

As a Perfectly Foolish Young Man I Wanted 7

By : Carl Halling

As a Perfectly Foolish Young Man I Wanted - Book Four - Seven Chapters from a Sad Sack Loser's Life -
Chapter One

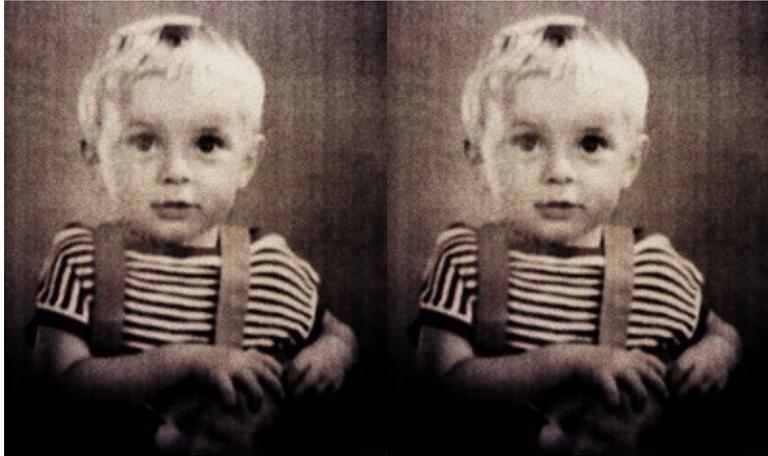


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Mon enfance...



Last pic: Wales, I think...

Sometime in the early 21st Century, anyone carefully contemplating the life of David Cristiansen would be forgiven for thinking of him as a loser. In fact not just a loser but a king-size loser, a loser among losers, a loser supreme. And being told he was the best at what he did may have afforded him some consolation at those times his status in life meant the most to him; and he felt most helpless to change the conditions of his existence.

They might see him as someone who'd failed in pretty well every conceivable area of life. And so ended up living alone in an apartment adjacent to his parents' suburban home on the wrong side of 55, unmarried and childless, and without fortune, profession or vehicle.

And they'd have a point. For when it came to the areas in which he hoped to succeed since he was a teenager with the world at his delicate feet, he had precious little to show for his labours but for a precious few fruits with which he was inordinately pleased. But in the end, they amounted to, well if not little, then far less than they should have done; and deep down inside he knew that all too well.

And it hurt him terribly to realise he wasn't a genius after all, so much as a regular sad sack with delusions of grandeur; as actor, musician and writer...especially as writer.

"I'm not done yet," he'd tell himself, or anyone else willing to listen, and to look at him, you might think he had a point. For despite his age, he still possessed a remnant of what was once a truly remarkable physical beauty.

Yet, many would insist David was foolish to lament all he had lost in terms of opportunities for fame, status and glory and all the wondrous things that accompany these. For after all, these are things one cannot take with us when we quit this earth, and life is short, so terribly short that it is described in the Bible as a "vapour".

And there were times his still handsome eyes failed to see this truth, as if they'd become clouded o'er by the tears he'd shed time and time again for the follies of his faraway past. While at others, it became manifestly clear to him, and he rejoiced as the most fortunate of men. Yet, it could have all been so different.

He'd been born at the tail end of the Goldhawk Road, a lengthy street within the limits of inner West London, while his first home was a little Victorian cottage in the long-demolished Bulmer Place in Notting Hill. And you'll search in vain for it in any London map, although you'll still be able to locate a Bulmer Mews, tucked away some yards from the main road of Notting Hill Gate.

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His brother Dany was born two and a half years later, by which time his parents had been able to afford their own house in Bedford Park in what was then the London Borough of Acton.

During David's boyhood it was still demographically mixed, yet well on the way to becoming completely gentrified.

Future Who front man Roger Daltry had relocated there from nearby Shepherds Bush when he was 11 years old in 1955 or '56.

And a few years later, he formed a group in the Skiffle style called The Detours, which would go on to shape-shift into The Who, whose furiously hedonistic music and philosophy would go on to make a permanent impression on the Western psyche; and help fuel the British Invasion of the American Pop charts. David's father Pat had been born Patrick Clancy Christiansen in Rowella, Tasmania, and raised in Sydney as the son of a Danish father and English mother.

At around eight years old, he won a scholarship to the Sydney Conservatory of Music, soloing for the Sydney Symphony Orchestra on a single occasion shortly afterwards.

