

ANYTHING
but
PLANE SAILING

by



**BRYDEN
MOSSOP**





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by

Bryden Mossop



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Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.
12620 FM 1960, Suite A4-507
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www.sbpra.com

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Foreword

by
Sheila Mossop

This is a true story about an ordinary guy, with many tales to tell. The author was blessed with both luck and an innate survival instinct. He has had more than his fair share of near death experiences, some from unforeseen incidents, unaccountable accidents, serious malfunctions and various other extraordinary mishaps. The luck comes from not being killed. When there was little, if indeed anything, he could do to save himself. The survival instinct is just that: doing the right thing at the right time - sometimes with only moments to think things through, and at other times, with barely seconds to change the outcome.

Chapter One

Pre-nanny State

To begin with, it wasn't my idea to write about any of this at all. The conversation went as follows, or something like this: A friend of mine said, "Ah, Bryden, I hear you had an engine failure."

"Yes, that's right."

"What were you in?"

"A C150, Golf, Brava, Delta, Foxtrot, Zulu; to be precise."

"Oh, what exactly happened then?"

"Well, I was at minimum altitude over York..."

After I related the tale, my friend was of the opinion that since 99% of pilots have never even experienced a rough running engine, never mind a complete engine failure, all things considered there has to be a book there somewhere.

That was soon after it had happened, a couple of years ago now. So, eventually deciding to put pen to paper, I began to give the subject some thought on what caused it to happen? What could I have done about it? What should I have done? Could I, or indeed, could anyone have done anything different? Was the fact that I got away with it pure luck or the product of a well-developed survival instinct? In the end, I decided that on reflection it must be the latter, in this case. As I've had so many close calls over the years, I would definitely have to put some down to luck, as these are things that happened to me, where I had absolutely no control over the outcome.

Quite often, I would find myself in sticky situations that required thought, judgement, and ultimately, decisions to produce the optimum outcome: survival.

Bearing this in mind then, it is imperative that I try to put some perspective on this survival instinct issue: where it stems from, how it is formed – which, in essence, is genetic. Most people like any animals are born with it, but it does need nurturing, and ultimately honing to the extent that the instinct to survive becomes second to no other, and does not necessarily require conscious thought. The process usually begins in childhood when even as a toddler fighting for the right place to sit, or to obtain the toy you covet most (usually one belonging to another child), or just to keep the piece of chocolate melting in your grasp safe from the rest of the group, this process has already begun taking shape. Though with the advent of the ‘nanny state’ this kind of behaviour will, by now, be classified as anti-social; heaven forbid that children should be allowed to get up to some of the mischief that, I and my contemporaries, embraced as purely routine on a daily basis.

So it is back to this time we must travel to get to the bottom of it all, and the facts on the engine failure must be put to the back of the book, in order to await their chronological turn. As we journey back to the nineteen fifties, I can clearly remember rationing, having been born in 1948. I started school in 1953, a year before it came to an end in 1954, when things on the home front really started to develop and generally pick up, therefore getting better for all of us. With goods arriving unhindered from America due to the cessation of hostilities at the end of the war, North American trade was gathering momentum and our manufacturing industry returning to civilian production.

The school I attended, St. Paul’s, was a Church of England establishment, situated next to the Church on the outskirts of the village of Frizington. About 2 miles from Rowrah, to the north east, and the same from Cleator Moor to the south west, with the Lake District to the east, and 5 miles almost due east of the coastal town

of Whitehaven, which was once upon a time the major sea port on England's west coast. This was probably why it was attacked late at night on April 22nd 1778, by the American buccaneer John Paul Jones; in fact not so many years ago some cannons were salvaged from the sea bed around the harbour, believed to be from that encounter. This school, like the cottages we lived in, was built from red sandstone quarried locally on the Rheda estate, (where, when I was young, once stood a beautiful mansion. At first left empty and boarded up, then knocked down in the sixties to make room for a couple of doctors to build a modern house). It was these same cottages, where in our early teenage years we used to climb right up the slate roofs to run along the ridge tops, right to the end of the row, frightening the life out of people in the dark evenings of early winter. Just for something to do, nothing malicious you understand.

The school windows in the main room were very tall, topped with Gothic arches - just like those in the Church next to it. This room was divided by wood and glass partitions, some 15–20 feet tall which, when folded back to the two ends of the building (concertina style), opened the whole school up into one huge multi-function room. It was used for Christmas parties and morning assemblies, where everyone stood around the perimeter of this large room with the head-master standing in the centre at one end; no one sat. Large, round, enamelled metal lamps, enclosing a single electric bulb, swung on long chains from the vaulted ceiling high above; a modern post WW1 replacement for the original gas lamps. The brackets for these were still fixed to the walls. There were huge cast iron radiators fed by 3 inch water pipes, heated by the solid fuel boiler, located in a cellar directly under the head-master's school room which was positioned across the end of the main room, giving a somewhat austere - bordering on Spartan - atmosphere.

