

Chapter 4

Things Get Hotter

I jammed inanely along until they stopped and shouted “Next!”

Lyall had been laying carpets for a year for £25 a week. He hated it. We had twice been on holiday together to Butlins in our youth and now at the ripe old age of nineteen, we agreed the time was right for a major change.

A quick escape, more like.

Preparations were hastily made. We purchased rucksacks and borrowed a tent from a friend. Well actually it was an ancient thing that looked like the last piece of equipment abandoned by the British at Dunkirk, green and khaki as I recall, and made from what appeared to be the same material as handkerchiefs, only more absorbent. Still, it was a tent, and that was good enough for us.

But by far the most inspired addition to our meagre kit was an eight foot square of what looked like *Bacofoil*. It was called a ‘Space Blanket’ and was in fact a thinner-than-gold-leaf sheet of silver-coloured plastic bag. This miracle of modern science had been developed by NASA for the Space Program (which again was good enough for us) and claimed to be so efficient at trapping heat that any

need for us to pack warm clothing was completely negated! And so - like the first Englishmen to climb the Eiger - we set off.

On Monday the 26th of July 1976, with our combined savings of £210, we got a lift from my folks twenty miles back up the coast to Buckie from whence we attempted to hitch a lift from a UK-Europe fish transport company. Unfortunately it turned out to be a local holiday and we ended up having to sit for nearly three hours on the bus to Aberdeen. There is a saying, 'start as you mean to go on', and we certainly did that!

We made it to France by Wednesday and hitched our way around for the next two months, totally running out of money and eventually ending up at *les vendanges* (the grape harvest), trying to scrape together enough to catch the train home!

We all learn by our mistakes, and I have to say that several poignant lessons were learnt on that trip. I will attempt to list some of them here for the benefit of generations to come. Let's call it...

The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to Hitch-Hiking:

- 1.) Bring tent pegs. Tents make terrible sleeping bags.
- 2.) Wear appropriate footwear. Even granted that the year was 1976, three-inch platform boots were never designed for the task.

- 3.) When emigrating and setting out to start a new life in a foreign land, do not spend 20% of your total funding the first day you arrive.
- 4.) If whilst seeking a place to sleep under the stars (and the rainclouds) you stumble upon an abandoned garage forecourt with two cars - a large and incredibly comfortable, unlocked Citroen and an open-topped Porsche Targa, choose the Citroen.
- 5.) Whilst preparing macaroni in a remote location, no matter how hungry you are, always cook it in water - *never* lime juice.
- 6.) If you are ever 1500 miles from home and you run out of money and a kind friend lends you 100 francs (£10) to buy food, buy food. Do not under any circumstances go to the cinema to see *Jaws* (esp. in French).
- 7.) When busking gentle slow unplugged acoustic blues on acoustic guitars near heavy traffic, make sure at least one of you is prepared to sing.
- 8.) When you have risen at 5.30am each day for three weeks to go and spend ten hours pruning the ends of your mate's fingers with secateurs (and vice versa), do not celebrate being paid by doing a double act on someone's brand new moped and falling off! You *will* have to pay for the repair.

- 9.) If you are ever sleeping in a tent on an idyllic yet completely deserted, moonlit Mediterranean beach in August, avoid serious embarrassment by rising before 10.30am.
- 10.) And finally, if whilst picking peaches from someone else's unfenced, unguarded orchard you stumble upon a sign saying "*Danger - Pieges*", do *not* wait another fortnight before finding out what it means. [Mantraps, apparently]

Arrival home again in Macduff to the double blow of no prospects and impending winter was offset by two distinct positives: food and the restoration of my folks' appreciation! By now they had come to terms with my new status as a no-hoper and were wonderfully supportive towards me. However, that didn't alter the fact that I was unemployed. I answered a local newspaper ad for a 'guitarist wanted' and began to play in a mainly *country & western* outfit from Huntly by the name of *Jack Frost*. The singer had a tremendous voice and we did quite well. Nothing to do with the band, but my dabbling in drugs increased over this period and the circle I mixed in was primarily concerned with *good timin'*.

However, the North East of Scotland is not exactly the heart of the British music scene and very soon - with my parents' extremely understanding support - plans were made for me to move in on a bed and breakfast arrangement with my father's (other) auntie in

Teddington, South London. Incidentally, my great uncle was sound man on Hughie Green's *Opportunity Knocks* at the nearby Thames TV studios - and I mean that most sincerely, folks!

