

PRECESSION

Pisces – Aquarius – Capricorn

Also by Derryl Flynn

THE ALBION
SCRAPYARD BLUES

PRECESSION

Pisces – Aquarius – Capricorn

by Derryl Flynn



First published in 2025 by Grinning Bandit Books

<http://grinningbandit.webnode.com>

Copyright © Derryl Flynn 2025

Cover design by Derryl Flynn

First published by Grinning Bandit Books in 2025

Copyright © Derryl Flynn 2025

‘Precession’ is the copyright of Derryl Flynn, 2025.

This is a piece of fiction and any characters or names that relate to any persons, robots, supercomputers, aliens, or wind spirits, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All reasonable efforts have been made to contact copyright holders for material that may have been cited, referenced, or paraphrased within these pages. Acknowledgements and sources can be found at the back of the book.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, digital or mechanical, without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

ISBN 978-1036928193

DEDICATION

*To all the brave souls who stood in the parks and refused the
three-dart-finish.*

Contents

PART 1 – AEON OF THE FISH	1
East of Lashka Gah, Helmand province, Afghanistan, 2012	3
Camp Bastion, Helmand Province	8
Leeds, England 1993	11
1994	16
1995	23
Summer 1995	28
1996 – 1997	44
1997 – 2001	52
Camp Bastion – 2012	63
 PART 2 – AEON OF THE WATER BEARER	 67
Carver Garrison, Essex	72
The City Within a City	72
It's Grim Up North	96
Kersha	110
Ampleforth	121
Ruston Parva	138
Percival Snodgrass	157
The Twelve Apostles	169
A Meeting of Minds	174
Reunions	191
Good Vibrations	219
Healing The Past	224
The Aquarians	244
 PART 3 – AEON OF THE GOAT	 249
Brigantia, North Isle	251
Down from Catterick	254
Sanctuary	259
An Education	264
Further Education	275
Amun's Story	282
Redemption – Deception	290
Glaston	299
Expecting to Fly	308
The Hawks Fly Home	327
 Acknowledgements	 334
About the author	335

*Crazy Horse,
we hear what you say
One Earth, one Mother
One does not sell the Earth the people walk upon
We are the land
How do we sell our Mother?
How do we sell the stars?
How do we sell the air?
Crazy Horse,
we hear what you say
Today is now at end
Praying Smoke touches the clouds
On a day when Death didn't die
Real world time Tricks Shadows lie
Red, White, Perception, Deception
Predator tries civilizing us
But the Tribes will not go without return
Genetic light from the other side
A song from the Heart
Our Hearts to give
The Wild Age, the Glory Days live
Crazy Horse,
we hear what you say
One Earth, one Mother.*

*We are
The Seventh Generation*

John Trudell

*"The simple step of a courageous individual
Is not to take part in the lie.
One word of truth outweighs the world"*

Aleksander Solzhenitsyn

*"It is possible to believe that all the human mind has ever
accomplished is but the dream before the awakening"*

H G Wells

Part 1 – Aeon of the Fish

East of Lashka Gah, Helmand province, Afghanistan, 2012

My name is Andrew Sarvent, Surgeon Lieutenant Commander serving with 3 Commando Brigade Royal Marines. I was a newly qualified general practitioner when I deployed here. I'm still only twenty-eight years old, but I've seen death at close quarters many times now. I've also seen it in different styles, if you can call the frighteningly fascinating declension to necrosis and mortification a style. Dealing with death on a daily basis has become part of my job, something, given my career choice, you would have thought would be part of the remit, anticipated and accepted; and I did, but never like this. To witness the macabre theatre of a dying man's bewildered reflection of a life terminal as he acts out the final moments of his ultimate scene, while that old clichéd notion of death, the hooded figure with scythe scenario waits at my shoulder with its slow, creeping reach and cold hand of clay. Or when the grim reaper tires of games and flicks the switch, snuffs the candle. Step on an IED: consciousness to oblivion in a microsecond. Death so shockingly instant. This is what I guess I mean by style. I suppose different people living alongside death think, cope, and deal with it in different ways. I can't help but wonder about death and its many manifestations. Death guided by fate and destiny, or random and arbitrary; who are we to tell? Death for cause; death without reason, the effect remains the same for those it takes and for those it leaves behind. Grief unimagined. Souls scoured hollow. Emotions wrung out to dry. Maybe this is what happens inside your head when you're halfway through your second tour of duty in this Godforsaken place. Or maybe it's just because of the person I've become.

Sometimes it's easy to see what a smile betrays; at other times it isn't. With certain soldiers of the ANA the latter nearly always applies. In the case of the young squaddie sat opposite me it's the former. Fear. Fear of the unknown; his unsure, nervous grin reeks of it. I hope my return smile and nod have all the confidence and reassurance they're delivered with without betraying the uncertainty that lies behind them. I glance over at my MEDEVAC team; they're

PRECESSION

both going through their own personal rituals; they've been here before. Reidy is going through his kit, checking and re-checking. Sergeant Farris is staring into space, seemingly oblivious to his surroundings. He's in the zone. In a few moments time we'll all be shaking hands with death.

