



DAVID
JASON

My Life

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About the Book

The long-awaited autobiography of one of Britain's best-loved actors.

Born the son of a Billingsgate market porter at the height of the Second World War, David Jason spent his early life dodging bombs and bullies, both with impish good timing. Giving up on an unloved career as an electrician, he turned his attention to acting and soon, through a natural talent for making people laugh, found himself working with the leading lights of British comedy in the 1960s and '70s alongside Eric Idle, Michael Palin, Bob Monkhouse and Ronnie Barker. Barker would become a mentor to David, leading to hugely successful stints in *Porridge* and *Open All Hours*.

It wasn't until 1981, kitted out with a sheepskin jacket, a flat cap, and a clapped-out Reliant Regal, that David found the part that would capture the nation's hearts: the beloved Derek 'Del Boy' Trotter in *Only Fools and Horses*. Never a one-trick pony, he had an award-winning spell as TV's favourite detective Jack Frost, took a country jaunt as Pop Larkin in *The Darling Buds of May*, and even voiced a crime-fighting cartoon rodent in the much-loved children's show *Danger Mouse*.

But life hasn't all been so easy: from missing out on a key role in *Dad's Army* to nearly drowning in a freak diving accident, David has had his fair share of ups and downs, and has lost some of his nearest and dearest along the way.

David's is a touching, funny and warm-hearted story, which charts the course of his incredible five decades at the top of the entertainment business. He's been a shopkeeper and a detective inspector, a crime-fighter and a market trader, and he ain't finished yet. As Del Boy would say, it's all cushty.

About the Author

Sir David Jason was born in 1940 in North London. His acting career has been long and varied: from his theatre work in the West End to providing voices for Mr Toad from *The Wind in the Willow*, *Danger Mouse* and *The BFG*; and from *Open All Hours* and *The Darling Buds of May* to his starring roles as Detective Inspector Frost in *A Touch of Frost* and, of course, Derek 'Del Boy' Trotter in *Only Fools and Horses*.

He lives with his wife, Gill, and their daughter, Sophie, in Buckinghamshire.

DAVID JASON

My Life



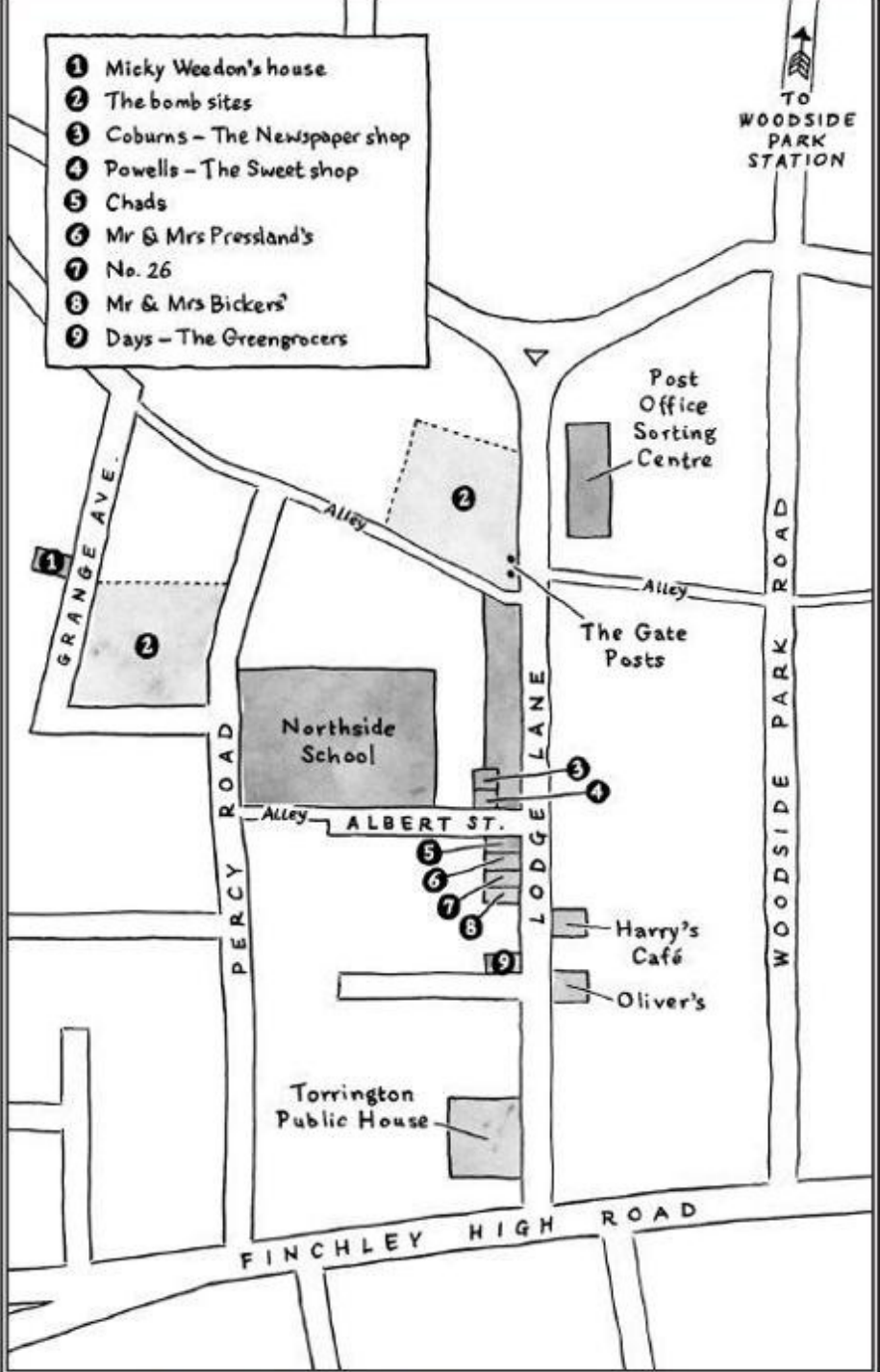
*To my lovely wife and daughter, my family and everyone who has helped me on this journey; this book
is for you.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

AS WELL AS the family members, friends and colleagues who appear in this book, there are some additional people I would like to thank for their support, advice and friendship:

Rod Brown; Ray Cooney; Les Davis; Jack Edmonds; Ray & Gloria Freeda; Suzi Freeda; Don Gatherer; Saleem Goolamali; Lady (Mary) Hatch; Jimmy Mulville; Dave Rogers; Lynda Ronan; Alan & Linda Smith; Giles Smith. A special thanks to Meg Poole.

And anyone else who knows me!



AROUND LODGE LANE c.1950

INTRODUCTION

By way of greeting, a brief recounting of my time on a desert island with no discs.

WHICH NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE shall I begin with? The one involving the thirty-foot drop at Ronnie Barker's house? The one with the pair of pliers and the bare electrical wire? The one in which the giant polystyrene sugar lumps rained down on me from a great height? Or the one caused by the rogue Flymo in Crowborough?

