



Autobiography:

now or never

Kamalashila



In the spring of 1949 my mother brought me into this world in a convalescent home somewhere in Hitchin, Hertfordshire. Being a nurse gave her the privilege of giving birth to one's offspring, free, in a protected environment. Yet with my two sisters she did not repeat the experience, and I have never returned to Hitchin, though I once passed it on the train.

As an infant I was happy, indeed I am told I was unusually gregarious. If not watched closely I would disappear from the house, to be found chatting with any one of the housewives which of course, in 1953, every neighbouring house contained. Our house, 288 Mayplace Road, was on the corner of a small cul-de-sac, and opposite was a golf course. I was bright, could read at three, and at age five was sent, after a few months at a local kindergarten – my mother's way of giving me the edge – to the local infants' school.

One morning I excitedly pointed out a green car to my mother – the few cars then were generally black or grey. The relative safeness of the roads was presumably one reason why my mother quite happily let me walk to and from school. The school can't have been far away. Mum simply took me there on the first morning; I walked home myself at lunch-time. During my first few hours of independence, something traumatic and very formative took place. This incident had to do with mid-morning milk. In those days schoolchildren were given free milk, and the universal tarmac playgrounds were always piled high with crates of used third-pint bottles. But what was more fascinating than the availability of milk was the way some other boys, using the drinking straws provided, could make subversive farting sounds. When I tried to follow their example, the entire contents of the bottle transferred itself to my jumper and shorts. In this way began the progression of social embarrassments which has continued to this day.

Another reason why I walked alone to school may have been that my mother wanted me to be independent. Certainly now I have this characteristic to a fault – if I ever work with others, they find me difficult to work with. So really I wish she'd taught me to be co-operative. That, however, would have required a firmer hand; she was probably just doing what she could with me, taking the line of least resistance. I always knew what I wanted, and she usually let me have my own way. My father tried to take a stronger line, but unfortunately he usually lost his patience with me, which would at once send me back to an easy life under Mum's protection. This obviously led to somewhat of an imbalance – I grew up avoiding my father's influence, protected by my mother.

Nonetheless I loved my Dad, at least from a distance. Arthur Matthews was handsome and dark haired. Even now in his eighties his hair – what there is of it – retains some of its colour (I've been white – and bald – since my forties). Dad worked for the London Council. His task over the period up to and around my birth was helping rebuild London after the damage of war. He was responsible then for the borough of Tower Hamlets; later on he was responsible for buying land for the South Bank project – the National Theatre and the Festival Hall. He knew a great deal of poetry by heart – he could recite, to give but one example, the whole of Wordsworth's 'the Ancient Mariner'. When I was ill he used to sing to me all kinds of songs, some of Shakespeare's like 'Where the bee sucks, there suck I' – songs that are now woven deeply into my heart's memory.

I have many memories of Barnehurst, the furthest eastern quarter of London where we lived, but few of the infants' school, so I conclude that we made our big move out of London fairly soon after I was five. A house in a new estate in Kent, on the outskirts of Tunbridge Wells, had been purchased – however there must have been some delay, since we had to leave Mayplace Road while the building was still incomplete. So we stayed with our grandparents – first in Forest Hill, South London, with the maternal grandmother and her daughter, Auntie Jean, and later in Grays, Essex, with Dad's father and mother. According to my child's sense of time this in-between state seemed to go on for at least a year. Not that I minded in the slightest being a nomad – I don't think I was at all concerned, or even aware, that we had no home. While in London I was actually enrolled at a local school over the winter months.

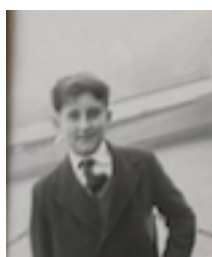
When we did finally move into 15, Brian Crescent, in Southborough, I was nearly too old for the infants' school, and since it was near the end of the spring term, it was decided that I should enrol in the Boys' Junior School in the autumn. I remember going with my mother to the infants section of the school in High Brooms, where this was decided, and feeling glad that I would be going to a boys-only school.

Most of the kids at High Brooms school were working-class; my parents were not really what (English) people nowadays think of as middle-class.

I had missed well over a year of school, and the social integration that comes with school; this distanced me to some extent from others. This was accentuated by the fact that I was also bright, especially at spelling and reading. At this, I was considerably more advanced than the others. We would have group reading sessions in which each boy would pick his way haltingly through a few lines before passing on; I would read ahead at great speed, and be several pages further into the story by the

time it came back to my turn. I became increasingly interested in reading around this time, and having exhausted the shelves of the tiny Southborough library, in those days in a back room in the council offices, I would go each week, by bus, to the children's library in Tunbridge Wells and pick several books. For some reason I was particularly interested in mythology, especially Norse and European fables and folk tales, and I read everything I could of this kind.

I enjoyed my four years at High Brooms Boys' school; this had a lot to do with the kindness of the teachers – in particular Mr. King, the headmaster, and Mr. Richardson, one of the form masters. I made some good friends, a few of whom I kept into adolescence.



Derek Camfield was my great friend. He lived in High Brooms – this was something else that separated me from the others, for I lived up the hill in the slightly posher Southborough. It did not separate me from Derek, however, for we were constant companions.

Our time together usually took place at his house in Weare Road, since it was a single street away from the school. There we would watch television, which was a treat unavailable in Brian Crescent. In this way I was introduced to the broader English culture – I saw advertising, and watched football and, later on, Top Of The Pops. Derek and I would also play a greatly extended version of Monopoly of our own invention, with special money. At the end of Derek's road was The Rec. – a half-acre field which sloped down to a run-down farm with a few pigs. The Rec. was provided with a tall slide, large and small swings, a Maypole, a sand-pit (next to the pigs), a shed, and a Roundabout – all standard playground kit. Young boys of all ages used this facility, and we continued to play there right into our tenth year.

Though we occasionally larked around on it, the slide did not draw much of our interest. Our main area was the swings, which we usually requisitioned and used for the very particular sport that we had developed. This was a kind of battle. In the bay were two swings. These we would straddle sideways – we perched, our legs splayed like frogs, with one chain at our back and another between our feet. Arching our backs and pushing with our feet, we propelled our swings sideways at tremendous speed, both moving backwards and forwards in parallel, sometimes going quite high into the air, until one of us made an aggressive move. The aim of the tournament was to knock the opponent off his swing with a sideways shift, overtaking and catching him off guard. We would do this by suddenly catching hold of one of the metal support struts behind. This interrupted the to-and-fro rhythm and give an opportunity to swing sideways and forward just as the other party



was propelled towards us. If they did not spot this manoeuvre, we could hit them sideways on and perhaps topple them – though of course we became very adept at staying seated, and cunningly avoiding such moves, by pulling on the chains in various ways. We could stop in mid-flight or make feint moves by shifting from one side of the struts to the other. We would of course challenge other boys, but Derek and I made sure we were the kings simply by spending far more time on the swings, and in this way, than anyone else.



The other use for the swings that I recall was for peering up the skirts of the girls. Sometimes quite a number of us boys would gather when the swings were occupied by the local talent, and lie innocently in front on the grass. I cannot remember whether this was encouraged by the girls or was a source of annoyance to them – perhaps it was both – but this was of course the time when sexual curiosity began to blossom. I fell in love, not for the first time – I think it was the third time, for I can remember incidents well before the age of five (see photo earlier) – with someone called Jennifer, and later on with a Josie Bridger. Neither of these angelic beings I ever spoke with. Both were fair haired. I used to think of them at night, imagining myself with them. Being a wordy person, I fell in love with their names – the name ‘Jennifer’ became unbearably evocative and, if I think about it,

still is.

Sometimes Derek and others would come to my house. Then we would usually play in the wood at the bottom of the garden. This was Brokes Wood. I also used to play there alone quite often, and even now can remember individual trees, and even patches of certain plants. If I take my mind there, I recall particular stretches of paths within the wood. I often dream of these places, and it is often these places that become associated in my memory with stories or descriptions I read.

For example, there is a famous story in the Buddhist Pali Canon of King Ajatasattu, the king with a guilty conscience, who had murdered his father for the sake of the throne. Ajatasattu is led by his chief minister, on a beautiful full moon night, into a deep wood to visit the Buddha, who is encamped there with thousands of disciples. But the king suddenly halts, wondering: am I being led into a trap? If not, how is it that it is so quiet? It is quiet because the huge gathering of monks are all silently meditating in the light of the full moon. Whenever I remember this story, the place where the king halts – in my imagination – is by a large beech in Brokes Wood which I remember being on the left, quite close to the start of the path going down towards the lake.

