

# I.

## THATTO HEATH RHAPSODY

When I go back to the very beginning, I can't help but smile. Like a Ken Loach film, there was a joy to be mined from everything life threw my way. It was who we were and how we lived. It was the perfect comic breeding ground, where self-deprecation shielded us from the indulgent evils of self-analysis, and we loved it that way. If I start my search hoping to find out where I got the feeling that I alone was not enough, then I know I'll draw a blank from my early years in St Helens.

I was loved as a kid; I was raised with more love and emotional support than most folks could wish for. Now, if you have siblings, you'll already know that there's no guarantee how each individual brother or sister might turn out. But nothing about my family background suggested I'd end up aspiring to anything other than what I already had.

Did I say aspiring? You see? I didn't even aspire. That better world was meant for folk who needed more, as far as I could see. I daydreamed, as all kids do, but never feared those innocent flights of fancy not coming true. My emotional cup overfloweth-ed with positivity, and financial hardship was

hidden behind a wisecrack or a definite no to any unrealistic pleas for whatever was the latest rage.

Instead we counted days, weeks, months even, for birthdays and Christmas to come around. That's the difference between the working and middle classes: our gifts weren't token gestures. A birthday or Christmas wasn't a time for sitting back and feeling grateful for what we had. We had fuck all, in the material sense, so it was a time for getting things your selfish little heart had convinced itself you really, really needed. To this day you'd be strung up in our house for trying to pass a Boots three-for-one 'gift' option off as a main present: 'I can shower with bloody Fairy Liquid ... I need a BlackBerry!'

The Fords, the Barnets, the Fenneys, the Croppers, the Rodens, the Leylands, the McGanns, the Dennings, the Carrs and the Kings – these were the whole street of supporting characters who made up the *Truman Show*-esque microcosm of my world. I was happy with my lot. I wasn't fat at that point, I was fairly bright at school, and I had some great mates. Bryan Davies, my best friend to this day, was built like a brick shit-house from the age of five. From the first day at school, I decided I would befriend the grumpy-looking git.

He had this intently furrowed brow when he was pissed off that would earn him the nickname Dan Aykroyd. My cousin, Dimon, was the same age, but appointed himself as my body-guard. He was 'nowty' – no nonsense – and had a brilliant, mischievous look to him just before he'd belt a lad. All the Holker brothers have it, and it always helped lend a comic-book violence to any schoolyard scrap.

I had a huge crush on my first teacher, Mrs Powell. At break time the girls would link arms with her and stroll around the playground whilst a gang of us followed on behind, egging each other on to touch the back of her long, black leather coat. She was my first inkling of sexy, before I knew what sexy was. She didn't dress like any other grown-up I knew at that age. She was my Cagney (Sharon Gless) to all the mums and fellow teaching Laceys (Tyne Daly). When she handed out my class

photo and told me that I looked like ‘a little film star’, I accidentally squeezed out a little bit of wee.

But I digress. I do that a lot. I think it’s my attempt to camouflage the short-term memory blips and attention deficits resulting from **JOHNNY**’s diet of Guinness, vodka, gravy and Gaviscon. Still, back in the day, Mrs Powell, along with St Austin’s Infant and Junior School, my family, my friends, that death-trap called Hankey’s Well at the end of our street (where we used to build dens, light fires and basically go full-on *Lord of the Flies*, minus the conch) – all these people and places were, in retrospect, a beautifully coherent, well-integrated influence on my happy-go-lucky young life.

But when I try to sift through and conjure up the atmosphere of my early childhood, it hits me like a giddy ton of bricks: I don’t know where to start. My memories aged nought to ten don’t sort themselves out individually – they’re all bound up together in a mesh of innocence and fun. And for someone with definite OCD tendencies, I’m strangely content to have them misfiled in no particular alphabetical order or coherent timeline. That’s not to say every picture that flashes into my mind is a happy one, but, like any strong relationship, or reality-snuffing episode of *The Darling Buds of May*, there was always enough good stuff stored up to cope with the bad.

While there’s nothing there to satisfy **HIS** appetite for torture, I already feel browbeaten by the paranoid suspicion that you don’t feel me capable of sharing the good things I associate with Michael Pennington, or that perhaps these are the personal insights you crave since you think you know all you need to know about **JOHNNY Vegas**? So I will purge myself of all the good things that held my hand from hitting The Priory speed-dial button after one of **HIS** ‘incidents’ – and the only way I can do so is to take a whole load of those images and throw them all out there together.

I realise that the English teachers among you might hanker after a few more full stops over the coming few pages, but please don’t worry: the joining words will be back in full effect in the

next chapter. I won't be giving it the full James Joyce any more, once I've done justice to the breathless childhood rush of:

Taking my birthday money into town under my cousin Gilian's supervision and buying 'Action Man: Helicopter Pilot' –

'Are you sure that's the one you want?'

'Yeah, deffo'

'Have you got the helicopter?'