Actually, let's get to all of those later. For now, as our little appetiser here, ahead of the death-defying feast beyond, let's cover the one where I almost cop it on a desert island in the middle of the ocean.

We're talking 1996 – my first holiday with Gill, who was then my wonderful girlfriend and is now my wonderful wife. I'm fifty-six years old at this point, and we're in the paradise which is the Virgin Islands, in a lovely remote spot, and I have decided to go diving. (I am proud to be able to call myself a qualified Dive Master, a fact I may mention in the following pages more than once.) A bad hurricane has hit these parts in the preceding stormy season and very few of the tourist operations are back up and running as yet. However, in the little town I drive to, there's one diving place open and the girl in the office, who is an instructor, says she'll get a boat together and take me out for a dive.

So off we go, pattering miles out into the beautiful blue open water, entirely alone there, and the instructor drops anchor and we strap on the masks and tanks and plunge in.

And it's bliss, as diving usually is. My two favourite activities in the world: diving and flying. I am rarely happier than when deep in the water or high in the sky. Psychiatrists: help yourselves.

Bliss, then. Bit of a strong current down there on this occasion. But even a few minutes at forty feet below – I'd recommend it to anyone. We clamber back into the boat and get ready to head for home, but the anchor has caught and won't come up. I volunteer to dive back down and free it.

All good. The anchor is now loose and I surface. Except that, while below the water, I must have got sucked into the current at some point without realising, and when I come to the top, I discover I have lost the boat. Or perhaps the boat has lost me. It makes no difference. I'm in high, pitching waves and twisting my head around in a state of increasing disorientation, and the boat is nowhere to be seen. Indeed, nothing is anywhere to be seen. Just miles of pitching waves, and me.

Panic, at this point, is obviously a decent option. But I try not to. There's a motto we Dive Masters know well: 'Stop. Breathe. Think. Act.' I had that thoroughly drilled into me by my instructor in the Cayman Islands, Ray 'Taffy' Williams, a former soldier with plenty of stories to tell who became my great friend. 'Stop. Breathe. Think. Act.' Any minute now, I think, a wave will lift me and I will catch sight of the boat, or the boat will catch sight of me.

The waves do lift me. But I don't see a boat. I appear to be alone in the ocean, miles from land, under baking sun and, as I am gradually realising, with increasing dawning horror, at the mercy of the current drawing me ever further outwards.

It's at this point, anxiously swivelling my head from side to side, that I notice a tiny island. At least I think it's an island. It bobs in and out of my view. It's some distance from me, but it might just be swimmable. Is there any other option? I don't think there is. I start to swim.

The swim is exhausting. It seems to last for hours and saps all the energy from my supremely thin (obviously) and (if you don't mind me saying so) highly shapely fifty-six-year-old limbs. But by dragging myself onward, I do eventually reach the island. Relief!

Except not. Perspective has played a foul trick. When I get there, it isn't really an island. It's more a broad, high, steep rock. No gently shelving sand to fling myself onto then, like in the movies. Instead

a tall, jagged cliff face, slapped by waves.

~~This inhospitable crag remains, though, my only plausible saviour. Assuming I can get onto it~~ obviously. By now my arms and legs are heavier than they have ever been. I have to use the waves to lodge me halfway up the rock. I try twice and fail and get washed back. If I don't get on this next time I'm not sure I'll have the energy to try again. One last desperate effort ...

I ready myself, ride the wave onto the rock, and this time manage to cling on and climb up. At the top of the rock is a small dip containing a shallow puddle of seawater flung up by the waves. I lie down in this puddle. And then I pass out.

I don't know how long I'm unconscious for, but when I come to, I sit up and discover that – well, what do you know, and isn't this just typical? – it was all a dream and, flooded with relief, I'm waking up back in bed with Gill in the safety of the apartment.

No, I don't. Because it isn't a dream. The bit about it being a dream was a dream. I am actually and indisputably on a rock in the middle of the ocean, under the still-baking sun.

But hang on. My eyes focus and there, out to sea, is the boat, plainly visible in the distance. The boat! The instructor is still out there, on the bright blue water, looking for me. I wave and shout. But the wind carries the sound away and she's looking down into the water. She's not looking at the rock.

I'm over here! It's OK. She's got to see me in a moment, hasn't she?

I watch numbly as the boat completes a few more silent circles. And then, with a sinking heart, I see it turn and motor away, growing smaller and smaller, towards the thin ribbon of the coast on the distant horizon.

Abandoned. She's given up on me.

Well, now I truly am stuffed. Washed up, a castaway. What would Robinson Crusoe do? Seek a source of food among the vegetation, no doubt, and begin to build a shelter. Yeah, well, cheer up, Robbie. I'm on a flipping rock. There is no vegetation, nothing with which to build a bijou shack and start a cosy bonfire, and very little altogether in the way of possibilities, short of beginning a new life as a cormorant.

Again, I don't know how much time now passes. But I do know that, as I sit there, staring mournfully across the wide expanse of totally unpopulated water, I have time to reflect. Just suppose it did end here. Just suppose the clock was now running on my final few hours, the reaper donning his terrible cloak and getting the scythe from the umbrella stand in his hall, prior to setting out. Just suppose I was, indeed, about to die. Well, you'd have to say, it had been a pretty good innings. Considerably short, maybe. But a pretty good stretch. A lot of luck in there. A lot of good times, with some truly great people. And some really amazing success. *Only Fools and Horses*, *The Darling Buds of May*, *Touch of Frost*, a few BAFTAs on the mantelpiece – not too shabby as CVs go. If it should all come to a halt right now, in a hot puddle, well, at the very least you would have to argue that it had been a busy and fulfilling life, and not bad at all for a working-class lad from north London who –

Oh, stuff all that. Here's the fact: I don't want to die alone on a rock. I don't even want to die with company on a rock, given the choice. I want to be alive. I've got stuff I still want to do. I've got Gill somewhere back on that shore. Reasons to live.

But what's this? A dot on the horizon, growing larger, getting closer. The instructor has returned to the shore for help, that's what she's done. There are figures in the boat. They're searching for me. I wave and shout and wave and shout. Someone in the boat lifts his head and sees me. Now the people in the boat are shouting and waving and the boat is coming to the rock. I'm saved.

True story, dear reader. And like the tale you're about to read, not one I have told before, though now, looking back at seventy-three, seems as good a time as any. Looking back, I should say, in a state of boundlessly grateful and sometimes puzzled wonderment at the unlikelihood of the journey that took me from where I started to where I've got to.

It's a story of immense good fortune, I have to say. But with scrapes, and a few things worse than scrapes, along the way. For, as we'll see, that day in the Virgin Islands was not the only time in my life when I thought the boat had gone and the boat came back.

CHAPTER ONE

Life during wartime. A long-standing mystery resolved. And sundry near-death experiences, one involving a tomahawk.