Captain Towler taps me on the shoulder and signals me ready. The look in his eyes is like an invitation to death. He lowers his goggles over them. I nod to my two paramedics, Farris snaps alert in an instant as the Chinook hits earth and the deep breath I inhale enters my lungs in a series of shudders. Captain Towler's barked orders to his men are lost in the dakka-dakka din of the rotors as we spill out into a whipped-up swirling storm of orange-grey dust. In front of me his men fan out and disappear into the tornado. I grit my teeth and run aimlessly. Clear of the rotor wash I hear the shout, '*medic!*' Sixty metres to my left a guy is knelt over a casualty. He frantically waves us over. I take a quick glance behind to check my team is with me and we crouch-sprint as fast as our equipment will let us. To our right, the twisted remains of a Jackal, flipped onto its back and still burning. The heat hits us with a diesel and cordite kiss, and behind us we hear the crack and whine of small arms fire. I reach the casualty almost on my belly. Both his lower limbs have gone. He's semi-conscious, calm and quiet apart from an occasional dull moan. The section medic has applied tourniquets in a frantic effort to stop the bleeding. I glance up at him; he's only young, twenty at most. His whole body is shaking involuntarily – shock.

'Are you okay?'

'... Sir,' he gives me a bewildered nod. At least he's noticed my rank, which is a good sign.

'IM?'

'Plasma, morphine.'

'Good man.' I need to establish triage quickly. 'How many more casualties?'

'One – two,' he says confused.

'Let's go.' I urge him on. One of my guys takes over and we move off. After only a few metres the young squaddie stops dead in his tracks confronted by a severed arm, its hand grotesquely reaching up to us out of the dirt as if pleading for some sort of deliverance. Other bloodied bits of body parts lie scattered around us, a human jigsaw. The kid, trying to hide his horror, looks sideways at me for some sort of guidance. There's nothing we can do here except to pick

PISCES

up the pieces. *T4*, I mutter to myself. It's a non-priority body bag job. Close by I see the third casualty, just off the road as it falls away into a ditch. I scurry over but before I get to him, I hear the urgent shouts of, '*Incoming!*' We hit the road and press ourselves into the dirt as the whoosh of an RPG flies over our heads and lands with a loud crump into the earth about eighty metres in front of us. From behind the cover of a Ridgeback and a couple of Snatch Vixens, I hear the rattle of LMGs and the *whoomp* of a mortar as the remainder of the ambushed patrol along with Captain Towler's men return fire in the general direction of the attack. We were supposed to have the protection of an Apache, but up to now I'd neither seen nor heard it. I'm on my feet as soon as the fallout debris from the RPG has subsided, and I scramble down beside the casualty, silently praying that someone has locked in the co-ordinates and has called in an air strike. This guy has caught the blast in the lower abdomen, directly underneath his Osprey CBA. I lift my goggles and try to wipe stinging sweat out of my eyes but only succeed in sticking sand and grit to them. I unzip my bag. Method ends up a frantic rummage. In my haste a glove tears. I rip it off cursing and slinging the shredded latex to one side. Procedure takes a back seat as I cut away at fragged bits of blood-soaked combat vest that have fallen into the gaping hole that had been his stomach. In the near distance I hear rounds pinging off armoured steel. I take a quick glance back at the upturned smouldering Jackal and back to this poor bloke's terrible injuries. It must have been one hell of an IED to do this amount of damage.

'Sarvo . . .?'

I look up in surprise. The badly wounded soldier has just opened his eyes and called me by a nickname I hadn't heard in years. ' . . . Is that you?' He asks it almost casually. 'What the fuck are you doin' here?'

I'd hardly looked at the face beneath the helmet. Now he's conscious, leering at me just like he used to. The shock, the circumstance, and the recognition all collide in a microsecond. Inside me, lactic acid and adrenalin surge. The scene freezes surreally. 'Harper?' I manage in a cracked whisper.

'Lance Corporal Harper, chor - took yer advice - did summat wi' me life - joined up . . .' He pauses and grins. It hides a grimace. ' . . . Now look what Terry's gone an' done - fuckin' ragheads.'

'Don't worry mate. We'll have you patched up and back at Bastion in no time,' I try and reassure him while avoiding his eyes.

PRECESSION

His abdomen is a mess, and he is haemorrhaging badly. He needs a miracle, and my experience tells me he isn't going to get one. I try and stay detached, remain professional, but it's almost impossible. My thumping heart is trying to vacate my chest, while my head tries to stay rational in a swirling sea of irrationality. As if these circumstances aren't horrific enough. I sense the reaper close by. Death plays its ace – *Deal with this one, you fucker* – This guy was my childhood best friend.

'Are you in pain?' I ask while tapping air pockets out of a hypo.

'Can't feel a fuckin' fing, charver - but me lug 'oles are ringin' - fink me eardrums are bust.'

