

A full-page photograph of a climber in dark gear and a helmet, carrying a large backpack, ascending a steep, snow-covered mountain slope. The sky is a clear, deep blue. The climber is positioned in the upper right quadrant of the frame.

# echoes

ONE CLIMBER'S HARD  
ROAD TO FREEDOM

**nick bullock**

foreword by Paul Pritchard

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# echoes

nick bullock



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To Mum and Dad, who made me who I am and  
looked after me in the ways that matter most.

To the memory of Jules Cartwright and Jamie Fisher –  
climbing partners, but more than that; great friends.

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# CONTENTS

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Title Page  
Dedication  
Foreword  
  
Prologue – Trust  
Brick  
Woodlands  
Chains  
Soul Mining  
Echoes  
Bells  
Fermentation  
Foundations  
The Block  
Guilt  
Flow  
Roads  
Dreams  
Innocence  
Germination  
Loyalty  
Tunnels  
Honesty  
Tracks  
The Worm  
Together  
Faith  
Fear  
Parole  
Loss  
Flight  
North  
Devotion  
Wire  
Words  
Confrontation  
Crash  
Time

Detritus  
The Sea  
Detox  
Stars  
Truth  
Turn

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Acknowledgements  
Plates  
Copyright

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## FOREWORD

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Nick Bullock is a ‘fucking nutter’, or at least one could be excused for thinking him so. After all, here’s a man who relishes the moniker of ‘Psycho’. A self-proclaimed ‘madman’ who has fallen off and survived just about every dangerous route around. I mean, falling onto *The Bells*’ peg! That’s complete and utter insanity.

However, to aspire to being more than just another good climber you must have your head in the clouds and push the boundaries of your physical ability ceaselessly. And if you’re going to do that then there comes with it a price – falls, obsession, relationship failures and, to a point, madness. And this is what these pages contain – an honest account of what it means to be an Alpinist.

After all, Bullock does join a long and distinguished line of glorious nutters across generations of British climbers – Crowley, Menlove, Whillans, Phillips, Dirty Alex, Dirty Derek, Johnny Dawes, Stevie Haston. All these climbers, I’m sure you will agree, are/were no mere slouches, just a few RPs short of a full rack. Besides, we need characters in climbing, as it was in danger of losing them all in the sport climbing ‘purges’ of the 1990s.

Having completely removed myself from the climbing scene since 1998, I had only vaguely heard of Nick Bullock. Back in 1997 he had attempted the Meru Shark’s Fin in the Garwhal Himalaya a few years after myself, Johnny Dawes and Philip Lloyd made our attempt on this wondrous and once recently climbed mountain feature, but I never met him.

Then recently I was flicking through an Italian magazine in which he detailed his approach to writing about climbing. Even if there was no hope of getting published he would still write because he loved the added challenge of writing, of translating the intensity of the ascent into text. Here was a climber who I could equate with and I was intrigued to meet him. And meet him I did, very soon after arriving in Llanberis. We had a lot in common even though we had never met. We had climbed the same climbs, rocked over onto the same holds, clipped the same manky pegs and traversed the globe to many of the same boulder-strewn glaciers. That was as good a place to start from as I could wish for.

I had begun leading again after an eleven year hiatus due to injury, and had moved back to Llanberis for a while to hone my new one armed climbing technique. Nick was living in his van in the car park at Ynys Ettws and climbing every day. This prompted Adam Wainwright to mention with a giggle that we could be the only two full-time climbers in Llanberis. In the 1980s there would have been forty full-timers in the village.

Bullock is an amateur – I mean in the Olympian sense of the word – as we were all amateurs in Llanberis in the 1980s. He is a deep gasp of fresh air in this age of professionalism, this age of financial deals and corporate sponsorship. Like an ascetic he simply goes climbing.

In *Echoes* Bullock is seeking his own voice. Under his guidance we are taken on a roller-coaster ride as Nick the all-round climber becomes Nick the all-round writer. His very irregularity of thought – one page he says grades don’t matter when on the next page he is keen to onsight an E7 – is what makes this book so joyous to read. Those who don’t change their mind regularly are at risk of being dishonest with themselves. There is no such risk in Bullock’s writing.

However, it is the self questioning (sometimes self attacking) that makes this a rare climbing book.

indeed. Through his bold and adventurous climbs – often undertaken alone – he finds he has come answer some important existential problems.

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In fact, throughout *Echoes*, with its seemingly unthinking frenzy of ascents, Bullock comes to the realisation that he has answered some pretty tough questions.

*Paul Pritchard*  
*Tasmania*

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## PROLOGUE – TRUST

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I cradled the man's head in my hands. His hair was wet. Blood seeped between my fingers. Strings of cerebral fluid hung from his ears and nose. Grey sticky stuff dripped from my knuckles. Sprawled on the floor, the inmate writhed. He was short and stocky, a real powerhouse. I grabbed a blue prison vest, bundled it up, pushed the fabric into the hole in his skull. He was flapping like a fish.

Then, miraculously, the prisoner stood. Some kind of animal drive, some instinct for survival forced him upright. He spoke, suddenly, in a strange bored monotone.

“Oh, oh, they tried to kill me...they tried to kill me...I'm dying.”

He staggered forward, moaning unintelligibly, bumping into the weight-training equipment. It rattled. I held onto him, guiding him around stands, bars, and circular weights stacked in pyramids. Everything was streaked with blood and snot – and the grey fluid leaking from his head. He made a sound from the back of his throat, part growl, part cry.

We both slipped, leaving bright red skid-marks on the floor. For the second time he collapsed. Then he spoke again, very slowly.

“They've killed me.”

I saw myself tangled up in cerebral string, red oxygenated froth soaking into my tracksuit trousers. I inhaled the smell of sweat and the metallic tang of blood. Then I slithered to my feet, screaming for help. The noise bounced back at me off the gymnasium walls. Thirty inmates stood quietly, like an expectant crowd at an execution. No one helped. No one except for John, an inmate entrusted with the job of gym orderly. He calmly picked up a short, blood-soaked iron bar, carefully wiped it clean, and put it back in its place on the rack.