Around the outside, on the two lower sides of the main building, ran a single storey corridor. The floor was flagged with huge 3 inch thick, 6 foot square, grey slate slabs; coat hooks lined the inside wall of the L shaped corridor all the way round. And several sets of hand

wash basins were grouped here and there along the outside wall of the corridor, which was accessed at each end by a large set of stone steps. Outside there were the lavatories and the playing area (this will take some detailed explanation which I don't really want to bore you with, but understanding the pre-nanny state hinges, in part, on grasping certain details about what passed for normal practice then).

The school was built close to the church with the graveyard between the church, itself being on the upper side of the hill, and the school built into the lower side. This was the problem – in so much as the building was slipping down towards the beck at the bottom, but we'll get to that in a moment.

At the top near the door into the corridor was a tarmacked area - where we used to line up on hearing the whistle to go into class – with the school door to one end; the lavatories along the upper side, and the steps down to the playground at the opposite end to the door and along the other side, some concrete look-alike stone pillars with iron railings stretched between them. At the top end of these, nearest the door into the school was a gap, I imagine that, originally, the railings would have returned to the corner of the building at this point and therefore enclosed the area reasonably safely. However, since the building was slowly slipping down the hill, it was necessary to shore it up by building a five foot tall concrete retaining wall, probably sank into the ground by at least the same amount sometime in the past, about a metre away and all along the lower side of the building, maybe a hundred feet long, in-filled and topped off with a tarmacked path.

Along the bottom of this one was another of the same width, though again the bulk of the structure being buried in iceberg fashion; this time only dropping about 2 to 3 feet to the top of the banking below, which in turn ran at roughly 30 degrees, for about 30 or 40 feet down to the top of the concrete wall around the playground at the bottom. None of these (parapets we'll call them) had any kind of railings or guards of any sort whatsoever; nothing at all to stop a five

year old falling off the edge to break a leg or crack a skull. Moreover, we were never forbidden to run along these constructions, much less walk along them, which we did each and every day at playtimes. Nowadays adults would have to be escorted wearing hard hats and high visibility vests, by experts wearing hard hats and high visibility vests who had previously undertaken a course and passed a test on the subject. Children, on the other hand, would not be allowed anywhere near the site, where previously we had jumped down, climbed up, fallen off and generally crawled, or ran, all over the structure.

The playground below was accessed by a tarmacked ramp which froze over in winter to form a fast, slick surface for us to slide down. We first ran and then leaped from the top of the six steps above to land hard and fast in a hunkered down position which we called the bogie. Then we would career at high speed down the ramp and across the play ground, which also sloped away to the low eighteen inch high concrete wall which we would crash into.

Sometimes we'd tip straight over it into the beck, which ran, unguarded, along the full length of the playground. Though some of us sustained some nasty cuts and bruises, no-one, that I can recall, ever sustained any serious injuries like broken bones or fractured skulls.

Beyond this beck, which incidentally ran for miles in both directions into the countryside and all of which we counted as our playground, was a swamp beyond which was a very steep embankment at about forty five degrees, reaching up about 200-250 feet to a field guarded by a barbed wire fence at the top. Part of the bank, directly in front of the playground across the swamp, was even steeper. This area of the ridge was overgrown with large bushes and gorse rather than the mixed deciduous trees to the left, shallower end. There chestnut trees abounded as in fact they did right by the school, where grew three of the biggest ones I have ever seen, even up to the present day - their trunks were five or six feet thick. They were hard to climb but climb them we did. No grass or vegetation ever grew

under the spread of these trees. To get to the top of this ridge either you had to go to the left, cross the beck and scramble up through the wood, this though shallower was still quite steep, or go away to the right into the countryside, cross the beck and climb the bank through the bushes where it was not as steep.

Incidentally one lunchtime, in this area, way out to the right, whilst practising jumping across the stream from an embankment; first running down it to a predetermined spot and then launching myself out across the beck to land on the far bank. This went well for several repetitions. Each time I ran, I took off from a foot or so further back up the bank until the exercise didn't quite go according to plan. I misjudged it, possibly because it was now a long way to jump therefore I may not have been fully committed, or I was just running out of steam - alternatively it could really just have been a jump to far. In any event, only my toes touched the other bank, as my feet dragged down the sheer face to land in the water. My right ankle came up like a balloon. Unable to bear my weight on it, walking was out of the question. So there was nothing for it, but to crawl on my hands and knees for about a mile, all the way through long grass and bushes, over tree roots and the like, back to school. Naturally, playtime was over long since; I knew that much as all the noise had ceased (it seemed ages since then). And though I was extremely late for class, no-one said anything - the headmaster simply ran me home in his car.