'No, but it's all right, you see he's not just a helicopter pilot, he's been trained to kill just like the others'

Taking all my Action Men including 'Talking Commander' – as well as my motorbike and side-car, jeep with trailer, lorry with opening hatch and mounted machine-gun, and free Asian-looking enemy characters – into school on 'What did you get for Christmas?' play-day –

'This one's got no undies on!'

'That's how you know he's a baddie – that, and the eyes'

Watching *Star Wars* for the first time with the Holkers on one of Uncle Mike's access nights and leaving the cinema with a million questions whilst believing that there really was a galaxy somewhere far, far away ... And not knowing how to ask why their dad didn't live at home

Climbing on the roof at Martin Hurley's and trying to summon Spiderman with a torch pointed at the moon through the plastic web rotor of his die-cast Corgi helicopter

Writing a short, farewell note on the back of an empty Cook's Matches box as we planned to run away to *Star Wars*' Mos Eisley and join the rebellion –

'We will have laser blasters or light-sabres so we will be safe'

My daft childhood crush on both Martin's sisters, especially Jane after she gave me an Ian Dury single with 'There Ain't Half

Been Some Clever Bastards' on the B-side –

'Does he actually say the 'B' word?'

'He does, 'cos he's a rebel'

'I wanna be a rebel when I'm older'

'Then this is perfect'

Exotic day-trips in the Hurleys' working car to Blackpool, Southport and the pre-bombed-out Arndale shopping centre, Manchester

Taking Martin to Morrison's on our weekly shop in a bid to return the day-trip gestures and shaming Mum into blowing her budget by buying us Yo-Yos at the checkout, then suffering a week of extra veg piled high at dinner as part of her quiet revenge

Martin's parents taking us into country pubs with them instead of leaving us in the car and then buying us our own drinks, *in our own glasses* –

'Look at this straw ... it bends!'

'Michael, will you be having a starter?'

'A what?'

Mum filling up a pop bottle with cordial and taking it with us to share when we walked to Taylor Park, or went wild and caught a bus to Victoria Park –

'Mum, *floater!*'

'Michael, what have I told you? Swallow your butty first, nobody wants to be drinking your leftovers'

Begging my dad relentlessly to be allowed to camp out on the big field with Ian Cropper –

'But everyone else is going'

'Well, good for them'

'We'll be dead safe, honest. Ian's got a knife and matches and a proper paraffin lamp'

‘Has he really?’

‘Yeah!’

‘Well, that’s three good reasons why you’re definitely not going’

Tying fishing-line to a purse and lying in wait in the bushes to yank it away when someone tried to grab it, knowing that the victims who got narky had intended on keeping it –

‘Whoever you are, I know your dads – just you wait till I see ’em!’

Making breakfast in bed for my dad on Father’s Day but accidentally putting salt on the cornflakes instead of sugar –

‘And as soon as you’ve finished, you can open your card’

‘There’s no rush, you know I like to take my time with my food’

Going round Danny Rawlinson’s house believing that the future had truly arrived as I sat and watched with awe and envy, waiting for my turn on Atari’s Space Invaders –

‘Are you rich?’

‘No, why?’

‘Dun’t matter’

Saying my prayers in the firm belief that if technology such as Space Invaders was within our reach, then surely *Star Wars* was a realistic possibility –

‘Please, please get me to outer space. I know it might mean killing people, Lord, but you saw what they did to Alderaan, I mean, that was a whole planet ...’

Making movies on Danny’s Super 8 film camera and feeling magical the first time our film came back from the processors’ and we watched it projected onto a sheet tacked to his front room wall –

‘Look, look, there’s me!’

Playing snooker on Danny's five-foot snooker table and dreaming of the day when Hurricane Higgins acknowledged the arrival of Michael 'The Storm' Pennington as the sport's new name to watch out for –

'... and as he lines himself up for a difficult angle on the blue into the right side pocket ...'

'Do you always talk to yourself when you play?'

'It makes it more like the telly'

'Weirdo!'

Fishing with Danny's spare tackle for four years –

'Can Danny come fishing, Mrs Rawlinson?'

'He's out with his dad, Michael'

'Oh ...'

'The tackle's in the garage – help yourself'

'Thanks!'

My mum finally accepting it wasn't a phase and buying me my own rod and reel from Makro for my birthday: a Shakespeare carbon-fibre ledger pro that you could bend right back on itself, although I never dared try –

'Bend it ...'

'No!'

'They're designed so you can bend 'em, to take the weight of a fish'

'So?'

'So bend it!'

'No!'

Trying to breed my own maggots for bait by hiding pork trimmings on top of the cistern in the outside toilet. My dad doing a bloody good impression of Michael Caine in that movie *The Swarm* after taking the racing page in there for his Saturday 'my time' constitutional –

'What the hell's wrong with just using a bit of bread?'

