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I Know This Much

From Soho to Spandau

Written by Gary Kemp

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I KNOW
THIS MUCH

From Soho to Spandau

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I stand opposite the house. I've come here for something – ghosts maybe – but what can I possibly expect? Others hold the key. I feel hurt by its silent disregard. The old step, shaped from children's play, looks deserted now, unattended, no longer the stage it once was, and sadly smaller. Looking up, I can just see through the first-floor window, the window nearest the pub, the pub now gutted and boarded, empty and silent. There's a shaft of light on the far wall of the room that reveals its size, and suddenly the geometry unfolds and begins to take shape: the two single beds pushed against each wall; the large walnut wardrobe; the Arsenal scarf hanging like a smile on the moon-landing wallpaper; and the square hole my father made in the wall to keep a caring eye on his sleeping babes. To the left, a small boy with a new guitar now sits on his bed. I should know him but he's hard to see, hard to define, so many years have distorted him. But now I can hear the lively piano coming from the pub, the pub that spills people, all noisy and lewd with Christmas beer, into the cold street. I try to ignore them, to experience the guitar, strange in my hands, but the celebrations outside disturb my concentration. Laying it down on the bed, I cross over to the window to see what it is.

And suddenly, there I am.

LONDON, 27 JANUARY 1999

There are moments in life when your entire confidence depends on the coordination between you and an inanimate object. Symbolically, and actually, the problem was a noose around my neck. Every time I knotted my tie the pointy bit was either above or below my waistband – too long and I felt like an accountant, too short and I resembled a Soho bartender. I rip it off again, wipe the back of my hand across my forehead and try to steady myself before another attempt. I'd earlier decided to go for the pink Turnbull and Asser shirt, freshly depinned, but I'd changed my mind and broke sweat struggling to remove my cufflinks in order to change into the more sober, white one. Pink had looked too presumptuous; a little cocksure. I don't want to give that impression.

Unfortunately clothes had always been an obsession. As a boy there had been my snake belt and Trackers, with their compass-in-the-heel bonus, then tears spilt over desired Ben Shermans and Budgie jackets; two-tones; brogues; toppers; the thrill of my first Bowie loons; cheese-cloth; plastic sandals; mohair jumpers; Smiths; straights; high-tops; GI chic; loafers; kilts; Anello & Davide ballet pumps, and all the madness that was the eighties dressing-up box. The event determines the clothes, but the execution of putting them on prepares you for it, and right now I'm suffering from nerves and in a bit of a state about the length of my tie.

I struggle with the knot in the mirror and wonder if any of this really matters. What the hell am I thinking about! My hair's freshly trimmed but my face looks tired and drawn from lack of sleep. Last night I'd woken again to play out potential moments from the trial in my head and had not slept since 4 a.m. God, this isn't working! A flush of insecurity pours into my chest and I feel sick down to my knees, but the doorbell rings (was that it earlier?) and I pull up the heart-shaped knot, throw on my jacket and coat and head downstairs. My tie will have to do. So, I hope, will my truth.

Ian Mill fills the room. Not just physically – he has a large, well-stocked frame, a picture of his own success – but also in terms of his character – a Pickwickian presence born of public-school confidence and class. ‘Spy’ should have drawn him for a Victorian issue of *Vanity Fair*. He picks up a handful of folders from his aching desk, buries them into his obediently open briefcase and, with a swipe of his hand, clears his barrister's wig from the table, places it on the top of the folders and closes his case with a snap.

‘Gentlemen?’

I wonder if he'd put the tonal question mark after ‘Gentlemen’ for other, more suspicious reasons. Here, in the theatre of law, stands the last bastion of the class system. Accents are prepared and nurtured, polished and loaded, before being sent out to pronounce judgement upon the fools of the world. I gaze through the window on to the red-bricked Inns of Court, survivors of the Great Fire of London and the Blitz, serving as historic reminders of the eternity of order. I find a certain comfort in all of this, and a genetically encoded forelock is being pulled as Steve Dagger and I follow Ian and our team out of the chambers and into the cold bright day that lights the Inns with a nostalgic beauty. As we walk towards the court I feel myself locked into

a crashing inevitability and envy the otherness of passing people, on their way to meetings, coffee, loved ones. But Ian bestrides the Strand and it's all I can do to keep up. We are about to enter his arena.

The Gothic, grey-stone edifice that is the Royal Courts of Justice could be the grand entrance to Oz, overdressed with multiple arches and varied ornate carvings, with a dark spire that points its righteous finger to heaven. But people don't come here to ask for a heart or courage, just judgement, and, of course, some money. Outside, a pack of media jostle for a statement and some pictures, and I submit myself to the hungry lenses, suddenly relieved that I hadn't gone for the pink.