And soon after his father's death on the eve of the Second World War, he set off with his mother and two siblings for Denmark, his father having expressed a wish to be buried in his native land. And then on to London where he studied both at the Royal Academy of Music and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. He joined the London Philharmonic Orchestra while still a teenager, and during the Blitz on London, served in the Sea Cadets as a signaller, seeing action as such on the hospital ships of the Thames River Emergency Service.

While David's mother had entered the world as Angela Jean Elizabeth Watson in the city of Brandon, Manitoba. However, while still an infant she'd moved with her parents and four siblings to the Grandview area of East Vancouver.

Many of Grandview's earliest settlers were in shipping or construction work, and largely of British origin. Indeed, Angela's own father, whose reputed trades included those - variously - of farmworker, builder and electrician, was from the little town of Castleberg in County Tyrone, Ireland. While her mother hailed from Springburn, Glasgow.

In high school, she came into her own in the Glee Club, thanks to a singing voice of rare beauty and quality. And in time was able to make her living exclusively as a soprano singer; while many of her greatest triumphs took place at Vancouver's famous Theatre Under the Stars in Stanley Park, which officially opened on August the 6th 1940.

After the war, she hoped to expand her career either in the US or the UK, but despite a successful audition for the San Francisco Light Opera Company, ultimately opted for England, a ticket to sail having become available to her.

And so she set off for the country of her forefathers laden with letters of recommendation from her singing teacher, as well as numerous press cuttings from her brilliant Canadian career.

And within a short time of doing so, she met Pat Christiansen through their shared profession, and they married in the summer of 1948.

Seven years later, they decided to have their first child, but Angela was repeatedly informed by her doctor she might miscarry. In the event, David breathed his first at 3.50 pm on the 7th of October.

While his first school was a kind of nursery school held locally on a daily basis at the private residence of one Miss Henrietta Pearson, and then aged 4 years old, he joined the exclusive Lycee Francais du Kensington du Sud in London's ritzy South Kensington district, where he was to become bilingual by the age of about four years old.

Almost every race and nationality under the sun was to be found in the Lycee in those days...and among those who went on to be good pals of David's were kids of English, French, Jewish, American, Yugoslavian and Middle Eastern origin.

His first two closest playground pals were Esther, the dusky scion of a successful Norwegian character actor and a beautiful Israeli dancer, and Craig, an English kid like himself, and for a time, they formed an unlikely but inseparable trio:

"Hi kiddy," was how she'd commonly greet him, and David would respond in kind.

While not a typical Lycee father as a man who favoured patched canvas trousers, David's father Pat was

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determined Dany and he enjoy the best and richest education imaginable, and to this end, he worked, toiled incessantly in the tough London session world.

And so that they be distinguished from the common run of British boys with their short back and sides, they were dressed in lederhosen with their heads shorn like convicts. These boys would be different. And David certainly set himself apart from the outset not least though his physical appearance, whose remarkable thinness was enhanced by long-lashed blue eyes of an almost exaggerated largeness.

He was also the kind of child who'd remove a periodical from a neighbour's letter-box on Esmond Road, and then mutilate it before re-posting it...donate a loaf of ancient green bread to another by posting it over the wall...and destroy still another's brand new balsa wood fence while trying to retrieve a stray ball, going through one rung after the other with a sickly dull thud...thud...thud...much to the hilarity of a close pal. But the neighbour couldn't see the funny side.

The era's famous social revolution kicked in in about 1963, and yet for all that, seminal Pop groups such as the Searchers and the Dave Clark Five - even the Beatles themselves - were quaint and wholesome figures in a still innocent England. They fitted in well in a nation of Norman Wisdom pictures and the well-spoken presenters of the BBC Home or Light Service, of coppers, tanners and ten bob notes, sweet shops and tuppenny chews.

It was in '63 that Beatlemania invaded David's world, and he first announced his own status as a maniac at the Lycee in that landmark year; but within a short time, a single new group had started threatening the Beatles' position as David's favourite in the world. They were the Rolling Stones; although an initial reaction to what he saw as a rough and sullen performance of Buddy Holly's *Not Fade Away* on TV, was one of bitter disappointment as he would later recall.

But before long, it had become evident he'd fallen hard for the band with the outlaw image. For during a musical discussion that took place in about 1965 with some of the new breed of English roses, who, if they had favoured such totemic Swinging Sixties fashions as mini-skirts or kinky boots, Marianne Faithfull tresses or spartan Twiggy crops, would have been typical, he proudly announced his fealty.

