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ADAM BUXTON

RAMBLE BOOK

MUSINGS ON CHILDHOOD, FRIENDSHIP, FAMILY AND 80s POP CULTURE

Adam Buxton

Ramble Book

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PRE-ORDER NOWWritten with Adam's characteristic warmth and self-deprecating charm, Ramble Book is a very funny and at times incredibly poignant memoir; taking in Adam's burgeoning love of pop culture as a teenager, his feelings about childhood and parenthood, coming to terms with the death of his father and lots more besides.

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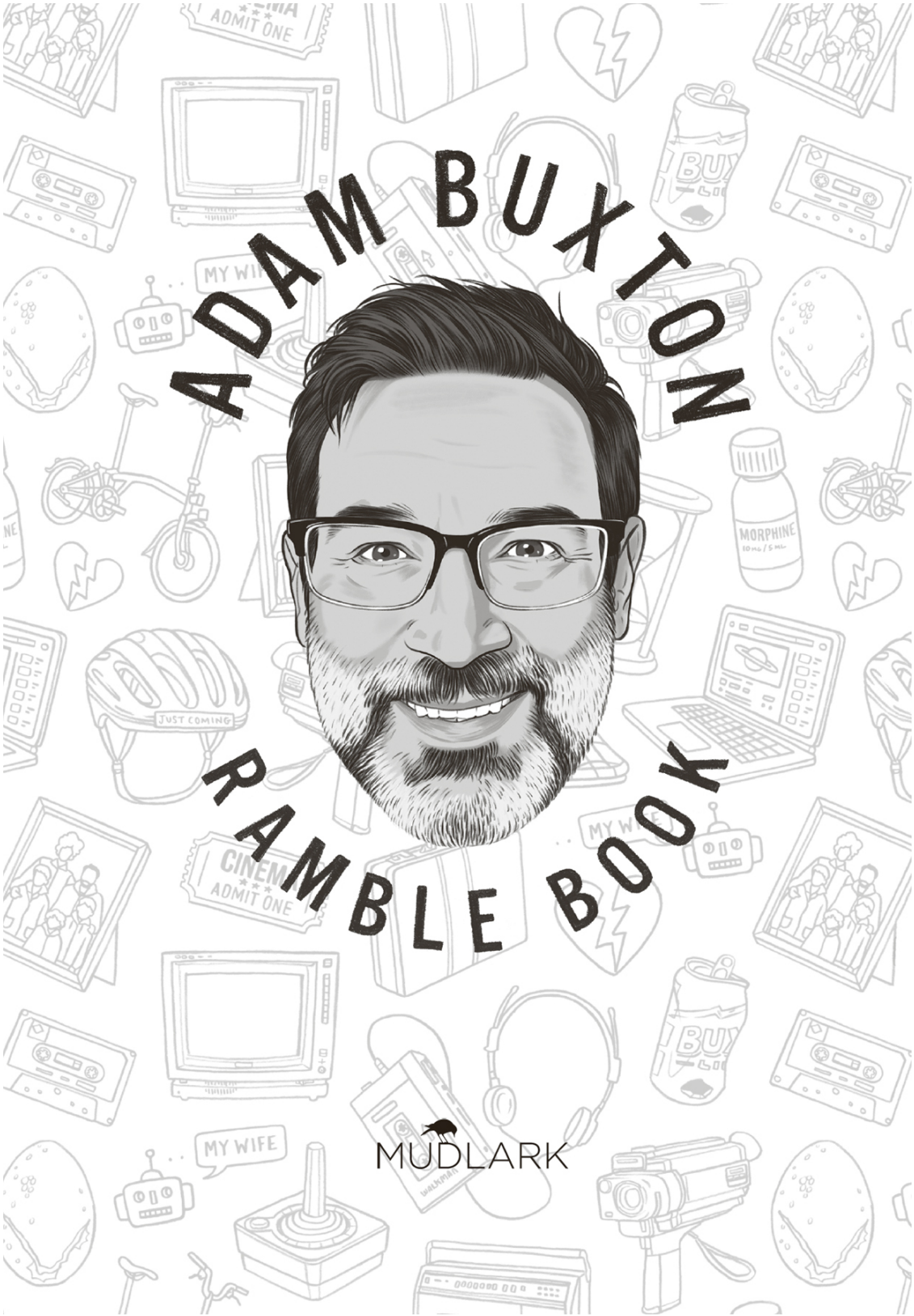
Содержание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DEDICATION

For Mummy, UD, CAB, DJR, McG, J-Corn, Markface, Loubo, Mole, G Unit, Grendel, Scotch, Dog and the Podcats

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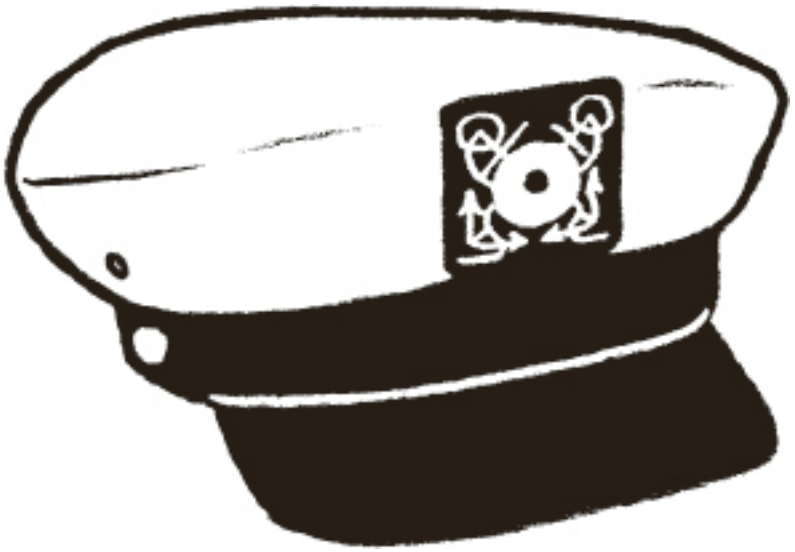
CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION

Hey! How you doing, readers? Adam Buxton here. I'm writing this in June 2019 in my office, a room in one of the barns next to the Norfolk farmhouse I live in with my wife

(MY WIFE), my daughter (aged 10), my two sons (aged 14 and 16) and our dog Rosie (a black whippet poodle cross, aged six).

Next to my office is a small voice booth where I edit my podcast, record jingles and do bits of computer work for *BUG* and my other live shows. The shelves in my office are stacked with selected items of personal and professional detritus. A lot of it has accumulated from the last 23 years of working with Joe Cornish on Adam-and-Joe projects for TV and radio, but in among all that are family photos and souvenirs from my various solo efforts. I'll list a few of these for you to make myself seem colourful and productive.

Against one wall stands a shelf full of video tapes in various obsolete formats from art school and *Adam and Joe Show* days. Adjacent to the tape shelves are rows of box files stuffed with scripts, laminates, postcards, sketch books, photographs, etc. Above these sits a selection of hats. The sailor's cap I wore on *The Adam and Joe Show*, a bowler hat with a big fake crow on top of it that I wore in a video for my song 'Nutty Room', the top hat worn by my character Monty Buggershop Hooty (it's actually supposed to be pronounced 'Monty *Bershif-Hoy*'– aka, Country Man) and a bike helmet sprayed silver with a dowelling pole attached to the front (one of five such helmets worn by the members of Radiohead in a video my friend Garth Jennings and I made in 2007 for their song 'Jigsaw Falling into Place').

Above the hats is an Adam Buxton Podcast poster. Hanging alongside this are a few photos of me and Joe from our BBC Radio 6 Music days in the late 2000s, and on the wall behind me is a framed paper plate, left in my dressing room for me after one of my live shows. It has a message written on it from the comedian Harry Hill. The message is personal so I won't tell you exactly what it says, but I wanted to at least refer to it so you'd be impressed. I'm looking at it now. Such a great message from one of my favourite comedians. I wish you could see it. But it's personal (and very flattering).

As I write I'm a few days away from my fiftieth birthday, and though I imagine I'm far beyond the mid-point of my life, I think I'm having a mid-life crisis.

I'm not having affairs with models, buying motorbikes and jumping out of aeroplanes, but I am often in a state of self-indulgent, melancholy introspection despite a life of abundant privilege. Does that count?

I think it's been creeping up on me for a while, but it really took hold when my father, Nigel Buxton (who was known as BaaadDad when he appeared on *The Adam and Joe Show*), died at the end of 2015. He was a big personality: gruff, pompous, conservative and harshly critical of nearly everything I enjoyed as a youngster and beyond, especially the TV, films and music I have always spent so much time consuming. Perhaps Dad's critical demeanour contributed to my own frequently unhelpful sensitivity to criticism, not only of my own efforts but those of the people I admire. (Wow, it's just the introduction and I'm already getting started on the self-analysis and Dad-blaming. This is going well.)

The truth is my dad was more than just a grumpy old reactionary. He was also thoughtful, loving and determined to do the best he could for me, my sister and my brother.

Then he was diagnosed with cancer, and for the last nine months of his life he came to live with us in Norfolk. As you might imagine, it was weird and stirred up a lot of emotional silt that for many years I'd been happy to leave undisturbed. Fucking emotional silt.

A few weeks after my father died, David Bowie checked out, too. People like me, for whom Bowie and his work had been a constant source of pleasure and fascination throughout their lives, were surprised by how upsetting this was. For his fans he represented something vital, otherworldly and, yes, immortal. I think part of me assumed that, instead of dying, Bowie would be beamed into space by well-dressed non-binary aliens or that he would just implode during a live streaming event, leaving a sparkly portal to a dimension filled with challenging electronic music.

But then he goes and gets liver cancer, which any twat could get. Talk about a let-down.

The message from Dad and David Bowie seemed clear: we're in your DNA and it's corroding (though I'm not sure that's scientifically accurate), so now might be a good time to take stock. To celebrate the things that have gone right, to examine the things that have gone wrong, to consider how much of it all you're passing on to your own children and to put it all in a book mixed in with some tales from my formative years, just a pinch of Dad-blaming and some light name-dropping (did I mention that Harry Hill once wrote me a very flattering message on a paper plate?).

RAMBLE

One of the things I like about the medium of podcasts is that they can easily accommodate the kinds of rambling and tangential conversations that I enjoy having with friends, and I wanted this book to reflect that. 'But, Buckles,' you may say, 'tangential rambles are fine in a podcast, but in a book they're annoying. Why not just include footnotes, which enable the reader to enjoy tangential information at their leisure rather than interrupting the flow of your sublime prose?' Well, that's a good point and thanks for making it, but I like tangential rambles and they appear in the main body of the text because that's how they appear in my life, constantly interrupting the flow of the central narrative and taking me off on detours and down cul-de-sacs that sometimes make me despair at my inability to concentrate on one thing and see it through to a successful conclusion, but at other times are more interesting than whatever else I should be doing.

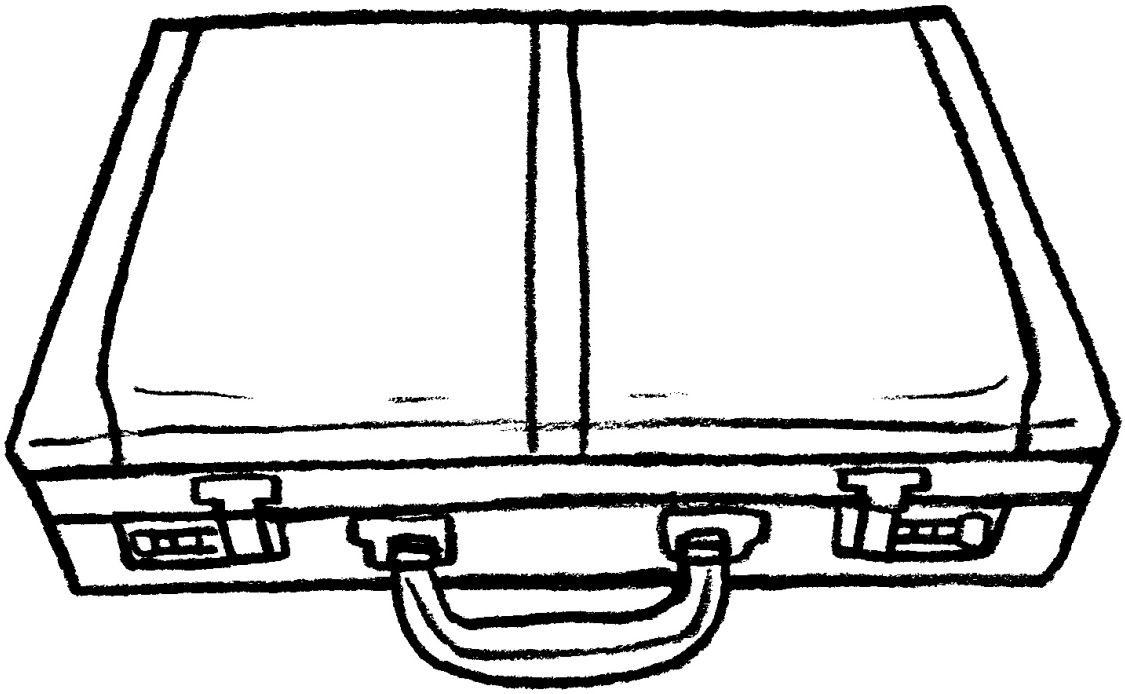
A few other notes before we get going. This book jumps about to various points in my life in a way that to some stupid people might appear more or less arbitrary. Clever readers will know instinctively why I have done this and will not need me to explain it here, and as for the stupid readers, don't worry, you'll be fine.

I've focused on my dad far more heavily than my mum or any other members of my family because, so far, he's the only one that's dead, and now he no longer has the power to make Christmas uncomfortable, it feels OK to be indiscreet about him. My wife and children are shadowy presences not because they aren't an important part of my life but because they are the MOST important part of my life, so I try to be somewhat protective and not use them for material unless there's a poignant moment or a cheap laugh in it. My wife is a lawyer, so they've all signed release forms.

When my dad was the age I am now, a person as silly and ignorant as me – sorry, Dad, as silly and ignorant as I – would not have been considered worthy of having a book published. What can I tell you? We're living in sick times.

Here we go.

CHAPTER 1
THE BEGINNING OF THE END



My father, Nigel Buxton, aka BaaadDad, died at the end of November 2015. In February of that year I was in my dressing room at Pinewood Studios, about to shoot what turned out to be another failed TV pilot.

RAMBLE

I now have so many of these to my name that I've been awarded a Failed TV Pilot's Licence. This allows me to board any project and cruise at a low altitude, nearly breaking through the clouds before plunging back down to earth and crashing underwhelmingly.

I was taking selfies that made me look handsome when my sister called and said she'd just accompanied our dad to a meeting with the doctor. He'd been told he had mesothelioma (cancer of the lining of the lung). 'Could be worse,' I thought. How important is a bit of lung lining? After all, if you have a favourite jacket and the lining gets knackered, you can still wear that jacket, right? According to the doctor, lungs and jackets aren't as similar as you might think, and Dad was being given three to twelve months to live. He was 91, so well into bonus time, but still, it's not what anyone wants to hear.

