BLIND BOY BOB

let me tell you a story about Blind Boy Bob
didn't have a home and begging was his job
didn't have a family
didn't have a friend
but that was all changed for him in the end
oh blind boy
oh blind blind blind blind boy
he loved to ramble - he loved to ramble around
well he may have been blind
but at last that lost boy was found

During the interval - a brief respite for folk fans to buy raffle tickets (a major source of income in many clubs) but, more importantly, to brave the noisy scrum downstairs and recharge glasses - I had another go at Arthur.

- What was he really doing here?
- Why had he come to see me after so many years?
- How had he survived the great pie factory massacre?
- Was it accident, suicide or murder?
- And if that hadn't succeeded in bumping him off - how come nothing else had?

Surprisingly he was more than willing to talk, at least on his own terms.

'I have a confession to make,' he said. 'Well, several actually, but they'll mostly have to keep for another day. I'll be upfront about this though – I need your help Alwyn.'

'Go on,' I said, rather distracted with tuning my guitar. He coughed, turning his head away and, I do declare, wiped away a tear.

'I know it was a piss take, but you were nearer the truth than you guessed all those years ago. You know? In that Marquee Club song? The bit about a groupie?'

'Really?'

'Well, there was someone - a good few actually - I took disgusting advantage of the chicks back then, if only for the hand outs and crash pads. They wanted my body man - what could I do? But that's not my guilty secret. No, there was this one bird – she was different - very different. Name of Susan McGoozan. Lived with her mum off Clapham Common. She was obsessive man. I mean, like a leech. Everywhere I went she followed me. It got creepy.'

'I'm not surprised, with a weird name like that.'

'That's just what I called her, from the old dance band medley: "Oh Susan McGoozan, the girl of my choosin', she sticks to my bosom like glue. I'd rather be losin' my cigarettes and boozin', than losin' my Susan McGoozan." '[1]

'Never heard it,' I said.

'Her real name was Susan McGargle.'

'Not so sweet Sue, eh? Didn't you ever try and talk to her? I mean, what harm could she have done?'

'Yeah, of course. But she was so painfully shy and…'

'And…?'

'To be honest… Look, I'm ashamed of this man, but there you are.'

'She was a dog? Is that it?'

'Not exactly, but… If she'd just put some makeup on, raked all that moth-eaten hair off her face? Slipped out of that filthy great donkey jacket occasionally? You know?' He

looked at me in such a pathetic way, his rheumy eyes seeking approval like a lost puppy. It was all so far from the jaunty old Arthur I thought I knew. 'If she'd just made an effort,' he pleaded.

'Would it have made any difference?' I asked after a long silence. 'A stalker's a stalker.'

'Probably not,' he sighed. 'But then… well, this carried on for years, off and on. And then… well, I said I wasn't proud of myself.'

'So, one night you shagged her? Is that it?'

'It wasn't like that. After a while I actually looked for her when she wasn't around. I dunno man - it was like my shadow was missing or something.'

'So, she seduced you? After all your rejections? I don't buy it. Were you off your face? Desperate? Or was it blackmail?'

'No, you idiot. She saved my damned life.'

I was speechless, which was just as well because Roz was calling out the winning raffle ticket number. 'Two – eight – one! Pink! And let's hope it's not you Maureen, for about the twentieth time this year.' We all laughed as a mousy middle-aged woman, the demure spouse of one of the pipers, sunk into her chair with embarrassment. Then Lester, Arthur's driver, jumped up excitedly and yelled, 'I have it!'

Almost hopping across the room, slapping hands and thanking everyone in his wake, he went up for his bottle of Cava as if accepting a Grammy award. 'I never won anything before,' he growled delightedly, his doorman's droop suddenly gone.

As the proceedings continued, much as before, I drifted off, mulling over what the old man had told me. Number one, it seemed, he wanted my help. But for what? Just to locate this strange creature he'd once had a reluctant affair with?

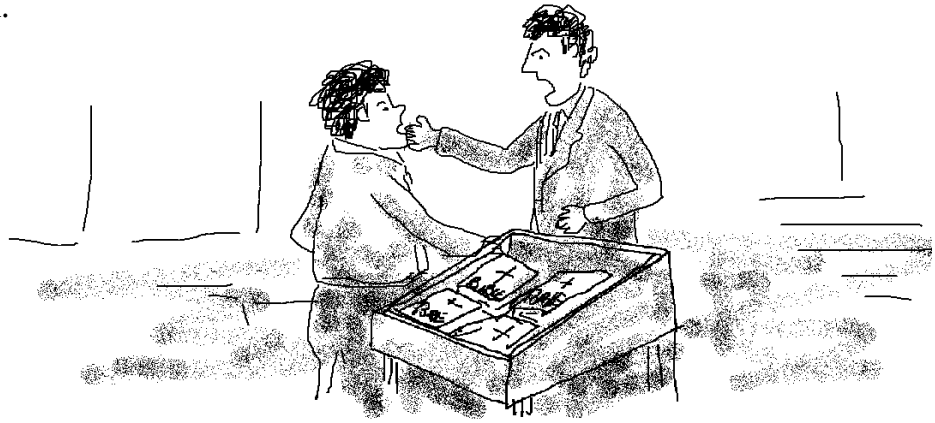
- Though how reluctant was it really?
- What did he owe her - or she him?
- And why now?
- What had brought this on after so many years?
- More to the point - I was ashamed to admit – what was in it for me?

