

July was a scorcher, the hottest one on record for yonks and yonks. We'd walk to the Spar for Ice Poles, but the rush on them meant they were seldom frozen solid and hardly lasted across the green before turning to luke-warm slush in our hands. If you bit their seal too zealously, you wore a lime green or scarlet grin like The Joker for a couple of days. When mooching about, we tried to burst tar bubbles with our bumpers, but Davo nearly lost his on Birchwood Avenue, and only us lying across the roasting pavement, hamming up the quicksand rescue scene from *Ice Cold* in *Alex*, stopped him from bursting into tears at the thought of his mum's reaction.

To retreat from the sun we beat it towards our woods, The Backs, so called because they were behind our side of the street. Grabbing our bikes from out front, we did a circuit through the allotments, passed Mr.Ginger's ramshackle shed, each giving it a swift kick as we went by. The sound of ringing corrugated iron echoed across the nettles like a tower clock with the winder slack.

In the shade of the trees we carted hard-core to the foot of The Run, arranging the bricks and chunks like a set of steps, before I dragged dad's missing cement board out from the under-growth and laid it on top. Sweat dripped from my forehead onto the grey mixing stain like that slow motion drop of milk on TV. Wiping my face with my

shucked T-shirt, I sucked the deep graze on my knuckles from earlier that day, when I'd come off my bike outside number 13.

Right now, despite being skanky in my muck-around clothes, I stood in my best, very obviously Steve McQueen-couldn't-give-a-shit attitude, and waited. For most this summer, especially Jamie and Davo, this was an Evil Kenieval moment, wrapped in a borrowed bed sheet and pretending to be their white suited hero - their chance to shine. They were always ready to leap their version of double-decker busses - our choked and stagnant, orange-foam stream - with all the grace and style that a Chopper could deliver. For me, I was *Hilt, the Cooler King* from *The Great Escape*, forever hacking around our estate, evading paperboys, Nazis or prams left, right and centre, albeit on my third-hand post office bike, with its blocks on the pedals.

In The Stonehousers, we had no real attempt at leadership, our occasional pecking order being based on whoever had the most popular idea or loudest arguing voice won the day. Consequently, in our scheming or footie commentaries, I usually became the master of ceremonies by warrant of having the biggest gob. So, this day I stood to one side of The Run and shouted for silence. Deciding to give the littlest kid first crack at jumping glory, I signalled Ali to the line I'd just stick-scratched in the bank and raised my hand for silence. And as I did so, I saw him.

Just down the slope from the start line, but about ten, twenty yards back, someone was behind our swing tree. Brown granddad shirt undone, blue cut-down jean shorts and tan desert boots. In the shadow under the ivy I could only just make out that his hair was quite fair, like a dirty blond, and that he had a very obvious tan mark where his collar should be, above a puny white belly.

But the most striking thing about him was that his shorts were around his ankles and he was wanking, his hand and groin a blur of action as he frowned, concentrated, staring straight up the slope - at us.

PERV! WEIRDO! WANKER!

The words came out of me as if disembowelled, my throat ripping from the panic scream. And for the briefest of moments, the world stopped. Then all hell broke loose.

Jamie, Davo and the boys swung around to where I was involuntarily pointing, and started yelling, too. Poor Ali slumped scared and uncomprehending to his nine year old knees, dropping his bike in the puddle of pee that rapidly spread around him. Down the slope, the perv was struggling to pull up his shorts, falling over in the process. As he went down, Richard threw a rock at him and, more from fear than anything else, we all

followed suit. As fast and as hard as we could, we pelted stones, bricks and sticks at the man as he attempted to shield both his groin and head at the same time as pull on his clothes.

I shot across to the boys, grabbed at Ali's collar, dragging him to his feet. Between us we scrambled back up the slope and ran like shit, taking the long way round through the flats, as the perv was still between us and our houses. Davo was just ranting, Fuck. Fuck. FUCK! over and over again, and someone else said that we must have hurt him, cos he hadn't got up. But by the time we rounded the corner into Stonehouse Drive, we were all silent, spooked by what had happened, by how close we'd come. And then from in front of the garages parents and siblings came running, and with them came Mum with Little Dean on her hip.

After a mad, frantic blitz of questions, shouting and tears, the mums led us off into Mervyn's, so that his nurse wife Rene could check us all for shock. Whilst they pumped custard creams and Robinsons into us, Mrs Campbell took Ali upstairs for a bath, borrowing a *Scooby Doo* T-shirt six sizes too big for when he was dry. Over the next hour we watched *Magic Roundabout* and *The News*, and for once didn't complain that we were the wrong age for either.

After a while, Mervyn called us to the door to say that the police were here talking to the dads and brothers on the front drive. With spades, 2 by 4s, and other weapons the

men stood surrounded by our retrieved bikes, leant on Mervyn's ornamental well, picked at the pebbledash on his porch. Richard's dad was telling P.C Jones that they'd all gone to The Backs as soon as they'd heard, and searched through the place with a fine tooth comb, Mateley even willing his German Shepherd, Bruce, to pick up the scent. But it seemed that all they'd found was one desert boot, which Dad was dangling from the end of his crow bar.

As the mums ushered us back into the lounge so we could calm down before we made our statements, Davo swore he'd seen blood on his dad's spade, started to say that he reckoned they must have caught him and smashed him up. Just as he was trying to get us to guess where they'd buried the perv, I looked past him, down the length of the hall, and saw Mum lean into dad's chest. She was shaking and as she pulled in tighter, Dad was forced to take Little Dean from her. As he did so, the crow-bar levelled towards the floor and the boot slipped off, landing with a dull, rubber plop. It didn't bounce, just lay there limp on its side, as if staring out between the crowd's legs.