and Fruit Salad sweets. And we were happy.

'Did you remember that, Jonjo?'

Jonjo was looking towards the Rookery and smiled: 'I remember beating you at football even then.'

I shook my head and playfully nudged his arm.

## 8 Crown Point

The common ended in a tarmac path and we strolled to the

pavement of a busy road leading towards Crown Point. Dermi walked beside me, cupping a cigarette and holding the carrier bag with the remaining beer. His jumper smartly draped over his shoulders, for a sophisticated effect. His eyes darted into the oncoming cars if he spotted a pretty face.

Shamus was a picture of displaced slobbiness. He didn't give a toss what he looked like. What a person felt and thought was more important to him than how they looked. An admirable outlook no doubt, but why did he have to take it to an almost arrogant extreme? His shirt was hanging down and shoved out the way by his peeking belly. He had shoulder-length grey hair thinning on top, through which was a glowing red pate – a 6562 Angstroms black-body glow I guessed. His hair mingled into a grey beard which, as I turned to look at it, was neatly trimmed. Shamus did like a neatly trimmed beard. Pity the rest of his appearance didn't live up to that neatness.

Jonjo was walking beside Shamus a short distance behind me and Dermi. Shamus was carrying the other plastic bag of beer and Jonjo was holding the football as he chinked away in his motorcycle jacket. He looked sweaty and hot but he just would not take that damn thing off.

Shamus was smaller and fatter whereas Dermi was taller and skinnier. There seemed to be a progression from fat to thin, short to tall as the brothers got younger. I pointed this out to Dermi: 'It's as if our DNA is like plasticine, which gets stretched with time.'

But Dermi wasn't impressed. He flicked cigarette ash at me which was caught in the backwash of a passing car and disintegrated onto my cheek.

We drifted out the park and were being drawn towards Crown Point near our old school, St. John's, as if it had some pull on our magnetic brains.

I hadn't really a plan, but I thought, just for the sheer hell of it we might as well carry on to Norwood Park, our main hangout when we were kids.

'We might as well go to Norwood Park,' I shouted.

'That's a mile away,' shouted Jonjo back.

'It's a nice day,' Shamus added lazily.

And that settled it. We couldn't organise things, we'd drift by on an air of immediacy.

At Croft Road, in gaps between houses, I could see St. John's above a raised water meadow. As we walked closer, the science block rose from the meadow like a rocket

slowly lifting off.

Shamus called from behind: 'Remember Dos?'

'He was bent as a meat-hook,' I explained to Dermi. 'He used to stick his hand down your shorts to make sure you didn't have any underpants on before PE.'

It was before Dermi's time. A time the school was changing status from boarding to grammar.

'That was his rule. No underpants. There were some right weirdoes around then.'

'Why was he called Dos?' asked Dermi.

'Sod spelt backwards.'

'They should have locked him up.'

'They couldn't do that. He was Shamus's best mate.'

I stopped and turned to face Shamus walking slowly. 'That's right, Shamus, innit?' I said loudly above the noise of a passing car: 'He's your best mate.'

Shamus was talking to Jonjo and I had interrupted him.

'Who?' he asked.

'You and Dos,' I said: 'You were best mates, weren't you? You were like that.' I crossed my fingers and held them up.

'Get stuffed,' and he swung his foot, wishing it were elasticised so he could kick my butt.

I said to Dermi: 'Dad used to like those sort of things, something that can be read forwards and backwards.'

## 9 Palindrome

Me, a teenager. Dad standing over the cooker late at night, breathing heavily from the booze, frying his sausage and onions. I tried to creep out the backdoor to star gaze but those damn Venetian blinds clattered as I swung the door open too fast.

Dad turned around. 'Ah. Mark. ...Napoleon. Napoleon. Him dumb...Me genius.'

Irritated I had to talk to him in that state. 'What you on about?'

He turned back and shook the hissing pan.

'Palindromes.'

'What?'

'Mark...Mark,' he reprimanded, slowly turning, waving a greasy fork, and smiling. 'You dumb...Me genius.'

He repeated things and was often cryptic, especially when in possession of some jewel of information he

thought I didn't know, clinging onto it like some precious, secret thing, and only letting me peep at it occasionally to keep my interest. Then again, at other times he was just too far gone with the booze, and would ramble incoherently.

'Dad!' I stressed, further irritated. 'What are you on about?'

'It's Napoleon. A palindrome,' he said with a superior smile: 'Able was I 'ere I saw Elba.' And he laughed, turning back towards his sausages.

'Switch that light off when you're finished. It spoils the observing.'

In the garden I heard his Muhammad Ali impression: 'I am the greatest!'

## 10 St. John's

'Hang on,' Dermi said, "'Dos" isn't a pally-thing anyway.'

I went quiet. 'Well, it just sort of reminded me of it.'

Strolling on, to our right we could see the school's main red-bricked quadrangle.

'We had some right weirdoes in our class,' said Dermi. 'There was this bloke called Clarence, you know, one of those cocky, snobby gits. He would shout out in a toff accent, while we were waiting for the teacher: "Has any one got a size 42 tit?" He spent most of the time getting his willy out under his desk at the back of the class, and sniggering.'

Out of all of us, Dermi resented the most the strict Catholic upbringing of that school and all those kids perceived as being richer and confident.

I told Dermi of Cecil in my first year who wouldn't have a packed lunch like mine; strawberry jam sandwiches, cut into quarters by a rushing mother contained in a plastic bread wrapper. They were squashed into my briefcase creating distorted shapes squelching with jam. No! Cecil had a neat rectangular Tupperware container with cold, cooked sausages and beans and a peeled hard-boiled egg wrapped in foil in a second container. Yet another container held the chunky silver plated cutlery and cruets of salt and pepper and a neatly folded red cloth napkin. He stood alone in the bustling Buttery using the window cill as a table for his miniature banquet and stared out the window, oblivious to any one else. He didn't need any one



else. At the tender age of twelve he was self-contained. A future captain of industry.

A crossroads at the brow of Crown Point. Standing two feet from death as the cars whizzed by in front of us. But we didn't even think about it being conditioned to accept this craziness.

I had driven past here a number of times going to my sister Maggie's house in Crystal Palace, but speed of movement didn't allow time for memories to form. But walking, with time not an enemy, seeing and smelling and hearing, memories peeked out from the crannies of my mind.

We crossed the road and descended Crown Dale to Norwood Park. That huge Crystal Palace tower seemed to have its base in the park.

The pavement adjacent to the shops was wide and we walked side-by-side.

'What about that moron Larry,' said Shamus.

'Oh yeah,' I replied, flicking my thumb to the right. 'We went there every Saturday after football.' We looked over to see an Indian restaurant now where Larry's café once stood.

'Those burgers,' Shamus laughed.

Shamus didn't like explaining things much when he was sober.

'Larry used to sell these wombat burgers or something. The place was disgusting, wasn't it?'

Shamus nodded, smiling.

'Sounds a champion craphole,' Dermi replied in a mock-northern accent catching his reflection in the plate-glass of the restaurant and adjusting the jumper around his shoulders then moving closer to the glass, rubbing his hands to smooth his hair. Wow! Zing! Ding! Ping! Neat hair.

We jogged easy gravity-assisted paces downhill into Norwood Park through an entrance cut from a low hedge. A conventional London suburban park mainly laid to grass with a few trees scattered for rural effect. Not climbing trees; branches too high.

We hadn't been here together for ages. Ten years or so. Felt good being back.

More larking about as we jogged onto a flatter part of neat grassland. Not nice playing football on a slope. Dermi unwrapped the jumper from his neck and folded it neatly, placing it on top of the bag with the beer. Shamus strolled

over and roughly put the other bag on top of Dermi's jumper.

'Oi! Leave it out,' he warned Shamus: 'That jumper cost a hundred quid.'

'Get stuffed,' he said weakly, implying a singular disdain for Dermi's superficial, materialistic outlook which didn't stack up with 'His' philosophy.

Shamus punted the ball high into the air and gave chase like a rhino on a mission with the aim of trapping it beneath his foot. Jonjo and Dermi steamed after him. But I felt like sitting down and watching.

## 11 The English Lesson

In the distance I could see the white angular facade of the main quadrangle of St. John's at the top of the hill we had just descended.

My first-year in secondary school. An English lesson. A class of thirty-one in a functional room. A saturnine feel. Bulky pipe radiators and a superior wooden podium for the teacher's desk. The front wall with three fixed blackboards. Four pendant light bulbs with metallic, hemispherical lampshades providing stark illumination. Slippery, worn, wooden floorboards with smoothed nail-tops stomped to submission by millions of small feet. Only the right of two noughts-and-crosses style windows providing any relief from the functionality with a first-floor panoramic view. Looking south into the distance is Croydon... with Streatham to the west. Occasionally outside below a hidden crunching of gravel. Unseen people. Who were they? I wished I could be with them sharing freedom, swapping this claustrophobic shroud. The strangeness of these surroundings. The smell of mingling wood polish and chalk dust. The confident, cosseted boys wrapped in secure middle-class parental blankets. The solitude of an interloper. The bleakness of a classroom taught by a black-clad religious order versed in competitive learning and driven by vicarious parental achievement. The dispassionate surroundings and perfunctory guidance.

The correctly clipped grammar of the boys. Their wide ranging general knowledge attained by parental interest and rote preparatory school learning. The unusual interests, hobbies and insights of gifted suburban mini-

adults. A baptism of separation for a boy emerging from the tunnel of an unaware junior. An alienation. An alien nation.

The class's eyes searing into my back. My heart thumped fast and hard. An abdominal vibrato. My head feeling as if the air had increased its density. My eyes frantically trying to follow the sentence across the page but with words jiggling like ants marching in snow. I needed intense concentration to make any progress at all. I could sense the ambient judging eyes. Critical susurrus. Some words came out wrong. A cringing embarrassment believing these confident kids thinking I can't read. The air from my shaking lungs weak and quivering. A cross between intense self-consciousness and dyslexia. I didn't want to be different. I had to fight for every word. Each paragraph a battle. Each page a war. I tried but I failed. The campaign was lost. I found it difficult to read aloud to the class. A strange phobia. Out of this classroom environment I seemed normal. Good at football and cricket. Perhaps popular. Surely an eleven-year-old should not be so nervous? Eleven-year-olds are meant to be carefree. With parents to console them, to cuddle them, to guide them, to listen to them, to morally support to them. I hated myself for this failing. I wished I wasn't me.

The opening of the bottom sash window lifted my tension. My suffocating feelings could escape. A gentle breeze rocking into the classroom to carry away my buoyant thoughts, swirling them, drifting outside, sentient smoke rising, floating carefree, a birds-eye view of Streatham Common or Romany Rise. Thoughts meandering.....wandering.....wondering.

Occasionally a flash of light entered the classroom, a twinkle from the mass of grey and green rolling towards the horizon. An instantaneous event in late afternoon sun. A superposition of sightlines. The sun's rays conforming to the laws of reflection. The glinting of a car windscreen. Where's that car going? My mind travelled alongside it for a while, carrying me away..freedom.

Everyone in the class took turns to read a paragraph from Laurie Lee's Cider With Rosie. Miss Griffin, a pretty-side-of-plain well-spoken forty-year-old looked at the register, glancing up disdainfully. The worse time. The tension torqued. I would have given anything not to be there. I would gladly have done anything, been any one else rather than endure this psychological nightmare.

"Thompson", Miss said with indifferent superiority.

Phew! Relief as the chosen boy read aloud to the class. Three minutes of anguished anticipation later I relived the same torment. My mind raced. Three minutes per boy, a forty-minute lesson, thirty boys in the class. This means she only has time to select thirteen boys at random. I might escape yet. There was a one-to-two chance of me being selected. Unfortunately the odds were against me. She called my name. A pause. The class silent. A cruel snigger from the back. From the open window I heard the buzz of an airplane. Before I started to read I pinched the bridge of my nose and breathed in. This made me slightly dizzy, something take me out this room. My technique to overcome a disheartening phobia.

I wish I had then a tool like booze which Dad used. He was old enough to self-medicate which he did with some relish. But I still had to wait and endure shame.

## 12 The Frogs and the Bees

A first-year biology class.

The biology master was talking about frogs mating. '...and the melt falls on the female eggs in the pond', he said, then cleared his throat and added in a hushed tone, darting his eyes from the us to the window, '...that is also how humans reproduce.'

The worldly boys smirked. The more sheltered looked around quizzically.

Frogs...humans! I was confused. But I would never ask a question on so delicate a topic. Luckily another boy put up his hand to ask the same question I was thinking.

'But how do we get the melt onto the eggs in the pond?'

The biology master looked flustered.

'Well...what do you think this 'thing' is for?' he replied flippantly, pointing self-consciously between his legs.

The bell rang.

I was still confused. The only thing I could think of doing with 'the thing' was to wee. So I came to the conclusion that when I was old enough I would have to get into a pond with a woman and 'wee' on her. Eeyuck! That disgusted me. I was upset walking home, thinking I could never do such a dirty thing.

I was fated to being alone.

### 13 Duco

My second-year classroom was near the front of that façaded building. A flash of memory from a Latin class knocked and entered my shuttered head. Duco appeared. I remembered it as a third conjugation verb meaning 'to lead'. From rote learning I could still remember the present indicitive: Du-co, du-cis, du-cit, du-cimus, du-citis, du-cunt.

A mental picture of the whole class conjugating the verb. At the end of the third person plural the previous owner of my text book had crossed 'Du' out and replaced it with 'You'. Caught unawares a fit of giggles overcame me, which was harder to suppress since you obviously weren't allowed to giggle within the severe atmosphere of a Latin class, especially at this part of this particular verb. I lifted up the lid of my wooden desk to shield my head in the guise of looking for something and at the same time pretended to cough into my handkerchief, releasing the inner tension of choked laughter. Not a discreet gesture. Like carrying around a neon sign saying 'I am not crazy' with a flashing arrow pointing to my head. Eventually, people would think 'that guy is crazy' even if they had no reason to think so in the first place.

'Hey, Shamus,' I shouted, smiling, 'you slobby bent whale.'

They continued bashing into one another looking down at the ball, not quite wrestling, and laughing. Shamus was shielding the piebald football like he always did - very well, the other two playfully kicking at his ankles and legs, but with not much aggression or force, and grappling with his flailing arms trying to throw him off balance. Even with all this illegal tackling going on he was just too hard to knock off that ball.

I got up with renewed zest, sprinted and jumped onto Shamus' back, barging the others out of the way, and grabbed him around the neck trying to keel him over using my weight. To dislodge him from his rooted position, I punched Shamus rhythmically on the side of his thigh.

Shamus had strong legs and exceptional balance, but his energy was ebbing and feeling the nagging pain in his thigh he just sort of gave up and keeled back with laughter. Unfortunately, I took the full force of Shamus' blubber on my chest. Thud!

'Shamus...*du-cunt.*'

## 14 Norwood Park

Exhausted, we slouched back and had a can of beer.

I scanned the park. My eyes like a video player of our past. In front I saw the flat brown cinder pitch at the far end of the park. We took on all-comers there at football. Glancing over to the right was the Threepenny Bit tree next to the swings. A squat oak with low thick branches that opened from a cradling hollow, an easy-to-climb vantage point. The raised octagonal concrete base provided the tree its nickname. This place seemed a part of me. A place where me and Jonjo tried to meet in our adolescent dream experiments.

'I'll meet you there later on in my dream,' Jonjo had said happily back then, snuggling the cheap duvet around his neck, poking a stringy arm out to switch the lamp off. 'Goodnight.'

An appointment that could not be kept. The meshing of this place within my formative years lended it a solidity, a sensation that I knew it so well no harm could befall me here. This tree and this park were my foundation stone. Especially now Dad was gone. A thing of solidity that exists and would always be there. I thought about this tree and park a lot, like it meant something.

I passed that Threepenny Bit tree every day from my first morning at primary school to my last afternoon in the sixth form at St. John's. A trudge across the park, from infant to young man - a span of thirteen years. A thousand journeys to and fro, surveying this very scene. Yet, each day the view being subtly different, depending on exact time of day or season, or how I felt at the time.

I recalled my first day at St. John's. A scared first-year carrying a too-large briefcase. Full of apprehension. Trailing behind my impossibly long-striding, fifth-form brother.

'Slow down, Shamus will you!' I complained. But Shamus didn't listen. I caught up by cradling my briefcase as if were a baby for ease of running.

That first traumatic morning at St. John's, I glanced over to the Threepenny Bit tree and found the comfort that it would be there on my way home. I stared to etch it into memory. I was determined to do the same thing on my last day at St. John's, seven years later, and overlay the thoughts. I was sentimental like that. Scared and nervous on that first day; it heartened me to think of the confident

person I must become on that last journey back from the sixth form.

'We'd better get back to sort out that headstone,' said Jonjo sitting on the grass with a tilted can of lager close to his mouth.

'Soon,' Shamus replied.

'How about going over to that tree first?' I suggested, darting my eyes my eyes to the right.

Jonjo looked over. 'The Threepenny Bit tree.'

'Yeah.'

Once we were settled somewhere we didn't like moving. Jonjo took over responsibility for the group. 'Come on,' he said and stood up. We stirred like slowly-opening petals to the first light of spring, not quite so gracefully with groans and creaking of joints.

'Oww! My back,' Shamus said as he stood and stretched his legs wide apart with hands on hips arching backwards to relieve the ache.

'Stuff your back, what about my frigging leg,' Dermi complained as he raised his trouser leg to inspect a red welt on his shinbone: 'It must be broken.'

Shamus bent down to examine it and wasn't impressed: 'That's nothing, you wimp.'

What an old soldier he was. He had suffered a lot worse during his amateur footballing career.

We moved slowly across the park towards the tree in the direction of our old home in Romany Rise.

Jonjo stopped at the tree. 'It looks so small now.'

'It used to be a right effort getting up there,' I said pointing to the hollow.

Shamus and Dermi strolled slowly onwards, down a slight slope.

Jonjo hopped onto the tree's base and easily hauled himself into the hollow and carefully stood up, sliding his hands up the trunk for support. 'Me Tarzan...you Pain.'

'Yes, Jonjo,' I said, as if talking to an imbecile. 'You'd better get down now before you break your neck. You're not a kid anymore.'

Jonjo thought getting down was a good idea so, bending his knees, he stretched out his leg to gain friction with his boot on a smooth knot contouring up from the trunk. Stretching his arms behind for support he moved his body slowly downwards and, looking beneath his feet, leapt the remaining few feet onto its caked mud base. He landed with a chinking thud.

'Ooww!' he yelped and hobbled towards me.

'Gravity affects you more when you're grown up!'

Shamus and Dermi had stopped at a shiny lectern next to the path running along the brow of the hill.

'What they looking at?'

Jonjo retrieved his chunky methylated-spirit lighter and held it to the cigarette in his mouth. I sensed an agreeable waft of the spirituous vapour. He clunked the lighter shut. 'That lighter's good. I like the clunking sound, and the smell.'

'Yeah, I got it in Brixton Market.' For my benefit he flicked it on and clunked it shut. Flick, clunk, chink.

I could see they were looking at a rectangular silvery metallic plaque supported by the metal rods of the lectern.

'What's that,' I called out, even though I was then quite close.

'It's identifying places,' replied Dermi.

As I stepped onto the other side of the tree-lined path, a panoramic view of the distant city of London spread out in front of me. I squeezed between my brothers to inspect the black etchings on the plaque highlighting places of interest. A tall rectangle with a triangle on top depicted Canary Wharf, easily recognisable in the hazy distance.

'It's good, innit?' I said, looking down to confirm the position of the cylindrical Post Office Tower.

Covent Garden was there somewhere but too low to be seen. This was one of Dad's last jobs as Clerk of Works for the Greater London Council. One of his legacies he wouldn't let us forget during his drink induced monologues.

Dermi pointed out the large, squat dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, now overshadowed by London's taller buildings. 'What's your gut doing over there, Shamus?' and laughed as he drew Shamus' attention to his finger rubbing at the etched dome on the plaque.

Being a whale of few words, Orca no talka, Shamus just grabbed Dermi's arm and slowly bent it behind his back.

'All right, all right, keep your bald patch on,' he complained. 'You're ruffling my jumper.'

And Shamus let him go.



I attempted to spot the turreted white building of the Senate House of The University of London. I recognised it in the bluey distance and pointed it out to Jonjo: 'Look, that's where I went to college,' I said with a gleam in my eye. 'It's two hundred and ten feet tall! Designed by Charles Holden...I believe.' But I shouldn't have been too enthusiastic. My brothers don't like enthusiasm. It wasn't cool.

'Lah-dee-dah Mark's swotty college,' Jonjo mocked: 'No one gives a crap.' And they laughed.

I took out my small magnifying glass and bent down to examine the plaque. I detected scratches from vandalism. They became more deeply furrowed as the defacing implement keyed into the plaque's surface rather than skimmed over it. I ran my finger over one particular gouge and moved closer to inspect it.

'What the hell are you doing?' Asked Dermi in a voice implying I was a nerd.

'Analysing this vandalism.'

'Why?'

I examined one gouge by probing at it with my finger and observed the impression formed to ascertain its geometry. 'I don't know. I just get interested in these sorts of things, that's all.'

I moved my head altering the sun's illumination on the plaque. I straightened and stated studiously: 'Judging by the width of this gouge I'd say a small screw driver was the offending implement. From the angle of trajectory of the scratch I deduce that it was held in the right hand of the vandal.'

Jonjo slapped me with a sarf-London accent: 'Shut up you ponce.'

'That's our house innit?' said Dermi pointing to the foreground, where we had lived until teenagers.

I studied the lines of the grey tiled roofs and located the bend in the road. Ours was the third terraced house from that bend. I counted silently: 'Yeah, I think so.'

My eyes flew roof-height along the nearest parallel row of houses just on the other side of the railway embankment at the bottom of the hill. At the end of the road through the skimpy blockage of the remaining elm trees was The Gypsy Queen pub.

I counted along with my eyes two buildings to the right and pointed: 'See that house. That's where Dad ended up.'

My brothers followed my arm sight-line. Jonjo

acknowledged me with a flick of his eyebrows but the others remained silent.

Behind Dad's last digs was the low bell-tower of St. Luke's church where we had been scouts. And beyond that was Norwood Cemetery where Dad was to be buried.

'Let's head on back now, I'm thirsty,' Shamus said.

'Hang on. What about the headstone?' said Jonjo.

'Headstone' encompassed the trip to the hospital to sort out the death certificate, then the funeral arrangements with the priest, Fr. MacTrass, and the purchase of the headstone itself.

'Okay, pub first, but we'll have to sort out that headstone tomorrow,' I agreed, entangled in the irresponsible situation.

So we headed back to Streatham and built up a right old thirst.

## 15 Pool Psychology

'Get the champagne in you donkey,' I ordered Dermi that evening as me, Shamus and Jonjo strolled over to the pool table in the public bar of The Manor. Not that we had much money really, and totally nothing to celebrate, but it just made the crack a bit better.

'Err...sorry,' apologised the barman of the stark bar.

'Okay...' Dermi said canting his head back towards us and we nodded silently: 'Four pints of Stella then.'

Dad not being on Earth anymore didn't modify our behaviour. Before his funeral had even begun we were still at it. We hadn't yet thought about lessons to be learnt from his boozy life. But liking a drink was a part of his legacy. I was even suspicious of people who don't drink...well, perhaps the word should be jealous or even envious...that they didn't need it.

The pub was quiet and we could take the pick of the seats with a grandstand view of the pool table.

Shamus with his roll-ups and Jonjo his Rothmans lit up in synchrony. Boring time of the evening, imaginations not yet sparked. No atmosphere. Not much to do except play a brain-deadening game of pool. Some of the clientele staring at the rectangular green baize like a television. Time to fill, don't think, just watch. However, like telly, only a one-way conversation.

'It was good today, weren't it,' said Dermi.

'Yeah...the memories,' I replied thoughtfully.

'And the old school,' added Jonjo.

'Why did you jump up and down, Jonjo when we were near the water meadow today?' I asked. I had meant to ask Jonjo at the time but was distracted by talking about Shamus's old mate Dos.

'I could just see the top of my old art block above the meadow when I jumped.'

I sipped the too-cold lager and winced as it washed over my sensitive teeth.

'You liked that art block didn't you?'

'Yeah. It was all right.'

'That art teacher was a bit of a fruit though, wasn't he?' I looked over to Shamus. 'He's one of your lot, Shamus.'

'Get stuffed,' he mumbled through a roll-up. He didn't express himself much when sober.

'I hated that art block,' I added.

'How can you hate an art block?'

'Well, it just sort of gave me a feeling of self-consciousness. Maybe be all that glass: looking at my baboon reflection.'

Glancing around the bar I noticed an exquisite creature. Pale skin. A vibrancy of perfection. An aura of a startled fawn seeking protection. My thoughts strayed from physics to biology. Four billion years of biochemistry overcoming three thousand years of scientific inquiry.

A wanton opportunity. I swivelled on the shiny mock-leather seat, catching her attention.

Annoyingly, my mind went blank. Randomly, a Shakespearean love sonnet formed; a crackling static charge to bind us together...forever.

'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' She scrunched up her face, 'nah...fuck off mate!' and she dragged on a cigarette.

Jonjo went to the bar.

He was performing this crazy thing he does occasionally. You know. Stupid really. He had an inkling he was an alien. An alien planted on this Earth to observe and eventually, when the time was right, report back. But it was a bit more subtle than that. It wasn't a certainty he would be contacted, or he didn't know for sure he was an alien. It was just this cerebral twinge he'd experience now and again. Within the more coherent moments of this mood he'd suggest he'd been brought to Earth by some wonderful spacecraft, and our mum, on hearing a baby

crying in the backyard, took him in, to cosset and nurture. Mum his surrogate. Her secret to take with her to the grave. Jonjo was not sure of his origins though. He once suggested Mars, but after I informed him the red planet had lost its atmosphere long before there was even microbial life on Earth, he became more vague about his celestial ancestry. If pressed, he suggested his likely home as a planet around a small companion sun to Sirius, the Dog Star, the brightest star in the heavens and, conveniently, one of the closest to Earth at a mere 8.6 light years distance. As corroboration, Jonjo cites an ancient tribe in Africa called the Dogon who also have a similar ancestral celestial narrative. Jonjo felt a singular affinity to that tribe, like they were long lost relatives or something. He had pictures of colourful natives cut from a National Geographic magazine stuck up on his bedroom wall.

Much to our annoyance he would occasionally talk in his alien tongue. 'Klaatu barada nikto,' he was now saying, with a strong expression, whilst pointing to the ornamental pipes of the continental draught lager. The barman poured four pints of Stella, with a cruel twinkle in his eye, humouring our celestial frère. Jonjo'd snap out of it in a few minutes. But sometimes, I'd prefer the alien.

My turn to play pool with Dermi. I strolled to the table and chalked the cue for an inordinate amount of time: 'Get on with it you ponce.'

My strategy was for tortuously slow play, to wind Dermi up and put him off his game.

I broke-off but didn't pocket any balls.

Dermi smirked while positioning himself at the table.

Dermi potted two reds and stared me in the eye with a look of confidence.

Pool played in working-class pubs isn't just a game. It demonstrated your personality. Being good at pool showed you to be cool, tough, a person to be admired. Bad at pool; you lacked street-cred. You had to play the game just right. Working class etiquette was all-important.

The bar was slowly filling. Some drinking. Some looking disinterestedly at the pool game. Well it was either that or stare at the music videos that spoil what the song might actually mean to you.

The pool combatants had to look poker faced. Smiling wasn't appreciated. You had to be very fair. Part of the machismo image. A good pot and you had to say: 'Shot,' accompanied by a rhythmical banging of cue-end on floor.

Dermi and Shamus had been playing pool for a long time and were better than me, even though I acquired a certain level of skill working in a plastic bag factory during college vacation. However they were entrapped by the public bar ethic of playing heroic, flair pool requiring them to line up their shots quickly. Having missed out on that upbringing I was not hampered by that public bar dogma. I could grind them down, taking time to line up shots and using safety play. They'd get frustrated, and I could occasionally beat them. In their view, even if I beat them, there was no victory in my manner of winning. I didn't win in a manly way. I'd won like some boring old ponce.

I hadn't figured whether our difference was nature or nurture. Since we were brothers we were genetically the same; similar brainpower, similar sensitivities, similar sense of humour. We were also brought up together, so the nurturing environment was the same. A difference was my conscientious, stubborn temperament enabling me to get to college to study science.

Shamus had a capable brain but had a booze problem and got stuck into all that hippy-shit that was around when he was fifteen. However his friends didn't take these icons so seriously. They'd get shedded every weekend but still ended up at college. But Shamus took it more to heart. Immaturity and the negative influence of our dad - no communication.

I felt annoyed about his flunking-out. 'Shamus, why didn't you go to college like your mates instead of wasting your life dossing around.'

'Get stuffed,' he mumbled.

'That's a good word for you, Shamus, "dossing". Seeming how you and Dos were like that.' I displayed my crossed fingers.

We laughed and Shamus leaned forward to lash out a jab which caught me on the arm.

Booze backed up Shamus' philosophy on life. 'His' philosophy I called it. But I couldn't easily describe what 'His' philosophy was. I have been getting lashed with him for years, many times arguing about this and that, like you do, for hours on end and yet we always eventually banged our heads against a mental wall - 'His' philosophy. It

explained the way Shamus was and the way we were, yet I hadn't a bastard-clue what it was about. The most frustrating thing was that even Shamus didn't know!

Yet, Shamus eventually used it in any argument, on any subject, like an emotional crutch, introducing it with that intense stare of his, his hands near his face, jerking to-and-fro with vocal emphasis and in synchrony to his ever-increasing intonation, as he tried to entwine you in some of his recalcitrant, muddled axioms borne from egoistic experiences.

I missed the yellow. Dermi in the ascendancy came to the table with an arrogant swagger twirling his cue.

Dermi pots another red: 'Shove that up your university education.'

We were following our usual routine. Conversation started reasonably sensibly. However with drink it degenerated.