Least of your worries, mate, I say to myself, plunging the needle into his thigh. Over my radio I hear the flight lieutenant's voice come over in crackling waves. He's not happy. Out here the Chinook is a big target and a sitting duck. Where is the air cover? All at once our collective prayers are answered. Overhead I hear the roar of a Tornado and moments later two loud crumps as a couple of Paveways are dropped onto the Taliban compound half a mile away. Breathing space. I send the young squaddie back to help stretcher the first casualty. My colleague Corporal Reid drops in beside us and puts in a temporary IV.

'Could do wiv a ciggi, chor . . .' Harper manages just as the diamorphine takes hold and he slowly closes his eyes. We tape him up and carefully lift him onto a litter, ruefully watching the field bandages change colour. Overhead, the Tornado makes another pass and sends what sounds like a Sidewinder into the insurgent compound. A percussion wave of noise and heat washes over us. I radio in two T1's and a T4 and we evacuate. By the time we reach the Chinook, the Apache arrives on the scene, banking sharply over our heads, completing a recce before letting loose a couple of rockets into the Taliban position. We take to the air, leaving Captain Towler and the rest of the patrol to mop up. Our farewell is a shower of anti-missile chaff, just in case any of the enemy had escaped the attentions of the Tornado and Apache. We hook up our two survivors and make them as comfortable as possible. I radio in code vampire for extra blood to be on standby. The relief of escaping that hellhole is tempered by the certainty that my old mate isn't going to make it. His vitals are weak, and deep down I know no matter how much stuff we pump into him we won't be able to save his life. The other guy, - I glance over at Reidy who gives me a reassuring nod - well, he

PISCES

won't ever walk again, that's certain but it looks like he's earned himself a one way back to Brize Norton. I look at them both and unashamedly wish it the other way round.

'Where's me ciggie, charver?' rasps Harper as he regains consciousness, much to Corporal Reid's amazement. We'd put enough morphine in him to quieten a horse.

'You can't smoke inside these things, Harper, lad,' I tell him. 'You can light up once we get back to Bastion.'

'Hands off cocks - on socks.' He grins up at me before closing his eyes again. I smile to myself. It was the line from *Kes* he always used to come out with. - They were the last words he spoke.

Camp Bastion, Helmand Province

I scrub hard at my red stained skin like a man possessed. This is the angry phase, where the fatuity of it all hits home. I've seen men self-harm when they go through this bit. Psychologically it has something to do with survival guilt, coming home from a patrol when a mate hasn't. I silently curse this cause to hell, this act of sophistry that is no cause at all, this human made mire borne of lies, deceit and duplicity.

Fatigue finally takes over from anger and I buttress my hands against the cool tiled wall of the shower. My head follows, and in a frisk like position I allow the cascading water to caress my weary limbs as I watch the last of Darren Harper's dissipated blood swirl away with the sweat and the soap.

Darren Harper – Darren Harper, Harper – Darren Harper. I mouth the name to myself mantra fashion, over and over; just two words travelling merry-go-round in my head. Their very nuance slowly becoming abstract, the joined-up letters not even resembling a name anymore, let alone someone I knew.

I climb into clean fatigues and prepare for the task I detest. I can cope with removing shattered limbs and patching up gaping wounds. It's my job; it's what I've been trained to do. But this bit, the bureaucracy of death, the wrapping up of another wasted life, I hate. I stare at the death certificate, pen poised, hovering; ready to sign, seal and deliver one more statistic into the annals of bullshit history. Darren Harper – Fuck.

I sling the pen on the fold-up table that's supposed to resemble a desk and take a slug from the bottle of Jack Daniels that's acting as my crutch this evening. I silently salute our friends from across the Atlantic for their magniloquent philanthropy, although, more than likely, this latest batch of Southern hospitality had been purloined from the American store of plenty by some beleaguered, disgruntled, disenchanting team of British Borrowers. The Borrowers: that's what the Yanks called us, the third world army. Funny, but painfully true. Mercifully, much of the jibe was directed at our leaders and politicians and not the boys they fought alongside. Anyway, we had our own take on the ways of our illustrious allies and their amusingly

blinker view of the world. Politics aside, I was thankful of this bottle, this passport to temporary oblivion that someone had thoughtfully set down in front of me during the sobering aftermath of today's events.

Another two casualties just came in. Another IED. SMO Lieutenant Commander Naylor said he'd deal with it even though officially he was off duty. Off duty, that's a laugh. In reality, there's no such thing here at Camp Bastion. The job's twenty-four-seven and you grab respite from dealing with the torn flesh and broken bodies when you can.

Corporal McAllister appears out of a mess of scurrying personnel. Amidst a background of organised chaos, he drops the dreaded brown envelope onto the desk in front of me. I stare at it blankly. It contains Darren Harper's personal effects.

'Sorry sir,' he says shuffling awkwardly from foot to foot. 'I understand you knew him.'

I offer a solemn nod in confirmation.

