

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

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Soon after returning from Spain in the summer of 1972, David Christiansen was launched by his dad on an intensive programme of self-improvement.

Through home study and with the help of local private tutors, he set about making up for the fact that he'd left formal education at 16 with only two General Certificate of Education passes to his name, where a respectable amount would be no less than five.

He took Karate classes in Hammersmith, and among his fellow students were hard-looking young men - some of them flaunting classic '70s feather cuts - who may have been led to the dojo by the prevailing fashion for all things Eastern, such as the films of Bruce Lee, and the "Kung Fu" television series.

And while he enjoyed them for a time, in fact, far more than the swimming classes he attended weekly in Walton on Thames close by to his own little suburban village of West Molesey, they were destined to be short-lived.

This possibly due in part to his growing fascination with an androgynous way of life inspired by Glam Rock, which was yet quiescent in late 1972. While Classic Rock was still foremost in his affections if the earliest long players of his nascent record collection were anything to go by.

And he was successfully initiated into the basics of the Rock guitar solo by a shy and sweet-natured man of about 45 by the name of Gerry Firth, who gave lessons from a tiny little abode in an alley on the edge of Walton. For it was there that he lived in apparent content with his wife and golden-haired infant daughter. While his profound love for the rebel music of Rock and Roll was wholly belied by an appearance which was almost militantly square, even by the standards of middle-aged men in those days. For he wore his salt and pepper hair in a severe short back and sides style, which he supplemented with shirt and tie and sleeveless sweater, and great baggy grey flannel trousers.

Was every inch the typical British seventies dad in other words; that is, on the surface of things, for the truth was infinitely different.

And on one memorable occasion, David tried to persuade him of the superior merit of Classical music on the basis that it's "well-played", which Gerry countered with:

"Well, isn't Rock Music well played?"

David was baffled by his argument, because despite his own preference for Rock, he (clearly) had no great belief in its artistic merits.

Another thing that bewildered him about Gerry Firth was his admiration for Marc Bolan of seminal Glam Rock band T. Rex, a man he'd always derided as much for his pretty-boy appearance as his simplistic three-chord Pop.

As to Glam, while it was a genre that veered wildly between Pop chart stompers by Bolan, and the more sophisticated decadence of major talents such as David Bowie and Todd Rundgren, it was yet to make any kind of impression on David. For he still favoured the hirsute macho men of the Heavy Rock movement.

"Don't you find him effeminate?" David once asked him of Bolan, fully expecting Gerry to express due horror at the thought of Bolan's startling choirboy looks, while continuing to enjoy his catchy tunes. But Gerry trumped him with an answer that caused his adolescent jaw to drop:

"Not as excitingly so as Mike Jagger!"

"Mick Jagger," said David, correcting the older man as if in a trance.

"Mick Jagger," Gerry conceded, still with the same stubborn fixed smile on his face.

By the following year, he'd become a massive Bolan fan himself. But at the time he was aghast at what he saw as the older man's defence of what was still to him the indefensible.

Sadly, Bolan died in a car accident close to his home in Barnes, West London at just 29 years old. Yet, following his premature quietus, he underwent something a transformation both in terms of his persona and his music, both attaining classic status where they remain to this day.

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For after all, Bolan must have had something to have so delighted Gerry Firth to the extent of making a sixteen year old look square for detesting everything he stood for. Quite a blow struck on behalf of the old hipster guard in the generation wars that were still being fought back then.

Late in the summer, David signed up for five years service with the Thames Division of the Royal Naval Reserve based on HMS Ministry on the Embankment near Temple station. And not long afterwards, it became clear to him that he was attracting some attention by virtue of his budding pretty boy looks. But far from being offended by this development, he found it strangely flattering, as if a seed of vanity had been implanted within a boy who'd spent the last few years as a swaggering lout.

To a degree then, it was a case of an ugly duckling suddenly finding themselves to be a swan, and enjoying the resultant notoriety, such as that latterly conferred on the young Spaniard of the Bar Castilla.

Not that he'd ever been ugly, in fact, several of his mothers female friends had already commented on his looks; but he'd never seen himself as any kind of Adonis with his twitching head, greasy lank hair, bony round shoulders and splayfooted walk.

