

Glue and Bastards

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Round Hill primary school field, Beeston, Nottinghamshire. Circa March 1981. This was a small town suffering the early effects of Thatcherite policy. Youth unemployment was skyrocketing and the chances of getting a job of any description were slack for my generation. The echoes of the Sex Pistols 'No Future' mantra was a steady fixture of my thinking back then. All the government offered to the rising crises in unemployment was to put my generation on youth opportunities schemes Youth Opportunities, the Youth Training Schemes....this was the future to look forward too. I poured the Zoff, plaster remover onto my red and black jumper sleeve and took a big suck. The icy taste filled my mouth. The hit was almost instant. The sense of reality my thirteen year old body was annihilated in a moment. Echoes filled my head, together with a sense of euphoria. Balance was clearly lost and a fuzzy, warm feeling covered my body. The hot summer day took on a new sense of reality; a new consciousness that would become increasingly familiar over the next few years. The grass under my feet felt unstable, balance was lost. Waves of disorientation undulated and swarmed through my head and an uncontrollable laughter burst out. Pleasure had been discovered for this young punk. I woke up after what seemed like a very deep sleep. Thinking I'd been out for hours it turned out I'd only been high for a few minutes. This was the pattern of sniffing various substances containing the dangerous chemicals that proved socially addictive.

Sniffing glue was popular within and without the punk scene in Beeston and throughout the UK. Tabloids screamed headlines of death and danger stemming from this new youth craze. From 1977 onwards I'd fallen in love with punk rock. The title of the zine, *Sniffing Glue* would not be discovered by this young punk for some time. All I knew was that it was dangerous, parents were scared and outraged by this practice and that was enough for me. Memory fails me how I came to be on the school field or who had the magical substance that day. Suffice to say the effects of that short sniff were to populate my life for some time. The industrial town of Beeston was in decline and ravaged by the Thatcherite policies of deindustrialisation. Unemployment was high and all the school I attended had in store for us was to be sent to the local factory once we'd left with next to nothing in terms of qualifications. Not that I cared, my education flew out of the stereo speakers from bands like Crass, UK Subs and Discharge. That music made clear sense to me (still does now). The scene in the early eighties was populated, predictably by a number of factions and these were in school. The group of friends I was with in 1981 changed frequently during this time, the original group of punks I associated were mostly into UK82 punk like the Exploited, Chron Gen and Blitz, much drawn from the legacy of the Sex Pistols (Glasper, 2004). I was a paper boy working at a number of newshops in the town. Journeying on my rounds I often encountered the odd discarded gluebag. Such items were strange, dried up affairs, often resembling a weird cast –off from some dubious sexual practice: a giant, used condom. As teenagers inevitably explore the nooks and crannies of their hometown environments, numerous examples of these bags could be discovered in graveyards, surrounding electricity substations and recreation parks. What often accompanied these relics were discarded rolled up tubes and tins of Evo Stick adhesive, soggy old boxes of freezer bags and cigarette butts. It was clear a thriving subculture surrounding this was evident in the town. The question that bugged me was who was responsible?

School was shit for me. I could not stand it, not only did I suffer from extreme, social anxiety, the teachers, for the most part were a bunch of prats. I loved to read books, loved music and writing, though the school experience never acted as a creative catalyst for me. My love of history was soured on a weekly basis by an awful authoritarian teacher. One particular afternoon when the class was

trawling through the finer, uncritical points of Richard III and the children in the tower, a rather interesting character that had been expelled from the school came into the classroom. Bleached, spiky red hair, a filthy bootleg Westwood 'Destroy' cheesecloth and forearm tattoos: a rather impressive Peter and The Test-tube Babies 'Up Yer Bum' design. There was something else to this character. He slurred out, "can you sign this form, Sir", arms hanging listlessly, the red hair making his complexion pasty, punctuated by copious chin spots and unusually red lips. Richard III was handsome by comparison. He was the best anti role-model I'd seen for some time out of his head and 100% punk. On the way home from school later the glue bags on the path we walked in-between the golf course were visible. The trademark of the unknown pleasure was evident

