



Screech Owl
By David Murphy

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My earliest memories are of my earliest humiliations. Standing in the nude in front of the patio doors while my mum searched through a pile of clothes for dry pyjama bottoms, my dad pointing out into the darkness, telling me if I pissed myself again he'd put me out there for the night. Or sitting on the toilet having taken a dump, and realising my mum was out, calling out to my dad downstairs, asking him to wipe my bottom please. Him trudging up the stairs and cursing me as he did it. He called me a dirty little bastard. So in a way my earliest memories are of what a shit my dad was. I only had to deal with that until my fifth birthday though. In a way.

My mum took her own role in those memories, too. I shouldn't deny her that. I remember lying in the room I shared with my sister. We must have had a red nightlight as I always remember it red. I was happily gouging out my nose with my finger when I caught hold of a thick and stringy piece of snot. I pulled it all the way out, but as my arm extended the rope of snot stuck deep inside my nose so that it reached all the way from my face to my outstretched finger, and I was stuck. With a few more years behind me I might have had the wisdom to use my other hand, or to wind it round my finger until it broke, but I can't have been much more than three, so I panicked. I shouted out for my mum. When she came she saw it and she called me a dirty little bastard too.

Maybe I just was a dirty little bastard.

We had stairs that went down to the front door from in front of the bathroom on the first floor. It wasn't until I was sixteen that I realised the memory I had of often jumping all the way down the stairs, from the top to the bottom, was an absolute impossibility. No matter how clear the memory was, no matter how vividly I still felt the sensation of leaping and landing heavily in the thick carpet, there was no way I ever really did that.

So if that never happened, maybe none of my other memories did either.

Like my sister's; She still clearly remembers father Christmas coming into our room one Christmas eve and putting presents in the stockings at the end of our bed. It wasn't until she was past ten years old that she accepted that this just didn't happen. It must have been our dad.

And if our dad was sneaking around dressed as Santa Claus on Christmas eve trying to deliver presents for us, was he such a shit as my memories suggest? Or as mother suggested for all those years afterwards? I tell myself he started out with good intentions, wanting to 'do the decent thing' once he got stuck in that situation, and he stuck it out for five years, in a steadily worsening decline of behaviour and decency, until he could take it no more.

That makes it seem better than just saying he was a shit. But now, when I watch my own daughter, and I think of how he left on my fifth birthday, shit seems more appropriate. By all accounts, well, by his accounts, he was very good at karate, and excellent on a motorbike. He was smarter than just about everyone he met, and he was adept at killing. He was just an abysmal husband, and a father that belongs in Bukowski's stories more than mine.

When I was three or four I went to Saint Helen's nursery school. I don't remember much. We had red uniforms which I liked, and I had a friend called Jeffrey, but I never saw him again after we moved. We used to get given a bottle of milk every day, a little glass bottle with a silver foil top, and a straw, which I would poke through the foil. That milk was the best god-damn thing in the whole world. I don't know what I was getting fed at home then – if later was anything to go by then not much, and nothing good – but that milk was ambrosia to me. Then Thatcher came and took away the children's milk.

I remember going to church in Ystrad Mynach, a miserable dark town in the arsehole end of the valleys. I only remember it because once an old guy sat in front of us in the church, and he stank so badly it made my eyes sting. I tried to sit still, and stand when we had to stand, and kneel when we had to kneel, but kneeling only brought my nose closer to him. My mum took me out the back halfway through and I puked bucket loads into the church toilet. I'd like to claim it was a moment of revelation when I realised there couldn't be an all-powerful benevolent god who would still make a little boy smell that stench, but I didn't draw any big conclusions, just a man that stank and a boy that puked, and I believed every word in those dark stinking churches for years to come.

We had a big blue pram, with solid white rubber wheels, and my mum would leave me out on the driveway in it to get some air. At least, I remember that pram, and I fit it into the story she told me. It might have been some other pram. I pulled myself up in it while I was still a baby, and I nose-dived into the concrete. There was no way I

should have been strong enough to do that, but I did. That's what she tells me. Maybe that head injury explains the stuff that happened later.

I remember being sat on the kerb with the neighbour's kid. He was hefting an iron bar we had found, and we were wondering what to do with it. Suddenly he had a revelation, and swung it from back behind his shoulder, catching me full in the mouth with it, opening the gap between my two front teeth even further than I had been born with. My mum took me round to their house and she knocked on their patio door. They were all sat in there eating dinner at the table. It looked really nice to sit at a dinner table like a family. They were all shocked when she explained, and they made the kid apologise. He apologised. That was it. What else could they do? Maybe *that* head injury explains the stuff that happened later.

