

Chapter 5

Things Get Impossible

"Nice hobbitses..."

It begins to get harder for me to write this. In a very real sense I don't want to remember most of these events. But I made a decision before I started that I would tell it like it was, re-live it, take it right down into the pit so people can see and perhaps even somehow experience something of the miraculous deliverance that was wrought.

Please, please bear with me... let us descend together.

That winter of 77-78 didn't seem at all unpleasant at the time. I bought a car, which was great¹. I had a steady job, a bit of cash, my mam to do my washing, and all the freedom in the world to hive about the place and hang around the Seafield Disco in Banff in a soporific haze from Thursday till Sunday night each week. Yes, there was definitely something to be said for this being *sensible!*

One of my mates, or was it two of my mates² - I'm not sure what the deal was to be honest - were renting a cottage about five miles out of Banff at the time. Now that cottage³ (which was and will forever

¹ I mean it was great *having* the car, not that the 1972 Morris Marina necessarily possessed some inherent greatness.

² Some names have been changed (in the words of Bon Scott) to protect the guilty!

³ Greenlaw Cottage, Alvah.

be known as the *Cottage*) was very significant indeed. It became a haven, a sanctuary, a tiny secluded retreat to which we could withdraw at will (usually in a taxi after the Seafield). It was an unkempt, male-dominated (though females were made extremely welcome!), smoke-wreathed shrine to the higher wisdom that we ardently sought. Many a blustery winter's night I passed with Joe (the easy-going rig chef), Huw (the intellectual Welsh hippy) and Darrel (the Canadian oilman/biker) staring communally into an open fire whilst turns were taken to change the album¹ or skin up the next number.

In short, the cottage was basically an opportunity. It was a place where we could indulge in unrestrained pleasure, and yet it was also a place where we could safely tune the world out whilst pursuing the elusive dragonfly of *meaning*. To the accompanying strain of artists such as Steely Dan, Todd Rundgren, Captain Beefheart, Little Feat, the Pink Fairies and Caravan, untold deeply philosophical breakthroughs were released into the world. Nothing changed though. In fact, the only effect all this produced in me was a misguided sense of social superiority - an insidious kind of inverted pride at the notion that I and my fellows were in some way more able to 'see through' the world and its rat-race value system in a way that 'straight' people never could.

¹ Album - a sort of primitive CD; large, round and flat, fragile, usually black, and sadly able to play only half its songs before requiring to be physically turned over.

Yes, we could see through it, but we were certainly not alone in that. People had been seeing through it for years without having to be part of *our* little clique! Karl Marx for instance, George Orwell, the Buddha, every hippy that ever lived, every Englishman that ever moved to Scotland and every child of the famine-struck regions of our Earth - all have seen through it. In the words of the great American philosopher and Eagle, Joseph Walsh, “*So What?*”

What we - or any of the above - couldn't do was change it¹. It took us all our time to change an album, let alone change our ourselves.

Still we pressed on. What else could we do? There was no one - and I mean no one - to guide us. Not that we asked for it. Every succeeding theory or insight carried equal weight² and most of them either conflicted with the rest or bore more than a passing resemblance to some pre-existing *New Age* pick'n'mix take on Hinduism, fairies³, ghosts, and/or assorted hobgoblinry of one kind or another.

Although having said all that, perhaps changing ourselves wasn't that high on the agenda - changing the world definitely, everyone else probably, but not ourselves.

¹ It could of course be argued that Karl Marx and the Buddha gave it their best shot and were not completely unsuccessful in bringing about change. However, whether it was change for the better is debatable, though obviously not debatable by them as they are both dead - an aspect of the sadness around us even they were powerless to change (apart from the Buddha, allegedly, yet whose word in life is all we have for what happened to him in the hereafter).

² None.

³ Or *faeries* as they now prefer to be spelt.

But even stranger things used to go on at the cottage...

It was in fact genuinely haunted. I use the bold phrase 'genuinely haunted' because occurrences were regularly witnessed by many different people. Now, as to whether the paranormal activity that went on there was associated with the place or with the people who lived, grooved and had their being there, who can say? But the fact remains that various 'phenomena' used to occur regularly.

Let me detail some of it:

- An extremely loud and violent noise was occasionally heard like someone smashing a heavy stick against the outside of the back door.
- The back door could be heard loudly opening and closing when it was locked and bolted.
- All four cooker rings were discovered on full - in the middle of the night!
- Footsteps were regularly heard on the gravel outside, always around 6am, even in brilliant sunshine or on Sundays (so it wasn't the postie).

