

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

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Chapter Three of a short autobiographical novel.



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The summer of '74 was one of the most blissful lifelong loser David Christiansen ever spent at the beautiful little former fishing village of Santiago de la Ribera; and there were a good few of those. Each afternoon, he'd meet up with friends both male and female on the jetty facing his apartment on the Mar Menor, which was more or less deserted after lunch, where they'd listen to Bowie on cassette, or Donny keening "Puppy Love" on a portable phonograph, and generally enjoy being young and carefree in a decade of endless possibilities.

To some youthful Spanish eyes back in '74-'76, David was an almost impossibly exotic figure from what was then the most radical and daring city in Europe, and he played his image up to the hilt. In truth, though, he was barely less sheltered and innocent than they, and how wonderful it felt for him to bask in their soft Mediterranean loveliness for a few brief seasons.

However, a change 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. So that, by David's last vacation in La Ribera in the summer of '84, it was he who was in awe of the local youth rather than the other way around. For they seemed so cool to him, dancing their strange jerky chicken wing dance to the latest New Pop hits from Britain.

By then, of course, most of his old friends had vanished into their young adult lives, and his time as the undisputed English prince of La Ribera long passed.

He returned to London in late summer '74 with a deep tan and his long hair bleached bright yellow by the sun. Only days afterwards, he found himself on HMS Ministry, moored then as today on the Embankment near Temple station. This involved his passing through Waterloo mainline station, which wasn't tourist-friendly as it is today, with its cafés and baguette bars, but a dingy intimidating place complete with pub and old-style barber.

There, he was approached by an old sailor who kept going on about how good looking he was; but he was no predator, just a sweet lonely old Scotsman who wanted someone to talk to for a few minutes, and David was happy to oblige.

He even went so far as to agree to a meeting with him the same time the following week, but he had no intention of keeping it. Besides, it wasn't long before HMS Thamesia was on its way to Hamburg, second largest city of Germany and its principle port.

Once they'd arrived, one of the CPOs warned David not to wander around Hamburg alone, for fear he might end up being ravaged and dumped in some back alley, or worse.

He duly joined up with a group of about three or four other ratings on his first night ashore, and they headed straight for the Reeperbahn in the bewitchingly vicious St Pauli red light district, which was in such stark contrast to the leafy outer suburbs, where David found himself, possibly a day or so later, through a specially organised coach trip.

A gang of them ended up in a park where David had his picture taken on a bridge by a reporter for the Surrey Comet, before a group of breathless tittering schoolgirls asked him to join them in some photos.

On the way back to the ship, one of the sailors announced he'd been quite a hit with the Hamburg teenyboppers, while another wryly opined:

"It's cos 'e's blond, innit..."

Whatever the truth, their simple unaffected joy of life must have seemed so touching to David, especially in the light of what girls barely older than they were subjecting themselves to a mere few miles away.

Some months later, in what was by then '75, David became a student at Prestlands Technical College which lay, then as now, on the fringes of Weybridge, an affluent outer suburb of south west London.

In semi-pastoral Prestlands, as in his beloved La Ribera, he learned to be a social being after years of near-seclusion, first at Welbourne and then as a home student. So, attention came to be a potent narcotic for

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him in the mid 1970s.

However, despite constant displays of flamboyant self-confidence, those who tried to get to know to know him on an intimate level found themselves confronted with a paradoxically inhibited individual.

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

On another, a trio of roughs who may have gate crashed the Disco only to see in David the worst possible example of the feckless wastrel student strutting and posturing in unmanly white, took him aside at the end of the night, doubtless intent on a touch of the old ultra-violence:

"Oy you, we bin watchin' you, you're a poof, ain'tcha..."

But David stood his ground, insisting that despite what they may have thought about him, he was just as straight as they. Apparently convinced, they then vanished into the departing crowds after muttering a few dark threats.

'75 again, and David's music, swimming and Martial Arts sessions were no more. But the private lessons continued with Mark, a slim young academic with long darkish curly hair who lived alone but for several black cats in long time Rock star haven Richmond-on-Thames. For as well as being a private tutor, he was a successful session musician.

Specialising in the French Symbolist poets, he exerted a strong influence on David in terms of his growing passion for European Modernist art and culture. However, it was the less well known literature of Spain they studied together, from the anonymous 16th Century picaresque novel "Lazarillo de Tormes", and embracing Quevedo, Galdós, Machado, Dario and Lorca.