I was too shocked and horrified to understand what had just happened. But I found out soon enough. A contract had been taken out on the inmate. The price for the hit was twenty quids' worth of crack cocaine paid by a dealer, who had often trained with the victim – until he found out he was a paedophile. The dealer had needed to save face.

The injured inmate was twice bludgeoned across the back of his head with the short iron bar ordinarily used for bicep curls. The would-be killer held it in both hands like an axe and swung from behind the inmate's back as he leant forward to pick up his own weight bar. But the victim didn't go down on the first swing. The attacker – a crack-addicted coward – panicked. He lifted the bar above his head and swung again with even more force. This time the victim's skull popped and he crashed on the floor. The second swing had punctured his skull and saved his life by releasing the pressure from the first blow.

The police arrived almost immediately and began an inquiry. A clot dried on the gymnasium floor, large and jagged, like the outline of Australia, while I stood speaking to them. Two days later the police concluded I was innocent of taking a bribe 'to turn a blind eye'. It was ironic that I'd been accused of looking the other way. From our team of six physical education officers, I had been the one who most regularly complained to management about sloppy procedures causing us to leave inmates unattended. Maybe that's why the would-be killer chose to murder when I was on duty. It was retribution for my not trusting them.

The prison governors had been told this inmate was at risk, but they had ignored the warnings and



so attempted to place the blame on me. The original paperwork proving my innocence had gone missing, but fortunately a photocopy was found, and the internal blame-shifting inquiry collapsed. I escaped prosecution either by a stroke of luck, or perhaps because of a methodical police investigation. I will never know.

I was thirty two and I had worked at Gartree Prison for ten years. I had spent eleven years in total working for the prison service at the time of this attempted murder, four and a half as a basic grade prison officer, and six and a half as a PE instructor. Over the course of my career, my opinions, my outlook, even my personality were transformed. At twenty one I had walked into a prison for the first time. I was impressionable, scared, desperate to be accepted and living constantly with doubt and uncertainty. At thirty two I was confident, prepared to give everyone a chance, be they paedophile murderers, rapists, gangsters, terrorists, drug dealers or fellow prison officers. It didn't matter to me the colour of a man's skin or his religion or from which country he originated. All I was concerned about was how people behaved and interacted with each other from day to day. Deep down I think I had always been like this, but in my early years of prison service it had been easier to fall in line.

I come from a working-class background, where black is black and white is white. As I matured I tried to bring this simple philosophy into my everyday life. But I have always struggled with inequality, with people receiving more than they deserve because of who they are or their upbringing. Inequality is largely what life is made of, and inside a prison inequality is rife. I find paedophilia abhorrent, but I also find pushing a shotgun into the face of a bank clerk or blowing up innocent people or pushing drugs to the masses just as abhorrent.

Yet for some complicated reason, in prison – and sometimes on the outside – it is deemed acceptable, even respected, for someone to destroy someone else's life – destroy a child's life by killing her father, to waste a life by pushing drugs. This was the type of hypocrisy among inmates I couldn't tolerate. The attempted hit in the gymnasium took place not because of the victim's crime but happened because a drugs dealer trained with a paedophile and thought he had lost face. He needed to do something to regain his status.

As I sat cradling the man's head, with his blood and brains sticking to my hands, I heard a voice – my own voice. It was asking me something. Asking how I had ended up like this, desperate and lost among people who thought nothing of caving in a man's head and then standing back to watch him die, like a pack of jackals. I remember how the blood was everywhere...

...and as I write these words, blood brings to mind blood from my other life...

...I remember shouting over and over again.

“Watch me Michael! IGNORE WHAT'S GOING ON. Just watch *me!*”

Seventy feet below, my climbing partner stood holding my ropes. Looking down I knew instantly that his eyes were wired and wide but fixed on me, even though blood was splattering the grey rock pooling in the polished folds of rhyolite just feet away from him.

I was on a difficult and scary climb called *Tess of the d'Urbevilles*, high up on the left wall of Dinorath. Cromlech's famous open-book corner in Snowdonia's Llanberis Pass. The walls are covered with routes of varying difficulty. *Tess* is one of the difficult ones – and most frightening. It has limited cracks for protection, and only those skilled at placing bits of fiddly gear can make the climb reasonably safe. Unfortunately, I don't fall into that category. I was climbing 'on-sight', knowing nothing about the route other than what I'd read in my guidebook description.

True to my character, I charged up the cliff with my usual why-bother-wasting-time-and-energy-on-fiddling-little-bits-of-pointless-brass-into-marginal-placements-when-forging-on-makes-more-sense philosophy. This approach works well unless outside forces intervene – or my arms get too tired.

The blood all over the rocks had not happened yet, and I was concentrating on my climbing. I had broken my kneecap a few weeks before in a fall from one of the slate quarries above Llanberis. Now I was forced to rock over onto my foot, twisting my knee into positions it didn't really like, and then putting immense pressure onto it as I stood up. It felt like an iccold nail was being driven into my leg. My eyes tried to focus on the sharp crozzled rock inches from my nose, but the sweat and tears provoked by all that effort and pain smudged my glasses and blurred my vision.

I was still on the sick from the prison, because of my knee, and I was now looking at a ground fall from seventy feet. My forearms ached from crimping my fingers onto edges no thicker than the tiles around a washbasin. I tried desperately to figure out a sequence of moves that would lead me to the comfort of the first good piece of protection since starting up the climb. What time and future I had left was contained in the puzzle of rock above me.

My trust in Michael was unquestionable. I knew I could forget about him and concentrate on the only thing that mattered, whether or not I could move just another ten feet to my right. This was everything climbing meant to me, this was what I loved doing best. I might have been in peril, but the situation felt normal to me – right on the edge, but enjoying it. Nothing odd was happening here.

