



Darker days and drunken nights

Until his teenage days George had been doted on by elders and shielded from family reality of massive debts and living beyond their means. This fabricated sense of serenity began to develop new cracks which couldn't be plastered over after his granddad found a fresh spouse and George a new school. Then, darker times began to come to light.

“Don't you ever try this again you little bastard!” the father roared. *“This boy is a hell of a lot younger than you. See the state he's in. Some friend you are!”* Then, one final haymaker and his son slumped to the floor, blood pouring from his nose. George looked on, his swaying body held aloft by the door frame.

The night had started as normal at the Saturday night youth club bash run by a local church. Things had gone rapidly downhill from there; first meeting up with a couple of *lads* at the back of the church hall, then relocating to the nearby *Barley Sheaf* saloon bar. The *lads* were almost legal, while George – bent on celebrating his fifteenth birthday – still had some way to go. This night was not his first night on the town by any means, but stood out from earlier nocturnal happenings because it signaled a point of no return,

where he said '*To hell with school and family*'. It was also the night that he was introduced to *Johnny Walker*: an initiation he remembered from that day onwards.

Approaching midnight, George was struggling to stay vertical, partly because of the glacial conditions underfoot, which didn't really go well with his trendy *winklepicker* shoes. The other factor he was attempting to deal with (accentuated by the shiny-soled footwear) was the plain fact he was totally pissed. One friend - with a similar, but somewhat disheveled Elvis-type quiff - remained from the pub, his arms around George's shoulder, trying to keep him aloft. The older boy failed miserably and they both collapsed in a flailing mess on the icy-cold concrete flagstones: quite a spectacle for the central street of this small country town, where the same two boys attended grammar school. They clambered up again, holding onto each and staggering forward. George looking down noticed his vomit-splattered scarf! Fortunately no-one of consequence was there to witness their awkward moment.

At first sight it was hard to comprehend what had happened to the young starry-eyed George - the angel-faced boy with puffy cheeks and endearing smile - who topped his tiny village school and skipped home to help with the milking; that boy who dreamt of running an enormous farm with umpteen tractors, and at other times of being the world's best fast bowler or top-scoring footballer. Now he was becoming a Saturday night (and sometimes weeknight) drunk, who played truant from school, becoming learned in the finer arts of snooker and gaining an infamous reputation in the local pool hall, rather than any notable understanding of algebra or science from his schoolbooks. On one school day he absconded with a couple of older mates to see *Cliff Richard* on stage in nearby Plymouth. This was an education of sorts, but not as it was supposed to be. What had gone wrong?

The answer appears to lie with the boy's changed environment. George was still a youngster with dreams, but his world - that space he inhabited - had to some extent collapsed. Firstly, he had become a minnow of a fish in a large town grammar school, after playing the role of big blue whale in a small village set up. Then his family life

changed dramatically when his mother's sisters (who had been caring for him since babyhood) both moved out of the *Old Rectory* family house to get married. In addition, and not long after the aunties departed, his doting father (in reality his grandfather) suddenly brought on board a new bride: a non-compromising, freckle-faced redhead from the North of Scotland, in her early forties and distantly related to the man's first wife, but many years younger than him.

The incoming spouse – to all intents and purposes George's new stepmother - came on board with her own ready-made daughter in tow; in her late teens and also unhappy with her changed circumstance. Then together - and even more alarmingly for George – his granddad and the Scottish beauty quickly began to breed a bunch of new siblings: three in total! So there were a series of changes, which came like rapid fire from a machine gun and worked in unison to turn George, in effect, from inspiring angel to apathetic asshole. His surrounds had changed out of all recognition and above all, his adored father figure had turned to new pursuits with disquieting results. All this had a devastating impact on the way George viewed his world ... and those who lived in it.