We pass through security, and make our way to Court 59. I dread my first meeting with the others. Will it all seem ridiculous when it happens? Will they drop the whole thing on seeing me and realise how preposterous it all is? We arrive at a tiny anteroom and Ian vanishes, leaving Dagger and me, and my two young lawyers, feeling temporarily rudderless. He returns dressed for his performance: wig pressed snugly over his boyish blond waves; white barrister bands tight around his pink neck, and a flowing, long black gown. I feel sick again and wish I'd never read *Bleak House*.

He resettles his wig; it seems to be focusing his mind. 'Try to sit at the front. Good to be seen clearly by the judge.'

Our Queen's Counsel, Barbara Dohmann, arrives – a small, middle-aged German woman whom I'm glad to hear is referred to in the business as 'Doberman' – and we shuffle into the aesthetically neutered courtroom. I'm relieved to see that the others aren't here yet and, following Ian's thrusting finger, we slide on to the front bench. Dagger squashes up to my right. This is the man who'd helped to create Spandau Ballet; who has lived, breathed and dreamt it as much any one of us. The rejection he has suffered would have been just as painful, the accusations worse.

He prods me, and with a nod points out their barrister, our adversary, Andrew Sutcliffe. Sharp and feral, his thin nose hovers importantly over his opening statement and I wonder how much pleasure he anticipates from my destruction. Beyond him, in the public seats, I notice some familiar faces – long-term followers of the band: fans. They look excited as they settle into their spaces and arrange their bags between their legs. Next to them are members of the press, notebooks and pens appearing from mucky pockets, and I can feel them begin to scrutinise me and I wonder how you look when you're about to be sued out of your home.

The courtroom door opens; a sudden hush of voices from outside, and, turning, I catch my first sight of what they call the plaintiffs, the men who've brought me here, the same men that I'd known as boys, that I'd embraced a thousand times, that I'd lived a young man's dream with: John Keeble, Steve Norman, Tony Hadley – men who had been my friends. I want to say hello – it feels ridiculous not to, we've known each other since school – but they avoid my gaze as they sideways-step into the bench at the back of the room. I'm surprised by John's rock-'n'-roll-flavoured peroxide hair, a recent statement of his commitment to the cause. I was probably closer to him than to any other throughout the whole extraordinary ride. I manage to catch his eye but he rejects it and sits between Steve and Tony. The press start to scribble. They can sense fear. To them, we must have the distressed look of people who've swum too far out to sea.

The fifth member of the band is missing – my brother. Only recently recovered from two brain operations to remove benign tumours, he is now – thankfully – forging a career as a successful TV star and has rightly chosen to avoid the court. But I have with me, in my heart, his blessing.

Two young clerks with over-gelled hair and oversized tie-knots arrive with trolleys teetering with box-files. Wheeling them to the front

of the courtroom, they casually unload the fifteen or so numbered boxes across the long console table directly in front of me. I quickly understand what they contain. Within them lies my life: cuttings of articles, interviews and photographs; letters and faxes; contracts – a yellowing, fading potpourri of our history to be judged by bewigged, gowned men from another world. All had come to this. Inside those dull boxes lay the innocent faces of five young working-class lads from London, living the greatest story they could have wished for, a story that is about to be told in the many different ways they remember it.

I suddenly realise how familiar this all is and feel sure now that it will drag itself through to the bitter end. This, after all, is another show. We're finally back together again; and the music will be played, and hearts will race. Here, surrounded by a crew of helpers and advisers, with a stage to stand on and an audience to listen, Spandau Ballet is once more the headline act.

'All stand for the judge.'

A stooped-looking clerk, the judge's toadying roadie, makes the announcement from the dais and we noisily obey. The stenographer crooks her fingers over her keys as though she's about to start a concerto, and Mr Justice Park, middle aged, thin and grey, but with gown flowing dramatically behind him, enters stage left and takes his central seat.

As I watch this powdered pomp begin, it occurs to me that the court is pure theatre. With its cast of goodies and baddies, it is improvised, emotional, and although without a predetermined denouement, as sure as in any good Greek tragedy there'll be a grand judgement from above, a winner and a loser, and before then, an awful lot of dressing up.

CHAPTER ONE

WAKY WAKY!

It began with an unwanted Christmas present. The year previously I'd been given a lunar landing module – well, a six-inch one, but I could hover it over a grey plastic moonscape with such grace and stability that my ten-year-old mind felt the primal thrill of power rushing through it. You controlled the landing by aiming a fan-gun at the module's attached balloon while issuing orders in a croaky American accent with lots of 'beeps' thrown in between the commands. What the 'beeps' in space-talk were for I was never quite sure, but they had something to do with adventure, bravery and the future that we now lived in. American accents were a must if any boy were to cut the mustard in an Islington playground and have any level of cultural credibility among his peers. Whatever the asphalt fantasy, it usually demanded you being an American, be it a Thunderbird, a superhero, or one of the Rat Patrol. I even did James Bond in American.