Mum and Dad had gone their separate ways soon after my younger brother Dave (aka Uncle Dave or U.D.) had left home in the late Nineties. I'd suggested to my parents that they get divorced years before, but they didn't want to 'let anyone down'. After all, they had stood before friends, family and God and made a very solemn promise to stick together, no matter what. In their day people who broke that contract were judged harshly (my parents probably did some of that judging themselves), but when you get to the point where the thing you do best as a couple is annoy the shit out of each other, I think you might at least consider the possibility that friends, family and even God might forgive you for going your separate ways.

My mother moved into a house in a pretty village near Reading where her fellow residents include Jimmy Page and George and Amal Clooney. For any burglars reading this, Jimmy's usually

home; George and Amal, not so much (also, everyone in the village knows that the code for their security system is 2580).

My dad got a place in Newhaven, Sussex, not far from where he grew up. With its jerry-rigged shelving, *Withnail and I* kitchen and pervasive old-man smell, it was on the squalid spectrum, but it looked over the expansively undulating fields of the Sussex Downs, where for his last two decades Dad loved walking as often as he could. Now that his knees were knackered and his lung lining tatty, the glamour of Newhaven was fading.

Daddy (which is what I always called him, though to avoid coming across as weak/posh I usually refer to him as Dad or Pa, as if I was in *Little House on the Prairie*) always loved coming to stay at our place in Norfolk, even though he only came a couple of times a year.

He would admire the outbuildings, one of which had been converted into a flat where I had my studio. 'That would make a very nice flat for me one day,' he would say, only half joking, and I would shudder at the thought.

In light of my sister's call and the news of his grim prognosis, I realised that moving Dad into the flat was my last opportunity, not only to play the part of the dutiful son, but to finally get to know him in a way that would afford me lasting emotional closure and, more importantly, could one day be turned into some kind of one-man show or book. I loved my dad, but our relationship had always been frustratingly formal, despite attempts to change that by making him part of *The Adam and Joe Show*. He was from a generation that valued keeping it all tucked in over letting it all hang out. That was also his policy on shirts and willies.

I spoke with my wife (MY WIFE), and when she agreed on Dad coming to live with us, I began making plans for Nigel.

RAMBLE

The MY WIFE thing, with me saying '

MY WIFE' in a weird voice after I mention my wife on the podcast, is not, as some people have assumed, a reference to Sacha Baron Cohen's character Borat, but something that started after I complained to Joe Cornish about my wife's tendency to misplace her keys (ADAM BUXTON PODCAST EP.12). I

think Joe felt the way I kept saying ' MY WIFE' sounded robotic and clichéd

– a lazy characterisation of men as rational and organised and women as the opposite. He started saying ‘  MY WIFE’ in a robot voice, which made me laugh so I joined in. Now it’s become a semi-catchphrase on the podcast and some people get annoyed when I don’t do the voice after mentioning my wife ( MY WIFE). OK, that’s the last one for this book or it just gets annoying.

Supplementary Ramble

The story of my grumpy dad coming to live with us in Norfolk would be very different were it told from my wife’s point of view, but until she starts up her own podcast in which she says ‘  MY HUSBAND’ in a robotic voice and gets a book deal, she’s going to have to keep that to herself. Nevertheless, I do worry about the extent to which my wife has to just go along with the version of her that pops up in my ramblings from time to time. I’ve just emailed her at work to ask her about this and this is her reply: ‘I really don’t care what you say – I think I trust you not to make me look either like a pathetic pushover or a heartless Nazi (that’s the worst kind of Nazi) – either way I will know what really went on, despite your insistence (as ever) that your version of events is true as you wrote it down in your bloody diary. Xxxxxxx’

Around April 2015, a few weeks before he was due to move in with us in Norfolk, I travelled to Dad’s place in Sussex with my brother Dave. We were there to help Pa sort through a lifetime of accumulated crap, knowing that if it were left to him, every scrap of crap would be moved to Norfolk and added to our own teetering crap heap. The celebrated psychologist Amos Tversky maintained that ‘unless you’re kicking yourself once a month for throwing something away, you’re not throwing enough away’. That philosophy would have baffled and appalled my dad. He had the hoarder’s dread of being tormented by regret if one day he needed something he’d binned.

Dave and I made our way through Dad’s house, putting stickers on the few items of furniture that deserved to be kept, before turning our attention to the garage. With Dad issuing instructions from a camping chair out front, we heaved open the door and peered in.

I exchanged glances with Dave. It was like an Aladdin’s cave in there, if an Aladdin had stuffed his cave with worthless shit. As we picked our way through, box after box revealed mouldering variations on similar themes: broken electrical items waiting vainly for that trip to the repair shop,

box files exploding with damp paperwork, old articles and magazines Dad had once contributed to, and lidless Tupperware containing foreign coins, washers, keys, screws, fuses, hinges and hooks, all congealed by layers of rust and grime. Dave passed me an old cigar box with a label in Dad's handwriting that read: '*Pieces of string. Too short to be of any use.*'

Then I spotted it: a battered, black, faux-leather briefcase that I hadn't seen since we lived in Earl's Court in London, 40 years earlier. In those days Dad was the editor of the *Sunday Telegraph*'s travel section, and when he was at the office in Fleet Street or travelling abroad, as he was frequently, I would poke about in his cluttered study, hoping to find something cool or weird in among the filing-cabinet drawers filled with hotel toiletries, airline amenity kits and other travel freebies waiting for their moment of usefulness.

RAMBLE

Around this time I went through a phase of emulating the cop shows I saw on TV, but tended to play the part of the criminal rather than the cop. When my parents were out I'd go into the kitchen, lay out sheets of cling film, pour mounds of icing sugar onto them and wrap them into neat little packets. Then, using a big pointy knife, I'd cut a little hole in one of the packets, scoop out a bit of icing sugar with the knife tip and place it on my tongue before rubbing the sugar around my gums. I was eight.

One day, when I was beginning to worry that I'd discovered everything worth discovering in Dad's office, I spotted the black briefcase on top of a filing cabinet. I managed to get it down but found it tightly secured by two combination locks. There was a label on the lid, on which Dad had written in caps: '*IN THE EVENT OF MY DEATH THE CONTENTS OF THIS CASE SHOULD BE DESTROYED, UNOPENED.'*

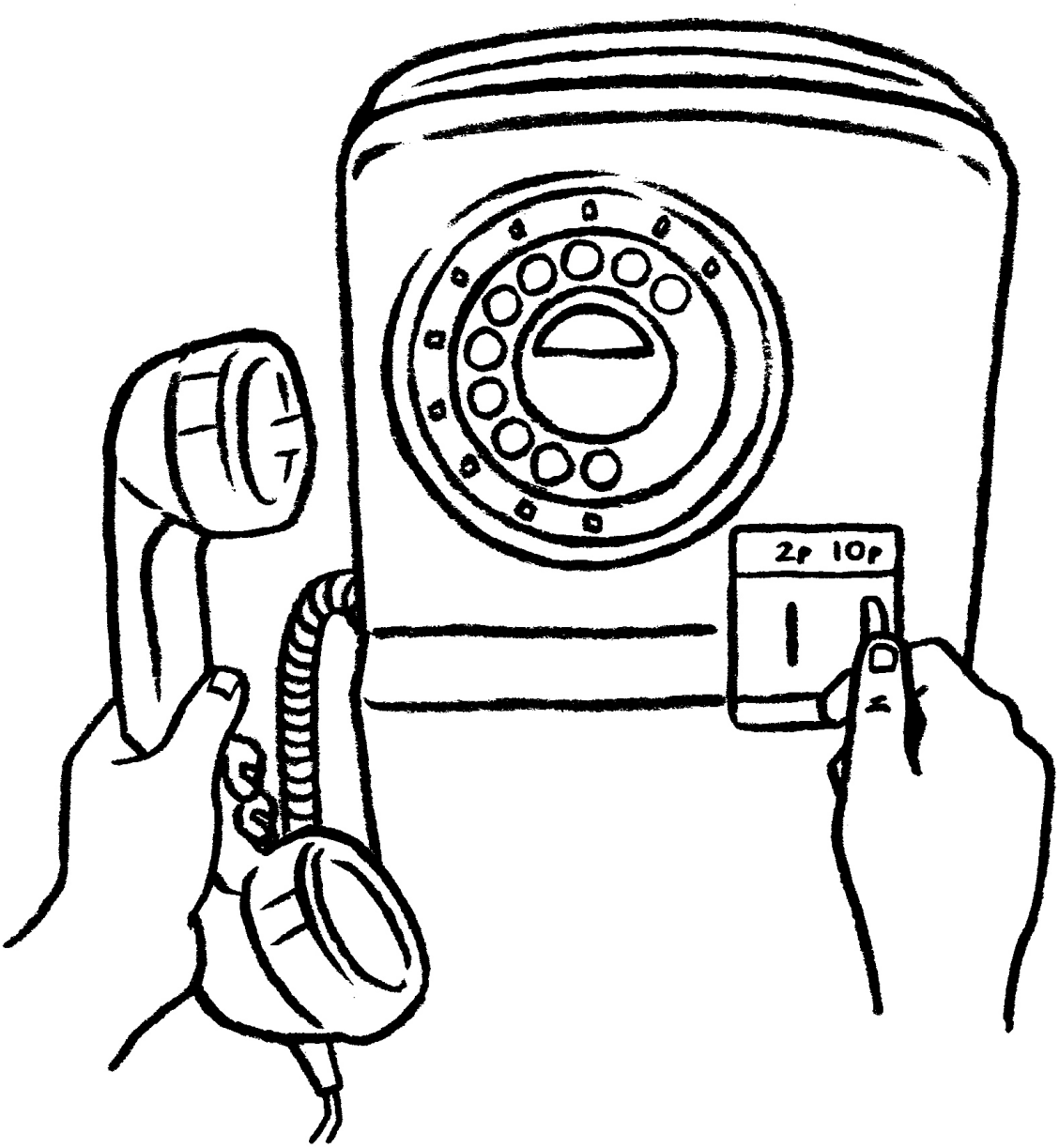
I think Dad realised I'd been trying to open it because the next time I got into his office the case had disappeared. I wondered about the mysterious contents of that case from time to time, but when I moved out of my parents' place I forgot all about it. Years later, when I was in my twenties, I had a drink with Uncle Dave who was still living at home. We were talking about Dad's eccentricities and Dave said, 'Did you ever see the black briefcase?'

'Oh man, yes!' I said, and together we chanted, 'IN THE EVENT OF MY DEATH THE CONTENTS OF THIS CASE SHOULD BE DESTROYED, UNOPENED.'

'What the hell did he have in there?' said Dave. Our top guesses were: pornography … actually just pornography.

And now, here was the mystery case again, though the label had gone. I stuck on a new one and wrote in Sharpie, '*MOVE TO NORFOLK.*' A few weeks later, I finally discovered what was inside. You could flick to the end and find out what it was now, but to be honest it's unlikely to blow your mind. Better if you get to it naturally.

CHAPTER 2
WILL YOU ACCEPT THE CHARGES?



Daddy, what class are we?'

'Middle class, I suppose,' replied my dad.

Mum looked up from her *Daily Mail* and corrected him: 'We're *upper* middle class.'

'What does that mean?' I said, and Dad smiled.

'It means we're not rich, but we're comfortable.'

In fact, in the years when my dad was the editor of the *Sunday Telegraph*'s travel section, my life was very comfortable. We lived in a house made up of a ground floor and basement flat in a Victorian apartment block that was part of a leafy residential square in Earl's Court, West London. I learned to ride my bike in the communal garden that was only accessible to residents – no 'Undesirables', thank you. The 'Undesirable' community had their own communal garden called the Earl's Court Road.

Throughout my childhood, thanks to Dad's job, we travelled to Greece, France, Barbados, China and all over America. At Christmas there was a good chance that whatever toy we had set our acquisitive little hearts on would turn up under the tree. What was more, our parents loved us, and I always felt safe and happy when they were around.

So it was an unpleasant shock when, in early 1979, they sent me to boarding school.

They broke the news to me a couple of months before I left. Mum and Dad talked it up as a grand adventure – all midnight feasts, jolly japes and super new chums – but as far as I was concerned they may as well have said, 'We know you thought we loved you and that your cosy life would never end, but in eight weeks we're going to shoot you in the back of the head and dump you in a field in Sussex.'

Christmas 1978 played out with a bass note of melancholy, rising occasionally to mild panic at the thought of the looming intercision. The same questions kept going through my mind: Why are they doing this? Who does this really benefit? Could there not be a second referendum? (NOTE TO EDITOR: Re. your insistence that this is a lame, outdated, topical joke that ought to come out – I absolutely disagree. People LOVE Brexit references, they always will, and I forbid you to remove it. Get rid of this note, though, obviously.)

On a freezing Sunday evening in January 1979, my parents drove out to Sussex to drop off their nine-year-old son at his new boarding school, a big Queen Anne-style house of imposing wood-panelled rooms and corridors that smelled of floor polish and disinfectant, behind which lay a complex of newer buildings, all surrounded by playing fields and woodland.

Mum and Dad carried my suitcase and new tuck box as a smiling senior boy showed us the way to my dormitory, his presence encouraging me to keep it together and act as if this was a super adventure rather than an inexplicable nightmare. Whereas my parents had found it easy to coo over the posh interiors downstairs, the harshly lit dormitory with its rows of little metal bunks presented more of a challenge, and they began to look more sympathetic. Just as I was considering losing it dramatically, a woman in a light-blue nurse's uniform appeared, who gently but firmly informed my parents that it was time for them to leave and that I would be fine. I looked at my mum as if to say, 'I am NOT going to be fine,' but before I could start bawling, she and Dad were gone.

The most painful parts of that first term at boarding school came whenever I phoned home from the call box in the corridor outside the dining room. Children queueing for dinner would watch as trembling 'Squits' like me jammed 10p pieces into the payphone, before becoming fully distraught once Mummy or Daddy picked up. A few times when my credit ran out, the coin-slot mechanism was too stiff for me to insert my next 10p, and the call was cut off in a din of beeps and sobs, so when Mum saw me next she explained how I could make a call from a payphone without money by just calling the operator.

'I have a reverse-charge call from Sussex, will you accept the charges?' the operator would ask when someone picked up at home. When I heard Mum's lovely voice say, 'Yes. Hello, Adam!' I crouched beneath the glass panels in the door so no one in the dinner queue could see me and sobbed my nine-year-old tits off. I asked Mum about those tearful phone calls recently and she said, 'Yes, it was the most awful feeling.' So why send me away? She paused for a little while, then said, 'Do you know, I've never really thought about it.'

My sister started at the same boarding school a year after I arrived, and a few years later my brother was sent there too, so Mum and Dad must have thought about it a little bit. I think they believed that the experience would 'toughen us up' (which they considered a worthwhile thing to do with a child), while also enabling us to 'belong' to the upper echelons of British society with access

to all the privileges and protections that membership provided. I suppose they also hoped we might enjoy it.

The school was progressive in many way: co-ed, no uniform, lots of arts and crafts, drama and cooking (I was the Lancashire hotpot and treacle tart king), and after the initial shock I ended up having fun and making some good friends there. But when I left school and started working, living and going out with people who hadn't been privately educated, my overwhelming feeling was not one of privilege but embarrassment. Perhaps I had an advantage if I'd wanted to become a Tory politician, a QC or a Harley Street physician, but outside the old boy network I felt that a public-school education just marked me out as a Merchant Wanker.