Mark was also an early encourager of David's writing, a lifelong passion that would degenerate in time into a chronic case of cacoethes scribendi; or the irresistible compulsion to write. As a result of this, he became incapable of finishing a single cohesive piece of writing until well into the eighties when he managed to complete a short story and a novel, both of which he went on to destroy but for a few fragments.

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

After he'd expressed interest in a copy, conspicuously placed in front of him on the desk they shared, of one of Christopher Isherwood's Berlin novels, "Mr Norris Changes Trains", Mark told him 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 David, 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.

So much that has become familiar to the West and beyond in the last half-century, from the deconstructive philosophies that dominate our academia, to the theatre of outrage that is the essence of Rock music, pre-existed in some form in the Berlin of the Golden Twenties, during which she existed as the undisputed world epicentre of the Modern impulse.

Under her auspices, great artistic freedom thrived in the shape of the painters of the New Objectivity movement, such as Beckmann, Dix and Grosz, the staccato cabaret-style music of Kurt Weill, Fritz Lang's dystopian "Metropolis", and the provocative dancing of Cabaret Queen Anita Berber, and her epicene companion, Sebastian Droste. And then there's the notorious sexual liberalism, which, through pictorial depictions of her cabarets and night clubs, has carried a power to shock even as far as the jaded 21st Century. But beneath the glittering carapace, she bore within her the seeds of her own ruin, for despite the genius that flourished alongside the licentiousness, she was operating largely in defiance of the Judeo-Christian moral values that have long formed the basis of Western society. Given that several other European and American cities were hardly less hysterically dissolute than Berlin, it's little wonder that the key Modernist decade of the twenties has been described by some critics as the beginning of the end of Western civilisation.

In its wake came the Great Depression, the unspeakable horrors of the Second World War, and the collapse of the greatest empire the world had ever seen, all of which were succeeded in turn by the dawning of the Rock

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and Roll era, and its quasi-religious exaltation of youth, which some critics see as the very triumph of Western decadence.

Decadence...that loaded word had a very special meaning and power for David Christiansen in the mid 1970s ever since his mother had used it, in fact, in reference to a series of photos of Germany's Weimar era featured in an edition of the Sunday Times magazine:

"Why do people want to be decadent?" She'd asked, as if genuinely concerned for those featured, which of course she was, having been raised in a Salvationist home in the idyllic Vancouver of the 1920s, and therefore imbued for life despite herself with a Christian worldview.

But to David Christiansen, the answer was obvious, because in his Rock and Roll eyes, decadence was so heavy with the mysteries of the most forbidden sins that he could scarcely wait to become its incarnation; and while he would fall far, far short of his goal, he'd almost die trying to attain it.

David made no less than three sea voyages in '75, 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 a three-masted topsail schooner TS Sir Francis Drake of the Society for the Training of Young Seafarers.

Among his shipmates were his 17 year old brother Dany, 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 deck hands.

In overall charge, though, was the suave Ship's Captain, who also happened to be an alumnus of David's own alma mater of Welbourne.

It was an all-male crew, and David was well-liked at first, even if his popularity faded in time, with a few good pals remaining him, such as the small cherubic southerner with long dark hair worn shoulder length like the young Jack Wilde, who stayed loyal to him after they'd tried to impress a couple of girls together during a brief stay in St Malo, France.

He got on fine with a few of the others, but Jack was a true prince who'd helped him out in his time of need: What happened is that David had fallen hard for one of the girls, Solange, and was wandering around in a mournful daze after having failed to pluck up the courage to ask her for her address:

"Oh, I really like Solange," he whined, over and over again, but his misery was genuine. That is, until Jack handed him a piece of paper containing Solange's address. It transpired she'd scrawled it down just before leaving them, and for a time, David was drunk with relief at the news, just walking on air, because there was the danger of his coming down with a serious case of lovesickness had she become lost to him forever, but thanks to Jack, he'd found her again.

There were heavy storms, and on at least one occasion, the crew were ordered out of their hammocks in the middle of the night to help trim the sails, and while David took no part in this, he did climb the rigging once, just before the Sir Francis Drake docked at Amsterdam harbour.

