

Reborn in the Nick of Time

# Reborn in the Nick of Time

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Part of "Rescue of a Rock and Roll Child"



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## Chapter Seven â Reborn in the Nick of Time

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The period embracing the autumn of 1992 and the first few weeks of winter may well have been the most debauched of my entire existence.

I'd get up early, possibly about six, and then prepare myself for a day ahead with a bottle of wine, usually fortified, then I'd keep my units topped up throughout the day with vodka or gin, taking regular swigs from the miniatures I liked to have with me at all times. Some evenings I'd spend in central London, others with my new friends from the college, and we were a close and pretty wild crowd for a while. There were times in town when I couldn't keep the booze down, so I'd order a king-sized cola from MacDonaldis, which I'd then lace with spirits before cautiously sipping from it through a straw. I was a euphoric drunk and so almost never unpleasant...but I was unpredictable...a true Dionysian who'd cry out on a British Rail train in the middle of the afternoon, causing passengers to flinch with alarm...or perform a wild disjointed Karate kick into thin air on a crowded London street. One afternoon I tore my clothes to shreds after having arrived too late for an audition and a barman who served me later on in the day asked me if I'd been involved in a fight...and then there was the shameful night at Waterloo station - or was it Liverpool Street? - that I had to be escorted across the concourse to my train by one of the drunks who used to sleep rough at mainline stations back then.

However, all these insane incidents came to a head one night in early 1993 in an Indian restaurant in Hampton Court close to the Surrey-London border. I'd been dining there with two female friends when, suddenly feeling like pure death, I asked the one closest to me whether I looked as bad as I felt. She told me I did, so I got up from the table, walked a few paces and then collapsed as if stone dead in the middle of the restaurant. I was then carried bodily out into the fresh night air by two or three Indian waiters, one of whom set about shocking some life back into me by flicking ice cold water in my face. "Don't give up", he pleaded, his voice betraying true concern...and in time thanks to him some semblance of life returned, and I was well enough to be driven home.

Yet, within two days I was drinking as heavily as before, continuing to do so virtually around the clock until the weekend. I then spent Saturday evening with my close friend from the restaurant, and at some point in the morning of the 16th after having drunk solidly all night I asked her to fill a long glass with neat gin and each sip took me further and further into the desired state of blissful forgetfulness.

I awoke exhilarated, which was normal for me following a lengthy binge. It was my one drying out day of the week, and so I probably spent it writing as well as cleaning up the accumulated chaos of the past week. One thing I definitely did was listen to a radio documentary on the legendary L.A. Rock band the Doors which I'd taped some weeks or perhaps months earlier. I especially savoured "When the Music's Over" from what was then one of my favourite albums, "Strange Days" released in the wake of the Summer of Love on my 12th birthday, 7 October 1967. This apocalyptic epic with its unearthly screams and ecstatic discordant guitar solo seemed to me about living in the shadow of death, beckoning death, mocking death, defying death.

I powerfully identified with the Doors' gifted singer Jim Morrison...who'd been drawn as a very young man to poets of darkly prophetic intensity, such as Blake, Nietzsche, Rimbaud, Artaud, as well as the poets of the Beat Generation, who were themselves children of the - largely French - Romantic poÃ´tes maudits, whose works have the power to change lives, as they surely did Morrison's. His philosophy of life was clearly informed by Blake, who wrote of "the road of excess" leading to "the palace of wisdom", while his hell raising persona came to a degree from Rimbaud, who extolled the virtues of "a long, immense and systematic derangement of all the senses" as an angel-faced hooligan in the Paris of the early 1870s. What a price he paid...dead at just 27...like Jones, Hendrix, Joplin before him, and so the '60s dream was revealed as the beguiling chimera it'd been all along.

After having spent the day revelling in my own inane notion of myself as a poet on the edge like my heroes, at

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some point in the early evening I got what I'd been courting for so long...an intimation of early death, when for pretty well the first time in my life alcohol stopped being my beloved elixir and became a mortal enemy, causing my legs to lose sensation and my life force to recede at a furious and terrifying rate. In a blind panic, I opened a spare bottle of sparkling wine I had about the house even though I'd hoped not to have to drink that day. Once I'd drained it, I felt better for a while, in fact so much so that I took a few snaps of myself lounging around looking haggard and unshaven, with freshly cropped hair.

