

Seven Chapters from a Sad Sack Loser's Life - Chapter Four

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Chapter Four of a short autobiographical novel.



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David Christiansen's final trip with the Thames Division of the Royal Naval Reserve came towards the end of the summer of 1977.

And while his best oppo Lofty O'Shea wasn't onboard, he had other mates to raise Cain with, such as Damon Cates, a tall redhead of about 26 who looked a little like Edward Fox in "A Day of the Jackal".

Like David, he loved music and fashion and the Soul Boy and Punk scenes, and they hit it off from their very first meeting back at HMS Ministry.

He later confided in David about his early life which had been marked by one family tragedy after the other; and his reserve masked a deep and complex sensibility. But he was not a man to flaunt it; nor an ability to handle himself in any situation. Such as the time an intoxicated sailor took a sudden, violent dislike to David in a south coast bar, and was clearly keen to do some serious damage to his pretty cherub's face. At which point Damon placed himself between David and his aggressor, before telling him to back off in no uncertain terms.

Doubtless, though, there were those who wondered how such a natural-born gentleman ended up on the lower deck, such as the guys from another division altogether, based far away from the fleshpots of London where a simpler, harder way of life prevailed, who sailed with them that summer to the port of Ostend in Belgium.

And when some of them were squaring up with some locals who had somehow offended them, Damon and David made it clear they had no intention of joining in.

Which prompted one of their number, a little waiflike sailor of about 16 or 17, to turn to them and ask, "What's wrong with youse guys?" with a look of utter bewilderment on his beardless face. But Damon simply didn't see the point of fighting for the sake of it. While a secret inner fortitude would eventually see him being commissioned as an officer in the Royal Navy, which had been his destiny all along; but not David's.

His time with the Thames Division, RNR, came to an end in late 1977 with a surprisingly positive character report. And if military life had never been for him, it became an important part of his identity nonetheless.

Even later in the summer, he joined the former Merchant Navy School in Greenhithe, Kent, as a trainee Radio Officer.

He formed several close friendships there; but closest of all was with Jayant, from Gravesend, a tough Thameside town in North West Kent with a large Indian community. And for a time, he and David were inseparable.

And it was through Jay that David started going to discos at Gravesend's Woodville Hall; and pretty well every week for a while, a gang from the college would take the train to Gravesend, to be treated like visiting royalty by the - mainly white and Asian - kids, whose outfits stood out in such striking contrast to the industrial bleakness of their surroundings.

For English suburban life in those days didn't include mobile phones or DVD players, personal computers or the world wide web, and so was a fertile breeding ground for way out youth cults such as the Punks and Soul Boys.

There were girls in chandelier earrings, wearing evening dresses and stiletto heels, which were in stark contrast to the hair colours they favoured, such as jet black or bleach blonde, with flashes of red, purple or green. Some wore bow ties, while others hanged their school colours around their necks.

The boys favoured short hair, thin ties, mohair sweaters, baggy, well-pressed peg-top trousers of red or blue, and winkle picker shoes. And when they took to the floor to pirouette and pose, they could forget the ordinary cares of their working class lives and become superstars for a brief few hours.

David enjoyed his time at Merchant Navy School and made several good friends in addition to Jay, but ultimately had to realise it wasn't for him.

And soon after returning to London, he auditioned for a place on the three year drama course at the Silverhill School of Music and Drama in the City of London, which was really where he'd wanted to go in the first

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place.

And Silverhill took him on, which was a bit of a surprise to him to say the least, seeing as he'd already failed two earlier auditions for the prestigious Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts.

Yet, it failed to prevent him sinking further into the nihilistic Punk lifestyle. And having been blown away by the hairstyle of one of a small gang of Punks he knew by sight from nights out in Dartford, he decided to imitate it a few weeks later:

It was spiked in classic Punk style, with a kind of a halo of bright blond taking in the front of the head, both sides, and a strip at the nape of the neck. And if you chose to flaunt such a style in those days, you lived in constant fear of attack or abuse. For Punk's culture of insolence and outrage was extreme even by the standards of previous British youth cults; such as the Teds, the Rockers, the Mods, the Greasers, the Skins, the Suedeheads and the Smoothies.