Rumours circulated around various peer groups that a few of the punks in the final year were into glue sniffing. These people compared to us third year novice punks were seriously cool. Always wearing the right UK82 clothes and displaying an impeccable disregard for authority of any type. They were seen frequently in and around the home town often boarding buses to hang out with other punks in Nottingham's Market Square. It was inevitable one of us was going to try this sooner or later...it was only a matter of time. My punk peer groups fluctuated during this period as the trial and error of finding good friends led me down a few cul-de-sacs. One of the staple themes of young teen discussion was glue sniffing. The Zoff incident above was the first time I'd been high or inebriated. It opened a new world up to me. That said it was not the real deal. Evo Stick was. This required freezer bags and the said solvent ensuring the correct high could be secured.

The paper round I had provided the income to purchase the first tubes of glue. The first time I tried sniffing was a solitary affair. The local Woolworths on the high street sold the glue. One summer afternoon in 1981 I purchased a tube of the red beast from Woolworths for twenty-five pence together with two packets of polo mints to mask the solvent smell. The bags were lifted from the cupboard at home. Some of the land at the end of my street was being redeveloped and housing built there. After the paper round I cycled up there ensconcing myself in the dusty first floor of the new build, surrounded by bags of cement and the aroma of fresh plaster. Summer was in full swing, the sound of children playing down the street added to the sense of personal change. It wasn't that long since I would have been playing down with them on my bike. Now I had a new potential hobby. With my bike safely stashed around the back of this house, I began my journey. The tube of glue had a tiny aluminium nipple that had to be broken off. The pungent odour of the glue instantly evident. Squirting half of this into the corner of the freezer bag, the top was folded over my hand. This technique I had observed from a lone punk staggering down Chilwell High Road some weeks earlier, with him blowing into the bag and breathing the fumes back in by pushing and squeezing the bag. Sat there in my little hideaway I began to do the same. The taste differed from the Zoff yet the high was 100% more powerful than this, instant and brutal. The taste as the vapours rose was oddly sweet. The bag began to echo, the more I breathed in the more the definition of vision began to blur. Echoes governed my hearing, auditory hallucinations of the first order. Thoughts became pleasurable in their confusion as unknown music began to fill y head in time with the rhythm of the bag. The high became deeper as the evening sounds and light collapsed into dreams.

Retrospectively it's difficult to recall what happened next, consciousness shit down though. I remembered nothing of the session awaking some hours later in the same room, covered in cement and plaster dust. This was hardly the most promising of starts to the new high, though for some particular reason the opening few minutes were amazing, indescribable really. Something told me it would not be that last time I'd be doing this.

My dad took a job in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia early in 1980 to stave off the looming unemployment crisis and free him from a failing marriage and dead-end job managing the local council depot. As a result he was absent for six month or longer periods. The result was I had the chance to run pretty much free, choosing to mostly ignore any authority my mother and brother feebly tried to foist upon me. The house we lived in was on the same street from my new found glue den. It took some time to gather myself together whilst constructing a believable excuse about what I'd been up to. Polo mints were devoured at a rapid rate in a feeble attempt to disguise the overpowering odour of glue, the crunch echoing through my newly addled head. The skin around my mouth felt delicate as if a rash was due to set in. My hands had glue residue, turning black from all the dust I'd been rolling around in my glued up state. Most of this was easy to remove but there were always little telltale spots that I would spot over the forthcoming days. I got in and remember my mum looking strange, I don't think she noticed but I still felt out of it, feeling paranoid that I felt sure she'd notice the smell. My 'get out of jail' story was already prepared: I would have said I'd been gluing the seat on my bike which had a split...., the perfect excuse. I remember that night feeling elated. I'd got away with my first glue-sniffing venture and was ready for the next day at school.