Soon after this macabre photo session I set off in search of more alcohol. Arriving at a local delicatessen, the Asian shop keeper nervously told me that the off-license wasn't open for some time yet. There was nothing for me to do but take refuge on a nearby green, where I lay for a while, still dressed I imagine in the shabby white cut-offs I'd been wearing earlier. Finally, the *offie* opened and I was able to buy more booze. I can't remember what I bought, but I think it may have been a litre of gin, because that's what I was guzzling from the next day. One of the last things I remember doing on Sunday evening was singing hymns in a nearby Methodist church as the tears flowed...tears of remorse, tears of fear, tears of desperation.

I've no further memory of what happened that hellish night, but there were many such nights ahead. At least one of these saw me endlessly pacing up and down corridors and stairs in an attempt to stay conscious and so - as I saw it - not die...and each time I shut my eyes I could have sworn I saw demonic entities beckoning me into a bottomless black abyss. I set about ridding my house of artefacts I somehow knew to be offensive to God from what I think was the night of the 16th and 17th onwards. Many books were destroyed...books on astrology and numerology and other mystical and occult subjects, books on war and crime and atrocity, and books about artists some call accursed for their kinship with drunkenness and madness and death.

I genuinely believe though that for all the horrors I underwent, it was during that first night that I came to accept Christ as my Saviour.

Had my violent conversion not come about when it did, I might have been lost forever, depending of course on where a person stands on the issue of Predestination and Free Will, but I'd have surely immersed myself in the new Bohemianism of the 1990s. The adversary values of the sixties had apparently vanished by about 1973, when in fact they'd simply gone back underground, where they set about fertilising new anti-establishment clans such as the Anarcho-Punks and the New Age Travellers who quietly flourished throughout the '80s. Around '92, some kind of amalgam between these tribes and the growing Rave-Dance movement produced yet another great counterculture, and I was readyâ 'ready as Iâ d never been to take my place as a zealot of the New Edge, only to be delivered from its seductive grasp by a violent "Road to Damascus" conversion to Christianity. However, if I'd been reborn against all the odds, I still had to suffer in the physical, if only briefly.

Many Christians are of the opinion that the longer a person puts off coming to Christ the less likely it becomes of their ever doing so and I'm among them. I also believe that Christians who convert relatively late in life may be required to pay a far higher price for the follies of their pre-Christian existence than more youthful converts, especially if these include alcohol, drugs, fornication, and involvement in the occult. God can and does heal Christians damaged by their pre-conversion sins but He's not obliged to do so as his Grace is sufficient, so while I was almost certainly already a Christian by the morning of the 17th of January, my ordeal was far from over. I somehow made it into New Eltham that Monday morning for classes at the University, but by evening I felt so ill I started swigging from my litre bottle of gin. I also phoned Alcoholics Anonymous at my mother's request, and agreed to give a meeting a shot.

Next day, on the way to Richmond College, I got the feeling my heart was about to explode, not just once but over and over again. After classes, I tried walking through Twickenham but I couldn't feel my legs and was struggling to stay conscious, so I ended up ordering a double brandy from the pub next door to the Police Station. I was shaking so much the landlord thought I was fresh from an interrogation session. Later, I was thrown out of another pub for preaching at the top of my voice, then, walking through Twickenham town centre I started making the sign of the cross to passers-by, telling one poor young guy never to take to drink

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like some kind of walking advert for temperance and he nodded without saying a word before scurrying away. Back home, in an effort to calm myself down, I dug out an old capsule of Chlomepiazole, a sedative commonly used in treating and controlling the effects of acute alcohol withdrawal, but dangerous, in fact potentially fatal, when used in conjunction with alcohol. I still had some capsules left over from about 1990 when I'd been prescribed them by my then doctor, which meant they'd long gone beyond their expiry date. For a time I felt better and was able to sleep, but soon after waking I felt worse than ever. Later, at an AA meeting, I kept leaving the room to douse my head in cold water, anything to shock some life back into me, to the dismay of my sponsor Danwho wanted me to stay put, as if doing so would exert a healing effect.

