

## “...IF...”

In 1961 I was living in Gatley, Cheshire. Gatley was pretty much equidistant from Manchester and Stockport. The Beat Music era was about to explode into British culture first, then the World. The Beatles were gigging at the Cavern Club in Liverpool about 15 miles away. Mods were redefining male fashion. After the austerity of post-war demob suits and hundreds of thousands of men desperate to forget the horrors war had forced them to witness in an age before any recognition of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and to keep their hair short a new generation, naturally, wanted to rebel. What better way than to do the almost exact opposite of the current norm? This meant long The WHO turned hair, dandyism to an nth degree, velvets, chiffon scarves, brocade curtains turned into trousers and, that ultimate symbol of the old militaristic days of British Empire, the Union Jack, into an iconic jacket. At 11 I was a little young to participate fully at the beginning, but I was thrilled and inspired to see young men, teenagers, wearing such liberated and liberating clothes. Even make-up and carefully backcombed “mod” hairstyles were burning through tradition like a brush fire! There was a National examination, at that time, called the “11 Plus”. Your results often decided your adult fate. A low score meant you went to a Secondary Modern which was seen as meaning you would always be in working class jobs with no future; a little higher sent you to a technical college to learn a blue collar trade ready for a skilled apprenticeship; a good “pass” slotted you into a Grammar School and finally upon a sparse occasion the “brightest of the bright” were offered scholarships to go to an English “Public School”. It is important to know and understand this term in particular as it is used in the United Kingdom before this movie “IF” can make sense. A “Public School” in the U.K. is actually an elite PRIVATE School that must be paid for by the pupil’s parents whilst a Grammar School is equivalent to a well respected, high achieving publicly run and

financed school. In 1961 I took my 11 Plus exam and passed with flying colors! There are reasons we did so well that we were able to choose between the three best Public Schools in the Manchester area. To make it more confusing the two named after the towns they were in were actually called Manchester Grammar School, William Hulme School and Stockport Grammar School. After looking around them I plumped for Stockport Grammar School (a private, fee paying, “public” school).

I was offered a full scholarship so my parents did not have to pay for anything except my uniform. The school was founded well over 400 years before in the late 1500’s and the main buildings looked almost exactly like those in “IF” (“IF” was actually filmed at Cheltenham school for Boys, the same town Brian Jones grew up in and rejected). Later, whilst at Hull University my friend Jesus Joheero who had gone to Cheltenham and I sneaked into his old school through leaded windows left open by students still attending Cheltenham in order to deliver hashish to his friends and to distribute anarchist pamphlets and our own inflammatory magazine “WORM”. We hopped to foment a rebellion of some kind similar to “IF”. WHY? Why did we want to literally start a potentially violent riot to destabilize a “Public School”? Well read on.

I chose Stockport Grammar School because it was the smallest, had the longest most appealing mediaeval history with the least restrictive rules. It was considered progressive and liberal. Test results, hard work and involvement in school activities were paramount. Hair length, shoe style and totally controlled uniforms were secondary. As one teacher said to me once, “It’s your brain we are interested in “Megson” (my old original name) not your hair.” The uniform was a school blazer and school tie, and a school cap. But you could wear any trousers you liked, grow your hair longer than The Pretty Things and add a pink-button-down-collared shirt. In other words, the regime, such as it was, was relaxed and sensible, friendly and encouraging. It was there I was encouraged to write poetry and where I learned about

harmonies in the school choir. I played soccer on the Left Wing position. As Mod grew in influence in fashion and The Beatles and The Stones generated a mock rivalry so we boys at Stockport Grammar School took note, chose sides ( I was a Stones fan of course) and dandied ourselves up as best we could with meager “spends” (weekly allowances, mine was \$2 a week at 18 years old). I loved that school. I had a great bunch of rowdy friends; I fitted in because there was no need to rebel. I wore chisel toe brown shoes, my pal Don Wardle wore outrageous “Winkle pickers” those super pointed shoes with a Spanish Heel. No one cared or told us off. Nobody sent us to detention. Despite having been founded so long ago by a somewhat mysterious Knight/Warrior Monk who I now suspect was a Knight Templar there was no obligatory military training. I listened to Radio Luxemburg and Radio Caroline on a small Bush transistor radio through an earphone under the bedclothes at home at night so as not to disturb my parents. When a new Stones single came out I’d rush to buy it after hearing it via my radio. Rivalry between The Stones and The Beatles fans was so intense that when The Stones played in Stockport just down the hill from my school there was a famously violent riot that included fans being thrown off a bridge into the river Mersey in Mersey Square during this event immortalized by “Unit 4 Plus 2” on their track “A RIOT IN MERSEY SQUARE” (available on a compilation on a BAM/CARUSO Records release).