All of the above (excluding the rings incident, although I was there that night) were experienced by me, and the footsteps were regularly heard by many. But by far the strangest incident occurred one dark winter's eve - a Friday as I recall - around eight o'clock as we got

ready to walk up to the old-style¹ country pub they called the *Pole of Itlaw*.

It was an unusual night. There were about seven of us there - a real blokes' gathering. It was very cold, quite a still frosty night, and we were all sort of milling about the room champing at the bit to go as one of the lads cleaned out the fire and set it ready to light on our return. The only guy who was out of the room returned through the kitchen corridor (beside the back door) and just as he opened the door something resembling a kind of visible breeze swished right through the room and out the front window. The effect was a bit like someone passing quickly by on a bicycle as you stand in a daydream on the kerb.

We all kind of looked at each other without wishing to appear conspicuous. As the seconds ticked by and the atmosphere demanded a response, someone eventually took the plunge and said hesitatingly, "Did you see that?"

To our astonishment we all had, apart from the guy setting the fire who had his back to the proceedings.

If I desired in my teens to experience the spirit realm, I certainly got my fill in my early twenties!

As I have already said earlier, I believe that the second half of the twentieth century was an unusually materialistic time in western

¹ Formica tables.

history, not just in terms of money, social ambition and status, but also in terms of a lack of openness to the possibility of a spiritual side to life. Church history being what it is people became cynical about Christianity, sceptical about the occult, and proud as punch of the perceived on-going success of science in replacing every mystery with a rational explanation, consigning all world faiths to the great recycle bin of history¹. The faith of the majority was in technological progress, education, medicine and the eventual, inevitable triumph of the inherent goodness of human nature². It was believed that through these things mankind would soon eradicate poverty and disease and generally bring about utopia.

‘What you see is what you get’ was the motto of a generation.

I don’t know why I didn’t just go along with it. Being artistic and a bit of a dreamer probably accounts for a lot of it. I suppose my *sense of paradise* was just too strong to ignore!

But before I leave the subject of the spirit realm, two more out-of-body experiences spring to mind. Allow me to hallucinate...I mean elucidate...

These both occurred within weeks of the Mill Hill ‘journey’ described earlier. For the hardened sceptics among you this will

¹ Restore all items?

² Or as the Bible puts it, ‘filthy rags’, Isaiah 64:6

probably make painful reading - still, everyone needs a laugh. (The sad thing is, I'm perfectly serious.)

As I've already said - and as I'm sure anyone who has had an out-of-body experience (*and returned!*) will probably agree - astral projection happens when your mind becomes 'conscious' whilst your body lies sleeping and you simply sit up and get out of bed. This is actually not quite as hard to do as it sounds, and is really just a step up from dreaming. You might say it *is* just dreaming, but that would probably be because you've never experienced it. It is certainly not full consciousness, but I suspect the level of awareness could easily be raised with practise. Scary stuff? Yes, it's scary stuff. It's what witches do - real ones.

And you thought Halloween was just for the kids!

- 1) I woke up in the middle of the night and sat up in bed. As I looked over to my right I could see my reflection in the shiny white gloss of my bedroom door. I could see my body still lying down. All around me (in the reflection) there were hundreds of glistening multi-coloured stars, like a sparkler in the dark, exactly like they use in cartoons to suggest magic. I reached down to the side of my bed and picked up a stick. It was about 18 inches long and one inch in diameter. I looked quizzically at it for a moment, then put it back down, laid myself down and went back to sleep.

2) I woke up in the middle of the night and realised I was in the out-of-body state. I thought ‘yes, here we go!’ and got up (it takes a lot to make me keen to get up). I then found myself floating above the bed looking down at my body in the bed, blah blah blah etc... at this I decided to go out through the window to the street. However as I approached the glass I couldn’t get through it, obviously because it was solid glass. This struck me as incongruous as I had just passed clean through the blankets! My solution to this problem was to spin my body round like a turning Olympic swimmer and stick my feet through first. This overcame for me the psychological barrier of the window and it was now simple to pass through and out into the night. I descended to the road beneath and stood on the junction for a few seconds to decide where I wanted to go. Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye I caught a quick movement. As I turned to the left a *pigeon* swooped down at me from the church building opposite then flew up and off into the night! I got such a fright! I *knew* the pigeon had seen me. I also knew it was a *real* pigeon and not an astral one¹. And I have always strongly suspected it was commanded to peck me much as the whale was commanded to swallow Jonah! I flew up

¹ Great name for a band – *The Astral Pigeons*.

through the window and got back into bed a lot faster than I got out!

