

THE ME I USED TO BE

PREFACE

These are stories whose roots run deep in the dark soil of a fifties and sixties childhood in a town I shall call Earlstone, and its neighbouring village - which I shall call Fairley. Most of the characters are based on real people I have disguised. My feelings towards them are overwhelmingly affectionate and, should they ever chance to recognise themselves, I trust that they will not be too enraged at my versions of them. If they are, I shall of course deny that they are them! Some have kept the names their mothers gave them. The roots of the stories are real but, more often than not, the flowers - their conclusions - open up to reveal a different bloom - in shape and colour - to those which actually saw the light of day.

1 BULLFURLONG LANE

Fairley Parva was a treat. My paternal grandparents had a tall, handsome house there with a long back garden in Coventry Rd. They had called it Beaumont. At the back of the house, on the right, at the end of the path which ran from the front gate along the side, stood a large shed in which my granddad's chickens hatched out. Inside, it smelt sweet like warm chocolate. In the far corner a paraffin heater cast a glow on the yellow cheeping chicks which churned around like fat maggots. At the far end of the garden, beyond the twisted old apple trees and the chicken run, stood a pig sty. I can just remember the pig and his sweet mash and his contented grunting. But the hunt for the rats in his pen I think I only imagine; I had so often heard the story of the squealing beasts being driven out to be smacked dead by a spade that the legend almost became a memory.

And Granddad's wonderful garden! Far too long for a child, it began respectably with two velvet lawns, a lattice fence with a thousand ice-cream roses and yellow snapdragons either side of the path, strolled past the white bench and the white-stoned rockery and ran on and on through row upon row of every vegetable you could think of, and ended at the rugged orchard where the scaredy fowl ran free. On both sides of the path, all the way along, were heaps of stones that his old rake over many years had dragged out of the soil, which he had beaten into the richest texture resembling fruit cake.

Whenever we slept there on a summer weekend I would go to the window at five or six o' clock, woken by the sharpening of a spade, and watch the distant figure of Granddad in his braces toiling in the early sun, turning the dark soil and lifting the vegetables for our Sunday dinner, working up a thirst to quench at The Sycamores.

As my boyhood passed and Granddad grew older and wearier, I remember that the part of the garden at the far end, which remained undug, moved slowly but relentlessly ever more towards the house.

And just around the corner was Bullfurlong Lane, or the Bully.

"Let's goo down the Bully!" we'd shout. It began respectably by my great-aunt's house and was a made-up road for about two hundred yards, bordered with stern-windowed houses; but then it narrowed into a dirt track and raced out to the right with high hedges black with berries in late summer and deep with ditches where a trickle of a stream could just be heard beneath the mats of wild flowers and watercress. And every so often a gap opened into a field, where there often stood an abandoned brick outbuilding, and there we would search in vain for house-martin nests. And we would watch the skylarks rise and hover far above their eggs, but despite our absolute certainty we could never find them. One field was cultivated with potatoes and we would sneak under the electrified fence - Man-hole swore it would kill us if we touched it - and

steal a few spuds. Then we would light a fire in a den and have bonfire potatoes that were always hard in the middle.

Man-hole was really Malcolm Mannion. My Grandma called him Malcolm Grub in her quietly ironic way - (the real Mr Grubb had a posh fabrics shop in the town) - in honour of the stalactite of green snot that hung from his nose summer and winter. He had a knack of knowing when it was about to escape his nostril and with a great snort would suck it back up to safety. Once when he was blowing a thrush's egg it grew almost as long as the trail of albumen and yolk coming out of the pierced end.

"Come and look at this, Vic!" Grandma said quietly.

"Well, I goo to hell!" said Granddad in disbelief and horror.

And just as we were thinking that Man-hole's snot was bound to break, the egg trail splattered out with a final bubble and at the same instant his dew-drop whipped back into his nose.

One Sunday we set out with our cousins, my uncle, my dad and my granddad down the Bully to cross the Watling Street at the end to net bream in Foster's Pond. We filled a great mint jar that Uncle Ken had brought from his mother-in-law's sweet shop. On the way back we chattered about making a fishpond at the top of Granddad's garden and Granddad gave us permission. Could we stamp down the soil enough so that the water would not escape? But one by one the fish died in the jar, deprived of oxygen of course, and we threw them all in the ditch. I was so disappointed that I cried.

But the one memory of the Bully that will never leave me was of an event one summer as August was ending. My brother had a cold and was at home. A promised visit from cousins Susan and David never materialised. Grandma asked me to go and get her a few berries for a pie and so I set off with a basket down the Bully.

I wandered off the lane from one field into another and then another, past the deep dark dens where village girls, faces stained red with shame, had showed me theirs and I had shown them mine. It was that dreamy time of year when summer is at its golden end; the air was warm and still; the grasses and hedgerows were yellowing and white threads of thistledown and willow-herb were floating suspended in the honey air. And everywhere there were blackberries glinting pewter in the soft, hazy sunshine.

I picked only the plumpest and wandered along the hedgerows in a trance. Suddenly I looked up and realised I had no idea where I was.

Those tall fir trees in the distance looked familiar. Had I wandered as far as the Three Pots, by the Watling Street? My basket was quite full and it was time to head for home. The sun was low and turning as red-orange as those rich yolks from Granddad's crooning hens.

I found myself in a spinney. Was this where we had come scrumping for apples once? I stopped and thought of the plump, bald man chasing us out of his orchard, probably infuriated more by our hoots of laughter than by the thought of his apples bulging in our pockets. Those petty fruits we usually discarded because they were sour.

I carried on cautiously and saw a house beyond. But nearby was a bank of brambles and I was brought to a halt by a mass of huge blackberries, as big as damsons. I dug out a space in my shimmering basket, eating a handful of inferior ones, and began to pick and pick.

"You know that they belong to our garden, don't you, young man?"

I nearly fell over with surprise. I turned and looked and saw a strikingly tall woman with black hair, wearing a straw hat. Her voice was like a delicious, chiming bell.

"I'm sorry" I stuttered. "I'm lost"

I told her I had come from Coventry Road across the fields.

"My goodness, you are a long way from home! Emma! Is there any lemonade left?"

And around the corner came Emma, a twelve year old version of her mother. And the loveliest creature I had ever seen. She smiled shyly through her drapes of raven black hair and looked up at me with her huge blackberry eyes.

“Come and have a glass of lemonade with us, young man, you must be really thirsty”

And I followed her and Emma to a table at the bottom of a long lawn.

Emma. I had never heard the name before. To me, in the perfect rounded lips of her mother it sounded like birdsong, a flute, a harp.

“Emma, go and fetch a basin. We’ll swap a glass of lemonade for a few blackberries, you’ve got millions there. Are they for your mother?”

Emma stood up and I watched her sturdy ivory legs carry her gracefully into the house.

I told the lady who I was.

“So, are you the son of R.V. Payne, the bookmaker in the Windsor Street?”

I said I was and felt embarrassed. I was old enough to know that what Dad did was not quite proper. She looked at me a while with her dark intelligent eyes and said slowly,

“I’m sorry to hear about your grandmother.”

I stared back at her confused but had no idea what to say.

“I mean...” and she slightly lost her silky self-assurance “Did I not hear correctly that she had died recently?”

I stopped drinking and stared back.

“No! She’s fine!” I pictured her kind round face offering me the empty basket. “I’m out collecting blackberries so she can make us a pie!”

She looked away, back towards the house and whispered that she was sorry; that she must have got us mixed up with another family. There was a long silence and it was a relief when Emma returned. When we began to pour them into the white basin many berries fell onto the table. As we picked them up, I brushed her slender white fingers with my red-stained ones, and I had the feeling she was deliberately going after the ones that I was reaching for. I snook a quick glance at her great dark eyes but she refused to look up.

“Emma goes to school in Warwickshire,” said her mother firmly. She looked at her watch and the setting sun. “My goodness, it’s well gone seven! You’ve got a half-hour walk from here, young man. You’d better be off. Take him to the front gate and point him in the right direction, Emma.”

I followed her past their great house and onto the pavement and instantly recognised where I was.

“Thank you Emma,” I said savouring the word “I know my way from here”

She looked up and gave me a full beaming smile and scampered away before I could say goodbye.

I am sure that she and her mother walked past Beaumont one day, when I was much older. I heard their voices, heard them pause and whisper and then move on. But by the time I had rushed out to the gate, like two fairies, they had vanished

In the gathering gloom I struggled home, my head full of Emma and rather disturbed about what her mother had said. As I climbed over a stile I stumbled and gasped in horror as all the blackberries fell into the stream beneath and were whisked away. With red eyes and the empty red basket swinging in my hand I approached the house. Outside was a large old black saloon car I did not recognise. As I came to the gate my dad came out, face tight with worry and shouted

“Where the hell have you been?”

But it was my grandmother, not my tardiness, which had turned him pale with worry. The big black car was the doctor’s.

A stroke. Up till then “stroke” was only a word I had heard from my granddad, somnolently watching the cricket after a lunchtime at The Sycamores and admiring the talents of Tom Graveney.

“Majestic Tom they call him,” he’d say to us in a whisper, as sleep began to overpower him. “Majestic Tom!”

Now a different sort of stroke had killed my lovely grandma and she was going to be buried. I recall my granddad sitting on the white bench, holding his head and smoking one Senior Service after another. And from a distance he called out over and over again “You miss a bad ‘un..... but a good ‘un, well.....well.... “

It wasn’t long after that that Beaumont was sold and Granddad moved in with us. Once I heard my mother and father arguing in their room. “He served her rotten! And so did you!” she whispered angrily. Did she mean Granddad? She said later she had meant someone else and I got a good telling off for listening in. That innocent, wonderful part of my life was over for ever.

The other night, prior to writing this story, I dreamt of Beaumont again for the first time in many years. The rooms were dark and dismal and Grandma and Granddad sat still, grey and silent, unresponsive to my exhortations to speak and get up.

“Because they are both dead,” said a crystal voice as I was waking up.

And I knew then that I had too long neglected them and that I should go back and revive them from that sleep.

BLACKBERRYING WITH GRANDDAD

We marched along Bullfurlong Lane
With a head held stiff and a concave back -
Granddad in white hat, with cane
To drag the brambles, full and black,
To my small hand that could not reach
The largest berries, beauties each.

“Dis-cip-line!” - mid-syllable ever stressed,
His mantra as we bowled along -
To click of cane, with doughty chest,
He would hum a marching song.
At last we crossed the Watling Street,
To Cloudsley Bush, my special treat.

For here the brambles, red in stem
And thorn, were dense with heavy fruit;
Our eyes entranced, as big as them,
Old soldier and his raw recruit;
Our picking fingers, purple stained,
By every weighty sprig detained.

Our basket almost overflowed.
At twelve a distant bell would chime;
At the Axe and Compass quick march slowed.
Our thirst we slaked at opening time.

We sat supping by a shady tree,
Me pop, him pints of Worthy E.

Loud he sang as home he swayed
To Tipperary! - and I joined in;
Then what delicious pies she made,
My grandma with her lovely grin.
How clearly still I see that pie
Which runs with juice I cannot try.

SCRUMPERS

In young summers when our days were hot
And we had fished to death the brook
Through orchards gingerly we snook
And, cunning, sought the safest spot
Where the jealous man whose trees they were
Could not make out our fingers dabble
With plum and pear and pippin apple
And succumb to dares of Lucifer!
From branches dangling, writhing snakes,
We throw down all the fruit forbidden...
And laughing, think how well we are hidden,
.....Until all hell below us breaks!

And, clipped, from Eden we are driven,
The thieves, like Adam, unforgiven.

2 ITCHING POWDER

I step off the train and leave the sullen, silent station. This is the place where so many childhood memories slumber. I falter and look round. On an impulse I do not go straight on towards town and home, but turn and cross the old bridge, and walk down the short incline into East Close, wondering how many years have passed since last I walked this way. I slow as I pass number 31. I see my mother in my mind's eye at the window, busy at the sink, smiling her toothy grin, with a twist of auburn hair falling from her head scarf.

And between 31 and 33, instead of the neat, low hedge, which grows there now, I picture instead those ugly concrete posts again, strung with the twisted wire that never reached and trailed in the dirt.

East Close intersected with West Close at the bottom of the hill running down from the station. Hardly ever did the children from either end mix, and if we strayed west, up there, a kitchen window would open and a voice would yell "Hoy, you, goo and play up yer own end!" Behind East Close were the Humps, a playground paradise inadvertently created by the Council when they had dumped soil there, excavated from the post-war build of some estate. Could there be any better place for Hide and Seek, Levo or Cowboys and Indians? But our East Close gang had rivals for this wonderful territory. Beyond the Humps and parallel to our Close was Brookside. Their gang was bigger and older and inflicted many a defeat on us whenever they decided to wander over from their territory, from the field way beyond, with its brook and

hedgerows, which was decidedly off-limits for us. Their leader, Victor, was renowned for his fists and his love of nastiness.

It was the summer of 1958, I think. We were downcast; the Humps were a no-go area because Vic was on the rampage and had already sent Man-hole and Mick home blarneying; and there was only a week left before school. It was hot and had been hot the whole holiday. The rose hips in the field at the end of our Close, a field which no-one really contested with us, were already ripe. We had already rubbed their seeds into itching powder and inflicted it on each other and all the girls and titches in the street but the novelty had worn off. We lay in the field too hot to play with our football, sucking the sweet ends of the tall grasses, no-one saying much and wondering what to do next.

“Let’s goo and catch some sticklebacks” said Man-hole.

No-one answered. There was a rumour that somebody had seen a catfish in the brook and we had spent a whole morning dredging there for it before giving up.

“Look at all those hips” said Mick. “We could make some more itching powder.”

“What could we do with it?” I asked.

“Sell it to a joke shop!” said Mick. We laughed.

Mick rolled over on his back, chewing on his stalk.

“Why don’t we sell it at school? We could charge a penny a poke. ”

I smiled to myself as I saw all the skipping girls, but especially pretty, little Julie Hickey, going mad with the itching powder stuffed down their backs.

I looked at my stalk peashooter.

“We could put it into keck stalks.....”

Man-hole sat up, suddenly inspired.

“That’s what we’ll do! We could make a fortune!”

We looked at each other, eyes wide and bright.

But Charlie Dickens was ever the thoughtful one.

“But how will you keep it inside the keck and how will you grind it all up? It’ll take ages....and where’s the keck?”

Of course Charles was right; the keck was on the Humps and Victor was King of the Humps.

We lay thinking.

“We could send the titches to get the keck stalks. Vic’ll leave them alone,” said Mick. “But they’ll need knives....”

“I’ll get the knives from home!” exclaimed Man-hole.

We looked at him. We reminded him of the week before, when his mad dad had launched him into the air with his boot for digging a deep hole in his garden, an utter wasteland where another hole made absolutely no difference. Stolen knives would bring an unimaginable punishment.

“And spoons, to grind the powder!” he continued, unabashed.

“But how will we stuff the ends up.....and what will we grind the powder on?” asked Mick.

Almost at the same time we shouted “The brook!”

We raced down there and began to fish out large flat stones. Man-hole put his hand into the fine silt on the bottom and said

“If we dry this out we can stop up the ends of the stalks!”

And so it was that in our final week of the holiday our field became an enterprise zone, twenty years before a certain person and her ilk came bustling into power. My little brother Neil and the titches came back with the cow-parsley stalks and in our precious den, carpeted with sweet hay from the field, deep within the hedgerow, we began to grind the hip seeds and fill and stopper the ends of our penny-a-poke itching powder tubes. A fire of twigs in one corner served

to dry the seeds and the muddy ends of the stalks. Everybody was allocated a job and we had a nice production line going.

We already had a fair pile, enough to make a pretty penny, when disaster struck. His dirty face streaming tears, my brother was pushed into the den, rubbing his reddened forearm.

“A Chinese burn,” he whimpered and looked behind him.

“They made me talk.”

An Indian war-cry then went up which froze the blood. It was Vic. We stopped and looked at each other in terror. And then his great fat face thrust itself into the opening. Around his basin of greasy black hair was tied a red band with a crow’s feather stuck in it.

“What um-palefaces doing in um-Vic’s den?”

Man-hole was indignant.

“You never come up here, Vic. This is our den.”

Vic came in and pushed him into the burning twigs. He jumped up and battered the sparks from his backside. Vic and his war-party of three laughed. We couldn’t help but laugh too.

Malcolm snivelled and drew up a shimmering dewdrop of snot back into his nose.

“Paleface heap snotty bastard,” said Vic and kicked him out of the den. His eyes lighted on the pile of keck stalks.

“What you um-up to then?”

Charlie spoke first.

“We’re mekking itching powder stalks to sell at school”

“How much for?”

“A penny a poke.... Do you want to come in with us Vic?” I added quickly. I watched the tiny eyes in his fat face grow as his dim wits began to realise how much money he was looking at.

“You um-chief paleface?” he said, looking straight at me.

“Yes,” said Mick smartly.

“You um-piss off then!”

“But that’s not fair” I shouted.

Vic looked round at his gang.

“Little Arm!” he commanded and a girl younger than me, whose malformed right arm ended in a twist of skin at the elbow, stepped forward. She swung the ugly sausage of an appendage back and smashed me in the face. The shock and horror and humiliation all at once, not least the pain made me burst into tears. The titches gasped while Vic and his gang laughed. In shame we left the den.

“Not um-little titches!” shouted Vic. “You can stay and help um-redskins”

We returned disconsolate to the Close and sat in the gutter. Who could we tell? Our dads were at work and telling Man-hole’s was out of the question. We sat outside the Bakers’ house playing with the dust in the gutter saying nothing.

The window opened. It was Mrs Baker.

“Why doon’t you goo up yer own end !”

Man-hole sniffed. We stood up and were shuffling off when she yelled

“Wait a minute.... Jane! Come here! Is this the lad who put that powder down your back?”

She held Jane up at the window. She was what one would call today a child with learning difficulties. One summer she had run out into the Close wearing nothing but a vest and we had pursued her to the brook. It had been my first sight of a girl’s front end.

“Is that him Jane? The snotty one from up the top?”

“Yeth, Mam”

Man-hole protested but Mrs Baker was straight out and on him like a terrier, shaking him like a rat. She clouted him and said,

“I had to take every stitch of clothes off her to wash, and had to put her in the bath. Her back’s red-raw, you little bugger. You wait until yer dad gets home”

But Mr Mannion was home. In fact he was already striding down the path towards us.

“What’s going on?” he shouted “You leave our lad alone. I’m the one that thrashes him, not you.”

“Well, he needs a bloody good thrashing”

And she told him the tale. His face went from white to pink, to red to a kind of purple, as the grip on Malcolm’s shoulder grew tighter. Mrs Baker threw back her head in triumph and marched back into the house. Mr Mannion looked Malcolm up and down, as if debating which part of him to thrape first.

Then Charlie had a brain-wave as Charlie often did.

“Hang on - it wasn’t Malcolm, cross my heart and hope to die. My back’s red as well. It’s a lad from Brookside who’s doing it”

Our backs were all red from itching and we duly showed them off to prove it.

“He’s up in the field now with his gang mekking some more” said Mick.

Mr Mannion’s grip on his lad loosened as his murderous eyes scanned the field beyond.

“Where?”

“Can you see the smoke coming from the hedge?” I said.

“He’s holding our Frieda prisoner up there and all the other little ‘uns.” whined Man-hole.

“What? Why?”

“He’s mekking ‘em help him - mekking itching powder, Dad.”

He strode off with us running behind him and, with white fists clenched by his side, headed straight to the den. He ducked down and entered and within seconds had wrenched out the struggling Vic, like a fat squawking bird from a nest. His feather fell out and his band came off. At first Mr Mannion spluttered but when he saw his daughter Frieda and the other titches emerge clutching his bone-handled cutlery he exploded.

“Did this lad here mek you fetch ‘em from hum?”

Man-hole nodded vigorously behind him. Frieda nodded too.

“Tek that you little bugger,” and he swiped Vic round his fat head.

“Ger off!” he shouted through his fear and sobs. “I’ll get me dad on you!”

“I’ll gie yer ger off!” and he swiped him again. “How old are you?”

“Twelve,” he sobbed.

“These are only six. What’s a big lad like you doing playing wi’ these, bullying ‘em and sticking stuff down their backs? You bloody little pervert.”

“We were only in there mekking itching powder to sell in stalks.”

Mr Mannion dragged him back in and went to see for himself.

“Right, put ‘em all on the fire!” he ordered. And soon a crackling blaze was underway.

“Now stay down yer own end!” and Vic was dispatched with a good kick and his sad gang trooped off behind him.

That evening a wind sprang up, hunted out the sleeping embers in our den and set the whole hedgerow and field alight. We watched from our bedroom window as the fire engine arrived. It was a brilliant blaze and it took ages to put out.

We heard the next day that Vic’s name had been given to the police. After that day I cannot ever remember seeing him again.

3 DUSTBIN DORA

When the dustcart trundled down the street, off the back would leap Dustbin Dora. He frightened us. He was a huge, fat man with a ruddy face, a bit like Oliver Hardy, who made us howl with laughter at Saturday morning pictures.

Saturday mornings at the pictures were an unsuccessful but well-meant attempt to train the children of the Fifties to get the cinema-going habit in the teeth of the new telly fashion. Did the disparity of Dora's funny resemblance to Olly and the horrible substance disturb me? Perhaps, for Dustbin was anything but a clumsy clown. His great leather jerkin and massive back-belt held in a seething mass of anger and spite. As gang-leader he ceaselessly chivvied the other men to be at the double and smart about it. His voice was so loud that you could already hear him in West Close. And woe betided anyone who dropped a bin, and woe betided any householder whose bin was smouldering with hot ashes.

"I shall have report this to the Council!" he'd yell after rattling the front door knocker in fury.

In those old renting days people feared the Council. We had crayoned up the hallway wall and had got a good hiding for it. For weeks, until it could be papered, my mother opened the door only a jot to the rent man in case he saw it.

Of course, in those days dustbin men actually collected mostly dust, the grey ashes from coal fires. There were a few tins and glass jars but there was absolutely no food-waste, only bones. Paper wrappings were thrown on the fire. The emptying of the ashes and the building of a new fire was a fascinating spectacle for us.

I see my mother kneel on a piece of newspaper, shift the grate out, shaped like a great set of false teeth, and begin to shovel up the ashes. There is a metal box to empty where the ashes and clinker have fallen but it is always overfull and a lot has spilt out. Once the fireplace is clear, back goes the grate and the ritual of the lighting begins. A sheet of newspaper forms a bottom sheet on which a few paper twists are laid; and on the top a couple of firelighters. They look like giant sweets, square and bound by a glossy chocolate brown wrapping, stapled on one corner. Around them and on top are placed small coals. And then the match strikes and brings the whole magic show to life. We watch fascinated as the flames begin to lick the coals and then roar up the chimney, turning the soot into sparks. Would the chimney catch fire? (A chimney fire always drew a crowd of kids from all over the Close. A good one saw flames leaping out of the chimney pot.)

Slowly the brash yellow flames subside and turn to blue flickers. The coals shift and around their edges a ruddy glow augurs success. Jets of gas in the coal begin to ignite, blow out, hiss and light again.

They fascinated me. You knew then the fire would take. The odd time it failed we would run into my mother and shout

"Mam, its gone out!" This made her angrier than most things, even the scrawl in the hallway, and even when she found us lighting tubes of newspaper to smoke as our first cigarettes.

It was no wonder that dustbins caught fire.

"No hot ashes" Dustbin would yell. "How many times d'you need tellin'? D'you want to set the whole buggering cart alight?"

The cart consisted of six compartments I think, three on each side, each with a sliding lid which they would slam shut under the watchful eye of Dustbin as soon as the cart had reached the end of the Close.

My dad knew Dustbin when they were younger men, before power went to his head. Mother told me that he had even attended their wedding after the war. Uncle Ken, seven years my dad's junior, had cried to have such a large, ruddy, loud-mouthed man to sit next to at the reception. "His mother (she pronounced the O as in "bother") dropped dead when she was cleaning the pantry out," said my mam one day not long ago, when I was asking her to reminisce to give me ideas. "She weren't half a nasty woman."

"Was she fat like him?" I had asked.

"She used to live at The Horsepool. One day she went around your grandma's and said – Elsie, if my brasses were like yours I'd go mad – Just out of the blue. Ever such a rude, outspoken woman...Really houseproud."

