

# FROM PALL MALL TO PASSING CLOUDS

By Latif Gardez 9/2/2012

It was the end of the summer when we got to Bristol.

I can remember it was getting dark as we entered the pokey, two bedroom flat, on Redland road. After unpacking I sat in the front room looking out through the grubby net curtains watching the rain as the light faded. We had been on the move for the best part of a year with only a brief stop outside Cheltenham for three months.

It had gone: home. Edinburgh, Cheltenham, London and now Bristol. Travelling had been part and parcel of our existence from the moment I was born. We'd moved over thirteen times before I was seven. All over the country, all over Europe, but now it was just the three of us. Me, my brother, and our mum. The last year had felt more like running away.

I had been in the kitchen when she told me. It had all become too much for her. The drinking, the women, and the lack of money. Before we left, the bailiffs were virtually camped on our front lawn, eager for news of the old man's whereabouts. He owed money everywhere and all the illusions came crashing down with a single blow. The house wasn't ours, nor was the car, and there was no money in the bank. Everything had been bought on tick and now they were here to take it all back. Of course the old man was nowhere to be seen and hadn't been back from London for several weeks. I can remember hiding behind the door whilst my mum talked to a policeman and her saying "...just arrest him why don't you?" The policeman looked shocked. "Oh we couldn't do that Mrs, he's such a nice man, plays golf with the Chief Constable!" Later, I heard her crying and didn't understand why. Eventually she told me. She would have stuck by him no matter what if it hadn't been for the love letters she had found written to his secretary; that killed it for her. He went bankrupt and she filed for divorce.

After a month in the gloom of Redland road we moved to a new flat in Montpelier, St. Andrews road. This wasn't much better but it was a lot cheaper and bigger. A four bedroom flat for five pounds a week was a good deal. In those days Montpelier was one of the poorest areas in Bristol, it being mainly an Irish and West Indian neighbourhood with the odd Hell's Angel thrown in for good measure. Two doors down the road from us was the Montpelier Arms Hotel, a bar and boarding house for itinerant Irish labourers. It was situated in a covered ally-way that joined St. Andrews road to York road and seemed to be the location for nightly brawls. The whole area had a Dickensian atmosphere to it and some street scenes more closely resembled the eighteen seventies than the nineteen seventies. On my way to school in the cold mornings I would pass road-gangs decked out in bituminized clothing. Standing outside the Montpelier Arms smoking cigarettes, cursing at everything that passed by; waiting for the transport to turn up. Most of the time their curses were they only thing I could make out their accents were so impenetrable.



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Due to my brother being smart and precocious, he managed to get accepted into Technical College, despite being only fourteen. I, on the other hand had to settle for the local Comprehensive, Bishopston secondary modern. Being dyslexic did cut down the choice and my mum felt because it was a smaller school I wouldn't feel so lost, unlike at the bigger Comprehensives. The school was conveniently situated next to the prison, which was where most of us were expected to wind up. It was the fourth comprehensive I had attended since I'd turned eleven and on first impressions seemed like it would be the worst. At that time Ska and Reggae had begun to make a big impact and the school was fifty-fifty, black and white. All the white kids were Skin-Heads apart from me, as my hair was longer than a crew-cut and although it barely touched the collar of my school blazer, it was long enough for me to be dubbed 'Squatter'. As I'd found at my other schools, getting picked on wasn't difficult to achieve. My mum had made a mistake in 'over emphasizing' my dyslexia which led them to assume I was an idiot. On the first day I found myself in a special class full of kids, most of whom couldn't speak English. This lasted for one afternoon. As soon as I opened my mouth the teacher asked. "What the hell are you doing here?" Glumly I replied. "Can't spell Sir" He shook his head. "Yes but you can speak English! God! Wait here..." and off he went. We were in one of those Porta-Cabin type classrooms. There was a Greek, a Chinese kid, two Indians, one Polish kid and a couple of others of unknown origin. As we sat there on our own, un-attended, the Greek kid, who seemed to be able to speak perfectly good English, got up and started looking around. I can't remember his name but he was a hairy bastard with an idiot grin on his face the whole time. "Hey, look at this!" He said picking up a stuffed sea-gull and then, in that age old tradition of idiots the world over, found something he could do to it. "Look...!" He said, delighted at having found a hold in its ass where he could insert his finger. It's an image that has stayed with me all these years. A boss-eyed Greek kid sticking his finger up the ass of a stuffed sea-gull saying. "Look, good eh?" Culture, you can't beat it.

Finally the teacher returned and I was re-located to a new class in the 'normal' wing of the school away from the sea-bird bugging Greek boys.

