

Chapter One

I could tell you what has happened, but for you to understand, I need to take you back...right back. To 1974, actually. When people talk about the Seventies, they will fill your head with free love, drugs, and rock and roll. Actually, that sounds pretty good, especially the free love part.

But what I'm going to tell you is initially from the eyes of a six-year-old — me. I know you're thinking that you want to put this down, but bear with me. We all like to peek into someone else's life, however boring it may be to the person living it.

So. Let's find our setting. Are you sitting comfortably?

Then I'll begin.

1974

Summer — 1974. Hot, sticky, and filled with promise. Days filled with nothing but what my imagination could conjure up, and that could be pretty frightening. Streets were packed with children on school holidays, playing 'tiggy-it' and kerby and avoiding cars as they raced to retrieve an errant ball. For those of you who haven't a clue what I'm talking about, 'tiggy it' is a game in which you run around trying to avoid 'it', and if unsuccessful you then become 'it' yourself, after having a clammy hand thwack you on the back and 'Tig! You're it!' screamed at you. Kerby is played with a ball and a kerb. Very creative. Space hoppers were the new black — a must for any up and coming kid on the street.

I was six years old. It was in Levenshulme, once an affluent part of Manchester but now filled with students and ethnic minorities. Old radios blasted *Shang a Lang* and *Puppy Love* into the street. Mothers bawled at kids climbing the fence to the railway tracks where they would flatten pennies, completely oblivious to the fact that they could be flattened, too.

I loved my childhood, loved it in a fucked up way. We were poor, dirt poor. I came from a family of five brothers and two sisters, all older than me, and all avoided me like the plague. Except Jo. She was sixteen months older than me and my idol. Her role on this earth was to be my surrogate mother, and to this day she still holds that place. We were like Siamese twins, but without the shared organs. Even our farts smelt the same. Uncanny or what? Jo still brags that hers don't smell. They always did, but I tried to ignore it and closed my mouth sharpish. She and I looked completely different, but relatives still confused us, and my mother had to resort to colour coding to differentiate. Of course we mixed and matched outfits, just to be little bleeders, and Jo hid her pink-rimmed National Health glasses at family gatherings as the final straw. Kids. Gotta love 'em.

Having told you this much, I might as well introduce the other spawn in my family. Five brothers...urgh! Every girl's nightmare, and if you met them you would understand why. Patrick, aka Sniffer (which characterises his approach to the opposite sex), is the eldest son. Simon, who is fondly known as Ebenezer (need I say more?), is the second eldest. Brian was the third, and in the words of my mum, 'such a bloody liar'. After Brian's birth, the doctors advised my mother to use birth control in the future.

No such luck. Aiden popped out, much to the disdain of my mother, who initially disowned him. Pity she didn't stick to her guns. But then came the crowning glory: Queen Angie, Queenie, Dammer, Screamer. 'Who is this bundle of fun?' I hear you ask. She's my big sister, sometimes wonderful, sometimes a psycho — which I found out the hard way. Playing chief babysitter and tyrant, she was a git to all of us while my mum was working at the nightclub. Over the years our relationship has grown stronger, though, probably because now I can protect myself.

The last brother finally came; what a prize! Alan. Our Adge. Skid mark. Yup...Skid mark, on account of the very fancy designs in his underpants. David Hockney, watch out: abstract (f)art.

Then it was Jo's turn, short for Joanne, the last but one. She had a myriad of names...but Bulber and Mazda were the main two. Reason being — her head was uncannily shaped like a light bulb, and it made it look like her body was constantly having brilliant ideas.

Now me, I had a fine selection of nicknames. So many in fact I had trouble remembering my real name, which didn't add to my appearing intelligent. Primarily I was known as Bergans (left for five hours outside the butcher's of the same name and not missed until tea was being dished out) and Chunky (generic name with the rest of the family). I introduced myself as Chunky. Other names sneaked in —

Henry the Eighth. No — I wasn't a fat polygamist with syphilis...or a beard; it was just the way I used to eat. You know, like it was the first morsel that had passed my lips in ages.

