



BORN THE SON of a teenaged cigarette factory worker and a nineteen-year-old miner, Gary Bell grew up in a condemned slum and left his tough comprehensive school without taking any exams. He spent his teenage years drifting through homelessness in the UK and France, football hooliganism (he was known by his mates as 'Animal' - though for his eating, not his fighting), and a strange variety of jobs.

As well as stacking shelves at Asda, making pies at Pork Farms, and spending very brief periods as a miner, a fireman and a bricklayer, Gary worked out how to pinch the cash from fruit machines. He made a small fortune, until he was arrested while waddling away from a pub, weighed down by two hundred pounds in 10p pieces... Sentenced to six months for fraud (the judge called him a 'criminal genius') he finally decided to get his life together.

After taking his O levels and A levels at night school, we join him arriving for his first day at University to read law, with distant hopes of becoming a barrister...

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CHAPTER ELEVEN: UNIVERSITY

Twenty-eight years to silk

I PITCHED UP at university that autumn, two months short of my twenty-fifth birthday.

My arrival, as ever, was unconventional.

Hitch-hiking back from Stuttgart to collect my stuff, I had by chance got a lift from a van driver who was delivering something to the village next door to my sister Dawn's and was then coming back south with an empty van.

Somehow, I persuaded him to take me to Dawn's, help me pick up all my stuff, and then drop me at Milton Keynes railway station.

I don't know why I did that: it was a typically ill-thought out and naïve plan.

I didn't have any money for my fare, and I didn't really know how trains worked.

Foolishly, I assumed that, if you were travelling from A to B, you simply caught a train at A and it dropped you at B. So it was with some dismay that I learned – at Milton Keynes – that a journey to Bristol involved travelling via Euston, and included taking the tube to Paddington where I would catch a whole different train to the West Country.

To get onto the Euston train, I simply borrowed a guard's trolley and brazenly pushed it onto the platform with my various bags and boxes.

But at Euston there were guards at the barrier checking the tickets of arriving passengers. I decided the best policy was to tell the truth.

'I'm travelling to Bristol, and...' I said, to a guard.

'Bristol?' he interrupted, forgetting to wonder how I came to be on the wrong side of the barrier. 'You're at the wrong station, mate – you want Paddington.'

'*Paddington?*' I said, swiftly abandoning the truth. 'But I was told Euston.'

'Well, you were told wrong,' the guard replied. He opened the gate and let me through. I'd made it to London free of charge, but I was unlikely to be able to scam the rest of the journey.

Praying she was in, I called my old mate Sarah Dixon, still in London and now living in Leytonstone. Within the hour, this wonderful woman arrived to save my life with enough money for a taxi to Paddington, a train to Bristol, and another taxi to my hall of residence.

* * *

BRISTOL UNIVERSITY EXISTED to provide a safety net for public school pupils who had failed Oxbridge, and I was just about the only student reading law in my year who hadn't been educated privately.

If my working class northern credentials had impressed the interviewing professors, they didn't impress anyone else.

My contemporaries affected floppy hair and wore salmon-pink trousers. I looked like this (you can't see the stonewashed Lee Coopers and white socks):



I stood out markedly from everyone else – not that they seemed to notice. They certainly didn't bother talking to me. I was used to being the centre of attention. Now I was an insignificant minnow in a giant lake. The whole thing was unsettling. I'm a gregarious sort, and I was very lonely.

I had hoped that it was true that all posh girls really fancied a bit of rough, but unfortunately it wasn't. Posh girls liked men with good looks, style, charm, breeding, and

money. I wasn't *too* bad-looking, I suppose, certainly the right side of hideous, but I was struggling on the other fronts, and I felt distinctly inadequate, especially when comparing myself to the other male students.

People like Tom Purton, for instance. It was easy to hate Tom. An Old Westminsterian, he was tall and handsome, and the first really wealthy person I had met. All the girls loved him. I quickly formed the opinion that he deserved a good kicking, but contented myself with ignoring him, and getting on with my studies.