Apollo, though, was everything. The Christmas before, my family had all sat spellbound in front of our small television as *Apollo 8* vanished into radio silence around the dark side of the moon, a phrase coined especially for a child's imagination, and we waited, gripped, for its return. Man had never been so far from home and those men had taken my imagination along with them. Sitting in awe, new presents suddenly

ignored, we listened to Commander Jim Lovell, floating in a black sea of risk, reading to us across the void from the book of Genesis. The following summer I was woken early to see black-and-white ghosts walk upon the moon. My father cried. We watched it over and over until the morning came and the magical moon faded from outside our window.

My lunar module also needed a bit of space to be successfully manoeuvred and in our front room that wasn't easy. It would often catch its leg on the net curtains. But if I were careful with its flight I could edge it along the drinks cabinet, with its purely ornamental miniatures and solitary bottle of Stone's Ginger Wine, over my father's *News of the World* as he read it, past the budgie, perched proprietorially on the paper's edge, and down over the floral-patterned settee towards the moon surface in front of my father's slippers, while trying not to go too near the heat of the glowing electric fire with its shadowy flame effect. The right side of the plastic coals had, sadly, broken, but the other side benefited hugely from the spinning device that created the 'flames' and added a greater sense of homeliness to our lives. One electric bar out of the two was always cold and ash grey whatever the weather, thus saving my parents the money to buy toys for their two boys, like Lunar Landing, or guns that shot ping-pong balls around corners.

But on this Christmas morning of 1970, no toys appeared for me. My younger brother Martin was rapidly tearing the wrapping off the presents that had been delivered soundlessly into the pillowcase he'd left at the foot of his bed. My pillowcase, on the other hand – and to my horror – was empty. My father winked knowingly at me and left the room while my mother helped Martin eagerly unwrap an endless procession of gifts. My toy was obviously so huge it couldn't fit into any pillowcase, but my heart sank as Dad sheepishly returned with something clutched awkwardly to his chest: a guitar. He looked as though he were about to dance with it.

‘We thought you’d like this,’ he said, turning it around in his hands.

I found it hard to hide my displeasure. It wasn’t even wrapped.

‘We saw you playing with your cousin’s toy guitar and thought you’d like a proper one.’ He could see he had some convincing to do and held it out gingerly towards me.

My childhood felt over. Was this to presage a future of socks and underpants for Christmas? I accepted my fate, took the guitar and sat it in my lap. It smelt of polish. Furniture smelt of polish, not Christmas presents; this was something adult, belonging to a world I wasn’t sure I wanted to enter yet. My arms clumsily wrapped themselves around its curvaceous body with its two ‘F’ holes like mournful, drooping eyes. Scratches on its tobacco-brown skin revealed that I wasn’t the first. It had its own story and I immediately felt pity for the thing – it was made to play beautiful music, but it had found itself in the hands of a disappointed child.

Nobody in the known history of the Kemps or Greens – my mother’s family – had ever played a musical instrument. I had attempted the descant recorder for one term, until I found myself at a junior school concert standing in a pool of my own drool while playing ‘Sloop John B’. A dripping recorder does not do much for a young boy’s standing among giggling schoolgirls.

But we were the proud owners of a radiogram – an old-style record player-cum-radio that fitted my mother’s brief of looking like a piece of furniture. When this highly polished example of veneered technology was not in use, it became a plinth for chalk ornaments, frogs made from seashells, and a miniature glass lighthouse filled with coloured sands from the Isle of Wight, all placed strategically by my mother on lace doilies. Our record collection was sparse and mostly never played: a Frank Sinatra anthology that had lost its inner sleeve; a rollicking Billy

Cotton album of innuendo-filled music-hall standards called *Wakey Wakey!*, plus some random Matt Monro, Patsy Cline, and Dave Clark Five singles, some of which had lost their centrepieces. To play these, one would have to place the record as centrally as possible upon the deck, and then suffer the wow and flutter as it gradually ellipsed in ever-expanding orbits around the spindle. The radio part of this dual wonder was more often used, and appears quite vividly in one of my earliest memories.

October 22 1962 was six days after my third birthday. My memory starts with my father leaning into the radiogram and tuning into the one o'clock news. He'd come home from work on his 'dinner break' but was agitated and I must have felt this as I'd followed him across the room, attempting noisily to get his attention. I watched as, hushing me, he stared hard at the amber-lit panel, hungry for the information its warm, authoritative voice was delivering. And then Dad said, 'There might be a war.'