I never did find out if she was fat.

Anyway, Dustbin's temper was to be his downfall. That summer was really hot and sweaty. The ground in the back garden was cracked like a great brown jigsaw.

We are in the outhouse where my mother is toiling over the hot copper, stirring the clothes round with the wooden tongs and pushing them down with the long poled dolly. We are waiting to see the billowing wet clothes driven through the mangle to emerge as stiff papyrus on the other side, before being unwrapped to be pegged out in the hot sun. The radio is singing. "All the girls declare that he's a gay old soldier!"

Mam joins in with the bits she knows. I think it was Music While You Work on the Light Programme, forerunner of Radio 2. She is wearing her old red polka dot dress and a head scarf. I have just been crying because I had picked up something and put it into my mouth. She had run over and clouted me to make me spit it out, shouting "Dirty, dirty". It had tasted vile. (Was it cat muck? We had a white cat which Dad had christened Omo.)

Then from next door there is a furious scream. Mam switches the radio off.

"Your bin's crawling with maggots! What the hell have you put in there?"

It is Dustbin yelling at Mrs Gardiner, our shy neighbour. We hurry out through the backdoor to listen because when Dustbin is in full cry, and as long as it's not you that have sinned, it's a wonderful free entertainment. Mam halts a snigger and puts her shushing finger to her mouth, just like she did that time when we hid behind the settee until the Indian gentleman in the turban, going door-to-door, had given up knocking and gone.

"Mice? Mice? What the bloody hell are you doing putting mice in the bloody, bugging bin?"

My dad was a soft touch. Mr Gardiner was slightly odd and couldn't work. He had a set of hairdressing tools, and now and then he came round to do our hair for a couple of bob. I hated it because his clippers always nicked the skin in my neck and I was scared of the spill he lit and blew out to singe hair which, for some peculiar reason was beyond the range or competence of scissors. And his hot breath smelt funny. Mr Gardiner also kept white mice which had pink eyes. Dad had bought a couple off him while my mam stood alternately scowling and smiling in the background. I took an interest in them at first as they scampered amongst the shredded newspaper on the floor of their little cage. I waited to watch the little black pellets emerge from their behinds.

I used to play a game with my brother where we took it in turns to watch the skin on our arseholes vibrate as we summoned up a fart.

"It's gone back to the refuelling station!" we'd say if one just wouldn't come. (Television programmes didn't start until about five o'clock back then, and you had to make your own entertainment.)

My mam's reluctance about those mice turned to absolute detestation as my dad's faithful promise to clean them out and take care of them went the way of most of his faithful promises, and they began to pong. Mam wouldn't go near them; they reminded her of the rats that we had had in Strathmore Rd when I was a baby. (Thinking about it now, those mice probably were rats.) Anyway, the rodents had, apologetically, been taken back by Dad when I came down one morning.

"I'll report you to the Council!" threatened Dustbin.

I think Mrs Gardiner was weeping by this time. We strained to hear her but she was a timid mouse herself.

Dustbin exploded. "But you can't just stick 'em in the bin cos they're bloody dead..." (Whining from Mrs Gardiner) "...What do you mean the ground's too hard to bury 'em? (whimper, whimper, whimper) "Well, I'm sorry to 'ear e's poorly, but that's no excuse..... You could 'ev allays just chucked 'em down the bottom of the garden in the rough for the bloody cats.... or the birds! Don't you know there's an 'eatwave? You should smell the bloody cart now. It's a bloody 'ealth 'azard." (more whimpers)" I'm sorry Missus, I shall 'ev to report it."

And we watched him stride off to his doom. The incident had made him so upset and indignant that as the cart turned at the end of the Close he keeled over and died, like his mam in the pantry.

There he lay surrounded by a gaggle of residents as the ambulance came. His great belly was heaved up into the air, a huge mound, way above his leather boots and head.

I wondered later, as I lay praying in my bed to gentle Jesus, meek and mild - if he had reported Mrs Gardiner to God.

4 EXHIBITS

The Thatchers at the field end of the Close intrigued me. I never saw a Mister. And Mrs was a small dumpy thing which rushed, almost ran, face wrapped in a headscarf, with a fixed smile and no greeting, clutching her patchwork leather bag to the shops on Brookside.

Of which there were six in a row.

The Coey was the biggest. 8143 was our divi number. The shop lady used to write it down on her pad and I loved to watch her, tip of tongue at the corner of her mouth, carefully rip out the tiny perforated ticket, leaving more visible of the shiny blue carbon paper beneath, and hand it to us with our change. And with it always a "And don't you dare lose it!"

Next door was the Co-op butcher, a thin, jolly man with thick black glasses. He seemed to take a great delight in chopping up meat and attacked it with gusto. His assistant was a portly lady. I remember her kindly asking my tiny brother Neil if the cat had got his tongue that day. He refused to answer,

"Aren't you going to say Hello?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Cos you're too fat, that's why!"

My mam gulped, scooped up her potted meat and dripping and dragged us out.

On the other side of the junction with Bridge Rd was a chip shop, Jarvis's grocery, a strange, whispering newsagent, Mr Campton, and, best of all, a chemist's. I used to stare at the tall, blue, long-necked (empty) flask in the window, wondering what its contents tasted like; as sweet as the delicious perfumes inside? Why did no-one ever ask for any?

Mrs Thatcher would hurry there and hurry back because of Michael. Michael wasn't "right" my mam said under her breath, when I asked her why he didn't come out to play and didn't come to school.

We would slow on our scooters outside his house and look up. He would stare back through his pink glasses, grinning with one tooth sticking below his bottom lip. He never showed any sign of frustration or animation behind the glass that kept him in. Like an exhibit.

The footpath beyond led down the side of the Thatchers' house to the field on the left and the Humps on the right. We were avid collectors of anything that moved there. Finding them and imprisoning them was the best bit; keeping them and looking after them became a bit of a chore. I had a white moth which I christened Fagash. I carried him round in an England's Glory matchbox with a slip of leaf in to sustain him. But it wasn't long before he went the way of the rest of my captures and was gladly buried with ceremony in a hole beneath the grass. Burial was something we learnt about quite early when old Mrs Dewis was carried out in her coffin and placed in the back of the hearse.

"Where's she going, Mam?"

"To be buried"

"Why"

"Her soul's gone to heaven and they have to put her body in the ground at the cemetery."

"Why?"

She thought but didn't answer. So when Nigel's pet mouse died we buried it on the Humps and he made us say our prayers over it. Nigel was a posh lad, probably the only Nigel on the estate, and he knew about things like that.

One day Man-hole netted a cat-fish in the brook. After we had ceased being amazed, we needed to think about the practicalities of its capture. To throw it back was unthinkable. So we dug a deep hole in his garden and stamped down the earth really hard. But however hard and often we stamped, to our despair, the feckless water always seeped away, leaving cracked brown clay as smooth as chocolate.

"Let's use those bits of slab and some stones for the bottom!" suggested Charles. Charles was always the practical one.

We carefully arranged the stones until the base resembled a cobbled street and the carefully poured in the water. Would it hold? But as it slowly began to trickle away and I cursed, in my simple way, the sheer awkwardness of things, our attention was diverted by Malcolm sailing through the air on the end of his crazy dad's boot.

"Now you fill the bugger in, you little bleeder."

"But what about me catfish?" he snivelled. But it was already hurtling high in the air to its doom amongst the Humps behind.

Man-hole collected fish. I collected caterpillars; the bristly brown ones of the tortoiseshell from nettles; the green stripy ones of the cabbage white and the tiny ones that made a loop from front to back as they walked along. My pride and joy was a green and brown monster with a thorn at its end. I kept it alive for days and days, only to come down one morning to find it, like all the rest before it, expired on the bottom of its jam-jar amongst its green pellets.

I wanted to see one turn into a chrysalis and hatch out into a butterfly. I would hunt for chrysalises in the shed at Granddad's and was fascinated to see them wriggle as I gently touched them with a finger. And I would prise them away from their silken corners, lay them in boxes and rush down every morning expecting to find a box full of new fluttering butterflies. But I never did. All my collecting was in vain.

As we return one day from the field with our jam-jars and our nets, an amazing sight stops us at the Thatchers.

The net curtains in the kitchen window are ablaze. We stand watching a scene in a slow-motion silent film. At one end of the window Michael is staring out with that unchanging, imbecilic smile, holding a box of matches, while at the other end his mother is calmly beating at the flames with her hands. Once done, she carefully picks him up, still with matches in his hand..... but then, alas, the screen goes blank.

I cannot recall ever seeing Michael again at the window. I think he might have gone to some special place. Mrs Thatcher seemed to have the same problem with her son as we had with our fish and insects. Now she had got him, what exactly was she supposed to do with him?

THE SHIFTERS

Our silver stream where fishes hid
In waterweeds, our brook of youth
We scoured like poets after truth
With a bath tub; Man-hole, me and kid.
Our curling shrimps, our water fleas
From pebbles, silt and sand we sifted.
What treasures in our tub had drifted?
- Silver sticklebacks and minnies!
And all that fluttered, crawled and swam
In meadow, hedgerow, bush and brook
Were gifts for greedy boys to pluck
And thence in box and jar to cram.

All from their rightful place, with leaves;
By apprentices of a race of thieves.

5 THE COURTING STILES

The Courting Stiles was a path that accompanied the railway from the station, along by East Close, through the field, past the allotments and as far as the Park Rd bridge. Park Rd was off limits for us. It used to have a notorious reputation as being the repository of all the flotsam and jetsom of the Council Estates of the town. We rarely went down there.

One of my earliest memories was of gathering snails from the plants that grew along the path. Schnee-schnaws I called them. I had gotten up early; it must have been a Sunday; the day was utterly silent. There is a garlicky smell of plants in the ditch and the bubbly froth left behind by the snails as I put them in my jar. But like a half-remembered dream there is nothing else left of the day. Just that one scene.

And what remains of twelve years of childhood? What of a whole life? Perhaps there will come a time when I will begin to dream my time back alive; that vanished white cat Omo and his days before and after my solitary vision of him; the door handle that moved by itself; the raspberries and then diarrhoea trickling down my leg. How did they all fit together? Where were the missing panels? And what were the secrets of the house; where are the keys to my father's silences and tempers? And who or what turned the handle of the kitchen door - I swear it happened - when only I and my brother were there?

The Courting Stiles runs like a thread through my first ten years, and still in my memories.. The older I grew the further along it I went and the more dare-devil I became. It was easy to break through the hedge and to climb up the embankment to the forbidden railway. A favourite trick was to leave ha'pennies on the line for the train to turn them into pennies. But I can never remember trying to spend them at Mr Jarvis's shop - as Mick swore he had and gotten away with it.

Further along, the railway path gave access to the field and a great vantage point to see the waters of the brook rushing out of a large concrete pipe from underneath the embankment. We would peer into the pipe to try and spot any catfish spilling out. My mother warned us about climbing in, saying a little boy had walked in one summer and had never come out. There was a grill a few feet in and beyond it a grumbling darkness. And I only ever crawled in as far as it was safe.

And we played on the stiles themselves, leaping over from one wooden step to the other. The slope at one point made it an ideal run for our trolleys. Every boy had a trolley, knocked up out of a wooden plank, two cross-spars, old pram wheels and a string to steer with. Some trolleys were really posh, with a crate at the back to sit in, complete with cushion.

In the summer holidays, it took us further afield, towards the allotments and their wealth of things that naughty boys found irresistible. The hedgerow between the field and the allotments provided deep dark dens where we hid, lit fires and got girls to show us their fannies, in return for a look at our willies. Charlie Dickens had sisters so he wasn't interested.

"They look like Ws" he said in answer to my question.

I was shocked and baffled. Ws?? And I couldn't stop thinking about it until I saw one for myself. Like Charlie, I found them a bit disappointing, but I never passed up a chance to confirm or amend first impressions, especially when I found out what they were really for.

But were the Courting Stiles ever used for courting?

In West Close there was a tall handsome chap called Rodney. He would go whistling past us of an evening, on his way up town, combing his black brilliantined hair back into a DA (duck's arse) as he went. The bane of his life was Rex, his faithful dog that would often get out and pursue him as he walked past us up the hill towards the station footbridge.

He would shout and say the forbidden F-word under his breath as he would be forced to turn and take the dog home.

He must have been feeling flush one evening or perhaps he was showing off to the pretty girl on his arm when he said to Mick

"Hoi, here's a bob. Tek the bloody thing home will yer!"

Some afternoons, we went spud-bashing. Creeping into an allotment on our bellies we dug into the potato ridges with sticks until we reached the tubers beneath and began to fill our red and white hooped t-shirts.

Above our great den in the hedge in the look-out tree my brother Neil was concealed. Being a titch he was an ideal look-out, whistling low if the gardener turned or started to walk our way. We were never caught but I felt really hot once when the man across the road told my dad that he would "Kill the little bleeders" who kept nicking his spuds, if he could catch them. Once he used the forbidden F-word in my presence and Dad turned crimson with either shame or indignation.

We crept back to the den with our prizes and with a jarful of water from the brook we washed the muck away. We collected straw from the field and sticks from the hedgerow. Malcolm, a snotty Prometheus, had stolen the matches from his dad's pocket Scrape...and the magic flame was already spreading through the grass and making the smaller twigs crackle. Soon we had a blaze and grey smoke, smelling like Dad's socks, was towering up through the hedge, camouflaged by the many fires that the gardeners had lit. One by one we placed the spuds on the edge of the fire, turning them regularly with our knives.

We were so impatient for them to be ready. Malcolm also had a pack of butter which he had borrowed from his kitchen. He had put it in a dark corner to stop it melting. And then the fragrant little spuds were ready and with a dollop of molten butter we put them to our mouths blowing them until they were just cool enough to eat. And they were double-delicious, because of the way they had been harvested.

One day we heard low voices from the path beyond, one a girl's and the other very gruff. They seemed to be quite close.

"I can smell smoke," she said.

"So what?" he said, impatiently.

We realised it was Rodney. We heard a twig snap. Charlie whispered that he was going up into the tree to have a look.

When he came back down he was stifling his giggles.

"What's going on?" I said.

"Rodney's taking his girlfriend onto the bank....I think he's going to do her."

We looked at each other in amazement. From dirty jokes (remember Fooker-arda?) we had some vague idea what this meant, but now we had a chance to find out first hand. As quiet as we could, one by one we crept out into the allotment and inched our way towards the hedge that ran along the Courting Stiles. Through the twigs we could see two figures that had passed through onto the steep embankment beyond the stile and which were now moving behind a bush. Gradually the girl's calf and arm peeped out and then a hand raised her dress to reveal her thigh and - amazement! - her suspenders. The leg began to move out further and then bend at the knee. I glanced at Mick's face; his mouth was open and his eyes were like green marbles.

"Stop!" shouted the girl. "I don't want..."

"Look, let me just..." pleaded Rodney.

But the rest of his words were lost as we heard a dog come barking up the path.

"F***ing hell" he shouted, as Rex raced up and dived into the hedge.

Boy and girl came tumbling out, as if from a burning bush, pulling up their britches and fighting off the dog. Our laughter turned to a stunned silence as we saw that the girl was Felicia, Malc's big sister.

"Who the f***'s there?" screamed Rodney, kicking the hedge behind which we were watching.

"Bloody perverts!"

And we got up and ran back to our den, and out into the field and were miles away before Rodney appeared on the path at the top. Malcolm said nothing and we didn't know what to say to him. His face was pale and thoughtful and the dew-drop at his nostril went up and down like a yoyo as he regained his breath.

Then the gleam disappeared into his nose and by magic appeared in his eye.

"Ah'm goo-ing in nah fo' mi tea, see yer, lads" and off he trotted.

I can't say whether it was a coincidence or not, but for a long while afterwards Malc seemed to have no shortage of money for sweets.

6 THE SPECIAL

Living by the railway station made it inevitable that we would take up train-spotting. But the passenger service on our branch line offered little variation. The same two weary tanker engines plodded daily between Birmingham and Leicester. Goods trains added some variety, with specimens of the more powerful machines clanking along the banked line between the semi-detached houses opposite and on through the field beyond. And an engine would be stranded most days in the marshalling yards, assembling slowly and patiently, with squeaky pistons, a goods train from wooden shacks on wheels and open wagons holding the bits and pieces that our small town could muster, mostly from its hosiery and knitwear factories. In those days lorries were few and the process of delivery very slow; but that world wasn't in such a headlong rush.

From the great cast of engines beyond little Earlstone station there were never any surprise guest-star appearances - no "namers", as we called them; no Jube, no Scot, a Brit or a Semi - as if it would have been absurd to attach such classy exponents, in their splendid liveries of dark ruby or emerald green, with their proud name-plates (Bechuanaland, Bellerophon, Rudyard Kipling, The Royal Scot) to the grubby branch-line traffic such as stopped at or rushed in disdain through our town.

Trains were infrequent and we combined their spotting with all the other activities that were on our summer agenda and we kept a stub of pencil and a scrap of paper in our pockets. Until the Jacksons came to live next door our only contact with the wider world of steam had been during our August holiday weeks.

The rail journey to Southport I remember better than the holiday itself (apart from the lion-tamer being mauled by the lion at the circus). The thrill of the engines on the other tracks rushing past, for whose front-end numbers Uncle John risked his head; and the bewildering herds of exotic beasts in sidings which we struggled to record as we steamed into Crewe Junction and the smart, shiny individuals waiting there impatiently at their marks; and that terrific wind-shielded Scot that roared contemptuously through Wigan station, pinning us back against the wall as we waited for our humble connection to Southport: these were as vividly different from the routine monotony of Earlstone station as the few days on a golden beach were from the rest of our monochrome weeks.

Colin and Denis were our new neighbours. A little older than us, they were really friendly lads. Colin had a blind eye which Denis had accidently shot out with an arrow as he had swung round on a post. We soon discovered that our bedrooms were either side of the dividing wall of our semis and we loved to hammer messages to each other at bedtime.

Nuneaton Trent Valley station, five miles away, was on the main London Euston to Glasgow line. Mr and Mrs Jackson mentioned casually to our mam that on Saturday mornings they went shopping in Nuneaton and left their lads on the bridge trainspotting for a couple of hours, and could they take Neil and me as well?

Could we? Could we, Mam? Please! We'll be good boys! And.....yes, yes, YES we could!

The bridge at Nuneaton looked down - not onto two pathetic, simple rails - but onto a magical, bewildering puzzle of tracks and signals. To each gap in the bridge railings there clung a child, and many big lads and chaps stood there as well. When the central signals on the great array in

front of the bridge proudly leapt up, so did everyone there, yelling MAIN! Then all eyes would gaze into the far distance to spy the first wisps of smoke.

To the south the line curved around past the railway sheds and the smoke and the funnel came into view almost at the same time.

But from the north, way beyond the rooftops of Nuneaton, the process was magical and tantalising; first came a puff of white steam, as if a genie had suddenly appeared out of thin air; for a moment it seemed to linger, going nowhere; but then it gained resolve and became a white mane, disappearing and reappearing as the leonine express entered and emerged from tunnels, thickening and accelerating with every second, rushing into the station beyond our bridge, then bursting out screaming, pistons a blur, past our saucer eyes, a huge red or green beast of a Brit, a Scot or a Semi, allowing us just a second to catch the five digits of its number. And whenever it turned out to be, after all the anticipation and excitement, only 46101, Royal Scots Greys, a too frequent captive of this track, the disappointment and hatred was immense.; a chorus of "Scrap it" would go up from all the vantage points. But our special contempt was reserved for the experimental Diesel engines that came shaking down the line; and as if in retort they would blast their hooters as they entered the bridge.

"All the steam engines are going to be scrapped. There'll only be Diesel and Electric," had said a long thin pencil of a man in a suit, standing behind us. His sort avidly read the technical stuff in the train spotting magazines which I only once attempted.

After a session train spotting, once home, we took down our Ian Allen London-Midland region booklets, which cost 2/6d, and in silence transferred our precious numbers from our exercise books with ruler and pen. A "combine", a hardback book of all the regions with all the numbers, Six-ers from the East, Three-ers from the South and Four-ers with, intriguingly, only four digits from the West, and the old-fashioned Fiv-ers which we called coffee-pots because of their tall funnels, cost an enormous 10/6d. Imagine my face one Christmas morning when I found that shiny treasure amongst my presents!

To see the underlinings multiply to the point even where there were fewer unspotted engines in a class than there were spotted was a cause of great satisfaction. A "P" by the number meant that you been pulled by the locomotive. A "C" meant you been invited into the cab by the driver; "Can we cab yer, mate?" was almost always met with by a smiling shake of the head. To be allowed up into a great engine was an unforgettable honour. To complete a class was the impossible dream. My dad told me that Mr Jarvis, the grocer, had said the bubble gum makers deliberately withheld the last few cards of footballers to keep sales high. I wondered if there were such mean people controlling the railways, keeping certain engines out of service on purpose.

Cribbing was the greatest crime amongst train-spotters. "You cribber!" was an accusation enough to cause a fight if someone took down the number of an engine they had missed, or if they were suspected of underlining numbers fraudulently. Cribbing began to bother me greatly. Once, when we were on holiday in Weymouth, and had rushed to catch sight of an engine on a platform as it pulled away, just glimpsing its coal-tender, the man whom we had asked for the number gave it us but then said with a sympathetic smile "Hard luck!"

We had slunk away and only guiltily written down the number when out of his sight. Hard luck? How much of an engine did you need to see, then? Where did spotting end and cribbing begin? These were the first philosophical questions I had to deal with. If I had seen the wheel of 70000, Britannia, (which I dreamed of spotting but never did until I was forty) removed for repair, would I be a cribber to underline the number in my combine? Was the photo in the combine sufficient? Did someone just have to describe it to me?

I could never come up with a conclusive, satisfactory answer in the same way that these days I still can't decide what it means precisely to love someone: do we love their livers and their bowels? Probably not, or at least not as much as other parts of their anatomy; but perhaps we ought to just as much, because after all, the object of our adoration would not exist without them. What is the minimum amount of a person that can remain before the identity disappears? A geneticist might say one cell; a lover would probably need a bit more to go on. Anyway it was about at that time, after these questions began to bother me, that my interest in train spotting began to wane, disappearing completely one day after I found my combine with every single number underlined by my spiteful brother. He had turned me into the biggest cribber on earth; I no longer knew which engines I had spotted and which I hadn't. The rotten bugger.

When The Special started to come through Earlstone my interest was still at its height. It was a summer evening, about half past eight. We had been playing at Filmstars in the Close. Starting together at the kerb, shouting out the name of the film star or singer from the initials given by the kid who was on, entitled one to a leap a pace forward, the winner being he or she who arrived at the kerb opposite first; "D D" "Diana Dors!".... "Right...one pace forward."

From the Leicester direction a shrill scream was heard and we all stopped, knowing immediately that here was some rare alien approaching and at high speed. We stood transfixed as a beautiful green Scot suddenly filled the gap opposite and vanished, followed by a rush of red mail carriages. Who had got the number? We rushed to the station up the hill and there stood Man-hole, his face pale with shock, his dew-drop hanging down to his lip. "A Scot!" he squeaked. He was wearing exactly the same expression as on the day he had pulled his net out of the muddy brook with a great fat catfish wriggling in it.

Man-hole was a hero. He had the number. The next night we waited and the next night and the night after that but nothing..... until a week later, the same day, a Thursday, at the same time, another Scot, another we had never spotted, came steaming through. The news began to spread throughout the estate and boys from Brookside, Higham Way, Holt Rd were ready waiting the next week - in the field, in our Close and by the fence at the station.

But my mother decided to put us in the bath one Thursday night, despite howls of protest from me and brother Neil. We heard the whistle in the distance, the roar of anticipation outside and we stood up in the bath, just in time to see the gap opposite turn dark green through the frosted glass of the window. Philosophy hadn't begun to trouble me at that stage and I had no qualms about getting the number later on, and it occurred to no-one that I might be cribbing.

Within a few weeks, for whatever reason, the Special stopped coming through and hum-drum normality returned.

The only other memorable railway event - later that summer - was when a man from Featherstone Drive was discovered cut and sealed into two neat halves on the Birmingham line.

