

Floating In Space

Chapter One

South Manchester, 1977

The countdown starts on Friday afternoon at four thirty when my colleagues and I pour out from the Regal Assurance building and stream and scatter for the cars, buses, and trains that carry us away to different and better lives. The countdown is for the weekend, and the weekend is one long high-energy cassette that plays on the hi-fi of life until that moment, that far distant moment, when the alarm bell rings for Monday morning and there are five days before you can rewind the tape and play it again.

That Friday morning I was already awake when the brightness hit me as my mother jolted the curtains apart and opened the window.

"Come on Stuart, starting waking up".

I slipped deeper into the warmth of the covers and wondered how to *start* waking up. I mean, you're either asleep or awake. How can you *start* to wake up?

Some inner force lifted me up, out of the bed and the bedroom, and pushed me along the short passage to the bathroom. There I stared at myself in the glass of the shaving mirror and contemplated the fact that no hint, no clue, not the faintest indication of my inner self, showed in the pale blue eyes that looked back at me from the mirror. I reached down; turned on the tap and the water shattered into the white basin and I held my hand in its coolness until it warmed up, then slipped in the plug.

I dressed quickly in the clothes my mother had freshly pressed for me. The bright summer sun of the early morning blazed across the urban council estate, which lay dormant before me through the window of my bedroom. Bars of light, shaped by the window panes and the curtains, patterned the poster-covered walls. Jackie Stewart's Matra MS80 dominated the view, next to Olivia Newton-John, Barry Sheene, and Elton John.

Breakfast, served in my mother's clean but spartan kitchen was porridge, as usual. My Dad had already started to eat and he had taken all the cream off the top of the milk.

"You've nicked the cream again" I said.

"It's all the same. It's all milk. What does it matter?"

It mattered. It was a battle of wills every day. Who would get the cream?

"Have you pinched the cream?" scolded my Mother, "you know Stuart like the cream!"

"Well someone's got to have it. Bloody porridge's going cold waiting for other people."

My Dad was a big man with broad shoulders and massive arms. He worked on the tarmac, making roads. He worked outside all the year round and neither the heat of the summer nor the cold of the winter seemed to touch him. My Mother offered to open another bottle of milk but that only set him off again.

"Don't open another bloody bottle!"

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"Don't start bloody this and bloody that at this time in a morning. Milk all gets used in the end."

"Tut" went Dad.

"Don't start tut-tutting either!"

It was heart warming to think that despite all the problems in the world, war, famine, starvation. Some people still had time for the trivial things in life.

We breakfasted on in silence except for the radio four newscast. While we ate my Mother rinsed out my Dad's brew can and slipped it into his bag alongside his sandwiches. Finishing the last dregs of his mug of tea he rose and quietly, -everything he did had the same cat like qualities of quiet and carefulness-and pulled on his jacket and cap. Taking his bag from my Mother he gave a nod that embraced us both and stepped outside. Mounting his battered old bike he nodded again, my Mother waved back from the window and he was gone.

"Hurry up and drink your tea" she said, turning to me, "time and tide and the buses wait for no man."

I smiled and reached out for my cup. It was Friday and the weekend was only hours away, and the expectant dream of it all shimmered before me like a mirage.

The orange and cream bus came more or less on time and I stepped quickly on board and took my regular seat at the back. I travelled on the same bus every day and always took the same seat, as did all the other 'regulars'. I paid the conductor thirty six pence as usual. Four stops later an attractive ginger haired girl wearing a yellow coat was among a queue of people who joined the bus. She sat adjacent to me on one of those seats positioned over the rear wheels that face inwards towards the aisle. She was another 'regular' and every day paid thirty-two pence.

As we travelled on the bus became busier and I took out my paperback to read. I read page forty seven then turned over to page fifty. Something didn't seem to follow on but it didn't matter, my mind had lifted up a notch into another consciousness, a daydream in which I had just rescued the girl in the yellow coat from the wreck of a burnt out bus. She looked lovingly into my eyes and we kissed, my hand moving slowly up the smoothness of her nylon sheathed leg, then the bus jerked suddenly away from the traffic lights. I looked up to see the girl in the yellow coat turn quickly away.

I entered the imposing offices of the Regal Insurance Company by the unimposing side entrance. The door was held open by the ex army commissionaire attired as always in his faultless black uniform.

"Morning" I mumbled.