I can assume that his statement shocked me, even at that age, as why else should it be so deeply branded upon my memory? So real was the nearness of the last war that even as a three-year-old it was a concept I had already begun to grasp – and fear. But I suppose what stunned me most of all was that first shocking experience of witnessing my father's vulnerability. My superman, the one whom I thought I could absolutely rely on for constant protection, was frightened. Something one day might slip through the protection of our perfect world and destroy it, and even he couldn't stop it.

It was the Cuban Missile Crisis and, of course, the man who could save the world had an American accent. Kennedy never joined the list of heroic characters that I tirelessly embodied in the playground, but his assassination the year after became another early memory, primarily because it stopped the TV and instead of *Top Cat*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*

or *Supercar*, I was forced to stare at a photograph of him, silently being broadcast across the channels.

I was born at St Bartholomew's Hospital within earshot of St Mary-le-Bow's bells on 16 October 1959. No one seems to remember at what time, for like all things to do with childbirth or war it was never spoken about and eventually forgotten. I was brought home to a house in Islington that was more connected with a Victorian past than any nuclear present. It belonged to an era of austerity that was yet to taste the 'white heat', or even the white goods, of the technological revolution. It seems hard to imagine now, but this central-London dwelling would not have electricity until 1960, when my father and his brother finally connected us to the modern world, so I must picture myself entering 138 Rotherfield Street by the yellow shroud of gaslight.

My father, Frank, had lived in this early nineteenth-century terraced house since 1945, when, as a fourteen-year-old, he had moved there with his father and mother and his brother, Percy. His two sisters had already moved into their own marital homes, while his older brother, Bill, was away fighting in Burma, a war from which he would never fully recover, or mentally leave, until his death in 2008.

I have a picture of my paternal grandmother, the wonderfully named Eliza Ettie Ruth Crisp, taken in 1912 when she was aged sixteen. Her large, moon face looks slightly bewildered by the photographic situation she's been thrown into. She's dressed in the high white collar, lace apron and bonnet of a girl in service – a maid. She sits, her hand resting awkwardly on a book – undoubtedly under the direction of the studio photographer – giving her the look of being caught reading during a break in work. I can just see the book's title on the spine and I take a magnifying glass to discover what it might be. It leaves me a little saddened and with a feeling that she's been slightly humiliated as the title's two words enlarge into focus: *Stickphast Cement*. Of course,

it would be a surprise if Eliza had ever read or owned a book other than the family Bible.

My paternal grandfather, Walter, wounded out of Flanders, had become disabled from his work at a veneering factory after a swinging tree trunk delivered itself into his shrapnel-softened leg. Jobless and desperate, he and Eliza created and ran a business from the kitchen of the rooms they rented above a mews garage in Islington. There, the two boys, Frank and Percy, along with Eliza's father, Granddad Crisp – a hansom cab driver and a man whose photos prove that braces always need a belt for extra security – would bag up nuts and sweets and help Eliza make toffee apples to sell to the queues outside the nearby Collins' Music Hall. It kept the Kemps fed and housed, but unfortunately, when the Second World War came, Eliza's little helpers were soon considered to be in danger from the new threat of German bombing raids. Equipped with gas masks, the two boys made their way through crowds of weeping mothers to Highbury and Islington station and a two-year stay away from home.

One evening, during the London Blitz, a Luftwaffe pilot caught in 'ack-ack' fire evacuated his payload of bombs. Below him was Walter, tall and lean, quickly making his way home through the empty streets, the sky above alight with tracer. Within seconds the eight bombs had landed around him, sucking him into the huge hole they'd created in the road. Luckily the bombs didn't detonate and, dazed, he crawled out and back to Eliza. But Walter's nerves were forever blown apart. Afterwards, he became wrecked and sleepless, and my father would often see the red glow of his cigarette as he lay smoking in bed through many a long night.

Unfortunately my father and mother were experiencing another hell. Both tell similar evacuation stories of beatings, accusations of stealing, and destroyed or censored letters home. Sadly for my mother it

would end at the age of nine, in a breakdown of bed-wetting, fear of noise and inconsolable night-crying. While they were both away, two bombs fell silently through the London night sky and destroyed each of their family homes and any evidence of their younger lives.

Walter and Eliza were temporarily relocated to the relatively peaceful suburb of Finchley, and Frank was granted his wish to return from rural exile to his family. His war was not over, though, and as a Boy Scout he was drafted into the role of stretcher-bearer at Finchley Memorial Hospital. On 6 June 1944, D-Day, a heavy raid delivered itself in retaliation upon the city. Frank carried eight dead bodies, young and old, into the morgue that evening, at one point having to shuffle them around to fit them all in. Later that night he lay sleepless in his bed, listening to Allied planes making their way to France and the final act of the war.