Shamus started with a point and argued vehemently for it. Jonjo took up the challenge and argued against it, not necessarily because he disagreed with it. Even if he had agreed he felt he had to argue against it. Eventually Shamus argued himself into a loop and even he could see he was arguing against the very thing he stood for in the first place! But that didn't deter him. He dismissed Jonjo's carefully constructed logical statements with a triumphant exclamation: 'Exactly!' as if he had won the argument by manipulating the pea-brain.

'What do you mean "exactly",' Jonjo asked in irritation.

'Exactly!' Shamus repeated, emphasising Jonjo's lack of understanding of his 'logical' stance.

'Hang on Shamus! Do you think by saying "exactly" you can turn around your crumbling argument?'

'Listen to yourself,' Shamus said in a raised voice. 'You haven't grasped what I've been saying.'

Jonjo lost it. 'What the fuck have you been saying?'

'Exactly!'

Jonjo sighed in irritation.

I missed some yellows and Dermi potted some reds. I was still seven balls up whereas Dermi only had two left. Dermi thought he was home and dry, however it was easy to snooker him. Since blocking the pockets and snookering were an anathema to Dermi, it added to his overall frustration with me. This was added to by my deliberate, slow play, typical of logical, step-by-step, metrical, scientific thinking, something Dermi hated.

I snookered him then potted a yellow.

'Hurry up,' Dermi said, glancing empathetically to the others: 'We've already been playing twenty minutes.'

Dermi left St. John's at sixteen after gaining a few CSE's to become a printing apprentice. He also has a booze problem. Despite this he held down a printing job for twelve years. He was a football supporter travelling all over the country to watch Crystal Palace. He proudly claims to have been beaten up in most parts of the country.

Dermi potted another ball and I potted two more. Jonjo and Shamus were watching with amusement as Dermi's confidence waned: scientific determination overcoming frivolity.

I had placed the balls so well all I needed now was one shot to have a good chance of clearing up. Dermi was nearly finished, ground down by boredom. I finished him off next shot. Dermi returned to his seat to the sneers from Jonjo and Shamus.

'You couldn't even beat that nerd,' was Shamus' considered opinion.

Time to leave. A cab to our sister Maggie's three-bed semi. Although she and Dad hadn't hit it off recently she was upset and sought reflection.

But a thud of bass music vibrated my chest as she opened the door smiling. 'What's all this crappy music?'

'I'm having a rave,' she said enthusiastically.

'Maggie, this is garbage. You're forty with a teenage daughter, why don't you grow up?'

'Don't be such a grouch,' and led us down the hall.

She was not overtly mourning. Not her style. She felt something, but buried inside. It would be examined with her maudling trowel over the years in an archaeological pursuit of family feelings.

Maggie: the oldest swinger in town? Her daughter was more mature. She was making up for lost teenage years having brought her daughter up instead of going out. In-between taking adult education classes in assertion training and Kung Fu she was now also a bereavement councillor!

Jonjo blew smoke into the air. 'Do you remember when Dad came home one night drunk as usual. We were trying to watch telly and he kept going on about us not crying when he died. He was really getting on my nerves.'

There were so many occasions back then it was hard to

pick on one particular thing, unless you were tuned into a specific event, because it meant something to you.

'I think so,' I replied lamely.

Shamus was now becoming obnoxious, his brain shrouded in a semi-permeable dialogue membrane - his words get out but no one else's get in. He was stewing in 'His' philosophy. What a philosophy! What! A philosophy? A philosophy hidden in a dark labyrinth. He could only guess its identity by exploring its shape with the feather of experience. Was it animal, vegetable or mineral? Shamus didn't know. Each deduction only yielded frustrating glimpses. He was unable to express 'His' philosophy since he had not been able to deduce what it was. It was a philosophy that led him to drink too much at every opportunity, excusing himself as some tortured artist figure. A philosophy which led him to feel he was external to any rules of society. A philosophy which led him to trivially assault these rules in a pale, anarchistic, immature way. A philosophy which led him to the admirable conclusion that everyone had a part to play in the spiritual harmony of life where love was precious and everyone could contribute, no matter how unfortunate the person. Yet five minutes later the same philosophy would lead him to a contradictory statement saying, if pressed, what he would do with someone who didn't want to share his philanthropic dream: 'Shoot the bastard!'

A philosophy causing him to vacillate in argument depending which way the crowd was swaying. What was the shape of 'His' philosophy? Was it a loathsome vulture or a noble lion? A vulture atop a lion?

We filtered off to bed leaving Shamus to his ramblings. I had to share the dining room floor with him on a makeshift mattress pieced together from assorted shaped cushions. I settled down to a lumpy sleep, but it was difficult to cut off from someone talking to themselves, especially when it sounded like he was using a megaphone.

I heard clinking bottles and an aluminium lid being unscrewed. Shamus was at the scotch. It went quiet then by an almighty crash.

Startled, I leaned upwards. 'Shamus, what the hell are you doing? Get to bed will you!'

But the rebuke was wasted. He'd fallen asleep on the kitchen barstool; glass of whisky in hand, and collapsed onto the floor. He was in a stupor and didn't hurt himself,



so I dragged him across the parquet floor and slouched him, snoring, on top of the cushions.

Morning came.

Shamus stirred, feeling fine as usual and, quiet-as-a-mouse joined us in the kitchen. Mark's annoyance of the previous night had evaporated.

'How's your head?'

'I wondered where this bump came from,' he said, gingerly touching his temple.

Mum was there. She had come down on the bus yesterday.

Shamus and Dermi were fortunate in that no matter how much they drank they rarely suffered hangovers; some genetic trait. However that reduced the moderating influence, with the only controls being lack of money or having to go to work.

Being a lovely morning and having my family around I felt happy so I decided to make them breakfast.

I smiled. 'Care for a bap, Dermi?'

Dermi was expressionless, staring at the floor sternly with cigarette in hand. 'Shove it up your arse!' he replied in a mock-northern accent.

## 16 The Crossword

Dermi settled down to the crossword, with a snapped-in-half pencil, the soft variety which made it easier to write on an unsupported newspaper. Visibly straining from mental effort he asked, apologetically, for fear of being thought of as not very knowledgeable, even by his own family, such was his deep-rooted sensitivity: 'What's that thing priests have to conform to?'

'Celibacy,' asserted Jonjo disdainfully, not bothering to turn his head away from his book, giving the impression it was all too easy for him.

Dermi scribbled the word onto the margin of the newspaper. He chewed the pencil: 'How do you spell that then?'

Mum thought she was helpful. I know how to spell 'C..E..L..E..R..Y.'

Shamus stared out the window at the hypnotic motions of a tree, branches jerking from the tug of the wind, twigs breaking clumpy air, filtering it into a seething turbulent microscale. 'I'm the best fucking poet here,' he said.

Dermi shouted across the room. 'You're some of that,' and gesticulated with his wrist.

After much arguing Shamus brought things to a halt saying: 'Exactly! Let's go down The Manor.'

'Champion,' said Dermi and we traipsed single file into the hall.

I concurred, in a bardic tone.

'Lo! For a headstone we must go,

With whaleboy Shamus, who's a homo.'

'Get stuffed.' Punch.

'Owww!'

And the door slammed shut.

## The Bus Back

### 1 Idiot on the Rye

We boarded the red double-decker bus back to Streatham and piled onto the top deck.

The number 137 took us up the hill to the ridge of Crystal Palace Parade. Away to my right in the distance I could see the gothic towers of one of Dad's historic buildings, The Horniman Museum.

Soon we passed the Crystal Palace transmitter tower. I craned my neck to look up. Boy, was it scary!

'It's seven hundred and nineteen feet tall, you know. The third highest structure in London and erected on my birthday as well,' I said, trying not to sound too enthusiastic.

Dermi blew smoke in my direction. 'Yeah and nothing's been erected ever since, Mark,' he smirked, having a dig at my lack of girlfriends.

I sulked and stared out the window. A woman in a shabby pink duvet-style jacket was letting her dog relieve itself in the middle of the pavement. Why doesn't she put a nappy on that stupid animal. I hate stepping on dog crap. It gets into the grooves of my trainers and takes ages to dig out with a twig or something. Swine!

And anyway, I thought, I did have a girl acquaintance at college that Dermi didn't know about. Well...sort of. Ellen was her name. And I did touch her.

She was one of the few female undergraduates studying physics and one day I accidentally bumped into her as we piled through the swing doors of the lecture theatre. I touched her elbow and smiled while oh-so-profusely apologising. But I didn't think she heard me. She seemed to look straight through me like I wasn't there or something.

But anyway, I thought, as soon as I found a female interested in Superstring Calabi-Yau manifolds of quantum

gravity there will be a different story to tell.

'Had any more thoughts about your story, Mark?' asked Jonjo, trying to cheer me up.

I shrugged off my bruised ego. 'I had actually. It came to me last night.'

I told Jonjo I spotted a slim tome in Maggie's bookcase called 'Catcher in the Rye' by JD Salinger. It just sort of caught my eye. I flicked through it impatiently finding out what the title meant.

'I'll just tell our story the way Salinger did, in a simple, plain way, straight from the heart. It could show how we interacted, and give some background about my childhood and my later relationship with Dad.'

Then a strange feeling overcame me, sensing myself becoming Holden Caulfield, the protagonist in 'Catcher in the Rye'.

'But you need to have some sort of structure...' said Jonjo pausing as he swivelled on his seat towards me. He scrunched his head up like a sponge trying to squeeze the word out.

Holden took me over.

*Chrissake, I hate it when someone says 'you've gotta have structure,' I really do. When someone says that, structure that is. Well, okay, just for the sheer hell of it I'm gonna tell you about me and Dad and things, just for the hell of it, mind you. Because that riles me that does, you know, about structure and things like that, it really does. I dunno why. It just does. All I'm gonna tell you is about fairly recent stuff like I said, you know a bit from secondary school and stuff like that. Not too much boring early stuff though. I like funny stuff mainly, not crumby sad things. Things like that depress me, you know, sad things. I dunno why they do. They just do. They really do.*

*Anyway for chrissake I just wanna give you some background and let you know how it was with Dad and me and my brothers and booze and pubs and the stars. We loved them. The stars that is. Me and Dad, I mean. I dunno why. We just did. We really did. They're so beautiful. Just looking at them can take you outta this depressing planet, they really can. The stars that is, they can really get you the hell outta here. Away from depressing things, and alcohol and smoking and crumby things like that. They really can.*

*I'll tell you like it was. Sort of anyway, like when I was growing up with my dad and brothers and alcohol and crummy things like that. I'm depressed now just sitting in this vomity bus seat thinking about all this stuff. I dunno why. I just am. I really am.*

Jonjo looked at me strangely. 'Have you been on the bourbon?'

'No.' I replied as the bus lurched to a halt at a roundabout opposite The White Hart, and I quickly put my hand onto the seat in front to stop my mouth getting bashed.

'You sound more like, "A boring ponce on the rye".'

Dad was a gypsy gent - a rye, from Romany Rise and was dying in Gipsy Road. Me and Dad, the rye, and my brothers roaming the rye of Streatham Common and Norwood Park. Dad - a shy rye from the Rise, and us unable to cry. It sort of all fitted - poetically.

Okay, before we sort the funeral and wait ages for the headstone while the grave settles, I have time to fill in the pieces of that story the idiot on the rye was going on about. I'll start it off with the stars that me and Dad loved. One thing we had in common.

Well, you've gotta start somewhere. You really do.

## **2 Levels of Inebriation**

I was fascinated with the stars since eight years old after reading a story of a boy riding on the tail of a comet. I wanted to be that kid. But I had to wait until I was thirteen for my first telescope.

Dad weaved back from the pub early like an indolent Cheshire cat. 'Look Mark,' he smiled breathing beer fumes over me. He showed me an ice-lolly wrapper acquired along his travels. A sometime eccentric, collecting interesting scraps of paper or articles from magazines, hoarding them like a secret stash. They spewed onto the floor from his bulging wallet.

He was okay tonight. Partly coherent. There were times when drink made him ramble, not listen, repeating things, especially those he thought funny. He showed me the back of the wrapper. An offer on a telescope, a one-and-a-half-inch refractor, boasting a fifty times magnification factor!

'A telescope! Great!' I said, feeling excited.

I was tingling at the prospect of seeing distant terrestrial objects close up, also the moon and the ringed planet Saturn. There was a catch though; the price. Nineteen shillings and six pence; money to be sent with two lolly wrappers.

Money was something we found difficult to elicit from Dad. I looked at him. Surely he wasn't stringing me along? Surely, by showing me this, he must already have decided to buy it for me. I gave a pleading look and tried to judge his sincerity. It was a bit of a lottery. Even if he decided upon something late in the evening he often conveniently forgot it next morning when sober. So I had a sleepless night, excited and anxious about whether Dad would go back on his tacit agreement to buy it. Next morning I nervously broached the subject.

'Dad, have you got the money for that telescope we talked about last night?'

'Awwwh Mark, later...later,' he said dismissively, as he ate his boiled egg, standing up as usual, staring out the kitchen window at the paltry view of the larch-lap fencing.

Not a good sign. He wasn't at his best in the morning. The stress of going to an office job for which he wasn't suited and five kids hanging around, and with a hangover didn't help.

That evening Dad got home around ten and seemed in a good mood. He must have had a good day with nobody harassing him at the office and he wasn't too tipsy.

From repeated observation, I could determine Dad's state of inebriation. It could conveniently be placed into four categories.

Level One category was the rare occasion Dad didn't drink anything. He would be home by seven. His early arrival perhaps due to losing too much money on the horses or it could be the end of the month and short of cash. Then he'd go into the front room and sit in his favourite armchair near the bay window and hardly say a word.

Level Two was merry. Home between eight and eleven, he would be able to get in by easily putting the key into the latch. Drink would make him sentimental and he'd be talkative, mainly to himself, a monologue with key phrases or ideas repeated.

'I am the greatest!' he said, standing in the kitchen leaning back against the breakfast bar with a smile on his face and a Senior Service fuming in his hand.

'At what?' I said heading toward the back yard and its shrouding comfort of darkness.

'Astrophysics is the premier science.'

'What!' I repeated impatiently, pushing at the handle of the back door to ease slipping the bolt at the top of the door.

'The premier science...astronomy.'

I clattered open the back door. 'Quick, Dad, I'm going out. What are you on about?'

'Oh Mark...Mark...Be Great!' he reprimanded my impatience: 'The stars...only nuclear physics is harder.'

'Okay,' I replied, zooming into the garden. I was used to half-listening to his cryptic nonsense.

It was possible to communicate with Dad when he was like this by carefully steering him onto another topic. I became adept at manoeuvring him out the living room into the kitchen so I could watch television in peace. The best tactic was to make it his idea. I could hear him clattering the plates and frying pan making his usual supper of sausages and onions with brown buttered bread. The same knife was used to cut the onions and butter the bread so in the morning we'd endure onion-smelling butter on our toast.

Level three was drunk. Generally home-time was after ten but early evening was not too rare, depending when he started drinking. The first indication would be a single tapping noise as his slurred aim of the door key missed the keyhole target and hit the surrounding metalwork. A pause, then more tapping before finally gaining entrance. That key-on-metal noise was barely audible, but our minds became attuned to it.

'Damn! Dad,' I muttered to Shamus near the climax of the film: 'I'm off to bed. See you in the morning.'

'Hmm,' he uttered, still concentrating on the film.

'You're not going to sit it out are you?'

Shamus didn't say anything but, aggravated, smashed the off-switch on the telly rocking it on its flimsy legs. We traipsed upstairs as the front door opened. I felt a cool physical and emotional blast. Soon, a waft of burning sausages drifted upstairs. He had left them frying while he fell asleep in the armchair in the front room, and I rushed down to open the back door quickly, clattering the blinds, in order to clear the smoke.

One night I stubbornly tried to sit it out despite Dad's drunken presence. Finding an audience, Dad plonked

himself into the chair, breathing heavily from the booze and launched into one of his hackneyed diatribes. He slouched in the chair looking up above the television towards the corner of the ceiling, a Senior Service smoking in his hand.

'Awwwh Mark...Be Great!...Be Great!' He repeated this phrase, filling any potential pause in his ramblings. It was impossible to concentrate on the television with his non-stop monologue.

'Dad, for god's sake just shut up and go to bed,' I blurted uncontrollably.

There was silence for a minute.

'Be Great!' he said, and repeated his monologue.

I averted my eyes and looked at him but he was unaware of my gaze. I was irritated. A conundrum. I was looking at something so annoying and yet also sort-of loved. It was sad to see Dad as a failed human and not as a hero.

He was talking at me and not with me. In droning monotony. I stared at him in frustration. He wasn't watching television and he wasn't even smoking the cigarette which was held purely out of comfort. He was staring into space and talking to himself, the cigarette smoke rising; the cooling plume zigzagging then billowing into a diffuse blue mushroom. A pathetic figure; semi-recumbent; wallowing in sentimentality. Sentimentality was not a bad thing; I could relate to that. But there should be a balance. For Dad, this attribute was ahead in the marathon run of life, with humour close behind. The five-hour stragglers were responsibility, maturity and emotional ties with his family.

I blurted out, 'Dad, snap out of these memories. You're not that old, yet you sound as if your life's over. Try living in the present.' Dad's constant talking but not listening got to me like some drip, drip, dripping of a Chinese Water Torture.

But he couldn't listen and rambled undeterred. I gave up and went to bed.

The level four category is very drunk. This was fairly rare, but became less so as we grew up, partly due to his increasing inability to communicate with us as maturing teenagers.

One summer evening I had one of my headaches and lay on the settee in the front room. Nervous headaches from reading aloud in the English class.



Early evening and bright. Jonjo sitting in the armchair. I was feeling okay, not happy, not sad. A wood pigeon cooed on the aerial across the road. Its call loud in the quiet. Watching a silly programme featuring some suave Mexican git and a midget.

Suddenly the front door crashed open and the living room door swung wildly in. I felt a panic. Like a dream world. What was going on? An idyllic summer's evening transformed into some sort of nightmare. I couldn't figure it out. Before I could react Dad grabbed my leg and dragged me off the sofa:

'Get out to work,' he shouted. Face full of anger and breathing hard; vaporising alcohol over me, and I had to turn my head to gasp fresh air.

My back thudded onto the floor. I stared up, shocked, into Dad's distorted face. Jonjo dashed into the hall. I hadn't seen Dad aggressive like this before and it frightened me. It wasn't a fear of physical violence because he wasn't like that, even in that state. For he himself was a gent in a turmoil. More an emotional fear of what he was doing to the family.

My supine position calmed him down. 'I'm fed up looking after you lot. Go earn some money.'

I detected a fleeting burst of regret on his face like I wasn't the real focus of his aggression. He was looking at me but thinking of someone else. Someone who was getting at him at work; perhaps for his lack of confidence or his strong Eire accent or his naive inter-personal skills.

Dad's hate for that person vicariously projected onto me. Grappling with a nightmare from his sober world.

His stridency for me to earn money now was simply something he didn't want. He wanted me to go to college. He would be proud of me. Not that he would ever tell me outright. Yet here he was having a go at me for complying with his unuttered wishes. He was shouting at me to do something he didn't really want me to do! When he was irrationally drunk like that I wished he would go away and die somewhere. Then, later, I'd feel guilty, and sorry I couldn't help him sort out his problems. Dad never discussed his problems with us. So we couldn't help.

In that level four state he would open the front door after several attempts and spill into the hallway, staggering into the ground floor bedroom which, due to the small-house-and-large-number-of-kids syndrome, had been converted from a dining room. We would be watchful

and one of us shepherded him back into the bedroom rather than let him loose in the kitchen with the gas cooker.

But, as kids, Dad spent time with us, up Norwood Park standing in goal wearing his only dark suit.

'Go on, Dad, run will you.' Jonjo shouted impatiently. Dad only ever walked after the ball, his hand flat in his jacket pocket. He wasn't much older than I am now. Yet I found it hard to imagine Dad being my age. He was lifted from any marker in time. He just seemed to be...well...a Dad's age.

When we were kids there wasn't much physical contact with him, no cuddling or comforting, but we were happy enough. Problems came as we started to think independently. Dad's playtime was over and he hadn't forged out any other role; not a mentor, adviser or carer.

'You have a roof over your heads and food, what more do you want?' he said.

But Dad could be fun and had a sense of humour. We often sat as a family and laughed at Laurel and Hardy and the Marx Brothers.

Oh look! There's Groucho. He somehow has become President of a country! Now he's asking that esteemed President of a neighbouring country for twenty million dollars, adding indignantly, 'you old skinflint', a fairly reasonable request one would have thought! What, he said no! The impudence! 'Twelve dollars 'til pay-day then?' And there's Harpo holding a fish with a sword sticking out of its gullet. What's he up to? He's knocking on the door of a speak-easy during prohibition America. You've guessed the password, 'Swordfish.'

'Cut the cards' one lug says to another. Whoosh! An axe appears from nowhere, neatly sundering the pack. Harpo was nearby, a look of mischievous innocence on his face.

We never had heart-to-hearts with Dad. Emotional strangers.

'I had a dog when I was young. But it died,' he told me one evening. He dragged on his cigarette: 'It took a long time to get over that dog.' He didn't want to get too attached to 'things' – us!

### 3 The Telescope

I gauged Dad at level two that long-ago evening.

'Shall we get that telescope,' I said, nervously fingering the sticky ice-lolly wrapper in anticipation, staring at the drawing of the telescope and small tripod. Better to hedge around a subject rather than be direct, where Dad could give a direct 'no'.

Dad's hand reached inside his jacket pocket. My heart beat faster. He put a closed chequebook down onto the kitchen table.

'Oh Mark. Be Great!' he said thoughtfully.

'The stars back in Abbeyfeale. So bright. Not like here.'

'If we got a telescope it would make it better. You know, make them brighter.'

'I was so hungry back then,' he looked in my direction but was focusing on another time, another place.

'The telescope would be great, Dad,' and I interrupted his gaze with a waving lolly wrapper.

'So many shooting stars. I could hear them whoosh sometimes.'

I gently sundered his fingers with a pen and guided his arm towards the chequebook. 'We can see a lot if we had this telescope.'

He wrote a cheque with laboured breathing trying to keep the pen moving along the line, eyes squinting through thick black-rimmed glasses.

At last, a cheque. But what about the barely legible handwriting? Would it be accepted? Anxiety next morning. Would he want the cheque back?

'I'll send off for that telescope today, Dad. It'll be great.'

He didn't say anything so I sent the cheque off that same day.

Oh no!

Twenty-eight days delivery!

A horrible feeling, wanting something so badly and having to wait for it. I thought I would be run over by a bus or something equally horrible before the telescope arrived. I might be involved in a freak accident; just my luck to be hit by a meteorite.

During that month, strange, doom-laden thoughts descended.

Walking through Norwood Park eager to get home knowing the parcel would be waiting. A clear afternoon but

cold. I didn't notice the Boeing 747 above me at two thousand feet, why should I? This area is on a holding pattern for aircraft going to London, Heathrow so you become familiar with low flying aeroplanes. You just don't notice them after a while. But this particular aircraft's route took it through humid air producing a small accretion of ice on its wing-tip, near the flaps. The aircraft must then have hit a small pocket of clear air turbulence. This phenomenon has no visual warning signs so can catch pilots unaware, luckily, however, it was localised. Lucky for everyone but me, that is. The large air stresses caused a flexing in the wing flaking off the accreted ice, sending a sharp sliver hurtling towards the ground.

I should have been okay, the plane wasn't overhead after all. But luck wasn't on my side, today of all days, just when my telescope was waiting for me. The ice had an aerofoil cross-section sending it on an improbable sideways trajectory towards me, at a high terminal velocity. A speeding, gravity-powered scalpel blade.

Whoosh! I heard the sound but felt nothing. I turned around to be confronted with the unwelcome sight of my butt bouncing onto the grass. Just my luck for this to happen before I could enjoy sitting for hours at my telescope.

*Ho-hum.*

*What to do?*

*Without a bum.*

#### **4 The Horror Film**

The diesel engine of the bus vibrated us as it moved along Crystal Palace High Street.

I wondered whether we would get that headstone today?

Great to be on the top deck. A different outlook on life. A haughty perspective. The bus like a larger body transporting me, which, by dint of analogy, I become the bus's brain; observing while moving. In turn, my body is a biological bus to transport my brain.

Inside the aluminium body were my brothers, sitting quietly, smoking, living within their own buses.

We got on well now we were older. But when young, fighting for privacy, things weren't always so.

As youngsters we'd have family arguments but tinged with tongue-in-cheek laughter.

Back then in Romany Rise all was quiet, until I heard a voice.

'Mark!' It was familiar, yet I didn't have the will power to respond.

A few moments passed. 'Mark!'

I stirred. But no...I wasn't really hearing this.

A few moments later. 'Mark!' The voice persisted. A soft voice with a northern Irish lilt.

No, it was nothing.

'Mark!' I was getting irritated as if a fly was persistently returning to my cheek.

I felt my leg being shaken lightly by a caring rather than assertive hand.

'Mark...Mark!'

The voice continued for what seemed ages. Grinding me down, moving me inexorably towards its aim, nagging like some sadistic harpy, pausing long enough for me to return into the arms of Morpheus...

'Mark, get up to bed.'

Oh no! I thought as my faculties slowly returned. I had fallen asleep on the sofa again! I was in an irritable mood, not so much at my mum insisting on me going to bed to sleep, but rather because I missed the film I had been so looking forward to.

There was a season of late night horror films on television on Fridays. I returned home from scouts looking forward to tonight's offering, the Brides of Frankenstein. I had scrounged a shilling at school and stocked up on a liquorice, a sherbet fountain and Black Jacks from 'Next Door'; a nearby small grocery and Off Licence.

I bit the bullet and bought Maggie's goodies while there, otherwise she would bark out her order for supplies to either me, Jonjo or Dermi just as the film was to start. She ordered us around and we just complied. Life wouldn't be peaceful if we didn't, her ferocious arguments and sulkiness would not be worth the hassle. Better to comply. She could wear me down just as much as mum.

Right. I was all set. Sweets, cheese and onion crisps and a can of Cidrax strategically placed in the corner of the settee. Pyjamas on, I slid into my sleeping bag, sitting on top of my goodies to keep out Jonjo and Dermi's scavenging hands.

Nearing eleven, the small room filled with the family,

except for Dad who was still down the pub.

My place staked out, nice and snuggly in the corner with my sweets. I was happy; nothing else I could want. Chattering died away as the film's titles appeared. Oh, damn. Irritation! I wasn't a hundred per cent comfortable and I needed to be otherwise the one per cent inflated to ninety nine per cent. The problem was the room was too bright.

I went straight to the head of the pecking order and mooted the suggestion to Shamus who agreed.

'Maggie, switch the light off,' bossed Shamus.

A chain of command was set up.

'Mark, switch the light off,' said Maggie, flicking at a Barbara Cartland novel and relaying the order without any real emotion in her voice.

'Jonjo,' I said.

'Dermi,' said Jonjo.

But Dermi complained to mum he was being picked on again.

So nothing was done.

I would have to switch the light off. The logistics have to be considered. Firstly, I have to take my sweets, that was all-important. I couldn't leave the sleeping bag either because that would get nicked. I could gather the sleeping bag and grab the sweet bag scrunching them between my neck and chin, then bounce across the room to the light switch like a kangaroo. But there was another problem; someone could take my seat. So I would come clean on that one with a proposition.

'Okay,' I said magnanimously: 'I'll agree to switch the light off only if you lot agree not to take my place.'

'Sure!'

At the light switch I heard a commotion. I turned around to see everyone piled high onto my seat!

This triggered a laughing frenzy.

Jonjo proffered a tangential reference to a film, *The Man in the Iron Mask*.

'Mark,' he said.

'You're *The Man in the Iron Pants!*'

Dermi brought closure with, '*The Man with the Balsa-wood Tongue.*'

The horrible, horror film.

I emptied my crisps into a bowl to avoid rustling the packet, something which annoyed Shamus. Eating your crisps too-loud could get you ejected into the hall by him.

But Dermi was now getting on Shamus' nerves. 'Stop breathing so loudly,' he barked. And I could see poor Dermi self-consciously slowly breathing through his mouth in an effort to be quiet.

The same Big-Brother rules at bedtime. Shamus lorded it in the large bedroom opposite the landing from my small bedroom shared with Jonjo and Dermi. At bedtime we chatted quietly with the light off.

'Frank and Stein was scary. Are you scared, Jonjo?' Dermi whispered, looking for comfort.

'A bit.'

'What's that thing on his neck?' asked Dermi a bit louder.

'It's a bolt, where they screw his head on,' replied Jonjo in a louder voice.

'Sssh! Shamus will hear us.' I warned. 'Anyway, that's not a bolt. It's an air valve where they blow him up. At night they deflate him and roll him up and put him in a drawer under the bed.'

'Shut up!' Shamus bellowed down the landing.

We remained silent for a reasonable amount of time. 'There's not much furniture in those castles. Not many places to pack a ten foot monster away. That's why Dr Frank and Dr. Stein made him inflatable. It's a space saver.' I added studiously: 'He has a prehensile tongue which he uses to swing around the chandeliers in that draughty old castle.'

'Mark, you're a prehensile wally,' laughed Jonjo.

'My teacher said the Three Wise Men brought him as a gift to the baby Jesus.'

The laughter was, surely, virtually inaudible to Shamus. Perhaps a couple of vibrating air molecules drifted past his acutely sensitive eardrums. But that was enough. We heard a commotion in his room and a scary hush overcame us. Thump, thump, thump, thump. He bounded across the rough nylon carpet to our room and burst in.

'I told you lot to shut up,' he shouted as his right fist flailed with uncanny accuracy.

He had bat-like range detection ability in executing the procedure in pitch-black. Bang, bang...bang, bang...bang, bang. Six punches rattled out in quick, rhythmic succession, in three groups of two. In total darkness and hidden under a blanket, each of the two punches found a sensitive part of the upper arm. The first blow tenderising, the second, bruising in a staccato sequence of unerring

accuracy. A long period of dishing out punishment to the minions had honed his skills. Without saying a word he returned to his quiet world.

