

### **...to Woolton and a new house!**

What the fuck was this? We moved to a four bedroom house in a cul-de-sac the name of which escapes me. Four bedrooms! All shiny and new and smelling of painty things! It had a big garden too and wasn't a million miles from the school. How bad was this? Odd memories linger of this place; memories of things like sitting in a classroom filled with strangers and looking around suspiciously as every one of the other pupils knew the words to and heartily sang *Over the Sea to Skye*, *Blow The Man Down* and something called *Long Drag Shanty*, which I think was all about Napoleon. I'd never seen this before, everyone knowing the words and enjoying the singing. My school days to this point were about doing what you were told and it was never something enjoyable. I even started learning and enjoying gymnastics, which equated to me running full pelt at my mate and him chucking me over his shoulder, sometimes I landed on my feet, mostly on my arse. Then there was the trampoline and Shinty, a sort of cross between hockey and... hockey. It's a Scottish game and I think it was that which appealed. I had recently found out that I was of mixed Irish and Scottish descent so I latched on to anything that came from either country. My grandparents on my mum's side were Irish and on my dad's side were Scottish and I was born in Liverpool, which pretty much makes me a Celt and I like that. Whenever I think about the attitudes of The English, I go into one.

*I'd rather see Ireland and Scotland in the World Cup any day than England. The English crack me up whenever the draw is made for whatever competition. They assume they have a divine fucking right to win it. The television pundits make me sick with the garbage they spout. The fools are absolutely fucking desperate to get the person being interviewed to suggest England will win so that they can claim you heard it here first folks, here on this show, England are going to win it. Face facts, the English are no fucking good at football, nor any other fucking thing. The Celts just get on with it. Sure, they know they'll probably not win it but fuck me they'll go down fighting. They*

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*just look at it practically and say that they'll do the best they can and see what happens. Their problem of course is that they don't have enough decent players to choose from but their time will come and .....there I go again.....*

I digress. I tend to do that from time to time. Back in Woolton, I got into singing and Shinty, did one of them badly and almost did the other one properly. All in all, I liked it there.

Another thing happened that changed the world a bit for us all, a baby came; a girly one and it screamed all the fucking time. What the fuck was that all about? There we were, in a big, fat, pretty, four-bedroom house with all the trimmings and an extra face arrived and my mother hated it, the house I mean, not the girl. She hated Woolton with a passion. Where are all her friends? Mums have friends. Didn't she and Reg talk about this before the move? I guess that's what men did in those days. They did what they wanted and the women did as they were told. Although, I think it was she who wanted out of Kirkby and he didn't give a toss either way. In my mum's eyes, the neighbours in Woolton weren't much to shout about. They weren't our type because they didn't mix. Well, that wasn't entirely true old girl. The neighbour's daughter did plenty of mixing with me, and a couple of other lads, ta very much. For whatever reason, Woolton had sparked the cheerier side of me. We were all beaten less frequently by my mother, I was thumped a little less by Peter, and my moods lightened a little.

Being a new housing estate and back then, miles from anything, there wasn't a lot to do at weekends, which meant young people go searching. Peter turned up one day with a pocketful of chocolate bars and told me he had an endless supply. He dragged me to where the booty was stored, in a railway siding where freight trains were often parked for a week or more. It just happened that one of the freight cars had magically left its doors open and a ten year olds idea of heaven floated out onto the tracks. Fry's Chocolate Cream and Turkish Delight, boxes and boxes of them. What's more, it happened again the following week and the week after that. Eventually we were captured by British Transport Police. The magistrate fined

us ten shillings each for trespassing on railway property. They couldn't do us for the chocolate bars because we were never caught in possession. They were well hidden and enjoyed for many weeks afterwards. That was the one and only time in my life that I broke the law, sort of.

It was also around this time that, for the first of a great many times, I contemplated committing the worst crime of all. Reg was a DIY fan, which meant he left a lot of tools around the house. We'd been told to stay away from them and being a timid lad and not wishing to incur any more screaming than was usual, I did. Peter didn't. One night he approached me wielding Reg's razor-sharp carpet knife. He asked me to feel just how sharp it was and I made the mistake of doing so. He thrust the knife upward, almost severing my thumb. I felt no pain but the amount of blood made me see red in other ways. This was the second time he'd stabbed me. I saw an axe in the toolbox and for a brief moment considered making sure he never got a third chance. Fear of another stabbing made me back down but the rage inside me took a long time to subside. Reg was not best pleased with what Peter had done but didn't say anything about it, mainly because we made it back from the hospital in time for him not to miss an episode of his favourite television show, *Bonanza*, so that was all right then. Unbeknown to us, after being in Woolton only eighteen months or so, discussions had been going on. My mum's dislike of Woolton was too strong. She couldn't make it work with the neighbours, so with Elvis Presley at number one with 'Return to Sender', we packed up our shit and moved...

