

Confessions of a Wanker

by Alan Wills

Based on a true story of a boy's coming of age in London's tough East End



Some biographical notes:

Alan Wills was born at Thorpcombe Hospital on 23/10/1940 and attended the Markhouse Road Secondary Modern School 1952 to 1955, where he was a Prefect in 1953/1954 and Head Boy in 1954/1955.



School Friends included Barbara Crew (Head Girl), Ann Berry, Ronny Wish, Molly ? and many more who's names I do not remember.

Mother Ada Florence - Father James William Wills - House at 32 Albany Road - Friends: Doug Kemp, Jeff ?, Denny Silver, Dave Mead.

Cousins: Kenny Swanton, Josie Swanton, Ernie Sellsby, Barry Collins, Tony Collins, Brian Collins. Girl Friends: Glenda Rowe, Rita ?,

Ann Blackwell, Lynette Gresham (fiancée).

Worked for Stanwood Radio 1955 to 1963, completed apprenticeship in TV repair. Friends included Geof Onslow, David? Peter Johnson.

Engineers: Len Ash, Ron Parrot, Joe Gallo, Charlie Davis. Manager Arthur Spinks.

The White Swan, at Wood Street and Havant Road, was my local pub from 1956 to 1963, Pub friends included Melvin & Michael Gresham,

Ronny Wish. and others who's names I have forgotten.

Isington Motorcycle Club friends. Jack Levy was a good motorcycle friend he lived in Woodford.

Immigrated to California 1963

Now 69years of age living in L.A. California. 3 children, 3 step children by 2nd wife.

12 grandchildren. When back to university when I retired and graduated Magna Cum Laude with a BA degree.

Now Simi retired. Part time Industrial Inspector. Owner of 12 rental houses. Travel world wide 1/3 of the year.

Have written a coming of age story, based in Walthamstow, called "Cockneys Ain't So Tough."

However my editor wants to change the title to "Confessions of a Wanker" before it goes to print

This will be followed by 2 sequels "Across the Pond." and "Life After Divorce." both of which are written, and are currently being edited.

More information on request (email: awills@charter.net)

Chapter 1 - After the War

“G-O-D” the vicar's three-syllable word always gets me attention. I’m looking up at his stern face high above me in his pulpit. His double chins hide most of his white clerical collar. Me eyes are glued on his huge mouth filled with big teeth, and his well-worn black suit strains against his plumpness. I think. *This monster could eat a small kid.*

“G-O-D wants you to refrain from self-abuse,” he demands, pointing his outstretched- finger directly at me. Me mind questions his words. Self-abuse? Wills, is ‘e talking about wanking?

No, self-abuse sounds like something that's painful and wanking is a release; like floating up to ‘eaven.

"G-O-D knows when you abuse yourself!" he bellows. "You will pay for this sin by going to a fiery hell!"

I’m eleven and a half, standing with three other scouts as the color guard in front of the whole bloody congregation wearing me neatly pressed tan scout uniform with merit badges on both sleeves. I grip the flagpole tightly with both hands, trying to hide behind it. The Boy Scout law rings in me ears, A Boy Scout is clean of mind and deed.

Everywhere I look I sense God, in this massive white stone St. Saviors Church, this Sunday morning. I feel the Holy Spirit looking right down the flagpole into me dirty mind with a thousand piercing eyes.

Me mother has eyes that can see though solid brick walls and around corners. She says God knows and sees everything. Funny, many times I totally forget about Him being around. Ironically, I never think of God while hiding in our outside loo, even though I’m making one more attempt at floating up to heaven. The age-old horror stories of "Wankers Doom,": hair growing from the palm of me hand, has not deterred me. But "G-O-D WANTS YOU TO REFRAIN" keeps rattling around in me brain. Mother says, “God is no one to mess with!”

I close me eyes and try to escape the vicar’s harsh words. Me mind flashes back through time and I see myself at a World War II bomb-site with me older cousins. I’m a happy little blonde, blue-eyed, six year old boy, rummaging through the personal stuff strewn throughout the blitzed homes. I find a small suitcase covered in dust and fill it with my new found treasures. Torn faces in broken picture frames, lifeless dolls with severed arms and legs, and other previously valued possessions of departed owners. I find one plimsoll and dig with a bent knife in the dirt to find it’s mate. I take off me black leather shoes with the holes in the bottom, that make me feet wet when I jump in puddles. The dirty white rubber shoes are too big but Patricia, me cousin, says I’ll grow into them. She says I can keep the plimsolls and little suitcase as the boy who owned them is in heaven.

Holding the flagpole, I think, *then the suitcase was me most prized possession. In me bedroom I use to talk into the suitcase to the boy in heaven. I was never alone again.*

A moment later me eyes spring open and me head jolts back. I now realize the human suffering that those bombsite playgrounds represent. The overpowering stench of decay returns to me nose and throat, I gag on the memory. I cling to the flagpole to regain balance.

The vicar drones on and on and my eyelids close again. I see the train bringing me and me mummy home from Liverpool. I’m five. It stops with a loud ‘iss of steam. A man opens the carriage door. He sort of looks like the picture that mummy kept next to our bed while we were evacuated, but with more lines. I’m a little scared of this stranger. He lifts me down to the platform and says how big I got. I don’t feel big, looking up at huge people all around me. I’m afraid I’ll be stepped on. He throws his arms around me mummy. They hug, and she cries. *I hate him for making her cry.* Then they kiss.

Each takes one of me hands and we walk down the platform. They talk about the London bombing and his job as air raid warden, missing each other, and terrible things that happened to some evacuated kids. I touch the toy knife sharpening man in me jacket pocket, and remember how happy we were staying with the old couple, who I called Uncle Bob and Aunt Mary. I go to show Daddy the toy, but change me mind. I keep look up at them but they just look at each other. *'e doesn't even know I'm 'ere. I like Uncle Bob better, I think, and not just 'cause he gave me the toy. I wish we'd never come back to London.*

The vicar's monotone voice reminds me of the drone of the German rockets that flew over London during the war. The big difference being, once the vicar stops talking we can all head back to the Scout room for biscuits and lemonade.

Me mind flashes back to 1943, I was three. The air-raid siren wails and me mommy scoops me up and carries me to the dark, damp, air-raid shelter, underground in our back yard. When I wake-up I can't see I have white stuff in me eyes. She says not to pick at it and calls it apses, as she washes it away. She tells me the loud noise in the sky was from German rockets, called doodlebugs, and that if the noise stops we have to get under the bed quick. Many nights in the shelter we hear the engine stop and under the bed we'd go. It's a fun game. She'd always holds me tight in her arms and prays to God that we'll be spared. When we hear the explosion, mommy cries, saying the Doodlebug had blown-up nearby, and Londoners had perished in the flames. She always asks God to save their souls.

I hold the flagpole tight and think, God, *will I ever be free of these memories of the war?*

I look around the church at all the neighborhood people dressed in their Sunday best. There are many more women than men. Mum said, countless husbands and sons didn't return from the war. I feel sad as I see the little old ladies with rounded shoulders and hunched backs sitting alone, who still dress in black and never smile. *God I 'ate war!*

Every Sunday the vicar says a prayer for their dearly departed. Then, I smile at the younger women who wear blue eye shadow and tight sweaters that show pointy breasts. I watch as some of them flick their hair back, or cough to gain the attention of the few single men in the congregation. I say a silent prayer, *God, please! No more wars! Plus help our fifties generation bring 'appiness back to England.*

It seems like bleeding 'ours that I've been standing 'ere 'olding this bloody flagpole. I think, shift from foot to foot. Once again I feel the weight of the war memories pushing down me shoulders and me eyelids feel heavy. I open me eyes real wide and try to empty me mind of war. Like a shuffled deck of cards me mind stops on the school exam that I took a few days ago. Have you ever noticed the questions they ask on school exams pertain to information that you'd swear had never been covered in class? This was definitely the case with me "Eleven Plus" which determines the type of senior school that you attend.

Looking at the exam paper in utter disbelief, I was petrified for most of the first hour. Then it hit me. *The school board has obviously devised questions guaranteed to eliminate the likes of me. What would me Dad's hero, Field Marshal Montgomery, do?*

In Dad's war stories he says Monty distrusted the obvious, and out-thought his enemy.

Me eyes become slits as I think hard about the exam. Then I feel a smug smile spread across me face, as I know what I must do. *Ignore the questions and check the answers in systematic order. A cunning teacher would start easy, with 'free yes answers to sucker ya in. Then slip in a no, then 'free more yeses, one more no and so on. Monty would be proud of me, deciphering this sneaky bloody plan.*

I quickly apply me theory, marking the first three questions with a yes, then one no, then the next three yes and another no. I smile; it feels very good being this confident. I quickly finish the exam

and I'm one of the first to leave the room. I wait outside in the drab green hall, displaying our school crest Circa 1902, feeling smug. A couple of classmates, “A” students, who we call book-worms, walk out of the exam. On checking me three-yes-to-one-no theory with their answers, it becomes obvious that I could be busted all the way back to kindergarten. Looking down at me shoes I wonder how to break this news to me mother, I hear a familiar voice. I look up and see Danny.

Today as always, Danny's clothes look as though 'e 'as slept in them. One sock up the other down around his ankle, his shoes are a combination of scuffs and mud, his dull mousy brown hair sticks up in all directions. Danny's face is a bombsite of acne and pock marks, which he continually scratches with his filthy fingernails.

“'ow d'ya do then, Alan?”

“Not so good Danny,” I admit.

"Sitting in the bloody back of the class, that was our downfall me old mate."

"'ow's that, Danny?"

"Well, information travels on sound waves, don't it?"

Knowing Danny once built a crystal radio set, I feel safe in agreeing with him.

"Sure does."

"So then it makes sense that some info. 'as long-waves and some 'as short-waves."

"Ya, that sounds right to me, Danny."

"I'm sure Alan, like me, ya noticed that the exam was filled with bloody short-wave length questions? So, as the information never reached us at the back of the bloody class. 'ow could we be expected to know the bloody answers?"

It made perfectly good sense to me. However, on me return home, me mother is less receptive to Danny's theory. She keeps asking embarrassing questions, like, “which questions didn't you understand?” Then she says the typical mother things, “God helps those that help themselves, you know? It's all up to you, Alan! I'm just trying to help!”

“How's she *going to 'elp me?* I think, as she's talking. *She can't even understand Danny's theory of long wave and short waves.* “See mum, the exam was filled with short questions that never reach the back of the room, where me and Danny sit.”

“That's quite enough, Alan!” she interrupts “Go to your room without dinner. Wait up there until your father gets home and see if he buys your story of Danny's waves. Personally, I reckon you are in for a good hiding!”

Chapter 2 - Living in Two Worlds

At thirteen Dave is the oldest of me mates. Danny and Eddy are the same age as me, twelve. We've all lived on Albany Road since we were born. It's a short street with terraced houses on both sides. Dad says they're two hundred years old. They look the same as all the working class homes in the East End of London. They are narrow two story brick houses, with a bay window, a front door next to your neighbor's door, and slate roofs. They have a black cast-iron coal stove in the living-room for cooking and heating. The toilet faces out to the back yard, and is bloody freezing cold in winter. There's no bathroom and no hot water.

Mum's sister Aunt Jenny and her hubby George, who suffers with terrible gout, lives next door at number 34. Their kids are me cousins, Paul's fifteen and Patricia's seventeen. Eddy's family lives opposite. Something I still can't figure is how Eddy can be their cousin, but they tell me he's not my cousin.

My best mate Dave lives four houses up on our side, and Danny Silver lives opposite him. Everyone knows everyone's business in our six block neighborhood. Dad says the war brought everyone together. Me self I think it's all the mum's chin-wagging their gossip over a pot of tea after their old men go off to work.

Because Dave is the oldest in our gang we think he knows everything. He is tall with a long face and square chin, sort of like a movie star, but with a big nose. All us other boys on Albany Road have blue eyes. Dave's smarter, his piercing eyes are brown, plus he tells us he's smarter. He always says, "If I don't know it, it ain't worth knowing."

Danny's dad is old and crotchety. His younger mum, who me dad calls a tart, shows lots of cleavage. She always stops, in full view of us boys, and lifts her skirt above her knees; looks back and straighten her stocking. Fridays and Saturdays nights his crippled old man stands out front and yells up the street, "Piss off ya trollop" as she heads for the pub.

Danny's a loner and a misfit. All us boys feel sorry for him, so we let him tag along.

Due to the shortage of teachers after the Second World War, students are herded through school with little concern for education. Unbeknownst, to me, it is impossible to fail the Eleven Plus exam. Kids who spell their names correctly, know the date, and answer most of the questions go on to the better schools to prepare for university. The rest of us are sent to Markhouse Road Secondary Modern school, just a five minute walk from me house, and a meager four year preparation for the rest of me life. For some unknown reason, me attitude during me first year at this mediocre medieval school is that of an onlooker watching a mere rehearsal. During the first year's final exam it hits me. Christ, I missed the main performance. Mother I swear I'll study hard next term.

Me and me mates think Cockney is real cool. So I live in two worlds. With my parents I speak proper English, and with me mates Cockney. Some people think, or as Cockneys say it ‘fink, the Cockney dialect low class. For us it’s a badge of honor to drop our H’s and “ ‘ope people fink we’re Cockney”.

We are also proud of our tough walk, not that I would let my mum see it, she calls it a cocky Cockney swagger. She say’s Cockneys are ruffians and low life who will never amount to anything. So as not to upset her, I keep me Cockney gear at me mate Dave’s house. Wearing Cockney gear is like giving the finger to English class consciousness. On Fridays, as soon as school lets out, I rush home, kiss me mum, and tell her I am going to Dave’s “House” to study. In front of her, I always emphasize H words. But then discard all my H’s on the way up our street. Dave’s mom, who is a real Cockney, opens the front door. “ ‘ello Alan, Dave’s in ‘is room waiting fa’ ya, listening to ‘is bloody awful music.” Her Cockney lilt is music to me ears. His dad calls from the living room,

“ ‘ello Alan, you two lay-about’s going up ‘ igh Street to ogle birds?”

“More than likely Mr. Kent, bird watching is me and Dave’s favorite pastime.”

As I climb the stairs I think, Dave is lucky ‘aving young Cockney parents. Wills you was a mistak! Me parents are older, and don’t have a clue about teenagers. I smile hearing Bill Haley’s Rock Around the Clock through the door. Bursting through the door, I kick off me leather school shoes, tear off me navy school blazer with the school crest on the pocket, and remove the noose they call the old school tie. With relief I kick off me gray short trousers, which label me a child. In me Cockney "gear," blue twill work trousers and the black pullover, I feel older. Lying on his bed, already dressed the same. Dave watches me as I strut around him like a bantam cock. He jumps up and opens the door, and I know we are ready to hang out on the street corners to be seen.

Outside of school and church our whole world revolves around the High Street. There are hundreds of stores, on both sides, all the way up the mile-and-a-half-long street. On market days the road is closed to traffic and becomes cram-packed with stands, known as bargain stalls. These are loaded with everything from clothes to china, to gold fish and cute puppy dogs. Push carts known as barrows are laden with fruit, flowers, or cockles, mussels, and fish. The barrow boys or costermongers, as some people call them, are all real Cockneys, and we hang on their every word. For us boys, the walk up and down High Street is sheer heaven. We find it almost impossible to pass a store window without stopping to comb our hair in the reflection. Along High Street just one tailor shop, Lou Rose, has a pair of America blue jeans in their window. Dave says, “they’ll never ever sell ‘um ‘cos they cost more than a bleeding suit.”

Dave told us, “These ‘ere jeans came all the way from America. They’re the same as them worn by movie stars, the likes of James Dean, and rock and roll groups. You’ve all seen the pictures on me bedroom wall. Every Friday all four of us made a bee line for Lou Rose just to look at the jeans in envy.

A few months ago we all followed Dave up High Street to Joe’s half price stall, where he showed us blue work trousers, that when he rolled up the bottoms looked like jeans . “Now, as we’re all mates.” Dave said, “I need ya to cough up ya money so I can get the first pair. Then every week each of ya can filch money from ya mums handbag and by months end we’ll all ‘ave Cockney gear.” We all empty our pockets into Dave’s hands. and he buys the blue work trousers. Then he went into the public toilet and comes out wearing them with a tight black wool pullover. “So what do ya ‘fink, gang?”

“Dave, were did ya get the new black wooly.” I ask

“Sort of slipped into the bag with the jeans didn’t it? When I pointed out the bird with the big tits, and Joe turned around to look.”

By months end we all had our Cockney outfits. For me the wooly itches like crazy. “Don’t be a bloody sissy!” Dave says, “It’s in, and remember, we’re tough Cockneys.”

In fact, our town it a good sixty minutes by bus to Cheapside, and the famous Bow church. Where to be a real Cockney you have to be born within the sound of its bells.

Me mum enrolls me at Smiths Dance Academy to learn to ballroom dance. Me partner is a very tall, older woman, who has rotten teeth and bad breath. I get the basic step but have trouble with the turns, so she lift me up at every corner and puts me down, and we dance on. I live in fear that me mates will find out I am taking ballroom dancing lessons

Dave tells us that Rock and Roll will change the world, and us 50’s kids will do things our parents generation never even thought of doing.

“Can you picture,” he asks “ ya dad sticking ‘is tongue half way down your mum’s throat or shagging ‘er in an ally?”

The thought makes me sick. I think, I know me mum would never let me dad do that.

Dave teaches us boys how to comb our hair in the latest styles with Brylcreem, hair grease. He has sideburns, and combs his jet-black hair into a DA,(ducks ass) with a “Tony Curtis” rolling over to touch the center of his forehead. Dave is “real cool.”

Dave is the only boy in his second year class who wears long trousers. This was prompted by a note sent home to his mother from the girls' gym teacher, Miss Babcock. It informed Mrs. Kent that

Dave's manhood had outgrown the length of his short trousers and that it was causing a major distraction to the girls in her gym class.

Miss Babcock is a beautiful young woman in her mid-twenties who always wears shorts. All us boys gave her ten on a ten-scale. Eddy is crazy for her, and gave her a twenty. Eddy and Danny are like chalk and cheese. Eddy's dad marches him to the barbershop for a short-back-and-sides every couple of weeks. He has almost white blonde hair, what there is of it, and there is never a hair out of place. He has to call his dad sir, and we are sure he would be court marshaled if he ever answered him back. Eddy's has three brothers and two sisters all much older than him. Even though he sits at the back of the class with me and Danny we ain't real close mates. His dad won't let him out to play much, and he's always doing chores or reading. I'm still confused, me cousin Paul says Eddy ain't me cousin's, but he's Paul's cousin? It must be true as Eddy never tells me no personal stuff, like cousin's do.

Today our science master was taken ill, so Miss Babcock came to our class as the substitute teacher. Fortunately, this voluptuous gym teacher knows nothing about science, and agrees to read a story to us. Me, Eddy, and Danny, sitting in the back of the room, and are going nuts over her short shorts, and bulging white cotton shirt. Frantically I wave me hand in the air, " 'cuse me, Miss. Me and me mates can't 'ear ya from way back 'ere. Can we come up front and sit on the floor?"

She agrees and we position ourselves in front of her with our eyes bulging. The direct view up the leg of her shorts, into the dark unknown, more than compensates for her poor reading abilities. At the bell, we rush to find Dave and tell him what we had seen... or, should I say what we hope he'll believe we've seen. In actuality, by squinting hard I almost saw her underwear. Well, at least I thought I almost did.

Chapter 3 - Almost Athletes

It's a short bike ride down Low Hall Lane from our road, past the war time allotments where neighbors still grow vegetables, to the green playing fields and swings of St. James Park. To the right of the park is the smelly ugliness of the city dump, a sad place where poor wretches rummage through trash for items to repair and sell. Its slim pickings for them as the dustmen always bag anything of value for themselves from outside the homes. Behind the park, there's the jungle, behind that the city used trash fill to build a beautiful sports area, consisting of football fields, cricket pitches, and a running track.

Danny uses the quiet of the cricket field as an escape from his battling parents. he's put his heart and soul into cricket, and has become an exceptional batter. It's the start of our second year, and he encourages me to try out for the team as a bowler. Mr. Stanton, the cricket master, stands three feet from the wicket and decides to “kill two birds with one stone” and observe both me bowling and Danny's batting stroke. Although I have never actually bowled before, I've seen cricket matches on TV, and feel I am destined to be a world renowned bowler. Me run-up is perfect. Me right arm rotates smoothly from behind me back and over me shoulder, and the ball leaves me hand at incredible speed. Unfortunately, me aim is exactly three feet to the right of Danny's bat and the rock-hard leather cricket ball strikes Mr. Stanton in the crotch. His screams lead me to believe that I have totally demolished his family jewels. I run to where he is reeling on the grass.

"Sorry, sir! I say. Must 'ave slipped out of me 'and. Won't 'appen again. Do ya want me to 'ave anover go?"

"Another go?" Mr. Stanton answers, in what sounds like a female voice. “Are you mad? Don't you ever show your face here again!”

So ended what might have been a promising career as a cricketer. *Who cares! I think. Cricket is almost as exciting as watching paint dry on a fence.* Mr. Stanton transfers me out of cricket and into the field and track program, along with Dave, Eddy, and the other cricket dropouts. Due to the shortage of teachers he is both the field and track and the cricket coach. He tells us that we are his first priority, but never spends more than the first five minutes at the track with us. Once the batsmen and wicket keepers have their leg pads on, he disappears to umpire their cricket match and we never see him again.

Being dedicated teenagers, we always run one lap before heading for the stands to play cards. However, as with all good things, our poker games come to an abrupt end.

It's a Friday, the last day of what had been an unlucky week for me playing cards. I'm down two shillings and sixpence to Dave, one and six pence to Eddy and even a few pence to the two twits who make up the rest of motley group. Riding me bike to the track this morning, I feel this could be me lucky day and that at worst I'll break even.

As I approach the others, surrounding Mr. Stanton, I can't help smiling at the array of non-athletic gear. Dave is wearing cutoff work trousers, black leather shoes, and a black sweater. The

twits look as if their mother dressed them from a rummage sale: Bernard is wearing a silky blue shirt and a pair of khaki army trousers, and his twin, Gilbert, is wearing an army shirt with the sleeves cut off and a pair of tight red shorts, that I swear are women’s. Eddy ‘as football socks pulled up above his knees, overlapped by white shorts that look two sizes too big. I feel very out of place in my dad’s long white cricket trousers and his starched white cricket shirt. Mother insists that I must dress the part, if I am to carry on me father’s achievements on the cricket pitch. Needless to say, I haven’t told them about being kicked off the cricket team. Therefore, I have to wear the bloody cricket whites, long trousers, and starched shirt, while running on the track.

"Well boys," Mr. Stanton says, "you have been selected to represent Markhouse Road Secondary Modern School at the County Games."

"But Mr. Stanton, we can't" I protest!

"You can and will, or I'll see to it that all you receive a fail for PE on your report card. And remember, I also teach you idiots social studies, which I predict you will also fail, if you don't enter the Interschool Games!" With a smug grin on his silly face, he turns and walks towards the cricket pitch.

"What a prick!" I say, and stick me tongue out to his back.

"No, he ain't a prick!" Dave says. "A prick's useful! ‘e's ‘nuffing but a bleeding blackmailer. But the way I sees it, 'e 'as all the bloody aces, so we 'ave no choice but to become the bloody field and track team. "

"But we don't know ‘nuffing about all that stuff," Eddy says.

"Then we'll learn, and learn bloody quick." Dave says firmly. "The games are in ten weeks and I don't want us to look like the idiots what Stanton ‘finks we are."

"Dave what do ya ‘fink our chances are of winning one of them races?" Eddy asks.

"I would say about a million to bloody one!"

"Oh, that’s OK then" Eddy says, "cause I didn’t “fink we stood any chance."

As agreed we all meet at the running track at six the following morning, giving us two hours to practice before school starts.

"All right you idiots," Dave yells. "As none of us knows our ‘idden talents in field and track, I want ya to line up. When I say go, run as fast and as far as you can."

"Fuck ya Dave! I say. "It’s too bloody cold and too bloody early to be running."

"Little Alan’s cold is ‘e." Dave says with a sneer. "Then run and you’ll get warm."

