

Chapter Four

Alec Bennett's Motorcycles

The following Monday morning I set off for my new job, my heart pounding, not with nervousness but with elation. At last I had escaped the hateful shipyard. Of my own volition I'd made the first bold step into my destiny and for the first time actually looked forward to going to work.

Ever since descending Mother Nature's water-chute, slithering head first into the brightly lit world unaware of the Cecil B. De-Mille production that was to follow, I'd been swept along by the rushing torrent of the adult world, indeed, from the instant of my conception my life had been filled with incident, none of which, so it seemed to me, of my own making.

However this morning was different, this was the first change that I had personally caused to happen, and did it all by myself, to boot! I was overjoyed, until this particular moment everything in my life had been thrust upon me by others, conception, followed by instant rejection then shuttlecocked between two families and returned to my natural mother only to be dressed as a girl. Shortly after this I was subjected to the horrors of World War II, spending five years hopefully avoiding the skills of the German bomb-aimers. Deprived of evacuation along with other children, I spent my days and nights in my parent's Anderson shelter or cowering under the stairs. Or as a special treat perhaps a night in a Public Air Raid Shelter. The eventual inevitable loss of my parent's home left us destitute and for a while we had nowhere to live at all, spending our nights wrapped in army blankets, huddled together on the floor of the Salvation Army Hut in the village of Botley.

God bless their little cotton uniforms, they were wonderful and in passing I would add that they remain the only religious order that I have any time and patience for. They looked after us, feeding us unsweetened cocoa plus hard-tack army-biscuits, although at the time it tasted like manna from heaven and maybe it was! However, manna was not always available and at such times then we dined on the awful food served in British Restaurants, while I consumed vast quantities of Cod Liver Oil and Malt almost everywhere else, meanwhile receiving a fragmented education doing silly walks inside freezing school halls and playing unwelcome soccer and cricket matches on the outside.

In tandem with this madness, the fear of being struck down by poliomyelitis, accompanied by the usual confusion at the onset of puberty, not to mention being sexual assaulted by a member of His Majesty's Royal Paedophiles. Then during and after the war ended, homelessness, the horror of which intensified with ever increasing harassing circumstances as my parents and I were kicked from pillar to post.

In my already jaded fifteen year old opinion, I'd been subjected to all this without my consent, at the same time suffering an uncanny lack of ability on the part of anyone, either at home or at school, to understand my pressing need to play music. All I really wanted in their whole mad world, was to play music, preferably on some drums! I wasn't fussy, any old fuckin' drum would have done, for Christ's sake!

This particular morning however, music had taken a back seat, sitting on a bus in a state of absolute euphoria, aware that I was going to work in Alec Bennett's motorcycle workshop. "Wow! Alec Bennett for god's sake!" I rejoiced, "The most famous racing motorcyclist of all time! Eleven times winner of the prestigious Isle Of Man Tourist Trophy Race! The TT no less! Imagine that! Eleven times the winner! Phew, I couldn't wait to meet him and this had been all my own decision, I had taken over control of my destiny." it was truly a red letter day and I was beside myself.

When the bus finally arrived at my destination I stepped from it and it seemed to me that the whole of

the main street in Portswood was owned by Alec Bennett! I walked along it noting an Alec Bennett bicycle retail shop which I'd never noticed before, further along was a car repair workshop, plus on the opposite side of the road a huge combined new-car showroom and service station, and of course the motorcycle sales showroom and repair workshop which I duly turned into.

Immediately on my arrival not surprisingly I was shown into a kitchen where I was informed I would be gainfully employed first thing every morning making tea for everyone. Well that didn't come as a great shock. Been there, done that, got the tee-shirt! I filled the urn, lit the gas under it and glanced around. "Hmm," I thought grimly, "My first job this morning will be to clean up after my predecessor, obviously he hadn't bothered to clean it himself, especially on his last day. In fact he hadn't cared much about cleaning at all."

I was not put out by this turn of events, it had a very familiar ring to it, By this time I knew that fourteen to sixteen year old boys were supposed to do this sort of thing, it was normal practice. Besides, I was surrounded by lovely shiny motorbikes, hundreds of the buggers! I'd never seen so many, row upon row of the things. So why would I object to spending a few minutes making the tea? Life had improved immeasurably as far as I was concerned.

I washed and scoured the dozen or so mugs that my slack predecessor had left unwashed and removed years of caked tannin from the spoons. When they were clean, I straightened the whole place up and mopped the floor, whistling happily to myself as I splashed around in the soapy water, when all was done I reported to the office. "Ah Harrison my dear chap, Well done, right on time!" drooled the foreman, holding his wrist watch theatrically in front of his face, cigarette smoke disappearing into his nostrils. It turned was the same trick-smoker who'd interviewed me in the first instance. I watched the twin columns of smoke disappearing into his nose, "If I ever learn to smoke cigarettes, I'm going to teach myself to do that." I thought (and I did). "Now then, my dear chap," he continued, "your next task will be to walk around the workshop making a list of the food the chaps require, that list will be tomorrow's order. You will then walk up the ramp and across the street to the cake shop opposite, hand the list to the lady behind the counter and she will give you a large tray of cakes, which you will bring back here and distribute from the the tea-trolley, along with the tea, of course! The chaps will tell you which cakes they ordered. Now come with me and I'll introduce you to them."

I followed him out of the office into the workshop. "Morning everyone," he announced, "This is young Ken, our new lad. He will be looking after your needs from now on." He led me along a row of low benches each with a motor cycle perched on it plus a man with his hands inside the machinery. As we arrived at each bench the foreman said, "This is Norman, This is Les, This is Tom, This is Archie," and so on around the shop. They nodded affably as we passed, "Which one is Alec Bennett?" I asked, agog with anticipation, he looked down at me his lip curling. "Mister Bennett pops in from time to time, maybe four or five times a year, just to keep an eyes on things y know. Now off you trot, go fetch the cakes, there's a good lad. Oh and by the way, any cakes that might possibly be left over are yours, a little bonus you might say!"

I was a trifle disappointed at not meeting the great man himself but took their orders and sallied across the road to the cake-shop. "Fan-bloody-tastic!" I thought as I went, "All this and free cakes too!" "Hello dear," said a middle aged counter assistant, "are you the new lad from across the road then?" "Hello," I replied, "Yeah, my name's Ken." and that was the nicest conversation we ever had!

I took the tray she handed to me, retraced my steps loaded it onto the trolley. When everything was ready, I trotted from bench to bench trundling the tea and the cakes before me. The guys were friendly and although I could hardly stop for a chat with each mechanic (otherwise the guy at the end of the line would have received his morning tea somewhere around lunchtime), I established friendly contact with

each one as I passed.

When I reached Archie I realised something that I'd missed the first time round, it suddenly struck me he was Archie Appleby, the foremost grass-track and scramble sidecar racing driver in England at the time. I mean *the* major grass racetrack rider! I was fourteen years old, going on fifteen, I was a fan! I'd read everything about him, Photographs of him and his brother appeared regularly on the sport pages of the local newspaper. In the motorcycle-sidecar racing world the Appleby brothers were invincible. I stared incredulously and he smiled back at me. "Mornin'" he grinned "Wha's on 'en, nipper!" I found my tongue, "I've read all about you and your brother." I said and as I spoke another grinning face appeared from behind the bike on the neighbouring bench. "And 'ere oi am! The man 'iself!" he carolled, They both had the most bucolic accents I'd ever heard and I was thunderstruck, "Tom and Archie Appleby! I was going to be working with Tom and Archie Appleby! it was utterly unbelievable! Fantastic!" "Ere! come on mush," said Archie briskly, "Get a bloody move on or ol' Les over there 'll get' the shits 'cos 'e's tea's gettin' cold!" They both laughed, enjoying my obvious adulation. I was even more amazed by their accent, they sounded like hayseeds! I'd never imagined famous people talking like farmers. I'd no idea how they were supposed to talk, but I certainly didn't expect 'em to sound like country bumpkins. Let's face it, I'd lived twenty yards from Bert Croucher and had never plucked up the courage to speak to him, so how would I know? (I also had no idea that I sounded exactly the same). I crossed the room to Les and served him his tea. I must have been wearing my reaction on my face because he too laughed, "You'll get used to 'em, after a few days you won't even notice 'em!" he said as he helped himself to his cakes. "I suppose so," I replied, "but I never expected to meet the Appleby Brothers here." "Well where would you expect to meet 'em then?" he laughed again, "I mean where else would you expect to meet motor-cycle racing people? This is the hub of that particular world, eventually you'll meet everyone who's anyone 'ere. Even guys who don't work 'ere comes in 'ere for their needs, sometime just for a look around. You'll soon stop gawking at 'em, besides, be warned, some of 'em are absolute arseholes! And speaking of arseholes, I've just been talking to the foreman and he tells me you live in Woolston. Is that right?" "Yes," I said, "Why d' you ask?" "Well, I lives at number six Sholing Road, opposite Peartee Church, you can come to work with me on my bike, if you like to that is?" If I would like to? Was he serious? Is a Rabbi Jewish? "That's fantastic!" I said, "I'll come with you tonight, if that's okay?" "Sure it's okay!" he said, "but you'll have to walk to and from my house, I don't run a door to door taxi service y' know." "I live at forty six Mortimer Road," I replied, still amazed, "just the other side of the church." "Well it's your lucky day then!" he smiled and added, "although it won't be if you're late, I shall just piss off without you, okay?" "I'll be waiting even before you are ready!" I laughed. "I believe you will too." he said, laughing with me. I made my way back to the kitchen, I wanted to be alone to gloat.

I drank my tea and ate the leftover cakes (and there were several, may I add). I cleared away the debris and washed everything, in preparation for the afternoon tea-break. These men had not yet relinquished their post-lunchtime break and I was already a street wise smart-arse, the less I had to do in the kitchen in the afternoon, the more time I would have with the motorbikes. Right?

When done, I presented myself to the foreman, "I've washed all the tea things." I said, proud of my effort. "Ah! I see. Hmm... Jolly good, Harrison!" he drooled, this time raising his left arm even more theatrically until his watch-face was an inch from his nose. He stared pointedly at it, the tube of smoke again curling from his mouth and parting at his nostrils. "You'll be working with Norman today M' boy!" he drawled. "He's trying to doing a W.C. Fields!" I thought, caustically. "Well he may be a better ham-actor but he'll never fool anyone, he's too tall and skinny, nothing like W.C. at all!" "If you would be kind enough to step outside and take yourself up the ramp to the parking area, you'll find waiting for

you a Norton Dominator. It's looking somewhat forlorn, so I've taken the liberty of placing beside it, a hose, a pan, a dish of solvent, a paint brush and some cleaning rags. It's your job to spruce the poor thing up for us. We would like to see it returned to its pristine showroom condition. Not a smidgin of grime anywhere, my dear chap. When you've achieved this Herculean task, I'd like you to fetch the machine into the workshop and help Norman push it onto his bench, then stand by to be of further assistance. Oh and by the way, if by the merest chance you should find yourself doing nothing and someone else asks something of you, perhaps you'd be so kind."

It was an extremely supercilious performance but at the moment I was unaware of that. I had never heard such posh chat before, not in the flesh anyway, I thought only his Majesty the King and people on the BBC spoke that way. However, I had no time to think about it and rushed eagerly off to find the motorbike. "Fan-fuckin'-tastic! A NORTON DOMINATOR! My absolute favourite! They were allowing me clean a NORTON DOMINATOR! Little ol' me! Kenny bloody 'Arrison! Alec Bennett himself had actually won the TT eleven times on a Norton Dominator! Hey! Maybe this was it? Wow, this is really living!" I chortled.



1948 500cc Norton International. A similar machine to the one I was in trouble with

I cleaned and polished the machine lovingly and only when I finally stood up and prepared to wheel it back inside did I realise how big a Norton Dominator was. I was four feet six inches tall. "This," I reasoned, "could turn into a disaster!" I was going to need great balancing skills and suddenly I was feeling more nervous than I'd anticipated. In fact I hadn't anticipated feeling nervous at all, "Hmm," I thought, "one false move and it'll fall over. If it falls away from me I won't have a hope in hell of saving it and not a great deal if it falls towards me either!"

I had neither the height nor body-weight to counterbalance the huge machine and realised that in addition to this I had a steep slope to negotiate. It was at this point I realised I'd been had. "The Bastard has set me up!" I thundered, "I knew there was something weird about him, with his silly fuckin' affectations! Well never mind that now, you gotta get this thing outa here somehow!" I reached for the handlebars, which were about nipple height (my nipples I mean, not the bike's).

Smokey Joe had given a lot of thought to the prank, he'd placed the machine in a tight alleyway, among

the staff's private vehicles and facing the wrong way, to boot. So in order to get it out I'd have to turn it round. That or reverse it, which would mean pulling it backwards and turning it up the ramp before allowing it to roll down. I had not much room to manoeuvre and I daren't let it fall, 'cos it would topple against the vehicles parked nearby, causing unimaginable damage. And I couldn't ride it, I didn't know how and besides, my feet wouldn't reach the ground if I climbed onto it and there was no way I could balance it from up there!

I stood back and looked at the machine anew, "Fuck him!" I thought, "Take your time 'Arro, this is a toughie, you'd better think about this for a bit. Come on son! You got out of that fucking metal box that prick riveted you into on your first day at the shipyard and you'll get out of this!"

I began to feel angry, but after spending a few moments thinking about the physics of the task decided to reverse it. "WRONG!" I'd already realised that if I did that I'd have to turn it to the left and pull it backwards up the slope before facing it downhill and I wasn't strong enough to do that. Another pause... I decided the only way to go was to wheel the thing along the alley between the cars and then do a three-pointer at the end, leaning it slightly towards me. "What if I make an error and it falls on me?" I wondered. "I've a much better idea, son," I muttered, let it fall on the fuckin' foreman's car, bollocks to him!" but checked myself, "No! You gotta get out of this with your dignity intact." I reasoned stubbornly.

I succeeded in turning it around and got it out facing towards the slope, however I was aware that as soon as I turned it to the left and pushed it onto the hill, it would run away with me. I was too small to throw a leg over it and ride it into the workshop, although I dearly wanted to, but if I did climb on it as it rolled down, on my arrival my feet wouldn't touch the ground and on making a grand entry I would simply fall over, bike and all and once it started to fall it was far too heavy for me to stop it. Back to square one, do not pass go, do collect 200 silly bloody japes!

I reached for the brake-lever which was way over on the other side of the handlebars, near the throttle grip, I could just reach it, but was far from comfortable. I inched the bike forward, letting the machine roll a smidgin, then easing the brake on I tested to see how sensitive it was, if I applied it too hard, it would snatch the machine and and jerk it to the right, completely out of my control.

