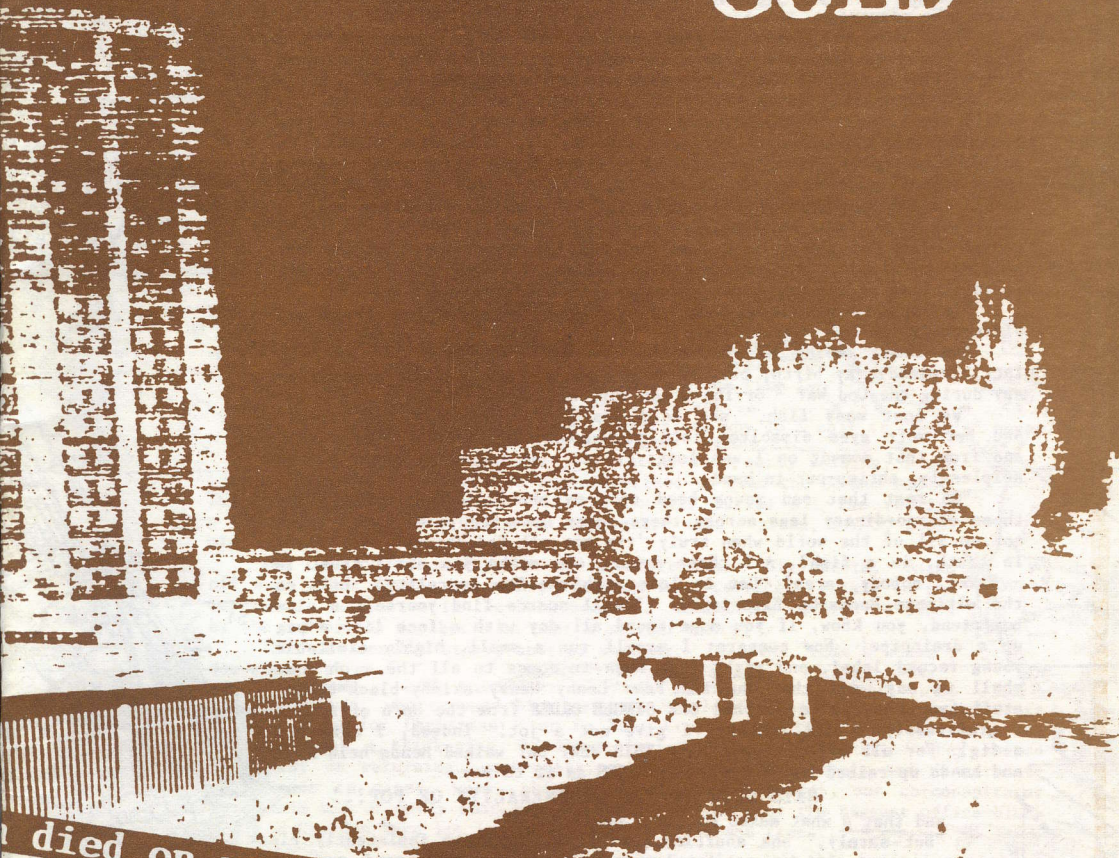


SARAH 14AA "COLD"



died on us somewhere further
is black and then something
od Bless You All," I thought,
e..."
e-distance of Her words,

A Lie

I REMEMBER WHEN WE ALL USED TO RIDE BIKES...
... NOW WE ALL WANT TO SOUND LIKE DINOSAUR JR.

I was talking to a girl on a train the other day. And I remarked, by way, I suppose, of passing the time, on the large cossack hat that perched cutely askew on the tumbling blonde candy-floss swirl of her hair - she was really quite pretty, in an odd, long-lashed and blue-eyed, unexplored kind of way, though her skin tasted oddly of fish-cakes. So anyway:

"Your eyes are like the misty insides of summer raindrops," I'd said, "and your hair the newborn sheaves of an early harvest, sculpted from melting sunlight. But I'm a mite unconvinced by the hat."

And thus did she come to tell of the large cossack who had infiltrated their household when she - Nikki - was but the size of a distant pea on a frozen horizon; and of how, disguising himself as an old Electrolux chest-freezer, he had lived well, in the corner of the kitchen - growing exceedingly plump, in fact - for four whole years until - a sudden power-cut had completely defrosted him; and her family, returning home from an inspiring talk on lichen-abuse at the local parish-hall, had found only that splendid fur hat, in a sticky wet pool on the floor. And she had been allowed to keep it, for she had loved it best of all. Indeed, everyone else had thought it was crap.

"Iceland is a strange country," she whispered, "they do things differently there."

And then, seeing my confusion, she explained that she was, in fact, Icelandic by birth, but had been sent over to Britain as a child-spy during the Cod War - or The Great War, as she would insist.

"We lost many fish," she said gravely, "they were bad times." And her soft eyes dissolved into rock-pools of distant blue tears. And from that moment on I was lost; I went slipping and splashing down helplessly, shrimp-net in hand...

"Oh rest that sad young head upon my shoulders!" I cried, "and those extraordinary legs across these eager upturned palms! And think not so ill of the world when truly 'tis not all Bad Things! For what, in truth, is a fish? All these dreary old myths you still trust in - Nikki, nobody cares! Get in love with the New Amorality! Life as the ultimate Hands-On Experience! You'll scarce find yourself a nice boyfriend, you know, if you mope round all day with a face like a pig up a drainpipe! Now compare: I myself run a small, highly excitable young record label, and right now, when it comes to all the - oh what shall we say, all that Burkina Faso Lenny Henry skinny-black-babies stuff (you know we've not had **ONE SINGLE ORDER** from the Horn of Africa - gratitude!) - well frankly, I give not a jot! Indeed, I care not a fig! For all of our bands have **THIS VERY DAY** walked heads-held-high and hands up-raised beneath **BIG RED BUSES** as if to say

HATS OFF! TO THE EPHEMERALITY OF POP!!!

and that's what makes my young heart sing!"

"But surely," she snuffled prettily, "in these insistently bleak times, when selfishness, intolerance, prejudice and greed run rank, surely it's imperative that one responds with more than just a hyperactively deontological pop sensibility?"

PUFF!!! Before us stood a young pop-kid, of noble heart and skin as pure as fresh-minced cod. Gently he took her hand and said:

"Nikki, listen: buy The Field Mice, take it home, wait 'til everyone has gone to bed, then switch off the lights, sit on the floor and - listen. It will change your whole way of thinking."

"You mean... **BOYFRIENDS?**" she whispered softly, with eyes the size of Saturn.

Actually this reminds me: I was sitting on the Left Hand of God the other day, thinking about my whole way of thinking, when He wearily said, a propos, I guess, of the world in general, for He was looking in that vague direction:

"If the sun going down can make me cry
Why should I not like the way I am?
By showing that you are sensitive
You risk being crucified by those you are unlike
My feelings are hurt so easily
It's the price that I must pay to see the beauty they're busy
killing"

And I said, listen, cherub, three things:

I was listening to The News last night; they've found another bomb factory. And I'm old, I remember the last IRA campaigns; evacuations, ribboned-off streets, hoax calls at school to make it all fun... bag searches, coat searches, lunch-hours broken by glass shards cascading through silence and then the first screams and time skidding on and there's blood and people yelling and stuff on TV; there's a photo indelibly framed in my eyes of a stupid sad crumpled-up mess of a train lying crippled and pointless up high in the cold around East Ham somewhere I think - on the Upminster line. Chance puts us here, Chance takes us away. [He shifted uncomfortably; confusedly He said I was squashing His fingers] What makes you cry these days? Now there are bombs again and I feel oddly queasy. I felt queasy creeping through Clapham Junction early yesterday morning, I felt

curiously alive."