The other alternative was to go the way we favoured mostly, that was across the swamp. This though was fraught with danger, since we had to pick our way across carefully on stepping stones. Some you could see but others were submerged, so you had to be careful where you put your feet, and then you had the bank to climb up. There were some very irregular foot holds requiring the use of both hands, as well as the feet. But if we were at the top of the ridge when the school whistle blew, it was the shortest way back. So we would hasten down these muddy steps on our backsides, and then across the swamp, which was infested with thousands of frogs. Quite often, on getting

back to class, we would have tiny immature frogs hopping out of our wellington boots. I (several times in fact) came to grief crossing these swamps, as in some places there was small pockets of quicksand, whereby the only way we could get out, if we were by ourselves, was to lay out across it and pull ourselves out by grabbing overhanging branches or a hand full of reeds. This done, we would just wade into the beck and wash off the mire and would simply tell the teacher we had fallen in. What with all the trees we had to climb and make dens in and to fall out of; the swamp to get bogged down in; the stream to wade and fish in; the bushes to hide in; the ramp to skate down; the parapets to climb and fall off and the horses to dodge, and, oh...now there's a tale!

On the way to and from school, we all used to cut through a field down what was called the 'Black Pad', which was just a rough and very stony track which cut between two banks and ran with water when raining – though it was eventually tarmacked. On the right, as we went down, was an embankment, consisting of 95% of the total area. On the left, was a steep embankment with a very narrow path, along which people could walk but only in single file. The path was bordered by a high, barbed wire fence all along its length. So once we set off along this path, unless we wanted to climb down the embankment which we could do but very slowly and carefully, we stayed on it until reaching the far end where the bank, and therefore the path, sloped down again.

Although the horses spent most of their time grazing in the main area of the field on the right, sometimes like us the horses would come along this narrow path atop the bank. Of course in that event we stayed clear by using the path in the bottom of the gully, or alternatively we'd walk along the opposite bank which most of the time worked fine. Unfortunately, there was among us a lad who would not stop throwing stones. He threw them at people (with a good sized stone, and from a great distance, he knocked my elder brother to the ground, completely unconscious, struck on the side of the head, he suffered concussion). He threw them at windows, at our greenhouses

(cost my father a fortune in glass), but most of all Arnold B. liked making the horses gallop. To do this, he threw stones at them. Unfortunately for them, he was a very good shot. In fact I have never yet met anyone nearly as good at throwing stones to hit a target, much less a moving one, as he was.

He was thus engaged one day, as my younger brother and I made our way through the 'Black Pad'. So in order to keep as far away as possible from Arnold B. and his galloping horses in the main field to the right, I decided it best to go along the narrow path on top of the bank to the left. Walking quickly, my younger brother behind, off we went. All seemed to be fine, as up to then the horses had stayed over the other side, running round and round as this idiot threw stones at them. Then, as we got to about halfway along the path, the big hunter, trying to get away from the flying stones, mounted the path at the far end charging toward us at a gallop. At first I froze. It would have been alright had I been by myself as I'd have taken the chance and gone down the embankment, but I had my young brother with me. As it was, I was pushing him back against the barbed wire fence along with myself, in the hope that the huge, black horse would be able to gallop on by, without trampling us to death.

But the closer it got, the bigger it got, until it seemed to fill my whole field of vision. To this day, I can see its huge knees and hooves, with the muscles on its mighty black chest working as they pounded up and down and its white blaze, slightly to the right of its forehead as it bore down on us. Glancing down, I spied a small pebble about twenty millimetres in size. Clutching at straws, I thought, 'He's chucking stones at them to make them run, it might work to deflect the horse from coming straight at us.' Though I couldn't think for the life of me where it might go since the bank was so steep and there was no way it could stop and turn around if it wanted to. So quickly, ducking down, I grabbed this, what seemed a pathetic little pebble, and in desperation swung my arm back and forth letting go of the stone. It struck the horse on the right temple. Whether it was the impact of the stone or merely the sudden swinging back and forth of my arm, since

it was only about fifteen feet away, the animal suddenly swerved diagonally down the embankment. How it kept its feet I'll never know. It must have been a surefooted creature. Had it not done so, we would have been trampled to death, but for the desperate act of a desperate ten year old kid. One way or another, we had a regular adventure playground, which adults would pay good money for these days to use as some kind of themed adventure park. The only admonishments came from our own parents for ripped clothing or wet shoes and of course the cuts and bruises that went with it. There was not a drop of alcohol or an ecstasy tablet in sight. That said, I once did drink something that wasn't quite what I thought it to be.

