

**N**ational Centre  
for Writing

# A Life Written

An anthology of LGBTQIA+ life writing  
Summer 2025

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Welcome to the sixth *A Life Written* anthology. *A Life Written* is a collaboration between National Centre for Writing and Professor Tory Young from Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) and would not be possible without the generous funding from ARU and the East of England Coop Community Cares Fund.

This year's programme invited LGBTQIA+ writers from Norfolk aged 60+ to come together and explore memoir writing. The group was led by memoirist and author, Karen McLeod (*Lifting Off, The Case of the Missing Eyelash*), and cartoonist, David Shenton (*Forty Lies: A Case of Ipsedixitism*). Our thanks to Karen and David for guiding and holding this group of very special writers through their journeys with memoir. You went above and beyond. We are grateful to editors, Kate Swindlehurst and Sarah Bower, for giving each of the writers the confidence to put their work forward for publication.

Since *A Life Written Two*, we have involved five Anglia Ruskin University students to respond to anthology pieces. A cross-generational conversation has emerged, adding new depth to the anthology. Our thanks to them for their considered and candid responses.

And by no means last, our gratitude to the 16 writers for sharing their brave and powerful stories, both written and visual, with the world.

**Hannah Garrard**

Senior Programme Manager, Learning and Participation

One hundred years ago (20 July 1925), Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary 'I want to read voraciously & gather material for *The Lives of the Obscure* – which is to tell the whole history of England in one obscure life after another'. Throughout her writing, Woolf sought new and true ways, unconstrained by conventions, to capture forgotten and concealed aspects of lives. She knew that the history of a country did not reside in the lives of 'Great Men', just as the truth of a life could not be captured in landmark dates but in, what she called, 'moments of being'.

I have always loved reading memoirs and autobiographies. I believe that everyone has a story to tell and that not only are our lives enriched when we take time to listen but that society depends upon it. When I first spoke to Hannah Garrard at NCW about a life writing programme for older people in 2019, I was distressed by the seeming polarisation between the young and old in the UK, the stereotypes of both groups that are so readily circulated in the media. I wanted older people to discover that through the act of writing, forgotten memories might be awakened, and for my students to engage with these stories. I am very fortunate to work for Anglia Ruskin University which prides itself on being open to the community and non-traditional students and which has a history of improving the lives of older people through world-leading research, such as that undertaken by the Cambridge Institute of Music Therapy Research. The Faculty of Arts, Humanities, Education and Social Sciences was keen to fund the initial project that

Hannah designed with Sarah Passingham and Kate Swindlehurst and have continued to fund the programmes which have been further developed by Sarah Bower, Dominique De-Light, Karen McLeod and David Shenton.

Since 2020, the project has run six times, each leading to a richly moving anthology and forging profound connections between the older writers and ARU students. A Life Written Six is the first programme to be designed for LGBTQIA+ people, whose stories have been marginalised, forgotten, ignored. I am grateful to all the writers for sharing their memories, the students for responding, and to all at NCW and ARU who have enabled them.

**Tory Young**

Associate Professor, English Literature  
Anglia Ruskin University

I have been teaching creative writing for over ten years and writing from life for at least twice that. One thing I know to be true is that our untold stories inhabit our bodies, creating all sorts of unnecessary noise and nonsense. These stories are like bulbs waiting for the right time to be planted, sprout and then bloom.

As we age, the desire to consider our past grows with us, as demonstrated so clearly in the group of writers I had the pleasure to work with towards this anthology.

For this manifestation of the A Life Written programme, the group were all over sixty and identifying as LGBTQIA+. These writers were born in an era when homosexuality was illegal and in order to find their true selves, had to navigate a binary world to find their way home. Growing up there was so much silence and so little understanding. There still is, but one thing is clear: this group thrived with sensitivity, grit, and spirit.

Over the ten weeks we realised how, regardless of laws or oppression, we experienced vivid inner lives. Within the most complex of times, we have all felt beauty, love, and wonder and from this, we formed a community through writing, drawing and expression.

Tutoring A Life Written became my own personal life raft, carrying me safely from London to Norwich and home again, each week returning with a renewed sense of wonder. On the evening before I began working with the National Centre for Writing my mother died suddenly. Along with co-tutor David Shenton, it was this group's

bravery, talent, and drive which galvanised a sense of purpose in me, while underlining the importance of creative writing for health.

The stories written were unusual and confessional, there were tales about hair and about dogs, stories of heartbreak and of friendship. We wrote songs and poems and reactionary words. We exposed shadows and silences left from childhood. There were truths we couldn't have said before, and which are now shared here as a record of our lives.

In this year, 2025, we see a removal of our rights and our hard-won freedoms, but our stories still grow. Our words will keep flowing and in order to be heard, there must be a space to write them. Together we are stronger.

**Karen McLeod**  
Workshop Lead



# Let's hear what 'SPANDREL' the DRAGON has to say about the latest 'A Life Written'..



# Scenes from a Teenage Opera

## Paul Crick

### Kooks

Summer 1982. We're about to go into Upper Sixth and A-Levels year. There is usually around six of us, often more, in David's attic – Kate for sure (Katie as she was then). We're drinking vodka, smoking Silk Cut, or if it's a party, Sobranie Cocktail, except Kate, constantly rolling up. Listening to Bowie's *Hunky Dory*, moving the needle back to 'Kooks' repeatedly, scrawling lyrics on the attic eaves: *'Take a chance with a couple of kooks, hung up on romancing.'*

It seemed to be about us. Not quite fitting in. Outside the norm. Kate certainly never wanted to conform – rebelling against family, against authority. David and I knew we weren't 'normal' – never acknowledging it even to each other back then, but hinting that, 'I know you know'. Dying our curly hair with wash-in wash-out dye – his blue, mine a reddish-auburn – then crimping it, smelling burning hair as we left the torture device on our heads too long. Dressing in a manner that might not be noticed in London but certainly made us stand out in a small market town – skintight jeans, my beloved pixie boots, and shirts that were more like blouses. Army greatcoats. David wore a single pearl drop earring, a step too far for me then.

Those nights are some of my fondest memories, the same I hope for David. I realise now they were queer nights, nights where a group of teenagers were allowed to be whatever they wanted, although

neither David nor I realised what our queerness meant then. Some nights the group was infiltrated, David's hospitality abused – others not in our circle knowing good times could be had there, rampaging in and out, school bullies spotting their chance to inflict emotional pain, never physical. I'd stay over for support. We'd talk into the night lying close together, never quite daring to do more, despite all the evidence showing that our bodies longed for it.

My future would turn out very different from David's, already affected by absentee and alcoholic parents and standing out from the crowd – I learnt the defence techniques allowing me to hide in plain sight for so long. He didn't. Yet he understood far better what we were. We have remained friends – the sort that wander in and out of each other's lives. The last time we spoke was 2021. I wanted him to come to a school reunion with me. I was going to face up to the bullies, to show them my life was a success despite them. He flatly refused. They had hurt him too much, despite me suggesting there was solidarity in numbers. He couldn't risk the hurt he had shut off rising to the surface again. I understood.

For now, David is out there somewhere. Kate and I have tried to make recent contact but without success. But I know one day, out of the blue, the phone will ring, and it will be him. And I can tell him just how much I love him.

## Elysian Fields

'To Paul, a little something for you to enjoy whilst travelling to France.  
Love Mum. February 1982'

Looking at my yellowed Penguin copy of *Brideshead Revisited*, I see that the date in the inscription means it was given to me the year after the Granada TV series aired. Yet it doesn't have the TV tie-in cover, but a stylised art deco drawing of a louche young man in a striped blazer enjoying a picnic. This pleases the book snob in me. I had read it prior to the TV broadcast, but the adaptation completed my adoration of the book. I was fascinated by the hold faith can have over a family at the cost of happiness. The crumbling of the class structure was beautifully portrayed, the book settings were perfectly reproduced by the TV cinematography and design. But for me, all that mattered was the repressed love between Charles and Sebastian. How I wanted to be lying on that roof naked with them. I struggled to understand why they resisted each other, and I actively detested Charles once he turned his attention to Julia mid-Atlantic. I wept at Sebastian's decline (which eerily foreshadowed the coming AIDS crisis in many ways). And how I wanted to be at that Oxford college with them, surrounded by posh, gay boys of all persuasions and inclinations.

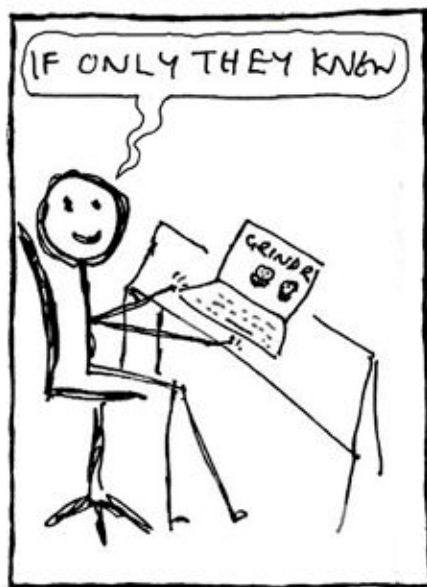
*Brideshead* didn't introduce me to the world of the queer upper classes. I had grown up in a small market town with a public school at its centre and had been surrounded by floppy-haired youths for as long as I could remember. The school buildings were scattered around the town and herds of young men moved between them at regular intervals. By my teenage years I knew where to be each day so as to be engulfed by them for five minutes or so, looking out for my favourites

– to be treasured in my heart and with the light out at night, loving them even though they could never know. In my mind I wanted to be like them, accepted as one of them; I longed to live in Another Country. My latent queerness was bound up with these boys, with Charles and Sebastian, later with Rupert Everett, even when I hardly knew what that meant. For me ‘posh’ was queer, and I as a working-class boy could only aspire to it. I even deliberately applied to the Oxford College that took one of the highest percentages of public-school entrants, fortunately being failed in the end by the comprehensive school system – thank goodness.

The *Brideshead* story has never relinquished its spell over me. Re-read regularly, it remains not just a world to escape to, but a prism through which to look back on my own life: family, faith, upbringing all seemingly in opposition to allowing me just to be me. And after all this time, public school educated men can still weirdly work their magic over me occasionally, although I have since painfully learnt they are only human.

Parental Guidance

Paul Crick



A Response to Paul Crick

# Identity Acceptance

## Ellie Barwick

Looking out from the top of the hill, Alice watched as the sky changed from shades of buttery yellow to ambers and oranges before darkening as night crept in. Peering over at the city illuminated below her, her mind focused on the number of people feeling trapped in their own lives, attaching themselves to an identity that enabled them to blend in and remain unnoticed. People just like her. Inhaling deeply, the familiar feeling of frustration seeped into her bloodstream as she cursed the grip that societal standards had on her. With her mind racing with a million questions, her brain felt suffocated, as if the walls were closing in around her, and the sound of traffic rang in her ears, whisking her back to the summer of 2021.

A hot evening in July, Alice's clothes clung to her body as she sat in the passenger seat of Meghan's car with the window rolled down. It had always been the four of them, but with James and Rosie insisting on taking the back seats, it just seemed different somehow. The pair had been together for as long as Alice could remember, and recently, their public displays of affection no longer seemed to embarrass them. This meant that Alice became a frequent witness to their intense make-out sessions, making her insides cringe with awkwardness. If only they knew the effect their actions had on her. Despite turning up the radio, she could hear the sounds they were making in the back seat, causing the hairs on her neck to stand on end and her skin to feel clammy. This was natural, she told herself. She needed to grow up.



