

New Boy
by Danny Brunton

It's the summer of 1966 and I have just turned twelve. My family has moved from a Glasgow tenement to a new-build estate of bought houses on the outskirts of Winchester. Because of the different school system in Scotland, I have missed the First Year of secondary education in England, so I join the Grammar school in the Second Year. I was usually top of the class in primary, so I manage to catch up with most subjects.

My new school has public school pretensions and we have to wear caps or straw boaters. I wear a cap but take it off the moment I am out of view of the teachers and prefects. Most of the pupils are dayboys, but some are boarders, whose parents live abroad. Many of my classmates can't understand my Glasgow accent; some ask if we had television in Scotland.

A couple of days before half term, I am invited to a party. We have just finished a history lesson and most of the pupils have vacated the room, leaving a group of four or five close friends, who went to primary school together and live in big houses in the posh part of town.

As we put our books away, Jeremy calls over to me, "Do you want to come to my birthday party, Scotty? Some County High girls are coming and my parents are letting me have booze."

I don't like my new nickname, but I don't complain because I want to go to a party with girls and alcohol.

Back on the estate, I play outside the terraced houses where some of the rougher kids live. Terry and Patrick, who go to the Secondary Modern and are in the year above me, overhear me talking about the party. Terry asks if I can take him and Patrick with me.

"I don't know if I am allowed to take anyone."

"Of course you can. We're your friends, aren't we?"

"I don't know him well enough to ask."

"He's in your class, isn't he? He won't mind."

"But the party is on the other side of town."

"So, how are you getting there?"

"My dad's taking me."

"He can take us too, can't he?"

"I'm not sure."

"Just tell him we're your friends. It'll be alright."

During the war, my dad was a Sergeant in the Black Watch, but now he works for the Inland Revenue. When he is not working or studying for Civil Service exams, he drinks. He is not violent or happy or morose. He just drinks with an air of resignation. He rarely pays much attention to what goes on in my life, so he fails to realize that I am in a tricky situation. I hope he will refuse to pick up

the older boys, but he doesn't, and they squeeze into the back seat of his Ford Corsair.

Jeremy has a den in the basement of his parents' imposing residence, with hand-me-down furniture and a record player. Some of my classmates are in couples with the grammar school girls. I introduce my "good friends" and nobody asks why I have brought two strangers with me. I gratefully accept a bottle of beer and start drinking.

Once the party is in full swing, Patrick grabs me, pulls me to the ground and pins me down. I feel the hard floorboards beneath me and the weight of indignity on my chest. I have been in similar situations before, straddled by some bullyboy tormenting me until I cry. As I wriggle and squirm to try to get away, I am acutely aware that the girls are watching.

Terry joins in, pulling down my trousers. I redouble my efforts to escape, but then a third boy joins in; one of my classmates. I feel the neck of a beer bottle clanking against my teeth, as he pours on the humiliation, beer overflowing my mouth, running down my cheeks. I am outnumbered, but my desperation is such that I manage to wrestle my way free. I scramble upright, raging, alcohol coursing through my veins. I am still afraid to tackle the bullies, so I punch my classmate in the face instead.

It's the first time I have ever drunk alcohol and the first time I have hit anyone back. I spin around like a deranged dervish, knocking over the table, throwing chairs across the room, pulling down bookshelves. Everyone backs off while Jeremy calms me down.

My social climbing has finished before it got off the ground.

To overcome my shame, I pretend I am a tough kid, the same as my nemeses from the estate. As a young child, I grew up in a chaotic environment. Although I did well at school and went to Boy Scouts and Bible classes, my parents both worked full time and I spent a lot of time out on the streets. Like my unruly childhood friends, I got involved in lighting fires in derelict buildings, stealing comics from the shops and scrapping with the Catholics from over the hill. I have plenty experience of troublesome behaviour, so I can readily adopt the persona of a delinquent who drinks and fights.

Back at school, I gravitate towards the boarders because they are outsiders. I avoid my classmates who were at the party, and the other local boys in my year. I hang out with the most disruptive pupils, the smokers and shoplifters, who are mainly boarders or new boys.

At the end of the Second Year, we are streamed according to our Latin results. The Latin teacher has shown little interest in helping me catch up and I have spent the year playing minesweeper with another new boy at the back of his class. I get 2% in the Latin exam, so I am put into the bottom stream, where I find the schoolwork easy. Once again I am top of the class, so I have plenty of latitude to mess around and still get all my schoolwork done.