Every white kid wanted to beat the crap out of me, which is why I probably made friends with the black kids first; they didn't have an agenda. My first friend was a big black guy called Ivor, who like me, came from a one parent family set-up, his father having disappeared or died or something; I never found out which. Ivor was a good friend, helping me to ward off the attentions of the local boot-boys. He was big and black and that scared them plenty. After a few months though I started to get along with just about everybody. The school was pretty typical – the teachers were either dull [maths] or aggressive [games] or disinterested [science]. The one exception was the art teacher who was Spanish and actually seemed to believe in something, other than discipline.

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Mr Garcia was the one ray of sunlight in an otherwise dead system. He smoked Gitanes which seemed incredibly exotic, and every now and then he'd actually let me have one. His art class was held in part of the Porta-Cabin complex. During the lunch break, he'd let some of the older kids run a dance club. That's where I first heard 'Papa was a rolling stone' by the Temptations, which personified that summer. The girls danced together and all of the boys stood around looking moody and nervous, apart from a couple of older guys who could dance. The other tune that stuck in my head was a track called 'Johnny Reggae' - The girls loved to weave around disinterestedly to that one.

My performance in school didn't improve a great deal, but somehow I managed to get through it all without suffering too much ridicule. As to my dyslexia, it just seemed to be ignored by most teachers. That had been the usual response from the very beginning. In those days, people didn't really understand it, and as often as not my poor results were put down to a lack of effort by me. The school wasn't exactly over-loaded with academic wizards and I guess I didn't stand out as much as I might have done.

To be fair, Bishopston was a dump, exemplified by the fact that when the English teacher left, the games teacher took over who's knowledge of English was slightly less than mine. There was one brilliant kid, he was called Brian.

In my second year, I made friends with a skinny black kid called Norman and we started hanging around together a lot. Norman and I shared the same interests, which was a total lack of interest in games, unless they involved a deck of cards and girls, and all kinds of music, plus a bit of petty pilfering. Our main distraction was the smoking club, which was held around the back of the prison every lunch hour. When I started playing guitar, Norman used to claim he would have been a natural at it having been born with six fingers on each hand. The extra digits were removed when he was a baby. You could still see the scars.

My friendship with Ivor waned the more I hung around with Norman, as Ivor was ruler-straight, being under the influence of an extremely religious mother.

When I turned fourteen, I began to patronise the tobacconist at the end of Picton St. which was run by a little old Polish guy. It was a real shop of wonders, with that sweet woody smell that came from the open bowls of pipe tobacco and the jars of boiled sweets. Pushing through the door, you got this waft of sugar scented air and the smell of old wood all mingled together and then, as you looked around, your gaze was drawn up behind the counter to the rows and rows of exotic cigarette packets. The first time I went in there was to buy a pack of ten Guards for my mum, but once I'd seen that display I was fascinated by all the different brands, where they came from and what they must taste like: I didn't even smoke at the time.

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The tobacconist seemed to capture, in a snap-shot, all the cultures of the world and that gripped me with its allure. It was mysterious, like copies of the National Geographic I'd seen in waiting rooms or on my father's desk.

I was fifteen when I left Bishopston, the year before they put up the leaving age to sixteen. I started work in an oil drum reconditioning factory, in Avonmouth. An industrial wasteland outside Bristol. It still rates as the worst job I ever had. Drum-Fever was a risk but I was making money, and that's all that mattered.

At the weekends I would treat myself to a different brand of cigarettes, each time I passed by the tobacconist's in Picton St. He had everything. There were Russian cigarettes called Kossack with a k, which had an inch of cardboard tube attached to them like a joint. Then there were Sullivan & Powell's No.1 Turkish, which were oval and came in a flat-top-box with a flip up lid. They were the smoothest smoke I'd ever tasted. Then there was Chesterfield plain, and Camel plain, and Pall Mall plain...the royalty of smoking, supposedly cured in Burgundy. Lucky Strikes 'It's Toasted' – Ducados, Gitanes...on and on it went like stepping into a new country every time I passed through the door. French, Italian, Spanish, Greek, Turkish, Russian...

He had snuff that came in a dozen different flavours, in little decorated tins covered in filigree. Each pack of smokes I bought taught me something about the world outside. But there was one brand that stood head and shoulders above all the rest just for the pure concept of it: PASSING CLOUD.

They had a pink, flip-top box, oval cigarettes with a little square picture of the Laughing Cavalier in the middle: designed by Dali, so the story went.

Sheer genius and they were made in Bristol, so there was something good about the place.

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