Suddenly, in 1964, as I had started to get interested in the burgeoning youth culture and the inspirational tsunami of radically new pop and blues music my family moved, over the Summer, to Solihull near Birmingham in the industrial wasteland of England’s Midlands. To this day we recall that whole conurbation as the most sterile area of Britain. A decaying and deprived toxic dump. I also had to leave all my friends, my Mod aspirations and my sense of belonging good-naturedly to my peer group. Hopefully you have meandered with me to this point as the preceding contextualizes

what happens next and why to this day watching “IF” can reduce me to sobbing tears as vile memories return.

The (Private) “PUBLIC School in Solihull was called “Solihull School”. Perhaps their shame leads so many of these hyper-privileged schools for the rich and/or powerful to use such innocuous and misleading names for themselves? Anyway, my parents could never afford the fees at Solihull School and so they met with the Headmaster (Principal to you in the U.S.A.) and the school board and were relieved to hear that this new public school would honor my scholarship and educate me to the highest standard for free. The downside for ME was the school uniform rules, which were inflexible and strict. In Winter I HAD to wear a vile grey herringbone wool suit. Grey woolen socks and black Oxford lace-up shoes, a white normal shirt and a school tie topped off by a peaked school cap. If anyone in the town saw you, at any time, holidays, weekends, after school in uniform but not wearing your stupid cap they were ENCOURAGED to inform the school and even try and get your identity! This would earn you a caning and detentions at the very least. Hair must be above the level of the top edge of your ears ALL the way around. In Summer I was forced to wear a school blazer; black trousers; white shirt, school tie; black lace-up shoes and a cap, or more ridiculous a straw boater hat. These rules would have been bad enough if I had only experienced Solihull School and not a liberal yet smart school in advance. But I HAD known another disciplinary and aesthetic uniform system that worked just fine and let everyone breathe easy and focus on studies, sports and special interests without a sense of fear and loathing. “IF” I was pissed at this new school before I went to my first day of classes, I had no idea of the horrors to come...

It IS probably relevant to also note, before I continue, that Stockport Grammar School was a day school only. All the students lived at home. On the negative side, Stockport did have school classes all Saturday morning and sports on Saturday afternoon, so it was a 6 day week plus homework on

Sundays. At Solihull School, on the other hand, about a fifth of its students were “Boarders” who lived there full time in “School House” in various dormitories. “Boarders” as they were imaginatively called, tended to be either problem children of the rich, politically connected, armed forces officer class, foreign diplomats and African royalty, or a problem solved by them being abandoned at a young age of about 6 years old until they graduated to University or Sandhurst (the elite officer training school).

The year before I started at Solihull (as we shall call it) the Headmaster had hung himself in his office rather than appear in court for soliciting homosexual favors in a local public toilet and rather than bring disgrace upon the good name of the school. A flock of other teachers resigned after his death as a homosexual ring was exposed that did include a few of the oldest boys, known as “BENCHERS”. At Solihull all boys became Benchers at 16, and were then given the right to punish other pupils at the school. They were the equivalent of the Jewish collaborators in concentration camps who collaborated with the Nazis, except these adolescents did NOT have the excuse that they were saving their lives as a result. A Bencher could make you heavy briefcase (leather schoolbag). They could give you detentions after school; give you assignments, essays, thousands of lines, degrading jobs...they could whip you with a cane as they saw fit, even when THEY were unfit.

Like many partially formed personalities given almost unlimited power over a prey that was powerless, they abused their power. In the past sexual favors had been alleged to have been included in what were called their “privileges”. I never saw proof of that continuing though their were rumors. Basically they were nasty, egocentric bullies whose sociopathic excesses were ratified by the next level of power, the teachers. To be fair, one or two of the teachers were supportive and prepared to consider the grievances some of us were airing. But here are a couple of examples as to why “...IF...” touches me still

in a place deep within me that is probably permanently wounded by such as those who were named “Benchers” and their cronies.