It seemed okay, I pushed the bike onto the slope, turned the handlebars to the left and steered it down the hill, keeping the handbrake on just enough to keep it at walking pace. I was sweating profusely both with apprehension and effort, it was bloody heavy!

I managed to steer it into the workshop, where luckily for me Norman's workbench was the first one t inside the door, so using the momentum from the slope to my advantage I allowed the bike to roll into exactly the right position. Kicking down the side-stand I leaned the bike onto it. "There y' are Norm," I said truculently, "all ready for you, mate." I glanced around to find everyone grinning broadly, they must have climbed up to the windows to watch the pantomime. "Well at least they're not laughing their bloody heads off." I thought, consoling myself, Realisation dawned, "Shit! Now I s'pose I'll have to suffer their bloody stupid initiation ceremonies all over again!" I'd managed to keep my dignity intact, but my feathers were ruffled and I was back *en-guard*. "Red alert" I suppose we would say nowadays. I helped Norman push the bike onto his bench, after which he pointed to a bench near the wall and said, "My toolbox is over there, use whatever you need. I want you to take the timing cover off, remove the chain and sprockets, then take them outside and clean 'em for me. Or if you'd prefer, you can fetch your brush and solvent pan inside and do it here." "No," I replied, "I'd prefer to do it outside, if you don't mind." I replied. "S all the same to me, ol' son." he said and turned his attention to the machine.

For the second time this morning I wanted to be alone, but this time it was not to gloat.

I spent the rest of the morning removing and cleaning various components of the Norton, as and when

Norman required them. Apparently my function was to keep him from getting his hands dirty. "Fair enough, I suppose. Hey, I'm taking a Norton Dominator to pieces! Any boy my age would kill for the privilege!"

When the afternoon tea break was over and I had washed the dishes, Smokey-Joe instructed me to empty the waste-paper bins and ashtrays then polish the floor of his office. After this I was given a bucket of sawdust and a broom and told to sweep the workshop floor, using the sawdust to soak up the oil spills. It took me until almost five o'clock and by the end of it, it is needless to tell you here that I was more than ready for the ride home.

I felt chastened but by no means unhappy, the victim of more silly workshop japes, I'd survived the day. I was surrounded by motorcycles and while they may not have been the answer to my prayers, they certainly filled the bill until I could get my hands on a kit of drums. Right now I was about to have my first ride on a motorcycle so what did I care? I walked over to Les. "Are you ready?" he asked, "You betcha!" I replied.

In the parking lot he stopped beside a motorbike-and-sidecar. "You can either hop on the pillion or ride in the chair, it's your choice." he said, using the word 'chair' the professionals term for a sidecar. I was disappointed but not game to mention it, I was getting a lift to and from work on a motorbike every day, not to mention saving the bus-fare. "I'll keep my good fortune a secret and put the money in my piggy bank." I gloated, my drum-kit materialising before my eyes. Naturally I elected to ride pillion.

On the journey home, as exhilarating as it was, I was preoccupied with how to break the news to my parents. "I thought you were going to keep it a secret?" you're thinking, "Why tell them at all?" Well, because I was bursting to tell them, for God's sake! Wassamatter? Are you stupid? It was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to me and on my very first day in my new job, too! Besides, I wanted to see their faces, oh my god how I wanted to see their faces!

I arrived home and naturally my folks were surprised to see me, I'd walked into the house at five twenty five PM. the same time as my dad. When you consider he'd left the shipyard (only a few minutes away), at five fifteen and I'd travelled six or seven miles from way across the city, plus transferring between two buses on the way, it was something to be surprised about. Dad had arrived home in a fraction of the time it took two buses to travel from Portswood to Woolston. Obviously it was going to be impossible to keep my secret anyway, "You're early!" said my mum, "What are you doing here?" "You're not due for another half-hour." They stood waiting for an explanation, there was no way out of it, right at that moment I didn't feel quite as confident as I'd imagined I might. "I came home on the back of Les's motorbike." I said.

It had all been worth it, it was as good as I had anticipated, I thought my mum was going to collapse. "You did what?" she ground again, through gritted teeth.

I felt instantly much better, what could she do to me anyhow? "You know exactly what I said, Mum!" I replied, "Les is one of the mechanics at Alec Bennett's and he lives just the other side of Peartree Church, so he brought me home on his bike. It's a motor bike and sidecar, so it's not as hair-raising as you might think." "Hair raising or not, I'm not having it! They're bloody death traps and you can tell him from me that if I..." "Mum!" I interjected, "What can you possibly do about it? Whatever the outcome of this argument, tomorrow morning I'm gonna walk out of here and instead of walking to the bus stop, I'll walk around the corner to his house and get on the back of his motorbike. What are you gonna do, come with me and bang him on the head?" "I'll stop your pocket money my son, that's what I'll do!" she said. "Oh come on! I don't even need the bus fare do I? And just for the record I get free tea and cakes so I don't need your money for food either!" I hadn't really wanted to admit any of this but couldn't resist driving home the sword. "I want to talk to him, I have the right, you're still a minor and

I'm still your mother!" she cried. "Okay I'll ask him to come and see you," I said, "I'm sure he'll understand, but it won't do you any good, it won't stop me. No matter what you say, I shall cheat!" She was beaten. On a couple of occasions my dad had tried to intercede and I got the impression it was on my behalf, but it was her hobby horse and she ignored him. Perhaps you'll recall that during our sojourn in West Meon, my dad had ridden to work many times in my uncle's sidecar and I guess he was vaguely in my corner. She began to cry and he put his arm around her shoulder "Drop it darling, he'll be alright." he said.

The next morning I got out of bed and out of the house as fast as possible, you couldn't have hacked through the atmosphere in there with a chainsaw. I hung about the churchyard trying to look like someone who was not hanging around a churchyard and finally when Les emerged from his house, I ran over to him, "Just in time eh!" I said. "Yeah, I saw you hanging around the churchyard," he said drily, "make a study of gravestones, do yer?" "My mum wants a word with you." I said, "Well well well! Surprise surprise!" He commented in the same dry tone, "No time now though, got to go to work. Come on get in the chair, it'll make it easier for me on the corners." I did as I was asked and it wasn't so bad, I mean it beat the shit out of travelling by bus. We arrived and I walked into the workshop wondering what absurd trickery the trick-smoking loony had up his sleeve for me today?

My routine was identical to the previous day, after morning tea he simply pointed to the bike slated for my attention and said, "Take that into the yard and clean it, we don't want your mess all over the floor in here, do we?" "I can't see why not," I thought as I walked away, "I'm the poor bastard who'll have to clean it up!"

I wheeled the machine outside and found a convenient spot near the door. I certainly wasn't strong enough, or stupid enough to try pushing it up the hill. "If he objects to me doing it here I'll just have to explain the facts of life to him." I muttered as I began work. Nothing untoward transpired and I was left in peace to get on with it.

At nine o'clock I went into the kitchen lit the gas under the urn then made my way across the road to the cake shop. When I entered, several people were waiting to be served so I waited my turn, even though I could see our tray of cakes sitting on the end of the counter. The woman served the people in front of me and then ignoring me completely continued serving those who had entered the shop behind me. Realising that she was very busy and I was being passed over I stepped forward and put my hands under the tray, "Hello dear," I said breezily, "It's only me, I'll just take this shall I?" She turned on me and knocked my hands from the tray, "You wait until I serve you," she barked, "I've got customers to attend to!" She turned back to them, "Young people today," she sniffed, "no manners at all!" "I'm a customer too y' know!" I exclaimed, "and I was here before any of these people!" "You keep a civil tongue in your head young man," she snarled "or I won't serve you at all!" I was tempted to say 'why should I care' and walk out, but what then? I stood back and waited but the woman behind me touched my arm, "You go next dear," she said, "I've got rather a lot to get." I didn't believe her but I was grateful to her for breaking the deadlock.

When I got back to the kitchen the foreman was waiting outside for me, "Where the hell have you been?" he said, "It doesn't take that long to collect a tray of cakes surely, I hope you are not planning to make a habit of this sort of thing?" For the tiniest of seconds I wondered if this was another of his orchestrated jokes, but decided it wasn't. I was in a cleft stick though and rather than spring to my own defence I thought I would jump to our joint defence, as it were. "That woman over there is a nutter," I said, "she refused to serve me, apparently we are not regarded as a customer." "What did you do to upset her?" he asked, "I didn't do anything to upset her, she ignored me, made me stand there while she served all the others," I said, "she thinks I'm just a kid, you should have a word with her, make some

sort of arrangement to have our tray put to one side so's I can pick it up without interrupting her or something!" "We have been dealing with that shop for years," he said, "we've have never had this trouble before, tell me what you did to upset her?"

So that was how it was? I was going to get the blame anyway! I was going to get the blame because they needed someone to blame. "Fair enough." I said and turned to walk into the kitchen. "Don't walk away from me when I am talking to you!" he said without raising his voice, he never raised his voice. I stopped and turned back to him, "I don't have anything more to say," I replied "and the longer we stand here, the later I am gonna be with the tea, this is not improving matters!" "Don't be insubordinate son, oh and by the way, don't light the gas and then disappear for half an hour, I had to turn it off!" he said, as if as a parting shot. "Jesus Christ," I thought, "he doesn't just want the last word, he wants to nail me for everything. Why couldn't he have just turned the gas down? Now I gotta start from scratch!" I walked away without further comment, what was the point of commenting further? I served the tea a few minutes late of course, the guys weren't happy about it but they didn't make a fuss, I guessed they'd overheard the conversation between myself and the trick-cyclist and were vaguely sympathetic.

After morning tea it was back to cleaning bikes. When I wasn't cleaning the mixture of road grime, dust, mud, grease and oil from their outsides I was cleaning grease and oil from the parts removed from their insides. A special treat was in store for me today, one of the mechanics was working on a major overhaul and the whole machine was to be dismantled, he called me over to his bench, pointed to a heap of greasy components lying on a small trolley and said, "Take these over to the trike bath Ken, put them in the wire mesh tray in the top of the tank and keep an eye on them, as soon as they are clean bring them back to me, okay?"

"Sure," I said, "where's the trike bath?" "It's that big green tank over near the back door, put all these bits in it and close the lid, you don't need to stand and wait, but it doesn't take long, so just check it from time to time, you can use this trolley to wheel them over there." I stacked the parts onto the trolley indicated and pushed it over to the large tank. Trike is the chemical used as a degreaser in the automotive and dry cleaning industries. The word trike is actually the shortened version of trichloroethane. You knew that! Right? Well I didn't and I was totally unprepared for what happened next. It was quite a large tank, I'd say maybe a one metre twenty cube. (or a four foot cube if you're still in the steam age) The lid was simply the top of the tank, a heavy hinged door which opened upwards and away from me, I was one metre thirty seven tall, my chin was just level with it. I pushed it open and peeped inside. As I put my head inside the tank I took in a lung full of the highly volatile fumes, in that same instant it attacked my eyes and nose.

Nobody had warned me about the fumes, I staggered backwards coughing violently, my eyes stinging, the inside of my nose was on fire and streaming in symbiosis with my eyes. to add to the discomfort the lid of the tank had slammed shut with a bang that rivalled a one gun military salute and my ears were ringing with the reverberation.

When I had regained some breath and could see again I looked around the workshop and everyone was laughing, I joined in the laughter as best as I could under the circumstances. "Okay," I wheezed, "Very amusing, more factory humour is it?"

"It wasn't a joke son," laughed Norman, "you gotta do it, we just didn't warn you, that's all."

"Well thank you very much!" I spluttered, "Something for me to keep in mind for the future eh?"

I opened the lid again this time keeping my face averted but it didn't help much, my height (or the lack of it) was the problem, when I held the lid open my head was smack dab in the firing line, I threw the lid open wide so that the fumes could escape upwards instead of straight into my face then loaded the engine parts into the tray and closed the lid. As I closed it, any relief I might have felt was offset by the

thought that I had to keep checking it, then, when everything was clean I had to take it all out again. It was not an encouraging thought. "How long does this stuff take to work?" I asked. "That lot? About half an hour," the guy shouted, "depends on the state of the parts, the more grime, the more time!" "Well I'll come back in half an hour then." I said and escaped into the fresh air. He was right, it didn't take long but in spite of my caution it was still an extremely uncomfortable job and by the time I had finished my nose and eyes were raw. From that moment on I dreaded this chore, I became accustomed to it, but it remained a *bete noire*. It had not gone unnoticed, by me that is, that I had been working at Bennett's Motorcycle shop for three days already and I had not yet ridden a motorcycle! "It's only a matter of time though." I consoled myself. The days turned into weeks, the weeks months, I cleaned and degreased, degreased and cleaned dozens of motorcycles, but I never rode one.

Although employed in the motorcycle repair and maintenance department I also functioned as a general messenger boy for the entire firm including the car and motorcycle sales showrooms. These separate showrooms were where the machines for sale (both new and pre-loved) were displayed and sold. It was my job when necessary to take a bus into The Motor Registry Dept at the 'Civic Centre' (Southampton's wedding cake of a Town Hall) where I then registered the details of the vehicles which had been sold and this was where I was heading on this particular morning.

I carried with me details of each machine and it's new owner and after the official paperwork was completed I returned to Alec Bennett's bearing the road tax discs and registration numbers. These numbers were painted onto the blank number plates and the customers then came and proudly rode their new toy away.

I looked forward to these inner city jaunts, they were my escape from the Aegean stable-like chore of cleaning cleaning and yet more cleaning. As you might imagine, by this time I had developed a somewhat jaundiced view of my situation. Although I still loved motor cycles even I had to admit that this job had not turned out to be the dream occupation that I, still in the early flush of optimistic youth, had at first envisaged. In point of fact, the few years I had so far spent upon this beautiful but irksome planet had jaundiced me very nicely thank you. At the risk of repeating myself and I intend to, I had been rejected at birth, bullied at school, bombed incessantly resulting in no proper home and no real education. I had been sexually assaulted in a cinema, deprived and frustrated as a musician, had been put to work before my time and against my will in a shipyard and now I was being treated as a drudge in repair workshop. Meanwhile across the road in a bloody patisserie I was being treated as a non person by a woman who, by dint of years of self sacrifice, hard work, study, and a personal effort above and beyond the call of duty had risen to the dizzy height of counter assistant in a fuckin' cake shop! I was not happy.

On the particular morning in question I was on my way to the said registry office and I sat in the bus staring blankly out of the window, the passing throng did not even register on my consciousness. I sat instead ruminating on the painful years, the fourteen tenderest years of my life in fact. "God almighty, life is a fuckin' pain in the arse isn't it? A constant disappointment." I thought grimly. Fourteen years of bloody misery. "Well they certainly inured me if nothing else. I've been badgered from bloody pillar to post. well from pillory to Post office, more like, considering my current destination!" I grumbled, smiling at my own wit.