Eddy takes off like a rocket. Being heavier and taller, it takes me a while to get going. But then I get into a stride and just kept running. Seeing the others sitting on the grass, I run all the way around the track and then join them.

“Alright.” Dave says, “Eddy, you’re quick off the mark, so ya take the ‘undred-yard dash, and the standing broad jump. Alan, the two-twenty and four-forty yard runs. Ya two twins ain’t very fast, and ya look like a couple of bloody fairies tip-toeing through the bleeding tulips. But ya did keep going, so ya can join Alan and Eddy in relay races. But, mark my words ya two. I’ll punch ya lights out if ya don’t do well in the Interschool Games. “As for me,” tall and slim Dave says, “I’m built for the high jump, and long jump. Be no problem, ‘cause I’ve watched both of ‘em on the telly.”

Even though we meet every morning, every evening, and weekends, I’m not feeling or seeing much improvement. As always, we work hard for two hours and collapse in a group on the grass sweating and panting.

Out of breath. I say “Dave, we’re wasting ... our bloody ... time!

“We’re not bloody motivated,” Dave says. “But I ‘fink I’ve got the answer. I went to Mr. Stanton and got the winning times from last years games. Now, ‘ere’s what we’re gonna do. We’re gonna race for green!”

“Oh, ya,” I say, “and where’s this money coming from? It don’t grow on trees!”

“No, Mr. Wills! We’re gonna nick it from our mum’s handbags, a few coins at a time. Then by the games we’ll each ante-up a pound in the pot. The one what gets closest to winning will get the big five pound prize.”

The big day arrives. We meet Mr. Stanton at six A.M. at the bus stop outside our school and board the red double-decker bus. Each of us really looks the part. Mr. Stanton had borrowed matching blue shorts and shirts from his old school. Getting off the bus, the white columned Grecian style South West Essex Tech looms up in front of us. We walk in silence to the running track. I know we’ve trained hard, every morning, evening, and weekend for the entire ten weeks, but I have huge butterflies in me tummy. Entering the field I see hundreds of real field and track athletes from the richer schools, limbering up. All me butterflies form a squadron and then fly upwards. I clench my teeth then swallow hard to stop from throwing up.

Miraculously, I take second in the four-forty and third in the two-twenty. Dave is disqualified from the long jump for continually stepping over the bloody line. However, his long legs place him second in the high jump. The two twits with Eddy and me take third place in the relay. We could have won, but one of the twits refused to let go of the relay baton, and Eddy dragged him half-way around the track.

Eddy shocks us all by winning the hundred-yard dash, and breaking the county record. I’m sure ‘e won’t mind me telling you how. It appears that at the starting line, he felt a terrible rumbling in

his stomach. Then as the gun went off, he says, “I let a very wet fart and was so afraid of pooping me shorts I ran like hell for the finish line, and the

W.C.” He not only won the five pound prize money, he also became the school hero.

On Monday, the headmaster calls all five of us up on stage in front of the whole bloody school, in the assembly hall after morning prayers.

“Jolly good show chaps,” he says. “These five boys showed courage, determination, and physical fitness at the interschool games, and I won’t you all to give them a big hand.

‘Heed their example!’ He continues as the applause dies down “They were the underdogs

and finished with flying colors, Eddy Sells breaking the county record..” thunderous applause starts again, and cuts off the Headmaster’s voice.

Christ, I think, I ‘ope “e never finds out about the five quid. Sure the five pounds made it fun, but I ‘fink the ‘fing what made us achieve the unachievable was our Cockney pride, to show Mr. Stanton that we ain’t no idiots.

Maureen Miller, a well endowed six on a ten-scale brunette, who is labeled semi-easy, approaches me after the assembly.

“ ‘ello Alan...., me name’s Maureen.” She says coyly. “Congratulations, ya’re one of our school ‘eros. I’ve always been turned on by a’ fletes. I’ve wanted to talk to ‘ya fa so long, but I was too shy.” Wearing a black bra beneath a white low cut blouse, she looks as shy as an alligator in a duck pond.

“Oh, Maureen! Glad to meet ya.” I say, unable to keep my eyes out of her cleavage.

She offers to take me to a movie. Considering me empty pockets, I gladly accept.

As we sit down in the back row, a huge bar of Cadbury chocolate flashes on the screen. The movie then proceeds to show Cadbury’s factory, and how chocolate is made.

"So what's the main movie, then, Maureen?"

"This is it!" she says, looking down."

"A bloody movie about Cadburys?"

"Yeah! I got the tickets for free, from a bloke outside Woolworth’s."

"Christ, Maureen! I ‘fought ya was taking me to a real bloody movie."

"Now, now, don't get pissed off. I'll throw me raincoat over us and ya can cop a feel."

The movie disappeared from my consciousness as me ‘and slipped inside her black lace bra and I’m titting-her-up. Unexpectedly, I feel her hand touching the head of me "Pride and Joy" through

me trousers. I feel embarrassed that she knows how excited I am. *Wills*, I think, *ya mates will never believe ya didn't force 'er 'hand down there.*

"Do ya wan ta put ya 'and up me skirt?" she whispers, nibbling on my ear lobe.

"Not 'alf!" I pull my hand from her bra and hold me breathe. I gingerly slip it between her legs, beneath her tartan skirt, and feel the softness of her inner thigh. I stop momentarily knowing that I am about to touch that forbidden place. *Could I be the first of us boys to actually touch what we have talked about for so long?* I think. So, *Wills*, 'ow can 'ya prove it to 'em? *They'll never believe ya!*

"What you two up to?" a voice says from behind a blinding light. It's the usher.

"Oh, nuffing, sir," I say, quickly removing me hand. "We're just cold, so we put the coat over us and..."

"Do ya see stupid idiot written on me forehead?" he says, shining the light in my eyes.

"You two buggers are doing nasties in me cinema and I'm going to call 'ya parents."

I jump up, grab Maureen's hand and push the usher across the aisle, and we run from the theater. We don't stop running till we reach the bottom of High Street.

On the way into the theater a Cadbury girl was standing with a tray of free samples. Maureen had helped herself to two bars of milk chocolate. When we reach her house, she takes them from her handbag, and hands one to me.

"I'm five minutes late and me dad'll kill me," she says. "Sorry we don't 'ave time to finish what we started, but I'll make it up to ya on our next date. I'll eat me Cadbury's in bed, and 'fink of you. On ya way 'ome, Alan, eat the Cadbury, and think about doing something to me." She kisses me really hard and disappears through her front door.

It all happens so quick that I just stand there feeling like a spare prick at a wedding. On me way home I think of her soft smooth thighs while I eat the chocolate, and long for our next date. Me mind is going crazy, *finish what we started. What could that mean?*

I usually sleep in on Saturday morning. But today I awake early, and become aroused remembering the excitement of putting my hand up Maureen Miller's skirt. I dress quickly, run up our street to Dave's house and pound on the door. his dad lets me in.

Without a word, I bound up the stairs, two at a time, and burst through his bedroom door.

"Wake up, Dave! I bloody did it. Wake up, for Christ sake."

Slowly he sits up, wearing orange pajamas, and rubs his eyes. "What's all the bloody fuss about then?" Getting out of bed, he pulls the chamber pot, which we call a "poe", from underneath, and takes a pee.

“I bloody did it.” I yell “I put me bloody ‘and all the way up Maureen Miller’s skirt.”

“So what?” Dave says, still half asleep. “Every bloody boy in school ‘as got a little stink-finger from Maureen Miller!”

I’m crushed. *That dirty slut!* I think. *Boy am I glad I didn’t actually touch ‘er ‘fing. I could have caught some ‘fing that might ‘ave eaten me bloody fingers away.*

Maureen Miller tries to talk to me a few times at school, but I just turn my back on her and without a word, walk away in disgust. I am definitely sworn off birds and pledge to just hang out with me mates. Next time we all go to the cinema and I have to have a bar of Cadbury’s. It recaptures the memory of Maureen Miller’s soft, smooth inner thigh. However, I feel a whole in the pit of me stomach, and I’m left wanting.

It’s now a year later and we all seem to have changed dramatically. At fourteen Dave's voice suddenly jumps three octaves. It goes from the high shrill of a girl being goosed in a crowd to the deep tones of a radio sports announcer.

Eddy, who insists we now call him Ed, says when he looked in the mirror one morning, he discovered that overnight his hands and feet had almost doubled in size. He uses his embarrassment as the reason he always keeping his hands in his pockets. However, we all know the real reason is that he’s playing pocket billiards.

Danny's poor face, and neck have become even more infested with acne. his favorite pastime is squeezing whiteheads that splatter onto the mirror in the boy’s toilet. he collects his blackheads in a matchbox, and grosses out the girls on the school playground. During this pitted-face period the same policeman who caught him sniffing girls' bicycle seats and let him off with just a warning, has now arrested him. It appears he had shinnied-up a drain pipe outside the municipal baths and was ogling women undressing. The policeman would normally shake is finger, call him a dirty little sod and send him on his way. However, this time Danny was holding on the drain-pipe with one hand and amusing himself by abusing himself with the other. The story flew around our school, and he is now called the “World's Wildest Wanker.” Dave predicts, Danny will be the one to start a new club called "Sex Without Partners."

As for myself, I am getting much taller and suffering many of the same teenage growing aches and pains, my legs always ache. Me mates attribute this to me standing while wanking in front of the toilet. How dare they suggest such a thing! I absolutely deny it! But I have change to a seated position.

Chapter 4 - Teenagers: Pubs, Fights and Sex

“We’re too bleeding old to go to Saturday morning pictures.” Dave says. when we meet as usual at the end of our road, ready for the long walk to the Dominion theater.

“I ain’t too old!” Danny says. “I love Roy Rogers and ‘is ‘orse Trigger.”

“ ‘Ya prat Danny! ‘e aint a real cowboy! Just a bloody actor.” Ed says.

“Well ya can’t beat it!A cartoon. Pathy News, and a main feature, for sixpence” I say.

“There’s only one reason our parents sent us to Saturday Morning pictures!” Dave says. “It’s so they can have it away! “ ‘Ya know shagg!”

“Get away Dave, ya nuts!” Danny says. “A good shagg would kill me old men.”

“Dave, I’m sure me mum and dad don’t do that.” I say, then wish I hadn’t.

“So little Alan, do ‘ya ‘fink ‘ya was an immaculate conception?”

“Lets go play football.” I say too cover my embarrassment, and run towards the top of our street, with me mates following me.

A few hours later we’re all sweaty and dirty, sitting on the curb having a bit of a rest after playing street football.

“Couldn’t ‘alf go for a Pigs Ear.” Danny says

“Right Danny! So where ya going get a bloody beer from?” I ask.

“Nick it from me dad’s stash in the cupboard under our stairs. You lot go up to the allotment I’ll be there in a flash.”

Unlike most of our neighbors me dad doesn’t like gardening, so he didn’t take the free twenty by twelve foot patch of dirt, allotted by our city to poor families, to grow vegetable during the war.

We’re all sitting on the ground hiding behind our usual shed when Danny returns carrying two pint bottles of beer. As me parents are teetotalers I’ve never tasted beer or ever been in a pub even though I’m twelve. Dave grabs a beer and chug- a-lugs half without taking a breath. Then Danny snatches it from him and finishes the bottle. Me and Ed smile knowing we’re about to do something naughty. Dave uncaps the other bottle and hands it to Ed who takes a taste and his face screws up like he’s in pain.

Dave grabs the bottle and hand it to me. “Go on Alan it’s your turn.”

I take a sniff. *Christ, I think, me mother will kill me*

“Ya pansy Wills. Take a bloody drink.” Danny says.

I’m surprised at the rich smooth taste and take a bigger gulp. Then not wanted to be though a pansy I guzzle half the bottle. I let out a huge burp and me mates all laugh.

We sit and tell jokes, exaggerated stories, and lie to each other the way that boys do.

Denny is our sex fiend. “I love riding the escalators at the underground. “They ‘ave all tem bra ad’s what shows so many tits.”

After about an hour I stand up and me legs feel wobbly, and I can’t stop giggling.

“Take a butchers (look) I ‘fink little Alan’s drunk.” Dave says, and they all laugh.

“What a sissy!” Danny says. “I’ve been going to pubs with me mum and dad since I was a nipper. Me and the other kids would sit outside. We were told if we be’ave they’d bring us a glass lemonade and a bag of Smiths Potato Crisps. You remember Dave?”

“Oh ya! Me and Danny ‘ave seen loads of punch-ups at the pub.” As he says it I think, *Wills, you’ve really been sheltered! God, I’d give anything to see a pub fight.*

As kids, me and me mates always sniggered when we walked past The Cock Tavern on High Street. Like all boys we think it cool to say anything that’s bad or dirty.

“Ya know gang.” Dave says guzzling the last of the beer. “I bet we could get served at The Cock! It’s market day and it’ll be bloody busy.”

Even though we all big for our age I’m afraid we still look young, but agree to try.

Dave says “The pub opens at five, so go ‘ome and get cleaned up and nick ya dad’s long trousers and a shirt and put ‘em on at me ‘ouse ‘cos me mum and dad ain’t ‘ome.”

Standing in Dave’s bedroom we look a right sight all dressed in our dad’s clothes.

“Dave I ‘fink we look funny, why not wear our pullover and jeans?”

“‘Cos we’re ‘ave to look older, don’t we!”

Sheepishly we enter The Cock. The strong smell of tobacco and beer makes me sneeze and the smoke makes me eyes water.

“Shush! Dave whispers. We all get in a line behind him, as he is a year older, and march up to the bar.

“Four beer, gov’nor, for me and me mates.”

“What type?” the grey hair wrinkled faced man, with a bulbous red nose, asks.

Dave looks at each label on the six white handles sticking up behind the bar.

“Red Barrel’s fine.”

“Pint or ‘alf?” the governor asks.

Dave holds his hand out behind his back and we all drop coins into it. Luckily we all have money, from running errands for neighbors, doing chores at home, plus nicking money from our mother’s handbags.

The butterflies in my stomach fly up to my throat, and I feel like throwing-up.

“Pints of cause.” Dave says lighting a fag.

Standing in the public bar with a pint of beer in front of each of us we all pressed our lips together to suppress our snickers.

Danny whispers behind his hand. “We bloody did it! That gov’nor must be a right prat (silly person), to ‘fink we look old enough to order beer.”

“Nice touch lighting the cigarette, Dave, made ya look older.” I say with a wink.

The next day it’s raining cat and dogs, so we’re all at Dave house, bored to tears.

“You boys are growing like bloody weeds.” Dave’s dad says looking over his newspaper. “Soon you’ll be bellying up to the bar at the boozer.”

“We just all got served at The Cock.” Dave boasts sticking his nose in the air.

“Well then let me tell you about pubs.” Mr. Kent say, and we all sit on the floor around him, all ears. “There’s sixty thousand Public Houses, or pubs as we calls ‘em, what make up our way of life ‘ere in jolly old Britain. No o’ver country ‘as pubs. When I was in the merchant navy we went to American bars in New York and Miami. Their bars are all dark and dingy not a place families go. Our pubs are well-lit, community meeting places. Pubs usually “ave two or more totally different bars. The public bar is for us working class, and usually ‘as a wood or linoleum floor. A man’s place, where rowdiness and bad language are the order of the bloody day. Most nights after work me and me mates head for our local. We stand at the long bar tipping down pints and play darts.” Mr. Kent tells us, with a glint in his eye. “Then there’s the lounge or saloon bar. They’re all posh, with thick carpets, tables and chairs and overstuffed furniture. Businessmen or couples on a date like all that stuff. Our kind would dream of going.”

When we leave Doug’s house all us boys have big grins, like we just entered manhood.

A week later, Ed, and Danny join Dave at The Cock Tavern to celebrate his fifteenth birthday. Standing at the bar holding our pints of red Barrel Dave says “I just ‘ad a brainwave. Why don’t we try some pubs in the real East End? Ya know, where tough Cockneys hang out?”

“I ‘eard The Blind Beggar on Whitechapel Road is a real tough pub,” Ed says.

“If we’re going all the bloody way to Whitechapel let’s go to the Ten Bells. That’s where I ‘eard two of Jack the Rippers victims was drinking just before he bumped ‘em off.” Dave says, lifting his glass as if to toast the killings.

“That’s too bloody gruesome.” Ed says with a shudder.

“You’re such a bloody sissy Ed.” Dave says “You’re fourteen and still a mummy’s boy. It’s my fucking fifteenff bir’fday and I say where we goes, got it?”

Dave’s always the leader. So we drink down our beers and follow him out. We wait for the steam train at James Street station, then push and shove to be the first in the carriage. Me mates all talk tough all the way to Liverpool Street station in the East End. I’m dumb struck, me thoughts are on overtime. *So Wills, you’re getting your wish to go to a tough Cockney pub. Maybe you’ll even see a fight!*

Shut the fuck up mind! I’m nervous enough! If mother finds out she’ll kill me.

“Ya know, me dad said he used to drink at The Pride of Spitalfield what’s just down Brick Lane.” Dave says “ ‘ow about we stop for a quick Tiddly Wink (drink) on the way to Jack the Rippers pub, and to test our luck at getting served?”

Inside the pub I look through the smoke. *Christ, I think, we’re so young compared to these rough, tough, looking locals.* Not wanting to make eye contact we all look straight ahead and march one behind the other to the bar. Standing in line behind Dave, again we leave it to him to order the beers. Ed’s in front of me and I see he has his fingers crossed.

The big bar maid’s huge breasts are spilling out of her blouse, and all our eyes are down her cleavage. She’s holding three full glass pint mugs by the handles in each hand.

“Danny whispers “ ‘er Brisols (tits) reach half way across the bleeding bar.”

“I wouldn’t wanna mess with ‘er,” I whisper in Ed’s ear.

“Great in a fight, Alan. All four of us could ‘ide be’ind ‘er.” Ed sniggers.

A burly bloke with a cauliflower ear and flattened nose next to me barks. “What the fuck are you little girls giggling about?”

Ed takes a gulp of beer then cringes, and says nervously, “Oh nuff...ing.... Sir.”

“Sir! Do I look like a bleeding sir to you, idiot?”

Dave turns and faces the man. Then steps in front of Ed. “ ‘cuse me mate. It’s me bir’fday and we’ve been out boozing it up.”

“Suburban-Slime! What the fuck are ya doing this far away from your mummies?”

Even though the earlier beers gave me courage, this chap is just too big. So I’m shocked when Danny steps out from behind me and says “We ain’t Suburban-Slime! We’re Cockneys!” Then takes a swing at the stranger’s leathery chin, but misses.

Dave steps in front of Danny and the bloke lands a hard fist to Dave’s nose. Blood splatters everywhere. I hand him me handkerchief and we all run for the door.

On the train ride home we are not as boisterous. Dave is holding a blood-soaked handkerchief to his flattened nose. We look anything but tough Cockneys.

It’s the following Saturday and we attempt another trip to Jack the Ripper’s Ten Bells pub. Walking into the pub Danny bumps into a bloke and spills his beer. The local swings a fist and pulverizes Danny left eye. Another Cockney grabs Ed’s hair and jerks his face down to the Cockney’s up-thrusting knee. Me and Dave grab Ed, all covered in blood, and drag him out the front door and away. Danny follows holding a handkerchief to his eye. We try to clean the blood off Ed’s face, by spiting on handkerchiefs, and make for the station. On the train I watch Danny’s eye close and that side of his face swells up and turns a greenish-purple color.

“Could ‘ave been worse.” I say “We did much better than The Ripper’s two victims from the same pub.”

“Shut the fuck-up, ya didn’t get wacked.” Ed says, dripping blood on the velvet seat.

It’s now two weeks after our beating. Me and the boys are standing at the public bar of the Cock trying to decide where to go tonight. Not one of us suggests The Ten Bells. I’m happy just standing listening to the beer orders being called in.

“I’ll ‘ave a black and tan, gov’nor! Jack, ‘ere, wants a mild and bitter, and give ‘is Trouble and Strife (wife) a lager and lime.” I’m fascinated watching the governor pulling the handles. He fills a pint glass tankard with a mixture of stout and cider, the second a mixture of mild and bitter ales. For the wife he reaches for a small beer glass, up-caps a bottle of lager, then adds a splash of Roses lime juice.

“Christ ‘ow ‘ard can it be to find a bloody Cockney pub? Dave knocks back his beer.

“A real Cockney ‘as to be born within the sound of the bells from Bow Church.”

“Ya Twit, we all know that, Ed.” Danny says “Any pub in the bloody City’s OK.”

“Well then that narrows it down, as the City of London’s only one square bloody mile! Got ya Danny,” I say.

“Tell us some’fing we don’t know, pecker-head!” Danny says. “The question is where the fuck are we going tonight to get some pig ear in a real Cockney pub in the East End?”

“There ain’t no shortage of beer in London, Danny! But this time let’s try it without a punch-up.” Ed says. “Me mum says we’re all gonna end up in the Nick (prison).”

I suggest The Angel in Islington and everyone says they’ve heard of it.

So we all jump on a double-decker bus, run upstairs and grab the front two seats. This gives us a great view of the night people doing what is called pub-crawling, many carrying beer in their hand from pub to pub.

Although Ed says no more punch-ups I am dying to try the knee-in-the-face maneuver.

I have been practicing fights in my bedroom. I grab an imaginary bloke’s hair, pull it down to my up-thrusting knee, and in my mind I always win.

The Angel smells of smoke and beer. It’s packed and loud with chatter. We push our way trying to get to the bar. I see me opportunity to try the knee in the face maneuver. A medium size bloke is pushing his way back from the bar carrying a beer in each hand. I stick out me foot. He goes down and the beers go flying over everyone. I take a stance and I’m ready for anyone taking a swing at me. The chap gets up off the floor and throws a right jab at me. I grab his hair, just like the Cockney did to Ed, and it comes off in me hand. In amazement, I stop and just stare at the first toupee I’ve ever seen. Seizing the opportunity, he lands a hard left fist to my eye, snatches his hairpiece and runs. Dave hands me a beer soaked handkerchief that I hold to my painful eye. On the way out I hear me mother’s voice *'curiosity killed the cat, Alan! Mother! Christ she would be so ashamed of me fighting, and getting drunk with low-life cockneys.*

The fights are becoming more brutal, bloodier, and more frequent. We seem to accept the beatings as necessary for us to become tough Cockneys. Me Mothers' warning keeps going through my mind: *Cockneys don't ever amount to anything. They fight from their frustration with their dead end life, and their sense of inferiority.* I wonder: *Are me and me mates hiding behind our Cockney talk, our Cockney swagger, and our flashy clothes?*

It’s 1953 and tight drainpipe trousers are the fashion, but way beyond our budgets. Dave, our fashion leader, had found us the blue twill work trousers on a stall down High Street market, that we hope look like American jeans when we turn up the bottoms. Dave is the first to wear black shoes with patent-leather toecaps. Dave’s description of being able to look up girls’ dresses in the mirror-like toecaps guarantees that all us boys eventually will own a pair. Luckily, me school shoes have holes in the bottom, so I am able to talk me mother into buying them. I spend hours polishing me patent toecaps, but find it difficult to put me foot far enough under a girls’ skirt without being too obvious. After many, many failed attempts, a golden opportunity arises. I’m at school assembly, just before morning prayers. Standing behind a girl in a flared skirt and I’m excited to try. I balance on me left foot and lift me right foot under the bottom of her skirt, and bend way forward to stare hard into me patent toecap. I think I almost see something, and bend further forward for a better look. The girl turns around and catches me off guard. She slaps me face and calls me a pre’vert. Standing on one leg I lose me balance and fall on the parquet floor. Looking up, I’m encircled by

loads of laughing kids calling out “pervert, pervert, pervert.” *Well, I think at least they pronounce it right.*

I never ever question what Dave tells us. When he said, ‘I see everything all the way up, looking in me toecaps,’ it was gospel to me. And, I’ll never admit to Dave that I’ve been unable to look up a girl’s skirt and see anything. I guess that being older, he has perfected the knack of using his toecaps as mirrors and, unlike me, he knows exactly what ‘e’s looking for. I wouldn’t know a twat if it jumped up and bit me.

When I was eight, me ten year old cousin Paul, next door, asked me behind his hand, “‘ave ya ever seen a girls ‘fing?” He whispered to me “I can arrange it! You show me sister, Patricia, your dinkle, and she’ll lift ‘er skirt and pull down ‘er panties and show you ‘er winny.”