'Sorry sir,' he repeats, knowing full well the words won't offer too much comfort, but I thank him anyway before dismissing him back to his grim duties. In the distance someone screams. Someone else barks out orders. I watch him walk away and merge with the madness in his green, crimson spattered theatre gown.

With a heavy sigh I push the envelope to one side, leaving the job of listing personal effects until last and scan the forms that need filling out: Lance Corporal Darren Harper. 3rd. Battalion The Rifles. Age: 28. Cause of death: Injuries sustained: Location of death: I fill in the details in between slugs of bourbon, just to numb the emotions. I take my time.

I get myself outside half the contents of the bottle before I feel ready to make an inventory of the stuff inside the envelope. I spread the contents out on the table and take a deep breath. I've seen it all before. Most of it is what your regular squaddie would carry about him, but there are two items apart that manage to stiffen me sober. One is a well-worn colour snap of a woman and two boys. I hold it closer to the desk lamp to get a better look. I feel like I should know her, the face seems familiar, but a name won't come to mind. I assume her to be his wife or partner, mid to late twenties, bobbed brunette hair. A robust, healthy-looking lass, maybe a touch overweight but smiling happy. The kids: one a toddler, no more than two. The elder: four or five; cheeky little grin; number two cropped

PRECESSION

head; a dead ringer for his dad. I hold the photo at arm's length in a shaky grip and try and put a freeze on my lips and chin that have started to tremble. Having carefully placed the photograph back in the envelope I pick up the other item that held a special interest for me. It was a sterling silver chain on which hung a pendant of a hawk in flight. I had one just like it, although I hadn't seen mine in years. It was more than likely tucked away in some old tobacco tin amongst the other collected artefacts of my youth, gathering dust in the attic of my parent's house, but I was sure I still had it. I hold this symbol of the most unlikely of childhood friendships in the palm of my hand and gently rub a thumb over the worn, tarnished metal. Like some bereaved Aladdin coaxing the genie out for one last time I wish him back. And slowly, yet inevitably the events that took place earlier today outside Lashka Gah begin to hit home. Despite the anaesthesia of the Jack Daniels, when the adrenaline created by trying to save lives under fire subsides, the reality hits you like a punch to the solar plexus. Shock manifests itself in different ways. I'm a doctor; I've seen it many times. But I'm still human. My eyes begin to sting with fatigue and the rest of it. Even when they fill with water the stinging won't go away. Memories start to flood my senses. Yes, I'm still human – barely.

Leeds, England 1993

I never knew what hit me, and I didn't see it coming, but it hurt. I'd only felt pain like that once before, when I was six, walking in the park with my mum and a ball some older lads were playing with hit me full in the face and knocked me off my feet. The pain felt the same, but it wasn't a ball that hit me this time, although I still saw stars, or flashes of bright light that you describe as stars, and I still ended up on my back looking up to the heavens with all the wind knocked out of me.

A fuzzy circle of sneering faces appeared above me silhouetted against the bright blue September sky. A couple of the faces jeered down at me, and I took three or four sly kicks to my ribs and buttocks. I scrambled to my feet, but before I caught my balance I was knocked sideways again. The jeering crowd parted as I fell. On my way back down something warm and wet sprayed from my nose, and I fleetingly caught sight of a couple of kids using my new brown leather satchel as a football. On my hands and knees, I gingerly felt up at the now throbbing source of pain and caught a handful of red. It dropped through my fingers in thick blobs and merged with the black asphalt, while regular drips from my bust nose caught up, adding to the ever-widening damp patch. I felt dizzy and sick.

'Fuckin' hell, he bleeds a lot, don't he?' were the first coherent words I heard.

'I hardly touched the soft twat,' someone sneered.

'Aww, look what you've done to him, Briggsy, yer rotten get,' piped up a girl from the crowd.

'See if yer can knock him out, Briggsy,' encouraged another kid.

'I'll knock *you* out in a minute, yer pleb,' said a menacing voice I assumed belonged to Briggsy, whoever he was. I made to get to my feet again, but a knee in the back kept me down on all fours.

'Lerrim up now Briggsy, yer big bully, you've gone an' brok his nose,' pleaded the girl.

'Who asked you, yer slag? Keep yer snek out.'

A pair of manky looking trainers suddenly appeared in front of me attached to a pair of filthy, black pants that were fraying at the bottom. 'What's goin' on?' asked the voice they belonged to.

PRECESSION

'Briggsy's gone an' smashed him in his face an' brok' his nose,' repeated the girl.

'Who is he?'

'Dunno, he looks like a posh kid.'

'What yer hit him for, Briggsy?' demanded the scruffy kid.

'What's it to do wi' you, yer Gypo?' Briggsy dismissed him with a snarl of contempt.

'Don't call *me* a gypo.'

'Thy *is* a gypo. Wanna mek summat of it?'

'Say it again, yer fat cunt.'

'Gypo . . .'

