

# ECHOES

a Memoir Continued

**WILL SERGEANT**



**THIRD MAN BOOKS**



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ISBN: 979-8-98661-456-4

Cover photo by André Balthazart  
Cover design by Will Sergeant and Amin Qutteineh  
Collage by Will Sergeant  
Additional layout by Amin Qutteineh

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To my girls: Paula, Alice and Greta



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## CHAPTER 1

# MINI GETS THE BOOT

### ‘You’re Gonna Miss Me’ – 13th Floor Elevators



**Bunnymen three piece, 1979**

It's 15 September 1979. It's a slow news day. Monty Python's new film *The Life of Brian* is causing sour God-botherers the world over to develop the hump; somehow, Python's Brian is getting confused with some far-out hippie bloke called Jesus.

As you may or may not know, my favourite war is the Cold War. The frosty relations between East and West are as strong as ever. And over in an East German forest clearing, two families

are frantically inflating a homemade hot-air balloon. The gas burner's flames heat the air of a vast home-sewn nylon sack. It billows as the air expands and tightly plumps up the membrane. The balloon starts to rise slowly and then tilts in a sudden gust of wind. The nylon skin catches the burners; it's now on fire. These Ossi are quick thinkers and soon extinguish the flames without much damage. It's a close shave, but there's no turning back now. They all clamber into the makeshift gondolier, anchor lines are cut and upwards they float to catch the westerly wind and softly drift towards the border.

Onto even more joyous news of 15 September. My new favourite band, Manchester's Joy Division, are on the telly tonight. Granada TV has just started a new show for the youth made by the youth called *Something Else*. But for me, Ian McCulloch and Les Pattinson, that night of the fifteenth is a pivotal day in the story of the Bunnymen. We play at our spiritual home, Eric's Club in Liverpool, alongside The Teardrop Explodes. Gigs have been picking up of late after John Peel from BBC Radio 1 played our Zoo Records single 'The Pictures on My Wall'.

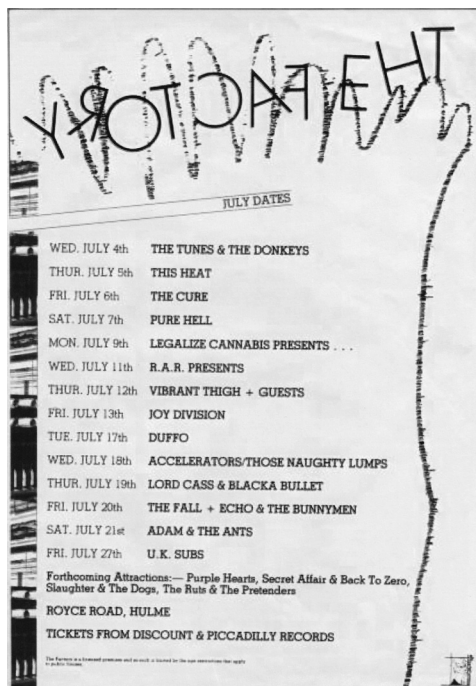
The London-based music press have pricked up their ears, and they sense something happening up north. They turn their dopey gaze towards the Mersey and the bands that are sprouting up all over the city – bands with one tenuous link that binds them, as all have ridiculous and vaguely psychedelic/avant-garde-sounding names. In the desperate haze of the punk-rock comedown, that's enough to call it a scene. And just like Jesus's lookalike Brian in the Python film, we are starting to collect disciples whether we want them or not. We, of course, do want disciples; we are glad to bring them along and expand our grass-roots devotees. Some will remain fans for their whole lives, and



## MINI GETS THE BOOT

I am grateful for that, as it has prevented me from doing a proper job until this very day. So far, so good.

That August, we had played at London's YMCA. American record boss Seymour Stein, the head honcho of Sire Records, was in attendance. After our show, he let it be known to our management, Big Bill Drummond, that he was interested in signing us to his incredibly hip New York label, with only one condition. 'They get a drummer.'



Factory flyer

Bill Drummond told me recently, 'I was worried that you would say no to this idea and tell Sire and me to fuck right off. Or worse still, not say anything,' and in Bill's words, 'drift into one of your ominous moods.'

I admit I could be a funny bugger back then and keep a gob on me for weeks. I was legendary for not saying hello to Macul for months on end if he had pissed me off somehow; the icy silence was my weapon of choice, my very own little Cold War.

I was very precious of our sound and the format of the band. Bill must have thought that having a drummer would take a little of my control away. It was my drum machine that was looking at life on the scrap heap, after all.