I have a very restless night’s sleep thinking about Patricia pulling down her panties. At school the thought of what it looks like totally owns me mind, and learning goes out the window. I rush home after school and can’t sit still waiting for Paul’s knock at our door. I jump up twice and run to the door, only to find it’s Bible pushers. Inpatient, I go next door and knock. Paul answers, and seems as excited as me. “Now ‘ere’s what’s going to ‘appen, Alan. We’re gonna play doctors and nurses. You’re the patient,” he tells me as we walk down the hall to the kitchen, where his sister is waiting.

“Ok, Mr. Wills. I’m nurse Patricia,” my twelve year old girl cousin says. “Now lay on the kitchen table for your examination. Patricia undoes my trousers and pulls down my underpants. Her eyes go as big as saucers. I feel very embarrassed, and quickly pull up my underpants and trousers and jump off the table. I can’t even look at her, but grab her arm. “Ok, Tricia, it’s your turn to be the patient.” I say feeling excited as I help her up onto the table, with Paul’s help.

Patricia is four years older than me and very pretty. I notice she now wears a bra, and I get a hard-on, even though when she lies down, she is flat-chested. Both her hands are clutching her flair-skirt against her legs, and her eyes are closed tight.

“Come on Tricia, fair’s fair. You saw mine, now you’ve got to show me yours.

“What on earth! Are you dirty little boys doing to my poor daughter?” Aunt Jenny yells, entering the kitchen carrying a broom. She raises it, as if to hit Paul and me. We take off running for our lives. We don’t stop running ‘till we reach St. James Park and collapse on the grass.

“No fair, Paul. Ya sister got to see me dinkle, but I didn’t see her ‘fing. At least tell me what it looks like.”

“‘ow should I know?”

“She’s your bloody sister!”

“Ya, but she’s never showed me her winny.”

That is as close as I had come to seeing a real girl’s thing. Dave gives me some dirty magazines that show tits and bums, but even with a magnifying glass, I can’t see what’s between a girl’s legs.

Crude pencil drawings on toilet walls at school show a slit, but I'm sure there must be more to it than that. I'm now totally obsessed with seeing what a real one looks like. Dave says girls things make their underwear wet, and in the patent toe caps you can see a perfect outline. I admit to Dave that me every waking hour is spent thinking about it. He says that if I die, they'd open-up my head and find thousands of girls things leaping around. As I have no intention of dying, I'm still working hard to perfect using my shiny patent toecaps to get my first glimpse of the elusive slit.

Chapter 5 - Earning Money for Teddy-Boy Suits

Danny, Ed, and me are up High Street, decked out in tight black pullovers and dark blue twill work trousers, which we are convinced look like American jeans. We are busy at our favorite pastime, eyeing-up birds (girls). As usual, there's a bunch of birds standing on the opposite side of High Street.

“What do ya ‘fink, Alan?” Danny asks.

“I wouldn't waste me time walking across the road for those old scrubbers.”

“You're bloody scared,” Ed says, in his usual baiting manor.

“Scared of what?” I sneer, fronting up to Ed.

“Scared they'll turn ya down, that's what!”

I grab Ed's hair and gesture to bring my knee up to smash his nose.

“Lucky, you're me mate or ya nose would be spread all over ya silly face with blood everywhere” I say letting go of his hair.

“You silly sod! You fucked up me bleeding ‘air.” Ed says, whipping his comb from his back pocket, then turning to see his reflection in the store window behind us.

“If me Tony Curtis don't go in right Wills, you're a dead man”

Just then Dave appears, as if from nowhere, and we all gasp. He looks like he has stepped right out of Lou Rose, the tailor's window. My eyes travel up from his patent toecap shoes, to tight black drainpipe trousers, a fingertip length black and white speckled jacket with a jet-black velvet collar, and a black shirt with a white slim tie.

“Christ Dave, where did you get all the new gear? I ask.

“Got a bloody part-time job, didn't I, with Bob the butcher. This ‘ere is the latest clobber worn by Teddy Boys in the East End.”

“What's a Teddy Boy, Dave?” Ed asks.

“Comes from the fact that their gear is copies of Edwardian styled suits, from ‘undreds of year ago. Teddy is short for Edward, get it?” he says with authority and walks away.

The three of us just stand and look at each other with our mouths open.

I start to fume inside. *I hate when Dave just walks off, as if to say ‘I've said it all! What could you three children possibly add? ‘e fucking did it again.*” I spit on the pavement. “Well that's it, we'll all ‘ave to get part-time jobs to buy Teddy Boys gear.”

After school the next day, I go down to Mr. Johnson’s small, cluttered, Tobacconist and Newspaper Shoppe. I think I’ll have a good chance at getting a job from him, as he knows me, because I have been in often when my dad buys his tobacco and fag papers.

“I need a job Mr. Johnston.”

“What can ya do lad? ‘ave you ‘ad a job before?” he asks, across the counter.

“Not exactly, Mr. Johnson, I do ‘elp me mum around the ‘ouse, and I’ve worked building stuff with me dad.” I say, looking down, my fingers crossed behind my back.

He is silent for a while, then comes round the counter and looks me up and down.

“Do ya ‘ave a bike, lad?”

I think for a minute. *I had got away with banging nails in a piece of wood, at the shelter, when I was three as “building stuff with me dad”, and God had not zapped me.* Now I cringe “ ‘course I ‘ave a bike.” then wait for the lightening bolt to strike me dead.

“OK then me lad, you can deliver papers. Be ‘ere tomorrow morning at four ‘irty.”

“But Mr. Johnson, I don’t get up till seven ‘irty. How about I deliver them in the afternoon, after school.”

“Sounds like you don’t really want the job, Alan. There’s plenty of lads what would give their right arm for such an opportunity.” He says walking back behind the counter.

“Corse I want the job ...see you at four ‘irty.”

I keep waking up all night worrying that I won’t get up at four thirty. But I do, and run all the way to the paper shop. Mr. Johnson hands me a very heavy big white canvas shoulder bag filled with newspapers.

“OK, young Alan, jump on ya bike and deliver these on Tudor Court, they’re in order, and I wrote the ‘ouse number on each paper.”

Luckily, he doesn’t follow me outside, so he doesn’t discover that I don’t have a bike. I walk street after street leaning way to the right to offset the weight of the shoulder bag on my left. Eventually I see a sign Tudor Court, and thank the Lord it’s down hill. Even so, when I get to the bottom of the hill I am tired out. I lean against the iron railing fence to catch my breath and come up with a brilliant idea. *I’ll hang the bag strap on one railing, carry just some of the papers, and then come back for more. Boy am I smart, or what? I think. Christ, I’ll totally revolutionize newspaper delivery on my first day!*

I walk a quarter way around the semi-circular court delivering the papers by the light of the street lamps. Feeling on top of the world, and thinking about earning the money to buy my Teddy-

Boy gear, I head back to the white shoulder bag hanging on the iron fence. There are no streetlights by the fence, but I think I can see something other than the bag. As I get closer, to my horror, I see a huge black and white spotted dog standing on his hind legs eating my newspapers. I run towards him yelling.

“Get the fuck off me papers you great stupid, slobbering, spotted bugger”

As I get closer I realize that all my yelling and screaming hasn't phased this huge dog one little bit. So I start waving my arms in the air, while still running towards him, I screw-up my face to look really mean. “Graw, Graw, Graw.” I growl, hoping he might think me a ferrous wild animal. But he just keeps eating my papers. Then it hits me! *Christ! I'm four feet from 'im. I'd better stop quick.* Now he stops eating the papers

and looks right at me. I make a sharp right turn and run all the way up Tudor Court hill without stopping. At the top I collapse on someone's lawn and can hardly catch my breath. *What will I tell Mr. Johnson? I 'ave no money, so 'ow can I pay him for the papers.* I eventually head back to the paper shop and run in the front door.

“Mr. Johnson someone stole me bike with all your bloody papers on it.” I wait, hold my breath, and look him in the eyes to see if he believes me.

“I bet your bike was ridden away by that bloody big black and white spotted dog down Tudor Court. The same bloody dog that ate the last paperboy's papers.”

Tonight, mum, dad, and me are walking to Uncle Frank's house to see his new telly.. He is the first person in our family and the first on his on his street to buy a TV.

“How can my brother Frank afford a television set?” mum asks my dad.

“Your bloody brother could fall into a bucket of poop and come up with a five-pound note. Just look at the wangle 'e's in now. Bloody furniture companies pay 'im to remove sawdust and woodchips from their machines. The only 'fing he does is stick it in sacks. Then 'e turns around and sells it to 'ardboard and chipboard manufacturers. It's like eating the same piece of cake twice. Bloody dishonest I calls it!” dad shakes his head.

“He isn't hurting anyone Jim,” mum says, “I think my young brother is real smart. In fact maybe Alan can get a job working for Frank and learn a thing or two about making money, something you never learned Jim.”

As we walk through the front door and into Uncle Frank's hall, I see that the front room is full of people. Dad asks a big fat woman, who I think is a neighbor, if she can spare one of the two chairs she is overlapping. Mother balances on a small part of one of the seats tight against the obese woman. Dad and me stand behind her, our backs to the wall. “Ain't it exciting.” The fat woman says, to no one in particular. “Can you imagine a TV set in Walthamstow? Didn't 'fink anyone in

this town was rich enough.” Everyone shakes their heads in agreement, and we waiting in silence, for the TV to be turned on.

“ ‘ere, dad, are all TV screens that small? It can’t be no more than twelve-inch!”

“No son, your Uncle Frank’s a flash git (show off). He bought the biggest cabinet he could find and that makes the screen look like a pimple on a pigs arss.”

Uncle Frank and Aunt Ann stand on either side of the TV set as if it is the unveiling of a precious artwork. Uncle Frank clears his throat. “We will be turning off the light and ask that you remain seated during the performance to avoid accidents. Thank you.”

Aunt Ann goes to the light switch, at the ready, awaiting a sign from Uncle Frank. He holds one hand in the air and the other on the on/off knob on the TV. Simultaneously, he brings his hand down, the screen lights the room with the black and white picture, as Aunt Ann, on cue, switches off the light. Uncle Frank then tries to make his way back to her but trips over my cousin Bernard’s feet and flattens the kids in the front row.

It was this accident on the TV night that leads to me working part time for Uncle Frank. When he fell he threw out his back. He can still drive his lorry, but can’t shovel up the sawdust and woodchips. Knowing there would be no huge black and white spotted dogs in the factories, I gladly accept the job.

It’s late Monday afternoon, and I begin to feel excited about my new job. I look at the clock on the mantle. It’s six. My mum and dad sit on either side of the tall floor model radio, listening to Dick Barton, their detective serial. Dinner had been my favorite: sausage, eggs, and chips, and bread fried in the sausage grease. Just then I hear Uncle Frank blast his lorry’s horn, summoning me to my first night of work.

What a great job, I think, as I climb into the cab of Uncle Frank’s big lorry. A real tough man’s job not a four in the morning sissy job like delivering newspapers.

We drive into the East End. Uncle Frank is telling childhood stories when he, my mother and four brothers and sisters all lived here. I am so excited to be way up high in the lorry taking in the names of all the pubs to tell me mates where we have been, that I pay little attention to his stories. Then suddenly, he gets my attention and I feel the blood drain from my face, as I look at him with my mouth open.

“What did ya just say, Uncle Frank? Ya cut off ya little toes?”

“That’s right. Me dad was a butcher. I stuck each foot on the block and cut ‘em off with me dad’s bloody meat ax,” he says with a big grin.

“Ya cut off ya own little toes? But why?”

“ ‘cos I was born with club feet, wasn’t I, and I couldn’t get shoes on ‘cause me little toes curled under. So when I was eleven I lops ‘em off,” he smiles. “Then I could wear shoes, and got a job down Petticoat Lane working on a stall flogging china.

“Hold on a bloody minute! If you cut off the first little toe ‘ow come ya didn’t bleed to death? And why didn’t ya go to a bloody doctor?”

“We were a very poor family, Alan, and couldn’t afford a doctor!” he says sadly. Then he smiles. “You’re a real smart young fella, asking why I didn’t bleed to death. Remember I was in the butcher’s shop where your grandfather worked. I ‘ad ‘idden away and ‘e locked me in when ‘e closed up for the night. Well, after I wacked off my right little toe I tied me foot up with clean wipe-up cloths. Then I put muslin over the top and it looked just like a leg of lamb, on the end of me leg. But then I felt very woozy and laid down and must have gone off to sleep. When I woke it was just getting light and I knew me dad would be opening up. So I ‘obbed over to the same butchers block, and wacks off the little toe on the other foot. Now I really start to getting woozy, but I know I ‘ave to bind it up cos, like you said, I could bleed to death. Next ‘fing I know me dad is ‘olding me in his arms running down the street. He runs into our ‘ouse and tells me mum that the silly little bugger has lopped off his toes. She faints on the floor and your mum, who was about seventeen then, helps dad take me to bed. She’s a good old gal your mum, never flaps, a real good gal to ‘ave in an emergency.”

Just then Uncle Frank stops the lorry outside the furniture factory. Quickly, I jump down from the cab, very glad to get some fresh air, as I too was a little woozy.

Inside the factory, we go from machine to machine sweeping up, and shoveling the sawdust into sacks. The sawdust flies in my eyes, in my ears, up my nose and in my mouth. The sacks I carry on my back all the way to the lorry. Uncle Frank said he would pay me twenty-four pence per hour. By the end of the first night I tell him I want thirty-six pence an hour. He agrees so quickly, I wish I had asked for five shillings

Three months later all the boys in the neighborhood have part time jobs and spend every penny to achieve the Teddy-Boy look. Decked out in our new gear we think we are hot stuff. Now, when we hang out on the corner of High Street we are noticed.

It’s Friday night, and I am admiring myself in the store window and straightening my Slim Jim tie.

“What ya doing Wills?” Danny asks.

I hadn’t realized anyone was watching me “Nuffing.”

“Don’t look like nuffing to me! Looks like you were making yourself lovely.

Fought ya was going over to chat-up those birds on the corner over there.”

“No bloody way, Danny. I ain’t wasting me new clobber on those trollops. I’m saving it for the girls on Canvey.”

“Sure Wills” Ed says “and when ya get to Canvey, it’ll be your saving ya Teddy-Boy gear for the birds in Walfamstow.”

“Well I ain’t seen either of you two layabouts buck up the courage to go chat ‘em up,”

“I was just gonna,” Ed says, looking across the road, “but I see they’re trollops.”

“Ya, that’s just what I was ‘finking. Old bloody scrubbers” Danny agrees.

With a sigh of relief, I turn my back on the girls. “Let’s get out of ‘ere.” I say.

With a cocky swagger we walk up High Street talking about our jobs, and claim the next corner.

“Me older brother Stan works at the brewery, ya know the one by our school.” Ed

says “e got me a job cleaning out oak barrels after school. Don’t ‘alf pay well. When ya perishers are skint I’ll loan ya money, at say ten percent interest. Plus beer at half-price.”

“Ya gonna charge us for beer what ya nick from the bloody brewery?” I question.

“If me money loaning business takes off, maybe I’ll give beer as a bonus.” He says.

“Go fuck yourself, Ed. We’re ya mates! Danny says and spits on the pavement.

Danny then tells us about his job working for Ray, the fishmonger, down High Street.

“Me mum complains that I always smell of bloody fish, and that all the cats what follow me ‘ome are breeding in our front yard. ‘owever she never complains on payday when she takes ‘alf me bloody pay for room and bloody board. I reckoned that me grouchy old man must ‘ave cut-off her drinking money, trying to keep her from going down the pub to meet men. So, I don’t really mind ‘er ‘aving the money. It’s me way of paying me old man back for all the beating ‘e’s given me over the years.”

Now that I am working, I have money in my pockets, and I feel more secure at home.

I give my mum five-shillings a week for my keep. This is the best five-shillings I ever spent, as it relieves me of all chores around the house and secures me room as private.

I even put a sign on the door “KEEP OUT Rented by Alan.” It feels so good to bring all my Cockney gear home from Dave’s house, and I now feel within my rights to dress any way I choose. Every afternoon, when school lets out, I run home, bound up the stairs to my room and slam the door shut. Almost at a fever pitch I remove my school uniform and don me Teddy Boy gear. I stand on my bed to get a full-length view in the mirror over my fireplace, and then turn to look from all angles. I know that me mother calls me for dinner at five, and Uncle Frank picks me up for

work at six, so I only have one hour, but for me it's the best hour of the day. I've found there is magic in standing on your bed. I feel very tall, and I definitely do my best thinking when I'm taller.

Recently my thoughts have been about Canvey Island and this summer's six-week annual camping trip. Standing on my bed, I picture our reception. *All us Cockney boys are dressed in our Teddy Boy gear. The girls line the streets applauding, maybe even fainting. We are the modern-day knights on a crusade to save the local birds. Saving them from a life with one of those local hicks, which we considered would be a fate worse than death. Suddenly it hits me, this could be good and it could be bad. The local birds will go crazy over us Teddy Boys because we look so different. The local jerks, on the other hand, will know we are Londoners, resent all the attention their girls are giving us and will want to fight.*

Every year, we've always called them names and made threats, mostly under our breath. In actuality, outside of a little pushing, we never had a real fight with them. Many times the boys and I talked about "Punching 'em out," just because they're rural Essex jerks. They all think at half-speed and talk with that real stupid country twang. Last year we made fun of them saying, "they talked so slow that ya could go to bloody sleep before the end of a sentence."

We all like to talk tough among ourselves, but never loud enough to start an actual fight. Plus now we have our new Teddy Boy outfits, and considering how many hours we have worked to earn them, getting them dirty by fighting is out of the question. However, don't you even start to think that we were afraid to fight, just because the Essex jerks are big, fit, burly farmhands. Remember, we are tough East End Cockneys!

Even though I'm now a money making teenager me mum still thinks she has the right to dictate to me. She's still on about Cockney's being low lives and not amounting to anything. The difference now is I answer her back and we get into yelling matches. So I now spend a lot of time hanging out in Dave's bedroom.

"Me mother's driving me crazy Dave."

"Yah, they go to school for it! Me mum not so bad, but she 'as 'er days when she's on 'er broom stick. Say's I should be saving me money, not spending it on records and clobber (clothes). Silly cow! What's money for if not to spend?"

"Some times Dave I just feel like running away!"

"Where would ya live, who would cook for ya, and wash ya clothes?"

"Oh shut the fuck up Dave! Ya're sounding like a bleeding adult!"

"Do ya ever wonder if our mum's were ever cute birds (girls)?"

"I saw me mum and dads wedding picture. They was sort of young but wore old fashion clothes. They looked very proper."

“Me mum said she used to sneak out of ‘er bedroom window and climb down a tree to meet me dad.”

“Ya mum’s real cool Dave. But do ya ‘fink they had sex?”

“She says they fooled around. What about ya folks?”

“Me mum would never do anything like that Dave!”

“So ya was an immaculate bloody conception Wills?”

Chapter 6 - Hercules Beard and Body Building

The Hercules movies have given us boys the inspiration to try to grow Steve Reeves beards, and body-build during the winter.

“We can’t do both!” Ed says. “It’ll drain all me energy.”

Dave, being older, shaves once a week. So by not shaving a scruffy beard appears within a month. Danny also shaves, and his beard comes in dark, which hides his acne cratered face, and we say it’s because he is part werewolf. Ed and I try everything; including holding our breath and straining down, but only produce a few chin hairs.

“Growing ‘air is proportional to body strength.” Dave says. “I read this story about Sampson, this strong bloke. They cut off all ‘is ‘air and ‘e was as weak as a little girl.

I decide to forget the beard and turn to body building.

One morning I take off my pajamas, and stand on my bed looking at my nude body in the mirror above the fireplace in my bedroom. I had just seen a Charles Atlas body building ad in the newspaper. *Christ, I think. I look like the puny man in the ad.* I grab my left wrist with my right hand, stick out my chest and tighten my biceps the same way Charles Atlas was pictured. In disgust, I throw myself down on the bed.

“Ya in there Wills?” I hear Dave’s voice. Then suddenly my door flies open.

“Ya’re stark bullock naked! Was ya wanking?”

Quickly, I pull the sheet up over my private parts. “All the bloody same if I was!

Ain’t ya never ‘eard of knocking before ya burst into someone’s bedroom?”

“You ain’t ‘alf gone red, Wills. I bet ya was wacking off.”

“No way, Dave. If ya must know, I was looking at me puny body in the mirror there.”

“Why?”

“It’s me bloody body! Why not?”

“Are you turning into a Ginger Beer?”

“With bleeding ugly blokes like you around the last ‘fing I’d turn is queer.”

“So what’s it all about then?”

“I saw this Charles Atlas body building ad. It ’as this puny bloke getting sand kicked in his face. Then ‘e does the bodybuilding and never gets sand kicked in his face again”

“So ‘ow many times ‘ave ya got sand kicked in ya face?”

“You’re such a wanker! That ain’t the point. Ya ‘fink ‘ow many times we’ve got beaten-up in pubs. In ‘free months we’ll be camping on Canvey Island. and them big burley Essex farm boys could want a piece of us for hitting on the local birds.”

Dave starts strutting about, “We’re tough Cockney’s.”

“Dave, that’s rubbish. None of us is really tough. But we could be.”

Dave paces back and forth, than scratches his head. “Body building! Are you bonkers? We’ll ‘ave to cut out the bloody beer.”

It’s Saturday and Dave calls a gang meeting over St James park. I bring the Charles Atlas ad. Ed and Danny agree that we all need to start body building. However, the Charles Atlas course is too expensive.

Danny say, “I can do chin-ups on the metal awning frames down High Street.”

Poor Ed is the runt of our litter. However, his dad was a drill sergeant and Ed says he knows where his old army training manuals are, with pictures of exercises. Dave says,

“Me and Ed will run in the bloody park, then work-out with ‘is dads army manuals.”

Running’s not me thing, and neither is swinging like an ape on awning frames.

Not be left out I tell the boys, “Well I ‘ave a secret body building plan, so there!”

The secret I find two days later in a pawn shop, Mr. Universe Chest Expander. However, it won’t be easy working out at home, since me mother said. “Alan, your new tough East End exterior worries her immensely.” The chest expander, and body building, would be interpreted as a stepping-stone towards me becoming a thug.

My parents had me late in their lives and our huge generation gap leaves me feeling alone and misunderstood. They seem oblivious to me unasked teenage questions about life. I find it hard to believe me parents ever had sex, so how could they answer my questions on the subject? When I was younger I tried to be the nice quiet little boy they wanted, but felt like a piece of furniture to be cleaned and put in the corner. I have always believed I was a mistake and they would have been much happier without me.

I had thought of weights but worried about the noise if I dropped them, and imagined the heavy weights falling through the ceiling while mum and dad were having tea. The Mr. Universe Chest Expander is perfect. The device consists of two large chromium-plated springs, about two feet long, with handles on each end. The manual shows twenty five exercises for developing the whole body, suggesting different expertise’s each day.

It's Thursday evening, about a week later. I am in my bedroom, having closed the door real tight, trying to be as quiet as possible. I have the springs totally expanded by stretching my arms out straight at shoulder height. I'm following the instructions for maximum muscle growth, so I'm contracting the springs as slowly as possible. Then, without warning, the door flies open. The sight of me mother makes me instantly contract the springs, catching and ripping the hairs from my chest – the few hairs, that at fourteen, I prize highly as a token of my manhood - but I can't scream out.

"What on earth are you doing, young man?" she demands. "For fifteen minutes I've been calling you to dinner, with no answer! What is that contraption in your hands?"

"Oh this, it's nothing. It belongs to one of me mates. I have to return it to him tomorrow." Sheepishly, I tuck the chest expanders under my bed, put on my shirt, and follow her like a whipped dog downstairs for dinner.

For a while I remember that the chest-expander is a potential lethal weapon and I treat the device with more respect. Every day I work out quietly in my bedroom, and as time passes I forget the danger of the contracting springs.