At least I wasn't intellectually intimidated. I had soon realised that this lot were no cleverer than I. They had just had more – a *lot* more – opportunity and encouragement. I threw myself into it like never before, was awarded firsts for my first three essays, and dominated my tutorials and lectures. I wasn't enjoying myself, but then I wasn't at university to make friends.

My problem with Tom Purton and his easy confidence finally spilled over in a tort tutorial – a 'tort' being a civil wrong, such as trespass, or defamation. We were discussing the implications of a very famous 1932 case, *Donoghue v Stevenson*, which revolved around a bottle of ginger beer sold to one Mary Donoghue at a Paisley café. The bottle contained a decomposing snail, and Mary suffered gastroenteritis and shock (she was easily shocked). She successfully sued the manufacturer of the ginger beer, one David Stevenson, and the judgment – that Stevenson could reasonably have foreseen that his failure to keep dead snails out of his pop might harm someone who drank it – created the modern concept of negligence.

Purton and I found ourselves in disagreement as to liability, and he dismissed my interpretation of the law in such a patronising manner that I thought the matter needed sorting out, Cotgrave style. I suggested that we take it outside to the car park.

Not only did he refuse to fight me, he found the very idea extremely amusing: the more I goaded him, the funnier he found it.

I was humiliated. I could just about have taken losing a fight – he was a big lad – but to be laughed off like that was something I'd never experienced.

I left with as much dignity as I could muster. Clearly Cotgrave rules did not apply at Bristol.

At least – not always. I recall an early law book sale, where second year students were selling their old textbooks to first years. I secured a copy of *Smith and Hogan's Criminal Law*

for a tenner, but later found I had been ripped off – it was hopelessly out of date. I went to find the chap who had sold it to me and demanded my money back.

‘*Caveat emptor*,’ he replied, with a scornful laugh. ‘Let the buyer beware.’

By way of reply, I grabbed the startled youth by the lapels.

‘No,’ I spat. ‘Let the *seller* beware! If I don’t get my money back I’m going to shove this book up your arse!’

He paid up immediately.

But this was a rare success for Animal.

If I was going to get on, I needed a different strategy.

My next gambit was to stand for first year Law Club President. When I saw the names of the other candidates I wondered whether I’d made a fool of myself – these people were about as posh as the Queen – but to my astonishment I was elected in a landslide. I felt a little more sure of myself after that, though it didn’t cure my general sense of anger and injustice, especially in respect of Tom Purton.

Until one lunchtime, when he approached me as we left a lecture.

‘Hi,’ he said, extending his hand. ‘I don’t think we’ve been formally introduced? I’m Tom.’

I took it, too surprised to do anything else. ‘I’m Gary,’ I said.

‘I was wondering if you’d like a spot of lunch?’ he said.

‘Er... Yes,’ I said.

It was the start of an enduring friendship. Far from the arrogant and condescending person of my imagination, Tom was – is – a kind and generous man, with a wicked sense of humour, and a tremendous thirst for life.

It proved a breakthrough moment. To my surprise, he and his friends welcomed me with open arms and, if my first few weeks had been miserable, the rest of the first year was very different. I pushed my overdraft to gargantuan limits, and ignored my bank manager’s entreaties. My studies went to the wall, too, as one of my contract law essays – written in the style of a ruling handed down by a Court of Appeal judge – suggests:

Gary Bell
2

Contract

I have read the essay of my colleague
Lord Vickers of Somerset and I wish to
concur with his judgement.

You may share his opinion but
unfortunately you are not
going to share his rank

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But then I came across a lifeline – debating. This was to play a major part in my life, though it all started, as things often seem to for me, by chance.

I attended a presentation by the top London solicitors Norton Rose, at which they laid it on thick about the glittering careers that awaited us, before dropping a nasty bombshell.