One of the girls was a Fab Four loyalist and announced this fact with a sweet smile as he'd come to recall. While another preferred a certain earthy Newcastle combo and acted cooler than the rest, as if these Geordie Bluesmen were somehow superior to mere Pop acts like the Beatles. While David felt compelled to ask her an unflattering question about her favourite band, which provoked a flustered response from the Pop fan.

During this golden era, David divided his time between the Lycee and his West London stomping ground, and from a very young age, took Judo classes in South Kensington. And it was there that one of his teachers, a former British international who'd fought in the first ever World Judo championships in Japan, was quoted as having said:

"I always know its Saturday when I hear Christiansen's voice."

Later, he took classes in a Martial Arts club in the somewhat rougher London suburb of Hammersmith. But if he thought he was going to raise Cain there he had another thing coming, given that its owner was a one-time captain of the British international team who'd served as an air gunner with No 83 Squadron RAF during World War II. He later held Judo classes in Stalag 383.

David resumed instruction there in the early '70s, this time mainly in Karate with a soft-spoken black belt from the north of England, until he got it into his head that he no longer wished to have anything to do with anything martial, precious blooming aesthete that he was.

For all that though, he knew real happiness on those Wednesday evenings he attended his cherished Wolf Cub pack.

Memories such as the solemnity of his enrolment, and being helped up a tree by an older cub to secure his Athletics badge remained with him for many years afterwards. As did the times he won his first star, and his swimming badge, with its peculiar frog symbol, as well as the pomp and the seriousness of a mass meeting he attended, with its different coloured scarves, sweaters and hair.

And then there was the Saturday afternoon when, following a soccer match between rival cub teams during which David dirtied his boots by standing around in the mud, and his elbow by tripping over a loose bootlace, an older cub offered to take him home. So they made their way to the bus stop through underground

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passageways teeming with rowdy kids, both white and West Indian, all shod in black plimsolls with elastic side strips...or so it seemed.

"Shuddup!" shouted David's new protector, and they did.

"Where exactly are you taking me?" David queried anxiously.

"The bus stop at Chiswick 'Oigh Stree' is the best plice, oi reck'n. You be awroigh' theah, me lil' mite."

David became convinced he'd never see his home again, and so started to loudly wail, his cherubic little face contorted into a hideous mask of anguish; and as they mounted the bus, faces both white and black suddenly turned towards him in concern, and what a strange sight he must have made, this tyke in distress, surrounded by a bevy of older wolf cubs.

After a few moments, David's new found friend, his brow furrowed with concern, as if he'd done his frail young charge some unspeakable wrong, assured him:

"Oim gonna drop y'orf where yer dad pu'y'on."

Then, David saw a street he recognised, and promptly left his seat, grinning uncontrollably:

"This'll do," he announced.

"Wai', Dave!" his friend cried out, "are you shoa vis is awroigh'?"

"Yup!" David replied him, as he stepped off the bus, which then moved on down the street and out of his life forever.

There was a point in the mid 1960s when David was dubbed *Le General* by his form teacher, by which time he'd be found barking orders in the playground to a tight circle of friends. While in the classroom, he'd sit at the back, leaning against the wall with his cronies, while pretending to smoke a fat cigar like a Chicago tough guy.

Certainly he was not above organising elaborate playground deceptions; and one of these involved his pretending to banish one of his best friends, Bobby, from whatever activity they had going on at the time. Bobby played along by putting on a superb display of water works, which had the desired effect of arousing the tender mercies of some of the girls. They duly rounded on David for his hard-heartedness, but he refused to budge, and of course it was all a big joke, and Bobby and he had never been closer.

If he was *Le General* at school, back home he apparently saw himself as some kind of spokesman for those kids whose houses backed onto the dirty alley that ran parallel to his side of the Esmond Road. For one day, he crossed the road to announce a feud with the kids of the clean alley...so-called because it was concreted over rather than being just a dirt track.

Soon after the feud had thawed, Dany and he went over to pal around with some of the clean alley kids, but there must have still been some bad blood because before long, a scrap was under way and he was getting the worst of it.