I had become used to a rational, reasoned way of education and organization in Stockport. On my first day of school in Solihull I was reluctant to wear the full uniform. I saw no constructive reason to be so oppressively reduced except to exert psychological control over us. But I knew my parents were really proud of my scholarship and that they believed absolutely that I was getting the best education this way. So I went to the school. I entered a playground area and waited for someone to tell me what to do. Where to go etc. A bell tolled and in what seemed an instant everyone vanished through various doors. I followed behind when I found myself stood entirely alone. I knew I was in a class called Lower 5.2. Through the doors was a quadrangle of buildings with an immaculately trimmed lawn divided by a diagonal path. I could see boys in various rooms all around the four sides and assumed those were the classrooms. I began opening doors asking for Lower 5.2 and eventually entered the right room. Roll call was in progress. When I answered “Here Sir” everybody began pointing and laughing at me. There then followed a few minutes of teacher led verbal abuse that centered around my English being unintelligible because I had a strong Manchester accent. The core of the ridicule included the “Why don’t you go back?” and “What is a pleb like you doing here?” content and of course attacks on my being a scholarship boy because my parents were too poor to pay. I didn’t respond. I thought the teacher would have restored order but he joined in. Suddenly another bell rang and everyone rushed out, shoving me out of the way and laughing at me. I tried to ask my teacher what was happening and he said, it’s a break. So I looked around, hoping to try and talk to someone, maybe begin a friendship.

As I walked through a doorway I found myself at the top of a concrete stairway. I wondered where it led...BANG! I was smashed on the head from behind and kicked by at least two people as I saw stars. Someone tripped me up. I was

kicked down the stairs as I curled up to protect my head. As I lay on the floor I was kicked over and over by about five boys as they yelled curses about my speaking being impossible to understand because of my accent. In fact I went unconscious. As I came around I saw everyone running away. By the time I sorted myself out. Still dizzy from being kicked unconscious, I realized I was, once more, alone in the quadrangle. I wandered about, first to my classroom, and then about the corridors. All the rooms were empty! It was like a sci-fi movie. Spooky. Everyone had disappeared. After a few minutes I saw a teacher (they wore black robes) and asked him where everyone had gone? "To chapel" he said. "Let me show you," he added. Then he grabbed me by my sideburns above my ear and began dragging me by my hair alongside him. As we turned a corner we saw a modern church in the school grounds that was big enough for all the students and staff and a lot of parents too.

As he dragged me by my hair he was shouting at me," what class are you in?" I told him Lower 5.2. "Don't be ridiculous, you're much too small to be in that class." he sneered. We reached the Chapel and he burst through the doors dragging me still by my hair. By now it was agony. He stopped dead, still sneering, and the entire school, the teachers, the cooks, the nurse, the Chaplain and the Headmaster and his family went totally silent and turned around, as one, to stare at me. "What have you got there?" said one teacher. "A little boy with big ideas," was replied." He thinks he is in Lower 5.2 , but he's obviously lying because he is too small. I think he is only five like the other boys." The other teacher said,"Well what shall we do with him," I tried to tell him I really WAS 14 years old and in Lower 5.2 but everyone was laughing at me now and THEY were enjoying my humiliation. I was in shock. To have the authority figures join in physical and verbal abuse of me in the first 2 hours at a new school! Then my captor said,"I'm going to put you at the front with the little five year olds where you really belong." And he dragged me down the central aisle in front of the altar and a giant painting of the Christ that covered the

whole 40-foot high back wall and dumped me on a pew amongst the little kids. In that five minutes that teacher gave permission to everyone in that school to treat me like dirt, to abuse, humiliate and physically hurt me with impunity. And that is just what they did. Not a single boy in my class spoke to me voluntarily in that first YEAR except Dave Rook, the school bully. Who would taunt me, despite his serious lisp, about the way I spoke. *(In my last year at that school he would finally go to far too often and after he grabbed my History homework that had taken all weekend to write, set it on fire and then laughing hysterically he shoved the burning papers into my face. I was cleaning my nails with a penknife at the time, relaxing after finishing my essay. In an instant the knife was in his belly up to the hilt. We were both lucky it was not a larger blade. )*

After the service, trying to ignore the catcalls and nasty jokes I found my correct classroom again. But I was a target. Almost every day I was beaten up, attacked. Kicked, punched. When playing hockey my unguarded legs were deliberately smashed from under me by someone using their thick, hardwood stick across my shins. I thought I would die from the pain. The referee teacher saw but did nothing. Still on that first day I was grabbed in the toilets by a gang of four more bullies and held upside down, my head shoved into the toilet bowl and then the toilet was flushed. I really thought they were going to drown me. When you watch “.IF..” don’t for a minute think it is exaggerated or made-up. My main complaint when watching it is that it not nearly as vicious, and appallingly sick psychologically as it really was for me, and hundreds of other victims of institutionalized brutal bullying. Then people ask me, “Why didn’t you tell your parents?” I just couldn’t. They were so proud of my scholarship, of my going to ...such a good school.” That I simply couldn’t tell them. It would have hurt them too much. So like a victim of domestic violence, I said nothing. I didn’t believe anyone at the school would help me. I believed the nightmare would only get worse if I was seen to have informed on the bullies. It would just



get worse. My father died a few years ago. My mother died just over a week ago. I never ever told them. My successful education, up until 1968 and University, was something concrete they could be proud of, especially given the media reputation I achieved as my trajectory of dissidence progressed. Who knows how many others stoically put up with vicious cruelty and physical intimidation year in and year out?