I didn't mind when work colleagues teased me about my plummy accent, as long as they weren't spitting with hatred as they did so, but it did make me self-conscious, and in my twenties I would occasionally experiment with life as a Mockney. If I got into a black cab and the driver was a chatty South Londoner who wanted to talk about football, I did my best to join in, not by pretending I knew about football, but by adopting a generic geezerish South London drawl that later became the voice I used for impersonating David Bowie. Meanwhile the cab drivers were probably thinking, 'Why's that posh geezer doing that weird voice?' Either that or 'Oh my God! I've got David Bowie in my cab!'

My eagerness to lose my accent would have distressed Dad, who throughout his children's lives never missed an opportunity to correct what he considered sloppy pronunciation or grammar. If any of us said a word like 'now' without a sufficiently full and fruity vowel sound, he launched into his Henry Higgins routine: 'Neh-ow? *Neh-ow?* It's *Nah-ow. Hah-ow, Nah-ow, Brah-own Cah-ow.*'

When he got ill and moved in with us, I imagined sitting up late into the night with Dad, doing shots of whisky and morphine and recording him as I asked all the BIG QUESTIONS I'd never felt able to ask before: who his parents were, what the war was like, why things hadn't worked out with Mum and why he'd thought it so important to send his children away to private school and have them speak with the 'right' accent.

The recordings would be poignant, personal and painful (ideally there would be some crying). I would turn them into an award-winning podcast and just before he died Dad would give me a hug and tell me how brave I was and that he was proud of me. But he hated all that sort of shit, so although we did have a few heavy conversations, they were not quite what I'd had in mind. As it turned out, most of our exchanges tended to focus on noodle preparation, men's nappies and whether or not he had taken his pills.

For the first year or two after his death, thinking about Dad was always painful. My unanswered BIG QUESTIONS were supplanted by recollections of distressing moments from his last months that sometimes I was only able to dislodge by humming or singing to myself. (PRO-TIP: This works for all kinds of thoughts you would rather not deal with.) Over time the older, happier memories resurfaced and with them my curiosity about Dad and how he had become the posh old bloke I always thought of him as.

His self-published memoir *The Road to Fleet Street*, which he completed shortly before his death, covered his school years, his service in the Royal Artillery during the Second World War, his time studying modern history at Oxford after the war, some posh old bloke name-dropping (including Reginald Bosanquet, Robert Graves and Harry Oppenheimer) and his glory days as columnist and Travel Editor at the *Sunday Telegraph*. However, there was nothing beyond that point, and nothing about who his parents were or the experience of starting his own family, i.e. all the stuff I was most interested in. Perhaps he felt that writing about his family was indiscreet somehow, but I suspect he simply considered it irrelevant and uninteresting. Then I remembered *The Proving Ground*.

One of several self-published projects, *The Proving Ground* was a novel that Dad had started writing in the late 1980s when he was deep in debt and had just been laid off by the *Telegraph*. He finished it around 2001, a year or two after he and Mum finally separated. It's the story of a travel journalist on a Sunday newspaper whose money problems are solved when he discovers a cache of gold during a trip to Alaska. *The Proving Ground* gave Dad an opportunity to cast himself as a heroic figure at a time in his life when he felt embattled, misunderstood and perhaps not completely certain that the sacrifices he had made for his family had been worth it.

Via his protagonist, David Barclay, Dad set out his values and detailed his fantasies with a directness he would normally have avoided. The characters along with certain events from his own life were so thinly fictionalised that when he showed it to me, my brother and sister, we agreed among ourselves that it made for a strange read.

The Proving Ground begins with David Barclay working at the *Sunday Messenger* (clearly meant to be the *Sunday Telegraph*). He has three children – Luke (clearly me), William (clearly my brother, Dave) and Sophie (clearly my sister, Clare) – who are receiving an expensive private education that is beyond their father's means.

Barclay is married to Margaret (clearly my mum, Valerie), a shrill woman who doesn't understand him and doesn't respect the passionately held principles that have led to his financial woes. I think Pa chose the name 'Margaret' for Mum's character because of Princess Margaret, who he found irritating.

The novel begins with Dad – I mean David Barclay – attending a crisis meeting at his bank, 'Mallards' (clearly meant to be Coutts & Co. where Dad held an account for a while). The manager at Mallards is a rude young man who tells Dad – I mean David Barclay – that sending his children to private school is financially reckless. There follow several pages of justification from Dad – I mean David Barclay – about the benefits of a boarding-school education:

A close relation had asked me recently if I was quite sure that I was right to beggar myself, not to mention Margaret, for what many people might see as a social prejudice. A social prejudice? … I never saw William in the orchestra at Haileybury without intense satisfaction that he was in the brass section there in Old Hall, not an overcrowded London flat, watching television.

Beggaring ourselves? My parents had striven only for their children; was I to betray mine by any inferior devotion? Sure we were right? I never picnicked on the lawns at Sophie's prep school in Sussex on 'Open' or Sports Day without knowing beyond a doubt that for a child to have the benefits of that particular school's environment for a start in life was worth whatever it might cost.

A few pages on, still restating the case he wished he'd made at the meeting with the rude bank manager, Dad – I mean David Barclay – continues to explain why he considers a private education so important:

To see William in Haileybury's elegant, spacious ambience always gave me the deepest pleasure. Everything about the place, from the well-tended lawn to the 1,300 names on the War Memorial panels in the cloisters, induced an awareness of a history richly imbued with all that seemed to me best in Britishness and the nation's imperial past, and all that seemed most admirable in English public school education and upbringing. That William now belonged here, sharing in so great an inheritance, gave me a satisfaction I hardly dared acknowledge for fear of tempting fate.

There are still many people who feel the same way that my dad did about public schools, though in an age in which social inequality is generally considered to be something worth struggling against and working-class credentials, even fake ones, are proudly flashed at every opportunity, the pro-public-schoolers are sometimes less keen to advertise their enthusiasm.

I'd always assumed that Dad's fondness for the British establishment and his apparent aversion to all things working class was evidence that he himself was an old-school toff, something we played for laughs in his BaaadDad segments on *The Adam and Joe Show*. Then a couple of years after his death I made a long-overdue trip to visit my aunt in Wales.

Dad had five older brothers and a younger sister, Aunty Jessica. When I was at boarding school Jessica would sometimes come and take me out on weekends and feed me cake and biscuits until I threw up. I loved Aunty Jessica. Then we didn't see her for a long time and Aunty Jessica became another member of our extended family that we seldom heard about, though she and Dad remained in occasional contact. I emailed her to ask if I could visit and ask about their upbringing, and she sent me a warm reply saying that I'd be welcome, but I'd better be quick because she was 91.

The following week I drove from Norfolk to Wales.

It was good to see Aunty Jessica again. After some cake, biscuits, hardly any vomiting and a bit of catching up ('Now, can you tell me what exactly a podcast is?'), Jessica told me about the grandparents I'd never met and the background that had primed Dad for a life dedicated to embracing the ruling classes.

It turned out that my grandfather, Gordon Buxton (who died long before I was born), had been a servant boy, a butler and a chauffeur before becoming an estate overseer for a wealthy family in the village of Cowfold, Sussex. He was known as 'Buckin' or 'Bucky'. In return for Bucky's service his wife and family got a house to live in, for which they were grateful. This was back in *Downton Abbey* days when, as Jessica told it, the lower classes were well looked after by their employers and 'knew their place', and everything was simpler.

When the First World War broke out my grandfather's boss, a Lieutenant Colonel, asked Bucky if he would travel with him to France to be his war bitch (not Jessica's phrase). Bucky was eager to oblige, despite having to leave behind his wife and three children (not including my dad, who was born after WWI). When the Lieutenant Colonel was killed on the first day of fighting at the Battle of Arras on 9 April 1917, Bucky carried his body off the battlefield and, upon returning to Sussex, continued to serve his widow and children. In *Downton Abbey* terms, it seems Bucky was more of a Bates than a Carson.

The continued patronage of the Lieutenant Colonel's regiment and family meant that my father was able to get on his social mobility scooter and attend the local grammar school before starting at the Imperial Service College in Windsor, a notoriously brutal and disciplinarian boarding school dedicated to preparing boys for military life. Teachers and senior boys at the ISC would regularly beat the younger ones with a cane until they bled for infractions like attending chapel with dirty shoes, failure to wear your school hat while visiting town or walking around with the collar of your overcoat turned up, unless you were a prefect or had been awarded a sports prize.

In addition to the jolly corporal punishment larks, my father was regularly taunted for not speaking with a sufficiently posh accent (something he absolutely nailed in later life). He became so keen not to stand out that whenever it was time for his parents to pick him up, my father insisted they meet him outside the school and down the road a short way. Dad worried that, next to the Daimlers, the Bentleys and the Rolls-Royces of the other parents, the Buckymobile would look too shit and he would get more grief from the toffs. Grandfather Bucky would tell my dad, 'The people who care don't matter because the people who matter don't care.'

Years later, when it was my turn to be worried about being judged for not having the latest cool thing, my dad repeated Bucky's advice, but I was confused. 'You mean the people who care about me don't matter?'

'No, the people who care what car your parents drive or what clothes you wear, they don't matter.'

'Oh. Well, maybe you should say, "The people who mind don't matter and the people who matter don't mind"?' Dad sighed.

His son, not for the last time, was being too literal, but I remembered the saying. It's a good one I think, but not always easy to take comfort from.

RAMBLE

Dad was impressed by successful people, even if they had become successful doing something he didn't approve of. After returning from a business trip in the late Seventies he asked us excitedly, 'Have you heard of some musicians called Who? I sat next to the singer on the plane!' We eventually established he was talking about Roger Daltrey. 'He was a thoroughly decent fellow. We talked about the joys of salmon fishing,' said Dad.

Other celebrity encounters that left Dad uncharacteristically exuberant included Larry Hagman (aka J.R. of TV soap *Dallas*), the rapper Coolio, who drove Dad round Los Angeles in his Humvee for *The Adam and Joe Show*, and pop's nicest guys, Travis, who Dad met at my wedding in 2001. Going through his belongings after he died, I found Dad's address book and saw that he'd collected the phone numbers of Dougie and Fran from the band. They were both under 'T' and next to their names Dad had written '*Travis – Pop Stars*'. Well, you never know when you might need a pop star.

In 1998, when Joe and I were flying to LA with Dad to do some filming, he used his old travel-editor contacts to wangle a seat in first class, where he found himself sat beside The Pretenders' singer Chrissie Hynde. Sadly, the salmon-fishing banter that had bonded him and Roger Daltrey all those years before failed to beguile Chrissie and she asked to be moved to another seat.

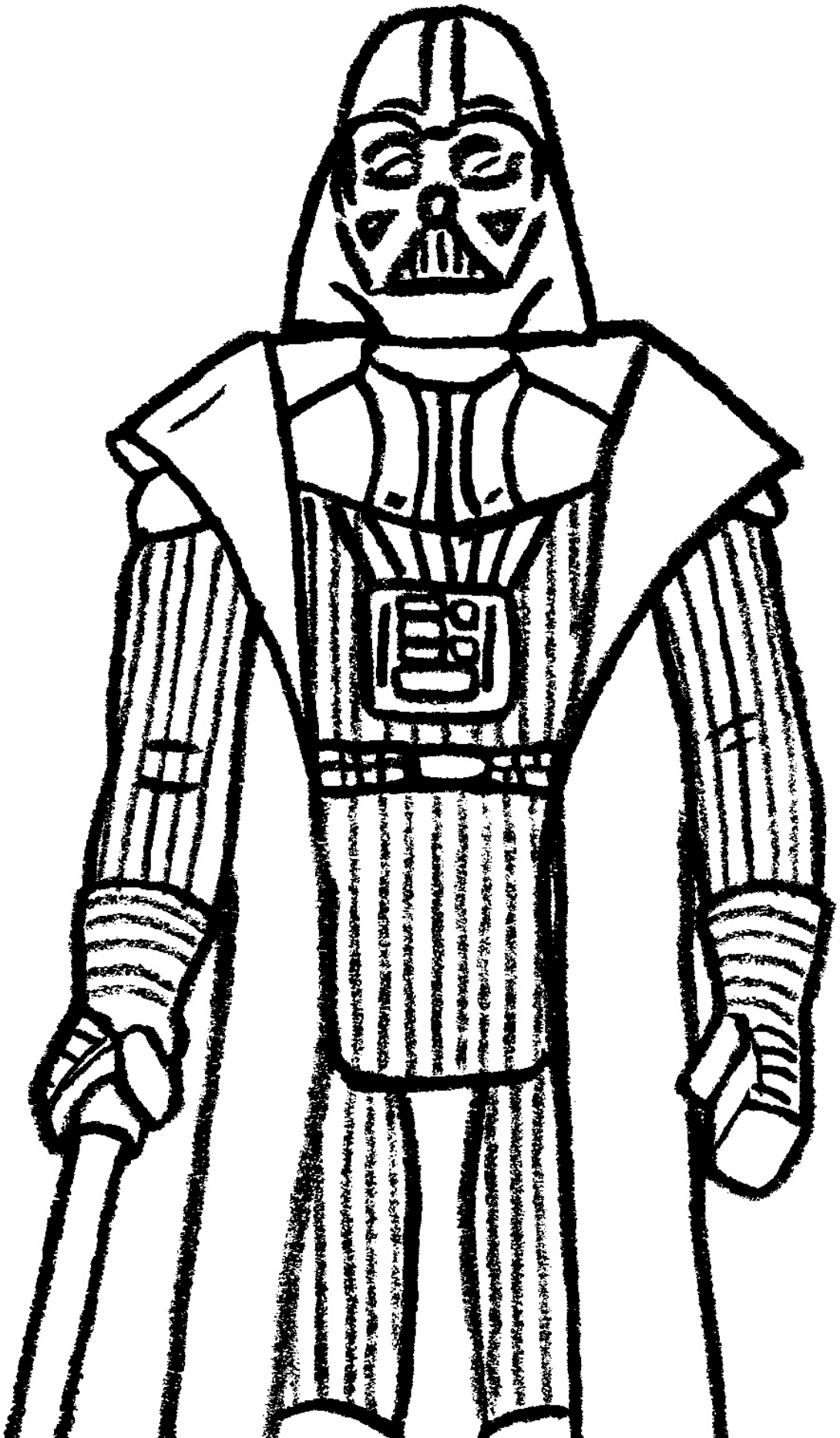
The Imperial Service College, the public school Dad attended, later merged with and changed its name to Haileybury. It's where David Barclay – I mean Dad – sent my brother Dave to school, and I think he loved the symmetry of having his son 'belong' to an institution at which he'd worked so hard to be accepted. In 1991 the real-life crisis meeting with his unsympathetic young bank manager resulted in Dad having to take Dave out of Haileybury while he was studying for his A levels. Pa considered it a failure for which he never forgave himself.

But Dave's fine. And anyway, who really belongs anywhere? I think that whole idea of 'belonging' and 'not belonging' is too often used to keep people 'in their place'. But I suppose that's easy for me to say, having enjoyed untold rewards from attending the kinds of schools I did and meeting the people I met there. Like it or not, that's thanks to Dad and his crazed determination to climb and to 'belong'.