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### **...to Kirkby, yet again**

This was very definitely not a new house. It was Bracknell Avenue in Southdene, just a half mile from the first Kirkby house. It had been a Council exchange but it was a fucking long way from being a fair one. Mum cried for days after we moved in. She was a very house-proud woman who had never had much but what she did have was always spotless. She had left the house in Woolton in immaculate order and moved into a skanky, filthy shit-hole. It had minging wallpaper, purple paintwork and slimy carpets in every room and there was grease and grime on every visible piece of woodwork. It had rats for fucks sake! What kind of people had lived here? I can only assume that the place looked great when Mum and Reg went to view it. Before the removal van had even left the street, Mum and Reg disappeared for a couple of hours. She had insisted he take her back to Woolton to give the previous occupants a piece of her mind. It made no difference to our situation but at least she got it off her chest.

Over the next few weeks, it was head down, arse up as we set about making the house habitable. Reg's talent with a box of tools came to the fore. With just a few lumps of wood and a paintbrush he knocked this out, put that in, redid all kinds of other stuff and before you knew it we had a half-decent place to live. Mum and Reg in one bedroom, baby sister Karen in her own and the brothers in the other, all three of us in the same bed, again. What a fucking nightmare! It might have been bearable if the three of us liked each other better. My younger brother and I got on reasonably well most of the time but the other one could be great one minute then turn his mood in a heartbeat. We just never knew when he was going to explode. Night after night we'd lay in bed terrified of pulling the bedclothes too far or elbowing him when rolling over. To this day I still sleep as far over to the edge of the bed as I can without falling out.

The new school was a bit of a challenge too. I had turned eleven and this was big school. Senior school. St Kevin's school run by religious zealots and attended by kids who were being brought up to kick the shit out of people rather than talk to them.

It was a long walk from our house to the school and fraught with danger for small skinny me. My occasionally protective big brother wasn't always there, which meant I had to do a lot of running but still got smacked about quite regularly. Violence was everywhere, on the way to school, in the school, outside it and on the way home. Mick and Nat, the school's two hardest lads, frequently challenged each other. That always drew a crowd and prompted several other fights, which triggered tribal behaviour. Anyone too close would get the shit kicked out of them and all too often I was one of the unlucky ones. The boxer John Conteh went to the same school along with his many brothers, the youngest of which would pick a fight with any big lad he saw. The big lads all knew that retaliation would mean John would be waiting by the school gates at four o'clock. To make matters worse, next door to St. Kevin's was Roughwood, a Protestant mixed school. How fucking stupid can you get. Some Council dickhead sat down and decided to build two schools of conflicting religions next to each other in a 1960's Liverpool overspill town, overspilling with thousands of Irish people who had come off the boats bringing all their religious hatred with them. Furthermore, not content with fucking that part up, the same council fools put two thousand boys in one school and a similar number of boys and girls in the other. Hormone City was born. Even murder didn't bring the situation to anyone's attention. One afternoon a normal 4pm fight began. Several hundred lads stood in a circle as the two boys in the middle kicked and punched each other. Back then, most Kirkbyites (as we were known) would tell you there's nothing wrong with that, it was known as character building. When one of the two lads in the middle began to get the upper hand, the other one took matters a step further and reached for a brick. One blow later the fight was over and few people were waiting around for the police or the coroner's van. Now *that's* character building. Hands up all those who think the brick wielder is not currently a well-known character in Walton prison?

Another vivid memory persists of a gentle giant of a lad in my class being held by two typically cowardly Kirkby bucks while a third battered him senseless. His face was covered in blood and he simply wiped it away from his eyes and nose

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whenever he got the chance. He made not a sound. No crying. No attempt to free himself. He knew that if he did resist they would just keep pursuing him. He wasn't the brightest of lads and looking back I have a feeling that getting a hammering was normal for him, and not just at school. He just took it. It wasn't hard to guess what his home life was like. I felt for him. I still do. Almost fifty years later, I often replay that scene in my mind. His quiet acceptance is such a powerful image. Is this guilt I feel, or solidarity? I should have helped him. Lots of people should have helped him. But we were either too small or too scared, in my case both. I got thumped enough at home and on the walks between it and school, I didn't want to invite more. The earlier mentioned protective brother disappeared altogether because Peter left school and started working. Which meant David and I got even more beatings than usual because Peter started working in a car repair shop as a paint sprayer. He would soak his protective face-mask in paint thinners and breathe it in all day, he would be so fucked-up when he came home we would get it even more than usual. His contorted facial expressions when he was 'on one' still scare me.

Attending a tough school didn't do me any favours academically either. Showing any signs of being clever resulted in being targeted by others. I loved writing, I was hopeless at it, especially proper grammar but I loved trying. I once wrote a story about a tramp saving the life of some bloke after an attack by a wild bear (don't ask). The teacher loved it, gave me an 'A' and asked me, no, ordered me after my objections, to stand up and read it out to the class. Prick! You just didn't do that in my school. I can still see the face of a kid named Bennett laughing when I stood up. The teacher told him to shut up. Bennet mouthed the words that I knew were coming.

