

PROLOGUE

Mum and Dad brought him to Bognor in the summer. Not every weekend, but maybe once or twice a month. He was five, or six. They lived in Horsham then. Dad worked in a shoeshop. They didn't have a car, but got one later when Dad became a manager, in a shoeshop.

They went to Bognor on the bus. It was so exciting. Those buses were green and cream, Southdown Motor Company. The number sixty nine, that was the bus, Horsham to Bognor. It was quite a long journey really. Horsham to Pulborough and through Petworth and Midhurst, places like that. And Arundel. Mum always pointed out the castle there. Then they went through Ford. Dad always pointed out the prison. And said that's where you'll end up, if you're a bold boy. And Mum said don't pay any attention to your Dad, he's only joking.

It was quite a long journey, but worth every minute. They had such a good time in Bognor. It was disappointing when they didn't go. On those summer weekends when they weren't going, when they were just staying in Horsham, or maybe going somewhere else, sometimes then he saw a Southdown bus on the streets. There weren't that many. Most of the buses in Horsham in those days were from other companies, and there were London buses too. But when he saw the green and cream Southdown bus, the number sixty nine, and when they weren't going away on it, he got quite upset. And Mum would say, we'll go next week.

Sometimes they did, go next week, sometimes they didn't. But when they did it was always the same, always exciting. Which was strange, that it was exciting, because they always did the same things. One weekend was much the same as the next. They would walk through the town from the bus station. That was in the High Street then. It's gone now. Down past the bowling green, where Dad would always say to Mum well we must give that a try some day. And she would laugh, but the child didn't know why, and she'd say I'll wait until I'm a little older. And Mum and Dad would laugh together, and he would put his arm around her shoulder.

They'd walk down the pier, and Mum would say stay away from the edge, John. And Dad would read rude postcards at the stalls. And he'd show some of them to Mum, and they'd both laugh together, and look at each other, something mysterious in their faces. They were very young then. He was the only child, and they didn't have much money. They never had any more children. After the pier they'd walk along the Esplanade, towards Felpham. And they always stopped at a particular place. Mum called it our place. They'd sit in deckchairs and a man would come along with a ticket machine to collect money. And Mum would have brought sandwiches, and biscuits. And in those days you could buy a pot of tea at stalls.

He'd play on the beach. There was always other children, and they all played together. And sometimes Dad would stroll down to the edge of the water, and throw stones into the sea. And he would run over to him, and throw stones too. And Dad showed him how to skim stones, so they'd hop across the water. But he wasn't really strong enough for that. He was only five, or six or seven. So he just had to content himself with throwing stones out onto the water, and watching the ripples that they made. And then that was it, more or less. They'd pack up their things, and walk back to the bus station. Past the pier and past the crazy golf and past the bowling green. The players there looked like snowmen to him, in their whites, ghostly snowmen in the gloom of the evening, moving slowly.

Back at the bus station they'd get on the bus. Green and cream, Southdown Motor Services. Back to Horsham, through Midhurst, Petworth, and places like that. It was sometimes quite dark when they got home. He'd lie in bed, listening to Mum and Dad, making love in the next room. He didn't know they were making love, too young to know. He just knew that they sounded happy. Mum was giggling. And as he listened he'd see in his mind the sea at Bognor. And the ripples from the stones he had thrown into the water. And he'd think of the ripples, going far away forever. To Australia even.

Mum never got old enough to play bowls in Bognor. She died at thirty two. Pulmonary embolism. It was very sudden. Life changed a lot, then, in Horsham. They never went to Bognor anymore. It wouldn't have been the same. He grew up. He went to Sussex University and then teacher training college in London. From there one particular Saturday he went to Victoria Station, and took the train to Bognor. Just for the afternoon.

On the journey he saw that station sign for Ford. And remembered Dad saying to him he'd end up there if he was a bold boy. Ford Prison. He didn't see Arundel Castle, maybe he was on the wrong side of the train. When he got to Bognor he walked from the station down to the esplanade. Past the bowling green where Mum never got to play. And down onto the beach. He walked along to the place that Mum used call our place. And he sat in a deckchair there, watching.