And so by the end of March 1977 - with *Boogie Nights* and *Hotel California* in the charts - I was in London. Unfortunately, as might be expected (by someone wiser than I) the streets thereof were not paved with gold. Actually I wasn't all that surprised. What did surprise me was the extent of the non-pavedness! The first audition I attended¹ was also attended by approximately sixty nine others. We were called in to the rehearsal room on a production line, plugged in and ordered brusquely by an extremely cheesed off band to "Play that!". The band started up and I was expected to do something that related to a sheet of music on a stand. This confused me greatly - not only because I couldn't read music - but because to me (and I'm sure anyone who's seen *School of Rock*) this just *wasn't rock and roll!*

I jammed inanely along until they stopped and shouted "Next!"²

It was now officially official - I was a little fish in a *very* big pond. Everyone and their auntie played guitar in London and I don't

¹ Through an ad in *Melody Maker* for a little-known group called *Bandit*. They had a couple of albums out and the singer was a young and not yet bald *Jim Diamond*. He appeared to be speaking with an Aberdeen accent which I thought might help me but he wasn't interested.

² I was fairly impressed with my sound through the *Ampeg* set-up though.

mind telling you I was daunted. But having said that my second audition effort met with slightly more success. This time my sights were aimed considerably lower and I'm happy to say that the (forming) band picked me out of twelve - and this in spite of the fact that they couldn't understand a word I said due to my fairly broad Doric [North East Scottish] accent. This didn't prove to be a problem however as they had no intentions of listening to a word I said anyway.

The band's auditions for a singer turned up a real special bloke. Tom was outgoing, confident, good-looking and a strong vocalist¹ - in spite of which he was a nice guy. Unfortunately, what with the Sex Pistols and all the punk thing, 1977 wasn't exactly the best year to be trying to land a recording contract in the style of Steely Dan! A producer was hired (whose credential was having produced the Glitter Band) to give a critique. His verdict was clear - we were *boring*².

This came as absolutely no surprise to me - I had already spent the past month trying to communicate as much to a sea of blank faces - but it devastated the band's songwriters who took themselves just a bit too seriously. Terminal depression set in and we split up. I took the opportunity to grab the singer (who was more of a rocker in the style of Paul Rodgers anyway) and started another band with some guys he

¹ Tom Magdich. He was in the original London cast of the Mamma Mia stage show. More info at [Hwww.backtorealitythemusical.org/the_writers.html](http://www.backtorealitythemusical.org/the_writers.html)

² Compared to the Glitter Band everybody is boring!

introduced me to from Edgware. He found a bedsit for me off the Edgware Road and so began a new chapter...

It was now June, 1977. The Commodores were Easy like Sunday Morning. Other stuff on the go was Lido Shuffle (Boz Scaggs), Black Betty (Ram Jam), Show You The Way To Go (Michael Jackson), I Feel Love (Donna Summer), Baby Don't Change Your Mind (Gladys Knight), Young Hearts Run Free (Candi Staton), If I Can't Have You (Yvonne Elliman), Black Is Black (La Belle Epoque), Car Wash (Rose Royce), Free (Deniece Williams) and one of my favourite records of all time - Best Of My Love by the Emotions.

Why is it I particularly remember all the soul hits from that time? Well, this was when I turned on to soul music. As you may have gathered I was rather prejudiced in favour of rock, until a friend constrained me to lie on the floor one night with a pair of headphones and listen to Summer Breeze by the Isley Brothers (with the Ernie Isley mega-solo at the end) and that was it - I was hooked¹.

As a band we practiced a few times at the deserted but legendary Railway Hotel in Harrow (which had been to The Who what the Cavern was to The Beatles) but we were more interested in drinking at the White Lion in Edgware than lugging speaker cabinets in and out of an empty pub.

¹ All this was much to the dismay of Lyall back in Macduff who (much to my dismay) was getting heavily into the Sex Pistols!

I got a job delivering motor spares for Kenning to garages across North London and settled very comfortably into an enjoyable social scene, but the 'music business' was finally kicked into touch when I started into a relationship with a lovely girl of eighteen from Mill Hill called Ann. The date was 7-7-77 (spooky!) and at this point things finally started to get ethereal...