He said, "you're sick."

I said, "listen."

"Early morning by the harbour

Five to six that's what the time is
Five to six, where you are...

Emma's house is empty; so why do I call it "Emma's" house?"

And He said and I said NO, you listen: it's early morning, south London, September. We said we were surprised to find the Common hilly. They said it was dead flat till the council buried all the rubbish a few years back. (It had grown over quite nice - grass, trees, dogs, mist, etc.)

And then on to an 8 track in Yorkshire Road. Big estate. Backs off some other estate or other. Bedroom in a terrace. Vocals in the box-room. Tambourine in the back bedroom. Tambourine covered in blood by the end of the day but - oh that's another story.

That was another story, another morning. That was "Emma's House".
Now number three.

Rudi, who stopped his lorry in Stapleton Road in the rain and drove us home for Christmas - or to East Croydon station, I should maybe say (through a thickening, headlamp-clotted dusk as fairy-lit Surrey seeped past us returning, work-weary, to lantern-lined gravels and dinners-at-seven in piney, warm, thick-shadowed rooms) - Rudi, our co-conspirator told us: of early that morning when the lights of the biggest office-block in Croydon were lit in the shape of a Christmas tree...

"Now just hold on," He interrupted, "cos the old brain's not what it was, you know, and, indeed, often likened to a suetty pud. So do an old man a favour, son, begin at the beginning, eh? Like how did it all start? Was it all without form and void, with darkness upon the face of the deep, and did you move upon the face of the waters - or what?"

[Well, no, I reflected, now He mentions it, it had really been quite sunny - though there'd been a few spots of rain early on, that's true...]

"I was on this bus the other day," He went on, "and upfront it says: WAIT UNTIL THE BUS STOPS! So I sits there all the way to bloody Hartcliffe thinking, 'boy, this'd better be bloody good!' Well, we're there at last, driver cuts the engine and - what happens? Fuck bloody all, that's what!"
"... and later it had begun really POURING down..."

"Still is," He said smugly. Then he plucked at a nearby young seraphim, sitting happily counting its toes. It squealed. "Come off in my hands," He said, tossing the snapped wing aside. "You were saying?"

CHAPTER ONE
"Danger; Do Not Lean Out Of The Windows"

OK then, here I am, another train, watching the newspapers fold and unfold... crash, splash, we rattle through rain, outside a new day is forming, the sky coalescing to paradise blue, ha-ha...

It's Christmas, almost; and things, in my absence, fall further apart. Something is out of control. I think it's people. I can't believe TV. There was no TV in our flat in Bristol; once a year I sit in my parents' front room in Loughton, Essex, and monitor a steady collapsing; increasing inanity reigns and subdues; shiny-skinned smiles phase unreally through bleak morning schedules and merge to the afternoon dreamtimes that merge to the cack-happy numbed evening shifts and here's nighttime again, another day done, put safely to sleep, open another window on the Advent Calendar, through the Tiny Square Window I see

Untold Epicentres of Drab Despair; tanks among the little children of Armenia; skull-shaven bodies kicked cold through the dry dust of Lhasa; a train unnaturally skewed in a cutting in Wandsworth, sausage-skin bursting apart and that over-ripe meat oozing gerry and slow is people, you know.

Close the window. I'm getting a little fed up with it all.

But there's a new Darling Buds single, same as the old one and John Peel will play it, I forget why, the world is stranger and stronger than we think.

on the forecast they keep on saying how tomorrow will be summery but it never bloody is.

CHAPTER TWO
"Solace"

I love the cool, dim, wood-odoured rosewater stillness of church-pews at dusk; St.Arilda's on Cowhill at noon on a hot day in August, the fields below pinned out in gold to the sea-wall, dotted with cattle and seen from a holy stone deep-shadowed window above; to stand alone in the high nave of Gloucester cathedral, or under the Chapter House roof at Wells, and fill with sad awe at the strength of belief and of FAITH or despair that drove them to build these things. There's beauty there. I'm not religious. Religion's a sham and a shame. But I won't glibly despise. No, I'll pity those who despise, who scorn without seeing that beauty or feeling that awe. The world would be a happier place without religion, it would be a poorer place without faith.

I understand why the helpless and hopeless find solace in the reassuring beauty of a church...

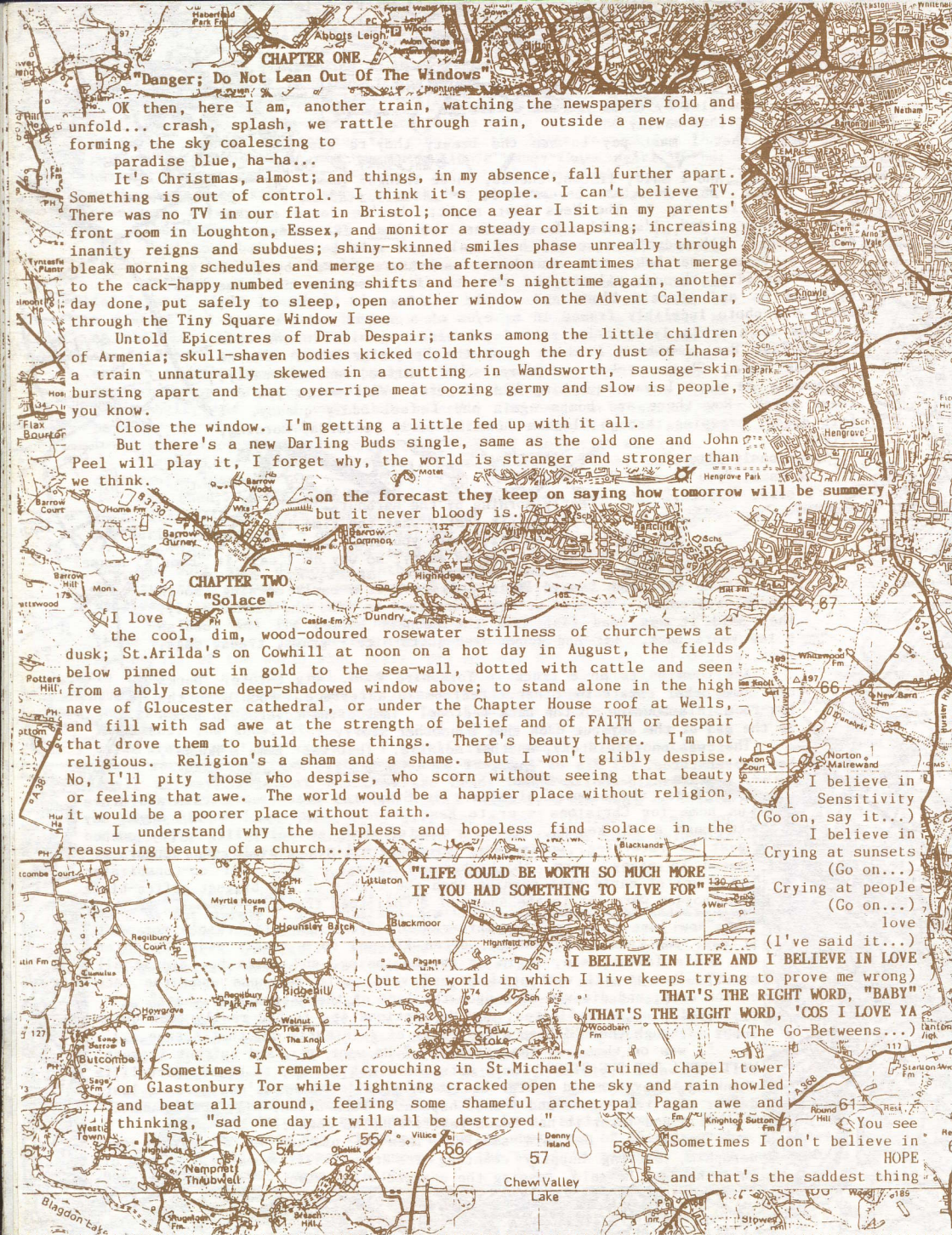
"LIFE COULD BE WORTH SO MUCH MORE IF YOU HAD SOMETHING TO LIVE FOR"

I BELIEVE IN LIFE AND I BELIEVE IN LOVE
(but the world in which I live keeps trying to prove me wrong)
THAT'S THE RIGHT WORD, "BABY"
THAT'S THE RIGHT WORD, "COS I LOVE YA
(The Go-Betweens...)