The person climbing *Cenotaph Corner*, the climb to my right taking the centrefold of Din Cromlech's open book, was just a blur, an insect buzzing on the periphery. He was there, but only in the grey mist of my sub-conscious. I locked off. The muscles in my shoulder tensed. *Shake-out-chal up-study-plan-breathe-deep-control. Prepare*. Once committed to the next sequence of moves one or two things would happen. I would either climb methodically to the top, or fall in a heartbeat to the bottom of the crag. Reversing these moves, climbing back down, wasn't an option.

The insect to my right made a move. A move he will not forget for the rest of his life. A move I will not forget for the rest of my life. He stood up, making a move hundreds of climbers had made over decades before him, and in so doing dislodged a brick-sized block of rhyolite that had been wedged in the crack at the back of the corner for hundreds or perhaps thousands of years. The rock slipped from the corner crack and span off into space.

Suddenly, it seemed my heart was pumping something cold and crystal clear through my veins. My senses sharpened. I now saw everything. I watched with fascination as, end over end, the block spun and heard the air it displaced whirring like the blades of a fan. The insect stopped buzzing, became human and screamed a warning. But his belayer took no notice. I went on watching, unable to pull my eyes away from the spinning rock. The climber screamed again. The block closed on its target. He screamed for a third time, the block now just a few feet above his climbing partner's skull. The belayer looked up, jerked back his head. The block skimmed his brow before ripping into the bare and gripping his leader's rope. Blood shot into the air and covered the rock around him. The belayer collapsed. His leader cried because now no one was holding his ropes. And the blood just kept on pumping out.

"Watch me Michael! IGNORE WHAT'S GOING ON. Just watch *me!*"

I made the moves to the right and finally reached the crack-system of a route called *Left Wall*. He was able to slot in two secure nuts that guaranteed I would not hit the ground should I fall. I was safe. And now hanging from big comfy holds, I looked down into Michael's massive owl-eyes. Now once had he taken them from me. Blood covered the rock just feet away from him. There had been screams and yells. The belayer's unconscious body had been lifted past him, and still Michael had faithfully watched me, utterly ignoring the body passing beneath our ropes. The poor leader had been lowered safely from *Cenotaph Corner*.

Half an hour later I finished *Tess* much relieved. But despite the nearness to death, the fear, even

the damage done to another person, I was nevertheless still glad, even joyful, to be amongst the mountains. ~~There was a big difference to my life in prison. The rock was blameless. Mountains are inanimate.~~ And, of course, it was impossible for them to hate – or take revenge.

I found climbing five years after starting work for the prison service, and when I did it took hold of my life. Climbing changed me. It cradled me, allowed me to take hold of my own life.

I had been brought up to chase the security of working, the benefits of regular pay, sick pay, mortgage, and a pension. Having got used to all that, it would be difficult to leave their security behind. But as soon as I became aware of the alternative and unfettered way of life climbing could offer, I began to nurture a dream of escape. The prison service was killing me. Even if I completed my service, I knew that the life expectancy of a retired prison officer was just two years. Every time I touched rock or whacked in an ice axe, my dream of freedom grew a little bit stronger. By the time I was thirty two, by the time I was holding an inmate's broken head in my hands, not a day passed when I didn't fantasise about standing outside the prison gates, taking one last look before turning around and walking away – forever.

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## BRICK

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I was born on Christmas Day 1965, in the front bedroom of 6 Brookhouse Road, a white-painted brick built three-bedroom semi on the edge of Cheadle in Staffordshire. I was the second child to Maureen and Graham, my sister Lesley having arrived three and a half years earlier. Cheadle is a small market town on the edge of the north Staffordshire moors, an architectural mish-mash of red brick, blue brick, large sandstone blocks, ornate iron railings and black-and-white timber frames. The people of Cheadle were a mish-mash also, the working classes spanning rural and industrial occupations: coal mining, engineering, sand and gravel extraction, textile mills, farming and haulage.

Mum and Dad worked full time, so Nan, my mum's mum, would collect me and my sister from primary school. Nan also lived in Cheadle, having been evacuated from Sunderland during the war, in a rented three-bedroom semi surrounded by council houses. Having lost her husband, who had died at forty eight of a heart attack, and a daughter, who died of diphtheria, Nan lived on her own, addicted to the Valium she had taken since losing her husband. She stored sugar, tea and soap in case World War Three broke out, and only used two rooms of her large house while doting on her grandchildren.



Mum's mum and dad; my Nan and the Grandad I never met.



Dad and Mum with my sister Lesley's children. Clothile sat on Dad's knee and Jake with Mum. I reckon Dad is reaching for a roll-up or a cup of tea! *Photo: Lesley Stone*

Mum finished work at five and would pick us up before driving home and getting the tea on, usually sausage and chips or chips and fish fingers, or burger and chips, or egg beans and chips, the egg having been cracked and dropped into the chip-pan to come out brown and crunchy with a runny yolk. I loved chips. Lesley came home one day from school with an exotic new dish called spaghetti bolognese, which was okay, but wasn't chips. On Sunday, because Mum had time to cook properly, we had a roast.

As a family we went on one holiday a year, always somewhere in Britain because of Tami our Golden Labrador. Dad would never have put her in kennels. Mostly we camped in Wales or stayed in the same guest house in Tenby. Dad worked full time at jobs he didn't enjoy: bricklaying, night shift in the local textiles mill, driving, insurance sales, youth care in secure homes and social work. Social work – visiting old folk up on the moors – was the job he stuck longer than any before retiring and setting up a small printing company for computer stationery.

Mum worked full time also, first in accounting, then bank work and social work before returning to accounting and in later life she started a computer stationery brokering business called Diamond Forms, which just managed to pay her and Pam, her partner, a wage and nothing more. Mum was tall, slim and dark skinned and very conscious of her appearance. She would always make herself up before leaving the house but was a grafter, who always worked hard. One day after school, we arrived home to find Mum covered in oil under her Hillman Minx changing the starter motor on her own. No one

else's mum did things like that.