But wait. I think I need to go back just a little bit further to complete the picture of the darling child I was. I'll totally understand if you don't want to read any more, but please believe me — it does get better.

I was born (very David Copperfield-ish — not the magician, but the sponging whining fucker Dickens wrote of), in the Year of Our Lord, Nineteen Hundred and Sixty Eight. To say I was a beautiful baby...would be a lie. I was very long and very ugly, with a bald head and eyes like a lemur. Of course I developed into a fat toddler but still with very large eyes, which, fortunately, enabled me to see in the dark when the electricity company cut us off.

I was the last of the bunch. One look at me and my mother finally cried, 'No more!' Years later she admitted that if the umbilical cord had not been attached, she would have sworn I wasn't hers. Angie loves to recall the day that they brought me home from the hospital. Her job was chief guard, standing at the front door like a bouncer, barring entrance to the neighbours: 'As not to frighten the womenfolk and kids.' This tale is told at every opportunity, usually between bouts of hysterical laughter and finger pointing in my direction — where I would sit...glowing pink. She loves to retell it, as, like the Ancient Mariner, she feels 'cursed' to regale others with it over and over again. She even takes on the features of the decrepit old seaman — drooling accompanying the overexcitement and spitting.

My mother used to bounce me and Jo down the road in a dilapidated pram, trying to avoid well-wishers in her path. Jo, who was cuddly, beautiful, and always had a ready smile, removed people's attention from my owl-like eyes, but on the occasions she wasn't present, the focus of the admiration went on the pram. I didn't care, as long as they left me alone to chew through the plastic mattress at the base. It was bliss on raw gums — cool, yet satisfying.

I wasn't the bravest of children. I was even scared of a rabbit once. Yes. You read that right — a rabbit. You may think that rabbits can't hurt you, but they can, as I will prove.

There was a woman who lived up the road from us. Weird bugger. Smelt of bleach and cigarettes. Well...she was a creative soul and a bit of an animal lover — and I mean 'bit'. In her back garden she had erected a majestic centrepiece consisting of soil, broken bricks, and bottles. It was beautiful...in a soily, brokeny bottle and brick kind of way — almost modern art...and very underrated by the rest of the community.

The hutch itself sat pride of place, resembling an Anderson shelter sawn in half and lovingly decorated with chicken wire. I can remember it as if it was yesterday...it was class. My sister, Angie, led me up to the monument that proved women should never be given free rein with a drill. (This was the Seventies and I can be Politically Incorrect — just this once). All it took was the aid of climbing gear and (in the words of the host of the children's show Blue Peter), 'a responsible adult'.

The ascent began.

Never in my young life had I been so scared. Thoughts flitted through my mind about what terrible monster would be imprisoned in a fortress like that. So, being an idiot, I started to back off, caught my heel in a broken Dandelion and Burdock bottle, fell backwards onto an artistically smashed house brick that was coyly peeping from the middle of the mound...and gashed my head open.

Have you ever noticed that children initially cry with no sound? Their mouths stretched to capacity, eyes dry, but not a sound to be heard. Then suddenly a low whine is discernible, culminating into the loudest, most annoying howl audible to mankind (heaven knows how dogs cope), and the waterworks go into overdrive. Of course, my wailing started. Many of the elderly residents thought the Germans were invading, as they had been secretly and quietly preparing for it for years.

I raced away, vowing silently I would never trust another Blue Peter presenter again, with my hands rising in slow motion up to the cut on my head, needing my mum like I'd never needed her before. All this amidst the initial laughter of the neighbours. Bastards. Concern came later, especially when my family came 'round to sort out the 'caged monster' and the smelly weird fucker who would allow a child to climb her monument unarmed.

As I said before, Levenshulme was very multicultural — especially with those of Asian descent. There was an Indian kid who lived down the road, who Jo and I were friends with. One day, his father gave us an onion bahji. We had never seen one of these strange things before. So...Jo and I played catch with it for a while and then bounced it home. How were we to know that this was a special culinary offering from one culture to another? Just think how offended we would have been if we had given them a Holland's Steak and Kidney pudding and they had played cricket with it. But we were kids... How were we to know?