Another place in Brokes Wood has also become part of my imaginal referencing system, in the story of Ksantivadin. This unfortunate monk’s limbs are severed, one by one, by an evil king, just to test his patience, and Ksantivadin experiences this terrible comeuppance in a small clearing just behind the holly tree directly at the bottom of what was once our garden.

I remember this particular tree extremely well. Due to an intense crowding of trees at this point, it had been forced to grow straight up, like an ordinary tree (I don’t know much about trees, but I usually expect holly to be more of a bushy thing). Generally,

people - i.e. my youthful friends - were put off climbing it because of its sharp, scratchy leaves. However I discovered that this danger was more notional than real. The holly had a good set of horizontals, and I could perch comfortably on a branch some twelve feet above ground. Since it was directly below our house, whose garden sloped down a steep hill before meeting the wood, this tree gave a vantage point for me to withdraw from the world and, regarding the house at



a distance up the hill, reflect on life, the universe and such matters. Actually of course I do not remember anything of my thoughts - I don't imagine I had many; it was probably more of a feeling. But it was definitely a place where I felt a positive separation from others. Probably I was aware that no one else, not even my friends, was likely to come up here, or imagine that I might be up here.

This tree was important to me in another way, probably also connected with withdrawal from the world. I developed a special game in which I let myself deliberately fall down from it, relying on its strong, pliant branches to slow my fall. I would experience an ecstatic feeling of liberation and freedom as I did so. It was not only that I knew I could fall from a height and survive; it was a kind of metaphysical release. I would place stress, as I let go, on completely abandoning myself to the force of gravity. This total abandonment was what the 'art' was all about.

I often used to indulge in 'falling out of the sky'. It began, I think, when I was six or seven, but even later, when I was a little older, I can remember testing myself and being pleased that I could still do it. That may have been immediately before we left Brian Crescent, when I think I was ten, but it may well have been considerably later, since I have a memory of going back there, and of wearing my fashionable two-tone brown 'foamback' raincoat. This memory, if accurate, dates the occasion, I think, to my fourth year at grammar school, when I would have been a stylish fifteen. Yet I don't think it is unlikely that I would do something so juvenile at that grown-up age. It is typical of the kind of self-amusing eccentricity upon which I have always tended, for my sins, to pride myself.

And probably it goes a little deeper than that, for there seems to be something rather shamanistic about the ritual falling; the holly tree itself definitely represented for me a kind of spiritual isolation. Not that I thought at all about it – certainly not in that way. The ritual just developed out of my play. It is interesting that the site of my odd asceticism is also connected, in my mind, with Ksantivadin, the 'Preacher of Patience' (who, incidentally, emerged victorious from this cruel test - he didn't bat an eyelid, we're told). I should clarify that this connection wasn't something I thought up, it is just the way I notice that my mind works -

As I mentioned just now, I was fascinated by Nordic mythology at this time, and no doubt there is a connection with that kind of shamanic, heroic, power-based, spirituality. Nowadays I have an intense fear of great heights, of high cliffs especially.



This came on, as I recall, in my late thirties. However, that would not apply to a twelve-foot holly. I am sure I could still fall out of that tree. Derek, I, and others, would play the kind of games you can play in woods – usually cowboys, or Robin Hood – anything involving warfare and weapons would do. I first went through catapults, then homemade bows and arrows, then a shop-bought bow with real metal tipped arrows, then a homemade crossbow that fired the same but at an armour-

piercing velocity, then home made guns that fired nails... This escalation led eventually to my owning an air gun with telescopic sights. However this quite soon finished me off as far as weaponry was concerned when I managed to kill a Jay, an event that was so distressing that I still remember it with great remorse. I don't think I used the gun much more afterwards. I hit the huge bird crucially, and it fluttered to my feet; but an airgun pellet had not been enough to kill it at once. I panicked at its writhings and heart-rending cries, and ended up squashing it to death, most horribly, with my foot. May all Jays everywhere live happy and long-lived lives, undisturbed by the machinations of naïve little boys.



There is so much I could tell about these very rich years, but one more thread, the musical one, will have to suffice. I love music and, I think, am somewhat musical. David Seal, Stephen Hoare, Dave Levett and I at an early point briefly formed a Skiffle group. Due to the cultural impoverishment caused by our family's lack of television, I knew nothing about Skiffle – a short-lived craze of this period – but nonetheless I managed an extempore violin along with their guitars to songs such as 'Hang Down Your Head Tom Dooley (Oh Boy, You're Gonna Die). Indeed this may have been our only song. Dave, I think, played the essential washboard, and we had to do without a box bass.

This means I was already playing the violin under the fine tutorship of Miss Gould. There were three Misses Gould, sisters who occupied a top floor flat in a quiet part of Tunbridge Wells. I pursued this art for several years and was a fair-to-medium student, passing a number of exams, playing nervously at public recitals, and eventually playing second fiddle in a small local orchestra, the Wells String Players. I also played in the school orchestra. But my great love, and my best talent, was for drums and percussion.

This love and talent revealed itself some time in the late fifties – or perhaps early sixties – a few months after I had started buying records for myself. The first record I bought was by Dion, and was called 'Put Your Head On My Shoulder,' with really quite an untypically sentimental appeal. It was after that that I found my first real musical groove: instrumental music, which came into vogue just then. Groups like the Shadows, Jet Harris and Tony Meehan (surely the first supergroup) and the strange group who recorded 'Telstar', played anaemic melodies on an all-electric range of instruments: electric guitars and organs, using the range of special effects then available, usually echo and 'tremolo'. To me, at around eight, it was excitingly modern and innovative. I appreciated Beethoven, too – very much, indeed I would listen again and again as Fritz Kreisler played the Kreutzer sonata on our record-player with its modern disc-changing device (useful for sets of six or more 78's, of which we had many, as well as LPs). But though I recognised the impoverishment of Jet Harris and Tony Meehan's whining, dull melodies, there was something here that was full of raw, exciting potential. To some extent, it was the rhythm. One day, playing my records again and again, as I often did, I saw what it was that Tony Meehan, the drummer, was doing, and I realised that I wanted to play drums.

From that point my visits to the music shop in Monson Road would take in not only the latest 45 (rpm) or EP in the listening booth, but a brief look at their scant selection of percussion items. I was unable to discuss my interest with, and thus show my ignorance to, the coiffured shop lads. Eventually I plucked up courage and bought a pair of sticks and, later, a pair of brushes. From that point on, Derek and I spent every Sunday afternoon drumming, continuously, to Top of the Pops – Alan Freeman's radio show, which played the whole Top Twenty in ascending order. My bedroom, where these sessions took place, contained a peculiar architectural feature: a plywood platform at (my then) chest height, which covered the stair-well below. To this bare wood, Derek and I would apply our sticks and brushes with ferocity. The sound must have been amplified throughout the whole house, and I admire my father and mother for their indulgence of our tremendous pleasure.

I entered my ninth year. Soon would come the eleven plus exam, and according to its result, entry into the next level of schooling. My father, hoping that I would develop some scientific or at least rational bent, tried schooling me in mathematics. This was a

humiliating failure. My mother, who was rather good at seeing where my talents lay, had me tutored in French. This I found easy and interesting. I progressed in my lessons, and this soon led to correspondence and an exchange visit with a fifteen year old French lad from Colombes, in Paris. It was really rather unfortunate that our ages – and hence our interests and experience – were so unmatched. We could hardly be friends, though we were not unkind to one another. The visit to Paris, of course, greatly widened my horizons, though I did not notice at the time. For it was not easy for me having no one to play with, to be in such a strange place with such strange people, who ate bloody steaks with chips several times weekly, and drank with everything, even adding to soup, wine from bottles refilled at a local shop. They must have thought me even stranger, a quiet little English boy, able to say little and inclined to say less, and too young for them conscionably to allow out alone. Colombes was not a ‘nice’ area. The month went slowly; apart from visits to places like Notre Dame I remember spending a lot of time in their living room reading Asterix comics.

That year I was the only boy at High Brooms who fully passed the eleven-plus. Most boys were destined for the Secondary Modern; Derek and some of my other friends passed at a lower level and went to the ‘Tech’; I was to go to Skinners’, the grammar school in town. It was the end of my friendship with Derek. Once the autumn term began, we hardly saw one another again. When we did, much later, we could find no common ground.

The Skinners’ School still exists. it was originally set up for the sons of a mediaeval guild known as the Worshipful Company of Skinners. It occurs to me only now to wonder how such an institution survives in twentieth-first-century Tunbridge Wells. Royal Tunbridge Wells is not at all a mediaeval town – it is a spa which began in the 1700s, in the wake of fashionable watering places like Bath. Its proximity to London earned it the patronage by the smart set and the never-omitted prefix ‘Royal’.