At the Motor Transport Department I stood at the counter for five minutes waiting to be served.

"What's so unusual about that?" you ask. Well I was the only customer! The staff were sitting at their desks writing or shuffling through the paperwork in front of them, some sipped cups of tea, one was actually doing a crossword puzzle! I waited patiently for five minutes, I was in no hurry, why should I be? I was not anxious to rush back to more cleaning. A further five minutes ticked by, I'm quite serious,

this is no exaggeration. I lounged against the counter lost in my own little world, I still didn't care, I truly had no desire to rush away. As was usual in these situations, when I found myself with nothing to do I listened to the orchestra in my head and after a while I began to drum my fingers softly in time on the counter top. One of the male clerks look up at me and snarled sarcastically, "Got bad nerves have you?" "No I haven't, but I fuckin' will have if I stand here much longer! You and Alec Bennett can all get fucked as far as I'm concerned mate!" I bellowed in my very loud and very deep voice, I must have blown a fuse because it happened completely without warning. I slammed the pile of forms down on the counter turned and walked towards the exit.

The man who had snarled at me got there first and barred my way, I didn't care, I was way past caring. "Get out of my fuckin road, arsehole!" I snarled and tried to duck under his arm. "Okay Okay Okay! I'm sorry mate!" he said, "We thought you were just a kid!" "Oh and that makes a fuckin' difference does it?" I sneered, "That entitles you to behave like a bunch of cunts does it?" He looked embarrassed.

"Er--- Look mate, could you... er... can you tone yer language down a bit. You know, in front of the-er-um-the ladies, an' that," he whispered, "and I really am very sorry!"

Scooping up my forms he walked back around the counter to his desk. I was still blind with pent up rage and quite capable of continuing on my way but I realised I'd broken through some kind of barrier, I was in front! I decided to leave things the way they were, I'd achieved what I wanted, end of problem. A few minutes later he came back with the completed documents and tax discs, as he handed them to me he said, "I'm really do apologise mush, I saw your head peeping over the counter and I didn't realise you..." "It's Okay!" I interjected, "It's over and done with, forget it ever happened, I'll be back in a few days and I don't wanna hear another word about it, let's just leave it there, alright!" "Yeah okay, and I really am very sorry, thanks mate." he grovelled. I picked up the paperwork and walked out, I was still bemused by the sudden change of events, it was the first time I had lost my temper since the day I had beaten up the school bully at Bitterne Church Infants School. the fast action had been just as spontaneous and the effect exactly the same. It caused another fundamental and important change in my psyche, the harsh realisation that being different was fraught with uninvited problems was not new to me, I was also very aware that being small was a double whammy. However, what had now become abundantly clear to me was that things were not going to improve when I grew up, because 'up' was not the direction I was growing! Some time ago I had realised I was going to need to work very hard at looking after myself, now it appeared losing my temper was not such a bad thing, it certainly produced a very positive result. "You must plough your own furrow 'Arrison," I told myself, "nobody, and I do mean 'Nobody, is going to give you an even break."

I caught a bus back to Portswood walked into the showroom and handed the paperwork to the Sales manager, then without waiting for his comment, I walked down the ramp and into the kitchen, fortunately it was time to brew the afternoon tea and I needed to be alone, I wanted to think, making the tea certainly had it's advantages. As the water boiled and I prepared the tea trolley, yet again I turned my life over in my mind, more than ever before I became determined that nothing and nobody was going to stand in my way, I began to make serious plans, I was going to be a drummer!

A few days after this, on my fifteenth birthday, Mum cunningly solved the problem she was having with Les's motorbike and sidecar. "Happy birthday Darling," she sang, "Come and see what we've bought for you!" Wondering what it could be that necessitated keeping it outside, I followed her into the garden and there, leaning on the coal shed door, sparkling in the morning sun was the best bicycle in the whole world, a brand new black Raleigh sports model with Sturmey-Archer four speed gears, a dynamo and racing handlebars. I was gobsmacked, "Oh thanks Mum and Dad, I don't know what to say? I really wanted one of these, this is absolutely the best, fantastic! Thanks a million!" She smiled,

“We wanted you to have the best!” she said, “Your dad and I talked it over and we agreed that it was time you had a bicycle, this one was the best we could find.” My dad looked knowingly at me over her shoulder and grinned, he wanted a normal son doing normal things and I guessed he must have convinced her that all normal boys of my age owned a bicycle. “It's utterly fantastic Mum!” I repeated and jumping on it I rode joyfully away. Well not too joyfully, I'd really wanted a green one but why nitpick!

One Monday evening remembering Jimmy Edward's alerting me to the existence of The Southampton Rhythm Club at Cliff Hotel, I took myself off to the pub and hung around outside the main entrance watching longingly as the people entered the premises. My excitement rose dramatically when some men appeared carrying instrument cases and I almost passed out completely when a man arrived carrying a kit of drums. added to my excitement was the fact that it was none other than Tony Godfrey, not just a drummer but a very successful Isle Of Man TT motorcycle racer.

Planning to stay around and listen to their music through the open windows I was in fact doing just that when a uniformed sailor appeared on the scene, looking down at me, a tiny urchin, he barked, “Oi! What's a little squirt like you doing' hanging around outside a pub? Go on, push off ya little bugger, do something useful with your life!” I was not so easily discouraged, “I was just listening to the music that's all,” I replied, “I love jazz, I'm gonna be a jazz drummer when I can afford some drums!” He looked at me anew, “Oh so you like jazz do yer?” and glancing over his shoulder in the manner of a theatrical MI5 agent, he opened his voluminous Royal Naval greatcoat, “Okay kid, get under 'ere! Come on, quickly! Move yerself! I'll get you past the bar and into the club, but after that you're on yer own. Okay?” Trusting him implicitly I slid under his coat, “Stay close to me!” he ordered and hiding me from view he smuggled me past the bar and Percy Hampton, the presiding publican.

Inside the crowded room he sat me in a corner, “Stay here,” he ordered, “I know it ain't the best seat in the 'ouse but with any luck nobody'll notice yer, I'll get you a glass of lemonade and a packet of crisps, okay?” It was a rhetorical question and I didn't bother with an answer, I was just glad to be in there. It became my regular Monday date, I am certain the people who ran the club knew I was there and they must have known I was under age but I was never challenged or asked to leave. In hindsight I realise now that the landlord must have been aware of me, it was his business to know such things but you see the landlord was Percy Hampton, one time drummer in the famous Sidney Lipton Orchestra. He had also played in and recording with Jack Jackson's band, plus he was the driving force in the short lived but potent band led by crooner Al Bowly on his return from the USA, just before the outbreak of the second world war. So Percy knew where I was coming from, he had travelled the very same path before I was born.

century maps and which is currently being refurbished and extended).

Landlords have on frequent occasions found themselves unsympathetic to the sounds of jazz. Not so at the Cliff. The licensee was Percy Hampton, like Monty Worlock a local man who made good in the music business. So much so that his face would beam from advertisements in the national music magazine *Melody Maker* which declared that "Percy Hampton the famous drummer uses Zildjian cymbals".

Percy played drums for 'name' orchestras such as Sidney Lipton's and, more notably, that of Jack Jackson, for whom he made a number of recordings which in recent years have been reissued on LP. He also set up that short-lived band fronted by Britain's finest crooner Al Bowlly after the latter's return from America just before the outbreak of the Second World War.

Long before all that Percy, born and educated in Woolston, had been drummer with the Royal Pier band led by Louis Armstrong's No. 1 local fan, fiddler Gil Hulme. He was also a sound effects man for silent movies, providing (to give one example) the explosions for *The Battle of the Falkland and Coronel Islands* when it was shown at the old Alexandra cinema on the site of the present Odeon.

Percy loved the rhythm club and the rhythm club loved him (except on those rare occasions when he played the Guv'nor a little too strongly!). For one thing, it gave him the opportunity to meet again some



Percy Hampton in his pre-war heyday.

of those famous musicians he used to know in London, people like the alto saxophonist Freddy Gardner and the clarinettist Billy Amstell.

The golden era came to an end. Percy left the Cliff (and, eventually, the licensed trade), living on until his late 80s but always happy to reminisce about the pre-war jazz and dance band scene. I am sorry to say that his death in March of this year went unremarked upon by his city's evening paper. If well-known citizens live to a great

age they tend to be forgotten . . .

It was at the Cliff in its early rhythm club days that a young soldier from Netley Hospital, Tony Donegan, joined the local Wolverines on drums. In bandleader Ken Grinyer's eyes he had one fault: he sang, and Ken didn't much care for his singing. Lonnie Donegan (for it was he) had the last laugh . . .

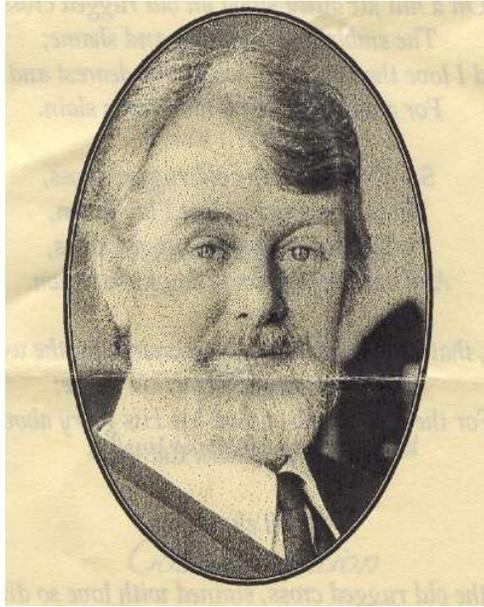
Southampton Rhythm Club had a broad policy, encompassing traditional, mainstream and modern styles, but its successor, the Jazz Society, has been inclined — in recent years at least — to concentrate on contemporary sounds at the expense of earlier and equally valid forms. I'm happy to say that the balance is now being redressed.

The annual Southampton Jazz Festival, too, is undergoing a sea-change. In the past organisers were heard describing non-contemporary styles as 'music from a museum' or 'cobweb music'. Doubtless the spiders will welcome the switch in attitude reflected in the seventh festival which starts on Saturday, September 7, and finishes on Sunday, September 15.

Much of it will be based on the waterfront area. On the opening day the Excelsior Marching Band can be seen on parade in Ocean Village, heralding a 'mardi gras' evening. The programme continues throughout the week at various venues and will include such traditional elements as a riverboat shuffle as a Chicago blues night. Among the contrasted 'names' are guitarist Jim Mullen and the John Surman, Andy Sheppard and Terry Lightfoot Bands.

Every Monday evening my sailor friend, his name was Bob Champion by the way, continued to smuggle me past Percy and of course became a valued and amusing ally. Stationed at nearby Portsmouth and a rabid jazz fan, he made the trip to The Southampton Jazz Club every week, His Royal Naval duties permitting that is.

Bob Champion



Like many seafarers he possessed a collection of great jokes, some of the best I've ever heard, clean as well as smutty and he never repeated himself. In passing I would add that he possessed another remarkable quirk, that of talking all the way through the performance. No matter who was playing, between jokes Bob would exhort you to, "Listen to that fantastic trumpet playing man!" then without giving you a chance and without pausing for breath he'd launch into the next joke. He appeared one evening out of uniform and I asked, "How come?" "I've got a few days leave, mush," he replied, "So I'm staying with me Mum, she lives just round the corner." and so I learned he was also a close neighbour.

With My new bicycle beneath me I was a free man. It may have taken a lot to convince my mother ,but in essence it solved her problem with the motor cycle. She was nutty, but nobody's fool. She was well aware that although riding to work in a motorcycle & sidecar was wonderful for a fifteen year old boy, it could in no way compare with riding my own bike. As for myself, at last I was free to go anywhere I chose at any time I chose and to my delight she was relieved about it!

I was not ungrateful to Les, a free ride to and from work every day was super, but there had been a problem, when he went home in the evening I had to go with him and during the long summer evenings I did not always want to do that. By this time I had friends in several suburbs, I had garnered them from wherever we lived during and after the war but without transport I had been hogtied, unable to visit them, but with my new bicycle I was now able to re-establish contact.

My first reaction was to ride it to Bitterne Manor to show it off to Arthur Cove. We had kept in touch of course, he still had his bicycle, so he was able to visit me, sometimes I caught a bus, but more often I walked, especially at weekends. In fact walking to Bitterne Manor was something I did quite a lot in my pre-bicycle days. It was always well worth the effort, there was always something interesting to do with Arthur around. The suburb was named 'Bitterne Manor' simply because that's what it was, the neighbourhood surrounding 'The Bitterne Manor House' home of the local nobility, the McNaughton family.

During the bombing, the house had sustained a direct hit tearing the rear end of the building away leaving the interior exposed and after everything of value had been removed the family simply deserted it. By this time they were greatly reduced in number and even if it was rebuilt, the only remaining

members were too old to look after it properly, so after the war they never returned to the ancestral seat. Meanwhile for the public it became the most wonderful playground and not just for us kids either, it was a peaceful haven for people of all ages and at night became a lovers idyll.

Built on the site of 'Clausentum' an early Ancient Roman riverbank settlement, Arthur and I played among the ruins from the time the shrapnel was still hot, indeed we collected some of our finest relics there, most of which were German of course, however I did actually excavate a genuine Roman coin. Being enthusiasts, in our innocence we took it along to show the Tudor House Museum curator, who accepted it graciously with a cock and bull story about such finds being government property. One can only suppose it is still on display.

After the McNaughton family left, the wrought iron gates at the entrance to the grounds were left open, no attempt was ever made to exclude the public from entering. The grounds were quite large for a city dwelling, heavily wooded, the trees hid the buildings from the road and conversely, concealed the road from the house. Over to one side and also hidden from view was a sizeable market garden.

Once through the open gates, a broad gravel driveway wended its way through the trees, encircling the house. Passing between the high stepped portico and flower-bordered lawns, it disappeared around the left side of the building to end at what one can only describe as 'The Tradesmen's Entrance', the kitchens and below stairs accommodation. With the owners gone we Wee-Willy-Winkies were at liberty to wander upstairs or downstairs, with or without our nightgowns and we certainly did so! The gardens to the rear of the house was also heavily wooded but it had been landscaped many years before to become gently rolling lawns, undulating to and forming part of the river bank. Dotted about these laundered slopes were many beautiful trees, the grass between which had previously been mowed and which of late had become sadly overgrown. There were bushes, rhododendrons and shrubs around the perimeter and in season small flowers sprang from every nook and cranny. Or as we were fond of saying, every crook and nanny.