Today is Saturday and we all meet at the park to compare notes on our body building. Dave says "Me older cousin says ya must stop wanking while you're body building. Some'fing about ya energy being spilled out." Ed and I make a pact to stop wanking. However, a few days later in a weak moment I'm standing in front of the toilet with my eyes starting to roll back in my head, when the vicar's words flash before my eyes,

"G-O-D knows when you abuse yourself. You'll pay for this sin by going to a fiery hell!" The thought makes me go limp. I then reach behind our toilet tank and remove the pictures of nude women that Dave gave me, along with my favorite Jane Russell picture. I take one last look. She is lying on the hay in a skimpy western outfit, in a barn, with her huge tits hanging out. I almost put them back, but then sneak the pictures out to the dustbin, stuff them into a Wheetabix box and cram newspaper on top. Sadly, I walk back into the house, and take out my frustration on the chest expander.

I have four sleepless nights worrying that my mother will find the dirty pictures before the dustman comes. Then after he comes, I'm worried that the dustman might find them and bring them back and show them to her.

I am determined to look like Charles Atlas no matter what it takes, so I silently, once again, pledge absolute abstinence.

Usually I come home and change from my school clothes into my blue work trousers and Plimpsole rubber soled tennis shoes before working-out. However, today at school lunchtime the boys and I measure our biceps with a tape measure, and Danny's are more developed than mine. So I am impatient to get home and pump up my biceps before the next measuring on Saturday.

Holding one handle under my right foot, I work my biceps by raising my hand towards my head and expanding the springs. In my haste for instantly huge biceps, bigger than Danny's, I expand the springs to their maximum. And then it happens! The handle slips from beneath my leather-soled school shoes, and the fast contracting springs propel the handle through the air to my forehead and knock the daylight out of me.

Once past those two mishaps, I now work out diligently and with care every night. I walk around on my bed, without my shirt on, looking at my expanded chest and new muscles in the mirror over the fireplace. Each of us four boys has dramatically developed our bodies. I now consider my physique equal to that of the local hicks on Canvey, and can't wait for our annual summer camping trip.

Chapter 7 - Canvey Island

Canvey is a lush green island, set in the estuary of the river Thames, about thirty-five miles east of London. For six weeks, during our school summer holidays, our family camps in a tent on a large field behind a sweetshop. The land is owned by the mayor of Southend, a neighboring resort. Mr. Harris is a jolly round-faced man with rosy cheeks and a welcoming smile. He allows ten underprivileged families from London to camp there, in tents, without charge every year.

Every summer, in gratitude, we kids climb the fence and steal sodas from the storeroom behind his sweetshop. We then have the nerve to walk through the front door and return the empty bottles for the three pence deposit. With the money we purchase an icelolly, which we devour as quickly as possible to discover if we have won the prized stick with the word "FREE." Just think, receiving three pence from the person from whom you had stolen the soda, then receiving a second free icelolly as a bonus for your crime! Needless to say we think we are master criminals pulling off the ultimate crime.

Dad hires the same big lorry every year to take us, and everyone's camping gear down the Southend Arterial Road to Canvey Island. When I was smaller I would ride in the cab with my dad and mom, her sister Aunt Jenny, and the driver, Ralph. At fourteen, I am now almost six foot and weigh over twelve stone (one hundred and seventy pounds). My dad agrees that Dave, Danny, Ed, and my cousin Paul can ride in the back of the lorry with me, as long as they help load and unload all the camping gear. Paul's sister Patricia, who gets angry when you call her Pat, goes to a snooty grammar school. She says she wouldn't dream of riding in a lorry, so she took the train with Aunt Jenny, whom she calls 'Mother' - Patricia never says 'mum' any more. My dad and mum and Dave's mum sit up front with Ralph the old driver. I feel sorry for the men as I know they will have to listen to all the neighborhood gossip.

Danny's bickering parents hate camping, thank the Lord, and are pleased to get rid of Danny for six weeks. Ed's dad said he spent the whole war in a bleeding tent so considers camping no bloody holiday. Aunt Jenny said Ed could sleep in their tent. Dave's mum took in Danny, after making him promise he would not to fart in the tent.

After our winter of bodybuilding, us four boys now have men's bodies. We have all the camping gear loaded in the lorry in no time, and the lorry takes off. Each of us is sitting or laying on top of the gear as the big old truck makes it's bumpy way down the Southend Road. The high black tarp above our heads is weather protection. The rear is open except for a thirty-inch high tailgate. Ed is seated at the very back, straddling one of the rolled up tents, pretending he is riding a horse. Suddenly the driver hits his brakes and Ed's horse became a bucking bronco. He is thrown from his seat and becomes air-born, heading out the back of the lorry. Luckily, me cousin Paul jumps up and grabs the back of Ed's pullover in midair and pulls him to safety. Paul is three years older than me, well built, over six foot, and has always wanted to be a policeman. He is very serious by nature and he tells us life should not be treated lightly. All the way to Canvey Island he sits by himself, with no interest in our discussion on our favorite subject, sex.

The truck leaves the Southend arterial road, winding it's way through the lush green county side of Essex. We hear the rumble of the tires and know we are crossing the metal Benfleet bridge to Canvey Island.

“Do you remember Alan,” Paul asks “when you were small and there were no cars on Canvey? We used to ride on that flat passenger cart pulled by just one horse. What was it called? A Break? When we climbed up on top, we sat on those wood bench seats facing out each side. And do you remember, it took what seemed like hours for that old horse to pull all our family and all the camping gear to the campsite?”

“ ‘course I remember, Paul. You was always ‘freatening to ‘frow me off the bleeding Break, if I didn't stop crying. I ‘ated leaving me daddy, and our ‘ouse, and coming to Canvey. I ‘fink it reminded me of leaving London and being evacuated to Liverpool during the war.

Once over the bridge it takes less than thirty minutes to reach the center of town and the sweetshop. Then Ralph drives the old lorry twenty yards down the old dirt road past the sweetshop and stops. Paul jumps right over the tailgate and opens the heavy cross-barred wood gate, which allows Ralph to drive the lorry onto the fenced lush green field. Eagerly, all us boys hang out of the back of the truck. We can see the small muddy duck pond, which we call the swamp, and a tent we recognize pitched close by. We all jump from the lorry and run across the field towards the Howard's tent to see Willy.

“Hold on a minute boys!” my mother yells, as she steps down from the cab. “Mr. Wills agreed you lot could ride in the back of the lorry, only if you loaded and unloaded the camping gear. Seems to me the job is only half done!”

As we turn to walk back to the lorry, Willy runs out of his tent and catches up with us.

“What ‘cha, me old mates.” Willy says with a beaming smile. “Need a bleeding ‘and do ya?”

“Not from the likes of you. You're much to bloody skinny,” I say, flexing all my new muscles. “Why don't ya do a bloody Charles Atlas course and come back when ya can lift some'fing.”

Willy punches me on the upper arm. A punch that hurt, but that I know meant he was glad to see me.

“Christ what was that?” I ask. “a pesky gnat-bite or a puff of wind?”

He punches me again, but even harder, in the same place, and now it really hurts.

“What the bloody ‘ell was that Willy, a sissy slap?” I say, flexing my bicep trying to make the pain go away.

“Alan,” I hear my mother call, and know I am saved from another punch. “Alan, please stop tormenting Willy. I know you're glad to see him, but the lorry needs unloading so we can pitch the tent before it gets dark.”

Dave, Danny, Ed, Paul, Willy, and me have the lorry unloaded in no time.

Over the years our tent got bigger and bigger as dad swapped tents with people whose kids married off and then wanted a smaller tent. This year he has outdone himself and he has two World War 2 army bell tents.

Dad just stands by smoking a fag, as I try to unfold one of the two heavy bell tents and call for help. After quite a struggle the six of us have the two big tents laid out. Dave and Danny then assemble the huge three-part, ten foot, tent pole for the first tent.

“Christ dad, where d’ya get these tents? From the bleeding circus?”

“Don’t be so cheeky young man! They’re bloody fine army bell tents, and can sleep twenty-four men, one under each panel with their feet into the center pole.”

“Oh that’s ‘andy.” I say. “There’s three of us. What ‘cha gona do, rent out the rest of the space to a small army? What possessed ya to buy such a big bleedy tent?”

“I didn’t buy ‘em, silly,” he says shaking his head. “Don’t ya know me no better than that, son? I was wallpapering a pub next to an Army and Navy Surplus Store, and made a deal with the owner to wallpaper ‘is store in exchange for the camping gear. I got these two great bell tents, wood camp beds, and sleeping bags. The ‘ole lot only cost me the price of some cheap wallpaper. Then your mum, the bright one of the family, sold one tent to your Uncle George and Aunt Jenny for more than the cost of the paper. So we got all this new camping gear for free, plus earned a little money to boot.”

Bartering for goods and services has been very common since the war, as credit is non-existent, and cash is very scarce. Plus the big advantage, that really appeals to Cockneys, is that it is a great income tax dodge.

“Christ, these ain’t tent poles they’re tree trunks.” Dave says, as two of them carry the pole into the tent and raise it up. Quickly the rest of us secure the guidelines by banging tent pegs into the ground. We follow the same procedure, about six feet away, with Aunt Jenny’s bell tent.

All six of us go into the first tent. “Christ Wills, what was your dad ‘finking about buying such bloody big tents. They’re bigger than wigwams.” Danny sneers.

“They’re army bell tents, Danny, Dad says they can sleep twenty-four people. Nice ‘fing to ‘ave, ‘case there’s another war.” I say, and everyone laughs

“I ‘fink twenty-four solders must ‘ave died, or left farts, in this one. It stinks.” Willy says, holding his nose.

“So it’s a little musty. It won’t kill ya.” I say, trying to make light of the awful smell. “Lets roll up the sidewalls to get some air in ‘ere. While I do this, a couple of ya get the grounds sheets laid inside both tents.”

Next we carry in our three camp beds, and my mother follows us. I am very excited as I unfold the camp beds and sleeping bags. In prior years we always filled mattress covers with hay and slept on a big waterproof sheet on the ground.

“Oh my,” she says “Those beds look so tiny in this huge tent. Alan, hang sheets from the roof and make rooms. Two bedrooms, a washroom, a kitchen and a living room.”

“Good idea Mrs. Wills.” Dave says “What ya gonna do with the other ‘alf of the tent, rent it out to a tribe of Indians?”

My mum is a true camper and is able to cook everything over a couple of single burner alcohol stoves. Dad made her an oven, which goes on top of one stove, by riveting a metal shelf inside of an 18 x 18 inch square biscuit tin. He secured the lid with a long piano hinge to make a door. Mother can actually bake bread and even made a Sunday roast dinner in this makeshift oven.

She always uses our wood packing boxes to make a dinner table and seats and hold the washbasin. She then sends Willy and me back behind the sweetshop for cardboard boxes to use as cupboards for food and clothes.

As so many times before, Willy and me set-off running to see who would be first to reach the sweetshop. Side by side we climb the heavy wood entrance gate, but my foot gets stuck in a crossbeam and I watch Willy jump to the ground and hit the path running. When I arrive behind the sweetshop I am surprised to find the storeroom door ajar. I then see the padlock and a large rock on the floor and recognize Willie’s handiwork.

“Look Alan!” Willy calls me into the storeroom. “The good Lord does work in mysterious ways.” Willy is pointing to a red, white, and blue rectangular metal picnic table, with attached benches on each side, which seats eight people. I read in the center, under a thick layer of dust, a big oval sign ‘Wall’s Ice Cream.’

“Well now brother Willy,” I mock, “it would appear that just as the bible says, The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away”. So let’s be about the Lord’s work and giveth this table to me mum, and taketh it away from the sweetshop, who, judging by the dust, don’t need it anyway.”

“Well,” Willy ponders, “maybe we should wait till it’s dark.”

“The good book says:” I say, peering at him with my neck craned forward just like our vicar, “He who hesitates is lost”. That means nicketh while ya can, before some dis’onest bugger, like one of the other campers, comes ‘ere and beats us to it.”

We carry the heavy metal table down the dirt road, through the wood entrance gate, across the field, and into our tent. In true ‘mother style’, the first thing she asked us is:

“Where did you two steal this table from?”

There's thanks I think. Where's the "Oh, thank you so much for finding me such a beautiful picnic table" or "how thoughtful of you two to carry this heavy metal table here for us to enjoy, rather than the wood boxes."

Willy and I look at each other for inspiration hoping to find the right answer.

“Oh no, Mrs. Wills, we didn't nick it. We asked 'em in the sweetshop if we could maybe just borrow it for a while until they need it back. They said no problem. Go right a'ead. Ya know Mrs. Wills, they're very religious people and they quoted the scriptures to us, some'fing about The Lord giveth and The Lord...”

Quickly, I cut Willy off “Well, yes Willy, mother is very religious and knows every scripture. As you can see mum the table's covered in dust. They don't use it.”

Mother walks over to inspect the dust on the table. I know we must make our get-away before she asks more incriminating questions. I nod to the side, telling Willy to leave “Oh mum,” I say pulling Willy by the arm out of the tent. “Aunt Jenny and her Patricia just got 'ere from the train, so me and Willy better go show 'em their bell tent. See you latter mum.”

After work, Uncle George caught the train from London to Canvey Island and arrives after dark. This has been a hard first day setting up the camp with the big bell tents. I am really tired and already in my sleeping bag by the time my uncle enters our tent. I half listen to their talk about work but then tune them out. I smile realizing how much I have grown since last year. My feet now reach the end of the bed. As I am drifting off, I flex my aching new muscles and wonder how we will now size up to the local hicks.

Chapter 8 - Girls and Rhyming Slang

Me and me four mates: Dave, Danny, Ed and Willy are inseparable. More correctly, I should say four mates plus one "hanger-on", Willy's younger sister. Beaky, as we affectionately call her, has a Toucan-shaped nose. We say the poor girl must have been christened with an ugly stick; she is skinny with a concave chest, thin straight- almost white-blond hair and a ghostly chalky face with premature pink zits.

Danny summed it up. "She could be shipwrecked on a bloody desert island, filled with ‘orney men who ‘ain't ‘ad it for bloody years, and she still wouldn't get touched!"

Of the six of us, only Willy and Beaky are real Cockneys. Dave, Danny, Ed and me pose as tough Cockneys when at home, and no one questions it. But Willy and Beaky are real Cockneys, born within the sound of Bow Bells, and they know the difference; but thank the Lord they never call us ‘suburban slime’.

We boys tease Beaky unmercifully about her nose. Nature, however, seems to compensate her royally with a wealth of coins and jewelry that she finds on the beach or in the grass by the roadside. To cover our envy, when she displays her latest find, we retort with our much-used cruel teenager zaps. "You would never ‘ave found that Beaky, if the weight of ya nose didn't make ya ‘ead almost touch the ground" or "Did ya scoop that out of the sand with ya nose Beaky?"

But she always seems to have the last laugh. Many times she flaunts the money she finds by going to the movies, leaving us outside green with envy. One time she made a trade deal with us, by saying: "I'll treat all five of ya to the movies, if you promise never to call me Beaky again!"

Naturally, being always broke, we agree, with the understanding that she would sit by herself at least five rows away. We keep our promise, for what is for us a long time. After the movie we run from the theater and call back to her, "Thanks, BEAKY!"

Within the next few days other lorries arrive delivering more London families to the camp-site. One family, the Washington's, from Stratford, are what we boys call salt and pepper. The father, Jefferson, is a big black man who had been stationed in England as a GI during the war. The mother, Lilly, is a thin, blonde, blue-eyed Cockney flower-seller from Covent Garden. The gossip is that he told her he is an American Indian Chief and she thought it was like marrying into royalty. Their daughter, Cassee, who we call coffee-toffee, denies the story. Even though she was born within the sound of Bow-bells, and has a real Cockney accent, we say she is not a real Cockney, as she is of mixed blood, so we choose not to play with her.

Another family, the Chandanis, are “Pakies or Towel-Heads” as we call people from Pakistan, or anyone who wears a turban. The Chandanis have three snotty-nose daughters who are all even darker skinned than Cassee Washington, so we never call them by name - just “The Darkies.” Luckily, every year they always pitch their tent with the Washingtons at the back of the field behind the duck pond. On those days when the wind blows up the field, we smell the wonderful aroma of curry. Not that we would ever admit it smells good. We say it “pongs” and it makes us gag, and agree those bloody foreigners shouldn't be allowed on our campsite. We never allow them in the

duck pond while we are swimming, as we say they will contaminate the water. The local kids can swim anytime, as they think us Cockneys real cool.

As usual, this summer, us boys are all swimming in the pond when three local girls turned up at the campsite.

“Alan, who’s them birds in the swimsuits? Danny asks.

“D’no! But the one in the red suit’s mine. Take ya pick of the other two.” I say.

“You two are right wankers.” Dave says. “They’re Caffy, Joannie, and Betsy the local tom boys we wrestled last year?”

“Christ Dave, they ain’t ‘alf bloody blossomed.” I say, getting out of the pond to greet them, closely followed by Dave and Danny.

“Hello boys, remember us?” the good looking blonde in red asks.

“Ya, cause I remember ya Caffy,” Dave says. “Care to join us for a dip?”

“Well Alan there goes your bird!” Danny whispers.

As if from nowhere Willy appears, and puts his arm around Joannie’s waist. “ello my little darling, remember me?”

“Of cause I do Willy. Last year you said I had the body of a young boy and the brains of a dumb girl.”

“Oh, well my dear, you seem to ‘ave grown up, and out in the past year, if ya know what I mean. You certainly do fill out that blue swim suit very nicely.”

“Well Alan that only leaves Betsy, the skinny cow.” Danny whispers, looking her up and down.

“No that’s Ok Danny, she’s all yours.” I say jumping in the pond.

While the boys and me are swimming, trying to impress the local girls, Cassee Washington walks past the duck pond in a tight swimsuit. She’s now sporting a pair of beautiful round tan breasts that are bursting out of the top of her suit. The Chandani girls are right behind her and they have also all developed curves during the winter. We all look at each other with grins on our faces, not believing our eyes. I start to get out of the pond to talk to them, but then see my hard-on raise up out of the water and I quickly duck down again.

That night the boys and me meet, and are all sitting on the top bar of the entrance gate.

“You know boys Cassee and the Chandani girls all look lighter this year.” Dave says.

“Well that makes sense.” Danny says “As their bodies fill out their skin stretches and their color must dilute.”

“Yeah, they’re much lighter” Ed agrees. “They’re about the same color we all are with our tans at the end of summer.”

“Boys, I think we should learn more about their culture.” I say. “To prove we are not prejudiced, we should invite all three, the Chandani girls and Cassee, to swim with us in the duck pond.”

From this time on contamination of the pond never again enters our minds.

It is the summer of 1954. Girls wear tight sweaters with pointed brassieres, and breasts are our obsession. Naturally, we don’t call them breasts. They are Bristols, (Bristol ships being the rhyming slang for tits), knockers, jugs, boobs, whoppers, melons, milk bars, big-un's, but most often just tits, and how we love saying tits. The boys and I do exhaustive studies on the subject. We conclude that the number of snaps on the back of the brassier is proportional to the size and weight of tits. Which, in turn, is directly proportional to the amount of male hand stimulation that tits have received. Dave says we are doing a bird a big favor by “titting-her-up” as it will give ‘er great tits.

The other day we saw a five snapper and followed her, in awe, for miles around Canvey Island. While stalking this well-endowed fine-looking bird, Willy tells us that Beaky stuffs her bra with cotton balls. “It’s like what God ‘as forgotten, she stuffs with cotton.” We all jump him and make him swear never to mention Beaky, while we are studying such a pure sex goddess.

Ed tells us his feelings: "The thought of Beaky nude makes me ‘fing shrivel up like a prune!" he says. “It's like thinking of doing it with a bloody nun!"

I naturally have to out do Ed. “I’d step over Beaky naked going somewhere to wank!"

We all live for Friday and Saturday nights, which is our time to hang out at the shopping area in the village and be seen in our Teddy Boy gear. We tell the local birds that our suits are styled from Edwardian times and are commonly called Teddy Boy suits. So we have become know as "Teddy Boys," all over Canvey Island. The look is more mature than the blue work trousers and tight pullovers of last year, and we are treated almost like celebrities.

We would never buy a suit off the rack; it has to be tailor-made by the "in" tailor Max Rose. We save all year to buy one suit, but it’s worth it. The best feeling in the world is to be personally measured, then return for fittings, until that magic day when it is perfect. I often wonder if millionaires feel this excitement all the time. This was when I decided that one day I’ll become a millionaire

The boys and I all prefer a dark gray or black suit with a long fingertip length jacket, slanted pockets and a black velvet collar. Turn-ups are out now, but trousers are tighter than ever, accentuating our manhood. A little secret, maybe I shouldn’t tell, but many times a rolled sock is used to enhance nature, and the girls love it. A "Slim Jim" quarter-inch tie and two-inch thick crepe sole shoes, called "Brothel Creeper," completed the total "Teddy Boy" look.

Naturally, being teenagers, we discount our parents' criticism of our clothes, by labeling them

old-fashioned. Our striving for individualism makes our Teddy-Boy suits uniforms, and we become "those lousy Teddy Boys!" to the local hicks. A label we love!

Our bodybuilding during the winter gives us East Enders added confidence over the big burly local hicks. Ironically, now that we have muscles, all the rules seem to have changed. The battlefield on Canvey now moves to the church dances, where dancing ability has replaced punch-ups.

Girls in tight sweaters with flair or short tight skirts, and high heels congregate at the end of the hall opposite the D.J. The local hicks, dressed in checkered shirts or T-shirts, line the wall on one side. Us boys, thinking we're the fashion pride of London in our Teddy Boy suits, own the other side of the hall.

"Go on, then! Ask a bird to dance." Ed tries to egg me on.

"I'm too busy right now." I answer.

"Busy doing what?" he asks. .

"Psychological warfare, that's what."

"Psychological warfare, my ass. You're scared to ask a bird to dance 'cos you might get turned down," Ed scoffs.

For a minute I'm at a loss for words, because what he says is true.

I think, How embarrassing it would be to walk the length of the hall, in front of everyone, and then be refused a dance. Wills, what would I do, ask another girl, and chance a second humiliation? No way!

"Yeah! Psychological warfare, that's what I'm doing. Out staring the local 'icks, and it's working! Ya 'aven't seen one of them ask a bird to dance, 'ave ya? I've bloody immobilized 'em." I say, sticking out me chest.

"And we ain't seen ya ask one nei'ver! So what's that mean? Are ya immobilized, too, or just a bloody wanker?" Danny jeers.

"I don't do that no more? I can 'ave any bird 'ere. I just don't see one what takes me fancy." I say.

"What about that one in the red dress, then?" Dave nods his head in her direction. "You've been eyeing 'er up since we got 'ere."

" 'er? Are you nuts? She's been 'ad by every fella on this bloody island."

" 'ow do ya know that?" Danny asks.

"Cos she's bloody pleasure bent, that's 'ow," I say with authority.

"What the bloody 'ell is pleasure bent?" Dave questions.

"Well, me cousin's mate, Jack, is in the navy and 'as been all over the bloody world. He told me that ya can always tell the birds that's 'ad it a lot because they end up bow-legged. Now, just look at the bird in the red dress. You could drive a bloody double-decker London bus between 'er legs! And you want me to dance with the likes of 'er? No bleeding way!"

We are all standing together tapping our feet in time to the Rock and Roll music, and also trying to look tough. Danny is the only odd man out. No matter how many times we tell him to quit, he reverts from tapping his foot to thrusting his pelvis in and out, in a shagging motion in time with the music.

"Dave, do you know how to dance?" I whisper.

"'Nuffing to it," he says "Just bloody move ya feet and the bird follows."

"So 'ave ya danced before Dave?" Ed asks

"Well, not exactly." says Dave "But I'm not real bothered; 'ow 'ard can it be? Just watch the dance floor and copy what ya see others doing"

Luckily, the impatient girls have paired up and the floor is becoming filled with girls dancing together. Trying not to appear too obvious we watch out the corner of our eye and try to learn the steps. Suddenly, Danny walks on the dance-floor, and looking down at his feet, starts stomping around. Dave quickly walks over to Danny, grabs the back of his collar and drags him off the dance floor.

"What the bloody 'ell do ya 'fink ya doing, Danny?" Dave asks.

"I'm learning to bloody dance. That's what! Just like you said, watch the dance floor and copy what ya see others doing."