On the estate, I make friends with Karen, a Jewish girl from North London, who lives in one of the detached houses. We are the same age and we are both tall and skinny. She likes Mod style clothing and has a good sense of humour. Her mother is young, attractive and hospitable, so I spend a lot of time at their house. A small gang of us congregate there to watch the Animals, the Small Faces and the Four Tops on Ready Steady Go! Karen goes to the Secondary Modern and I get to know her school friends.

In the mornings, I have the plum job at the newsagent's, marking up the papers for the delivery boys. I stay in the back room in the warm, while the others cycle out in the wintry cold. One Friday, after the last of the newspaper boys has set off on his round, the newsagent asks me to mind the counter, while he nips out the back. No customers come in, so I have time to take a packet of twenty cigarettes off the shelf, tuck it into the waistband of my trousers, and rearrange the others, so it won't be missed.

Later that morning, during the break, I cross the frosty playing fields to the squash courts where I find the smokers, who buy half the cigarettes from me for a few pence each.

The next day, I get ready to go into town, putting a coat on over my bomber jacket. I meet up with my friends from the Secondary Modern, who live on the Stanmore council estate, which is right on the other side of town. One of them wants to buy the latest Ronson lighter, so we all troop into the tobacconist shop. While the shopkeeper is demonstrating the lighter's variable flame, I take a pack of cigars from the counter display and slip it into my jacket pocket, alongside the remaining cigarettes from the previous day.

We go into a café in the High Street, hoping to bump into some girls, but we are out of luck, so we decide to get up to some mischief instead. We go into Boots and buy a Valentine's card, then we go into W H Smith, where one of the boys tucks the card in amongst the rest of the cards on display. A few minutes later I make an ostentatious display of "stealing" the card. The store detective duly follows us out and claps a hand on my shoulder. He leads us into the back room, where we sit giggling, waiting for the police to turn up, anticipating the punchline, when I produce the receipt from Boots.

When the police arrive, we feign indignation at being wrongly accused. They get us to turn out our pockets and question my friend about his new lighter, suspecting it is stolen. I have forgotten about the cigars and cigarettes in my jacket pocket and I break into a sweat when the police discover them.

We are taken to the tobacconist's in the police car. Once the police have satisfied themselves that my friend has paid for the lighter, they turn their attention to my cigars and cigarettes. One of them notices the display of cigars on the counter and surmises that I may have stolen them. I have no ready explanation and my heart drops as I realise that if they trace the cigarettes to their source I will have to face the newsagent's censure. I decide to admit to stealing the cigars and, rather implausibly, that I stole the cigarettes from the tobacconist's.

The police take me to the station, give me a formal caution, then call my parents. My father is furious, "This is the first time in my life I have ever been in a police station and it is to pick you up!"

I don't really care about upsetting him. I am more concerned that the newsagent will find out and I will lose his trust and my job.

In the evenings, Karen babysits for some of the young married couples on the estate and I go round with her to play records on their stereos. We both like Tamla Motown, which appeals to the romantic in me, but I am also into Reggae, which is more rudimentary. The first record I buy is Max Romeo's "Wet Dream". We also share a similar taste in clothing. I am able to avoid wearing school uniform because we are allowed to wear suits, so I get my parents to order a slick, grey, made-to-measure mohair suit from Burtons. The

specifications are very precise, a thirteen-inch single vent at the back and diagonal ticket pockets with three-inch flaps. To complete my look, I also get a skimpy brim trilby.

One weekend, I go round to Karen's to find her cousin from Ruislip sitting in the kitchen. He is wearing a checked shirt from the Ivy Shop in Richmond and tongue-and-tassel loafers from the Squire Shop in Wardour Street and he is a Chelsea supporter.

Although I'm not particularly interested in football, or any other sport for that matter, we arrange to meet up at Stamford Bridge and go to a match together. I enjoy the atmosphere, the chanting and the camaraderie, so I take the train up to London regularly and get to know some skinheads from Basingstoke who are also Chelsea supporters.

After the first season I start going to away matches, meeting up with half-a-dozen of the Basingstoke crew on the way. We get off the train at Waterloo, wearing our 'Crombie' overcoats, cherry-red Dr Martens and blue-and-white scarves. We take the escalator down to the Underground and, before the station attendants can stop us, vault over the ticket gates and rush on down to the platform. On arrival at King's Cross or Euston, we try to slip through the barriers undetected. If we get stopped by the Transport Police we say we got on at Oxford Circus.