My father had a sort of market garden when I was young which required a lot of water, especially in summer. Quite often a hose pipe would be fitted to the tap in the kitchen to supply water to the storage tanks and tubs in the vegetable gardens thus putting the tap out of commission for hours sometimes. One such day, I'd got too thirsty to wait and I spied an old kitchen kettle in our backyard. I picked it up and shook it. I was sure that there was plenty water in it. I put the spout to my mouth and drank deeply. It didn't taste very good. But it was summer and I thought, 'Ugh, that's gone horrible in the heat.' Just then my mother appeared on the scene and seeing me pull a face whilst wiping my mouth as I put the kettle down. She shrieked, "Have you just drunk out of that kettle?" I nodded, fearing the worst because of the way she yelled. She immediately sent my elder brother to fetch my father, with the order to, "Tell him to get his-sel here quick!" (She was a Jock from Irvine in Scotland). A couple of minutes later, my father arrived on the run. He could run then too; he always beat us in a sprint.

By this time, I was feeling decidedly off colour. Whether it was mother ranting about drinking out of kettles and what not, or whether it was the half pint of petrol (in those days it was leaded) I'd just swallowed, kicking in, I'm not sure as I was only seven or eight. As Dad came in, mother told him what I'd done. (Not that she needed to as my brother had already spilled the beans), which is no doubt why

my father got there so fast, as he rushed in, he told her to get some warm water and a packet of salt. Whilst he grabbed a chair which he slammed in the middle of the kitchen floor with the curt order to me to, "Sit there".

Soon the mug of warm water and the packet of salt appeared. My father took the mug in one hand, the packet of salt in the other, and then he tipped enough salt into the mug of water to choke an ox. After stirring it rigorously, he then thrust it at me, "Drink this."

It was a terrible concoction to swallow. I was gagging on the stuff but by now I realised I was in serious trouble. I had to get the stuff out of my stomach before it got into my intestines. At that time in my life, all I knew was that I'd drunk poison, and being a little boy as I was, I was frightened too. I had to get it up no matter what. I forced down as much of the salt water as quickly as I could swallow; which I have to say, was about a fifty-fifty mix. Very soon I heaved, and the kitchen floor was covered with the contents of my stomach.

But not satisfied my father made up some more warm water and salt soup and made me drink most of that lot too. Very soon I was retching again, bringing up some more of the stuff. I must have drunk plenty of petrol. You could clearly see it separating in the huge puddle spreading around the chair and across the floor. I was, by now, retching uncontrollably but bringing nothing up. I asked for a drink of water. My dad said, "Yes, get him some water. Drink as much as you can. That way, you can bring some more up. You've got to get it all out." He was right about bringing more up. That's all I did for the rest of the afternoon - it seemed like. God I was sore. They never called an ambulance, or took me to hospital. Not even to my GP. Ever since then, I've heard that people should not be made sick after swallowing none-food substances, and on no account should they be fed salt in water. The way I see it, had my father not taken such drastic action so promptly, by the time I'd have got to hospital the petrol would have at very least done serious irreparable damage - if it hadn't have actually killed me. Though it might explain my irresistible attraction to engines (eat your heart out Richard Hammond).

Not that we had engines in the transports we were used to then. These would be man powered only - what else? Apart from the milk collection lorry that we used to hang on the back of! How it worked was, around lunch time usually, the Milk Marketing Board's lorry would be collecting the full milk churns from the local farm, further up the road from where we lived. The churns were on the raised platform next to the farm gate, ready to be replaced with empty ones for the next day. The driver would stop the lorry close to the platform, so he could just tilt the full churn onto its edge and roll it across onto his wagon. This was a flat bed wagon with steel poles every metre or so around the edge. It had strong chains that hooked across between the poles to stop the churns falling off the side. Us lads would hang around until the driver had completed this task. Trying to keep out of sight as he set off, we would grab hold of the chain across the back of the lorry, clinging on with our hands only, since there was nowhere to put our feet. We would just hold them up and dangle from the chain as he drove off down the hill picking up speed. Now this is where good judgement and playing chicken got mixed up, since three or four hundred yards down the road. Several of us lived opposite each other and if we had been walking home at the same time, we would be hanging on the milk truck together. Hence the chicken verses judgement syndrome. In that no-one wanted to be the first to let go of the chain, or at least not before getting to a point opposite our own homes.

Downhill, you can imagine, the lorry picked up speed quite quickly. Where, and when, should we let go of the chain and drop off the back onto the road? We had to hit the ground running as fast as we could. Sometimes, just to complicate matters, there would be traffic directly behind us. We dare not drop off, for fear of being run over by the vehicles following behind. It very nearly happened a couple of times. Sometimes we had just left it too late. The truck would be going too fast to get off, without killing ourselves. We would be forced to hang on longer, for more than twice the distance in fact, until the vehicle behind had overtaken the lorry. But this didn't

always happen so we would have to hang on until the milk lorry slowed down to turn into the lane to go to the next farm. Then we would not only have to walk back to where we lived, we would be approaching our homes from the wrong direction and this would need explaining too.