Having said that, though, he had nurtured a sentimental streak throughout his teens that placed him somewhat at odds with his peers.

It also made him susceptible to such notorious tearjerkers as Rodgers and Hammerstein's "South Pacific", whose movie version, which he saw at the flicks with his mother at about 15 years old, had a life-changing effect on him.

And the same applies to John Schlesinger's stunning screen adaptation of Thomas Hardy's "Far from the Madding Crowd", which may have initiated a lifelong love affair on his part with hopeless love and high romantic tragedy.

Yet, the softening process that took place in the closing months of 1972 was unprecedented in its sheer intensity, and can be at least partly attributed to the spirit of the times. For popular culture was changing, and hirsute Rock and Roll stars in scruffy denim flares were no longer the last word in cool. While the cinema was producing a new breed of film idol who was a far cry from the he-man of old.

It received a further boost when, towards the new year, he saw former Bubblegum band the Sweet on an afternoon Pop programme called "Lift Off With Ayesha".

The Sweet had once incarnated all he opposed in terms of commercial chart Pop, yet, watching them prance around in high heels and make up, pouting and preening like a quartet of hysterical transvestites, he underwent what was little short of an epiphany.

Then, several months later, veteran hopeful Rock star David Bowie appeared on the chat show "Russell Harty Plus" with his eyebrows shaved and a glittering chandelier earring dangling from his left ear, and so David's devotion to Glam became total.

Even David's mother was charmed by Bowie, when, towards the end of the interview, after Harty had made a joke about his dainty strap-on platform shoes, he referred to the chat show host as "silly", before flashing an impossibly innocent smile:

"Aww, he's sweet," the former Miss Ann Watt might have said; and she was also enchanted by the wit of Elton John when he appeared on Harty's show a short while later. But when she caught sight of the cover of the first New York Dolls album, which David had latterly ordered by post through his usual outlet, she told him that apart from the hardest hard core pornography, she couldn't imagine anything quite so repulsive to the eye, or something to that effect.

Yet, Bowie's sphinx-like charisma was so potent that even some of the most unreconstructed of macho men were drawn, irresistibly, to his art, which combined the most seductive melodies with complex, deeply literate lyrics.

For the cult of androgyny was a powerful force in Britain in 1973, having been earlier incubated by both Mod and Hippie culture, and musical acts as diverse as the Stones, the Kinks, Alice Cooper, the Stooges and T. Rex.

Furthermore, it was reinforced in the cinema by several movies featuring angelically beautiful men.

And yet, you still put yourself in danger if you chose to parade around like a Glam Rock star in the mean streets of London or any other major British city in the early 1970s; and therefore few did.

But David fantasised about fame and adulation as never before throughout the Glam era, and he built an

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image based on his idol Bowie, spiking his hair like him, and even peroxidizing it at some point. And there will surely be those students of human psychology who will wonder precisely what effect the gender revolution exerted on young men such as David who came to manhood at a time some of the foremost male heroes of the culture resembled beautiful women.

And they did so of course in direct defiance of strict Biblical commands concerning sexual appearance. Yet David had initially resisted the seductions of Glam, until its leading exquisites came to represent something quite deliciously taboo to him. And he sought to emulate them, resenting his adolescent stubble, which he smothered with concealer along with unsightly acne spots, and which he would soon enhance with subtle application of rouge.

And quite understandably perhaps, he didn't entirely fit in in his blue collar surroundings, unlike his brother who wasted little time in becoming part of a local youth scene centred mainly around football, traditional sport of the British working classes.

As to David, he came into his own in La Ribera, and it was towards the end of the summer of '73 that he finally started being noticed in a big way by the local youth, most of whom were from either Murcia or Madrid. He'd croon for crowds of La Riberan boys and girls, who'd make requests for their favourites along the lines of:

"Oye, David, canta la de Gilbert O'Sullivan!"

"Conoces Cat Estebens?"

"Canta como Sinatra!"