Going hell for leather playing Murderball at Grange Park Youth Club until volunteer Phil blew his whistle –

‘Find a ball and you can carry on, otherwise the scrapping stops *now!*’

The first time we tried to play American football after watching *The Longest Yard* with Burt Reynolds, and my brother Mark kicked our Rob so hard that Mum and Dad had to take him and his baking apple-sized swollen balls to A&E, where the doctor suggested pressing charges before being made fully aware of the circumstances –

‘His own brother did this?’

(Taking Mum and Dad to one side.) ‘Is he adopted?’

Rob’s glee at the stitches Mark had to have in his bum when Gaz Leyland stopped mid aeroplane-swing and dropped him on a broken bottle –

‘Your arse looks like a *Sky At Night* chart’

‘Shut up!’

‘Give us a pen and I could draw the Plough on it’

‘*MUM!*’

That huge terrifying swing off the flat shed roof and over the sharp, iron-tipped boundary fence of Hankey’s Well that everyone had to pog onto – a forty-foot arc of white-knuckle terror for the nine or ten kids clinging on for dear life –

‘Whoever’s holding on there, *don’t* – aim for the rope!’

The games of Skillie, or Manhunt, that covered the whole of Thatto Heath, Taylor Park, Portico, Red Rocks, Broadway and Eccleston Mere, despite always getting caught early and never, ever launching a successful escape bid for my team –

‘Same bush, same spot, every bloody time! Look, I can see you from here, Mike, and if you make me go over there and tag you, you’re getting a dead arm ... a proper one’

‘I surrender!’



‘And you wonder why you’re always picked last?’

Our Dimon blowing his birthday money on sweets for everyone and ten packs of *Star Wars* cards for me down at the corner shop near Thatto Heath Park, and the bollocking we all got from Aunty Kath for filling up on Blackjacks, Sherbert Dips, Cola Cubes, Fruit Salads and Drumstick lollies before his birthday tea –

‘I’m cooking nothing this week till all that’s gone, do you hear me?’

‘Yes’

‘Pat, get the clingfilm back on’

‘What about my cake?’

‘Don’t push it!’

Me getting Astro Wars for Christmas after pleading with Steve Butler for a full term of playtimes for a go of his, then praying with all my might that his batteries would have an acid leak and he’d have to make do with a game of Bulldog like everyone else –

‘I only ask Lord because you’ve seen him – he’s a proper tight git’

All the patients from Rainhill Hospital wandering around Thatto Heath Lane, some shouting random swearwords, but most just dazed and confused from the institutionalisation –

‘Bloody buggers ... bloody’

‘Mum, that man just –’

‘Shush and finish your pie’

The pig that used to escape from Piggy Fletcher’s and run riot down the lane, stopping traffic and drawing out all the drunken wannabe rodeo cowboys from The Vine pub

My nan, Mary, taking us to Blackpool and telling us we could stay in the Funhouse for as long as we wanted, even if it meant missing our coach and catching a train home

My dad building us a sledge and dragging it – with me sitting on it – all the way to Taylor Park’s big hill, just so we could crash it into a tree –

‘You’re not concussed, you’d be vomiting if ... here, use my hankie, and not a word to your mum, all right?’

Sitting in the garden with my mum if I went home from school for lunch, watching *The Sullivans* courtesy of a long extension lead and eating my Blackburn’s steak pie with cream cake to follow –

‘Well, will you marry me?’

‘Yes, yes, I will!’

‘I think Kitty’s gonna be all right, Mum. Mum, are you crying?’

‘Shush and finish your cake’

Not sleeping for weeks after watching *Salem’s Lot* but being grateful that Dad had a crucifix hanging in every single room in the house. And wishing our Mark wouldn’t keep whispering –

‘Michael, open the window, Michael’

Actually worrying that Mum might be part vampire as she applied her prescription sun-block after being diagnosed with a rare allergy to sunlight. Wondering if I could bring myself to stake her if the blood-lust ever overwhelmed her mothering instincts –

‘That’s not your mother, she belongs to the Master now’

‘Forgive me, Mum!’

Realising that vampires don’t tend to wear crosses around their neck as Mum did, and therefore deciding all was probably well

Dad taking the day off and taking me out of school to visit the Liverpool Maritime Museum –

‘Shut? Ah, well, do you want to see the huge police station I built?’

‘All by yourself, Dad?’

‘I did the stairs. I remember telling the foreman that those drawings the architect sent were wrong ...’

All of Dad’s stories and how adversity never seemed to get him down. Never even hearing him shout like some of the other dads on our street

All the front doors left open on our street and all the verbal snippets of family life –

‘Mum, Muuuuum, come and wipe me bum!’

That camping holiday in Wales when Dad’s old army tent ripped in half following a force twelve gale, and the sleepless night that followed as the rain blew in –

‘Dad, I’m cold’

‘Go to sleep’

‘Dad, my sleeping bag’s wet’

‘Go to sleep’

‘Dad, can I go and get a shower?’

‘No, go to sleep’

‘Dad, when can I get a shower?’