British Rail put on special trains comprising old rolling stock with ripped seats and scratched windows, so it doesn't matter if they get vandalised again. Some of the London skinheads wandering up and down the corridors look really hard, with crops, sideburns, turned up jeans and well-worn Dr Martens. My boots are new, so I scuff them as much as possible to round off the edges.

We are usually received by a welcome committee of mounted police, who try to herd us along the authorised route, but our small gang splits off from the main body of supporters and makes its way towards the football ground along the backstreets. As we approach the ground we start chanting, "We are the North Stand, we are the North Stand, we are the North Stand, Stamford Bridge!" Local supporters spill beer from their pint glasses as they yell abuse at us from pub doorways.

Once we are through the turnstiles, we hide our scarves so the police can't identify us and wander past the hotdog and doughnut stands to the home supporters' end, where we meet up with other Chelsea supporters on the concrete steps of the terraces.

When the match starts, we get our scarves out and start chanting, taunting the locals, who shout back in call and response. We are within spitting distance of the opposition, as each side attempts to intimidate the other with displays of verbal aggression. Eventually, our swaying bodies mass together like a single entity, until it reaches critical momentum, then we charge into the ranks of the other supporters. If the home supporters back off, I feel brave enough to launch into the crowd. My adrenaline pumps as I dive into them, kicking and punching at fleeing bodies. But if the opposition retaliate, I scramble towards the back of the crowd with a knot of fear in my gut.

Sometimes I'll see a home team supporter, who looks like they could give me a good kicking, grimacing and gesticulating at me, challenging me to a one-to-one fight. I avoid eye contact with them. The hardcore fighters engage in hand-to-hand combat, whereas I just lash out randomly.

After a few of these clashes, a phalanx of police officers drives a wedge between the two bands of supporters, who continue shouting over the top of the constables' helmets for the remainder of the match.

On the way back to the station, the mounted police intervene to break up mass brawls as the opposing supporters ambush us. Safely on the train back to London, we regale one another with tales of bravado.

When I get back to Winchester on Saturday nights, I go dancing to Soul and Reggae at the Teenage Centre, which is down a cobbled street in an old converted warehouse. It is always busy, although I never see anyone from my school there. They are all either from the Secondary Modern or have left school.

I get another job in a supermarket on alternate Saturdays, stacking shelves with beer, wines and spirits. Before the end of each shift, I take a quarter bottle of spirits, usually whisky, and hide it next to the bins in the loading bay. As I leave the building via the back door, I pick up my bottle so I can drink it later that night on the way out. By the time I arrive at the Teenage Centre, I am drunk enough to get into fights and ask girls to dance.

I am a good dancer. I am not inhibited like the boys who stand around leaning against the wall. At the end of the evening, when the slow music is playing, I always make sure I dance with some of the girls, although I rarely talk to them. This is when I begin to get off with girls; the ones I snog and get my hands up their jumpers and eventually down their knickers, standing in back alleys or in the shadows of shop doorways.

I have my eye on one particular girl. She is older and quieter than the others. Instead of the mohair suits and patterned tights that most of the skinhead girls wear, she dresses in Etam checked skirts and jumpers. She is a good dancer, so I often ask her to dance to the slow tunes. One night I walk her to the bus stop. We don't talk; it just happens. We stand in the rain with the other late-night revellers, waiting for the last bus to the Stanmore estate, where she lives. As we sit in silence on the top deck, I wipe the steam off the windows.

We walk the last dark stretch to her parents' house and creep into the sitting room. We get onto the settee, where we remove the minimum amount of clothing, so that I can get between her legs. She pulls her tights down below her knees and I undo my trousers and push my erection between her thighs. In this position, I can barely get inside her, but I don't want to manoeuvre too much in case we wake her parents. We continue quietly, trembling, until I come. I leave the house as silently as I arrived. It takes a couple of hours to walk home, giving me time to relish the experience.

The following week at the Teenage Centre, one of the skinheads from the Winnall estate deliberately bumps into me. I push him away, punch him in the face and he falls to the floor. Before he can get up, the rest of his gang jump me. Someone boots me in the bollocks and I double up, then someone kicks me in the head and I curl up as they continue kicking me while I lie on the floor. Karen is there and she throws herself on top of me, shouting at them, until they back off and leave me alone. I am cut and bruised and the cartilage in my ear is broken. We go back to Karen's house where her mother patches me up before I go home.

