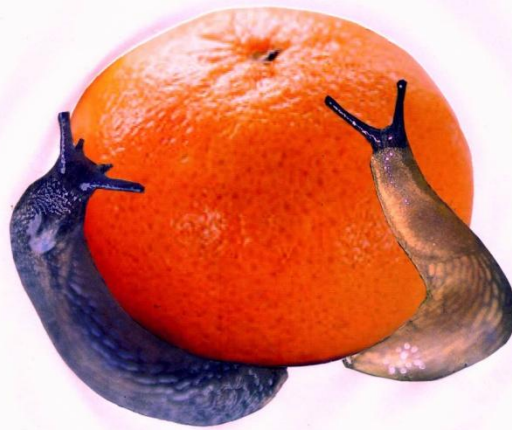


TWO SLUGS AND A SATSUMA



A Novel by Jimmy Skelly

Two Slugs and a Satsuma

Chapter 1

The hour of the lemming had long been a time considered best avoided by inner city travellers.

I had been given less choice than most to avoid that ungodly hour because of demands from texts that made their presence felt whenever I emerged from a tunnel. I eventually reached Paddington to discover that the forename of my recently acquired alias had changed from inconsiderate to feckless, while the last name no longer implied a lack of legal of parentage but suggested a rapid up and down hand movement.

I crossed Praed Street, stepping quickly between the traffic, stopping when I had to until reaching the opposite pavement which brought me to the corner of Spring Street and to 'The Gingle Boy'.

Sitting outside at a table on the pavement beneath an awning drawn to keep away an earlier June drizzle, Howard continued to play with his phone. He lolled in his seat, his legs sprawled before him and his feet rested upon his large leather travelling bag which went with him everywhere. Taking one hand from his phone he reached for a partially filled glass beside an empty bottle. I felt my phone vibrate before hearing that sodding ring tone that had irritated me throughout the evening during my travels with the maniacal majority.

Howard must have heard my phone and looked up. His face; in fact his whole countenance seemed larger than it had when we last met. He looked at me without that quizzical expression which came with his head half-cocked similar to a border collie. Instead he beamed, his blue eyes lit up with devilment, an innocent with an expression of delight to see me, which suggested that he'd had more to drink than what had been in the bottle on the table.

"You look old and tired" he said cheerily which made me think that my present state, brought about by the stress he'd put me through to meet him on time after finishing work, made him feel young and energetic 'Go and grab a couple of bottles, we're meeting Rosemary and Chris here later.'

I'd not met Rosemary, but assumed that like Howard and Chris she'd had something to do with teaching.

Chris, Howard and I went back to a time when the very act of our meeting would be fraught with incidents of varying degrees of lunacy. The solidarity we once shared kept us in contact although our reunions were usually brief and prompted either through invitation to an event, or whenever we happened to be in the same part of the world.

I recalled one occasion when we were still fairly new to each other, Howard inviting me to meet some of the teachers at his school in an Israeli restaurant on the Finchley Road. That's when I first met Chris.

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A group of Israeli students had been sitting at a nearby table celebrating the success of an offensive against their neighbouring state. Howard couldn't sit while he listened and began drumming his fingers on the table. Chris, I later learnt, knew Howard far better than I did at the time and how he would react to their gloating over such an issue. She ran her finger down the menu and switched to her teacher mode, which she could do so effectively, to ask and distract him.

"Howard! What is falafel?"

"Aha!" exclaimed Howard seizing the opportunity and continued in a voice becoming louder and more bellicose. "Falafel is an Israeli delicacy introduced into this country after being discovered by the brave troops in the Israeli armies, while taking great delight in toasting Arab babies on the end of their bayonets over the camp fires."

The place immediately went quiet, but not for long. Howard, who'd been standing, was first out the restaurant and I followed. Fortunately the girls in our company had the presence of mind to hinder those in pursuit at the door, giving me sufficient time to eventually join Howard on a platform in Finchley Road Station.

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I stepped from the door of 'The Gingle Boy' with a bottle of house red and an extra glass and took them with me to sit with Howard outside. Once my annoyance, due to his persistent text

messages and my frustration at not being able to arrive any sooner had left, I recalled another occasion the previous year when I went to meet him in Budapest. He'd had with him the same large leather travelling bag which had an ingenious brass catch mechanism that enabled it to be opened to expose all of its contents; consequently it could be packed and unpacked in seconds. I'd not seen him since then and recall leaving the shadow of Ferihegy Airport to encounter a torpid heat.