Although I had absolutely no concept of it at the time, I now believe that by unwittingly laying down the piece of wood by my bedside without further investigation, what I actually did was to decline the offer of a *magic wand*¹. Ok, laugh if you will, but remember you're laughing at things you know nothing about, which just ain't scientific... *or is it?* (works for Dawkins)

Be that as it may, the pigeon was enough for me and I never did it again (at least not much).

It was the summer of '78 (*not '69*) when I started playing Country and Western². Again we are not talking Shania Twain here - more Conway Twitty - but I quite enjoyed it at any rate as the other two members of the band were of the opposing gender. What with the shop and now the band, Elgin was becoming more important. Commuting daily from Macduff - a round trip of about seventy five miles - seemed impractical so my folks suggested I look to buy a house up there. The idea didn't initially fill me with joy. Perhaps *horror* would be a better word. Let me explain:

¹ Or a *broomstick* or whatever you want to call it.

² Definitely a paranormal phenomenon!

When I was a kid my folks were quite ambitious to succeed in business. This, coupled with my old man's overt atheism combined to give me a thorough impression of thorough-going materialism. Of course, my parents' generation - growing up in and around the war years - had very little in the way of material comforts, which fuelled their drive to better themselves. And of course it must be remembered that they were also doing it for their children, so we would have a better chance in life.

My mother for instance had been totally excluded from the possibility of going on to university though she was easily capable, simply on the basis of her social position. And my dad, who left school at fourteen to deliver sausages, has since said he would have liked to have been an architect or a draughtsman¹. In their children's world of the 1970s it was for the first time becoming possible, and in today's world they easily could. But this social trap was how they were raised, and they didn't wish it on their kids.

Unfortunately, I didn't appreciate it. I can be very philosophical now with the benefit of hindsight, but at the time they simply appeared to me to be obsessed with money and status. Because I believed that life had a spiritual side, but mainly because I had never myself experienced poverty (*except in France!*), I had always had the luxury of being able to reject the materialistic view. My own generation of the

¹ The guy who drew up the final plans in the days before CAD.

1970s had the *1960s* for a foundation! What hope did I have of understanding my parents?

So anyway, now - to my horror - my folks were proposing that they help me buy a house.

In effect they were about to complete for me by the age of twenty one what I perceived as the *evil trinity* of confirmed slavery to the world system:

- 1) To own a car.
- 2) To have a *responsible job*. And...
- 3) To buy a *house!*

I can remember clearly the sense of inner panic and turmoil that I felt. I knew that I had been committed to an ideal and that if I went down this road it would be nothing less than a betrayal of my lifelong, dearly held (if rather vague) principles. But I had no answer to give. You see, my principles were all negatives - I was very clear on what I *wasn't* into, but didn't know what I *was!* Now the chips were down all my arguments against sounded so inane that I made no effort whatsoever to voice them. I found myself paralysed and trapped and, worst of all, completely unable to discuss my misgivings with my folks for fear of losing their respect and looking stupid.

So what did I do? I saw their point of course.

I silenced my inner voices, anaesthetised my convictions, convinced myself I was wrong and smiled all the way to the estate agent's.

Not good.

The house that we (or I should say I) eventually bought in September¹ was an extremely quaint affair. In fact it was so quaint that it probably goes off the scale for quaintness. It was an old lodge house for a big estate by the small Speyside soup-kitchen of the world, Fochabers, situated on the edge of town, nine miles from Elgin. Like so many of these lodge houses it was very old and octagonal in shape - except this one had two storeys and a squat, sticky-out railway-style roof, was built of mushroom-coloured sandstone blocks and *looked exactly like a mushroom!* Since my chums and I were by no means averse to the odd stroll on the golf course by moonlight² the mushroom angle clinched it. To be honest, it wouldn't have looked out of place in *Lord of the Rings*.

"Nice hobbitises..."

¹ For £9000 (£70 per month!)

² Gleaning *magic mushrooms*.

And so it was, at the age of 21, in this far-from-sensible house, that I was about to launch my new lifestyle as a responsible adult man-of-the-world.

Joe (who had rented the cottage) and I had been spending more and more time together over the previous year and we got on extremely well. Although he had really wanted us to get a flat together in Elgin, he kindly agreed to move in and gave me and my folks a hand to decorate. A few weeks later, in order to offset the mortgage (a *highly sensible* reason), a friend of a friend from Buckie moved in, which - to be fair - was a bit of a bummer for Joe as he had to share his room.