With the war over, the Kemp family returned to Islington and new rooms in Rotherfield Street, rented from a local landlord. But the brothers would still have to replace the walls and ceilings themselves, as a doodlebug had dropped in the street and partially destroyed them. They took the top floor, their parents' brass bed set up in the living room creating a centrepiece reminiscent of Roald Dahl, but in reality it was nothing but cramped and stifling. On the floor below, even more Dahl-esque, lived two 'filthy old boys', as my father called them.

Sadly, the family didn't have the means to indulge Frank's aspirations or potential, and his desires to stay on at school beyond fourteen and become a journalist were impossible even to contemplate. So Frank was sent to work as a printer – ironically, printing ruled lines onto paper for others to write on. In 1952, after his two years in National Service, he returned to the print and a blind date with a shy, Irish-faced girl from the New North Road called Eileen Green. Their first evening together ended with what must have been a memorable visit to the London Palladium to see Little Richard perform. A few dates later and they were helping to

shake its Grand Circle up and down while watching Bill Haley and the Comets. Somewhere between the rock and roll they fell in love.

On Eileen's first visit to her new boyfriend's house she was welcomed at the front door by one of the resident 'old boys'. Wrapped against the cold in ancient grey clothes and carrying an oil lamp in his greasy fingers, he beckoned her in, slowly guided her up the narrow stairs, and pointed her on past their own stinking rooms towards the top floor and the waiting Frank. The fragile Eileen swore she would never come again to this decrepit place, but eventually married Frank, and, as a proud virgin in white, moved into the house on their wedding night. Awkwardly undressing for bed, she broke the gas mantle, casting them both, gratefully, I'm sure, into darkness.

Eventually, they rented two rooms on the floor below and uncomfortably shared the kitchen with the elderly gents, now in their nineties, who infuriated Frank with their habit of keeping coal piled in a corner of the landing outside their door. Thankfully, the two nonagenarians soon shuffled off their shabby mortal coils, and with my arrival my father took over their space and turned it into a bedroom for me, giving his new family the whole floor.

Almost two years later my brother was born in my parents' bedroom. My father looked after me, banned, like all men of his time, from the proceedings, while two midwives and a doctor saw Martin into the world. My mother had chosen to have Martin at home, not for any holistic purpose or lack of NHS service, but because she couldn't leave me, as my father was unable to take time off work. Unfortunately, Martin was thought to be a 'blue' baby – meaning he might have a potentially fatal blood condition – and was immediately rushed to hospital. When cleared, he would return home to two murder attempts from his brother.

The first was more of an experiment. He was asleep in his cot and my fury at his satisfied, gurgling presence was unbounded. I must have

realised his breathing was essential to life because first I poured the remains of a pot of Lyle's Golden Syrup on to his face, and then, pleased with my initial syrupy delivery, followed it with a bowl of sugar – a fine recipe for suffocation, I thought. He would at least enjoy it while it lasted. I watched little sweet bubbles form and pop around his mouth and nostrils and then suddenly there was a room full of screams, a crying baby, and a punished, whimpering child. I'd failed. This time.

A few weeks later I took my chance again. A sunny day meant a stroll to the New River Walk, a faux little brook that was actually designed to bring in fresh drinking water to thirsty Londoners but was now a favourite haunt of new mothers. Outside our house my old perambulator proudly stood with its new incumbent tucked tightly inside. My mother went back to shut the door and I took my chance. I grabbed the handlebar and shoved the huge beast of a pram into the road. A woman passing by screamed as it flew from the kerb, tipped backwards onto its canopied end and, wheels spinning helplessly in midair, came to a stop. But so swaddled was Martin that he never moved from the security of the covers, his head safely cushioned by the pillow, and within seconds my mother had him and the pram back on the pavement. With a stinging arse I saw that he was blessed, and probably worth keeping.

Below us, on the ground floor, the landlord had his rental office, and one day a week a line of people would snake through our 'passage' to pay their rent through a hole in the wall, a public encroachment which never seemed to bother us, although my mother would struggle to push her pram past the grumbling tenants. On a wet day they'd all cram into the narrow hall for protection, filling the house with the smell of damp clothes and the murmuring of local rumour. Under all of this, in the basement, lived an elderly woman, who eventually filled the house with a fetid stench of her own, alerting us to her lonely death.