An ever-evolving group forged an incredible closeness that summer that lasted for a full four years, and oh what magical summers they were for both Dany and David. They'd never forget them, nor be able to fully recapture the purity of the joy they knew in the still so innocent Spain of the final years of the Franco regime.

Even later in '73, the minesweeper HMS Thamesis set out for Bordeaux in Gironde in the south west of France. It was David's first voyage as an Ordinary Deckhand with the RNR, and he was just seventeen years old.

He struck up a friendship with the most unlikely pair of bosom buddies he ever came across in the RNR or anywhere else.

One half was Mickey, aged about 23, and rumoured to be a permanent yearlong resident of HMS Thamesis. The other was just as much of a lad as Mick even though he boasted the patrician manner of a City of London stockbroker or merchant banker.

Mick took David under his wing with a certain intimidating affection:

"We'll make a ruffy tuffy sailor of you yet," he once promised him, even though both men knew he'd never be anything other than the most useless mariner in the civilised world. And there was one occasion when, during some kind of conference being held below deck, he was asked by an officer what he thought of minesweeping, and he replied:

"It's a gas!"

On another, after the ship had been prepared for a major manoeuvre, such as a jackstay transfer, and every hand was in their respective allotted position, he was found wandering about on deck in a daze, and when asked what he thought he was doing, casually told them:

"Just taking a stroll..."

And it was incidents like these that made him the object of much good-humoured banter onboard the Thamesis, where he served as a kind of latter-day Billy Budd. Although without a tithe of the young foretopman's seamanship.

Its crew spent its final night in a club in the southern port of Portsmouth, though it might just as easily have been Plymouth.

The main event was a hyperactive drag artiste who tried desperately to keep them entertained with cabaret style numbers sung in a high woman's voice, and bawdy jokes told in a deep manly baritone, but he was way out of his depth and the Thamesis salts subjected him to a savage barrage of heckling for his pains.

At one point - perhaps in the hope of seeing a friendly face - he turned towards David, and excitedly trilled: "Ooh...you look pretty, what's your name?"

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"Skin!" the sailors bellowed back, as in "a nice bit of skin", which may have referred to David's cherubic appearance.

A little while later, the tar with the beard who'd been seated next to David all night asked him to hold the mike for him while he performed Rossini's "William Tell Overture" on his facial cheeks. And he ended up passing out on the table in front of him after having collapsed face down with an almighty CRASH! But he wasn't the only one to suffer such an undignified fate that bacchanalian night.

And speaking of bacchanals...as soon as he was back onshore, David resumed his growing passion for all that was louche, bizarre and decadent in music, art and culture.

However, increasingly from '74 onwards, he turned away from what he now saw as the old hat tackiness of Glam Rock, convinced that Modernist outrage had nowhere left to go. Instead, his devotion started to centre on the more refined corruption of the golden age of Modernism of ca. 1890-1930, and especially its leading cities, in terms of their being beacons of revolutionary art, and of luxury and dissolution. They included the London of the Yellow Decade, Belle Époque Paris, Jazz Age New York, and most of all, Weimar Republic Berlin.

At some point in '74, he started using hair oil or brilliantine to slick his hair back in the style of F. Scott Fitzgerald, sometimes parting it in the centre just as his idol had done. And to build up a new retro-style wardrobe.

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

There were those artists in the Rock and Roll vanguard around 1974-'75 who appeared to share his love affair with the languid Café and Cabaret culture of the continent's immediate past. Among these were established acts, such as David Bowie and Roxy Music, and newer ones such as Steve Harley of Cockney Rebel; and Ron and Russell Mael from L.A band Sparks. Some of Roxy's followers even went so far as to sport the kind of nostalgic apparel favoured by Ferry himself, but they were rare creatures indeed in mid-seventies London.

As for David, he wore his bizarre outdated costumes in arrogant defiance of the continuing ubiquity of shoulder-length hair and flared denim jeans. And in the summer of '75, he would even go so far as to attend a concert at West London's Queen's Park football stadium in striped boating blazer and white trousers like some refugee from a Cambridge punting party.

