# BOY ABOUT TOWN

A Memoir

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The Jam

The Fall

TONY FLETCHER

BESTSELLING BIOGRAPHER OF KEITH MOON AND THE SMITHS

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# About the Book

*‘I was no longer fitting in at school. I was unsure of my friends, and they were increasingly unsure of me. I wanted to be a rock star – a punk rock star, if need be. But while all around, voices were starting to break, acne beginning to appear, facial hair sprouting, I remained all flabby flesh and innate scruff, with a high-pitched whine and not a muscle to my name. I could come top of the class, I could converse with the older teens on the football terraces and with adults in record stores. Yet I was the runt of the class and rarely allowed to forget it. I had no father at home to help me out, and could hardly talk to my mum. So I took solace in The Jam.’*

As a boy, Tony Fletcher frequently felt out of place. Yet somehow he secured a ringside seat at one of the most creative periods in British cultural history.

*Boy About Town* tells the story of the bestselling author’s formative years in the pre- and post-punk music scenes of London, counting down, from fifty to number one, attendance at seminal gigs and encounters with musical heroes; schoolboy projects that became national success stories; the style culture of punks, mods and skinheads, and the tribal violence that enveloped them; life as a latchkey kid in a single-parent household; weekends on the football terraces in a quest for street credibility; and the teenage-boy’s unending obsession with losing his virginity.

Featuring a vibrant cast of supporting characters (from school friends to rock stars), and built up from notebooks, diaries, interviews, letters and issues of his now legendary fanzine *Jamming!*, *Boy About Town* is an evocative,

bittersweet, amusing and wholly original account of growing up and coming of age in the glory days of the 1970s.

# About the Author

Tony Fletcher is the author of seven non-fiction books and one novel. His biography of drummer Keith Moon, *Dear Boy*, has been named in many a Best Music Book list, and his biography of R.E.M. has been published in several languages. His most recent book, *A Light That Never Goes Out: The Enduring Saga of The Smiths*, was published by William Heinemann in September 2012. Born in Yorkshire and raised in South London, Fletcher now lives with his family in the Catskill Mountains of New York State. He can be found at www.ijamming.net and twitter.com/tonyfletcher

## Also by Tony Fletcher

*A Light That Never Goes Out: The Enduring Saga of The Smiths*
*R.E.M. Perfect Circle*
*All Hopped Up and Ready to Go: Music from the Streets of New York, 1927–77*
*The Clash: The Music That Matters*
*Hedonism: A Novel*
*Dear Boy: The Life of Keith Moon*
*Never Stop: The Echo & the Bunnymen Story*

# Boy About Town

Tony Fletcher


WILLIAM HEINEMANN: LONDON

For Ruth,
For everything

# Number 50: COULD IT BE FOREVER

DAVID WAS MY first love. Not David Bowie, though it was Bowie's single 'Starman' that brought my eight-year-old self, my eleven-year-old brother and our thirty-something mum to this place in time: Counterpoint Records in Crystal Palace, a Saturday in summer, 1972. My brother Nic had watched *Top of the Pops* two nights earlier and been transfixed by the sight of Bowie, sporting orange hair, an amazing Technicolor jumpsuit and a blue guitar, throwing his arms around a guitarist whose gold lamé two-piece suit matched the colour of his own considerable mane. The visual impact, and perhaps even the music, had sent him running to our mum, begging her to buy him a copy. It was the first time he'd ever asked for a record of his own.

I'd already pestered our parents into buying me a couple of singles over the years: 'Back Home' by the 1970 England World Cup Squad – because what self-respecting six-year-old football fan could possibly go without? – and, much to my dad's dismay, 'Something's Burning' by Kenny Rogers, which I'd fallen for on one of the few occasions I'd been allowed to watch *Top of The Pops*. Dad, the head of music for the Inner London Education Authority, had always frowned on pop. We'd been brought up learning the cello (me), violin (Nic), piano (both), and taught to read music almost as soon as we had learned the alphabet. My brother spent his Saturdays in Pimlico, at the music-school-within-a-school that Dad had recently founded in the comprehensive there; I was expected to follow imminently.