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The air had been still and I soon became irritated under the weight of all I'd undertaken to bring with me until boarding a coach to take me onto the metro. In the small square outside the station a small number of gypsy beggars gathered and slept under sheets of tarpaulin, hardboard, anything lying around. But because of the heat I'd acquired an immense thirst and a small bar on the corner became of more interest to me. I returned from the counter with a large cold beer and sat at one of the tables within the picket fence surrounding them. Howard had arranged to meet me at three that afternoon giving me ample time to relax and take in my surroundings. I counted the change to find that I had sufficient forints in coins to purchase another drink. Stuffing the notes into my pocket I left the coins on the table and began watching the gypsies.

They seemed hardly aware of each other, some drinking and hard arsed at it, others inhaling from paper bags. I began to take an interest in one sitting apart from the others amongst some old books. Noticing me watching, the gypsy stood to come over and surprised me when I realised that she had been a woman and spoke English. She pointed to the coins and I pushed them over the table towards her. Despite the heat, mittens without fingers covered her hands; her nails had become ingrained with dirt and broken. She again surprised me by leaving the coin of the largest denomination and left, only to return a short while afterwards with two books. When I accepted them she smiled to expose what remained of her teeth before reaching for the remaining coin. She came over to me whenever I returned from the bar and after buying several books I got to know that her name was Edith.

The books I received from her were either German or Hungarian, and with no intention of ever attempting to read them, I stuffed them into my backpack. Before leaving I noticed her being abusive to one of the other gypsies and arguing with him, I called out to her. This time to her surprise and I sensed her blush when she responded like a young girl, smiling waving me goodbye and almost reaching to a curtsy to reassure me that everything was fine.

I arrived at Deak Feren Ter twenty minutes before my meeting with Howard, which should have been time enough but for what Saint Christopher had planned. In his anarchic scheme of events, two days earlier there had been torrential rain resulting in heavy flooding and the closure of some of the other stations. The only way I knew how to get to mine had been by train. When I got there to find the other lines closed I felt abandoned, alone and left with that bloody meaningless question of - if only?

I took the escalator to confront the sun which, although later in the afternoon, had become no less intense. I walked around in ever increasing circles feeling that with Edith's contributions, the contents of my backpack could fill a charity shop window. Nonetheless I hoped to meet someone with her linguistic skills. Witnessing the shaking of heads from many trying to avoid the hour of the lemming I realised my pronunciation must have been confusing. Which an American corroborated by pronouncing it differently and he pointed me in what I hoped would be the right direction. I hopped onto a trolley bus which had become too crowded to afford me the luxury of

dropping the backpack from my shoulders. When my mobile started bleeping, my backpack became a means to smash into those immediately surrounding me until I found sufficient space to enable me to reach into my pocket for the phone. I brought up a message which came as no surprise.

'You feckless Bastard, if you're not here soon I'm off.'

I'd struggled to bring up the screen and select the message, but my dexterity or knowledge of the phone hadn't been sufficient to allow me to reply, unlike some who could no doubt text midway through a bungee jump. I swayed with those surrounding me to the motions of the trolley bus, until being taken by a sudden migration out onto the pavement and to the terminus building. I clambered up the stairs and stepped out onto an open deck. There, hunched over the bar with his back to me, wearing a loose fitting, short sleeved, blue patterned holiday shirt and chinos, Howard continued to play with his phone.

Later in the week, we met up with another friend and decided to travel on to Lake Balaton. It was Howard's idea to change trains mid journey to go to the north side of the lake, to Balatonfured, where at a later date we could take the ferry across to travel by coach onto Pecs.

The carriages behind the train were old and huge with large windows and with ample space we sat at a table besides one. Phil, the friend who had recently joined us, produced a selection of cooked meats, cheeses and bread. I rummaged, taking items of clothing from my backpack in search of a couple of bottles of local wine and so did Howard. I felt totally relaxed and at peace for the first time since Phil's arrival. I'd not met with him in a long time, when I did again I discovered that he had grown old alone and had become uncompromising. He had been grumpy since leaving the airport and held me to account for the cock up in our arrangements to meet him, when in fact I'd waited for him patiently at that bar before the metro. To pass the time I'd been drinking large cold beers, stockpiling books and watching passengers leaving the airport bus to board the metro. But I didn't see Phil, he lived beyond my means and did the one thing that I would never consider, he took a cab. Also he'd been dissatisfied with our accommodation arrangements. Howard had commandeered the double bed in the master bedroom of one those immense eastern European flats with ceilings high enough to suggest that they were meant to accommodate practising acrobats or jugglers. I spent the first night in the single bed in the same room as Howard. The following day I decided to leave that pleasure for Phil hoping they would bond. Only to realise later I should have known better recalling the Christmas when they met.