"Morning" he replied, "got your pass lad?"

He referred to my staff card, endorsed with my name, department, and staff number and further enhanced by a photograph revealing the long haired gangling youth of yesteryear that I had once been. To let an employee past the portals of the Regal Insurance Company

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without his staff card was unthinkable to a man occupying the noble office of commissioner.

"Got your pass lad?" he repeated.

"Er sorry no" I replied, "but I won't be long. I'm only here to blow the building up."

"Now then..."

"I've got my Bader-Meinhoff card. Is that all right?"

"Now look lad, you know the rules as well as I do. No pass, off you go round to reception and get them to identify you."

"Look, I've just forgotten it. You know me; I've been here for five years. I'm late already."

"Rules lad. You've got to have rules. Now round to reception and they'll sort you out."

Joan, who worked on reception, was a pleasant plump woman of about forty. She smiled at me and picked up the phone.

"No pass Stuart?"

I leaned on the counter and nodded.

"I can identify him you know" she told the escorting commissioner.

"Well, his department still have to send someone down."

"Hello IA/1? Joan here on reception. Can you send someone down to identify Stuart Hill? He hasn't got his pass with him." She turned to me and asked, "have you lost it or just forgotten it?"

"Just forgotten it."

"Yes he's just forgotten it. Okay. 'Bye."

The offices of the Regal Insurance Company were large, spacious, and Victorian. IA/1 was no exception. There were twelve rows of high wooden desks, three desks to a row. One clerk sat at each end desk and the centre desk was used to pile papers, accounts, and other fragments of our clerical affairs.

Mr Preston, the head of the department was talking on the phone when I came in, so I quietly signed the attendance book and went to my desk. Mr Preston was a pleasant bespectacled man in his late forties who suffered from a rather unfortunate disorder. He kept doing things twice. We all suspected it was some kind of mental condition. He had been perfectly normal until he went away on holiday two years ago and had been taken badly ill. A blood clot on the brain was the rumour and Mr Preston was off sick for more than twelve months. He was very popular and everyone was glad to see him back, but then the irritating little incidents began to happen. He would come to sign letters and be surprised to find the signature 'Les Preston' already there. He would go over to the drinks machine, buy a coffee, and then find another coffee already on his desk. On this occasion he came over to my desk, asked me to make sure to bring my pass on Monday, stressed the importance of the pass procedure, and hoped I realised that though certain rules seemed rather silly to me, they were backed up by sound reasoning.

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Twenty minutes later he came over again. He asked me again to remember my pass in future, re-stressed the importance of the pass procedure, and explained for a second time that seemingly silly rules were backed by sound reasoning.

Margaret Steel came over with a tea from the drinks machine. She was tall and lovely and her long brown hair tumbled back over her shoulders. She had a lovely lively personality and when I had first started in the office, a shy youth fresh from school, she had been the first to come over and say hello.

"That's the tea I owe you from yesterday" she said, "You probably need it after being told off twice in one morning."

I laughed and said "cheers" and took a sip of the tea.

"Oh yuk. What's this? Did you do a 136?"

136 was the tea machine code.

"136" said Margaret adamantly, "white tea with sugar!"

"No, 136 is tea without. 137 is tea with, and mine is 138 -tea with extra sugar."

"You always have 136."

"I don't. I always have 138."

Margaret smiled and began to wag her finger at me. "I bought you a tea the other day and you had 136!"

"Yes, that was in the archive. It's a different machine. On our machine its 138"

"Right that's it. Just wait a minute" announced Margaret and marched off in the general direction of IA/3.

"You've done it now" laughed Abigail McCartney who sat at the end of my row, partly hidden behind a pile of accounts.

"Oh no, that young lady tried to fob me off with 136 and it's just not acceptable. 138 every time. Isn't that right Jeff?"

Jeff, who sat just in front of me turned around.

"Stew" he announced, "don't stand for it mate. Demand 138 every time"

"Thank you. A true friend. What more can I say?"

"Well, what about telling us what happened in the archive for a start."

Abigail giggled but I ignored her.

"Jeff, as a true gentleman I'm afraid I just cannot reveal that information."

Margaret came back just then with two sachets of sugar. She emptied them into my tea and stirred it vigorously with my parker pen.

"Thank you Mr Hill" she said, smiling.

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"Thank you Miss Steel."

