

The Triumph of Decadence

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Chapter Two of "Rescue of a Rock and Roll Child".



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Sad Loves of a Seafaring Man

In late summer 1973, the minesweeper HMS Thames set out for Bordeaux in Gironde in the south west of France. It was my first voyage as an Ordinary Deckhand with the RNR, and I was just seventeen years old.

During the trip I made my best ever RNR friend in the shape of a fellow OD called Kevin â Loftyâ Oâ Sheaâ who called me only a few years ago from his East London home in point of fact. We talked about the time we became trapped by a gang of mangy-looking stray dogs late one night in the French city of la Rochelle in 1975, after having gotten lost on the way back from a wild night spent with locals. That tale is yet to be written.

I also became quite friendly with the most unlikely pair of bosom buddies I ever came across in the RNR or anywhere else. One half was Micky, a tough-talking working class ladies' man of about 23, who was rumoured to be a permanent year long resident of HMS Thames. He took me under his wing with a certain intimidating affection, once telling me me heâ dâ make a ruffy tuffy sailor of me yetâ , even though we both knew that that I'd never be anything other than the most useless mariner in the civilised world. The other was an older man, possibly in his mid thirties, but just as much of a lad as Mick, even though he boasted the patrician manner of a City of London stockbroker or merchant banker.

To make it clear just how much of a lubber I was, there was one occasion when, during some kind of conference being held below deck, I was asked by an officer what I thought of minesweeping, and I replied it was a gas. On another, after the ship had been prepared for a major manoeuvre, and every hand was in their respective allotted position, I was found wandering about on deck in a daze, only to casually announce I was taking a stroll. Incidents like these made me the object of good-humoured banter onboard the Thames, where I served as a kind of latter-day Billy Budd, but without the seamanship.

Its crew spent its final night in a club in the southern port of Portsmouth , though it might just as easily have been Plymouth. The main event was a hyperactive drag artiste who tried desperately to keep us entertained with cabaret style numbers sung in a high womanâ s voice, and bawdy jokes told in a deep manly baritone, but the poor man was way out of his depth, and he was fiercely heckled for his pains. At one point - perhaps in the hope of seeing a friendly face â he turned towards me, and trilled something along the lines of "Ooh...you look pretty, what's your name?", at which point some of the sailors bellowed back, â Skinâ , as in "a nice bit of skin", which was some kind of slang term for an attractive youth.

A little while later, the tar with the beard I'd been sitting next to all night asked me to hold the mike for him while he performed Rossiniâ s â William Tell Overture â on his facial cheeks. Once heâ d done so, the MC suavely quipped heâ d next be appearing on Thames Television, a joke which had some validity at the time. He ended up passed out on the table in front of him after having collapsed face down with an almighty crash; by no means the only one to suffer such a fate that night.

Back onshore, I resumed my growing passion for all that was louche, bizarre and decadent in music, art and culture.

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However, increasingly from 1974 onwards, I turned away from what I now saw as the old hat tackiness of Glam Rock, convinced that Modernist outrage had nowhere left to go. Instead, I turned my devotion to the more refined corruption of the golden age of Modernism of ca. 1890-1930, and especially to its leading cities, in terms of their being beacons of revolutionary art, and of e, luxury and dissolution. They included the London of the Yellow Decade, Belle Époque Paris, Jazz Age New York, and most of all Weimar Republic Berlin.

At some point in 1974, I started using hair cream to slick my hair back in the style of F. Scott Fitzgerald, sometimes parting it in the centre just as my idol had done, and to build up a new retro wardrobe.

These went on to include a Gatsby style tab collar, which I wore either with striped collegiate tie, or cravat or neck scarf. Over this, I might wear a short-sleeved Fair Isle sweater, a navy blue blazer from Meakers, and a belted fawn raincoat straight out of a forties film noir. My grey flannel trousers from Simpsons of Piccadilly typically flopped over a pair of two-tone correspondent shoes.

There were those cutting edge artists who appeared to share my love affair with the languid cafe and cabaret culture of the continent's immediate past. Among these were established acts, such as David Bowie and Roxy Music, and newer stars such as Steve Harley of Cockney Rebel, and Ron and Russell Mael from L.A band Sparks, who had recently come to Britain in search of Glam Rock glory. Some of Roxy's followers even went so far as to sport the kind of nostalgic apparel favoured by Ferry himself, but they were rare creatures indeed in a mid-seventies London.