Ann was very spiritually-minded and although I hadn't particularly been thinking down those lines for a while, we sparked right away. She reawakened a deep longing in me to search for reasons and talk about life in a spiritual way. The very fact that our relationship began on all the sevens seemed (as these things do to young lovers) highly significant. She wasn't at all interested in drugs and my own involvement receded very naturally over the horizon. In spite of her spiritual openness she was very down to earth, and firmly in possession of a grasp of common sense that was (in case you hadn't noticed) pretty much foreign to me. In short, she was good for me. What I was to her I may never know.

I suppose the first major thing that happened was when she told me about an experience she had had a couple of years previously when she and a friend had gone (for a laugh) to a public performance by a spiritualist medium. The medium-lady had called Ann forth from the crowd and informed her that she would marry a boy who would not be

English but would have the Christian names of English kings, and that they would have four children.

Well, you can imagine the effect that had on us - what with me being a Scotsman by the full name of *William James Edward* Brown!

We talked long and hard about life. A teacher of R.E.¹ she had at school had made a great impression on her - as much by his character as by his belief, which was Christian - and Ann knew a bit about the Bible. I knew nothing, but for the reasons I explained earlier relating to my disenchantment with science I was no longer biased against it. However, she was far from convinced about Christianity and we just threw everything into the melting pot in our search for meaning.

Some of what follows may seem a little incredible to some, but I can assure you that it was all *very* real to us.

One night in my little bedsit I had a dream. I dreamt that I was flying very scarily through the night sky over London at great speed. I was conscious in the dream of the idea that I was on my way to visit Ann but there is no recollection of actually arriving or of returning. The flying experience was however marked by several distinctive features:

- 1) I was clutching on for dear life to the end of a stick! It felt exactly like an ordinary wooden brush handle - about the same weight and thickness (as I write I can even feel the

¹ Religious Education: the moralistic forerunner of today's wider-ranging R.M.P.S.

roundness of the end) - although it was about half the length and had nothing on the other end.

- 2) The wooden stick was supplying all the propulsion, and it was going like a rocket!
- 3) The trajectory we were taking was exactly like that of a rocket, or a shell fired from a gun. I was being pulled upwards at great speed in a perfect arc, up and over the rooftops of London far below and travelling north east from Edgware to Mill Hill. (If you've ever seen the intro to the Muppets' Christmas Carol you'll picture the scene!!)

The next night when Ann and I were together we sat on a wall outside the pub and exchanged stories. I can't remember who told who first, but she told me she had wakened in the night and sat up to see me standing at the foot of her bed, with my hair blowing gently in the astral breeze!¹ She didn't feel afraid in any way as it was just me.

Apparently I just stood there for a while, then left. She said we talked briefly but she couldn't remember anything of what was said.

Obviously - you may be thinking - she might have made this up, but knowing her as I did this would have been out of character. I have no recollection of anything beyond the journey there, but the fact remains to this day that this was a landmark event in my life.

¹ Whatever that is.

Why? Because it was my first actual experience - to me tangible evidence - of the existence and reality of the spirit realm.

The 'broomstick' connection may seem obvious to you as you read this but I can honestly say that I missed that at the time. Maybe if there had been a great welter of dried brushwood sticking out it would have been different, or a cackling black witch, but there wasn't. Of course, it is very possible it was *only* a dream. But there's more...

Some months before Ann and I started going out, she had been invited by a male friend to come along one night to a meeting of a witches' coven that he was a committed member of. She had obliged out of curiosity, but hadn't liked it much. Whether it was because he felt turned down, or because she knew too much (these things are meant to be secret I believe) he had then begun to harass her a bit in a creepy way. Weird things had been happening which she believed he was at the back of, including lamps and blankets flying about and him somehow reciting the Lord's Prayer backwards. Of course this was all according to Ann, who was an impressionable seventeen year old when it all occurred - but she was pretty freaked out by it. The upshot of it all in my life was to convince me that, whatever my interest in the spirit realm, I came down very firmly on the side of *good*.

The other effect it had was to make me painfully aware of how totally powerless I was to come to her aid in any way. The guy seemed

skilled in the use, or abuse, of forces against which I had nothing to offer.

Anyway it all died down, which was fine.

Ann and I had a great summer and our relationship was becoming serious. It wasn't that I was afraid of settling down, but somehow at the age of twenty, the idea of my future life stretching out before me in *London* seemed a little unreal. I was torn. Seriously torn.

To this day I wonder if Ann really understood why I had to go. She must have had some idea because she couldn't contemplate coming back to Scotland with me. I understood. After all it wasn't that long since she left school. But by mid-October I was home, a lodger yet again in the family residence. What did my folks have to *do* to get shot of me?!!