George's downhill slide was reflected quite clearly in his performance at school. While topping the class each term in Geography - the one subject he had an inbuilt passion for – he was continuously tormented (persecuted might be a more accurate description) by the teachers of every other subject, who in effect delighted in plastering *Could Do Better* stickers all over his work. In today's more tolerant world, some enquiring mind might seek to discover what had turned sour with this lad whose path looked so promising when he first joined secondary school, for it all to disintegrate by the time he was in the second year. However in that post-WWII atmosphere of the early 1960s those old Victorian values still lingered on, at times with unwarranted ferociousness. These values would change rapidly over subsequent decades, but when George was at grammar school, the mindset of school and staff was still grounded in the ethics of a bygone era. '*Just give him more stick!*' was their main mantra, '*He'll come round.*' This quite literally reflected the truth, as George got used to shoving a magazine down his pants each week, as he lined up for *Six-of-the-Best* from his nemesis ... the dreaded headmaster!

An example which highlighted this astounding mismanagement of a young child's progress came around each term, when George was put on (what was termed) *Short Report*. This meant that for the first few weeks of the following term, he had to front up - cap-in-hand if you like - to the class teacher, to get scored a plus or minus for his performance during the week. Too many minuses translated to caning by the headmaster before home-time on Friday. It was a demeaning and soul-destroying system, which - as most people would realise today - caused the young boy to rebel even further. His best mate said to him one day: "*I can't understand it George, you topped the class for Geography and went up in some other subjects too, but they still put you back on Short Report! I don't think it's very fair.*" George didn't think it was very fair either ... and responded accordingly.

At home, as well, the atmosphere was not entirely conducive to living peacefully and studying with intent. During the evenings in the big house there was a propensity towards very loud family fights, mainly about money (of which they had virtually none) and management of the farm (which was a tussle between the old ways of the patriarch and the new ways of his son, who was actually doing the managing). In effect these events became shouting matches between father and son, usually accompanied towards the end, by one or the other storming off to bed, red in the face, amidst a storm of slamming of doors. At times George was unable to sleep, with booming voices and banging doors ringing in his ears. Looking back, it is really no wonder the youngster went off the rails, veering towards saloon bars and pool halls. No wonder at all!

With 'O' levels unlikely to be achieved and the errant teenager on the verge of being expelled from school - just when everything looked as though it was careering downhill towards a fate as they say, worse than death - George was thrown an exceedingly well-timed and opportune lifeline: his *get-me-out-of-jail-free* card. Later in life he would wonder about the timing, and who instigated it, but at the moment of happening it came as an unheralded, but glorious relief from a downward spiral. He was drowning in a sea of self-made circumstance; this was the Houdini-key to open the underwater padlock.

“Come and sit down for a minute George.” His (grand) father was sitting at the kitchen table, beckoning to him.

It was a weekend, and George - almost sixteen at that stage - planned to travel by train with friends, to watch *Plymouth Argyle* (the local team they regularly went to support) play an FA Cup 3rd round tie, against league leaders *Tottenham Hotspur*. It was one of the biggest games ever in that part of the world, and promised to include his hero, *Jimmy Greaves*, as the star for *Spurs*. It was a Saturday, and after coming back he planned to go out with his mates for a few drinks. God knows what time that would end.

So George was in a hurry and dressed for the part: black leather jacket as a fashion statement - but also to withstand the January cold – those favoured *winklepicker* shoes (the pointed leather *must-haves* of the day) *and* hair slicked back like Elvis, another hero of the moment. The young man was certainly not inclined at that point in time, towards any family chats: loving or otherwise. In fact, in those days, he had begun to communicate less and less with his *father* and clearly avoided getting too close to him, as had been quite normal just a couple of years before.