But I wasn't long in contemplation as the running order was changed and I had to play again. I explained that the inspiration for this song, one I'd written over thirty years ago but could still miraculously remember the lyrics to (unlike most), was inspired mainly by the life of the Welsh poet, W.H. Davies, who'd lost a leg jumping a freight train. My song has the protagonist die, then return as a ghost before finding a belated salvation, but the original writer's life was even more remarkable. After very humble beginnings in Newport, 1871, Monmouthshire, he worked his passage as a teenager to the States where he bummed around the country, begging or working his way at whatever menial jobs were available. Unfortunately, any money he earned was soon blown on booze till eventually, mainly prompted by his accident, he returned to the UK. For some time he lived a hand to mouth existence, staying mostly in doss houses and hostels around London whilst attempting to get his poetry in print. He came to prominence following the publication of 'The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp' in 1907 after the manuscript had come to the attention of George Bernard Shaw. Though Davies experienced many changes of fortune, he eventually achieved great success and became something of a celebrity. He is perhaps best known for his poem, 'Leisure' [(2)], which begins:

What is this life if full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare?

But, in the Sixties, his delightfully meandering autobiography was almost as inspirational for many young wanderers as Kerouac's 'On the Road' despite coming from a long-gone generation.

Though critically disparaged in his lifetime and since as a somewhat 'naïve' poet, he was nevertheless very popular with the public. Arthur Adcock, a journalist at the Daily Mail, on reading 'The Soul's Destroyer', an early self published poetry collection, wrote that he; 'recognised that there were crudities and even doggerel in it, but there was also some of the freshest and most magical poetry to be found in modern books.' Adcock, among others, championed Davies, enabling him to get his first professional foot on the ladder. In 1926 he was eventually awarded an honorary degree from the University Of Wales – and in 1938 a plaque was unveiled in his honour in Newport with an address given by the poet laureate, John Masefield. It had been a very long, tough and convoluted journey, but he finally made it in the end.



My song, apart from the twisted fairy tale ending which kind of amused me, included three recurrent themes – death, the afterlife and railways. The first and last of these could relate back to childhood experiences, but the second is more complex. As with W.H.Davies, I've never been much of a church goer, nor indeed were my family. I don't recall religious or spiritual matters ever being discussed at home, either when I was growing up or since - but have considered this a blessing as it avoided any indoctrination and freed me to work out my own beliefs, or not, as the case might be.

Though we were read Bible stories and repeated Christian prayers in Junior school assemblies, it was all very gentle stuff simply encouraging kindness to one another. The songs we happily sang were likewise mostly of the 'Morning Has Broken' variety, accompanied by comforting pictures of cherubic children, docile animals and gentle Jesus meek and mild. I was more than willing to participate in these comforting daily rituals and especially to join in singing the lovely old songs with their simple melodies and evocative lyrics. Though it was a Church of England school, there was little dogma taught and you weren't expected to believe in God or anything else much except a 'do unto others' notion of goodness. However, this easy-going state of affairs was swept aside and replaced by stark conflicts when I moved up to the Secondary school at eleven.

Not only were there new temptations, such as the delightful Lulu and a host of other uniformed beauties, but also many previously undreamt of opportunities for mischief along with a cheery new gang of accomplices. In a pathetic attempt to combat all these evils, and no doubt the hormonal tide arising in our bodies, we were given weekly RE lessons. As an added bonus, they also tried filling our heads with endless lists of unpronounceable names, dates and other unlikely historical data so that, as with other subjects, we could be tested, ranked in order of merit and thus put in our places. Theological debate of any kind was discouraged, and the possibility of other faiths, cultures or lifestyles never even considered. Also, morning

assemblies, which had been nice cheerful occasions, became quasi-militaristic rallies where staff and pupils alike were lined up in rows and made to stand unflinching while the Old Gorilla groaned on.