On the river bank itself and in the centre of it, stood a semi-circular summer house, complete with cupola roof and a built in bench seat. If we felt inclined, we could sit there watching the river traffic as it passed. Alternatively, if preferred, we could take our clothes off and placing them on the seat leap smartly into the water. I don't think for one moment you will have any problem guessing which use we put it to. Well during the balmy summer months anyway. Besides leaping smartly into the water, we built campsites among the woods, climbed trees and indeed all over the house, even scrambling onto and across the dangerously sagging roof. We leapt into and swam in the river, well the other kids swam, I paddled. Sometimes they simply lay on their backs chewing blades of grass, watching the pollen drift across shafts of sunlight filtering through the tree and dreamt of what they were going to be when they grew up. I never joined in these dreams, I already knew what I was going to be.

The extent of the bomb damage was curious, the rear wall of the house had been completely blown away leaving the interior exposed like a giant dolls house. The rest of the building was virtually intact, some rooms even quite unharmed, one highly polished wooden floor of a first story bedroom was still in one piece but it hung, curved downwards at an alarming angle, like a huge corner of polished brown cardboard hanging over the edge of a table. One felt an enormous temptation to slide down it on your bum but the drop to the ground was a tad too high to risk it.

Some of the artwork were fresco's, painted straight onto the walls of the rooms and so were there for us to enjoy at our leisure, irretrievable for the artist or the owners of course, but greatly appreciated by us. Firing imaginary guns or bows and arrows from the Balustrades and balconies we fought imaginary wars in the gardens and all over the house, it becoming Sherwood Castle or indeed whichever castle we fancied at any given time. Under the house we found the cellars and kitchens; a constant source of

adventure, Armed with torches we lit fires in the great iron stoves and roasted and ate potatoes which we found still growing in the now uncared for market garden. A large three legged dog named Peter came to join in our adventures, a heavily built black and tan animal his favourite game was chasing the stick. "So what! Any dog will chase a stick if you throw it." you're thinking. Quite so, but this dog made it abundantly clear that he wanted us to throw it, and not just anywhere either, he insisted we throw into the river.

Upon arrival he would joyously join in our games, barking and leaping all over us but when he'd had his fill of our nonsense he would initiate his own proceedings. He did this by finding a piece of deadwood which he dropped on the ground in front of us. As soon as one of us bent to pick it up he would grab it, rush to the riverbank and drop it at the water's edge, barking furiously. If you couldn't understand what he was trying to tell you then you were as thick as his piece of wood. One of us would pick it up and throw it into the water, as soon as we bent and laid a hand on it he would reverse, about eight to ten feet from the bank and then charge forward launching himself into the air hitting the water with his neck stretched out and legs thrust forward like a three legged canine swan landing on the surface. I realise this elegant simile loses something in the telling, but you get the picture. Peter meanwhile collected the stick and swam to a tiny sandy beach a few yards to our right whereupon he then repeated the routine from the beginning. I can tell you that this was some dive he was performing here, on an average tide the surface of the water was about four to five feet below the top of the riverbank, so he was airborne for a few seconds. He would keep this up until eventually he staggered away so exhausted he could hardly walk at all even had he possessed all four of his legs!

One day his owner appeared in the grounds, he was a tall slim man wearing a khaki safari suit and broad-brimmed Akubra hat, "I thought I'd follow 'im, see where 'e goes," he said, "he's comin' home buggered and bloody wet through too!" I picked up a piece of wood and walked to the water's edge, the dog barked expectantly and I threw the stick. As I raised my arm he backed up and did his diving routine. The Australian watched the performance and then said, "Strewth! No wonder 'e's buggered eh? Well, we won't need to worry then!" The dog returned and his master picked up the stick and threw it in the water. As the dog dived in after it, Arthur asked him how it had lost it's leg and what it's name was? "'e's called Peter," said the Aussie, "'e was run over by a car and his hind leg crushed. We couldn't do away with 'im, so I had it taken off. Good thing I did, eh?" "Oh yeah" I laughed, "and I think he's thanking you for it." Peter had dropped the stick at his master's feet and was barking furiously.

Soon after the war a Boy Scout hut was built just inside the gateway, it was indeed the same Boy Scout hut wherein, aged twelve, my hopes of becoming a drummer had been dashed, now aged fifteen and on my new bicycle I was back again, but no nearer my goal apparently. On arriving at Arthur's place we went through the ritual of me showing off my bike and he admiring it, that over with he said, "Now I have something exciting to show you, come on, I'll take you to see it!" He jumped on his bike and with him leading the way we rode the few hundred yards to The Manor House. We cycled through the gateway, past the Boy Scout hut around the house and down through the grounds to the tiny beach where years before Peter had returned with his stick. Arthur jumped off his bike ran to the water's edge and pointed. "There!" he cried triumphantly, "What do y' think of that then?" moored to a tree by a long painter and floating some yards from the shore was a rowing boat. He grabbed the rope and began to pull the craft towards the beach, "Is it yours?" I asked "Yeah!" He said, "Well actually it belongs my uncle's but he put it here for us to use, get in, I'll show you how to skull it." He untied the painter and pushed us off from the shore. I picked up the oars, fitted them into the row-locks and rowed us into the midstream then turned to point the bow upstream. Upstream or downstream it made no difference, there was no imminent danger of a sudden tidal change sweeping us out to sea. In case you are unaware of

the Southampton tidal phenomena I will explain that the port of Southampton is unique, it is the only place in the entire world that has two tides per day. This strange occurrence is caused by the Isle Of Wight and it's reaction with the peculiar lie of the land around this particular region.

I'll explain further. Southampton Water and the Solent is an inverted Y shaped estuary, fed primarily by two rivers, the Itchen, from the east and the Test, from the west. There are others, the Hamble and the Meon being two that spring readily to mind, but who's counting! None of these minor tributaries were in any way responsible for creating the Y shape, the Isle Of Wight's classic diamond shape managed that all by itself by sitting directly in the mouth of the estuary. In the time honoured tradition, the waters from the rivers flow gently to the sea, but on reaching their destination their egress is halted, or rather, hindered by the island and they become trapped in the Solent. Meanwhile, the returning water from the previous tide is creeping in the opposite direction via the English Channel and after wending it's way around the island into the Solent, it too is trapped. The combined waters then escape into and fill the Portsmouth Basin from whence it trickles slowly into the estuary and back up the harbour, thus creating another high water. Meanwhile water is still trying to escape around the island, but it's progress is slow and by now the next ocean tide is on it's way and so the whole process begins again. That's the general principle anyway, give or take a few million litres.

In the rowboat Arthur took the oars from my hands, "I meant what I said, y' know." he boasted, "Look, I'll show you how to skull." and placing one of the oars in the bottom of the boat he slotted the other into a deep semi-circular notch in the transom and twisted and waggled it in such away that we were propelled through the water quite efficiently. I was impressed. "How did you learn to do that?" I asked. "My uncle showed me." He replied, "I work for Ivor Creek now." he said, changing the subject in mid-conversation.

Ivor Creek was a motor racing man who had raced both cars and motorcycles and in common with most of his kind (before or since) including my own boss, whom I'd still not met) he had set himself up in the motor trade. Arthur went on to explain that he was employed in the repair shop as a trainee mechanic. "Have you been to the speedway?" he asked, mercurially changing the subject yet again, or so it seemed. "I haven't been anywhere yet," I said, "I've only just got me bloody bike ain't I, but now I've got it things are gonna be different!" "Good, we'll go there next Tuesday then, a lot of the riders come in to see Ivor, he helps 'em tune their engines." "Really?" I said, "None of 'em ever come near us!" "P'raps they're scared the Appleby brothers 'll knobble their bikes." he said and we laughed conspiratorially at our inside joke.

We had a wonderful day messing about on the river. I know, it's been used before, but can you think of a better way to describe it! I left Arthur mooring his boat to the tree and rode home, My mum would have convinced herself that I was dead beneath the wheels of a car by now. God knows what her reaction would've been had she known I'd been out on Southampton Water in a rowboat?

The following Tuesday we went to the speedway as planned and I adored it. Never a sporting man myself, I refused to barrack for The Saints soccer team or indeed the Hampshire Cricket side but I shouted my head off in support of Bert Croucher. He had been my role model since the day I had first recognised him in Luton Road and although I had never crossed the street to speak to the great man I worshiped him and copied his mannerisms. I even aped his slouch, his hunched shoulders and gangling walk, well he didn't so much walk as fall from one place to another, it was quite fascinating to watch really, upon emerging from his house to get into his car he lurched along his garden path, his arms swinging loosely in all directions. It always seemed to me that if the car had not been there he would have continued lurching until ending up sprawled in the gutter. Tall, skinny and round shouldered with a lank of greasy black hair hanging over his right eye, he seemed to be continually tossing it out of the

way by swinging his head simultaneously backwards and sideways. These idiosyncrasies coupled with an SS Jaguar car plus two chromium plated J.A.P. speedway racing machines mounted on it's trailer was all a boy of thirteen required to fall in love. I was in awe of it all, and of him! When I first began to copy his sloppy mannerisms my mother was grief stricken. As I lolloped and lurched from place to place she followed me, saying, "Walk properly Ken, pull your shoulders back and stand up straight for God's sake, what's on earth's the matter with you?" Then she would add as if to herself, "He used to have such a nice straight back!" She would adopt the same turn of phrase a few years later when as a young jazz musician I sycophantically sported a crew-cut. "He used to have such a lovely head of curly hair." she would say to nobody in particular.

She was quite right of course, but sycophancy being the eternal commonwealth of youth I had a few more disappointing years to live plus an even greater loss of faith in my fellow beings before I acquired the arrogance necessary to ignore peer group pressure.

Ironically, doing so becomes a pressure in itself, the common herd is never comfortable with it's mavericks tending to kick them to death or shun them, driving them from the congregation.

"The big headed little shit!" you are now exclaiming and now you may see what I mean! You are angry at me for what I have just written, right? Well you are quite correct and fuck you too. That's the point I am trying to make here!!! If I do or say something you wouldn't, you hate me for doing so. Now some pedantic arsehole is gonna write in to tell me I shouldn't use three exclamation marks. Well who's writing this fuckin' book, you or me?! Yeah, that's right, I just broke another rule, I used a question and exclamation mark combined, that's my way of expressing a question which is simultaneously an exclamation. Right?

Now, several years later, aged fifteen and still impressionable, I was sitting in a floodlit speedway stadium shouting encouragement to the same Bert Croucher, as he slid sideways around a dirt-track on a motorcycle. In fact I desperately wanted to change places with him, well at least until I became a drummer. The fact that he never won a race completely passed me by, some years later he improved and became the team captain, but by then I'd lost interest and was aping someone else.

At interval time Arthur grabbed my arm, "Come on!" he said, "Let's nip round to the pits and find Ivor, he'll probably get us in!" "Terrific!" I said and followed him, though in my heart I felt the last thing Ivor Creek and his mates needed were two teenage boys getting in their way, as they prepared for their next race. However, such was our enthusiasm and naivety we rushed round there anyway. Naturally they ignored us studiously and we comforted ourselves that amid all the hustle-and-bustle they simply hadn't seen us, "Too preoccupied!" I said, "Yair," replied Arthur, they never looked up!" "Nah, If they'd have looked up and seen us we would have been straight in there!" "Yair bloody right!" he said, but deep deep way down where it really counts we knew the truth.

Among the melee around the pit-gates we met with quite a lot of enthusiasts our own age who were also imitating their leather clad heroes. They however, had taken it a step further by making their own home made dirt-tracks on bomb sites and were using their bicycles to race against each other instead of real motorbikes. We thought this a great idea and took over the piece of waste ground next to John Abraham's house, where we proceeded to do our bit towards creating a new teenage craze. The thrill of speed and the tingle of danger is part of being a teenager and one of my biggest new thrills was riding down the steepest hill I could find, the steeper and more dangerous the hill, the better I liked it. One such hill existed quite close to home, a suburban oasis called Miller's Pond, a small but pretty wooded area with swans gliding on the large pond's surface. The hill itself ran down the side of and curved around this small woodland spot, joining the main road at its bottom end, near the lake.

I was tearing down this hill one morning just after some rain when the bicycle slid away from under me

and disappeared across the road. Meanwhile, I was catapulted between the front wheels of a car which was coming up the hill towards me. I passed completely under the car and out between its rear wheels unscathed, but I was in shock, naturally. I got to my feet and checked myself for cuts and bruises, apart from a scraped knee and elbow there were no serious injuries. I walked back to the car which of course had screamed to a halt when I disappeared under it. I peered through the window and saw the four occupants sitting as if turned to stone, their eyes wide staring straight ahead like small bright saucers. I knocked on the glass, they came back to life as if the film had been restarted. "Oh my God!" said the driver as he wound down the window. "Are you alright?" I heard a strained voice say, it was me, asking them if they were okay! "Yes, oh my God, you're still alive!" a woman's frightened voice came from the back of the car. "Yeah, I'm okay, I don't know about my bike though." I said, my teenage priorities leaping glaringly to the fore. "Fuck your bike," snarled the driver. "and fuck you too, you stupid little shit!" he added as he drove furiously away.

I found my machine several yards away, wedged against a wooden fence, I inspected it closely and apart from a bent mudguard and a few minor abrasions to the paint work it too was undamaged. I straightened the mudguard and continued on my way, a wiser young man. I had realised that it was very stupid of me to have attempted the sharply curved hill when it was wet and greasy after rain, the resulting mixture of road-dust oil and water is a very greasy combination. From then on I treated it with respect.

Of course before the event I had lacked experience but these highly fraught occurrences are the grist to one's mill, they are how we acquire experience. The poor occupants of the car however had had the experience forced upon them and as I rode away I realised that had I died under their wheels, the poor driver would have got the blame and he knew that too. What really amazed me as I thought it over afterwards, was the calm which had descended as I careened towards the wheels of the car. In those few seconds I knew I was dead and yet I did not react at all. Furthermore, immediately after the event, they were traumatised by the experience, while I was seemingly unaffected by it, it was me who asked them if they were okay, not the other way around. I wondered about that for some time.

One evening after finishing work, I decided that instead of going home or to visit my friends I would go 'Up The Common', to use the local colloquial description. Let me remind you that 'The Common' was the large public park on the northern outskirts of the city where you may recall Arthur and I raced the model powerboat. Now that I owned a bicycle I naturally thought 'The Common' also had great potential for speeding recklessly about on and added to this, was a bonus, it was only around the corner from Alec Bennett's motor cycle emporium, less than ten minutes away on my Raleigh sports with its Sturmey-Archer gears, dynamo and racing handlebars. By the way, if by chance you are a bona fide racing-cycle fanatic don't write to tell me my new bike was a load of crap, I was fifteen years old for Jesus Christ's sake! It was absolutely the best bike in the whole world! D'you understand what I'm telling you?