And at the risk of being fanciful, it could be said that to some extent, Britain was a nation still under the sway of the moral values of the pre-war years, so that a cultural war was being fought for the soul of the nation. While the Punks were the avant-garde of a new Britain in a way that would be impossible today. And this may go some way towards explaining the incredible hostility Punks attracted from many ordinary members of the British public.

But David was determined to be part of the revolution. And to this end, he saw local Punk band Sham 69 in a hall above the Surveyor, a pub in the heart of the Molesey Industrial Estate some 12 miles from the centre of London.

This was shortly before they shot to fame after singer Jimmy Pursey was arrested on the roof of the Vortex Punk club in central London on the 23rd of September 1977.

Sham's very name had been derived from the legend Walton and Hersham '69, scrawled on a wall in Molesey's sister town of Hersham, referring to the year she topped the premier division of the long defunct Athenian amateur football league.

David already knew Pursey by sight, having seen him a year or so earlier miming to Chris Spedding's "Motorbiking" at the famous Walton Hop, supposedly Britain's first ever discotheque, which held mime competitions for Hop regulars at the height of its popularity.

Pursey was such a regular, and the same could be said to a degree of David and his brother Dany. And one evening, David and Dany and a friend considered taking part in the competition themselves; having selected "I Can't Give You Anything" by the Stylistics to mime to; but at the last minute, they changed their minds, as they hadn't even taken the trouble to rehearse.

While unlike the ditherer David, Pursey made it clear to all who witnessed his performances at the Hop he'd been born to be a star.

And sure enough, for a brief period, he was one of Britain's leading Punk heroes. While his followers, the Sham Army, consisting of skinheads on both the left and the right of the political spectrum, became almost as famous as him. But after a riot at the Middlesex Polytechnic in North London, the first frenetic phase of Sham's performing career came to a close. Although they continued having hits until in 1980, when they disbanded until the inevitable reformation.

But 1977 was Punk's year zero in the UK, and a far darker one than those immediately preceding it for that very reason.

Around about this time, David was often to be found at the Surveyor on a Sunday night with Dany, and mutual friends.

On one occasion, the usual Disco or Pop gave way to a violent Punk Rock anthem which saw the tiny dance space being invaded by deranged pogo-dancers as if they'd been summoned by some malignant deity. On another, a Ted revivalist who favoured flashy fifties-style clothing, tried to start some trouble with him in the toilet, at which point Vinnie, another Ted who'd befriended him about a year previously when he looked like an extra from a '50s High School flick stepped in with the magical words: "He's a mate!"

Vinnie's intervention may have saved him from a hiding that night, because Teds had a loathing of Punks informed by their essential conservatism. To them, Punks probably seemed to have no respect for anything.

The Teds, or Edwardians as they were initially styled, were widely perceived as folk devils when they'd first

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emerged in the UK in about 1952, with a look purloined from a small minority of upper class Guards officers who'd adapted the Edwardian fashion in the late 1940s in defiance of post-war austerity.

However, in comparison to the later Punks, they were a model of respectability, and that was especially true of the '70s, when a brief revival resulted in battles between Teds and Punks taking place on West London's Kings Road all throughout '77.

They persisted into the '80s, only to all but vanish from the face of the globe with the passing of that last great decade of youthful eccentricity.

It may have been that very night that Vinnie the Ted almost imploringly asked him whether he into "this Punk lark", and David assured him he wasn't. He may even have added he still loved the fifties, which was true to a degree, but that wasn't the point. For the fact is he lied to him to look good in his eyes, which was a pretty low thing to do to a friend.

But given the times, young men like David were forced to learn certain survival tactics, such as the ability to flee at the first whiff of trouble.