"Hit him, David," his brother urged above the chilling din of the clean alley loyalists baying for his hot young blood to flow, but the best he could manage was to briefly get his antagonist into a headlock. Finally he agreed to leave, and as he cycled off, one of the clean alley kids kicked his bike, so that it squeaked all the way home in unison with great heaving sobs.

But if David's good mate Paulie had been with him on that afternoon in the clean alley, its unlikely he would have had to suffer as he did. He lived virtually opposite the Cristiansen family in Bedford Park, but was from another dimension altogether, a skinny cockney kid with muscles like pure steel who seemed to have been born to wage war on the bomb sites of post-war London. And when he'd made his first personal appearance in the dirty alley on someone else's rusty bike, screaming along in a cloud of dust it rendered all its denizens speechless and motionless.

"Davy!" He'd always cry when he wanted his treasured friend's attention, while their wicked cahoots included howling at the top of their lungs into random blocks of flats, and then running away, as their echoed screams blended with incoherent threats of:

"I'll call the Police, I'll..."

Yet, David's mum made a point of liking him; and he was always welcome to come to tea with the Cristiansen family at five twenty five; even though one of her closest friends, Helena Jacobs, expressed concern over David's association with Paulie, as if he might end up going to the bad. And incredibly, she was not alone in thinking this. For far from being some latter day Jack Dawkins, is it not fair to say David was just a lovable

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little imp causing mayhem in a leafy London suburb; and as one of those premature romantics who never go through a phase of detesting the fair sex, blessed with a naturally tender heart?

And if ever proof was needed that puppy love can be as agonisingly painful as its adult counterpart, it came in the shape of his adoration, as a fantastically skinny nine year old, of a young blonde girl of about his age with a strong London accent whom he met through no fault of his own in the midst of that most mythologized of decades of recent times.

It was the year of '65; and he knew this to be an absolute fact thanks to certain songs which, even when played in the early 2010s, took him violently back to the time of his love for little June Cassidy.

And each and every one of these tunes, such as the Fab Four's *We Can Work it Out* and Pet Clark's ever so poignant *My Love* stemmed from that most totemic of years when Pop plausibly started mutating piecemeal into Rock; and London was in mid swing with Carnaby Street as its trendy epicentre.

She announced herself to him with a radiant smile one afternoon while they were both attending classes at their local swimming pool soon after asking him whether his name was David. After he'd confirmed to her that indeed it was, she confessed her reason for having so unexpectedly entered his world:

"My mum knows your mum," she chirpily informed him, before explaining that her mother Maryanne had become friendly with David's own mother through their mutual attendance of a sewing class in what would have been a local education centre. She then turned to her friend and, still smiling, more or less reiterated what she'd told David:

"My mum knows his mum."

But if she was overwhelmingly friendly during that initial meeting, she was never so pleasant again, but the more David was ignored, the more he adored. And on one occasion, he may have tried to attract her attention by swimming ever so close to where she was sitting on the edge of the pool with a friend, only to get caught up in the splashing of her feet; but he could have sworn she smiled to her friend at this point, and he clung to the hope that this indicated some kind of affection for him.

But such hope was forlorn, for she never spoke to him again, and he was driven to distraction by her indifference, even to the point of looking up her mother's name in the telephone directory. And oh with what joy he saw it clearly written there, Maryanne Cassidy, and it restored some kind of control to him, so that the intensity of his love was somehow mitigated thereby.

In fact, it consoled him to realise that should he so desire, he could call her, and speak to her, but what would he say? After all, they weren't friends; in fact, she didn't even seem to like him, so he let it go, and in time, his love receded.

Yet he carried its memory far into adulthood, despite the fact that were she still alive, she might have grandchildren of the same age she'd been when she so enchantingly introduced herself to David in that totemic year of '65:

"My mum knows your mum!"

He left the Lycee in the summer of 1968...before spending some months at a certain Central London crammer...so as to become sufficiently up to scratch academically to pass what is known as the Common Entrance Examination.

Taking the CE is a necessity for all British boys and girls seeking entrance into private fee-paying schools, including those known as public schools, which are the traditional secondary places of learning for the British governing and professional classes.

And the vast majority of those who go on to public schools begin their academic careers in preparatory or prep schools, and so for the most part leave home at around eight years old.

The school his father had selected for him was the Nautical College, Welbourne, and somehow, he managed to pass the CE, so that at still only twelve years old he became Cadet David Christiansen 173, the youngest kid in the college, and an official serving officer in Britain's Royal Naval Reserve.