"Your making a bloody fool of ya'self, and letting all the birds know we don't know 'ow to dance," Dave says. "Lets go to the loo, boys, but not too obvious. Like one at a time, so they don't 'fink we're queer."

Once all five of us are in the toilet, Dave looks at Danny and beckoned. "OK Danny come 'ere and you can be the bird."

"I ain't dancing in the loo with a bloody feller. Some one'll come in and 'fink me a a bloody Ginger Beer."

"Alright then." Dave says pointing his finger in front of him. "You all stand in a line in front of me and follow what I do."

"I feel like a real wanker," Willy says, as we form the line.

Dave then demonstrates that he really has been paying close attention to the girls dancing, and teaches us many of the basic steps. We then head back into the hall, one at a time, and return to our original space next to the dance floor. Just then, two not bad-looking girls dance close to where we are standing. Knowing all my mates' eyes are on me, I buck-up the courage and blurt out,

"It's more fun with boys, ya know!" and I step forward and split the girls' hands apart. I hand the plain one to Dave, and take the better looking one myself.

I count to myself “one, two, three” and push her forward into another one, two, three.

I would love to strike up a conversation, but I am too busy mentally counting one, two, three’s.

Mine is wearing one of those fuzzy sweaters, the type that always leaves telltale lint on your suit, which takes ten rolls of Scotch tape to remove. Even so, I long to have her closer to me, since from twelve inches away I can sense what her breasts will feel like against my chest. Her "Ya-Ya" skirt flares out with hundreds of petticoats beneath. We all say the bloody starch in the petticoats is the modern chastity belt, keeping the like of us from touching heaven.

Canvey girls are not as proficient with makeup as the girls in the City. Her lipstick looks as though she put it on with a putty knife. I’m sure this is another safe-guard against attack, as I can picture my lips sliding right off this mound of slick red grease, long before getting a kiss. My thoughts make me loose step, and I quickly twirl her around to hide the mistake, then start mentally counting again one, two, three. I then think, *as I am doing real well at dancing, maybe she would go outside with me and I could get a kiss.*

"You Teddy Boys are all alike!" she says, almost reading my mind. "Think you can pick up on us Canvey girls just like that, don't you?"

"Come on, love, we aint so bad! Don't we make a bloody nice change from dating them country bumpkins with bloody straw sticking out of their ‘mouf’?" I wait for an earfull, but it doesn't come. Instead, she cuddles very close and whispers in my ear,

"My name's Sally! What's yours?"

Funny, I don't really feel her breasts against me, as I am too busy looking over her shoulder to see if my mates can see how close I am to her.

Rock & Roll dancing and the Twist have replaced punch-ups for us modern day knights. We discover that birds really gravitate to those of us who are good dancers.

Dave is the only one of us that has a singing voice and his partners really digs it.

Our weapons of war are subtle: a pointed elbow thrust into the hick's back from a Rock & Roll spin, or a well-placed heel that has many a wounded hick limping from the dance floor holding his shin. *Oh yes, Lord, I must thank you for the crowded dance floor and the watchful eye of your minister. They save us from what could be certain beatings at the hands of the hicks.*

Rhyming slang is our secret language, used to pass messages in the presence of our enemy, the

hicks. All of us boys have worked in outdoor markets, where rhyming slang has been used for hundreds of years. The stool holders use it among themselves to exclude the customers.

"Look in the Jack at the lovely Bottle and Bristols." Dave might say. This makes us aware that the girl in the corner (Jack Horner) has a lovely ass (Bottle & Glass) and nice tits (Bristol Ships).

The Canvey girls love rhyming slang and beg us to teach them. We always teach them the same sentence: "Go put on your Whistle & Flute, Dicky Dirt, clean Almond Rocks and Daisy Roots, do ya Barnett Fair and meet us down the Frog & Toad for a Pig's Ear." This translates to: "Go put on your suit, a shirt, clean socks and boots (shoes), comb your hair and meet us down the road for a beer."

Unfortunately, a few of me mates are lacking in moral fiber and succumb, shall we say, to exchanging learning for loving. Everything is fine until the girls hear us using a rhyming slang that they can't understand. Between ourselves, we never use the rhyming second word, only the first un-rhyming word: "Go put on ya whistle, dicky, almonds and daisies, do ya barnett and meet us down the frog for a pig's".

Naturally, we would never dream of teaching the girls the un-rhyming first word version. So very quickly they realize they have been taken, and fly off the handle.

I will share with you a pearl of wisdom that emerged from Danny's mouth on one such occasion. "Why is it that birds always calling us fella's, animals! That only want them for one 'fing! Then when we prove 'em right, they act surprised, and get pissed?"

Chapter 9 - Gypsies and Their Powers

As there is no drinking water at the campsite, we use the tap behind the sweetshop. Walking back to camp carrying the two five-gallon canvas water buckets that I had filled, I see the Gypsies. They are riding in horse-drawn, highly varnished wood caravans ornately decorated with hand-painted colorful chains of flowers. They look like doll houses on wheels, with flowered shutters and lace curtains at the small windows. A smokestack leads down through the red roof to a wood-burning iron stove on which the Gypsies cook. I had peered into a caravan last year. The small living area contained a bed, covered with a handmade patchwork quilt, and a small wooden table with stools, the type milk-maids use.

Á Gypsy lives a carefree life, traveling throughout the British countryside. Some are tinkers who sharpen knives and scissors and repair pots and pans. Others are candlestick makers. However, most work the fair as palm readers or run the games and rides.

Me mates all agree to meet after dinner and build a campfire away from the tents. Sitting in the dark, by the light of the fire, I tell the boys I've seen the Gypsies and we exchange stories we have heard about the "Gypos", as we call them. To us, Gypsies are a scary people with mystical powers.

"Me cousin 'as a friend who told him that Gypos eat dogs and cats what they cook in those big black caldrons over their campfires." Willy looks at each of us to see if we believe him.

"It's true. it's true," affirms Danny. "'aven't ya noticed far fewer dogs and cats since the Gypos came to town!"

"You two 'ave no bloody idea! They don't eat bloody dogs and cats! They eats the remains of the people they rob and bump off," Dave insisted. Dave's an artist with a vivid imagination, plus being the eldest at fifteen, we all believe him.

"Dave, do ya really 'fink so?" I ask. "They are very strange people. All foreigners are bloody strange, but Gypos give me the creeps."

We all hold our breath and wait for Dave's reply. He looks around, as if to check that no one else is listening, and whispers into the eerie silence

"Look, you lot! I know they bump off their victims, chop up the bodies, and cook the bloody evidence. But don't 'fink the cops are go'na do any'fing 'cos they ain't! 'cos they're also afraid of the Gypsies powers."

"Let's change the bleedy subject", Ed urges, with a shudder "Some'fing not so bloody spooky."

"What about that time last year?" Willy says, "When I hid in the bushes and watched them Gypsy girls dancing 'round the fire? They wore them low-cut peasant blouses with their tits all shiny with sweat in the moonlight. And their eyes was so bloody dark, they sparkled by the light of their campfire. And their long black 'air flowed over their sexy bare shoulders, and them full skirts circled way above their 'figs as they twirled round to the music of the violins." Willy seems to be

getting turned on, sharing his memories.

"God, Willy, what did ya see? Did ya see anything?" Danny drools. Danny still had never actually dated a girl. Even though he had graduated from sniffing girls' bicycle seats, he now delights in dirty magazines, sex stories and voyeurism. During this period, we all thought that Danny would grow up to be a Peeping Tom, or if he really put his dirty mind to it, a card-carrying dirty old man.

"Ya wouldn't believe me if I told ya." Willy beams. I saw everything all the way up."

"But what did ya really see, Willy?" Dave challenges.

"Well I saw white undies ... silk white undies ... yeah, silky white clinging undies, that's what!" He waits to see if we believed him. "Their undies was so tight that I could see the outline of their twats!" Willy says triumphantly.

"That's all made-up!" Dave says. "Bet ya 'fought it up while wanking in the loo"

He must have hit the nail on the head. Willy stands up and waves his finger at Dave.

"I don't do that no more. That's for kids! When you've 'ad the real 'fing, pulling ya pud just don't make it!" Willy boasts.

The truth is, we all boast about our sexual exploits, but we don't know who has and who hadn't. I hadn't, but would never admit it to me mates; they would think me a pansy. Willy had told us the same story last year and I can't tell you how many times I fantasize about Willy's Gypsy girls. Their bare breasts glistening in the moonlight, and the glimpses up their skirts to their silk white panties as they dance. That scene captivated my mind, and was responsible for me spending half my time in the toilet.

Dave doesn't boast that often, so I think he might be the only one of us who really has done it. He always says he's going off by himself to paint. I have a sneaky feeling that he has a bird on the side, but that she's so ugly he don't want to admit it.

"Let's go get us some Gypsy girls and fuck 'em." Danny says lustfully.

Within a second Willy mimics. "Let's go get us some Gypsy girls and fuck them. You're off your bleedy 'ead! Don't ya know better than to mess with Gypsy girls? They can cast a spell on ya and make ya their slave forever." Willy sounds like an authority.

"Grow up, Willy. That's all fairy-story stuff!" Ed sneers.

"Ya may scoff, Ed, but you've seen people under their bloody spells and ya just don't know it." Willy says. "Them twits that wear the tights, showing off their family jewels, and doing all that high wire stuff. You can't tell me they'd leap around on that tiny wire way up in the bloody 'air if they weren't under a spell."

Willy's statement makes a lot of sense. After all, he has made an extensive study of Gypsies, if

only from an underwear point of view.

"So, 'ow do they do it; 'ow do they hypnotize ya?" Danny asks Willy.

"Just by looking in ya bloody eyes, me lad. They look right into ya very soul," he replies, sticking his chest out and opening his eyes real wide.

From that time on, I never let a Gypsy make direct eye contact with me.

"Those dea'f-defying acts attract lots of suckers to the circus," Willy continues. "Then when the suckers are looking up, the Gypos pick their pockets."

"Well, they sure wouldn't find no money in mine! But I'd love to have one of those Gypsy dancers hands in me pockets," Danny says with a stupid grin on his face.

Later, lying in my camp bed I think over all the information we had heard around the campfire. I could hardly wait for tomorrow to check out my new-found knowledge of the Gypsies.

The next morning I wake-up early, dress quickly and run across the campground towards the fair. I want to see how much progress has been made and what time the fair will open. As I approach the big wood country gate at the camp entrance, my adrenaline is peaking. My mind flashed back to my older cousin Paul telling me how he used to jump over this gate with ease. So I go for it! It isn't until I am about three feet in the air that I realize I can't make it. My legs hit the solid oak top bar of the gate and flip me over the top into a somersault. I hit the ground hard, but quickly jump to my feet. I look around, and I'm relieved to find there are no witnesses to my early morning attempt at the high jump. I brush off the dirt and gravel and find I am not seriously hurt. I hurry to the large dirt lot, catty-corner from our campground, on which the fair is being erected. Workers are busy installing sideshow tents, hammering stakes, assembling rides and putting up signs. One sign announces that the fair will open at five P.M. today, and the circus will start tomorrow. I hurry back to camp and sneak into each tent where me mates are sleeping. I shake each one awake and tell them to meet me by the gate. Looking still half-asleep, Dave is the last to arrive.

"Where's the bloody fire then?" he says with a yawn.

"Oh Dave, there ain't no fire! But look across the main road. It's the fair. It opens this afternoon at five," I announce.

"Great! So why the bloody 'ell are ya waking me up at eight in the bloody morning for a fair what don't open till five tonight?"

"Well, it's so exciting." As the words leave my mouth, I want to snatch them back, realizing that I sound more like a little kid at Christmas than a tough East Ender.

Dave dresses and we walk out of his tent to the gate. "Exciting, my ass! Exciting is seeing some bird walking out of a bloody warm restaurant into the cold night air and seeing her nipples get 'ard. I'm going back to sleep till something is 'appening round 'ere!"

“old on a minute, Dave.” Danny says “Ya can miss a lot of stuff by sleeping, if you'd ‘ave been up an hour ago you would ‘ave seen Alan somersaulting over this very gate.”

I can't believe that "Peeping Tom" Danny had seen my embarrassing act.

"Will ya do it all again, Alan?" Willy asks. “I didn't get to see it." They all laugh.

"Oh shut ya mouth, Willy. Ya know ‘ow Danny lies! He made up the whole silly story. He was probably just dreaming."

"No chance, Mr. Wills. When I dream, it's something dirty! Not some prat making a girlish attempt at jumping over a bleeding gate and falling flat on his silly face. I saw ya with me own eyes," Danny says. "I was standing over there, in the bushes, taking a piss.”

"What was ya doing, Alan?" Dave chimes in. "Trying to use ya early morning ‘ard-on to pole vault over the gate? No wonder ya didn't make it!" They all laughs out loud.

"Alan... Oh Alan." I hear my mother calling me from our tent.

"Coming, Mother," I reply, risking that the shock of my instant response could give her a heart attack. But I bless her for saving me from more embarrassment.

The six of us, Willy's mother makes him take Beaky, are first in line for the five P.M. opening of the fair. Londoners, especially teenagers, have a cocky strut - like, "Notice me, I'm something special!" When the gates open, we saunter through the turnstile, then link arms five abreast, and walk as if we own the place.

There must be at least forty brightly lit game booths, all with flashing colored lights, one after another. A barker is singing “Roll a bowl a ball a penny a pitch.” Each barker is trying to out yell each other above the music, to attract customers. The excitement of the fair brings big grins to all our faces.

“Roll a ball, knock down the pins, all for just thrupence”...”Win a bloody big bear”...”Everyone’s a winner”... “Toss the hoops over the peg - it’s as easy as pie”... “Make the bell ring - show the little lady how strong you are”... “Everyone’s a winner”.. “Shoot the water in the clowns mouth - you can’t miss”... “Everyone takes ‘ome a prize.”

Having five years experience at the fair, we know every game, including the ones we could cheat or "fiddle," as we call it. An old dodge is for one of us to distract the money- taker while the pitcher leans halfway into the booth, then makes a killer shot at the cans with the beanbag. For the coin toss we put rubber cement on the bottom of the coin, which stops it dead on the otherwise slippery glass plate, and we win. But how many goldfish in plastic bags can we carry? Over the years we have dumped so many goldfish in the duck pond, back at the camp, that you can almost walk across on their backs.

Bursting the balloons with darts is no problem for Willy. His dad is a darts champion and Willy

has played since he was five. In fact, his dad taught blind people how to play by using a string from the bulls-eye to their nose.

Willy's ugly younger sister Beaky gets all goo-goo eyed over a giant black and white panda, and she pesters us to win for her. Naturally, that puts an end to our game playing, and as intended it really pisses her off as we walk away. Winning is so easy that we are bored with the games anyway, so we decided to visit the freak shows.

Leaving the Bearded Lady exhibit, me mates are joking about how disgusting it would be to kiss her. Then I see an earth angel! Any girl would have looked good after the Bearded Lady, but this girl really takes my breath away. I just can't take my eyes off her. She is wearing a peasant blouse, pleated skirt, and gold hoop earrings. She is the total turn-on of my "Gypsy fantasies", but definitely not a Gypsy. At five foot eleven, I stand a good foot taller than her. She is so petite, with bright piercing blue eyes, long auburn hair and a big smile. As corny as it sounds, it is love at first sight!

At fourteen, I'd never had a real steady girlfriend. I'd kissed a few girls at the park and even walked some home for a second kiss. The time with Maureen Miller at the movie was the height of my sexual experience, and even that fell short of its goal. Sure, I had tited-up a couple of other girls, but those girls allowed all the boys in school to touch them, so they really didn't count. Titing-up now totally consumes my mind and I yearn for the time when I can touch the boobs of a girl who wasn't labeled easy.

As I look at this dream angel, my mind becomes confused. Standing in front of me is the girl of my dreams, and it is obvious to me that she isn't the type of girl who would let anyone tit-her-up. She looks like, to use my mother's description, "a nice girl." Mother had told me that there were nice girls, the type you marry, and then there was "the other kind." But why, if she is a nice girl, am I getting this lustful feeling in my loins ... the feeling I would expect to experience only from "the other kind"?

She smiles at me, and I blush. Suddenly I realized that I have been staring at her for the longest time. I feel awkward and look away. I'm surrounded by my mates, but I can't focus on what they are chattering about. I hope they haven't seen me staring at this girl. I'm dying to talk to her! But not in front of the others, as I know they would tease me, or as we call it, take the Mickey. *I just have to dump them!*

"I 'ave to slash. Let's go to the loo," I say, walking ahead in the direction of the toilet. My mind is going wild. How can I ditch them? The answer comes, as if by divine intervention, while we are all side by side, holding our pride and joy, taking a slash.

But first I must take time out to explain about a Teddy Boy's most valuable possession, his comb. Understand that our hair is the most important part of our total look. The mile and a half

walk down High Street, Walthamstow, could take as long as three hours, as it is almost impossible to pass one's reflection in three consecutive store windows without stopping to comb one's hair.

The hair ritual is very exacting. First we plaster our hair with greasy Brylcreem and comb it back over our ears into a D.A. (duck's ass - the two sides of our hair met in a slit at the back and extended to below our collar line). The D.A. achieved the rebellious, tough-guy look. We comb the front up on both sides to meet in a point, which we pull down over our forehead, to form the Tony Curtis look. Those of us that shave, grow side-burns down to our jaw lines to prove we are men. This combination gives us our tough guy, film star appeal... or at least this is our theory.

So back to the bathroom:

"Oh shit! I've lost me comb!" I lie. "Bet it fell out of me pocket at that Bearded Lady! I'll just nip back for it and catch up with ya all by the Bumper Cars."

This is the first time that I am willing to deceive my mates for the sake of a female, something I would have sworn I would never do in a million years. Naturally, I have to walk back in the direction of the Bearded Lady, as I know my mates are watching my every move, if not timing me. To cover my time, once around the first corner I start to run through the throngs of people, looking for the girl of my dreams. But she is nowhere to be found. I become despondent, frustrated, out of breath, and very aware of how quickly time is passing. I give up, and head back towards the Bumper Cars. As I turn the last corner, I can't believe my eyes! Willy is talking to her. As I watch, keeping out of sight, I see her smile at him.

What a rat! I think, I'll kill 'im! How could he do this to me, especially after our pledge to be blood brothers for life? Me mind is going ninety miles per hour.

Wills, he beeding conned 'er into talking to 'im! She's too nice a girl to just stop and talk to the likes of Willy.

The sweat is dripping down my face and my hair is a real mess. I dodge into a space between two games, wipe the sweat on their side curtains, and try to comb me Tony Curtis into place. Feeling as if my heart will explode through my chest, I saunter, as casually as possible, up to me mates.

"This 'ere's Alan," Willy says as I approach. "This 'ere's a local tart called Glenda."

I try to seem disinterested by only half-looking at her. "Glenda? Never heard of such a name! OK gang, let's get going." I say. *Had I flipped my lid? What am I saying? I can't even believe my own words. Leaving is the last thing I want to do.*

"I saw you looking at me outside the Bearded Lady," she says, in what to me was the most angelic of tones.

"Me? Looking at you? Ya must be off your 'ead! Never seen ya before and 'ope I never see ya again." I hear myself saying the words and want to take back every single one.

Glenda's smile fades and she looks at me with a quizzical look. "Why do you Londoners have to act so tough?" she asks. "You know our eyes met for the longest time. Didn't you feel some electricity?" She sounds as though she could read my every thought.

"Electricity? You've been watching too many sloshy love movies. Ya know, where Mary runs through the bloody long grass into John's waiting arms." Again, I hear my words and could kill whoever it is working my mouth.

Willy grins "Don't mind him, miss. He don't know how to treat a lady!".

"Is that so? You back-stabbing, girl-stealing, slippery slimy excuse for a blood brother," I yell. And with this typical pre-fight character assassination, I jump on top of Willy, knocking us both to the ground. We scrap, rolling in the dirt, getting a punch in now and then, until Ed and Dave pull us apart. Even though Dave stands between us, a hand on each chest, our verbal abuse continues. In fact, we are so busy yelling at each other that we almost don't notice that Glenda has walked away.

"Let me go," Willy insists, running after her, and I'm not far behind.

"OK, you!" demands Willy, catching up to Glenda. "Choose between us!"

Such rivalry elevates Glenda from a four-foot-eleven country girl to a six foot Amazon femme-fatale. She knows she is in control and doesn't rush to answer, but just looks both of us up and down. She smiles at me and her eyes sparkle. I feel myself blushing, but I can't take my eyes off her; the background to her beautiful face goes out of focus as my mind visualizes her as an angel.

Then her voice breaks the spell. "Willy, I love your long blonde hair, and your smile drives me crazy." Willy is grinning like a Cheshire Cat. "But I really felt electricity between Alan and me, and I've never ever felt that before."

"Oh come on, Glenda, not more 'B' movie stuff," Willy scoffs.

OK mouth, I think, don't start denying our eye encounter. So what if Willy thinks it sounds soft? I hold my lips pressed tightly together and I am bursting with pride inside, until I can stand it no more.

"All right love, let's get out of here. The company stinks!" I say. Like a true victor, I put my arm around Glenda's tiny waist, and we walk away.

I would like to say into the sunset, but it isn't. But to me it's just as romantic. At fourteen this is the first time I've fallen in love.

Chapter 10 - First Love

Me and me mates have always done everything together, so how can I now sneak away and spent time with Glenda? I lay here in my camp bed and connive how I will use my mother and Aunt Jenny’s shopping trip at Southend, as an excuse, to slip away from me mates. Unfortunately, me mom and me mates know I hate shopping, but it’s the best I can come up with. I dress, and walk out of the tent, still preoccupied with me problem.

“So what ya ‘finking about so ‘ard Alan?” Willy asks. “Maybe ‘ow ya stole me girl and now ya can’t decide ‘ow to give ‘er back.”

“Do what, Willy?

“Or maybe you’re in L.O.V.E and your friends don’t matter no more.” he says in a sarcastic way.

I think, *how true. How can I stay tight with me mates, and also be with Glenda?* Me mind becomes even more confused. I had no idea that being in love is so complicated.

“Willy it ain’t like that at all. We are blood brothers and no bird will come between us.” I say, trying to convince myself as well as Willy.

“What we doing today then?” he asks. “Maybe walk around the bloody sea wall, and catch some crabs?”

“Oh no! Me, me mum and Aunt Jenny are going to Southend, I need some shoes.”

“Maybe all us boys could tag along, nip in the Kursal Fun Fair, ride the bumper cars, the scenic-railway, and all that stuff.” Willy grins, liking his idea.

“No, no! Me mum don’t like me playing all those slot machines, says it’s a waste of money. Plus, she says a bad element ‘angs out at the Kursal.”

“What the bloody ‘ell is a bad element? I ‘fought that was us!” Will says with a grin.

“Look Willy, I ‘ave to go and get ready for the trip. See ya later.” I turn and walk back to the tent feeling relief he had bought the excuse.

I enter our tent, and tell mother I want to go to Southend.

“But you hate shopping! What’s the catch, young man?”

“No catch mum! Thought you might like me to do something with you for a change.”

“Come off it, Alan! Teenage boys don’t want to be with their mothers. Why don’t you tell me what going on in that devious mind of yours?”

I have no come back for mother’s question, so I ignore it, and go to our washroom and comb me hair.

Mother not only sees through brick walls and around corners she also reads minds. I never underestimate her, but I do wonder how she got this smart. All us boys know that birds are dumber than us. So I wonder at what age do they get their smarts. Maybe God, in his wisdom, gives them smarts when they are in the hospital having a baby, because he knows what a handful us teenage will be later.

Mother calls into our washroom. “OK. Alan, your Aunt Jenny is here. Quit combing your hair for the thousandth time, and let’s get going to Southend.”

The three of us walk to the bus stop outside the sweetshop, and board the bus a few minutes later. I look out of the window for inspiration on how to get away from my mother to go see Glenda. I watch: mile after mile of green fields and small farm-houses but they do not produce the answer. Suddenly, I hear the rumble of the bus tires on the bridge crossing over from Canvey Island to North Benfleet. I know time is running out, as at Benfleet we will board the steam train for Southend. Seating in front of mother and Aunt Jenny, I slump down in the seat and hold my hand to my forehead.

“What’s wrong, Alan.” mother asks.

“I think one of me migraines.” I say in a low pain ridden voice.