The driver tried to stop us quite a few times but we took no notice. If he set off and then stopped to make us get off, we'd just drop off and run away until he got back in his cab then we'd do it again. In fact we used to do the same thing with rear door buses. We'd wait until a bus slowed down for a corner or a junction, somewhere near where we wanted to be, and just casually drop off the back with as few quick running steps as we could - looking real macho-like, in our teens.

Going back to our man powered transports: with four old pram wheels and a board about a foot wide, a large bolt, some nails and a piece of rope. Of course to us they were chariots or bogies at least. The rear axle would be fixed to the underside of the board, with either some large wire fencing staples or some nails knocked halfway in and then bent over the axle from each side, all the way along, however many was needed. At the front the axle would have a piece of wood fastened in similar fashion along its length, wide enough to have room at one side to put a hole through the middle of it - in order to accommodate the large bolt we had put through the middle of the front end of the large board. The front axle swivelled on the bolt to accommodate steering which we did with either our feet or the rope, whilst being propelled from behind by a friend who would often jump on the back, especially where we lived with all the steep hills around.

When we weren't engaged in this pastime, since it was only one of many, someone would get an idea into his head about making a different type of bone shaker. (or bone shakker as we called them). These would consist of any kind of bike frame; any kind of wheel from pram wheels - large and small; and old bike wheels - sometimes not buckled and mostly without tyres, certainly without brakes, usually

no saddle and definitely no bell. Sometimes not even pedals or a chain; you had to run with it to get up some speed and then jump on. Okay downhill, not so good uphill. We would compete against each other in races for the best or the fastest one made. Of course, it was inevitable that some of us would come a cropper and we often did. There were no brakes so no way of stopping quickly. Though sometimes a wheel would come off - bad enough if it was a rear one. It was much worse if it happened to be a front one; that usually stopped us quick enough, for a split second anyway, since when the forks dug into the ground you went over the handle bars - this was invariably painful.

Talking of which, one of the lads we knew from school, Jack G. from Lingla bank, didn't live down our end, had got a brand new racer for his birthday, all chrome with not just brakes, but a speedo as well. Of course, he volunteered to let all of us try out his new bike. After we talked to him and explained his rights, as none of us had ever heard of this, Miranda person, that American cops always refer to, we made them up, as we saw it if he had the right to come down our way swanking his new bike. We had the right to try it out; everyone else had a ride on it and then it was my turn. The bike I used for school then was one my father had used. This was the old sit up and beg type – the sat upright, arms out stretched position. Whether the brakes were fitted to work the opposite way round, on my old bike, I can't remember now, but they were lever and cable, as opposed to lever and rod the original type.

Having finished my circuit of the houses, tearing down the hill to where the gang were stood waiting, I applied the brakes with the intention of screeching to a halt, in a flourish beside them. This last bit I achieved certainly. I put the brakes on hard; the front wheel stopped first. I went over the handle bars, but at a speed not commensurate with the speed I had been travelling, but slowly almost in slow motion. Because I was reluctant to let go of the grips in a vain effort to somehow stop myself hitting the ground and getting hurt. This bit is difficult to explain technically, but I ended up on the tarmac, face

down, facing the way I was originally going, but with my arms behind me and my legs bent at the knees, sticking up in the air. With the bike upside down on top of me, I was still gripping the handle bars though; with my hands now twisted round in a different position. It was like I'd laid face down on the road with my hands back behind my head, and my legs bent up at a right angle from the knees, and as though someone had turned the bike upside down and placed it on my back, with me twisting my hands round to grip the handle bars. It must have looked incongruous.

The gang certainly thought it was hilarious; they were helpless with laughter, all except Jack G. No-one bothered to ask me if I was okay. Nevertheless I felt sorry for Jack G. He was in a right state. His brand new bike getting damaged; his father would go mad. He was nearly crying, poor guy as he ran his hands all over it looking for damage. Finding a couple of scratches in the chrome right on the top of the Pifco headlamp, he was mortified. Considering what had happened, I thought he got off lightly. He spat on his fingers and vainly tried to rub the scratches out. I, on the other hand, had bruised knees and elbows; but hey, what the hell, I'd had far worse.