The pencil man was right of course. Years later, as we travelled northward to a football match in Liverpool it was painful to see long lines of engines at Crewe, exiles from their great heyday, nameless, and stripped of their livery down to their ceramic guts and gizzards; all that remained of those awe-inspiring, beautiful machines which had steamed and hooted through my boyhood and my dreams.

And still do.

7 MEDICINE

In those far-away fields of boyhood, cruelties were a commonplace, the necessary foils to those few wholly unambiguous pleasures we loved: barley sugars, trips to grandparents and the pictures, train journeys, lollipops and Christmas and such.... My friend Man-hole was either roaring with laughter or just plain roaring, having been given a hiding by his ferocious dad for acts of terrible wickedness, like digging a hole in the garden, bringing in mud, a sullen word. ...But I often wonder if those regular clouts and thrappings have ruined him, wherever he is. Does he sulk in some alcohol-stained corner, marred as a victim for life? Or does he reflect upon them, wryly, as an unavoidable consequence of being born who, where and when he was?

My dad used to give me a special look and I knew immediately it was time to shut up or pack up. The worst good hiding I got (and I did deserve it for waking him up one night) was for climbing in bed with my brother and (inadvertently) making him cry. I was so terrified of the dark some nights that I couldn't bare it in bed on my own. But in the stiff-upper-lip 1950s it would have been as inconceivable to confess to that, as to snivel to a teacher about a bully.

That post-war, polka-dot world was full of High Hopes, Gay Old Soldiers, Whippoorwills and Itsy-Bitsy Bikinis, whose lyrics did not quite rhyme with some of the darker elements below the gay old surface.

But I wonder. Are not fear and pain unavoidable and, well, (dare one even breathe it in these indulgent days?), necessary, like medicines - very bad, of course, if overdosed on - but serving to rectify evil manners, vanities, absurd conceits and silly notions of immortality? We all know what shocking bad cards Life can deal us poor players. How shall we, if unschooled in the cruel ways of the world, play the hand we pick up next?

Surely children need to be prepared and immunised a little against the dark tricks and terrors that may lie in wait for them - and against their parentally-induced and self-induced overblown sense of their own importance.

Don't they?

And what a range of medicines we had to take! There was the metaphorical sort at school: swishes of the cane, the boxing of ears (hands ungloved) and whacking slippers. On the way there and back in January and February, there was the freezing of any appendage not balaclava-ed or mitten-ed in those proper winters. And then the many trials we had to endure at home, such as freezing cold get-ups, spoons of malt, cod liver oil and a horrible pink stuff for coughs which had been invented by a caped and hooded committee of child-hating scientists, which they vilely christened THE LINCTUS. It even came supplied with its own sinister plastic spoon mysteriously stuck to the bottle.

And my mother had a well-proven theory that a banana would do you absolutely no good whatsoever unless it was eaten with "bre'n butter". She was such a believer in it that once when Neil and I fell into the brook and came back home drenched, shivering and crying, almost before we had stripped off our clothes she had persuaded us to consume a banana and bread with dire warnings of catching our death of cold if we didn't. Just that once, we gobbled down the combination without one word of fuss. In later years, when we were young men, she turned her witch-doctor eyes onto celery. We couldn't have a Christmas tea without being badgered into eating a stick of celery. Thirty years later I still look upon that stringy stalk with much suspicion.

And shall I forget the bitter taste of Beechams powders and sickly Alka-Salzer? (which worked wonders on my nausea by inducing immediate and violent vomiting.) Being Sick was probably the thing I hated and feared most at home, but at school it was a teacher we nicknamed The Beast.

Once he dressed up as Father Christmas. But he didn't fool me for a second. Even from behind a white beard and from within a scarlet hood the sheer ruby-red nastiness of the man radiated out, never mind all that Ho-Ho-Ho-ing.

Even as a little first year at Junior School I had managed to attract his ire and fire. On our timetable was a new subject - Handicraft - which, reminded me of Witchcraft, and therefore filled me with apprehension, even terror - especially when the teacher turned out to be him. Nowadays I would be diagnosed as "dyspraxic" (which is a snooty, pretentious way of saying absolutely bloody useless.) Anyway, my plasticine rabbit quickly became an object of scorn, my papier mâché figure got mashed and my stitches had him in stitches. One day he was particularly disgusted with my efforts.

"I SAID tie a KNOT boy, NOT make a BODGE!" he yelled while doing a little energetic handicraft of his own on one of my winter-reddened, massive, sticky-out ears.

Of course, (like Man-hole and his dad(?)) I hold absolutely nothing against him now. Off duty he was almost certainly an absolutely wonderful family man and well-liked - as Hitler surely was by his cats - and he was only really a part of that thorough, necessary preparation for the many, many days when the sun did not and does not shine. He had a brilliant cure for cuts and bruises, a horrid purple substance called iodine, which I imagined he brewed up in his florid cheeks and spat out into a large jar. Back then, every racing, tiggling, kiss-chasing, tree-climbing and skipping child was made not just of sugar and spice and slugs and snails, but abrasions and cuts, ranging from the tickly brown healing scabs on knees, which we picked at to reveal the creamy new skin beneath, to those fresh, killing, blood-beaded wounds. The rough tarmacked playgrounds back then were designed to inflict maximum damage and a good scattering of grit (did The Beast get up early to scatter it?) compounded the pain.

You only went to the Beast once, limping and crying. The jar would be carefully unscrewed and a generous daub of iodine would be held fast to the sore. The agony would make the victim squeal louder than the injury.

"There, that's better" he would say with a satisfied grin.

You sorted subsequent scrapes out yourself in the toilets, with running cold water and shiny IZAL toilet paper - the sort that nearly dislocated your elbow when you wiped your bum - and you dabbed and dabbed till all the black grit was out and the beads of blood had almost stopped.

Having left Juniors and The Beast behind (he turned almost into an avuncular figure in our fourth year, as some teachers do when they flirt and fraternise with the departing enemy) I went onto Fairley High School and encountered a new terror, the Headmaster George (Bomber) Brown, but that's another story.

I was by no means a sickly child but I did have two spells in hospital before the age of ten. The first was a seemingly interminable stay at The Royal Infirmary in Leicester. This was due to an ear infection when I was about five. It was a lonely time - my parents could not get over to see me much and I have mainly eradicated it from my mind, apart from the regular morning ordeal of porridge (and malt) and watching a man in the next room have an injection in his pimply bum. And I recall the ride back in the ambulance with a group of kids rushing to the house to see if there was going to be someone in agony or dying brought out on a stretcher. But it was only me and they were disappointed. The most painful part of that episode of my life was being taken for a pretend walk after some weeks of recuperation which turned out to be obviously an

attempt to take me back to infant school. I wept and screamed and clung onto every post I could reach, but to no avail. Within an hour I was sitting quite happily in my classroom making plasticine models. I don't think I was quite into my Rabbit Period at that time.

My main problem as a child was my tonsils. I seemed to have a throat infection every second week. And it was worse agony than Beast's Brew. It was on those occasions that I had to gargle with the entirely awful TCP. Now this really was the potion of vicious sadists. Do the letters stand for To Cure Pain? To Cause Pain? The Corrosive Potion?

"Keep gargling!" would shout my mother. And I did - well, I had no intention of swallowing the stuff.

"If you keep gargling you'll get rid of all them white horses!"

Them white horses were the tiny blisters on my tonsils. And after days of this ordeal, remarkably there they were, like harmless white butterbean skins swilling around in the plughole. But were they caused by TCP or cured by TCP? Do people still gargle with it or have the Health and Safety brigade banned TCP gargling? Once again, I hold nothing against it. It was a necessary evil of childhood. I might even try it again for a nostalgic, Proustian experience.

Anyway, it was decided that enough was enough and the tonsils would have to come out. Tonsillectomy became very fashionable in the late fifties. GPs and surgeons the length and breadth of the country had decided as one man, and the odd woman, that that tiny pair of testicles swinging around at the back of children's throats should come out, as they were good for nothing apart from getting infected. They offered a convenient way, I suppose, of occupying a surgeon's time and skills, as the opportunity to remove things must have been an infrequent event back then. (There are quite a few appendages and bits and pieces which fall into that useless category, sooner or later.)

But I was terrified. And because I was terrified and the eldest of that particular intake at the Markfield hospital, I seemed to be marked by certain nurses for the same disapproving scowl and comment which Beast had so enjoyed reserving for my plasticine rabbit. It began when we were in a huddle around the kindly doctor who was explaining to us all what would happen, how they would whip out the offensive little blighters within seconds and have us back, coming round, on the ward within minutes. Or something like that. But I wasn't really listening. My mind was dwelling on the words operation, anaesthetic, cut and imagining myself lying on the table. We had already had an injection to make us drowsy and he must have said to us something like-"You'll feel thirsty but we can't give you a drink" - while my mind was roaming around the operating theatre and as soon as he said "Any questions?" (What an enlightened man for 1959!) I returned to reality and my hand shot straight up.

"Yes, young man?"

"Can I have a drink of water?"

The groan from the others - nearly all younger - and his sorry smile which said "How can such a big boy like you be such a thick pudding?" utterly humiliated me and I felt like running away. A pretty nurse gave me such a scornful look and as soon as I did come round with the agony of the operation making me cry out and weep, she was at my bedside in a flash, hissing like a snake

"You should feel ashamed John Payne. You're the eldest here but the biggest baby of the lot - the others aren't crying," and she was off, tossing her pretty blonde mane back in triumph.

Oh, the disparity between the appearance and the reality! Had God given me bad tonsils just so that I might discover that shocking truth? And it didn't stop there. When I couldn't eat a plate

of yellow fish - on which the yellow milk had been disgustingly mashed into the potato - partly to do with the pain of swallowing, partly to do with the loathing of it, I was held up to my neighbourhood of tiny patients as the worst child on the ward in living memory.

But the most harrowing experience was still to come. I think my mam and dad had been to see me and now that all the visitors had obediently trooped out, it was decided to bath us all - one by one, of course. I was in my dressing gown and zipped bootee slippers and as luck would have it, guess who had the pleasure of inflicting the torture of a bath on me.

“Well, come on...get in...we’ve got all the others to do...can’t you do it for yourself?”

And as she removed my dressing gown and seemed to spot my bit of a willy, she sort of snorted. In excruciating embarrassment I plunged in my foot with my slipper still on.

“Well I ask you!” she announced, and with that she left me entirely to bathe in my own misery.

I don’t remember coming home in an ambulance that time. For days I had to take twenty deep breaths at an open window and I wasn’t allowed out for weeks. On the pretty nurse’s sayso?

When I eventually did go out I was weak, and, on the look-out for Mick and Man-hole I had wandered up to the railway bridge, which was also the part-territory of the West Close gangs with whom we had nothing to do. Perhaps the gang of smaller kids there sensed a weak prey animal in me because I was soon on the floor being slashed with whips of twigs.

“Hey you... You leave him alone. You shouldn’t be picking on him; he’s just had his tonsils out, you naughty boys!”

I hadn’t a clue who my passing Guardian Angel on a bicycle was but her dubious shouted logic had stopped them in mid-whip. For a second they looked me up and down, as if to spot where the tonsils might have been taken out from, and with a mixture of uncertainty, fear and pity, went on their way.

8 SCIENCE

In the post-war euphoria of victory (which did not much survive 1951), in the fervour to build a shining new Britain and slay the fusty armies of aristocratic Toryism, education was one of the main standards in the vanguard. I wonder how many new parents in the late 1940s and early 1950s were swayed to render up their hard won pennies to the door-to-door salesmen with their thin pencil moustaches and trilby hats – “Good morning Modom,” - (respectfully removing hat and cradling it in left hand while proffering case in right hand) – “Could I possibleh interest you too, like your neighbours - whilst I ‘eppen to be in your hareah, in a never-to-be repeated-special-opportunitteh...”

To buy, by monthly instalments, a set of encyclopaedias.

Arthur Mee must have made an absolute fortune. I cannot recall a time when they did not stand bolt upright to attention there on the bottom shelf of our meagrely populated book-case, like a row of tall red soldiers, ready, willing and able to invade my empty mind.

One of my earliest memories is of cradling one of those huge volumes in my lap, looking at the wonderful pictures and scanning the unreadable print, making up what it might say and saying it out loud to myself, while my mother hummed away to Music While You Work in her headscarf, peeling the potatoes.

Within weeks of infant school that tantalising code began to unravel before my eyes, although some more strangely spelt words like “OKEEN” stayed a mystery for years.

“Col...um...bus...gazed...across...the o...??? ...Ma-a-a-a-am!”

She was singing.

“Yes all the girls declare, that he’s a gay old soldier...dumpity,dumpity, dumpity dee.....The dumpity Sergeant Major.....”

“MAM!”

“WHAT?”

“What’s an okeen?”

“Okeen?....Let me hev a look.....Columbus gazed across theocean !”

And what did I look at most? Well, I was an avid collector of everything that grew, flew and swam and I would stare for ages at the flowers, fish, caterpillars, moths and butterflies, wondering by what magic some turned into others, comparing the extravagant liveries of lava and imago and looking for clues.....And in one of the volumes I sat and stared at the pages and pages of flags, because their vivid colours reminded me of butterflies: reds on green, reds on yellow, blues and reds, blues and yellows, triangles, squares, oblongs and best of all the swallow-tailed flags, because I could imagine them leaving the flagpole, like tortoiseshells leaving a nettle flower, to fly on the wind by themselves..... These kept me occupied for hour upon hour.

As my reading and knowledge slowly improved I began dutifully to attempt the unillustrated pages, perhaps under History, where heads in profile in curly wigs were the only thing to look at, but it wasn’t long before I had turned back to the flags or the insects again.

And then I discovered my consuming passion.

The Universe!

It wasn’t long before all the red soldiers were prostrated on the floor, open and being interrogated for any sign of a lonely beacon in darkness, any planet, gaudily hooped or plain, any neighing head of a cosmic cloud, any mention or photo of a galaxy, comet or star. Or other Beings. I would look out of my bedroom window at night at the star-teeming sky and try to imagine all those images within those tantalising flickering dots of light.

“Are you really there?” I would whisper. “Show me!!”

Would one flare and fade away, as I watched, like it said in the book they did, like the crab nebula did once, in something called the middle ages?

And all this, I found out, was to do with “skience”! Why didn’t we do that at school? Instead of Handicraft? Outside our classroom was a large easel with rows of books and one was a beautifully illustrated account of the planets which I almost knew off by heart.

(Oh, where is it now?)

I loved to look down the page from Mercury to Pluto and back again to the fiery sun and try to take in what the millions and millions of miles might look like and try to imagine where a nebula might be flaring.

From school to Sketchley Hill was one mile. Mrs Braine had said so once as she stood there scratching her fanny as usual (did it never occur to her that we all knew, despite our littleness, what was between her legs??)

One mile. It took my little legs twenty minutes to get there; past the smelly AMCO chemical works (where a bush crawled with butterflies - a self-sown buddleia?) on past Sketchley dye-works with its deep weir, to the little shop at the bottom of the hill. That was one mile. And I still had ten minutes to go before I got to East Close. How long would 93 million miles take, if I didn’t stop to catch the butterflies and look at the water pouring out of the weir? Why did things need to be so very far away, beyond the reach of a little boy.....?

“Interested in the solar system are you, Payne?”

I started and looked up from the book. It was Mr Best, in avuncular mood.

“Yes sir”

“Well you’ll love the Seniors then. You’ll begin science once you go up there.”

I look at him puzzled. And then the penny drops....It was science, not skience.

And then one afternoon when he announces in Handicraft that we wouldn’t be doing papier-mâché but some SCIENCE, my heart leaps.

Will he tell us what Martians might look like? Show us a picture of a blue or golden disk to prove after all that pictures could be taken of stars light-years (which I vaguely understood) so far removed from our Earth?

He has a large can like a catering tin of beans, only larger and he is talking about some weird force.....

“Acting on all of us there is a force called atmospheric pressure which is about 14 pounds per square inch. Now, you can’t feel it because.....Day, if you don’t sit still boy, your ear will have the extra pressure of my hand added to it...and Regina Coulton will you please look this way.....”

But I need no telling to look. My huge lugholes are like red antennae dying to receive the message...but I don’t really see what a massive bean tin has to do with outer space....

He continues. “Can you think why you don’t notice it?”

A hand is up.

“Yes Woodward?”

“Because you get used to it?”

“Interesting answer but no....Yes, Collis?”

“Because you’ve got your clothes on?”

The barbs of ridicule and scorn which he inflicts on this answer mean that all the sea anemone hands that were waving forward suddenly shoot back into their shells.

You....don’t....feel....it.....because....” And here he is looking around, savouring the moment of making the Big Point

Because in each and everyone one of us there is exactly the same pressure.... pressing outand keeping us....all of us..... even Richard Norton....”

(Best sniggers in self congratulation: Norton’s a fat boy, a policeman’s son who got us the cane by canting on us for walking on the railway line)

“...yes even saves Richard..... from..... being.....squished!!”

Absolute silence. Julie Hickey is picking her nose. Eddie - (who in our last summer there kept us entertained with the size of his willy) - is pretending to pick up a pencil, but is in reality gazing in scientific wonder up Regina’s dress. Cook-ene (so nick-named after the lard), who has been hacking with a cough all morning, hacks again, spoiling Best’s big crescendo. He had expected the lively reaction of buzzing intelligent bees, not this utter becalming, and his red face is now slightly more scarlet, a well known warning signal. Cooky sees it and stops coughing.

“Go and get a drink of water, Cook,” he snarls, as if he really meant prussic acid.

In slight bewilderment, The Beast begins to gesture with his palms pushing onto his chest and then away again repeatedly, as if this would do as an explanation. What is he on about? How can there be enough of Atmer’s feric pressing inside me or Eddie or even Best (and that canting turd, Fattie Norton) to stop everything what is outside us squishing us all? When there’s millions and millions of miles of it...and in the nebulas as well?

He pats the tin. It is his talisman.

“Astonished are you? I can tell. You don’t believe me do you 4A?”

Silence. We all spot the trick question. NO could mean a clout. YES could mean that you have to get on your feet and explain why you do believe in Atmus-thingy Pressing.

“Righto! I’ll prove it!”

He has a thing attached to the big tin which starts to make a funny squeaking noise like a mechanical mouse.

“This pump is gradually..... removing.... the air from this tin.....so that there will be absolutely nothing left inside it...just like in outer space....”

I am jolted back to full attention by “outer space”, having been silently giggling to Eddie about the squeaky noise.....

“And then, once there is nothing inside it and because of all the pressure still outside, the tin will.....Well, what do you think will happen to the tin?.....Mills?”

“Er.....will it be squished Sir?”

He smiles. He knows he is finally getting through

“Well done Mills. I’m glad someone is listening. Inside the tin there will be a..... vacuum, like you have in a vacuum cleaner,... so that it picks the bits up.”

But now I’m really puzzled. My mam’s doesn’t pick the bits up. That’s what she keeps saying about it, any road, moaning to dad about getting a new one.

“And..... (*dramatically*)...any second now... wait for it.....”

But any second now goes on for a good minute. The squeaking seems to be turning into a rasping, then a whispering. Best’s face is going scarlet and he is tapping the pump and cursing it silently under his breath. Someone near the front lets out an involuntary Oh! Later, she swears she heard him whisper S-H-I-T. He looks at us and tries to pretend he’s not bothered.

“Well 4A....” Cook coughs. “COOK, GET OUT AND SEE ME AFTER!”

His hand his shaking and now pressing down on the tin. He tries to disguise the force he is using.

“The pump will have got most of the air out before it.... broke....down.. REGINA COULTON AND EDWIN DAY. GET OUT OF MY SIGHT.”

They troop out. His ferret eyes beam out a dire warning around the room, as if mentally applying to us all a good dose of his iodine. He needs to add nothing verbal to the compress and we all wince inwardly.

“Now..... all I will need to do is apply a little more pressure and the tin will collapse.....”

But the little more pressure reminds us of the pressure he generally applies to the heads and palms of naughty boys until, finally, due more, I think, to the absolute glower of vehement hatred which he now directs towards the tin than to the application of his hands, it finally buckles - to our and to his obvious relief. He smiles but his ruddiness turns the smile into a hideous demonic leer.

Fattie Norton, exposor of evil and fraud around every corner cannot help himself. He whispers to Collis “*He* did that.”

But he has judged the volume wrong and The Beast is down the row and on him like a shark on a seal. Now his broad ugly head has become the tin and is being subjected to considerable force. But the atmus feric thingy inside him means it doesn’t buckle either, proving everything he had said at the start of the experiment was the truth.

So that was my first proper science lesson. I didn’t go to the Seniors. It frightened me. The school field was shared between the infant, the junior and senior school and sometimes at lunch times I strayed too close and got a good Chinese burn for it. And there was a huge black pile of coke up against one wall. And the smell of the boiler room which we had to pass was like the smell of the AMCO works.

By 1960, Fairley High School in the village was open. So I went there instead.

It is the first day. We all sit in the Hall while a nice lady who will soon turn into a screech-owl reads out our names, assigning us gradually to our classes, ascending from 1E, through 1D, 1C, 1B to 1A. After that will come the very special 1 Alpha and then, the disturbing 1R - which we know means Remedial even though we're not sure what remedial means. But we know it ain't good.

I sit in agony every time her scarlet lips open. Will I be called next? 1E through to 1A is torture. Payne is a common name in the pagan lands of the old Danelaw, east of the Watling Street, and I have to endure many painful Paynes – Michael, Robert, Wendy - until 1E to 1A have all been read out and have trooped off. Now I sit amongst the last scattered remnants, in trepidation and total uncertainty. Had I been told a lie all along? Were all my stories rubbish? Was I really as thick as a brick? Had they just been trying to shield me kindly from the truth, even to the extent of putting me straight from 1A into 3A at Juniors? (Vicky Smith had slithered back like a snake into 2A while me and Julie Hickey had rallied and climbed the ladder into 4A.)

1R or 1 Alpha? It was like an exquisitely cruel beauty contest, where of the ten finalists the third, second and first places were announced in reverse order. We remaining few were either going to be judged the most clever people in the year or remedial.

At the kind end of the alphabet, Eddie Day is soon relaxing and looking around with a swagger. He has the pretty blonde girl, whose name eludes me, in his sights. With a P I have to wait for a seeming eternity before I too am included in the fold of the blessed elite. We all collect a hymn book and a copy of **An Approach To Latin** and make our way to our form room (which twelve years later, would be my first teaching room.)

Latin and French were intriguing. A Frenchman in a pom-pom hat has fallen into a pond. Below the picture instead of "splash" it says "floc". Now how could a French and an English pond make two such different noises? (The one meant for Cedric in year three would go "thud", as you shall later see.)

My mark for my first French homework - 3/10 - plus the phrase that instils terror into my heart - SEE ME - is an utter shock. Until this, every piece of work at infant and junior school has been lavished with generous praise, apart from my plasticine rabbits and sewing cards. I have never "seen" a teacher in my life. I join the sheepish queue of see-ers. It turns out that my bowl of flowers, labelled with all the French colours, is basically just a horrid mess and cannot deserve more than a measly three. I can picture it now. I had modelled my vase on one at home, a monstrosity which Granddad had insisted on bringing with him when he moved into the newly built flat on the back of the bungalow after Grandma died. The stems of the flowers look more like twisted wires. My handicraft handicap has pursued me from Westfield like witchcraft and is still casting its bad spells on me.

I stare at the funny tables in the Latin text book. I seem to have cottoned onto the nominative, vocative, accusative, genitive, dative and - the one I wonder at - the ablative (it reminds me of Aston Flamville, a nearby hamlet, for no clear reason) and I can accept that *mensa*, with a long stress on the A, means from a table, while *mensa* with a short stress means simply the or a table or in the vocative, O table! Why did the Romans talk to tables? Was it a symptom of the fall of their empire?

Today I am astonished that I could understand - with virtually no explanation offered or sought - what those quaint grammar terms meant. But I still only got 2/10 for my first Latin homework because I misunderstood what we were supposed to do. I have to see the Latin teacher. He is diminutive. So I am not afraid. But I should be.

"I love the table, Payne," he explains rather exasperated at my stupidity. "Should you be in 1 Alpha boy? Go and sit down!" he roars, all redness.

I had written - *Table, I love*. Why not? Wasn't the verb at the end?