But when the nausea hit, it only reminded Alice that she was different from her friends.

Throughout secondary school, Alice always told people she had crushes on boys in her class, but they never progressed into relationships of any kind. The truth was that Alice never felt any genuine attraction to anyone she had met. She could appreciate someone's attractiveness but didn't feel any desire to get close to them romantically. Maybe she was a late bloomer, or maybe she'd never feel this way toward anyone. Panic erupted inside her, causing her throat to burn and her eyes to sting with tears. She felt isolated from her peers. Every little girl's dream was to get married, but she began to think that maybe love wasn't in the cards for her. She maintained the pretence as she entered adulthood, feeling that the decision she made at eleven had placed her in a box she couldn't escape. Exposing her true identity was scary to even comprehend, let alone act upon. Wasn't it?

Feeling the softness of the grass under her feet, Alice returned her gaze to the lights below her. Exhaling with a deep sigh, she thought that maybe, just maybe, she would start to tell the truth about who she was. And she decided that she would begin by being honest with herself.



# Two Skies, Two Beds

## Jojo Foster

'I love my boat!' Jil says, and I smile inside, knowing that after a few hours of unpacking, mopping out the engine room, rearranging food cupboards and clearing the portholes of webs and spiders, she has truly arrived.

Jil is home. Her mum, in the house they share three hours' drive away, will be waiting for a 'here safe' message. She is now too elderly to climb aboard. Jil's parents were boaters too, and her Dad and Jil spent five years building hers from the steel hull to the beautiful, strong, 'good and faithful' narrow boat it is now.

While I was glad of the opportunities to get to know Tony and Evelyn, and be such a part of their family, it was on the water that I saw Jil in her own space. Gifts and treasures she had gathered, her nan's teacups and oil paintings in ornate frames on the walls; her colourful vintage fabrics and creativity. I could see her enjoyment of little things that fitted into clever storage ideas, craft books on her grandad's shelves and her own painted panels. Jil in her boiler suit, her toolboxes and her dad's old paintbrushes, his workmanship everywhere, wild nature surrounding her.

I can see her strength and sadness as she looks after her boat, her dad no longer here, remembering the richness of the times they shared on the boat. I help too, and we learn as we go along new skills and how to be brave. Jil is always the captain, but generally I manage to hold on to the title of Deck Scrubber, and occasionally achieve First Mate. My favourite, though, is Cabin Boy.

Looking across the water, this land of two skies feeds my desperate hunger for light, and I breathe its energy into my tired and sore body. My thoughts come away from the flitting and unrooted explorations of screen life, and I begin to feel softer, more responsive and less shielded as I absorb the shapes and sounds around me.

'Kingfisher!!!' Though whispered, the syllables bounce over the water towards the reeds and it is gone.

Life keeps moving here, yet I can be at peace with this, feeling part of it and not just an observer. The boat will cradle us when that dark stripe rising behind the greyed-out hill pushes the brightness aside and thunders its rattling rain onto the steel roof. We shall be warm together, and I feel excitement and joy.

Restless often, easily unsettled yet craving new experiences, I have been able to share these ways of being with Jil. Searching out new music or foods, tiny homes and hideouts in nature, believing in each other's new projects and dreams. To be able to live an adventurous life in different worlds with one love is beyond what I could have hoped for.

I check the ropes and zip down the cratch cover, savouring the last smell of wood smoke in the frosty night, and climb down into the warm.

\* \* \*

I have relit the wood burner and climbed back up into Jil's tiny bed with its two ornate wooden posts at the bottom, lights and Spanish carnival flowers hung between them, and a green stained glass Northern Star. Soft embroidered cushions are behind me. Fluffy reed heads shine with early and frosty light, dark skies showing them off. Swans fly over loudly. I wonder if they have eggs yet?

A vague smell of Calor gas and the toast that Jil is making on the stove.

Peter's soft shoes on the wooden pontoon as he takes his dogs

out. Quiet and quick. It's 6:30 then. I need to get the water topped up, and wheelbarrow the 'honey pot' up to the yard today before it rains. I look out the porthole. Spring is on its tippy toes and has huffed an excited first thin breath of lime green onto the very tops of the tall skinny trees, making them look luminous with that charcoal cloud behind them. We are moving just a little and the fender 'bops' on the side of the boat.

I need to glue and mend the hatches after cutting the rot out last year. I meant to ask Peter about the battery charger, and try to get the fridge sorted. Wonder if we have any bitumen on board for that scratch.

Back home after canal time, my bed is huge! And a bit empty without Jil. But I love my bed! I'm so lucky, a gift from friends, who hauled it up the stairs to my flat and reassembled it after its long and difficult trip from Lucille's 11th floor flat in south London. Nina said she'd never do it again.

Overnight oats in the fridge. Enjoying my first cuppa under the quilt...the window needs a wash. The magpies have taken over that tree, 'clack clack clack' and small birds feasting on lichen. A rare squirrel! The boiler blasts again; people starting the school run, that final bang of their front door. Big bass and R and B vocals from the car. Getting quieter and quieter...children playing in the infant school's outdoor breakfast club with a very loud teacher.

Dogs kick off, they've been left for the day. Delivery van, bin mens' jokes, neighbours slagging off the council in the hallway and another downstairs coughing. How will I write or make music? I distract myself on my phone. At least I have a signal here, though I quite enjoyed the lack of it on Roane once I'd let go of the need I felt for everything it gave me.

The grass looks long. Next door's brambles are coming over along with fragments of rotten cat towers and play tents. Why don't people care?

I'll go outside later. I shall walk across the heath to shop for supplies then light a fire in the old washing machine drum firepit and just be. And saw and chop some kindling to take to the boat.

# 'Thrown Together'

Jojo Foster  
&  
Stephen Poulter



# Diamonds on the Beach

## Martin Grant

We sit bare feet in the sand. A delicious feeling like warm silk between our toes. The simple wooden table is set for a very special meal. All around us the Indian Ocean laps quietly at the edges of the tiny sand spit that we will inhabit for the next few hours. The sun slowly slipping towards the horizon is perfectly reflected in the mirror of the sea. There are just four of us on this tiny speck. A waiter and a chef complete the number. All around small translucent pyramids, protecting candles within, flicker and glow in celebration as the moon casts its silvery light.

This evening is her treat to me as well as a celebration of her seventieth birthday. We have come a long way, together and apart, over forty five years. The last twenty-nine years are separated by different time zones. Me in the UK and her in San Francisco, half a day apart. Not the easiest relationship and certainly not the most conventional.

He was my first true love. Spotted one summer evening on the number fifty three bus from Wimbledon sitting next to the only vacant seat. Our legs touched. I made sure of that. The thrill was short lived as he got off at the next stop. The next morning, arriving at the bus stop, he found me waiting. He was the most handsome, exotic looking man I had ever met with perfect olive skin and, now I think of it, plucked eyebrows! It was the late seventies and his attire matched the mood of the times. The New Romantics were the height of fashion. I would do my weekly shop wearing dungarees and a tailcoat. He favoured bright

colours and unusual costume jewellery. My excuse? I was at art school. But he was a biochemist!

He invited me to dinner. He cooked steak and chips while I discovered I was allergic to his cats, had an asthma attack and rubbed my eyes until they were like blood-shot hard-boiled eggs. It's surprising there was a second date! Eventually I learnt to live with his cats, and the others that followed, during our sixteen years together.

My parents had not welcomed the news when I came out as gay. A catholic upbringing meant it was met with absolute disgust and their opinion that I belonged in the gutter. For a time her transitioning made it easier for them to pretend. Mother was almost ecstatic at hearing the news. 'Oh but this is marvellous news,' she gushed. 'Now we can tell all the neighbours that you're living with a woman'.

A hopeless romantic, I believed we would always be together. We still are but now as friends with a special understanding. Tonight in this private sanctuary we thank each other for the gift of life. If we hadn't met we would probably have become another statistic of the AIDS epidemic. As the sun disappears completely we are surrounded by sparkling phosphorescence like a protective force field shielding us from the rest of the world. A metaphor for how we present to the world, keeping our truth to ourselves.

One of the lucky ones, she was born with feminine-sized hands and feet and no discernible Adam's apple. Early after the operation she had no confidence and hid herself away even refusing to leave the car when viewing a property we were to buy together. I shopped for her clothes and essentials and watched her slowly start to believe in her new identity. Eventually I too reinvented myself and I regained my confidence to explore my own truth, eventually finding a man to share my life with. She blossomed and finally became the person she was

born to be. Her chosen appearance is a cross between designer chic with a touch of the bohemian. Never dressing to impress but always to express.

This evening she dresses simply in white linen but still indulges her love of expensive jewellery. Her earrings catch the moonlight splintering it into a thousand pieces. This is a special occasion. Tonight she wears diamonds on the beach.



# Time Machine

## Martin Grant

It is a simple glass bowl. It measures twenty-three centimetres in diameter by nine centimetres in height. There are three sets of slightly raised rings equidistant around its outside circumference. To the uninformed eye it would appear to be of very little value. Definitely more Pyrex than Lalique, but to me it is a cherished item.

The inside of the bowl is covered with numerous tiny marks, each one a reminder of its previous life from another time and place. It sits, not on a display shelf to be admired, but in a kitchen drawer shut away most of the time in the company of other bowls of less significance.

When it came into my possession it was a conscious choice. I could instead have taken the contents of the display cabinet. A selection of mannequins in national dress collected by her over many years. Most of them still in their original, clear rigid, plastic tubes looking like they had expired from lack of oxygen. They had only recently come to be housed there. Until their arrival the cabinet had proudly displayed an impressive looking collection of silverware. Gifts on the occasion of a long forgotten wedding. Items never used. Candlesticks that never held burning candles. Elaborately decorated serving plates that never served a purpose. All now scattered amongst the patrons of the Red Cross shop on Southbourne High Street, taken there out of misunderstanding when the Alzheimer's began to attack her brain.

I chose the bowl as my keepsake. Every time I use it it becomes my own Time Machine. The numerous tiny indentations memories of eggs and butter beaten, flour sifted and flavours mixed. Watching her

make the weekly cake, chocolate or Victoria sponge. It didn't matter which flavour it was as long as I got to lick the spoon. To me that bowl is worth far more than a cabinet of silverware.

# Fingers

## Jane Hattrick

*Content warning: Includes references to sexual assault.*

Not used to walking in high heels, I'm immediately regretting my decision to wear the green Mary Jane's Tracy bought me for Christmas twenty years ago. Hardly worn shoes that were always too high and had never been a good fit on the Brighton scene. Adjusting my stride to counter my teetering, I turn the corner and cross over the main road, walking through the December darkness towards the large, detached house. The 1940s style dress in maroon crepe with its sweetheart neckline I'd found on the sale rail in Topshop earlier in the day, clings to my shape in an unfamiliar way. The outfit feels like a costume I've put on to perform my complicity with the social mores I imagine will be required at a straight, drinks party in Norwich. I climb the steps and ring the doorbell. The host opens the door and welcomes me in, he takes my coat and leads me down the hall and into the kitchen, already alive with conversation.