We had two cats, a posh Siamese called Suzy and a street fighter called Maggie. I loved Maggie and she loved me, but one time I put Suzy in a box and shook it and she never liked me after that, even after she had a stroke and needed all the friends she could get. We must have been doing alright for a while because they were pedigree cats. All that meant to me was that they had special names that only we knew and those names were Leezanne Aurora and Marzipan Sweet Melody and I can't explain it but those two names were like magic spells to me that let me know there was another world where any street bum called Maggie could be a princess, and I can't explain it but because of that I knew that words were magic things and there was more than one world and my life changed because I knew the secret names Leezanne Aurora and Marzipan Sweet Melody, and when I say those names I still feel like I need to bow my head like they made us in church whenever we said the word Jesus.

When I was five we moved to a town called Cwmbran, which meant 'valley of the crows', and it was the valley of the crows. We lived in an area called Saint Dials and when I looked it up later there was no person called Saint Dials and nobody knew where the hell the name came from and that just about said it all for me. Cwmbran had an area called Hollybush and another one called Thornhill, where my cousin died. I tell people he was joyriding because I want them to know what the place felt like, but what happened was his dad's workmate left his car and the keys at theirs, and Lee decided to drop his mates home. He was doing thirty on a thirty road in Thornhill when it spun on ice and hit a lamppost. They all went to hospital and they got checked and told they were fine and they all went home then Lee said his stomach hurt and they went back and he died. He was fifteen. I was in bed and my mum got up to answer the phone. She stopped outside my door after the phone call and said 'Lee's dead', then went crying into her room. I had two cousins called Lee and I didn't know which one but I didn't want to disturb her to ask, but when I heard the story I learned that, when something bad happens to you, you might think you're fine, but inside you're not.

The new house was made of black wood and grey concrete, which, variety-wise, was an improvement on the rest of the town, which was made of grey concrete only, though I think Saint Dials only got the wood because it was cheaper than concrete and they always knew they were going to stick the problem people there. The windows were almost big enough to look out of. Outside there was a holly tree that had a really bent trunk which made it excellent for climbing and I climbed it a lot, and so did my sister. If you went as high as you dared you could see into the electricity substation next to it. My

mum told us if we went in there we would die straight away. I never went in there. Past the garages next to the holly tree was a paved place with a little cemented brick pile on it, which we called the brick house. You could see it from the landing window of our house. It was there for the kids to play with. Or on. Or in. I'm not sure what they meant to happen with it. It was just some bricks. The other side of that there were two blocks of flats, red bricks with the same small windows. Later we would go into them, up the open staircases, and knock doors and then run away. I don't know why we did it in the flats, they were the only buildings with a good view all around, and we always got chased. Maybe that's why we did it. There was black hill, which was steep and went a slow way to school, and white hill, which wasn't so steep, but went somewhere I didn't know. They both started up from another paved square the other side of the flats. I guess the council got a deal on paving slabs.

I was at the top of black hill with my sister. We had new bikes and we were being brave, going all the way down the hill to the little paved square to see how fast we could go. My bike was blue and it had Mickey Mouse on it. I went first and I was going faster than anyone had ever gone. I wanted my sister to know so I turned back to look at her and shout 'look at me', but I forgot my hands were steering, and I turned the handlebars too. I hit the little kerb at the side of the path and went face first into the black tarmac. I don't remember much but I remember running over the grass between the flats. I got to our front door and knocked on it. My mum answered and looked down and saw my missing teeth and my lip split open halfway to my nose. She said "Where's your bike?"

She told my sister to run to our gran's house, a few streets away. My dad's parents were the only people we knew who had a car. She knew my granddad would be

drunk but I suppose she figured that was still the best option. He came with my sister sat in the back of his metallic gold Datsun, her wide eyed and him stinking of whiskey. I remember sitting in the back seat as we drove to the hospital. I was calm and quiet and I just kept saying "Can I see a doctor please?" My granddad leaned over to look at me. He took in the blood and the hole in my lip and the missing teeth. "That boy needs a doctor!" he slurred. He was a great man. He fought in Burma. When I joke to my own kid I hear his voice in my mouth.

We were sick, my sister and me. She had bad asthma so it was hard for her to get enough air, and she had black bags under her eyes because of it. I had bronchitis that year and every spring after and they pumped me full of antibiotics, except when they gave me penicillin I puked and got worse, so they had to give me something that didn't work as well. Then one day we were at my granny's house (the granny we called nipper's granny because she used to have a budgie called nipper but it died,) and my auntie came down the path with a whiskey in her hand and looked at me. She sucked on her cigarette and said to my mum "Tha boy hasn't got bronchitis. Tha boy's gorasthma." So then we both had asthma. I got a fever that year and I was lying on the brown and cream sofa looking at the wall and laughing at cartoons I could see on the wall, except they weren't really there and my mum got scared. Like I said, we were sick kids.