Around this time my elder brother and I were engaged in a bit of free enterprise, doing gardening-related work, like the disposing of rubbish, etc. for people. Other lads had paper rounds, so why not? We were used to this sort of work anyway, as we had to do it at home. First, obtaining an old pram with a good set of large wheels. Of the type that partly overlap each other in order to remain within the parameters of the pram (large wheels give baby a more comfortable ride - don't you know?). Much better than these modern prams with tiny plastic wheels you see so much of these days. The undercarriage had a couple of planks fastened on, with an old tin bath set atop, the steel rim on the bottom of the bath dug into the wood surface, when full of rubble or soil-based material (all of which was heavy) and so resulted in stopping it sliding off.

In those days you could just take things to the local tip; a land fill site owned by one of the local farmers. Just one of many big holes

left behind when iron ore mining ceased in the area. Some were open mine shafts, but flooded, which was the problem in the first place. It wasn't that the iron ore, or the coal for that matter, had run out, but that it was impossible to keep the water out of the pits and mines. Mines and shafts make great ponds or lakes. Especially open cast mines, since they cover a much bigger area unlike deep mine shafts. One in particular springs to mind only about 300 feet across. This was a deep hole, with an even deeper shaft in the middle of it, going all the way down to the bottom of the mine. Always full, sometimes with prolonged heavy rain, there would be some run off, but otherwise it always remained the same.

This open mine shaft came complete with a pair of resident swans, who guarded their territory jealously. They would attack us if we went too close to them, and quite often would fly straight at us on sight, even on approaching the pond from the opposite side; they were unpredictable in this way. It was at this pond with a couple of friends, where I thought I could step out onto what I thought was an upturned bucket, sticking half way out of the water. Only to be stopped, just in time, by one of my friends, who promptly declared, "It's far too deep. It's practically bottomless!" "But I was going to step on that upturned bucket." "Bucket, that's a cut off tree trunk, coming out from the side lower down," said he. And on closer inspection, I could see he was right. It just goes to show how easily accidents can happen. However, we much preferred to play on the flooded open cast mine we called 'The Dal'. Since it covered a much bigger area, there was more scope for adventure.

Though hardly any of us could swim, the thing we liked doing most was making rafts out of any bits of wood: from tree trunks to bits of old pallets and old railway sleepers. Whatever we could get our hands on - usually cobbled together with bits of rope, string or binder twine (used in straw bailing machines) and sometimes the odd six inch nail. These things (you could hardly call them rafts), barely floated a lot of the time, with water sloshing up through the gaps in the floating 'death traps'. We liked to think they were just the job for

every school boy to go sailing around on. Even though they would often start to come apart while we were pushing or paddling around this flooded open cast iron ore mine. Times, without number, we'd just make it back to the edge of the lake, in time to leap across to the bank or, in some cases, wade to it as the raft disintegrated. But no matter how close we came to sinking farther out in deep water, it never stopped us. As far as we were concerned, it was great fun.

To get on to the tip you didn't need a permit or vouchers from the local council, not even permission, there were no men in high vis vests and hard hats, checking what you were carrying, directing you here or there. Referred to locally as 'The Ash Tip', because of course, back then, nearly everyone had open fires and burned coal - hence the ash. Having done a job for someone with our bogie loaded to the gunwales, as it were, we'd set off down this long steep hill with a snaking right hand bend at the bottom, where the road cambered hard to the right.

Once this bath tub was fully laden with heavy material like soil, rocks and the like, with no means of breaking its speed, it was impossible to hold it back going downhill, especially this one. The only way to control the bogie was to run flat out with it. Difficult enough to do bent over double, but at high speed, whereby the weight going downhill took over producing the momentum, to the extent that it became impossible in the end to move our legs fast enough to keep up. But we had to, because not only could we not stop it, but at the speed we were travelling to just let go of the bogie, would mean, without any doubt, that we would hit the tarmac with our faces at breakneck speed. Consequently, allowing the bogie to careen into the traffic which, up to then, we had managed to dodge. All we could do was hang on to the pram frame, one on each corner, until the road levelled out which thankfully it did about a hundred yards before the turning into the tip.

Making the turn in was usually okay, if we were able to find enough strength to dig our heels in to slow the bogie down in time to make the turn. Sometimes we just had to miss it. The rough ground

thereafter making progress difficult. Due to the deep wheel ruts produced by the heavy refuse vehicles, and pushing the bogie all the way across to the edge of tip was hard work. This edge, by the way, was always burning; sometimes for quite a way back with underground fires, caused initially by the heat generated from the cinders. Which would smoulder on until finally the material had all burned away, often collapsing in, leaving hot craters - very unsafe and dangerous.