~~She was also very much a full time mother. She drove my sister and me around, shopped for food on Saturday morning, cooked and cleaned the house with compulsive vigour and drank very strong instant coffee day and night while smoking Embassy Number 1 or Peter Stuyvesant extra-long cigarettes. My Dad was of his time. He didn't wash up, didn't cook, clean or shop, but he was always there, usually reading a book with a roll-up clamped between his index and middle finger and with a mug of strong tea with several sugars added. He worked on the house, the cars and the garden and was the person I would be sent to for a clip around the ear. Dad was also very astute and careful with money, something he learnt from his father, who was cautious through necessity.~~

Dad's parents had no savings. They lived in rented property and survived on a state pension. Grandad was quiet but caring and good fun. Before he retired, he'd been a mechanic and a long distance lorry driver. He often told the story of a fellow lorry driver – Jacky Oil – driving his lorry with strings of snot hanging from the wing mirrors after he had cleared his nose out of the window. Grandad loved the reaction from telling that story. Dad told me the story of how Grandad had suffered a toothache as he drove south on a job, so called into the dentist and had the whole of his top-set of teeth removed. When he drove back north he called into the dentist and had all of the bottom teeth taken out as well. I think I probably learnt my black-and-white attitude from Grandad. He always had a Silk Cut hanging from his mouth but was dead-set against alcohol, having taken the horse and trap as a boy to the pub to collect his dad, who was drunk most nights.

Dad worked for every penny and watched every penny with reverence. At home we only had a telephone for short periods when he needed one for work. Even then it had a bar so you couldn't make outgoing calls. Mum had to hand over wages and was given an allowance for food and the kids. She used to say Dad was so tight he squeaked when he walked, but if the money had been left to her, we would have been destitute. She would have given away her last. I remember Mum hiding bills and invoices from Dad so he didn't know she had spent money.

Wallowing in mud, wading and damming the dirty brook near our house, collecting birds' eggs, scrumping, hanging out, setting fires, tree climbing, hunting newts among the reeds, this was how I spent my time, a normal childhood growing up in Cheadle. When I was nine, long before the small gymnasiums came into fashion, I joined Cheadle Health and Strength Club. This comprised a few open weight-training stations, a cable machine, skipping ropes, dip bars, blue mats and an exercise bike, all contained within the walls of a dusty, run-down former chapel. Monday, Wednesday and Friday, I would run the four miles from home to the old chapel where I followed a programme written by the local keep-fit guru. Afterwards I would run home. Through the Cheadle Health and Strength Club I became friends with Alan Johnson, a farmer's son from Huntley and it wasn't long before my main interests outside keeping fit were shooting and hunting.

In my final year of primary school, an enthusiastic teacher, Pip Owen, found I had a talent for gymnastics. Pip was a gymnastics instructor at a large club in Stoke-on-Trent and he got me enrolled. I was soon training four times a week. Mum found herself spending a lot of time driving me the thirty-mile round trip to and from Burslem after a day's work but she never complained and always appeared happy to dedicate her life to her kids.

When I was eleven I moved to Cheadle High School, a comprehensive recently created under the Labour Party's reforms by the merger of the local grammar and secondary modern schools. After the first year I was placed in the upper band, meaning I was studying for O-levels. My sister Lesley was already there and studying hard, but I hated school and didn't really try. Looking back, I can see clearly the path my life took and the people I chose to call friends. I was from a skilled working-class

background, and so were most of my mates. Their parents owned their own houses and worked hard for what they had, just like mine. The parents of a few friends were from the professional classes and quite liberal and open-minded. Dad struggled with this kind of outlook. He was a staunch Conservative with strong right wing views. He called anyone who was liberal and open-minded “wishy-washy”.

Before I was born my parents lived in Birmingham, off the Hagley Road in Harborne where at the time many new immigrants were living. This was long before racism in Britain became unacceptable. Such rapid change was difficult for many ordinary white Britons to absorb. I can still hear Mum telling me how there wasn't a bed in hospital when she gave birth to Lesley because they were full to capacity with immigrants. But I can also remember Mum and Dad talking about white people crossing the road as Mum walked toward them because her skin was so dark. Growing up, I would regularly hear Enoch Powell's 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech quoted over the dinner table and the Labour leader Harold Wilson called 'Billy Liar'. Immediately after Powell's speech, made in a Birmingham hotel, the whole country was in turmoil. Workers marched with banners in support of Powell, a member of parliament in nearby Wolverhampton. Many people were carried along by the force of his words.

Even now, I find some of Mum and Dad's attitudes and politics from their earlier life difficult to understand. Dad was the eldest of three children but he didn't speak to his sister or his brother, David, who was twenty years his junior. Uncle David had long ginger hair tied in a pony-tail and was caring, liberal and good fun. He lived in a caravan on Cheadle common and had been arrested for growing cannabis around it. David was the ginger sheep I didn't know existed until I joined Cheadle Health and Strength Club, where he was also a member. Instantly, I connected with my soft-speaking uncle. He seemed different, being rather Bohemian and peaceful without the air of aggression that characterised many others in the town. I suppose Uncle David was the first person I met who didn't appear to want to live 'normally'.

Dad was conscripted into the army and served in the Korean War, driving a breakdown truck that was used to rescue other trucks or tanks that had broken down or slid into ditches. He didn't talk much about the war, not to me anyway, and when he came out of the army he took a bricklaying apprenticeship. From appearances, Dad was the archetypal Labour supporter, but he voted Tory and hated the unions for most of his adult life, a hatred born from an accident he suffered while working for Ansell's Brewery in Birmingham. Dad opened a large vat full of boiling cleaning fluid, which was registered empty. But the gauge was faulty, and he was submerged in red hot liquid. He suffered second and third-degree burns to his whole body.

His union used the accident as a lever against the company, eventually making a deal with the bosses to get more power for themselves, but in doing so the shop stewards agreed not to push for the correct amount of compensation for Dad. They even visited Mum while he was still in hospital and threatened her when she suggested employing an independent solicitor.