Wednesday morning saw me pacing the office of the first available doctor, who seemed at a loss as to what to do with me, but then it may have been touch and go as to whether I was going to stay on my feet or overdose on the spot and die on him. It was he who prescribed me the Valium which caused me to fall into a deep, deep sleep which may have saved my life, and from which I awoke to sense that a frontier had been passed and that I was out of danger at long last.

The piece below first existed as a series of rough notes scrawled on a piece of scrap paper in the dying days of 1993 and are a pretty accurate account of the incidents I've just described.

### Oblivion in Recession

The legs started going,  
Howlings  
In my head.  
Thought I'd go  
Kept awake with water,  
Breathing,  
Arrogantly telling myself  
I'd stay straight.  
Drank gin and wine,  
Went out,  
Tried to buy more,  
Unshaven,  
Filthy white shorts,  
Lost, rolling on lawn,  
Somehow got home.  
Monday, waiting for offie,  
Looked like death,  
Fear in eyes  
Of passers-by,  
Waiting for drink,  
Drink relieved me.  
Drank all day,  
Collapsed wept  
"Don't Die on Me".  
Next day,  
Double brandy  
Just about settled me,  
Drank some more,  
Thought constantly  
I'd collapse  
Then what?  
Fit? Coronary?

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Insanity? Worse?  
Took a Heminevrin  
Paced the house  
All night,  
Pain in chest,  
Weak legs,  
Lack of feeling  
In extremities,  
Visions of darkness.  
Drank water  
To keep the  
Life functions going  
Played devotional music,  
Dedicated my life  
To God,  
Prayed constantly,  
Renounced evil.  
Next day,  
Two Valiums  
Helped me sleep.  
By eve,  
I started to feel better.  
Suddenly,  
All is clearer,  
Taste, sounds,  
I feel human again.  
I made my choice,  
And oblivion has receded,  
And shall disappear...

### Called by Contact for Christ

To reiterate an earlier assertion...there is a widely held belief within Christianity that the sooner a person comes to Christ the better when it comes to their immortal soul. The same could be said for their subsequent relationship with God. There may for example be serious health problems resulting from a former self-destructive lifestyle which could damage their effectiveness as Christian witnesses.

On the other hand, one possible advantage of being a late convert is a testimony with the power to cause those normally sceptical of the transforming power of the born again experience to sit up and take notice. Such as that of this rescued Rock and Roll child...raised in an age in which messages of revolt...and defiance of all forms of authority, society, the family, God himself were being spread by an adversary culture led by Rock music. We drank deeply we children of the sixties from the spiritual darkness that was all around from about '65 onwards, and it affected us in ways I believe to be unique to us. That darkness has been a thorn in my flesh ever since my first days as a Christian, when I suffered from panic attacks that at one stage could be triggered simply by venturing beyond my front door, and I've never been able to fully throw it off.

I struggled on with the PGCE, partly at the University of Greenwich, and partly at Richmond College, Twickenham, while rehearsing for a couple of tiny parts for the play *Simplex of the Moon* by Rosalind Scanlon, under the direction of Ariana. Based on the life of James Joyce's troubled, fascinating daughter the dancer Lucia Joyce, it premiered at the Lyric Studio, Hammersmith on the 4th of February 1993. I also attended occasional drugs and alcohol counselling sessions at a church in Greenwich, south east London with dear Eileen, a lovely blonde woman of about 45 with a soft and soothing London accent and the gentlest pale blue eyes imaginable.

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The only time I ever knew her to lose her composure was when I announced over the phone that a matter of hours after deciding of my own volition to stop taking Diazepam, I'd switched to Chlome thiazole...unaware at the time that when it interacts with Valium, it can be fatal. However, enough time had passed between my taking the capsule and calling Ellen for me to be out of acute danger, and I can recall her literally laughing with relief at this realisation.

I owe so much to people like Eileen, and my AA sponsor Dan - who kept tabs on me during my very worst time - and other AA friends like Brian, who had such a soft spot for me because it had only been a short time before we met that he'd been in an even worse state than me. As far as I'm concerned, they're the salt of the earth. Still, I chose to attend only a handful of meetings before stopping altogether.