Sometimes I remember crouching in St.Michael's ruined chapel tower on Glastonbury Tor while lightning cracked open the sky and rain howled and beat all around, feeling some shameful archetypal Pagan awe and thinking, "sad one day it will all be destroyed."

Sometimes I don't believe in HOPE
and that's the saddest thing

Chew Valley Lake



KINGSWOOD

CHAPTER THREE

"Emma's House Has Just Been Recorded"

23 months ago; and you and I are travelling the Northern Line's southernmost wastes, 8.30pm, "Emma's House" has just been recorded, we're coming back up through Clapham, Kennington, The Borough, and this young kid, fifteen, sixteen, maybe, bored and full of himself and out for impressing his mates (sprawled in loud mock discomfort) and the whole bloody carriage in general - accuses my poor worn-through hole-y jeans of being some off-the-peg Designer-ripped fashion and

"Christ," I whisper in your ear, (and later, north of the river, he starts on your shoes and tights and I'm glad you're not wearing your perfect black cap) "we can't even suffer with integrity any more, even that's been stolen away..."

And later, when you'd gone, I sat and watched while my father gazed with distant surprise at an Acid House Special in that week's Observer, bright young middle-class things come to fake-out a cult in Sunday best colour and

yesterday, I sat and watched while the Field Mice assembled a brand new perfection of NOISE called "Sensitive" that said most things I ever wanted a pop-song to say and it cuts me to shreds and

yesterday, at the end of a south London alley, I found a dead rat stretched along the grey kerb, with a sweet furry head half-eaten away and crawling with flies, I call them flies, maybe they weren't, I feel they should have been maggots and stuff but they buzzed and then flew so I'll call them flies - Nature and Wildlife were never my thing, grey birds are pigeons and ones that aren't aren't, that's where it starts, that's where it ends. Seagulls are white and go AWK AWK AWK. I know them too. Two. Two birds.

And further up, through high thin metal mesh fencing that fenced in a new council low-rise, a white plastic carrier lurched in the wind; tied at the neck, it was the shape of a swan, and it flapped like a cornered swan.

Three birds. City streets suddenly teem with wild things and the poetry pours out of me, all curious manner of camouflaged creepies come crawling out calling my name...

HEY, I CAN SEE THE WHOLE WORLD FROM UP HERE...

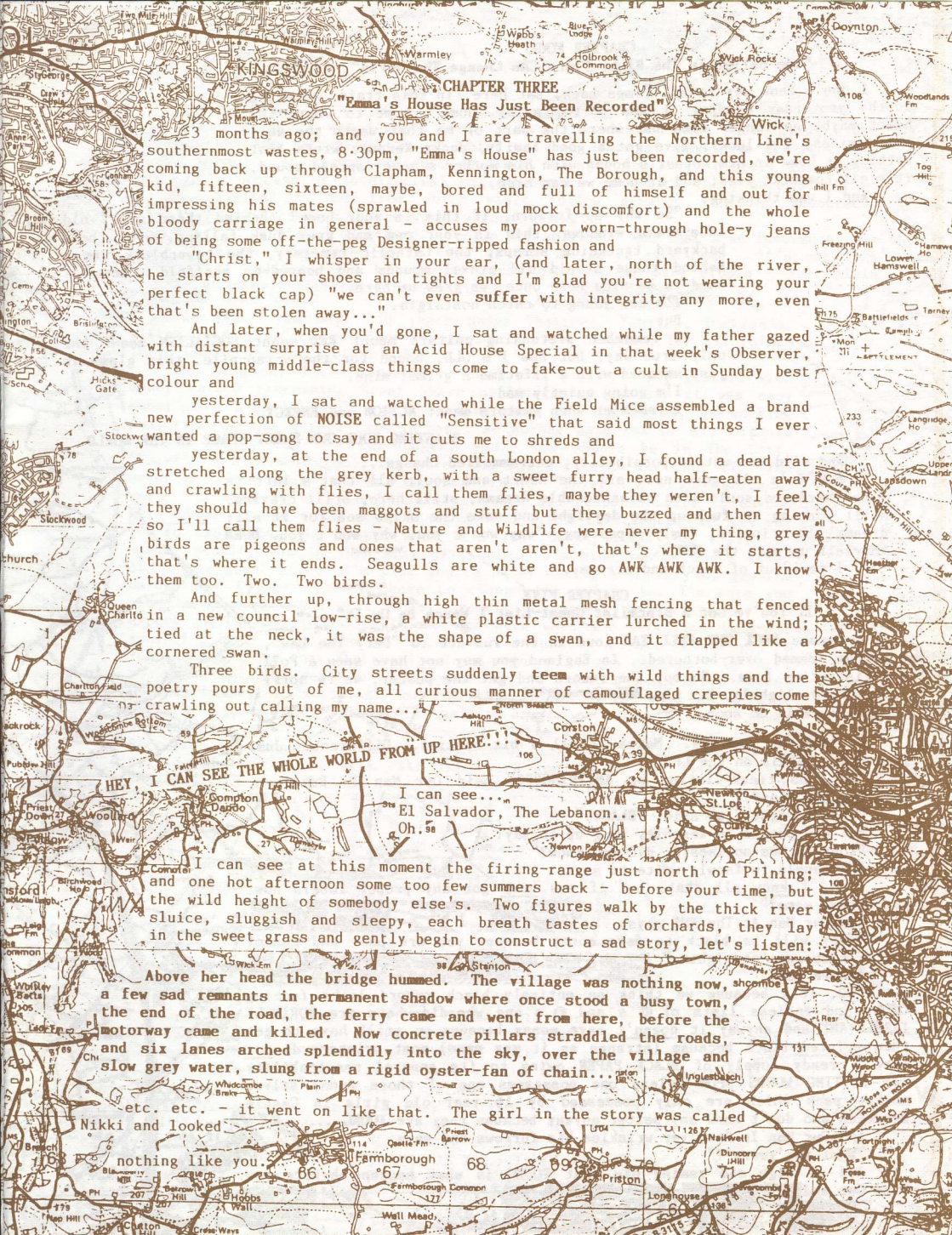
I can see...
El Salvador, The Lebanon...
Oh.