WHAT I REMEMBER is being extremely young and hearing thunder and feeling the walls of the house shake and the floor beneath us tremble and fearfully asking my mother what was going on. And my mother holding me close and saying, 'It's nothing to worry about. It's just God moving His furniture around.'

It wasn't, in fact. It was Hitler moving London around – something the German Chancellor seemed to be particularly keen on at that point in his career. I was born on 2 February 1940, five months after the outbreak of the Second World War, and even though those five years of global conflagration quite clearly had nothing to do with me, the Luftwaffe nevertheless pursued me from aeroplanes, with impressive enthusiasm, for all of my tenderest years. Which is why I associate my earliest days with the smell and taste of brick dust.

My brother Arthur, seven years my senior, was eventually evacuated to the safety of the countryside, like half a million other London children. But I was too young for that, so my infancy was spent in war-torn north London, where, upon the sounding of the air-raid sirens, I was periodically strapped into a government-issue gas mask, an infringement of my liberty which, apparently, I bitterly resisted. Then I was made to lie down with my parents in the Morrison shelter – essentially an indoor wire-mesh cage which doubled as a stout dining table and which gave you a fighting chance of surviving in the event that your house collapsed around your ears. As the printed letter that had come round from Mr G. Beach, Air Raid Precautions Officer for the Borough of Finchley, had kindly explained: 'Protection in your own home is an excellent alternative to communal or public shelter and it conforms to the principle of dispersal which experience has proved to be a wise one.' Excellent and wise, indeed. So, there, amid the distant and not-so-distant crumps and crashes and all the awesome noises of destruction, my mother would lie with me, dutifully honouring the principle of dispersal, and doing her level best not to transfer her fear. It was just God, moving His furniture around.

We kept my infant gas mask in the house for many years; it was like a rubber deep-sea diver's helmet, but designed to hold the baby's entire body, with drawstrings at the bottom. Long afterwards I used to get an eerie feeling just looking at it.

We were the White family and for some reason the target of Hitler's frustrated anger included our tiny terraced house at 26 Lodge Lane in Finchley – so tiny that when you opened the front door, you almost fell up the stairs, which were right in front of you. It was a three-up, three-down. There was a front room, which we were never allowed to go into except at Christmas and, presumably, in the event of a member of the royal family happening to drop in, although, in my recollection, this rarely happened. Beyond that was the middle room, where the open fire was and where the whole family sat and listened to the wireless – and where, much later, we gathered to watch the television. Beyond the middle room was the kitchen, and beyond the kitchen, out in the backyard, in a lean-to, behind a latched wooden door, was the lavatory – all mod cons. But no electricity, of course: electric light didn't come to Lodge Lane until the early 1950s. Until then, it was gas lamps, with their fiddly mantles and constant hiss.

And then upstairs were three bedrooms, although one of them was really just a box room – a bedroom suitable only for a very small collection of boxes. That was where my sister June slept, after she came along, seven years after me, in 1947. I shared with Arthur, a cosy arrangement which prevailed for nearly a decade until he left home.

My mum, Olwen, worked as a maid in a big house in the well-to-do suburban part of Finchley. Her

employer, always spoken of with great reverence in our house, was Mr Strathmore, a portly judge. Mum had found work with him when she left Wales as a young teenager, fleeing her drunken and violent father – not a passage of her life that she was much inclined to speak about. At first Mr Strathmore employed her as a live-in maid, and even after she met my dad, married and began renting a house of her own, she still went there in the day to clean.

She took me with her to work one day and I remember, as she unlatched the gate, being staggered by the grandeur of this place – a detached house in its own garden, of all things, with its own driveway. I went back and looked at it many years later, and, comparatively speaking, it wasn't all that grand. But at the time, to a kid from Lodge Lane, it was a place of unimaginable richness – something from another world entirely. When my mother eventually retired, Mr Strathmore gave her a Japanese silk print of cherry blossoms – again, a rare and exotic item in our terms. It hangs in my house to this day.

There were no books in the family home, but my mother was a bright and talkative woman who loved a gossip and a story, embellished or otherwise, and was given slightly to malapropisms: family lore has her leaning over the fence and solemnly informing Mrs Pressland from next door that the woman over the road had gone into hospital to 'have her wound out'. And she was Welsh so, of course, she sang. One vivid vignette in my mind: being cuddled up with her on the sofa in the dining room on a dark winter afternoon, just the two of us in the house, the fire lit, her singing me Christmas songs as snow fell into the yard. In truth, physical affection and displays of emotion were rare, and moments of intimacy, too. But that wasn't just my parents: that was how people were. It didn't feel like a lack. We knew we were loved.

My father, Arthur, was a porter at Billingsgate market. His brothers were butchers – indeed, if you climb back through my family tree, butchers crop up a lot. It turns out that I come from a long line of people who knew how to wield a meat cleaver. There was a notable exception in the form of my great-great-great-grandfather (roughly speaking), back in seventeen-hundred-and-frozen-to-death, who owned a brick-making business in Sussex and was apparently an extremely wealthy man. But not so soon had the White lineage finally come into some money than one of the sons immediately blew the fortune away – drink and women, no doubt, and the rest of it, I'm sure, he wasted. And after that everyone went back to being butchers again.

Anyway, my father had courageously stepped to one side of the family tradition of butchery and he was a fishmonger – firstly at Billingsgate and later behind the counter of the Mac Fisheries fish shop in Camden Town. He moved on from there to serve in another Mac Fisheries branch, in the Jewish community in Golders Green. A practical and resourceful man, he knew how to save a bob or two. He cut up an old bike tyre and stuck lumps of it around the front of his work shoes to form an improvised bumper against wear and tear and the cold water that fishmongers spend their lives sloshing around in. Thus rubberised, and making sounds like a pantomime horse, he would be up at four and trot off to work on his bike. Of course, 1940–45 were the years of the wartime blackout, making night-time cycling a potentially risky business. Sure enough, one dark morning soon after my birth, so the story goes, my father, his shoes and his bike dropped into a freshly made bomb crater. The bomb had dropped on the London side of the bridge at Archway, right in the middle of the road. It was so deep that it must have stunned him momentarily. He was down there for some time until the morning light dawned and some passing air-raid wardens heard his cries for help. They hauled him up to the surface whereupon, as he stood dusting himself down, they could only express their astonishment. 'Look at this bloke: he's had a bomb drop right on top of him, and he's still alive!' My father did not correct them. He straightened the front wheel of his bike, smoothed down his hair and rode on to work.