A few days later, Bill Drummond finally plucked up the nerve to give us the news Seymour wanted to sign us, and the proviso that we retired the drum machine (known as Echo) and employed a real drummer. To Bill's delight and shock, we all agreed sharpish (even me). He was expecting me to be dead against this drastic move, as I was generally the band member quick to get a shitty on with all the cheesy crap you are expected to do to become a successful pop group, plus I was the drum machine's operator.

On this occasion, I was not so stupid or stubborn as not to realise that the band, the songs and the live gigs would be better with a drummer, plus it would take the pressure off me at the gigs, with the constant worry that the drum machine would stop or, worse, I would perform some sort of fuck-up with my cobbled-together footswitch system. It was always touch and go; often, a desperate cry would go out from me:

'Shit! Nothing's working.'

I would occasionally miss-hit the footswitch, my count one, two, three, four would be greeted by silence, and a stumbled start would make us all look like a bunch of dicks. It was easy to slip when guiding the slender sole of a painfully fashionable

winklepicker onto the tiny footswitch button on a darkened stage.

The truth is that we had outgrown the limited repertoire of our electronic beatbox. We wouldn't conquer the world with the anaemic tick-tock of the only two settings on the drum machine we found useful, namely Rock 1 and Rock 2. Our songs were now demanding a more dynamic and powerful rhythm.

It was just like when the Fab Four's early drummer Pete Best got the Beatle-boot up the arse to be replaced by Ringo. As all you Beatles fans know, this was done for the benefit of moving the recording of the song and groove up a notch. (Believe that and you'll believe anything.) This had nothing to do with Pete Best's stubborn quiff haircut that didn't quite fit in with the other lovable mop-tops' locks.

We follow suit, and the Mini Pops junior drum machine aka Echo is the first casualty of this new post-punk war; Echo gets the elbow for the greater good.

Behind the scenes, our manager Big Bill Drummond is still unsure of my acceptance of the group having a real live human member. Even so, Bill and Dave Balfe, who founded Zoo Records together and are both involved in looking after the Bunynmen and The Teardrop Explodes, leap into action and set about trying to find the band a drummer. It is a challenging task to fish out a loose drummer in the small pond that is Liverpool. There is a defiant cockiness that comes ready installed in the scouse breed. Most Liverpudlian muso types have a bravado welded onto their egos. They think of themselves as singers or guitarists, even if they are, like me, not that competent. Most scousers don't want to be drummers destined to be stuck at the back of the stage. Hence in Liverpool, drummers are very thin on the ground.

Luckily, up steps Dave Balfe's younger brother Kieran. Kieran attended a posh boarding school near Bath in Somerset, Downside. Quite an apt name for this school; the downside, in my view, is the fact that Benedictine monks run it. The school and Pete's life couldn't be further away from what I and the rest of us are used to.

Kieran tells Dave, 'There is a lad from our school who is a drummer; his name is Pete de Freitas.'

And just like that, Big Bill and Dave Balfe decide to go and meet this kid who used to go to the posho school. They are on a trip down south anyway, on their way to collect pressings of the latest Zoo Records release, then drop the product off in London at Rough Trade Records, Small Wonder in Walthamstow, Beggars Banquet in Wandsworth and various other indie record shops. It was all very cottage industry in those days. Bill and Dave were storming up and down the motorways with a car full of boxes of seven-inch singles. Soon the country's indie record shops would be chock-a-block with Zoo Records products.

Consequently, it's no big detour to head off to a flat in Stamford Hill, north London, that Pete shares with Kieran Balfe and another bloke called Percy Penrose. When Bill and Dave arrive, they head for the local pub to get acquainted with Pete and his mates. After a few pints, some chit chat, and, like these things do, pub closing time fast approaches; they head off via a chippy, and with fish and chips warming their hands, it's all back to the flat where they are treated to a jokey musical performance with guitar, bass and drums.

I give Dave Balfe a call, and he tells me, 'It was rubbish, but the drummer stood out,' and both he and Bill think he's brilliant.

★ ★ ★

A few days later, Pete's invited to Liverpool to meet us. I can't remember if I had much worry or thoughts about this; I guess I was taking these developments with a pinch of salt. Coincidentally, Pete was in the audience at the YMCA gig in London in August. And later said in an interview, 'I thought they were not particularly good . . . They were weird and weird-looking.'

That sounds like a plus to me; who doesn't like things weird? I know I do.