I arranged the camp bed in the smaller room of the two we'd rented. After spending their first night together, over breakfast the following morning Phil did nothing in the way of conversation other than to bicker. Some of his bickering I could sympathise with because on the odd occasion when I awoke during the night, I could hear Howard snoring from the other side of the wall separating us. We decided after a couple of days to travel on, to avoid the crowds that would be drawn to the grand prix that would be occurring that weekend.

Following their initial spats I felt good watching Phil and Howard getting on well together, sharing morsels of good food and drinking local wine. I rummaged through my backpack again pulling out odds and sods, but not Edith's books; I'd left them back at the flat. Finding my camera I began taking photographs of Phil and Howard against the backdrop beyond the window of a slowly changing landscape. The train stopped, someone walking up and down the platform started to shout unintelligibly.

'That's us!' Howard exclaimed. He downed what remained in his glass and all his possessions were stowed into that bag with the speed of a conjurer performing a trick. Phil wasn't long in joining him. I stuffed everything back into my backpack and fell onto the platform

to see in the near distance Howard and Phil climbing into the rear carriage of the carriages ahead. Shit!-my camera. Returning, this time with my entire luggage, I found myself alone on the platform apart from a uniformed man holding a green flag while I watched the back of the train containing Phil and Howard disappear into a shimmering haze brought about by the dry heat.

Having Missed out on the previous opportunity I needed to eat and drink, but first I had to find out when I could get the next train to Balatonfüred.

The platforms were adjoined to one another and the foyer via a subway. I strapped on my backpack and reached to the floor to pick up the camera by its strap before descending the stained concrete steps. I followed the subway to the last stairwell, which I felt would be the exit and where the ticket office would be. When I reached the top of the steps four children confronted me, the eldest seeming to be no older than her mid-teens. They talked amongst themselves and indicated to me by reaching their fingers into their mouths, that they were hungry. The elder girl held her hand out. I reached into the top pockets of my shorts swapping the camera from hand to hand to bring out whatever coins had been there. I did the same after unbuttoning and lifting the flaps from over the pleated side pockets on the legs. The youngest of the group, a boy, took hold of my camera. Although he made no attempt to snatch it away from me he distracted me and held my attention until at some signal they all ran off together. I followed a long corridor into the foyer.

In sharp contrast to the subway the ceiling was high and a large wooden framed clock hung from the centre. I crossed a floor tiled with small black and white squares to get to the ticket office.

The booking clerk bought the side of her head closer to the crystal cut window in the veneered partition separating us to listen more attentively. I reached up on tiptoe and forward from the counter to try to speak more plainly and effectively. She still couldn't understand my questions so I reached into my pocket for my ticket to show her but found nothing in the side pockets. My wallet and cell phone had also gone. I thought of the children and hoped that after removing the money they would be considerate enough to leave my wallet somewhere where I could find it. I left my back pack after pointing to it and indicating to the booking clerk that I would be back soon. But whatever qualities I felt I saw in those children rapidly disappeared with every platform and toilet I searched through.

Considering whether or not to report them I couldn't see the point, in the time that it would have taken me to communicate anything to anyone of what had happened they would be far away. I returned for my luggage with just my comb and camera and walked away dragging my back pack over the floor. I felt hollow inside with no money, no means and incommunicado so to speak, and could well imagine what texts those kids were going to receive. I went outside for a breath of fresh air and dropped the backpack against the wall. Thank God the wine wasn't of a greater vintage. I unscrewed the top from one of the bottles and, as unreasonable as it may seem, I felt a great desire to crucify those kids along with Phil and Howard. Again I'd been left alone with that familiar niggling, negative and self-pitying question that always comes with moments like this of, 'If only?'