‘When you wake up, now go to sleep’

‘Dad, can I mind the torch?’

‘No, go to sleep’

Mum having her drink spiked with Pernod at The Catholic Men’s Society New Year’s Eve party and her coming home singing ‘Some Enchanted Evening’ before getting poorly –

‘No, the bucket! Under the stairs, next to the bleach!’

Butlin’s! Us and the Holkers paying for two families of three in the self-catering chalets but smuggling the rest in. Simon getting the short straw and having to go in the boot of the car –

‘Well, just take little breaths and for God’s sake don’t make a sound till we’re well past reception!’

Rumbles with the Protestant school, St Matthew's, but making up by home-time as half the kids in our street went there –

'You don't get Communion because Jesus dun't even believe in you!'

Almost wetting myself laughing at watching a truck drive backwards at high speed thanks to rewind on Martin Hurley's brand new video recorder –

'Can I do it?'

'No, you might break it. You should tell your mum and dad to get one'

'Maybe ...'

'That's what you always say'

Wimpy's opening in St Helens and my dad acting genuinely bemused as to why I'd want to opt for that over a pig's trotter from Kwik Save's in-store butcher's department –

'But it's what Action Man would eat in a real war'

The Morris 1800 that my dad refused to scrap despite living under it with a tool-kit every spare Saturday afternoon. Putting it in our backyard after demolishing the wall to get it in. All the make-believe day trips we went on in it, although even then my brother made me sit in the back with my seat-belt on –

'Do you wanna go to Disney World or not?'

'Yes, but ...'

'Because any more out of you and I'll turn this car around right now and we'll go straight home, got that?'

The fights my brothers had with other kids in the street – the Rodens, Gaz and some of the Fords – all over nothing and forgotten the minute a football appeared on the scene

Offering Lee a go on my bike the awful day I found him sitting looking lost on the kerb outside his house after hearing his dad had died falling from a ladder on a building site –

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yeah, just no going off kerbs, and don’t let me mam see you’

Dunking cold toast in a flask lid of hot tea for breakfast in school because we’d attended early mass during Lent –

‘Chocolate’

‘Sweets’

‘*Newsround*’

‘*Newsround*’ dun’t count – it’s educational. You have to give up something you’d miss, like *Tiswas* or *Hong Kong Phooey*’

‘He’s right. You’ll end up in purgatory for *Newsround*’

‘*Blue Peter*?’

‘Same difference’

That moody bloke who’d had the first ever double-glazing fitted in our street –

‘Your dad doesn’t earn in a month what one of these would cost to replace, now bugger off and play outside yer own house!’

Playing football in the grounds of St Matthew’s Church and my dad not bollocking us when the vicar called round to grass us up because he never forgave them for not giving up their cast-iron gates during the war effort.

Flashing Julie McDonald and doing ‘The Penguin’ around the back of Rainhill cricket club in a giddy, nine-year-old fit of wild romantic abandon

‘What you doing that for?’

‘Dunno’

‘You’re not funny’

‘Right’

Struggling to explain the flashing incident in Confession that week and being grateful I’d got funny Father Joyce instead of stern Father Turner –

‘I accidentally showed myself to a girl from school’

‘Accidentally what?’  
 ‘My pants were loose, they fell down’  
 ‘And what did she do?’  
 ‘Told all her mates in class. They kept calling me “The Flasher”’  
 ‘That’s not good’  
 ‘No’  
 ‘And are you sorry?’  
 ‘Yes, Father’  
 ‘Well, say two Hail Marys, just in case’  
 ‘Okay’  
 ‘And tell your mum to get you a belt’

Missing out on Halloween because my dad reckoned it was a blasphemous celebration of the occult, but getting the money to go to the pictures instead –

‘There’s enough evil in the world without throwing a party for it’

Our Mark belting that posh lad sitting behind us during *The Spy Who Loved Me* because he’d already seen the film and told his mate, really loudly, that the car was about to turn into a submarine –

‘Have you seen the bit where this happens?’  
 ‘I beg your pardon ...? Ow!’

Watching our Mark play rugby – he was a blinding scrum-half

Watching our Rob score that amazing goal from a corner

Offering to put out the corner flags for future footy matches after failing to get selected for the school team because I wouldn’t quit goal-hanging and couldn’t grasp the concept of off-side –

‘You’re a parasite, Pennington. Do you hear me? A parasite!’

Learning to swim courtesy of our headmaster, Mr McManus, after numerous lessons with my brother Mark had failed –

'Put your hands on the sides again and I'll stomp on 'em. Now move your arms, kick your legs and bloody swim!'

Paul Barnet sticking blades of grass up frogs' arses and inflating them a bit before gently squeezing to make them fart –

Phhhht

'Can you make 'em burp?'