After the Eric's gig, we are all chatting with Pete; he's a very quiet lad and happy to observe. He's surrounded by these loud scouse punks, with his posh accent and polite manners, a fish out of water. Underneath the posh exterior, it's clear that he's a cool kid and he's getting on with everyone. He's being viewed as some fascinating exotic animal, but from the start, Pete is open and friendly, without the slightest hint of any snobbery. I feel a bit protective towards him and am keen for this weird situation to work. I am trying my best to keep him entertained. I bring a steady stream of the girls that I know over for him to say hello. OK, that's a slight exaggeration. I only know about three girls, and them only vaguely; even so, they all seem to like him and are chatting with him happily.

He tells me he thought the gig was good (obviously better than the one at the YMCA). After a couple of bottles of Eric's Pilsner and more random chat about music, the clocks tick forward to closing time. The lights are unceremoniously flicked on; it's kicking out time, 2 a.m. When any lifting or carrying is on the cards, Macul does his usual disappearing act, so Les and I are loading our scant equipment up the back stairs of Eric's and into Les's rust-pocked Ford Transit, which is parked on Mathew Street's cobbles.

At this exact moment over in Germany, the do-it-yourself balloon is getting dragged along the ploughed soil of a Bavarian spud field. The two families on this night-time ride scramble out of the balloon's basket, get themselves together on the solid earth and gaze up at freedom's clouds. They have made it. Oh dear, someone in the Stasi has dropped a bollock, and no doubt it will be the East German equivalent of the Gulag for them.

Unlike those poor sods fleeing the East for a better life in the West, Pete is escaping his already better life in the South. With a posh upbringing, a lovely family house in Goring-on-Thames and a place at Oxford University, Pete is likely to be giving all that up in exchange for an uncertain future with a trio of northerners in the Bolshevik heartland that is Liverpool. It's a brave thing to do, and I still wonder, *Why?* But I'm so glad he did.

It is decided that the next day, Sunday, we are all to head to our practice room or, in the slang we use, pracky room. By the way, for some reason we always called it going to pracky or practice, not rehearsals, back then – I think most of the bands did. I can still see in my mind's eye Gary Dwyer, the drummer from The Teardrop Explodes, sitting in the Armadillo Tea Rooms as he drains the last few dregs of cold tea he has been nursing for ages, saying, 'We're off to pracky at Yorkie's ma's basement.' Yorkie's ma being the amazing Gladys.

It must have been a Liverpool thing. Or maybe another punk-rock hangover. 'Rehearsals' sounded a little too old school, a touch too much like professional terminology for the likes of us Johnny-come-latelys, the reserve of bands that know what they are doing. So pracky is good enough for us young upstarts.



**Yorkie's basement today**

Yorkie's real name is Dave Palmer, who's persuaded his mum Gladys to let bands use her basement. Dave is the apple of Gladys's eye and he is indulged by his mum, even if this means suffering a gang of scruffs making an unholy racket radiating from the basement, thundering up the wooden stairs and through the flimsy cellar door into her kitchen on a regular basis. Yorkie is a few years younger than us. He is an interesting character, to say the least. Some of his clothes made our overcoats and oversized dead men's suits, with a touch of charity-shop shit that we thought Mark E. Smith of the Fall might wear, look mainstream. The teenage Yorkie was often seen about town in a Second World War tin hat, jodhpurs, highly polished black leather Canadian motorcycle dispatch riders' boots and

gaiters, all this topped off by a severe Richard III haircut. Yorkie told me he would get our friendly neighbourhood barber Victor to cut his hair in this rather unusual way.

‘As long as you don’t tell anyone where you got it cut, will ya, lad?’

As a sixteen-year-old, it must have taken balls of steel to be seen wandering the streets of Kenny (Kensington), not the most accepting area of Liverpool, to put it mildly. As his style developed, he could be spotted trotting up and down the city centre’s nearest thing to a bohemian or groovy street, Bold Street, in a thick hooded First World War nurse’s cloak with a ceremonial scabbard, covered with ornate metallic flourishes and housing a full-size sword, clattering around on his belt.

He had been questioned about this by an inquisitive member of our post-punk gang, a chap called Justin, he himself obsessed with all things from the 1930s and 1940s, and dressing accordingly in demob suits, silk ties, highly polished brogues and a collection of Roy Fox, Lou Stone and Cab Calloway records stacked up in his radiogram.

‘Hey, Yorkie, don’t you ever get into bother with the scalps around your way walking about looking like that?’

‘No, not really,’ Yorkie said softly in his slightly more rounded, song-like Liverpool accent.

A quick note on Liverpool accents. Now, this is just my opinion, so no actual scientific study has been made, but I generally feel that for dwellers in the south end of the city their accent is a little smoother and the words are delivered a bit slower. The city’s northern parts have a more complex and faster, abrasive edge, with a lot more of the phlegm-inducing back-of-throat growl. I have always felt the southern



Liverpudlian accent sounded posher. More like George from the Fab Four.