While all the while he was surrounded by hirsute Rock fiends, including his professorial friend Jim, who felt moved to enquire of him:

"You're just taking the mickey, aren't you"

But he was deadly serious. And even though the headliners were his one-time favourites Yes, whose "Relayer" album he'd bought the previous year, his passion for Progressive Rock was a thing of the past. And he'd moved on since '71, towards a far deeper love of darkness and loss of innocence.

But there was nothing even remotely dark about the time he fell in love with Dutch beauty Marianna, while sitting his Spanish "O" level in June 1974 in Gower Street, Central London. Although she didn't look Dutch; in fact, with her tanned complexion and long dark brown hair, she was Mediterranean in appearance.

It was probably she who approached David, because he'd have never made the first move, and in all the time he knew her, he didn't have the guts to tell her how he felt. So, once they'd completed their final paper, he allowed her to walk away from him forever with a casual "I might see you around," or some other cliché of that kind.

For about a week, he took the train into London and spent the days wandering around the city centre in the truly desperate hope of bumping into her. One time he could have sworn he saw her staring coolly back at him from an underground train, possibly at South Kensington or Notting Hill Gate, just as the doors were closing. But he was powerless to act, and simply stood there as the train drew away from the station.

In time, his infatuation faded, but certain songs - such as "I Just Don't Want to be Lonely" by The Main Ingredient, and "Natural High" by Bloodstone - would continue to recall for him those few weeks in the summer of '74 which he spent in hopeless pursuit of a woman of whom he knew quite literally nothing.

It wouldn't be long before he'd forsaken his twenties style image; nor started to wonder whether Marianna had

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been slightly repelled by the vast expanse of white forehead that had been revealed by his slicked back hair, slicked back with hair oil or brilliantine.

Once he stopped styling his hair like Valentino, his romantic appeal started to swell by degrees...but this didn't return Marianna to him. She was lost to him forever, and whether he ever fully recovered from her loss is open to debate. The chances are he never did.

In July, David's father decided that a week-long yachting course in the little village of Lymington on the south coast of England might help him develop some sorely needed moral fibre.

He was to reside for this period in a guest house owned by the gracious Mrs Edith Drummond-Smith, whom David came to see as belonging to a type of quintessentially English upper class widow native to the sailing-besotted villages and hamlets of England's south coast. To him, they were all charming if slightly aloof, immaculately spoken, kind, calm and considerate, and distinguished by the most beautiful manners imaginable; although for all David knew about them, Mrs Drummond-Smith may have been the only one to be so blessed.

For he knew little of the arcane secrets of heartland or rural England, his father and mother having originated from the commonwealth nations of Australia and Canada respectively, while his earliest months were spent in a tiny little workman's cottage in London's Notting Hill. His veins could boast English, Scottish and Scots Irish, and possibly also Danish and Irish blood. Yet, he dressed as a perfect English gentleman, or rather how such an individual might have dressed several decades theretofore, which rendered him an unusual figure in a Britain still dominated by long hair and flared trousers.

Also resident with Mrs Drummond-Smith were Gilles, a Belgian boy of about twenty, and Mr Watts and his teenage son Dylan, and while all were on the same course as David, they had different sailing instructors. For example, David had been allotted the course director, Captain Peter St Aubyn, which was propitious, as he was an alumnus of his own alma mater of Welbourne College, a private school of military stripe situated in the wealthy county of Berkshire near London.

All four became firm friends, David and Gilles becoming especially close. As to Dylan, he liked to listen to David's theories on music and fashion, and was fascinated by his use of brilliantine, even going so far as to dab some in his own hair on one occasion. He did so in the hope it would make him resemble the man who was for him, an icon of "smoothness", a synonym for cool in those days. This being singer-songwriter Bryan Ferry who was also a favourite of David's; in fact, David's twenties-inspired wardrobe was remarkably similar to Ferry's.

On the first day of the course, David discovered who would be sailing with him for the duration of the week; namely Corin, a cool, tall, dark young man of 28 with a full moustache; and typically sporting fashionably heavy spectacles; Tom, a sweetly genial man of about sixty or seventy; and Simon and Peg, a deeply pleasant young married couple. To say nothing of the skipper, a charismatic presence whose wryly solemn countenance concealed a warm heart and "pythonesque" sense of humour.