I sat on my backpack with my back to the wall and began swigging wine like a gypsy beggar. Recalling them gave me an idea. There'd been something left of the afternoon and the more wine I drank, the more optimistic I became. I hadn't lost everything. I needed to get to Balatonfüred to find Phil or Howard and hoped the place wouldn't be big or crowded to enable me to locate them more easily. I still had my camera and could sell that. Surely the money I'd get would more than cover the price of the ticket. As it was I didn't want to move and it struck me

what comfort wine could bring to those who had nothing else. Each time I lifted the bottle to my lips something began to irritate my right nipple. I lifted my left hand inside my denim shirt to discover that there had been something in the breast pocket. While reaching inside to feel what was there I brought my head back to the wall behind me to let out a breath just short of a whistle. Whenever Howard had been on a mission he'd stop for nothing and I didn't want to be left behind. So when my debit card had been returned to me earlier in the day, I had just stuffed it into the top pocket along with the ticket and receipt. With hope restored, and dragging my rucksack behind me, I rushed to catch up with him and Phil.

There were few people on the train that I boarded and again sitting beside another of those large windows, I again watched the countryside passing and began to feel more at ease.

Collecting a timetable from the station, Howard and Phil sat at a nearby bar and had, I later discovered, found a common interest in criticising me, which I didn't mind if it kept them both happy while they were in each other's company. When I arrived it had been Howard's turn to greet the train and words fail to convey my delight seeing him there. But I found no gleam in those blue eyes, nor had his head been half cocked wearing the puzzled expression of a border collie. His then was more like a pit bull terrier, its front paws raised and straining at a chain which was preventing him from getting any closer.

'You've kept us here all day. You really are a feckless bastard.'

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In reminding him of my history of poor time-keeping and organizational cock-ups, I tried to suggest to him that he might show a little patience, or at least some consideration to what I may have been through in my efforts to reach him. Before he could reply Chris came with Rosemary to join us and Howard stood, I must say with some difficulty, to go back inside 'The Gingle Boy' for more wine and glasses. Once he'd returned they all expressed how glad they were to see each other again and Chris introduced me to Rosemary. Then, after Howard had filled the girl's glasses, he attracted Chris's attention.

'Can you recall the time we got lost trying to find that party in Barnes?' After taking a sip of her wine Chris wasn't long in replying. 'Yes I do, Dee was with us.'

'That's right.' Howard stopped to give Chris time to remember before asking 'can you recall what happened?'

Chris thought for a moment and took another sip replying with 'No, no not really.'

Thinking back to the fuss he'd made at the time I could, but before I could interject he continued with.

'Well I do; we stopped at a pub and he went inside to ask for directions. Twenty minutes he kept us waiting until I followed and found him drinking and talking to someone at the bar while we'd been stuck outside in the cab with the clock running.'

That had been thirty years ago and had been a chance meeting with someone I hadn't seen in a while.

Chapter 2

Coming to the end of the wine, between us, we tried to decide upon a place of interest we could go on to. Rosemary expressed a desire to see some examples of art nouveau and I knew of a place on the way back to my house and Chris's 'The Greenwood Hotel'. The interior design and decor in the ballroom would be a perfect example because the management kept it in pristine

order to be used as a set for either film or television productions. Also to help pay for its upkeep, on a Friday night it would be let to be used as a venue to tribute bands. I didn't know who would be playing that night, but the bands I'd been to see previously had all been good. I suggested that we could go onto there. They agreed to it, but walking from the wine bar Howard's steps became more laboured and he began to struggle under the weight of his bag. I took it from him and would later be proved wrong in my assumption that he moved awkwardly because he'd had far too much to drink. With one hand to the wall he veered, as though taken by some unseen force, into an Italian restaurant. We followed and at his insistence sat with him at a table. The meal wouldn't be of one my choosing and would be expensive I realised from the small portions and how they'd been decoratively presented.

Howard seemed troubled and when the wine came I sampled it before taking the bottle and filling the glasses.

Rosemary wore a red dress, which had been a fortunate choice of colour, because Chris reaching for her glass knocked it over. The contents spilt from the glass over the table cloth onto Rosemary's dress before she could stand to avoid it. We all stood to assist her and it seemed to me that Howard continued to struggle. Following the kerfuffle that brought us to the attention of the serving staff and to some of the other diners, the plates were removed. In seconds the soiled table cloth had gone to be replaced by another giving us the merest glimpse of the rectangular chipboard table top beneath.