Unloading some cobbles and rubbish one day, I'd inadvertently strayed too near the edge of one of these fires. It wasn't that I wasn't aware of them, I was well used to the fires, and indeed what would happen if I walked over one that was in the prime of its burn, or about burned out and ready to collapse. If I ever needed it underlining, I had recently heard on the wireless, of these two young lads, about my own age in fact, who had been swimming somewhere local to where they lived elsewhere in the country. They had decided to take a short cut across a burning refuse tip where the ground had opened beneath one lad; collapsing into a huge red hot crater, taking him down with it. His friend had tried to save him by stretching out with his towel, which though damp from the swim, nevertheless immediately burst into flames, the heat was so intense. Consequently the lad was beaten back and ran for help. All the fire men could do on arrival was push huge steel sheets which turned red hot within a couple of minutes, down the sides of the crater to stabilise them while they retrieved the remains of the poor boy.

But, sometimes you get blasé or just forgetful. In any event, I felt the ground start to give. Looking down quickly, I saw that I'd gone past the burning edge. It was a couple of yards behind me. I knew instinctively trying to go back would be just like treading water, except I'd be burning not drowning. Each step I'd take would just give way beneath me. So I legged it down the fifty, maybe sixty foot bank, over the rubbish as it collapsed behind me. But the thing was, or at least the way I saw it, was that the further down the bank I got, the shallower it would be. Eventually I would be on to rubbish that wasn't burning, as all the big stuff rolls to the bottom of any heap.

Moreover, there was water at the bottom of the rubbish bank; not at all inviting mind you, since it was full of old, rusty, tin sheets and drums, etc. but it wasn't on fire. So I galloped down the forty five degree slope as fast as I could, in order to stay on the surface. It worked; I managed to run across the edge of the pond on top of various drums, and other objects, sticking up from the surface.

The only injury I sustained was a burn from a red hot cinder that had got down inside my baseball boots (or sneakers as they were sometimes referred to - all the rage then), just above my right heel, when the surface initially gave way. The scar is still there to remind me. Had I tried to turn and go back, I'm quite certain I'd have suffered the same fate as that other unfortunate young lad. I shuddered then as it reminded me, forcefully, of a very good friend. A girl I had a soft spot for. Whom I used to sit beside or sometimes behind, depending on the lesson we were in. She had been bought a nice, new, wispy night dress as a present, and like any other thirteen year old girl tried it on and did a twirl. They had an open fire just like the rest of us, and Agnes got just too close. The flimsy nightdress caught fire and went up in flames, and so the poor girl burned to death. I didn't need reminding of how fortunate I'd been on this occasion. I suppose the fear of what was likely to happen galvanised me into the right action.

In this pre-nanny state, I'm sure I was not alone. There were, I don't doubt, a lot of lads like myself getting into, and out of, mischief, much the same as I was doing. I remember a party, of sorts, at the farm of a school chum of mine, Phil. I'd gone along before the rest, to give a hand clearing the farm machinery from one of the sheds we were going to use that evening. Once the task was completed, he went in to change. I went walking around the place, just idly filling in the time. It was dark by the time I rounded the corner of a huge shed. In front of me was a large flat area, concrete I thought, but wet, obviously since the surface was glistening. Already I had one foot outstretched to step onto it. When I thought, 'That's funny. I don't remember it raining.' Pausing for a moment I looked up. Phil was just

coming round the corner. On catching sight of me he shouted; “Hey watch out! Watch you don’t fall in.”

As it turned out, I was standing on a concrete wall about a foot wide, surrounding a six foot deep slurry pit. This just happened to be full to the brim which is why I couldn’t tell what it was, having no perspective. The cow slurry was too viscous to show ripples and was perfectly flat; being level with the top, it looked for all the world like a level concrete surface. It caught one of their cows out the same way. They had to smash a big hole in the concrete wall on the downward side to let it run out, in order to save the cow. That indeed would have been a horrible way to go - choking on cow dung. Much worse than if I’d succumbed when I crashed my motor bike, or the several times I’d run into cars.

Once in particular, when I’d been late for a rendezvous, after jumping off a bus, and hitting the ground running; I continued to run as fast as I could between parked cars. I didn’t see the one that was moving in time, nor could I stop, going flat out like I was. To say I hit the car and rolled across the bonnet, alighting on the other side largely unhurt, might sound a little trite, but it’s not meant to be - since not only was it not planned, nor in anyway intentional. The simple fact is that I had no control whatsoever over what happened. I’d hurt my knees when I collided with the front left wing of the car but was too embarrassed to stop, so I just gritted my teeth and kept going.