I felt the scruffy kid make a lunge, and I took a whack to the side of my head as he did so, but I suddenly felt free of the knee that was in my back and pinning me down, so I took the opportunity to scramble to my feet and quickly distance myself from the now scuffling pair.

"ere y'are mate. Are yer alright? Yer new bag's a bit scratched.'

The girl had retrieved my satchel and was holding it out for me with a sympathetic look as I continued to try and stem the flow of blood from my nose.

'Satchel,' I blubbered, blowing bubbles of red.

'Eh?'

'It's a satchel.'

The look of sympathy turned to one of incomprehension, so I offered her a muffled thank you and took it from her. She wasn't a pretty girl. In fact, she also looked a bit of a scruff. She had a uniform on of sorts, but it was too big for her, even though she was far from skinny. It looked like a hand-me-down. Her hair was shoulder length, dark and greasy-lank. She was staring at me, fascinated, like I was from another planet.

'What school have *you* come from, then?'

'St. Botolphs.'

She continued with her look of incomprehension and added a slight curl of the lip. I looked down at what was my clean white handkerchief that didn't have much white on it anymore.

'You're not from round 'ere, are yer?'

I looked at her and the three or four other kids that were still milling around gawping at me with a curiousness that was tinged with contempt. Here I was, first day at a new school in my new, clean uniform that didn't look too new or clean any more, clutching my

PISCES

new scuffed and scratched leather satchel in one hand and trying to stem the flow of blood with the other. No one else had satchels. No one else had new uniforms or shoes that had been polished. She had stated the obvious.

‘No,’ I said. ‘No, I’m not.’

Alongside the pain I had a mix of feelings, like I was the star attraction at some freak show, or a wounded animal being surrounded and stalked by a pack of braying hyenas. Nearby, the one they called Briggsy and the scruffy kid were squared up in a push and shove stand-off, hurling insults and obscenities, goading, daring one another. Briggsy was bigger, both in height and weight, but the scruffy kid had a hardness about him, wiry but mean. I had an urge to move away, find a corner and lick my wounds, but my feet wouldn’t budge, and I stayed rooted to the spot.

‘Teacher!’ I heard someone hiss loudly, and in an instant the pack of hyenas had evaporated into the Serengeti of the playground. Even Briggsy and the scruffy kid had sloped away amidst glowered threats and promises. By the time the teacher arrived I was stood all alone, still rooted to the spot with my head back, red rag stuck to my face, looking up at the blue sky once again.

‘What’s been going on here?’ she demanded.

‘Nothing, Miss – tripped and fell, bust my nose.’ I lied.

My mum and dad were great parents, lovely people, but at that moment I hated them. I hated my dad for having got himself transferred up here. I hated mum for making me wear a brand-new uniform, and buying me a satchel, complete with pens, pencils, ruler, compass and the rest of it. She lived in a time warp. Who had satchels these days? Worst of all, everyone thought I was a posh kid, which was far from the truth. Mum and dad were working class, but they were hard working. Dad was an engineer who had to move to this place because of his job. Mum was a company bookkeeper. We weren’t poor but we certainly weren’t posh. We came to Leeds at the start of the summer, and all the Middle schools of choice were full, even though they were in our catchment area. This one wasn’t even on our list, let alone in our area. It served two of the roughest estates in the city. We would be appealing.

PRECESSION

At break I found myself a quiet spot in a shady corner, hopefully out of harm's way and observed the chaotic buzz of excited kids on the first day of a new term from a safe distance. I gingerly touched my nose, which, thankfully, had stopped bleeding but was still grazed. The school nurse assured me it wasn't broken, although there was noticeable swelling. I still don't have a clue what that Briggsy character hit me with.

'Hey up, 'ere yer are, mush. I've been lookin' all over for yer. How's yer neb?'

The scruffy kid appeared quickly from around the corner of the building and in no time was up in my face. I instinctively backed away.

'It's ok,' I said eventually, 'a bit sore.'

He nodded and grinned, and for the first time I saw him up close. Along with the knackered trainers and the fraying black pants he wore a grubby navy sweatshirt that roughly approximated the school's colours. The only neatness I could detect in his whole appearance was the number two cropped hair. He continued to grin.

'Er, thanks for what you did this morning,' I said just for something to say.

'Ah, that's alrate,' he smiled dismissively. 'I hate that bastard anyway.'

'Who is he?'

'Briggsy? – He's just a nobody who thinks he's somebody. Reckons he's gonna be cock o' this school, but he's wrong. 'ere, want one o' these?' He dived into a pocket and came out with a handful of blackjacks and fruit salads. I thanked him and took a fruit salad. 'Tek some more,' he urged. 'Go on, I nicked a shitload from t'shop this mornin'. I took a couple more. He un-wrapped three or four blackjacks shoving them in his mouth together and pretty soon he was grinning liquorice as we chewed in silence for the next few minutes.

'What's yer name, mush?' he asked eventually.

'Andrew.'

'Andrew?' He pulled a face and curled a lip. 'An-drew?' He looked at me to see if I was serious. I nodded apologetically. 'What's yer last name?'