Howard turned from the table, presumably to go to the toilet. The restaurant floor had been split level with a single step down and in negotiating it Howard dropped in such a way that it appeared that his legs had suddenly collapsed beneath him. I rushed over. He rested on his arm and hands, right side turned towards the floor, his legs buckled under him.

'I can't use them.'

He uttered meaning his legs, which suggested to me that he couldn't assist me in helping him to stand. I struggled to turn him until he could rest with both hands on the floor behind. A meaningful lady left her company to join us. Kneeling with one knee on the floor, she explained that she was a doctor and asked Howard if he had blood pressure? Her intrusion Howard didn't welcome and he replied sarcastically.

'I certainly hope so.'

Obviously miffed by his response she abruptly turned from him. When we stood together she asked me 'Had this happened before?' but in replying. "I wouldn't know I usually precede him" continued with Howard's rejection which I soon regretted saying. How huge Howard was I hadn't fully realised in all the years that I'd known him until that moment. I attempted with Rosemary and Chris's help the impossible task of trying to raise him with Rosemary suggesting during our endeavours to call for an ambulance. In considering this I realised what the waiting room of any A & E would be like late Friday night. They were places at that time when any allegiance to the Hippocratic Oath would be at breaking point. Word must have gone around amongst the staff, because not long after Howard had fallen someone came to assist us from the kitchen. He was also massive and stretching down he reached underneath Howard's armpits. He leant backwards using his full body weight to raise Howard, which he struggled to do until lifting him sufficiently to enable me to place a chair beneath him. With that achieved he returned to the kitchen. Once Howard seemed more composed, we helped to get him outside. He couldn't move without the assistance of something or someone to help support his weight. Trying to hail a cab while we struggled to help Howard, Chris became more annoyed and frustrated with each rejection. We reached the railings on the corner, which were there to prevent pedestrians from

stepping out onto the road. I left Howard with the girls while I went over to the taxi rank outside the station. Finding a sympathetic driver I explained to him. He drove with me in the back to the railings to collect Howard and with help from the girls to get him back to my place.

I went down to the conservatory the following morning to find Howard there smoking. I sat with him and talking about the doctor amused us to point of laughter, reminiscent of times from a past when the pleasure we got from many an escapade was talking about it afterwards over a drink. Chris called around a little later to pick Howard up and take him on to Tilbury to see a boat he was considering purchasing on behalf of the Trinity Trust, a charity that Howard had established in Brixham that enabled, amongst others things, special needs children to go to sea in the tall boats belonging to the trust. Although still unstable, Howard could walk unaided.

I had just settled down to watch the start of an England qualifying football game in my local when Howard text me later that day. His lameness had returned and he'd been waiting with no means to get in outside my house. I told him to wait there and rang for a cab to collect him, to bring him to where I was. He had no interest in the game and consequently didn't stay with me for long. When Chris came to collect him he went off with her and Rosemary to meet with acquaintances of theirs unknown to me. Howard had travelled from Devon and so had Rosemary, but because Chris was local to me and had a house in West London, I didn't expect to see any of them until the following day.

I awoke to hear the house phone above the music from the cd that I'd put on before crashing. When I stood I felt something crack or flash behind my eyes and I had to close them briefly before leaving the room to reach the phone.

'It's Chris. Howard wants a word with you.' And why Chris rang and not Howard, to address me in an abrupt authoritative manner, like she would to a naughty boy in her class, I could only presume later had been because of the inconvenience I may put her through.

I sat on the bottom stairs and lowered my head as the weight of it seemed to be increasing and listened with a kind of numb resignation when Howard continued following Chris's introduction.

'I got a cab back to yours last night. I could hear your music, hear the dog barking, I banged on your door until your neighbour came out. All those coins in the front garden are mine; I threw them up at your bedroom window. Anyway Chris is driving me round to pick up my bag and drop me off at the station.'

I'd not been given the opportunity to reply. I checked the ash tray to see how much I'd smoked and then went to see what I'd left in the bottle, returning to the front room with a medicinal coffee brandy. I felt too bad to feel bad and when Howard came to collect his bag, Chris remained beside the car. The consequence of my solitary indulgence last night had pissed everyone off. Chris and Howard left abruptly, neither one inviting me to accompany them, nor waving me goodbye and insisting I should visit soon.