Stuff like *I love the table* (mensam amo) did not exactly inspire me to learn Latin - in the same way that quadratic equations and calculus, (the growing banes of my young life - replacing handicraft and my tonsils) would also fail to ignite the requisite spark of desire to do and understand Maths – which had stealthily replaced Arithmetic.

No explanation was offered of what quadratic equations were for. What did quadratic mean? Our teacher's face forbade a request for help and clarification.

“That's how you do the sum; now get on with Exercise 1, missing out questions d and j.”

Briefcase open; newspaper out; big shoes on desk; class silent; books in; bell goes.

Some people, like Carstairs just knew by some automatic process what it was all about and could do it and did just get on with it. A bit like me and Latin. Latin made “sense” to me although it was absurd. Regina agricolam amat - *The queen loves the farmer*. Unusual. But then, why shouldn't she, even though the farmer was feminine? Perhaps that affection made up for all her misery of getting overcome (whatever that was) over and over again in that island of hers. (Why did she keep going back there, if something or somebody kept overcoming her??) Quis in horto ambulat? - *Who is walking in the garden?* I never really found out. Perhaps it was the same bloke who had overcome the queen. But I found out that Regina Coulton really meant Queen Coulton. Useful stuff.

I had had a dodgy start in 1 Alpha, but I was not relegated by Christmas like some were, including the pretty blonde whom Eddie had fancied. I rallied and in the first year exam came 8th.

And what of science? Well, our teacher was as uninspiring as it was surely possible to be. He was remarkable for his utter absence of personality and had a slow, sleep-inducing drawl with a dialect I have never managed to identify. I have even completely forgotten his name. Physics - as science was now called - began quite unpromisingly with us pointlessly opening and closing the air-hole on Bunsen burners, and I soon realised that the last thing Physics was going to be about was what Venusians might look like - if they could bear the heat of their planet.

“At the top of your page write the date on the right and the title - underline it...and underline them..... Now underneath write EQUIPMENT in the margin and underline it.....Miss three lines and write METHOD....and underline it....Count three lines up from the bottom and write CONCLUSION in the margin ...and underline it.”

With hindsight, I realise that he had to teach what was a key part of the syllabus - experimental method. But there was no desire to inspire and enthuse. WHY we were messing about with iron filings and little clock-like boxes with needles which swung left or right? And often we would come in and he had covered three boards with dense tiny writing and while we dutifully copied it he would disappear into the prep room for a fag. It wasn't long before I was messing about, spoiling the girls' experiments, hiding Cedric's glasses and disconnecting gas-taps.

And it wasn't long before he had taken rather a dislike to me.

Needs constant watching. That was his comment on my first year report. And whenever he told me off it was with a bored whine.

“Payne, will you please de-sist!”

He never lost his temper - at least not with me - because he didn't care enough to. But when my brother Neil shattered his trust in him by pressing the wrong switch, depriving his fish-tank of air for the whole weekend, rendering his pets as lifeless as those bream in Uncle Ken's jar, he lost it then, slapping him in the middle of his bonce.

What else was memorable about Science? Mr Clutton's everlastings of course. Humus Hulbert who took us for Biology in 3 Alpha awakened our curiosity by organising a trip to the canal to collect all sorts of fleas and flies. In our group we took it quite seriously for a while until Eddie decided we should have a pissing competition. Who could slash furthest into the canal?

After that Cedric decided to take the competition one naughty stage further and nearly got caught in the act. I'm sure Humus, as he rejoined our group to have a look at our water-boatmen must have spotted Cedric's great newt, stiff in his hand, but as a Biology teacher he was more inclined perhaps to turn a blind eye. But on the way back on the bus he went inexplicably livid when Cedric started singing There Were Three in The Bed.

And then there was Nutty Turner at Earlstone Upper School who stood on his head and drank a glass of water to prove that peristaltic waves took our food down our throats and not gravity. His pet word was hypothesis.

"Gravity may be a plausible hypothesis to explain swallowing, but just watch!"

And there he was upside down drinking. Brilliant.

And when he left, as he was rounding off his farewell speech to the school it was even more brilliant when he took a pair of scissors to his much mocked floral tie, because it so obviously ruffled the Boss, Mr Ruffle.

For a while the school didn't have a replacement for him and a rather tired lady came in on supply. In would walk Sweaty Sinclair who always had great patches of sweat around his armpits, even in the winter close-season for sweaty armpits, making the whole Science Block pong of him all year round. It would sometimes combine with hydrogen sulphide to make the air in Science virtually toxic to all life-forms. "Sweaty" would scribble the work (copying out) on the board and without issuing any threats of any kind he would leave us all to wallow in his BO. After a while we cottoned on that nobody cared if we did a stroke or not, least of all the kind old lady who sat chatting to the nice front row girls and knitting God knows what - possibly a new sweater for Sweaty.

So out came the comics, the magazines and the playing cards. We had learnt solo (not the solo which was Cedric's favourite hobby). No, the card game. Eddie was a particularly keen player. It was unfortunate for him that he was so wrapped up with the game and had his back to the door that lesson. When the girls and the knitting fiend at the front fell silent he ought to have realised something was amiss.

We pushed our cards quietly under our books and took up our pens, pretending to consult the ceiling for some kind of inspiration. Eddie was still suiting up his cards. Had he gone Misère? He must have thought he stood a great chance. Anyway, he was really keen to get the play started.

"Whose lead is it?"

Total silence.

"Whose lead is it?"

He still isn't looking at us. That was Eddie's trouble. A bit too wrapped up in himself.

"I SAID WHOSE F***ING LEAD IS IT?"

And now he is staring directly at me. The Boss takes a card from his hand. Eddie swivels around in indignation, expecting to see Spanner piddling about as usual.

"I would lead that one Day, if I were you....."

At break time we are all in the library, five or six heads poking around the curtain looking directly into the Boss's office. We can see Eddie and he can see us but the Boss can't see the library window. We can see from Eddie's face that it ain't pleasant. Misère Ouvert. Once he almost loses it for he can't help but watch us making faces, wagging our tongues and going cross-eyed at him. He must have been biting whatever his teeth could seize on and pinching himself as hard as he could. Afterwards Cedric, his worst tormentor, has his football boots slung in the Biology pond.

So I never did quite make an astronomer or an astro-physicist. If I had had the courage to get up and ask that idle Maths teacher, what was the point of quadratic equations, who knows where I might have ended up? He might have clouted me - or - put down The Telegraph, sat me down, all kindness and smiles, and actually taught me. How different my life might have been had I been better at mathematics! (The probability is, I think, my great lug would have proven as irresistible to him as to many other tormentors of mine.)

Life and the Universe are such eerie mysteries. How can even God know, with so many zillion things going on at once, how can he know, even for the next few seconds, how all those things are going to turn out next?

How could Edwin Day or anybody predict that he would die at the age of 56 under the wheels of a bus in Leeds while he was on a pub crawl? This one's for you, Eddie. God bless.

9 DUTTON

In those precious days of childhood in the 1950s these were the bare essentials for a long happy summer holiday from school; firstly, fields which led to other fields and on and on, then trees to climb with nests which we secretly knew contained no eggs and other nests that surprisingly did; minnows and sticklebacks to dredge gasping from brooks; huge blackberries to pick and, odd times, a recreation ground with swings, a slide and a creaking, clanking roundabout, shaped like a teepee, which we called a maypole.

What were the anxieties? There were few, apart from my father's scarlet temper; Maths, and early morning reports of hangings from dreadful-sounding places like Wormwood Scrubs.

And bullies.

So it came as a terrible shock that Dutton, our new-found wonderful friend of a few days earlier, turned out to be one, and one of the nastiest variety.

Had he not invited us to play with him and his little gang at hide and seek? Gratefully we had joined in, scooting among the bushes, trees and buildings which housed park equipment and of course, decently turned back to back on one another, the boys' and girls' toilets. The other children, girls and boys, were a little older than us but Dutton was a very big boy. This should have given us a clue. Years later, as we sat sozzled in the Danilo, Dutton sat totally on his own a few rows ahead of us, not concentrating at all on the film, his pale head swinging from left to right like an ugly Janus.

In fact Dutton was a very ugly boy indeed, with a long hatchet of a ghastly face, stuck with a great beaky nose, as if a poor replacement for the fallen-off one he had been born with, but the nearest match that could be found. But on that day we had had such an exciting time. Hide and seek had turned into tig, tig into tig-off-ground and then into kiss-chase, round and round the trees and buildings, the best I had ever played. Some of the girls were pretty and when we began to chase each other into each other's toilets the very daring of it and the tantalising something in the eye of the very pretty girl made my heart race.

Until at last Dutton, out of breath and excited, turned to me and my brother and said "See the gate? My advice to you is to run as fast as you can and git the hell out of here and never come back!"

It was late anyway and, full of laughter, we did as we were told and ran off to Grandma's and Granddad's, agreeing that we had never had such a wonderful time.

A few days later we were back. Hasn't experience taught us all never to expect to recreate the magic of a past event? Here began our first lesson.

With eager anticipation we approached the maypole where sat a quartet of slightly older boys trying to hang on. Inside stood Dutton, pushing the frame backwards and forwards, but not round, causing it to clang horribly.

"Hello Roy!" I shouted.

All looked up and the maypole stopped suddenly, causing one boy to be launched onto the grass. Silence. Dutton sprang onto the bench of the apparatus and attached his long arms to the uppermost strut. He really was amazingly long. He lifted his pumps from the seat and began to yell like a Red Indian, clapping one hand to his mouth. We all greeted this feat of strength with helpless laughter. Dutton jumped down and said

"I thought I told you two never to come back."

We laughed again. He jumped off the maypole and, all smiles, came towards us and knocked off my brother's school cap.

Laughter. As he tried to pick it up he kicked it away. More laughter, but a more nervous kind this time from us. He turned to me and knocked off my cap and as I bent down he kicked me – hard – up the backside. Hilarity. But now I was angry and tears were welling up, of pain and humiliation.

"What did you do that for? I thought we were friends!"

Jeering came from the roundabout and then a silence as everyone waited to see how Dutton would deal with this monstrous allegation. The friendly smile that had turned to a leer became blank anger. His appalling ugliness had nothing now to take the edge of it.

He rushed first at Neil then and at me and knocked us over. We lay on the grass snivelling with fear. He surveyed us both, considering what torture to inflict next when a voice behind us said "Oi, you! You go and pick on somebody your own size!"

It was an old man with a walking stick. Dutton took a pace back. We needed no further cue and ran to the far gate, sobbing as we went.

For a time, the park became yet another forbidden area; then one to enter with extreme caution until at last the experience was forgotten and Dutton faded from the landscape of our childhood.

Two or three years later we were having a kick-about up the rec' with Paul and Nev, two half-cast West Indian brothers with whom we were as thick as thieves.

Suddenly Dutton appeared, 14 or 15 now, taller, broader and much, much uglier. A trio of younger acolytes trooped along behind him. He picked up the ball and announced "We'll give you a game, four against four!"

I don't think he remembered us. Paul and Nev didn't know him and before I had a chance to say anything they had agreed to the match.

My brother was, at twelve, rather tubby and needed no second invitation to go in goal. Paul was athletic and graceful, with sturdy long legs; the younger Nev was nippy. To add to his other demerits, Dutton was also a useless footballer and before long we had chalked up three easy goals.

"Swap goalkeepers," ordered Dutton laughingly, but of course this was not the problem. Paul and Nev were bamboozlers and I wasn't too bad in defence, in my slow way.

I could see Dutton's face on the turn and managed to say to Paul as I passed him

"Watch him Paul, I know him. He's a nutcase"

Paul passed the ball to Nev who left Dutton sitting on his backside. Behind me Neil couldn't help sniggering, neighing like a little fat horse. Oh no. Dutton was up in a flash, lunging at Paul, who leapt high, as if over a skipping rope, leaving him once more on his back. This time Neil laughed out loud. Dutton became aware of the source of the merriment and grabbed the ball that Paul had left behind as he had escaped.

He strode over to Neil and hurled the ball into his face, knocking him over.

"Who are you f**king laughing at, fat boy?"

Sensibly Neil stayed down. Dutton had the ball again.

"Right....game's over. You win but we're keeping the ball, for your cheek. Now you can all piss off. No nigger boys allowed in this park. Can't you read the sign?"

Paul was light brown, as if sun-tanned, and now I could see the red anger flushing in his cheeks.

"Give us our ball back!"

"No Paul, leave it" I said, grabbing his arm.

Again Dutton charged at him but Paul swept to the side like a matador and left him thrashing at nothing. Suddenly sensing the evil in him and the danger he was in, Paul began to lope away like a springbok towards the far gate, with me and Nev not far behind. Neil had already started running. Dutton had stopped and was throwing the ball up in the air, laughing and jeering "Our ball, our ball!"

We were probably now forty yards away and slowing down. Paul was also a good cricketer with a long, unerring throw. I watched him pick up a great round brown stone, wheel around and hurl it at our enemy all in one movement. Our little world stopped still for a few instants until Dutton leapt into the air with a scream, as the boulder hit him square on the right foot. The whole park stopped and turned to observe. We were shocked and paralysed by the sheer miracle that had taken place. As Dutton began to do a war-dance of agony the spell was broken and we began to laugh.

But hilarity was followed closely by horror, as against all probability and expectation, the victim began to charge at us like a crazed, limping bull, roaring murderous threats.

As I sailed past Neil the look of panic mixed with giggling delight produced such contortions on his red, round face as I shall never forget. Paul and Nev had already whizzed through the gate and were long gone. Neil seemed to be running deliberately backwards, whimpering, sniggering and wheezing all at once, straight into the clutches of the lurching devil behind him. I slowed down, torn between terror and fraternal duty. I stopped and looked over my shoulder. Dutton was on the point of devouring Neil.

And then the second miracle happened. Just as his hands were about to pounce on his little shoulders Dutton's limping foot completely gave way and he collapsed in a great gangling heap, like a wrecked maypole.

Neil cantered on, his face suddenly changing from panic to one of sheer hooting delight.

The truth is, I reckon, that Dutton was so ugly outside that it gradually spread inside. Or maybe it was the other way round.....

10 CHEGGIES

In the soft early days of September the cheggie hunt began in earnest. In our impatience of mid-August the spiky pods with their half-creamy soft foetuses had clung fast to their branches. But now, from the bricks and sticks we loved to hurl into the trees the splitting pods no longer needed much encouragement to fall. They peeled away easily from the chestnuts, now smooth and orange and swirling with isobars, nestling and glistening in their sticky white linings.

We stripped the laces from our dads' shoes and hunted for string in the shed. We racked the drawer for the carving fork (no-one then possessed a corkscrew).

The chestnut was my favourite tree (but what did it have to do with the horse? Did horses eat those spiky pods?) I watched its progress with love and fascination from the great gluey buds in March, bursting into florets of lime-green leaves in April, through the lovely candelabras in May to the tiny cudgels that swelled in June, July and August.

When we lived in East Close I planted a chestnut in a pot and to my astonishment it grew! It became a lovely miniature of the real thing until Micky cruelly pulled it up by the roots and killed it.

I cannot remember ever speaking to that soulless boy again, though doubtless I did.

By September, the leaves have just begun to go crispy and gold at the edges, and amber seams run in their veins. I know vaguely of a paddock in Sketchley near the Watling St. which is the very best place around for cheggies. Our dad had taken us there one hot Sunday years before. Try as I might, I cannot remember the way.

Then one day it comes to me! I convince Paul and Nev of the existence of this Eldorado. We skip past the Sketchley Grange and after a search find the narrow lane that descends steeply to the secret field at the front of a big old house facing the road.

The trees are not tall and old like those in the cemetery, but bushy and compact. Each wears a metal girdle and in one corner, chomping, stands a chestnut mare with its foal, not interested in the trees at all.

We stare at the old house and the windows stare back. Cautiously we climb through the railings and began to kick around hopefully in the grass for early fallers.

Paul shouts "Look at this 'un!" He rips its last quadrant of shell away. It is as big as a hen's egg. We look up at the tree. The pods are all enormous and there are thousands of them.

"I told you this was a good place," I shout, swelling, like the chestnuts, with pride. Nev finds a stick and, with another glance at the sightless old house he hurls it high into the branches.

Down comes a shower of pods that crump like a clutch of bomblets on the turf. One hits Neil on the shoulder. He winces. (Why do they have spikes?)

We fall on the pods, peeling one huge conker after another into the world of light. Some are twins, with a flat side each. The feel of them in the hand is delicious - cool and slippery and moist. Our bags and pockets are filling up steadily when we hear voices on the path. A bike and three big boys come into view.

"The lad in the red jumper!" hisses Nev. We huddle behind the tree trunk and hold our breath. The voices carry on and fade.

They haven't seen us.

During the holiday we had been chased out of the recky by him and his gang. Nev had called him a name and we had shot off into the fields beyond. After a long chase he had found me behind a tree. He stopped and stared at me, recovering his breath. I must have looked terrified. I couldn't run another step.

"Frit are yer?" he sneered.

Now I was for it. He was older and a foot bigger than me. He took a step nearer. I froze. I felt his panting breath on my face.

"Open your eyes.....If they ask yer, say I punched yer in the guts. D'yer hear?"

I nodded.

“D’yer promise?....And you tell that little brown kid I’ll bang his head in the next time I see him.....And if I get to hear you told anybody I didn’t bang yer one, you’ll get double....Now clear off.”

I kept his secret. The lad in the red jumper was a pacifist bully.

We have enough conkers to last us for ages. Once back at our new bungalow we begin to sort them into big, massive and super-massive. The smallest we would trade or sell and we put them to one side. Now we need to find the champion of champions.

From the super-massive pile, with eyes shut, we each choose one. To my delight I take the broadest and chunkiest one of the lot. The long prongs of the fork are too close together to pierce these monsters and we have to get a long nail and the hammer from the shed. We each thread our champions and the tourneys begin.

A conker which had smashed another is a one-er; two victims make it into a two-er, and so on; if a ten-er conquered a fourteen-er it became a twenty-four-er: the kind of Maths that I understood, whereas quadratic equations made absolutely no sense at all.

The great bulging thing that dangles and spins on the end of my lace is soon a three-er, then a four-er, and surely smashes its way through all-comers. I am helpless with laughter, looking at the others’ disconsolate faces as their favourites shatter. I have a thug of a conker! It swells out on one side like a knuckle and I am careful to take aim with that part of its anatomy. The drive is soon littered with bits and pieces, quarters and halves of the vanquished.

Paul comes up, determined to claim the crown.

“Bags first go!” I shout. Paul holds his conker, a lovely specimen, rounded and compact, perfectly still. I take careful aim.

The first of my allotted three goes misses completely.

“You moved!”

“I never!” he retorts.

The second grazes the skin and the two strings tangle.

The third smacks it square on with a dull nutty thud. But nothing shatters. We expertly examine each for a tell-tale crack around the pierced holes.

“Right. Now prepare to meet your doom, O Conker,” says Paul, using the vocative case, and after a few practice swings as he takes aim.

I fear defeat.

Crack!! He hits it on the full and at once there is conker splattered everywhere. But Paul holds an empty string swaying in the breeze while my brute swings backwards and forwards like a boasting gorilla. His face stares in disbelief.

I collapse with laughter and, like dominoes, so do Neil and Nev - who then shoots up, runs into the half-built bungalow next door, pulls down his pants and - I’ll never forget it - lets fly a great stream of conker-coloured diarrhoea two or three feet through the air.

That night I lie in bed handling my great conker. It is an eighteen-er, the best I’ve ever had. Tomorrow it will triumph at school.

Paul soon spreads the word that Payney has a conker to beat all and at break I am smashing conkers all over the tennis courts.

“You’ve baked it, you cheat!” says one challenger.

“No he never!” says Paul. “I watched him thread it yesterday!”

Eventually word reaches a big third year lad whom we always do our best to avoid. Gilbertson.

As the bell goes he comes over and challenges me, quickly revealing the small brown thing on the end of his string.

"Mine's a thirty-sevener-er. What's yours?" he growls.

"A twenty-fiver"

"You baked it or soaked it in vinegar?"

"I didn't need to. Did you?"

He grabs me by the lapel of my blazer.

"I'll find you at dinner"

Next we have Maths. I am trying to peer over Carstairs' shoulder at his neat quadratic equations when a note lands on my desk.

I look up at the teacher. He is in a semi-snooze behind the Telegraph. I open the note:

BEWARE: GILBERTSON'S GOT A BALLBEARING.

The news pierces me like a cold spear. I affectionately fondle my conker in my blazer pocket and wonder what to do. At the change of lesson I gave it to Paul to look after. But Mortiboys, Gilbertson's half-pint henchman, must have seen me do it.

As I leave the dining hall for the field Gilbertson is waiting.

"Come on then," he says.

"Come on what?" I ask, as easily as I can manage.

"Conkers," he sneers.

"It got smashed"

"Who smashed it?"

"Dunno....some lad on the stairs...we had a quick match after Maths and it smashed."

Mortiboys jumps on my back.

"Liar!" he shouts. "You gev it the nigger."

"No I never!"

Gilbertson grabs my chin and hisses "Go and get it, Paynebox. Or are you too gibbered?"

The whole lunch hour we hide. We put the conker in the garden behind a bush. When the bell for home goes I rush out to get it and am just peddling up the hill, approaching the school gate when I spot them by the pillar. I can't escape.

"Come on then Payne, now we'll see...."

Gilbertson yanks his conker string from his pocket. I look at it carefully and my spirits and courage begin to rise. It really is a conker, but a runt of a thing, wizened and dull.

"You've baked it" I declare to all onlookers. (He really had.)

"I'm not a cheat, so you just watch it."

I think he is going to slap me. Instead he holds it out his little conker for me to have first go. 37 and 25.....but I am too nervous to work it out.

My heart is thumping so hard I am sure that the laughter I hear is because everyone knows how nervous I am and can hear it thumping. My arm is weak and limp as in that dream we have when we need to be as strong as we can; and my first go is totally pathetic. I barely get my monster to swing and it falls a good way short of his. The crowd that has gathered hoots and calls out insults. I vainly look amongst them for an ally.

"Come on" laughs Gilbertson "My sister could do better than that!"

The onlookers hoot again and I feel tears sting my eyes. I look at the paltry thing blowing in the breeze and take a deep breath. This time I hit it with a ping and, like the ball bearing in that

old arcade game at the seaside, it whizzes round and round before coming to rest unharmed beneath his fist.

“Last one Payney” he says with a grin.

The crowd has gone quiet. Paul struggles through from the back.

“Go on John. Smash the bloody thing!”

A few other voices take up the shout and a surge of strength and determination runs down my arm. I look at his conker and notice a crack by the string on its nipple.

I carefully bring the knuckle side of mine around and take careful aim, holding it in my left hand. I make two or three practice swings like a golfer.

I let fly. It hits it perfectly. Gilbertson’s conker hurtles off towards the crowd, swiftly followed by his gaping, bony face. I hear cheering. Forgetting Gilbertson, I hold my hero aloft.

A fifty-two-er! But not for long. Before I have a chance to move it Mortiboys has taken out the ball bearing. His aim is perfect.

With a crunch my beautiful conker falls into two perfect grooved halves onto the floor. He laughs. Furious and crying I lash out with the fist holding the empty string but miss him as he skips back. As I lunge forward again he smacks the ball bearing onto my forehead and, ears ringing, I fall to the floor.

The fickle crowd is laughing again. I sit there in total misery, staring at the two halves, with the empty string still in my hand as Gilbertson and Mortiboys ride off together on my bike. On the way home we find it in the middle of the stinking green pond along with my satchel.

All my books are ruined and my trousers get covered in smelly slime. I take my punishments at home and at school in silence.

In those days you didn’t tell, you just didn’t. But I lay in bed, praying to gentle Jesus that something nasty would happen to Gilbertson.

Later that year his mother died and I felt guilty all week.

11 THE BACK ROW BOYS

Cedric Gilfeather was a special child: musically gifted, tall, sensitive; and a great dunce. Most importantly, his parents were considerably rich. In the village his father owned a factory which produced indestructible socks. Now everyone in 1 Alpha was invited to a garden party at Cedric’s – apart from Slob Ward, for self-evident reasons, and Christine Duffey who unselfconsciously picked her nose and ate her bogies to everyone’s astonishment and horror. That was something you did in private.