I arrived at 'the common' and for the first fifteen minutes I careened around the open grassland scaring the shit out of old ladies and gentlemen taking their evening stroll, not to mention young mothers with toddlers. In common with all kids of my age I soon grew bored with this game and rode off towards a copse on the far side of the park and once inside it proved to be a great find. There were paths winding in all directions. In among the trees and around their huge trunks were humps and bumps of all shapes and sizes and the trees and their roots were an integral part of this natural obstacle course. It was mother nature's gift to a boy on a bicycle, indulging myself in my dream world I tore madly along the clay coloured walkways, swish-backing over humps and bumps and around the trees, shuddering across their tangled and gnarled roots, ducking under low hanging branches and even splashing through a tiny

stream sending a cascade of silvery water out from either side of my wheels.

I was Bert Croucher and the Appleby brothers all rolled into one, I was invincible! Suddenly a boy shot past me so fast I thought I had stopped! He hit a hump at such speed that both his bicycle's wheels left the ground and he sailed majestically through the air for a few seconds. Upon landing he did a wheelie to prove he didn't need the help of a hump to perform miracles then circled around me a couple of times before disappearing among the trees, only to reappear behind me a moment later to perform an encore. For the second time in only seconds he shot past me like a rodeo rider on a stallion's back and swung the cycle sideways in a broadside, like a real speedway rider, bringing himself to a halt across my path barring my progress. "You've done this before!" I said, he grinned, enjoying his moment of supremacy. "Haven't seen you here before?" he said, "No, this is my first time, it obviously isn't yours." I replied. "Follow me," he said without further preamble, "I know the best bits." "What's your name?" I asked as he shot away, "Dave Henton." he flung over his shoulder as he disappeared among the trees.

Compared to my sophisticated machine his bike was a wreck, or at best a remarkably simple affair, it was a frame, two wheels, a saddle and two peddles. To my way of thinking it was scrapheap material, it sported no gears or racing handlebars, no mudguards and no brakes, although even without them he seemed to be able to stop whenever he pleased. I did my best to keep up with him but he ran rings round me and that is a perfect understatement. He was as fit as a fiddle and in match condition, but I was not used to this sort of activity and after a while I needed a breather. I stopped chasing him lay my bike on the ground, stretched out on my back beside it and stared up at the dappled fading light as it filtered through the canopy of leaves. Dave came and sat beside me. "How do you do all that on that old wreck?" I asked him. "You'll never do it on the thing you're riding," he said, "too heavy for a start, them racing handlebars might be alright for riding in a straight line or racing around a banked velodrome, but they ain't much use to you here, ordinary straight old sit up and beg handlebars are the best for this sort of thing, the wider the better and if you must have gears keep it in the lowest one you've got!" It was getting dark. "Well I gotta go now." I said, "Do you come here a lot?" "Every day mostly," he said, "but there are other places, I'll take you to them if you are interested but I should make a few changes to your bike first if I was you."

I rode home deep in thought. "He was seriously bloody fantastic, like a circus performer!" There was no way I could strip my bike down to his level, Mum and Dad would go berserk and I understood why, they had paid a lot of money for it only a few days ago!

"I'll wait a while then I'll put lightweight plastic mudguards on it, I can turn the handlebars upside down, it might not be the ideal answer but they could hardly object to that, I could even do it now, when I get home!" I thought.

Life is very strange, you can never tell which way fate is going to jump, naturally my mother caught me turning the handle bars over. "What are you doing? Don't you start taking that bike to pieces!" she cried. I had to be cunning, "I was just thinking that racing handlebars are very nice but I would have been quite happy with ordinary ones Mum." I wheedled. "Well take the bike back to the shop and ask the man to put the proper ones on it for you, I never wanted you to have those bloody racing things in the first place, that was your father's idea not mine. Go on, I don't want you messing around with it, get it done properly. Bert!" she called, "Come and make sure he puts these handles back on his bike properly." and then as if to herself she added, "He should never have taken 'em off in the first place!" You could have knocked me down with a feather, I'd been anticipating a hell of a battle with her over the changes. Dad came into the garden, "You certainly know how to upset your mother don't you!" he said crustily. "It's alright Dad," I replied, "I can fix a pair of bloody bicycle handlebars, I work in a motorbike repair shop for Christ's sake, but if it will make her happy I'll take the bike back to the shop

where you bought it and have the guy change them for me.” “There's no pleasing you is there son,” he said despairingly, “I thought you would prefer the dropped handlebars?” “It's wasn't your fault Dad, fashions change from generation to generation,” I said “I'll get a pair of the new wide straight ones.” “Oh so that's yer little game is it?” he jumped in immediately, “You don't fool me my son, I know what you wants, they're like bloody motorbike handlebars ain't they!” he snorted and stomped into the house in high dudgeon. I laughed to myself, “Well that was a lot easier that I expected it to be,” I thought, “I'll have the other changes I need done at the same time, they won't even notice!” and that's what I did, the following morning I went to the bicycle shop and had it fixed.

The man did it while I waited and I arrived at work a little late, someone else had begun the preparations for tea but when I explained why I was late nothing more was said. They understood perfectly, they were in the same business, people brought their bikes in for changes and repairs all the time, motor bikes, pedal bikes it made no difference to them and their way of thinking.



1958 500cc Manx Norton. Really the kind of machine that Mr Bennett won his TT-races on!

“Alright Lad never mind that now, serve the tea and then I want you to have a really good clean up around the place, Mister Bennett is coming in for a look round after lunch and it had better be absolutely spotless by the time he get's here. Don't worry about the bikes, just concentrate on the premises, d' you understand?” “Yeah sure, right away!” I said and went to do as he'd asked. “Alec Bennett coming here? Wow! At last! So I'm finally going to meet the great racing legend himself! I won't panic this time, like I did with Bert Croucher,” I told myself, “I work in Alec's workshop”, I can talk to him no problem. I'll just walk up to him and say, “Hello, I'm Ken Harrison, I've read all about you. I keep all your motor-bike's clean.” I rushed hither and thither cleaning every nook and cranny, dusting every shelf and window sill, I cleaned every oil-stain off of every inch of every floor and even polished my kitchen until it sparkled.

After lunch-break was over, I was clearing away the debris, leftover cakes and dirty dishes, when through the kitchen window I saw the latest model Rolls Royce Corniche swish into the yard and park

exactly over the spot where I'd cleaned the Norton Dominator on my first morning. The door opened and out stepped a small, white haired dapper little man wearing a midnight blue silk mohair suit which exactly matched the colour of the car (and more than just coincidentally, I noted). On his head was the obligatory smoke-grey cloth-cap that all top fashion-conscious motorcyclists were wearing that year. "My God! It's him! It's your actual Alec Bennett himself! In person, at long last!" I chortled. Glancing around the car park, he walked over to the dustbins and inspected them, after which he looked behind the paint-spraying-shop, went inside for a few moments and from there, moved into the main workshop. Nodding briefly to the mechanics, he glanced perfunctorily around and in less than five seconds had turned and walked up the slope to disappear in the general direction of the showroom, he had not spoken to a single soul!

At three PM. he walked back down the slope got into his Roller and drove away.

I served afternoon tea, mentioning nothing of the disappointing visit to anyone, but instead retired to the kitchen (which by now had become my haven). Drinking my tea in disappointed silence, munching my way through the left-over cream-buns and jam-doughnuts.

Since getting my new bicycle I'd been buying them from a cake-shop about a quarter of a mile up the road, stopping to pick them up as I rode past on my way to work. Nobody had noticed the difference, or if they had they hadn't said anything. "Who needs her fuckin' bullshit!" I thought to myself.

However, as I entered the workshop to collect the dirty cups, the foreman leaned out of his office-door and crooking a finger, he beckoned. I obeyed and walked over to him whereupon he repeated his trick with the cigarette smoke. I waited patiently for him to exhale and finally he spoke. "I want you to make as much clear space around here as possible, Harrison. Clear out every tiny corner, d' you hear? I want you to move the dustbins from where they are and put them in the narrow alleyway behind the paint-shop, then move all the motorcycles over there, away from that rear-wall and make room for another two rows behind them. Between them and the wall, so to speak. Do you follow me?" I nodded sullenly, "Then, we must move all the cars and motorcycles in the car park and place them as close together as possible, in the far corner of the yard. Do you understand all that?" "Of course I understand it, there's nothing very complicated about it, is there!" I said, by this time I had dropped all facades, becoming openly crusty. "No indeed," he drawled, unperturbed. "However I want to impress upon you the importance of what you are being asked to do here, we need every single square inch of space." Taking a drag on his fag, again two columns of smoke drifted neatly up his nose. "Okay," I replied, "And why are we doing this by the way, if you don't mind me asking?" "Not at all my dear chap," he replied, "We've had a bit of a windfall, d' you see, and we must make room for a great many more machines, Mister Bennett has purchased them from Her Majesty's Government, Ex-WD bikes - from the war you know, dispatch riders and all that sort of thing. They'll be arriving by the lorryload very shortly so get a move on, there's a good chap, we haven't much time." "I can't move other people's cars and motorbikes," I said, "they'll have to do that for themselves." he of course agreed, "You just get on with your job and leave all that to me." he answered, "Oh and by the way, the lady in the cake shop had a word with me and it appears you've been buying our cakes elsewhere? Just stick to our previous arrangement would you, there'll be no changes here unless I say so!" I was furious but absolutely powerless of course and it was back to being treated like dirt every morning.

The trucks arrived and I helped the drivers to unload the machines and store them in the space I'd prepared. Even to a greenhorn like myself, it was obvious that a moneymaking proposition *par excellence* was occurring here. Alec Bennett simply bought the khaki-machines for a minimal outlay, then proceeded to strip them down to the bare-metal (or rather, he had me do it for him I should say). Then they were resprayed in the maker's peacetime-colours, the famous logos were stuck onto the fuel-

tanks and the machines were then sold to the public at just below list price. Maybe it was even tax-free for all I knew! I had no idea of the intimacies of government-levies on such deals but on the face of it everything appeared legal, the machines were simply displayed and sold to the public as 'Ex-WD stock'. Even I had to admit it was a brilliant proposition.



1938 BSA M4 500cc Gold Star. A similar machine to the those I was degreasing and cleaning and indeed judging from its vintage and the Southampton registration plate this could even be one of them!

After the trucks departed I glumly studied the rows of combat-green machines, a mixture of oil and mud from the European countryside, plus sand from the North-African desert still caked on them. A bleak future stretched before me, what had been a financial coup for Alec Bennett meant endless dismantling cleaning and degreasing for me, plus the added attraction of paint-stripping. The trichloroethane bath loomed large and my eyes began watering at the thought of it, "Bloody hell, sheet-metal work was better than this!" I muttered, I'd had it with motor-bikes, I couldn't take much more, but how to explain this to my father without losing face? I needed to be alone and escaped into the kitchen to think.

The kitchen had become my hideaway, housed in a separate building complete with it's own toilet, it was a place where nobody went but myself. It also had an attic which I'd found my way into and as the months passed and the tedium grew, I took to hiding up there reading my magazines, 'Metronome', 'Downbeat' and of course on Fridays, 'The Melody Maker.'

For me life had deteriorated beyond endurance anyway. When the Ex-WD bikes arrived one did not need to be clairvoyant to read the future, however, what I had not foreseen was that each machine had to be fitted with a new set of tyres and I don't need to tell you who's job it became to change them. In this day and age we have machines to do the job for us. All the operator has to do is lift the wheel onto it, pull a lever to lock it in position, press a button and stand clear, the machine strips the old tyre from the metal rim in two seconds. To refit a new one the procedure is more or less reversed, you grease the tyre, place it on the wheel, press the button and zeeeeeyp, the machine zaps the tyre onto the rim. In 1949 there were no such machines, the task was performed using two large tyre-levers and a

whole lot of muscle-power. It was a tough gig and I mean seriously tough! During the next few weeks I developed immensely strong arms and hands, plus a deep loathing for motorcycles. Of course I couldn't tell my parents of my disillusionment. Apart from loss of face, there were things happening outside the workshop which began to throw an entirely new light on my plight.

Ironically, as is the case with bush fires war destroys and creates at the same time and one of the great creations of WW II was the destruction of thousands of buildings, thus creating thousands of available bomb-sites, which meant that in all the major cities there existed temporary derelict land upon which teenagers could build miniature speedway tracks and as a result the cycle-speedway game really took off. The entire teenage male population of Britain began racing around these home made dirt-tracks on bicycles, imitating their idols, real speedway riders. Moreover, in this particular case, as the new sport grew, the imitators became the real thing, people began watching the sport for its own intrinsic skills, it developed it's own super-stars who in turn had their own followers, fans and groupies and I was now deeply involved in this activity. A national glossy magazine covering the sport hit the newspaper stands and was very successful, one issue even had a picture of me in it!

Teams were travelling about the country, competing in inter-city matches, even some international matches were arranged and I recall the Dutch and Swedes being as enthusiastic about the sport as the British lads. Teenagers are peer group animals, prestige is paramount and sometimes it is arrived at and measured via serpentine routes, the people who push fashions, drugs, and cheap music, all with a built in obsolescence, are aware of this and use their knowledge to their advantage. Sycophancy is also paramount, the young worship the rich and famous be they good or bad and ironically in a teenage sport based on the adulation of the motorcycle and the famous men who race them, my position at Alec Bennett's motorcycle emporium carried weight. I was aware of this and though unhappy, it halted my efforts to find a more suitable alternative. Basking in the glow of reflected glory, I was prepared to suffer a private ignominy and stay were I was.

One day, Dave Henton and I decided to take a look at a cycle speedway team who's fame was reaching national proportions and we'd heard about it. They operated some way from the city centre at a place called Millbrook, close by the George V Graving Dock and we decided to ride over there and investigate the scene. It was a fortuitous decision.

In those days to get to Millbrook circumnavigating the main road traffic, it was possible to ride or walk along a cinder-track or pathway, which ran directly alongside the railway-line all the way from Central Station, in the city-centre, to the suburban Station. There, the path terminated, widening to three times it's width at the bottom of the Station-footbridge. And when we arrived, we found a group of young men using the path and the wider expanse of cinders as a practice area for broadsiding, a word they used to describe laying the bike sharply to the left, causing the rear-wheel slide sideways then steering the front wheel into the slide the object being to effect the longest, best controlled skid. The 'practice' session appeared to be conducted in the manner of a competition. i.e. he who maintained the longest slide with the most elegant style, without losing control or coming to grief, was judged the winner. So, without bothering with introductions or waiting to be invited, Dave Henton and I simply joined in. Needless to say Dave slayed 'em in the aisles and he performed a few wheelies on his approach run, just for good measure. While not remotely in his class, I was no slouch and did well in spite of having the wrong bike for the job. After some mighty efforts and thirty minutes of unspoken jousting, suddenly it all came to a halt and they sat, staring at us.