“Poor lad does suffer from migraines,” mother says to her sister, as she leaves her seat to sit next to me.

“We’ll take you back to camp, Alan, and put you to bed and I’ll stay with you.”

“Oh no mother! I’m a big boy now, and I don’t want me mates to think you have to molly coddle me. Just give me bus money and I’ll head back. Don’t worry, I’ll just go to bed and the migraine will pass.

“Are you absolutely sure? Jenny and I can go to Southend tomorrow, you know.”

“I’m sure!” I say, my palm still to my forehead, like I am at death’s door. “Just give me the fare, ‘cos you don’t want to miss the train.”

I feel triumphant on the return bus ride, and can’t stop smiling as we travel back down Long Street. I outwitted me mates and me mother, and now I feel really excited to be heading to see Glenda. The bus makes a left turn on the main street and I see the boys going into the sweetshop. Quickly, I duck down in my seat as we pass.

Wills, that was close. I think. If ya mates would ‘ave seen ya, ya would ‘ave ‘ad to get off the bloody bus, and spend the day with ‘em.

I get off the bus four stops north of the sweetshop, at High Street. Then head up the long dirt path that takes me to the other side of the Island. The directions are indelibly etched on my mind from the first time I walked Glenda home, after we met at the fair.

I have never felt so happy, and my feet seem to float across the uneven country road.

My mind is full of that night, and I can't stop grinning. I think, *we just couldn't stop kissing and hugging each other. Each time I said goodnight and walked a few steps away, I rushed back for another kiss. I couldn't leave her lips. Time didn't matter! Then her mother called from the house, that it was twelve o'clock, and time for her to say goodnight. It was as if my feet never touched the ground, that night, all the way back across the island to our campsite. Boy, was I brought back to reality quickly, when I reached our tent and my mum scolded me for being out so late.*

I come back to the present, look around, and I'm surprised how far I've walked.

What a beautiful day, today! I think. *The sun is warm and the birds are singing.* I whistle as I walk through the green countryside feeling excited to be seeing Glenda again. Eventually, I turn right onto her small country lane, and I feel butterflies in my stomach.

I look up, and smile, liking the way the lush grass embankment of the seawall forms a backdrop behind her house. The single story white house with green shutters is the last house on the lane and stands on a large lot. It looks as if it has been in need of paint for some years. *How different, I think, to our small two story terraced house in London, that my father seems to always be painting.* As I reach the low white fence I see the lawn, that surrounds their house, is overgrown and spotted with dandelions and other weeds. I think, *My father would be out here morning, noon and night, weeding and mowing until it was immaculate.*

I reach the small white gate and the front door flies open. “Alan” Glenda screams, running down the front path, and throws her arms around my neck. I lean forward over the low gate, and she kisses me very passionately. My mind is owned by the kiss. Suddenly I feel the pointed upright slates of the gate against my crouch. I gulp. Had I impaled my private parts? Embarrassed, I try not to look down while I put my hand under my crouch, and lift myself off the wood points of the gate. I hope she doesn't see, and hope even more that I have no permanent injury to my gonads.

“I'm so glad to see you Alan. I haven't slept a wink since we met.” she says, walking me up the path to the front door holding my arm. “I told my mother all about you, and she really wants to meet you”.

“Christ, Glenda, what did ya tell 'er?”

But before she could answer, a person that looked like her sister, wearing a low cut white blouse, a short tight blue skirt and high heels, opens the door. She grins and looks me up and down in a

very provocative way.

“You must be Alan. I’m Glenda’s mum, Kitty! Please come on in.”

Christ, this is Glenda mum? I shouldn’t be looking down her cleavage. But as hard as I try, her breasts are like powerful magnets to my eyes.

As I walk into the living room a slight breeze comes through the open windows, bringing the smells of flowers from their garden. The settee is covered with an old blanket with women’s magazines and romance paperbacks strewn everywhere. On the floor is an oval area rug with an old dog, who pants, but doesn’t get up. A rocking chair with dog scratches, and an easy chair with a rip in the vinyl on one arm, are on each side of the fireplace, which has weeks of unlearned ashes. The walls are quite bare with just a couple of old fashioned framed photographs on each side of the upright wood cabinet radio that sits on the dusty wood floor.

“Sit down.” Mrs. Roper says. “Make yourself at home. We don’t believe in standing on ceremony. Take us as you find us, that’s what I always say. Don’t I Glenda?”

I feel relaxed with no urgency to talk, and my mind takes over. *Mrs. Roper is just like Dave’s mum. She’s easy going, like she doesn’t have a care in the world.*

Ya Wills the total opposite of your parents who spent so much time working and keeping an immaculate house they never have time for fun. The Ropers house sure is different. Your front room, with the piano and green leather three-piece suite, is always kept locked except for those rare occasions when they have company.

Ya, this home is comfortable, lived-in, like they really enjoy being a family here.

“Can I use your loo... er toilet.” I ask.

“Glenda, show Alan where the bathroom is.” Mrs. Roper says

As soon as I close the bathroom door, I pull down my trousers and underpants and inspect my most valuable possessions. I am relieved to find no blood, just red blotches from the pointed slates of the gate. I sigh, relieved knowing everything is intact.

I return to the living room and Mrs. Roper asks, “So, what are you two up to today?”

“Thought I would take Alan for a walk down the seawall and then get him in the long grass.” Glenda replies with an impish grin. Their eyes meet, and they both burst out laughing.

I’m shocked and feel my face turn red. I can’t even look at Mrs. Roper.

“Don’t get embarrassed, Alan,” Kitty Roper says. Glenda says you’re almost fifteen. That’s how old I was when I had her, so we are more like sisters than mother and daughter. We wear each other’s clothes, and tell each other everything. It’s not so long ago that I was seventeen, so I know

the feelings Glenda has. It’s quite normal to feel a little randy. I was! So you two get out of here and have fun, it’s a beautiful day.”

“Come on my Cockney darling.” Glenda says as she pulls me by the arm through the front door. “Bye mum. See you when I see you. I love you.”

My “Nice to meet you Mrs. Roper.” is cut short as Glenda slams the front door behind us. As we walk through the gate she reaches for my hand, and we run up the steep grassy embankment. Once at the top, on the four-foot wide path, she throws her arms around my neck and plants a very hungry kiss on my very willing mouth. We walk with our arms around each other, and stop to kiss many times. As we walk I’m filled with aliveness, a new confidence, I have never been happier, I’m in love. We walk a long way around the seawall and there seems no need for words, but my mind is on overtime. *With Glenda by my side I think I could rule the world.*

Chapter 11 - Love Ain't Easy

I'm unaware of anyone else on the seawall, we are a couple, and time and tide have no importance. Life is perfect.

“See up there on the Downs,” Glenda points “That’s Hadleigh Castle, it’s Norman, but all in ruins now. I’ll take you up there one day and we’ll have a picnic.”

She tugs at my hand and takes me off the path and over to the edge. We look down at the lapping sea against the massive rocks that make up this side of the sea wall.

“Do you like to catch crabs, Alan?”

“Oh sure, me and me mates have caught ‘undreds, over the years on Canvey, we use a fishing line and a mussel dangled between the rocks.”

The last think I want to talk about is catching crabs. I turn Glenda towards me and kiss her.

“Hold on a minute Casanova! I told my mother I was taking you for a walk first, and then to the long grass.”

We both laugh and head for the long grass. The landside of the sea wall is lush with long dark green grass. Glenda leads me down the slope to where it meets the meadow. She seems to know where the grass is the tallest and thickest, and I wonder how many other boys she had taken to this very spot. We lie down, and our bodies flatten the grass of this perfect hide-away. My eyes are drawn to Glenda's full red lips. They're moist and parted. We kiss for hours, and disappear from the outside world. Her kisses excite my body, and consume my mind. I become totally absorbed by our passion. I'm dying to touch her breasts, but decide it's not worth the risk to chance losing these incredible kisses that satisfy me completely.

Night falls, and it's getting cold, so we head back to her house. Between the house and the seawall stands an old caravan that she says they use for guests. Quietly she opens the door to the dark caravan, and we slip inside. Glenda lies back on the bed and pulls me on top of her, and she devours my mouth with a kiss that seems to never end. When we do come up for air, she asks

“How do you feel about me, Alan?”

“You really ‘ave to ask?” I kiss her softly on the lips.

“God, that kiss was beautiful!” she whispers, the moonlight catching a tear in her eye. “It lets me know more then words could ever say. Alan, I think I am falling in love with you.”

“Oh Glenda, I've been crazy about ya ever since I first laid me eyes on ya outside the Bearded Lady booth.”

She sits up quickly, and in the moonlight I see a puzzled look on her face.

“In front of your mates you said, and I quote – “Me? Looking at you? You must be off your ‘ead! Never seen ya before and ‘ope I never see ya again.” She mimics my cockney accent perfectly. We both burst into laughter, and for the first time in my life I am able to laugh at myself. It feels really good, like a heavy yoke has been lifted from my shoulders. I hug her, and think, *how easy it is to be with Glenda compared to my mates*. Plus *she hadn’t made a big deal about me not be able to say I love her*.

“Glenda, ‘fings are different when I’m with me mates. Like I ’ave to act tough. Ya can’t tell them about ya feelings, and fears, ‘cos they’ll ‘fink ya soft, like a bloody sissy.”

“But we only just met, and you told me. You have known your mates forever. Have you ever tried telling any of your mates your innermost feelings?”

“Christ no! They’d ‘fink I’d gone off me bleeding rocker, and ‘ave me committed.

Glenda, we come from totally different worlds, and I can’t expect ya to understand

how it is in the East End. Canvey’s like paradise. Ya ‘ouse is a ‘appy ‘ome. Ya can tell ya mum any’fing. Ya mum is young and ‘appy, and understands teenagers. She ain’t forever worried about the bloody ‘ouse, cleaning, and painting to impress God knows who? You can be open with ‘er, ya don’t ‘ave to sneak around to do stuff. When I wanted to body build I had to do it behind me closed bedroom door, being real quiet, ‘oping not to be discovered. If they’d ‘ave known I was body building they would ‘ave labeled me a future thug, and maybe even called the bloody cops.”

“Maybe you could take me to London someday, and then I might understand? I really want to know all about you, Alan. All your hopes, fears and your dreams for the future.” She says and leans forward and gently kisses my lips.

I get a lump in my throat and my eyes get very moist. I feel a tear run down my cheek and quickly start to turn away. She kneels on the bed, and throws her arms around my neck, turning my face towards her, then snuggling her lips against my ear, and whispers.

“It’s OK, Alan. Just let it all out. You don’t have to be this tough Cockney with me. The way I see it Cockneys ain’t so tough! They just seem to need everyone to think they are.”

I take a deep breath and close my eyes to hold back my tears. Suddenly, I jump up from the bed. “Christ, Glenda, what’s the bloody time?”

She holds her wrist against the window, and looks at her watch by the moonlight. “It’s eleven thirty.”

“Not again. Christ, me mother will kill me! Said she almost called the cops last time.... I’ve got to go, Glenda. But I don’t want to! I’d give any’fing to just stay ‘ere with you forever.”

I run, by the light of the moon, all the way back across the countryside of North Canvey. I reach High Street, the sweat streams down my face as I stop to rest against a lamppost.

“So, what are you up-to my lad” the question comes from a policeman that I hadn’t seen, on a bike only a few feet away from me.

“Who me Constable? Nuffing. ...er.. just going ‘ome.” I pant, trying to collect my breath.

“Judging by your dialect I would say you have a very long way to go, like the East End of London if I’m not mistaken.” He says, and shines his torch in my face.

“Well yes..., and no.” I say, having now caught my breath. “I am, as you rightly guess, from the East End of London. But when I say I am going ‘ome, I mean to our campsite behind Mr Harris’s sweetshop.

“Oh, I see! So why are you in this part of Canvey this late at night, may I ask?

Been breaking into peoples houses have you? Never have trusted you Cockneys!

“Oh no sir. Me girlfriend,” pant “lives over this side of the Island and I ‘ave to walk all the way back to our tent.”

“Likely story! I’ll have to take you to the police station for questioning.” he says, holding his uniform lapels and sticking out his chest.

“So Constable, who will question me at the police station.”

“Well, I’m the only policeman on Canvey, so stands to sense it’ll be me.” his eyebrows lift showing his surprise at my question.

“Why don’t ya do it right ‘ere and now.” I ask with my fingers crossed.

“Because at the station my wife can reach me by phone, and I’m late.”

“So why don’t you let me go. You can always reach me at Glenda Roper’s.”

“That’s Stan Roper, the car mechanic’s girl. Right?”

“Yes sir, and Mrs. Roper is ‘er mum,” but as I say it I know it’s a stupid remark.

“Well OK, off you go home. You’re right I know where to find you behind the sweetshop, or at the Roper’s house, if there’s has been any houses broken into tonight.”

Again I start to run as I know I am in for a good hiding when I get home. Then I stop. *Why the hell am I rushing to receive a good hiding?* So I walk the rest of the way, anticipating my father’s punishment. When I get to the gate I’m shocked to find Dave.

“So you dirty stop-out you decided to come ‘ome at long last.” *He sounds like me dad.*

“Dave! What the bloody ‘ell are ya doing ‘ere?”

“Waiting for you lover boy. Where ya been? With that little Glenda bird? I bet!”

“Well...yes, me and Glenda spent some time at ‘er ‘ouse with ‘er mother.” I say sheepishly.

“Oh! Ain’t that bloody nice! Little Alan’s already been taken ‘ome to meet mother. So when’s the bloody wedding then?”

“Dave, it’s not like that. Mrs. Roper is like Glenda’s sister. She’s real neat and even knows we get randy, she ain’t like a regular mum.”

“So maybe you could fix me up with ‘er,” he grins, “We could ‘ave a mother and daughter fuckerthon.”

“Shut up Dave.” I yell and walk away in disgust.

“ ‘old on a bloody minute lover-boy. Ain’t you even a bit curious why ya tent’s all dark, and I’m standing waiting for you at the bloody front gate.

I turn back to face him “ ‘course I am. What’s ‘appened?”

“Your big old Aunt Jenny broke ‘er leg or some’fing in Southend, your mum’s at the ‘ospital with ‘er. She calls ya dad in London, and he took the train direct to Southend after work. Then your mum calls the bloody sweetshop, tells the bird at the counter to go tell ‘er son, who’s in bed with a migraine, what ‘as ‘appened. Well now, funny ‘fing, the counter bird can’t get the son with the migraine to wake up, no matter how loud she yells through the bloody door of ya tent. So she comes to our tent to deliver the message. I tell me mum ya was out and I’d wait for ya and give ya the bloody message.”

“ ‘fanks Dave. You’re a real good mate” I say, and mean it.

“Well, if ya’re real grateful,” he smiles, “ya’d let me smell ya middle finger so I can get to know that Glenda bird personally.

I feel something well up inside me. Then my right fist swings out and I hit his jaw as hard as I could. “Don’t you ever talk nasty about Glenda again, I scream, shaking my finger at him where he lays on the grass holding his jaw. I walk away feeling good that I had defended her honor. I go to bed smiling, as I realized I have also dodged the beating from my dad for being so late.

I tell my mother that I met a Canvey fisherman who needs a deckhand on his fishing boat. She doesn’t ask all her usual questions, maybe because she knows Dave and I are on the outs. She knows I love to go fishing, so agrees I can accept the job for a week.

The very same day Glenda gets fired from her job at Dutch Village for sleeping on the job. Although I feel bad, knowing that our late nights are responsible, I am also glad, as now we can

spend time together day and night during this week.

Monday, as promised, we head up the downs to Hadleigh Castle for a picnic. Glenda runs off into the ruins of the castle. She climbs up, and calls out to me from a tall narrow slit from which the knights fired arrows.

“Save me I’m a damsel in distress.”

I run behind the only remaining portion of circular castle wall, and climb up to where she stands.

“Lady Glenda, I’m your knight in shining armor come to save you” and I pick her up in my arms, then carry her carefully down the large square granite blocks of the castle ruins. I stop at the bottom, lay her on the over grown grass, and we kiss passionately.

“Brave knight, I must repay your gallantry I’m yours for the taking.”

I kiss her soft red lips again, and again, pushing my pelvis away from her so she won’t be shocked by my hard on.

We’re so engrossed with our long passionate kisses that the heat of day passes, and clouds cast shadows over us. We sit up and discover that seagulls are eating the picnic sandwiches her mother had prepared.

“They are doves sent to us by cupid, isn’t that romantic?” she says with a sigh.

“They ain’t doves they’re bloody seagulls. Christ, Glenda, a Canvey girl like you should know the bloody difference.”

“Oh, well I guess that means our romantic picnic is over and we had better be going home.”

“Just cos the seagulls eat our bloody sandwiches?”

As we walk back across the Downs my mind is full of questions. *Boys really do think differently than girls. With some other chap, when she said “take me I yours,” he would have be taken advantage of her.*

Wills, do ya fink it made any sense, her walking away from kissing just because she though a seagull was a bloody dove. Women can’t be understood?

Ours is a very physical relationship, even though I respect her too much to actually touch her sexually. When we walk, it is always with our arms around each other. When we run, we are always hand in hand. And in the long grass our bodies intertwine so that physically, and emotionally we are as one.

It is now halfway through the most wonderful week of my life. We are in the long grass but I can feel that Glenda is uneasy. We sit up and she tells me that tomorrow her dad is taking her to Southend for an interview, for a well paying job. As if that amount of time apart isn’t devastating

enough, she says, he also plans to visit relatives, who live just outside Southend, for the evening. We cling together as if this is the last day of our life.

“Alan, lay on top of me.” she pulls me to her and engulfing my mouth with hers. Her tongue darts in and out of my mouth teasing my tongue. This is new to me, and very exciting, so I do the same to her. She lets out a low moan, and then sucks on my tongue almost pulling it down her throat. She is rubbing her body against mine and moaning even louder. I feel embarrassment as I realized that my erection is rubbing between her legs so I try to pull away. The harder I try the more she rubs herself against me, and then suddenly she lets out a very loud moan, and releases her grip on me. I feel dizzy for a minute, and sit up. I then notice that she’s lying very still and I get very scared.

“Glenda, you OK?” my finger tips touch her arm.

“Oh yes, Alan. I’m perfect,” she whispers opening her eyes and smiling. “Are you OK my Cockney lover?”

“Well sure, I’m fine, but what about you? You seemed to just stop, and I worried case I did some’fing wrong?”

“Oh no, you did everything perfectly right. Come here, hold me and stroke my hair”.

After stroking her hair for a while she slips into sleep with a peaceful smile on her face. I hold her, but feel very uneasy that she might just pass away in my arms. I don’t know what to do, but I know I wouldn’t want to live if she dies. Suddenly she stirs and opens her eyes.

“I love you,” she whispers “I love you so very much.”

“Oh. Glenda I’m so glad you didn’t bonk-off.” I sigh with relief. “I feel the same way, but don’t you ever die, OK”

“Why are you talking about dying?” She sits up looking at me in a questioning way.

“Oh, I guess I just don’t want to live without you, so don’t die, OK”

“I’m only seventeen, Alan, why an earth would you worry about me dying? She looks very puzzled. “Is it because you are fourteen that you think I’m going to die three years before you, or something. Well from what I understand women live longer than men, so you will probably kick the bucket before me. Oh I get it, have you been reading Romeo and Juliette at school, and think that’s us?”

“Who the ‘ell is Romeo and Juliette?” I ask

She grins “Oh, you wouldn’t know, Alan! They’re not from the East End. Come on let’s go back to the house for something to eat, I’m starving.”

As we finish the cheese and Branston pickle sandwich she made, we agree that she must have an

early night to be sharp for her interview tomorrow. It is getting dark as we walk out side, and I kiss her against the old caravan. I say softly “good night” and we cling to each other as though we might never see each other again. Neither of us wants to let go of the other. We kiss, and say good night again and again. I walk away, only to rush back into each other's arms a dozen times before actually being able to part. As I walk up her lane I turn, and wave goodbye at least twenty times before turning the corner that leads me across the fields. As I walk my mind is going one hundred miles per hour, “*How am I going to make it through a whole day and night without seeing her? Maybe I should turn back to be with her. No, that wouldn't be fair! She has to be alert for her interview tomorrow.*”

I walk on and try to clear my head, but the more I try the more things jump into my mind. *Maybe she is not going to Southend with 'er dad at all, but with another feller. Someone 'er own age, someone that 'as a car. Someone that can afford to keep 'er, so she wouldn't have to work.*

I feel very sad and, my feet get heavy as I walk. Time and place have lost all importance without Glenda, as I trudge along. I reach the tent and feel totally done-in. These last few steps are agony, and I collapse on top of my sleeping bag.

The next thing I hear is “Wakee, Wakee, it's six o'clock” It's my mum and she's much too cheerful. “You'll be late for going on the fishing boat. Don't want to lose your job, you only have a couple of days left.”

As is quite usual lately, I awake tired, and figure it has to be the morning. I try to open my eyes to answer her, but the bright light through the tent door feels like it is about to burn my eyes right out of my head.

“Mum, I didn't tell you, Jack the fisherman isn't taking the boat out today. He's going to Southend on an interview for a good paying job. So I can sleep in. Goodnight mum, thanks.”

I awake again at ten-thirty, wearily leave my camp bed, and go to the washroom basin to splash water on my face. I remember that today I will not be seeing Glenda, and I feel sad. Even pulling on my trousers takes extra effort, but I make it, and walk out of the tent. My eyes became accustomed to the bright sun. I can see the boys swimming in the muddy duck pond, and walk over to them.

“Whatya gang!. 'ows the water?” I ask, in the jolliest tone I can muster.

They don't answer. I look from face to face and they all look bored stiff, or could it be hostility towards me?

I ask again “'ows the swamp water? Warm is it?”

"So, 'lover boy" Danny says. “To what do we owe the pleasure of your company around our 'umble camp?”

"Oh, I just thought we could all spend some time together, like the old days," I lie.

I'm not about to tell me mates that Glenda had gone to Southend for the day.

“What about your bird? Dave scoffs “Won't she be lonely without little Alan?”

I feel hurt by their attitude, but deep down I know I have ignored them for Glenda.

"Look! You're me mates, and always will be. Nu'fing has changed. But haven't ya ever been in love?" As I say it, I know it's a big mistake.

"Oh Christ!" Danny exclaims. "He's in love, and all his mates can go fuck 'em selves."

"Danny, that ain't true. I'm 'ere now, so why don't we all do something together?"

"What ya 'ave in mind, Wills?" Ed says sarcastically. "Maybe we could all sit around, then you could tell us about being in love, and how bloody wonderful it is."

"Come on, leave me alone about love, and about Glenda."

“Oh, you don't want to talk about ‘ow ya stole me bird." Willy sounds very bitter.

"Maybe we could all go out and pick up some skirt and then ya could nick someone else's bird?"

"It's no bloody use! I can't talk to you lot when you're in this mood," I say over my shoulder as I walk back to our tent.

"So what's wrong with you, Alan?" Mother asks. "You look as though you lost your best friend!"

How do mothers do that? I think. They seem to have a sixth sense.

"Come on, my lad. Buck up, and look alive. There's not many more days left of our vacation, you know!"

God, she's right! I hadn't thought of having to go home, or that there would be a time without Glenda. The thoughts make me feel sick inside. I say nothing, as I hadn't even told my parents I have a girl friend. I have never been able share my feeling with them, so how can I possible explain my intense fear of being separated from Glenda?

Chapter 12 - Unjustly Accused

For hours I just lazily stare out of the tent, my mind in a blue funk. Then, as if in a mirage, Glenda appears outside the massive wood gate of the camp ground. I can't believe my eyes. *She's in Southend with her dad!* I think. My mind goes into red alert. *I can't bring her into the camp! How would I introduce her to me mother? Oh Mother, I'd like you to meet Glenda, the one you know as Jack the fisherman, the girl I've been sneaking out to see. The seventeen year old kissing maniac I haven't told you about! Christ! I must get rid of her!*

In sheer panic I dash for the gate. With no thought of my past experience, I make an Olympic leap, and this time easily clear the top of the gate. Almost before my feet hit the ground, I grab Glenda by the hand, and hurry her down the footpath behind the cover of the hedgerow.

"Hold on!" she says breathlessly. "What's going on?"