'Nah, they'd be sick. That'd be cruel'

Believing Paul Barnet when he told me he was born on a meteor that crash-landed in Taylor Park and therefore he was half werewolf –

'I don't turn into a full wolf, I just get a craving for sausages and chops or owt else meaty when it's a full moon'

Our Robert and Mark getting Paul to chase me down the street just so they could test their latest man-trap by lifting up a piece of fishing line at the last moment and nearly bloody decapitating me –

'It'd work if you weren't so bloody slow at running!'

Trying sterilised milk for the first time at Martin Hurley's house and throwing up for three days straight at home afterwards

Eating snails at their house and throwing up at home afterwards

Eating a Goblin meat pudding at their house and throwing up at home afterwards –

'Mum, can I go and play at Martin's house after school?'

'Yes, but best come home for your tea afterwards'

Martin's mum taking us to see *Grease* even though we were under age and then to a curry house where she let us have a real beer shandy, then my throwing up on Martin's hand after drinking it, which made him throw up in the restaurant fish tank –

‘Just the bill, please’

Hearing that my nan had died on the first evening of our caravan holiday in Rhyl and packing the car to go back home. There was no conversation to cover the sound of Mum weeping in the bedroom

Me and our Dimon pounding on a lad the afternoon after Nan’s funeral for shouting –

‘Ey-up, it’s *Rentaghost!*’

Leaving Mum in church on Sundays as she knelt and cried her heart out week after week after week

Playing Kamikaze golf in the Holkers’ bedroom and our Mark knocking the ball through their window and leaving a clean, golf ball-sized hole in it –

‘Catch a bird, kill it, say it flew straight through’

‘You’re an idiot!’

Watching *Superman* with Christopher Reeve and actually believing a man could fly!

Watching *Superman II* with Martin Hurley and his dad and seeing families get up and leave during the scene where Superman was in bed with Lois Lane –

‘But Dad, why?’

‘Never mind why, just get your coats. And bring that popcorn with you!’

Having nightmares about the bedroom filling with water and a shark getting in after our Robert told me all about *Jaws* chomp by chomp –

‘DUUUH DUH. DUUUH DUH’

‘Mum!’





*I was crap at climbing. This tree had actually blown over in a storm.*

The tree outside our bedroom window that looked like a witch

The parent alarm our Robert built with a Subbuteo floodlight and the switch contacts that he hid under the carpet outside our bedroom so we could play cards after lights out, not knowing that Dad used to stand outside tapping it for his own amusement –

‘Right, your turn ... shush!’

‘Twist ... shush!’

‘Twist agai – shush!’

‘Twi – shush!’

Watching the BBC Television Centre on telly and thinking it was almost as far away as the *Star Wars* galaxy, then committing the postcode to memory: ‘W128QT, W128QT, W128QT’

Vowing never again to waste a Saturday morning trying to call *Swap Shop*.

The look on eagle-eyed Action Man Talking Commander’s face when I brought home my first *Star Wars* figure –

‘Who’s this?’

‘Just a friend. Nobody special, why?’

‘No reason. I’ll be in my jeep if anybody needs me’

Playing round Alan Hale’s house with his massive collection of *Star Wars* figures and vehicles –

‘I want your life’

‘What?’

‘I don’t care if you have got Boba Fett, that is not enough troops to bring down an AT-AT!’

My sister Catharine’s fear of moths and the weeks it took gathering twenty dead ones to hide under her duvet –

‘I’m not going back in there, I’m sleeping round Janet’s’

Getting told off by the dentist’s receptionist for ripping a photo of Jimmy Connors from a magazine for my sister to apologise for the moths incident –

‘I just saw you tear it out and put it in your pocket! Magazines cost money, you know. Did you stop to think about the next person who might want to look at Jimmy Connors before an extraction? No, you didn’t, did you? Through there, second door on the right’

Thinking I was drunk after drinking Canada Dry at Father Chris’s ordination party because I’d seen ginger ‘ale’ on the can –

‘The bucket, Dad, in the cupboard, next to the bleach’

‘Michael, bed, now!’

Keeping nicks for Father Turner whilst our Simon helped himself to altar wine –

‘It’s borrowing, and it’s not a real sin ’cos it’s not actually Jesus’s blood yet’

‘Well, give us a bit then’

Martin Hurley getting the holy mother of all rollockings for sticking his tongue out at me with the practice Communion host still stuck to it –

‘This being a rehearsal does not change the fact that by your actions you have pulled a face at God and rejected Jesus Christ Our Lord!’

Losing a chunk of my front tooth when Bryan threw me over his back whilst playing ‘Mad Bryan on the Loose’

Telling Bryan it would be okay after his mam dressed him in short trousers on the first day of junior school

Bryan beating me at maths and spelling in that big test

My mum buying me a comic when I cried my eyes out after losing the egg and spoon race at St Austin’s sports day

Dad making ‘a moral point of order’ at Butlin’s about the amount of rented costumes as opposed to the ingenuity of those put together from items found on site –

‘It has nothing to do with the spirit of fun!’