I can see at this moment the firing-range just north of Piling; and one hot afternoon some too few summers back - before your time, but the wild height of somebody else's. Two figures walk by the thick river sluice, sluggish and sleepy, each breath tastes of orchards, they lay in the sweet grass and gently begin to construct a sad story, let's listen:

Above her head the bridge hummed. The village was nothing now, a few sad remnants in permanent shadow where once stood a busy town, the end of the road, the ferry came and went from here, before the motorway came and killed. Now concrete pillars straddled the roads, and six lanes arched splendidly into the sky, over the village and slow grey water, slung from a rigid oyster-fan of chain...

etc. etc. - it went on like that. The girl in the story was called Nikki and looked

nothing like you.



CHAPTER FOUR

"One Bullet In The Right Place Can Change The World"

I don't know why it all comes back, sat here, in this train, hurtling south; yesterday evening it was north, going "home", home to where the heart maybe no longer lies but where the part of me that wants the easy way resides, I'm lucky, I've got a good family, Jacky Kerouac wrote best sitting at home in his mother's house with his mother's money spread round, it's all romantic lies; and at home we can hide...

And I was thinking:

"So why so forlorn, if this is your home? Behind these smoky old tube-train windows, this is your own sad grey dusk falling, over these backyard trackside scraps, the Catholic cemetery, the towerblock rim - behind these stupid old gravel mounds and heaped-up scaffold tubes, it used to be nice here once, we grew up here..."

I'm too young to catch nostalgia.

But

I remember pretending guitars meant RED meant SOCIALISM meant the only true way; but now I'm OLD, bound for the scrap-pile, this glass is just smeared with a lifetime's grime; mine.

I'm going quietly mad.

I remember when guitars meant ACTION and ENERGY,

BLASTING YOUR OWN SWEET SPACE IN THE WORLD

and wild and untold possibility, untrammelled change...

But it's all gone now, all the heart and soul; all that's left is a few hardened souls with unfashionable dreams, still here, still craving, still wanting to fuck-up the daylight and make the skies sob for it all; dreamy old cripples, dimly repeating, "why won't you, why won't you, BURN yourself up with the FURY..."

I feel out of touch and screamy.

CHAPTER FIVE

"If You've Got A Blacklist Guest-List I Wanna Be On It"

They wrote FUCK THE POLL TAX loud in the run-off to "Defy The Law", but nobody seemed over-bothered. In England you may not have seen a Poll Tax registration form. So buy the record and get the poster, we're sorry it got burned slightly, but then ~~you~~ you all will do soon.

We like our posters. Makes it all a bit special. Different. Just like black labels on the LP...

"Wot, no track-listing or ANYTHING???" said Our Man In Revolver, tickling his beard.

"That's right," we said, "BLACK."

But now people in Keighley ring up to say:

"Your LP has no labels, did you know?"

And people in Knowle write to say:

"Yes, I know all that, but if you have got any proper labels now, can I have some?"

And Our Man At The NME says:

"They will be black to save money because you are poor and cannot eat or keep warm at nights."

And we say:

"NO, it's because we think an entirely black record looks fucking COOL, and endless lists of $\text{\textcircled{S}}$ and $\text{\textcircled{C}}$ s and who-did-whats are BORINGLY IRRELEVANT and anyway it doesn't save money because we still have to get them printed black because (strange as it may seem) most printers do not have a ready supply of BLACK PAPER owing to its general unsuitability for PUTTING WORDS UPON unless one possesses one of those funny silver marker pens which are only possessed by 16 year old girls in Castle Bromwich who don't know any better anyway because they are YOUNG..."

And Our Man In Revolver wrinkles his furrows and says:

"What is 'young'?"

And we sigh and remind him that YOUNG is what happens before you

Figd Out and

W

39

when I was young I used to have this notion that a Socialist state was the Natural State, to which we were aimed by some slow gravitational haul. It seemed obvious, sensible, morally logical. History was simply a process of intellectual enlightenment - to which there were surely no limits? - and from which would follow greater freedom, democracy, egalitarianism, compassion, understanding...

I missed something. People are selfish. And that's an insurmountable block. So maybe we've come as far as we'll ever come. It's not lack of enlightenment holding us back, aborting my baby utopia - just plain old self-interested human-nature.

"Ah yes," you say, "10 years under Thatcher, Yuppies, Docklands, witter, witter..." - and other regulation pop-kid disgusts for all things Tory, learnt at your brother's NME...

But hang on; don't I remember you buying your new pop guitar, with money earned processing Steel Share applications, because it was easy money and - a good laugh? And don't I remember you signing-on, and working full-time on the quiet, cash-in-hand, so no-one paid tax or NI, and making up the rest? You old tax-dodger, you! You should be in The City. "Thief"s a nice word too. You never did buy a licence for that TV. You never did show your "ticket" on that train. "Thief"s a bloody gorgeous word. It must be nice to be able to dodge all responsibility to anyone but YOURSELF, and still keep a clean political conscience; to pretend you're exploiting The System when it's just OTHER PEOPLE you exploit - honest people, who in turn must give more. I'm glad you're happy going in on the guest-list. I'm glad you're happy making a mockery of genuine hardship - I guess they'll have to change the rules; but I'm sure you and the genuine cases will suffer exactly the same. It's nice that you expect us (SARAH) to be faultless and pure when you sacrifice fuck-all yourself, just gloat when we "fail". It's funny - it strikes me you're just as amoral as that Thatcherite Yuppie you scorn and despise - in fact, you're worse; at least he's no hypocrite, he doesn't profess to "care" or call himself a "socialist" or sing the praises of the good old working class he's never met - who are as selfish as you or anyone else who wakes and breathes air in this fucking world. That's why we'll never have a Socialist government. Because "socialists" like you would abuse it to Hell because it's all TAKE TAKE TAKE with you, never one little GIVE. Your politics are a fucking joke, about as funny as McCarthy LPs...

But I still believe in Socialism

Because we have to keep living...

And that means believing in PEOPLE, not despising them.

Which is a bit of a bugger, quite frankly.

CHAPTER SIX

Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted"

I found a new fanzine today; it fumed with derision and dripped contempt upon those not sharing THE WRITER'S OPINIONS. It made me sad; for such smug arrogant SELF is just FASCIST HATE not constructive fury: I'm sick of these holy superior cliques of dim soul brothers, writing their letters and selling their fanzines to nobody but themselves, snobbishly narrow-minded but then they're PROUD to stand so alone, up there, in the vanguard of change. Sieg Heil, our new Master-Race... You call yourself a Socialist yet scorn 99% of humanity because (goodness me) it doesn't even like THE SAME MUSIC AS YOU.

AND IF IT DID, YOU'D HATE IT EVEN MORE.

CHAPTER SEVEN
"Cyprus"

Above her head the bridge hummed. The village was nothing now. The village was a shell. She remembered when she was small and cars rattled through in a vigorous stream to queue at the water's edge; the silly impatient horns and shouting; the slow processional growl to the gates; the thick breath of petrol that lurched in your throat when you sprawled on the slippery slipway wall and gazed out at the unhurried toil of the boats on the glistening two mile divide; the shops full of money; and the curious dull grey peace of winter Sundays, when the ferry lay quiet and the village tip-toed in a reverential hush. She remembered all this. She was twenty years old.

And now I'm remembering too; years ago, maybe, home is east London, and one afternoon I walk out and come to a bleak battered flat space of mud and dead roads; then a thin black terrace, a dim prairie ghost-town, a l01 drags itself up from the river and slips through unnoticed to Beckton and East Ham and Forest Gate's cemeteried wastes; in the cold raw distance, in blank glass and steel, Docklands is rising.