Still, when he'd left home a few months earlier, the culmination of incompatible parental tensions evident even

to a small kid like me, Dad also left behind his collection of late-sixties Beatles albums that appeared to provide the exception to his musical rule. I'd enjoyed isolating them from the symphonies and operas that otherwise dominated the record cabinet, singing along to those songs which made sense to me: 'Maxwell's Silver Hammer', 'Piggies', 'When I'm Sixty-Four' and 'Your Mother Should Know'. The pop bug was something I'd surely been born with. It was just that, until now, I'd been prevented from tending to it.

But with Dad having moved over the river, the mood around the house suddenly changed. It wasn't all for the good: Mum told us that he wasn't paying his share, so she worked a couple of evenings a week at the Youth Club at Norwood Girls School, after already working there all day, teaching English to kids who didn't speak it the way they did on the BBC. And Nic and I had to spend alternate weekends at Dad's posh new flat in Pimlico, the very notion of which brought on migraines for me if some sense of continued bonding for my older brother. Still, freed from Dad commandeering the living room every other night to rehearse the teenage male prodigy violinists he was grooming for his London Schools Symphony Orchestra, we found we could suddenly start behaving like kids were meant to behave – and that Mum could act like a mum was meant to act around kids. Allowing us to watch *Top of the Pops* – and watching it with us – was a major first step. So was taking us to the record store. Mum even got her own single at Counterpoint that day: 'Walkin' In The Rain (With The One I Love)' by Love Unlimited, which came complete with watery sound effects, a high-pitched female chorus and the sound of a man talking to his woman on the telephone in the deepest voice you'd ever heard. Her choice, I figured, was influenced by the teenage girls at Norwood: it wasn't exactly like the music she sang with *her* group, the Bach Society.

Now, as we stood there by the record counter, she invited me to choose a single as well. But, my interest in pop music having previously been denied, I had no idea what to get. I stared at the racks of 45s, most of which were in plain paper sleeves. They meant nothing to me. I studied the list of the current Top Thirty, laid out in moveable white letters on a black board near the counter. I didn't recognize any of their names. So I did what seemed natural for an eight-year-old. I asked my big brother for advice.

He examined the ranks, as cagily as I had. Just because he'd watched *Top of the Pops* the other night didn't make him an authority. All Nic knew was that by cuddling with his guitarist while singing about a starman who 'thinks he'll blow our minds', David Bowie had made history – and that all the kids in his class wanted to be, or buy, a part of it. Finally, he fingered through the rack of half-price singles – records that had recently fallen off the charts – and pulled out the only one that came with a picture sleeve. It was called 'Could It Be Forever'.

'You should get David Cassidy,' he said, with evident relief, showing me a round feminine face that filled the whole of the cover in colour. 'All the girls love him.'

I was not a girl, but that wasn't the point. He recommended David Cassidy because he thought it was the limit of my expectations. As if to prove him right, I took him up on it. The next I knew, singles in hand, we were walking back to wherever Mum had parked the Hillman Imp and heading down Gypsy Hill towards home – a modern 'Wates' estate of narrow terraced three-story houses called Little Bornes, sandwiched in between the expensive homes of West Dulwich's Alleyn Park and Sydenham's massive Kingswood Estate. Low garden fences separated us from our posh neighbours to the front, a twelve-foot fence from the poorer estate to the back. England could be funny like that.

When I finally got to hear it in full, at home, 'Could It Be Forever' was sugary sweet almost to the point of sickliness,

nothing like the alien sounds of David Bowie's 'Starman'. But once I convinced myself that I liked it anyway, then David Cassidy's feminine face revealed itself as deeply handsome, a fragile symbol of male tenderness. I tried to assure myself that his shoulder-length hair mirrored my own bowl-like cut, even though his was dark and mine was blond. If David Cassidy could look so girly and yet be so popular, then one day, I figured, so could I. And with that, the idea of being a pop star suddenly seemed as worthy a goal in life as any – especially for a kid like me, who was precocious beyond all acceptable limits and who craved the attention that came with it, a kid who thought nothing of heading out alone on his bicycle all over the surrounding neighbourhoods and yet who clung too close to his mother's apron for either's benefit, who worshipped footballers and wished he could be one himself and yet who was overweight and emotionally unstable, as evidenced in easily provoked and alarmingly frequent crying fits. I played the record again and I was convinced. Yes, David, I swore of my first love, it *will* be forever.