Dozens of boys manned the yard arms, to which they were attached by their safety belts alone. David had been determined to make the climb, even though the experience made his legs shake throughout.

The Dutch capital was marked by the same kind of open sexual licence he'd witnessed only the year before in Hamburg, although it seemed to him 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, warned David not to go strutting about Edinburgh town centre in a flashy boating blazer with his long white socks tucked into the same blue jeans he'd worn for sailing. But having only packed a handful of clothes, David was forced to ignore his advice, and, waltzing some time later into an inner city pub in broad daylight, a grinning hard man with long reddish curly hair asked him:

"Are you frae Oxford, son?"

Perhaps he was aware of the great university's reputation for producing flaming aesthetes like Brideshead's Anthony Blanche, and if so, it may have been touch and go for a while as to whether he was going to inflict some serious damage on David's angelic English face, but in the end he left him be. He may even have

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admired his chutzpah. But there was just something about David, something that repelled physical violence, some mysterious protective force.

Within a few weeks of returning to London by train from Edinburgh, David and Dany were off to sea again, this time as part of the Mariners' Club of Great Britain, bound for the Baltic coast of Denmark by way of Germany's Kiel Canal. And while they were once more supervised by "mates" under the command of a Ship's Captain, the Mariners' utilised modern yachts rather than traditional tall ships.

The Christiansens were quick to recruit a good looking young guy called Cy from Wotton-under-Edge in Gloucestershire as their best pal and confidante for the trip. It turned out they'd actually met him some ten years previously while passing through Calpe, Spain, either on their way to or from their grandmother Mary's home on the Costa Brava.

Soon after setting foot on Danish soil they got talking to a couple of girls who, as might be expected, had natural golden blonde hair, but their efforts at romance were wholly innocuous, despite the reputation Scandinavians had in those days for progressive sexual attitudes.

A less pleasant romantic episode took place towards the end of the trip, which saw David in pursuit of a pretty German girl called Ulrike. He was crazy for her, and she made it pretty clear she liked him too, and yet he'd senselessly sidelined her for the sake of a night of drunken idiocy with his brother and Cy, perhaps expecting her to run after him or something.

Suddenly, overtaken by sickly pangs of remorse, he set out to find her, and at some point during his quest, while walking along some kind of wooden pontoon, he lost his footing and fell fully clothed into the waters of what must have been the Kiel Canal.

He was a pathetic figure the next day, with his fancy dandy clothes all laid out on deck.

"What happened last night?" the captain breezily asked him.

"Well," he hazarded in response, "I was looking for this girl and"

"You live in a dream world, David."

Indeed he did, and self-sabotage was fast becoming one of his specialities.

Also during that summer, David 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.

Up to this point, he'd not had any ambitions beyond becoming a celebrity, or rather major Rock and Roll star.

And to this end, he'd made countless recordings of himself singing and playing his own simple songs on a series of portable cassette tape recorders. And all too often, these sessions culminated in a full-on tantrum, such as the time he hurled a newly purchased machine against his bedroom wall, totalling it instantly.

So he took the train from Hampton Court to London Waterloo; and thence to the south coast of England, to spend three days within the gates of HMS Stirling, a shore-based specialist training centre in Gosport, Hampshire, attending various examinations and interviews intended to assess his potential as a future naval officer.

His father was delighted at this unexpected turn of events, little suspecting that in his desire to join the Senior Service, he was driven not by any selfless instinct to serve, so much as a vision of a privileged existence of refinement and elegance. And if this sounds distinctly Wildean for a mid 1970s youth, then it was perfectly in keeping with what we've learned of David so far.

For as stated earlier, he'd never been anything other than a typical scruffy, sporty, ruffianly male until around about his 17th birthday, when he fell under the spell of Glam Rock.

And about a year after that, he started to move away from the gaudiness of Glam towards a fascination for those artists whose rebellion against middle class respectability manifested itself as dandyism, or the tendency to ostentatiously over-dress. And this they invariably combined with that typical corollary of dandyism, decadence.

They included poets Charles Baudelaire, who affected dandyism in the Paris of the 1840s, Jean Cocteau, whose playground was the Paris of the so-called Belle Époque, and the aforesaid Oscar Wilde, whose delight it was to scandalise the late Victorian bourgeoisie of the London of the 1880s and '90s.