So back to the question.

‘Don’t you get your head kicked in or at least legged by those beastly young Kensington scallywags?’

Then it struck me: he was armed with a fucking massive sword in a scabbard at his side. And he looked like a mental hospital escapee. No offence, Dave, but you looked fucking nuts. And I’m glad you did, so well done. We need more Yorkies in this world. People that just say, ‘I like it, so get fucked, you fuckers.’ As far as I know, zero swashbuckling shenanigans were ever engaged in, and the sword was never drawn in anger.

Back in Yorkie’s basement, our plan is to run through some of the songs with Pete on drums and see if it works.

Les sets off from his house in Aughton in his Transit van and picks me up from my dad’s house in Melling, then on we go to get Macul from his flat. It’s a short journey across the backside of Liverpool’s suburbs. We chug past Anfield, Liverpool FC’s ground, then we climb up to the foothills of Everton Valley. We can see the city spread out before us. The two contrasting cathedrals, ancient and modern, reach skywards, both magnificent beacons shrouded grey in the misty city swirl. This haze softens the hard Liverpudlian streets below. In the distance, the broad Mersey shines like a mercury ribbon. It’s our city. Never mind that I’m from a few miles out of the town, a ‘wool’, I am a Bunnyman, and it’s our city now.

We continue to Breck Road then along Sheil Road traversing the outskirts till we arrive at Yorkie’s Victorian house in Prospect Vale, just a stone’s throw away from the Silver Blades

ice rink, where I used to go with my secondary school for free-choice skating fun. I would slither around and around with the grace of a larupped ostrich while the Supremes' 'Baby Love' was blasted out of the tinny speakers.

Yorkie meets us at the Prospect Vale basement and lets us in the room. It's a little damp; it's always cold. The walls are lined with cardboard and eggboxes, as is the ceiling. It's a vain attempt to quell the sound.

As Macul attends to the vital task of smoking fags, me and Les have our equipment out of the van and set up and ready in no time. We nervously wait like we are on some sort of weird date. A couple of cups of tea later, Pete arrives with Bill Drummond and Dave Balfe in tow. Bill and Dave decide to bail out and let us get to know Pete on our own, without much interference from them. Yorkie brings us yet more tea in his strange *Eraserhead*-ish garb; it doesn't seem to be freaking out Pete in the slightest. But he is used to being taught algebra by celibate geezers in hooded robes. It's not surprising that Yorkie's clobber strikes him as no weirder.

While we make small talk, Pete works on the drum setup. He is using Gary Dwyer of The Teardrop Explodes' kit, recently bought off Deaf School drummer, artist and Gary's hero Tim Whittaker; the drums are already set up inside the basement's hopeful cardboard-lined walls. We will soon learn that no amount of eggboxes will quell Pete's din.

Pete takes the whole matter of drumming very seriously; he is tweaking the drums just how he likes them. Drums are like clothes: they must fit and be comfortable. He is wearing a percussive made-to-measure suit, but it's been fitted for Gary Dwyer, not Pete. Every part of the kit is positioned precisely,

and comfortably. This kit needs major alterations. I have observed this ritual many times over the years. Each drummer has their own way of it feeling just right. This is a very personal and precise requirement for drummers to play at their best. We stand around awkwardly. We are used to plugging in the drum machine and testing the volume, and that's it, drum check over. Pete is fucking around bashing the drums and turning a little chromium key used to tighten or loosen the drum skins, all done to tune them up. I never even knew you had to tune drums. Pete continues bash-tweak-bash. This seems to go on for hours. Suddenly I'm thinking having a drummer appears a bit of a faff. Eventually, Pete has a final run around the kit to check that the drum tones sound good together.

We are ready.

Yorkie's mum, the marvellous Gladys, sits upstairs with her feet up. All dusting is done. She is taking five. She's dressed in the standard 1970s mum's uniform of floral-patterned tabard and fluffy slippers, with a tight curly perm sitting above large-framed glasses. She's holding a cup of tea as the oven slowly crisps the King Edward's spuds and crackles golden her signature dish of honey-roast pork. It's going to be a fantastic Sunday lunch. Down in the basement, and as Jethro Tull say in their song 'Wond'ring Aloud', I'm tasting the smell. The wonderful aromas are wafting down the steep stairway and straight up my oversized hooter. I am hoping we get a taster. After what is to come, it's doubtful. She is expecting the usual din from below but nothing like what is coming.

We go through the song at roughly the right tempo so that Pete has an idea of speed.