I had a stamp collection that filled three books already, and several tins full of old (and, I hoped, rare) coins. I'd started copying out the phone book over the school holidays one year because it seemed like an important project. And I wrote down football attendances in a scrapbook because someone had to keep track of these things. It only made sense then that, having chosen David Cassidy as my pop star, I should collect everything about and by him, and *now*. Setting about my task with a vengeance, I learned that David belonged to something called the Partridge Family, who released their own records, and even had their own TV show. I learned too that he had competition: Donny Osmond, who *also* sang in a family group that had their own TV show. Donny Osmond's 'Puppy Love' was number one in the charts; now that I started paying attention to these things, it was obvious that you couldn't escape it. It was

equally obvious that it was a soppy piece of rubbish; ‘Could It Be Forever’ was far more grown-up than that.

And so, over the next few weeks, I convinced Mum to take me on repeat visits to Counterpoint, as well as to the record store in West Norwood, near her school, so I could find more David Cassidy singles. She didn’t seem any more convinced of my taste in David Cassidy than my dad had been over Kenny Rogers, but at least she didn’t stop me indulging in my new obsession. Soon I had two 7"s by the Partridge Family to join the one by David Cassidy. I had the makings of a collection.

Singles were great fun. They were inexpensive, they were instant, and they didn’t last long enough to lose interest in them. But I knew from the Beatles already that LPs were more important, that they were the mark of proper musicians, as well as the adults who appreciated them. So, one Saturday, about five minutes after receiving my pocket money, I rode my bike over to West Norwood, parked it outside the record shop, walked up to the counter, took a deep breath . . . and asked the manager if he could tell me the names of all the LPs by the Partridge Family and David Cassidy. He studied me closely, as if to assure himself I was not wasting his time; presumably satisfied by my earnest expression, he pulled out a big reference book he kept behind the counter, scrolled through it until he found the right page, and read out a short list of LPs. I then asked which of these LPs had been released first and, after again checking that I was not having him on, he told me: the debut – I loved that word, ‘debut’ – album by the Partridge Family was called *The Partridge Family Album.*

The cover to *The Partridge Family Album* had a treble clef stave with stick figures of the various Family members across it, designed to look like what *I* knew to be crotchets and quavers. In the bottom corner, David Cassidy had signed his autograph. (So had Shirley Jones, his mother, though I couldn’t understand how, if they were both part of

the Partridge Family, they had two different last names.) It wasn't a match for the *Sgt. Peppers* album cover, but if I was to be a real pop music fan, a dedicated follower of Cassidy, I had to start my own LP collection here, at the beginning.

But I didn't have enough money on me. I only had fifty pence. And I was worried that if I tried to save up for the album the record shop might sell it in the meantime and then I would *never* own it. I explained my situation to the manager and he suggested I make what he called a 'down payment'. I could give him 50p now, come back later with another 50p, and when I'd paid the full price of the album, I could take it home with me. Until then, he'd keep it behind a counter so that nobody else could buy it.

I gave him my fifty-pence piece. In return, I got a slip of paper confirming that I had made a down payment on a – no, on *the – Partridge Family Album*. My collection could now begin in earnest.

But I hadn't bet on my mother. When I told her about the deal she appeared aghast. She retrieved the deposit the next day. Whether she thought the store was taking advantage of me, or just that I had appalling taste in music, she never made clear.

# Number 49: HELLO HOORAY

ALICE WAS A boy who named himself after a girl. He looked like something that had crawled from the gutter. We were introduced on holiday, in the south of France, only a few weeks after I'd pledged my allegiance to David. I was on a campsite in the Dordogne Valley, where thunder clouds had become trapped by the surrounding mountains and were pelting us – me, my brother and my mum – with such relentless rain that one of the only joys to be found was in the portable radio we'd brought with us.

And that's how I discovered Alice Cooper. I tuned into Radio Luxembourg one day – because I had to find *some* way of staying connected with this new love of mine called pop music – and I heard his single, 'School's Out'. It opened with a screaming guitar riff that cut through the miserable weather like a guillotine. That riff gave way to a sneering verse, and the sneering verse to a rousing chorus. There was a crazy guitar solo in the middle of it all and when the song ended, it did so by grinding to a halt, like someone had turned the record player off – only to suddenly speed up again like a UFO taking off into the distance. The whole thing was dangerously loud: you could tell as much even through the crackle of medium wave on a portable radio in a foreign campsite in the rain. And as soon as I heard it, there was no turning back. From that moment on, David Cassidy was history.