Thence, David arrived at HMS Stirling as an immaculate aesthete. Doubtless complete with foundation style make up and some blusher and eye shadow, where most of the other candidates might have favoured standard issue jumbo collared shirts and great billowing flared trousers.

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His foppish attire was compounded by a face that would have made him a perfect choice for a casting director scouting around for someone to play Dorian Gray in yet another celluloid version of Wilde's only novel. By the same token, he could have played Waugh's Sebastian Flyte with no less facility...or Highsmith's Dickie Greenleaf...or any number of kindred idle male beauties. But the role of a naval officer was clearly way beyond him, and it wouldn't be long before he'd provoked someone of a more serious cast of mind to intense irritation.

The "someone" in question turned out to be a northern lad with a little hint of a moustache who, finding David putting the final touches to his toilette before some assignment or another in front of a handy looking glass, felt moved to remind him:

"Its not a fashion parade, mate"

He wouldn't be joining David at the disco that night, or any other night for that matter; but you couldn't fault his dedication, nor his powers of observation.

Two guys were eventually persuaded to keep him company, but their hearts weren't in it, and they sensibly returned to base for an early night, leaving David alone at the disco, where he befriended a shy young woman with short golden curls by the name of Shirlee, with whom he spoke about the AIB, and his fear of failing.

"Oh, you'll pass," she told him with a reassuring smile.

But if she'd looked a little closer at his wardrobe, with its boating blazers and striped college ties, and shoes fit for the Charleston rather than the Latin Hustle, she might not have spoken so confidently. For, far from bespeaking the status of the perpetual high achiever, they may have constituted a disguise, distinctly overdone, and donned daily by an individual who'd tasted failure too many times for one of such tender years. When David finally returned to Stirling himself, he was shocked to discover that her main entrance had been locked and was now being manned by an armed guard.

As the young man set about trying to make contact with his superiors, he must have wondered what kind of person returns to base in the small hours, dressed to the nines, while in the midst of three days of tests and interviews that were supposedly vital to his future career. But he gave no indication of it.

And in time, his efforts were successful, so that shortly afterwards, a sheepish David Christiansen was forced to pass through an officer's mess in order to reach his room. And after briefly exchanging pleasantries with its airily affable occupants, he retired for the night.

As might be expected, David failed in his noble attempt at passing the AIB, and never did get to wear a naval officer's uniform.

Perhaps he'd have stood a better chance if just for once he'd done the right thing and gone to bed early rather than rave it up at the disco in all his finery, but then again perhaps not. For after all, few if any naval officers have been historically selected on the basis of how good they look in a well-cut uniform.

Like all dandies he could be said to have partaken to some degree of the nature of the infamous Biblical character Absalom, about whom it was said in 2 Samuel 14: 25:

"But in all Israel there was none to be so much praised as Absalom for his beauty: from the sole of his foot even to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him."

And yet, Absalom's flawless beauty was ill-matched by a vain and reckless character which ultimately secured his ruin. As to David, despite exceptional artistic gifts, he'd spend much of his early adult life trying to find a place for himself in the world with little real success. And on those precious few occasions when those gifts came close to fulfilling his lifelong dreams of fame and glory, all too often, he mysteriously sabotaged his chances. It was as if despite his endless self-promotion, he felt that failure was all he deserved; and so failure became his destiny.

The summer of '75 also saw David spending a week with the RNR in the Pool of London, a stretch of the Thames lying between London Bridge and Rotherhithe.

Halfway through the week, he decided to attend a nearby club known as the Little Ship, which he knew for a fact to be hosting a discotheque. For oh how he loved to dance - quite alone - to the sweetest Soul music, for Soul it was still known in '75, as opposed to Disco.

And Disco he came to associate with a commercialised form he saw as closer to pure Pop than Soul. And which was epitomised at its best by the Bee Gees' soundtrack to "Saturday Night Fever", for which he had a lot of respect, and its worst by the infamous Disco novelty song.

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And so dressed in a white open neck shirt worn sporting style with striped boating blazer and white trousers and shoes, he made his way to the Little Ship alone.