‘Of course,’ said the chap, ‘we only employ people with first-class honours degrees, or other evidence of outstanding ability.’

As things stood, I had about as much chance of getting a first as of joining the Chippendales. But did I detect a slight get-out in his words?

‘What do you mean by “other evidence of outstanding ability”?’ I piped up.

‘If you excel in something like debating,’ he said.

I rushed round to the Debating Union first thing next day and found, to my delight, that entries closed that very afternoon for an open competition. Needing a team-mate, I scurried off to Tom Purton’s flat, but he wasn’t interested.

‘Come on, Tom,’ I said, picking up the Norton Rose promotional brochure from his coffee table, and flourishing it. ‘We’re not going to get firsts. If we want a job at Norton Rose, we’ve got to do something like this.’

‘That’s true,’ he said, ‘unless your father is the senior partner.’

He went to answer a knock at the door, and I looked at the brochure. *Norton Rose – senior partner Peter Purton.*

Tom reappeared, followed by James Barnes.

‘I’ll join you, Gary,’ said James. ‘I did a lot of debating at Rugby.’

I was petrified almost to the point of speechlessness in our first debate, but we upset the form book by annihilating the tournament favourites and swept on through the next three rounds, only to come up short in the final. But runners-up felt pretty good; shortly afterwards, James and I were elected Secretary and Treasurer of the Debating Union respectively.

As part of our law degree we had to take part in a competitive moot, where we would argue a point of complicated law in front of professors posing as Court of Appeal judges. James Barnes and I were drawn as a team against Tom Purton and Ronnie Vickers.

James was entirely convinced that our natural flair would overcome the incredible amount of preparation put in by our opponents. I didn’t share his optimism, especially as I watched Ronnie and Tom carrying a huge number of heavy law books into the mock courtroom, with colour-coded Post-it notes tagging the relevant pages.

But I needn’t have worried. Even as Tom reached for his first authority, a complex landmark tort case called *The Wagon Mound No.2* which concerned breach of duty of care in negligence, the wheels started to come off his carefully-prepared moot. As he turned to the page flagged by his pink Post-it note, he found to his dismay that it didn’t identify the Wagon Mound Case he had expected, but an entirely different matter called *Brown*, about the lawfulness or otherwise of sado-masochists nailing their testicles to a coffee table.

Unaccountably, Ronnie Vickers experienced similar confusions with *his* Post-it notes, and these mix-ups unsettled the pair of them sufficiently that, hopelessly underprepared as we were, James and I stormed to victory. (Tom later accused us, wholly without justification, of sabotaging his and Ronnie’s authorities. If there’s one thing I can’t stand, it’s a bad loser.)

My life of partying like a sort of low-rent Charles Ryder was interrupted during that year by terrible news from home. My brother Kevin had had a difficult life. In a family of generally short stature, he stopped growing at seven, and underwent unpleasant human growth hormone treatments at Great Ormond Street hospital during his teens. He eventually reached average height for our family – a shade under five feet – and to his great credit he overcame that hurdle to join the Royal Corps of Signals as a technician. He had left the Army and settled back in Nottingham with his wife Margaret and their son, Richard, and Margaret

had recently given birth to a daughter, Rebecca. But I received a call one day to tell me that Rebecca had died in her sleep. She was three months old, and I never met her.

The sheer injustice of it made me weep. Margaret had lost her mother as a child, and had been raised in various foster homes; surely she and Kevin had suffered enough grief, between the two of them.

The funeral was held in Radford, with a cremation at West Bridgford. I was trying to work out which buses Dawn and I would need to catch to get there, when Tom Purton spoke up.

‘I’ll drive you, Gary,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry.’

It went as smoothly as it could, and we finally retired to a small wake. Apart from a few friends of Kevin and Margaret’s, the only others present were my Auntie Eileen (mum’s adoptive sister) and her husband, Uncle Harold. Harold was a builder with hands like shovels, who had fought at Monte Cassino in the war, and was not shy of mentioning it. I hadn’t seen him for a long time, and he was full of advice and concern for my welfare.