That evening, David dined in what may have been the clubhouse of that bastion of Englishness and English privilege and English exclusivity, the Yacht Club...perhaps even the Royal Lymington Yacht Club itself. He did so in the company of Corin, who informed him of his humble origins and the fact that through natural resourcefulness and sheer hard graft, he'd ascended to a managerial position within his chosen profession. They'd become good friends despite David's bizarre affectations, and Corin's suspicion thereof, but Corin couldn't help but warm to the kid despite himself.

But uncompromisingly masculine men such as Corin were always a little perturbed by David, as Hemingway had been of his friend and fellow writer F. Scott Fitzgerald, whom he met in Paris in 1925. And in the essay collection "A Movable Feast", he describes Fitz as having "a delicate long-lipped Irish mouth that, on a girl, would have been the mouth of a beauty."

David loved to play the clown for those who both liked and despaired of him; and Corin certainly fell into this category, but then so did Captain Peter St Aubyn, as he was to discover once they'd finally set sail.

"Take the helm, David, steer 350," he ordered, and David duly did as he was told, before settling himself comfortably at the helm as the yacht meandered peacefully through Hampshire waters under a balmy midsummer sun.

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"Mmm," he cooed, perhaps a little like the youthful Kenneth Williams, "this is nice..."

"Oooh, you thing," said the skipper, causing David to lash out with a sneaker-shod foot, much to the good captain's amusement.

And then there was the time Corin goaded him for having wrongly plotted a course, and he snapped like a petulant schoolboy.

"Oh shut up," he hissed, "let's see you do better!"

And once again, the skipper came up with his catchphrase, but with even more glee than the first time:

"Ooh, you thing!"

On the second or perhaps third evening of the course, there was a large informal get-together at the clubhouse which included David, Corin, Gilles, Dylan and four or five other yachtsmen, the course's acknowledged wunderkind Daryl among them.

"He comes alive in the evening, this boy," Corin told the assembled yachtsmen, clearly referring to David's propensity for getting tight each night, and the shenanigans that inevitably ensued.

"I'm not an alcoholic," said David.

"You drink three pints to my one," Corin countered, "so you've certainly got potential."

At this point, David decided for reasons best known to himself to have a dig at easy-going course whiz-kid Daryl:

"Daryl," he said, "how long have you had long hair?"

"What...long hair?" said Daryl, "what's that got to do with anything...is my hair long...I don't know anything about that."

"Do you realise that twenty years ago with your hair as it is, even though it's only a little below your ears, you would have been hounded, persecuted, beaten, for being a deviant, a freak, are you trying to ignore that?"

"And you would have been accepted?" said Daryl.

"Oh yes," David replied, looking over his attire, "knife edge pressed flannels, blue blazer, white V neck pullover, open neck shirt and cravat, a bit sporty, I suppose, but utterly acceptable."

"How safe!" scoffed Daryl.

"Safe?" said David incredulously, "that's something I never am, safe."

"Well, quite frankly, I think you look ridiculous!"

Following this last statement of Daryl's, David could no longer contain his hilarity, but his laughter was like no other his new friends had ever heard, nor would hear again. For it assaulted the soft-carpeted clubhouses quiet and respectable clientele as if it had proceeded from the depths of Hell themselves.

Daryl, struggling gamely to control his own mirth, had gone a redder shade of tomato, while Corin, quivering with glee, hid his face in an attitude of mock-mortification.

"I disown him," he gibbered, "he's insane, insane."

Gradually the hysteria subsided, and Corin decided it was time David had a taste of his own medicine.

"How do you get those bracelets on your wrist?" he queried, referring to the four or five bangles David liked to wear on one wrist in those days:

"Easily," David languorously replied, displaying his remarkably slender wrists, "I have very graceful wrists."

"Let me see," said Corin, almost in a whisper, and David duly handed him one of his bangles, before it was passed around the entire group, each member attempting, with considerable difficulty, to put it on his own wrist. Presently, it was back in David's possession, but rather than express his relief, he cried out in his distress, having discovered it had been cruelly mutilated by one or another member of his party.