Skinners’ was a half hour walk from Brian Crescent - or a bus ride. However, unless it rained or I was late I walked, because I was allowed to keep the money I saved. During this half hour walk between my two main worlds I would become aware of my own thoughts and feelings about things in a way that the presence of others seemed to inhibit. Not that I realised at the time that that was happening – I would just enter a different world; and an oddly uncomfortable world it was. I do not remember ever meeting anyone I knew, and at that time of day, apart from milk and post, there was rarely even a passer-by or a passing car. As I walked along the wide pavements that bordered the white suburban roads, I did not feel bored exactly, but the lack of immediate stimulus made me acutely aware of myself. As the familiar ease of home receded into the past, and the inevitability that I would soon be entering the school gates pressed ever closer, I became focused on the present moment in a most peculiar way, so much that I did not know what to do with such a tangibly mysterious sensation. At some point I devised a form of meditation to channel and address it. (It is of course only now, over forty years later, that I recognise what I was doing.) The practice was to count my footsteps for the length of Newlands Road, which was perhaps a ten minute stretch. As I walked with the necessary awareness to make counting possible, my mind would quieten and become relatively clear. The feeling of anxiety that came with the self-awareness was somehow contained and channelled.

I don’t know when I started this, but I suspect it was during my second or third year, when I began half-consciously to realise that I didn’t like Skinners’ School, and that it didn’t seem to like me. Perhaps surprisingly, this was not an especially negative

feeling: I didn't resent being at school, despite disliking it. The realisation simply heightened my sense of self-consciousness: who was I then, I wondered, and what was I doing. Even I wondered, very hazily, what am I doing in this world?

From being acknowledged over several years as the brightest lad in school, I was now among my equals and betters, and no longer enjoying the attention of admiring teachers wanting to draw me out, my academic progress declined term by term. I was at first considered promising and placed in One 'Red'. As we soon discovered, 1 (green) and 1 (blue) were the inferior grades, and after the first year, classes were graded a, b and c as normal. I did well at French, coming top or close in the first term, tolerably well at English, OK at Latin and other subjects, and poorly at Maths. In my second year I scraped into 2a, where I continued to lose interest. By the third year I was recognised as being of 'b' grade potential. By my fifth, at sixteen, I was pleased to leave.

As soon as I discovered I could not excel in any subject, not even in English, at which I tried hard (I was good at French because I had studied it already, but English was something at which I felt I should be excellent), my attention shifted to my friendships.

This in fact was the missing factor at Skinners'. What was wrong I don't know, but none of the teachers were especially friendly. Certainly they were not friendly to me, but my impression now is that this was quite general. The Headmaster, Cecil Beeby (known as 'Cess'), seemed to us boys a distant, superior sort. Some of the masters were OK – for example the young Science and English teachers, or the music teacher Mr. Pamment ('Pansy'), who was rather old, and probably not queer as we all assumed, but simply kind (our imaginations in that quarter doing overtime). Most, however, seemed unpleasant: the R.I teacher Gerald Chamberlain ('Dog-End', rumoured to have only one lung, and to us obviously homosexual); Mr. Reynolds ('Rhino' after his aggression and titanic build) – all were disliked. Or was it just me? It could have been.

I had many friends, though no one became as a close friend as Derek had been. Life was busier, and more testing. And people lived much further apart. Almost no one from my year lived in Southborough, and certainly no one did in High Brooms. Kent is a county of villages, and apart from Tonbridge – a small, dull public-school town five miles north, in a quite different part of Kent – there are no other large towns. Tunbridge Wells is the cultural centre of all the many scores of small towns, villages and hamlets within a twenty mile radius. So boys came to Skinners, usually by bus, from anywhere between Tonbridge and Uckfield. After school, they of course went home. Thus friendships had to be pursued during school time, which imposed certain limitations. But the prevailing view of the purpose of school, as I think I have already made clear, had little to do with friendship. The purpose of school was to educate – academically, that is – not to foster human or cultural values. That, I imagine, was seen as the province of the home and family, if it was considered at all, or failing that, perhaps, as the responsibility of religion.

My father is pretty much an atheist – I must ask him about this some time. I think my mother wondered about religion, though, and this is surely why she sometimes took me to church. These feelings, or whatever they were, were quite likely the influence of her own mother, who was a Baptist whose sect baptised by total immersion. I was christened, I went to Sunday school at St. Matthews in High

Brooms, and I sang in the choir. I also attended the Youth Club attached to the church.



That was, I think, on Saturday evenings. What sticks in my mind is that there were girls and a chip shop opposite. It was held in the church hall, where there was a dusty back room with seats, shelves full of bibles and hymnals, and an old pedal organ, on which I used to play 'Green Onions', still my only keyboard piece, and rusty, but still - you can improvise for a very long time to a 12-bar blues. About twenty lads and girls used to go regularly - there was little else to do, and for us 8-10 year-olds it seemed like an introduction to real adult (well, teenage) life. We all acted as though we were in our mid teens. The girls wore a trendy short shift dress - a tubular, sleeveless affair - and over tan-coloured stockings, white socks turned over below the knee. This fashion, then universal, is one of the few of that era I have not seen recalled. Certainly the blue hooded nylon anoraks all girls wore came back again (black, and hoodless), around the millennium. We, the men, wore narrow trousers and, if our parents were indulgent or couldn't care less - mine were neither, so far - winkle-pickers or chisel toes. Even though the youth club was the centre of our budding social life, we were all completely unappreciative of it. It was a joke, quite valueless, just a sham, merely a way to get you involved in church. This must largely of course have been true. Generally, we thought of religion as a bad joke, a corrupt institution; something that it was right to hate. I remember the vicar of St. Matthews, the Reverend Edward Baines, who lived in one of the 'High Brooms' very few desirable dwellings, as the first person I consciously hated. I remember clearly the moment when I perceived that I hated him - and that, therefore, I could hate another person. I don't remember having this feeling about anyone else, even though there were other authority figures I disliked. Mr. Baines seemed to me simultaneously smug and false. It may well be that I was simply acting out of my post-war conditioning - vicars embodied the archetype of all that was not with-it, that was straight, conventional, boring, and - more

sinisterly – false and corrupt. But there was more: I also felt he hated me; that essentially, his attitude to me was one of contempt based upon a conviction of superiority. For this wrong I desired revenge, and I took it in whatever ways I could devise, even if they were only in my own mind.

I enjoyed singing in the choir, and the church services. They had many aesthetically pleasing moments. In his Sunday school classes, however, Ted Baines managed to convey to me nothing of what Christianity might really be about. To me it simply seemed foolish to believe in Jesus as the ‘only son’ of God, who came down just this one time to save us, etc. – none of it made any sense. If God was omnipotent, surely anything could be achieved. So why do it like that? If religion was about how to live, and an explanation of what life is all about, why did it have to be so odd, so distorted and complex? But such questions, even if they could have been formulated, would never have been comprehended, let alone addressed with sympathy. My friends and I soon became irretrievably bitter, cynical, and ironic about Christianity. What worried me was that so many people were Christians – I thought that surely there might be something in it. Ted was well-meaning, narrow though he seemed, and Christians generally were not stupid – indeed, some of those I knew seemed, in many ways, admirable. But then they believed so much that no reasonable person could accept! I was quite confused about this for many years – to a certain extent, in fact, I still am; though now I can appreciate the mythic aspect of Christianity, and other forms of faith that can transcend the literal interpretation of its doctrine, though I know these are actually heterodox. I can also understand that for most ordinary people, Christianity is just what’s available – it is the European religious tradition, at least post paganism, and there is no real alternative. Other forms of religion, to most people still, is for ‘intellectuals’, or people who want to be seen as being different. This problem created a tremendous gulf in my life, for I could not be a Christian, even though in a sense I wanted to be. I felt religion was a good thing.

I had a night time life from an early age. As soon as I lay down in bed I would watch as my thoughts – or whatever they were, they became something different from ordinary thoughts – rolled back and back in a spacious, kaleidoscopic tapestry of light, colour and meaning. This unfoldment started with thoughts, displayed itself in this way for fifteen or twenty minutes, and ended with sleep. Sometimes it was something marvellous and beautiful, though since it simply happened each night, I did not think of it as anything special. Nor do I think now that it was really anything special to me: it was simply the mind.



As puberty dawned, this did not change, but my nocturnal activities changed. I acquired a transistor radio, a relatively recent invention. Indeed, I made one from a kit, but I seem to remember that one not working well enough to use. With my plastic earplug, or by simply lying right under the clothes, I would listen, undetected, to Radio Luxembourg instead of at once merging, as I formerly did, with the ineffable tapestry of consciousness. I would listen until I was ready to sleep, which would sometimes be for a couple of hours. This would make me reluctant to rise the following day.