Prayers and hymns were intoned without thought or feeling, and anyone caught not fully participating was liable to have their name taken for a thrashing later. Though I did not at first connect any of these rituals with God, or indeed anything religious, but simply accepted the absurd regime at face value and looked for amusing ways my mates and I might combat it. We were great admirers of POW escape stories and could identify with prisoner's attempts to outwit or undermine the goons. You obviously couldn't defeat the organization, but you could sometimes make a fool of it - and that became our constant challenge, preferably without getting caught. The nonsense pressed onto our lips in assemblies was just more gobbledygook you didn't need to worry about or take seriously.

But one day I was made to have second thoughts. My best friend, Easy (EZ for Eddie Zachman), was a rotund little kid with a ready smile who never had a bad word for anyone. He was late for the RE lesson on this occasion, along with the strident Christian teacher, Mr Piddock, so we lads hatched a little prank. We collected the class Bibles, stored one to each desk, and piled them all into Easy's desk next to mine. We hadn't done this with any malice intended against my friend; I guess we chose his desk simply because he wasn't there to argue. Maybe I should have done more to prevent it, but that never occurred to me at the time, though later I'd have good cause to regret the lapse.

When old Piddle entered, rather flustered, just a moment or two after Easy, he immediately asked us to retrieve our Bibles which, of course, we all began complaining weren't there. The teacher was dumbfounded, but not so much as Easy who stared in amazement at the pile before him. Eventually he put his hand up but, when Piddock saw the hoard, instead of being relieved or seeing the funny side, grabbed my poor buddy by the hair and dragged him squealing to the front of the room. He then began to simultaneously shake his head and hurl abuse for several minutes before eventually pushing his quivering victim away. As my pal limped tearfully back to his place running his hand through previously flowing locks - great clumps of hair tumbled to the floor. What made this ugly incident even worse in my eyes was the teacher's subsequent justification saying that, sometimes, 'righteous anger' was necessary.

For weeks I pondered what had happened and how Christianity was employed to justify disciplinary procedures, not only at school but, I began to realise, in many other areas of public life. Though I didn't pretend to understand anything of the spiritual aspects, the Holy Trinity, the Resurrection, Heaven and Hell, etc, but what did make sense was a respect for truth - which is what Jesus seemed to be saying in the books we studied. And truth meant not being hypocritical. As an experiment one day, I rather boldly asked a random selection of my classmates if they believed in God. Of the sensible answers I got back, none were very convincing. My impression was that few had given the concept much thought and those who answered in the affirmative simply trotted out the expected response. 'Of course,' they said, looking a little bewildered. 'Doesn't everyone?' My feeling was that, if they were honest, most students didn't believe, including the staff. I got this impression not from what people said, of course, but how they acted.

Christ, the man they kept going on about in assemblies, said we should love our enemies, give away our wealth to follow Him and, most apt here, suffer little children. Didn't anyone take this stuff seriously or were we all involved in a huge conspiracy - or more like, a monumental bad joke? A case of the Emperor's New Clothes on an unbelievably gigantic scale? All over Europe, if not the world, the most magnificent buildings, revered institutions and time-honoured historical practices, even the class system from its feudal foundation, had been predominantly Christian - was it all fraud? So many conflicts and the subsequent

exploitation of weaker nations and their lands had been justified by an assumption that we had a divine right to conquer. Onward Christian soldiers and all that (one of my favourite hymns in fact), now I wondered what it all meant - not so much on a grand communal scale, but for me personally.

Trouble was, I didn't know what or who to believe. It was a simple but critical realisation. I had no idea where I came from, what I was doing here in this world, nor where I might be going. Most of the deeply disturbing and mystifying questions regarding life, death, the universe and, most tricky of all, eternity, had not yet even occurred to me. I just knew one thing; I didn't know. I didn't know anything! That was it. I was just a kid. I had enough to deal with. But still, I had to respond to this minor revelation of my own ignorance somehow. I guessed there was no use trying to have a reasonable discussion with any teacher, especially old Piddle after what had happened. In any case, he'd assume I was trying to wind him up, which is indeed what we lads usually were. I suspected my Mum, a very moral person but not an intellectual, wouldn't have much to say other than throw my questions back at me, not out of unkindness but simply because she had no more answers than I did.

But it wasn't really explanations I was after - fine sounding platitudes were two a penny and no use to me. I felt like Holden Caulfield, from Salinger's 1951 book, 'Catcher In The Rye', who finds almost everyone 'phoney' but, unlike him, I was not yet ready or able to run away from my situation. I realised I couldn't beat the system, though maybe I could make some kind of a stand - something which wouldn't involve awkward discussions (I couldn't have articulated what I was feeling anyway). Then I realised what I had to do - make a symbolic, though probably futile, gesture.