Cedric lived in a rather grand house at the top of a rather exclusive Close, in comparison with which my East Close would have suffered miserably. By that time we were about to move into a bungalow ourselves and I remember worrying, as we inspected the first course of bricks, how we could all fit into such tiny rooms.

The realisation of how ordinary, even poor we were, first dawned on me when I was about nine. I had taken my buddy Mills home for tea to East Close. When he saw the council houses he stopped and said

“You live here??”

Anyway, he really enjoyed himself, running round and round the Close on the front walls, jumping over the gates, in pursuit of me. After tea his father came to rescue him in one of those half-timbered Morris estate cars. Vehicles then were a rare event in East Close, apart from dustcarts, coal carts, the paraffin man, the doctor’s black saloon and occasionally a hearse.

That car had been designed for his father and his ilk; a silent, boring, bespectacled, gawky type which God in the fifties turned out in great batches, put carpet-slippers on and sent out to potter in greenhouses or sit reading the Daily Mail or Telegraph. On Saturdays they probably had quick, silent sex with their wives after the white dot on the telly had faded away.

Mills never came again. But I was treated to a grudging return match round his place, a smart bungalow on a new estate in Sketchley. Someone once said that a bungalow is midway between a house and a coffin. Well, we sat in our bryl-creamed silence, nibbling away like mice at tiny squares of sandwiches. A couple of years later, my lovely grandma was buried and afterwards we all sat around whispering at the funeral tea, while Granddad sat outside smoking and shaking his head; and it put me in mind of that deadly afternoon at Mills's.

Anyway, the great gala day arrived and in a flotilla of excitement, girls in their summer frocks and boys in short trousers, we all assembled in front of Cedric's. His mother sailed around us like a pocket galleon on the wide bay of their front lawn, dispensing an unheard-of liquid she called Limon Bar-leh Wart-ah and meat-peeste sandwichers. Well, well! We had that at home! It came in tiny pots made by Shippams. I remember an advert for it where a grinning, jolly crustacean used to skip around apparently enraptured by the prospect of having his precious essences scoured from his shell and crammed into a tiny glass jar. Anyway, back then we ate it with gusto. How it would suit today is hard to tell.

At Cedric's party the "peest sandwichers, barleh wartah and keek" were soon polished off and we were into Blind Man's Buff and French Cricket. Cedric seemed to be "on" for much of the time. This was politely tolerated on his home soil but not at school. I would like to think it did him some good, mingling with the boisterous likes of us.

The fact is that in class many of us wanted the limelight - for naughty reasons. One lesson, when the English teacher turned around to the board I was instantly on my feet at the back, yelling ABDUL ERIS! And sitting straight back down. "Abdul eris" sounded like something in a popular song in 1960 and felt vaguely Latin. I thought I was being very smart. But Mrs Kearney turned back slowly with a bored, scornful expression and droned on as if nothing had happened. After the third or fourth time without a reaction, and not one snigger from the back rows, I lost interest.

Slob Ward used to come into his own when we had Religious Instruction. He made the lady teacher's life absolute misery. She was a blubbery-lipped, red-faced young woman with thick black spectacles. There was so much to taunt of which she was painfully self-conscious. Why do such people expose themselves to such ridicule? She was a stumpy ugly woman constantly on the verge of tears - and we were 1 Alpha! What did 1 E do to her?? Slob Ward could not resist the bait. As if by some tacit pact we other naughty boys at the back (Slob had been moved next to Pamela at the front) let her be and left it entirely to Slob.

I would like to say we felt sorry for such an easy prey-animal but to be honest Slob diverted so much attention away from us that me, Eddie and Cedric - the copy-cat - who sat adjacent to us, took the opportunity to get our cocks out and have a quick toss. In RI! She would be too busy boiling up screams in her red throat and face to scald Slobber with, to take much notice of us. Eddie had a good 'un but poncey Cedric, by some malicious twist of fate, had a real monster. Rosemary, the bolt upright, legs-always-together girl who had been given the honour of recording the names of naughty boys in a little vocabulary book caught sight of it once as she was looking round for names to write down and let out a tiny squeak of astonishment. Did she put down - "10:42 Gilfeather playing with himself"? I doubt it, but did I hear recently that she went on to be a traffic warden?

Once, daring Eddie was called out to the front by the Latin teacher as he was in full-toss. I mean Eddie, not the Latin teacher. How he managed to zip up the horrible thing instantly

without trapping it, I don't know. Mr Kettlewell was a tiny scarlet-faced man who even terrified the back-rowers. We sat in agony whenever he wrote the accusative case of Marcus Superbus - and he seemed to do it with sadistic regularity - on the blackboard: Marcum Superbum. He would immediately wheel around and fix the back rows with his ferret eyes in the hope of detecting the meekest hint of a snigger.

Then one day in a passion the RI teacher actually swiped Slobber so hard that she broke his glasses. She wept. Slob wept. And she never came back. The Old Boy who replaced her - Charlie, hands deep in a saggy, pipe-smoked out jacket that he had surely been demobbed in - stopped Slob dead, with some magic knack, in his tracks. And he loved to talk about the war. And we loved it because we did so little writing and our hands were free to pursue other naughty pursuits. And so were bogie-hunting Christine Duffey's. Then one day she left too. To have her finger surgically removed from her nose, I suppose.

But we were not the only makers of mayhem in our class.

Chemistry. Someone around the middle of the lab has just blown off, a really loud, liquid, echoey one, at the very second when the teacher is pouring a green liquid from one test-tube into another, saying, "Now, watch what happens....."

Absolute uproar of course.

"SILENCE! WHO....DID...THAT?"

Total silence. A (lab) stool squeaks on the polished parquet floor

"HANDS....ON...YOUR...HEADS.....ALL...STAND..... Okay, if that's how you want it, we'll stay like this for the next twenty minutes...AND ALL LUNCH-TIME FOR ALL I CARE.....until the dirty culprit owns up."

He shouts. He cajoles. He reasons. He threatens. He shouts again. Nothing. Five minutes. Ten minutes. Still nothing. He goes into the back, into the prep-room, wilting under the pressure of our resentful, stony stares.

The back row boys are glaring around at others. Now there's whispering.

"It was you Spanner!"

"Jonesy, did it"

"No I did not. It came from near you!"

"Whoever it was, own up, or we'll be stuck in here all lunch."

"No footy."

The teacher must hear and he probably thinks that his little prep-room move is doing the loosening trick, like a good dose of syrup of figs. He hangs around in there, unscrewing and screwing jars back up.

"Dan. You shitten-arse!"

"Weren't me!"

"Rich! Own up and I'll give you a threepenny bit"

"Shush!"

And he is back, looking theatrically at his watch. Five minutes before lunch.

"Well? Owing up?.....NO??....right, all sit down. We'll pass the time with an everlasting"

Groans.

"Don't groan at ME. Blame whoever hasn't the courage to spare you all."

Papers are given out.

"How many of you?" He counts thirty-two and chalks it on the board.

"Now write down 32 and add 00. Start taking away 32 until you reach zero. All working out to be clear. Any mistakes - and be sure I'll check -and you'll be back tomorrow to do it again. Now begin."

A girl has her hand up.

“Yes Tessa?”

“It was me Sir”

Disbelief. She’s a firm favourite of his.

“TESS ---AH-H...!?”

But Cedric seemed to lead a charmed life. He was the silliest arse of us all and would often sit playing an imaginary piano at the back. I say a charmed life because the naughty back rows in whichever class, even though they checked regularly at the door-window for his tall, silver head, knew that sooner or later he would catch them. But still they could not resist the temptation to horse around and run the risk of falling into the traps he set. Bomber Brown. The Head. “Here’s Bomber!” was enough to put the wind up even the worst boy. Door open; boy plucked; door shut, as if it was the stony entrance to the subterranean lair of some vicious clawing monster, almost too quick to see. Bomber had been a fighter pilot and his speed of reaction was astounding. What chance did one wriggling boy stand in the grip of one so adept at potting evil Messerschmidts?

Once he had read out a rugby result. Bragwell High had beaten Fairley High 55-0 and a boy at the front of the assembly hall - the team captain - had laughed. Bomber had thrown a vase of flowers at him. A direct hit.

And Mitch told me once, years after we had left, that he had received a direct hit on his ear for not having his duffel-coat off by the time he walked through the door. Mitch had been away for a while and of course did not know of this New Edict. He had had an ear infection – yes, the very ear that Bomber decided to strafe. But nothing much happened – no scandal. In those days teachers could more or less do as they pleased.

“Mrs Wainwright, I’d like to apologise for killing Mitch.”

“Thank you -- sniff-sniff-sniff -- Very kind of you, Headmaster.”

“Mr Wainwright.....”

“That’s alright, old chap....No doubt he deserved it....Here’s a cheque for ten guineas made out to the Sadistic Headmasters’ Benevolent Fund...”

Music. Mrs Hunter is Welsh and has long black hairs swirling about in her stockings like isobars (What do her unstockinged legs look like??) We are singing *All Through The Night*. She is playing the piano. Suddenly the door opens and closes and Paul and Spanner have been whipped away by an unseen puppeteer. We had been singing *I need an hoss*. Now, as we mouth the proper words we glance towards the door. In the porthole window we can see Bomber’s head and hands pitching and rolling around like things in a washer. He has a high-strung northern voice. We hear smacks and “cane”, “boys”, “bad”, “laugh”, “sing” in a whiney descant to our song. That had been their crime; laughing instead of singing. Then suddenly they are back in, red-faced and sobbing next to an ashen-faced Cedric, who, it turned out, had been doing daft conducting next to them, apparently completely unnoticed by this spot-on RAF ace.

Once, I swear I saw him glance in and away when Cedric was playing his magic piano. Why did he live this charmed life? Cedric spoils my painting. I dribble blue paint onto his orange sun. He complains. I get a clout, Cedric a mild telling-off.

In the third year the back-rowers developed a taste for tipping one another’s (and some enemy girls’) desk-contents onto the floor. Cedric loved this game and was the most enthusiastic player. Then, when he did really badly in an autumn assessment (I came fifth and he came twenty-seventh) this caused consternation and astonishment (though not amongst us, and, I suspect, not amongst many of his teachers).

Letters are written, appointments made and lists of distractions and names drawn up. Cedric’s underachievement turns out not to be the result of his idleness and dimness - oh no - Cedric

blames us. We are bullying him, spoiling his pictures, hiding his glasses, scribbling on his work, ripping his books and even tipping them onto the floor.

So it was with mounting trepidation that a score of us, all the back row boys, ten or so girls (not Rosemary) and some middle-rowers squashed into Bomber's study onto its red carpet for a hoarse, shrill telling-off.

Cedric Gilfeather's "books" - he pronounced book like Luke - were "Not to be touched", he was "Not to be interfered with and his "stiddies" were not to be "interrupted." Studies? Cedric? Now we were in two minds. Cedric was a back row boy and arsed around as good as what we did, even though we couldn't in our hearts include him because he was posh, a ponce and a pillock. But now he had snitched not just on one of us, not just on all of us but on pupils who were as good as gold. The mammoth injustice of it all, when he was the main offender, incensed us. And yet he had Bomber's blessing. So how could we ever get him back?

We pondered. In the field beyond the footpath that led to the school was a horrible slimy green pond, put in by the council for the benefit of miscreants like us, like a hazard on a golf course. Many a snotty first year, his bike and his shiny new satchel ended up in its smelly depths (about two feet). Cedric had to walk back home that way to his Close. Could we hide in the bushes, ambush him, throw him in and get away with it?

Ron, a new recruit to the back row from Stoke-on-Trent, who sounded disconcertingly, for us and himself, a bit like Bomber, had an idea. Everybody had an old balaclava stuffed into a drawer at home. Why not cut two eye-slits in the back and wear it back-to-front?

Paul had some gloves to conceal his half-cast brown hands. So we waited for a really cold day when a pane of ice over the pond would make our revenge doubly terrific.

A January day dawned when the world was all frost. Trees stood all day weighed down by white and we knew immediately that this was the day of reckoning. As soon as the bell went we were down the stairs, out and through the gate into the field. The air was already turning blue with dusk. Grasses were bending with their load of coconut-ice and the field crackled as we stamped through it towards the bushes huddled together behind the pond. Somebody had already thrown a large round stone onto the ice. It nestled there in its own pearly opaque setting, not quite heavy enough to break through the thin under-layer of bottle-green glass. "Brilliant" said Spanner and I laughed out loud, picturing Cedric with his arse underwater, his spindly legs straight up and his long hands grappling at air like an overturned crab.

"Shut up!" hissed Paul as we headed for cover. Nervously I pulled my balaclava on and struggled to align the slits with my eyes. Now it was really gloomy. A great black toad of a cloud had gulped down the low sun. We heard the crunch of footsteps.

"I think he's coming" I hardly dared say, glancing out. A lanky shape was approaching. "It's him," I mimed.

Ron was starting to giggle; my heart was really beating; but Paul was already charging out to pounce. A scream, a laugh, a whoop and a yell and we were on him, grabbing a writhing limb each, now giving him a leg and a wing, and then a jolly good swing and like a lanky leggy lobster he was flying through the air and landing with an awful thud on the ice. For a second nothing happened. Then a creak and a crack and he slowly slipped down and down without a sound into the dark green potion, like a black coral into its shell, until only hair, hands and great long shoes were left poking out.

We ran and didn't dare start laughing properly until we were a quarter of a mile away. We went into a dark den in the hedge and went over our alibi again. We had gone straight round Paul's. We had got there at 4pm. We had played Subbuteo. Paul had won the final. 5-2. Against Ron.

But that night was a night of terrors. No matter how often I turned over in bed I still found myself in Bomber's study. Confessing.

I hear Bomber whining “Kiteley says he played you in the final, Payne. You say Kiteley played Henman. Henman says he played you. According to him he won 5-3. You say Henman won 5-2. Against Kiteley. Spencer says he went home with a bad headache. All of you say he was with you. So is one, are two or three or ALL FOUR OF YOU LYING THEIR PANTS OFF?”

And on and on it went. Oh no! What had we agreed?

One of us, probably and shamefully me, was bound to crack. Like Cedric’s ice.

I fell asleep and immediately awoke to a gem of a day, with the sun shining benevolently into my face. For a second I lay basking in that brightness and glee which only a child knows when it wakes; and then my heart sank. Like Cedric’s bum.

I called round for Paul.

“Better not go in together,” he whispered. He looked as worried as I felt. He slammed the door.

I crossed the field. What if Cedric was still there? Had he died of cold or had even drowned in the dark? Had a search party been out looking all night? I peeped around the corner of the hedge and was relieved to see a thin skin of healing ice on the area where he had gone in.

I had a quick look in to make sure that his glassy dead eyes were not staring up at the sky. I dawdled as slow as it was possible to dawdle without stopping, and arrived at the gate.

Hey, there he was! Running around and laughing. Chasing Spanner!

“It was really freezing in that pond Payney - but no hard feelings boys. I got a real rocket from Mummy when I trolled in soaked to the skin, but I told her I fell in. I deserved it. I shouldn’t have said what I said to get you all told off. Even-Steven?”

But of course he only said that in my imagination

I shout “Spanner!”

He kicks out at Cedric and trots over to me.

“What’s he say?” I hiss.

“Nothing”

“Nothing???” (I am baffled) “What did you say?”

“Nothing”

“Good. What was the score?”

“5-2to Ron.”

The bell rings and we troop in. Cedric sits at his desk making trumping noises behind his hand.

I laugh. I could kiss him.

“WHOEVER is blowing raspberries will now stop so that I can call the register. Is it you Payne?”

“No Sir”

The register is called. Silence.....”Henman?”No answer.....”Kiteley?”No answer.....”Payne?” “YES SIR.”

The yellow-bellies! Just wait till they come back!

Like a lark I fly down the stairs to assembly. As the teachers enter in procession we all stand.

And stand and stand. Where’s Bomber? We start to glance round.

“Luke to the front, BOY!” Smack. It is bottle-bottom-eyed Jones who has the misfortune to be in range as Bomber enters the hall. Now he is sauntering in. He arrives at his table on the stage, picks up the hymn book, opens it...and puts it back down.

“Sit.”

And we all sit. Bemused. We should all be singing now. What's wrong?

He looks for an age out of the huge window, smiling into the low dazzling sun. He's in a good mood. He's going to tell us one of his RAF stories!

"Well," he says softly "We should be singing All Things Bright and Beautiful now. But all things aren't bright and beautiful this morning. At least not here. Leave the piano Mrs Hunter and go and sit down".

We watch her monster spider legs mount the steps and she sits down.

"The boo-lling in and around this school will cease as of this day. A boy nearly had to go to hospital last night..."

Oh no! Have I just groaned? What does my face look like? Spanner looks unconcerned. But already, on cue, a group of thunderous-looking accomplices, like black-caped demons, like great bats from a tree, are descending from the stage, now moving slowly through the hall looking down rows, inspecting faces for a hint of guilt, sniffing the air for a whiff of terror.

".....If a member of the public hadn't pilled him clear of the pond when he did...."

Oh no.....but... Cedric had been his usual chasing, farting self this morning...

".....Who knows what might have happened? I personally went to see Mr and Mrs Starling last night....."

Starling? Starling?

"....And managed to persuade them not to involve the Police....."

The word sticks me like a spear. Oh no, is little Kettlewell staring at me? Marcum Super - NO STOP IT - and I stifle a giggle of terror. His face darkens and he pauses at the end of our row, three boys away from me. I stop breathing. Bump, bump, bump...He must be able to hear my drumming heart. I cannot stop myself from glancing up. But his red searchlight stare has passed me over and is fixed on someone else...

".....Because I promised....." and at this point Bomber opens the drawer of his assembly table, and as slowly as he can, he extracts a long, everlasting cane, one we have never seen before, and canes the air with it....."That whenand I don't mean if... WHEN I find out which three or four despicable cowards...and I have one name already...."

Paul? Ron? I picture them hauled into school in their pyjamas and thrown onto his red carpet pleading for mercy.

"....Cowards who decided to pick on a lad who has only jist recoived from pneumonia....."

New what?? I gasp. I look up at Kettlewell and can only think *O me miseram*.

"....And deliberately, for no reason - he hadn't called them a name, hadn't even looked at them, can't remember doing anybody a bad turn - He's not that sort of boy - for no reason; for a bit of a laugh; because they're rotten cowards..... - and you all know how freezing cold it was yesterday - they throw this boy onto thick ice....And when...."

And - WHACK - to everyone's horror, as the cane is brought down on the table in front of him - which instantly, oddly, brings to my mind the frozen pond - it breaks in two, and one half catherine-wheels and lands with a click in the gangway. The whole school gasps - even the staff - in horror, a relieving cover for my terrified squeak. What a shot! What chance had the Jerries stood?

"....And when - NOT IF - *when* I found out all their names then I shall cane their hides harder than I have ever caned anyone in my career...."

Not life. Career. More terror.

"....And if they come to me and tell me it was they BEFORE I TELL THEM IT WAS THEY WHO DID IT (shrill diving Spitfire voice tailing off into an almost absent-minded drone) then I might decide, might, mind you...(now almost a whisper so that we all had to strain to hear)...might not expel them..."

Expel? Had I sobbed? But no-one is watching me. All eyes are on Bomber, sauntering out, enjoying another of his finest hours, apparently not looking left or right, unaware of our

miserable existence. It had been a master-class in terror-induction. I glance at Spanner. He calmly gives a brief shake of the head, as if to say – please don't look at me.

It is the duty of the shaken Deputy to dismiss us, one silent, cowered row at a time. The school has the hushed silence of a crematorium all morning. All morning I await a summons. I feel sick. I watch my pen dawdle, stop and dawdle on again. Break is an exquisite torture, kicking a ball I don't want to kick and saying nothing when the others keep saying - *You wait till Bomber finds out! I wonder who did it!* And at lunch we rush round Paul's, then Ron's, and tell them the horror-story and watch their eyes grow. And go over the alibi again, again and again.

That afternoon, Bomber takes the initiative and is on the rampage in each class, one by shaking one.

"Was it you boy?....You boy?.....You boy?..." examining each pair of frightened rodent eyes like a barn owl.

By the time he gets around to us, his ardour has cooled.

"I don't for one instant expect that anyone in 3 Alpha was involved..."

He pauses and surveys us back-row boys, seeming to pause overlong on my ashen face.

"....At least, I would be viry mich hope not....but it goes without saying that if you do hear who was responsible that you will report it to me."

Oh joy! Bomber hadn't got a clue who had done it! The boy himself had no idea! The only people who knew.....were we!

By the next week the pall of fear had thinned to the normal haze of apprehension we worked and played in. Paul and Ron were back and Cedric had even started playing his magic piano again. Even Starling had returned and had been pointed out to everybody, a great wing-nut-eared galoot of a boy, running around the playground, arms stretched out like an aeroplane.

We are sitting in the Middle Ages. Mr Hughes is going on and on about somebody called Beckett. A little girl comes in with a pink note. We all stiffen. Pink is the colour of Bomber's memo pad. Hughsey reads it. It's for him.....No it's not.....

"Paul Henman and John Payne to Mr Brown's room immediately."

We stand as if yanked up by some invisible force.

"What have you two been up to then?" he says with a grin.

Like automata we turn and stagger out. Down the stairs my legs feel as if they are twitching and wriggling like giant insect legs but I am making hardly any progress, as if in a ghastly dream.

Paul's dusky face had turned red.

He is stammering something.

"W-what?" I ask.

"I said - what was the score, 5-2 or 5-3?"

"...5.....2.....to you"

And though we can hardly walk we have arrived at his red, sound-proofed door. I watch a hand, my hand, totally beyond my control, knock.

"Come"

He sits there. He is a very handsome man with two sweeps of brilliant silver hair divided by a crease as sharp and straight as an aerofoil. Behind his black-framed glasses two steady, thoughtful brown eyes as big as roundels are looking from me to Paul and back again. He says nothing. I can hear Paul breathing quickly and shallowly. He is trembling. I am rigid. Bomber is in his element. The sun is behind him. He has us fixed in his sights and there is no chance now to duck and dive.

"Well?"

I can bear his gaze no longer. I look at the red carpet and count the circles in the pattern. Paul is definitely sniffing. Suddenly I am speaking, unable to stop myself.

“S-sir... we didn't mean to get Starling. It was a mistake. We were after Gilfeather for making up a load of lies about us. He's as bad - worse - than us. It was dark. We thought it was him...Starling's tall and lanky like Cedric.....”

We waited an age for the awful reckoning.

“Who else?”

Paul spoke. “Just us”

“I didn't know it was you. Call it a hunch. Payne, you have one of those faces that look guilty even when you're innocent. Don't become a criminal lad. You wouldn't last two minutes.

Paul.....You are a bright lad. Don't go the wrong way”

“No sir”

Had he really called him Paul? We waited and waited, desperate not to know our fate. Would we be expelled? Cane us hard, as hard as you like!

“Luke at me. You are both bright boys. Don't IVER let me see you in here again. IVER”

The expression on his face was then almost kind, and tears streamed down my face to see it.

And neither of us, nor any other back row boys ever were in his office again. And the club duly dissolved itself. But Paul, to my later regret, did go the wrong way. I heard that Cedric got to play the organ at the Albert Hall and I reckon he would be absolutely appalled to be reminded of this.

Or would he laugh and strike up a tune on his magic piano?

12 ALE

“When ale's in, wits are out” would sigh Grandma Payne.

Or if Granddad came back from The Sycamores, promising this or promising that, she would start to warble - “Spring will be a little late this year...” And he would laugh and affectionately reprehend her.

“It's in the blood,” would mutter my mam in resignation and, if she was there, my shy, sweet Aunt Berl would nod her head too. Not that Granddad, Dad or Uncle Ken often came in tipsy. Oh, but that awful Christmas when they almost tumble into the back kitchen, laughing and joking after Christmas lunchtime at “The Sickys”, only to find Berl and my mam comforting my grandma who is weeping. She feels unwell.....(Vic had told her he'd be back early to do a hand's turn...).

The Christmas dinner has had to take care of itself. My mam glares but says nothing. There is suddenly silence - wits are back in - and they are imbibing a cold cocktail of guilt, apprehension and disappointment. In those days you packed up work on Christmas Eve and were back at it again on the 27th. These two days were precious oases.