I took a sip of tea and turned to Abigail.

"Can't get the staff" I commented.

"Men!" she replied.

The day at the Regal Insurance Company had begun. A bit of banter, a bit of work. It was the banter that made it all bearable, that and the chatting, the chatting-up, the flirting and the skiving. Skiving could be a quick natter at the tea machine or, sometimes something more creative like the inventing of imaginary problems that could send you down to the archive for a good twenty minutes, preferably with someone as lovely and as interesting as Margaret Steel with whom you might debate the meaning of love, life, and the universe, and how about a date on Saturday night? The problem there was that Margaret was simply the most attractive and popular girl in the company and you had to take your place with executives, management, and clerks alike, all competing for her attentions. Still, nothing was serious, only the endless stream of c80 insurance forms to be checked recorded and filed.

Paul Littlewood came over and asked me about correction forms.

"I've sent in three, but they're not being shown on the account. What shall I do?"

"Send them a letter" I said without interest.

"What shall I say?"

"Its a stock letter, A C537, put a little note with IA/1, the amount, date and all that stuff, and put for the attention of the District Manager."

"Seen that new typist that started this week?" asked Paul idly.

"Which one?"

"You must have seen her. Black hair. Tall. Seven out of ten."

"Eight of ten", corrected Jeff.

"I think I'll take this letter over and give it to her personally" said Paul.

"Give her what?" smirked Jeff and Paul made a coarse clenched fist gesture and leered obscenely as he moved away towards the typing pool.

"No chance whatsoever" declared Jeff, "especially if Jan gets her hands on him."

Jan was Paul's girlfriend and many people found it hard to understand what Paul saw in her. Paul was smart and fairly good looking and all his previous girlfriends had been reasonably attractive. Jan on the other hand was scruffy, overweight, foul mouthed, and had long greasy hair. Behind their backs they were known as the odd couple.

I speculated to Jeff that perhaps Paul liked big knockers, only to be struck on the side of the head by a missile, possibly an elastic band, coming from Abigail's direction.

"We're all sex objects to you men" she remarked haughtily.

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Eleven O'clock and time for a tea break.

"Whose turn is it?" I asked Abigail as we walked over towards the tea machine.

"It's probably yours but I'll get them. Oh shit."

"What's up?"

Abigail pointed to a hand written note cellotaped to the drinks machine.

"No tea" she read out, "fancy a coffee?"

"No, can't stand the stuff."

"We'll have to pop round to ED. Their tea tastes lovely."

We carried on through the partition into IA/2 then out into the corridor. The corridors were beautiful at Regal, as was the whole of the building. It had not been knocked up in a matter of weeks like modern buildings but had been designed and constructed with care, and perhaps even with love, by craftsmen. The wonderful tiled walls led up to high ornately decorated ceilings and the floors were of highly polished wood.

Abigail had a slightly freckled face with small round eyes, a small nose, and rather pouting lips. She was small and slightly plump, but quite attractive. We had been out together on a number of occasions and we spent most lunch times together, but she had a regular boyfriend and had just become engaged to him.

"Coming to the pub at dinner?" she asked, "it's Jenny's birthday."

"Oh shit, I forgot to get her a card."

Jenny was one of our typists. I had groped with her at the office party and had subsequently taken her for a night out. We had gone to the pictures and apart from some tame necking nothing much had come of it.

"It's alright, I've put your name on my card."

"Oh my God. -New office scandal. Love from Stuart and Abigail!"

We both laughed and went through the door into ED.

At twelve thirty we made our way over to the Salisbury pub. Abigail bought the food; meat pie chips and beans, and I bought the drinks including a rum and black for Jenny. Jenny had said 'thanks' with a nice smile and Abigail made me give her a birthday kiss.

"Didn't you take her out once" asked Paul.

I nodded and he asked if I had given her one.

"What, in the pictures" I replied.

The main contingent of IA/1 began to settle down in a pleasant sun bathed corner of the pub and Arthur, a tall rather untidy lad who always reminded me of a university student was going round collecting for the kitty.

"Come on now ladies and gents" he called, "cough up your dosh, come on now."

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Margaret and Graham were sat together; their relationship was front-page news on the office grape vine at the moment. Margaret was twenty-six, Graham only eighteen. Shock horror scandal.