My mum threatening to call the Queen on me for not wanting to go as Noddy in the fancy dress at the Silver Jubilee street party –

‘Never you mind how I got her number’

‘I told you I wanted to be a Womble’

‘Well, Noddy can pick up litter’

‘It’s not the same!’

‘Well, tough! Your Auntie Marjorie was up half the night sewing secret bells into those shoes ...’

The unmistakable weight and balance of a birthday envelope from Auntie Marjorie containing a classic car, golf trophy, gentleman fly fishing, or grouse shooting with a Labrador-themed card with money sellotaped to the inside of it –

‘Don’t just take the money! Read the card, properly, out loud!’

Uncle Joe’s insistence on filling in every fifth word with ‘doings’ when explaining something technical –

‘So I’ve stripped all the doings right back, cantilevered the cross doing with a strip of two by four doings and carried that through the same all the way along the doings. Do you see?’

My mum rocking and patting me as only she knew how whenever I was ill. There was rhythm to her mothering as beautiful and comforting as any Beatles ballad

My dad giving me a big slug of brandy when I was full of a cold, not knowing Mum had just given me a big dose of adult cough medicine. I fainted just like they do in the movies –

‘He’s going, Lol, he’s going – catch him!’

My dad bringing crisps home from the club and using them to explain the nature of different faiths –

‘So, imagine we’re all stood around this giant, 40-foot bag of crisps. We’re all looking at the same thing, but just from different angles. And people have to be willing to walk around and look at God from other folk’s perspective, rather than stand their ground and dismiss other points of view’

‘Including the Protestants’

‘Aye’

‘Even though they kept their gates’

‘Even though they kept their gates’

My mum bringing back leftover sausage rolls, bits of things on cocktail sticks, and triangular sandwiches, a bit stale around the edge where the bread had been cut. All wrapped in little napkins from a buffet at somebody’s party –

‘What’s this, Mum?’

‘Erm ... pineapple’

‘I don’t like it’

‘Well, leave it on the tissue and I’ll clear it in a bit. Don’t put it in the wicker bin, it’ll smell’

Us moaning because Dad would nab the chicken drumsticks and stick them in his family-sized Stork margarine tub make-shift butty box for work –

‘You have the butties, we’ll have the chicken’

‘When you go to work and I get to go back to school, it’s a deal!’

Getting Dad to sing or recite a poem so we could stay up just that little bit longer, or just hear him talk about his youth, and his family doing singalongs and putting on turns in their Thackeray Row parlour. His twinkle when he talked about the nan and granddad we never got to meet. Even Mum getting weary and worrying what the neighbours might think –

‘So I’ll meet ’im later on,

In the place where ’e is gone,

Where it’s always double drill and no canteen;

E’ll be squattin’ on the coals,

Giving drink to poor damned souls,

And I’ll get a swig in Hell from Gunga Din!’

‘Lol, LOL! Get to bed ... you’re drunk’

‘Goodbyeee, goodbyeee,

Save a tear, baby dear,

From your eyeeeeee!’

The dream of turning fourteen so I could play on the snooker-tables at St Austin’s Catholic Men’s Society Club

Dad getting slapped when forced to point out to a drunken lady guest that the club’s snooker tables were for men only –

‘You’re more than welcome to partake as a spectator’

‘Sexist pig!’

The mini ploughman’s lunches – two crackers, two onions, one mini slab of Red Leicester – that Jackie Henshall would buy

me after his third Saturday afternoon pint before trying to teach me the basics of crown green bowling –

‘Toe’s not broke, just bruised, it’ll be right. Now, next time, yon mon, hold the bowl with two hands, yeah?’

Our Mark’s first Mod jacket, confirming his status as official family rebel. My contemplating cutting fishtails into the back of my kagool.

Hearing *Quadrophenia* for the first time –

‘You say she’s a virgin, well I’m gonna be the first in!

Her fella’s gonna kill me, wooooooaaaaaaoooh fu—’

‘Michael Pennington, get in here right now and explain to me what you think you just said!’

My mum always being there for us and maintaining a home, sometimes on a pittance, every day that God sent, always managing somehow to fill in the practical gaps that prayers so often seemed to slip through

My dad working every day God sent till Tory policy dictated otherwise, always willing to debate rather than simply dictate, and constantly trying to instill in me the need for patience and tolerance, who loved me even when I went out of my way to be thoroughly detestable –

‘Can I go camping, please?’

‘Nope’

‘Urgh ... I hate you!’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘I said I hate yer!’

‘Well, guess what? I love you. I’ve loved you since the moment you were born, and I’ll never stop loving you, and what’s more, you’re stuck with that fact no matter what’

‘So?’

‘So ... hate is a very powerful word, an awful word, and it’s responsible for a lot of the evil and wrongdoing that goes on in

this world. And, one day, maybe not tomorrow, maybe not next week, or next month, maybe not for years to come, but one day, you'll remember saying that to me and it'll make you so, so sad that you did, and regret's an awful thing to carry on yer back'

'I didn't mean it ... not proper'

'Then try not saying it unless you do, all right?'