I had been looking forward to that horror film. I hoped it would be scary. But to no avail. Fifteen minutes later I was asleep. Sleep was irresistible. I had seen the first half of most films. I always regained my senses to the same sound of mum trying to wake me up to go to bed.

## 5 Party Four

As a teenager, a cycloidal path of booze to think freely by freely drinking.

Late one evening I took a large Party Four tin of Watneys Red Barrel beer to Norwood Park. I sat alone in the dark on a wooden bench near the railings of the railway embankment. A grassy incline up towards the paddling pool at the brow of the hill dimly lit by the perimeter lamps like a string of orange pearls. The Threepenny Bit tree nearby. I put the heavy tin on the grass and opened it whilst averting my face to avoid the spurting froth. I punctured both sides for a steady flow.

I stared at the stars. How small human life is within the cosmos. My life seemed insignificant in the grand scale of things. A sense of perspective. It was like I was the smallest part of a bacteria and yet I was still worrying about life. It's hard to rationalise away worry although the starry awe can help.

A small block of flats to my right. White lights on the cell-like balconies speckled through the black leaves. A cosy feeling. I could be in some far-off exotic place. Perhaps the Palatine hills overlooking Rome.

What about the people living in that flat? What were they doing at that moment? What did they do for a living? I felt like ringing a doorbell and finding out about their lives. But what could I say? How could I explain my strange presence? They would be suspicious and call the police. Before I knew it I would be locked up and subjected to psychiatric scrutiny.

Staring at the stars I thought about my life. The circumpolar constellations of the Plough and Andromeda are like friends, accompanying me through my life. Star-gazing made me feel something. The miniscule transience. Sensitive people can be mawkish.



## 6 Crystal Palace High Street

The bus stopped at traffic lights at the end of Crystal Palace High Street where a crossroads forced a clearing in the rows of shops.

On top of the hill I could see London' skyline in the distance like silver bristles on a brown chin.

The lights turned green and on the right we passed a police station. As kids we had marched into that police station, and the sergeant was pleased to see us. We were also featured on the front page of the local newspaper. What crime did we commit? Well, nothing. Two months earlier a policeman was shot in the course of his duty. This was such an unusual event it made big headline news. As a mark of respect, Dad made us save all our halfpennies. He came up with the idea to collect nine hundred and ninety-nine halfpennies to donate to his fund. However, as the months passed and the incident faded he decided on a new target; six hundred and sixty-six halfpennies.

'Dial six-six-six and you'll get a policeman standing on his head,' was his lame logic.

Mum trooped us up to the police station with a bag of coins in her shopping trolley. Dad wouldn't go, being shy of publicity. It was Dad's show, his idea and everything, yet we had to go through with it. A noble gesture on his part but, even so young, I hated being controlled.

A reporter interviewed us. Dad again absent. The photographer took our picture which had an old paint-peeling door as a backdrop. I was annoyed at this intrusion of my privacy. I didn't want my friends seeing me in front of some scrubby old door with my brothers and sister. False neat hair. False smile. My feelings were overridden like I didn't exist or like some sort of pet.

'Remember that, Shamus? Six hundred and sixty-six halfpennies.'

'Yeah,' he said looking across the road towards the police station. He mumbled cryptically in a low, creepy voice, 'six, six, six...the number of the beast.'

'Leave Dermi's one-night-stand out of this.'

'Oi!' said an indignant Dermi.

I moved unsteadily down the isle as the bus made its jerky way down Central Hill towards Virgo Fidelis, Maggie's old school. I sat behind Shamus then slid forward in the seat leaning over the metal support rail and retrieved my trusty magnifying glass and focussed the sun to burn a

tiny hole in his jacket.

'Get stuffed,' he said, jerking his arm away and stared nonchalantly out the window, a roll-up balancing on his bottom lip. He let things wash over him - like mum - unconcerned, like it was too puerile to argue or even an understated happiness to be at the centre of the humour.

## 7 Please Don't Cry

The droning bus stratified my jumbled memories and I recalled Dad saying about not crying.

Eleven in the evening. Mum and the teenage family at home. Mum in the kitchen as usual. Maggie upstairs. Shamus, Jonjo, Dermi and me in the front room watching highlights of an England football game. Out of a tense reflex action I glanced at the clock. The match would finish at half past; the second half had just started. A race against time - would we make it?

My heart thumped at what I thought was a front gate clatter, close to the window: our terraced house had a small front garden, just enough for a dustbin really. I focused my hearing though the window. Nothing. Wait! A stumble onto the door jamb. A tapping noise of metal-key-on-latch.

'Damn!' Shamus sighed: 'He's back.' And promptly went to bed. Dermi followed as Dad poured through the front door like a saggy Guinness.

Hearts sank. That was the end of the football. Stubbornly, Jonjo and I stuck it out.

A slow-motion closure of the front door. An unsteady hiss of sleeve sliding along the wall towards the closed living room door. Decision time. We listened intently, thoughts not on the football. Please pass by. But no. Fumbling at the handle he staggered into the room. Our tightening chests. His laboured breathing. Faltering movements and smiling glazed eyes showed he was sozzled. Finding his captured audience he plonked heavily into the armchair, banging his thinning, grey-haired head against the back of the chair. Aggravated, we sat it out hoping he would remain quiet.

A few minutes silence.

'Please don't cry,' he sighed enigmatically.

We didn't want to discuss anything with him in that state so we kept quiet and tried to concentrate on the

match. We had practice ignoring him when full of the drink but it didn't make it easier.

'Please don't cry,' and he lit a Senior Service. He didn't want conversation. That phrase an opening gambit for a repetitive, self-indulgent monologue.

Ten minutes of the game remained. I might be able to last it out. Dad wasn't in too obnoxious a mood. I wondered what he was talking about though?

'Please don't cry.'

Jonjo snapped. 'DAD, shut up will you, we're trying to watch the football.'

He knew this was the wrong way to handle the situation, but he couldn't help himself. He had provided Dad with some feedback into his alcohol infused, spintext sub-world, no matter how negative. This was the 'Ischra' - a spark to ignite the melancholic, deluded tinder his life had become.

'Please don't cry, when I die.'

Quiet.

'Please don't cry,' he said sadly.

I had had enough: 'Look Dad,' I said with reason, 'we just want to watch the football okay. Why don't you go to the kitchen, make your sausage and onions and leave us in peace for a change?'

'No!' he replied sternly, adjusting his posture upright and turning his head toward me: 'Please, please don't cry.' The repeated word emphasised a different aspect to his thoughts, but it was lost on us.

'What the hell are you talking about?'

'Just bury me and forget it. Life's too short for sadness...and please don't cry.'

We all but gave up watching the football.

'Okay, Dad, we won't cry all right! Now go away.'

Silence. Mesmerised by his thoughts and fixing his gaze at the far corner of the ceiling.

'Please don't cry.'

That was it. Another great end to the day. We stormed up to bed wound-up.

At the head of the stairs I heard: 'Please don't cry, when I die,' seeping from the downstairs room, abandoned by his children.

Many years later we didn't.

## 8 Asleep in the Library

'One thing worse than wanting something is getting it,' luckily didn't apply to me and my brand new telescope.

I roamed the back gardens with the telescope during the day - close-ups of flowers, cats and brickwork, and the moon at night. I wanted to observe the stars through the window of my warm bedroom but the images were distorted by the glass. I had to freeze outside on those winter nights.

The full moon like a lardy firefly bathes the garden in soft beams. It drowns out the stars yet it is a half a million times less bright than the Sun. I consulted an old encyclopedia Dad would flick through on Sunday morning in his suit watching All Our Yesterdays before noon church and the King's Head. I found out the lunar surface actually is not very reflective, about the same as coal dust. Also the moon virtually has no atmosphere, in its entirety it would fit into a matchbox here on earth.

A bright object in the south-west after sunset had a crescent shape like the moon. It was the planet Venus. But where was Saturn? I was keen to see its beautiful rings, but how would I find it?

I beat a path to Norwood library. Under the physics section they held astronomy texts. My eye caught a small hardback book with a dust jacket displaying a plan drawing of the celestial hemisphere. 'Naked Eye Astronomy' by Patrick Moore. It seemed suitably simple to understand and filled with large illustrations of constellations. It didn't show me where to find Saturn though. It slowly dawned on me a text book couldn't tell me where to find the planet because a planet by definition is a 'wanderer' moving relative to the fixed starry background. The time variations of an almanac in the reference section is what is required.

Shelves of books lined the parquet walkway to the right. On the left a series of floor-to-ceiling double-glazed windows and patio doors skirted the small outdoor quadrangle, a peaceful mix of orange, blue and red in summer. A tangerine row of sixties-style, chromed swivel chairs sat to attention.

Wait a minute! I thought I recognised a figure slouching in the end chair near the inquiry desk. I moved closer. Yes, it was Dad! Snoozing. His head tilted back supporting thick black-rimmed glasses. His crossed outstretched legs resting on his heel. Hands clasped, held

by interlocking fingers, placed on top of a book snuggling restfully open in his lap, face down. It was a late Saturday afternoon and the library was a frequent haunt of his after being ejected from a lunchtime session in The Hope, so it was no great surprise to see him here. I halted, straining to look at his book. Between his fingers I could just make out the title - Magnetohydrodynamics! What the hell he was reading that for! He couldn't have understood a word. But he often tried to read complicated books like that especially later on when I went to college.

He'd challenged me with a technical term he had memorised.

'Dad, you haven't a clue what you're talking about, you've just picked up the odd complicated word. You've no idea of the concepts behind the words,' I said, in a fit of pique, having been bombarded incessantly with the same repeated phrases.

Dad went quiet, occasionally catching me out with his sensitivity. Maybe he was listening after all! I felt churlish: 'You are intelligent, it's just that you didn't have much education.'

'Quarks...quarks...quarks...they are the thing. You don't understand Mark, it's the premier science...nuclear physics,' he said, shifting into a professorial stance, flicking me on the chest with his fingertips for emphasis, laughing, surprising himself with his erudition.

'Dad, you're not listening.'

'Me...fantastic genius,' he said, slowly emphasising each word, smiling, standing upright with hands clasping the lapels of his dark grey jacket. A hackneyed phrase he would churn out at the drop of a hat.

I persevered. 'Listen! It's not your fault. You just weren't given the opportunity to study, coming from the backwaters of Eire.'

'It doesn't matter if you don't know what a quark is. It's just a concept. Lack of knowledge about what these models are doesn't make you any less intelligent, Dad.'

Dad stood there, smiling from his previous wisdom. His right hand moved from his lapel to his forehead, momentarily settling above his right eye, like he was about to salute me. It darted diagonally upward and then swept out an arc as he added: 'Thanks!' averting his eyes heavenward, looking up at a cartoonist's idea-bubble: 'Me no dumb Irishman.' Laughter again. I had an idea this phrase underlay his motivation.

I stepped quietly past Dad hoping the brief pause caused no suspicion of a family relationship. I nonchalantly gazed at the inquiry desk and then opposite towards a couple of people sitting at the breakfast bar arrangement of the reference section.

Good, no one is looking at me. I had escaped an embarrassing association.

An older me would not have minded the association. Had Dad been happy within himself, I would have accepted his behaviour as eccentric as even interesting and different. But for me, the teenager, I just wanted Dad to be 'normal' or better still, what every boy really wants - a hero.

Whitaker's Almanac. I soon became familiar with the organisation of the data and found the positions of the planets for November. Fortunately Saturn was visible in the east as an evening object. Its thirty-degree altitude, a bit more than the width of a hand span at arm's length, would take it clear of the low row of flats. It was the bright object in the zodiacal constellation of Gemini.

Over the next few evenings I consulted 'Naked Eye Astronomy' to locate Gemini. I identified Saturn and eagerly pointed my telescope at it, a procedure that wasn't straightforward because the small, cheap telescope didn't have a finder scope. I had to resort to viewing along the barrel of the scope to get the best alignment possible then, looking through the eyepiece, swept the telescope in an ever increasing spiral until the object was located. A frustrating exercise taking many attempts. With practise I attained a certain proficiency in the technique. But, I was disappointed with my first glimpse of the giant yellow planet. All I could see was a small elliptical blob of shimmering light; I couldn't even make out the rings.

It dawned on me the spectacular sweeping vistas of the planet with rings splayed open showing Cassini's division had been photographed by the huge two hundred inch telescope at Mount Palomar Observatory.

More resolution was required from a larger telescope but with an exponentially increasing cost.

With help from my book I gradually recognised the brighter constellations. The dark winter skies were the best but coldest for observing.

I spent hours in my small concrete back garden lying on an old mat staring at the sky. The sheer awe and wonder. A sense of comfort. An unchanging starry

background.

Cosmos. A quasi god-like quality; stable and always there. The dark sky hypnotised me. A high, like alcohol, but without the hangover pay-back. A mind splashed laterally from a sea of thoughts. The infinity of space put anxieties into perspective. For a while.

Eventually I studied the stars and was disappointed.

## 9 Pennine Walk

As a teenager, with alcohol, I became physically boisterous and verbally aggressive in a humorous way, whether teasing someone or wrestling with them on the floor. I drank and drank until I became unconscious, throwing up along the way.

During half term my venture scout group from St. Luke's organised a sponsored walk along a squiggly two hundred mile route through the Lake District starting at Kendal and ending at Pen-Y-Ghent. Carlo, the scout master, had arranged to meet us outside St. Luke's at eight on Sunday morning to drive us.

I met my scout mates Pete, John and Colin down the church social club for an eve-of-walk drink, which was not a good idea.

'A pint of Trophy please,' I said, sitting down at the round bar table. I had saved forty pence that week, enough to buy two pints of beer.

'Light and Bitter,' said John.

Colin added: 'Make that two.'

Pete dropped the playing cards onto the table and they splayed out like liquid paper.

Colin gathered them. 'Right. Three-card brag with two's floating. Who's in?'

Clanking and sliding noises from slapped loose change.

'Cut the cards,' Colin muttered through a mouth pinching a Consulate cigarette.

We were only sixteen but the priest turned a blind eye to our drinking. We were the young adults of the parish and were treated maturely.

I had initial luck on the turning wheel of fortune, lubricated by beer. But the effects of the second pint were felt and ideas, which seemed good at the time, reared their sozzled heads.

'I need more beer but I'm broke,' I said, looking around

for a sub. Normally I wouldn't ask directly for money, but I was a bit pissed. No-one offered.

'My parents are out for the night, let's go back to my place,' John suggested.

I wasn't too enthusiastic: 'What about booze?'

'They've got a cocktail cabinet,' he said, maybe unwisely.

'Great.'

Pete and Colin weren't too sure. They were more worried than John about the damage I could do in his house. Examining their meagre money they bought into the plan. The group formed its own identity and we surrendered to it. This inanimate thing took over us relieving us of personal responsibility. It decided on immediate action. We hid the beers under our coats and left the club into a cold, dark October evening trying not to look too suspicious.

'See you, Carlo,' I shouted in a too-loud voice. He shook his head with a knowing smile from the far end of the hall.

'Remember, bright and early tomorrow lads,' he boomed.

We supped under cover of darkness dawdling up the poorly lit alley alongside the church toward the bus stop.

We huddled against the cold like penguins in a shop entrance while surreptitiously sipping beer without too long a wait. The number 196, a red double-decker, took us to South Norwood Hill. The bus was pretty empty and we piled onto the top deck. Holding the handle of the beer jug through my coat pocket I pulled myself upstairs using the handrail.

We planted ourselves at the back of the bus - for the security of no person behind.

We were buzzing.

Pete, reasonably, reminded us: 'That walk's gonna be tiring.'

'I've heard that beer's cheap up north,' I said.

'You look the oldest, Pete. You'll have to buy it,' said John planning the beering.

A purple haze of cigarette smoke dispersed into the top deck as the bus jerkily weaved to Crown Point, passing from St. John's to the top of South Norwood Hill. Blinking lights on the ITV television mast - a baby Eiffel Tower - and along with the Crystal Palace transmitter are the landmarks of south-east London. I feel the comfort of my



home patch at the sight of them puncturing the air like huge spikes.

The bus creaked down South Norwood Hill.

'Come on,' said John, flicking my ear as he got up.

'Oi!' and I pulled at the lapel of John's great-coat then swigged the remains of my beer.

'All right, Mark, calm down!' he said defensively.

I threw my chunky beer jug onto the seat.

'Mark. What you doing!' said Pete, alarmed.

The jug bounced and clanked onto the deck.

'What's going on up there?' the conductor demanded from below.

I slid down the stairs. 'Nothing's going on but we're going off,' I replied. I didn't feel like it was me talking, so I didn't care.

We piled off loudly and walked with a certain enthusiasm towards John's house.

The well-decorated semi was quiet.

John was having second thoughts now. 'Pete, how about getting some money off your old man for beer from the off licence. There's only spirits in my cocktail cabinet.'

I was having none of it. 'Come on you wimps. I can drink more spirits than you lot put together.'

In John's lounge I made a beeline to the cocktail cabinet and impatiently pulled at its locked door. 'How'd you open this thing?'

John hastily appeared with the key. I opened it slowly, full of anticipation and delighted to see an assortment of bottles of spirits. In the centre a large empty glass pitcher, for sangria. I took it out and gave it to Colin who examined it approvingly: 'Okay, pass the first bottle,' he said.

It was whisky and he liberally sloshed it in. Next was the gin, then followed the vodka and finally lots of tonic water. The pitcher was brimming.

'Go on, Mark. Down in one,' challenged Colin.

'Don't be stupid,' warned Pete: 'That would kill him.'

Even though I was tipsy I wasn't stupid. I brought it to my lips and gulped, shutting my nasal passage at the back of my throat to reduce the taste of the foul brew. The others took a swift mouthful each before it was my turn, all-too-quickly, again. They were behaving more sensibly than me. After the fourth passing the concoction was finished.

'Right. What shall we do now?' I slurred. But quite suddenly I felt its blurring effects. We tried to play cards,

but my head was swimming. I boisterously broke the leg of an antique set of coffee tables that John's parents had received as a wedding gift eighteen years previous. Nausea. Before I wrecked the place the others pushed me out the house muttering something about getting up early the next day.

I barely remembered walking home. I was losing consciousness as I zig-zagged up South Norwood Hill. I lay in the middle of the road hardly aware of the oncoming car headlights and beeping horns. I staggered the homeward route like ploughing through sand. I collapsed in Norwood Park, staring at the stars. They performed acrobatics for my alcohol-sodden brain.

Orion the hunter danced around the southern sky. My beautiful Pleiades performed a pitiful jig. My stomach contracted. The Seven Sisters - four thousand million million miles away. I wondered if there was any one up there, lashed, looking at our sun and throwing-up in synchrony?

'We are stoned...immaculate,' surged through my mind. A teenager's empathy with The Doors.

Sleep jerked at my sleeve in the park but instinct drove me home. Home after midnight yet I had to get up by seven, for the week's walk. My numb brain deafened by ringing ears in the still blackness as I crawled up the stairs. Ringing rhythmically with my heartbeat.

Let there be light: all too soon. Dizzy. But not too bad amazingly; no headache or nausea.

I ate cereal for breakfast then packed my rucksack.

'See you next week, mum,' I shouted, a frying pan in her hand, as I closed the front door carefully, trying not to let that annoying brass knocker rebound.

Chirpily I walked the mile to the church to meet the others and help load Carlo's car with camping gear. However, the more I walked the worse I felt. Why did that other me have to drink so much last night! The things he gets me into. I hate him! Fucking idiot!

At the church car park feeling green, I tried to make light of it in front of the others who, irritatingly, looked fine to my cursory glances.

'You okay, Mark?' Pete asked mischievously patting my head, a bit too hard for comfort. I tried to hide behind a smile that formed too falsely. I rushed away and retched in the toilet and felt worse by the minute.

Carlo found out what had gone on the previous evening

and had no sympathy. 'I warned you lot last night,' he bellowed.

Carlo, the scoutmaster; an imposing figure. Six feet tall and eighteen stones with a voice that had seen some action. He wasn't a bully though. He was fair to everyone. He had that rare talent of being able to control thirty teenage kids, not through fear but through respect. Despite what we said, we loved him. Carlo learned his technique in the army. The SAS he reckoned, which I wouldn't dispute. His was a soft-harsh approach. One minute he would be screaming obscenities at you and the next he would be chatting man-to-man with you, surreptitiously slipping you a can of beer behind Father MacTrass's back. But that voice though! It could have a fair duel for dominance with Concorde flying low overhead.

Torture: how was I going to face a two hundred and fifty-mile car journey feeling that bad? I sat with my head near the rear window for ease of retching and shut my eyes to ease head and stomach.

We stopped at the Junction 13 motorway services near Bedford.

'You've got fifteen minutes,' Carlo shouted in our direction, but he was staring at me: 'If you're not back then, you can fucking well walk.'

I wouldn't put it past him.

I spent most of the time with my head down the loo even though my stomach was completely empty it kept spasming. If I could have reached inside my brain I would have throttled that other bloke. That other person wasn't me. It was someone I didn't like or admire and made me feel bad.

I bought some Alka Seltzer but couldn't find a cup.

*Why me? Why couldn't I shut my eyes and be back in the comfort of my cosy bed? Why was I here in this bleak, bustling, unfriendly motorway service station feeling like crap? It was a nightmare. Maybe if I scrunched up my eyes and opened them slowly I'd be back home, looking at that psychedelic mural on my bedroom wall that me and Jonjo painted. And my arty poster of Ché Guevara giving a concerned look towards the black footprints I painted on the ceiling; steps which ended in a half-footprint at the wall, as if someone in an upside down world walked across my ceiling - like the walls didn't exist.*

I opened my eyes slowly only to be confronted by a fat woman staring at me and then I caught a waft of greasy

sausages.

'Can I get a cup out of the camping stuff, Carlo?' I pleaded.

'No you fucking can't. Now get in the car.'

He was a bastard sometimes. Carlo thought I deserved the way I felt.

I sat at the back of the car sucking on an Alka Seltzer tablet, which violently fizzed up, filling my mouth with a foam of such volume and sharp taste it was just too horrible to swallow. A rabid animal. The tablet was salty and I was parched. We wouldn't be stopping for another two hours. Oh hell! Fuck booze!

That sentiment didn't last long though. I was at that warm northern beer the following day. Booze was part of my make up. Me, my brothers and my dad. We couldn't avoid it. The writing was on our DNA.

## 10 Common Room

I was in the sixth form common room hoping the small assembled group would approve of my selection on the communal hi-fi.

Some had brought in trendy records like King Crimson, Van de Graff Generator, Gong or Greenslade.

Static tickled my knuckles as I slid the vinyl record out of its inner sleeve and placed it on the turntable. Speakers crackled as the volume was cranked up.

Then a fabulous, twangy, Texan-rock guitar introduction producing in me a shivery delight. 'Nasty Dogs and Funky Kings' the first track on side two of *Fandango*, a half-live, half-studio album by the unknown band, Z Z Top.

'That's great,' said Cohen: 'It's really exciting.'

Tim heard the music from the corridor and joined us. He was going through the adolescent emotional torture phase which spewed out as eccentric behaviour.

He entered the room thoughtfully, his brow furrowed, and, without saying a word, glanced towards us in a smile of recognition and proceeded to sit cross-legged under the hi-fi table, a gesture which passed without serious comment.

I got a buzz out of my peer group liking my record. Why I should bask in reflected glory for a record I had nothing to do with was beyond comprehension. Perhaps I

felt I had achieved something, given a temporary meaning to my life that day.

On hearing the too-loud music Mr. Merfat, the maths teacher, popped his head around the door. He crossed the room purposely and turned the music down. He first looked impatient and then concerned with a deliberate pause lending force to his words: 'May I remind you gentlemen that you have a maths class with me in five minutes.'

He noticed Tim sitting under the table in a semi-lotus yoga position and as an emotional chameleon changed his expression now to impatience. Tim shifted his not inconsiderable bulk from under the table and was confronted with a you're-not-clever-enough-to-be-interesting stare from him.

My fellow pupils changed as they grew up, sometimes with a rapidity that was alarming. Edward a quiet, plump, shy boy, from the first to fifth years suddenly emerged into the sixth form like a butterfly from its staid chrysalis. His personality and outlook on life had completely changed. Perhaps triggered by emergence of facial hair giving him confidence to think he was becoming a man, increasing assurance in his emerging personality.

'Morning Mark, dear chap,' he said, strutting past, popping out his monocle as a greeting gesture and deliberately opening his blazer to display a gold pocket-watch and chain smartly decorating his waistcoat. He took to referring himself with a double-barrelled name, his surname hyphenated and suffixed with his Christian name. He attracted his own group of friends, which bolstered his new found self confidence. A loop of positive confidence feedback.

That yogic sitter, Tim, also changed on entering the sixth form. He wore his hair longer and grew sideburns. He had become quiet and philosophical about life.

None of us guessed his inner turmoil as we would soon discover.

## 11 Primary School

'Yee-haa!' said Dermi, as gravity accelerated our bus down Central Hill towards our old primary school, St. Paul's, cradled in the small urban valley like a swaddled infant. From my elevated position I could see across Norwood

Park up towards the swings and the Threepenny Bit tree where we were yesterday.

Thinking back on that record, Fandango, I was glad Cohen was impressed with it, even after the first hearing. Having a quantitative brain I examined a hypothesis to explain why liking something first time wasn't necessarily a testament to its quality. I opened the discussion to my brothers.

I explained that normally you have to put something in, to get something out. Like something instantly and it will become instantly forgettable. A sort of principle here, like conservation of intellectual quality. A relatively small effort is required to produce an instant pop song and a small effort is required to like it instantly. But it is instantly forgotten. However it takes more effort to write a symphony, and it will take more effort to appreciate its complex themes, subtleties and nuances. A much slower process.

Instant something yields instant nothing.

I could formulate a set of cerebral equations; 'thought mechanics'. Thought power is the cognitive equivalent to mechanical power, leading to a mathematical expression for thought energy - a product of thought power and its duration of application. A bright mind thinking for a long time to produce a symphony equates to much expended thought energy.

It is therefore possible to quantify human achievement. Something good has higher quality, it is computed to contain a higher level of thought energy. Quality can be quantified. No longer abstract.

'What d'ya think of my hypothesis, Dermi?'

He crunched up his face in disapproval, 'You can't shag it.'

A row of horse chestnut trees stood to attention at the end of the school playground like mossy bearskin caps. I remember when I was no more than seven, standing under those trees, a musty smell of autumn filling the damp air, and looking between them across Norwood Park towards home, yearning to be with mum. I cried.

During morning prayers before milk break also. As the class stood up to say prayers I sensed an untrue scene of mum sailing away to Northern Ireland and leaving me. Her honey-coloured hair wrapped in a head scarf, strands streaming across her face, looking back across the sea between blue sky and foaming white wake towards the

horizon of England, and me. She hadn't even said goodbye. Too much to bear. I burst into tears. The teacher led me to the back of the class to sit quietly in the corner and sup milk through a waxed drinking straw piling it under my fingernail for comfort.

Looking down on St. Paul's now it seemed so small. The plan of the buildings have changed. They were more centralised. The older classrooms which had been at the far side of the playground had been knocked down and replaced with newer ones within the central hub of buildings. For security reasons maybe. That was a bit of a depressing thought, having to think about security for little kids. Anyway, I didn't know whether that was the reason so I didn't want to depress myself unnecessarily with the thought.

I played football in that playground, using a tennis ball. Other classes also had games at the same time in imaginary criss-crossing pitches. I dribbled past kids who weren't even in my game. I got a tennis ball in the eye once. It stung like crazy. I couldn't see out that eye for the whole afternoon.

The noise of the bus changed as it slipped into a lower gear to pull our weight up Crown Dale towards Crown Point and my grammar school St. John's.

## **12 Sixth Form Disco**

The main event of the sixth form was the Christmas disco.

The venue, the first floor of the school hall also housed on the ground floor the library and chemistry labs. St. John's was an all-boys school, but word soon spread of the event to the associated all-girls' grammar schools within the area via sisters and advertising posters. Ladies were expected from Coloma and Virgo Fidelis – hopefully not too faithful!

I didn't have money for casual clothes so it was a problem to dress smartly. In the end I plumped for my only pair of blue jeans, a blue Ben Sherman shirt, a green baggy tank top and, to top it off, a silky red cravat with dapples of grey.

I looked as appealing as a hippo wallowing in a mud pool chez cravat.

I was just interested in getting hammered, so I could become that other person. These times were exciting; the

dawn of the addiction. The transformed character. He acted differently to me. He wasn't shy and scared.

Jonjo came into my room looking neat with his 'social' shirt on. 'You ready to go?'

I listened to Z Z Top loud on a cheap music-center swigging a bottle of special brew, trying to get into the mood despite the distorted, tinny strains of the music. 'Go where?'

Jonjo eyed my bottle. 'The disco.'

'Hang on. You're not going. It's only for sixth formers.'

'Come on,' said Jonjo, grabbing the bottle and slurping quickly: 'It'll be fun.'

'Oi!' my hand followed the bottle. 'Well...okay,' I surrendered: 'You might as well finish it off.'

Being older and now having more privacy at home, with our own rooms, Shamus and Maggie having left, we started to enjoy each other's company socially. A couple of years earlier this wasn't so. Then we would rigidly stick to our own circle of friends.

I sank a couple of bottles was losing my inhibition. The emergence of the boisterous, jokingly abusive other person.

We traipsed across Norwood Park in the dark following the sparsely lit path. At the top of the hill, just after the swings, I could see St. John's on the horizon; its tall frontage reflecting the orange streetlights. It felt different walking through the park a bit tipsy. Normally I would feel apprehensive about going to school. Not now though. I felt thrilled to go and see my school mates as a different person; a confident one.

Shrouded by the dark, I felt curious whether Jonjo and his friends had arranged to see any girls, but I didn't want to ask him outright. Jonjo and his group of fifth formers were more sociable than me, and I had noticed them a few times talking to a group of Fidelis' girls at the bus stop outside school. I was more 'square' than Jonjo and never got into that sort of hip group. I was embarrassed to talk about girls. Being tipsy now helped though.