Beryl Bailey laughed her high pitched machine gun laugh at something and Paul Littlewood commented "Christ, what the hell's that! What sort of a laugh's that! Stew, have you heard that laugh, it's not for real."

"You want to hear yourself, Paul Littlewood" countered Beryl, "you sound like a bloody monkey!"

"Hey Stew, do I sound like a monkey? Abby?"

It was common knowledge that Paul laughed like a monkey and Beryl laughed like a machine gun but neither Abigail nor I would comment. Paul affected a hurt look and forked up a mouthful of chips while Jan leant over and picked up one that had dropped on to his trousers. Paul shot her a scathing glance as she began to wipe away the stain with a wetted handkerchief.

"Here it comes" whispered Abigail, referring to yet another Paul-Jan public row. Paul seemed content though to just pause for a moment and give Jan the blackest of his black looks.

Arthur, still collecting for the kitty, had reached Jenny, Janet, and Mavis, a trio of our typists.

"Jenny, you don't have to pay, it's your birthday" declared Janet.

"Leave her alone" I called, "she can pay if she wants."

"Oh shut up Stuart, who asked you?"

"Yes, you tight pig" added Abigail, "shut your face."

I laughed and called for Arthur to get a move on. I needed a pint. He called back asking for a hand at the bar so I stood up to help him.

Arthur called up the round and while he sorted out the money I spotted Jeff over by the jukebox. He was with Sheila, the black haired new typist.

"Looks like Jeff's making a move already" I said, nudging Arthur.

"Looks like it" he chuckled.

I picked up a tray of drinks and took them over to our table.

"Right, pint of bitter for me, pint of lager anyone?"

"Here" said Paul.

"Half of lager?"

"Present" called Abigail.

"A red drink with a bit of lemon in it?"

"Port and lemon you berk" corrected Abigail, "is that yours Mags?"

"Thanks Abby, is there a pint of lager there for Graham?"

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"Coming up" boomed Arthur who appeared with another tray.

Arthur, who managed the IA/1 five a side football team, distributed the rest of the drinks and took the opportunity to give us a tactics talk about the coming game with IA/3.

"We've got to keep our eyes on IA/3 lads; they're a bunch of dirty bastards."

"Arthur, please," complained Beryl, "there are ladies present you know."

Arthur rambled on about marking people and our forwards attacking more but it was lost in the blur of cheery banter that bounced across the table.

The Salisbury was always busy at lunchtimes, especially on a Friday when the local office staff took their first bite of the approaching weekend apple. I loved the warmth and atmosphere of those lunchtime sessions. The jukebox painted a background of classic pop music just tinkling above the hubbub of people talking, drinking, smoking, laughing, lounging and idling. Idling was a good description because it summed things up perfectly. No matter what people were doing outwardly, inside their motors were idling, ticking over until it was time to go back to work.

Jeff and Sheila, Paul and Jan, and Graham and Margaret were engaged in three private conversations and it occurred to me that they were examples of three different stages of a relationship. Jeff was chatting up Sheila. They were sounding each other out and sizing each other up, while Paul and Jan were at the other end of the scale. Constantly falling out and arguing, they were even carrying on a quiet argument at that moment. Their relationship had pretty much run its course I supposed. Exit visas imminent. Graham and Margaret were somewhere in the middle. They seemed reasonably happy but, there was a strong element of jealousy on Graham's part as Margaret was by far the most popular girl in the whole of the Regal Insurance Company.

Beryl's banshee machine gun laugh brought me down to earth and I asked a giggling Abigail what had happened.

"I told her the Sherlock Holmes joke!"

"The Sherlock Holmes joke" asked Paul, "what's the Sherlock Holmes joke?"

"Well if you'd have been listening you'd have heard it."

"Stew. What was it? Tell it us."

I smiled and reached out for my pint of bitter.

"Don't tell him Stew. He should have been listening when I told it."

"Arthur'll tell it" I said. "Tell him Arthur."

"The Sherlock Holmes joke! I'm not telling that in mixed company. It's disgusting."

"The Sherlock Holmes joke?" asked Margaret, "is that the one about the lemon?"

"Yes it is" called Abigail, "but don't tell Paul!"

"Right" announced Arthur in his best senior clerk voice. "One twenty six. Let's be having you. Back to the office now."

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We stood up and drained our glasses. Jeff and Sheila came over and Paul quizzed Jeff about the Sherlock Holmes joke.