Anyway...Jo's best friend, Tina Brace, lived in the road opposite ours. Tina's nickname was the 'Rooter', as most of her playing time was spent rooting through my mum's drawers and the kitchen

cupboards. We used to slag her off, but she did come in handy. If we couldn't find anything, Tina always knew where it was and would direct us to it. 'Oh, I noticed that when I was going to the toilet. It's in the lads' bedroom...in the cupboard in the far left corner...second drawer down, right up the back.' She was to be one of many strange friends who would come and go over the years.

I was unfortunate in that I had to share a bedroom with Angie, Jo, and the whole Osmond family, especially Donny. Donny Osmond was Angie's idol. Whatever pop tune rattled forth from between that enormous set of teeth was like the national anthem for my sister. The whole family had to stand to attention (in absolute silence) for the King of the teenybopper world. When I woke up frightened in the night and couldn't sleep (being a 'whinging little git' as Angie called me), she would try to calm me down with the words, 'Donny's laughing at you.'

Right enough, he was. Wherever I looked...he grinned back. Even when I opened the drawers, he was flirting with me through the mound of my underwear. God, I hated him...smarmy bugger — and the rest of his family! I hated *Puppy Love* and bloody *Paper Roses*. I hoped he would get distemper and someone would pour petrol over Marie's roses...ending with a delicate kiss with a lighted match. This whole Osmond thing should have mentally scarred me, but it just made me stronger...so thankfully, when Jo's Cliff Richard obsession kicked in, I was prepared.

Before I go on to tell you what happened to me when I was six, I need to tell you how I became the distrustful person I am today. Nothing spectacular, but let's just say a lesson learned, okay? You can be the judge.

Would you be tempted by a free glass of lemonade? Especially if all you usually got was Corporation pop (water), except for when your mum was flush and you got the fruity drink, Vimto? I was tempted by the offer of lemonade. Very.

It was an ordinary evening, atypically quiet, and it all boiled down to my sister Jo. She asked me if I would like a drink of the aforementioned lemonade. Of course I did! What sugar-craving child wouldn't? As free gifts usually do, the lemonade came with a catch. I had to carry her on my back, on all fours like a donkey, for half an hour. I should have guessed that Jo did not have any lemonade — she did not have any money to buy lemonade — but I trusted her. She was my surrogate mum, after all.

On the floor I went — not even four years old and scrabbling around on all fours, building up my thirst. I asked intermittently when I was going to receive my well-earned refreshment, only to be told, 'Soon. Soon.' Now, looking back, the crooning tone of her voice should have told me something was not right. The innocence of youth, eh?

Eventually, through sheer exhaustion, I rebelled and demanded that I should be paid in full for my services. Jo paid in full...by God, she paid in full. My payment of lemonade came as pee — donated by her, over my back. I can still hear the laughter in her voice as she shrilled, 'Enjoy your lemonade, you deserve it!' All I can say is it's a good job that she never promised me chocolate. To this day, she still can't tell me why she did it, just mumbles something about being possessed.

The story doesn't end there, I'm afraid. My brother Patrick's latest victim, sorry...girlfriend, was staying with us at the time, and every time a police car went past she wanted to play *Let's Hide Under the Bed*. Once again — children are so gullible. Nowadays I would be at the bedroom window screaming 'She's here...in here...under the bed!' Unfortunately, she had to share the room with me, Jo, Angie, and the Osmonds — all of us in a dilapidated double bed, but when she walked into a puddle of pee, I thought the shit was going to hit the fan. Obviously it was my fault...and she classed me as a disgusting degenerate (my face said 'huh?') and promptly stormed off to sleep with my brother. Many years later I realised this was her golden opportunity to get between the sheets with Sniffer, and I wasn't really a freak of nature — still not sure about Jo, though.

I know...I'm going off the point.

Oh...all right then...

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I was six years old. It was Levenshulme. And that's where I first spotted Ashley Richards...or Ash, as she liked to be called...