“There’s a letter from your sister Dorothy. She’s inviting you to Australia.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” George pulled up in his tracks, already halfway out the door. Within seconds he had put two and two together. *“Hey, that’s different.”* He said to himself. *“A ticket out of here; out of this mess of a life. That would be fantastic!”*

So somewhat begrudgingly, George went over and sat down at the table, next to the man who had taken care of him since he first came into the family as an illegitimate baby in a cardboard box. The blue airmail letter (the main means of overseas communication in those days) talked a lot about life in Australia and what the family - Dorothy, her husband John and their two children - had been doing during the Australian Summer. Towards the end, on the turnover back page, he came to the bit he was most interested in. *“We would like to invite George to come and stay with us for a while,”* it read, *“It’s a*

great life here and I'm sure he'll love it, but he can always choose to return to England if and when he wants to."

George scanned that bit a couple of times. Geography was his thing and travel his ambition. It was like manna from heaven.

"Sounds great. When do we start?" were his only words of response as rather abruptly he pushed back the chair, his mind now focused on the five-star football match with his weekend mates.

Teenage years are not always the time for close reflection, but if he had taken a few seconds to look carefully, before he stormed off, somewhat reinvigorated by the news from Australia, George would have seen a tear forming in his grandfather's eye; his father as it was, for the past sixteen years. George had shared *dad's* bed and sat on his knee at the dinner table; the only one permitted to drink from the patriarch's huge white, pint-sized mug. This once tall white-haired man could see he was about to lose his blossoming youngster: the little boy he had cherished and cared for, from the trials of his birth to that present moment. He knew he would miss him dearly, but he also realized paradoxically, that by marrying again and fathering even more children at an older age, he had been the one to cause George to distance himself ... and probably it seemed to leave, perhaps forever. For in his heart the ageing man, by then well into his sixties, knew he might never see the boy he loved so much, ever again.

A few months later, George stood on the deck of the newly commissioned P&O liner, *Oriana*, waving to his family way down below, on the dockside. They had travelled together from Cornwall to Southampton: four of them plus George, in his *dad's* small *Ford Prefect* estate car. Now, the engines of the ship growled, as the massive vessel moved sideways, away from the quay. One by one the coloured streamers from ship to shore snapped and lingered in the breeze, before dropping down towards the dark waters below. In a more contemplative mood, George could have spotted the analogy to be drawn from this, for in fact it was the moment when the young man, just halfway

through his teens, cut ties with the old country and threw his lot in with the new: that land of opportunity *down under*: Australia.

George recalls those turbulent times that ended with him waving goodbye to Cornwall and striking out for the lucky country.

“My secondary school days began with a dose of excruciating embarrassment (similar to the soiled underpants episode, during my first class, when I was just six years old). It was an omen perhaps of things to come! After being anointed to attend the esteemed Grammar School halls of learning - where the lucky few were segregated from the unlucky rest, who trudged off to attend the nearby ‘Secondary Modern’ - I recall on the third or fourth day, being singled out by the class teacher and commanded, in no uncertain terms, to come to the front. He grabbed me sharply, by my left ear, with the sole intention of causing embarrassment. “Filthy boy!” he said, loud enough to create a spectacle for the whole class to hear ... to which they responded with uproarious laughter. “Wash behind your ears tomorrow boy, or you will sit outside the whole day.” The next morning, with freshly scrubbed ears, I listened in awe, as Yuri Gagarin, the first human in space, circled the Earth!

The ears incident heralded the start of the rot during those grammar school days. It was indeed a forewarning - or veiled prediction - that my life to come was not destined to be all plain travel on smooth terrain, and that indeed there would be quite a few serious bumps and potholes to navigate along the way. I guess it’s the same for most people - life is not always easy - but in my case, over the years since my thwarted abortion, it feels as though I’ve had to deal with a host of extraordinary incidents, scattered across various countries and continents, and several decades in time. Some people have an easier ride, some I guess harder; I have never had to deal for example with real poverty, or exist in a war zone. Looking back to those earlier days, I can only surmise that life is experienced according to personal circumstance, and while being acutely relevant to each person at their own level, it bears no direct comparison to individuals in other spheres, or at alternative levels.