And so much for the music business. At least I had got that out of my system. I came to the conclusion that if you are serious about 'making it' and you feel you absolutely must go to London, you are definitely better to take a complete act there than to go alone in search of one.

But I wouldn't be taking any act there.

Life in Macduff went on as before. I went to work for my dad in his shop in Elgin (*Records Unlimited*) and commuted the 72 mile daily round trip in his car.

Now you might think this would be an idyllic life for a musician - selling records and tapes (and 8-tracks, grandad!). Unfortunately I didn't find it so. I was too into my own thing musically. I loved certain music - heavy rock, soul, obscure instrumental stuff, Soft Machine, the Crusaders, the odd bit of classical - but the type of music that really sold in Elgin at that time was, wait for it... country and western. Hey, we aren't talking Shania Twain here (she probably wasn't born) - we are instead talking *Sydney Devine*:

[In a heavy Glasgow accent]

“She taught me to yodel,

Yodelay-hee-dee! Yodelay-hee-dee! Yodelay-hee-dee!

She taught me to yodel,

Yodelay-hee-dee! Yodelay-hee-dee-oh, Hee-dee!”

And of course the unforgettable...

“Send me the pillow that *you*'s dream on...”

I did get to meet and shake the hand of Sydney personally so I don't know what I'm complaining about.

The other thing that got me down was the sheer commercial exploitation of the music business. I mean, even allowing for the fact that I was basically a hippy, the attitude of the record companies seemed hell-bent on exploiting the sheer gullibility and unmusicalness of the general public. I on the other hand naively believed that music was something precious, something beautiful, something in a sense spiritual, which existed to give expression to our innermost feelings and aspirations - not just an economic commodity, there to be pummelled and deconstructed, and packaged in with a trend so as to generate the maximum superficial momentary excitement, translated into readies!

In retrospect I don't think things were nearly quite as black and white as I was seeing them, but it all contributed to my mounting cheesed-offness with the world system.

However, in spite of all my gripes and theories about it, it was certainly good that I was able to land on my feet like that and I did appreciate it. Of course it also saved Dad from having to go up to the shop, and he was now able to spend his days doing what he loved - painting landscapes up in his attic room/studio which he referred to as *Bohemia!*

Unfortunately things weren't completely straightforward, as the shop had been up for sale since before I arrived home.

My position was in no sense secure.

Evenings and weekends were spent with friends, mostly in the pub or disco. I didn't really gig much around this time. Lyall and I drifted apart - he liked his pint and I liked the other thing. In fact the other thing¹ became more and more important as the months rolled on.

Something I feel I ought to point out here about my love, as it was, for the buzz obtained from cannabis (or dope as we called it) was the way that it seemed to enable me to *think* into things. I was always a thinker. I wanted to *know* what life was about. Dope changed the way my mind seemed to operate² in the following way: instead of holding in my mind about five different things at once (as we all do all the time without being overly conscious of it) dope seemed to enable me to think five times more deeply into *one* single subject, and in a kind of way from different angles as well (or laterally, as they say nowadays). I would sit for hours, as one does, in the disco or by the fireside - it mattered little - just thinking. Contemplation and analysis became a way of life - and I wasn't alone. The group of friends I was part of³ were equally willing to discuss and swap insights and philosophies. We would often 'headbang' into the wee small hours.

¹ Mainly cannabis resin, and the odd line of speed (amphetamine sulphate). I only once dropped acid (LSD) and then made the mistake of going to a disco. My main recollections of this were the ladies' make-up appearing to be half an inch in front of their faces like an African mask, feeling incredibly superior in terms of the tremendous insight I now had into reality compared to everyone else, and missing the table completely when I laid down my pint!

² Surprise, surprise!

³ I will refrain from referring to them all by name, but let me just say in case anyone feels inclined to judge on the basis of drug-involvement, that more supportive, compassionate and intelligent friends no one could ever ask for.

Everyone goes through that at that age its true - attempting to figure out whether life has meaning and purpose - but for me it was an all-consuming passion. I was extremely conscious that I did *not* know what life was about - the big questions, why we are here? etc. - and it appeared to me that nobody else seemed to know either! This worried me. It worried me especially that adults by the time they reached middle-age all seemed to have become hardened, cynical and fatalistic about the whole subject, and extremely discouraging - even derisive - toward me for seriously searching.

But I just couldn't let it go. I *had* to know, because I felt in my heart that there must be an answer, and that it was somehow absolutely imperative that I find it - and find it soon. My sense of paradise simply *couldn't* be an illusion.