The next day's paper round was completed in a groggy manner and I felt sure I'd made a few mistakes. Sod it. At least I made it round. The walk up the golf-course path to school with various mates was as per usual and I kept tight lipped about the sniffing episode, that was my secret for now. Lessons and assembly for me were of the usual disinteresting CSE diet of boredom. Most of my time in lessons was consumed either by daydreaming or causing disruption acting the goat with the other never do wells of the class. Ten o'clock was breaktime, marked with the usual spilling out of the rowdy pupils. This was also the time for the smokers to gather at the appointed place on the school field, safe from the prying eyes of the teachers supervising the usual chaos. Two of the smokers crowd were brothers a year or so above me, John and Pete. Both were adopted and had been in trouble for various offenses at the school and beyond. Neither were punks but I knew that John was into sniffing for sure. Quietly I told him about my previous nights exploits and asked if he fancied going sniffing later in the week. The answer was of course, yes, as agreed we'd meet after the paper rounds in the high road at five. Friday was payday so I was covered to get more glue.

The school week dragged in the same way the week began. I hated school and never felt it challenged me or allowed creativity. To me it was more often than not about following rules and adhering to a hidden curriculum: I made it my mission to secretly fuck with the rules at every opportunity. No one in our year was fooled by rosy career talks for the religious freak of a deputy headmaster; we knew there was massive youth unemployment. Sniffing was a clear escape from this pressure. We all knew we'd either be on the dole or stuck on a shitty scheme in a couple of years. Friday arrived and I was excited, the last glue buzz was marred by oblivion, this time I felt sure some of the hallucinations I'd overhead in playground discussions would visit me, well hopefully. All was not going to go to plan.

It was the tail end of a scorching hot summer's day in Beeston and, as usual I called into Woolworths for a Slush Puppy, and this time I'd get two tubes of Evo Stick. I was pretty well paid in those days for the paper round and also did the Sunday morning shift which paid over a pound for the session. The till girl didn't bat an eyelid at the two tubes of glue, this was the time before the major local panic fired by the *Nottingham Evening Post* about the 'lethal youth craze' of sniffing had took hold.

I met John at the end of the high road, he was on foot and we walked back up to my house to drop my bike off. We headed to the golf course; I'd managed to stuff a few freezer bags into my

jeans pocket. The usual pisstaking and horseplay happened while we made our way to the golf course. John was a fair bit taller than me and pretty handy in a fight. He was always in trouble for one thing or another and always managed to slip away leaving someone else with the blame, pretty clever. Equally, there was an uncanny, disordered sense to his general persona. While he wasn't a punk and always banging on about Dexys Midnight Runners who I thought were shite we got on pretty well. I'd met him as part of garden creeping and general trouble causing gang. We'd ride around on bikes firing berries with catapults at suburban windows, annoy the super rich on Beeston Fields Drive by ringing doorbells and running off and lots of similar, typical teenage behaviour. By far the Garden creeping was the most fun. There was one rule. You had to get from one end of a street to another by climbing over fences and not being discovered. Inevitable we were often chased by angry householders and occasionally the police. We always managed to get away, meeting up afterwards in fits of laughter. That said the fearlessness of John always gave the impression of him being slightly disturbed. He never discussed his past and all I knew of him was he and his brother lived with his stepparents. His stepmother was terminally ill.