In hindsight, it's hard for me to sum up in a nutshell what went wrong. I think it must have been the coming together of so many factors that seemed to change me from the starry-eyed eleven-year-old - playing 'Mole' in a stage play of 'Wind in the Willows' for my finale at the local village school - into an unrecognizable clone of Elvis Presley, less than five years later, with oiled hair styled into a 'quiff', along with clothes and surly attitude, to mirror and admire 'The King'.

During this time, when I seemed almost to morph into an alien being, there were still many glimpses of the old me: the OK me. Like when I was out on the farm with my older brother, who became in effect my first, and perhaps most important mentor (much later I was shocked to discover this man, twelve years older than me, was in reality my uncle). I never stopped loving those lush green slopes, with the hay barn at the summit and primroses flowering down below, near the riverbank and in the hedgerows, to herald the coming warmth of Summer. After school I would huff and puff while climbing 'Great Hill', to fetch the cows, then stumble down the rocky, high-hedged lane, in wellington boots behind the herd. Each of the fields had a distinctive name - Dudley Hill or Outer Oxner Park for example, and now decades later I can still recite their names. Many of them too I came to know intimately, while sitting for hours on the tractor seat, ploughing or harrowing their dirt. I also grew to know each one of those dairy cows in that herd - their names and their natures - which at that time was only about twenty-five in number. Some were leaders, most were followers; in those days some still had horns and could turn on you - like a bull to a matador - but most were docile. After milking, my job was to shovel the discharged shit and straw mix, onto an enormous heap just outside the dairy door. Apart from cutting out the light coming through those narrow dairy doors, the stinking, ruminating winter heap also helped to keep the place warm. With hindsight I can say I loved all of it, even shoveling the shit!

Over ten years, I developed a close affinity with the land, which to a certain degree fashioned my later life. It was only back inside the grand monolith of a house on top of the hill, after milking and stumbling up 'The Break', behind my 'brother', when everything changed, and I reverted to a worse than stereotypical teenager. Then I was

faced with my grandfather - who had posed as a very loving father for as long as I could remember - plus his fiery new wife and their fast-developing brood of children. That was the moment when it all fell apart. Most teenagers, everyone recognizes, can become a bit surly, distant, hard to handle I guess; but I was something much more. Banished at home, black-balled at school: it was not a good situation to be in, and I have to admit (in hindsight) that my response to it all made things a whole lot worse.

After spending one year to get to know the town grammar school - when we were all mixed up across three classes – for the second year I was relegated to the third (and lowest) stream. My family was perplexed, but I guess it was partly my own fault; I didn't do enough homework, and then only really concentrated in class when my favourite subject, or teacher, came along. Geographical studies were tops, and other 'arty' type subjects not too bad, such as art itself, history and 'English Lit'. The rest – from my warped reasoning – all deserved to be binned. So that's where I put them!

In the third stream, and without very much effort, I didn't do too badly; usually well within the top ten overall. But it was the 'without-much-effort' part that turned teachers against me; and not just one; almost all ... except Geography of course. A dull student could be praised for coming fifteenth in the class, but a bright child would be severely chastised for coming fifth. Thus, from the second year on there was an all-pervading attitude from them that I was lazy, which prompted most on a persecution trail, to make me see the light, so that I might then perform up to my recognized potential. But their methods were almost totally ineffective: where today we understand the value of praise to bring out the best, they only understood the value of put-downs and oppression, which with me was a route to eek out the worst.

Before long I began to take debatable refuge in the disguise of class clown, which delighted my classmates, but annoyed the masters and mistresses even more. I remember one art class, when I encouraged my partner for the day to help me collect all the paint pots and hold them on our desk. After a while, the rest of the class were searching for paints which were piled high on our desktop. We had hardly touched a

paint brush and were both thrown out of the class by Miss Yule, an elderly (and most probably delightful) teacher, almost in tears. That escapade, which I regarded as an outstanding success, resulted in a visit to the headmaster's office for a caning: something which I was quite familiar with by that stage.