Yet, by the time of the internet revolution, Punk had become just another exhibit of the Rock and Roll museum, itself just another branch of the vast entertainment industry. And the culture wars of the late '70s had long since been quieted, while rebellion had become more or less fully co-opted by the mainstream.

To give Punk its due, that this situation had come about in the first place was at least partly as a result of its utter ferocity. Which is to say of its first serious assault, which targeted a Britain still desperately clinging to the final vestiges of its Judeo-Christian moral fabric. And while it was rejected by the vast majority of British people - indeed the West as a whole - its influence went on to be little short of cataclysmic.

Yet, declared dead by about '79, it returned to the underground, where it set about fertilising one rebel movement after the other throughout the '80s. And so, Post-Punk, No Wave, Anarcho-Punk, Industrial and Goth all benefited from its ethos, until finally in the early '90s, the Alternative Rock revolution brought it fully back into the mainstream.

Spearheaded by acts as diverse as Alice in Chains, the Red Hot Chilli Peppers, the Smashing Pumpkins and above all, Nirvana, this movement could be said to have been Rock's final desperate outburst of sedition. And after its passing, Rock finally took its place alongside Classical, Jazz, Folk and World as just another music genre, where once it had been little short of a religion of youth.

While the sheer intensity of Nirvana's later music continues to startle, it's been wholly shorn of its iconoclastic power; and it's available for anyone of any age to access via the simple click of a computer mouse. And the same could be said of the Sex Pistols, whose one-time bassist, the tragic Sid Vicious, has emerged as Punk's leading icon.

Is this development in some respects a fulfilment of Nietzsche's philosophy of the transvaluation of all values?

There are those cultural commentators who would insist that this is indeed the case, and that far from being a positive move towards universal tolerance, it's a tragedy beyond compare, although rather than Nietzsche, it's the Book of Isaiah they might feel moved to quote from:

"Woe to those who call evil good and good evil."

But there was a time that such a revaluation met with enormous resistance, and the British public's outraged reaction to Punk in '77 was a perfect example of this. As for the Teds, goodness knows they were no angels. But to them there was something uniquely rotten at the heart of Punk, while the Rock and Roll they loved possessed all the purity of a classic art form.

It was at the tail end of this Punk Rock Year Zero that David took Jay to a party in London's swanky West End. It was the last in a long series of celebrations he'd gone to throughout '77 mainly as a result of friends from Welbourne reaching the landmark age of 21. It was also one of the last times he ever saw Jay.

Before arriving, Jay and he met up as arranged with future oil magnate Chris, and as soon as the introductions were over, Jay saw fit to offer a solo display of his lethal street fighting skills:

"I'm suitably impressed," said Chris...and he was, although he was no wimp himself; but Jay was something else, and few would have benefited from crossing him, but they got on like a house on fire that insane night which at one point saw David pouring a full glass of beer over his head. What the beautiful dancer he'd spent most of the evening with thought of a nice guy like David doing a thing like that she didn't say.

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In those days, David knew so many people who'd have done anything for him given half the chance, and yet his one true passion appeared to be the creation of endless drunken scenes, and a party wasn't a party for him unless he'd caused one, after which he simply moved on.

And indeed in the spring of '78, he was on the move again...this time to the city of Fuengirola on Spain's Costa del Sol; and with the intention of helping set up a sailing school with Adam, a young Englishman whom his father had recently befriended in London. But for some reason, the project came to nothing.

However, David stayed on, living first in an apartment Adam had kindly set him up in, then in a little hotel in town; and finally, rent-free with an American friend, Scarlett, one of a handful of US ex-pats resident in Fuengirola in the late 1970s alongside young people from Australia, Britain, Ireland, Germany, South America and other parts of the world.

It was a hedonistic scene, and David wasted little time in becoming part of it. He spent his nights at the Tam Tam night club, where he set about establishing himself as Fuengirola's very own Tony Manero, in Punk Rock attire.