'Sarvent.'

He looked at me blankly.

'Sar-vent,' I repeated like I was talking to a deaf person.

PISCES

‘Where do you live?’

‘Roundhay.’

‘Roundhay,’ he said raising an eyebrow. ‘Bit posh up there innit?’

‘No,’ I countered defensively, ‘just normal.’

We looked at each other with the recognition that our perceptions of normal were light years apart.

‘What’s your name?’ I asked, although I wasn’t half as interested as he had been.

‘Harper – Daz Harper. People just call me Harper.’

‘Where do you live?’

‘Gipton.’ He said it like the word carried great significance, waiting for some sort of reaction that would normally come from the very mentioning of the place. I had never heard of it, and I quickly got the feeling that it wasn’t a place I would be in a hurry to get to know.

I’m saved from having to strain the conversation further by the bell, signalling end of break.

‘See yer around, Sarvo, an’ remember, if that cunt bovvers yer again just give us a shout, yeh?’

I gave him a vague nod before he disappeared back around the corner as quickly as he had appeared. I looked down at the two fruit salads that had started to turn sticky in my hand. I thought about the manky pocket they came from and quickly threw them in a nearby bin.

I trudged back to class still silently cursing my parents. The last thing I needed was protection from some chav from Gipton. The first thing I needed was a successful appeal.

1994

My parents appealed. They appealed three times. By the time the third appeal had failed I was already into the last term of my first year and was past caring. During that period I had somehow managed to avoid any more nosebleeds, and thankfully, the satchel had been assigned to a cupboard under the stairs.

I hadn't been accepted by all and sundry. I was still referred to as the posh kid, but I had a new best friend. His name was Darren Harper. How it came about, to this day I'm still not too sure, but it did. The origins of such an unlikely friendship are hard to pin down, and I'm not about to start analysing the chemistry of its beginnings now. It could have been something to do with a willingness to share a seemingly never-ending supply of purloined confectionary in return for exclusive use of a Gameboy, but it was more than that.

I didn't seek out his company or companionship at first, in fact I actively avoided it, but there was something about his persistence, the physical and if necessary violent removal of anyone else who inadvertently sat next to me in class, the permanent in-your-face inane grin, and the constant seduction of surreptitious under-the-desk penny sweets. It had all started with a reluctant, anything-to-keep-the-peace, kind of tolerance and had somehow led to me thinking of him as a mate – my only mate. I had even got used to the permanent odour of what smelled like wet dog and foist that would emanate from his person and permeate anything within a five-metre radius. I guessed that he didn't care to wash too often, and I later learned that the bath at home was what one of his older brothers used to grow cannabis plants in, although at the time I didn't have a clue what cannabis was.

Harper had plenty of other chav mates, but his relationship with them was more about violent one-upmanship and who could skank who the most. Nearly all my class were world and streetwise. The stuff they seemed to know made my nine-year old naivety shine out like a Belisha Beacon. That's all we were, nine- and ten-year-olds, but most of them spoke and acted like adults, albeit nasty, child-like adults. They knew all about things they shouldn't have and yet knew nothing about what I held important or fascinating. The act of

growing up according to their age seemed to have passed them by.

School was boring for all of us. For them, because they appeared to have the attention span of goldfish. For me, because what the teachers were trying to impart was nothing short of remedial and so I simply switched off.

Like a lot of the kids in my class Harper wasn't a regular patron. He would often go missing for days, even weeks on end, and during such times I would be left to the mercy and persecution of Briggsy and his ilk. I actively tried to stay out of trouble but was quietly determined not to allow anyone get the better of my vulnerability whenever my minder wasn't around. At some point I knew I had to stand on my own two feet, and when one break time I found myself surrounded by Briggsy and a couple of his hyena mates attempting to tax me for my Gameboy, I knew that time had come.

My dad had enrolled me for Taekwondo classes when we first came to Leeds. I took to the ancient Korean martial art like a fish to water and during the school year had quickly progressed through the first ten junior rankings known as *geup* and was already on my first dan. Briggsy was a big lad, but he was also a bit of a lard-arse, a monster-muncher. He was far from fit, as I had observed on many a PE lesson. I figured if I could stay light on my feet, take on the ringleader, I might just be able to make a monkey out of the fat boy, and then maybe the rest of his droogies would back off and leave me in peace.

Briggsy had his hand out, palm up, beckoning with his fingers. 'Hand it over, yer little puff,' he demanded with a leer.

I was backed against a wall, which is where I didn't want to be. I edged myself slowly away so that I had some manoeuvring space behind me. Briggsy and his little team followed me in a menacing semi-circle.

'Give – if yer know what's good for yer.'

I went as if to comply. I put a hand into the inside pocket of my blazer and slowly brought it back out as a fist. I took up a poomse, planted a stance and centred my gravity. With my eyes I beckoned him towards my outstretched arm. This seemed to confuse him a little as even Briggsy would have known I wouldn't be able to conceal a whole gameboy within my fist. He approached cautiously, the leer never once leaving his big ugly mush. He grabbed my wrist and roughly twisted my arm so my hand faced upwards.