Our Mark trying to mend the inflatable beach-ball I'd won after a school trip to Southport fair with a fork heated over the stove and then trying to get rid of the smell by burning toast and spraying me in Pledge –

'Why does it have to be me what burnt the toast?'

'Because you're little'

'I said try a plaster first!'

Not that bloke who offered me a drink of real beer if I'd have a wee in front of him –

'I don't feel like a wee'

'You will if ya sups a bit of this?'

'I'm not supposed have beer'

'I won't say nowt'

My mum rushing me home after I started crying because Sharon Carr had kicked me really hard in the shins, and I instinctively knew I couldn't kick her back, partly because she was a girl, but mainly because she scared me –

'Are you gonna tell the teachers what she did?'

'I might have a word with her mam but, trust me Michael, you don't want it going any further than me, you and the front door'

My fear of fish night when Dad would bring home stinky 'Finney Haddey' from the docks, gagging at the sound of him coming through the front door –

'Why can't we have a normal chippy night like everyone else?'

'Action Man wouldn't ...'

'Action Man's gone, Dad. Just answer the question!'

My mum's baking. Her cherry pies and homemade quiche. Sitting peeling the skins off mushrooms while watching *The Waltons* with the smell of frying bacon drifting in from the kitchen

SAINTS!! Paying when Dad had the money, or climbing in to see a match when he didn't. Seeing windows around the town decorated in red and white like a second Christmas whenever they made it to a Challenge Cup final and knowing my town was best at rugby league. And making glass

Setting light to plastic beer-crates to watch the hot gloop spit and drip but having to hide the burn from Mum because she'd go ballistic if she found out we were playing with fire

The Sunday bonfire club and setting light to anything that would burn over Hankey's Well

Refusing to jump off the roof of St Austin's Infant School and starting to cry when our Robert tried to motivate me by lying about the police coming –

'You'll go to jail and never see me Mam or Dad again'

'They can come and visit'

'They'd be too ashamed. Now jump!'

'I'll write to them, every day'

'Suit yourself, ya tart!'

Watching our Mark pour meths on a car and light it then run down the street shouting, 'Get back! It's gonna blow!'

Throwing blackberries at car windscreens from the railway wall and hoping some angry bloke would stop the car and give chase

Throwing stuff onto the train tracks on the other side of the railway wall and watching the train demolish it when it left Thatto Heath, despite knowing we'd never be allowed beyond



hand's grasp of our mum's apron strings again if we were caught playing near there

Climbing down the huge water-meter rule that ran up the side of an empty Hankey's Well and hating the peer pressure that had prompted me to do so, yet thinking it was like a picture I'd seen of the Colosseum in school once we were down there

A gang of us watching a kid whose name I won't use for legal reasons wipe his arse on the corner brickwork of our street, then examining the results for worms –

'Oh my God, that is sick!'

'What would you know? Girls, eh? Pah!'

'I think they've got a point'

'Ya girl!'

My dad pulling my pants down and smacking my bum in front of everybody for climbing on the electricity sub-station

Finding a Tom O'Connor cassette over the woods that still worked and listening to it with my dad, both of us laughing even though I wasn't always sure why –

'It's funny 'cos it was true, proper storytelling and with no effing and blinding like most of 'em nowadays!'

Crashing Paul Barnett's birthday party by pretending to return a bag of sweets our Mark had misplaced at home, just so I could see his Evel Kneivel

Stealing the car from Lee Leyland's *Starsky and Hutch* board-game and burying it in our rabbit hutch when guilt got the better of me

Volunteering my pet Blacky when I thought Dad was joking about whose rabbit was going in the pot, until I came home and found him skinned and strung up –

'I saved you these'

'What are they?'

'His ears, tail and feet. They're meant to bring good luck'

Waiting for Mark to get out of our shared bath so I could pour water on my willy with an empty shampoo bottle because I liked the tingle

Swapping a booty for a sip of the gravy from Chris Ramsdale's Pot Noodle packed lunch –

'It must be like this out in space!'

Teaching the whole year how to dance proper to 'Prince Charming' by Adam and the Ants –

'No, it's right arm up, step, then left arm up and cross, step, right arm down on hip, step, left arm down on hip, step. Sort of swagger when you do it and keep in time or else we'll all look stupid'

The first time I ever got caned for fighting with Phil Morgan for jumping the queue at break time –

'And you know why you're here?'

'Yes, sir'

'Yes, sir'

'And the punishment, as a result?'

'Yes, sir'

'Yes, sir'

'And have you anything to say for yourselves?'

'No, sir'

'Yes, sir'

'What's that, Pennington?'

'Did you know that I'm an altar boy, sir?'