The house contained no bathrooms, and the only toilet was outside in a small walled yard where my father had once kept chickens that he horrifically ‘burst’ by swelling their stomachs with an inappropriate diet of barley. On one side stood a brick air-raid shelter full of paint pots, rusting bicycles and hidden creatures. On the wall hung a tin bath that I never remember coming into the house – a ‘good wash’ was always had in the kitchen sink. I only remember this being once a week, unless my father took me to the local baths, where I’d lie tense and repulsed in one of their large cubicked tubs, with its flaking enamel and worryingly brown rust spots, timidly calling, ‘More hot water, please’ to the old geezer patrolling the corridor outside. Our outside toilet was a reeking, damp home for insects, and although torches were required in the evenings, it was beyond the call of nature to visit it at night. I also feared the empty basement that you had to pass to get to it, especially in the knowledge that the old woman had recently rotted there, not to mention our cat Ginger, who’d spent his last hours of life spewing on the dusty floorboards. To make things worse, in winter the pipes would freeze and the cistern would stop working altogether. Night-time relief was had in a bucket, and it was common in the morning to see Uncle Percy or Aunt Jean carrying theirs down to the loo. A stroke had taken Eliza before I was born and Walter just after, so my uncle, now married, lived upstairs with his wife and two children. We were joined in the house by my older cousin, her Turkish-Cypriot husband and their son, who all moved into the old ground-floor rent office when the council took over the property and turned the room into a dwelling.

It was now a house full of relatives (and, oddly, a monkey – my cousin’s husband having bought one in Club Row market as a pet); and although the three families kept themselves separate, sequestered on their different floors, the children claimed the doorstep, the yard and the damp basement space for their adventures in imagination.

CHAPTER TWO

HOME-MADE

Rotherfield Primary stood at the end of the street; a typical redbrick Victorian state school, infused with the smell of sour milk and hot plimsolls. The rule for boys was to wear shorts until they were eleven, which gave the local long-trouser school boys great ammunition to abuse us with. In June, shorts made sense, but in winter we were a swarm of goosebumps. Towards the end of my time there my mother thought it too extravagant to buy me a new pair, even though I'd reached a size where my hulking thighs were bursting out of my shorts like escaping sausage meat, and when I sat down they'd ride up and resemble a pair of worsted underpants.

My parents were constantly pushed to the limit of their purse just buying what was necessary, and so to give love and save cash my mother knitted jumpers for us. I particularly remember a rusty brown one that I wore proudly for school the day it was finished, although I was a little unsure about the jagged blue 'G' she'd sewn on its breast. Martin, of course, had a perfectly straight 'M'.

I was spotted – for rust can be a little lurid – as soon as I entered the school gates. I'd forgotten about the 'G'.

'That stands for Germ!' A playground nasty confronted me; even at eight, he already had the worn face of a man. 'Look! G for Germ!' He

was now pointing out his witty discovery to his host of sycophants. The phrase became a ringing tune repeated endlessly for my benefit by more and more of his cronies. I never wore the jumper again without tears.

Even visiting barbershops seemed frivolous when my dad could easily do it himself. It was the era of the as-seen-on-TV gadget, and the kings of these domestic necessities were K-Tel. They'd sell you things that you never knew you needed, with chirpy, urgent voiceovers and slick demonstrations. Vegetable choppers, knitting machines, even hair trimmers arrived at our house. This last device was designed to trim the hair by just combing it through. In actual fact, it tore the hair in random places as it ripped its way down; a medieval torture instrument by any other name. My father would force us on to a chair and then begin his Sweeney Todd-like operation. You'd sit and pray for no pain, but then it would catch on a knot or a curl and successfully remove your hair whole from its follicle. It felt as if it had been yanked from the back of your eye and you jumped like a galvanised frog. To make things worse, the more haircuts my dad administered the blunter the 'trimmer' became. When it was over I'd sit in the chair, shoulders covered in broken pieces of hair, and wipe away tears. I'm not sure if these home-made haircuts were actually to save money or simply to satisfy my father's love for DIY.

He was creative with his hands, and apart from the usual shelves and decorating, if there was a fancy dress competition or an Easter hat parade then Martin and I would invariably be wearing something grand, often mechanical, and always of a winning formula. I felt his love for us through the time and effort he put in, and the Kemp boys stood out at school because of it; though not always in the way we would have chosen.

My brother had a fully working windmill bonnet made for him once, and I remember awkwardly walking to school dressed as a knave-of-hearts playing card – a large painted box hung on me from braces,

while a hat and straw wig finished off my nursery-rhyme look. Embarrassingly, I won. As usual.

On one awful occasion, though, my mother cried over what I had to wear. I was crossing the street and must have been struggling to walk as my shoes were too tight. My poor mother was mortified – they had no money at the time to buy me a new pair. I didn't think we were any different – everyone we knew owned very little; houses were rented, and everything we sat on, slept on, drove in and watched was on HP. Constant saving through 'Christmas Boxes', coupons or Green Shield Stamps would pay for holidays, and bottles were always returned promptly for their thruppence deposit.