It was also at this time that I discovered that the pleasure of sex did not merely consist in that mingling of organs I had known about, imagined and made furtive jokes about

since age seven or eight. I desired that even then, but in a relatively innocent way, since no one had said anything about orgasms. No one at school had twigged this either, since, of course, they hadn't had one. We experienced boyish erections. We knew about babies, and that they resulted from sex. And it was obvious that sex would be pleasurable. But of orgasms we knew nothing. I think we all assumed that penetration, which was sure to be pleasant, was the long and the short of sex. But as I played with myself and listened to the enthusiastic American accents on 'Wonderful 208 - Radio Luxembourg – your Station of the Stars', one night I began to experience those all-absorbing sensations that lie at the root, so to speak, of so much human endeavour. And thus began a long, and it seems unconcluded, career of masturbation. At home I would do it at any time of day, but I specialised in the early morning, just before school, a juncture that was encouraged by the fact that my bedroom window gave onto the main route leading to a local school. While I lurked very furtively in the shadows, taking extreme precautions so as not to be seen, past my window paraded at least half the sweet-faced girls of the Ridgeway Secondary Modern, in their hooded blue anoraks, white blouses, short grey skirts and white knee socks. This, as well as being something I was ashamed of, was a frustrating exercise, since there was too much choice and too little time really to savour the experience. Yet for a while I became a little addicted, for I was reluctant to go to school, and this opportunity arose at the very point where I should be girding my loins to go there. Mum would be shouting 'Anthony!... come on, it's *already half past eight*' just as another set of knee socks hove into sight, and I would shout back 'Yes just a sec. Mum, I won't be long...' but the viewing angle wouldn't be quite right, or she might suddenly seem too young, or not as developed as I'd hoped, or not dressed as excitingly as it had seemed at a distance – and then she'd be right there across the road, and I'd have to make up my mind – but then I'd have carefully to swap sides of the window, and then it would be a rear view, not interesting in quite the same way... yes, it was an exercise in pure frustration. It was not until many years later that I could see how universal and how central this intense picking and choosing kind of mental activity is for us human beings, and by no means only in relation to sex.

Probably, I wasn't really very happy around this time. Luckily, my capacity and opportunity for finding friendships suddenly improved tenfold. One afternoon at school, in my fifth year (I was roughly a year younger than others in my class throughout school, having entered school at ten), I walked into 1Blue's classroom to find three fourth year boys playing guitars. Whether by coincidence or design, I had my drumsticks with me. Steve Fisher, Terry Moran, Hugh Maitland and I formed the Chanticleers, an R&B group that continued for a year or more, playing in a local youth club and practising at least weekly. ('R&B' then meant Rhythm and Blues – it means something else nowadays.) At first I had no drums, and on our early practice sessions played a selection of cardboard boxes and a fireguard. Even on our first live performance, at the Pembury Youth Club, I used an upturned washing bowl stuffed with the two-tone foamback mat already mentioned. Shortly after this, I managed to buy a cheap snare drum, and in time, my mother indulgently bought me a kit. But even this inadequate beginning won us the special attention of the opposite sex, and all four of us began relationships of one kind or another. I was too shy to make a first move, and so others paired me off with someone called Sandra, whose twin sister was going out with Terry. Apparently, she liked me. I walked her home after the club, not knowing really what to do or even say, Sandra's house getting closer and closer. In the

end I took the plunge and, awkwardly, we kissed. Soon afterwards we met in Tunbridge Wells and went 'over the common' (this was what you did), lay in the bracken, kissed and fondled. One evening her big brother, a 'hard nut' caught me looking at him, and thought I was 'taking the piss' out of his sunglasses – apparently they concealed a black eye. He took a swing at me and knocked out a lower front tooth. 'I've got bad eyes, chav, alright?'. This was Kentish dialect – at least, I've never heard it anywhere else, but it was familiar language to all of us. I do not think it lasted long with Sandra. The connection was not at all elevating or interesting for either of us. It was hardly a friendship – a mere product of sexual curiosity. I found her attractive, but no more than many girls; and I immediately noticed something I have ever since been keenly aware of in sexual encounters. As soon as the barriers are down, and it is clear we may now do what lovers do, the attractiveness fades and you see the spots, the sweat, the naivety, the vulnerability, the lack of polish. I at once saw that at least half of sexual attraction comes from the barrier itself, whether that be temporary, permanent, real or imaginary. Not surprisingly, I suppose, this early insight made no difference at all to my pursuit of the unattainable.

This period of my life is really quite unclear to me. It is only in recent years that I have realised how unhappy I was at Skinners. My dreams often take place in its corridors and classrooms, but I remember little about it. So I will tell you how I came to leave. I was in the sixth form – or was it the fifth – did I even get into the sixth form – I cannot even remember that. I remember sitting in a class – maybe it was geography or history – and for the first time started thinking about what I wanted to do with my life. It was not something my parents had pressed upon me; they left it up to me with, perhaps, a hope that I might go to university and take the decision there. Whether to go for university or not was the issue on my mind. What did I want – what was important to me? I saw that the only thing I saw as crucially important was other people. It wasn't that I felt a particular calling. I certainly did not have visions of becoming a social worker or anything at all heroic. But I did feel as though this idea of orienting my life towards others was tremendously important. This should be my starting point. What mattered was that I could be with others, help and befriend them. From this point of view it didn't matter what I did as a career. And there was no point in going to university. It would be just like Skinners – I would not be particularly good at my work, and though I would get some qualifications, as I had here, the time would essentially be wasted.

This was how I thought. Naïve, wasn't it? And other things, too. But strangely perhaps, time seems to have borne out my decision. I do not now at all regret leaving school early, even though it was from almost every conceivable angle a huge mistake, and it didn't give me an easy early life. I suppose that my heart was simply not in school any more. During primary school, studying and becoming educated was very much what I wanted; but in the reality of grammar school, this quite quickly faded. So now I had decided. I went straight to the head's study and told him I wanted to leave. Cecil was not at all sorry; I think he even said that, but he can't have been that bad; probably it was just a hint.

Telling my parents was more difficult – they were not at all party to my thoughts on all this! I do not remember what my father said or thought. He must surely have been bitterly disappointed, but no doubt, perhaps a bit like Cecil, the headmaster, realised he could do nothing with me. I would go my own way in this as in everything else.

I thought I would get a job, but I had no idea of what kind of job I wanted. There was a careers advisory service attached to the local education department, so I went there and in a talk with someone decided that I'd enjoy being a buyer for a shop. I have no idea why this appealed to me – probably I considered that I had a good eye for what was needed. I quickly found a job at Chiesman's, a smart department store in the centre of town, as a trainee buyer. Obviously a sixteen year old trainee buyer needs to know everything about selling, and to work his way up through the store. I don't remember anyone actually telling me this, however – what I remember is being put to work in the linen department. I learned how to sell single sheets, double sheets, Egyptian sheets, woollen blankets, 'Acrilan' blankets, towels, tea towels, bath towels, face flannels – in short, an extended variety of pieces of rectangular material – to the generally female customers who visited the department. I worked well enough, but I was soon very bored. I started going out with someone, another shop employee – that soon finished... I fell in love with an unattainable girl called Maz, bought mod clothes – levis, bush jacket (ex-War dept. gear was just coming into fashion), a parka, and a down-at heel scooter... I lasted three months at Chiesman's, and left after Christmas.

Mum came to my rescue with a prospectus for the West Kent College. In principle the idea of further education had of course already been rejected as part of my idealistic leaving of school. I was now, however, in a quite different mood, having now understood that there are different kinds of work in the world, and that at this stage I still had a certain choice. How it was that I decided that I wanted to be a stage designer is no longer clear to me, but that's what I did. I would do an art 'A' level – a requirement for Art School – and study English Literature and Drama. All these were favourite subjects – English literature I loved and wanted to learn far more about; I was very interested in drawing and painting, and had a modicum of raw talent. The WKC was offering a two year course in the basics of Theatre – it sounded great. It was, too.

The course was led by Ivor Morris, a Welsh ex-pro in his fifties. To us at least he really looked the cracked actor, with his oiled hair, nicotined fingers, actor's intonation and alcoholic manner. There were fifteen or so of us on this new course, which occupied each morning for five days a week. I can remember all of them in some detail, since we inevitably got to know one another extremely well as we worked together on plays, improvisation, and in the intensive training we were given in acting, stage management, and theory of all kinds. In all this, Ivor was a wonderful teacher, and he clearly enjoyed us immensely. I had the impression he had managed to recover from a rough patch in his life, and now it was as though he had accidentally tripped out of the lonely obscurity and unemployment that most actors endure, up to a heaven of genuinely rewarding and engaging work.