When he got bored with watching he went down to the shoreline and threw stones. And watched the ripples on the water. He imagined Mum and Dad sitting up there in deckchairs, watching him. But when he looked around there was just empty deckchairs flapping in the breeze. Mum was dead and Dad was too, by then. He'd never really been the same. Alcoholism.

He walked back to the station. It was early for the train. He went into the pub there in Station Road. There was a bunch of guys and girls there that he knew. He'd known them at Sussex University. They were going back to London. And there was other students with them that he didn't know. They all went back together to London. On the train he found himself sitting beside a Belgian girl, one of the students he hadn't known before. She was very pretty. Her name was Yvette De Donnea. He married her.

## ONE

*SUSSEX POLICE. ARUN DISTRICT. BOGNOR SOUTH.*

TRANSCRIPT.

11.15. 20 March 2009

DI HARRIS - John Stanley Dexter

*"Yes, she was a pretty girl, if I remember rightly".*

*"What does that mean, if you remember? She was either pretty, or she wasn't".*

*"It's an expression".*

*"I don't need expressions. I need to know. Anyway, it doesn't strike me as being an expression. Strikes me as being an evasion".*

*"You reckon?"*

*"Yeah I reckon. Strikes me as you saying you don't really want to admit she was pretty. Or that you found her pretty".*

*"Why would I do that?"*

*"Hey. We have a system here. It goes like this. I ask a question. You answer.*

*"Ask away".*

*"So, you tell me, why would you not want to admit? That she was pretty?"*

*"I don't know...why I would do that. There's no reason".*

*"There's a reason for everything".*

*"I disagree".*

*"I know you do, you believe in chance. Or let's put it this way, you say you believe in chance. Coincidences".*

*"I prefer to call them correspondences. Parallel sort of things, happening."*

*"Call them what you fucking well like. I'm not going into that psychic crap. Just answer the fucking question. Was she pretty?"*

*"I suppose so."*

*"You suppose? If you remember rightly?"*

*"OK, she was pretty".*

*"She was pretty. Jesus how long is this going to take."*

*"Takes as long as it takes, I suppose".*

*"I wasn't asking you. It was just..."*

*"An expression?"*

*“Don’t fuck around with me John. What was she wearing?”*

*“When?”*

*“What do you mean when, when when when, what are we talking about here?”*

*“A dance. A school dance. A disco. She was wearing what you’d wear at a dance.”*

*“I wouldn’t wear what she was wearing. I’m not a fourteen year old girl”.*

*“You’re kidding? You had me there for a minute.”*

*“What was she wearing?”*

*“I told you, she was wearing what a girl would wear, dancing, clubbing”.*

*“You didn’t, you told me she was wearing what I, me, a Sussex copper, what I would wear at a dance”.*

*“I meant what one would wear at a dance. One.”*

*“Enough of the fucking English grammar lesson, you’re not a schoolteacher. Anymore”.*

*“Once a teacher, always a teacher”.*

*“Once a fucking evasive bastard, always a fucking evasive bastard. Look John, the point is. The reason we’re sitting here. You were a schoolteacher then, at that disco. So, tell me, what was she wearing?”*

*“A skirt”.*

*“No top? Like some kind of south sea maiden?”*

*“Of course she was wearing a top. I just started by mentioning the skirt”.*

*“Why?”*

*“Probably because they usually wear jeans”.*

*“Who, who usually wear jeans?”*

*“Girls, teenagers”.*

*“You spend a lot of time looking at teenage girls?”*

*“I was a teacher, didn’t have much choice”.*

*“I didn’t say spent, I said spend. The present tense. I said you spend a lot of time looking at teenage girls. It was a question.”*

*“No more than most, men, I suppose.”*

*“So you’re just an average sort of creep, rather than a special one. Jesus.”*

*Anyway. This skirt. What sort of skirt?"*

*"What do you mean?"*

*"Like was it a dress kind of skirt, sort of flowing skirt, to the ankles, or a little short job?"*