And there, eyes streaming, I huddled and cowed, as loud winds blasted in from the docks; and their dry winter howling soundtracked with dull bleakness a sad almost dreamlike decay - the returning to dust, then to mud as it rains, of these final few beatendown rows.

And then, as the wind whipped and tore through this world, I quite suddenly felt - so beautifully lonely, yet sharply ALIVE - no, not just merely "alive", but MORE: for the windrush was some huge historical stream, I could raise up my face, I could breathe its wild air, let all HISTORY pour into me; and with everything blown by this same lovely wind HERE WAS I, tiny speck in a bleached-out waste as important as THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN THE WORLD...

Unlikely as it sounds, that place is called "Cyprus"
Or maybe - "was" called...

I love churches; they put me in touch with a primitive trust. Love churches and hate religion. Love history, hate convention. Maybe you can be a Socialist who hates people?

CHAPTER EIGHT
"The Shadow Factory"

When I worked at the multi-storey in town, I'd cycle down for the 6am shift through hushed unworked streets in which the low freewheeling tick of my wheels was the only living sound; and yet I'd pass, at Christmas Steps, a ghostly double-decker rising up out of the city-centre, empty bright lit windows washed with soft grey morning mists; shadowy it slips away, and on the indicator board, for the first and only time that day, it says: 587 SHADOW FACTORY.

You learn something new every day.

CHAPTER NINE

"McCarthy v The Third World"

"PAY NO MORE THAN 99p - CAPITALISM IS KILLING MUSIC"
(Billy Bragg, "Waiting For The Great Leap Forward")

"PAY NO MORE THAN 99p - LIMITED EDITION ONLY"
(Because The President Loves The Kids...)

We mustn't criticise Doing It For The Kids because Alan McGee lost lots of money. (Though what's a full page ad. in the NME cost, Alan..?)

Actually, I don't see how they lost money, unless the bands are incredibly greedy, or The President incredibly stupid. Or why the 7"s have to be Limited Editions. Or why the sleeves have to proclaim their cheapness when all one colour layouts cost the same. Or why the gig was in London - not where most people live, only most journalists... actually.

Malcolm says Third World problems aren't caused by eating meat (the food-chain argument, this-many-cows-need-that-much-grain etc.) but by CAPITALISM, so he'll eat meat because small gestures are pointless distractions to the real objective, the OVERTHROW OF CAPITALISM.

Somebody said:

"Malcolm, while we're waiting for this revolution, and since you don't work, why not do something useful, if small-scale, helping the elderly, say, or the handicapped..."

Malcolm says: "We mustn't get sidetracked."

Somebody said:

"Malcolm, aren't the tactics used to market your records and further your career pure Capitalism? How can you pretend to want to overthrow something which, by your very actions, you help bolster?"

Malcolm says: "We must compromise now to speed that overthrow, subordinate EVERYTHING to that; in the hands of the educated proletariat, limited edition gatefold sleeves and glossy picture inserts can become..."

And we all interrupt to say:

"COMPROMISE??? But don't you ridicule the Labour Party and Billy Bragg for their compromises???" Labour compromises to sell policies, you compromise to sell records, what's the difference?

(they both help to further careers...)

"OK, so their compromise means diluting the actual philosophy; but you just make a nonsense of your philosophy by hypocritical actions. Both compromises are openly a means to an end.

(they both help to further careers...)

"But for a band like yours (who compared to Billy Bragg or the Labour Party are just a pointless distraction) to plead that the end excuses any means is laughable. It smacks more of self-deceit and lame excuses for inaction. You'd change more if you SET AN EXAMPLE..."

Only we don't interrupt, do we? We just buy the 12" and moan about the re-mixed electronics that's replaced PURE UNHYPOCRITICAL GUITARS...

I've got this other theory says only PURITY wins out in the end and compromise only works in the short-term, and when you start from a compromised base your constructions will always be weak. Which is why,

yes, I hate to see the Labour Party watering down its Socialism.

I want pure philosophical, radical thought.

But we have to get the Tories out of power somehow.

While they'll still let us.

I like to think SARAH is quite pure.

But she's still rather young and distracting.

CHAPTER TEN
"Noah's Ark Is Leaving"

Crash.
Splash.

We rattle through rain, this train is dragging its wheels, it squeals and it judders and hurls us around, it's nearly Christmas, and what have we done, the sky's coalescing, paradise blue, downhill out of Stratford we scream into blackness.

The village withdrew. The ferries stopped, the buses stopped, the people stopped trying and moved away. She stayed.

Her bedroom had looked out over the estuary. She'd loved it best on high summer evenings; the sun slipping down from a tired clotting sky and the waves in that moment becoming ALIVE with a sharp phosphorescence that flickered and shimmered out over dark water a film of melting silver. Sometimes she imagined that cold white brilliance just spreading and spreading, engulfing the shoreline, their house and the village, the whole world dissolving to one, apocalyptic, flash. It was how she imagined The Bomb. She saw tiny black specks in a calm western sky become planes and the bomb doors opening - anachronistic, yes, she knew, but it made it seem somehow more human, more real; more, quite simply, stoppable; the truth lay far too remote for fear; and sunsets made her cry.

But now the sun set early behind a concrete rim, and sunset just meant shadows and cold.

The village withdrew. But she found she loved it more, the life that remained was resilient, deep-rooted, it knew its quiet place in the scheme of the world. Sometimes, when the traffic pulsated above, she would lie in the scrub grass under the bridge and press her head to the floor; it seemed she could hear the Earth beating.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"There's Bob And There's Hugh And There's Me And There's You"

Mile End looked different. Last time I was here they were rebuilding, and broken tiles and piles of concrete slabs and bricks and things were scattered about the platforms, but now... I don't know, it just looked somehow kinda - ELVISH.

Two young elves were watching from atop a fallen bough, which till then I'd dismissed as just some new kind of anti-tramp seating module. Odd to find snow indoors, I thought, especially underground. Newspapers rustled. The doors opened. Goodness, I thought, isn't it sunny!

"All Change," said a voice, "this sleigh is being taken out of service owing to mindless vandalism by young people."

Snow crunched underfoot. I toyed with that word "sleigh", but, fuck, I thought, it is just a word, same as ostrich, or weathervane - and no one thinks twice about them... and anyway:

"Bloody typical," somebody was saying, "innocent people get killed at Clapham, and here they are dressing up tube stations to look like Alice in bloody Wonderland. Who'd believe we'd just had ten glorious years."

And he spat wetly.