"I'll tell ya in a minute." I help her maneuver through the broken fence, which leads to the unused area on the extreme right of the camping field. At a quick glance I guess it to be safe as our tents are at least fifty feet away. I pull her down into a patch of long grass between the hedgerow, and we disappear from sight.

"I'm sorry, love! I'm having some trouble with me mother, and didn't want to get ya involved."

Glenda looks dejected. We sit in silence, and my mind takes over. *Glenda's mum is so open, how can I explain my Victorian parents to her? I would give anything to see my dad kiss my mother the way Mr. Roper greets his wife when he gets home from work. It's like they are still young lovers.*

Wills, your parents stopped being Jim and Ada in love, and become strangers to each other long ago!

She looks into my eyes and smiles. "But I'd love to meet your mother!"

"No! No, you wouldn't! Believe me! No! No! Not right now! Maybe later! Maybe much later!"

"Like after we're married maybe, Alan?" Her head drops, and she looks down, dejected. "What's wrong with me? Is it because I'm a Canvey girl?"

"Course not, love. She'll love ya. It's just not the right time. Please trust me with this! By the way, I thought you was at Southend on a bloody job interview?"

"I was, but they had already hired someone else. I told my dad I have been so keyed up for the interview that I now had the runs. So he let me come home by myself on the bus, while he went on to visit the people I told you about. Oh Alan, I just miss you so much, and just had to be with you." She sighs and her quivering lips meet mine.

All thoughts of my mother are quickly removed from my mind by Glenda's impatient lips. Once again, we totally disappear into our passions. I am quickly jolted back to reality by my mother's shrill voice.

"You dirty beast, molesting this poor young girl after dragging her into the long grass."

I jump to my feet, and instantly feel the sting of her right hand as she slaps my face really hard. Glenda takes off running. I stand there speechless, glaring at my mother, hating her for what she just did in front of Glenda. I have never felt so humiliated. I turn my back to my mother, and feel sick to my stomach. I punch my hand, grind my teeth, and then find it hard to catch my breath. If it had been my dad who hit me I would have punched him out, but not my mother! I feel frustration welling up inside. My mind tells me, *I have to get away from her, as far away as possible*. I make a dive for the hole in the fence, and feel my shirt rip on something. I start to run with no sense of time or direction. Eventually, I find myself on an unfamiliar muddy beach at the waters edge. I have run mindlessly for miles non-stop and now feel done in, my muscles ache. My mind fills with the embarrassment and hate for my mother. I collapse, too exhausted, and my eyes fill with tears. Then shake my head, and think, *Cockneys are tough and don't cry!*

I must have fallen asleep because I awake to the cold incoming tide washing over me. I shiver, the sea water has saturated my shorts, and I am unable to collect my thoughts. Again the cold salt water washes over me. I jump to my feet, but confusion owns my mind. The tide has filled my shoes, all I can do is look down, and think, *Why me Lord?*

Again the tide fills my shoes, and it is as if I don't have the energy to stop this happening to me, but I know I must. I turn, take a step and my right foot disappears. Quickly I push down on my other foot for leverage but it too sinks into the gooey mud up to my knee. I pull up my right leg but can only move it ahead a few inches. When I put it down it sinks into the mud up to my knee again. Every step through this horrible mud is a battle, but I eventually reach the big rocks of the sea wall. I sit on a rock for a long time. I shiver, and my leg muscles ache more than ever. I crawl on all fours over each big rock, feeling like a crab, until I reach the top of the sea wall. The mud on my legs is heavy, and as I stand up, the cold North Sea wind chills me to the marrow of my bones. I start to shiver and can't stop. I know I must get warm or I could die of exposure.

Wills, I think, you really only have two choices. Head north, to Glenda's house.

Sure idiot, that would have been an easy choice before mother slapped me. But now I'm a weak little boy in Glenda's eyes! I'm sure she won't want anymore to do with me.

So Wills, you really only have one choice, to head back to the tent.

I'm not familiar with this part of the seawall. I look around, and surmise it might be somewhere near the oil storage depot at Deadman's Point, way on the southeast end of the island. *If I kept the Thames estuary on your right, I think, I will reach somewhere I know*. My aching muddy legs will allow only a cross between a fast walk, and a slow run, along the top of the seawall, but I keep

pushing myself knowing I must keep warm. I proceed for what feels like miles. Just as I am about to give up, and walk back in the other direction, I see the familiar seafront, and the breakwater that is the kids swimming pool. *Wills, you wanker, you made it!* I brake into almost a run for the last fifty yards.

I roll down the grassy side of the seawall to get out of the wind, and just sit and think. I feel in my pockets and find no money to ride the bus. So I walk down the Esplanade and along the length of Furtherwick Road, and eventually get to the sweetshop. Luckily when I reach the campsite, the tent is dark. I remember that Dad is staying overnight in London for some union meeting. I guess that my mum must be at a neighbor's tent, telling the whole terrible story about her son, the rapist.

Wills, you a Rapist? That's funny!

You're right, Glenda had almost raped me! I smile at my own thoughts, then remember my mother's words: *You dirty beast! Molesting that poor young girl. What a laugh! If only she knew how old Glenda is, she would probably have Glenda arrested for adding to the delinquency of a minor, or whatever that law is.*

I awake to daylight, and feel sick inside. I know I have lost Glenda. It's so quiet that I must be alone in the tent. Mother is probably at Aunt Jenny's tent. Maybe, discussing how she has failed as a mother. I stay around camp all morning, almost as a self-imposed punishment. I choose the path from the gate to the toilet as my exercise area. My mother's words ring in my ears: *'You dirty beast!'*

With head hung low, I get to know every twig and stone on the path. My heart is heavy as I realize that I can never face Glenda again. My mind is still filled with sadness, embarrassment, confusion, and anger.

"I want to talk to you, young man." Mother summons me, calling over the big wood gate. I follow her to the tent like a whipped dog with his tail between his legs.

"Wait till your father gets home!" She repeats her favorite threat. "He won't believe when I tell him what you did to that poor young girl!"

I feel like screaming, but I hold it inside. *It just isn't fair when she does this to me.* Many, many times before, I had agonized all day, anticipating my father's punishment. As unfair as I consider this double punishment, there is no discussing discipline with my parents. My dad's favorite saying, he calls it his Golden Rule. "The one that brings 'ome the gold," he always says, "makes the bloody rules. When you bring all the money into the 'ouse you can 'ave a say, till then you'll do as your told, young man."

Each year my father spends his two-week vacation with us at the camp. The last four weeks he commutes an hour and a half each way by steam train from London, to be with us most nights.

Tonight he is late, exactly one hundred and twenty-two minutes late. I have been counting down the minutes on our old wind-up alarm clock with the loud tick, and the two silver domed bells on the top.

The flickering oil lamp causes moving shadows on the sides of the tent that mesmerize me. Suddenly, my mind snaps back to the present by the sound of my father untying the strings on the tent door flap. I become tense with apprehension and don't move a muscle.

He greets us with, "What a terrible bloody day!" as he enters the tent. "I missed the bloody train! The wallpaper I had to hang today is bloody crap! Cheap bastard that owns the pub, charges six pence more than anyone else for a pint of beer, then buys cheap crappy wallpaper on sale. Silly sod will pay double the number of hours for me trying to get it to stick to the bloody pub walls!"

I realize right away that this could be the last day of my life!

Wills, maybe, while he is ranting and raving, you could slip under the sidewall of the tent and run off and join the army, or elope to Gretna Green and marry Glenda!

No, she wouldn't want to marry a kid of fourteen who still gets slapped by his mother. And even if she did, when me dad found us he would make 'er an instant widow.

Wills, you must escape, because any minute now mom will tell him "Your dirty rotten son raped this poor girl," and you will be a goner!

I see how impatient she is, waiting for him to finish his account of his terrible day.

My mind sends her a message, *there is no hurry mother, none at all!*

"Oh, Dad, what is the name of that pub? I stall nervously. "And what color is that crappy paper? And who was working with ya?"

"It won't work, Alan! Mother says, "Jim, sit down! Let me tell you what this son of yours did!"

The last thing this poor man needs, after his terrible day, is her verbal barrage.

"Your son." She always disowns me at times like this. "Your dirty, sex-crazed son had this poor young girl in the long grass, her skirt up around her neck and her blouse unbuttoned all the way!" Mother bellows.

My mind flashes back to the scene of the crime. *I would give anything to see Glenda in such a state of undress. Had I just been too close to see? Had I missed the chance of a lifetime? Even a chance to tit-her-up maybe?*

Wills, there's something wrong with your mind! How can you have sexual thoughts so close to your demise? Christ, is mother's description, which sounds like Sodom and Gomorrah, turning-you-on? You wanker?

Suddenly, my thoughts are shattered by my father's voice. "Well, me boy, what do ya have ta say

about ya disgusting conduct towards that poor young gal?"

"Dad! It....." I am cut off by dad answering his own question.

"What can ya say! Ya violated, molested, and took advantage of her, and ruined her for life! You're a bloody animal! Who would 'fink me own son, a bloody Boy Scout, a Prefect at school, would do such a 'fing?" He pauses and shakes his head in disgust. He keeps shaking his head for what seems like forever.

Instantly, my mind figures out what is happening. *Shaking his head must wind a massive spring attached to his right arm, which will slap me to kingdom come at any minute. I have to act quickly!*

"Dad, it wasn't like that! I didn't do nuffing!"

"Ya didn't do nuffing? Hear that, Ada? So ya mother's a liar, is she?"

"No, Dad..."

"She made up the whole bloody thing! Ya was never in the long grass with this young lady? Ya was with ya mates, I suppose!"

"No, Dad! I mean yes Dad! I, er, I, er... We were in the long grass but we didn't do nuffing."

"What's ya idea of nuffing? Is exposing her breasts to the whole world nuffing?"

"No! No, Dad, that never 'appened. I love Glenda!" I say proudly. Then I feel a rage well up inside me. *I hate him! How can he make something as beautiful as my first love sound so dirty?*

"So you say you love 'er? And that gives ya permission to ravage her in public, and in front of ya mother?"

"Dad, ya just don't understand. Maybe you did that in your day...." My mind flashes.

I don't believe my own words, is someone moving my mouth again.

"In my day, you say? I don't understand, don't I? You dirty little sod."

Those are the last words I hear, before a four ton weight hits me so hard on the side of my skull that I actually look for my head rolling across the floor. I bite my lip to stop from crying. The ringing in my ears makes my head spin. Tears of pain and frustration well up in my eyes, but I am too old to cry.

"Don't ever lie to me, Alan. I won't stand being lied to! I will slap the truth out of ya! Don't think ya too big, either! I brought ya into this world and I'll take ya out."

I can't think. I still have ringing in my ears, and my brain feels scrambled. "Dad, please! Please believe me". I sob. "I'm not lying! We were just kissing! We've never done nuffing else! I love 'er!"

"So who is she, then?" he asks, putting away his angry face.

"Dad, her name's Glenda. She's a nice girl! I've never touched her!"

"Then if she's such a nice girl, why were you two 'iding in the long grass? Was ya too ashamed to introduce her to us, ya parents? Ain't we posh enough for her?"

"No Dad, that ain't it! I just didn't 'fink you'd understand! What with 'er being seventeen and me only fourteen.

"So that's it!" he exclaims. "Ya out getting experience with an older woman!"

I see a twinkle in his eye, as if he likes the idea. Then he seems to be deep in thought, but still has a half smile on his face.

My mother clears her throat, then gives him the evil eye, and he jumps a little.

"So ya admit what ya mother says is true. Ya was molesting her?"

"Dad, we only kissed!"

"Son, do I look stupid? Ada, do I look stupid?"

"Now, Jim, calm down! You've had a bad day. You don't need all this after missing your train and getting home so late," she says in a soothing voice.

What's she saying? I think. She's making it sound like she had nothing whatsoever to do with any of this. Where's the loving mother who cuddled me during the air-raids and made me feel safe. The woman who put band-aids on my knees, and wiped the tears from my eyes. Has it been too long since she was in love? Did she ever lover my dad?

"Let's go to bed now Jim. You can punish him tomorrow before you go to work."

I can't believe 'er suggestion, to prolong my punishment for another twelve hours.

"Punish him!" Dad shouts, getting riled up again. "I should knock his block off, so he won't go out molesting other innocent girls. Ya just don't appreciate what we've done for ya, Alan! How many kids do ya 'fink get six weeks holiday every bloody year? Look

at ya poor mother, having to cook over a bloody oil stove with a biscuit tin as an oven to make ya bread! But do ya appreciate it? No! Do ya think I like hanging cheap flock wallpaper for cheap-ass pub landlords? Covered in bits of bloody flock, up and down a

bloody ladder eight hours a day, five days a week and twelve months a bloody year, just so ya can spend six weeks every year sowing ya wild oats on Canvey bloody Island!"

Wills, how could a kiss have such devastating effects? I think. Is he upset because he doesn't get to kiss Mother any more? Why can't he understand?

I must make him believe the truth, otherwise he will always think the worst of Glenda. He has to understand that she is a nice girl.

"Dad, please listen," I plead with my hands clenched as if in prayer. We just kissed! What's wrong with kissing? What's wrong with the feelings I have for Glenda, ain't they normal? Just explain it to me! I am so confused! Please, Dad. I don't understand! Why it is so wrong? Didn't you and Mum ever kiss?"

"That does it, Ada! Call the man with the lorry. We're packing up and going 'ome!"

We're doing home? All this from a little kiss! I think.

Wills, if ever he finds out you tited-up Molly O'Toole with the other boys at school, or put your hand up Maureen Miller skirt in the movies he would have you beheaded.

Chapter 13 - Banished

I choose to ride alone with all the camping gear in the back of the lorry on our return trip to London. I decide I'd rather be shaken to death than be in the cab listening to the wrath of my mother's tongue all the way home. Old Ralph, the driver, is the one I feel sorry for, as I'm sure mother will fill his ears with nothing but the rape of that poor girl!

The scene keeps replaying in my mind, where my mother catches Glenda and me kissing in the long grass at the back of our camp ground.

Why did she have to slap my face in front of my sweetheart? Why did Glenda run away? Why did mother lie to me dad about Glenda's blouse being unbuttoned and her skirt up around her thighs? We were just kissing.

Wills, our mum still thinks of you as her little boy, she don't realize at fourteen you have all the feeling of a man.

The arterial road from Southend to London has no speed limit, other than by the age of this very old lorry. Once past the Halfway House pub, the checkerboard fields of alternate green and contrasting bright yellow rape plants are left behind. I read the developers signs advertising "New Towns," they are building way out here, cutting into the Essex countryside. Londoners anxious to leave the East End slums are now commuting over an hour each way by train. As the passing miles bring us into the older suburbs, it is progressively gloomier, as is my mood. Finally, bumper to bumper, breathing carbon monoxide, we enter the outskirts of London. Emerald green Canvey Island and Glenda now seem a million miles away and everything seems drab and dirty.

I think, *why haven't I noticed the dirt and grime before?*

Wills, could falling in love with Glenda opened your eyes to beauty?

We've now been home a week, the longest week of my life. Me mates are all still on Canvey Island. I stay in my room with nothing to do but think of Glenda. I've lost my appetite, but mother insists I come down to dinner. Every night the lecture's the same.

"Well, I hope you've 'ad time to 'fink of the disgrace you've brought on this family!"

Well Wills, here we go again, I think. Dad must have had a bad day at work hanging flocked wallpaper in a pub, and rehearsed this speech while up his ladder.

"Not only did ya embarrass us in front of the whole bloody camp, but ya made us come home and miss the whole bloody weekend! Didn't matter to ya that I work all week, looking forward to me weekends at Canvey for me much needed rest!"

I think, *I wish I had the guts to tell him that it was his idea to pack up and come home, not mine!* I push food with my fork, and bite my tongue, rather than add fuel to his fire.

"We trusted you, Alan! Now ya poor mother will worry herself sick every time ya go out, that

ya might rape some young unsuspecting girl!"

"Dad, I didn't... I'm sorry! OK? I've got a bad headache! I'm going to lie down."

Going up the stairs I think. *I never had a migraine on Canvey Island! Here I'm miserable. I close my door and I pull down my window blackout shade, left over from the war. I lie in almost pitch black and think; I hate London! I hate my life and hate my old parents! Then there's me job with Uncle Frank, shoveling up all that sawdust that gets in me eyes, up me nose and in me mouth. God, do you know 'ow much I hate that job? But I need money? I didn't deserve being banished from Canvey Island. I did nothing wrong. You know I love Glenda, and we were so happy! I could be myself!*

Wills, you're just lonely. Only children are always lonely!

I ain't lonely I have me mates! They all say me mum spoils me rotten.

Wills, around your mates you're not yourself! You work hard to be a tough Cockney.

So, do you want me to sound all posh like me mum? Glenda liked me Cockney dialect.

Wills, Glenda was a summer love. Summer's almost over. This will be your last year at school. Prefect in the third year, now the staff voted you head boy.

Don't remind me! Everyone calls us prefects teachers' pets. Now as the head boy I'll be telling twelve prefects to snitch on their friends, and write their names in the truancy book. No running on the stairs, and they must break up fights on the playground. Plus, catch Peeping Tom's, and idiots drawing dirty pictures on the walls of the boy's loo.

Wills, you're big and a loner! That's why they picked you as the leader.

It's now the autumn and we're back to school. I'm having trouble concentrating as Glenda is forever on my mind. I miss her so much that I hurt deep inside. Many times I throw-up at the thought of never seeing her again. Neither of our homes have a phone, I hadn't given her my address, so I decide to write. I head for the room the head girl and I share, it's quiet and the perfect place for me to write to Glenda. I throw-away at least twenty unfinished letters, before I write the one that expresses my feelings for her, including my hopes, fears and dreams for our future. Ironically, when I read it a few times, I realize it exposes my inner feelings so completely that if she didn't reply it would do me in. So I throw it on top of the other crumpled letters in the waste-paper basket.

Having left the island without saying goodbye to Glenda has left a hole in my heart. The more I pine for her, the poorer my grades get at school. I had always been a good student, so now my teachers are becoming concerned. My parents are oblivious to my depression and just scold me for my bad grades. After one such scolding, I ask myself *don't they know how much I miss Glenda? Have they never been in love?*

Wills, have you ever seen them kiss and cuddle, or even hold hands? Maybe they're just too old for love.

God! I hope I never get that old!

I feel desperate, and need someone to talk to, but who? I'm sure my mates would just make fun of me, or as we say "take the Mickey." I know it should be someone older. I decide to confide in Jack, a Cockney who sells used motorcycle parts on a stall down Walthamstow market. I guess Jack is in his thirties. He is always reminiscing, to me and the boys, about the war. "During the war," he says "I made love to hundreds of women throughout Europe". I often wonder when he had time for fighting. Luckily, not all our soldiers could have been as amorous as Jack, otherwise we would never have won the war

As I approach his stall on market day I see he isn't busy. He's sitting on an up ended apple crate smoking a fag. He's wearing his usual "cheese-cutter" red plaid cap, an old yellow turtle neck pullover, and army khaki trousers he must have brought back from the war. Jack is slender, and working outside his wrinkled face is always tanned. He usually has a big smile for everyone. Seeing me he moves the cigarette over to hang out the corner of his mouth, and throws up his hands to welcome me.

"ello Alan! So what do I owe the pleasure of ya company on this fine day?"

I look around to be sure I won't be overheard, and in a low voice ask, "Jack, can I talk to ya?... About something personal"

"Sure ya can. We're mates, ain't we. What'd do knock-up some bird?"

"Sure we're mates, and no, I didn't knock-up no bird. I can't talk to me folks, they're ain't hip like ya, Daddy-O. Like ya know what fella's need to talk about?"

"Well, that's 'cause I ain't ya parents! I couldn't talk to me mum and dad neither, not till I came 'ome from the bleeding war that is. I 'fink the war some'ow changed all of us, 'cause now we get on just fine." Jack smiles.

"Jack. er... er... was ya ever in love?"

"In what? Are ya kidding! Love's for sissies! What Cockney birds want ain't love! They want ya to be tough, someone what'll look after 'em The worse ya treats 'em, the more they come begging!" Jack says, throwing out his chest.

"But didn't ya ever miss a bird, Jack?"

"What's to miss? I ain't 'eard of no shortage of bloody birds in London. 'ere now, is that why you've been moping about, with that bloody long face on ya, since ya got back from ya 'olidays? In bloody love, are ya?" he winks and takes the fag out of his mouth.

"Course not! I was just asking that's all! It's a mate of mine what 'finks 'e's in love."

Quickly I walk away hopping I sounded tough, and that Jack doesn't suspect nothing.

“See ya later, lover-boy! Jack calls after me. “Invite me to the bloody wedding, OK!”

Wills, why can't you be tough, like real Cockneys? They have no trouble "lovin' and leavin' birds!" They don't mope around over a girl, they just go out and get another one! Just like Jack says, "there ain't no shortage of bloody birds in London"

However, walking home his advise confuses me more than ever.

Winter this year in London is very cold and seems to go on forever. I'm in our loo, with the ice cold wind whistling under the door, sitting on my hands to save my bum freezing to the seat. I do my business as fast as possible, then pull up my underpants and trousers together, pull the chain and rush out the door into our back yard.

“ello Alan,” old Mrs. Furrier, next door calls over the garden-fence. She's older than dirt but I still like talking to her.

“Ain't this the coldest winter ever, Mrs. Furrier?”

“This ain't nuffing! I remember when I was a girl it was so bloody cold that I was sitting on the toilet and me pee froze. Had to bloody break it off, I did. That's cold!”

I had never heard such and thing, so I run up the road to consult with Dave, whom you might remember knows everything. I tell him what Mrs. Furrier told me.

“Alan,” he says “has anyone ever offered to sell you Tower Bridge?”

“Dave, I didn't know it was for sale.” I admit.

“Point is, me old mate, you've been 'ad!” He says with a smirk. “Ya pee can't freeze 'cause it's bloody hot when it comes out, ain't it?”

Once again I feel embarrassed at my lack of knowledge, and leave Dave's house feeling really stupid. I run home, slam the front door shut, and bound up the stairs two at a time. I slam my bedroom shut, as my mother was yelling “Don't slam doors.”

I lie on my bed and relive the warm summer days on Canvey Island. With my eyes closed I can smell the just cut grass, and feel the warm sun on my face. Suddenly, I see mother's stern face. Then the slap in front of Glenda! Again I feel my humiliation. *Why did she exaggerate what we were doing?* My eyes spring open.

Wills, you're such a wanker! Why didn't you stand up to ya mother?

I close my eyes and disappear back into Glenda's passion. I lick my lips and once again feel her moist lips against mine.

Glenda gave me her gold hoop-earrings as a keepsake. Every night I remove them from their hiding place; an envelope taped behind a picture on my wall, and I take them to bed. I always pray, “Dear Lord let me sleep until spring, so I can be with Glenda.”

God didn’t grant my prayer those cold winter nights, but somehow I did make it through winter. It’s now spring, and I have made up my mind that I must go to see her!

During class my mind is on overtime. *I can’t wait any longer I must be with Glenda! I’ll tell her how much I love her, that I want to spend the rest of my life with her.*

All I need is a good bike, and I bet I could make the thirty-five mile trip down the Southend Road to Canvey in four hours.

My woodwork teacher, Mr. Worthington, has a used racing bike for sale. It’s a hand built Claude Butler; an ultra lightweight bike, with aluminum wheels, racing tires and a narrow racing leather saddle. He is asking thirty-five pounds, but I only have ten pounds in the envelope taped behind my mirror. I scrounge another ten pounds between Dave, Danny and Ed. Then I tell my cousin Paul, next door, that his sister, who he hates right now, said he will never have any money ‘cause he don’t know how to save. Paul promptly takes out his money-box and shows me a wad of pound notes. After giving him a little blarney, about boys being better than girls, he hands me five one pound notes. Telling his sister the same story, with the characters switched, I get another five pounds from Patricia. Jack the motorcycle SPIV, at the market loans me the final five pounds. SPIV, by the way is VIP’S (Very Important Persons) in backslang. SPIV is a term to describe someone with a quick mouth who is a wheeler-dealer.

I don’t want my parents to know I have a bike, so I hide it at Dave’s house, covered with a black plastic sheet behind his front privet. After school I hurry to Dave’s, and with pride polish the light gray bike, and shine the aluminum till I can see my face in it.