It was partly David's own fault. He seemed so insecure. 'Could It Be Forever' had been followed that summer by 'How Can I Be Sure'. One of the Partridge Family singles I'd picked up was called 'I Think I Love You'. Not 'I *Know* I Love

You', or even just 'I *Love* You', but 'I *Think* I Love You', as if he couldn't be sure it could be forever. The other Partridge Family single, 'Breaking Up Is Hard to Do', suggested that even *that* part of this thing called love was laced with doubt.

I had no concept of love – other than for my mum, my cat and my football team. But I knew this much already: breaking up was *not* hard to do. Breaking up was really easy. You just stopped seeing someone. You didn't even have to tell them. So I dropped David – just like that – and pledged myself to Alice, instead.

Alice didn't sing about soppy things like love. And he wasn't unsure about himself, either. Alice sang in statements. 'School's Out' was number one in England for three weeks during the holidays that summer, only dropping off the top spot in time for us to return to school after the August bank holiday. By the time we did so, I owned my very own copy of *School's Out* – and not the single, I was proud to say, but the LP of the same name. We'd gone to stay with my godmother in Beverley, the Yorkshire town where I'd been born, to make up for the disastrous camping holiday, which we had finally cut short due to the endless rain. The record store in Beverley, opposite the marketplace, had a copy of the *School's Out* LP in the window. I stared at that cover daily – hourly, even – and I knew: I had to own it. Not in the way I'd thought I had to own *The Partridge Family Album*. No, this time the longing was real.

Of course, I still didn't have enough money for an LP. So this time I set about it the old-fashioned way: I begged. I made such a case for ownership that my godmother, generous to a fault, decided to treat me. She packed me off to the store with the additional pound I still needed to buy my very first LP.

*School's Out* came in a sleeve that folded out into a school desk, the top with the group members' initials scratched into it, the inside with a photograph of its contents – catapults, flick knives, a cartoon about someone called

Liberace and a picture of the Alice Cooper group sitting on rubbish bins smoking and drinking. If my godmother was horrified at the very sight of this, especially in the hands of an eight-year-old she was still dragging to Sunday School at every opportunity, she was kind enough not to show it. She may have just been counting her blessings: *School's Out* came with the strict instruction that it be played on a stereo record player *only* and hers, an old hinge-top portable, was mono. I had to wait until we were back in London before I could hear songs like 'Street Fight' and 'Public Animal'.

And when I did, it was like being beamed onto a different planet. The *School's Out* LP was not just loud, like the single, it was obnoxious as well, and though it was funny at times, it didn't invite you to snicker along. My dad, I knew, would have hated it.

I set about following Alice with a passion I'd barely hinted at with David. The singles 'Elected', 'Hello Hooray' and 'No More Mr Nice Guy', each on a distinctive green label carrying the same instantly recognisable Warner Brothers logo, made it into my growing collection of 45s. So did Alice Cooper's previous LP, *Killer*, which I bought at Counterpoint, despite the sales person's evident concern that I might be too young: the cover, after all, had a snake on the front and it opened up into a fold-out sleeve of Alice Cooper hanging from a noose. I knew from occasionally reading *Disco 45*, the fortnightly bible for under-age pop fans like myself, that this was all part of Alice's stage act, as was the cutting up of baby dolls and other gory stunts. Sure enough, when I got the album home and played it on the living-room record player, Mum found 'Dead Babies' as funny as I did. She was definitely loosening up.

And so, for my ninth birthday, she gave me what I wanted: Alice Cooper's new LP, *Billion Dollar Babies*. *Disco 45* said that the sleeve was the most expensive ever made, and I had no reason to doubt them. It came in a gatefold jacket with a pocket for a giant-size billion-dollar bank note; a wall

of perforated cards to cut out and keep; and an inner sleeve with the lyrics on one side and, on the other, a full-colour photo of the group, in front of what looked like a billion bank notes, ominously cuddling live laboratory rabbits along with a chubby baby sporting Alice Cooper's distinctive eye make-up. The music was no less over the top, 'Elected' and 'Hello Hooray' and 'No More Mr Nice Guy' (all of which I now owned twice) joined by the likes of 'Raped and Freezin'', 'Sick Things' and the grand finale, 'I Love the Dead'.