Sometime later, I discover that the girl I went home with is engaged to the leader of the Winnall gang. As far as I am concerned it's worth a kicking to

have had sex, with the added bonus of knowing it was with the gang leader's girl.

When I turn seventeen, I apply for a provisional driving licence. It already has endorsements because I have a previous conviction for Taking and Driving Away a scooter. I pass my driving test first time and buy an old Morris Minor for £50.

One Saturday, I take some friends to a disco in Stockbridge, a small town near Winchester. Later that night, we drive around town hoping for a confrontation with another gang of skinheads who had been at the disco. I take the wheel-nut spanner out the boot and have it handy in the footwell. Stockbridge is deadly quiet and we see no sign of the other skinheads. I spot a biker walking along with his girlfriend. I pull over, get out of the car and walk back down the road.

I shout at him, "Oi! Cunt!"

When he turns round, I hit him over the head with the wheel nut spanner. He clutches his head and looks incredulously at the blood in his hand.

His girlfriend screams at me, "Why did you do that?"

"Because he is a greaser." That's sufficient justification for me.

A few weeks later, I am at a neighbour's house, babysitting with Karen. The doorbell rings and it is my sister coming to tell me that two police officers have turned up at our house looking for me. By the time I get home the police have already left, but my parents tell me that the biker had to be taken to hospital for treatment and the police have a witness, who has identified me as the attacker.

My parents follow me up the stairs to my bedroom. They stop at the bedroom door and I go over to my bed. They searched my bedroom before I got home and the drawers next to my bed are open. Maybe they were looking for some kind of explanation. Instead, they found a cosh made from a length of hosepipe filled with sand and lead shot.

"What is wrong with you? Why do you do these things?" my mother cries.

I am silent.

"You were such a nice boy once. And now look at you."

I just shrug.

"Are you on drugs? What's this?" she holds up the cosh.

"It's just sand," I say dismissively. "Why have you been going through my things?"

"I don't know what to do about you any more. You must be possessed by evil spirits."

I stifle a laugh as I take some clothes from the open drawers and put them in a plastic carrier bag. "I'm getting out of here."

Finally my father speaks, "You're not going anywhere."

They are standing in the doorway, blocking my exit.

"You can't stop me," I tell them, as I open the window and climb onto the window ledge. "If you don't let me out, I'll jump."

They step aside and I leave by the door. I go downstairs, get into my car and drive to London.

I stay with one of my football mates, who lives in Clapham Junction. I sleep on his floor for a few nights, while I go out looking for work. In one employment agency, I explain my situation and the agent advises me to go back home. I don't know what else to do, so I take his advice and return to Winchester, where I am charged with Assault.

When the case goes to Court, it gets reported in the local paper, as a minor scandal about the conviction of a Grammar school boy. My parents and I are called into a meeting with the Headmaster. It is nearly the end of the autumn term of my final year and I am due to sit three 'A' Levels in the summer. The Headmaster agrees that I can return to school after the Christmas holidays to finish the year. He informs me that my boarder friends will be advised to stay away from me, if they want to keep out of trouble.

On New Years Eve I set off to catch a train to London to meet a gang of skinheads I know from Brixton. When I leave the house, it is already snowing and by the time I get to the station, the snow is thick on the ground. There is a notice board announcing that all trains have been cancelled. I hang around for a while, hoping the snow will stop, but no such luck.

I go into the Eagle, one of my usual drinking spots. It is almost empty, apart from a couple of old boys sitting at the bar. I order a pint, then put some Tamla Motown on the jukebox. I take my drink over to the pinball machine. By the time I have finished my game, there is still no one I know in the bar, so I wander into town along the deserted High Street, kicking my way through the snow.

As I pass the alleyway that leads to the Royal Oak, a popular pub for hippies and bikers, I hear the sound of raucous laughter. I have never been inside, but I don't want to spend New Year's Eve on my own, so I overcome my prejudices and decide to go in.

When the heavy wooden door opens, a cloud of smoke emanates from the interior, accompanied by the sound of Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven". It is still quite early but the pub is already fairly busy. Heads turn, eyeing me up suspiciously, as I walk to the bar and order a drink. I feel less self-conscious once I have a pint glass in my hand. I establish my position at the bar, then cast my gaze around the room.

Sitting on a bar stool next to me is a girl, who looks a year or two older than me, with dark hair, short on top, with long bits at the sides. She is wearing a black, fur bomber jacket and white dungarees. She looks intelligent, with fine features and an aquiline nose. I decide to talk to her.