Off course the fowl, one of Granddad's, isn't done properly and the half-baked spuds and brussels swim around in gravy as thin as the silent air. Grandma takes to weeping again. And is comforted again. The grandchildren - me and Neil and Susan and David - are as good as gold. There is just the click and scrape of cutlery on crockery, gentle weeping and whispered it'll-be-alrights. But it won't be and it isn't.

Grandma has to lie down in the afternoon. A downstairs room has long been converted into a bedroom. We play Totopoly quietly in the room next door. On the vibrating race course Susan's metal horse loses every race and she goes quietly mardy. Grandma sleeps.

Grandma had long been unable to manage the stairs and if ever we stayed there in those days I had the run of the quiet, chill rooms upstairs, where an unwelcome, invisible Guest was already stirring. By the summer of the following year He had found His way downstairs to her makeshift bedroom. No-one at the time had told the children how poorly she was with her heart. But it was a stroke that took her. All those scenes possess for me now, looking back, the slow inevitability of a sad drama.

In those very special years before her death, how I came to love her. She had never worked and all her energies were channelled into pure affection. She and I walked out slowly together in the summer. She would send me to fetch a loaf from Truslove's, the kindly grocer in Windsor Street, or from Newcombe's opposite The Sycamores, and say that the mice (my eager fingers) had been at it, and smile. She would cut a huge slice of bread and smear it with pork dripping. She accepted and even loved human weakness and my granddad, as strong in arm as he was as weak in resolve, loved, neglected, adored her - and would miss her terribly.

How she loved to see the blackberries we picked. She would take the basket to her nose and inhale deeply. She knew blackberry spells which I have forgotten. How I loved her secret, quiet ways with things. She made blackberry vinegar for pancakes and luscious blackberry syrup and jam.

In the early morning she took us down the long path to the hen-house to collect eggs for our breakfast, deep gold, going on red, and often twins. And in the summer holidays she took me into Robinson's nursery to look at the wonderful roses

"Here's our Elsie!" Mr Robinson would exclaim. She never bought a thing there. Just her being there seemed reward enough for him. Occasionally we would wander down to the Pyeharps to sit on the swings and eat an okey from the nearby shop.

All gone. For ever.

When ale's in, wits are out. How she loved to murmur this.

Whenever I smelt it on their breath when I was small the sour smell disgusted me.

"I shan't ever drink beer, Mam."

"Good lad"

We spent lovely summer Saturday and Sunday nights out the back of the Sickys, pretending we were trains on the mazy paths between the rose beds and swinging around on the trunks of the sycamores themselves. And every so often we would go to the lounge window where those we loved sat in a cheery semi-circle. Grandma would smile and point. And out would come Granddad, Dad or Uncle Ken rattling their pockets. A shilling. A florin. Half a crown. More Vimto and crisps with their little blue twists of salt.

"Excuse me please..." (I was in the tiny off-door where two or three old ladies sat almost nose to nose on facing benches.)

"Yes, young man?" said the landlord, looking down. "You're Ron's lad aren't you? What's up?"

"This bag hasn't got any salt in"

"S 'ev a look.....Look, what's this 'ere then, at the bottom? Scotch mist?"

There was lots of that about in the Fifties.

Sometimes there would be two salts. And there was real cheese and onion on the cheese and onion crisps.

But it wasn't always so serene.

We have had our Sunday dinner and Granddad doesn't feel so well.

To my horror now he is being sick down the sink. Afterwards I can see Brussel leaves in there. This is the other connotation I have of the Sickys. Now Granddad is in hospital. He is relieved. It isn't cancer. But by the time all his operations are over, he reckons half his stomach has been removed. After the final one he makes us all laugh when we go to see him at the City General in Leicester.

"I wake up and look around....and....bugger me...guess where I am? Bloody Catchem's Corner...that's where. Bloody Catchem's. Frightened me t' death."

After my grandma, and then my dad are dead - (he dies in a car-crash on her birthday, November the first) - Granddad drinks in the Sickys or at The Bull more often than not, on his own. Uncle Ken and Aunt Berl have gone to their first love, Blackpool to live, depriving us of Susan and David.

Sometimes I sit quietly with a bottle of pop on the back garden, reliving earlier charging days there. One time I pluck up the courage, go into the empty off-door and ask, as nonchalantly as I can, for a pint of shandy. The new landlord pulls it and sets it down.

"You are eighteen aren't you?"

"No, fifteen"

"Well I can't serve you then"

"What are you going to do with that then?"

"Pour it away"

And down slams the hatch.

I sit waiting for Granddad to come out. He emerges with his pint glass half-full. He is swaying slightly. He sits down next to me on the bench and for a while sits sighing, saying nothing, staring up into the massive old sycamore trees. He pats me on the shoulder.

"I dunno lad." I can see a tear on his lash. He is slurring. "Who would ha' dreamt it....best woman in the world....I lose her...then Ron...all in a year....afore she's even cold in her grave.....what wicked bad luck..."

He tries to take a swig. But he grimaces. He is at capacity. A good gallon.

"I've hed enough, lad."

"Don't drink it if you duln't want it"

"Bloody horrible stuff..." and in disgust, as if it is a further draught of his wicked bad luck, he slings it on the roses. "Don't you ever start lad."

"No Granddad."

But I have started. On Saturday nights I go the pictures at the Gaumont with Ron, Pete, Geoff and Ron. Before the film we are in The Prince's Feathers drinking strong cider. The landlord there is not concerned about our age. We are pretty drunk after two or three pints. Mr Fry, the Manager of the Gaumont, pleads with us to be quiet or we'll have to leave. The lady at the kiosk is amazingly ugly and doubles as the ice-cream lady. She peers into our faces for signs of disgust as we queue for tubs. But we are always kind. Our crime is to go looking round for spare girls. We have a points system. One for a kiss, two for a bit o' tit, three for finger and four for a shag.

Pete is a lying, boasting bastard. One time, he gets himself slung out of the other cinema, the Danilo for having a row with a bird he has picked up on the back row. He had asked her to go to the bogs to take her knickers off.

A few weeks later he decides to chance his arm at the Danny again. It's The Day Of The Triffids and we really want to see it. Geoff has already bought his ticket. Now it's Pete's turn.

“Downstairs, please,” he says confidently in a dark voice through the scarf he has wrapped around his gob.

“Downstairs?” retorts Blondie, the fearsome manageress “What after your last performance with that nice girl? You’re banned, lad.”

“What? How long for?” he whines.

“For as long as I manage here.”

We have just bought our tickets from her weedy husband at the other window.

“Right come on lads,” he commands. “The old cow won’t let me in.”

We shake our heads. We can’t wait to see these monster plants stinging people to death. I had got a John Wyndham trilogy as a school prize for General Merit. And we’re a bit fed up of Pete and his bragging. I’m particularly disillusioned. He had ceased to be my hero. I’ll explain.

We had hitch-hiked up to Manchester together to watch Leicester City at Maine Road. We go 1:2 up. We leap for joy. Pete gets set on by three blokes. I wade in to help. I get chucked out. But Pete stays on to see us win 1:3.

“Stringy’s last goal was fantastic.”

(Mike Stringfellow, England Under-23.)

“Great, Pete,” I say, wobbling my broken nose.

And earlier that year we had been eating chips outside a chip shop in town.

A blonde girl pretends to put her hand into his bag. He is admittedly a handsome lad. Nobody puts their hand in *my* bag. Anyway, Pete follows her and her mate and offers to swap a chip for a kiss. They wrestle playfully. Around the far corner walk Tommy Osborne and his gang.

Tommy Osborne needs little excuse to beat anybody up. Here he has full justification and is beside himself with excitement.

“Hey up lads! That chap’s messing about with that gel and she dun’t wan’ him!”

Within seconds Pete is under a scrimmage of arms and legs. To the rescue staggers SuperPayne, that silly great asshole.

“Hoy leave off,” I shout breezily. Ale’s in.

The action freezes. I, the hero, watch as Pete escapes in another time-frame through the melée and jumps onto his push-bike. He is already rounding the bend, legs going like pistons, when the action in this dimension resumes and I finish up with his beating. (Did Tommy even notice it was someone else they were punching and kicking?)

Anyway, with a snort of anger at his Danilo betrayal, Pete is off and we rarely have anything much to do with him again. But after the fifth or sixth person in the film succumbs to a row of red welts from these evil Triffid leeks and the action gets a bit bogged down, we get a bit fed up and start a swinging motion. The row we are sitting in cracks and we all fall back giggling, suede shoes in the air. We had done the same at The Gaumont during *Mary Poppins* after about ten minutes (do we hold the record time for getting bored with that bloody awful film?) but managed to persuade poor old Mr Fry that it was an accident. (These days he would have probably had to offer us free tickets for a year in compensation, in case we sued him.)

But Blondie is made of a different metal.

“Right you’re out.”

The greasers further down have probably also reached saturation point with psychopathic legumes and are now waking up and turning round.

“I said you’re out....if you don’t go, we’ll call the police.”

So out we troop. At the door I make a slurred speech.

“This is the biggest dump in town. The roof leaks...”

But I am drowned out by the shouts and cheers of the greasers and we are on our way. We discover later that Blondie has had a major clear-out after our departure and only a scattered

few remain till the end to watch the murderous vegetables get their come-uppance – (in a giant blender??)

One time I sit next to a girl in the dark at the Gaumont and am on my way to three points. Behind me sits an enemy. She is about sixteen and so fat and ugly that no-one ever tries to score any points with her. I can hear her fuming.

“She’s only twelve you filthy beast!” she announces.

I take my hand off her trembling thigh and have a good look at her. She is. I lean back in my sudden sobered shame and stare at the screen. After a decent interval under the cover of some torrid action on the screen, I slither off to my seat at the back, catching the hot breath of her gloating triumph as I go. This is the end of the competition.

But the liking for beer is taking hold. Ron tells the landlord at The Barley Sheaf three times it’s his eighteenth birthday. And he smiles. Ron’s still only sixteen. He knows, he knows.

“That’s the gallon!” is his favourite slogan on a Friday night. But we don’t go into The Marquis Of Granby with velvet coats on because the violet light shows up all the bits. And the little landlady, made even tinier by the serving area being three feet below the counter, looks up at us with a distant face of disdain. Stuart and Larry swear by The Union side-bar but it’s full of Mods and we hate it. We are neither Mods nor Rockers. But the former hate us because we ride on Yamahas (apart from Ron, who has a moped – and I sit on the sharp square tin behind him, which makes a nice copy of itself on my bum) and the Rockers hate us because we wear sports jackets and velvet jackets.

And I come near to losing my virginity. Roger has fixed us up with Wendy and her mate around her house. Within minutes I am in her mate’s bedroom. To my horror and amazement she has undressed. What do I do now? I lie down by her. She is all a-tremble. I decide to creep down to have a look at it and it resembles a leering red wound. I am startled and disgusted. They never used to look like that in the fields and hedges down the Bully. Anyway after a few token kisses and gropings I have had enough. I sit on the edge of the bed. She starts to cry. I get up and knock on the other door.

“Rodge?”

“What?”

“I’ve got a head-ache. Let’s go.”

Wendy titters. Soon we are outside and getting on his motor-bike.

“You know what?”

“What?”

“That Wendy’s got the biggest fanny I’ve ever seen!”

I do not bother to argue. I know her friend’s must come close but I say nothing. Back in Granddad’s flat something, perhaps a whiff of stirred-up hormones, must register with him.

“I hope you’re behaving yourself, our John.”

“Yes Granddad.”

My face is probably as red as what I’ve just been gawping at.

After my dad dies I want to leave school and get a job. But my mam insists I stay on to do A-Levels. One Saturday we pick up four birds at The Barley. They can’t get back to Leicester. Their bus has gone. Pete’s parents have gone away for the weekend, so we are all invited to kip there. One of them is fluttering her eyes at me. Wow. On our way back I call in home to let my mam know where I am going.

“Oh no you’re not, our John. Your exams are starting next week.”

I plead. I promise. I threaten just to go. But she insists. And I stay and go to bed.

The next morning Rodge knocks on my bedroom window.

“How did you go on?”

He draws his finger across his nose, smiles and goes cross-eyed.

“Pete reckons he got a shag. But I don’t believe him.”

I pass my A-Levels and get an interview at Worcester College, Oxford.

On the night before the interview I go out with an American. He drinks six pints of milk, me six pints of bitter. The next day I’m rather rough. This funny don is asking me questions as he gazes into his fire. Another says nothing and makes notes. Somehow I am getting myself boxed in.

“Are you seriously suggesting, Mr Payne,” he spits my name out like a hot nasty sweet “That scientists don’t read novels and poetry?????”

I know I have cocked it up.

“Well the ones at my school don’t,” I venture lamely. And it’s true! The buggers don’t. But this cuts no ice in this rarefied place.

“...And what do you write poetry about, Mr Payne?”

It sounds pathetic. “Love....emotions...you know.....” Julie Hickey.....

If I had said “about chimpanzees’ arseholes” it could have hardly have gone down worse and I know that my name will be on the list of “duds” which some breed of public school horse-monstrosity has been sneering about as he scans the notice board. At this point I realise that I don’t care if I am on that list. I feel relief when the train pulls out of Oxford station and when the letter eventually arrives to confirm my duddiness.

So I’m off to Liverpool, my sixth choice, to study German and French.

My grant gets held up and for weeks my mam has to send me postal orders. Leicestershire have a notorious reputation for holding on till the last minute before parting with their ha’pence. I have a room in Derby Hall which slavishly imitates an Oxbridge college. We can collect two slices of bread from the porter to make toast in the evening. On a hook behind the door is an academic gown. The warden drones on about propriety and pride of association.

“JRM McFarquhar-Henderson-Smythe CBE DSM was a membah of this, er, college and you will no doubt recall that he won a bronze medal at the 1928 Olympic Geems in the beckstroke...blah, blah.....And it has come to my attintion that some students are feeling to attind dinnah in thar gowns.....This must cease..... And you must not leave the refectory before the last course has been served to avail yourseelves of coffee.....”

But he gives us all a wink when he says “As far as we are aware the only child conceived in this college was conceived at four in the afternoon.....But all leedies must be away from here by tin p.m. at the viry latest”

That weekend I buy a white enamel bucket for Julie Hickey to pee in and give her the all-clear to come over from Sheffield. As Christmas approaches we give it a good wash and try to brew some beer in it. I have got in with a Classicist called Graham from Sidcup who loves to prowl Sefton Park in the middle of the night, dressed in a dustman’s leather jacket, with a sheaf-knife for protection.

My next door neighbour Philip from Kettering, with a crescent-moon face and who wears an ancient buttoned-up sports jacket - miles too tight for him across the chest - and black shoes a yard long and takes The Gramophone magazine, cannot really make head or tail of us. He is a bit vulnerable so I look out for him. But he won’t come out to the pub because he fears there is sawdust on the floor. He refers to sex as “that sort of thing” and tells me of how his auntie had once thraped a dog mounting another in the park with her umbrella.

Mike in our wing is a Liverpudlian and a bit of an intellectual snob. His room is next to a clump of bushes. Graham smuggles a bust of Ovid, or somebody from the Latin department and when we get back late from The Rose, with our wits out, we lie beneath his window and slowly raise heavy old Ovid up between us until he notices and lets out a shriek.

We get invited to his Christmas party as curios and take our terrible home brew along in four cider bottles. His elder brother is a rougher diamond. He has already met us and hasn't quite taken to us.

"Did you two bring that shite?"

We had put it at the back of the table and started on the other stuff.

"Don't you like it?" asks Graham in astonishment "It's our home brew"

"My girlfriend's just tried some and it made her sich."

"No!"

"I've just had a sip...." And here he gets up quite close "Has one o' yers pissed in it?"

Here we are on solid ground and can sound as indignant as we like.

"As if we would do such a thing!" It was not a lie - after all it had been Julie Hickey and not us.

At the Christmas dinner wits are really out and buns are flying. Even the warden throws one.

My capacity is becoming legendary around the college. The rugger team sends a bottle over.

"Here try that!" shouts Mike. "Special brew"

It is in a wine bottle with the cork pushed back in. I pull it out and take a swig. I spit it out to applause and shrieks of hilarity. It actually is a bottle of fresh warm piss.

My celebrity grows after The Battle of The Chip Shop. The local youths hate the students from Derby Hall, especially when they try to pull their birds. We come out of The Rose and we fancy a bag of chips. Up against the wall inside the chippy a lad from our Hall is holding his face and crying. A thickset Scouser and his mates are loving it.

"An' next time yer in The Rose yer keep yer eyes to yerself, clear?"

He nods vigorously and sobs.

"...She toll yer"..... another dig in the ribs.... "She done fancy yer...." Dig... "...But yer wone take no for an an-swer" ...Dig....Dig....

Wits are out and I can't help it.

"Hey up chap. He's had enough. You've made your point. Leave him alone, eh?"

He turns, sneering like a tenth rate James Cagney.

"Chap? Chap? And who might that be, breathing down my nech, CHAP?"

He has grabbed me in a waltz and we are dancing round and round and round. His four wachs start clinging on to me as well. I am taller than all of these roughneck short arses and manage to get one hand free. I am playing the bongos on their stupid heads and howling with laughing.

And then I just run out of puff and they are dancing me out of the shop onto the road. I am on the floor about to get a good kicking when I see my neighbour, the architect, a rugger front-row forward, as wide as he is tall, picking one of them up and slinging him away like a doll. And then another until he can get through to pick me up.

"Y'alreet?"

I'm more than alreet. The next night the victim pays for my beer. I'm a hero!

In our second year we plan to move out into a flat with three other Classicists but Graham fails his exams and gets slung out. He ends up marrying a widow twenty years older than himself. One day he cycles all the way from London to Brum to see Pat, stays for a few drinks then cycles back. The last any of us see of him.

So I move in with Will, Patrick and Stan. And as a late substitute for Graham, Mac. It isn't long before Mac and Patrick realise that they loathe each other. Patrick is quite insane. He dangles Will out of a top floor window but Will, who is quietly insane, doesn't really mind. Mac brings a girl round so Pat empties Mac's tins of baked beans onto the carpet outside his room. On

Stan's birthday he buys him a cricket bat and after we have been to the pub we play cricket with Mac's eggs. I am the wicket keeper and get hit in the teeth. I dribble blood and yolk and Pat rolls round in an agony of laughter. Stan is the soberest one. I barely sober up all term.

Until one morning I am summoned to the Mod Lang Office.

"We've had a phone call from your mother John. I'm afraid your grandfather has died."

This time I do not hitch-hike down. I get the train.

"It was a stroke" says my mam.

He had cut down drinking and stopped smoking but the night before, he had been up to The Sickys. When he failed to come back my brother Neil had gone out looking and found him stuck in a hedge helpless with laughter.

"I think he must have known deep down his time was up. He kept saying he felt odd. Anyway, the day he died your grandma" (this was my mother's mother who had moved in with us too, and had got married to Granddad to everybody's delight and astonishment)....." comes in from the flat because she can't get him up."

"What the hell's up wi' me Dot?"

With these final words his wits had gone out for the last time, and another well-beloved face disappeared for ever from the storybook of my life.

On November the first.

13 HOOLIGANS

Massed support and singing was unknown at football matches until the early sixties. Until then I imagine, based on the evidence of old newsreel footage I have seen, that a goal in the bloodless past might have caused supporters to smile, raise their eyebrows, shout "I say you fellows, a goal!" and give their rattles a couple of twizzles. All really spiffing, jolly good fun, what!

When did people develop genuine, overt passions? Were they suppressed until the Second World War was over because everyone was just too busy winning the war? Or consigned to that great trunk labelled Things we Prefer Not To Discuss?

The insidious weakening of religion and authority in the post-war era led to a host of suppressed phenomena bubbling to the surface, including Teddy boys, rock and roll and mysterious tales of only half-willing girls being "intimate" with their only too willing boyfriends, increasing my growing auto-erotic delving into The News Of The World on furtive paper-shrouded Sunday mornings at home or at Uncle George's and Aunt Joanne's. I was dying to be intimate with somebody.

I am twelve. We go on a coach tour and as we pass through a village I see a beautiful blonde girl out walking. I turn to gaze back but she has already gone for ever, just as pretty Ursula had disappeared on the Isle of Wight as we steamed away, back to Portsmouth, all those forty-odd summers ago when I was too shy to stand up in the dining room of the boarding house and declare idiotically - Ursula, I love you!

Ursula! Whoever you were and where ever you are now, if you ever read these rambling reminiscences I love you still, with a pure love, the very purest, uncontaminated by the grimy realities of experience. I see you still, gazing at me with your accusing, downcast, lovely hazel eyes beneath the pretty eaves of your golden hair as I ridiculously fold the paper I am

pretending to read into a thick square to protect my embarrassment from your stare. Are you angry only because I fail to acknowledge your loveliness? Or do you really love me?

At thirteen, in the total absence of intimacy there can be but one substitute: allegiance. Leicester City FC becomes the answer. Our dad, not many months away from his death, takes us to watch Leicester beat West Ham 2:0. A young wing-half, Frank McLintock, signed by the new manager Matt Gillies from his native Scotland scores a brilliant goal. I am entirely and irrevocably hooked.

To squeeze forty odd thousand into Filbert Street was an unbelievable achievement. "Can supporters in the Spion Kop please move nearer to the centre until they are almost suffocating and sharing virtually the same space as each other," the tannoy should have announced at the really big games, one being that unforgettable cup replay one Wednesday night in 1967 when we came from 1:2 down to beat Man City 4:3; the most pulsating, electrifying game of football I have ever seen.

On such occasions we rarely finished up standing anywhere near where we had started and bobbed and surged around, in a mass game of tig-with-feet-off-ground in a great dense sea of excitement for an hour and a half. It was an unbelievable, exhilarating experience. Of course, after first Heysel and then the Hillsborough disaster, the Health and Safety Mafia had an excuse to put paid to all such dangerous, intoxicating activities and the capacities were lowered everywhere, and at Leicester to a safe, pathetic (eventually sedately seated) 23 000 or so. Had said Mafia been around doing a Risk Assessment of my running, chasing, climbing, falling, railway bridge-walking, bike with no brakes-riding, trolley-downhill-hurling childhood I would probably have been tied to an armchair in front of the telly, to succumb slowly to diabetes and obesity.

In the 1962-63 season (their best ever) Leicester City ran Tottenham Hotspur close for the Championship (they eventually tired and finished fourth) and then lost to Man U 3:1 in the Cup Final. When Leicester played Spurs at home we got there as early as we could and out of some very absurd, misguided child-logic we decided that we needed to stand at the back of the Popular Side (the "Bike Shed" of which every LCFC fan was ashamed) to get a good view. Thirty minutes before kick-off we were of course completely dwarfed. Suddenly we were being passed by kindly hands over cheery, fag-puffing heads to sit on the track with all the other kids. And what a game! The rhythmical clapping with which we are all now so familiar -bum,bum, bum-bum-bum, bum-bum-bum LEICESTER! - rippled around the ground but did not put off the Spurs from exhibiting why they would go on to be champions. Jimmy Greaves was in his prime and looked to have put Spurs 1:3 up but the ref ruled the goal out, explaining afterwards that he had blown the half-time whistle before the ball crossed the line and crashed into the net. So only 1:2 then at the interval and after a brave fight-back against the aristocratic Tottenham (City were always "unfashionable") in the second half it finished 2:2.

By the mid-sixties "Kops" were forming at all league grounds and I was a founding member of the one at Leicester. Of course neither we nor anyone else could hope to rival the marvellous one at Liverpool, with its swirling clouds of flags and banners, now sadly also health-and-safe-tied out of existence, but it brought a new exciting dimension to spectating, before the really bad rot of organised mass-warfare set in during the seventies, where newly self-appointed yobs, first in ridiculous tank-tops with sideburns and then as appalling skin-heads watching virtually none of the play, almost destroyed the game.

Amongst tyro hooligans like us there were of course some tussles and threats back then but mostly the rivalry was good humoured, with one visiting Kop standing next to or behind the

home Kop, each trying to drown the other out. Missiles were usually toilet rolls, occasionally a flaring box of Swan Vestas, rarely a coin.

It was at the home game in 1965 or 66 against Liverpool that I was thrown out of a football ground for the first time. The Scousers had just been teasing us about our ground chanting "Fairy Lights" when the lights had come on and someone behind had thrown down a toilet roll. It landed at my feet and naturally I picked it up to sling it back. As I did the crowd in front parted and a bobby pointed and shouted "You! You're out!"