By all accounts, my father was something of a showman in the workplace, joshing with the customers, whom he loved, giving them a bit of a routine as he wrapped the haddock and the haddock, messing about with the scales and the weights. It was probably his way of making the job tolerable.

because a lot of the time he'd have been frozen and wet and on his feet for hours on end. (Arthritis would punish those feet for a lifetime of exertion when he was older.) In any case, piss-taking seemed to run on his side of the family. The term he and his relatives used for it was a piece of obsolete market trader's slang: chi-iking. At work, and socially, my dad was forever chi-iking – bantering and winding people up. At home, though, the showmanship tended to go away and he was a rather brooding and forbidding presence whom you did your best not to cross. He occasionally gave the impression that he didn't much want us kids about. He adored my mother, though, and respected her, entirely aware that she was the brains that made the family work.

So, to Mr and Mrs White, in the particularly cold February of 1940, a further son. Two further sons in fact – twins. But only I emerged alive from the womb (or, as my mother would have put it, 'the wound'). I was healthy, but my companion for those nine months simply hadn't thrived. In the family version of these events, passed on to me as a child, I had been too greedy and eaten all the food. (Not how even this potentially sensitive area was not spurned as an opening for mild chi-iking.) The fact that I was originally one half of a duo would eventually give rise to a theory, much propounded in newspaper profiles over the years, that all my life since then has been a desperate effort to compensate for that stillborn brother. It's a grand idea, though I fear the truth may be a lot more prosaic. After all, this incident, sad as it was, was something that dated back to the day I was born, about which my memories are bound to be a bit patchy. From my point of view, it was a distant curiosity, a piece of passed-down history. It was hard to feel it as a loss – or even as an event in my life.

Still, the legend surrounding this biographical detail and its psychological meanings gained a further layer of decorative guilt after a pair of journalists visited my mother at home, late in her life, with flowers, warm smiles and open notebooks. Whereupon, over a pot of tea, my mother garrulously told her friendly visitors how delighted she was that I had taken the stage name 'Jason' in my twin's honour. Furthermore (and here one can imagine the journalists' biros starting to scribble especially quickly), the stringencies of the war, which saw so many public services suspended, had denied my twin the opportunity of a traditional funeral and so my mother had had no option, had she? She had buried him herself in the backyard.

Well, I did mention that my mother liked to embellish a tale. I should also point out that she was well shall we say, well into her anecdotage by the point at which she gave this interview. (I remember her telling me over the phone, 'I had a lovely chat about you with some journalists today,' and thinking, 'Uh-oh.')

So, just to straighten the record: I and my ill-fated twin weren't born at home; we were delivered at North Middlesex County Hospital, as declared on my birth certificate. My mother, to the very best of my knowledge, buried exactly no bodies in our back garden, during wartime or any other time. And my twin, being stillborn, was unnamed. I owe my stage name to another source of inspiration altogether, as I shall relate.

Now, it may well be that my parents were troubled by the baby they lost, and the life that never was, in ways that I wasn't, and in ways that I never knew. I assume, at least, that they weren't preparing for twins: in the absence of ultrasound scanning, the first they would have even known about my mother carrying two babies, rather than one, would have been at the birth. Did that make it easier to accept? I don't know. I can only say that they always seemed entirely sanguine about what happened. Perhaps the times taught them to be so. After all, there was a war on. There was a lot of death about. People like my mother and father did what they could, and got on with being alive. And so did I.

* * *

NO BAD TURN-UP, of course, to have a fishmonger in the family during wartime. And no bad thing, either

to have an uncle who was a butcher. The war brought food shortages and strict rationing. Apparently, as a baby – in the absence of anything sugary or even a traditional dummy – I was given a carrot as a pacifier, so they must have been cheap and readily available. But like everyone else, my parents had to scrape and scratch to get what provisions they could, and anything extra was welcome. Which is why one morning, after an air raid, Mrs Pressland called across the fence to my mother in a state of some excitement. ‘Mrs White,’ she shouted, ‘you’ve got a dead chicken on your roof.’

Now this was quite a coup. The unfortunate piece of poultry had obviously been flung up there during the night’s destruction – manna from the skies. It seemed unlikely that the chicken had been innocently blasted from a nearby coop – this was London, after all, where not a lot of people kept chickens. But maybe a butcher’s shop had copped it, or just some unfortunate household’s larder. Didn’t matter, really. The point was, a whole chicken would provide our family with at least two decent meals, and stew from the boiled-up bones – and with no resort to the ration book. (My mother incidentally, made the world’s greatest stews, sometimes from almost no recognisable ingredients whatsoever, and proudly and defiantly took her recipe’s secrets to the grave with her.) So my mother eagerly rushed upstairs to the room my cot was in, looked out and began to devise a plan to get the heavenly delivery down.

Except, as closer inspection from my bedroom window revealed, it wasn’t a chicken. It was part of a human arm. I’m not sure even the Presslands would have been hungry enough to boil *that* up.

I was too young to know, but I often wonder what must have bulked larger in my mother’s mind at the moment she realised what had come to rest on the tiles: the sheer horror, or the disappointment of not getting a free roast. In any case, the local Air Raid Patrol was called and the warden turned up with a ladder and quietly bagged and removed the offending limb.

The Luftwaffe never did manage a direct strike on 26 Lodge Lane, but they did manage to take out a stretch of three houses down the road. The assumption was that a German plane had got hit, and the pilot dumped his load in desperation as he struggled to get back across the Channel. There were strikes on Nether Street, Percy Road, Lodge Lane – you could follow the track of these discarded bombs across a map. Two hundred yards to the right and the despairing bomber would have taken down, the very least, our outside toilet and anyone who happened to be in it.

A narrow escape for the Whites, then, and a cautionary illustration of the thinness of the thread by which all of us held our lives in those dark and tremulous days. Although, of course, had the bomb dropped two hundred yards the other way, it would have been nowhere near us. But that’s not as good a story, nor as good a cautionary illustration.

So, the German armed forces failed to get me, and so, too, did my seven-year-old brother, although he also had a go. My mother checked on me one night, when I was just a few months old, and found Arthur slumbering in the cot on top of me and in grave danger of smothering me. He said he’d got frightened of the dark and had clambered in for company.

A few years later, Arthur was again almost successful in seeing me off, this time by using an old canvas army shoulder bag, which we normally used to hold wooden play bricks, to strap me to the coat hook on the rear of the back door in the kitchen – with my compliance, I should add, because we both agreed that if he spun me round in this position until the bag was tight, I would then, when released, spin back and amusingly resemble a tangled parachutist up a tree. (Look, I was seven, right? I was just delighted to have my older brother condescending to play with me.)

Actually, we were wrong about the parachute impression. As it turned out, my proximity to the door prevented me from spinning and unwinding in any way, and, accordingly, having turned blue, I didn’t resemble a parachutist at all, but, more closely, a hog-tied Smurf. Kids: don’t try this at home. The entertainment continued when, in what could almost have been a scripted moment, my mother entered from the other side of the door on which I was hanging, and obliviously asked, ‘Where’s David?’

which point, my brother straightforwardly reported, 'He's on the back of the door.' My mother shut the door to reveal me, bright blue, gasping my next-to-last breath.