All this afore mentioned trivia, is by no means an exhaustive list, but instead merely a sample of the way we used to live pre-nanny state. Take fire works for example we could buy them in any shop close to the school when we bought our sweets, or Woodbines, (or in my case Player’s Navy Cut) for the bad lads. So from October onwards, resounding bangs could be heard in the playground or in the girl’s lavatories. Followed by squeals and screeches from the girls and raucous howls of laughter from the boys who’d lit and thrown the firework. Bonfires were where the real fun was; apart from each street or village endeavouring to have the biggest and therefore, by definition, the best bonfire on the night. Mostly, we liked raiding other

gangs' bonfires, either to abscond with the material such as we could drag away, or as in most cases, to set a light to it, in order to burn their bonfire to the ground. Whilst this was an action requiring a reciprocal sortie by the defenders of the bonfire, nevertheless, we used to wait until the opposition had built their bonfires to an enviable size. This heightened the excitement for both protagonists, since the bigger they built their bonfire, the more chance there was of people like us raiding it. Therefore they would be guarding the bonfire which made it much more difficult and dangerous to raid and set fire to.

What worked best, usually, was to wait until they had all gone to bed. This tactic required infinite patience. It could be two or three in the morning before you got your chance. Even then, stealth and silence were the order of the day. Otherwise it could be just a long, cold night to achieve nothing but failure. On the other hand, if we were successful, it was great to be rewarded by the sight of all the sick faces the next day. Although we knew who's bonfire we'd successfully raided, the poor unfortunate owners could only guess at who was responsible for their dilemma. This act of sabotage was usually most effective anywhere from about a week before, to the night before November the fifth. Then not only was the bonfire at its biggest, but with less than a week to go it left little time to gather for, and rebuild, another one. Of course what goes around comes around. The unfortunate victims of the prank would endeavour to return the favour. Firstly, to those whom they thought to be the most likely culprits, to have performed such a dastardly deed; followed by as many others as they could manage to burn. Not just to be sure to get the guilty, but because by then there was nothing to lose. Therefore they would be having as much fun as possible at their contemporary's expense. Though this was never easy, because at this point the word was out. Everyone was on high alert, which again fuelled the excitement. This was great fun for any young teenage boys. We didn't need to bring guns and knives to the party to spice things up, as kids seem to do now. (Whatever happened to good clean fun?). Any group who still had a bonfire to burn on the fifth of November

was either very lucky or extremely crafty. In that they had split the material up and hidden it around and about to be brought out to build the bonfire on the night, which also meant if it had been kept dry it would burn well.

It was a very labour intensive and physical existence in those days. There were no home computers, videos, video games or mobile phones, no calculators, (which kids can even use in maths exams now). Whilst we in our day struggled to get hold of an abacus - it didn't matter how much corn we offered, the Egyptians wouldn't part with any counting frames; thus ninety five percent of us were slim and fit, as befitting people of our age. The odd person, who was overweight, was usually referred to as Bunter, or just fatty, because they were. If there were more than one, or sometimes two, in a school class of thirty, they stood out because it was a rarity indeed.

There wasn't 4x4s and cars by the score blocking up the streets surrounding schools then. No-one was given a lift to school by a parent; we walked, or biked mostly. If we lived too far away we used the school bus. Physical training at least twice a week, plus a double period of games was mandatory and included football, cricket, rugby, athletics; everything from the high jump, long jump, javelin, discus, and running all the short to middle distances. Plus fell running; that always included crossing through the River Ehen. The gym work twice a week, included mat work, wall bars, rings, ropes, bench work, medicine ball, work horse and box work, as well as a range of gymnastics. Not to mention employing all the wall bars, ropes, rings and just about every other piece of apparatus. For our best, and most, fun game of all: pirates - just use your imagination.

Take wood and metal work, people, that is to say adults employed in a factory, or in the manufacturing industry, would not be allowed to work without protective equipment. On the other hand, we had, and used, every conceivable type of tool and piece of equipment in use anywhere, including a full size coke powered forge and an oxy-acetylene hearth for braising and soldering. These activities we all carried out without any protection whatsoever. Plus smelting

equipment, sand and moulds for casting, not to mention an impressive array of drills, grinders, whet stones, etc. as well as all the sharp chisels and tools, etc. that were available. Add to this, all the different sorts of adhesives we used, like Evo-stick for laminating ply's to make trays and table tops, etc. I dare say now the word 'glue' isn't in the school vocabulary; at least not in the same context due to some student's predilection for glue sniffing.

I'm elucidating on these few, but relevant points, merely to underline where, and how, we achieve our instinct for survival. Personally I feel that we, as people, on the whole have let society down. In so much as in striving to make things and life in general easier, we have produced generations of obese, physically restricted to incapable, and therefore, ailing people, with ever decreasingly effective immune systems. Consequently, we have not just made a rod for our own backs but more importantly for our children and theirs. We really do need to reintroduce the word 'no' to our children's vocabulary when referring to saturated fat diets and the consumption of food; and include the word 'yes' to physical activity. Whilst I would be the last person on earth to advocate a return to a spartan, austere, Dickensian Briton, paradoxically, I have never believed in utopia, there is no such state; however whatever happened to, 'everything in moderation.

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