'Open up,' he demanded.

PRECESSION

I slowly released my fist, revealing nothing but an empty palm. This confused him some more, so as the cogs whirled and before he could become enraged at my messing about, I deftly twisted out of his grip, grabbed *his* wrist and pulled him towards me all in one swift movement. He came easy, all off balance and I planted my right spear-hand into his liver meridian, one of the major and vulnerable pressure points. It was the first time I had executed jiapsul and it was textbook. Briggsy turned to stone for a second or two and his eyes glazed over before collapsing like a sack o' spuds. That would have been enough to keep him quiet for a while, but I had to show his lieutenants that I meant business. As he dropped to his knees I finished him off with a sokuto, a side kick to the chest, a move I would have loved to have delivered to the side of his head, but which my discipline strictly forbids. I performed taeguek il jang and returned to choom-bi, the ready position, while Briggsy's mates performed guppy shapes and visibly shrank before my eyes.

"kin hell, posh kid knows kung-fu," one of them managed to utter. I retained choom-bi and stared hard at the pair who had started to back away, said nothing. 'He knows kung-fu,' the kid repeated in awe. Beyond striking distance, he decided to make a run for it. His mate, quickly realising he was now on his own, soon followed hot on his heels. 'He knows kung-fu,' I heard him shout one last time, to no one in particular, as they both disappeared round a corner.

When they were out of sight I relaxed my stance. The bully who had given me the little silver scar on the bridge of my nose a year earlier lay on his side in a crumpled heap. He made no sound, but as the bulk of his dishevelled form rhythmically rose and fell, I could tell he was still breathing.

Word soon got round that the posh kid was no longer a pushover and from then on in I was generally left alone. Don't get me wrong, over the next two years it wasn't all plain sailing. There were plenty of other kids ready and eager to take on the deposed Briggsy's mantle, but together Harper and I were usually afforded a healthy respect and given our space, and I rarely had to resort to martial arts again.

There weren't many kids on our street, and the few that were went to better schools and appeared even more nerdy than I was. At home I was surrounded by plenty of stuff to occupy my time with, and I'd always been content in my self-imposed isolation, so, making friends with the aloof type who went to school in the back of daddy's

PISCES

Volvo was never at the top of my agenda.

‘You know you’re quite welcome to bring a school friend home for tea anytime if you like, love,’ mum said casually over breakfast one morning. Up to then Harper and I had never seen each other outside of school; we lived miles apart, and I could tell that my antisocial tendencies had begun to worry mum slightly.

‘Ok,’ I said as casually as she had offered, but remember thinking at the time – *fine Mum, you asked for it. I bet you don’t offer twice.*

§

‘Did your mum say it was ok then?’ I asked as we stood waiting for the bus.

‘What?’

‘You staying at mine for tea.’

‘What’s it got to do wiv her?’

‘Haven’t you even asked her?’

‘Why would I?’

I shrugged. ‘Won’t she wonder where you are; won’t she have made you some tea?’

Harper looked at me like I was talking soft. ‘Don’t talk soft,’ he said snapping off a large chunk of cherry liquorice between his teeth and offering me the rest. I refused with a shake of the head knowing that mum would have made an extra special effort with whatever she put before us and would be upset if she didn’t see clean plates.

By the time we turned onto my avenue Harper had devoured all manner of cheap sweets. ‘You won’t want your tea,’ I said, sounding like my mother.

‘Course I will, I’ll eat owt, me,’ he said popping in a pink coloured flying saucer.

It was obvious his mum never cooked for him. He relied on a get what you can, when you can, any which way you can regime wherever sustenance was concerned and never mind the quality.

‘I’ve never been up here before,’ said Harper, eyeing up the eclectic mix of Edwardian and pre-war dwellings. ‘This is where our Frankie comes robbin’.

He picked up a stone and flung it at an unsuspecting tabby sat sunning itself on a fence. I gave him a look of reprehension and immediately felt even more like my mother.

PRECESSION

‘Don’t like moggies,’ he spat. ‘Like dogs, can’t fuckin’ stand moggies.’

I had been unsure if all this had been such a good idea, now I was beginning to feel certain.

I’ll never forget the look on mum’s face when she opened the door to us. Wiping her hands down her apron, the beaming, welcoming smile soon morphed into a fixed grimace that did its best but ultimately failed to retain smile status.

‘Oh – oh,’ she said hanging on to the door that I thought any minute now might be shut back in our faces. We both looked at her blankly. Harper was still chewing on something.

‘Mum, this is Harper. Harper, this is mum,’ I said flatly. He gave her a vague nod of the head.