Even in this summer weather John wore a donkey jacket, jeans and dockers. I never was him dress any different. I had my usual regulation red and black striped jumper on, black bondage trousers and dockers. We got the entrance of the golf course. We had to be careful. Aside from the path through the middle this was a private playground of the rich. Frequent signs warned of trespassers being prosecuted: they were there to be ignored. All the local kids ignored this and the woods surrounding the golf course were a regular haunt of local kids who built dens, played hide and seek and got up to general mischief. One of the main 'hobbies' was collecting the lost golf balls and selling them on to Bowden's second hand shop on Chilwell road for ten pence a pop. This time we were on a different mission. Once the coast was clear of golfers crossing from one course to another, we snuck in. John knew the way, and we darted down a long path surrounded by tall trees and bushes. At the end of the path, a disused swimming pool greeted us. The summer heat had dried the remaining water to a small muddy puddle at one end. We sat on the side, John said no one ever came through here, we were safe. We sparked up a Benson and Hedges cigarettes down to the nubs from a ten pack, passing the time for a bit in the early evening sunshine sat on the side of the pool. Each of us had a gob puddle forming, each bit of spit punctuating the conversation with the occasional 'fizz' of the ash as it landed on the mess. Eventually with a couple of fag nubs sizzling in the gob puddles we got the freezer bags out. I handed John the red tube of Evo, he said he'd pay me back on Monday at school. Caps broke off and fresh glue in the bags we began to sniff. The familiar pungent flavour filled my mouth, the warm, crackly feeling echoing across my body and into my head. The last time I sniffed I took it easy with the glue. John saw it differently as a seasoned sniffer. We'd got into it, the usual antics occurred, running and staggering from one end of the pool. We were having a right laugh, my thoughts were jumbled up, the colours of the world became much brighter, the rushes from the glue getting much stronger. Nothing could top this, we felt unbeatable. Then it began to go wrong.

We were shitfaced; John produced a new half tin of glue from his pocket. The two earlier bags were now dried up, early dusk was closing in and the golfers were tuning into the clubhouse in the fading light. I was really out of it and felt a bit scared, I didn't want to get more smashed but agreed. The metal seal of the glue tin was punctured in with John's house key. This time he poured loads of glue into each of the bag. We began to sniff again. This time I totally blacked out. It was like I'd entered a large black void, mostly the same as the previous occasion though this time I had the craziest dreams. After what seemed like an age I remember slowly coming to. We were no longer at the swimming pool and instead on the main fairway of the golf course. My head felt like a merry-go-

round. It was then I realised that John was swinging me around by my arm. I began to feel sick, regaining my senses quickly. John had a mad, distant look in his eyes. I tumbled over on the grass, tearing the knee of my jeans, the grass stain and bloody graze visible. Lying back and looking into the dusky sky. A sharp tug on my arm brought me back to my feet again. John swung around in circles; he was totally out of it and must have sniffed the remainder of the tin. I landed this time rolling down one of the banks of the course. I'd now got the fear. The dusk cast shadows on the course. Managing to get back on my feet I thought I'd better run. As I started running, John's arm caught me around the neck from behind. I was dragged to the floor. He pinned my arms down to the floor with my knees. Shit, I was in a tight spot, this youth was a nutter! Cloudy, vicious eyes regarded me with undiluted hate. 'I'm gonna strangle you, you cunt!', he bellowed. Sticky, glue covered hands were tight around my neck, the top of his gluebag visible from the top of his Donkey jacket. Try as I might I couldn't shift him. He was muttering, 'die you cunt', over and over. I thought this was the end of me, game over. He stopped, then grabbed my arm and threw me again, leaving me in a spluttering heap. He was soon back on top of me, as I tried to struggle my arms away from being pinned. The glue had totally worn off now, heart pounding. I punched him in the side and then had my hand pushing his hand back, this made him even more determined to continue his warped task. The brute strength pinned my arms down again. I was helpless. The hands were back around my throat, even though I'd been sniffing the miasma of glue and cigarettes were wafting onto me as he drew his face forward. This is it; I'm going to die, with thought of my previous life flashing through my mind. I was in the shit this time. Then John stopped, stood up and walked away. It was bizarre, yet I realised he must have come to and worked out what he was doing. I was angry, upset and still scared.