I haven’t told anyone, including Dave, that I plan to ride to Canvey Island.

It’s Friday night, about eleven thirty, and I am having trouble falling asleep as I’m too excited about my new bike, and my plan to ride to see Glenda tomorrow. Dawn is just braking when I jump out of bed at five-thirty. Being Saturday my parents are still asleep. As quietly as possible I tip-toe down the stairs, but forget about the stair the always creaks, luckily they don’t wake up. I pack a Spam sandwich and water bottle in my small knapsack. Quietly, I close the front door behind me. Feeling like a thief in the night I’m grinning from ear to ear, as I run up to Dave’s house. I leap on my trusty stead and peddle like crazy. Once around the corner I yell “Yes! I did it.” and head for the Southend arterial, Canvey Island and my Glenda.

Chapter 14 - Back to Canvey Island

My bike is Pegasus the winged horse. As I fly down the Southend Road, I ponder my wisdom of not telling at least my mates of my plan to return to Canvey to see Glenda, my one and only love. *But how could I tell them? They would think me real soft, going all that way just to see a bird!*

I can hear each of them in my mind as I ride:

Dave is saying *"You're going thirty-five bloody miles to see a bird that ya 'aven't even done it with?"*

Then Jack's voice, *"Don't ya know there are 'fousands of birds in London, all at ya bloody beck and call?"*

Then Danny, *"You went in debt thirty-five nicker for a bike to see a bird? Christ, you could go get a real good-looking pro, who knows all the tricks, for twenty pounds."*

I hear old money bags, Ed, *"Thirty-five pounds for thirty-five miles, Christ, that's a pound a mile. Why the 'ell didn't ya get a taxi cab, it would 'ave been bloody cheaper!"*

I decide I was right not telling my parents, because it would have started the *"What ya did to that poor girl!"* routine all over again!...*God, I hate my mother for slapping my face in front of Glenda... all for just a kiss... like I'm still a little boy.*

I ride with such enthusiasm, overtaking every cyclist on the arterial road. There are wings on my feet and I feel tireless.

My mind talks to me constantly. *I must ride with precision. Gear changes must be timed perfectly for maximum speed over the hills. Discard my knapsack, after I finish*

my Spam sandwich, as its drag is reducing my speed..... I must judge my water, I coach myself, to last the whole trip, because I don't have time to stop to refill! If only this was a championship, like the Tour de France, there would be people by the roadside to hand me water, and I would toss the bottle away to the cheers of the crowd!

The road is long and straight and I find my mind wandering. I see Glenda's face, hear her laugh, and see her hair flowing in the wind. I can smell her perfume and taste her lips. My bike swerves and almost goes off the road.

Wills, for 'eaven's sake stay focused before ya kill us. The mishap has made me aware of everything around me, as if someone has taken blinders from my eyes. I think,

This is the most beautiful spring ever! The countryside is so green and there are flowers everywhere bursting into bloom! I smile, liking my non-Cockney thoughts. These small towns are filled with newly painted houses, and the cars are all highly polished with gleaming chrome.

I wave at some kids on a school bus outing. Their smiles and waves heighten my new-found joy, and the miles disappear behind me. I have escaped the prison that is London's East End.

I don't have to make-believe that I am tough any more! This trip is proving it!

I look at my watch; I have been on the road three hours and thirty-five minutes. My mind is my constant companion. I am the fastest cyclist on earth! Only one week ago this incredible machine was abandoned in the back room of the woodshop, dirty and with flat tires. Today, my trusty steed has redeemed itself and is winning the Tour de London to Canvey Island. It and I will go down in the annals of history listed under: "THE DAY MAN AND MACHINE BECAME ONE" or "THE WONDER BIKE THAT UNITED TWO LOVERS."

Instantly my mind stops daydreaming at the sight in front of me. "The Bridge! The Bridge!" I yell out loud.

I can't believe that I have already reached the Benfleet Bridge, that once crossed, will put me on Canvey Island. My mind is in orbit, as my front wheel touches the bridge. I now know how Sir Edmond Hillary and Sherpa Tensing must have felt on Everest, or how Roger Bannister felt being the first man to run a mile in under four minutes.

I must push for a big finish, I coach. There's the local bus up ahead. I must overtake it! OK, muscles, mind, and bike, do your stuff! I push beyond my limits and almost burst with pride as I pass the bus. Wills, brake 'ard, you idiot, that's the short-cut to Glenda's 'ouse! Christ ya almost killed us again!

Shut the hell up! I'm doing great! Now down the unmade road and we've made it!

Wills, Bloody 'ell! Watch out for them pot'oles.

They weren't there last summer. Why the hell don't they fix this damn road? That's it! A right-turn on Glenda's lane... Now, push, push for the big finish! God, everything looks so bloody green!

Suddenly I realize I am going too fast to make it through her gate. "Fuckng 'ell, Wills, turn! Turn! Turn! ya idiot!

"Christ the sea wall!" I yell as I hit the green embankment, and fly over the handlebars. Luckily my landing is on the plush soft grass. I smile and roll down the grassy slope. I come a stop at the bottom of the hill, next to Glenda's house, and laugh hysterically.

“I did it! I trucking did it!” I laugh again liking my own joke about trucking. I pick myself up, run to the front door, catch my breath, and knock.

Why don't they answer? I think and knock again. *They won't be out! Not after me riding all this way!* I rap four more times on the door.

"Hold on to your horses. I'm coming, I coming." *It's Mrs. Roper's voice.*

"It's me! It's Alan!" I call through the closed door.

She opens the door with a big smile. "Alan! what a wonderful surprise!" Quickly her smile disappears, and she seems to be searching for words, "But Glenda's not here. She's gone to Southend with her...her...a friend."

"So when will she be back?" I ask impatiently.

"Oh, not till late." Mrs. Roper says. "They are going on the pier, and then to the Kurcel to ride the bumper cars. Then I think they said they are going dancing. So it could be real late....." she is silent as she looks me up and down "You look tired out! Come on in. How did you get here, by train?"

"No, me bike."

"You came all this way on your bike! Where is it?"

"Half way up the bloody sea wall. I say pointing. "I'm so tired, I missed ya gate and crashed. I hope me bike's OK! I made the trip in record bloody time, even overtook the local bus! I just have to see Glenda!"

"You poor thing! You must be exhausted! Come on in and sit down and I'll make us a nice cup of tea."

"No 'fanks, Mrs. Roper. I'm gonna ride to Southend to try and find Glenda. There's so much I 'ave to tell 'er!"

"That's not such a good idea, Alan..." She pauses, and her eyes drop down to the front step "You see, she's with a feller!"

Neither of us say a word. I too, am now looking down at the step, as I don't know what to say.

"Well, you'd better come in." She says walking into the living room. "Now, sit yourself down on the settee, and I'll sit at this end."

I sit where she is pointing, being too numb to think. She reaches over and holds my hand. "She didn't hear from you! She went to your camp the next day. They told Glenda you had gone back to London. She was so upset that you didn't even say goodbye! Poor girl cried her eyes out for weeks. She moped about here for months. Every day she met the postman expecting a letter from you. She didn't know your address, so she couldn't write. In fact, I had to talk her out of going to

London to find you. She thinks it's like Canvey, where you just ask the postman where so-and-so lives and he directs you right there. Anyway, in the end I guess she just gave up on you. Then she met Steve. He's twenty-two and lives on Canvey."

"Does she love 'im?" I ask, not wanting to hear that she does.

"It's different with Steve and her. Glen's more grown up now. It did my heart good to see how in love you were with my Glenda! And I know she felt the same way." Mrs. Roper stops abruptly, as if to choose her words correctly. "You know, we are like sisters, Glenda and me, and we tell each other everything like sisters do. We talked about you all the time and how we wished you were older. If you had been older, my Glenda would have married you in a minute! And with my blessing, I might add."

Again an awkward silence falls between us and I can sense her searching again..

"Please, Mrs. Roper! Please, just tell me everything. I just 'ave to know! Spent the worst bloody winter of me life, missing Glenda. Now, if I ain't meant to 'ave 'er, at least I'd like to learn from the experience, so all the 'urt wasn't for nuffing."

"Well, you know she was crazy about you, and she loved the way you made her feel when you kissed. Do you know what I mean?" she asks, looking over her half glasses.

"Sure, she liked the way I kissed!" I say

"It's much more than that, Alan. She was almost eighteen! And a young woman gets these feelings inside that she wants more than kissing." She looks at me sadly, "Why the hell do you have to be so young?"

"I guess my parents were bashful for the first twenty years of their marriage," I say clumsily.

"You know I think the world of you, Alan, but I don't know just how to tell you the facts of life!" she says, reaching across the settee for my other hand.

"Are ya kidding? Facts of life! I've had lots of birds. Ya 'fink Glenda was me first?"

She drops both my hands and blurts out, "Then why the hell didn't you make love to her? Poor girl wanted you in the worst way, she was yours for the taking!"

I'm speechless. I stand then walk around the living room my mind in a whirlwind. *Glenda was my mother's "nice" girl! Mother had instilled into my head that nice girls save themselves until they're married. "Treat these girls with respect", she would say. "Then there are the "loose" girls that no one wants to marry."* I sit back on the settee, my mind still going crazy. *I guess this was the reason I hadn't even tried to tit her up! Was Mrs. Roper making Glenda to be an easy girl just to let me down easy?*

Confronted by this different Glenda, I feel totally confused. Mrs. Roper picks up the newspaper as if to say there's no hurry. My eyes drop to the floor and I can't speak, but my mind keeps racing. *Mrs. Roper has never lied to me, so I trust what she's telling me about Glenda must be true. Could*

it be that girls wanted it, just like boys? Could I have been wrong all this time? I think back: the long kissing sessions, when she taught me to 'French' and use my tongue. She introduced me to the pleasures of her neck, the nape, and the soft skin above her collarbone. She would softly whimper and sometimes push herself against me, and kiss me so hard. Many times I had to push her away so that she wouldn't feel me erection. The time when I did touch her breast, by mistake, and I felt her hard nipple, that drove me crazy, and it took all my self-control not to caress her breasts. How could I have been so wrong? Why didn't I know she wanted me to touch her? Christ! At Hadleigh Castle she said "Brave knight, I must repay your gallantry I'm yours for the taking." She must have thought me so dumb! "

My thoughts and the realizations make me feel really stupid. Consciousness of the room, and Mrs. Roper, slowly come back into focus. As I look at her I feel her holding my hands once again.

"Are you OK, Alan?"

"Oh yes! Well, I 'ave to go now. Nice seeing ya again, Mrs. Roper. 'Fanks for the talk. But it's a long ride 'ome, so I must be going."

"Now, you just sit down, young man, and tell me what's going on in that thick London head of yours."

Christ, Mrs. Roper now sounds like me mother, and I'd always thought of her like Glenda's sister. The change of roles messes with my mind. But I do need someone to talk to, I do like her and trust her.

"Mrs. Roper, I 'ave never felt so stupid. I wish I could just find a place to 'ide until I grow up."

"So where do we start, my boy?" Her eyes smile, even though her taut lips show she is deep in thought. "We have a lot of time and it will help you to talk." She says, her voice filled with caring.

More caring than I can take at the moment, so I excuse myself, and head to the bathroom. I could no longer hold back my tears. Thank the Lord, Mrs. Roper is tactful enough not to come and look for me. "

Wills, why are ya crying. Cockneys don't cry! Get hold of yourself. So what if Glenda got a fella? She lives too bloody far away, anyway. And so what, if ya didn't touched her tits? And so what, if ya hadn't tried anything with her? Christ! Our dad nearly knocked ya block off for getting caught kissing her in the long grass. If ya'd had your hand on her tits, it would have been the bloody firing squad!"

As rational as all these justifications sound, I still keep blubbering. Eventually, I guess I must have just run out of water and the tears stop. I wash my face, comb my Tony Curtis and DA, and return to Mrs. Roper in the living room.

"Sorry, I took so long I really 'ad ta go."

"That's OK Alan! I have trouble going some times."

What a beautiful liar she is. Why doesn't mother have Mrs. Roper's understanding?

"Want to talk now, Alan, or would you like to take a walk along the sea wall first and collect your thoughts?"

"That sounds great. Ya don't 'ave nothing else to do?... Ya'll be 'ere when I get back."

"Of course I'll be here," she says. "Take your time. We have all night, Mr. Roper is going to the pub. He's in a dart championship, so win or lose he'll come home drunk and pass out on the bed, so we won't be disturbed. You can sleep in the caravan, on the side of the house, and ride home tomorrow. If you still want to talk to Glenda, you can have breakfast together. Or maybe you just want to tuck down for the night, then slip away early in the morning. It's up to you!"

I make my way up the grassy embankment, check out my bike and I'm glad it's OK.

I stand on the seawall path, as Glenda I had done so many times last summer, but now I

feel very alone. As I walk along the seawall, I look up at the Downs to Hadliegh Castle, and remember our picnic, and "*I'm yours for the taking!*" I look away feeling stupid and choke back the tears.

We were so in love. But I screwed it all up by not knowing what girls really want. But why didn't I know? I ask myself. Me mates and I talk about sex all the bloody time. Maybe they don't know nothing either!

As I walk, I remember all the times Glenda and I had walked and laughed together. I look down at the long grass blowing in the wind, and the flattened area that was our love nest is no more. The evening insects break the silence with their lament. I think, *How could I have been so dumb? How differently I would do things now that I know what she wanted. Why had God given me the body of a man, and the mind of a child? I'm older now. But where is she? I'll never make this mistake again!*

Chapter 15 - The Birds and The Bees

Mrs. Roper opens the front door before I knock.

"I'm back," I say, trying to sound cheerful.

Mrs. Roper holds her arms out wide, and gives me a big come hither smile "Come here my sweet boy. You look as though you need a hug."

She's right, I need a hug. *Mothers seem to know what boys need, except my mother!*

We hold each other tight for a long time without a word.

"Well young man,' she says with another big smile, "I bet you have a million questions. Holding my hand she leads me into the living room. "Why don't we sit back on the settee, and you just fire questions at me. There's nothing you can ask that will embarrass me, Alan. It might embarrass you, but you'll get over that by the time we finish talking about the birds and bees."

"Will you adopt me?" I ask, half kidding.

"No, but I will always be here for you. Even if Glenda gets married, which I'm sure she will one day. You will always be welcome here, Alan, and don't you ever forget it!"

"Mrs. Roper, I must first clear up some'fing! I lied to you. I 'ave never been with a bird. In fact I really don't know much about sex. Me mates never really talk about 'ow to do it. They just boast 'ow many times they did it, I want it to be real special. Like Glenda and me."

"You are special, Alan. Just don't let the other boys make you feel inferior. The sex thing will work out when it's the right girl. You'll see!"

"Come on, Mrs. Roper, how can ya say that? You said ya own daughter wanted me. And ya even admitted we was right for each o'ver. So how come I didn't know what to do? When I 'fink back she gave me loads of bloody signs?"

"Experience, or lack of it, I guess. Let me ask you, Alan, you now fifteen, didn't your parents ever talk to you about sex?"

"Ya bloody kidding, right! They never kiss or show any affection to each other. They wouldn't dream of talking any'fing dirty like sex. Now, don't get me wrong, they're good people. Ya see, they're older, very Victorian, and I 'fink I was a surprise. They treat me totally different than ya do Glenda. That's why I want ya to adopt me."

"So now you're one of my kids, OK. Whatever we talk about won't ever leave this room" She reaches out and holds my hands and I get a lump in my throat.

"I believe ya. But you're still a lady and it feels funny talking about... well, you know, sex, and

stuff."

"Would you rather talk to Mr. Roper?"

"No way! He's a bloody mechanic. What's he know about sex?"

Wills, you idiot! She knows how much her husband knows about the subject at hand.

I look at the clock; two hours of me stumbling over questions have flown by. I feel embarrassed not knowing quite how far I can go. I stop time and again, having to think of the correct names for body parts. For some reason penis and vagina sound dirtier than dick and twat.

Mrs. Roper is a wonderful teacher; she's very patient and seems intuitive, and many times nips my embarrassment in the bud.

I now summon the courage to ask one of the big questions that has been on my mind for a long time.

"Do girls want it like boys do? I mean, like, do they get randy? Like er... I mean, when they look at boys do they 'fink the 'fings we 'fink?"

"Sure they do. Just the same! Girls look at fellas with a nice tight bum and have the same desires. Be a real mess if God only gave those feelings to men, wouldn't it?" she says, with a big grin.

"That makes bloody sense. If he only gave those feelings to boys the world would have been filled with Nancy-Boys! Ya know...Ginger Beer's.....queers?"

We both laugh, and the tension leaves my mind. But now comes the biggy. I take a deep breath and close my eyes looking for courage. She's sitting so close to me now that I can hear her breathing, and smell her perfume.

"Do women, er... well, like men... well, let's put it this way... well, ya know men shoot off. No, I'm sorry! What I mean... Christ, this is so bloody 'ard to talk about!"

"Take your time. Now, do you mean do women reach orgasm?"

"Er...org what?"

"Orgasm! It's the correct word for come." she says, a little sheepishly

"Like wanking, whacking off, pulling ya pud'in?"

"The correct name is masturbating."

"No kid! Well that's some'fing me and me mates know a lot about." I admit, then wonder if I'd told her too much.

But she laughs, and I know everything is OK.

“Women do have orgasms,” she said. “They don't shoot off, as you call it, but they do reach a climax that feels the same. Unfortunately, many men are selfish and are only concerned with their own satisfaction. A good lover takes the time to make sure his lady is also satisfied. Mutual lovemaking is the most wonderful experience in the world.”

Sadly I say “I wish I ‘ad experienced it with your Glenda.”

“Don’t worry, Alan, you are still very young, and I’m sure you will experience it many, many times in you life. Sometimes people judge the person we marry by their looks, and might even think them unattractive!”

As she speaks I picture Mr. Roper. A short man, not very attractive, with a beer belly, and dirty mechanic fingernails. Every time I have seen him he is wearing greasy navy overhalls, and the same old greasy cap, with a British Leyland Truck badge that is coming unsown. I had often wondered why this very attractive woman hadn’t married a handsome man her own age?

“It's been my experience,” she continues “that these are often the best marriages, because the couple finds happiness in a mutually satisfying sexual relationship. That doesn't mean that sex is everything in marriage. There are many other facets, but sex is very important. Looks fade with time, Alan, but a good lover is a joy forever. You should go to your library. There are many books now available on the art of lovemaking. There were none when I was young. But I was very fortunate; I met the most considerate lover in Mr. Roper.” She sighs. “Even though he’s a mechanic!”

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean....”

“I know you didn't. I'm just teasing you.”

We both laugh.

“Let me ask ya some’fing that drives me crazy. If I read ya books, who do I practice with, some old scrubber?”

“What's an old scrubber, Alan?”

“You know, some bird what's easy. Ya see, I don't want some bird that every Tom, Dick and Harry has diddled. But then if I do it with a nice girl, how do I know she's not really a scrubber? How can I do er, and still ‘ave respect for ‘er? Do ya understand?”

“Sure! All girls understand that dilemma. Mothers drum it into our heads at a very early age. This isn't a new problem. It's always been the same. Women want an experienced lover, and all men want to marry virgins. Doesn't add up, does it? But it all seems to work out, and has for thousands of years.”

I rub my eyes and realize I’m tired from the long ride. My head aches and mentally, I am exhausted from hours of questions and answers. Emotionally I am done in, so I decide to call it a night.

“ ‘fanks for everything, Mrs. Roper, but I gotta get some kip now, and get up early.”

“Yes, you look like you need to sleeps! She opens her arms. “Give me a hug.”

The hug really feels good, but I can't believe my body and mind. Here I am being hugged by the most wonderful mother-figure I have ever met, and I am thinking how great her tits feel against my chest. Ashamed of my thoughts, and aware that she might feel my excitement any minute, I pushed myself away. She reaches out and takes my face in her two hands, pulling it towards her face, and then kisses me on the lips. This is not a motherly kiss goodnight, it curls my toes. I am too embarrassed to know what to do, so I just say goodnight, and head for the caravan. (trailer)

Lying on the bed my face still flushed I feel more confused than ever. My mind is going crazy. It flashed back to a time to Glenda and me in long grass. We're wearing swimsuits, and necking passionately. She had my right leg between her legs and kept increasing the pressure until she let out a low moan, and then relaxed. I asked her if she was OK.. She said it was female stuff, that I should just hold her close, and be tender. *That was it! Just like Mrs. Roper said women actually reach an or..... whatever the word was? Glenda, had bloody come!*

Wills, you was sure stupid asking her if she was OK. She was more than OK. She was enjoying that feeling of floating up to heaven.

Thanks to Mrs. Roper's motherly talk I now know much more about sex. However, when she kissed me passionately on the lips she was acting more like Glenda's sister. Now I wonder how much I really understand about women.

I feel myself dozing off with the thought, *I now accept that Glenda is too old for me.* Suddenly, I am awakened by people laughing outside the caravan window. It's Glenda and a male voice. I'm now fully awake.

“Come on, Glenda, let's go into the caravan, and mess around. Your mother's probably asleep by now.” he says.

“Steve,” I hear Glenda's sweet voice “you really got me turned on, dancing so close tonight.” Then it goes quiet, and I guess they're kissing.

Instantly, I realize that, although I thought I accepted her as being too old, he is still kissing my girl! Quickly, I throw on my trousers, and in a fit of jealous rage fly out of the caravan, landing next to one of the tallest, and best-built men I have ever seen.

I'm at a loss for words.

“Oh, er..... ‘ello Glenda.” I say

“Alan! What the hell are you doing here?” she yells.

“Oh, I was just, er... out for a ride on me bike, and er...thought I'd stop by and just say ‘ello.” I hate how nervous my voice sounds.

“Well, that's nice! Real bloody nice! You leave without saying goodbye last summer and don't even write. Then you think you can just turn up now, in the spring, and everything is going to be the same? Well that might work for butterflies but it doesn't

work for me! Oh yes, and this is Steve. We're getting married!”

“We are?” Steve almost chokes.

“You keep asking, don't you? Well I'm accepting,” Glenda announces, then turns and walks into the house slamming the door behind her.

Steve and I stand looking at each other. I still can't believe his size. The short sleeves of his shirt form a tight band around his biceps, and his chest looks as though he could burst off the buttons any minute.

“So you're the little Cockney bastard that she's so crazy about. Looking at you I just don't understand it,” he says in a serious voice. “You broke her heart, plus caused a big problem between me and Glenda, and I'm about to solve it once and for all.”

Have you ever noticed how feelings kept recurring in life? I was experiencing the same fear for my life that I have known so many times from my father. To date, my father has not been successful. Steve, on the other hand, was at least twice my father's weight, and looks ten times stronger. Very quickly, I realize he could annihilate me with one punch.

Quickly, I fathom that I have two options. One, reason with him! Not a real good idea as he is a local hick, and I am the hated Cockney enemy. Or two, which I quickly take, to fly back into the caravan, lock the door and pray God will save my life!

I wake early the next morning, and consider myself lucky to still be among the living. I thought over Mrs. Roper's option of having breakfast with Glenda, but decide to just slip away before the family awakes.

The return ride home takes twice as long, as now there was no incentive to hurry. I have a lot of time to think about Mrs. Roper's frank sex talk, that has my mind working overtime. My other serious consideration during the ride, is the possibility of being skinned alive by my father for making the trip without telling him where I was going, and that I would be gone overnight. I do consider telling him I'd been kidnapped, but decide that won't fly, as I would have to dump the bike that I still owe a fortune on.

I have heard about loss of memory, but can't remember where I had heard it, so this wouldn't be believable.

Maybe I could get arrested and call him from the jail? Being unable to think up a good excuse my mind quickly changes back to thoughts of my favorite subject sex. I think of Glenda, the long

grass, and girls wanting it as much as men. But foremost in my mind is Mrs. Roper’s tits against my chest, and her kissing me right on the lips.

Without warning I suddenly find myself flying over my handlebars, one more time, through the air and landing on some grass. I look up at a road sign, just a few feet from where I land. It’s a large sign that reads LONDON, with a big arrow.

I know this is a sign from God telling me to go right home, and tell the truth.

See Wills mother was right God does work in mysterious ways!