

As a Perfectly Foolish Young Man I Wanted 13

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As a Perfectly Foolish Young Man - Book Four -Seven Chapters from a Sad Sack Loser's Life - Chapter 6(b)



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Then early in '91, he spent a few weeks in the beautiful seaside town and major London overspill area of Hastings, in an effort to pass a course in teaching English as a foreign language.

To this end he worked like a Trojan; but he was struggling terribly, tormented by OCD and its endless demands on his time and energies in the shape of rituals both physical and mental. And while he didn't drink at all during the day, at night he was sometimes so stoned he was incoherent.

Predictably perhaps, he was failed; and when he asked the authorities if they might reconsider, he was informed that their decision was final. It was a bit of a let-down for him for sure, but he'd loved his time in Hastings, even while continuing the search for some kind of spiritual solution to his mental troubles which led him to a "church" which was far, far from the kind he'd come ultimately to seek out.

At least part of the reason for his torment may be provided by the following extracts from a letter his beloved mother wrote him during a fascinating but fruitless sojourn:

"...I had a chance to look at your library...I could not believe what I saw. These very strange books, beyond my comprehension, most of them, and I thought what a dissipation of a good mind that thought it right to read such matters...I feel very deeply that you have up to your present state, almost ruined your mind. Your happy, smiling face has left you, your humorous nature, ditto, your spirited state of mind, your cheerful, sunny, exuberant well-being, all gone. Too much thought given to the unhappiness and sad state of others (often those you can not help, in any way)...I've said recently that I am convinced that anyone can get oneself into a state of agitation or distress or anxiety by thinking or reading about, or witnessing unpleasant things, and the only thing to do is to, as much as possible, avoid such matters, to not let them get hold in the mind. Your fertile mind has led you astray. Why, and how?"

How many millions of mothers over the course of the centuries have asked this of offspring who've been inexplicably drawn to the shadow lands of life only to lose their way back to sanity? Only God knows. Most of course, successfully make the journey back before settling into a normal mode of life, but the danger of becoming lost is always there, especially for those who remain therein far beyond adolescence. Eternal adolescence being arguably one of the prime features of our era, facilitated by its exaltation of youth, which is an intrinsic part of its pre-eminent art form, Rock Music. And while there are those who'd insist that far fewer young people today are in thrall to the dark glamour of self-destructive genius than in previous Rock eras, the world view still very much exists.

For David's part, he came ultimately to view Rock as more than just a simple Pop music derived from various Folk genres, so much as an enormously influential subculture, even a religion, and to contend that those who grew to maturity in the sixties were spiritually affected not just by the music but the cultural changes brought about by the Rock revolution.

He'd insist that from quitting formal education aged 16, he was in thrall to a cult of instant gratification that had been growing progressively more powerful throughout the West since about 1955.

After all, he'd contend, he failed to build a future for himself, in terms of a profession, a family, financial security, and so on, having once viewed all these with an indifference verging on contempt. And it hurt him deeply to realise the extent to which he'd sabotaged his life with such a negative identity.

The following summer of 1992, he made another attempt at passing the TEFL course...this time at a college set in one of London's most beautiful parks. But he was drinking on pretty well a daily basis, and even though he worked hard and gave some good classes, there was no way on earth he was going to pass.

Still, it was a fabulous summer, and much of it he spent in a state of manic hyperactivity. Bliss it was to stride in the warm suburban evening sun to his local station of Hampton Court...perhaps with the Orb's eerie *Blue Room* playing again and again in his mind...on his way to yet another long night of ecstatic insensibility. He could have passed out on any one of these wild nights and found himself in Hell; that is the terrifying truth of the matter.

The romantic decadence associated with the eighties was no longer even remotely current, and there was a new spirit as he saw it, a kind of mystic techno-bohemianism perhaps, which appeared to him to be

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everywhere in the early nineties.

And he sought to visit as many clubs and venues as he could where it was being celebrated, even though in the event he only ever went to one, Cyber Seed in Covent Garden, which was poorly attended and only lasted a short time.

Later on in this final beautiful lethal summer of intoxication, and soon after appearing as Stefano in *The Tempest* at the Conway Hall in Red Lion Square, he set out on yet another PGCE course; this one bearing the suffix "fe" for Further Education.

Its purpose was to train himself and his fellow students to teach pupils in sixth form colleges and other further education establishments. And while its base was the University of New Eltham in the tough outer suburbs of South East London, he divided his time between New Eltham, and Twickenham College in the leafy Royal Borough of Richmond on Thames.

While on top of all this study, there were the gigs with Maxie...the novelty telegrams...and who knows what else...and he loved every second of a frenetic lifestyle lived in total ecstatic defiance of the wholesale ruin of mind, body, soul, spirit...

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

He'd - typically - rise early during the week, possibly around six, before preparing himself for the day ahead with a bottle of wine, usually fortified; then he'd keep his units topped up throughout the day with vodka or gin, taking regular swigs from the miniatures he liked to have with him at all times. Some evenings he'd spend in central London, others with his new friends from the college, and they were a close and pretty wild crowd for a while. There were times in town when he couldn't keep the booze down, so he'd order a king-sized cola from McDonald's, which he'd then lace with spirits before cautiously sipping from it through a straw.

He was a euphoric drunk and so almost never unpleasant...but he 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 he tore his clothes to shreds after having arrived too late for an audition and a barman who served him later on in the day asked him:

"You bin in a fight then?"

And then there was the shameful night at Waterloo station - or was it Liverpool Street? - that he was so incapacitated by drink that he had to be escorted across the main concourse to his train by one of a colony of rough sleepers that were a feature of mainline stations in those days.