John made his way up the fairway to the exit gate, we'd been through earlier. I tagged along feeling the bruises appear around my neck and pulled muscles, adrenaline pulsing rapidly through my body. John was quiet, though I wanted answers. Catching up with him, I asked what the fuck was he up too. I was met with silence. He continued to walk saying nothing. Reaching the gate he stopped. I asked again, what all that violence was about. He still had a vacant look about him and muttered something about not knowing what I was on about. Fucking hell, he either had a very short memory or was in total denial of his actions. We gave each other a leg up over the fence and walked back towards my house pretty much in silence. My fuzzy head was clearing and I was beginning a plan of how I could get in the house and straight up to my room. It was way past ten o'clock now though my mother rarely complained about me being late in those days. Me and John parted company at the corner of Fellows Road, he only lived a few streets down. I mumbled something about seeing him again but made the mental note to avoid the mental cunt again at all costs. The realisation was hitting me clearly that I could have been killed. This sniffing thing could be fucking dangerous. Indeed that was an understatement.

Managing to get in the house undetected and mumbling something to my mother about getting an early night I got to my room. My reflection in the bathroom mirror betrayed the nasty bruises visible on my neck. I'd have to borrow some of my mother's foundation make up to cover them up. Looking at my torn knees in my jeans I felt lucky. I washed my grazed knee and went to bed. Sleep came fast that night, though the memory of this shitty night would last a lifetime. Monday at school, I avoided John, my mind firmly made up to avoid the mental bastard at all costs. That, in earnest was where our friendship stopped. Over the next few years we seldom saw each other and when we did the events of that night were never mentioned. My first sniffing session had been marked by the oblivion of total memory loss. I often puzzled that John's behaviour that night was down to his

troubled background. That the past demons had come out to play in some glued up nightmare. I guess I'll never know.

The next few years were marked as most teenagers are, with fleeting trips across various friendship groups. My other love outside of punk rock during the early eighties was BMX freestyle bikes. This was the activity that kept me away from the sniffing, though as I matured, began to hang out with punks again. Glue inevitable revisited my life. Mostly my desire to sniff again was rekindled by schoolyard gossip of the older punks sniffing. The gluebags around the various nooks and crannies of Beeston multiplied and so did the tales. New peer groups were developing and I got into collecting punk records and also hanging about with a group of punks the same age. Steve, was one who was a decent sort of youth, we occasionally sniffed and had a laugh, mostly down the darker corners of the school field. The one tale of horror was one of the older punks who totally lost it whilst sniffing one night. The rumour was he totally damaged his brain and ended up in hospital. A lot of this was Chinese whispers of course though it turned out mixed with an equal measure of truth. With lots of the new peer groups forming at school, some were sniffing more regularly than others with some regularly skipping school to go down the Trent and spend the afternoon sniffing. One youth was expelled from the school as a result of being caught. He ended up at a school across the town.

BEESTON CAR PARK EPISODE

The next group I fell into were ace. Mostly they were my own age and all into Discharge, Crass, UK82 but mostly anarcho punk. This would be my new peer group and I'd spend the next couple of years of my life hanging around with them. Central to the groups were the King brothers. Both shared a love of Stiff Little Fingers and we spent many a time walking home through the gluebag golf course, singing 'Wasted Life' and 'At the Edge' at the tops of our voices. What united us during late 1982 was a collective love of glue sniffing. The King Brothers both had paper rounds. More than that they were both excellent shoplifters. After their paper rounds they would both go into Wilkinson's hardware supermarket and lift a few tins of Evo Stick and packs of freezer-bags into their paper bags. By the time we split off after the walk home we agreed to meet at the Oak tree at the Golf Course entrance on Wollaton road at six. Sometimes we had to phone each other to check if the brothers had been successful in their Wilkos trip. The codename for glue in those days of parents listening into the landline was 'milk'. This 'code' saved our necks a couple of times as parents were sure we were up to no good.