The thing that still seems odd to me about Dad's idea of what constituted a desirable existence is that it was so closely correlated to social class. Though he detested the latter-day Etonian Tories and Bullingdon yobs, he remained throughout his life a conservative and a snob who found it hard to find value in what a person had to say if it was said with the wrong accent – the kind of accent that as a boy at the Imperial Service College he'd felt obliged to shed.

I never properly suggested any of this to him when he was alive, and it feels both gutless and redundant to say it now he's dead and I can't get the 10p in the slot, but I wonder if he would accept the charges.

CHAPTER 3
1980



My adolescence fell squarely in the 1980s and, for better or worse, the culture I consumed in that decade has played a significant part in defining my life ever since.

I look back at some of those Eighties influences with fondness and admiration for my good taste, but others evoke the sadness my dad felt about what I chose to fill my days with. To him it seemed as though I was living on a diet of worthless junk that would clog my intellectual arteries and lead to possible art failure. Now, in doubt-filled middle age, bringing up my own children as growing sections of society revise their attitudes to much of the culture and the values I grew up with, I often find myself thinking Dad might have had a point.

Where are the books? The trips to galleries or museums? The theatre? Where is the engagement with politics and social issues? The work by people other than men from the US or the UK? And when something genuinely worthwhile was put in front of me, even if eventually I ended up appreciating it, my initial response was usually to scrunch up my face in disgust, like a baby tasting caviar.

A decade of expensive private education, and all I had to show for it was a love of left-field pop music, an intimate familiarity with TV and mainstream cinema and the ability to quote a few Eddie Murphy routines (I use the word 'quote' loosely; basically I would fill any conversational lull by saying, 'I got an ice cream and you ain't got one', 'Goonie-goo-goo, with a G.I. Joe up his ass' or 'SERIOOOOO!'

Join me, then, as I revisit a few of the adolescent moments, along with their audio-visual accompaniment, that helped make me the towering genius I am today.

Pits, Pendulums and Dirigibles

The year 1980 began with me aged ten and starting my second year at the co-ed boarding school in Sussex that Dad always referred to as 'The Reformatory'. I no longer cried when they dropped me off there but would still rather have been at home, eating Penguin bars and McDonald's quarter-pounders and chips in front of *The Dukes of Hazzard*, *Metal Mickey* and *Fantasy Island*. And *CHiPs*. The cultural treats on offer at school may have been more nutritious, but they were harder to digest.

Most nights, when everyone was in bed, stories would play out over the PA system. Sometimes it was something fun like *James and the Giant Peach*, *The Colditz Story*, *The Hobbit* or some Greek myths, but on other nights we'd be treated to a profoundly upsetting helping of horror from M.R. James or, worse, Edgar Allen Poe. It was a kind of audiobook Russian roulette and you never knew if the chamber was loaded until the PA crackled to life and the story began.

I lay in my bunk, wide-eyed with dread in case the words 'I was sick – sick unto death with that long agony' came through the tannoy, because that meant it was 'The Pit and the Pendulum' time, and the next half-hour of homesick gloom was further darkened by Edgar Allen Poe's story of physical and psychological torture during the Spanish Inquisition. 'The Black Cat' and 'The Tell-Tale Heart' would follow, by the end of which one or two children in every dormitory would be sobbing softly, and in the junior dormitories, wailing loudly. And that was just the bedtime stories.

One afternoon every weekend a film was projected onto the wall of the gymnasium. In the days before 24-hour mobile entertainment was considered a basic human right, these film showings were a big deal and I could be found sitting cross-legged on the wooden floor of the gym, regardless of what was playing. It was a varied programme that during my time included *The Four Feathers*, *Kes*, *Capricorn One*, *Bugsy Malone*, *The Thief of Bagdad*, *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, *Duel*, *One of Our Dinosaurs Is Missing*, *Ring of Bright Water*, *Jaws*, *Hooper*, *Smokey and the Bandit* and *Smokey and the Bandit Ride Again* (as the Eighties dawned, Burt Reynolds was still considered one of cinema's most alluring cishet fuckboys).

Along with lashings of Burt, they also served up some of the biggest and stupidest disaster films of the Seventies, and my first sense of how much could go wrong in the world came via school gym performances of *The Towering Inferno*, *The Poseidon Adventure*, *Earthquake*, *Meteor* and the *Airport*

series. But nothing took a giant shit on my psyche quite like *The Hindenburg* and *The Cassandra Crossing*.

The Hindenburg was basically a 'Whogonnadunnit' that took place on a luxurious passenger airship in 1937. George C. Scott played a German colonel who has been warned of a plot to blow up the dirigible. Unaware that the film was loosely inspired by historical events, I expected George to foil the plot in the nick of time and prevent the airship from exploding. SPOILER ALERT: he doesn't.

The final section of the film switched from colour to black and white, intercutting between newsreel footage of the actual *Hindenburg*'s fiery skeleton sinking to the airfield, with shots of various characters staggering from the wreckage, some horribly burned. Presumably the lack of colour was supposed to take the edge off the horror, but not for ten-year-old Buckles. I sat, heart beating fast, as Herbert Morrison's famous commentary tearfully mourned 'The humanity!'

RAMBLE

For several years in my twenties I developed a fear of flying, and every time I boarded a plane, images of the crumpled *Hindenburg* would pop into my head along with the phrase 'twisted mass of girders'. (If you're reading this on a plane, sorry, but honestly, you're going to be fine. However, in the unlikely event that something does happen, just ask someone to send in the charred remains of your boarding pass and I'll personally issue a full refund. For the book that is, not the flight.)

In *The Cassandra Crossing*, a terrorist carrying a deadly plague virus created by the Americans for germ warfare boards a train travelling across Europe, where he infects a load of passengers before the authorities reroute the train across a rickety bridge. Richard Harris, Sophia Loren and O.J. Simpson do their best to avert disaster. SPOILER ALERT: they don't.

I can trace a number of my biggest fears back to that Sunday-afternoon screening of *The Cassandra Crossing* and to this day I do my best to avoid deadly viruses, quarantines enforced by armed men in scary hazmat suits, trains that plunge off rickety bridges into ravines and O.J. Simpson.

As I was an easily confused ten-year-old without parents on hand to clarify perplexing moments in films like this, it was left to other equally clueless ten-year-olds to concoct explanations. For example, my friends and I decided that when, in one scene, the plague-carrying terrorist sneezed on a bowl of rice, he was in fact vomiting maggots, thereby adding three more items to my list of Worsties: vomiting, maggots and vomiting maggots.

Obligatory *Star Wars* Bit

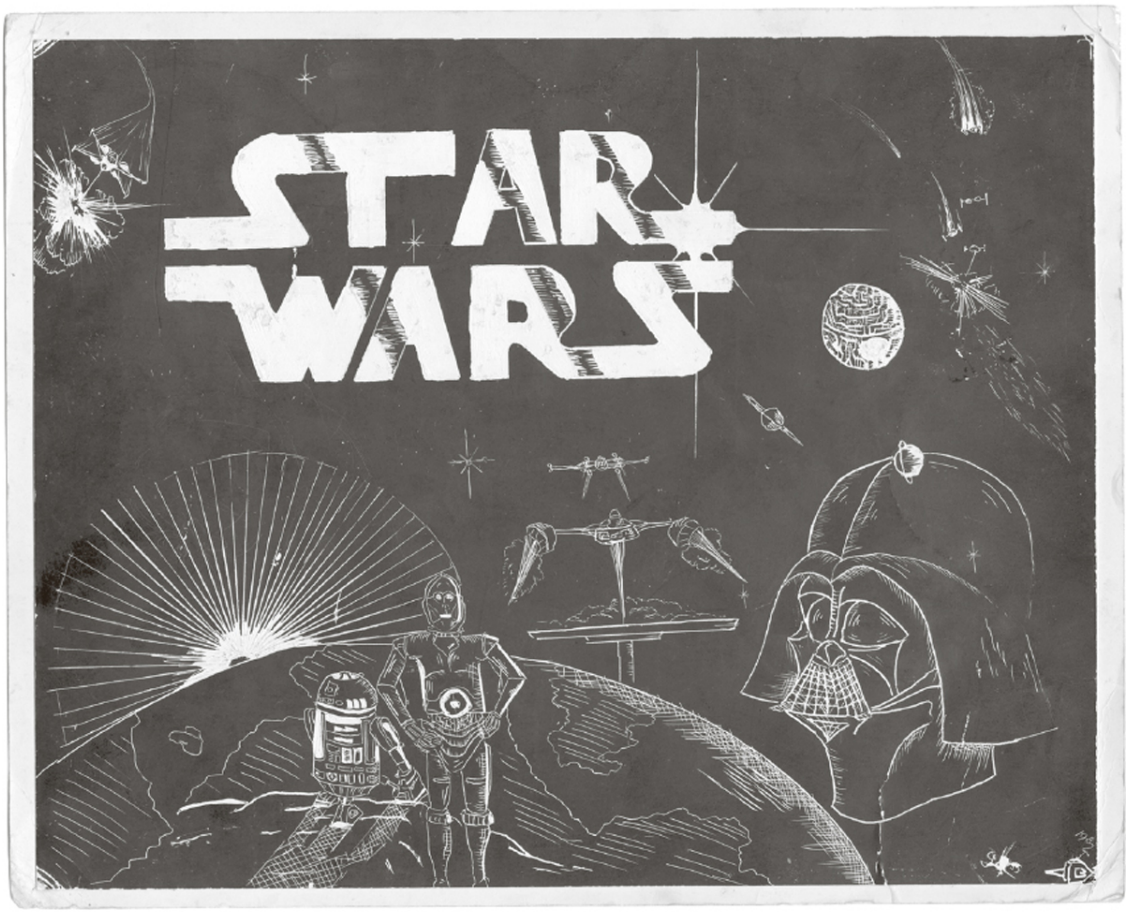
By the time *The Empire Strikes Back* was released in May 1980, everything *Star Wars*-related made me vibrate with visceral joy.

Two years earlier, when we were living in Wales, Mum had driven me and my sister all the way to the West End of London to see the first *Star Wars* film (if you're thinking, 'Well actually, Buckles, it was *Episode IV – A New Hope,*' then please close this book/switch off this audiobook, get dressed and go out into nature). For the first half of *Star Wars* I was overwhelmed and a bit frightened (especially by 'Dark Vader'), but when Princess Leia referred to Chewbacca as a 'walking carpet' everyone in the cinema laughed, including Mum, and I knew I was having the best time of my life.

There was no merchandise in the foyer other than the film soundtrack, which Mum bought on cassette to listen to on the way back to Wales. I thought the 'soundtrack' would be all the audio from the film, including the talking and sound effects, and when it became clear it meant just the boring classical music I was gutted. It was the characters I loved, the colourful aliens, the funny robots, the cool Americans; it was them I wished I could take back with me to my room in Wales, even if only in audio form.

Then one day later that year I was in WH Smith's with Mum and I saw a rack of *Star Wars* action figures. After some energetic and tearful bargaining, I went home with a little Luke and a tiny R2D2 (those are not euphemisms). From then on I negotiated constantly for action figures, accumulating goodies first and baddies later. It was a shock to discover that 'Dark Vader' was actually called 'Darth'. I didn't think that was a good space name. He may as well have been called Jatthew, or Vominic.

Luckily he had an extendable red plastic lightsaber, though it wasn't long before I was compelled to bite off the tapered tip.



1982 scratchboard art by the 12-year-old, *Star Wars*-obsessed Buckles. I knew that attempting to draw the humans would go badly, so concentrated instead on the robots, spaceships and a floating baddie helmet.

Over the next three years I wangled action figures of every significant character from the first three *Star Wars* films, as well as a Landspeeder, X-wing Fighter, TIE Fighter, Droid Factory, Creature Cantina and, on a trip to California when my Aunty Leslie took us to Toys "R" Us and said, incredibly, 'You can get what you like,' I came back with a *Millennium Falcon*. When Dad saw the giant box he made a face that I now understand meant 'How the fuck am I expected to get that back to the UK, you greedy little shit bag?' He managed it, though, and unpacking the *Falcon* on my parents' bed back in Earl's Court was no less memorable and moving than the birth of at least two of my children.

As for *The Empire Strikes Back*, it started out as the greatest film of all time and ended as the most depressing. SPOILER ALERT: Vominic Vader turns out to be Luke's dad, which we find out after he's cut off his son's hand and made him do some very ugly crying. Meanwhile Han, easily the best guy in the whole thing, has been turned into a giant doorstop. For some people this was a more dramatically complex and satisfying ending for a *Star Wars* film than the cheesy medal ceremony that concluded the first one, but ten-year-old Buckles was not one of those people. If I'd wanted upsetting dramatic complexity, I could have just watched my mum waxing her legs in the nude.

Disney Bangers

Let me paint you a picture of the Britain I grew up in during the 1970s, using all the same bits of archive they use in TV documentaries. There was social and economic upheaval, rubbish piling

up on the streets, the dead going unburied, frequent power cuts, racial unrest, football violence, punk music and, worst of all, disrespectful playground poetry. Here is one sickening example:

In 1976
The Queen pulled down her knicks
She licked her bum
And said 'yum yum'
In 1976
RAMBLE

Although the seven-year-old me admired that poem, and would often recite it, I knew that it lacked plausibility. Was Her Majesty really so flexible that she could lick her own bum? And was QEII so obsessed with rhyming words that she only felt able to pull down her knicks in 1976? Didn't the underwear come down in 1972, when she must have wanted a poo? None of it adds up.

Whatever grimness was going on in the outside world during the Seventies, my sister, my brother and I knew nothing about it. Mum and Dad subscribed to the Bubble-of-Innocence school of parenting, part of which relied on keeping us gratefully anaesthetised on a Disney drip.

We loved all things Disney: the Land, which we visited several times on trips to America; the TV show (*The Wonderful World of Disney*); the films and the songs, which we had on four cassettes filled with music performed by fun animals and boring princesses. As the Eighties arrived and my sister began attending the same boarding school, those cassettes were still a crucial part of keeping us pacified on the depressing Sunday-night car journeys back to The Reformatory.

Disney songs reminded me of carefree times when my parents loved me so much they didn't send me away to expensive prison, but as for the music itself, much of it (to use one of my mother's favourite expressions) made me want to open a vein.

Our beige Ford Cortina only had a radio, so the Disney tapes would be played on Dad's portable tape recorder, which sat on the lap of whichever parent (usually Mum) was in the passenger seat. For that reason, it wasn't an option to fast-forward through the most syrupy, princessy songs. I was only able to endure sludge like 'Someday My Prince Will Come' from *Snow White*, 'A Dream Is a Wish Your Heart Makes' from *Cinderella* and 'Rumbly in My Tumbly' from *Winnie the Pooh* because I knew that eventually we'd get to a Disney Banger.

When songs like 'Everybody Wants to Be a Cat', 'Pink Elephants on Parade', 'I Wan'na Be Like You' or 'The Bare Necessities' were about to start, my sister and I would lean forward, unfettered by boring seat belts (which only squares wore in those days), and we'd dig those Disney grooves. I especially liked 'The Wonderful Thing About Tiggers' and the hipster beat combo version of Cruella De Ville (different in arrangement and spelling to the version in the *101 Dalmatians* film and not, as I search, findable on the Internet).