It was his first year as a full-time Punk, in point of fact, and among the clothes he favoured were a black cap-sleeved wet-look tee-shirt, drainpipe jeans of black or green, worn with black studded belt, festooned with silver chain filched from a Spanish restroom, and kept in place by multiple safety pins, fluorescent pink teddy boy socks, and white shoes with black laces like the ones he'd seen on the cover of an album by London Punk band 999. At one stage, he even wore a safety pin - disinfected by being dipped into a drink - in his left earlobe, but removed this once his lug had started to pulsate.

After a few weeks, he became lead singer for the Tam Tam house band, and would typically wear so much make-up onstage that one occasion, the microphone became smeared in lipstick; but the patrons liked him, and he'd pose and pout and throw his spare frame about for their benefit.

He was always short of money, but could order anything he wanted from the Tam Tam bar, and when he was flat broke, his close friend Laura bought him toasted cheese sandwiches to keep him going.

Laura and he were rarely on the beach, but would sometimes hang out at the famous Campo de Tenis; although David spent a lot of time rehearsing with the band. And in the evening, he was often to be found at Laura's parents' house, putting on the slap, and perhaps even painting his nails a gaudy shade of red, before heading along to the Tam Tam to do his gig.

One night her dad, a charismatic former tennis pro, was disturbed by their antics, and upon spying the pair of them, with David possibly wearing more make-up than his own daughter, incredulously asked:

"What is this ****, Laura?"

However, there were those nights they preferred to get away from it all, and for David, it was a special joy to be alone with Laura, while brimful with anticipation, in the demi-light of the Disco, with the evening still in its infancy. And on one incredible occasion as they were making their way through Fuengirola by dark, possibly to or from yet another club, the legend that was racing champion James Hunt called out Laura's name before emerging from the shadows. They exchanged a few words; and then it seemed he vanished just as suddenly as he'd arrived.

Once David Christiansen had started at college, he made it pretty clear than the nice clean-cut young man who'd auditioned the previous year had been a curve ball; as he was making no further attempts to conceal his Punk image.

This was compounded by a bizarre hyperactivity that occasionally verged on the downright outrageous, not to say, disruptive. It was as if he was determined to convince the world that he was an artist with a capital "A", and therefore entitled to incessantly attract attention to himself with aberrant behaviour and clothing.

And among the items he favoured were slim jim ties, drainpipe jeans, florescent Fifties-style socks, and white leather brothel creepers, but the piece de resistance was a pair of tight plastic snakeskin trousers which he actually only wore the once.

As if all this weren't enough to cause eyebrows to raise among the authorities, he insisted on wearing make-up even in classes, although to be fair it was subtly applied, except for gigs and parties, when he really piled on the slap...foundation, eye shadow, blusher, lip rouge, the works. Talk about lipstick, powder and paint.

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On one occasion, in the course of a class supervised by Den Denaghy, a brilliant bearded professional mime artist who'd been a regular on children's TV for a time, the compact he usually carried about with him for sporadic touch-ups fell out of an inner pocket of his jacket during an exercise, before hitting the floor with an embarrassing clatter. All eyes went to the compact, and there was a mortifying silence, which the manic Den mercifully broke by retrieving the offending article from the floor, and furiously daubing peoples' startled faces with glittery blusher.

Still, his days of wearing slap were numbered. It was as early as '79, in fact, that he developed some kind of allergic reaction to a certain brown eye shadow, which caused his eyes to become so swollen and sore as to verge on the porcine...yet, he'd only worn it a little time before, and suffered no ill-effects.

This was during that first gig, held in the basement of the nearby Lauderdale Tower a few days after his 23rd birthday as part of one of the Folk Nights held occasionally at Silverhill in those days. And he was singing for a band he'd named Narcissus, one of several he was involved in at Silverhill.

And through one of them, The Rockets, he was talent-scouted as lead singer for a guitarist of genius called Don Taylor, who was hoping to form a band himself, and clearly thought David would cut it as a front man. But for some reason, it never came to be.