Once he'd had a drink or two, and the Soul had seeped through to his bones, he hit the dance floor possibly with a cigarette smouldering elegantly in his hand, and he was in his element. But within a short time of his having done so, the up tempo songs gave way to a long series of slow tunes, and he began to scan the departing dancers for a partner.

Soon his unfeasibly long-lashed blue eyes fell upon a slim girl with a head of bobbed curls of a striking yellowy blonde, who was frantically shoos her friend away in order to make room for David; and he walked up to her and asked her to dance. She agreed, and they danced, wordlessly, for what must have been a full half hour, until, exhausted, David's new found companion informed him she had to rejoin her friend, which she did, leaving David at a loss as to what to do next.

The bond had been broken. But then, as they'd not exchanged a word despite having been intimately locked together for aeons, there'd barely been one to begin with. And then he spied her at the bar, conversing with her friend, and he acted cool towards her, as she did him, and they made no effort to approach each other, and the moment was gone for good.

Perhaps David then returned to the floor to dance alone as he'd done earlier, like some kind of Mod, lost in a narcissistic reverie.

But David was no refugee from an age when peacock males were supposed to have been more interested in their beautiful images than any romantic experience with a woman. For later that night, while a power boat was ferrying him out to his ship in the glittering Pool of London, he announced to one of the officers onboard: "I'm in love!"

At which point the officer, a tall languorously elegant man with a charming, approachable manner, graciously replied:

"That's good news."

But if he'd divined the condition of the handsome sailor's soul, he'd have spoken differently. Yes, David was in love, but his love was nowhere to be seen, and he'd returned from his night of dancing desperate to be reunited with the slim blonde angel he'd held so close for a blissfully brief thirty minutes or so, only to lose her forever.

But that was David, and he'd be back on that disco floor again before too long, risking his heart again before too long, dying a little of his solitude again before too long. And oh how he loved to dance.

Since 1974, David had worshipped at the altar of those artists who had either immediately predated the age of Modernism or been part of its Banquet Years, and beyond into the Golden Twenties and so on.

However, in '76, a gaudy new era started to influence the way he dressed and acted, and for much of that year, he dressed down in a workmanlike uniform of red windcheater, white tee-shirt and cuffed jeans as worn by '50s icon James Dean in "Rebel Without a Cause".

Dean had died a week to the day before David was born in late 1955, and the 20th anniversary of his death appeared to exert a strong influence on rising Pop stars such as John Miles and Slik's Midge Ure.

Slik were one of the biggest bands in Britain in 1976 with an image straight out of "Rebel" or a dozen lesser fifties delinquent movies. Sadly for them, though, and for many other bands who'd surfed the Glam Rock wave or emerged in its wake, they would be unjustly ousted by the Punk uprising.

As entranced as David was by the fifties, there were still times when he reverted to the old escapist dandy image he'd adopted in defiance of what he saw as the leaden drabness of post-Hippie Britain, while discovering Modernist giants such as Baudelaire, Wilde, Gide, and Cocteau for the first time.

One of these occasions came during the dying days of a famous long hot summer, when he wore top hat and tails and his fingernails painted bright red like some kind of hellish vision from Weimar Berlin to a party hosted by a friend from Prestlands.

It was mid-September, and David would have been at sea at the time, serving as Able Seaman David Christiansen on the minesweeper HMS Kettleton.

A day or so afterwards, there was an accident involving Kettleton and a far larger ship, which resulted in the loss of twelve men, most of whom he knew personally. Of the twelve who didn't survive, David knew three

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quite well, and they were all men of remarkable generosity of spirit and sweetness of disposition, and it broke his heart to think of what happened to them.

He so wanted to comfort his shipmates for their loss, to bond with them and be part of what they were going through. He wanted to have survived like them; and he went over it all again and again in his mind, until he was driven almost insane with regret and grief. But he'd taken the easy way out, and this time it wouldn't be so easy for him to forget or explain away.

And the world took a darker turn for David Cristiansen, as the following year was marked by the irruption into the British cultural mainstream of Punk.

From its London axis, it spread like a raging plague, even infecting the most genteel suburbs with an extreme and often horrifying sartorial eccentricity, which, fused with a defiant DIY ethic and a brutal back-to-basics brand of hard-driving Rock produced something utterly unique even by the standards of the time.