Their leader threw down his machine and approached. Immaculately dressed, in tailored jodhpurs and polished riding boots he look more fitted to cantering Rotten-Row than sliding sideways on a bicycle). "Norman Pike," he said, "Captain of The Turf's! Which team are you from?" "We're not from any

team,” replied Dave categorically, “we just sort of... go anywhere!” I interjected, “Occasionally I ride with a bunch of guys at Woolston, plus some old school mates at Bitterne-Manor, but I don't belong to a team.” “Come over to the track.” said Norman and recovering his bike he led us and his colleagues into the scrub. Dave glance at me quizzically, but we followed them anyway.

He led us through a large expanse of reclaimed-land until there, by the side of the dock railings on the flat hard sandy surface, was the perfect cycle-speedway track, an exact 'small-scale' replica of the real thing, it had two straights, two bends and had been properly marked out, cleared and was well tended. Without doubt it was the best of it's genre Dave and I had ever come across, these guys had put a lot of work into clearing, marking and tending and it was being done with great expertise.

The leader rode to what was obviously the starting grid and was joined by one of his colleagues, positioning themselves in team formation on the grid, tacitly they invited us to join them. The others very interested now lowered their bikes to the ground and stood back to watch, except for one, who walked to the centre of the track and performed the duties of 'Starter'. Without preamble he simply said: “On yer marks, ready, **GO!**” and we went!

Racing round the track, we sycophantically aped our favourite speedway-rider's style doing all the things our idols did, putting our left foot onto the ground as we negotiated the bends, just as the real motorcycle-speedway riders did. That is to say all except Dave Henton. He kept pedalling all the way round, he never stopped, on the bends he simply threw his bike from side to side so that whenever the nearside pedal was in danger of digging into the sand, he threw the bike momentarily upright and then back again and so on around the course. As I've described, he looked more like a cowboy on a bucking bronco than a speedway-rider, in point of fact it looked ungainly, messy and downright sun-speedway-like, but he crossed the line a bloody long way in front of everybody else.

Puffing with effort we lay our bikes down and ourselves beside them. I'd finished last, of course but it didn't matter. “You did remarkably well for a guy on a street-bike!” said Norman, “Thanks.” I said, “It's a nice track, you've worked hard on it.” “Well, my dad helps out a lot.” he replied, Okay, do you want to join our team?” “Sure.” I replied and Dave nodded, we were in!

Introductions followed and after the formalities were over Norman looked down at my bike and said “We'll have to do something about that! It's no bloody use to you at all! I mean it's a nice bike and all that, but.....” he held his hands out and shrugged. “I know, I know,” I said “but it's brand new, my mum and dad bought it for me only a couple of weeks ago. I can't rip it apart yet!” “I can see that!” he said grinning, “I didn't mean for you to rip it apart, I meant get yourself another one!” “Another bike?” I exclaimed, “Are you fuckin' crazy? How the hell am I gonna get another bike? It took me five years of fuckin' pleading to get this one!” Alright! Keep your bleedin' hair on!” he laughed, and getting up from the grass mounted his bike, “Follow us.” he said.

He led his party away from the track over the footbridge and up the hill opposite the station, (Foundry Lane) until eventually, at the brow of the hill, we came to an opening between the houses, a gravel driveway leading through the gap into a spacious builders-yard behind the rows of houses.

I say Builder's-yard but really it was full of what looked like junk, a couple of ancient trucks piled high with oil-drums, rolls of barbed-wire and bales various other kinds of wire and industrial material, the purpose of which was too obscure for me to even make a guess at. Ringing the yard were rows of jerry-built sheds workshops and outhouses, containing all manner of things, from piles of old Wellington-boots to live-chickens.

Turning right Norman led us to the largest of the sheds, situated in the far left-hand corner, which turned out to be a well equipped workshop and in it, in various stages of construction, or deconstruction, depending on your point of view, were several bicycle frames and their component

parts, wheels, pedals, sprockets, chains, tyres, handlebars everything in fact, that one require to build a bicycle, several bicycles in fact. Waving an arm around, he said, "Well, here you are!" he exclaimed, "choose your weapon!" I stared in disbelief, "You mean, help myself?" I asked, incredulous. "Exactly! Help yourself!" he replied, "Make yourself a racing-machine. If you're gonna ride for me, you'll hafta build the proper machine!" I still couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Wait a minute," I said "Am I hearing you right? Are you giving me a bike? Who owns all this stuff? What's the story?" he grinned but I insisted he explain. "Okay! My Dad owns the local hardware-store, a few hundred yards further up the street." he began, "He deals in everything, doesn't matter what it is, new, second hand, you name it, he buys and sells it and 'this' is his yard, and workshops. We have full use of it the yard, the workshop and everything in it, but we have to look after it. Soon we're going to build a cycle-rack to keep our track bikes in and when you've built yours you can leave it here and ride your street bike to and from home. Where do you live, by the way?" "Woolston." I said still, incredulous. "Well, it's up to you," he said, "Woolston's a bloody long way to ride on a track bike, with no lights and no brakes. The cops 'll stop you for sure!"

I glanced round at the bikes they were riding, like Henton's they were very utility, perhaps even more so, basically they were just a frame with two wheels and a saddle. Well they had two pedals, a chain plus handlebars of course, but you get my drift, there were no lights, no gears, no brakes nor mudguards, nothing else at all. Stripped to the barest essentials and painted whatever colour the rider chose, then festooned with their own personal transfers. "I'll bet the transfers come from Daddy's fuckin' hardware store too!" I thought, rather uncharitably, considering his generosity. I didn't feel uncharitable though, but I admit the thought crossed my mind. "Okay," I said, finally "thanks very much, I'll get on with it then!" "We'll give you a hand!" chorused the lads and they did just that. Picking the smallest frame I could find, for obvious reasons (my feet wouldn't have reached the pedals with a larger ones, never mind the ground!) then chose a pair of narrow racing wheels. Norman held up a hand, "Bad move," he said, "you'll be better off with the old fashioned wide ones, mate!" I looked up quizzically, everybody was nodding, "Wider tyres are better on the cornering, they'll last longer too, wide wheels don't buckle so easily. If you use the narrow ones you'll be in here straightening 'em every five bloody minutes!" someone said. "You straighten your own wheels?" I said, still unable to take it all in. "Of course! Christ, it'll cost you a fortune if you don't learn to repair the damage yourself!" said another, wryly. "What colour d' you want? The paint's over here!" somebody called and looking to where he was indicating I noted several pots of various coloured paint on a workbench. "I'll leave the colour for now, thanks," I said, "I'll give it some thought overnight."

I was still cautious, I didn't want to get in too deep here, everything seemed fraught with fiscal danger to me, I earned next to nothing remember. I'd never had money to burn and was saving for a drum-kit. I had to be very careful here!

"Please yerself!" said another voice, the owner picking up the rear-wheel I'd chosen. He looked at it sceptically, "You'll have to change that sprocket, it's far too small," he said, "you'll need at least an eighteen or a twenty." he said, referring to the number of teeth. Then he laughed, "This bastard 'll make you feel like you're riding uphill mate!" "Which handlebars do you prefer?" another boy asked. "Don't worry about that, I'll get my own!" I said. At this point Norman Pike looked up from what he was doing and said, "Well you'll have to buy those yourself than, My dad doesn't sell sprockets or handlebars, everything else here is free, what you see in here is for nothing, if you can't find it in here you'll hafta go to your local bicycle-shop. The paint comes with the frame and the wheels by the way!" "Ah," I said, grinning "that answers my next question then." and 'then' I dropped my bombshell, "Like I said," I continued, "Don't worry about it," I said, "I work in Alec Bennett's Motor-cycle Repair-Shop, I'll get a

sprocket and some real motorcycle handlebars for staff price!”

Instant stardom! Such is the power of teenage sycophancy, in those few seconds I went up the social ladder a million notches! “Bloody Hell!” someone gasped, “You work for Alec Bennett?” “You lucky Bastard!” said another, “What's it like? Do you get to ride the bikes? Tell us about it?” The questions were coming at me from everywhere and with no chance to reply. It didn't matter. Well I couldn't tell them the truth, could I? Not the real truth. What could I say? That it was horrible, I hated it and really wanted desperately to escape? I couldn't say that! Not to these guys, anyway, so I lied and it was at that moment I realised I would have to stay at Alec Bennett's for a little longer than I'd been planning.

It was getting dark, the day had slipped by unnoticed and it was time to go. Leaning my new/old bike against the wall, I turned to my new friends, “Thanks a million for everything fella's! It's been a fantastic day, but I gotta leave. I'll see you tomorrow.” “Right!” said Norman, “Great, my dad's shop is closed on Sundays so he'll be here when you arrive, He'll be very interested to meet our two new team-members, see you tomorrow then!”

Dave and I rode home together, or that is to say he rode halfway with me. He lived in Portswood, which was about midway between Millbrook and Woolston, as the crow flies, although personally I've never been by crow, however it's a near enough assessment. “Well, well, well!” I said, “Yeah,” replied Dave, “that was sump'n' else, huh?” it was more a rhetorical agreement than anything else.

After leaving him, I rode on alone my mind swirling with the wonder of it all. In a very short while, my entire life had turned completely around, a few days ago I couldn't get my hands on a bicycle for love nor money and now suddenly, I had two!

Working at Alec Bennett's had turned into a nightmare, but now I could see it was going to have some distinct advantages. “Maybe thing's are not so bad really.” I thought, half desperately. I reviewed my life so-far. Surprisingly, by some miracle I'd survived Poliomyelitis to the point of not catching it, I'd escaped the shipyard grind and although money was not plentiful I now owned two bicycles, no longer having to pay a bus-fare to wherever I wanted to go, plus existing on a mountain of free cream-cakes, I was now able to save very well for my drum-kit. It was utterly fantastic, life wasn't really so bad after all!

By this time I'd been working at Bennett's for about eight or nine months and although the work itself was awful there was a plus side. For instance, one day the apprentice mechanic, a young man of about 20 years, informed me that in a couple of weeks from now, Archie and Tom Appleby were competing in a major grass-track meeting at Ringwood Raceway and he wondered, “Would you like to come to the meeting with me on the back of my Beezer?” (the pet name for BSA motorcycles in those days)

“Would I like to go with him?” I chortled “Is the Pope a fuckin' Catholic?” I'd been cleaning bloody motorcycles for almost a year and had still not been on one! The nearest I'd come was riding home in Les's sidecar! I avidly accepted his offer and equally gleeful, met him at the appointed time and place. Needless to say I had a wonderful day. Ringwood is a small village on the edge of the New Forest and that made it even more wonderful, I was not just taking my first ride on a motorbike. Rather than a quick trip around the block, I was being taken to some far-distant foreign-part so to speak. The thrill was beyond description.

Speeding through the countryside, my hair and eyes streaming in the wind, in spite of only riding pillion, I adored the thrill of the throbbing between my legs. (sorry ladies) Its a strange feeling the first time you heel over on a bend at high-speed, after the first time, I remember him turning to me and shouting over his shoulder, “Don't try to stay upright, let yourself lean over with me, otherwise it affects my control of the bike.” I gave him no problems after that and a good time was had by all.

Added to the pleasure was the thought of seeing Tom and Archie, my own workmates no less doing

what they were famous for! It was ridiculous really, I'd read about them in the newspapers and worked everyday with them, yet ironically, I'd never seen them perform on a racetrack!

I arrived to be greeted by a large contingent of guys from my cycle-speedway world there and I was now really in my element, especially when the Appleby brothers walked over to talk to me. That was sheer-peer-group-heaven!

It was all very relaxed, grass-track riders seemingly more informal than the cinder-brigade, in fact compared to the turn-stiled, fenced-off, flood-lit tension of the dirt-track stadium these grass-track meetings had a picnic air about them, even some of the riders wives and girl-friends dishing out food and drinks to all and sundry. I had a wonderful day and then another thrill riding home after it was over. Time passed. During the months I'd been with the 'Turfs Cycle-Speedway Team' they'd gone from strength to strength. The name 'Turfs' derived simply from Norman Pike's love of the picture on the front of a cigarette packet, depicting the winged horse 'Pegasus' flying through a rainbow. Indeed he approached Bramtoco (the British-American Tobacco Company) and talked to them about sponsorship, they weren't forthcoming with money but presented us with a set of silk-screen-printed silver bibs, with their splendid logo on the front, plus our team-numbers and names on the back.

So now we looked very impressive indeed, I mean it was a real professionally produced job. The name on mine was 'Tiger Harrison'. Well what did you expect? I was fifteen years old for fuck sake!

Again it was Norman who approached the major tyre-companies and asked them to produce a one for us, equivalent in design to a real motor speedway tyre, one company saw the potential and indeed, jumping on the band-wagon, produced the heavily treaded tyres we used from then on. They are common-or-garden nowadays, standard on all BMX bikes and similar.

We then approached the bicycle manufacturing companies and suggested they pay attention to our needs and it was the 'Phillips' Cycle Company who listened most attentively and began, at our suggestion, to build a cycle designed especially for the sport. They were also sensible enough to ask our advice and we told them the things we regarded as fundamental in a bicycle designed for this kind of activity. It changed bicycle design forever. A bent crossbar was introduced allowing a lower saddle position, no mudguards, Knobbly tyres and wide handlebars became *de-rigueur*, for kids bikes forever after. Before these things became available, we'd been forced to make the changes ourselves, some of us even making our own wide handlebars from lengths of piping and we were lucky if our tyres lasted more than a couple of weeks.

Best of all though, well from my point of view anyway, was the opportunity to travel. The Turks competed extensively throughout the entire south of England, racing against teams as far afield as Saint Mary Cray and Orpington in Kent, plus teams in the home-counties and even London itself. New Cross I remember was a favourite spot of mine. We country yokels, with our pirate accents got on famously with the slick-talking cockney lads, the ragging, joking and general high spirits we shared with our hosts still ranks in my memory as one of the idyllic part of my existence on this unholy vale of earthly tears.

When on tour we travelled in a huge pantechnicon, a removal van provided by and driven of course by Fred Pike, Norman's dad. Some of the guys took tents with them and those of us who didn't own a tent simply slept in the back of the truck. It was no great discomfort, in fact it was fun and it was on one such trip that a girl-follower of the sport, took a liking to me and eschewing the formality of the standard, "I'll show you mine if you'll show me yours" routine, got straight to the nitty-gritty.

I was sitting alone in the lorry one afternoon when she climbed in and sat beside me, without a great deal of preamble or opening chatter, she kissed me.