As for me, I wore my bizarre outdated costumes in arrogant defiance of the continuing ubiquity of shoulder-length hair and flared denim jeans. In 1975, I even had the gall to go to a concert at West London's Queen's Park football stadium dressed in striped boating blazer and white trousers, only to find myself surrounded by hirsute Rock fans. The headliners were my one-time favourites Yes, whose "Relayer" album I'd bought the year before; but my passion for Progressive Rock was a thing of the past. I'd moved on since '71, towards a far deeper love of darkness and loss of innocence.

There was nothing even remotely dark, however, about the time I fell in love with a Dutch girl while sitting Spanish "O" level in June 1974 in Gower Street, Central London. She didn't look Dutch; in fact, with her tanned complexion and long dark brown hair, she was Mediterranean in appearance, and even had the name to match: Maria. It was probably she who approached me, because I was so unconfident around girls in those days that I'd have never made the first move, and in all the time I knew her, I didn't have the guts to tell her how I felt. So, once we'd completed our final paper, I allowed her to walk away from me forever with a casual "I might see you around", or some other cliché of that kind.

For about a week, I took the train into London and spent the days wandering around the city centre in the truly desperate hope of bumping into her. One time I could have sworn I saw her staring coolly back at me from an underground train, possibly at South Kensington or Notting Hill Gate, just as the doors were closing. Typically though, I was powerless to act, and simply stood there like a lovesick fool as the train drew away from the station. In time, my infatuation faded, but even to this day certain songs – such as "I Just Don't Want to be Lonely" by The Main Ingredient, and "Natural High" by Bloodstone - will recall for me those few weeks in the summer of '74 that I spent in hopeless pursuit of a woman I didn't even know.

Later on in the year, and fully recovered from this absurd unspoken passion, I found myself once again in La Ribera in south eastern Spain.

The summer of '74 was one of the most blissful I ever spent there, and there were a good few of those. Each afternoon, a gang of us would meet up on the jetty facing our apartment on the Mar Menor, which was more or less deserted after lunch. There, we'd listen to Bowie on cassette, or on a portable phonograph, Donny singing "Puppy Love", and talk and swim and laugh and generally enjoy being young and carefree in a decade of endless possibilities. To some youthful Spanish eyes back in '74-'76, I must have seemed an almost impossibly exotic figure from what was then the most radical and daring city in Europe, and I played my image up to the hilt. In truth, though, I was barely less sheltered and innocent than they, and how wonderful it was to bask in their soft Mediterranean loveliness for a few brief seasons.

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However, there was a change that came over Spain with Franco's passing, and the birth of the so-called *Movida*, which could be said to be the Spanish equivalent of London's Swinging Sixties revolution. Perhaps it didn't happen right away, but by my last vacation in La Ribera in the summer of '84, it was I who was in awe of the local youth rather than the other way around. They seemed so cool to me, dancing their strange jerky chicken wing dance to the latest New Pop hits from Britain. By then, of course, most of my old friends had vanished into their young adult lives, and my time as Charly, the undisputed English prince of La Ribera, had long passed.

I returned to London in late summer '74 with a deep tan and my long hair bleached bright yellow by the sun. Only days afterwards I found myself on HMS President, moored then as today on the Embankment near Temple station. This involved my passing through Waterloo mainline station, which wasn't tourist-friendly as it is today, with its cafes and baguette bars, but a dingy intimidating place complete with pub and old-style barber. There I was approached by a former sailor who kept going on about how good looking I was. He even told me that he loved me; but he was no predator, just a sweet lonely old Scotsman who wanted someone to talk to for a few minutes, and I was happy to do that. I even went so far as to agree to a meeting with him the same time the following week, not that I had any intention of keeping it. Besides, it wasn't long before HMS Thames was on its way to Hamburg, second largest city of Germany and its principle port.

Once we'd arrived, one of the CPOs warned me not to wander around Hamburg alone, for fear that I might end up being ravaged and dumped in some back alley, or worse. I duly joined up with a group of about three or four other ratings on my first night ashore, and of course we headed straight for the Reeperbahn of Beatle renown. There, in the red light district of St Pauli, sights awaited me I don't think I'd even suspected existed up until that point. It was all so different from the quiet outer suburbs, where an organised coach trip took us to us to, possibly a day later.

We ended up in a park where I had my picture taken on a bridge by a reporter for the Surrey Comet, before a group of breathless giggling schoolgirls asked me to be in some photos with them, and I of course obliged, flattered by their attentions. On the way back to the ship, one of the sailors announced I'd been quite a hit with the Hamburg teenyboppers. Another wryly opined it was due to my appearance, the blond hair and blue eyes of the classic Teuton. Whatever the truth, there was something so touching about those sweet suburban girls and their simple unaffected joy of life, especially in the light of what girls barely older than they were subjecting themselves to a mere matter of miles away.