The best thing about 'Tiggers' and 'De Ville' was that even Dad liked them and occasionally sang along. 'Such good lyrics,' he would say of 'Cruella de Ville'. 'Mind you,' he would continue, 'I love anything motivated by the patriarchy's fear of powerful women.' Alright, those may not have been his exact words, but I think that was the gist.

BOWIE ANNUAL

Exactly 22 years after I first heard his music in an art class, David Bowie walked towards me at Maida Vale studios in West London. It was September 2002 and he'd just performed a concert for BBC Radio, to which Joe and I had been invited by the show's host, Jonathan Ross. Jonathan knew

we were both big fans, albeit fans whose enthusiasm had been tested by Bowie's musical output for well over a decade. We had learned that when critics greeted each new release as 'Bowie's best since *Scary Monsters*', what they actually meant was, 'Well, this one's not total bollocks.'

And yet, stood in the small audience at Maida Vale watching the 55-year-old Bowie with his boyish floppy hairdo and smart-casual clothes emphasising a face that was at last showing its age, I found myself getting tearful a couple of times, overwhelmed by being just a few metres from someone who had meant so much to me over the years, particularly in the Eighties when I was discovering him and his work for the first time.

Then, after the show, there he was, walking towards a little group of us standing in a backstage corridor with Jonathan Ross. Bowie spotted Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, who had also been invited along. It was only a year since the first series of *The Office* had aired, but it had quickly become a mainstream success and Ricky and Stephen were well on the way to becoming full-blown celebrities. I'd met Ricky a couple of times at Jonathan's house and I knew he was also a huge Bowie fan, so it was cool to see him meet his hero for the first time and have Bowie tell him that he thought *The Office* was great, but I left Maida Vale deflated.

As well as being an artist whose work I admired, David Bowie was someone I'd always thought of as a person who had a similar outlook on life to me, someone who found the same kinds of things interesting, someone whose taste in music I could trust and whose recommendations were worth exploring. In other words, I'd always thought of him as my friend, but then I had to stand by and watch as he declared his affection, not for me but another comedian. OK, so Ricky was at least as much of a fan as I was, and even back then he'd made a more lasting contribution to the world of comedy, but that didn't make it any less galling.

'Serves me right for taking the piss out of Zavid for so long,' I thought.

After the first flush of unequivocal adoration, Bowie had become something of a comedy character for me, Joe and our friends. We enjoyed dissecting his less well-judged career moments, pronouncements and pontifications, often while doing an impression that relied on the gentle buzzing sound Bowie produced when he spoke words with an 's' in them; for example, 'zuperlatative' – a pleasing Bowie variant of 'superlative' we'd heard him use in an interview. Over time this impression evolved into a single noise that was our shorthand for Bowie: 'wuzza'. Instead of discussing the serious issues of the day, we whiled away many hours with symposiums of 'wuzza, wuzza, wuzza's. I don't suppose any of that would have endeared us to Zavid, but I've always taken the piss out of people I love, and I really love David Bowie.

'We're going to have a free drawing class today,' said our art teacher, walking over to the record player in the corner and setting the arm down. 'Here's some music to inspire you. It just came out last week.' It was September 1980.

Sun shone through the big glass panels that ran down one side of the art room as the space filled with the sound of clicks, hisses, a rattle, someone counting in, then squalling electric guitar, a woman declaiming in a foreign language and a man who sounded nutty. I exchanged WTF? glances with other mystified ten-year-olds. This music was weird, but the second song was more conventional, and by the time they were chanting '*Up the hill backwards, / It'll be all right, ooooh*', I was sufficiently intrigued to ask the teacher who we were listening to.

I liked the name 'Bowie'. It sounded strong, supple and elegant with the potential to unleash arrows. It was, well, bow-y.

William Mullins (aka Muggins or Bill Muggs) came back to school the following term with his brother's copy of the Bowie compilation *ChangesOneBowie* and we listened to it on the common-room record player. Even as I was listening to 'Space Oddity' for the first time I was looking forward to hearing it again.

The cover of *ChangesOneBowie* is a black-and-white photograph of DB taken in 1976 by Tom Kelley, who took the famous nude calendar shots of Marilyn Monroe. It captures Bowie at his most

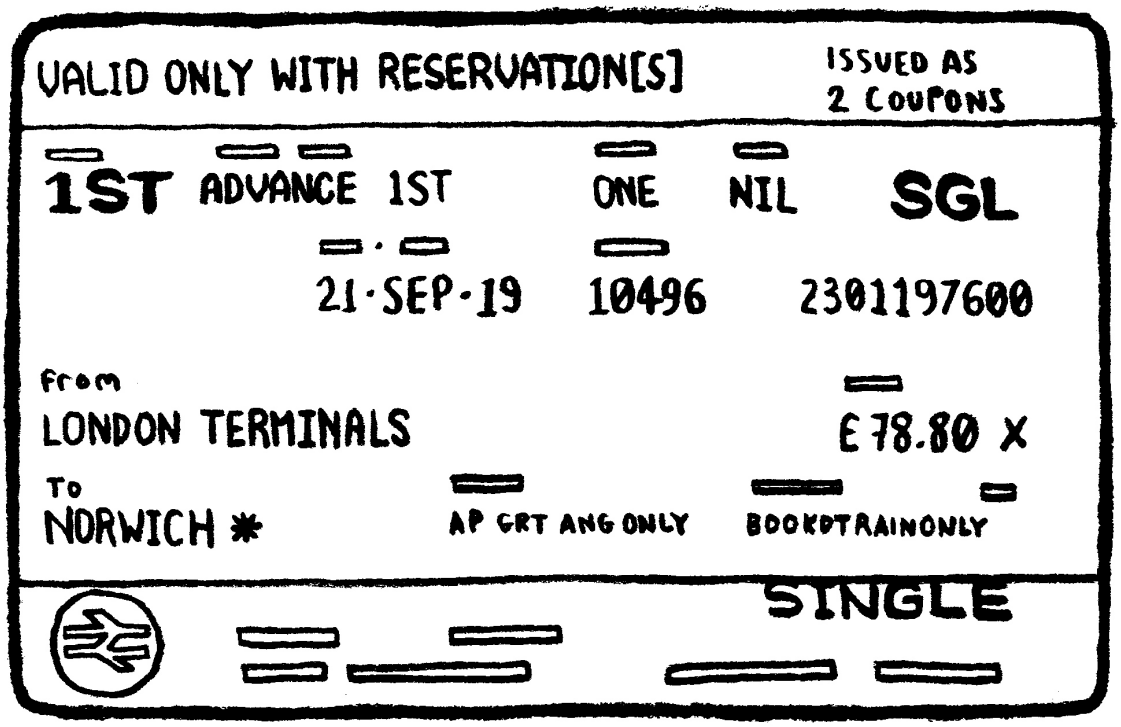
conventionally handsome, yet disarmingly fey. His hair is swept back, his hand is up to his mouth as if he's considering a work of art, and there's a distant look in his eyes that says, 'I'm thinking of complicated things in a more original and zensitive way than an ordinary person would.' I stared at the cover of *ChangesOneBowie* and thought, 'Mmm. Yes, please.'

A few weeks later Bill Muggs turned up with *Hunky Dory* and, though I was a bit confused by Bowie suddenly looking like somebody's hippy mum on the cover, as soon as 'Life on Mars' came on with lyrics about cavemen and Mickey Mouse combining the esoteric and the accessible, I recognised it as the kind of powerfully dramatic, emotional and mysterious music I'd often heard playing in my head, playing in my heart even, but never out loud. Or maybe I'd just heard it on the radio and forgot.

Either way, I realised I was interested in David Bowie.

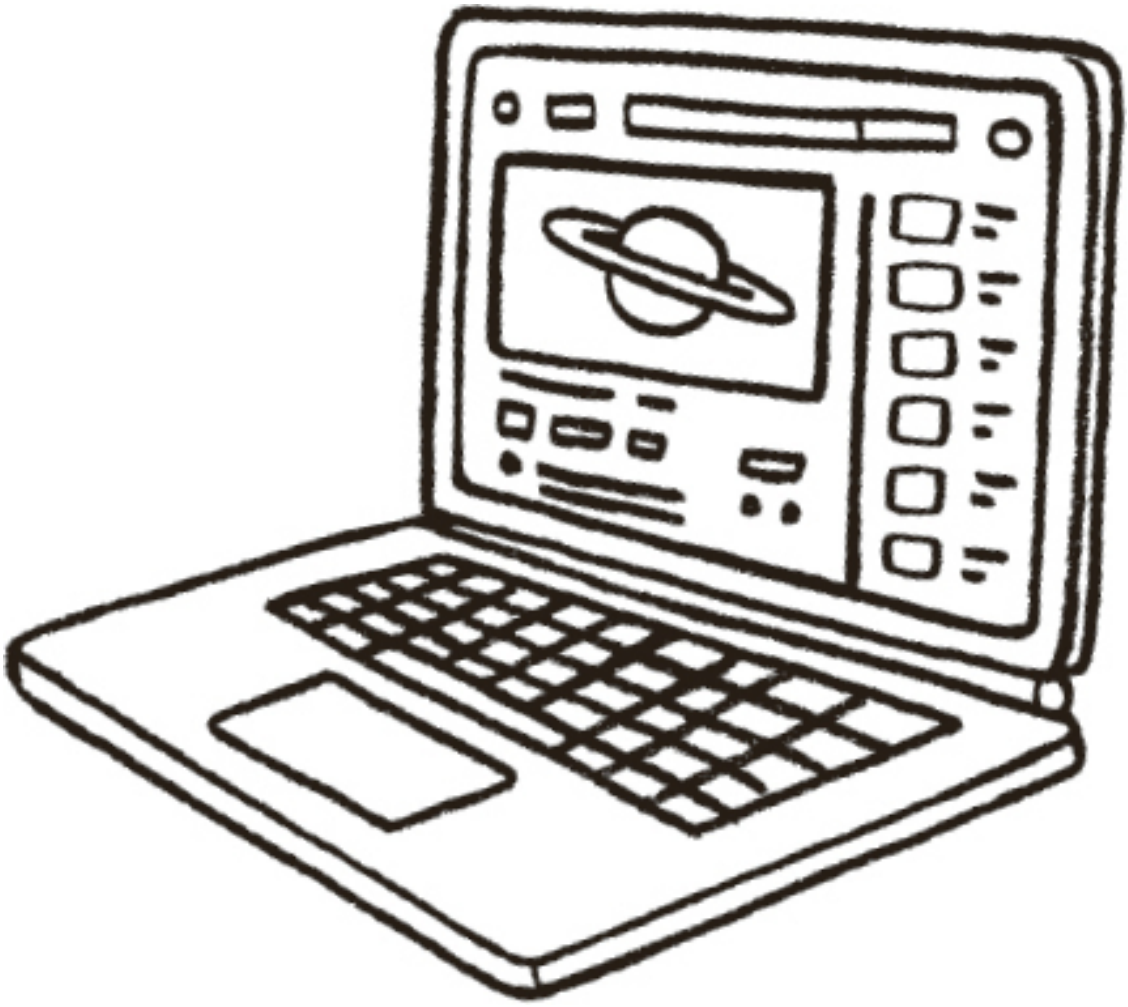
Up to that point all the strangers I'd been interested in were fictional – the Bionic Man, the Bionic Woman, the Invisible Man and the Man from Atlantis – not really superheroes, but enhanced humans that I thought I'd get on well with. Bowie was the first real person to join that list, and for the next few years we got on very well indeed.

CHAPTER 4
FIRST-CLASS BASTARD



Before I moved out of London, I seldom travelled by train. On the rare occasions I did, it never occurred to me to buy a first-class ticket. I was happy to sit in my standard-class seat, stare out of the window and enjoy the loud telephone conversations of twats.

In 2008 I moved out to Norfolk with my family and life as a semi-frequent train commuter began. I was doing a weekly radio show on BBC 6 Music with Joe at the time, so every Friday I'd cycle to Norwich, get on the train to Liverpool Street, stay at my in-laws' place in West London on Friday night, cycle to the 6 Music studio in Great Portland Street on Saturday morning, talk bollocks with Joe from 10 a.m. till 1 p.m., then get the train from Liverpool Street back to Norwich. ('That was an interesting routine you just outlined there, Buckles, thanks!' You're welcome.)



The more I took the train, the more I found myself wanting to do some important laptop work as I travelled: sorting and labelling 10,000 digital photographs of my children, reading YouTube comments for OK Go videos, editing footage of myself dressed as Gwen Stefani pointing at animated turds and saying, 'Oooh, this my shit, this my shit' – that kind of thing.

Sometimes I was able to get a four-person table seat to myself (an optimal scenario for my preferred workflow), but even then I was without plug sockets or Wi-Fi and had to contend with the sound of children watching wisecracking animated films without headphones, groups of boisterous men enjoying lager-powered sports bants and of course the loud telephone conversations of twats.

For a few months I experimented with the Quiet Carriage (or QC). This is a single train carriage in which prominently displayed signs make it clear that it's an environment reserved for those who are *not* uplifted by percussion leakage from shitty headphones and do not enjoy listening to one side of someone else's entirely unnecessary phone conversation. In my mind the QC was first class for standard-class travellers. Affordable paradise.

At busier times, however, affordable paradise went wrong, and the QC ended up being the most stressful of all the carriages. Any remaining seats were quickly snaffled by people who considered refraining from behaviour that might disturb others as risibly effete. I'm talking about Inconsiderate Shitbags (or IS), a community that sees no race, gender or class, such is their commitment to inclusivity and representation. Members of IS are just as likely to be self-important business berks and red-trousered toffs as they are truculent tinkers or boozed-up bootblacks.

For the IS, the quaint codes of the QC are there to be ignored at will. Sit in the Quiet Carriage during peak hours and you won't have to wait long before some utter fucker thinks of some excuse

for a phone call or just launches into a chat with a pal (both *entirely* antithetical to the spirit of the QC). When it becomes clear that there's an IS member in the QC, heads begin to pop up, like angry meerkats, focusing all their disapproval on the culprit.

One evening, when the peace of a packed but luxuriously silent Quiet Carriage was torpedoed by a young man in a suit taking a phone call, I went full angry meerkat. Mine was one of six other heads that periscoped up and began scanning the carriage, first locating the offending IS operative, then looking around at the other meerkats as if to say, 'Can we believe this guy and his phone call? This is the ONLY carriage in the whole train where you're asked to be quiet and this guy isn't giving a single hoot.'

I waited for someone to say something, but of course no one did. At last the man finished his call, and once again the carriage was beautifully quiet. My shoulders began to relax and my breathing was starting to return to normal when the man started jabbing at his phone again before bringing it back up to his unbelievable fucking ear. I couldn't take it. Someone had to speak for the meerkats.

Aiming for a tone that was relaxed, geezerish and non-crazy, I said, 'Hey! Mate! It's the Quiet Carriage, mate!' The man continued to chat without even registering me and the other meerkats cringed. Feeling I had committed myself, I tried again, but this time when I called 'Mate! Quiet Carriage!' I pointed at one of the large 'Quiet Carriage' stickers on the windows, to demonstrate that my position was backed up by stickers.