My parents needed to work hard for money, and at times our front room resembled a factory. My father not only worked Saturday mornings but also brought home work for some extra cash, and for a while we had a small printing press squeezed into a corner. The smell of ink soon became a familiar, homely one. My mother also worked from home as a machinist, stitching up 'golliwogs' among other things, and the rattle of the Singer sewing machine and Mum's frantically pedalling foot became our constant soundtrack.

To a child, things reveal themselves in symbols. Once, for a curious, forgotten reason, but probably to find money for sweets, I reached into my mother's coat pocket as it hung over a chair. Not only was I surprised to find the pockets empty, but also both of them had holes, and my hand reached down into the dusty lining. It shocked me and I snatched my hand away. It felt as though I'd discovered something hidden about my mother. And, possibly, about us.

Like Dad, Mum was the youngest of a family of five children. She knew very little about her father, Thomas Green, as he'd died from gangrene before she was born, and so hated was he that he was never mentioned

thereafter. A drinker and a bully, this road-worker of Irish descent, proudly born on St Patrick's Day, would terrorise the home – when he chose to be there, as he often vanished for long periods of time. His background is unknown, his Catholic family having ostracised him when he married Elizabeth Bristow of Shoreditch, an Anglican with no previous pious convictions. 'Liz' – ten years his junior – worked in the local bathhouse and blamed her later debilitating rheumatoid arthritis on the dampness of her workplace. A woman in constant pain when I knew her, she rarely spoke to me, and because of her 'bad legs' played little with her grandchildren.

I picture her, grey hair, grey face, puffing billows of grey smoke around the room, as if her body were making grey at such a rate it needed to expel the surplus. Sitting toothless and pinnied in her twelfth-floor flat, bloated legs on a leatherette pouffe, mechanical ashtray perched on a metal stalk by her side, she would talk to my mother while Martin and I sat motionless on the sofa, letting her clouds slowly embrace us. When Nan's constant smoking had filled her faithful ashtray, I was allowed the privilege of operating it, and with a press of a button would watch its little trapdoors open and the dirty butts vanish into its ashy bowels.

My parents would often take my grandmother out in our black Ford Popular on summer day trips. Southend-on-Sea was a favourite, and Martin and I would sit trapped in the back of the car, windows closed, while Nan puffed solemnly away for four or so hours on her Player's Weights. These were pre-service-station days, and Nan's bladder had to be emptied in numerous lay-by bushes along the route, making it a journey of immense proportions, but at least allowing us some respite from the fug. We'd finally arrive, set her down on a deckchair, put a plate of whelks in her hand, and play in the mud for a few hours before the return journey home and another gassing.

I could leave her there, in the back of the Popular, heading home towards Shoreditch, or maybe jump-cut to 1978 and the last time I saw her, waving me goodbye from her hospital bed, ancient against the smooth, fresh pillowcase; either way I would be doing this woman a disservice, the woman I never knew, the one that existed before the broken version that I met. So I want to wave goodbye to you again Nan, and try to see the young, cockney girl who once fell excitedly in love; the woman sadly resigned to the constant disaffection of her husband; the mother who was forced to say goodbye to her babies at a wartime railway station; the fighter who worked all the hours she could to feed her five children; and the brave widow, who once crawled from a shelter to see her home and all her lovely things crushed by a German bomb.

The Duke of Clarence was a busy Victorian pub, full of etched glass and polished wood, with a well-worn upright piano pushed against a nicotined wall. Part of the terrace, it adjoined our house and was the venue for my parents' wedding celebrations. Of a winter's evening, returning from shopping or a family visit with my mother, I would hear the liquored ribaldry coming from the smoky warmth inside, and through the swinging door witness flashes and hints of this secret, prohibited place of adults, brilliantly lit in all its bottly glitter. My parents weren't drinkers – I don't think they'd been inside a pub since the night of the broken gas mantle – and so the people within held some kind of illicit attraction for me. My father would occasionally have a bottle of brown ale on a Saturday night – his glass perched on the mantelpiece as a symbol of the weekend – and manage to make it last the entire evening, whereas it would take at least a wedding for my mother to drink. My bed was next to the pub's adjoining wall, and at night I would lie and listen to the muted devilish sounds of the piano accompanying hearty, raucous singing. Those old, boozy music-hall

songs that swam through the wall – still part of the prevailing culture in the mid-sixties, albeit waning – became my lullaby, and to this day I'm home when I hear them.