This is the first party I've been invited to since moving to Norwich in May 2018 after the death of my dad the previous August. I still feel fragile and raw with grief. I'd chosen Norwich in the misplaced belief that I could pick up the threads of my disrupted career, write my book and perhaps return to teaching. Exertion intolerant, standing is a physical ordeal for me and my social battery falters when talking to people, but networking in this new city is a priority and I really want to

make some friends. I head for the table loaded with finger food and prosecco.

The kitchen opens out into a dining room making an L-shaped space, currently filled with conservative looking, middle-aged heterosexual couples of a type I'm not used to socialising with; the noise levels indicate they all know one another. Not feeling confident enough to penetrate this crowd, glass in hand I move into a quieter spot and get talking to a man about my research. He seems engaged and I feel at ease. The host comes up and stands beside him, leaning in and listening to our conversation, feigning interest. He suddenly leaps back, clutching the man by his arms, pulling him away from me.

'We've got to watch this one...' he says, as if horrified. 'She's trouble!'

Hesitantly I join in their laughter to cover my confusion. Is he mocking me for discussing my work? Part of a university community for nearly thirty years, I've never encountered this type of response before. Shifting my weight from one foot to the other, I surreptitiously check my watch. It feels too soon to leave so I persist, moving on around the room, making small talk, before ending up back in the kitchen talking to another man, the next door neighbour, increasingly aware of the crepe dress stretching tight and the plunging neckline.

'...so once my father died' I explain, 'I felt the need to escape his orbit and the constant driving to and from the care-home in Swaffham – driving to the shops became quite triggering. I'm hoping to get another job here in Norwich and continue with my research.'

'Oh, you'll easily get another job, you're very attractive', he says, narrowing his eyes and focusing on my dress.

Stunned, I can't find the words to challenge his opinion on my job prospects. Tilted towards him in my green shoes, glass in hand, I'm aware of myself simpering. Does he think he's flattering me, or does

he really believe that women get jobs in academia because of the way they look? I feel like a character in a science fiction story that has been sideways shifted into a parallel universe and trapped. A Stepford Wife in the twenty-first century. I desperately want to leave, so I begin to make my exit and find myself in the narrowest point where the kitchen meets the hall. I am standing alongside the host, not talking with him, both of us facing back into the party. I'm searching for his wife in the crowd in order to make my goodbyes.

Suddenly I feel a hand thrust into the back of my skirt, cupping my flesh in a firm but yielding way; I feel his long, middle fingers pressed hard and pulsating against my vulva through the fabric of my skirt. As if in slow motion, I recoil and turn to my host.

'...did you just touch my bottom?!' He says nothing and seems to meld away, dissolving into the wall. I turn back to face the room trying to regain some control. His wife comes rushing towards me through the crowded room.

'Your husband just touched my bottom!,' I shout above the guests, surprising myself as I deliver my lines like someone in a comedy sketch, or into a speech bubble on the pages of a graphic novel.

'I'm amazed he hasn't had his face slapped before now!' she replies, jauntily, putting her arm around me and steering me back into the room. 'Now come and meet Sue, you have so much in common. She's just started a degree in History of Art and has become an impossible 'know-it-all' since.'

I struggle to focus on what the mature student is saying to me, finally managing to extricate myself as soon as it feels polite. I grab my coat, head for the front door and stumble out of the house, shaken and ashamed. I take my shoes off and walk, half run quickly away through the dark towards home, clutching them in my left hand by

their straps, my heart pounding. I lift the lid of the bin in my front garden and let go of the shoes.

Afterwards, the more time passes the more regularly I have flashbacks of the assault, my body remembering how disgusting it had felt. His fingers were the wrong fingers. But his fingers are the ones I remember. The last fingers to touch my body, leaving imprints that I cannot erase.

May '24. On being unseen by an 'educated male doctor... full of that jaunty, misplaced confidence so many medical professionals have!

I haven't seen you for a long time!

I've had covid and have been too ill to come and see you

I think it's important too, to add that I've had covid to my medical notes... my ME has been so much worse since...

you don't SEE me even when I am sitting next to you!

Oh... well it's not a registrable disease anymore...

... and there is no treatment for ME!

how do I explain to him that I might have long covid on top of ME?

# Life isn't all a bed of nails

## Mark Hinsley

There are times in our lives when behaving badly is downright good for us.

I didn't go to uni until I was in my late twenties; I went to come out, to myself if not to the rest of the world. I made a lot of good friends there, all knew me for who I am.

My friend Peter was and still is outrageously rude, bitchy and funny, however his heart is in the right place and he would do anything for anyone in need. Talk amongst friends was often of love, being lovelorn and of sex and sexual conquests. Peter and I often discussed our sex lives and I remember one of our naughtier conversations...

'Oh my god you didn't sleep with him did you?' exclaimed Pete.

'Yes well, he's a nice enough lad,' I said.

'But his knob is like a huge strawberry!' Pete glared and shook his lion's mane hair.

'You don't get to choose what someone's cock is like, you just go with it.' I replied.

'Yes but he's my housemate and you've been and done him!'

I wondered how Pete knew so much about his housemate and suspected he'd been there before me. Pete wasn't averse to sleeping with anything wearing trousers, he'd tried hard to get into mine enough times.

'Well you can't talk,' I sniped back at him. 'you're getting through half the blokes on campus!'

'Ah but I'm sooo much better at it than you are,' he pronounced.



‘Well luckily I’ll never know that you filthy little queen!’

We both collapsed in laughter.

After finishing university my family found out about me and although there was some confusion at first, all including my mother accepted me for who I am. Freed from secrecy I met and settled down with my lovely husband Steve, who my late mother adored.

After getting our first house together, Steve and I bought our first new bed, a bed head suitable for use with handcuffs and other attachments. Well you have to have some fun in bed as well as sleep...

We also had our first cat, whom we named Baby, not because she was a pseudo child but because my partner’s brother wanted us to name her after him. His family nickname was Baby and having recently watched the very funny classic film *Bringing up Baby* about a leopard, we thought it a good name.

The first time we let Baby sleep with us, she was delirious with pleasure, purring much of the night. When we woke up she’d moved on elsewhere in the house and Steve exclaimed he’d wet the bed in the night, but somehow had only wet the duvet and not the mattress. I let him think this was the case for a while but then decided to let him off the hook and told him it was more likely the cat, who was so happy she didn’t want to leave us to go and use the litter tray.

# "CONFUSION"

Mark Hinsley



# Who I am?

## Mark Hinsley

It must have been the late sixties when it happened.

I'm still not sure what happened, but later in life it seemed significant.

Looking back I think it was significant then, I just didn't know it.

I was, after all, only seven or eight years of age...

We were watching the TV in what we called our living room. TV, sofa and chairs, the dog, the cats, umpteen of my six siblings sat around watching the telly or reading. The room was lit by a single bulb hanging from the central ceiling rose, no shade just a bare bulb, kitsch sixties wallpaper providing a mesmerising brown geometric backdrop to a plain fifties tiled fireplace. The two tone metallic gas miser fire glowing orange from the hearth, moderately heating the room, while roasting those closest to it. Further heat and the smells of cooking coming from the open door to the kitchen. My father sitting alongside the hearth smoking his un-tipped Park Drive fags, half reading the *Birmingham Evening Mail*, half watching the box opposite him. My mother in and out of the kitchen, watching the telly and cooking.

A documentary about the summer of love 1967/68 came on the telly. Hippies filmed outdoors at a festival, apparently smoking dope, wearing flowing clothes, headbands, draping themselves over each other and of course flowers in their hair. I wasn't really taking that much notice of the spectacle that all these young people created, so far from my realms of knowledge or experience, living on a housing estate in working class Birmingham. The camera moved around

the colourful scene whilst the narrator commented on the beautiful bohemian youngsters.

Panning around, the camera alighted on two bearded men kissing each other. I was hypnotised by the image. I stopped blinking. I may have even stopped breathing, but I couldn't look away. I was locked into the picture. The rest of the room and the people within it no longer there, perhaps the rest of the world didn't exist for that short moment. I was entranced. I was the image, the image was me. The image was everything.

My mother's voice came through my mesmerised state, clear and uncompromising, 'If ever one of my sons did that, I'd disown them.' She spoke to the room, but I felt it was being said to me, it was a dagger to my heart and I didn't know why. The whole thing was such a new experience; I had no idea what it symbolised. It wasn't something I'd ever come across before, but it registered its importance somewhere in my psyche because I have remembered it the rest of my life.

When I discovered I was sexually attracted to boys rather than girls, I was always aware of what my mother had said. Although loving men felt absolutely right for me, it was something I had to hide, something I would be shunned for, something I would be disowned for.

# The Lessons I Learnt in School

## Sally Hunter

### Part I

'My name is Tommy,' I said. My primary school teacher looked at me indulgently.

'No, Sally, I don't think so.'

'Yes,' I said defiantly.

So began my career as Tommy Hunter, aged seven, at Oaklands Primary School.

I don't think I wanted to be a boy, but rather to be *like* a boy and do the things that boys did. This involved running around, being a gang leader, bossing people about, and — most importantly — climbing trees. The list of things I felt I could do as a boy, and not as a girl, was both appealing and exciting.

Girls, on the other hand, were epitomised by a classmate called Leslie. She was very pink and plump, liked skipping, playing with dolls, and making daisy chains. She also seemed to be continually crying.

My parents were very liberal and progressive and accepted me as Tommy without much fuss. They had been very much at home among other socialist intellectuals when living in Hampstead, but were perhaps a bit lost now in a small conservative town in Essex. Still, true to her liberal principles, my mother set to and made me lots of boys' clothes — cowboy chaps from an old fur coat, lots of pairs of shorts, and my prized possession: a pair of dungarees.

However, I still had to wear my primary school uniform: a grey skirt, white shirt, and a green tie and blazer — but I wore them all with a rather rakish, nonchalant air when I look back at the photos.

I soon had my wish to become a gang leader at school — a gang consisting mainly of boys. I didn't have a high regard for girls. They seemed a bit weak and feeble, and not very interesting. I became very busy, involved in endless fights to protect our gang territory, which consisted of a rough shelter made of sticks and hay in the corner of one of the playing fields.

The teachers at my school, I think, dealt with me quite sensibly and without fuss as 'Tommy', and there didn't seem to be a problem with my change of identity.

Eventually, the boys left to go to prep school. I was at a private primary school — much to my communist father's disgust!

My final fling as Tommy took place outside of school and consisted of two separate events, both of which had quite an impact on me. The first was my eighth birthday party. There were lots of boys, and it ended up as a sort of giant rugby scrum on my family's living room floor. My parents looked anxious and alarmed — and I really noticed that. I felt bad about it.

The second event was actually quite traumatic. Two of my neighbourhood friends — both boys, of course — invited me to spend the night in a sort of den in their garden. I was very excited about this, but it turned out to be a disaster, as they spent the whole night beating me over the head with a teddy bear.

**The lesson I learnt in primary school was that boys have more fun — but aren't entirely to be trusted.**

## Part II

After the boys left my primary school, I soon became interested in horses, riding, and pony books. I was completely absorbed in my horse world. I liked nothing better than to be part of the child slave labour tribe — spending all my holidays and weekends at the riding stables, coming home smelling of horse and covered in horse dust, then settling down to read *A Pony for Jill*. Were the horses transitional objects from my boy interests to girlhood? I have no idea.