Meeting at the Oak at six we were clearly had strength in numbers. There was anything from five to around twelve of us. We'd walk down Wollaton road, cross the A52 and head up through the sprawling Lowes estate to the scrubland at the back known as Snakey woods. Once there the sniffing began with the most popular spot being a tennis court on the school at the top. Things were much more relaxed and more punk than my past experiences of sniffing. My tolerance to sniffing had also improved. We could get really messed up yet remain in control. That wasn't to say that we didn't black out occasionally but I felt much safer doing it with these people. The years have blunted my memory somewhat though the residing memory for me at this point was the emergence of tunes filing my head as I sniffed. My favourite tune at this point was the Poison Girls 'Persons Unknown' track off the *Bloody Revolutions* split record with Crass. This tune repeated in my head throughout a number of sniffing sessions during the winter during early 1983. Equally and more bizarrely, I also had a music loop of Duran Duran's 'This is Planet Earth' stuck in my head whilst sniffing, enough to put me off the practice forever. I hated that fucking band. That said the general experience of sniffing glue at this time was my first experience of what could be achieved between a group of friends who were into punk. We all had our individual parental troubles and face a bleak future in terms of jobs. Glue sniffing and punk was a great escape route for us as a group, a bonding ritual if

you'll excuse the pun. In spite of other groups sniffing glue at school, our growing anarchist and vegetarian political stance brought the ire of the deputy headmaster and the local jocks. We managed to find strength in our status as outsiders. Gradually the sniffing tailed off for some of us, including myself as we approached leaving school. We were growing up fast and also getting heavily into animal rights politics. As glue was not vegetarian on account of its rather nasty animal bone ingredients, the practice fizzled out. After school most of us ended up either on government training schemes or on the dole. The last sniffing session I remember was just off Chilwell high road making our way down to Dovecote lane wreck. That night I remember the head sniffing soundtrack was from the Icons of Filth with the track 'Show us You Care'. That was a great memory, tainted only by the 'that's bloody disgusting' jibe from a passerby as I boldly sniffed in public walking down to Dovecote lane. My residing memories of this session were of one of the King brothers tripping into an altered state of consciousness on a glue high. This was the ultimate sought after glue sniffing experience. Schoolyard tales of hands coming out of gluebags; the glue man who came to visit the sniffers, holding conversations with them and the tale of three floating nuns one individual recounted. My own experience of this was sniffing at the Oak with a couple of mates one night when I evaporated into blue steam. I felt I'd left my body and vividly remember the feeling of looking back at myself in my donkey jacket and black Mohican haircut sniffing before materialising back in my body. That was an odd experience indeed.

Back on Dovecote lane wreck, the sniffing tailed off. A few had gone home on account of training schemes to attend the following day. I was left with the King brothers and a relative newcomer to the group: an ex Bramcote skinhead called Gramph, who'd seen the light of the anarcho punk ideal. He was also a frequent sniffer and had chased the King brothers once when they were sniffing up at Snakey woods. All was good now, or supposedly so. I was sat smoking on the swings, about to head off home. The others were in one of the wooden shacks built on the park for children to climb though. Grampher suddenly lost it lashing out unprovoked at the King brothers, the sound of punches resonating across the park. Various insults and threats were traded, though the fight soon calmed down. We parted and I took Grampher back up to my house to calm him down. Just like John her was oddly quiet and not recognising what had just occurred. The glare of the strip lights in the kitchen shone on the true state Grampher was in. He sat there not drinking the tea and moving his fingers in a circular motion, unresponsive to any of my questions. This seemed to go on forever, though I was mildly relieved when my mother entered the kitchen and he showed some signs of life. My previous experience with John nearly killing me left me nervous. The mental note had been made. Sniffing was a dangerous business. I was out of that hobby for good. Grampher eventually left and the incident never mentioned again. My time with this group of friends was beginning to move in different directions.

The year or so that followed our last sniff led me in a different path. I wanted to be a musician and took to hanging out in Rock City; this was where the occasional use of LSD in the mid eighties upstaged the gluebag days. One day we decided to return to Snakey to try sniffing again. After the mind-blowing blast of acid, most of us left and went our own ways. The teenage buzz was dead for us. Onto pastures new.