Mum was the well-educated one, although this was still only a state education which culminated at eighteen. Yet Dad read avidly. He sucked in facts and information, listened to classical music and followed politics. Throughout my childhood my parents hardly drank alcohol. Dad would drink a bottle of Scotch over Christmas and then nothing for another year. Later in life, in his mid-fifties, he decided to become an alcoholic and began drinking half a bottle of whisky every day. Until recently I thought I inherited my obsessive genes from Mum. Now I'm not so sure.

I didn't really mix with kids from the council estates or with kids from broken homes. In fact, divorce was almost unknown in my circle of friends. I went through secondary school looking down on kids from the council estates, feeling I was something better, even though I wasn't. I was always u

for a bit of an adventure – thieving, smoking or drinking – but only as long as I thought I wouldn't be found out. One day, aged eleven, I rolled up at home drunk, after the local pub's landlady gave me several ciders in payment for helping her move some boxes. Mum, normally the placid one, was furious although since I passed out soon after, I don't remember much. A few years later I helped myself to several bottles of barley wine through a broken window in the pub cellar. I got smashed and was caught by the police. They cautioned me and took me home to my furious mother and embarrassed father, who was then working at a secure home for young offenders.

I suppose I was of average intelligence, but while growing up I used my average intelligence for trouble and excitement – not education. I was a teacher's worse nightmare. I would learn if I wanted but if a teacher couldn't prove the worth of what they were teaching, I couldn't be bothered. In which case, all my efforts would be put into working out how to do as little as possible. My English teacher told me I was worse than the real troublemakers. At least she knew what they were. But, she said, I was sly because she never knew what I was thinking. At the time I took this as a compliment.

On the surface, I was a confident teenager, into punk rock and hunting. In reality, I was shy and easily hurt. Uncle Dave moved to Brighton, where he became the road manager of a successful ska punk band called the Piranhas. Parked one night by the side of the road, Dave was killed by a drunk driver who ran into the back of the band's vehicle. Several members of the Piranhas were also injured.

Dave's death made me look at life differently. For the first time I experienced loss. Life was no longer safe. After Uncle Dave's death I became quite rebellious and mixed up. I thought a lot about death. My time was spent catching rabbits with ferrets in Huntley Wood or moodily stalking the sandstone flags between the two record shops in Cheadle's town centre. Initials were carved in Cheadle's sandstone paving flags and a worn runnel ran down the middle. Shit-covered Wellington boots, painted Doc Marten's, high heels, brogues, blue-crepe-soled brothel-creepers, platforms and torn work-boots with rusty steel, all writing their history into Cheadle's pavements. I would catch rabbits or buy records, doing both dressed in red jeans, a pink, green and black striped mohair jumper, Doc Marten boots and a green combat jacket covered in the names of punk bands – The Slits, The Vibrators, The Sex Pistols, The Ruts – and on the back I added a large encircled 'A' – the symbol for anarchy.

The farmland surrounding Cheadle was grass meadows with hawthorn separating each field. The meadows were used for grazing dairy cattle and haymaking, but corners, and on occasion whole fields, were neglected scrub. These neglected areas, where blackthorn and bramble flourished, were home to rabbits, fox, wren, robin, blackbird and finch. Down towards the slow-moving brook, the meadow became waterlogged, studded with yellow buttercups and the occasional purple marsh orchid and populated by green plovers picking their way through the marsh. The brook's meandering path was marked by twisted and scabby alders growing along its edge. On the brook's tightest corners, where the water ran deep, brownies would linger in the shade of an alder and kingfishers and sand martins would burrow.

Catching rats with ferrets and terriers, lamping rabbits with longdogs and poaching game were popular pursuits in Cheadle. Aged fourteen I bought my first shotgun and hunted crows, pigeons, rabbits, pheasant, and squirrels. I left school in 1982, aged sixteen, by which time I was hunting with passion. Gymnastics, Cheadle Health and Strength, all that was in the past. All I wanted in life was to become a gamekeeper.



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## WOODLANDS

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My first position as gamekeeper was on Lord Lichfield's estate at Shugborough Hall in Staffordshire. This was a short-term placement on a government youth employment scheme, but six months later I was offered a full-time job as 'underkeeper' on an estate near Porthmadog in North Wales. This opportunity was thanks entirely to my parents. Unbeknownst to me, when I was fourteen and still in school, they applied on my behalf for a place on a new scheme run by the British Amateur Shooting and Conservation Society to place young people for a week with a gamekeeper. When I was selected they surprised me with the news and drove me to Wales. This first visit was a success and I returned several more times, taken to Wales in the school holidays and picked up again a week later.

A part of a gamekeeper's work is to control and protect. To hunt down. To kill. And my life as a sixteen-year-old gamekeeper was black and white. Birds and animals that ate pheasant eggs threatened pheasants were considered vermin. Creatures were hunted down and then killed before being displayed on a gibbet for the bounty the estate owner paid. Crows, stoats, weasels, foxes, rats, squirrels, jays and magpies, all hanging in a stinking, rotting line.

Politics in Wales was black and white also. The head gamekeeper was a large, thickset Derbyshire man always dressed in a camouflaged jacket and Wellington boots. Brian was a staunch supporter of Margaret Thatcher and extremely right wing. He revelled in the way Mrs Thatcher bullied and dictated.

I lived in a static caravan at the end of a rough track on the side of a small mountain called Moel Gest, between the North Wales coastal towns of Porthmadog and Criccieth. The caravan, a large creature torpedo, looked toward the cliffs of Tremadog. I would frequently watch the brightly coloured rock climbers draped across the cliffs. Years later I learnt the names and climbed some of the climbs on these cliffs: *Vector*, *Sexual Salami*, *Cream*, *Void*, *Vulture*, *Sultans of Swing*, *Bananas* and *Extraction*. But at the time, in 1982, the names, the cliff, the activity itself meant nothing to me.