"My bracelet," he hollered, "look what you've done to it...I entrusted it to you and you've gone and twisted and bent it."

The group stared as one at David, not knowing whether to look sincerely sorry for what they'd done, or merely laugh at his distress, and so settled for a nervous cross between the two. After several uncomfortable moments, Gilles broke the silence by requesting to see the injured bracelet.

"Let me see eet," he said, "I weel try to feex eet."

Everyone was hushed as the Belgian contemplated the bangle, touched it, turned it round and rattled it, and finally, with considerable calm, placed it on the floor. He scratched his head, as if trying to settle on a decision, and ended up extricating one of his shoes.

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David looked a little concerned at this turn of events, but in a desperate attempt to preserve his cool, lit a cigarette, which promptly fell from his slim white hand when a terrible crack like a tree hit by a sudden flash of lightning echoed throughout the clubhouse.

Gilles was attempting to persuade the bracelet to revert to its original shape by raising his shoe, profuse with studs, before repeatedly bringing it down on the trinket with all the strength he could muster.

"Oh come on, it's not funny," David protested, reaching out to retrieve his precious bauble, which a grinning Gilles now held out for him, but which, far from being shattered beyond repair, was barely altered from its original slightly misshapen state.

"Ees all right, David," Gilles chuckled, "I was eeteen' zee floor wiz my shoe, not your brezlet."

David looked at Gilles, then he looked at the other lads, then his eyes began to sparkle, his throat to gurgle, before it all came out at once, that terrible infernal laugh:

"Hi hi..."

"I'm not with him!" cried Corin

"We'll get thrown out!" said Daryl.

"He's insane...in-sane!"

"Come on, drink up, lads," David barked suddenly, having made a rapid recovery from his latest paroxysm, "let's go where the action is, let's go and find a party or something!"

"No, it's not worth it," said Daryl, "we're having a good time here. You're a real laugh, David, just so long as you don't go too far. We might as well stay."

"Not me," David announced, "I'm getting out of here. I need a change of atmosphere. Who's coming?"

"Yeah, might as well," Corin volunteered

"Yah, me too," the boy from Belgium followed suit.

So, the trio left the clubhouse, and before long, they were heading along a main road, although to precisely where they hadn't the slightest notion. David performed his manic laugh to each passing car, sometimes even going so far as to stand in the road as he did so, before fleeing at the final second. After a time, though, he tired of this lethal activity and took to chatting to Gilles, with whom he felt such a strong rapport.

"That Belgian girl in your group is nice, isn't she?" he said.

"Oh yes," said Gilles, "eef only 'er farzer wuren't weez 'er all zee time."

After a time alone, they found themselves being trailed by two pretty teenage blondes; and perhaps urged by Corin or Gilles, David turned around to confront them with an unlit cigarette in his hand.

"Can I have a light, please?" he said, looking intently at one, then the other of the two young women, one of whom was slim and petite, the other, far taller, and yet with the same long blonde hair. After he'd succeeded in getting his cigarette lit, he made an effort at conversation.

"So, what shall I do, stay here with you, or go back to my friends?"

"Stay 'ere," one of the girls mumbled, almost inaudibly, in a strong London accent.

"Pardon?" said David, and both girls answered him by smiling, so David bid them goodbye, and the trio then continued on its way, with the two girls in hot pursuit.

"Why don't you turn around?" Corin suddenly said.

"Why?" said David.

"They like you," Corin announced.

"Really?"

"Course they do. If you can't see that, you're more short-sighted than I thought you were."

So David returned to his admirers.

"What are your names?" he asked them.

"My name's Julie," said the smaller of the two, "and this here's Sue...what's yours, baby?"

"Why do you call me baby?" asked David.

"Because you look like one," said Julie.

"I happen to be all of eighteen years old," said David, feigning indignation.

"We thought you was abaht twen'y," said Sue.

"Really? Well I'm eighteen and my name's David."

"Wha's your name?" said Julie, gesturing towards Gilles.

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"My nem eez Gilles, he replied.

"Where are you from?" Sue asked David.

"London. Why?"