'I do, yes'

'Okay'

'Okay. Right, well, altar boys first, then. Hands out, Pennington'

'Yes, sir'

Thursdays being velvet corduroy trousers day and hating how velvet corduroy felt against my skin, but still feeling guilty when I purposely took the knees out of them

Finding a pound note in the snow and believing my dad when he took it off me and said he was going to take it down to the lost property department at the local police station –

‘But it’s mine if nobody claims it?’

‘Oh, aye’

‘How long does it take before they decide?’

‘About a year, give or take’

‘Will they call as soon as they know?’

‘I should imagine so. Either way, at least you know you did the right thing, eh?’

‘Yeah’

My dad offering me five pence for every book I read and my tear-arsing it down to Thatto Heath library as a result –

‘*Noggin the Nog* counts as a book!’

‘Don’t try kidding a kidder. There’s too many pictures in that for a lad of your age and intelligence’

‘I can’t wait to get a paper round!’

‘Well, at least you’ll not be short of ow’t to read while you’re doing it’

Believing our Mark when he told me that Beecham’s Clock Tower in St Helens’ town centre was Big Ben

Believing our Mark when he told me that cars drove over the top hump of Runcorn Bridge

Marching through town to protest about a sex shop opening and feeling guilty because it used to be called Pennington’s the Tailor’s –

‘First Benny Hill, now this. What’s the world coming to?’

Busting our stereo by dropping a half-penny down between the cassette buttons and the casing and nearly electrocuting my mum when she needed some time alone with Johnny Mathis

Saying family bidding prayers in front of Archbishop Worlock in the Liverpool Wigwam and thinking –

‘Don’t think it, don’t think it, don’t think it, don’t think it ... but if you shaved the bits of hair off the sides of Derek Worlock and stuck ’em on his face ... he would make a great Ming The Merciless. Sorry, God!’

Gasping on the tarmac while waiting for Pope John Paul to land at Speke Airport with people going mad because some blokes with trolleys were trying to charge 70p for cans of Coke and Fanta –

‘Just one can between us?’

‘No, here, have some of this’

‘It’s warm!’

‘And it’s full of floaters!’

‘Michael ...’

Watching my mum belt our Robert for necking with a random girl whilst Pope John Paul addressed the crowd –

‘You’re a ruddy disgrace. Well, I hope you’re happy with yourself because his blessing did not include you!’

Feeling guilty for folding my one-day, all-zone travel pass and crushing Pope John Paul’s face

The ITV kids’ show *Michael Bentine’s Potty Time* –

‘Mum, are the patients down the lane potty or mental?’

‘Who?’

‘You know, like that man who shouts bloody bugg—’

‘They’re just not well! Now shush and come get your tea’

Sicking up my mashed carrot and turnip after finding a lumpy bit but having to eat it again because my mum couldn't tell the difference between vomit and the original –

'Mum, please, just smell it!'

Trying to imagine being twenty years of age while sitting in the choir at church

Hating the idea of letting go of my belief in Father Christmas, even though deep down I knew I was getting too old for 'that sort of thing' –

'I've seen your presents, Mike – they're in our garage!'

'La la la la la la la la la la la!'

Throwing a strop on Christmas morning because I had to leave my new chalkboard-painting easel and go to church to celebrate the birth of Jesus –

'Get dressed, now, or this goes straight back to Father Christmas'

'But why? He doesn't come to my birthday!'

'Of course he does, he's everywhere!'

'Well, why can't I play here with him instead?'

'Because he wants you to go to church, that's where the party is'

'Is there cake?'

'No'

'Jelly?'

'No'

'Then what's the point when it's not even a proper party?'

Even the day I nagged Dad relentlessly for an ice cream and he took me outside for a chat –

'I got laid off today. Do you know what that means?'

'I think so'

'Well, then I need you to do me a favour, okay?'

'Yeah'

‘Take this quid and get yourself something from the van. Only, make it last and don’t ask again for a while’

Stealing all the page threes from the newspapers we collected to raise money for St Austin’s Church, and hiding them in a Kwik Save carrier bag under a brick just behind the garages beside St Matthew’s Church. Not knowing why they made my giblets tingle but convinced that it was naughty, yet not feeling guilty about their god watching me because they still had their railings they’d held back in the war ...

All of these feelings, each and every moment, were (and are) a part of me. All of them, wittily broadened out, would make perfect anecdotes to fill a cheery book of nostalgia ten times over. But they’re paths not travelled by my psycho-Siamese-twin **VegaS**.

It’s along the abnormal, moody B-roads of my mind where I have to search for the first signs of him. Not an easy task, thanks to **HIS** scorched earth policy. Carrie Fisher had her postcards from the edge for evidence; **JOHNNY** refused to pay the postage.

It’s a shame, though. I loved my childish existence with all its harmless ups-and-downs, and I didn’t care in the least that nothing at this point in my life felt remarkable. It was innocent and lovely, it was growing up in Hayes Street, Thatto Heath, St Helens. I was eager for a life without incident. I thrived on normality. Or, at least, I thought I did.