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Sometime in 1975, I became a student at Brooklands Technical College which lay then as now on the fringes of Weybridge, an affluent outer suburb of south west London. In semi-pastoral Brooklands as in my beloved La Ribera, I learned to be a social being after years of near-seclusion, first at Pangbourne and then as a home student. So, attention came to be a potent narcotic for me in the mid 1970s. However, despite constant displays of flamboyant self-confidence, those who tried to get to know to know me on an intimate level found themselves confronted with a desperately diffident and inhibited individual.

The regular Brooklands Disco was a special event for me. On one occasion early on in a Disco night I got up in front of what seemed like the whole college and delivered a solo dance performance to a fiery Glam tune by Bebop Deluxe, possibly with white silk scarf flailing in the air to frenzied cheers and applause. I just blew everyone away.

On another, a trio of roughs who I suspect may have gate crashed the Disco only to see in me the worst possible example of the feckless wastrel student strutting and posturing in unmanly white took me aside at the end of the night. Doubtless, they were intent on a touch of the old ultra-violence; but I stood my ground, insisting that despite what they may have thought about me, I was just as straight as they. Apparently convinced of this, they vanished into the departing crowds after muttering a few dark threats, leaving my cherubic face intact.

'75 again, and my music, swimming and Martial Arts sessions were no more, but the private lessons

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continued, mainly with a young academic called Mark who lived alone but for several black cats in long time Rock star haven Richmond-on-Thames. He was a quiet slim young man with long darkish curly hair who, as well as being a private tutor, was a successful session musician who went on to play drums for a fairly well-known Contemporary Folk outfit.

Mark, who specialised in the French Symbolist poets, exerted a strong influence on me in terms of my growing passion for European literature and Modernist culture. However, it was the less known literature of Spain that we studied together, from the anonymous picaresque novel "Lazarillo de Tormes" (1554) onwards, and embracing Quevedo, Galdos, Machado, Lorca, and others.

He was also an early encourager of my writing, a lifelong passion that was ultimately to degenerate into a chronic case of *cacoethes scribendi*, or the irresistible compulsion to write. As a result of this, I became incapable of finishing a single cohesive piece of writing until well into the eighties when I managed to complete a short story and a novel both of which have since been destroyed but for a few fragments.

It was largely through Mark that I came under the spell of the Berlin of the Weimar Republic of 1919 to 1933:

After I'd expressed interest in a copy of one of Christopher Isherwood's Berlin novels, "Mr Norris Changes Trains", conspicuously placed in front of me on his desk, he told me in animated tones that it had inspired the 1972 movie version of the Kander and Ebb musical, *Cabaret*. In fact, while a work of art in its own right written for the screen by Jay Allen, and directed by former dancer Bob Fosse, "Cabaret" had been largely informed by Isherwood's only other Berlin story, "Goodbye to Berlin".

Seeing "Cabaret" later on that year was a life-transforming experience for me, one of only a handful brought about by a film, and the beginning of a near-obsessive preoccupation with the Berlin of the Weimar era, which has been likened by some cultural critics to the contemporary West; and it could be said that much of what's happened to the West since the end of the second world war was to some degree foreshadowed by the still horrifying decadence of post-war Berlin, which begs the question, why?

Part of the reason may lie in the fact that more than any other nation of the late 18th and early 19th Century, the blessed cradle of the Reformation had played host to a school of Biblical exegesis known as Higher Criticism, which flagrantly, not to say blasphemously, attacked the authenticity of the Scriptures. What's more, late 19th century Europe had witnessed a major occult revival which particularly impacted the great cultural centres of Britain, France and Germany.

These two vital factors surely contributed to the terribly debilitated condition of Christianity in Germany in the years leading up to, and including the implementation of, the Third Reich in 1933.

By the onset of the '20s, crushed by war debt and blighted by urban violence between mutually hostile right and left wing factions, Germany stood on the precipice of disaster. However, some kind of reprieve came with an increase of affluence in 1923, at which point Berlin's Golden Age began, and she became the undisputed world epicentre of artistic and intellectual foment. Under her auspices, great artistic freedom thrived in the shape of, among other phenomena, the painters of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement such as Beckmann, Dix and Grosz, Berg's ground-breaking opera "Wozzek", as well as the staccato cabaret-style music of Kurt Weill, Fritz Lang's dystopian "Metropolis", the provocative dancing of Cabaret Queen Anita Berber and so on.

