

Greatest Hits
(Writing as Saul P Tiler)
5771 Words

It's not by choice that I take the fifty-three-minute walk. My parents live in the middle of nowhere. Let's put it this way. At night you can see stars in the sky. That's the kind of place they live in.

And it's not really fifty-three minutes. Google always seems to think that everywhere is a cosmopolitan area, despite their myriad analytics. In London the mystical estimating genie normally gets it right due the fact that you're normally taking two steps forward and one to the side to dodge tourists or commuters or that rare third London breed, residents. In East Anglia, and I do mean anywhere in the region, including the cities this is much less of a problem. So, the walk time is considerably less.

I haven't been to my parents for ten years and to be honest it was only due to a fear of mortality, or more accurately my mother's increasingly frail condition, that has led me home this time.

Ok that's a lie. I split up with a long-term girlfriend recently and we would normally spend Christmas together. And despite my bravado about being happy to spend it alone, it was bullshit. It wasn't the spending it alone, it was spending it with her not there.

So, I came 'home'. And within half hour of being there I knew it was an error in judgement. All that was on my mind was the fact that I thought she was cheating on me. Happy Christmas.

I needed out.

The nearest thing to civilisation was a twenty-four-hour Tesco's built at the back of a holiday camp. I used to work there as a waiter when I was still at school. I walked along the road opposite my parents and found that the track that I used to walk down to the camp car park was still there. It had changed a little since those days in that there was a fence surrounding it and a mobile broadcast tower standing sentry like next to the path.

Local kids had quickly found a way to loosen the fence causing a gap that even I could squeeze through. Thank god for childhood obesity. Then I was there, back in the holiday camp that I had worked at thirty years ago.

Move Closer. Phyllis Nelson.

Whenever I hear this record now I still feel my head twitching around like a meercat. This is going to feel alien to the drug clubbing, Spotify, You Tube generation but there was a time when the sole reason for going to a club was to meet women, if you were a man. (Or meeting men I guess, but that thought wouldn't have entered my head. Homophobia, passive or otherwise was rife back then).

At the end of the night, for those that had not copped off with someone, they would play a couple of slow records where you could take the long walk toward a girl of your choice and, if you were brave enough to ignore the laughing eyes of her friends, ask her to dance.

I remember Mark Hudson being much bigger than me. He was always going to the gym or getting us involved in American football

(and yet weirdly hated rugby) before it was even a thing in this country. He was a nice fella but had a temper. I had never seen him hit anyone, but I had heard stories. He laughed them off at school, we were best mates, but I wouldn't have been surprised.

I had pulled this girl Fiona from York. She had been mucking about on the boating lake with a less attractive mate and of course I helped them get out of the canoe when they came in.

There was a lot of white in the eighties. I don't mean that in a racist context, but that was true as well if you talked to either of my parents. And both Fiona and the friend who was not attractive enough to have a name (yes, I know how that sounds but I was that person so deal with it, I had to) came dressed in matching jumpsuits (told you EIGHTIES) of an eye bursting white. I introduced Mark to Helen (I have to give her a name...) and he made talk so small that it was barely visible with an electron microscope. He wasn't good with women and though it sounds like I was doing him a favour, I just wanted to fob him off with the friend, so I could try to get in Fiona's pants. He couldn't chat girls up for shit. Most of the time Mark went out with friends cast offs or sisters or someone he had talked to in the limited social circle that you had in those days. Five hundred Facebook friends my arse.

Waiting is piss poor paid. Literally, because we spent all our money on booze. Even though we were only sixteen the bar staff in the camp didn't seem to give a shit I had bought a snakebite and black and we were sharing it as we danced with the girls. Mark was drunk already, and I was on the way when the slow songs came on. I put down the snakebite glass and fished out the slice of lemon that

was inexplicably at the bottom. (As I mentioned the bar staff was a little bit fly, holiday camps didn't care as long as people bought drinks.) I was trying to work my way into a kiss, but Fiona was too busy watching Helen trying to hold the swaying Mark away from her. 'Move Closer' started and I knew it was the last song of the night. It had been the last one of every night for five weeks after all. I needed to take the girl out of my intendeds' line of sight if I was to get anywhere.