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. He'd been dining there with two female friends when, suddenly feeling like pure death, he turned to the lady who was next to him and asked:

"Do I look as bad as I feel?"

As soon as she'd told him that indeed he did, he got up from the table, walked a few paces and then collapsed as if stone dead in the middle of the restaurant. He 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 him by flicking ice cold water in his face.

"Don't give up," he pleaded, his voice betraying true concern...and in time thanks to him some semblance of life returned, and David was well enough to be driven home.

Yet, within two days he was drinking as heavily as before, continuing to do so virtually around the clock until the weekend. He then spent Saturday evening with his close friend from the restaurant; and at some point in the morning of what was almost certainly Sunday the 17th of January 1993, after having drunk solidly all night, he asked her to fill a long glass with neat gin and each sip took him further and further into the desired state of blissful forgetfulness.

He awoke exhilarated, which was normal for him following a lengthy binge. It was his one drying out day of the week, and so he probably spent it writing as well as cleaning up the accumulated chaos of the past week. One thing he definitely did was listen to a radio documentary on the legendary L.A. Rock band the Doors which he'd taped some weeks or perhaps months earlier.

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He especially savoured *When the Music's Over* from what was then one of his favourite albums, *Strange Days*, released in the wake of the Summer of Love on his 12th birthday, 7 October 1967. This apocalyptic epic with its unearthly screams and ecstatically discordant guitar solo seemed to him about living in the shadow of death, beckoning death, mocking death, defying death.

He 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 those of the Beat Generation, who were themselves to a degree children of the - largely French - Romantic so-called accursed poets, 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.

After having spent the day revelling in his own inane notion of himself as a poet on the edge like his heroes, at some point in the early evening he got what he'd been courting for so long...an intimation of early death, when for pretty well the first time in his life alcohol stopped being his beloved elixir and became a mortal enemy, causing his legs to lose sensation and his life force to recede at a furious and terrifying rate...or so it appeared to him in his desperate condition.

In a blind panic, he opened a spare bottle of sparkling wine he had about the house even though he'd hoped not to have to drink that day. Once he'd drained it, he felt better for a while, in fact so much so that he took a few snaps of myself lounging around looking haggard and unshaven, with freshly cropped hair.

Soon after this macabre photo session he set off in search of more alcohol. Arriving at a local delicatessen, the Asian shop keeper nervously told him that the off-license wasn't open for some time yet. There was nothing for him to do but take refuge on a nearby green, where he lay for a while, still dressed in the shabby white cut-offs he'd been wearing earlier. Finally, the offie opened and he was able to buy more booze.

In years to come, one of the last things he remembered doing on Sunday evening was singing hymns in a nearby Methodist church as the tears flowed.

He had no further memory of what happened that hellish night, but there were many such nights ahead. At least one of these saw him endlessly pacing up and down corridors and stairs in an attempt to stay conscious and so - as he came to see it - not die...and each time he shut his eyes he could have sworn he saw demonic entities beckoning him into a bottomless black abyss.

He set about ridding his room of artefacts he somehow knew to be offensive to God from the night of the 17th or 18th 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.

He genuinely came to believe that for all the horrors he underwent, it was during that first night he came to accept Christ as his Saviour, and that had his violent conversion not come about when it did, he might have been lost forever, although whether one agrees with him or not depends on where one stands on the issue of predestination versus free will.

But he'd have surely immersed himself further in the new bohemianism of the 1990s, which of course was not new at all, simply a revival of the adversary values of the sixties. Far from vanishing around '73, these values had merely 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 could be said to have taken place. And David was primed...supremely, passionately ready...to take his place as a zealot of this New Edge, only to be delivered from its seductive grasp by a "Road to Damascus" conversion to Christianity.

However, if he'd been reborn against all the odds, he still had to suffer in the physical, if only briefly. And on the morning of the 18th, he somehow made it into New Eltham for classes at the University, but by evening he felt so ill he started swigging from a litre bottle of gin in the hope this would improve his condition. He also phoned Alcoholics Anonymous at his mother's request, and agreed to give a meeting a shot.

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Next day, on the way to Twickenham, he got the feeling that his heart was about to explode, not just once but over and over again. Then, after that morning's classes, he tried taking a stroll around town but couldn't feel his legs, and was struggling to stay conscious, so he ended up ordering a double brandy from the pub next door to the Police Station. He was shaking so much the landlord thought he was fresh from an interrogation session.

Later, he was thrown out of another pub for preaching at the top of his voice, and, walking through Twickenham town centre he started making the sign of the cross to passers-by, telling one poor young guy never to take to drink like some kind of walking advert for temperance. The fellow nodded in assent before silently scurrying away.

Back home, in an effort to calm himself down, he dug out an old capsule of Chlome-thiazole, 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. He still had some capsules left over from about 1990 when he'd been prescribed them by his then doctor, which meant they'd long gone beyond their expiry date. For a time he felt better and was able to sleep, but soon after waking, felt worse than ever.

Later, at an AA meeting, he kept leaving the room to douse his head in cold water, anything to shock some life back into me, to the dismay of his sponsor Dan who wanted him to stay put, for the purported healing effects of doing so.

"What do you think I come here for," he asked him, "the free cups of tea?"

Wednesday morning saw him pacing the office of the first available doctor, and it may have been touch and go as to whether he was going to stay on his feet...or overdose on the spot and die on him.

It was he who prescribed him the Valium which caused David to fall into a deep, deep sleep which may have saved his life, and from which he awoke to sense that a frontier had been passed and that he was out of danger at long last.

Photo: Jane Whitton, Spring (?) 1993

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