My main gripe was against the hypocrisy of morning assemblies. So, I thought, I'd secretly omit the most important, or iconic, thing we chanted out obediently every day - the Lord's Prayer. I had no particularly problem with this one item as such, any more than the others, simply that it was obviously considered sacrosanct and, to me, equally meaningless. So that's what I did. Without mentioning my action to anyone I simply stopped saying, 'Our Father who art in Heaven…' etc, every day - and subsequently for the rest of my school career. No member of staff ever caught me out, though if I saw any staring suspiciously I just began miming. It may seem a very minor rebellion, but it felt good to me. Such was the strictness of our school assemblies that any defiance would have had serious consequences, so it felt quite daring at the time.

The only things I didn't object to during these tedious dawn gatherings were the occasional hymns. The words of one, which for many years I assumed was by William Blake, included the line;

> *'A man that looks on glass, on it may stay his eye;*
> *or if he pleaseth, through it pass, and then the heav'n espy.'* (3)

This was intriguing stuff and summed up my immerging thoughts about the world which, even before psychedelic experiences, I suspected was a lot crazier and more mysterious than we were led to believe. Most hymns struck me as boring dirges with unnecessarily convoluted and old fashioned lyrics which, even leaving aside the inexplicable religious message, meant nothing to me. Having said that I quite enjoyed the sing-song, when in the mood. 'He Who Would Valiant Be', 'Onward Christian Soldiers', or 'We Plough The Fields And Scatter' and other rousing numbers may not have stood up to my childish lyrical analysis, but they could get the blood churning on grey mornings when all we had to look forward to was another day of bum-aching tedium where even the monotonous suburban world outside the window beckoned enticingly.

Blake's soaring 'Jerusalem', for example, was always a good belter, and also had intriguing imagery. There were several more, often with interesting histories I much later discovered (when, as a teacher myself, I was to accompany school assemblies on guitar, though thankfully by then there was more acceptable, less stridently dogmatic, material available) but most seemed to be praising the one and only way. Surely there were others?

After the folk club I stood shivering outside the pub with one or two of the performers, chatting about other open-mic venues elsewhere and saying our goodbyes. There was lots I wanted to discuss with Arthur but, concerned about getting up for work in the morning, I declined the offer of a night cap back at their hotel. In any case, it had been a long eventful day and I needed some space to mull it all over.

As I'd guessed, the Bentley was his, but before it glided off into the gloomy North East night he handed me a scrap of paper. 'See if you recall any of these,' he said. 'It's a long time ago but you never know, someone might remember her.'

'What was her name?' I asked. 'Sue, something?'

'McGargle. Susan McGargle. Could be worth a lot to her – and also the kid,' he smiled.

'Kid? What kid?' But he pulled the door shut and they were off.

FOOTNOTES - Chapter 7

(1) I found this information about **'**Susan McGoozan' on The Mudcat Café website.
'This 1899 song by Joe Lincoln and Henry Shepherd can stand as an example of many songs (just think how many used "I love my wife, but oh! you kid!") that have a catchy hook but don't stand up as a whole.

Susan Van Doozen, the girl of my choosin',
You stick to my bosom like glue,
When this you're perusin', remember I'm musin',
Sweet Susan Van Doozen, on you,
So don't be abusin' my offer and bruisin'
A heart that is willin' to woo,
And please be excusin', and not be refusin',
Oh! Susan Van Doozen, please do.

‘As the wonderfully silly "Susan" had the misfortune to stem from an otherwise mostly forgettable, clumsy song frame and a scarcely better melody, music publishers tried to keep squeezing money out of the copyright by putting it in medleys with any two other songs, sometimes as "Susan Van Dusen," sometimes as "Susan McGoozan" (the latter apparently to get rid of its Dutchness). By 1940 its origins were completely obscured.’ www.mudcat.org

(2) W.H.Davies – from his collection, ‘Songs of Joy and Others’, 1911.

What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.
No time to stand beneath the boughs
And stare as long as sheep or cows.
No time to see when woods we pass,
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass,
No time to see, in broad day light,
Streams of stars, like skies at night,
No time to turn at beauty’s glance
And watch her feet, how they can dance.
No time to wait till her mouth can
Enrich that smile her eyes began.
A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.

(3) ‘The Elixir’ by George Herbert, 1593 – 1633. He was a Welsh poet, orator and Anglican priest, born into an artistic and wealthy family. Educated at Cambridge University, which led to his holding prominent positions there and also Parliament. He became a priest after the death of King James and worked in a rural parish, writing poetry and hymns whilst assisting poorer members of his flock. Many of his poems were set to music by leading composers such as Ralph Vaughan Williams, Lennox Berkley, Judith Weir, Randall Thompson, William Walton and Patrick Larley www.english.cam.ac.uk/cambridgeauthors/herbert