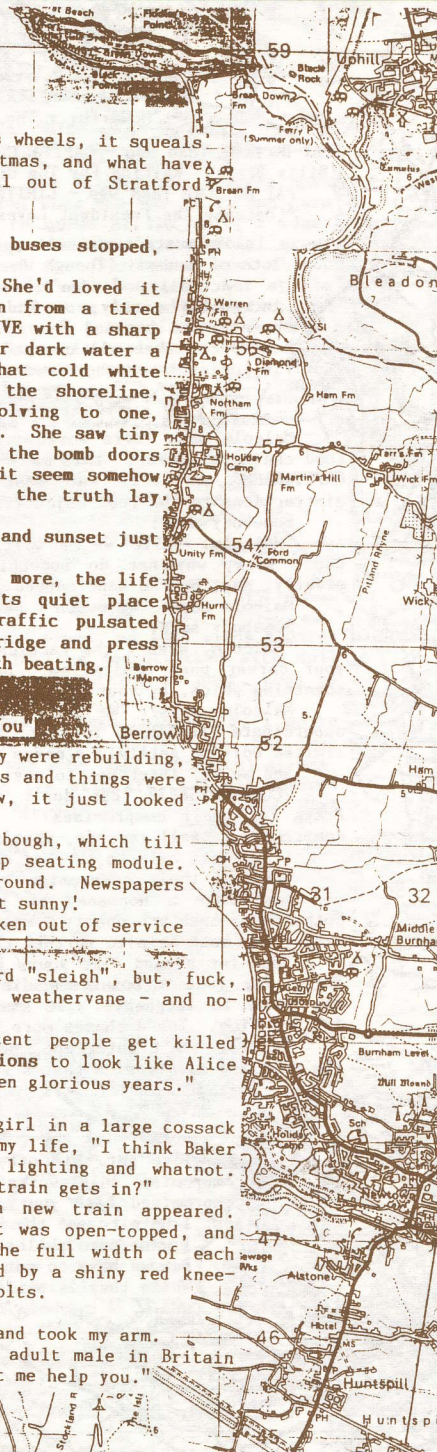
"Oh, I don't know," answered a pretty looking girl in a large cossack hat whom I much preferred and felt I had known all my life, "I think Baker Street looks lovely with all that mock Victorian lighting and whatnot. Shall we ask these elves if they know when the next train gets in?"

But, almost before I'd finished watching, a new train appeared. It wasn't like most other Central Line stock. It was open-topped, and the seats were painted wooden planks set across the full width of each carriage, and each compartment so formed was sealed by a shiny red knee-high scalloped wood door held closed by tiny brass bolts.

And it had no wheels, it had runners.

We waited apprehensively. An elf skipped down and took my arm.

"Did you realise," it said, "that the typical adult male in Britain today has, on average, less than two legs? Here, let me help you."



CHAPTER TWELVE
"On Dial Hill"

Two days ago a 747 tumbled from the clouds over Lockerbie and the sky, it is said, rained molten fire. Quite poetic, really. Then came the looters. A "Sun" man was first on the scene. It's tempting to say that if the money spent on nuclear weapons was spent instead on a fully-automated centralised fail-safe signalling system, such things would never happen, and people wouldn't get killed. But maybe that's politically naive. Or maybe it only works with trains. Two days ago nothing much happened round...

I've lost track of all sensible criteria.

But Clevedon was perfect last week. Our anniversary, who'd have thought! - climbing on up through a ramshackle jumble of tumbledown back-garden fences and gates in the soft winter light of one late afternoon on Dial Hill; the town lay in stillness below; the bay gleamed, a gilded pool in the crooked back black silhouette arm of the headland; two ships took the tide and moved slowly upriver, dark abstract shapes on the dim line of haze, speckled with light, that was the Welsh shore, preparing for evening.

And I could have just STOPPED, DEAD, there, FOREVER - the bus left from Six Ways at twenty to five but I'd glimpsed the whole world from Dial Hill and I knew now that it was just US, just ME; Grand Canyons, Niagaras and all of the rest were just so much meaningless SIZE I don't need, I'm happy, here, curled-up in the long-grass with Barbara Pym and a babble of images inside my head to bring all joys and hurts, I LIKE it here, I understand it here...

It's all I need. I'm fed up just skimming the surface, I want to find out about ME; I don't want to move forwards or sideways I want to move DOWN; tomorrow I want to walk beside King's Sedgemoor Drain, from Parrett to Cary on Somerset's moors, see England's last battle and swim in the lost mediaeval seas, let all the old waters seep into me...

St. Mary's chapel on the hillside high over Bradford-on-Avon is where my heart flies, it's an old pilgrims' rest-house and shelter from storms...

I'll come home when you've shown me you care.

All of you.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN
"Wrong"

Of course, I could be wrong.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Hey Ho"

The journey to Bethnal Green took ages. In fact, we never arrived. The motors stopped and all was quiet; we sat in blackness for minutes on end. And then the lights came on.

"Goodness," said Nikki, "a grotto!"

And indeed it was. Somebody tutted. Another sighed. But our elf flung open the door and skipped out.

"Come on!" it shrieked, and took Nikki's hand; and she in turn took mine and

so the whole trainload progressed, hand-in-hand, down a long rocky slippery cold twisting tunnel - till we came at last to a Large Gloomy Place, in the centre of which stood a shiny gold throne. And on that, I'm afraid, sat a reindeer. And a salty compassion for all mankind surged in my miserable veins, such was the look of glum predictability that filled its poor sad eyes.

"Hullo," it said glumly, "remember me? You did me last issue. That means you're glumly predictable."

"I know," I said, "it's a glum Allegory For Our Times." 53

The reindeer snorted derisively.

"Cretin," it said.

At which came stumbling into view, a small, unpleasant looking creature...

"We call it J.B." said the reindeer, noting my helpless disgust, "we found it at the top of a skyscraper on the South Bank, pretending it could fly. In London, you know - where the Queen lives. 25 floors above The Street... but enough cheap symbolism, what you got there, James?"

The creature snivelled and dribbled, burst into tears and tossed a scrumpled-up piece of paper to the ground. The reindeer observed it with distaste.

"Some manner of press-release," it remarked at last, "and, rather conveniently for your plotline, it would appear to be in Icelandic."

So Nikki bent down nicely and picked it up.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "Hafnarfjordshur! That's where both my parents died of asphyxiation in the Great Fire at the saw-mill when I was six, leaving me to be brought up by two sexually frustrated maiden aunts and an over-protective bull labrador - isn't that fun?!" She coughed, and began to translate:

"SARAH RECORDS: Summer Releases

"ANOTHER SUNNY DAY: 'I Found God In A Tub Of Marge'."

"Marge?" I interrupted.

"Margarine," advised the reindeer, gazing distantly roofwards as if to say, "hullo, roof," but instead adding merely, "a butter substitute." So that none of us might be in the dark.

Nikki was still reading:

"...ubes, too many evenings spent noggng the nog with a bevy of hard-drinking trolls having taken their toll, "Tub Of Marge" features three unremarkable tales of teenage woe beside the seaside, tedious, reactionary, old hats."

"Old hats?" I said.

"H-A-T-S," she affirmed, "and listen, there's more:

"THE SEA URCHINS: 'Actually, Some Of My Best Friends Are Bikers'"

"The Sea Urchins, refugee babies from Cod War atrocities, cast adrift by thankful parents in an open margarine tub and forced to eat each other's haircuts till only one remained. Now based in Birmingham, they are sometimes popular, always amusing and often thought to be an elaborate hoax. Sometimes they don't turn up for gigs, and everybody laughs!" "Those Urchins," they say. Now signed to Joe 'Pillock' Foster's Kaleidoscope Sound, they hope to follow in the illustrious footsteps of I Ludicrous and The Surf Drums." - a pillock is a small freshwater fish," Nikki added solemnly, "not so good." She sighed a small saltwater sigh, and continued: "In Brum, you can travel anywhere on the bus for just 35p!" quips singer Jamie, wiping a mischievous squirrel from his face.

"THE GOLDEN DAWN: 'My Secret Squirrel'"

"We want to make the record The Jam never made," they declared

at The Dawn's inception. Two early ventures, "Beat Surrender" and "When You're Young" failed miserably, "Town Called Hafnarfjordshur" came close, and "My Secret Squirrel" at last pins the tail on the donkey. The Dawn remain justly unpopular, especially in their home town, where they have almost No Friends.