I still had the slice of lemon in my hand (yes, I know that's weird, I didn't know what I was doing a lot of the time back then, did you when you were that age?) so I decided to idly toss it Mark's way to attract his attention.

I had misread the situation. I spun Fiona around to distract her and with the other arm threw the lemon. But Helen wasn't trying to fend off my friend's attentions. She was trying to give in to them and, as the song indicated, move him closer.

She moved in for the kiss just as the lemon hit his forehead. There was a wet slap and the slice stuck. Helen stopped in mid-lunge and look horrified at the sudden appearance of the citrus crescent.

Then she started to laugh. Fiona saw what was going on and did the same and when Mark's eyes met mine realising what I had done I couldn't help but laugh myself,

But his eyes, his eyes were filled with betrayal and something else. As if the world had finally confirmed what he had always knew.

Everyone was against him.

But he wasn't going to go down without a fight. For a moment I thought that he was going to roar, showing me the temper that I had heard about from everyone else in class.

But the sharp intake of breath was just a precursor to a red sea of vomit.

It covered Helen's jumpsuit from head to toe. She screamed but it was cut off as the next torrent of scarlet hit her squarely in the mouth. The scream turned into a gurgle and I felt Fiona drift out of my arms as she ran to aid her stained friend. Mark wiped his mouth and just turned away to leave the dance floor.

Weight of the world confirmed.

We were never really friends after that. After Mark left school he joined the army or the TA or something like that, but I hear he never left Lowestoft.

Maybe when the world was against you then nowhere was the best place to hide.

I fucked Fiona six months later, on an ill-fated trip to York involving a shitty coincidence that caused me to lose a girlfriend. But that's another story.

I know it's annoying. The constant comments in brackets. But it's the way my mind was working as I walked into town. Your subconscious is an intrusive bastard. It makes connections and just drops them in. And I'm sorry (I'm fucking not) but it's hard to

control it. I wish I knew what it was up to, but I don't. So, go easy.

There was a new set of roads built so that you could get around a town easier than had nothing in it. I walked up the hill passed a pub called the Foxburrow which, apart from the smallest Travelodge in the world stalking it from behind, probably hadn't changed in a hundred years.

I remember Boxing Days spent there with a brood I wish I been part of. Without going into detail, if you look up dysfunctional in the dictionary then there would be a picture of my family. That's if they ever enjoyed each other's company enough to be in the same place at the same time. You get the picture. My surrogate Boxing day family I was perfect, and I didn't even hate them for it. That's how nice they were.

Or maybe how nice I wasn't. It's hard to decide.

A hundred yards past the pub is a plain looking semi-detached house. It has an equally green dull front garden. It's surrounded with a low wall that now has a hedge and railings backing it up, probably a reflection on the growing crime rate in this dying town. I know the accoutrements weren't always there because that low wall still has a place in my heart.

Mostly because it broke it.

Love Cats, The Cure.

A lot of Goths or Emos or Stoners or whatever the fuck they're called now, hate this record. Other Cure records are deemed cool even by the non-black wearing community. But no one liked Love Cats, not at the time anyway.

And neither did I. Until I met Michelle Black. Miche for short. She was taller than anyone else in the school year and to be honest, most of the teachers. She was pretty much curve less, skinny with stick arms, her figure was an anorexic's dream.

I wasn't in much better condition. Spotty with a basin haircut that had sprouted curls at the fringe making my head look like a furry fucking sunflower (Thanks mum). Weirdly I could still pull girls at the camp where I worked part time, mostly due to a gift of the gab. But that was everything I had in my armoury.

Most of the school drama club consisted of the beautiful people, not necessarily popular but if they did have an acting career in the future then they would be leading men and women. Not 'Fourth person in bar'.

You get the idea. So, me and Alison gravitated together. The first couple of sessions were improvisation. The teacher was called Ellie, a post hippy replete with tied dyed t-shirt, cords and ethnic necklaces. The improv was 'to get our juices going'. I laughed and realised that the sound floated around by itself, lonely apart from its own distorted echo.

But it wasn't an echo. It was Michelle. I looked back to see her sitting in the top left corner alone, crouched down after her

involuntary giggle. We exchanged conspiratory nervous smiles. From then on we would sit together both at drama club and in class. Not being one of the golden children we were never picked to do improv with the others, so we always partnered up.