Sometimes Quiet Carriage stickers seem only to prohibit the use of mobiles, but these stickers also included symbols prohibiting noisy headphones and talking people, making it as clear as possible that 'quiet' didn't mean whatever kind of 'quiet' happened to suit you at that moment; it meant actual silence, like in a library or an exam room or a nice relaxing crypt.

This time, the man registered me. He glanced at the sticker, nodded and continued his conversation. I sank into my seat. I wasn't prepared to make a scene.

You've got to lighten up, Buckles, I told myself. There's more important stuff out there to go angry meerkat on. But then another voice – one that sounded a lot like my dad – chimed in: 'Moments like these aren't merely some bourgeois pursuit of order. For those who aspire to a society in which we harmoniously coexist, the Quiet Carriage is a proving ground, and if you're too cowardly to challenge phone-call man then I hope you like chaos, because that's what you're going to get.'

RAMBLE

The thing is, I don't mind a bit of chaos, but Dad really hated the stuff. On *The Adam and Joe Show* in the late Nineties we asked him to review the techno track 'Higher State of Consciousness' by American DJ Josh Wink, and upon hearing its electronic shrieks and squeals, my dad seemed genuinely worried, likening the noises to dark wheeling systems in a universe coming apart. 'It's chaos!' he kept saying. 'Chaos.' But if you've liberated concentration camps and never tried ecstasy, techno is probably always going to be a tough sell.

Whatever my thoughts on chaos in the QC, I was too cowardly for a confrontation, so there was only one thing for it.

Whenever I took the train on weekends the conductor would regularly announce that passengers could upgrade from standard to first class for £7.50. I never took any notice of these announcements until one weekend when there was a big football match on in Norwich, and the train from London was rammed. Like many others I found myself without a seat, standing in the corridor outside the toilet, trying to digest a stomach full of impotent rage. The ticket collector pushed his way through, mumbling apology-style bollocks about the lack of seats, and when he came to me, I said it: 'Could I have an upgrade, please?'

A minute later the doors to first class slid open and I stumbled out of the corridor scrum into paradise. It was busy, but there were free seats, and it was cool and quiet, with a more relaxing colour scheme. I found a single seat by the window with my own power socket below the table. I opened

my laptop and my little Wi-Fi radar locked in satisfyingly (that will be a useful line if I ever write robot porn).

The Wi-Fi was free.

My first-class upgrade also entitled me to free water, free tea or coffee, free crisps and free biscuits in the buffet car. I loaded up. The crunchy yet moist apple-flavoured biscuits were extraordinary and I returned for more, flashing my first-class upgrade like a detective flashing his badge at a DELICIOUS crime scene.

It was the greatest journey of my life.

The Rubicon had been crossed. As long as I could afford it, I would never return to standard class.

Nowadays I travel via Cambridge to King's Cross, which is closer to where I tend to record podcasts and do gigs for members of the liberal elite. The first-class situation on that route is not great, perhaps due to the relatively short journey times. The first-class compartment from Norwich to Cambridge currently sits just seven people and there are no free drinks – not even water – no snacks and certainly no fucking apple biscuits. But it's seldom busy and it's always quiet. Well, not quite always …

For the last year or so the train from King's Cross to Cambridge has run late more than half the time, which means I end up missing the connection to Norwich and have to wait around in Cambridge station for another hour. I like to use this time to have a run-in with a member of staff at WH Smith's before taking the next available, much busier train. This happened a few weeks ago and by the time I finally boarded the Norwich train I was desperate to sink into my favourite first-class seat (a single one at the back by the driver's door). To my dismay I found it was already occupied by a young person with a couple of non-first-class-looking plastic shopping bags. They were engaged in a loud mobile phone call and everyone else in the unusually busy carriage was obliged to listen.

'Yeah, I'm on the train. I'm in first class. I'm probably about to get moved cos I haven't got a first-class ticket. Well, they never really check. I did it the other day and I was just sat in first class all the way and they never checked! Yeah. I know. No, we're waiting for the train to leave. My battery's low. I don't have my charger. No, she said that was her charger. I found that one on the floor, but it wasn't my charger. I haven't got a charger now …' This was followed by several more minutes of urgent charger chat, then finally: 'All right, bye, then.'

Ah, luxurious first-class peace. But no, moments later: 'Hi, yeah, it's me. No, I'm on the train, just waiting for it to go. No, my battery's low. I know, I don't have my charger. No, she said that was her charger. There was a charger on the floor, but it wasn't my charger. No, she said that was her charger. I haven't got a charger now etc., etc., etc.

'This cannot stand,' I thought. I need to speak for the meerkats. Chaos cannot reign. This is not a class thing. This is not a privilege thing. This is not even a 'you're in my favourite seat' thing. This is a quiet thing. A consideration thing. I'm on the proving ground, and it's time to step up.

When the second call finally ended I found myself standing up and approaching the young person. Trying hard to eliminate any trace of irritation from my voice I said: 'Excuse me, just to say, I've got no problem with you being in first class with a standard-class ticket, seriously, go for your life, but part of the reason we're in first class is that we just want some quiet so we can work. So please – don't make any more phone calls.'

'Oh yeah, I wasn't going to make any more calls,' replied the young person airily.

'Oh, thanks very much,' I said and returned my seat. It was all very civil and straightforward. 'What a great result,' I thought.

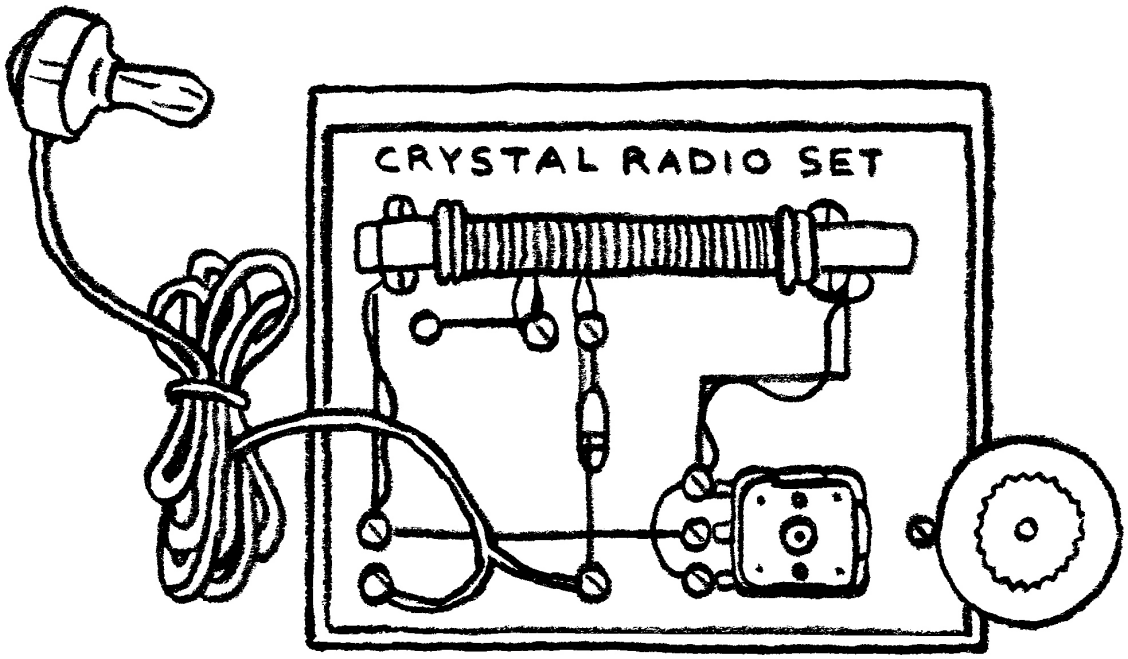
I luxuriated in the gratitude and admiration I knew my fellow first-class meerkats must be feeling. 'Finally!' I imagined them thinking. 'Someone who isn't trying to humiliate another person on the basis of status but who has the guts to strike a blow for order and harmonious coexistence.' Then, before we'd even pulled out of the station, the young person got up and left the first-class carriage.

The doors slid shut and my triumphal bubble popped. I had a strong urge to call the young person back. 'Hey! Young Person, who I definitely would have challenged even if you'd been a giant angry-looking football supporter, I wasn't trying to get rid of you! I only wanted you to keep the noise down! Hey, look, if you want to sit in first class, that's cool with me! I like sticking it to The Man sometimes, too! Bloody Man! You should be aware, there is an on-the-spot fine for sitting in first class with a standard-class ticket on this route, but hey, if it comes to that, I'll pay! I'm one of the good guys! Young Person! Come back …' but it was too late.

An oppressive silence engulfed our shabby cubicle of privilege. Order had been restored. First-class ticket holders only.

Another phone rang. The first-class ticket holder sat across the aisle from me scrambled to answer it, shooting me a nervous glance as they did so. They mumbled in hushed tones for a few seconds and concluded the call hastily. They had learned their lesson. The hot heat of shame burned my hairy cheeks and spread to my ears. When did I become such a cunt? Was it back in the Quiet Carriage, or was I always a first-class bastard?

CHAPTER 5
1981



It was during my third year at boarding school that I discovered the power of drama. If I was in a class that I really struggled with – maths or French, for example – I would quietly hyperventilate until I started to feel faint, whereupon I would ask to be excused for a lie down in 'The San' (the sanatorium: a mini dormitory where the school nurse tended to ailing children). Later, when my friends saw me looking perky at lunch and accused me of being 'a skiver' I would tell them truthfully, 'I really *was* feeling faint.'

As for the school's 'legitimate' drama productions, I tried to get myself in as many as possible, as it seemed like the most magnificent scam. Of course, I cared deeply about the craft, but I also loved the fact that rehearsals often meant you got to miss lessons, avoid sport, go to bed later than everyone else and generally get away with murder.

Nineteen-eighty-one was the year I got the lead in the school play, *The Thwarting of Baron Bolligrew* by Robert Bolt. Throughout production on *Bolligrew* I received so much attention and praise, I started to believe that I might be one of the most special people that had ever lived, a suspicion that was borne out when I was awarded the Acting Prize (one of the school's most prestigious honours) for my explosively powerful portrayal of the Baron.

My parents came to see the play and afterwards Dad, worried that I was in the process of becoming a monster, gently urinated on my parade. 'You were good, old boy, but for God's sake, don't get any ideas about going into acting.'

'Why can't he?' said Mum.

'It's just a terribly hard life,' replied my pa, 'fraught with sadness and disappointment, even if you're good at it.' (Oddly enough, that was exactly what Mum said about being gay when the subject came up a few years later.)

Acting wasn't the only reason I was enjoying school more. By 1981 I had a best friend: a big, blond, charismatic boy called Tom. Tom was excellent at Latin, sometimes wore a spotty handkerchief like a cravat, claimed he had legally changed his middle name to 'Apollo', understood all the jokes

in *Not the Nine O'Clock News* and showed me how to turn a can of Right Guard deodorant into a flame thrower.

Tom was also the first person I knew whose parents were divorced, which added greatly to his mystique. What was more, Tom's mum was cool and weird and hooked him up with non-regulation Day-Glo socks (extremely ace), a T-shirt with Mickey Mouse's head exploding (a bit much) and a load of Fat Freddy's Cat and Freak Brothers comics (totally mystifying). Tom also shared my growing enthusiasm for music.

Throughout the whole of 1981 I knew and liked nearly every song in the Top 40 and was always one of the people crowded round the school TV to watch *Top of the Pops* at 7.20 p.m. on a Thursday. Particular favourites included Adam and the Ants, Madness, Toyah, Kim Wilde, The Human League, Altered Images, Soft Cell, The Teardrop Explodes, The Specials, Ultravox, OMD and, yes, Joe Dolce.

RAMBLE

Joe Dolce's comedy song 'Shaddap You Face', about the things his Italian mother would say to him as a boy, was a worldwide hit in early 1981 and was Number One in the UK charts for three weeks, famously preventing the epic 'Vienna' by Ultravox from reaching the top spot. I loved 'Vienna' and would play air syndrums whenever the mysterious video (imagine Fellini making a perfume commercial) was played on TV, but I didn't have a problem with 'Shaddap You Face' being Number One, because I like funny songs. It made me laugh when the mother in the song would say to her little boy, '*Why you look-a so sad? / It's-a not so bad!*' only to immediately become impatient and say, '*Ah shaddap-a you face!*' But laughter in music, as in so many other art forms, is dismissed as ephemeral and cheap, even when it comes with a very amusing Italian accent.

At home, my musical ally was my mum, then aged 42. She had been a Beatles fan as a young woman and as we drove back to boarding school on a Sunday night she was happy to make the transition from Disney cassettes to Radio 1's Top 40 countdown. Dad, meanwhile, was 58 and regarded pop music as proof that society was in a state of collapse and would soon be extinguished.

One Sunday, in an effort to indulge me and my sister before we were dropped back at The Reformatory, Dad reluctantly switched off Wagner and let us listen to the Top 40. One of the new entries that week was 'New Life' by Depeche Mode, and within a few bars it was speaking to me on a very clear line, the way that 'Cars' by Gary Numan had done a year or two previously when I'd heard it on a jukebox while on holiday in Greece. Songs like these used a language of cool sounds to tell me that instead of wrestling with difficult emotions the ideal thing would be to behave like a robot from the future.

As 'New Life' played on the car radio I leaned forward for a better dose of boingy, synthy Depeche Mode goodness and to my surprise Dad suddenly started singing along as he drove. Wobbling his head from side to side, he screwed up his face and whined derisively: 'Operay-ting, generay-ting, nyooo loyfe. Nyooo loyfe.' It took a few moments before I realised Dad was taking the piss out of Depeche Mode as if he were a child in a playground. He practically spat when he was finished.

Part of me was crushed that he didn't like it, but another part of me was impressed that he could come down to my level of juvenility. It didn't make me think any less of the song. When Dad unleashed his impression of whiny Dave Gahan (pronounced '*Garn*'), it was one of the first times I remember thinking, 'OK, I love you, but I think you're wrong about this.'

Yes, the vocals are weedy and the melody is basic, but 'New Life' is operating (and generating!) on its own terms and exceeding targets in all departments. The sounds are harsh and inorganic compared with the warm tones of classical instruments, and Dave Gahan cannot sing like Ella Fitzgerald or Kiri Te Kanawa (my dad's favourites, along with jolly old Wagner), but if he could sing like Ella he'd be doing different songs. For an oblique three-minute futuristic musical cyborg drama, you need reedy, emotionless Basildon vocals and burbling machine pulses delivered from a

collection of circuits by a grumpy-looking midwife in a leather jacket – congratulations, Mr and Mrs Mode, it's a hit!

It's taken me 40 years to formulate that brilliant defence, and even if I'd been able to convey it to Dad back in 1981, I don't suppose it would have changed his opinion of 'New Life'. Instead, I just stared out of the car window and continued to fantasise about being a robot.

Tom's Library

I could never get excited about superhero comics. I thought they tried too hard to be cool and funny and didn't do an especially good job at either. I preferred Asterix and Tintin, especially the intensely trippy Tintin adventure *The Shooting Star* with the giant spider, exploding mushrooms and the end of the world. Later I went through a phase of thinking Charlie Brown and Garfield were clever and hilarious, and I loved the film spoofs in *MAD* magazine, though I found the drawings much funnier than the dialogue. Then Tom turned up at school with some books that raised the bar considerably.