And so, the two of us set off the first Wednesday night to the Elgin roup¹ with the princely sum of £10 in my pocket and none in his. After a few tokes² we went in. The place was packed and we were hardly in the door when I met someone I knew. After a brief exchange of surrealistic pleasantries, during which time I had not been paying attention to what was going on, Joe turned to me with this look of absolute horror on his face. "I've just bought two chairs," he said.

"How much?"

"Ten."

"Ten *what?*" He had me worried.

¹ Auction saleroom.

² Draws on a funny fag.

“I think, ten pence.”

“You *think* ten pence?!”

We set out immediately for the hatch to find out whether our evening’s entertainment was effectively over. Amazingly he had in fact purchased the two chairs for ten pence - five pence each! They were lovely solid little things, amazingly comfortable with wooden arms and Queen Anne legs¹.

For my ten pounds that night we came away with the two chairs, a three piece suite, a bed, an old Singer sewing machine² and several ‘boxes and contents’. I also bought a big old black Bible. Well they were all black then, weren’t they? I actually bought it for reasons of serious spiritual interest and to my amazement the whole arena *laughed* at me! I thought they were a right ignorant lot.

Like so much in life that seems a good idea at the time, this living arrangement seemed a good idea at the time. However, the cracks soon appeared, (although it should be noted that these were possibly only cracks from my point of view).

¹ About fifteen years ago I stripped off the horrible black paint, and my wife reupholstered them and they still adorn our living room today. Certainly the best ten pence I’ve ever spent, and *I didn’t even spend it* - cheers Jim!

² A sewing machine! I think I thought it was an antique. Lovejoy may be a ‘divi’ but I’m not.

As the dark nights drew in we were all very cosy with our coal fire and all the trappings of the pseudo-freak lifestyle - most notably the combined firepower of three substantial album collections. We would sit up into the wee sma' hours gazing into the flames and swapping incisive insights into the workings of this and other universes. Joe would sit there in his chair like Gandalf himself, smoking his pipe (or something) and exuding all's-wellness with the world. [On reflection he looked more like Gimli, but we won't go into that.]

But there's always a downside. Sadly, for me, I had a job.

You see, unlike the other two I was not unemployed, which basically meant that each night, just as the party was getting going, I was forced to go to bed. How very sensible of me. But it got to the stage where I would pass the guys still sitting there from the night before as I left the house in the morning!

To start with I used to get home from work to the delicious smell of vegetable stew in the pot, the warmth and sight of a roaring fire in the grate and the joyful strains of sweet music. But as November approached, nights got later and lie-ins got longer and I was fast becoming the alarm clock for the other two - and the welcome I received evening after evening in the house at 5:15pm was now pitch darkness and freezing cold¹.

So how did I feel about that? The cracks began to widen.

¹ No central heating in those days - not for plebs like us.

You might imagine that I was cheesed off with their lifestyle - in retrospect I probably should have been - but the truth is that I envied it! There I was, knocking my pan in just so I could own a house I was never in, and also maintain the habitual privilege of remaining sober on the weekend so I could taxi everyone else around the nightspots in the car I was paying for, whilst my faithful companions lived what I considered to be the *life of Riley* right under my nose! I mean, they were even on *postal dole*¹ and didn't have to leave the house to sign on!!!

Needless to say the effect all this had on me was profound. It was as though someone had run a huge luminous orange, celestial highlighter pen clean through all my doubts and misgivings. If I had ever remotely succeeded in convincing myself of the validity of commitment to a more responsible way of life (as expressed by the evil trinity previously delineated), my resolve was now folding like a house of cards.

I felt like a hypocrite... a traitor to the cause.

But two things served to fully, finally, convince me of my plight:

- 1) I lost my chair. There were two large and extremely comfortable armchairs, one at each side of the fire, and a

¹ Jobseekers' allowance, ha ha!

settee¹ in the middle. But this was no ordinary settee. Settees can be extremely comfortable affairs, but not this one. It was unusually high off the ground and hard as *Hinnerson's erse* due to the fact that it contained a huge cumbersome folding-out contraption of a bed - and *Muggin the Mug* had to sit on it because Gordon had pinched my chair.

- 2) One cold and frosty morning my car wouldn't start (cars used to do that). The guys had not long gone to bed and were pretty cheesed off at having to get up and give me a push. I do believe that was the final straw.

Inwardly I became desperate, though I told no-one, least of all my folks. I simply could not bear to hurt them by telling them the truth now. I had been a fairly trouble-free child, a 'good' child, and my parents trusted me without reserve. I found it only too easy to deceive them because I knew what they wanted to hear. I began to live a lie - a seriously double life - and the strain began to show.