‘Hey up, our Gary,’ he said, beaming.

‘Hey up, Harold,’ I said.

‘Are you married yet, me duck?’ he said, looking suspiciously at Tom.

‘No, not yet,’ I said.

‘You want to get a move on.’

‘But Harold, I’m only young.’

He sighed, and changed the subject. ‘Have you got a job?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I’m a student.’

Like Shania Twain, that did not impress him much.

‘I don’t know, me duck,’ he said. ‘I *knew* you’d never come to anything.’

‘But Harold, I’m at university doing a degree,’ I said. ‘In law.’

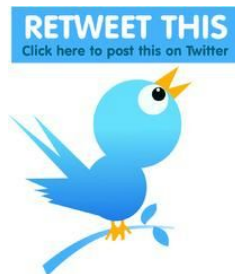
‘I don’t know,’ he said again, and then he fell silent for a few moments. He seemed to be having some sort of internal debate with himself; he would sigh, then tut, then raise his eyebrows, and then shake his head. Finally, he set his jaw at me. ‘I’m probably being an idiot to meself,’ he said, ‘but your mother would have wanted me to help you if I could.’

‘What?’ I said. ‘How?’

‘There’s a job going at our builder’s yard,’ he said, taking my hands in his and boring into me with his pale blue eyes. ‘If I have a word with the gaffer, I reckon I can swing it for you.’

‘But Harold,’ I protested. ‘I’m studying *law*. At *university*. I’m going to be a *barrister*.’

‘I don’t know,’ he said, releasing my hands and admitting defeat. ‘There’s no helping some people. You’re that stubborn, it’s like fighting the bloody Jerries at Monte Cassino.’



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to spread the word.*

THE FACT WAS, Harold just could not understand what I meant. I might as well have been talking French, or trying to explain the concept of non-violent protest in the Cotgrave Miners’ Welfare bar.

My mum had said it to me, years earlier: people like us did not become lawyers. People like us didn’t even take our O levels. You got a job, you got married, and you settled down. As it had been, so it would always be – except that it wouldn’t. The pits were closing, the factory work was going to the Far East, everything was being mechanised and automated and computerised. The jobs-for-life, which had fed, clothed, and housed men of my class and their families for centuries, were disappearing. I may not have articulated it in that way at the time, but I could see that the world was changing, and I was determined to change with it.

I’m not ashamed of my roots by any means – I wouldn’t be laying them bare in this book if I were – but I’m not particularly proud of them, either. To my mind, you should have pride in things you have achieved, things you have worked for, sweated for – not something you are by a mere accident of birth.

I wasn't going to turn my back on anyone – certainly not my family or friends – and I haven't. But while I stayed in touch with my roots, my horizon was obviously widening. The deeper I immersed myself in my new university crowd, the more I realised that many of these people would be with me for the rest of my life.

By now I was spending most of my time with the Old Rugbeian James Barnes. He was to become my greatest friend, the best man at my wedding, and Godfather to my son, Harry. But if my daughter ever comes home with a man like him, he's going straight out of the bedroom window. James was bitter ugly, with bad skin, dandruff, and a wardrobe consisting mostly of a raggy, lime-green jersey. He was also extremely dirty in his habits. He never bathed, held the world record for the most consecutive days spent wearing the same pair of boxer shorts and socks, had terrible breath, smoked forty cigarettes a day, and was rarely sober. But he was also wholly irresistible to women. I was astounded at the quantity and quality of his conquests, and by the stylish way in which he would end relationships when he felt they had run their course. I recall one girl, Camilla, who had been seeing James for a couple of weeks – long enough, in his view. Camilla had come over to his flat, and was waiting for him to get ready – which meant putting in his contact lenses – when she noticed a handwritten *aide-mémoire* on the table.