I hedged the question. 'Are you...err...meeting any one up there?'

Jonjo thought for a bit. 'Maybe just Neil.'

I was disappointed.

Imposing curlicue gates greeted us and muffled music drifted from the hall across the playing field. If music be the food of love; I'll have a side-order of onion rings.



Across the green darkness I saw coloured lights flashing in sequence through the partially opened red drapes. Smaller white lights from a mirrored globe traversed the ceiling. I was tipsily excited at meeting people. I caught a waft of my own Brut shampoo. Silhouetted figures milled around the plate-glass entrance.

We climbed the marble-effect stairs to the muted thudding music - a sophisticated beat of Roxy Music's Love is the Drug.

*I was transferred into an imaginary world of Bryan Ferry, elegantly ascending the stairs, oozing suave charm. Women couldn't control themselves. Over to my right I saw an attractive blonde looking at me. She coyly dipped her eyes - she didn't want to appear too easy. Talking to her was a chic leggy brunette, her seductive gestures forced me to catch her eye. Returning her salacious glance I provocatively adjusted my cravat; a wild, erotic opening gambit in the intellectual foreplay. With seeming indifference for her reputation she sashayed towards me, deliberately filtering her frisette backwards through fingers in a mock attempt at removing it from her gaze. This lascivious creature moved her pouting lips towards my ear moistly pleading: 'Whisper sweet cosmology to me.'*

I snapped out of my delusion to face the harsh reality of my baboon-image reflected in the unsporting plate-glass window at the head of the stairs.

Jonjo saw my reflection and smirked: 'You look like a dog-turd on legs.'

Tim was alone at the top of the stairs engrossed in thought, self-consciously looking out the window towards the school gates, like he was waiting for someone. Seeing my reflection he turned around and seemed genuinely pleased to see me and idled over for a chat, trying not to appear too keen.

'Hi ya, Mark,' he smiled. He darted his eyes sideways: 'It's a bit empty in there at the moment.'

My hyped-up brain wasn't in tune with Tim's quiet voice and sincere manner. I wanted to seek out more exciting action. 'Is it?' I said abruptly braking off the conversation: 'See you later.'

The glass panels of the swing doors were adorned with posters, blocking the view into the hall. I grabbed the curved metal handle: 'What a tosser, he's some of that,' and gesticulated with a jerking wrist.

Jonjo was surprised at my liberally abusive behaviour,

treating a colleague with contempt. But I was showing how tough I was, how I didn't really care about people. Smart to be sassy. But hey, this wasn't really me, it was that other guy.

That Monday at school we heard Tim was found dead at the bottom of a multi-storey car park - a teenage suicide. I was shocked and saddened, particularly because of my off-hand encounter with him that Saturday.

If only I had said something kind, something worthwhile, given him hope or something to cling onto. I shuddered thinking he may have saw me unfairly criticising him.

A vigorous debate in the local press followed about exam pressure. Tim surely would have laughed at himself ten years later for feeling so intensely about undoubtedly trivial matters. But this was no good to him now.

*Think about your life, friends, feelings and hopes. Everything that makes you what you are. Imagine it can be encompassed into a single coin. Go through life holding that coin at arm's length, putting it into perspective with the universe around it. Don't hold it too close though...*

### 13 Crown Dale

Our bus slowed up the hill towards Crown Point, past St. Paul's.

*"...or you'll never see anything else."*

'Shove your crap philosophy up your ass, Mark,' said Dermi, flicking ash at me.

An elderly lady was waiting at the bus stop. She had a headscarf; not that it was cold really. She fiddled inside her handbag as the bus halted. Some muffled conversation as she took her place on the bottom deck and then more voices and cackling laughter. These old people like to have a good time.

They are the only people on buses at this time of day - old people on the bottom deck. The top deck is empty - apart from us now. But in the evening it is the other way around. The bottom deck is empty and the top deck is full of boisterous young people; mainly jobs or drunks.

Soon there'll be no more old people left to occupy the lower decks. That older generation can't drive. A unique moment in history. The last generation not to be dependent on cars. This moment should be captured on

film and stored in an archive - old people on buses and not driving.

## 14 A Brief History of Africa

Things between Dad and us became worse when we were teenagers. Me, then seventeen, felt I had to apologise to friends for his behaviour.

I was in St. Luke's social club one Saturday night with Pete, Colin and John, trying to get tanked up on seventy pence. I wanted to get into the mood for Andy's party. Andy was Shamus's friend, but over the years I got to know him.

I was light-headed with the drink, when Dad stumbled into the busy club shortly after ten. His stumbling gait and bleary eyes showed he was well-cut. Somehow I sensed him entering the club before he actually appeared. My brain cleared and was put on alert. How I next felt depended on his state. Dad's drunken appearance made my heart beat faster with tension and a sinking feeling descended upon me.

What will he do now? How will he show me up?

Dad wasn't aware of my presence; however I was staring at him intensely from the far corner of the club, hidden by seated friends. Dad was well-known in the parish, attending the church for a long time and he belonged to The Knight's of St. Columba - a parish masonic lodge. Most people recognised him as being my father.

I watched him with irritation as, umbrella on arm, and thin hardback book under it, he unsteadily made his way to the bar, bumping into people sitting near the gangway.

I could see him saying something to one group and pointing at the book under his arm and laughing. With a pint of Guinness in hand and a Bell's chaser on the bar he surveyed his audience. In my distorted opinion he was annoying everyone within earshot.

Why did he bloody well have to come down here and ruin my evening? Why couldn't he have stayed at The King's Head for the last hour?

I thought Dad's actions were specifically designed to belittle me.

He collared Carlo at the bar, laughing, touching the book under his arm.

What the hell was he up to?

Carlo came over to chat and said almost apologetically: 'Your dad's on good form tonight.' I smiled pretending not to be too embarrassed.

Dad, the prima-donna, not at centre-stage downed his scotch and wandered, Guinness in hand.

Father MacTrass appeared at the side-door leading from his study; he was making his customary pre-closing round. Dad was near him, but they didn't see each other. Damn! Their paths intersect near my table.

I heard him. 'Look! A Brief History of Africa,' he said to the priest as he produced the book from under his arm opening the title page laughing to himself: 'It has to be brief, look how thin it is!'

Not particularly funny but for him worth repeating ad nauseam.

For god's sake let the priest go.

The priest smiled politely and slyly glanced at me with a courteous smile. I caught his eye and smiled back but doubted I hid my humiliation.

Maybe my friends thought it cool to have 'one of the lads' as your father. No matter what you have, you want something else. Had I been more objective I might have thought the same way, but I was only a kid.

The priest extricated himself with an assertive smile then Dad spotted me.

'Look, Mark, A Brief History of Africa.'

Feeling boxed-in I said abruptly: 'Very funny,' and stood to leave. 'Come on let's go to the party.'

Dad followed. 'Where you going?'

Irritation. 'Andy's got a party.'

'Good...I'm coming.' He invited himself without a thought for any one else.

'No you're not. Look at yourself! You can hardly walk.'

Why couldn't he appreciate my feelings? But in that state he could only think of himself.

My words emerged with anger. 'You've had enough booze. Just go home.'

He had already spoilt my evening, I didn't want him spoiling the party as well; taking center-stage, acting a bore in front of people half his age. Chronologically incongruous. I didn't want my friends to see him like that. I wanted him hidden; pretending everything was normal. He had his teenage years, so why couldn't he let me enjoy mine now? Anyway, Shamus and Maggie would not

appreciate seeing him. They would blame me for bringing him.

'I've got to tell them about the Brief History of Africa.' He held the book up as he followed.

I was losing patience but didn't want a scene in front of my mates. I pretended to be in control of myself.

The lads were caught in the middle; they didn't know what to say so they didn't say anything about this inverse-teenage syndrome.

I flicked up my trench coat lapels tilted my head forward and walked with determination. My mates caught up after a few forced strides. We walked in silence with the high cast-iron cemetery railings to the right.

A ghostly glow of white marble headstones reflecting streetlights; rows fading into darkness. Was this what I have to put up with before I joined these peaceful observers?

I turned around; Dad still following. Maddening. Dad knew where Andy's house was and would get there no matter how fast I walked ahead. I hated confrontation but had to turn around.

'Get lost will you. Go home,' I said in a stern voice, gently pushing him to make my intent clear.

Dad didn't say anything but, to my surprise, stared back with almost understanding eyes. I moved on and glanced around to see him moving unsteadily back home.

'He really pisses me off.'

But an annoying feeling of guilt then surfaced.

The next couple of days I saw him briefly late in the evening. He had been drinking but was unusually quiet. Brooding. Next night he came home well drunk. Shouting at me in the kitchen: 'You should have more respect.'

'You don't even have respect for yourself,' I snapped.

We tussled, but Dad was stronger than the seventeen-year-old. He ended up on top of me, left hand loosely around my throat, right arm cocked with clenched fist. I hoped he would hit me so I would have something tangible rather than just psychological to fight. But Dad wasn't like that really. He never hit us apart for the occasional 'clip' around the ear.

Generally he would just threaten; arm raised across his body, open hand near his cheek, about to play a backhand tennis shot. That was as far as it went. The shot hardly ever completed. At heart a gent with a bark worse than bite. A bark formed from his own battles with sober

timidity.

The sight of me on the floor waned his physical temper but not his emotional one: 'You shouldn't show me up in front of your friends,' he said taking the line out of my mouth.

## 15 Early Morning Revision

Clear blue sky domed a summer morning.

I walked across Norwood Park to school intent on early morning revision with Cohen. Serenity. A chilly breeze plied my form shedding off wakes of swirling vortices invisibly marking my existence. I walked towards the paddling pool surrounded by a sea of dewy grass. Tranquillity immersed in greenness, capped by pale blue.

Suddenly, a strange feeling. My imagination expanded - an out-of-mind rather than out-of-body experience. I became acutely aware of my surroundings. As if someone had given me spectacles for the first time, correcting unaware short-sightedness. Nature being brought into focus.

In this heightened state I sensed my exhaled water vapour gently sinking to the ground. A swishing noise of shoes sundering sodden grass. Awareness of the cyclical drama of my weight pulsating throughout my body pushing down on the ground and then reflected back by solidity underfoot. A sharp realisation of what I was actually stepping on. The Earth! A ball of rock eight thousand miles in diameter. A solid sphere moving along an invisible trajectory around the sun. I had taken this for granted. I was so used to walking around I had forgotten what I was walking on. I was treading on a sphere floating in space! Each time I stamped my foot down I deflected it a minuscule amount from its path around the Sun, gravity causing it to oscillate back. I involuntarily forced my feet onto the grass, stamping harder and harder to feel the Earth recoil. A surreal feeling.

Suddenly, these thoughts left, floating away to find a new home. Perhaps towards that man way over there by the railway embankment at the bottom of the park - the guy walking his dog. Would the thought enter his head? I didn't know how fast a thought travelled but, provided it wasn't deflected by the wind, it could be entering his head

about now. I looked for involuntary stamping actions. Nothing! But hang on, his dog seems to be stamping around!

## 16 Final Day at School

My final day at school. On that last walk home a strange feeling overcame me at the brow of Norwood Park. Compulsion! I stared at the Threepenny Bit tree and, for a spilt second, was uncertain why. Then a flood of recollection...I remembered...yes...that very first day. But a wave of gloominess then crashed at the crumbling rock of my ego as I realised I hardly felt any different now than way back then. What happened to my expected increased confidence? Simply getting older didn't make me become what I wanted when young. I was despondent. But I hoped I was still at an immature phase of my development. Maybe in ten years time, when I am properly grown up, I will then feel confident.

## 17 Uni

Mr. Merfat had stood at the front of an upper-sixth maths class at the beginning of Christmas term: 'I take it you're all going to university.'

A simple matter-of-fact statement.

I hadn't considered it. I was flattered at the implication of my ability but didn't think I was good enough. All the others in my class were obviously good enough, but not me.

I didn't have the maturity to think about my education. I just drifted along. At the end of the fifth year most people went into the sixth form, so did I, without thinking. The only consideration was what to study. Having dyslexia I found it hard to read books so grew to hate English, because of my nervousness at reading out aloud trying not to make mistakes.

I liked astronomy but didn't think maths and physics were relevant; how could these sciences be related to staring at the stars? But I was accepted at a London college.

And so, in time I stood admiring the impressive Corinthian portico of the university. The dome of a small

observatory in the foreground used a century ago within central London's dark night sky. A shell today. Testament to the city's light pollution.

With senses alert I walked the cloistered terrazzo approaching large glass swing doors to the college's northern access. You have to be careful. You've got to keep your eyes open. They could pounce on you at any moment, especially near this particular entrance. An experienced third year student had warned me during Fresher's week. They can catch you unawares, swoop down when you least expect it; two or three of them wearing you down, carrying you, the unwilling victim, off.

Oh no! I thought. What's that on the other side of the swing doors, skulking in the shadow of that oh-so-utilitarian display case of Jeremy Bentham? I averted my gaze and increased my pace. If I can just get around that corner to mingle in the postgraduate area I am sure I will be all right; safety in numbers.

But it was no good. They had singled me out; my youthful looks and apprehensive demeanour signified my status as a novice, and turned me into a victim. I didn't have the experience to avoid them. They had out-thought me. Two to my left herded me, corralling me towards the one waiting to pounce. It was too late to avoid the confrontation; the encounter was inevitable. I became their latest victim.

'Hello, why don't you come and help us with one of our experiments; we'll give you free coffee and biscuits,' was the enticement.

...Bloody psychology students! They get everywhere.

One of the enduring mysteries of the world is the abundance of psychology students. If that isn't bad enough the number of students reading psychology is growing rapidly with time. Is the study of human behaviour that fascinating? Where will it all end? Extrapolating this increasing trend, every available student would be studying psychology by the year 2050. Nothing else but psychology would be offered at university. Picture it. A whole university of psychology students, strutting with their clipboards. The trouble is, who do they now study? The coffee shop, of course, would be emptied of biscuits, yet there would be no one to entice into their laboratories. Mother Hen's clucking around, stocking their nests with supplies but fretting over the absence of chicks. They couldn't study themselves after all. That would invalidate



their experiments. Their training would bias the outcome of their experiments. Turning their microscopes upon themselves they would just see their own huge pupils. Scientific objectivity would be lost. So, as quickly as their numbers had grown, they would now face a catastrophic decline, becoming rapidly extinct, victims of their own success, wiped out by a meteorite of subjectivity. Modern age dinosaurs fossilised in intellectual sediment.

Oh god! My first lecture. Relativity! That boring 'man on a train' analogy, illustrated with someone's weird ideas of how clocks work.

I was deflated. Maybe I was on the wrong course; this was physics' rubbish. All I wanted to do was to look through the twenty-inch Radcliffe refractor telescope at the college's observatory in the outskirts of London.

Worse was to follow. Afternoon laboratory work. Calibrate a voltmeter! Oh no, this can't be happening to me! How tedious. Someone get me outta here quick!

I had been naïve. It dawned on me professional astronomy was based on maths and physics, and I couldn't remember any one telling me this.

## 18 A Square Peg

I met Gareth there. A Welshman from 'The Valleys' he proudly proclaimed.

He was short and stocky and occasionally his head seemed too large for his body when the backdrop didn't suit him. He had powerfully built thigh and rump muscles, useful for playing rugby he had said. This gave him an almost endomorphic appearance. He had a rich welsh accent and spoke in a low-pitched drawl, rolling words together.

His diction was not very clear to his Londoner colleagues. He was often asked to repeat himself, much to his chagrin.

'These bloody Englishmen, can't they understand anything?' He complained and looked towards me for support: 'It's not that difficult to understand me is it, Mark?' he pleaded.

'Yeah you're right, it is warm for the time of year.'

He was clear enough to me after becoming used to his accent.

Gareth was a bit of a square peg to humanity, not quite

fitting in socially or academically, but he didn't seem to mind. He was oblivious to it all.

'Gareth, how come you always seem to be ninety degrees out of phase with everyone else?' the uptight marine physics lecturer snapped one day after one of Gareth's many obtuse interruptions.

We had been studying turbidity of the oceans. Underneath this general heading the lecturer had scrawled on the green floppy blackboard, in barely legible chalk freehand, the following causes of turbidity: 'detritus' and 'faecal pellets'.

A bemused Gareth stuck his hand up and asked, genuinely, in slow, undulating tones, indicating his concern: 'What's a faecal pellet?'

One afternoon Gareth was using the library's photocopier on a scientific paper I had obtained from the *Astrophysics Journal*. Returning from the copier he sat beside me. I had a large learned volume opened out on the table in front of me, in the hope some information would miraculously transfer into my brain. Gareth slipped the paper underneath the book I was studying and then he opened a small book, *Stellar Atmospheres*, and placed it to his right, just outside his area of concentration.

Gareth fumbled underneath the table for his black briefcase, which didn't come easily to hand. Glancing under the table he surmised the bag was further away than he first thought so he brought his head closer to the table to improve his reach, occasionally glancing underneath for cross reference until eventually his right cheek touched the cold surface of the table, eyes looking along it. He felt in earnest for his bag, his fingertips scouring a corral of soft blue carpet enclosed by the swept radius of his outstretched arm.

Gareth was known for his quick temper which he was not self-consciousness about showing. Once he smashed his books down in a hushed lecture theatre to let his displeasure be known when a lecturer had unwittingly rubbed something off the blackboard before he had copied it - even though everyone else had finished long ago.

I watched Gareth from the corner of my eye. His breathing became laboured and his squarish head - a bulky shape magnified by his short hair - turned red. I sensed Gareth was about to explode.

'Damn it. Where's that bloody bag?' he blurted in a controlled shout, but loud enough to startle other students

studying there.

'Gareth, you really ought to be more phlegmatic,' I said quietly in a patronising voice, and he started to laugh. Gareth cooled off and appreciated the funny side of his lack of control over a triviality.

What Gareth didn't appreciate was that unbeknown to him every time he nearly grasped his bag I had moved it further away with my right foot.

'You should learn to relax. Chill out like me.' I preached mockingly. 'Be a scarecrow: observing life, but not letting it adversely affect you.'

Gareth smiled after waxing wroth, but didn't really understand what I was talking about.

Gareth settled down and removed from his case, which I obligingly kicked over to him, a lined pad of A4 paper and a sharpened soft-led pencil and placed them to the left of the open text book. He pulled out his stellar physics tutorial sheet due for submission soon. He grasped the too-often photocopied sheet in both hands and contemplated its three questions.

Time passed quietly.

'Mark,' he soon said in a semi-pleading tone: 'Have you done this tutorial yet?'

'No.'

'Do you want to do it now?'

'No!'

Gareth slammed the question sheet onto the table with a force that bounced his pencil up into the air. A neighbouring student darted a glance of irritation at us. Gareth muttered to himself showing his annoyance at my lack of co-operation.

I didn't want to be unhelpful. But I just liked doing things at my own pace. I found it hard to share thinking. I would lazily nod a lot and let the other person sort it out.

Now quiet, apart from Gareth's industrious page-flicking of the textbook, hoping for inspiration. The soft sound of a scribbling pencil, then silence. Gareth's breathing was becoming laboured again. He obviously found it hard to take my advice about chilling. He scratched at his head. Then made a tutting noise. Oh no!

He slammed down his pencil in frustration: 'These bloody Englishmen, why don't they ask some easy questions for a change?'

I noticed the scientific paper Gareth copied earlier must have been lying face down on the desk, since I could only

see blank bits of paper. I wondered though?

We returned to our work, Gareth with renewed vigour, from the confirmed knowledge that the subject matter was supposed to be challenging. Still, the thought about that scientific paper niggled me. After a while I could no longer resist the temptation, I just had to look at it. I stretched out my right arm, momentarily obstructing Gareth's view and peered under the corner of the nearest page. Just as I thought - it was blank! I quickly turned all the others over before Gareth moaned about me interrupting his space. They were all blank! Gareth had put the scientific paper upside down in the photocopier and hadn't bothered to check the negative fruits of his labour.

'Gareth,' I said slowly, stirring him up to an admonishment: 'Those photocopies you've done are useless?'

'What!' he said surprised, quickly moving his arm towards the paper to check.

'Damn!' He looked at me sheepishly.

'What an idiot!' I said slowly emphasising each word, in a mock condescending tone.

'Hold on a minute, maybe you did put the originals in correctly. The library might have been supplied with one of those new types of copier. Have you heard of it?'

'No.' Gareth said the word slowly, implying interest; his welsh accent made the word sound like 'gnaw'.

'A new generation of copier with the exceptional feature of turning your originals blank.'

Not quite getting it Gareth exclaimed: 'What's the bloody hell use of that!'

'No bloody use at all! Sheer, unadulterated uselessness.'

Laughter.

## 19 Relativity

I had endless prevarication over straightforward scientific questions. Doubting the doubt. An Archimedean spiral of doubt. Ratiocination. The doubt producing delay and adding to the burden of anxiety for when the paper is eventually submitted – of course not to my satisfaction – if only I had more time.

I found a phrase that bolstered my confidence.

'It's funny how the stupid are cocksure, yet the

intelligent full of doubt.'

It was rather precious of me, but now and again you have to blow your own trumpet, as Dad said: 'Someone's got to!' Then again it could be just my luck that the phrase was coined by some dumb-ox to account for his failings.

Einstein was intelligent and he did something with it. He was most famous for the theories of relativity; the Special and the General theories. In that first year at college I was confused by the German translation. Why Special? Was it special because it was extraordinary or because it was a sub-set of something else? Special-Case relativity would have made it clearer.

Dad introduced me to relativity when I was thirteen. I knew nothing about it, which put me only half a step behind him. Even though he Dad knew very little about these topics, no one was going to stop him thinking about them.

Returning from the pub in a good mood he faced me in the kitchen, pack of sausages in hand, and said: 'A man got on a train to see his friend. Now, was he going to see his friend or was his friend coming to see him?'

He stared at me with an amused look, watching my brain tick over. He plopped the sausages into the pan and they hissed.

I replied with a smile: 'Well, since *the* man got on the train and *his* friend is waiting for *him* at *his* house, therefore *the man* is going to see *him*!'

A sozzled smile lit his face while correcting me with self-appointed professorial assurance: 'No, you are wrong.'

'What do you mean I'm wrong?'

'It's relativity...relativity. You don't understand.' He repeated the word to convey the impression he had something extra to say on the topic.

No, I thought, it's relativity Dad, you don't understand.

He threw in the name Einstein to give perceived authority to his statements, but that anecdote was all he knew about relativity really. But he got good mileage out of it, repeating it over the years, mainly late in a beery evening.

## 20 Plastic Bag Factory

Along Crown Point a turning to the left leads to a side road

and a couple of small factories. They're not visible from the busy road where St. John's is situated. The factories snuggle incongruously into the corner of a residential crescent of detached houses with some having small carriage drives, and with mature trees dotted randomly giving the area a suburban feel. One of the factories repaired light machinery and the other was a plastic bag manufacturer.

I worked in one of these factories during a summer recess from college. I particularly remembered this because I could occasionally be naively arrogant enough to think I could change someone's outlook on life.

I lounged around Romany Rise that lazy summer browsing the local rag when I came across a job advert.

'Machine minder required in plastic bag factory.'

Underneath this main heading was the statement in smaller type: 'Must have experience at operating machines'.

I went for an interview and was guided through a small dishevelled shop floor. Six machines chomped away, cutting and sealing a continuous tube of polythene from a large roll at one end of the machine turning it into plastic bags boxed at the other end.

At the far end of the former stage-hall was an extruding station for the polythene tube occupying two levels. The lower one housed the hopper into which twenty-five kilogram sacks of plastic granules were continually loaded. The melted granules were extruded vertically and, by a series of rollers, wound into a roll of tubular plastic.

I entered the office portakabin in the backyard. The manager and assistant, joint owners of the operation, quizzed me.

'Why do you want to work in a plastic bag factory?' the manager asked, lifting his eyes up briefly before returning them to the bits of paper he was shuffling around on his desk. He almost broke into a smile, perhaps thinking it was a silly question.

This wasn't a proper interview, more of a case of weeding out any weirdoes - you know, the sort of people who, when no one's around, use karate on the twenty-five kilo sacks of polythene granules trying to burst them with one punch or even puncture them with a single peck of the Eagle Finger technique.

Ooops! That's me, I thought. So I'd better not let on.

I hadn't expected such a superficial question and was unprepared. I spluttered for an embarrassingly childish answer.

'Well, it seems like an exciting environment. What with all these fascinating, big machines chomping away at the plastic, it's really great.'

'Ummm...,' the manager uttered ruefully, rubbing his chin. 'I suppose that will do. You're in.'

'Ta' very much like,' I replied in a mock-northern accent taking a leaf out of Dermi's book.

What a boring job. It may not have been inherently boring, it was just that I found it so. The most exciting thing was to be selected to put out the rubbish on a Thursday morning. A real treat!

The job was humdrum but the people were funny. An uncomplicated and puerile humour, but sometimes belly-splitting.

Mike, one of the factory operatives, struck me as being unusual. He minded the machine next to me.

Every now and again, for no particular reason, he would shout out: 'Cancer!'

That was it. No build up. No sentence. Just that noun, delivered with his chin held high in the air, with lyrical annunciation. He would then happily continue with his work - the temporary haze of erudition having left him.

I slyly observed him collecting his plastic bags now as if nothing had just happened, moving with a normal demeanour as if the temporary fiend had been exorcised.

Initially I thought Mike shouted this out randomly. However, having not much else to occupy my mind, I felt I had established a singular pattern to it. Mike would only utter this nonsense every second working day, in the afternoon, after he visited the loo, on his way back from tea break. My hypothesis was strengthened with the passage of time, however any smugness I felt for this psychoanalysis was shattered on my last week.

As I collected the plastic bags at my machine and stuffed them into the waiting cardboard box, I noticed Mike out the corner of my eye suddenly bolt upright as if the tedium of his occupation had suddenly dawned on him. He stuck out his chest, looked straight-ahead and hollered, 'cancer of the left bollock!'

I crumbled as my hypothesis shattered. Why couldn't he have waited another week so I wouldn't have heard this new, embellished version.

I felt so down. I wouldn't now have time to establish a supposition. Doomed to be stuck in an analytical limbo.

The factory teatime conversation was tedious, the only topic on the menu being smut. However there was a free pool table and I became relatively proficient at the game. Of course I couldn't beat Mike, who had gained a certain reputation within the environs of south London.

Mike liked thrashing us, using one hand and still beating us leaving all seven balls up. However his ability at pool was not matched by his modesty or intellect.

'Whatsa use of all'at rubbish you study?' asked Mike during a pause in our game.

I worked my way around the table and replied in an improving factory accent: 'Well it's knowledge ain't it. This is how mankind progresses.'

Mike thought for a moment as he watched my pathetic shot. 'Yeah, but what use is it?'

He acted cockily as if I was the one missing the point of life: 'In this game you've gotta winner and loser; you don't af to explain fings.'

I sensed the radiation of Mike's arrogant, slobby aura and wondered hmmm...maybe. As he continued potting balls I put a proposition to him. 'I'm sure with a bit of imagination you could get interested in, say...mathematics.'

He was too busy wiping the floor with me to look up. 'Yeah, right! That load of ol' bollocks. The only fang I need to know ab'at sums is to work out what size tits she has,' he said pointing his cue towards the picture of a Page-Three girl which had been roughly torn from the newspaper and stuck onto the wall above the coffee table; the minimal use of torn rather than cut sellotape attested to the functional quickness of the procedure.

I had to think of something quick, ideally with some element of sexual connotation.

'How heavy are you?'

Mike seemed taken back: 'Why?' he said defensively, feeling uncomfortable at giving away personal information. He was on the flabby side and I thought I could detect a pained reminiscence in his face, perhaps of past memories of schoolboy taunting.

'Fourteen an' arf stone,' he asserted, after a bit of mental composing.

'Well let's see... ' I said and found a pencil and a scrap of paper. I muttered to myself. 'Fourteen and a half



stone...two hundred pounds...hmmm...humans similar density to water...I make your volume equivalent as ninety litres. Now how old are you?’

‘Fir-ee-two,’ he said as he leaned closer to the paper I was writing on, getting interested in the calculations.

‘Right. Assuming you have been sexually active for sixteen years,’ Mike’s ears pricked up at the mention of the word “sex”, ‘say, giving you the benefit of the doubt, three times a day, and looking at you that’s mainly with yourself, that’s about eighteen thousand times.’ I finished my scribbles and looked up at Mike eyeing me intently.

‘Right, Mike, the power of mathematics has established that you have ejaculated the equivalent of your own weight.’

His face brightened up: ‘Wow!’ he said, pleased with himself.

He turned towards the factory from the raised platform of our tea area and shouted to the rest of the operatives standing, not too attentively, at their machines: ‘Oi! Lads, spaceman ‘ere says I’ve cracked-off me own weight in jam.’

He stood facing them, proud of his computed achievement.

Did my belated exposition of mathematics alter Mike’s life?

Through the grapevine I heard Mike had progressed from being a machine minder to the dizzy heights of GBH and prison!

On hindsight, I shouldn’t have been too surprised, after all, the mathematics did demonstrate that Mike was a prize-winning wanker.

## 21 Covent Garden

Dad left the carpentry trade for an office job at the Greater London Council within the Historic Buildings Department at County Hall. He was a clerk of works to the renovations of some of central and south London’s historic buildings; Brompton Oratory, Crystal Palace, Syon Park and his last achievements, of which he wouldn’t let us forget, the re-building of Covent Garden and the refurbishment of Horniman Museum.

In my final year at college Dad invited me to witness the renovation of Covent Garden. I arrived on site and was

hard-hatted by ten. We surveyed the works from the vantage point of a portakabin perched on top of a row of three others like stacked multi-coloured bricks.

'See that old Irish boy over there,' Dad said with an already growing smile.

I adjusted my sight-line along Dad's outstretched arm. 'What, that guy down there, the one carrying the plank of wood?'

'Yes,' he said and broke out into a chesty, cross between a laugh and a giggle.

'He's always either going to or coming back from somewhere, he never actually does anything.'