However, it was the days and nights out of school, which most likely set the seal on my impending expulsion. I became friendly with boys two or three years older - regarded, even by some of my classmates as not the best company – and through them began to know the pubs that would serve drink to under-age patrons, plus the snooker hall, which turned a blind eye to students playing truant from school. By fourteen or fifteen I had attained a remarkable proficiency at billiards, snooker and pool, and could hold my own at the saloon bar. It was not a route to success, that's for sure! An unauthorized trip to see Cliff Richard and The Shadows, on stage at The Plymouth Odeon during their hay day of No. 1 hits, probably enabled good old Jimmy Lingard, the moustachioed, cane-wielding head, to tap the final nail into my expulsion coffin. Myself and my delinquent mates were fairly and squarely nobbled and accused of truant. They were severely reprimanded; for me it was one offence too many.

But the downward slide was interspersed with some fantastic memories. During the summer before leaving Cornwall I managed to find my first real job, along with Roger, a best friend (who did not hang out in pubs and who had a more positive effect on my character). Our task was to clean caravans every weekend, before the next week's holiday makers invaded the hill-top park, which overlooked the picturesque fishing village of Polperro and The English Channel. Each Saturday through that summer we would set off to cycle the four or five miles through the Cornish lanes - on our highly-prized racing bikes, with the smells, the sounds and the excitement of summer in the air - taking turns to surge into the lead as we pushed hard for the next bend. That, I remember, as one of the best feelings from those early years.

Roger, for some unknown reason known by all as 'Sid', was also a soul-mate when it came to music. He had a small portable record player and when we weren't out cleaning

caravans most of our time together revolved around listening to the new, almost revolutionary music, of the early sixties. The Stones and The Beatles of course swept all before them, but there were others from the other side of the Atlantic whom we also idolized. Del Shannon and Duane Eddy were firm favourites of mine, while 'Sid', I remember, went for Dion Dimucci (a name to conjure with) and Neil Sedaka. Each week we would turn up with our latest '45 rpm' disc, then both sprawled out on the carpet in his room, listen repeatedly, before getting into mild argument on the pros and cons of this latest offering from the 'Hit Parade'.

This much-cherished friend, slightly younger than me, was an only child with a very stable family. Both parents were in fact teachers at the local secondary modern school. I think they saw that I was going 'off the rails', but nevertheless tried to help where they could. Roger, with his more positive attitude went on to complete 'A Levels' and later became a scientist. I never saw him again after leaving for Australia.

A few days before leaving Cornwall, one of my sisters - an auntie of course, at a later stage - gave me a camera and a few spools of slide film. I was elated: one of my dreams was to possess a camera. So, I spent the best part of two days photographing my family of that time, in the Cornish setting that I knew so well. It would be the last time I would see my grandfather (alias father) and more than eight years before I would return - a twenty-something Australian, with a new bride by my side and down-under accent - to re-unite with a somewhat estranged family. I had moved on to become an agricultural advisor: a technical representative for a company, where I commanded a territory as big as Scotland! They had grown into their marriages, with kids everywhere, and all with that strange West-country voice, that I also used to own.

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I stayed for a while on deck as, in the fading light, the big ship ploughed down The Solent and out into the English Channel. I was excited about the voyage to come and the places that would enter my viewfinder along the way. But those high spirits were quickly dampened during the first night when we hit a violent storm, whilst tracking

southwards across the Bay of Biscay; a notorious stretch of water known for its rough seas. Lying on my bunk and turning various shades of green, I recall watching a white towel, suspended from a hook on the wood-grained door of my small two-berth cabin, swinging from side to side; moving in tune with the grand ocean liner, as she rolled in the enormous swell.