"Don't tell him!" shouted Abigail.

"Ooo it's a belter that one" said Jeff, winding Paul up.

"Oh come on. Someone tell us the bloody Sherlock Holmes joke!"

"Paul" chided Beryl, "language, please."

Lunchtime was over and the countdown to the weekend was already moving forward. In the afternoon Mr Preston asked me two correction forms for Enfield district. Later on he asked me for two more.

Three O'clock was time for the afternoon tea break. Abigail and I sampled the tea from the basement print room. She liked it though I preferred the tea from ED.

At a quarter to four Sam came round from IA/4 with a query about one of my districts. Sam was a backward lad employed by the company under a scheme to help the mentally handicapped. He spent the greater part of his time in IA/4 describing circles in the air with a plastic ruler and had been overjoyed at the Christmas party when his colleagues had asked the DJ to dedicate John Lennon's 'Number 9 Dream' to him.

I fobbed him off with a lot of double talk and when he left I dropped his query into the internal mail box so that I wouldn't see it again until Monday morning. On the way back to my desk Abigail and Margaret -who were skiving by the photocopier- engaged me in a rubber band fight. I lost due to lack of ammunition.

At ten past four my best friend Mike called me up on the office phone. Was I out tonight? Fancy a pint? OK Meet in the Snooty Fox about half eight.

Four fifteen and Mr Preston came over and asked me to refrain from using the office phone for personal conversations. At four twenty he left for home.

"Oh er Mr Hill" he said as he went past my desk.

"Yes Mr Preston."

"I think you know our rule about private conversations on the office phone. I do not want your friends calling you here. In future do not give out this number to personal friends."

"Yes. er I'm sorry about that Mr Preston."

"Alright Stuart. Goodnight."

"Goodnight Mr Preston."

Work finished on the dot of four thirty at Regal and the whole week ticked past in those last few minutes. The day ended as it had begun with a piercing bell which was the signal for a walking, running, pushing, elbowing race for the lifts, stairs, and doors. There were cries of 'have a nice weekend' and 'see you on Monday'. A tumbling turmoil of rush and relief, relief at getting through another week and the rush to get out, out into the warm expectation of the weekend.

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I had half an hour to wait for my bus so I never joined in the private rush hour at Regal Insurance. I would wait for the tumult to subside then amble down to the bus stop. Paul was coming out of the cloakroom wearing his waterproof motorcycle jacket and he called me over to show me his new crash helmet. It was an 'Ago' helmet like the one used by Agostini, the Italian ace. Brilliant wasn't it? Not cheap crap, the best. Motorcycles was one thing Paul and I had in common, but he always had a better bike, better helmet, and better gear than me. He always chided me for not coming to work on my bike, but I preferred to come on the bus and to put my feet up and read or have a doze while I travelled to work.

"See you Monday Stew."

"See you Paul."

Margaret and Graham came out of the cloakroom together, Graham helping Margaret with a lightweight coat and eyeing me suspiciously. Perhaps Margaret had told him I'd asked her for a date? Still, Margaret got asked out at least three times a day by various male members of staff. It was about time Graham got used to it.

"Bye Stew. Have a nice weekend" said Margaret warmly.

"Bye Mags, same to you. See you Graham."

Graham looked me over cautiously before acknowledging me with a cool wave of his left hand. He must have known that I was no threat to him, but the fact that he seemed to think I was gave me a perverse pleasure.

They walked off, arm in arm, through IA/3 towards the main entrance while I turned the other way, down the stairs, past the queue for the lift and down to the side entrance. The grim commissioner from this morning mumbled 'night lad' as I stepped out into the hot bustling street.

The number 152 bus was hot and I could taste engine fumes in the air. It had been a mistake to sit near the engine on a day like today.

I took out my book and began to read at page fifty. I could see that I'd missed something so I flipped back to page forty six. When I reached page forty eight I put the book away. Somehow I wasn't getting into this novel.

The girl in the yellow coat was sat in her usual seat. She was hot and flushed and her coat was folded neatly on her lap. She paid thirty two pence and left the bus four stops before me. When I reached home I went straight for the fridge for the iced orange juice that was always there. It wasn't there.

"Bet you ten to a penny the old fellers been at it" said my Mother.

"Someone's got to bloody well drink it" said my Dad.

Floating in Space is available from [Amazon](#) as a Kindle download or as a traditional paperback.