But what I do know is that when I went to my all-girls high school, I instantly made friends with another horse-mad girl named Susan, and we would exchange drawings of horses' heads and anatomy during our lessons.

Although I no longer called myself 'Tommy' — I was definitely Sally — I still had some of his rough and ready ways. I was often to be found playing an illegal (by school rules) game called *scrummy*. This involved up to 20 screaming girls running around the asphalt playground, chasing one girl who had possession of the netball, wrestling it from her, then chasing the next one in possession. To add to my rule breaking, I was also often to be found in the out-of-bounds stream adjacent to the school playground. If we got wet or injured in *scrummy* and needed first aid from the staff, we never revealed the true reason for our injuries or dampness.

Soon, my interest in the sixth-form girls — our idols — grew and blossomed. We all had crushes on different girls and openly discussed their strengths and weaknesses. For instance, my crush, Janet, had quite bad acne — but that just made her even more attractive to me. I thought she was lovely, funny, and always nice to me. I must have spoken to her at least three times!

Gradually, by the third form, most of my friends had given up their

crushes and moved on to talking to the grammar schoolboys over the fence during the dinner hour. My interests, however, had shifted to the staff — all of whom were female. First it was the Latin teacher, then our English teacher. There was a definite excitement and thrill around these fleeting meetings, contacts, and visions. I soon realised that none of my friends talked about having similar feelings towards the staff, so I quickly learnt it wasn't acceptable to talk about this — and that I needed to keep my feelings secret.

**The lesson I learnt in high school was that I was Sally — a girl who was attracted to girls and women — but that Tommy would always be a part of me.**



# My First Name

## Serena James

A weekend in June 2012 and my wife of 42 years discovers that I am, and have been since the age of five, transgender. It is the most traumatic weekend of our entire lives. An emotional rollercoaster with many tears. I have kept it a secret for 58 years.

She is an extraordinary woman. She immediately finds out as much as she can about being transgender in order to understand and support me. On the Sunday evening, she wants to meet 'me'.

'Do you have a female name?' she asks. I don't.

She then asks, 'Would you like me to help you choose one?' I am completely overcome with emotion.

'How do you feel,' she asks, 'when you are yourself?'

'Serene and calm', I reply.

'Serena is a perfect name.'

I have been Serena ever since.

We are still together.

# IT'S MY LIFE

Serena James



I NEED SOMEBODY  
(HELP) NOT JUST ANYBODY

THE BEATLES 1965



ALL MY SISTERS COMING TOGETHER  
SAY "YES I WILL," "YES I CAN"

ALICIA KEYS 2007



AND FREEDOM TASTES  
OF REALITY

THE WHO 1969



I AM WHAT I AM  
I AM MY OWN SPECIAL CREATION

GLORIA GAYNOR 1984

Serena James 2025

# The Lost Photograph

## Serena James

In 1960, when I was eleven, I was in the top class of Holy Trinity Junior School in Taunton. We had a new, young and dynamic head teacher — Mr Whatmore — who decided to take a group of us away for a week. We went by train to Paignton in Devon and stayed at Pontins Holiday Camp, seventeen girls and three boys. We slept in chalets and ate in a large communal dining hall. Every day we swam in the pool, played games, and, in the evenings we went to the entertainment hall to hear singers and comedians, and watch dancers and magicians. I loved it! Towards the end of the week, the theme for the evening was ‘Topsey-Turvey Night’. All the female guests were invited to dress as men, and the male guests to dress as women. Well! Who’d have thought!

I saw them coming. With one voice the girls said,  
‘You are going to be a girl’.

I did not resist. In fact, I very much enjoyed the experience.

They put me in a floral dress with a white cardigan, white ankle socks and beautiful red ballet pumps, with a matching red clutch bag. The final touches were a pair of clip-on earrings and bright red lipstick supplied by our bluecoat chaperone.

The camp photographer (actually, he wasn’t at all camp) took my picture, in black and white of course, and I proudly brought it home with a few other photos and put them in the family album. At some point in my life, I am not exactly sure when, during one of my several ‘purges’ to rid myself of this terrible affliction, I destroyed the only copy of that photograph.

During Covid lockdown, my wife and I were going through old family albums and we discovered the remaining photos of that Pontins holiday. For the first time, I told her about 'Topsey-Turvey Night', how wonderful I felt, and how I had destroyed the photo.

'Why don't you try to recreate it', she suggested.

I superimposed a 1960s dress on my body in one of the other photos. I decided to mount it in one of the original Pontins cardboard frames, so I removed the picture, only to discover 'the lost photograph' underneath. I had not destroyed it after all but hidden it out of sight. I cried.

The whole episode is still vivid in my mind. I remember going on stage, holding my number and sashaying up and down. I didn't win the competition but it felt wonderful. I can still taste that lipstick and feel my feet slipping into those beautiful red ballet pumps sixty-five years later.

# The Playlist

## Lilly Newton

### Garagedad.

*'Back in the garage with my bullshit detector —'*

The Clash's 'Garageland' blares from the battered old radio, Dad hates it but today he humoured me.

In our garage bullshit was not allowed, Dad's word was law.

Little me loved it; once the garage door was shut we were safe, we both knew the rules, and I knew my place. Dad was the undisputed champion of the garage. Dad loved complete control.

Me, I was the junior mechanic, learning their way. Already I'd graduated from simply holding the spanner to using it! I felt so grown up.

Dad abhorred dirt, so everything was spotless and every tool had its place. I was in trouble if a socket or a drill was in the wrong spot. Not only could I use a spanner, I was a genius with the dustpan and brush.

Dad will always remain alive and kicking in the workshop in my head.

In the garage our worlds intersected, we coalesced around a love of vintage cars, especially racing cars. Sleek, shiny, loud, smelly, fast, pieces of engineering art. We were inspired, we were happy, we were together.

Mum loved it too, she also knew we were safe. Safe to be left alone, her role as referee redundant for the time being.

Outside life was more complicated; we lived perched on the edge

of a volcano. You never knew when Mount Dad would explode. Of course, teenage me didn't help as I fought for my identity, whilst Dad tried to smother it.

I wonder what he would have made of me now?

'Can you come and help please' yells Dad.

I jump to it.

'Close the garage door after you.'

### 'I'm coming out, ready or not!'

Picture this: Mum's farmhouse kitchen, its bare stone walls very French, quite foreign, but oh so familiar.

Dad's racing car posters were still on the wall, Sir Stirling, Mike Hawthorn, alongside Mum's china plates, with that delicate orange glass teardrop lamp shade, which miraculously had survived house move after house move, hanging over the table.

During my run I'd listened to Diana Ross singing 'I'm Coming Out' in my headphones, I'd sing along, loud and proud, full of joy, today was the day. I'm coming out, my mind was made up, coming ready or not!

Mum's house was in South West France. This Friday was the first day of French Lockdown, a Friday like no other, and a good day for outing myself. Covid-19 was about to change my world.

I'd waited 62 years for this moment of truth. Mum was blissfully unaware of what was about to happen.

So far an uneventful day, the village was eerily quiet, almost spooky. We were both in a good mood.

I'd been on my habitual run, me and Diana. Confined to our mansions, I'd run 20 laps around Mum's field, drinking in the beautiful countryside.

After showering, I'd cooked dinner; that French classic Fish and

Chips. For Mum, always a taste of home.

It was the weekend weekend...Hurrah!... I'd allowed myself to open a bottle of red. Dad always thought I drank too much, his spirit didn't let me get away with it easily either.

Though on this Friday, all bets were off.

It was just me and Mum; Dad had died 11 years before. Mum and me had always been special; easy, relaxed and happy. Conversation flowed readily, but in this conversation I was about to drop a bombshell.

I never imagined this moment could come, but the two of us were locked in for the next 12 weeks, I knew I had no choice.

If not now, never!

'Mum', I said as I prepared the meal, 'A glass of wine?'

She accepted gladly, the next three months were going to be weird.

'Mum another?', I asked as we devoured our fish and chomped our chips.

These were strange times, two glasses was a lot for Mum,

'Why not?' came her response.

The ground was prepared, would my resolve hold?

'Come on Lilly, you can do it' my internal voice chimed encouragingly.

'Come on Lilly, you can do it, *vous devez!*' called out my carry-on suitcase full of Lilly clothes from my bedroom.

My make-up, those black wedges, undies, my boobs (I didn't have my own back then), that yellow dress. Oh how I love that dress. I must. *Je dois...*

The tension built...

*Allez*, one more glass should do it..

'A top up Mum? I've got something to tell you!'

## 'Montague Terrace (In Loze)'

'Play *The Best of Scott Walker*', I command.

'Oh I love him, and the Walker Brothers too,' added Mum.

So here we are, still confined to that French kitchen, going slightly stir crazy. With just the two of us, Alexa had become part of the family. We are starting to talk to Alexa a lot.

'Playing 'Montague Terrace (In Blue)'' comes Alexa's drab voice.

'*The girl across the hall makes love*' sings Scott, tugging at our heart strings, wowing us with his smooth baritone sound.

Mum sings along. Funny in real life, she doesn't do emotions, but she loves a melodramatic song.

'*And we'll dream, won't we*' Scott rises to a crescendo.

Yes, more wine, lots of cheese and Alexa. You are getting the picture of our little life; our French lockdown farmhouse evenings. Meanwhile Alexa has moved on to Coldplay.

Mum adores them, so rather spoiling the mood, I say,

'I really don't like this, can we have something else please? It says nothing to me about my life.'

How could they know about my life? How could Mum know about my Lilly life?

Mum sighs, 'OK Lilly; Alexa Stop! My daughter has no taste.'

An unfamiliar silence.

In my head, a moment of realisation.

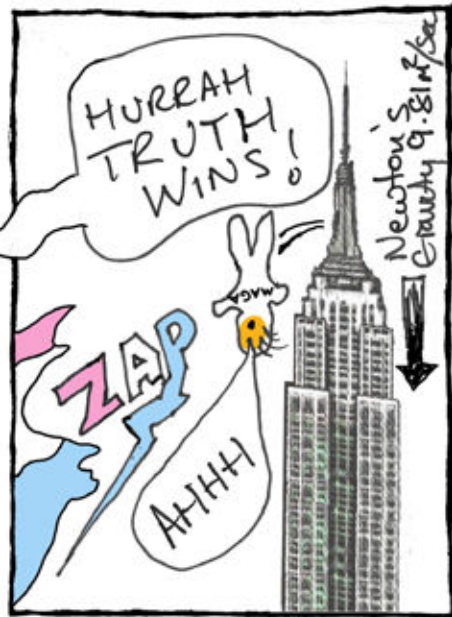
'Her Daughter.'

Mum just called me 'Her Daughter' ...now that is cool!!!



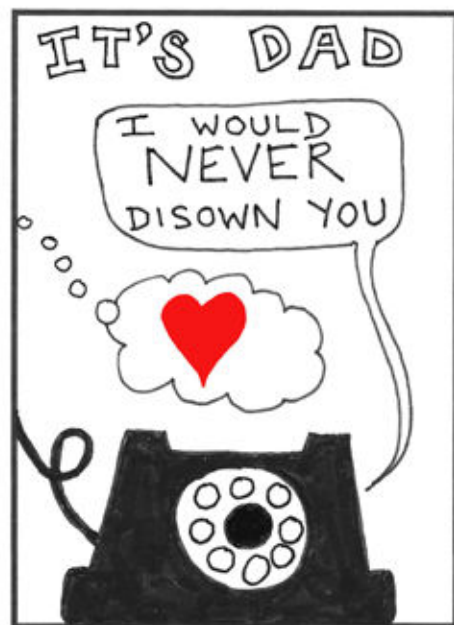
# Lilly Saves The Day, Again!