Obviously Arthur had some productive impact on my childhood, too. He spent a lot of time wheeling me around the streets in a wheelbarrow, like some kind of nobleman in an eighteenth-century litter. And he was the source of my early wardrobe – lots of hand-me-down clothes that I was sincerely assured I would 'grow into'. In fact, I was assured I would 'grow into' a lot of things, including the large bike I received for Christmas, aged ten, to the pedals of which my father had attached wooden blocks so that my feet could reach them. For a while there, I was touring the neighbourhood on what was, in effect, an orthopaedic bike. I didn't exactly look suave and sophisticated. Then again, I had a bike: the joy of that fact overwhelmed any embarrassment.

As it turned out, I was to get most of my growing done by about the age of fourteen when I reached five foot six and my body decided it had had enough of lengthening and left it at that. We shall have cause to return, periodically, to the advantages and disadvantages of my less than statuesque height in the course of this narrative.

Around the age of eight or nine, though, I did become the proud owner of a pair of perfectly fitting wellington boots – a fantastic breakthrough if only because this meant I could now clamber down into the brook without soaking my socks. The brook was in the nearby park, and my big childhood mates Ronnie Prior, Ray Jeffers and I would head there to spend long afternoons building dams, prior to appointing ourselves fighter pilots and bombing those dams to bits by throwing stones and making all the appropriate noises while we did so. The war was over by then, but it lived on in our imagination and our games – how could it not?

Incidentally, in case, dear reader, you still have the appetite for this kind of thing: find a building site that has a large pile of soft sand – not sharp sand, but soft sand. Then push some house bricks around the sand to form a network of mountain roads. Then wet some of the sand and mould it to form tank turrets. Push twigs into the turrets to make guns. Now position these sand-tanks on the mountain roads and, from a distance of fifteen to twenty feet, attack the tanks with thrown stones. Hours of amusement can be yours. And no batteries needed.

Lodge Lane when I was growing up was a quiet backstreet, mostly made up of houses, though it also included Smith's the cobblers, and a greengrocer's run by a family called the Olivers, who owned a horse and cart and would deliver the fruit and vegetables door to door. Every year they would decorate the cart and dress up the horse and set off for a rally in Hyde Park and would often return with prizes and rosettes, to the widespread pride of the neighbourhood.

Also using a horse and cart, but to less popular effect, was the window cleaner, a largely cheerful soul who, as was the tradition, carried a bucket with him to collect up anything the horse left behind on its way through. I often found myself wondering – as you do – what would happen if you were to insert a firework into that bucket, when it was full, and then if you were to light the touchpaper on the firework and retreat. And one day, entirely in the interests of science, I found out.

What would happen is this: there would be a muffled bang, followed by a really quite magnificent fountain of horse shit, much of it eventually attaching itself to both the window cleaner and his recently completed work. A splendid result. Except for the window cleaner, obviously. And I don't suppose the horse was all that happy, either. Still. Nobody much liked that window cleaner. Or his horse, frankly.

Lodge Lane also had an off-licence, Chubbs, where jugs of beer could be filled from taps. The railings outside the shop had been commandeered for the war effort and you could easily climb up and lean over into the backyard. If you were lucky, there would be a crate of empty pop bottles within reach and, with a willing accomplice behind you on the pavement, you could lift a few of them out and pass them back, and then take them into the shop to claim (or, in fact, re-claim) the deposit – though

think Chubbs wised up to that little racket eventually and started stacking the crates further from the wall. It was from Chubbs, incidentally, that I got my first Jubbly – a pyramid-shaped carton of frozen orange juice, and a complete treat. As the advertising slogan used to say, ‘Lubbly Jubbly.’ I would go to hear those words again, a lot further down the line.

Then there was the street’s tiny shop-cum-cafe with four tables and chairs and, on its little counter a battered tea urn and a dingy stove with a greasy, blackened frying pan. It was run by an ancient bloke called Harry, who was forever in a pair of exhausted, shiny-kneed corduroys and who had a wounded foot which prompted him to go about with a proper shoe at the end of one leg and a carpet slipper at the end of the other, held on by half a dozen elastic bands. I used to go into the shop on an errand to buy my mother’s cigarettes for her and find Harry grimly making tea and egg-and-bacon sandwiches for the local builders – salmonella on legs, you would have to assume, and unlikely to pass muster with the hygiene inspectors these days, but a key community service in any case.

I was also responsible for bringing back my father’s *Daily Mirror* and, on Sundays, his *News of the World*, and running round to Radio Rentals, the electric appliance shop, to swap the battery for his radio set. No electricity, remember. For my father to listen to the Home Service of an evening, he required two electric ‘accumulators’ – unwieldy glass jars which enabled you to peer in at the metal plates, steeped in their mysterious liquid. You’d have one accumulator wired up to the radio, and the other on charge at Radio Rentals. For my part, I would eventually acquire a crystal radio set, which miraculously required neither batteries nor electricity. I kept it in my bedroom, twitching the whisk of wire to find voices or music, and lying in bed in the dark, me with one earpiece, Arthur with the other, listening to the great wide world.

There wasn’t much to keep us off the streets in those days, although when I was about seven, my mother took me to church a few times – or, as she referred to it, ‘the House of God’. She wanted me to be religious. She wasn’t particularly religious herself, but she clearly believed it would be nice if I was. Perhaps she thought of it as an accomplishment, like playing the piano – something her son might do to make her proud. Anyway, on none of those trips to the House of God did she stay. She pushed me in through the door and left me there for the service while she walked home. One Sunday after depositing me, she had just got into the kitchen and was probably about to make herself a cup of coffee (or Camp chicory essence, more like, which was what passed for coffee in our house in those days), when lo and behold I turned up behind her. (This was easily achieved as the key to the front door always dangled on a string, fixed by a nail to the back of the front door, so you could simply reach through the letter box and pull it out. This was as good as asking burglars to come in and help themselves. But as there was very little for burglars to help themselves to, it didn’t seem to bother me much.)

Seeing me, my mum said, ‘What happened? Why didn’t you stay in church?’

I said, ‘I’ve come home. I’ve had enough.’

She said, ‘What do you mean?’

I said, ‘Well, I’ve been going to the House of God all these weeks, and every time I go He’s never home.’

To my seven-year-old mind, it stood to reason. Why wasn’t He home? If you went to Auntie Win’s, my dad’s sister’s, as we would for Sunday tea sometimes, Auntie Win was actually there. And you’d get a piece of cake if you were lucky. God, on the other hand, was never in. And as for a piece of cake, forget it. On top of that it was always so cold in there. So why would you go? Disillusion with religion set in right there.

I probably figured my time was better spent playing Knock Down Ginger – that classic game where you rap on someone’s front door and run away, a sport, alas, with very few takers these days, in the PlayStation and Xbox age. A shame, really, because clearly Knock Down Ginger promotes a healthy

active lifestyle, especially if – as once happened with me – you have barely finished knocking when the bloke throws open the door and comes out after you.