I worked every day, living on the job, for the job, lugging huge sacks of wheat to the woods, cutting tracks through forest, raising, feeding and nursing birds. Climbing was something happening on another planet, far outside my orbit as a gamekeeper. I lived in another world, far removed from the momentous events of the early 1980s – industrial strife, social change, economic upheaval. On the rare occasion I watched television, it showed images of the dark green South Atlantic swallowing burning battleships, in a pyrotechnic dance of death.

I remember the science fiction film *Blade Runner*, a film noir adapted from Phillip K. Dick's book *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* The book's theme is the nature of life. Is the life of a person any less valuable than that of an android, or 'replicant' as they were called in the film. What, in fact, does it mean to be alive? What crucial factor defines humanity? I didn't identify with the film's star, the anti-hero Harrison Ford and the replicant Rutger Hauer, but with a character called J. F. Sebastian, a loner stuck on a blighted Earth, too ill and broken to join other, successful humans in the 'off-world colonies'. Instead, he had created his own menagerie of fantastical replicants to keep him company. In the same way, I felt separated from all my friends. I felt alone.

I was brought up to believe life is not for pastimes or leisure. Life is supposed to be a struggle. Satisfaction is something achieved only through hard work. I'm not sure if I was ever told this, or

became an inbuilt mechanism after watching Mum and Dad work full time and bringing up kids. Years later I took the same philosophy into climbing, but that philosophy also made me sneer at people I considered had not earned their freedom or their position.

Often, I walked alone, a loaded shotgun cracked across my arm. I remember the tractor beams of sun piercing the swaying forest canopy and the fern spores released from unfurling fronds dancing in the beams of light. Above my head oak leaves whispered. A smell of mould rose from the ground as I walked through the leaf litter.

A loud screech brought me out of my reverie, masking the quieter insect drone. As I drew close, I saw the shocking blue of a jay's covert feathers, its speckled paunch of cinnamon down. The jay spotted me and stopped crying. The bird was trapped inside a wire netting dome designed to catch pheasants.

The head keeper and I had made many such traps, which we had placed around the woods to catch breeding stock. Once caught, we would collect and place the pheasants in a large pen. When the birds started to breed and lay, we would gather the eggs carefully and place them inside a giant incubator. Three weeks later, the young pheasant chicks would hatch. The trap had a round mesh tunnel, a funnel which led into the centre of the dome where wheat was piled as bait. Once a bird had pushed through it could not reverse out. The trap attracted other birds, including this jay.

I pulled back a bamboo pole sealing the top of the dome. The jay flapped and bounced, struggling against the netting. Cinnamon down floated in the dappled light. I grabbed the bird, cradling it in my hands. The bird struggled, and then settled. Splayed stick feet stretched into the sky. My fingers squeezed against its softness. I could feel the ribcage expanding as the bird inhaled and a small heartbeat pulsing in the palms of my hands. The forest insect drone returned. Applying more pressure, I constricted the rise and fall of the bird's chest until the bird could no longer breathe. Two shining black beads looked at me before two leathery eyelids shut. And opened. The black beak opened, unable to draw breath, and closed. My hand remained clenched, clenched tight, until at last, after a final struggle, the bird's eyes shut forever, its head dropped, and its breathing stopped. *Time to die.* Black and white. The forest was silent.

When I started full time in Wales there was an underkeeper called Colin on a youth employment scheme, the same scheme that had got me a job on Lord Lichfield's estate – a six-month contract with the government paying £25 a week. Twenty five pounds a week was, at the time, the same amount given to an unemployed person on unemployment benefit.

Colin was from Scotland and about twenty years old. He was tall and gangly and introverted. A mop of curly dark hair poked from beneath his tweed deerstalker. The head gamekeeper's wife called him creepy; she said he would sneak around the house not talking. My immature perspective could not see the real reason for Colin's introverted behaviour. Wanting to be accepted, I would agree with her. *Creepy Colin.* It was not until he left the estate and the head gamekeeper's wife turned on me, ignoring me, turning others against me, eating in the kitchen away from me so she didn't have to feed me, talking to anyone who would listen about my creepiness – that I understood what Colin had endured.

I remember the endless nightshifts, rain tearing into the dark forest canopy, heavy drops from ancient oaks plopping onto my jacket. One night I huddled in the darkness, in the lee of a stone wall on the side of a lane, which cut through the estate, heading towards Black Rock Sands. The winter wind was blowing the rain horizontally into my shelter. A stream gurgled through moss-covered boulders. Max, the estate's Alsatian, whimpered and pushed close. The smell of wet, matted dog hair overpowered that of the forest. It was well past midnight, but I couldn't return until two at the earliest.

“Nightwatch,” Brian called it, patrolling the estate in the dead of night on the lookout for poachers. I was sixteen and weighed ten stone. The pick-axe handle I carried weighed about as much as I did. The chances of actually detaining anyone were nil, while the chances of being beaten to a pulp were high. The dog was soft and useless, so I huddled and hid, and dozed fitfully as the fat drops soaked the shoulders of my wax jacket.

I woke with a start. Headlight beams cut the heavy rain and lit the dark between the trees. Car tyres swishing across the ground. The car slowed and stopped. I withdrew further into my jacket. The window of the car opened and after what felt like an age, a hand flicked out a cigarette. The cigarette bounced, sparked and fizzled. The window closed. The car moved on. The cigarette dimmed and went out. Marching through my mind were the boots of soldiers yomping through the mud into battle on the Falkland Islands. *“It’s too bad she won’t live, but then again, who does?”*

Through the shooting season I would get out of bed at five, walk to the woods and feed the pheasants, then return to the house. By then the shooting party and beaters had arrived. ‘Beating’ crashing through the forests to flush the pheasants for the guns, took the rest of the morning and into the middle of the afternoon. I would leave the shooting party mid-afternoon to feed the pheasants in the woods for a second time. I walked on my own, listening to the crack of gunshot echoing from the hills, and imagined my pheasants being killed. In the evening I would go back on nightwatch. Work on these winter days generally lasted for eighteen hours and I received £38 per week from which ten was given to the head gamekeeper’s wife for food.