I went to Our Lady of the Angels primary school. We were Irish catholic so I guess that's why. There was a girl there called Katie James and my mum and her mum were friends somehow and they decided we would be boyfriend and girlfriend. They made us kiss each other on the lips outside Katie James's house and sometimes they

made us hold hands when we walked home as Katie James's house was on the way back to our house from school. Katie James and me didn't really like it and we didn't know what they wanted but it seemed to please them so we both just played along. But Katie James's mum liked my hair too much and she always wanted to touch it, and I didn't like that. One time my mum took me for a haircut and she asked the man to sweep up my hair and put it in a box and she told me that Katie James's mum wanted some of my curls to keep. I didn't like that either but she gave them to her anyway and Katie James' mum seemed pleased.

My mum got some part time work in a shop and one day she couldn't get us from school so my dad had to do it. This was before the end of the year when we started walking back on our own. He was waiting at the gates for my sister and me and we were really surprised to see him. Part of the surprise was that he'd come to pick us up. Another part was that he'd come to pick us up on his motorbike. He wheeled the motorbike along the pavement, and when he asked which way we went home we told him we had to go Katie James's way home because it was the quickest way without crossing any big roads. He pushed the bike up the hill to the steps that led up past Katie James's house. When he saw the steps he said some words I didn't know, then he pushed the motorbike up them, bumping one by one. It was a big motorbike. Then we got to the bottom of auntie Pam's lane, which was the steepest hill and called auntie Pam's lane because auntie Pam lived on it with her son Christian who was in my class at school. My dad said "right, wait here," and he started the motorbike and put my sister on the back of it and she put her arms around his waist and he put his helmet on and drove off up the hill. I waited. He came back down and picked me up and put me on the back and I held onto him and he drove us up the hill. I wished I could see in front but I

could only see the bushes to the side, so I leant sideways to look around him. He shouted something in his helmet and I didn't understand it but I thought I'd better sit still. I think it was the only time I ever touched him, apart from when he wiped my dirty bottom. He was wearing leather, and it felt good, but his back was turned to me and I couldn't see his face.

The next year was Mr Roberts' class. He never seemed sure about me, but then one day I was angry about something when we were playing football. We kicked off after the other team scored and I thought I don't need a team I'm better than everyone, and I ran and I was angry so I ran fast and hard, and I ran past two people, then I ran into Matthew McCarthy, who was one of the bigger boys. We ran shoulder to shoulder, and he pushed me away from their goal, but I kicked the ball as hard as I could, and it snuck slowly inside the post. I stopped running and looked at Mr Roberts. He laughed and said 'yes!' and I knew I'd scored my first goal. I didn't know then that his laugh was because he didn't expect that from me. He put me in the school team straight away. In my first match I scored a goal. It was from very far out, but really I hadn't taken in anything about the game, I hadn't seen my team or theirs, the ball just came at me, and I kicked it at the goal, and because their defenders and their goalkeeper didn't know what they were doing it wobbled slowly over the line. I think Mr Roberts knew that somehow. He never put me in the team again.

It was in Mr Roberts' class I first noticed Darren Morgan. I noticed Darren Morgan because Mr Roberts noticed Darren Morgan. He didn't like him. I remember him laughing at Darren and calling him names in front of the class because Darren couldn't spell something, I can't remember what. One time he had Darren out in front of everyone, and he made him hold two books in each hand, and hold his hands out to his sides at shoulder height. Then he just carried on with the lesson. Darren was okay for a while, he even smiled. I think he thought it was some kind of joke. It didn't take long for him to realise it wasn't a joke. After a short while we could all see his arms starting to

shake, and the look on his face changed. Mr Roberts just smiled and carried on. Once or twice he said 'Keep those arms up Morgan.' Darren was really shaking hard, but he looked determined like he really didn't want to cry. He was a rich kid because his dad owned two burger vans and he had a dark sun tan because his family went on holidays and so later when they knew the word the boys at school would start calling him nigger Morgan but most of us didn't even know what a holiday was. Darren Morgan hit me quite a lot.