'What's this, James?' she said.

'Just a list of things to do,' he said.

'Oh,' she said. 'Do your washing, buy some milk... what's this? Dinner with Valerie? Who's Valerie?'

'She's the girl I'm taking to dinner tonight,' he said.

'What about me?'

'I think you'll find that's next on the list.'

She looked down. 'Pack Camilla in!' she yelled.

He strolled over, took the list from her, and ticked the item in question.

'There you go,' he smiled, and opened the front door.

It was James who first suggested the metamorphosis.

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IT HAPPENED TOWARDS the end of my first year. *The Official Sloane Ranger Handbook* had not long been published, detailing the minutiae of social acceptability – what to wear, how to speak, why you should eat jelly with a fork, read Dick Francis novels, and live in the country (‘or, failing that, Kensington Square’). A moment’s study would confirm whether you were PLU (people like us), one of the *nouveaux riches*, or a mere prole (there was no doubt into which bracket I fell). It had quickly become Bristol’s bible, and was being followed slavishly.

I happened to be at Tom’s flat one day, and was admiring the photograph of Princess Diana, the Sloane’s Sloane, on the cover, when James arrived.

‘Hello, Gary,’ he said. ‘Thinking of becoming a Sloane?’

‘Am I not one already?’ I said, with a laugh.

‘Not quite,’ he said, grinning.

‘What’s the difference between you and me?’ I said, putting the book down. ‘Give it to me straight.’

I’ll list his main observations.

Hair: I wore mine close-cropped, whereas Sloanes tended to the floppy, Hugh Grant look.

Moustache: A huge *faux pas*. Sloanes were clean-shaven.

Shirts: Lumberjack shirts were out, and Thomas Pink stripes were in, worn with a silk tie.

Jerseys: I didn’t have any. I needed at least one, preferably from Benetton.

Coats: I didn’t have one of those, either. I needed a Crombie, and a Barbour.

Trousers: I would have to swap my tight, stonewashed jeans for baggy green cords (worn without a comb in the back pocket).

Pants: Y-fronts were also a no-no; Sloanes wore boxer shorts, preferably spotty ones.

Socks: My extensive collection of white socks would need immediate binning; Burlington Argyles were the thing.

Shoes: Ditto my comfy Dunlop Green Flash, in favour of Church’s brogues.

‘Anything else?’ I said, a little dispirited.

‘Your name could do with changing.’

‘What’s wrong with Gary?’

‘It’s very working class,’ he informed me. ‘Probably second only to Kevin.’

‘That’s my brother’s name.’

‘And one more thing,’ he said. ‘You absolutely have to get rid of that awful northern accent.’

I spoke like everyone else from Nottingham, with flat vowels and ‘th’ sounds pronounced ‘f’. I dropped every ‘h’ and ‘g’, and called everyone ‘duck’. It sounded fine to me. But James got me thinking: could I succeed as a barrister if I didn’t come from the same *milieu* as most of the rest of the Bar?

And – given that I didn’t – could I fake it?

The more I thought about it, the more I realised that it would be a big help if I became upper-middle class.

* * *

THE UNIVERSITY YEAR ended with my attire and accent unchanged. Needing to pay off my overdraft, I headed off to a camp-site near Montpellier, where I got a job picking up litter with a stick with a nail in the end of it, and an evening job as a barman.

The bar was frequented entirely by French people, and it was while chatting with them one night that it struck me that I pronounced the word ‘France’ with a flat ‘a’ when speaking English, but with a longer ‘a’ when speaking French. I was equally comfortable with both, and started experimenting quietly to myself with English words. For instance, ‘bath’ was ‘baff’ in Nottinghamese, but ‘barth’ in the style of James Barnes; the more I said ‘barth’, the more I liked it. It sounded... more barristerial.