Ellie, as part of her 'look I'm a cool teacher' routine would have the radio on in the background whilst we were acting. One session me and Michelle were trying to do a serious scene. I remember it was something to do with a couple discussing whether they should adopt a child.

We were sixteen. There was no point of reference for us and we were just babbling, going nowhere. And that was when we were talking. The improv was so stilted that you could hear the uncomfortable creak of the auditorium chairs in the long thick seconds of unacted silence. Miche could see how much I wasn't enjoying it. Don't get me wrong I could see the same on her face, but she cared about it less than me. I could feel the weighty eyes of the crowd. My cheeks flushed red and I stuttered the few words that I could manage. I thought I was going to cry. I could see that she could see that I was going to too.

And then Love Cats came on. Miche stood up. Her gawky limbs suddenly windmilled to the rhythm and her less than co-ordinated feet began to skip. I just stood as she danced until she took my hands and suddenly there was no one else there.

I could dance a bit, I was waiting at the camp at this time and whilst not exactly John Travolta, I could move about to the beat. I was reticent for a moment but all I could feel was the warmth of her hands in mine. When I looked up she had this mad look

on her face, a sort of hysterical grin urging me on. And we danced until the song finished. A few people clapped, most laughed and others just whispered quietly to each other, probably confirming our freak status. Ellie said 'it was unconventional and added the word 'nice' which sounded much more patronising than someone of her liberal leanings meant. In that moment, and for whatever it means when your sixteen, I fell in love with Michelle.

The Love Cats improv had cemented us as the weirdos of the group. I splashed out on a Walkman with the rare spare cash that I earned at the camp and we would listen to the Cure on it during rehearsals. The stretch of the tape that contained the song had been worn down to the point of being see-through. After drama club finished for the day, I would walk her down the road to where her Dad was going to pick her up and we would sit on the garden wall talking about everything and nothing.

Ever since that first day that she had saved me I had wanted to kiss her, and it didn't help that we sat so close that I could feel the heat from her long legs against mine. But time and biology can be cruel. In that short adolescent space of time Miche had begun to bloom. Her hair had grown long, and she gained curves where there once were none. Whilst I, with my broken skin and ridiculous haircut, had not changed. The more attractive male members of the cast had begun to talk to her. But she just seemed to tolerate their attentions before returning to me. Miche would walk back, crossing her eyes and sticking out her tongue to indicate how bored she was with their conversation. I loved her even more for that.

Again, bear in mind I was just a kid. After the first real performance we were back on the wall and she was talking about all the pointless things that we talked about and all I could do was sit and watch her. She was so beautiful, and I like to say that I had found her just as attractive before the physical changes that puberty, the ultimate plastic surgeon, had wrought.

I'd like to say that, but your mind has a way of rewriting history so that you look better back then. You know the quote about victors, but I was a loser, so I might as well at least try to stick to the truth.

I knew I was going to lose her and as she told me about her Dad's mad way of not being able to sit at the dining table without all the cutlery lining up with the grain of the wood....

(OCD wasn't a thing back then, those people were just eccentric, dyslexics were just thick and people with Asperger's were just 'Divs'. I never knew where that word came from, but it was the nom de plume of every kid that did something stupid. And no, I'm not wandering away from the point here as some sort of stylistic literary cleverness, I'm procrastinating because I don't want to talk about the next bit. Because this is the bit that smashed my heart into a thousand pieces. For the first but not the last time. But eventually this diversion must end because the damn parentheses (..oh here's one, I could have said bracket but it's a shorter word and then I couldn't have added this recursive aside to explain it) is going to turn up eventually. And here it is...)

....when I just lunged at her for a kiss. Miche may have got better looking but she was no less lithe. Reflexively, I hope, she backed

away and my gawky teen frame overbalanced on the wall and I fell headfirst into flowers that had no way of avoiding my lack of coordination.

We both started to say sorry for different reasons and I avoided the hands that I had held dancing a hundred times but now felt alien. I climbed over the wall to where she was now standing.

"I didn't mean to, well I did but I really like you, really. I just can't, I'm sorry. Oh god."