I read and memorised the lyrics to each of these songs, but I didn't try to decipher them. I viewed 'I Love the Dead' much as I did those Dracula films I'd occasionally be allowed to stay up and watch. It seemed harmless enough. Alice, I figured, was a cartoon hero, like Desperate Dan perhaps, which made his band the equivalent of the Bash Street Kids. The music they made was mad, and I didn't doubt that they were genuinely tough, and I knew that nobody mistook them for the Osmonds, but surely I didn't have to understand the word 'raped' to sing along to them, did I?

But while I loved Alice Cooper more than anyone else, I didn't love him – them? – exclusively. I loved everyone associated with this music they were calling 'glam rock'. And why not? It was obvious that this was a unique time to be eight, nine, ten years old and yet, just as my brother hadn't been able to explain his hunger for 'Starman', only his need, I couldn't tell why I now read *Disco 45* cover to cover, studied the logos on the labels of every single I owned, even memorised the credits underneath the song titles. It seemed more than just useful information. It seemed essential.

Most kids at my primary school, Langbourne – situated on the Kingswood Estate, just a short walk through the grounds of Kingsdale, the local comprehensive – liked Sweet *or* Slade. I loved them both. I loved Sweet for Brian Connolly's shoulder-length blond hair and for Steve Priest's girly winks at the *Top of the Pops* camera, and especially for the thrill of

‘Teenage Rampage’, which sounded almost as rebellious as Alice Cooper. And I loved Slade for Noddy Holder’s hoarse roar, Dave Hill’s endless array of platform heels and ludicrously loud clothes, and the group’s wonderfully misspelled song titles, silly lyrics and repetitive choruses. I liked Gary Glitter *and* Alvin Stardust; I knew that they’d both been making music since before I was born, that they were old enough to be my dad, but it didn’t seem to matter. It was pop music. Who cared about IRA bombs going off elsewhere in London, the three-day work week, the endless strikes by the miners and dockers and railway workers and the rest, or the fact that there were routine power cuts and we had to have dinner by candlelight a couple of nights a week? It was ‘I Love You Love Me Love’ and ‘Good Love Can Never Die’. It was a fantastic time to be alive.

I picked up Suzi Quatro’s number one single ‘Can the Can’. *Disco 45* said that she was friends with Alice Cooper (they both came from a place in America called Detroit), plus she had the Chapman-Chinn songwriting credit underneath the song title on the RAK label, and if those names were good enough for Sweet, they were good enough for me. Besides, everyone said Suzi Quatro was sexy and it was difficult to argue, given that she was just about the only girl (dressed like a boy) in a scene that otherwise consisted almost entirely of boys (dressed suspiciously like girls).

And I didn’t stop at glam. Together, Mum and I collected the novelty hit instrumentals: the squiggly synthesisers of ‘Popcorn’ by Hot Butter, the pub piano of ‘Mouldy Old Dough’ by Lieutenant Pigeon, and the foreign yodelling of ‘Hocus Pocus’ by Focus. I had a soft spot for both the high-pitched ballad that was the Bee Gees’ ‘Run to Me’, and the weepy deathbed poem that was Terry Jacks’ ‘Seasons in the Sun’. I bought ‘Snoopy Vs. the Red Baron’ by the Hotshots and ‘Too Busy Thinking ’Bout My Baby’ by Mardi Gras because they each had a similar infectious jerky rhythm to

them. I bought ‘Happy Xmas (War Is Over)’ by John Lennon. And I got a copy of Albert Hammond’s ‘The Free Electric Band’ because I loved the message, the idea that the singer would throw everything – school, job, love – away for music.

These songs did more than just entertain me. With the exception of Lieutenant Pigeon, who appeared on *Top of the Pops* with an old lady on piano who looked like everyone’s granny, they suggested that there was a bigger world out there, one that extended far beyond the streets of South London, the fields of Yorkshire, even the campsites of southern France. On ‘Be My Lover’, Alice Cooper sang, ‘I told her that I came from Detroit City, and I played guitar in a long-haired rock ’n’ roll band,’ and made it sound like the greatest job in the world. On ‘Cum on Feel the Noize’, Slade’s Noddy Holder sang, ‘So you think my singing’s out of time, well it makes me money,’ and the song went to number one, which proved his point. But it was Albert Hammond who put it best when he sang, ‘Just give me bread and water, put a guitar in my hand . . .’