Lilly Newton



# CALLED OUT

Steve Oldfield



# Best Place Ever

## Steve Oldfield

'He's old enough to go to miners now.' I heard my Mam say.

Miners, I thought, then there's a coal mine in the town?

'Will it be dark?' I asked.

'Yes it will.'

I was afraid of the dark.

So, there I was with some of my small friends on a Saturday morning in 1964, being taken by two older children to the local coal mine. At some point I must have realised, with some relief, that it wasn't quite the place I'd expected. I was a minor with an 'o', not a miner with a dirty face and a pickaxe! And the coal mine was in fact the local ABC cinema. I was still worried about it being dark though.

I was completely overawed when, after stepping into the foyer, buying my ticket for nine old pennies, being rushed through the large lounge, up a staircase and through two sets of double doors onto a balcony, my eyes first saw the huge auditorium. It was magically illuminated by hidden lights, it just sort of glowed a warm orange, and it smelt a heady mix of stale cigarette smoke and floral disinfectant — how I loved that smell! At the opposite end of the hall was the proscenium with festooned curtains that appeared like precious silk in the glow of the coloured footlights. In reality it was a rough, musty, old, beige-coloured pair of drapes. But I didn't know that then, the illusion was perfect.

This was the best place I had ever been to in all my life. Songs by Manfred Mann, Herman's Hermits and The Beatles were bursting from

the speakers, and when Paul McCartney sang *'then we will remember things we said today,'* I wondered if I'd be remembering what I'd said and done on this day, years from now.

There was a lot of noise from a lot of children, and a lot of movement, and I waited, half in delicious anticipation and half in fear and dread, for the darkness to come. The lights and Paul McCartney began to fade, but the curtains were still glowing as they gracefully parted. My fellow Minors began to cheer at the emerging screen which was filled with words. Then the tune of 'Blaze Away' played and a bouncing ball landed on each word so you knew what to sing. *'We are the boys and girls well known as minors of the ABC...'* Goodness, I had to learn a whole new song to belong to this club! It ended with *'...we're all pals together, we're minors of the ABC!'* Massive communal shouting of those last three letters; even if many didn't know the rest of the words, they knew they were ABC Minors. I hardly realised I was no longer afraid of the dark.

Occasionally, they would allow some of us onto the stage to dance to Chubby Checker's song, 'Let's Twist Again'. That was fabulous, we felt like stars, our two-and-a-bit minutes of fame! To reach the stage you went through a little door to the left of the screen, and brushed past those amazing curtains, that's when I discovered how rough they really were.

Della, a fellow Minor who was looking after us, told me how the cinema worked.

'The pictures are on a roll at one side of the screen and are pulled across it,' she said.

'No they're not.' I replied, 'The films are on a machine in a room at the back, and they're projected onto the screen.'

Della didn't believe me.

‘Well what’s that beam of light for?’ I said.

‘That’s just to light up the roll of pictures so we can see them,’ was her answer.

Reels of film, or rolls of pictures, in them I found many wonderful characters to share my Saturday mornings with: Mighty Mouse, Bugs Bunny, Laurel & Hardy, Rocky Jones Space Ranger, Old Mother Riley, Batman! But, my favourite of all was Nyoka the Jungle Girl, because she got around by swinging from vine to vine, Tarzan-style. She was the girl everyone would love to have for an older sister. I already had a perfectly acceptable older sister, but not one who could grapple with crocodiles and lions, or call out ‘Beelaah!’ to summon her tame elephant.

Nyoka was always in deadly peril, often at the hands of the evil Shamba. On one occasion she is trapped in a room with friends Jack and Curly, and the floor begins to slide into the wall, revealing a bottomless pit down which they will inevitably fall. Will they escape? Well of course they will, but we’ll have to wait until next week to find out how.

I remember lots of things from those days, such as deciding whether to spend my last three pennies on sweets, or on a glow-in-the-dark ABC Minors badge. I remember losing a tooth on the balcony, flicking lolly sticks at the kids in the stalls below, screaming with everyone else when the trailer for *Carry On Screaming* was shown, or arriving too early when the cleaners’ lights were still on, and momentarily, the magic was lost.

I remember too, the glare of the sunlight as we all emerged from the darkness into the real world, and running home with our duffle coats held on just by the hood, the woolly material splaying out behind, making a pretty effective Batman cape.

Sixty years later here I sit, clutching my old, still-luminous, ABC Minors badge like some mystical talisman. I close my eyes and wait for the images to form. The glorious curtains once again part as the lights fade, and I am back there in the best place ever.

A Response to Steve Oldfield

# My Happy Place

## Holly Farrell

The best place ever: a world of happiness and wonder found in our childhoods. Like Steve's world, these are where our former imaginations thrive. Reading about Steve's experience at the ABC cinema, with its magical illuminations and grandness, made me realise that children have a unique interpretation, and innocent misinterpretation, of the world around them. This makes our beloved childhood places transcendent worlds; they are blissful, creative and joyful but separate from the present and the realities of adulthood. Yet our childhoods never leave us. Like a spiritual journey, we make our way back to them through our memories and keepsakes. These are the essential tools, like a map or compass, that guide us in the direction of the past and our former worlds. We must therefore hold onto them.

The way Steve's ABC Minors badge allows him to relive his former childhood world, with nostalgia and comfort, inspired me to reflect on what I consider to be the best place ever: the moments in my garden where I searched for wildlife, picked flowers and embraced the sunshine on a summer's day. It was here that I felt most happy and at home. Even though this feels like a long time ago, in my poem 'My Happy Place', I journey back to this wondrous world to embrace the same comforts that Steve experiences in his own best place ever.

## My Happy Place

Today, I travelled to another world, a familiar one, where  
bees buzz and hum, telling me about  
making honey for their tea party, where the daisies all dance  
to the wind's melody, and butterflies are  
painted by garden fairies, and grass is softer than a blanket.

This is my childhood happy place.

My world of joyous fabrications and fantasy.

A place where the impossible is possible.

And even though time

stretches on,

the objects of my childhood are evidence of this world.

My old drawings and pictures of

bees, butterflies, trees; the photographs of

me in the garden; the pressed daisies

in my scrapbook

transport me back to this place.

These souvenirs are precious to me.

And I will hold onto them forever as I have discovered

my childhood world's tangibility.



# Come Out Come Out Wherever You Are!

Steve Peck

Coming out took four years.

In a sexist, misogynistic, machismo working and family atmosphere of the 1970s, I existed in a subterfuge of living two lives. Superficially outwardly I surrounded myself with drink, cigarettes, football and being 'one of the lads'. After all, I had played rugby, five-a-side football, squash – didn't that make me fit in?

My naivety was astounding. My size helped, being six feet one inches tall and overweight, I was the opposite of the limp-wristed camp stereotype that appeared on television, e.g. John Inman, that were my only guidelines to my very secret longing for a male lover.

Amidst all this bravado there lurked an as yet unidentified individual who craved something else. Sure, this person still lingered over the men's underwear section of his mums Kays catalogue; still kept a photo of an hirsute Cliff Richard in bathing trunks; and kept friends with an old school pal whose demeanour was kind of sexy.

These were considered shaming, dirty, unsavoury images which added to guilt without having any knowledge of explanation. Self-discovery being hampered by the confusion of expected actions in that straight world.

Sanctuary was sought in immersing myself in the romanticism of BBC2 Saturday afternoon films of the 1930's featuring Astaire & Rogers, Busby Berkeley et al. Yearning and longing in the idyllic lyrics

of Noel Coward and Ivor Novello. The mystery of how I could convert this romanticism into subjective reality continued to evade my soul.

Depression was sometimes prevalent. It is epitomised by the author Ronald Blyth: 'If there is no life, then life is not living, the epitome of depression that enshrouds loneliness. However the interminable quest for love keeps you afloat.' \*

\* \* \*

I reasoned that I would have to visit the only gay pub in Ipswich that I had heard about in embarking on this quest. Feeling extremely self-conscious and checking that I wouldn't be seen by anyone else outside, I entered.

There were only three people in the small L-shaped smoke stained bar, two guys in their forties who didn't look at all gay and a woman – were they allowed in this bar as well? They ignored me as I drained my glass quickly and exited. What a disappointment, no future lover, no atmosphere, no gayness. My quest determined that I revisit on a Saturday night, surely it would be busier with someone there that I could love?

Over the next two years I was a regular attendee, experiencing the reality in this bitter pub atmosphere, being preyed upon by sex starved carrion queens, used, abused and spat out the next morning. A result of nervous overindulgence of alcohol, warped expectations and massive naivety in believing that this was what gay life actually meant.

My key feelings still required a deep relationship entwined with a pure heartfelt love. I still wanted to dance with someone on a cloud of romance with mutual adoration leading to a lifetime of joyous harmony....mmm...

Friends irrigated an otherwise desert of expectation with their badinage, insights, gossip and even fun. However, the overwhelming atmosphere in that pub was of spite, jealousy and character assassination. I put up with it adding an amiable personality in aiding survival of my love quest.

Until...

I cadged a lift to a gay night in a Colchester pub. I knew two of the three fellow passengers. At the pub I noticed that the unknown passenger was looking rather lost. Conversation ensued and we found that we had common opinions concerning our limited knowledge of gay life. We parted promising to meet again at the Ipswich pub. So far, so ordinary.

Over the next few weeks my first real love was born, blossomed and flowered. Passaged through attraction, conversation and mutual appreciation of interests. The subdued hesitant invitation to meet in a quaint teashop – both dressed in our best outfits. The tinkling of teacups over which our smiling faces led to an unfamiliar growth of pure longing mirrored within each other, gradually peeling away the layers of life's experiences warming both our hearts.

The excitement of the first occasion that we could meet alone in my flat. The preparation and expectation aside the longing setting my heart pounding in adrenaline soaked belief that this could be – would be the one person to share my life.

Then the explosion of being, the cataclysmic implosion of all that pent up emotion being shared on the mattress of pure passion. Smiling with depth, adoration of the perfect, encompassing the moment – was this ecstasy? Fred & Ginger danced before my eyes – Noel Coward sang of our love – this was the culmination of dreams at last.

Subsequent meetings were forged with the desperation of being together always. I wrote to him: 'The seed of our love has been planted, I hope that we can cultivate and make it grow into a new age for us both. Fate has been kind, I sincerely hope that destiny will treat us both with the same gracious aplomb'.

It was this love that enabled me to bury the demons of pain and shame, gradually turning the lock on that particular cellar door of guilt. A rebirth of hope, solidifying the idea that life was worth living.

Our relationship lasted eight glorious months but due to the complications of location, time pressures, finance and the ever-present secretiveness from family and work colleagues, the situation became intolerable. Though our love was strong, it was inevitable that we would have to part. Our final farewell took place in a tawdry cafe. Tears were silently shed; we didn't even embrace when parting – it hurt too much.

Oh, but the memories!