"I'm stupid," I said my face feeling too hot.

"No, God, no you're not. It's just we're friends and I never thought of you-No, I mean Oh god. Please sit back down."

Of course, she never thought of me like that. I tried to think it was a good thing, I didn't want to be one of those boys that she walked away from, pulling faces at them when they couldn't see her. Awkwardly we both sat back down.

"I'm sorry Miche, I just really like you and I thought you really liked me," I said looking at her stupid Doctor Marten's boots examining every stupid scuff and trying to think that it made her less stupidly feminine and stupid, stupid, (oh you were really stupid),stupid, stupid.

The lack of a flinch was a surprise when she touched my hand and I let my eyes wander to the long fingers and then up her arm to her fucking annoyingly beautiful face. I couldn't stay embarrassed/angry/broken because she looked hurt and maybe about to cry.

"I've got a boyfriend, that's all."

That's all.

Two words that could rip out your aorta, lobotomise your brain and sever your cock. Two simple sharp syllables. We had talked about everything.

Everything and apparently nothing.

She had never told me that she had a boyfriend. Because she knew. All that time she had known that I liked her as more than a friend and she had kept it a secret. Because of how I would act, because of how I was acting in that moment. A pathetic hurt little boy.

We sat back down in silence for a bit longer until she started to look at her watch.

"My Dad's probably on his way, I might walk down and meet him."

She stood up and moved toward me as if she was going to hug me or kiss me on the forehead or something else that just felt like a second prize. I suddenly found something else, anything else, more interesting, looking away from her. Miche took the hint. I remember her waving at me, even though it was in my peripheral vision. I wished I'd looked up, I wished that I had made her feel better. I wished that I had been twenty years older so that I had handled it better.

We never really talked after the play was finished.

I never went back to drama club.

I had reached the outskirts of town proper and was shocked to see that the villagers hadn't burned down Dracula's castle. That was the name we gave to Gavin Reeder's house. Either side the townsfolk had built these mundane semi-detached houses. They differed only in the style of the conservatories and porches that had been built on them to keep one step ahead of the invisible Jones's. For semis they had big back and front gardens, most of which had added fences or brick walls or hedges with topiaries that had been carved without skill into down syndrome birds. Or animals so indistinct that they were only recognisable because they had four legs. But Gav's house had probably been there long before its modern neighbours.

A four-storey gothic edifice that looked like it was permanently frowning down at its neighbours in vampiric disgust. It wasn't just surrounded with abused hedges but also large thick coniferous trees that hid the shame of the crimes that went on within. I considered going in and saying hello, if Gavin's parents were even still alive. But then they never liked me. Not since the wanton vandalism that I perpetuated in the shadow of that bleak house (thank you Mr Dickens). But then I blame Chris de burgh for that. Women in red, my arse.

Crusader: Chris De Bergh.

We had called him Addams at school. Mostly because of the house but mostly because he had this pallid look about him. Gav was one of

those kids that every school has; worn school uniform, dank greasy hair and smelled of something musky and unidentifiably unpleasant.

But we became mates because of the Smileys. I ended up sitting next to him because of Ali. After the garden wall debacle, I didn't want to sit next to her in class anymore and the only other seat was next to stinky Addams. Whilst I was trying to understand the sudden bizarre symbology of calculus that o-level maths hadn't prepared me for. Gav had started to draw a grid in his exercise book and then numbered it along the edges. Then he carefully drew an etch a sketch style landscape and then drew these things around it. They were circular, half the circle was divided in an arc with vertical lines joining it to the edge, representing a mouth. Two other arcs were joined above it with smaller circles inside making eyes. Then he appended each one with a name, finally writing his own next to one. Each time the teacher turned to the board Gav would roll a green and red dice and cross out a square on the grid. If the square was on a 'Smiley' then he would cross out the name. He saw me watching and turned to whisper to me.

"I never win," he said.

Everyone knew Gav had it bad at home. His Mum and Dad weren't abusive as such but pretty much disregarded him. Word in the playground was that his hippy parents had him because they were too liberal to have an abortion. But that didn't mean that they wanted him. Maybe ignoring him was worse than killing him before birth. Just proves it's never too late to abort.