"You sahd Ameri'an or somefing."

"Well, I am half-Canadian."

"Oh, that would explain it," Julie resolved.

"Why," David went on, "where do you girls come from?"

"We come from London an all," said Sue, "sarf London."

"What are you doing down here?"

"We're spendin' a few days on 'er dad's boat," Sue went on, pointing at Julie.

"Has your dad got a boat?" David asked, as if amazed these two cockney waifs should be associated with the super-posh world of yachting.

"A yacht!" cried Julie, "not just a boat. Don' come from any old family, I don'."

For reasons best known to themselves, the three young men set on their way once again, and once again, they were followed by the girls, who took to kicking a stray tin can around to make their point.

"I weesh Coreen were not 'ere," Gilles whispered into Shane's ear.

"Why?" said David.

"Eez prezence eez deesconcertin" zem."

As if to confirm what Gilles had just said, the girls suddenly turned a corner and left their half-hearted suitors to their own devices.

"See ya, then!" they cried.

"Bye, girls!" said David.

"Bye, David darlin'!"

And with that, they disappeared, doubtless feeling, quite reasonably, that they'd given David and Gilles every opportunity to demonstrate their romantic interest in them.

"I wonder where zey went?" Gilles wistfully enquired.

"I shouldn't worry about it," said David, "you've got your Belgian girl, haven't you?"

"Ave I?" the forlorn Walloon replied.

Perhaps he couldn't understand why David had behaved in such a cavalier fashion towards two girls who'd clearly been besotted with him on sight. But then was he not a normal young man, devoid of the loser gene that causes those such as David to waste and squander every good gift that comes their way.

It's as if they don't have enough to fight against, or fight for perhaps, a little like WASP prince Hubbell Gardiner, as played by Robert Redford in the romantic movie masterpiece "The Way We Were". For at the beginning of the film, a short story of Gardiner's, "An American Smile" is read out in class by his college professor in which he describes himself as "in a way like the country he lived in; everything came too easily to him."

The Isle of Wight is separated from the mainland by a strait of the English Channel known as the Solent, and on David's penultimate day, a trip to this island county lying to the south of Hampshire took place, and the entire course was involved.

Lunch was in a public house in the port of Yarmouth to the east of the island, where tall, slender English gentlemen of the old school, clad in double-breasted reefer jackets and flannels or white duck trousers, were apt to take a tincture or two between sails. Some sported bow ties, and others, magnificent handlebar moustaches which appeared to betoken a former membership of the Royal Air Force. Their wives favoured large navy-blue pullovers, silk scarves and slacks, although by nightfall they'd be in full evening dress. Back in Lymington for tea, David happened to bump into Sally, a fresh-faced young sailing ace, possibly in her early 20s, who typically scorned the use of beautifying products, but for whom David had a soft spot nonetheless.

"Hello," he said, "where are you going?"

"Back to my room," Sally replied.

"Oh", he went on, "hey, apparently there's a get-together of all the crews on the course tonight, you know, a

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few drinks, a bit of dancing, a lot of laughs, are you going?"

"I don't know, I..."

"Oh, go on," he urged, "I'm going."

"Well...okay," she said, "I suppose I'll go...uh...this is where I turn off."

"Oh. Well..."

"See you tonight then."

"Yes, bye...hey wait! Do you know my name?"

"Yes, of course I do, David, bye!"

"Bye, Sally!"

Back at the guest house, the clock struck five to find David dressed to the nines as was his wont, and taking tea with Mrs Drummond-Smith, who'd have been scandalised had anyone suggested he was anything other than a deeply likeable young man with a single, glaring fault: forgetfulness.

She had a duty to charge her guests for the packed lunch she made for each of them every day, even if they forgot to take it, but never did in David's case, despite the fact he was the only one of her guests to routinely leave his lunch behind.

She seemed to have something of a soft spot for him, for he may have reminded her of the bachelor dandies of her youth.

A little later, David, Corin and Gilles set out together for the dance, briefly stopping off at a pub for some much needed Dutch courage, although David's was the greatest need by a hectare or three.

"Half of bitter, please," Corin ordered.