One morning, I looked in the mirror and saw a Rubicon which needed crossing. With a squirt of foam, and a swipe or two of the razor, my moustache was gone, never to return. For the rest of the summer, I made a deliberate and conscious effort to change my accent. Mostly, I would practise in my tent; it must have sounded absurd for a while, but by the time September rolled around I had arrived at a fair approximation of a BBC newsreader from the 1940s. I had also grown my hair and, as soon as I got home I invested the £700 I had saved up not on my overdraft but on a variety of brogues, cords, and striped shirts.

Before going back to university, I went up north to visit my sister and some of my Cotgrave mates, and it was while I was strolling through the village that I happened across my old school friend Mick Pringle. He was working on a car outside his parents’ house,

where he still lived, and he invited me in for a coffee, having first remarked that my painfully-cultivated BBC accent made me sound like ‘a cockney’.

We chatted about old times for a while, and then he suddenly stood up and announced that he needed to get ready because he was going out to a ‘posh do’ that night. His house wasn’t very big, and it was easy for me to conduct a conversation with him whilst I sat in the kitchen and he busied himself with getting ready upstairs.

‘It should be a good night,’ he called down. ‘D’you fancy coming?’

‘I can’t,’ I said, apologetically. ‘I’m expected somewhere else.’

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘There’ll be loads of people there that you haven’t seen for years. You’ll have a great time.’

‘I can’t Pring, I’m sorry.’

‘Course you can,’ he said, forcing the issue. ‘Mind you... have you got any smart clothes to wear?’

‘Yes, I have,’ I snorted. ‘I’m wearing them.’

‘Let’s see,’ he said, peering over the banister.

I stood up to reveal my new Sloane Ranger wardrobe. ‘This is smart, isn’t it?’ I said.

‘No,’ he said, tersely. ‘Haven’t you got a suit with you?’

As he spoke, he was descending the stairs, and now he walked into the kitchen.

His outfit was a classic of the period. He had a packet of cigarettes in the breast pocket of his shirt, the material of which was so thin that not only could I clearly read what brand they were, I could tell how many fags were left. The suit itself was made of grey, woven polyester with rainbow flecks so loud that they seemed to wink at you. His trousers were the regulation six inches too short, giving a tantalising glimpse of white sock, and his shoes were of such highly combustible plastic that they’d have been dangerous in direct sunlight. He’d topped it all off with a tie that resembled the tail of a kite.

The whole effect was so stunning that I completely forgot Pring’s last question. He strode over to a mirror, ran a comb through his hair and moustache before tucking it into his back pocket, and then turned to me as he slid his sovereign rings onto his fingers.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘Have you got a suit or not?’

‘Er, no,’ I said.

‘I didn’t think you would have,’ he sneered. ‘You always were a scruffy bastard.’

Back at university there was much hilarity at the new Gary Bell when I turned up for the first day of term.

The official university newsletter had a column, called *Nonesuch*, dedicated to gossip about the smart set. Everyone was desperate to feature in it, though this had been but a pipe dream for me during my first year. In the first issue at the start of my second year, there I was!

Meanwhile Gary 'Dumb' Bell must be congratulated on his contribution to raising the social tone. His wonderful efforts of buying a completely new wardrobe, including, we expect, Barbour and trimmings, must make him our leading contender to take over from Huge (sic) Elwes as President of the very exclusive 'I'd love to be mentioned in Nonesuch club.'

I never failed to get a mention in *Nonesuch* thereafter.

One chap, Dominic Sanders, saw an opportunity for even more fun.

'Gary,' he said, one day, 'why don't we go the whole hog and turn you into an Old Etonian?'

That sounded amusing, so I became Eliza Doolittle to Dominic's Henry Higgins. He and a bunch of other OEs spent hours tutoring me on the finer points of 'School'. I was fed – and lapped up – an entire, fictional backstory... which house I'd belonged to, who my contemporaries had been, the names and foibles of various masters, and so on. We took it so far that I was signed up to play for the Old Etonian team in the University football league, and went 'back' to Eton several times to play the Field Game against the current school teams – hence the vignette which opens this book.