I didn’t have a guitar yet, just a beaten-up grand piano in the living room that Dad had diverted from the school system’s scrap heap, and an equally beat-up school cello, but that didn’t stop me dreaming of my own free electric band. In the meantime, I filed my singles alphabetically in their own bookshelf in my bedroom, where I was donated the old cabinet record player once Mum finally had the money to get a new ‘hi-fi’. I put the singles that had come in plain white paper sleeves into proper cardboard covers that had polythene inners, writing the title and artist in neat felt tip on the outside. And I gave my most treasured singles a silver or gold star the same way the teachers at Langbourne awarded us silver or gold stars for schoolwork.

Langbourne took in kids from both the council estate and the posher local streets, and we wouldn’t have known it was unusual if we didn’t occasionally hear our parents talking about it. We were too busy being loud and unruly. Our

deputy head, who was also my class teacher, and much loved by everyone, watched these energy levels grow steadily more frenetic the closer it got to the weekend, and made the brave decision to do away with classes on Friday afternoon. He added an extra assembly instead – to be run by the kids. They were an immediate hit, with most pupils seizing the opportunity to read their own silver-starred short stories, show off their latest paintings, explain the results of some successful science experiment and the like.

Me, I sang the latest glam rock hits. Unaccompanied, I'd stand at the front of the hall, facing some 200 or more of my fellow Juniors sat cross-legged on the floor, and I'd break into the current chart-topper by one of the glam rock regulars. If there was a guitar riff, I'd sing it; if there was a backing vocal, I'd sing it; if there was a high-pitched scream during the third and final chorus, as there was on every Slade single, I'd sing it. If there was a distinct move that 'belonged' to a certain artist, I'd copy it. I even took a white secondary school shirt from my brother, ladled the back of it with glue in the shape of a star, spread several tubes of coloured glitter on top, and then wrote, in bold felt-tip pen above and beneath this star, the words 'It's Only Rock and Roll'. This was the title of a single by a group called the Rolling Stones, and though I hadn't yet heard it, that didn't mean I didn't *get* it. Wearing that shirt, singing to the entire school assembly, I felt like a pop star. Like I was on *Top of the Pops.* I saw it as training for the real thing.

Other kids soon followed suit. Singing the hits of the day became a regular part of the Friday assembly. All of a sudden, I was no longer unique. Most of the kids had better voices than me. Many had a better build than me. And, I hated to admit it, but some of them were more popular than me. Fortunately, there was only so much time allotted for singing, and it wasn't enough time for everyone. So, towards the end of the school year, four of us teamed up, commandeered the singing time, and presented our own

version of the Eurovision Song Contest. We wrote out the lyrics of our chosen songs in different colours according to who would sing which lines, and we practised dance routines. We learned six songs in all, and we sang one each Friday afternoon for six weeks in a row. And then, on the seventh week, we were given the entire assembly to ourselves. We sang all six songs again, one after another, and then we took a vote by a show of hands. The ten- and eleven-year-olds split their choice between the various glam songs. The eight- and nine-year-olds voted en masse for ‘The Funky Gibbon’ by the Goodies, whose TV show was the funniest thing in the world (for that age group). ‘The Funky Gibbon’ was the runaway winner. And so, just like on the real Eurovision Song Contest, we sang our winning song again, and the whole hall cheered and laughed and sang along with us. We didn’t say as much to each other, but we surely all sensed it: life would probably never get any better than this.

# Number 48: MAKE ME SMILE (COME UP AND SEE ME)

DEAN WAS THE best-looking kid in our year at Langbourne: even at the age of ten, we understood that kind of thing. Plus, he was smart, and he was tough. He was captain of the school football team. He'd taught me my first swearword – 'bloody', as in, 'the other team bloody fouled our Terry' – and I'd immediately got into trouble for repeating it at home. And then, at some point in our fourth and final year, he came up to me in the playground at lunch and asked if I masturbated. This was a big word and he knew it.

'Maybe,' I replied, hedging my bets.

'You should,' he hit back. 'It's great.'