"THE SPRINGFIELDS: "Green Windmills Are Happening"

"The Springies grew up in Barrington, Illinois, near Chicago, famous for its houses. Despite therefore being reactionary imperialist scumbags who wouldn't recognise a popular socialist uprising if it took them to bed and blew up their noses, they're really rather lush and besides, they've knocked around a fair bit now and done some good stuff here and there - "My Uzi Ain't Heavy, And Anyway It's My Brother's", is often cited even by Public Enemy as a major piece of do-do - so good luck to them,

"THE ORCHIDS WITH GENE PITNEY: "Something's Gotten Hold Of My Legs"

"A re-working of the old Sonic Youth standard, "Ticket To Ride", a song about taking everybody for one, "Legs" is from the new LP, a...

"SELL OUT!!!" shouted someone.

"But it's all LIES!!!" I cried, "it's not FAIR!"

The reindeer shrugged, which made its antlers cross rather comically. "What is?" it said, "you expect too much. You think life should be all beer and squirrels. You're the sort of jerk that cries at sunsets. You're a gem. Sunsets are crap. Life is just hippy crap. You should have got used to it by now. At least you don't have antlers."

"But..."

"I mean - what is there? Go on, tick them off - sex, good TV, long trots in the rain with a little of what you fancy - all the usual highspots, your first mortgage, your kid's first little bony outgrowths - but what's the rest, all the other days? You get up, you frisk about a bit, you have lunch - day after bloody day. I mean, so what?"

"But..."

"I mean, take rutting. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy rutting; but it's a bit of a ritual, really, it soon palls. I don't miss it."

"No?" I snapped, petulantly.

"No, not at all."

"Well, that's OK then, isn't it?"

A pause.

"Why, what have you heard?"

"Oh, nothing..."

"Was it about my antlers?"

I had never toyed with a reindeer before. I found it oddly fulfilling. Then Nikki touched my arm.

"I always said," she whispered gently, "that I could never sleep with a man who had sticks on his head, but you're somehow - different..."

"I haven't got sticks on my head," I said.

"Maybe that's it."

And she tilted her head and smiled moistly.

"That reindeer's paranoid about its antlers," I went on, gazing over her shoulder, "have you noticed? Look at it now, cavorting about like a mad thing..."

["Sticks! Sticks! I'll give her sticks!" the reindeer was bellowing, and generally working itself up into a fair old froth.]

"...Probably peer group pressure," I mused, "something sexual..."

"Oh forget the bloody deer!" she cried out, "what about me!"

"Sorry," I said, "what did you want?"

And it was then that she crooked her little finger and rested the polished flat of the nail gently against her two front teeth, trapping the fleshy sides softly between her lips; and then she let it drop, bit her bottom lip, and sighed:

"Oh - nothing."

I nodded. It was really quite beautiful. The way it all happened. Pastoral. Springlike. No banging about and shouting, just - nice.

"Actually," she said, removing her large cossack hat, "there is just one thing..."

"Go on..."

"What did happen to The Sea Urchins? Why did you get rid of them?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"A Small Nation Falling Into The Sea"

... to the World's End in Camden, but it's too fucking noisy, we can't talk here so shift over the road - got a DJ now, stuck in the corner, fat as fuck in his sweaty red sweat shirt, too old and too bored but he knows his trade well, this boy, that's fucking true - sweet golden old'uns, oh how they loves it, but Jesus, I STILL CAN'T HEAR WHAT YOU ARE SAYING, I can't hear what you say... somebody's ringing a bell, that's odd, somebody's speaking, gruffly, clumsily, "ladies and gentlemen - please, your attention, ladies and gentlemen please, as a mark of respect now, for Sugar Ray, a fighter and gentleman, one minute's silence, everyone up on your feet now please" - and everyone rises, the odd smiles get stifled, the pub goes dead silent - then someone gets ringing that bell - they're ringing out dear old dead Sugar Ray Robinson, ain't that the cutest...

"Ladies and gentlemen, please - one more thing. In this afternoon's FA Cup semi-final - at 6 o'clock the news from Hillsborough was 64 dead, by 9 o'clock it was 93; ladies and gentlemen, one minute's silence, please"; and the pub's all silent again; but me, I just get that bloody word "dead" echo inside my head, "dead", "DEAD"? 93 people don't DIE... not just DIE... please - we've been shut in the studio all fucking day, I've been up since half five, I'm drink blurred and tired eyes I want to go home but I want to know what this man's saying, because it frightens me, it scares me because I really don't - understand... 93 people killed - by what? By PEOPLE? Black and white torsos lurch from the wall, jab at my eyes, stripped to the waist, cheaply framed photos, fists upraised, jab jab jab... my eyes - if people have been killed then - killed by PEOPLE I mean, at a football match, I really am ceasing to understand anything left in this world any more, jab jab, the photos go, jab-jab-jab, duck, weave, but it's OK, I'm already down, bobbing, swaying, down down down...

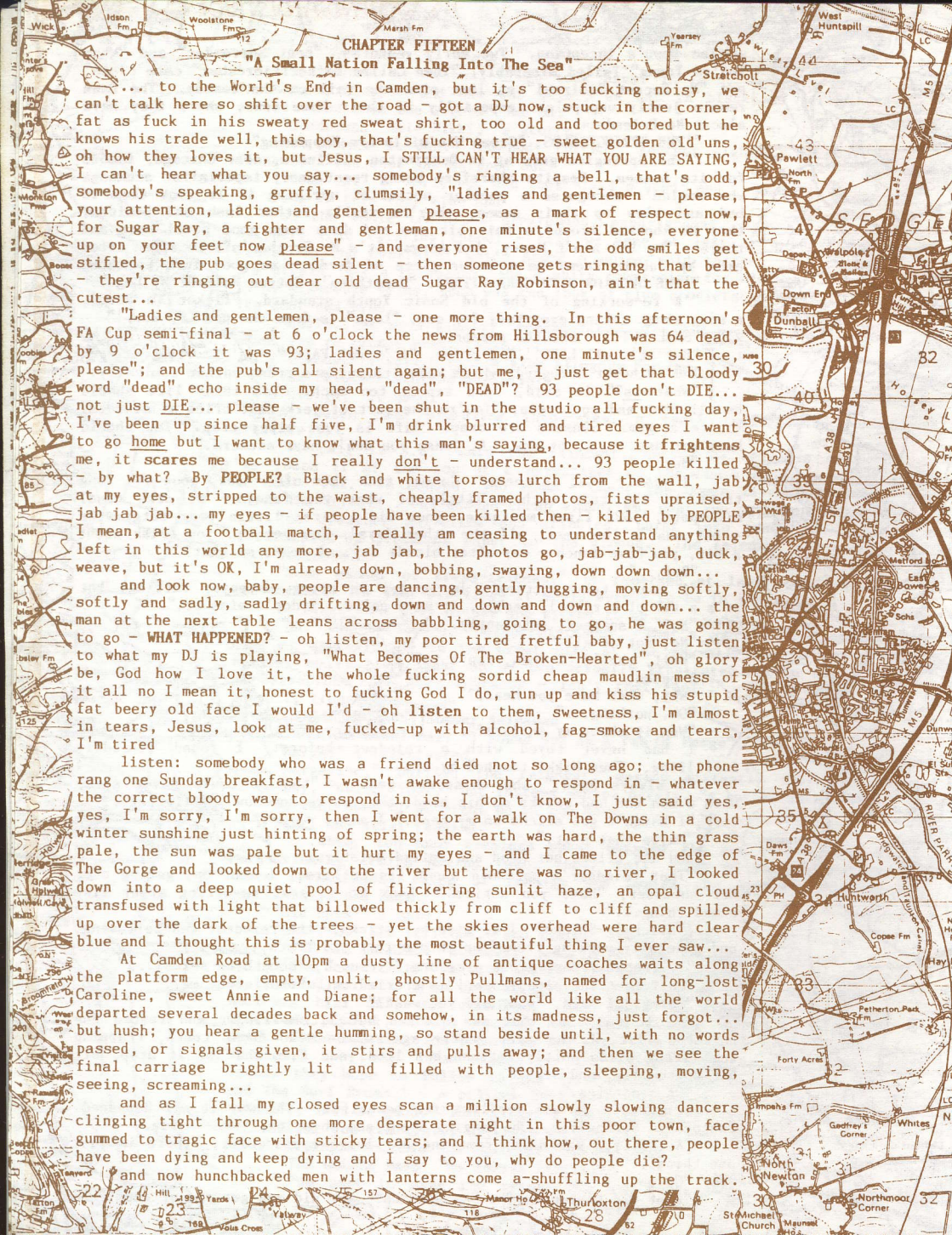
and look now, baby, people are dancing, gently hugging, moving softly, softly and sadly, sadly drifting, down and down and down and down... the man at the next table leans across babbling, going to go, he was going to go - WHAT HAPPENED? - oh listen, my poor tired fretful baby, just listen to what my DJ is playing, "What Becomes Of The Broken-Hearted", oh glory be, God how I love it, the whole fucking sordid cheap maudlin mess of it all no I mean it, honest to fucking God I do, run up and kiss his stupid fat beery old face I would I'd - oh listen to them, sweetness, I'm almost in tears, Jesus, look at me, fucked-up with alcohol, fag-smoke and tears, I'm tired