*'You're fucking dead after class.'*

The teacher spotted him and made it even worse by telling him to 'shut up and listen, you might learn something.'

*Sir, will you shut the fuck up, you stupid bastard?*

I screamed in silence of course. I read my story and after class picked up my A-mark and my beating. After that I never wrote another word that I would allow anyone else to see. I'd just write something then throw it away or tell stories in my head.

Although I knew deep down I wasn't completely thick, I found so many school subjects difficult. I was having regular mood swings by this time and was incapable of concentrating long enough to absorb anything. In those days nobody knew what was causing the moods and more to the point, nobody gave a fuck what was causing them. Back then you were just spoken about and thought of as one of those moody fuckers. My moods were getting much worse, as was my anger. After one particular beating by a gang in the street outside our house, I ran inside and took an axe from Reg's toolbox. I ran half the length of the street as I chased one of the boys that had attacked me, swinging the axe wildly at his back and head. All the fears that had been beaten or legitimately instilled into me of what life in a borstal would be like went out of my head. I wanted to kill and I didn't care who it was. All of my blows missed, so fortunately I didn't kill the fucker, or did I miss intentionally? After a while, I calmed down, quietly put the axe back in its place and brooded for several days. I brooded because I didn't hit the bastard. I felt I'd allowed him to win.

I continued attending school but only as a presence. I simply couldn't cope with the lessons. Mathematics and any science-related subject were then and still are mysteries to me. I simply don't get them. Mental arithmetic has never been an issue. Even as a kid I always knew if a shopkeeper had tried to stiff me but stuff like calculus, trigonometry and finding the area of this or that left me in mental pain. I blamed the Barber, our maths teacher, so named because he always wore a grey nylon barber's jacket. He hated kids. In his class we spent more time writing lines than doing maths and it was the same line over and over. *'My object is all sublime, I shall achieve in time, to make the punishment fit the crime.'* I can remember that but not a single mathematical equation. I can still feel the pain from being hit with his wooden blackboard duster. Although I hope you died in agony you fucking prick, I do of course accept it wasn't your

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fault that I couldn't do your subject but you didn't have to beat me every fucking day for not being able to. If a kid can't do maths, put him in a fucking art class! How difficult is it for you educationalists to understand the logic of that? We're not all the same! Get it?

Then there was the Geography teacher. What a twat! I can't remember his name but he was a vicious piece of work. It was his job (and boy did he enjoy it) to hand out beatings to those of us that had been sent to him for any form of misbehaviour or simply for being late. His weapon of choice was a reinforced, rigid leather strap. We would have to stand with arms outstretched pointing toward him, one hand beneath the other to ensure we took the full force of each blow. Extra blows were added if you dropped your arms. The blows rarely landed on the palm of the hands, it was usually the wrist joint and lower arm, which would swell up very quickly. After six of those, the pain was intense and lasted a very long time. I genuinely hope that sadistic bastard also died a horrible death suffering as much pain as he inflicted. After one such beating, I gave him a verbal lashing that resulted in him not allowing me into his classroom for the final two years of my schooling. I would just stand in the corridor gazing out the window. It was probably illegal but I cared little. After a week or two of those sorts of days I stopped attending lessons altogether, and that shaped the next several years of my life.

My mate Tommy and I discovered that if we offered to carry out repairs to damaged tables and chairs in our house-hall, we could avoid lessons completely and do so without being questioned. Once one set of repairs had been completed and both kids and teachers were busy at classes, Tommy and I would stroll around the building loosening screws and tearing down curtains, we would then dutifully report the damage to the housemaster, Mr Cooney, who was only too happy to leave us to it. I'm certain this was not out of negligence. He knew neither of us stood any chance of achieving anything of academic value. He was giving us an opportunity to learn something else and in a way, for me, it worked. As well as pretending to be a caretaker, each day I helped set out and lay the dining tables for school lunch. I took pride in laying every knife, fork and spoon just so

and every water glass as clean as its age would permit. It would pay off later in life.

Friday 21st July 1967. What a day! Today I will leave school, officially. It was a few weeks shy of my 15th birthday. Had I been born in September, it would have meant another year at school. At the school leaver's meeting, the teachers attempted to give us the benefit of their collective wisdom.

*You're about to start out on a major journey boys. Stay with God. Go to church every Sunday and Confession every Saturday and he will take care of you.*

*Fuck off you fucking wanker!*

I let loose with a barrage of insults that I always knew I had in me but had been too scared to release. But they can't touch me now.

*Try strapping me now, you fuckers! I'll never set foot in another church as long as I fucking live! Fuck you and fuck your fucking school! You can take it and your fucking church and your fucking priests and your fucking nuns and stick them all up your fucking arse!*

With the room silent, I turned and left, several hours earlier than scheduled. Apart from one wedding, one christening and two funerals and those only to avoid offending family, I have kept my word and never knowingly entered any place where religion is practiced. Still shaking with rage, I passed through the school gates for the last time and with The Beatles top of the charts with 'All You Need Is Love', I moved...