Experience gained and emotions at last making sense, he had validated my existence in that I could be loved if I loved myself. I had garnered the strength to live and expand.

I had come out to myself at last!

As Ronald Blyth encapsulated: 'Home is not where one comes from, it is where one arrives.'<sup>\*</sup>

<sup>\*</sup>Collins, I., 2024, *Blythe Spirit*, London, John Murray, p304 & p266.

'Come Out,' 'Come Out,  
Wherever you Are...

Steve Peck



A Response to Steve Peck

# Outside the Box

Maisie Feek

Steve, upon reading your work for the first time, I sourced inspiration for my response from your open and warm discussions regarding your personal acceptance of your identity, and the story of your first love.

In secondary school, I never quite managed to 'fit in'. I was always that individual sitting at the back of the class who people regarded as the 'odd one out' because I was different to them. I spent all my time worrying about how others perceived me and changing myself to be the person I thought I had to be to fit in, bought the same black handbag that everyone used as school bags, and bought clothes I thought I should wear. Of course, that never worked, and I ended up miserable. On top of that, I always had a thought at the back of my brain that I was too confused and in denial to address: 'Why does it feel so incredibly strange whenever I ask out a boy?' This search for community and affirmation defined my teenage years. It didn't leave me until I started university.

I decided to go with some of my course-mates to the LGBTQ+ club in Lincoln, The Scene.

Having been incredibly introverted growing up, the world of clubbing had never entered the equation. I bought myself an outfit that I *wanted* to wear, dyed my hair bright pink, got my nose pierced, and went out. The building was decked in pride flags and rainbow lights and as I stepped up to the door to have my hand stamped by a drag queen, I was introduced to a whole new world. I'd like to believe

that it was through sheer intuition that this drag queen figured out it was my first time in the club and offered to keep an eye out for me, but honestly? I gave it away immediately. I was spellbound. The lights and music swaddled me up and I sang and danced until 4am, returning home having opened myself up to an element of my sexuality that I had been too scared to explore.

Three years on, I identify as a lesbian, and when I reflect on all of those years I spent worrying and confused, I now view them with a renewed sense of warmth. Because I think that if thirteen-year-old Maisie could see me now, she would be proud.

# Belated confessions of a gay teen drama queen Stephen Poulter

*The lights suddenly went off and he was plunged into darkness. He closed his eyes and stood up quickly. He took a step forward with his left foot and then brought its companion up to join it, but continued to slide that foot in front of him until it made contact with an unyielding vertical surface ahead. Leaning forward, his hands found the hard edge about 18 inches above the ground. In a fluid move he jumped up, took another stride forward, before pirouetting to stand bolt upright facing the way he had just come.*

*It had gone exactly as he'd rehearsed it over the past few weeks. Except when he opened his eyes, he was momentarily surprised that everything was not pitch black as he'd expected. A patchwork of pale luminous bars of what must have been moonlight were strafing the dark, huddled mass of bodies disappearing into the gloom of the cavernous space.*

*He felt calm and confident as he opened his mouth and, in a loud and clear voice, began to deliver his lines. A text he had learned so completely that he would still be able to recite it from memory decades later.*

*'In the beginning God created the Heaven and the Earth. And the Earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.*

*And God said: 'Let there be light, and there was light.'*

*At this precise moment he was enveloped in a dazzling circle of illumination. Blinking in the sudden glare was a small, dark haired seven-year-old with a pale complexion, serious demeanour and piercing blue*



*eyes. Smartly dressed in school uniform he sported a maroon jumper, crisp white shirt and a maroon tie with diagonal silver stripes. The ubiquitous short, grey flannel trousers had straight, smooth legs descending to just below the knee where grey woollen socks were rounded off by well-polished, black shoes.*

*This was a moment of epiphany in his young life — he revelled in the attention that was exclusively directed at him; unphased by the responsibility he bore for his memory, performance and vocal skills carrying the whole first section of the show.*

*A few years later, having become the teenage star of the village amateur dramatic society, his mother was to observe — only half-jokingly — that it had been very unwise for him to have had the opportunity at such an early age to ‘play God’ and conjure the whole Universe into being, as it had clearly given him ‘delusions of grandeur’.*

It wasn't until I reached my teenage years that I realised that when someone said: ‘Oh, he's the *‘theatrical’ type* – if you know what I mean?’, it actually applied to me. Remarkably, I can date the first moment I realised I was attracted to my own sex — it was the summer of 1965 and I was eight years old.

My mother was a huge fan of The Beatles during their early years of fame, before they went all ‘weird and druggy’, and so I was hauled off by her to see their latest movie *Help* at the local cinema. This was one of my favourite places, which we visited regularly to enjoy the latest Disney offerings. The Odeon in town was a rather unimpressive 1930s concrete block of a building — its façade covered in peeling and grubby white paint and the interior having a general air of benign neglect.

After my previous diet of cartoons, it was a surprise to see those hugely famous pop stars behaving in a ludicrous and supposedly

hilarious manner in their slapstick new offering. Suddenly, well into the film I sat bolt upright and became glued to the huge, moving images on the screen. In yet another farcical plot twist Paul McCartney had accidentally been injected with a 'shrinking' serum and disappeared as his clothes crumpled into an empty heap. The camera then cut to his tiny figure peeping from under the hem of his trouser leg. As he emerged naked, he grabbed a discarded Wrigley's Spearmint wrapper nearby and pulled it around his nether regions to protect his modesty.

I was electrified to see this famously good looking and desirable young male musician in an apparent state of complete undress. But my heart skipped a beat when he almost dropped his makeshift covering as he clambered into a huge plastic ashtray to protect him from a cartoonish fight which had broken out above and around him. A beer bottle was knocked over and showered him with brown liquid which he stood up and started to wash in — the paper skirt slipping to a dangerous angle across his thighs as he did so.

Literally on the edge of my seat, I was willing his flimsy covering to drop and reveal... Well, I wasn't actually sure, but I was desperate to find out! And then — suddenly — it was all over. Paul regained his full size and the utterly absurd storyline hurtled on. Half an hour later I walked out into the early summer evening sunshine in a total daze.

Those images, which had only lasted mere seconds, were burned into my memory — every time I closed my eyes in the months following, they replayed vividly and I felt this new and weird mix of anticipation, curiosity and, what I would only later identify as, pure lust.

But it was to be another four VERY long years before I would get to satiate my constant ache for sexual fulfilment with one of my hormonally-overactive classmates. A skinny, loose-limbed and slightly

buck-toothed boy called Tony who had an older brother from whom he inherited an impressive stash of 'dirty' magazines and harboured — as I was to discover to my cost — a bottled-up volcano of Catholic guilt. But that's another story...

A Response to Stephen Poulter

# The Profession

Ani

—let's talk about sandwiches, shall we? David says out loud.

A tray of sandwiches in front of him, and a table no longer quiet as conversations break with laughter. And a thousand world affairs erupt in the room, with people, and in my mind.

In the scene, it's lunch. The table's messy, with too many plates crammed together. Friends are sitting around, humming songs and poetry, gossips, and soliloquies. He's sitting next to me, sharing glances, one at a time. Soup is in our bowls. Our knees touch like gentle kisses, arms unintentionally caressing, softly rubbing onto each other.

Is there something going on with you two? Hannah asks, her brows furrowed, smiling suspiciously.

No, we say almost instantly, and laugh it off, and go back to staring at our soup. He drinks it, I eat it. She goes back to Leonard on her left side, speaking of nature and politics.

There's a discreet shift in his disposition, while I listen to the inane chattering of the group at the table. He grabs my thigh. Before anyone could notice, he whispers, is there something going on with us?

I look at him and reply, I dunno, is it?

Clanking of the spoons against the china. The room is engulfed in the scent of good food. Sweet, salty and sour. The room smells so herby, David says as Rosalind and Anwar serve some pesto onto their plates.

He didn't reply. He simply played with his food. Swirling the spoon in the soup. Poking the desert next to his bowl.

I breathe. We share glances yet again.

Oh, for god's sake, two of you just start fucking already, Lee shouts from the other end of the table.

Fuck off, Lee, I say. Lee grins.

He looks at me. Again. He is waiting for me to perform the remaining dialogue.

I felt the gaze not just his but also everybody else's. A spotlight. It was exciting and nerve-wracking. He and I were colleagues. Friends. But there's desire now. Oh god. And there's violence to this desire. It won't be satiated by mere congeniality, it seems. The citrus smell of his sweat and perfume, his mandarin collar shirt, his razor bumps on his jaw. I think of him a bit too much. I think of him—

Wait. This wasn't in the script — Um, I freeze.

\* \* \*

CUT! The assistant director's voice echoes throughout the set. Let's take a five everybody.

He gets up and goes to his chair near the table fan. Fanning himself with his shirt. Anwar is next to him, cracking jokes, not sure what he said, but they chuckle. He is on his phone now.

Sorry, I froze a little, I tell Arundathi, our assistant director. That's alright, don't worry about it, she says, it was just the first take of the day anyway. We'll get there. Just go through the script, and we'll take it from the top. She smiles. She's nice.

Okay, I reply.

I have a confession to make. I think I'm not very good at acting.

# Don't Forget your Tights!

## Stevie Savage

'I wish that I could have swingy hair,' I said to my mum as I sat on the floor between her knees as she pulled it into tight cornrows.

'Well, you have the hair that you have, and we have to make the best of it.' Mum was the manager of my hair, and she took this job very seriously. It was her mission to keep it tamed and tidy despite it having a will of its own. Feather light, unruly, frizzy and brittle, it never grew beyond my neck. She brushed hard and pulled it into the style of the day, and there were many. Bunches, buns, plaits, cornrows.

I dreamt of all the ways I would have my hair if it was straight. I particularly yearned for a high ponytail that would swish from side to side as I walked.

People frequently wanted to touch or comment on my hair. Friends' parents, playground mums, teachers, strangers sitting behind me on the bus. 'I bet you can't get a comb through that,' or 'it's softer than I thought it would be,' or, 'those plaits really only suit coloured hair' (and she didn't mean red or purple).

'Why is your hair like a Brillo pad?' asked my friend, 'it's scratchy and hard'

'Yes, like a fluffy gollywog,' said another then they patted and wiggled their fingers into my bunches giggling at its texture. I could feel my cheeks bristling with shame.

'My mum's going to straighten it tonight,' I retorted defiantly.

I could smell the cooker ring heating the hot comb in the kitchen.

'Ready love,' Mum called. I feared the imminent hot scalping but

equally loved the thought that my hair would be slightly swingy for a short while.

'Hold still girl.' I was trying to swing as it was happening. 'All done now.' I was free to shake my head like a pony and feel the feathery fronds of joy of joys, a fringe! No need for a tea towel and headband this evening.

As I got ready for bed mum called up, 'Don't forget your tights, you don't want nappy head in the morning.' My nightly routine of a lathering of coconut oil and a stocking leg pulled over my head, fastened with grips bought me sharply back to reality.