I watched him play Smileys for five or six classes and he was right. The last of the grinning little icons destroyed was never him.

During the next class he watched with fascination as I drew a similar grid and populated it. Then I turned away so that he couldn't see me finishing off the set up. The teacher, a beer smelling, cord encrusted man ironically named Mr Lush had to take one of his too frequent toilet breaks and I took the opportunity to present Gav with his new game. He looked down at the grid and for a moment looked slightly bewildered before his pale face lit up, looking like one of his own drawings.

"Now you can win'" I said. Each Smiley had the name Gav written next to it.

We were friends after that and I needed one in the post Ali dusk that I was perpetually living in.

Gav's parents were academics, I never knew what in, but they loved books. Everywhere you went in the gothic monstrosity there were piles of them, on tables, in the downstairs bathroom, in the bloody bath (which probably explained the various aroma's that my new best friend emitted). His parents went to a lot of conferences or seminars or other similar sounding things that I now know to be just a jolly. Which meant we had the house to ourselves a lot. Or more accurately we had his Dad's homebrew to ourselves.

I was still suffering a bit from Ali and Gav had had a fight with someone at school that he didn't want to talk about, so we both could with something to take our minds off what we thought were the

most important things in the world. We had only stolen small glasses of the lethal beer that Gav's dad had been brewing in an old bathtub in one of the rickety sheds in the back garden. But Gav seemed particularly determined to abuse the privilege that night. We found a couple of buckets and submerged them in the thick brown froth before carrying them back to the house. Gav kicked books off a couch which wasn't pointing at anything in particular because they didn't have a television. In fact, they didn't even have a radio. Like I said Gav's parents loved books, but they hated 'degraded forms of art' like movies, music, television. In fact, just about anything apart from books. Which was why it was such a surprise when Gav disappeared after the first tonsil grating pint and brought in a record player.

"That's all well and good but what the fuck are you going to play on it, the fuckwits (as we got used to calling them) haven't got any records."

"Yeah, I know, but I have."

Gav moved yet another pile of books exposing a cubby hole with a pile of albums. All of which were shit. Five star, Bryan Ferry, Bloody Saxon and a few others.

Oh, and Chris De Burgh.

Not even lady in Red CDB, not that that would have been much better. Crusader, the album was called, so we put the bloody thing on. At least it drowned out the serial killer creaking from the multiple floors upstairs. Gav always said it was just the house

settling. The fucking thing had been there for more than a hundred years. You would think it had settled in by now.

Despite a taste like pissed on twigs we got shit faced on the home brew. I was in a pretty good mood and started to make towers out of the books, thinking they were babelesque in stature despite knocking them over, due to fingers more ale than flesh, even before they reached my own height.

Gav didn't seem into it. He just stared at the records as if he had a bad taste in his mouth, which he did of course so I put it down to that. I even suggested taking the tomes outside and making a bonfire, but he just shook his head. Which was pretty ironic as I loved books and had to hide them from my Dad who would destroy them, giving no quarter. But then when you your liver is a hundred and twenty five percent hops you make bad decisions. And I mean both me and my pater here.

"No one ever learned anything from books boy," Dad used to say. But that's another story.

Gav gathered up the records, snatching at them like you would an irritating mosquito.

"I've got a better idea."

We went out to the garden and Gav started to decorate the tiny trees there with the albums. The colourful rectangles catching the last of the summer sun in their new home amongst the branches.

"What the fuck are you doing Gav, you spastic," I said.

"You'll see," he said, marching off to the shed.

He came back with a rifle.

There was a sense of relief when I realised it was an air rifle. Just for a moment I thought that Gav was going to top himself. But that would be hard work with twenty-two calibre air pellets. My brain kicked back in and I finally put two plus two plus gun plus records together.

"But we'll fuck up your records," I said, loading it anyway with the pellets Gav passed to me.

"They're not my records."

"They're not you parents?" The question was rhetorical. The only way they were theirs were if they had bloody lectures on.

"Heard something at school and someone wanted to keep my mouth shut about it. So, he leant me them."

"Well he's going to be pretty pissed off if we fuck them up."

"He's already pissed off, I told him I was going to tell anyway. And then he gave me this." Gav pointed at his black eye.