I imagine the West Kent education department had accepted pretty much anyone who applied for this, but we were a good mixture. The majority wanted to act, or thought that they might. A few, like me, were interested in the more technical side of theatre – one lad wanted to do lighting and electrics, while another, Sue, was interested in wardrobe; and I of course, for some reason I cannot remember, wanted to do stage design.

In our first term we did *Under Milk Wood*. I played Organ Morgan. Since *Under Milk Wood* was written for radio, it did not require a set. In fact, I don't recall designing one set during the two years of the course, though I must have done. It didn't matter to me. My wish to train in set design was genuine, but I had no real interest in it – that

is, I had no idea, really, what having that kind of interest in a career might mean. It was something almost abstract.

Almost all the students became well known to me, and I would spend a lot of my free time with all but, say, five out of the fifteen. There is more than one friend of whom I cannot recall whether they joined this or the second year of the course, since several of our friends also decided to join as they saw how much we enjoyed it. Simon, I think, was one of these. Simon Withers became my closest friend since leaving primary school. I certainly met him during my first year, which was held in Tonbridge. I may have met Simon through encountering David Goodale. But I am going too fast! I must backtrack to fill in what had been happening in Tunbridge Wells.

I managed to lose my virginity soon after I left school. This was through the good agencies of a school friend, Pete Adams. Peter and Paul were giants, twin brothers, and northerners, originating from Harrogate. And as did a couple of other friends, they lived in Crowborough, a township some eight miles south-west of Tunbridge Wells. I got on exceedingly well with both brothers, in the usual way – my sense of humour – but Peter was closer, and the friendship continued for a year or so after school. Indeed, so much of my final year of school was spent half out of school, that the edges are now quite blurred. Anyway, Peter had somehow made a definite arrangement with two girls from the Tunbridge Wells girls grammar school. We arrived, via his Tiger Cub, at a small country house, very likely somewhere in Crowborough; the parents, of course, considering the nature of our assignation, being away. We paired off, and the deed was done to the pleasurable satisfaction of both parties, in my case at least. However, as we returned to the kitchen, we discovered that Pete had for some reason not been able to bring himself to perform, to his partner's evident disappointment. Accordingly I volunteered for another round – which also seemed to go well, though darkness and giggles is all I remember. Pete certainly wasn't upset; I think he was relieved at my action. Though it is true that in those days I was a quick, flashy little tyke, I don't think I would have done anything to hurt Pete. He was slow, kind, thoughtful, and intelligent with it - the better man, I think. We waved goodbye, kick-started and roared off into the summer evening.

The fact that in those days I had three good friends called Peter never occurred to me until this moment. It was in Crowborough that I first got drunk, too, with Peter Beech - a diminutive red-haired lad, a close friend, and Peter Maverley who, like me, lived in Southborough. It was probably his scooter that transported me to Peter's house. Since Peter Maverley was another giant, he bought the vodka. It was a sunny Sunday afternoon. We drank the whole bottle between us and reeled around some woods, laughing at the crystalline magic of it all.

While at Chiesman's, as may already have been apparent, I became something of a mod. The very earliest mods were very romantic in their dress, with long, bouffant, lacquered hair and makeup. As the trend became popularised beyond central London, however, its aesthetic became more masculine with highly tailored suits and shorter hair, still slightly bouffant – back-combed at the crown, with a fringe over the eyes. As it became even more popular, it adopted the motor scooter as part of its modern, clean image, influenced by the designed look of sixties London. My own scooter was not really of this order: a Lambretta LD, a five year old model. I attempted to give it the look by attaching a chromium bath-rail to the front, but I knew I could never compete with the smart GS's and LI's, with their chromed or

sometimes coppered side panels, tall aerials and banks of lights. These glamorous machines would sweep by, the wind billowing the driver's parka and smart haircut, and freezing at his back a pale-faced girl with huge eye makeup and a bright coloured leather coat.

I could not really be like that – for one thing, you needed to be earning real money, and for another, I don't think I could really have been so committed – but I was utterly inflamed by the aesthetic. It felt liberating and modern in a way that was not just a primitive reaction to convention, like the teddy boys of the fifties and their successors, the rockers. It appealed to me because it seemed intelligent – it implied a new kind of culture that included art, design, and a new kind of music. I somehow smelt in this not just another youth culture, but the beginning of a new kind of culture. With hindsight, I think this may be justifiable, but in any case I could not be fully part of it. My friends were not really part of that crowd. We just wore some of the clothes, and some of us went dancing at the clubs – La Bamba in Tunbridge Wells, Bligh's in Sevenoaks, and a smoky little club by Bromley railway station where they played ska and blue beat. We were out of our depth with such esoterica, however. Country boys like us were more used to Soul and Tamla – at least as dance music. The music we bought and listened to ourselves encompassed folk music, the exploding developments in post-Beatles Britpop, and the new electric blues. This was John Mayall's heyday, with future superstars like Eric Clapton under his wing. The names of obscure blues artists such as like Howlin' Wolf and Big Bill Broonzy would casually drop from the lips of a growing band of image-conscious young males. This was not about dancing and getting off with girls – this was music worthy of appreciation for its own sake. At a dance in Sevenoaks starring Mayall that I attended, there was no stage; the band played in the centre of the floor, surrounded by youths like myself who simply stood, stared, and listened to the music, especially to Clapton's out-of-this-world guitar. This was what was new about the new kind of music – it was something you concentrated upon. Music was becoming something more personal – it was becoming an experience.

This important shift in the culture was happening partly, it seems to me, because of the growing availability of drugs. The original mod drug was of course amphetamine – purple hearts or 'blues,' and methedrine. You took a handful of blues on a Friday night, and – if you were eighteen and healthy – you'd still be high on Saturday night. You'd have the brain of a carrot, while feeling omniscient, crystal clear – and invincible. And by that Saturday night, you might also be feeling somewhat irritable, because, somewhat unwillingly no doubt, you would be starting to feel the effects of the drug withdrawing. This left your brain still operating at super-speed, while you felt increasingly flat and empty inside. (This combination must have fuelled the mod/rocker rivalry and other violent outbreaks.) Methedrine was the original 'speed.' It was an extremely powerful drug, designed, I think, for injection. Which, of course, is exactly what some people, known as 'speed-freaks', did with it. For us humbler folk, however, half an ampoule, taken in some milk, was all you needed for an experience of pure intellectual and emotional pleasure. Amphetamine concentrated the mind, so that you could *really* listen to music – you'd be utterly transfixed by it – or read a book from cover to cover, or hold forth with tremendous confidence, and at great length. You'd be unstoppable, for it also gave you an undreamed-of quantity of energy – you could just keep going on and on. However, the feeling of enhanced intelligence it bestowed was entirely subjective. Others would find one's conversation tedious; the

brilliant written or artistic endeavours produced during a night on amphetamine would be seen, in the cold light of the following day, as entirely lacking in worth. Furthermore, 'speed' affected the short term memory, so that however incisive the insights of the previous evening, one could never recall their actual content. There would perhaps remain just a piece of paper, on which one had scrawled the secret of the universe in an obscure phrase which now conveyed nothing whatever.

I suppose this may upset those readers who have persevered this far, but I have to say that for all their inherent problems and dangers, drugs were, on the whole, very good for me. I am tempted to speak of particular drugs, and naturally some have been far more helpful than others, but I think it is for the whole phenomenon of drug-taking that I feel gratitude. Drugs certainly wasted my time, drained my energies, involved me in activities that I regretted. But the benefit that far outweighs all these was the change of consciousness that is involved in taking any drug. This made me realise something very important: that the quality of life is dependent on a state of mind, indeed that is precisely what it is. It is true, as has sometimes been said, that drugs can awaken religious or philosophical understanding. Drugs changed my whole viewpoint on life. You could say that the way I left school had been the result of a kind of altruism, but that was now a faded spark, the vaguest idea; nothing I had done since then had developed it. Sixteen and tossed in a whirlpool of influence, I had forgotten it long ago.