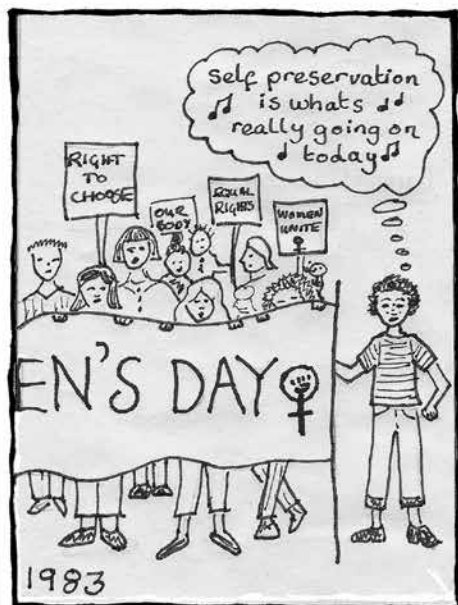
By the 70s a wave of black singers were proudly sporting huge afros. My brother and I went for it, perfecting our fros in the hallway mirror. Mum was not happy with this 'loose hair' but it was at this time when I embraced who I really was.

As a young mother I had no time for fiddly styling, wearing cornrows for ease.

By the time I was fifty, the change in hormones made it thin and brittle. Why don't you take it all off, suggested my wife during lockdown and at the age of sixty I liberated myself from my hair. I now sport a grey number one buzzcut and I feel amazing.

# What happened to "Young hearts run free"?

Stevie Savage





# Hospital Bed

## Stevie Savage

I have held a thousand souls, the ancient and the new.  
There at the best and worst of times,  
where life begins and ends, and all that's in between.

I am the carrier of pain and loss and fear,  
my pillows sanctuary of so many midnight tears,  
my blankets a swaddling of hope for recovery.

A woman's labour brings forth in me sweet heads of a new generation.  
I bear their mothers' pain and joy.  
I am the backdrop to their first photos.

I am a refuge for the confused and frail, wandering rooms that all look  
the same.  
Stan's milk float as he begins his round at 3am,  
Betty's worktop where she packs and unpacks, packs and unpacks her  
shopping.

I visit every corner of my sterile world, the scanner and the theatre.  
Like an ocean liner I plough the sea of visitors  
with their kind smiles and pitying looks.

I am dressed daily in stiff white linen,  
Precise corners performed with pride

by those whose cool touch is laid on those for whom compassion is everything.

I am a place of prayer and vigil, of families gathered,  
and priests and holding of hands.

I hold safe those departing this life until it's time for them to go.

A Response to Stevie Savage

# Four Walls

## Darsey Dale

When I read 'Hospital Bed' by Stevie Savage, it made me think about all of the things around us that aid our everyday lives but also contribute to the lives of millions of others. Though these people may be strangers, like we once were, we all share a common denominator somewhere, whether that be a picnic bench, a supermarket, or a parking space. It also made me think of the individual constants in our lives that we might not care to think about. What came to mind for me was the walls of my childhood bedroom, which have surrounded me since I was little to this very day.

The walls of my childhood bedroom hold secrets,  
Never heard before.

The walls, once lilac and mint green, are now a dark blue,  
A crack runs from one corner to the centre,  
Growing over the years as I have done too.

As a child, three of the walls were lilac,

One was a statement mint green,

My bed was pushed into the corner and the walls would watch over  
me,

As I prayed to a god I didn't believe in for friends.

I was young and I was lonely,

And too young to be lonely and never anyone's first choice.

My dad preferred my sister,

My best friend had her own best friend,  
And my favourite teacher probably doesn't even remember my name.  
But I had four walls and a roof.  
As a pre-teen those walls were dark purple,  
I moved my furniture around every other week,  
And the walls would watch over me as I cried and read,  
And prayed to a god I didn't believe in for clarity.  
I was young and I felt alone,  
And I was too young to understand why I felt about girls how I did  
about boys too.  
I asked and He never answered  
But I had four walls and a roof  
As a teenager my walls were light blue,  
My bed didn't have a chosen spot,  
And the walls around me would observe in silence as I cried and  
silently called out for help.  
As I prayed to a god that I didn't believe in for any way out of the hole I  
dug,  
I didn't want blood on my hands and I didn't want to make a scene,  
So I begged to be detached.  
I would whisper to the ceiling,  
To the sky above it,  
To the heavens above that,  
And I would beg for some kind of resolution.  
But it never came, not in the way I wanted,  
And I was, at the end of the day, a sad girl with four walls and a ceiling.  
Now, at twenty, my walls are dark blue,  
I have a double bed which I share with my cat,

The walls around me watch as I laugh with my friends and watch my favourite TV shows.

I now have a best friend, I am hers too,

I accept myself more than ever,

And I am alive but I am also living.

# The Stick

## David Shenton

Taking a dog for a walk is an absolute joy during lockdown. Along with all vulnerable over-seventies, we are the first to be shut down and locked in, never to see the light of day for another seven months... at least.

Unless — you have a dog — or two, even better. Spot and The Wolf are my licence to wander at will, and we go everywhere for as long as we like.

You are allowed to exercise your dog twice a day. There is no specified length of time as dogs can be stubborn about pooing in a planned time frame.

All of a sudden, dogs are the thing to have. The going price for puppies shoot up... 'You can get £300 apiece for these beauties,' somebody hisses in my ear.... There is a national surge in dognapping cases.

We walk down the middle of deserted main roads. We visit Chapelfield Gardens, and come across all kinds of unmasked stragglers who want to rent my dogs. 'Yeah, we got this bad rat problem round ours, mate... how about 50 quid for a weekend lend?' and 'We're setting up a Jack Russell breeding programme in Hethersett, these handsome studs would have the best of lives.'

'No good to you mister, they've been done.'

'That's criminal that is.'

'Criminal!', he yells after us as we slope off.

So we explore less threatening areas, like the lawns around the Covid abandoned County Hall... once a park designed by the famous Humphrey Repton from Aylsham and his Red Books, as discussed in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. Now the grounds of a 60's office block where I had an interview for my first teaching job in 1972.

I'd heard there is also an aeroplane, a Jaguar XW563 'The Spirit of Coltishall'.. as a garden sculpture. Me, Spot and The Wolf escape grim lockdown once again in search of this fighter jet.

As we get to the grounds, the bushes rattle and part and the tiniest, oldest little old lady steps onto the path, clutching stolen daffodils. We both have face masks on, mine a snazzy tartan number, hers a soggy blue NHS type.

'Hello' I say, 'Can you tell me where the aerop...'.

'I've got a stick,' she says.

'WOAHH.' I hold my hands up.. but I see no stick.

'Stick?'

'It's a fold-up. See...'

She fishes around in her coat pocket and comes out with what looks like a magic wand... She maybe presses a button and flicks it. The wand telescopes out, shows itself to be white — a stick for the partially sighted.

'Have you come to drag me back?' she asks.

'No, I'm taking my dogs to see an aeroplane,' as though that makes sense.

'It's there — look. Nobody has ratted on me then?'

'Not to me.'

'We're all locked in our rooms, I can't bear it. I'm on the ground floor, so I climbed out of the window.'

'Have you walked far?'

'No, Bracondale Residential.'

'Can you see ok to get yourself back?'

'I can see enough.'

'And your stick?'

'Oh, they're very strict about the stick...you're supposed to use it all the time, no arguments.'

'But it was folded in your pocket. Don't you like using it?'

'It makes me look ancient.. and do you know what I like doing most?... I like to swing my arms.'

She folds the stick, puts it away, gives me the daffodils, pats the dogs, turns and leaves — striding away, swinging her arms for all the world to see.

Me, and the boys, we all watch and smile as she goes, then turn to seek out our next Covid-19 adventure.



# No Kid of Mine

## Steve Shillinglaw

I never asked if I could go to college, I always knew there was no money for that in our family. Don't get me wrong, there was money for alcohol and my sisters, who married young and had children immediately. They were constantly being drip-fed a fiver here, a tenner there. My brother and I were just expected to get on with it.

I managed some decent O-Levels at 16 and that same summer, fell into a job with Dad as a labourer converting a pair of dilapidated cottages into a country property. Dad strangely wanted me to be a builder like him, he was proud of being a qualified bricklayer and took a real pride in his work. However, I saw this opportunity as easy money, I didn't really like getting dirty!

I oddly enjoyed the work and learnt an awful lot about building and architecture, I worked on the project until completion and Dad thought I was all set to learn a Trade. But it was a cold winter, so I took a job in a local factory where I quickly progressed and became trainee management. The work was interesting and I wasn't unhappy, but I could see into the future: wife, kids, dog... I instinctively knew that wasn't me, I quietly made plans to make a big change!

The grant system at the time was such that if you could show you had supported yourself for at least three years you could apply for a discretionary grant for higher education based on your own income. Here was a chance to be independent, I wanted to go to Art School and ultimately become an Interior Architect. I felt as if I was building on Dad's foundation, just my sights set a bit higher! I applied for, and was

offered a place, I quietly organised the finances and secured future lodging.

It was now 1979 and although I didn't spend lots of family time watching TV, I did like *Play for Today*, a kitchen sink drama often pushing at conventions and boundaries.

*Coming Out* by James A Hall, starring Hywell Bennett and Anton Rodgers, was the play that particular week. None of us fully understood the title, but it quickly became clear and the atmosphere in the room was heavy and loaded! I sat on the end of the sofa nearest the TV, Dad at the other end. I found myself hoping the seat cushions would just swallow me up, but I was frozen to the spot.

Somehow we saw it through, mostly in an uncomfortable silence, and as the titles rolled Dad leaned forward and spoke very clearly to me via the TV screen.

'If any kid of mine turned out like that, well, that would be it! He'd not see his Mum, or his sisters, any of the family – he'd be out, gone!'

Mum was unusually quiet!

What would *you* do?

I *was* that Gay kid, I felt it was always fairly obvious, Dad absolutely knew and was making his thoughts crystal clear. I now knew I was making the right decision, it was six months until, unbeknown to them, I started at Art School. I wanted to save as much as possible to help me through student life. I felt I couldn't risk the threat. I kept quiet.

A month before the start of my new life, I handed in my notice at work and three weeks later my parents had to be told. Dad was livid, incandescent with rage! 'Why would you give up a perfectly good job to go to bloody art school!' I wasn't surprised, I knew he wouldn't support me, I spoke with Mum and she thought he was a bit jealous, but he was her husband, a proud man and she understood her role

and place.

Art School was everything I wanted it to be. For the first time I was good at something, popular and independent. The opportunity wasn't wasted on me and I qualified with excellent results. I just loved learning and then went on to complete a degree in Leeds, far away from Norfolk.

I had very little contact with any of the family during this time, I was focused solely on my studies.

I received a brief note from Dad at my graduation, it read, 'Congratulations on your BA. You will have to start thinking about a job now, still, you know best. Dad.'

I still have his note.

Dad died in '94 and I felt an invisible weight lifted, I wanted to push ever forward and the following year I met my life partner. Mum died three years after Dad and even though we never had that 'I've something to tell you' moment, she met my 'friend' and did her best.

The following summer, circumstances allowed me to drive my sisters to see my brother in Newcastle — I took the opportunity to officially out myself in a Travelodge (Oh the glamour!). We talked 'til 3am before we heard a gentle knock on the door. Our neighbour was very happy for me but needed some sleep! Lots of stifled giggling but my revelation was not really required, they already knew and had just been waiting!

I envy those who have wonderful stories of embracing their sexuality. What would have happened if, on that sofa in 1979, I had stepped up and challenged Dad. Of course, I'll never know.