Founded at the height of the British Empire, Welbourne still possessed her original title in '68, while her headmaster, a serving officer in the Royal Navy for some quarter of a century, wore his uniform at all times. However, in '69, she was given the name Welbourne College, while the boys retained their officer status, and naval discipline continued to be enforced, with Welbourne serving both as a military college and traditional

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English boarding school.

The Welbourne David knew had strong links to the Church of England, and so was marked by regular if not daily classes in what was known as Divinity, morning parade ground prayers, evening prayers, and compulsory chapel on Sunday morning.

Later in life, he felt indebted to her for the values she'd instilled in him if only unconsciously, even though, by the time he joined Welbourne, they were under siege as never before by the so-called Counterculture. While failing to fully understand the implications of the cultural revolution of the late 1960s, David was to passionately celebrate its consequences, and take to his heart many of its icons, both artistic and political. Yet, from the outset, he desperately wanted to distinguish himself at Welbourne...and especially at sports, starting with the great ruffianly game for gentlemen of Rugby Football...and oh with what longing he gazed at the sight of colours on the blue blazers or striped blazers of those who'd earned them on the playing fields of Welbourne.

Traditionally awarded in public schools and universities for sporting excellence, colours weren't everything David desired; but for a few years they came pretty close.

But he'd not been born into a typical British family, and so attended a prep school, as has ever been the case for the vast majority of those destined to pass into the public school system.

Although, it would be false to assert that Welbourne was exclusively composed of the sons of the privileged, because she wasn't. And neither was she a narrowly Anglo-Saxon institution, because during David's time, he knew American, West Indian, Middle Eastern and South African cadets as well as British ones, and several of these were close friends of his.

What's more, she was supplemented in the autumn of '68 by cadets from a recently dismantled training ship, founded in 1885 by a wealthy businessman and keen yachtsman for the rescue of London slum boys who would then be trained for service in the Royal and Merchant Navies.

Most fitted in well, as indeed did David, but he was never going to be one of Welbourne's wonder boys, despite his having been kept back an extra year in the third form, which should have put him at an academic advantage; but didn't. And he may have done so partly in response to the meningitis he succumbed to in Spain during his first summer vacation. And which necessitated his being hospitalised for a time in Zaragoza, where he became the white-haired boy of several of the medical students, who hailed from such diverse regions of the Spanish-speaking world as Peru and Puerto Rico.

Yet, there were those teachers and pupils who insisted that while criminally idle, he was also intelligent...a bit of a fraud then, or what the French call a *fumiste*; but for all that, his behaviour did sometimes verge on the medically alarming.

On one occasion, for instance, he went for an eye test in the village, only to return to college without having taken it, before announcing that he'd forgotten why he'd gone into town in the first place. As for his hygiene, at one point it was so minimal that the bottoms of his feet were literally as black as soot, as if someone had painted them:

"Talk about 'Paint it Black', Christiansen!"

"When did you last wash your feet?"

But he never stopped longing to be recognised as being good at something, even going so far at one point as to become a member the college boxing team. As such, he suffered punch-drunkenness at Eton at the hands - or rather fists - of an elegant young adonis with what he later recalled as a classic Eton Flop. He later commented on an especially cruel blow he'd inflicted on David with a certain degree of remorse...and how deceptively graceful he was, this flower of Eton...king of all public schools.

However, around '69, some time after having seen a TV programme about young revolutionaries who idolised Che Guevara, David became a Che acolyte himself, and one of the greatest accolades he ever received while at college came in consequence of a short story he wrote about a young man who becomes involved with Che in his revolutionary activities in South America. And it was during this era that he came to fancy himself as a full-blown Communist, covering various items with the hammer and sickle, including at various times, a school notebook, and possibly even his own hand. And in consequence of having fallen hard for the Hard Left, an older, far larger boy was provoked into setting about him in a spirit of mock-outrage...but his heart wasn't in it.

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In fact, his time at Welbourne coincided with the Counterculture being at its point of maximum intensity, which is to say between the infamous year of rioting and street fighting of 1968, and that, four years later, when the sixties really and truly came to a final close and which was defined in Britain at least by the artifice and decadence of Glam Rock.