Pete counts in 'One-two-three-four' in the time-honoured

tradition of the rock drummer. We launch into 'Villiers Terrace'. Macul is sharply chugging away at the chords; I am making a stab at my best Tom Verlaine impression. Les is pummelling the bass like a heavy punchbag at a boxing gym. The drums are loud, thunderous, made even louder by the confined space of the small cellar. There is only one thing for it, we all turn up our amplifiers to compete with Pete's heavy-metal thunder. Pete is the loudest thing I've ever heard since the Pink Fairies blew my mind out at the Liverpool Stadium gig in 1972. He seems to want to punish the shit out of the drum skins. It's no wonder he had to spend ages tightening Gary's flabby skins. The windows in the street are beginning to rattle as is, just above us, the glazing in Gladys's large, amber, plastic-framed glasses. Any distressed shouts from up in the kitchen go unheard by us. We are riding out on the adrenaline of this whole new scene when, in midflow, the basement door is flung open.

There stands Gladys. She's not happy. She rushes over to Pete and is all up in his grill, as the kids say nowadays. She growls at him with high-pitched, intense, sarcastic venom: 'Can't you play those fucking drums any louder?' adding, 'Turn them fucking down!'

And the funny thing is, as we learn over the coming years, yes, he could play those drums a fuck of a lot louder if he wanted to.

Pete jolts up to attention at Gladys's furious screech and shits himself (not really; at least, I don't think so). Young Peter has not been used to or even been in the same room as someone like Gladys. He stops playing immediately. The shock on his face is portrayed in an ashen grimace. He is white with fear. We are all glad her spleen is not being vented at us. Far from being

scared, we all look on at Pete's terror. This is very amusing to us. We know Gladys's bark is worse than her bite, as we have been on the other side of her acerbic tongue on many occasions. A cheeky smile from Macul is usually enough to diffuse any anger when she storms into the basement. Gladys has a soft spot for Macul.

We never had this problem with the drum machine, but we could turn that down. Turn Pete de Freitas down? That seems unlikely, and why the hell would you want to?

Pete's terror is downgraded to the bemused look of a frightened puppy.

Gladys breaks into a smile, her bright eyes enlarged by her glasses. She softens her face and says, 'Just turn those sodding drums down, will ya?'

Gladys heads back upstairs and then returns a little later with tea and biscuits. We try a few more songs, and Pete does try his hardest to turn it down, slightly.

I'm no expert on drums (especially back then). Of course, I love Keith Moon from the Who, Charlie Watts of the Stones, John Bonham of Zeppelin, Clive Bunker, Barriemore Barlow from the aforementioned Jethro Tull, and the jazz vibes of Robert Wyatt from the Soft Machine and John Densmore from the Doors, and numerous others. I can even tell the styles of such giants, but technically I'm no drum aficionado. So, I have no idea that we have just found one of the world's most inventive, influential and musical drummers. He will be cited as an influence by countless world-class drummers in the future. Back in the cellar at the arse end of 1979, all I know or understand is that he sounded brilliant. POWERFUL is the best word to use. The butterflies flapping about in my stomach seem

to agree. All of us are smiling; Macul and Pete spark up a fag in celebration.

Pete's easy-going personality is a joy to be around. We manage to get him laughing a lot on that first day. Bill and Dave Balfe return, and we set about playing a couple of tunes for them. Bill is grinning excitedly and is flailing his arms around like he's playing the drums in the way that an air guitarist would play, well you know, air guitar. We can see that he and Dave are liking what they are hearing. We are complete now, and fortune has smiled on us yet again. As a band, we have increased our power by several shed-loads. Let's hope he decides to bin off all that Oxford University nonsense and stay up north.

## CHAPTER 2

# **PUNCH-UP NEAR SLOWCOACH'S SECRET GARDEN**

### **'Fire' – The Crazy World of Arthur Brown**



#### **Me, up to arty self-timer photography in the back parlour**

Back at the Sergeants', life is relatively stable; the old man and I are getting along just fine. Not much in the way of arguments echo around 15 Station Road any more. We hardly ever see each other, so maybe that's why. I'm either out on my seaside-salvaged motorbike (it's a long story) razzing along in the night air as the slow flakes of rust start to gain a foothold and are

gradually blistering the paint off the frame; or I'm at work as a commis chef. In the evenings and days off, I usually find myself in the back parlour listening to records or dicking about with my tape-recording machines.

You will find me at the punk club, Eric's, or practising with my band when the weekend comes. My mates in Melling are still going to the pubs around the area, but I'm not a massive fan of the pub, probably because my dad is the pub's biggest fan: he's in there every night, and I don't want to be like him. My mates Davo and the gang are still into music, but not the same stuff I listen to now. We all still love the Ramones and the Buzzcocks, but I am drawn to the more out-there records. The Residents are my band now. And I delight in playing them to mates I know won't understand them and even hate them.