Dad showed me around the site, the labourers and craftsmen acknowledging his presence with a smiling nod. His good-humoured nature and alcoholic fallibility gave him a better-than-average clerk of works-to-builder relationship. After the tour we returned to the portakabin for a cup of tea.

Dad was getting jittery, glancing at his watch. Supping the sugary portion at the bottom of the poorly stirred tea I realised the reason, it had gone eleven and the pub was beckoning.

The foreman entered and information exchanged. Dad's action of grabbing his black Crombie-style coat hastened the end of the makeshift conference and the foreman left. Half past eleven, trusty black umbrella at his side - he liked giving the impression of being a city gent, an Irish lad made good - we left for his local.

Given the choice his local would be a Young's pub; he liked the Irish ambience. Otherwise it had to be one frequented by middle-aged people in jackets and ties. No music or gaming machines, no pool or darts and no serving of food. It also had to offer room-temperature bottled Guinness.

Dad drank Guinness and I had ram-and-special.

We were the last ones to leave the afternoon session; the manager becoming annoyed at Dad's unwillingness to finish his drink more quickly. I drank the remains of my pint quickly, being more sensitive to the manager's plight at wanting to close up and get ready for the evening session. Dad seemed oblivious though. For me, I felt uncomfortable, not used to people thinking I was a waster.

Out of the darkened pub after a few beers into the bustling afternoon streets of central London weirded me out. I no longer felt part of what is going on around me.

Like viewing reality on a screen. I couldn't be phased by anything. I wanted to talk with strangers. My mind previously like a trapped bird in a cage now able to soar, gasping at freedom.

We sneaked back into the portakabin, refreshing ourselves with coffee. Half an hour later we were on the bus to Norwood and the familiar comforts of The Hope.

We got through London's traffic quicker than expected and so wiled away some time in the library, flicking through astronomy texts.

As Rory unbolted The Hope's door we were standing there. Half eleven that night we both staggered down the hall to the kitchen for a sausage and onion supper.

## 22 Clouds

At the end of the second year I returned home and soon found myself in the backyard hoping the clouds would disperse.

A thick blanket of stratus cloud hung around for days. The broken, fluffier cumulus would invariably disappear once the sun set, especially if they were blown from the south-west from the direction of Norwood Park.

I found out convective heating formed these clouds locally. Take the heat source of the sun away and they disperse. This battle with the clouds led to my interest in them.

## 23 In a Nutshell

The bus rumbled to a halt outside Larry's café-now-Indian Restaurant as the lights turn red on Crown Point.

'Yee-ha! Larry Cheesehead,' shouted Dermi.

'Shhh!' I said, feeling self-conscious about the few old passengers on the bottom deck.

'Wrap up you swot,' he replied. 'I've contributed to society by being a printer all these years while you ponced around at college so I have a right to be heard by society.'

'Very profound.'

Dermi belched into his hand, and threw it at me.

'You didn't even learn anything useful at college, while I was out working hard.'

'You martyr.'

'Well then, what did you learn that was useful to the common man. What's the bottom line?'

Oh well, I thought, just to tie things up for him – I explained astronomy in a nutshell to Dermi.

We are on this ball of rock, yet there are stars and an infinite amount of space out there. No one knows where it all came from. There are many ideas, sure, but still no one knows for certain...yet.

'Anyway,' I continued, 'the interesting thing is the observing. Studying the stars at college may have been a mistake. Perhaps it's best to leave it as a mystery and just enjoy the awe of the dark sky spectacle.'

'The skies are hardly dark in London are they. It would have been better had Dad stayed in Abbeyfeale. We'd have been right old country yokels then.'

'Yeah, that's true. But then again, there's a helluva lot of cloud on the West coast of Eire,' I added.

'I suppose it's bad enough the amount of cloud we get in London,' said Jonjo and puffed and exhaled a stream of cigarette smoke.

'Yeah, tell me about it. I used to have a mental battle with those clouds in the backyard at home. You know...will it clear up or won't it.'

'Where does all this poxy cloud come from anyway?' asked Dermi as he stubbed his cigarette out on the deck of the bus and turned to face me whilst smoothing his hair.

Clouds in a nutshell.

The Sun is hot. The Earth has a watery atmosphere, which is cold.

'Hang on a minute, expand a bit more,' asked Dermi, getting interested, the bus straining into life as the traffic light turned green and it lumbered across Crown Point like a heavy robot.

I pushed my stomach out and puffed up my cheeks and put on Harpo's gookie facial expressions, like the time when he discovered the stolen treasure in the lift shaft scene from A Night in Casablanca. I had the overall appearance of a bizarre, bloated donkey.

'Any good?' I blurted.

The Earth intercepts the Sun's heat. At maximum, the amount of solar power it captures per square metre is equivalent to one hundred bright light bulbs. The light that hits your living room floor weighs ten millionths of a pound. This captured energy heats up the Earth's surface which in turn heats up the air layer lying on top causing it

to expand, becoming less dense and rising. Luckily not all the air rises at the same time otherwise we would suffocate. Globally, warm air rises near the equator and is replaced by cooler, denser air rushing in from the poles. The rising air expands and cools. Cooling saturates then condenses the moisture it brought with it from the wet ground. Bingo! Cloud! The atmosphere is cold at the poles and warm at the equator but physics-nature-physics doesn't like this. The warm air moves from the hot equator northward, taking its cloud with it. To keep the whole thing in balance, the cold polar air moves south. The rotating Earth swirls this cloud into those giant whirlpool features on satellite pictures.

'Shut your neck, you swot, Mark,' Jonjo said, suddenly fed up with my blatherings, and proceeded to draw a boss-eyed sloth on the window condensation formed from his breath.

## 24 Mongolian Ambassador

I received a rare phone call from Dad.

I rented a room in a shared attic flat in Camberwell during my last year at college. It was cramped and the ceiling sloped so I had to duck to get into bed. The heat from the roof was conducted into the room so summer days were spent studying in sweltering conditions trying to keep an eye on the test match on my black and white Sinclair 1 inch microvision TV.

Funny me supporting England. I was born in London and didn't think of myself as half Irish. How quickly allegiances change. From being the enemy of my grandfather to becoming one of them, all within seventy years. That signified hope. After a couple of generations disparate communities could be stirred together. Eventually we will all be the same...Earthlings...but then we can start hating the Alpha Centaurians.

Watching cricket on the tiny screen required more concentration than my studies.

'It's for you, Mark,' Bill shouted up from the hallway downstairs. It was a nice feeling getting a phone call.

'Mark?'

I was surprised to hear Dad's voice.

'Oh, hello, Dad, what's up?'

It was strange for Dad to voluntarily use the phone. He

was normally against 'this bloody intrusive invention.'

He didn't bother with greetings but lunged straight in with: 'Do you want to see the Outer Mongolian ambassador?'

I chuckled and, prompted, Dad joined in. I hadn't seen Dad for months and then he comes out with this! Maybe it was just the words Outer Mongolia that made me laugh. Connotations of silliness.

'Mark, you're a zombie from Outer Mongolia,' Dermi often said when we were kids.

I listened to Dad while facing the tired lilac-coloured plastered walls of the hallway and an effusive smell of mildew. I was upbeat - any place must be better than this. 'Well Dad - the ambassador eh? Sounds like fun.'

Dad was pleased at my enthusiasm and fed me the information. 'He's opening the Mongolian cultural exhibition at The Horniman Museum next Wednesday.'

'Okay, where shall I meet you?' I asked rubbing my foot on the bottom of the wall, knocking off crumbling plaster onto the olive green carpet.

'Hmmm...I don't know really.'

'How about Crystal Palace somewhere?' I could get there easily enough by train from Denmark Hill.

'Err.....I'll meet you at The White Hart. You know the place? It's got a picture hanging outside of a white beast with huge fangs on it.'

'Antlers! Okay. What time.'

'Well...speeches and formalities are at two and the opening of the exhibition is scheduled for three...better make it eleven.'

Well I suppose it only gave us three hours to get into the mood.

Returning to my room, for the sheer hell of it, I booted the wall and plaster erupted onto the floor. A startled spider scurried across the carpet, picking its way through the displaced plaster. As I reached the head of the stairs my flat-mate Bill craned his head out of his room, eyebrows raised begging an explanation to the noise, but he didn't get any.

Ten past one. After a few drinks me and Dad walked along Crystal Palace Parade and boarded the bus for the short journey to Horniman's museum. The temptation to continue the session outweighed all other considerations and so Dad didn't even make the effort to get off the bus opposite the museum's ornate iron entrance.

'Where are we going?' I asked. Even though I wanted another drink I ostensibly had to be interested in the exhibition.

'Well it's a bit early...' was all he replied, shifting uneasily in his seat as the sentence fizzled out.

I looked at his watch. Fourteen minutes to two! Plenty of time.

## 25 Shamus' Fizzled Sentences

Shamus was also adept at producing these never-completed sentences. They were a light-hearted excuse to himself, knowing full-well what he intended, given the slightest encouragement. This back-up could be the situation as it unfolded; perhaps a winning streak at pool. It could be due to meeting an interesting person with a good line in conversation. Mainly, though, the encouragement would simply be the presence of a brother. Singly he may overcome the urge, but together there was only one possible outcome - the pub.

As if we were in the darkened room of life, full of stumbling blocks. We fumbled to recognise the position and size of each block, wondering how to manoeuvre around it and how any deflection would effect the direction of our lives. We groped for clues as to our whereabouts. However, for a brief time, while we were together, an amazing thing happened. My brothers the batteries for a torch of ideas flowing in a circuit of empathy; a beacon shedding light into the darkness. We were able to see life's obstacles and ways around them, gaining transitory insights as to the shape of life's room and our place within it...then we'd stumble and trip.

Jonjo had popped around in the morning to see Shamus. After fifteen minutes of chit-chat Shamus fizzled: 'I need a few bits of shopping...' and the kernel of an idea grew in his mind.

Along the High Road he slowed down, retarded by some invisible pub force field, and he moved his eyes to the ale-house opposite: 'I just want to pop over there for a minute to see...'

His slowly moving words meandered into a dried-up sentence, burdened by the weight of emotional silt, eroded from youthful emotions by the powerfully flowing river of non-caring mentors. His head bobbed around trying not to

listen to himself, fearful of a negative self-analysis.

So the willing partners, unrestrained by the bridles of responsibility, hit The Manor. Many hours later, after a lifetime of thought, they returned home, happy for a while.

## 26 Nearly Heard the Speech!

In the Dulwich pub, close to the museum, two pints came and went, so did three by three.

'We don't want to get there too early, we might actually hear some of the speeches!'

Dad punctuated ensuing smiles by repeating the last part of the sentence, pushing the laughter to resonance. Shades of Groucho admonishing the Hansom Cab driver for nearly getting him to the opera on time!

By half past three the speeches would be over and the wine would be flowing at the cultural exhibition. We laughed up the hill, Dad looking gent-like, long black umbrella perched midway up his arm, which was bent horizontally at the elbow.

'Where is Mongolia anyway?' I asked, trying to get into the cultural mood.

A bus whizzed past and a wispy flap of Dad's white hair gave chase. 'Well, if you're coming from Brixton to Norwood,' he started in a serious tone in his quick Eire accent: 'Instead of going straight to Crystal Palace, you hang a left and keep on going...for a few thousand miles.'

'They've got funny animals over there,' I said, the drink making me feel oblivious to everything but Dad at my side. 'One that looks like a hanged sheep.'

Dad breathed heavily, he was getting old. 'It's called a llama,' he explained using his umbrella to draw an air-picture. 'It's a queer looking beast with four legs, one in each bloody corner!'

We crept into the museum, me feeling like a naughty schoolboy. The attendants by the cloakroom stood proudly in newly pressed black uniforms and polished peaked caps.

'Make a note where you hang my coat,' said Dad to the attendant, handing over his tired looking black Crombie: 'I don't want the ambassador picking it up by mistake.'

Sneaked towards the main assembly room. Noise of clapping dying down. I clapped, looking around to catch people's eyes, exuding a beery confident air. Phew! We



nearly heard some of the speeches.

The Mongolian wines increased the dew point of my misting brain towards room temperature; however the ambassador did seem impressed by my geometrical analysis of the llama.

## 27 Magnetic Brain

The months at uni passed. The Manor played music to drum up customers and for a while was the 'In' place with a fairly young clientele on a Saturday night. Not a place Dad would frequent – an attraction in itself.

I swivelled to Dermi.

Dermi looked at me, pint poised for a quick slurp if preparation for an answer were required.

'Is the brain magnetic, and if so what's its flux density?' But he slackened my jaw as quick-as-a-flash he replied: 'Of course it is,' he gulped a couple of mouthfuls: 'I reckon males' brains are positive whereas females' are negative, that's why they attract. It's not a magnetic personality that gets you laid, but a magnetic brain.'

Shamus stacked the empty glasses. I took advantage of the extra space by pushing his pint around the table in a spiral, like an executive stress-relief toy.

Jonjo turned up. 'Oi, Jonjo! Over here mop-head.'

Jonjo swivelled his head and chinked his way over. 'All right,' he said with a smile.

'Just in time...it's your round. Three pints of lager my good man, and make it snappy,' I said in a snooty voice.

'I'll have three pints too,' mumbled Shamus.

'We've just done an experiment. Dermi got out his whirling hygrometer and found that lager is magnetic. This explains why we find women more attractive as we drink.'

'Enough of this madness, I'm going to the bar.'

'Yeah...and wash your neck while you're there.'

Later on I introduced them to my professor's weird idea.

'There is more energy in one cubic centimetre of vacuum than in the entire mass of the observable universe!' I stated and waited for a reaction.

Einstein equated mass and energy; they are equivalent. If you wind up your watch it has more energy and weighs more. To convert from mass to energy you have to multiply by a very large number. One kilogram of

water has untapped energy of a trillion joules, enough to make everyone on the planet a cup of tea. Just one kilogram of matter! How many trillions of kilograms of matter are there in the universe? The mind boggles when you try to comprehend the equivalent energy of all this matter. How is it possible then one cubic centimetre of vacuum, which is 'nothing' after all, can possibly have more energy than this? A ridiculous proposition. Scientists come up with weird ideas, but this one surely takes the biscuit for prize-winning absurdity.

My brothers grimaced, and waited for me to comment.

Dermi threw a cigarette to Jonjo who tried to catch it in his mouth, but a hopeless attempt rebounding off his cheek and plopped into spilt lager on the table.

'You twat!' But then smiled and looked at me.

A bit unsatisfactory to me, but I guessed the prof was talking about the foaming sea of virtual energy. This concept is a consequence of another quirky idea. For it is not necessarily a bad thing to be uncertain in science. There is a famous precedent wrapping this idea into a principle. Heisenberg formulated this foible of quantum mechanics in the early part of our century.

The professor was alluding to Heisenberg. His uncertainty principle leads to the idea an almost infinite amount of virtual energy can suddenly appear from the vacuum. However there is a draw back, it is only allowed to exist for an infinitesimal period of time!

This virtual or vacuum energy density is important for cosmologists figuring out the origin and evolution of the universe. It is related to what Einstein called 'his biggest blunder', the cosmological constant -  $\Lambda$ , lambda. This gives the vacuum i.e. space, an inherent expansion. The origin of the universe, the Big Bang, was an expansion not an explosion. But unlike the quantum physicists, the cosmologists think lambda is tiny, not large. Who knows? The vacuum energy could be near zero or it could be near infinite. I preferred it to be the number 137, the number of the bus running between Streatham and Crystal Palace.

My brothers seemed to be listening intently; after all it was quiet in the pub with no women to distract us.

'It's champion garbage,' Dermi deduced in a northern-accent, concluding his analysis by flicking hot cigarette ash towards me. It floated onto my jeans, a glowing orange centre bursting on impact. I swished it off my leg.

Dermi shifted to attention with some urgency, leaning

forward and saying quietly: 'Look at the frontage on that!' He averted his gaze towards a teetering shape entering the bar. I looked up but could only now see her back swaying through supporting a cantilevered load.

So we forgot about quantum mechanics and had another drink.

## 28 Flunked Out

The bus moved along the water meadow behind St. John's, where Shamus flunked out. Pity that, I thought. Shamus had intelligence but maybe not something else. Not quite sure what that something else was. Maturity, or will power, or self-discipline or concentration. The word encompassed all these things.

I stared across the raised meadow towards the old art block. I could see the school hall where the Christmas discos were held. Poor Tim.

Perhaps, I thought, the word was temperament. Yeah, that was the word. Shamus thought intelligence was the most important human attribute, but I was not so sure. A good temperament is a precious thing. Key to a normal, stable life. Intelligence without proper temperament is dangerous. A curse, not a blessing. Intelligent people with poor temperaments become the drop outs; the tortured artists, the asylum patients, the suicide victims. Intelligence is not worth having under these circumstances. Better a calm, satisfied plumber or something. Not that plumbers aren't intelligent. Einstein would have liked to have been one. Anyway, I didn't want to be drawn into all that.

Shamus shuffled around in his seat getting comfortable. The seat bowed as he slouched back.

'Oi, Shamus, what's the fastest bird?'

He shook his head slowly and I sensed a smile. It was all too easy. He puffed out smoke. Steam from his mind engine.

'Horizontal flight: a swift at 120 miles per hour. Diving, a peregrine falcon can reach 220 miles an hour.' He turned his face in profile. 'Now don't waste my time,' he said in an easy-rider drawl.

'All right then, who's the biggest lard-arse on the bus. I'll even give you a clue. His name is a double 's' bacon sandwich and he's as bent as a meathook.'

Shamus' shoulders jiggled up and down in a silent laugh.

I could see the trees at the top of Streatham Common. No-one walking in the woods. These woods are ignored. A hinterland of a hundred thousand people, yet only a fraction use it; mainly as a dog loo. Something wrong. No kids climbing the trees – too busy playing computer games.

'Give it a rest, Mark, you old grouch,' said Dermi.

## 29 Mum's Gone

Not dead. Just gone!

When Dermi left school to become an apprentice printer mum then left Dad.

'Dermi, are you coming to Streatham?' she asked in an unusually direct way.

Leaving her husband seemed matter-of-fact. The obvious thing to do, once Dermi, the youngest, had started work.

'Where are we going to stay?' asked Dermi. He also had had enough of his dad's bachelor-like behaviour.

'Maggie's friend is renting a flat.'

'Okay.'

So mum who dutifully stayed at home until Dermi finished school left with him and Jonjo the art student. Psychologically driven out. They were glad to leave.

'Him and that stupid drink,' mum said as she shut the front door of her home forever and left without saying goodbye to Dad who was down the pub. His increasingly alcohol-dependent life lost him his wife and job in the space of a year.

His behaviour had deteriorated way back on changing jobs from a carpenter to a clerk-of-works in the Greater London Council (GLC) at County Hall.

He thought it was a career change for the right reason - a steady job - but joining the GLC was the horizontal turning point in his life. He was now on a downward slope. As his time in this job increased, his interaction with his family decreased and his drinking increased. Because he was unhappy. Office life wasn't for him. Intellectually he could cope but he couldn't cope with office politics. His rich Eire accent and quick speech, coupled with his shyness when sober, gave him a phobia of using the phone. He

didn't like himself for this - the worst person not to like - self-esteem took a nosedive.

Dad preferred his transformed personality in the pub. He felt freer, confident: his mind able to wander unashamed. If it wasn't for the associated depression the pub might even have been therapeutic. However he was now driving down life's slope without a foot-brake; only the hand-brake of humour and observation able to feebly slow his descent, a decline increasingly difficult to control - the inevitable brick wall looming.

But if his persona were fashioned into a mirror, we could worryingly recognise dim and distorted reflections of ourselves. The mirror most polished for Shamus.

Dad hung on at the GLC for sixteen years before redundancy. Discarded by family and employer; both had had enough. Even Dad had had enough of himself. Now left in solitude, sharing an empty house with sentimental echoes of his laughing children.

I was suspicious of Dad's motives for not wanting to remain a carpenter. I thought Dad changed jobs because he wanted to proudly proclaim at the parent-teacher association meetings, to middle-class teachers, he was a clerk-of-works at County Hall. An office worker. Not a labourer, earning a living from his muscles. His brain would be doing the work. This boosted his ego. This was important, coming from an Irish farm labouring background. He had made it. From the backwaters of Ireland to an office job in London. He wouldn't have to admit to being a carpenter, as if this were somehow a lower occupation.

He paid a high price for misguided ego; himself and his family. A Pyrrhic victory. He should have done what he was happiest doing. He shouldn't have bothered to wear the mask. No-one liked him with it on; eventually, not even himself.

He was satisfied to leave the job at first; redundancy money cushioned the blow. However, booze, gambling and a trip back to his roots in Ireland frittered it away. Materialistically, they were the best years he had had in his life, but it didn't mean a thing. He was alone.

When he had money, people around him benefited; buying drinks, or giving kids on the playground opposite a box of crisps. When happy he wanted others to be happy. Sodden with alcohol he exhibited spontaneous acts of kindness.

As a kid I remembered him coming home with shoulders rounded and hands in his jacket pockets cradled something.

'What's that?' I asked, peering into the cradle.

Something nestling in the newspaper moved as I probed it with a finger.

'I found it in the street,' he said, not particularly concerned.

I could see bristles. 'A hedgehog!' I smiled in surprise.

'It was lost,' he explained with a beery smile.

With his general joy of life and humour he deserved a better deal. But no one is going to give it to you. Fatalism isn't good enough. You have to make things happen for yourself.

But he couldn't. He was just a country-boy shrouded in sensitive feelings; swaddling him in isolation.

### 30 Desert-Island Calendar

I finished college and felt a dutiful urge to visit him.

The brass knocker a too-loud clanking noise, announcing my presence to the twitching curtains. Dad peered around the edge of the door, like he was unreasonably careful. He was dressed in a charcoal-coloured suit. He had two suits, both the same colour. Threads were hanging out the cuff.

'Tut!' was the greeting as I followed him into the kitchen. 'The house is cold, Mark,' he said sadly.

It seemed bare. No longer comfy and familiar. A spartan kitchen; a single pot and frying pan on the stove and a plate, bowl and cutlery on the table; a sign of his subsistence living level. A row of matchboxes lined the back wall of the breakfast bar; an urban desert-island calendar. Although the house seemed to be descending into chaos, subsequent visits showed it didn't become untidier. His normal level of organisation.

The Venetian blinds made a familiar clatter as I opened the back door and saw my backyard unswept and abandoned. Sad seeing that old backyard rejected. On numerous occasions I had lain there, staring at the starry sky; comforting sounds of mum and the family drifting towards my blackness. A cosy ambience then; now just despondency.

Saying goodbye I shut out the sad situation. But Dad's

solitude gripped my brain, squeezing drops of tears.

### 31 Long Green Balloon

A long, green balloon stuck out from the door of mum's new flat; a spike of humour injected into the Xmas proceedings as the door swung shut.

I followed her into the living room where Dermi was using the sofa as a chaise longue, watching a war movie turning him temporarily into a culturally acceptable psychopath with no empathy for the willing slaughter of enemy soldiers. He cranked his head to acknowledge me with a smile. 'Heyyy, Charlie Cheesehead!'

'All right,' I said squeezing between the sofa and coffee-table. Cramped, I tried to move the coffee-table with my right foot, but it wouldn't budge. I bent down and put both hands under its small lip, adjusting them for comfort for the ensuing effort. Off-balance, it took all my effort just to raise it slightly off the thin blue foam-backed carpet. 'What the hell's this table?'

Dermi returned his gaze to the television: 'Maggie made it and gave it to mum. One of her magazines showed her how to build it.'

'They recommended neutron star material?'

'Pass the nut-bucket while you're there,' said Dermi, snuggling horizontally.

'What the hell's a nut-bucket?' I asked, shifting my stance to ease the lowering of the excessively heavy table, then reached underneath to find, surprisingly, a bucket full of nuts.

Mum had an obsession with buying peanuts at Christmas; with the slightest whiff of holly in the air she would be off buying dozens of bags of salted nuts. She emptied them into a beige plastic bucket which normally resided under the kitchen sink awaiting a household emergency of the plumbing kind.

As I bent down my left leg was exposed too-close to Dermi's face. Suddenly, Dermi flicked a jab to the side of my leg. I collapsed onto my back, exaggeratingly rubbing my leg...and laughed.

'Yessss!' said Dermi, breaking into a laugh, triumphantly gesturing with a raised hand and with a clacking sound of little finger against fleshy palm.

Dermi didn't hit me that hard and I wasn't in that much

pain; just ritualistic behaviour. Unable to say we were pleased to see each other we went through this form of physical contact.

From a prone position I jerked upright and lashed out a haymaker, but Dermi sussed me and went for the Sicilian suicide defence; protecting his dead-leg area with knuckles. Too-late I saw this tactic. Knuckles clashed and we were both now in pain.

We sat silently, finding it hard to communicate unless to a hubbub of clinking glasses.

Clomp. Clomp. Clomp. Heavy footsteps coming up the stairs. A squeak of the front door. More clomping-of-boots and chinking-of-buckles down the hall; a dragging noise of boot-on-carpet every fifth step; someone was carrying a heavy bag. Clomp, chink. Clomp, chink. Clomp, chink.

The living room door opened and there stood a mysterious figure in leathers and black motorcycle helmet...a bag in his right hand. I glanced at Dermi; synchronicity ruled. We dived towards him and simultaneously executed dead legs. The figure collapsed.

'We better get to the pub before we kill each other,' said the echoing voice of Jonjo painfully chuckling from within his helmet. He had returned from St. Martin's art college, studying graphic design.

## **32 Redshift on That!**

The Manor Arms back then the first time. Thirty yards from mum's flat. Our new local.

Turning from Babington Road onto busy Mitcham Lane we entered the saloon bar and smashed into early evening Stellas.

'Where's Shamus?' I asked, during a pause. 'I thought he was turning up.' Not that we were particularly keen to sample 'His' maturing pain-in-the-arse philosophy. But he was our brother after all, we had no choice but to like him - somebody had to - we thought it best to take on this onerous task rather than leave it to some poor unsuspecting person who might unwittingly become his friend.

'He's probably swimming from Whale-Land as we speak. Depends how often he has a plankton stop,' was Dermi's analysis.

An attractive girl in a red dress appeared from the



public bar. From flitting movements she was obviously looking for someone. Conscious of the eyes surveying her form she hurried in her search and whizzed out.

'Look at the redshift on that!' said Dermi.

Quiet.

Jonjo's face distorted. 'What's all this redshift garbage anyway?'

Although he ribbed me about science he was interested. He had stumbled into art - his hand forced by winning a Kellogg's Cornflakes art competition when a kid.

I stumbled for a sensible explanation. 'If you look at the rainbow of light from distant galaxies you find their constituent dark spectral lines have been shifted towards the red end. Shifted to red - redshifted - see.'

Jonjo quizzed. 'Well,' he paused, then asked impatiently, '...what causes this redshift then?'

He hunched forward looking stern.

'The speed of the galaxy away from us,' I replied without intimidation. 'This is called a recessional velocity. A simple relationship states increasing redshift means increasing recessional velocity.'

The pub was filling and became smokier

'Cosmologists say this describes an expanding universe. So it must be expanding from somewhere, that somewhere being the so-called Origin, and the expansion was caused by the Big Bang. The Big Bang is therefore the origin of life, the universe and everything.'

'Yeah, that's right,' nodded Dermi. 'You know Noel, my mate in the Palace Firm, "The Early Birds", he has a theory about this. He touched on it last week at the Millwall game, after giving a good shoeing to one of their supporters.' He dragged on his cigarette. 'By the way, he especially hates them Millwall fans, he thinks they're right plebs. He reckons half of them have never even read Hawking's "A Brief History of Time", and what's worse for him, the other half only pretend they have! He's caught them yobs out on a number of occasions, especially on the metric of the space-time continuum...they're notoriously weak on that.'

Dermi glanced to the left and we automatically followed his gaze. He shouted across towards the entrance: 'Whale ahoy!' and we saw Shamus with an embarrassed smile squeezing through the swing door - now he's not playing football any more he's getting obese. E-so-be not e-sob-er. His portly shape, alcohol-painted rouge complexion, greying hair and beard gave him the appearance of some sort of dipsomaniacal super-inflated gnome.

He sauntered across pleased to see us, although he wouldn't show it.

He cut an eccentric dash, wearing a long flowing beige trench coat over light green elephant-cord trousers – with emphasis on the elephant - a green and brown lumberjack shirt open at the neck displaying a small-shell necklace, acquired at the kibbutz, topped off by his favourite brown suede waist coat with a watch-and-chain in one pocket and roll-ups in the other. Appropriate to our conversation, the silver buttons on his anachronous stomach-bulging waist-coast looked like galaxies on an expanding universe. Not so much the Big-Bang more the Big-Whale. Black, leather, fingerless mitts rounded off his pastiche to beloved Easy Rider days. He was middle-aged yet still wouldn't conform.

He arrived from his flat in Brixton, the northern end of Streatham. He had a couple of days leave from his latest in a string of jobs as a casino dice dealer.

'You've still that poxy waistcoat and crappy watch and chain? What a twat.'

Undaunted Shamus continued toward us.

'What are the parameters of your meagre existence?'

He just smiled.

'I'll have a pint of Stella,' his first utterance to us in months; a request not aimed at any one in particular, more a lofted projectile hopefully caught by an empathetic mind.

'What you've been up to you old donkey?' I asked.

He fingered his waistcoat for tobacco and Rizla papers. No eye contact, uneasy at being the centre of attention whilst sober.

He gazed into the distance stretching his neck forward like a tortoise saying slowly: 'Working.' He slid the cigarette paper across his bottom lip.

'Same old verbose oracle Shamus.'

'Orca you mean.'

'Exactly!'

### 33 Flow of Ideas

A pause stretched into minutes.

Drinking. Not talking. Thinking.

For me, drinking and thinking also rhyme intellectually. Two parts of my brain normally separate. Scientific and artistic, deductive and intuitive, male and female: not meeting. Positive and negative terminals unconnected. No communication. Alcohol is the electrolyte. The brain's terminals are dipped into it. The circuit closes. A flow of ideas from plus to minus. The potential difference harmonised, left to right lobe. Melding detached thoughts. A current for insights. An electrifying cross-fertilisation.