This institutionalized hierarchy of violence began way back in Mediaeval times when Knights were warriors protecting the State, though not their Serfs which would be most of you and, certainly me. In Victorian times it was seen as strengthening the boy, to make him a man for the graduates of these “Public Schools” for the rich and privileged are intended to create the leaders of tomorrow. One boy came to school towards the end of my education there and mentioned it was his birthday. “Oh,” I said blithely, “What did you get for your birthday?” “A Rolls Royce for me to go to the golf club at weekends,” he replied!

In my 17<sup>th</sup> year I eventually met and became friends with four other students at Solihull School...Spidey; Little Baz; Pinglewad and Paul Wolfson.

We were all targets of the intimidation and abuse in differing amounts, so a certain camaraderie initially threw us together giving us as at least a small level of mutual protection from this regime of violence and abuse that continued for three of my four years there. My friend Spidey was a year younger than me, as were the others I mentioned before. During one year his English teacher asked him to write a poem. Four notorious bullies who ALL came from wealthy families that were renowned for large monetary endowments to the school found out Spidey HAD written a poem. For this crime they stalked him, cornered him, and whilst hurling insults at him that he was a “puff and a queer” because he wrote a poem they beat him up so badly with their fists and feet that his appendix was ruptured

and burst. He was lucky not to die from the equivalent of peritonitis. He was near a hospital and so he survived.

The same sociopathic gang mimicked "IF". Our school was intended to supply officers to Sandhurst, the West Point of Britain. So we had Navy, Air Force and Army Cadet forces. Every Monday afternoon was dedicated to whichever branch of the armed forces you were channeled into or chose. I was in the army. We had our own rifle range in the school! We also had our own armory, which contained hundreds of 303 bolt-action UK army wartime issue rifles. There were mortars; Bren Gun heavy machine guns; Sten guns which were automatic machine guns. A few officer issue pistols and even a real, working 45 pounder heavy artillery piece. There was a jet fighter bomber parked by our Parade grounds. Sometime during 1967-68 the Schoolhouse gang tried to break into the armory to steal automatic weapons and rifles and boxes of the piles of live ammunition that were stacked up in the building. To this day I am not sure if I am glad or sad that they failed to get through all the padlocks. When they failed they tried to set the Armory on fire they were hoping to cause a massive explosion when the ammunition went up. Their frustration still not satiated they then committed a cardinal sin. They managed to start up a bulldozer and drove it across the cricket pitch gouging great tracks in it. Cricket pitches are holier than, though a similar pristine level quality to, golf holes...surely, we other students thought, surely THIS will get them some kind of retribution? No. Privilege is EXACTLY that. It raises you above and beyond the dynamic of justice all we mere mortals are subject to. In the end even the cricket pitch was subservient to the aristocracy of wealth. Nothing was done to them. I have not even given their nicknames. For who knows? They may now be Prime Minister of England, A Cabinet Minister or a Captain of Industry...

It was the 60's, Spidey had more money by far than me so he was able to dress as a Mod. We read the Beats together at our own, secret parties, discovering Hashish and sex along the way.

We created, printed and distributed our own little magazine “CONSCIENCE” and included articles against the school rules that were anathema to us. The ludicrous traditional rule of being forced into wearing caps, no matter how adult and fully-grown with facial stubble we might have become, we succeeded in finally ending. Likewise length of hair. I was invited by the Headmaster to meet with him regularly as an Ad Hoc representative to discuss any issues that were causing resentment or a sense of injustice amongst the students. I was commissioned to design the first ever issue of the SILHILLIAN School official magazine in Summer 1968. Although “Art” was not recognized as a “real” subject still and taken off every student’s curriculum when they reached a maximum age of 15. Yet, when it was time for me to leave in preparation for University I was given a special Art Prize; I received a special Headmaster’s Prize for Initiative and in the end several more Prizes on the annual Graduation Day, where prizes were awarded for merit 1968. Go figure...what IF?

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