As happens with friends, you grow up, things change, and your interests are no longer the same as your mates' interests. Even though it is only eight miles away, being in Liverpool shapes my view of the horizon, and I'm contemplating moving out of my dad's house. Paul Simpson, my friend and ex-bandmate who was on keyboards in The Teardrop Explodes for a while, has a flat, and I can see his freedom. Besides, all the action is in Liverpool now.

Returning to sleepy Melling has become a touch bland. It's all got a little stagnant in my tiny Melling and Station Road bubble.

Occasionally I team up with the old gang, but they are moving on too. They have bought more enormous motorbikes, beasts that I would have no way of keeping up with. I go with them sometimes on the pillion, mainly with Davo on the back of his Suzuki GS1000. It goes like stink, and I am clinging on to the back like my life depends on it, and guess what, it does depend



PUNCH-UP NEAR SLOWCOACH'S SECRET GARDEN



Liverpool, early 1980s

on it. We go to the Bootle Arms in an area called the Melling Rocks, so-called because this is where the red sandstone rock was quarried and used to build Melling church. It's out of the way of the semi-detached housing estates and the people living there. The Rocks are a slightly more well-to-do area of Melling, and the Sergeant brothers who didn't spend all their money down the boozier could afford to buy houses up there. Two of my uncles live at the Rocks. The Bootle Arms is only a ten-minute walk, up past my junior school, along an old sandy path known as the pads. Pads? I've been told 'pads' is short for paddocks; it only took me sixty-odd years to figure that out. As kids, we never thought it could mean something. It was just part of the linguistic landscape of our youth.

There's a small shop up at the Rocks. As kids, it was exciting to venture up to Makin's Shop. Mrs Makin would always give you a couple of extra sweets. White mice were the ultimate expensive treat at a halfpenny each. The Bootle Arms solid-stone pub must have been a farm at some point. Maybe it was one of those stop-off places to rest horses as you travelled from town to town. Or, more than likely, somewhere that the people from the nearby canal barges could get some food and beer. With the arrival of cars and the demise of canal transport, the barn and stables were no longer needed and are now part of the pub. Random long oak tables with mismatched chairs provide the seating. It's quaintly rustic with a hard-worked stone floor and whitewashed and fire-soot-stained walls. The décor, like all pubs then, has been tarnished by decades of pipe and cigarette smoke. The sticky ceiling above has a coated dark, raw sienna sheen. It looks like it hasn't changed for centuries.

In the sixties, my mum was a cleaner in the Bootle Arms. She

claimed she saw a ghost in the upstairs living quarters while cleaning the bar. Mum was beckoned from the stairs by a woman in old-fashioned clothing, including a white linen mop hat. Initially, she thought it was the woman who ran the pub, Nora Blundell, in fancy dress. She followed her up the stairs and into a bedroom, where she found the entity looking out of the window, beckoning to someone over in the fields. As she tried to make sense of this scene, the apparition faded, and my mum realised this wasn't Nora. She ran down the stairs screaming. My mum said she asked the vicar, Dr Hayes, about this, and he said someone was killed in the fields by the Roundhead soldiers of Oliver Cromwell's New Model Army. After winning the civil war, Cromwell's parliamentarians had Charles I executed in 1649, so when the monarchy was reinstated, his son Charles II insisted Cromwell be dug up and executed even though he was already a long time dead. His head was stuck on a spike, only for it to fall off the next stormy night. It's unclear where it is now. Those royals – you couldn't make it up, all proper nutjobs. They make the Sergeant clan seem normal.

Very occasionally, my mate Davo and I go to the pub in the centre of the village, the Horse and Jockey: the name is due to the proximity of the Aintree racecourse, home of the Grand National. Sometimes I see my dad in the bar area. Back then, pubs were segregated between the bar and the lounge, with the bar for workers with dirty overalls and even dirtier mouths. Generally, women, though not strictly banned, were discouraged from going into the bar areas. It was somewhere that blokes could swear and be rowdy.

I see my dad being the life and soul of the party and telling jokes with all the regulars. He's a totally different fellow in the pub. The alcohol changes him. But by kicking-out time, the

reality of his life floods back, and the dark mood returns, but all in all, things are not too bad after my mum has jumped ship. And we could watch some early evening TV shows together like *Star Trek* and the bargain basement BBC sci-fi show *Blake's Seven*. He likes science fiction, which is not what I would expect from someone with such a closed mind.