I promptly turned and scarpered, only to swivel my head and discover that this bloke was still coming. Normally blokes would just open the door and shout. So I put my head down and ran a bit faster. He was still on my tail. I went over a wall. He was still there. I ran and ran. He ran and ran. There was no losing him. Finally – at a point where London began to give way to open countryside, so it seemed to me – I realised that I simply couldn't run any more. I had to stop. This would mean getting a belt round the ear, I knew, but at least I wouldn't die an agonised death by exhaustion, which seemed to be the alternative. So I leaned against the wall, trying to recover, and awaited my fate. My pursuer soon reached me and I braced myself for the clobbering that would surely follow. In fact, he leaned there too, breathing heavily for a while. And eventually, when he had composed himself, he said, 'Well run, son. Bloody good run.' And then he turned and walked back the way he had come – followed, eventually, at a slightly bemused and wary distance, by me. Needless to say he was taken off the list for Knock Down Ginger.

The strike on Lodge Lane had left a handy bomb site. It didn't occur to us kids to think of it as a place where people had suffered and died or to consider the gravity of the scene in any way. Rather it seemed as if the war had gifted us the perfect playground. We had all the bits of bricks we could possibly desire for throwing around and building things, and an absolutely brilliant location for bonfires. Percy Road had their bomb site and we at Lodge Lane had ours. Every autumn, in the run-up to Bonfire Night, we'd go out in the evening and raid the Percy Roaders' bomb site, because they might have a stash of rubber tyres or bonfire-building materials, or some other treasure they had collected. And then the Percy Roaders would come and make a revenge raid on our bomb site, usually in the dead of night.

Then there was the mob from round Downing Street way (not that one, another one). Our site faced the opening to the alleyway which led to Downing Street, so it was strategically well placed to see off invaders from that direction – especially given that someone eventually came up with the ingenious idea of tying an old rubber bicycle inner tube to the gateposts, which were still conveniently standing and using the resulting machine as a catapult with which to ping half-bricks across the street into the alley. We had a stack of broken masonry ready as ammo at all times, in case of attack. The real heavies in the gang were the ones who pulled the rubber back. I was too slight for that duty, but I saw active service as one of the loaders, passing up the bricks. The Downing Streeters didn't used to know what had hit them. Well, actually they did: it was house bricks.

House bricks and, on one occasion, worse. Ernie Pressland, my next-door neighbour, who was a bit older than me, was the leader of the Lodge Laners – all boys of course. Girls might as well have been another species for all that we had to do with them at that stage. Under Ernie's instruction one day, we used bits of slate – still lying around the place from the bombed roof – to construct tomahawks, made with a wooden chair leg, split at the top, with the slate, cut into the shape of an axe head, slotted into it and bound round with string. Hey presto – the classic American Indian hand-held scalp-taker.

The next time the Percy Roaders raided us, out we sprang from our hiding places. Mine, remember, was a galvanised water tank. We chased them into an immediate, screaming retreat, brandishing our tomahawks. Unfortunately one of our number, getting slightly too much into the western spirit, threw his weapon. It arced meanly through the air and bounced against the back of some poor kid's head, causing the kid in question to fall to the ground. Those of us in the pursuing pack instantly put the brakes on and ran the other way. Whatever happened after that, I genuinely know not. I assume the poor chap managed a full recovery, because we would have heard about it fairly quickly if he hadn't. Nevertheless, slate tomahawks were quietly withdrawn from our armoury from that day forward.

As 5 November was shortly to arrive, we decided to build ourselves the mother and father of all bonfires. We collected rubbish from all over the neighbourhood and stacked it high into the air. Ernie, again in charge of the operation, had the genius idea of constructing the bonfire with a low tunnel in its core so that, when it was finished, someone could still crawl into the centre of the pyre and light from within. This made sense because, given the late-autumn weather, the bonfire was likely to get soaked by rain, but this approach left a dry centre, ready for ignition.

Because I was the smallest, I was given the duty, come the appointed hour, of crouching down and burrowing deep into the mound with the matches – a duty which I regarded as the utmost honour. However, as I was within, getting it lit, some prankster – by the name of Ernie, I'm fairly sure – decided it would be most amusing to light the outer end of the tunnel. I think it had been Ernie's plan all along: he thought it would be great fun to see an incandescent White exit, or not, from the centre of the fire. From outside came the noise of uproarious laughter, followed by acrid smoke and flames. Somehow I managed to push my way out, not best pleased.

Still, at least I wasn't hospitalised in that particular incident – unlike the time when a lump of brick thrown by my brother's mate Jimmy Bickers, created an opening in my forehead which required closing by qualified medical staff. And unlike the time when the top of my skull broke the flight of a rusty paint tin flung by, of all people, my brother Arthur – his third significant attempt on my life. And unlike the occasion when the back of a parked-up welder's truck into which I happened to be scrambling proved to contain a six-inch nail which cut a long, deep groove in my thigh. Blessedly, Mr Bickers, Jimmy's dad, the owner of the only car in Lodge Lane, was at home and prepared to play the part of the ambulance driver. I needed anaesthetic while that particular gash was healed, and in those days that meant chloroform dripped onto a gauze mask. Really, if the wounds didn't get you, there was a decent chance the treatment would. It's a wonder I made it through this period at all. But such was life as a Lodge Laner – lived under the permanent risk of death to ourselves and others.

Eventually, to our immense chagrin, when I was about ten years old, the council levelled the bonfire site and built a small block of flats in its place. And with that we lost our playground. The flats are still there, and the alley too, and many of the old houses, but sadly not number 26, which at some point became a car park. But times have changed, of course, and customs with them, and you'll look in vain nowadays for children throwing handmade tomahawks at each other. Maybe they're doing it on the internet, instead. That would be far safer.

With our playground gone, we had to seek other venues for our amusement. But the world of entertainment was itself moving on rapidly. There was untold excitement round our way in the summer of 1953 when Ronnie Prior's dad acquired the neighbourhood's first television set. He had it installed for the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II that June and then invited everyone within about a three-mile radius to come and share the experience. You've never seen such a crowd gathered in a single sitting room. People were hanging from the light fittings. The technological marvel we were all straining to see had a glass screen, the thickness and approximate shape of a standard goldfish bowl, and affixed to a teak wood cabinet large enough to conceal several bodies. Yet the apparition on the screen of these silvery figures, going about their regal business in Westminster Abbey, seemed utterly miraculous. The only thing you'd ever seen like it was the movies. But this was the movies in the corner of a room – unthinkable levels of magic.

Two years later – just in time to catch the launch night of Associated-Rediffusion, the first ITV channel, in September 1955 – we had our own set at 26 Lodge Lane, on hire purchase. You put a sum down, paid a weekly fee, and then two years and half a dozen new tubes later, the television was yours. That opening night for Associated-Rediffusion included a variety show, a boxing match and an advertisement for Gibbs SR toothpaste. But never mind the fact that the tubes kept going and that my father was never entirely happy with the positioning of the aerial on top of the set, I rather liked the look

television. My hunch was that it had a great future ahead of it, if it ever managed to catch on.