"Half a shandy, pleez," came Gilles' modest request.

"Double scotch for me please," said David...and a mere ten minutes later, he was ordering a second one, while Corin wisely passed, and Gilles ordered his usual half of shandy. Some ten minutes after this, David started up on the pints.

"Come on, David," said an exasperated Corin, "let's go."

"We mus' go," Gilles agreed.

"Drink up!" Corin went on, "we don't want you in a disordered state before the dance, now, do we?"

David swallowed his pint and the three departed the pub. Shortly afterwards, they arrived at the site of the evening's festivities which was a large hall filled with tables and chairs with a space left for dancing. But David's first concern was locating Sally.

He saw her sitting next to a slim, smart, casually dressed young man with fashionable light blond collar length hair and a neatly trimmed beard, and approached the apparently happy couple, perhaps half-expecting she'd quit her date just to be with him.

"Hello, Sally," he said.

"Hello," she replied.

"Do you want a drink?" he asked.

"Er, no thanks," she said, "but I will have one later on."

"Okay then," he agreed, before making his way to the bar.

"Double scotch!" he ordered, and then some ten minutes later, he ordered a second one, soon after which, things went a bit hazy for him. However, one thing is certain, the evening ended with his jumping fully-clothed into the filthy waters of Lymington harbour.

What happened is that Corin and Gilles had spent some time wrestling with him, pretending they were about to throw him in, and then, as if exhausted by their efforts, they relented. At which point, to their amazement, David launched himself in by his own volition, before spending some time in his soaking wet clothes discussing music with a coterie of hippies encamped nearby listening to "The End" by the Doors.

The final day of the course was a melancholy one for David. For someone had told him it was possible to catch a deadly disease from swimming in the waters of Lymington harbour.

Around lunchtime, Dylan's father Mr Watts found him gazing into the very part of the harbour into which he'd elected to project himself the previous evening, and set about reassuring him that in all probability he'd escape from his injudicious dip unscathed.

Soon afterwards, David set off for the final time for Mrs Drummond-Smiths elegant domicile in order to pack

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in anticipation of his father's arrival, expected later in the day. On the way there, he had a chance meeting with Captain Peter St Aubyn, who urged him to mend his ways in a spirit of paternal concern:

"David," he said, "stop the drinking and the chasing of the birds, it's a hard world out there."

While he was touched by the skipper's words, he might as well have told him to stop breathing. He was only 18 after all.

That's not to say, however, that the vast majority of young people at any given time aren't equipped for success, because they are. It's just that the David Christiansens of this world are never among them. For them, the party never ends, until it's forcibly closed down forever.

Soon after reaching the guest house that had been his home for the past fortnight, David discovered that his dad had already arrived. In fact, he was getting on famously with Mrs Drummond-Smith, with whom he was engaged in an animated discussion, whose central topic was: David himself.

"He is a little eccentric," he told her at one point, which caused the gracious lady to almost cry out in protest, as if it had been a mortal insult.

"Eccentric?" she exclaimed, "oh, anything but, but he does have one fault, I'm afraid to say, he is rather forgetful."

She then went on to tell David that Gilles had been looking for him earlier on in the day, and was sorry to have missed him. Of course, were this today, the two young men would have already exchanged e-mail addresses or cell phone numbers. But in those days, precious friendships and romances forged over extended periods of time were all too often discarded overnight to be lost forever. The reason being that the only way to stay in contact was via telephone or snail mail, which required a certain amount of dedication, and not everyone had the patience for it.

The words of singer-songwriter Carole King's "So Far Away", from her classic "Tapestry" album from 1970, "So far away, doesn't anyone stay in one place anymore?", could be said to be an apt description of social life in the mid 1970s for some people. You could say goodbye to a person you loved on any day of the week, in any month of any year, and never see them again as long as you lived.

Indeed, after the summer of '74, David never saw Gilles, or Corin, or Dylan, or Daryl, or Sally, or Captain St Aubyn, or Mrs Drummond-Smith, or the two blonde teenagers who'd tried so hard to elicit his romantic interest ever again. But he never forgot them, nor the events of that faraway summer of so long ago.

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