But I know what you are thinking: *Hold on; we never signed up for happy families; conflict is what we want!*

OK, what about this one? Not quite as out there as Charlie and Ollie's seventeenth-century right royal religious capers, but somewhat odd, so read on.

Thursday is my day off from work; I lazily lie in my tiny, freezing bed. I am gleaning and storing all the possible body heat I can muster. My army blanket and the fully unzipped nylon sleeping bag that has been promoted to the rank of eiderdown are trying their best to warm me. I am like a lizard on a rock waiting for the rising sun to bring me to a slow simmer and back into life. I'm still chilled; my pink snout poking out of the covering is nearly dropping off with the cold. The freezing room is causing my breath to be visible; grey plumes of vapour are puffed out like fag smoke. I don't want to face the icy day just yet. I laze there, and my mind occupies that creepy little region of consciousness between sleep and waking. I drift nonchalantly along the astral plane. My thoughts are sliding back to the mid-sixties and recalling something that still shocks me.

I am about eight years old; it's sunny, so I presume it was in the summer holidays. I reckon about 1966. I am playing in the yard at the Sergeants' woodworking business, which everyone in the family called the works. I am clambering among the stacks

of wood and general detritus of a woodyard, with only the occasional forklift truck or heavy wagon whizzing about the yard. I am crawling over and under precariously stacked rows of planks waiting to be made into packing cases. Sergeants' Woodyard is owned and operated by my dad and five of his brothers, Frankie, Johnny, Tommy, David and Harold.

I am mooching around near what was known as the big shed; that's right, it's a great big shed with massive metal sliding doors at either end of the structure. The sliding doors are daubed with pink rust-resisting paint. It's big enough for the firm's Bedford flatbed lorry to drive through comfortably. The shed is clad in corrugated asbestos sheeting, grey and crumbling with the odd jagged hole where a rogue plank or sacked worker's boot have made their mark. Asbestos was used everywhere in those days.

My dad told me that he and his brothers had constructed the shed shortly after the war. They were slicing the massive asbestos sheets with the big circular bench saw. He said the dust clouds from the sawing made it almost impossible to see what they were doing. Asbestos particles billowed all around. This shit is best not to be breathed in as it lodges in your lungs and can take years to start to cause problems. Back in the 1950s, no one knew how dangerous asbestos fibres were; luckily, I don't think any of the uncles died of asbestosis; by all accounts, not the nicest way to go.

The big shed's massive sliding metal doors are wide open. I can hear raised voices increasing in volume; I become attracted to a commotion at the entrance. Two of my uncles are shouting and scuffling with each other. I only have a vague memory of which of my uncles were fighting. I don't want to name them anyway. I'll call them uncle one and uncle two. They are swearing and pushing one another. And the argument is escalating as

they jostle in the doorway. The shoving now becomes punching. And wrestling.

By their feet is a dirty tin tray of machine parts. Bits and bobs from the big machines, submerged and soaking in an oily liquid, most likely diesel fuel. Poking out of the black goop are cogs, random nuts, bolts and broken bits of woodworking machinery – to put it simply, a shitload of widgets. Uncle one, on the right, grabs for the tin and flings it at uncle two on the left. The heavy cogs and mechanical components hit uncle two square in the chest. The liquid drenches him; his dirty blue overalls now glisten with the oily liquid. I am amused and slightly excited by this in the same way I am when it all kicks off in my house between my mum and dad. I thought this hostility was expected – everyday normality in the grown-up world. Witnessing the violence of life back home gave me some weird nervous thrill. Like when you are getting told off at school, but you can't help but plaster a grin on your stupid mush . . . And then you get told, 'What are you smirking at, laddie?'

My reactions to conflict are all messed up. I look on, now transfixed, and then uncle one wants to finish the job. He reaches into his overall pockets, quickly brings out a box of Swan Vestas, and instantly begins to strike and throw the lit matches at oil-drenched uncle two. The matches are extinguished well before hitting their target; they only leave little smoke trails in the afternoon sunshine streaming through the sliding door. I'm almost sure that uncle one never intended to set uncle two ablaze and burn him to death; I believe now it was just for show.

The scrap fizzles out like the Vestas bouncing off the concrete floor. After a little more shoving and swearing they slink back to opposite areas of the shed, still spitting insults over their shoulders: 'Fucking gobshite!' 'Fucking bastard!' 'Fucking arsehole,' and the

good old, 'Why don't you fuck off, big mouth?' Not forgetting one of my dad's all-time favourites from back in the day, the rather quaintly old-school, 'You're a fucking yard dog!'