Don went on to play and write for one of the world's leading Rock superstars, but at one point he briefly joined a Silverhill-based Jazz-Funk outfit with another then friend of David's. That band would go on to become one of the most successful Pop acts of the eighties, chalking up one hit after the other in a Britain in which Jazzy Dance music was favoured by flash boys in white socks and tasselled loafers. David was even invited to an early rehearsal, at a time when they might have done with a front man like himself...but of course, he didn't go.

Through Narcissus, he found only disgrace and humiliation, and not just the once. Narcissus played a grand total of two gigs, both of them fiascos.

The first time they played together was just prior to the forming of the Rockets, and although it had been a disaster due to his drunken upstaging of the other band members, piano player Perry was sufficiently impressed by him to ask him to front the Rockets.

And it was through the Rockets that he was offered the job of front man for Don's mooted musical project. However, rather than wait for the call from him, David went on ahead and re-formed Narcissus with original members Simon on guitar and John on percussion.

David piled on the make-up, and Simon and John followed suit, but being relatively untainted by personal vanity, the results were unsettling. Sweet-natured Simon painted his Botticellian features like an ancient pagan warrior, while gentle giant John saw fit to smother his with military-style camouflage. Not surprisingly, their set was accompanied by a riot of heckling which, although far from malicious, ultimately provoked David to irritation, and he ended up tossing his plectrum into the audience with a sarcastic:

"Here's to all my loving fans!"

This petulant outburst may have caused no end of harm to his reputation, because the chutzpah of the natural leader who demands and gets attention and respect through the sheer force of his personality was never among his gifts. Rather he was blessed with the seductive charm of the social climber for whom alpha status comes through the subtle exercise of exquisite manners. In this respect, he was a little like Julien Sorel, anti-hero of Stendhal's "The Scarlet and the Black" who despite humble origins, succeeds in ascending to the very top of the social ladder, only to allow a single act of madness to destroy all his good work.

David's final band was the '50s revivalist act Z Cars, which even won a small fan base for itself, its members being Carl Cool, the front man and chief songwriter who had a tattoo painted onto his shoulder, Robert Fitzroy-Square, the geek with the Buddy Holly horn rims, Dave Dean, the hard man of the band, and Little Ricky Ticky, the baby at only 18.

Things went wrong when one of the key members quit, to be replaced with a close friend, the deeply gifted Rhys Gruffydd, who was a far better musician than any of them. And thence to deviate from their usual three-chord doo-wop or Rock with more complex songs, starting with a tightly arranged version of Arthur Crudup's "That's All Right Mama", complete with harmony backing vocals. But they weren't up to the task, and disillusion swiftly set in; although by this time, David had left Silverhill anyway, and things just weren't the same.

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There had been emotional scenes at his farewell party held in the depths of the Barbican Estate's Lauderdale Tower, and some cried openly at the thought of his leaving.

During the course of the night, a very dear friend of his, Tamsin, told him to contact Harry Creasey, a London-based impresario and agent well-known for offering young actors their very first positions within the entertainment industry.

David was to take her advice, and sauntering cigarette in hand into Harry's Denmark Street office a few weeks later, he was confronted by a dark slender man of about forty whose outrageously flamboyant manner was compounded by seismic levels of personal charm, but not before he'd made one of his final ever trips to Spain.

Yet, even though the guys from the band had so wanted him to reclaim his place as front man in Fuengirola, he'd chosen to go to La Ribera with his parents instead, and he felt a deep and overwhelming sense of exhaustion as he stretched out under the Costa Calida sun. It was as if he was already unconsciously aware that his acting career was destined to be a non-event.

Yet, shortly afterwards, he took up his very first official acting job as Christian the Chorus Boy - doubling as Joey the Teddy Bear, complete with furry ursine costume - in a pantomime tour of "Sleeping Beauty", all thanks to the infinite generosity of Harry Creasy, who wanted David to look as good as possible "because he's pretty, all right?" he explained, and no one was going to dispute that.

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