What a disgrace to be frog-marched around the ground to ho-ho-hos and down the tunnel past disdainful officials.

"You think it's funny somebody killing coppers do you, you little bastard?" hisses the policeman gently.

"No..." I reply puzzled. Then I remember and assume he must have seen me join in with the rest.

"Harry Roberts is our friend, is our friend, is our friend

Harry Roberts is our friend,

He kills coppers!" (to the tune of London Bridge is Falling Down.)

I am silent and somewhat shamed. I hover in that amoral, callous void between childhood and adulthood, called adolescence. It will not disappear properly for many years. As I am paraded around the touchline and down the tunnel, a horror-thought grabs me. Had any of my teachers, neighbours or people who knew my mam seen me? But within minutes I had paid again and was back in. I forget the score but we lost.

Losing. The long walk back to the station; the silent wait for the train; the silent, swaying ride back to Earlstone with the noise of the crowd still ringing in my ears; the long uphill walk back home - were all horrible elements of that torture, one that became more frequent as Leicester's star began to set in the latter part of the decade.

We are walking back glumly after a trouncing 0:5 by Man U. A fan in a red scarf, much older than me, in fact a grown man, sees my blue scarf and extends his hand in sympathy. Bobby Charlton has been awesome this afternoon and once all hope of a comeback has been dispelled by a third goal, at first with grudging, then with total admiration, we have watched him and his co-conspirators take our unfashionable puffing plodders apart with guile and imagination. I grasp this man's friendly hand in belated recognition of this. But instead of a cheery handshake he is twisting me round, nearly unscrewing my arm at the shoulder. He says nothing, grins sadistically and disappears into the crowds heading for the station, whirling my scarf above his head. In the late sixties it became a trend for hooligans to steal and tie opposition scarves, usually of young boys, down their forearms, like injun scalps.

After this incident, I loathe Manchester United, a loathing deepened by experiences one Easter a couple of years later. I had hitch-hiked up to Old Trafford with Norm Tooley. They have not been beaten at home for nearly two seasons. Now everyone watches in disbelief as our unfashionable, unfancied team scores first one, then a second and then a third goal. The stadium is silent. We are not ecstatic. Having already been roughed up by a visiting delegation from the Stretford End, much to the satisfaction of even the older fans in the stand behind us and to the amusement of the bobbies on the track, we are cautious. With our scarves tucked inside our jackets we shuffle out miserably with all the miserable rest. Grown men are sobbing, fists clenched, on the look-out for any sign of the despised blue. We escape. We are exhausted,

having sat all night in a city centre café and are delirious when the coach driver allows us on for two bob each. On the bus we celebrate quietly. But one of the fleet has all its windows bricked as it drives away and at the services the proprietor swears he'll never do another match to Manchester.

Now as I trudge back to the station I am on the verge of tears of pain and anger and disappointment, to have lost so decisively, 0:5, and to have had my scarf stolen so treacherously. And a week beforehand my dad had been killed in a car crash.

A glass bottle is side-footed through the crowd and arrives at my right foot. It takes the full force of my fury and shatters in the street. I am not very lucky with these petty acts of hooliganism. Now a navy barge of a policewoman is on my bearing, notebook out, glowering like a ref.

“Run John!” urges Daz. But I am rooted by something to the spot.

“Pick it up” she snaps. With my foot I sweep the pieces into the gutter.

The others hang back. “Run!” I hear again. I give my proper name and then the false address which we had always practised for if ever we were caught in Leicester London Road engine sheds, trainspotting.

“And whereabouts might that be?” she asks wearily.

Stupidly I hold up my hand and point vaguely in the direction of the city centre.

“Right....You are aware young man that it is also an offence to give false information to the police?”

I shudder. This time I give her the right address. And wish I had been able to run.

Weeks pass. Nothing happens. I have almost forgotten all about it until one morning the brown envelope thuds onto the mat. Mother upset. Me upset. Headmaster irritated.

“If you had come and told me earlier I could have helped you out.”

He was a magistrate.

Anyway, the dreaded day arrives at Leicester Juvenile Court. I am suitably cowed by the regalia and insignia behind the bench.

I have lamely pleaded Not Guilty. The policewoman gives her evidence. To my relief she says nothing about my pathetic attempts to deceive her.

Now it is my turn. I feel more nervous than before my entrances on stage for the school plays I have appeared in. Even to my ears, accustomed to hearing the lie so many times that it had become the truth, my tale now sounds trite and utterly unconvincing. The Head studies the ceiling. He has heard it too...how the bottle hit my foot and accidentally bounced off it.... The three heads on the bench stare back at me and scowl. I bring my whispered lamentable performance to an abrupt end. Now they confer and after a few miserable seconds pronounce me guilty.

Now it is my headmaster's turn to approach the Bench; he tells of my good character... how I had suffered the tragic loss of my father.....

“A very promising pupil....possible Oxbridge potential.....”

And Leicester had lost five nil to Man U....Nearly had his right arm torn off.....Big bastard nicked his scarf...

And as he affirms my near-angelic status I think of all the sea-shell lights I had helped to smash on footy specials; poker and brag schools; the under-age drinking and ructions and sweaty goings-on in local cinemas. I feel as if I am blushing. And I imagine the landlady from The Marquis, Blondie from the Danilo and Mr Fry from the Gaumont come bursting in, protesting to the heads on the bench that this is all a pack of lies.

“We grant you a conditional discharge Payne for twelve months. Any further offences in that time will mean that this offence will be taken into account in any future sentencing..... SO BEHAVE YOURSELF.”

Afterwards the Head warns me.

“You saw some of those people in there today. Do you want to mix with the likes of them again?”

I shake my head. I reassure my mam and decide to go straight, particularly on away trips where anonymity had loosened the ties of self-restraint.

Away matches! What could be more exquisite than the thrill of a victory or the misery of a defeat than one which we experienced away from home? The anticipation all week, the buying of the football special tickets on the Tuesday or the Wednesday and the sheer exhilaration of waking up on the Saturday morning itself - and these were just the preludes to the main action! We had swapped train-spotting excursions to places like Crewe and Newarke for trips to Aston Villa and Sheffield Wednesday (where we always seemed to win) and Stoke and Nottingham (where we always seemed to lose). In a great mass we would leave the station chanting LEICESTER, the legion of the most famous, bring whichever city-centre we were in to a standstill, and march like Romans down to the ground and occupy the sacred precincts of the home Kop.

Once we spotted Kenneth Wolstenholme in First Class on the train and the great man actually asked us in to chat. Like us, he was on his way to Hillsborough to record one of the first Matches of the Day. We told him we thought we would win (what perceptive pundits we were!) and after those few priceless minutes he asked us to leave him so that he could study his statistics. Later that night, after our usual victory, by the margin that we had predicted, 0:2, we watched the highlights on BBC 2 and he actually mentioned us!

In the days before I finally went straight, we travelled to Liverpool for a Cup replay. Like two people who didn't get on, Leicester and Liverpool were regularly crossing each other's paths in the FA Cup. The latter usually finished in the ascendant in both Cup and League but due the odd occasion when Leicester triumphed, because they were so unfashionable, they were labelled Mighty Liverpool's bogey team.

We have skipped off school to catch the special coming through Earlstone at three o' clock. Geoff has told the garage where he sprays cars that he has got to go to a funeral. Stew has told his electrician boss that he has a hospital appointment. My brother Neil, Starkey and Nev have already set off in the morning by normal train. As usual they have fourpenny platform tickets. Their resolution never to pay will remain unbroken as they slip from toilet to toilet while the ticket inspector makes his way along the train. He will bang on the toilet door and shout “Tickets please”

Nev can do quite an impressive old lady and croaks back “One moment please,” while the other two are doubled up in silent laughter. As the moment turns into two the inspector might say “Can you slide it under the door love?”

“...Yes...oh...sorry....it's in my coat by my seat”

“Don't worry. I'll see you on my way back down.”

And the sport continues until they have reached their destination where by some distraction or early exit from the crawling train they effect their escape. Nev is also a resourceful liar. Once he hadn't done his Maths homework and tells the teacher that some hooligan on the football special had slung his book out of the window. This is such an outrageous, irrefutable falsehood that he is believed.

The Special slows as it reaches Earlstone station. Conky and the Braunstone mob shout greetings as their carriage goes by. And there is the gorgeous Welly, the buxom Fanny and the impressive General, their pig-tailed Brunhilda bodyguard, all waving madly. Once on Wigston station, Welly had turned to Fanny with a bag of peanuts in her hand and had said "Do you want some Fanny?" to which quick-witted Geoff had said "Yes please!"

We clamber in. Royston has a rucksack on his back. We assume it's his dinner. We settle into our antique compartment with its pictures of jolly, passionless families on beaches and such legends as *Come To Sunny Paignton*. I have the pea-shooters and Geoff has a couple of boxes of dried peas. Pretty soon, the floors inside and in the corridor are covered. The driver, an unwitting member of our evil conspiracy, slows down for every station, enabling us to get off a good salvo of hard peas at the passengers crowding the platform. At one station the train is slowing so much that passengers start forward thinking this is theirs. A man in a suit with a briefcase miraculously turns white as from a carriage further back from ours a fire extinguisher is aimed at him. A few yards on and the train shudders to a halt. Some idiot has pulled the communication cord.

Consternation. Passengers on the platform are indignant. Man in the ice-cream suit is banging on a window with his black umbrella. Worse. Now three Bobbies are looking through windows and waiting passengers are vaguely pointing at our carriage. We sit down, shut the door and look innocent. Ever closer we hear doors sliding back until it is our turn. A fat red face beneath a helmet appears at the door.

"Right lads. Who set the extinguisher off?" Silence. "OK. Anybody in here got a pea-shooter?" The floor is still littered with peas despite our desperate attempts to pick them up. We all shake our heads. Incredibly he doesn't look down but up, and now spots Royston's bag in the luggage net.

"Whose bag is that?"

"Mine" says Roy.

"Wassinnit?"

"Pigeons"

His eyes narrow and his solemn mouth acquires a thin smile. He gets hold of it and undoes the buckles. His eyes are as big now as half-dollars as first one then two more woken pigeons flutter out. He drops the bag, staggers back, closes the door behind him and is gone. We stare at Roy in stupefaction. Already he is grabbing them and putting them back in his bag.

"Mi dad's fed up wi' um. Om tekkin um to Liverpool an lerrin um goo up theer."

And he does. As soon as we have left Lime Street and are announcing our arrival to bemused Liverpudlians, with a whoop Royston is shaking his bag like a lemonade bottle and out they fizz.

We sit in a dingy bar and get a few pints down us and as the kick-off approaches we make our way into the end opposite to the Kop. The Kop has been one of the reasons to come and we are not disappointed. What a sight! The flood of Leicester fans at the station is now dilute and no concentrated counterforce can be mustered. We shout. We sing but there is no gathering of the legion. Suddenly the banner and flag waving red masses of Scousers opposite, stretching back and high like a great human mountain, find their voice all at the same time and the shout of LIVERPOOL! feels like a great bellow from an inch away and we almost feel their hot breath on our faces. I almost stagger backwards. We stare and say nothing. Liverpool are going to murder us tonight. We are almost bottom of the league, we reflect. Our players look like dwarves compared to Hunt and Yeats. Shall we leave now? We've seen the Kop.....

Liverpool have won the toss (with their magic coin they always do) and have elected to attack the Kop end as usual in the second half, like a cruel Emperor delaying the final savage cuts on the brave but bleeding weaker gladiator until the last moment.

My heart is thumping as Leicester almost reluctantly kick off. His hands shaking, Stew lights a fag. Immediately Peter Shilton's goal below us is under siege. The magma chamber of the Kop rumbles, boils and belches in fury. The red volcano erupts again and again. We watch amazed as a succession of bolts whizz just wide or just high of our goal. Our defence is like a foolish maiden on the wheel of a mad knife-thrower. The first of many fatal daggers must go in with a terrible thud soon. On the Leicester defenders' faces in the glare of the lights there is terror and panic, as their terrible foe gets nearer and nearer to guessing their secret weaknesses. But somehow the inevitable does not happen. Our heroes are inspired to charge into every breach that opens up and to throw themselves at every wicked cannonade unleashed.

Then suddenly there is relief. The ref, a philanthropist, cannot stand this cruelty any longer and awards City a free kick. Some of our players have ventured forward to peer up at the caldera. The whistle blows. The ball hangs in the air. The Liverpool defence must be shackled by the fluences which make Leicester their part-time bogies because Andy Lochhead, wonderful, beautiful Andy, our totally bald centre-forward, reflecting the full glare of a floodlight into their red demon eyes, rises high and easily glances the ball past a static Clemence into the net. I almost faint. Geoff is skipping, a lunatic without a rope. Stew and Royston are passionately embracing.

In the astonished silence we hear distant strangled cries of joy. The Leicester players run back, arms aloft and giving thanks like fervent converts. But the enemy all around are staring at us. It was always a myth that the Kop was a dangerous place to stand for away fans. Like a dragon which had nothing to fear, it clipped your ears with its sharp-witted tongue and turned to breathe a short flame on you in a half-friendly warning. Years later, as a student there I found this out when that underrated genius, the late Keith Weller (who, amazingly, in his first game for Leicester - against Liverpool! - had scored a wonderful second-half hat-trick to wipe out a two-goal lead and thereby bolster that bogey legend), equalised an early Liverpool lead, with that fluence guiding his feet - and I received the most innocuous slap on the head for leaping up.

No, the real demons inhabited the opposite end, looking for victims who had strayed from the fold. Like us.

We hear a thin chilling voice.

"Enjoy it while you can lads. While....you....can."

We resist the temptation to turn. One by one, as the mauling on the pitch continues, we filter down a few steps until we think we are safe.

"I think one of um's gorra knife," whispers Roy.

When Liverpool are at the height of yet another paroxysm of attacking rage I glance around.

No-one's face fits the bill of mass-murderer. I relax.

"I think we've g'en um the slip lads."

The second half. Liverpool towards the Kop. The battle-orders are the same: Liverpool attack. Leicester retreat. The imagery changes. The players are driven ever further back, until, like a crew of sea-tossed midgets, they are virtually washing within the great gaping maw of the Kop. Shilton in goal is possessed. The Kop thunders. The people around us are growing increasingly noisy and angry. But not with us. I suddenly realise that there is less than twenty minutes to go. A corner. St John catches the ball full-boot and it is screaming into the top corner. Suddenly Shilton throws his fist at it and sends it into the crowd. The scream of disbelief is deafening.

“We’re going to win now,” murmurs Geoff. I gasp at this foolish temptation of Fate. But he has a point. Although the tumult inside the stadium is appalling, now there is something else. Resignation. The bogey. The Leicester goal survives more salvos and after each one the resigned anger is louder and in the Liverpool players, although they fulminate, the realisation is growing in their heavens-staring eyes and in their tortured praying fists that the result has already been decided at some higher level; that despite their massive superiority and their obvious deserving.....they are going to lose.

With increasing joy, I note that one or two fatalists are drifting away towards the exits. They pause as Liverpool take their last corner. The ball falls into a whirlwind of red and blue and disappears. A red player seems to have smuggled it out and a blue player is on his heels. Now other players are falling, getting up, falling again. PENALTY bellows the Kop. The action stops. The ref is pointing. A great YES! rings out. My heart stops and I look down. Euphoria turns to absolute fury all around, and Geoff is skipping again. Not a penalty! Our free kick! Shilton is wondering if he can kick the ball into the docks and the players are trooping upfield. The ball is in the air for an age and as it falls the wonderful ref blows and points to the dressing rooms. Impossible. We have won.

Inside, there has been bright, chaotic terror and exhilaration. Outside, the sullen stare of the terraced houses in the hushed gloom is sinister. We have our scarves hidden. We look for other stragglers from the blue army but red and blue in the dark look the same. We wash along with the torrent of the disconsolate. Our train leaves at 10:15. The sure-footed way here, when everybody in the red twilight had the same goal, falters into a series of false turns and back-trackings as the multitude divides, divides, divides again and disperses to its various encampments. I risk a question to a silent bus queue.

“Which bus to Lime Street please?”

The queuers look me up and down in disgust.

“....Number 12.....On your left past the pub.....Turn right at the chippy...”

I have blown our cover.

“Lucky bastards.....You’d be shite without friggin’ Shilton.....”

We are hurrying away; something hits me on the back.

I say “Quick lads...” and we begin to canter.

That voice again: “I told you to make the most of it....lads.”

We run. We turn at the chippy. There is no pub. There is no bus stop. We run as fast as we can without a glance behind. The fluence is guiding us the right way for now we can see the tall buildings and glow of the city centre. I stop. Geoff is twenty yards behind. We stand and wait but Stewart and Royston are nowhere. Five to ten.

“Perhaps they’ve gone another way”.

“There’s no point going back. We’d never find them.”

Guiltily we trot on but at Lime Street station there is no sign of them. Our blue legion is intact apart from a few cuts and is celebrating as it queues for the train. Neil, Nev and Starkey are there, certain they’ll be OK as footy special tickets never get looked at on the return leg. We look in the buffet and bar, everywhere but our mates aren’t there. The queue is moving and cheering and chanting. Stragglers are running in but not Stew and Roy. We wonder what to do. We run outside the station. We run back. 10:13.

“We can’t just leave um here.”

Now the whistle blows and in disbelief we watch the train slowly pull away, with blue scarves trailing from its top windows. And I’ve forgotten to tell Neil I might be late home.

We wait silently outside. A car speeds along Lime Street and stops suddenly. From one side emerges Roy and from the other struggles Stew, his lip torn and his eye swollen. Two big

Scousers with red scarves have got out from the front seats and are helping him onto the pavement.

“Train’s gone lads,” I say. They say nothing.

“He might need the hospital,” says the driver.

Roy says “Thanks for your ‘elp.”

“Don’t mention it....Lucky Leicester bastards!”

And with a laugh they jump back in and drive off. We clean Stew up and have a cup of tea.

There’s a last train at gone eleven stopping at Nuneaton.

“But they wuln’t lerrus on that wi’ our special tickets,” groans Roy. We turn out our pockets.

We have nowhere near enough money to buy singles.

Anyway, we hang back until we are the last passengers and then with our sob-story at the ready we approach the sentry box at the entrance to the platform. Geoff is going to do all the talking.

“We had to take our friend here to hospital because he got beaten up at the match....so we missed the special back to Leicester....and we had to pay for a taxi to the hospital....so we haven’t got enough money to buy new tickets.....And this lad - (*me*) - is only 16.”

He offers up his battered ticket. The railman looks at it and looks at Stewart.

“You’d best ask to see the Station Master, I can’t.....”

He looks at his watch.

“Leicester you say?”

“Yeah, we’d change at Nuneaton.”

He shakes his head.

“No trains at one o’ clock...”

“We’ll walk”

He clips the tickets and we cheer.

“I wouldn’t do it for everybody, but seeing as you’re from Leicester...”

“Good on yer,” says Roy.

“Yeah...I’m an Evertonian....”

The five mile walk back to Earlstone in the late March dawn takes an age with a hobbling Stew. My mother is absolutely beside herself and the next week has a telephone installed.

And the pigeons are cooing on Roy’s shed when he gets home.

14 MARDY BUM

“Mardy bum, play the drum!

Tell your mother the cat’s come hum.”

How often did this humiliating taunt ring out in my childhood, from my friends, enemies..... and Mam and Dad!.....because I could be a right moody mardy bum.

Cousins Susan and David aren’t coming to Grandma’s and Granddad’s this Sunday as I had expected. Uncle Ken prefers to have a rest that afternoon. I have looked forward all morning to playing with them up in the old orchard amongst the gossiping fowl, or perhaps a walk, raiding the riches of the Bully, and now I am furious. I walk off sulking when we are half-way there. Mam, Dad and Neil walk on. Eventually I turn up but refuse to play cricket on the lawn. Dad laughs and starts to sing. Neil joins in. This makes me worse. Granddad puts a consoling arm around me, which I refuse, and it is only when I see the warning glint in Dad’s eye that my flattened spirits are slowly forced to rise.

From quite early on, Neil realised that I had a short fuse and took great delight in getting me to throw a big mardy or to lose my rag, which would often land me in trouble with Dad. If we sat eating, he knew that I hated to see him chewing with his mouth open, so when he thought he wasn't being watched he would open his gob as wide as he could, to reveal the horrible mess of food rolling around like cement in a mixer. This would incense me and if he kept doing it, he would inevitably get a kick or a punch, at which he would delight in producing a mighty, exaggerated howl through his mouth full of slop, his face inflated like a great fat red balloon, eyes puckered like twisted balloon knots, and this would earn me a good cuff for this cowardly, obviously unprovoked attack (and for causing this horrible apparition, which put everybody at the table off their dinner.)

We seemed to spend most of our childhood looking for ways of getting our own back on one another. One incident when we were quite small, I am quite ashamed of even today - and I have never told Neil of my secret.

We are playing on the banks of the forbidden railway, sliding down to the ditch at the bottom. My hand suddenly feels wet. I see to my horror a flap of skin, my skin, hanging from just below the knuckle of my left index finger. And there is a steady pulse of blood. I cry out in terror. Neil sees it and gasps. And without a word we start to run back down the Courting Stiles towards East Close and home. I see that if I press the flap back that the blood is checked, but I start to stagger and pretend to faint. Neil is terrified and is weeping, urging me to keep moving. I play-act even more and begin speaking slowly, as if I am about to die. He howls. We make it back but he is inconsolable. As when our dad is killed. I still have that scar today, on my finger and my conscience.

So we had a tit-for-tat childhood, the seal for which was set, so our mam, reminiscing, remarks, when as a toddler at the opposite end of the pram to my new baby brother I kick out at him like a bigger nestling so violently that the pram threatens to tip onto its side. We were always rivals but the bond was strong and even when we have bordered on feud and estrangement there has always been an emotional reconciliation. We had fights on the back lawn in our teenage years and had bowls of cold water thrown over us. When I was revising for my A Levels I woke up in the middle of the night to see him piddling in a drunken stupor over my literature notes on the table. I almost knocked him out in anger. The next morning as soon as I wake up I remember and, jumping out of bed, I find to my dismay my precious papers looking like ancient scrolls with illegible pale hieroglyphics. I am so incensed that I drag him out of bed and clout him again, and when I tell him what he's done he laughs, so I clout him again, even harder. Which makes him laugh even more.

But he has his revenge. I am revising hard from what I can still decipher. He sneaks up to the closed bedroom door and places his radio just outside it and turns on Radio One at full volume. By the time I open it he has snatched it up, run off and locked himself into the bathroom, in helpless fits of laughter. After several close calls I eventually anticipate the next trick and now have the radio in my hand and am hurling it, blaring down the garden until it is silenced for ever by an impaling fencing stave.

We are still rivals to this day in our 50s, playing chess in the pub on Fridays with £10 as the prize for the first to twenty points. And he howls with laughter with the same face that roared in pretended pain at the dinner table, when he sees me looking disconsolately at a hopeless position on the chess board.

"You should...just...see...you..old...boat-race!!" he manages to stutter between the guffaws, and he stops to mimic my gloomy, stony stare perfectly. I can sit for ten minutes even now

sulking at the age of 57 when he has beaten me in a particularly long, intensely fought match, while he chortles away to himself, giving unwanted post-match analysis and insincere advice, as he rolls himself a fag. The bastard. How can he, with not one O-Level to his name, beat a graduate like me? Cunning, low cunning, that's how. Once he "back-scuttled" me (took my rook and checked me with his queen, thereafter neatly removing the other rook) and didn't stop laughing for ten minutes. And nothing gives him greater pleasure than a knight move forking my king and queen and taking the latter - especially when he doesn't even lose his knight.

Only the other week we are walking to watch our beloved Leicester City lose at home again when Neil stops to talk to someone he has recognised. He is a tall, thin man, about our age and seems to recognise me, even though I do not have the faintest idea - and to be honest - the faintest interest, who he is. I am impatient to be on our way. In silent irritation I pointedly ignore his glances in my direction as he makes his remarks. Finally we are free and before I can ask Neil who it was, he is already calling me rude for ignoring him.

"Ignoring him? I wasn't! Should I know him?"

"Surely you can remember him! From Park Road - when we were kids!"