One of the reasons for this was that a matter of days after coming to Christ, I received a phone call from a counsellor for an organisation called Contact for Christ based in Selsdon, South London. I think he'd got in touch as a result of my having half-heartedly filled in a form that I'd picked up on a train, perhaps the previous summer while filled with alcoholic anticipation as I slowly approached Waterloo station by British Rail train with the sun setting over the foreboding south London cityscape. Knowing me I tried to put him off, but he was persistent and before I knew it he was at the door of my parents' house, a trim, dark, handsome man in late middle age called Spencer with gently piercing coffee coloured eyes and a luxuriant white moustache, and at his insistence we prayed together.

Some time later I visited him and his wife Grace at his large and elegant house where suburb meets country just beyond the Greater London border. On that day, he and I made an extensive list of aspects of my pre-Christian life he felt required deep repentance, and we prayed over each of these in turn. My continuing use of tobacco was one of the lesser issues addressed, and while it may have been coincidental, soon after I'd taken my last Valium, I stopped enjoying cigarettes, so that a single draw was enough to interfere with my breathing for the rest of the day, and so rob me of a good night's sleep.

In addition, we discussed which church I should be attending, and there was some talk of my joining Spencer and Grace at their little family fellowship in the suburbs, but in the end, Spencer gave his blessing to Cornerstone Bible Church, where I went on to be baptised by the pastor.

Cornerstone, known today as Cornerstone the Church, is a large fellowship affiliated to the Word of Faith Movement and specifically Rhema Ministries of Johannesburg, South Africa, pastored by Ray McCauley. I'd attended my very first service there even before becoming a Christian in late 1992. Drunk at the time as I recall, I'd sat next to a beautiful blonde woman of about 55 whom I later discovered to be a successful actress who at the height of her career in the sixties had appeared in television cult classics - *The Avengers* and *The Prisoner*. Apart from an elder from the Jesus Fellowship, who'd laid hands on me at a meeting of theirs in central London, she was my very first Christian mentor, if only for a very brief period of time. However, I was never to see or speak to her again as I didn't return to the church for several months, and by the time I did as a new believer, I think she'd moved to another church. We kept on missing each other, and she died in June 2001. I've never forgotten her.

### Descent into the Hothouse

In the early part of '94, I set out on the final phase of the PGCE (FE) at the University of Greenwich in New Eltham, South East London. To recap, there'd been two previous attempts at passing this exam, the first taking place in 1986-'87 at Homerton College, Cambridge, and the second, in 1990, at the former West London Institute of Higher Education, based on two campuses in the suburbs of Isleworth and East Twickenham. The third was the only one I actually managed to complete, although not successfully...mainly I think because I didn't show enough authority in the classroom at Esher College where I did my Teaching Practice. To their credit, my tutors at Greenwich did offer me the opportunity of retaking just the TP component, but I chose to turn them down. Perhaps I was a little put out about being failed after so much time and effort - but if I was, it wasn't for long because in September I successfully auditioned for a newly formed fringe theatre group called Grip based at the Rose and Crown pub in Kingston for the role of Roote in Harold Pinter's little known "The Hothouse".

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While perhaps not among Pinter's greatest plays, "The Hothouse" is a superbly written piece nonetheless, and supremely Pinteresque, with its almost high poetic verbal virtuosity and inventiveness and dark surreal humour laced with a constant sense of impending violence. Written in 1958, it wasn't performed until 1980, when it was directed by Pinter himself for London's Hampstead and Ambassador Theatres.

From the auditions onwards, I gelled with the American director Tom because while most of the auditions I'd attended up to this point had hinged on the time-honoured method of the actor performing a piece from memory before a panel of interviewers, Tom had us reading from the play in small groups, which enabled us to attain a basic feel for the character and so feel like we were actually acting rather than coldly reciting. For me, this is the only way to audition.