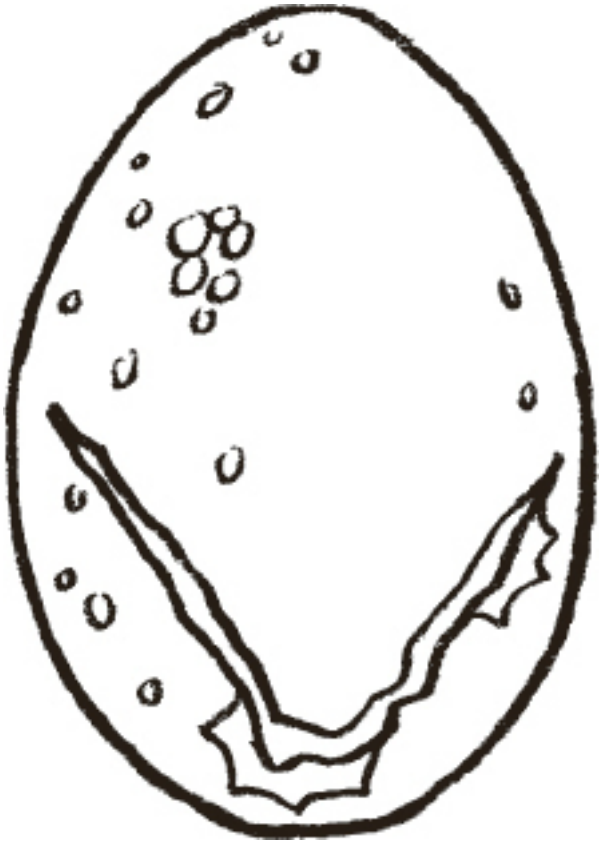
In addition to his impenetrable stoner comics and *Not the Nine O'Clock News* book, Tom allowed me and the other straights to pore over his big coffee-table tomes of sci-fi and fantasy art by airbrush wizards like Roger Dean and Chris Foss, as well as a collection of classic record-sleeve art called *The Album Cover Album*, which I studied for hours, admiring the surreal imagery, the cool typography and the see-through underwear of the women on the cover of *Country Life* by Roxy Music. But the most in-demand items in Tom's subversive library were *The Adventures of Phoebe Zeit-Geist* and *Alien (The Illustrated Story)*.

The Adventures of Phoebe Zeit-Geist (or '*Fo-eb Zeet-Geest*' as Tom and I mispronounced it) is still one of the odder things I've ever stumbled across. Phoebe is a beautiful, posh young woman who, entirely nude throughout the book, is kidnapped and rescued by assorted monsters and weirdos including Nazis, Chinese foot fetishists and lesbian assassins. I've since read that the series was intended to satirise the way female characters were treated in certain erotic comics of the 1960s, but that sailed way over my top bunk aged 11. Mainly I just couldn't believe there was a comic in which the hero was a beautiful naked woman. Yes, she would occasionally kick ass, but I think if I told my daughter that Phoebe Zeit-Geist was a fable of female empowerment, she'd give me only the shortest bit of shrift.

Alien (The Illustrated Story) represented the only way 11-year-old Buckles was going to see any actual images relating to a film that loomed large in the dark, backlit corridors of my imagination. All I had seen of it was the creepy egg poster and a clip on *Film 80* one night, which my mum switched off when she saw me watching from the doorway in my PJs. It seemed clear to me that this was a film so appallingly terrifying that if I was to watch it before I was at least 30, I would instantly lose my mind and spend the rest of my life wearing a straitjacket and rocking back and forth in a padded room (which is what mental illness was like in the 1980s).

Someone in a senior dorm had a copy of Alan Dean Foster's novelisation of *Alien* and I had broken my 'No Reading for Fun' rule in order to verify the rumours that the film contained a scene in which a monster ripped its way out of a man's tummy. Once I'd located the relevant paragraph, I wandered from dorm to dorm before lights out, reading aloud the chest-bursting description to anyone who was interested, not so much to freak them out as to deal with my own fearful preoccupation by sharing it.

The arrival of *Alien (The Illustrated Story)* rendered my wandering audiobook minstrel skills instantly redundant, and little groups formed round Tom's bunk to gaze at the spectacular full-colour, double-page illustration of what appeared to be a big snake with incredible abs and two big sets of teeth erupting from a man's chest 'in a scarlet shower of flesh and blood'. Most of Tom's library was confiscated within in a few days, but by then it was too late; I had resolved that one day, though it would almost certainly undo me, I would see *Alien*.



Alien poster design from 12-year-old A. Buckles. *Not having seen the film at that point, I decided instead of a nobbly egg, what the poster needed was incredible 3D lettering, a spaceship that looks like a Yorkie bar and a big angry snake fish.*

The Crystal Set

In 1981 the two things I wanted most in the world were an Atari 2600 video games console and a Walkman. My dad felt that buying me either of those things would have the same effect on my development as shooting me full of heroin. He still clung to the hope that his eldest son might be moulded into a person who appreciated books, the natural world and the company of other humans, rather than becoming just another dull-eyed consumer drone, obsessed with gadgets that would isolate him from anything real or important (he would have loved being a parent these days).

Dad's idea of a compromise was to give me a crystal radio set for my twelfth birthday. This was an inexpensive piece of kit consisting of a couple of bits of wire, three tiny electronic components, a little plastic dial and a single flesh-coloured earpiece that, when assembled, could pick up faint AM radio signals. It required no external power and no batteries, which made Dad happy, as he hated how much batteries cost and would become apoplectic if he ever came across a battery-operated gadget that had been left switched on. Not a problem with the crystal radio set.

I knew there was no way I was getting the Atari, but I was so disappointed that my parents hadn't got me a tape player or even a real radio that I just shoved the crystal set under my bed, unopened. Then one incredibly boring and depressing Sunday afternoon I got it out and put it together.

RAMBLE

It's hard to communicate to anyone born in the Internet Age just how dull, bordering on physically painful a Sunday in England could be at the end of the 1970s and early Eighties, even in central London. In deference to Jesus, anything that might provoke even the mildest excitement was off the menu.

Everything was closed – literally everything – and TV (by some way the most powerful domestic entertainment device in those days) was neutered by televised church services and current affairs programmes.

Sub-Ramble

I would sometimes watch the Sunday-afternoon political interview programme *Weekend World*, presented by Brian Walden, not because I relished Walden's crackling exchanges with the politicians of the day, but because I loved the theme tune – a short blast of supercharged rock that preoccupied me partly because I assumed I would never be able to identify it.

Thirty years later I googled '*Weekend World theme tune*' and that tantalising childhood mystery was gone in six seconds – it turned out to be a section from a song called 'Nantucket Sleighride', a long, otherwise tedious track by Mountain. Yay! The Internet!

Nowadays any hint of boredom can be treated instantly with a couple of clicks that will deliver punching, kicking, special powers and space lasers, but when I was little, the only time anything that exciting found its way into your home was Christmas, and in those days Christmas took an eternity to come round.

One Sunday afternoon, Dad found me with my face inches from the thick, curvy glass of the boob tube, trying to make out patterns in the static as if I were Carol Anne in *Poltergeist*. Remember static? The Digital Revolution got rid of that before the Internet, Wi-Fi and portable screens banished boredom forever.

Now, the dream I dreamt as a child of an entertainment ubiquity has come true, but I'm too old to celebrate it. I'm just some old fart who thinks we threw boredom out with the bathwater before realising how valuable it was, not just philosophically but physiologically. Did you know, for example, that when we become bored our brains release a protein-rich neuro-balm that not only mends broken synaptic pathways, it also forms new ones vital for creative thought? OK, so I made that up, but it sort of sounds right, doesn't it?

I assembled the components of my crystal radio set on the plastic base provided and after a few hours of fiddling I got a faint blast of white noise through the earpiece. Then, turning the dial in tiny

increments, I started to hear voices and music. It was thrilling, as if I had made contact with aliens from a distant galaxy where they also had middle-of-the-road music and annoying radio adverts.

We weren't allowed electronics at boarding school; they were worried expensive gadgets might cause feelings of envy and resentment or get stolen. Nevertheless, some children lucky enough to own radios or tape players smuggled them into school where, sure enough, they caused envy and resentment and got stolen. I decided the chances of someone stealing my crystal radio set were very low, though, so the following term, having installed a false bottom in my tuck box, I sneaked it in.

For a while I got into a routine of lying in my bunk after lights out and surfing the airwaves, slowly and softly, finding the clearest signal coming from a station that identified itself as Radio Luxembourg – The Great 208. A DJ called Stuart Henry would play all my favourite songs from the Top 40 at the time: 'Bedsitter' by Soft Cell, 'Spirits in the Material World' by The Police, 'Joan of Arc' by OMD and, one night, a song I didn't know. A stripped-down electronic song that pulsed and twinkled urgently, stirring the emotions despite a vocal that sounded bored and detached. 'At last!' I thought. 'The apotheosis of all my romantic robot dreams!'

For the next few weeks I listened to Radio Luxembourg at the same time every night, hoping to hear the song again, until one night they played it, and rather than going immediately into another song, the DJ announced, 'The sound of Kraftwerk there. Their name is German for "power station" and that's a number from a few years ago called "The Model" that's been reissued on a double A-side with their song "Computer Love".'

I bought the single (my first) for 99p from WH Smith's on the Earl's Court Road, with a record token I got for Christmas that year. Most people's first singles are mildly embarrassing – something naff by a children's cartoon character or a DJ who turned out to be a sexual predator – but for once my taste was impeccable, and I suppose that's partly thanks to Dad and the crystal set.

Alison

There were certain weekends during term time when no one was allowed out of school, and activities were organised to prevent 350 students aged 9 to 13 going maximum *Lord of the Flies*. One summer weekend, Tom and I were the only boys to sign up for the senior disco-dancing class. Our plan was not to take the class seriously and to disrupt the efforts of the girls to learn dance routines for music we did not respect: 'Super Trouper' by ABBA (boring), 'This Ole House' by Shakin' Stevens (sad) or 'Making Your Mind Up' by Bucks Fizz (mega chronic).

The poster for the disco-dancing class said 'Dress cool', so Tom suggested we wear T-shirts underneath Sunday-best suit jackets that we turned inside out to reveal the shiny inner lining. A tie worn round the forehead like a bandana completed a look that was more than just cool, it said: 'Watch out, because these two 11-year-old guys don't give a solo fuck and are going to take the absolute piss out of your pathetic girly disco.' Then we arrived at the gym.

Groups of girls, mainly from our year, who previously we'd considered annoying if we'd considered them at all, were now ranged before us in silver leggings, hot pants, pedal pushers, leg warmers, tank tops, deely boppers, lipstick, eye shadow and glitter. (One of the advantages of boarding school, depending on your perspective, was that at moments like these there were no parents around to say, 'You are NOT going out dressed like that!') Tom and I, responding obediently to our monkey-boy/patriarchal programming, were instantly beguiled and decided to abort our piss-taking mission.

We were too young to be struggling with any desires more powerful than simply to flirt and make a few of the girls laugh, but to the extent we were able to do so, both of these produced an unfamiliar surge of excitement. My attention quickly focused on one girl I'd never spoken to before, though I'd seen her and her pals around and always found them vaguely irritating. In homage to the Pink Ladies from their favourite film *Grease*, they would often pretend to chew gum (real gum was contraband) and make belittling comments about passers-by in American accents. It was infuriating but also sort of funny.

To my mind the funniest, cheekiest and prettiest one of the Pink Ladies was called Alison, and unless I was greatly mistaken, as we struck heroic poses for our first dance routine – 'Prince Charming' by Adam and the Ants – Alison was smiling at me. Or possibly laughing at me. But even if she was, I felt for the first time that ridicule (or, as Adam Ant would have it, '*rid-di-kewl*') was nothing to be scared of.

RAMBLE

Before I was a full-time Bowie bore, I loved Adam and the Ants. Most of us did. Their album *Kings of the Wild Frontier* was always playing in the senior common room and every track was catchy and fun to sing along with despite being quite odd, like a lot of chart music in the early Eighties. When they played 'Antmusic' at a school disco, I pulled away from the wallflowers and danced along for the first time, thinking, 'So this is the point of discos!'

More importantly, Adam Ant was called Adam (which is also my name), and he was handsome and pretty at the same time (again, check!), but best of all, he was known to be short (5 foot 6 – the same height I am now). For some reason Dad's reassurances that I was 'taller than Napoleon and Genghis Khan' didn't stop me fretting about my height when I was young, and finding out that Adam Ant was a fellow short man provided genuine comfort. You can imagine how excited I was when I saw my first Danny DeVito film.

Everything at school was different after the disco-dancing class. Tom and I talked to the girls whenever we got the opportunity, and on a school trip to see a theatre production of *The Turn of the Screw* (or was it *The Taming of the Shrew*?) Tom sat next to one of the girls he fancied on the bus and I sat next to Alison.

The theatre trip was a fun break from the school schedule, seeing the outside world, being given a small tub of ice cream at the interval and sneakily buying my first bag of Toffee Eclairs when the teachers weren't looking. The play itself failed to make an impression – I recall it being dark and there was some scenery; all I could think about was how much I was looking forward to talking to Alison when it was over, to laughing at her rude jokes and having her laugh at mine.

In the bus on the way back we asked the driver to put on Radio 1 and 'Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic' by The Police started playing as Alison and I hid beneath my jacket, ate some Toffee Eclairs, put our heads together and kissed. I'd heard 'Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic' before and thought it was not as good as 'Message in a Bottle', but, kissing Alison, it suddenly sounded a lot better than 'Message in a Bottle'. In fact, it sounded better than anything I'd ever heard.

I don't remember if any kind of ceremony took place or if anything was written down to formalise the arrangement, but within a few days I realised that I had a girlfriend.

A local band came to play in the gym one weekend and part of their set was a cover of Supertramp's 'Breakfast in America'. Not having heard the song before, I was delighted by how apposite the lyrics were for my new romantic status. On hearing the line 'take a look at my girlfriend', I looked over at Alison and grinned, and she smiled back because she was my girlfriend and I was taking a look at her. At the line 'she's not much of a girlfriend', I looked over again and rolled my eyes, hoping Alison would realise this was visual banter rather than a genuine indictment of her girlfriend skills. Then I did the same joke several more times and Alison started rolling her eyes, too. It was off-the-charts Eye-Bants.

That evening we went up to the overgrown maze on the hill above the football pitches, which was known as a hotbed of wayward behaviour. After some light snogging, Alison reached into her jeans' pocket and produced a small packet of powder, shaking it as she held my nervous gaze. It was Rise & Shine, crystalline orange juice concentrate, which the school had recently classified as contraband, and I was up for it.

We licked our fingers and dipped them into the packet, but rather than suck off the zesty powder immediately, we touched our fingers back to our tongues and dipped again until a damp, sugary orange mound containing enough concentrate for a full glass of fake orange juice had built

up on our forefingers. Then we sucked it off. Tangy doesn't begin to cover it. Now and then I'd see other children round the school with orange forefingers and think, 'Hello, looks like you're in the tart but sweet club, too.'