However, Weimar Berlin remains best known for its notorious sexual liberalism, as seen in pictorial and photographic depictions of the cabarets and night clubs in which license and intoxication flourished unabated which still have the power to shock. Given that several other Western cities in the twenties were hardly less hysterically dissolute than Berlin, it's little wonder that this key Modernist decade has been described by some critics as the beginning of the end of Western civilisation. In its wake came the Second World War, the collapse of the greatest empire in history, and the rise of the Rock and Roll youth and drug culture, which could be said to be the very triumph of Western decadence.

The Tears of a Woman

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I made no less than three sea voyages in 1975, two as a civilian and one with the RNR, as well as spending a week with them docked at the Pool of London.

The first of these was to Amsterdam via Edinburgh and St. Malo on the three-masted topsail schooner TS Sir Winston Churchill of the Sail Training Association, now known as the Tall Ships Trust. Based in Portsmouth and Liverpool, the TST was founded in 1956 for the character development of young people aged 16 to 25 through the crewing of traditional tall ships, originally Churchill and the SS Malcolm Miller.

Among my shipmates were my 17 year old brother, several young men from Scotland and the north of England, some recent recruits to the RN, and a handful of older Mates who'd been given authority over the rank and file of we deck hands. In overall authority was the elegant, distinguished Ship's Captain, who also happened to be an alumnus of my own alma mater of Pangbourne.

It was an all-male crew, and I was quite well-liked at first although my popularity cooled in time. I kept a few pals though. One guy in particular stayed a good friend after we'd tried to impress a couple of girls together during our brief stay in St Malo. He was a small cherubic southerner with long dark hair worn shoulder length like the young Jack Wilde. I got on OK with a few of the others, and some were merely indifferent, but 'Jack' was Churchill's true prince.

He helped me out on one occasion when I desperately needed him to, bless his baby-faced soul. I'd fallen hard for one of the girls, and was wandering around in a mournful daze after having failed to pluck up the courage to ask her for her address, when Jack handed me a piece of paper with it on. It transpired she'd scrawled it down just before leaving us, and I was drunk with relief at the news, just walking on air, because there was the danger of me coming down with a serious case of lovesickness had she become lost to me forever. Jack saved my hide.

Life on the Churchill was no luxury cruise. There were heavy storms, and on more than one occasion, we were ordered out of our hammocks in the middle of the night to help trim the sails. I never took any part in this, which can hardly have helped my reputation. I did climb the rigging though, just once, before we came into the port of Amsterdam. Dozens of us manned the yard arms, attached to these by our safety belts alone. I was determined to do it, even though the experience terrified me so much my legs shook throughout.

The Dutch capital was marked by the same kind of open sexual licence I'd witnessed only the year before in Hamburg, although it seemed to me to lack the German city's sinister vibrancy. Then - just as today - the sad De Wallen red-light district was filled to the brim with hundreds of little illuminated one-room apartments, each with a single woman sitting in clear view of onlookers plying her lonely trade.

As for Edinburgh, just before setting foot in the city for the first time, one of the lads, dressed to the nines himself in the trendiest seventies gear, all flared slacks and stack-heeled shoes no doubt, warned me not to go strutting about Edinburgh town centre in a flashy boating blazer. Of course, I completely ignored his advice, and, waltzing some time later into an inner city pub in broad daylight wearing said blazer and blue jeans tucked into long white socks, a grinning hard man with long reddish curly hair asked me if I was from Oxford. Perhaps he was aware of the Oxonian reputation for producing flaming aesthetes, but I doubt it. I think he just took one look at my jacket and thought: "Who's thus flash ponce askin' tae ge' hus heed kecked in?", or worse. It may have been touch and go for a while as to whether he was going to inflict some serious damage on my angelic English face, but in the end he left me be. He may even have liked me. The unlikeliest people did in those days.

Within a few weeks of returning to London by train from Edinburgh, my brother and I were setting off again, this time as part of what is known as the Ocean Youth Club.

We set sail towards the Baltic coast of Denmark by way of Germany's famous Kiel Canal, and while we were once more supervised by Mates under the command of a Ship's Captain, the OYC was more like a cruise than a trial by water, utilising modern yachts rather than traditional tall ships. The captain himself was a lovable bearded larger than life true character with a weakness for freaking out to John Kongos' "He's Gonna Step on You Again", who became a close friend and fellow reveller.

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My brother and I were quick to recruit a nice young guy called Cy as our best pal and confidante for the trip. It turned out we actually met him some ten years previously while passing through Calpe, Spain, either on our way to or from my grandmother's home on the Costa Brava. Soon after setting foot on Danish soil we got talking to a couple of girls who, as might be expected, had natural golden blonde hair. Our efforts at romance were wholly innocuous, despite the reputation Scandinavia had for progressive sexual attitudes.