As it happened, I already knew as much. The previous summer, Nic and I had gone to Canada, where our dad had recently taken a job as music professor at the main university in Nova Scotia. We spent a week in Cape Breton, staying with a friend of Dad's who had kids more or less our age, ten and thirteen, and one evening when we were all alone in the family barn, the older of the host's kids brought out a copy of a magazine called *Playboy*. It had full colour pictures of naked women, all with bronzed bodies, big breasts, and bushes of tangled hair between their legs that seemed to be hiding some greater mystery, and me and the other younger brother gasped in amazement at the sight of it. Nic though, seemed unimpressed, like he'd seen that and much more. As if to prove as much, he offered to show us all what he could do with his willy.

First, he fished around for some tissue paper, like it was an important part of whatever came next. Next, he took

down his jeans and pulled out his penis. This was odd enough behaviour in itself, but then, while staring at the pictures of the naked women, he played with it and teased it so that it grew hard. Then he wrapped his wrist around it and, still looking over the pictures in *Playboy*, jerked back and forth furiously as the three of us watched, confused and scared but equally amazed and impressed. After a couple of minutes he began moaning – was he hurting himself? – as whitish goo came gushing out the end in a sequence of erratic spurts, almost all of which he caught in the tissue paper held an inch or so away from his penis. A bizarre series of facial grimaces accompanied this action, until he let out a deep sigh . . . after which he wiped himself clean, smiled victoriously and pulled up his trousers.

Back in London, in his room up at the top of the house, Nic introduced me to the treasure trove under his bed: dozens of magazines that made *Playboy* look like the *Daily Telegraph*. Where he got them from I had no idea; they were all marked ‘Not to be sold to persons under the age of 18’ and though Nic was thirteen already, he wasn’t yet passing for anyone’s idea of an adult. But it didn’t matter. His magazines had names like *Men Only*, *Mayfair*, *Fiesta* and *Knave*, and they showed women’s naked bodies in much greater detail than the Canadian *Playboy*. Nic talked about parts of the women’s body while he turned the pages, and I was even more impressed. I hadn’t a clue.

Next time I was alone in the house, I borrowed one of the magazines and brought it down to my own room, where I laid it out on the bed and played with myself as I had seen my brother do in Canada. I pulled at my willy repeatedly and sure enough, without too much provocation, it grew erect in front of me. My penis didn’t look threatening the way his had; it looked like a little dagger poking out from under my belly button. But when I played with it, electric currents pulsed through me. I turned to the readers’ letters with their

graphic descriptions of wild sexual encounters and wondered if I was feeling what they felt when they ‘did it’.

And as I went through what I hoped were the correct motions, I found something welling up inside of me. The sensation caught me by surprise, but it was far too pleasurable to stop. Instead, I kept pulling away at myself until the strange feeling washed over me in a series of intensely ecstatic waves, causing me to shake involuntarily and emit a small gasp of pleasure. I was surprised, as much by my reaction as the sensation itself; in failing to control my emotions, it was as if I had discovered something more powerful than my own being. I knew that from now on life would never, *could* never be the same again.

There was only one problem. I hadn’t produced any of the white goo that my brother had unleashed in Canada. I wondered if that meant that there was something wrong with me. That evening, in his room, I asked Nic about it while he was poring over the latest *Fiesta*.

‘You’re not old enough to ejaculate,’ he informed me authoritatively.

‘Old enough to have an orgasm,’ I challenged proudly.

‘You are?’ He seemed incredulous. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Sure I’m sure. Great, isn’t it?’

‘I didn’t know you could have one without the other,’ he said, shaking his head in surprise. ‘You’d better make the most of it.’

I needed no more encouragement. With Nic off early to secondary school at Pimlico, and Mum out equally early to teach at Norwood, I was the last to leave our house in the mornings and trusted to lock the door behind me. I’d use the extra time I had after breakfast to go back to bed, surround myself with pictures of naked women and masturbate. Naturally, I was soon addicted.

. . . So I should have just agreed with Dean in the playground that day. I should have said, ‘Yeah, it *is* great, isn’t it?’

But I wasn't sure if it was OK to admit to it. It didn't seem the type of thing you discussed in public, let alone in the playground. So, that evening, in the privacy of his bedroom and while we studied the curves on *Mayfair*'s Miss June, I again sought out my brother's advice. 'Does *everybody* masturbate?'

'Of course,' he replied, looking at me in astonishment. 'Everyone. From puberty onwards. Even grown men do it. Anyone who denies it is a liar.'