Once a month, local mods would converge on the pub and I'd stare out of my bedroom window, thrilled by the scooters gliding down the street, a dream in white sparkle and mirrors, reflecting the sharp, neat lines of their riders. This was certified mod country – a greased rocker wouldn't dare walk the Essex Road. Young men here took a feminine level of time in their grooming, and my cousins' boyfriends would be all slim suits, burned-in partings and geezer sovereigns.* The mods would reincarnate themselves here one day as soul boys and I would join them, but that's for the future. Right now, my Aunt Dolly is drinking inside, blonde and beehived, her voice warm with rum and black.

Dolly lived two doors away from us with her mother and her brother, David, and she'd occasionally pop in on her way to the pub. I'd never smelt perfume before, and she was all sweets and smoke on our sofa, with a great big laugh that denied the cancer swelling within her. When she died, David's 'mum' revealed to him that she was really his grandmother, and that Dolly was not his sister at all, but in fact his real mother. I was beginning to realise that it was what people thought you were that was important, even if it wasn't the truth.

In front of me is a grainy black-and-white photograph of my family, taken in the Clarence's upstairs function room during the wedding reception for my pretty cousin Janice. It's about 1967, and she has just married one of the Nashes, an appropriate moniker for the family who ferociously dominated the Islington underworld. Here's Ted, my

* Local legend has it that you could purchase these huge masculine rings, sotto voce, at the sarsaparilla and apple-fritter stall in the local market. The trader, apparently, kept them secreted at the bottom of his fat fryer.

great-uncle who fought in the First World War, standing proud in a three-piece suit, face as white as his hair, homburg settled on a cabinet behind him. Here's Aunt Flo, looking mischievous and twinkley in winged spectacles, and here's my cousin's husband, wearing a pin stabbed through his collar and, like the other men in the picture, hair trimmed neatly and Brylcreemed. The men wear dark suits, white shirts and sombre ties with small, hard knots pushed up to strangling point. The younger women have their hair high in beehives, while the seated, older ones look comfortably ample and matronly as they contribute to the ashtrays that spill over on the table. My parents are both sporting tans, telling me that we must have just returned from our annual summer visit to my Uncle Tom and Aunt Joyce's family home in Swansea, and that there had been good weather that year on the Mumbles. I'm stood behind my brother, but you can only make out the top of my head, hair newly trimmed – probably by Dad's do-it-yourself shearing tool.

Staring at the photograph now, I'm reminded that I may have been a little tipsy here. The reception had deteriorated into post-speech raggedness, the children starting to be ignored in favour of flowing booze and knees-up music. Women were kicking off shoes and dancing in stockinged feet on the now sticky carpet that had, over the years, cushioned many a cockney do. Lured by fascination with what my parents had claimed was a reception full of bookmakers and villains from the Angel, an area of Islington where Essex Road met Upper Street, I wandered around the edge of the room. I was attracted to a mucky, lipstick-stained glass of thick, yellowy fluid, and, lifting it from the deserted table, drank its sweet contents. The elixir was – magically, I thought – called a Snowball; is it any wonder that I wanted to drink one of those? Head curiously light, I loitered around the male conversations at the bar, now heavy with cigar smoke and braggadocio. It was here, in hushed tones, that I overheard a cousin mention the Krays to another

man. Was it a gang? A new musical group even? There was such reverence and awe in his voice that it struck me, even at that age, that whoever or whatever they were, they were to be feared and, disturbingly, this wedding was somehow bringing them closer to my door.

And then the bragging men were rushing past me. A fight, outside somewhere, between some of the wedding party and a gang of interloping rivals. The excitement that suddenly swept through a number of the male guests as they ran into the street was palpable. Someone told me to stay where I was but I was thrilled by these heavy, bristling blokes, hot in their bri-nylon shirts, as they strode back into the hall, pumped with adrenalin and beer, cigars still smoking in hands, breathlessly recounting what had either just or, more realistically, almost occurred. Many years later, these would be the kind of men that I would draw on when asked to play one half of that feared East End fraternity.

With friends from show business and politics, and pictures of them by Bailey and other society photographers, the Kray twins, Ronnie and Reggie, were supreme rulers of London's underworld, and their name had fast become a byword for proletarian power. They dressed in the stark, dark uniform of the working-class male, which owed more to the sartorial sobriety of the forties and fifties than anything that could be considered 'swinging' in this new age. The Krays put the Nashes in the shade.

We poured out of the Clarence and into the warm night air. It felt grown-up to be part of the noise in the street, the noise that usually woke me, and I was thrilled by our loud, carefree voices echoing off the redbrick housing estate opposite. Bentham Court had been built in the hole that the doodlebug had made and it would be there, within the next year or so, that I would meet a dynamic young Irish woman who'd set my life on a course that would one day take me to Broadmoor prison, and a meeting with Mr Ronnie Kray himself.