My relationship with Dad was always somewhat complicated. I hope he understands how my gamble to pursue higher education paid off. I've enjoyed a lifestyle beyond my expectations and his too, I'm sure. I

had to sacrifice my relationship with my family, at least for a while, but that's behind me now and it is possible that my pursuit of education over some promiscuous fun possibly kept me alive! HIV/AIDS was at its peak when I graduated in 1986 — and that's a whole other story!

As I look back more than forward, I question some of my decisions, or the timing at least, but I am finally living an authentic life which I could never have imagined as a queer kid growing up in Norfolk 60 years ago.

**BONDING**

Steve Shillinglaw.

C'm on  
boy -  
time I got  
you your  
first pint

Two pints  
please  
Thelma



Actually  
Dad, I'd  
rather have  
a G+T...  
ice and a  
slice

a  
Lady's  
Glass



drank in  
silence  
- never  
repeated

# Dark Side of the Moon

## Chris Trilsbach

Probably the most significant album I ever owned was Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon*. It was a Christmas present when I was about seventeen, and my second LP. Having two LPs to play was incredible, and even better was another gift which was my first pair of stereo headphones. Suddenly I could listen to music whenever I wanted, and at any volume.

Listening to stereo music on headphones for the first time was a revelation, the depth of the soundstage made the music come alive. You could hear the minute details in the recording, including sadly the inevitable scratches.

A danger of course was that while wearing headphones you could not hear your own voice. Singing along to music can be embarrassing when there are family members in range. I once caught my sister singing along to The Osmonds at the top of her voice not realising how loud she was.

The stereogram our family owned was very basic and not what you would call hi-fi in those days, but at least it had two speakers, and most importantly a socket for my new headphones. It would sometimes skip on records, and did it seamlessly in the same place every time on the same track on side B of *The Dark Side of the Moon*. You could not easily tell that something was missing. It was not 'til I heard it on someone else's stereo that I realised I was missing several seconds. To this day when I hear that track, I wait for the extra piece of music.

The album was so different to anything I had heard before, with

sound effects including clocks ticking and chiming loudly. There were strange vocal sounds in the background, which were recorded by a roadie in the band and the doorman at Abbey Road studios. It also used experimental synthesisers on some of the tracks to make unique sounds and melodies that were impossible with conventional instruments at the time.

The title *Dark Side of the Moon* implies something hidden or unseen but the album really is about life, death, greed and mental illness. It was supposed to represent the struggles the band were going through, and the recent loss of a member to drugs.

Apart from the music the lyrics were so powerful and remain so to this day. The third track 'Time' starts with the lyric, '*Ticking away the moments that make up a dull day, you fritter and waste the hours in an offhand way.*' How true these words were, and how often over the years have I frittered badly.

I played this album to death, and when CDs became available it was the first one I bought. Listening to it clearly in full Hi Fidelity without the scratches was like hearing it for the first time again, especially on headphones. Originally the album had to be compressed to fit on vinyl. Now finally it was available in all its glory.

# Electronic Detective

## Chris Trilsbach

I'd always been fascinated by electronics, but never imagined I would become an electronic detective.

At the time I was working for British Telecom and had done an apprenticeship with the company. There was a problem in that somebody was making nuisance calls to a woman on a regular basis. The calls were disturbing because the caller would give details about the victim's movements proving that he was watching her.

These calls were being made on an early electronic exchange. It was by modern standards very basic and it was impossible to trace telephone calls unless an engineer was there at the time. I was asked to look at the problem as my manager knew of my interest in electronics.

This was my dream job. I was good at electronics and programming computers and above all I loved problem solving. Especially when solving the problem helps someone. I was in my element and being paid to do it as well. Of course, there was some nervousness as well as there was a lot riding on me to catch the nuisance caller.

I managed to connect a PC to the exchange's central processor, and I could then record in a file on the computer the telephone number of anyone in that exchange who picked up their phone and what time they did it.

Once I got it working we had a plan. With my monitor and PC set up in the exchange, all we needed was the perpetrator to call more than once. The exact time the calls were received was very important,



so we had the victim of these calls set up an accurate clock beside her phone, and a notebook to record the times of each call. In theory all we needed was three calls and the nuisance caller's number should be the only one to appear in the computer file at those three times.

The trap was set and we waited nervously to see if he would call. After a day of waiting, we got the message that three calls had now been made to the victim. I excitedly downloaded the large file from the PC, and carefully deleted all telephone numbers in the file that were more than two minutes different than the times the victim gave us for each of the three calls. This would allow for timing errors and the time it took for him to dial. This still left a lot of numbers in the file, but I sorted it into telephone number order and looked for the incidence of three of the same number appearing and there it was.

We applied for permission to put a monitor on the nuisance caller's line, and the next time he made a call to his victim he got a visit from the police. We found out later that he had made hundreds of calls, and to more than one victim. He worked in electronics and knew that his calls couldn't easily be traced. He was wrong.

# Crossing Thresholds

## Steven Walton

Born during a Friday in August, 1960, under the sign of Virgo.  
Would I have been different if born on a Tuesday in Leo?

Childhood lives in memory as a continuing summer — sunshine, warmth, fields of golden wheat, cotton clouds in blue, arching skies that went on for miles; clear nights with silver moons.

I grew up on a Royal Air Force base in Norfolk, miles from the nearest town.

The safety was insular, enclosing, protective. Guarded by men in uniform.

Heavy Vulcan planes I never saw fly were based at Marham. They carried nuclear weapons. *That* was a state secret.

My daily needs were met by family, friends, and the military health services.

‘War brings bravery, honour, injury, trauma. Where is glory?’

BBC reports from Vietnam still leave me unsettled.

Mr. Purdy, a wartime serviceman and teacher, told our school assembly from the edge of the stage one truth: every casualty is someone’s child.

It was an early seventies Thursday evening, behind the Youth Club — a green, barrel-shaped metal hut, built during the Second World War — where I had my first kiss.

Sixties music seeped through the corrugated outside walls.

My lips were dry. Our teeth clashed. She wasn’t a girlfriend... Was this a threshold or a rite of passage?

A formative experience came years later — I stepped into the wider world.

Into the world we [the LGBT] inhabit.

The month was November.

My body, armouring itself against the cold.

I walked, shoulders hunched, posture stooped, weighed down by judgments — my own and others.

The target of ignorance. Hostility. Misrepresentation.

I believed others mattered more than me.

Naive and inexperienced, I longed for affirmation, a place to belong, proof that I mattered.

Outside the Jolly Butchers pub stood a police van, its lights glaring.

State-sponsored intimidation.

Those van lights illuminating their verdict:

*'You are criminal. You are unnatural.'*

Van lights victimised indiscriminately those who walked through the red-light area of Norwich — some simply on their way home.

I cannot remember — was there traffic in Ber Street that night?

I had turned back before.

Not this time.

Their presence ignited something in me.

They weren't there to protect.

They were there to control.

*'I, We, They, Them'* — the marginalised were to be kept in place.

Hesitating at the curb.

Was it worth it?

Would I find what I needed?

I stepped forward, crossing Ber Street into the van's harsh white lights.

Let them see me.

Unsteady courage, certainly.

The action was my beginning.

Ahead of me, a cobbled alley, a century or more old?

Light shone on the wet stones.

Were these hard, rounded cobbles polished by patrons of Ber Street Molly Houses where homosexual men met secretly in the eighteenth century?

By wartime American servicemen, and doss-house residents in years past?

My few paces adding to the history of the alley.

Looking left — the inconspicuous threshold: a plain wooden door, set above a stone step.

I paused my breathing and movement.

Walking forward, over the step, through the open door.

Inside, a composed unknown woman at the entrance — Beryl, I learnt her name later — looked up.

*'Do you know this is a gay club?'*

She enquired, not knowing who I was.

A pivotal moment of reckoning.

Self-expression, survival, the unknown.

Or turn away.

There was to be no retreat.

Despite the noose of fear and self-oppression tightening my neck.

A pause.

Taking a stand against repression.

Acknowledging forbidden wishes.

A firm nod — forcing itself through the stranglehold — a necessary affirmation.

‘Yes.’

Years later, in spring 1985, I took a train, climbed a steep hill to Sheffield University for my first Friends Homosexual Fellowship weekend.

We were Members or Attenders of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).

In the silence of worship and the presence of those gathered, I found healing.

Resting in the Light, I belonged.

The soundtrack to that weekend: Madonna’s ‘Material Girl’.

Why? Something to do with the synthesizer and background beat.

Four decades later, I have friends among Friends.

I have had forty years of adult life experience since crossing Ber Street. Different forms of employment, HIV/AIDS in the world, discovering my vocation, boyfriends, travelling. Post Covid ... another threshold.

My therapist: a straight man, a doctor.

Creating a place for emotional and physical catharsis.

Streaming therapy: body-centred, personally confrontational and challenging.

Our face-to-face sessions in a small, multi-purpose room, painted in magnolia — so plain to prevent distraction.

I was recounting the ‘*Do you wanna try*’ scene from the HBO film *Looking*, parts filmed on the Castro, in my paradise city of San Francisco.

Patrick, a white Anglo-Saxon (me), realises Richie, the dark, hairy

(my fantasy) Latino, is the man for him.

The soundtrack: Perfume Genius' 'Hood'.

Plaintive piano notes, a solo man's voice tapping into personal bittersweet truths.

Dr. Shrinks' (his name preference): hands and fingers applying pressure, kneading, manipulating stiff muscle fibres, compressing cells, discharging decades-old toxic energy.

Imagining my breath reaching into my body, muscular armouring cracking open.

Sharp pain, penetrating my chest.

My body reacts.

My psyche splits.

Moments of pregnant timelessness.

Purposeful surrender.

Chest heaves.

Tremors build into total-body muscular shuddering.

In the silences: releasing.

Expanding.

Expressing.

Retching.

Not suppressing.

Storm waves of emotions and truths hit — repressed passion, desire, fantasy, accusations against myself, others, life, unrealistic expectations, unmet needs, loneliness.

Seeing through tears.

The physical and emotional catharsis left me disorientated in place, unsteady on my feet, asking myself:

*What is love?*

*Is love authentic connection?*

The maelstrom settled.

Illusions that once provided 'comfort' had been stripped away.

Processing and recovering from the consequences of that physical and emotional upheaval took weeks.

I felt exhausted, raw, hollow.

Over time, connecting with others — and with myself — my ground became firmer and honest.

### A moment of reflection.

I continue to live.

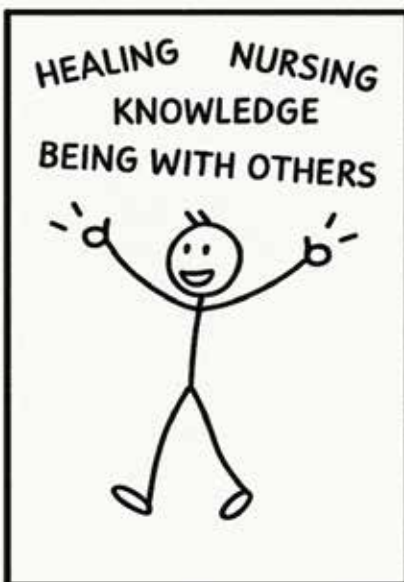
Not knowing if and how I would have been different, born in Leo.

I have been formed by experience — being touched, touching the lives of others.

I say Yes, then Yes again, intending to keep saying Yes to every threshold.

Discernment  
Seeking What Matters

Steven Walton.









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