*"Short".*

*"Why didn't you say that? Why didn't you say she was wearing a short skirt?"*

*"I hadn't got to the detail".*

*"Yeah, right. This whole conversation has the same problem. Nice legs?"*

*"Nice legs?"*

*"Yes, that's what I said, that's what I asked. I'll ask again. Did the girl, the pretty girl, the pretty fourteen year old girl, did she have nice legs?"*

*"Unusual".*

*"What do you mean? Like she'd no knees or something?"*

*"Unusual just to have legs, or to see legs, because ordinarily these kids would wear jeans."*

*"So the legs came as a surprise?"*

*"You could put it like that".*

*"I am putting it like that. You're telling me...let's get this precise...you didn't expect this girl to have legs. So what the fuck do you think they all have under their jeans? Sticks?"*

*"It was just a bit of a shock".*

*"Good legs, huh? Nice thighs? You a leg or a tit man?"*

*"I don't know, really".*

*"I think you're a leg man".*

*"What makes you so sure?"*

*"Because you didn't mention her top. What she was wearing".*

*"I hadn't got round to that".*

*"It's where you start that counts. I know what she was wearing on top".*

*"Do you? How?"*

*"Two reasons really. One I'm a detective inspector of police, I know what's going on. In society. With teenagers. All that. "*

*“And the other reason?”*

*“I’m a tit man. And I’m telling you she was wearing a skimpy little top with her tits poking out one end and her belly the other. Am I right?”*

*“Not quite.”*

*“Where did I go wrong?”*

*“Well in those days you wouldn’t see their stomach. It wasn’t the fashion”.*

*“OK, you’re the expert. On teenage girls. I’m only the amateur here. But I bet I’m half right. I bet her tits were falling out of the top”.*

*“It was pretty low cut, yes”.*

*“You in the fashion business, the rag trade?”*

*“You know I’m not”.*

*“Well stop saying things like it was pretty low cut. What we both mean is her fucking tits were falling out of her fucking top. Am I right?”*

*“OK, you’re right”.*

*“Good. Now. So what do we have here. This little teenage poppet. Tits all over the shop. With nice thighs”.*

*“I didn’t say that”.*

*“No you didn’t, but you said she was wearing a skirt”.*

*“That is not the same thing.”*

*“Did she not have nice thighs?”*

*“Well I suppose all young girls have nice thighs”.*

*“Do you? Do you suppose that?”*

*“Well you know what I mean”.*

*“No I don’t. Don’t tell me I know what you mean. Tell me what you mean. Hey, by the way, what colour were her eyes?”*

*“Green”.*

*“So you remember that, immediately. Kind of vague about her legs, her tits, but you remember her eyes. Now why is that?”*

*“You tell me.”*

*“I’m thinking about it, thinking about it”.*

\*

The green eyed girl came over to help. Or did she, John Dexter wondered, did she come to help? Was that the real reason he found her, standing there, hovering about? Or was she part of the group, the gang that had caused the damage? That bunch had scattered pretty sharpish, seeing him coming. Disappeared into the mob of dancers. Was this girl just left behind, one who hadn't been quite quick enough to merge into the crowd?

Yes, he admitted it to himself, it's happened. Happened already. Asking myself those questions. Suspicious questions. Six months teaching and already he didn't trust teenagers. Ok, he was close enough to them in age. Only about five or six years since he'd been one himself. Maybe that was the reason he didn't trust them. But whatever. Among them here now in the school he felt geriatric. And only six months in, if that. And already such a grim view and a dim view of the pupils. God knows what his opinion would be by retirement.

“We better get this cleaned up”, he said to her, looking at the rubble on the floor.

“What a mess”, she said.

“What's your name?”

“Moonshine,” she replied.

“Your name is not Moonshine”, he said, or did he sigh the words? Whatever it was, he suddenly felt extremely tired. Tiredly he started kicking bits of the rubble into a heap with the side of his foot.

She looked at him. “Your name is Mr Dexter, innit?”

“How do you know?”

“Some of the girls fancy you”.

“Well, that's nice. Better that than some of the boys.”

She laughed, and started kicking from the other direction, her feet in high heeled sandals. It was a nice laugh. But she looked rough. But then, why shouldn't rough

.....EXTRACT ENDS.....  
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