David was assaulted for the first time by the monstrous varieties of dress adopted by the early Punks while strolling along the Kings Road the morning after a party in what may have been January 1977, and it would only be a matter of time before he too hoped to astound others the way they'd done him.

However, for most of '77, he dressed in a muted form which first took shape as a pair of cream brogue winkle pickers. And which he went on to supplement with black slip-ons with gold side buckles, mock-crocodile skin shoes with squared off toes, and a pair of black Chelsea boots. All perilously pointed; in fact so much so that within a year or so, they'd finish up being jettisoned into the murky black waters of the Thames.

His new look evolved by degrees at the endless series of parties he attended as one after the other of his old Welbourne pals celebrated their 21st in houses and apartments in various corners of trendy West and Central London.

Of all of these, he was perhaps closest with future oil magnate Chris, who was still finding his feet in London's most exalted social circles. These included Adrian Proust, a friend of Chris' from the north of England who forged cutting edge images for some of the most powerful trendsetters in Rock music.

David joined them a couple of times at Maunkberrys in Jermyn Street; and apart from the Sombrero in High Street Ken, it was the classiest club his suburban eyes had ever seen.

Being the rube he was, he thought the style that dominated London's club land was somehow Punk-related, but he was way off the mark. While it was the antithesis of the hippie look that was still widespread throughout the UK, it was deployed not as a gesture of violent social dissent, but for posing and dancing to the sweetest Soul music.

It was partly the realm of the Soul Boys, whose love of Black Dance music was a legacy of the Mods and Skins that preceded them.

Yet while the Soul Boys were largely working class hard nuts from various dismal London suburbs, some Soul lovers were in fact not Soul Boys at all, so much as elegant trendies. But with a penchant for floppy college boy fringes, plaid shirts worn over plain white tee-shirts, straight leg jeans, and the by now obligatory winkle pickers. And these were the kind to be found at such sumptuous places as the Sombrero.

The Soul Boys also favoured the wedge haircut, which could be worn with streaks of blond or red or even green, brightly-coloured peg-top trousers and winkle pickers or plastic beach sandals.

Speaking of the wedge, it was taken up at some point in the late 1970s by a faction of Liverpool football fans who'd developed a taste for European designer sportswear while travelling on the continent for away matches. Thence, the Casual subculture was spawned.

And its passion for designer labels persisted well into the 2010s, being manifest in every small town and shopping mall throughout the land.

By the summer, David was working as a sailing instructor in Palamos on Spain's Costa Brava, although he lost his job after only a few months. But instead of heading straight back to London, he chose to stay on in Palamos, parading around town by day, while spending most of his evenings at the Disco dancing to Donna Summer's "Love Trilogy".

As much as he loved the party life, what he wanted most of all was to enjoy it as a successful working actor like golden boys Peter Firth and Gerry Sundquist, both of whom found fame on the stage before branching out into movies and TV, although Firth had begun his acting life as a child star.

The problem was, he wasn't really cut out for the task. Granted, he had the pretty boy looks, but very few

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actors, or even musicians, become truly successful on the strength of looks alone, and this was especially true of the seventies, an age without MP3s or My Space or endless TV talent showcases.

He'd had no acting experience to speak of, except a handful of roles at Welbourne, all but one of which involved him wearing women's clothing.

The first was in Max Frisch's "The Fire Raisers", which saw him standing stock still as an old woman for a few brief minutes without uttering a single word.

The second, in a short play by George Bernard Shaw called "Passion, Poison and Petrification", saw him clomping around as a household maid in dress and studded military boots, and each time he spoke in the falsetto he'd selected for the part, the house erupted.

A third garnered some praise from one of the cadets for a convincing performance as a Holly Golightly style socialite; while his only male role was as psychopath Alec in a little known Agatha Christie one-acter called "The Rats", one of whose key lines was:

"Darlings, how devastating!"

And if the praise of the college nurse was anything to go by, it showed real promise:

"What are you going to do with your life, David? You're a good actor"

But when all's said and done, he was hardly a National Youth Theatre wunderkind. And in terms of his other "talents", he'd written a few simple songs on the guitar, but he still couldn't play bar chords. Although he managed a passable take-off of Sinatra.

While as a would-be writer, he'd filled countless pages with endlessly corrected notes, but there was nothing tangible to show for it all. It could hardly be said then that his future positively glittered before him.

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