CHAPTER TWO

The cockerel from hell. Something called acting. And the law feels my collar.

EVERY SUMMER MUM would take me and my brother and sister to stay with her family in Wales, going on the train from Paddington, which was a stunning scene of noise and smoke in those days. It's hard to convey, now, the excitement in the build-up to those trips. Sleep the night before would prove nearly impossible. Then there would be the ride on the Underground, taking our cardboard cases; and then, from Paddington, the walk down the ramp that led into the station, with the unutterably exciting sound and smell rising out of the place and beginning to envelop you. I remember us working our way across the thronging concourse, seeking out our train, utterly trusting my mother to find the right platform, completely in her hands in that wonderful, literally carefree way of childhood, which goes eventually and which you can never get back. I would spend the entire train journey with my head out of the window – not too far, for fear of getting decapitated by another train coming the other way or the arrival of a passing signal, but part of the way out. There was something magnetically compelling about catching sight, on bends, of the rest of the train that you were in, and I positioned myself where I could see this magic whenever it happened. By the time we got to Cardiff, where we changed for the valley train and Pontlottyn, half my face would be blackened by the steam, like some kind of peculiar London-born Pierrot doll. At which point my mother would have to spit into her wadded handkerchief and clean me up. The first time we travelled up from Cardiff on the Merthyr line, I thought I was in fairyland. The line ran along and through mountains so green they hurt your eyes, and the river wound in and out of the valley like a blue ribbon. I was a young lad who had lived among the bricks and mortar of London. Here, you could virtually smell the colour green.

In Pontlottyn I had two uncles – Uncle Llewellyn and Uncle Idris, known as Uncle Id – and a batch of cousins, large and small. Uncle Id had two sons, my substantially older cousins, Cyril and John. John was a miner whose leg was badly injured when a tunnel he was working in caved in on him. Some weeks later, he came out of hospital. It didn't stop him riding a bike, though, with his broken leg stretched straight out in a plaster cast and his other foot doing all the pedalling.

You might think Cyril, meanwhile, had taken a blow to the head, because during some possible over-lubricated evening or other, with a few of his beer-drinking mates, he had taken a bet that he wouldn't drink a glass of petrol. On the plus side, I guess he must have won the bet. But the petrol did untold damage to his digestive system, put him in hospital for quite a long time and, essentially, crippled him for the rest of his life. Kids: don't do this, either.

Obviously a fairly deep streak of eccentricity ran through this part of the family generally, evidenced by the fact that, sometime around 1940 or 1941, with the Blitz in full swing, a party of the family had come up to London to stay with us in Lodge Lane in order, basically, to have a look at the war. I guess they must have thought it was the kind of thing that wasn't likely to happen all that often and that you might as well get a sight of it while you could. So up they came. And they were, apparently, thrilled when a doodlebug obligingly cut its eerie mechanical path above our roof in broad daylight, bringing the excited Welsh visitors rushing from the backyard, through the house and into the street in order to track its course, while my mother tried and failed to convince them that it might be better if they joined the rest of us under the kitchen table at this point.

Anyway, the general trend was for the London part of the family to visit the Welsh part, rather than the other way round. Sometimes we would stay with Mum's friend, Mrs Rogers, who lived on the hillside in a place called Abertysswg, in a big house that I was very impressed with. Other times, though, we would stay with Uncle Id, which was a different experience. Uncle Id had been a miner, but

had retired in order, it seemed, to be able to spend more time doing what he principally loved, which was drinking. He lived very poorly in one of a network of tiny workers' cottages in the heart of Pontlottyn. The houses had no gardens but backed on to a little square of wasteland, partly given over to stinging nettles, in the middle of which was a string of toilets – about half a dozen cubicles, each one shared. This less than magnificent emporium was known as the House of Commons. Each cottage had its ascribed cubicle – Id's was number four, as I recall – but you shared it with five or six other families from the square. By these standards, the outdoor privy by the back door at Lodge Lane, cramped and draughty as it was, came to seem almost Roman in its luxury. As for the smell that routinely greeted you as you gingerly eased your way into the House of Commons ... well, let's just say that, on a hot summer's day in Wales – and, just occasionally, you did get one of those – the aroma rising off that block would have been enough to stop two advancing legions of the Spartan army.

Uncle Id had a pet cockerel with only one working eye, called (naturally enough) Nelson. The other eye was missing, presumed lost in some long-forgotten dust-up with another cockerel. And whether it was because he still bore a grudge about that, or for other reasons, Nelson had what we would now call 'issues'. In fact, he was essentially a Rottweiler in a cockerel outfit. This battered bird had appointed himself protector of Uncle Id's property and its chief guardian against invasion, not just by other animals but also by humans. Indeed, the only human Nelson was prepared to tolerate was Uncle Id – to the extent of coming to sit on his shoulder at breakfast, where Id, who appeared to love Nelson as much as he loved anyone or anything, would feed him bits of bread. You can imagine the wonder I had for Id, who appeared to possess the powers of Dr Dolittle.

Mostly, however, Nelson would adopt a sentry position on the window ledge out the back, flicking his head around and flexing his neck to scope the surroundings with his one good eye. To know Nelson's fixed monocular gaze was to know fear. Deep fear. Coming in or out of the house, your best chance was to hope that he was asleep, when you just about had a chance of tiptoeing quickly around him. What you didn't want to do, however, was to get caught between the back door and the House of Commons. Because then Nelson would attack.

Dear reader, I don't know if you have ever been attacked by a cockerel, but if you haven't, then allow me to tell you that it's an experience with very little to recommend it. Sometimes a cockerel, defying physics, has the uncanny ability to come at you low, hard and seemingly out of nowhere. Like Nelson did, anyway. Occasionally, you would peer tentatively from the rear threshold of the house and establish that the horizon was clear. Then, just as you were marooned in the middle, he would materialise aggressively at your ankles, chasing you into the House of Commons. And then you'd be stuck there, looking out through a knothole while he paraded up and down outside the door, daring you to come out again. What was it with that bloody creature?

There wasn't a time that I returned to London from Uncle Id's without a pair of legs peppered with beak wounds below the knee. Moreover, this double jeopardy – the aroma of the toilet block plus the chance of getting pecked to ribbons by a violent half-blind cockerel – meant I spent an awful lot of the summers of my childhood determinedly crossing my legs and clenching my buttocks, evacuating my bowels and bladder only as a very last resort.

