

To The Jubilee

I was a punk in 1977, part of a gang. We were vile and outrageous, the kind of boys your mum warned you about. We were going to tear down Western Civilisation, and uproot polite society; we were going to roam the streets, terrifying the old-guard and fermenting a revolution; and we were going to do it all in a single playtime.

There were three of us, Martin Dawson, Tommy Shands and me. We were in the same class at Park Lane Infants' School, and most of the time there were only two of us because Tommy was always absent. 'Sickly' my mum used to call him.

Martin was the leader. I'd only seen pictures of punks in the paper and on the TV, but Martin's brother, Eric, was the real thing. Eric was fifteen: he wore his hair straight for school, but when I saw him hanging round in the precinct with his mates it had rock-hard three-inch spikes. He had also covered his jacket with safety pins and scrawled an ⊕ symbol on the back.

At school we tried to emulate the look by spiking our hair with tap-water in the toilets each break time; we didn't wear jackets and thought our mums would be cross if we wrote on the backs of our parka coats. We'd spend the entire break playing 'punk rock'. We would around the playground as fast as we could, and occasionally shout "punk rock" at a small groups of girls. After shouting, we'd run away as quickly as possible. It was all Martin's idea; I had a nagging feeling there ought to be more to it.

"What do punks do?" I asked my mum.

"The same things as we do, only with different hair," she said.

I realise now how wrong this was. I shouldn't have asked my mum how to be a punk, and she shouldn't have given me a reasonable answer. She should have screamed something about filth and degradation, and told me to stay away from Martin Dawson and his punk friends. She should have grounded me, and I should have snuck out through the back door. As things stood, I was allowed out before tea, provided I didn't go further than the end of the road, and I was allowed out after tea, provided I stayed immediately outside our house. I never tried to push these boundaries any further because Mum was all powerful, and would strike me down the moment I stepped an inch beyond them.

Sometimes I went round to Martin's on a Saturday afternoon, although it wasn't that often. He had a friend who lived on the same street, Kevin or Kenny or something beginning with K. I was only invited when Kevin or Kenny went to stay with his dad. I invited Martin to mine a few times, but he said he wasn't allowed.

It was at Martin's that I heard 'Pretty Vacant' and 'God Save the Queen' blasting out of Eric's bedroom. His dad knocked the door after those two songs, and asked him to turn the volume down, which he did. Martin was disappointed: he'd been jumping around and shouting "we mean it maaan," in the same voice we used to shout "punk rock" in the playground. I was secretly relieved because I was beginning to get a headache.

Later Martin and his brother walked me home. Eric plied Martin with questions: "Who's better, Kid, the Pistols or the Clash?"

"The Pistols."

“Why?”

“Because they mean it, maaan.”

“What do we want?”

“A door-key in the UK.”

Eric laughed. “And what do we say to the Jubilee?”

Martin looked puzzled.

“Come on, I told you last night. It’s that thing you can’t say in front of Mum and Dad.”

I didn’t get to find out what they said to the Jubilee, because we had arrived at my house.

I knew other things about the Jubilee. There were going to be parties on most streets, including Martin’s, but not ours. I didn’t know why. I knew that Mum and Dad didn’t like the Queen, but that couldn’t be true about the whole street.

When the Jubilee was on TV, Mum would change channels if she was close enough; otherwise, she would find something to do in another room. Dad would go out into the garden, and spend a couple of minutes turning over the soil until Mick, the next door neighbour, came out.

He seemed to agree with Mum and Dad about the Queen. Dad was always more excited about stuff like that after he’d been out in the garden. He’d come back in, and start talking about the Queen, or the government, and every other sentence would begin ‘Mick says,’ or ‘Mick reckons’. Mum asked me to take a drink out to him one afternoon. When I got out there they were talking about Denis Healey. I had heard his name on the news, but didn’t

know who he was. As I went back inside I heard Mick say something about a 'class traitor', which puzzled me because I thought he was too old for school.

As we got closer to the Jubilee the rest of the world, the bit that wasn't our street, seemed to be going mad. As well as the streamers, there were flags, and pictures of the Queen; people on other streets had painted crowns on the walls, or red white and blue stripes up the telegraph poles. We still had nothing.

The weekend before, Martin asked if he could come round on the day of the Jubilee. He came into school with a note for me to give to Mum. He told me he had decided to come round but his mum had made him bring a note to explain. During the day I was desperate to open the envelope, but I didn't dare. I told Mum what I thought it said when I gave it to her after school. "I always go round to Martin's house, so he has to come round to ours." After she'd read it, she tucked it into her purse without saying anything.