The social atmosphere opened my skull. Captured thoughts escape, mingling with thoughts from other lives, feeding off each other, or escaping the Earth, into space...returning like so many salmon to our dusty ancestry.

I became aware of a strange feeling. This happened now and then. Coming to me as I stared at the drink-burdened table. A feeling like I had already lived my life. I was now just going through the motions second time around with a detached contempt for its familiarity; like recalling some long-ago film - familiar yet strange. You know it, yet you don't.

A strange sense of something past bubbling up, shadows of a previous existence. I was not a re-incarnation buff, but who knows? I didn't know whether I believed this sensation.

An impression of being a past hero; a watermark impregnating my current life. Shades of performing some notable deed at some unknown time. An assertive, courageous, virtuous gentleman once existed inside.

The occasional, unjustified comparison made it harder for me now...you see, in this life I am a coward. Not that I could pinpoint any particular act of cowardice; just that I had a phobia for physical or verbal conflict. Echoes of some past hero reverberating inside a cavernous shell of cowardice. The imbalance unsettling. How to reconcile such ambiguous feelings? In certain situations fleeting hints of the hero come to the fore, though now not strong enough to direct me. The coward wins - a typically spineless contest; reality out-manipulating valiant shadows projected from the hue of past eras.

'Actually Mark, I reckon you were a slug in a previous

life...a species not noted for its heroism,' said Jonjo with a grin.

'All right, all right,' and I grabbed my beer as reflex for comfort.

A meshing of familiarity with strangeness. I couldn't put my finger on it. A fleeting sense of something. Like the first minutes of a family reunion. We sit comfortably with each other, yet for a while there are unknown things between us. The best of friends, yet strangers. The hero...the coward.

### 34 'His' Philosophy

The saloon bar was crowded.

Most seats were taken. Scattered groups of people glued by conversation. Standing strategically placed in areas supporting drinks; the bar, mantelpiece or table edge. Air, thick with smoke at head height, irritating my eyes. My brothers, all smokers, seemed unaffected.

Shamus was out of his box now, obnoxious, ready to verbally steam-in at the slightest provocation. You could only get so far talking to him in this state before you came up against a mental shutter. 'His' goopy, half-baked, self-contradictory philosophy, rears its immature head; all-pervasive, thrashing around for acceptance. Frustrating trying to get through to him. Echoes of Dad.

'...i.e. no one is better than any one else,' said Shamus finishing one of his illogical-logical arguments using his stock expression 'i.e.' which he employed liberally, with emphasis.

Dermi looked him in the eye and smirked: 'You don't really believe that do you, Shamus?'

'I do! Everyone has their contribution to make,' he stressed with a louder voice, a voice people could think of as being somewhat aggressive: drinking made him go deaf.

Shamus got himself into situations like this having to defend something we didn't think he really believed.

Dermi mocked: 'That's all very noble, Shamus, but it's not really true is it?'

'It is!' he stressed, staring with manic intensity, hoping for a nod of approval; not that he needed it, he would stumble on blindly anyway.

I felt I could clearly catch him out on this point, at last

staking 'His' fatuous philosophy onto a spike, displaying it as a warning to potential devotees.

'Okay, say you were on a ship approaching a desert island onto which you were to be cast off, but you are allowed to choose either Einstein or a moron as a companion. Now, who would you choose? What does your philosophy say about that?'

But Shamus defended his position: 'I wouldn't choose.'

He could worm his way out of a black hole! Intransigence of giga-proportions. Had Shamus lived two thousand years ago within the environs of Jerusalem I was sure Christianity wouldn't exist today. Jesus may have forsaken everything for the intense, momentary pleasure of strangling Shamus.

'That's a cop out,' I said in irritation. 'Say, that you had to choose otherwise your family would be slaughtered.' Arguments always ended up with silly propositions.

Shamus paused for a moment, looked at our goading faces, then slithered: 'I'd put them on the island and I would stay on the ship.' An illuminating end to this chapter of 'His' philosophy.

'You twat, Shamus,' said Jonjo.

'Your gut is the island,' said Dermi.

'Yeah, Moby Dickhead island,' I concluded, darting up from my chair grabbing Shamus around the neck putting him into a walking headlock, and we crashed out through the pub door, cocooned in an aether of nonsense, unaware of nastiness in the world.

### 35 UFO

Our bus moved along the flat open parkland at the bottom of Streatham Common.

Dermi looked across to the grass. 'Oh yeah. I meant to ask you earlier, did you see the South London Press last week, Jonjo? Someone reported seeing a UFO here.'

Jonjo smirked. 'Yeah, I did. It was seen during the day as a small silvery disc high in the sky, wasn't it?'

Dermi looked at me for a scientific opinion. 'It was probably a plane,' I said disdainfully.

'No,' insisted Dermi: 'Two people who saw it reckon it was stationary for half an hour before shooting off fast, vertically.'

'Yeah, it was probably one of my mob, the Dogon clan,'

said Jonjo proudly. 'Maybe they're looking for me in Streatham.'

I tutted. 'It was a kite or something'

'That's crap. It was later seen by a lot of people in north London, where it was reported as being accompanied by smaller spherical crafts, hovering around and joining it to become part of the main ship.'

I tried to dismiss the whole thing. 'Look Jonjo, you just can't trust people's observations. They don't know what the hell they're looking at half the time. It might even have been a silvery weather balloon blown off course, or something.'

'Do you reckon there's other life in the universe?' asked Dermi.

'Bound to be, astronomers have detected planets around the nearest stars. And because there are ten thousand million million million stars in the observable universe there is bound to be life out there. It's an impossibility for there not to be.'

I gazed across the common into the blue horizon. 'They detect the gravitational tug on the star by its planets. This causes a wobble in the star's position against the fixed starry background. The wobble is caused by the star and its planetary system moving around a common centre of gravity.'

Looking for a planet directly is like looking for a grain of salt next to a bright light bulb from the other side of the house. In our own solar system the massive planet Jupiter wobbles our Sun with a period of twelve years - the time it takes the Sun to orbit the centre of mass of the Solar System. Wobbles are almost undetectable even for the nearest star to us Alpha Centauri. At this distance of 1.33 parsecs our Jupiter is a thousand-millionth as bright as the Sun which has an angular wobble on the thousandths of an arc-second scale. This is hardly anything at all. Hardly more than the error of measuring these sorts of things. This wobble is the size of a penny held at a distance of a thousand miles.

Although tiny, it is just within the latest measuring techniques of astrometry. So astronomers can just detect planets orbiting the nearest stars.

'Shamus must be causing our Sun to wobble enormously from the huge gravitational pull of his gut,' said Dermi. 'We could be seen as a beacon of planetary life across the galaxy. No wonder all the aliens come and visit

us. It's down to Shamus's gut'

'Exactly!' mumbled Shamus.

I squinted through the sunny window, opaque by grime-scattered brilliance. Hard imagining our Sun wobbling away in our galaxy. A stellar greeting.

'Most of the nearest stars have wobbles, so astronomers can deduce they have planets.'

'Anyway, that's probably how life got started here,' said Jonjo, referring obliquely to some point, while lighting up. Clunk: 'It was seeded by visiting aliens in prehistory.'

'Yeah, it was Shamus' pants that started it all off. With all that microbial life on those skid marks,' laughed Dermi. 'That's where you got your pants from Shamus, wasn't it? Alien garbage you dug up, fossilised, from your garden. Four billion years old when you found them, and yet you still haven't washed them!'

Shamus looked out the window unconcerned.

The bus turned right at the traffic lights and headed along Streatham High Road towards The Manor. We were nearly home.

### **36 Be Great!**

Dad was full of sayings which from familiarity and the radiance of his good mood in telling them, often brought smiles to our faces.

'Me thinks.'

'Confucius say.'

And the ubiquitous phrase for any situation whether a discussion, argument, humorous interchange of ideas, anger, or his frustration at our behaviour or rebelliousness. At any hiatus we knew what was coming. No matter the topic he shrouded it in two words; a hackneyed dénouement. Two words never changing, intonation only adapted for the situation. Simplicity itself. A phrase for all seasons.

'Be Great!'

As unhappiness and boozing increased his stock phrases and repeated anecdotes took more hold of his conversation. A contributing factor had been his work which, I thought, couldn't have been that bad. Most of the time he seemed to enjoy what he was doing. Only one or two requirements spoilt it. In certain respects the job suited him. Out of the office most of the time, arranging

his timetable for visiting historic buildings, he had scope for filling in the odd hour or so at his favourite houses, the public ones.

### 37 Strategic Word Processing

Not long ago now I visited Dad, determined to straighten up the place. I arrived with a broom, mop and Brillo pads.

That old metal knocker reverberated loudly again.

The door opened and Dad squinted into the daylight through a cautious gap like staring at a robber.

'All right.'

He sighed. 'Ohhh...not too good.'

'What's up?' I asked, following him into the small kitchen.

Dad parted the venetian blinds and looked into the backyard. 'Nuffink,' he said, deliberately getting the word wrong.

When we were young he made us smile with his irish-cockney-ese. 'I am the greatest. You know nuffink.'

But now he didn't say this in a humorous way and I didn't feel like smiling.

'I'll clean up a bit.'

There was gentle disapproval. 'Awww, Mark. Leave it, leave it.'

'Well, just a bit a sweeping then.'

Dad didn't say much else and but just sat in the front room scrutinising The Racing Post.

At midday while scrubbing the floor I saw him leaving in his black Crombie and long black umbrella perched midway on his arm. He craned his neck outside and said hedgingly like an aspiring city gent: 'This bally weather.' He didn't look back at me as he closed the door, silly knocker clanging all over the place.

Looking down at the lathered floor I felt naffed off. Pub time and Dad hadn't even bothered to say goodbye, never mind asking me to go with him. I realised Dad didn't really want me there. He wanted the house the way it was; a wallowing hole for sentimentality. He didn't want an injection of reality from my presence. He wanted us around when it suited him like on the occasional lonely evening back from the pub.

In Dad's remaining years it was felt he didn't want us back at home. But we weren't sure and appeasement for



guilt about leaving him alone subconsciously turned us into his victims – how lonely was he? He wasn't that bad? It's our fault for not getting along with him? We should have been more understanding? Maybe help him out of alcoholism?

His share of selling the family home provided him a timely cash injection which kept him in a good lifestyle for his few remaining years. Mum split her share with us.

We didn't begrudge Dad spending all his money on himself - if it kept him happy for a while longer why not?

He moved into a rented flat in nearby Gipsy Road, sharing it with two Irishmen of similar downward fortunes.

A room on the ground floor of a dingy-but-clean, end-terrace, sixties-style council house, with paint peeling from the metal window frames. It felt cold from draughty windows and lack of central heating, a feeling enhanced by shiny lino rather than carpet.

A dark wooden table was centrepiece of the communal living room, covered with a cream linen tablecloth. An occluding black piano shadowed the small room. A picture of the pope on the main wall next to a black rosary hanging limply, held by an unsympathetically large nail. A plastic blue and silver statuette of the Virgin Mary stood on top of the veneered television. The gloomy reverence of the room like a shrine.

His flat was the last place I would look for him. The most likely haunt was 'His' corner of The Hope. Then the library. Or maybe moping around the church, reading last week's bulletin. Or in The Queen's Arms or lolling around the cemetery contemplating life, perhaps sitting on the bench near his final resting place.

He might be in The Gipsy Queen near his flat. If I turned up a blank on these places only then would I try his flat. He didn't have a phone - a far too complicated device.

I usually found him in The Hope. As soon as I entered the pub my eyes darted across the bar and I was pleased to see that beacon of white hair in 'His' corner.

In those last years Dad was genuinely pleased to see me, greeting me with a glow in his eye and shaking my hand firmly like some long lost friend. Solitude was getting to him.

He had already sunk a few: 'Awww...Mark,' he said slowly looking me up and down, lapping up my presence.

The present coagulated from the past: 'Look!' he said excitedly, darting a hand into his bulging jacket pocket. He pulled out a business card with distinctive blue letters on a silver background announcing the title 'Strategic Word Processing'. Underneath were his name, address and a telephone number. I stared at the card trying to fathom its meaning whilst listening to his explanation.

'Strategic Word Processing,' Dad said smiling.

He moved beside me and bent slightly forward so our heads were close and both looking at the card.

He continued his explanation: 'Strategic...' he emphasised whilst underlining the word on the card with his finger and looking at me for recognition: '...Word Processing. Get it? Strategic Word Processing.'

Confusion reigned: 'Err...what's it all about, are you...going into business or something?'

'Strategic Word Processing,' he replied, touching the card and moved in front of me, staring with a grin.

'You're going into business then?' I asked, trying to establish some sort of fatigued logic to it all.

'Word processing is the thing these days.'

Confused still, I looked at him. 'But, Dad, you haven't got a phone.'

'...but it looks good on the card, though.'

'But if they can't ring you, how are you going to get business?'

'Awww...Mark,' he sighed, not welcoming a financial analysis of his business plan.

He thought for a moment as he sipped his Bell's whisky chaser: 'I'll contact them.'

'Who?'

He gave me a supercilious look and said slowly, accentuating my lack of intelligence: 'Those people that want Strategic Word Processing of course.'

'Yeah, but how do you know who they are?'

He quickened in tempo, straightened his back and swished his head around, as if addressing the bar-audience: 'Well, there must be some bally idiots around here who want it!' he said, laughing. 'You don't understand Mark. The key word is Strategic.'

He was right, I didn't understand.

Dad placed his hand on the bar and the barman was attentive - a slick interaction from practice. 'Yeah, I'll have a Ram-and-Special, cheers Dad.'

After chit-chat, about nothing personal, he reached into

his jacket pocket and took out a cheque book. The back of this emaciated book was covered with writing. In black ball-point pen were lots of phrases each no more than five words. Written in one column down the length of the left-hand side of the cheque book then, having reached the bottom, the book had been turned sideways so the phrases filled all the available space. The phrases were deliberately, grammatically incorrect, occasionally absurd and in essence homophonic with some having dual meaning.

*Know One's Ear.*

*Littl'un Large.*

*Sure Nuff.*

*Art Attack.*

*Tight an' Nick.*

*Silly Basy.*

*Ego Missed.*

*Mo's Art.*

*Shoe Bert.*

*Baked Oven.*

*Pro Cough Yeff.*

*Sicko Fant.*

*Ben Him.*

*Status Quid.*

*Quark Plug.*

*Blank Whole.*

*A Tom, A Dick.*

*Iceberg's Uncertain Pinnacle.*

*Wavicle Monality.*

*Shrewd Inger's Equation.*

*'Cause Molly's Cheese.*

And the last one, standing out bold by liberal use of pen:

*The Non-Pedestrian Ear.*

They were quirkily amusing rather than funny so all I could do was smile for Dad, who was staring at me waiting for approval. He pointed to the last phrase and reached for his Crombie hanging up on a wooden coat-stand next to 'His' corner. Out of the pocket he pulled a stack of identical vinyl singles records and placed them on the bar then handed me one.

I read the front sleeve. A cover version of 'Dancing in the Streets' by Random Hold - I had heard of neither. On the flip side Dad pointed out the dedication standing out in scrawled red ink on a bluey-black background: 'For Denis, The Non-Pedestrian ear.'

I was amazed since Denis was Dad's name. 'What's all this about then?'

Smiling, he turned and sipped his Bell's chaser, deliberately pausing to increase the dramatic tension. He faced me, right hand arched in the air and then stiffened his posture as if to recite a soliloquy.

'Me...fantastic genius,' he said slowly, head erect with pride and breaking into laughter.

He slouched back onto the bar and flicked me lightly on the chest with his fingertips, as Hardy would do to Laurel, a gesture of patronising condescension.

But he never explained things. A conversation comprising hackneyed stock phrases, anecdotes or reminiscences. I had the frustrating task of wheedling out information by asking the right questions, piecing together the full picture; like a prosecutor questioning a hedging witness.

Like digging ice cream out of a plastic container with an inappropriately designed spoon, which bent at the most inopportune moment fracturing the ice cream, flicking the contents of the spoon onto the kitchen floor - a simple task turning into a frustrating mess!

I stared at the record sleeve. 'How did all this come about?'

'Me no dumb Irishman.'

'What...someone in the pub is in the music industry?' I gathered this from him nodding. 'You showed him your list which he liked and decided to use this particular phrase.'

'I am the greatest!' Dad said mimicking the great boxer, pointing to the pile of records on the bar.

'Look,' he continued, rubbing at the 'The Non-Pedestrian Ear' on the record sleeve; 'Strategic Word Processing. Get it?'

'Well...not really.'

He tutted and flicked his eyes heavenward, a gameful indication of superiority: 'Me fantastic genius...you dumb.'

I cut short his moment of glory: 'Are you getting any money or anything from it?'

'Awww...Mark...money...money...money,' he said, disapproving of my materialism.

His exhaled smoke caringly away from my face. 'I'm in the video.'

'Really!' I was surprised he kept this industry quiet from us.

Cigarette in hand he pointed: 'We sat over there in the corner playing some funny board game. We got free drink the whole day.'

'Not really typecast then.'

'What do you have to do with these records?' I continued, averting my gaze to the small stack.

'I can give them away,' he said with a degree of self-importance.

'Dumb marketing or something; here have one.' He gave me a badge as well.

'Last week I was in the Two Towers and there was an off-duty film crew there,' he explained, taking a sip to stir his recollection: 'They were filming the sport at Crystal Palace. That bloke from the telly was there, err...what's his name,' he looked at me with a pained expression: '...you know...that tall chap with a basin hair cut.'

I stroked my chin thoughtfully. 'Well, that cuts it down a bit, Dad. Umm...Derek Nimmo?'

Dad paused a second as the name rebounded from his brain. 'No...I think this chap reads the news.'

'John Craven.'

'Well...could be...what does he look like?'

'Err..., I don't really know.'

'Sounds like the very man.'

I continued: 'Well what happened?'

'I asked him to play my record on his show.'

There was a pause.

'Well...what did he say?'

'He asked me what it was like.' Dad paused again, for effect.

'...Well?' I prompted impatiently.

Dad chuckled: 'I said, "how do I bally well know. I've never heard the damn thing!" '

I laughed as he repeated the sentence, tapping me on the chest with his fingertips, milking the laughter. 'I don't like this infernal racket. If I had my way they would put blank records in jukeboxes so you could buy three minutes silence!'

### 38 CAMRA

Months passed.

My mind wandered, drifting through Norwood Park, along the terraced houses of Romany Rise, passing the oak

tree at the top of Auckland Hill, speeding under the seedy railway arch to the more acceptable High Road and The Hope, focusing on 'His' corner.

How was he today?

'Mark!'

'Mark! You're daydreaming again,' said Shamus.

I was staring at my pint - in particular at the bubbles. Why did they form at certain positions along the glass? Something to do with the lack of glass smoothness at the microscopic level as well as impurities in the beer. I focused on one origin of bubbles. A stream of rapidly ejected bubbles. A trail in single file following a curved trajectory within the golden liquor disappearing into a frothy patch. The bubbles were not equally spaced. The distance between them increased along their journey. I remembered this effect in the school physics lab. A ticker-tape trolley produced similarly spaced dots accelerating under the uniform influence of gravity. Uniform acceleration must be acting on the bubbles within the pint. It couldn't be gravity - otherwise the bubbles would start at the surface then sink. A frothy head at the bottom of the glass! Nice bum on it - a bit sexist for CAMRA.

The bubbles accelerate because of buoyancy. On a larger scale the same principle waters life on Earth by producing clouds from the rising bubbles of warm, wet, buoyant air.

'Oh sorry, I was miles away.'

'How come you're always hard of hearing when it's your round?'

'Pardon?'

Shamus and Dermi were irritable, after all, they only had a third of a pint left.

'Okay I'll get the drinks in soon, you've got plenty left at the moment anyway,' I said with a straight face.

'Mark, get your arse up that bar now,' insisted Dermi, who was getting fidgety at the thought of not having a full pint next to his increasingly empty one.

'It's not a race is it? Why don't we just have a civilised drink? What's all the rush?'

Shamus trunked-in: 'Don't give us all that intellectual crap, just get the frigging beers.'

'Shamus, leave him,' said Dermi in a conciliatory tone: 'You'll just make him worse.'

'Four pints of Stella then?'

'I'll have four pints too!' Jonjo shouted as I reached

the brassy bar.

'Make that four pints of Stella, my man, and hold the cheese.'

'Yeah, no more fucking cheese!' shouted Dermi.

### 39 The Easy Stuff

I was in The Manor the following evening with Jonjo and Dermi.

The warm pub air hit the freshly drawn cold pint of Stella and condensation formed on the glass. I slurped a mouthful and, shutting my lips, left it wallowing there for a second; it took two or three swallows to dispatch the mouthful. A strange drinking technique; a double action involving filling the mouth then swallowing. Maybe I was scared of being poisoned in a previous life, so now I subconsciously tasted the first gulp.

Chink, chink, chink. Jonjo returned from the cigarette machine and plonked himself down. I waited until he adjusted himself, lit up and sipped his beer. In the early evening we usually talk about science, things like where space came from, or if how come matter could neither be created nor destroyed then where the hell did it all come from in the first place? - you know, the easy stuff.

'...Well, quantum mechanics is about describing the motions or actions - that is the mechanics part - of little bits of energy - that is the quantum part.'

A few years earlier than this, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Einstein's relativity showed you couldn't measure things like distance and time absolutely, and now in quantum mechanics Schrödinger said there was no certainty in the precise behaviour of matter. The previous two centuries of mechanistic science was stripped of their god-like attributes of universal certainty and stability.

'That's crap!' Jonjo snapped, 'what you've said is simply not common sense.'

But in a fight between nature and common sense, back nature.

The problem cannot be understood from everyday experience. This acatelepsy always struck me as being rather strange; why are human's born with just enough brain power to make everything around them seem confusing? Why aren't our brains bigger in the first place so we can immediately understand everything? Everything

would then be common sense.

A bow wave opened the glass swing doors of the pub and in flowed Shamus swimming a tsunami of air.

'Waa...hey, Charlie Cheesehead...over here,' Dermi shouted in a silly voice across the sparsely populated saloon bar.

He strolled over. 'Palace won today,' he said in a non-assertive voice, sounding like he had had the thought but found it too much effort to vocalise.

'Will you repeat that in English.'

'Shamus, get a life and get rid of that poxy waistcoat, you gnome-effort.'

'Yeah, burn it immediately!' stressed Dermi, as Shamus plopped his bulk into one of the chairs which creaked, complaining about the weight.

#### **40 Nothing's Impossible**

Dermi said edgily, 'there's no chickeroonies in 'ere.'

Nearing eight, a change of atmosphere was in order. We agreed to go to The Stoned Crow the other end of Streatham High Road. This was Maggie's haunt, she would probably be in there with some of her friends, providing an extra gender dimension.

We concertinaed our way out, a family of exotic, charmed particles held together by four-dimensional super-humour.

We dodged traffic across busy Mitcham Lane - where are these people going? - and passed St. Leonard's Church. The anachronism of its small ivy-strewn graveyard at the front and classical masonic architecture was highlighted by the backdrop of bleak simplicity of the adjacent bank and Indian take-away. A quality building time-warped into a plastic, fast-food, fast-living, money-centric people - 'yeah and that's just you, Mark,' said Jonjo.

Left-chink, right-chink. Jonjo strode purposefully ahead. It was at his suggestion we took this trek. Normally we couldn't make a decision, so continued in The Manor until closing time. Floating on a sea of fatalism like so much flotsam, unwilling to navigate our lives, perhaps from fear of steering into a rip-tide, carrying us from the safe shore, to be lost forever in the vast uncertainty of the oceans. Since no-one really understood what they were



doing, surely fatalism is as good an option as any?

I shouted ahead to Jonjo: 'Oi!...what's the time.'

Jonjo broke into an infantile song: 'Half past nine...'

Dermi took a cue and put his arm roughly around my shoulders coaxing me into the Can-Can. '...Hang your knickers on the line.' They stared at me with silly faces.

Dermi said: 'Come on Mark, lighten up...laugh..that's what it's all about...the meaning of life.'

I laughed at the absurdity: '...you childish twats.'

Shamus dawdled rolling a cigarette. The Charcoal Pit. Those flame-grilled burgers smelt tempting, too tempting for Shamus.

'Wah, wah, wah...burger...wah, wah...hot pepper sauce...wah, wah,' he mumbled.

I shouted ahead for Jonjo to stop, then turned to face Shamus.

'Shamus! You, wailing, whale from Wales.'

Jonjo shouted back to him: 'You fat bastard, you're always eating. What you trying to do, put the Sun out of a job as gravity provider for the Solar System?'

But Shamus's undetermined philosophy, 'His' philosophy appears again. It invades The Charcoal Pit. It causes him to go to excess. A basic tenet seemed his perceived intellectual superiority required he be conscientiously, quirkily, non-conformist, taking things to the limit. He wore it as a proud badge.

'I'll have the biggest burger you've got. I want it really well-grilled also,' he said with a four-pint smiling face, hoping for some glance of empathy from the chef for his hippy, carefree values. 'Have you got any of that West Indian hot pepper sauce?'

The chef just nodded. I had seen this look before on people he talks to after his alcohol obnoxiousness kicks in. His boisterous, patronising manner often wound them up. He was blissfully unaware and it could get him into trouble. In his view, he was doing no wrong. He was trying to have a good time and make everyone happy. But Shamus didn't realise people don't want to be forced into being happy; it has to be their idea. Even though he was the eldest, his immature behaviour was a liability and our watchfulness over him inhibited our carefree enjoyment.

It was clear the chef didn't want any of Shamus's self-styled enlightenment, he wanted to serve and get rid of us.

You had to hand it to Shamus, that pepper sauce was

really hot. I don't think much of his jumbled, confused philosophy but I do pay due homage to his asbestos taste buds.

I slipped my order in quietly. 'I'll have an ordinary burger please.' But Shamus overheard and I knew this wouldn't get by without serious comment. The onset of physical boisterousness with a constant smile was the telltale sign he had quaffed a few. He leant towards me, right arm roughly around my neck, me rocking from supporting his slobbering weight.

'You wimp, Mark. You would have a *normal* burger wouldn't you?' he said in exaggerated tones emphasising my 'squareness'.

I was irritated. 'Shamus for god's sake, it's only a crappy burger! It's not a statement of my personality. It doesn't matter whether I have hot pepper sauce on it or not.'

'His' philosophy retorted. 'It does!' He stared at me with manic eyes. He had an idea now and his hands orchestrated its formation. 'Don't you see, your whole life is like a plain burger without pepper sauce. You always choosing the sensible option.'

I laughed at his cetacean psychoanalysis. 'Shut your spout and let's get going.'

We strolled slowly down the High Road passing the cinema. Shamus's fingers and cheeks covered with pepper sauce and he must have been feeling its effects, but he didn't let on.

Jonjo, with the duty of self-imposed leadership, strode ahead, showing the necessary detachment of a leader.

Streatham High Road was always busy. It could be three in the morning on a Christmas day with Russia having eight minutes ago targeted its full complement of ICBM's onto Streatham Library whilst, coincidentally, the astronomers confirmed that a one mile diameter meteorite would strike the Earth in two minutes, the epicentre expected to be The New India Garden take-away next to Streatham Hill Station...and yet Streatham High Road would still be packed. I thought, where are they all going? Even more confusing was the fact that both lanes of the road were equally packed. The people north of Streatham wanting to go south, and vice versa. Swap addresses. Sorted!

A whiff of smoky alcohol from Streatham's first wine bar, The Grape Affair. Two surly bouncers eyeing us,

itching to exert physical dominance.

We were quiet. Minds swirling in the eddies of passing traffic. Dermi suddenly directed his head upwards and with a sweep of his hand across the sky said: 'Is all this real or are we in a dream?'

Shops with five-storey apartment blocks banked the High Road on both sides. Only a strip of sky visible - a celestial Streatham High Road.

I looked at the night sky trying to recognise the constellations. No problem in my backyard where most of the hemisphere was visible, but more difficult in a built-up area. The perspective made recognition difficult. Hindered by light pollution, I managed to recognise the summer triangle. I pointed it out to Dermi; the three bright stars, Vega in the constellation Lyra the Harp; Altair in Aquila the Eagle and Deneb in Cygnus the Swan form the triangle's vertices.

'These stars have been around for billions of years and they still exist now: this is real no matter what bullshit some philosophers come up with.'

'Yeah, but the extremes of science which turns into philosophy is just impossible for mere mortals like me to understand, isn't it? Why does it have to be beyond common sense? I want to understand it,' Dermi pleaded.

We stood on the pavement outside to The Stoned Crow, cars crawling by.

As Shamus pushed the pub heavy swing door open he glanced back: 'Come in you morons, you've got everyone looking up at the sky.'

I looked down and my eyes intersected those of a middle-age lady in a blue Cavalier crawling along in the busy traffic. She sensed me looking at her, and her eyes darted from the heavens in awkward embarrassment.

'We'll be there in a minute...get us the strong lager.'

I continued. 'These scientists swim and swim, moving further from the mainstream of thought, struggling up the smaller tributaries. It's only when they come up for air do they realise how far from perceived reality they've gone.' I glanced at Dermi whose eyes were following a mini-skirted girl in high heels, clicking along on the opposite side of the road.

'Dermi,' I said, attracting his attention again.

'Yeah, what?' he replied, turning towards me with an apologetic look.

I couldn't clearly remember what I had just said, so I

just stressed to Dermi that nothing was impossible.

Inside, Shamus stood over a corner table talking to Maggie and her friends. Maggie saw us come in and waved frantically. Some of her harsher life experiences, like having a kid while a teenager to some guy she didn't really know, and then her second divorce, made her more emotional than us.

I involved Maggie in the conversation I just had with Dermi.

'Maggie, I was just saying to Dermi that nothing's impossible.'

'That's crap!' said Jonjo, with surliness squeezing from his skull, leaving glistening beads of moisture on his furrowed brow.