I didn’t question the pay, the hours, or the work – not until the gamekeeper’s wife started to make my life intolerable. Then I began to ring home and complain to my parents. After a year and a half Mum and Dad turned up unannounced and told me to pack my stuff. On the drive back to Cheadle, I sat in the back of the car watching as the rain-lashed mountains and sodden moors faded into the distance. I never returned to gamekeeping and it took years to rebuild the confidence I had lost.

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## CHAINS

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Coming home from Wales was a dark time. I argued frequently with Dad about everything and felt mentally fragile after the abuse I had suffered. In my head living back in Cheadle was a step backwards. I was unemployed. I had given up. I had failed.

At first I blamed my parents for taking the initiative and coming to rescue me, but now I know the favour they did me – and what a strain my phone calls and unhappiness must have been. I didn't have a social life in Wales; the head gamekeeper wouldn't allow me to mix with anyone for fear of giving away secrets about where the pheasant pens were situated and how often we patrolled. Suddenly I had friends all around me again and going to the pub most nights was normal. It was like returning from a long and isolated expedition.

Sport and training had fallen away with the start of work. Now I had a girlfriend, I was drinking and smoking, and grabbing whatever bits of manual work I could find, generally labouring on building sites with my mate and his Dad or on the farms where I had spent much of my teenage years. I started a day-release course in Stoke to become a bricklayer, but gave it up and became self-employed instead, working at a large dairy farm near Rocester. After six months the Tories brought in milk quotas, which cut the income of many dairy farms. Once again I was looking for work.

Fortunately, an old school friend, Steven Barber, or 'Bung' as he was known, had begun work in the merchandising warehouse at the theme park, Alton Towers, which led to seasonal work. But as the second winter since returning home drew in, and the Towers laid me off, I was unemployed again. I worked unofficially on Littley Farm with the owner Roy Harrison. Roy was a dour, dirty-purple-berry boiler-suited, wellington-bootshod forty-a-day-Capstan-full-strength dairy-farmer, who, beneath his gruff exterior, had a heart of gold.

Inside the asbestos-roofed breeze-block shed, bleary-eyed, I oversaw early morning milking, steam pouring from chewing mouths, clouds billowing from hot black and white bodies, piss flowing down semi-circular gutters cut into concrete, the milking machine's methodical, rhythmic sucking "Schlurp schlurp..." – and the rattle of chains wrapped around the necks of the cows. After the milking and the mucking-out were finished, my day was free until milking and mucking-out began again in the evening. And in between I would go to Huntley Woods with my ferrets to catch rabbits.

I had kept ferrets since I was twelve years old and I loved spending time with them, smoking and thinking and listening to the insect hum of the woodland. Thinking was a big part of ferreting for me. Catching rabbits involved covering every rabbit hole with a purse net pegged to the ground – 'Why am I unemployed?' – lifting the ferret from its box – 'What will I do with my life if I can't find work?' – popping the ferret at the edge of a hole, giving her a stroke – 'To be a success, a person needs to work.' – and waiting.

The ferret, thick creamy white fur, pink eyes and pink nose would smell the air and the earth, she would sense the space and freedom and shake her body like a dog coming out of water, her coat pointed and spiked. Then with one last sniff, she would scamper down the dark hole, her back arched and chattering like an otter. The quiet of the wood would grow heavy as though the trees and ferns sensed death. A nuthatch, powder blue and orange, walked down a peeling silver birch trunk. Thoughts of being a failure ran through my mind. A tractor in the field. Cars and a police siren in the distance.

‘Grow up, get a job, meet a girl, buy a house, have kids...’

Bump, bump, bump...

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Thumping underground. Thumping, then a brown explosion of fur and long feet and a white bobbed tail. A magpie shocked by the movement screeched. The rabbit was tangled inside the purse net, so its fur poked through net holes. Big brown paws scrabbled which tangled it more. Unwrapping the rabbit by taking it by the back legs, hanging it upside down, the rabbit automatically sticks out its head.

‘What’s wrong with me? Why couldn’t I stick it in Wales?’

A karate chop, just one swift killing blow to the neck did the job.

‘Failure.’

Huntley Wood was, like a lot of things around Cheadle, a rural and industrial mix. The middle of the wood was a mountainscape of sand peaks and mining metalwork, large trucks and conveyor belts. On the weekend, with my girlfriend Sheila, we would walk my dogs – Murphy, an aggressive Patterdale Terrier with a wispy beard, a barrel chest, thick front legs leading to feathered feet like those of a grouse and a loyal, intelligent Golden Labrador called Dipper. Through the woods we’d go into the massive hole quarried out of the heart of the wood, climbing over the sand and gravel moraines. I would kick steps. Large round pebbles would roll away. Dipper would paddle, his big golden paws marking sandy prints in the shallow salt-flat. Murphy would muscle aside the rhododendron looking to kill anything that moved.

Sheila was only seventeen, long red hair, slim, pale, she could have been from Wales or Ireland. She could have had a feisty, fiery streak but she didn’t. She was caring, compassionate and loyal. It was obvious she wanted to settle down and have kids. Sheila didn’t want much from life apart from a person to love her and a family. I knew this way of life was not for me, but it was difficult to accept. This is what people were supposed to do.

I knew our relationship was doomed and at some point I would end it, to let her find what she wanted. Or I would cheat on her so she’d dump me. But I was twenty and selfish and at that time I needed the love she gave me, even though I offered her little in return. Dipper bounded back to me splashing water, thick wagging tail, big brown eyes, unquestioning, undemanding companionship.

I had been working in the warehouse at Alton Towers for three years. I was now full-time and managing the warehouse, but I didn’t see it as a career or somewhere I wanted to be in another ten years. It was a great place for my social life, although perhaps not so good for the cars I owned.