The next day, she had a note for Mrs Dawson. We saw her in the playground before school. I took it over, and gave it to Martin who pretended to read it before he passed it on. This earned him a clip round the ear, which was quickly followed by a look between the two women. Mum had told me what was in the letter: Martin could come round anytime he liked; Mrs Dawson only needed to let us know. I was a bit put out by it: I was hoping I could go round to his that day. Why would he come round to ours when we weren't even having a party?

Eric brought him round. He winked at him as he left: “what do we say to the Jubilee, Kid?” Martin turned bright red and looked at my mum, then back at his brother. Eric laughed and said he’d be back later.

It was the most boring afternoon of my life. We weren’t allowed to turn on the TV, because Dad was worried about us having a ‘proper gander in the house’. We went outside, but there was no one about. The other kids were presumably allowed to have proper ganders in their houses. Perhaps they had managed to do what I hadn’t and taken advantage of friends who lived on other streets. I said we should play punk rock, but Martin wasn’t keen. “I don’t feel like a punk today.” There was no one to shout at anyway, but I worried that my house or this street might not be suitable for punk rock.

We went back inside. Mum was ‘spring cleaning’. I’d never been sure what that was, or why it needed doing, but I knew it was best to stay out of the way while it was taking place. Dad seemed as bored as we were. He had gone out to the garden; Mick hadn’t come out – I thought I’d seen him earlier, but wasn’t sure. I looked at Dad pretending to dig and wondered how long he’d stay out there. We went back outside again.

Martin was bored too, but I had a plan. “Why don’t we go round to yours?”

“Mum told me I’d got to come round here.”

“I thought you told her.”

“This morning. She told me this morning. I didn’t want to come– it’s rubbish here – but Mum told me I’d got to because I’d already said.”

“It’s not rubbish,” I said.

“It is. My street’s better.”

“Let’s go there then.”

He stopped for a moment and looked at me while he thought. “I was going to go anyway,” he said “without you.” He walked away. Did he want me to follow him? I looked back at my own house and the empty street, and ran to catch him up.

We passed two street parties on the way. It wasn’t far, but my legs began to ache. As we passed the second party, I saw a lad from our class. He looked up, but then looked away again when he saw us. Why didn’t we just stop at this party? No one would mind, and as it was between Martin’s house and mine, it would make it easy for us both to get home. I didn’t say this out loud, and Martin continued walking.

We arrived at his street, and saw the party at the far end. We could hear it too, although no one had noticed us. We stopped. I looked back the way we’d come, and then ahead, towards the party.

Martin wasn’t moving. His house was part way down: there was a small van parked outside it. As we watched, his dad came out carrying a box. The stuff inside was flowing over the top, and he was holding something down with the underside of his chin.

Martin took a step forwards. Had he forgotten I was there? He took another step, and we heard a voice from the garden to our left: “Oi, Kid.” We looked round. Eric was stood outside someone else’s house. He beckoned Martin towards him. I didn’t know if I was included, but I followed anyway.

Afterwards Eric and Martin took me home. None of us said anything while we walked. I didn't tell Mum we'd tried to go to Martin's in case she was angry about me leaving the street. I told her that Eric had turned up to take Martin home early. She thought it would have been nice for him to say goodbye, but didn't say anything else. After tea, I said I was tired and went to bed early, but I couldn't sleep: every time I closed my eyes I thought about the afternoon.

Inside the house there was another punk, a girl about the same age as Eric. She smiled, but I didn't think she was very happy. Eric certainly wasn't. He sat Martin down and crouched at eye-level. Everyone ignored me. "Why did you have to come back?"

Martin shrugged.

"Don't do that. What does that mean?"

"I was bored."

"Bored, so what? Life's boring, Kid – get used to it." Martin blinked to stop himself crying. It didn't work. "Don't start that. I thought you were supposed to be tough."

Martin rubbed his eyes and stared at his brother.

"Tell me why you had to come. Why couldn't you just stay round at your mate's?"

"There's nothing to do there."

"There's nothing to do here."

"There's the Jubilee."

“What have I told you about the Jubilee?” Martin said nothing. “What have I told you about the Jubilee?”

Martin spat the answer through his tears. “Hillocks to the Jubilee.”

Eric and the girl laughed. Eric patted Martin on the shoulder. “Good kid,” he said.