Once he'd told me the part of Roote was mine, I devoted myself to his vision of Roote, the pompous yet deranged director of an unnamed English psychiatric hospital: the Hothouse of the title. He demanded of me an interpretation of Roote which was deeply at odds with my usual highly Method-oriented, subtle, intense, introspective and yet somehow also emotionally vehement approach to acting, but his directorial instincts were spot-on, as his production went on to receive spectacular reviews not just in the local press, but in the international listings magazine "Time Out" in which my performance was described as "flawlessly accurate" and "lit by flashes of black humour". An amazing triumph for a humble fringe show. A major agent went out of her way to express her interest in me, and asked me to ensure my details reach her which I did...but I never heard from her again, possibly due to the shabby condition of my CV at the time; and I didn't pursue the matter further. Why I didn't more fully exploit the opportunities offered me by the unexpected success of "The Hothouse" and so go on to the West End superstardom some may have seen as mine for the taking remains something of a mystery.

In my defence I can only say that since my recent conversion my priorities had shifted so that I viewed worldly success with less relish than I'd done only a few years before. Also, I badly missed the relaxation alcohol once provided me with following my work onstage, and the revels extending deep into the night during which I'd throw my youth and affections about me like some kind of maniacal gambler. So, while I still loved acting itself, the process of being an actor had become pure torture. I'd boxed myself into the position of no longer being able to enjoy social situations as others do, nor to relax. This may have been something to do with what the state of my endorphins, the body's natural feel-good chemicals, there being a theory doing the rounds today that these can be permanently depleted by long-term abuse of alcohol and other narcotics...but I'm in no position to either endorse nor dismiss it myself.

To further complicate matters, towards the end of '94 I started suffering from deep tormenting spiritual problems for which I'd ultimately seek a solution in the shape of what is known as Deliverance Ministry. This came first through a venerable evangelist called Frank, who laid hands on me after lunch at his home deep in the heart of the Devonshire countryside—but there were further sessions...one of these taking place at night in a beautiful old Anglican church with just myself, the vicar, and the vicar's wife in attendance.

Within a short time of "The Hothouse" reaching the end of its two week run, Grip's artistic director, Simon, asked me if I'd like to audition for his upcoming production of Jim Cartwright's two-handed play "Two". Naturally I said yes and so after a successful audition, found myself playing all the male characters opposite brilliant Liverpool actress, Jill, who played all the female, and by the end of the run the houses were so packed that people were sitting on the side of the stage at our feet, something I'd never experienced before on the London fringe. Yet, as much as I loved working with Simon and Jill, I dreaded the end of each performance, which would see me make my excuses as soon as it was possible to do so without causing anyone any great offence to anyone.

Release from what had become a torturous dungeon of sobriety came while I was attending some unrelated function at the Rose and Crown a day or so following my final performance in "Two", when a guy I'd only just met offered to buy me a drink and I asked for a glass of wine. Apart from the time at my parents' house a few weeks earlier when I took a swig of what I thought was water but which turned out to be vodka or gin, this was the first alcohol to pass my lips since January '93.

This single glass of wine made me feel amazing, doubly so given the purity of my system. I cycled home that night in a state of total rapture, feeling for the first time in months that I could do anything. Over the next few

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week my drinking increased, reaching a climax in a pub in Twickenham where I met an old university friend who'd just finished a course at St Mary's University College in nearby Strawberry Hill, and where I drank and smoked myself into a stupor.

Cycling home afterwards, I took a bend near Hampton Wick and came off my bike, striking my head against a bus shelter. I stayed flat on my back for a while abject and stinking of drink -I could've sworn I saw a shadowy figure running towards me as I lay there in the dark - but before long I was shakily resuming my journey home. However, weeks of controlled drinking and one massive binge, possibly combined with the ill effects of a violent blow to the head, resulted in my becoming ill and virtually incapacitated for what might have been as long as a fortnight. Time and again during this awful period I'd awake from a feverish semi-sleep, dizzy, faint and nauseous, with my face a deathly yellowy pale, but each time a single further second of consciousness seemed beyond me I felt the Lord breathing life back into me and the terror of dying subsided. All I could do was lie around, waiting, praying for a return to normality...and when this came, I determined never to drink again as long as I lived. But we swiftly forget our sojourns in Hell...

**This is the alternative roman Æ clef version, so some names have been changed.**



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