But it was not that a particular drug experience showed me, by way of a vision, that I was not merely a dedicated follower of fashion. There is a more complex thread that I shall have to follow from its source. Alcohol was my first drug, as I have already mentioned; that showed me less than nothing. After that first experience, I developed quite a taste for the drinking lifestyle. In my last year at school I almost always went out to a pub – the one opposite Skinners, or the Clarence in town – with several friends for lunch; by the time I was of an age to drink legally, I was in the habit of knocking back five pints or more of bitter in an evening, with perhaps spirits as well. And it was all because at some point I fell under the illusion that I could not do unaided whatever it was I wanted to do. But I'm not going to try to explore the root of *that* thread, which I'm sure goes back into beginningless time! My second drug arose out of similarly doubtful origins. I discovered that my father's jacket pockets, which I regularly searched, contained bottles of tranquillisers. I can imagine only now what he might have been going through. At that time, however, I was interested only in what these might do for me – so I'd take two or three and go down to Surf City, a new club in the centre of town that was open all day. The effect was not unlike that of alcohol: 'tranks' bestow the confidence that nothing can really go wrong, since you are so pleasantly insulated from the world by a rubber wall of numbness. At that time I went to Surf City almost every day. Its décor was not at all reminiscent of California or the Beach Boys, but was more like a cave, with a small dance floor surrounded by little booths with tables, each partitioned off with rough concrete daub painted white. Apart from the spots that highlighted the tables, the illumination was low and partly fluorescent. During the day the club hosted the local yobs on the dole, who tried to tempt the less experienced into their continual games of three-card brag, played for high stakes. From about four it filled with teenagers from the local schools, who also played cards, or just sat around drinking coffee, larking about, and feeding the jukebox.

That phase didn't last long, though I did meet Claire at Surf City. The Chanticleers were still going strong, practising each week in Bill Rankin's basement opposite the Clarence, our school lunch pub. However, for all our rehearsal of such delights as 'Route 66', I don't recall us ever performing anywhere, ever, apart from the aforementioned debut at Pembury. I think the important thread between us was our enjoyment of friendship. In this, some of us explored drugs – well, Hugh and I did. Steve seemed too middle class, and Terry too working class, for drugs to be easy to accept, at that point, for either of them. This was a shame, really – it would have suited them, too, had they been able to make the leap; and in the end, that cultural difference split us up. We - the group – had once or twice played a game which in spirit was very similar to the drug experimentation Hugh and I were getting into. In this game, one of us would squat on his heels, breathe deeply and rapidly in and out for some time, and then blow hard on his clasped thumbs. At least I think that was how we managed to pass out – I'm not going to try it now to check! When one 'comes back' from a faint, one has absolutely no idea what has happened. Even one's sense of identity is quite attenuated – it's quite an interesting state of mind that raises numerous questions. So knowing this, the others playing the game would create a special atmosphere. There would be, perhaps, the fragrance of Gitanes, harmonium music, the clink of glasses, and whispered conversation *en Français*. And then – after a moment or two of bewilderment, one experienced a moment of existential purity. For a short while the world would become the clear and magical place that it always has been, but we lose sight of it.

The main drug was of course cannabis. Graham Greene gave me my first taste of this. Graham was a spoilt rich kid whose parents worked in Hong Kong. He was rather unusual looking – tiny, that is shorter than my 5'8½", with reddish shoulder length curly hair and a slight, sinewy body like a model. I don't know why I mention this – I didn't fancy him or anything! He was my age, but Graham seemed infinitely worldly wise, and somehow disturbingly amoral. He was a brat, was perhaps a little unhinged, but contact with him revealed how unsophisticated and inexperienced I was, so for that at least I can thank him – as well as for 'turning us on'. Thus Issur and I (this was now Hugh's adopted name – I don't know where he got it from) began our respective careers as hash-smokers with long joints of Pakistani black rolled impressively by Graham in his parents' smart modern flat near Dunorlan Park. Much of the evening was spent falling around the floor laughing at anything anyone might say, or even not say. The effect of cannabis is liberating, certainly at the beginning. As I imagine many of my readers must know, the effect is that all sense experience, including the mind sense (i.e. that which recognises and elaborates objects of mind, especially including thoughts) is enhanced to a degree previously unimagined, so that food, for example, is indescribably delicious, a heavenly pleasure. That applies, however, if the food is of a kind that one naturally enjoys. That which one dislikes, whether it is food or any other kind of experience, may sometimes be experienced as truly horrid – as very unpleasant, perhaps even nightmarishly so if one is deeply under the influence. After a few hours the effect of the drug wears off, with no ill effects. However my experience of a number of years' smoking was that regular use tends to dull the experience, and (with few exceptions I have noticed), the experiencer himself – though perhaps in the case of those I have known, there have been other factors in that decline.

I will certainly have more to say about all that, since it was a steady feature of my life – and of most others I knew – since then. At that time I must have known several hundred young people, and very few of them did not smoke cannabis, or would not. At first when experiencing any altered state was a novelty we enjoyed, we would try anything to get high. I can remember smoking herbal mixtures and banana skins, and eating the bitter contents of decongestant inhalers (only the last of which had any effect). We were lucky that in those days the dubious pleasures of glue sniffing were not common knowledge. But once altered states of mind were no longer special in themselves, the drugs of choice were cannabis and LSD, about which I will shortly say more. As drugs go (and nowadays, of course, I take none) cannabis seems to me a reasonably civilised pleasure, easily rivalling alcohol. But we were not yet civilised, if we ever became so.

Occasionally, for entertainment, people would take something called Mandrax, a heavy tranquilliser – an intensified version of my unfortunate father's prescriptions – which, later on, contributed to one of my most regretted misdemeanours. Similar rip-offs from the British National Health Service became available from time to time. Of course at that time, as now, drugs were illegal, so what one imbibed depended on what came on to the underground market. Crack had not been invented; Cocaine and heroin were not widely available in those days – they circulated in the far older, more exclusive, drug scene that began, I think, in the late 40s and 50s. We were part of a new, seemingly healthier renaissance of drug use. In the late sixties, obtaining drugs had not assumed the hard, criminal dimension that surfaced in the early 70s. In 1967, LSD itself was not illegal, and hashish had only very recently been scheduled. To my generation, smoking hash and dropping acid was seen as something very positive, progressive, open-minded. Drug dealers I met were nice people like you and me, genuinely friendly, caring, interested. They took the LSD they sold, and it seems to me that any basically sane person who takes LSD cannot knowingly act with harmful intent. It was when a majority of people stopped taking the drug, from the 70s on, that the scene went bad.

It is understandable that this happened, however. LSD is often a considerable challenge, and if you often take trips, you can't really live normally; almost certainly, you can't run a business. Many tried to do both, but after a while they nearly all settled for cannabis as their regular drug. LSD can seem to intensify your experience, like cannabis, but that is not really what it does. (Its effects were easily conflated to those of cannabis since it was common to smoke it whilst tripping.) It is not merely the input from the senses that are intensified so much as one's awareness of the reality underlying all experience. With acid, then, one enters much deeper water. The veil of rationalisation that we all build up, from our birth onwards, is temporarily perforated. That part of our mind which selects from the vivid raw data of reality all those little facts from which we derive our orientation and sense of ground, begins to dissolve, so that standard givens, like 'this is a person', 'this is me', 'this is a room', 'this is a cup of tea' melt as the drug radically shifts the 'experiencer's' point of view. And I have to place that notion in inverted commas, since under the influence of LSD one can no longer be sure whose experience this is, if indeed it can be said to be anyone's property. So in many ways acid is like dying, since the ordinary world, and our place in it, is fundamentally undermined. That is certainly how Timothy Leary saw it. One can then be faced with very strong religious and ethical imperatives. So this is not at all like any ordinary drug – acid cannot be used in an expectation of pleasure, even

though the experience is often ecstatically joyful. It has been called ‘the truth drug’ and though that is a little banal, it is a closer match than the usual labels that derive from a legalistic view of drugs, such as ‘hallucinogenic’.

I can’t remember the circumstances of my first trip – they have all rather merged into the same experience, which is essentially as I have just stated. As is well known, for some the experience brings out a latent schizophrenia, but I don’t personally know anyone who suffered permanent damage. Some friends took a great deal of it without ill effects - a current colleague took LSD every weekend for years; my friend David Goodale met, and



filmed, Indians in Venezuela who take something similar every afternoon of their lives¹. I could not do that! Or rather, I would not want to. I have taken acid at the most twenty times. Typically I would experience visions of walls of words, written in flowing scripts which I could read if I wished, but they contained no message I could ever decipher. That wasn’t the point at all. The visions were powerfully meaningful in another, nonconceptual way that arose straight out of one’s deepest being. One felt as though one were party to the deepest truths of existence. To be among natural things was the best way to use the opportunity of a trip. The forms of trees and mosses, clouds, fire, the sounds of the wind and the light of the stars were seen with amazing clarity, and as something literally incredible – beyond comprehension. It was LSD users in the 60s who turned that adjective into a cliché. Expressions like “Wow, that’s incredible”. “Oh, incredible...” “Oh what! – how amazing, look at this...” “Oh wow... man, that is so incredible...” would very typically comprise the conversation of a group of happy trippers absorbed, say, in the markings on a piece of tree bark.