listen: somebody who was a friend died not so long ago; the phone rang one Sunday breakfast, I wasn't awake enough to respond in - whatever the correct bloody way to respond in is, I don't know, I just said yes, yes, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, then I went for a walk on The Downs in a cold winter sunshine just hinting of spring; the earth was hard, the thin grass pale, the sun was pale but it hurt my eyes - and I came to the edge of The Gorge and looked down to the river but there was no river, I looked down into a deep quiet pool of flickering sunlit haze, an opal cloud transfused with light that billowed thickly from cliff to cliff and spilled up over the dark of the trees - yet the skies overhead were hard clear blue and I thought this is probably the most beautiful thing I ever saw...

At Camden Road at 10pm a dusty line of antique coaches waits along the platform edge, empty, unlit, ghostly Pullmans, named for long-lost Caroline, sweet Annie and Diane; for all the world like all the world departed several decades back and somehow, in its madness, just forgot... but hush; you hear a gentle humming, so stand beside until, with no words passed, or signals given, it stirs and pulls away; and then we see the final carriage brightly lit and filled with people, sleeping, moving, seeing, screaming...

and as I fall my closed eyes scan a million slowly slowing dancers clinging tight through one more desperate night in this poor town, face gummed to tragic face with sticky tears; and I think how, out there, people have been dying and keep dying and I say to you, why do people die?

and now hunchbacked men with lanterns come a-shuffling up the track.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Ho Hum"

"To annoy people," I muttered, deflated, "OK?"
"OK then," shouted someone else, "what about The Golden Dawn? Why are you doing another Golden Dawn single when everybody hates them, even their closest friend?"
"To ANNOY PEOPLE."

"And what about The Inspiral Carpets," piped up a fresh voice, "why did you call them 'The Young Person's Mighty Lemon Drops' in your last brochure?"

"I didn't, I only just thought of it..."
"And why did your LP have black labels, I mean really?" enquired a man with a beard, tickling himself.

"TO FUCKING ANNOY PEOPLE!!!" I yelled, stepping back, as the crowd circled slowly, "and anyway, they weren't black, they were transparent."

"But what have you got against the Inspiral Carpets," persisted the piping, "when the extent of their talent and everything else is so blindingly obvious?"

"More to the point, why are you so small-minded and childishly petty about Alan McGee?..." said Alan McGee, waking up...

"McGee! McGee!" shouted the crowd as one, and glory shone around.

"... when, after all, it was We who invented 7" polythene bags..."

"... and pop-music!..."

"... and Joe Foster!..."

"... without whom there would be no Sea Urchins..."

"Because," I cried, as they all pressed forward, "it's FUN!!!"

"Fun?" said Alan McGee, and fell back asleep.

"But what exactly did the Sea Urchins do...?"

"They made a horrid whining noise. Didn't you notice?"

"And that's why you..."

"Oh, you're nothing but a pack of cards!" I screamed.

At this they all stopped and looked at one another.

"No we're not," they all said, except the reindeer, who swallowed and said, in a pleasant, slightly high-pitched tone:

"Ho ho! I see you've all just noticed my, that is my..."

"Goodness," cut in Nikki, "a talking hat-stand, how surreal."

At which the reindeer glazed and slowly crumpled to the floor; and then it began to sob, convulsively. A stout man broke from the silent ranks and ran and knelt at its side, he cradled that great sad head in his loving arms and: "Bastards," he murmured, "bastards." A fearsome wave of cold hostility swept out towards us. And then I saw the goblins.

Westonzoyland

"I can see some goblins over there," I said. Beside me, Nikki had begun to tremble.

"Listen!" she cried, "Christmas is coming!"

I stared at her.

"Does that really excite you?" I said.

"No, listen..."

I listened. And then I heard. From distant labyrinthine depths a hollow rumbling boomed and echoed:

"HO, HO, HO..."

"My God," I said, "now what???"

She gripped my arm:

"Do you believe in redemption through love?" she whispered under my breath.

I said I wasn't sure, but I'd give it a go.

So we did.

Convulsively. ~~Es~~ Take Moor

And it worked and we all lived happily ever after except The Sea Urchins, who didn't deserve to and wouldn't have enjoyed it anyway.

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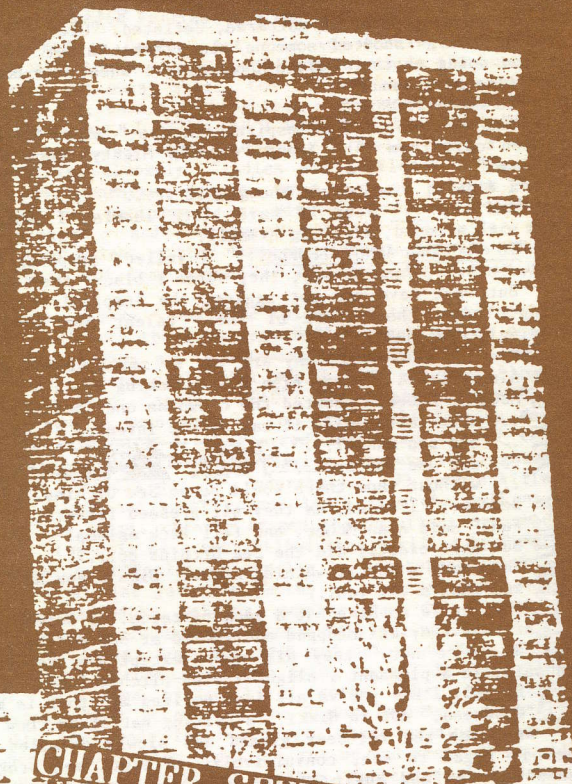
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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"Cold"

Yes, it was all just a lie. The train
west, just died, nobody said a word, all
distantly roared and I gave up trying. "C
"you make it all seem so utterly unworthwhi
And I stared out into the bleak midd
and all I saw was neverending grey...