There had been no attempt to stop the fight by any of the other brothers. My dad Alf was nowhere to be seen. There is no suggestion that this display should not have happened before the eyes of a little sun-bleached blond eight-year-old lad. I'm sure uncle one understood the matches would be extinguished before reaching their objective. And I am also certain you are all well aware that the flammable properties of diesel oil need immense compression and heat for ignition. Therefore, I don't consider this a serious attempt at murder. In hindsight, it was merely an ordinary act of absolute hatred from one Sergeant brother to another. Normal.

The fun is over, and without a word or any embarrassment I can remember from any of the uncles, I'm ignored, so off I trot and return to play, this time around the back of the big shed. It's another world around there. It's like Narnia, though I had never heard of Narnia back then. So more likely, somewhere like the magical and forbidden part of the garden that Bill and Ben the Flowerpot Men sneak into on occasion. Those plant potheads slink into this forbidden zone via a ragged hole in the fence. In this mysterious and secluded garden, they encounter my favourite supporting puppet character of BBC's most out-there kids' TV show, under the catchall moniker of *Watch with Mother*. However, the Woodentops and Andy Pandey are all, let's face it, out-there too. Yes, you've guessed it, Slowcoach the tortoise, who, now that I think back, had an exceedingly Zen demeanour and was a welcome addition to this children's TV show. He is a soft, contemplative foil to Bill and Ben's constant frantic

blame game. Slowcoach never gets troubled by anything, always calm; of course, as we all know, the tortoise is the most chilled of all the reptiles. He lives in the moment; nothing worries old Slowcoach. He never develops the hump or gets in a mood and certainly never seems to mind if Bill (or is it Ben?) clammers uninvited on top of his shell and is now getting a free ride. Not sure if I would have put up with it myself, with their uncomfortable clattering flowerpot legs all over the shop. But old Slowcoach is happy to trudge deliberately along, giving them a lift. As usual Little Weed back at the house is saying nowt. She may be a weed, but she's not a grass.

Behind the big shed is my secret playground. It extends to the banks of the Leeds and Liverpool Canal. I love exploring this boggy uncharted territory in the shadow of the significant asbestos shed that looks down on me, glowing white in the sun. I spend school holidays making dens, jumping ditches and constructing bridges with old spare planks. I'm getting covered in mud and shite and watching the numerous frogs hopping about. It's common to turn over a discarded piece of corrugated asbestos to find the occasional grass snake chilling and snoozing.

Sadly, I've never seen one since those sun-drenched days.

Peppered among the long grass, ferns, brambles and nettles, giant exotic opium poppies glow pink and red. The tiny poppy seeds must have hitched a ride with a shipment of wood from some decimated rainforest in the Far East. After all the argy-bargy between my uncles, this serene and secret place has a calming effect on me. This is not anything to do with the narcotic nature of the poppy seed pods; no, I'm only eight, after all. It feels quiet and peaceful lying on flattened grass, with



spiders, hoverflies and beetles keeping me company. I'm looking up at the cloud formations interspersed with swallows swooping and scooping up flies by the ounce. I could spend hours there. There's something entrancing about lying in long grass out of earshot of the authorities, namely parents and teachers, and quietly out of sight. I am a kid just soaking it all in. Not sure kids today would understand this. They hardly ever look up from their phones to see life as it is.

In my bedroom, or as I like to think of it now, *Ice Station Zebra*, I unwillingly slide away from past lazy summers and back into consciousness, and with the fortitude of a dead-end-street Shackleton, I decide to brave the cold of the house. I am visualising a cup of piping hot tea. I throw on my clothes and head for the electric kettle my dad has recently invested his substantial hoard of Green Shield stamps in.

Soon, clutching my comforting steaming mug of tea, I head into the back parlour, which I have adopted and adapted as my music room. The gas fire is lit. I plonk an LP on the deck of my Pioneer PL-12D. *Another Green World* by Brian Eno: track one, side two, 'Sombre Reptiles', wondering if Eno was thinking about our reptilian mate, the highly chilled Slowcoach. When he clicks the drum machine's start button this is unlikely; anyway, Slowcoach is seldom sombre, always happy, like I said, Zen-like. Eno's rhythmic chug of the electronic beat machine is ticking away on a samba, or was it a mambo setting? Then it all floods back, the practice with Pete on Sunday. And the possibility of having a real live drummer. This is such an exciting prospect, and Pete, though we haven't known him long, we could already tell he was such a nice, chilled bloke. His

## ECHOES

demeanour is not too dissimilar to the easy-going, Zen Slowcoach. Unlike Slowcoach, though, when it comes to drumming, he is a thunderous force of muscle, precision and speed. Poor old Slowcoach, the tortoise, could only ever dream of beating the shit out of a drumkit.