With that endorsement – and from an expert, no less – I doubled my schedule. I'd masturbate at night as well as in the morning. I could keep quiet doing it and there was still no mess to clean up. It was the greatest hobby in the world. I even began to imagine what it would be like with girls. Not the girls at Langbourne, who were all flat-chested, but with real women. I understood their attraction now, and I had a relatively good idea what sex was about. I couldn't wait to start trying it.

And then I went to an all boys' school.

It was my own choice. I could have gone to Kingsdale, where most of my primary-school friends from the Kingswood Estate were going as a matter of course, including the flat-chested girls who would soon start growing breasts. But it was never on the cards. Kingsdale, which took in thousands of pupils from as far away as Brixton and Peckham, was one of the toughest comprehensives in London.

This reputation, long-rumoured, was confirmed for all to see the day I'd come running out to the playground from the lunch room at Langbourne, only to find a fight taking place in the street that ran between our two schools. And not a normal school fight, between two teenagers. No, this was a fight between two *armies* of teenagers, like you'd see on television when it took place at a major football match. Whole gangs of kids were charging each other, swinging fists and boots whenever they thought they could make

contact, throwing bottles and even the occasional brick. We found out later, after the fight had been reported on television and in the newspapers, that it was over some girls. We also heard that Kingsdale had ‘won’. It was something to boast about, for sure, our local comprehensive being that tough, but it didn’t mean I wanted to spend at least the next five years of my life in the place.

My dad always said that if every kid, rich or poor, dumb or smart, weak or tough, went to his or her local comprehensive, the schools would get better overnight. I suspected that he was right, but like many people who wanted to make decisions on other people’s behalf, he’d had no experience of what he was talking about. He’d grown up in the countryside, been sent to boarding school, gone to Cambridge University. Besides, he’d set up that music-school-within-a-school at Pimlico, so that kids like my brother could choose a comprehensive that wasn’t their own. In the meantime, I wasn’t willing to be the Kingsdale boys’ daily mincemeat just to prove his point.

There was talk of applying for a ‘scholarship’ at Dulwich College, one of the oldest and biggest – and richest – schools in London. But I had no intention of doing so. The people I admired in life already – footballers and pop stars – didn’t come from schools like that. I knew as surely as I had a picture of Alice Cooper hanging from a noose on my wall that I would not be caught dead at Dulwich College.

I opted for Archbishop Tenison’s Grammar School for Boys, opposite the world-famous Oval cricket ground at Kennington. It seemed like a sensible middle ground between Kingsdale and Dulwich College, even if it was considerably further away. There was a point during the planning process when my mum asked me what I’d do about its lack of girls when I got older. I thought such a question was rude and invasive – what did she know I knew about them? – and it wasn’t a deciding factor. It wasn’t as if we talked much about girls at Langbourne.

Little did I know. On our first day at Tenison's, as we got to know each other in the classroom and the playground, trying to find ways to distinguish ourselves (we were all wearing identical brand-new blue blazers with the Tenison's crest across the pocket, our school ties done up tightly to our top button, our black shoes freshly polished), everyone wanted to know who had a girlfriend and how far he'd 'got' with them. This kid Adrian, who'd boarded the number 3 bus to Kennington at the stop after mine – not that I'd dared talk to him on the inward journey – let on that at camp towards the end of primary school, he'd been 'locked' in a cupboard with a girl for a full forty-five minutes, and when we pressed him for details, he declined to elaborate, and smiled instead, like James Bond in the face of similar enquiries from Miss Moneypenny. Adrian had blond hair, like I did. He was shorter than me. If he could talk a girl into a cupboard for half an hour, I figured, then maybe, and perhaps with his help, I could as well. I decided to stick close to him. That afternoon, we rode the bus home together and got talking. Soon we were best friends. It didn't take long to notice that Adrian didn't have a girlfriend any more than I did. He did have two teenage sisters, though, and that was the next best thing. I made a point of stopping in at his house on our way home almost every day, hoping to see them, smell them, simply be near them.

A few weeks into our first term, while we were all still working to impress each other, I brought a copy of *Men Only* into school with me. That would show them, I figured, and I wasn't wrong. Other than a handful of swots, every kid in class swarmed over me to get a look at it. Most of them obviously hadn't seen pictures of totally naked women before. I noticed a couple of boys' faces turn bright red, their pupils enlarging in front of me. As they grappled for a closer look, one kid offered to buy it from me, there and then. I couldn't see why not – it wasn't like my brother