Park Road! East Close was rough but was like Park Lane compared to Park Road. Connected to each other by the Courting Stiles along the railway embankment, we were for ever running along there, away from our pursuers if we strayed and stayed too long on the bridge, the undisputed territory of the Park Road mob. It was the greatest dare of childhood to walk the length of the high bridge wall thirty feet above the rails, especially if a train was approaching, to envelope the intrepid balancer with its hot, brown fog as it hurtled past screeching below. Would he still be there when the fog dissipated? I never dared attempt it and only saw it done once. Or did I dream it?

"So aren't you going to tell me who he was?" I say after a silence.

"Billy Timms," he replies.

I stop dead in my tracks and look back amongst the passing crowds for him. The boyish image I have of him in my head, that leering, sneering, rubbery-lipped, lanky streak cannot be reconciled to any face or body I can see. We have had a few pints and I am excitable.

"He wasn't going to the match," Neil says. "He lives round here now. Why? What's up?"

"If I see him again, I'll beat his effing head in, that's what's up!"

At this Neil scoffs. "You're joking! A man of your age, of your brains... Well! You're pissed!" I stalk off, back straight and bristling with anger at him - but more at Billy Timms, scourge of my thirteenth year. I am sullen. Neil calls me a mardy arse and all through the memorable match my thoughts keep straying back to those unhappy months of summer 1963.

Alan, neighbour and friend of Nev and of my beloved Paul, said he had a cousin in Park Road. With Alan we would have reasonably safe passage to get through the minefield of Park Road and into the paradise of Queens Park where there was enough space to stage three or four full-scale football matches. There were also slides, swings and a roundabout. And all around the periphery there were tall trees to climb in and sit smoking under, if the sun became too unbearable. The cousin and our vouch-safer in Queens Park was Billy Timms. He was tall and wiry, full of quips and bright chatter. Paul took to him immediately. I saw this and was jealous. Billy seemed to sense instantly that I was his rival for Paul's affection, and it was not long before I was the butt of his humour, and then his jibes. At that time Candid Camera, with Jonathan Routh, was very popular and for some crazy reason - (because I was John??) - Timms decided to call me, in a pejorative tone, the Routh. This vexed me and he saw it. The others - Alan, Nev, Paul and my brother - found the title inexplicably hilarious and began to call me the Routh too. At first I laughed it off but day in, day out to be the object of such brainless teasing began to exasperate me. And when Timms had the ingenuity to adapt Billy J Kramer's hit

“Sweets For My Sweet” and kept singing “Sweets for my sweet, and nothing for the Rou - ou - outh” much to everyone’s delight, I began to feel tears prickle in my eyes. But I kept quiet and hoped that either he would tire of his silly game or, what would be much more preferable, that the others would tire of walking on such hot days to Queens Park and opt to return to the proximity of the recky in Fairley, and Timms would be forgotten. But, alas, it was not to be. My temper and his taunts were bound to bring the simmering pot - me - boiling to overflow.

It is hot. We are playing cricket in Queens Park. I have already managed to further alienate Paul. I cannot not help but cheer when we hear on our tranny, that Sobers is out.

“I thought you wanted the West Indies to win!” he says indignantly as we lie stretched out in the shadow of a tree. Embarrassed, I make no reply. Paul and Nev are proud of their Barbadian descent. Now I can tell that Paul feels betrayed. Timms senses it too.

“Sobers! What a great player!” he exclaims. “What do you think, Routhy?”

He says this with such contempt that I do not reply, and this only seems to compound my disloyalty. There is silence as we hear the tinny voice commentating on the proceedings at Trent Bridge. Suddenly the voice is strangled with excitement as another wicket falls. Paul stands up and angrily boots the tennis ball as hard as he can miles into the air. Timms stands up to catch it and the ball is soon being thrown from one hand to another. But never to mine. Paul fetches the stumps and with some difficulty manages to make them stick in the baked earth with the end of the bat. It will be every man for himself - the best score will win. We all put a fag into the kitty from our precious packets of five or ten, and someone wraps them in a dock leaf to keep them from drying out. Paul shouts “Bags I bat first!” and nobody dares dissent. We will all field against him and take it in turns to bowl. When I come on - last as it happens - he has already amassed quite a total. He has smashed my pudgy brother’s efforts all around the ground and when Timms bowls at him they are such fawning, lazy lobbers - as we called them back then - that Paul has no difficulty in keeping them out or knocking them far and wide. I am determined to play fair. I am not a bad bowler. The first ball he flashes at and misses. The second he skies. Timms, who so expertly caught Paul’s high, booted effort, somehow manages to fluff this dolly-catch, much to my intense irritation. My other deliveries I forget. Paul has had his five overs and it is now someone else’s turn to bat. By some tacit, preordained agreement I also find myself batting last. I have amassed a fair total and am within reach of Paul’s winning score. It is Timm’s turn to bowl at me and his cousin, Alan, for whom I have no great affection either, is taking his turn as wicker keeper. The wicket keeper was always the umpire too and his word was final. I need ten or so runs to win. Timm’s first delivery is maliciously fast but wide. “Wide! One run!” I shout. Alan ceremoniously shakes his head.

“You must be blind!” I yell. Timms snorts and shouts “Routhy! Play the game!” I bite back my rising anger and steady myself for his next ball. I watch it out of his hand and go to give it such a terrific smack on the off-side, but someone I manage to miss it. “Howzat!?” he shouts. I laugh. I have missed it by a good inch. “Out!” says his complicit cousin behind me, to my utter disbelief. I turn and see that he has caught the ball.

“You bleeding cheat!” I shout at Alan. Timms staggers about laughing. I turn and glower at him as he begins to sing his stupid ditty about me.

“You’re out Payney,” says Alan. “You clipped it.”

My fury can now only erupt and I tell him I am going to clip him. He laughs. He is a big lad, a foot wider and taller than me, but I just can’t help myself. I throw down the bat and all the pent-up anger in me goes into pushing him on his back. He does no more than spring up and punch me straight on the nose. In my dizziness all I can hear are the jeers of the others. When my head stops spinning I see my hands are covered with blood from my stinging nose.

“You’ve got a nose-bleed, Routh!” sneers Timms. I am literally crying with rage. I take one look at each leering face, including my perfidious brother’s, turn and march off.

“Mardy bum, play the drum, tell your mother the cat’s come hum!” they chant. I stride along Park Rd and across the bridge where, without safe passage I am kicked and chased. All the long way home I fume, resolved never to have another thing to do with any of them, as long as I live.

My brother got the brunt of it. As soon as he began to chortle and call me Routh that night I clouted him with such force that it brought my dad running in to exact revenge on me, with his slipper, on his behalf. Rarely had I felt so miserable.

The next day Neil went off without a word to join the treacherous others. I went to Fairley to see who was in the recky. I rolled down the grassy bank a few times near some other boys but no-one seemed very inclined to befriend me, and feeling unutterably sorry for myself I took myself off to my grandma’s. For the two or three weeks left of that summer I spent my time with her - or, for reasons I can no longer remember, with the half-witted half-brother of Alan. If those events were not bad enough, one afternoon I returned home to find that my railway combines had had all the numbers underlined and my precious stamp collection had been wrecked. Those beautiful, mysterious triangles and squares lay, a gaudy confetti, at the bottom of my drawer and those few which had not been torn had been spitefully reassigned to wrong pages. Neil never did confess but I just knew that they had all been around the bungalow - including that bastard Timms - and they had done this to infuriate me. When school resumed Paul chose to sit well away from me, and although I managed to smile once or twice in his direction, I cannot recall exchanging one further word with him until we threw Cedric in the pond.

All this ran vividly over and over again through my mind at the match and when the whistle finally blew I was relieved. We left the ground without a word. As we rounded a corner who should we see but Timms. He was pushing a young man, who was obviously severely mentally handicapped in a wheelchair.

He greeted us cheerily. Had they lost again? He could see by our faces that they had. He looked at me closely. “John, isn’t it?” I could feel Neil stiffen with some apprehension beside me. I nodded curtly.

“It’s been a long time,” he said. Then he looked down at the man, who was stretching backwards and gazing up at him, like a long-necked heron, and shouting something strangled and incomprehensible. He laughed, tousled his hair with genuine affection and said. “OK, Col, let’s get going. Mum will have our tea on. See you lads. Take care.”

15 GAMES

What could be more absurd than the game of rugby? When Webb Ellis came over all strange and picked up the football, little did he realise what the consequences would be. Did he then proceed to sit on it for hours afterwards until he squashed it into its silly egg shape, or did some bizarre committee decree it? Why not a box shape? That would make it even harder to catch and if the “ball” bounced at all it would do so even less predictably. And eight sharp corners would inflict more often an injury than just two points. For is that not the real aim of the game, to produce agony and all the other ingredients of a pitched battle (violence, blood, mayhem, skulduggery and terror) just short of one, death? And is it not an irony that the adherents of this turbulent sport are reputedly wise, sensible and courteous while so many fans of its cousin, soccer – a game increasingly for play-actors and nancy-boys – are, by general consent, aggressive, foul-mouthed and vulgar? Is it not a further irony that a game of brute force and little subtlety is governed by a set of rules so arcane and so numerous that the rule book (and I have never seen one) is surely as wide as the collected works of the great Bard? How can a referee gaze into the dark mayhem of a brawl, or rather the ruck, and know when,

how and which rule has been broken? That he can remember all the rules is an amazing feat but why have a referee? And why have rules?

Before my transfer to Earlstone Upper School I had never played rugby and had not even seen a rugby ball. I knew you had to run and try to avoid being caught and I really ought to have been rather good at it. I was thin and fast and dodgy. At Juniors where we had played British Bulldog I had generally been one of the latter few to be tagged as the survivors jinked their way across the playground evading the pairs, hands joined, who had been caught and converted from dodgers to catchers. And my deviousness lent itself well to our other great playground favourite, levo, and I resorted even to creeping up in the wake of a gaggle of girls – girls, I ask you! – to slap my hand on the wall of the den, shout levo and release my captured team-mates. Do young children still play these games, or are they banned on grounds of health and safety? Anyway, I was almost looking forward to rugby in spite of my handicap, my feet, which had predisposed me to be pretty useless at footy. Surely feet would play less of a role in a game of hands? Mine were more square than oblong and in my tight-fitting boots they resembled ugly cudgels. Eddie Day, my sporting hero at Fairley High School had slender, shapely ones which he cruelly compared to mine in the changing rooms (as well another appendage) and he could stroke the ball with consummate ease and elegance.

“Don’t toe-punt the ball, Payne!” would yell our games teacher, Mr Onions (a dab-hand with a plimsoll on the buttock) who had pungently and sensibly not decided to gentrify his name to O’ Nions, as was the case with other onions I knew. (I ask you, why do people called Death alter it to De ‘Ath or Bastards pronounce themselves Be-StARD or Cockbills prefer Co-bills? Imagine introducing oneself honestly to a quaking class – “My name is Death, children, and don’t you forget it” or “Bastard’s my name so make sure your homework is in on time”. I remember now a boy on the first day at Earlstone Upper being reduced to tears when he told the teacher, who had mistaken his neighbour for him, “No, Sir, I’m Bent.” (not a name amenable, I concede, to much amelioration (Beent? Bernt? Bunt?) and had been told not to worry, he would soon be straightened out. What repartee!

Anyway, toe-punting for me was pretty much the only option I had for my feet had no sides or top. If I managed to kick the ball at all, and not fresh air, the ball would invariably hurtle away at a completely different angle to the one intended. I had lottery-feet.

At Fairley High School I was in Kent house and the football team happened to need a goalie as the regular had broken something. Standing in goal, as last pick, was something I had ample experience of and I felt the call of destiny. The trouble was that the person who picked the team, Mr King, was my Maths teacher and I had given him ample reason, through my ineptitude in his subject, to hate me. In those days it would never have occurred to a teacher to explain something more than once or to ask “Who doesn’t understand?” And that a pupil would ask for clarification was unthinkable. Had I put up my hand in his lesson and said “Please Sir, I need help” I am sure I would have been treated scarcely less kindly than Oliver Twist with his empty gruel bowl. The fifties and sixties were hard schools and today’s child would suffer horribly there and many would die.

The animosity of Mr King stood in my path to glory. Tall, red-faced, unsmiling and with a purple shaving shadow on his jaw he spoke my name as if he was spitting out a sour berry – making the plosive P more into an explosion.

“P – ayne, three out of twenty....”

One week I had been away ill and had produced no homework, so he actually seemed to smile as he announced that he would give me an average for that task. I thought he meant the class average and for a second my spirits rose. “The average of your other homework marks, of course,” he said with relish, appearing to realise my mistake (had he actually encouraged it?) as he bent over his mark book with a grin, wicked red pen in hand.

If my classwork was poor, my homework was worse. It never occurred to me to ask my parents for help and they never offered. I sat and suffered in silence. In class I could sneak a look at my neighbour's work whenever Mr King was daydreaming – about infinity, the square on the hypotenuse or quadratic equations, no doubt. I wondered how parallel lines could meet at infinity if infinity didn't finish. A better way of conceiving of and experiencing infinity for me was to sit in one of his lessons. It was probably my imagination but his scarlet face seemed to turn ruby whenever he looked into my quarter of the room. I was a clever boy, he must have known. Why was I so useless at Maths? - Answer: lack of effort. Like all my other Maths teachers – terrible, unsympathetic, uncomprehending people – he made no effort to identify the problem and come to my aid.

However, to my utter astonishment, he had been prevailed upon by one or two regulars in the Kent team (were they double-agents?) to draft me into goal in place of Rich Middleton, who was a good goalie and a decent enough mathematician. My goalkeeping experience was limited to standing between a lamppost and a fire hydrant in our street and hurling myself around between jumpers and at the local recreation ground, pulling off magnificent saves. In the run-up to my debut for Kent I day-dreamed of replacing my idol Gordon Banks at Leicester City. I felt certain that here was my destiny. I lay at night making one impossible stop after another and earning wild applause and even a proper smile - of praise - from that deadpan teacher. I would show him! Maths was not the only thing! So at an age when I should have been fantasising about the girls and their bra straps I was rolling around in bed in my football kit covered in mud.

The great day arrived. I loosened up between the posts and once or twice caught the ball (Mr King had told our winger to try me out on crosses.)

He looked on now from touch with grim, head-shaking expectation. The game began. The other team – was it Grey or Flamville? – had a tiny centre-forward called Mick Payne (no relative I think) and, as he shaped to shoot from about twenty yards after two minutes, I felt confident. I put up my hands to parry the shot and saw with utter horror the ball bend my butter-fingers backwards and fly into the goal.

“Oh P – ayne!” exclaimed Mr King, as if commenting on my algebra, “At least try to catch the ball!”

Our centre-half made a much more earthy comment on my prowess as he launched the ball up-field for the restart. A few minutes later and it was Mick Payne again as I dived athletically to my right and just missed his slow, bouncy effort by about two feet. Two nil. More groans. My namesake was now in confident mood. I went to catch a speculative effort from him scooped up into the air from way outside the penalty area and caught the low, blinding sun instead. Three nil, my humiliation and his hat trick, with barely ten minutes gone.

Our ruddy manager had seen enough and was striding around to order the right-back to put on my green jersey.

My dream was shattered. I would never follow in Golden Gordon's footsteps and lead out Leicester City at a Wembley cup final. I was ordered to stand at right-back and kick the ball away – not to pass it or dribble with it – as hard as I could, should our team endure the misfortune of it ever coming anywhere near me. He did not add that clause but he might as well have done. I was more deflated even than our plastic ball which our exasperated neighbour, Trapper Trigg, had finally taken a carving knife to when it had landed on his rhubarb yet again. There were no substitutes in 1963 and the team was stuck with me but I do not doubt that it would have fared hardly less well with only ten boys. I shivered. I wished I was home. But the laughing Gods had seemingly had their sport with me and the play passed me by. After the initial onslaught, in which not only my flaws had been exposed, a poor Kent side began to rally so that the malicious ball decided to stay in the opponents' half.

We swapped ends and kicked off straightaway as the treacherous sun was setting. The advantage of the slope was now theirs. I did as I had been directed and, like Subbuteo man, stayed more or less put. Inevitably they attacked, lots of boys converged on the ball, which squeezed itself out of a skirmish of twenty thrashing legs, and, to my horror, came in leaps and bounds directly at me like a vicious dog. I had no time to think. I swung back my right foot, closed my eyes and hoped for the best. My lottery-foot hit the jackpot. I heard a hollow ringing sound as I made perfect contact – with my toe-end of course – and the ball flew high and straight and much farther than any foot, slender or stubby, had managed to despatch it that cold afternoon. To my delight and astonishment it landed in the proximity of our centre-forward who shook himself awake, once he had gotten over the shock of seeing such an up-and-under descend, to whack it straight past their frozen keeper to score. I was a hero! Now I knew where my fortune really lay. I would play right-back for Leicester City and ultimately for England. I even began to move about. Another ball came loping my way a bit later and with supreme confidence I bent back my foot and missed it completely. It went into touch for a goal-kick. “Well left P- ayne,” shouted my coach, to general hilarity although his sarcasm did not register with me until that evening.

In all innocence, as we trooped back to the dressing room, having lost three-two, I did the unthinkable – I caught up with the striding Mr King and asked him a question.

“Please Sir, can I play at right-back next match?”

I could hardly have received a more bleak response had I asked him for assistance with those impossible quadratic equations. He looked down at me sullenly, did not speak and strode away. My football dreams were at an end.

Up-and-under, grub-kick, drop-kick, lock-forward, scrum-half.....here was an intriguing new language to learn as well as German at my new school. Rugby might really turn out to be my game. I could weave and dodge – and all I needed was to carry that funny ball. How hard was that?

Imagine my disappointment when the master who took us for rugby, Mr Goole, turned out to be the very same who taught us Maths.

He was reputed to have only one lung and it soon became apparent to me that, if this was so, he could have well have busted the other by yelling at innumerates like me. In class he wore a sinister black gown and had a voice which simmered with loathing for useless boys. He spoke quietly and deliberately as if he had taken medical advice on the consequences of busting lung number two. He terrified us more than just about any teacher we had ever had without making much of an effort.

My first rugby lesson was a telling one. It told me I hated it. I recollect we had played football mainly that soft autumn and it was not until bone-hard January arrived that it was deemed unpleasant enough to initiate us in a proper game. The ritual was quite exquisite. It began with a shivering quarter-of-an-hour walk in freezing fog along Leicester Road to some remote, open fields where the temperature was hovering just above zero. There a pitch was roughly marked out and two goals stood with gaunt leaning posts like dead trees; the grass was frosty-white, like the tangled hair of old men. Distant cows were mooing and crows were cawing as if crying with cold. Each trembling boy issued a long ectoplasmic breath. Had Mr Goole been wearing his black cloak the scene would have been an ideal set for something dastardly to happen. The next lesson would be Maths with him and I remember feeling about as miserable as a cold schoolboy could be.

I had red knees, red elbows and, though I could not see them, enormous red ears. My round boots had pinched my square feet worse than ever on the walk down, but now in the frost they

were anaesthetised and could have been painlessly and bloodlessly sawn off. I found myself standing alone and useless at the back again, as somewhere in the white murk a kick-off whistle peeped and the crump of an unseen boot sounded on unseen leather. I saw a vague oval harden into a dark bomb and hurtle straight towards me. I watched it fall out of the fog, spinning and wobbling. It hit the ground just a couple of yards in front of me. Being that ridiculous shape, it could have bounced away in any direction, even backwards, but of course it decided spitefully to pitch dead ahead and hit me, with a sharp end, smack in the goolies. I writhed in agony on the floor. I was about to die when I was wrenched to my feet by Goole and brusquely told to “run it off”, his panacea for all rugger injuries.

In my dreams of jinking glory I had given little thought to the ball. Now it came into its nightmarish own and was naturally too slippery, too big, too awkward and too heavy for small, frozen hands to catch, handle, control or throw and it was determined to keep landing on its vile, pointy ends.

I had been judged too scrawny to be a forward. So I stood and watched, almost in weeping envy, my first scrum as other boys clung together for warmth and shoved their heads up each other’s rears. It only struck me much, much later in life that this absurd ritual must have been dreamed up by some wise but eccentric public school master to provide for the boys, in the absence of girls, a healthy outlet for their primitive urges and thereby reduce the incidence of certain goings-on in the dormitory at the dead of night. It is, I claim, another irony that the widest, burliest and most ferocious, and possibly most homophobic, of men have been conditioned and persuaded to commune with each other in this extraordinary fashion. Could you imagine a gay scrum?

“I say, don’t scrape my new socks with your boot please, you’ll rip them.”

“Well you did pinch me on the way down! And you broke my nail in the last ruck.”

“Listen you two, stop bickering would you? You’re spoiling it for me.”

I must confess that sticking my head up another fellow’s arse has never been my idea of having a good time, on or off the field.

My second recollection of school rugby is hardly less pleasant than the first, and the unpleasantness came about entirely due to a cultural misunderstanding. This time I was not so freezing cold but it was my misfortune to find myself isolated yet again at the back of the field, with Eddie Day bearing down on me. He had the ball clutched firmly to his chest and had already handed off and shoved over nearly half the team – the half who were dim enough to get in his way. He loomed over me like a colossus and in his eye there was a triumphant gleam, for only this skinny non-sporting entity, this last-pick, me, now stood between him, the try-line and victory. A pathetic posse of pursuers had quickly given up the chase and stood watching, awaiting my disarticulation, should I be so foolhardy as to step into the path of this charging bull. But I had no intention of throwing myself suicidally at Edwin Day and my British Bulldog training snuffed out any spark of involuntary derring-do.

Now I honestly did not have any idea that the faux pas I was about to commit was such a taboo in rugby football. Dislocating, gouging, biting, stamping, scraping, disembowelling were all, I suspect, equally against the rules, and would have incurred a penalty and a good talking-to, but were not as scandalous as my action. In proper football it was only a mild offence, punishable by a free kick. In rugby it was punishable by summary execution.

I refer of course to the dire act of tripping.

I jinked to the left, stretched out my ugly boulder of a right boot and sent Goliath sprawling. He slid for yards but not quite to the try-line. Bobbling from his grasp and, obeying Payne’s Law (which describes the mathematical relationship between ovoids and the grassy tuffets they

bounce on, and whose first clause states that they never do what you expect) the stupid ball stopped dead. To great cheers I kicked that inert demon into touch. I laughed as Eddie sat up and cursed me. His abrupt silence and open-mouthed stare should have alerted me to danger. It did not. Striding up behind me was one-lung Goole. Wallop.

When I eventually struggled to my feet my great ears were ringing like Sunday morning bells and all the stars in my head were bursting. Goole had knocked me unconscious. He told me gruffly to run it off.

Today it would be a sacking offence and a glum Goole would be staring psychopathically from the front pages of the local press. He would certainly lose his pension and probably his liberty too for a while. That would be today.

And back then? I forgot about it almost as soon as he had tongue-lashed me for my cowardice, sneakiness and lack of sportsmanship.

“You should stick to soccer, boy!” He spat the word out in the same way as King had said my name.

And so it was that my sporting genius remained unrealised. No doubt there were sports at which I would have excelled, perhaps lacrosse or curling. I did have a brief rush of blood in the summer of 1966, achieving several athletics standards. I fancied myself as a shot-putter and took particular pleasure in getting revenge on my pet hate, rugby.

“Who’s been putting the shot on the rugger pitch?” yelled the new, young Games master I loathed. We were all invited to inspect it. It looked like one of those baking trays you do mince pies in.

I was also taught at last to swim by an ultra polite teacher, and therefore a little suspect. He actually said please and thank you. I remember he had the remarkable ability to stand on one leg for ever and swim in the air to show us how it should be done under water. He would make a marvellous exhibit at the Tate Modern. The other remarkable thing about him was his breath, which could bring a crow down at fifty yards.

By the way, I failed my Maths O Level, but retook it in the autumn and, to my stupefaction, and, doubtless, Goole’s as well, I passed, without pain or the extra lessons I skived off from, because they were timetabled with him.

In the sixth form I bunked off from Games with my sweetheart, Julie Hickey. We went home those afternoons for some very enjoyable extra-curricular activities. I discovered a sport in which my lottery-feet were no handicap.

Seven years later, when we were thoroughly conversant with the rules of engagement, we were married.