Well! It was different from any kiss I'd ever experienced before and it electrified me. Until then, the

only kisses I'd received had been goodnight pecks from my mum, as she tucked me into bed and the ones dished out during games of Postman's-Knock at children's parties, so what did I know? Although once, at Norman Pike's home on one of his birthday celebrations a girl had said to me, "You don't know how to kiss, Harrison! Come here!" and grabbing my face she kissed me with her mouth open... I suppose it was my first 'real' kiss, however, we did not exchange tongues so overall I was unaffected by it, although I admit it was nicer than any of my previous 'wooden' attempts. But I was still none the wiser and walked away bemused by the experience and wondering what was the matter with her. "What the hell was that all about?" I asked myself. However this was a very different experience, the wonderful young woman kissing me now, left me in no doubt at all as to what it was she was about and I was shocked beyond belief when her tongue entered my mouth, I'd certainly not been prepared for that! My brain exploded with shock, however... I approved of it! I was certainly not left bemused or wondering this time.

Returning the compliment, I insinuated a hand inside her skirt and between her legs and was astonished, plus delighted when they opened and her bottom slid eagerly towards my fingers. The invitation to investigate more deeply into her inner secrets left me with no choice and by this time I was incorrigible anyway and was certainly getting plenty of incorrigment. As I probed deeper I was even more surprised when she opened my fly and put her hand inside. A strange relief came over me. (no, not yet! but finally I was about to have a great curiosity assuaged). My amazement at the silky warm smooth velvetiness of all that my fingers were encountering was unprecedented, what I found felt more beautiful than anything I could ever have imagined, even in my most erotic childish dreams.

When we do something for the very first time, by the very token it is unique and although exhilarating, it will probably not be the best we will ever execute the manoeuvre, however it will always remain the most exciting, it will always be the first time and therefore will remain unique. Unfamiliarity is what imparts the excitement, an excitement which in this particular instance can never be repeated. Not ever! When we reach maturity, ripe and experienced, the number of things which occur for the first time diminishes. The longer we spend on the planet the more the odds lengthen against something fresh and untried happening. We run out of 'new' things to do and the timeworn axiom, "Been there, done that!" becomes a fact of life. Indeed it becomes a mid-life crisis for some. Silly old men chase pretty young women and vice versa and often they sacrifice a great deal in the process, like the loss of family, home and in some cases, close friends.

It's also the reason why ninety-year olds will suddenly go parachuting, free-falling, or bungee-jumping. Not only are they running out of things to do, they're running out of time! However, if one has led a full and exciting existence, one can indulge in the fascinating pastime of rolling one's life backwards. It's much like reviewing a movie in the studio cutting-room. One can view it at great leisure, picking out the good bits, plus the bad bits too, of course, and often it is the latter that turn out to be the best of all! At this the point in life certain aspects of old-age becomes a joy. One can indulge in examining one's life minutely, frame by frame, and better still, it's completely painless. The most horrific nightmares and embarrassing moments turn out to be the funniest and your worst heartbreaks the most amusing, now they are mere comic relief and what had seriously seemed like a *bone-fide* reason for suicide thirty years ago, now brings a secret smile to your lips. Perhaps even someone you once thought you hated, you discover you now still love. No, I didn't sacrifice my virginity in the back of a truck on that sultry afternoon somewhere in Kent, but I did discover one of nature's beautiful secrets.

Besides, the extremely heavy petting which ensued, was quite enough to be going on with, thank you very much - and very satisfying in it's own sweet way, if you take my point.

Our relationship developed into a pen-pal love-affair and after several months of writing passionate letters to each other, she came to stay with me, at my parents home. Throughout her visit our sex remained at the very-heavy-petting stage, leaving little or nothing to the imagination. However, lacking as it did the *coup-de-gras*, I developed the most painful pair of lovers nuts you could ever imagine. A classic case of over stimulation without final gratification, it left me with such painful testicles I was unable to walk upright. I'd no idea what was causing my agony, but my father recognised the symptoms and taking me aside, explained what was happening. "Under your present circumstances, my son, I think the best and safest advice I can offer is for you to lock yourself in the toilet and have a bloody good wank!" In spite of the immense shock at hearing my father use those words, not to mention offering me advice like that! I took it. Several times... After a few times my pain eased slightly but by no means did it disappear entirely. The girl returned to her parents still *virgo-intacta* and soon I was able to walk normally again.

When I become very very old, laughing secretly to myself as I rock to and fro in my wheel-chair and no doubt regarded as senile, people will pass by saying, "Poor old feller, Used to be a jazz musician y' know. Well, you know what they were like! He's demented now you know, not surprising really! He sits all day long laughing to himself and he never remembers anything!"

Wrong! I'll be remembering everything, That's why I'll be laughing!

Meanwhile, back at Alec Bennett's motorcycle emporium, things were going downhill fast. I no longer felt the need to hide my dissatisfaction and in fairness, Smokey Joe had no reason to hide his either and we locked handlebars constantly. I avoided cleaning and sweeping the floor as much as possible, disappearing to hide in my attic most of the time and never around when he needed me. Disenchanted with motorcycles, I no longer took pride enough in my work to even bother rubbing a polishing rag over them and my relationship with the arsehole in the cake shop had sunk from an all time low to subterranean. Every morning I did my best to arrive at the shop so early no other customers would be there. By doing so I figured she'd have no cause to be rude, or to delay me, but this didn't work either, she was a nutter and abused me no matter what! Frustrated beyond endurance, spite now invaded my equanimity and I became more hateful to her than she was to me. Snarling my way into the shop I snatched up the tray and stormed out, no matter what she said or threatened to do. Unsurprisingly she wrote an official complaint to the foreman, protesting my behaviour and he called me into his office to remonstrate over 'my' apparent breach of etiquette. I listened to what he had to say then told him that if she didn't like it she could get fucked! "And preferably by somebody else!" I added, for good measure. I went on to point out that from the very beginning I'd been the victim in this affair and in spite of what he or I decided at the current interview, the bitch would continue terrorising me no matter what! I was surprised when he agreed, but then went on to say that while he understood my position, it was incumbent upon him to ask me to apologise to the good lady. At this I drew myself up and exclaimed, "ME! Apologise to HER? You must be mad! I ain't never gonna do that!" His secretary, who'd been sitting silently throughout the interview, interrupted, absurdly correcting my grammar, "You are not going to do that!" she advised unwittingly. "Okay, okay okay!" I snarled, "So I are not gonna do it!" and turning back to him, said, "Look! Every time I walk into that shop the cow keeps me hanging around until I have to beg for attention. At which point, she insults me terribly and things get really nasty. It is even embarrassing for her retail-customers, the poor buggers have to stand and listen to all this garbage. Some of them knowing I was there before them! There's no way I'm going to apologise for that!" Sucking his omnipresent cigarette, as usual he allowed the smoke to escape, disappearing again up his nose, and as he did so he studied me. Then in his mellifluous convoluted English he said, "Well Harrison, I think we've reached the point, where it must be as obvious to you as it is to me, that

perhaps it would be better for all concerned if you were to find something a little more in simpatico with your desires.” “I cannot disagree with you on that,” I replied, “I've been extremely unhappy here.” “Quite.” he replied, “Of course you are entitled to the usual two weeks notice.” “I don't think I'll bother,” I said, “I'll leave right away!” “Just as you wish,” he said, “in that case we'll have your money ready for you at five o'clock” “I mean now!” I said adamantly and turned to walk out. “But what about our morning tea, my dear chap!” he said. I couldn't believe my ears. Stopping in my tracks I turned, “In the past,” I hissed, “You've proved you are more than capable of turning the gas off. Old Chap!” the sarcasm dripping from my tongue, laying stress on his own words, “and I'm convinced that in the fullness of time, when I'm gone, you'll find a way to turn it on!” And with those immortal words still dripping from my tongue, I stormed out of his office and out of the motor-cycling world forever. Oh and by the way, I was never able to eat a doughnut, cream-cake or indeed any sweet gooey confectionery ever again. Still can't!

Naturally my parents made an enormous fuss when I told them the story and my father commented, “You better be careful my son, you're getting close to sixteen years of age. If you don't get a trade behind you soon, life is going to become very difficult for you!” “Don't worry Dad,” I replied, “I'll look in the newspaper and see what's on offer.” and I did. I scanned the 'Positions Vacant' page and there it was, bold as brass:

Fifteen year old boy required
to assist electrician. Facilities
available to learn trade and
serve articulated apprenticeship.
Apply in writing or phone: etc.

I got the gig!

He turned out to be a household electrician, by that I mean the bulk of his work was of the domestic variety, or that is to say, we performed in people's homes. Rewiring, fitting power points, stoves, heaters, extra lamps, that sort of thing. Occasionally a job came with a little more balls, but mostly it was as I've described. I liked it very much, it was the first time in my working life I did not have to get dirty as part of my job. I was indescribably happy about that and realised I actually abhorred getting dirty, detested it, it was a part of my character that I'd not previously been in touch with and was surprised by it. For instance I was offended when, upon entering our first house together my new boss said, “Don't touch anything, don't lean on the furniture, don't leave dirty fingermarks, or indeed marks of any kind anywhere, and don't put your feet on the furniture, Never! Remember, this is somebody's home, I don't want complaints about us leaving it in a mess.” I choked back a reply, after all, how was he to know I'd been brought up by a house-proud fanatic, who when she cleaned the floor put newspaper on it so's we didn't walk on it and God help us whenever she cleaned the toilet because then we weren't allowed to use it! “Let it go, Ken,” I chided myself, “he didn't mean anything by it, maybe in the past he employed lads who totally wrecked the joints?” He never had to repeat the words, it became instantly obvious that I was meticulous, even keeping his workshop meticulously meticulous!

As it happens, it was a very nice workshop, very small, it started out as his mother's garage at the rear of her home and she had allowed him to convert it into his workplace. It was easy to keep clean and I should know, after nine months working at Alec Bennett's workshop I was a cleaning expert and this one was child's-play, five minutes with a broom and it was spotless. Making tea was equally simple, nothing could have been simpler, it was like being at home, with only two people to cater for when you

wanted a cup of tea you simply put the kettle on and made one!

However, on this particular morning, at my first job in a private home, he handed me a small box containing the ingredients, "Take this into the kitchen and brew the tea" he said, "and clean up any mess you make." and he never had to repeat that again either.

Some weeks had passed when early one morning I arrived to find him in a bind because he had two jobs and the deadlines were conflicting. Appearing stressed he said, "We've got to fit a power-point in a house here in Shirley and I have to make a thermostat switch-box for a chip fryer in a fish & chip shop at Milbroo..." "I can make the switch-box," I interrupted him, "you go fix the power-point and I'll stay here and make the box!" He looked at me doubtfully, "I dunno about that?" he said. "No, really!" I insisted, "Trust me! Do you have a diagram of the box?" "Sure!" he said and handed me a drawing. Then still looking doubtful he took off to do the power-point job.

When he returned the box was ready and the paint almost dry. He was astonished, "How'd you manage that?" he asked incredulously and I laughed, "I wasted a year in the sheet-metal shop, at John I Thornycroft's" I said, "I assisted in the manufacture of hundreds of these buggers and figured I could easily produce something I'd helped create many times." "Well, that's very good!" he said, "You can do any others that come along then. We don't get much call for that sort of thing, but it crops up from time to time," "I'll be glad to." I said, feeling very satisfied with myself.

Close to my sixteenth birthday when it was almost time to sign the indenture binding me to him for the next five years, he took on another lad. A year younger than myself, a school leaver in fact, the boss introduced us, "Alan this is Ken, Ken, Alan. Look after him mate and show him the ropes." he said and left us together.

He was a nice lad but a gangling oaf, a calf in a china shop, you might say. In the homes we visited he bumped into things, in fact he bumped into everything. He was issued with the same warning as myself but it fell on deaf ears, I mean it made no difference, With nothing to do, he would lean on a sideboard and knock a vase over. Walking past a table, he'd nudge it and something would fall over, worse, fall off! When Alan arrived on the scene, naturally the task of sweeping the workshop floor and making tea, was passed to him, but in people's houses I quickly regained the latter because, frankly, whenever Alan did it there was every chance he'd spill more than we drank. I need hardly add that wherever he put his tea-cup it invariably left a ring. Work-wise, every order had to be repeated ten times, admittedly he was improving, but his progress was slow. Other than that everything was fine and I was very happy.

On a rewiring job I went into the roof to pull out the wiring and feed in the new, because if Alan went up there, as sure as little green apples he'd put his foot through the ceiling. Alan was the sort of guy who'd make a special effort to step carefully over a joist rather than on it!

On my sixteenth birthday I was fired. "But why?" I asked, astonished, "Did I do something wrong?" "No!" replied the boss, "Have I offended you in some way?" I asked. Even at that age I knew I was abrasive. "Not at all, I just feel that you won't be staying long, I don't really think you are cut out for this kind of thing, in time you'll find this all very tedious and it's better for me if I cut my losses now." "But what about Alan?" I said, "He's hopeless!" "No he isn't," he said, "he's no different than I was when I was fifteen, he's learning well enough, he'll be fine, given time!"

For the second time in recent months I heard, "Of course you're entitled to the usual two weeks noti..." "Don't bother" again I interrupted, "Forget that crap! You should've told me this before! Today is my sixteenth birthday and I've gotta find something really quickly or I'm gonna miss out on an apprenticeship altogether! You've dropped me right in the shit! I'm leaving now!" and for the second time in three months I walked out on an employer (but only after getting the sack, I should add).

Naturally, when dad came home that evening to find me reading the employment section of the

newspaper, he went totally ballistic and when I explained what had happened, he transferred his anger to the electrician and was all for confronting the guy. "To say what?" I asked. "To tell the bastard what I think of him!" he ranted. "Oh come on Dad," I said, "You can't do anything, what are you gonna do? Punch him? Sue him? Forget it!" "Forget it!" he yelled, "What do you mean forget it? You're sixteen years old today! It's too bloody late, son!" Hoicking a thumb out of the window, he said "I know what it's like out there! If you haven't got a trade behind you, life can become hell!" "I want to go to music classes," I said, "I never wanted to be a tradesman in the first place." "Don't talk such bloody nonsense!" he bellowed, "Music, music, bloody music! That's all you ever talk about, I've told you before, you're going to have a proper job. Music and bloody motorbikes is all you ever think about my son! Your head is full of dreamy crap!" He turned to my mother, "Don't worry, Gert," he said, "I'll have a word with somebody at the yard, it may not be too late if we're quick!"

It was useless arguing, I was aware of that, it was pointless explaining that the motorcycles had been merely a placebo, something to quell my desire, divert my attention from the orchestra inside my head. He was too deeply ingrained, too steeped in knowing his place, accustomed to touching his forelock to ever understand that the right road for me was the one I was pleading to be allowed to travel.

The following evening he came home with the dreadful news, well as far as I was concerned it was horrific, for him it was neither good nor bad, I mean he was pleased but not elated, "It's gonna be all right Gert," he said, sounding relieved, "I've managed to get him back in the yard! It's not what I wanted for him, but it's better than being a bloody labourer for the rest of his life." "What is it then?" she asked, relieved that at least it was something. "I went to see Harry Phillips again hoping to get him back in the light-plating department, but no chance, he's full right up, no more vacancies for years, but for some reason he likes Ken and he rang the management and put in a good word for the lad and as a special favour they've agreed to take him on in the heavy-plate department, even though he's over sixteen!" he concluded triumphantly.