Jonjo did not want to be left out of an argument for long. He lived up to the Gaelic root of his name - 'Dark Contention'. Mark - 'Strong Contention'. Shamus - 'Whale Convention'. Appropriately, removing the last 's' from his name you get Shamu - the killer whale from Disneyland!

'Come on then Jonjo, let's have it.' I felt resigned to my fate.

'It's impossible for you to dress smartly.'

This opened an avalanche of hilarity, laterally exploring the absurd. Everyone except the family unwittingly left out - them not understanding why the chronic mention of Shamus as a whale being funny. I guessed it was the familiarity of phrases and our own expected roles in the piss-take. Roles fashioned by the sculptor of time. Mark; the square scientist with a poor dress sense who didn't have any girlfriends and had never really lived. Jonjo; the argumentative, self-analytical, quasi-philosophical, artist. Dermi; a snappy-dressing, Palace-fan, lothario-printer. Shamus; a massive, obnoxious, psychologist's-nightmare, failed academic, home-spun philosophical mensa-member, piss-headed cetacean. Maggie; the party-going, common-touch, pretty, naive, twee, assertive-trained, irritating feminist. Jollity built on these foundations, structured with a framework of lateral thinking and teasing, and plastered with booze and laughter.

Before the point was lost, I looked earnestly at Dermi. 'You could study in your spare time, gradually get to know about cosmology or quantum theory.'

'Stud-ieeeeee!' Dermi nerdily blurted, then added in a more serious tone: 'Yeah, but that would take years.'

'So what!' I encouraged. 'You shouldn't look at the

whole daunting task ahead of you. Only at the bit in front, otherwise you'll get demoralised.'

He nodded as he sipped.

'Be like the champion potato-peeler. He doesn't look at the whole mound of potatoes behind, he just concentrates on the one in hand.'

'How about this one then, Mark,' Dermi said: 'You have to drink the whole of the Pacific Ocean in a microsecond without going for a piss;' they laughed, 'under pain,' he stressed, 'of your dick being sliced off and spit-roasted in front of you. Now, that is impossible! Come on, admit it, you can't worm your way out of that one.'

They stared at me hoping to see me squirm.

'All right...all right...all right!...Get stuffed the lot of you.'

They were pleased with their victory; Dermi shouted 'team' and gave each other the 'high five'. Slap. Chink.

'You lot are pathetic. What's all this "worming out" business anyway? Why can't we just have a civilised, constructive discussion?'

'Get stuffed, you wimp,' said Dermi, enjoying his moment of victory. 'Just accept gracefully that you've been intellectually trampled into the dirt.'

## 41 The Big C

We never spoke about our true feelings with Dad. A taboo area hedged with chit-chat, humour and drink. I never asked Dad whether he was happy and he never asked me to see him more often. A limbo.

I saw him more than the rest of the family during his twilight years.

'What are they up to?' he asked me while standing at 'His' corner of The Hope. He didn't ask straight out why they didn't come to see him more often - he was too proud. I wasn't sure why I visited Dad more than the rest of the family. Perhaps out of duty, or guilt, or empathy or even selfishness, hoping to dissipate my responsibility.

'It's not you, Mark,' said Jonjo that evening: 'He just wants to show you off for having got a poxy degree.'

I should have asked Dad whether this was true, but I didn't. To my unasked questions there would soon be no possibility for answers.

In Dad's last years visiting this planet his lifestyle was

curtailed by a reduced income, a prospect which didn't fill him with joy. The worst time of his life. No family, no home, no job; only alcohol and a small amount to spend on it. Living in a dream-world of things that might have been and the sentimentality of things that had been. He couldn't understand the relevance of his life and his contribution to humanity. Did his life have any purpose? Were its effects tangible or illusory? Perhaps his negative judgement to this dilemma convinced him his time was up - one way or another. This only showed the alcohol-affected reduction of his objectivity and grasp on reality. The living proof of his contribution to humanity were within a few-mile radius of him: his kids. He couldn't see the wood for the trees. He examined his value through a poorly-focused microscope fashioned from the bottom of an empty beer bottle. Optiks had misted his optics. His judgement could only come out one way; the glass was against him, distorting his view of reality. We should have worked it out together. We should have helped him hold that penny at arm's length.

But without support, his arm was getting tired.

A few months ago I visited him and, being early, went straight to his flat on a bright, crisp morning.

I walked the shady side-entrance and rang the doorbell. Disconcerting not hearing anything when I pressed the bell so I pressed again for good measure. Waiting, I looked around the unfamiliar surroundings. The unfamiliar rusty bike chained to the unfamiliar, dilapidated, garden fence. Unfamiliar unkempt grass. Sad to see him ending up in a stranger's house. His money frittered away. A mixture of his easily-content personality and the effects of alcohol reduced his level of expectation, seeping away standards of self-esteem. His penultimate resting-place was foreign.

Even though we hadn't seen each other for months there was the customary non-verbal greeting. His charcoal-coloured suit with a dull, red-patterned tie - inebriate Irishmen keep up their appearance as if the smart suit acts as camouflage. A long glance at me and, with a nod of acknowledgement, turned down the hallway. I flicked my eyebrows as a hello.

Dipping my toe into the lukewarm setting, I asked: 'How's things?' as I entered a room smelling of furniture polish.

'Awww...not too well.' And he sat himself down in the

far corner.

He was not at his best in the morning, but, even so, his downbeat appraisal was unusual. I remained standing thinking we would be leaving soon. Dad seemed sombre and I sensed something on his mind.

'What's up?'

Thoughts whirred inside his mind. He cranked his head to look out the window, towards the railings of the railway embankment. Easier to express himself to inanimate objects.

'It's the Big C!'

I heard but didn't register. A part of me was numb, another part felt...strange. A thought I didn't want to admit to myself. It persisted. On the dark side it was almost like a thought of...well...excitement. Perhaps, excitement is too strong a word, more an air of expectancy for Dad. He will soon discover whether there actually *is* anything after life, or if it is all just a fairy story, told to keep the puerile human race from being naughty.

I felt frustrated Dad wouldn't be able to let me know. There isn't a good track record for communication from beyond the grave. Conceivably, a hundred thousand million people have died in the last ten thousand years, yet nothing has been heard from any of them! Either there is nothing after death – so no god or fairytale heaven - or, in fact, there is something, but the dead are unable to or not allowed to communicate.

And Mark had no time for religion with its concepts appealing to the human frailty of wish-fulfillment which is understandable in children but irritating in grown-ups.

Philosophy is the religion of the intellectuals.

Gods...understandable for ancient tribes since they were the technology of the day. The answer to the human why? An egocentric belief to hurdling death. A technology that should have been superceded by human advancement. Otherwise it's like people who should know better pig-headedly persisting in using a slide-rule instead of a computer.

Mark is an atheist. But he felt this word wasn't quite right. He didn't want to be categorized as being against a delusion. That seems to give the delusion some primacy. Just as he wouldn't want to be called an anti-murderer. The appearance of the word in the description brings an association with it, even in its negative. There shouldn't be a word for not believing in gods it should be the default position.

I broke the unreal silence with the obvious.

'What...cancer! You've got cancer?'

No answer was his loud reply.

Dad's manner changed now the subject had been lifted from his chest. He took on the air of an old soldier contemplating war wounds but uncertain how to express his anguish and pride. Like he almost relished the fact. It was easy to feel this at that moment. He felt hardly different. No pain. Cynically speaking, he had a badge, credentials for centre-stage attention; from here he could fire ammunition of guilt at the helpless targets – his kids.

'Are you sure?'

'...They have to do some more tests,' he hedged.

'So you're not sure then?' I deduced, trying to dig a nugget of hope.

'We'll see.'

He didn't want to be drawn on the subject; enough was said. The situation left in a delicate balance. Relief or tension. Benign or malignant? He wasn't tipping the scales. The genesis of an orchestrated, confused situation. Why shed light when darkness suits your muddled purpose?

We didn't stay in the flat; we couldn't talk unless in a pub. Facing each other in that quiet room didn't feel right. Quietness - intrusive. Inhibition. A feeling of talking to a cashier through a robber-proof screen. A barrier. In the silence we felt uncomfortable like two strangers, paths crossing in an empty elevator. In the pub each other's presence is not so intrusive; more elbow-room for our psyches. Accompanied with the feeling, for a while, as alcohol flowed, things were getting better.

We walked down the steep Gypsy Road. Dad asked me to slow up to catch his breath - perhaps he was seriously ill after all? I didn't really know what to believe.

We turned right at the crossroads and walked towards The Hope.

An afternoon spent in 'His' corner, then killed some time in the library until The King's Head opened. It opened



earlier in the evening than The Hope, so it was the obvious next stop, even though it had fallen out of favour over the last few years; he thought it was getting too commercial when the landlord started selling plastic combs which he displayed bizarrely next to the multi-coloured bottles of spirits.

The King's Head. A sparsely decorated pub that Irishmen seem to prefer; perhaps no one sought their opinion and them being too laid back to proffer one. Down to basics, drink was all that was on offer and was gratefully received.

I stood at the bar and Dad sat on a high bar stool. He didn't normally sit; perhaps another indicator of a real illness. Silence was occasionally interrupted by conversation from an elderly couple; voices too-loud in order to overcome poor hearing. A soporific hiss of a calor-gas heater at the base of a red anaglypta wall.

A sombre mood. What next? I stared out the window: the bottom part frosted, the top portion clear apart from an inverted arc of words 'Fine Ales and Spirits'. Spirits - coloured liquor in bottles, not the essence of people.

A scintillating point of light caught my averted vision. Mars peeking from behind a chimney pot of the terraced shops opposite. It dimmed as it picked its way through crumbling mortar. Prophetically, the Bringer of War glimpsing at us from the east. A procession of twilights accompanied the planet along its southerly trajectory, brightening in the darkening sky.

Dad's moment. A final foray for sympathy. Last Tango in Norwood.

I never saw him upright again.

Confusion reigned over the following months. Benign? If any one knew they weren't saying.

Shamus informed us, 'it's malignant and he refuses treatment.'

'It could be benign...the tests are inconclusive,' comforted Maggie.

He lay in his room feeling poorly. A marasmus of mind and body.

He was where he had wanted to be. I'm ill, don't you all feel bad now for leaving me, I imagined him saying.

Dad centre-stage, unwilling to be removed from the limelight. In control of unquestioning troops, marshalling them to his whims, free to hurt them by capitulating to the illness, perhaps some spiteful revenge. Surely he didn't

really mean to add weight to the crosses he fashioned for us. No! I thought not. He just wanted his own personal exit without the need to involve the establishment or his family. He was like us really, doing our 'own thing' and this was the final curtain call. He hadn't involved us too much in his life and now he was excluding us from his death.

'They don't want to take him into the Hospice, his doctor told the authorities, he was not that bad,' Maggie reassured us in The Gipsy Queen after visiting him.

Benign or malignant? In the end it didn't really matter. He had been given a way out and he was going to take it.

## 42 Gig in the Sky

Ten past two early on a summer's morning. The phone rang...it was Shamus.

'What!' I barked unsympathetically from scrambled woken-up senses.

'Dad's dead.'

I didn't feel anything. 'I'll give you a ring in the morning.'

I dreamt...the ethereal strains of Neptune the mystic...

*'I'm not frightened of dying,  
anytime will do...I don't mind.  
Why should I be frightened of dying?  
there's no reason for it.  
You've got to go sometime.'*

...I'll see you later Dad in that celestial Gig in the Sky. We can be together with the stars.

## 43 Headstone

We clambered off the bus near The Manor. The pavement busy with a flow of people buzzing around the shops like bees seeking nectar. We walked in single file. I saw that triangular area of grass where I had sat a couple of nights back. A lifetime ago. Ahh! I recognised that ball of unfinished Chinese still in the wire rubbish bin, squashed now with the weight of uncollected garbage. I smiled...one hell of a throw.

Anyway, that was how it was with me; growing up with Dad and booze and the stars and pubs and my brothers

and laughing at zany things and the Marx Brothers. I wasn't sure if I had figured out why we weren't with Dad when he died. I needed more time, away from the maddening crowd of my brothers. Now might not be the right time. Too close to the event.

I moved aside to let Dermi open the front door.

'We've really got to sort that headstone out today,' I said.

'Give it a rest,' moaned Dermi, 'that's all you've been going on about the last couple of days.'

'Yeah, but I've got to go to work tomorrow and if I don't sort it out today no other git's going to do it are they?'

'Exactly,' said Shamus, slowly.

We seemed to agree as we mounted the communal stairs of the converted flats.

Jonjo clonked heavy-footed up the stairs. 'Jonjo, can't you walk anywhere quietly?' Dermi moaned. Dermi seemed to be moaning a lot today, maybe he had a hangover, which would be unusual. 'You make so much bloody noise with those boots.'

Jonjo just couldn't walk anywhere quietly with those enormous motorcycles boots. 'Yeah and that poxy leather jacket chinking away all the time,' I joined in. 'It's getting on my frigging nerves.'

'Oh...sorry for breathing,' Jonjo replied sarcastically, exaggeratedly clonking and chinking his way up the stairs. And we sort of laughed.

The door creaked into life after the ignition key turned. I saw mum in the kitchen. Maggie had given her a lift back early this morning while we were mucking about at her house. She liked to get back early. Though barely afternoon she had already been shopping, hoovered the flat, made the beds and washed the net curtains. Out of habit she could not relax, even though we were all grown up and everything. She had this accelerated pace of living. Surely she must run out of things to do later on? I always wanted to ask her whether she'd run out of things to do later on in the day. But I didn't. I don't know why I didn't, I just didn't.

'Do you want some bacon an'egg?' she said rhetorically, already retrieving the large frying pan with a clatter. Not that she meant it to be rhetorical.

We relaxed in Jonjo's arty bedroom-cum-studio scattered with object d'art. He put on Dire Straights.

'Where's that number Maggie gave you?' I asked Jonjo, flicking out my right hand in anticipation.

'All right, all right keep your nappy on.' He didn't appreciate being hassled.

He looked on the large drawing-table, spattered with part-finished sketches and Post-Its. He picked one up and turned towards the large bay window scrunching his face to read it. 'Here,' he said, trying to flick it towards me, but it stuck to his finger. He impatiently walked over and stuck it on the telephone. 'There,' he said, then clonked over to pick up a book and slumped into an armchair, opening the book at a sticking out bit of torn white paper. The bookmark fell onto the floor and, with a groan, bent down and stretched to place it onto the adjacent desk top.

'Turn that music down a bit, Jonjo. I'm ringing up about the headstone,' I complained.

'For chrissake,' he said impatiently, putting a cigarette to his mouth and lighting it with his chunky lighter which he clunked shut only to open again - the cigarette not lighting properly. He slammed the book on the arm of the chair and creaked upwards. 'Can't we sort that out later?' he said, moving across the room to roughly swivel the amplifier knob.

I dialled. After initial probing questions I replied to information passed through the earpiece: 'How much!' I turned, covering the mouthpiece and grimaced. 'Four hundred quid for a headstone!'

Dermi offered some advice. 'Can't they knock one up out of balsa wood or something?'

'...It's ten pounds a letter for the epitaph,' I said; eyes darting between my brothers and the receiver.

'Mark, tell them you've got two words for them and the second ones "off." I reckon that's seventy quid they owe us,' smirked Dermi.

I put a silly question to the funeral director. 'Well...err...what can we get for four pounds fifty?' My brothers stared at my smiling face. 'A full stop!'

'Yeah,' said Jonjo, 'we could just have...say...five full stops - one for each of us. I think that would convey a pleasing, enigmatic message, wouldn't it.'

'Yeah, you're right,' I said, hanging-up the telephone, 'an ellipsis on the headstone would project a comforting, unfinished feeling, as if it's not really over. Taking away the finality, like were expecting a reply.'

'Plus it's cheap,' mumbled Shamus.

We could see the financial merits of that scheme but eventually decided upon a more appropriate epitaph. On umpteen occasions Dad had stood alert with his left hand on his jacket lapel, right hand open in salutation, stating with an air of triumphance to his captive audience two words eventually to adorn his headstone:

'Be Great!'

#### 44 Registrar

That afternoon I was driving us back from the Camberwell Registrar of Deaths along Southampton Way.

'It's funny that you need all this paperwork just to die,' observed Dermi.

'Yeah, you need a bit of paper from the hospital to say he's dead, which you take to the registrar who gives you a tarted-up piece of paper to confirm he is, in fact, deceased, both of which you pay for,' I said getting on my high horse. 'I mean isn't it obvious that someone who is lying around for ages not saying anything is dead. Why all the paperwork?'

'According to those criteria, Shamus should carry a piece of paper letting people know that he is, in fact, alive.' Shamus smirked and punched Dermi's leg.

Dermi smoked in the back with Shamus. I caught a side-glance of his sharp haircut in the rear-view mirror as he scanned the pavement for a free ogle at any chickies.

'Yeah, and all the arrangements, and the cost of it all. It's ridiculous,' sneered Jonjo in the front seat, as he wound down the window to flick out his cigarette. 'You have to pay for the plot at the cemetery, they are in cahoots with a priest who you pay to perform the service. He uses a certain funeral director. It all costs a fortune. It's a cartel. You need money to die as well as to live. It's all crap,' he complained.

Even though it was warm Shamus still had his beige trench coat wrapped around his ears, like some secretive spy. 'They should cut out the middle men,' he said in his quiet-because-he-was-sober voice: '...put it in a body bag and blast it into space.' Even though it was gone noon he hadn't yet touched a drop; mainly because he forgot his hip flask.

I concentrated on finding the route back to Streatham along unfamiliar roads. 'That's a great idea Shamus,' I

said, 'orbiting the Earth before ending up as a shooting star. A fantastic way to end it all!'

Shamus returned to the point. 'All this phoney reverence and incense in the funeral parlour, and the discreet whispering tones, it irritates me. It's all hypocrisy,' he said not liking anything that wasn't 'up front', although I was sure he wouldn't like a lack of respect. Another example of 'His' woolly philosophy.

I guessed funerals aren't meant to be 'real fun'. But then again I'd been to a cockney wake where the theme was to have a 'nuf'r ale.'

We stopped at traffic lights and waited to turn left into Peckham Road.

'Talking about whispering, do you remember that teacher at St.John's who used to whisper all the time?' asked Dermi. This was after Shamus's time so he wouldn't know.

'Oh yeah,' said Jonjo with a wide smile from an emerging forgotten thought. 'He looked after the library didn't he; had something wrong with his voice box and could only whisper. What's his name?'

'Brother Silas wasn't it,' I recalled.

'Yeah that's right,' said Jonjo with a short laugh. 'He was fanatical about quietness in that poxy library of his.'

As soon as you entered his hallowed terrain he would scuttle up and guide you by the elbow to the nearest bookshelf and force you to take a book which you didn't even want to read. He would usher you to one end of a reading desk on which there was, at most, only one other boy who had been strategically placed diametrically opposite.

'What a fucking idiot. In his over zealousness he missed the point of a library being an atmosphere for free learning. His jealous guarding of this seat of learning was self-defeating, his logic disappearing up his arse.'

'A whispering idiot.'

'A whispering-donkey.'

The genesis of a ridiculing phrase. Two words that seemed right for each other, like horse and carriage. Each the poorer for the absence of the other.

## 45 The Priest

I had arranged to see the priest down St. Luke's the

following evening to discuss the funeral service. I hadn't seen him for many years and I wasn't sure he would remember me.

The housekeeper asked me to wait in the sacristy at the back of the church. I hadn't been inside a church for ages. But stepping into the sacristy the smell of extinguished candles mixed with incense brought back memories from being an altar boy. A shadowy-dim room. Rays of coloured dust beams from the narrow, stained-glass windows. Stoicism of stone eclipsed by spiritual obsequiousness. A consonance of piety and duty. An ambience of such intense serenity and religious expectation I felt, had I stayed longer, even I may experience unlikely holy enlightenment.

I was apprehensive about meeting the priest. Would he ask me whether I was still a Catholic? My experience of his lack of sensitivity would leave any question open. Married or living in sin? Would he preach or be magnanimous, providing spiritual guidance and wisdom, an emotional crutch for the death of my dad at an early age of sixty-four?

Leather soles slapped stone and the dark oak-panelled door creaked open and in stepped the priest, a black cassock straining over his large stomach and carrying a note book and pen. A business-like meeting. His business after all. The meaning of an action tends to diminish with familiarity.

He purposely strode towards me, lips curling in a smile of recognition and in an *Eire staccato* said: 'Haven't you heard of Grecian 2000!' while pointing his biro towards my prematurely greying hair.

## **46 Biological Recycling**

I didn't feel depressed, perhaps I even felt happy, but that could be misleading. If I felt sad I could paradoxically feel an underlying sense of happiness by simply knowing things could only get better. But then again if I felt happy, a sadness could descend from the sure knowledge that things could only get worse.

*No reason to be sad though. It is easy to do. Nothing to it really. It required no effort at all. My dad's just done it, so have my grandparents, a long time ago. My mum will do it soon. Me and my brothers probably have a while yet before we do it - dying that is.*

Strange setting a date for your own mortality. Just thinking about what happens next made me go light-headed. If I thought about it, before I knew it, the thoughts evaporated and my mind just whirled, thinking about nothing. Like a cerebral roller coaster. Initial effort to crank one's mind into gear and slowly ascend the neural framework then upon reaching the summit there followed a free-fall mental buzz.

What would I be doing after I died? It wasn't a sensible question. Beyond rationality. I didn't know what I was before this life and I don't know what I am to become afterwards. It was a complete mystery.

Sometimes I felt scared about living my life. Too much a burden of responsibility to bring kids into this arena. But I shouldn't really feel like that. Life was nothing to do with my desires, which were on too small a scale to be relevant. I was born and that was that. So it would be with my children. They have their turn; not through any rights, since this word is steeped in the structure of human thought. Life is beyond any such structure we can attribute it. More a transient biochemical thing.

Still...thinking about what I was before I coalesced into this geologically-instantaneous shape of cells, or what I will be after the cells disperse, set my mind reeling, round and round; not in a spiral though, that would imply some focus. More of a hypermind explosion - whatever that means.

So death is natural and nothing unusual. One hundred and twenty thousand million humans have done it since the dawn of civilisation; a bio-mass of some eight billion kilograms. Intellectual compost returning to Earth. The energy of sunlight and geo-chemistry produce this mass. See the light. We are the light. Son's of our Sun. But conservation of mass applies to the Earth otherwise it would become heavier with dying bodies, changing its orbit. The Earth recycles us - a natural, biological resurrection.

Depending on your belief it may be your spiritual end, but it isn't your chemical end. Energy can neither be created nor destroyed. Chemicals that gave us life for a



geological instant, leech back into the soil. A flower grows. A bee pollinates. Seeds scatter. Sheep eat. We eat. A chemical merry-go-round. An epicycle rotating hundreds of millions of times faster than the star-death-to-star-death chemical-stirring cycle. A dumbness-intelligence cycle. Intelligence from dumbness. A unique arrangement of chemicals.

## **47 Legacy**

The quickness of Dad's demise robbed us of preparation. No climax. No valediction. Maggie, in particular, found it hard to reconcile her isolation from Dad; isolation as a result of teenage traumas producing a lack of communication. My philosophy of death was scant comfort for her unresolved situation.

Dad's legacy was not materialistic. It was education, sensitivity, sense of humour, dependence on alcohol and immaturity. His legacy was to hold centre-stage as a topic of conversation; how he touched and shaped our lives, for better or worse: a continuing abreaction.

He should have held that penny of life outstretched. In his last years we were too young and too close to see him for what he was rather than what we wanted him to be. Our immature strength wasn't great enough to hold him at arm's length.

## **48 Funeral**

He was buried.

Jonjo chinked away at the funeral in his leather jacket. Dermi glanced around for a pretty face. Shamus got rolling drunk at the get-together with uncles and cousins we've hardly ever seen - some of those old Irish boys can really pack it away.

A wait for the headstone.

## **49 Shamus' Garden**

Life goes on. Jonjo kept painting – not walls but fine art - and mum kept trying to appreciate it.

Time passed and we could no longer put off visiting Shamus's latest abode – an aura of a cardboard box, without the cardboard and about as boxy as an arse.

He liked to fill his box with classic novels. Not that he read much. It's just that he was comforted by being near to them. His security blanket of human achievement. A sort of us-against-the-rest-of-the-universe. Look what we humans have achieved. And what have you aliens done! Something for humanity to be proud of. The Earth - a planetary popinjay puffing out its rocky chest.

Mum pointed to one of a Jonjo's framed drawings limply hanging without much razzmatazz on a plain wall. He had donated these prized possessions to Shamus to alleviate the overwhelming dullness of his new flat, just off Streatham Vale. Well, Shamus thought, it was either hang them up or throw them in the dustbin; however not his bin, which was better decorated than his room, that's why the pictures ended up on his wall rather than mess his bin.

No one else seemed to want Jonjo's drawings, a fact which dented his shield of self-esteem.

Art...the sensual presentation of ideas – or presentation of crap in Jonjo's case.

'Is that a boot?' mum enquired softly, directing her gaze at one of Jonjo's pictures.

'No, Mum. It's a training shoe,' I explained.

'Is it a painting?'

'No, Mum. It's a study in charcoal.'

Not quite satisfied with my explanation she moved her attention to the adjacent drawing.

'Is that a boot as well?'

'No, Mum. It's a portrayal of four wax candles.'

'Is it a photograph?'

'No, Mum. It's a study in pastel.'

'Oh,' she said, drifting along in her surreal world.

Shamus' flat had been kindly donated by Social Security after him getting the sack from his casino job for being drunk on duty and being 'bombastic' to the clientele.

Infuriatingly an intelligent bloke like Shamus couldn't hold down a steady job. I don't know why Shamus turned out like that. I should have asked him but I didn't. I don't know why I didn't. I just didn't. I reckoned it was down to 'His' philosophy. They go hand-in-hand like Laurel and Hardy. Unaware of any overall plan. Living for the mixed-up moment. Maybe the fault of our school, St. John's, or Dad's fault, or even Shamus' fault.

Could have been a tiny thing even. Like the lack of feedback he received at school once over the painstaking effort he had put into a homework project on The Bible; an assignment for the third form summer holiday. Shamus returned home that first day of the new term and slung a green ring-binder onto the kitchen table: 'Idiot,' he said, stomping upstairs and upset. My curiosity was aroused and I sneaked a look at the folder's contents. Inside, the enormous amount of effort Shamus had put into that project over two months was rewarded by a single, solitary red tick. Forty pages of neat handwriting and painstaking coloured illustrations only merited a single tick! No comment. No platitudes. No acknowledgement. Just a single red mark. An isolated mark which marked him for isolation - or at least boozy, lazy, non-conformity, tinged with a smirky school-boy, 'I couldn't give a damn' attitude. The teacher didn't like Shamus. Sometimes it's as simple as that. They must realise the power they wield over sensitive pupils. A simple 'well done' might have changed Shamus' whole outlook on life. Grudging praise even, seconds to write, might have changed his mindset for those important years of adolescence and exams. But teachers are really busy. Shamus should have took control of his own life, or get guidance and support from Dad. But Dad was usually down the pub.

An example of Shamus' attitude to life was staring at me through the grizzly casement doors of his lounge. I was looking out onto 'His' philosophically designed garden.

Shamus endured a microsecond garden hobby. He had been harping on about his green-fingered diversion. Jonjo unwittingly supplied mum's old garden furniture, which Shamus hijacked from its council dump destination.

Shamus was keen to show off his labours to me. From his description I was expecting The Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

Disappointingly, it was just an area the size of a bedsize rug sparsely covered with tired looking gravel with incumbent weeds and decorated with scrubby old plastic chairs not particularly judiciously placed.

'It's a naturalist's 'Secret Garden' a la Capability Brown,' Shamus beamed.

I didn't know what was funnier, his effort at garden design or the fact he thought it was good.

'Yeah, well, at least it attracts the wildlife,' he said defensively, and gained momentum by adding, 'remember that fox we saw snooping there the other day, Dermi?'

'It was a fucking rat,' shouted Dermi, 'probably attracted by the stench of the place! The only other unfortunate creature I've seen near that garden is a cat thinking twice about crapping on it.'

It was a waste of effort pursuing further horticultural debate with Shamus, his attention span for the subject had faded.

I rang him later to lend moral support and to appreciate his latest effort at keeping off the booze with his landscaped diversion.

A surreptitious clinking of ice-on-glass: 'Shamus...I thought you were on the wagon?'

'It's only scotch!'

Me, Jonjo and Dermi visited him to confirm his downhill garden.

'Come on, Shamus,' encouraged Jonjo: 'The garden's not that bad really. You should keep at it.'

'No!' said Shamus, then added dolefully: 'I can't continue anyway. I've got this goutish knee.' He touched it gingerly.

I sympathised, 'You've been to the doctor?'

Shamus perked up from my concern. 'Yeah. I told him that if I did this...' he balanced on his left leg, lifted his right knee and flexed it then moved it sideways from his body, '...that it hurts.'

'What did the doctor say?'

'Don't do that then!'

Now, freeing himself from the manacles of horticultural creativity, Shamus leapt up and kicked open the patio doors and grabbing a plastic banana he half-volleyed it into the garden and yelped with cathartic exaltation: 'Yesssss!' He collapsed in pain rubbing his knee. The banana landed symbolically upright on a small pile of gravel in the centre of 'His' garden giving a sneering potassium-packed 'finger' to all and sundry.

In the morning, as a parting gesture, I lobbed one of Shamus' scrubby old patio chairs into the rough grass at the back of the garden. A month later it was still there; a bare leg visible above the tall grass - plate tectonics was the only movement now going on in that garden. Shamus could wait twenty million years until continental drift moved him down the road to pick up his dole cheque.

## 50 Marx Brothers

Waiting for the headstone.

Driving in Wandsworth, a handful of miles from Streatham, and going to my security-controlled work site. A narrow arch burrowed underneath the railway. Traffic lights changed from green to amber. My foot on the accelerator, one-hundred-and-eighty horsepower beckoning; the wail of the Sirens. Should I go for it? My right foot moved to the foot brake and in harmony with its applied pressure I slipped the car into neutral and came to a smooth halt as the light turned red.