"What the fuck was it you were going to tell?"

"Can't say, said he'd kick the shit out of me every day if I did."

"You can tell me Gav."

He looked at me then and I couldn't tell if he was going to cry or hit me.

"No, I can't tell you, especially you."

He looked down at the floor then and he looked lost, guilty and sad. I'd never seen anyone so sad. I didn't want him to feel like that, I did the only thing I could think of to take his mind from it.

The dull thwack of the first shot caused Gav's head to shoot back up. The pellet had ripped a long scar across Bryan Ferry's smug brylcreemed hairdo. I reloaded and fired again and this time the satisfying sound of plastic shattering washed over us as the projectile ripped through the album and fractured the disc within.

"Fucking cool," I said and held out the rifle for Gav to take for his turn, but he shook his head.

"No, you carry on."

"No way Gav, you're missing out."

He gently pushed the gun back my way.

"No, you should. I want you to. They're the favourite records of the prick that hit me and they're shit," And there was the sadness again.

I shot them down one by one. We saved Crusader until last. And when I was finishing killing (so called) music I turned, and Gav was smiling.

I didn't think the shop would still be there. As I walked into Lowestoft proper most of the small establishments had closed. Shutters hiding the shame of being bullied into silence by their

bigger corporate brothers. Green grocers that couldn't keep up with Tesco's, post offices that couldn't keep up with email, book shops that had been whooped by Amazon. So, it was a surprise when I turned a corner to find the record shop sitting there open.

Gav's Greatest hits.

Not only was it open but on walking in I found it populated with people half my age flicking through albums. Because it wasn't records they sold anymore. It was Vinyl. I snorted by accident, a half laugh at the joke I told myself that these embryos wouldn't get.

Maybe in ten years Betamax would make a comeback as well.

"Fuck me backwards."

Gav was a shadow of his former self. It was a twenty stone shadow that eclipsed the kid I remembered. Waddling out from behind the counter I could see that his fashion sense hadn't changed but he looked happy. Happier than I had ever known him.

"Styler, run the till," he said to a girl with ROYGBIV hair and piercings in parts of her face that looked out of place.

'It's Skylar, Mr. Reeder," she said with a 'I've told you a thousand time's' face'. He just flapped a hand at her and she flounced to her station looking sulky.

Before I had a chance to proffer a hand to shake Gav grabbed me and gave me a hug.

"Prodigal son and all that," he said, "it's good to see you. What the hell are you doing here?"

Before I could tell him, he led me past the face pulling Skylar into a back room where a pot of tea was already sitting.

We sat for a couple of hours and swapped war stories over the stuff that had happened in the last twenty years or so.

Only the good stuff, the stuff you want someone to know about you. We had got through four pots before I mentioned the house. He was still there, inheriting it from his parents even though they had always said they would donate it to a 'charity for lesbian Lebanese freedom fighters' or some other nonsense as he put it.

"Pretty funny," I said when there was a pause in the conversation.

"Hmm?" he said through a mouthful of Tetley, a raised eyebrow asking what I had found amusing.

"I knew you owned a record shop, ironic considering we fucked up all those albums that night."

For a moment Gav looked perplexed then he laughed.

"Christ I'd forgotten about that. You know right?"

"I know what?"

"Oh, shit all these years and you didn't know."

I shrugged.

He looked at me in disbelief, then a mischievous look crossed his face.

"Hang on," he said and then forced his bulk up out of a grateful wooden chair and went back into the shop. A minute or so

later he returned with a single and placed it on the turntable that played music into the shop.

It took me a second to place it, but the unmistakable tone of Joe Johnson's voice sang out of the speakers.

The song was 'Is she really going out with him'.

Gav looked at me, searching my face to see if I understood his cryptic musical clue.

"You know whose albums they were right?" he said.

And I thought about the walk, my trip down memory lane and the way your subconscious fucks with you. And the vertigo of sudden realisation hit me.

Gav laughed and made to pour me another tea. He picked up the semi-skimmed, but I stopped his hand.

"No milk?" he asked.

"No, not this time, "the least you could do when your subconscious had played a blinder was tip your hat to it.

"Do you have any lemon?" I said.

End