"Supercilious condescending bastards!" I snarled, "Still up to their snide upper-class tricks then!" "I'm one day over sixteen years of age and they're calling it a special favour!" "You've got ideas above your station, my son," he said, not for the first time, "You should be grateful they've given you anything at all!"

Throughout dinner I sat picking at my food, my chin on my chest, anger and dread coursing through my veins as I listened to two people discussing my future as if I were not present. Suddenly my mother banged her fist on the table, "Are you just going to sit there then?" she barked, "Aren't you going to thank your father for saving your bacon?" I didn't look up, "Thanks Dad." I mumbled. "You start on Monday morning!" he replied. "Well don't look so bloody overjoyed!" sneered mum sarcastically, "If I were in your shoes I'd make some effort to..." Slamming my knife and fork onto the table, I got to my feet, staring at them dumbly for a second or two it was one of the few times in my life that I could find absolutely no words at all. Then, recovering some small rationality I stormed out of the house, jumped on my bike and rode furiously away.

I had no idea where I was going, with no destination in mind I simply rode around the streets until eventually flinging myself into the long grass on an uncultivated stretch of The Veracity Ground, a curiously named triangular shaped piece of common land full of playing fields, soccer, cricket, rugby, etc. At it's narrowest end was a children's section with swings, roundabouts and seesaws and beyond this, at it's most useless point, the grass and weeds had been allowed to grow wild. Probably for more than Freudian reasons this was where I chose to prostrate myself.

I'd been lying there for quite some time, my hands behind my head, staring up at the fading light when a long forgotten unfamiliar voice said, "Allo Nipper! You look awful, is summat wrong?" It was my

cousin Phillip, the one I was forbidden to talk to and who's breast milk I'd shared sixteen years previously. "Hello Phil," I said, "yeah, I'm bloody choked, mate!" "I can see that old son," he said, "what's up?" "It's my bloody parents," I said, "I can't make contact with 'em at all! Not on any level and I don't know what to do about it? I can't make them understand even the simplest things that are important to me." he nodded sympathetically, "I dunno why I'm telling you this, I said, "but I gotta tell somebody!" "Course you 'ave, mush! Why don't you come home for a cup of tea?" he said, "Mum would love to see you. It's been years since she's clapped eyes on you?" For the first time during the years to which he referred I decided I wanted to meet her. "Right!" I exclaimed, getting to my feet. "We only lives across the road," he added, "there look!" he pointed and it was less than ten yards away. He led me across the street and through the garden gate and as we progressed I asked myself if it were possible I could have come to this place on purpose? I experienced a strange feeling, a low key excited nervousness mixed with powerful curiosity.

Certainly I knew I was rebelling, enjoying disobeying my mother's long standing rule, but it was more than just that, I didn't know quite what to expect? What was my aunt really like? I'd been brought up to believe she was some kind of evil monster. So would she be? We walked along the garden path, round the side of the house and through the back entrance into the kitchen. "Hello Mum," called Phillip "I've got a surprise for you, guess who I've brought home?" "Well I dunno do I! How am I supposed to know that?" called a woman's voice from the living room, "Who is it then?" He stepped to one side and gestured me into the room, I walked passed him and stood before her. "It's our Ken!" she breathed, no surprise showing on her face at all, "How are you dear?" she asked tenderly. "Hello Aunt Kath, I'm okay I guess." I replied morosely. "You don't sound okay. You sound as if you could do with a cup of tea. Phillip, go and put the kettle on!" "Okay, but It won't fit me!" he said as he disappeared, "Daft bugger!" she called after him and turning to me said, "He's ever such a good boy really!" She laughed and I noticed she was completely toothless! Obese, short, (shorter even than myself) with strands of untidy grey hair escaping from a tightly wound bun and straggling across her forehead, she peered at me over a large nose, the hereditary family feature accentuated by her sunken mouth, as a result her chin seemed to almost touch the end of it. However her eyes were kindly, very bright and very friendly. Pictured, my Aunt Kath as she looked at around this time and in a typical pose for her, always holding someone's baby.



I felt awkward and stood staring dumbly at her, I had the impression she wanted to hug me and was trying hard to resist. “Sit down then, son!” she said and opening a cake-tin decorated with pictures of the King George V Coronation, she pushed it towards me. “Biscuit?” she asked, “Thanks.” I said taking one, I didn't like sweet tasting things but this was not a good time to refuse. “Bring some side-plates with you, Phillip!” she called, “Okay!” he called back. “How's your mum and dad?” It was not a loaded question, she was just making conversation. “All right I s'pose,” I replied, “Dad's his usual self, but Mum's getting stranger by the minute. He does all the shopping now, she won't go outside the house!” “I dunno what's the matter with her, son?” said my aunt, not unkindly, “She was always a bit funny, if you know what I mean, right from when she was a little girl.” I couldn't pass comment on this and for a second or two remained silent. At this point Phillip entered bearing a tea-tray. “How's your dad coping?” asked my aunt as he placed it on the table. “He seems all right,” I replied, “in spite of her keeping us awake all bloody night. She goes on and on about the rows she had with you all those years ago. Never lets up on it, babbles on and on and on and on, over and over again, first what you said to her, then what she said to you, then what you said to her, *ad-infinitum*. Christ, I've heard it a million bloody times! she keeps me awake too - paper thin walls, prefabs!” I groaned, “He tells her to shut up but she never takes any notice.”

She pushed her cup and saucer towards Phillip, who, picking up the teapot filled it, mine and finally his own. Picking up her cup she took a sip, “It's all so silly,” she sighed, “so long ago now, I don't understand why she doesn't just put it all behind her and come and be friends?” “Neither do I!” I agreed, with much feeling and sipping my own tea I lapsed into silence.

“Another biscuit dear,” she offered again and selecting the plainest, nibbled at it. Of course she understood, of all people she knew exactly why my mother couldn't relent but she didn't break the code, not even a hint. I didn't know the full story at this point and again couldn't comment. “You don't look

well, Ken, is it really making you that unhappy?" she asked. I thought about this for a few seconds, "No, it's not that," I finally replied, "My real problem is I don't want to go back in the shipyard, but Dad is insisting on it. I want to be a musician and he won't hear of it, he thinks I've got ideas above my station and wants me to be a heavy-plater. To be honest I feel hopelessly trapped." She smiled, "He's only doing what he thinks best," she said, "what he believes is best for you, he doesn't want to see you hurt again!" "I've never been hurt!" I interjected, not comprehending her unintentional reference, "I just need to be myself, but they don't understand!" "Phillip's an apprentice painter down the yard, aren't you dear, and he's quite happy, aren't you Phil? He enjoys it." she said, managing to address both of us simultaneously. Phillip nodded and I stood up, "Well that's the whole point," I said, "I envy you, mate. But you're doing what you want, you want to be a painter," I said, "and I'll never be happy until I can be what I want to be!" He nodded sympathetically but didn't comment "Anyway thank you both very much for the tea and the chat, it's been a relief to get it off my chest." I said, "I really needed it. I'll try to take your advice Aunt Kath and do what my dad wants." "He's got a lot on his plate, my love." she said. "I know that. I do understand, but it's driving me insane." Climbing out of her chair, this time she did hug me, "You're always welcome to drop in for a chat, dear." she said, "Yeah, I know that too," I replied, "and thanks very much. Thank you too, Phil." and walking outside, I picked up my bicycle and rode away.

My aunt wasn't a monster at all, she was a kindly old lady and it had really felt good talking to her. I decided that from this moment on I'd visit whenever I felt like it and bugger it, I'd chat to Phil when I felt inclined too, this bloody nonsense had gone on for too long!

On my way home as I rode into the prefab estate I passed close by the one which now housed my Uncle Jim, Aunt Lillian and cousin Jacqueline. I'd not seen them since aged nine I'd put my hand between Jackie's legs and got us thrown out of the pub. I chuckled at the memory as I passed the house, "Hey, that's not bad going, come to think of it, How many nine year olds have been ejected from a pub for doing that!" I giggled. "Bollocks to it! I'll go visit them too!" and turning around, I rode back, parked my bike in their side-entrance and knocked on the back-door.

It was opened by Jacqueline, now eleven years old. "Hello Jackie," I said, "It's me, Ken!" She was struck dumb, her eyes almost popping out of her head. "Well who is it, Jacqueline?" called a broad Scouse accent from inside the house. "It's our Ken!" She gasped, surprise sounding in her voice. "Well don't stand there gawpin' at him, y' daft tart, ask 'im in!" said the voice, "And while you're about it, put the kettle on!" "Come on! Do as your mother says. I'm sure you'll look lovely in it!" I quipped, borrowing Phillip's joke as I crossed the threshold.

Uncle Jim smiled and waved from his armchair, but Aunt Lil leapt to her feet and rushed at me, hugging and kissing me. "Well I'll go t' t' foot of ower stairs!" she said, "Or I would, if we 'ad any! This's terrifeek, Ken! What a luvly surprise! It's great t' see you again after all these years, it's been too long, you should've come to see us sooner. Where the hell have you been all this time? How's yer mum and dad?" after which the conversation so closely mirrored the previous one it's not worth recording here. I will add, however, that you have must have gathered by now that Aunt Lil was a Scouse and being from Liverpool even the most banal subject was tinged with gentle humour.

I chose to answer the questions with some modified answers, in fact I explained that my mother was not a well lady and as far as I could tell was getting worse. I described the agoraphobia and insomnia and explained how mum kept us awake with her incessant nightly chatter. I did not however tell them what she talked about all night. Aunt Kath was the subject of my mother's constant preoccupation and I figured it was no concern of theirs and merely stated that she spent every night pointlessly bending our ears with her version of long forgotten family squabbles (forgotten by everyone but herself that is).

They listened sympathetically, no mention was made of my past sexual mis-demeanour, in fact they were more concerned with my mother's welfare and agreed it didn't sound good.

Uncle Jim spoke for the first time since our Hello's. "How's your dad taking it?" he asked. "He seems alright, apart from GBE. You know, Grievous Bodily Ear-hole." I said. My aunt smiled, "I think we should all get together for a drink and a good laugh. That's what your mum needs, a laugh!" she said, "Well I'll drink to that!" I replied, with even more feeling than before. "Have another cup of tea then!" she said, "No thanks," I said, "Honestly, I've got tea coming out of my ears!" "Don't nod yer head then, you might spill some!" she said, "Gordon Bennett, I gotta go! I can't take any more Scouse wit, nor more tea either," I laughed, "I went to see Aunt Kath this evening and she loaded me up with the stuff!" At my revelation, Aunt Lil raised her eyebrows, "Did you indeed?" she said, then suddenly she smiled, "Well a it's good thing you did! It's about time too! In fact it's time the whole family got together. Tell your mum and dad to come round any time, we'd love to see them." "Thanks, I'll do that!" I said.

For the second time that evening I got up to leave forbidden company and as I rode home felt happier than I had felt for a very long time.

My reception at home was far different, not at all resembling the friendly kind I'd received elsewhere. Because I'd stormed out in a blind fury, my parents were more concerned than they might otherwise have been. "Where the bloody hell have you been?" they duetted in unison. "I've been to see Aunt Kath and Aunt Lil, if you must know!" I said, knowing the effect it would have. Their facial expressions justified my expectancy, especially mum's. "You've been where!" she ground through clenched teeth, her nose wrinkling at my audacity. "They'd like to see you, Aunt Lil says we should all get together for a good laugh." I said, "she invited us round for a few drinks!" "Oh did she indeed? Well you can tell her from me, that if she wants to see me she can bloody well come round 'ere, I'm not kow-towing to her!" she snarled. "Jesus Christ, Mum! There's no helping you is there? I'm going to bed!" I proclaimed and went to my room slamming the door behind me. "Don't you slam your bloody door at me, my son!" she cried.

I threw myself onto the bed, a frustrated bundle of jangled nerve endings. A tightly knotted bundle of frustration and fury, "Shit!" was all I could muster. A good cry would have done me the world of good, but I couldn't do it. I hadn't cried since the day she'd told me to dry my tears during the first air raid on Southampton and now, it seemed I no longer knew how!

To add to my despair my girl friend wrote from her home in Kent to explain that she'd met another young man, a sailor and he was a very nice boy, She was very sorry but she was afraid this was the end of our relationship. She hoped I wouldn't be upset. Upset? Me? I wasn't upset, I was catatonic with fury, indeed with every emotion known to anatomical and physiological science! She had been the only girl-friend I'd ever had and was ever likely to have, as far as I could tell. I was cut adrift, Bereft!

For the next two days I sulked around town avoiding places where I knew my friends to be, preferring instead to remain alone. At Woodmill (a favourite beauty spot of mine), just a few hundred yards from the mill I lay on my back beside the river and stared moodily at nothing. Dourly I contemplated my future. "Christ-All-Bloody-Mighty," I thought desperately, "My girl has dumped me and now I'm facing five years of fuckin' purgatory in a shipyard. What a ghastly waste of my time!"

I felt doomed, the approaching Monday morning rushed slowly and inexorably towards me and I lay there I feeling as though watching the guillotine blade drop slowly towards my throat. "Another fine mess you've got me into Stanley!" Oliver Hardy's complaining whine intervened as my fervent imagination began its games, "ME?" I replied, "Problem is, you've got the fuckin' Minus touch, mate! Everything you touch turns to gold. Golden shit, more like!" Back to square one, Arro... Do not pass Go, do not collect 200...

However, this time my situation had worsened, light-plating may not have been my idea of Nirvana but it beat the shit out of heavy-plating! “Stay away from it m'boy! Whatever y' do, 'tain't good for yah!” the vaguely familiar voice that I'd heard in my head once before re-identified itself, W.C. Fields' again invaded my thoughts, “Oh Yeah, smart-arse, and I s'pose you have the answer to everything?” I snarled, “Gotta be one somewhere's young man, always take refuge in the bottle m'self!” he said. “Like a fuckin' genie I s'pose?” I snarled. “Don't get smart with me m'boy, I'll break every knot in yer body!” he hissed, as he had once hissed to Charlie Macarthy, a famous US ventriloquist's doll.

At this point I began to laugh at my silly mind games, “Think it's funny do yer?” snarled WC, “Just as well m'boy, you're probably the best audience you'll ever get!” Rising from the river bank, I recovered my bicycle and threw my leg over it. “I'm becoming wackier than my mother!” I thought, “That will never do, it's no good sitting here listening to your crazy thoughts Arro, go to the track and talk to the guys.” However as I cycled away I couldn't help but think, “At least some obscure part of my brain got a laugh out it.”