On a handful of intensely exciting occasions, Tom set his Game & Watch to wake us at one or two in the morning, whereupon we put on our slippers and dressing gowns and crept out of our senior dormitory, down the stairs, through moonlit corridors and over to the girls' wing. If we'd been caught, it would almost certainly have meant suspension and to calm my nerves as we crept I listened in my mind to Madness's 'Night Boat to Cairo' and The Human League's 'The Things That Dreams Are Made Of'.

Once in the girls' dorm, we woke up our respective girlfriends, indulged in yet more snogging, then crept back to our beds feeling like sexy POWs. I loved kissing, though I always said 'snogging' so as not to come across as effete. Apart from the fact that Alison wore delicious peach lip balm, whenever we kissed it felt to me that we were defying the normal lonely order of things and forming a connection that went beyond the physical and into the telepathic, as if we were kids with psychic powers trying to evade shadowy government agents bent on exploiting our mind gifts for evil.

RAMBLE

I spent a lot of time wishing I had special mind powers as a child. During the Seventies films like *Escape to Witch Mountain* and TV shows like *The Tomorrow People* enthralled me with their depictions of telepathic and telekinetic children, and when left alone I would narrow my eyes, touch my fingers to my temples and concentrate hard on an object like a cup or a toy car, willing it to move with all my might because I knew that if it did, it would prove that I wasn't just an anxious thickie who couldn't do maths, I was in fact part of a new stage in human evolution. But all I managed to do was burst a few blood vessels in my cheeks from straining.

For snogging enthusiasts, the biggest event in the school calendar was the End of Term Film. This took place in the school gym the night before holidays began and was as significant for us as Prom Night is for American teens. Establishing who you were going to sit next to in the End of Term Film was a process of lengthy and fraught negotiation that began weeks in advance and could easily fall apart at the last minute if your date got a better offer.

The End of Term Film on Friday, 11 December 1981, was *Hawk the Slayer*, a low-budget British Sword-and-Sorcery adventure released the previous year. Alison and I found a space against one of the side walls of the gym where all the serious snoggers sat. Sitting against the back wall was no good because that's where the teachers sat and only 'Squits' and tragic losers sat in the middle of the gym, as I knew from bitter experience.

As the film started and the lights went off, Alison and I closed our eyes and began to snog (at least I did; Alison may well have surreptitiously watched *Hawk the Slayer*). Our mouths didn't part until the end credits had rolled and the lights in the school gym were back on; 90 minutes in total. If you can beat that, you've got problems. A year or so later they showed *Hawk the Slayer* on TV and I finally saw the images that went with the audio. It was better the first time around.

BOWIE ANNUAL

I'm sure there are French teachers who electrify their students with their passionate conjugations of irregular verbs, and physics teachers who state the principle of moments for a body in equilibrium so rivetingly that lives are changed forever, but you seldom hear about them. Meanwhile, all an English

teacher has to do is tell the class to stand on their desks and read out some poetry and at least one or two of their students are guaranteed to crap on about how inspiring it was for the rest of their lives.

My first unconventional English lesson took place in a posh wood-panelled room in an old part of the school that I'd never set foot in before, though by that time I'd been there for three years. The classroom upgrade was one of the privileges that came with being a senior, along with suddenly being treated like an adult by some of the staff (after all, we were 12), and our new English teacher, Mr Davidson, was one of those who seemed especially excited at the prospect of laying some grown-up shit on our arses (that's not a good choice of phrase in this context, but you know what I mean).

Mr Davidson looked like Serge Gainsbourg with a hangover: unshaven, eyes heavy-lidded, hair messy and clothes rumpled – the kind of person my dad would have called 'a real creep'. (NOTE: My friend Patrick just sent me a picture he took of Mr Davidson back in those days and he doesn't look like Serge Gainsbourg with a hangover at all. He looks like a young, smart Serge Gainsbourg in a suit and a tie.)

As we filed into the posh room that day, an unsmiling Mr Davidson eyeballed us silently. There were a few nervous giggles after we'd taken our seats because Mr D still hadn't said a word. Instead, he went over to fiddle with a record player on his desk and suddenly the sound of a growling electric guitar rang out. Mr Davidson turned to the blackboard and began to scribble: 'Ziggy played guitar. Jamming good with Weird and Gilly …'

This all seemed a bit daft to me and I looked over at Tom to see what he thought. He grinned and raised his eyebrows as if to say, 'Go with it!' Mr Davidson wrote out all the lyrics before the song had ended and when he was finished he turned and stared at us with crazed intensity.

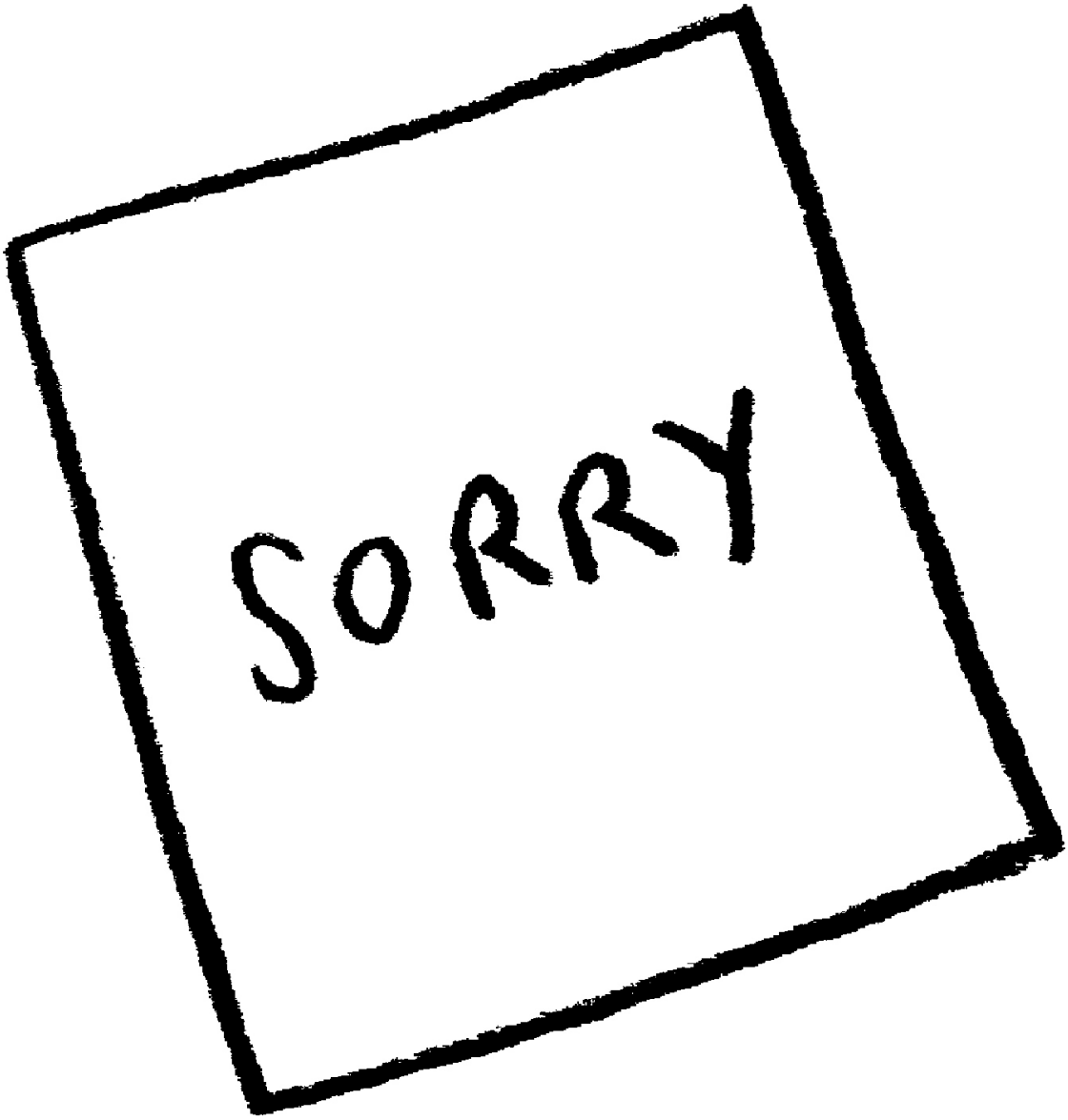
For the rest of the lesson we analysed the lyrics to 'Ziggy Stardust'. Though I still struggled to take it all seriously – 'Why do you think the fly was trying to break his balls?' – I couldn't deny it was more fun than a 'normal' lesson. I was surprised when Mr Davidson told us the song was by David Bowie. I wasn't crazy about it. To me it sounded less interesting and inventive than 'Space Oddity' or 'Life on Mars', but later in the senior common room Bill Muggs put on a cassette of the whole *Ziggy* album and I heard 'Five Years' for the first time.

'Five Years' was like a whole film in a single song, beginning with a silent, empty aerial shot that gradually zoomed to earth to the sound of a beguilingly odd drum pattern, before finding Bowie making his way through a busy market square as around him people struggled to take in the news that the world was ending, not that day or the next, but in five years. I didn't like to think about the end of the world, but because Bowie was there it felt OK somehow, and by the flashback to the ice-cream parlour and the '*milkshakes cold and long*', I was no longer on a beaten-up armchair in the senior common room with Bill Muggs, but smiling and waving from inside the song.

I bought *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* on vinyl during the holidays (my first LP) and back home in the front room, studying the rear of the album sleeve, I saw the message: '*To be played at maximum volume*.' That wasn't going to happen because I didn't have headphones and I wasn't up for Dad interrupting to tell me to turn it down. Nor did I relish the prospect of either of my parents hearing the line about a cop kissing the feet of a priest and making a '*queer*' throw up.

Instead, I played the record at approximately one-third of the maximum volume but lay on the floor with my eyes closed and the shitty hi-fi speakers positioned right next to my ears. In that position I listened to 'Five Years' over and over, mishearing the line '*your face, your race, the way that you talk*' as '*your face, you're ace, the way that you talk*', which made me think of Alison. By the time the song reached its emotional crescendo in the cold and the rain with Bowie feeling like an actor, my throat hurt and my heart ached, and it was tremendous to be alive.

CHAPTER 6
ARGUMENT WITH WIFE LOG



When two people live together for 25 years, from time to time there will be irritation. If those people share the money they earn, have brought one or more children into the world and continue to have (occasional) sexual relations, the potential for friction increases dramatically. If one of those people is in the habit of texting during movie night and thinks proper cutlery-drawer segregation 'feels racist', then it's argument time.

Underlying each argument are resentments and insecurities that haven't been satisfactorily dealt with. So a comment that was in no way passive-aggressive about always leaving the door of the dishwasher open (which is a tripping hazard) takes only a few minutes to spiral into a series of acrimonious accusations over class, money, parenting, education, climate change and the meaning of life.

In the heat of an argument the notion of admitting I might be wrong or attempting to unpack the disagreement is about as likely as being in the throes of sexual passion and suddenly deciding to make a start on those taxes. It's technically possible, but it's not top of the agenda.

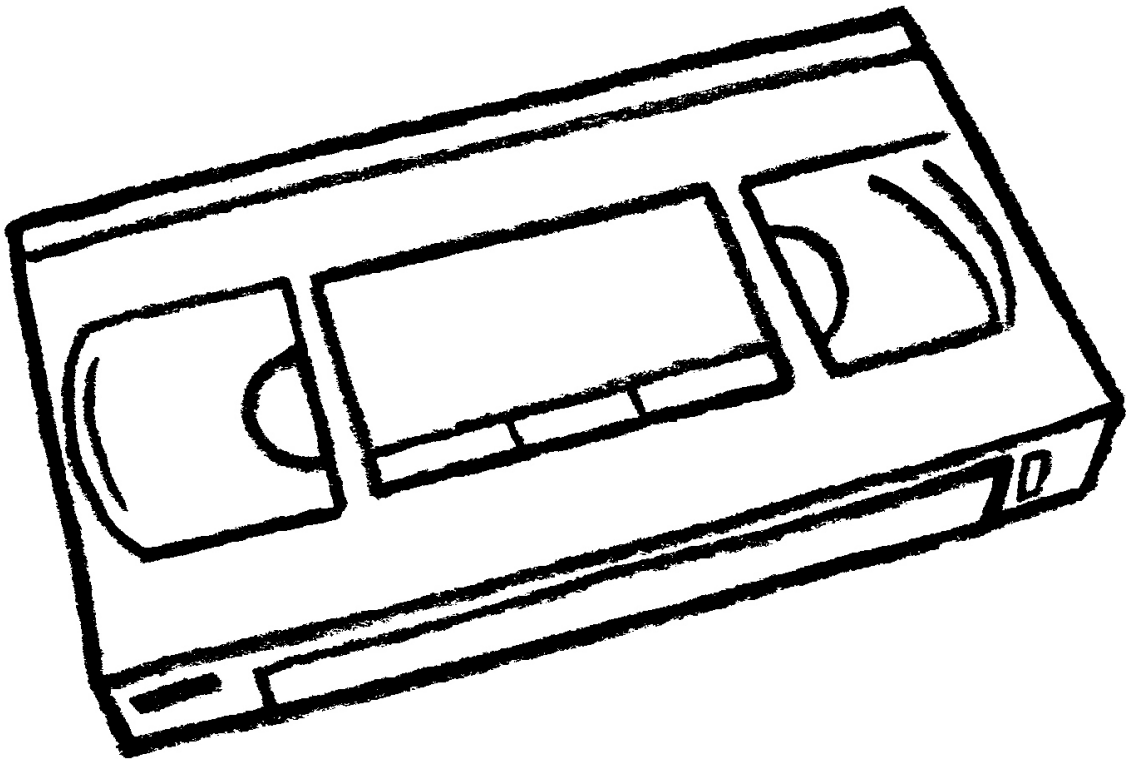
Much more important is acting as though I'm innocent of all charges, turning my wife's every accusation back on her and, most crucially, having the last word. Sometimes we'll reach a point in the argument when we're just going round in an angry loop – in these situations I sometimes find it useful to deploy the Silent Walk-out in High Dudgeon. Medium or low dudgeon may also be effective.

Some might see the Silent Walk-out as a dick move. In the past my wife has called out, 'Go on then, off you go!' as I depart, but if I'm able to stop myself going back for more, the suspension of hostilities afforded by the Silent Walk-out is vitally important. Only when we're out of physical proximity is it possible to begin the Chill-out Section, and if all goes well, that's followed a while later by the shambling, shamefaced Apology Summit. The duration of the Chill-out Section needs to be right, though; turn up for the Apology Summit too early and you risk being served a giant helping of Argument Rehash.

When I argue with my wife it's one of the worst feelings in the world, because it brings into view, however distantly, the possibility that our differences are too great and it would be better for everyone if we were not together. Then I imagine the reality of splitting up. The pain and regret that I'd feel if I lost my closest and kindest ally. The sadness our children would endure. The admin. Oh God, imagine the admin! And, of course, one of my big podcast catchphrases would be fucked.

I'm happy to say that over the last few years my wife and I argue less. This is partly because we have both done our best to talk through some of the underlying causes of our trivial disagreements with an admirable degree of maturity, but I believe another important factor has been my determination to keep a log of our arguments, providing as it does an easily searchable database of grievances that reduces the chances of covering old ground during valuable argument time. For the record, my wife strongly disagrees.

CHAPTER 7
1982



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