Despite the battles with Nelson (and perhaps a little bit because of them), Wales was a magical place to my boyhood self. With my cousin Derek, who was roughly the same age as me, and his gang of mates, I would go out all day clambering around those mountains, drinking water from the springs and playing in disused mines, among the overgrown railway tracks and abandoned wheelhouses. One year Cousin John, who after his leg injury had healed had been given a job 'at the surface', as they called it, organised for me and my mate to take a tour of a working mine. I would have been about fourteen. I remember us both climbing nervously into the lift with John and the mine safety officer

and then descending slowly through the cold and wet to where no man or beast should go. In the case of the lift on the way down, the darkness was so thickly black that you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. I know that's a familiar expression, but I experimented, bringing my fingers right up to touch the tip of my nose and even touching my eyelashes, where I still couldn't see them.

Eventually we reached the bottom, where the pit ponies stood mournfully in their stalls. We were shown around and taken halfway to the pit face. All I can say is that those men who worked there, in that wet, dusty, close environment, were heroes.

On the return journey to the surface, it seemed to take an eternity to reach the top and we were more than a little relieved when the doors finally clanked open and we stepped out into the light and the warmth of the day. John then took us over to the winding house, where the man who operated the lift said, 'Did you enjoy that, boys?' We must have looked a little uncertain, even as we politely nodded, and he burst out laughing. 'I had you going up and down that lift like a yo-yo,' he said. He was bringing the cage up and then gently sending it down again, then up again, then down again, just for a laugh. He knew that it was so dark that we had no point of reference, and no way of knowing which way we were going. The secret, and his expertise, was to make the lift change direction so smoothly and gently that you never noticed it happening.

At the end of the day, I used to sleep on the couch in Id's front parlour – a battered horsehair chair with its stuffing spewing out. But I used to love this bed because it put me in prime position to experience the sheer wonder of the local train. This house had at one time in its history been a shop, and it had a big front window looking out over the road to the embankment that carried the railway line. At about four in the morning I would be woken by the noise of the Merthyr-bound steam engine, pulling out of Pontlottyn, leaving in its wake the local miners who had finished their night shift. Then, as it would shunt past, I could raise my head from the pillow and see the glow of the firebox, lighting up the figure of the fireman shovelling in the coal, and hear and even feel the tremendous rhythmic thunder of the engine from where I lay. Hard to better the romance and excitement of that, for a young boy. Then I would hear the miners on their way home, clanking down the pavement in their steel-capped boots, and sometimes, when the mood took them, they would sing, their voices rising gloriously through the pre-dawn summer air, singing for the sake of singing. They call Wales the land of song, and on many of those holiday mornings, I knew why.

* * *

HOLIDAYS BEAT SCHOOL, of course. I attended Northside Junior School and then Northside Secondary Modern, as they called it, without noticeably raising the bar, scholarship-wise, at either – and certainly not at the former. At primary school, Miss Kent read us the Greek myth of Jason and the Argonauts in daily instalments, and that fired my imagination. But that was pretty much where my interest in the classroom started and ended. Learning wasn't really my thing, and it was fairly clear from an early stage that I would be unlikely to be troubling the scorers at Oxford. In tests at primary school, I routinely finished third from bottom of the class. If I told you that the person who finished second from bottom was called Richard Moron and, moreover, that Richard Moron devoted the best part of his school days to drinking the ink out of the inkwells and chewing reflectively on sticks of chalk, then you might begin to get a sense of where I stood.

Bottom of the class? That was Pidgy Saunders, who, bless him, couldn't write his own name. Not even with a stick in the ground. So, there you have it: the line of descent went White, Moron, Saunders, strictly in that order – and that was also the case after the test to decide which stream (A, for the intelligentsia, and B, for the rest of us) we would go into at the secondary school.

Being in the B-stream wouldn't have mattered much to me, except that Tony Brighton, my best

friend throughout primary school, and a fellow Lodge Laner, scored high enough to go into the A stream. That hit me for six. I thought we should have been together, me and him, fighting the world. But suddenly, he was the brains and I was the laggard. It was very divisive, and not a little irritating. I should add that Tony and I did continue to fight the world together, despite this academic wedge so cruelly driven between us. At fourteen, the lucky benefactor of a cigarette machine at Finchley ironworks, I think that had a fit and disgorged its entire contents of Capstan Full Strength into his waiting hand. Tony gave me my first cigarette, thus commencing a habit which was to stay with me for many happy years.)

My main problem was that I lacked confidence – couldn't stand the thought of thrusting myself forward in lessons. And that inadequacy continued for some time after I moved across from the primary school to the secondary school. With my male peers, self-assurance was less of a problem. In anything, I was a touch on the cocky side. I made two particularly firm mates in these years – Mick Weedon from two streets away in Grange Avenue, and Brian Barneycoat – and all three of us were the same height. The Shorthouses, we used to call ourselves. Otherwise, though, in a social hierarchy where power and influence naturally gravitated to the big and the strong, I sought to compensate for the relative slightness of my physical presence by the classic method of being the clown. I don't recommend this as a fail-safe scheme for the avoidance of bullying. Sometimes it's the short one trying to be funny that get picked on worst of all. But it worked for me.

My comic speciality was mimicking the teachers. There was a teacher at Northside Secondary Modern called Mr Winter who was tough – not nasty, but tough, and when he talked, you listened. He had quite a deep voice and was very well spoken, but I could do a very convincing Mr Winter. So when there were children monkeying around with the caretaker's equipment in the bike shed at break time, I would wait my moment and shout: 'You, boy! Get off those ladders!' People would freeze and jump away – much to everyone else's hilarity and increasing my own kudos.

Academically, though, I struggled and was quite close to useless for a very long time. Because I couldn't do many of the things I was asked to do, I was gripped by the thought that I couldn't do anything at all. That kind of attitude feeds on itself very quickly and is the curse of many a school career. What mainly turned it around for me was the arrival, as my form teacher, of the appropriately named Mr Joy – the new, all-singing, all-dancing, fresh-out-of-the-teacher-training-school-showroom Mr Joy. Mr Joy was also the school gymnastics master. And gymnastics was the one area of school life where I genuinely could do things – and do them better than others. Maths might have been a problem, but if you wanted someone who could stand on his hands, or execute a perfectly rounded somersault, I was your boy. The epiphany came during a rope-climbing lesson in my early teens when, for the first time in my school career, I was singled out as an example: 'White – show them how to do it,' said Mr Joy.

For a moment, I looked around on the assumption that another White had turned up in the class without me knowing. But no. He meant me. So I was up that rope like lightning. If Oxford had offered a degree in rope-climbing, they would have been begging me to come – and I would have been weighing their offer against a number of attractive and equally firm propositions from the top-ranking American universities. But they didn't.

Mr Joy, though, through many such moments, gave me the confidence that I could do things. And that confidence started to filter through to other areas. I'm not saying I became Harvard material overnight – not unless Harvard is particularly drawn to students whose final school report relates that they have 'considerable ability' in woodwork – but I did OK, even blossomed a bit, and won some prizes for my work. That same report for English says: 'Reads with intelligence, fluidity and understanding.' I owe that to Mr Joy because I think he did something no one else had thought to do. He told me I was good at something.

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