I now knew that I *had* to find a way out... an escape.

I had always believed as a child that when I grew up I would have an understanding of what life was about, that I would somehow - probably through the promise of science - find the answers to all the big

¹ A sofa.

questions. In my late teens I had made considerable efforts to reach out and discover these answers, in the process losing confidence in the ‘if it can’t be proved I won’t believe it’ of science¹ and turning the spotlight on more ethereal, metaphysical and ultimately religious areas - what would probably now be termed *New Age*. But desperation was setting in. I felt that I couldn’t begin to get on with the rest of my life until I *knew*. And I knew that I didn’t. I felt that time was running out for me. I would soon be twenty two (which seemed very old) and adult life had well and truly begun. It had sneaked up from behind and taken me for its own, and there was absolutely nothing I could do to stop it.

Desperation alone began to dictate my path.

The heart - unable to persuade the mind to accompany - would soon be forced to go on alone.

One quite out-of-character incident from that time (late ‘78) sticks in my mind. It was a day that my father was up in the shop, probably November. There was an antique shop just up around the corner and I had had my eye on something hanging in their window for

¹ Of course, while the common man has erroneously been led to believe (by the Dawkins school of scientism) that scientists consider it unscientific to accept anything that has not or cannot be proved, this rigorous discipline has never been applied to the Theory of Evolution, for which there is not only no evidence whatsoever (beyond the artwork of Uriah Heep’s *Bronze* record labels), but there is actually considerable and mounting evidence *against*. [See <http://creation.com/origin-of-life-questions-and-answers>]

a while. I'm not exactly sure why but I felt I had to buy it, I remember it was £4.50 - a lot of money then! I took it into the shop and tentatively unveiled it to my old man. He was obviously pretty dumbfounded and he pooh-hoed it from a great height.

It was a Victorian cross-stitch wall plaque in an old-style wooden frame with overlapping corners like the corners of a log cabin, which read in Old English script,

The LORD Will Provide.

Genesis 22:14

I certainly wouldn't have considered myself a believer as such but obviously without even noticing it, I was no longer the atheist I used to be - especially braving my old man's scorn!

Another thing I remember was one night casting a cursory glance at the inside of my *bought-for-serious-spiritual-reasons* black Bible. In a moment of heart-rending meaningfulness I opened it at random (like you do) and turned up the verse, Exodus 20:25. It read, "And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of **hewn stone**: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it."

That was it. I now believed I understood why Christianity had gone off the rails... they had taken something that was meant to be treated with holy reverence and built *churches* instead!

I interpreted the scripture as meaning that God wasn't pleased.

But I was.

I never liked the smelly place anyway. Now I had the kirk hoist with their own petard I felt perfectly justified in throwing the holy child out with the font water.

Actually, I never did throw Jesus out, just the church - and although I now know I was wrong to impose an Old Testament ruling on the 'age of grace', I would also have to say that the kirk had a heck of a job getting back in!¹

More on that later, maybe.

Work-wise I just wasn't interested. What had begun as a general sense of dissatisfaction had now crystallised into a cynical aversion to the whole 'record industry', as it was called. The girl who worked in the shop had the rare skill of being able to judge people's (usually Country & Western) tastes as they browsed through the album sleeves on the shelves. She would then dive for a record and stick it on. Then, sure enough, the potential customer would amble up to the counter, inquire as to what was playing, swap enthusiasms, then part with the cash. A *sale* - leaving her with one more notch on the till.

Now, as manager, I should have been approving of this, even encouraging. But I wasn't. I felt like it was disingenuous, even manipulative (I no longer believe this. She was simply introducing

¹ But then, they never really tried very hard.

people to new artists, and everybody enjoys that). I suppose I just couldn't really believe that people could actually *like* the music they bought, but of course they did. I just couldn't see over my own prejudiced and disgruntled parapet.

But sadly, the bottom line was *guilt*. The whole episode simply confirmed to me (and worse, to her) that I wasn't capable of doing my job. For my own part I would spend the day lollygagging through the backshop drinking coffee and smoking rolies, issuing edicts to our (fortunately for me) conscientious employee and enthralling the passers-by with a seemingly endless stream of non-C&W, non-Pop, such as Kraan, Brasil 77, Vivaldi, Robin Trower, James Brown and Rush. The shop wasn't doing brilliantly and I wasn't helping, but hey, the music was great!

Christmas came upon us - traditionally by far the busiest time for a music shop. As 1978 drew to a close the charts were topped by Boney M with 'Mary's Boy Child', and the big Christmas mover was Abba, The Album.

But I couldn't care less.