"So this is your local?"

"It obviously isn't yours. What are you doing in here?"

"I was on my way to Trafalgar Square, but the trains are all cancelled so I'm stuck here."

"Why Trafalgar Square?"

"To meet my mates and have a laugh. Push people into the fountain maybe."

"Is that the sort of thing you do then? Are you some sort of football hooligan?"

"I am a Chelsea supporter."

“And a Paki-basher too, I suppose?”

“Fuck off. I’m no racist. I only fight skinheads and greasers.”

“So you go fighting at the Teenage Centre?”

“I don’t just go there to fight. I dance too.”

“What? The Skinhead Moonstomp?”

“Yeah, yeah. What kind of music are you into, then? I suppose you like all this hippie shit?”

While we banter about music and clothes, the pub is filling up. We order more drinks and two of Jackie’s friends come over. Big Pete is a tall, mild-mannered hippie, with long blonde hair, a wispy moustache and beard. Little Pete is short, with dark curly hair, wearing a grey herringbone overcoat with a black velvet collar.

Little Pete teases Jackie, “Who’s your friend? Has he come in looking for a fight?”

She introduces us and we start talking about music. They like the Doors and Pink Floyd. It turns out that Little Pete went to the same Grammar school as me.

“I was a Mod, then. I used to go to the Flamingo and the Whisky-A-Go-Go and stay up all night taking Black Bombers and Blues. Do you still get them?”

“Not Black Bombers. It’s mainly Blues and Dex these days.”

Big Pete pipes up, “Speed is no good for you. You should try smoking dope. It will give you a different perspective on life.”

Little Pete ups the ante, “Yeah, but Acid’s the best. That really alters your perception.”

With that, he takes a folded cigarette paper from his breast pocket and unwraps it to reveal several microdots of LSD.

He looks around mischievously, “Who wants to drop a tab?”

Jackie and Big Pete nod approvingly. I am pleasantly pissed and enjoying the company, so I decide to join them. Following the others’ lead, I lick my finger, pick up one of the tabs with my damp fingertip and place it on my tongue. By the time the pub closes in the early hours of the New Year, I am hallucinating and feeling elated. Big Pete invites everyone back to his place. As we leave, Jackie takes hold of my arm and we walk through the snow together.

When we arrive at Pete’s place there are a bunch of hippies getting stoned, listening to Jefferson Airplane’s “White Rabbit”. Jackie and I go downstairs to a room in the basement, with wall hangings and a mattress on the floor. We talk into the small hours, listening to the music drifting through the ceiling. The walls appear translucent and the colours and textures of objects seem intensified. I wander round the basement, touching and examining the details of all the surfaces.

Eventually we get under the covers to make love and I feel a deeper connection with her than with anyone else in my life before. In the morning, still mildly hallucinating, we go out into the cold winter’s daylight of the New Year.

For the remainder of the holidays, I hang out with Jackie and the two Petes. I discover that Jackie works in a clothes boutique and the Petes are working on the construction site where the new Law Courts are being built.

When I return to school after the holidays, it seems more oppressive than ever. The gloomy, redbrick Victorian building, the teachers in their menacing bat-like gowns, boys decked out in uniforms, caps and ties. I am wearing my suit as usual, but today my school tie hangs around my neck like a noose that I have to loosen in order to breathe.

I am standing in a corridor waiting to go into a classroom, when one of my gang of schoolmates walks towards me. I greet him, but I am taken aback when he walks straight past me. I wasn't expecting any of my friends to take heed of the Headmaster's warnings. I suppose he doesn't want to jeopardize his future. My sense of alienation has been exacerbated since taking the Acid and my friend ignoring me pushes me over the edge.

At the first break, I walk down to the Coach Station café, order a cup of tea and sit down to do the Daily Mirror crossword. I finish the crossword, but instead of going back to school, I walk to the building site where the two Petes are working and talk to the foreman, who offers me a job as a plasterer's labourer. On my way home I decide to cook lunch, so I buy a steak from the butcher.

My mother normally arrives home from work before me, so when she finds me sitting at the kitchen table with the remains of my meal, she immediately knows there is something wrong. At first she tries to persuade me to return to school, but when it becomes obvious that I have no intention of going back she gives up in despair. On the other hand, there is a sense of relief that it is all over.

The following morning I go to work on the building site. Within a few months, I leave Winchester and start a new life in London.