I know what Shamus and 'His' Philosophy would decree. What a wimp! That's the story of your whole life. You never go for it. Always playing safe and plodding along, slowly and surely.

I sat, irritated I didn't try to beat that red light. Then an impression of something whitish to my left, just above the eye line. On impulse I turned and saw graffiti in white block capital letters, emblazoned on the tall sloping grey-bricked Victorian embankment. Words that must be the second finest piece of criticism ever written. I was glad I didn't beat the lights, otherwise the writing would only have been a blur.

Impossible to put it more succinctly. Eloquence in simplicity. Shouting by whispering. A grateful world tipping its hat. Humour, a gift to society. Writing on the wall for civilisation.

'GROUCHO, HARPO, CHICO...THANK YOU'.

The finest piece of criticism? Criticism of a long ago photographic exhibition - 'me no Leica'.

## 51 At Work

I pulled up into the private car park outside the boundary security fence. Inside there worked a few hundred people; mainly engineers, designing systems for spacecraft. The parking spaces were annoyingly just a bit too small, so I had the usual hassle of squeezing out the car with my briefcase in one hand and sandwiches and car keys in the other, trying not to dent the adjacent car with my door.

Walking up the tarmac incline I was overcome with a feeling of self-consciousness, perhaps brought on by the approaching building looming overhead, its mirrored glass

concealing imaginary prying eyes. I looked down at my legs. Phew! I had remembered to put my trousers on!

I nodded good morning to the security guard, showing a dog-eared security pass. I turned up the inclined path to walk the twenty-three paces towards my building.

Over the years, and having nothing better to occupy my mind, I had measured most things; from the exact distance to work following five distinct routes, and the time taken for each, to the number of paces from my office to two separate toilet blocks on my floor - the furthest urinal. Trudge, trudge, trudge as the days passed into weeks and months; analyse this route, analyse that route. Trudge, trudge, trudge. Months passed into a year, new routes to measure; Building K to the Cash Office in Building C, yeah, that's mega. A year turned into a few years, more subtle things to conquer. The distance to the furthest photocopier on site from my office, no cheating mind you, I had to use established shortest route entrances not fire exits. That was a tricky one, requiring a visit to the Site-Services department for blue-prints.

I approached the red-brick, two-storey building from its northern corner with nothing particular on my mind. Looking down as I climbed the paved steps I noticed only the fifth step seemed to have any amount of bird crap on it. Quite a lot, and it wasn't evenly distributed. Nearer the building there was a high crap density but towards the middle there was only one or two splashes and none at all on the outer part of the paved steps. The fourth and sixth step hardly had any splashes, just a few towards the centre and fairly evenly spaced. Hmmm! Interesting. Sure beats Shanks' Pony mensuration.

Along the corridor I nodded 'good morning' to colleagues and put my briefcase down beside the right hand side of my desk, took my coat off and switched the kettle on for a cup of coffee. I stared out the window at a large cedar tree; its flattened branch structure, like verdant altocumulus clouds.

Why? Why that unusual bird crap distribution?

I swung into my chair and noticed tippexed initials on my colleague's chair. I smiled thinking about the time when someone borrowed my chair but returned a similar one. Similar but not the same. My colleague's forceful denial was overturned by my indignant pointing out at the lack of my tippexed initials. My proper chair was duly located.

It nagged at me that in getting older I was turning into someone for whom I would have had utter contempt for when I was young.

And these idiots who think they own the road outside their homes, defending it aggressively, getting annoyed when someone unwittingly parks on 'their' property - what fools - haven't they got anything better to think about...but that's me now.

When young, I had laughed about a friend's Dad who, on his day off, would still get up at six in the morning and sit quietly at the kitchen table sipping his cup of tea. Why didn't he have a lie-in?...yes, I was afraid to say it again, but that was me now.

On balance it's probably best I soon shuffle off this mortal coil before I become a complete and utter arsehole!

Later, while I was computing a telemetry system link-budget from Earth to Saturn, that short-period orbiting thought re-entered my consciousness - of course! That must be it. The corner of the building must explain it. That fifth step was directly underneath the corner of the building. Birds must prefer sitting on a corner of a building. More birds equals more crap!

Mid-morning I rang Jonjo: 'Any news about the headstone?'

'No.'

'That's ridiculous. What are they playing at? Are they producing the rock themselves? Waiting for creatures to die and build up sedimentary pressure and then wait a billion years for the rock to form?'

'I think I'd better order mine now,' agreed Jonjo about the delay, 'just to make sure it arrives on time.'

'Maybe. But wouldn't it be disconcerting if it arrived before you died? I mean...are you going to leave it standing next to your telly or something. Seems a bit creepy.'

'It would be a reminder of your own mortality though,' Jonjo said, 'making you live each day fully, like it was your last.'

I supposed there was logic to that. 'Well, if you say so. Anyway, have you already paid for it?'

'Yes.'

'Probably a mistake. They'll just keep delaying until we forget about it.'

'How are we going to forget about Dad's headstone? You twat.'

'Well, you never know with us do you.'  
'Don't be daft.'  
'I hope you're right. Anyway, see you later.'  
'Cheers.'

*A hedgehog tears open my black plastic rubbish sacks again, spewing out the smelly mess, but don't get annoyed...remember that headstone.*

*I've had to replace the fuel pump on my car twice over the last five thousand miles. Don't get wound up...remember that headstone.*

*Shamus is becoming an alcoholic. Don't ignore it...remember that headstone and don't accept the situation.*

*Dermi's elbow is becoming arthritic and may need replacing. Don't overlook his feelings....remember that headstone. Ring him up and ask him whether there is a date for the operation.*

Maybe after my death all I'll be remembered for is my actions from remembering that headstone.

## 52 The Bigger Picture

Weeks later Jonjo rang me. 'The headstone's been set. Are you coming over to The Manor tomorrow.'

That night we talked about death and the universe.

'People don't seem to care about their place in the universe. Everyone is getting on with their trivial little lives unaware of anything but their immediate surroundings,' I said disdainfully of the human race. Jonjo supposed I was really talking about myself.

I likened our existence to ants living on an insignificant ball of rock in an insignificant solar system in the outskirts of an insignificant galaxy in an insignificant local super-cluster of galaxies. I thought people are denying their past, turning their backs on their celestial family. Every bone, every muscle, every sinew of their bodies was once inside a star, just like those up there in the sky. The stuff that makes us, makes the Earth and makes the Sun came from inside an exploding star. People go around with paper bags over their heads, unwilling to look at the bigger picture. The goals you seek with such fervour, a bigger



car, a bigger house, more bathrooms, may now seem trivial.

'Hang on, Mark. Exactly how does your flash car and yuppie flat mesh with your ideas of this bigger picture?' said Jonjo, between sips of lager, trying to be objective and not liking my hypocrisy. I suppose there is something to needing more on the outside if you have less on the inside.

But I still fought fire with childish fire. 'How about gauging your own usefulness objectively. If I was on a desert island and could take either a graphic designer or a sack of manure, I know which one would be more useful.'

'Mark, you're wearing a sack of manure!' Dermi chipped in.

Shamus took over on the Trivial Pursuit gaming machine from a couple of lads who had rapidly wasted their money. They hovered around Shamus. Soon the machine coughed up an almost unending stream of coins. I sauntered over.

On seeing Shamus scooping out what they regarded as their money the taller lad snarled, 'what is he, a rocket scientist?'

Naïve, eager-to-be-informative me enlightened them, 'no actually...I am.'

The shorter bloke aggressively flicked me in the face with his finger tips: 'You cheeky git.'

They strolled out, looking happier now.

### 53 i.e.

'Oi, Dermil!' I said.

'What?'

'You're a Vector Boson.'

'Ta' very much like,' he replied in a mock-northern accent.

And, of course, Shamus still tried to peddle 'His' philosophy.

'Shamus, say you had the choice of sleeping with either a supermodel or Quasimodo, now who would you choose?' asked Jonjo, trying again to plummet the depths of 'His' philosophy.

Shamus thought for a moment, then leaned forward with manic eyes: 'Well...it depends...i.e....,' he replied, but before he could get much further Jonjo beat him down.

'Oh, get lost, Shamus. Get real! Ditch that philosophy.'  
'Get stuffed,' he mumbled through lips holding a roll-up.  
And he wouldn't.

## 54 The Cemetery

That Sunday Dermi and I visited Norwood Cemetery to see Dad's headstone for the first time. I thought I could remember the location of the plot but was becoming less sure after fifteen minutes driving around. I hadn't been there since the funeral. The landscape a maze with few distinguishing features. I drove back to the entrance to start again, hoping for fresh inspiration.

A clear, cold November's day. Deep blue sky. The dizzy, low sun flashed at the white-stoned debris of lives, floating on a sea of bright grass. This wide panorama had a calming effect, a magical looking glass, selectively filtering and focusing the rays of my life into a simplified perspective.

To my left were three large mausoleums of the Oakey family, famous for Oakey's knife polish. Far to the right was a large monument to Sir Henry Bessemer who died in 1898. Famous for the Bessemer Converter which is an efficient way of converting cast iron into steel. Of course, you can't forget his 'next door' neighbour, Dr. Gideon Mantell, with a citation 'the discoverer of the Iguanodon'. The phrase an admixture of pomposity and absurdity.

Here, a person's ego survives after death. A huge granite monument signifies a huge man; the notability of the man vicariously preserved for their families; ostentatious even after humbling death.

The surroundings were becoming more familiar.

*I shouldn't take this first right hand fork should I? It's the next one I want, I think!*

I parked by the side of the narrow tarmac drive, near the second fork and we hunted down the headstone.

Suddenly Dermi shouted: 'Oi! It's over 'ere.' He was standing by the first row of graves to the right of the fork in the road.

The headstone looked far better than I had imagined. Three feet high and five inches thick. Constructed from impossibly smooth, black marble. I had envisioned it as white. The epitaph 'Be Great!' composed of gold letters,

stood out in contrast to its blackness. A monolith of clean-cut sleekness. A menhir for the future.

This was the physical end then Dad. A seven-foot long oblong plot of ground, your head pointing due south. With spectral vision you can stare at stationary Polaris and be blessed with views of circumpolar constellations. In winter you can see the celestial procession of Perseus and The Great Bear. In summer, befriend Eltanin, at the head of Draco and welcome the 'W' pattern of Cassiopeia. Astrally travel into the dense part of the Milky Way, an opalescent phantom.

Silently we cleared the dead flowers.

Dad walked here often. For contemplation. Under foot is where my Dad had stepped. Peel off the thousands of footprints and there will be Dad's underneath my foot now. He wouldn't have known I would be here now. That's the advantage of the future - hindsight. Foresight in the past is a much rarer commodity.

I stared at the patch of ground: 'how come all the other plots have grass on them whereas here,' I brushed the earth with the sole of my foot, 'the sparse grass is rotten?'

The patches of turf had an unusual blackened appearance as if it burnt.

'Must be the near one hundred per cent alcohol effusing from him, killing everything off,' smiled Dermi.

Dad would have approved of this humour, I thought.

There was the distant rumble of jet engines as an aeroplane prepared itself for the final approach to Heathrow, west of London.

'You blame Dad, don't you?' I probed.

Dermi looked at me with an expression showing he didn't like a direct personal question.

'I told you, I didn't really know him.'

'Come on. Stop hiding behind some convenient childhood memory lapses.'

'Give it a rest, Mark.'

I paused and looked down at the mound of brown, clumpy clay at my feet. 'You shouldn't be so hard on him, you know. It wasn't his fault really.'

'Well, who else's fault was it?' he snapped.

I tapped at a small boulder of clay with my soft squash shoe, chosen to feel a football better. 'It's just the way life is.'

A car intruded, moving respectfully slowly, and we

remained silent until it passed. Dermi twitched his head down to see who was driving, but it was only an old lady hunched over the steering wheel, grasping it tightly as if it were trying to get away. A pungent waft of decaying flowers from the nearby bin in the car's gentle wake.

Dermi lit a ciggie and blew smoke towards the grave: 'Yeah, but, if he didn't want to be involved with us he shouldn't have had us.'

I felt a bit aggravated. I thought Shamus, Maggie, Jonjo and Dermi used Dad as a convenient excuse to account for their failings. I felt I had to defend Dad. But not sure why. Maybe being so near to him, standing on top of his grave. Or it could be that, as my brothers kept saying, I was the favourite, which may have been because I was closest to him in temperament. Apart from alcohol abuse since that accolade belonged to Shamus. I did feel an empathy with him. I could imagine being like him. A cold, analytical, impersonal scientist, not interested in relationships. Perhaps my brothers could see this more clearly than me. Perhaps I really was the one most like Dad. After all, we did share a pathological interest in the stars and we were both introspective and sensitive.

It irritated me that Shamus blamed Dad for him flunking out of college and leading an unstructured life. I remembered a drunk Shamus saying if he could have talked to Dad or Dad had shown some interest in what he was doing when he was in the fifth form it would have dissipated his teenage resentment of him.

And I knew Jonjo was annoyed at Dad for his resentful behaviour towards him when he was a teenager – he had told me so on many occasions.

The same story for Maggie. Although she secretly loved him and now he was gone she felt particularly hard done by, there was singular conflict between them when she was a teenager - a time when she was first dating seriously.

I remembered a teenage Maggie coming home with Dave, a seemingly grown-up twenty-one year old from the working classes - but he had a car which impressed her. Unfortunately Dad came back from the pub late that evening particularly drunk and he verbally laid into Dave.

'What do you think you're doing with my daughter,' he shouted. 'You're too old...too old.' He grabbed Dave's arm and tried to pull him from the chair.

Dave looked shell-shocked. He had been secretly

dating Maggie for a few months, she usually waited for him at the bottom of Norwood Park; I knew, I spied on her a few times - as younger brothers do - giving me a bargaining chip to negate her bossy nature. But this was the first time Dave had met us and, prior to Dad's entrance, must have been thought what a nice, quiet and polite family we were.

I felt a cringing embarrassment at Dad's drunken behaviour so I could imagine how Maggie must have felt.

A humiliated Maggie pushed Dad into the hall: 'Dad, leave him will you. Just go away.'

By this stage in her life mum was emotionally washed up, and she hated arguments. All she could muster was: 'You and your stupid drink.' She went into the kitchen. There was nowhere else for her to go.

Dad was pushing at Dave who tried to rationalise: 'What's the age difference between you and your wife, Mr. Foley.' But that made him worse. He didn't want to explain himself to his family let alone a stranger wanting his daughter.

'You're too old. Get out. You're too old. Get out,' he shouted.

Maggie's face crumpled into tears squeezed from her shame. 'Go away, Dad,' she screamed.

Dave moved into the hall towards the front door with Maggie trailing close behind, Dad following.

'I'd better go Maggie before I do something I will regret,' said Dave. He squeezed her arm and left.

Maggie turned around and pushed past Dad in the small hallway fixing him with an intense stare and sobbing: 'I hate you!' and she stomped upstairs towards her room.

'He's too old. Just too old,' Dad said more calmly, now he had got what he wanted.

At the head of the stairs Maggie turned and said with controlled-tears assertion: 'I'm going to marry him.' She slammed the door of her room shaking the house.

Six months later, on her seventeenth birthday, Maggie did marry Dave in a registry office. Dad didn't turn up. Maggie was already two months pregnant. The marriage was a sham of course that barely lasted a year. Dad almost goaded her into the whole fucking mess.

Even with all this turmoil Dad had produced, I still felt like shouting at my family: stop whinging, using Dad to account for your own failings. The decisions you make in life are up to you. Don't blame anyone else.

But I didn't know if I was right to say this. I could always see the other side of the argument. I couldn't make a decision. I couldn't have a definite opinion about anything. Maybe this was a bad way to be. Then again maybe it wasn't.

*I was ratiocinating to high shit.*

I said to Dermi: 'It's not as simple as that. They had all that Catholic anti birth-control stuff then. It's a lot more sensible nowadays.'

Dermi sighed: 'I dunno. I suppose so. I just wish he could have been more open with us. I'm sure if we were just friends instead of family we could have had a better relationship.'

'Yeah, I know what you mean.'

Dermi became more relaxed. He never did stay angry for long. A man is as big as what makes him angry.

I looked at Dad's single headstone, which was nice enough, but my eyes were jealously drawn to the gently rising ground in the south-east. There, near the summit, was the largest solid block of granite in the whole cemetery, weighing-in at well over ten tons and occupying a volume of one hundred and forty-five cubic feet. Fifty times the volume of Dad's. This monolith was in remembrance of Sir William Cubitt, a civil engineer who died in 1861. He was responsible for building London's Covent Garden and County Hall - a strange coincidence since these two places had also played a part in Dad's life. Weird, who would have thought they would be together now?

'Dermi, let's come back tonight and swap Cubitt's and Dad's memorials. I don't think any one would notice.'

'That's not a bad idea,' thought Dermi. 'But might it not be better to develop Dad's plot in its own right, after all, we do own it?'

'I guess so,' I said, patting the earth down with my foot: 'We paid enough for it didn't we.'

Dermi looked up from the grave toward me. 'That must mean we own all the land beneath to the centre of the Earth and all the sky above it,' he said in an upbeat manner.

'Yeah,' I agreed. 'If we dug everything out between here and the centre of the Earth and placed it on top of his plot, this new monolith would form a column of rock about four thousand miles high and would weigh...hang on a minute...let's see...what's the density of rock Dermi?'

'You're the fucking scientist.'

'Well okay, it must be between two to three tons per cubic metre...that gives us a column of rock weighing...let's see...about thirty million tons.'

'Sure would put Cubitt's piddling little headstone to shame wouldn't it.'

'Exactement!'

Dermi lifted his eyes skywards. 'What about the space above?'

'I suppose if we extend the column upwards, continuing through the atmosphere towards space, looking at the plot's projection onto the celestial sphere,' I said looking around to get my bearings: 'I reckon we must own a bit of The Plough.'

'Cheers, I'll have a free pint then.'

'No! Ursa Major, The Great Bear.'

'Oi!...leave my girlfriend out of this.'

'Maybe we should just plant a memorial tree.'

'That's a bit of a come down innit?' said Dermi disappointedly.

'A Giant Sequoia!'

'Champion!'

## 55 Exeunt

Trying to extend the weekend feeling, me and my brothers went bowling that afternoon at the other end of Streatham High Road.

Afterwards Shamus suggested: 'Have a swift half in The Manor before you go back, Mark.'

I was sorely tempted but I thought I would never get back to my flat which overlooked Wandsworth Common. I would also feel pretty lousy at work from another late boozing session, which undoubtedly it would turn into. So I just dropped them off and intended to turn right to get home through Tooting.

But I was strangely gripped! Something forced me to drive straight at the lights and take a left up by the side of Streatham Common, driving up that hill we had walked months ago, flattening out by the woods where we used to climb those trees when young. On towards the brow of Crown Dale by St. John's and Shamus' mate 'Dos'. Down the other side passing Larry's and his delicious, rotten burgers, heading towards Norwood Park, overlooked by

that television mast pricking the sky. I was urged on by some unseen force.

I parked at the brow of Salter's Hill next to the park. It was cold so I slipped on a wax jacket and strolled over to the entrance by the kid's swings.

Twilight bid goodnight as I ambled the path with those now low railings of the swings to my left. They were so high when we played there, for hours as kids.

The bench creaked as I sat not far from the paddling pool.

Sitting amidst the flickering shadows of noisy gusting trees I was getting that feeling again, of being separate...alone. A feeling like I was always on the outside of everything. Even surrounded by friends I still felt set apart. Not a physical loneliness. Sometimes the more people around the more isolated I felt. Sober, I couldn't stand the intense loneliness of a crowded room. A spiritual loneliness: I found it hard to open up and let people in. I had this barrier. Too reserved. Like Dad. No one who was in tune with me to dilute my isolation. Only the similar feelings of my brothers filled the chasm - that is why I sought their company. We could communicate for a while, alleviating the solitude. This spiritual loneliness could make me a candidate for Christian enlightenment. Without such enlightenment all clergy could feel as humanly singular as me.

But the stars. A spiritual balm. Spiritual – a feeling of one's consciousness and place in the universe. There is no contradiction between being an atheist and a spiritualist in the sense of the word as one who studies nature 'physis' – physics.

Whilst sober...I wondered. That might be a clue why we and Dad drank.

A few nights ago I was in my flat looking at a Marx Brothers' video, washed down by a bottle of wine. After a few glasses my vision became restricted onto things physically near. Sober, my mind had a one-way interaction with distant people, like being in a large crowded room yet able to notice if a person in the far corner was glancing towards me - my sensitivity filled the room. Awkwardness exuded like slippery fumes of a gas fire, yielding a sense of isotropic awareness.

Alcohol decreased my range of sensitivity, squashing it into a smaller beacon, becoming more directional and shorter range. With further booze I could only sense things



directly in front - like staring at that television screen - nothing else existed. I was only aware of Groucho happily been told by the departing ship's bursar that he didn't have time to settle his hotel bill. I thought I must be getting old; I was starting to like the harp solos of Harpo.

At these limiting sensations I usually stopped drinking. Otherwise my mind crept back into a recess and interacted with some shady part of itself, hidden in an abandoned leafy neural lane.

This limited sphere of awareness made me feel like a small child again. As a kid, I remembered belting stones with a tennis racket over the houses unaware they would be landing on cars or cracking windows or injuring people. I knew what was on the other side yet I didn't think about it - it was too far away, another world where the stones could magically appear as floating feathers. A kid's limited sphere of awareness, like booze makes me feel now. Alcohol makes me become childlike. That could be it - I longed for my childhood lack of awareness, lack of sensitivity. Perhaps I had never grown out of childhood, and alcohol put me back there to finish it off. Kids do seem to act like an adult under the influence. They haven't the sensitivity to make them aware of their surroundings. They only respond within the closeness of their sphere of awareness. People under the influence aren't self-conscious. Inebriates and kids act the same. Kids can shout or act silly on a crowded bus causing embarrassment, same as a drunk.

Me and my brothers drink because our childhood hasn't been fulfilled, it hasn't finished properly. Maybe we needed Dad to be around more. Maybe we craved more guidance and support from him. Perhaps we will eventually mature and grow out of alcohol dependence.

I smiled. I could imagine Jonjo criticising my crappy thesis as he, unwittingly, fondled his wet-nursing pint.

Jonjo could be right. I didn't understand why I had to analyse everything. I should just accept things. There is so little time on this Earth. It would make things easier.

Taurus, the elongated triangle of stars, horns of the bull, makes an appearance from behind drifting clouds. The constellation from where the Sun shone on the day I was born some long ago spring morning. Ascendant now - a keel to steady me on life's voyage.

I recalled what Dermi said that morning in the cemetery, about me being like Dad.

*I won't turn out like Dad. Will I? Dying alone.*

In the darkness I sensed my ghostly image trudging across the grass towards St. John's. Etched into the scene from repetition.

Familiar views make the surroundings friendly. The swings and the feebly illuminated railings of the paddling pool.

My outstretched foot nods the tall grass under the bench. I glance at the Threepenny-Bit tree. I hardly feel any different now than when eighteen, or eleven...a mature adult now, I should be confident, know myself or be wise or profound or something. It never happens. The chrysalis encasing my development is a waiting rather than changing room.

*I can't turn out like Dad...Can I?*

I creaked off the bench and coins jingled in my pocket. I moved the warm coins in my hand towards the waxy illumination. One had a coppery darkness, the other three shiny. I threw them into the darkness but didn't hear them fall on the grass. A pay-back for a kid's thrill of finding coins some long-ago time. I hoped a needy kid finds them. Sowing seeds of kindness, to be harvested by someone else. If everyone could sprinkle a few seeds a chain reaction may produce a phenomenal harvest.

I headed down the hill towards the plaque depicting London's sights. Shadows of trees slithered along the grass in step with the passing lamps.

I leant on the plaque's metallic coldness.

The street lights like strings of glow-worms slinked in front of the twinkling constellations of the city lights. I stood upright at the plaque. A lectern. An inner tension built as if I was expected to justify my feelings to a hidden audience of critics in London's dark amphitheatre.

So here I am: school's over, university's over, I've now got a steady job - but my dad's dead, not many months ago. A single letter of the alphabet changed life for him - Dad...dead.

Staring towards my old home, thinking of my family as carefree kids and later as troubled adolescents stirred up

by alcohol I felt a tightening inside. A burgeoning tide of sentiment from the pit of my stomach rising to a reflex at my throat. A vomit of emotion.

Shouted bullets punctured the darkness. Tracer glowing from burning anger and bitterness. Fizzing past the railway embankment towards Romany Rise; flashing over my astronomy backyard; smashing through the Venetian blinds of the sausage-and-onion kitchen; bursting into the smoky, alcohol-vapoured front-room to Dad, sitting, staring at the ceiling:

*Dad, why didn't you let me in?  
...why didn't you show me your feelings?  
...why didn't you show me your hurt?*

Tears; sobbing to the metronomic light on a distant Canary Wharf.

*...why didn't you let me cry when you died?*

Ringing silence.

I glanced around glad the darkness shrouded my embarrassing tears.

*Dad...why am I so like you?  
...I don't want to die alone.*

I stared towards Dad's last digs in Gypsy Road.

No! A sense of determination. It doesn't have to be like that. It doesn't have to end that way.

My shocked chest heaves less as I wipe away tears on my sweatshirt sleeve tugged through the jacket.

I whisper, 'thank you,' moving my gaze beyond a shadowy St. Luke's to Norwood cemetery where he now lay.

Dad has spoken to me - I should show my tears. These tears. So should my brothers.

If I have kids I'm going to talk to them. You know, really talk and love them and have a human relationship with them, warts and all. That's all I can do. That is what I have learnt from Dad.

And now, too, with my brothers. I don't want to make excuses for not being with them when they die.

This is the lesson from Dad.

Phew! I sighed. What had gotten into me? I hadn't cried for ages. I re-adjusted - but not too much - my scientific, unaffected mind back into its shell. I felt relief and on that upbeat note I wanted to rush to Streatham and tell my brothers. I thought this was something useful I could put in that memorial tome.

Maybe it was true what Jonjo said about having a headstone next to your television to remind you of your own mortality.

I could have forged a deeper relationship with Dad if I imagined just for an hour that he was no longer on this Earth. I could picture him with eyes full of the transience of life and help him open up and get in contact.

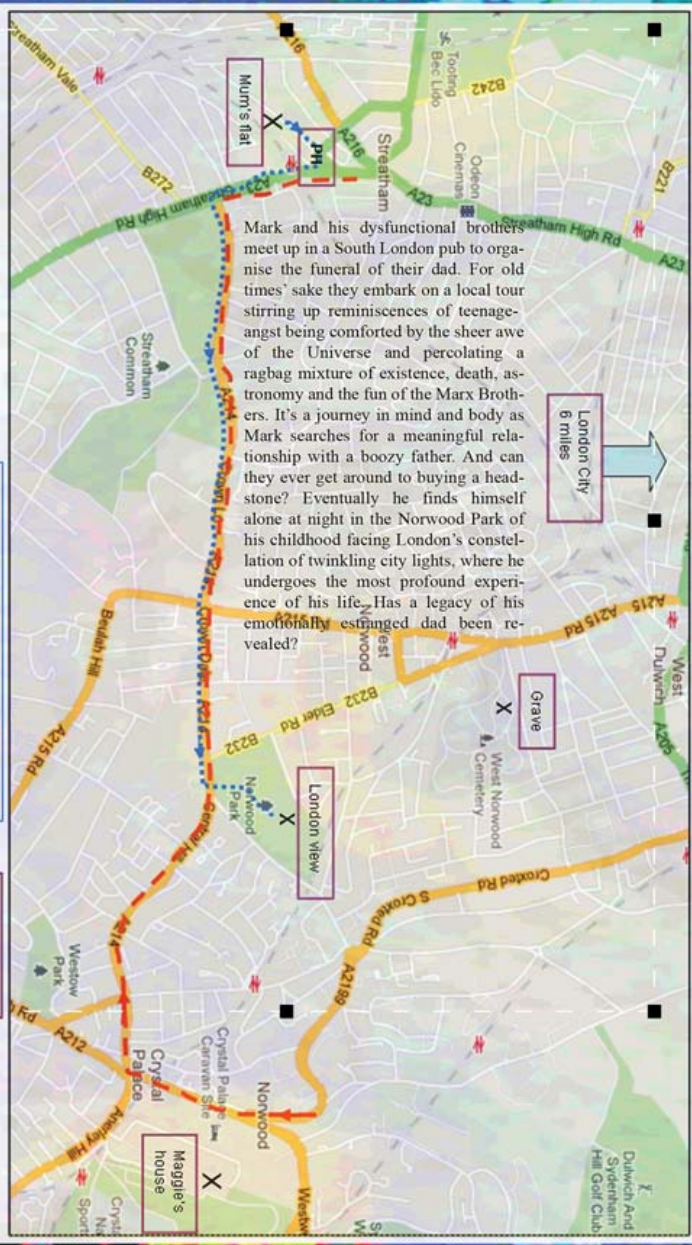
Why wasn't I there when Dad died? Because he wouldn't let me care enough about him.

I exhaled a ghostly vapour.

The night air is chilly. Noise of a gust through the trees startles me. The darkness shrouds me. I have outstayed my welcome.

Time to leave.

*Come on...me and these whisperings, from Dad in the wings...exeunt.*



Mark and his dysfunctional brothers meet up in a South London pub to organise the funeral of their dad. For old times' sake they embark on a local tour stirring up reminiscences of teenage angst being comforted by the sheer awe of the Universe and percolating a ragbag mixture of existence, death, astronomy and the fun of the Marx Brothers. It's a journey in mind and body as Mark searches for a meaningful relationship with a boozy father. And can they ever get around to buying a headstone? Eventually he finds himself alone at night in the Norwood Park of his childhood facing London's constellation of twinkling city lights, where he undergoes the most profound experience of his life. Has a legacy of his emotionally estranged dad been revealed?

- ..... Mark and his brothers walk out
- - - - - Mark and his brothers bus route back
- PH: The Manor