After having had the dream experience I described earlier, I began to think a lot about the whole subject of out-of-body experiences (aka astral travel or astral projection). And one Sunday evening around November I had a particularly strange experience¹.

I had had a particularly heavy night on the town the night before - in fact so bad I was still feeling pretty grotty by about 5pm. I phoned Ann and she told me she was just getting ready to go out with her friends to the White Lion. I went to bed around 6pm and, because of the hangover, fell into a strange state where I seemed to be sleeping yet

¹ No, I didn't go to church.

still able to think consciously - kind of caught halfway between asleep and awake. Then the thought occurred to me - *what would happen if I got up?*

I then proceeded to sit up in bed. I could see the room around me - not clearly as normal but more as in a dream - yet my thinking was clear and conscious and I seemed to be in control of the situation. As I rose to get out of bed I found myself floating in mid air, and looking round I could see my body still lying there in the bed! I felt an edgy flutter pass through me and I drifted over to the window, but I found I couldn't get through the glass. Contemplating the situation it occurred to me that this was illogical since I had been perfectly capable of passing through the bedcovers. I realised that the barrier was a psychological one, based on my mind's normal perception of physical things. The problem was solved by simply spinning round in mid air - much like an Olympic swimmer turning. For some reason, due to the lack of thought involved, it seemed easier to slip my feet through the glass. My whole body followed.

Once out in the street, I realised the full excitement of what was happening - and the possibilities! Immediately I decided to 'fly' to London to see Ann. I headed swiftly up to the junction of the Aberdeen road - the main road south. As I 'stood' there considering the journey - feeling a bit overwhelmed by the sheer distance and wondering how to get there - all of a sudden I found myself in Mill Hill!

Those who claim to know about these things say that there is ‘no distance in the spirit realm’. If what I was experiencing was in any sense real - and by that I mean an experience that was more than just a dream - then I can certainly vouch for the truth of that.

There I was hovering like Superman high above the road where Ann lived, farther up the street by two blocks of houses, at around three times the height of the rooftops. (I can see it all very clearly as I write - twenty seven years on!) I then remembered that she wouldn’t be in as she had said she was going to the White Lion. I looked wistfully toward Edgware but decided for some reason (a touch of fear actually) that I had best be thinking about getting back. Strangely enough that was all I had to do - think about it - and I found myself back in bed, coming to.

And as if all that wasn’t bizarre enough, wait till you hear what Ann had to say...

She informed me next time we were on the phone that she had been sitting surrounded by her friends in the White Lion at about six o’clock and suddenly she had gone into something like a trance. Alarmed, her mates tried to communicate with her but she was totally out of it. This lasted about thirty seconds until she sort of came round. Apparently she wasn’t conscious of anything during the event.

The plot thickens - *or does it?*

Obviously this raises more questions than it answers. I certainly had no answers, other than to throw myself with even greater gusto into the whole quest for meaning.

Emotionally, Ann and I were on a cleft stick. Life and circumstances had thrown us together, life and circumstances had torn us apart. I began to have serious misgivings about having done the right thing coming home. The homesickness that had afflicted me down South no longer exercised its power and I saw no great future in North East Scotland to remain for.

As the dark nights drew in and we continued to phone and write to each other, I was beginning to feel ready to make the long term commitment that would be necessary. I was still a fairly immature and irresponsible guy, but I knew there could be no chickening out a second time.

But is anything ever that simple?

Just at this point, an offer came in for the shop. And my folks had until 5pm the following day to accept or reject it. I'm not even sure my folks knew about my intention to return South, but anyway they drew me aside at teatime and suggested to me that if I decided I wanted to go into the shop as manager - which would involve buying a car and perhaps moving up nearer Elgin - they would decline the offer and hold on to the business.

There then followed one of the worst experiences of my life.

I had no one to talk to about it and I didn't even believe in God, or at least if I did it was in such a theoretical way as to be no earthly use in a crisis. I lay on top of my bed and writhed and twisted in an agony of desperation and indecisiveness. (Even thinking about it now is painful.) But by 9pm my folks had their answer:

I would stay.

So that was that. Ann, London... history.

For what felt like the first time in my life I had made what seemed like a very safe, secure and *sensible* decision. Of course, being sensible had never really been one of my great strong points and I really wasn't that certain I could make sensible work for me. It seemed to work for everyone else so - what the heck - why not me?

Why not indeed.