Even now, I still amuse myself from time to time by adopting an OE persona, occasionally helping things along by wearing an Old Etonian tie – there's no law against it, after all, it's just a blue striped piece of cloth.

I must be pretty good at it, too, because to this day I meet people who are *convinced* I was at Eton with them.

Or Rugby.

I do a pretty decent Cheltenham, too – Rageh Omaar certainly remembers knowing me there!

And, I must say, I enjoyed it all immensely.

One afternoon, Radio Bristol turned up at the law faculty to do on-the-spot interviews with Sloanes about their extravagant lifestyles. Most people were tame and guarded, but I gave them exactly what they wanted.

‘What car do you drive?’ said the interviewer.

‘Whichever one I feel like driving when I get up in the morning,’ I said.

I became something of an overnight celebrity.

The real world has a habit of intruding, of course. Christmas came around and, far from being the son of a stockbroker or a minor aristocrat, with a country pile to return to, I had nowhere to go.

I planned to stay on at Bristol on my own, but word got round and the offers flooded in. Dominic Sanders invited me to his family estate for the first week of the Christmas break, and James Barnes and his family offered to host me for the following three.

Dominic lived on a large country estate in Shropshire. The local hunt met their on the second day, and it was followed by the Shropshire Landowner’s Dinner, an annual event which was being hosted on the family estate and to which I was invited.

I wasn’t sure which spoon you used to eat the fish course, but I followed the conversation alright. Just like back home in Cotgrave, it revolved around desperate financial hardship: one poor chap had been forced to sell a Turner to meet a tax bill, while others had flogged off their estates in Scotland, or the family castle.

After dinner, the ladies retired somewhere, and port and cigars were brought out for the gentlemen (in which number I was pleased to be counted). One of them, Lord somebody or other, turned to me.

‘You’re a friend of Dominic’s, I understand?’

‘Yes.’

‘Were you at school with him?’

‘No,’ I said, figuring that I’d be unlikely to pull off my Old Etonian act in this company.

‘So where *were* you at school?’

‘Er... the school on the hill,’ I replied, truthfully. Toot Hill Comprehensive *was* on a hill, after all.

‘Ah,’ he nodded approvingly. ‘Harrow. A jolly decent school.’

From Dominic’s, I hitch-hiked to James’s. The Barnes family lived near Stratford-upon-Avon, and were the sort of people about whom PG Wodehouse and Evelyn

Waugh might have written. Indeed, in the years that followed, I was virtually adopted by James' family, and their home became my Brideshead.

His mother, Greta, was a world expert on asthma who hated drinking and smoking, both of which her son did to great excess. That she had her concerns as to my own health was made clear on our first meeting. 'Goodness me!' she said, by way of a greeting. 'You're fat!'

It was not an allegation I could deny, having by now regained all the weight I'd lost whilst starving myself to death in Cannes. Greta was not one to beat about the bush, but in time she became – and remains – a very generous and supportive figure in my life, who encouraged me to aim as high as I could.

James' father worked like a Trojan and played just as hard. He thrashed me repeatedly at tennis – they had a court in the garden, naturally – and introduced me to the more ancient and highbrow sport of real tennis, at nearby Leamington Spa. (Players of vastly different abilities can still play a competitive game of real tennis, thanks to its astonishingly complicated handicapping system. This was almost certainly the first such system to appear in any sport, and – so the story goes – was brought in to assist Henry VIII in the sixteenth century. Once a formidable player, Henry gradually got fatter and lazier, and the handicapping became more and more extreme, culminating in Henry winning the All England Championship one year against an opponent who had to carry a chair in his left hand and play all of his shots whilst standing on it.)