A less pleasant romantic episode took place towards the end of the trip, which saw me in pursuit of a pretty German girl called Ulrike. I was crazy for her, and she made it pretty clear she liked me too, and yet I'd senselessly dumped her for the sake of a night of drunken idiocy with my brother and Cy, perhaps expecting her to run after me or something. Suddenly, overtaken by sickly pangs of remorse, I set out to find her, and at some point during my search, while walking along some kind of wooden pontoon, I lost my footing and fell fully clothed into the waters of what must have been the Kiel Canal.

I wrote to Ulrike, but she never replied, and I can't say I blame her. To this day I can't understand what possessed me to ignore her so callously, just in order to tie one on with the boys, which I could have done any night of the week. Self-sabotage was fast becoming a speciality of mine.

Still later in the summer I sailed with the RNR to La Rochelle on the Atlantic coast of France, and shortly after that I was with the RNR again, this time in the Pool of London, a stretch of the Thames lying between London Bridge and Rotherhithe. In order to reach the ship, I had to board some kind of launch with a group of other seamen, one of whom, a strikingly handsome Leading Seaman of about 30 I knew only by sight, had taken unofficial charge. Once we were all safely aboard, it was the turn of our golden-headed leader to join us, but as he stepped off the launch, he somehow lost his footing and slipped into the Thames beneath him. Within a matter of minutes his heavy clothing and boots, helped by a vicious current, had dragged him beneath the river's surface and he was lost.

Soon after returning to London, I told my mother what had happened, and she wept the tears of one who instinctively knew what those who loved this man must have been feeling at the time. It was only then that the true appalling tragedy of the incident hit home and I ran into the bathroom and sobbed my heart out myself. Thinking back on it, a line from that beautiful song "How Men Are" by Scottish singer-songwriter Roddy Frame comes to mind: "Why should it take the tears of a woman to see how men are?"

It was in this same year of '75 that I attempted to pass what is known as the AIB or Admiralty Interview Board, with a view to qualifying as a Supply and Secretariat officer in the Royal Navy. This involved my taking the train down to HMS Sultan, the Royal Navy's specialist training centre in Gosport, Hampshire, where I spent three days attending various examinations and interviews intended to assess my potential as a future naval officer.

On one occasion, early on in the long weekend just before one assignment or another, I was putting the final touches to my toilette in front of a handy mirror when one of the guys I was sharing a dorm with felt it necessary to remind me that I wasn't at a fashion show. He wasn't going to be coming along with me that night to the disco, or any night for that matter, but you couldn't fault his dedication.

Two guys eventually did agree to keep me company on one of the nights we spent at Sultan, but they didn't really seem all that keen. As things turned out, they left me alone at a Gosport disco to return to the Sultan for an early night. When I got back myself, I was shocked to discover that Sultan's main entrance had been locked and was now being manned by an armed guard.

If the young man nervously trying to reach someone in authority within the training centre on a walkie talkie was wondering exactly what kind of person returns to base dressed to the nines after a night's disco dancing when he was supposed to be in the midst of three days of gruelling tests and interviews that were vital to his future career, then he gave no indication of it. He did however eventually make contact with someone in authority, and I can remember passing through an officer's mess soon afterwards and briefly exchanging

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pleasantries with its airily affable occupants. English gentlemen of the old school, they of course kept their actual opinions of me to themselves.

It may just be me, but I can't help thinking that had I returned to Sultan that night before being locked out, I might have been in with a better chance of passing the AIB, that is, as opposed to failing it, which I perhaps rather predictably did. Ay, every inch the superstar.

One of the last notable incidents of the year took place in December, when dressed in all-white with a fawn raincoat I took my friend Norma, one of the London Division Wrens but originally from the north of England, to a dinner dance at London's Walford Hilton Hotel. We were joined there by a couple of Norma's close friends, a fair, bearded man in a suit, and his dark, extrovert wife. The husband was one of those deeply gentle men I came across from time to time in the 1970s. They weren't all bearded; but I can think of some who were, such as the madcap ship's captain described earlier. What united them was that they behaved with special protectiveness and affection towards me, and I've never forgotten them for it.

Early on in the evening, Norma became incensed when a group of older seamen started teasing me from their table, which didn't bother me at all because I knew these guys, and they meant no harm. Military life after all, is fuelled by this kind of raillery, but she insisted that their attitude stemmed from the fact that I was "better than what they are", as she put it, possibly in imitation of their pronounced London accents. It was kind of her to say so, but I think her judgement was way off the mark, because with them, what you saw is what you got, and if it wasn't always pretty, at least it was honest.

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

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