Alton Towers merchandising department warehouse workers – L-R: Dave, Nick, Steve, Andy. Dave Critchlow on my right always did fancy himself! Bung my good mate is directly on my left.

Racing and then writing off a mini-van and an Alfa Sud hadn't slowed me. Dad encouraged me to buy a Skoda, which promptly blew up. In recompense and I'm sure feeling a little guilty he bought me a Renault 4, and that did slow me down. Evenings would generally start straight after work. I'd sit on the stone wall outside the Wild Duck in the middle of Alton with my mates, Dyche and Bung, smoking and drinking, flirting with the part time girls who worked the summer season and then were gone, laughing, joking, getting pissed.

The sun filtered flame-red between the sycamores. I turned my face toward the sky to watch the swifts, their haunting screams penetrating the still evening. The swifts were just returned from their challenging journey. They appeared happy and confident in their fitness and skill, wheeling around the darkening sky, threading stars, scooping flies, screaming, wheeling, screaming. Perhaps it was not being settled to one place that gave them this apparent joy?

“You should apply for the prison service. Job for life, pension, growth industry.”

That was how Dad put it after reading an article in the *Express* about the prison service's drive to recruit seven thousand new prison officers. What he didn't see, or neglected to mention, was the effect it would have on my personality, the horror it would introduce to my life.

And yet, bored with life at Alton Towers and almost on a whim, I listened to Dad and filled out an application form for the prison service. A few months later, I drove to Stafford Prison for the entrance exam and a month after that, having passed the exam, I returned once more to Stafford Prison for an interview.

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## SOUL MINING

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Approaching the oak doors of Stafford Prison, I tried to swallow. The doors soared above me like a cliff. People wrapped against the cold walked quickly to work along the leaf-blown pavement.

The leaves rustled a warning: “Turn around!”

My throat was dry.

Towering turrets, round and grand, made from huge, unclimbable sandstone blocks, supported the huge frames of the Victorian double doors.

I knocked on a smaller door inset into one of these giants, jiggling, from one foot to the other. I wished I had been for a pee. All of the moisture in my body had obviously drained to my bladder.

I could hear footsteps drawing close on the other side of the doors – on cobblestones, metal set-heel-caps tapping out a remorseless rhythm. A flap covering the small, barred window in the smaller door shot open with a guillotine snick. A red cherub face pressed itself against the bars.

“What do you want?”



Nick Bullock, age 22, Gartree Prison.

“Ah...” my throat failed me for a moment. “I’m here for an interview.”

A key was thrust into the lock, its long chain swung and rattled. The apparition the other side of the door made me think of Bumble from *Oliver Twist*. Then I stepped through the wooden hole and leapt behind the smells, sights and sounds of the normal world.

Wearing the suit Dad wore for his wedding twenty five years before, I looked like a teddy boy ~~black drainpipe trousers, pointed black suede shoes, scraggy hair and spots.~~ Bumble led me through the grounds of Stafford Prison, along with several other would-be prison officers. Inmates were digging manure into raised flower beds of red roses. They looked up and laughed, pointing at my suit. Embarrassed, I ignored the jibes, but felt shocked that the inmates were allowed to talk and make fun of visitors. I had a lot to learn.

Several months after the successful interview, and at the age of twenty one, I was back at Stafford Prison, beginning my first two weeks of work in the prison service. It was both frightening and fascinating, and every day was an eye-opener.

Stafford Prison was a category 'C' jail, housing a wide variety of prisoners. Some had been long-term, high-security inmates nearing the end of their sentences. Some were convicted of domestic crimes and sex offences. Most were habitual criminals in for standard offences – drugs, robbery, ABH, GBH. Most of the inmates in category 'C' prisons were serving short to mid-length sentences anything from two to ten years. The higher category prisons, cat 'B' and cat 'A', held lifers and long-term prisoners and inmates who were notorious or serving such long sentences they had nothing to lose.

There were many different prisons. Some were deemed acceptable by the inmates, some were not. Wandsworth in London and Winson Green in Birmingham fell into the despised category. They were prisons with a reputation for zero tolerance. I learned inmates hated these prisons and the prison officers who worked in them.

Stafford Prison was the old Victorian design of building, built from solid blocks of stone with large accommodation wings, hollow warehouses stacked high with the unwanted. I remember the solid three-inch wooden doors, the pipes along the corridors, the bars, grates and wire mesh. The environment was claustrophobic. It was dark, and smelled of sweat and human waste. The sound of the pipes, the rattle of key-chains, doors slamming and human voices merged in my head, a raucous chatter like the honking of geese.

Our nervous little group of entrant prison officers was led through one of the wings and I looked directly into the pasty face of a man in his mid-thirties with the words "Fuck off" tattooed across his forehead. Never had I been so close to someone who didn't care. I discovered Stafford Prison had a reputation for being austere with a strict regime, although not as strict as Birmingham or Wandsworth. The prison officers were supposedly dogs, doling out beatings in a regime of intolerance. This strict atmosphere, I found out, was usual for a category 'C' prison although at no time were beatings legal even if at times they appeared justified.

After a two-week induction at Stafford, I was sent to prison officer training college. Ordinarily, this would have meant Newbold Revel in Warwickshire or Wakefield in Yorkshire, but with the extra recruiting taking place, a reorganisation euphemistically dubbed 'Fresh Start', the prison service had opened two temporary schools. So I was sent to Ripley at the Derbyshire police headquarters.

There were approximately eighty new-entrant prison officers at Ripley, mostly men, but also a few women. The new entrants came from all walks of life – ex-servicemen, coal miners, engineers, builders, firemen, reps – people that had started their working life as something else and, for whatever reason, had found themselves out of work and hunting something more stable. Virtually no one I knew grew up wanting to be a prison officer. At least, *almost* no one, and if they did I wondered what had gone wrong in their childhood to make them want to lock people up for a living.

During the three months' training we were taught the basics of prison routine, the sort of things that would become second nature after a few years. We had lessons on control and restraint techniques,



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