In return, I introduced the Barneses to football, taking them to watch Nottingham Forest play Birmingham City at St Andrews on Boxing Day. Forest won 1-0, but it was a dull match. The only excitement came when fighting broke out beforehand. I spotted a couple of Forest hooligans taking a pasting from a large group of Blues fans, and realised to my dismay that one of them was my old mate Paul Scarrott. I was on the horns of a difficult dilemma; I couldn't stand by and watch a friend getting filled in, but I didn't want to drag Mr Barnes and James into it, either. Fortunately, as I watched, Scarrott broke away, the police moved in and he bounded over towards me, with a couple of vicious-looking chums.

'Hey up, Animal!' he said, wiping a bloodied nose.

'Alright, Paul,' I said.

'Right,' Scarrott turned to his mates. 'Let's get the bastards!'

'There's not enough of us, Paul,' said one of his sidekicks.

‘What do you mean, not enough of us?’ said Scarrott, incredulously. ‘There’s us three, plus Animal and his two mates. That’s six!’

As he spoke, Birmingham charged us and another fight broke out. I did my best to avoid the fray, but we all got caught up in it and, amazingly, we won. The Birmingham fans retreated to lick their wounds, and I started to apologise. The Barneses laughed it off; I didn’t know that Mr Barnes had been a schoolboy boxing champion.

Christmas came and went, and it was back to university, where I finally started to make the breakthrough I *really* wanted.

Among the girls I dated in that second year were the daughters of a cabinet minister and a Belgian diplomat – neither of whom had noticed me during my first year. In the frantic social whirl, my connection with the Law Faculty became more and more tenuous. I attended no lectures, and precious few tutorials. But I did drink and eat a lot, and got on first-name terms with the croupiers at the Beau Nash casino. My bank statements were horrifying.

I attended a large number of twenty-first birthday parties, mixing with posh people from other universities. I found it was a surprisingly small circle. If two students of roughly the same age met, and they had attended one of the major public schools, they either knew each other or had friends in common. I suppose I was unwittingly conducting my own anthropological experiment. To give just one example, among the most glamorous members of my new crowd was an Iranian called Sahar Hashemi, who went on to co-found Coffee Republic. Her parents had fled Iran after the Islamic Revolution, arriving in the west with nothing but the clothes they stood up in – apart from a house in Kensington, an apartment in New York, a villa in Cannes, and about ninety per cent of the Iranian GDP in a bank account in Switzerland.

After Ayatollah Khomeini’s death, Sahar was allowed back to her homeland, and when she returned she wept openly as she told us of the horrors she had seen. ‘Our house used to stand in thousands of acres of countryside with woods, lakes and rolling hills,’ she sobbed. ‘They’ve knocked it down and built schools and hospitals there instead!’

F Scott Fitzgerald wrote, ‘Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me.’ How right he was: given my past life, of pork pie manufacture, football hooliganism/criminality, and homelessness in a variety of European countries, it was all rather heady.

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Over the following thirty years, Gary's life has followed an extraordinary path, as he stumbles and bumbles from one catastrophe to another, always somehow landing on his feet. Somewhat implausibly, he would become a Los Angeles lawyer before he even graduated, and later a barrister back in the UK.

His legal career would recover from distinctly unimpressive beginnings – and various lavatorial disasters, which often seem to occur on the very steps of the court, or in front of stern-faced judges – before he scaled the heights of his profession. These days, his cases take months and involve everything from huge drug conspiracies to giant frauds to gangland murder... though he somehow finds humour in almost all of them.

Along the way, he has accidentally offered Harry Enfield and Griff Rhys-Jones advice on their comedy careers, roped Nick Hornby into his London football team, become a pilot, and eventually, and to his enormous surprise, managed to woo the girl he fancied from afar at university. (She was very posh, very pretty and very slim; he was very poor, 'the right side of hideous', and very fat. But of course that didn't stop him.)

Even all of that doesn't really scratch the surface of Gary Bell's preposterous life...

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