I don't think he didn't like me. Not the way Mr Roberts didn't like him. It was his way of playing with me. One day we were doing music and he put his hands together like a club and swung them way back behind him like he was going to hit me. He swung them really hard and I thought I'd be clever so I ducked, but he wasn't trying to hit me and he swung his hands really low. Because I ducked he hit me in the side of the head, really hard. It didn't hurt lots but he got in trouble.

My sister and me ate at the table then. We had a table in the dining room and a little hatch that went into the kitchen, and we sat in there for breakfast and we used to have food like cereals in the house in case we were hungry. And for evening meals we'd sit in there too like we were a proper family, but I don't remember my dad ever sitting in there. And I don't think my mum sat in there much either, because my sister and me had to finish everything before we could leave the table, even if it went cold ages ago and we hated it, so we started throwing food down the back of the chest of drawers that was in there. My mum didn't find out for about a year. I don't know how she didn't notice the smell.

On my fifth birthday we were sat at the dining room table, me and my sister and Katie James and Darren Morgan, and Christian who was auntie Pam's son who lived on auntie Pam's lane. I think probably my dad didn't like the noise, because he had a big row with my mum. The cake was on the table and my friends were there and my dad started shouting. My friends looked at me but I didn't know what to say so they stopped looking at me. My dad had a plate of food and he came out of the front room with it and threw it at my mum's leather jacket she had left on the stairs, then he left. He never came back. My friends all had to go home, and my sister and me had to go to my mum's mum's house (the granny we called Jock's granny because she used to have a dog called Jock, but it died.) My mum sat at her mum's table and cried with her hands covering her eyes. I really didn't like it that she was crying and I wished she wouldn't. My friends and me hadn't cried when we were sat at my mum's table.

My dad stayed at Nipper's granny's for a while after he left, and I cried when I finally went to see him. Not in front of him, but in front of my sister on the way there. I didn't want to see him because I thought he'd still be angry with me for making noise because if he wasn't still angry then he would have come back home. I was sad when I saw him but I didn't cry in front of him. Instead I asked if I could sit in his new car and play driving so I didn't have to be sad and not cry. I found the cigarette lighter in the car and I pushed it in and then waited for it to pop out and when it popped out I looked at how bright red it was. I thought it was beautiful and I wanted to touch it, but I didn't, but I pressed it into things. I pressed it into the back of the steering wheel so my dad couldn't see that I had done it. A long time later he told me he knew I had done it, but he didn't tell me off. That confused me.

My mum told Nipper's Granny and Nipper's Granny told my dad that Darren Morgan had been hitting me. My dad had been a karate teacher and she asked if he would teach me karate so I could karate Darren Morgan, but my dad said 'Karate is a way of life, not a way of fighting.' One time when we went to see him at Nipper's Granny's he knew somehow that Darren Morgan had my coat from school. He asked me why Darren Morgan had taken it and I said I didn't know. My dad was annoyed but he seemed to be annoyed with me instead of Darren Morgan. He asked me where Darren lived and I told him. It was just a few streets away, in one of the big houses. Then my dad said 'come on' and we got up and left. After a bit I saw that we were going to Darren Morgan's house, and I knew my dad was going to say something about the coat. I wished that he wouldn't and I wished that Darren Morgan could just keep the coat. I didn't care about that coat. We got to the gate and my dad told me to wait there. He went in and he was gone a very long time, and I didn't know what they could be talking about for so long. Then my dad came back out and he had my coat. We walked back to Nipper's granny's. On the way he told me that I had to stick up for myself, and not let people push me around. I didn't really know what he meant but I thought it must be important because of the way he was telling me. He was telling me like he really meant it.

So the next time we were in the school yard and Darren Morgan started pushing me I grabbed his shirt and pushed him, and we both fell over. I was on top of him and I didn't know what to do, so I put my hands around his throat and squeezed. I don't know where I learned to do that. Some kids from the older year stood around us and shouted. Matthew Vella, who was very fat, and Abbott, who they called Lou, and all their friends. I had my hands around his throat and then he punched me hard in the side of the head. It

hurt a lot so I let go of him and got up, and he got up and walked away. I think it would have been easier to win if Darren wasn't at my fifth birthday party but he was. I touched the side of my head and there was a lump there like a small egg, and it was very hot and it hurt when I touched it. Matthew Vella and Lou and the others started shouting at me and laughing, and saying 'you could have killed him' and 'what did you do that for?' They kept shouting and laughing and walking round and round me and I got angry and more and more angry and a dinner lady started coming to see what was happening, and then I ran towards her and started crying. She put her arms around me and patted me and she said to Matthew Vella and his friends 'you are very nasty boys!' and I thought she was right. She was a nice lady and it felt good when she gave me a hug, but I decided not to stick up for myself any more.