Or it could as easily describe a set of parallel monologues. For that was another limitation of drugs. It was true that the great majority of trippers, including myself, were not mentally and emotionally equipped to communicate what they were experiencing, and so were reduced to the banal mode of utterance I have described. But it was also the case that the fact of having ingested a substance that changed your consciousness was never especially conducive to communication. Speed made you want to talk a lot, and drink can loosen the tongue, but neither allow for real communication. Drugs allow one simply to be left alone on one’s personal island of experience. This was quite comfortable for me, for in that world, the Tunbridge Wells drugs scene and its later diaspora, I was a fairly extreme introvert. I rarely spoke, and

when I did I was inarticulate to a degree that concerned me. I didn't understand that the issues I was trying to broach just didn't interest those around me. So though it was easy for me to be into drugs, I could see that that aspect really did me little good. The people I used to go around with in Tunbridge Wells, the drug crowd, were not greatly into personal interchange – generally they were content to sit around, roll joints, and open ears and hearts to the latest electric music. And so was I – for the music coming out at that time was, well, quite incredible. And in any case, I was getting my more human and emotional satisfaction from the friendships coming out of the drama course. Indeed, these worlds overlapped to some extent, and would soon overlap a little more.

After its first year in Tonbridge, the Drama course shifted to a large house in Broadwater Down. This was a typical Tunbridge Wells road – quiet, leafy and wide, paved with the local red brick, and lined with huge Georgian houses and their massive gardens. Tall pines and bulky rhododendrons now lined the walk to college each morning, rather than the cracked, oily pavements and corrugated iron shuttering that had greeted the eye at our previous location, around the back of Tonbridge railway station.



During that summer, the summer of 1967 I had made firm friends with David Goodale and his wide circle, spending much time at the smarter end of Tonbridge where he lived. Like numerous others, David's parents must have moved to that unremarkable little town solely because of its well-known public school, and settled some of the pleasanter streets close by. Certainly many of our friends lived just a few houses, or a street or two, away, and most had some connection with Tonbridge School. I think I first met David at the Railway Tavern at lunchtime, after our daily drama session with Ivor (which took up each weekday morning). I deliberately went to see him, because I had heard so much about him from Jo Bousfield, a girl on the course who deeply impressed me. I don't think much happened at this meeting, but it must have been soon after this that Claire and I found our way to his 'Jelly Freak' one summer evening. We thought this

would just be another Saturday night party, but it was not, as we immediately knew as we walked round the corner of Bordyke into Hadlow Road, smelt the bonfire and soared spiritually at a first hearing of the new Beatles, 'All You Need Is Love.' That single impression, so powerful and inspiring, is the sole remainder of that evening. I heard later there was a huge pond full of jelly and various other typically Goodale occurrences, but I had not encountered them. I was probably quite drunk.

Goodale (often called by his surname rather as one might refer to 'Hockney' or 'Hitler') was inspired by the happenings, music and other liberative phenomena of the cultural revolution, but wasn't especially into drugs. This meant we could talk and have fun. It was what I needed. He had a room in his parents' house, which his younger twin brothers also shared. Thereafter I must have spent hundreds of

afternoons and evenings in that room, usually in a threesome with Simon Withers (not the currently famous English artist of that name, though if Simon had gone that way it would have been no surprise.) What made this three way friendship jell was the way our various senses of humour, all wacky in the extreme, interplayed and reinforced one another; also the pattern of the friendships between us individually worked well. I was more Simon's than David's friend; David was more Simon's than my friend; Simon was more my friend than David's, but there were three strong friendships there and a great deal of goodwill, coming especially from David, who was always hospitable, apparently always happy, always full of ideas, plans and new jokes. His parents were also very friendly, even though they viewed me with a little suspicion since they found out I sometimes took drugs, which was probably the main thing they dreaded in the way David was going. Mr. and Mrs. Goodale were active members of the Tonbridge Theatre and Arts Club, along with the parents of quite a number of our friends, and hearing that I wanted to do stage designed they invited me to design a set for a performance of 'the Relapse' which they would be performing at the TTAC – a tiny theatre round the back of the Mitre pub opposite David's house, Tonbridge School, and in Le Puy, a town in the south of France that is twinned with Tonbridge (appropriately famous for its production of lentils).



It is only in connection with the TTAC that I remember doing any actual set design, though I think I may have designed the set for our college Pantomime that year, Cinderella, performed at the Opera House in Tunbridge Wells. The first set I ever did was for David's Alice in Wonderland. It was simple, consisting of black and white psychedelic patterned semi-circular flats that receded, three on each side, towards the back of the tiny stage. Ultra violet lighting worked with the white paint to create a magical and slightly eerie effect. It was a good set, and made quite an impression. David even kept the pieces of stage work – at least, he still had them when I visited him in the mid-eighties. The set for the Relapse, which I must have done after Cinderella, was comparatively elaborate. It used a revolving stage, which required considerable design, not to mention carpentry skills. However it was just the kind of project the TTAC men loved, and they worked on it at the weekends. The play went well – when we took it to France a three day farmers' strike kept us blockaded (by tractors) in Le Puy. The very mature and cultured set of adults with whom I was suddenly in contact was a new experience. They were very generous in encouraging me so open heartedly, and I responded knowing that I was in a completely new area. The idea came from Terry McConnell, a BBC director living two doors from David, whose daughter Karen was a close friend of his. Karen was rather like her mother, dark and curly haired (a la Hendrix) with a fiery passion. Terry was comparatively shy, though impressive for his (much admired) professional capacity. Karen wasn't my type, in fact none of David's girls was, which was fortunate. David never actually went out with girls, and rarely seemed interested in doing so. I concluded he was bisexual if not out-and-out gay, but he probably wasn't clear about that himself. The girls he did go for were always classically good looking, even beautiful, and blonde.

The women I fall in love with are invariably dark haired with blue or green eyes, (like my mother's, I eventually realised). But my best girl was definitely Claire Timewell, who was a blonde, and with whom I was never in love. She and I met, as I have said, in Surf City. I was in a booth playing cards. She came in wearing the short horizontally striped dress she often wore, looking leggy and fresh, and hung around. We got on from that point, and went out, on and off, for a couple of years at least. She was attractive, her straight blonde hair cut in an asymmetric Mary Quant, and a manner that suggested she took delight in everything. So naturally, she herself was a delight; everyone loved her and enjoyed having her around. Claire was happy, energetic and 'kooky' – a word from those days meaning that she was eccentric, or delighted in eccentricity. She often laughed, showing her back teeth (and of course her front ones, one of which was pleasantly crooked). Our relationship was not at all intense, which is why it worked so well. We'd both go off with other partners from time to time, but if we wanted one another, there we were. She and I went on holiday together twice to Polperro in Cornwall, inhabiting a shelter on the cliff tops and a single sleeping bag, the only time I've ever done that. I've occasionally shared sleeping bags with other ladies, but never for more than, say, an hour, for such conditions go beyond intimacy. But Claire and I were naturally close; we just enjoyed it anyway.



Soon after making David's acquaintance I met a girl for whom I developed a fatal attraction, one that I could not relinquish for many years, and which continually faced me with conflict and self-doubt. Wendy Bindloss was the daughter of one of the Tonbridge housemasters, so she lived at the school (with six hundred boys). She was a touch taller than me, with a creamy white complexion, long thick wavy dark hair and happy blue eyes. I assumed then that her family were originally from Ireland, but recently discovered that Bindloss is a place somewhere in Kent! Wendy, like me, was something of an artist – she wanted to do film work, and indeed that's what she ended up doing. She was not especially attractive looking, at least by the standards of the average male chauvinist, though she certainly wasn't ugly. I cannot explain her attraction for me. It was something to do with her intelligence, clarity and confidence. She was a confident, spirited girl – she'd grown up in a quite testing environment. Probably, in the classic way of these things, she simply possessed all that I sensed I lacked, especially (my own derivation being lower-middle-class and politically Socialist) amongst the Goodale crowd whose parents were decidedly upper-middle-class and Conservative. At the time of course such considerations occurred to me only very vaguely – I fancied her, she 'meant something' to me. That, however, was what it seems she represented. We did hang around a bit together, especially when we first met – got off with one another at parties, fondled and snogged as teenagers do. And it was generally recognised amongst the men that she was somehow my property – something that perhaps was not appreciated by Wendy. But it must also have been obvious, especially to those who had known Wendy over years of acquaintance, that my attentions to her were not especially reciprocated. She was friendly, we spent time together and in a way were even intimate, but she still held me at a distance emotionally. It was a fact that I could not bear to acknowledge consciously, but which made me extraordinarily diffident with her. I suspect that her holding back was something of a test. Wendy had been brought up around a lot of men; she could see I had a weakness, and this she very naturally didn't want. If I had been able to take more initiative she'd have responded, I think, with pleasure. However I was overawed by her background and her confident groundedness. I was out of my depth, knew that I needed to leap in and swim, and even that she wanted me to do that, but I could not. It was a painfully numbing, deadening feeling: my emotional nadir – I hope.