The next day, anchored by Gibraltar's Rock was a complete contrast, with millpond waters under a cloudless sky. I leaned over the railings, watching as small boats ferried people back and forth to Oriana. Then we were on our way again, and just one day later I found myself wandering the back streets of Naples. For me it was an enthralling experience: as if the texts from those Geography lessons over the past few years – which I had always been captivated by - were coming to life in real time.

Back on board, I was finding my sea legs and becoming familiar with the ship's layout. Intrigued by the daytime disappearance of my forty-something cabin-mate – whom I only saw when snoring - I decided to scout around and try to find his hide out. Then, as we were crossing the Mediterranean from Italy to Egypt, I spotted him by chance, in one of the ship's many bars. He invited me for a drink, and the barman seemed not to object (considering my young age). When I asked for a scotch and soda my cabin-mate also didn't bat a lash. "My choice too," he confirmed. "Cheers! Let's drink to that." From that day on, the pocket money I had carried with me from Cornwall, reduced rather rapidly.

By that stage we were leaving Europe, destined for more exotic ports. Before entry to the Suez Canal, in Port Said, I remember bartering with the traders who stood in small boats, way down below, full of mustard-brown and russet-red leather bags, one of which I bought; the money and the purchase being shuffled up and down on a long rope. Later, SS Oriana led a convoy of some 30 ships down the canal to the town of Suez, stopping on the way in Bitter Lake, to let another convoy going Northward, pass buy. The incredible heat of that day was a forerunner of what was to come in Australia.

Then quite amazingly, after tracking South from Suez, we made an overnight stop in Aden, where Peter, a classmate from the Cornish village school I had attended some

years before, came on board to take me ashore for a tour of the town, plus a meal amongst camels and dimly lit souks. His family boasted a long line of sailor folk, and it was his first posting in the Royal Navy. He was 18 and I was 16. Incredible to think that just a few years before, we had been playing catch in the primary school playground; now we sat as young men, talking and smoking sheesha, with the bright lights of Oriana - anchored close to shore - as a glittering backdrop.

Leaving Peter to help keep the Union Jack flying in Aden (which as history knows, didn't last much longer of course) the good ship Oriana and I ploughed on across the Indian Ocean to Ceylon, another (former) British outpost. It was a particularly rough section of the journey, bringing back memories of that first night in the Bay of Biscay. But little did I know, there was even worse to come!

After 24 hours in the heat of Colombo – my first taste of the tropics - where on-board friends were surprised to bump into me, a young lad wandering the streets alone, we all resumed back on board for the longest sea-leg: a six-day, straight line journey South to Perth. For a few days It was all deck games and smooth going, then on the day prior to arrival in Fremantle - the main port - we started to run into bad weather, which turned into the mother-of-all storms (our third and decidedly worst of the journey). This meant the big ship had to 'hove to' (which I think is the nautical expression for stop and wait for things to calm down) for a full twelve hours, until the wind and the waves had reduced enough to allow the local pilot to board, so that Oriana could be steered into port.

After that it was a short two-day hop, across a relatively calm and tranquil Great Australian Bight, to our destination port: Melbourne. There, I was due to meet the family who had invited me to stay (and unknown to me at the time, my mother, whom I had last seen more than ten years before).

Viewed in hindsight, I sometimes feel the short three-week journey from England to Australia had contrived to change that stropky teenager into a blossoming adult. I had stood on deck as S.S. Oriana pulled away from the Southampton dockside, a somewhat grouchy and gangly youngster; then from the voyage, which traversed vast oceans and

took me to exotic ports, I was afforded a privileged glimpse of an adult world, which amazed and inspired me. When I looked out from the deck, as the massive ship crossed Port Phillip Bay, and then slowly edged into the Port Melbourne quay, it was as if I had begun to inhabit a new, more adult persona.

The journey had hinted at an exciting world, beyond my prior conception, and I felt the urge from somewhere deep down inside, to put the past few years of turmoil behind me, so that I could respond without constraint to a future of brighter horizons.

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