‘Oh – oh,’ she said again just about gaining enough time to compose herself before stepping to one side to allow us in, albeit reluctantly. Eyes bulging, she gave me a *what-the-fuck* look as we stepped by. I gave her a smile and politely enquired as to what time tea would be ready. She said we had a half hour window. Before we went upstairs, she reminded us to take our shoes off, which in hindsight wasn’t such a good idea as she would be out with the Glade for the rest of the evening. We trudged off up to my room, Harper with the big toe of his right foot sticking conspicuously out of the end of his smelly sock. Afterwards Mum asked why he wore odd shoes. I told her it was because apparently you can’t nick trainers in pairs.

I suppose when you’ve got stuff you take it a bit for granted. I never felt privileged in any way, nor had I ever felt deprived. I’d not much thought about it really, but I guess most of the things I ever asked for I tended to get without too much bother. Harper surveyed my room in silent wonderment, his eyes flitting sharply in all directions, his hands wanting to touch, poke and probe everything at once. I followed him around the room, amused at his giddiness. I watched him lift two of my precisely placed Mutant Ninja Turtles off a shelf, Leonardo and Michelangelo. I laughed to myself as I watched him make them do battle, making what he thought were all the appropriate martial art noises. He quickly moved on to my model Porches and Ferraris while I carefully placed the discarded turtles back to their original positions. Next came Dad’s old vintage Dinky and Matchbox toys that he’d lovingly looked after as a kid and proudly handed down. By the time he’d moved on to my Airfix kits

PISCES

I'd begun to get a little nervy.

'Don't touch that!' I shouted as he made a move for my pride and joy, The Ark Royal.

'Chill out, Sarvo, I aren't gonna brek it.'

I formed a barrier between him and the labour of love that took me months to complete. 'It's not a toy,' I explained. 'You're not supposed to touch it.'

'What's it for, then?'

'It's a model; you're just supposed to look at it.'

He pulled a face like I was crackers and moved onto something else. The more precious I became, the more bored he got. He ended up looking through my telescope.

'Kin 'ell, yer can see rate into that house,' he exclaimed.

'It's for looking at stars,' I said.

'What, yer mean you've never looked at women gerrin' undressed?' he asked incredulous.

'No,' I said shocked and embarrassed.

'Bollocks you haven't,' he said disbelieving.

'Stars and birds, Harper, that's all. We're not all perverts like you.'

'Wow, look at this bird,' he shouted suddenly all exited.

'Piss off, now. Stop messing about.'

'No, serious,' he said all seriously. 'It's a beauty. It's got wings all black an' blue like a Maggie, burrit in't a Maggie.'

'Here, let's have a look.' I edged him away from the telescope and peered through the eyepiece. 'It's a jay.'

'No, it in't.'

I looked at him like the moron he was. 'It's a bloody jay,' I told him with authority.

'How do *you* know?'

I tutted at him and walked over to the bookshelf, pulled out my Ladybird book of British Birds and opened it at the colour plate of The Jay. 'That is a bloody jay, my friend,' I said stabbing a finger at the page. 'And I'll have money on it.'

Harper looked at the illustration, then back to the telescope. He did this two more times before he seemed convinced. 'Yer rate, it is,' he said at last. 'I've never seen owt like it.' He seemed genuinely thrilled.

'You're lucky,' I said. 'It's not often you see a jay, 'specially round here.'

PRECESSION

With its characteristic screech, Harper watched the bird swoop down from the oak tree and gather a vole or something up in its claws from the garden opposite and carry it away all in one swift movement. He was enraptured.

I watched him eagerly leaf through the book with his grubby fingers. He struggled to read the sections on any bird that caught his interest, so I read them for him. He reminded me of Billy Casper from the film *Kes*. I hoped he would wash his hands before tea.

Mum had made a chicken plate pie with mashed potato, broccoli and gravy. Dad was working late, so Mum and I watched fascinated as Harper noisily wolfed down the contents on his plate with lightning speed, minimal chewing, the food hardly touched the sides, his earlier unhealthy intake of sweets having no effect whatsoever on his appetite. He sat bored and impatient while we finished ours. The broccoli remained untouched.

‘Alrate that, missus – ta,’ he said as mum gathered up the plates. ‘Not rate keen on them little trees.’

‘You mean the Broccoli?’ said Mum.

‘Whatever.’

‘Have you ever tried it?’

‘Nah.’

Mum continued to look bewildered, right up to when she served the home-made baked rice pudding out of its Pyrex dish. Harper eyed it suspiciously. He’d only ever seen rice pudding out of a tin.

After tea I dug out the *Kes* video. He said he’d never seen it before. We sat and watched it in almost total silence; the only sound being our occasional sucks and slurps as we devoured a seemingly endless Harper supply of sugary kola cubes. His concentration was unfamiliarly intense. I’d never seen him so still and quiet.

I’ll never know if it was that chance encounter with the jay or the revelation of the Ken Loach film that triggered the passion, or whether he was born with an obsession of all things feathered, or if his ornithological bent stayed with him until his dying day, but for the next six years or so it would remain as the hub of our unlikely friendship, the universal centre for many a crazy adventure as we journeyed our rocky way toward youth and adolescence.