And one sweet afternoon, David found himself longing to join the Hippie throngs he saw flocking in all their ragged multicoloured glory to what was almost certainly the famous Reading Rock Festival from the window of a college coach. For rebellion was everywhere in a desperately imperilled West, and in later years David would hazily recall...the dreams of Hippie freedom lying beyond the confines of college...the intensely close friendships forged by bands of cadets in secret wooded places within the college...the adoration of Rock music and its icons with their defiantly androgynous clothes and floating, flouting hair.

Yet, by the early 2010s, David would insist that all that was best about him he owed to his faith first and foremost of course, but also to a significant extent to his education. Within this sphere, he'd place the four years he spent at Welbourne, whose authorities extended him a fair and decent report following his premature departure in the summer of 1972. As well as a good send-off in the college magazine, mentioning his time in the Boxing and Swimming teams, and his tenure as 2nd Drum in the college band. And he'd wish his old friend well, having come to love her in her sanctuary deep in the Arcadian heart of the English countryside. But some forty years theretofore, he moved back into his parents' home in West Molesey, a small largely working class suburb close to the Surrey-London border to where they'd relocated from Bedford Park at the start of the decade.

Their own street was quite gentrified, and their two closest neighbours, businessmen with roots in inner West London...Jack at number 12 being the son of a former boy soldier during the Great War; while Johnny at number 16 was the product of what he proudly called "abject poverty" in Shepherd's Bush.

He was still a hippie at heart; and yet 1972 could be said to be the year in which the androgynous seventies really began, as the excitement surrounding the Alternative Society and its happenings and be-ins and love-ins and free festivals and so on started to fade into recent history.

The golden age of the long-haired boot boy had lately come to pass, and every street seemed to David to be pregnant with menace in the Glam Rock nation he'd returned to, while so many of the songs were like football chants set to a stomping Glam Rock beat. It was as if the spirit of Weimar Berlin with its unholy mix of violence and decadence had been resurrected in stuffy old England.

Such a terrible time to be young; but for better or worse, it would be David's era, and he'd come to love it, lap it up.

And a change came over him in the summer of '72, which may have been caused to some degree by the prevailing zeitgeist, but which can also be traced back to a single defining incident.

This took place in a bar named Castilla in the little Spanish former fishing town of Santiago de la Ribera on the Mar Menor - a large saltwater lagoon separated from the Mediterranean by a thin strip of land known as La Manga - where he'd been vacationing with his family since about 1968.

It involved a young man he'd idolised for several years, and who incarnated a kind of old-school Iberian macho cool. He was quite fair of complexion, as opposed to swarthy, as might be expected, and stocky, with muscular arms. And if he'd worn a medallion and identity bracelet, he'd have been typical of his kind.

By that summer, he was sporting collar length hair, which was still quite rare among Spanish men, as well as large-collared shirts, which he elected not to tuck into his trousers. The style of these meant that his hair would occasionally get caught between neck and collar, which necessitated his flicking it out with a sweep of his hand, and coquettishly tossing his head. This he did one evening in full view of Castilla's clientele. While these gestures seemed perfectly in keeping with his swaggering machismo in David's besotted eyes, there was another of Castilla's patrons who was less impressed. But rather than put David off, he came to covet the notoriety that had suddenly been afforded the young Spaniard.

Yet while this incident may have marked the beginning of the end of his identification with undiluted masculinity, his interest in the opposite sex was no less forceful than that of any other male in late adolescence. And if an attractive female happened to speak to him in a public place, he'd be in acute danger of falling in love on the spot. In fact, he didn't even have to be spoken to:

It was on SS Patricia while travelling back from vacationing in Spain late in the summer of '72 that he fell in

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love by sight with a fellow passenger, a young Spanish girl he saw several times about the ship but was too frightened to approach. So he became obsessed by her, even to the point of roaming the streets of London for several days in succession in the vain hope of somehow bumping into her.

Two songs especially served as the soundtrack to this irrational spell of romantic insanity; and these were *Betcha by Golly Wow* by the Stylistics, and *Last Night I Didn't Get To Sleep At All* by the 5th Dimension. And like all the loves he'd ever lost, they'd remain with him for the rest of his inchoate life.

As would the vision of a seventeen year old, sauntering late one afternoon in the receding sun, his quest in tatters, yet, who is suddenly drawn to a girlish voice floating downwards from an apartment of a lofty dwelling in the heart of the ancient city of his birth, causing him to ponder, if only fleetingly..."could that be she?"

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Photo (right) by Peter Kingsford



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