For these two years I had plenty of free time – my mornings were spent at the Drama course, and some afternoons were occupied either at the Art School or studying English Literature. I did not find the way the English was taught very interesting, but the art lessons I found absorbing. I had started to feel quite confident in the path I had chosen. The rest of my time I was free to meet my numerous friends, either those in Tonbridge or Tunbridge Wells. Tonbridge friends were, as just described, constellated around David. The Tunbridge Wells scene was more diverse, consisting of Issur and the Tunbridge Wells drug scene; and new connections growing out of the Drama course, which was now based in Tunbridge Wells and had been populated, in its second year, with several friends including Issur. I would smoke joints or ingest some more adventurous substance at Issur's place, or sometimes in someone else's house. At one point several of us were arrested with cannabis while smoking with Nick Lowe, one of the local band Brynsley Schwarz, and later fined. Sometimes we would go to London to 'score' from friends near Euston, or go to an all night concert at the Roundhouse in Chalk Farm. I remember in particular seeing the Doors and Jefferson Airplane there.

At a certain juncture the Reays - Trisha, Judy, her quieter sister, and Mrs. Reay, their redoubtable mother, appeared on the scene. The Reays lived fairly centrally in Tunbridge Wells, and quite close to Issur. Mrs. Reay was widowed and devoted to the happiness of her daughters. Their house, No. 20, Arundel Road, was always open house for us – there was always a sofa to sleep on, or a talk to be had into the small hours with any of the three – Mrs. Reay being no less vociferous than Trish. She was a wonderful woman: passionate, opinionated and generous. Trish took after her; Judy, who was rumoured to be a Christian, perhaps took after the father, about whom we never heard. Mrs. Reay disapproved strongly of drugs, like any normal parent of that period, and much of the time we respected her feelings at our innumerable get-togethers and parties in her front room. So even at that insensitive age, we appreciated her generosity in allowing us the use of this outstanding haven. We'd go there in the afternoons after college and play 'the truth game' – in which one goes round the circle discovering something that each person really thinks about one. Or we'd just listen to LPs, talking, smoking and drinking coffee.

Adrian Plass, who had been a year higher than me at Skinners, sometimes came to these gatherings. Tall, dark, and Satanic in appearance, he would narrow his already slit eyes, curl his worm-like lips, and roll a cigarette between his nicotine-stained fingers in a peculiarly expressive way. Adrian was fun. Despite his averred, and extremely conservative, Christian beliefs, he was very much at ease with non-Christians, seemingly in a way that nowadays would be called 'non-judgemental'. Yet Adrian was two decades before his time in his distaste for political correctness. I used to call him 'June'; he called me 'Vera'. This, it turns out, is quite a good name for a Buddhist, but this was the sixties and our camp humour was, of course, a reaction to the rising tide of 'gay consciousness'. I am glad to see that nowadays he has continued in a similarly humorous vein. It is not just that he is still calling on jokes borrowed from those days in his literature. He is as dogmatic and convinced as ever, while at the same time very openly unsure about certain aspects of his faith – aspects about which no-one can really be sure, and be truthful. It is this combination of doubt and commitment that endears him to others, and is his great gift.

Soon, too soon, autumn turned to spring, the second year of the drama course came to an end, and I started a new chapter of my life. Having received a place on an Arts Foundation course at Croydon Art School, and a grant, I moved to Croydon – or at least, to South Norwood, a mile or so away.

It was the first time I had lived alone and away from home. My one roomed, ground floor flat was not at all pleasant, though it was one I had chosen. There was a revolting smell there which I still recall – not only from this, but also from other rented rooms – somewhere in between vomit and cheap room deodoriser. The odour emanates from under the lino, or from under the huge wardrobe that takes up a quarter of the space, and which you would rather wasn't there.

It was not a pleasant time; I can't remember why, I think probably I was simply lonely. I was smoking dope too much, I think – I'm sure that didn't help. I remember enjoying college – it was a good course and the tutors were friendly and inspiring. All were practising artists. I remember George Popperwell, our main tutor, and the sculpture tutor, Bruce McLean. I made a few friends, but there was no one with whom I could spend a weekend or even, usually, an evening. So much for my varied social life! This was London, and I didn't understand the dynamic. People lived in many different areas and had their friends in those areas. I suffered. I survived a

term, and then decided to commute from Mum and Dad's house. It was a long train journey – a couple of hours all in, with changes at Tonbridge and Redhill. I did a project on commuters – taking clandestine photographs of them – but it was weak. My college work generally was not great. It wasn't working very well. I only survived that second term; during the third term I stopped going to college.

It is 2024, and I am editing this autobiography which up to now has needed almost no changes. It now tails off into rough headings and notes-to-self containing fragments of memories, some of which will be found in a later biographical account 'My Dharma Life'. In summary, I left school at 16, did three years of Theatre followed by two years of Art School, which will have taken me to age 21. Over my late teens and early twenties I gradually grasped the truth that I had no idea what to do with myself, and for a few years alternated between anxiety and relaxation about that. Eventually I relaxed into being a simple artist, making prints and drawings in Muswell Hill, and it was during this phase that I stumbled into Buddhism, where I finally felt a fulfilling affinity.

Over the autumn following my aborted Foundation year at Croydon Art School, I have a job in the Northcott Theatre in Exeter, helping with the stage sets. I have a feeling that the McConnells might have helped me with this. It is a miserable time, partly because I have to share a living space with Greg and Sandra. They are quite OK for me to sleep in the corner of their bedroom, where they loudly have sex every night. I have very mixed, unacknowledged feelings about that. But also dislike the work I am doing during the day and late in the evening. It is during this period that I realise that I do not want to work in theatre at all, and that it has all been a terrible mistake.

I think what followed this was a period of contrition during which I allowed my parents to fix me up with a place in a college in Southampton with full board. This was a very low and lonely time and my memory is that I simply ran away. Maybe, since it is the next note-to-self, I ran away to share a flat with my old friend Issur in East Dulwich and managed to negotiate a second go at the Foundation Course at Croydon Art School. This will have been 1970 because for me that date is associated with becoming a vegetarian after a particularly lucid LSD trip. I've not eaten meat since. In that year also I made a lovely girl pregnant without her telling me, and - something highly traumatic for me - being forced by her mother to have an abortion. I played drums and percussion, with Issur and some other Art School friends, in a Grateful Dead tribute band. For a while Issur and I moved to Hammersmith, and then to Inglewood Road, West Hampstead. At this point I had to get a job. I worked for three months as an office-wallah for the Automobile Association in Leicester Square. It becoming clear that an office environment is not for me, I began Street Trading in that same Leicester Square, selling tourist trinkets from a legal stall before progressing to the more lucrative fly-pitching in Oxford Street, an occupation that continued for a year, while I lived alone in Agamemnon Road, West Hampstead. I decamped for a while from London life and reoccupied my attic room in my parents' house in 12, Yew Tree Road, Southborough, painting it in horrid shades of brown and

blue. I still had little idea of what to do, though I remember finding a plaster Buddha image in the attic and making some copies of Aubrey Beardsley's pen and ink works.

Soon after this Simon Withers contacted me with a crazy job offer. I was to look after a three year old child: Marquard, son of Hertha Köttner, a German artist. Hertha was being supported by David, a Jewish businessman, whilst conducting an affair with my friend. She was making a sculpture of Simon having a bath, using steel and perspex. This bohemian ménage flourished in a pleasant mansion near Carmarthen with nice grounds (including a section of the river Towy) and a Cézanne. The fact that I accepted this offer shows not only how lacking in direction I had become, but that others felt enormous trust in me. It also offered distraction, solitary occupation and a kind of acceptance as an artist, for it was here that I learned that being an artist simply means making art. I accepted, loaded my drum kit on to a train along with a pound weight of dubious Moroccan hashish, and joined the family in 'Bryntowy' for an autumn, winter and spring, after which I moved back to London where Steve and Liz had a spare room in Muswell Hill, where I finally settled and started making prints.

All at once, everything in my life felt resolved and settled. Maybe I felt that I'd seen enough, that my soul had cycled around the cosmos enough times for me to begin living the life I always knew I wanted to lead, but had found no expression for in all these years. What that life was still had no clear name or form, but I knew I was properly in the groove and could at least safely identify with being an artist of some kind.

And it so happened that the real thing, that would shape the life I always wanted, would make itself known to me very soon.