I would be best leaving trying to contact Howard or Chris for at least a couple of days. Later that afternoon I went down to my local. Before I could lift a pint I doubled up in similar fashion to someone receiving a blow to his lower abdomen. A sickly feeling came for an instance, which always follows shock. I went outside to get a breath of fresh air and sat on the steps up to the pavement from the slip road. My forehead had become clammy damp; the air felt refreshing and I inhaled it with slow deep breaths until the pain subsided. After a while I became more afraid than hurt and after climbing the steps I went home.

I realised that it would be a long night when I felt that I needed to, but couldn't pass water. When I finally did, it wasn't to be without some discomfort. I became further alarmed when I

saw seemingly undiluted claret. Suspecting renal failure I went upstairs to lay awake and reflect upon the many things that can happen, and the changes in lifestyle that would be necessary to prevent such things from happening, in the event of my kidneys beginning to fail.

Not booking an appointment weeks previously I remained in the waiting room for some considerable time until the doctor became free to see me. I took the cylindrical sample jar to the toilet and inspected its content before returning it to the G. P. I didn't see any blood, only little flecks floating about which were not dissimilar to those in snow scene paper weights that are turned upside down for effect. She inspected it under some kind of scope and her prognosis of kidney stones came as such a relief that I became heedless to what else she had to say. She made hospital appointments on my behalf, while I thought of Samuel Pepsys and how he had overcome kidney stones before witnessing the historic fire that had been started by some careless baker in Pudding Lane.

Once I'd returned home, and in the realisation that my condition wasn't that threatening, I became more concerned because of Howard's. I couldn't wait the few days I thought best before contacting him. Just before retiring I phoned him later that evening. Like me he'd been to see his G. P., but unlike mine, his condition had been of some concern to both him and his doctor. He'd had no sensation of pain when his toes had been pricked and consequently he was promptly booked into Shiphey General Hospital for tests the following day. I'd had two previous encounters with Shiphey General; once when I went to visit Howard when he had been a patient there previously. I gathered then from what I'd been told that Howard's admittance had been typical of how he used to be.

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He'd been decorating the outside of his house. Without consideration for anything apart from what he'd been focused upon, when he stepped backwards to see how successful he'd been, he fell from the platform. His descent resulted in multiple fractures.

Thinking back to that time, shortly after I'd received the news from Howard, I met with George an old friend of ours from the Roslyn. While talking with him I told him about Howard's accident and together we recalled the time we went to spend the weekend with Howard to go sailing.

Howard had somehow acquired a small sailboat with an outboard motor, which he took great pleasure from, and it had been a pleasure he loved to share with those appreciative enough to want to share it with him. On a calm summer's evening we decided to go fishing. Armed with an ordinance chart, string lines and traces, we set to sea after boarding 'The Nimbus'. Watching Howard as we gently rolled with the waves never failed to impress me. He'd become well adept with his craft which in many ways was unlike him. Howard would often cut corners to avoid things of a lesser interest, and this on many an occasion resulted in things collapsing around him.

Howard eased back the throttle and while the motor idled, we tied the traces with feathers, hooks and plumb bobs onto our lines. We sailed around in slow circles lifting the lines and dropping them until we felt the plumb bob dink upon something solid, hoping that it would be one of the wrecks on the chart. Howard opened the throttle and we began catching fish. It delighted George. We headed back just as dusk descended listening to tales from George about the fishing trips he'd made with his father before leaving Jamaica. In recalling all of this we decided to visit Howard in hospital, and before parting, we agreed to meet at Paddington Station the following Saturday.

The journey had become all too familiar to me. Until reaching the South Devon coast, I paid little attention to the passing countryside. But when we came to the sea the train followed the coast for some distance passing sandstone monoliths, caves and tunnels, with shadows moving from dawn to dusk, silhouetted by the glistening reflection from the sun upon the water behind.

We arrived at the hospital, and as pleased as Howard had been to see us, it wasn't long before he made his frustration felt in being confined to a bed. A nearby window had been broken as a result of him throwing a plate to get someone's attention. Not so much for his own good I felt, but more for the good of others, to restrict his movement a broom handle had been inserted into the plaster behind his ankle. We had to leave when the time came and Howard's parting words to me were. 'I've got to get away from here. All they talk about is football, shit and masturbation, and I don't know a sodding thing about football.'